

Chapter 30

Total Force

The morning never really dawned. It just began.

Jay was determined to break his mood, so he was using his day off to fly on an out-and-back to Fairbanks. The short flight should excite his spirit. It never failed.

As the C-130 broke through the Anchorage overcast, there was sunlight this morning after all. Not much yet, but once the clouds were left behind, the orange horizon glowed prominently in the southeast. In another few hours the sun itself would appear for its brief trot across the southern sky.

As the C-130 began its descent into Fairbanks, Mount McKinley projected upward off the left wingtip. The sky was now sparkling clear.

Jay had volunteered to serve as crew chief, with the airplane's regular crew chief receiving an unexpected and enthusiastically-received day off. It also made Jay feel more comfortable commandeering a seat on the flight deck's relief bunk. For the regular Air Force personnel encountered along the way, the comfort level wasn't so high. A chief master sergeant in the real Air Force would never be caught slinging chocks.

The day was crystal-clear in Fairbanks, and the terminal forecast indicated extreme cold. But when they taxied in, Jay's view from the flight deck revealed a civil service marshaller in a military olive drab parka that was completely unzipped. Underneath his parka was a gray sweatshirt, and Jay swore he saw the marshaller's naked belly button at the bottom of the shirt. Maybe it wasn't so cold after all. The man appeared to be native Inuit, as did the two members of the loading crew who emerged from the flightline shack as the C-130 pulled into it's parking spot. The loadmaster had not raised the cargo door and

lowered the rear ramp as they taxied in, although that was traditional for a quick-turn. Losing their cargo compartment heat was to be delayed until the last minute; the flight deck was open to the airflow from the aircraft's ramp.

Thus, the first door opened at this stop was the crew entrance door on the left front side of the airplane, and it was Jay that undertook this simple task. He twisted the red locking lever and the door unlatched and swung downward to reveal an Inuit civilian with an open parka, exposed belly button, and a broad smile. The cold that hit Jay was like nothing else he had ever felt. It was bone-piercing. Stunning cold.

"Aren't you cold, man?" asked Jay when he'd recovered his breath.

The unzipped civil service worker just smiled.

"Not here. We're having a warm spell today."

It may have been warm to him, but for Jay it was enough to snap his sinuses to attention. But it wasn't enough to change his mood.

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Total Force. Total chaos.

The chaos began because the Army was late, and that was probably on purpose. The aircraft couldn't be loaded until the Army showed up, and maybe the Army was simply punishing them. The quantity of paratroops that were to be buckled in determined the amount of cargo-of-opportunity they could carry. And the number of paratroops was still undetermined. Total Force. Total frustration.

Part of the frustration was because no one was talking to anybody else. The mission was scheduled to depart in twenty minutes. That left just enough time to get everybody loaded on the aircraft, with the cargo pallets a big unknown. The baggage pallet sat on the ground near the rear of the aircraft with two four-by-fours underneath the pallet to allow the forklift to hoist it aboard. But that pallet couldn't load until the paratroops arrived. And it had to be the last pallet aboard. The other equipment for King Salmon Airport, which included a Jeep and several other pieces of rolling stock, couldn't go up the ramp until the number of troop seats were determined. Total Force. Total mess.

The mess didn't resolve itself. To make matters worse, it was early morning; cold and dark. Ice fog surrounded the C-130 to the extent that the NF-2 light-alls were creating visibility near zero. The

powerful beams of light reflected off the tiny frozen water droplets to produce a complete whiteout. From his position adjacent to the baggage pallet, Jay could barely see the Herc twenty feet from him. This was not a good morning. The Army either didn't know what they were doing or they refused to share it with the Air Force. Total Force. Total headache.

The headache intensified when the brown Army bus finally appeared in the ice fog, with only its parking lights illuminated, to prevent things from getting worse. The paratroops began exiting the bus, a process that took way too long. This flight was going to be late, and the Army captain at the bus door was yelling at his troops. It didn't sound like yells of encouragement. Aerial Port, the real Air Force's contribution to Jackfrost, was standing by to load the equipment, but they too had no idea what was going on. Regular Air Force, Army, Air National Guard. What a combination. Total Force. Total joke.

It was a cold joke, and Jay wished it was over. He'd been in this situation before, too many times. The Army wouldn't talk to the Air Force, and the Air Force wouldn't talk to the Air National Guard. And it was the Air National Guard that was supposed to be pulling this mission off. No one even knew how to load the airplane. On this cold, dark morning, with ice fog and Army troops and forklifts and whiteout and yelling, Jay resolved to get this bird out of here. Be done with it, go back to bed, and wait for go-home day. Total Force. Total disgust.

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Go-home day.

Jay had waited for this day more than ever before on a military mission. Being so close to Shawna but so far away had proven nearly impossible. He had not called her once after her telephone call to him. He kept waiting for her to contact him again. She never did.

The four Wyoming C-130's were already gone. Now it was California's turn. As usual, Jay was on the last airplane out. This aircraft had most of his squadron's mechanics, a pickup truck, and the "war ready spares kit", a pallet of spare parts that was the life-blood of any deployment operation. More important, this aircraft carried the mission's supply of souvenir king crab. The crabs were freshly frozen and stored in rows of boxes on the aft ramp, the coolest spot in the cargo compartment. This aircraft had a special priority, since no one wanted to risk a delay in delivery of the crab to the families of the returning heroes.

If only all sixteen engines would start, they should be home soon after sunset. A refuel stop was scheduled at McChord Air Force Base near Seattle, since the B-models typically did not have the range for a nonstop trip to Southern California unless the winds were extremely favorable.

