

There were just too many Cuban troops at Silo One. The two SuperCobras assigned there expended their Hellfire missiles on the tanks and trucks, then scoured the area with 20-MM cannon shells. Between them the assault choppers fired 1,500 rounds of 20-MM. As the first two assault choppers headed back to Key West for fuel and ammo, Battlestar Control aboard United States routed other SuperCobras to the site. They began flaying the area with a vengeance. The problem was that the troops were fairly well dug in. Almost a thousand men had arrived in the area early that morning under an energetic young commander who had ordered trenches dug and machine guns emplaced in earth and log fortifications. Two small bulldozers helped with the digging.

The machine-gun nests were gone now, victims of Hellfire missiles, but the troops in trenches were harder to kill. Fortunately for the Cubans, the trenches were not straight, but zigged and zagged around trees and stones and natural obstacles.

The young commander was dead now, killed by a single cannon shell that had torn his head off when he'd tried to look over the lip of a trench to find the SuperCobras. Most of his officers were also dead. Two of the SuperCobras had been shot down, one by machine-gun fire and the other by a trooper with an AK-47, who had managed to kill the pilot with a shot in the neck. The first chopper managed to autorotate down, and the crew jumped from their machine into an empty trench. With a dead man at the controls, the second machine flew straight into the ground.

The SuperCobras on site were almost out of ammo, and they were too low on fuel to fly the width of the Florida Strait. Accordingly, Jake Grafton ordered the crews to remain engaged and use their weapons sparingly. He also diverted all the SuperCobras with ammo remaining into the area.

The noise of eight assault choppers hovering around the battlefield that centered on the barn did the trick. One by one, the Cubans threw down their weapons and climbed out of their trenches with their hands over their heads.

Several of the SuperCobras turned on their landing lights and hovered over the barn, turning this way and that so that their lights shone over the men living and dead that littered the ground.

Minutes later an Osprey landed just a hundred feet from the entrance to the barn. Toad Tarkington was the first man out. When that V-22 had emptied its troops, it lifted off and another settled into the same spot. Marines with rifles at the ready came pouring out.

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With his engines running and the canopy closed, Major Carlos Corrado taxied his MiG-29 toward the runway at Cienfuegos. Two men walked ahead of the fighter with brooms, sweeping shrapnel and rocks off the concrete so the fighter's tires would not be cut. They weren't worried about this stuff going in the intakes: on the ground the MiG-29's engines breathed through blow-down panels on top of the fuselage, while the main intakes remained closed.

Inside the fighter Corrado was watching his electronic warning equipment. As he suspected, the Americans had a bunch of radars aloft tonight, everything from large search radars to fighter radars. He immediately recognized the radar signature of the F-14 Tomcat, which he had seen just a week or so ago out over the Caribbean.

Yep, they were up there, and as soon as the wheels came up, they would be trying to kill him.

A man only dies once, Corrado reflected. The Church doesn't make very much of that fact, but it can be a comfort at times. Everyone dies, but only once.

Carlos Corrado taxied his MiG-29 on the runway and shoved the twin throttles forward to the stop, then into afterburner. The MiG-29 rocketed forward. Safely airborne, Corrado raised the landing gear and came out of afterburner. Passing four hundred knots, he lowered the nose and retarded the throttles, then swung into a turn that would point the sleek Russian fighter at Havana.

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Inside the barn at Silo One, Toad Tarkington took in the carnage at a glance. He was the first American through the door.

Cannon shells and shrapnel from Hellfire warheads had played hob with the wooden barn structure. Holes and splintered boards and timbers were everywhere--standing inside, Toad could see the landing lights of the helicopters and hear Americans shouting.

Apparently several dozen men had taken refuge in the barn; their bloody bodies lay where the bullets or shrapnel or splinters from the timbers had cut them down. The floor and walls were splattered with blood.

Toad found the wooden door, got it open, used his flashlight to examine the steel inner door. He set three C-4 charges around the combination lock, and took cover.

The charges tore the lock out of door and warped the thing so badly it wouldn't open. Toad struggled with it, only got it open because two Marines who had come in to check out the interior gave him a hand.

The stairway on the other side of the door was in total darkness. Not a glimmer of light.

With his flashlight in his left hand and his pistol in his right, Toad slowly worked his way down.

He saw light bulbs in sockets over his head, but they were not on. Once he came to a switch. He flipped it on and off several times. No electrical power.

At the bottom of the stairs he came to a larger room. The beam of the flashlight caught an instrument panel, a control console. A bit of a face...

Toad brought the light back to the face.

A white face, eyes scrunched against the flashlight glare. An old man, skinny, with short white hair, frozen in the flashlight beam, holding his hands above his head.

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The radar operator in the E-3 Sentry AWACS plane over Key West was the first to see the MiG-29 get airborne from Cienfuegos. He keyed the intercom and reported the sighting to the supervisor, who used the computer to verify the track, then reported to Battlestar Control.

