

Unmanned and unnerved

- a story of the 'war on terror' by Julian Delasantellis

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Sometimes, at times like this, taking the whole family out for the monthly shopping trip, United States Air Force Captain Brian (Big Green) Forrester reflected that what he was doing now seemed very reminiscent to what the pioneers did when they settled this area of the west almost 150 years ago.

Like in movies such as *Shane*, and TV shows like *Little House on the Prairie*. There, the father, like Michael Landon in *Little House*, would gather his whole family, his wife and three girls, and load them into the wagon for the long and arduous trip on the rocky roads to the town general store. In contrast, here he was, behind the wheel of his Chrysler Town and Country, heading south down Nevada State Highway 95 for a brief trip to the modern equivalent of the general store, the massive Costco on Decatur Avenue in North Las Vegas.

His family, Carilyn, wife of 16 years, 12-year-old daughter Lilly, and eight-year-old son Ethan Allen, were with him, all, as mandated by Nevada state law, firmly strapped and buckled into their car seats. Forrester had no idea how those old fashioned families passed the time on their much longer shopping trips than these. From the house on Fisher it may take 30 if the lights and traffic were breaking against them, 20 minutes, from the soccer fields on Alliante, if Lilly's team drew the early kick and they were through by the time the sun was just peeking over the towers of the strip, they might make it in ten.

Still, his modern family was not just going to sit quietly and observe the parade of American franchised commerce, Best Buy, Vons, Papa Murphy, Chili's. Carilyn was listening to an MP3 of her supervisor's comments on her monthly report, Lilly was watching a DVD in the backseat player, EA was playing his Gameboy.

Even at this hour, the only parking space for the big rigs was up at the gas pumps near West Rome, so Brian dropped his brood off, parked, met them under the canopy. They were waiting for him outside the entrance; they couldn't get in without presenting their Costco membership card, which was in his name. While waiting, Carilyn was furiously rubbing the handle and other "touch" areas of the massive shopping wagon with one of the free disposable disinfectant cloths.

"Didn't you hear that somebody here got tuberculosis?", Carilyn said. "You can't be too careful."

Pat Kass, the retired social studies teacher who had to go back to work after she outlived her savings at age 77, perfunctorily waved the Forrester's through with barely a glance at the card. A few meters inside, they came on the first of the sample stations, a young, portly Mexican girl, in full hairnet, total body glistening clean white apron with white stretch booties, and thick, light blue anti-germicidal latex gloves.

"Care for a mini Chips Ahoy? Only \$7.99 for a four pound box, each pound individually wrapped and sealed?"

Carilyn took one from the disposable dish the girl had poured the cookies in. "Very nice," then motioned her family to continue walking into the store

The cart filled up quickly, a five kilogram bag of ground beef, eight Angus T bones, five one-kilogram blocks of Velveeta, five kilograms of chicken breasts, six one-kilogram cans of tuna, 10 kilograms of rice. Forrester and EA took samples of rib eye from Dom Mattuchio, who Forrester knew was in his first job since losing his construction business last year; all four took pizza samples from Rose McGuinness, the RIFed assistant audio-visual tech who used to handle the Lightbox in Lilly's school. Departing the food section, there were four cans of Lysol wrapped into a

single register item, two 48 roll, almost sofa-size, packages of bath tissue, and then they were in electronics. Lilly begged her parents for the new Jonas Brothers CD, and although he knew that Carilyn disapproved, he put it in the wagon - after all, she just aced her AP calculus class. EA saw this, knew there might be fertile ground here for another kill.

"Look, Dad, the new Call of Duty," referring to the video game series developed by Activision. "It's the one with all the new bombs and stuff. Can I get it, please, please oh please?"

Carilyn brusquely took the game from her son's hand and put it back on the display rack. "Now Ethan, you know that your father said you couldn't have that before Christmas unless your grades improved." She gazed back up at Brian, seeking parental reinforcement.

But Forrester was momentarily pre-occupied, going over the depiction of a Hellfire missile fired from a Central Intelligence Agency Predator drone slamming into a posse of swarthy Chechen terrorists.

"Honey?"

"Listen to your mother. Not until your grades improve."

Those who believe in the supremacy of individual human agency, the William Ernest Henley worship of "my unconquerable soul" overruling all other human destiny, might have a hard time explaining this peculiar destiny of the Forrester family, where the toy video game with the feature that EA desired, the Hellfire missile launched by the Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) system, was, after riding the backseat of an F-15 Eagle for six years, actually the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of his father. This unique, intergenerational circumstance grew out of events that occurred before both were born, on October 6, 1973, the first day of the fourth Arab-Israeli war, most known to history as the Yom Kippur war.

