Long Road Home

By tvig0r0us

Chapter 1  
Echoes of the mountain  
  
On a hazy morning near the eastern coast of the East China Sea island of Skira, a cool mountain dew settles on the slender, deep green blades of grass that cover the fertile soil of the great volcano. A great battle rages for control over a mountain side encampment, as well as the last stand for PLA forces on the island. Gunfire echoes through the otherwise tranquil forests that shroud the now extinct volcano that birthed the island.   
  
"Move up!" shouts a Marine special forces squad leader as tracers streak through the hills, whistling past their heads. PFC Ludwig races towards a small patch of trees. I should be able to get a clean shot into their lines he thinks to himself as the sweat rolls down his brow. Somehow, over the piercing crack of the rifles he hears screams of agony as one of his squad mates is struck by one of the pieces of hot lead whizzing down the hill.   
  
"Oh \*\*\*\*, it hurts", the Marine screams.  
  
This is not like the bullshit in those video games, not even close, Ludwig thinks. This is war...   
  
Not normally shaken by an intense situation, something this time feels different. In the back of his head there's a voice telling him that this time around is his last, and no matter what he does, the sound of the voice echoes in his mind.  
  
 Ten meters to cover as the bullets pour down the hillside on his position, somehow missing their mark. With a final leap he crashes into the brush behind the solid trunk of a great tree. Crack, crack, thud… the bullets bury themselves into the base of the tree, some striking the dirt sending dust into the air.  
  
He looks back across the clearing he just crossed to an unsettling sight. The number two in his fire team, PFC Greaves, lies writhing in pain on the ground. As he fights to focus on his friend through the spray of dirt and hot lead he sees a crimson red stream working its way between the blades of grass, through the dark soil of the mountain. A gaping wound in the side of Greave's neck is feeding the flow as the life leaves his body.   
  
"What the \*\*\*\*!?!" yells Ludwig... but his voice is drowned out by the relentless barrage of machine gun fire.  
  
"Two is down", yells the team medic, PFC Walczak. The fire team has been fighting the entire operation side by side and here in the last leg, fate has taken one of them away.  
  
"\*\*\*\* these mother fuckers", responds Ludwig. "Throw down suppressing fire on that position", Ludwig says as he motions towards a wooden bunker to the left of the dirt road winding up the mountain side. A static machine gun continues to rain fire on their position as the soldiers fight to hear one another. Ludwig surveys the hill side, noticing a friendly fire team flanking the encampment just a couple hundred meters to the west. If these guys can get to the crest of that hill we can cut down the soldiers in that bunker with the crossfire, he thinks.  
  
Walczak opens fire on the bunker with his m16. Rat tat tat... rat tat tat.... the crisp report of the rifle rings out. Ludwig carefully peaks around the trunk of the great tree.  Up the hill, he can see the gunner duck into the bunker to take cover. This is my chance he thinks as he jumps up and makes a dash for the dirt road. The adrenaline rushes through his veins as he bounds between the trees and into the clear. It only takes a few wide strides to cross the road and get to cover behind another tree. Just as he reaches the brush he hears a deep thump from over the hill top.   
  
"Incoming mortar!!!" screams a soldier from down the hill behind Ludwig. Oh, \*\*\*\* he thinks just as a flash engulfs Ludwig’s entire body.... Bump, bump, bump he hears bouncing in his head.  
  
"Wake the \*\*\*\* up Ludwig, you're dreaming", says Greaves, pounding on the locker at the foot of Ludwig's bunk. "Man you need to get on some fucking meds or something", Greaves laughs.   
  
"\*\*\*\* you", Ludwig snarls.    
  
"Easy mate… We have a briefing this morning, I'd hate for you to miss the good news", replies Greaves.   
  
It's been a couple of years since the PLA were driven from the island, but right on the home stretch of the campaign, Ludwig had a brush with death when a mortar came down on his position, almost costing him his life. If not for the guy standing next to him, he probably would have died, but the event has lingered in his mind. In the time since, he has recovered, but as for the island that he almost died trying to liberate, it would appear that the foreign policies of the Obama administration have emboldened the PLA to assert itself again in the dispute for the island. Japan, while insisting they have a claim to the land, is not devoted to putting its own resources into defending the place. Once again, the Marines are on the hook as the enforcers.

Chapter 2   
Situational awareness  
  
Click, click, click, click... the sound of footsteps on the metal grated floor resonate through the long hall in the bowels of the USS George Washington. The Nimitz class carrier has been anchored roughly 50 clicks from the south east coast of Skira for the last two weeks. Day by day the gravity of the situation on the island is taking hold on the seamen aboard the vessel. Some of them have been here before.  
  
"What kind of bullshit do you think they're going to feed us today?" Ludwig overhears a passing seaman as he makes his way towards the deck. I really hope these yahoos in Washington get this straightened out before we have to go in there and mop up.  
  
