

RECON STRIKE

11

A fist ended her struggle. The Americans bound her, one man pressing her face into the mud and grass while other hands looped ropes around her wrists and ankles. A hand jerked her head up and she saw an instant of a camouflage uniform and then tape covered her eyes, the tape going around her head, then over her eyes again.

Blind, her hands tied behind her, her feet tied, Rivas felt the hands withdraw and she kicked out, ignoring the pain of her ankle, trying to find the Americans, to strike out a last time before they took her. Her kicking only sent her rolling down the slope.

Brush scraped her and she stopped. Leaves and branches pressed her. She heard no voices or movement around her-- only her own breathing and the sound of the falling rain. In the distance, the noise of the fighting continued on the ridge. Rotorthrob came from helicopters.

Why had the Americans left her? To capture the others?

She jerked at the ropes on her hands, trying to tear her hands free, trying to do the impossible and break the ropes. Pain stopped her. She tried to find the knots with her fingers, bending her hands back until her wrists ached, but she could not touch the rope.

Desperate, she felt for rocks in the mud and grass. Her fingers found the long, jagged edge of a rock. Turning, shifting her position, she felt branches hooking at her, leaves scratching

RECON STRIKE

her face as she laid back and sawed her wrists against the rock. She worked frantically, ignoring the pain of rock scraping away her flesh.

Rifles fired random bursts in the distance, the firefights ending. Voices called out-- in Spanish. She felt blood flowing over her hands and she twisted her wrists. The rope did not part. But when she put the rope against the stone again, she felt the edge catch at a place-- she had frayed a notch in the nylon. Working harder, straining outward with her arms to hold the rope taut as she dragged the frayed section along the edge of stone, she forced the pain of her wrists and the ache in her shoulders out of her mind.

Men crashing through the brush. Weapons and equipment clattered. A voice called out-- in Spanish. "There's another one."

She did not move. Boots knocked rocks free to roll down the slope. Then the soldiers stopped a distance above and away from her. A boy screamed in pain and the soldiers laughed.

Slowly, silently, she wrenched her hands apart, the sawed rope giving, long fibers stretching and snapping, the coils falling away.

She lay still, slowly, silently easing her bleeding hands to her face.

The adhesive tape tore, giving her vision-- but she saw only broken darkness. She lay inside heavy brush, the tangle of branches and leaves concealing her. Rain fell, water dripping through the leaves. She turned and she looked up the slope.

A trail of plowed leaves and red mud led directly to her. In

RECON STRIKE

the gray brush and rain, she saw soldiers criss-crossing the hillside. One soldier picked up her Uzi. He slung the submachinegun over his shoulder and continued kicking through the brush, searching for her.

Bending down to her feet, she untied the knots of the ropes binding her ankles. Her wound still bled. She wiped it off with rainwater, grinding her teeth against the pain. Just above her ankle, a small-caliber bullet had entered behind the bone of her leg, passed between the bone and the tendons and muscles, and exited on the opposite side. She felt her ankle and leg, her body flashing with pain, but she did not find shattered bones.

Boots approached. She waited, listening. She had no weapons, her Uzi gone, her Beretta gone, not even a knife. The soldiers followed the marks of her slide. She looped the cords around her ankles, then patted the adhesive tape down on her face. A space allowed her to peer out. She found a rock the size of a fist and put her hands behind her, waiting, faking unconsciousness.

"There!" One soldier said to the other. "A white shoe! One of the capitalenos."

"And blood."

Two soldiers scrambled to the brush concealing her. Not moving, she peered under the tape, seeing the boots and camouflage pants of the soldiers as they thrashed into the branches. A hand grabbed her foot and dragged her out.

"Got another one."

"Quiet! Keep quiet. She's ours. Look at her. She's a

RECON STRIKE

beautiful one. Even under all that mud and shit she looks like a princess."

"Look at that, tied up and her pants on. And no one's fucked her yet."

Hands pulled up her shirt. She did not move, controlling her panic, forcing herself to breathe slowly. They pulled up her bra and she felt the rain on her breasts. The two soldiers went quiet.

"Anyone else?" One whispered to the other. "You see anyone?"

"They're all up there."

"We'll fuck her. To hell with the lieutenant and the colonel. This time we get first fuck on one of the girls. No one will know. Hold her down."

Plastic clattered. She saw the boots and camouflage of one soldier. The soldier propped his rifle against the rocks, then crouched down and opened her pants. Hands took her shoulders. She faked a semi-conscious moan, turning her body.

"Hold her!"

The hands on her shoulders gripped her hard. Grinning, glancing up to her, the soldier between her legs stroked the curve of her waist. He tried to pull down her tight jeans. She moaned and turned, as if regaining consciousness.

