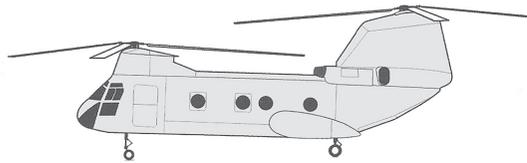


Rotorboys

by

Larry Carello



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Author's Notes

Rotorboys is a work of military fiction, inspired by my time flying the CH-46 helicopter in the Western Pacific theater. All characters are fictional; resemblance to any real people or actual events is purely coincidental.

References to historical military and political figures are accurate to the best of my knowledge, except for the meeting depicted in Chapter 26 between Ferdinand Marcos and two naval officers. That event, of course, never really happened.

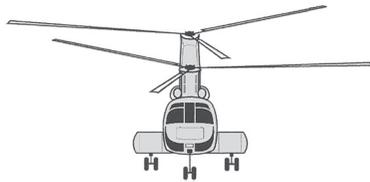
The U. S. Navy retired the last of its CH-46s in 2004, capping off the aircraft's forty-year span of service to the fleet. U.S. Marines continue to fly this splendid machine on missions around the globe.

Larry Carello
June 2013

About the Cover Artist

Depicted on the cover is "Sideflare 65" painted by Emmett Lancaster, an award-winning commercial artist who worked in charcoal, pastels, oil, and acrylic. His service as a B-26 pilot during World War II and later with the Arizona Air National Guard imbued him with a love of aviation. He created numerous aviation-themed paintings, including this one of an H-46 with the first detachment deployed from the newly commissioned VERTREP squadron, HC-11, based at NAS North Island, California.

For all those who know how to hover



Prologue

The nightmare always began the same way. Bud Lammers set down his Huey gunship in a grassy clearing during a raging tropical storm. He was the only soul on board – his copilot and door gunner had vanished. He keyed his mike and called their names, but heard only static in his headset. Bud twisted the helicopter’s engine throttle to its idle position, unstrapped and stepped from the aircraft’s landing skid onto the soggy Vietnamese soil. His flight boots sank ankle-deep as he struggled across the clearing searching for his crew. About one hundred meters away, he saw images of men as they emerged from the bush. Bud shielded his eyes from the downpour and focused on the images. They were a team of American fighters. The men sighted the helo and began running toward it. Bud tried to pivot and return to his aircraft, but the quagmire had risen to his knees and he was stuck in place. A rifle shot tore through the wet air, then another, and another. Bud turned to see a throng of black-clad rebels in pursuit of the Americans. He fumbled for his sidearm, but the holster latch was jammed; he couldn’t open it. He stood helplessly and, for the countless time, watched the surreal tragedy unfold. The enemy’s bullets found their targets; the first American fell to the ground. One after another they dropped, until the team’s leader was fighting alone, refusing to surrender. Ultimately, a flurry of lead shredded the valiant warrior’s legs and he toppled face first into the mud. With their last foe eliminated, the rebels turned toward Bud and took aim.

Lammers bolted awake and raised his head from the damp pillow. His heart raced as he grappled in the dark for the reading lamp suspended above his bunk. He found it and flicked on its switch. Cold, grayish light illuminated the tiny stateroom. A chill ran through him as frigid air from a ceiling vent blew against his sweat-soaked T-shirt. Bud saw his flight suit hanging from the corner of a locker door. It swayed ominously, like a pendulum, as USS *San Angelo* began taking some moderate rolls. He checked his watch; still a few minutes to compose himself before today's launch. He took a deep breath and then reached for his cigarettes.



Chapter 1

Flying a helicopter isn't easy. Its whirling, twirling mass of moving parts makes it inherently unstable. Piloting a helicopter, low-level over the water at night, is one of the most challenging jobs that any aviator can ask of himself.

Bud Lammers hated to fly over the open ocean after dark. He was an experienced helo pilot with combat under his belt. He'd been shot at and had seen just about every emergency that his aircraft's complicated systems could throw at him. But in the course of a two-hour nighttime flight, he'd burn a dozen smokes and chew half a pack of gum to keep himself calm. Forget about eating; he'd skip dinner in the officers' wardroom, preferring instead to scrounge something from the cooks after landing.

"Sideflare Zero-One, wind steady at zero-two-zero, eight knots. Green deck," said the voice in Bud's headset.

"Roger, Tower, copy green deck."

Bud rolled the H-46 smoothly to wings-level, shifted his eyes from the warm security of his flight instruments and found the ship, about a mile ahead. A smattering of dim lights on *San Angelo's* flight deck twinkled on this moonless night in the South China Sea. At his altitude of two hundred feet, he'd have only a few seconds to get his line-up squared away before he started a gradual, constant-angle descent to the ship's flight deck. Unlike his fixed-wing brothers flying their sexy machines to the carriers, he had no visual guidance, or "ball" as they called it. No angle-of-attack indicator or landing signal officer to talk him down.

"Looks good, Boss. Speed ninety knots, descent rate five hundred," said his copilot, Ron Carbone. The ship's landing pad grew larger in their windscreen. The aircraft buffeted as it passed through the twisting air that funneled around *San Angelo's* superstructure, prompting Bud to make some quick corrections to stay on course. Now, less than one hundred feet above the water, the fluorescent glow of the ship's churning wake filled the clear chin bubble between the pilots' feet. Somehow, no matter how black the night was, that aqua-green glow could always be seen from above, signaling a silent, frothy "welcome home."

"Fifty feet," Carbone said.

Bud located the orange wands of the ship's enlisted landing signalman, or LSE, on the deck below. Forward, forward, add power and come to a hover above the landing spot. The signalman's wands were extended straight out from his shoulders, parallel to the deck as the helo floated in suspension. He lowered his arms slowly, telling Bud "land now." Bud pushed the collective down gently with his left hand, flattening the pitch of all six rotor blades. One short nudge of the stick to compensate for the ship's roll and *thump*, Sidflare Zero-One was on deck. The chock and chain gang swarmed the aircraft, securing it down.

"Hey Carbs, great to be done, huh?" Bud said.

"You know it, Boss," the burly Bostonian answered, already loosening his helmet's chinstrap and easing the tension on the five-point shoulder harness that had strapped him in for the last several hours.

"Tower, Zero-One to disengage rotors," Bud requested over the radio. Like Carbone, he'd slackened his straps and harness lock. Stopping the bird's rotors and killing fuel to the engines was just a formality now. A quick reading of the shutdown checklist and the two pilots' work would be over. *San Angelo's* two helicopters had moved more than one hundred eighty tons of freight to seven other ships by a method called vertical replenishment, or VERTREP. The ships had ranged in size from an aircraft carrier down to a small frigate.

"Tower, say again, request permission to—"

"Zero-One, stand by, Bridge is tracking a close-in surface contact and may have to execute a breakaway. Be ready to get airborne if needed," the control tower operator said.

"WTF, Brightness?" Carbone blurted out, breaking from standard radio discipline. The wisecracking former enlisted sailor was low on patience. He looked up, trying to sight the air control officer, or "Tower Flower." Tonight, that job fell to an off-duty pilot, Ensign Robert Bright, call sign

"Brightness." The radio was silent. Carbone leaned his head from the helo's side window and threw his hands up, begging a response from the Tower Flower. Still poised outside of the rotor path, the LSE crossed the wands in an "X," telling the flight crew to hold. Carbone watched as he shuffled the wands into one palm and pressed his free hand against the headset he wore, which linked him to the control tower's intercom. He nodded toward the tower, and then gave the signal for chocks and chains to be removed.

"Hey, Tower, what gives?" Bud asked.

"Standby..." Brightness answered.

"Looks like the party's not over yet, Boss," Carbone said. Both pilots cinched-up their harnesses.

"Yeah, I got it," Bud said, grabbing the controls again. Two young sailors ran back out to the helo, disconnected chains from the bird's stubby winglets and removed a pair of chocks that hugged the main wheels. *San Angelo* began to take on some heavier rolls and light rain misted over the helicopter's windscreen. Carbone glanced at the ship cruising in tight formation off *San Angelo's* port side, still attached by a jungle of cargo transfer lines and refueling rigs. Distance markers glowed like a string of Christmas lights. The two massive vessels were only a hundred feet apart, steaming in unison at twelve knots and in the last stages of their replenishment evolution.

