

RECON STRIKE

04

Contra soldiers walked along the trails in a long line, several meters between every man. Only a few pines provided concealment. Cutting of the pine and oak forests decades before had denuded the mountains. Now tangles of scrub trees and brush covered the slopes. In some areas, farmers had cleared the mountainsides for pastures. The line of contras zigzagged from thicket to thicket to exploit the cover, following cattle trails and weed-covered footpaths, sometimes climbing down eroded gullies.

Throughout the day, Niles watched the distant ridgelines and the sky. The contras continued their march in stops and starts. The line paused often as Sergeant Martillo checked tracks or sent out squads of scouts. No one risked talking as they crouched in the brush, watching the hillsides for ambushes. But as the men waited for the signal to move, Niles smelled cigarettes, the alien smells of tobacco and menthol drifting through the mountain air. And when the men moved again, cigarette butts littered the trail.

Twice, Niles saw planes. The first flew far to the south. Hours later, a second plane passed two thousand meters above the mountains. Niles dropped to a crouch and pointed to the plane overhead. At the same moment, a shout came from the platoon leader, telling the men to take cover. A minute passed before all the men found concealment. The platoons waited until the white speck

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disappeared behind the mountains, then continued their march.

They crossed an empty landscape, passing abandoned fields and burnt-out farms. On a ridge overlooking the valley of Jalapa, the fire-gutted ruin of mud brick house showed the marks of an assault--bullet pocks and a gaping hole blown through the thick wall by a rocket-propelled grenade. Slogans of the Sandinistas and the con-
tras had been scratched into the walls.

Leaving his place in the line, Niles went flat on the highest point of the ridge. An afternoon haze grayed the details and colors of the long, flat valley. To the north-east, Niles saw the town of Jalapa. A river lined by trees wound down from the mountains, providing water for the town and a green checkerboard of small farms. West of the river, the fields turned yellow and dusty red. The areas without piped water could not be planted again until the rains came.

From Jalapa, the road angled south-west, cutting through dry fields and pastures. Fires had blackened sections of the roadside. To the west, where the mountains blocked his view, the road continued to Ocotal.

Martillo crouched beside him and pointed out a curve in the highway. "We hit them there."

The contras started down, following the contour of a wide canyon created by two long ridges. Almost a kilometer across at the highway, the triangle of flat, alluvial land narrowed to a point at the northern end where a gorge snaked into the mountains. Steep slopes walled both sides of the canyon.

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A dirt road led from the highway to a cluster of burnt-out houses surrounded by scorched trees. Unharvested corn stood dry and yellow in the fields. The plots of tobacco had died. Plots of tree-shaded coffee bushes lined the lower slopes of the mountains.

Following a weed-overgrown path, Martillo led the platoons into the shade of the coffee rows. Niles looked back and saw flat weeds and boot-broken earth marking their trail. Under the trees, smoking and talking, the contras rested while a squad went ahead to check the cornfields and road. Blanco joined Niles. He brought another friend with him, Omar, a hard-muscled, scarred teenager with curly hair and a spotless Fabrique National FAL rifle. Omar's eyes always moved, watching the fields, watching the brush for movement. He did not smoke or take off his pack. He never took his hand off the pistol-grip of his rifle.

"Why have we not seen patrols?" Niles whispered to the young men.

"Maybe they have seen us," Omar commented.

"They are four or five or six," Blanco explained. "Only a few. When they see forty men, fifty of us, they hide."

"They are not stupid," Omar nodded. "They hide and then they run and get an battalion."

Downslope, Sergeant Martillo paced and argued with his squad leaders, his voice carrying over the hillside.

"Think they've seen us?"

"Listen for helicopters." Omar watched the sergeant. "The Guard had helicopters and cannons and tanks and when they fought the

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Sandinistas, they lost. Now the Sandinistas have the helicopters and the Guard fights them again"

"He says," Blanco glanced at the sergeant. "That we will be victorious, we will be in Managua in summer."

Omar laughed quietly, bitterly. "And maybe we will be in the dirt tomorrow."

The scout squad waved from the opposite ridgeline. Sergeant Martillo crossed first, all the others following in a ragged line. Head-high brush, vibrantly green despite the dry season, lined a dusty pathway. The greenery screened the contras from the highway and airborne observation. Wary of mines, Niles stepped in the bootprints of the men ahead of him. The platoons crossed quickly and rushed up the steep slopes to the ridgeline.

