

CHAPTER 2

“Good morning America! Hello to all you Comm-Rad 1 fans out there. You just heard a traditional favorite of all us Italian Americans, “Volare” by Dean Martin. Before that we played the greatest pop song of all time, “Be My Baby” by the Ronettes. Dig that wall of sound! Coming up next we’ve got a very special musical treat, possibly the greatest singer of the 20th century. This one is dedicated to our Glorious Leader General George McLellan. Here we go... the immortal Frank Sinatra from 1965 singing “Strangers in the Night.” Enjoy ...Benevolent General...grandfather of the American People... enjoy ...”

The General slumbered in his quarters but the song-*that* song began to rouse him. Images from a distant time almost a century ago flashed through his mind. They weren't distinct memories, more like still photos and impressions really (after all he was only two years old in 1965). He did remember sitting in between his parents in the front seat of the black 1963 Lincoln Continental. He still had old tattered photos of the car. George's father, an executive with the Hell Cat Aircraft Company, loved the Lincoln, keeping it until 1969 when he traded it in on a brand new Buick Electra 225. Listening to the music McClellan's thoughts continued to drift back to that day in 1965, sitting beside his vibrant father and striking blonde haired beauty of a mother. He could recall Sinatra playing on the radio, his old man turning up the volume, both adults looking at each other and laughing. Little Georgie McLellan also started to laugh the way a child will when they don't necessarily understand why Mom and Dad are so happy but just because they feel the love and security from parents who love each other. The image of daddy grinning at him, taking a strong hand and mussing his hair remained vividly etched into his memory. The General luxuriated in a state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, thinking of those far off childhood recollections of a time and place long ago departed. “I hope you're proud dad...proud of what I've done...of ...who I am...” he muttered as he slowly fell back into unconsciousness, numb to the cares of his other reality, the world of an old man he sometimes didn't recognize when he looked in the mirror.

Captain Alan Haig and Sergeant Danny Trumbel scanned the holographic imaging for heat signatures from potential insurgents as they guided the Daimler down I-75. Their sensors picked up a few possible hostiles as they passed piles of rubble. Unfortunately the scanner didn't work too well through solid objects, making it difficult to assess the threat level.

In the Special Forces, operatives enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy when planning missions. Even so, Colonel Baldwin bluntly told Haig that he was “a nutcase” when the Captain insisted on using the Daimler for a ground retrieval. Haig told his superior he thought a stealthy ground operation stood more chance of success as reports said the insurgents were shooting the hell out of any aircraft sent over Detroit. Haig didn't relish the thought of landing at all major hospitals in Detroit and having every idiot with an old AK-47 take pot shots at them as they searched for their target. If they knew Edwards exact location, then it would be a simple matter of getting in and out before the radicals knew what happened. Besides, the Daimler, although looking on the outside like some clapped out old junker, boasted more advanced technology than most Air Force fighters. All of that high tech stuff was all well and good but the most important feature from Haig's always practical viewpoint had to be the lightweight composite armor supposedly capable of withstanding an anti-tank round. Supposedly being the key word.

Finally the two of them reached a compromise. Colonel Baldwin agreed to allow Haig and

Trumbell attempt a ground entry into Detroit, but once they found the Navy pilot have a heavy lift VTOL evacuate them and the car by air. Haig, usually too independent for his own good, reluctantly agreed... only because he respected Colonel Baldwin as an Intel Commander.

As they motored down the freeway, Haig wondered to himself again for at least the hundredth time why the powers to be wanted this guy so damn bad.

Suddenly, the intangible thoughts of “why” they found themselves on the mission quickly became secondary to the much more pertinent “how” not to die. A radical on the roadway ahead of them had fired off a shoulder launched King Stinger V missile. In the first second after the weapons launch, the auto’s defensive systems sensed the threat and took action. Searching its Supernet database for the schematics of all missiles made in the last one hundred years, the vehicles Artificial Intelligence CPU sent an electronic signal that detonated the Stinger about twenty-five meters from the Daimler. Even though it wasn’t a direct hit, the enormous explosive power of the warhead (roughly equivalent to a 20th century cruise missile) stopped their auto like it slammed into a brick wall. The blast, while taxing the structural integrity of the car, did not harm the occupants or any vital components thanks to its highly advanced battle armor. Although uninjured, the almost instantaneous deceleration stunned Haig and Trumbell.

