

Chapter 3

“This is Doctor Luv here on Comm-Rad 1 talkin’ to all you luvahs listenin’ out there. You just heard “What Is Life” by George Harrison and some “Aqualung” from Jethro Tull. Sometime in the next hour I’m gonna play you “Wild World” from Cat Stevens but up next I’ve got one of the greatest luv songs of all time, a tune that also happens to be a favorite of the Great General. From the dynamic duo of Burt Bacharach and Hal David...”The Look of Love”...Comm-Rad 1 Your Luv Channel...”

The General never forgot that mid-December day in 1970. He remembered going to LAX with his parents and three year old sister where they boarded a humungous new Boeing 747. The McLellan family awaited departure on their long anticipated family vacation to Hawaii. As they found their seats a stewardess bent down very close to him and smiled, asking his parents the name of this handsome young man sitting next to them. He remembered the smell of this beautiful ladies perfume, looking into her eyes, noticing the dark clumped mascara on her eyelashes. The Bacharach song “The Look of Love” played faintly over the planes sound system. She disappeared to another part of the plane after winking at him, George’s mother making an idle comment to his dad about how Pan Am hired very friendly stewardesses. A mere trivial moment for them - his folks would never know the importance their young son placed on this casual contact, how all of his interpersonal relationships with females were vividly, psychically imprinted by that brief connection. Now he recognized his three failed marriages, many mistresses, and countless casual liaisons with women as nothing more than tragically doomed attempts to capture emotions experienced so briefly during that vaporous long vanished instant. Memories were a funny thing. He remembered this experience from ninety-three years ago better than he could recall what he had for dinner yesterday...

Rance Edwards sat alone in the sparsely decorated conference room in General Singh’s temporary headquarters. The solidly built brick building used to contain Federal Government offices at some point, judging by the old framed photographs of General McLellan and former President Ronald Reagan that hung on one wall. Reagan’s image often bedecked Government bureaus since McLellan regarded the man as a super patriot, underappreciated during his own era.

Rance thought about the possible reasons why he found himself here awaiting reactivation into the military. Various scenarios ran through his head but none of them made any real sense. The powers to be obviously knew of his Christian faith, apparently willing to overlook that glaring truth if they now wanted him back in the Armed Forces so bad.

It all made him very curious indeed. People of his faith had become the most hated group of all time, hunted and exterminated at every opportunity as well as being the scapegoat for most of the world’s problems. Even though the General sometimes gave nominal lip service to preserving the rights of all citizens, including Christians, his treatment of this minority group was almost as savage as that practiced in the rest of the Community of Nations under World Leader Antonio Lanza. Believers could count on imprisonment as a near certainty with brutal torture and interrogation of detainees being very common. Even so, executions were not automatic as in Europe where Christians found themselves sent to thinly veiled extermination factories the New BBC and other European propaganda agencies referred to as “re-education camps.” Most people

knew the truth about what happened to the missing, but since the practice mainly affected a despised hate group called Christians, no one really lost too much sleep over it. Besides, as Lanza's propaganda machine constantly drilled into the population, if the cult members simply ceased their senseless and stubborn resistance to world peace there would be no need to detain them for their own protection. In Europe, actually most of the world, anyone alleged to be a member of this "repulsive organization" immediately found themselves held for questioning by the ruthless security forces. Following interrogation by the political officer, if any suspicion still existed the prisoner might be a Christian or even merely sympathetic to this group, they were given three chances to renounce their "God" Jesus Christ and to pledge allegiance to the True God Antonio Lanza. As an additional act of loyalty, the suspect also needed to provide the names of at least three other people who might be Christians. If the three opportunities to accept True Salvation were rejected and the detainee still insisted on allegiance to their outmoded, pagan Deity, they would immediately be sent to the camps. The State used some inmates as forced labor but most usually faced an immediate death penalty. Those killed could be considered lucky as the Government worked slaves to near death before finally guillotining the worn out human husks when no longer of any use to the World Community. Rance feared that with the United States now a member of Lanza's empire, believers here would also share this gruesome fate.