The AWACS crew reported the MiG as a bogey and assigned it a track number. They would be able to classify it as to type as soon as the pilot turned on his radar.

Unfortunately, Carlos Corrado failed to cooperate. He left his radar switch in the OFF position. He also stayed low, just a few hundred meters above the treetops.

There are few places more lonely than the cockpit of a single-piloted airplane at night when surrounded by the enemy. Corrado felt that loneliness now, felt as if he were the only person still alive on Spaceship Earth.

The red glow of the cockpit lights comforted him somewhat: this was really the only home he had ever had.

The lights of Havana were prominent tonight--he saw the glow at eighty kilometers, even though he was barely three hundred meters above sea level. He climbed a little higher, looking, and saw a huge fire, quite brilliant.

Carlos Corrado turned toward the fire. Perhaps he would find some airborne targets. He turned on his gun switch and armed the infrared missiles.

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The E-2 controller data-linked the bogey data to the F-14 crew patrolling over central Cuba at 30,000 feet. The bogey appeared on the scope of the radar intercept officer, the RIO, in the rear seat of the Tomcat. He narrowed the scan of his radar and tried to acquire a lock on the target, which was merely a blip that faded in and out against the ground clutter.

"What the hell is it?" the pilot demanded, referring to the bogey.

"I don't know," was the reply, and therein was the problem. Without a positive identification, visual or electronic, of the bogey, the rules of engagement prohibited the American pilot from firing his weapons. There were simply too many American planes and helicopters flying around in the darkness over Cuba to allow people to blaze away at unknown targets.

The darkness below was alive with lights, the lights of cities and small towns, villages, vehicles, and here and there, anti-aircraft artillery--flak--which was probing the darkness with random bursts. Fortunately the gunners could not use radar to acquire a target--the instant they turned a radar on, they drew a HARM missile from the EA-6Bs and F/A-18s which circled on the assigned stations, listening.

The F-14 pilot, whose name was Wallace P. "Stiff" Hardwick, got on the radio to Battlestar Control. "Battlestar, Showtime One Oh Nine, request permission to investigate this bogey."

"Wait."

Stiff expected that. Being a fighter pilot in this day and age wasn't like the good old days, when you went cruising for a fight. Not that he was there for the good old days, but Stiff had sure heard about them.

"That goddamn Cuban is gonna zap somebody while the people on the boat are scratching their ass," Stiff told his RIO, Boots VonRauenzahn.

"Yeah," said Boots, who never paid much attention to Stiff's grouching.

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Carlos Corrado saw that a building was on fire, burning with extraordinary intensity. Never had he seen such a hot fire. He assumed that the building had been bombed by a cruise missile or American plane and began searching the sky nearby visually for some hint of another aircraft.

He flew right over the V-22 Osprey carrying Tommy Armellini and Doll Hanna back to the ship and never saw it.

A lot of flak was rising from the outskirts of Havana, so Carlos turned east, away from it.

In the black velvet ahead he saw lights, and steered toward them. At 500 knots he closed quickly, and saw helicopter landing lights! They were flying back and forth over a large barn!

They must be Americans--they sure as hell weren't Cuban. As far as he knew, he was the only Cuban in the air tonight.

Corrado flew past the area--now down to four hundred knots--and did a ninety-degree left turn, then a two-hundred-seventy-degree right turn. Level, inbound, he retarded the throttles of the two big engines. Three hundred knots...he picked up the landing lights of some kind of strange-looking twin rotor helicopter and pushed the nose over just a tad, bringing it into the gun sight. Then he pulled the trigger on the stick.

The 30-MM cannon shells smashed into Rita Moravia's Osprey with devastating effect. She was in the midst of a transition from wing-borne flight to rotor-borne flight and had the engines pointed up at a seventy-degree angle. This twelve-second operation was controlled by a computer. This rotors were carrying most of the weight of the 25-ton ship, so when the cannon shell ripped in the right engine and it ceased developing power, the V-22 began sinking rapidly.

The good engine automatically went to one hundred percent RPM and transferred some of its power to the rotor of the bad engine through a transmission interconnect.

With shells thumping into the plane, Rita felt the bottom fall out. The one engine she had couldn't handle the load.

She pushed the nose over, trying to maintain rotor RPMs. The ground rushed at her, even as the cannon shells continued to rip the plane.

She pulled back on the nose and felt the rotors bite into the air. Then the machine smashed into the earth and she lost consciousness.

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In the missile room, Toad Tarkington held his flashlight on the old man as he produced a candle from his pocket and a kitchen match. He lit the match and applied it to the candle's wick.

One candle wasn't much, but it did light the room. Toad turned off the flashlight and stood there looking at the old man.

Muffled crashing sounds reached him, echoed down the stairwell, but no one came. Toad's head set was quiet too, probably since he was underground.

"Do you speak English?" Toad asked the white-haired man in front of him.

The old man shook his head.

"Español?"

"Si señor."

"Well, I don't."

Toad walked over and checked the man, who had no visible weapons on him.