As his men spread out in the concealment of the brush, Martillo diagramed the action for Niles. "There, where the highway bends, we wait. They will send a bus first. If the bus hits a mine, it is an atrocity, so they always send a bus first. Then comes the soldiers and supplies for the town. We know they come tomorrow. Our people tell us."

"And if they're wrong?"

"Then we wait. The trucks will come. There are many soldiers in Jalapa. There are many outposts on the road. A battalion or more. They must eat. When a truck comes or a convoy comes, we hit them."

"There are helicopters in Ocotal. What if--"

"Of course! That is why we came! Do you think I brought forty

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five men only to burn a few trucks? I can do that alone--"

A man hissed to Martillo, then pointed to the west. A line of Sandinistas walked along the road. All the talking and movement on the ridgeline stopped. Squinting into the setting sun, Niles studied the patrol. Twelve Sandinistas walked in two lines, six men on each side of the highway. From time to time, a man waved a metal detector over the road.

"Militia," Martillo told him. He passed his binoculars to Niles.

Teenagers and older men, the militiamen wore mismatched uniforms and carried only Kalashnikov rifles. Niles looked for an antenna or a radio-pack. None of the men carried a pack. As the militiamen passed the canyon, their faces turned, glancing at the fields and the hills, but they stayed on the road as they wandered toward Jalapa.

After dark, the contras shifted their positions. One platoon went down to the highway to set the ambush. The other men spread out on the ridgeline. Martillo told Niles to stay on the ridge.

"What if you are killed? Who would tell Washington of my victory?"

The platoon found positions in the brush and trees, then cut branches and lashed together camouflage. Niles watched as Blanco and Zutano set their position in an open patch of dry grass. They worked by starlight and a fragment of moon, using their knives to gouge fighting holes from the hard earth of the ridgeline.

"Why are you digging there?" Niles asked. "You have no cover."

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They will see you if they circle in a helicopter."

"That is why we are here. My rockets are for a helicopter. I cannot shoot from inside a tree."

"Have you shot at a helicopter before?"

"No. I have only seen them from far away. But the sergeant gave me instructions."

"If you are there, you will get killed."

Niles scanned the night landscape of the valley and ridgelines. He plotted the approximate orbit of an incoming helicopter. Then he found two tangles of brush growing close together.

"Here, come here and dig your holes."

As the teenagers worked, Niles carefully trimmed the downslope bushes to create a clear line of fire for a kneeling man. He wove the cut branches back into the bushes. Then he bent and broke other branches to overhang the position.

They worked for hours. When Niles finished, the teenagers had protection and a clear view of the canyon. They worked for another hour to dig a fighting hole for Niles a few steps away. As the young contras drifted to sleep, they whispered to him, telling him of the Revolution and their hope for a free Nicaragua. Niles listened as he watched the valley.

From the lights of Jalapa, to the south-west where the mountains blocked his view, he saw only darkness. No cars or trucks travelled the highway. No lights showed from houses. After two years of fighting for the freedom of Nicaragua-- contra raids ambushes and counter-insurgency sweeps by the Sandinista bat-

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talions-- no one remained on the land between Jalapa and San Fernando. Two years of war had won only death and desolation.

As dawn paled the horizon, Niles scanned the valley and highway with the sergeant's binoculars. He swept the optics across the abandoned fields and along criss-crossing dirt roads, searching for the distinctive forms of walking soldiers. He watched the clusters of empty shacks. He saw no Sandinista patrols.

No traffic moved on the highway. He held the optics on the curve where the contra platoon waited in ambush, studying the area, looking for tracks, breaks in the roadside brush, any detail that might alert a truck driver or an airborne observer. He saw nothing that betrayed the unit.

On the ridgeline, the platoon of contras woke. They stretched under their tarps, talking, weapons and equipment clattering. The soldiers left their camouflaged positions and slid downslope to urinate in the brush. Others lit cigarettes. Niles heard the lookouts hiss warnings, telling the others to stay down, to be silent. Voices answered. Niles checked Blanco and Zutano. They remained silent within their screen of interwoven branches as they ate from cans and prepared their weapons.

