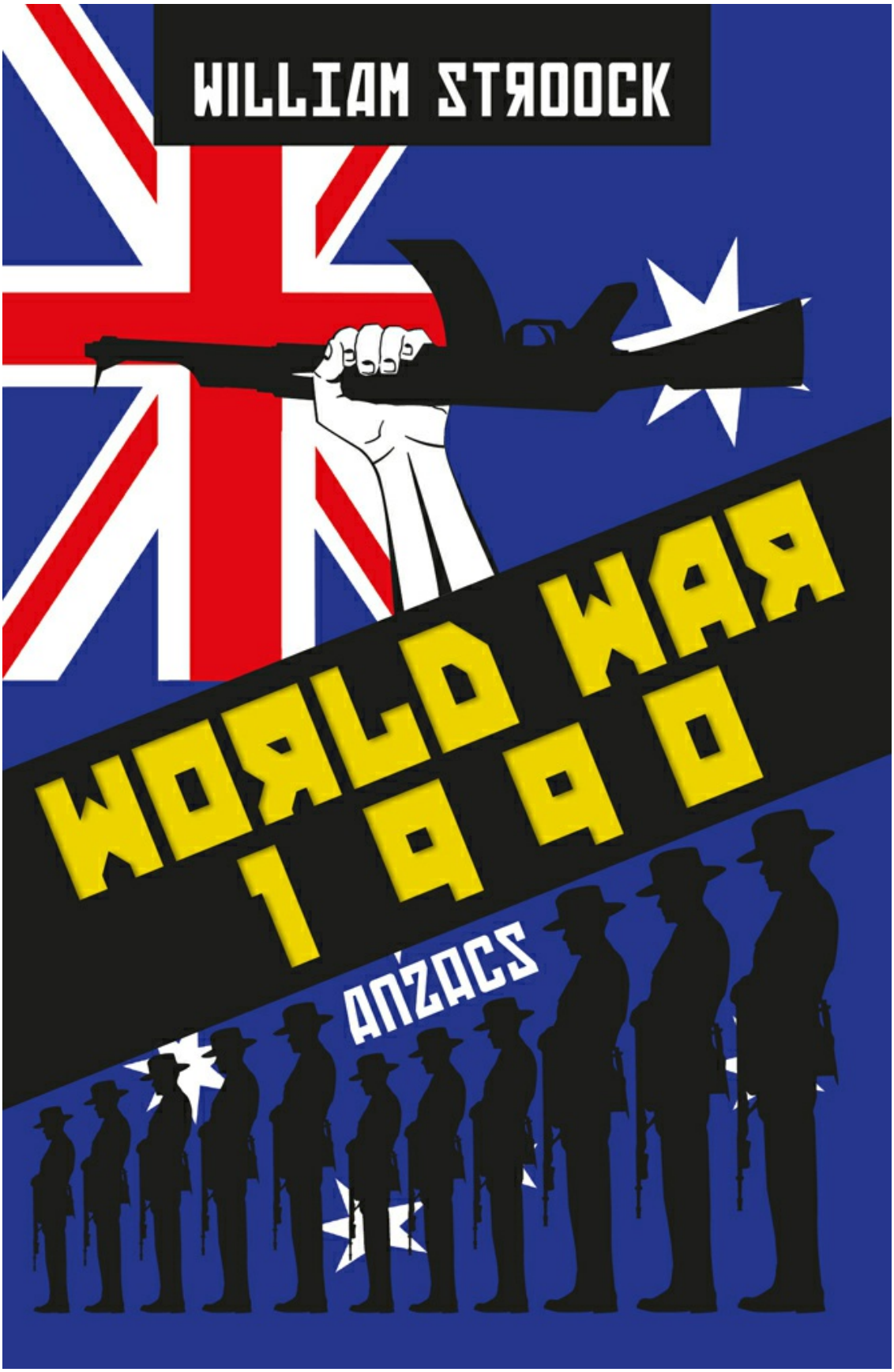
WILLIAM STROOCK

WORLD WAR 1900

ANZACS

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World War 1990: Anzacs

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William Stroock

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
PART I
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
PART II
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 1
EPILOGUE

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INTRODUCTION

I originally intended to title this book *World War 1990: Operation Pacific Storm* . The more I worked, researched and wrote, the more I decided that this book was about the ANZACs, the old Australian New Zealand Army Corps. The Great War and Second World War saw the English-speaking peoples unite against tyranny; the Third World War would have been no different.

Researching *ANZACs* was harder than I thought and I amassed a small library of books about the Aussies and Kiwis in Vietnam and post-Vietnam conflicts.

As noted in *World War 1990: Castro's Folly* , we've been fascinated about the war in the far corners of the world. After all, Tom Clancy never dealt with those in his classic *Red Storm Rising* .

ANZACs has plenty of historical players and parliamentary intrigue typical of this series. That said, from the division level on down, I fictionalized the characters.

Following close behind *World War 1990: ANZACs* will come *World War 1990: The Final Storm* .

As always maps are available at williamstroock.blogspot.com .

In the meantime, please enjoy *World War 1990: ANZACs.*

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PART I

Captain Tran was the last to land at Cam Ranh Airbase. Hundreds of soldiers and aircrew lined the runway; a jumping, shouting, cheering mass of men. Many of them were old enough to know better than to cheer the folly of their nation's leaders.

Vietnam just entered World War Three.

Tran taxied his MiG-21 down the big runway toward the American vintage-hardened bunkers, following the runway master till they were beneath the great concrete archway. Tran opened his MiG-21's canopy and looked up at the bunker ceiling. He smiled at the irony. How many times had American pilots parked within this bunker after flying a mission over North Vietnam? He wondered what kind of aircraft had been housed within. An F-100, maybe. Perhaps an F-4 Phantom. He had watched many of them as a wide-eyed youth.

Tran hopped out of the cockpit and climbed down to the ground. The crew chief shook his hand.

'You deployed all of your ordnance, Captain,' said Sergeant Li.

Tran thought back to the raid. As he watched one MiG after another attack the docks. Tran thought he hit something, at least. Other than that, his squadron did little more than kill a lot of fish. Judging by the lack of smoke plumes over the target, Tran suspected the other squadrons also performed badly.

With his helmet resting on his hip, Tran walked out of the hardened bunker. The ground crew cheered. Beside them stood the pilots of his squadron; most of them looked grim. They were under no illusions as to their raid's effectiveness. Vietnam had just delivered its best punch and the American bases across the South China Sea remained unscathed. The Americans would be angry.

He recalled seeing that anger as a 12 year old boy, watching the mighty

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American air force hammer targets throughout North Vietnam. From the roof of his apartment building in Haiphong, Tran watched the Americans bomb the harbor and airport. He'd actually cheered-on the American jets as they soared in the sky, a trail of Vietnamese tracers following them. When Tran's older brother realized he was cheering for the Americans, he gave him a good beating and told their father, who gave him another. A few years later the brother was killed during Tet. Tran went into the PLAAF the next year.

Tran suspected that somewhere, his late brother was laughing at him.

'We shall see who laughs last, brother.'

Cam Ranh Naval Base, Vietnam

Shiskin wiped the sweat from his brow and marveled at the Americans. *How did they ever get used to this heat? Fifteen years of war. I've been here for six months and I am ready to shoot myself.*

To the north another Vietnamese MiG landed.

What was it the British in India used to say? Don't give into the heat and the heat will give in to you …So far the Vietnamese heat was holding firm against Ivan Shiskin.

Yet another MiG landed.

Shiskin shook his head at that - both the folly of entering the war and the short-sightedness of STAVKA. Six weeks prior, as war loomed, STAVKA ordered all Soviet naval forces stationed at Cam Ranh to evacuate immediately. This included several frigates and destroyers and a half dozen submarines. What happened to them since, Shiskin had no idea. As the war dragged on, STAVKA siphoned off aircraft based at Cam Ranh for other areas - the northwest Pacific, Shiskin guessed. Those airplanes were gone forever, shredded in the US Pacific Fleet's meat grinder. Shiskin was not really privy to the VPLAF plans in Southeast Asia, but he suspected that the squadrons of Soviet MiG-23s previously based at Cam Ranh could have been helpful in this new raid. The evacuation and accumulated poaching left Shiskin with a cadre command at Cam Ranh base: a few platoons of naval infantry for security, mechanics and administrators. He had less than a thousand personnel now. Mostly these were the washed up, the unmotivated, and the chronic malingerers. In that sense they were just like Shiskin.

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He watched another MiG come in.

I suppose I should consider myself lucky. How many Warsaw Pact airbases has NATO pummeled ? Most of them, Shiskin knew. He had too many contacts in the Red Air Force to believe the propaganda circulated by the Politburo. The Soviet Union was losing the war. And now they brought the war to Cam Ranh.

Shiskin wiped the sweat from his brow again.

Clark AFB, Philippines

Sgt. Towson drove the pickup to the north end of the runway, stopping about fifty yards in front of the crater. Scattered about the scar in the earth was the wreckage of a Vietnamese MiG-21.

'Damn,' he whistled. 'I ain't seen a downed Vietnamese jet in twenty years.'

'We got one!' Captain Pagliano proclaimed.

Sgt. Towson doubted that.

'Anybody see a chute?' Pagliano asked.

The two other airmen in the pickup shook their heads.

'Those fuckers couldn't hit a damn thing,' said Sgt. Towson.

'I'd say they were trying to send a message, Sergeant,' Capt. Pagliano replied.

Sgt. Towson turned from the line of craters alongside the runway and looked at the air force reservist. 'Yes, sir,' Towson said in a way that conveyed his contempt to the other regular Air Force personnel around them, but hid it from the middle-aged reservist.

'If they wanted to hit us harder, they would have,' Pagliano said.

Sgt. Towson missed Lt. Zook. He was a young and conscientious officer who listened to Towson and took his expertise for granted. Ten days ago he'd been transferred to one of the airfields which the 82nd Airborne captured on the Soviet Pacific coast. Pagliano was his replacement.

With squinting eyes, Pagliano looked around the base. Here and there a smoke plume rose into the sky. A few bombs cratered Number 2 Runway, but those were easily fixable and the runway would be operational again in an hour. One bomb struck the PX, causing a near riot as airmen scrambled to

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collect cigarettes falling from the sky. Another bomb landed in a stand of palm trees, setting them afire and making the damage to the base seem worse than it actually was.

'Sir?' Towson motioned to the M-16 Pagliano had slung over his shoulder. 'Do you really think that is necessary?'

'Paratroopers,' Pagliano explained.

Indeed, the middle-aged reservist was in combat fatigues and wore a helmet.

'If you don't mind my asking, sir,' began Towson, 'what do you do in civilian life?'

'I sell copiers.'

'Ah, that explains it.'

'Sorry, Sergeant?'

'Oh, nothing, sir.' *He's just having fun*, Towson thought.

Towson walked to the crater lip and peeked down inside. It was hot with flaming fuselage. The cockpit was intact, but contained the charred remains of the pilot.

'Let's go down there and see if the pilot is still alive,' said Capt. Pagliano.

'Sir, I really don't think…'

'He could provide valuable information.'

The copier salesman got out of the passenger seat, unslung his rifle and walked toward the crater.

'Let's go, Sergeant.'

If you insist, dumbass , Towson thought.

Towson followed the intrepid copier salesman down into the crater. Pagliano cautiously approached the hot wreck, and even poked the canopy with the muzzle of his M-16.

Fucking amateur, Towson thought.

'He's dead!'

'Yes, sir.'

Pagliano walked the length of the fuselage, inspecting it very closely. 'What kind of jet would you say this is, Sergeant?'

'MiG-21, sir.'

'I don't see any damage,' Pagliano remarked. 'Why did it crash?'

Sgt. Towson muttered, 'Probably because it's a piece of crap.'

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Subic Bay, Philippines

‘It’s too bad about all those bleedin’ fish,’ said Captain Gates.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Chief Petty Officer Ramey. He spat into the water.

The morning’s events left Gates in a philosophical mood. He had skippered *HMAS Adelaide* through six weeks of war, escorting American convoys from Subic up to the Kurils, participating in the great anti-submarine picket outside the Sea of Okhotsk and helping hunt down a few Soviet subs. Throughout those operations, *Adelaide* was paired with Japanese Self Defense Force Ship *Haruna* . Somewhere, Captain Gates’ own father, himself a cruiser skipper in the Second World War, cursed and howled.

During the raid, as a pair of Vietnamese aircraft made right for *HMAS Adelaide* , Gates stood on the wing and thought, *Twenty years after we left Vietnam, I’m going to be killed by Vietnamese communists* . It seemingly happened in slow motion. The MiGs approached low over the bay. As the first MiG released its bombs, Gates’ stomach jumped. He actually saw the bombs tumbling down to the water. They fell into the bay maybe thirty meters off *Adelaide’s* port. For a second, Gates thought they would skip across the water and explode above the ship. Instead they exploded in the bay. He wasn’t able to see the second pair of bombs, but they both exploded far off *Adelaide’s* wing. As Gates stood there dumbfounded, a giant salt water wave crashed over the wing. When the aircraft passed over *Adelaide* , Gates stood there, now soaking wet and surrounded by fish, and laughed.

Chief Petty Officer Ramey ran over and asked, ‘Are you alright, Captain?’

With water dripping off his cap he replied, ‘I think this uniform is finished.’

As Gates and Ramey watched now, fish flipped and flopped all over the wing. Ramey good naturedly kicked as many fish as he could back into the bay. Looking down, he saw hundreds of fish floating dead in the water. Gates looked around the harbor and then the sky.

‘Is it over?’

‘I don’t hear anything, sir,’ said Ramey.

Soaking, Gates went to the CiC.

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‘Christ, sir,’ said Commander Nikos, the ship XO, ‘What happened to you?’

‘You don’t want to know,’ Gates said as he pulled his shirt off his considerable girth. ‘Report.’

‘All contacts proceeding west.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Any orders?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Alright. Make preparations for getting under way.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘Communications, contact the harbor master, tell him we are preparing to depart.’

‘No orders to do so yet, Captain,’ said Nikos.

‘We’re not under orders here at Subic anyway.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘No incoming contacts?’ Gates asked again.

‘No, sir.’

‘Alright. Nikos, you have the CiC. I’m going to change.’

Back at his stateroom, Gates stripped off his soggy uniform and threw it in his small closet.

‘What the hell good did any of that do?’ he asked. ‘Bombing Subic Bay. What other fuckwit ideas do the Vietnamese have?’

Hong Kong

The bomb hadn’t detonated. Instead it slammed into the tarmac at Chek Lak Kok airport, bounced into the air and careened into the line of Royal New Zealand Airforce A-4 Strike Fighters. In a stroke of bad luck, the bomb clipped the tail of the first A-4 and then slammed into the fuselage of the next, snapping off the left wing and pushing the fuselage into the engine of the third. Only then did the bomb’s path of destruction come to an end.

Sgt. John Gipp walked up to the line of A-4s, his demo bag in his hand.

A member of the Royal New Zealand Air Force ran up. ‘Oy. You from the SAS?’

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‘I am,’ said Gipp.

‘I’m Mallory, crew chief.’

‘Right.’

‘Come this way.’

Mallory led Gipp over to the third A-4. The bomb came to a rest beneath the fuselage.

‘What do you make of that?’ Mallory asked.

‘It’s a bomb.’

Mallory said, ‘I bloody know that! Can you defuse it?’

‘Why would you want to? It didn’t explode?’

Mallory, already distraught that a trio of A-4s were out of commission, shot back, ‘I bloody well don’t want it to blow.’

‘Those are A-4s right?’

‘Right.’

‘You sure you don’t want that bomb to go off?’ Gipp pointed to the A-4s. ‘If you ask me, whoever dropped that bomb did us a favor.’

‘Why you…’

Mallory approached Gipp. ‘Sergeant, please,’ the SAS man said. ‘I killed Vietcong with me bare hands. I’ll drop you like a rugby ball.’

Mallory stopped, looked at Gipp and said, ‘Well are you bloody well going to do something about the bomb?’

‘I suppose.’

‘Sergeant Gipp,’ said Captain Connors. ‘Would you please get on with things?’

‘Right, sir.’

‘Excuse me, sir,’ said Mallory. ‘Are you responsible for him?’

‘I’m Captain Connors.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Mallory saluted.

‘We’ll have my man take a look.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Mallory. ‘Sorry to call for you all, but you’re the nearest bomb demo blokes around.’

‘Right, Sergeant,’ said Connors. ‘Carry on, Sergeant.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Connors watched Gipp. Behind Gipp *RNZN Wellington* cruised in the harbor. She was the final element to New Zealand’s contribution to the war along with the flight of A-4 bombers and Connors’ own SAS squadron. The

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government had balked at sending troops into actual combat. But dispatching a contingent to Hong Kong freed up Australian forces who were deployed in the Sea of Okhotsk and patrolling the sea lanes between. Connors didn't know, but suspected his counterparts in the Australian SAS were working up there as well. Quietly, the government in Wellington also suspended its 'no nukes' policy for U.S. Navy ships docking in New Zealand.

'How's it coming, Sergeant?'

'Oh, it's coming along right, sir,' Gipp replied.

He spent several more minutes getting into the guts of the bomb before standing up, and wiping the sweat off his brow. With a spanner wrench in his hand, Gipp walked over to Mallory and Captain Connors and said, 'Problem's very easy. Let me show you something.'

Gipp walked the two over to the bomb.

'You see this bomb here?'

The other two men nodded. Gipp kicked the bomb with all his might.

'Bloody hell!' Mallory jumped back. Connors just stood with his hands on his hips, amused at Gipp's show. 'You trying to blow us all to hell?'

'No, Mallory,' Gipp said. 'See, I noticed this earlier. You know how we had a bunch of Vietnamese jets flying overhead, yet there was not one explosion?'

Connors said, 'Come to think of it, yeah.'

'Well, if you look here, you can see that those buggers back in Hanoi, or wherever these MiGs took off from, forgot to actually pull the arming pins on the bombs.'

'You mean…'

'Yes, Captain. I mean I could shoot this bomb with me sidearm here…' Gipp patted his .45.

'Please don't, Sergeant,' said Connors

'Right, sir. I could shoot this bomb here, and all I would be doing is wasting a bullet.'

Mallory breathed a sigh of relief. Connors laughed.

'Yes, sir. Funny as hell, it is. This has to be the worst air raid in history.'

Connors patted his bomb disposal man's back. 'Thank you, Sergeant. Carry on.'

'Yes, sir,' said Gipp. 'Right. Get me a couple of coolies and a transport

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would you? I say we roll this sweetie right into the harbor…'

New York City

Over the course of the 80's, the disgraced president's reputation recovered somewhat. Time and distance healed the wounds of Watergate and the nation. The man had written a few books about statecraft and diplomacy and these were mostly well received, even by his enemies at the *Washington Post* . From time to time President Reagan called upon the former president seeking his advice. He even appeared on televisied public affairs programs. By the time the new decade dawned some looked at his accomplishments, which were significant after all, and wondered if the proper word for President Nixon was 'flawed' rather than 'corrupt'.

Still, the last six weeks were particularly painful for Nixon. It seemed as if all his hard work unraveled. SALT and détente of course. Even during the darkest days of exile, Nixon could always take comfort in his great deeds. But moreover it seemed as if the world he worked so hard to create was gone. His work was for nothing.

Now the news reported Vietnam had joined the war. Nixon slumped back in his chair as Bloviating Hair Maniac made a breathless report about Vietnamese actions from his studio in Washington. Pat walked in.

'Oh, Richard, would you stop worrying?'

Nixon held out a hand to the TV, 'Would you look at this?'

Pat walked in to the TV room and changed the channel to Wheel of Fortune.

'Richard, it's not your problem anymore.'

Nixon watched Vanna White flip white letter blocks and tried to believe that.

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CHAPTER 1

London

The Prime Minister glumly gazed at the Thames as her car made its way across the bridge. She went over the just concluded meeting. Her face ever a mask, the Queen gave only a small hint as to her thoughts on the current situation. It was subtle to be sure, most in the room missed it, but not a PM who had dominated British politics as thoroughly as had Thatcher. It mattered not that the Vietnamese raid on Hong Kong caused no damage. When the Prime Minister finished the briefing, the Queen inhaled deeply and quickly. The gesture was so little yet said so much. Her Majesty was displeased, of course, that Vietnam attacked one of her possessions. But she was also displeased that MI-6 failed to see it coming.

'I wonder,' the Queen casually remarked, 'if this is how my father felt when Winston told him the Japanese attacked Singapore.'

'I couldn't possibly say, Your Majesty,' the Prime Minister replied thinking that the Queen was being a bit dramatic.

Now the Prime Minister's car pulled into Downing Street. The press met Thatcher before Number 10 and as usual barraged her with questions.

'What is the situation in Hong Kong?'

'Can we defend it?'

The Prime Minister paused before the entrance.

'Is this another Singapore?' asked one of the Fleet Street snakes.

'No, no,' the PM replied. 'I am meeting with my security cabinet now and we will be considering all options.'

The snakes shouted more questions including, 'Why wasn't Hong Kong adequately defended?'

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Thatcher recognized one of the paid liars from the *Guardian* . Her eyes narrowed upon him, as if taking a target in imaginary crosshairs. ‘As you may have noticed, Her Majesty’s armed forces have been grappling with your paper’s Bolshevik friends in Europe. A war, I might add, that your paper does not see fit to prosecute to victory.’

‘What about Hong Kong?!’ shouted one of the less odious vipers from *The Times.*

‘We are taking all necessary precautions to defend Her Majesty’s territories. Good day, gentlemen.’

The Security Cabinet waited in the Cabinet room. Sir Colin, the director of MI-6 tried and failed not to look like a little boy who had lost his homework. Thatcher recognized that same look from Heseltine, holding the defence portfolio.

‘Minister Heseltine, please begin your briefing on Her Majesty’s forces in South Asia.’

The briefing didn’t take long, ‘We have one Gurkha battalion in Hong Kong. Another is stationed at Singapore, a few battalions on Diego Garcia and that is all.’

‘Nothing more?’

‘No, Prime Minister.’

‘What if we require action against the Vietnamese?’

‘We can put a Gurkha brigade together. Otherwise action will have to be conducted by some other party.’

‘The Americans?’ Thatcher asked.

‘I’m afraid not, Prime Minister. They are stretched to the breaking point as it is.’

‘But this army of theirs around Petropavlovsk?’

‘Is committed to the northwest Pacific Prime Minister. The Americans and the Japanese have big plans, I’m afraid.’

‘Vladivostok?’

‘Vladivostok,’ Heseltine confirmed. ‘And in quick consultations with their defense secretary, it appears that Americans are committing what forces they have left to Cuba.’

John Major said, ‘With all the Cuban meddling in Africa and Central America, I cannot blame them for that.’

‘Yes,’ said Heseltine. ‘Cuba is 90 miles from Florida. The Americans

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just cannot afford to risk Castro taking some action there.'

'And I do not want to risk the Vietnamese taking further action against Hong Kong.'

'I'm afraid we have no resources to spare,' Heseltine said.

Thatcher thought for a moment. 'What about the Commonwealth?'

'Yes,' said Heseltine. 'If any action can be taken, I'm afraid it's going to be up to the Anzacs.'

Canberra, Australia

A pall of cigar smoke hung in the cabinet room at the prime minister's residence. Here met Prime Minister Bob Hawke's wartime security cabinet to discuss the latest war developments. The cigar smoke hanging above the men assembled was, it seemed, actually cut by the tensions between the three major players in the room.

'This is no time to be an 80 percent ally.'

Prime Minister Hawke looked at the leader of the opposition. 'Please go on.'

John Howard said, 'Right. The world is at war. The west is at war. Australia needs to do her bit.'

The Prime Minister said, 'I believe we have already made major commitments to American operations in the Pacific, have we not?'

'We have, Prime Minister. But this move by the Vietnamese changes things, doesn't it?'

Prime Minister Hawke chewed on his cigar. The question, of course, was what would the Australian people think? The nation had a long history of fighting alongside the rest of the west. First the British in the Great War and the Second World War, later with the Americans in Korea and Vietnam. The latter had now attacked both.

Paul Keating, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said, 'This entire idea is just daft. What are the Vietnamese hoping to accomplish?'

Howard said, 'They are acting on orders from the Soviets for sure.'

Keating retorted, 'You don't know that.'

Howard replied, 'Why else would they attack the Philippines and Hong Kong? To amuse themselves? Besides, with Saddam invading Kuwait and the

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Cubans mucking about in Central America and Africa, it's clear what's happening.'

Keating sipped his brandy.

'This is why we are at war, Prime Minister,' Howard said to Hawke. 'The communists are causing trouble in the Middle East, Central America, Africa, and now Asia.'

Realizing that he was losing the argument Keating spoke, 'Oh come now,' was all he could manage.

'We're in a rough neighborhood, Prime Minister,' Howard said. 'And the Vietnamese just made it rougher.'

Howard was right, the Prime Minister knew.

Keating said, 'Are you proposing, minister, to broaden our involvement in the war?'

'If necessary, yes,' Howard replied.

Keating looked to the Prime Minister, 'Bob, you cannot be taking this seriously.'

Hawke nodded to Howard, 'Go on, John.'

Keating was about to protest but Hawke held up his hand, 'Let him finish.'

'Don't we need to do our bit, Prime Minster? Doesn't Australia need to fight alongside the United States, Great Britain? Look what the Canadians have been doing. We were with them in the Great War and World War II. We should be with them now. With this new action, the Soviets opened all of South Asia to war.'

Hawke looked over to Keating. He was popular, the financial wizard who turned the treasury around during the previous seven years. He was the Prime Minister in waiting and everyone knew it. The transition would be soon, too, Hawke understood. Keating probably didn't want to inherit a war.

'What do you want to do, Paul?'

'We should be sure our forces remain ready, but as for further involvement, I say no.'

'I say yes. Yes!' Howard reaffirmed.

Hawke looked to the minister of defence. 'What can we do?'

Kim Beazley spoke up, '*Melbourne* and her group just returned from the Indian Ocean maneuvers. We have several more frigates and destroyers available, half a dozen Oberon class submarines, two squadrons of F-18 and

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F-111 bombers.'

An impatient Keating interjected, 'We are all aware of our military capabilities.'

'We have ten army brigades over all, three division headquarters, one brigade currently at Darwin, another at Perth, one more at Townsville. Keep an eye on things up north, you know.'

'Yes,' said Hawke.

'All of our reservists have undergone mobilization and training exercises and can be recalled as needed.'

Hawke nodded.

'Overall, I would say our armed forces have not been at this state of readiness since the war.'

Howard leaned forward, 'Prime Minister there is a world war on. What is the point of having this military force if we don't use it?'

The question hung in the room with the cigar smoke.

Perth, Australia

By rights, *HMAS Melbourne* shouldn't exist. The Australian navy had planned to scrap the carrier in 1981 and replace her with the Royal Navy's *HMS Invincible* . But after war with Argentina, the British decided they needed *Invincible* and cancelled the sale. Many in the naval ministry proposed simply scrapping *Melbourne* without replacement. But with the increasing bellicosity of the Ligachev regime, and under pressure from the Reagan Administration to maintain defense expenditures, the ministry decided to keep *Melbourne* , so long as the Americans underwrote part of the cost to refurbish her. So in 1990, now 35 years since its original launch, *HMAS Melbourne* steamed into Cockburn Sound just south of Perth.

Standing on the wing, Captain David Crewe soaked in the sun and the breeze and scanned the docks with his binoculars. In the throng of a few thousand people, Crewe looked for his wife and sons. It was unlikely he'd find them, he knew, but he thrilled at the prospect of seeing them. Malcolm and Brian would be hopping up and down and pointing at the big ship. Cheryl would be attired in something appropriately form fitting and holding great promise for later in the evening.

‘Find them yet, sir?’ Commander Gerry asked.

‘Nope.’

‘Can I…’

‘Shhh,’ Crewe said. ‘This is the best part. The anticipation. The excitement. Just let it play out.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

Crewe didn’t find his family until the tugs were pushing *Melbourne* to the dock.

As Crewe came ashore, the boys launched themselves at their father, nearly knocking down the tall gangly man.

‘Oooof!’ he proclaimed.

‘Boys!’ Cheryl shouted.

Crewe was not disappointed. A form fitting cotton dress that stopped at the knees and cinched at the waist. Cheryl’s breasts seemed to want to pop out of their own accord.

‘We missed you, Da-Da!’ Malcolm shouted.

‘Did you bring us anything?!’ Brian demanded.

‘Boys!’

‘Oh yes, I had plenty of time for presents!’ Crewe mocked.

Anticipating just this question, Crewe had asked one of the carpenters aboard to make a pair of wooden A-4s. Crewe took the small wooden toys out of his pocket and presented them to the boys. They took them in their hands and jumped up and down in delight.

‘Thank you Da-Da! Thank you!’

‘We can paint them later.’

‘Today!’ Brian shouted.

‘When we get home!’ Malcolm added.

‘Boys!’ Cheryl admonished. ‘Your father would like to rest.’ She took her husband’s hand. ‘Come now.’

Cheryl drove home keeping one eye on the road and the other on the rambunctious boys in the back. Crewe slumped in the front seat and enjoyed the feeling of not being in charge and letting someone else handle things. He was asleep before they got home.

Later, after the boys were asleep and the well-wishers gone, Cheryl lay next to David. She said, ‘Three weeks at sea. You’d think we were at war.’

‘We are at war,’ Crewe said absentmindedly.

‘Oh, come now.’

She didn’t know of course, few outside of the government knew of the anti-sub and commando operations the Australian military was conducting.

Cheryl got close to him. ‘I can’t miss my husband?’

‘Sure.’

‘You missed me,’ she teased.

‘I did.’

Will you be going back out to sea?’

Crewe shrugged. ‘Probably.

Cheryl folded her arms in mock sadness.

‘We have to warn off the Soviets,’ he said.

Indeed, during the last three weeks at sea, *HMAS Melbourne* visited Diego Garcia, rehearsed amphibious operations in the Seychelles and conducted numerous anti-submarine operations in the Indian Ocean. For the last two days they rehearsed tracking and destroying a Soviet ballistic missile boat. Surely that was an indicator of the government’s worries. He knew for a fact the Americans and British were aggressively hunting Soviet missile boats. Why shouldn’t the RAN get in the act?

During the anti-submarine exercise, one of the young bridge officers actually asked, ‘Captain, the Soviets wouldn’t nuke Australia, right?’

Crewe only shrugged and said, ‘Back to the sonar readings, Ensign.’

Since then Crewe comforted himself with the notion the Soviets might indeed nuke Australia, but not Western Australia, right?

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

Before Tran climbed into the cockpit he patted the two American flags stenciled below his canopy. Those stencils made him a legend in the North Vietnamese People’s Air Force. Few who fought the Americans had survived, fewer still had actually shot down American aircraft. Tran remembered both kills, and had hundreds of times regaled family and colleagues with the story. His first came in 1972 during the Easter Offensive, an American F-100 on a recon mission. The second came a few months later during the Americans’ Operation Linebacker II air offensive against Hanoi. This time Tran shot down an F-105, one of the Americans’ superfast medium

bombers.

As he ran through the system's check with his crew chief, Tran thought, *Well, brother, given this mission, you may finally get me.*

'This is Blue-2,' said his new wingman. 'System checks out.'

'This is Blue-3. System checks out.'

'Copy,' said Tran. He looked at the crew chief. 'Everything checks out here.'

Sgt. Li patted Tran on the helmet and closed the canopy. Then he patted the canopy and then the American flag stencils on the fuselage. Tran's flight of three MiG-21s got in the air and over the South China Sea. To the north three more MiG-21s assembled for the half-hearted attack.

'Hey Tran,' said his wingman.

'Radio discipline, Twe,' Tran replied.

'Come now,' Twe said. 'As if the Americans do not already see us.'

No doubt the big American radar station at Clark AFB had already detected not only Blue-Fight, but Red, Green, White and Orange Flights assembling to the north. In all 18 MiG-21s were assigned to this night's strike.

'Do you think this effort will satisfy Hanoi?'

'Depends,' Tran said. 'If we lose a few aircraft then we have martyrs for Marxism. So they will be happy.'

Twe laughed, 'But will Moscow be happy?'

'Always!' Tran said. 'As long as they are sacrificing the Asiatic.'

'Remember that flight instructor at the school outside of Moscow?' Twe asked. 'He said he hated us even more than Chinese.'

'Yes, he said all the locals around Cam Ranh Bay always wanted to know why he didn't have any money even though he was white.'

The two pilots laughed at that.

On this night Twe carried gravity bombs while Tran was armed with air-to-air missiles. By agreement they alternated missions. Tran was glad to be on air-to-air duty. The first night as he made an attack run on a ship docked in Subic Bay, he'd been painted by multiple radars and had ditched his bombs, no doubt killing hundreds of fish in the process. He'd been hesitant on his next bomb run, missing the target by a wide margin. Which was fine with Tran. This entire business was madness and he sought only to get through it alive.

‘ETA to target….twelve minutes.’

Subic Bay, HMAS Adelaide

‘Are they bloody kidding?’ Captain Gates asked.

The comm officer handed the paper to Gates. ‘Here you go, sir.’

Gates took the paper and read, ‘Air raid Subic Bay. This is no drill.’ He handed the paper back to the comm officer and said, ‘Oh for fuck sake… Radar!’ he walked down to the radar shack. ‘How many contacts?’

Gates peered at the screen while the technician said ‘I see six inbound, Captain.’

‘Air raid Subic Bay, no drill,’ Gates mockingly repeated. ‘Six bloody contacts. It’s a regular oscilloscope spike I tell you,’ Gates said, referring to the Pearl Harbor radar that detected the incoming Japanese.

Gates picked up the receiver, ‘CiC, this is the captain.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Go live bring everything on line.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

Gates went back to the bridge. To the XO he said, ‘Commander Nikos, you fight the ship from the CiC.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

‘I’ll stay at the bridge.’

‘We have four inbound.’

‘Engage, CiC.’

‘Copy.’

‘Take us to fifteen knots,’ Gates ordered.

‘Fifteen knots, aye.’

‘I doubt the Vietnamese will be interested in us but there is no need to make it easy for them if it turns out they are. What are the incoming bogies doing?’

‘Just coming over the bay now. On a direct course for the naval base.’

‘Anybody see anything?’ Gates picked up a pair of binoculars and looked out onto the bay. ‘There they are,’ Gates said as he spotted a pair of dots in the distance.

Two black dots, then four made their way overland and then over the

bay toward the great American naval base. Gates wondered about the Americans' fighter cover. Where were they?

'Patch in the CiC,' he said. 'I want to hear what's going on.'

'Aye, sir.'

'….tracking target,' reported the radar tech.

'Weapons?' asked Nikos.

'I have a lock.'

'Weapons, fire one!'

'One fired.'

The forward SAM battery sparked and in a whirl of smoke sent a SAM into the sky over the bay.

'Fire two.'

'Two fired.'

Another SAM went into the air in a rush of smoke and flame.

Gates listened to the chatter in the CiC and tracked the contrails through his binoculars.

'Running true' said Nikos. 'Maintaining lock…'

Gates followed the contrails as they twisted and turned in the sky over Subic Bay until…

'Hit!' exclaimed Nikos. 'We got one.'

From the bridge Gates heard the cheering and clapping of the men in the CiC.

Gates kept his binoculars trained on the black dots. He could see one trailing smoke. As he watched the jet gradually lost altitude until Gates couldn't see it anymore.

'Radar, what about the other contact?' Nikos asked.

'It's breaking off, sir, heading due north….and now I have more contacts. Phantoms, sir, definitely American.'

Gates picked up the receiver and dialed up the CiC. Nikos answered. 'Well done commander.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Gates put himself on ship's intercom. 'This is the, Captain. *HMAS Adelaide* just shot down an enemy aircraft.' The crew cheered. 'Well done. We'll send a party ashore and get some booze for an extra ration tonight.' This time the crew cheered even louder.

Clark AFB, Philippines

‘Hello Charlie!’ Capt Pagliano shouted.

Christ almighty he thinks he’s in the Green Berets , Sgt. Towson thought.

Towson looked around. The second raid on Clark AFB was even more pointless than the first. This time the Vietnamese hit absolutely nothing and only made craters in the earth until being chased off by a quartet of F-4 Phantoms. The raid’s complete lack of drama, or even military effectiveness, did not prevent an American TV reporter from breathlessly relaying a blow-by-blow account. Now, in the distance, that crew trained its camera on the crashed MiG-21.

Pagliano stepped forward, M-16 at the ready, and pushed the Vietnamese pilot down to the ground

‘Easy there, Captain,’ Towson said. ‘That man is shell shocked.’

Indeed, after crash landing his MiG-21 to the ground, the pilot climbed out of the cockpit and staggered out away from the aircraft. Towson was impressed with the Vietnamese pilot’s flying skills. It wasn’t easy to crash land any aircraft much less a dilapidated shit box like an old MiG-21. Towson would be damned if he was going to let a shit-heel like Pagliano hurt such a fine pilot.

‘Captain, why don’t you go inspect the aircraft?’

‘Me? I have a prisoner.’

‘Yes, sir. I’ll take care of him. We need an officer to inspect that aircraft.’

‘You’re right, Sergeant.’

Pagliano lowered his M-16 and cautiously walked toward the MiG. When the captain was far enough away, Pagliano questioned the pilot. ‘You speak English?’

The pilot shook his head, ‘No.’

In vaguely recalled Vietnamese, learned during his time at Tan Son Nhut, Towson asked, ‘You hurt?’

‘Shaken,’ replied the Vietnamese pilot.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Twe.’

‘I’m Towson.’

‘Where did you learn Vietnamese?’

‘Slow down,’ Towson said. ‘It has been twenty years. That answer your question?’

Twe nodded.

‘Oh.’

‘Was there in ’68 and again in ’70.’

‘I no doubt flew MiG-21s against aircraft flying from Cam Ranh.’

‘Really, you’re that old?’ Towson said. ‘I never could tell the age of you people.’

Twe laughed.

‘I probably fueled aircraft you flew against,’ Towson replied. ‘Come on.’

‘Where are we going?’

Towson pointed. ‘Truck.’

Two airmen waited in the bed. They stared slack-jawed as Towson approached with Twe.

‘What the hell are you two looking at?’ Towson asked.

‘Sorry, Sergeant.’

‘Yeah, sorry. Never seen a commie Vietnamese before. My dad was in Vietnam.’

‘Yeah, mine too.’

‘Well so was I,’ said Towson. ‘And there’s nothing more to see.’

Towson opened the passenger door for Twe and then walked around to the driver’s side and got in. Twe laughed. ‘Do not worry Towson, last year my children saw me with a pair of Russians. They could not stop looking at them. Actually, my children thought they were Americans, they’ve heard so many stories about round-eyed white people.’

‘Can’t tell us apart, eh?’

‘No.’

Twe reached into his overalls and took out a revolver. ‘Do you not think you should take this?’

Towson took the revolver. ‘Thanks.’

‘Here comes your captain.’

Pagliano ran back to the pickup.

‘What is that communist doing in the truck!?’ he shouted.

‘Sorry, Captain. Seems like the best place to put him.’

Pagliano got in the passenger side and pushed Twe in the middle.

‘To the brig,’ Pagliano ordered

‘Yes, sir.’

Twe turned to Towson and said in Vietnamese, ‘Is he as stupid as he seems?’

‘Pagliano means well.’

‘That’s more than I can say for my commanders.’

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

After the first strike against the Philippines and Hong Kong, Vietnamese personnel were crawling all over the Cam Ranh Peninsula. They had been nosing around Cam Ranh Naval Base under various pretexts. These usually centered around borrowing mechanics to service their aged fleet of MiG-21s. Stupidly, whoever was commanding the operation ordered a second round of strikes.

Sitting in his office Shiskin fiddled with the air conditioner. It was old, left behind by the Americans. Base lore said that each of Shiskin’s predecessors had gone to extraordinary lengths to keep the machine operating. The mechanic Shiskin once detailed to repair it said he found parts obviously fashioned in Cam Ranh machine shop and newer parts from the factory. Now how had a Soviet officer in Cam Ranh Bay gotten air conditioner factory parts from the United States? That no doubt took some serious horse trading. Now the machine, which Shiskin had come to rely upon to make his time in Vietnam bearable, showed signs of sputtering out.

Shiskin turned from the AC unit when he heard a knock on the door.

Gennadi his secretary walked in. ‘Ahhh….’ He said looking at the air conditioner. ‘She is sputtering again?’

‘You have seen it do this before?’

‘I have, General.’

Gennadi had been the secretary, or more formally the senior administrative aid, to Shiskin and several of his predecessors. Just how far back he went at Cam Ranh Bay, Gennadi wouldn’t say. But he was all too familiar with the vaunted American air conditioning unit.

‘Colonel Dubrodin to see you.’

‘Send him in.’

The barrel chested naval infantryman walked in. ‘Ah, Yuri, I see the air conditioner is breaking again.’

Dubrodin sat down in front of his friend’s desk. ‘I told you a posting here would be fun.’

Shiskin looked up from his AC unit and sat down.

‘You simply wanted company because your wife left you.’

Dubrodin laughed at his old friend. ‘She always hated it here.’

The air conditioner sputtered, coughed and then came back to life. In a moment the two felt cool air washing over them.

‘That’s better,’ said Shiskin. He turned to his friend. ‘Now to what do I owe this social call?’

‘I think you know.’

‘I am afraid I do.’

‘As commander of the base security element….’

‘We still have an element?’

‘Which is my point. I have a depleted company of naval infantry, and as commander of the base security element I must inform you that I do not believe I can secure this base or defend it in case of attack.’

‘So what do you propose?’

‘Evacuation.’

‘Can we do that?’

‘You are the base commander. You can do whatever you like.’

‘True,’ Shiskin replied. He felt the blood in his face cooling finally. ‘I do not suppose our allies will look kindly upon the evacuation of the garrison here.’