Proving once again that nothing so brings defeat to a military faster than the arrogance of victory, the Israeli air force, the hero of the 1967 Six-Day war with their early bold strikes behind Egyptian and Syrian lines, attempted to do the same in the early minutes of the 1973 war, confident in their ability to cut the lines of communication and supply of the Egyptian invasion force that had crossed onto the Eastern littoral of the Suez Canal. However, the pilots were driven back, sustaining significant casualties of up to 200 fighter aircraft shot down, by the sophisticated anti-aircraft system provided to the Arabs by the Soviet Union, primarily the SAM 6 missile and ZSU-23 radar directed anti-aircraft gun.

The only other major world power with the resources to marry so much cutting-edge technology and money in the service of warcraft, the United States, stood up and took notice. They weren't so concerned about the prospect of more downed planes, in the new environment; after all, each one of those was just another appropriation line to some lucky member of the military industrial complex.

But the loss of the pilots, well, that was another story. They were devilishly expensive to train, and their training was always long and arduous. In United States civilian factories, the principle of replacing manpower with technology, most commonly known as automation, was now well under way, so would it be in the military. If you're sending something over a heavily defended enemy frontier, the new thinking would be to decouple the plane/pilot package that had existed since the age of flight began, and send in only the plane, in this case, the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) .

The first chance to demonstrate the new technology was in the 1991 Gulf War; there, it was camera-equipped UAVs that pilots in conventional fighter/bombers relied on to target air-to-surface ground munitions fired from behind enemy lines to reach their target; this led to the famed "luckiest man in Iraq" joke told by allied commander, Norman Schwarzkopf, in response to an Iraqi bridge blowing up seconds after an Iraqi truck driver passed over it.

By the time of the wars of 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan to root out the Taliban, and then, the war to depose Saddam Hussein, the CIA and United States Air Force had married the capabilities of its extended range Predator and Reaper UAVs with that of its Hellfire air-to-ground missile, and a new way of war was born.

Thus, after bringing the US\$350 order back from Costco, and after a few beers and a few innings of the Dodgers, captain Forrester showered, shaved, donned his air force blue, kissed the family goodbye, climbed up into the cab of his Dodge Ram and began the lonely 80 kilometer journey northwest through the darkening Nevada desert, up State Route 95 to Creech Air Force Base, the proud, self proclaimed "Home of the Predators".

But, in actuality, where he was really going was straight into the heart of the Afghan war zone.

To save on fuel, weighed down neither by human pilots nor the life support system needed to keep them alive, the eight-meter long Predators were set aloft from their simple fixed rail launchers as close to the action as possible, but as for where they were controlled, that was another story. With the increases in Pentagon satellite bandwidth that could be anywhere, and once the bad guys, be it leftover al-Qaeda in Iraq or the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, found out just how hard they were getting it from the Predators, the air force looked around and found Creech, almost a kilometer in the sky, a formidable obstacle to any jihadi trying to pass as Anglo in the nearby town of Indian Springs.

Once inside, one of the 12 interlocking 30-meter trailers (Britain's MI-6 had a trailer on the other side of the base; a few months ago, Prince Harry was here training on Predators patrolling over Pakistan) and settled in, Forrester's missions were not that different from EA's when he plays the game with friends. He's strapped in, before him are a VDT screen and all the controls needed to "fly" the Predator, flaps, throttle, rudder. Besides Forester is his co-pilot, First Lieutenant Rodger "Rico" Colon, the payload operator controller, responsible for all the systems necessary to keep the Predator aloft, as well as its key attraction, its two Hellfire II AGM-114 missiles, carried under the Predator's wing, along with a number of uniformed intelligence analysts helping them with targets.

With their light, composite material weight and relatively small, engines, the Predators could conduct missions of far longer duration, sometimes up to 22 hours, than their human controllers had the endurance for; this necessitated each mission to be manned by two separate teams, Forrester's Red Team, and Captains Mike "Sherlock" Holmes and Jay "Pulaski" Popowicz's Gold team, which were just finishing as Forrester's team approached. Another Predator, patrolling about 125 clicks to the north, was controlled, from the station on the other side of the room, by the Green and Blue teams. The whole command was in the hands of Colonel Joe "Sidewinder" Ross, an old F-16 pilot now commanding the Predators from his raised communications command platform between the two Predator control stations.

Popowicz signed out his time roster. "Get any tonight?" Colon asked him, wanting to know if they had played a part in stabilizing the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.

"Naahhh. The CIA had us shitting bullets over what they thought was Khalid al-Raymi, and we were chasing our tails over that for a couple of hours, but it all was nothing. Something for some striped-pants Langley faggot to get it up before his wife breaks the on/off switch on the 'ol vibrator."

At Creech, they were well aware that the CIA had other Predator launch stations in the area, from the Horn of Africa providing coverage all the way down the Somali coast, through Iraq to Pakistan, all controlled by another ground facility like this somewhere at Langley. The idea was that the uniformed military would task Creech for the targets that supported the forces on the ground, and the CIA would target the supposed big stuff, like high-value al-Qaeda, that they found.