As bad as things sometimes became under General McClellan's independent rule at least the old dictator did not play favorites. Yes, Christians were persecuted, but no more than any other group perceived as "radical" and a possible threat to the ultra-paranoid American regime.

The authorities detained Rance on two occasions, with his history as a former war hero not earning him any favors. During the last incarceration a dozen sadistic prison guards attacked him with batons. After taking out six of his attackers, he then received an even more severe beating for daring to fight back, suffering a concussion, a bruised kidney and cracked ribs. Rance never learned why he found himself being released after only a few days, both times unceremoniously getting dumped in a back alley. He suspected the reason had something to do with someone higher up the chain of command learning about his war record and not wanting a potential "embarrassment" incarcerated in their interment center. Most of the fellow members of his home Church had also been arrested.

Then came his father's illness, Errol Edwards's being diagnosed with a form of aggressive mutated carcinoma, unable to get treatment because he did not have a chip. For three months the cancer continued to ravage his body, until Rance heard a rumor that some big city hospitals now gave ineligible people basic medical treatment and may be able to help.

After a dangerous journey from Lansing to Detroit, Rance eventually found the Hutzel hospital and compassionate care for his father. Unfortunately, because of the late delay in receiving appropriate treatment, doctors diagnosed the elder Edwards normally curable malignancy as being too far advanced to treat effectively. Now facing an imminent demise and feeling unsure where his eternal soul would go upon death, he allowed his son to lead him through the Sinners Prayer. With Rance's gentle guidance, his father thanked the Savior for dying on the cross for his sins and then invited Jesus Christ to come into his heart, accepting Him as his personal Lord and Savior. Errol Edwards died of his illness less than two months later. Rance thanked God for the assurance found in God's Word that he would meet him again and also for the doctors and nurses at the Hutzel for making his dad's last days as comfortable as possible. The environment could not exactly have been considered friendly towards Christians but the administration made a fair and determined effort to help everyone they could regardless of beliefs. Rance and a few fellow believers began helping the overwhelmed staff during the

desperate days leading up to Detroit being declared a “Dead City.” As word of the Christian presence at the hospital spread throughout Detroit, Hutzel became an oasis of peace as more people sharing the Faith began to find their way to the building. Because of the heroic efforts expended by the Christians in helping to keep the Health Center open, they earned the grudging respect of most staff and patients. Rance had been fully prepared to stay and to die if necessary helping these people wholeheartedly as the Apostle Paul spoke of in Ephesians 6:7.

Then, totally unexpectedly the Lord God demonstrated His enigmatic omnipotence by taking him from that situation and putting him here, facing what he knew not. Because of that uncertainty weighing upon him he decided to do the only thing he could do under the circumstances: he prayed.

Right there in the conference room he knelt down in communion with his God. He could not have cared one little bit if General Singh came into the room at that very moment or if surveillance techs happened to be monitoring him (which they most likely were). Rance only knew he needed to submit all his cares to a much higher authority than a mere worldly General.

“Lord, I come to you in prayer. Dear God, I pray that your Kingdom comes quickly before any more lives are lost on this evil world. I ask you for strength and wisdom to discern your purpose in all things. I don’t know your reasons for bringing me here, but I do know you remain firmly in control of everything and everyone. As King David said in the 40th Psalm, I desire to do your will and ask that your love and your truth always protect me. I submit myself to you Lord. I ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ... Amen.”

General Rajinder Singh came into the room a few minutes after Rance had finished his prayer. Surprisingly, for such an important officer, he was alone without any security or even an aide. Even though not yet officially back in the military, Rance stood to attention and saluted. Singh did not bother returning the salute, snapping a quick “At ease!” and sitting heavily in one of the conference chairs.

They just sat there a few moments, studying each other across the table. Although Rance had never met Rajinder Singh, sometimes affectionately called “Raj” by his subordinates, he knew a few things about the celebrated Commander of the 22nd Air Strike Wing. The mustachioed, distinguished looking General Singh came from a famous Sikh family with a long history of illustrious service in the Indian Army. Young Rajinder immigrated to the United States early in the 21st century with his military engineer father and biologist mother. After scraping through West Point, he turned his back on the long family tradition of serving in the army and transferred to the US Air Force where the rest as they say is history. He proved to be one of General McClellan’s ablest and most loyal officers, qualities of great importance during the recent “troubles.”