‘We have no garrison. Just retreads. Less than a thousand personnel now, correct?’

‘Da,’ Shiskin said thoughtfully. ‘Still, STAVKA would not look kindly upon the abandonment of this facility.’

‘There may well be no STAVKA soon.’

Shiskin nodded reluctantly.

‘And the war will certainly come here.’

‘Do you really suppose it will come to that?’

‘Have you been over to the airbase?’

‘Nyet. I have been avoiding it.’

‘They’re hopping up and down like they just liberated Saigon.’

‘Yes, but do you suppose the Americans will do anything? I mean, really, are they not busy in Europe and Siberia?’

‘Yes, but it is not the Americans that concern me.’

‘Then who?”

‘We are in Southeast Asia, my friend. Our Vietnamese allies have foolishly attacked not only the Americans but the British as well.’

‘The British are occupied.’

‘Yes, but the Australians are free.’

Canberra, Australia

The Defence portfolio was perfect for Kim Beazley. A military enthusiast in the same way some were enthused about Cricket or Australian Rules Football, Beazley loved poring over the Australian Defence Force’s TO&E and budget. During his six years holding the portfolio in the Hawke government, Beazley had lobbied hard for increased defence expenditures, an aggressive modernization program, and a strong Australian military capable of projecting power regionally. The time had arrived where that capability was needed.

Australia’s Cold War policy had always been one of ‘forward defence’, fight the enemy over there before you had to fight them over here. Throughout the Cold War Australian land, naval and air forces assisted the British in her various post-colonial conflicts, and even the Americans in Vietnam. Even so, Australian commitments were small, and for good reason. For a few awful months after the fall of Singapore in World War II, Australia faced the very real prospect of Japanese invasion. With one Australian division lost at Singapore and three others fighting in the desert, the nation was virtually defenseless and Prime Minister Curtin had had to convince Churchill to send Australian forces home. Even then the nation had to turn to the United States for help. With the Singapore memory in mind, the prime minister’s war cabinet resisted calls from Howard and a few other war-hawks to outfit an expeditionary force for Europe.

Now Beazley felt triumphant as he presented his plan to the cabinet. The rest of the security cabinet knew that this was the moment for which

Beazley had waited six years.

‘Prime Minister,’ Beazley began, ‘I would like to form a task force on *HMAS Melbourne* . Four frigates, Four destroyers, two submarines.’

‘Right.’

‘I would like to get New Zealand to contribute to the task force.’

‘That may be difficult.’

Indeed with the long and embarrassing nuclear free zone struggle New Zealand waged against the United States, John Palmer’s government would most likely have no desire to contribute troops to Beazley’s proposed task force. Even getting New Zealand to fulfill its existing Commonwealth commitments in Hong Kong had required a major diplomatic effort on Hawke’s part.

The Prime Minister said, ‘We will get to that later. For now, what else do you propose, Kim?’

‘Two squadrons of F-18s based in the Philippines. Two squadrons of F-111s.’

Hawke nodded. ‘And ground forces?’

‘We have the First Division of course. Three brigades. I want to build a corps headquarters around the division, reinforce it with several regiments and battalions. Its strength would jump from three brigades to four plus.’

‘Good,’ John Howard rapped the table. ‘Good show.’

‘Forgive my being a skeptic,’ Keating said, ‘But what are we going to do with all this force?’

Beazley said. ‘We are going to take action against Vietnam.’

‘Have we even been asked to do so?’ asked Keating.

‘Not yet,’ said Hawke. He looked to Gareth Evans, the Foreign Minister. ‘Perhaps you would like to explain.’

‘Of course, Prime Minister,’ said Evans. ‘I have spent several hours on the phone with our ambassador in Washington. We have all seen the reports of American outrage at Cuba’s actions.’

‘Yes,’ Howard said. ‘They are gathering a coalition, are they not?’

‘They are, John,’ said Evans. ‘Now, we all expected James Baker, the American secretary of state, to run the foreign policy. But according to our ambassador, that function, at least the thinking behind it, is coming more and more under the direction of their vice president.’

‘What of this new secretary of defense?’ Hawke asked. ‘Kim?’

‘I have not spoken with my counterpart yet.’ Beazley said of Wolfowitz.

‘During my talk,’ Evans continued, ‘the ambassador spoke of several players in defense and in the vice president’s office who are actively pushing for the widening of the war and the destruction of the Soviet Union.’

Howard rapped his knuckles on the table once again.

Hawke asked, ‘Have they talked about Vietnam yet?’

‘Not seriously, Prime Minister,’ said Evans. ‘At least not in public.’

‘But it does follow, does it not?’ Howard asked. ‘If they are taking action against Cuba, they will want some sort of action against Vietnam.’

Evans nodded his head in agreement.

Hawke said, ‘Thatcher is hopping mad about Hong Kong.’

Beazley said ‘There’s really nothing she can do.’

‘But we can,’ said Howard.

Beazley agreed, ‘Yes certainly.’

Keating said, ‘You want to invade Vietnam?’

‘After the actions against the Philippines and Hong Kong I think it is certainly justified,’ said Beazley.

Anticipating protests, Hawke said, ‘We can act, but as part of a coalition.’

Beazley nodded. He looked to Evans and said, ‘We have the legal and diplomatic justification via the Five Power Defense Arrangement do we not?’

Evans said, ‘It’s not a treaty, per se. Just a series of defense arrangements with Britain, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore.’

‘But it does allow cooperative action,’ stated Beazley.

Evans nodded.

Beazley said, ‘And our armed forces have worked and trained with not only New Zealand, but Singapore and Malaysia.’

Hawke looked at Beazley, ‘Anyone else, do you think?’

Beasley said, ‘Fiji…’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Hawke. ‘A couple of Fijian battalions would look good.’

‘I should think some Gurkhas.’

‘Right,’ agreed Beazley. ‘I should think that will be no problem with Maggie.’

Beasley rubbed his chin, ‘Singapore.’

‘I like that idea,’ Howard said.

Evans said, ‘Slow down, gentlemen. Before any of that, we must get New Zealand on board. And I’m afraid they are going to be tough to convince.’

‘And then there’s the Philippines.’

‘I’m afraid that’s a matter for the Americans.’

Manila, Philippines

When the war began General Ramos insisted on mobilizing the Philippines armed forces. Given the Vietnamese attack on Subic Bay and Clark AFB, President Aquino really couldn’t say no. Now one Filipino frigate patrolled Manila Bay while another stood guard at the entrance to Cavite. Troops were on the streets in Manila, Mariveles, Cavite, Lingayen Gulf and a few other places. This was mostly for the cameras and to appease the populace. Filipino Nationalists had already taken to the streets. Only the ring of marines around the Vietnamese embassy prevented the mob from burning it to the ground. Aquino wondered if General Fidel Ramos or his allies weren’t behind that bit of theatre. Certainly, the president concluded as she pondered the meeting she’d just had with the American Ambassador.

Ramos was indeed active. On his orders three battalions of Filipino Marines were gathering at Cavite. At the same time the Philippine Scout Regiment had assembled at Clark AFB. Aquino wasn’t sure what these moves were about. Did Ramos really think she was going to approve some kind of Filipino action against Vietnam? Was this a threat from Ramos? Or the first moves to a coup? She had already survived one military coup, thanks mostly to the United States. As coup elements bombed the presidential palace, President Bush personally ordered American F-4 Phantoms into the air to keep the now hostile aircraft out of the sky.

As she met with the American ambassador he made all this perfectly clear.

‘Mr. Ambassador,’ Aquino said, ‘I understand the United States’ concern here.’

‘Madam President. This involves not just America but Britain as well.’

‘Yes, Mr. Ambassador. Still, I do not see how my government can allow American forces to attack Vietnam from bases in the Philippines.’

‘Excuse me, Madam President. This operation will mostly involve allied troops.’

‘Allies?’

‘Yes. Australian, New Zealand, a few others.’

‘I see,’ Aquino replied. ‘Even so, I cannot permit the Philippines to be dragged into this war.’

‘I am sorry to hear that, Madam President,’ the ambassador leaned forward as if he were addressing an underling. ‘Look, if it weren’t for President Bush you would have been deposed last year.’

‘I am well aware of that, Mr. Ambassador, and grateful.’

‘Then it is time for you to show that gratitude.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes,’ the ambassador said. ‘Or must we consult with General Ramos?’

And with those words the deed was done. The Philippines would be used as a base of operations against Vietnam and it was entirely possible that Filipino forces would participate.

Wellington, New Zealand

With the Australian Prime Minister’s plane having landed, and pro forma ceremonies concluded Prime Minister Palmer met with Prime Minister Hawke in his private office just off the cabinet room.

‘Do you still like Scotch, Bob?’ Palmer asked as he headed for his liquor cabinet.

Hawke smiled, ‘Of course, John.’

‘Good.’ He took out an expensive bottle he kept in the back of the cabinet. ‘I have been saving this for a special occasion.’

Palmer poured two tall glasses of Scotch and gave one to his Australian counterpart. The two toasted to Australasia and drank.

‘Now,’ Palmer began, ‘I suppose you came here to bother me about getting involved in Maggie’s little Vietnam adventure.’

‘It’s not Maggie’s adventure, John. It’s our responsibility.’

‘You speak for Australia, Bob, not New Zealand.’

‘Come now, John. Do you really intend to sit this war out?’

‘We have a force in Hong Kong already.’

‘A token force.’

‘Did you come here to insult New Zealand’s contribution?’

Hawke sipped his drink. ‘You know about Australian operations in the Pacific, Yes?’

‘Your government has kindly kept mine informed, yes. Intelligence gathering, escorting American ships.’

‘Yes, John. And now we are going to lead this operation against Vietnam.’

‘Well that is up to you, Bob.’

‘You are going to stay out?’

‘I hope to.’

‘The world is at war.’

‘And the Americans and Russians are on the verge of destroying one another. I’d like to keep New Zealand out of their way.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you understand, Bob, that there are many here who would be perfectly happy to see the United States and Soviet Union blast one another to smithereens?’

‘As there are in Australia, John.’ Hawke took another sip of his drink. ‘We call them loonies, kooks. They do not make policy.’

‘What are you saying, that I’m a loony?’

‘No, John, but you are listening to loonies.’

‘Bob…’

‘Just listen, John. Ok?’

‘Ok.’

‘This isn’t some nuclear controversy. This isn’t some Greenpeace yacht or some nuclear free movement.’

‘You try to convince me by mocking me?’

‘No, just stating facts.’ Hawke polished off his drink. ‘And I will state another. It really doesn’t matter, militarily speaking, if New Zealand is on board.’

‘Then why come here?’

‘Because I want a united front. And frankly, I think it would be good if in the future, we can point to yet another war where we all fought.’

‘We all?’

‘Brits, Yanks, Canucks, Aussies and Kiwis. Just like World War Two.

Just like the Great War.'

'You are going to kill men over sentimentality.'

'It means something, doesn't it? At least it means something to me.'

Palmer shook his head.

'Now, John. When it is all said and done, either posterity will talk about New Zealand, or it won't. Do you really want to be the man that kept New Zealand from getting its due?'

Palmer made a face and rubbed his chin. He looked at the floor in thought and then looked back up at Hawke. 'Well I suppose New Zealand could contribute a destroyer.'

'Or two.'

'Very well, two.'

'And?'

'And?'

'Yes.'

'We could dispatch our A-4 squadron to the combat zone.'

Hawke nodded. 'And?'

Palmer shook his head. 'No ground troops.'

'Fiji is contributing a regiment.'

'Fiji?'

'Yes, Fiji.'

'Good lord, I am being blackmailed with Fiji?'

'Send a brigade.'

'We only have a brigade.'

'Send it.'

'Anything else?' Palmer asked. 'Our SAS Squadron is already in Hong Kong.'

Hawke finished off his Scotch and held up the glass for another. 'I think that will do for now.'

Palmer got up and poured his victorious colleague another drink.

Hawke said, 'Won't you drink with me, John?'

'I need it.' Palmer poured a tall one for himself. 'To what shall we drink?'

Hawke held his glass aloft. 'To the ANZACs!'

CHAPTER 2

Canberra, Australia

‘I think,’ began Bomber Beazley ‘that Operation Boomerang Shot is a joint mission but with the navy in the lead.’

Sitting next to the Minister of Defence, General Jim Coates, Chief of Staff nodded his head. Across the table the Air Force and Navy chiefs agreed.

Beazley continued, ‘For that reason this operation will have a naval commander.’

‘Who?’ asked the navy chief.

‘We are still working that out,’ Beazley said. In a political gesture meant to reconcile the army and RAAF Beazley said, ‘We would be grateful for the input of the other service branches.’

Both chiefs nodded. Admiral Michael Hudson, the navy chief said, ‘Admiral Ken Dooley.’

‘If you think so, Admiral.’

‘Now, first as to the naval contribution,’ said the PM.

Admiral Hudson said, ‘Well, Minister, *Melbourne* and her battlegroup. Ten combat ships, two submarines all together plus an as yet undetermined number of transport vessels.’

‘This will include a number of allied war vessels,’ said Beazley.

‘Yes, Minister. Do we have a hard number yet?’

‘Two from New Zealand.’

‘Two? I would have thought convincing Prime Minister Palmer to contribute even one ship would have been troublesome.’

Beazley smiled triumphantly. ‘Not only is New Zealand contributing two warships they are also contributing what amounts to a brigade.’

General Coates clarified, ‘Two infantry battalions…’

‘They only have two infantry battalions, don’t they?’

‘Yes,’ replied Coates. ‘Plus an artillery battalion, recon battalion and of course the SAS squadron. This force is light but significant.’

The air chief nodded his head.

‘And two squadrons of F-111s and F-18s.’

‘That will be virtually our entire complement of both.’

‘Yes, well the aircraft are meant to do more than simply look good on the tarmac, are they not, General?’

‘Of course, Minister,’ replied the air chief. ‘Where shall we deploy them?’

‘I am thinking for now one F-18 squadron at Hong Kong while the rest go to American bases in the Philippines.’

‘Yes, Minister,’ said the air chief. ‘That makes sense. The Americans will have the facilities necessary.’

‘Now, ground forces,’ said Beazley. ‘We shall send the 1st Division, reinforced with a few sundry elements including engineers, an extra artillery battalion the SAS Regiment of course. Call it four and a half brigades in all plus the New Zealand contingent.’

‘Don’t forget the 1st Fijian Regiment,’ reminded Coates.

‘So that gives us two reinforced divisions,’ said Beazley. ‘Plus contingents from Malaya and Singapore, which are still being negotiated.’

‘And a Gurkha brigade.’

‘Now as to logistics….’

‘Yes. Northern command will exercise operational control over the operation. Our main port will be Darwin, of course.’

‘Will we be deploying troops in the Philippines, Hong Kong?’

‘Singapore will be our staging area.’

‘That makes the most sense.’

‘Now,’ said Beazley, ‘General Coates had some ground force commanders in mind….’

Sydney, Australia

Upon receiving the orders to report to Canberra, General John Grey’s first

thought was, *So they're really going to do it* ! His second thought was, *And they want me to command?* Grey was actually relieved. For weeks he had fretted that someone in the Hawke government, Bomber Beazley mostly, would insist on outfitting an expeditionary force for Europe. This was not unreasonable given the Australian Defense Forces' history. Over the course of the 20th century, Australia contributed troops to Imperial efforts in the Boer War, the Great War, the Second World War and a myriad of low level Imperial conflicts from Malaya to Yemen and points in between. Australia was even then clandestinely helping in the Pacific. But with the Australian Army's famous efforts in Europe during the previous two world wars, some fools in Canberra wondered why Australia did not now send troops to fight alongside their British, Canadian and American cousins in Europe.

The Australian Army wasn't built for Europe. After their experience in World War II, the Malay States, Brunei and of course Vietnam, the Australian Army were experts in small unit and jungle warfare. Australian officers in exchange programs with the American Army in Europe and the BAOR had observed firsthand the complexity of modern mechanized combat operations, with a myriad of combat arms combined into one massive armored/mechanized fist.

Now, General Grey listened as General Coates read the formal order from the Prime Minister, making him general officer commanding, ground forces, Task Force Australia.

'Congratulations, John,' said General Coates.

'Thank you, General,' Grey replied.

The two generals shook hands.

General Coates gave Grey a quick rundown of the force under his command.

'I'll have complete control, then?'

'Answerable to Northern Command and the Defence Ministry, yes.'

'I'm not going to get any guff from the Kiwis about their brigade?'

'No.'

'Or Singapore or Malaya?'

'No,' said Coates. 'I would say your position is similar to MacArthur's on New Guinea.'

Both men smarted at the mention of the controversial MacArthur whose

mistreatment of Australian units during the war was still talked about in Canberra.

‘Perhaps Abrams in the last war.’

‘This seems apropos.’

‘Now as to the actual mission.’ Coates slid a folder marked Top Secret over to Grey. The GOC, ground forces of Operation Boomerang Shot opened the folder and looked through the proposals. ‘Let’s see here, Cam Ranh Bay…’

‘Yes, we think it’s the target that makes the most sense. It’s where most of the Vietnamese attacks are coming from.’

Grey added, ‘And it’s the Soviets’ biggest base outside of Europe.’

‘Yes,’ said Coates. ‘So the Americans will certainly support an attack there.’

‘What of the Soviets based there?’

‘Most ships put out to sea weeks ago. Few aircraft remain.’

‘Ground troops?’

‘Security personnel, MPs, rear echelon personnel.’

‘So Soviet forces at Camranh Bay…’

‘Are depleted yes,’ finished Coates. ‘In fact, we are wondering what they could be doing there, if anything.’

Grey read on, ‘And Haiphong?’

‘Yes.’

‘You want us to take Haiphong?’

‘Yes.’

‘What the hell for?’

‘To show the Vietnamese that we can. And to threaten Hanoi.’

‘Daft!’

‘If you can’t do it General…’

‘Oh, I can do it,’ Grey replied. ‘Camranh makes perfect sense. Haiphong though…’

‘It’s political, yes. Though that said, since our plan is to draw out some Vietnamese formations, for the Americans to bomb a landing at Haiphong is more likely to do that.’

‘I see.’

‘You certainly will.’

Anderson AFB, Guam

The B-52's lined up on the tarmac. One by one they taxied down the runway, their four engines groaning as they lumbered into the air. Above, a pair of F-15s from the California Air National Guard flew CAP. In all, 18 birds were airborne and bound for targets on the Soviet Kamchatka Peninsula.

Colonel Mark Heath watched from a jeep at the end of the runway as each bomber roared overhead.

'This never gets old,' Heath said.

'Yes, sir,' said his driver, a bored airman named Stevens.

Heath laughed.

'They're an eclectic bunch aren't they?'

The last B-52 in line roared overhead, drowning out Heath.

'What?!' Stevens asked.

'I said they're an eclectic bunch.'

'What's eclectic mean?'

'Strange. Weird.'

'I guess, sir.'

'You really don't care, do you Stevens?'

'Sorry, sir.'

Heath laughed again. 'I think they're great.'

'I guess, sir.'

Collectively the crews of the bomb group were a bunch of strange flyers. Maybe it was the sun of Guam, or simply the prolonged boredom. With the success of the Air Force's small number of B-2s, the venerable B-52 was the forgotten bastard child of the war. For many weeks the pilots lounged around Guam with little more to do than bitch about the B-2s. Idle time made for wandering minds with strange ideas. Some crews renamed their ships after songs and band members from The B-52s. The group leader named his ship *Fred Schneider* , while the number two man named his ship *Wendy Wilson* . Other ships had names like *Love Shack*, *Roam,* and most amusingly to Heath, *Tin Roof Rusted* .

With the last ship in the air and on the way to Kamchatka, Heath said, 'Alright, let's go to the mess.'

Heath would idle away a couple of hours at the mess hall, reading a paper over coffee and maybe playing cards with other officers. Only as the

bomb group approached the target would he head to the CiC. Heath had just sat down to his coffee when General Parker came in. As head of planning, the General was Heath's boss. He came and sat at Heath's table.

'Morning, General.'

'I thought I'd find you here.'

'Yes, sir.' He tapped his newspaper. 'Always have to see what's happening.'

'What is happening out there?'

'This Cuba business is a mess.'

Parker nodded.

'Things are going well in Poland.'

'Schwarzkopf is working wonders.'

'Then there's this little thing brewing in Vietnam.'

'Yes, that's why I'm here.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Start drawing up plans to support the Australians in Vietnam.'

'Wow, really?'

'Yes.'

'So, we're going back.'

'Yes.'

Heath laughed. 'Been a while since I planned a Haiphong mission.'

Clark AFB, Philippines

Callam stepped off the Air National Guard C-130 and immediately felt hot. He wiped his brow and rolled up the sleeves of his jump suit. It was one he had in his locker before the war began. After six weeks of almost constant flying the suit was loose. Constant stress, lack of sleep and little time to eat led Callam to drop an entire suit size.

'Colonel Callam?' asked a junior lieutenant standing at the bottom of the stairs.

'That's me.'

The junior lieutenant saluted. 'I'm Lieutenant Dall, here to pick you up, sir.'

Callam saluted back.

‘Can I take your bag, sir?’

Dall indicated the small bag Callam had placed on the tarmac.

‘Sure.’

Dall picked up the bag. ‘Right this way, sir.’

He led Callam over to a jeep parked by the side of the tarmac. Dall drove them down the runway.

‘Man, I forgot how hot it is out here,’ said Callam as he fanned himself with his cap.

‘Sorry sir?’

‘The heat!’ he shouted. ‘It’s hot here.’

‘Oh, yes, sir,’ said Dall. ‘I guess I’ve gotten used to it.’

‘I’ve gotten unused to it.’

‘Yes, sir,’ He said. ‘Is it cold in Germany now?’

‘Na,’ replied. ‘It’s cooling off, but not cold. Hell, I was out here when Pinatubo erupted.’

‘Wow, I’ve heard about that one. I was in high school.’

‘High school?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Jesus,’ said the weathered Aardvark driver. ‘What year did you graduate?’

‘I graduated in ’86, sir.’

‘You know what I was doing in ’86?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Bombing Libyans.’

‘I remember that.’

‘Thank god.’

They proceeded down the runway till Callam saw a row of F-111s parked beneath camo tarps.

‘That them?’

‘Who, sir?’

‘The Aussies?’

‘Oh, yes, sir.’

‘That’s why I’m here.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Dall. ‘You were flying Aardvarks in Germany, right?’

‘Yeah,’ replied Callam. ‘Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia…’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We had a few Aussies with us. Observational role.’

‘Yes, sir. I guess we’re returning the favor?’

‘Something like that.’

They drove on. Callam reported to the airwing commander and handed him his orders.

The commander seemed tanned and rested, unlike the commanders in Europe.

‘We’ve been raided three times by the Vietnamese, Colonel’ he said.

‘I don’t see much sign of that.’

‘You won’t,’ the general replied. ‘The commies can’t hit shit.’

‘Can’t say the same about them in Europe.’

‘Is it that bad over there?’

‘It was, sir. I lost several Aardvarks on the ground. I kept my squadron in the air just to keep them from getting destroyed on the tarmac. Things settled after a few weeks, you know, once we got air parity and won the Battle of the Weser.’

‘We’ve flown a few combat ops, mostly Orions against subs and such. Even bagged a Soviet sub out of Cam Ranh Bay. Nothing like you’ve faced, though.’

‘Yes, sir.’

After being dismissed, Callam left and went back to his jeep.

‘The Aussies are housed over there by the F-111s too?’ asked Callam as they drove away from the F-111s

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Take me to the Aussies. Might as well meet them.’ Might as well get this over with, he didn’t say.

When Callam got to the Quonset hut that housed the Australians a lieutenant greeted him. Callam introduced himself and asked for the CO.

The lieutenant said, ‘That would be Colonel Williams, sir. I’ll go get him.’

The lieutenant left leaving Callam to survey the squadron quarters. Above the door was a large banner that read Pig Drivers. Callam laughed at that. He learned early on that the Aussies nicknamed the F-111 ‘Pig’ rather than ‘Aardvark’. Inside he saw the Aussies decorated the place with little touches from home. This included Australian flags, banners from their favorite Australian rules football team, rugby or hurling teams. Several

Rachel Hunter foldouts adorned the walls. The Lieutenant returned with a short, stocky, fireplug of a man with a beard and shaven head. ‘Colonel Callam?’ said Williams.

‘Yes, Colonel Williams.’

The two shook hands. Callam handed Williams his orders. ‘These are my orders putting me on attached duty to your squadron for the time being.’

Williams opened the envelope and read the orders. ‘Well, it will be a pleasure to have you fly with us pig drivers, Colonel.’

‘Please, call me Jeff.’

‘I’m Paul.’

‘Right. If you’ll come this way Jeff, we have an office and bunk for you.’

‘I don’t mean to put you guys out.’

‘Not at all. We’re not going to treat you like a bagger.’

‘Bagger?’

‘Married officer living off base.’

‘Oh.’

‘Besides, you’ll be doing us a favor.’

‘How so?’

‘This way we’ll be able to pick your brain whenever we feel the urge.’

‘Ah. Well, thanks, Paul,’ said Callam. ‘In the meantime…’

‘Oh of course, you want some rest.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Shall we get you in a few hours, then?’

‘A few hours.’

‘Yes, splendid.’

A tired Callam walked to his small office/billet and lay down on his bunk.

There was a time when he would have insisted on walking the flight, meeting pilots and crews. But not at 44 years old. Not after seeing half his squadron shot down and not after watching his Australian co-pilot get his brains blown out all over the cockpit. Callam closed his tired eyes and pushed away memories of the last six weeks.

Canberra, Australia

Despite sleeping little over the past few days, Beazley felt wide awake, exhilarated really. This unplanned afternoon meeting with the Prime Minister only added to that sense. Beazley chose the timing wisely. While Beazley was buzzing, the PM was probably looking forward to an afternoon nap. He'd be at his worst.

As Kim Beazley sat down Hawke asked, 'How are things progressing?'

'Flights are headed into Hong Kong now. That's more Heseltine's department but he's keeping me updated.'

'A strong message, it sends, I would say,' said Hawke.

'Yes,' said Beazley.

Kim Beazley leaned forward. The Prime Minister held out his zippo and lit the Defence Minister's cigar.

Hawke leaned back in his chair and said, 'How's the Scotch?'

Beazley looked at the oak-colored liquid in the glass and said, 'This the black?'

'It is.'

'Special occasion, then?'

'Well, Kim, I figured that since you asked for this one-to-one meeting, you had something very important in mind.'

Beazley held up his glass and nodded in appreciation. 'So, shall we begin?'

As he lit his cigar the prime minister said, 'Please'.

'I want to talk about the future.'

'As well I thought you might.'

'And I want to talk about our roles in Operation Boomerang Shot.'

Hawke took a large sip of Scotch. 'Go ahead.'

'I want to be the point man on this.'

'You're the Minister of Defence.'

'I mean, I want to be the point man with the press. I want to handle the briefings and I want the news to flow through me.'

'Done.'

'Done?'

'Provided I am, as you say, the point man on the lead-up to the operation.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, Kim, that I am seen as the man who organized the military and political end of things.’

‘I can live with that,’ said Beazley.

‘And you will be seen as the man who conducts the operation.’

Beazley held up his glass. ‘Deal.’

Hawke did the same.

Beazley said, ‘Now as to the future…’

‘Future?’

‘Yes. You are now a wartime Prime Minister, Bob. When it is all over I will be the man who won the war for you.’

‘Will you now?’

‘Yes, Bob.’ Beazley made his play. ‘And after that, I expect a date certain for the formation of my government.’

Hawke couldn’t suppress a laugh. ‘Do you, Kim?’ he asked. ‘Or shall I say, Bomber Beazley. And have you worked this out with Paul Keating?’

‘I haven’t said a word to Keating.’

‘As I would expect,’ said Hawke. ‘Paul would be none too happy about this. Apoplectic, in fact.’

‘You and he discussed this before, Bob. Always you have put him off. Always you said you would step down in due time.’

‘I have always promised that, yes.’

‘Now is that time.’

‘But for you, not Keating.’ Hawke finished off his Scotch and leaned back in his chair. ‘You think you can force me out?’

Beazley put his Scotch and cigar down and leaned forward. ‘You think you can force me to stay, Bob?’

‘Are you threatening to resign?’

‘Today.’

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘Here is my letter. Unsigned of course.’

Beasley took a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to the Prime Minister.

‘And what shall you say?’

‘We have irreconcilable differences as to the conduct of the war.’

‘And then what?’

‘Then I take stock and decide whether or not I challenge you for the leadership. That will force Keating to move.’

‘He’ll win, you know.’

‘But you’ll lose.’

‘You bastard.’

‘Yes, I am, Bob.’

‘I should just fire you right now.’

‘And risk a political fight during a war?’

‘It’s been done before.’

‘Bob, you have to consider what you want.’

‘Come now, be realistic.’

‘Bob, it’s time to make preparations for the transition. Now either you can be the prime minister who won the war, or the man who lost his office before the war. Make your pick.’

Hawke looked at his adversary and realized he had been out-maneuvered. ‘Shall we say the end of the year, then?’

‘When?’

‘December first.’

‘At the very latest.’

‘Then we have a deal.’

The two shook on it.

Beazley stood.

‘Won’t you stay and finish your drink?’

‘Sorry, Prime Minister. I have much planning to see to.’

You son of a bitch , Hawke thought.

Outside the private office Beazley smiled and inwardly referred to himself as the Prime Minister in waiting.

Hong Kong

Even though the Vietnamese had three times raided Hong Kong, city authorities refused to institute a blackout. War was war, but business was business and war would not be allowed to interfere with that. Besides, the Vietnamese couldn’t hit anything in broad daylight. It was unlikely they’d do any damage at night. With Hong Kong gleaming in the distance, Hong Kong

International received several RAF transports.

Chief Mallory shouted, ‘Get moving! Keep moving!’

Before Mallory one Airman Carr clad in orange jacket and waving a pair of glow sticks, motioned for the British transport to taxi down the runway.

‘Keep moving!’ Chief Mallory shouted again.

Airman Carr mumbled, ‘I’m not driving the bleeding plane, am I?’

‘Move it!’ he shouted. ‘Second transport is coming in!’

Fed up, Carr turned and shouted, ‘I ain’t driving the plane, Chief!’

‘Well get it over!’

‘Get off my back! I am!’

‘Are you being insubordinate!?’

‘If you don’t like it, Chief Mallory, you can taxi the plane.’

‘No need! It’s taxied down now!’ Mallory shouted.

Airman Carr walked in front of the plane and led it over to the air terminal.

With the first aircraft squared away, Mallory waved to the control tower and radioed. ‘Right, bring in the next C-130.’

‘Copy.’

By the time the second C-130 was down, Airman Carr returned from parking the first C-130. This time he hustled. Mallory smiled at his ability to induce hustle in his otherwise lazy, young airman. While the possibility of the Vietnamese actually doing damage to the airport proper was remote, memories ran long in the British and Commonwealth militaries. The armed forces of the Anglo-Saxon world had institutionalized memory of Vietnamese and before that, Japanese infiltration. As such, a section of the New Zealand SAS stood watch along the tarmac.

Specialist Gipp, with his Uzi slung at his hip and a cigarette dangling from his mouth asked, ‘What do they think, the Vietnamese are going to swim here from Saigon?’

‘It’s Ho-Chi-Minh City now, aye?’ said his companion Sergeant Adams.

‘It will always be Saigon to me,’ said Gipp as he watched the first RAF C-130 taxi to the jetway. ‘What are we doing out here?’

‘Giving the higher ups piece of mind,’ said Adams. ‘Me grandfather was in the war against the Nips. He talked about Japs coming through our

lines all the time, slitting throats and the like.'

'Our troops was in the desert and Italy during the war.'

'Yeah, well me grandfather was in the British Army. Only came to New Zealand after the war. Met me grandmother in Auckland, he did.'

'So he rogered your grams and stayed in Auckland. Bet there was a shotgun at his back.'

'Shut the hell up, Gipp,' Adams said. 'Me grandfather was from Manchester, see. And he saw his chance to get somewhere else and took it.'

'And yer grandmother, too.'

Adams reached out and slapped Gipp in the back of the head. 'Shut up!'

'Right.'

Gipp pointed. 'Who is they?'

The SAS men peered at the soldiers as they filed off the C-130.

'Hey I recognize that flag.'

'Oh yeah,' said Gipp. 'Blue field. Union Jack in the corner, shield and coat of arms in the middle. That's Fiji.'

'Bloody hell,' said Adams, 'The Fijian 1st Infantry Regiment.'

'Maybe they really are worried about a Vietnamese attack here.'

Auckland, New Zealand

General Roger Lee thought the Hacka was a nice touch.

The New Zealand Provisional Brigade boarded the *SS Tasman* before thousands of people - families, well-wishers, and of course dignitaries. The old timers said it reminded them of troops setting off for the Western Desert and Italy during the war. Indeed, many a veteran showed up at the dock in his old uniform. Most uniforms dated from the Second World War, a few from Vietnam or the Commonwealth's various mid-century imperial campaigns. Even a few nonagenarians from the Great War came. Oddly, the Prime Minister seemed reluctant to be at the send-off and his speech struck many as pro forma, almost like a scared child's forced apology. Few wanted to hear him anyway.

Also present was a sizable contingent from the local Auckland chapter of Greenpeace and other activists. At first these held up a large banner declaring 'Whales not Bombs' among other assorted peace placards. The

well-wishers mostly ignored the peacenik assembly till some of them broke out their guitars and led the protestors in 30's era folk songs. After a few minutes the crowd's rugby and hurling hooligans tired of the peaceniks' antics. The assorted hooligans formed a skirmish line and walked menacingly toward the peaceniks. The police didn't lift a finger to help, and the hooligans dispersed the mob without trouble.

As had happened during the Second World War, the First World War and Boer War, the ship departed with streamers flying and troops lining the deck waving to the crowd and trying to keep their eyes on their loved ones even as the distance grew between ship and dock. The men on deck noticed the crowd parting. Into the gap marched a double column of Maori men clad in a mishmash of old, musty uniforms. Everyone knew who they were. These were veterans of the Maori Battalion of Second World War fame. Out of deference and respect people made a space for the proud vets as they marched to the dock edge. Their leader, himself a captain who had fought in Greece, the Western Desert and Italy placed a PA system on the dock. Speaking into the microphone he said, 'Company! Atten-shun!'

The uniformed old men went ramrod straight. The Captain shouted 'Haka!' To a roaring crowd the Maori war vets stamped in rhythm and let out blood curdling screams in a ritual war and challenge dance. When they concluded after two minutes of such, the men of the Provo Brigade, as they were already calling themselves clapped and cheered.

Thinking quickly, the brigade's senior sergeant shouted 'Silence in the ranks!' With silence achieved, he shouted. 'New Zealand Provisional Brigade!....Ka'mate! Ka'mate Ka Ora! Ka Ora!' He let loose a blood curdling scream. New Zealand's young men repaid the tribute with screams, protruded tongues, body slaps and foot stomps.

After an hour's cruise, North Island was on the horizon and by nightfall had disappeared entirely. The distant glow of light and civilization was all that remained. The officers ordered the men below decks and assigned billets. General Lee allowed two men to a cabin and forbad private cabins to all but senior officers. He placed MPs at the ship's bars. After the men were settled he convened the commanding officers of the Provo Brigade assembled in a conference room.

'Gentlemen I thought we should do an introduction followed by a description of roles and our upcoming mission.'

The officers nodded and grunted in agreement.

After pleasantries, Lee nodded to the next ranking officer.

A tall, lanky man stood and said, ‘Lt. Colonel Arthur Gipson, GOC 1st Infantry Battalion, 1st New Zealand Regiment.’

‘Lt. Colonel Vincent, commander, 2nd Infantry Battalion.’

‘Major Ken Roon, Queen Alexandra’s Mounted Rifles.’

‘Colonel Ron Tiaki, 16th Artillery Regiment.’

After engineers introduced themselves Lee said, ‘Ah, good. Now then. This brigade will be attached to the Task Force Australia. While we will be subordinate to their General Grey, at all times our forces will be an independent force and fight under the New Zealand Flag.’

The officers nodded their approval.

‘Our primary combat power will be the infantry battalions.’

He nodded to the two infantry battalion commanders.

‘We will be joined by Captain Connors and the SAS squadron later.’

Roon held up a hand. ‘And what about us, Colonel?’

‘Ok, Colonel Roon,’ Roon nodded to the Colonel. ‘Your Mounted Rifles will be our reserve. If we have some trouble you’re the cavalry.’

‘Got it, sir.’

‘And if need be, you’ll be our maneuver element.’

‘Right, sir.’

‘Now, as to our objective. The First Provisional Brigade is tasked with taking Cam Ranh Bay.’

Colonel Gipson said, ‘Be bloody well nice to get back, wouldn’t it, sir?’

‘I myself passed through Cam Ranh Bay,’ Lee said. ‘Anyone else?’

Colonel Gipson raised his hand.

‘Sorry,’ Roon said. ‘Too young.

‘Now as to the present situation aboard. The men will run laps above deck in full gear. They will make full use of the ship’s exercise facilities, it has several. I have already spoken with the ship’s captain and he says we will be able to deploy toward targets from the aft. So there will be ample time for target practice.’ He looked at the officers one last time. ‘Any questions? Good. Dismissed. See to your men.’

Hong Kong

‘Here we bloody are again,’ said Adams. ‘Another night, another bloody flight of C-130s.’

‘Wonder what’s coming in tonight?’ Gipp asked as he watched a pair of lights on the horizon.

‘Looks like a C-130, doesn’t it?’

‘It does judging by the light pattern.’

‘Aye!’ Gipp shouted over to Chief Mallory. ‘What’s coming in?’

Mallory walked over to Gipp and Adams, ‘Just you keep an eye on that water, will you?’

‘What?’ Gipp asked, ‘Is some Vietnamese frogman gonna come climbing out of the murky depths to slit all our throats?’

‘Just you two watch it!’

‘Aye, Mallory!’

‘Yeah.’

‘You mean watch it, be careful of you, or watch the water?’

Mallory stepped forward and raised a fist.

‘Just try it, Chief,’ said Gipp. ‘Ol’ Adams here was a boxer.’

‘Aye.’

Adams tried to look as menacing as possible. Mallory was a stocky man and claimed to have worked the mines in England’s coal ring. Mallory would be tough to handle.

‘Plane’s coming in, Chief!’ Airman Carr shouted.

Mallory pointed a finger at Gipp and Adams. ‘Just you two wait.’

‘Ooooh my, Chief!’ Gipp mocked. ‘But I don’t swing that way. Can’t speak for Adams here.’

‘Hey, shut yer arse hole.’

Adams smacked Gipp in the head. Gipp retaliated by giving Adams a right cross to the jaw. As Gipp’s momentum carried him to the left, Adams pushed him down to the tarmac. He was about to kick, but Gipp got both hands around Adams’ ankle and upended him, sending Adams crashing down to the tarmac.

‘Ach! My tail bone!’ Adams shouted. He rolled around on his stomach with one hand cupped around his throbbing tail bone.

‘Have to admit, you look kind of like a poof that way.’

Watching the whole scene, Mallory doubled over laughing.

‘Hey, Chief!’ shouted Airman Carr. ‘Where do you want this inbound?’

As Carr asked the C-130 touched down, its massive tires screeching on the tarmac. ‘Same as last night, right? Over at the jetway.’

‘Right.’

Clad in orange vest and sporting dayglow sticks Carr flagged down the C-130 and motioned it to follow him. He walked the large plane over to the jetway. By then Gipp and Adams decided their little fight had gone on long enough and got back to their feet.

‘You two really are poofs.’

To Mallory’s eye, it looked like Gipp was thinking about testing his boxing chops. Mallory shook his head, ‘Any time, mate.’

‘Second plane coming in, Chief!’

Over his shoulder, Mallory shouted ‘Taxi her right down the runway next to the first!’

‘Right!’

Mallory turned his attention back to the two SAS men. ‘You two just gonna waste my time or you gonna make a move?’

Adams tugged Gipp’s arm, ‘Come on, mate. It ain’t worth it. Let’s stand to.’

Mallory nodded. ‘Right then, lads.’

The three watched the second C-130 come in. The ramp came down and out filed a phalanx of soldiers.

‘Who the hell are they?’ Allen asked.

Illuminated by the terminal lights, they saw colored soldiers dressed in brown and kaki and wearing bush hats.

‘What flag is that?’

‘Oy,’ said Mallory. ‘Those are Gurkhas.’

‘You sure, Chief?’ Gipp asked.

‘Yeah, see those knives hanging from their belts.’

‘Yep.’

‘Those are Kukri knives. Only the Gurkhas carry those.’ Mallory whistled.

Adams said, ‘My old man served with them in Burma. Said they were some tough blokes. Said the Japs were terrified of them.’

Airman Carr shouted, ‘Here comes another plane, Chief!’

‘Right,’ Mallory said, ‘Well, enough of you two. I have to get these planes in.’

‘See you later, Chief!’ Adams shouted.

Over his shoulder Mallory gave them the finger.

‘Gurkhas?’ Adams said. ‘I get the feeling that things are very serious.’

‘How you figure?’

‘You think we need all these Gurkhas just to protect Hong Kong?’

Gipp thought about it for a moment. ‘Ohhhh…’

Clark AFB, Philippines

Callum shook the water out of his hair. He looked in the mirror, ‘Not as much as there used to be,’ he said to the empty washroom. ‘Hell, not as much as there was when the war began.’

He leaned forward and peered closely into the mirror. There was no getting around it. In six weeks his hairline had retreated perhaps an inch up his scalp and the hair above his ears was peppered with gray. ‘Beats being dead,’ he said.

‘I bet it does.’

Callum turned and saw a pair of Australian flyers standing at the entrance to the washroom.