Still, the separation of labor was not perfect; Langley was always on the blower to Ross about Creech picking up the ball on something they dropped. Ross had the authority to retask a Predator

to a CIA target, but heaven help him if some marine infantry company pinned down under mortar fire took hits just because he had shot the Predator's wad chasing down Langley's ghosts.

His first shift was uneventful, but, halfway through his second, on the next day, something came up.

"Hey, Red Team," Ross called out. "Crescent Security is mounting a resupply convoy from Khazxni to Kandahar. Leavin' in a couple of hours. They're afraid if they catch any shit, they'll scratch all their new Rolexes. They want a traffic report, to know if anybody's doing any road maintenance."

"OK, boss," Forrester replied. He checked his watch, it was still before 10 at night in country, about nine hours to sunrise. He turned his Predator, which had been doing lazy circles above the Darya ye Arghandab, east towards the remainder of Zabol province.

"Road maintenance" was slang for a jihadi crew planting an improvised explosive device in the path of an inbound American resupply convoy. This was always done at night, Johnny Jihad had still not learned the Predators could, with their IR Gear and other low lights, see them just about as well in dark as in light.

After a couple of hours of them doing their "traffic report", Forrester found them, 65 clicks northeast of Kandahar. Five guys working intently on the side of a curved section of the road, the perfect place for an IED.

Ross worked the room. "Intelligence?"

The intelligence guys conferred, but only for a couple of seconds. "Yup."

"Rico?"

"Hell, ya."

"Bri?"

Forrester now held the power of life or death over the men in the video screen 11,000 kilometers away, but he didn't dwell on it. "Highway patrol. License and registration, please."

Forrester's old joke cut through some of the inherent tension in the room, between those who kill and their soon-to-be victims. "Green light," Ross said firmly.

Forrester took the Predator up 1,000 or so while Rico locked the target in his radar.

"Lock," called out Rico.

"Fire."

The camera picked up only about a tenth of a second of the Hellfire leaving, but it still shook for a second or two. At about launch +4 seconds, a tremendous explosion filled the screen, followed, about a half a second later, by a tremendous secondary explosion, as what would have been the roadside bomb went up as well.

Immediately, the room exploded in cheers. Rico, standing on his chair, called out Kilgore's famous line, "I love the smell of Hellfire in the morning - it smells like victory!"

When Forrester's shift ended 36 hours later, Ross approached him as he was changing back into civvies, handed him a photocopied piece of paper with Arabic lettering.

Forrester didn't read Arabic, and Ross knew it. "This supposed to mean something to me?"

"French intel picked this up in Peshawar, on the other side of the Paki border. It says 'DEATH TO THE ASSASSINS FROM THE SKY, TO THE LAST OF THE LINES'.

"Is this a threat?" Forrester asked.

"What do you think?"

Of course it was a threat; just because the battlefield was on the other side of the world, it didn't mean that Ross wasn't going to check out the men in his command for post-traumatic stress disorder, or maybe just old fashioned cowardice.

"So Johnny Jihad's coming to North Vegas?" Forrester asked, running a comb through his hair.

"Maybe."

"Effing fantastic, I haven't been able to find a good gardener since all the Mexicans left." Forrester closed his locker, saluted, turned and left.

Forrester had managed about 14 hours in the sack, and as the shadows were lengthening on the bedroom curtains, he felt Carilyn tugging at his shoulder.

"Waky, waky, baby. Big meeting at school tonight."

Yeah, it did look like a big meeting tonight. You could forget about getting a parking space in Saville Middle School's parking lot, or even just outside on Torrey Pines; he was around the corner on Grand Teton. Both EA and Lily had been left home for this meeting at Lily's school; this was for adults.

Walking into the school, they headed towards the large auditorium, the one with the big pictures of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon in 1969 and John John saluting the coffin of his father, president John F Kennedy, as it went by on the gun carriage in 1963. If it was five minutes later, they would have been shunted off to the large lunchroom with its old pulldown TV screen.

A high school kid came over as they were sitting, hands them a pamphlet. "SAVE COACH PARDELLI!" Opening the pamphlet, Forrester read that the school's girl's soccer team coach, Nick Pardelli, a former tower supervisor at Nellis before he got out with his 20, was being subjected to a travesty of American justice worthy of comparison to Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs, maybe even O J Simpson.

"Is that true?" Carilyn asked Forrester.

Forrester laughed, threw the pamphlet away. "Puleeze."

It started four weeks ago. Lily's team was playing Cannon, 1-1, a couple of minutes left. Lily slips the ball into the goal box to the team, and league's best striker, Masha Voronikov. It looked like a sure goal, but from out of Cannon's goal came their keeper, Sandy Mayworth, with great sliding save.

