

Friends - The most frequent question I receive from readers is “How did Ted Kehr, Rev. Allison and Cardinal Guzzetti become members of the Fellowship?” This Christmas I have an early gift for you - the story of how Ted Kehr became a member of the Fellowship of the Essentials. (We’ll have to learn about Allison and Guzzetti another Christmas.) You can enjoy it whether or not you’ve read The Diaries of Pontius Pilate and I hope you do.

Merry Christmas friends, Max Lewis

BAY OF BENGAL

- sometime between the 1st Iraq War and 911

Not much made Gunnery Sergeant Art Styles nervous, but an Army 3 star General at an off the books CIA annex on an isolated island was one of them.

“You worked with A-716 in Iraq.”

“Those Green Berets? Yes sir. Pretty good guys for doggies.” Styles took a deep breath.

“Sorry sir, no offense sir.”

In the same way the Jones family called themselves “The Jones,” Green Berets referred to themselves as members of their detachment, so collectively the twelve men Styles had fought with in Iraq were “A716” or just 716.

“You and some of your Marines had some beers with them?” Lt General Al Brunner looked bored by all the Doggie stuff.

“Yes sir. Basically the Republican Guards herded us. We both got forced onto an Army Combat Outpost called “Outlaw,” in the middle of nowhere. It was my Recon platoon, Captain

Harris's detachment and about 40 doggies . . . soldiers. The same day we made it to the COP, they hit us. A couple battalions of Republican Guards. The cloud cover was down to about 200 feet - no air cover, just us. We got all mixed up . . . everyone was fighting side by side for a while . . . Typically Marines and Army guys don't drink together . . . Marines think . . ."

"I don't care about what Marines think Gunny. I care about the fact that not that long ago Operational Detachment A-716 seemed to like you and trust you . . . as much as they trust anyone. I read about it, the after action reports. The weather rolled in and you guys were on your own, no air support for two days. I'm surprised anyone made it out alive."

"Captain Harris and his guys had a lot to do with that, sir. Them and Ralph Jackson, that kid is . . ."

"I've heard about Jackson but that's a different topic. The reason you're here is to help manage 716 and especially Ralph Jackson."

"Help manage? Sir?"

"This is off the record, understand? "

"Yes sir."

"Operational Detachment A716 has gotten a little . . . squirrely since Iraq."

“Squirrely?”

“Unpredictable, belligerent, unreliable, occasionally hostile . . . basically you can’t count on them to do what they’re told, the way they’re told.”

“Sir, may I asked why you didn’t just break ’em up? That’s what Force Recon would have done . . . or else court-martial them.”

“It’s a long story that doesn’t matter because we need them now,” General Brunner said.

In fact Brunner knew it wasn’t a long story. No one broke up 716 because while they might not do things the *way* they were told, they got the job done. Every time SOCOM, the Unified Combatant Command in charge of the various Special Operations Units, was ready to dismantle A-716 one more thing came up, something un-conventional, long term, down in the dirt. In other words something outside the capability of direct action glamor boys like the Seals and Delts who were waiting outside and something that required a bit more finesse than the ‘kick in the door’ tactics of shock troops like Gunny Styles’ Marines or Army Rangers. True, there were other outstanding, maybe even better operational detachments, but A-716 got results and . . . they were expendable in the eyes of more than a few guys at SOCOM.

“Yes sir,” Styles said.

“Here’s the situation. I pulled half of the team out from a very dangerous area of operation. They’re in air and on their way here right now. That’s made the other 6 guys we left behind a lot more vulnerable and endangered the success of a mission 716 has been working on for almost two years.” A ghost of a smile crossed Brunner’s face. “Based on the radio traffic, the members of 716 are very unhappy right now . . . and very tired and very stressed out. They’ve been in the field for fourteen months.”

“Fourteen months?”

“Fourteen months, knowing if anything happened we’d cut them loose, say we didn’t know them, say they were mercenaries, criminals. So, for all 716 knows this is another Washington DC butt cover that makes them the sacrificial lambs. When they land, I want them to see faces they know and trust and your Marines are the best I could come up with on short notice. That’s your job, security on the landing pads, in the buildings and to keep A-716 from boiling over. Got it?”

“Ay Ay, sir.”

“Good. Set it up and I’ll see you in the briefing room in . . . how long?”

“Give me 15 minutes sir.”

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Three groups of men were waiting for General Brunner in the briefing room. Brunner pushed through the door and Gunnery Sergeant Styles growled:

“Atten hut.”

“As you were,” Brunner said.

Brunner didn't give them time to get off the chairs. He stopped in front of a wooden podium someone placed on the table and as his staff officers followed him in, eyeballed the room. They were in a steel framed building lined with long Formica tables and tan plastic chairs. To his left, the Navy Seals looked to him like a bunch of really tough college football players. To his right, the clean shaven operators from Delta Force had the hard eyed look of sociopaths who ran triathalons for fun and cheated widows and orphans for a living.

Direct Action units were used to storing their weapons in garrison, so when Styles' Marines told them check their weapons with the armorer, there was no objection. The only men in the room with weapons were his Marine security detail and they looked like . . . well . . . Marines.

Every man in the room, including Brunner, had been gathered together from the four corners of the globe, loaded onto planes and flown half way around the world. Once they were

assembled, the CIA speed-boated them out to the black site. With less than 24 hours notice, Brunner patched together the best force he could out of the best men available.

They looked at him, wondering what was taking so long.

“I’m not going to start the mission brief, but I will tell you why we’re waiting around. The target area is currently being worked by a Special Forces Operational Detachment. They’re on an unrelated mission, but they’ve been operating in the area for a little over 14 months. They know the terrain and conditions. They know the locals. I pulled half of the team out so I can brief them and you. Then they can brief us on local conditions. They’ll be taking you in.”

Everyone knew that kind of assistance was invaluable, but the Delts looked gift horses in the mouth for a living.

“Fourteen months sir?”

It was the Delta Force Major, Bill Henry. What many outside the military didn’t know was Operational Detachment Delta or Delta Force, was a sub-unit and part of Army Special Forces, the so-called Green Berets. With very few exceptions, everyone in Delta Force had served on an operational detachment or A-Team before joining Delta. They knew fourteen months was a long time to be in the field. Especially when you weren’t - legally - supposed to be there in the first place. And when the locals you were working with might betray you at any moment. And when you never got much food or sleep or anything else except grief.

“They might be a little ragged at the edges, Major, but they know what they know. They should be able to walk you guys right up to where you’re going.”

“Understood sir, but guys that high strung . . . personally I’d like to see them unarmed when they walk in.”

You’d like to not see them at all if you knew what I know, Styles thought.

“Gunny?” General Bunner said.

“Already handled it, sir. We’ll get em on the tarmac. Half of my Marines are on the pad, waiting for the helicopter. Your guys will recognize a few of our faces, sir.”

One of the General’s aides entered the room and approached Brunner.