Swinging with all her strength, she smashed the rock into the soldier's skull and twisted as the soldier fell sideways, clawing at the hands of the second soldier, hitting his face with the rock, hearing him gasp and curse. He punched her but she blocked the blow with her left shoulder. The soldier fell forward, off balance on

RECON STRIKE

the steep slope, falling over her as she hit him again and rolled backwards under his body.

They crashed through brush and saplings, his rifle barrel slamming into her head, rocks gouging her back. But she kept her left hand knotted in his rifle sling and shirt, holding him against her as she hit him again and again.

A tree stopped them. He slammed sideways into the trunk and momentum jammed her against him, her naked breasts scraping against the equipment on his fatigues. She hit him again with the rock but he did not move.

Blood bubbled as the soldier struggled to breathe through his smashed face. Rivas held onto his shirt and dragged him farther down the slope, finding shelter beneath a ledge of rocks. No one could see her. She closed her pants and pulled down her bra and shirt. Her right hand throbbed, a fingernail somehow torn away, her fingers and knuckles cut and torn from the soldier's shattered teeth. Blood welled from the gouges on her wrists. She found his bayonet. Putting the point against his throat, she threw her weight down on the handle, driving the blade full depth into his neck as he convulsed and choked. She held on with both hands until his body went still.

Blood and mud and filth covered her. She worked quietly, quickly, stripping his body. She took his web gear and shirt, then his boots, bundling it all together. Slinging his rifle over her shoulder, she continued down the ridge, sliding and limping, until she came to the overgrown road.

RECON STRIKE

In the ruins of an abandoned house, she washed herself in the falling rain. She cleaned the mud from the barrel of the dead soldier's M16 with a rusty wire and a bit of rag. Then she laced the boots on.

With a branch as a crutch, she continued higher into the mountains of Morazon.

Minutes later, in the Managua office of the Ministry of Exports, Raul Condori heard an incoming code sequence on the radio monitor. He played back the recording, decoding and transcribing an urgent message from a transmitter in the Honduran town of Caba@as. He keyed the confirmation code, then called the mansion in the suburbs south of Managua.

Pazos did not answer. He had returned the late preceeding evening from Cuba. Thinking his superior still slept, Condori let the phone ring for minutes. Finally, one of the Cuban soldiers who guarded the residence answered. "Who is this?"

"Condori. From the office. Where is he?"

"With the girls."

"Which place?"

"This an emergency? He said only if--"

"What's the number?"

"No telephone"

Condori took the panel van and sped through the rain-flooded streets of Managua to the failing shops and beach clubs along the

RECON STRIKE

lake shore. After the earthquake destroyed the factories and commercial buildings in the center of the capitol in 1972, the tourist businesses enjoyed a brief boom as international relief organizations sent experts and workers. But Somoza's plundering of the foreign aid and fears of communist revolution halted the economic recovery. In the years of the civil war, no tourists came to Nicaragua-- only journalists. Most of the resort owners left after the Sandinista victory. Whoever remained did not waste their few dollars on imported paint to brighten their motels and hotels and discos for European hippies and East European military advisors.

The apartment house dated from the 1930's. Two story, with neo-colonial ironwork on the balconies, the building stood alone a muddy street of broken concrete and vine overgrown lots-- most of the other apartments and shops on the block had not survived the earthquake. A faded sign offered rooms in Spanish, English, and French. Now the old proprietress offered more than rooms. Condori parked on the sidewalk and rang the entrance bell.

A square window in the door opened. The old woman's yellowed eyes peered out through a mask of powder, mascara, and lip stick. A Hermes scarf bound her hair, the patterns and brilliant colors framing the pastels of her face. Her perfume overwhelmed the smells of garbage and diesel.

"Who are you?"

"I want Diaz, the Mexican."

"Sir, I do not know of whom you speak."

"He's here. He's a regular. There's an emergency at the

RECON STRIKE

office and if I don't get him, he'll be fired for sure."

Looking past him, she glanced at the panel van marked with the letters, TV. "If it is a matter of urgency, I will allow you to disturb my guest."

She unbolted the heavy door. In the entry, Condori saw the Ministry of Exports Mercedes and a battalion jeep parked bumper to bumper, their rain-polished paint splotted by sodden leaves and flowers from the copa de oro vines. Tropical plants filled the central courtyard, the original garden lost in tangles of fronds and glistening leaves, vines advancing over the paving stones. Copa de oro covered the interior walls, twining through the wrought iron of the second floor walkways. Under the heavy rain clouds, the courtyard remained in semi-darkness, the air cool and scented with the old woman's perfume. She led him up a flight of tiled steps to a second floor room.

"You wake the gentleman. The responsibility for this intrusion is yours."

Pazos heard her voice. "Who is it?"

"There is a message at the office."

"What?"

"I can't shout it out."

