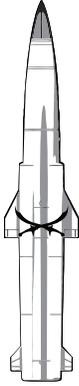


M.J. Mollenhour

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1

Daybreak
Amazon River backwaters
South of Manaus, Brazil

Screams. Screams drove Jack McDonald on. Screams tightened his grip on the throttle. Screams played over and over from the video surveillance he'd just watched.

Her screams.

Jack had watched the monitor's surreal, black and white, night vision camera images in horror as Consuela screamed, thrashing against the men who tore at her dress. Her skin, bronzed by years under the Brazilian sun, glistened, slick from fighting for her life. Her long, dark hair flung wildly about as she kicked and clawed her two attackers.

She screamed his name at the covert microphone, begging him in English to help her, urging him to come, to hurry and to kill these two men who were pinning her down even as Jack dashed to the canoe.

Racing through the Amazon River backwaters as fast as the motorized canoe would buzz, his tortured mind reverberated her screams for rescue. Time slowed, unyielding to his curses and rage. Time mocked him, forcing him to listen to the echoing screams. Time and space refused to warp to his will, leaving him droning slowly, slowly through the swollen swamp toward

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Consuela. Nothing could cut his short canoe run through the jungle waters by even a precious minute.

As if time's stubbornness and Consuela's repeating screams were not torture enough, other screams rose in dissonant chorus—screams from a different time, a different jungle, and from a different woman. From a different—death.

In this familiar vision from the past, a woman pressed her hands to her gaunt face and gaped down at him in shock and grief. *Or, did her eyes accuse?* He knelt on both knees in front of her, cradling her husband's bloodied head in his lap, groping for the severed artery, desperate to stanch the bleeding. Jack stuffed his own Combat Gauze into the wound but blood flowed, unabated. Jack screamed, "Doc! Quikclot!"

The woman's husband, conscious of fading away, mouthed, "Thank you," to the young American officer holding his head. Then, having absolved his would-be rescuer, the dying man peacefully shifted his gaze upward to his wife, unafraid of The Grim Reaper, concerned now only with trying to console his love. She looked back into his face, saw her husband's life ebb away, and she screamed again and again.

That memory had returned from years ago in the seemingly suspended time and still jungle night. The rage-grief duet screams from the two women struck ethereal disharmony in the mind of the man choking the motor's tiller—and then *that other* scream returned to join them.

Unlike the other two in the maddening trio, he had never heard this punctuated scream. He could only imagine his wife's scream, her violent death, her loneliness at life's abrupt end, without him there to treat her wounds or to console her. He had been away—again—at her death; but, on many nights, he had

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relived her last moments, her terror just before the crash—and he heard her screams in his nightmares.

High-pitched, outboard motor whines cut through the haunting cacophony. The angry engine churned and moved the canoe forward from the channel into the lake. His ghosts pleaded with him to hurry! Their voices urged him on toward the yet-living woman, but the wound-out motor argued with them, scolding the lone American in the slender wooden boat to slow down, threatening him with a breakdown. Threatening him with *failure*.

But, not tonight. Not again. He would not lose the woman just ahead in the jungle, pinned on the floor of the bungalow. Not like he failed the woman whose husband he lost in that bamboo hut in the Philippines.

Not like he had lost his wife.

This time, he would *not* arrive just tiny time-slices too late. He crouched, set his jaw, and squinted hard ahead, jungle to the left, open lake water to the right. The sun's rays probed through the forest at the edge of the lake, determined to make morning break through the canopy. He twisted the throttle with all his might, as if to squeeze more drops of gasoline through the fuel line.

Jack wanted to scream, too—scream with fury at the evil men who, right now, might be claiming his agent's life. He bit his lip and stared ahead, straining to spot the creek's mouth from among the rising mist-curtains of tangled brown and green.

There! He almost missed it.

He shoved the outboard's throttle handle hard right. The canoe canted and slowed in the sharp turn, but the canoe creaked from the strain and obeyed, piercing the narrow creek mouth.

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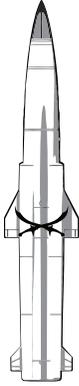
Now, straight ahead. Only a few hundred yards more. Only the whining motor's time-space limitations stayed him from the throats of the men who would slay her—who would slay Consuela.