“Sir, we’ve got a problem. Our chopper is less than a mile out and we don’t have any room. Turbine problem on deck one and some kind of refueling leak on deck two. The Agency’s got drones, refuellers and men all over the place.”

The installation only had two landing pads and it’d been a long reach getting A-716 out. Their extraction bird was flying just past the safe limit of its fuel range.

“It’s a helicopter. Tell them to wedge it in.”

“The spooks say no way sir, both pads are too crowded. We can set them down on the VIP pad in the back.”

The facility had two operational pads where the Agency launched seemingly non-stop drone missions along with helicopter flights. The VIP pad was at the rear of the facility, installed and reserved for the Agency, Military or Foreign Service big whigs who often turned up unannounced or on short notice and didn’t want to wait.

“Sir . . . I told them to do it.” The aide was a young looking Captain. “The bird’s on fumes and . . . I didn’t think I had the time to clear it with you. If you-”

”It’s the right call, Tom,” Brunner said. “Relax. Tell them to drop onto the VIP pad, but get the passengers off and inside - asap. I don’t want anyone wondering what’s going on and maybe asking around.”

“Yes sir.”

Styles didn’t need to be told. He keyed his commo mike to the Marines he’d assigned to the flight pad.

“Jack, change of plans.” Styles couldn’t see how his men would get there in time, but he had to try. “Get to the other side of the building, asap. They’re landing there.”

No one spoke. A few minutes later someone’s key rattled in one of the steel doors at the far end of the room. After that everything happened pretty fast. A nervous looking man in a flight suit opened the door, held it and tried to remove his key. Someone in ratty looking fatigues pushed him to one side and leaned against the door. He held a Belgian made assault rifle and pointed it toward the flight deck.

Two other men with the same type of fatigues and weapons entered with their rifles angled toward the floor, but their fingers inside the guard. They swept the room with their eyes and slid right and left, backs toward the wall. Two more men followed them in and the final two walked in backward, keeping their eyes on the flight deck until the door slammed shut.

Boys, meet A-716, Gunny Styles thought.

The newcomers brought with them the aroma of a compost pile. They were all coated with the kind of long term, ground in grime that only comes after months in the field. Each had “no-sleep” half-moons carved out below their eyes. Styles recognized Ralph Jackson, who sported a spongy looking, yellowish gash across one of his cheeks. It glistened with what was probably some kind of antiseptic cream that had its work cut out for it. Captain Mel Harris’s left hand was swollen. All of them were scratched up. Every fingernail was caked with dirt.

To say they looked unhappy would have been an understatement of monumental proportions.

“I warned you about the weapons,” the Delta Force Major said, shaking his head.

“It’s Dellltah Foooce! We ahh sayved!”

It was one of the Green Berets in a near perfect imitation of Dudley Do-Rights’ girl friend, Nell. Gunny Styles recognized him but couldn’t remember his name. Maybe it was Penn. The chopper landed filled to the gills compared to these guys, Styles thought. They’re the ones running on fumes.

The Delts sat stone faced, but one of the younger Seals couldn’t leave well enough alone.

“Excuse me. Guys. This is a super-secret spy base. The homeless shelter’s down the road, okay?”

“Hey Flipper,” Ralph Jackson said, holding up his left hand, “when you’re done spinning on this you can tell me the last time you’ve spent more than 12 hours in the field.”

“Who’s the half-wit who came up with this idea?” Captain Mel Harris said.

“I’m that half-wit,” General Brunner said. Brunner’s stars were stitched on his fatigue collars.

“Ha! No surprise there. So, Napoleon, since I’ve got 6 of my men trying to hold together-“

”Captain!” Styles strode forward with his right hand, his gun hand, in the air, palm out, holding his men in place.

General Al Brunner had enjoyed a long, successful military career and he didn’t get it by not knowing when it was time to let his NCOs handle things.

He sat down, shut up and waited.

The Green Berets tensed, but Styles saw recognition in Harris’ and, thank heaven, Ralph Jackson’s eyes. He didn’t stop until he was less than an arm’s length from Harris.

“Gunny-“

“Mel, listen,” he whispered. Styles wanted everyone’s attention and he got it. Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeants didn’t call Officers by their first names. Ever.

“You haven’t slept for God knows how long and you’re not seeing this straight. All you’re doing-“

“So he’s a General?” Harris whispered too. “He’s got my men twisting in the wind because-“

“You’re *not* seeing this straight. All you’re going to do is put you and your men in a world of hurt. Tell him you thought he was one of those CIA grass moles . . . trust me on this. Sir?”

Harris waited a long time, but finally nodded.

Styles stepped back and raised his voice, like he’d been chewing them out.

“Are we clear? Sir?”

“General, I apologize. I thought you were with the Agency and this was one of their . . . Sir, sorry.”

“Take a load off, Mel.” Brunner stood back up and waved him down, as though insulting a General to his face was no big deal. “The rest of you safety those weapons . . . join Captain Harris in a chair.”

Styles shot a sharp glance at General Brunner, then nodded in his direction. The man had some game. Everyone on 716 knew Brunner could have made something of it if he'd wanted to. But he didn't. The hostility in 716 started oozing out like a balloon with a small leak.

Not bad for a Doggie General, Styles thought.

One half of Operational Detachment 716 lowered their weapons, decided to give everyone the benefit of the doubt and sank into those chairs, just like the General ordered, or suggested, or hoped for.

"Okay, listen up," Brunner said in a brisk voice. He turned around and pulled down a vinyl map of the Bay of Bengal showing the eastern coast of India and all of South East Asia. He illuminated a small island with a red laser pointer.

"We are here, on Narcondam Island, officially a protected wildlife reserve and UNESCO tentative World Heritage Site. In reality, its home to a CIA black site courtesy of the Indian government, which is every bit as concerned about Muslim terrorism as we are. We're about 160 miles from the southern coast of Burma, or Myanmar, but since I'm old I'm calling it Burma. The target site is here, north Burma right around the Laos, Thailand, China triangle. We'll hear from Captain Harris shortly, but this has been where Mel and his men have been operating for the last 14 months."

Brunner turned to a staff officer.

“Let’s show them Geng first, Tom.”

“Yes sir.”

One of the Captains turned on a projector, fiddled with a computer and then projected a color photo onto the wall behind Brunner.

“This is Tzi Geng. He’s a Chinese national, big time arms dealer, Muslim terrorist and full service criminal all wrapped into one. Compound, Tom. This is a satellite pic of Geng’s compound. Its big, its walled, its well-guarded and it contains several buildings. This is the one we want and this power source right here is how we know it’s the one we want.

Starting about two weeks ago, we began to pick up huge power spikes emanating from this compound. ‘Weird’ power spikes I’m told. Then, yesterday, the National Reconnaissance Office picked up satellite photos of a large party of men with connections to Islamic terror groups entering the compound. This morning, one of the largest, weirdest spikes ever emanated from the place.

