**DANANG**

The Special Projects Staff was hard at work on the development of the *Tactical Assessment and Operations Analysis Procedures* manual designed to provide staff planners with the types and amounts of quantified date to permit long range strategic planning based on isolated tactical data. This was no mean task but the Special Projects Staff, comprising nearly fifteen percent of the total Marine force allocation in the theatre dug in with an enthusiasm characteristic of their halcyon days.

"First, let's decide what's important and what isn't," suggested Boots during the daily huddle. "Who's got any ideas?"

"Sortie rate for one," offered PFC Bung, who had arrived the previous evening. Because he was the bearer of the latest stateside gossip he was accorded celebrity status, a distinction that lasted for about 48 hours at the most, after which he would be classified as a bore until the next rookie arrived.

"Ordnance load's important too," chimed in Captain Wright.

"Don't forget target response," implored Lieutenant Dixon who liked probabilities so much that he was usually broke within an hour of pay call.

In the end there were these as well as target size, attack frequency within a given area, time of day, weather, and finally first-hand damage assessment.

"Ok, gang, we've got a good start," approved Boots who had just returned from a meeting at the Third Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) headquarters where it was agreed that the Vietnamese orphanage over by the beach would be razed to make way for a football field. "Now all we have to do is develop a matrix and weighting factors and we'll have it."

"It seems a little simplistic to me," countered Captain Norton after he reviewed the concept. "What you are saying is that in order to come up with an analysis of any given raid's effectiveness all you have to do is multiply the number of aircraft launched by how many bombs each carried, divided into the number of targets assigned, multiplied by a factor of two." He paused, reviewing the formula for yet another time to make certain he understood it. "Is that essentially what you have in mind?" He was greeted by a general nod of assent.

"What happens if the pilot doesn't find the target, or he flat misses because he puts in the wrong sight setting, or any of a thousand other things that can and do go wrong every day?"

"We took it into account by multiplying the targets by a factor of two, but if you think three would be better . . ." the chorus responded in unison.

"You don't understand," Captain Norton persisted in mounting desperation. "You can't go around making assumptions like these without some basis in observable fact."

"No, Captain Norton," Colonel Heine corrected as if he were scolding a small child, "you don't understand. If we wait until there are enough data to create an exact formula, the war will be over and it won't make any difference. Whether it's a factor of two or three is trivial in the long run. What is important is that we impress on the pilots how important all of this is and they'll just have to stop missing targets, that's all." And that was that.

The next morning, a huge banner fluttered outside the Special Projects Staff Headquarters bearing the proscription:

Ae = 3T / SB

"By golly, Tumescent, you can always count on an Edsel man in a pinch," SecDef roared approvingly. "Look at this. Colonel Heine has surpassed himself. With this, we won't have to listen to all of those brass hats bluster about how the need this weapon or that amount of manpower. All they have to do is supply us some simple information and we'll tell them what they need and how they're doin."

"Yes sir," puffed Tumescent, still showing the strain of climbing the sixteen flights of stairs from the data processing center to the Secretary's office. "I've fed our existing records into Alice using the formula and she confirms what we already suspected. The war is going better than our wildest dreams. At the current rate our boys are crunching those commies, there will be no more targets in North Vietnam by noon tomorrow."

"Wait'll I tell the President. He'll be so excited he'll probably want to hold a barbecue. By the way, Tumescent, make up a memo and send it around on the gold list."

Tumescent did better than that. He went directly to Langley to inform the Deputy Director of the wonderful news.

"That's terrible," he wailed much to Tumescent's astonishment. "We can't let this happen." He got up from his desk and paced back and forth for several minutes before punching his intercom.

"Get me Crap, Miss Shorthair."

"Crap listened quietly while the Deputy Director outlined the catastrophe. Even before the Deputy Director had finished giving all the gruesome details, Crap lifted the white phone from its cradle, checking his stopwatch as he did.

"What took you so long, Mr. Chairman," he hissed, sending sparks rattling through the secure line all the way to the Kremlin. Next you get your fat ass on the line in ten seconds or less, or it will be worse than the salt mines. We'll have your wife and daughter move back in with you."

Crap chuckled as he heard the gasp on the other end, knowing he had scored a bulls-eye.

"Let me tell you what I just heard from the guys down at the agency," he began, proceeding to explain the problem.

"Not to soak your shirt, Comrade. I have talk with Ho Chi Minh only hours ago and he tells me all is going well. They have suffered less than ten percent impairment of overall capabilities in the last wave of attacks, but with shipments arriving daily now, they should step up operations by end of the month."

"I'm relieved to hear that Mr. Chairman. We're paying you damned good money to see that things go as planned. By the way, you'll be happy to know that we don't have to funnel all the money through Yugoslavia any more. Congress approved supplemental relief payments to Czechoslovakia, which lessens the likelihood that some malcontent will catch on and blow the whistle."

"Excellent. My advisors tell me that with the new rules of engagement, we should be able to hold within the twelve-billion-dollar limit including our commission. However, Ho was a little concerned over your Barrelroll missions in Northern Laos. He says it's expensive to haul guns out there, particularly when the planes are making strikes all over the place. He suggests that you cut back on the missions or have them concentrate them on where the guns are. Otherwise, it's going to cost you more money."

"I'll take care of it. How's the marijuana project going? The Maui project is costing us a bundle, so the sooner we can start using the Asian stuff, the better off we'll all be."

"They expect the first harvest in late April and after that the stuff should roll in like clockwork."