"What do you think?" asks Walczak, "I bet we're going to be playing war this week."  
"You're probably right. I'd hate to give the PLA a reason to think we forgot about them", replies Ludwig, with a sarcastic tone in his voice.  
Greaves chimes in, "Well you bet your ass that if we go back in there we're not gonna be playing patty cake."  
  
As the three approach the briefing room they come to a sailor listening to a radio broadcast over a shortwave channel.  
  
"What's on the airwaves ya squid?" pokes Ludwig.  
"They're talking about us," says the sailor, "listen."  
  
"Chinese officials have issued a warning to the state department not to intervene in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. The arrival of several destroyers and the aircraft carrier USS George Washington in the region has elevated tensions and made negotiations for a peaceful resolution difficult. State department officials insist that the naval presence is part of a scheduled exercise in coordination with the Japanese Navy....," the voice rambles on through the crackly speaker of the radio.  
  
"What a bunch of bullshit," laments Greaves, shaking his head in disgust.  
"Yeah, this is an exercise alright... in mass suicide. What in the hell are we here for anyway??? So the Japs don't get a scratch on one of their dingies?," says Ludwig with a chuckle. "We better get in there and see what's on the platter."  
  
The three Marines make their way into the crowded room and squeeze their into one of the less than comforting metal chairs. Several of the top brass are in the front of the room which does not boad well for them. A stack of reports is passed around the room until each soldier has his own copy and the briefing is called to order.  
  
"As some of you may know, the negotiations between the PLA and Japanese are rapidly deteriorating" starts the officer at the head of the room. "As you also know, when our allies request our help, we answer," he asserts. A long eerie pause follows. "We are not yet at the point of intervention, but we intend to prepare as if we were going to put boots on the ground tomorrow. The PLA have agreed to honor a 5km buffer zone from the coast of the island before they will consider our actions those of aggression. We are going to establish a presence right on their doorstep," he continues.  
  
"Now this is what we know," says the officer, nodding towards the analyst sitting in the front row. He stands up from his chair and walks to the front of the room.  
  
"The PLA have rebuilt the long range radio capabilities at the main tower on the island enabling them to establish a solid communications link back to the Chinese mainland. This indicates that they are preparing for a long term stay on the island. We have intercepted signals coming from the island, but we have not been able to crack their encryption to this point. This is a solid indication that there is a radio engineer on the island that is able to handle and administer the encryption codes," he says. As he flips the page of his briefing he continues, "In addition they have established a heavy anti air presence featuring several SAM arrays capable of downing any aircraft within a 3km line of site radius. Their missile systems are advanced and once a lock is established you can be assured the missile will find it's target. This is also an indication that they have a technical officer on the island capable of engineering and programming the arrays. It's imperative that you strictly observe the buffer zone."  
  
Greaves leans over and whispers, "This just keeps getting better."  
  
The analyst carries on, "We also have solid intel that the PLA have created a chemical weapons manufacturing facility at the abandoned chemical lab of Whitefang. This facility is a major bone of contention in the diplomatic negotiations and could pose a serious threat if combined with their long range missile delivery systems. Fortunately we have no indication of any Sunburn missile systems on the island. Lastly, we have solid intelligence that they are stockpiling their weapons in the western town of Malkovo," the analyst says as he flips through his report. He finishes with a matter of fact, "That is all."  
  
"That's all?" snickers Walczak.  
  
The officer steps back to the front of the room. The look on his face is very serious. He states in a sullen voice, "I know I don't need to remind each of you how serious the situation is. It is very important that we not overstep our bounds in such a way as to provoke a conflict, but we must establish a presence in order to send the message that we are to be taken seriously. With that in mind, we will proceed with exercises starting at 0700 and continue them for the remainder of the negotiations or until otherwise instructed by Washington. We will be rotating sorties of Marine seahawks flying maneuvers just outside the buffer zone. If you are approached, you are not to engage unless fired upon. We do not want to insight an international incident, so precision is of the upmost importance." The officer pauses and looks around the room. There is an uneasy feeling hanging in the air that is so thick you can cut it with a knife. "Any questions?" asks the officer. After another moment of silence he announces, "Dismissed."  
  
As Ludwig observes the faces in the room he can pick out the newer recruits, pale and shaken. I've been there, he thinks to himself, and it's not a good place. As the soldiers rise and begin to file out of the briefing room you can hear the quiet conversations between them. On a normal day, they at least seem happy, but there's nothing joyous about facing your mortality and that of every man around you.  
  
Ludwig and his team silently exit the meeting and move up along the walkway of the flight control tower, looking down over the flight deck. Seamen are scurrying about like ants in an ant hill, preparing for the unknown. Everyone focused on fulfilling their role on the ship and insuring that the living machine of war functions without missing a stroke, and oblivious to the forces that steer it.  
  
"You up for this partner?" asks Greaves.  
Ludwig pauses for a moment and replies, "As much as I can be. I just don't want to wind up on that hill again."  
"Don't worry boss, I'm ready to put you back together," jokes Walczak. "Look at that," he says, pointing at the horizon.  
  