‘Sir.’

Callum nodded. ‘Men.’

He knew what this was about. Callum went about his business. He reached into his travel bag and took out his tooth brush and paste. He brushed his teeth.

‘A moment, Colonel.’

‘Mmmmph.’ Callum nodded.

The two flyers walked to the sinks. ‘I’m Reece.’

‘I’m Campos.’

Callum nodded.

He spit out the toothpaste and went to work lathering up his face.

‘I suppose you want to know about Major Kirby.’

‘Aye,’ Reece said.

‘Not much to tell, really,’ Callum said as he ran the razor across his

face.

‘Then it won’t take long at all, sir.’

‘Will it? Sir.’

‘I got to be honest with you two, I really hadn’t intended to relive the moment.’

‘Well, do us a favor then, sir.’

‘Please, sir.’

Without looking away from the mirror, Callum said. ‘Well, we were flying a mission against a Soviet follow-on column. Before we hit the target we took heavy flak.’

‘And… Sir?’

‘And a volley of 25mm shells slammed into our ship. One entered the canopy and blew Major Kirby’s head all over me. I didn’t know if I should clean Major Kirby’s brains off the canopy or pick bits of his skull out of my mouth.’

‘Oh.’

‘So I guess I just crashed.’

‘Is that how he went then, sir?’

‘It is, Reece. That answer your goddamn question?’

‘Yeah.’

Campos said, ‘It’s just that Major Kirby was one of our mates, sir.’

Callum finished shaving. He took the towel around his waist and wiped the excess lather off his face. Reece and Campos stepped back in surprise. Without bothering to put the towel back on Callum said, ‘You lost one of your mates, did you? Well I lost most of mine.’

The two Australian fliers didn’t say anything.

Callum turned around and looked at himself in the mirror to see if he missed any spots.

‘Get out of here,’ he said.

‘Yes, Colonel.’

‘Sorry, Colonel.’

‘Yeah, I bet.’ Callum said. He thought. *And I’m going to be flying with these guys* .

SS Tasman

‘You got to admit,’ Dec Wilson said as he flopped down on the bed, ‘this is a hell of a way to go to war.’

Indeed, like everyone else in the Heavy Weapons Company, Dec Wilson and his mate Tim McDonald had been assigned a cabin. It was decently appointed, with a mini fridge. For his part, Tim simply stared out the porthole at the Pacific Ocean.

‘Will you stop staring like that?’ Dec asked. ‘It’s the same ocean you looked at yer whole life.’

‘Yeah’ the young Tim, replied. ‘But I never seen it like this before.’

Home had already disappeared on the horizon. Before them passed mile upon endless mile of ocean. ‘Look at the wake we’re making. We must be going fast.’

‘At least 20 knots,’ Dec said.

Without knocking on the door Sergeant Ngata walked into the cabin.

‘Hey, Sergeant,’ Dec said.

‘Hey, Sergeant,’ Tim said.

Sgt. Ngata looked to the floor, where the team’s MAG F7 machinegun lay. ‘Now see here,’ he said, pointing to the machinegun.’ He looked at McDonald, who had yet to turn away from the portal. ‘Hey, sheep shagger!’

This got Tim’s attention. ‘Shearer, Sarge. I’m a sheep shearer on me dad’s farm.’

‘Well, anyway. You two. I want this MG stowed in the closet here. Understood?’

‘Yes, Sergeant,’ the gunners said in unison. ‘Your weapon will be cleaned. It will be maintained. It will even be fired during this trip. If anything happens to this weapon, it’s your ass. Got it?’

‘Got, it.’

Sgt. Ngata looked at Dec. ‘What’s with him?’ he nodded to Tim.

‘Sorry, Sergeant. Tim ain’t never left South Island before he joined the army. First time he saw the big city was when I took him. So this is a great big adventure for him. He ain’t never seen none of this before.’

‘How old is that kid anyway?’ He asked Dec.

‘You can ask me, Sergeant.’

‘Ok, kid, how old are you anyway?’

‘Eighteen, Sergeant.’

‘Eighteen. Jesus Christ,’ Ngata said. He muttered a few Maori oaths. ‘I bet you’re still a fucking virgin.’

‘He is, Sergeant.’

‘Hey!’ Tim protested.

‘I tried to take care of that…’

‘I knew you both was poofs.’

‘Not like that, Sergeant. I tried to introduce Tim here to some nice girls, but he wasn’t interested.’

Ngata looked at Tim suspiciously. ‘You a poof?’

Tim smiled. ‘No, Sarge.’

‘Well the two of yous better not go that way on this here trip. Understood?’

‘Yes, Sergeant.’

‘Carry on.’

Dec walked over to the portal and looked out. ‘You really ain’t never been anywhere before, eh?’

‘Not really, Dec. No.’

‘That why you joined the army? See the world? You don’t need to join the army to do that. I’ve been to Sydney, Perth, even Bali once, all before I enlisted two years ago.’

‘Na,’ Tim shook his head. ‘Just didn’t want to shear sheep my entire life.’

‘But the way you talked to Ngata before.’

‘I’m still a sheep farmer at heart. My dad always told me to have pride in it.’

Dec nodded. ‘Makes sense. My dad is a bus driver. I don’t know that he ever had pride in it. I guess he did, way he wore his uniform and all and always kept the yard up. Hell, when me sister got herself knocked up….’

‘Save it, ok.’

‘Ok,’ Dec looked at the fridge. ‘I wonder…’ he opened the fridge but it was empty. ‘Ah well. I guess they cleared out the fridge before we got in.’

In the hallway, Sgt. Ngata shouted. ‘Alright, lads! Assembly topside, let’s go! On the double!’

Dec and Tim put on their berets and went out into the passageway with the rest of the platoon. They formed a line and went down the passageway

then up to the deck. The Sergeant and Lt. Bixley led the heavy weapons platoon to the ship's fore, where there was enough room to gather the two thousand men of the New Zealand Provisional Brigade. General Lee was at the prow with the various unit colors and commanding officers. When the entire force was assembled he said, 'Right, men. Welcome aboard *SS Tasman* . We are the guests of the cruise line and let me be clear. The officers and crew of this ship will be treated with courtesy and respect by this provisional brigade, clear?'

The entire brigade replied. 'Yes, sir!'

'You will follow the orders of *Tasman's* crew without question as if they come from your officers. Clear?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Now, I don't want you men to get too comfortable here. Mornings aboard ship will start like any other mornings, with PT. The men of this brigade will daily run laps around this deck in full gear. There are three gymnasiums aboard. The men will also take advantage of those facilities. My executive officer Major Jones is working out a schedule. This after Captain Crosby here,' he nodded to the ship captain, 'will take us through various ship's safety drills. You will master them. Clear?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Now then, after morning PT, gym time and afternoon drills, you men will be off duty. During that time you may feel free to take advantage of the ship's amenities…'

A great cheer rose up from the assembled.

'There will even be a ration of two drinks per night…'

More cheers.

'Reveille will be at 0600 hours sharp. Sea drills will begin within the hour. Until then…' he nodded to the regimental sergeant who stepped forward and said, 'Brigade!....Dis-missed!'

When Dec and Tim got back to their cabin Dec said, 'Yes, sir. Not a bad way to go to war at all…'

HMAS Melbourne

When *HMAS Melbourne* entered Singapore Strait she was greeted by an anti-

submarine patrol of Singaporean patrol craft, helicopters and two frigates. Further above a pair of F-16s patrolled the skies. As was customary the Singaporean Navy had Admiral Dooley ashore for an official visit and a formal audience with President Lee Kew. Later Admiral Dooley was introduced to Commodore Duk Ang, commander of the Singapore flotilla and in a nod to political expediency, Admiral Dooley's second in command. After the meeting, Commodore Ang expressed his interest in seeing *HMAS Melbourne* . Admiral Dooley agreed to arrange a tour.

So it was Captain Crewe who waited on deck while Commodore Ang's boat made its way from shore to ship.

Commodore Ang came aboard. He saluted the flag and then Captain Crewe. After he granted permission to come aboard, the two shook hands.

'Thank you, Captain,' said Commodore Ang. 'I am most grateful for this opportunity to tour *Melbourne* .'

'It is my pleasure, Commodore. Shall we?'

Crewe started with the bridge and after the maneuvering room and living quarters, ended with the hangar, filled with A-4 bombers. Commodore Ang was particularly interested in these relics of the 1960s. The squadron commander gave the Commodore a personal tour of an A-4, walking around the ship and inviting him to sit inside the cockpit. When they were finished Crewe invited Commodore Ang to dinner.

Commodore Ang spoke perfect, though slightly accented English. He had learned the language as a youth and later attended naval war college. Ang served aboard Royal Navy destroyers and even had taken courses at the American Naval Academy at Annapolis. Over appetizers, Ang admitted he flunked out of the Royal Navy's infamous Persisher submarine programme, after which he returned to Singapore.

'Tell me, Commodore. What do you think of *Melbourne* ?'

'A fine ship, the best carrier I have ever been aboard.'

'Oh come now, Commodore,' said Crewe. 'Surely you have toured an American carrier, perhaps even their mighty *Nimitz* class carrier.'

'True,' said Ang. 'But *Melbourne* harkens back to an earlier era. The empire and commonwealth, the Malay insurgency. Even the Vietnam War.'

'Yes,' said Crewe, 'I served aboard her during the latter.'

Ang thought of the ferocious naval campaign in the Atlantic, 'And two of those mighty *Nimitz* carriers are at the bottom of the ocean now. As well as

the Americans' *Enterprise .'*

After a steak dinner and over coffee and tea, Crewe said, 'I must admit, Commodore, I was somewhat surprised that Singapore is so enthusiastic about this operation.'

'Come, now, Captain. President Kew deeply resents the Vietnamese actions.'

'How so?'

'They have brought the conflict to South Asia. They attacked Hong Kong and they just as easily could have attacked Singapore.'

'True.'

'And their actions destabilize the entire region.'

'Also true.'

'And Singapore is a signatory to the Five Power Agreement. Standing by Hong Kong is our responsibility as it is Hong Kong's responsibility to stand by us.'

Crewe nodded. 'The Commonwealth stands by its own, then.'

'Yes. And besides, the Soviet Union will be absent in the post war world. China will no doubt seek to replace them in Asia. President Kew believes, as do I, that we in south Asia must cement our alliance in order to present a united front against Chinese encroachment.'

'And in the meantime our two nations fight together. An interesting development, don't you think?'

'Oh I don't know about that,' said Ang. 'Australian troops fought in Singapore and Malaysia during the war, did they not?'

'They did, they did,' replied Crewe.

'Personally, I view this as the natural extension of that conflict, and its conclusion.'

'Hard to disagree, Captain.'

'And at the end of it our alliance will dominate.'

SS Tasman

The men of the New Zealand Provisional Brigade crammed the decks of the *Tasman* as she steamed passed Singapore's great docks.

'Wow,' said McDonald.

‘Never seen anything like it, aye, Tim?’ Dec said.

‘I thought Auckland was big.’

‘Auckland?’ said Dec Wilson. ‘Auckland is a village compared to this.’

Indeed, Singapore boasted a massive skyline rivaling the world’s great metropolises and the largest port facilities in Asia. Much of the shoreline was a forest of cranes and up-loaders. Below these of course were docked dozens, scores of merchant vessels. Even with a war on, Singapore was the most important trade hub in Asia.

‘Oy, look at that!’ said Tim. He pointed to the carrier anchored in the bay.

‘Must be *Melbourne* ,’ said Dec.

‘I see a bunch of other ships.’

‘It’s a whole battlegroup, Tim,’ Dec said. ‘You don’t send a flattop out on its own without escorts.’

‘Oh.’

‘Don’t know anything about the navy or women do you, Tim?’

Tim said nothing. He just looked in awe at *Melbourne* and her battlegroup silhouetted against Singapore’s skyline.

‘What are those two ships over there?’ Tim asked.

He pointed to a destroyer and frigate sailing up the channel toward *Melbourne* .

Wilson peered at the flags. ‘I think those are Malaysian.’

‘Oh.’

The two friends stood by the railing looking at the great city before them.

‘That town is loaded with girls.’

‘So?’

‘So, we go ashore and I can get you taken care of.’

‘Oh, because you know so many people in Singapore.’

‘It ain’t that hard to do. We go ashore, find a nice bar. Probably be some girls looking for a good time and…’

‘I’d be careful about that,’ said Lt. Jones.

‘How long have you been standing there, Lieutenant?’

‘Long enough to hear your plans, Corporal. If we go ashore you’ll be on your best behavior. They don’t like that kind of carousing in Singapore.’

‘Oh.’

‘Just fine with me,’ said Tim.

Dec patted his back. ‘Don’t mind Tim, here, Lieutenant. He likes sheep.’

Tim slapped Dec’s hand away.

‘Carry on,’ said Lt. Jones. Then, ‘I’d hate to have Sergeant Ngata lock you two up.’

The Kiwi soldiers stood for a while longer until their banter was interrupted by the ship’s PA.

‘Now hear this! This is General Lee speaking.’

Dec nudged Tim, ‘Get yourself ready, mate. We’re going ashore.’

‘This ship will remain at anchor here in the Singapore Strait…’

‘This is it…’

‘During this time men of the New Zealand Provisional Brigade will remain aboard. That is all.’

‘Bloody Hell!’ Dec shouted.

Tim couldn’t help but laugh.

Dec spat out a string of curses until Lt. Jones came back.

‘Now, now Corporal. That will be all.’

‘But Lieutenant…’ Dec held out his hand toward Singapore.

‘Corporal, look,’ Lt. Jones pointed toward *Melbourne* and her battlegroup. Look at those other ships gathering here in Singapore Strait.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Look at those other transports. Those are filled with Australian troops.’

‘Yeah.

‘That one over there flies the Fijian flag. Fijian. Think about that.’

‘Right.’

‘Would you just sit here with this fleet gathering?”

‘I guess it would be risky.’

‘We are leaving soon.’

‘Where are we headed then?’

‘Points north. Other than that, I really don’t know.’

Clark AFB, Philippines

The pilots of No. 6 Squadron assembled in the briefing room. Colonel

Williams walked in first. The pilots stood, Williams waved for them all. Behind him was a white screen and a photograph projector, inside of which were loaded several of Colonel Callum's slides.

Williams began. 'We've all watched the war in Europe and Asia. Soon it's going to be our turn.'

The pilots clapped.

'Now our primary target will be Vietnamese airstrips, cratering them and destroying enemy aircraft on the ground. If necessary we'll hit Vietnamese armored formations, but these should fall under the purview of American B-52s out of Guam. Now, the American Pentagon has been good enough to send us one of their men to consult and lend us his expertise. Colonel Callum?'

Callum walked in. Williams shouted, 'Squadron attention!'

The men of No. 6 Squadron stood. Callum walked to the podium. 'Please be at ease,' he said.

The Australians sat and clapped and cheered.

'Please, please, men,' Callum said.

Williams said, 'Settle down, you lovelies.'

'Thanks for having me,' Callum began. 'After six weeks in Europe it's nice to be back in a tropical climate.'

'Sure it is!' someone shouted.

Callum laughed. 'On the trip over here I had prepared a long briefing. But I think I'll do this informally with a quick talk about what we did in Europe.'

'Well, let us have it then,' said Williams.

'Ok. My squadron was in combat operations for forty-nine consecutive days.'

Men whistled and murmured among themselves.

'Let me define to you what that means. Every aircraft, all nineteen of them, flew multiple missions every day without exception. Sometimes three, sometimes four. During the crisis point at the Battle of the Weser I myself flew six missions in three different aircraft.'

The pilots looked on in amazement.

'We finally came off line four days ago, I think. Forgive me but with the travel and the crossing of datelines the time line is a bit fuzzy.

'My squadron began the war with nineteen aircraft. When I left we had

eight.’

The pilots remained in mortified silence.

‘I myself was shot down twice. Once I crash landed on the banks of the Weser and was picked up by a Belgian unit. The second time I went down behind enemy lines. I stayed hidden till I saw M60 tanks of our own National Guard.’

‘How long?’ someone asked.

‘Two days.’

Someone whistled.

‘It wasn’t like I was on a desert island or anything. I hid out in a chicken coop.’

Williams said, ‘I think we have a real survivor here.’

‘That’s my story,’ Callum said. ‘I think now we can open things up to questions.’

‘I’d like to start,’ said Williams. ‘When you flew a mission, what did you face?’

‘Everything,’ said Callum. ‘Absolutely everything. Triple-A, SAMS, fighters. Hell, I often came back with AK-47 rounds in my air frame.’

One of the pilots asked. ‘Did a MiG take you down either time?’

‘I really don’t know.’

Another asked. ‘Did the electronic warfare help? Your EF Ravens and such?’

‘Sometimes. Sometimes, when the Soviet radar got scrambled it just alerted them and we faced a wall of Triple-A.’

A pilot raised his hand and said, ‘Excuse me, Colonel, can I ask, were you in Vietnam?’

Callum laughed. ‘Yes, I flew the Aardvark in ’72.’

‘Linebacker II?’ another pilot asked.

‘Yes, two dozen missions.’

‘Whose anti-air was worse?’

‘Well,’ Callum rubbed his chin in thought. ‘The Soviets’ screen was more intense. Much more intense. But I’d have to say that after years of war the Vietnamese really knew what they were doing. So overall I would call them a tougher adversary.’

The questions turned from Soviet air defenses to Callum’s experiences against the North Vietnamese. Finally Colonel Williams said, ‘And, Colonel,

overall how would you rate the Aardvark in combat?'

'She's a tough bird.'

The pilots nodded in agreement.

'Well we are going to find out,' said Williams. 'Thank you Colonel Callum, thank you very much. Now, Colonel, you will be flying a ship with us, of course.'

'Yeah, sure, Colonel.'

'Wonderful. You will need a co-pilot. Would you like to choose?'

'Oh absolutely,' Callum said. Devilishly he looked out at the men of No. 6 Squadron. He saw Reece, eyes narrowed Callum pointed.

Reece thought, *Oh god, not me. Not me* !

'Reece. I'll fly with Reece.'

'Excellent.'

Singapore, HMAS Melbourne

General Grey walked into *Melbourne's* briefing room and took the podium. The officers stood and saluted. 'Be seated, gentlemen. Be seated.'

Grey surveyed the officers before him. They represented every nation in southern Asia, many present in an observation role. Australian and New Zealand officers, of course. Colonel Kaipaiwai of the 1st Fijian Regiment, General Gurung of the Gurkha contingent even then flying into Singapore from Bhutan. Some had flown from Hong Kong via Manila then on to Singapore. A long flight, the first of many, Grey was here to tell them.

'Alright Gentlemen,' General Grey said. 'First off, I'd like to thank Captain Crewe for making *Melbourne's* facilities available for our use.'

Captain Crewe stood and nodded. Men rapped their knuckles on the sides of their seats in recognition.

He then said, 'And I look forward to working with Admiral Dooley,' he nodded to the fleet GOC of Operation Boomerang Shot.

'We all know what's happening in the world. As I speak, NATO forces are battling the Soviets in Eastern Europe. Because the Soviets are losing, they've pressured the rest of their commie friends into making trouble. You've all seen the headlines out of Central America and Africa. Now, this morning I was contacted by our own Defence Ministry in Canberra with a bit

of news. For those of you who haven't had a chance to turn on the BBC, last night the Americans invaded Cuba.'

The officers murmured to one another. Someone said, 'About bloody time' another, 'No surprise there.'

Grey waited a few seconds before continuing.

'The Americans have one goal: topple Castro.'

The officers nodded. Someone rapped their knuckles on their chair.

'We don't want to do that in Vietnam. In truth, gentlemen we can't. We don't have the capability.'

Everyone in the briefing room knew this of course.

'We've thought long and hard about what we are trying to accomplish, our goals. There are two. First, protect the region from more Vietnamese encroachment. Second, punish the Vietnamese government for their actions thus far.'

There were more affirmations from the officers.

'This will have two steps. First we'll conduct a series of air and naval raids up and down the Vietnamese coast. These will be conducted by air elements of the Australian, New Zealand, Singaporean, Malaysian, Filipino, air forces. In short all national contingents. Even the Americans.'

A few eyebrows raised.

'The Pentagon has agreed to contribute assets, both in the Philippines and elsewhere.'

'B-52s?' someone asked.

'Yes. Out of Guam.'

Someone whistled.

'I gather by your whistle you're starting to understand the second part of the plan.'

The whistler nodded.

'Since we don't have the combined assets of the Americans…'

'Who does?!' someone shouted.

There was laughter.

'Now, I've spoken with Captain Crewe,' he nodded to the captain 'he and his staff will coordinate air operations from *Melbourne.* '

'Right, General,' Crewe said.

'So this ship will be the air operations nerve center with Captain Crewe's Combat Air Controller running the show.' He looked at Commander

Wells, *Melbourne's* CAC. 'Would you mind standing, Commander?'

The room gave light applause.

General Grey went on. 'We'll hit the Vietnamese all at once. While the aerial campaign begins, ground forces will come ashore at Beach Red. They will secure our objective but also, it is hoped, draw out Vietnamese ground forces. And then the Americans can pummel them from the air.'

General Lee, who had been quiet till that point said, 'In other words we are going to be bait.'

'Ah, General Lee,' Grey said. 'I wouldn't go that far. We shall enable air and naval support, General' said Grey, effectively ending the discussion. 'Anything else?'

With no questions, Grey turned the briefing over to Admiral Dooley.

Admiral Dooley stepped up to the podium to polite applause.

'Thank you, gents, thank you.' Admiral Dooley cleared his throat. 'It's a pleasure to command this task force. I should note that this is the largest Australian task force since the Vietnam War,' he looked around the room. 'Many of us were in that war of course, and now we are going back.'

Most of the officers in the room, Australian and New Zealanders nodded their heads.

'Many of us served aboard this very ship. She's an old girl, but after speaking with Captain Crewe here, we both know the old girl is up to one more war cruise,' Admiral Dooley stamped his foot on the thirty-five-year-old deck. The officers, navy and army both, clapped.

'We'll show the world that carrier operations aren't limited to the Americans and Brits.'

The naval officers cheered at that.

'Now, our mission, of course, is to secure the South China Sea against the Vietnamese navy and whatever Soviet forces remain. Once this mission is accomplished we'll land General Grey and his task force on time and on target.

'To accomplish this we'll have the ANZAC task force of ten Australian and two New Zealand ships, two Singaporean amphibious warfare ships, two Malaysian amphibious warfare ships. Supplemental to their contributions to this task force, Malaysia and Singapore will maintain a patrol of the South China Sea's southern reaches against Vietnamese and Soviet encroachment.'

He nodded in deference to the Malaysian and Singaporean captains

present.

‘I should also note the presence of commander Chakan, he is our liaison with the Royal Thai Navy.’

Commander Chakan stood and nodded.

‘They’ll be conducting a patrol in the Gulf of Thailand.’

‘Now, while the Task Force will be sailing out of Singapore, air support will be based at the Americans’ Clark Air Force Base. We will have tanker support for aerial refueling, but this will be limited with the Americans’ world-wide commitments.’

‘So with a few exceptions this is an ANZAC operation.’

CHAPTER 3

Clark AFB, Philippines

In pairs the F-18 Hornets of No. 3 Squadron taxied down the runway. Pagliano watched with his hands on his hips. Standing next to him as the first pair of Hornets lifted into the air, Sgt. Towson clapped and whistled.

'What's with all the fanfare, Sergeant?'

'This is the most exciting part, Captain!' Towson whistled again as a second pair of F-18s got airborne. 'This is what you do at the beginning of an air campaign.'

'Yeah?'

'I was here in '68 and for Linebacker II….and I fueled the Aardvarks in '86.'

Fearing that he would look like an overeager civilian if he cheered, Pagliano felt at ease now. He whistled and shouted, 'Kick some ass, Aussies!'

'That's the spirit, sir.'

In the air, Lt. Skip Bonfman gently pulled back on the stick and leveled off his F-18 at 1000 feet. His wingman, Lt Cradle, eased his ship alongside him. Bonfman wagged his wings.

He radioed Clark, 'Tower this is Kokoda Flight, airborne and in formation, over.'

'We copy, Kokoda Flight. Good luck. Happy hunting.'

'Good luck!' Bonfman mocked. 'Ha.'

Colonel Leary the squadron commander, thought Bonfman was cocky and arrogant. Bonfman thought he was just confident and talented. Half of Cradle's job was just reining in Bonfman.

‘Alright Cradle,’ Bonfman said to his wingman. ‘Let’s go hunt some MiGs!’

Cradle sighed.

‘Right, let’s go.’

HMAS Adelaide

Captain Gates stood on the wing watching *Perth, Darwin* and *Canberra* , all in line with *Adelaide* as they steamed north toward the enemy.

‘Quite a site, eh?’ he said to Chief Petty Officer Ramey.

‘It is, sir.’ Ramey replied. ‘You know, my old man sailed on *Canberra* during the war.’

‘You mean...’

‘Yes, he was at Savo Island,’ Ramey said, referencing the infamous night surface action in which the Japanese sunk five American cruisers as well as *Canberra* .

‘You trying to say something, Ramey?’ Gates asked.

‘Me old man said as they steamed into battle everyone thought the Japs stood no chance. So I suppose I’m saying be careful.’

‘Right,’ Gates said. ‘At least this beats sitting in Subic Bay getting attacked by the Vietnamese and bombarded with flopping fish.’

Ramey laughed at the memory. Then he looked up and said, ‘Those F-16s are breaking off to the north.’

‘It does look like it.’

‘They must have incoming targets to engage.’

From the bridge the communications officer said, ‘Sir, message from *Perth* , enemy approaching.’

Gates said, ‘Action Stations.’

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

Shiskin and Dubrodin watched as another MiG-21 took off down the runway.

‘That’s the last of them,’ Shiskin said.

Dubrodin shook his head. ‘What are they hoping to achieve?’

‘The Australian fleet is approaching.’

‘And I think between the fleet, and whatever they have stationed in the Philippines, the Australians will more than handle our Vietnamese allies.’

Shiskin looked at the naval infantry commander. ‘What would you do?’

‘I know what I am doing.’

‘It really is unbelievable, isn’t it?’ Dubrodin said of the news from Moscow.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Shiskin replied. ‘I never trusted the Romanians.’

‘And now they’ve revolted.’

Which explained the new orders from Moscow.

Shiskin laughed. ‘What does Moscow think you and your seventy-three men will able to accomplish in Hanoi?’

‘We are to hold down the embassy.’

‘And keep an eye on our comrades,’ Shiskin added.

‘Given what just happened in Romania, certainly. I am to stop a popular uprising with seventy three men,’ Dubrodin laughed. ‘Oh, and the dozen or so KGB men at the embassy.’

‘Anytime Hanoi wants, they will take over the embassy.’

Dubrodin nodded. ‘Da.’

‘So, you think it will come to that?’

‘I have no idea,’ Shiskin said. ‘He put his arm around Dubrodin. ‘Come back to my office, comrade. We shall drink before you leave for Hanoi.’

Blue Flight, Over the Gulf of Tonkin

Unlike the first raids on Hong Kong and the Philippines, this time Tran and his flight took off to no fanfare. Gone were the ground personnel cheering and waving flags and the state news agency cameras recording the take off for propaganda. The situation was much too serious. Even the cheerleaders in Hanoi understood that.

Five MiG-21s fell in line behind Tran. None of those pilots were Twe’s equal. Tran watched his friend go down. He saw no chute but also no blast as Twe’s MiG-21 made a crash landing at Clark AFB. Maybe he lived, Tran hoped.

You aimed for me, brother , Tran thought, *but got my friend instead .*

They flew out into the South China Sea and banked south. After a few

minutes they passed two columns of ships, also steaming south to do battle with the approaching Australian fleet. Tran wagged his wings in recognition. He wondered if any of them would survive the encounter. Tran doubted his own chances.

Ground control called, 'Blue Flight, Blue Flight. Enemy bogies at eight-zero degrees, speed four-five-zero knots.'

'Copy,' Tran replied. 'Can Blue Flight engage?'

'Alter route and engage bogies.'

'Understood,' Tran replied. 'Blue Flight, follow me.'

Tran banked his MiG-21 to the left toward the incoming Australian bogies. He turned his eyes up to the sky and said, 'Come and get me, brother…'

Task Force Australia

The personnel in *Perth's* CiC kept themselves busy receiving and collating data. Dooley watched the CiC radar readout - at least eight ships with a column of four in the center and two on either flank. Aerial recon by Crewe's intrepid Skyhawk pilots identified the class of ship. Several *Petya* frigates were present as well as several mine sweepers. It was not an insignificant force. In fact it outnumbered Task Force Australia. Dooley kept *Melbourne* well back with a pair of escorts. With *RNZS Waikato* detached on picket duty, Dooley actually only had *Perth, Darwin, Adelaide* , and *Canberra* steaming north, line abreast. The Vietnamese had to know they were outclassed. Why steam forward for a direct confrontation then? This worried Dooley.

What are they up to? He wondered. *I'll be damned if I lead Task Force Australia into an ambush.*

'Comm, signal the task force.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Slow to five knots.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

Dooley stared icily at the radar readout as many in the CiC looked at him. Five knots? More than one sailor wondered if they were turning yellow.

'Other orders, sir?'

'Maintain course.'

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

‘What is the air wing status at Clark?’

‘Last update came eight minutes ago. Four Hornets on the tarmac now, four being rearmed with Harpoon missiles.’

‘Very good.’

‘Four groups of two fanning out across the sea now. Two Singaporean flights of F-16s as well.’

Dooley furrowed his brow. ‘So plenty of air cover. What do you make of this, then?’

‘Admiral, I just think they’re going to fight.’

‘Yes, but I am concerned with what the Vietnamese have up their sleeves….’

HMNZS Waikato

Waikato steamed ten nautical miles west of Task Force Australia. She was far off from the main body of the Task Force. Captain Francis Nelson knew Dooley wasn’t trying to insult *Waikato* or the RNZN, but he had. Admiral Dooley might as well have said, ‘Women and children to the rear.’

Standing out on the wing, Captain Nelson trained his binoculars on the shore. Four miles to port was Con Dao Island. They saw little. Just miles of beach and palm-covered hills. Maps showed some sort of town and several fishing villages. But it seemed all the boats were docked. Radar spotted none, anyway. At least it was a mission, which was more than her sister ship could say about being on station in Hong Kong.

Waikato rounded Con Dao’s northern tip and turned south.

‘Sill not seeing much, Captain?’

‘No,’ Nelson replied.

‘Contact!’ shouted the sensor officer. ‘Coming right at us!’

In annoyance Nelson said, ‘Bearing, man!’

‘Sorry, sir. Contact at one-nine-seven bearing zero-zero-zero...speed…..twenty five knots.’

‘Twenty-five knots?’

‘Look, sir!’

A few miles to the south of Con Dao was a small, tree covered island.

Coming out from behind the island Nelson saw a pair of waves, and boats bouncing in the water. A flash of light emanated from both boats.

‘Missile contact!’ shouted Lt. Coff, the weapons officer.

‘Holy…’

The ship’s Seacat SAM system went live and fired off one missile, then another.

‘Damn that’s close,’ said Coff.

‘Quiet!’ Nelson snapped as he watched the quartet of missile contrails.

Coff reported, ‘Captain I have Exocets locked and ready.’

‘No. Save them for something bigger. Engage with the forward battery and the 40mm if need be.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The 4.5mm gun turret came to life and swiveled, tracking the approaching missile boats. As the gun leveled on the targets, the first incoming missile burst harmlessly. A moment later the second missile exploded. The 4.5mm fired a round. It fell far behind the approaching missile boats. Each fired a second missile.

‘Damn it!’ Nelson said.

Two more Seacats streaked out from *Waikato.*

The forward gun tracked the boats, firing shells in two-second intervals. As the first shell exploded between the oncoming boats, a Seacat brought down one of the incoming Exocets. The ship’s 40mm guns engaged the second Exocet, spitting out shells in rapid succession, exploding it a few hundred yards off the port beam. A moment later the 4.5mm gun hit the first missile boat.

A cheer rang out from the bridge.

Nelson put his binoculars to his eyes and found the boat. She billowed smoke from several portals and was listing on her port side.

‘Well done, I…’

Before Nelson finished, the second boat fired another missile…

‘Captain, new contact!’ said the radar tech. Nelson saw two more boats coming out from behind the island.

Ok, Nelson thought. *They’re trying to catch us in a pincer.*

‘Captain…’

Nelson thought for a moment. ‘Full speed ahead!’

‘Ahead?’

‘Yes, we’ll bore through.’

‘But, Captain.’

‘I don’t want to present them with a large silhouette by coming about. We’ll engage.’

‘Aye, Captain.’

The forward gun spat out shell after shell at the second boat until her captain lost his nerve and turned to starboard and away from the ship.

‘Contact! Two…make that four missiles incoming!’

A pair of Seacats streaked out from *Waikato* quickly followed by another pair.

Nelson said, ‘Leave that second boat alone and fire on the first…’

The first of the incoming missiles exploded.

‘Aye, sir….’

The ship’s 40mm guns came alive, throwing shells at the oncoming missiles.

Nelson actually saw geysers of water spurting up beneath and around the incoming missiles. A Seacat brought down another. A moment later a third exploded, victimized by one of the 40mm shells. The forward gun swung around and fired at the still approaching missile boats. Nelson wasn’t really aware since he was following the last missile.

‘Its gonna….’

Flares and chaff burst into the air around the *Waikato* . Then Nelson saw a blinding flash of light and felt a blast of heat and concussed air wash over him.

‘Did we get it?’ he asked. ‘Or am I…’

The cheering crew answered his question.

‘We got it!’ exclaimed Coff who was ecstatic to be alive.

The two approaching missile boats turned away from *Waikato.* Her 4.5mm gun tracked the lead boat, its shells kicking large geysers of water in the air until one shell landed a glancing blow off the stern. The missile boat actually spun out, kicking up a great wave which swamped her deck. Now an easier target, another shell found the boat, boring through the hull and exploding. A second later the gun magazine ignited, making a great shower of flame over the water.

The crew cheered again.

The first missile boat came back around and sped toward *Waikato* at

thirty knots.

‘Tough bastards,’ Nelson murmured.

‘Missile contact,’ sensors reported as the boat fired its last missile. ‘There’s another!’

After surviving the quartet of missiles, Nelson was almost unconcerned with the two incoming projectiles. The Seacats brought them both down hundreds of meters from the ship. Nelson followed the fleeing boats.

‘Is that it?’

‘Shall we head after them?’

Nelson thought for a moment, ‘We shall continue our mission. Slow to five knots.’ Take us around Con Dao Island.’

Blue Flight

‘Contacts…multiple contacts,’ Tran said as his radar warning indicator beeped and beeped. Looking down at his radar screen he saw a missile making right for his flight. ‘Break, break!’ he ordered.

The half dozen MiG-21s fired off flares and chaff and scattered. Tran dove for the deck, levelling off at 100 meters above the water. He dispersed another round of flares and then turned hard to his left toward the Australian jets. ‘Blue-2 follow me,’ Tran ordered his wingman.

‘I am right behind you, Blue-One.’

The water streaked below them as they closed the distance.

‘Keep your radar passive,’ Tran said.

‘Copy.’

‘Don’t let them…’

One of the missiles exploded just behind Blue-4. The force of the explosion sent shrapnel into the engine, shredding it and sending the aircraft cartwheeling into the sea. Seconds later a second missile hit home, blowing Blue-5 right out of the sky.

Tran cursed at the loss of another aircraft and pilot. ‘Switch on.’

‘Roger.’

Both pilots threw their radars on and immediately got locks on two approaching F-18s.

Blue-2 asked, ‘I have two contacts but where are the…’

Tran's missile warning indicator buzzed. He cursed again.

A few miles away Kokoda Flight banked hard to left. Savoring his kill, Bonfman shouted triumphantly. 'I was ready for that little maneuver, Charlie!'

With two sidewinders launched, Bonfman and Cradle climbed off the deck and into the ensuing dogfight.

'Whoooo! That's three downed!'

'Let's get after the rest!'

Bonfman looked at his radar and saw three blips. Two were running north, a third banking and turning west.

'Negative,' Bonfman said.

'Just why the hell not?'

'Because I said so,' Bonfman replied, 'and I don't have to explain myself to you blokes. We stay over target in support of the Task Force. Reply.'

'Affirmative…'

Tran ran west between the two fleets getting ready to brawl. He tried to contact the surviving pilots of his flight but couldn't raise them and wondered if they were purposely ignoring him for fear he might order the survivors back into the fight. Indeed he would. Tran looked at the two missiles under his wings. He'd be damned if he'd go back without having fired them.

Tran banked hard again, pointing himself back at the oncoming Australians. He switched his radar back on and quickly got a lock. Then he fired both missiles and banked hard back to the west. It was then that he saw an explosion to the north, and then another….

HMNZS Waikato

At five knots *Waikato* crept along, pinging away with active sonar until Nelson was satisfied that no submarines lurked about. They sailed a nautical mile off Con Dao Island's western coast.

'Hit it with searchlights!' Nelson ordered.

'Aye.'

The ship's two searchlights illuminated the island, but the crewmen detected nothing but beach.

‘We’re just exposing ourselves.’

‘Aye,’ Nelson replied, ‘But it is not as if they don’t know we’re here.’

‘True, Captain.’

‘Shut the lights off.’

The island returned to darkness.

To the north the horizon was anything but dark. The sky flashed and then burned, and no one on deck really knew which side was which and who was blowing the hell out of whom. It was those missile boats that concerned him, and two of them were still out there.

The ship crept slowly around Con Dao’s southern cape.

Nelson looked at the cape. In the dark he saw rocks and palms.

‘What do you think?’

‘I think I feel something out there, Captain.’

‘As do I.’

‘Search lights?’

‘Hit it!’

The searchlights powered up and shined right on the cape. There, illuminated in the beam of yellow light was a Vietnamese missile boat. Her engine roared to life and several flashes emanated from the deck. One of the search beams cut out amid cursing sailors.

‘Forties open fire!’ Nelson shouted. ‘Fire!’

A pair of 40mm guns cut loose, sending long bursts into the cove at the slowly accelerating missile boat. The surviving light kept the boat in its beam. Another volley streamed into the superstructure. Suddenly there was an explosion on board. The missile boat spun out and was rocked by another blast which lifted it out of the water and slammed it back down, swamping the decks. In the light Nelson saw several men bobbing and thrashing in the sea.

Then Nelson heard shells coming in. One exploded a few hundred meters to the fore. The second landed further away.

‘Mortars?’ Nelson asked.

‘I think so, Captain and…’

Now several machineguns fired from shore. Nelson looked about and saw a bunch of muzzle flashes. Bullets streaked through the air and bounced into the water. A few hit *Waikato* above the waterline. Another volley of mortars came in and landed a bit closer to the ship.

‘They can’t hit shit, Captain.’

A pair of bullets dinged off the hull.

‘Let’s not wait around until they finally get the range,’ Nelson said. ‘Helm, ten knots, course two-zero-zero.’

Another mortar volley came in and again missed wildly.

‘Sensors,’ Nelson said. ‘Any sign of that fourth missile boat?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It’s out there someplace.’

‘What about this boat?’ he pointed.

The missile boat floated impotently, flames licking out from the bridge.

‘Weapons, target that boat, forward gun!’

‘Aye.’

The turret swiveled until the stricken boat was in its sights and fired. The round impacted on the forward beam, shattering it. The missile boat slipped beneath waves, leaving several Vietnamese sailors in the water.

‘What about them?’

‘They can swim to shore.’

HMAS Melbourne

For half an hour the F-18s out of Clark tarried with flight after flight of Vietnamese jets, downing several and losing none of their own. Crewe was envious. *Melbourne’s* contingent was limited to Skyhawks and a half dozen choppers. After all the great aerial battles fought by the USN and RN over the past weeks, Crewe would have liked nothing better than to fight one himself. He imagined the gestures and machinations of ground crew and the roar of powerful two-engine fighters as they catapulted into the night sky. Later the pilots would triumphantly return to cheering sailors.

Instead he sat in the bridge, watching the distant fires on the night horizon as Task Force Australia closed with the enemy.

‘How many is that?’ Crewe asked.

‘By my count, seven, Captain.’

Crewe nodded.

‘Captain, CAP rotation.’

As the bridge crew watched, a quartet of F-16s from Singapore moved

into position, relieving the four that had been flying CAP. In a few more shifts they'd switch to Australian F-18s out of Clark for reasons of fuel economy. Crewe idly listened to the radio chatter between the two flights until the horizon flashed several times.

'More Harpoon missiles, sir.'

'Got it.'

'I guess they're really giving it to the Vietnamese.'

Craving a cup of tea, Crewe left his XO on the bridge and went down to the officer's galley. He made himself a cup and paged idly through a car magazine someone had left. After a few minutes the intercom called him back to the bridge. Crewe sighed and polished off his tea.

'What is it?'

'Sorry, Captain, I thought you'd want to know a flight of Harpoon-armed F-18s is closing in.'

Crewe nodded. He sat back in the captain's chair and nodded. 'Well, let's have a listen.'

The comm officer tuned in to the Hornet's radio net.

'….are four-four klicks from target, over.'

'…what about bogeys…'

'…several but they are well north of here and trailing west…'

'…I guess Charlie has had enough…'

'…Woooohoooo!'

'…cut the chatter…switch on radars…'

'…I have a lock…'

'…me too…'

'…Range now…four-zero klicks…'

'…those bogies are turning….'

'…they're too late.'

'…yes, we'll get our missiles off long before they get here…'

'…but we'll have to fight them…'

'…we are fighter pilots, right…'

'…shut up and concentrate on the target…'

'…thirty-eight klicks…'

'…I'm getting a radar lock warning...'

'…me too…'

Aboard *Melbourne* Crewe said, 'Christ how close are they going to

get?'

