

A close-up photograph of a man, identified as Captain Scott O'Grady, sitting in the cockpit of an F-16 fighter jet. He is wearing a dark flight suit and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The cockpit's instrument panel, featuring various gauges and controls, is visible behind him. The background shows a clear sky and a flat landscape, likely an airfield.

BASHER

FIVE-TWO

**THE TRUE STORY OF F-16 FIGHTER PILOT
CAPTAIN SCOTT O'GRADY**

CAPTAIN SCOTT O'GRADY WITH MICHAEL FRENCH

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**THE TRUE STORY OF
F-16 FIGHTER PILOT
CAPTAIN SCOTT O'GRADY**

**CAPTAIN SCOTT O'GRADY
WITH MICHAEL FRENCH**

A YEARLING BOOK

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*To all those who were part of my rescue,
and to the POWs
and MIAs, past and present, who gave me the
inspiration to survive*

U.S. MILITARY CODE OF CONDUCT

I I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

II I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

III If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

IV If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

V When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

VI I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

HIGH FLIGHT

by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and
swung

High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark, or even eagle flew.

And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

ONE

In the early afternoon of June 2, 1995, as I sat in my F-16, ready for takeoff from Aviano Air Base in northeastern Italy, I had no idea what fate had in store for me. I could never have imagined that in the next six days I would have my plane shot out from under me with a missile, run for my life as soldiers hunted me down, eat leaves and ants to survive, make friends with a couple of cows, and be rescued by the United States Marines. And that was only part of my ordeal. Afterward I would call it the adventure of a lifetime. Maybe that's an understatement. It was the adventure of two lifetimes.

That summer, as a United States Air Force captain, I was one of thirty-five American pilots assigned to the 555th Fighter Squadron, or the "Triple Nickel," of the Thirty-first Fighter Wing. Our uniforms boasted a Velcro patch of a fierce bald eagle, the insignia of the Triple Nickel, and another patch showing a winged dragon, to identify the Thirty-first Fighter Wing. We were stationed in Italy as part of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air team. To the east of Italy, across the Adriatic Sea, was Bosnia and Herzegovina, part of the Balkans and a country in the midst of a painful civil war.

Our NATO special mission—called Operation Deny Flight—was to try to help end that war.

The Triple Nickel took turns with other NATO pilots—Dutch, Italians, French, and British—in patrolling the skies over Bosnia. Our job was to keep all military aircraft of the fighting factions—the Serbs, the Muslims, and the Croatians—out of the skies so that they couldn't hurt each other with air strikes. We were not there to take sides, but if necessary, we were to use our weapons to enforce this “no-fly zone.” Neither the Serbs, the Muslims, nor the Croatians wanted us there. They would just as soon have shot *us* out of the air so that they could fight their own war. But NATO had decided we were needed, and all of us in the Triple Nickel took our duty seriously.

That morning of June 2, I showered, shaved, and laid out my olive green flight suit. My spirits couldn't have been better. Not only did I love flying an F-16, I had lucked out by being stationed in Italy with the Triple Nickel. In my six years in the U.S. Air Force, I had called nine different places home, but no location had been quite as beautiful as northeastern Italy. My apartment was in a quaint village called Montereale Val Cellina. Besides being close to the air base, I was thirty minutes from the beach in one direction and ten minutes from the Italian Alps in another. The locals were friendly, the cafés didn't serve a bad meal, and my landlords took me in as part of their family.

I slipped into my one-piece flight suit, zipping it from crotch to neck, and grabbed my logbook and wallet. Because my fridge was basically empty, I decided to skip breakfast. Climbing into my Toyota 4Runner, I left for the Aviano Air Base. I didn't *have* to fly today, but an opening in the flight schedule had come up the day before, and I had a good reason for grabbing it. Too busy with duties on the ground, I hadn't flown a mission in more than ten days. And I was due shortly to start my vacation, meeting my mom, Mary Lou Scardapane, and her husband, Joseph, to travel through Italy. It had been a long time since I'd been in the air, and an F-16 pilot never wants to get rusty.

I took my time driving to the air base. Over the years I'd become a careful driver, but my early experiences behind the wheel were no shining example for a driver's ed class. I spent my teenage years in Spokane, Washington, the oldest of three children. One thing my brother, Paul, and I had in common was a love of speed. Starting with my parents' Chevy Suburban, which I drove off an icy mountain road one afternoon and crashed into a tree, I had had a series of mostly minor car accidents in fourteen years of driving.

