

The Longest SAR

by Adam D. Hunt

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Notice

This is a work of fiction. While the Canadian Forces units involved, the aircraft and some of the locations actually existed much as described in the period in which the book is set, the characters, dialog and events described are entirely my own invention. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, real conversations or events is purely a coincidence.

Software

This book was written on the OpenOffice.org Writer free, open source word processor, running on the [Ubuntu](http://www.ubuntu.com) Linux operating system. You can download the entire Open Office.org suite for free at www.openoffice.org

Dedication

To my mother, Audrey R.B. Hubber, who made this project possible and to my wife, partner and companion Ruth, for her unfailing support, encouragement and editing skills.

Cover Illustration

442 Squadron CC-115 Buffalo, serial number 115462. Photo by the author.

Other Books by Adam Hunt

- COPA Guide to Amateur-Builts
- COPA Guide to Buying an Aircraft
- COPA Guide to Certified Aircraft
- COPA Guide to Getting Back Into Flying
- COPA Guide to Public Airports
- COPA Guide to the Limited Class
- COPA Guide to the Owner-Maintenance Aircraft Category
- COPA Guide to Ultralights
- M.E.E.T. - Manager Employee Effectiveness Training cowritten with Ruth Merkis-Hunt

Introduction

This is the novel that I wanted to write for 27 years.

That is a long time to carry around an outline in your head without actually writing the book!

The idea for this book came to me while on a search in Bella Coola, BC in 1983. It has been itching to be written ever since. What has prevented it has been not a lack of inspiration, but that usual and mundane nemesis of all writers, lack of time. The usual consumers of time: a career as a military helicopter pilot, several subsequent flying and non-flying jobs, families, marriages and one divorce have all eaten up the time that could have been spent writing this book. Instead I have had to settle for writing a number of much shorter articles and a collection of non-fiction books. I must confess that those were all quicker to write than a long novel and, as many were demanded as part of paid employment, they got done first.

By January 1st, 2008 all those preventers of novels were mostly gone from my life and at last I had the time and most important of all, a supportive partner, to start this book.

In writing this book I have tried to make it as close as possible to the military SAR procedures in use at the time and as true to the time and places in which it is set. When I first conceived of the book the setting was “now”, but the mid-1980s are now distant history and much has changed in the world since.

Any mistakes and inaccuracies are entirely my own.

Adam Hunt
Ottawa, Ontario
March 2010

Glossary

This type of story necessarily requires the use of terms that are in common use in military and aviation but may be unfamiliar to the casual reader. Some of these terms can be explained in the context of the story, but in many cases it would break up the dialog to do so. To fill in the gaps here is a glossary of terms used in this book.

10 TAG – 10 Tactical Air Group – that part of the air force that the tactical helicopters belong to.

ADF - Automatic Direction Finding – a cockpit navigation aid that points towards NDBs (qv).

Adm Clerk – Administration Clerk.

AME – a civilian Aircraft Maintenance Engineer, someone who repairs and maintains aircraft.

AirCom HQ – Air Command Headquarters, the air force's headquarters at CFB Winnipeg.

AStar – The Aérospatiale AS350 Astar six seat helicopter

ATGHQ – Air Transport Group Headquarters, CFB Trenton, Ontario.

Avgas – Aviation gasoline.

Base Ops – Base Operations, the operational command post for flight operations on a flying base.

Buff – see *CC-115 Buffalo*.

CASB - Canadian Aviation Safety Board, the federal government's civil aircraft accident investigation body. It was replaced in 1990 by the Transportation Safety Board.

CC-115 Buffalo – CF designation for the de Havilland Canada DHC-5 Buffalo twin engine STOL transport airplane.

CC-119 “Flying Boxcar” - The CF designation for the Fairchild C-119 Packet, twin engine and twin tail boom flying freighter. The RCAF operated this type from 1952 to 1965, when it was replaced by the CC-130 Hercules.

CC-130 Hercules – The CF designation for the Lockheed C-130 Hercules, four engine tactical transport aircraft.

CC-138 Twin Otter – The CF designation for the de Havilland DHC-6 twin-engine STOL transport airplane.

Cessna 172 Skyhawk– single engine, 150 horsepower, four seat, high wing light civil aircraft. A very common private aircraft and favoured for

searched due to its good downward visibility.

Cessna 182 Skylane– single engine, 230 horsepower, four seat, high wing light civil aircraft. Common private aircraft and favoured for searches due to its good downward visibility.

Cessna 185 Skywagon - single engine 300 horsepower, six seat, high wing light civil aircraft, often seen on floats or amphibious floats.

Cessna 206 Stationair- single engine, 300 horsepower, six seat, high wing light civil aircraft, favoured for searched due to its good downward visibility.

Cessna 310 – a six seat, twin engined light aircraft manufactured by Cessna Aircraft of Wichita Kansas between 1954 and 1980. Favoured by commercial charter companies.

CF – Canadian Forces, Canada's navy, army and air forces.

CFB – Canadian Forces Base.

CFS – Canadian Forces Station.

CF-101 Voodoo – CF designation for the McDonnell F-101B Voodoo, two seat supersonic fighter, used by all-weather fighter squadrons from 1961 to June 1984.

CH-113 Labrador – CF designation for the the Boeing Vertol Model 107 tandem rotor rescue helicopter used by the Transport and Rescue squadrons. Served in the CF between 1962 and 2004.

CH-135 Twin Huey – CF designation for the Bell Model 212 twin-engined version of the Huey helicopter. Served in Tactical Helicopter, Base Rescue and utility squadrons between 1971 and 1998.

CH-136 Kiowa – CF designation for the military version of the Bell 206 Jet Ranger, used in the observation role with Tactical Helicopter squadrons between 1971 and 1996.

CMCC - Canadian Mission Control Centre, the office at CFB Trenton, Ontario that monitors SARSAT ELT signals for Canada.

CO – Commanding Officer.

Det Commander – Detachment Commander.

DF-88 – Direction Finding radio installed in many different types of aircraft – able to home an ELT signal.

DFS – Directorate of Flight Safety, a part of National Defence Headquarters responsible for aviation safety programs and accident investigations.

