

Sample of Black Flagged Redux

IN THE BLACK

August 2006

2:30 AM
"Dock Sud" (South Dock)
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Daniel shifted his elbows slightly, and stared through a small handheld spotting scope at the building one hundred and sixty meters away. Situated strategically among several dozen stacks of multi-colored maritime shipping containers, the modest, unattractive two story structure didn't attract much attention on any given day. This particular Wednesday proved to be an exception, though to the casual observer, it looked like any other late night in the sleepy, working class barrio, on the southern outskirts of Dock Sud.

The areas immediately beyond the container yard's high walls were quiet, except for the cars that passed in the distance on Avenida Juan Diaz de Solis. Since he arrived two hours earlier, only three cars had turned off Juan Diaz and penetrated the sizable slum squeezed between the container yard and a vast sea of fuel storage tanks that extended all the way to the Rio Plata waterfront.

He reconfirmed the presence of two sentries stationed outside of the building. One on the roof of the two story building and one pacing a small deck located on the second floor. The sentry on the deck guarded an external door at the top of a metal staircase that sat flush against the building. Lights blazed behind curtains inside the windows on the second floor, leading him to assume that the ground floor was deserted, and possibly not connected to the upper level.

The outer staircase further supported his theory. The rest of Daniel's team waited in the shadows of three separate container stacks surrounding the building. The building and all adjacent stretches of flat gravel were bathed in the orangish-yellow glow of several strategically placed sodium vapor lights, which prevented the rest of the team from approaching any closer. Only the two sentries stood in the team's way at this point, and removing them was his job.

Lying prone for two hours on the hard metal container was starting to take its toll on his concentration, and he found himself shifting every couple of minutes. He employed active breathing techniques to take his mind off the fact that his hip and elbows were beyond the point of finding comfort on their new metal home. He gently placed the spotting scope next to his elbow, and pulled the dark grey thermal shielding blanket over his head, nestling in behind his rifle. The rooftop sentry scanned the dark areas of the container yard with a hand portable scope that may have thermal detection capability. The blanket was designed to foil thermal imaging and worked well against low power, handheld scopes, but would do him little good against the kind of sophisticated thermal imaging equipment found mounted on aircraft or vehicles.

He sighted in on the rooftop sentry through the ATN MARS6x-3 night vision scope attached to a silenced Heckler and Koch MSG-90 rifle, placing the center red dot on the stationary man's upper chest. At three hundred meters, with the ambient light of surrounding sodium vapor lights, the bright green image was crisp. He could have used a

conventional scope for these shots, but as soon as the sentries went down, electricity to the yard would be cut to maximize confusion in the building.

Based on intelligence provided by Senior Galenden's contact in the Buenos Aires Police Department, a high level meeting of Chechen street bosses was scheduled for tonight, which always preceded the arrival of a large "tri-border" area, Andean cocaine shipment destined for Europe. He might need the night vision scope to deal with any men left outside to guard the VIP vehicles, which still hadn't arrived. They anticipated a possible total of twenty targets at the building. Their mission was simple. Kill everyone on-site. Senior Galenden wanted to send the Chechen mafia an unforgettable message, and put an end to their encroachment on his legitimate dock interests.

Four minutes later, his patience was rewarded by the staggered arrival of three expensive, oversized SUVs. The drivers maneuvered the SUV's to face away from the building, and parked them side by side, away from the four assorted cars and trucks already parked at the base of the building. All of the truck doors opened at once, and several men walked toward the metal staircase. He didn't count them. One of the breach teams would take care of that. Instead, he noted that two heavily armed men stayed with the vehicles. They positioned themselves on the exposed side of the nearest SUV, a silver Mercedes, and lit cigarettes.

"All teams, this is control. Proceed."

"Overwatch, out," whispered Daniel.

Through his earpiece, he heard the rest of the teams confirm the order. At this point, everything hinged on Daniel's shooting. The three breach teams would move once the roof sentry dropped to the ground, which might require a little more patience. He wanted to hit the man while he stood on the edge of the far roof, so he would tumble to the ground. He couldn't be sure of the roof's thickness, and an unusual overhead thud during a tense meeting would not be a good start to their operation.

Daniel steadied the crosshairs, which had already been adjusted for the distance and a steady six knot right to left breeze, and waited. The roof sentry touched his right hand to his ear for a few seconds, which was a telltale that he just received orders through an earpiece that he was unaccustomed to wearing. It was a hard habit to break, even for a seasoned professional, and one of the easiest ways to spot hidden undercover security personnel. The guard moved toward the far edge, and Petrovich was willing to bet he had just been ordered to keep a close eye on the areas behind the building. They already had three men watching the front.