'…keep pressing in…they'll forget all about us once we put our birds in the air…'

'...copy…'

'…missile launched…'

'…I see it…'

'…keep pressing in…

Aboard *Melbourne* the XO said, 'Brave buggers.'

Crewe dismissed the sentiment, recalling his own time flying F-8s. 'We used to do the same thing.'

As they listened, the comm net filled with buzzing and beeping indicators showing more SAMs coming up from the Vietnamese fleet.

'…bloody hell…'

'…shut up….fire…'

'…Fox-two…'

'…Fox-two…'

'…Fox-two…'

'…Fox-two…'

Melbourne's radar display showed four blips traveling at over 500 nautical miles per hour make their way across the screen. At the same time the Hornets fired off flares and chaff, banked hard to the left and climbed. As the flight captain predicted, the launch of four Harpoon Missiles grabbed the Vietnamese' attention, and the drivers easily avoided the incoming SAMS. Crewe followed the track of the Harpoons….one winked out, then the other. Simultaneously two merged with their targets on screen. Crewe looked up and saw a great flash of light in the distance. The bridge crew cheered.

HMAS Perth

Out on the wing Dooley smelled the battle from the night before. Fire seemed to hang in the air with the sickly stench of charred metal and rubber. There was a light haze as well. He saw the battle floating by, too; crates, mattresses, wooden tables, plastic cups, anything aboard a ship that could float.

Dooley wondered if Admiral Mikawa had felt the same way after pasting the USN and RN in the Battle of Savo Island. That Allied defeat was

the only equivalent Dooley could think of. The results were the same. Under his orders, Task Force Australia kept its valued Harpoon missiles in check and closed to just out of the Vietnamese own suspected range. It had been a risk, of course. No one was quite sure of the range of the Vietnamese missiles, relying only on intel estimates. They weren't even sure if the five *Petya* class frigates carried Soviet or Chinese ordnance. But the risk paid off. At twenty-two klicks, barely over the horizon, Dooley ordered his quartet of frigates to fire. A volley of four Harpoons streaked into the sky, and then another and another.

The explosions followed moments later, great fireballs arcing into the night sky marking the death of ships and hundreds of men. The Harpoon volley sank two frigates outright, they knew, and left a third dead in the water. The Vietnamese fleet of eight vessels scattered after that. Task Force Australia spent the next few hours tracking ships individually and bringing them under missile fire. In this way they blasted a third ship right out of the water. Half an hour later a hit just above the waterline sunk a fourth ship. Then the Harpoon-armed F-18s arrived and down went two more vessels.

The Battle of the South China Sea was a rout, Dooley knew. More than that, it was the greatest naval victory in Australian history and he was its architect. Now in the morning he acted with caution so as not to risk his ships or the standing of what was so far, a flawless naval victory. A Kiwi P-3 was in the air and had spotted the three survivors of the task force. They were all steaming north at 20 knots trying to get out of Task Force Australia's way. Up ahead *HMAS Adelaide* crept forward in search of Vietnamese submarines. Until he was satisfied the way was clear, Dooley kept Task Force Australia on a patrol pattern in the battle area.

Absentmindedly he asked, 'What is happening with *Waikato?* '

Canberra, Australia

Bomber Beazley walked into the press briefing room. It was packed with journalists and cameras from all the major newspapers and television networks in Australia and New Zealand, too. He spied reporters from Singapore as well. He nodded to the cameras and then read a short, solemn statement. With his statement completed, Bomber Beazley enjoyed the

barrage of flashbulbs and the hurriedly shouted questions. It was his press conference to discuss the victory he planned. He savored the moment for a few seconds.

He enjoyed pointing to members of the press even more. ‘Yes.’

‘Can you say for sure the ADF has suffered no losses?’

‘Task Force Australia has reported no losses…’ he pointed to another reporter. ‘Yes.’

‘What about Vietnamese casualties?’

‘Well those are enemy casualties and we don’t have a hard number on them. Again I can tell the nation for a fact that we shot down seven enemy aircraft and sank five vessels.’

Beazley went on to talk about planning and training, mentioning his role throughout, but emphasizing ‘the hard work and training of the men risking their lives at sea and in the air.’

Watching from his own office in Canberra, Paul Keating fumed, ‘Bloody tosser!’ he shouted. ‘He’s taking advantage of this bloody war to elevate himself.’

‘Yes, sir,’ agreed Keating’s chief of staff.

‘Above me!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get the PM.’

‘Sir, I…’

‘Now!’

The chief dialed the prime minister’s office and to his surprise found Hawke available and amenable to quick chat.

‘The prime minister, sir.’

Keating took the phone. ‘What the hell, Bob?’

‘I knew you’d call.’

‘We had a deal.’

‘We still have a deal.’

‘Then why is that child on the telly?’

‘He is the minister of defence, Paul.’

‘He is sucking all the oxygen out of the room,’ Keating said. ‘He’s jumping right ahead of me. Did you allow this?’

‘He is the minister of defence.’

‘Fire him.’

Hawke laughed mockingly.

‘You can’t let him do this!’

‘I’m sorry, Paul. You’re on your own.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘You have clout. You have allies. Make use of them. You’ll have a leadership fight in due time. I really must be going now, Paul.’

Hawke left Keating fuming at him and at Beazley on the TV.

Back in the press room Beazley said, ‘I am really rushed and must consult with the task force…’

‘That is a nice touch,’ said the chief of staff. ‘Seemed urgent.’

Keating glared at the chief, who stood chastened.

‘Only one more question,’ Beazley said. He pointed. ‘Yes?’

‘What now?’

‘Task Force Australia will continue to develop operations and move on to the next phase of Operation Boomerang Shot…’

PART II

CHAPTER 1

Singapore

With President Kew's gracious permission, General Grey made Task Force Australia HQ at Singapore's Brani naval base which had the necessary secure communication suite for contact with the task force, the government in Canberra and assorted allied nations. Singaporean marines and a platoon of Australian military police stood guard around the base headquarters. A pair of Singaporean patrols boats were off shore at all times, as were a flight of F-16s.

Within Grey's HQ the mood was high after the previous night's rousing naval victory. All morning the word went about headquarters, 'We sunk five ships,' 'biggest Australian naval victory ever,' 'we didn't take a single loss,' 'that'll show the Yanks and Brits'.

General Grey didn't have time for that. In his temporary office he spoke over the phone with Admiral Dooley.

'Yes, General Grey, the remaining enemy ships are fleeing for their lives,' said Admiral Dooley.

'Do you intend to pursue them?' Grey asked, thinking of the security of the invasion force.

'We do not. I'd like not to risk assets if I don't have to. We are not the Americans, you know.'

'I am thinking about our paucity of transports. Not to mention men.'

'Yes General,' Dooley replied, perturbed that he was being pestered with this after winning such a resounding naval victory. 'We shall keep our assets close, General Grey. If those ships come about, we'll blow them out of the water.'

‘Very well, Admiral,’ Grey gave in. He wasn’t going to argue naval tactics with an admiral after all. ‘And what is the status of the invasion force?’

‘We are coming on Cam Ranh Bay right now.’

HMAS Melbourne

It was early morning, the sun had yet to rise. Red light bathed *Melbourne’s* bridge.

The last of a quartet of A-4 Skyhawks roared down the carrier’s flight deck. On the bridge, Captain Crewe watched as the birds formed and broke off south. In front of them a pair of F-18 Hornets out of Clark flew escort. Crewe envied the Americans. *Four Skyhawks….* he thought. *Four bloody Skyhawks* . As Australia’s small Fleet Air Arm went into action, thousands of miles away American carriers were putting scores of strike aircraft into the air, flying deep penetration raids against the Soviet Union. Right then the news of the great battle in the Barents Sea dominated the BBC.

Four Skyhawks….

‘Radio,’ said Crewe, ‘patch us into the strike radio net.’

‘Aye, Captain.’

The communications officer flipped a switch, piping *Melbourne’s* CiC radio through the speakers.

‘Alpha-One-One this is Uno,’ said the flight operations officer.

‘I have you Uno.’

‘Proceed to course three-zero-zero at three-five-zero nautical miles.’

‘I copy Uno.’

‘E-T-A to target two-three minutes.’

Crewe followed the A-4’s progress on the radar. When he saw other blips across the screen he asked, ‘Who are they?’

‘Kokoda Flight. F-18 Wild Weasel, Captain, out of Clark.’

‘ETA?’

‘Three minutes, plus.’

Good luck, wild weasels, he thought. *Here we go.*

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

Callum pushed off the KC-135 Tanker.

He reported, ‘Borneo Flight refueled.’

‘Roger.’

‘Proceeding to target.’

‘Roger.’

‘Borneo Flight, this is Borneo-One. ETA to target nineteen minutes. Radio silence from here on in.’

The other five pilots said ‘Roger’ and ‘affirmative’.

They could already see the Vietnamese coast, or the lights anyway, a dim glow on the horizon. Callum looked at his co-pilot. ‘Nervous, Reece?

‘Yes, sir,’ Reece said formally.

‘Just keep busy and you’ll be fine.’

‘Right, Colonel,’ Reece replied

‘Being nervous is fine, Reece,’ Callum said, ‘If you’re not nervous you’ve lost your edge and you need to get out of the business. Stay on the ground. I had to do that with several pilots.’

‘Really?’ Reece said, his interest finally piqued. ‘I thought pilots just got grounded for shell-shock.’

‘I grounded plenty for that too.’

Including myself , he didn’t say.

‘Look, Colonel I’m sorry about…’

‘Forget it. Right?’

‘Right.’

They flew on, heading towards the Vietnamese coast at 450 knots and five hundred feet off the deck.

‘At least you don’t have to keep an eye out for trees,’ Callum said. ‘I watched a French Alfa jet slam into…’

The radio crackled, ‘Borneo-Flight. Be advised Kokoda-Flight is approaching target, one minute out.’

‘Copy,’ said Callum.

Up ahead were Lt. Bonfman and his Kokoda-Flight of Australian F-18 Hornets, half armed with HARM anti-radar missiles, half with air-to-air missiles.

‘They’re not going to bloody well go for this,’ said Lt. Cradle.

‘Shut up,’ Bonfman warned.

‘After six weeks of war you think they’re going to go for this?’

The South China Sea streaked below the two Australian F-18s as they approached the coast at 600 knots. They could see it clearly now, a dark patch of jungle and mountain silhouetted against the sky and illuminated by the city of Cam Ranh.

‘Haven’t these people ever heard of a blackout?’ Cradle asked.

‘Well they haven’t bloody well been in six weeks of…oh crap, I got enemy radar.’

‘Tally,’ responded Bonfman as he saw the contact.

‘Now do it!’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Cradle.

As pre-planned, Cradle pulled back the throttle and sent his F-18 jetting from the deck up into the Vietnamese sky. His radar indicator filled the cockpit with its urgent buzz.

‘They have a lock!’ he shouted.

‘Well I have one too!’

‘What are you bloody waiting for?’

‘Easy, keep climbing….’

‘I’m at three thousand, thirty five…’

‘Ok, got him,’ said Bonfman.

Back on the deck Bonfman toggled his missile switch. One of his four HARM missiles fell off the wing. He closed his eyes against the flash and then opened them to watch the contrail.

‘Can I go back down to the deck?’ Cradle asked.

‘Keep climbing!’

Cradle’s cockpit filled with the sound of his missile warning indicator. ‘They’ve launched one!’

‘Tally,’ said Bonfman. ‘And make that two.’

Cradle toggled off a line of flares.

Without watching his first HARM missile, Bonfman searched for another Vietnamese radar. His radar indicator buzzed. ‘I have him.’ He toggled the missile switch and fired another HARM.

He was barely aware of the explosions several klicks to his front.

‘You got one!’ Cradle shouted. ‘I’m heading back down.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘I wasn’t bloody asking for permission! Oh shit, another missile!’

‘I have the radar,’ Bonfman said calmly.

He toggled his fourth HARM into the air. ‘Missile away.’

This contrail he followed, watching it gradually bank right and then down until it exploded. Bonfman’s radar warning indicator went silent. ‘Ha-ha!’ he shouted.

‘I’m on the deck.’

‘Coming forward now.’

‘Your turn!’ Cradle shouted. ‘Climb, motherfucker!’

A few miles behind Kokoda-Flight, Callum accelerated. ‘Borneo Flight follow me to target.’

Affirmatives came back over the radio.

‘Thanks, Borneo-Flight.’

‘A pleasure, Borneo,’ Bonfman replied. ‘Go get ‘em.’

‘Feet dry,’ Callum as the space below them went green with jungle canopy.

Callum dropped another five hundred feet.

‘What are you doing?’ Reece asked. ‘We’re barely 250 feet off the ground.’

‘And if I knew the ground we’d be even lower.’

‘Oh stop!’

‘Pay attention to the weapons readout.’

‘Uhhh…copy…’

‘Borneo Flight stay on my six. Nap of the earth.’

Nervous affirmatives came back.

Callum moved the throttle forward, his eyes narrowing as they closed on the target. The sky flashed, and then flashed again. Orange and yellow tracers drifted up from the ground.

‘Oh shit!’ Reece said.

‘Take it easy, they don’t see us. They’re just guessing.’

‘What if they get lucky?’

The sky flashed.

‘What do you think?’

The missile launch warning buzzed. ‘I see it!’ Reece shouted.

‘Relax, they’re just trying to scare us. They don’t have any radar to track us, remember?’

‘Target approaching, Reece said.’

As they flew right above the target of military warehouses, Reece released their sticks of MK-82 gravity bombs. Callum banked the ship hard to the right and accelerated. The warehouses exploded in a fireball of corrugated tin.

‘Holyfuck!’ Reece shouted.

Callum levelled off and glanced south just as another warehouse went up in a massive fireball.

‘Borneo-Flight bank alternate right and left and follow me out,’ ordered Callum. ‘Back to Clark.’

Cam Ranh Bay

Men ran to and fro in the Camranh Bay regional headquarters. The younger officers were excited and trying to find something to do in order to look busy and seem as if they were playing an integral role in a major event. The older officers tried to go about their jobs so they didn’t betray their worry or fear. They had seen this before, and knew just what kind of destruction the enemy could inflict upon Vietnam.

For his part, General Twi Li Vann stood in his operation center as his staff tried to determine just what was happening.

General Vann took the phone from his chief of staff, Colonel Ngyuen. ‘Yes.’

On the other end of the line an excited officer reported, ‘General, radar is reporting several blips incoming from the sea.’

‘Course, speed?’ he asked.

‘Radar did not say, General.’

‘Well, find out,’ Vann hissed. ‘Call me back when you know something useful.’

Before the officer on the other end of the line responded, General Vann hung up the phone.

Colonel Ngyuen said, ‘General, coupled with the reports we have of action over Haiphong….’

‘Yes, I know.’

Already enemy forces had hit targets around Haiphong and Hanoi.

Upon receiving word from up north, General Vann ordered his own command on alert. This included two infantry divisions, various support elements, and the naval and air assets around Cam Ranh Bay.

Colonel Nguyen asked, ‘Should we order troops to man defenses?’

‘No,’ Vann shook his head.

‘But…’

‘I said no!’

Vann had no intention of sending his troops to preplanned defensive positions in and around Cam Ranh Bay. Surely those had already been spotted by the enemy and marked. If he deployed his troops there, the Australians would blast them to bits.

Vann waited for several more minutes until Colonel Nguyen reported, ‘General Cam Binh Island has gone off the air…’

Vann looked at the map. Cam Binh Island was at the entrance to Cam Ranh Bay. With that first step, Vann had all the information he needed.

He shouted after Colonel Nguyen, ‘And get our troops mobilized!’

Cam Binh Island, Vietnam

Lying at the entrance to Camranh Bay, Cam Binh Island is shaped like a U. At the well of the U sits Binh Hoa, a small village lined with docks, fishing boats and junks on both the north and south shores. The pillars of the U are peaked at both ends with craggy, tree lined hills. When planning the 1st New Zealand Provisional Brigade’s attack, General Lee and Captain Connors of the SAS squadron made the peaks their first targets.

A kilometer south of the island cruised *HMNZS Waikato* and *Wellington* . From both ships’ decks, a single Huey helicopter took off. Each held eight SAS men. One helicopter broke for the east peak while the other made for the west. In a few minutes both helicopters were over their objectives. They hovered a few feet above the peaks and disgorged their SAS team. The choppers roared off south to their home destroyer to pick up the next team.

Atop the peaks the SAS men established a perimeter and set up a landing zone for the next wave.

Below them *HMNZS Waikato* steamed parallel to Cam Binh Island at five knots. As she crept along in the darkness, crewmen lowered a half dozen

rubber boats into the water. These were powered by a five gallon outboard motor and carried four SAS troopers. Once they were in the water the boats sped for Cam Binh's south waterfront. The SAS boats reached their target without incident. The SAS men left a section on the docks to await reinforcements and then advanced north into the town. Captain Connors made his temporary headquarters on the beach. Into his radio receiver he called the west peak, 'Hawk, report.'

'Point Hawk secured.'

'Falcon report.'

'Point Falcon secured.'

With a pair of eight-man sections on each peak and no resistance reported, Connors ordered the next wave to come directly to the beach.

As the SAS consolidated its hold on Cam Binh Island, *HMNZS Waikato* steamed around Cam Binh's east cape around to the north end of the town. Aboard *Waikato* , Captain Nelson put his binoculars to his eyes and looked at Binh Hoa's northern bay. Here the waterfront was jammed with fishing trawlers, junks and fish traps.

'Forward gun, fire when ready.'

Lt. Coff ordered a star shell into the air. It burst and slowly drifted down, illuminating the bay below.

'Comm,' Nelson nodded.

The communications officer flipped a switch, and the exterior speaker boomed with a message ordering persons on the waterfront to evacuate immediately.

'How long, sir?'

'Keep it running till the first star shell flares out.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Then we'll fire another.'

The flare burned out a few minutes later.

'Gunnery.'

'Sir,' said Coff.

'Get the machineguns set up.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

On the starboard side, crew set up a pair of 30mm guns and a quartet of .50 caliber guns, supplementing the 40mm Oerlikons. On orders, the guns opened fire on the sea of small watercraft in the bay. Here and there an

outboard motor or fuel tank exploded, starting a small fire aboard. Concentrated fire hulled many dozens of boats. After a few minutes the bay was a floating junkyard of planks, plywood and aluminum.

‘I think that ought to about do it, sir,’ said Coff.

‘Right. Cease fire.’

‘Now what, sir?’

‘While the SAS secures the island, we shield it from Camranh Bay.’

A few minutes later comm reported, ‘Sir, message from Connors. He says they’re in Binh Hoa and on the north bay. He reports no resistance and we left him quite a mess.’

‘Acknowledge.’

When the sun came up, *SS Tasman* sailed into Cam Binh Island’s south harbor and dropped anchor. She disgorged an infantry company which relieved the SAS on the island. On the east peak, General Lee made his temporary brigade headquarters. From here he observed Cam Ranh Bay to the north, and the naval base to the northeast. The base occupied a low, sandy plain more or less at sea level. However due east of the base was a thousand foot peak which dominated not only the naval base, but the entire bay.

General Lee scanned the peak though his binoculars. Next to him Captain Connors did the same, as did the executive officer from *Waikato* . It was the peak that concerned Lee.

‘There doesn’t seem to be much up there,’ Lee said.

‘I agree,’ Connors replied. ‘Though I’m seeing a lot of reflective light from there.’

‘Yeah, I see it,’ Lee replied without taking his eyes from his binoculars. ‘Some people are up there.’

‘But not many, that’s for sure.’

‘Can you take the peak?’ General Lee asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Connors.

‘What about that pier?’

Lee pointed to a long pier about a mile north, northwest of their position. Connors looked at it through his binoculars.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I don’t see why not.’

‘And you can do both at the same time?’

‘Absolutely, General,’ Connors said. ‘Same as last night, we land a couple of sections atop this peak, and send a couple more sections over to the

pier by motorboat.'

'Can you do it in the daylight?'

'That would be suicide.'

'Tonight then.'

'Absolutely, General.'

Cam Ranh, Vietnam

General Vann put the telephone receiver down. He didn't need the abuse from some party flunky in Hanoi. Besides, he was shouting and Vann could hear him just fine.

'While you are sitting on your ass in Cam Ranh our troops are heroically defending Haiphong!'

Vann picked up the receiver and said, 'I understand' and put the receiver back down on the desk.

'Are you sure that's wise, sir?'

'This flunky can't do anything to me.'

Indeed, Vann was well connected. He had served in the American War under General Giap and commanded a regiment during the 1975 offensive. From there Giap had personally overseen Vann's career. Vann was almost untouchable, and certainly couldn't be damaged by irate desk generals in Hanoi.

'General? Are you listening?'

Vann picked up the receiver and said, 'Of course.'

'Then what do you propose to do?'

'Nothing.'

'Is that all?'

'For the moment, yes. Is there anything else?'

'Not at this time, General. I shall be reporting this incident to the chief of staff.'

'Yes, please do, goodbye.'

'General?'

Vann waved away the concern. 'I have more important things to worry about.'

'If you say so, General.'

‘Now, what is the status of our forces?’

‘Yes, General. We have one battalion at the extreme north end of the Cam Ranh Peninsula. The 7th Division is in Cam Ranh. The 12th Division is still making its way east. They can be in Cam Ranh by the end of the day, sir.’

‘No,’ replied Vann. ‘Do not rush them. Not during the daytime. The enemy will spot them from the air and they will be vulnerable.’

‘General, these are not the Americans.’

‘There is no reason to assume the Australians cannot call in air support as needed, perhaps even American B-52s out of Guam or Diego Garcia. We shall take our time.’

‘What do we do when forces are assembled?’

‘We shall attack. But not now.’

Vann looked at the map of the Cam Ranh Peninsula. ‘What do we know about the enemy’s deployments so far?

‘So far, General, the enemy has confined himself to the southern part of the Peninsula…’

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

With the Provisional brigade coming ashore General Lee made his headquarters in the office of the former base commander. It was decorated with Soviet photos, Lenin and Stalin and Ligachev. Above the desk an air conditioner hung on the wall. Lee suspected the unit had once belonged to an American. Across the desk lay a Soviet map of Cam Ranh Bay and its environs.

‘Interesting accommodations, General.’

General Lee laughed. ‘Yes, a day ago this was the office of the Soviet base commander. Wherever he is. Now, I’ll get right to it. This position is not necessarily tenable.’

‘Sorry, General, not necessarily tenable?’ asked Colonel Gipson.

‘We have the naval base and control of the harbor entrance. But the city of Cam Ranh is in enemy hands as is the north end of this peninsula.’

The assembled commanders looked at the map. Captain Roon said, ‘But General, the access to the peninsula is no good from there.’ He pointed to the

mountain overlooking the north end of Cam Ranh Peninsula.

‘You’re right, Captain. I doubt they will try to enter the peninsula from there.’ Lee pointed to a location near the center of the map. ‘This two lane bridge is more of a concern.’

Colonel Tiaki said, ‘You want me to drop it?’

Lee shook his head. ‘We are under orders to minimize damage to property and civilian infrastructure.’

‘What if the Vietnamese send troops across?’

‘Then we can do whatever we wish.’

‘Why not then take the east end of the bridge now?’

‘I don’t like the idea,’ replied Lee. ‘The bridge is miles from our perimeter and we are stretched as it is.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Now, as to our situation here,’ Lee said. ‘First Battalion will garrison the base proper, with one company on Cam Binh Island.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Colonel Gipson.

‘Colonel Vincent, I’m deploying Second Battalion on our north perimeter. I want the heavy weapons platoon manning this hill here, Firebase Cassino.’

‘Right, sir.’

‘This will be the base of our northern line, the lynchpin around which all the other defenses will be built. Colonel, you’ll deploy one company along the northern line, and another along the shore.’

‘Just in case the Vietnamese get cute and try to cross the bay?’

‘Exactly.’

‘I’ll see to it, sir.’

‘We’ll place our artillery on this hill and the south end of the base, Firebase Crete.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And my squadron?’ asked Captain Roon.

‘I want you and your tanks just north of the base under tarps as our rapid reaction force. I’m keeping Connors’ SAS squadron there as well.’

The commanders nodded.

‘This way we’ll have a compact position to defend and plenty of firepower with which to defend it. Not only ourselves, here, but *Waikato* and *Wellington* off shore.’

The commanders nodded.

‘I don’t anticipate much will happen here,’ Lee concluded. ‘The Vietnamese are far too busy up at Haiphong to bother with us.’

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

Tim walked out of the waiting area and into the hot, humid air of Cam Ranh Bay. He held up a hand against the sun.

‘Pretty hot, aye boyo?’ Dec mocked.

‘Yeah.’

‘You ain’t on South Island anymore.’

‘Company assemble!’ bellowed Sgt. Ngata. ‘Captain?’

Captain Jones stepped forward. ‘Thank you, Company Sergeant. Men, we are assigned a low ridge at the edge of our occupation area. You can just see it from here.’ He pointed to a low sandy ridge about a kilometer from the dock. ‘General Lee has designated it Firebase Cassino. We shall proceed there immediately. Company Sergeant.’

‘Sir.’

‘Disembark the men.’

‘Right,’ Sergeant Ngata said.

Sergeant Ngata led the heavy weapons company off the deck and down the plank to the dock. Here they reassembled and marched ashore.

‘Didn’t expect this,’ Tim said.

‘What?’

‘All this sand, all this dry scrub.’

‘What did you think it would be?’

‘Jungle.’

‘Well it ain’t.’

The company walked over sandy ground past Quonset huts and American era buildings. They came to Firebase Cassino and marched up the sandy, scrub colored slope. Atop the ridge they could see all of the naval base to the south and all the way up north to the mountain that marked the end of the peninsula a dozen kilometers away. To the west lay the city of Cam Ranh.

Captain Jones reassembled the company around him. ‘Alright men,’ he began. ‘I don’t think I have to explain the tactical importance of this ridge.

We have a position from which we can dominate everything to the north and everything to west down to the beach. Anything wanting to get at the naval base is going to have to get past us first.

‘We’ll dig a line of pits along the slope. Company Sergeant…’

Sgt. Ngata stepped forward, ‘Right, sir. All right you lovelies! The pleasure cruise is over! Get yer shovels out and get to work!’

For the next hour the men of the Heavy Weapons Company dug into the dry, grainy sand.

Tim put the shovel down and wiped the sweat off his brow.

‘That ought to about do it,’ he said.

‘Let’s knock off,’ Dec agreed.

The two soldiers stood in a four-foot-deep foxhole with sand bags piled along the edge. Machinegun pits were twenty meters to either side. Above them, at the peak of the hill, were two other pits. The rest of the company was dug in along the ridge.

Dec put his hands on his hips and looked down slope to the flat sandy ground below.

‘Yes, sir,’ Dec said. ‘Anyone coming through here is going to get a bloody nose alright. And we’re going to be the ones to give it to them.’

CHAPTER 2

HMAS Melbourne

Haiphong sits on the south bank of the Cam River. To the east of the city lies low grassy ground crisscrossed by roads. The area is cut by an inland road leading through the center of the peninsula, while another road runs west on the banks of the Lach Tray River. A mile or so east of the city and about two inland from Beach Red is Haiphong International Airport. This was the Australians' first objective.

Several fires burned in and around Haiphong harbor. Yellow and orange balls drifted up into the sky, lazily seeking out Australian aircraft that had already departed the area. On *Melbourne's* flight deck, a sailor waved glowing red sticks in the air guiding the first A-4 Skyhawk to the deck. After catching the arresting cable the pilot taxied his Skyhawk to the elevator platform, making room for his wingman. Flight deck personnel crowded around the jets. They clapped and cheered at the pilots' return from *Melbourne's* first combat operations since the Vietnam War.

'Oy, how was it Lt. Radets?!' the crew chief asked.

Radets took off his helmet. 'Right hot,' he said. 'Lots of triple-A, lots of radar warnings.'

Walking the length of the Skyhawk, one of the crew said, 'I don't see any damage. A few scuff marks from shrapnel.'

'Well good, then,' Radets said. 'We hit the target. Two gravity bombs right on that Triple-A battery. I saw plenty of secondaries as I pulled away. You'll see it in the gun camera footage.'

Radets was interrupted by his wingman's landing.

'Right!' the crew chief said. 'Enough gawking and gabbing like a bunch

of harpies! The Lieutenant has his debriefing. Let's get this Skyhawk bombed up! Move!'

Watching above from the bridge, Captain Crewe thought, *the boys would like this* .

'Captain,' said his task force operations officer, '*Tobruk* and *Adelaide* forming up now.'

'Ok.'

Crewe looked to the west. Off in the distance he saw the landing ship *Tobruk* and the frigate *Adelaide* escorting it to Beach Red. Here *Tobruk* would land a battalion of the 1st Armoured Regiment to be followed by a battalion of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. Once the beach was secured, Singaporean and Malaysian helicopters would ferry reinforcements. By morning the entire 3rd Brigade under General Bosch would be ashore and consolidating the Australian position outside of Haiphong.

As Crewe looked on, a pair of helicopters flew out from the task force and made for Beach Red. They took no ground fire as the Vietnamese seemed to be concentrating on Australian aircraft flying over the city. The choppers launched several flares which hung in the air and illuminated the shore below.

'Looks good, Captain.'

Crewe agreed, he saw nothing to indicate the Vietnamese were waiting.

'Signal *Adelaide* and *Tobruk* to proceed.'

'Aye, aye.'

At ten knots the two-ship assault force steamed forward, passing *Melbourne* and her escorts. Crewe stood watching the assault ship and said, 'Signal *Adelaide* and *Tobruk* .'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good hunting and good luck.'

Crewe watched the destroyers for a few minutes.

'Captain, we have a message from Admiral Dooley'

'Alright.' Crewe took the message and read.

> Be advised we have been informed by US Air Force that B-52 assets will not, repeat, not be available for operation BOOMERANG SHOT.

Now what the hell, Crewe thought. *They spend two weeks promising us big bombers and pull them back at the last minute?*

Crewe handed the note back to his radioman, 'Seek clarification.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

A minute later Crewe had a personal message from Admiral Dooley, 'Confirmed, no B-52s.'

Crewe cursed to himself. He left the bridge to his XO and took the message down to the CiC. Commander Wells was coordinating air operations between *Melbourne* , Clark and Singapore. Crewe showed him the message.

'What the hell?' he asked. 'This changes everything. Our entire plan was predicated on drawing out Vietnamese forces and pounding them from the air.'

'I know,' Crewe replied. 'Damn!'

'How the hell am I supposed to make up for the loss of B-52s?' Wells demanded. 'Even if I pull everything from *Melbourne* , Singapore and Clark, we couldn't come close to matching the B-52's firepower.'

'Something must be going on in Washington,' Crewe said.

'Like it bloody-well matters here,' Wells grumbled.

'Damn,' Crewe said. He thought for a moment. 'Just make the best you can of it.'

Wells shook his head. 'I don't know how I'm going to replace an entire bomb group of B-52s,' he said. 'What the hell happened?'

Anderson AFB, Guam

There was a lot of grumbling amongst the crews as they walked down the flight line.

'Goddamn desk generals.'

'What the fuck?'

'Have us do all that prep…'

'Only to call us back.'

'With a full bomb bay.'

'God, I hate landing with those things in the bay.'

In the operations room Colonel Heath said, 'I don't understand, sir.'

General Parker replied, 'This comes directly from the Pentagon.'

Heath shook his head.

Parker read the order again, ‘All nuclear capable aircraft are grounded and set aside for use in potential nuclear exchange…’

‘Jesus.’

‘Pretty scary, Colonel.’

‘Sir, I was commenting on how we’re leaving the Australians hanging.’

Kokoda Flight

‘Kokoda-Three launch on my mark.’

‘Copy Kokoda-One.’

Bonfman looked up at the horizon one last time before looking down at his radar. ‘Three….two…one…Launch!’

He shut his eyes against the flash of the HARM missile launched from his port wing. A hundred meters on his port, Lt. Cradle fired a HARM. Bonfman looked ahead and watched the two contrails streak out toward their target southwest of the Lach Tray River.

‘Target’s radar is still on,’ said Cradle.

‘They’ll…oh there they go.’

Detecting the incoming HARM missiles the Vietnamese SAM commander on the ground shut off his radar.

‘Gonna be too late for that one,’ Cradle said.

Bonfman followed the contrails as they twisted down toward the ground. ‘And….hit!’ he reported as the first missile hit the SAM radar. ‘… Hit!’ The second followed the first.

Cradle said, ‘Looks like we have a secondary and…whoa!’ he exclaimed as black smoke clouds burst off his port side, ‘Triple-A….crap!’ A pair of 20mm rounds slammed into Cradle’s fuselage.

‘Break left! Break left!’ Bonfman ordered.

Bonfman radioed Clark AFB, ‘Target destroyed, returning.’

‘Copy, Kokoda-Flight.’

‘Copy.’

‘How you doing, Kokoda-Two?’

‘A little shaky but I’m ok. I’ll make the refuel.’

‘Right,’ Bonfman replied. ‘You head out, I’m taking a run over the

target area.’

‘Copy. See you at home.’

Bonfman followed Cradle’s Hornet as he flew off toward the sea. He wasn’t trailing any smoke and he couldn’t see any damage. He dropped down to a thousand feet and slowed to 400 knots. He saw smoke plumes from the SAM site. Here and there a tracer round shot out from the ground. He flew toward Haiphong but banked south over the sea. Bonfman didn’t want to risk a direct flyover. His current pos gave him an excellent view of the airport and the ground south. From here he saw columns making their way out of the city proper and lines of troops moving south from the airport.

Bonfman accelerated and flew out over the South China Sea without incident.

After landing, it was time for the after-action debriefing.

Bonfman sat down across from a young intel officer. He had an US Army issue desk, with an inbox marked ‘Debriefing: Pending’ and an out box marked ‘Debriefing,: Completed.’ So far he had been absolutely maniacal about getting his debriefings, going so far as to barring pilots from leaving the room until he was satisfied.

‘You hit the target?’ he asked.

‘Absolutely. Cradle and I hit the SAM site.’

‘Secondary blasts?’

‘Yeah,’ Bonfman said, now getting annoyed with intel officer’s insistent questions. As if Bonfman didn’t know to look for secondary explosions.

‘Very well, Lieutenant, thank you.’

‘Sure,’ replied Bonfman. He got up and said, ‘Oh, I saw lots of infantry moving south of the airport. Trucks and vehicles too.’

‘You waited until now to tell me?’

‘Sorry.’

‘That would have been good to know up front. I’m sure the army is going to be very interested in this.’ He reached for another form and began writing. ‘G’day, Lieutenant.’

Up yours mate , Bonfman thought.

Haiphong-Beach Red, Vietnam

By the time the sun began setting, all of 1st Armoured Regiment was ashore. Beach Red was jammed with vehicles and men, all slowly moving northwest toward the inland road that led to the airport.

'I don't like this,' Lt. Colonel Jenkins, the regiment's GOC said. 'We're jammed up here. Wide open to attack.'

'Yes, sir,' Major Belk said.

Behind them lay Task-Force Australia. Above flew several aircraft, some off the deck of *Melbourne* , others out of Clark AFB across the South China Sea and one pair of F-16s out of Singapore. The Australians ashore had little idea of what was ahead of them, other than the airport and the enemy.

'Now this bloody mess with the American B-52s,' Jenkins said. 'What the hell happened?'

'Colonel,' called the radio operator. 'I have Captain Baker for you.'

What the hell does that kid want? Jenkins took the receiver. 'Go ahead.'

'Colonel,' Baker began. 'We're just sitting up here with nothing to do.'

'We stay put till morning. That comes from brigade.'

'Right, sir. But we're stuck up here and no one is to our front.'

'Well that's good news then, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir. I have an idea, I want to discuss with you. Can I come back?'

'Alright, go ahead.'

'Thank you, sir. I'll be right there.'

Baker showed up a few minutes later. He seemed to strut through Beach Red, almost in expectation that the troops would make way for him, like the Red Sea parting for Moses. This was typical for the Oxford educated Captain, Jenkins had learned over the last few months.

Bloody tankwit , Jenkins thought. *Can't see beyond his own gun turret* .

He saluted.

'Alright, Captain,' Jenkins said. 'Talk fast.'

'Here's what I want to do, sir…'

Later, after Jenkins approved Baker's plan, Major Belk asked, 'Task Force Baker off, sir?'

'Saw them off just now. Captain Baker is heading up the road as we speak.'

Jenkins' orders from General Bosch and brigade were to consolidate his position and hold till morning. But the fresh-faced Captain Baker made an excellent case for limited action.

The chief shook his head. 'I just don't know about this, sir.'

'Baker made some good points. Let's be bold.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Especially with the Americans withdrawing their B-52s at the last moment…'

Task Force Baker

Advancing up the central road, Captain Baker swung his MAG-3 forward as his platoon of four Leopard tanks advanced toward the airport. Already he was suspicious of the tall grass before him. Vietnamese RPG teams could be hiding within. That worry, among others, was why the ambitious Captain Baker had argued for this little maneuver. Why not make a dash for the airport now? If they waited, the Vietnamese position there could only grow stronger. Baker argued passionately for a preemptive move on the airport before the rest of the brigade was ashore. So with four tanks and four MAG-3 armed jeeps in tow, Task Force Baker, as it had been dubbed, sped northwest along a narrow paved road. On either side of the small, but fast and potent convoy lay telephone poles and tall grass.

Baker smiled. *I always was a good debater* , he thought, remembering his days on the college debate team. It was Baker's final, and admittedly silliest point that won over Colonel Jenkins. Baker reminded him of the scene in the movie *Anzio* , where the Americans found Rome almost entirely abandoned only to see their commanding general wait cautiously on the beach for fear of moving too recklessly. *I can't believe that's what pushed the colonel over the top* , Baker thought. Unconsciously, Baker was reminiscing about the minefield scene in Anzio when they came around a short bend in the road and saw several Vietnamese Army trucks parked on the side of the road.

'Wow!' Baker shouted. 'Driver, stop!'

In the turret, Sgt. Crabbe looked up from the main gun site, 'What gives?'

‘Fire! Fire! Fire!’ Baker shouted.

He pulled back the firing pin on his MAG-3 and fired a long burst at the first Vietnamese truck.

‘Holy shit!’ Crabbe shouted. ‘I’m loading an HE round, Captain.’ Fucking *Muppet* , he thought. *Most Useless Person Ever Trained….*

‘Right, fire when ready!’

Glass shattered and tires burst as Baker riddled the first truck with MG fire.

Crabbe fired, exploding the second truck in the line. Baker fired long bursts into the third truck. One round found the gas tank, sending up a diesel - fueled fireball.

‘Save the rounds!’ Baker shouted down in the turret. ‘I’ll take out the trucks with the MAG!.’

‘Right!’ Crabbe said. ‘That is actually not a bad idea,’ Crabbe said to his fellow crewman.

Driver Franklin said, ‘He’s having fun, isn’t he?’

Crabbe, who’d actually served in Phung Toc Province in ’68, shook his head.

Baker was riddling the last truck in line with MAG-3 fire when the first Vietnamese RPG streaked out from a stand of trees and whizzed past his head. He had barely recognized what was happening when a second RPG flew right past him.

‘Where did that come from?!’ Baker shouted.

Muzzle flashes answered Baker’s question. He felt bullets whizzing by and heard them slam into his tank’s hull. He ducked down inside the turret and radioed his task force. ‘This is Baker-One,’ he said. ‘All stop. Everyone stop.’

Baker looked into his site. He saw the gun flashes and watched another RPG streak out from the bushes. It, too, missed high and wide.

‘Open fire!’ Baker shouted. He looked through the scope. ‘Call it one-fifty.’

Crabbe looked through his site. ‘I’d say more like two, sir.’

‘Fire!’

‘I said stop yelling, sir.’ *MUPPET* , Crabbe thought. ‘On the way.’

Crabbe pressed the trigger, firing high velocity frag rounds which exploded in the vicinity of the target area.

‘Fire another. Frag.’

The loader slammed a round into the breach ‘Frag up!’

‘On the way.’

This round exploded amongst the bushes.

‘What now, sir?’ asked Crabbe.

‘Advance.’ He spoke into his mic. ‘Task Force, advance.’

Baker stood up in the cupola. He grabbed the MAG-3, pulled back the firing pin and let loose a couple of bursts into the target ahead.

‘Jimmy get up here!’

The loader came up and manned his MAG-3

‘Fire into those bushes.’

Jimmy let loose a long burst.

‘Driver advance.’

The Leopard tank lurched forward down the road, stopping just in front of the bush. At point blank range Baker and Jimmy fired their MGs, spraying foliage everywhere.

‘Uh, Captain, look.’

Jimmy pointed down the road, where a column of Vietnamese tanks was making its way toward Baker’s column.

‘Oh, shit!’ Baker shouted. ‘Driver, traverse left.’

‘Got it!’

Franklin backed up the Leopard and pointed toward the oncoming tanks.

‘Gunner, target! Right in front of us!’

‘Well that’s just great procedure,’ Crabbe said sarcastically.

‘HE!’

Nothing happened.

‘I said HE.’

Baker looked at Jimmy, who stood dumbfounded in his cupola.

‘Get down there and load!’

Baker pushed Jimmy down into the turret. He grabbed an HE shell and slammed it into the breach. Crabbe fired. A second later the lead Vietnamese tank exploded.

‘Holy shit! I’m in a tank battle!’

‘What about the rest of the task force!’ shouted Crabbe.

‘Oh, right!’ Baker spoke into his mic, ‘Task Force Baker this is Baker-

One.’ Baker looked behind him. ‘Advance to my position and take a right past me down this road. I’ll cover!’

