

DR. STEVEN GREER WWW.DRSTEVENGREER.COM	<b>Sentinels of Ether</b>	
	<b>Date:</b>	July, 2023
	<b>Author:</b>	
		<b>Document ID:</b> 26489

# Sentinels of Ether

This document includes chapters 1 & 2 of a book of fiction that depicts a situation that happened in real life.

The chapters and the accompanying Department of Defense letter were given to Dr. Greer after this individual heard the testimony of Michael Herrera. He wanted to clarify that what Herrera saw may have been arms or drug trafficking, but from this person's direct experience may also have been human trafficking. All are a reality with these rogue groups.

This person is currently high up in the system managing the UAP projects. While the story is fiction, it accurately describes actual events. This account illustrates the urgent need for Disclosure and to get these criminal rogue activities under constitutional control. Using the cover of National Security to carry out these atrocities is an abuse and must be stopped immediately.

These chapters and the DOD letter have been shared with a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

*The link to the original testimony can be found here:*

[ARV Testimony given by Michael Herrera in October 2019](#)

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**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**  
**DEFENSE OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW**  
 1155 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
 WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1155

[REDACTED]  
 November 30, 2022

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

This is in response to your April 9, 2022, correspondence requesting public release clearance for the manuscript titled, "Into Ether". The manuscript submitted for prepublication security review is **CLEARED AS AMENDED** for public release. Enclosed are copies of the "cleared as amended" manuscript pages. Amendments are clearly identified with blacked out text; where applicable, additional text provides recommended alternative language for some of the amendments. I enclose also a stamped copy of the first page of the manuscript.

[ The amendments protect from release "non-public information", which can include classified national security information, controlled unclassified information, operational security information, export-controlled information, and unclassified information that may individually or in aggregate lead to the compromise of classified information. The amendments may not be exclusive to the Department of Defense (DoD), as manuscript reviews often require consultation with other federal agencies who own information in the manuscript. ]

This clearance does not include any photograph, picture, exhibit, caption, or other supplemental material not specifically approved by this office, nor does this clearance imply DoD endorsement or factual accuracy of the material. You are responsible for sourcing and acknowledgement of all photos in your manuscript, to include any stock footage you use of military equipment.

This office notes that your manuscript may include the names and other personally identifiable information (PII) of former or active duty Service members, DoD employees, and third party individuals, the release of which could be a violation of the privacy rights of these individuals. As the author, you are solely responsible for the release of any PII and its legal implications. If you have not done so already, you may wish to consult these individuals and obtain permission to include their PII in the manuscript.

If you are not satisfied with this response, you may request that this office reconsider the initial determination. Within 60 days of this response, provide any and all information or explanation of facts that you believe this office should know. You may include citations or copies of similar references that show this information was previously released and already in the public domain, although a mere listing of published citations may not necessarily be sufficient to reverse the initial determination. Please note the wide availability of certain information in open sources does not in and of itself constitute an official DoD or U.S. government acknowledgment, release, or declassification of the information. DoD and U.S. government websites, and books previously cleared through the prepublication review process are all approved sources. Additionally, you may rewrite portions of the redacted information and resubmit the manuscript for reconsideration.

You also have the right to appeal this response to the appellate authority. The appeal must offer written justification as described above to support the reversal of each required

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amendment being appealed. Appeals must also be submitted within 60 days from the date of this response. Please submit any reconsiderations, rewrites, or appeals to:

[REDACTED]

This office requires that you add the following disclaimers prior to publishing the manuscript: "The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government. The public release clearance of this publication by the Department of Defense does not imply Department of Defense endorsement or factual accuracy of the material. Please direct any questions regarding this case to [REDACTED]"

Sincerely,

for

[REDACTED]

Enclosure(s):  
As stated



SENTINELS OF  
**ETHER**

---

ALVA DOUGLAS



## Prologue

If it wasn't for the patches of waist high indigenous plants that patterned the flats of the desert landscape just north of Cayome, Mexico, the place would be indistinguishable from Mars. Marked by scars of ancient water flows and vertical tectonic movement, Planet Earth showed her age here. Canted mesas, unevenly pushed up over millions of years brandished varying shades of rust and cream-colored layers of sedimentary rock that streaked like diagonal pinstripes down the canyon walls. Ages of harsh geo-activity had also left large boulders littered about like shrapnel. Some of them were stacked in such precarious formations they appeared to defy physics, looking less like artifacts of nature and more like the commissioned art pieces of a progressive sculptor.

The light pollution factor out here was dead zero, and on nights like this, without a moon, darkness would soon be stark. The kaleidoscope of stars above would do nothing to help illuminate the ground tonight, their only practical contribution was that they would soon highlight the threshold between terrain and sky.

## Chapter 1

March 23, 2004

Ethan McEwen knew when he enlisted in the military that he could die in any number of ways; shot, blown up, drowned, beheaded, tortured, or by colliding with the earth at terminal velocity. If he were given a thousand guesses, he never would have imagined he would die like this.

His earpiece crackled, "Scout. this is H1 over."

The voice in Ethan's earpiece was fuzzy but loud, louder than the last transmissions from his teammates who he hadn't heard from in several minutes now.

"Uh, this is Scout go ahead." he replied confounded, just as a low frequency repetitive thump began to resonate in his body.

"Scout. H1. We are here for extract. LZ is 100 meters ahead of you to the south."

The resonating thump grew stronger and began to blend with an audible *thwack, thwack, thwack*, splitting through the air from somewhere off in the distance.

He raised his rifle in the direction of the noise and peered through his optic. With a 1-8 x 24 zoom/objective scope he could make out the silhouette of a helicopter flying nap-of-the-earth (low to the terrain) about a mile down canyon.