After they recovered their senses, Haig inched the Daimler forward. Everything seemed to work okay as they drove over a red smudge of human blood and tissue on the road surface. It was all that remained of their attacker after the vehicles autodef system fired a self-directed ten second burst from concealed fifty caliber twin Gatling guns.

Haig felt relief when the expected second detonation never came. The militia member apparently worked alone rather than being part of a larger ambushing team.

Trumbell prepared their weapons and gear for an immediate exit in case the Daimler became incapacitated but they encountered no further problems for the next five kilometers.

One of the Daimlers alarms began chirping, alerting them to a roadblock and concentration of approximately fifty anarchists blocking their path a few hundred meters ahead. Small arms fire started pinging off of the Daimlers armor. Haig pulled off onto the first available exit, giving them a bit of limited protection from direct attack.

Even if the cars twin fifties could easily destroy the force manning the barricade, Haig’s years of battle experience made him willing to bet that there were probably more missiles ready to be launched at them. Too many being fired at the same time could overwhelm their vehicles defensive countermeasures, which left them with only one alternative: Call in the cavalry.

Haig, like all operatives, remained under standing orders to only use standard mental communication techniques with the Government Issue NSA/CIA telepaths to call for help but he knew that would not work today. Too much adrenaline now pumped through his body for him to relax enough to be able to transmit effectively. That left only voice or text communication which although scrambled could possibly be intercepted by the enemy. Haig hesitated only briefly before muttering, “Screw it” and activating the military S.O.S voice channel.

“Wildcat one calling Eagle one,” he said, feeling stupid using the somewhat hokey sounding call signals.

The calm Midwestern sounding female voice responded almost immediately.

“Hello Wildcat one, this is Eagle. How may we help you?”

“I have a rat at DT54-38 requiring nontoxic extermination,” said Haig, his response giving the location of the problem and requesting a non-nuclear solution.

“Roger, rat zapper on the way. You have yourself a nice day now,” said the Air Force control officer as she signed off.

Within one minute the low rumble of U.S Air Force F-22s mushroomed into a thunder that shook the Daimler as two jets flew over at low altitude and launched their air strike. The radicals attempt to scatter came too late as a fireball engulfed their position.

“Right on!” Trumbell shouted, shaking his fist in the air as the magnesium/hydrogen fueled explosion consumed everything blocking their path.

It took ten minutes for the blast area to cool down enough for them to proceed with unnecessary caution, scattered piles of ashes being the only tangible reminder of the militia members and their roadblock. As Haig had hoped, the rebel forces avoided making any more attacks and they made good progress, soon approaching the first hospital on their route: The Ford Medical Centre.

Haig and Trumbell had been briefed on possible conditions at a large hospital in a “dead city” like Detroit, but nothing could have prepared them for what awaited them after they parked the Daimler and approached the front entrance. Rotting corpses littered the formerly well-manicured lawn and sidewalks near the doorway, obviously overflow patients from the inundated medical center. As they entered the lobby area with weapons drawn, the smell of death became overwhelming even for battle-hardened veterans like the two Special Forces troopers. Emergency power globes cast a ghostly light on a sickening, horrific scene. Their weapons were unnecessary as only the dead and dying occupied this area, a few of the still living crying out for help that would never come. If Edwards had the misfortune to be among these people then they were already too late.

The troopers proceeded towards the operating theatres and ICU, now stuffed full of desperately ill patients. They questioned the few harried medical professionals remaining on site, showing the holo-pic of Edwards but no one could remember anyone matching his description.

It took the rest of that day to do a somewhat thorough check of the patients, as well as the assorted squatters, scavengers and cannibals who now populated the hospital but they did not find Commander Edwards. As the very dangerous night hours now approached Haig and Trumbell found a secure area in a now unused maintenance room to bed down on some old mattresses for the night. Not ideal but safer than possibly needing to fight their way from the exit back to the vehicle. They didn’t worry about the Daimler parked outside, knowing any fool stupid enough to go near it would be electrocuted, burned, shot or a combination of all three by the cars shielding systems.

After a restive night of taking turns on watch, the two Special Forces soldiers went out to continue on their journey to the next hospital. Sure enough, several bodies lay lifeless near the car, foolish thieves unsuccessful at their attempt to steal the average looking but lethal old Benz.

As they pulled onto the cratered remains of the M-10 towards I-94, a few sniper bullets bounced off the composite armor but Haig and Trumbell paid little attention, being more preoccupied with the huge plumes of smoke rising from uncontrolled fires in downtown Detroit.