A flurry of affirmatives came in response. As the rest of Task Force Baker careened past his tank, Baker looked down the road toward the Vietnamese column. The vehicles were jammed behind the burning tank, but he saw several infantrymen advancing on either side of the road. Then he saw a muzzle flash and heard several rounds ricochet off the Leopard’s hull. When the last vehicle in the task force passed, Baker ordered his driver to follow. He turned the tank around and brought up the rear of the convoy. Baker traversed the turret until it faced backwards. He fired off another MAG-3 burst.

‘Baker-One this is Baker-Two, where are we going?’ It was Lt. Shaw, the commander in charge of the jeep squadron.

Baker fumbled in his pocket for his map, but could see nothing in the darkness. He ducked down inside the turret and tried to find where they were.

‘Wait one,’ he said.

‘Well, we’re coming to a T in the road we have to go left or right.’

‘Go left,’ Baker said. ‘I don’t want to backtrack away from the airport.’

‘Ok, turning left.’

‘And then pull over so we can get situated.’

‘Ok, Baker-One.’

Baker turned the corner and ordered Jimmy to halt. He looked at the map.

‘Where the hell are we?’ He climbed down from the tank and took out a map and compass.

Shaw came over to consult.

So this must be where we are,’ he pointed to the map.

‘Right,’ replied Shaw.

‘North is that way,’ Baker said.

‘We knew that,’ replied Shaw.

‘Now that road up there,’ he pointed to a narrow road a dozen meters away that branched north, ‘leads to a small village. If we continue east…’

‘We’ll run right into the bloody river, won’t we?’

‘Right. So…’

‘Captain!’ Jimmy shouted. He pointed east down the road. ‘Look!’

Baker looked up and saw the distant silhouette of a tank. ‘Oh well, look

at that.' Baker walked forward and waved his hands. 'Hey!' he waved furiously.

'Bloody idiot!'

Shaw reached out and grabbed Baker.

'What the hell?'

'You don't know whose tanks those are, you tankwit!' Shaw said. 'They keep coming…'

The tanks drove right past Task Force Baker.

In the lead tank, the commander stood in the cupola and waved to Baker. Baker waved back.

Shaw said, 'That's a bloody T-62.'

'Holy fuck.'

Shaw waved and elbowed Baker, 'Wave back, idiot.'

'Oh, right!'

The two waved in the most friendly way possible. Each Vietnamese tank commander waved back.

'I just hope everyone here gets the message and waves too.'

Baker looked down the line. In the dark he could see his men waving and exchanging greetings with the Vietnamese. When the last tank passed, he walked down the line and twirled his finger in the air. 'Mount up!' He climbed into his turret.

'Let's go, Task Force. Start engines on my mark…three…two…one….'

Four Leopard engines roared to life.

'Where are we going, Captain?'

'Follow me.'

Baker led the task force down the road.

'Oh fuck!' he shouted as he saw another Vietnamese vehicle come around the corner.

Baker ordered, 'Driver traverse left and accelerate.'

'Got it.'

Baker spoke into his mic, 'Task force traverse left down the dirt road. Quick!'

When he got all eight vehicles on the road Baker ordered the task force to halt. He ducked down in the turret and looked at the map.

'Captain, the sun will be coming up soon.'

Indeed, the eastern sky was already turning gray.

‘I know.’

‘Sooner or later they’ll find us,’ Crabbe said. ‘He stood up in the cupola and looked around. ‘Look, sir. There’s a village a few hundred meters up there.’

Baker stood up and looked at the map. ‘It’s not here on the map.’

‘That map dates from the Vietnam War, Captain.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘Let’s go to that village and hunker down until we figure out a way back to the regiment or the regiment figures out a way to us.’

Baker looked back down the road.

‘Let’s go.’

The ‘village’ identified on the map was really a collection of old concrete buildings which looked to have been bombed sometime during the Vietnam War and never rebuilt. One long building was cut in half by a bomb blast and over time, its roof decayed and had fallen so the floor was lined with wooden beams and ceramic shingles. The other building was a large square, with roof partially intact. They sat at a crossroads.

It was in these buildings that Captain Baker parked his tanks. He placed one jeep in the brush on the side of the road guarding the north-south axis, and another guarding the east-west axis. Sitting at the former, Lt. Shaw looked north down the road.

‘See anything, Pop?’ he said to his driver, John Papadopoulos.

‘Nothing yet,’ replied the young soldier.

‘I heard engines down that way. I’m sure of it.’

His gunner, Private Adair said, ‘Well something is happening isn’t it, Lieutenant?’

That was certainly true. Jets crisscrossed the sky, and they heard artillery fire.

‘What was that?’ asked Adair as a gun boomed to the south.

‘That sounded like a naval gun.’

‘Like from one of the frigates?’

‘Yeah,’ said Shaw. ‘Right about now I wish we had something like the Americans’ big…’

‘Hold it, Lieutenant,’ said Adair.

‘What?’

Adair pointed down the road and squinted. ‘I think I see something.’

Shaw peered down the brush and palm tree lined road. ‘Give me the binoculars.’

Adair handed Shaw his binoculars. ‘That’s a lot of dust.’

‘Yeah….there’s a truck, and another behind and…’

‘Uh…Lieutenant,’ said Pop. ‘Those trucks are getting close.’

‘Ah, fuck,’ Shaw said. He pulled back the firing pin of his MAG-3 and shot a long burst down the road at the truck. The rounds slammed into the lead truck’s engine and shattered the windshield. The truck skidded, wobbled and then turned onto its side with a great crash.

Adair got out of the jeep and down on one knee. He raised his rifle toward the oncoming trucks but did not fire. The radio squawked, ‘What the hell is going on?’

Adair grabbed the mic, ‘Enemy trucks coming, sir!’

‘Ok I see them.’

Shaw fired another burst. This one slammed into the truck’s gas tank exploding it in a shower of fire and steel.

‘We got a truck,’ Adair said.

In the rectangle building, Baker ran to the glassless north-facing window. The first truck was a flaming wreck, but the truck behind it stopped and backed up. Unfortunately for the second truck, the third truck kept coming on and slammed into the second truck.

Baker spoke into his mic, ‘Why aren’t you firing, Shaw?’

‘Because I can’t see anything beyond the flaming truck!’

‘Hold on.’

Baker climbed onto his tank and stood on the engine deck. From there he saw over the burning truck, but not through the smoke. Vietnamese troops crouched along both sides of the road.

‘Alright, I see troops, I see…I don’t know half a dozen other trucks, maybe more.’

‘Maybe more?’

‘Like you said it’s hard to see through the smoke. Hold on.’ He raised the regiment, this is Baker-One.’

‘We copy Baker-One. What is that firing we hear?’

‘Enemy approaching. I’d like to call in a fire mission.’

‘Copy.’

Baker said to Crabbe, ‘I’m calling in the gun-bunnies. He raised the

artillery battery and relayed the coordinates. A moment later he heard the distant boom of the regiment's 105mm guns. The rounds tore through the air and straddled the road about twenty meters north of the last truck.

'Report, Baker-One.'

'Hold on.' He called down into the turret, 'Crabbe!' and handed him the mic.

'Oh Jesus Christ,' Crabbe took the mic. 'Drop fifty and fire for effect.'

'Copy.'

This volley was right on target, exploding another truck and scattering hundreds of Vietnamese infantry into the brush on either side of the road.

'Baker-One this is Baker-Three.'

That was Sgt. Robinson. He and his tank were behind the square building facing east.

Baker waited for the artillery volley to pass overhead before responding. 'Go ahead.'

Baker heard Baker-3's main gun fire and a moment later heard the explosion. 'Contact, Baker-One. Enemy vehicles. Distance three-five-zero.'

'Crap, what kind of vehicles?'

'I'd say some kind of armored car. Hold on.'

Robinson fired his MG.

'Lots of infantry, Baker-One….fire.' Robinson's main gun spoke again. 'And they're fanning out on either side of the road and into the jungle.'

'I'll call in the gun bunnies again.'

'Please,' Robinson replied. 'And tell the regiment to get off its arse and get here!'

Haiphong, Beach Red

General Bosch was not pleased, first the late news about the American B-52s now this crisis. 'Talk fast, Colonel Jenkins.'

'Yes, sir.' Jenkins was about to defend his decision to send a flying column north against the airport but several machineguns cut him off.

'Don't let those machineguns trip you up, Colonel,' said General Bosch.

'Well, Captain Baker…'

Bosch wasn't really listening. Instead he bit his lower lip in

consternation. Both the 1st Armoured and 2nd Cavalry Regiments were busy deploying. Indeed all around the two officers were tanks, APCs, artillery pieces and NCOs screaming at their men to get moving and get off the beach. *Tobruk* had already disembarked while the pair of Malaysian and Singaporean assault ships were preparing to raise their ramps and steam out to the fleet.

'…Captain Baker was very persuasive.'

General Bosch said, 'And you agreed?'

'I just didn't want to be caught here on the beach when the airport was wide open.'

'But the airport isn't open, is it, Colonel?'

'No, sir.'

'Certainly not judging by that machinegun fire,' General Bosch said. 'Those are Vietnamese guns, not ours,' Bosch chastised. 'And now you've lost this….what do you call it?'

'Task Force Baker, sir.'

'Four tanks and four jeeps are lost.'

'Well, they're out there someplace.'

'Someplace?'

Colonel Jenkins said nothing.

'Summon your executive officer.'

'Lt. Colonel Dawson, yes, sir.'

As Jenkins got his XO, General Bosch pondered the supreme stupidity of the situation and determined to try to find a way out of it himself. He walked over to Jenkins' APC and ordered the radioman to raise Task Force Baker.

'I have them, sir.'

General Bosch took the receiver. 'Get me a map,' he said to the radioman.

'Right here, sir.'

Bosch sat down and spread the small map over his knees. Quickly he located his position and the airport.

'Task Force Baker, this is Bosch.'

'General Bosch?' Baker said on the other end. 'Yes, sir.'

'Where are you?'

Baker relayed the grid reference.

‘Do they know where you are?’

‘I don’t think so, sir.’

‘Good. You are lucky. Find a place to hunker down and laager. We’ll come to you. Bosch out.’

General Bosch gave the receiver back to the radioman. He stood outside the track, hands on his hips and thought. The loss of a reinforced squadron would be a disaster. He planned to consolidate and gather his strength for one strong push against the airport. But that wasn’t possible now. And General Grey would want an update. Telling him that he’d lost a squadron was out of the question. He had to act.

By the time General Bosch made up his mind, Jenkins returned with Lt. Colonel Dawson.

‘Ah, good, Colonel,’ General said. ‘Colonel Jenkins, you’re fired!’

‘But…’

‘Get on one of those assault ships and get out of here!’

Jenkins stood stunned for a moment.

‘Now, Colonel.’

Jenkins saluted and left.

‘Lt. Colonel Dawson, you now command this regiment.’

‘Yes, General.’

‘Get organized and ready to advance. You have fifteen minutes.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And get to Task Force Baker.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Lt. Colonel Dawson saluted and ran down to the beach to get the last of the APCs deployed.

Bloody Hell, General Bosch thought. *We need to get moving now or this is going to be a bloodbath.*

Dawson looked at Major Belk. He was one of Jenkins’ men. He looked on pensively. ‘Relax, Major’ Dawson said. ‘We don’t have time for a lot of staff change.’

‘Right, sir.’

‘Any change in plans, sir?’ asked Belk

‘None,’ replied Dawson. ‘The regiment will advance.’

Heavy fire came from the west. ‘What’s that?’ Dawson asked.

‘Must be Second Cavalry…’

CHAPTER 3

River Road, 2nd Cavalry Regiment

Captain Paul Lowey blew his nose.

'What a time for a sinus infection,' he lamented.

Lowey was the sickly type and as a child earned the nickname 'blow' because he always had a inhaler with him. Being tall and skinny only added to his childhood reputation as a sickly weakling. So he proved all those bullies wrong by joining the army. Now in action for the first time, his childhood maladies were back. It was the last round of maneuvers Lowey figured. All that time outdoors in a dry climate gave him the sinus infection. His nose stuffed, sinuses reeling from pressure, Lowey refused any medication, lest it dull his senses.

Captain Lowey suffered as he led Alpha Squadron into battle. He kept his LAV in between the 1st and 2nd platoon. He rode unbuttoned, his binoculars to his eyes as he looked to the right for any signs of the enemy. So far nothing from the enemy, and that concerned Lowey. He felt they should have made contact with someone by now, what with the battle being waged by Task Force Baker. Off to the right he heard a series of mortar bombs exploding. That had to have been the Vietnamese engaging 1st Armoured Regiment over on the inland road.

'Blue-One this is Black-Six,' he called the lead platoon. 'Halt.'

'Copy, Captain I…'

Blue-1 never got the chance to finish his sentence as a Vietnamese anti-tank gun fired and hit his LAV killing himself and one other crewmen. As their LAV burned, a half dozen infantrymen scrambled outside and threw

themselves to the ground.

‘Blue-One, Blue-One!’ Captain Lowey said.

‘This is Blue-Two.’

‘Is that you Willard?’ Lowey asked.

‘Yep. Blue-One is on fire.’ Sgt. Willard replied as ranking member of the platoon. ‘Blue-One is….’ He was interrupted by the rip of a MAG-3 ‘Blue-One is dead. I’m deploying.’

‘Copy,’ replied Captain Lowey, ‘I’m coming forward.’

Lowey grabbed his F-88 rifle and climbed down from his LAV. He crouched low and jogged forward fifty meters to Blue- 2 which was keeping a respectful distance from flaming Blue-1. Troops lined either side of the road, all lying flat and pointing their rifles forward. Blue-2 ordered a pair of MG sections forward. These alternated firing bursts down the road.

Lowey knocked his rifle butt against the LAV to get Sgt. Willard’s attention.

‘Two dead, sir,’ Willard said.

‘Jesus,’ Lowey sniffed. ‘Ok what’s…’

A Vietnamese machinegun fired, then another. After that they heard mortar bombs coming in.

‘Down!’ Sgt. Willard shouted.

A volley of shells exploded behind them.

‘They’ll get the range on the next one, Captain.’

They heard the rip of another machinegun and then the pop-pop of several small arms. A moment later one of the soldiers on the side of the road fell screaming.

‘They’re on the other side of the river!’ Lowey shouted. ‘Down! Down!’

Sgt. Willard traversed his machinegun west. He looked over the lip of the gun’s armor plate and saw several flashes across the Lach Tray River. ‘Ok, I see them,’ he said. Willard spoke into his mic. ‘Company, target the far river bank and open fire.’

A few seconds later a half dozen MG’s fired on the west bank. Another mortar volley came in and exploded on the Australian held side, another followed, this one landed in the river, cascading the Australian bank with water, weeds and fish.

‘Captain! That’s a second mortar battery.’ Willard ducked down as a

round exploded behind them.

Captain Lowey reached up and said, ‘Give me your mic.’

Willard dropped his mic down to the Captain. ‘Battery, Battery, this is Blue-Six.’

‘This is Battery, Blue-Six.’

Another volley of mortar bombs landed around them. Willard squeezed off an MG burst at the west bank.

‘Fire mission. Fire mission….’ He took his map out of his pocket and called in the coordinates. A second later they heard the boom of the battalion’s 105mm guns. The rounds came in overhead and landed in the river.

‘Battery, add fifty and fire for effect.’

‘Will do.’

A second and third volley landed on the west bank of the Lach Tray, kicking up a cascade of smoke and fire.

‘Blue-Six this is Black-One,’ called the regimental commander. ‘What’s going on up there?’

‘Black-One I have resistance to my front…’ Lowey stopped as another volley of 105mm rounds came in, ‘and am taking heavy fire from the other side of the river.’

‘How heavy is the resistance to your front, Blue-Six?’

‘I’ve already lost an LAV.’ Lowey stood up and looked forward, ‘I’d say…several MGs, small arms fire, mortars….’ As he spoke another mortar bomb volley came in.

‘Roger, I hear them.’

Willard fired another burst.

‘What do you want me to do, Black-One?’

105mm rounds exploded on the far bank.

‘Blue-Six, hold your position.’

‘Roger, sir.’

‘I’m bringing Charlie Squadron forward. You’ll hold there and pass off the advance to Charlie Squadron.

‘I understand, Black-One,’ he said. *Uh oh*, he thought. *Big Greg Hiller is coming for you, Charlie.*

River Road, 2nd Cavalry Regiment

Two hundred meters behind Alpha Company, Captain Greg ‘Big Greg’ Hiller leaned up against his tank and smoked a Camel.

‘Captain!’ shouted his gunner, Shelby, ‘Battalion is calling.’

Hiller threw his Camel down to the ground and climbed up into the cupola.

‘What the hell do they want, Old Shelby?’ he grumpily asked the gunner.

‘No idea, sir.’

By coincidence two men named Shelby were posted to the tank. Hiller distinguished between the two by calling the one serving longer Old Shelby and his counterpart Young Shelby. Neither liked it, and in fact had suggested that Hiller refer to one by a middle name or transfer one to another tank. But Hiller couldn’t have cared less what they wanted and the nicknames amused him anyway.

Hiller put on his helmet. ‘This is Charlie-Six. Go ahead.’

‘Charlie-Six. Advance to contact.’

‘Is that right? Advance?’

‘Yes. Blue-Six will hand off to you. Advance to contact and engage the enemy.’

‘I copy. Will do. Charlie-Six out.’ He switched to the company frequency. ‘Charlie Company this is Six. Mount up. Mount up and start engines on my mark.’ Hiller grinned. ‘Yehaw!’ He twirled his finger in the air. ‘Let’s go, Black Hats!’ he shouted referring to the armoured corps’ black berets.

Over the course of the war, Captain Gregory ‘Big Greg’ Hiller, had read after-action reports filtering in from his colleagues in the Canadian and West German Bundeswehr. The commanders wrote glowing reviews of their Leopard Tanks. Fast, maneuverable with a 120mm main gun that was more than a match for Soviet armor. And while the American’s M-1 tank was already understood to be the best tank of this or any war, the Leopard was a close second. In fact, ‘Big Greg’ had argued passionately over a pint of VB that the Leopard was actually better since it came at about half the cost of the mighty M-1.

Hiller brought his tank up the road, leaving the rest of the squadron

behind so he could consult with Alpha Company first. As he approached, he saw Blue-Six and waved. Crouched over, he ran back to the tank. Up ahead Hiller saw one LAV burning along the road. Another was burning on the river bank.

‘Great to see you, Greg,’ Lowey said. He sniffed.

‘How’s the infection?’

Lowey held down a nostril, leaned over and blew out the other onto the ground.

‘Right, John. What’s doing here?’

‘Ok. We got stopped up ahead,’ he pointed to the burning APC and the platoon facing northwest, covering. ‘And we’re taking pretty heavy fire from the river bank. In fact, you hear that?’ he asked as a volley of mortar bombs approached. ‘That’s the Noggies.’ The rounds fell on the riverbank.

‘OK. Well, I’m just going to bring my squadron up and punch on through.’

‘Right, Greg,’ Jones said. ‘While we’re waiting, do you think that you could bring your tank up to the bank and hammer the Noggies on the other side?’

Hiller grinned. ‘Why, it would be my pleasure!’

Hiller ordered the rest of Charlie Squadron to come forward. In the meantime he brought his Leopard to the river bank. Gleefully he lined up the turret and ordered Old Shelby to fire, working the bank from south to north until the rest of Charlie Squadron approached. Hiller ordered his tank to the head of the squadron.

Lowey said, ‘Thanks, Greg.’

Hiller waved to his approaching tanks.

‘Charlie Squadron this is Charlie-Six. Fall in behind me.’

Thirteen other tank commanders responded affirmatively.

‘We will advance in column. Traverse turrets alternate left and right.’

Hiller stopped Charlie Squadron at Alpha’s line. He looked at the knocked out APC. Three bodies covered in blankets lay next to it. The road lay ahead, lined by thick scrub and the occasional palm tree. He heard 1st Armoured Regiment fighting somewhere to the right.

‘Ok,’ Hiller said to himself. ‘Battery, Battery, this is Charlie-Six’

‘Copy, Charlie-Six.’

‘Fire mission,’ he read the grid reference ahead of him. ‘One volley and walk it forward at fifty meter intervals.’

‘Copy.’

A volley of six 105mm shells came in and exploded ahead, kicking up dirt and vegetation.

‘Battery, on target. Walk it forward.’

‘Copy.’

The next volley fell fifty meters down the road.

‘Driver advance,’ Hiller said. He spoke over the squadron net. ‘Squadron advance.’

As the barrage walked up the road, fourteen Australian Leopard tanks advanced toward the enemy.

Central Road, Khu Dan Cu

From Beach Red, the main road to Haiphong International Airport runs through the town of Khu Dan Cu. This is a pleasant assemblage of one story middle class homes each with a small yard protected by a stucco wall. Palms line the main thoroughfare as do small businesses. It was here that the Haiphong Regional People’s Militia Regiment made its stand.

At the beginning of the Third World War, the People’s Republic Ministry of Defense wisely mobilized most of the nation’s local militias, conducting roster audits and maneuvers. As a result, the Haiphong Regiment was at full strength with an infantry battalion of four companies, each numbering nearly 200 men. These were a mixture of men who had fought the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge, some of whom had fought the Americans, and a few who’d even carried a rifle against the French. Long ago had the exuberance of youth left these thousand men. They were weary and their faces weather beaten. These were middle aged and old men who needed to only hear a rotor to tell if it came from a Huey or Cobra, and knew the weak spot in an M-48 tank in which to fire an RPG. Not one man had an interest in the outcome of the great existential conflict raging across the globe, but as soon as their homeland came under attack, the men of the Haiphong People’s Militia Regiment were determined to fight.

Upon arriving in Khu Dan Cu two days before, the men of the

Haiphong People's Militia Regiment expertly fortified the town. They scattered arms and ammunition caches throughout the village. Inside every building along the main thoroughfare were at least a few Molotov cocktails, concocted from petrol volunteered by citizens and town officials. Militiamen confiscated every vehicle in town and parked them across streets and wired them with plastic explosives. Medical staff placed aid stations throughout the area.

Into this hornet's nest rolled the Australian 1st Armoured Regiment.

The regiment's GOC deployed its A Squadron of fourteen M-113s and their infantry in a line southeast of Khu Dan Cu. Under their covering fire, C Squadron of twelve LAV's advanced north along the main road toward town. Behind them lay B Squadron's Leopard Tanks, waiting to take over the advance as soon as M-113s and infantry established a foothold in town.

On the tank line, Lt. George Wycke fired a smoke round and put his binoculars up to his eyes.

'Anything, sir?' asked his gunner.

'Na,' said Wycke. 'I can't even see the diggers anymore through the smoke. They're in there someplace.'

'When is the brass going to give us a shot?'

'Don't know,' said Wycke, who had been wondering the same thing himself.

On the edge of the village, two militiamen set up their MG and watched the Australian 1st Armoured Regiment deploy. Sgt. Duc finished threading his MG belt, leaned up against the stucco wall and lit a cigarette.

'You have another?' his loader asked.

'Sure, Phong.'

Duc gave him a Chinese cigarette and lit it.

'Nothing to do now but wait,' Phong said.

'Shut up.'

'Why?'

'I knew that already.'

Duc peeked over the lip of the stucco wall. 'I see them...' he said. 'This is unusual for me.'

'How?' asked Phong.

'I fought with the NVA 7th Division out of Cambodia. Mostly in the

jungle. I never saw the Americans like I see these Australians now.'

Phong said, 'I saw plenty of them.'

'Ever fight these Australians?'

'No.'

'Neither did I,' Duc said. 'Look at that, a line of tanks. And here comes a column of APCs.'

Phong peeked over the wall. 'I recall those. Just like the ones the ARVN used.'

'And the Americans.'

'Well, here they come.'

Indeed, A Company's APCs drove in a long column down the road toward Khu Dan Cu. Behind them the tanks of B Squadron opened fire.

'Uh oh.'

The two middle aged militia men ducked behind the wall as the shells exploded in the open ground to their southeast.

'You never lose these instincts,' said Phong. He looked over the wall.

'Just smoke rounds.'

'Yes.'

'But it seems as if there is heavy firing over on the river road…'

River Road, 2nd Cavalry Regiment

Charlie Squadron of 14 Leopard tanks advanced at 15 KPH. Hiller remained in his cupola. Behind him was the rest of the squadron arrayed by platoons, White, Blue and Red. He put his binoculars to his eyes and looked forward. He saw a few smoke plumes here and there but nothing else. On his left lay the river bank. The Vietnamese no doubt lurked on the other side but as Hiller scanned it he saw nothing. He looked up the river and saw several barges and fishing boats moored on the bank.

Hiller spoke into his mic, 'Squadron this is Six. Look out for….'

He heard mortar bombs coming in.

'Incoming!' Hiller shouted.

The first volley exploded in front of Hiller's Leopard. A second came in a few seconds after landing, just in front of White-1. Hiller ducked down inside the cupola.

‘Bloody hell!’ he exclaimed. ‘Those same mortars from across the bank.’

‘Right, sir,’ replied Old Shelby.‘Noggie mortars.’

Waves of shrapnel pinged off the hull.

Hiller spoke into his mic, ‘White Platoon, turrets left.’

A flurry of affirmatives came back over the squadron net.

‘Engage targets as necessary.’

‘Charlie-Six, this is White-One.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘I see movement but no targets.’

Another mortar bomb volley exploded around them.

‘Well I…’

‘Target forward!’ shouted his gunner.

Hiller looked through his scope and saw a tank.

‘Holy cow!’ Hiller shouted. ‘Gunner HE!’

Old Shelby grabbed an HE round from the locker and slammed it into the main gun breach.

‘Distance…two-two-zero.’

‘Have it.’

‘Fire!’

‘On the way!’

The gunner pressed the trigger and sent a round screaming forward toward the oncoming Vietnamese tank. Looking though his scope Hiller saw the target explode in a ball of fire.

Before Hiller could announce the destruction, he saw a flash and then felt the tank rock back on its sprockets as a Vietnamese round exploded just to the front.

‘I think….’

The tank shook again, this time a round glanced off the turret and exploded on the side of the road.

‘Get off the road! Get off the road!’ Shouted Hiller.

Young Shelby pushed the tank forward and to the left and got out of the way for White-1. Behind them White-1 moved forward. White-1 came parallel to Charlie-6 and exploded as a Vietnamese shell slammed into the turret just left of the main gun.

‘You’ll have to do better than that!’ Hiller shouted. ‘Gunner Heat!’

‘Up!’

Hiller looked through his site and saw a Vietnamese tank coming forward.

‘Target two-zero-zero.’

‘I have it.’

‘Fire.’

‘On the way!’

Before Hiller was even aware of the round being fired, the target exploded. Hiller looked through his site and saw the two tanks flaming on the road.

‘Charlie-Six this is White-Two. What orders?’

Hiller replied. ‘Charlie Squadron all stop.’

Hiller poked his head into the cupola. He heard an MG rip and a moment later felt bullets slam into the tank. He fell back down inside the turret.

‘What do you see out there?’ The gunner asked.

‘White-One is toast,’ Hiller said. He called White-Two, ‘See if you can give White-One any help, or at least tow him off the road.’ Hiller looked through his site. ‘I’ll cover.’

He remotely fired his MAG-3 down the road. ‘I see another tank.’

‘Want me to put a round up?’

‘No. Its stuck behind that flaming tank up…shit!’

Even though it didn’t matter, Hiller ducked away from his site as the new target fired. Because the Vietnamese gunner had to fire over the flaming tank, the round sailed high. Hiller squeezed off a burst from his MAG-3 for the hell of it. Cautiously he poked his head above the lip of the cupola. When nothing happened he stood up behind the MAG and looked behind him where he saw the rest of the squadron waiting. White-2 had come forward and pulled in behind the smoldering White-1. Two men were trying to attach a tow line to the back of White-1, while White-2’s commander knelt on the engine deck, a rifle in his hand.

‘White-Two, anything?’

‘All dead.’

Everyone slammed to the ground with the sound of another mortar bomb volley. Then, on the far bank of the river several MGs opened fire, accompanied by dozens of small arms.

Hiller said, ‘White Platoon, Red Platoon. Traverse turrets left and return fire.’

White-2 got the line hooked up and slowly pulled White-1 back from the firing line. Behind him a main gun fired and then another.

‘Charlie-6 this is Red-One.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Ahead we’re taking heavy fire from the other side of the river.’

‘I know. Keep engaging.’

‘…Fire!’ Red-1 ordered. ‘We’re piled up back here. When Charlie calls in the gun bunnies we’ll be wide open.’

‘I know.’

‘What do we do now?’

Hiller looked forward. ‘Just hold on,’ he said. He looked to his right, ‘I got an idea…’

Central Road, Khu Dan Cu

As boys Duc and Phong had been notorious trouble makers in their village, many of the elders expressed happiness when the two went into the PNVA together in 1966. They did not see each other again until Duc returned home in 1977. It was a tearful and joyful reunion of two old friends. Naturally over beer and cigarettes they swapped war stories. Duc described his various jungle encounters, Phong described the fighting in Hue, a long conversation in which Phong came away disappointed. Duc just didn’t understand what urban warfare was like.

As he watched the Australian mechanized company enter Khu Dan Cu, Duc finally understood his old friend. A massive blast that greeted the Australians as they entered the town. Whoever was commanding the platoon along the main thoroughfare, Duc thought it was that still youngish Lt. Yi, allowed the first half dozen Australian APCs to enter the town. Then he detonated the massive mine planted under the cobblestones. Duc nodded. His grandfather drove trucks for the French during the Great War, and had once described to a wide-eyed Duc the underground mines detonated beneath the trenches. It must have been like this. The APC above the mine disappeared forever in a mushroom cloud of fire. Before the rest of the column knew what

was happening a pair of RPG teams set upon the lead APC and put a pair of rockets into its flank. Other soldiers brutally gunned down the Australian troops fleeing the disabled vehicle. Then from the rooftops came a barrage of Molotov cocktails. Half a dozen slammed into the APCs or the ground around them, setting one alight. In the homes lining the streets, dozens of militiamen fired on the Australians.

Only then did Duc and Phong go to work. They propped up their machinegun on the wall and opened fire on the half of the Australian column still outside the town, as did several other MGs. Together with several AK-47 armed men they threw a wall of lead against the half dozen M-113s. Their ramps came down, and out came Australian soldiers. They flopped to the ground and returned fire up and down the line. On the other side of the open ground, C Squadron opened fire. Their deluge of fire sent the Vietnamese gunners diving for cover. Then came the Australian artillery, once again firing smoke rounds to obscure the defenders' sight.

Inside the town, the Australians fought for their lives. Slowly the surviving APCs and infantry backed out, the latter firing at anything and everything they saw. By the time the last APC was out of Khu Dan Cu, every wall was a moonscape of bullet holes, every window smashed. Two APCs were disabled, a third burned. The Vietnamese heard men screaming within. One compassionate soldier got up from his position and made for the burning APC. A burst of Australian MG fire exploded his head. Seeing the fate of their comrade, the rest of the Vietnamese let the Australians burn within the APC.

Duc watched as the stricken column backed away down the road. 'I do not think we hit much.'

'You are so eager to kill again?'

Phong shrugged.

'If you want carnage go to the main thoroughfare,' Phong said as he cleared the MG breach. 'I am content to stay here.' He slammed the cap shut. 'Hopefully the Australians won't come back.'

'Do you really think so?'

Duc pulled back the firing pin. 'No.'

Over on the Australian tank line Wycke said, 'Hell of a mess of things they made over there.'

'Yes, sir,' his gunner said. 'Would have been nice if they had a few

tanks along in the cake and arse party.'

'Yes, sir. We would have blown the Noggies to bits.'

River Road, 2nd Cavalry Regiment

Hiller emerged from the scrub by the side of the road, cut and bruised but happy. For half an hour he cleaved a path through the scrub, once hauling a downed palm tree aside by himself, then rolling over a rusted old oil drum with French writing on the side. When he'd gotten a few hundred meters east of the River Road, Hiller turned and made his way back to Charlie Company.

Old Shelby fired a frag round. He wasn't aiming for the two knocked out tanks forward, but the NVA infantry that was milling about amongst, behind, and on either side. The frag round exploded just in front of the tanks sending a geyser of dirt into the air. Behind Hiller, MGs and F-88 rifles rattled away, peppering the far bank of the river with fire.

Hiller put his helmet on, slung his F-88 over his shoulder, jogged over to White-2 and crouched down behind it. He opened the utility box and plugged in his spaghetti cord.

'This is Hiller, you read me?'

'Yeah, I read you,' White-2 said rather icily.

'I'll walk forward and lead you down the path. Stay about ten meters behind me.'

'Got it.'

And when we get off the road stand in the cupola so you can hear me.'

'Ok.'

'Ready?'

'Yeah.'

'Let's move out.'

Hiller unplugged his spaghetti cord. He unslung his F-88, looked down the barrel and chambered a round. He walked in front of White-2 and waved and walked off the road. The tank climbed the small embankment and came down on the soft, grassy earth. Hiller led them forward about twenty meters and then stopped. He walked back to the tank.

'How does the ground feel from your pos?'

White-2 nodded. 'Should be ok.'

‘Right, then. Let’s keep going.’

Up ahead, well past where Hiller had stopped clearing brush, they heard heavy fighting, MGs, small arms and mortars. Then they heard the scream of Australian 105mm shells and their explosions as they slammed into the ground.

Looks like 1 st Armoured Regiment isn’t having much more luck , he thought.

Hiller turned around and said, ‘Hey I…’

Before he finished White-2’s neck exploded in a burst of tissue and blood. He flailed about, turning and flapping his arms as if he was drowning.

‘Oh no I….’

Hiller felt something punch him in the shoulder and fell to the ground. He looked down and saw blood spurting out of his right shoulder. He tried to put his hand over the wound but his arm wouldn’t move. Hiller grimaced in pain. Then he heard shouting and gunfire. Hiller looked up and saw several men in olive fatigues climbing up on the tank. White-2 was dead and slumped over in the cupola. One of the Vietnamese soldiers pushed his lifeless body inside the hull. White-2’s gunner stood up in his cupola and then his head disappeared in a cloud of blood, bone and brain matter. His headless body fell back into the turret. Inside, the two surviving tankers screamed and shouted. One of the Vietnamese soldiers stuck his rifle barrel in the turret and emptied his magazine inside.

‘No! No!’ one of the men inside pleaded.

The shouting stopped.

Hiller felt a boot on his chest, but never felt the bullet that entered his brain.

Beach Red

General Bosch could do little more but listen as General Grey went on, ‘So let me get this straight, General. Fir st Armoured Regiment is bogged down on the central road before Khu Dan Cu.’

‘Yes, General.’

‘And 2nd Cavalry Regiment is bogged down on the river road.’

‘Yes, General. We lost two tanks.’

‘And a squadron commander.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And this Task Force Baker of yours is still lost.’

‘Well, General, they’re not lost, but they are cut off.’

‘Jesus, bloody, hell. This is a bloody disaster!’

‘Yes, General.’

General Bosch took the berating for some time, there was little else he could do. When General Grey hung up, General Bosch looked at his map. He rang up 1st Armoured Regiment.

‘Alright, Colonel Dawson,’ he said, preparing to send some of the crap he’d just gotten from Grey down the line. ‘What’s going on?’

‘We are arrayed in a line south of the Khu Dan Cu. All of our vehicles are in the tree line. APC’s in line, B Squadron and their tanks in column down the road. The Noggies cannot see them.’

‘Ok, keep it that way.’

‘Now, each company has a skirmish platoon forward in the open ground. They’re dug in and they all have scouts ahead. They are trading fire with the Noggies in the town.’

Indeed, from his HQ on Beach Red General Bosch heard the constant pop of F-88 rifles punctuated by the rip of machineguns. Every few minutes the enemy launched a barrage of mortar bombs. This was followed up by an Australian mortar barrage in search of the Vietnamese mortars.

‘We have an excellent killing zone ahead of us, General,’ said Dawson. ‘If the Noggies come out we’ll slaughter him.’

General Bosch replied. ‘I doubt he’ll do that. I fought at Long Tan. The Noggies ain’t suicidal.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So what are you facing to your front?’

‘They’ve fortified every building at the edge of town. They all have walled courtyards and second stories. We see sandbags and lord knows what’s behind them. We sure took it on the chin this morning though. Right now I don’t dare send the tanks in.’

‘No, don’t repeat that mistake. Sit tight for tonight.’

’Yes, General.’

‘For now, deploy them on the line and hammer those buildings. Blow

them to bits and make them useless.'

'What about civvies, sir?'

'The locals must have evacuated them by now. Reduce that position.'

'Yes, sir.'

General Bosch signed off and called 2nd Cavalry Regiment. Colonel Whalen reported that his situation wasn't much better. 2nd Cavalry Regiment was taking fire from the front and the far riverbank, despite the constant counter artillery strikes.

'And I'm down a squadron commander, General.'

'Right,' Bosch replied. 'I'll send you someone.'

General Bosch signed off. He put his hands on his hips furrowed his brow in thought.

Finally, 'Get Colonel Jenkins on the line.'

River Road, 2 nd Cavalry Regiment

Jenkins stumbled off the Singaporean LST. The cold night water felt good, it woke and sobered him up. Behind him Singaporean sailors lugged crates of ammo ashore. In front of him came a priest clad in camo and wearing a helmet affixed with a cross. He led a sad line of body bags aboard ship. Then came the stretcher cases, with red-soaked gauze packed over their chests or stomachs. There followed the walking wounded who quietly filed aboard, here a man on crutches there a man with his arm in a sling, a blindfolded soldier…

'Jesus,' Jenkins said. He took a long pull from his thermos of hot coffee. 'They're kids!'

Jenkins shook his head. He hadn't seen anything like this since his two tours through Vietnam.

'Colonel Jenkins!'

Jenkins saw a sergeant jogging toward him. He waved.

'Sergeant Huggins, sir. I'm here to take you to Colonel Whalen.'

'Right.'

Sergeant Huggins led him to a jeep and drove him off the beach.

Jenkins smelled the battle - smoke, cordite, burning metal and the stench of dirty, dying humanity.

They pulled up to the regimental CP. Jenkins gulped down the rest of his thermos of coffee and hoped no one would be able to smell gin on his breath. Colonel Whalen waited outside his CP. Jenkins and Whalen knew one another of course.

‘Good to see you, Jenk,’ he said.

‘Nice to be back.’

‘Is it?’

‘It is.’

The Colonel didn’t say anything about Jenkins’ firing the day before.

‘You’re here to take over Charlie Squadron.’

‘Right.’ There was a thorny issue to make clear though. Jenkins said, ‘Now look, I want to just say, I’ll command the squadron subordinate to you. That’s all there is to it.’

‘I appreciate that, Jenk.’

‘Shall I head on up there, then?’

‘Right. Good to see you again. And good luck.’

The two Colonels shook hands.

Jenkins got back in the jeep.

They drove up to C Squadron’s CP. Hiller had placed his CP just off the river road behind some palm trees. Next to it was the White-1 tank, recovered from the brush path. They placed it in front of the CP to help protect it from fire coming in dribs and drabs from the river bank. The officers and men saluted Lt. Pearson, Blue-2 and the highest ranking officer on hand.

‘Good to have you here, sir.’

Jenkins looked into the man’s eyes, he seemed relieved. He looked around the CP and saw a lot of tired, worried faces. Jenkins shook the last of the cobwebs from his mind.

‘Alright, Lieutenant, tell me what happened.’

Upon seeing a senior officer take charge, Pearson already looked a little better. He told him about the initial firefight, the loss of the first tank, and then Hiller’s doomed foray into the brush. ‘So I led a couple of men after him. By the time we got there everyone was dead, sir. I drove the tank back. The Noggies followed us all the way back here, until my tank blew them away with a stream of MAG fire.’

Jenkins patted Pearson on the shoulder. ‘Well done, Lieutenant.’

‘Thank you, sir. We’ve been hunkered down here ever since.’

‘Ok, so what’s our status?’

‘Eight dead, two tanks knocked out.’

‘Ok.’

‘Plenty of enemy fire to our front. They brought tanks up, you can see the two knocked out T-62s up there.’

Jenkins looked up the road.

‘Nice road block.’

‘Yes, sir. The Noggies pulled back the rest of the tanks. Our artillery was hammering them. Somewhere back there they got another tank, we saw the secondary blast. Lots of small arms fire ahead. And we’re taking fire from the far bank of the river. Not as bad as before, but the Noggies are still there.’

‘Ok,’ Jenkins put his hands on his hips and inhaled deeply. ‘Our orders are to break this logjam and open the road.’

Pearson replied. ‘So what’s our first move, sir?’

Jenkins looked up the road again, then he looked to the river bank.

‘We’ll start over there.’

Khu Dan Cu, Vietnam

Duc kept digging.

‘Would you mind helping me?’ he asked Phong.

Phong lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. ‘I really would.’

‘They will blast this wall down next.’

‘I know. So why bother?’

‘I survived the last war I would like to survive this one.’

‘Well…’

Incoming Australian shells cut off Phong. ‘Uh oh.’

Duc dropped his shovel and dove into his shallow foxhole. The shells landed well to the front of their position. Instead of exploding they disgorged smoke.

‘Uh oh.’

‘That smoke can only mean the Australians are coming.’

Somewhere on the firing line, a whistle blew.

‘It seems as if the company commander agrees.’

‘Who is the commander now?’

‘I lost track a few hours ago.’

Indeed, as the Australians systematically bounced the rubble along the firing line, the company lost one commander after another. The militiamen may have been old, but they were tough and brave and wouldn’t abandon their positions. Dozens of bodies lay in the rubble, and still men took up firing positions behind piles of brick and mortar blasted by the Australians.

‘Here they come,’ Phong said.

They heard Australian engines.

‘Sounds like tracks, no?’

Phong finished his cigarette and shrugged.

Duc peeked over the wall. He could see nothing, but he heard the engines growing louder. Then came another artillery volley.

‘Shit!’ Duc shouted.