Ethan, a Tier 1 Operator, returned his rifle to his chest and returned his eyes to his immediate surroundings.

It was approaching dusk. Sun light had transitioned to twilight and the faces of the weary travelers under his care were becoming more easily recognizable by the whites of their eyes than the features of their faces.

Ethan turned and squinted back in the direction of the incoming rotorcraft and raised his rifle again. About 100 meters in front of him, and on the same line of sight, was a small, confined area just big enough to accommodate the rotor disc diameter of a large helicopter.

*The LZ.* He noted.

The arrival of a helicopter for extraction is usually a welcome site, but the aircraft was early...way early, and exfil without the rest of his team was not part of the plan.

Admittedly, Ethan surmised, none of this was part of the plan, the plan as it too often does, had gone to shit hours ago.

Taking in the condition of the ramshackled group around him, Ethan bit down on the end piece of the hydration tube routed over his shoulder and drew in a mouthful of 98.6° water warmed by his own body heat radiating through the neoprene wall of the hydration bladder.

His earpiece blared again, "Scout. H1. do you copy? Advise when you have the LZ in site."

"H1 Stand-by." Ethan snapped back as he wiped a bead of sweat from the tip of his nose.

The day's events had led to this. Escorting a group of refugees across a jagged and treeless terrain, about 2 dozen of them, all women and children. Additionally, he was now solo. This was not ideal. The rest of his team was somewhere behind him trying to catch up.

He keyed his mic, "H1. Scout. LZ in site, you guys are a little early." he said with a tone more as though he was asking a question than making a statement.

H1 returned coms instantly." Negative! exfil is now, rally Sir."

Ethan looked back to the north behind him for any sign of his team. There wasn't any.

Ethan queried again, "H1 what's your 20?"

It is commonly known by anyone familiar with basic CB communication that the number 20 is a code. A code used by cops and long-haul truckers to inquire about someone's location. This however, is not what this was.

This was a Verbal Interrogation Identification (VII). Used for Identifying Friend or Foe (IFF). The code Ethan was using today was not known by anybody, anybody that is except for those directly associated with the classified mission still at hand.

This code was proprietary. A specific call and answer system for rendezvous with other players - Friendlies.

How it worked was operators could securely I.D. each other by initiating a verbal interrogation, a "call", that must pair with a specific "answer".

By design, the verbiage is always arbitrary and temporary. The words are made up.

Consistent with bottom-up mission planning, the call/answer verbiage is chosen at the pre-mission briefing by the team itself. If an old or incorrect code is used during the VII process in the field, the operators assume compromise and defensive positions are taken.

Today the call word to be used, either by itself, or in a sentence, was “20”. And the correct answer was “Matchbox”, intentionally backwards for Matchbox 20, which was chosen earlier this morning during the brief in honor of the intel officer’s favorite 90’s band.

Ethan adjusted his posture, physically poised for the response. He pressed his earpiece hard into his ear with his left index finger. His right index finger pressed hard against the frame of his rifle’s lower receiver.

No response yet. There was a delay.

Ethan prodded again, “H1. Scout. what’s your 20?”

A half a moment later the voice returned loud and clear, “Matchbox”.

Hearing the word Matchbox, Ethan’s tension dissipated.

He turned towards the refugees and waved his hand signaling for them to move. He keyed his mic one last time, “Roger H1. moving”.

---

The large helicopter was now on short final to the LZ. It flew slower and lower as it progressed through translational lift on glide slope for the confined area.

Ethan and his travelers hunkered down and watched.

The beast flared as a pair of twin dust cyclones manifested behind it, appearing to swallow the helo tail first.

Ethan squinted and raised his hand to his brow in preparation for the ensuing sand blast, while the others clung tightly to their garments.

He continued to observe, though struggling to take in the scene through his eye’s narrowed slits. The cyclones were swelling, now spanning the width of Ethan’s field of vision.

Suddenly, his eyes darted. *What is this?*

Something above and behind the LZ caught his attention.

*A second helicopter.* He processed.

The second helicopter was even bigger and on a higher approach profile than the first. Even more oddly, 150’ below the helicopter, slightly canted and slowly spinning, hung a steal seatrain shipping container. It was a Conex with what looked like a small generator or maybe a mini split H-Vac unit attached to the roof.

Ethan stood up to better observe the bird and its sling load but was instantly engulfed by a complete brownout.

The gritty blast from H1 washed over the small crowd as they buried their faces. The helicopter's engines roared with a high-pitched overtone so unpleasant that several of the refugees plugged their ears.

Almost a full 30 seconds passed before the pilot lowered the collective pitch of H1 - removing the source of air disturbance and dissipating the small dust storm.

Ethan raised his head and returned his gaze to the LZ. The audible irritation lessened as the engines began to wind down to idle.

Straight away, from out of the earthy nebulous surrounding the helicopter, three figures materialized and were instantly on the move.

Ethan watched like a hawk.

The men were not small, but their footwork was fast and smooth. The 2 lead men advanced quickly on a hard line towards the group while Man 3 bounded up the hill to Ethan's left like a cat. Man 1 and 2 were now clearly running directly at Ethan, barrels first, with articulate strides.

Uneasy, Ethan adjusted his footing.

Their movement was aggressive, linear, and they appeared as deliberate as ancient hunters about to throw spears.

Choking back his mild intimidation, Ethan settled and flipped his rifle's selector switch from Safe to Burst.

As the men closed the distance, Ethan shot a quick glance at the third figure already abeam him on the hill. Ethan had presumed this guy was positioning to provide cover. Looking at him now however, it was clear that Man 3's attention was not on the perimeter, rather, all his attention, including the business end of his rifle, was pointed dead at Ethan.

