

# WINGMAN

BOOK 1



MACK  
MALONEY



# Wingman

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**Mack Maloney**



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# PROLOGUE

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HE KNEW THE AIRPLANE was coming.

It was an early spring day. The sun was shining. The whole mountain was melting, coming to life again after the long, cold winter.

The airplane was still some distance away, but the sound was unmistakable. He closed his eyes and saw it. Small engine, no more than 200 horse. It was a Piper Cub—10, maybe 15 miles to the southeast. One of the airplane's pistons was misfiring slightly.

He waited.

For two years, one month and six days he had lived on the top of the New Hampshire mountain. The camp—nothing more than a shack with a bed and a wood stove—had belonged to his family years before. He had visited there many times while growing up, so he knew the isolated mountain area well. But two years of trapping rabbits, opening cans and drinking nothing but stream water or melted snow was no life for a fighter pilot. He hadn't seen or talked to a soul in all that time. And until he had heard this airplane approaching, he wasn't sure that there was anything flying anywhere. He wasn't even sure if there were any people left.

Two years—a long time to be alone. When he first climbed the mountain, he was convinced it was to escape the chaos he envisioned would sweep the country. Did it ever happen? Did America commit national suicide after it lost World War III? Lost, not on the battlefield, but by the actions of a Russian mole who waited until America and its allies were victorious before he showed his true colors? Would he have felt differently if the traitor had been someone other than the Vice President?

He waited another hour before the airplane came into view. It was at the other end of the valley, flying slowly, being buffeted by the mountain cross winds. As it flew closer, he saw it was towing something—a sign like those once used to carry advertisements. Even with his extraordinary vision, it was still too far away for him to read. How strange it would be, he thought, if the first plane he had seen since the end of the war was pulling a sign for suntan oil.

Two years—it was a long time to think. That Christmas Eve. He had just arrived at Cape Canaveral to begin pilot training for the Space Shuttle. It was then he had heard of the Russian attack on Western Europe. SCUD missiles. Tens of thousands of them. Millions of Europeans dead—not by nuclear holocaust, but by nerve gas. A massive invasion of Western Europe had followed. Then China had been nuked. The Free World had struck back. He had been ordered to rejoin his unit, the 16th Tactical Fighter Wing, known in peacetime as the famous Thunderbirds aerobatic demonstration team. A day later they had been in Rota, Spain, bombing up for their first mission against the invading Red

armies. War had broken out all around the world. Any country who'd had a dispute with its neighbor had decided to have it out now. Great battles raged; the earth was in flame. But nowhere had the horrors compared with the Battle for Western Europe. There had been everything from hand-to-hand combat on the ground to killer laser satellites duelling high above in deep space. His squadron had been in the middle, flying above the killing fields, battling anything and everything that the Russians put into the air. For two months it had gone on relentlessly. But finally, it had been in the air that the battle had been won. The final push. Two straight days. Thirty-seven straight sorties for him. No sleep. No food. Living only on the adrenaline rush one gets when his country is at stake. It had been the largest air battle ever fought. More than 4000 aircraft, jammed into less than 200 square miles of airspace. It had been incredible. Even the soldiers on the ground stopped fighting to watch. And in the end, it had been the air forces of the Free World, led by the Americans, which won the battle. But America had still lost the war ...

As the Piper flew even closer, he saw the tow sign's words were made up of letters of different styles and uneven shapes. It was apparently cut from several different types of airborne ads. The thing looked like a flying ransom note.

Two years—it was a long time to spend on theories. When did the Vice President decide it was time to turn? Was it after the ceasefire had been agreed to? Or after the armistice had been signed? Or had it been after his henchmen assassinated the President and his cabinet? No matter. When the battles were over and America wasn't looking, he had turned off the Star Wars defense just long enough for 150 Russian nuclear missiles to obliterate America's MX and Titan ICBMs while they sat in the silos. The surprise attack had blown away most of the country's mid-section along with the nuclear deterrent. Another sneak attack on America. Had it been the only way the enemies of freedom could defeat her?

The Piper was now right in front of him, slow enough so he could read the sign: HUNTER-REPORT TO OTIS—JONES

It sounded crazy. Was the message for someone who was out shooting deer and for some reason had to report back to a guy named Otis at the request of Mr. Jones? Who were they? Game wardens?

Then, as the plane flew on past, it hit him. Could *he* be the "Hunter" they were looking for? Had he been up on the mountain so long that he didn't even recognize his own name? Otis *had* to mean Otis Air Force Base, out on Cape Cod. And that meant there was only one Jones it could be—*General* Seth Jones, hero of the European Theater. The man the allies had followed into battle against the Russian Air Force. The man who had almost single-handedly won the war. The man on whose wing he had flown for two years in peacetime with the Thunderbirds and two months in wartime with the 16th. Jones was the man who had nominated him for the space program. The man who flew with his father

in Viet Nam. The man who had watched over him since the day his parents' plane crashed. The man who had named him his own wingman the very first day he had climbed into his F-16. And now Jones wanted him to report to Otis.

He was packed and gone by noon.

# CHAPTER ONE

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IT TOOK ALMOST THREE weeks, but he finally reached Otis. The cold morning fog was just lifting off the cranberry bogs, but the warmth of the growing spring would soon be evident. The sun was coming up. The base was starting to come alive. Smoke was pouring out of what had to be the mess hall. He could see lights in the barracks, smell the exhausts from trucks being started, even hear an occasional voice.

But he hadn't yet heard that one sound he was waiting for ...

What was the general doing here? Could it be that people finally came to their senses and realized that the U.S. really *did* win the war? If not, what was the state of the country these days? What country *was* it these days? He had no idea ...