Bud started to key his mike again when *San Angelo's* whistle belched five thunderous blasts, signaling an emergency breakaway. Within seconds, all lines connecting the two vessels were severed. Lammers and Carbone watched as the destroyer eased ahead of them, gaining speed steadily as her boilers went to flank power. *San Angelo* continued straight ahead for a few seconds and then began a hard turn to starboard. The helicopter's parking brake and nose steering were locked, but the centrifugal force generated by the ship's turn, combined with the rolling deck, was too much. Bud jammed down the helo's collective, hoping to pin her to the deck, but the aircraft started creeping as it lost traction. Spinning blades dipped perilously toward the deck and the two rotor heads pounded against their mechanical stops. Bud needed to get airborne, and fast, to avoid losing control.

"We gotta get off this deck, Tower!" he shouted into his mike. He flashed the helo's nose light three times and prepared to lift off. The LSE looked up and over his shoulder at the array of lights next to the Tower – still all red. Obeying his orders, he kept the wands crossed, signaling the helo to remain on deck. Wind and rain picked up as *San Angelo* entered a squall and continued to accelerate while turning. The scene suddenly

looked like a newsreel from a hurricane; small hailstones pelted the flight deck as the LSE braced himself to hold his footing.

The nose wheel broke free first, followed by the two main tire assemblies as the aircraft leapt sideways, bounced, and began sliding toward the deck edge. Bud couldn't wait for a green deck: he yanked an armful of collective and jerked the craft into the dark sky. He pulled back on the control stick, placing the helo in a stable hover, fifty feet above the water, aft of the fantail. As he did, the Tower Flower pressed a button switching off the red lights and turning on the green ones, clearing the crew for lift-off.

"Well... OooKaay..." Carbone said sarcastically over the radio. The LSE figured out what was going on and sheepishly raised his wands to the hover position. He scanned both directions, circled the wands above his head and gave a "clear to go" signal.

"Tower, you heard anything from Zero-Two?" Bud asked. "I'm not crazy about blasting through this weather blindly without knowing where my playmate is."

"Last time they checked in, they said they were a couple miles off the port side after making a drop," Tower responded. "Oh, maybe two minutes before everything hit the fan."

"Yeah, I remember McGirt saying they were gonna extend downwind while we made our approach. They're out there somewhere," Carbone said.

"OK. We'll hold over here on starboard side for a while," Bud said. He pitched the helo's nose over and added power. The rain let up, enabling him to climb to a few hundred feet and remain in the clear. He switched on the autopilot and reversed course, keeping *San Angelo* in sight as they flew downwind. He was too whipped to hand-fly the machine right now, and with more than four thousand flight hours, there was no reason to prove his "stick and rudder" skills. Besides, he needed a cigarette.

"Looks like we're coming out of the crud, Tower. I can see some stars peeking through. That was some nasty stuff," Carbone said.

"Copy, Zero-One. Just hold a starboard delta 'til we sort this all out."

"Roger, starboard delta," Bud said, acknowledging the holding pattern on the ship's right side. "Hey, Brightness, hand the mike over to Rayburn, will ya?"

"Can't do that, Boss, he's not here." Bud remembered that he'd reluctantly endorsed Rayburn's request to be on the Bridge for the last couple hours of tonight's event. His Assistant Officer in Charge had blindsided him with the proposal during a briefing in the ship's wardroom earlier in the day. Rayburn had presented such an altruistically convincing argument to the

ship's executive officer that Bud would have looked foolish not to go along with his request. He regretted that decision now.

"You gotta be shittin' me! Brightness is running this circus by himself?" Carbone said.

"You take it, Carbs, I gotta burn one," Bud said. Carbone acknowledged with a waggle of the stick and assumed control. Bud pulled out a pack of unfiltered Pall Malls and lit up. *Another lousy habit from the war*, he thought to himself. He sucked down a couple deep draws and tilted his helmet back, onto the top of his seat. Carbone monitored the autoflight system and guided them into gentle right turns while they held abeam of the ship. Bud reached up and slid open the Plexiglas window by his side. The fresh air felt good against his sweaty flight suit.

Tower came up on the radio again. "Sideflare Zero-Two, Tower, radio check." No answer.

"Hey guys, where you at?" Brightness asked. It wasn't unusual for the helo's crew not to respond. If the bird was several miles away, over the horizon and at low altitude, its UHF radio would be out of range.

"Zero-One, Zero-Two's not answering," Tower said.

"Yeah, we got that, Brightness." Light rain started up again as they entered another squall. Bud closed his window and turned on the wipers in order to keep the ship in sight. Despite all the spectacular, sunny days that the Pacific had to offer, when the weather turned bad, it turned really bad. Tonight seemed to be one of those times.

"Hey Tower, you boys out there somewhere?" piped a familiar voice over the radio. Johnny Jack McGirt's soft Kentucky twang was unmistakable. "Sounds like ya'll been right busy for a while."

"Welcome back, Zero-Two," Tower answered.

"Thought we'd stay out of the fracas and hold off to port while things got sorted out. Any paint get swapped between us and that small boy?" McGirt asked.

"Negative," Tower said. "Bridge had to do some maneuvering, but we're ready to recover you and Zero-One. Say fuel state."

"Well, glad you asked," McGirt said. "We're a little low on gas and need to get on back to home plate. We got maybe... make'er two-zero 'til splash."

Tower answered, "Copy Zero-Two, twenty minutes until splash. Stand by."

Bud didn't wait for Brightness to make a decision. With only twenty minutes of fuel in his tanks, McGirt had to get aboard. Both helos had eaten up extra fuel during the emergency breakaway, plus McGirt and his crew had done most of the heavier loads and traveled farther between

ships to make their drops. It hadn't been planned; it had just worked out that way tonight.

"Tower, we're fat on gas with three-zero till splash. Better get Zero-Two aboard first," Bud said.

"Got it, Boss," Tower replied. "Break... Sideflare Zero-Two, wind zero-five-zero at eight, green deck." *San Angelo* had settled into a northeasterly track, the reverse of what it had held before the breakaway. The ship traveled in and out of light showers, but the worst of the weather seemed to be behind them now, to the south.

"Bridge will continue on this course for recovery."

"Appreciate that, Tower. We just passed over a little guy. Fishin' boat or something. Did he try cuttin' in on our dance with that tin can?"

"Zero-Two, we'll brief you when you get on deck. Call us in sight," Tower said.

"Roger that. Entering some heavier squalls now. Wind musta pushed us a bit – gauges say we're ten miles out. We'll call the deck in sight," McGirt said.

Bud and Carbone remained in their holding pattern to starboard while Zero-Two began its approach. Bud hacked the helo's clock and lit another Pall Mall. All eyes on the flight deck focused aft, searching for Sideflare Zero-Two to emerge from the dark mist. The LSE had removed his goggles, wiped the raindrops away, then peeled off the cranial headgear everyone on the flight deck wore: a combination of lightweight helmet and sound protectors. Zero-One was a mile or so forward in a lazy holding pattern. The *thump, thump, thump* of its rotor blades faded out as it flew upwind from *San Angelo*. The wind began gusting again as the LSE donned his gear and illuminated the wands. The deck crew waited, eager to wrap up the night's work and climb into their bunks.

Bud tossed his half-burnt smoke out the window. He raised his helmet's visor, hoping to pick up the reassuring sight of the other aircraft's lights as it came to a hover over the deck. Carbone switched off the autopilot and guided the bird around some low-hanging clouds. A gust of wind buffeted the airframe, causing them to lose altitude, as they waited.

Lammers' playmate, Sideflare Zero-Two, had maneuvered clear of the scene after hearing the Tower's warning of the impending emergency breakaway. Inside the helicopter's cabin, two enlisted aircrew prepared the aircraft for its final landing. The senior of the two – a big Louisianan named LaRue – ambled forward to the cockpit and crouched down, wedging himself between the two pilots' seats.

