

RECON STRIKE

08

Quezada watched and listened for movement. He lay flat in a tangle of brush, his eye scanning the gray-on-black forms of the bare hillsides. For an hour, he waited. Nothing moved. He heard only the occasional sound of an insect or the falling of a leaf through the branches.

This night challenged his student, a wiry and athletic teenager from Mejicanos, a slum district of San Salvador. The boy had taken the brave and vain name of Lobo, the Wolf. Tonight, Lobo had the task of slipping past the two instructors playing the roles of soldiers. And the boy had, so far, done very well. Despite the months-dry earth and the brilliant stars and moon, no one had seen or heard Lobo on the hillside. He somehow moved through the dry brush and grass without noise and without revealing himself to his instructors or his commander on the ridge.

The stars and moon defined the brush and slopes of the hillside, denying Lobo the easy concealment of darkness. Moonlight glinted on the shifting leaves. The grass and dying ferns looked pale blue, every dry blade and stem reflecting the moon. If Lobo exposed his dark-clothed form as he bellied up the mountain, he failed the test.

Quezada looked at the luminous dial of his watch. He watched the dial as the second hand completed an exact hour, then he

## RECON STRIKE

whistled to the gun crew.

A hundred meters away, metal scraped against metal and a mortar tube popped. Quezada shaded his eye. An instant later, the white magnesium light of a flare seared away the night, the glare creating an abstract landscape of white and grays and shadows. Like scratches on glass, the monofilament lines of trip-flares and black powder booby traps ran across the slopes, sticks holding the lines at knee-height above the earth. The parachute flare drifted down from the infinite dome of the night sky, swinging from side to side on its parachute. The scene swayed and wavered.

Only the shadows moved. Quezada studied the hillsides, trying to discover the boy in the grass and rocks, mentally comparing what he saw now to what he remembered.

The machinegun hammered the silence. A tracer streaked through the glare as an instructor fired a burst into the black splotch of a pine. Erosion had undercut the roots and dropped the tree sideways but the pine continued growing across the gullies, the low branches fanning over the hillside.

If Lobo had trusted his life to the protection of that tree, the bursts of machinegun fire had taught him a sudden lesson in the power of high velocity, heavy caliber bullets. The firing continued and tracers passed through the pine and streaked into the distance. The f  
the slope. The erosion-cut gullies offered concealment. But booby-traps made the gullies difficult. The open slopes had tangles of brush for concealment. But would the teenager have the nerve to advance in the open?

## RECON STRIKE

Thumbing a cigarette lighter, Quezada touched the flame to the long fuze of a paper-wrapped bomb. The absence of his left arm made the throw awkward. He had to drop the lighter, then pick up the bomb as the fuze sparked and hissed. The National Guard torturers who had years before clubbed and twisted his bullet-shattered arm had not made him betray his unit, but they had ended his dream of playing baseball after the Revolution. Without the natural counter-balance of his left arm, he threw wild and short, the bomb going only thirty meters and landing two meters to the side of the gully. He repeated his awkward light and throw routine, this time managing to bounce the oversized firecracker into the gully.

The dull booms came seconds later. Balls of smoke and dust floated upward as he watched for movement in the swaying shadows. The flare dropped low in the sky, shadows stretching across the hillsides in long, swaying lines. Then he saw the form of shoulders and a head. A crease in the dry grass-- created by a crawling man-- led to the form. Light glinted off what appeared to be a grease-blackened hand. In the last seconds of illumination, Quezada threw another black powder bomb, scoring a hit on the form. Then the night went black.

Fire streaked through the air. Quezada saw the sparking bomb bounce two steps away. He did not waste time or risk his fingers to match the boy's trick. Rolling away through the leaves and mud, he put his arm around his head to cover his ears as explosion slammed him.

The instructors fired-- they had seen the boy throw back the

## RECON STRIKE

bomb. Unlike the soldiers the young man would face in the future, they aimed high, keeping the bursts of slugs a meter above the ground. But, Quezada knew, the sound of the bullets ripping through the air would be a sound Lobo would not forget.

"That was very good trick," Quezada called down to the unseen student. "But a firecracker is not a grenade. If you try that trick in combat, the dogs will eat the wolf. And all our time invested in your training will be wasted. You failed this test tonight. Lay there until morning and think of your error." He shouted out to the instructors manning the machinegun. "Gunners! If he moves before dawn, kill him."

A squawk came from his walkie-talkie. "What is it?"

"A message."

"Check-in?"

"No. There is an emergency."

"I am coming now."

