



### BRIEFING ROOM 303

"I don't believe this," Sun Dog repeated incredulously. "I just don't believe it."

"Your scepticism is noted, Captain," growled the Old Man, who looked like he hadn't slept in days. He nodded to the briefer standing in front of the whiteboard. "Continue."

"We do not anticipate any enemy fighter activity at all in the target area. Antiaircraft defences will be limited mainly to MANPADS and short range mobile systems. Medium- and long-range SAM coverage has been slow catching up with the lead armored elements and we do not expect division-level air defence units in the area for another eight hours."

"Why?" This was the wing Director of Operations, who always seemed to want to know that.

The briefer stopped and looked at the DO for a moment, as if deciding something. When he finally spoke again, his voice was even flatter than its usual monotone.

"There wasn't enough chemical protective gear to issue to the air defense units." And the area in question was going to be residually "hot" for another eight hours, at least, since it had been an especially persistent agent which had been used. Another horrible question answered.

A moment of uncomfortable silence, and then the DO's eyes locked with ours. "Your delivery profile will keep you well outside the engagement envelopes of the expected weapons. You may get a search pulse from the brigade surveillance radar, but he's sixty miles away and he doesn't have any fighters to call in on you anyway." Sun Dog and I nodded. We had reviewed all of this in our minds a hundred times in the ninety minutes since we had been told.

"Questions?" This was the Old Man. We had none, or at least none that could be answered by anyone present in the room. "Okay, Ops, tell me about the birds."

The DO had been leaning against the wall with his arms folded. Now he straightened up and glanced at his watch. "Twenty minutes. They ought to be loading the Weapons right about now."

We didn't exchange any words while suiting up in Life Support, or on the van to the shelters. Our two Vipers were spotted in the hardened shelter on the far end of the airbase, easily identifiable by the cordon of armed security police arrayed around it. The van wasn't authorized within 200 feet of the shelter, so we had to get out and walk the rest of the way. At the entrance, a mean-looking security policeman who had entirely too many weapons on his person inspected the badges we wore on chains around our neck, and waved us inside.

Under the floodlights perched a pair of Block 40 F-16C Fighting Falcons. They were the best in the squadron, and had been assigned to runway alert until Maintenance tagged these two for The Mission. The special weapons people had worked fast, even while encased in full MOPP-4 NBC gear. Our eyes went automatically to the belly stations of our airplanes, as if to confirm to ourselves that this wasn't just a terrible nightmare, a trick of the imagination brought on by a few too many beers the night before. But we were more painfully sober than we had ever been before in our lives.



We stood for a moment, looking in silence.

"Shit." Sun Dog's voice almost cracked, even over that most basic building block of fighter pilot vocabulary.

"Yeah." What could I say?

We watched for a moment more. Over by my airplane the major in charge of the special weapons detail spotted us and started in our direction. Sun Dog turned to me and grasped my gloved hand in his. "Good luck," he said, his voice steadier now.

But in his eyes I saw a flash of what might be sympathy, or perhaps even pity. For on this mission, which really called for only a single aircraft, Sun Dog had had the good fortune to be assigned the spare.

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"Four-eight-zero-two-one-seven."

"Four-eight-zero-two-one-seven," the major agreed.

Then I punched in the six-digit release codes that had been given to me in the briefing room. The major had a six-digit code of his own, which he proceeded to enter after mine. The permissive action link display blinked again, running the numbers through an elaborate and highly classified cryptographic algorithm, then displayed a final result. I looked at the last digit, while the major looked at the first; neither of us knew what the other's was supposed to be. Our eyes locked for an instant, and we nodded simultaneously. Any fleeting hope that all of this had been some elaborate joke evaporated with that nod.

The major hit the arming key. Had anything been out of order -- and there was no way for either of us to tell with the information we had been given individually -- the fusing circuitry would have melted, rendering the Weapon useless. But nothing was out of order, and a green light illuminated on the arming box. One of the ordnance people pulled off the red UNARMED streamer.

"It's armed," the major told me unnecessarily, closing the access panel on the Weapon and standing up straight. "Good luck." A brief handshake, and then he scurried away, as if he wanted to be as far away from the damned thing as possible. Yeah, me too, I thought.

Two minutes later I was climbing into the cockpit.

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"BLADE 31, RAMBLER. Picture clear for eighty." Her voice was serene and professional, with a hint of Texas in it.

We didn't have to acknowledge the AWACS. Radio protocol for this mission was restricted to specific event calls only, to minimize the chances of detection. We were streaking along the desert floor at over five hundred knots now, our throttles wide open. Sun Dog was a few hundred yards off to the right in line abreast, holding formation as smoothly as in a Thunderbirds demo. Both of us could easily fly lower than the five hundred feet AGL that we were maintaining, but consideration for our payload convinced us not to risk it.

