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DEATH VALLEY

SOMEWHERE IN ABYSSINIA

MAJ. JOHN RANDAL, DSO, MC, LAY ON A RIDGE STUDYING the coffee plantation in the valley down below, through the Zeiss binoculars he had captured from a Panzer colonel at Calais, France, in what now seemed another life.

The plantation was something the Italians called a Democratic Colonization Project (DCP). The Fascists had the model farms scattered all around Italian East Africa. The layout of this DCP consisted of a main house, three outbuildings and a tall silo.

The Blackshirts had brought agricultural experts by the thousands to Italian East Africa to operate the model farms after forcibly evicting the previous owners. The projects were intended to be showpieces. "The Leader," Benito Mussolini, wanted to demonstrate to the international community the superiority of the Fascist system of managing an African colony.

The plantations were worked by slave labor, something that Il Duce failed to mention.

Major Randal glanced at his black-faced Rolex wristwatch. The lime green digits read 0615 hours. The watch was a present from his ex-fiancée Capt. the Lady Jane Seaborn, OBE, RM.

Originally it had been intended as a birthday present for her husband, but he had been lost at sea before she could give it to him ... temporarily lost, as it turned out. This had made Major Randal's love life, for lack of a better word, complicated. Though it had been pointed out that Captain Lady Seaborn was in Africa working to support Force N instead of home in the U.K. with her returned-from-the-dead husband.

Major Randal thought about her every time he glanced at the watch. He had been informed by a reliable source that this was why Lady Jane had given him the Rolex. If true, it worked.

Also attached to his wrist on a faded olive green canvas strap that matched his watchband was a wrist compass. It was made by Rolex for the Italian firm Panerai on contract to the Italian Navy, especially for its elite frogmen. Captain Lady Seaborn had given the compass to him on the last night he was in Kenya. It was a gift from Cdre. Richard "Dickey the Pirate" Seaborn, VC, OBE, who had captured it when he boarded the Italian submarine the *Galileo*.

Now he had two reasons to think about Lady Jane on a regular basis. Not that he needed them.

"Stand by ready," Major Randal ordered.

"Roger that, John," Capt. "Geronimo" Joe McKoy replied, fiddling with the traversing wheel of the tripod machine gun mount on which a Boys .55-caliber Anti-Tank Rifle was mounted.

The Boys could not penetrate any known armor and was arguably the worst antitank weapon in history. On paper its cigar-sized, .55-caliber, armor-piercing bullet had a maximum effective range of one mile and was extremely accurate. However, in practice the weapon's loud blast, punishing recoil, and its iron sights limited its actual range to 400 to 600 yards.

Captain McKoy studied the weapon and saw possibilities. He installed an all-steel, No. 32 Mk1 scope designed for use on Bren light

machine guns on a Boys and then mounted the AT rifle on an obsolete 110-pound GP Hotchkiss Omnibus tripod. The result was a deadly accurate .55-caliber rifle effective out to its maximum effective range of one mile.

Why no one had ever thought of the combination before was a fair question. Captain McKoy had created the world's finest long-range sniper's weapons system.

1 Guerrilla Corps (Parachute), Force N had a dozen of them scattered between its Mule Raider Battalions (MRB).

In the early morning light down in the valley, Lt. Butch "Headhunter" Hoolihan, RM, could be seen leading a file of his Force Raiding Company troops into position on the south side of the plantation building complex. His Abyssinian Patriots were armed with U.S. M-1903 A-1 Springfield rifles. The men were wearing Tom Mix style cowboy hats and had bandoleers of .30-caliber ammunition strapped across their chests, making them look like Mexican banditos. The native troops were all barefoot.

In addition to rifles, each soldier was armed with a short sword. Only after a great deal of persuasion had they been convinced to leave their small round shields and spears behind. The Abyssinians were miserable shots—mainly because ammunition was currency to them, so they never fired any to practice.

The Force Raiding Company troops were the exception. They had been trained in the fundamentals of marksmanship when they were No. 3 Company of the 2nd Mule Raider Battalion, "Lounge Lizards" trained in Kenya before being selected to deploy to Force N as the Force Raiding Company.

Regardless of their training, the troops still preferred the spear as their weapon of choice, but eight-foot spears and shields are unwieldy.

Lieutenant Hoolihan had finally hit upon issuing his men bayonets, and that solved the problem. Bayonets are heavy. More ammunition could be carried if they were left behind. They also took up precious cargo space on the handful of aircraft that supplied Force N. However, having a standard issue (U.S. Army) 16-inch bayonet fixed on their rifles which could be used like a spear made the troops happy.