Quezada scrambled out of the brush. He crossed the ridgeline and went down the opposite hillside. His technician had finally received a radio transmission from El Salvador. The radio operators of the unit had maintained their schedule of morning and evening coded transmissions-- always at the exact time, always transmitting the exact code-- until that night. No codes came at six in the evening and the operators did not respond to the quick messages from the base. If only one radioman had missed his time, Quezada would not have initiated an alert. But both radiomen failed to report and both did not respond. Quezada immediately directed his

## RECON STRIKE

communications technician to alert their other contacts. And now a message had come from the unit or one of the contacts-- an emergency.

By memory, he followed the trail through the coffee rows and orange trees. He saw the lights on in both the communications room and the file room. The soldiers guarding the hacienda passed him through the high chainlink outer fence. He crossed the mined zone on the concrete walkway and entered the hacienda through a side gate, then rushed the last few steps to the radio room.

Antonio Salazar worked at the table, translating the coded message into text. Of all the technicians and clerks and instructors at the camp, Quezada trusted only Salazar with the codes.

A veteran of both the Revolution and the war against the contras, the young man came from a family of Sandinistas. His father and older brother had died in the Revolution-- killed in the National Guard's bombing of Esteli??-- and his mother and sisters served as couriers and nurses. After the triumph, Salazar volunteered for two years of service in the Sandinista Army. He learned radio operation and maintenance from Cuban and East German technicians. He reenlisted after completing his two years and applied to become a member of the Sandinista Party. His battalion's political cadre referred Salazar to Quezada. Salazar proved to be a very efficient young man. In the few minutes since he received the transmission, he had finished decoding and typing the message. "Why did they not report?"

"The police took them."

Taking the typed page, Quezada read that Salvadorian police had

RECON STRIKE

captured one of the drivers early in the day. Interrogation got the names and addresses of two other young men. The police seized those members later. But the others had managed to evade capture. The army and police now searched the city. The source could not learn the names of the prisoners.

"Any messages from our support people? Did you radio them?"

"Yes, of course. But nothing. Only this one knew anything about what happened."

Rushing to his office, he dialed the number of Ministry of Exports. No answer. He dialed the number of the mansion where Pazos stayed. The Cuban occupied a home abandoned by National Guard general in 1979. Only a few kilometers south of the capitol, with palatial rooms, a swimming pool, and expansive lawns, Pazos maintained a second office there. His aide Condori answered:

"Where is he? I want to talk to him now."

"The Director is not available. I will have him call you when he can."

"Don't give me that excuse. You know who I am. Put him on the phone."

"He's not in the country."

"There's an emergency. Is there anyone manning the radios in the office?"

"We can't discuss what has happened on this telephone line. It is not secure. But we've consulted the Director and the Ministry is taking appropriate steps."

"What? You know about it? Why wasn't I told?"

RECON STRIKE

"I had no instructions to inform you. It was unnecessary to inform you of--"

"Unnecessary? Boy, those are my fighters. They report to me."

"We have channels to get the product out."

"You what?"

"The emergency is over. We are moving the product out through our own channels."

"I want it stopped! You are not to endanger my fighters by--"

"It is already done. Speak with the Director when he returns."

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Holding her Uzi submachinegun, Lydia Rivas peered through the papered-over second floor windows, watching the street and early morning traffic for police surveillance. The traffic slowed to a stop in front of the garage. Horns sounded as a trash truck clashed gears but did not move. Diesel smoke clouded from its exhaust stack and the grinding of the gears continued. Two helpers stood on the truck's back bumper, their clothing black with filth. The driver of a Fiat behind the truck leaned on his horn. Looking back at the Fiat, one of the helpers motioned for the driver to cut his horn. The driver shouted an obscenity. The blare of his horn and the horns of the taxis and pick-ups continued.

"When will that truck come?" Paulino Rivera complained from another window. Rivas did not answer. The horns continued even after the trash truck lurched into motion. As the truck went around the corner, one of the helpers gave a backhand toss and a newspaper

## RECON STRIKE

bundle arched through the morning light. Garbage splashed across the windshield of the Fiat. Swerving, but too late to turn and pursue the trash truck, the Fiat continued straight through the intersection.

Rivera laughed. Rivas did not take her eyes from the street. Her eyes ached with the strain as she watched every movement on the street and the narrow lane intersecting the street. She now wore her French t-shirt and only pair of designer jeans. Though the long sleeved t-shirt accentuated her breasts and small waist, she knew the dark blue of the shirt and the denim blue of her jeans presented a more revolutionary appearance than tennis whites. She had also wrapped her hair with a black cloth, in the style of an campesino woman, the cloth like a black helmet across her forehead.