The immediate vicinity of the next stop on the route, the Hutzel Hospital didn’t look to be too badly damaged, seemingly unaffected by the violence affecting most of the city. Nearing the hospital parking lot they again saw corpses near the front entrance although far fewer than at Ford Medical Center. The dead were stacked neatly as though waiting for disposal. Haig and Trumbell glanced at each other as they exited the car and drew their weapons. Being professional soldiers, both silently knew a semblance of order at this hospital could either be a good thing or a very, very bad thing. The people here might have a security force or even National Guard remnants protecting them from looters. Semi confident that any remaining security would have enough courtesy to ask questions before opening fire, Haig decided the only thing to be done was

to boldly proceed into the building. Of course being bold might also lead to some major gunplay and a lot of people dying. After all, they were undercover on this mission and looked like any other rag tag refugees except perhaps for their unmistakable professional military bearing. Only one way to find out for sure...

"Freeze! Drop your weapons now!" someone screamed as they entered the semi darkness of the lobby.

"Hold on buddy. Let's talk about this," said Haig, attempting to buy some time until his eyes adjusted and he could see what they were up against. He shook his head at his own stupidity. Damn rookie mistake not wearing night vision gear.

"I said...drop your weapons!" the unknown voice screamed out, this time even more vehemently.

Haig began to make out the man behind the voice and assessed the threat level: African American male, mid-thirties wearing a hospital security guard uniform and aiming an ancient AR-15 at them. The man came across as an unprofessional in the business of killing. Not a serious threat. Under normal circumstances Haig would have eliminated such a nuisance like the guard without a moment's hesitation. Something this time however told him he should try and reason with this man. His assistance could save them some much-needed time.

"My name is Haig. Captain Haig. This is Sergeant Trumbell. We're United States Special Forces Troopers... we need... your help."

The man's forceful reply snapped back at Haig. "You expect me to believe that white boy? If that's true then why the hell aint you wearin' uniforms?"

"Were undercover," said the trooper, looking directly into the guard's eyes. "Would you wear an army uniform out there?"

"Even if you is army, give me one good reason why I shouldn't plug you right now. The government and army left us on our own and people is dyin'. I don't owes you nothin' man!" spat the security guard.

If nothing else, thought Haig, this guy had courage.

"Look, I can help you. You need medical supplies and troops to protect this place? I can supply you with whatever you need-just name it," said the Captain, lying convincingly enough to fool anyone who didn't know him well.

"Now I'm going to slowly reach into my shirt pocket to get my holo-ID and gently... very gently toss it over to you."

So far so good thought Haig as the security guard bent and picked up the ID and then carefully activated it, examining the holographic picture while trying at the same time to keep a close eye on the two troopers.

Obviously somewhat convinced by the holo-image but still wary, the security guard simply asked, "What you want?"

Haig smiled. "Before I explain could you please stop aiming your weapon at me? You probably don't need any more patients. Am I right? Officer..."

"Johnson. Sean Johnson," the officer said as he lowered the weapon. "I just hope you weren't lyin' about all those promises you made."

"Do I look like I would lie to you Officer Johnson? No wait. Don't answer that," said Haig, grinning. "Seriously though, we do need your help finding someone." The smile disappeared as he turned on and then handed over the small holo-likeness of Commander Edwards. "Have you seen this man?"

As soon as Officer Johnson looked at the image Haig knew immediately by the look on his

face that the answer was a “yes.” Even though the security guards expression continued to be obvious, he still made a determined attempt to protect the man. “Sorry. Never seen this dude before.” He pressed the off button and passed the holo-imager back.

Okay, thought Haig, time to stop this game. “I know you’ve seen this man so stop lying to protect him. All I can tell you is our orders are not to harm him, just to keep him safe. If you bring us to Edwards right now, nobody will get hurt. Now...if you don’t cooperate with us...we’ll start shooting the living shit out of this hospital and everyone in it until we do find him and a lot of innocent people are going to die...starting with you. Nothing personal, just part of the job. You have five seconds to make your decision. Five, Four...”

Johnson just glanced back and forth at the two troopers, assessing his chances. He may have been a brave man but he wasn’t a fool. He simply said, “Follow me,” turned around and began walking down the hall. Haig and Trumbell followed weapons at the ready.