In a small guerrilla army far behind enemy lines, having happy indigenous troops is a good thing.

On the north side of the plantation house, Major Randal could see that Lt. Dick Courtney was already in position with his two former Gold Coast Border Police strikers, X-Ray and Vanish, and a small detachment of Force Raiding Company men. Also with him was an experienced Green Jacket, formerly of the Rifle Brigade and Swamp Fox Force, manning a Hotchkiss Mk1 light machine gun. The LMG was notoriously prone to jamming, but it was hoped that a trained Raiding Forces operator could keep it running.

The Rolex read 0630.

Normally, people on farms are early risers. But this was Africa, and there were a lot of hungry animals with big teeth out and about—not to forget shifta bandits. So no one on Abyssinian plantations ventured forth until well after daylight. Everyone was still inside the DCP model farm.

Lieutenant Courtney ordered, “Commence firing.”

On his command, the Hotchkiss LMG opened, as did everyone else in his detachment, firing their M-1903 A-1 Springfields.

The result was instantaneous. The Italian nationals and the farm security detail spilled out of the main house and the outbuildings, some half-dressed, and stood to. The Blackshirts manned the fighting positions on the north side of the perimeter in the direction the firing was coming from.

That was a mistake. Lieutenant Courtney was carrying out a feint. And it worked like a charm.

As soon as the Italians built up their base of return fire directed toward Lieutenant Courtney’s men, on the far south side of the plantation house Lieutenant Hoolihan stood up and shouted loud enough (he hoped) for the people inside the main building to hear the command every Royal Marine officer secretly longs to give: “Fix bayonets!”

This was a completely unnecessary order since the men of Force Raiding Company never, ever *unfixed* theirs.

“Move out!”

The Force N troops stepped off in a ragged line formation and, as they had been trained to do, bolted and fired their rifles every time their bare

left foot hit the ground. The Patriots were screaming savage war cries as much to build up their own courage as to intimidate the opposition. The crackle of forty M-1903 A-1 Springfields was inspiring even if they were not hitting much, not even their objective—the three-story plantation house.

Italian resistance melted the instant the security detail realized they had fallen for the oldest trick in the book. Those men not already dead or wounded bolted from their fighting positions. A lone sniper remained at his post in the top of the silo and began firing on Lieutenant Hoolihan's assault line.

BAAAAAROOOOOMMM! Captain McKoy's Boys .55-caliber Anti-Tank Rifle spoke. A tiny puff of smoke appeared from the target followed by a small "crunch," and there was no more firing from the silo.

Lieutenant Hoolihan signaled one of his platoon leaders, Bimbashi Cord Granger, to clear the outbuildings while he continued the attack on the main objective.

Lana Turner, one of the two slave girls Major Randal had liberated on his first day in-country, brought up his white mule, Parachute. Then, with the other ex-slave, Rita Hayworth, in hot pursuit, the three made a death-defying ride straight down the steep ridge, racing to get to the plantation house in time to influence the outcome of the firefight.

Waldo Treywick, himself a former slave, and Gubbo Rekash, *aka* Cheap Bribe, the Patriot commander of Major Randal's auxiliary troops, and his shifta, came pouring around the mountain on their animals at a dead run. Each man was leading a mule belonging to one of the Force Raiding Company soldiers. The Patriot troops were hoping to get to the scene of the action before all the loot was gone.

In the world of the Abyssinian shifta bandit, there were only the quick and the broke.

As Lieutenant Hoolihan's assault line approached the plantation house, Lieutenant Courtney ordered, "Shift your fires!"

The Hotchkiss Mk1 machine gunner adjusted his point of aim to the main house as planned and swept through it from left to right, then ceased fire. Within seconds the assault troops hit the building. Lieutenant Hoolihan led them inside with his Thompson submachine gun at his shoulder.

Major Randal and the two girls rode up. Cheap Bribe and his bandits thundered into the yard. Inside the house there were a couple of muffled pops, then the *RAAAMP* of the Thompson was heard.

Lieutenant Hoolihan appeared at the door. “Clear, sir,” he reported, Royal Marine cool.

“Nice job, stud,” Major Randal said. “Secure all the military-type weapons, then let Bribe’s boys clean out the rest.”

When Waldo translated that to the one-eyed bandit chief, the old scoundrel immediately started shouting commands to his men. The established protocol was that he and Major Randal would divvy up the take once it had been collected—with anything of military value going to Force N and the bandits keeping the rest.