The fierce fighting in Detroit had decimated the Second Army with Lieutenant General Jackson and his staff officers being killed by a stolen battlefield size nuclear weapon. Because of these catastrophic losses, various Army and National Guard remnants became part of Singh’s US Air Force command (in the chaotic American Military of 2063, the line between the different services often became quite blurred anyway). These combat ravaged fragments, ranging from platoon to battalion size as well as some armored units, were now getting reorganized into Division strength and prepared for what appeared to be the next theatre of operations against the anarchist forces: Chicago.

The Sikh-American General looked exhausted, the leathery wrinkled face and emaciated body reminding Rance of his father’s appearance just before he died.

General Singh’s voice sounded weary as he began speaking with a distinctive upper crust Indo

American accent.

“Welcome Commander Edwards. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’m well aware of your exploits during the war – at least someone taught those bloody European bastards a lesson they won’t soon forget. I know you’re probably curious as to why you’ve been brought here. I’ll try and explain what I can, although even I too am limited about what my orders allow me to tell you. First of all, your reactivation: Effective immediately you are conscripted back into the Military of the United States of America with a rank of Brigadier General. Yes, I agree. That is an unusual rank for a former Navy officer but let’s just say it certainly wasn’t my decision.”

Rance tried to make sense out of these somewhat baffling orders being conveyed by General Singh. His promotion to Brigadier General rather than the corresponding Navy rank of Rear Admiral pointed to the involvement of a person with a rather bizarre way of doing things: General George McLellan.

Singh coughed a few times before continuing. “I’m also aware of your peculiar taste in religion, but don’t worry. I have no orders to force you to get a chip. It may surprise you to know that most senior U.S military commanders do not have them implanted either... anyway; you are to be immediately brought by an F-22 trainer to Peterson Air Force Base. You will then be transported by an X-36 shuttle to...to an orbital platform where you will be given further instructions. Those are all of your official orders,” said Singh as he focused his gaze on Rance. “Now, off the record I wanted to ask you something. What do you know about the Optimus Project?”

Rance didn’t answer immediately. Although it had been almost two years since he left the Navy, even then there were numerous theories about Optimus and speculation, sometimes quite fanciful about what it may be. The ready room on board the USS *Washington* always bred various wild rumors but as far as Rance could tell these contained very little hard fact.

“Just the usual gossip sir. Truthfully, I have absolutely no idea what Optimus is.”

General Singh paused as if carefully searching for the words that he could or possibly should say next. “Son, all I can tell you is this. You are about to become one of the few individuals on Earth who is ever going to find out exactly what the word Optimus means. In some ways I envy you - in other ways I pity you.”

General Singh had a faraway look in his eyes as he got up from the table and left the conference room, leaving Rance alone to try and make sense of it all.

Within a few minutes the security team hustled Rance out to the landing pad where a VTOL transport sat, warmed up and waiting to transfer him to Selfridge, a Michigan Air National Guard base. The crew of the aircraft as well as the men escorting him meant business, not saying one word to Rance on the short flight. His efforts to make small talk were met only with polite smiles and nods. Rance didn’t take it personally however. He knew to them he was only a very important piece of meat they were under orders to escort safely to the Air National Guard base. The team’s responsibility for his safety would then be transferred to someone else and they could breathe a huge sigh of relief. Allowing Rance to be killed probably meant their sure deaths, as a mission failure, especially in an operation protecting a VIP was not looked upon very sympathetically in the U.S military.

If they were, God forbid shot down by a radical missile on this flight and crash landed in hostile territory, Rance knew the men entrusted with his safety would without any hesitation sacrifice their own lives to protect him. That may have been one of the main reasons why the tense looks on all of Air Force Security Team members noticeably eased as they safely landed at Selfridge.