Seconds later, the door opened. A girl in a nightgown slipped out. As thin as a child, her breasts only points on her chest, she looked no more twelve or thirteen years old. Condori stepped into the darkness of the room. Pazos sat against the ornately carved headboard, the sheets tangled over him.

RECON STRIKE

"So what is so important that you must you tell me now?"

"The army wiped out the unit."

"What? All of them?"

"Helicopters attacked them in the mountains. A few of the guerrillas escaped. But no one in the unit."

"What of Lydia Rivas? Any word of her?"

"It is not known if they are dead or captured. But none of them made it to the meeting place."

Outside the door, the old woman listened to Pazos cursing. Then she heard him say:

"What a loss! She was so beautiful. We killed some Marines, but no Marine was worth losing her. Not a hundred Marines."

Maps of the action covered one wall of the wood-panelled office, tape joining topographic print-outs of the town, the river, and the mountains. Green ink indicated the path of the Marine squad to the observation point. Other maps showed the route of Highway 8 through the mountains of Salvador, then north through the lines and whorls of the disputed national border to the towns of Caba@as and Marcala in Honduras. A tourist map of Honduras showed the road continuing north to the Department of Intibuca.

In his office in the Old Executive Office Building, Devlin studied satellite photos of Highway 8 between the border and Caba@as. That section of the Highway had deteriorated to a rutted one-lane road serving only a few scattered farms. The fields and

RECON STRIKE

pastures of the farms spread through the narrow valleys. Corn rows curved along steep hillsides. Foot trails scarred the ridges. Beyond the road and farms, the trails continued through the mountains, winding along ridges and slopes to remote shacks. Some of the trails ran to the road, others paralleled the road and continued to the town.

A few kilometers north of the Salvadorian border, the roof tops of Caba@as lined the intersection of Highway 8 and the Carreterra De La Paz. The dirt track of the Carreterra snaked east through the mountains, linking villages and logging camps to the Department capitol of La Paz. In the 1960's, truck traffic from the Departments of La Paz and Intibuca had passed through Caba@as with loads of lumber and cattle and coffee en route to the cities of El Salvador. Then the wars had stopped all cross-border trade, isolating and impoverishing the town.

However, Caba@as continued to be a market town for the surrounding area. In the satellite photos, Devlin saw foot trails radiating from the town, following ridgelines and hillsides to patchworks of fields and pastures of the small farms. A few of the trails joined the trails cutting through the mountains. Devlin traced several zigzagging foot paths from El Salvador to the trails converging on Caba@as.

A folder contained photos of a coffee farm south of the town. The photographer had parked across the road and snapped photos the adobe house, the slat board and barbed-wire gate, and the trees and barbed-wire fence enclosing scrap cars and trucks. Behind the

RECON STRIKE

house, tree-shaded rows of coffee bushes covered the hillsides and merged with the pine forest.

Another series of photos showed the farm as seen from a hill. The back of the house opened to a workyard. Heaps of coffee beans dried on concrete slabs. Rusting cars and trucks lined the fences.

Comparing the snapshots to the satellite photos, Devlin found the road and the rectangle of the farm house. A north-south trail to the Salvadorian border ran along a ridge overlooking the road. A faint footpath cut through the pines and trees to the back fence of the workyard.

A report from agency sources in Honduras identified the coffee farmer as a contact for the Workers Army. The operator had been assigned to transport the gang from the mountains to their transportation out of Honduras. This farm and the contact men waiting there would be the next target for the Marines.

A call interrupted Devlin. The hiss of electronic encoding circuits denatured the voice speaking from San Salvador:

"Colonel?"

"Here."

"The army reports six prisoners. Five identified as teenagers from the capitol. The sixth prisoner is a co-conspirator from the capitol, a middle-aged man. He is already talking."

"Casualties?"

"All wounded. Bullet wounds to the knees and ankles."

"No other casualties?"

"The army reports a few men dead and wounded. But the guer-

RECON STRIKE

rillas got wiped out."

"Any extraordinary elements? Cubans, foreigners?"

"Not that the army reported."

"Keep me informed--" Breaking the connection, Devlin keyed the number of an extension in the basement of White House West Wing.

"Carpio speaking."

"I just got a call from down south. The army made the pick up. Complete success."

"What about your men?"

"Not a word. I'm leaving the office now. I'll fly down there to debrief them and give them the next assignment."

"Don't. We've got a problem."

"Is this my problem? A problem with my men?"

"No, but it'll be your problem to solve."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

"The conference room--"

Stripping the sheets of paper from the walls, Devlin rolled the photos and computer-generated maps into a tube and locked the materials in the closet of the office. The maps and photos of Caba@as went in his briefcase. He rushed from his office and hurried through the turn-of-the-century roccoco decor of corridors.

A guard at the stairs checked his pass and allowed him to run up the fire stairs to the third floor.