DME – Distance Measuring Equipment, reports aircraft distance from the transmitter in slant-range nautical miles. 50 DME is 50 nautical miles, 58

statute miles or 93 kilometres.

DND – Department of National Defence.

DND OI - Department of National Defence Office of Information – the military regional public affairs staff.

EGT – Exhaust Gas Temperature – in the summer the power limiting factor on the Kiowa helicopter.

ELT – Emergency Locator Transmitter, a small radio required to be carried in most aircraft, that emits an intermittent tone that can be homed usually on 121.5 MHz and 243.0 MHz.

Embraer EMB 110 Bandeirante – Twin turboprop 15-21 seat passenger aircraft, built in Brazil

FBO – Fixed Base Operator, a civil aviation fuelling facility, usually including a lounge and terminal facilities

Fin Clerk – Finance Clerk

HF – High Frequency radio, static-prone but the best way to communicate over longer distances. Used for air-to-ground communications.

ICBC – Insurance Corporation of British Columbia, socialized car insurance, sold through private brokers in the province.

IFR – Instrument Flight Rules, flight by instruments, including flying in clouds.

ILS – Instrument Landing System, a 1940s vintage electronic guidance system that provides lateral localizer and vertical glideslope information to allow an aircraft to land in poor weather conditions.

JAG – Judge Advocate General, the military legal department.

Lab – see *CH-113 Labrador*.

Lima-Lima – military radio terminology for land-line, meaning a regular wired telephone.

Medevac – Medical Evacuation flight.

Met Tech – Meteorological Technician, military trade that specializes in weather observing and briefing.

MOTV - Modified Offset and Track Variable, a scientific method of calculating the optimal area to search during a SAR, developed in the 1970s. This was replaced by a new method based on updated research in 1991, the Canadian Search Area Definition (CSAD).

NCO – Non-commissioned officer. In the CF, the ranks from Master Corporal to Chief Warrant Officer.

NDHQ – National Defence Headquarters, located in Ottawa

NDB – Non-Directional Beacon, a radio transmitter that broadcasts for

aviation navigational use. See also “ADF”

NOCL – Notice of Crash Location, a radio message in code, sent by a search aircraft to Search HQ, giving details of a crash site found.

NOK – Next-of-kin – the nearest relatives of the missing aircraft crew and passengers.

NOTAM – Notice To Airmen, Transport Canada bulletins to pilots warning them of hazards, runway closures and similar items.

OJT – On the Job Training, usually applied to Officer Cadets parked in menial jobs answering telephone calls and doing photocopying, while awaiting the start of their flight training.

PAR – Precision Approach Radar, a system of ground-controlled radar talk-down military aircraft used in low weather.

Pelican – The Sikorsky HH-3F Pelican, used by the US Coast Guard from 1961 until the late 1990s as their main SAR helicopter.

PEP – Provincial Emergency Program, the BC provincial program that assists in searches, as well as providing disaster relief, etc. The volunteer searchers of PEP were later made part of a DND-backed national SAR volunteer program called the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA).

PER – Personnel Evaluation Reports, the annual work performance evaluations written by CF member's supervisors on which promotions and postings are all based.

PMQ – Permanent Married Quarters, military housing rented to married CF members.

POW – Prisoner of War

QETE – the Quality Engineering Test Establishment, the CF's engineering lab in Ottawa.

Rad Op – Radio Operator

RCC – Rescue Coordination Centre, a command post where minor searches are coordinated 24 hours a day. Larger searches are turned over to a squadron searchmaster detached to RCC, once they are under way.

SAR – Search and Rescue.

SARSAT – Search and Rescue Satellite, properly called “COSPAS-SARSAT”. This system of low-earth orbiting satellites was deployed in 1979 by Canada, France, the USA and the Soviet Union to aid in locating ELT signals and speeding rescue.

SAR tech – Search and Rescue Technician, highly specialized and trained parachutist/scuba diver/mountaineer/paramedic who performs the actual

first aid and rescue extraction work at crash sites. Most are ex-army combat arms soldiers and they view themselves as an elite force. SAR techs wear orange flight suits to aid in spotting them on the ground.

Search Object – official term for a missing aircraft.

Sky Genie - a rappelling device that allows a person who is attached to it by a harness to make a rapid, but controlled descent.

Snake Ops – 442 Squadron operations, named for the squadron emblem of “Haietlik”, the Nootka Lightning Snake.

SOB – Souls On Board, the number of people on an incident aircraft.

SOPSO – Squadron Operations Officer, principal staff officer responsible for the day-to-day operations of the squadron.

STOL – Short Take-Off and Landing, usually referring to an airplane that can operate from a 1500 foot runway over 50 foot obstacles.

T-33 Silver Star – CF designation for the Lockheed T-33A Shooting Star two seat jet trainer. It served with many different schools and units between 1954 and 2001. Universally called the “T-Bird”.

TACAN – TACTical Air Navigation system, a 1950s vintage means of aircraft instrument navigation consisting of bearing transmitted from a ground station and distance calculated from a round trip signal.

Tac Hel – Tactical Helicopters, army aviation flown by air force crews. Not a popular posting for most air force pilots.

TCU – Towering cumulus cloud.

TD – Temporary Duty, an assignment or trip for a short period of time with accommodation and food paid for by the CF.

UNSAR – Unnecessary SAR, a false alarm launch of a SAR aircraft, usually due to an accidental ELT activation.

U/S – Unserviceable, in other words: broken.

VFR – Visual Flight Rules, flight with visual reference to the ground.

VHF – Very High Frequency radio, clear but shorter range communications used for air-to-air and air to ground, including Air Traffic Control.

VU-33 – a former Canadian Navy squadron that flew T-33 jet trainers and CP-121 Tracker patrol aircraft from CFB Comox.

Prologue

1984 was an interesting year in many different ways.

It is probably still most remembered as the setting in which George Orwell put his gloomy totalitarian society. His choice of the year 1984 was entirely arbitrary and simply chosen by reversing the last two numbers in the year when the book was written, 1948. He did not intend it as a prophesy of a specific year of doom.