The sky is beginning to lighten with a gradient shift to a brilliant yellow towards the eastern waters. The sun breaks the barrier between the sea and the heavens and shines it's first light of the new day on the men as they wonder... will this be one of the last?

Chapter 3  
Flight of Fear  
  
"Alright, let's head out," says Ludwig as he and his team make their way onto the flight deck of the USS George Washington. This is the last flight of the evening for the men as they embark on their first evening of close exercises off of the south western coast of Skira. It's been a long day and they are eager to get back to their bunks for some shut-eye.  
  
"Two down, one to go," says Walczak, "This isn't so bad... it's like sight taking a helicopter tour of a bombed out coastline."  
  
Greaves chuckles, "Whatever you say man... You're a bit fucked up in the head, you know that?"  
  
As the men approach the helicopter on the deck the last of the mechanics disembarks from his perch at the engine compartment and smacks the side of the grey machine. "That should have you straightened out," he says to the pilot.  
  
That's not what I want to hear before I strap a flying machine onto my ass, thinks Ludwig. The first two sorties of the day went smoothly, but flying has never been among his favorite things to do. Maybe it's the heights, maybe it's his cynical view of manmade flying machines. Whatever it is, he just doesn't feel good about flying.  
  
"What's the matter boss?", pokes Walczak.  
  
"Ha ha," Ludwig responds, "just get in the damn helicopter."  
  
The men climb on board and strap in. They sit tight as the crew performs their final checks and the whining of the APU is muffled out by the sound of the engines firing up. As the main rotor begins to gather speed he can hear the blades cutting through the humid air. The men put on their headsets so they can join in on the chatter.  
  
"Welcome aboard," says the Pilot, "We'll be at a flight deck of ten meters for this surf run. Enjoy the ride."  
  
"This is Mocking Bird Alpha requesting permission to take off," the co-pilot radios to the tower.  
  
"Roger that Mocking Bird Alpha. You are cleared for takeoff," the controller responds.  
  
As the pilot moves the cyclic the rotors begin to make a deep thumping sound and the helicopter lifts off. A few meters over the flight deck and the nose of the craft turns down and they move over the open water...  
  
The maneuvers seem to pass quickly as the team studies procedures and protocols during the flight. They have done this hundreds of times and the only thing that seems to change is the weather. They are close enough to the island to see the silhouette of the mountains blocking the horizon.  
  
"We're on the home stretch," says the pilot over the headset.  
  
No sooner did the words leave his lips than a loud thwack can be heard in the helicopter. "What in the \*\*\*\* was that?" Walczak shouts.  
  
"We're losing oil pressure!" exclaims the co-pilot, "Mocking Bird Alpha to GW Flight control. Mocking Bird has broken wing, I repeat, broken wing."  
  
As the co-pilot rushes to divert power from the damaged engine the alarms in the cabin begin to squeal. A loud groan begins to sound out from overhead.  
  
The pilot comes over the radio, "We're going to have to set it down. We have suffered a major oil pressure loss and I can only keep it up for a few more minutes before a catastrophic failure."  
  
Ludwig and his men look at each other in the back of the helicopter in disbelief. They know this can only mean one thing, they're heading back to the island ahead of schedule. It's the only place they have to land. As the helicopter banks and towards the island they descend to a lower altitude. Looking out the window they can see the water whizzing by only twenty or thirty meters below them. The next few minutes seem to last an eternity as they speed towards the very airspace that they were supposed to avoid. As they look out of the side windows they can see the details of the island becoming more defined as they approach.  
  
The groan of the disabled engine gets louder and louder until finally a loud metallic sounding snap can be heard like the sound of steel being sheared apart. The helicopter shakes violently as Ludwig sees the beach whiz by below them. "Brace yourselves!" screams the pilot just as they smash into the ground. The approach of the ground seems like a slow motion picture to Ludwig as he looks through the front windscreen.  
  
Half way out of his seat, hanging by the harness, Ludwig opens his eyes. For a moment he doesn't even realize where he is or what has just happened. Was this all a dream? He raises his head and looks across at the seat across from his.  
  
"Holy \*\*\*\*!" shouts Greaves, "Is everyone OK?" Everyone in the back of the helicopter replies with an affirmative, but the front of the helicopter remains silent. The helicopter crew is unconscious, or worse, dead. The smell of fuel begins to fill the air.   
  
"We have to move and get the hell off of this helicopter," Ludwig orders the men. They get free of their restraints and pull crates with them from the wreckage as Ludwig checks the crew for signs of life. "Son of a bitch, they're all dead," Ludwig says with anger in his voice.  
  
A flame ignites near the front of the helicopter as he quickly moves clear of the wreck. Just as he gets clear the tanks ignite and the chopper is almost instantly engulfed in flames. The men are stranded. To make matters worse, the long range communications radio was on the helicopter and they are so far out that they are unable to radio back to the George Washington for assistance. They find themselves in a dire situation. Armed only with the weapons they were able to salvage from the wreck and the intelligence they were given at the briefing, it's up to them to find a way off of the island.  
  
What happens next is up to you...