The Brainiacs at DARPA think the chances are 70 / 30 that its some kind of EMP weapon, and an electro-magnetic pulse of the magnitude they’re anticipating, depending upon placement, would shut down 70 percent of the United States. Think about that. Besides rendering us mostly defenseless, it’d shut down the power grid, cars wouldn’t start, controls for nuclear

power plants would go haywire. If it's portable, all they'd have to do is find a manufacturing facility or sub-station, someplace with access to a lot of power, and hook it up. For all we know the terrorists are leaving with it tomorrow, or today."

Everyone was paying attention. The Seals and Delts knew about The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, because they were often the beneficiaries of some of their work. If the DARPA guys thought there was a threat, that was good enough for them.

"Here's another thing about this compound. It's right on the Chinese / Burma border in an area both countries lay claim to. The Chinese have radar and observation posts all over the place. That means no cruise missiles, no drones, nothing that's likely to start a war with China. We don't even know if they're in on it.

So . . . you're walking in and taking it out. We've got some pretty potent explosives set aside for you. Questions?"

"How are we going to recognize this thing sir?"

"Find what's hooked up to the power supply. Destroy it. Destroy anything that looks scientific, or dangerous or you just don't like. Err on the side of caution."

"Sir, rules of engagement."

“None. Just don’t get caught.”

Brunner let that hang there for a moment. The men looked at each other and then him.

“These people are terrorists,” Brunner said. “We all know terrorists are not covered by the Geneva convention, no matter what a bunch of egg heads in the Hague say. Terrorist don’t wear uniforms. They intentionally target and hide behind women and children. Personally, whoever’s in that compound except for kids is fair game in my opinion. But that’s up to you. Just make sure there’s no evidence. I do know this, I’d hate to see another one of these things built in a few months and another group of men like you having to risk their lives again.”

Some of the men shot glances at each other. In other words, scorched earth. Take no prisoners and don’t leave survivors who might be able to build another weapon.

“Anything else?” Brunner waited.

“Okay then, here’s the initial phase of the insertion plan. We’re breaking you up. Mel, you take two men and accompany Major Henry’s Delta Force Operators. Pick three others - they’re going with the SEALs.”

Captain Mel Harris hesitated, then decided. “Sgt. Penn, take Sgt Dillon and Sgt Jackson and accompany our SEAL friends. Sir, am I clear in understanding it’s our mission until we get them to the objective, then they take over?”

“Good point. Listen up. We’ve got a lot of strong personalities here, but know this. A-716 is in charge of the infiltration. You hear that? The guides make the call until you’re on site, then you take over. But not until then. Right?”

“Yes sir,” the Seals and Delts said.

“I’ll give you the complete itinerary before you take off. But for now, you’ll go from here to a friendly airstrip on the Burmese coast. We’ll fly you from the coast north on a pair of DC-3s, then truck you closer, to Mong Ping. From there you’re humping it gentlemen and as I said, 716 is in charge of the infiltration.”

When Brunner looked out at the men, he liked what he saw. Determination.

“Very well. Captain Harris, do it from up here. Tom, put up the topo shot.”

Captain Mel Harris went to the front of the room and stood behind the General’s podium.

“I’ll walk you through the topographical shot in a moment, but first some background. This thumb at the northeast corner of Myanmar . . . Burma, is our area of operations. Our mission is need to know, but understand this, everyone is at war with each other, and everyone is an ally of each other. It just depends on what day it is. The Pro-Christian Kachin Independence Army’s fighting the government, so are the Rohingya Muslims. The Shan, Lahu, and Karens are

fighting each other and fighting the government at the same time. Finally, the U.S. relationship with the military government is strained. If some of the economic sanctions that are being talked about in Congress get passed, they'll be a lot worse than strained. So-

"Tell them about al-Qaeda."

"Sir, do they need to-

"Tell them."

"Our mission has been to interdict a Muslim terror network called al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is something new under the sun, it's like a terrorist franchise. They've got their own people, step in when they think it's worth it, and can throw around a lot of money, but mainly they use individuals or smaller terror groups to carry out their missions. That's what bothers me. When General Brunner said a bunch of terrorists went into the compound, I'm thinking that's how those guys work. Exactly like that. Co-opt or buy off another group's idea or project and use it as their own."

"Anyway, once we're at Mong Ping, hopefully after dark, we're out of there as fast as possible. Mong Ping is a collection point for every intelligence service, faction recruiter and criminal in the area. This valley, then ridge line's probably are best avenue of approach. We have contacts, and will use them, but remember what I said about who's a friend or foe. Be ready for anything. Once we're at the end of this valley and near the border, the situation changes. Look,

Laos, Burma and Thailand are all contiguous. Burma, Laos and China are all contiguous. Where we're going, China and the Thai border are only 70 miles apart. Burmese citizens who also happen to be ethnic Chinese rebels are in a hot and cold running war with the Burmese army. Right now it's running luke warm, but we've got to be careful. We don't have any contacts we trust in this area, just factions we might be able to play off against each other if we have to. Let's hope we don't have to. Sir that's all I 've got. We'll work out the details of the route once we're on the ground."

"Any questions for Captain Harris," Brunner said.

"A million sir, but we know Captain Harris can't answer them. We're good." It was Major Henry, the Delta Force commander.

No one else said anything.

"Then that's it," Brunner said. "Muster up and draw your weapons. 716, at ease until we get the transport set up. Stay here, we're bringing in some hot grub for you."

"General?"

"Captain Harris."

“Thanks for the food, sir. Some extra ammo’d be good. Maybe three magazines each of 7.62?”

“I don’t know.” Brunner glanced down at their weapons. “Warsaw Pact or NATO? What are you carrying?”

Warsaw Pact 7.62 bullets were formed differently than the American made NATO ammo, so if 716 was using old East Block weapons, Brunner’s bullets wouldn’t fit.

“NATO, sir. These are Belgian, FLN’s.” Belgium, of course, was a member of NATO so they had a fit on the ammo.

In fact everything A-716 was using was foreign. Their combat boots were made in Poland, the fatigues were French Foreign Legion issue, their web gear was Brazilian. And on and on. Since the mission was illegal, the United States didn’t want anything on 716 linking them to the United States.

“Shouldn’t be a problem then. Captain Elery, see to it. Dismissed.”

After Brunner left and while the SEALs, Marines and Delts filed out of the room, Captain Harris motioned his men to close in.

“Okay, they’re splitting us up. We don’t know the guys we’re leading and it’s pretty obvious someone threw this together real quick. Keep your team radios, conceal them as best you can and keep them on.”

Before 716 deployed to Burma they each bought commercial FM two-way radios and a bunch of flesh colored ear buds at Radio Shack. That’s what they used for inter-team communications, not the military issue stuff. Civilian radios reduced the chance that anyone, foe or friend, could listen in and know what they were doing. If it sounded a bit paranoid, 716 wouldn’t have disagreed, they would have said they had their reasons. When they bought them, the civilian salesmen solemnly warned them that if they’d didn’t register them with the Federal Communications Commission, they could get in real trouble. A716 smiled and thanked the salesmen.

