

EXCERPT:

MISSION CRITICAL

Below them, a young mother exited a small market on Anastavia Street in the town of Klochki, in the Province of Pervomayskiy. Her five-year-old son, Vitaly, first heard the drone of airplane engines, then raising his eyes to the sky, he saw the contrail.

“Look, Mama! Pretty!” he cried, pointing at the silver speck drawing cloud curves high above.

“It is only the military flying over us to keep the peace, Vitaly. Come, we must prepare a meal for Papa. He will be home soon.”



All six cameras clicked off high-speed frames in machine-gun speed as Carl flew a zig-zag course which covered the grid in 10 min.

“On to Manchuria. Reload the cameras. Coming up on the second IP in fifteen minutes.”

“Hold on, Skipper.” Sgt. Hayward adjusted the focus through the camera’s view finder. “I see a whole bunch of Russian vehicles headed into North Korea from the Vladivostok side of the Tumen River. It looks like a supply convoy of some sort ... nope, more than that. I see tanks, Skipper, at our three o’clock low. Looks like a runway cut into the valley between those mountains. That’s a lot of movement for a peacetime operation.”

Carl banked the ‘29 toward the sighting.

“Got ‘em. Good eyes, Sergeant Hayward. I’ll shoot it from our nose array.”

“Captain Withers, please raise the curtain on that facility.”

Wit pressed the camera “Gun” button on his control yoke. All three K-22 fixed nose cameras, each fitted with filters for various light-spectrum settings began reeling-off frames almost as fast as a movie-camera. The still shots offered a panoramic view from a variety of focal ranges using interchangeable lenses from 6in/f6.3 up to 40in/f8.

The photographic specialists removed the film canisters from the K-22 photo-mapping cameras, labeled them and stowed them in the onboard darkroom. Fresh cartridges were inserted and locked in place. Next stop, Manchuria.

“Hayward to Pilot. Captain, see that buildup of cirrus clouds ahead? They’re going to reduce our image resolution. Can we get below that stuff?”

“Wait one, Sergeant.” Carl switched off the comm. and turned to his co-pilot.

“What do you think, Wit? There’s one more grid yet to cover.”

“It’s been quiet so far, Carl. No radio chatter on any of the standard frequencies. How far down do you think we’ll need to go to drop underneath the cloud cover?”

“Low enough we’ll attract some attention. I hope to heck our WMO cover will stall off any aggressors until we clear their airspace.”

Carl pondered his choices only for a moment before keying the intercom.

“Pilot to crew. We’re going to drop beneath the layer of cirrus clouds. It may draw some Red lookie-loos, so climb into your full survival gear if you haven’t already done so. Camera crew, be ready. We only get one try at this. Pilot out.”

At 28,000 ft, the clouds were still as thick as they were when they started their descent. Carl continued downward as his sense of foreboding rose. Descending out of 20,000 ft they dropped into clear skies.

“Roll film now!” he commanded.

The crew finished their last photo-mapping sortie over Feng Tien north of the Tumen River.

“Applying full power. We need to climb back to altitude.” A flash of red rocketed upward at their 10 o’clock and disappeared.

“Holy ...! What was that?” Capt. Withers craned his neck and turned his head rapidly as if on a swivel.

“Pilot to crew. We have company. Secure the film and buckle in. I only got a glimpse, but it looks like some kind of swept-wing fighter aircraft travelling at high speed. Whatever it is, we’re vulnerable at this altitude. I’m taking us back to 38,000 and turning for home.” The bomber began a turn toward the Sea of Japan some 200 km distant.

“Inbound, six o’clock! I see it. It’s attacking ... coming in hot!” a frightened Norman Whitford announced from the tail camera position.

“I got a snapshot, Skipper. Intel’s going to love this.” Airman Binwen reported from the waist camera position. He quickly removed the film canister and stuffed it into his chest pack with his survival gear. He had to remove some equipment to make it fit, but he figured it would be worth the sacrifice.

Carl began evasive maneuvers by repeating a rapid succession of turns and elevation changes to prevent the enemy from getting a clear target picture. The Soviet MiG-15 had the advantage and easily matched the ‘29’s turns. It maintained position following the slower American reconnaissance plane as the *Sophia* continued course toward friendly airspace.

“Why isn’t he firing on us, Skipper?” a nervous MSgt Thruelsen asked.

“I guessing it was up here on a test flight. I’ve never seen anything like that. The red star on her tail says she’s Soviet built, but we’re in Chinese airspace. Question is, ‘What are they doing here flying a swept-wing jet?’”

“Tail camera to pilot. Bogie inbound ... dropping out of the clouds at our six o’clock.” With the push of a button, SSgt. Virgil Hayward began reeling off still photos of the approaching Lavochkin LA-11. The MiG veered off as the propeller-driven Soviet fighter pulled up and matched speed with the ‘29. The fighter lowered its gear and waggled its wings.

“He wants us to follow him, Skipper, what are we going to do?” Captain Withers asked. The tension in his voiced matched Carl’s.

“Nothing for now. No doubt he’s on the horn to his base for instructions. His command will run our tail number through their intel people. If they buy our cover story of a WMO weather mapping mission, they might let us back into our airspace and register a complaint.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then they want our film, and that’s the only reason why we’re still in one piece. Either way, we need to stall them and keep heading toward home. I think they’ll let us know in about one minute.”