Not this time. Not like the Philippines.

The bow cut through murky waters, darker here than on the lake, with jungle pressing in. The tall, broad-shouldered man seated at the tiller overbalanced the canoe just a bit. When he ducked from the snare of a low-hanging vine, the canoe lurched crazily, slamming against a rubber tree root, almost capsizing. The collision pitched him headfirst into the gunwale. He struggled to his knees, fought the vines away and seized the throttle again. The canoe leveled, regaining lost speed as he aimed it up the creek channel like a dagger. He wiped the blood trickling into his narrowed eyes and glared at the bungalow emerging from the gloom ahead.

He prayed to God that Consuela still lived and that God would grant him the furious grace to fall upon them in time to save her life.

Not this time. Not like that other jungle dawn in the Philippines.



2

*December 2002, daybreak
Cartowan Village
Basilan Island, Philippines*

“Attack first light Lieutenant Jack! What you think? Slip away again if we not hit now—hit hard. What you think?” Batenga urged the tall American Army officer, now almost as brown as he.

Jack thought his counterpart in the Filipino Marine Light Reaction Company was as bloodthirsty a little soldier as he’d ever seen, that’s what he thought. “Fierce and Fearless at Five-Five”—“4F” Jack had nicknamed him. Jack would fight with 4F anywhere.

4F squatted low, wound like a tiger ready to spring, waiting for his American adviser’s agreement. The American rolled over and peered into Batenga’s fiery eyes. He looked past, at Batenga’s men, or at least toward those he could see. Between the camouflage and weeks of mud, all of the men blended with the rich jungle earth in this murky mixture of night shadow and new day.

“What you think? What you think, L-T Jack?” Lieutenant Batenga whispered, grinning wickedly from ear to ear, barely able to contain his primal urge for combat, for rescue—for revenge.

“I’ll tell you what I think, 4F,” Jack started to say, but checked

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his speech.

Lying prone, 40 yards from the enemy just wasn't the time for Jack to tell Batenga that he thought Batenga's hot, dank little corner of the Global War on Terror, here in the extreme southern Philippine Islands, to be the strangest place on earth—the Far East version of that line in Europe roughly marking the furthest advance of the old Ottoman Empire. South of here, you entered Moslem Indonesia's islands at your own risk. Sometimes, staring out over the Celebes Sea, Jack saw this line, like a boundary between alien beings, shifting like a long, strung out swirling mass of venomous sea snakes, but clearly marking the two different worlds—as different as land is from water.

“I say ‘Go.’ I say ‘Attack,’” Jack whispered to Batenga, instead.

Batenga gave Jack thumbs-up and grinned wider, if that were possible. Already, Batenga popped the caps from the ends of the M-72 LAW anti-tank rocket and extended the launcher tube until it snapped into place and locked. He glanced behind to make sure no hapless soldier was about to be roasted in the back-blast. Up on one knee to clear the brush, Batenga fired the portable rocket that boomed out the unmistakable attack signal. The Light Reaction Company men rose from the earth on line as one, their rifle fire and curses rolling before them like a wave of sudden death.

It was over in two minutes for these Abu Sayyaf terrorists.

The village mayor's intel had been solid. The Light Reaction Company caught the Abu Sayyaf holding the kidnapped Americans right where the mayor said—in the abandoned village between the road intersection and the creek.

Bad choice. Desperate, Jack guessed. Cornered. Tired. Hungry. Weren't they all? Time to end it.

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The Company moved in at midnight and spent a stealthy night crawling into position for the first-light raid in the morning. One squad set up on line in ambush along the north road, another blocked the east road—no escape either way for the enemy. The other two squads deployed on line across the creek, crossing this “danger area” by rushing in unison just as Jack had trained them, exposed for only a flash, disappearing into the brush on the far side, then crawling forward as one. Then, the two squads stayed on line as they stalked in the dark as close to the abandoned—but now Abu Sayyaf-occupied village—as possible.