He approached the base cautiously. He had spent the night in the woods nearby, the last time he'd have to sleep in a battered makeshift lean-to—or so he hoped. Standing at the very edge of the base perimeter, he pressed against the chain link fence and peered in. For all he knew, this could be a Russian base, or that of some kind of Russian client's occupying army.

Or was this a base camp of the army of The New Order? What was The New Order? Hunter could never really figure it out. Even before the dust had settled from the Russian sneak attack on the American ICBM sites, the Vice President was issuing orders to all military personnel still in the country to start enforcing The New Order. Laws that said there would no longer be 50 states, that America would be broken up into a dozen small countries and a patchwork of free territories. The traitor had said this was the settlement he had reached with the Russian Peace Committee to end the war—the war that everyone conveniently forgot American forces had won. But the swiftness that the new ruling came down smacked of years of pre-planning. (God only knew how long ago the Russian moles had infiltrated the American government!) There were so many questions: Why had some in-country National Guard units immediately started doing the Vice President's bidding—destroying military equipment, burning state capitol buildings, universities and libraries, blowing up TV and radio transmitters? How long had these units been compromised? The idea had been to complete the isolation of the American citizen. Not to let the ordinary Joe catch on that the Soviet Armed Forces were lying in cinders scattered all over Europe and Asia, decisively beaten by the Free World. It was the Big Lie. Win the battle, lose the war.

Hunter cautiously made his way along the base perimeter. Had the sign-towing Piper been just a ruse? Was the great General Seth Jones really dead, buried on the European battlefield? Was Hunter being set up? Logic again intervened. Crucial questions needed crucial answers. He needed proof.

He stayed close to the fence, passing through deep woods until he saw the main gate. He stayed hidden. The gate was manned by a single sentry. One look at the soldier and he knew things had



changed.

The man was not standard military. His uniform was a bright green and he was wearing a chrome helmet, a headpiece usually reserved for parades and ceremonies. Nor was the sentry carrying standard military firearm. Instead, he was armed with a cowboy-style pistol and holster, and a double-barrel, sawed-off shotgun.

A bizarre flag was flying above the guardhouse. It was a mishmash of green, blue and white jumbled up in a field of uneven stars, stripes and what looked like dollar signs. Below the flag attached to the roof of the guard house was a sign that read: Flight Operations Center—Armed Forces of the Northeast Economic Zone. Well, at least it didn't *sound* communist. More mysteries. More questions to be answered.

Then Hunter heard the sound he was waiting for. Off in the distance, probably at the far reaches of the base, came the distinctive rumble of a jet engine warming up. The noise filled him. For the first time in more than two years, he felt warm. He was ready for anything now. "Just get me airborne again ..."

He emerged from the woods. The chrome-helmeted cowboy saw him coming and had his gun ready. Hunter had forgotten that his appearance wasn't exactly—well, friendly-looking. His hair was beyond shoulder-length and his beard covered nearly half his chest. His clothes were threadbare. He was carrying his meager belongings in an old laundry bag and he had the M-16 and ammunition belt in full view.

Just as he was about to speak to the guard, he heard a roar and instinctively looked in that direction. There was a trail of smoke and an orange spit of light, burning through the morning mist, but the outline was unmistakable. He felt a surge run through him—it was *that* feeling again. He watched as the fighter jet quickly disappeared into the low clouds.

The sentry raised his gun and cocked it.

Hunter smiled and raised his hand in the universal sign of peace. "Major Hawker Hunter to see General Jones," he said.

Five minutes later, the sentry led him into a small office. Sitting behind a dilapidated desk was a man he thought he'd never see again: General Seth Jones.

Hunter couldn't believe it. Jones actually looked *younger*. He was trimmer, leaner and meaner-looking. His hair had grown out of its trademark military whiffle, and the resulting locks with a tinge of gray gave him a kind of professorial look.

The last time Hunter had seen him was at the NATO base in Rota. The squadron had just got word of the destruction of the American nuclear ICBM arsenal and that their forces were to be disarmed. Finnish Peace troops, the enforcers of the bogus armistice, had arrived and started systematically destroying the 16th TFW aircraft, while the Americans stood by helplessly, under orders from the

Vice President. It was only later—when the VP started broadcasting the Rules of the New Order from Moscow—did they realize he was a traitor. When the horrible destruction of the Wing's F-16s was completed, the Finns handcuffed Jones and drove him away. Hunter was convinced he'd never see him again.

But here he was. And the general proved to be still all-Jones Boy.

“What's this, corporal?” Jones said, putting on his sternest military face. “Another veteran looking for a handout?” Despite Hunter's long hair and beard, Jones could still see his handsome, oddly hawk-like features. Sloppy appearance or not, he knew the young man was still the best fighter pilot in the world.

Hunter snapped to a mock attention.

“Major Hunter, reporting for duty, suh!”

“You're out of uniform, Major,” the general said.

“So are you, sir,” Hunter replied, eyeing the senior officer's bright green, rather garish uniform. If the sentry wasn't still present, Hunter thought he would have probably embraced his old friend.

The general fingered his loud green coverall and said, “Do I detect insolence in your voice, Major? I'll have you know this is the standard uniform of the Armed Forces of the Northeast Economic Zone Air Patrol. I wear it proudly.”

Hunter looked around the spare office, trying not to laugh out loud. A desk, a chair, a lamp and a coffee machine in the corner, and that was it. It was a far cry from Jones's surroundings back in the Thunderbirds days when his office was jammed with hundreds of mementos, including photos of just about every fighter plane ever made, plus several computers, a bank of telephones and telecommunications gear and a well-stocked, top-shelf, wet bar.