“If anyone hears or sees anything that’s out of place I want everyone else on the team to know about it. Roger?”

Everyone either nodded or Yes sired him.

A few Marines wheeled in four carts loaded with meat, potatoes, a vegetable and a selection of drinks, then left.

“Okay, eat up, but if we gobble up too much of this crap it’s going to slow us down later.”

716 didn't waste any time, but they tried to slow down and keep their portions small. A couple guys went back for seconds and before they finished the Seals and Delta Force men re-entered, escorted by Styles' Marines. This time everyone was armed to the teeth. One of the Marines approached the Green Berets and put a nylon bag full of magazines on the table.

"Your extra 7.62, sir. Spooks had FLN mags in stock too. Gunny Styles wanted you to know, we start loading up in about ten minutes."

"All right, finish up," Captain Harris said.

His men reached into the bag for the extra magazines, then cleaned off their plates and returned to their seats.

The Seals and Delts studiously ignored them. Then Styles re-entered the room.

"Ten Hut."

Brunner strode in and tossed them an "as you were" as he went. Once he reached his podium he turned to face them. One of the staff officers projected an enlarged map of Burma.

"Listen up, the choppers will fly you to a friendly airfield just outside of Bassein, off the coast. Here." Brunner highlighted it with his laser pointer. "Couple hours away. There's two DC-

3s waiting there to airlift you about 400 miles to another private airfield just west of Taunggyi, here. We don't want you too close together, so we'll use fifteen minute staggered takeoffs and landings. DC 3s are two prop planes that cruise at about 200 mph, so flying nap of the earth, more or less, figure a little over two hours. We're trucking you from Taunggyi to Mong Ping. That's fifty miles, so say 90 minutes. This is as firm a set up as the military and our friends at the Agency can make it. Once you're on the ground at Mong Ping get out of town and into the hills before anyone sees or starts wondering about you. Jeff?"

Another staff officer handed out maps to the leaders.

"I've got maps with the entire route marked out, one for Major Henry, Captain Arbauch, Captain Harris and Sergeant Penn. From Mong Ping to your objective . . . Captain Harris will decide on the infiltration route."

Harris looked over his map.

"I got a few ideas, but first I want to talk to the rest of my team once we're outside of Mong Ping. See if there's been any changes on the ground since you pulled us out sir."

"Very well, but keep it vague. No specifics." Brunner raised his voice. "Captain Harris is in charge of the mission until you reach the target. That's it. God Speed."

"A ten hut."

Brunner and his staff marched out. Styles waited until the door closed, then faced the assault force Brunner had assembled.

“Follow me and good luck.”

The helicopter flight to the Burmese coast was just the way they wanted it, without incident. As soon as the choppers landed, Captain Harris and Sgt. Penn separated their Delts and Seals. The Burmese hustled them onto the waiting DC 3s. Harris stepped off to one side of the ladder and while everyone else loaded held up his hand to Penn and his team. Penn waved back, then climbed aboard. Ralph Jackson followed him up the steps. After the ground crew shut the door Ralph’s DC-3's props coughed into life, the plane pivoted on the runway and took off.

XxxxxxxxxxxX

Once they were in the air, Petty Officer Dale Brickner and his partner, Petty Officer Jose Alvarez watched everyone with hawk eyes. The pilot opened the cockpit door and yelled over the engines.

“We’re on auto pilot now, but in about ninety minutes the mountains complicate things. I’ll be hand flying her then, so if you want some sleep or to eat something, now’s the time to do it.”

Ninety minutes, so they had time. Brickner and Alvarez noted where everyone sat. Where they placed their weapons. If they, like many veterans, took advantage of the down time and the plane's lulling vibration to sleep.

Jack Harmon, the Seal who'd made the 'homeless shelter' comment walked over to the Green Berets. He wasn't grinning and didn't look as young as he did inside the briefing room. He looked all business.

A716 eyed him as he approached.

"I feel a lot better about this, having you guys along." He looked at Ralph Jackson, then the other two and said, "Didn't mean anything by that dumb grass comment back there. Pre-game jitters."

"We're good," Penn said. It was a classy move. A-716 nodded at him.

"Just wanted you to know," Harmon said.

After he walked away Brickner watched the Green Berets separate. Penn and Dillon took nearby seats on the copilot side, dropped their gear and stretched out. Ralph Jackson went all the way to the rear of the plane, stopped by a tarped pallet and sat down. After a moment he leaned back against a stack of explosive charges intended for Tzi Geng's compound.

Crap, Brickner thought. He and Alvarez had been warned by the Society, over and over, about Ralph Jackson. Brickner was still enough of a SEAL that it aggravated him that a Green Beret was the one everyone was worried about, but it didn't over-rule his common sense. If those ice cold Society guys were worried about Jackson, Jackson was someone to be worried about.

Brickner had planned to move in close and use his first shot to drill a hole right into the middle of Ralph Jackson's forehead. Put an immediate end to Jackson, his bullet train reflexes and his creepy sixth sense.

Now he was at the other end of the plane. Was that Jackson and his 6th sense? End of the plane was a tough shot. Luckily, Dale Brickner was a very good marksman. Brickner leaned back into the nylon web and relaxed. He didn't move, but his eyes were on patrol. Alvarez was physically relaxed but alert, his eyes hooded. He and Brickner caught each other's eyes and looked away.

How'd they get Alvarez, Brickner wondered. After they got bent and were introduced to each other, they'd never brought it up. All the Society men said was, "we like to invest our resources strategically." Brickner was sure they had some of the Delta Force operators, probably cops, politicians, it seemed like they knew everything and everybody.

They got Brickner through his wife, put him in a position where he really had no choice. Plus if he did what they wanted, he'd get a lot of money. And they'd let him divorce his wife and

keep custody of his kids. That was what mattered, his kids. He'd work in a gas station. He still couldn't believe he was doing it. Betraying his country. Betraying . . . murdering his brother SEALS. He wanted to cry, but then thought about his kids. This was the only chance they had.

He glanced toward the rear of the aircraft. Sure enough, 14 months of stress and hardship took their toll on Ralph Jackson. It didn't happen right away, but eventually his eyes slid closed.

Brickner looked across at Alvarez. His partner smiled a smile so sad, it almost broke Brickner's heart. Between the two of them, they were going to kill everyone. Brickner stood up and walked into the cockpit.

"Where's he going," one of the Seals asked Alvarez.

"Duuno, co-pilot motioned him up."

"Huh."

Then three pistols shots followed each other in rapid succession. Alvarez had his M4 up and out and used controlled bursts to kill the men closest first, then he fired down the length of the plane as men realized what was happening and scrambled for their weapons.

Brickner came out of the cockpit after murdering the flight crew holding his pistol with his arms extended. Ralph Jackson was job one, but he was too late. Even as Brickner lined him

up Jackson moved in a blur and before Brickner could adjust Jackson shot Alvarez through the throat. Brickner shot Jackson in the head and watched him fall as he picked up Alvarez's M4. Brickner finished off the survivors.

