

Chapter 1

September 10, 2001

My left leg tingled as I shifted in the pilot's seat. My lower back ached from the weight of body armor – Chinook cockpits were notoriously uncomfortable for such a long flight. I sighed as my Night Vision Goggles struggled to amplify enough light for a clear video. It was darker than I would have liked over the bayous of Southern Louisiana. I nervously tweaked the NVG focus, hoping to improve the picture. The moon, if it were up, would have helped, but it was nowhere in sight. A quick glance across the cockpit revealed my copilot Jethro's eyes reflecting an eerie green glow from his NVGs. "Damn, it's dark," he said to nobody in particular.

The dark cockpit was lit only by four multi-function displays on the instrument panel. My radar was on, augmented with the Forward-Looking Infrared sensor, known as a FLIR. This was as good as it would get. So, I turned my attention to our front, scanning the horizon for navigation cues and hazards.

I was the flight leader of two Special Operations Chinooks and had a mission to finish.

I was mad about the last back-and-forth conversation on the radio.

I'd just argued with the Air Mission Commander riding in Chalk Two. He and I had distinct ways of doing things. He wanted me to abort the infil because he thought the poor weather would keep us from our intended target, and would rather cancel than fail. I took a second look at my map. We would not have a problem – I was sure.

We'd butted heads before over similar circumstances. Joe Gorst was a captain, and I was a chief warrant officer three. As a CW3, he outranked me. But I was the 'Flight Lead,' an influential leadership position in the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR). Years of experience, piloting skills, talent, cult-of-personality (ego), and decision-making put me at the front of our formation, not his seniority. I was goal-oriented with an attitude to match. I'd go over, around, or through any problem I faced to complete my mission – sometimes to a fault.

I'd gone toe-to-toe with senior officers before, and mostly, I got my way. Joe was once a non-commissioned officer in Delta Force before attending flight school and working his way to our unit. His personality and attitude were every bit as intense as mine. Sometimes I think he just loved to argue because he never overruled me outright – this mission was no different – I'd gotten my way. So, as we pushed

through the rain, the stress was all on me. If I came up short, Joe would never let me forget that he was right and I was wrong. To say we were both stubborn would be an understatement. I was the proverbial immovable object, and Joe was the rock smashing against me. But the advantage was mine, with several thousand flight hours under my belt. Our disagreements might get my ass kicked someday over a beer, but in the air we always worked things out.

I started planning for flight deviations as we penetrated the simulated enemy air defenses of the fictional country of Pineland.

Night flying can be challenging in the best of circumstances. Add thunderstorms and the complexity increases. I hoped the heavy rain wouldn't derail our riverine infil. 'Observer Controllers' from the Louisiana-based Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) were onboard, watching our clandestine operation. JRTC provided a realistic free-play-training environment, allowing me to exploit the strengths of my specially modified Chinook helicopter. We couldn't ask for a better venue to practice with our Special Forces brothers.

Jethro did most of the flying. The affable copilot kept his head moving side-to-side and occasionally up and down scanning the landscape for unlit antennas and power lines. Windshield wipers stroked across my field-of-view like an inverted metronome. The visibility dropped to an uncomfortably low distance. So, I ordered my wingman to drop back and pick up two minutes of separation, keeping in mind we'd still need to rejoin before arriving on target. Several checkpoints later, I brightened the aircraft's clock slightly – it was time.

Satisfied that we'd met our requirements to re-join the flight, I instructed Jethro to reverse course using a standard-rate turn to the right. I frantically searched the sky for my wingman. The risk of collision was very real. We'd need to see each other before getting any closer.

I pointed. "Over there."

Emerging from the misty dark background at my two o'clock was Chalk Two.

The MH-47E Chinook isn't the most beautiful machine in the air, but it is one of the fastest and strongest helicopters in the world. The flat-black airframe made it more challenging to see at night, but the fuselage was big, close to fifty feet long and ten feet wide. It resembled a miniature space shuttle without wings, or maybe more like a Greyhound bus with a pointy nose. The fuselage hung beneath two massive sixty-foot rotors at the front and back in tandem. The standard joke was that it looked like "two palm trees mating in a trash dumpster." But as it banked in my direction, I noted how gracefully it maneuvered through the sky.

The radios were quiet, but the intercom chatter in our aircraft picked up as the joining black Chinook passed down my right side and circled behind me. Once in position, and in formation, we turned back along our next intended heading and accelerated to make our time-on-target – plus-or-minus thirty seconds.

I craned my neck to look back into our cargo compartment to see the 'precious cargo.' A Special Forces Maritime Operations Team was asleep and sprawled

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over their motorized inflatable Zodiac. I divided the twelve-man MAROPS Team evenly among our two Chinooks, with each aircraft easily carrying a boat to insert. The rivers in this area cut through heavily wooded swamps and forests. And we were going to 'infil' our passengers at a pre-designated linkup location.

