

CHAPTER ONE



IT TOOK ALMOST THREE WEEKS, but he finally reached Otis. The cold morning fog was just lifting off the cranberry bogs, but the warmth of the growing spring would soon be evident. The sun was coming up. The base was starting to come alive. Smoke was pouring out of what had to be the mess hall. He could see lights in the barracks, smell the exhausts from trucks being started, even hear an occasional voice.

But he hadn't yet heard that one sound he was waiting for . . .

What was the general doing here? Could it be that people finally came to their senses and realized that the U.S. really *did* win the war? If not, what was the state of the country these days? What country *was* it these days? He had no idea . . .

He approached the base cautiously. He had spent the night in the woods nearby, the last time he'd have to sleep in a battered makeshift lean-to—or so he hoped. Standing at the very edge of the base perimeter, he pressed against the chain link fence and peered in. For all he knew, this could be a Russian base, or that of some kind of Russian client's occupying army.

Or was this a base camp of the army of The New Order? What was The New Order? Hunter could never really figure

MACK MALONEY

it out. Even before the dust had settled from the Russian sneak attack on the American ICBM sites, the Vice President was issuing orders to all military personnel still in the country to start enforcing The New Order. Laws that said there would no longer be 50 states, that America would be broken up into a dozen small countries and a patchwork of free territories. The traitor had said this was the settlement he had reached with the Russian Peace Committee to end the war—the war that everyone conveniently forgot American forces had won. But the swiftness that the new ruling came down smacked of years of pre-planning. (God only knew how long ago the Russian moles had infiltrated the American government!) There were so many questions: Why had some in-country National Guard units immediately started doing the Vice President's bidding—destroying military equipment, burning state capitol buildings, universities and libraries, blowing up TV and radio transmitters? How long had these units been compromised? The idea had been to complete the isolation of the American citizen. Not to let the ordinary Joe catch on that the Soviet Armed Forces were lying in cinders scattered all over Europe and Asia, decisively beaten by the Free World. It was the Big Lie. Win the battle, lose the war.

Hunter cautiously made his way along the base perimeter. Had the sign-towing Piper been just a ruse? Was the great General Seth Jones really dead, buried on the European battlefield? Was Hunter being set up? Logic again intervened. Crucial questions needed crucial answers. He needed proof.

He stayed close to the fence, passing through deep woods until he saw the main gate. He stayed hidden. The gate was manned by a single sentry. One look at the soldier and he knew things had changed.

The man was not standard military. His uniform was a bright green and he was wearing a chrome helmet, a headpiece usually reserved for parades and ceremonies. Nor was the sentry carrying a standard military firearm. Instead, he was armed with

WINGMAN

a cowboy-style pistol and holster, and a double-barrel, sawed-off shotgun.

A bizarre flag was flying above the guardhouse. It was a mishmash of green, blue and white, jumbled up in a field of uneven stars, stripes and what looked like dollar signs. Below the flag, attached to the roof of the guard house was a sign that read: Flight Operations Center—Armed Forces of the Northeast Economic Zone. Well, at least it didn't *sound* communist. More mysteries. More questions to be answered.

Then Hunter heard the sound he was waiting for. Off in the distance, probably at the far reaches of the base, came the distinctive rumble of a jet engine warming up. The noise filled him. For the first time in more than two years, he felt warm. He was ready for anything now. "Just get me airborne again . . ."

He emerged from the woods. The chrome-helmeted cowboy saw him coming and had his gun at the ready. Hunter had forgotten that his appearance wasn't exactly—well, friendly-looking. His hair was beyond shoulder-length and his beard covered nearly half his chest. His clothes were threadbare. He was carrying his meager belongings in an old laundry bag and he had the M-16 and ammunition belt in full view.

Just as he was about to speak to the guard, he heard a roar and instinctively looked in its direction. There was a trail of smoke and an orange spit of light, burning through the morning mist, but the outline was unmistakable. He felt a surge run through him—it was *that* feeling again. He watched as the fighter jet quickly disappeared into the low clouds.

The sentry raised his gun and cocked it.

Hunter smiled and raised his hand in the universal sign of peace. "Major Hawker Hunter to see General Jones," he said.

Five minutes later, the sentry led him into a small office. Sitting behind a dilapidated desk was a man he thought he'd never see again: General Seth Jones.

Hunter couldn't believe it. Jones actually looked *younger*. He was trimmer, leaner and meaner looking. His hair had grown

MACK MALONEY

out of its trademark military whiffle, and the resulting locks with a tinge of gray gave him a kind of professorial look.

The last time Hunter had seen him was at the NATO base in Rota. The squadron had just got word of the destruction of the American nuclear ICBM arsenal and that their forces were to be disarmed. Finnish Peace troops, the enforcers of the bogus armistice, had arrived and started systematically destroying the 16th TFW aircraft, while the Americans stood by helplessly, under orders from the Vice President. It was only later—when the VP started broadcasting the Rules of the New Order from Moscow—did they realize he was a traitor. When the horrible destruction of the Wing's F-16s was completed, the Finns handcuffed Jones and drove him away. Hunter was convinced he'd never see him again.