The worst had just happened this fall, on the same road to the Aviano base. While stationed in Germany, I had bought a BMW—it took all my money and was the first new car I'd ever owned. Of course, I'd brought it to Italy

when I was transferred to Aviano. While driving around a curve in the predawn darkness, blinded by the headlights of an oncoming car, I jerked my BMW off the road. I ended up in a ditch, upside down. Fortunately, the air bag inflated, saving me from head injuries, and my fastened seat belt kept me from flying out of the car.

Although the BMW was totaled, I crawled out with barely a scratch. I had this lifelong habit of inflicting serious damage on cars, but somehow I also had the luck to escape harm to myself and others. My family, particularly my father, liked to say I had nine lives, like a cat. After the BMW disaster, it was also understood that I had better change my ways—otherwise I might go through those nine lives too quickly. That was when I bought the 4Runner and began taking those curves more slowly.

Entering the main gate of the Aviano Air Base, I passed through several security checkpoints, parked at the squadron building, and signed in at the operations, or “ops,” desk to be briefed about the day’s flight. From Aviano, we usually flew our sorties—air missions—over Bosnia in pairs but sometimes flew in a formation of four. Today I would be flying the more standard “two-ship” formation, with Bob Wright as the lead pilot. I would be his wingman. I was qualified to fly lead and often did, but on any given sortie you can only play one role, and today’s assignment listed me as a wingman.

This would be my forty-seventh sortie over Bosnia. My call sign, or “handle,” for the day’s mission was Basher Five-Two. Bob, in the lead plane, would be Basher Five-One.

Bob’s nickname was Wilbur—after one of the famous Wright brothers, who flew the first airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Bob was a good friend. We had met three years earlier when we were both F-16 pilots at the Kunsan Air Base in South Korea. At thirty-three, Wilbur was still younger than a lot of F-16 pilots, but he was one of the most experienced and capable leaders I knew. Unlike the character Tom Cruise played in *Top Gun*, Wilbur, like every other F-16 pilot with whom I’d had the privilege of flying, was cool, calm, and collected. We were no reckless hotshots. The years of training to qualify to fly an F-16, and the \$20 million price tag of each plane, left all pilots with a feeling of enormous responsibility. When we were flying, it wasn’t like driving a car. Sure, there was the element of speed. If I maxed out, I could travel at more than twice the speed of sound. But the F-16 was so complex that it demanded an encyclopedia’s worth of knowledge, split-second reflexes, and absolute, total attention every moment you were airborne. There was always a low level of fear when you were flying, but having Wilbur alongside me took off some of that edge.

We dressed for our mission in a locker room of the

squadron building. First we removed the Velcro insignia patches of the winged dragon and bald eagle from our flight suits. If we were captured, we didn't want the enemy to know the names of our units. According to a famous international treaty called the Geneva Convention, which all nations are supposed to honor, in time of war you don't have to tell the enemy anything more than your name, date of birth, rank, and serial number. Article Five of the U.S. Military Code of Conduct contains the same rule. Both Article Five and the Geneva Convention are supposed to help prevent the abuse of anyone who is captured. Of course, we all knew that in the history of war, nations had often violated such rules, sometimes using torture to extract information.

For anyone serving in the military, particularly as a fighter pilot, the risk of being captured was always a reality, but it wasn't something my fellow pilots and I dwelled on. In the several years that NATO had been flying sorties over Bosnia, only one pilot, a British captain in a Harrier jump jet, had been shot down. He had parachuted safely into Muslim territory, been captured without a struggle, and been returned by the Muslims to NATO forces the next day. I didn't think there was too much to worry about. On the other hand, I knew from our intelligence, or "intel," officer that things had been heating up. Intel officers had special information about

the enemy that could help a pilot in the sky. We had been told that NATO planes had recently destroyed one of the Bosnian Serbs' weapons piles. In revenge, the Serbs had rounded up 350 unarmed NATO military observers throughout the country and made them hostages. The Serbs had physically tied the captured men to their other weapons depots, daring NATO planes to attack again.

In Bosnia, you could never be sure what would happen next. But you knew all the three factions in the civil war could be ruthless.