He focused the binoculars on the canyon below him. In the still morning air, hundreds of tiny birds flitted through the cornfields. He watched the flocks for sudden flights caused by fright. The birds darted from row to row, feeding in nervous but undisturbed flocks. He swept the optics along the rutted dirt track

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and the pathways through the fields, searching for patrols. He scanned the triangle of the canyon from the mountain gorge to the highway-- he saw only the birds moving.

The contras on the ridgeline talked and smoked. An empty bean can rattled down the hill. The noise brought Sergeant Martillo. He cursed and threatened until the soldiers went quiet. Niles saw the ex-sergeant pause beside the radioman, then continue along the line of hidden soldiers to Niles:

"You made that for them?" Martillo studied the position concealing Blanco and Zutano. "Very intelligent. I will remember that. You Marines can teach my soldiers many tricks."

"Vietnamese taught me that one."

"But if we had good missiles-- Redeyes, Stinger missiles-- we would not need these tricks. We could knock them down from high in the sky."

Niles scanned the western horizon. "Vietnamese knocked down hundreds of helicopters. They didn't need missiles."

"Don't sightsee. Watch that road."

"I think it's coming."

"I don't see it."

"If I were them, I'd send a spotter with a convoy."

In the west, a point of light flashed against the fading darkness-- an observation plane. He focused the binoculars on the road and waited.

Kilometers away, a speck of yellow appeared.

"There it is"

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Martillo scrambled back to the radio. The soldiers passed the word along the ridgeline. Niles saw the soldiers checking the tarps and branches concealing them. Blanco peered out of his position and gave Niles a clenched-fist salute.

Speeding over the dirt highway, the bus took form in the binoculars. Niles saw cargo on the roof. Two transport trucks followed. Dust clouded behind the bus, reducing the trucks to shadows. Niles followed the trucks with the binoculars but the distance and dust defeated the optics-- he could not see what the trucks carried. He focused on the bus and saw what appeared to be men on the roof cargo rack.

The bus sped through the curve and continued east. Thirty seconds later, the first truck started the curve and the road exploded in a churning wave of dust as the ambush unit fired a series of claymore mines, thousands of high-velocity steel balls punching through tires and sheet metal of the truck, instantly killing the driver, reducing the truck to a hulk rolling on the wheel rims.

The second truck stopped two hundred meters short of the curve. As the driver tried to turn the truck around, a machinegunner propped a weapon on the cab of the truck. Other Sandinistas jumped from the sides. Then a second series of mines exploded.

Dust and smoke obscured the action. Niles shifted the binoculars, following the road east. Hundreds of meters past the ambush, the bus stopped. Men with rifles climbed down from the roof. The bus continued to Jalapa as the Sandinistas ran into the

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fields behind the ambush, trying to attack the contras from behind. The faint popping of rifles drifted through the calm air.

Minutes passed as the contras annihilated the few survivors of the ambush. The teenagers on the ridge cheered on their compatriots. The riflefire died out and smoke rose from the wrecked trucks. As the dust cleared, Niles saw flames. The trucks and the dry roadside fields burned. Contras ran around the trucks, stripping weapons and equipment from bodies. Individual rifle shots popped. Then contras left the road, groups of men running through the dry cornfields.

The few Sandinista militiamen from the bus stalled the retreat from the road. Contra squads maneuvered around the militiamen, killing the isolated and outnumbered men in firefights. But the elimination of the militiamen cost time. The spotter plane continued circling a thousand meters above the fields, watching as the contras retreated.

Niles heard the whine of the approaching helicopters. The contras on the ridge went quiet. No one moved as the two Soviet MI-8 troop transports banked into a steep turn. The pilots powered through a high circle, surveying the burning trucks, the fighting, and the ridgelines over the valley.

Mini-guns and rocket pods marked one helicopter as an assault version. The assault helicopter dropped down and swept the far ridgeline with the mini-guns, the sound of the machineguns cutting through the rotor whine.

"No one move!" Niles shouted out. "No one shoot! Get down!"

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Pressing himself against the bottom of the narrow ditch, he heard the shriek of the helicopter and then the sound he remembered from Vietnam-- the roar of mini-guns. Hundreds of heavy caliber slugs slashed through the brush and hammered the earth. The helicopter flashed overhead, brass cartridge casings showering down as the guns ripped trees higher in the mountains.