Cold. Dark. And more cold. And this morning it was snowing besides. But all sixteen engines responded, and the last plane out was out.

Performing admirably in the cold dense air, the four California C-130's climbed in-trail, separated by only a few minutes. It would be a loose formation flight all the way to Seattle.

This mission had taken its toll on Jay, more than any mission he could remember. The night shift hours coupled with the nearly perpetual darkness of the day and his remorse over Shawna had left him exhausted. As the last aircraft taxied out, he found himself nodding off. All of the other mechanics with him in the cargo compartment, twenty-four in all, seemed alert and excited. For Jay, it was everything he could do to keep his eyes open. He didn't try very hard.

"Chief, wake up," yelled someone. He couldn't have been asleep but a few minutes.

"What?" said Jay in a voice too low for anyone to hear.

"Chief, come take a look," yelled the autopilot mechanic enthusiastically.

As Jay awakened, he could see his mechanics gathered on the opposite side of the cargo compartment, looking out the small oval windows. The deck angle was distinctly upward, so they were still climbing. He must have been asleep only a few minutes.

Through one of the oval windows, Jay saw the problem. Number one propeller was at attention, fully feathered.

As Jay regained his perspective, he peeked out the window closest to him and estimated that they were at approximately ten thousand feet, still climbing. Number one engine was shut down, and Jay knew the rules. So did everyone else. An engine failure during departure necessitated an immediate air abort, with a return to the nearest suitable airport, in this case Elmendorf. Jay had finally escaped only to be recaptured.

"They want to see you in the cockpit," said the hydraulic mechanic.

As the ranking maintenance man on board and the official troop commander, Jay climbed the steps to the flight deck and plugged his headset into the interphone system. The conversation was calm and specific.

"Well, Bill, we're going have to decide pretty soon," said the aircraft commander.

"Yes, sir," said the copilot. "You call it."

Jay looked around the cockpit. Everybody was busy except the aircraft commander whose seat was pushed back in its tracks, feet up on the yellow foot rests.

"Okay, any inputs from anybody?" asked the pilot.

"I wanna' go home," said the flight engineer.

"Withstanding that, any other thoughts?" said the pilot.

Silence. Jay surveyed the flight instruments. The copilot was hand-flying the airplane, with the flight director system engaged. The altimeter was winding upward through twenty-one thousand feet now. He had probably been right; the engine shutdown had likely occurred at about ten thousand feet.

"Okay, we're going to need to decide real quick. Let's get ourselves level first," said the pilot.

"Cruise checklist," called the copilot. They were leveling now at flight level two-four-zero.

"How you doing back there, slow poke?" The voice on the UHF radio was from one of the aircraft in front of them. The remaining C-130's used that radio call as their cue to harass the three-engine aircraft. Apparently, they had already been advised of the situation.

"See you in Seattle, if we don't beat you home before you get there," said another taunting voice. Jay looked out the copilot's front window and could see one of the C-130's, perhaps three miles ahead. Scanning further, another C-130 formed a speck, barely visible on the horizon. It was already evident that their buddies were starting to pull ahead of them. The C-130 was not known as a particularly speedy aircraft, even slower with only three engines.

"Keep that crab cold for us," chimed another voice on UHF.

The mission commander refused to acknowledge the taunting from the other aircraft. In this loose formation, he was wise enough to know that this would end sooner if he just kept quiet.

"Okay, let's buy this." The aircraft commander was speaking to everyone on the interphone link. "The rules are clear. If an engine failure occurs during departure, including climb, we are required to divert to the first usable military runway. If that's not feasible, we're supposed to go to the nearest civilian field that can handle a C-130."

No one corrected the aircraft commander. He continued.

"But if the failure occurs in cruise, we can continue to our destination. Now, the real question is whether we were in a climb or cruise when the failure occurred," noted the aircraft commander.

"Looks like level flight to me," said the navigator.

"Me too," said the co-pilot.

"Hey pokey, how's it goin' back there," kidded somebody on the UHF radio.

"Don't take any bird strikes from the rear," added another voice. "They probably knew what the decision was going to be.

"Engineer?" said the aircraft commander.

"Definitely level flight, sir."

"Troop commander?" said the aircraft commander.

"Sir," said Jay, "I've never seen a more beautiful demonstration of level flight."

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An hour after the engine shutdown, the flight engineer provided an unusual report to the aircraft commander. Since the shutdown, the engineer had been busy with the cross-feed of fuel to the remaining engines. If they were to continue their flight, he wanted to be sure to properly redistribute the fuel from the B-models six tanks to the remaining three engines. Due to the reduction of overall fuel flow with the inoperative engine, he reported to the aircraft commander that their range had been extended just enough to make it all the way home nonstop, considering the winds aloft and the required reserves. They would have to reevaluate their fuel consumption as they approached Seattle, but it looked like the McChord fuel stop could be

eliminated. And that would mean that their engine change could be delayed until they were home.

Four hours later, as the three-engine C-130 looked down on McChord Air Force Base from twenty-four thousand feet, three other C-130's could be seen huddled on the ramp, receiving their needed fuel. There was a constant truth about flying -- no matter what the calculations indicated, a one-hour fuel stop always took two hours.

**"Too bad guys," said the flight engineer to no one in particular.
"Looks like we're going to beat you home."**

The aircraft commander took his right thumb, placed it to his nose and waived a full-hand salute from flight level 240. Everyone else in the cockpit immediately followed suit.