He jumped back into the foxhole. This volley landed just behind the firing line, shaking dust and paint off of the already battered walls and rocking the very ground beneath Duc. The volley advanced further into town, bouncing even more rubble. Phong still leaned casually against the wall.

‘Would you get down here?’

Phong shook his head.

‘Why not?’

‘Surviving the last war took every ounce of courage, cunning and endurance I had. I was a young man then. I no longer have such wherewithal.’

‘Would you please stop joking?’

‘I am not joking.’

‘So you are just going to die?’

Phong lit another cigarette. ‘Why go on just so we can engage the Australians and get run over by a tank? I will accept getting blown to bits in an artillery barrage.’

The M-113s were less than a hundred yards from the firing line now.

‘Alright. I won’t engage them with the MG. What would be the point?’

‘Promise?’

‘I promise.’

They heard mortar bombs coming in now. Phong pulled himself up and got in the foxhole.

By that time the Australian M-113s were taking fire from the various

Vietnamese skirmishers. Those that maintained their positions and fought also died, most being machine gunned by passing M-113. A few were gruesomely run over. Passing Australian infantry shot the few Vietnamese left. When they got to within a few meters of the village, the line of M-113s halted. Sections of infantry gathered behind them. In the cupolas gunners fired MAG-3 bursts deeper in town. The sustained barrage brought stucco, shingles and dry wall down into the streets of Khu Dan Cu.

With the M-113s and infantry covering, B Squadron rolled forward, fourteen tanks in column. Despite his XO's pleading for him to come up behind the lead platoon, Captain George Wycke led his squadron from the front.

'I'll be damned if I'm going to bring up the rear, Lt. Cooper,' he said. 'But you can If you like.'

Lt. Cooper did so as to ensure a ranking officer survived the engagement. He doubted Wycke would.

Behind Captain Wycke, Blue Platoon followed with their main guns aimed forward and slightly to either direction. Follow-on platoons came with turrets alternating left and right. In this way B Squadron rolled into Khu Dan Cu. They rolled unmolested until the first intersection. Here Vietnamese militia fortified both buildings on the opposite ends of the interaction and built an impromptu roadblock of carts and taxi cabs. They did not open fire until Captain Wycke halted to clear the roadblock. Then a flurry of Molotov cocktails came down from the building above the lead tank. One landed right atop the turret and another on the engine deck. These did nothing to the tank. Captain Wycke dispatched the roadblock with an HE round, killing the two sappers waiting there with explosive packs. Wycke then brought the right hadn't building into the main gun's site.

'Fire!' he said.

The second floor exploded in a hail of brick, stucco and wood. Bullets bounced off the hull as Wycke traversed his turret left. The commander brought his main gun on the second building. An RPG streaked out from same and exploded on the Leopard's front glacis plate, knocking the crew about the turret but causing no damage. The left-hand building exploded.

'Column advance. Blue-1 traverse right, Blue-2 traverse left. Cover those streets.'

As Wycke advanced into the intersection, militia swarmed around and

climbed onto the tank. Behind him, Blue-2 bathed his tank with MG fire, blasting the Vietnamese militia back to the ground, a gruesome spectacle that ended with a small explosion and a man running away in flames.

‘Fire on those first floors!’ Wycke shouted.

Seconds after the tanks opened fire, the first floor of the right-hand building exploded. Wycke saw several men flailing inside. One ran out, his body engulfed in flames. Someone mercifully shot him. Wycke advanced through the intersection and looked at his map. They had a few hundred meters of village left. On the right was a line of houses, and open fields on the left. As he looked forward, Wycke saw several men running from one side of the road into the field.

‘Gunner, frag.’

‘Up.’

‘Fire!’

The main gun boomed and a moment later the frag round exploded in the road. Wycke saw a body fly into the air. He pulled back his MAG’s firing pin and fired a burst forward.

‘Right, Blue-One, Blue-One come parallel to me.’

Blue-1 came through the intersection. The Lieutenant stood in the cupola.

‘Right. Now we got Noggies up ahead. Some in the houses on the right, a bunch in the fields.’

Captain Wycke put his binoculars to his eyes, ‘Got it.’

‘You’re going to advance forward with me. You’ll keep two tanks on the houses and two on the field.

‘Ok, Captain.’

‘Red platoon will hold this intersection. I’m calling in an artillery strike on that field.’

Wycke called in the strike, the rounds kicked up dirt and vegetation and obscured the field in smoke.

‘Alright, Squadron, let’s go.’

The Australian tanks lurched forward. When Wycke took fire from one of the houses he traversed his turret and fired an HE round into it. The house absorbed the force of the blast and collapsed. Vietnamese in the next house opened fire.

‘Right, column halt.’

He lined up the next house and fired an HE round into it.

‘That oughta scare the bastards off.’

They continued forward, lining up parallel to the field.

‘Alright, mates, if you’re not buttoned up, better do it!’

Captain Wycke ducked down in the turret. As they pressed forward, the field came alive with small arms fire. Something impacted on the turret but bounced off.

‘What the hell was that?’

An RPG streaked out, and then another, hitting Blue-2 but doing no damage.

‘Heavy, heavy, fire here, Captain’ said Blue-1.

‘I got it and…’ another round bounced off his tank this one came from the right side.

‘Ah fuck,’ he said. He traversed the turret right and brought the house into his site. He actually saw a couple of Vietnamese, one holding an ancient bazooka of some kind. They were too close to fire the main gun so Wycke remotely fired the MAG-3. The two Vietnamese disintegrated in a hail of bullets and debris. Behind them the first floor exploded as a 7.62 round found one of the bazooka rounds. Debris shot out from the house and cascaded down upon the tank.

Behind him, Blue-1 ordered, ‘Platoon traverse right.’

The four tanks came around, facing their frontal armor to the enemy.

‘Open fire,’ Blue-1 said. ‘Fire, everything!’

Blue-1 got in his cupola, pulled back his MAG’s firing pin and uncorked a long burst into the brush. His gunner fired the main gun, he closed his eyes against the blast. With the other tanks unloading everything they had into the brush, he could hear nothing else. The roar was deafening. He dropped down into the cupola. ‘Load a frag!’ he shouted. ‘Elevate and fire. Walk the rounds back!’

He repeated the order over the platoon net. His gunner fired a round, elevated and then fired another. After a minute he spoke, ‘Alright, cease fire! Cease fire! Cease fire!’

He stood back up in the cupola.

Before him was a crashing wave of earth and vegetation, renewed with each blast from the Australians until all that remained was a boneyard of destruction.

At the same time, Captain Wycke advanced up the road at 10 KPH. He and his loader stood in the cupola each firing their MGs into the houses at point-blank range. Glass shattered and wall studs split as they fired hundreds of rounds into each home. They stopped in front of the last one. Someone kept throwing grenades from the first floor even as he fired MAG-3 caliber rounds into it.

‘Ah…fuck!’ White shouted. ‘Driver traverse right!’

He dropped down into the cupola and took the tank’s F-88 off the bulkhead. ‘Plow it forward,’ he said.

‘Will do.’

Wycke stood back up in the cupola as the tank plowed into the home, bringing wood beams raining down on the turret. He randomly fired his M-16 inside as he heard someone shouting in Vietnamese. He shouted down into the turret, ‘Back up! Back up!’

The driver backed the tank out of the house. When the chassis cleared, the entire edifice came down upon itself.

‘Alright, Alright!’ Captain Wycke shouted over the squadron net. ‘Blue platoon hold. Red Platoon come forward on my pos.’

As the firing let up, Australian infantry walked into the south part of the town.

‘Check that bloody wall!’

‘Right.’

Two soldiers approached the white brick wall. One fired while the other jumped over and landed on the other side. It was pock marked and shot through in places but still stood. ‘Bloody hell!’ he shouted as he fell into a shallow hole. ‘Bollocks!’

‘What is it, mate?’

‘I’m on a body. It’s that bleeding machine gunner that gave us all that… fuck! Don’t you move!’

Lying beneath his friend’s body, Phong held up his hands and smiled.

‘Speak English!’ the trooper shouted. ‘You speakie English! English!’

Phong kept his hands up.

‘Alright, sunshine. Out you go.’ The trooper stood up. With his rifle barrel held in Phong’s face, he grabbed him by the collar and threw him against the wall.’

‘You stay! Stay!’

‘He ain’t a bloody dog.’

‘He is as far as I’m concerned.’

As the two soldiers argued, behind them more Australian APCs and tanks rolled into Khu Dan Cu.

CHAPTER 4

HMAS Melbourne

Red light bathed *Melbourne's* CiC as Commander Wells went over his current air dispositions with Captain Crewe.

Crewe said, 'Ground forces report we have Vietnamese armor massing northeast of Red Beach, here.' Crewe pointed to the map, 'and at the airport, here.'

'We have four Skyhawks ready to go now.'

'We'll send them up as needed.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'And I want to make sure we have a flight ready to go at all times.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'What's available at Clark?'

'Two flights of F-111s are on the tarmac now. As are two flights of F-18s, one anti-air, one anti-radar.'

Crewe nodded. 'Keep hammering Charlie's SAM positions, we need to be able to operate with impunity.'

'Right, sir.'

'What's in the air now?'

'Two F-18 CAPs,' he pointed to the radar display. 'These two flights are their relief.'

'And this group here at Area Tango?'

'Flight Kokoda, sir. They're hitting Yen Bai air base.' He pointed to a location in the northwest corner of Vietnam. 'Heavy fighter activity out of Yen Bai, sir. We're going to take it out.'

'With four Hornets?'

‘This is just the first effort, Admiral. We’ll follow up with Aardvarks in the day time.

‘Very well.’

‘What about this one here?’ He pointed to a radar blip making its way across the South China Sea.

‘Four Aardvarks, sir. They’re hitting an armored concentration south of Haiphong.’

Borneo Flight

For the first week or so of the war in Europe, just getting over the target area was problematic for Callum’s squadron. They flew nap of the earth, often at night. Even then, Warsaw Pact fighters often jumped them. Flying like that, day in and day out, Callum and his pilots saw an ever-worsening landscape strewn with the flotsam and jetsam of war. Now during his fourth mission against Vietnam, Callum watched the South China Sea shimmer in the night.

‘Why do you keep looking down at the water like that, Captain?’

‘It’s just strange, seeing something so pretty on the way to a target.’

‘Oh.’

‘I mean for a couple of days we flew over this town along the Weser. Each time we went over, the town was just a little more damaged. By the last flight it was just gone, all the buildings, all the houses. Just rubble. Like a tornado wrecked the place.’

‘I guess it was the Soviets, then.’

‘No actually the Soviets held the place. I think we were bombing the town in support of a Belgian unit.’

‘There’s the coast,’ Reece said.

‘Yep.’

He made contact with *Melbourne’s* CiC. ‘Hello *Melbourne* this is Borneo Flight. Feet dry.’

‘Borneo Flight,’ reported Commander Wells from *Melbourne*, ‘You are clear to target.’

‘Copy, *Melbourne* ,’ Callum replied.

Up ahead he saw the lights of Haiphong, and those cast by the Australians at Beach Red. Several fires burned.

‘Borneo Flight you’ll find smoke over friendly territory and flares over enemy armor.’

‘Copy.’

‘Good hunting.’

Reece said, ‘I thought your big bombers were supposed to take care of enemy tanks.’

‘Well, Reece, now we are the big bombers. So, deal with it.’

As they closed in on Haiphong, Callum saw a trio of flares hover over the dark land below.

‘Borneo Flight, recognize flares above target area and proceed.’

The other four drivers confirmed.

Callum looked over at his weapons officer. ‘Let’s do this!’

Callum took the Aardvark low over Haiphong harbor and then banked hard to the south over the target.

‘Look out for that flack!’ Reece said as an ack-ack burst went off near them. Tracers reached up from the ground and cut in front of Callum’s ship. More ack- ack burst beneath them, bouncing the ship.

‘Ahhhh…’ Callum said as the ship rattled bit. ‘This is nothing compared to our nightly runs over Poland.’

‘Holy…’

‘Alright, we’re over target,’ Callum said.

‘Just hold….there it is,’ Reece said.

Reece toggled his bomb switch, sending several sticks of MK-82 dumb bombs plunging to the ground.

Callum banked hard to the right and was rewarded by the sight of several secondary blasts.

A beeping sound filled the cockpit. Callum banked hard south back over the ocean.

‘Pop some flares,’

‘Got it,’ replied Reece. He toggled off a half dozen flares.

To the northwest, several explosions arced into the air as Borneo Flight dropped its ordnance over the target, pilots reported their hits, ‘Whoa, really got that one.’

‘Coming in now….’

‘You’re right on…’

Callum said, ‘Borneo Flight, re-form over area…’ he looked at the

small map clipped to his leg,'…Moon.'

The flight copied.

Reece looked at the line of secondary explosions and asked, 'Ever seen anything like that before? Oh my god.'

Callum said, 'Uhhh…yeah. Just about every goddamn day for a month.'

'Oh.'

'Borneo Flight this is *Melbourne* .'

'We have you, *Melbourne* .'

'Be advised flight of four Skyhawks on your right.'

'Understood,' Callum said. He looked to his right and saw a quartet of dots forming up over the Australian fleet.

Task Force Baker

Standing in his cupola, Crabbe said, 'Wake the Lieutenant.'

'Right.'

After the afternoon's excitement Baker wisely took the lull in fighting to cat nap before night time, when everyone was sure the Vietnamese would make a push on the crossroads.

He stood up in his own cupola. 'Get some shut eye, Lieutenant?'

'Enough, thanks, Sergeant. You're next.'

'Sir I really…'

'I'm not having any of it, Sergeant. You and the crew need rest too.'

'Not sure we're going to have much time for that, sir. Look.'

Baker put his binoculars to his eyes and looked up the road. A great dust cloud gathered several hundred meters to the north.

'Ok, I see it.'

'You feel it too, can't you sir?'

'Yeah.'

Indeed the ground to the north had grown quiet as if the animals went into hiding with the approach of the mechanized column. But closer in, near Task Force Baker's line, Vietnamese were stirring among the brush and palms.

'The Noggies breaking camp, it looks like, sir.'

'OK.' Baker looked at Crabbe. 'You get a little shut eye.'

‘But, sir…’

‘They’re not going to attack in the next five minutes.’

‘You’re right.’

Crabbe went into the turret. Baker ran a hand over his face and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He looked at his watch. Crabbe let him sleep for nearly an hour, which was too long. He put on his helmet and spoke into his mic. ‘This is Baker-One. All units report.’

After he got unit updates from everyone, Baker reported enemy movement to battalion.

‘Alright, that makes sense.’ Replied Dawson. ‘We’re through Khu Dan Cu. Lots of enemy movement to our front coming out of the airport. It looks like they’re coming in from the east too.’

‘Yes, sir. Can you send help?’

‘Not at this time, and I can’t give you any artillery either.’

‘Jesus, sir.’

‘You can have *Adelaide* though.’

‘Alright.’

He called *Adelaide.*

‘*Adelaide* , this is Baker. Copy?’

‘Baker this is *Adelaide* , we have you.’

‘Fire mission.’

‘Copy that, Baker.’

Baker relayed the coordinates.

‘Stand by, Baker, one round.’

He heard the gun fire and then a moment later the shell reached through the sky above and exploded within the grid Baker relayed.

‘You’re right. Well done.’

‘Thank you, Baker. Firing for effect.’

Another shell came in and exploded and then another. This one kicked up a large secondary explosion.

‘*Adelaide* you got something. Pour it on.’

‘Copy.’

Then Baker heard mortars. ‘Oh shit.’

He ducked back into the turret as the first volley of Vietnamese mortars came in, exploding right on the crossroads and rattling the tank with shrapnel. Baker looked over at Sgt. Crabbe.

‘Should we wake him?’ Franklin asked.

‘Let him sleep,’ Baker tuned to the platoon net. ‘This is Baker-One. Anyone see movement?’

Shaw replied. ‘Not yet, I…wait one…..Oh crap, there they are! Coming in from the east.’

‘Hold on.’

Another volley of mortar bombs landed. Baker stuck his head out of the hatch and looked east down the road. He saw groups of Vietnamese soldiers running at a crouch along the sides of the road. He dropped back into the turret.

‘Wake the Sergeant up!’

‘Wha huh?’ Crabbe said.

‘The Noggies are on the way!’

Blue Flight, Over Hanoi

Tran looked down to see a blacked-out Hanoi.

Behind him Blue-3 whistled. ‘I have never seen the city like that before.’

‘I have, Blue-Three. During the last war.’

‘Right, Blue-One.’

Bien Hoa Airbase called, ‘Blue-Flight, Blue-Flight.’

‘This is Blue-One.’

‘Contact at seven-seven bearing two-zero-zero. Proceed and engage.’

‘We copy.’

Tran dropped down to one thousand feet and accelerated toward the target. He picked them up on his radar, a pair of blips moving at 400 knots.

‘Those are the Australian A-4s, Blue-Flight,’ He said. ‘Follow me and engage.’

Task Force Baker

All night the Vietnamese kept the crossroads under fire, probing for weakness. Just past midnight he made a mad dash out of the brush, but Shaw and his machine gunners threw out a wall of lead that forced the Vietnamese

back into the brush. For the last hour Baker watched and listened to 2nd Cavalry Regiment's battle on the river road. The sound of the melee was cut off by a jet screaming low overhead and crashing up the road.

'Shaw this is Baker-One.'

'Go ahead.'

'Was that one of ours of one of theirs?'

'Don't know Baker-One.'

'Well didn't you see it?

'Did you?'

'In the dark?'

Baker signed off and wondered about the crashed jet and the distant fire from the river road. After a few minutes Lt. Colonel Dawson called.

'Baker-one here.'

'This is Six-Six. Did you see that A-4 go down near your pos?'

'Roger that, Six-Six.'

'The navy is asking if we saw any chutes and if so, can we recover.'

'Will do.' Before Dawson signed off Baker said, 'Sir? Any news on getting us some help?'

'I can't at this time. You'll just have to hold on.'

'Sir, the enemy has been probing us all night and…'

'…and this snipe hunt was your idea, Captain. So you'll just have to hold on.'

'Understood, sir.'

When Dawson signed off, Baker cursed.

Baker said, 'Sergeant, you hold down things here. I'm going to talk to Shaw.'

'Right, sir,' replied Crabbe.

Baker jogged over to Shaw and his jeeps on the east side of the crossroads. His jeep was parked on the side of the road behind a felled tree and camouflaged with palm fronds.

'How goes it?' Baker asked.

'They're not coming down the road anymore. Mostly just harassing us from the east, northeast.' He pointed into the scrub.

'Right. You see the A-4 go down?'

'Yeah, up that way.' He pointed north up the road.

‘See a chute?’

Shaw shook his head.

‘You see exactly where the A-4 crashed?’

‘Yeah, that little fire up there.’ Shaw pointed. East down the road. ‘You can see the fire.’

‘Battalion wants us to go check it out.’

‘They’re bloody well daft!’

‘Right. Take your jeep up. We’ll fire away here and I’ll call in *Adelaide* again.’

Shaw shook his head. ‘If this is one of your schemes….’

‘This comes directly from Dawson.’

‘It better.’

‘Call him.’

Shaw relented, ‘Ok, Ok.’ He looked back at Adair on the MAG-3 ‘You ready?’

‘Yep.’

Shaw tapped his driver on the shoulder. ‘Ok, Pop, let’s get going.’

Private Papadopoulos started the jeep and drove it slowly down the dark road.

‘Right, the fire is over there,’ Shaw pointed to the right, ‘That’s our destination and…’

A jeep-rattling thump cut him off.

‘Sorry, sir, bodies in the road. You want me to turn on the lights?’

Shaw hit Pop in the back of the head. ‘Don’t be daft.’

Pop grinned.

‘Now up there…’

They pulled over to the side of the road as a volley of mortar bombs exploded up ahead. ‘It ought to be right in here,’ Shaw said. ‘You men stay here and hold this position. I’m going into the brush to check.’

‘Yes, sir.’

To Pop he said, ‘Let’s go, Mr. Comedian.’

‘Awwww, come on, Lieutenant.’

‘You like cracking jokes, you can do it while we look for the downed A-4. Let’s go.’ He said to Adair, ‘Don’t get trigger happy.’

‘Right.’

The two men unslung their rifles and proceeded into the brush. Shaw

followed the fire until he saw the A-4. Its fuselage was intact but the crash snapped off the wings. Several Vietnamese soldiers stood around the wreckage, before which lay a body.

Shaw raised his rifle and opened fire.

‘What the hell!’ Pop shouted. He raised his rifle and fired as well.

Two of the Vietnamese dropped and remained down as the others ran.

‘Come with me.’

‘Oy, what the hell for?’

‘Because we’re going to get our bloke back.’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Shut up!’

Shaw ran over to the A-4 and slammed up against the fuselage. He looked forward but didn’t see anybody. Then he reached down and moved the tarp. There was the dead pilot, his face smashed in, flight suit covered in blood.

‘Pick him up,’ Shaw ordered.

‘No way!’

Someone fired an AK-47 and several rounds volley-slammed into the A-4. There was no time to argue. Shaw slung his rifle and picked up the pilot, fortunately he was not a big man.

Another Ak-47 fired.

‘Let’s get the hell back to the jeep.’

‘Don’t have to tell me twice!’

Pop took off for the road, leaving Shaw to follow with the dead pilot slung over his shoulder. Now several AK-47s fired. Shaw looked around and saw the muzzle flashes. He hefted the body and started for the jeep shouting to Adair, ‘Fire the MAG! Fire over my head!’

Adair fired a burst.

Shaw tossed the body in the back at the feet of the gunner. ‘Let’s go!’ Shaw shouted.

Pop turned the jeep around. There was more AK-47 fire from the brush and then MG fire. A moment later a volley slammed right into the engine block. The hood burst open and slammed into the windshield, shattering the glass and spewing oil all over everyone. Steam poured out of a punctured valve. The gunner fired a long burst back into the brush.

‘Ah hell!’ Shaw shouted.

‘We could run!’ Pop shouted.

‘You run again and I’ll shoot you myself,’ Shaw replied. ‘Fuck!’ Shaw shouted. ‘Keep firing into the brush,’ he said to Adair.

‘Right.’

Shaw took the receiver and said ‘Baker-One, Baker-One this is Shaw.’

Back at the crossroads Baker watched the muzzle flashes and replied, ‘What the hell is going on up there?’

‘Baker-One, we found the Skyhawk and have recovered the pilot’s body and now the Noggies is chasing us. Our jeep is disabled. They shot the shit out of it.’

‘Alright, stay there. I’m coming to get you.’

‘Appreciate it, Baker-One.’

‘Just hang on.’

Baker brought another tank forward to cover while he took his own tank up the road to rescue Shaw.

‘Bloody hurry up!’ Shaw shouted as enemy fire cut the jeep up.

Sgt. Crabbe suggested, ‘Let’s fire a round in the brush, give the Noggies something to think about.’

‘Go ahead.’

Crabbe ordered a frag round into the breach and fired, sending the shell screaming over Shaw’s jeep and crashing into the brush. Baker stood up in the cupola and grabbed the MAG-3. He pulled back the firing pin and fired a long burst. They pulled up in front of the jeep.

Baker turned from his MAG-3 and shouted, ‘Come on!’

Shaw climbed up onto the tank. He turned and motioned for Pop and Adair to bring the pilot’s body over. Shaw grabbed it by the belt and hauled him onto the engine deck. While Baker fired, Pop climbed up onto the deck.

Shaw shouted, ‘Get the MG!’

‘Right!’

The gunner unhitched the gun from the jeep, handed it to Pop and then climbed onto the tank.

Shaw shouted, ‘Let’s go! Let’s go!’

Baker ordered the tank to back up. He pulled back the firing pin on his MG and let loose a burst. No one followed them as they drove back to the crossroads.

‘Get him down,’ Baker said. ‘Carefully,’ he said as Pop and Shaw

grabbed hold of the pilot's body.

They got the pilot's body to the ground. Shaw looked up at the turret and asked, 'You see anybody?'

'No one is coming.'

Baker radioed Dawson, 'We have the body.'

'Body? He's dead then.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Any enemy activity to your front?'

'I don't see any, sir. Just skirmishing.'

'I expected that. We're putting pressure on them and they're feeling it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'So sit tight.'

'Will do.'

Bien Hoa Airbase, Vietnam

The ground crew lined the tarmac cheering and hooting and pumping their fists as Tran taxied his MiG-21 to the bunker.

Sgt. Li climbed up the ladder and helped Tran open the canopy. The crew chief extended his hand.

'Congratulations, Captain.'

Tran took his hand. 'Thank you, chief.'

Tran climbed out of the cockpit and down the ladder. A renewed cheer rang out from the assembled men. Several crewmen patted Tran on the shoulder.

The chief said, 'Two kills, Captain.'

'Let us wait until the gun camera footage is reviewed.'

'You are being too modest.'

Tran gave a noncommittal shrug.

'Four kills.'

'Four?'

'Yes, Captain, you shot down two aircraft in the American War.'

Tran laughed. 'Eighteen years between kills.'

'Congratulations.'

Tran thought back to 1972 and of all his comrades he flew with. Most

were long gone yet here he was.

'We will get your ship fueled, armed and ready to fly.'

Tran wondered, *What happens when they come the next time.*

HMAS Melbourne

After the last of the A-4s landed, Crewe went down to the squadron bay. The pilots were morose, of course, and the wingmen of each downed Skyhawk were inconsolable. One simply cried in the arms of *Melbourne's* chaplain. Aside from the personal loss of two pilots, these were the first combat losses suffered by Australian air in decades, and the men of the squadron were taking it pretty hard. The mood in the CiC wasn't much better. At first Wells believed Vietnamese guns brought the Skyhawks down, but once troops on the ground surveyed the wreckage it was clear Vietnamese fighter jets were responsible for the loss. Crewe and Wells went over the map.

'We neutralized these two fields here,' Wells said.

'You're sure?'

'I can show the aerial recon photos, sir. Cratered, with several Vietnamese jets caught on the ground.'

'So where are the bloody jets coming from?'

Wells considered the map. 'Sir, I would think the only alternative is here.' He placed a finger northwest of Hanoi.'

Crewe looked and said, 'Bien Hoa?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What do they have there?'

Wells went into a nearby folder marked SECRET and took out an aerial photograph. He handed it to Crewe.

'One airstrip, several bunkers as you can see.'

'Uh, huh.'

'Before the war, one squadron of MiG-21s was stationed there and most likely still is.'

'Can we hit it, then?'

Wells shook his head. 'I wouldn't even think of sending the A-4s, sir. I'm afraid I'm going to have to put together a strike group out of Clark.'

'F-111s, F-18 Wild Weasels?'

‘Yes sir.’

‘We must hit that airfield tonight.’

‘We will, sir.’

Kokoda Flight

‘Feet dry,’ Bonfman reported as the South China Sea was replaced by the Vietnamese jungle.

‘Copy,’ replied the flight leader.

A dozen nautical miles on their six, Callum led a half dozen Aardvarks and two Hornet escorts. They had crossed the sea south of the fleet at the entrance to the Song Hong or Red River. Now they were flying low up the river valley, hoping the jungle-covered slopes would help cover their flight to Bien Hoa about a hundred and thirty miles northeast of the coast.

The MiG 21s appeared. Bonfman actually found this comforting as they approached Yen Bai. So far Vietnamese Su-27 Flankers had only been seen above and around Hanoi. If the Vietnamese had them at Yen Bai Airbase, they’d be up now, meaning that maybe Yen Bai wasn’t a priority for the PLAF. And maybe the ground defenses weren’t as thick as they were around Hanoi and Haiphong. Indeed as they flew northwest along the Song Hong the flak was light. When the MiGs showed up it stopped all together.

‘Tally! They’re coming right on,’ said Cradle.

‘Copy, Bonfman replied. ‘Kokoda-Two and Four stay low and on target.’

‘Copy.’

‘Me and Kokoda-Three will climb and engage.’

‘Roger.’

‘Let’s go.’

Bonfman pulled back hard on his stick and brought his ship off the deck. Immediately the radar warning lock went off.

‘There’s your target Kokoda-Two, let ‘em have it.’

‘Roger, Kokoda-One, moving in now…’

Bonfman looked down at his radar and saw two blips approaching from the northwest.

Kokoda-2 and Kokoda -4 launched their HARM missiles and banked

hard to the south under the cover of Bonfman and Kokoda-Three.

‘I have a lock!’ Three said, the sound of his missile lock buzzing in the background.

‘What are you waiting for? You fire, I’ll push in…’

‘Missile away….’ Three reported as he fired off a sidewinder. ‘Missile away,’ he fired off a second.

‘I see them, I see the MiG’s engines, they’re turning hard!’

‘Yeah, there are the flares.’

‘And…’ Bonfman said as he followed the contrails. ‘Got one!’ he shouted like a kid playing a videogame.

‘I’m seeing ground explosions here,’ Kokoda-4 reported.

‘No more radar lock signal’ reported Kokoda-2.

‘Alright Kokoda-Two and Four, you stay on station in case more radars pop on.

‘Copy.’

Bonfman called Borneo Flight, ‘Borneo, Borneo this is Kokoda.’

‘Copy,’ Callum replied.

‘We have opened a path for you.’

‘Very good.’

‘I’ll take you in.’

‘Ok Borneo-Flight, we are heading into target. We’ll follow Kokoda and drop ordnance in order. I’m in the lead.’

Callum heard five Aardvarks in the flight as they replied with affirmatives.

The ground moved quickly below as the Aardvarks made their way to the airbase. They were less than twenty seconds off target when Bonfman reported, ‘New radar lock. New radar lock!’

His missile warning indicator went off.

‘I have it too,’ Callum said.

‘Sure wish we had the Ravens like you do in Europe,’ Reece said.

‘Half the time they just warned Ivan we were coming and…’

Bonfman said, ‘I have missile launch…shoot, there’s another! Two and Four where are you?’

‘Moving in now…’

‘There’s a third missile.’

‘They’re not fooling around.’

‘Missile away!’ Kokoda-2 reported.

‘Missile away!’

‘Oh shit, I have enemy fighters coming off the deck.’

‘Missile launch!’

‘Closing fast…’

Static cut off Kokoda-2. A moment later Kokoda-4 disappeared too.

By then the air ahead of Borneo Flight was filled with flares and chaff, drawing off the three SAMS. Callum ordered his two escorts to engage the oncoming bogies.

‘We’re not breaking off?’ Reece asked.

‘Not hardly. We’re too close….’ Callum called the flight. ‘We are going in, Borneo-Flight, maintain course and speed. No breakoffs.’

The pilots replied in the affirmative.

Callum saw the airbase now, partially illuminated by the volleys of tracers stabbing up into the air.

‘Jesus,’ said Reece.

‘This is nothing,’ replied Callum. ‘God, you wouldn’t last ten seconds over a target in East Germany.’

A flak round exploded a few hundred yards forward, rattling the ship. Then another. Calllum pushed his throttle forward, losing altitude.

‘What are you doing?’

Another flak round burst up ahead close enough to rattle both men in their seats.

‘Getting under the flak.’

‘We’re over target,’ said Reece.

He toggled the trigger several times, releasing several sticks of MK-82 bombs. With the bombs away, Callum banked hard to the left and accelerated. Callum brought the ship southeast so he could watch as the rest of the flight made their runs over the airfield. As he watched, a line of explosions billowed up into the air. Reece exclaimed, ‘We got it!’

‘Yep,’ Callum said.

A few seconds later an even larger explosion billowed up into the sky.

‘That a fuel tank?’

‘Yep.’

‘So we took out the target.’

‘Charlie won’t be flying out of there for a long time.’

‘Ha!’ Reece said as the joy of accomplishing the mission and being alive filled him.

‘Hey,’ Callum cautioned. ‘We lost two birds, so take it easy.’

‘Right.’

Several kilometers north, Bonfman and Kokoda-3 had chased off the MiGs, but not avenged the loss of their two ships. Kokoda-3 flew a wide arc over the target area looking for wreckage. He saw none in the dark.

‘Any chutes?’ Bonfman asked.

‘I don’t see any.’

Bonfman shook his head. ‘Damn.’

‘I can take one more turn.’

‘Na, we’re reaching bingo fuel. Break off, the tankers await.’

‘Copy.’

‘Damn!’ Bonfman said. ‘Hope it was worth it.’

Bien Hoa Airbase, Vietnam

Tran looked at the hangar.

‘This is better than getting blown out of the sky,’ Sgt. Li said.

A bomb slammed into the roof and exploded. The American reinforced concrete absorbed the blast and crumbled, showering the MiG-21 below with chunks of concrete. A large chunk fell through the canopy and smashed the control panel. Another fell onto the wing and snapped off several feet of it. Tran’s MiG-21 was out of action.

‘I am not sure of that,’ he said.

‘How many times have you gone up?’

‘I lost track.’

‘I have not, Captain. Twenty missions in the last Six days.’

‘I suppose I have flown my last mission.’

The crew chief patted Tran on the shoulder. ‘You have done your part. What would you do, go down to Haiphong and carry a rifle?’

Tran laughed and looked up, ‘You failed, brother.’

CHAPTER 5

Singapore

‘So that’s the situation, Minister,’ General Grey said to Bomber Beazley.

‘Good,’ Bomber Beazley replied. ‘Now what is the plan going forward?’

‘Today Three Brigade will advance on a two regiment front. We’ll take the airport today.’

Beazley added, ‘And set the stage for a move into Haiphong.’

‘If necessary, yes, Minister.’

‘Good,’ Beazley said. ‘Now, I’d like to get up to Haiphong as soon as possible.’

‘I would advise against that, Minister. The beachhead is still under fire. This is no time to get yourself killed, sir.’ *And our men on the beach don’t need to be props in your political campaign* , Grey didn’t add.

‘Very, well,’ Beazley conceded. ‘I should fly up to Singapore to consult.’

‘Yes, Minister,’ Grey said. ‘At your convenience. Might I suggest tomorrow?’ Grey said, in hopes of keeping the minister away for as long as possible. ‘By then the airport will be under our control…’

‘Ah, excellent thinking, General Grey,’ Beazley replied with the political implications in mind. ‘What is the ETA for the airport attack?’

‘Both regiments are jumping off presently…’

River Road 2nd Cavalry Regiment,

Jenkins stood up in the cupola. He looked behind him and turned away as the rays of morning sunlight poked over the water. He put his sunglasses on and thought, *Good. The sun will be in the Noggies' eyes.* He looked forward. Ahead lay the road and beyond several smoke plumes. He heard a few jet engines in the distance and saw a pair of dots moving lazily across his field of view. Behind him the guns of *HMAS Adelaide* boomed.

'Sir?' said his driver. 'The barrage is over.'

'Right,' Jenkins said. He spoke into his mic. 'Can't let the gun bunnies do it all. Squadron advance.' Then to his driver, 'Take us forward, Johnnie.'

'Right, sir.'

The tank lurched forward along the River Road. Mortar rounds landed among the advancing tanks. It wasn't until he heard MGs ripping that Jenkins ducked into the turret.

'Fire from across the river, sir.'

'Ok,' Jenkins said. He keyed his mic, 'Blue Platoon, traverse turrets left and bring the riverbank under fire.'

'Copy.'

Blue platoon traversed turrets and peppered the far side of the river bank with MG fire, kicking up clouds of dirt and vegetation. The concentrated fire kept heads down as C Squadron advanced. While Blue Platoon kept the far bank under fire, Jenkins ordered them to the side of the road and brought White Platoon forward. One tank advanced parallel with his own, while two more kept their turrets traversed right toward the brush. The Vietnamese fired on C Squadron as they reached a bend in the river road. Then several Vietnamese soldiers burst out of the brush, explosive charges in hand, each led by a man carrying an AK-47. Fire from White-2 and White-3 sent the sappers flying back, their insides turned out from the impact.

Jenkins halted. He traversed his turret till the barrel was aimed fifty meters to the front and right and fired a frag round into the brush. Along with earth and vegetation, a shattered Vietnamese soldier flew into the air and landed in a bloody heap on the road. He then traversed back toward the road and fired another frag round forward. Jenkins pulled back his MAG-3's firing pin and meticulously fired into the brush, working his way forward.

'White-Platoon, this is Charlie-Six. Fire into the brush as we go.'

After receiving affirmatives, Jenkins called in a walking barrage from Bravo Company's mortar section and resumed the advance. The tanks moved

northwest along the river road. Red Platoon fired into the far river bank while White Platoon fired into the side of the road. Jenkins and White-1 kept the front covered. With guns blazing in every direction, C Squadron advanced nearly a kilometer until it was parallel to the airport about 800 meters on their right.

Jenkins deployed the squadron in a three sided box with one platoon held in column at the open end. He reported his position back to battalion, which sent up B Squadron's M-113s.

Once 2nd Cavalry Regiment joined the Australian left flank, 1st Armoured Regiment moved out of Khu Dan Cu. A Squadron led the push, with a dozen tanks in line, followed by B squadron and a dozen M-113s. Infantry advanced dismounted. Overnight the Vietnamese dug a series of trenches along the southeast facing edge of the airfield and reinforced them with log embrasures and roofs. They were easily visible from the air. As the 1st Armoured Regiment advanced, a pair of Skyhawks flew over the positions, dodging ground fire as they went, and bombed the bunker line. Regimental artillery hammered them next. By then a cloud of dust, smoke and fire obscured the airfield.

Baker Squadron's top sergeant walked back and forth among the line of advancing infantry screaming at the men not to bunch up behind the tanks and tracks, 'Spread out! Spread out!' Sgt. Lacke shouted. 'Spread out!' When he came upon a particularly bunched group of soldiers, he grabbed one and pushed him off to the left, then grabbed another and pushed him back, and then grabbed his mate and shoved him over to the right. 'Let's go, spread out! Eyes forward!'

Sgt. Lacke left grumbling soldiers in his wake.

'Blimey,' said one dismount. 'We're going into that?'

'Shut yer hole!' Sgt. Lacke shouted.

The scared dismount was going to reply when the first volley of Vietnamese artillery came in. The Vietnamese gunners had the field well sighted and landed the volley right on the advancing infantry. One round decapitated Sgt. Lacke and took out the three dismounts he had just admonished. Under cover of the barrage, the Vietnamese bunker line opened fire, washing the advancing Australians in a wave of fire. The tanks returned fire on the bunker line. Behind them, gunners in the APCs rode in the cupolas

and fired their MAG-3s. The Vietnamese RPGs came next; several streaked out from the bunkers but hit nothing. The tanks reached the bunker line and fired their MGs into it. Dismounts came up behind them and rolled grenades into the gun slits, stuck their rifle barrels inside and emptied their magazines.

The tanks then turned their attention to the airfield. The terminal was well fortified with sandbags and concrete barriers. The tanks didn't turn their main guns on the terminal - the RAAF might want it later. Instead they lit it up with MG fire which broke every window and left the façade looking like the surface of the moon.

The commander then ordered the tanks forward. When the first tank rolled over a bombed out bunker it took a direct hit from a distant gun, and exploded in a spectacular display of fire. There emerged a company of Vietnamese T-62 tanks. These, however, were no match for the Australian Leopards. In moments the Leopards stopped, brought the T-62s into their sites and fired en masse. Instantly a half dozen T-62s exploded. Four more went up in the second volley and the rest were quickly dispatched by the third. Now inside the perimeter, the Australian tanks stopped in front of the bunkers and fired a volley of HE rounds across the air strip. At the same time the tracks and infantry took up positions just behind the bunkers. The airstrip was theirs.

Beach Red

With the airport in Australian hands, the 1st Brigade came ashore courtesy of Singaporean and Malaysian transports. Wounded soldiers waited patiently for the unloading to finish so they could board. Crates of shells for the tanks and artillery were rushed forward as soon as they were unloaded. At sea, Captain Crewe was querying the Americans at Clark AFB about a shipment of 127mm shells for the fleet's frigates, who had been going through their own stocks at a prolific rate.

General Bosch stood in his CP with Lt. Colonel Dawson and Colonel Whalen.

'Final casualty reports, sir.'

General Bosch took the sheet of paper and read, 'Two hundred and hirty two dead, one hundred and one wounded. Well, honestly, given the cock-up

this landing has been so far, that could be a lot worse.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Six Leopards lost,' Bosch said. 'Again, given what the West Germans suffer on a daily basis, that's not bad. Nine tracks lost.'

'Alright, send this on to Singapore.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now show me the intelligence briefing.'

'Yes, sir.'

They walked over to the map. It showed the southern end of the peninsula up to the airport under Australian control. Haiphong and its environs were shaded in red, of course. No man's land lay between the two shaded areas.

'Now, General,' he began. 'Vietnamese forces are gathering north, here at the Lach Tray River Bridge. Tanks and infantry. Once assembling here, troops are moving east along this road and deploying opposite the airport.'

Bosch nodded his head. 'If the Americans hadn't pulled back their B-52s, we'd smash them.'

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'We also have indications of follow up forces gathering and moving west of the Lach Tray River Bridge.'

'So they're really moving a heavy force in here.'

'It would appear so. Troops are also streaming south out of Haiphong.'

'The Noggies are preparing a major counterattack. At least two brigades.'

'Probably more like three or four altogether.'

'What's your read?' he asked Lt. Colonel Dawson.

'We have a clear killing zone, sir. Those tanks are no match for ours. We shot them to hell, forgive the expression sir, at the airport.'

'I agree,' said Bosch. 'But the Vietnamese are going to follow Soviet doctrine, no?'

'Probably,' both commanders agreed.

'They'll use mass against us. Can you men really stop wave after wave of tanks? They'll pick off one or two of you every time.'

The regimental commanders nodded their heads.

'Now if we had the American big bombers like they promised, we could take care of the enemy. But we don't.'

Lt Colonel Dawson said, 'I doubt you mean for us to give back the

airport, sir.'