“Where have you been, Major? Hibernating?”

“Worse than that, sir,” Hunter replied, still standing ramrod straight at attention. “I've been contemplating my existence.”

“Obviously, you're suffering from post-World War III syndrome,” the general said. “It's been going around.”

Hunter continued. “Got a bunch of books, went up to a mountain and tried to find the meaning of life, sir.”

“Jesus, not that!”

“'Fraid so, sir.”

“And what conclusions did you reach, Major?”

Hunter paused a moment for effect, then replied, “Well, sir, I discovered that every man has to believe in something.”

“And ...?”

“And,” Hunter said, looking around the general's empty office. “And, I believe I'll have a drink

“sir.”

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“Scotch?”

“Neat, sir.”

With the wave of his hand, Jones dismissed the properly impressed, if slightly confused sentry. He walked around the desk and hugged Hunter.

“Good to see you, Hawk,” he said.

“Same here, sir.”

Jones locked the office door and broke out his emergency bottle.

“Had breakfast yet?” he asked.

Despite the early morning hour, they sat and ate stale doughnuts, while mixing the no-brand whiskey in with cups of steaming coffee. Then they talked.

“Well, Hawk,” Jones said, swigging his laced coffee. “What the hell happened to you after Rota?”

“You really want to know?”

“Sure as hell,” Jones said, smiling. “You tell me your story and I’ll tell you mine.”

Hunter took a deep breath. It seemed like so long ago. “Okay,” he said. “Hang onto your hat.”

Hunter began his story. After Jones had been led away, everyone took for granted he was heading for a firing squad. The members of the 16th scattered. But Hunter was determined to get back to America, or what was left of it. He knew there was an American sub base up in Loch Lomond in Scotland, and figured it was the only place where ships might be trying to get back home. So he walked. Right through Spain, through France and, after bribing a Frenchman to take him across the Channel, right up through England. It took him more than two months to reach Loch Lomond only to find the place filled with ex-GIs who had had the same idea as he. There were at least 10,000 men trying to get on no more than a half dozen Navy warships docked in the harbor. No one was in charge. The base was in a state of utter chaos.

Then he got lucky. At one corner of the sprawling base he found a battalion of Marines. They had set up an orderly camp on a hill inside the base and were grimly going about the task of staying civilized in the middle of all the disorder. Hunter fell in with them after pulling rank on a couple of the camp’s guards and demanding to be taken to their commanding officer. His name was Captain John “Bull” Dozer and after a brief talk, he offered Hunter some grub and a place to sleep.

Dozer’s outfit was going by the curious name of the 7th Cavalry—odd because the Marine Corps had no cavalry, per se. Over a pot of coffee, Dozer explained to Hunter that his unit had been fighting in Turkey when the last great battles of the war were raging. At one point they were surrounded by four Soviet army regiments near Ankara. Yet his Marines fought ferociously, and, unlike Custer’s 7th Cavalry, caused the enemy to back off the siege and rethink the situation. By the time Dozer got his troops to more defensible ground, the war in Europe had been won and the Russians had agreed to a ceasefire.

Dozer promised his men that if they stuck together, he would get them home. He commandeered two Turkish airliners at gunpoint and forced the pilots to fly his 900 soldiers to England. His goal was Loch Lomond and they had arrived two weeks before. When Hunter told him America was his goal too, they shook hands and agreed to work toward it together.

By the second afternoon, the six ships in port were overflowing with the survivors. One by one they disappeared over the horizon. Hunter knew their chances of making it to America were nil.

Two days later the enormous outline of an aircraft carrier appeared off to the south. It was the *John F. Kennedy*. The captain came ashore and word quickly spread through the 5,000 remaining enlisted men and Marines that they could hitch a ride to America as long as it was an orderly evacuation. The 7th Cavalry saddled up, and with Hunter tagging along, were among the first group to be taken aboard the great ship.

The voyage west took ten days, and as the faint outline of Manhattan appeared on the horizon, questions ran through the minds of the men on board. What was the country like now? Was there any country left to come home to?

They got their answers soon enough. As the ship neared the harbor they could see that what looked to be a mist enveloped the city. The mist was actually smoke. The city was burning. A collective shudder went through the men on the ship when they got a look at the Statue of Liberty. She was headless. The top had been blown off by some unknown catastrophe. As the *JFK* neared a docking point just off the southern tip of Manhattan, sounds of gunfire could be heard coming from the city streets. Welcome to New Order America, was all that Hunter could think of.

The ship docked and the passengers began filing off. Some stayed in groups, others just disappeared into the streets alone. Not many of them had any destination planned. Hunter gladly joined the Marines as they smartly formed up and marched down the gangplank.

Dozer told him that the 7th had decided to stay together no matter what. Technically, they were no longer Marines and Dozer was no longer their commanding officer. But they agreed to stay with him and try to reach Fort Meade, Maryland. The Marine captain asked Hunter to go with them, but Hunter had made up his mind that if New York City was an indication of the state of the country—and he was certain it was—then he wanted no part of it. He had already set his sights on getting to the White Mountain in New Hampshire. Still he knew it would be wise to stay with the Marines until they were out of the horrible Beirut-like Manhattan.

Dozer formed his troops into one main column and gave them the order to march. The destination was the George Washington Bridge. The sound of gunfire was everywhere. No one had any clue as to who was fighting whom, but most of the destroyed equipment they came across bore the markings of the National Guards of New York and New Jersey. Were the two states battling it out for possession of the island?