The whole thing was over in 35 seconds.

He ignored Alvarez as the other SEAL gagged to death - it was every man for himself now. What he really wanted to do was head shot Jackson again but since that creepy little sob killed Alvarez he didn't have the time. He had to get the explosives in place. Brickner checked but no one moved, so he took a chance, rifled through his and Alvarez's packs, got the C-4 blocks and timers and rigged them up on a couple bulkheads. Once they were in place he returned to the cockpit and grabbed one of the flight crew's emergency parachutes. As soon as he strapped himself in, he ran back to the timers and set them for 45 seconds. Once the last one was set he ran to side door, threw it open and jumped out.

XXXXXXXX

Ralph Jackson came to with a throbbing head and immediate certainty about what to do. The red l.e.d. light at the far end of the aircraft was at 34 when he saw it. No doubt the timer was on an explosive charge.

A powerful wind swirled through the aircraft from an open side door and tugged at his pant legs. Ralph saw the back end of someone's feet, no doubt the Seal who shot him, as he

jumped through the door and exited the aircraft. Ralph couldn't explain it and didn't understand it himself, but he always knew what to do. He saw everything, all at once, processed the information, knew what to do and acted on it. He always had. It was gift, or maybe a curse. Ralph was already running toward the open door before the red l.e.d. hit 25.

He slowed, slapped at Penn's web gear, freed his knife and dove through the door without a parachute.

Ralph held the handle of the knife backward, gripping it upside down with the blade was pressed against his forearm so the blade wouldn't catch air. Brickner was some distance below him, moving away from the aircraft in what sky divers called a "Delta." By straightening your legs, keeping your arms to your side, hands cupped and head up, you move at high speed and a 45 to 50 % angle. Down fast and away from . . . say a plane that's about to explode.

Ralph did the same, but in a different direction, to get out of the SEAL's range of vision. Then he straightened, dropped his head to his chest, arms and legs absolutely straight and went into what's called a no lift dive. A parachutist in a Delta drops at about 140 mph, but one in a no lift dive falls at about 210 mph. Ralph dropped like a stone and by the time the SEAL looked over his shoulder to watch the plane explode, Ralph was out of his range of vision and had flared into a standard sky diver flex, legs bent at the knees, arms bent at the elbows, catching more air and slowing up.

Ralph looked down and spotted the SEAL. To fall below him meant death, to be seen by him meant the same. Brickner was in the same flared position, about 300 feet below. Ralph used his arms and legs, pulling them close and reducing his air resistance to close the distance to about 40 feet, slightly off to the Seals left.

It was now or never and Ralph saw how to make it happen.

He went into a Delta position, increasing his speed, angling toward the Seal, flaring to slow down and doing it again. Finally he was ready. Ralph went back into the Delta dive position and collided with the SEAL from behind, slamming his chest into the Seal's parachute. As soon as they made contact, Ralph stabbed him in the back of the neck with an powerful windmill overhand strike. The knife went through the sailor's neck, he went limp and Ralph wrapped his arms around the body. They went into a crazy spin. As they careened toward the earth Ralph got the left leg and arm strap of the SEAL's parachute unclipped. One strap smacked him in the face. The centrifugal force picked up, Ralph's head ached and soon he'd black out. He spun, dumped the Seal out of the rig and managed to get an arm through the still clipped right arm strap. Ralph grabbed for the left leg strap, behind him, got it, pulled the strap close and got the clip for his left leg attached. The pain was too great. Ralph had to flare out to stop the violent spin he was in. As soon as the pain receded to mere agony, he went after the left shoulder strap, got it, clipped it and looked toward the ground.

No way could he capture the right leg strap, unclip and re-clip it before he hit the ground. His head hurt so badly he almost didn't care what happened. Ralph crossed his arms in case the

leg strap gave out and pulled the rip cord. He jolted to a vastly slower speed and lurched to the right. His right and left shoulder straps along with his left leg strap held. He didn't want to, but he forced himself to grab the right leg strap, unclip it, wrap it around his leg and re-clip it. As soon as he did, the air force chute dumped him onto the ground with a bone jarring thud.

Ralph rolled over and "cut away" or released the parachute canopy from his harness before the wind picked up and drug him along the ground. He fought off the pain and prayed, but not in vain. His radio shack radio was still in working condition.

Ralph rolled on his side, groaned, sucked in a mouthful of air and keyed his mike.

"716, it's Jackson, over."

"Ralph, its Ted, your signal's weak but I've got you, over."

"Watch the Delts . . . or maybe the flight crew, someone on your plane's bad and they're going to try to kill you."

"Ralph, its Harris, what are you-"

Ralph heard gun shots, then static. He looked at his watch and did the hardest thing. He waited. Continuing to call his teammates could only distract them or give away their position.

Finally he keyed the radio.

“A-716, come in, over.”

“I’m here Ralph, over.”

“Ted?” He sounded out of breath.

“Roger.”

“What happened, over.”

“Everyone’s dead. Three of the Delts were bad, including that Major. He brought silencers and they got the pilots and half of the other Delts by the time you called. We were at the rear of the plane and just didn’t know it. Over.”

“What about Frank and Captain Harris?”

“They’re gone, brother. So is everyone else. The plane’s on auto pilot. It’s a flying coffin, over.”

Ralph went monster over Hendrix and Harris. He loved them but they didn't matter, no one mattered when you could disconnect your feelings. He went cold and knew what to do. Like always, he knew what to do immediately and with absolute certainty.

“Ted, rig the plane with C-4, take one of the flight crew's emergency chutes and blow the plane. Over.”

“What? Over.”

“I'll explain later, but the plane's going to crash anyway, unless you can land a DC-3. Go through the Delts bags, you'll find what you need. Over.”

“Ralph, I'm not going to blow up the plane . . . Over.”

“Someone is expecting that second plane to explode and if it doesn't, they're going to know something went wrong. They'll want to know why. You're only five minutes away from me so hurry. Set the timers and jump out when I tell you. Over.”

Ralph listened to static for what seemed like a long time. He knew better than to try to push Ted Kehr.

“I’m on it,” Ted finally said. “We got delayed on the run way for an emergency landing of some kind. Took about - here’s the C-4 and . . . here’s the timers. It took about 5 or 6 minutes longer so . . . Over.”

Five minutes. That gave them a little more time and some breathing space.

“I need Mel’s gear, Ted, his web gear and pistol for sure, the FAL’s too big, bring an M-4 if you can manage it. I’ve got nothing. Just the radio, my watch and a little money. Over.”

“I’ll try, give me a minute, over.”

It was more like five minutes and when Ralph heard the distant hum of a turbo prop, then saw what had to be Ted’s DC-3, he called out.

“Ted, I’ve got a visual on your plane, over.”

“Roger. The plane’s rigged and I’m strapping on the gear now. Over.”