Ethan's head snapped back to Man 1 and 2 approaching rapidly.

He raised his rifle .... then realizing his mistake, immediately lowered it.

"Shit." he exclaimed, scolding himself.

Man 2 shouted first –

"Good evening Ethan!" he said with a strong but almost sing-songy tone.

Then Man 1,

"Don't even fucking blink bro." Man 1's tone was blunt and serious.

*They knew my name.* Ethan absorbed.

But he wasn't comforted. Comfort was not the emotion charging his nervous system at the moment. On the contrary, he was keyed up.

Ethan put his selector switch back to safe and opened his mouth to speak but Man 1 beat him to it, "drop your fucking weapon now!"

"I agree with him." Man 2 added as he tilted his head toward his partner.

The men stopped their advance just at the tip of Ethan's long shadow that stretched out in front of him on the ground – about 20 feet away.

The shadow ironically appearing to highlight the stand-off space between the parties - the unofficial no-fly zone. Ethan's shadow also visually echoed his unambiguous body language that said he was declining to "drop his fucking weapon."

The two Men's guns were so perfectly pointed in line with Ethan's face that they appeared two dimensional from his point of view. As a gesture of compromise, Ethan kept his rifle pointing at the ground rather than back at either of them.

Tension grew rapidly.

The ball was in Ethan's court. It would only take him seconds to decide what to do next, but it felt like minutes.

Ethan looked back at his castaways, their little sea of white eyes all looking back at him as if to say, "Are we cool here or what?"

*Relax Ethan.* he thought to himself.

Digesting it all rapidly, he reviewed the circumstances. He expedited his thoughts, Ethan had to assume this would all deescalate and workout if he gave these guys the control.

Even if he was wrong in conceding control, it didn't really matter. He was out gunned, flanked, and he sure as hell wasn't going to shoot first.

Man 2, started whistling the tune from the game show Jeopardy.

Keeping eye contact with Man 1, Ethan unnervingly placed his weapon on the ground.

*It's about time ass hole.* Man 1's look conveyed implicitly.

*These guys clearly had 2 different personalities.*

"Now put your hands on your head and take five steps back." Man 1 instructed.

"Are you kidding me?" Ethan scoffed.

"Nope." fired back Man 1.

Ethan complied.

Man 2 moved in. With Ethan's rifle now out of his reach, he could only watch as Man 2 dug his toe into the space between Ethan's rifle's muzzle and sling attachment point and dragged the gun towards himself.

Continuing to use his toe, Man 2 popped the rifle up by the buttstock and caught it with his left hand. He then tactically cleared the weapon, displaced the rear take-down-pin, separated the upper and lower receiver, and removed the charging handle and BCG (Bolt Carrier Group).

He carelessly tossed the charging handle to the ground and flipped the BCG up in the air. It completed a 180° revolution before landing back in his palm.

Next, taking a wide step and lowering his hips, Man 2 drew back and accelerated his arm sending the BCG hurling into the dry creek bed below.

“Jesus, this is not good.” Ethan uttered under his breath.

It was always a good policy for there to be no more weapons than free hands of the good guys in the same proximity, the problem was, by Ethan's math, his hands should be tallied with the good guys'.

The man eyed Ethan's pistol holster next. It was vacant. Ethan's pistol had been lost earlier in the day's events.

*At least my pistol would be spared the humiliation of this guy's theatrics.* He thought.

The optimism that Ethan was in the company of brothers was fleeting.

*Who in holy hell were these guys?* he toiled.

Man 2 slung his own rifle around to his back and removed a set of large zip ties from his cargo pocket.

Ethan could assume what those would be for. Thoughts spinning and with no options, he simply continued to observe.

The men weren't wearing boots. Man 2, who had just hacky-sacked his rifle off the ground and side armed its parts out of site like a second basemen, was wearing two-hundred-dollar Brooks running shoes. Being an avid distance runner himself, Ethan was familiar with the model.

Man 2 also had what looked like burn or chemical scarring covering most of his neck - tracing his jawline. His jawline must have acted like some sort of firewall during the incident that caused the scarring because his face was free of disfigurement.

Also, his ear was missing on the left side of his head. Where his ear should have been, was similar scarring and a gnarled hole which led into his ear canal.

The Fussier Man 1's face appeared common, like one that would be hard to remember. He was sporting calf high black-on-black Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars with his pants tucked in the tops.

The pants didn't match his BDU (Battle Dress Uniform) top. Nor did Man 2's. In fact, nothing really matched. They were both outfitted head-to-toe with a fatigue mash-up straight off the clearance racks at Old Serge's International Guerilla Surplus Store.

Their body armor, judging by the girth, or lack thereof, under their tops was light weight. This clearly indicated speed and mobility was a higher priority than protecting their center of mass from anything bigger than small arms fire. This means they obviously had confidence in what to expect today.

In contrast, their helmets and audio equipment were top notch. And they both wore black and olive green Nomex flight gloves that did in fact match.

Their weapons were a curiosity too. Although Ethan couldn't make out what Man 3 on the hill was shouldering, the two men in front of him carried standard M4 Carbines. Nothing special at all. Man 2 was running classic iron sights on his M4 - no optic, while Man 1 had a picatinny rail mounted optic the likes of which Ethan had never seen - this is saying a lot for a guy with eleven years in the military, four of which now in the teams. Mounted on the end of each Man's rifle was an augmented IR laser illuminator.

Abruptly, Ethan's mental note taking was rudely interrupted.

Man 2 grabbed one of Ethan's wrists atop his head, twisted it down and around to the small of his back, torquing his shoulder.

"Aaah! God damn it. What are we doing here guys?" he winced.