They were nearing Central Park East when they ran into trouble. Scouts stationed ahead of the column got word back to Dozer that a small group of armed men were holding two women at gunpoint three blocks away. Using hand signals, Dozer instructed his men to surround the gunmen. When one of the gang members raised his rifle the armed men were cut down in a volley of murderous gunfire.

And then a strange thing happened. One by one, civilians started to appear. They had been hiding in doorways, alleys and in buildings. Shyly, cautiously at first, they began to emerge from their hiding places. Soon, there were a couple of hundred of them—old men, women, children. Some of them were wounded; all of them were caught in the terrifying madness of the anarchy in New York City.

One man was particularly happy. He was running up and down the street, waving a small American flag and yelling “The Marines are here!” Just as he was running up to Hunter and Dozer, a shot rang out. The man’s chest exploded from the sniper’s bullet. He fell right into Hunter’s arms. He gasped and tried to speak, but all that came out was “... Why ... shoot ... me?”

Then he died.

Hunter laid the man’s body down on the street. He was about 65 years old, Hunter figured, just one of millions of New Yorkers. He located the man’s wallet and looked inside. His driver’s license said he was Saul Wackerman. A photo showed him, his white-haired wife and two daughters. Another photo showed his son—apparently an Israeli soldier—in full uniform.

Hunter looked back at the man. He was still gripping the American flag, so much so that Hunter had some difficulty prying it from his fingers. He folded the flag and put it in his own pocket. The look on Saul Wackerman’s face would haunt the pilot for many years to come.

Then Dozer showed Hunter something which would also haunt him: one of the gunmen had been carrying a AK-47 Kalishnikov assault rifle. Obviously, there were plenty of guns in New York City these days. What was startling was the AK-47 was the standard issue rifle for the Soviet Army.

Several hours later they reached the George Washington Bridge. The Marines were heading south. Hunter was going north, determined to get to the mountain in New Hampshire before the whole world came crashing down. He thanked Dozer and bid him and his troops farewell, knowing he would never see any of them again.

The general listened to it all, quietly sipping his morning brew and at one point, breaking out a box of Havana cigars.

Hunter reached into his pocket and produced a piece of cloth. He unfolded it. It was the flag he had taken from Saul Wackerman.

“We could both be shot just for your having that,” Jones said nonchalantly.

“So that’s what it’s come to,” Hunter said defiantly. He felt the flag for a moment, fingering the bloodstains that dotted one edge of it. He always carried it with him so he would never forget what it was like ... before. He folded it carefully and returned it to his pocket. “They’ll have to pry it from my hands.”

fingers, before they take it away from me.”

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“They probably will,” Jones said smiling grimly.

There was silence between them for a few moments. Then Jones clapped his hands together and reached for the bottle.

“Well, shit, Hawk,” he said, freshening his coffee. “That’s one hell of a story. No wonder you’re headed for the hills.”

Hunter had to laugh. It must have sounded like an incredible adventure. And he didn’t even tell him the part about how he had met and bedded down with a beautiful girl along the way in France.

“So what happened to you?” he asked Jones, reaching for the whiskey bottle himself. “We thought we’d seen the last of you when the Finns drove you away.”

Jones let out a loud laugh and clapped his hands again. “I was in Paris, Hawk, old buddy. And don’t you miss some party, boy!”

# CHAPTER TWO

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WHEN THE NEW ORDER came down and the general was led away by the Finns, Hunter had assumed the old man would be thrown in prison at best, or worse, executed. Actually, the officer had a free ride to the French capital where his handlers inexplicably set him free. Once there, he met many other ex-military officers who were of the same mind as he: We won the war and we still got screwed. With nothing else to do, they proceeded to drink the Paris nightclubs dry.

“It was great,” Jones testified. “More booze than I’ve ever seen.”

Paris was one of the major cities Hunter thought he was prudent in avoiding during his odyssey in Scotland. He had visions of deserted streets filled only with rotting corpses, its beautiful buildings in ruins, the curtains drawn on the proud French republic, finally defeated.

“You’d be surprised how good a shape the city was in,” Jones told him. “Of course, considering that the largest battle ever fought in the history of mankind took place about 30 clicks away, and that half the people had either been gassed or had *vamoosed* before the first shot was even fired, the ones who stayed were great. Writers, politicians, musicians, artists, old bucks who had fought the Nazis. These people just kept on celebrating. They didn’t give a shit who won. They didn’t give a shit that the Russians—or what was left of them—were just over the next hill. They just wanted to get back to the food, booze and getting laid. Everything else was secondary to them.

“I was traveling around with a bunch of crazy Brits. RAF guys. We busted up the town pretty good. But after a few weeks, we realized that the city was getting real hot—real fast. We knew Iva was just over the hill, licking his wounds and getting ready to play the conquering heroes.” He spat out disgust. “The filthy swine! We kicked their asses and they made like they just took over the world.”

“They did,” Hunter reminded him.

The general went on. A bunch of senators and government bozos were stuck in Paris after the armistice was signed. They had the Concorde—the famous SST—waiting at Orly Airport. Jones said the seat on that plane couldn’t have been bought for a million dollars. The politicians were getting itchy to get out of Europe before it went Red. Trouble was, the pilot never showed up. Now they needed someone to fly it. Somehow, they knew Jones was in town.

“They got word to me while I was shitfaced, sleeping under a table in a bar on the Left Bank. Or was it the Right Bank? Anyway, they sobered me up and fed me. Then, we loaded the sucker up with French wines and chow, and it was *oeuvre!*”

He clapped his hands in joy, just thinking about it. “You should have come to Paris, Hawk, man. We had a hell of the time there!”

