

EAST CHINA SEA

1990

YOU FLY THE PLANE ONE HANDED, ON A DESPERATE BEARING SOUTH, STARING THROUGH THE PLEXIGLAS BUBBLE AND INTO THE CRYSTAL NIGHT. THE AIR INSIDE THE COCKPIT STINKS OF FEAR MINGLED WITH CHEMICAL TOILET AND GASOLINE FUMES.

A SQUADRON OF SABRE JET FIGHTERS RAKE LINES OF SILVER AND WHITE ACROSS THE SKY IN THE MOONLIGHT. YOU SEE THE SWEEPED-BACK WINGS AS THEY PEEL OFF INTO A HUNTING PATTERN, LIT AFTER-BURNERS GLOWING LIKE FAST-MOVING COMETS.

YOUR RIGHT HAND HOLDS THE BUTT OF A COLT .45. THE BARREL POINTS ACROSS THE CRAMPED COCKPIT AT YOUR CO-PILOT'S CHEST. HIS HEAD IS BURIED BETWEEN HIS KNEES LIKE YOU ORDERED. HIS NAME IS EVAN GRAY. HE WAS YOUR BEST FRIEND BUT YOU TOLD HIM AND THE OTHERS THAT YOU WILL KILL THEM IF THEY TRY TO STOP YOU.

THE SABRES STREAK TOWARDS YOU IN 'FINGERTIP' FORMATION. EVASION IS YOUR ONLY CHANCE. YOU STAB AT THE LEFT RUDDER PEDAL WITH YOUR FOOT,

LAY THE COLT ON YOUR LAP AND PUSH DOWN ON THE YOKE. G-FORCES FROM THE DIVE STRETCH YOUR FACE AND PULL AT YOUR BODY. THE B50A SUPERFORTRESS YOU FLY IS A GARGANTUAN CRAFT, ABLE TO CROSS CONTINENTS WITH A PAYLOAD OF DEATH, YET SHE MOVES LIKE A DANCER IN YOUR HANDS.

YOU SEE MUZZLE FLASHES AS THE SABRES ATTACK. BULLETS STRIKE THE FUSELAGE OF YOUR AIRCRAFT, LIKE STEEL PUNCHES DRIVEN BY GIANT HAMMERS. SOMEONE SCREAMS. YOU HEAR A HISS OF AIR AS THE CABIN DEPRESSURISES, THEN SEE PAPERS FLYING - LOGBOOKS AND HERSHEY WRAPPERS ALL SUCKED AFT IN A RUSH OF AIR.

AHEAD YOU SEE THE TOWERING WALL OF BLACK CUMULONIMBUS CLOUD, TWENTY THOUSAND FEET HIGH, A PHALANX OF DARK GHOST-SHAPES RIDING THE SKY, JOSTLING LIKE HORSEMEN. GUSTS ROCK THE FUSELAGE AND THE SEA IS A GROWING FURY, WIND-TOSSED WAVE CRESTS BURSTING INTO WHITE TIPS.

YOU KNOW THAT THE STORM MIGHT SAVE YOU, THAT REACHING THE CURTAINS OF DARK CLOUD WILL MEAN A REPRIEVE. YET THE SABRES SWARM LIKE BATS. AGAIN COMES THE CRASH AND WHINE OF FIFTY CALIBRE MACHINE GUN ROUNDS BREACHING THE FUSELAGE, AND LOUD, UNBEARABLE WEEPING.

SOMEONE CRIES OUT, 'GOD HELP US. THOSE MEN WEAR OUR UNIFORM, THEY'RE OUR BROTHERS IN ARMS - PLEASE MAKE THEM STOP.'

'I TOLD YOU, HEADS DOWN,' YOU SHOUT, WAVING THE COLT BEFORE TURNING BACK TO THE DASH.

ALL LIGHTS FLICKER OFF, YET THE FIRST TENDRILS OF DRIFTING CLOUD ARE JUST HALF A MILE AHEAD. YOU SEE SMOKE STREAM FROM THE STARBOARD OUTER

THE TIME OF THUNDER

ENGINE.