Voronikov was going for the league record here in the last couple of games, and she was clearly pissed. The goalie got up, and maybe exchanging a few words, started to move back into goal.

Not if Masha Voronikov had anything to say about it. She reached for the goalie's ponytail, and, in full view of the about 25 videocams and 50 cellphone cams on the sidelines, pulled it down hard, Mayworth buckled, collapsed, hit the back of her head really hard against the pitch, rock-hard due to the watering restrictions mandated by the district's budget cuts.

The girl was out cold, not even a doctor and an ER nurse in the crowds could bring her up. They called for the medical evacuation chopper, she was still out. The chopper was just about to turn west to head to LA Children's, but then she woke up, so they turned back to land at Vegas Sunrise.

Matters between Voronikov and the Mayworth, or the Mayworths and the Clark County School District, were in the hands of the lawyers; there was talk that Mrs Voronikov, a single mother and dealer at Harrod's, could lose her small house. Tonight at the auditorium the issues were different, namely, should Pardelli keep his job, or did the incident reveal a fundamental moral flaw in his pedagogy. Also, was there a fundamental moral flaw in their lives here in the Spring Valley that acted as the enabler of Marcia Vorinkov's clearly antisocial impulses.

Sent up from downtown, a School Department flack laid down the law. Reading from Section 5141.1 of the student code, he intoned that "a student shall not intentionally cause physical injury to any person, nor behave in such a way as could reasonably cause physical injury to any person".

But it wasn't like they didn't have plans for Pardelli. Since, according to the flack, "the Clark County School District is committed to providing all students and employees with a safe and respectful

learning environment in which persons of differing beliefs, characteristics and backgrounds can realize their full academic potential". Violators of this normative social order would be subject to the modern equivalent of the electrodes on the testes treatment, diversity training. "The Clark County School District will provide for the appropriate training of all administrators, principals, teachers, and all other personnel employed by the district."

The chair opened the floor for questions. A young mother, patched jeans and a hooded knit sweater right out of the peasant markets of San Salvador, or maybe Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, stood up.

"With all due respect to Mr Pardelli, I didn't come here to talk about the coach tonight. My oldest won't be here at this school for another two years, but I'm starting to wonder. If the schools are nothing but a reflection of the general society, what impression of what behaviors we expect from our children are we passing down to our kids? Like when we bull in front of each other in the bank or the Starbucks line, or when we go through the supermarket express line with too many items? Or when we drive our big, powerful cars like no one else matters on St Rose Parkway? What about when we water our lawns to the point of drowning; doesn't anybody care about all the little animals in the ground we're sentencing to death by thirst?"

A few snickers, a few claps of applause, and then she sat down. Everybody knew who it was that was standing up next, it was Gus "Gunman" Gallagher, the owner and proprietor of the Make My Day Guns 2nd Amendment Discount Superstore, down on South Tropicana.

"With all due respect to the little lady just finished," Gallagher adjusted his bolo around his American flag shirt. "I want to express a different opinion."

The crowd murmured; they had all heard plenty of him, including his political views, from his cable TV infomercials.

"Now, I don't wanna say anything bad about the little girl who got hurt. I'm a football man myself, but people I know that know their soc-ker says that was a helluvah play. I'm personally pledging \$100 tonight to her hospital bills."

Polite applause.

"But I wonder, are we coming down a bit too hard on the coach and on the other little girl? What exactly is it that they did wrong?"

Forrester had actually been to Gallagher's house, a big, hulking 700 square-meter Spanish colonial on Winter Palace Drive; Gallagher invited some guys from Creech over to his place for a barbecue. A lot of people thought his commercials were stupid, but they weren't the ones given full auto Berettas with instructions to shoot out the 500 cod he had dumped in his swimming pool.

"Was it that they had played tough? Well, what's so wrong with that? We're Americans, isn't that what we're known for?"

Forrester found he couldn't get the image of Gallagher's house from his mind's eye.

"We played tough with the Injians who were here when we got here, the Limeys, the Mexicans, then the krauts and Japs. Hell, if not for playing tough, we'd still be paying tolls to the Frenchies to head out over the Cumberland Pass."

Suddenly, the image in Forrester's brain changed, from Gallagher's house to that same house framed by the infra-red targeting screen of the Predator.

"We gotta teach our children to be tough, to break some rules, hell, to break some skulls if they have to. If the guys won't do it, if they're too busy knitting doilies in cooking class, maybe we should be glad that the girls have 'em these days, instead of the Mexicans taking them back over the Rao Grande like they did everything else."

"Lock." Forrester hears his mind's voice call out.

"Lock," Rico responds.

"We got society rotting out from the core like an old tomato." Gallagher continued to address the crowd. "What would have rather seen, the kids going to their diversity counselors for training in how to bawl their eyes out?"

"Yes!" said the previous speaker, the hippie mom.