“Roger that, wait for my command, then set the timers and jump. Open as high as you can. I’m hoping you can drive that dog of a parachute right to where I’m standing. Over.”

Ralph listened to static for a while. The plane kept inching closer. Ted came back.

“Okay, I’m rigged up and waiting to set the timers. Over.”

The DC3 was clearly defined with an audible hum. Ralph waited.

“Get ready Ted, I’m going to get you as close to me as I can, just stand by and wait, over.”

Just like that it was time, or maybe ever a little late.

“NOW!” Ralph yelled it, waited, then watched a figure drop out of the plane. After a short free fall, Ted’s parachute billowed open.

“Ted, can you read me, over.”

“I read you, ground guide me. Over.”

“Turn to your left and wait. Over.”

Ralph watched as the figure slowly turned away from him.

“Sorry Ted, wrong way, turn to your right, over.”

The figure dropped slowly, then began to turn and move toward Ralph.

“That’s it Ted, pick out a straight line landmark and keep on course. I’m moving toward you. Over.”

The ground was uneven, rocky and steadily sloped upward. Ralph moved toward Ted’s line of descent as quickly as he could, occasionally calling out course corrections as he went.

Off in the distance, the plane exploded.

Ralph was on a high ridge line and close enough to see where Ted landed. It took about 35 minutes, total, but Ted and Ralph met each other in a small valley. Ted had already gathered up his parachute and stuffed it under a bunch of rocks near some underbrush.

“That’s as close as I’ve ever seen you come,” Ted said. He was referring to a bloody tract starting at Ralph’s temple and running back along the side of his head. Ralph’s hair was clotted with blood and his eyes were “burst blood vessel red” from his spin during free fall.

“I woke up when they started shooting. It was two of the SEALs, seated far up front. I thought I’d get them both. I barely got the first one and then the second one got me.”

“Where is he now?”

“I took him out on the way down.”

“What?”

“Tell you about it later. My head’s killing me. Let’s get out of here.”

“I’m going to find out who did this and I’m going to kill them,” Ted said. Mel Harris and Ted Kehr were exceptionally close friends.

“Ted, that’s the kind of thing I do, not you.”

Ted pointed to the web gear and weapons piled nearby. Ralph sorted through it, slipped into the web gear and snugged up the belt and straps. Harris’ knife, canteen and pistol were all secured to the belt. One ammo pouch contained 2 magazines for the American made M-4 assault rifle, the other was empty. Ralph looked up.

“Best I could do Ralph,” Ted said. “There wasn’t much time.”

“I’m good,” Ralph said. An M4 with 2 thirty round magazines and a loaded pistol was a lot better than nothing. “I think we’d better get moving.”

“Agreed. On the way down I got a good look at the terrain. There’s a wide fast moving stream south west of here, about 2 or 3 kilometers. Should be enough vegetation for us to find a place to hole up and decide what to do.”

The two men were used to rugged terrain. They used such cover as they could find and maintained a watch for aircraft or anyone on foot. About 45 minutes later Ralph heard the gurgling of water moving over rocks just as they crested a small ridge line. Tough looking vegetation appeared and thickened near the water. At the stream bank they drank as much as they wanted, refilled their canteens and found a telephone booth sized gap underneath some scrub brush that provided concealment and a 180 degree view of the terrain.

The two men sat facing each other.

“What just happened,” Ted asked.

“I don’t know, but whoever’s behind it bent two Navy Seals and three Delta Force operators, one of them a Major. That takes a lot of muscle. We’re in big trouble unless we play this exactly right . . . and get really lucky.”

Ted outranked Ralph but like the rest of the members of ODA 716 he’d learned to trust and rely on Ralph’s weird sixth sense about threats and how best to deal with them.

“This might improve our luck.” Ted reached into a cargo pocket on the leg of his fatigues and pulled out a large, clunky looking cell-phone. It was actually a satellite phone, capable of calling anywhere in the world.

“Excellent. Where’d you get it?”

“The Delt Major.”

“The bad guys might have tagged it,” Ralph said, meaning placed a chip inside the phone that sent out a periodic signal or “ping” that allowed it to be tracked.

“We’re not dead yet, are we?”

They’d been on the ground for over an hour, more than enough time for an air strike, drone strike or the insertion of a ground force.

“Good point,” Ralph said.

“How do you feel about calling MacDill?”

MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida was the headquarters of The United States Special Operations Command which controls not only Army Green Berets, but also Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force special operations forces. Green Berets hated being under a unified command and longed for the freewheeling days when they were under effective command of elements at The U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg North Carolina.

“I hate it,” Ralph said.

“Me too, but they’re our best chance of getting out before something else happens. Besides, where do we even go? The embassy? Do we try to link back up with what’s left of 716?”

“No,” Ralph said. “We don’t want the rest of 716 pulled into this. It’s the embassy for sure but . . . remember Dan Frech?”

Despite their situation, Ted Kehr smiled. Dan Frech was once an Army Ranger and now one crazy DEA agent working narcotics interdiction in Northern Burma. He and some of his guys had gotten themselves into a serious jam while going a drug lab raid not far from where Ralph and Ted’s Green Beret team had been working. ODA 716 overheard enough of the radio traffic to know Frech and his boys were in trouble. Captain Mel Harris and the rest of 716 never let a little thing like orders stand in the way of helping out the good guys. They paid off a few local warlords, hired a few of their fighters and launched a rescue mission.

“Not a guy you’re likely to forget,” Ted said.

“Let’s give him ring, see if he can’t get some of his local contractors to pull us out and get us back to Rangoon. Ted, obviously it’s your call but the further outside the chain of command we can get, the safer I’m going to feel.”

“Yeah. Okay, sounds good to me. 1-800-DEA-Rocks, right?”

It had been a pretty nasty business. Both 716 and DEA lost a few of their indigenous fighters. Penn’s forearm got grazed by small arms fire. One DEA agent ended up with a bad shoulder wound that Doc Dillon had a hard time stabilizing. After ODA 716 helped Frech and his men fight off the drug gang, they made their way to a clearing for the DEA choppers. Once they landed, Frech turned to them while the rest of his team was loading.

“Take this,” he said, handing Captain Harris a slip of paper. On it was a number, 232-76257. “That’s my priority phone number. Memorize it and burn the paper. I always answer or check it every hour. You guys get in a jam, call me.”

“We’ll never be able to memorize that,” Harris said.

“Sure you will,” Frech replied. “It’s DEA Rocks.”

Kehr had looked over Harris’ shoulder. Sure enough, on a numeric phone key pad 232-76257, spelled out ‘DEA Rocks.’

ODA 716 started laughing.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Harris said.

Frech winked at them, then sprinted onto the helicopter. It was the last time they'd seen him.

"Yeah," Ralph said, "but let's call him first and get our story straight while they're on the way out, okay?"

Ted nodded and punched in the numbers.

Frech picked up on the first ring.

"Frech."

"Frech, its Ted Kehr. I'm one of the--"

"I remember you, Ted."