Good plan. Combat choreography. The blocking squads ambushed the leftover Abu Sayyaf trying to run away. Good men. Good mission: free the hostages grabbed at the seaside resort over a year ago—and kill any Abu Sayyaf they caught terrorizing Basilan Island. Oh, yes, all within the Rules of Engagement, of course. Oh, yes, the ROE. But, out here, with Batenga’s men, far away from camera lenses, forgotten by the American public, and with the military lawyers covering commanders’ asses in Afghanistan and Iraq, they adapted the ROE to their nasty little war against the Abu Sayyaf beheaders—the “Abee-headers” Jack and his men called them, to make sure they didn’t forget the kind of enemy they hunted.

Without speaking, each of the men had decided that he would take no prisoners today. Each somehow understood the Light Reaction Company’s unanimous agreement—and the concurrence of their sun and grime-darkened American Army advisor. Maybe keep one of the wounded for questioning. Maybe. For a while.

And the Filipino Marine Corps Light Reaction Company had succeeded—finally.

What a mix of emotions! His men soldiering expertly, raiding just as they’d been taught. And victory.

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But also loss.

Relief, but grief.

And guilt. Numbing guilt.

Success, but First Lieutenant Jack McDonald, U.S. Army, 1st Special Forces Group, assigned to organize, train and advise this Light Reaction Company, would second-guess this raid now and forever.

Later, back at their base camp, weapons cleaned, gear hung and ready for the next mission, still in his filthy uniform, Jack sat at his laptop and stared at the screen. What else was there to say? Finally, he keyed into the report the terse final phrasing: “Husband died; saved wife.”

It was the violent death of long-held hope that finally broke her. Their yearlong captivity frayed their sanity, but always the kidnapped couple hoped and prayed. Hope endures so much. They had endured and encouraged the others, but they had seen others in their group singled out by their kidnapers, some raped, others beheaded. Still, the young missionary pilot and his wife had always clung to the hope of seeing their children again.

Then, this new morning of captivity crackled with gunfire and the promise of imminent rescue by the soldiers. This time, the two could tell, their Abu Sayyaf captors had been caught lax, their three perimeter guards dozing. This time, the machine gun fire clearing the dirt street and the charging men swarming toward them assured victory mere seconds away. Rescue. They’d dared to hold to hope, to faith, and now the Filipino Marines had arrived.

But hope whiplash-reversed again in the dawn crossfire: assassination by one of the Muslim kidnapers, bitterly exacting one more death before facing his own? Or, was it a stray round,

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an accident, a “friendly fire” tragedy, perhaps fired by the very American officer accompanying the band of men bent on rescuing them?

Either way, her husband, hands still tied to the post, drooped and fell on the floor, his blood pooling.

It was this realization of their enduring hope, raised to immediate reality, then shattered in front of her, that released her screams from within her as Death clutched for her husband’s bound, exhausted body. Even as the jubilant young officer sprang up the steps into the hut to greet them in excited English, she screamed for her husband, finally, finally despairing.

Her screams stopped the soldier’s own jubilant cheers.

He stood, shocked for a moment, then dropped to his knees and began first aid, shouting for the medic, groping into the mess for the artery to close it off, urging the man to live, to live. He stuffed a blood-clotting bandage into the bullet hole, but rolled the wounded man over gently and saw the gaping exit wound—and knew.

Had it been his round? He’d killed their guards, hot to get his red-dot sight on their black hearts, pressing the M-4 trigger quickly to kill them before they could present the hostage couple as shields. Two to the chest—shift the dot—two more to the chest in two quick trigger presses—shift the dot and press twice more—taking out all three guards in less than two seconds. Finished off the one still moving with a head shot. Good shooting, he thought, but it all happened so fast.

Had he been too eager?

Did she blame him?

He looked up at her and knew her grief.

Oh, God, had it been his bullet?

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Afterward, Jack shifted and steadied himself with his M-4 carbine against the palm tree, his mind and eyes blurring even as 4F gently led the rescued American woman away to the waiting Blackhawk. Jack turned again and stared at the young missionary pilot's lifeless body. Jack shielded his eyes from the rest of the men as if to guard against the chopper's rotor prop-wash kicking up dust and chaff, and he wept.

For the young man. For their four, fatherless children. For their mother.

And, Lieutenant Jack McDonald, a young man himself, though hardened by Rangers at Fort Benning and combat in Afghanistan, Columbia, and now in the Philippines, wept for salvation from all the seemingly endless evil in the world.