"Mr. McGirt, we gotta put a fix on that dang cargo hook," LaRue said over the interphone. "It's been a pain in the ass all night."

"It can wait," McGirt replied without turning his head. "We're done hauling loads for the night. The maintenance guys can handle it after we land." His eyes were glued on the bird's dimly lit flight instruments as he flew the aircraft at a precise speed of one hundred knots. The needle of his radar altimeter gauge was pinned at exactly two hundred feet. After months of intense nighttime ops, McGirt felt confident flying low-level above the Pacific's black, foamy wave tops.

LaRue swiped a flight glove over the chewing-tobacco drool on the corner of his mouth then asked, "With all due respect, sir, why waste time?" He jerked his head toward the rear of the aircraft and laughed. "I got my pet monkey, Lincoln, on it as we speak."

McGirt swiveled his head slowly and faced LaRue. "I warned you about that language, LaRue. Knock it off," he said. "Secure the hell-hole and prepare for landing."

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant," LaRue answered innocently. He stood up and began walking aft into the darkened cabin. He made no attempt to hide the sneer that had crept over his face.

As the aircraft went into a turn, LaRue gripped a handrail that ran along the helicopter's sidewall. He heard the pilots saying something about bad weather, but their words were muffled by the high-pitched whine of the machine's engines and transmissions. LaRue grinned as he watched the shadowy image of Lincoln in mid-cabin. The younger sailor was seated over an open, three-foot-square hatch that housed the aircraft's cargo hook assembly. Lincoln's legs dangled freely in the windstream as he struggled to repair the jammed release mechanism that had plagued the crew all night.

LaRue felt the aircraft's bank angle steepen. He squeezed harder on the handrail as G-forces pressed against the soles of his boots. He peered out a cabin window and saw the reflection of the helicopter's beacon as its pulsing light bounced off the water. A sinking feeling welled inside his gut as he watched the reflection grow brighter and the angry sea zoom up at him. He heard McGirt shout something over the interphone, then the aircraft rolled rapidly in the other direction and pitched up violently. LaRue lost his grip and crumpled to the deck.

Chapter 2

S*an Angelo's* bridge crew had spent a hectic eight hours during tonight's replenishment event. They were tired and wanted to hit the rack — all except for one sailor: Lieutenant Thomas Rayburn III. He'd taken a quick bathroom break, wolfed down a ham sandwich from a tray on the quartermaster's table, and then guzzled a can of diet soda. He was more energized now than when he'd left the Tower. With the VERTREP going smoothly, he'd felt comfortable leaving Bright alone. Rayburn strutted onto the dimly lit Bridge and received a briefing from the officer of the deck, a crusty fifteen-year veteran named Johnson. When he was ready, Rayburn adjusted his ball cap, stood tall and declared for all to hear, "This is Mr. Rayburn and I... have... the con." It was important that he said those time-honored words in the most appropriate way, slowly and in a slightly louder, more forceful tone than he normally spoke. He'd actually practiced his delivery in front of the mirror, a couple minutes ago, while alone in the officers' head. At six-foot two inches in height and blessed with square-jawed handsomeness, Rayburn projected the image of a natural leader. Taking control, or "the con" as it was commonly known at sea, was a feather in the cap for Thomas Rayburn III as he climbed another rung on the promotional ladder.

Over the last six months, he'd worked diligently to establish himself a cut above his fellow pilots by pulling double duty: flying the H-46 and pursuing his Surface Warfare Officer designation, or "water wings" as everyone called them. Rayburn's goal was to be the youngest aviator ever

to achieve the feat of earning both qualifications. He was well on his way to pinning the shiny new insignia on his starched khaki shirt, just below the aviator wings.

Rayburn walked outside the Bridge to the port lookout wing. Alongside, about one hundred feet from his ship, was the hulking silhouette of another vessel, the last of seven ships *San Angelo* would service tonight. The two ships appeared to be loosely hinged together by a collection of lines and hoses that dipped and rose as the vessels glided through the rolling seas at a lazy twelve knots. Over the wind noise and sound of rushing water below, Rayburn heard the muted thwapping of rotor blades as his squadron mates approached the ship's helo landing spot, several hundred feet aft. As light rain resumed, he returned to the Bridge.

"Sir, Combat reports contact alpha at ten thousand yards, three-three-zero degrees relative and closing."

"Very well," Rayburn replied. The Combat Information Center had been following the surface target with its radar for the last hour. Earlier, on his way back to the Bridge, Rayburn had visited CIC for an update on the unidentified small vessel, now only a blip on *San Angelo's* big radar screen.

"I'd guess a small, mongrel freighter, churning its way toward Manila," the CIC watch officer had told him. The officers stared down at the green speck on the radar console. "She's been moving on an erratic course. Hard to predict really, possibly a steering casualty. Considering the kinds of derelicts I've seen in these waters, though, maybe the helmsman fell asleep at the wheel." Both officers chuckled at the thought of that old cliché actually being the case. "Anyway, for the last thirty minutes she's been on a constant course, decreasing range. We'll keep you advised."

"OK, Mr. Rayburn, what do you think?" said a voice to his side.

Rayburn turned to the OOD. "Well, sir, I recommend we make a broadcast in the blind on channel sixteen stating where we are and what we're doing. With these rain squalls and limited visibility, there's a good chance they can't see us. It's questionable whether they even have radar on board. I understand that our lookouts on the signal bridge reported seeing some spotty lights, confirming what Combat's painting on their scope."

"Good choice. I can see you've been doing your homework," the OOD said. He dialed up channel sixteen, the emergency frequency, and made the transmission, hoping to raise the stray contact on radio. Rayburn grinned confidently and glanced over toward the ship's captain, Walt Lugansky, who sat in a big, barber shop-like chair, reading from a clipboard. The "Old Man" had propped up his feet and seemed blasé about the activities around him.

Earlier in the evening, Rayburn had successfully brought *San Angelo* alongside the lead vessel, an aircraft carrier, in a textbook display of seamanship. As junior officer of the deck, he'd used his keen ship handling skills, or "conning," to maneuver into position, closely abeam the giant "bird farm." With *San Angelo* now the lead vessel, it was the destroyer's responsibility to maintain the course and speed that Rayburn chose to set during the replenishment event. Not much different than flying an aircraft in formation, he'd concluded.

Unlike flying his helicopter, however, Rayburn didn't use a control stick and collective, but rather the knowledge in his head that gave him the ability to control the lumbering vessel through commands directed at others. There was a helmsman, who actually steered the ship, and another sailor who relayed signals to the engine room to fine-tune the ship's propeller, regulating its speed. Rayburn had seen these same maneuvers before, on a much smaller scale, at the Naval Academy, where he'd studied in Luce Hall and practiced guiding Yard Patrol training boats in the Chesapeake Bay. The process was tedious and boring in the eyes of most aviators, and absent the instant gratification pilots felt after a slick shipboard landing or a precision cargo drop on a black-ass night.

But Thomas Rayburn III was a different breed of aviator, "the complete naval officer," as he liked to think of himself. Being able to con a ship was just another square to fill on his race to the top.

The rain and wind intensified as the formation passed through another squall line. No one on the bridge wing bothered donning their foul weather gear; the cool droplets felt good against their skin. They'd been dealing with bad weather all evening: short bursts of sideways precipitation lasting two or three minutes at a time. After several hours of this routine, the foul weather was more of a nuisance than a hazard.

Captain Lugansky set down the telephone next to his chair. "Officer of the Deck, we'll execute an emergency breakaway if contact alpha closes to four thousand yards," he said. "Pass the word to the destroyer and all work stations."

"Aye aye, Captain," the OOD acknowledged.

Rayburn's heart rate picked up. He'd only conned the ship once during an emergency breakaway, and that had been during a training event in daylight with perfect weather, about five months ago. Combat had calculated a closing rate of twenty knots with the freighter. With only six thousand more yards to lose, Rayburn guesstimated another ten to twelve minutes until the formation would be at the captain's execute point, four thousand yards.

He took a deep breath and reviewed the emergency procedures in his head. This would be a defining moment in his career and he had all the confidence and the knowledge to handle it like he always did: perfectly.