“I’m picking him up on the radio, Skipper. Patching him in now,” SSgt. Will Ashton reported.

... is Soviet Fighter Pilot. You will follow me. Turn to course three-two-zero degrees and descend to nine thousand feet. Acknowledge, American B-29.

Soviet fighter, we are not a military aircraft. We are an unarmed aircraft on a photo mapping mission for the World Meteorological Organization. We have errantly strayed into Manchurian airspace and are returning to neutral airspace. Our sincere apologies, sir.

Negative, American bomber. You will proceed on course heading three-two-zero degrees immediately. I have orders to fire on you if you do not comply.

No can do, Soviet fighter. Call your command. They will verify our mission. I repeat, we are a civilian unarmed WMO aircraft. We are in Chinese airspace. This is no concern of the Soviet Union. I repeat, we are not armed.

The fighter kept pace for a minute and then veered off, banking away, from and climbing above the *Sophia*.

“Ben, keep your eyes on our six. I’m not sure he’s gone for good. We’re continuing on course for home. We’ll be clear of Manchurian airspace in fifteen minutes.”

“Skipper, why are the Soviets coming after us? Why not the Chinese? We’re in their airspace, not the Russians.”

“The Chinese are working with the Reds. That MiG-15 is brand new. I think they’re training the Chinese to fly them. If so, the Korean peninsula could boil over into a civil war between the commies and the provisional American military government.”

The Russian fighter reappeared, dropping down behind them, preparing for a rear attack.

“We have our answer, Horacio.” Carl keyed the intercom on the crew frequency.

“Pilot to crew. That fighter is going to fire on us. I’m going to keep us in the air as long as possible. If I give the order to bail out, do it ASAP. I’ll draw him off and try to keep this crate airborne. Prepare yourselves ... chutes, survival packs ... everything.

“Sgt. Ashton, on my command transmit the message.”

“Copy. Ready to transmit on your command.” Ashton held the message in front of him as his right hand hovered over the transmit switch.

The Soviet fighter, proudly showing the Soviet red star against a gray fuselage and wings, opened up on the RB-29 with its twin 23 mm nose cannons stitching holes along the fuselage and right wing. The inboard starboard engine burst into flames.

“Fire in number three engine. Pull the fire bottle. Feathering now!”

Carl feathered the damaged engine. The engine smoke turned from black to near white.

“Fire’s out, Skipper.” MSgt Thruelsen was all over the engine instruments. “Number four oil pressure dropping. Manifold temperature is climbing! We’re holding altitude, at least, but ...”

The fighter came at them again, dropping down on them like an eagle to its prey. Again, the cannons blinked death. Rounds cut through the fuselage and the port wing. The attack ended all

possible hope of making it home. The number one engine exploded under the assault, and the left wing dipped suddenly, causing the '29 to yaw to the port side.

“Bail out, bail out, bail out! Radio, transmit the message.” Carl shouted over the intercom. He held the '29 in a shallow bank adding full power to the two functioning engines. Still, the altimeter wound down with the loss of lift. The bomb bay doors opened, and the crew dropped into the sky 18,000 ft above the ground.

“Alright, now you guys.” Carl ordered Horacio and the remaining crew on the flight deck to bail out.

The Flight Engineer, MSgt Hank Thruelsen, was the first to drop through the hatch. He was followed by Navigator, Lt. Brad Telford. Carl's close friend, Capt. Horatio Withers, dropped down next. The last man out was SSgt. Will Ashton. The message, affirming the sighting of the sweptwing fighter and announcing their position, had been sent.

Carl held the big plane in a bank until he had visual confirmation that all the chutes had deployed. By turning the aircraft in a tight-spiral, he knew the crew would land close together, improving their chances of finding each other on the ground.

The RB-29J turned toward the Korean border and the Sea of Japan beyond, until at 10,000 ft, Carl set the autopilot to hold the aircraft in its current attitude: wings level in a shallow descent. The *Sophia* was losing altitude at the rate of 800 ft/min. He reached down to the left side of his seat and found the red cage that covered a toggle switch. When pulled upward, the switch armed a dozen explosive magnesium incendiary charges that would destroy the *Sophia* and all the photographs that were stored in the cameras and in the onboard dark room. There would be a 30-second delay during which he must bail out before the charges lit up and consumed the plane and everything in it in a 5,000-degree Fahrenheit furnace. He unbuckled his harness, un-caged the switch and toggled it upward. A red light began blinking on and off telling him the charges were armed. He fought his way toward the escape hatch.

The Russian saw that the '29 was crippled and headed out of Chinese airspace. Although the bomber was continuing to lose altitude, the fighter closed in for the kill. From above and behind, the Soviet fighter opened fire.

Carl felt himself being thrown violently to the left and struck his head on a bulkhead. The blow disoriented him and rendered him dazed. His head cleared just as his hand found the opening to the hatch. He strained every muscle to drag himself through the opening while fighting the g-force that tried to pull him back into the plane. *Sophia* was now in a death spiral diving toward her grave.

The Russian pilot performed a victory roll as the American RB-29J rolled to the left and nosed down in a steep dive toward the farmland and mountains beyond which lay the Tumen River.

Carl's parachute deployed, and five seconds later an orange-yellow fireball filled the sky with an ear shattering concussive blast. The Soviet pilot turned back toward his home base.