

War in Appalachistan

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"We never announced a scorched-earth policy; we never announced any policy at all, apart from finding and destroying the enemy, and we proceeded in the most obvious way. We used what was at hand, dropping the greatest volume of explosives in the history of warfare over all the terrain within the thirty-mile sector which fanned out from Khe Sanh. Employing saturation-bombing techniques, we delivered more than 110,000 tons of bombs to those hills during the eleven-week containment of Khe Sanh.

~ Michael Herr, 1977

The Softening Up

Daylight came early on Thursday 8 June. In another twelve days, the very longest day of the year would hail the arrival of full Summer. Sadly, a great many who saw that dawn would not live to see another.

First light saw pilots and technicians swarming toward aircraft up and down the coasts and up into the mountains of Appalachia. Jets and attack helicopters began taking off just before dawn.

All along Interstate 85, from Lynchburg Virginia to the crossings of Lake Hartwell on the border between South Carolina and Georgia were deployed the tanks, troops, armoured transports, and command vehicles of the slave owners including hundreds of thousands of volunteers from the communist-indoctrinated inner cities. These forces would head upslope three hours after dawn, once the anticipated "softening up" had battered the resistance into what the owners anticipated would approximate submission. They still had no understanding of the abolitionists opposing them.

Meanwhile, their artillery crews began pounding the nearby hills, villages, and towns with round after round of shells, mostly incendiary and anti-personnel, but in some places high explosives for fixed emplacements and to shatter buildings. Where defenders were in armoured vehicles, these were targeted with armour piercing rounds from the artillery units, although many such vehicles were hidden from view in caverns, hollows, entrenchments, inside buildings, and in other ways.

Some aircraft were aerial reconnaissance, now necessary because the orbital assets of the slave owners were being rapidly destroyed, ever since the late Tuesday victory in the space war by the freedom alliance. Isaac Vossius's name was on the lips of all the freedom enthusiasts worldwide who had followed the events in orbit. His sacrifice was not in vain.

In the early light, behind the first ridge line, all along that route, men, women, and children began to

inflate balloons of various sizes. In some places, there were pressurised tanks of helium, in other places hydrogen was used. As the first owner aircraft began to dot the eastern horizon, hundreds of thousands of balloons were released, each carrying aloft a cable, chain, or small piece of metal. As the jet aircraft sped overhead, they met the rising clouds of the smallest balloons coming out of the West, carried on the prevailing wind. Dozens of aircraft sucked these into their air intakes, flamed out, and came out of the sky - here and there crew members were able to eject successfully.

The coordinated offensive continued. Now attack helicopters were sent in to wipe out the rebels manning the lighter than air defence. Now these people released many tens of thousands of pairs of balloons, each set with a cable between them, many also linked to the ground by strong tethers. Various applications of nanotechnology and 3D printing had gone into some of these cables, others were simply the strong metal familiar to tow cable manufacturers.

Elsewhere, defence teams were pulling cables taut between trees, towers, buildings, and across ridges where the cable ends could be set in stone. Helicopters encountering these obstacles in their "nap of the earth" flights were quickly arrested. Some flew between balloons only to find fouling cables wrapping their rotor systems. Few of these high speed encounters were survivable.

Yet the assets of the slave owners were massive, and everything seemed to be committed in this battle. For every jet brought down, four more were behind it, for every attack helicopter reduced to burning debris, six were following.

Having done their work, the lighter than air defence crews left their empty gas cylinders and moved to other locations. Some took up positions to resist the assault waves with sniper rifles, anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, rocket propelled grenade systems, and many other innovative weapons. Others fled back to safer locations in the hills and hollers, going to ground or taking up support roles in logistics, communications, or supply. Women and children retreated into the massive limestone caverns found all over the region, or were shepherded by loving families into deep underground bunkers.

In spite of the efforts of these brave defenders, hundreds of aircraft completed their bombing runs, attacked isolated positions, and supported the ground assault. It was as though the slave owners were throwing everything that they had at the interior of the country, to destroy those who would defend themselves from tyranny.

The Deep Fake

Deep underground at Wasp, Tennessee, there was a muted sound and much shaking of the ground with each nearby bomb detonation that exploded up above. Susan Nolan and her children gathered around Bob Nolan and Sam Smith who were about to set out.

Bill Watson looked around for Tyrone and, sticking his head through the partly opened doorway of Ty's bedroom, found him staring at a computer screen. Bill said, "Ty, it's about time for Bob and Sam to head out."

Tyrone looked up. His sickened expression was disturbing to Bill, who turned his head slightly to indicate his question. Tyrone gestured him over and moved his mouse a bit, then pushed back his desk chair on its casters, as if to distance himself from the video now playing on the screen.

Bill watched the video as an actor turned toward the camera, displaying Ty's face, and then did various terrible things to women and children. The sound was off, but from their expressions it was clear they

were screaming in pain and terror. He shook his head, reached over to the screen and pushed its power button. The blank screen reflected Ty's image, then Bill turned to face his friend.

