

RECON STRIKE

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In the lantern light from the shack, the men crowded around Niles as he put on the deep blue fatigues of the FDN-- the Nicaraguan Democratic Force. Bands of light and shadow moved on the impassive faces of the men as they studied his body, looking at him like a piece of used equipment. They saw the strength of his legs and the lean, sinewy muscles of his torso and arms. Veterans of years of war, they recognized his scars on his body as old combat wounds-- a leg shot through-and-through, the fading slashes from shrapnel on his legs and back, the fishbone lines of field hospital stitches.

"An old one," a teenager with an Fabrique Nationale FAL rifle commented. The hard-eyed teenager wore camouflage fatigues. "But he is still strong."

One of the older men pointed at a red welt that scarred Niles' ribs. "A bullet. He was unlucky this year."

"And there, on his arm."

"From bullets."

The perfect line of the wound marked the inside of his left forearm and continued across the curve of his ribs. Only months before, in the Beeka Valley, Niles had made the mistake of trying to take a wounded Iranian Revolutionary Guard alive and received a

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point-blank pistol shot as thanks.

"And on his back. Scars."

"Made by the hands of a woman," he lied, speaking the same peasant Spanish as the fighters. Some of the men laughed at his joke.

One asked, "Was her name Kalashnikov?"

Niles laughed but did not answer. He had not come to the mountains of El Paraiso to tell the contras of Laos. Sitting on the wooden porch of the shack, he shoved his street clothes into a plastic bag. Only his boots would go with him into Nicaragua. He took nothing else, no identification, no personal possessions, no camera or recorder. He laced his boots and watched the FDN fighters watching him.

Some men had the sun-weathered faces and scarred hands of farmers. Others looked like ex-National Guardsmen, tattoos on their arms and revolvers in holsters they wore on their belts. Many of the guerrillas had not yet turned eighteen. The teenagers and campesinos smiled, the ex-guardsmen maintained hard masks of arrogance.

"Where is your camera?" A teenager asked.

"Don't have one," Niles answered. Like the campesinos and guardsmen, the sun and exposure had scarred his face. The corners of his eyes crinkled from years of squinting into the distance. He looked older than his thirty-eight years.

"All the gringo journalists have cameras," a man with a scarred

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face asked. "Why don't you have a camera?"

"I don't take photos. I remember what I see."

"You don't have a tape recorder," an ex-Guardsman said.

"I remember what I hear."

"Good shoes." A campesino with broken, decaying teeth smiled and pointed at Niles' boots. The campesino wore torn boots. String kept the soles of his boots and the canvas uppers together.

"I knew I would walk very far. So I brought my best."

"Where is your pencil and book of paper?" the campesino asked.

"I will write when I return."

"The other journalists," a teenager said. "Don't wear our uniform. They are afraid."

Niles faked shock. He stared around at the contras and the pines and the night. "Is it dangerous? Commander Martillo said I should wear a uniform so my good clothes don't get dirty."

The crowd laughed. Niles knotted the plastic bag and went back to the door of the shack. A short, bull-necked man took the clothes. The man used the war name of El Martillo-- meaning The Hammer. An ex-sergeant in the National Guard, Martillo had a round belly and thick, vein-knotted forearms. The muscles of his shoulders stretched his shirt. Displaying macho vanity, Martillo wore a gold cruxifix, a gold watch, and a nickle-plated Browning automatic in a black nylon shoulder holster.

Of all the men in the camp, only Martillo knew Niles had not come to report on the war for the newspapers. A colonel in Wash-

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ington had spoken with a contra leader who described Martillo as a field commander worthy of American support. The colonel sent Niles to accompany Martillo on a cross-border raid. Knowing this, Martillo flashed a gold-toothed grin at the soldiers questioning Niles, then jerked a pack off the floor.

"Here is your equipment, reporter. Food, water, plastic sheet, hammock. And because we are going to fight, you will help carry our claymores and mortars. The weight will slow you down. So that you do not walk ahead of us on your long legs."