He had a handful of plastic ties in his pocket. These ties were issued to every Marine for the sole purpose of securing prisoners' hands, and feet if necessary. Toad put a tie around the old man's hands. The man didn't resist; merely sat at the control console with his face a mask, showing no emotion.

"Cuban?" Toad asked.

"Nyet."

"Russki?"

The white head bobbed once, then was still.

Toad used the flashlight to inspect the console, to examine the instruments. This stuff was old, he could see that. Everything was

mechanical, no digital gauges or readouts, no computer displays...the console reminded Toad of the dashboard of a 1950's automobile, with round gauges and bezels and...

Well, without power, all this was academic.

His job was to get that damned warhead out of the missile, then set demolition charges to destroy all this stuff, missile, control room and all. He left the Russian at the console and opened the blast-proof door across the room from the stair where he had entered.

Another stairway led downward.

Toad went as quickly as he dared, still holding the flashlight in one hand and his pistol in the other.

He went through one more steel door...and there the missile stood, white and massive and surreal in the weak beam of the flashlight.

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The aviation radio frequencies exploded, everyone trying to talk at once, when Rita's plane was shot down.

Battlestar Control finally managed to get a word in over the babble, a call to Stiff Hardwick. "Go down for a look. Possible hostile may have shot down an Osprey."

Stiff didn't need any urging. He rolled the Tomcat onto its back, popped the speed brakes, and started down.

"Silo One," Boots said, "this bogey is flitting around down there like a goddamn bat or something, mixing it up with the SuperCobras and Ospreys. Let's not shoot down any of the good guys."

"No shit," said Stiff, who was sure he could handle any Cuban fighter alive. This guy was meat on the table. He just didn't know it yet.

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Carlos Corrado pulled out of his strafing run and soared up to three thousand feet. He extended out for eight or nine miles before he laid the fighter over in a hard turn.

He had seen helicopters down there, at least two. It was time to use radar.

As he stabilized inbound he flipped the radar switch to "transmit." He pushed the button for moving targets and, sure enough, within seconds the pulse-Doppler radar in the nose of the MiG-29 had found three. The rest of the drill was simplicity itself- he selected an Aphid missile, locked it on target, and fired. Working quickly, he selected a second missile, locked on a second target, and fired.

He had to keep the targets illuminated while the Aphids were in flight, so he continued inbound toward the silo.

One of the SuperCobras exploded when an Aphid drilled it dead center. The second missile tore the tail rotor off its target, which spun the violently into the ground and caught fire.

Carlos flew across the barn, holding his heading, extending out before he turned to make another shooting pass.

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Toad Tarkington found the circular steel ladder leading upward in the missile silo and began climbing.

When he reached the catwalk he walked around the missile, examining the skin. There was the little access port, six inches by six inches, with the dozen screws! That had to be it.

Toad put the flashlight under his left armpit and got out a screwdriver.

He had three screws out when the flashlight slipped out of his armpit and fell. It bounced off the catwalk and went on down beside the missile, breaking when it hit the grate at the bottom.

The darkness in the silo was total.

Toad cursed softly, and went back to taking out screws. He worked by feel. Someone will come along in a minute, he thought, bringing another flashlight. If someone doesn't, he would take time to go find another.

The trick, he knew, would be to hold on to the screwdriver. He only had one, and if he dropped it, it would go down the grate.

He heard muffled noises from above, but he couldn't tell what they were. It didn't really matter, he decided. Getting this warhead out of this missile was priority one.

Carefully, working by feel, he removed the screws one by one from the access panel. When he had the last one out, he pried at the panel. It came off easily enough and he laid it on the catwalk near his feet.

So far, so good. He carefully stowed the screwdriver in his tool bag and wiped the sweat from his face and hands.

Okay.

Toad reached up to find the latch that the ancient Russian engineer had said should be there. God knows where the CIA found that guy!

Yep. He found the latch.

He rotated it. Now the latch on the left. He was having his troubles getting the latch to turn when the lights came on in the silo.

From instant darkness to glaring light from twenty or more bulbs.

Toad pulled his arm from the missile, clapped his hands over his eyes and squinted, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

He could hear a hum. Must be a fan or blower moving air.

No. The hum was in the missile, just a foot or two from his head.

Something was winding up. The pitch was rising rapidly.

A gyro?

What was going on?

Toad started down the ladder, moving as fast as he could go, intending to go to the control room to see what in the hell was happening.

He heard a grinding noise, loud, low-pitched, and looked up. The cap on the silo was opening.

He still had his tools. If he could get that access panel off and cut the guidance wires, the wires to control the warhead...

The American scrambled back up the ladder.

The little six-by-six access hole gaped at him. He ran his arm in, trying to reach the other latches that would allow the large panel to come off.

He got one open. The gyro had ceased to accelerate--it was running steady now, a high-pitched steady whine.

He was out of time: the fire from the missile's engines would fry him to a cinder.

He heard the igniters firing, popping like jet engine igniters.

The rocket motors lit with a mighty whoosh....

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