As they walked toward the surgical inpatient ward, Haig realized that their initial assessment about the hospital had been correct: in spite of the chaos reigning in greater Detroit, things remained very organized here. They barely noticed any smell of decay and although stretchers and beds crowded the halls, the patients occupying them seemed to be receiving a measure of care from an assortment of nurses, orderlies and people in civilian clothing. Some gave Haig and Trumbell curious stares but because of Officer Johnson no one challenged their presence, at least not until they neared the operating rooms.

A surgeon, his surgical gown soaked with blood, pushed through the swinging doors and immediately stopped when he noticed Johnson and the two shabbily dressed men approaching with weapons drawn. “Johnson! You know the rules. No civilians are allowed in this area-I don’t give a shit if they have guns or not. Get them the hell out of here!”

Haig was impressed, the doctor had chutzpah. He might even regret having to kill Doc if he became too much of an annoyance.

“Sorry Dr. Malvo,” said Officer Johnson. “These dudes are U.S. Army Special Forces. They’s uh... lookin’ for Mistah Edwards. Thought I’d let you talk to ‘em. Maybe you can explain how important Rance is around here. Him and his friends that is.”

Dr. Malvo gave them a cold appraising stare. “U.S. Army eh? Well you listen here. I want you to get on the comm with your boss. I don’t care if you have to talk to General McLellan himself. We desperately need medical supplies, equipment and doctors. I’ve been using surgical techniques that have been unknown for at least the last fifty years. Now do something damn it! There are probably a hundred patients that will die by tomorrow unless we get...”

Haig stopped the tirade by raising his H&K 45 and pointing the laser sight directly at the surgeon’s forehead. “No Doctor, you need to listen to me. General McLellan has declared Detroit a Dead City. That means no further resources will be wasted on saving people who are already under a death sentence. There’s absolutely nothing I, or anyone else for that matter, can do about it. Since that little delusion is now over I’d appreciate your assistance in the urgent matter at hand. Bring me to Edwards. If you don’t, we’ll begin executing your precious patients.”

“Just a minute,” said Dr. Malvo. “Rance Edwards and his friends are about the only thing holding this hellhole together. I know you’re most likely under orders to kill him because he’s a Christian. Look, I can understand that. I used to feel the same way about them myself but my opinion has completely changed in the past month. These are genuinely good people who are sacrificing their lives to help us.” Malvo paused to wipe the sweat away from his forehead. “I also think a lot of the propaganda we’ve been fed about Christians is pure bullshit. The point is I need Rance here. You can shoot me if you want but I won’t tell you where he is.”

Haig didn't say anything. He just nodded to Trumbell who walked down the hall to a stretcher holding the nearest patient, a middle aged man who appeared to be in a comatose state. The Sergeant calmly pressed the barrel of his .44 caliber handgun directly against the man's temple and pulled the trigger, the deafening explosion blowing a large spray of blood and brain tissue against the wall.

A few screams punctuated the silence that followed.

Haig pointed his weapon at Johnson's head. "Don't ... try it!" Bringing his attention back to the surgeon, he said "Okay Doc. It's totally up to you. Should I tell the good sergeant here to whack another patient or are you going to have Officer Johnson show us where your little buddy Rance Edwards is?"

If looks could kill, the glare that Dr. Malvo gave Haig would have caused an instant coronary. Never taking his eyes off the Captain he replied, "Do what he asks Officer." Johnson didn't say anything but infinite sadness clouded his face as he proceeded towards the stairwell area with Haig and Trumbell following. The surgeon, knowing his compliance had probably condemned a good man to death, watched them leave and then went back into the operating theatre to continue the now seemingly futile business of saving lives.

The Troopers went to the third floor with Johnson into what in better days once housed the holistic healing department. The Officer poked his head into several open doorways, inquiring about Edwards.

Finally they found someone who remembered seeing him, directing them to one of the patient rooms. As they entered, Haig noticed that the space originally intended for a single person now held six individuals. "Inside Out" by Eve 6 played softly in the background. His attention focused on one of the beds where a man, his back turned to them, seemed to be providing care to a patient. The caregiver looked trim but solidly built, approximately 6'3", wearing a plain white cotton shirt and denim blue jeans. Even without seeing his face, Haig knew they had found their quarry. He just needed to confirm the obvious ... "Mr. Rance Edwards? Or should I say Commander Edwards?"