With the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the USA in 1980, the Cold War had taken on new vigour, with Reagan calling the Soviet Union “the evil empire” in June 1982. Tensions were running high on both sides while the Soviets were fighting a losing war against the Mujahadeen insurgents in Afghanistan. The Cold War would come to an end only in 1989 as the Soviet Union began to collapse.

In Canada, 1984 is remembered for many things.

It was the year that Canada had three Prime Ministers. On February 29th Pierre Trudeau took his “long walk in the snow” and decided to retire from politics. John Turner succeeded him as leader of the Liberals only to be soundly defeated by Brian Mulroney and the Progressive Conservatives in the federal election held on September 4th. Mulroney promised to expand the Canadian Forces from 78,000 personnel to 85,000 and get rid of the disliked “rifle green” army uniforms which the air force and navy, as well as the army, had worn since unification in 1968. It was a popular promise amongst members of the CF, although, the cost of the new uniforms would cause the cancellation of new combat equipment purchases and upgrades.

January 24th saw the introduction of the first Apple MacIntosh 128K personal computer, at a price in US dollars of \$2495.

On May 8th, a Canadian Forces Supply Technician from CFS Carp, near Ottawa, Corporal Denis Lortie, entered the Quebec's provincial legislature, the National Assembly, and fired a total of 70 rounds of 9 mm ammunition from two stolen military Sterling submachine guns. Lortie killed three people and wounded 13 more before he was persuaded to surrender by the Sergeant-at-Arms, René Jalbert. Lortie had intended to kill separatist Premier René Levesque, but arrived too early in the day for the meeting Levesque was scheduled to attend. For his actions René Jalbert was awarded the Cross of Valour. For his actions Denis Lortie served 10 years in prison. The CF leadership, particularly in the Logistics Branch that Lortie belonged to, was appalled at these events and especially at Lortie's poor marksmanship and as a result ordered more submachine gun

practice for Supply Technicians.

On May 19th the Edmonton Oilers beat the New York Islanders 5-2 at home to win the Stanley Cup for the first of what would be five times, establishing a Canadian hockey dynasty.

On August 31st, Much Music first went on the air as Canada's first home-grown music video channel.

Between September 9-20th Pope John Paul II toured Canada. This event required major participation by the CF for security purposes, especially after the bombing of the Montreal's Central Railway Station on September 3. The bomber was a 65 year old, psychotic, retired American Army Officer, Thomas Bernard Brigham. Believing he was Jesus, he had left a dynamite-gunpowder-gasoline pipe bomb in a railway station locker, as a protest against the Pope's visit. The blast killed three people and injured over 30 others. Brigham was arrested, tried, convicted and died of a heart attack in the Pinel Institute for the Criminally Insane in 1993.

Singer/songwriter Avril Lavigne was born on September 27th, 1984.

On October 5th Marc Garneau became Canada's first astronaut. A member of the CF, Commander Garneau had been a naval systems engineer on HMCS Algonquin.

Colin Thatcher, a Saskatchewan Conservative provincial politician and the former Minister of Energy and Mines in the government of Grant Devine, was convicted of murdering his ex-wife on November 6th.

On November 18th the Winnipeg Blue Bombers defeated the Hamilton Tiger-Cats for the Grey Cup in a game played at Edmonton's open-air Commonwealth Stadium. It snowed all afternoon that day and the temperature only reached -9C, with wind chills near -15C.

In 1984 there were very few cell phones in commercial use, no PDAs and the internet, as a public institution, was still seven years away.

People who needed to be contacted in a hurry, such as doctors, carried pagers which beeped when their number was telephoned. They had no voice or data capability. If your pager beeped you had to find a phone and call in to find out why you were needed.

1984 was also the year the longest search and rescue operation in the history of Canadian SAR first started, although it would last well beyond the end of that year.

Part One



Map 1 - British Columbia

Sunday 23 September 1984

1014 hours

After Saturday's solid rain, Sunday morning on the east coast of Vancouver Island was bright and promised to be warm later. As the sun slowly warmed the ground, the puddles evaporated, creating small patches of fog that the sunlight shone right through.

Captain Steve McBain was in the middle of his drive on the tee of the 13th hole of the Glacier Greens Golf Course at CFB Comox when his pager bleated. He topped the ball and it rolled only 30 yards down the 414 yard fairway. The grass was still wet from the previous day's rain and the ball kicked up a small rooster tail of water as it slowed to a stop.

"Damn," he muttered and pulled the pager from his belt. The pagers the air force leased would go off if the batteries ran low, often giving a false alarm. He reset it and it tested okay. *It must be a real page*, he thought. That would figure, as he was holding stand-by as the searchmaster-on-call for 442 Transport & Rescue Squadron.

It was a beautiful Sunday morning for golf and Steve was practicing being retired. His numbers were up at the end of the year and he was planning on getting out of the CF.

"Once you complete 35 years there is no point in working any more," he had pointed out to the younger pilots on 442 Squadron on several occasions. "At 2% per year, your pension maxs out at 70% and you are working for free after that." Steve had joined right out of high school at age 18, he was enthusiastically looking forward to trading air force life for more time on the golf course at 53.

Steve was not totally surprised that the pager had gone off. Lying in bed at home in his PMQ he had heard the tell-tale hum of a CC-115 Buffalo transport airplane's props pulling it into the air at first light. He had checked the scheduling board in squadron ops on Friday afternoon before heading to the mess and he knew that there were no training trips programmed that Sunday morning, so it must have been the 442 Squadron stand-by bird launching. Ninety percent of these launches were "UNSARs", unnecessary launches, false alarms, pilots who forgot to close a flight plan or aircraft Emergency Locator Transmitters that went off in the hangar during removal and had been dropped. If it turned out to be a real SAR he had just hoped that he could get in his regularly-scheduled round of golf with his usual foursome before he got called.

Steve picked up his golf bag, stowed his number one wood and went to retrieve his ball. Fortunately it hadn't gone far.