Man 1 grumbled an almost now predictable, "Shut the fuck up."

Then Man 2, "Down on your knees please."

Ethan begrudgingly complied.

Man 2 reached for Ethan's second wrist.

Ethan piped up, "Easy asshole, I'll do it."

But it was no use, before he could lower it himself, Man 2 snatched, twisted, and zipped it next to the other hand in just as an unfriendly manner as he had before.

He then placed his gloved index finger across Ethan's lips and whispered, "Shhhhh...talkie, talkie, no talkie" coining a phrase from Adam Sandler's block buster Billy Madison.

Ethan was at a loss.

With both of his hands secured tightly behind his back and turning purple, his eyes scorned.

Man 1 and 3 kept Ethan at gun point while Man 2 continued to work.

Man 2 reached back into his cargo pocket and pulled out a bandana.

What happened next left Ethan wholly befuddled.

In what must have been a sick primal display of dominance, after Man 2 placed the bandana over Ethan's eyes, he pulled a face and let out an utterly obnoxious flatulence.

Incredulous, Ethan scowled just as the pungent smell hit his nares.

The man apologized in jest, "sorry, I'm nervous." But he wasn't nervous at all, he was uncannily calm.

Man 2 secured the blind fold with a square knot on the back of Ethan's skull just below his occipital bone.

Ethan was blind and bound. His best guess was that he was about to be escorted somewhere, and when he got to that somewhere, he wasn't supposed to know where that somewhere was or how he got there.

Man 1 pulled out a small electronic device with an illuminated circler wand attached to the side of the device's rectangular housing and tossed it to Man 2. Man 2 slowly moved the device over Ethan's head, then up and down each side of his body. The illuminated wand blinked every time Man 2 change direction, but it never made a noise.

Man 2 keyed his radio. "We are all clear here. He doesn't have it...that's affirmative..."

It was obvious, Man 2 wasn't talking to Man 1, he was transmitting to someone on his headset.

Ethan listened intently, trying to imagine the other half of the conversation.

"Copy...yes. So, are we going with plan A or B?... Roger, Bravo it is."

Then Man 2 spoke aloud to Man 1, "You heard it, he is staying here...we are going with Bravo. Who's turn is it today?"

Man 1 looked toward Man 3 on the hill, keyed is mic and said, "Yours!" Man 1 then stuck his arm up high in the air and playfully flipped Man 3 the bird. Man 3 smiled and flipped him the bird back.

"3 tries. That's it. I get the fourth." Said Man 1.

"Deal" transmitted Man 3 still smiling.

Ethan could only listen. His mind reeled. He scoured his thoughts for an explanation, but then quickly stopped himself.

With the remaining senses he had at his disposal, he needed to remain calm, observe, and make a plan.

His inner voice now on playback; *calm, observe, plan...calm, observe, plan.*

Ethan sensed movement...a transition, Man 2 moved out and Man 1 moved in. Ethan could hear the crunching of rocks under shoes as the men switched places.

Man 2 stepped back and whipped his rifle back around to his front side.

Man 1 now stood closest to Ethan. Ethan could detect a difference in the man's smell and his nose welcomed the upgrade.

Man 1 placed his large hand on Ethan's shoulder and led his kneeling body to rotate a few degrees to the left. Ethan awkwardly shuffled on his knees following the guiding pressure.

Man 1's grip tightened on Ethan's shoulder, he then looked up to Man 3 still poised at the elevated position on the hill. Then Man 1 and Man 3 exchanged thumbs up.

What happened next luckily could not be seen by Ethan. Man 1 held his hand high and pointed a single digit straight up in the air.

Keeping visual with Man 3, Man 1 stepped back and lowered his hand parallel to the ground.

His arm out straight, with the palm facing the ground, he made a fist. Flexing at the wrist he then gestured two consecutive knocking motions above Ethan's head.

Immediately following the second knock, Man 3 who had never stopped smiling, pressed his trigger finger and sent a 7.62 x 39mm round crashing into Ethan's right shoulder.

Ethan roared in agony.

His trapezius and posterior deltoid were blown open, and his clavicle pulverized.

Ethan fell to the ground landing on the wounded side of his body, breaking the short fall with his mauled shoulder.

Lightning bolts of pain rattled his consciousness.

Ethan's body was now prone – face down. Using his foot Man 1 rolled Ethan back onto his shoulder facing him broadside to Man 3 on the hill.

Man 1 looked again at Man 3. In the same fashion as before, He held up 1 finger, then knocked twice over Ethan's now horizontal body.

The AK-47's muzzle flashed, the echo from the shot muted instantly by the idling rotor engines nearby.

In a spray, Ethan's throat ripped open from its center.

Some of the children were screaming, many of them covered their faces to avert their eyes.

As Ethan gurgled and choked from the gaping cavity in his throat, Man 1 reached down and grabbed a fist full of Ethan's now blood wet hair.

Man 2 stood completely stoic and watched as Man 1, the undertaker, pulled Ethan's entire body back to a vertical kneel using only the mechanical advantage of Ethan's scalp and hair.

Ethan's body wobbled and wavered.

Man 1 released the hair and took a step back. He pointed and knocked.

Ethan's face exploded.

Ethan's head whipped backwards over his heels; his torso immediately followed. With his hands still bound, he plopped in a heap with his chest facing the sky.

A few of the women, having witnessed unimaginable scenes of horror in their past, didn't look away. Rather they watched blankly as the blood meandered down slope in a micro flashflood, mixing with dirt on its path towards the creek bed.

It had taken Man 3 all three tries to get the head shot.

The mass of carnage and clothing that now lay in the crimson mud, no longer bore the likeness of Ethan McEwen. What lay there, was no longer the precious vessel of a patriot. It was merely biological litter.