My Viper handled beautifully, with only two wingtip Winders for self-defense, in addition to the special weapon on the centerline. I had expected more drag from the bomb, but it seemed to exact less of an aerodynamic penalty than the normal drop tank did, which was nice. The result was an F-16 which would turn almost through thought alone, whistling through the air like an arrowhead. From my vantage point, seated high beneath the bubble canopy, I could watch -- no, I could *feel* -- the crests and valleys of the desert landscape rush past, to the right, to the left, and below the nose of my aircraft. The ride was a little bumpy, but not uncomfortably so, and the reassuring whine of the GE engine made it seem all the more smooth.

Above me, from horizon to horizon, the sky was as clear as I had ever seen it -- unmarred by clouds, or by anything else. According to RAMBLER, herself orbiting almost one hundred fifty miles away, Sun Dog and I were the only aircraft of any sort for eighty miles in any direction. It was as close to alone as we had ever been in this theater, whose skies were normally filled to capacity with Coalition aircraft on even the blackest of nights. Which was just as well, since this patch of airspace was going to stay relatively deserted for some time to come after this mission.

"BLADE 32, point ANVIL coming up in thirty seconds," RAMBLER reminded my wingman. She needn't have done that, I thought. Sun Dog had no doubt been counting the seconds to his separation point from the moment he put the wheels into the well. Since only one of us would actually deliver his payload, Sun Dog as the spare would break off well outside the target area and go into a high-altitude orbit upwind. If my weapon failed to release or a malfunction caused me to abort, he would roll in and finish the job. The wing staff had studiously avoided the topic of what would happen if I got bagged on the way in and had to eject.

"RAMBLER, BLADE 32 is ANVIL now." It was only the second transmission our element had made since being handed off to the AWACS. Sun Dog gave me a parting wave, and raised his left wing, peeling off to the east. In a few seconds he was a receding dot.

Fifteen miles.

I had the TACAN on to give me a waypoint marker to the run-in point, although there were probably a half dozen RAMBLER controllers who would have instantly jumped on the air if I let the nose wander even two degrees. On the multifunction display just above my right knee, the stores control display glowed. Since I was still in a navigation mode, none of the stores were selected, and the single B61 on the centerline station remained on safe. Well, as "safe" as a PAL-released tactical nuclear weapon could be, anyway. I marvelled at how horribly relative things had suddenly become in my world.

"One minute to HAMMER," the steady female voice spoke in my headphones. I briefly wondered what that controller was thinking right now, as the navigation timer at the bottom corner of the HUD ticked past 55 seconds. *Sure as hell doesn't sound as nervous as she should be.* For a second I thought about resenting that, until the lunacy of this entire stream of thought struck me. *Here I am, with a tactical nuke dangling underneath my rear end, and I'm worried about seeming nervous? Concentrate, or you're really going to have something to worry about.*

The TWIS hummed and an 'S' appeared at twelve o'clock, on the outer ring of the threat warning indicator. That would be the brigade search radar I had been warned about, just as the DO had said. I hoped that his information about the lack of fighters in the area was as accurate, although RAMBLER would have warned me if something unexpected was happening. I was doing five hundred fifty knots. The nav timer ticked down to zero, and started counting back up as I roared through the waypoint.

"BLADE 31, crossing HAMMER now." The final leg to the release point was only ten degrees to the right. It had been planned that way by the wing staffers to minimize the distraction to the pilot at this most vital point of the flight.

"Roger, BLADE 31," the controller replied, her voice as steady as ever. A few seconds' pause, and then she clicked on to the radio circuit again. Her voice lost a fraction of its calm with her next words. "BLADE 31...be advised your signal is Golf Romeo, Golf Romeo. Acknowledge."

"BLADE 31 acknowledges Golf Romeo from RAMBLER." Okay, here we go. The sequence that followed had been drilled into my head from years of alert practice. Step into air-to-ground, select centerline station, safety cover off, master arm switch to SPECIAL and in the on position. The stores control display bracketed the B61 to show that it was the selected piece of ordnance, and the HUD jumped into freefall gravity mode. Then, back on the radio: "BLADE 31, switches hot, lighting up."

"Roger."

The timer to the next waypoint went to two minutes. I smoothly pulled back on the sidestick, guiding my Viper into a smooth +3g climb to thirty degrees. At 2,000 feet I leveled off, and switched the APG-68 from standby into radiate, then focused on the radar display above my left knee.

It took four sweeps in GM mode before I got the hits I was looking for. The scope lit up with at least twenty solid reflections, arrayed in clusters scattered on the desert floor about thirty miles away. I broke out my designated target and steered the crosshairs on to the appropriate blip, then stepped the radar into fixed-target-track. The display decluttered, and only the single diamond blip with a set of cross-hairs appeared. Glowing on the HUD was a tiny acquisition box. "BLADE 31 has acquired."