He got up and started another pot of coffee brewing. Hunter was astounded at the general’s ability

to land on his feet. There he was, crossing the Atlantic lashed to a bulkhead on the *JFK* in the middle of a hurricane, and Jones made the trip supersonically, in three hours, drinking the best wine and eating the best food in the process.

“It was the last congressional boondoggle flight in history,” the general continued. “We put down in Washington, because New York City looked too hot to handle. These guys didn’t want any part of it. Half of them were on their way to Weather Mountain. You know, that place near DC where they have a fully stocked city right inside the mountain and all the big shots are supposed to go when the bomb was dropped?”

Hunter had heard of the place.

“Well, I don’t know how many of them made it past the door, but they were telling me about the place. They had enough stuff hidden away to last them for years. The place is so big inside they even have a lake there. These guys claimed you could water ski on it. One senator said there was even a plan to round up all the best call girls in Washington right before the shit hit the fan and get them down there too. You know, just to give them all something to do while they waited for the dust to settle? Yeah, we had our share of great leaders, huh? They needed women to continue the human race with. Let their descendants crawl out of the cave and run things. You know, keep it in the family. But can you imagine what kind of a bastard is produced when a politician knocks up a hooker?”

The thought of it sent a shiver down Hunter’s spine. He took a slug of his whiskey-laced coffee.

Jones did the same, lit up a cigar and went on with his story. Once he touched down at Andrews Air Force Base outside of Washington, the politicians bolted off the plane and were gone without so much as a thank you. Except for one of them.

“One guy did give me a bag of French francs,” Jones said, blowing smoke rings. “Big deal, I thought at the time. They were probably worth all of twenty-five bucks, and that was in France! He thought he was doing me this big favor and all he cared about was that his ass was home, so he was in a generous mood. Typical politician. Well, I hung onto them Frenchies, a wise move, I found out later.”

“Andrews was pretty much abandoned. There were a few creeps around. Left behind GIs, MPs. These screwball National Guard guys. People like that. All of them were armed to the teeth and looking for trouble. I ignored them, but they had their eye on the plane. I saw a bunch of aircraft that had been blown up by some good little soldiers. Some assholes following the New Order to the letter, I suppose. Air Force One was there, or what was left of it. Lot of F-15s, gone. Pieces of them, scattered everywhere. It made me sick to look at them.”

Jones became quiet for a moment. Hunter knew the general was thinking of the wasted, destroyed jets.

“I was beat and I had nowhere to go, so I slept for about two days right in the Concorde. Finished off the food and booze, then I realized that I could be sleeping in a real bed somewhere. I found some LC’s office with a hideaway bed. I stayed there for two days, and you know, during the night some



assholes sneaked down to the runway and blew up the SST? God, I'd heard of following orders, but some of these people carried it a bit too far."

Hunter nodded. Another example of a waste of technology. When would anyone get around to building a supersonic airliner again?

"I bummed around DC for a while," Jones said, stirring his coffee. "There were some people still left. All the restaurants were open. It was nearly business as usual, except they were practically giving the food away. Dollars were as valuable as used toilet paper, but I found out that people would take coins, including my francs. It didn't matter that quarters, dimes and nickels were all clad coins with not enough silver to fill a tooth. These people treated them like they were pure through and through. There were even people running around with *real* silver and gold coins. So they loved to see me use my francs."

Jones soon took residence in an abandoned swank Georgetown townhouse. It was his home for three months.

"It was party time there too," he said. "All over DC. Food, booze and broads. I was out in a bar every night. It's great when you don't have to go to work. Met a lot of funny people. But unfortunately, I also met a lot of people carrying guns, and not just .32 caliber water pistols either. It started getting tense. Pretty soon there were shootouts every night. It was Dodge City. I figured it was just a matter of time before a stray bullet would catch my ass, so I started thinking about getting out."

"Then I heard some of these new little countries were starting navies, armies, militias, things like that and they needed military people to help. I talked to a guy, who knew another guy who had a friend who knew about this job. Commander of the Northwest Economic Zone's Air Patrol—'ZAP,' for short. A little bulky, but it sounded good to me. They had a little money to spend and they were lucky. Most of their National Guard units were never turned on by the disarmament weirdos, so there were still a few guys around who knew how to take an order. I tell you, troops like that are a rare commodity these days."

Jones had traveled to Boston and met with the leaders of the Northeast Economic Zone. They promised him almost complete freedom. Just as long as he paid lip service to the New Order rules.

"You know, no radios, no TV, no old uniforms, no Stars and Stripes." Jones's voice cracked slightly when he mentioned the ban on the American flag. "That's why we have these stupid pansy color uniforms on, and that's why that candyass, three-dollar-bill flag is flying over this place."

"But I've always liked the Cape, and they let me fly, so here I came. Been here about a year and a half."

But Hunter was confused. Fly? The last time he'd heard, one of the New Order's rules—the most important one in his eyes—was that all military aircraft had to be dismantled as part of the demilitarization agreement. But he had heard jets at the base. Then, as if on cue, the sound of a jet taking off filled the office, shaking the coffee pot slightly.

Jones read his mind.

“We have a few planes here, Hawk,” the general said, his smile looking like the cat that ate the canary.

“So I can hear,” Hunter said. “But how’d you get around the demilitarization order?”

The general gave out a loud “Ha!” and waved his hand. “We were lucky, Hawk. And the traitors—our so-called Vice President and the rest of them—were stupid. Their New Order said ‘dismantle all the combat aircraft’ when it should have said ‘destroy all combat aircraft.’ so what do you think the smart people in Europe did? They just started taking the planes apart, cataloging the numbers and packing them away. And who the hell was going to stop them? The UN? The Finns? The Russians? No way. So these enterprising sorts packed all the pieces away, put it on ships and sent the ships everywhere and anywhere, just before the commies moved in.”

