

Chapter 2

Low-Level

They broke away from the Panamanian jungle on the northern coast soon after dawn, crossing the shoreline with all four turboprop engines echoing against the cliffs of a small bay. Even from inside the noisy C-130 Hercules, the flight crew could hear the change in pitch. No longer was the sound swallowed by the lush green growth of the jungle. The placid bay beneath them now reflected the roar of the engines and thrust it out toward the open ocean and back upward into the cockpit. It was the roar of metallic power.

The shadows on the shoreline below were distinct in the early morning light. In the middle of the bay, a small sailboat tipped its sail delicately towards the water, capturing the light breeze from the Caribbean Sea. Few pleasure craft were awake this early.

Second Lieutenant Dana Munson, Minnesota Air National Guard, was sitting contently in the Herk's copilot seat. He looked through his lower right cockpit window, watching the sailboat below the aircraft. The C-130 was skimming low enough over the bay for him to see two dark men dressed in swimsuits aboard the boat, waving outstretched arms over their heads. Dana smiled to himself and then returned his attention to the instrument panel, backing up the aircraft commander.

In the left seat, a graying, perfect-posture lieutenant colonel eased the control wheel to the right in a shallow turn, eyes scanning the coastline but also attentive to the instrument panel. His movements were precise, and the aircraft reacted accordingly. Dana glanced down at his turn coordinator and smiled when he saw the ball perfectly centered. No surprise.

The aircraft was in air-drop configuration for this mission. Its cargo compartment, however, was empty now. The pallets bearing supplies for the U.S. Army ground forces had already been dropped into their

jungle destination in the morning twilight. This had been a morning jaunt to maintain tactical mission flight proficiency in a time of restless peace.

The station-keeping radar still capped the top of the instrument panel, a reminder of the earlier formation of three C-130's, now well separated from each other, each on their own separate tours of the northern Panama coast. This morning's mission had been a low-level air-drop, cutting across the jungle 500 feet over the canopy of green. Over the Army drop site, small Container Delivery System pallets were tugged from the cargo compartment by gravity's pull on the aircraft's high deck angle. Pallets cascaded from the C-130's gaping rear cargo door and parachutes opened quickly, scoring an almost direct three-ship hit on the ground site. It was a resupply mission to support the Army's simulation of an aggressive Cuban attempt to disrupt the operation of the Panama Canal. A Cuban threat didn't seem very realistic, but it was a nice diversion from routine cargo hauling missions.

"Let's go up," said the Colonel.

The Colonel in the left seat eased the four throttles forward with his right hand, a smooth calculated motion as he pulled back smoothly on the control wheel with his left hand. The nose of the jungle-camouflaged cargo aircraft rose distinctly above the horizon in a steep climb. Dana felt himself pushed back comfortably in the right seat as the g-force peaked and then returned to normal. Not exactly a fighter, but this baby could sure perform at its near-empty weight.

Leaving three thousand feet, the Colonel turned his gaze towards the Lieutenant and gave a satisfied nod that indicated that it was time for the boss to relinquish control of the aircraft.

"You've got it, Dana," said the Colonel.

Dana sat up straighter in the seat, as if his imitation of the Colonel's posture would lead to the same smoothness on the controls. He felt taller now, both in dimensions and attitude. His attitude was never lacking, but his stature was. Dana had barely made the Air Force's minimum pilot height requirements of five-foot, four-inches. Just another of his many worries along the way. And it made him look even more like a kid. In reality, he was.

"Got it," said Dana. "What altitude?"

"Level her at five-point-five, northbound for now. We'll need to get ready for the arrival into Howard in a few minutes. But first let's just enjoy the ride."

"My wife's a taxpayer," said the flight engineer, nestled behind the pilots in the center seat. He was even younger than Dana.

"So am I," said the Colonel. "After protecting our country all afternoon, we deserve a few first-class air miles."

"You call that protecting?" said the flight engineer. "It seems more like harassing the jungle monkeys. I bet we made a real 'whoosh' when we hit Checkpoint Bravo five hundred feet above the deck."