Nodding, Niles took the pack and almost dropped it. The crowd laughed again. Niles rubbed his hand across his face.

"Oh, yes," Martillo said. He passed Niles tubes of grease paint. "Your suntan lotion." Niles squeezed out a dab on his fingers and smoothed the dark brown pigment onto his tanned face. With his other hand, he sorted through the contents of the pack. He took out a cardboard packing tube marked in Cyrillic letters, overmarked with stencilled Arabic code. On the other side, a label printed in English and Spanish identified the contents as: 82mm Mortar/High-Ex. The pack contained two of the heavy mortar rounds. He found two canvas cases with claymore mines and firing devices.

Stepping out of the storage shack, Commadante Martillo handed Niles a Kalashnikov rifle and a webbing set with ammunition pouches and a knife. Niles slipped the frayed suspenders over his shoulders and buckled the waist belt. Then he quickly stripped the Soviet rifle, examining the components for wear and corrosion.

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"He is Cia," a voice commented, using the common Latin American pronunciation of the initials of the Central Intelligence Agency--CIA.

Shouldering the pack, Niles tried the straps. "You see them carry a load? You see them carry a rifle? Or do they come in their cars with air-conditioning, bringing you their stories and promises and lies? I came in a truck. And I brought only my boots. Don't call me that name."

Sergeant Martillo shouted out for his men to gather their packs and weapons. The crowd scattered, leaving Niles to check every detail of the issued equipment. Opening his ammo pouches, he examined the feed lips of the Soviet magazines, the head stamps of the Czechoslovakian 7.62mmComBloc cartridges, then thumbed down the cartridges to feel the pressure of the magazine spring. He adjusted the straps and tested the stitching of his pack. Finally, he put the contents in order, his hands moving with the ease of long, long experience.

Niles knew weapons and packs. He had served all his adult life in the United States Marine Corps, enlisting the morning of his seventeenth birthday in 1963 and taking a Greyhound bus from the poverty of Harlan County, Kentucky for the regimen of Perris Island, North Carolina-- only the first of a series of camps as he progressed from recruit to Private First Class to combat meritorious Sergeant in the I Corps of Vietnam, the squad leader of Recon units operating along the Demilitarized Zone and the Laotian border.

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After two tours of duty, he applied for Officer Candidate School. He returned to Vietnam as a very experienced 2nd Lieutenant and led Recon patrols-- wearing North Vietnamese or Khymer Rouge uniforms and carrying Soviet weapons-- into Laos and Cambodia. Since then, he had served in the United States, the Caribbean, Central America, and Lebanon. He had transferred to Honduras five months before, joining the contingent of American servicemen training the Honduran and Salvadorian counter -insurgency battalions at Puerto Trujillo. But in fact, Niles-- and a few other Marines under his personal command-- took orders directly from a colonel in Washington, D.C. By telephone, the colonel had directed Niles to evaluate Martillo and his force of guerillas. A pickup truck delivered Niles to this camp on the border of Nicaragua a few hour later-- Niles knew no other way to judge a combat unit except to accompany the soldiers and their officer into combat. Sergeant Martillo assembled the contras in the center of the camp. The lines of men stood under the pines as Martillo waved a flashlight over the equipment and munitions carried by the fire teams. Two men bore the weight of heavy M-60 machineguns. Belts of cartridges criss-crossed their shoulders. A squad carried a Soviet 82mm mortar broken into tube, bipod, and base. Other men had RPG-7 rocket launchers. Niles waited in the center of the second platoon, watching the sergeant and looking at the men around him. Two men shifted their positions in line to stand close to him.

