

Synopsis to here. It has been a rough couple of days for Gordon. He is in great pain. The going has been terrible. He has developed a bad case of dysentery and his leg has become infected. Climbing has taken the last of his reserves and while he is short of what he considers would be a safe area, he knows that he is at his limit. Abandoning his crutches, he has crawled during the night to a knob 1500 feet above the Laotian plain, knowing that he must wait until an aircraft enters the area before transmitting.

Chapter 6 Rescue

The sun had been up for two hours, but as yet no aircraft had appeared. After a huddled sleepless night of shivering, the warmth felt good, and Gordon was more optimistic as he surveyed the area around him. Below to the west, the hill dropped steeply away 1,500 feet into the ravine through which he had fought for more than a day. From this vantage point it looked benign - almost inviting, but he knew better. The knob was a rocky outcrop on the southwest side of a mountain which rose another 3,000 feet in a continuous climb. The ravine on the east side appeared similar to the other and the mountain on the far side looked to be higher than 5,000 feet.

On the surface, the knob seemed to be a good location. It should be readily identifiable from the air, yet remote enough that enemy troops would have a hard time reaching him. It all depended on whether there were any anti-aircraft sites in the area.

There ought to be a flight out here pretty soon.

"You'd think so, Mac, but maybe they've had a stand down or something." He didn't want to worry Mac, but Ace knew that he couldn't last through another cold and sleepless night. He had nothing left to give.

Listen! I hear something. Gordon froze, straining to catch the whisper above the light breeze.

No . . . maybe . . .

Then they were there. A pair of Phantoms arrived from the north, descending from high altitude in a left hand bank in preparation for an attack. Out there somewhere was probably an Air Force Skyraider preparing to mark a target for them. Gordon flipped on the emergency radio, checked the squelch, and began transmitting.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Phantoms descending in a left turn, this is Captain Mike Gordon on the ground in Laos, how do you read, over?" He waited ten seconds before repeating the call. Abruptly the Phantoms broke off their descent.

"Station calling Mayday, this is Streetcar one-one. What's your situation?"

"Roger. This is Marine Captain Mike Gordon of VMFA-337. I was Manual forty-five dash three shot down over Xepon on March twentieth. I'm in the foothills at your ten o'clock position for ten miles."

"Roger that, Manual forty-five. Standby while I switch over to Hillsborough."

"Forty-five standing by." Two minutes later, Streetcar one-one was back on frequency.

"Manual Forty-five, this is Streetcar, over."

"Forty-five here."

"Hillsborough is coordinating with the Sandys and Jolly Green and they estimate one hour til on-station. What's your situation?"

"I'm now at your four o'clock for about six miles. I'm going to flash you with my mirror." Gordon located the sun in the aiming spot and tracked it to the lead Phantom.

"Tally-ho your flash. Are there bad guys around?"

"I don't think so, though I heard some anti-aircraft fire yesterday down near the trail."

"Hillsborough is getting authentication stuff from your outfit, so I'll be switching back and forth between frequencies."

The Phantoms had climbed to 15,000 feet orbiting lazily in a left-handed racetrack pattern.

"Manual Forty-five, Streetcar here. A little snafu has come up. You're being carried as Missing in Action, so your service record with the authentication dope's been sent home."

"What happens now?"

"They're diverting one of your squadron's flights over here to confirm your identity. He should be on station in one-zero minutes. Hang in there."

"Streetcar one-one, this is Sandy Two-one estimating your position in one-five minutes. We're a flight of four Alpha-ones and one Hotel fifty-three."

"Roger, Sandy. I've got a tally-ho on Manual Forty-five."

"Hello Streetcar One-one, this is Decorate Four dash one. You there, Mike?" Relief flooded over Gordon, and for the first time, he allowed himself to really believe that the rescue would come off. Decorate Four dash one was Robbie Robinson, a long-time friend who would know immediately that he was who he said he was.

"Dat you, Zom?," he replied mimicking an Eddie "Rochester" Anderson line from a movie the squadron had watched at least ten times aboard ship enroute to Vietnam.

"Where's the first place the duty officer ought to check to find us?" Robbie was referring to the general recall of the entire squadron when it received surprise overseas orders. When he and Robbie checked in with temporary orders to go through the Phantom Systems Training program at Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego, they were told to get lost until the next morning. When asked about interesting things to do, the duty officer told them to go to Tijuana.