He kept the red dot centered on the man's upper back, and started his breathing drill. Slow, predictable breaths, allowing him to gauge the rifle scope's natural drift. He gently added pressure to the sensitive trigger, and the rifle bucked into his shoulder, the large silencer barking a sharp hiss that was unlikely to attract any attention. The sentry lurched forward from the impact of the 175 grain hollow point projectile, and disappeared over the edge.

He zeroed in on the second sentry, and fired a hasty shot, knowing that the first round had passed over all three of the men travelling at over 2100 feet per second. The sound would be unmistakable to a veteran. The second projectile struck center mass, and the wall behind the guard turned dark green in his scope. By the time he centered the crosshairs on one of the two guards near the SUVs, less than one second later, all three of

the breach teams had reached building undetected. Two of the teams ascended the stairs, and one climbed an affixed ladder, on the far side, and headed for the roof.

He fired two shots, quickly alternating between the guards on the ground, dropping each of them unceremoniously to the hard gravel. One of the SUV windows shattered, reminding Daniel that the high velocity rounds seated in his rifle's magazine tended to exit humans at these ranges, unlike the smaller caliber hollow point projectiles fired from pistols. He checked the bodies for signs of movement. If one of them managed to operate their handheld radio, the breach team would have a big problem. He saw an arm move for one of the compact assault rifles lying in the gravel. The rifle bucked, and the movement stopped. He quickly changed rifle magazines, and aimed at one of the second story windows, waiting for the lights to go out.

He didn't envy the teams tasked with entering the building. Everyone inside was heavily armed and anything could go wrong. He felt lucky to be lying on top of a quadruple stacked shipping container, nearly three stories up, and well removed from the danger below. Things had worked out decently enough for Jess and him in Argentina, and he had no intention of taking a bullet to help Sanderson pay off a debt to one of his crony supporters.

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Five minutes later, nearly six hundred miles away near the Chilean border, General Sanderson's satellite phone rang. He answered the call, and listened for a few seconds.

"That's great news, Rich. See you back at the ranch," he said, and disconnected the call.

He leaned back in one of the leather chairs situated around the lodge's stone fireplace, and relished in the team's success, the program's success...his success. He had sent twelve operatives into Buenos Aires to execute a high risk raid on behalf of Ernesto Galenden, their "unofficial" sponsor in Argentina, and it had gone off without a hitch. This was fantastic news, given that Sanderson had decided against fully stacking the team with their most experienced operators. Just over a year into their formal training, the newer recruits needed opportunities like these to hone their skills and instincts.

The final body count at the container yard had been eighteen. He suspected that the message would be received clearly by the remaining Chechen mafia heads, and if not, Sanderson would gladly send them another, if Senior Galenden desired. Sanderson needed to keep Galenden happy. The headquarters compound and surrounding training areas turned out to be ideal, and he needed at least another eighteen months in Argentina, before he could start pushing the newest batch of operatives into their assigned areas of operation (AO). Presently, he could deploy most of the operatives into their AO's for short assignments, but they lacked the fine tuning necessary to ensure their longer term survival. Fine tuning that came with consistent practice and patience.

So far, the program's progress had exceeded most expectations, despite the difficulties experienced getting the Middle East program off the ground. Viable recruits had proven difficult to find and screen, especially candidates with prior military or law enforcement experience, and most importantly, fluency in either Farsi or Arabic. Sanderson had overstated the program's Middle East capabilities when he struck a sudden

truce with Karl Berg and the CIA two years ago. He knew that Berg had seen a healthy portion of the original Black Flag files, and would believe that Sanderson had re-engineered a new program to face America's biggest perceived threat. Radical Islam. The fact that Berg had kept Keller's photographic memory a secret from The Pentagon to steal information, and had gone "off the books" to hire a covert assassination team, led Sanderson to believe that Berg was a player. He was an expert at reading people, and Berg struck him as the kind of career CIA officer, who normally worked within the system, but had enough salt to cross the line if the potential payoff was big enough. Sanderson had been correct in all of his assumptions, and once Berg took the deal over the phone, there was no turning back for him.

In less than two years, he planned to have the entire program fully capable of conducting sustained operations throughout the world, right on the doorstep of every pressing threat to U.S. national security. At that point, it would only be a matter of time before they stumbled onto something big enough to give him the leverage needed to pull his program back into the fold as a legitimate and necessary extension of the United States.