But here he was. And the general proved to be still all-Jones Boy.

"What's this, corporal?" Jones said, putting on his sternest military face. "Another veteran looking for a handout?" Despite Hunter's long hair and beard, Jones could still see his handsome, oddly hawk-like features. Sloppy appearance or not, he knew the young man was still the best fighter pilot in the world.

Hunter snapped to a mock attention.

"Major Hunter, reporting for duty, suh!"

"You're out of uniform, Major," the general said.

"So are you, sir," Hunter replied, eyeing the senior officer's bright green, rather garish uniform. If the sentry wasn't still present, Hunter thought he would have probably embraced his old friend.

The general fingered his loud green coverall and said, "Do I detect insolence in your voice, Major? I'll have you know this is the standard uniform of the Armed Forces of the Northeast Economic Zone Air Patrol. I wear it proudly."

Hunter looked around the spare office, trying not to laugh out loud. A desk, a chair, a lamp and a coffee machine in the corner, and that was it. It was a far cry from Jones's surroundings

WINGMAN

back in the Thunderbirds days when his office was jammed with hundreds of mementos, including photos of just about every fighter plane ever made, plus several computers, a bank of telephones and telecommunications gear and a well-stocked, top-shelf, wet bar.

“Where have you been, Major? Hibernating?”

“Worse than that, sir,” Hunter replied, still standing ramrod straight at attention. “I’ve been contemplating my existence.”

“Obviously, you’re suffering from post-World War III syndrome,” the general said. “It’s been going around.”

Hunter continued. “Got a bunch of books, went up to a mountain and tried to find the meaning of life, sir.

“Jesus, not that!”

“Fraid so, sir.”

“And what conclusions did you reach, Major?”

Hunter paused a moment for effect, then replied, “Well, sir, I discovered that every man has to believe in something.”

“And . . . ?”

“And,” Hunter said, looking around the general’s empty office. “And, I believe I’ll have a drink, sir.”

“Scotch?”

“Neat, sir.”

With the wave of his hand, Jones dismissed the properly impressed, if slightly confused sentry. He walked around the desk and hugged Hunter.

“Good to see you, Hawk,” he said.

“Same here, sir.”

Jones locked the office door and broke out his emergency bottle.

“Had breakfast yet?” he asked.

Despite the early morning hour, they sat and ate stale doughnuts, while mixing the no-brand whiskey in with cups of steaming coffee. Then they talked.

“Well, Hawk,” Jones said, swigging his laced coffee. “What the hell happened to you after Rota?”

MACK MALONEY

“You really want to know?”

“Sure as hell,” Jones said, smiling. “You tell me your story and I’ll tell you mine.”

Hunter took a deep breath. It seemed like so long ago. “Okay,” he said. “Hang onto your hat.”

Hunter began his story. After Jones had been led away, everyone took for granted he was heading for a firing squad. The members of the 16th scattered. But Hunter was determined to get back to America, or what was left of it. He knew there was an American sub base up in Loch Lomond, Scotland, and figured it was the only place where ships might be trying to get back home. So he walked. Right through Spain, through France and, after bribing a Frenchman to take him across the Channel, right up through England. It took him more than two months to reach Loch Lomond only to find the place filled with ex-GIs who had had the same idea as he. There were at least 10,000 men trying to get on no more than a half dozen Navy warships docked in the harbor. No one was in charge. The base was in a state of utter chaos.

Then he got lucky. At one corner of the sprawling base he found a battalion of Marines. They had set up an orderly camp on a hill inside the base and were grimly going about the task of staying civilized in the middle of all the disorder. Hunter fell in with them after pulling rank on a couple of the camp’s guards and demanding to be taken to their commanding officer. His name was Captain John “Bull” Dozer and after a brief talk, he offered Hunter some grub and a place to sleep.

Dozer’s outfit was going by the curious name of the 7th Cavalry—odd because the Marine Corps had no cavalry, per se. Over a pot of coffee, Dozer explained to Hunter that his unit had been fighting in Turkey when the last great battles of the war were raging. At one point they were surrounded by four Soviet army regiments near Ankara. Yet his Marines fought ferociously, and, unlike Custer’s 7th Cavalry, caused the enemy to back off the siege and rethink the situation. By the time Dozer got his troops to more defensible ground, the war

WINGMAN

in Europe had been won and the Russians had agreed to the ceasefire.

Dozer promised his men that if they stuck together, he would get them home. He commandeered two Turkish airliners at gunpoint and forced the pilots to fly his 900 soldiers to England. His goal too was Loch Lomond and they had arrived two weeks before. When Hunter told him America was his goal too, they shook hands and agreed to work toward it together.

By the second afternoon, the six ships in port were overflowing with the survivors. One by one, they disappeared over the horizon. Hunter knew their chances of making it to America were nil.

Two days later the enormous outline of an aircraft carrier appeared off to the south. It was the *John F. Kennedy*. The captain came ashore and word quickly spread through the 5,000 remaining ex-GIs that they could hitch a ride to America as long as it was an orderly evacuation. The 7th Cavalry saddled up, and with Hunter tagging along, were among the first group to be taken aboard the great ship.