"Tower, Bridge, heads-up for a possible emergency breakaway," the OOD said over the intercom. "Say position of the two choppers, over."

"Bridge, Tower, Zero-One just landed and Zero-Two is off the port side. Last transmission, McGirt said that they were extending downwind to avoid some clouds."

On the Bridge was a speaker that monitored UHF radio communications between the Tower and the ship's two helicopters. The chatter, however, had blended in with the rest of the cacophony inside the cramped Bridge, packed with watch standers.

The OOD turned to a string of young, dungaree-clad sailors standing against the Bridge's aft bulkhead and said, "Phone talkers, pass the word to all stations to prepare for breakaway and be ready for heavy seas while turning." The seamen repeated his words verbatim and spoke into an apparatus known as a sound-powered telephone, which permitted conversation without the use of electricity. This was an essential feature if anyone along the network were to lose power. The talkers passed the word to all work stations, most importantly the deck crews, who handled fueling lines and cargo, CIC, and the engineering spaces that controlled the ship's boilers. Lugansky rose quietly from his chair and stood next to the OOD, who was on the telephone with the CIC officer.

"Skipper, Combat has contact alpha now at three-three-zero, fifty-five hundred yards, still closing at twenty knots," the OOD said. "We're on a direct collision course."

Rayburn remained on the port wing. He still had the con. A phone talker stood dutifully at his side. Rain started pouring down at a forty-five degree angle. Both Rayburn and his talker grabbed their yellow slickers and slipped the gear on over their already-wet uniforms. The two ships began taking bigger rolls, the shallower-drafted destroyer leaning hard on her side in the ten-foot swells. Lugansky joined Rayburn on the wing and looked below at the deck handlers struggling to do their jobs. Refueling lines and cargo transfer rigs slackened and then drew taut again as the vessels plowed forward in unison through the worsening weather. On the ships' main decks, platoons of sailors controlled the lines' tension manually, in essence forming a long tug-of-war between the two vessels. In calm seas, this was a moderately easy task, but not tonight. The crews whipped fore and aft across the wet deck, gamely trying to compensate

for the ship's motion. One handler stumbled and tripped, causing another half dozen sailors to cascade over him like dominoes. Unable to get to their feet, the entire group was dragged across the deck, refusing to let go.

"Captain, contact now at forty-five hundred yards and closing," the OOD reported.

Lugansky didn't hesitate. "That's enough!" he said. He moved halfway back onto the Bridge and shouted, "This is the captain — I have the con! Execute emergency breakaway. Sound five blasts on the ship's whistle. Maintain present course and speed."

The helmsman and engineman echoed his commands. Talkers barked the order through their microphones. Lugansky returned to the port wing and watched as the scene unfolded. *San Angelo* stayed on her present course. Systematically, lines and hoses connecting the two ships dropped into the water. Fluorescent lights, attached as distance markers, sprang from the waves like illuminated flying fish as the lines bounced wildly off the whitecaps. One by one, lines were reeled back aboard. The destroyer eased forward of *San Angelo*, steadily gaining speed. Black smoke spewed from her stacks as her OOD ordered maximum turns from the engine room.

The agile destroyer continued accelerating rapidly, now well ahead of *San Angelo*. "Right full rudder, all ahead full," Lugansky commanded. He added forty-five degrees to the ship's last heading, turned toward the helmsman and added, "Continue right to course two-seven-five degrees."

"Let's go look for this guy," Lugansky said to the OOD at his side. The air of tension began to dissipate as the escape maneuver unfolded, separating the ships from impending disaster. The captain and OOD rejoined Rayburn on the port wing. With the speedy destroyer already well clear, the threesome had a good view of what would have been the closest point of approach between them and the errant vessel, which refused to give way. Through the steady rain shower, they got a glimpse of a small craft, its running lights bobbing erratically in the high seas. Slowly it began to come around, turning on a southerly track.

The OOD raised a set of binoculars and found the vessel's profile in the darkness. "Looks like a small freighter, Skipper. She has no business in these waters tonight," he added rhetorically.

The captain grabbed the railing in front of him and gazed at the tiny vessel's fading lights. "Jesus Christ, all this for that little piece of crap?" He shook his head and walked back onto the Bridge. "OOD, take back the con. Slow us down to twelve knots, maintain present course."

The OOD acknowledged and assumed control of the ship. The captain added, "Let's get both birds on deck and sort this out. I'll be in Combat with the XO."

The ship's navigator came forward and interrupted. "Pardon me, Captain, but you may not have heard the tower over the radio. They report Sideflare Zero-One never disengaged rotors during the breakaway. The crew got airborne and is holding in starboard delta. We've lost comms with their playmate."

The skipper walked out onto the starboard lookout wing and saw the helo's position lights as it circled, a few hundred feet above the water.

"What? They had a red deck. Now they're up again?" The Old Man seemed peeved.

"Appears so, Captain. It all happened in the middle of the breakaway."

Chapter 3

“**W**hoa,” Carbone said, adding power to maintain altitude as Zero-One continued in its holding pattern. “The navigator said we’d be in and out of this crap all night. Guess he was right.”

Bud had grown edgy when McGirt hadn’t answered Tower. He gripped the cyclic to key his mike when a shout rang out over the radio.

“In the water! In the—”

“Say again, Zero-Two,” Bud transmitted before Tower had a chance.

Something unintelligible came across the radio, followed by static and then nothing. Bud and Carbone glanced at each other, stunned, hoping their ears had played a trick on them. A few more radio queries went out from Tower, Bridge, and Zero-One, but still no response.

Bud shuddered at the specter of losing anyone from his unit. He drew a couple deep breaths before he spoke. “Carbs, we have to rig for rescue and go look for them.” But before Carbone could acknowledge, a voice from the back of the helo answered on the intercom.

“We heard you, Commander. We’re on it.” Bud turned and looked over his left shoulder, and saw his lead crewman, Norris, give a nod. “Ready in two minutes, sir,” he added.

Standing beside Norris was a skinny kid from New Jersey, Sartelli. He was already out of his green Nomex flight suit and, with the help of Norris, slipping into the wet suit and gear of a rescue swimmer. Bud made eye contact with the youngster, whose expression was a mixture of

determination and pure terror. The crewman's hands trembled visibly, but he flashed a "ready to go" thumbs-up at Bud.

The rest of the crew of *San Angelo* had settled down after the successful emergency breakaway. Some went straight to bed; others drifted down to the mess deck for midnight rations, hoping to unwind before turning in. When the officer of the deck triggered the helo crash alarm, it was met with wide-eyed expressions and "WTF" looks. Tired sailors grumbled and bitched, but doubled-timed it to their duty stations. One critical group, a crew of boatswain mates, readied a motorized rescue boat, all the while wondering how on earth they'd control their small craft at night in rough seas, if given the order to launch from the ship's skipper.

The OOD radioed ahead to the aircraft carrier, now spraying a rooster tail at flank speed toward liberty in Subic Bay. Except for the lagging destroyer that had participated in the breakaway, the flattop and her escorts had already put over thirty miles between themselves and the supply ship. *San Angelo's* OOD knew that the carrier had one asset onboard that might be key to the rescue: the H-3 helicopter. With its sophisticated automatic Doppler hovering system, the H-3 Sea King was the Cadillac of nighttime search and rescue. Without this automated feature, Bud and Carbone in their H-46 would be in a fifty-foot manual hover above rolling seas, guided only by basic verbal commands from the hoist operator and their own "seat of the pants" skills. Plus, with Sartelli in the water, they'd have one more body to pull from the drink, assuming there were in fact any survivors. Not an impossible feat, but one that would test Bud and his crew mightily, especially on the heels of a long, arduous mission.

"Tower, we're starting a search pattern a few miles to port, in the area Zero-Two reported that civilian small boy," Bud announced.

Before Tower could respond, CIC came up on frequency and said, "Zero-One, Combat here, breakaway was initiated to avoid a slow-moving surface target. She's not talking with anyone. Last contact I had was two-seven-zero degrees at eight miles. We had a faint radar return with Zero-Two in that same area just prior to his distress call. Radar is down now. Expect to have it up in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Combat, that helps," Bud replied. Carbone rolled the bird into a steep bank and took up a westerly heading.