Martillo shouted out, "Anyone hit? Report any casualties!"

Men answered with whistles and cheers. Niles looked up and saw the soldiers around him emerging from the holes. The storm of bullets had not killed or wounded any of the contras on the ridge. The d covered the fading noise. The second helicopter descended into the canyon, dropping down fast. The troop transport landed five hundred of meters ahead of the contras retreating from the road.

The sergeant's voice bellowed out, "Now! Kill those Cuban sons of whores."

"No!" Niles shouted out. "Don't! There's a--" Obeying the order, the contras fired, their rifles and machineguns overwhelmed Niles' voice. He scrambled across the slope. As Blanco rose to one knee and aimed a rocket at the transport helicopter, Niles reached for the pistol grip of the launcher. "Wait--"

Blanco fired and the rocket flashed away. Before the first rocket hit, Zutano jerked the safety cap off the second rocket. Other teams fired rockets.

"Wait!" Niles grabbed the launcher.

Sandinista soldiers jumped from the sidedoors of the helicopter and ran through the rotorstorm of dust and flying cornstalks. At

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that moment, the anti-armor rocket grenades hit. Men disappeared in flashes of high-explosive. A mortar shell landed fifty meters past the helicopters.

"The sergeant ordered--"

"The other helicopter--"

The other rocket crews fired again and scored. The troopship cockpit exploded, fragments of metal and plexiglass spinning through the brilliant morning light, the helicopter tilting sideways, the main rotor blades slicing through running soldiers. Turbines shrieking from behind the contras, the second helicopter returned from the east, screaming over the ridgeline and banking, turning to point its gun and rocket pods back at the contras. The two M-60 machineguns fired continuously, trying to track the gun-mounted troopship.

Niles took the loaded rocket launcher. Kneeling, he thumbed back the hammer and sighted through the 2.5X scope, setting the reticle lines on the hub of the five-bladed rotors. He waited. The pilot brought the helicopter around and started back, coming straight into the scope. Niles raised the reticle ahead and above the helicopter.

He squeezed back the trigger. The rocket shrieked away and at the same moment, the pilot fired his mini-guns, streams of slugs ripping apart the hillside hundreds of meters below Niles, dust and chopped wood churning, trees shuddering, a wave of dust and shaking racing up the slope as the pilot held down the trigger button.

The rocket went high, missing the fuselage but exploding in the

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tail blades. The helicopter spun out of control, the bullets from the mini-guns whipping to the side, 57mm air-to-ground rockets flashing from the pods but flying wild.

All the firing on the ridge stopped as the helicopter smashed into the steep slope, the rotors shattering. Impact reduced the fuselage to twisted metal. An instant later, the fuselage rolled down the hill, throwing junk and broken rotors as the wreck disintegrated.

A mountainside kilometers away erupted in flame and dust as the volley of 57mm rockets hit.

The contras on the ridge shouted and raved. Cursing, Martillo ran along the ridge. He pointed at the road.

Two trucks crowded with militiamen came from Jalapa. The sergeant and the crew of the mortar jerked the legs and tube around and aimed at the road. The sergeant spun the elevation and traverse cranks, aimed, adjusted the gears again before dropping a shell down the tube. Seconds later, the shell burst at the roadside, a hundred meters west of the trucks. The trucks stopped, the militiamen jumping down. The sergeant adjusted the traverse. The next round hit fifty meters past the trucks. The Sandinistas scattered and the sergeant adjusted the aim again and sent the third round into the militiamen. The trucks left the highway, lurching over the fields to escape the mortars.

The contras on the ridge fired into the downed helicopters. Tracers touched off the fuel of the second helicopter, flames rising from the wreck, ammunition popping, rockets exploding.

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Niles focused the borrowed binoculars on center of the valley. He saw Sandinista soldiers trying to rescue their comrades from the first helicopter. Incoming rifle and machinegun rounds dropped men.

Hundreds of meters away, the contra ambush platoon ran for the mountain. A man fell and all the other contras went flat in the furrows. Searching the area, Niles found a line of Sandinista riflemen in a dry ditch, firing across the cornfields at the contras.

He saw dust puff around the Sandinista squad as full-auto bursts from the machinegunners found the range.