It was done. A dark prophecy dating back to his childhood had been fulfilled. Ethan McEwen had died serving his country, or at least that is what he thought seconds before his brain went black - forever.

Chapter 2  
Joint Special Operations Command  
Pope, AFB NC

E.M.P. is an acronym for Electromagnetic Pulse. An EMP is widely considered one of the most catastrophic and realistic threats to the planet - for which there is no mitigation plan. A large EMP, like one from a solar flare or other extra-terrestrial sources, could permanently disable all electrical systems on planet earth. A localized EMP, like one created by an atomic bomb or lightning strike can permanently disable all electrical systems within their impact area. A weaponized EMP, like one created from advanced technology, can decimate small specific moving targets like vehicles and aircraft.

The red phone rang. A JSOC staffer picked it up and instantly identified herself. The bustling and windowless operations center at Pope AFB, NC, went silent.

“Get me General Stinemaker.” The Secretary of Defense barked, barely giving the officer time to finish her standard greeting.

“Yes sir, stand by.” She stretched out the coiled phone cord and handed the receiver to General Dale Stinemaker, the Commander of Joint Special Operations Command.

“General Stinemaker here”

“What just happened out there Dale?” The SecDef spat coldly.

The General didn’t answer. He too was wondering *what the hell just happened out there*.

After a confident pause, the General adjusted his posture as well as the collar of his heavily adorned uniform before expertly volleying the question, “Mr. Secretary, tell me we don’t have agency guys out there?”

“What? No of course not.” The veins in the SecDef’s brow swelled.

“I need not remind you Commander, everyone is at war, including the Special Activities Division....no one should be in God-damned Mexico, including you!” The Sec Def now clearly taking a shot at the Commander. SOF (Special Operations Forces) were over tasked department wide. For the first time in U.S. History, SOF were being used as the primary offensive force in a war, and not just “a” war, but two.

Thanks to 911, the DOD was currently at war both in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the three short years since 911, the task force that had always been nimble and nuanced had morphed into a bit of a behemoth. For the first time in their 24-year history, JSOC was conducting business as a large scale force. Stinemaker deeply resented the metamorphosis taking place in the new

millennia. Blasphemously numerous with personnel and more technically advanced than ever, JSOC was quickly becoming painfully bureaucratic and cumbersome.

Tonight however, JSOC's operation in Mexico had nothing to do with either war. It was completely pre 911-esque both in mission scope and method. The senior but greener Secretary of Defense, naive to the surgical and ethereal pre-911 nature of JSOC, was on edge.

The position of the Secretary of Defense had felt impossible the last 24 hours. At the end of the day this would be his mess in Mexico – the poor bastard was inherently accountable without being in control. He was also highly insecure about JSOC's lack of transparency and abundance of autonomy. Making it worse was the fact that there was really no one to complain to about it. When it came to dealing with their "superiors", JSOC acted like they didn't have any.

"What are you saying General? Are you suggesting this is blue on blue?" The Secretary's stomach sank at the thought of fratricide at this level.

"You mean black on black sir." The General snapped back, "Someone else who is *not supposed to be there* just took out my whole SMU, clearly not "everyone is at war." The commander paused a moment, unsure of how his words had just landed.

His words had landed like boulders...

...silence hung like a body from a noose.

*The whole Special Missions Unit?* The Secretary of Defense swallowed hard, his fragile poise evaporated instantly.

The live video footage, courtesy of a predator drone orbiting high above the Chihuahua desert, was being streamed both to the General's team at the JOC (Joint Operations Center) and to the *Tank* in Washington where the secretary, although not entirely sure what he was looking at, had just watched the encounter unfold.

The Predator served as the unit's ISR(Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), providing live IR(infrared) footage. Shortly before the red phone rang, Ethan McEwen's teammate, the Special Mission Unit's CCT, or Combat Controller, had made a desperate call for close air support from his OP (observation post) using his iridium satellite phone. But, before the 24 STS controller could finish communicating his request he bled to death. His body's thermal image was now one of 6 that lay cooling and motionless.

The General pressed on, "Mr. Secretary. ISR has pinned the sat phone call. We are vectoring F-18's out of White Sands with real world tasking as we speak. This is an air show now. We will keep you advised." Then the Commander boldly hung up the red phone.

Stienmaker stared at the phone a moment, gently tapping his knuckles against the receiver before looking up to address the room. His intense face panned around the JOC. All eyes were locked on the Commander.

He turned his broad shoulders square to the center of the room and pressed his knobby knuckles into the large conference table, "I want every eye in the sky we have on those two helicopters and wherever they are going, we are going to get there first."

Spit sprayed from his lips, "Well? what are we waiting for!" Stinemaker bashed his fist into the table and instantly the room burst back to life.

The small, specialized command center went to work. Fingers *clacked* away at keyboards and dialed phone numbers as eyes darted around the giant video grid. Within minutes, multiple satellites were redirected to Coyame, and a half dozen other airborne resources were queued for dispatch. Soon the 9-panel grid of fifty-inch flat screen tv monitors in the war room were live streaming a plethora of advanced imagery. The fleeing helicopters were the star of every show.

Inside H-1 the pilot donned his Night Vision Goggles (NVG's) and scanned his instrument panel. He toggled through an 8-inch display screen taking note of the distance, speed, and time as it counted down...

Waypoint: 13.8 miles

Ground Speed: 61 knots

ETE (Estimated Time Enroute): 18:12...18:11...18:10...

H-1 led the flight of two at an air speed that the bigger H-2 could manage while slinging the spinning shipping container under its belly.

Like cockroaches in the night, the two rotorcraft scurried along, oblivious to the fact that just minutes away, tasked with their extermination, and traveling at nearly ten times their speed, were two Navy F-18's.