"Roger. RAMBLER shows you at one minute to pop." That search radar was still pulsing, but stayed on the outer ring of the threat indicator. It was too late for them to do anything about it even if they wanted to.

A new voice on the radio, this time. Older, harder, a voice accustomed to command -- a voice that was as cold as the words it delivered. "BLADE 31, this is the RAMBLER mission controller. Your final signal is FLASHPOINT. Repeat, your signal is FLASHPOINT. Acknowledge."

Everything had a dream-like quality about it, now. "Roger," I said, slowly, for the mission tapes that were certainly recording every moment. "BLADE 31 acknowledges FLASHPOINT final release from RAMBLER ACTUAL at time 00:46:32."

"Thirty seconds. Picture clear for eighty." It was the female controller again, her voice flat. *God help anybody who's dashing in for an intercept now.*

I waited for the timer to tick down, and then pulled the nose up to fifty degrees, while slamming the throttle into stage five afterburner. The altimeter spun wildly as my F-16C rocketed to altitude on a pillar of flame. Angels fifteen...seventeen...nineteen...gradually the airspeed began to slide downward as I cashed in my energy for height, clawing at an atmosphere which was progressively thinning out.

The weapons computer had been programmed with a B61 release angle inhibitor of +45 degrees. Any steeper and the computer would fault, preventing weapons release. I eased out the climb at around 35,000 feet and 330 knots, with the burner still blowing in stage five. Intended ground zero was twenty nautical miles away.

I pulled the stick back smoothly, and pegged the flight path indicator at the 45-degree marker on the pitch ladder. As the airspeed wound down and my altitude broke 42,000 feet, I pickled the weapon.

"THUNDER, THUNDER, THUNDER," I called out to the world.

I continued to pull for a second more, then rolled inverted. My Viper was wallowing near stall speed after its ragged climb, and it was a bit slow to respond as I wrenched the stick over into the most desperate split-S of my life. There wasn't the energy to spare to complete the loop over the top, and the roll had cost me precious time, but as I unloaded the jet in a -1.5g dive for the desert floor, I bought that time back with interest. Unburdened with its centerline load and with the burner still plugged in, my Viper responded like a champion racehorse, with the airspeed tape on the left side of the HUD streaming past five hundred knots and climbing. *Go, go, go, go...we screamed through the sound barrier, my Viper and I, and neither of us was ready to stop.*

Somewhat belatedly, I remembered to shut off my radar and TACAN. And then--

The whole sky pulsed a furious white and in an instant I couldn't see a thing, even though I knew that my photosensitive flash visor had blackened to opaque in less than a millisecond. I didn't hear a thing. Less than two seconds later the blast wave arrived and kicked me, blind and deaf, into a violently shaking, spinning world of nothing. I hit my helmet on something hard -- the ejection seat headrest? -- and couldn't figure out which way was up. Was I tumbling end over end? *Oh God I didn't clear ground zero I didn't clear ground zero...*

And then my senses slowly came back. The first thing I was aware of was the distress of the engine, which felt like it was sputtering violently. Without being able to see, I retarded the throttle to idle, and heard the welcome sound of the engine's response. Then my vision began to return, as the flash visor faded back to transparency. The horizon was tilted to the left and I was in a slow right roll, about twenty degrees nose down at ten thousand feet. Flashing on the caution panel mounted on the left were the ENGINE FIRE and MASTER CAUTION lamps -- I tried righting the airplane with some stick input, and found that the flight control system was still responding. In a moment, the fuel flow indicator -- which was also working -- stopped at idle, and I shut the engine down. A few seconds later the ENGINE

FIRE lamp extinguished, and I toggled an engine restart. A momentary pause, and then the welcome, familiar whine of the GE filled the cockpit again.

I was alive! Nobody was on the air, and the rushing sound of static was the only thing to be heard on any of the radio freqs. TACAN was out. JTIDS was out. Structurally, my airplane suffered speedbrake damage, as well. But the airplane was still flyable, and I was alive! Exhilaration coursed through my veins as I came to a full realization of that simple fact. A stupid grin spread across my face, underneath the rubber mask that was blowing bottled oxygen at me.

But then I grabbed one of the ACM handles on the side of the cockpit and did a sector scan, more out of habit than anything else. And the hellish apparition I saw reaching into the heavens at six o'clock hit me in the gut like a fist. Feeling it rise, I clawed at the oxygen mask. There wasn't time to reach for the airsickness bag until it was too late.

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## BRIEFING AUDITORIUM 200

The hardest thing for me to do in my professional life was to walk into that auditorium two hours after landing, for the debriefing.