After removing my insignia patches, I squirmed into my G suit. This was a special tight-fitting brace or giridle that I wore over my flight suit. It wrapped around my stomach and my legs. The purpose of the G suit was to help me resist the forces of gravity—what pilots call G forces. On earth, normal gravity is one G. On a roller coaster, on a steep plunge, it's possible to feel three Gs. In an F-16, the rapid acceleration and sharp turns a pilot go through can mean pressure up to nine Gs. If someone weighs 100 pounds normally, with the pressure of 9 Gs it's as if he weighed 900 pounds. That much pressure naturally causes blood to flow from the head into the rest of the body. When that happens, a pilot can easily black out and have a fatal accident. The tight fit of the G suit, however, makes it harder for the blood to leave your head and flow into your stomach and legs. In addition, as a

pilot you are taught to strain or contract your leg and stomach muscles when going into steep turns—extra insurance against blacking out.

I dropped my Swiss Army knife into a chest pocket and put on my survival vest, which included a two-way radio. I holstered my 9-mm semiautomatic Beretta pistol under my armpit and tucked my Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) receiver into another pocket. Into my G suit's right shin pocket I shoved an evasion map and a "blood chit." This was a note from the U.S. government, printed in eleven languages, including Serbian and Serbo-Croatian, that promised to pay money to anyone who hid me from the enemy.

I buckled my parachute harness over my vest and placed my helmet in a cloth helmet bag, along with a card that listed my mission number, takeoff time, radio call signals, and Alpha frequency for both receiving and sending radio transmissions. I would carry all that onto the plane. I also made sure I had my flashlight and earplugs and checked my life-support gear.

Just before we had entered the locker room, Wilbur had asked me to verify our search-and-rescue (SAR) plan, in case, he said, one of us had to eject. Because the likelihood of an air accident seemed so small, not all pilots bothered to review their SAR plan in detail before every sortie. It was something you ran through in three minutes. Wilbur, however, was a perfectionist. He in-

sisted that each of us recite the full procedure in detail, starting with the moment we had to parachute to the ground and hide from the enemy. We also reviewed the two radio frequencies for communicating. One was called Guard, the international distress channel, on which the whole world could hear you, including the enemy. The other was Alpha, one of the two SAR channels on our handheld radios, the frequency of which we changed often to give us more privacy than we had on the Guard channel. Wilbur and I agreed on a secret code if we had to radio in our GPS coordinates over Alpha, so that the good guys could find us but not the enemy. Taking the extra time to run through every detail satisfied Wilbur and left the plan fresh in our minds.

Though I had no idea of it at the time, something else happened that morning that may have helped prepare me for the ordeal ahead. An article entitled "The Will to Survive" was posted in the men's room, which was near the ops desk. For some reason, I had never read it. This morning, however, I had a few extra minutes, and I found my eyes skimming the article. It told the stories of two similar survival crises with very different outcomes. One story was about a man traveling in the Arizona desert who, injured in an accident, got lost and went for eight days without water. By the time rescuers found him, he was so dehydrated that everyone concluded he should have been dead. But his will to survive was so incredibly

strong, he probably could have gone even longer without water.

The other story was about a civilian pilot in Alaska whose single-engine plane went down on a frozen lake bed. The man radioed for help but wasn't sure whether anyone heard his transmission. He wasn't far from shore, and from his footprints it appeared to rescuers that he had walked toward the shore but had never bothered to build a shelter or start a fire. Instead, he returned to the plane, picked up the gun that was in his survival kit, and killed himself. Rescue helicopters came twenty-four hours later, having heard his radio transmission. Because he had assumed the worst, because he had given up on himself, the man had thrown away his chance to survive.

For the briefest of seconds I wondered how strong my will was. But the question dissolved into more immediate concerns. The planes were ready, and it was time for our sorties.

One of the last things Wilbur and I did was chow down on a pizza, which we shared with some enlisted men. Having skipped breakfast, I was hungry and could have eaten a lot more.

Moving toward the van that would take us to our F-16s, I discovered I'd left my flight jacket back in my locker. I'd never been that forgetful before a mission, but rushing back and wrestling off my vest and other gear so that I could put on my jacket seemed unnecessary. Cli-

mate control in the F-16 was perfect. You could turn the heat up or down with a dial. I decided I could live without my jacket for one flight.

The van driver dropped off Wilbur and me by our planes. We made separate visual inspections of our aircraft before climbing into the cockpit. The 47-foot-long, 30,000-pound (fully loaded with fuel), single-seat, single-jet-engine F-16 was a marvel of engineering. It had been designed and built by General Dynamics back in 1978 and had gone through several updates over the years. The F-16 was small and compact compared with other fighter jets, but it was very popular with air forces around the world. More than half of our own air force's fighter planes were F-16s. Its weapons and defense systems made it superior to the Soviet MiG, one of its famous competitors for speed and power, and its long-term safety record spoke for its keen performance.