Restricted Area 5107A - White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, sat 170 miles north of Coyame and was the largest military installation in the United States encompassing almost 3,200 square miles. WSMR is historic for being the place where the first atomic bomb (code named Trinity) was test detonated at Trinity Site near the northern boundary of the range on 16 July 1945. It has since become infamous for being a war games waist land. Contrary to the implication of the name, it wasn't just used as a missile range. The vast highly restricted air space above the territory made it an ideal dog fighting playground. A dog fighting playground that was the ideal place to find *Aces* capable of engaging threats in North East Mexico 24/7.

147 miles north of Cayome the two twin engine fighters streaked across the boarder. F-18 Pilot 1, the lead F-18, radioed for an updated BROCAL (bearing, range and altitude).

The controller reported back immediately, "Your target is radar contact, one-four-seven, one-five-zero, two thousand".

"Roger that." Pilot one confirmed. At their current vector and speed, and with a fuel range of nearly 600 miles, the fighters would be on top of the helos in less than 12 minutes with enough fuel to play for 30 mins and return to R-5107A.

The controller called back, "Command wants to know your loadout, what ordinance are you guys carrying?"

Having picked up real world tasking directly from a dog-fight training mission meant the fighters would have no live munitions.

This was a routine safety protocol, broadly known as “hazard trapping”. One could think of it as risk compartmentalization. There is no way someone could flip a guarded switch and fire a missile accidentally if there wasn’t one attached to the wing.

Pilot 1 waited to finish laughing out loud before keying the mic to respond, “Uh... sorry gang, we are fast but not fatal today. We are negative for loadout. We can’t offer a kinetic force option, but I would assume the bad guys don’t know that. How about a Show of Force to get things started?”

There was a sense of unresolve in the brief radio silence before the controller acknowledged, “Copy. Command confirmed - you are cleared for Show of Force. No kinetic force.”

“They want every hostage and hostile taken alive. Priority is HUMIT. We need you to try and get them to land...safely. ISR will stay at 15,000, you guys are cleared unrestricted surface to 12,000.” For some reason the controller’s choice of words made it sound like taking everyone alive was commands idea all along.

Kinetic force is a euphemism for active lethal force. It seemed being negative for loadout was precisely in line with what the doctor ordered. Collecting human intelligence (HUMIT) was top priority.

Pilot 1 set the marker on his altimeter, “Wilco (will comply), cleared surface to 12,000, showing 11 minutes out.”

Pilot 2 then called Pilot 1 on a separate air-to-air frequency, “Hey Skip, easy for them to say huh...just make them land?”

“Right? Let’s see if the bad guys will talk to us. If not, perhaps we can *motivate* them to land.” Pilot 1 replied *tongue in cheek*.

The two raced on, punching hot holes in the virgin night sky.

A few miles ahead in the darkness, the helicopters drew closer to their destination;

Waypoint: 6.3 miles

Ground Speed: 62 knots

ETE (Estimated Time Enroute): 8:12...8:11...8:10...

At 5 miles out, the captains of H-1 and H-2 both decreased power, established a normal rate of descent, and fell below the apex of the sidewalls of the gorge.

As soon as they did their blip vanished from the controller’s radar. He waited only one radar pass before calling back to the Hornets.

“...I have lost radar contact on the target. They must have descended below my coverage. You guys should be *merged plot* in 4 miles. Let me know when you have them insight. Last position was two o’clock low – south bound.”

“Roger looking...” Pilot 1 replied.

Pilot 1 retarded the throttles and slowed the fighter jet to 300 knots - the ideal *VA* (maneuvering speed) and began to look outside. Pilot 2 followed suit. The two bled altitude at an aggressive descent angle before leveling off at 8,000 feet MSL (above mean sea level).

Radar was a line-of-sight technology that the curvature of the earth and terrain could block. An aircraft not wanting to be detected by radar could take advantage of this by flying very low to the ground. This is known as *nap of the earth* flying. A merged plot meant the F-18’s were inside the same mechanical radar resolution cell as the target they were being vectored to – in simple terms, according to the last radar hit, the F-18’s should be right on top of the helos in seconds. It was time to go eyes outside.

Both pilots visually scanned outside for any sign of the helicopters. Externally mounted IR targeting POD’s followed their head movements with precise mimicry.

“You see anything yet?” asked Pilot 1.

“Negative, looking...” replied Pilot 2.

Pilot 2 looked back inside his cockpit and toggled a castle switch cycling through display modes to see if an onboard system would pick up the helicopters first.

Then Pilot 1 sounded off, “Bingo, traffic in sight. two o’clock low”

Pilot 2’s head darted back outside and confirmed, “Roger, visual contact.”

NVG visors made detectable what wouldn’t have been to the naked eye. The helicopters could be seen flying low, hugging the terrain in a wide but narrowing dry river canyon. Both helicopters were blacked out – no exterior lights. However, there were interior lights. Interior lights that made the helicopters visible thanks to the optoelectronic image enhancement of the NVG’s. The low-level red cabin lights luminating out the aft compartment windows and up through the spinning rotors highlighted the helos just enough. From above and through the NVG visor, the subtle red-light signature produced a glowing green strobe like outline of each helicopter.

Pilot 1 switched his radio selector switch to guard frequency 243.0 MHz and attempted to establish coms (communication).

Pilot 2 listened in.

“Copter flight of two east of Cayome, this is a United States Navy F-18, how copy?”

A long moment passed, no response.