“Don't be afraid to finish the round without me,” he said over his shoulder to the other three captains that he played golf with. This was becoming a standing joke amongst them. Only once in the last month had they finished eighteen holes together and that was last Sunday. The Sunday before that Butch Taylor was paged off the golf course by Base Operations, where he now worked. Butch had, until recently, been a CF-101 Voodoo interceptor pilot with 409 All Weather (Fighter) Squadron, but the unit had been disbanded in June to re-equip with the new CF-18 Hornet fighter. Not all the pilots would go on to fly the Hornet and some, like Butch, stayed in Comox but moved to ground jobs in sections like Base Ops.

The weekend before that it had been Scott Forbes who had been sent by his unit, VU-33, on an early morning parts run by T-33 and had missed their tee-off time. The weekend before that Steve had been on rescue stand-by and had launched on that Sunday morning with his CH-113 Labrador helicopter and crew of four, to go and search for an ELT. The weather had been pretty marginal and the aircraft was located, not crashed in the bush, but in a locked hangar in Powell River across the Straits of Georgia, on the mainland.

Only the fourth member of their regular foursome had never missed a Sunday. That was 'Woody' Woods, who was a Logistics officer with Base Supply. He didn't work weekends.

The remaining three of them watched Steve walking the 350 yards across the 17th and 18th holes towards the clubhouse to find a phone. They just shrugged to each other. Butch teed his ball up and whacked it 300 yards down the fairway.

Steve propped his golf bag outside and entered the clubhouse. Someone was using the phone in the lobby so he headed towards the bar, where the other phone was. He realized he was still wearing his spikes and slipped them off, so as not to perforate the carpet. He had left his street shoes in his car.

This early before lunch the bar was empty and the phone was not in use. He picked up the heavy receiver on the old phone and dialed the four digit number for squadron ops. A young voice answered, “442 Ops, Officer Cadet Thompson”. This was one of the unit's OJT officer cadets, given the thankless task of watching the phones on the weekend.

Steve was slightly annoyed, he wanted to speak to someone in charge. “Captain McBain here, you paged me?”

“Umm...yes, sir. RCC called looking for the duty searchmaster and I paged you.”

“What's happening,” Steve barked. He was hoping that he could

get back to his game.

“They didn't tell me, sir”

“Fine, I'll call them myself,” Steve responded quickly and he hung up without waiting for a reply. He dialed 0 for the base operator and asked for a line to the Rescue Coordination Centre in Victoria.

“RCC,” the voice said, he sounded busy.

“McBain here, 442,” Steve said.

The voice on the other end of the phone brightened considerably. “Hi Steve, didn't know you were on this weekend, or I would have called before you paid your green fees!”

Steve recognized Paul Reynolds' voice. He was a former 442 Buffalo pilot. Most of the RCC Victoria controllers were ex-442 Squadron pilots or navigators, doing a ground tour, while waiting for a posting back to Comox and a flying job.

Steve had been in the SAR world for the past 20 years. He joined the RCAF in 1949, just as the Korean War and the Cold War were both spooling up after the massive demobilization at the end of World War II. Initially he was an engine technician, but after five years of working on the Merlin engines of maritime patrol Lancasters with 404 Squadron at RCAF Station Greenwood, Nova Scotia, he had applied for pilot training. He had earned his wings at Gimli, Manitoba on T-33s and then went on to fly CC-119 Flying Boxcars, flying freight around the world, “trash-hauling” as they called it. After a course at the helicopter school in Rivers, Manitoba, Steve moved onto the new CH-113 Labrador tandem-rotor helicopter in 1964, flying it from Summerside, PEI, Comox, BC and Gander, Newfoundland. He had also spent time as a staff officer at Air Transport Group HQ in Trenton and as an RCC controller in Victoria. He was posted back to fly “Labs” in Comox for his last tour of duty prior to retirement, which was not an uncommon, or unpleasant way for a SAR pilot to end his career. There wasn't much Steve didn't know about search and rescue.

“What's up, Paul?” Steve asked, knowing that it must be serious to have had him paged in the first place.

“We've got an overdue Cessna 310 with four on board, out of Campbell River for Prince George. They departed yesterday afternoon and the flight plan ran out just before dark. SARSAT received nothing and I launched a VU-33 DF-88 equipped T-33 last night, but he didn't hear anything either. I launched your Buff this morning to do a visual track crawl. He finished that and landed in PG. He saw nothing, but then the weather was duff anyway for most of the way. I have him doing a look around in the Chilcotin flatlands up that end of the route, but I was going

to bring him back to do some coast crawling. I think its time to call out the troops.”

“Sounds like it to me,” Steve said, his mind sharpening to the task and forgetting his golf game. “What was his flight-planned route?”

“VFR Direct.”

“You have to be kidding, the weather was crap yesterday and there are some pretty big rocks on that route.”

“Yeah, I know it,” said Paul. “It gets better, it was a fishing charter for some foreign nationals. I'm still trying to figure who was on board.”

“Oh great, sounds like SAR Melissen all over again,” sighed Steve.

Steve had been a Lab pilot on that search. It had been a year ago in early September 1983. A Britten-Norman Islander twin-engined light aircraft with one pilot and six millionaire passengers on board, four of them West German businessmen. They had been on a hunting trip when the plane had disappeared between Campbell River and Smithers, BC. There was no ELT signal. Under pressure from the West German government, the search went on for six weeks, which is longer than normal. German laws don't allow missing people to be declared dead for seven years, so everyone wanted the bodies. Steve had said on several occasions that part of the BC coast just eats aircraft and doesn't even spit out the bones. Since 1940 there must have been 1500 aircraft lost in that area and most of them have never been found. That area is all mountains, thousand-foot deep fjords and 300 foot high trees that go right down to the edge of the water. You could put a 747 in there and never see it again.

Steve had been glad to be flying on that SAR and not searchmaster and have to deal with the pressure from above, from the families, the media and embassies to find them no matter what. All the crews flew all day on that search for six weeks in appalling weather until they were all time-expired and had covered the ground six times over. They spent a million dollars a week looking for them with more than 15 aircraft and crews. No one ever saw a thing.

“I'll find out more about who was on board and get it to you, I don't know how sticky this one is, yet,” Paul said. “Where are you going to set up your Search HQ?”