Gubbo Rekash was a veteran shifta chieftain. He suspected that there was going to be hard money or jewels in the house somewhere, and he was already making plans to strip search his Patriots once they made camp later that day. Any of his men caught hoarding loot was going to be in serious trouble.

Cheap Bribe only had one punishment for major crimes, like not turning in all the captured booty—and that was banishment. To be cast out was a fate worse than death. In a country where murder was the national sport and strangers were viewed as fair game, anyone on his own was in for a slow, painful demise.

The threat of banishment should have been a major deterrent. However, there was always someone in his band willing to take a chance. So Cheap Bribe never did. His policy was to consider every member of his command guilty until proven innocent.

There were no prisoners. Any of the Italians or their minions who had not run away were dead. Force N was fighting a war to the knife. No quarter was asked or given.

Orders had been issued before the action began not to pursue anyone who tried to escape. Capt. Hawthorne Merryweather, the Force N Special Warfare Officer assigned from Psychological Warfare Executive, *wanted* panicked Italians arriving at the nearest Blackshirt base describing the attack.

“You’d better come see this, sir,” Lieutenant Hoolihan said.

Inside the house, the sack was on with the Patriots frantically tearing through drawers and closets and climbing up into the ceiling. The master bedroom on the third floor was an ugly scene. There was a dead blond woman sprawled on her bed in a pink silk negligée with a bloody head wound and a dead Italian male in his fifties on the floor—also with a wound to the head. A Bodeo 10.4mm service revolver was laying next to him.

“We do that?”

“No, sir. It looks like the plantation manager killed his wife to keep her from being captured, then shot himself, a murder—suicide. I wanted you to see for yourself, Major.”

“Roger,” Major Randal said. “Search this room for anything of intelligence value, then let Bribe’s boys in to get at the rest.”

“Sir, I ...”

“This is guerrilla war, Butch; women get shot like anybody else.”

Waldo came in, “Gunroom downstairs, Major. Got some heavy huntin’ rifles would ‘a’ come in handy when we was sittin’ up for lion every night. Couple ‘a’ right nice over ‘n’ under Beretta bird guns down there too.”

“Secure the weapons we need, Mr. Treywick,” Major Randal ordered. “Tell Cheap Bribe to hurry it up. I want to move out shortly.”

“Shot his wife, huh?” Waldo said. “Wops is real brave when they got the upper hand, not so much when the shoe’s on the other foot.”

Out in the yard, the Patriots were piling up the plunder. Major Randal mounted Parachute as Captain McKoy came trotting up with the three mules that carried his Boys Anti-Tank Rifle, followed by his security detail.

“Butch did a right nice job,” the ex-Arizona Ranger said, pulling out a thin cigar and biting off the end.

“Yes, he did.”

Waldo came outside with two of the Force Raiding Company troops, each carrying an armful of weapons confiscated from the gunroom.

“We’re moving in fifteen minutes, Mr. Treywick.”

When Lieutenant Hoolihan walked outside, Major Randal ordered, “There’s too many men bunched up here at the house, Lieutenant. Post security.”

The orgy of looting continued, with Cheap Bribe's men dragging everything that could be moved out onto the yard, including overstuffed chairs, sofas, even a slate pool table. It was a mad race between the Patriots to see who could score the most treasure, even if most of it could not be carried away on mule back.

"You planning on playing pool, John?"

"Might be nice to have us a game now and then," Waldo said.

"Hope springs eternal," Major Randal said.

Kaldi, the Force N interpreter, reported, "We found a small safe, sire. It was open, but there was nothing in it but documents, some of the manager's personal papers and a handful of cheap jewelry."

Major Randal glanced at his Rolex. "Time to go, Butch, saddle up."

A detail was driving in the livestock that the raiders wanted to take with them. Exultant bandits were wearing petticoats, colorful men's neckties or curtains draped around their necks. One stuck a lampshade on top of his Tom Mix hat.

A giant letter "N" crudely painted on the side of the silo made it clear who had come calling. Captain Merryweather was going around and placing a calling card he had recently printed up on his mobile printing press on every dead body. The cards had a large "N" on the front and the message, "If you are reading this you may be next. 1 Guerrilla Corps (Parachute), Force N."

The back of the card read, "If everything is blowing up around you—it's probably us."

As the raiders rode out, all the buildings were in flames.

All across central Abyssinia, the four Force N MRBs were carrying out similar operations following orders to "move fast, hit hard and disappear."

Major Randal's private war was in full swing.