The voyage west took ten days, and as the faint outline of Manhattan appeared on the horizon, questions ran through the minds of the men on board. What was the country like now? Was there any country left to come home to?

They got their answers soon enough. As the ship neared the harbor they could see that what looked to be a mist enveloped the city. The mist was actually smoke. The city was burning. A collective shudder went through the men on the ship when they got a look at the Statue of Liberty. It was headless. The top had been blown off by some unknown catastrophe. As the *JFK* neared a docking point just off the southern tip of Manhattan, sounds of gunfire could be heard coming from the city streets. Welcome to New Order America, was all that Hunter could think of.

The ship docked and the passengers began filing off. Some stayed in groups, others just disappeared into the streets alone.

MACK MALONEY

Not many of them had any destination planned. Hunter gladly joined the Marines as they smartly formed up and marched down the gangplank.

Dozer told him that the 7th had decided to stay together no matter what. Technically, they were no longer Marines and Dozer was no longer their commanding officer. But they agreed to stay with him and try to reach Fort Meade, Maryland. The Marine captain asked Hunter to go with them, but Hunter had made up his mind that if New York City was an indication of the state of the country—and he was certain it was—then he wanted no part of it. He had already set his sights on getting to the mountain in New Hampshire. Still he knew it would be wise to stay with the Marines until they were out of the horrible Beirut-like Manhattan.

Dozer formed his troops into one main column and gave them the order to march. Their destination was the George Washington Bridge. The sound of gunfire was everywhere. No one had a clue as to who was fighting whom, but most of the destroyed equipment they came across bore the markings of the National Guards of New York and New Jersey. Were the two states battling it out for possession of the island?

They were nearing Central Park East when they ran into trouble. Scouts stationed ahead of the column got word back to Dozer that a small group of armed men were holding two women at gunpoint three blocks away. Using hand signals, Dozer instructed his men to surround the gunmen. When one of the gang members raised his rifle the armed men were cut down in a volley of murderous gunfire.

And then a strange thing happened. One by one, civilians started to appear. They had been hiding in doorways, alleys and in buildings. Shyly, cautiously at first, they began to emerge from their hiding places. Soon, there were a couple of hundred of them—old men, women, children. Some of them were wounded; all of them were caught in the terrifying madness of the anarchy in New York City.

One man was particularly happy. He was running up and down

WINGMAN

the street, waving a small American flag and yelling “The Marines are here!” Just as he was running up to Hunter and Dozer, a shot rang out. The man’s chest exploded from the sniper’s bullet. He fell right into Hunter’s arms. He gasped and tried to speak, but all that came out was “. . . Why . . . shoot . . . me?”

Then he died.

Hunter laid the man’s body down on the street. He was about 65 years old, Hunter figured, just one of millions of New Yorkers. He located the man’s wallet and looked inside. His driver’s license said he was Saul Wackerman. A photo showed him, his white-haired wife and two daughters. Another photo showed his son—apparently an Israeli soldier—in full uniform.

Hunter looked back at the man. He was still gripping the American flag, so much so that Hunter had some difficulty prying it from his fingers. He folded the flag and put it in his own pocket. The look on Saul Wackerman’s face would haunt the pilot for many years to come.

Then Dozer showed Hunter something which would also haunt him: one of the gunmen had been carrying a AK-47 Kalishnikov assault rifle. Obviously, there were plenty of guns in New York City these days. What was startling was the AK-47 was the standard issue rifle for the Soviet Army.

Several hours later they reached the George Washington Bridge. The Marines were heading south. Hunter was going north, determined to get to the mountain in New Hampshire before the whole world came crashing down. He thanked Dozer and bid him and his troops farewell, knowing he’d never see any of them again.

The general listened to it all, quietly sipping his morning brew and at one point, breaking out a box of Havana cigars.

Hunter reached into his pocket and produced a piece of cloth. He unfolded it. It was the flag he took from Saul Wackerman.

“We could both be shot just for your having that,” Jones said nonchalantly.

MACK MALONEY

“So that’s what it’s come to,” Hunter said defiantly. He felt the flag for a moment, fingering the bloodstains that dotted one edge of it. He always carried it with him so he would never forget what it was like . . . before. He folded it carefully and returned it to his pocket. “They’ll have to pry it from *my* fingers, before they take it away from me.”

“They probably will,” Jones said smiling grimly.

There was silence between them for a few moments. Then Jones clapped his hands together and reached for the bottle.

“Well, shit, Hawk,” he said, freshening his coffee. “That’s one hell of a story. No wonder you headed for the hills.”

Hunter had to laugh. It must have sounded like an incredible adventure. And he didn’t even tell him the part about how he had met and bedded down with a beautiful girl along the way in France.

“So what happened to you?” he asked Jones, reaching for the whiskey bottle himself. “We thought we’d seen the last of you when the Finns drove you away.”

Jones let out a loud laugh and clapped his hands again. “I was in Paris, Hawk, old buddy. And did you miss some party, boy!”