"Eight miles... we'll be there in less than five minutes," Bud said.

Carbone held the aircraft at two hundred feet and one hundred twenty knots, relying solely on the primary flight instruments to navigate. They were flying through moderate rain and turbulence, but Carbone kept the helo

rock-steady, on course and altitude. His eyes scanned rapidly, back and forth between gauges: attitude gyro, compass, altimeter and airspeed. Interrupting the pattern for a split second, he checked the aircraft's fuel quantity.

"Hey, Bud, hate to bring this up, but we're getting skosh on gas ourselves."

Bud did what most pilots would do in the same situation; he tapped the fuel gauges a couple of times, then pressed the "reset" button, wishfully thinking the instruments might recalibrate themselves to a higher value. Sadly, they didn't.

"Damn, you're right," he said. The last thing he wanted to do was put a swimmer in the water and then flame out his own aircraft before they could make a pickup and return to the ship. "But we have to give it a shot. With these seas, it'll take the rescue boat a good half hour to get in the water and motor to their position. If we can't make a fast pickup, we'll mark the spot with a flare and drop them a raft."

Bud glanced back into the cabin to see how things were progressing. After helping Sartelli suit up, crew chief Norris had rigged the rescue boom and tested its electric hoisting wench. Sartelli stood barefoot, clad in a full-body wetsuit. A mask and snorkel were perched at parade rest on his forehead. Under one arm, he held a pair of long, sleek fins.

"Crew chief, about four minutes till we're on station. Let Sartelli know, will ya?" Bud said over the intercom.

"Got it, sir," Norris replied. He pushed the mike away from his mouth, held up four fingers and screamed into Sartelli's ear, "Four minutes, Guido!" Sartelli caught Bud's eye and flashed a calm, confident grin. The shakiness had subsided as his training kicked in and helped quell the initial adrenaline rush. This was what he had volunteered to do for a living and he was ready.

"Zero-One, Tower, Combat tells me there's an H-3 doing 'buster' to us. Should be on scene in about twenty minutes." Bud felt some relief at knowing they'd have a backup soon. The H-3 was making its best speed with a fresh crew and full load of fuel.

The clouds had crept down to one hundred feet above the surface and visibility was less than a quarter mile. Rain pelted the aircraft's windshield as the crew of Sideflare Zero-One pressed on. Carbone flew with his eyes glued to the flight instruments; Bud scanned outside for any sign of survivors. Sartelli came forward and squatted between the two pilots in the narrow entry to the cockpit, prepared to help Bud as a lookout. The crew chief leaned out the helo's side entry door, looking as well.

Bud checked his clock and noted the mileage from the ship's TACAN

signal. "We should be there in about a minute," he said. Carbone slowed to forty knots and descended to fifty feet.

"Take it up to seventy-five, Carbs; that little freighter's out here somewhere," Bud said. "Light's coming on." He slid his left hand to the top of the collective and found the searchlight switch.

Carbone bore-sighted the flight instruments as Bud swiveled the beam back and forth over the wave tops. Light reflecting off the fog and rain illuminated the cockpit with an eerie glow. Bud knew his partner was forcing himself to stay focused inside, fearing he'd develop vertigo if he shifted his sights outside, even for a second.

"Commander, over there on the right! I see some lights!" Norris exclaimed. Using only instruments for guidance, Carbone gently fed in some right rudder, pointing the helicopter's nose in that direction. The aircraft held a perfect hover, motionless.

"Tell me when, Bud," Carbone said.

"OK, that's a good heading. Stop. Continue forward," Bud said.

The lights grew brighter. It was the freighter. She bobbed and rolled in the rough seas. Bud flicked on the searchlight again: black waves and blowing sea foam were all he saw — no sign of aircraft wreckage. McGirt and his crew would have an arsenal of devices inside their survival vests to signal rescuers: pencil flares that could be fired high into the air; another brighter, handheld flare, and lastly, a powerful strobe light that could be affixed atop of their helmets. That was, of course, assuming anyone had survived the crash and then managed to wriggle free of the helo before it sank to the bottom.

"Boss, we're guzzling gas hovering around out here," Carbone said. His tone was composed but wary.

"Sir, standing by," Norris said. Bud looked back and saw Sartelli, at the doorway and in position. The crew chief held a hand firmly on the youngster's shoulder, ready to give him three quick pats — the signal to jump. Bud made eye contact with Sartelli and saw the fearful look had returned to his face, but he raised his arm and gave a trembling thumbs-up.

Bud checked the fuel gauges one more time. They were down to the minimum safe reserve. This wasn't going to work; they'd have to return to *San Angelo* and land. He shook his head and said, "We gotta go. The H-3 should be here in a few minutes. Crew, secure from rescue ops and prepare for landing."

Bud and his crew headed back to home plate. He figured that by the time they finished refueling, the H-3 would have arrived on station and assumed control of the search. He'd heard them check in on *San Angelo's*

radio frequency during Carbone's approach back to the ship. Nonetheless, there was no way that Bud Lammers was going to sit this one out. After a quick shutdown, refuel, and cup of black coffee, he'd be ready to get back into the air. He'd polled his crew, asking if anyone wanted to get off after over ten hours on duty. Not a single man chose to quit.

The ship's radar was still down, so Carbone executed a homemade approach, using *San Angelo's* radio beam to guide them in. As they descended to fifty feet, Bud picked up the glow of the churning wake about a half-mile out.

"Carbs, I've got the wake. Stay on the instruments until I call the deck."

"Roger that," Carbone acknowledged as they flew in and out of rain showers. He lowered the collective and began to bleed off airspeed when Bud called the flight deck in sight. The rain eased up a quarter mile out.

"I'm visual, Boss," Carbone said.

"Green deck, cleared to land," Bud replied.

Carbone guided the aircraft into a constant-angle descent, arriving over the deck in a ten-foot hover. The LSE gave them the "land" signal with his wands. Carbone lowered the collective a notch, but then yanked it back up when the flight deck unexpectedly rolled to the left.

"Aw, fuck it!" he said. Frustrated, he pressed the collective down and planted the aircraft roughly on deck. "Sorry, Bud, I don't have the patience to play around with it," he said.

The chock and chain crew did their thing; Tower cleared Sideflare Zero-One to disengage rotors. Bud pulled the engine condition levers to stop, killing fuel to the turbines, then reached up and pressed the rotor brake switch. The helicopter's two transmissions and six blades came to a smooth, firm stop. Bud and Carbone unstrapped.

"Let's refuel, do a quick engine wash, and get back into the air," Bud said. After several continuous hours of flying in the salt-laden environment, the aircraft's turbines were subject to fouling. Their intakes needed to be sprayed with fresh water to flush away salt encrustation.

The ship maintained a rolling motion as the fueling crew dragged a thick hose across the flight deck. Halfway to the aircraft, they stopped, dropped the hose and looked up. Despite still wearing their helmets, both pilots heard the thump, thump, thump of rotor blades — not the smoother, fanlike sound of an H-3, but the unmistakable beat of an H-46. The helo was close enough that Bud and Carbone felt the pounding vibrations in their seat cushions. Sartelli had deplaned, peeled down his wetsuit to the waist, and joined the gawking fueling crew. All eyes were fixed off the ship's fantail.

Bud removed his helmet and poked his head out the cockpit's side window. There, like a ghostly mirage, a helicopter emerged from the misty darkness. The ambient lighting from the flight deck lit the surroundings enough for him to make out the numerals on the nose: "02."

Carbone crawled over the center console and crammed his head out the opening next to Bud. In unison, they let out a wild whoop at what they saw. McGirt and his crew were still airborne!

Bud and Carbone scrambled out of the helo and joined the rest of the crew to get a better look. However, as their feet hit the nonskid deck, it became obvious that something was seriously wrong with Zero-Two. She couldn't hold a stable hover and gyrated erratically in all three axes.