Phil Carpio answered the door. Richard Todd paced the room as he spoke into a telephone. He nodded to Devlin and motioned him to the conference table.

RECON STRIKE

"State," Carpio whispered. A balding, retirement-aged administrator who had flown combat missions as a young pilot in the Korean War, Carpio worked in the bureaucracy of the CIA, specializing in the co-ordination and confirmation of information from foreign sources. He had worked closely with Devlin on the contingency planning for a counter-strike after the 23 October terror-bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut. The Administration had never authorized the air strike on the Iranian-sponsored gangs of Baalbek, but Carpio had continued working informally with Devlin, managing the assembly of information from various U S government and foreign agencies. This allowed Devlin to exploit many sources of intelligence material without exposing himself to questions.

Todd nodded to Devlin. Devlin and Carpio waited as the slight, gray man paced the room. His jaw clenched with anger as he listened to the handset but he spoke very calmly:

"Of course, I realize the importance of this opportunity. That is why I believe this operation must continue in complete secrecy ... no, the correct time for that is after the Salvadorians seize all the other members of the terrorist organization. The Salvadorians not only must conduct exhaustive interrogations in complete secrecy, they must also continue the interrogations until the security forces seize ... I must object ... yes, of course ... to present the Salvadorian armed forces to world ... in the best possible light. However, it would also somewhat diminish the success of the operation ... yes, of course ... I have complete confidence in the Salvadorian security forces ... yes, of course.

RECON STRIKE

Keep me informed."

Slamming the phone down, Todd did not speak for a moment. He finally turned to Devlin. "Good morning, colonel. We've received word that your men performed exactly as expected. A perfect operation. However, as Mr. Carpio told you on the telephone, we have a problem. A problem in El Salvador. It seems that the capture of the gang presents a media opportunity that the Salvadorians-- and the State Department and the embassy-- cannot allow to pass."

"A what? A media opportunity?"

"Your men in Honduras did as we asked and delivered the prisoners to the Salvadorians. When we agreed to that delivery, the Salvadorians told us their interrogators and security men, with the assistance of a special investigative team from the FBI, would continue the operation against the organization in complete secrecy. However, the Ambassador and the State Department demand that we allow the Salvadorians to manage the publication of the the capture of the murderers of the Embassy Marines. We can not stop it. They assure us that the investigation will continue, however--"

"There is no point in continuing," Devlin told him. "The organization will disband and scatter."

"That is already occurring."

"Our sources in Honduras" Carpio glanced at a telex page. "In Caba@as. The sources report trucks leaving the farm where the gang would meet their drivers. We've got to assume the organization got word of the captures and sent out the alarm to all the other

RECON STRIKE

contacts along the line."

"Then we've lost the chance to pursue the network back to the leaders."

"No," Todd answered. "The technicians salvaged this for us. The NSC monitored the gang radio transmissions and identified one transmission location."

"We think it's the training base." Laying out satellite photos, Carpio pointed to a hill topped by a complex of buildings and security perimeters. An airstrip cut across flat pastureland. "Interrogators in San Salvador can't get a definite place of training from the killers. The killers don't know. Cuba or Nicaragua, they don't know. Planes flew them there in the night. But they did describe the camp where they trained. Matches with this camp. NSC got a fix on the radio messages going out to the guerrilla radios. It's here. Near Palacaguina, small town on the Pan American Highway, north of Esteli?? and Managua. Information's still coming in, but the Cuban who runs this gang out of Managua-- we've got a fix on his transmitter, too-- this Cuban named Pazos travels in and out of the country as Emilio Diaz, a Mexican journalist. In Nicaragua, he has an office called the Ministry of Export Development. He drives up to the camp in a truck marked with white letters, T V. So he doesn't get shot or kidnapped by contras. What do you think, Colonel?"

"Can your men capture this Cuban?" Todd asked.

Devlin poured a cup of lukewarm coffee from a thermos on the table. "And give him to the Salvadorians? What is the point?"

RECON STRIKE

"This time it will be our operation. State is out, the Embassy is out, the Salvadorians are out. We'll run this operation from the Council. No cooperation with allies or other departments. The operation will not exist except as actions. When your men capture this man, or anyone else in his organization, our personnel will conduct the interrogations."

"Like the operation into Colombia and the Beeka?"

"Exactly. Except that this will not be a one-shot action. This will be the continuing operation you have wanted since we brought you on staff. Your men will not be reacting to attacks. They will be following the chain to its source. They will neutralize the terrorist organization before they kill Americans again."

"They will have authorization to do whatever is necessary?"

Todd nodded.

"And back-up?"

"Covert support-- information, money, transportation, specialists. Whatever they request. But nothing that involves documentation. Nothing will be in writing. Your men will operate on their own whenever possible. This will a tight operation, an operation that officially does not exist." "That is exactly what they want."