Waiting on the river were a pair of heavily armed riverine boats from a nearby Navy Special Boat Unit. The Army and Navy would work together in a Direct-Action assault of an enemy encampment a few miles from the river.

On the dark and stormy night, our landing zone was merely a straight stretch of river just wide enough for our large rotors to fit snugly between the tree-lined riverbanks as we conducted what we called an 'Amphib-One' approach.

An alarm sounded in my flight helmet. The distinctive 'Bing Bong' reminded me we were close to our objective. I alerted the crew, "ten minutes!"

Trained and proficient, the crew chief at the right ramp responded with "Ten minutes, aft ready."

The crew chief at the right gun position did his part, "Ten minutes, forward ready."

The SF Team leader acknowledged the time and passed it on to his men.

I needed to conduct a Before Landing Check and quickly review the 'Amphib' procedure. It was simple. We'd approach the area at eighty knots and eighty feet, looking for our rendezvous point. And once we identified the 'friendlies' and their boats on the river, we'd set up to come alongside.

At a pre-determined distance, we slowed to forty knots, then descended to forty feet, followed by twenty knots and twenty feet. Once in the correct location, Jethro slowed to ten knots; and I entered ten feet in the keypad of the Control Data Unit (CDU) near my right knee. The flight director accepted my input, and I engaged the coupler. The helicopter descended on its own to ten feet above the water and maintained a precise altitude.

Jethro adjusted our speed and heading with the help of the Integrated Avionics Suite Hover Page. The video-game-like display helped us keep our desired track along the river with minimal lateral drift.

As the helicopter descended, the foliage to our left and right parted as our rotor wash pushed most of the branches away. The trees were closer than I was comfortable with, and it wasn't long before the scent of newly shorn pine trees wafted into the cockpit. The rotor tips cut through the more rigid pine boughs that refused to move with the rotor wash.

"Jethro, we're chopping wood, slide right," I said.

"Sorry. Coming right."

If we hit a big enough branch, we could damage the aircraft, or worse, end up in the water in a spectacular crash, killing all of us.

Jethro's adjustment was enough as both aircraft settled into the flight-profile of ten knots and ten feet. The spray and mist roiled up by our rotor wash, made it hard to see, but Jethro focused on his hover page... My side window was still open,

allowing my left arm to get wet from the spray. The cool water felt refreshing, and as far as I could tell, we were ready, and I wanted to get the guys in the water – So, I gave the order, “Boats, Boats, Boats.” I repeated the call on our FM radio for Chalk Two to hear so they could mirror our actions.

Windshield wipers swiping back and forth improved what I could see, but not by much. I could feel the subtle shift in the helicopter’s center of gravity as the boat slid off the ramp and into the water. The six Special Forces soldiers followed it into the river. I wanted them to hurry. The further we went upriver, the narrower it became; and the longer we held the profile, the more likely we’d trim trees again.

Jethro held our speed and altitude while the crew chief counted heads. “Six thumbs up – clear to come up.”

With one stroke of a button, the Radar Altitude Hold function began a climb. And as we got higher, the spray and mist dissipated.

Chalk Two tucked into formation, and we began accelerating to our maximum range airspeed of 138 knots. I wanted to get back to base, to rest and reset. The infil went well, but to complete our mission, we still had to weave our way home through Pineland. I had to believe the JRTC controllers wouldn’t allow us to penetrate the enemy air defense network without making our flight a learning event. To add stress and increase the difficulty, air defense systems along our projected flight path would stimulate our Radar Warning Receivers.

The MH-47E’s Aircraft Survivability equipment (ASE) incorporated a suite comprised of a Radar Warning receiver, Jammers, Flares, and Radar decoying CHAFF. A small circular screen displayed symbols of Air Defense threat systems emissions detected, their location, and mode. A computer-synthesized voice spoke into my helmet, announcing a potential threat system. “S-A, S-A Six, Two O’clock, tracking.”

The JRTC team placed a simulated SA-6 radar-guided missile at a nearby airport. I’d have to evade the threat to avoid being shot out of the sky.

The SA-6 was the most likely weapon we’d see on deep penetration missions other than heat-seeking MANPADs. ‘Bitchin’ Betty,’ the female personality of our voice warning system, alerted us to our jammer’s automated response: “Radar warning – Pulse Jamming Forward, Pulse Jamming Forward.”