The former backwoods Air National Guard base now bustled with U.S Air Force activity, having become the main air support hub in anti-radical militia efforts in the Michigan region. The familiar rumble of F-22's landing and taking off assaulted Rance's ears as the security team brought him to one of the Air Force buildings, transferring his custody to a waiting U.S.A.F General.

Even though Base Commander Michael Maltin outranked his guest, the tanned and silver haired Air Force General and his staff received Rance like a conquering hero. He enjoyed Cuban Salsa music, (a tribute to another famous ancestor), refreshments and a delicious meal all the while being peppered with questions about his legendary exploits in the Euro-American war. Rance, as always remained humble. He explained how possible divine intervention, not to mention the known superiority of his F-22 over the European Dassault-Dornier Omega fighter, played a major role in being able to shoot down the ten opposition fighters.

After goodbyes and handshakes all around, General Maltin introduced him to Lieutenant Colonel John Williams. Almost unknown to the general public, this heroic pilot shot down three European fighters over the Persian Gulf on the last day of the Euro-American War. Williams, who with his blonde crew cut and all American good looks could have been in an old Air Force recruiting poster, would be piloting the F-22 trainer bringing him to Peterson Air Force base. Rance sat in the trainee seat, a place he hadn't occupied since he was finishing his pilot's training in the Navy.

"Sorry General Edwards," said Williams through the intercom as he and Rance readied themselves for takeoff. "I know you would have loved to fly this baby but General Maltin felt it would be better if I took the controls since you haven't flown in a while."

"That's okay Colonel," said Rance as he went through his checklist. "You won't be getting any complaints from me. My last flight was...slightly...eventful. I don't know what your beliefs are Williams but if you don't mind, I'd like to say a little prayer before takeoff."

Somewhat taken aback, Lieutenant Colonel Williams paused before saying; "You go right ahead Sir. First though, I just wanted to say what an honor it's been to meet you and have the privilege of flying you to your destination."

Rance appreciated the pilot's sincerity. "The pleasure is all mine Colonel. Now the prayer:"

"Dear Heavenly Father, we come to You in prayer and ask for Your protection on this flight. Please watch over us and protect us – if it be Your will Lord. As the psalmist wrote in Psalm 46:1, God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. So, Lord we again ask for Your will to be done and we give thanks. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, our High Priest... Amen."

Rance thought he heard a muffled "Amen" from Williams as the pilot pushed the throttle and taxied the F-22 trainer to its assigned take off spot. A familiar exhilaration hit Rance in the gut as the sudden G-forces of takeoff pushed him back in his seat. He hadn't been in an F-22 since that fateful day over Northern Germany when he bailed out and almost died.

Rance thought about how significantly that event altered his life. Battered and bleeding to death, he didn't even remember his discovery by a German army unit whose medical officers heroic efforts kept him alive until stable enough to be medevac'd to the Hamburg military hospital. He spent the next month going through numerous surgeries to repair his massive internal injuries. That time of pain and trauma brought on some serious soul searching about his life and its lack of meaning. Before this Rance always thought he had it all; a fulfilling Navy career, beautiful fiancée, loving family, but suddenly because of his near death experience, everything once important now seemed insignificant. He never thought much about God or

where a person goes after death but the long forgotten words of a Christian television show Rance viewed as a child kept popping back into his head. Something about a “personal relationship” with Jesus Christ being the only way to salvation and true fulfillment. It made no sense at all. The media depicted Christians as a despised hate group that no one took seriously but something kept pushing him to know more, to find “the truth.”

After being sent back to the United States to the Hero’s Welcome publicity stunt prepared for him, the hypocrisy of his so called fulfilling existence became overwhelming. He needed to take some time away, to drop out of his present life to continue his search for true meaning. Rance remembered the rainy November day when he spoke to his beautiful fiancée Christine at the local Coffee Haus. With “Hate Me” by Blue October playing from their tables Sensusound system, Rance explained his decision. He managed to tell Christine he didn’t think it would be fair for them to marry, dragging her through the embarrassment of the very public multi media circus sure to follow. He couldn’t erase horrible memories of the tears, the stunned look in his true love’s eyes, the profound hurt that he could sense when she asked what on Earth could possibly make him throw everything away. He couldn’t answer because at that point he didn’t know the answer himself. He just kept saying, “I’m sorry” as she shook her head, bitterly screamed, “You dirty bastard! I hate you!” and ran crying from the cafe. It was the last time he had ever seen her.