"I am Blanco," a thin contra told Niles. In the darkness, he

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could not see the young man's face, only the silhouette of his sharp features. He carried a folding stock Kalashnikov and an RPG, a rocket loaded in the launcher. "I was Sandinista. I fought in the revolution since I was twelve years old. First I carried messages, then I killed a Somoza policeman and took his rifle. An M-1 Garand. A good American rifle. I killed a Guardsman from a kilometer away. I fight in mountains, I fight in the final offensive. But then the Cubans and the Soviets come and now I fight in the mountains again. Until victory. And this is Zutano--" Blanco put his arm over the shoulders of another man standing in the darkness. "He did not fight in the revolution, but I teach him how to be a guerrilla."

"And now I fight the communists who stole the revolution," Zutano added.

The lines of contras left the camp, following trails higher into the mountains. They walked by starlight and a fragment of moon, stumbling through the shadows of overhanging trees, men cursing, the noise of rattling equipment and scuffing boots loud in the night. Niles adjusted his webbing and pack straps as he walked.

Letting his Kalashnikov hang by the sling, he rested his right hand on receiver, the safety off and a finger hooked over the cocking handle, ready to jerk back the bolt and chamber the first cartridge.

After a few kilometers, the platoons reached the crest of the mountains. Blanco whispered behind Niles. "This is Nicaragua."

The moon-lit mountains extended into the distance. Though the map he had memorized showed towns and roads, Niles saw no lights--

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no farms, no towns, no headlights on the roads. The mountains and what he saw of the valley of Jalapa remained blacked-out.

Sergeant Martillo took point, leading the platoons along narrow trails overgrown with dry weeds. A brave man, Niles thought. Leads by example. But if a Claymore or the first burst of an ambush takes him away, who leads these men out?

In Nicaragua, the contras moved more carefully, their rifles in their hands, their heads always turning as they watched the brush and trees around them. Their noise and voices went silent. They walked quietly along the trails, the sergeant halting from time to time.

They continued south until the sky blued with the rising sun. On a hill viewing the canyons and scrubland for kilometers in three directions, Sergeant Martillo called a halt. Soldiers sprawled in groups, digging through their packs for food. The machinegun teams went to the perimeter and sentries watched the trails. Niles scanned the expanse of mountains. Beneath the startling blue dome of the sky, cloudless and infinite, the ridgelines glowed with the horizontal light. The slopes and deep canyons remained black. Individual trees and out-jutting rocks stood out like details in a stereoscopic viewer. Niles realized that no smoke stained the air.

No cooking fires sent smoke drifting through the trees, no farmers burned the weeds and dry cornstalks from their fields, no trucks spewed out diesel soot-- no one lived in these mountains.

Looking up through the trees, Niles scanned the sky for

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aircraft.

"Looking for the communists?" Sergeant Martillo asked. "You must wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow we hit them hard and you will see many, many dead ones."

"Don't they patrol the mountains?"

"They are too afraid. If they patrol, we kill them. The Cubans and Soviets can't get them out of the towns." "And the helicopters?"

But Sergeant Martillo rushed away. His voice boomed as he shouted over the talk of his soldiers. A group of contras gathered around him as he unfolded a map. They looked out over the ridgelines and canyons, talking and consulting the map.

Niles backtracked up the trail. Finding a tangle of brush a few meters from a machinegun team, Niles went flat. Behind him, he saw the contras littering the area with cans and papers and cigarette butts. He opened a can and spooned out beans as he watched the mountains.

Blanco and Zutano followed him and sprawled in the brush. The two young contras took turns eating, one watching the trail as the other ate. When Niles finished his beans, they watched as he used his knife to dig a hole. He buried the can, refilled the hole, then recreated the matting of dry grass and fallen leaves. Leaving his position, he used a stick to whisk away every mark of his presence.

The two contras tried to erase their marks. Without speaking, Niles showed them how to comb the grass upright with a stick.

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Blanco nodded:

"Mister, you don't talk. But you know. My teacher in the Sandinistas, they trained him in Cuba and he fought in the mountains for five years. He did what you do. I know you are a soldier."

Niles shook his head, no.

"Then what? You say you are not Cia."

Niles leaned close to the young men and whispered, "Tourist."