'No,' replied Grey. 'Let's act instead. Let's hit them first.'

The assembled commanders nodded in agreement.

'Now, Whalen. I'll reinforce you with elements of First Brigade. You'll have infantry, artillery, anti-tank guns and missiles…'

'Right sir.'

'You should be able to absorb a few attacks.'

'I should think so.'

'Now what I'd like to is counter the Noggies' mass by taking his initiative away entirely. Here's what we'll do...'

Haiphong Airport

Two miles north of Haiphong International Airport runs a four lane asphalt road between the Lach Tray and Song Cam rivers. All day, elements of two Vietnamese armored brigades gathered along the road. They assembled out in the open in daylight and rather clumsily. As such, the Australians were well aware of the large armored force gathering to their north. Had this been an American operation as soon as the threat became evident, massive air and artillery strikes would have been called in on the assembling Vietnamese armor.

At dawn Jenkins led C Squadron out of laager north along the river road. B Squadron followed close behind, also in column. Advancing before a rolling barrage of 105mm shell and turrets traversed alternating right and left, and commanders riding in the cupola, A Squadron blasted and machine gunned its way north

While 2nd Cavalry Regiment made quick progress north, *Adelaide* sailed into the mouth of the Lach Tray River.

'Right, bring the gunners up on deck,' Captain Gates ordered. A Fijian heavy weapons platoon came on deck. The gunners set up their MGs and pointed them at the west bank.

'What are they waiting for!' Captain Gates shouted. 'Fijians open fire!'

The burley Fijian infantry brought a deluge of fire to bear on the west bank of the Lach Tray.

Following close behind *Adelaide* was one of the Singaporean landing

ships. This too was lined with Fijian machine gunners, while below waited the rest of the Fijian regiment. *Adelaide* pushed on till it got within a few hundred meters of the river bend and the Lach Tray Bridge. Here she came to a stop and allowed the Singaporean landing ship to pass. The ship steamed ahead at five knots. Vietnamese soldiers on either side of the river watched in shock as the landing ship plowed through the water and slammed into the north bank of the river bend just below the bridge. With guns topside blazing away at both banks, the ramp came down and a half dozen MG armed land rovers emerged. These fanned out in all directions as infantry poured out of the landing ship's hold.

One company made for the roundabout on the west end of the trunk road, while a second stormed the northern end of the bridge. The Fijians dug in.

'Captain,' said the XO as he viewed the far bank through his binoculars. 'I see several tanks coming down the trunk road for the roundabout.'

Gates put his binoculars to his eyes. 'I see them.'

'Gunnery.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Target those tanks!'

'Aye, Captain.'

The gunnery officer relayed the coordinates to the 127mm gun. A moment later the gun traversed and the barrel elevated. It fired one round which exploded well to the north of the approaching tanks.

'Drop fifty and fire.'

The gun fired again.

'Add twenty and fire.'

The third round landed right on the road.

'There we go. Mark and fire for effect.'

The next round produced a secondary explosion for the bridge crew to see, and the next knocked a second T-62 over on its side. That was enough to convince the Vietnamese armored commander to pull back. Gates allowed the gun to chase the Vietnamese down the road for three rounds before ordering a cease fire. While the forward gun was firing on the Vietnamese tanks, the Fijians aboard *Adelaide* raked the west bank and south end of the bridge with fire. This produced a steady trickle of Vietnamese soldiers streaming out of the peninsula to get away from the fire.

With the Vietnamese position there shattered, the 3rd Fijian company came over the bridge and fanned out across the peninsula. For an hour they advanced south, engaging pockets of Vietnamese troops wherever they found them. After an hour, the 3rd Fijian company was at the base of the peninsula and more or less parallel with Haiphong airport. Here they dug in.

Aboard *Adelaide* the XO reported, 'Captain, I see another tank column coming.'

'Where?'

The XO pointed, 'North, northeast.'

Gates put his glasses to his eyes and looked to where the XO was pointing. There he saw in the distance a column of Vietnamese tanks coming south from Haiphong.

'Yes, there they are,' Captain Gates said. 'You can see them between the trees.'

The XO looked west down the trunk road. 'Coming from that way, too.'

'So it's a full blown counterattack.'

'I would think so, Captain.'

'Better inform the Fijians.'

'Right away.'

'And call Alpha.'

The XO pointed to the east bank of the Lach Tray. 'There he is, right there.'

Advancing along the River Road Jenkins could see the roundabout and had made contact with the Fijians.

'Phoenix, Phoenix. This is Alpha-Six.'

'I have you, Alpha.'

'Approaching now up the road.'

'Yes I can see you.'

'Make sure our way is clear.'

'Yes, Alpha-Three-Three,' Phoenix replied. 'We'd much rather you handle those approaching tanks than we.

Jenkins laughed. 'Will do, Phoenix.'

'We are already taking artillery fire, Alpha-Six. Please hurry!'

Fijian soldiers gathered in the center waved as Jenkins' tanks entered the roundabout. Jenkins led White Platoon around and to the north. Here they

deployed in a wedge.

‘Blue Platoon, break left and deploy against the oncoming tanks.’

‘Copy, Six’

Asked Blue-1‘What about us?’

‘Stay south of the roundabout and….’

Jenkins’ gunner shouted, ‘Target!...three-two-zero.’

‘HE!’

‘Up!’

‘Fire!’

‘On the way!’

Up the road a Vietnamese T-62 exploded.

On the roundabout White-1 reported. ‘There they are! Target, two-zero-zero….’

A second Vietnamese tank exploded.

On *Adelaide,* Captain Gates advised Jenkins, ‘Alpha-Six we have a great seat up here and let me tell you, you had better call in artillery and air strikes.’

‘Copy, *Adelaide*, ’ Jenkins replied.

‘There’s a lot of tanks out there.’

Beach Red

Beach Red was more crowded than ever. Now three transports unloaded Gurkhas. They filed ashore and proceeded inland over the fields won during the last two days. Ahead of them the sky was lit by fire. During their second attack, the Vietnamese had set the airport terminal ablaze. Now it flamed out of control.

Bosch listened in as 1st Armoured Brigade absorbed the latest Vietnamese armored attack.

‘Where are they? I don’t see them…’

‘They’re stuck behind those wrecks from the second attack…’

‘Perfect. I’ll call in the A-4’s.’

Indeed, all day a pair of A-4s had been on call, delivering MK-82 bombs when called.

‘A-4 flight, A-4 flight, mission profile.’

‘We have you, relay the coordinates.’

After 1st Armoured Regiment’s CaC relayed the coordinates, the A-4s swooped in over the battlefield and delivered a quarter of MK- 82 dumb bombs.

‘Hoooooo…boy A-4 Flight! You really nailed them. Can you see all those secondary blasts?’

‘Aye, we see them. Thanks.’

‘Much obliged….’

Bosch shook his head. The ground between Haiphong and the airport was now a junk yard of Soviet equipment. The last attack broke up less because of Australian fire and more because the Vietnamese tanks and armored vehicles couldn’t make their way through the debris.

The situation was similar over on the River Road.

‘Give me Second Cavalry,’ Bosch said.’

When the communications officer raised 2nd Cavalry Regiment he handed the receiver to Bosch. ‘How goes it, Johnny?’

‘Well, we just drove off another attack.’

‘How many is that?’

‘The third, same as with 1st Armoured Regiment. They’re not probing us as hard as they are 1st Armoured Regiment. They’re coming at me from the north and west. We knocked out a few tanks and then they pulled back.’

‘Right. The Noggies are just trying to keep you pinned for the main attack. Can you hold them?’

‘Absolutely. So long as I have the transport and *Adelaide* . Not to mention the Fijians. I have no worries about my position.’

‘How are the Fijians?’

‘Fanatical fighters, sir. I suggested to their commander that he reel in a few of his outposts but he refused.’

‘Refused?’

‘Yes, he said Fijians hold their ground, sir. So no worries there.’

‘My compliments.’

‘I will pass them along, sir.’

‘One last thing before I let you sign off. Tell me about Jenkins.’

‘Absolutely a fine tank commander, sir.’

‘That is good to know that he redeemed himself…’

Borneo Flight

A quartet of escorting Hornets was up ahead, warding off any Vietnamese interceptors that had survived the last few days of combat. The ground raced by below the flight of four F-111s. Eight ships were coming up behind him.

'You see anything?' Callum asked. 'We're coming up on the coordinates.'

'Naa I don't…oh there they are.'

Then Reece pointed northeast to a long, paved road. Indeed as far as they could see the road was clogged with vehicles.

'Doesn't look like they're moving,' the copilot said.

'Well, let's not wait for them to get a move on.' Callum called the rest of the squadron. 'Target ahead. We'll hit them on the east end of the road and work our way back. Follow me.'

Callum banked right and flew perpendicular to the road. He wasn't interested so much in dropping his load on the road as he was in marking the target. As the road approached Reece released his bombs, straddling the road and scoring a few hits as indicated by secondary blasts below. He banked back right over the city and saw a pair of burning vehicles. Then the second Aardvark came in and dropped its load at a slant angle. Callum circled back around as the squadron pounded the road.

When the last Aardvark hit the target Callum ordered the squadron to re-form over the Gulf of Tonkin. They did so without incident and turned east for Clark AFB.

'We must have slagged nearly a kilometer of road.'

'About half a mile, right.'

'Still plenty of vehicles though.'

'Doesn't matter,' Callum said. 'We did this to the Soviets in Germany too.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah, it will take the Noggies days to get that road clear.'

'Oh.'

'Nothing's getting into Haiphong for now...'

Task Force Baker

Shaw said, ‘Firing dying down.’

Baker added, ‘Tailing off north and west too.’

‘Yeah,’ Shaw replied. ‘No trouble from the Noggies the last few hours.’

‘Lucky.’

‘For us,’ said Shaw. ‘Hell of a jam you got us in.’

Baker shrugged. ‘I thought it was a good idea.’

Shaw just looked at Baker.

Crabbe shouted up from the turret. ‘Excuse me, sir,’ Sgt. Crabbe said. ‘Getting a message from battalion. They say watch out for our guys coming down the road.’

‘Really?’ Baker said.

‘Yes, sir, any minute now, they said.’

With the back of his hand Shaw slapped Baker across the arm. ‘So I guess we survived.’

Singapore

As information came into headquarters, Grey’s map of Haiphong came to be dominated by blue pins, each representing an Australian or allied regiment or objective taken. The operation had finally shaken out. The airport was in friendly hands and all four Australian brigades ashore.

On the line with Admiral Dooley, General Grey asked, ‘Can you get the Gurkha Brigade ashore tonight?’

‘I don’t see why not.’

‘Good. Please do so.’

‘We shall,’ Dooley said.

‘Thank you Admiral. That will give us two fresh infantry brigades ashore, our 1st Infantry Brigade and the Gurkhas.’

‘General, do you intend to march into Haiphong?’

‘If necessary, yes.’

‘General, I am reminded of the Israelis in Lebanon in 1982.’

‘Yes I know, they went into Beirut.’

‘And it was a terrible mistake.’

‘True, Admiral, and I’m hoping we don’t have to go into Haiphong. But we’ll need to be prepared to do so. ‘

‘Can you take Haiphong with what is on the ground?’

‘Two fresh infantry brigades supported by our two armored regiments should be enough.’

‘Very well, General. Do you really think that will be necessary?’

‘I don’t know if I’ll get the order to go into Haiphong, Admiral.’

‘Bomber Beazley will probably give that order if necessary.’

‘Hopefully the Vietnamese will see reason before that.’

CHAPTER 1

Vann worried even though the operation was progressing nicely. He watched as men of the 12th Division proceeded across the bridge and onto the Cam Ranh Peninsula. Here they joined elements of the 7th Division which had already been in position for 24 hours. Surely the New Zealanders down the peninsula saw the movement of the 7th Division but hopefully not the 12th and hopefully not the movement of the heavy equipment further north. These Vann had brought down from Nha Trang and onto the peninsula. Here they were nearly ten miles away from the target, but Vann was willing to move them over a greater distance in the hopes of remaining unspotted.

'General,' said an aide, 'The 365th Artillery Regiment is approaching.'

General Vann nodded.

The artillery regiment was going to take up positions across the sound opposite Cam Ranh Naval Base. From this position they would deliver harassing fire to the New Zealanders and potentially draw them away from the main thrust by the 7th Division down the peninsula.

So far everything was falling into place.

That's what worried Vann.

Why wouldn't the New Zealanders take Cam Ranh Bridge? Was it simply an oversight? Or as some of Vann's junior officers had speculated, were they just spread too thin?

Vann watched a column of T-55 tanks breakoff to the south down the road along the sound.

We shall find out.

Provo Brigade CP

‘Well that’s bloody all good,’ General Lee said. ‘I’m glad to hear the Australians have taken the airport, sir,’ he said to General Grey hoping his cynicism wasn’t coming through. ‘But I have multiple reports of Vietnamese forces gathering on the Cam Ranh Peninsula. They’re crossing the Cam Ranh Bridge, and I think they’re coming down the neck as well.’

‘What strength?’

‘I can’t say, sir. But a lot of them. And we hear motors. Plenty of those.’

‘Coming across the bridge?’

‘Not yet, just down the neck.’

‘What is your position?’

‘Strong, General. We’re dug in. We have mortars and a battery of howitzers, our two destroyers. But we could use some air support.’

‘We’re tied up here at the moment. You do have those two New Zealand A-4s at Manila. I’ll release them right away.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

General Grey signed off. Lee walked over to his map. His main position was on Firebase Crete, with Colonel Gipson’s 1st Battalion deployed west to the beach in depth. The heavy weapons company was at Firebase Crete. Behind them on the north shore of the lake, A Squadron of 14 Scorpion tanks was in laager. Second Battalion occupied the rest of the base, Cam Binh Island and the west tip of the entrance to the bay.

Troops coming across the bridge, vehicles coming down the neck. Troops advancing on the far side of the sound. The Noggies are going to hit us, he thought. *Tonight.*

Firebase Crete

Firebase Crete occupied an excellent position atop Hill 184. From there the Kiwi gunners could see well up the Cam Ranh Peninsula and dominate the ground leading to the Provo Brigade’s assembly area. But before the hill lay much vegetation which the New Zealanders had not cleared.

It was through this vegetation that two Vietnamese infantry platoons infiltrated. For two hours the pair of lightly armed platoons moved through

the trees and shrubs. In single file they advanced to within a hundred meters or so of Hill 184. Here they halted. Surely the New Zealanders mined the slope. Scouts reported back that the slope was clear. Instead, between the Vietnamese infiltrators and Firebase Crete lay a few strands of barbed wire. Captain Cao looked gingerly up the slope. Cao was too young to have fought the Americans, but had seen action against Cambodia and later China. This was a different enemy entirely and Cao led his men forward with one standing order, 'Get close. Hold their belt buckle.'

Scouts cut a path through the wire. Once through the wire they could hear the New Zealanders. Those that spoke English heard talk of hurling and rugby from a few voices.

Cao's men fanned out, forming two lines near the middle of the hill. The crest was only a few dozen yards away. They could actually see a New Zealand soldier. He stretched and then looked back. Captain Cao decided this was the time. He took a flare gun out of his belt and fired it into the air. Then he blew a whistle and stood up.

'Follow me!'

The AK-47s sounded.

Firebase Crete

Captain Jones made his CP next to a trench at the center of the firebase. Here he set up a tarp, a radio, a couple of crates for chairs, and a cot. He was lying on the cot trying to get some shut-eye and failing. The enemy's movement up the peninsula was open for all to see. That could only mean that the Vietnamese were going to attack. Jones felt it best to get a little rest before they did. Company Sergeant Ngata even told Jones to get some rest. 'Trust me, sir, you'll need it,' he said. 'Now get sacked out,' he practically ordered.

Unlike Captain Jones, Lt. Ball groggily climbed out of his trench. It was the first time he'd been able to get three or four hours of sustained shut-eye after two days of overseeing the fortification of Firebase Crete, stringing wire, digging trenches and the like.

'Ahhhhh…..' he said as he stretched the sleep from his tight muscles. It was then that he heard a pop and saw a flare heading up into the night sky. 'Who the hell fired a flare…I'll…'

Ball never had a chance to finish the thought as several AK-47 rounds ripped into his torso. He was dead before he hit the ground. Other soldiers atop Firebase Crete looked at the commotion only to see several dozen Vietnamese soldiers rushing up the hill. Someone shouted, ‘Noggies! Noggies!’ Another soldier screamed. As men scrambled up from their MG pits or out of their tents they saw the gaggle of Vietnamese soldiers running toward them firing wildly. Another New Zealander went down and then another. That was all the rest of the troops needed. Dozens of Kiwis took off running down the reverse slope, leaving their kit and their machineguns and mortars.

Over at his machine gun pit, Dec turned to run but slammed right into Tim. Tangled together the pair fell into their pit.

‘Awwww fuck!’ Dec shouted as he landed on the barrel of their MAG.

‘Get off me!’ Tim shouted.

Dec rolled onto the floor of the pit. Tim sat up and looked down the slope where he saw a bunch of Vietnamese soldiers running toward them.

Dec looked down the north slope. ‘Oh shit!’

Tim grabbed one of their tarps and pulled it over the pit.

‘What the fuck are you doing!?

‘Hiding!’

‘Awww fuck!’

In moments, two platoons of Vietnamese soldiers stood triumphantly atop Firebase Crete, cheering and firing their rifles in the air before Captain Cao could get them under control. Already men were searching the tents and rifle pits looking for treasure. Captain Cao shouted ‘Stand to! Stand to!’ But the young soldiers, raised on their father’s stories of fighting the Americans and liberating Saigon from the corrupt regime, would not be denied celebration of their own victory.

Down at the bottom of the hill Captain Jones gathered his dazed soldiers. ‘Who’s missing?’ he asked. Sgt. Ngata did a quick count. ‘Looks like five, sir. They may be dead, they may be hiding up there,’ he pointed up the hill. The shouting of the Vietnamese soldier came down the slope.

Sergeant Ngata said, ‘Look, Captain. I was here in ’67. We have to go back up there, right now.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘We have to retake our pos. Right this minute.’

Captain Jones looked around. All the men wore their side arms, a few had rifles. ‘With what? ‘45’s and rugby tackles?’

‘If we have to, yes.’

‘You’re mad.’

‘I know what I’m talking about, sir. We have a little time. Right now the Noggies is jumping up and down and hooting like hell. In a few minutes their officers will get control. By then it will be too late.’

‘I see what you mean…’

‘Let’s go, right now!’

Captain Jones nodded.

He drew his sidearm and fired a round into the air. This got the company’s attention. ‘Alright lads! We’re going back up there!’

This was greeted with shouts of ‘What?’, ‘Is he daft?’, ‘Does he want to die?’

Sgt. Ngata muttered, ‘Get ‘em moving, sir.’

‘We’re going right now!’

Ngata jumped in. ‘You lovelies want to go home and tell your girls you ran away from a bunch of skinny, slant-eyed commies?’ He let that sink in for a second. ‘Ran away! Bunch of fine rugby players are you lot!’

There was grumbling in the ranks.

‘Next time, just have your girls play the match.’

Now the men of the heavy weapons company were getting angry.

Ngata shouted, ‘Ka’mate! Ka’mate Ka Ora! Ka Ora!’

The men took up the chant, ‘Ka’mate! Ka’mate Ka Ora! Ka Ora!

‘Alright you lot!’ Sergeant Ngata bellowed. ‘Me and the Captain is going back up! Any of you nancies with us?!’

With his blood up now, Captain Jones shouted. ‘Follow me!’

Sixty-five motley armed men ran back up the hill cheering like maniacs at a rugby match. The Vietnamese atop Hill 184 didn’t even realize what was happening until the New Zealanders were on them. When the Kiwis surmounted the hill, Captain Jones and Sergeant Ngata fired their pistols as if they were in a gun battle of the Old American West. One man ran at the nearest Vietnamese soldier and tackled him rugby style. Another punched a Vietnamese soldier in the face, ripped his rifle from his hands and then beat him over the head with the butt. Confronted with a mass of screaming, frothing Kiwis, the stunned Vietnamese soldiers scattered in all directions.

Captain Cao was shouting after his men when Sgt. Ngata jumped him and skulled him with the butt of his pistol. As the Vietnamese scattered, New Zealanders ran to their tents and grabbed their weapons, or picked up discarded AK-47s and fired them down the hill at the fleeing Vietnamese.

Lying under the tarp Tim said, 'I think our boys are back.'

Cautiously he peered out from beneath the tarp and saw the company sergeant wringing a Vietnamese soldier neck. Tim threw back the tarp, 'Oy, Sergeant!'

Sgt. Ngata looked up from the Vietnamese from whom he was wringing the life and said, 'What the bloody hell are you two doing over there?'

'Hiding!'

Still with his hands around the Vietnamese' neck he said, 'Well man your weapon and fire downhill!'

'Right!'

Tim opened an ammo box, took out a belt and threaded it through the MAG-3. He and Dec looked down the hill and saw a mass of Vietnamese infantry nearing the bottom.

Dec shouted, 'Oy, Sergeant, look!'

Ngata saw hundreds of Vietnamese coming out of the brush.

'Get to your guns! Get to your guns!' Captain Jones shouted. 'Here they come!'

Cam Ranh Bridge

From his position at the Cam Ranh Bridge General Vann saw the two infiltration platoons storm the New Zealanders' hill. He smiled as they surmounted the crest and drove the enemy down the reverse slope. Behind the infiltrators waited two infantry regiments poised to exploit the breakthrough.

'Signal the regiments to advance.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And send the other regiment forward.'

'Yes, sir.'

As preplanned, while one regiment of the 12th Division took the hill, another would advance between the hill and the bay and assault enemy

positions to the west. Then with these pinned, a third regiment from the 7th Division would push on and retake the naval base.

Vann ordered, ‘Signal all guns to open fire.’

As the infantry advanced, several artillery batteries fired on Cam Ranh Naval Base. Vann saw geysers of dirt and sand sprouting up all along the peninsula. After a few minutes Cam Ranh Naval Base was totally obscured by the artillery fire.

‘General, look!’

He trained his binoculars on the hill and saw sustained gunfire.

‘I thought we had the hill, what the hell is happening?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘Well find out!’

‘Yes, sir.’

A moment later Vann saw for himself. Dozens of Vietnamese soldiers streamed back down the north slope of the hill. These collided with the infantry company that was coming up the slope. From atop the hill one NZ MG fired, then a second and a third and in moments the entire hill was sheathed in the muzzle flashes. Vann saw Vietnamese soldiers dropping to the ground like bowling pins. Those near the front of the rush had no chance, while those near the back dropped to the ground or ran back toward the scrub. The New Zealanders kept up the deluge of fire, leaving a carpet of Vietnamese soldiers on the north slope dead or writhing like a mass of dying snakes.

From the foot of the hill came a steady stream of small arms fire.

‘Good, good,’ Vann said. ‘Return fire. Keep their heads down.’

By then two companies made it past the hill and approached the New Zealanders’ main line.

Vann ordered, ‘Artillery, target the hill, now.’

‘But the base?’

‘Keep the New Zealanders’ heads down on that hill. If they see reinforcements moving, they’ll cut them down.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Clark AFB, Philippines

‘Alright let’s move!’ Pagliano shouted.

Towson struck a match, lit a cigarette and tossed the match away. ‘I’ll hand it to Captain Pagliano. For a reservist, he’s a pretty good admin.’

Indeed, for the last forty-eight hours Pagliano had run the tarmac with an iron hand. He excelled at getting aircraft armed, fueled, prepped and back in the air.

‘Maybe he’s not useless after all,’ Towson said.

‘Sergeant Towson!’

‘Sir.’

‘Let’s look busy, please.’

Towson inhaled his cigarette and threw it to the tarmac.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I need someone to find those two Kiwi pilots.’

‘Right away, Captain.’

Towson found them both asleep in the pilot’s lounge, still in full flight gear.

‘Hey, you two,’ he said. One of the Kiwi pilots looked up from the couch he was lying on. ‘Oy?’ he asked groggily.

‘Excuse me for waking you, sirs,’ Towson said, ‘But my Captain says you’re to get to your aircraft right away.’

The other pilot stirred from the lounger in which he was lumped. ‘What’s that, Tompkins?’

‘We’re being summoned.’

‘Arghhhh…’ Tompkins said. ‘Jesus, Owens, can’t we sleep?’

‘Do you know what this is about, Sergeant?’

‘Something about Cam Ranh.’ Towson replied. ‘But we’re getting your ships fueled and armed.’

Owens raised an eyebrow.

‘Alright, let’s go.’

The two Kiwi pilots pulled themselves up.

‘This way, sir.’

Towson led the pilots to Captain Pagliano who was busily supervising as ground crew secured MK-82 CBU bombs to the wing pylons.

‘I guess it’s hit the fan, huh?’ Owens said.

Pagliano looked over from the line and said, ‘Thank you, Sergeant.’ He turned to the pilots. ‘We’re getting your ships ready to go.’ He handed Owens

a clipboard. ‘Only a bare briefing I’m sorry to say. As you say, the shit’s hit the fan over at Cam Ranh.’

Owens pointed to the wings. ‘What are those?’

‘Mark eighty two’s. That’s what we have handy.’

‘That’s fine. We’ve checked out on those.’

‘Do you have charts of Cam Ranh?’

‘We do.’

‘Ok, then,’ Pagliano said. ‘Here’s the situation. Charlie is pressuring your guys there. You still hold everything but they need air support.’

Owens nodded.

‘We’ll fly you in to target.’

‘Charlie in the air?’

‘No. You’ll have a couple of flights of Singapore Falcons to the south and Hornets over the Gulf.’

‘Alright, let’s get prepped then.’

Owens and Tompkins climbed into their respective cockpits and waited while the final bombs were secured and the fuel tanks topped off. The crew chief closed their cockpits and gave Owens the thumbs up. The chief climbed down and removed the ladder.

Owens radioed, ‘Tower this is Zulu Flight, requesting taxiing instructions.’

The tower relayed the instructions and said, ‘You are clear for takeoff.’

Owens took his ship into the air first. He climbed and formed up over the coast and proceeded west.’

‘ETA, fifty six minutes,’ he said. ‘We’ll refuel at…’ he checked the small map clipped to his knee, ‘Area X-Ray and proceed to target.’

‘Hey look down there, it’s the Filipino navy.’

Owens looked out the cockpit. Indeed he saw several vessels.

‘What are those?’

‘Looks like destroyers….and…troop transports…’

Provo 1st Battalion

Colonel Gipson deployed his battalion in depth with A company occupying a trench line forward and B Company in a trench line a hundred meters back.

Both were anchored on the beach on the left and Firebase Crete on the right. Gipson was walking the defenses and checking up on the men when the first Vietnamese artillery rounds came in. The 1st Battalion was right in the crosshairs of two Vietnamese artillery regiments. Aided by base personnel, they expertly sighted the New Zealanders' trench line. The first rounds landed a hundred yards north of the 1st Battalion. The second volley exploded on and above the trench line. With the target marked, the other Vietnamese battery fired from across the bay and landed their rounds on the beach. The next volley landed right on the target.

As he heard the rounds come in, Gipson dove into the nearest trench. Here he stayed until the fifth volley landed a shell right above Gipson, shredding to bits the colonel and the two men in the trench with him. The men of 1st Battalion endured the barrage for several minutes. When the artillery fire lifted, they heard tanks in the distance. These halted a few hundred meters before the trench line and smothered it with MG fire. As they did so, columns of Vietnamese infantry raced forward.

Sporadic fire met the advancing Vietnamese, cutting many down in the open. But many more pushed their way through and fell upon the dazed New Zealanders. A dozen soldiers' battles began in the trench line, coming down to rifles, hand grenades and bayonets. Here, too, the New Zealanders mostly held firm. But in the mass melee several dozen Vietnamese broke through their trench line and fanned out south. With Colonel Gipson dead, it took the officers of the 1st Battalion some time to sort out the command situation. Most of the trenches were on their own when the T-55s advanced.

A Squadron Laager

As ordered by General Lee, Captain Roon parked his 14 Scorpion Light Tanks in laager at the north shore of the lake. Here the tankers fished, swam, and napped under their tarps and generally enjoyed a good campout. On the edge of the laager two tankers stood guard, one with an M-16 slung over his shoulder, the other with just a sidearm.

'What the hell is going on up there?' Private Filson asked as the first artillery rounds came in. He unslung his M-16.

'Yeah,' Yarrow replied. 'Where the hell is Captain Roon?'

Captain Roon had been enjoying a nighttime swim in the lake when the fighting started and was now scrambling to find his clothes on the shore line.

Yarrow and Filson dove to the ground.

‘Guess we’re lucky, eh?’

‘I don’t know…’

Another volley came in.

‘Shit!’

Filson saw a group of men running toward them. He stood and shouted, ‘Oy! What the hell is going on over there?’

Vietnamese AK-47 bursts cut down Filson and Yarrow.

The Vietnamese ran toward the tank laager, firing their AK-47s at the parked Scorpion tanks and their stunned crewmen. Most of the men were back at their encampment around Roon’s PC and only one man was on each tank. One tanker was sleeping on the engine deck when the Vietnamese arrived. He sat up to see what the commotion was about only to be shot several times. Another tanker poked his head out of his hatch and dived back down when rounds ricocheted off the hull. A Vietnamese climbed onto the tank and emptied his AK-47 into the turret.

When he heard the AK-47s rip, Roon said, ‘Ah the hell with it,’ and ran for his CP in nothing but his swim trunks. Men in various states of dress hunkered down on the ground loading rifles or trying to find equipment.

‘Thank god, the Captain,’ someone said.

Within the CP were a few officers and the radioman frantically trying to raise General Lee.

‘Captain!’ he shouted. They heard a loud bang and then rifle fire. Everyone fell to the ground.

Roon asked, ‘What the hell is happening!’

In the distance, several AK-47s fired.

‘Have they overrun our laager?’

‘I think so, Captain.’

‘Christ almighty!’ Roon shouted.

‘And it sounds like a bunch of them are fighting their way onto the base now.’

A round of mortars exploded.

‘So let me see if I understand what is happening here. The Vietnamese just took Firebase Crete.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And he’s fighting his way onto the base.’

‘Yes.’

‘And we’re out of contact with First and Second Battalion and brigade.’

‘Yes.’

‘Bloody hell!’

Roon put his hands on his hips and looked down at this bare feet. *We better get to work, here,* he thought.

‘Would you like some pants, Captain?’

‘Fuck that, someone get me a rifle.’

HMNZS Waikato

Dreams of future days filled Captain Nelson’s sleep as his brain tried to unravel the endless series of mental strains aboard ship. He was woken from his sleep by the urgent sounding of the comm hanging on the wall next to his bunk. After decades in the navy Nelson had become instantly alert upon waking. He picked up the receiver.

‘Captain, this is the bridge,’

He recognized the voice of his young communications officer.

‘Go ahead, Ridley.’

‘There’s massive firing in and around Cam Ranh base.’

‘Alright, I’m coming.’

Nelson hung up the receiver. As he put his pants on, he heard the distant sounds of battle. ‘Jesus,’ he said.

He got to the bridge and asked, ‘Anything on radar?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Sonar?’

‘Negative.’

‘We’ve been listening to the Provo Brigade’s radio net, sir. Plenty of fighting. It sounds like the Noggies are hitting them.’

‘Pipe it in.’

For several seconds Nelson listened to the voices of various officers on the ground at Cam Ranh, punctuated by rifle and MG fire.

Ridley asked, ‘Shall I raise Provo-Six?’

‘Negative, they’re busy right now.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

‘Action stations.’

The alarm klaxon sounded.

‘Helm, take us into Cam Ranh Bay.’

Firebase Crete

‘Hey,’ Tim said. ‘Look at all those buggers down there.’

Dec turned his attention away from the MAG and looked down the west slope to where Tim was pointing. He saw several columns of men making their way along the beach toward the base. These were fanning out and forming a line, firing the AK-47s as they went. Behind them came another mass of men.

‘Awww fuck it all,’ Dec said. He swung the MAG around to the west, pulled back the firing pin and fired one burst and then another. Tim shouted back, ‘Hey Captain! The Noggies are down there. A lot of them!’

Captain Jones ran over to their trench and looked over to where Dec was firing.

‘Fuck.’ Jones said. He shouted back, ‘Bring the MAGs over here! Let’s go!’

Two machinegun crews hustled over and splayed themselves down on the dirt. They threaded belts and opened fire.

Jones patted Dec on the shoulder and said, ‘Pour it on.’

‘Right, sir.’

He got up and ran over to the mortar pit, where the mortar men were still trying to get their tubes set up after the Vietnamese overran the hill.

‘One going, sir. The other soon.’

‘Get it set up now.’

‘I’ll fire the tube I have.’

‘Do it!’

Captain Jones ran over to the north-facing firing line. Here several MGs pointed down the slope. Every few minutes one of the gunners sent a flare up, illuminating the macabre carpet of dead and wounded men leading down to the scrub.

‘What’s happening here?’

‘The Noggies are staying down there for now.’

They heard mortars coming in, but these went right over Firebase Crete to the tank laager.

He looked down the slope again.

‘You see all that movement down there?’ Captain Jones asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘Fire another flare.’

‘Right.’

He took out a flare gun and sent a flare arching through the sky. Below they saw scores of Vietnamese crouching in the brush and getting ready to rush the hill.

‘Open fire!’

A half dozen machineguns tore into the brush, scattering the Vietnamese who left a dozen of their comrades dead.

By then both mortar tubes were working, and their crews launched bombs at the Vietnamese advancing past the hill. Jones ran back over to the south side of the base and looked down the slope toward the advancing Vietnamese. He fired off a flare. Below he saw a gaggle of Vietnamese hunkered down at the base of the hill.

He pointed, ‘Looks like those guys are getting into position for an assault!’

Dec fired a burst over their heads. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘What else have you seen?’

‘Looks like a big bunch of ‘em got past us.’

‘Crap.’

‘But we held this bunch here, that’s for sure.’

Dec fired again until the belt ran out.

‘Get another belt,’ he said to Tim.

‘Right!’

Tim opened up an ammo can. He took out one belt and handed it to Dec and then slung the other over his shoulders. On either side of them the MGs fired down the slope.

‘Wait here.’

Dec said, ‘I wouldn’t dream of going anyplace else, sir!’

Captain Jones ran back to the mortar pits. ‘Got ‘em both working?!’

‘Yep!’

‘Alright, stop dropping rounds on the base of the hill. The Noggies are getting ready to come up!’

‘Right!’

From his CP the signalman shouted, ‘Captain! Brigade is on the line!’

‘Well it’s about bloody time!’ He patted the head mortarman on the shoulder. ‘Get to work!’

Captain Jones ran over to the CP and grabbed the receiver. ‘Weapons-Six!’

‘Six this is Provo-Six, what is your situation?’

‘The Noggies are all over the place, General Lee.’

‘Here too.’

‘I could use an artillery strike.’

‘We’ll call it in but right now they’re supporting 1st Battalion.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Keep firing on those Vietnamese down on the beach. Hold them as long as you can.’

‘Roger.’

‘I….’ The line cut out.

‘Hello Provo-Six! Hello Provo Six.’ Jones got no response. ‘Dammit.’

He gave the receiver back to the signalman.

Sergeant Ngata pointed down the south slope toward the tank laager.

‘What about all those troops swarming around the tanks?’

‘Naaaa….’ Dec said. ‘Those are our guys…’

A Squadron

‘Captain Roon, they’re crawling all over our tanks.’

Roon and his two crewmen lay in the sand about fifty meters from the laager. In the night the Vietnamese running roughshod through the laager couldn’t see them. Besides they were too busy climbing all over the tanks. Roon watched as a Vietnamese soldier looked down into the turret of one tank and then flew back with a bullet in his face. A hand then reached up and pulled the hatch shut. Another Vietnamese jumped onto the tank. The tanker inside ingeniously traversed the turret and knocked him to the ground. Yet

another Vietnamese jumped onto the turret. This one banged on the hatch with a hammer. The tankers inside traversed the turret but the hammer-wielding Vietnamese hung on.

‘That’s First Battalion over there,’ Roon said.

‘They should be alright, sir.’

‘Hope so.’

Artillery came in over their position and exploded on the base.

Up ahead they saw Firebase Crete pouring fire into the Vietnamese swarming around the hill. Roon saw their mortars flash and explode at the base.

‘Get all the men you can,’ Roon said.

‘Right sir.’

The firing from the base intensified. Another volley of artillery slammed into 1st Battalion’s positions there. As Roon watched the conflagration, his officers and noncoms ran in all directions shouting for men to gather outside the CP. ‘Over here!’, ‘Right here!’, ‘Rally to Captain Roon at the CP! Move it!’

In a few minutes two dozen tankers were gathered around the CP. They carried a motley array of weapons. M-16s, M-14s and pistols.

‘Is that everybody?’

‘That’s all I could find, Captain.’

‘Alright.’

Another volley of artillery came in and exploded on and around 1st Battalion. Up on Firebase Crete the mortars fired again and the machinegun fire intensified.

‘Alright,’ Roon said. ‘No point in waiting around.’

He looked over at the laager, where Vietnamese soldiers ran to and fro. Roon stood up, still barefoot, his torso covered in dirt and sand. He hoisted his M-16 and chambered a round.

‘Let’s go!’

The tankers ran toward the laager firing their guns and the Vietnamese scattered throughout. Roon shot one soldier off the turret of a Scorpion and then climbed aboard. He looked into the open hatch and saw one of his men lying dead inside. About him the Kiwi tankers filtered through the laager firing as they went. He looked up and watched as the rest of his men chased

the Vietnamese out of the laager, firing after them as they ran back the way they came.

‘What now, sir?’

‘Get the tanks going!’

Provo-6

A lucky hit from the Vietnamese artillery barrage destroyed Lee’s headquarters. He made his makeshift CP in the airport control tower. This drew the attention of the Vietnamese, who peppered the tower with MG fire, forcing Lee and his staff to move once again, this time to one of the hangars. Lee had his radio set up and a map, but little idea what was happening and resorted to sending staff officers out to gather information.

One of his officers, covered in soot, ran into the hangar.

He cursed as another volley of Vietnamese artillery exploded nearby.

‘Well?’

‘Noggies overran the tank laager.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘Looks like Roon and his men retook it.’

‘What are they doing now?’

‘I couldn’t tell sir.’

‘And First Battalion?’

‘Holding their position, sir. But under heavy pressure. Retaking Firebase Crete probably saved them.’

Lee nodded, ‘I see.’

‘It looks like a lot of Vietnamese broke through, though.’

‘Damn it.’ Lee said. ‘So, the Noggies are probably crawling all over the base.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good work,’ Lee turned to his signalman. ‘Where is my communications?’ he demanded.

‘Sorry, sir. They shot up our radios pretty bad. I’m pretty close to getting this set working.’

A flare arced into the air, illuminating 1st Battalion’s positions. This was followed by another artillery barrage and renewed MG fire.

‘Sir, radio is up!’

‘Get me First Battalion, now!’

The signalman raised the battalion and got the CO. Lee took the receiver, ‘How are you doing, Arty?’

The noise of battle nearly drowned out the voice on the other end. ‘Lousy!’ he shouted over the blurts of a heavy machinegun. ‘Some got through and…’ Lee heard a bang sound ‘…we have the line now. This is Captain Rossim by the way, Provo-Six.’

‘Where’s Colonel Gipson?’

‘Dead, sir.’

‘Ok.’

‘They’re hitting us hard!’ a mortar burst nearby. ‘Jesus, that was close. The fire support from Firebase Crete is back and that’s helping. I think it stopped the Noggies’ reinforcements, but they’re still hitting me up and down the line!’

Lee heard talking in the background.

‘Alright, Captain. I’ll give you the artillery for now.’

‘Thanks!’

‘What about Second Battalion?’

One company was on Bien Hoa Island, another occupied the west side of the strait. The rest were scattered through the naval base and Lee didn’t dare move them.

‘Sorry, Captain, I can’t send you any help.’

‘I figured!’ Captain Rossim replied. ‘I gotta go.’

Lee looked over at his signalman. ‘Raise Firebase Crete.’

‘Yes, sir.’

After a moment Captain Jones was on the line. In the background his machine guns hammered away at the Vietnamese, a never-ending cacophony of one second bursts.

‘The enemy is gathering at the foot of the hill. I have my mortars dropping bombs on him, but he’s coming and soon. Can I have an artillery barrage?’

‘Negative. They’re about to go in action in support of First Battalion.’

‘What about Roon?’

‘He’s still retaking the Scorpion laager.’

‘So what the hell am I supposed to do?’

‘Hold on until I can get you some help.’

‘Thanks a lot.’ In the background Lee heard shouting and the pace of MG fire pick up.

‘I have to go,’ Jones said tersely. ‘Crete out.’

Cam Ranh Bridge

Reports from the front were mixed. The New Zealanders had quickly and easily retaken Hill 184. Now they were delivering devastating fire to their front and to the regiment advancing along the beach. News there was better though, with several platoons overwhelming the New Zealanders’ line and breaking into the base. Vann was trying to reinforce them with the third battalion, but this was proving to be problematic. Most of the 7th Division’s lead regiment was bogged down before Hill 184.

Vann looked south. Several flares hung over the naval base. These only served to illuminate the pall of smoke that fogged over the entire position. Within the fog he saw countless muzzle flashes and the longer flashes of enemy MGs. A mortar bomb exploded within, then a volley from one of Vann’s own artillery batteries. He raised the regiment’s commander.

‘Report, Colonel Ti?’

‘General, I am pinned down in front of the enemy’s main line. At least two platoons are behind them though.’

‘Why are they not attacking the enemy’s main line?’

‘I ordered them to seize targets within the base.’

Vann growled. ‘This was a mistake, Colonel, as I am sure you can see now.’

‘Yes, General. Sorry, sir.’

‘There is no time for that,’ Vann replied.