As it stood, he had the generous of several extremely influential and wealthy powerbrokers, who professed the same commitment to worldwide stability as Sanderson, but their support came with a price. The occasional "favor" had turned into a monthly distraction, which provided his operatives with real world experience, but underscored the fact that he wasn't ultimately calling the shots anymore. Sanderson's practical side had long ago come to terms with this arrangement, but for a man who had "run the show" for decades, it gnawed away at his insides. The sooner he could break free from these shackles the better.

General Sanderson stood up and pushed the remaining glowing ashes around in the fireplace. The fire had long ago died, but the embers had kept him warm enough while he waited for word from the team. He turned off the light, relying on instinct to get him to the front door of the headquarters lodge, and opened the wooden door to step outside into the frigid winter night. A thin layer of snow covered the ground, illuminated by the first quarter moon that beamed through the valley at a low angle above the Andean foothills. The valley was deathly silent, except for the sound of water trickling past larger rocks in the exposed river bed ahead of the lodge.

He stepped onto a worn path to his right, and cleared the lodge, crunching the freshly fallen snow under his boots. He glanced around, and confirmed that all of the compounds lights were out, except for the one he had expected to see shining through the thick trees of the forest. His last duty of the night would be to let Jessica Petrovich know that Daniel was fine.

The Petrovich's remained somewhat of an enigma to Sanderson. He had never met two people more tightly connected than Daniel and Jessica. He had limited information regarding their relationship in Serbia, but he was convinced that something had happened in Belgrade to seal these two together forever, aside from their audacious plan to steal over a hundred million dollars from Srecko Hadzic. He wasn't overly concerned about their secret, but it kept him from fully trusting them.

He could already sense that Jessica was losing her interest in the program. Much to his surprise and pleasure, she had embraced her duties as an instructor with a raw eagerness that painfully contrasted Daniel's less than enthusiastic arrival at the

compound. Gradually, they reversed roles, and now he found Daniel deeply immersed in the program and Jessica drifting, which wasn't the only thing that worried Sanderson. Lately, she struck him as less emotionally stable than when she first arrived. If he couldn't predict, or at least control her behavior, she could quickly become a major liability. It was something for him to consider, and watch with a keen eye.

He softened his footsteps as he turned down the path that would lead him up to her door. Terrence Sanderson didn't have many fears. An active thirty year career in Army Special Forces had cured him of that useless emotion. Still, as he slowly approached the Petrovich's timber A-Frame, he kept imagining Jessica inviting him inside, and cutting his throat. Most men might have a different fantasy about Jessica Petrovich, but for Sanderson, his thoughts about her always involved a quick, razor sharp knife. She was starting to get under his nerves, and he didn't like it.

BLACK TIDE

Early April 2007

Chapter One

8:05 PM

Foothills of Kurchatov

Republic of Kazakhstan

Anatoly Reznikov stared at the fading ribbon of cerulean blue sky over the darkened steppe. He sat in the back of a cheap, Russian four door sedan, likely rented at the airport in Semipalatinsk (Semey), where he would soon board a privately chartered aircraft. From there, he would fly unescorted to some dumpy airstrip in western Russian, where generous prepayments ensured that he could walk straight from the plane to a four-wheeled drive vehicle, with no questions or hassle. Of course, this had all supposedly been arranged for him by his new partners, while he worked on their product at the laboratory. Reznikov had few illusions that they had any intention of honoring the final terms of the contract, so he had made his own arrangements.

The driver was still headed vaguely in the right direction, but Anatoly knew the man had taken a subtle turn down a dead end spur, which might have gone unnoticed in the dark, if he hadn't been paying close attention to every single action, facial expression...even word uttered by his partners, as the project neared completion. It also helped that he could understand what they were saying, a fact he had kept secret from everyone, especially his new "partners."

Over the past few weeks, he had overheard some interesting conversations about "covering their tracks" and "getting rid of any links." The kind of phrases that had buried a pit in his stomach, and made it nearly impossible for him to focus on the transfer of his product to the delivery devices. He had expected to be killed at any moment, either in the lab, or his room, and the suspense had nearly crippled him. The feeling gnawed at him for nearly two weeks, as he played scenario after scenario in his head, trying to determine if they realized that either of his assistants could complete the final steps of the project.