Jethro’s instincts were sharp, and his moves well-practiced. His effective ‘break-lock’ maneuver interrupted the SA-6’s ability to track us, as the JRTC observer watched intently. Things got exciting when our altitude dropped too low, causing ‘Bitchin’ Betty’ to speak again. “Altitude low, altitude low.” The radar altimeter showed that we’d descended to seventy-five feet... much too low. And I didn’t want to collide with any unlit man-made hazards; I had friends in Desert Storm die that way. So, I was about to coax Jethro higher, when the crew chief on the Right Gun noticed powerlines to our front emerging from the mist – Right in front.

“Crap.” I was sure they would slice through my windshield.

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An excited voice pounding through the intercom pushed Jethro to action. "Climb, climb, climb!"

Jethro pulled too much 'thrust,' reaching a power limit. Betty bitched at him again, "Torque, torque, torque." About the time we cleared the wires, the SA-6 radar would regain its track. So, we banked again, popping a cloud of aluminum CHAFF to help break the radar lock. "That was close," I said. And the visibly shaken observer controller confirmed our maneuvers succeeded, allowing us to return to base.

I gloated about our success. I was right, and Joe was wrong... At least I was self-aware that I had an egotistical streak. But what pilot didn't?

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Our destination was Camp Beauregard, Louisiana National Guard base. The old state-run facility was comprised of single-story cinder block buildings. We each had individual rooms furnished with a bed, nightstand, and TV – no complaints from me. There was a downside – acoustics. The waxed tile floors and masonry walls amplified every noise along the echo-enhancing-hallways. Loud conversations penetrated the thin particle board doors effortlessly. Even soft-spoken conversations reverberated throughout the building. As members of the Night Stalkers, we worked a PM schedule – this JRTC rotation was no exception. Our days started around 11:00 in the morning with a run and workout, followed by breakfast, which was everyone else's lunch. After a shower, we'd report to the planning area to work on our next mission... replay over and over.

For now, it was time for sleep. I must have been tired because I don't remember adjusting my pillow; I just remember waking up to some loud conversations in the hallway.

"Holy crap, did you see what happened?" someone said.

"Yeah, that's messed up!"

Someone yelled further down the hall. "What the heck, guys? Be quiet!"

"Dude, you need to see the news – turn on your television!"

Curiosity drove me toward the TV. Without a remote, I had to climb out of my bed. "How primitive," I joked. The television video was slow to appear, allowing time for me to realize the air conditioning was too cold. I shivered as I read the thermostat. I squinted as I tried to make out the tiny faded numbers. I would need glasses soon. And after a suitable temperature correction, I turned my attention back to the TV. "Wow..." Now, I knew what the commotion was about; it was the same on all channels. One of the World Trade Center towers was on fire. Smoke billowed from a gigantic hole mid-way up. I stood there, dumbfounded. Within minutes, another airliner flew in from off-screen, tearing into the second tower. All that remained was an eerie airplane-shaped hole and smoke.

There's no way two impacts could be an accident – we were under attack.

The unfolding news coverage continued. There wasn't much for me to do at that point. So I did the only thing I could think of and made a pot of coffee. The aroma of the fresh brew permeated the air, adding some sense of normalcy to my morning.

It wasn't long before strong black coffee slipped over my lips, scorching my tongue, "crap, that's hot." My God, what was I seeing; was that a person? As more objects dropped from high atop the twin towers, news cameras zoomed in; those falling objects had souls. They were people making a horrific choice – burn to death or fall for forty seconds and die quickly on impact.

As I poured another cup of coffee, other guys assembled in my room to watch TV.

Then, without warning, the towers collapsed in succession. Right there – right in front of us. How could that happen? What about all those police and firefighters? How many people were inside? There had to be thousands.

What we didn't realize was that another plane had hit the Pentagon, and one plowed into an empty field in Pennsylvania. By this point, no one knew how big an operation this was. So, to be safe, the Federal Government 'grounded' all air traffic. Nothing except military fighters could fly, not even us. I did not understand how pivotal this moment would be in my life – no one did.

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Our battalion commander, LTC Brass, and I rented a car and drove back to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Once in the controlled environment of the Headquarters, we'd be able to access sensitive information that might give us some direction in our preparation for war. The eleven-hour drive was silent as the colonel and I each tried to make sense of what was unfolding. The attack on our country would warrant a counterattack of some magnitude. Our unit would likely be involved in any immediate response. Rapid deployment was our bread and butter. Which is why our families had to be ready to stand on their own any day of the week. I hoped my wife, Linda was up to the task...

What if the deployment was too long for her? Or worse, what if I didn't return? Ideas, thoughts, and various scenarios bounced around my brain until the gentle hum of our tires on pavement produced a slight bout of 'road hypnosis.' We still had over six hours remaining in our drive home. The colonel and I settled in for a long, quiet ride. I was sure our unit would be part of our nation's response to the heinous attacks on our homeland. I looked forward to the opportunity.