"Um, I'm here with another guy and we'd appreciate it if you could send someone to pick us up and get us back to Rangoon."

"Where," Frech asked.

"North Burma. About 50 miles south west of Taunggyi."

“Two guys, total. Right?”

“Affirmative. And Dan . . . I know it’s asking a lot, but if you could keep this to yourself . . .”

“Understood. You’ve got to be on a sat phone, that far north,” Frech said.

“You’re right,” Ted replied.

“Okay, this will take a little time, but I can round up some equipment and we’ll trace you guys once we get close. Turn off your phone for two hours, save the batteries, then turn it back on. We’ll be close by then and pick up your signal on some kind of high tech tracing gear I don’t understand but know works. When you hear rotary wing aircraft, call me, okay? That’ll speed things up.”

“Yeah,” Ted said. “Hey Frech, we appreci-“

”No problem Ted. See you soon.”

Ted looked at Ralph. “He’s on his way.”

“We’d better get our story straight.” Ralph thought for a moment. “Okay, here’s what happened, we were shot down by SAMs. There’s a ton of Gremlin systems in use around here.”

SA-14 Gremlins were Surface to Air Missiles from a man-portable air defense missile system manufactured by the old Soviet Union. They were placed into service with the Red Army in 1974 and sold to everyone everywhere. Gremlins were all over the globe and still as lethal today as they were in 1974.

“What? Why don’t we just-“

“Because something’s wrong Ted. Someone pulled us off a high priority black mission to hit that compound. Someone else managed to put the touch on two SEALs and three Delta operators to stop us. I can’t imagine how they pulled it off but . . . if they can do that, who else is in on it? My point is, if we let on we know what really happened on those aircraft, we’re done . . . dead. We might not make it out of the Embassy. So, we play dumb, hope they, whoever ‘they’ are decides the best thing to do is let it go.”

Ted took a deep breath. As the ranking NCO it was his call.

“All right.”

“The flight must have made some of the drug dealers nervous, so they took us out. We got hit by a couple SAMs, they ignited the explosives-”

“Better yet,” Ted said, “you say that, I’ll say I fell asleep, woke up, the plane was on fire and filled with smoke, there were tears and punctures in the aircraft skin, dead guys everywhere, fire smoke. The fire was spreading to the explosives and I had no choice, I grabbed a parachute and jumped.”

“It’s got holes, but its plausible. Things like this don’t always make sense. It’ll work if we stick to it.”

The two hours turned in to more like three nerve racking hours before they finally heard the whoop whoop of helicopter blades in the distance. Ted called Frech and guided his choppers in. When they landed, the birds weren’t just carrying Burmese mercenaries. Frech was the first one off the helicopter and the mercenaries who fanned out on security were joined by three other fatigue clad, heavily armed DEA Agents.

“Wow, Concierge treatment,” Ralph said as he climbed aboard.

Frech grinned.

“There’re more of us waiting at Rangoon. In fact, DEA Burma isn’t doing drug interdiction at all today. We’re either here or waiting at the airport. We don’t forget our friends.”

The bird picked up with a yank and accelerated, moving southward. Ted leaned toward Frech and shouted loud enough to be heard over the rooters.

“Once we land, can you get us to the embassy?”

“It’s like that, is it?”

“Yeah,” Ted said.

Frech took his time and thought about it.

“I’ve got a place we can hole up for a while. It’s safe and we can talk this thing through, make sure there’s no mistakes. You won’t get a second chance with the embassy or military liaison, you know?”

“That’s a good idea, but just you okay? Nothing against your guys, we’re grateful but . . .”

“No problem Ted.”

Ted and Ralph leaned back and drew into themselves for the rest of the flight. As soon as the helicopter landed the DEA guys shoved them into a waiting Suburban with blacked out windows and drove off. After 15 minutes of twists and turns through Burmese neighborhoods, they pulled into a commercial looking building. The garage door shut behind them with a metallic rattle and clang. Frech hopped out.

“Got to check those weapons in here guys, then follow me.”

Once they left turned over their weapons to another agent, the DEA man led them through a door, up a flight of stairs and down a hallway before opening one of the doors and leading them inside. It was set up like a generic hotel room with living room furniture, two beds along the wall and a small kitchenette.

“There’s food and drinks in the fridge,” Frech said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He was true to his word. By the time Ted and Ralph sat down with bottles of cold water, Frech and another of the fatigued DEA agents were back. Frech dropped into a chair across from them. The other Agent stood near the door.

“Let’s hear it. What happened?”

They gave him the story: they fell asleep, woke up when someone yelled “Incoming SAM,” the planes exploded, caught on fire and filled with smoke. There were tears and punctures in the aircraft skin and dead guys everywhere. The fires were close to the explosives. Each man grabbed a parachute and jumped. The only wrinkle they gave him was omitting the CIA Base and Special Operators part. Instead they told him the other men were mercenaries and they’d been flown directly onto an airstrip on the Burmese coast and loaded onto the DC-3s.

“Ted, do me a favor and follow Paul down to the canteen.”

“No.”

“Yes or I’ll just call the embassy and have them pick you up.”

Ralph Jackson started to get out of his seat. They were going to get screwed.

“Hey!” The DEA agent named Paul pulled back the safety snap on his holster.

Ralph sank back down into the chair. Ted glared at Frech, then got up and followed Paul out the door.

Another DEA agent entered and took Paul’s place.

“Okay Ralph, let’s go through it again,” Frech said.

Frech heard him out, asked a few questions and then had Ralph swap places with Ted. When they were reunited 45 minutes later Frech held up both hands in a surrender gesture.

“Sorry guys but it was for your own good. You’re only going to get one chance with the military liaison and the CIA guys at the Embassy. I know who does their debriefs and he’s good.”

Frech walked to the fridge for a water, then sat back down.

“Okay, your stories are obviously a load of crap.”

“Wha-“

“Enough. Just listen to me. It’s obviously a load, but you both stuck to the story when I separated you. I’d expect some inconsistencies from a couple guys who woke up in a burning, smoke filled plane - nice touch by the way - but there’s lots of real holes.” Frech sighed.

“Fortunately, there’s no one to contradict you, is there?”

Ted and Ralph looked at him blankly. Frech snorted.

“They train you guys pretty good, don’t they.”

More blank looks.

“Okay, here’s a couple things I think will help you sell it. Turns out I was on a routine surveillance patrol when I saw a DC-3 a few hundred yards away. What really caught my attention was a surface to air missile launch that hit the plane. It burst into flames, trailed smoke, but managed to stay aloft long enough for a single figure to jump out and open a parachute. While I was in route to pick up the first survivor, I got a visual on a second one. That’s you Ralph. We got you first, then picked up Ted. Got it?”

Both men nodded.

“Then let’s go. I had Paul call the embassy, so they’re expecting us.”

“Dan,” Ted said.

“Yeah.”

“If there’s anything we left out, it’s all stuff you really don’t want to know about,” Ted said.