“Every war has its profiteers,” Hunter said.

“You get the idea,” the general said, pouring him another cup of coffee and adding a dash of booze. “Now, don’t get me wrong. A lot of planes were destroyed. I mean, look what happened to us.”

Hunter well remembered the day when the Finnish observers arrived and systematically blew up the squadron’s 12 remaining F-16s.

“Yeah, nice guys, those Finns,” the general said, digressing for a moment. “They live in the armpit country of Europe and spend most of their time sucking up to the Russians.”

Hunter felt a surge of rage flow through him. What a waste of money and technology?

“Anyway,” Jones continued, lighting up a massive cigar. “The New Order boys also screwed up by not including other military aircraft like cargo planes and tankers. Copters. And they didn’t mention anything about de-commissioned aircraft either.”

Hunter’s vision of a flightless world was happily coming to an end.

“You’ve been to Wright-Patterson,” Jones said in a puff of smoke. “You know how many planes were in mothballs there?”

“Hundreds, I would imagine,” Hunter said, adding some hooch to his own coffee. Wright-Patterson Field in Ohio, Hunter knew, was the location of the Air Force’s surplus aircraft storage area. It was like an elephant’s graveyard for old planes; especially the sophisticated ones that had some years behind them but were too damned expensive to send to the scrap heap. So instead of shredding them, the Air Force just plugged all the holes, drained the tanks and had them sit out at Wright-Patterson to use in case of an emergency.

“Thousands,” Jones corrected him. “And most of them just needed the screws tightened and the oil changed and they were ready to fly.”

A tinge of panic took a swipe at him. “But, *what* is Ohio these days? Who’s running things there?”

“No one, which is fine with us,” Jones hauled out a map that was so new, it looked as if the ink

still wasn't dry. It was the first time Hunter had seen the new countries and territories of America. "Ohio is now a Free State. In other words, it's an open area. No government. At least for the time being. A couple of guys out there realized they were sitting on a bonanza and opened up shop. And these little countries or regions or states—or whatever they are—came running because everyone wanted to start their own air force. It's an airplane supermarket. We've got a couple of guys out there right now, bidding on some planes."

Hunter instantly wanted to see the place.

"What are you shopping for?" he asked.

"Mostly small stuff, fighters, attack craft. They've got everything. A lot of heavy bomber merchandise. B-58s, B-47s, even a couple B-36s." The general rose and poured himself a third cup of joe and added the mandatory splash of whiskey. "But we can't fool around with the heavies. We can't afford them and the runway here won't take a lot of it. Way too short. And where would we put them?"

"And what would you do with them?"

"Exactly," Jones replied with satisfaction. "The people running all these little air forces think the bigger the better. Now, I'm sure a lot of them are thinking of converting their B-47 into a cargo plane and, in some cases it will work.

"But you can be sure that some of these clowns are thinking differently. Some of these states are being run by the typical crooked and/or stupid politician who suddenly woke up and found he was king. Hell, this so-called Vice President—what's his name again, Benedict Arnold?—appointed half of them. God knows what deals he made before he traded in his stars and bars for a hammer and sickle.

"Well, what happens when someone in the country next door doesn't want to pay a flyover tax or money at the tolls? Or starts fishing in the other guy's river? How much will it take before one of these pisspots in control gets mad enough and orders his B-36s to go and flatten the other guy's capital? It's already happening! They've been having a hell of a misunderstanding down near Florida and Alabama. Blowing the shit out of each other. Using gasoline bombs, napalm, terrible stuff."

"Napalm?" Hunter said, stirring his coffee with a pencil. "You can get napalm these days?"

"Oh yeah," Jones said, relighting his stogie. "Anyone who wants it can get 'palm from the Middle Aks."

"Mid-who?"

"Mid-Aks. The Middle Atlantic Conference States. Everything from Delaware and Pennsylvania down to Georgia. New Jersey doesn't count. The 'Aks. They're real dangerous, Hawk. They were sitting on a lot of military hardware when the balloon went up and they must have either hid ninety percent of the shit when the New Order came in, or made a deal to keep it all because they still have a lot of it. I mean these guys are armed to the teeth and then some with tanks, PCs, howitzers. And the

have a lot of men in uniform too. Lot of scumbags living down there even before the war. Now, at least, they're employed."

He let out a snort and took a healthy swig from his coffee mug.

"We'll be fighting them here next," he said, a touch of nervous caution in his voice. "They're already making noise. They took over several little territories around Kentucky and Tennessee. Just rolled over them. Sherman-to-the-sea type stuff. They have Fort Knox and made themselves rich. Now they want to talk to my bosses about 'Mutual Defense Treaties' and all this happy horseshit. It's a joke! They have a bunch of crooks running the show and they can use a whole army as enforcers. I like to kick their asses."

"How are your ... bosses?" Hunter asked.

"Ah, they're okay," Jones said. "They were smart enough to know that if you can't have a big army, you'd better have a good air force. Especially with all the coastline they have to protect. From old New Hampshire, to Boston Harbor, the whole Cape out here, right down to Long Island. They'll probably get Maine someday, too. Right now, that's a no-man's-land.

"They pretty much leave us alone down there. They give me money and I pay everyone and what's ever left over, I invest in spare parts and start saving for some more airplanes. We fly up to Boston every few days, buzz the city, just to let them know we're around. The people up there like it. They like to think someone's watching over them."