With her sunglasses, she thought she looked very much like the terrorists she had seen in magazines and films. But she needed combat boots. She had only her low-cut tennis shoes-- now ruined by splotches oil and filth.

"Soldiers!"

"Where?"

"In the shacks!" Two fighters watched the turquario in the ravine behind the garage.

Throwing his chair back, Rivera ran along the walkway.

"Stay at your position!" Rivas hissed.

"There's soldiers back there. You're watching the--"

"Stay there!"

Rivera went back to his window. In the rear of the garage, the

## RECON STRIKE

lookouts scuttled from window to window to peer at the soldiers. Rivas saw only workers and traffic on the street. Then a police squad car appeared. Rivas watched the squad car cruise the block. The traffic jamming behind the police did not sound their horns.

The squad car-- a black and white late-model four-door Dodge donated by the United States Agency for International Development-- carried four policemen. Three pointed M-1 carbines out the windows. The fourth drove. Rivas saw the driver speak into a microphone.

"What are the soldiers doing?" Rivas asked.

"Its a patrol. Only a patrol."

"A police car!" Rivera's voice went high-pitched with panic.

"Quiet!" Rivas hissed. "Shut up."

Pressing her head against the crumbling paper pasted to the window, she managed to watch the police car cruise down the block. The car swerved into a driveway. Rivas watched the traffic surge past the parked car. The police remained inside the Dodge.

"Are they gone?" Rivera called out.

Rivas did not answer him. She saw a soldier lean against the car and talk with the police. A line of soldiers walked down the street toward the garage. She called out to the lookouts at the back. "Are their soldiers back there?"

"No, they're gone. It was only a patrol. Fascist dogs on a patrol, terrorizing the poor of the--"

"Shut up!"

"Shut your own mouth, you Castillian rich bitch."

"Louder," Rivas hissed. "The soldiers out front cannot hear

RECON STRIKE

you."

"What?"

"They're coming!" Rivera's voice cracked.

Honking sounded in the street. Rivas saw a flatbed cargo truck loaded with white sacks. Three people sat in the cab-- from her angle she could not see their faces. Blocking traffic, the truck honked and the line of stopping cars behind it sounded a hundred horns.

"Roll up the door," Rivas shouted out. "The truck is here."

"Oh, Jesus, no!" One of the back lookouts whined. "The soldiers--"

"You shits!" Rivas checked the safety of her Uzi, then put it on the planks of the walkway. She rushed to the chain and pulley assembly of the roll-gate. Loathing the feel of the oily links, she pulled the chain hand-over-hand to raise to raise the door.

A soldier ran past the garage entrance. Rivas looked down at the rifle in his hands and she jerked back against the wall. Waiting, motionless, she heard a shout. She went back to her position and picked up her Uzi.

Looking outside, she saw a soldier stopping traffic in the street. The truck engine gunned. She saw the driver make the wide turn into the garage. Rivas set down her Uzi again and ran back to the chain and lowered the door.

They all heard the boots and clanking of equipment as the soldiers passed.

Anna and two young men got out of the truck cab. One man

## RECON STRIKE

helped Anna to a crate. She sat there and shook, sucking down ragged gasps of air. The driver took a plastic sack of red pills out of his pocket and gave one to Anna. Rivas recognized the pills as one hundred milligram capsules of Secondal.

The driver looked up at the fighters on the walkway. "In the truck!"

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In a hanger on the civilian side of Toncontin International Airport, Niles sorted through boxes of military equipment marked with the insignias and inventory numbers of the Salvadorian Army. Through anti-biotics in the first-aid kits, fraying straps, corroded batteries. He had expected defects. The night before, when he prepared the list for Todd of the CIA, he had requested weapons and supplies for eight men, not four. The boxes of spare equipment provided replacements.

Only the camouflage fatigues for the Americans-- marked with the insignia of the Atlacatl Battalion-- came new.

Nothing that Niles and his men carried would identify them as American Marines.

Niles assembled sets of fatigues and web-gear. On the concrete floor of the hanger, he laid out four rows of camouflage fatigues and packs, complete with boxes of rations, canteens, rope, compasses, flashlights-- all the miscellaneous items required by his team.

A few minutes after noon, fists banged on the hanger door. "You inside! There is an American here."

## RECON STRIKE

Stepping into the glare, he saw Honduran soldiers standing with Alvarez. "He is with me. Also, I am expecting two other men. A white man and a black man. Bring them here when they come."