He had become a nervous wreck, plagued by stomach problems, unexplained sweating episodes, and numerous other symptoms of severe paranoia. All of that suddenly vanished when they announced that he would be transported to the airport as agreed. His "friend" Ahmad spoke in plain voice, right in front of him, to a rough looking man Anatoly had never seen at the lab complex. "Get rid of him." As soon as the words were spoken, Anatoly felt calm, almost relieved. He found himself looking forward to the ride. Finally, he could get on with the plan he had set in motion nearly three years earlier, when he first tried to contact these traitorous jackals.

He wished there had been some way to keep the final product out of their hands, but this crew didn't mess around, and there had been no opportunity to sabotage the project, while keeping what he needed. He wouldn't get the second part of his payment, but it didn't matter. He had exactly what he had set out to obtain, sitting in two

innocuous, specialized designed thermos sized coolers, snuggled into the backpack sitting next to him.

The car continued for another minute, and then slowed to a stop.

"I think we took a wrong turn. I need to look at the map to try and make sense of these dirt roads. This is the middle of nowhere," said the driver, who proceeded to get out of the car with a map and flashlight.

The front passenger, a man he had not met before, joined him, and they laid the map out on the hood, examining it with a flashlight. The driver yelled back at the car, and beckoned Reznikov to join them. He rolled the window down, and heard the rear car door open. The interior roof lamp bathed the car in a dingy orange light, and the man in the rear passenger seat next to Anatoly started to exit the vehicle.

"It's an old Russian map. They need your help reading it," said Ahmad, who had been part of the original crew that met with Anatoly.

"Oh, no problem," he said.

Anatoly opened the door to join the three Al Qaeda operatives, who were staring quizzically at a map that had given them no problems on previous occasions. As he approached, the new passenger pointed to an odd cluster of hills to the southwest.

"We're trying to figure out where we are. Can you see if those hills break apart in the middle. If they do, I know exactly where we are. You might have to walk down the road a bit," he said, and went back to the map.

"Sure," Anatoly said, and continued walking.

As he reached a point alongside the three men, he drew a compact GSh-18 pistol from a large, flapped pocket on his dark brown overcoat, and fired two 9mm hollow point bullets into each of their heads. He started with Ahmad, who was facing him on the other side of the hood, and then rapidly dispatched the remaining two extremists, before they had even straightened their bodies in response to the deafening noise.

In the reflected light of the car's high beams, he watched the mystery passenger's body slide down the side of the car, taking the blood and brain matter stained map with him. Ahmad and the driver lie on the road next to the car. In the partially blocked, dusty illumination of the dropped flashlight, he watched Ahmad's left foot twitch erratically, until it slowed and stopped.

Satisfied that the men were dead, he returned to the car and opened the trunk. Inside, he found exactly what he had expected. A cardboard box filled with spray bottles of cleaning solvent and assorted rags. Like Reznikov, his "partners" had no intention of returning a blood stained car to the rental agency at the Semey Airport. He took the cleaning supplies and grabbed the flashlight from the side of the road. He'd start with the larger brain pieces first.

Chapter Two

1:24 AM

Caucasus Mountains

Southern Dagestan

Captain Vasily Tischenko fought with the controls as he tracked the infrared navigation lights of the lead helicopter through the incredibly tight, tree lined canyon. His grainy perception of the scene through night vision goggles (NVGs) told him that he had plenty of room, and his limited experience flying similar missions validated the deceptive green image that flickered and changed without warning. He had supervised the detailed route planning with the other pilots, and knew logically that the Mi-8MS "Hip's" rotors had ample clearance from the rocky, pine covered sides of the small river valley, but he had long ago learned never to trust anything but his instruments while flying at night.

Unfortunately, the only useful information he received from his cockpit controls told him that he had one hundred feet between the helicopter and the ground, and the altimeter hadn't been installed with night-vision flying in mind. Normally, he could check the altimeter and trim gauges with a flicker of his eyes, but the night-vision goggles severely limited his field of vision, requiring him to move his head and take his eyes off the helicopter ahead them.

He despised flying with NVGs, and relied on his co-pilot to check several instruments for him, most importantly, their route. His co-pilot monitored a recently installed, low light GPS screen, and called out their position relative to the calculated track, which gave him some reassurance that they wouldn't slam into the side of the valley. Tischenko figured that if the lead helicopter didn't crash and burst into flames, they would probably be fine on the approach. He had enough distance between them to avoid a deadly pile up.