“Destination's PG,” Steve responded. The traditional place for Search HQ is the destination airport. Besides Steve knew that the Shell dealership there had some space they could rent for a couple of weeks.

“Yeah, I figured you want to go to Prince George,” Paul said, with a smirk. “Okay, I'll spool things up as quickly as I can. Call me when you're in place and I'll let you know what the story is. Let's aim to hand it

over to you tomorrow morning sometime.”

“Rog, have you scrambled the stand-by Lab yet?” Steve asked. The squadron usually had a stand-by Buffalo transport and a stand-by Labrador helicopter on 30 minutes notice on the weekends.

“The crew should be inbound now to the hangar. I was going to send them up Butte Inlet, if they can get in there. It was about the only close-to-sensible route in the weather that we had yesterday. It isn't much better today, which is why I didn't send them earlier. I am hoping the fog will clear a bit.” Paul added.

“Makes sense to me. Maybe they were trying to cut up to Highway 20 and Tatla Lake from the north end of Butte. Tell you what, if you are going to send the stand-by Lab up Butte Inlet then I'll take the next available Buff to PG. It can be my ride up there and we'll use it to start on the flat lands out of there. We'll aim to get going around 1400.”

“Sure thing,” Paul said. “I'm here until 1600 and on again tomorrow at 0800.”

Steve hung up. His mind was racing though the checklist of things to do. *Better let Linda know that things are happening*, he thought. He dialed home and told her. “Hi honey, I got called on a SAR, gotta head out to Prince George. I'll be home in five, can you drive me to the hangar?” She wasn't surprised and didn't sound pleased.

Steve called Squadron Ops, Officer Cadet Thompson answered again. “Are you there alone,” he asked Thompson.

“Yessir,” was the reply.

“Well you won't be alone for long, the stand-by Lab crew are on their way in. Call the stand-by Assistant Searchmaster, whoever that is.” He was trying to remember who was supposed to be his assistant for the weekend, but the name escaped him.

“I'll need you to call the SOPSO and get me a second Buff, staff for a major search and find out what else we have serviceable,” Steve said. He rather felt sorry for this young Officer Cadet caught in the middle of what would be a flurry of activity at the hangar for the next few hours. “Tell everyone that we are going to Prince George departing at 1400, and not to pack light, it's going to be a long one.” He knew he was right about that prediction, Steve was usually right about things, but he had no idea how right he would turn out to be this time.

He hung the phone up and strode out of the golf club, picking up his spikes on the way and slipping them on for the walk to his car. The September sunshine was warming the morning as he grabbed his golf bag and walked quickly to his black 1964 Impala SS in the parking lot. He had

owned the “Impaler” since it was new, twenty years ago. It had over 400,000 miles on it and no rust. BC was kind to old cars.

He opened the truck and placed the golf bag in its permanent resting spot. He pulled out his loafers and switched shoes, before slipping in behind the wheel and starting the V-8.

The Impala accelerated out of the parking lot and onto Tracker Street. Many of the streets on the base were named after aircraft. Driving towards the PMQ took him down Argus Avenue and past the 13th fairway. He waved to Butch, Scott and Woody. They knew he wouldn't be back to finish the round.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1040 hours

Steve swung the Impala into the PMQ driveway, braked to a halt, parking the car behind Linda's gray Chevette and headed for the door.

In the hallway Linda was already putting her shoes on. She wore sweatpants and a sweater. Her shoulder length hair was coloured chestnut brown and was tied back in a ponytail. The effect was to make her look somewhat younger than her 47 years. He smiled as he raced past her. She didn't smile back.

Steve made his way to the bedroom upstairs. He always had his parachute bag packed for a trip like this. His flying suit was hanging up, with everything he needed already stuffed into the pockets. All he had to do was transfer his wallet and keys into it and he would be ready to go. He pulled the one-piece flying suit on and zipped it up. At the front door he paused and pulled his boots on and zipped them up, too, grabbed his summer flying jacket and was ready to go.

Linda was sitting behind the wheel of the Impala. They had to take his car, since hers was blocked in the driveway by the Impala. Steve threw his bag in the back seat and slid into the passenger seat. Without saying anything Linda put the car into gear and headed to the 442 Squadron's hangar. It was a very short and familiar drive – Spruce Street to Little River Road to Ryan Road and round the circle to the hangar.

She pulled up outside the hangar and Steve started to get out of the car. He sensed her silence.

“You okay,” he said, more as a statement than a question, hoping that she would just indicate that she was so he could get going.

“Tomorrow is our 29th anniversary – you were supposed to take me out, “ she said, coolly. He noticed that she looked at him sharply, her

brown eyes narrowed.

“As soon as I get back,” he stated. “Besides there will be no interruptions for our 30th, I promise.” He was thinking about being retired at the end of the year. He got out without waiting for her reply. He didn't have time, out there somewhere in the woods four people needed his help more than she did right now. At least, hopefully, they were still alive and needed help. He grabbed his parachute bag from the back seat and dumped it on the curb. He walked around the car to her open window and gave her a kiss, it landed on her forehead. He smiled, but she didn't look up.

“I'll call you when we get set up,” he said, hopefully. He shouldered his bag and headed for the hangar. He quickly looked back when he got to the door; the Impala was on its way back around the circle. *No time for all that right now*, he thought to himself.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1047 hours

Steve strode into Snake Ops, dropped his bag on the floor and startled the Officer Cadet on duty. The cadet was younger, more pale and thinner than Steve had imagined. Chuck Thompson hoped to be a pilot one day, but for now was putting in time in the bewildering environment of 442 Ops.

“My deputy is...” Steve begun.

“On his way in,” Officer Cadet Thompson stated, quickly.

“...and the Lab crew?”

“Also on the way in”.

“SOPSO?”

“Already in his office, sir. He came in on his anyway.”

“Order us a dozen box lunches for for here, for noon,” Steve snapped.

“Yessir” Thompson picked up the phone to call the kitchen at the mess.