Edwards slowly turned towards them, showing the left side of his face first. Haig stared at the former Navy pilot, momentarily speechless. This man did have charisma, a leadership presence that his average looking holo-pic did not begin to hint at. The fierce blue eyes locked onto his as if to say, "Yes and who the hell are you?" Haig managed to break his gaze away in order to examine the rest of the features of this commanding man. Three jagged scars from the war injury ran down the left side of his once almost too handsome face, which although disfiguring for anyone else, only added a more distinguished, martial quality to Edwards. The darkly tanned skin hinted at his interesting ancestry, the brown hair beginning to gray much too early for a man still in his early thirties. Haig, himself an expert at assessing threats knew he had already been evaluated and then dismissed as insignificant by another professional when Edwards turned his back to continue caring for the patient.

It took Haig a few seconds to decide how best to approach the problem of persuading Edwards to willingly come along with them. Getting his agreement would certainly be much easier than forcing him to come along against his will. Although knowing they could do it the hard way if they had no other option, he also sensed that Edwards, known to be a master of Wing Chun Kung Fu was not a man to be trifled with and would be quite dangerous when cornered. Haig decided to try the good old loyalty and duty ploy.

"Commander Edwards, I have orders to bring you safely to a location near Grand Rapids Michigan where you will then be transferred to the custody of General Singh, Commander of the

23rd Air Strike Wing. Your immediate reactivation into the United States Military is to follow. I cannot provide any further information except to tell you that this is a matter of extreme national importance.”

Edwards didn't stop helping the patient, but did respond. “What I'm doing now is also a matter of extreme importance.”

“Commander, I am delivering a direct order from High Command, possibly from General McLellan himself. I know you'd prefer to not leave your father here but it can't be helped. We will give you time to say your goodbyes. Now if you would-“

“My father is dead,” interrupted Edwards, turning around to face Haig. “He died two weeks ago. I decided to stay on and help my fellow Christians provide care to the sick. I'm sure you're well aware that I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. Correct?”

Haig gave a nod in the affirmative before Edwards continued. “Since I'm a believer, my decision to accept or decline these orders you're delivering must be based on the Word of God. Now, if my reactivation into the military depends on a chip implantation, you need to be aware that I'll never have this procedure done. Scripture makes it very clear that this implant is the mark of the Beast that Christians can't accept under any circumstances. Philippians tells us that ‘to live is Christ and to die is gain’ so I'd gladly accept death before receiving this mark, which symbolizes worship of the Beast. We also recognize World Leader Lanza as being this Beast or Antichrist foretold by the Book of Revelation.”

Edwards paused, trying to think the matter through before continuing. “This poses an interesting question: If I accept these orders am I then a follower of the Antichrist since the United States is now a satellite member of Lanza's Global Community?” Edwards sounded like an intellectually superior professor making a subtle point to a slightly dim-witted theology class, not surprising since his profile indicated he had an IQ of 142.

“Some may argue that it would. However, if what you've said is true and General George McLellan himself might be the one issuing my orders, then I really need to give this careful consideration. I met McLellan after the war. To my knowledge the old man isn't a believer, and I haven't agreed with many of his policies, but he's definitely an independent man of strong convictions as well as the leader of my country.”

Rance paused, glancing upwards, as if he was waiting for divine direction before continuing.

“To avoid any action that might be contrary to God's will, the answer to important decisions should always be found in the Bible. Since Romans states that ‘Everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities’ I'll go with you willingly on one condition: there will be no persecution of the other Christians that remain here.” Rance flashed a boyish grin. “I think you probably know I could make your life just a touch difficult if you reject my terms.”

Haig was more than willing to make that minor concession. After all, everyone remaining in Detroit most likely faced a death sentence anyway. “You have my word. We won't report finding any other...cult members at this location. As for the implantation, that will be up to you to discuss with High Command. Time is a definite factor though, so if you can quickly say your goodbyes I'll arrange for immediate transport.”

Fifteen minutes later they boarded an Air Force VTOL, the nervous pilot wasting no time getting out of the Detroit area before some rebels surface to air missile brought them down in a flaming mass of wreckage.

They made the flight without any mishaps and soon landed at General Singh's temporary headquarters outside of Grand Rapids Michigan. Edwards then found himself in the care of six burly Air Force Security Specialists who brusquely shoved him into a briefing room for an

“information session” with Singh.

Thankful the mission was over, Captain Haig and Sergeant Trumbull proceeded to the base bar where they promptly got drunk, smoked some good Jamaican ganja cigars and forgot all about that damn Christian war hero.