‘General, it seems as if the New Zealanders have retaken the tank park.’

‘They have?’

‘Yes, sir. The platoon commander on the ground there is trying to regroup.’

Vann nodded.

‘Send him some help.’

‘We are trying to, General.’

‘What about the other platoon?’

‘It is scattered throughout the base. I can say for sure they are causing trouble and doing damage.’

‘I hope for your sake they make a difference.’

‘Yes, General. The platoon leader has established himself in a maintenance tunnel by the fuel tanks.’

‘What good does that do?’

‘When we break through, we will make our way there.’

‘I see. Press on.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Vann looked toward the battle again. We have to break through that line, he thought. ‘Send orders to the 7th Division,’ he ordered. *Maybe the tanks can force their way through.*

Cam Rahn Naval Base

A flare arced over the base. Connors watched, wondering from where it came. As he did so yet another volley of Vietnamese artillery came in.

‘There’s one!’ Gipp shouted.

Gipp raised his rifle. Connors saw a dark form running across the open ground. His silhouette showed a pith helmet and AK-47. Gipp fired a burst. Next to him, Sgt. Adams did the same. The figure stumbled to the ground, plowed into the sand and slid to a stop.

‘That bloke moving?’ asked Gipp.

‘Na.’

‘Let’s go.’

Connors led Gipp and Adams forward. Weapons at the ready, they crept over to the dead Vietnamese.

Connors looked around the base. Several small buildings were on their left, and a warehouse to the right. These were already occupied by NZ SAS.

‘Where did he come from?’ Connors asked.

Several AK-47s fired, but these were in the distance and answered by New Zealand rifles.

Adams pointed to a concrete stairwell that led underground. ‘What about over there?’

‘It’s just a stairway, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah but it leads somewhere.’

‘I think it’s for servicing underground fuel tanks,’ Connor said.

Indeed, in the flare light they could see the concrete bunkers housing the fuel tanks and a long concrete embrasure running along the length of the fuel tanks.

‘That must be where the bloke came from,’ Gipp said.

With the back of his hand Connors slapped Gipp’s arm. ‘C’mon, let’s go!’

Connors motioned for the two SAS men to fan out. Adams crept toward the left side of the stairway entrance while Gipp made for the right. Rifle at the ready, Connors cautiously walked forward till he was at the stairway’s concrete edge. Slowly he peered over and saw a Vietnamese soldier crouched there. He raised his AK-47 at Connors but Adams shot him down before he could fire. Someone opened the steel door to the tunnel, saw Connors, and shut it.

Connors jumped down into the stairwell and tried to open the door but it wouldn’t budge.

‘Gipp can you blow the door?’

‘Sure, Captain. If I had my explosives.’

‘Well go get them!’

‘Sorry, Captain. They’re back at the encampment, which the Vietnamese have.’

Connors cursed. Then the door opened a crack and out fell a hand grenade. ‘Oh fuck!’ Connors shouted as he bounded up the stairwell. He got to the top and dived to the ground as the grenade burst. A Vietnamese soldier popped out of the door, AK-47 at the ready. Standing in front of Connors, Adams fired a burst that slammed into the steel door. The Vietnamese retreated back inside.

‘You alright, Captain?’ Adams extended a hand.

Connors took Adams’ hand and said, ‘Yeah.’

He picked up his rifle and looked around. Then he hopped onto the concrete embrasure and looked down into the stairway. Adams saw he was standing on a grate. Adams shouted over at Connors who waved his hand and put a finger to his lips. Then he waved Adams over. In hushed tones he said, ‘They’re down there, listen….’

The two strained to listen.

‘Oy, what’s this all about?’ Gipp shouted.

‘Shut up!’ Connors shouted back. Then in a whisper, ‘Keep the door covered…’

‘Right.’

Several MGs went off in the distance.

Connors looked the grate over. ‘I think I can bash it in.’

Adams nodded.

They heard a lot of Vietnamese chatter down below.

Connors raised his rifle over his head. ‘Ready.’

Adams nodded.

Connors brought the rifle butt smashing down upon the grate once, then a second and then a third time, partially knocking it loose.

Adams said, ‘Good enough.’

As the Vietnamese inside scrambled, Adams stuck the muzzle of his shotgun between the grate and the concrete and fired. He pumped the shotgun and fired again and then again. Connors took a grenade off his belt and dropped it inside the tunnel. The two SAS men turned away from the grate as the grenade exploded. They heard screaming inside. Then Connors grabbed the hanging part of the grate and with all his might yanked it loose until it came completely away from the concrete.

‘Give me another grenade.’

Adams handed the captain a grenade, he pulled the pin and dropped it in. After it exploded Connors took his torch off his belt and shined inside.

‘Oh..uugh….’ he said as the beam flashed on the pile of flesh.

Adams peeked in and said, ‘One of ‘em is still moving….’

A Vietnamese lobbed a grenade up. It landed right between Connors and Adams. The two rolled over the concrete onto the ground as the grenade exploded.

The steel door flew open again and out came another grenade. Gipp hit the deck. The grenade exploded harmlessly. Gipp got up on one knee and fired as a Vietnamese staggered out of the tunnel. Then he jumped down into the stairway. Gipp got down on one knee and fired a long burst inside. Connors ran down, stood behind him and shined his torch down the tunnel, revealing several still living Vietnamese.

‘Fire! Fire!’ he shouted.

Gipp let rip his rifle again.

Connors threw another grenade in and then slammed the door. ‘Ok!’ he shouted. ‘Get everyone else and bring them here!’

‘Right, Captain!’ Adams shouted.

‘This is our spot. We’ll stand here!’

Firebase Crete

‘Yes, Provo-six,’ Jones said. ‘The Noggies are staying put in front of me. But they keep moving along the beach past my pos.’

‘Well can’t you fire on them?’ General Lee asked.

‘We’re hitting them with everything we have…’

Captain Jones heard the incoming volley and ducked.

One shell landed close enough to Dec and Tim’s foxhole to slam them to the floor. Dec shook himself off and asked, ‘You alright, mate?’

‘Yeah.’

Dec clawed his way to the lip of the trench and looked down the slope. He saw Vietnamese springing out of the brush and throwing themselves to the ground, AK-47s at the ready. Behind them another line of troops lingered in the brush.

‘They’re getting ready to come up again!’ Dec shouted.

Tim lay an ammo belt at his feet.

‘Forget that,’ Dec said. ‘Get your rifle.’

‘Sure.’

Tim picked up his rifle and chambered a round.

‘You ok?’

‘Yeah.’

A wall of lead came up the slope. Tim and Dec ducked behind their sandbags. Down below, someone blew a whistle and a great shout came up from the massed Vietnamese. Dec and Tim looked over the sandbags and saw dozens of Vietnamese charging toward them. Dec fired a long burst from the Mag-3. Up and down the line other MGs lashed the slope. Next to him, Tim looked on transfixed until Dec slapped him on the arm.

‘Fire, Tim!’

‘Oh! Right!’

Tim aimed his rifle down the slope and fired again and again, spraying bullets right, center and left. One after the other, the Vietnamese rushing up the slope fell, flew back and stumbled until the bodies began piling atop one another. The whistle blew again and the Vietnamese turned and ran back the way they came. Tim kept shooting but Dec put his hand on his shoulder and said, 'Save it, save it, I….'

On their left the two M-60s ripped. Tim tapped Dec's shoulder and pointed down the west side of the slope. 'More. Come on,' Dec said.

Dec unlimbered the MAG-3. Tim took the tripod and set it back down on the west end of the trench. Dec replaced the .30 caliber, levelled it at the oncoming Vietnamese and fired. As they fired, Captain Jones jumped into the trench.

'Jesus,' he said. 'They don't stop coming.'

Dec grunted.

'Let the others handle the slope.'

'Then where the hell do we fire?' Dec asked between bursts.

'Look for concentrations further back. Break them up, keep their heads down.'

'Ok,' Dec emptied the belt. Tim grabbed a new one and fed it into the Mag-3.

'Last one!' Tim shouted.

'I'll get you guys some more belts.'

Jones ran back to the ammo pit and got a trio of belts. He draped them over his shoulder and ran back over to Dec and Tim. 'Here!' he threw the belts into the trench.

Dec didn't turn from his gun. Tim took the belts and draped them around his neck.

'Hey Captain?' Dec said. He fired a long burst.

'Yeah?'

Bullets whizzed past Jones and he jumped down into the trench. Dec stopped firing and pointed.

'Ain't those tanks down there?'

Dec looked, 'Oh crap….'

While one platoon of T-55 tanks advanced in column toward the 1st Battalion down on the beach, a second advanced in line up the hill directly at

the heavy weapons company. As the tanks approached the hill, Jones frantically called in fire support, ‘Battery! Battery this Firebase Crete. Fire mission!’

‘Sorry, Crete no can do.’

‘What do you mean!’ he screamed.

‘We’re throwing everything in support of First Battalion.’

‘But the tanks!’

‘They got them over there too, you’ll have to wait.’

‘Ah fuck! They’re coming up the slope!’

Men rolled grenades down the slope toward the tanks for all the good it would do. Others fired their MGs. Jones shouted. ‘Hold your goddamn fire! It’s not going to do any good!’ As a tank drew near to his trench Jones dropped down to the dirt and put his arms around his head. With its machineguns ripping, the tank passed right over Jones, blocking out the flares above and sheathing him in total darkness. After the tank passed over Jones, he stood and saw Vietnamese soldiers running right toward him.

Over on the left, Dec and Tim dropped down to the ground. The approaching tank passed close by. Tim stood up just as a Vietnamese soldier dropped down into the trench. With no other weapon at hand Tim took one of the belts strung over his shoulder and whacked him in the face. Then Dec grabbed an ammo can and brought it down on his head. Tim picked up his rifle and fired at the oncoming Vietnamese.

While Dec and Tim were fighting for their lives, the T-55s stopped at the crest and saw the vulnerable base before them. They advanced down the slope and opened fire.

Down below, Roon was standing on the engine deck of his tank when the first shell hit. The force from the exploding Scorpion Tank knocked him off the engine deck and to the ground. Another explosion followed.

‘Bloody hell!’ Roon shouted as he clawed his way back to his feet. He climbed onto the tank and into the turret. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here!’

Another explosion rocked the tank.

Roon climbed into the tank and got in his seat, put on his helmet and keyed his mic, ‘A Squadron! A Squadron! Bug out!’ The tank rocked back on its sprockets from another blast.

‘Where to?’ his driver asked.

‘Anywhere! As long as it ain’t here!’

‘Righto!’

The driver backed the Scorpion up and then forward, taking them away from Firebase Crete. Other tankers followed Roon’s example and followed. The T-55s chased the Scorpions with fire as they went, sending several rounds after them.

‘Turn around!’ Roon shouted.

The driver brought the Scorpion around facing Firebase Crete.

‘Gunner!’

‘I see the tanks.’

‘Get a round up the spout!’

‘Up!’

Roon keyed his mic, ‘A Squadron! A Squadron. Form up on me and fire on the hill.’

A flurry of affirmatives came back. One by one the surviving tanks made their way over to Roon’s position and opened fire on the T-55s atop the hill. The Scorpions were rewarded with the sight of an exploding T-55.

Roon stood up in the cupola and looked around. ‘How many tanks do we have?’

He counted and then keyed his mic, ‘Report! All tanks report!’

Seven Scorpions were up and running. Roon counted four knocked out back at the laager.

Meanwhile, up on the firebase, Tim swung a shovel at a Vietnamese soldier and caught him in the neck. The blow, delivered by a young man made strong by a decade of hard farm work, severed the soldier’s jugular vein. He screamed, his blood spattering out all over Tim who screamed in return.

‘Fire your rifle!’ Dec shouted.

‘I’m out of ammo!

‘Well, then…Ah fuck. Look down there.’

Dec pointed west to the beach, where a column of T-55 tanks had breached the 1st Battalion’s lines and was heading right for the base.

HMNZS Waikato

Clad in life jackets and steel helmets, *Waikato’s* crew looked on grimly as the

battle raged ashore. Smoke and dust rose from the earth. Several fires raged on shore as did countless muzzle flashes, the sounds of battle, a constant symphony of small arms, machineguns, light and heavy artillery, all oddly out of sync with the flashes ashore.

Captain Nelson spoke into the receiver, ‘Hello Provo-Six, hello Provo-Six. This is *Waikato* .’

General Lee responded with the sounds of battle audible in the background. ‘Got you, *Waikato* .’

‘Look out to the bay, we’re just off your left.’

‘I see you.’

‘Provo-six, I make we are seventeen hundred yards off shore. We have two 4.5 millimeter guns ready to assist. Where do you want it?’

‘Frankly *Waikato* I can’t tell what’s happening.’

‘Oh, dear.’

‘Just find the enemy and drop rounds on him.’

‘Will do, Provo-Six.’

‘Tanks would be nice, *Waikato* ,’ said Lee. ‘I have to go.’

‘Can you give me approximate locations of your forces, Provo-Six?’

‘Sorry, *Waikato* . I have no idea. Provo-Six out.’

Nelson gave the receiver to the signalman. ‘Well that’s bloody helpful,’ he said

Nelson stepped out onto the wing where a sailor stood clad in life vest and steel helmet and holding an M-14 rifle from the ship’s armory. Several other sailors were so armed and on deck. Nelson raised his binoculars to his eyes and scanned the shore but saw little through the smoke and fog. After a frustrating few minutes he went down to the CiC and consulted with the gunnery officer.

‘Lt. Kyle I’m afraid we really can’t see much.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

He traced his finger along a map of Cam Ranh Bay. ‘Provo’s main line was here,’ he pointed to a green line running from Firebase Crete to the beach. ‘They’re definitely under heavy pressure there. I can see plenty of firing.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So let’s fire a volley in front of the main line and walk them back at fifty yard intervals.’

‘We’ll let them have it, sir.’

Nelson returned to the bridge. A minute later both the 4.5mm guns boomed. He watched with anticipation but saw no secondary blasts. The next volley screamed in and kicked up a fireball.

‘There you go,’ Nelson said.

When the third volley exploded, Nelson called the CiC, ‘Hold your fire!’

‘Aye, aye, Captain.’

‘I’ll call Provo-Six and get some guidance.’

‘Aye, aye.’

‘In the meantime, fire up the shoreline. We can at least interdict some of their reinforcements.’

‘Aye, aye, Captain.’

The two gun turrets swiveled up the shore line and fired…

Provo-6

General Lee put the receiver down in frustration.

‘I have no idea what’s happening,’ he said.

‘I think *Waikato* is scoring hits, sir and I…’

The officer talking was cut down by an AK-47 burst. He fell to the ground revealing a bunch of Vietnamese running right for the CP. Lee dove to the ground. Someone inside fired a pistol. Then one of the SAS men detailed to guard the CP opened fire. Lee actually saw two of the Vietnamese fly back from the impact of the rounds. The rest hit the ground and fired into the CP. Rounds slammed into the communications equipment.

‘Here, sir.’

Someone pushed a rifle into Lee’s hand. He took it, chambered a round, and pointed it at the Vietnamese. He took a soldier into his site and fired.

Someone tugged at his shoulder, ‘General, let’s get the hell out of here.’

Lee got up on one knee and led the rest of the men out of the CP. They ran into the open and jumped into a shell crater.

‘Where’s our radio?’

‘Shot up, sir.’

A group of Vietnamese ran into the CP. Lee and his men opened fire.

‘We have to find a radio!’

Lee looked north. On the right stood Firebase Crete. Fire lashed down from the base, down the slopes at the enemy. On the left was 1st Battalion. Its line breached and with some positions overrun, the battalion held on, lashing Vietnamese infantry with small arms and MG fire as they passed.

‘We can’t head north,’ Lee said. ‘We’ll never make it.’

‘Right, sir.’

He looked down to the beach and saw *Waikato* firing into the peninsula. That was no good either.

‘Let’s just fall back,’ Lee said. ‘We’ll find someone with a radio.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Let’s go.’

SAS

After securing the tunnel Connors gathered his disparate SAS men and deployed them along the embrasure. He had seventeen men in all, gathered from all parts of the base and carrying a polyglot array of equipment.

‘Is that a tank?’ Connors asked as he watched a T-55 move north across his field of vision.

Gipp replied, ‘It ain’t one of ours, sir.’

Off to the north, something exploded.

‘I think those are *Waikato’s* guns,’ Connors said.

The tank fired its main gun. They couldn’t see what he was aiming at. Then they saw Vietnamese soldiers coming up behind the tank.

Connors shouted, ‘Anyone grab any LAWs from camp?’

There was no response.

‘Anybody?’

Still silence.

Gipp reported, ‘There’s another tank, sir. And more Vietnamese.’

‘Fuck,’ Connors replied.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Gipp, you and Adams head back to camp and grab all the LAWs you can.’

‘Why us?’

‘Because you’re right next to me,’ was Connors’ reply. ‘Now move!’

‘Right, sir.’

In the twinkling flare light, Adams and Gipp made their way to the SAS camp a few hundred yards to the rear. They passed walking wounded headed to the aid station, shell-shocked soldiers wandering in a daze. When they got to the camp, Gipp said, ‘Now where the bloody hell did we store the LAWs?’

‘I dunno,’ Gipp said.

‘Well look around.’

‘The supply tent is over here.’

For several minutes the pair searched the supply tent until Adams said, ‘Found the crate!’

He stood at a wooden crate mark LAW. With his rifle butt he knocked the top off, revealing a half dozen LAWs inside. He reached in and grabbed one.

‘Leave it,’ Gipp said. ‘It’s just easier to carry the whole crate, both of us.’

‘Right.’

The SAS men each took an end and picked it up. Awkwardly they carried the crate out of the warehouse and back toward the tunnel embrasure.

‘Hey, Gipp,’ Adams said. ‘You think we’re winning this battle?’

‘Let’s see here….our lines are breached, our guys are stumbling around…we got tanks in our perimeter….’

When they got back to the tunnel Connors said, ‘What the hell took you two so long?’

‘Sorry, sir. Took a bit of time to find them,’ said Gipp

‘Right, sir.’

‘Someone’s coming!’

Gipp and Adams lowered their rifles at the approaching figures. They waved and shouted, ‘This is Provo-six! Provo-six!’

‘Bloody hell. That’s General Lee!’

Captain Connors stood up and waved his hands. ‘Over here, sir! Falcon here!’

Lee and his men ran over to the embrasure.

‘Good to see you, Captain.’

‘Wish I could say the same, sir. I suppose we lost the CP.’

Waikato’s two guns boomed.

‘That’s right. Let me have your radio.’

‘Right, sir.’

Lee took the receiver and called out on the brigade line. ‘This is Provo-Six. This is Provo-Six. All units report. First Battalion report.’

Lee waited but heard nothing.

‘First Battalion….’ He waited another moment. ‘Damn, their CP must be overrun.’

‘This is Firebase Crete.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘We’re under heavy pressure here, sir. The Noggies are everywhere. Their tanks rolled right over us. They’re at the bottom of the hill and I can’t do anything about them.’

‘Yes, we see them. Just hold on.’

‘No other choice, Provo-Six.’

Lee shook his head. ‘Where the hell is A-Squadron?’ He said. ‘Raise them!’

When Captain Roon got on the line, Lee said, ‘Roon, where are your tanks?’

‘I have seven. Those T-55s overrunning Firebase Crete got four of mine.’

‘What about the rest?’

‘No crew.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’re a few hundred yards east of our laager now. What do you want us to do?’

‘Hit those tanks and then move over and shore up First Battalion.’

‘Can do, Provo-Six.’

Lee signed off.

‘Hell of a CP I have.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Connors said. ‘What do you want us to do?’

Lee looked around. *Waikato’s* guns fired again.

‘We’ll hold this position for now.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It’s up to Roon and his tanks.’

Zulu Flight

Owens pushed away from the tanker.

‘X-Ray, thank you much,’ he said.

‘Our pleasure, Zulu Flight. Happy hunting.’

Owens formed up with Tompkins again.

‘ETA seventeen minutes,’ he said.

‘Copy.’

‘We’ll drop down to one thousand feet.’

‘Got it.’

‘Now if we can just make contact with Provo Brigade.’ Owens switched his frequency, ‘Provo Brigade, Provo Brigade this is Zulu-One. Please respond.’ He tried again and got nothing. ‘Tower, this is Zulu-Flight.’

‘Copy Zulu-Flight.’

‘Is there any word from Provo Brigade?’

‘Hold on, Zulu-Flight…’

Tompkins said, ‘Be nice to know what the hell we’re supposed to be bombing.’

‘Yeah.’

‘We’re fifteen minutes out…’

Clark Tower interrupted, ‘Zulu-Flight I’m sorry but we don’t know much.’

‘Thanks, Tower.’

They cruised on. Owens tried again. ‘Provo Brigade, this is Zulu Flight…’

The radio crackled, ‘Zulu Flight this is Provo-Six.’

‘Hah!’ Owens exclaimed.

‘What’s your ETA?’

‘Under fifteen minutes.’

‘Do you have area maps?’

‘Sorry, no, Provo-Six,’ Owens said. ‘I’m afraid you’re going to have to tell us where you want it.’

‘Alright, Zulu-Flight, give us a few minutes, we’ll call you back.’

‘Copy, Provo-six.’

As Owens and Tompkins waited, the sea passed below Zulu-Flight. The radio squawked again.

‘Zulu-Flight this is Clark Tower.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Be advised contacts to your north are friendly.’

‘Friendly?’

‘Yes, Zulu-Flight. Philippine transports bound for Haiphong…’

Firebase Crete

From their position, Dec and Tim had a great view of *Waikato* as she hammered the Vietnamese advance on 1st Battalion.

‘Nice to see the navy doing its bit.’

A pair of 4.5mm rounds exploded before 1st Battalion’s line.

‘Is it doing any good?’ Tim asked.

‘Sure it is.’

‘Do we even hold the line anymore?’

‘Sure,’ said Dec, and he pointed. ‘Look, those are our guys in that trench there. And there…’

‘I see.’

‘And look at them pour on the fire…Oh fuck!’ Dec shouted.

Tim looked down the slope and saw the T-55 coming up. Dec turned the MAG-3 to fire on the tank but Tim grabbed him. ‘What’s the point?’

‘Well what the fuck do you want me to do then?!’

Tim grabbed Dec and threw him to the floor of their trench. ‘Get down!’

The T-55 continued up the slope and then crested. Its hulk blocked out the flare light and shrouded both soldiers in darkness. They screamed as the tank rolled over their trench, clutching each other as they expected to be crushed. Instead the tank passed harmlessly over them and continued across Firebase Crete.

‘Look,’ Tim said. ‘It’s turning.’

Indeed the tank was swinging about and coming back around.

‘It’s coming right back for us!’

The T-55’s MG ripped, sending both to the floor of the trench.

Captain Jones was at the mortar pit when the tank came up the slope. As he watched it turn, he said to one of the mortar men, ‘Can you put a round on

it?’

‘Won’t do no good. These are frag.’

‘Ahhhh fuck!’ he punched the dirt in frustration. ‘He’s going to squash those two.’

‘Sorry, Captain.’

Enraged now, Jones pushed the mortarman out of his way and grabbed one of the shells. Then he got up and ran toward the tank and followed along, waiting for his chance. Then Jones took the shell and jammed it into the left tread. The shell exploded earlier than he thought. It took off a pair of sprockets and Jones’ left arm as well. Jones fell to his knees, blood gushing from his sundered stump. The tank turned helplessly, like a turtle on its shell.

‘Holy fuck!’ the mortarman shouted. He grabbed his rifle and ran toward Captain Jones. A Vietnamese jumped out of the hatch and onto the engine deck, followed by another. The mortarman raised his rifle and sprayed the tank with fire, shooting both of the Vietnamese off the engine deck. He knelt by the Captain, who continued to spray blood everywhere.

‘Oh crap! Oh crap!’

The mortarman lay the captain on the ground and took his belt off. He wrapped it around the stump and tightened the belt as much as he could. With the bleeding stopped he said. ‘Stay here!’

The mortarman climbed up on the tank and onto the turret. He jammed his rifle into the hatch and emptied his magazine inside. Then he laughed.

From his trench Dec asked, ‘What the fuck is so funny?!’

The mortarman replied, ‘Like he could go anywhere.’

‘Huh?’

‘Oh shut the fuck up,’ he said, ‘Look!’

The mortarman pointed down the slope where one of the T-55s now burned. Three New Zealand Scorpion tanks advanced past the wreck. In unison they fired at another T-55 and blew a hole through the turret.

Dec shouted, ‘Finally some goddamn help!’

Riding in the lead tank, Roon looked forward and in the flare light saw another tank. He identified the tank and took the range and then ordered everyone to target it. A trio of 76mm shells stopped the T-55 dead. Another tank came out from behind the first. Roon fired another shell but this ran high and glanced off the turret. The T-55 brought its turret around and fired, but missed. The tank backed up but exploded from two direct hits.

‘That’s our line up ahead,’ Roon said. ‘We’ll deploy right along it.’

Roon grabbed his rifle and climbed out of the tank. He waved for his own Scorpion to stay put and then motioned for the next in line to follow him. Roon trotted forward shouting, ‘Hold fire, hold fire! New Zealanders on your six!’

From one trench a Kiwi soldier waved.

‘Bloody glad to see you!’

‘I got seven tanks! Roon shouted. He looked back and waved and pointed. ‘Right here! Right here!’ he shouted.

The Scorpion tank pulled up behind the trench. Roon waved for the next tank to follow him. He trotted further down the trench line until he found an MG pit.

‘Holy fuck!’ a Kiwi gunner shouted. ‘Finally got our own tanks do we?!’

‘That’s right!’ Just then a Scorpion tank fired its main gun. ‘And we ain’t going anywhere!’

Cam Ranh Bay

The sky was on the verge of turning from nighttime black to morning gray. What the burgeoning light revealed was not good. Against all attacks, the New Zealanders atop Hill 184 had held firm. The armored breakthrough on the beach had petered out and then been turned back by the New Zealanders’ own tanks. Now his two battered divisions were arrayed opposite the New Zealanders’ line. From that line they maintained a steady stream of fire and showed no sign of giving ground. In the bay a New Zealand destroyer fired on both the peninsula and the shore.

That ship’s forward gun kept the Cam Ranh Bridge under fire, pumping rounds into an approaching convoy and preventing them from crossing. Vann actually saw New Zealand sailors on deck spraying the bridge with MG fire. Vietnamese artillery failed to score any hits on the ship. A tank platoon came forward and brought it under fire, but lost two tanks to the ship’s guns before withdrawing. Even now they smoldered on the west bank. Two others lay idle at the top of Hill 184.

Vann trained his binoculars on Hill 184. Several guns flashed and

blinked. The sound of their staccato fire reached him several seconds later. This was now the key. Before the hill, two infantry columns approached. These were the 12th Division's last reserves. With as much fire support as the division could muster, artillery and machineguns, they'd stormed the hill. It wasn't much but it was all Vann had left. As he watched, a puff of smoke emanated from the hill. It was white but quickly turned red and billowed into the sky.

'What's that?' he asked out loud.

Then Vann heard jet engines.

Above Cam Ranh, Owens looked forward and said, 'Roger Provo-Six I see the red smoke.'

In his CP General Lee said, 'Put it down a hundred yards forward of that smoke. That's where the Noggies are.'

'Copy. Coming in now,' Owens said. 'Alright Tompkins. I'll lead the way, you come in on my left.'

'Copy.'

At a thousand feet the red smoke loomed. Owens flew through it and then toggled his bomb switch, releasing their Mk 82 bombs. A second later Tompkins flew through the smoke and did the same. The bombs fell in a

staggered pattern over two hundred square yards.

Atop Hill 184 Dec and Tim had a ring-side seat. As fireballs arched into the air, Dec muttered, 'Jaysus.'

'Yeah,' Tim replied.

'I think they put them right on top of the Noggies.'

'Yeah.'

'I wouldn't want to be any of them buggers.'

'No.'

'I almost feel bad for the blokes.'

'Not me,' Tim said. He picked up his blood-soaked shovel and held it in defiance. 'Come back up, you gook bastards!' he shouted over the explosions. 'I'll brain you!'

'Easy there, Tim, my boy.'

Dec put his hands on Tim's shoulder and tried to bring him back into the trench but Tim resisted.

Captain Jones ran over and lay on his stomach next to the trench. 'That

got them!’ he declared. He looked over at Tim, his face twisted in a growl. ‘Knock it off, Tim. We’ve won!’

EPILOGUE

Jenkins said, ‘I wonder if this is what the European battlefields look like?’
‘Couldn’t say, sir.’

Jenkins put his binoculars to his eyes and scanned the ground before him. In the background lay the city of Haiphong. In front of that was open ground. This was littered with smashed Vietnamese vehicles; smoldering tanks, burning tanks, overturned trucks and what looked to be hundreds of bodies. Fortunately the wind was coming off the Gulf of Tonkin this morning and sparing the men of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment the stench of death.

‘Heck of a fight, sir, wasn’t it?’

‘Yep.’

Indeed it was. A concentrated Vietnamese mechanized counterattack, the Australians and Fijians holding firm, deluging the battlefield with HE rounds and wire guided missiles, wave after wave of F-111s and Skyhawks hammering the Vietnamese. It made for a horrific field of death.

‘I wonder how the Yanks and Brits do it?’

‘Do what, sir?’

Jenkins pointed to the sea of destruction before them. ‘This. Every day.’

‘I couldn’t say, sir.’

‘Every damn day.’

‘Think we’ll do it again today, sir?’

Jenkins looked behind him. His A Squadron, less two Leopards, was arrayed along the River Road. Behind it were B and C Squadrons. To the right, 1st Armoured Regiment was arrayed in columns as well. Behind them was the 3rd Australian Infantry Brigade and the Gurkha Brigade. Further back on the beach a pair of ancient American-made Second World War landing ships disgorged even more troops.

‘Not sure how I feel about those guys,’ he said nodding toward the column of bush hat clad Filipino marines marching up the road.

Jenkins shrugged. ‘Who knows? They’re just place holders.’

‘Hope so, sir. I really doubt they can fight on our flank.’

Jenkins looked over to Haiphong. ‘Hopefully we won’t need them.’

Above and behind they heard a pair of jet engines. As they grew louder Jenkins said, ‘Sounds like F-111s.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The Skyhawks flew missions almost hourly, usually in pairs. They were closer after all with *Melbourne* just a few miles away. The Aardvarks came in waves.

‘Just a pair of Skyhawks, sir.’

They flew low over the battlefield and left 500 pound dumb bombs in their wake. The bombs exploded. One fireball mushroomed into the sky.

‘I guess they hit something, eh?’

‘Yes, sir, why I….’

Before he finished, they heard another pair of jet engines. ‘What are those?’

‘I don’t think I recognize them.’

‘They ain’t A-4s or F-111s.’

‘Hornets?’

‘Naaa…’

Not until the jets were overhead did they realize. ‘Those are F-5s, sir.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive sir.’

‘Well, who the hell do they belong to?’

‘Philippines, sir.’

‘Christ, they are serious then.’

Cam Ranh, Vietnam

The sunrise revealed a grim scene.

Waikato maintained her position in the bay. Occasionally she fired a few rounds at the Cam Ranh bridge. Out in the Gulf, *Wellington* patrolled against Vietnamese ships, but there was no sign of them. Overhead a pair of F-16s out of Singapore flew CAP against the PLAAF. Again there was no indication that the Vietnamese intended to challenge them. General Lee

walked 2nd Battalion's trench line. Within the trenches lay or sat soldiers exhausted from a night's fighting. Here and there small fires or butane-fueled hot stoves heated meals. The lips of the trenches brimmed with rifles and machineguns. If Charlie came back he would suffer once more.

The captain had taken over the battalion after Gipson was killed. 'Good to see you this morning, sir,' he said.

'Likewise, Captain,' Lee said. 'My compliments on your handling of the battalion.'

'I don't think I really did very much, General. It was our men who took back the trench,' he replied. 'Oh, and Roon's tanks.'

'Yes, they did a job on the Noggies, didn't they?'

Lee nodded to the T-62 tank lying dormant about a hundred yards away. It was slumped down on one tread, its cannon hung limply from the turret.

'Still, under your leadership the men didn't run but stayed in the trenches. Bravo!'

'Thank you, General.'

From 2nd Battalion's line, he walked up Hill 184 to Firebase Crete. Here the heavy weapons company rested. Several men sat against one of the two burned out Vietnamese tanks, smoking, eating or napping. Beside them were a line of body bags. He tried not to count but couldn't help himself. Fourteen, Lee realized. That made for one hundred and two dead from the 1st Provisional Brigade. Lee wasn't even counting the wounded yet, but experience from Vietnam, Malaya and Borneo led him to expect that number would double the dead. He looked to the north at the scorched battlefield. Actually, one hundred dead out of a brigade of nearly fifteen hundred men wasn't that bad, all things considered. He knew there were NATO units in Europe that lost half their strength in the first few hours of the war. No one back home would see it that way, though. Right, Lee thought, this is a disaster for New Zealand.

Lee walked back to his CP, reclaimed from the Vietnamese a few hours earlier. A pair of enemy bodies lay outside. Inside his signalman said, 'General, Singapore was calling for you.'

'Was it General Grey?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well, raise him.'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘In the meantime somebody find a flag pole and get the Blue Ensign up.’

Across the battlefield General Vann saw the Blue Ensign go up over Cam Ranh Naval base.

‘We could bring up reserves and try a daylight assault, sir.’

Vann shook his head. ‘No.’

‘But, sir, we have elements of two divisions coming down from Nha Trang now.’

General Vann looked to the sky where he heard enemy jet engines. ‘No. They would just be interdicted by enemy air and depleted before they even reached the front.’

‘If you say so, sir.’

‘A daytime attack would result in the futile loss of life.’

Vann peered through his binoculars and focused on the Blue Ensign again.

‘Damn.’

Haiphong, Beach Red, Vietnam

General Grey rubbed his eyes. He’d been up all night listening to the various battles over the radio and alternating phone calls with General Bosch in Haiphong, Minister Beazley in Australia. Bomber Beazley had dramatically moved his office to Darwin, to be closer to the action, he explained to the media and was no doubt already planning a triumphant battlefield tour. Grey determined to beat Beazley there. In the morning he’d taken a US Air Force VIP jet to Clark. From there he’d taken an American Blackhawk out to *Melbourne* and finally another chopper to the recently liberated Haiphong airport. He had dozed on that flight.

General Bosch greeted him on the tarmac. He saluted and said, ‘We’d better get out of here, sir! The enemy has the strip under observation and they like to lob a shell or two at it.’

‘Right.’

Crouched over, the two generals ran over to a jeep which took them off the tarmac and back to Bosch’s temporary CP just outside of Phuong Trang

Cat. They passed a convoy of trucks bringing ammunition forward. Several columns of troops marched northwest toward the battle line. When they got to Phuong Trang Cat, they saw a tent city above which flew the Filipino flag.

'How are they working out?' Grey asked as they got out of the jeep.

'We aren't asking them to do much, frankly. But so far, so good.'

'They are here to garrison, thereby freeing up your troops for a move on Haiphong.'

'Right, sir.'

They got to the CP entrance. Grey held open the flap for Bosch to walk in.

'And to scare the Vietnamese.'

'Yes, sir.'

The two generals sat on fold-out camping chairs. They looked at a map of the area.

'Alright, General Grey, you should know that the Defence Minister is going to come here within the next day or so. I need to know what the situation here is.'

'I suppose he wants us to advance into Haiphong.'

'He hasn't said so yet.'

'Will Hawke stop him?'

'I don't know. Howard is all for it, as you can imagine.'

'Really not suprising, is it, sir?'

'Can you take Haiphong?'

'Sir, I have an armored brigade, two Australian infantry brigades, the Gurkhas, the Fijians, and now Filipino troops to hold the rear area.'

'In an emergency you can get more Filipinos.'

'Their Scout Regiment?'

'Sorry, no. With the approval of President Aquino, I've sent them to reinforce the Kiwis.'

'OK.'

'Now, would you try to take Haiphong, General?'

Bosch thought for a moment and chose his words carefully. 'Well, General Grey, when we went into Khu Dan Cu the Vietnamese were waiting for us.'

'Uh huh.'

'And they fought like devils. Took us a couple of tries, sir.'

Grey rubbed his chin, ‘So the price was steep.’

‘Both to us…’

‘I’ll need a casualty list.’

‘We’ll get it for you, sir,’ Bosch nodded to his chief of staff who sent a few junior officers looking for the numbers. ‘We had to do a lot of damage to the town as well.’

‘And you had to clear it out.’

‘House to house, General.’

Grey pursed his lips in thought. ‘I feel like the Americans fighting the Japs.’

‘I think that is an apt analogy, sir.’

‘If they put up this kind of fight for a small town, what will they go through for Haiphong?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Grey leaned back and sighed. ‘I’ll tell Beazley to forget it.’

Canberra, Australia

Beazley said, ‘So I’m afraid, Prime Minister, General Grey is adamant that a further advance against Haiphong is a bad idea.’

Hawke put his cigar to his mouth and nodded. ‘Very well, what does he want to do?’

‘Wait’

‘Wait for what exactly?’ asked an annoyed John Howard.

‘For negotiations to begin. Then we demand the demilitarization of Hong Kong.’

‘Good play,’ said the foreign minister. ‘Might I suggest an international peace-keeping force?’

Hawke nodded. ‘Yes, good.

Paul Keating watched. With the success of Operation Boomerang Shot and Beazley’s rise in the media and the public’s esteem, he had only one piece of ground on which to stake his flag. He did so now. ‘Are you so eager to continue the war, John?’

Howard shot daggers at Keating. ‘So that’s your play, is it?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Anti-war candidate.’

‘Oh please, John,’ Keating said.

Hawke looked on in amusement.

‘Right now,’ Keating said, ‘all the talk out of Hanoi is bellicose.’

‘Is it now?’ asked Howard.

Keating ignored the opposition leader, ‘Prime Minister, Hanoi is talking about national resistance. They say they are fortifying every town, every street.’

Hawke nodded. ‘What do you think, Kim?’

The Defence Minister sipped his drink and said, ‘General Grey, when I spoke with him, was particularly concerned with the prospect of urban fighting. The 1st Brigade already fought a battle in the town of Phuong Trang Cat.’

‘This is my concern as well, Prime Minister,’ said Keating. ‘Now I know Kim here likes his bombers and tanks….’

‘Oh bugger off, Paul,’ Beazley said.

‘Both of you,’ the Prime Minister said as if he were admonishing his own children.

Keating said, ‘We are going to see a considerable outcry here over the casualties we’ve taken.’

‘It’s a bloody war!’ If they were sitting at a table, Howard would have pounded it.

Keating went on, ‘And I don’t even want to think about what Prime Minister Palmer is going to face once his government releases the casualty list.’

Beazley nodded. Most likely Prime Minister Palmer would have to resign.

‘There’s little more we can accomplish, right Kim?’ Keating insisted.

Kim nodded and said, ‘Not unless we mount a national effort similar to the war.’

Keating said, ‘We are *not* going to do that.’

‘No,’ added Hawke. ‘So, what is our next move?’

‘As I said,’ Keating began, ‘right now Hanoi is screaming about national resistance. We have to get them to agree to a ceasefire.’

‘They started the damn thing!’ Howard said. ‘It’s their own damn fault.’

‘I admit this is true,’ Keating said. ‘But now we have to get them to stop.’

Trying to regain some of the traction he had gotten over the last weeks, Beazley said, ‘And we have certainly smashed their ability to make any more trouble.’

Hawke nodded in agreement. ‘So what do you want to do?’

‘We must,’ said Keating, ‘find someone who can get the Vietnamese to see reason. Perhaps someone with whom they’ve dealt with before…’

New York City

Nixon was approaching the house. Pat waited at the door and shouted, ‘Richard!’

‘What is it that can’t wait till I come in the door?’

‘Jim Baker is on the phone.’

As the president approached, Pat reached behind her and handed her husband a glass of water. He took it gratefully and downed the entire glass. ‘Three miles, today.’

‘Don’t keep Jim waiting.’

‘What the hell does he want?’ Nixon grumbled as he stepped inside. ‘He calls during a time like this…’ Nixon walked over to the phone and picked it up. ‘Hello?’

‘Dick?’

‘Is that really you James?’

‘It is, Dick. How are you?’

‘I should be asking you that, James.’

‘I’m a lot older, Dick.’

‘I wish there was something I could do to help,’ Nixon said, dropping a hint.

‘Well, as a matter of fact, Dick, there is.’

Nixon’s heart leapt a little bit.

‘I’ll do anything I can, Jim. You want me to open a dialogue with the Russians. I still know people in their government…’

‘Hold on, Dick. We want you to talk, but not with the Soviets. Frankly, it’s long past time talking with the Soviets.’

‘It is, I think that’s a mistake and…’

‘Dick. There’s no time for any of that. We’re hitting them soon, and hard, with everything we have.’

‘What does that mean, Jim?’

‘You’ll see, Dick.’

‘…Ok, Jim.’

‘But the president does want and need you.’

‘I’ll do anything he asks.’

‘Good. He wants you to hop a plane for Canberra for consultations with Prime Minister Hawke.’

‘OK.’

‘Then on to Hanoi for direct negotiations.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, the president wants the Vietnamese to see reason, and he thinks you’re the man to make them see it…’

Anderson Air Force Base, Guam

Colonel Heath looked at the order.

‘This can’t be right,’ he said.

‘This memo is fresh from the Group Commander.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘Call up General Parker if you like.’

‘I will.’

Heath picked up the phone and called Parker’s office. ‘Ah, Colonel Heath.’

‘What is this order, sir?’

‘It’s self-explanatory. I don’t understand why you are calling.’

‘But this payload…’

‘Is self-explanatory.’

‘Nuclear weapons?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s the target?’

‘The Soviet Union.’