Steve could see the twin-rotor Labrador helicopter out on the ramp, the late morning sunshine making the yellow SAR paint scheme look even brighter and more conspicuous than it normally was. He glanced at the duty board on the wall to find out who his deputy was. The board said “Ashbury”. That would be Captain Walter Ashbury. Walt was a second tour Buffalo pilot who had just completed his searchmaster's course. He had done his first tour in Summerside, PEI. He was okay, young and still enthusiastic enough about SAR.

Steve went upstairs to his office and grabbed his searchmaster's checklist book. Returning to Ops he found Walt had just arrived and was questioning Thompson. Steve gave him the quick run down on the route and the plan.

"Are you packed for a week or two?" Steve asked Walt.

"You bet," he responded.

"Okay, then go pack a map package for me. Make sure you have at least ten copies of everything – we are going to need it. I'll check over the Searchmaster's boxes and make sure everything is ready there," Steve said directly. 442 had a well stocked map room, for just these sorts of operations.

"How far do you want?" asked Walt.

"Everything south of 55 north and east to Alberta, this could be big."

"You got it," Walt responded and hurried out of Ops.

Steve noticed a flight engineer on the ramp at the Labrador, doing a walk around. The Lab crew were starting to arrive.

Captain Rene Leclerc walked into Ops and dumped his bag on the floor. "Okay, I'm 'ere," he said in heavily-accented English. "Where we goin'?" After half his career on the Canadian west coast the Quebecker from Trois-Rivières spoke perfect English, he just liked to play up the French accent to bug Steve McBain.

Steve ignored his provocation. "We've got a little lost Cessna 310 with four SOB, out of Campbell River for Prince George late yesterday. Call RCC and talk to Paul Reynolds, you're working for him until we get set up in Prince George."

"Oakay-dokey," said Rene and he picked up the phone to call RCC for the details. Outside on the ramp, the two SAR techs in their orange suits were rolling some extra gear to the Lab on a dolly. The flight engineer had untied the rotor blades and was winding up the tie-down equipment, bundling the straps up into a neat package. Rene's co-pilot was filling out a flight plan, ready for the destination details that Rene was getting from Paul at RCC.

Hanging up the phone Rene spoke to his co-pilot. "Plan us to Butte Inlet, via Stuart Island and return here." The co-pilot scratched it all in on the flight plan.

Steve turned to Officer Cadet Thompson. "I'll be in with the SOPSO if anyone is looking for me." He turned and purposefully strode out of Ops.

Two doors down the hallway Major Mark Payne was behind his

desk, wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt that said "Queens University". Mark Payne had an MBA from Queens. Six years ago Payne had had arrived in SAR and Steve had taught him most of what he knew about it. Payne had a degree, was bilingual and was promoted to Major. Steve found Major Payne a major pain. Steve had graduated from the School of Hard Knocks, not some eastern university. Besides the military was not a business. His way of dealing with Payne was to keep things short and on topic.

"Morning, sir," Steve started. "I'm deploying to Prince George for this SAR with Captain Ashbury at 1400 hours. I'm going to need some additional help for this one. Can I get an Adm Clerk, Fin Clerk and Rad Op to leave at on the Buff at 1400?"

"I've already called them," Payne said, with self-satisfied smile. "I figured you'd need them."

"Great, uh, thanks," Steve managed. It bugged him that Payne was ahead of him. "Any idea who the Det Commander will be?" On major SAR operations the squadron's deployed aircraft and crews were put under a Det Commander, so as to free up the searchmaster to plan the search instead of organizing the aircraft.

"Yeah, I haven't been on one of these for a while, so I thought I would take that myself. Can't let everyone else do all the flying," he said with another smile.

"Okay," Steve said, caught off guard. Usually the SOPSO stayed home and helped run the squadron on a daily basis. Usually the Det Commander was another major, a Flight Commander or equivalent. No matter, he could make anything work.

"What have we got available?" Steve asked.

"Well you already have one Lab and one Buff out there now," he started. "You can have that second Buff you want for 1400. I called a crew out for that. We have one more Lab serviceable that the school doesn't need and a third Buff that may come up serviceable some time tomorrow. If it does I'll bring that one up to Prince George and get set up."

442 Squadron was not just a Transport and Rescue Squadron, it was also the Operational Training Unit for the Lab, the school for training Labrador pilots. That side of the unit always needed at least one Lab left home. The unit had five Labs, but one was torn down for inspection and another was away at Boeing Canada in Arnprior, Ontario for overhaul. That left three. With one for the school, the search could use a maximum of two. Steve hoped both those two 22 year old helicopters would stay serviceable.

“What else have you got coming?” Payne asked.

“RCC is organizing that, I'll know tomorrow morning. Please let me know your accommodation requirements and we'll take care of it from our end.”

“Have fun,” Payne said smiling dismissively.

Steve headed down to the hangar floor and the storage room where the Searchmaster's kit was kept locked up. He could hear the stand-by Lab spooling up, out on the ramp outside the hangar, as Rene and his crew got going for Butte Inlet and its fog and rain.

The weather on the British Columbia coast, especially in the spring and fall, can vary greatly from place to place, over a short period of time. This Sunday in late September it was sunny in Comox, but just north and east of there it was still wet and foggy. The forecast for the next few days was for more rain and fog. Weather is always a factor when flying in the mountains of BC.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1115 hours

Steve unlocked the two steel containers with his key and went through the equipment that made up the searchmaster's kit. It was carefully packed and seemed undisturbed since the last major search. One box had radios, batteries, cables and antennas – all the radio gear. The other was full of clipboards, paperwork, pens, stationery supplies and lots of forms. Steve grabbed a blank searchmaster's logbook. Everything seemed to be there. It just had to be loaded on the Buff for Prince George.

In the silence of the storage room, Steve sat down for a moment to collect his thoughts.

There were a million things to make happen, but he had done it all before and he had his checklists to back up his memory.