As with all Alpha Group Spetsnaz operations, the pilots had been given scant details regarding the nature of the target, only the ingress and egress routes, timeline and expected support tactics. Tischenko had only flown two other missions for Alpha Group, and one had been aborted thirty minutes into the flight. The other had been a fairly straightforward insertion, in an uncontested landing zone near Grozny.

Overall, Tischenko's year in Chechnya had been quiet, as most of insurgency had been quelled by the time his helicopter squadron had started its one year long rotation. This had suited him well. A ready supply of SA-7 "Grail" surface to air missile launchers had been distributed to the rebels by mutinous Chechen regiments, and dozens of helicopters had been lost in similar operations during the early insurgency years. Helicopter losses were a rarity these days, which gave Tischenko all the more hope that he would make it back to see his daughter Elena's third birthday.

The Captain's stomach pitched, as the helicopter unexpectedly dropped fifteen feet, and he nudged the collective to raise the 22,000 pound chunk of metal back to a steady altitude. He was careful not to over-react, since the close walls of the canyon would not be very forgiving of an over-correction. The helicopter buckled again, and he repeated the process, fighting a sudden torque problem, as wind shears from his own

rotor wash came back from the valley walls directly across his tail. He delicately applied pressure to pedals that controlled the tail rotor blade pitch, and kept the fully laden assault helicopter pointed at the center of the Alpha One. He had fought thousands of these small aerodynamic battles since entering the river valley fifteen minutes ago, and could barely wait to get out of these narrow confines. He sensed no change to the vibrations of his helicopter, which settled his stomach...slightly. He could detect the slightest changes to his helicopter, and could often detect a problem before the helicopter's own fault sensors.

He wished there was an easier route to their target, but he understood the need for their clandestine approach. Three helicopters were about to drop sixty Alpha Group "special operators" onto a single site, which meant their target was important, and probably heavily defended. He figured they had another minute before banking hard left, and dropping directly into the middle of the insurgent base.

Once he made the turn, his helicopter would be less than one minute from dropping twenty of Russia's most highly trained Spetsnaz into the darkness. There would be no room overhead to hover and provide cover fire for the commandos. They had been instructed to climb out of the valley, and use the nearby hills for cover, until the operation had concluded. If requested, one helicopter would return for close air support. Luckily for Tischenko, that task fell to Alpha One.

"One minute to Final Waypoint," said the copilot over the internal communications circuit.

Following standard procedure, the copilot flashed the muted, dark red lights in the troop compartment, which would let the commandos know that their insertion was imminent, without ruining their night vision. They knew the drill better than Tischenko's crew, and would be moving around the compartment making last second preparations. His two gunners would start to spin the barrels of their GshG-7.62mm miniguns, in preparation for the short period of time they would be allowed to engage targets of opportunity on the ground. It would be the only support Alpha Group would receive from the air, and his gunners wanted to make it count.

Roughly one minute later, Tischenko watched Alpha One's shadowy green profile started to change, as the massive helicopter banked left and disappeared behind the adjacent valley's rocky spur. He would execute the same turn, and line up on Alpha One, as soon as he was clear of the same tree covered outcropping. He expected all hell to break loose when they accelerated into the hidden valley.

A few more seconds passed, and he could tell that his own helicopter had crossed into the secondary valley opening. He caught sight of Alpha One's infra-red tail lights through his night-vision, and adjusted the cyclic to put the helicopter into a sharp left turn. He steadied on Alpha One with a clever manipulation of his pedals, and watched as the lead helicopter picked up speed...seconds away from inserting its team.

His copilot flashed the troop compartment lights twice in rapid succession, and Tischenko felt the helicopter jolt as the doors on both sides of the modified special operations helicopter slammed open, ready to disgorge their human cargo. He felt the crisp, mountain air rush into the cockpit, and fill his helmet. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, as Alpha One flared, and two thick ropes dropped from each side of the black, hovering beast. Once the helicopter settled a few seconds later, figures started to rapidly slide down the ropes, and Tischenko tried not to count them. He needed to focus on the narrowing gap between his rotor blades and the trees, since reconnaissance photos and

survey maps indicated a tight squeeze before the valley opened up into the perfect hiding place for a high value insurgent base.

He found his helicopter approaching Alpha One too quickly, and reduced the forward cyclic, waiting for the lead helicopter to dip forward and speed away. Once Alpha One started moving forward, he would move Alpha Two into position for his turn. Given the tight fit within the valley, and the limited flat ground near the insurgent base, mission planners had decided against trying to fit two helicopters into the LZ at one time, especially at night. One miscalculation could be catastrophic. Alpha One's miniguns started firing, and long, continuous streams of green tracers reached out into the darkness on both sides of the helicopter.