“Like what the in-flight meals were, how cramped everything was. Boring details, right?”

“Yeah, like that.”

Frech loaded them into the back of the same Suburban they’d arrived in. When they left the building, another Suburban everyone knew was loaded with armed men pulled in behind them and followed along. Ted and Ralph noticed there were no Americans this time - everyone except Frech was a Burmese contractor. After all, you couldn’t interrogate someone who wasn’t there.

Ralph and Ted were both exhausted and from the time they entered the embassy's gated compound on, everything was a blur. They were fed and allowed to sleep, but only for about three or four hours at a time. For two days they lived in the embassy basement, separated and questioned four times, once together and from then on separately. They never saw Frech again.

Finally State Department Security Officers drove them to the airport in the middle of the night and flew them to Special Operations Command at MacDill. When Ted and Ralph got off the plane, they were expected. Both men were escorted by 4 Military Policemen to private, separate rooms in the NCO quarters. Dress uniforms in their size, with their rank and official decorations awaited them. The MPs told them to shower, change clothes and be ready in 30 minutes. The two Green Berets looked at each other, then complied.

They were picked up in some sort of golf cart type vehicle and taken to the Special Operations Command Headquarters building, then marched directly into a large briefing room. Three men were waiting for them at a long table. Two chairs were in front of the table. The room was back lit, so Ralph and Ted could see the stars gleaming on the men's shoulders, but not the faces of the shadowy figures seated along the wall behind the Generals. No one identified themselves.

"Gentlemen, this panel has reviewed the transcripts and video your interrogations in the embassy in Burma. We also consulted with General Al Brunner about the mission and its parameters and reviewed the statement of DEA Agent Frech. Is there anything you wish to add or correct."

Neither Ted or Ralph was foolish enough to look at the other. They remained locked up at attention. Since they'd accurately reported the pre-flight segment of the mission and only omitted the treason of the Delts and Seals, neither wanted to change anything. One of the things Frech has stressed to them is never change anything, tell them you were stunned, half asleep, banged your head, whatever, but don't change anything.

"No sir," the two men said in unison.

"None of us believe this load of crap, okay? You and your team have been nothing but insubordinate prima donnas and now a lot of better men than you are dead. You always do it your way, but you two managed to survive. You're hiding something." He threw paper onto the table and glared at them. "I knew Bill Henry, he worked for me. If it were up to me you'd both face court-martial. I think you and your 'team' are nothing more than war criminals . . . but it's not up to me. Here's what's going to happen. And just so you know, A 716 is done. We're taking it apart, scattering your teammates and empty slotting the entire ODA for 6 months. Then we'll re-staff it with some real soldiers."

The General picked up and shuffled his papers, looked up.

"Staff Sergeant Kehr, you were on a forced extension of your most recent enlistment because we weren't going to pull you out of Burma just to re-enlist you. That extension is

terminated and you will receive an honorable discharge as part of a mandatory reduction in force.
By this time tomorrow you will be a civilian.”

“But sir-“

”At ease. You got a problem with that, we’ll go the court-martial route.”

“Sergeant Jackson, you have six months left on your enlistment and will be re-assigned as a range officer in the most faraway, isolated post on Fort Bragg. When your enlistment runs out, you will separate from the Army with an honorable discharge. Understand that?”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s it. Captain Grace!”

The MPs re-entered the room.

“There’s a C130 waiting for these two men. Take them from here to the plane, fly with them to Fort Bragg and turn them over to representatives of the Provost Marshal. Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

That's what happened. When they landed, Ralph and Ted didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. Ralph was taken by a separate jeep to his new duty assignment, a two room shack in the heart of Fort Bragg's no man's land. Ted was escorted from station to station where he turned in gear, arranged to be paid for his un-used leave, signed paperwork, was given a discharge physical and then locked out of his empty NCO quarters.

The MPs took him to the gate.

"Here's a key and a paid receipt for a storage locker," one of them said. "That's where all your personal items are. Here's your check book and a voucher for two weeks at the Carriage House Extended stay. There's the address and here's your cab."

"Mr. Kehr?"

Not Sergeant. Mr.

"Yes?"

"If you come back onto this base for any reason, you'll be arrested."

Ted climbed into the waiting cab which took him to his hotel. After he checked in he called his Pastor, told him he'd been RIFed or kicked out of the Army as part of a reduction in force and arranged to see him the next morning.

Lord, Ted prayed what is happening to me?

Ted hadn't slept well when he pulled into the Church parking lot to meet with Pastor Ron Sellers. Ron was waiting for him in the Pastor's study and pointed to a seat.

"Ted, I know you planned on making the Army a career, so I can't imagine how you feel."

"Disoriented Ron. Like . . . I don't know."

During their friendship Pastor Ron had always been good at drawing out a somewhat private Ted Kehr. When they were done talking Ron prayed with him and Ted had to admit, he felt better, now some curiosity was mixed in with the sense of loss. He had his whole life in front of him and who knew what the Lord might do with it?

Ron walked him to the door and stopped at the threshold.

"I hope you don't mind, but I've made a couple calls on your behalf. If I hear anything I'll let you know."

"What kind of calls . . . I mean . . ."

“Let’s see if anything comes of it first. Of course, you’re not committed to anything, but you’re a unique man with a unique gifting. Keep an open mind, okay?”

“I’ll keep an open mind. You know where I’ll be, just leave a message with the front desk until I get a new cell phone.”

After two days Ted didn’t hear back from Pastor Ron and in fact forgot about it. He spent the evenings at the towns surrounding Fayetteville, hoping to reduce the risk he’d run into anyone he knew. He went to the several matinees during the day and some of the movies were actually pretty good. He ate at two different steak houses and had his eye on a third one.

On the third day Ted ate breakfast then took a stroll around a nearby park. Of course there was a lake, so he sat on a park bench and watched the ducks, lost in thought. Someone sat beside him at the far end of the bench. The guy looked vaguely familiar, so Ted smiled, nodded and went back to the ducks.

“Ted Kehr?”

“Ted who?”

“Ted, I’m Fred Allison, a friend of Ron Sellers. We belong to the same . . . its kind of like a fraternal organization, but we like to call it a Fellowship. When Ron called me about you I flew over to see if we could talk.”

“I know who you are. You’re that TV preacher that takes off his tie and whips it around . . . Freddy Lee Allison!”

“Um, that’s kind of a stage name. Look, it helps me reach people for Christ, so I’m willing to do it.”

Allison looked uncomfortable.

“Why are you here, Mr. Allison?”

“Ron told me you’d just been discharged from the Army and our . . . Fellowship could use a guy like you. I’d like you to consider a new career.”

XXXXXX Merry Christmas, friends. If you’d like to read more about Ted and what happens XXXXX next, you’ll enjoy The Diaries of Pontius Pilate, then Separation of Church and State and finally, Baghdad Burning. They make great Christmas gifts, just go to my website - josephmaxlewis.com - and click one of the “Buy the Books” links.

Blessings, Joseph Max Lewis