This will be a good way to finish off a career, he thought to himself, *one last big SAR and then retirement. Hey, maybe I will get my photo in the papers with the survivors!*

He smiled at his own optimism. He knew that most major searches ended in a coroner's report, not a rescue and happy smiling faces. The worst ones were like SAR Melissen last year, tons of flying in rotten weather and then, at the end, no answers at all. Everyone had done his best, but it wasn't good enough. That always left the SAR crews gloomy when they went home. It also left the families gloomy, the media gloomy, everyone gloomy. Everyone involved wants a happy ending, the search to

be followed by a rescue, no one more than the searchmaster.

That moment of solitude gave him the only time for reflection that he might get for days.

Steve re-locked the containers and walked back to his office to start filling in his searchmaster's logbook. If anything were later questioned, the only defence would be good records.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1150 hours

On the east side of the highest peaks lies the Chilcotin, an area of rolling hills, flat rangeland, conifer groves and lakes, that stretches all the way to Williams Lake.

On this particular Sunday morning in late September, the Chilcotin forests were a buzz of activity.

A red squirrel was working hard, darting back and forth gathering the seeds from fallen white spruce cones for the coming winter months and storing them in his nest in the hollow space high up in a spruce tree. As he passed through patches of sunlight that reached the forest floor, his coat shined a clear copper colour.

A good frost had come to this part of the Chilcotin last night and this spurred the squirrel to hasten his efforts to store away a good supply for food for the colder months he knew were almost here.

Only a few hundred metres away an American marten was silently resting after a morning hunting for frogs along a nearby stream bank. The marten was watching the squirrels working and thinking about a squirrel supper. Red squirrels are the martin's favourite, when they are available.

The marten wasn't concerned about the coming winter, he enjoyed the easy tracking of prey and good hunting conditions of the cold part of the Chilcotin year. Well equipped with broad snowshoe-paws he could walk over top of the deepest snowbanks which squirrels would leap from tree to tree to try to avoid. Once on the ground the squirrels were easy prey in the depths of winter.

The sun was now high and the day was warming slightly, under clearing skies, the frost mostly gone from the ground, except in the darkest hollows, the trees casting shadows of frost where the sun had not yet reached. With no wind in the spruce grove, the only sound was that of the squirrels dashing about. The marten watched and didn't move.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1200 hours

The Search HQ team was assembled in the squadron canteen, sitting at a single table, eating the box lunches that had recently arrived. The CFB Comox all-ranks mess kitchen did a good job on these and no one went hungry.

Steve looked over the team that would hopefully make this search run smoothly.

There was Captain Walt Ashbury, his Assistant Searchmaster, who had completed collecting all the needed maps. He had no worries about Walt, he would make an able assistant.

The Adm Clerk was Master Corporal Brenda Fineworth from 442 Squadron. She had been on searches before, although not with Steve as searchmaster. She was a short, efficient women in her thirties, with a quick smile, her long brown hair pinned in a severe knot behind her beret. She was originally from Nova Scotia and her slight accent gave away her province of birth. She would be responsible for much of the logistics as well as the administrative details. Her husband was a sergeant with Base Supply.

Master Corporal Sylvia Cardinal was the Finance Clerk assigned from the base. This was her first search, but she exuded that sort of confidence often seen in Base Finance personnel and she carried a lock box full of cash. She was from Lac La Ronge First Nation, a northern Saskatchewan Cree reserve and while shy and quiet, had something about her that said she could take care of herself.

The Radio Operator was also from 442 Squadron, Corporal Tim O'Brien. He had been on several searches. The 22 year old from Vancouver was a weight-lifter who also played on the base hockey team. He would set up and run the VHF and HF radios at Search HQ and keep the radio logs, leaving Steve and Walt with one less thing to worry about.

Steve wanted to make sure everything would be ready for the 1400 Buffalo flight to Prince George. He went around the table quizzing everyone on their equipment.

Looking at MCpl Fineworth, he started, "What have you got set up for accommodations?"

"Twenty rooms already booked," she said quickly. "I put them all in your name." She smiled.

"Yeah, fine," he said, quickly, impressed that she had it all in hand. "You have everything else you need, forms, pens, stuff?"

“You bet,” she responded quickly. Steve found her a bit disarmingly informal, but she was getting the job done, so he had no grounds to complain.

Steve looked at the radio operator. “Have you checked over the radio box yet?”

“No sir, just got here,” O'Brien, responded gulping a sandwich.

“Okay, I'll take you to the store room as soon as we're done here and you can make sure that we have all the cables, antennas and parts there.”

Master Corporal Sylvia Cardinal jumped in before Steve had a chance to ask her. Without making eye contact she said in a low voice, “Cash, receipts, invoices, purchase orders, all set.”

“Okay,” Steve said and left it at that. Finances were just not his area of expertise and so he had to leave it to the Fin folks to know what they were doing there.

Steve talked to Walt, “Check with RCC and see if there are any updates before we leave, I'm going to see that the Buff crew have all the details.” Walt nodded, still eating.

Steve continued, “I have us office space in PG for search headquarters. The FBO has a trailer that we used on the last SAR. It is all hooked up for power so we should be able to move right in.”

The clock on the wall hummed. Steve felt he should make some sort of inspirational speech.

“I know some of you have been on a search and some of you haven't, yet. Searches tend to be a whole bunch of work, but this is the real operational stuff that we train for all the time so let's try to act like a team and work together. If stuff comes up that you can't handle then let me know and we'll figure it out. We can get more help too, if we need it. This might go on for a while, you never know – we might find them by tomorrow or it could be weeks. If you have to get home let me know and we'll try to arrange for a rotation if possible. Just keep talking to me, as things develop.”

He wasn't sure what to add. He wanted to be more inspiring, but couldn't think of anything to say that didn't sound like a football huddle speech. The air force always emphasized more informal leadership. It made it harder to do than issuing orders, but you got more cooperation from technically-skilled subordinates.

“Let's get everything packed on the Buff for 1330 to be in the air at 1400,” he finished.

The Search HQ staff, sensing that Steve was done, started to

disperse to get everything on the plane for Prince George.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1330 hours

In Squadron Ops Steve checked with Captain “Lance” Lancemeir, the Buffalo pilot who would take them to Prince George. “How does it look?” Steve asked.

“We’ll get you there,” Lance responded. “You got everything on board?”