"Blue Fox, booby," he responded jubilantly referring to the sleaziest joint in town. By the time they returned to their squadron, the story had become embellished, having them racked out of a whorehouse in order to go to war.

"Jolly Green, this is Decorate Four dash one. Let's get this guy home in time for happy hour."

The Sandys swept by 500 feet overhead, arriving almost before he saw them. After passing, they broke off, fanning out to the west to be in position to lay down suppressive fire if the need arose. Above, Streetcar and Decorate flights orbited, ready to jump in with more ordnance if the Sandys needed help. It was a textbook performance, with Jolly Green now the central character.

The helicopter came in low and fast, pitching up to stop and hover. Gordon broke from cover and hopped into the open. Even before the chopper's forward motion was spent, the sling was already on its way down.

Let it hit the ground to discharge the static electricity. Gordon shuddered at the memory of being knocked flat when he grabbed the sling too early during his short trip to jungle survival school in the Philippines. The instructor hadn't warned the class, opting for an actual demonstration to get the point across. The sling was still three feet above the ground when Gordon grabbed hold, and the jolt knocked him cold. Everyone else laughed as he struggled to clear the cobwebs, but it was probably true that it was a lesson no one would ever forget.

The thought that he might not remember how to get into the sling passed through his mind, but he dismissed it. It touched down five feet away and he made a flying lunge totally disregarding the possibility of adding to his injuries. No sooner had he slipped the horse collar over his head and shoulders than he was snapped airborne, tossed about like a ragdoll dangling beneath a kite.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye, Mac, I'm on my way back to the world."

Don't be surprised if we meet again, Ace. In the meantime, good Luck.

Suspended behind and beneath the accelerating chopper, Gordon struggled to stabilize himself against the buffeting of the slipstream. He thought he had his body under control as he neared the fuselage, but close in, the airflow shifted causing him to bang his leg against the doorway as the crew chief pulled him aboard. It was the final insult and he let out a howl of pain knowing he could do that now because it was over. He was in someone else's hands, so let others sort things out.

The helo took up a direct course for Danang Air Base in South Vietnam on the coast of the South China Sea. In less than a half hour Gordon would be at Charlie Med where his condition would be stabilized until he was strong enough to be flown to the Hospital at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines.

"They say that the poor bastard's been missing for over a month," the pilot reported over the intercom. "He must have been captured and escaped. How's he look, Doc?"

"Pretty bad. He's in shock and he's got a moldy bandage on his right calf. He banged it coming through the door and let out a real yelp." I'm fixing some IV's and then I'll get after the leg."

The corpsman set up and adjusted intravenous transfusions of plasma and Ringer's lactate before cutting away the filthy, tattered bandage on Gordon's leg. Although the wound was badly infected, it wasn't life-threatening, nor did the limb seem to be in danger given the current state of the medical art. What perplexed him was the wound itself. Quite obviously it was a gunshot wound, but just as obviously, surgery had been performed and the wound sutured shut.

"I think you're right about his being captured and then escaping, though I'll be dipped if I know how he did it with this leg. By the looks of his clothes and the rest of him he must have crawled most of the way." By the time Doc had finished swabbing the wound and applied a dressing, some of Gordon's color had returned.

"Good," Doc thought, pleased by the small but significant change for the better, but it was evident that the man had come awfully close to the end of his rope. The best thing to do was bundle him up and leave the rest of the clean-up for the Charlie Med people.

For his part, the crew chief was amazed. He was used to plucking downed aviators out of the jungle - often he had to go down to the ground to retrieve the wounded ones - but he wasn't prepared for Gordon's ravaged condition. Even beneath the layer of filth and grime the man was as ashen as a corpse. What struck home even more was the man's gauntness: sunken cheeks and eyes; drawn skin; feeble trembling. He looked like those wretches who survived the Nazi concentration camps.

"God knows what's happened to him in a month," he sighed, speaking to no one in particular, but it went out over the intercom and Doc nodded his agreement.

"Tell him that we're only two minutes out now, Doc," the co-pilot suggested.

"I'll do it, sir, but I don't think he'll understand me. He's out cold."