Bill said, "You knew this would happen. As soon as we began discussing telling the world about their death camps and torture sites, you knew that they would use your images from the video to create a deep fake. We all knew it was coming, too. Everyone knows it's how they operate, how they think, who they are. They think people who obey them believe all their lies and are unaware of their deep fake technologies. Perhaps they even think that people in the rebellion would be taken in, but we're not. They can't discredit you. And this video of theirs tells you how desperate they are."

Tyrone sat with his arms crossed, looking down. He nodded, looked at his friend, gritted his teeth, and gave a slightly feral grimace, as if he were ready to tear into someone, anyone. Then he mastered himself and shook his head. He said, "I know it. I still feel hatred toward them for doing these things."

Bill nodded, "I know. Hard to love your enemies when they're so patently evil."

Tyrone nodded as well. "Jesus never said it would be easy to follow his ways. He also cast out demons, and I think that's part of what we're facing."

Bill nodded again and said, "C'mon, let's go shake hands with Sam and Bob. They're heading out."

Hopping to his feet, Ty held the door open for Bill and followed him into the main room.

Ground Attack

All along the line of their enemy's attack, people loyal to the rebellion began dropping highway overpasses and bridges. In many places, they were using already rigged explosives, in other places more impromptu methods were needed. Some hillsides above stretches of highway were brought down to landslide over the road, leaving dirt, boulders, and whole trees littering the path of the oncoming troops and transports.

Some of these actions took out individual vehicles, but that was incidental to their purpose. In a few places, bottlenecks into the hills kept the enemy from advancing. In most, though, it simply delayed them while they found alternate routes. But in every case, it pinned the lead vehicles heading toward the broken roadway, forcing them to stop and make arrangements to back up the column of those following them.

As a result of having now stationary targets, the abolitionists were able to bring in attack aircraft of their own, such as the Super Cobra flown by Sam with Bob handling the weapons systems and accompanying drones. Where aircraft weren't available, artillery shells rained down on the stopped columns. Panicked troops fled their vehicles and tried to find ways off the roads, which had become killing zones.

The View from on High

Up in orbit, Juan's teams had spent the entire day Wednesday gathering the materials from the remnants of the destroyed enemy battle stations. Several dozen sky rods were salvaged. When the enemy attack on Appalachistan came, Thursday morning, these rods were directed at the columns of tanks heading up Interstate 26 from I-85.

Numerous craters were left where the sky rods fell. One company of tanks crossing the French Broad

River were hit by six sky rods that not only obliterated many of the vehicles, but also dropped the bridge, stopping the column of tanks, trucks, and armoured vehicles behind. Again, the rebellion sent forward attack aircraft and used artillery to disrupt the trapped column.

Ann Branson sent a detailed report down to the team at Wasp, Tennessee. Analysis of the attacking formations made it clear that they were attempting to reach, with as much firepower as possible, the location where Bob Nolan's lab was hidden. As the weary day wore on, it looked as though some enemy infantry, the irregular forces out of the coastal cities, including Red Rangers, were going to get through.

Difficult Answers

Karen Runningwolf looked into the web cam above the laptop. She said, "Mr. Difficult completed his interrogation today. Things are much worse than they seem. The owner's whip, Antony Marcus, revealed that the owners are preparing to use nuclear weapons all over the Appalachians, in the Rockies, and wherever they think our people are found. According to Mr. Marcus, they were looking for an excuse to justify their actions. No doubt the destruction of Hampton Roads and the damage to Newport News is the pretext they were looking for. I'm sorry I don't have better news to report. You'll find attached to this message lists of targets recovered from the bunker where we found him. Some of these are marked highly probable from his reactions under interrogation. Every effort should be made to warn the affected populations, including our own people. May God have mercy on their souls."

Another Cataclysm

Far away across the continent from events in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee there was a deep rumble throughout San Francisco. The long awaited and much feared "big one" had arrived. Seismomenters read 9.2 on the Richter scale, and the modified Mercalli intensity was rated at XII, the most extreme level.

Seismic waves could be seen on ground surfaces. Buildings collapsed. Bridges and overpasses slammed down. Underground pipelines throughout the city ruptured. Rail lines bent and sheered. Rapid transit and cargo trains derailed all over the region. Everywhere lines of sight and level were distorted. Cars, people, and many other things were thrown into the air.

Within moments of the initial shock, fires broke out. Rubble, bodies, and debris littered the city. Clouds of smoke and dust blew slowly along with an onshore breeze.

Colonies in Space

Far to the east around the curve of the Earth, the space colony lifted off its cradle. One hundred three rocket engines provided lift, and their nozzles were slightly canted to provide spin. Moments after liftoff the vehicle was hundreds of feet in the air, spinning gently for stability and accelerating.