Two Sandinistas went still. Others ran. A stream of slugs from an M-60 spun a man, then a rocket splashed flame and left only torn corpses.

Niles looked for other Sandinistas still fighting. But smoke obscured the area as flames spread from the helicopters to the dry fields and brush. The smoke also hid the movement of the contras as they ran to the foot of the mountain and zigzagged up the slope.

Shouldering his pack, Niles rushed down the ridge to Martillo. The sergeant labored with the mortar gears, adjusting the aim to follow the Sandinista reaction force as they rushed through the fields. He grabbed the binoculars from Niles and watched the Sandinistas. Smoke rising from the canyon obscured his view. Only two 82mm high-explosive shells remained. Niles crouched with the crew and waited, exchanging grins with the teenagers.

Martillo cranked the gears. He took one of the shells and held it over the tube as he watched the Sandinistas in the distant

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fields. He dropped the shell and waited. Niles saw the explosion scatter the Sandinistas.

"Ha! I got the head dog." He raised the binoculars again. "Now they try to help him" The sergeant snatched up the last shell and dropped it down the tube. "Now we go. We are victorious." As the crew disassembled the mortar, Martillo scanned the canyon, surveying the black hulks of the trucks, the burning fields, and the flaming wreckage of the Soviet helicopters.

"Did it not go as I told you?" Martillo asked him.

"You got them, no doubt about it." Niles squinted into the sky, watching the spotter plane circle. He scanned the horizon. "Question is, where are the gunships?"

"The gunship? Are you blind? It is burning down there--"

"That was not a gunship. It was a troopship. With guns and rockets."

But the sergeant had already rushed away, shouting at his soldiers, ordering the mortar and machinegun crews to move faster. Nile crouched there, his rifle in his hands, watching the contras assemble for their retreat to the Honduran border. He noted every detail: the men with the M-60 machineguns dragging the loose-swinging belts of cartridges through the dust, the teenagers firing their Kalashnikovs blind into the swirling smoke, the sergeant maintaining control over the platoon with shouts.

Gasping and coughing in the smoke, the ambush platoon staggered to the top of the ridge. Rifles popped a thousand meters away as

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the Sandinistas in the canyon tried to hit them, the spent slugs zipping through brush and skipping off the hard earth. Niles eased down prone, exposing only his face to the random fire as he waited.

He saw Omar emerge from the swirling gray smoke. He half-carried a semi-conscious teenage contra. A bloody bandage wrapped the wounded man's arm and a web belt cinched the flopping, broken arm to his torso. Another contra improvised a branch and rope stretcher.

The smoke reduced the men to a crowd of shadows. Martillo led the platoons north, the line of men running as fast as the weight of their weapons and packs allowed. Blanco and Zutano waited for the men carrying the stretcher. They alternated with the burden of the wounded man.

Last in the line, Niles watched the ridge behind him, expecting the Sandinistas to appear at any moment. But the contras reached the treeline without pursuit. There, Niles looked up, trying to see the observation plane. The column of smoke billowed high into the sky, blocking his sight-- and the sight of the observer in the plane.

The turbine-scream of the third helicopter came a minute later. The contras panicked and ran through the pines and oaks. Niles spotted a narrow erosion-cut gulley between two oaks. He called out to the group struggling with the stretcher and helped them lower the wounded man into the narrow gulley.

Like a long, tearing explosion, mini-guns ripped the ridgeline

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with a malestrom of heavy caliber slugs. The guns went silent. Niles looked up and saw the belly and weapon-pods of an MI-24 assault helicopter pass over him. The gunship circled and rockets tore into the section of ridge the contras had occupied. Returning again, the gunship flew slowly along the ridge. They heard the turbine-whine fade as the Soviet helicopter flew higher into the mountains, searching for the contras.

Niles and the others jerked the stretcher out of the gulley and ran. They found the main force of contras leaving their concealment. Sergeant Martillo laughed when he saw Niles:

"Thought they got you. Who would have told my story in Washington? Who would have described my victory and asked them for anti-aircraft rockets? I tell you, with a Stinger rocket, we could have killed three helicopters today."

"Yes, commandante," Niles nodded. "It was a good trick. But I don't think you can ever try this again."

"Not again? I will do it many times! Tell them of the helicopters. Tell them I want missiles."

"You can be sure I will have much to tell them about today."