A loud, boyish voice boomed over giant speakers above the flight deck. "Zero-Two's got to be almost out of fuel, Boss. We have to get you in the barn so they can land." Lost in the excitement, Bud had forgotten that McGirt's aircraft would be even lower on gas than his bird. He spun around and waved his arms back at Brightness, signaling that he understood.

"All hands, prepare to move aircraft into the hangar. Now!" Brightness ordered over the speakers. A crowd of sailors, wearing a variety of different colored jerseys, exploded onto the flight deck from all directions, surrounding Bud's aircraft — firefighters and ordinance handlers clad in red; the "purple gang" of fuelers; the launch and recovery crew in green, plus a collection of mechanics and "lookey-loos" unable to sleep, milling around the hangar.

"Carbs, I'm going up to the Tower. I want you to take charge here while they push her in the barn," Bud said to his copilot. "These guys look pretty fired up — don't let anyone get hurt."

Carbone nodded. He knew exactly what his boss was getting at. Sadly, a lot of blood had been shed over the years by the crews of distressed aircraft, as well as by the well-meaning folks trying to help. Adrenaline and bravery frequently won out over good sense while attempting to save a shipmate.

Bud hurled himself up the steep steel ladder that led to the Tower, two stories above the flight deck. Once topside, he grabbed the compartment's hatch and felt the handle being twisted from the other side. He backed away as a series of latches spun around and the three-hundred-pound slab of iron rotated on its hinges. A massive man stood in the entryway, nearly filling the big, oval-shaped opening. In the darkness, all that Bud recognized was a khaki uniform and the prominent white eyeballs of the black-skinned sailor, Chief Petty Officer Irvis Jenks.

"I'm up here helping the ensign, sir," Jenks shouted. He backed away from the hatch, making room for another body. Once inside, Bud battened

down the weather-tight door. With it secured, the tiny observation tower became nearly silent. The air inside was sweltering and smelled like a locker room.

"A.C. musta crapped out, Boss," Jenks said loudly. He pulled out a white handkerchief and mopped his glistening face. He took his voice down a few decibels once it registered that the door was shut. "We tried opening the hatch for a breeze, but the noise got bad. Couldn't hear you or the Bridge."

Seated at the Tower's control station was Ensign Robert Bright. The short, slightly built officer held a phone receiver to his ear and a round microphone in the other hand. His light blond hair was plastered down with sweat.

"Understand, Bridge, we're pushing her in now. Green deck for recovery at my discretion," Bright said. He placed the phone against his chest, put the mike to his mouth and said, "Cleared to move aircraft — let's go, guys!" Inside the snug tower, without the amplification of a P.A. system, the officer's tinny voice came across like that of a male cheerleader, pumping up the crowd at a high school ball game. All three men stood up and looked below to the flight deck. Someone had already begun the process of folding the aircraft's rotor blades. A swarm of bodies leaned into the helicopter, pushing against the machine's stubby winglets that housed fuel cells and its landing gear. Bright reached overhead and flicked on a set of wipers to clear the Tower's windows. In less than a minute, the helicopter disappeared into the hangar bay beneath the tower.

With that situation under control, Bud turned his attention to McGirt's aircraft, which had maneuvered directly off the stern, ready to set down. Its crew struggled to keep her in a decent hover, wobbling in all directions and unable to communicate over the radio.

"Brightness, where's Rayburn?" Bud asked. He instinctively pulled out a crumpled pack of smokes from a pocket in his flight suit.

"Not sure, Boss, probably still on the Bridge." Bud saw anger in the young officer's eyes. "I think he wanted to work on his OOD qualifications tonight during the UNREP. Chief Jenks came up to help when the shit hit the fan."

Bud looked out at the helicopter dangling precariously off the tail end of the ship, reassuring himself that they were still airborne. "All right, we don't have time to track him down," he said. "McGirt's gotta be down to only a few minutes of gas."

The tower hatch opened and Rayburn hurried inside.

"Where the hell have you been?" Bud asked.

Rayburn brushed the rainwater from his face and said earnestly, "They needed me on the Bridge. What can I do to help?"

Bud shook his head in disgust. "Nothing, now. Brightness has things under control without you," he said. Rayburn slinked to the back of the tower cab like a scolded child. Below, the LSE ran out to the center of the flight deck and waved his wands at the Tower, signaling that Bud's aircraft was out of the way and the deck was clear for McGirt's landing.

"OK, give them a green deck... let's get this fiasco wrapped up," Bud said.

Before Bright could switch the deck status lights, Zero-Two ignored the LSE's hold signal and lurched forward over the small landing spot.

Chief Jenks was the first to spot the helo's damage. "Christ, the nose gear's missing! And what's that hanging down from the hell-hole?"

Simultaneous with Jenks' revelation, Carbone burst from the hangar bay and grabbed the wands from the LSE, who robotically continued giving the flight crew a "land" signal. Carbone positioned himself squarely in the center of the flight deck and crossed the wands. Zero-Two jerked backwards, placing the helicopter's ass end hanging off the fantail and over the water. As it did, something fell from the bird's underside and into the wire safety nets that surrounded the deck edge. It was one of Zero-Two's crewmen. Two deck hands ran toward the nets and dragged the limp body across the flight deck and into the hangar.

"What the?" Jenks shouted. He and Bud ran outside, hoping to get a better look at the bizarre scene unfolding before them.

Carbone stood defiantly in the center of the flight deck, blocking any chance of Zero-Two setting down. Its crew flashed its landing lights frantically, signaling for him to move so that they could land.

"They can't set down like that, Chief!" Bud hollered into Jenks' ear. "Without the nose strut, they'll go into ground resonance." The aircraft's nose and two main gear struts were similar to shock absorbers on a car. If a landing were made missing any one of the three, the helicopter's rotor system could become dynamically unbalanced and the machine would essentially thrash itself to pieces. Bud walked to the deck railing, pulled a flashlight from his survival vest, and beamed it at the hovering aircraft. The LSE joined Carbone at center deck, and also shined a light on the bird's underside. The helicopter's nose strut had been ripped completely off. In the area where the nose gear had been, the bird's aluminum skin was peeled back as if someone had taken a can opener and pried at it haphazardly. Wires and cables hung from the gaping hole.

"Chief, we've got two options: find a way to brace the nose when they set down or order a ditch," Bud said. Jenks stared back at his boss, speechless. The odds of recovering the helicopter after an open ocean

ditching were slim to none. With the present sea state and the aircraft's inherent top-heaviness, once the rotors stopped turning, she'd flip over in seconds. The crew would have a fair chance of escaping, but the helo would be destined for Davey Jones' locker, miles beneath the surface.

Jenks stood tall and hollered back above the noise. "We're not going to lose that aircraft, Commander, not on my watch! Let's go back inside. I got an idea." Bud and Jenks hurried back into the Tower with Bright. The air conditioning had come back on, lowering the temperature from stifling to merely hot and muggy.

"Boss, Bridge is up to speed with what's going on," Bright said. "I calculate they've got about seven minutes of fuel in their tanks." On the table was an aircraft manual opened to the "fuel burn" charts. Next to the manual was a standard Navy-issue green notebook. Bud glanced down at its page and saw that the young officer had kept a meticulous log of the events as they'd unfolded: times, verbatim radio transmissions, calls to the Bridge, everything.

"Thanks for writing this all down, Brightness; we'll need that when we try to put this all together," Bud said. He picked up the phone and punched a button that linked him to *San Angelo's* Bridge. While he did, Jenks and Bright huddled together over the notebook.

"Yeah, Bridge, Lammers here in the Tower. I need to speak with the captain." Bud never considered using the chain of command and going through the OOD. He knew the ship's skipper would be on the Bridge now, running the show.

"Captain, Bud here. Zero-Two is hovering over the fantail but can't land. It appears that they hit the water and tore off the aircraft's nose gear. Without support under the nose, she'll have to ditch or crash land onto the deck. Our other option might be to conduct a HIFR." Bud was referring to Helicopter Inflight Refueling, also known as "hi-drink."

"How much time we got?" Lugansky asked.

"Six, seven minutes, tops," Bud said.

The captain didn't hesitate. "Get a fuel hose inside that aircraft and buy some time," he ordered. "I'll get the ball rolling from this end."