"Tumescent, it's time you got your ass out of Washington and over to Vietnam," Crap explained as he led the father of his grandson to his den. "I want you to act as my personal representative. You know the plan better than almost anyone, and I want you to make it work. You'll still be in the employ of the Defense Department, but you'll report directly - and only - to me, is that clear."

"You have my authorization to make on-the-spot decisions if you have to, but let me know immediately what's going on."

They talked for several hours going over even the minutest details.

"What happens if the President pulls one of his micromanagement games and screws things up like he almost did by trying to send the Special Projects Staff to Khe Sanh?" Tumescent shuddered at the memory of that near catastrophe.

"God, it’s a problem," Crap sighed in exasperation. "That Texas turkey has such a Hitler complex going that he thinks he's the only one in the country that can call the shots. If he keeps it up, we'll have to treat him to a Texas-style motorcade like the last one."

"Look," Crap told him at the door, "you just get the Special Projects Staff in gear. I'll take care of the rest even if it means having to eat some incinerated cow and ride around in an Edsel."

The Boeing 707 wallowed and lurched from one thunder cell to the next as it made its approach to Danang Air Base just west of the coastal city still shown on most maps as Tourane. The shock of seeing Monkey Mountain pass close aboard through the shards of ragged clouds and blinding downpours was enough to erase all vestiges of his earlier nausea. With a sigh, Tumescent settled deeper into his seat, thankful that if he was to meet his maker, he would do so without chunks of chicken fricassee adorning his vest. Tumescent was fastidious.

Actually, his first impressions of Danang would glow brightly in his memory until his dying day. Disgorged into a downpour driven horizontal by a forty-knot gale, Tumescent was propelled uncontrollably across the ramp into a stack of mattress-like rubberized bags. Only after he had extricated himself with difficulty and staggered to the lee of the primitive screened plywood structure with a corrugated metal roof that served as Danang's passenger terminal did it dawn on him the contents of his recent roost. At once, his nostrils filled with the scent of burned flesh and putrid sinew, and as visions of green puss and purple gore welled up before his eyes, Tumescent stumbled back into the fury.

The terminal was hardly better than the ramp. In places, the water stood ankle deep, dammed in by two-by-four joints bolted to the concrete pad to help anchor the walls from the incessant onslaught of the wind. The rain was reduced to mist by the wire screening, and seemed to come from all directions at once. The pounding of rain and wind against the corrugated tin roof created a cacophony of sound of such intensity that conversation was impossible beyond the most rudimentary of yelled queries and barked answers. Even at that level, communication was a matter of pure happenstance or prior knowledge.

"Special Projects Staff," he shouted to a rain-suited Sergeant attempting to communicate his needs with hand motions that said I'm here. I need to go to the Special Projects Staff, there.

"What?"

"Special Projects Staff," he tried again, realizing the futility of the situation. This time the Sergeant lost interest, shrugging and pointing to a field telephone at the end of the counter.

It took fifteen minutes more to convey his requirements to the switchboard operator and another ten to establish solid contact with Special Projects Staff headquarters, but finally he got it across to Griselda who he was and what he needed.

"Hang in there, ace," she counselled, happy that she was going to get out of the office for a while. "I'll be there in a jiffy to pick you up."

After another half hour of cowering from the wind and slashing rain, Tumescent heard the jeep coming, slapping geysers as it slammed into water-filled potholes. He looked up in time to see Griselda arc half-circle, wheels coming to rest against the terminal steps. She was driving an open jeep, clad in combat boots, poncho liner, and football helmet. Tumescent groaned, undecided whether he should stay where he was and die of exposure or get in the jeep and die any number of ways.

Out on the main service road, Griselda wove her way expertly through the quagmires and potholes, bulls-eyeing each and every one to Tumescent's uncertain knowledge. To the left were rows of clumsy looking A-1 Skyraiders with Vietnamese markings, while farther on sat lines of brutish F-4 Phantoms hunkering menacingly in the deluge. To the right, next to the perimeter fencing, were low white French-style buildings flanked by wooden South East Asia (SEA) huts and strong-back tents. The road was bordered on both sides with concertina barbed wire that at times provided the only sure clue as to the right of way. The road ran north almost to the bay, clearing the runway overrun before swinging west toward the headquarters area and the hills beyond.

Traffic was incessant as dump trucks and six-by-sixes plowed through the worsening slime throwing curtains of mud through which the jeep careened as it rocketed along towards Charlie Med. Rounding a corner at the northwest corner of the base, Griselda did a magnificent job of avoiding almost certain disaster by snaking nearly sideways between the oncoming traffic and a wrecked six-by that had slid off into a mud hold, burying itself to the tailgate. In what seemed to Tumescent a surreal scene cast by an escapee from a lunatic asylum, helmeted aircrewmen in tiger-striped flight suits tore past, en route to the flightline on brightly painted motorcycles, while pajama-clad natives plodded stoically in both directions along the road berm, oblivious to the danger attending them on all sides.

When at last the jeep arrived at General Heine's villa, Tumescent was a basket case. Having begun the trip in the peak of sartorial splendor, he was now reduced to the level of a Main Street bum. Whatever vestige of dignity he might have mustered was shattered when Brogan, who had come to the door at the sound of the jeep, wrinkled up his nose as he barred the entranceway.

"Leave your clothes on the verandah," he ordered imperiously. "You'll find a robe in the guest suite." He started to close the door in Tumescent's face but stopped as another thought came to him. "I'll have someone take care of your suit."