In my years of training before the Air Force, I had piloted almost a dozen types of civilian aircraft. I was rated to fly all of them, but none was more exciting or challenging than the F-16. Besides its smooth ride, it was smarter than Einstein. The F-16's brain center was an advanced computer inside the aircraft. A separate targeting pod could be added to the underbelly of the plane that would "talk" to the computer inside. This pod relayed information through my cockpit instruments that helped me find and lock on hostile targets that were miles

away. The targeting pod also could send out a laser beam to mark ground targets, which would help me guide my bombs more accurately. In addition, the F-16 carried an electronic countermeasures pod, which could block or jam enemy radar.

Under its smooth, gunmetal gray skin, the F-16 was designed to hold as many weapons, and as much fuel, as possible without hurting the plane's speed and ability to maneuver in the air. Under each wing was an air-to-air missile along with a 500-pound laser-guided bomb; each wingtip held another air-to-air missile. In the fuselage was a 20-mm Gatling gun, for use if an enemy plane came within close range or if I had to fly low to fire at a land target. Since our missions over Bosnia were more defensive than offensive, and because we wanted to be as light and as fuel efficient as possible, we didn't carry the four additional 500-pound bombs an F-16 normally held. They were hardly necessary. While I wasn't looking forward to combat, I knew I was ready for any hostile situation.

One unique feature of the F-16 was the one-piece bubble canopy that sat over the entire cockpit. Its sleek shape acted as a perfect windscreen, and it allowed a pilot clear views in almost all directions. For strength and resilience the canopy was made of a high-tech material called polycarbonate. If an unfortunate bird was to find itself on collision course with the canopy—a common problem in

the sky—the polycarbonate wouldn't shatter dangerously the way the old cast-acrylic canopies had. Instead, it would absorb the impact of the bird by bending inward, then magically reshape itself. It may sound silly, but to make sure the polycarbonate canopies were "bird safe," the aircraft manufacturer tested them by shooting four-pound frozen chickens out of a high-speed cannon, hitting the canopies at over 300 miles per hour! While safe from a shattering canopy, a pilot in the air still faced the danger of the momentary dent left by the flying bird. If a plane was moving at 500 miles or more, a good-sized turkey vulture could actually hit the canopy hard enough to knock out a pilot. That's why it was necessary to maintain some distance—the size of your fist, at least—between your head and the bottom of the canopy.

The cockpit of the F-16 was not exactly designed with extra luxury room. As I climbed in and straddled my legs around the center instrument console, I placed my feet on the rudder pedals and strapped myself in. The snug cockpit fits like a glove. It also makes you feel as if you're part of the sky. Unlike the cockpits in other fighters, the F-16's cockpit projects out and over the front of the plane, so most of the fuselage is below and behind you. With the gorgeous views from the one-piece canopy, sometimes you're tempted to forget you're even in a plane.

I plugged my air hose into my G suit. When I started

making sharp turns in the sky and the G forces kicked in, the air hose would automatically turn on and fill the various pockets or bladders of my G suit—two on each leg and one at my stomach. Filled with air, the G suit was another way to help keep blood from flowing from my head into the rest of my body. After inserting the air hose, I hooked my shoulder harness clips to my parachute risers. Clipped to my hips was a canvas package that contained a survival rucksack, a deflated life raft, and a small “hit and run” secondary survival kit. This package was part of the seat pan on which I sat. If I ever had to eject from the plane and use my parachute, the seat pan, along with my entire seat, would fall away, but the canvas package would stay clipped to my hips. It contained the gear that, if the parachute landed me safely, I would need to survive.

After fastening my lap belt, I put on my helmet and oxygen mask. With a thumbs-up signal to the ground crew chief to pull away my cockpit ladder, I made a final review of my lineup card, which detailed my flight mission information.

“Fore and aft clear . . . fire guard posted . . . chocks in place?” I asked over the intercom to the crew chief. Chocks were blocks that were placed in front of the wheels so that the plane wouldn’t roll.

“Roger,” he answered. “All ready for run-up.”

I turned on two switches, one for electrical power and

the other to start a small engine that would, in a few moments, turn over the main jet engine. My left hand moved the throttle from Off to Idle. With a whine building to a roar, the main engine, a GE-100, came to life. After more ground checks, one by one I activated all of the plane's systems.