"There he goes," the copilot said eagerly, before Tischenko could process the fact that Alpha One was speeding away.

He generously pushed the cyclic, and the helicopter lurched forward. His copilot continuously called out the distance to the final Assault Point, using the GPS system, which was accurate to one meter. Tischenko was a skilled pilot, and brought the Mi-8MS "Hip" right into position, flaring at the last second to completely stop the helicopter's forward motion. As the helicopter settled, the first thing he noticed was unmistakable sound of small arms bullets clanking into his helicopter. He couldn't hear the source of the gunfire, but one of the lower cockpit windows spider-cracked, followed by the window immediately to his left.

"Stable at Assault Point. Deploy Alpha Team!" he yelled into his helmet microphone.

"Alpha Team deploying," he heard.

His own helicopter's miniguns barked like buzz-saws, spitting hundreds of 7.62mm bullets per second back into the insurgent positions. Through his peripheral vision on both sides, he saw thick streams of green tracers float away from his helicopter. They had a full scale battle on their hands in this shitty little valley. Alpha One had warmed them up, and escaped untouched. "Lucky motherfuckers" he thought momentarily, before he immediately regretted the thought.

Alpha One had cleared the LZ, and just started its ascent from the valley, when at least two flashes caught Tischenko's attention. The flashes came from the left side of the valley, and his mind didn't have enough time process more of the scene, before his night vision flared bright green, temporarily blinding him. He held the controls steady, as every natural instinct programmed into his body fought against him. The Spetsnaz team had already commenced fast-roping to the ground, and he could not break his hover. Any sudden changes to the aircraft's stability could hurtle one or more commandos fifty feet to their death. He had to settle himself, and wait for the "all clear" from his crew chief, who was directing the fast rope operation. He pivoted the night vision goggles out of his face, and took in the scene. It gave him little hope of seeing his wife and daughter again.

Alpha One had activated its decoy flare system, which fired eight blinding magnesium flares into the air behind it, and temporarily neutralized his night vision equipment. By the time he had knocked the goggles clear, the flares had hit the deck, completely illuminating the entire valley, including his own helicopter. He couldn't see Alpha One beyond the burning flares, but a crunching explosion, followed by a billowing orange pillar of fire, didn't leave much to Tischenko's imagination. He needed to get out of here, before the insurgents could reload their rockets.

"Chief, how much longer," he yelled into the helmet microphone.

"Half of the team is out. We're doubling up on the ropes. Five more seconds," came the abrupt reply.

One of the cockpit window panels above his copilot's head shattered, and a bullet ricocheted through the cockpit. Several more bullets struck the reinforced glass, around them, which miraculously held. The miniguns belched sustained bursts of withering fire back at their targets, as Tischenko counted the seconds aloud. Seven seconds later, his crew chief screamed through the headset that they were "all clear."

He decided to skip the low level egress route chosen by Alpha One, and pushed the cyclic and collective together, favoring the collective. Alpha Two rushed forward, ascending rapidly. His IR missile sensors started to flash and a harsh tone blared in his headset, but he resisted the impulse to launch his own flares, knowing that they would likely rain down on Alpha Three. The missile threat never materialized, and Tischenko's helicopter rose above the valley, racing for an adjacent range of hills. He could see enough without the night vision goggles to keep them safe for now, until they were inevitably called back into the valley to pick up the Spetsnaz.

"You need to redesignate helicopters, Captain," said the copilot.

"Standby," he said, and opened a channel to the ground force commander and the other helicopter.

"Redesignate callsigns. Flight Hotel Victor Four Three Two is now Alpha One. Flight Hotel Victor Four Three Three is now Alpha Two, over," he said.

"This is Alpha Command. Out."

"This is Alpha Two, Out."

Tischenko enjoyed a few more seconds of peace, hovering in what he hoped was safe airspace.

"Alpha One, this Alpha Command...request close air support in vicinity of Assault Point. Alpha Strike units will designate targets for your gunners using IR pointers, over."

Shit, this was going to be the longest, or possibly the shortest night of his life, he thought. At least he wouldn't need his night vision goggles. The flares and burning wreckage had transformed the valley into an inferno.

"This is Alpha One, thirty seconds from commencing gun run. Mark targets in two-zero seconds," he said.

"This raid better be worth it," he muttered, as the orange glowing valley reappeared ahead of them.