Rance embarked on an interesting but unfulfilling spiritual quest for a few months, studying various Eastern Religions until an anonymous note on his doorstep left cryptic instructions for him to sit on a park bench at a certain time “If he wanted to hear the Truth.”

The following day he waited on that bench and met “Pastor Randy” a preacher at an underground house church.

Two days later, at that humble little place of worship Rance’s search ended with him becoming a Christian, accepting Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. The two subsequent arrests, persecution and beatings were a small price to pay in comparison to the priceless gift of Salvation. Soon after that last incarceration his father was diagnosed with cancer, changing everything and leading to the uncertain situation where Rance presently found himself.

Williams spoke through the ships intercom; interrupting the painful and rambling thoughts. “Were approaching Peterson Sir. ETA five minutes.”

After a smooth landing, Lieutenant Colonel Williams enthusiastically shook his hand before Rance transferred to the protection of Captain Johnny Rickenbacker, pilot of the X36 shuttle *District of Columbia* scheduled to take him to his next destination. The longhaired, unshaven pilot’s interpretation of the military dress code was definitely rather casual since he covered his flabby body in khaki shorts and a stained Led Zeppelin T-shirt.

As they boarded the District of Columbia, Rickenbacker explained the features of the North American X-36 and how aviation experts considered it a direct descendant of the ancient X-15 rocket plane from the mid-20th century. “The main differences are the extended, widened cabin accommodating two crew members, four passengers and some cargo space and the fact that we take off from the ground with the assistance of rocket boosters instead of getting launched from a B-52 like the old X-15. Otherwise, this is still the cheapest, most efficient way to get into space. Not necessarily the safest, but what the hell. You can’t have everything.”

Rance couldn’t help but register surprise that only the two of them were on board. “Do you usually take off without a co-pilot?” he asked.

Rickenbacker rolled his eyes and pointed to the co-pilot seat. “Uh...dude... That would be YOU. Now strap yerself in so we can get this show on the road. Don’t worry buddy. This old

crate can practically fly herself.”

Rance grinned as he adjusted the seating position and tightened his seat straps. “You’re quite a character you know that?”

Rickenbacker convulsed in a laughing fit. “Look who’s talkin’? I get stuck with a punk ass war hero who’s a certified Christian no less. That’s rich. Next thing I know yer gonna be askin’ me if ya can say yer prayers before we take off!”

Now it was Rance’s turn to laugh. “Well actually...”

After Rance finished his prayer for protection the shuttle pilot completed the checklist, taxied to the end of their assigned runway and waited for takeoff approval from the tower. Rance sensed something must be wrong after fifteen minutes passed with no word from the air controller.

Finally Captain Rickenbacker decided he could wait no longer as sitting in a fully fueled X-36 shuttle containing thousands of gallons of highly explosive alcohol and liquid oxygen was comparable to sitting on an armed hydrogen bomb. He sent a signal: “Control this is X-36 asking for takeoff approval, over.”

After a few more seconds of silence they finally got a response. “X-36 this is control. We have a ...situation here.” The voice of the controller seemed high-pitched and cracking under obviously intense stress. “Radicals... attacking the tower and on runway. Waiting for ground forces to stabilize situation. Stand by for further instructions.” The controller kept the mike keyed and they could hear gunshots and yelling in the background. Someone closer screamed out “Please don’t kill me. I beg you... don’t do...” a gunshot reverberated just before the signal went dead.

Rickenbacker looked out the front glass of the X-36, observing guerrilla militia members on the runway ahead running towards them and the muzzle flashes from their weapons. The pilot shouted out a string of colorful expletives as he triggered the launch sequence controls. “Hang on!” he managed to say as the solid fuel booster rockets erupted in a controlled explosion of millions of pounds of thrust, hurtling them down the runway and immediately incinerating any attackers caught in the blast zone.