Pilot 1, the Skipper, knew establishing radio coms was a long shot, but he made the call anyway. National Security Protocol required all aircraft operating to or from, within, or transitioning the

U.S. Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) to monitor frequency 243.0 MHz UHF, and, to comply with intercept procedures when engaged. Non-compliance with the procedure, even for an innocent civilian pilot taking a Sunday stroll in his private airplane, could result in the non-compliant aircraft being justifiably shut down. But today wasn't Sunday, and at this point H-1 and 2 were not presumed to be innocent nor assumed to be compliant.

He tried again, "Copter flight of two with the external load east of Cayome Mexico, this is a United States Navy F-18, you are instructed to land immediately."

The helicopters said nothing and stayed the course, their noncompliance the result of indifference more than oblivion. They had heard the call.

"Since we're not going to converse with the *squids*, do you mind turning that rubbish down?" Man 2 said over the intercom - complaining to the front seaters about the repeated chatter in his headset.

The co-pilot of H-1 looked down at the flickering amber light that indicated com traffic on GUARD frequency and reached for the volume knob on the radio receiver mounted in the center console and turned it down.

Pilot 2 chimed in on a separate air-to-air frequency to Pilot 1, "Either they're not monitoring GUARD or they're giving you the Bueller treatment."

"Maybe were not speaking their language, how about that show of force?"

"Sounds good to me."

A Show of Force was a tactic of intimidation, a display of superior air power which essentially had three elements. The first element was the visual shock of an enemy fighter appearing out of nowhere at an incomprehensible speed and unimaginable close range. Second, was the sound. A shrill so thunderous and violating that it rumbled your bowels and made you think the universe was being ripped in half by the hands of the devil himself. Lastly, was a devastating tsunami of compressed air carrying supersonic dust and debris.

Pilot 1 made the call to the controller, "...we have the targets in sight. We are unable to reach them on GUARD. We are going to engage with a Show of Force."

"Roger that, your cleared hot."

"Alright Skip, show time." Said Pilot 2 to Pilot 1.

"Yes it is. Back me up on SA (situational awareness) and let me know if you can figure out where these guys are going."

Pilot 2 remained at 8,000 feet and maintained a "God's eye view" of the situation via the SA display in his cockpit.

Pilot 1 looked outside his cockpit...then back in at his instruments...then back outside - visualizing his maneuver. His body stiffened with contained excitement.

He consciously activated his left hand and the adept muscle memory took over. The pilot, one with his machine, throttled back, rolled inverted, and pulled the nose of the aircraft - pointing it at the earth like a lawn dart. The vertical speed indicator topped out as he raced toward the desert floor. Within sixty seconds, the F-18 had descended 2,500 feet, rolled out and stabilized completing the Split-S maneuver.

He was in his element, the aircraft felt like an extension of his body. The master aviator visually confirmed his new range from the helicopters before springing back into action. Thrusting the throttle and center stick forward with fortitude, he accelerated his F-18 to over 700 MPH in another aggressive plunge.

As the fighter passed below 200 feet, below the tops of the surrounding terrain, the terrain radar sprang to life. Pilot 1 pushed lower, descending further, to within 100 feet of the jagged rising river drainage below.

Pilot 1 fixated on the near 'bin' display of the 6 x 4-inch radar screen and trusted his life on its abstract 2d representation of the terrain. It showed the desert rising sharply beside him. His fixation on the near bin however, caused him to omit the far 'bin' which showed the terrain 12+ miles out.

As he glanced outside for a visual cross check of the helicopter's position, his attention instantly diverted to the dramatic black swell in front of him.

The mountain was enormous. A massive lone feature that breached the horizon like a killer whale against the backdrop of the star filled sky. His eyes shot back inside to the far bin and confirmed its existence. The dry river gorge was a one-way bottle neck that dead ended into the only mountain for miles.

The ability to make near instantaneous risk assessments that resulted in immediate action was a regular matter of life and death for fighter pilots. It was referred to as the 80:20 rule. 80% information was enough for extreme time-sensitive decision making. Pilots had to trust their ability to adjust to the 20% unknown as it became known. Historically, not making a timely decision was worse than making a less than sure decision. In short, paralysis by analysis was an unacceptable reason to die.

The show of force maneuver had just become extremely time sensitive. Time and space was now in short supply for both Pilot 1 and his prey. As Pilot 1 barreled toward the mountain, he did a quick calculation of the space required for turnout after the fly by. The 20% information he didn't have for the calculation echoed in his head a couple times before making its way to his lips,

*"Where the fuck were these guys going?"* he whispered to himself, then radioed Pilot 2.

"You see anything that could work as a HLZ (helicopter landing zone) yet?"

"Negative. Not in the direction they are headed." Pilot 2 responded.

“Yeah man, it is all no bueno down here, you see *Mt. Mexico* out there...” Pilot 1 said, making up his own name for the obstacle, “...it is a sheer 1,500 foot cliff on this side. What’s their end game?”

Pilot 2 quickly responded. “Yeah I see it alright. There is no way they have the performance capability to climb over the mountain from their position and if they had planned to circumnavigate it, they would have had to have adjusted their course a half a mile ago.”

“Copy that. I will be cutting it close myself. I need to do this now. I will be left turnout for return to target. Keep a lock on the lead helicopter.”

“Wilco, stay safe Skip. You don’t think they are planning to...”

Pilot 1 cut him off, knowing exactly what he was going to say before he said it, “Don’t even go there...”

Despite just having the same thought, the possibility that the flight of two was on short final for mass suicide was not data he wanted to contend with at that moment.

Pilot 1 reinforced his hand position and pushed the F-18 past Mach 1 driving it even closer to the ground. A pair of amber cones torched from its tail as the F-18 screamed towards H-1 and H-2 with a wrath of dust and rock in tow.

The helicopters continued their relative creep - rising and falling, banking left and right, following the subtle changes down the gorge.