"Ahh, shut the hell up - nobody wants to hear your bullcrap." With that, a few in the crowd booed loudly, and the chairman was about to bring down his gavel; not that it would have stopped Gallagher.

"Arm." Forrester's mind's voice continued the launch sequence.

"Arm," Rico replied.

"Now, what about the coach? We gonna nail him to the cross, we gonna send him down to the unemployment line?"

"Friendlies?" Ross asked from the command tower?

"Nope."

"Call the ball, Big Green."

"Hell no we ain't," Gallagher continued. "We should be handing him a medal. The only way the kids be acting right is if us adults teach 'em right."

"Fire!" In the auditorium, Forrester felt his fingers tighten, as if he really had just let a Hellfire go. Gallagher's house sat there in the VDT for a couple of seconds, then, almost as if he had been storing oxygen canisters in the basement, blew the estate to bits, actually, it blew the summit of his hill clear straight off, with a tremendous explosion.

The upshot of the meeting was that, for now, coach Pardelli, as long as he kept up with his diversity and sensitivity training, could keep his job, at least until the school district dealt it away in the payoff stage of the lawsuit talks with Sandy Mayworth's attorney.

"What did you think?" Carilyn asked as they were leaving.

Forrester remembered Schwarzkopf's old first Gulf War joke. "You know Gus Gallagher? Luckiest gun dealer in Vegas."

Carilyn had no idea what he was talking about.

This must be what fox hunting is like, Forrester thought, although he had never actually done it. Everybody's jacked up on testosterone and the prospect of spilling blood; like popping a virgin's cherry, there was a reason they called a successful mission "getting some".

Twelve minutes earlier, CIA/Langley had called in. They had a guy up there in Kunduz with a laser designator, painting a house where they had positively identified Said Haydar, former paymaster of the Hamburg cell, and currently believed to be number three deputy to Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Forrester had the nearest bird, and he was screaming it in at almost 225 k/ph, well in excess of its maximum speed. He knew that the Pentagon would take a Predator going down with engine failure if it meant getting this guy; hell, if they got this guy, Forrester wouldn't be surprised if the Pentagon got him a brand new Gulfstream.

Crossing into the valley, you sure could see the results of the laser; the small mud house was lit as bright as Cortez's palace on infra red. Forrester pushed the Predator in closer. In front of the house were two men; the heat image indicated that they were probably smoking cigarettes.

"Is that him?" Ross asked.

"Affirmative," one of the intelligence guys said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yup."

"Who's the other guy?" Ross asked.

The intelligence guys shook their head - they had no idea.

"Aww, screw, for Christ sake's, find out." Ross ordered. "If this guy's Saudi royal family, I'm not going to go down in history as the guy who brought America \$10 a gallon gas. Call Moishe."

The intelligence guy picked up the phone, called "Moishe", the 24-hour open line to the Mossad operations center in Tel Aviv. After the picture was sent, intelligence knew who this was.

"Christ, it's Mustapha al-Saqa, the butcher of Mumbai. These two are on everybody's dance cards."

"Let's do it." Ross put his spurs in the process, and with good reason. Everybody in the room could just smell the commendations and promotions on this one.

"Take it. Big Green." Ross ordered Forrester.

Forrester had the Predator racing down on the deck. "Arm," he commanded.

"Arm," Rico replied, and Forrester could feel the anticipation in his voice, his breath.

"Lock."

"Lock."

Forrester moved to the trigger, than looked up to the screen in horror. In the upper corner of the VDT, in the back of the house, were about a half dozen kids playing with a small horse. Forrester pulled the stick up sharply, which, as he intended for it to do, broke the radar lock on the target.

"FRIENDLIES!" Forrester screamed, and he grabbed the stick back, trying to get it back under control.

"Friendlies, where?" Rico asked in amazement.

"In back, up top."

"Those kids? Aww, come on, gimme a frigging break."

But try as he might, Forrester couldn't get back control of the Predator. It crashed and burned about 300 meters from the house; the bad guys must have known what this was and found it hilarious. Back in Nevada, everyone in the room emptied their obscenity bomb bays of everything they had ever learned on any school playfield on Earth, then, silently, fixed their gaze on Forrester, who could almost feel the cotton in his shirt being set alight.

"Aww, Jesus, bro', what did you just do?"

Forrester and Rico didn't speak much for the next 16 hours of their shift, actually, nobody on Red Team was in much of a loquacious frame of mind. After they had been relieved by Gold Team, Forrester saw Rico by his locker, wrapped in a towel after his shower, violating every rule in the book by smoking a cigarette.

Forrester stood beside his locker. With nothing coming from the younger Rico, Forrester pulled rank.

"You got something to say, first lieutenant?"

Rico laughed at the question. "Yeah, I got something to say, Christ, Brian, how could you do it? How could you let those two go?"