"Copy, sir," Bud said. He hung up the phone and turned to Jenks. "Hi-drink, Chief."

Jenks stared at the flailing aircraft an instant then said, "Ensign's working on a plan, sir. I'm going down to get the word to the crew about fueling them."

Jenks ran out of the Tower and down onto the flight deck, where the LSE had taken back his wands and relieved Carbone, maintaining the

“hold” signal. Jenks went to the hangar’s maintenance office and searched for something big to write on. Attached to the steel bulkhead above his desk was a blackboard. He grabbed a piece of chalk, held it on its side and wrote in bold print, “NOSE GEAR GONE – DON’T LAND! HI-DRINK.” Then he yanked on the board, busting it loose from its fasteners one corner at a time. He ran through the hangar and out on to the flight deck, where a gaggle of sailors had already pulled out an extra length of fuel hose and waited.

Jenks joined the LSE on deck and held the blackboard above his head. He could see McGirt at the controls, wrestling with the bucking machine as it oscillated. McGirt inched the bird closer, then turned on the searchlight and rotated it directly at Jenks.

The chief turned his head to the side, blinded by the spotlight. He felt the blackboard begin to buckle from the rotor wash and prayed that McGirt could read his writing before the board snapped. Then McGirt blinked the light a few times, indicating that he understood, and backed off.

A crewman appeared at the side door and gave the chief a thumbs-up. Slowly, the aircraft’s rescue winch swiveled into position and began to pay out cable. A hook at the end of the cable contacted the deck as the crewman un-spooled another few feet of slack. The LSE gave the fueling gang the sign to run the hose out to the middle of the flight deck, where one of the crew attached the hose’s nozzle to the hook on the cable’s end. The crew chief winched in the line, lifting the thick hose from the deck. The fueling crew then stood off to the side in a line, cradling the hose in their arms, much like firefighters, allowing it to roll off of its reel and up, into the aircraft. Inside, Zero-Two’s crew chief located the quick-disconnect fitting along the helo’s sidewall and attached the hose. He flashed the OK signal to the cockpit crew, who relayed it outside to the LSE. Another sign was given to the pump station operator, who turned on the spigot. A few seconds later, the crew chief reappeared at the door, clapped his hands together and gave a jubilant double thumbs-up. The aircraft’s fuel gauges began to rise.

Bud called the Bridge again. “Captain, tell the fuel gang to give them fifteen hundred pounds; that’ll give us about an hour.” He hung up and rubbed a hand across the top of his head. His thinning hair was soaked in sweat. Brightness handed him a paper towel to dry off. Bud sank down in the empty chair next to the junior officer and said to himself, *Now what?*

Bright slid the green notebook across the table and said. “Boss, take a look at this. The chief and I have an idea.”

Chapter 4

S alipada Menadun hadn't really wanted to go on this voyage. His last two weeks at home, he'd started to feel halfway normal: decent food, clean clothes and a warm Filipino woman lying next to him every night – well, almost every night. He'd spent the last of his pesos three days ago and watched as his little harem had disappeared one by one.

“No money, no honey, Sali-boy,” the last of the mahogany-skinned hard bodies had told him as she'd slammed the door in his face. *You'll change your mind as soon as I get paid*, he'd thought. When his boss, Eduardo Borco, had called and offered him the nine-day run to Manila, Sali, broke and lonely, had jumped at the opportunity.

The first day out of Cotabato City, his job as *Jolo's* first mate couldn't have been easier: calm seas and sunny skies. The old freighter, loaded with rattan, coconut oil and hardwoods, handled well on the placid waters. After a day and a half, the ship had made a brief stop in Sabah, west of Mindanao, before beginning its “money trek” to Manila. During the ten-hour port call, more goods were brought on board and crammed into the vessel's already teeming holds. But equally significant, for some reason known only to the shipping company, was the departure of *Jolo's* regular captain. A new skipper, Santos, had taken his place. Sali had never worked with this new man, who, according to shipmates, had the personality of a loose fart and didn't say much.

Jolo was on a northeasterly track, paralleling the coast of Palawan, when Sali relieved the ship's helmsman. At this hour, he was the lone person on the Bridge and, most likely, the only crewmember awake. The ship's other topside watch stander, a lookout, was curled up and asleep on the bow. Sali glanced at his wristwatch: 23:30. Four more monotonous hours steering the ship before his relief would show up. He looked forward to getting off his feet, finding a peaceful spot on the fantail, and doing a joint before getting some shuteye. The one he'd smoked before coming on duty was wearing thin.

Prior to turning in for the night, the captain had mapped out a course and given Sali blunt running orders: "Keep us on course and wake me if something important happens," he'd said. Sali gave a nod and Santos retired to his sea cabin, downed a tumbler of cheap scotch and drifted off in a stupor. The middle-aged seaman had made these runs scores of times, and despite having never worked with Sali, he figured that if the shipping company had confidence in his first mate, that was good enough for him. Before getting under way from Sabah, he'd noted in the weather forecast a storm brewing over the Sulu Sea. Using some optimistic calculations, he figured if *Jolo* maintained its present track, west of Palawan, they'd outrun the worst of the weather. After thirty years sailing these waters, there wasn't much he hadn't seen, and this trip was no different from all the rest. *Deliver the goods, reload and head home with a nice bag of cash.* He'd be back at his Sulu beach house in no time.

Sali, bored and restless, picked up the Bridge phone and dialed the engine room, hoping to find someone to talk with. The phone rang a dozen times with no answer. *Those maggots are all deaf anyway, probably can't hear it even if they're still awake,* he thought as he hung up.

He looked down at the compass: still rock-steady on the northeasterly course the captain had ordered. The flat seas they'd glided across earlier in the day had given way to moderate swells once *Jolo* had ventured into the South China Sea. The vessel rocked gently as the breeze picked up, offering some relief from the Bridge's stale, humid air. Sali let his body relax with the rhythm of the waves and closed his eyes for a few seconds. The short reprieve felt enticing to his weary brain. His head snapped back as he caught himself fading off. Startled, he checked the compass again — still steady on course. The old freighter was making his job easy tonight, requiring few, if any, corrections at the helm.

Sali let go of the wheel and walked the few feet across the tiny bridge. He found a folding chair tucked behind a table where the captain had plotted the ship's track, and then reached up to lower the volume on the

radio transmitter that hung down a few inches above his head. *Nothing but static tonight. No need to listen. We're a little ship and it's a big ocean*, he rationalized. He opened the chair and set it down behind the wheel. The swells started building, but *Jolo* stayed glued to her course as if attached to submerged rails. With the vessel loaded to her gunwales and at her maximum draft, she held her own against the ocean's power. Sali sat his tired body on the chair, resting his forehead against the wheel. He followed up by draping his arms through the wheel's spokes to hold it in place. He felt the tension release from his neck and shoulders as he slumped over and closed his eyes.

When Sali had showed up for work the other day, he'd noticed a fragile-looking youngster sitting on a rusty capstan outside of the shipping company's office. The boy was dressed in clean, pressed work clothes and wore a delicately knitted *kufi* atop his head. The light-colored cap contrasted sharply with the teen's dark skin and brown eyes. A tiny set of wire-rimmed glasses rested snugly on the bridge of his nose.

The boy had looked up from his prayer book and smiled. If not for his short hair and skullcap, Sali could have easily mistaken the lad for a young girl. The kid had a peaceful, angelic look that caused Sali to wonder what the teen was doing alone on the busy wharf. He'd smiled back, butted his cigarette on the pavement and opened the office door.

"Who's the kid outside? Did you father another illegitimate bastard, Eduardo?" Salipada asked. He let out a demented laugh at his own joke. Over the last ten years, he'd delighted in swapping insults with the tubby little dispatcher. "Why don't you share some of that with me, *fatso*?" Sali added as he reached over the counter, aiming for the pile of sweet rice cakes on Eduardo's desk.

"Keep your filthy Moro hands off my *merienda*," Eduardo said. He grabbed the paper plate full of treats and held them away at arm's length.