It wasn’t until they reached an altitude of 100,000 meters and prepared to drop the booster rockets that Rickenbacker could relax enough to glance over and say anything to Rance. “Full diagnostics completed. No sign of damage from small arms fire and all systems on line and functioning properly. Which is a really, really good thing because had we experienced any serious problems we might’ve been forced to use the emergency crew return system – the only problem is that about half the crews who’ve used it operationally burned up in re-entry. We were damned lucky.”

“I prefer to think of it as a little more than luck my friend,” said Rance, looking very composed.

Rickenbacker didn’t say anything as he dropped the burned up solid fuel boosters, setting the sequence controls for their primary rocket engine to fire and take them the rest of the way into orbit.

When they were at an altitude of approximately 400,000 meters, the pilot questioned Rance. “I wanted to ask you man, have you ever been in orbit before, I mean not just as a tourist but as a member of the military? I guess what I’m askin’ is do you have any idea where the hell yer about to go?”

Rance although very curious about the purpose of the questioning remained outwardly indifferent. “No. Never been in orbit either as a tourist or in the Navy. Singh told me I was

going to an orbital station. That's all I know. Now, what do *you* know that you're not telling me?"

Rickenbacker snickered at the question and Rance's apparent ignorance. "Don't worry pal. I'm not going to ruin the surprise. I always like to see the expression on the faces of first timers."

The Captain just smiled when Rance tried to get him to explain himself. "You'll find out soon enough," he said and left it at that.

A short time later Rickenbacker asked Rance if he was able to see anything unusual through the thick front glass of the X-36. Looking forward he began to make out an object, almost completely dark, outlined against the stars. At first Rance speculated that they were approaching their destination, the orbital station. Something didn't seem right however. Although having no reference points in space in order to determine dimensions, the object in front of them seemed huge. Then the X-36 went underneath it, the dark mass above them appearing to go on for what looked like many kilometers. Protuberances jutted out in places, reminding Rance of the twin gun stations he remembered from the USS *Washington*. Dim blue lights emanated from some areas casting an ethereal glow. As Rance observed, he got the distinct impression that the blackness seemed to narrow as they went meaning the ship, if that's what it was, must be triangular in shape. For what felt like an endless period of time, the District of Columbia traveled under the black void until finally they passed it and viewed the brightness of stars once again. The pilot started a slow loop so that they were soon headed directly back at the mysterious, light absorbing apparition. Rance already felt something akin to stunned amazement so it took a few seconds for his thought processes to register what he now gaped at. Along this strange anomalies side, in bright contrast to its shadowy mass were vividly emblazoned huge white letters reflecting the suns unfiltered and burning brightness:

USS HORNET CVS 1

This wasn't any mere "orbital station." The brute, alien majesty of the thing could easily lend plausibility to a mistaken assumption that it might have originated from another galaxy, crafted by another race, were it not for the very familiar human characters inscribed on it. No, only human beings could have done this, an elegant combination of sideshow vulgarity and beauty beyond all comprehension, overflowing with the creative genius and haughtiness needed to conceive of let alone build such a monstrosity.

Suddenly many things became apparent to Rance, everything now made sense. Obviously most of the capital of the once great United States of America had been poured into such a massive project for decades while countless Americans lost their lives due to civil unrest and lack of adequate resources. Clearly, what happened down below on Earth wasn't important to General McLellan when compared to the wealth and talents it must have taken to build this, this spacecraft? Spaceship? Starship? Rance didn't even know the correct terminology for something so wildly outside of his past experience and understanding. Manned orbital travel, in addition to the regular manned moon and mars missions had long been common place, but comparing this "thing" to those still relatively crude hydrogen/oxygen powered space vehicles smacked of comparing the Wright flyer to a modern F-22 fighter. Without a doubt the creator of this craft intended it for a far greater purpose than some short jaunt in our own solar system. Although feeling disgust at the sickening misuse of the God given prosperity his nation once possessed, Rance still found that he could not take his eyes off of the spellbinding technological achievement that they now quickly approached.

Rickenbacker, looking over at his astonished companion said simply, "Welcome to Optimus pal."

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Optimus 4 Sources and Notes

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