"Maybe it's just because I didn't want to kill a half dozen kids today. Ever think of that?"

"Don't give me that shit."

"And any order for me to pull that trigger," Forrester continued, "Would have been illegal. You know dammed effing well that's true."

"Bullshit. Who do you think those kids were, the Brady Bunch? What were they doing 10 meters from two of the biggest targets in this theater? Those kids, 'friendlies?' What a joke. You know

dammed well that our concern for collateral damage decreases in direct proportion to the importance of the targets. At the very least, those kids were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Bummer for the kids, right, to die just because who it was on the other side of the house."

"Yeah, it was." Rico lit another smoke. "Just like it was for the kids in Dresden, in Berlin, in Tokyo, under the Eighth Air Force. Hey, man, there's no draft anymore. You came to us, not the other way around. You telling me now that you didn't think it would involve killing kids?"

Forrester bummed a cigarette, lit it, but did not reply. Rico continued. "Did you have any thought what this would do for me, the rest of the team? You're close to your 20, but I'll never make captain now, they're gonna bounce my ass clear out of the blue at O-2. Next year, when I'm out there trying to support a family on the \$29,000 the commuter airlines pay you to fly 65 hours a week between Shit Beach and Crap Valley, I'll know who to thank for it."

"And six kids will be alive."

"Screw you! You think you're the only one with kids in there?"

"I dunno. You tell me."

Silence, then Rico offered him another smoke. "You know, I'd love to put a cap in your ass right now, and if the cameras weren't here (pointing to the ever-present eye in the sky camera cut into the ceiling, behind the opaque glass,) I probably would. But it ain't your fault. Maybe it's this screwed up experiment the air force is trying, using the technology to make us front line trigger pullers while still living here in the home front culture, with the wife and kids.

"Somebody must have thought it would be a good idea. Maybe they thought the Force would keep the guys who didn't want to miss their kids growing up, like the grunts on the ground are. Maybe somebody thought that our wives would take the place of shrinks. Maybe they were just pushing the communications technology out onto the edge of the envelope."

Forrester laughed, but he was listening.

"It never used to be this way," Rico continued. "You had the civilians, and far away you had the guys on the front - the two didn't mix. Now, we're on the front, but we're also right in the middle of this inane civilian culture.

"It's especially true with this culture, the kid-obsessed and feminized anti-male culture. Look at the playgrounds, with all their rubber surfaces and safe amusements, a kid would have to pull a pin on a grenade to get hurt in one. Look at the stores, with their little sports car shopping carts, or all the play areas at the malls. Christ, look at the aspirin bottles; you just try to open one of those if you're wasted. No way does this produce warriors."

"I see you're getting full value from your distance Master's Sociology class at 'Chapman'," but even Forrester felt his words trailing off at the end.

"It's like the guys who come home and light up a movie theater with their M-60's. They brought the war home. You brought home to the war. Same difference."

By this time, Rico was dressed. Turning on his heels to leave, he pointed at the floor under Forrester's legs. "Uh-oh."

Forrester looked down. "What is it?"

"I think you're getting your period." Then he saluted, pivoted, and left.

Forrester was picking up EA from his friend Jimmy Sullivan's house. Walking into the playroom in the basement, he saw that, although young Sullivan's grades were as bad or worse than EA's, his pop had still gotten him the new "Call of Duty", the one that Carilyn and Forrester had denied EA.

Thank god, the kids weren't firing Predators, they were just using their shooters, their pretend M4A1 carbines and blasting everything in sight. Pow! Boom! - as bodies were blown up on the screen, and as the boys' eyes grew ever brighter.

Maybe this was the difference between Rico and him, now, between all of the rest of the Red Team and him. Maybe they, like soldiers down through time, found the intoxicating thrill of testosterone, to destroy, to blow up, to carry on the male heritage as an annihilator of life, just as the female heritage was to be a creator of life. Who cares what the target was, or if he deserved it or not? What a sweet, operatic majesty to the whole spectacle.

But wait a minute. Forrester was an American. From the time he was old enough for his Mom to put him in front of the old black and white TV, it was always the same, good guys and bad guys, cowboys and Indians, or sheriffs in white hats and cattle rustles in black. Yanks versus krauts, Japs, the Vietnamese, hell, in *Aliens*, it was the marines versus some bad extraterrestrial monsters. Forrester was no pacifist, it's not like he wanted to see Sigourney Weaver and the marines in *Aliens* sit down with the monsters and discuss how their current sad adulthoods had been shaped by their unhappy childhoods.

Was it too much to ask that, when a soldier killed, the object of the exercise somehow deserved it? That's what his culture taught him, but it seemed a distinct minority view in the Predator command trailer.

The boys showed no indication they wanted to stop playing. "Boys," Forrester called out, his tone becoming sharper.

"Ahh, Dad."