They waited as the soldiers walked away from the hanger. Alvarez took off the straw ranchero hat he wore and shaded his eyes as he studied the distant mountains. At the north end of the runway, turbines roared as a commercial airliner accelerated for take-off. Alvarez pointed to the west, to a horizon churning with clouds. He shouted out: "A storm."

"Looks that way-- drive your truck in." Niles pushed the rolling door aside.

Inside, Alvarez took a heavy cardboard case from the cab of the pickup. "Where's King Kong?"

"At the range. Putting rounds through the rifles. He's already late. All the radios working?"

"Like magic," Alvarez told him. He opened the box, pulling aside sheets of foam padding. He held up a small radios in each hand and clicked the transmits. The hand-radios showed no brand name or place of manufacture. Designed by the National Security Agency, the radios employed encoding circuits to scramble the transmissions. Without one of the four radios, a technician scanning the bands would intercept only bursts of electronic noise. "I ran the micro-vac over the boards. Checked them all with a microscope and put in new ni-cads. Ready to make space-noise."

"And this one? Enhancements check out?" Nile picked up the telephone-style handset of the Salvadorian Army radio.

RECON STRIKE

"Perfecto. Same routine, then tested the spook bands. That set is set. Scanner, too--" Alvarez brought another electronic unit from the box. "I tell you, sir, the Agency does have fine electronics. The Corps will never have technology this fine."

"The agency? What agency?"

"The travel agency that sends to all these fantastic places. Colombia, the Beeka--"

"Don't know what you're talking about, sergeant. But I do happen to have here satellite photos of another exotic locale-- which you may wish to study. Lieutenant Stark will be coming--" Niles checked his watch. "-- any minute. With maps for all of us. With weather info."

"What about the storm? Any problem with that?"

"Not for us. There's your camos and gear."

"Atlacatl?"

Tires screeched outside. A drum beat and bass line thudded through the sheet steel walls of the hanger.

"Must be Vatsek," Alvarez guessed.

They rolled the doors open and a leased mini-van pulled into the hanger, the screaming voices and wailing guitars of heavy metal rock and roll booming from a stereo. In the front, Vatsek nodded with the beat, grinning to the captain and Alvarez.

Stark left from the van. Though he held a briefcase, he tried to cover his ears with his hands. He rushed to the far side of the hanger and stood there with his hands over his ears, his eyes closed. In his white tropical-weight suit and slacks, he looked

## RECON STRIKE

like an international entrepreneur-- tormented by the screaming guitars and voices.

Jerking and bopping with the music, Vatsek jumped out and slammed open the sidedoor. Music exploded from the van. With a final howl, the tape ended and Vatsek brought out an M16/M203 over-and-under assault rifle/grenade launcher.

"Finally ...." Stark commented.

"Finally!" Vatsek shouted out, raising the M16/M203 in his fist. "Months in this country and finally! No more training these Hondo-vatos to clean their rifles. No more. We're out of it. We are out to take heads and lay waste."

"Did you brief the sergeant?" Niles asked Stark.

"Sir, I attempted to. But there was a noise problem. Communication was not possible."

"Brief?" Vatsek asked. "What is there to tell me? We got action! We're on our way out, right?"

"It's just an in and out, Godzilla," Alvarez told him. "Walk in, make an arrest and--"

"Arrest?"

"You know, like cops," Alvarez added.

Niles leaned into van and took out a short Colt Commando rifle. He jerked the charging handle to lock back the bolt. "Not quite ...."

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Darkness and heat. The stink of diesel smoke and sweating

## RECON STRIKE

bodies.

The gears clashed and the noise of the highway faded as the truck slowed to a stop. Soldiers shouted. Lydia Rivas lay in darkness, her hands gripping the sweat-slick steel of the Uzi. The driver jerked the manual brake and she heard the engine slow to an idle: a checkpoint.

If the soldiers discovered the compartment under the sacks, if they checked behind the driver's seat, she died. But not before she killed the soldiers who found her and the others.

The others slept the dreamless sleep of barbituates. Only Rivas lay awake-- she had not swallowed the capsules of Secondal the driver distributed to all the comrades. In the stinking, fetid darkness of the compartment jammed with her sleeping comrades, she listened to horns and the engine noise of other trucks. Staring into the darkness, she waited, listening, feeling streams of sweat flowing over her body.

Only a few more hours, she told herself. Only a few more hours and then they hid for the night. The driver had told them they would not risk the road into the mountains today. He would first send a car north on the Perquin road to look for army checkpoints. Tomorrow they travelled again. Then another night before they walked through the mountains to Honduras.

Only a few more days ....