Jones returned to the map again. "We fly out to the Berkshires, go up around Mt. Washington, skirt down around Connecticut. That's about the range of our patrols. We could fly right over New York City if we wanted to, but the place is so heavy, you never know what they'll shoot up at you. You think it was bad when you were there? It's incredible down there now. Everyone has a gun, a missile or a tank. And all they do is fight each other for the right to call this block or that apartment house 'their turf.' They enjoy it. Every man's a king and the fighting never stops. And it's a great cover for what really goes on down there, and I mean all kinds of smuggling. Guns, drugs, women, missiles, explosives, gasoline, booze—you name it. Enough parts to build your own goddamn B-52, if you have the gold or the silver or whatever to pay for it. And I know for a fact the Mid-Aks run most of the guns into New York City and trade them for protection—a free rein in smuggling stuff in and out."

Hunter's thoughts suddenly flashed back to Dozer and the heroic 7th Cavalry. Who knows what ever happened to them?

"We've seen a little action, mostly pirate ships and stuff," Jones said, helping himself to his fourth pick-me-up of the morning. "We've had some strange doings lately though."

He drained his mug and stood up.

"Come on," he said, pulling on his jacket. "I'll show you what we're flying these days."

Hunter thought he'd never ask.

# CHAPTER THREE

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WALKING OUT INTO THE brisk morning air, Jones began to show Hunter around the base.

The place was more runway than anything else. There were three of them to be exact, two which ran parallel to the ocean nearby, the third intersecting them at a 70-degree angle. The entire base was probably a square mile in size. There were six lonely buildings scattered about—two of them bi-quonset-hut style hangars, two others served as housing for the base's occupants. The flight operations building had the base's control tower sitting beside it. The sixth building was next door, a catch-all mess hall, which he would soon find out, served as the well-patronized base saloon.

The base was surrounded by a chain link fence and guard towers every 500 yards or so. Soldiers walked the perimeter in pairs. He could see some rudimentary 20mm anti-aircraft gun positions ringing the perimeter, with a few mobile SAM launchers and even a couple of old Hawk anti-aircraft systems thrown in.

But the only aircraft sitting on the flight line was the Piper Cub that Hunter had seen towing the sign a few weeks before.

"I knew you were probably alive," Jones said matter-of-factly. "And, if you had made it back from Europe, that you were probably hiding out somewhere, waiting for the fall of civilization."

"I'm still waiting," Hunter said with a laugh.

"Me, too," Jones replied. "But I figured you would return to where your roots were. The mountains in New Hampshire seemed like a good bet, although I had that Cub flying all over the state before you spotted it."

They walked right over one of the runways. Hunter could see that although there were weeds popping up through the asphalt, there were also some tire skid marks, indicating that something besides a Piper Cub had landed there recently. Where were the other planes?

"Don't ask just yet," Jones told him, reading his thoughts again.

They walked in silence for a few moments, over the second runway and approached the beach.

"We lost twenty million people, Hawk," the general said, the bitterness evident in his voice. "When the double-cross went down and that Quisling left a hole in the Star Wars shield, the Russian ICBMs just kept on coming, all of them landing on or around our silos. Talk about overkill! They just about blew the country into two parts. From North Dakota on down, it looks like the moon. Craters as big as cities, forest fires that will take years to burn out. Even some of the rivers are on fire, who knows why."

"What about radiation?" Hunter asked, sniffing the air for effect. "Nothing seems to be glowing."

"Most of the bombs that fell were 'clean,'" Jones said with noticeable relief. "Thank God for that. There is some low-level radiation, not much though. But those bastards also sent over nerve gas."

germ bombs, even some hallucinogenic stuff. It's scattered everywhere. They must have launched everything but the kitchen sink at us, and we didn't so much as fire a popgun at them."

"So much for nuclear deterrence," Hunter said.

"It used to be beautiful country out there, Hawk," Jones continued. "The Dakotas. Nebraska. Kansas. I was raised out there. I know. Now it looks like another planet. It's a no-man's-land out there. I've flown over it. It gave me the creeps. It's downright spooky and it's going to stay like that for a long time."

Hunter nodded, then said: "I know it sounds terrible, but twenty million dead isn't so bad considering what could have happened if they had nuked our big cities," Hunter said.

"You're right," Jones said, stopping to light his cigar in the brisk, ocean breeze. "But they want something left for them to take over. This 'No Occupation' section of the treaty is a bunch of yabanz. You know and I know that as soon as those ugly, crude bastards get their hammers and sickle straight, they'll be over here, eating our food, fishing our rivers, screwing our women. They'll be able to take the *Queen Mary* over here, who the hell's going to stop them?"

Hawk felt the bulge of the folded American flag in his back pocket. "We'll stop them," he said matter-of-factly.

Jones looked at him and laughed, but didn't say anything for a couple of moments. "You could..." the general said, finally, thinking of Hunter's expertise in the air. He was widely known as the best fighter pilot ever. "You could probably shoot 'em all down singlehandedly."

Hunter steered clear of the subject.

"What's with this 'New Order' business," he asked. "Do people really give a damn?"

"No, not really," Jones answered. "It's a case of malignant neglect. That traitor Vice President set himself up as the New Order Commissioner, or some such thing, and then took his entourage of faggots and weirdos and Russians and went to Bermuda or Moscow or someplace to play house. Before he left, he set up a bunch of rules. All of them are designed to stop people from talking, or even thinking, about the old ways."

"I know it's 'illegal' to fly the Stars and Stripes," Hunter said. "What else did they come up with?"