YOU REACH FOR THE FIRE-FIGHTING SWITCHES AS THE FIRST SILKY THREADS OF CLOUD PASS BY THE SCREEN, AND A SHROUD ENVELOPES THE AIRCRAFT. YOU LOOK DOWN AT THE GAUGES. THEY SHOW FUEL FOR FOUR THOUSAND MILES, BUT YOU KNOW THAT YOUR CHANCES OF MAKING IT A FRACTION OF THAT DISTANCE ARE REMOTE. YOU THINK OF YOUR BROTHER, AND HOW CAN HE POSSIBLY LIVE WITHOUT YOU. OUTSIDE, IN THE DARKNESS OF THE STORM, SAINT ELMO'S FIRE DANCES ON THE WINGTIPS AND NOSE CONE, LUMINOUS BLUE FORKS OF STATIC ELECTRICITY, LEAPING AND CONTORTING LIKE GYMNASTS. SOMEONE IS PRAYING. YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE STILL ALIVE. YOU LAY THE HANDGUN ON THE DASH AND CUT THE THROTTLES BACK TO CRUISING SPEED. IN ALL THE WORLD YOU CAN THINK OF ONLY ONE SAFE PLACE. YOU STEER THE PLANE SOUTH, KNOWING THAT IF YOU ARE WRONG YOU WILL ALL DIE TONIGHT.

ONE

Around dawn a fisherman tending his nets wide offshore from the Filipino village of Cariaga looked up and saw a plane such as he hadn't seen since the war between the Japanese and Americans. Flying unusually low, it appeared to have been damaged, and only three of the propellers were turning.

In Ambon, off the coast of West Papua, two teenage sisters tending the family taro plot saw an American plane. The youngest claimed that she had seen the handsome pilot through the round window at the nose.

In Maningrida, in Australia's Northern Territory, three children from the Kunibidji people stopped their game of keep-away on the beach to watch the plane pass over. Despite its size, they thought it looked old and tired, like the elderly men who stayed in the shade all day with their dogs. Surely, they decided, it would die soon and go to heaven like the missionaries promised happened to all good people.

Further south, a lanky nineteen-year-old camp cook for a gang of buffalo hunters woke up in the mid-morning. They had all drunk too much rum the night before, and the camp was littered with sleeping men. The youth crawled out of his swag and was taking a leak on a nearby tree when he heard a roar in the

sky. Looking up he saw a huge bomber, blocking out the sun with the width of its massive wings.

The ear-splitting sound of the aircraft's three working engines woke the camp. The men were still talking about what they had seen when they loaded their Lee-Enfield carbines and rode off on their horses for the day.

In Tucson, Arizona, ten-year-old Danny Carter came home to find three cars parked outside his house. The yard was busy with men, some wearing Air Force uniforms, others in black suits and hats.

Danny looked imploringly at Miss Sullivan, the woman who boarded him while Matt was away, leaning on the handrail at the foot of the front steps. Tears fell down her face. Danny had never seen her cry before. Never imagined her capable of it.

Beside her stood Pastor Sieftring, Davis-Monthan Base's chaplain, his arm around her shoulders. Miss Sullivan took Danny's hand. Her skin was cold, and her lipstick pale.

'Come inside,' she said. 'I'm afraid that there's some very bad news.'

They sat Danny at the kitchen table. The chaplain's voice was a dull monotone. 'I'm sorry to tell you that your older brother is missing in action ... believed killed.'

People came and went. The chaplain led a prayer then drove away, but more cars arrived. Men with frightening faces sat down at the table, firing questions. 'Was your brother acting strangely before he went overseas? Did he go to meetings late at night? Was he a communist?'

Danny scarcely heard. Two words repeating over and over. *Matt's dead. Matt's dead. Matt's dead ...*

'Did your brother bring foreigners home with him at any time? Men with strange accents? Have you had any mail from him? Did he leave any papers?'

After a while they left the house, carrying cartons of papers, books, the contents of a filing cabinet, maps, magazines and dreams. Their boots thumped on the wooden stairs as they tramped out to their cars.

Forty years passed. The war in Korea faded into memory. Vietnam divided a generation and left wounds deeper than shrapnel. Saddam Hussein's Republican Guards marched into Kuwait. Kingston Rule ran a record time in the Melbourne Cup and Allan Border's cricket team beat Graham Gooch's England by ten wickets at the Gabba.

Finally, the time came.