"I said now!" Forrester barked. Moving over to the game console, he flicked off the power switch. "Let's go, son." EA reluctantly got up to follow his father. Forrester looked down at young Sullivan, who appeared totally dejected. Moving to an area behind one of the floor speakers, where Forrester knew that the boy's dad kept his secret stash, he pulled out a DVD, popped it in the player.

"Here, son, this is better for you," as the disc spun and the credits rolled for *Lesbian backyard whoopee orgy VI*. The boy saw two naked women in leather dog collars caressing themselves next to a backyard suburban above ground pool.

Once inside the car and buckled up, EA asked his father just what he had put in the player.

"Educational programming," and then his phone buzzed, indicating he was getting a text message.

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Forrester tightened his grip against the phone, slammed his hand against the steering wheel.

"Damn. Oh, damn. Blast, blast, blast."

Waiting in the car for Lily to get through her ballet class with Carilyn, hearing her prattling on about the latest apocalypse in the accounting department where she worked, Forrester knew he was losing it.

"And then Mr Chancellor said we should be using the new 015-217-PH pass through forms, but then Marcia said that we weren't supposed to even be unpacking the 217s until we were all done with the 205s, but Mr Chancellor said he hadn't seen a 205 since Michelle went on maternity leave, so."

"Son of a bitch!" Forrester exclaimed. Carilyn looked over, saw him white as a sheet, gripping the steering wheel, sweating in the overheated car.

So he told her everything, the mission, the kids, especially, the reaction from his buddies. She had not had a specific, nuts-and-bolts understanding of just what he did at Creech, but he knew that she would understand.

Or would she?

"So you had a direct order to fire, and you refused?"

"No, it's just that we were tracking a guy down, and the implied assumption was that when we found him we'd, I'd, kill him. But the decision was always mine."

"So, you made the decision not to kill this guy?"

"Yes. And to save a half dozen kids."

"Did they get him later?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"But probably not. By now, Haydar's men would have dug the wreckage out of the ground, identified it as a Predator, causing Haydar to go to ground ever deeper. They'd have to be awfully lucky to get another shot at him, let alone getting both Haydar and al-Saqa with one stone."

"So you're in trouble with this?"

"Maybe. Probably." He hadn't called up AF JAG yet, but it wasn't like it was that hard to guess what they wanted. Even they were calling to charge him, or to offer their services for charges about to be filed, but, whichever way, he knew there was a world of shit coming down fast.

Carilyn was silent for a moment, then her face indicated that she had worked the problem through in his mind.

"Have you tried to apologize?"

Forrester couldn't believe what he was hearing, but Carilyn continued. "I mean, like a nice, well-written, contrite letter, written on nice stationary. Then maybe we could have Ross and his girlfriend put in a good word for you. It might work to cut down on a lot of the tension, maybe get the whole thing swept under the rug."

"Damn it, Carilyn, this is serious. This ain't like walking out of your office with a box of gorilla clips."

"Don't yell at me - I didn't let two of those animals go. How could you? You listen to Reverend Hagee, about the US and Israel being Jesus' armies of light, versus the Arabs as the forces of darkness."

"Ahh, Carilyn."

"It's the same with the Mexicans, you know that? Brother Haines says the Arabs are coming up along with the Mexicans, you know, like infiltrators. You can't tell them apart. God, Brian do you have any idea how many Mexicans are around here, and how many Arabs they might have brought with them?"

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"You know, the other day, I took EA to a McDonald's, and he had to use the bathroom. He was in there for a while, so I went in. There was a Mexican family in there, and when I saw what they were doing here, I grabbed EA, took him home, put him in a tub for three hours while I bundled up his clothes and put them in the dumpster. You were on base then, so while you were letting killers go I had to defend us all by myself?"

"What about those kids whose lives I saved?"

"If they were innocent, Jesus would have protected them."

Forrester couldn't believe it.

"And another thing, what did you do over at Noreen Sullivan's house; she said that you showed Jimmy a porno tape with two Mexican prostitutes? She said that she wanted to have you put onto the sex offender list, but I said I'd talk to you and ..."

In the Creech cafeteria, Forrester was blowing on a bowl of beef stew until it cooled. He was alone at the table, as he usually was on base these days. Five weeks had passed from what was now being called "Forrester's folly", and he was back on the team getting some good kills, but he knew things would never be the same.

A young man, about 30 years old, appeared at the other side of the table with a tray of food, cottage cheese and melon slices, hot water with lemon. "Mind if I sit here?"

Forrester looked around, saw at least 30 empty seats around him. "Suit yourself."

"Ohh, this food is a blessing, isn't it?"

"It's OK," Forrester said. Actually, it was awful.

Forrester looked across the table. There, looking back at him intently, was a young man with fair, close-cropped sandy hair and a face that looked like its skin had never seen fuzz, although through the facial talc Forrester could see where he had just cut himself shaving. What was most noticeable were his eyes, deep and rich and as blue as the sky before one trips into space.