Once I was in the air, the instruments on my center console would indicate airspeed, altitude, attitude (the plane's reference to the horizon), and bearing. Just over my left knee, a radar screen would show me if there were any no-fly-zone intruders. Above that screen sat my threat warning system, which would let me know if my plane had been tagged by hostile radar. If that happened, I knew there was a real possibility of a missile attack. A rectangular keyboard pad was perched above the instrument console, along with buttons for my two radios. There was also a head-up display (HUD), a clear glass panel directly in front of me, that gave additional information to help with navigation and weapons targeting.

After exchanging more hand signals with the ground crew chief, I was directed to move my plane forward. I fell in line behind Wilbur. There was a last-minute stop to allow for a final systems and weapons check by the ground crew. Finally, we were cleared for takeoff and I taxied onto the runway.

No matter how many flights I'd made—and I'd flown more than 800 hours in an F-16—each takeoff was an act

of magic that never grew old. Maybe it goes back to my fascination with speed, or just a deep appreciation of the F-16. As I moved my plane to one side of Wilbur's so that his jet exhaust wouldn't blow on me, Wilbur received takeoff clearance for both of us from air traffic control. Then Wilbur gave me a signal to turn up my engine to ninety percent of full power. After I scanned my instruments for any last-second warning lights, I watched Wilbur roll down the runway at full thrust. Within seconds, an orange flame shot out the back of his plane, indicating that his afterburner had kicked in. The power of a takeoff is so incredible that, even if you're a good distance behind and to one side of the departing jet, your plane shakes like a leaf. By the time I had blinked and straightened in my seat, Wilbur had become a small red dot against a deep cobalt blue sky.

I waited twenty seconds after Wilbur started his takeoff roll—this was a necessary time span so that we wouldn't collide in the clouds—before I took my feet off the brakes and pushed my throttle forward. Gliding smoothly down the runway with a sure, steady motion, I pushed further on the throttle until I was at full afterburner. This injected fuel into the engine's hot exhaust stream and created thrust, the power for a quick takeoff. I felt as if I were being shot into space with a slingshot.

Liftoff speed was 200 miles an hour, which I had reached in a matter of seconds. I made a lightning-speed

check of my instruments to be certain there were no systems failures or need for an emergency landing. In the next second, before the plane reached 330 miles an hour, I pulled up my landing gear. That speed is critical. The landing gear is fragile, and if a pilot waits too long to pull it up, high air speeds can do serious damage when the gear is in motion. Everything in the F-16 happens in what seems like microseconds. Reflexes mean a lot.

I looked at my watch, an old but expensive Rolex that had been a gift from my dad several years before. It was 1:15 P.M., Aviano time, and I was feeling on top of the world.

TWO

I broke through scattered cloud cover at 12,000 feet and stared into a magnificently clear sky. I had already locked on to Wilbur with my radar, and now fixed my airspeed so that I would stay two miles behind him. At our current speed, we could cover two miles in all of twenty seconds.

"Two is visual," I radioed to Wilbur on our interflight frequency. This meant that I had him in my sights.

"Clear to rejoin," he replied. We were now over the Adriatic Sea and would be in Bosnian airspace in about fifteen minutes. I closed the gap between us until we were in fingertip formation. We flew side by side, separated only by a few feet, and held our positions. This allowed Wilbur and me to make a visual inspection of each other's aircraft, to make sure that there were no fluid leaks and that all external systems were working. We also tested our chaff and flares, both part of the F-16's defense system. Chaff was a substance like tinfoil that was discharged from the plane to give enemy radar a false image to read. Flares were discharged to try to attract incoming heat-seeking missiles away from our planes.

Everything looked perfect. Inspection over, we moved

into a formation known as tactical line abreast. As the wingman, I flew a mile and a half from Wilbur and about 2,000 feet above him. Wilbur's role was to lead our mission and to be the eyes and ears of our two-ship element. My responsibility was to maintain the basic flight formation and to support Wilbur in his decisions during the mission. We were now at 27,000 feet and cruising at 500 miles an hour, an altitude and speed similar to those of a commercial jetliner. The only difference was, we were flying over unfriendly territory.

Our flight pattern carried us over the lush, green boundary separating Croatia and Bosnia, just south of a city named Bihać. We were running into a fair amount of clouds, and the air was choppy, but we decided to establish our combat air patrol, or "cap." We patrolled the skies by flying an oval pattern, similar to the shape of a race-track, with each leg covering about twenty-five miles. Each oval took about eight minutes to complete, including making the two 180-degree counterclockwise turns. Flying the same pattern over and over might sound boring, but you never knew who would try to enter the no-fly zone. This was called our "vul" time, when we were vulnerable over hostile territory. A few minutes after we started our vul time, our radars showed a low-flying aircraft to the west, near the Udbina airfield. This was the stronghold of the Krajanian Serbs, and they were an aggressive bunch. Sixteen months earlier, despite NATO

planes protecting the no-fly zone, the Krajanian Serbs had boldly launched an air attack against Muslim sites in Bosnia. To show that we meant business, NATO pilots had had to shoot down four Serbian jets.