"Ah, relax, you can have them all for yourself. I don't want to turn into a lard butt like you, anyway," Sali said. Eduardo looked down at the plate in front of him and frowned. He slipped on a pair of reading glasses, gathered some documents and shoved them into a folder.

"Here, take these and lead the boy over to your boat. He's going with you to Manila," Eduardo said.

Sali walked around the counter. He sat on the edge of Eduardo's desk, took the folder and opened it. The top sheet was a manifest that listed the boy as a "minor passenger," with Sali's name as his guardian for the voyage.

"What, I'm a babysitter now?"

Eduardo removed the glasses and tucked them in his shirt pocket. He leaned back and reached for another rice cake.

"He's seventeen years old. He'll be OK by himself; just make sure he gets on and off the ship safely," he mumbled between mouthfuls. "And don't let those slobs onboard give him any crap – he's just a kid."

"So I *am* the babysitter, aren't I?"

Eduardo brushed some powdered sugar off his chest and stood up to adjust the air conditioner that creaked from a window above his head. "I'm doing his father a favor and letting him travel in the vacant cabin, behind the skipper's stateroom."

Sali laughed smugly. "So you owe his old man some money – I get it. Still losing your ass at the cockfights, fat man? Thought you promised that old hag of yours you'd give it up." He filched a rice cake before the dispatcher could sit down. Eduardo's face reddened.

"That's not it, Sali," he said. "His dad's a farmer, upriver. We grew up together. Like I said, I owe the guy a favor."

"Yeah, that's the least you and your pack of thieves could do," Sali said sarcastically.

Like thousands of Christian families, Eduardo's clan had migrated from the Philippines' northern provinces when he was a child, as part of the government's campaign to "civilize" Mindanao and other distant islands of the archipelago. In the process, they'd finagled themselves into some of the region's choicest jobs. Most of Eduardo's brothers and cousins had cushy positions with the Hong Kong-based shipping company here in Cotabato.

"Christ, you'd think he could at least buy the kid a ticket on a decent ferry boat. It's gonna take us four or five days to get up there."

Eduardo thought about explaining the story to Sali, but decided against it; he was hopelessly behind with the paperwork strewn across his desk and needed to get back to work.

"That's all you need to know about it," he said, pointing to the papers in Sali's hand. "I could've called a half dozen other guys to do this run, but I called you."

The arrogant grin left Sali's face and he nodded gratefully. Unable to resist life's decadent temptations, his financial state tended to vary widely – either flush with cash, or broke. "I was just busting your balls," Sali said. He patted Eduardo on the shoulder affectionately. "I'll bring you back some good smokes from Manila. There's usually some GIs in port willing to smuggle me a few cartons off the military base."

"That'd be great." Eduardo took the cigarette from his mouth and held it up disgustedly. "These things taste like the corn husks we used to puff on when I was a teenager."

Sali left the cool confines of Eduardo's office and walked back outside. The young Muslim boy hadn't moved from his spot along the pier. He sat peacefully in the blazing sun, head lowered in deep prayer.

As Sali got closer, the boy rose from his seat and extended a small, soft hand. His dark eyes glowed with joy. "You must be Mr. Menadun," he said in a gentle voice. "My name is Malik Abbas."

* * *

When Sali came to, the first sounds that he heard were the thunderous blasts of a ship's whistle. The first thing he saw was the half-naked torso of *Jolo's* skipper as he stumbled onto the bridge and ran to the helm. His bulbous gut shook loosely above his sagging boxer shorts as he fought to untangle Sali's arms from the wheel.

"You moron!" Santos shrieked, his voice a full octave higher than normal. He pushed Sali out of the way and kicked the chair across the bridge with his bare foot. Sali landed with a thud, banging his head on the damp deck. He lay there stunned and speechless as the skipper spun the wheel furiously to regain control of the vessel. Sali got up and attempted to make his way back toward the helm, only to be halted by Santos' glare.

"Get away from me, you!" he growled. Sali stood immobilized, hanging his head in shame. He knew instantly how serious this was. He'd been caught committing the cardinal sin — the one that, throughout the ages, seamen would never tolerate from one another, for any reason: he'd fallen asleep at the helm.

Sali's cocky veneer melted as he paced aimlessly from one side of the bridge to the other. The skipper, thankful that *Jolo* had avoided the collision, took a deep breath and slackened his death grip on the wheel. He grabbed the bridge phone, dialed the engine room and barked some orders to the watch stander there. That sailor, alerted by the vessel's violent turn, obeyed and cranked up power to the ship's two diesels. The increased speed helped Santos maneuver *Jolo* around to a new course.

By now, several crewmen had gotten up and stood half-dressed in the narrow passageway that led to the bridge. Not one of them dared set foot inside the ship's tiny control station. Their eyes were frozen on their captain as he stood stoically at the helm. Realizing that his crew was there, Santos collected himself and stood more erect despite his state of undress. He nonchalantly wiped the sweat from his dripping brow.

“Mr. Menadun, leave the bridge and go below,” he said. His deep, authoritative voice evoked both fear and relief in the crewmen. They whispered nervously amongst themselves, grateful that the ship had avoided disaster.

Sali walked off the bridge as the men pressed themselves up against the bulkhead to make way. He kept his eyes down, ashamed to face them. As he cleared the throng, he shifted his sights up from the floor and made his way along the dimly lit passageway that led below. A few meters ahead, he saw what looked like a ghost in the shadowy light: a tiny person wearing a long, linen nightshirt, standing motionless and silent before him.

Sali braced himself against the steel bulkhead as the ship took a steep roll. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The image steadied itself against the vessel’s motion and began to move toward him. As it came forward, Sali finally recognized the delicate figure: it was Malik.

Chapter 5

S*an Angelo* had sent a message to the carrier group detailing the airborne crisis with Sideflare Zero-Two. The carrier, with its parking lot-sized flight deck, volunteered to turn around and offer assistance. After some discussion back and forth between the ships' captains, it was determined that there really wasn't any advantage to landing on the flattop. McGirt's aircraft was still missing its nose gear, and having a larger space to set down would, in effect, only provide a bigger area over which to spread the wreckage of parts if he screwed up. The H-3, with its fresh crew and extended endurance, remained on the scene.

With McGirt's crippled bird gassed up and able to stay in the air, Bud had bought them all some time to regroup and put a plan together. Captain Lugansky, a career "boat driver" with limited aviation knowledge, had delegated the recovery operation to Lammers and his crew. Luckily, the OOD had found a reasonably smooth stretch of ocean in which to loiter. The sea state was still moderate, but by steaming directly into the wind, *San Angelo* had settled into an acceptable roll and pitch to allow McGirt to put down. Bottom line: unless the crew of Zero-Two was willing to stay in a hover off the fantail, refueling every couple hours until the ship could get closer to land, they'd have to make a shipboard landing. Jenks, Bud and Carbone crowded into the Tower with Bright while Zero-Two bobbed in a hover off the fantail.

"Boss, the chief and I came up with an idea," Bright said.

"Yes sir, we made a little drawing," Jenks added. He leaned his six-foot

six-inch frame over Bright's head and grabbed hold of the green notebook on the desk. Perspiration dripped from his chin and onto the page as he spoke. "We get some wooden pallets from the Supply boys, stack 'em about yea high, then pad 'em with some mattresses. Lieutenant McGirt sets her down nice and soft. Soon as he does, he cuts the rotors and my guys strap the bird down good and tight, so she don't slide." Jenks looked up at the three officers crowded around him. "We can do it, Commander, I know we can," he said.

Bright nodded in agreement. "Chief's right. This is our best chance."

"Let's do it, Bud," Carbone added.

Bud agreed and the plan was set in motion. After he called the Bridge and relayed the message directly to the skipper, the OOD had the duty quartermaster on the Bridge pass word to all hands via the ship's PA system (IMC):

"All hands not on watch, remove mattresses from bunks and lay same to the hangar deck. Break, break. All Supply personnel, locate all empty pallets and lay same to the hangar deck as well. I say again..."

We hope you have enjoyed this short sample of Larry Carello's *Rotorboys*.

It is without question, an exciting tale of Navy helicopter flying.

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