His navy blue blazer looked like it could have just been traded in at the Goodwill store by an out of work real estate agent, and his pastel blue Polo shirt had a freshly starched crispness to the tight, well-honed figure it presented of his torso. His elasticized Sansabelts were pure desert fairway plaid, and his artificial leather Velcro fastened shoes were the best to be had at JC Penny.

"You know what else is a blessing? Good friends. You've got a lot of friends, don't you, Brian?"

So that was it. This guy carried no "base visitor" pass clipped to his lapel; they sure were making it obvious. Not only had this guy been sent out for god knows why, they had provided him with his picture as well, or else somebody in the room had just marked him.

"Do I know you, pal?"

The man reached into his blazer for his vinyl blue business card holder, revealing three small tandem crosses where others would have an alligator. "Dr Mark Steven Tolliver, at your service, captain."

"Doctor? Of what?"

"Psychology. University of California Riverside. Also, doctorate of biblical studies and pastoral counseling, Abilene Christian University."

"Got all the bases covered, eh, padre?"

"I don't know anything about that. If I have gifts, I place them before the Lord to use as He desires. Can we go back to talking about your friends?"

"What about them?"

"They're worried about you, Brian, very worried."

"About what? Ohh, let me guess, Could it have something to do with what happened last month in a trailer in a part of the base that you're not cleared to be, or over the skies of Kunduz?"

"Do you want to give me your side of the story?" Tolliver asked, and Forrester noted how soon he had given up any and all pretense of this being anything but that day.

"Suffer the little children to come unto me; the Book of Mark, isn't that how its supposed to work? I had the opportunity to deliver some pretty extreme suffering to some kids, but I screwed it up, right padre?"

"I can't believe you think that's the meaning of that passage. It really means that no child is too young to hear the message of the Lord."

"Even the way I do it? With the message of the Lord duct-taped to a Hellfire?"

Tolliver paused a minute. "Wow. You're pretty angry aren't you."

Forrester throws the spoon down into the soup. "Angry? Why should I be angry? Five weeks ago I think I'm doing the Lord's work, you know, curtailing collateral damage in a Just War? My life has been hell ever since, all the way up to this meeting here with you, who should be most on my side."

"Just War is not a Christian concept, it's a Catholic one. Many respected Baptist and Fundamentalist clergy have much trouble with its precepts."

"Bullshit. Your boys at Corncob Christian just suffer one two many butt kickings on the gridiron from Holy Mary Seminary?"

Tolliver closes his hands and prays out loud. "Dear Lord, help me. Help me deal with a man with so much fury and hatred in his heart. Help me bring him out of the dark into the light."

Forrester chuckles, then picks up his knife. Putting the look of a monomaniacal killer on his face, he makes the slightest, almost imperceptible move towards Tolliver with it, then uses it to cut a particularly large piece of stew beef. Tolliver, showing no fear or concern with the threat, was impassive in body and affect.

"I think I may know what the problem is. That day, what did you really think you were doing in not firing that missile?"

"I dunno. Maybe saving six kids' lives."

"But you can't save any lives, my son The power of life and death belongs only to God."

"In this business, sometimes I don't get that impression."

"Then you have fallen for a lie, Satan's great lie." Tolliver's voice rose, as if he was trying to fill a large church or maybe just a small roadside revival tent with the saving power of his voice. "Only God gives or takes lives; it is for that reason your superiors pledge their obedience to the Lord."

"Even Colonel Ross, out doing his girlfriend at the motel while his third wife waits at home?"

"For the same reason those under you are the sheep to your shepherding. 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'. Your problem is that you think you're mentioned in there as well. The true Christian, the true well-adjusted officer, knows that at the pinnacle of every command organization is our Lord Jesus Christ, not our Lord Jesus Christ and Captain Brian Forrester."

"So it's like what they used to say in Nam, right Padre? 'Kill them all; let God decide'?"

Tolliver arose, put a gentle, pastoral hand on Forrester's shoulder. "Don't you think he had the power to, my son?"

On Forrester and Carilyn's bed are three duffel bags, which Lily is helping her mother fill with her father's clothes.

"But why does Daddy have to go away, why? He promised he'd be here for my recital!"

"I don't know, Lily, I don't know."

"Why can't we all come?"

"Because there's no billeting for children at his new post. Now give me those sweaters."

Downstairs, Captain Forrester is, while randomly flipping through channels, on his third Molson six pack. Upstairs, the two women keep packing.

"Take this folder," Caroline orders, "Put it in the front pocket there. It's got important papers." Including his transfer, effective immediately, to become deputy operations director at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Graf-Ignatievo airbase in Bulgaria.

"When will we see him again? Will he come home for Christmas?"

"I don't know," her mother replied. "All I know is that your father's going to be away for a long time."