From their acceleration stations Aamiina Hersi Kalinle and Harold Ley monitored the launch sequence with elation. Everything was going great. The enormous spacecraft headed east to take advantage of the Earth's rotation. As its ground track crossed over the shore of the Indian Ocean, it was fifteen miles in the air.

Far below them in the waters of the Indian Ocean, a submarine had just surfaced. Crew members scurried out of hatches and onto the deck, rapidly assembling equipment and deploying an experimental surface-to-air rail gun. As they made ready to aim and fire, the new space colony continued on its ponderous way, gaining altitude and passing toward the east.

A klaxon sounded, and the captain's voice came over the crew address system. "Stand down. Target has reached altitude beyond our range."

All across the deck crewmen stared at the fiery apparition as it continued to rise beyond their reach. Many of them smiled, then looked around to see who had seen them doing so. Finally, they returned to their tasks, and began disassembling the rail gun.

Strategic Retreat

As Friday night fell, the enemy forces were still battling their way in eastern Tennessee. Bob and Sam had already refueled their Super Cobra twice during that day of fighting. Like a massive amoeba, the forces of the slave owners sent out one pseudopod after another. Everything that wasn't headed toward Wasp seemed to be part of an effort at envelopment.

At 10 pm, Bob called for retreat. The people remaining in his lab were clearly in danger of being surrounded and there was no way to hold the position. Indeed, their military doctrine was against holding positions. Far too many weapons could project force into any given building, fortification, or cavern. No location was worth sacrificing men and women to defend it, simply because the locations were not the freedom alliance. The people were.

Bill made sure everyone was headed down the northern escape tunnel. Then he set the trip wires. Anyone forcing their way in would not survive the explosions prepared for them. Nevertheless, Bill wanted to leave the lab intact in the event they were able to return to it. So he left all the power systems operational. He, Bob, Susan, Mary Sue, and Clementine all had the codes for getting back in. If there were anything left to get back into, that is.

As they emerged from the tunnel, Bob and Sam's helicopter, once again fully fuelled, came overhead. It headed up the valley toward US 25. Scouting the area, they found everything clear and reported back. Then they proceeded west along the highway to check further down the intended escape route.

As the refugees came up to the highway, they entered a long low wood building. From the outside it gave every appearance of being an abandoned stable. Opposite the road was the door they entered by. Inside were several pickup trucks and SUVs. Screened from the highway by trees were two sliding doors that Bill and Pete opened.

Susan, Clem, Mary Sue, and Tyrone drove the various vehicles out onto a gravel parking lot. Pete and Bill closed the doors behind them. Bill climbed in on the passenger side of the pickup driven by Mary Sue. Pete did likewise with the SUV driven by Clementine. Susan had her three children with her. Soon everyone was seated and heading West.

Three jet aircraft came out of the eastern sky, flying low and fast. Their sonic booms swept over the fugitives. Their cannons and missiles targetted Bob and Sam's helicopter. Bob's drones expended all their ammunition returning fire at the jets, downing two of them, and fighting off the missiles, interposing themselves to absorb much of the auto-cannon rounds.

Screaming in a high gee turn, the last of the enemy jets came back around. Its remaining air-to-air missiles and cannon fire from its guns overwhelmed Bob's remaining defence systems. Sam had brought the helo up to just above auto-gyro altitude. When the main rotor system took a hit, began leaking hydraulic fluid, and started flaming up, the last jet broke off and headed for its home base.

Shrapnel in his left shoulder, Sam guided the copter as best he could through its emergency landing.

As the copter crashed in a farmer's field, Susan turned the convoy of ground vehicles down a side road. Coming through the open gate into the field, she was fairly confident that open gate meant no livestock. Flying over bumps and folds in the ground, she raced with her family toward her husband, the other vehicles following only slightly less recklessly.

Cresting the last ridge separating her from the crash site, she saw Bob supporting Sam as the two moved quickly away from the flaming wreckage. Rounds began to cook off behind them, sending tracers, shrapnel, and bullets in all directions. Somehow everything seemed to go elsewhere, but seeing the chaos ahead, Susan turned on the crest of the hill, slowed, and turned to parallel the ridgeline, getting her children back below the hillcrest away from the wreck.

As if to confirm her fears, a fireball lit the sky. The fuel had exploded. The uncontained explosion went in all directions, preceded by a ground shock travelling at the speed of sound in dirt, knocking the feet out from under Bob and Sam, followed moments later by the air shock, and then a rain of debris. Fortunately, only minor wounds were inflicted as they hugged the ground beneath them.

Having made certain of the explosion, Susan turned again and headed over to her husband. Parking nearby she and the children rushed up to Bob and Sam, who were still clinging to the dirt. Lifting his helmeted head and shaking it slightly, Bob looked up, rolled onto his side, and exposed his shattered visor. His face, battered, bruised, and cut, but mostly intact displayed a rueful grin.

As Susan, Little Bob, Kathy, and Amy rushed up, Bob said, "Hello wonderful people. It's good to be home."

[End part thirty-three, book one concludes in part thirty-four]

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