The lone plane stayed clear of the no-fly zone, avoiding any hostile action by me.

After about an hour of combat air patrol, we began to run low on fuel. The F-16 uses an enormous amount of fuel—a mixture of kerosene and gasoline, about 10,000 pounds for every hour and a half of flying. That's the same as a car getting two or three miles to the gallon. Following Wilbur's lead, I headed back over the Adriatic to meet our specially equipped Boeing 707 plane. This was our airborne gas station. While I "parked" on the tanker's wing, Wilbur took a position directly under the fuselage of the 707. As we all flew at the same speed, Wilbur flipped a toggle switch to open his fuel door, which sat right behind his cockpit. At the same time, the operator of the 707 extended a boom and probe—like a gas hose—into Wilbur's open fuel tank. Then it was just like any other gas station. The pump was turned on, and you waited until your gauge showed Full.

After Wilbur's turn it was mine, and I passed the seven-minute refueling time talking to the tanker crew on my intercom. I discovered one of the crew was a former "Juvat," a pilot with the Eightieth Fighter Squadron in Korea, with whom I had served a tour of duty. We Juvats,

past and present, were a tight bunch. We even had a squadron coin that summed up our close bonds. The coin read: "You will always be a Juvat no matter where you go."

"*Audentes fortuna juvat*," I called out to my fellow Juvat as I left the tanker. The Latin words were our squadron's motto: "Fortune favors the bold."

For our second vul time, Wilbur led me slightly north of our last location, in search of better weather. Finding a relatively clear patch of sky, we settled into our routine. Instead of running our ovals northwest and southeast as we had last time, we rotated to due west and east. I was 1,000 feet above Wilbur and continually moved my eyes between the sky and the dials and digital instruments in front of me. While we had no reason to worry about anything specific, we knew to stay far away from the Bosnian Serbs' SAM rings to the north and to the east. SAMs—surface-to-air missiles—were a definite threat to an F-16, even with our high-tech defense systems.

What Wilbur and I had no way of knowing was that a Bosnian Serb unit had secretly trucked a SAM battery into an area underneath where we were patrolling. And their missiles were already lined up, ready to fire at us.

The first sign of trouble came when Wilbur's threat warning system showed a blip on his screen. He had been "spiked," spotted by radar on the ground. By itself, this was no major concern. In Bosnia, radar was extremely common as a general tracking device, much like traffic

control centers at major airports. A blip on a screen wasn't necessarily connected with missiles. But the F-16's electronics could pick out different types of radar. Wilbur had been spiked by "acquisition," or threat, radar—the kind that SAM operators liked to use. With threat radar, the enemy can learn enough about a plane's location, speed, and flight pattern to launch a missile in seconds.

"Basher Five-One, mud six, bearing zero-nine-zero," Wilbur radioed to me on our open frequency. He wanted me to know there was possibly threat radar to the east.

"Basher Five-Two naked," I shot back. That told him my threat warning system hadn't picked up anything.

On the same open radio frequency, I listened for Magic, NATO's nearby airborne command center. Equipped with special intel electronics, the airborne center served to help pilots as an early warning system. In touch with spy satellites and U-2 spy planes, Magic could tell Wilbur and me if there was active radar from the SAM rings to the north and to the east as well as in any other location. If the radar was coming from the north and the east, we didn't have to worry because we were out of their missiles' range. The blip on Wilbur's threat warning system would have been a false alarm.

It took Magic only seconds to get back to us. "Basher Five One," a calm voice called over our radios, "your mud six report is uncorrelated."

While flying his F-16 on a mission to keep the peace in Bosnia, U.S. Air Force pilot Scott O'Grady was shot down. The plane exploded, and Captain O'Grady parachuted five miles to the ground. In exciting detail, Captain O'Grady tells how he evaded capture, and how, with little water and no food, he survived on his own in enemy territory. This is a thrilling look at an American hero—a hero not because he lived to tell the tale, but because of the skill, faith, and courage he displayed while fulfilling his duty as a member of the armed forces.

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