The pilot of H-1 scanned his instrument panel again,

Waypoint: 2.4 miles

Ground Speed: 63 knots

ETE: 1:35...1:34...1:33...

From the JOC, the drone operator widened the ISR’s camera’s aperture, now capturing both predator and prey in the same moving video frame.

Then it happened. With the whole of the JOC on the edge of their seats and their eyes glued to the 9-panel grid, the four screens that displayed the drone feed went out. The four screens flashed fuzz-grey followed by the momentary appearance of a thin set of grainy horizontal lines. The lines buzzed - splitting each screen in half.

Everyone gasped, nearly sucking the air out of the small room.

Then two words appeared, centered on every screen...

LOST LINK

The ISR operator sprang out of his ergonomic rolling office chair and pounded his fingers frantically on his primary keyboard, not even knowing the problem was worse than he imagined.

Although the drone was preprogrammed to orbit in the rare case of link loss, it couldn't, because something even rarer had just happened. The Rotax 914 turbocharged engine magneto ignition system also failed.

In short, the aircraft had lost its whole electrical sole.

With no intelligent control and no power plant, the unmanned glider helplessly tracked away from the action slowly bleeding altitude.

Meanwhile 13,000 feet below the drone, Pilot 1 watched his cockpit go black. His oneness with his machine decoupled as the digital fly by wire flight control system went dead in his hands. At less than 200 feet AGL, near Mach 1, and with no mechanical linkage to the flight controls, the top gun graduate panicked for the first time in his life. Both of his hands shot between his legs and grabbed the ejection handle. Then, he stopped himself -

*Shit*

Another split-second risk assessment had to be made. He was going too fast. A supersonic ejection was certain to cause serious injury - more likely death.

Time seemed to stand still but it was only milliseconds - he thought of the first man to perform a supersonic ejection, George Smith. Despite ending up blind in both eyes and in the hospital for seven months, Smith was not only the first to perform a supersonic ejection, he was also the first man to survive one - meaning the day after his event in 1955 the survival rate was 100%, 1:1.

With the spirit of George Smith in mind, Pilot 1 pressed his head back against the seat rest and secured a double fist-full grip on the handle between his legs and pulled.

8,000 feet above, Pilot 2 screamed profanely in his own dark and lifeless metal tube. The billowing ball of orange fire from the crash below bounced off his canopy and set his cockpit aglow. There was no way for him to know. Did the helicopters crash? Or was it the Skipper?

He forced the question out of his mind and went to work on his own problems. Thousands of feet up, he had more time than the Skipper. He cycled the battery switch and began an air restart sequence for Engine 1:

1. APU - ON
2. ENGINE CRANK - LEFT
3. THROTTLE TO FLT IDLE – 20% N1

With engine 1 back online he quickly repeated the process for Engine 2 then thrust the throttle forward and recovered the aircraft from its plummet.

Aviate, navigate, communicate was the priority hierarchy. With the fighter back under positive control, Pilot 2 rushed to bring his avionics back online. He was desperate to make contact with the Skipper. He got his radios back first, then the SA.

“Skipper radio check, are you alright?”

The Skipper never answered his question, but the SA screen did.

The two helicopter targets were still speeding along. The Skipper's F-18 was gone. Pilot 2's stomach inverted. His distress quickly compounded with the horror that the helicopters were seconds from impacting the face of "Mount Mexico".

*Oh my God, they are going to kill everyone.*

There was no time left to turn. There was no HLZ.

Inside H-1 the Estimated Time Enroute (ETE) made its final count down.

ETE: 0:03...0:02...0:01...

Man 2 peered over the backs of the pilot seats and looked through the front windshield as the helicopter came face-to-face with the mountainside. Grinning *ear to missing ear*, he keyed the helicopter intercom and commented to his crew, "Bro, I love this part."

Just as the tips of the spinning rotor blades appeared to make contact with the side of the cliff face, the ethereal hologram of the mountainside began to dematerialize.

A low frequency wavering electronic interference could be heard pulsing in the crew's headsets as the 3d image transitioned to 2d, and then pixelated away to nothing - revealing a vast interior cavern made of steel beams and stone.

Like passing through from the front side to the back side of a waterfall, H-1 and 2 disappeared from the outside world into an enormous hidden private chamber. Echoes overwhelmed the unintentional auditorium as the roaring rotorcraft beat the cold damp air into submission. Now hovering in place, both helicopters made their final routine vertical approach to three large, marked landing pads below.

60 feet above Pad 1 Man 1 slid open the right-side cargo door, looked down, and keyed the intercom, "Right clear."

Then Man 3 slid open the left side, "left clear."

On Pad 3, a man wearing elbow high leather gloves and holding a static wand stood ready to receive the spinning container. Inside the container the nauseated human cargo embraced one another and contemplated their fate. H-2 hovered patiently behind H-1 and waited for hand signals as colossal clamshell doors slowly rolled closed behind his helicopter.

With the rotorcraft now safely sealed inside, the electromagnetic force field reenergized outside the hidden entrance to the subterranean base.

"Sterile Cockpit" was a term used for radio silence. During critical phases of flight only essential communication was allowed. With the helicopter now securely on the ground and the engines rolled down to flight idol, Man 2 was the first to break the silence,

"Nice work team. Anyone else hungry? I am starving!"

“When are you not hungry?” Replied the Co-pilot.

“Never. It is Taco night, right?”

Then the pilot chimed in, “Well it is Tuesday - at least for the next few hours.”

Man 2 looked at Man1 slapping him on the shoulder, “You cook I’ll clean?”

Man 1, Mr. Serious, didn’t look back, he simply gave a confirming nod.

Man 3 said nothing. He just smiled.