"You can't even say the name of the country—the name before all this shit happened, that is," Jones said. "Not even the word, America. Now it's just The Continent. No more national anthem, no more newspapers, TV, radio. They even banned sporting events. But the Texans told them to go screw themselves on that one."

"And some people choose to follow these rules?"

"Well, yes and no. It's more like you can avoid a lot of trouble if you just keep your mouth shut."

"That was true in Germany in the 1930s," Hunter said.

"I know," Jones sighed. "But I look at it this way. If I start mouthing off, my bosses get upset."

They get upset because they have to deal with the New Order flunkies who are running around Boston, looking over everyone's shoulder, collecting their 10-percent tax, off the top. I make too much noise, a New Order clown gets wind of it and tells my bosses to can me. They can my ass, I ain't got a job, money or a place to hang my helmet. What's worse, I can't fly. If I can't fly, I might as well die. You know that."

Hunter nodded again. "Me, too."

"So I play their little game. We've got a good thing going here. We can build it into a *really* good thing. The Northeast Economic Zone is just another word for 'We're making money.' They have good airport facilities in Boston. A lot of traffic goes through there. All the major convoys to the Coast go out of Boston and Montreal. It's big, big money. Real silver. Real gold. They pay a tax to that jerk-off in Bermuda. He keeps the Russians happy by sucking up to the Politburo. It all evens out. No one wants to jinx it by talk of the old days."

The general was quiet for a while.

"We're mercenaries here, Hawk," he said finally. "We're not soldiers fighting for a flag or a cause. We're fighting for a paycheck. We're guarding their investment. They're getting rich and putting people to work. People work, have food, they stay happy and quiet. Look, I have permission to raise an army here, train 'em, make a special forces unit out of them. The Leaders Council in Boston—they're my bosses—will give me just about what I need. In return, I protect their asses. I watch over their convoy routes. I make sure there ain't no pirates in their airspace. But if something big brokes out, I mean like a war between the Zone and the 'Aks, I'm gone. And my people are gone too. It ain't like the old days. It ain't worth losing your life over."

Hunter let it all sink in.

"What's it like in the big cities these days?" he asked as they approached the beach on the other side of the runway. "I mean, I know New York City is like Beirut. But how about LA? Chicago?"

"Well, they're empty, most of them," Jones answered. "They figure that more than half—that *half*—the Americans moved out of the country in the past two years. Didn't want to live here, simple as that. Of the one hundred million that left, most went north to Canada, and some went south to Mexico. There are huge resettlement camps up around Toronto, Quebec, Montreal, places like that. The Canucks were good enough to take our people in. They didn't get burnt so bad in the rumble. Mexico is another story, from what I hear. Lots of trouble down there. The Mex still remember we kicked their asses back in 1836. Lot of those people have moved back into the ROT."

"ROT?" Hunter asked.

Jones laughed. "Shouldn't call it that I guess. 'Republic of Texas.' Those crazy bastards finally got their wish. They are their own country now. Got a hell of an army, too, so I hear."

Hunter wasn't too surprised to hear the Texans were adapting.

"Shit, you don't think a little thing like World War III would stop those people, do you?" Jones

said. “Let me tell you something: after the armistice was signed, the Texans took about a day and half off to change the colors on their flag and adjust their college football schedule. Then they went back to work.

“They knew that no matter what happened, people would always need three things: heating oil, gasoline and jet fuel. So they fired up their refineries and concentrated on just those three products. Since then, the world—such as it is—has beat a path to their door. Of course, the stuff goes for premium prices. Gasoline is worth about twenty-five old dollars a gallon these days. I forget how much that is in real silver. But that’s why everyone just about stays put these days. No more jumping in the car to see Grandma. And there aren’t that many cars working anyway.

“The heating oil is cheaper and a little easier to get. But still, these days you have two, three maybe four families sharing what used to be one-family houses. That’s how people are surviving. It’s the buddy system. It’s a lucky man who has a job—and he gets paid whatever is available. Food, clothes, heating oil, sometimes money, I guess. There’s no such thing as a regular paycheck out there anymore. It’s catch as catch can. That’s why so many people are joining the army. Pretty soon, I think everyone will be in the army in some capacity. For many of the little countries, it’s the only secure job there is. Now, like I said, people here in the Northeast have it better than most. That’s what we are protecting. The ’Aks cream their jeans thinking about what we have going here.”

He relit his cigar.

“Of course, it’s the jet fuel I’m most concerned about. We are worthless if we don’t have the juice to fly. I can deal with Texans, or I can deal with some of the Arabs that are still alive and pumping crude. It’s way cheaper with the Texans and more reliable, too. You can imagine what is going down in the Arab World these days! But with the Texans, they insist on a fighter escort for the ship, round-trip, no less. There are a lot of people out there who haven’t the sweet deal we have here and who’d love to get their hands on a tanker filled with JP-8 fuel. And they wouldn’t mind slitting your throat to get it.”

“Things are that bad?” Hunter asked, feeling he’d missed a chapter of history during his exile on the mountain.

“They’re worse,” Jones said with a grim laugh. “Besides here and out on the Coast, and maybe Texas, it’s as if all the rest of the decent people were either killed in the war or are in hiding. Out there, only the scum survived. The seas are filled with pirates—and so are the skies.”

“Air pirates?”

“They’re everywhere, Hawk,” Jones said, waving his hand at the sky.

They had reached the beach by this time. Hunter looked at the waves, crashing on the shore a few hundred feet away. Cape Cod, he thought. No place like it. A bunch of seabirds scattered as the general approached a beat-up picnic table. Jones produced a small flask and with a mock toast, took a healthful slug. Passing the container to Hunter, the general pulled the table around to face the ocean, then s



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