The Colonel laughed carefully. He knew his by-the-book attitude was usually apparent, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Dana focused his attention on the altimeter as he leveled the aircraft at fifty-five hundred feet, then pulled back slightly on the throttles with his left hand. He glanced below the throttles to the laminated card covered with grease-pencil reminders of the aircraft's critical speeds at takeoff and landing weight. Dana realized he was looking at the throttle quadrant; the wrong technique for flying a Herk during level-off. *You don't need to look at the throttles to move them. Keep your eyes outside the cockpit.*

He consciously relaxed his right-hand grip on the yoke. It was always better to fly with fingertips than a fierce grip. *Trim, trim, trim. Get with it.*

Dana had been in awe the entire week. It was his first real mission as a pilot with the Air National Guard. He had no more than returned from C-130 flight training in Little Rock, Arkansas, than he was on an aircraft bound for Panama. It had all happened so fast.

He could smell the aircraft. Why that smell appeared just as he grasped the controls of the C-130, he didn't know. But he noticed it again now. It was the smell of old metal mixed with oil and hydraulic fluid, a musty smell enhanced by the cool air pushed from the overhead vents; an air conditioner trying to keep up with the Panamanian heat and humidity. Maybe it was because he was concentrating on every aspect of the aircraft the moment he took control. Every noise, every vibration, every smell.

Dana Munson had spent five years with the Air National Guard as an enlisted crew chief, mothering a C-130 in and out of its parking spot, refueling, and performing general maintenance on his assigned

airplane. He had worked hard for his unit in Minneapolis, but a pilot slot had been his constant dream. That was what had brought him to the military in the first place, and he wasn't about to give up. So he finished his bachelor's degree at the University of Minnesota and was ready for the very next pilot selection board. Every night he did stretching exercises to try to increase his height that extra half-inch. It helped his psychological attitude. But it was his commendable record as a crew chief and his nearly two hundred hours of civilian flying that put those gold bar insignia of a second lieutenant on his uniform and won him a pilot slot. He earned it, and he cherished it.

Dana's two-week Minnesota rotation in Panama was now half completed. Only the Minneapolis aircraft were flying this early today. Their rotational partners, the North Carolina Air Guard, had worked all night, preparing their C-130's for departure later this morning. Four more C-130's inbound from California would replace them. On any given day, there were eight Herks at Howard Air Force Base to perpetually guard the skies of Central and South America. It was a continuous rotational mission called Volant Oak, shared by the units of the Air National Guard.

"Where to?" asked Dana. He glanced to his left, and the Colonel gave a shrug that meant that the Second Lieutenant could do as he liked.

"Clear right?" asked Dana.

"She's clear," said the Colonel.

Dana rolled the aircraft into a thirty-degree bank to the right, provided some back-pressure on the control wheel with his right fingers, and advanced the throttles a bit with his left hand to hold the altitude. The C-130 stabilized in a right turn, the altimeter pegged at fifty-five hundred feet.

He continued the turn until the shoreline was again in sight off the right side of the aircraft. Dana rolled the Herk out of the bank, nearly parallel to the shoreline, easing inward at a shallow angle, the aircraft now headed east. The low sun was now to the right of the center windshield, angled directly at Dana. The flight engineer stretched behind Dana to the right side window and removed a dark green sun-visor from its clipped storage location. He handed the visor to the Lieutenant, and Dana clipped it to the visor tubing on his forward windshield.

"Thanks," said Dana.

"You're welcome. You butter-bars need all the help you can get," said the flight engineer.

Dana smiled and shrugged off the teasing insult about his newly acquired second lieutenant's gold bars. Inwardly, he swelled with pride. It seemed impossible that he was really handling the controls of a C-130. In fact, he could maneuver this aircraft, for now, anywhere he wanted to go. A 120,000-pound military cargo airplane in the hands of a novice. It couldn't get any better than this.