The Wing DO was there, as was the Old Man. Both of them glanced at me when I walked in, then stared at the floor. The rest of the squadron sat quietly in chairs and ignored my presence. Sun Dog was scribbling on a kneeboard in a seat at the end of the front row. I sat down two seats away from him and wished with every fiber of my being for this nightmare to end.

Sun Dog ignored me for a half-minute more before putting away the maintenance forms on which he had been doodling. He turned and looked me in the eye just as the colonel who would run the debriefing took the stage.

"Well," Sun Dog murmured to me in a matter-of-fact voice, "your delivery really sucked."

I said nothing. The colonel ran through the basics of the mission, giving the ground crews and special weapons detail high marks for efficiency. The RAMBLER crew performance was graded as satisfactory. Then he looked at me. I wished that the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

"BLADE 31 pulled up into a nuclear delivery profile at the designated time after correctly acquiring the simulated target. The simulated B61 tactical nuclear weapon was released at a pitch angle of 45 degrees at 42,518 feet. The speed of the F-16 at the moment of release was 0.78 Mach. The time of flight of the weapon was fifty-six seconds." A pause. I stared at the wall behind the colonel and wondered if the airlines were hiring.

"The miss distance was estimated at just over *six miles*. Given the low yield of the simulated weapon and the nature of the targets, the exercise controllers have judged the delivery a no-grade, resulting in a total of zero primary ground kills." The briefing colonel seemed to smirk a bit at that. *Well, I'll be sure to shack the next one, Colonel sir*, I couldn't tell him. *I'll just imagine you standing on the bull's eye.*

"You *missed* with a nuke?" someone exclaimed incredulously.

"He didn't miss, he hit the ground," someone else snickered.

"Knock it off," growled the Old Man. The briefing colonel waited for the noise to die down, then continued. The amusement in his voice disappeared.

"The atomic demolition munition simulator that we borrowed from the Army successfully went off at ground zero, however, and the fireworks could be seen from miles around. Some Marines out on an FTX in the adjoining range got quite a light show. BLADE 31 successfully executed simulated engine shutdown and restart as briefed, and recovered on schedule back here at Nellis." A pause, while the major shuffled some papers. "With that mission, this RED FLAG rotation is concluded. Despite the somewhat disappointing outcome of this final mission, your Wing has done very well. You should be proud of your men and yourselves."

"But we ultimately lose the scenario," said a new lieutenant with some disgust.

The colonel surprised us all. "No, you do not. In scenario terms, Blue Air successfully delivers a tactical nuclear weapon in response to Orange's chemical attack of the previous day. Within four hours Orangeland asks for a cease-fire. Blue's terms are met unconditionally. The war is won."

"Wait, but we missed with the nuke," the lieutenant protested. It was the Old Man who responded, which further surprised the junior officers in the room.

"It didn't matter," the Old Man said quietly. "The importance of using a tactical nuclear weapon was as a statement of resolve, in response to Orange's escalation to weapons of mass destruction on the previous day. It was not as a warfighting weapon at all. If we really wanted to kill those tanks, we could have pounded them into the desert with round-the-clock conventional air operations. The air defenses weren't coming up for another eight hours anyway, and the Block 50 HARM shooters could have handled that. Using Mavs and GBUs would probably have been more effective against those targets than a single nuke." He let that thought sink in. "But we used the nuke because, in this case, what it would say was ultimately more important than what it would actually *do*."

The colonel nodded in agreement. "Now that doesn't mean that the drop couldn't have been better," he said, looking at me while I turned red, "but in this case, it was good enough."

There wasn't much left to say after that. Over the weekend, the final take-home debrief package would be prepared by the RED FLAG staff for us as a souvenir of sorts. "Don't forget," the colonel called to us as the auditorium began to empty, "the Threat Directorate is hosting a farewell party at the O-Club at 20:00 tonight, and you're all invited..."

"This is crazy," Sun Dog said to me as we both stood and collected our things. "First they insert a nuke scenario in the middle of a war that's going just fine and dandy for the Blues -- never mind that we haven't nuke-qualified in over two years -- and then after we botch the delivery they tell us we won? What the hell?"

"Well," I replied, "I guess different rules apply to nukes." A grimace. "I'll be glad to stick to iron bombs."

"That's cause you can't drop nukes worth a damn." He received a rather obscene gesture in exchange for his observation.

"Well," Sun Dog resolved, "this exercise is screwy any way you cut it, and I don't believe it, and you can't make me." That decided, he eyed the quickly emptying auditorium and shifted mental gears. "Hey, you going to that farewell shindig tonight? I have a feeling that that lady AWACS controller is going to be there..."

"Sun Dog, you never cease to amaze me."

"Good. Then next time, you should let *me* drop the nuke!" He was so busy grinning at his own perceived wit that he didn't quite duck out of the way in time.