“Yeah, let me confirm that.” Steve walked out on the ramp to the waiting Buffalo. It shone in the afternoon Comox sunshine, the rear ramp down. Steve could see most of his Search HQ team gathered around the ramp, talking with the crew’s two SAR techs. Brenda and Sylvia were standing just outside Ops, away from the aircraft, smoking. Steve asked if they were ready. They both nodded.

At the Buffalo ramp Steve could see the aircraft loadmaster strapping down all their freight with ratchet tie down straps. The ratchets clicked quickly as he worked securing the load. It all looked like it was there, the two steel containers, everyone’s personal gear, even Steve’s own parachute bag made it on board.

The two women had finished their cigarettes and took their assigned seats. The Buffalo’s seats are fold-up sling seats, lined along the outside edges of the freight hold. Steve sat by the ramp and watched the “loady” finish strapping everything down.

Steve pulled out the helmet that he always wore when flying the Labrador and plugged the comm cord into an intercom box. The aircrew had boarded and were going through their pre-start checks. Soon Steve heard the copilot call “starting one” and the distinct whine of the left-hand General Electric CT64 engine as it wound up. The igniters fired and as the propeller started turning a rumble could be felt as well as heard, as the engine accelerated. The airframe vibrated as the propeller came up to speed. Then the second engine was started.

Checks completed, the Buffalo started to roll forward, taxiing for the active runway. Steve had a view of the hangar through the still-open ramp as they moved away. It would be the last any of them would see of CFB Comox for several weeks. The warm coastal air wafted through the cabin.

The Buffalo crew were carrying on checks while taxiing, copying the IFR clearance to Prince George. Steve could hear Lance’s voice on the

intercom, "Hey Steve, are you plugged in?"

"I'm here," Steve said, fumbling for the cord-mounted push-to-talk switch, that was almost underneath him.

"You wanna see this old freighter hover?" Lance said.

Steve didn't respond, he didn't like to encourage the Buffalo pilots to outdo the helicopter crews.

"Cabin?" Lance called. The "loady" closed the ramp door and replied, "secure".

Steve heard Comox Tower on the radio: "Rescue 462 cleared for takeoff."

The Buffalo lined-up on the runway, the propellers wound up and the vibration levels increased then smoothed out. The Buffalo strained against the brakes and then suddenly leapt forward as the brakes were released. It jumped into the air at a seemingly impossibly slow speed and climbed away. Through the window Steve could see the base, the golf course and the green grass spread beneath them. The rest of his team were all looking out the windows. The two SAR techs sprawled out on the baggage.

A few miles out, over the Straits of Georgia the Buffalo entered cloud and the view outside the windows went white. Steve closed his eyes.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1549 hours

The sun was shining when the Buffalo touched down on the shortest runway at Prince George's airport, CYXS. Once they were shut down in front of the Shell FBO, the loadmaster lowered the ramp and everyone went to work, unloading the equipment.

Lance talked to Steve. "We got a tasking from RCC to search out of here while we have the weather and the daylight, so we'll just kick you guys out and get going." Steve nodded; it was an expected move. The search HQ team and the Buffalo crew moved all the equipment off the lowered ramp. One of the FBO staff met them with a small tractor towing a pair of baggage trailers.

Steve and Walt walked over the the FBO building attached to a wartime hangar and found Mac there. The manager, Ken McLeod, was finishing up a fuel sale to an executive jet. He smiled when he saw Steve and Walt enter the old office in their flying suits. He could count on a few weeks of pumping jet fuel for the Buffalos and Labradors. This time he would also make some money renting them his old trailer. The local hotels,

restaurants and bars would benefit from the SAR as well. The longer it went on the better, especially late in September when the tourists were mostly gone. Military SARs brought big money to town. Mac was in a benevolent mood.

“Hey, Steve,” Mac began, getting up. “Great to see you!”

“I’m just glad you have space for us,” Steve began, shaking Mac’s hand.

“I’ve always got room for you guys,” Mac said. “I heard there was a Cessna 310 missing.”

“We’ll find him,” Steve said, cutting off the inquiries. Everyone they would meet for the next week would ask who was missing and what happened. There were no answers yet.

Mac handed Steve the keys to the trailer. They walked out of the office to where the trailer sat on the ramp near the parking lot. There was a picnic table outside the trailer on the ramp.

Once inside they found that power and three phone lines were hooked up and that a few chairs and tables were stacked in one corner. A couple of room dividers were pushed against the back wall. A stark setting but that would change as the crew set up shop. There was no heat in the building, but an electric heater could be brought in if needed, Mac offered. Posters of light aircraft, World War Two fighters and bombers were tacked to the beige walls. The floor was linoleum tile squares, some cracked, curling up at the corners or missing altogether. Two windows looked out on the ramp area. The place was close enough to clean. Mac had used the trailer as a classroom when he had a flying school operation there in past years. Since then it had just had occasional use, including a short SAR 18 months before, in the spring of 1983. There was no water and no washroom – they would use the hangar facilities for that.

“Good enough,” Steve pronounced.

“I have more chairs, if you need them and maybe a folding table, too,” Mac stated.

“What are you going to charge us for this dump,” Steve asked, knowing that this was the start of the military cash drain into the local economy.

“Hey, I am doin’ my civic duty,” said Mac, “\$200 a week is fine.” He knew that the trailer was a lost-leader for the fuel sales. If the search went on for three weeks he would make \$600 total from the trailer rental, but perhaps pump \$10,000 a day in jet fuel.

“I’ll send our Adm and Fin people over to sign the contract,” said Steve. “Will you take a Purchase Order?”

“Sure, Federal government credit is always good, I'll just send the bill to Brian Mulroney,” Mac laughed.

Steve told Walt to get the new HQ set up and running. Walt tackled the job with enthusiasm and, with help from the rest of the team, by five o'clock everything was set up. Steve had been talking on the phone with RCC and working out a deployment plan for the search aircraft.

Walt gave Steve the tour of the trailer that would be their office for the foreseeable future. The floor had been swept, the chairs and tables set up, maps tacked to the walls and even the radio equipment was installed and working. The dividers separated the space into working and briefing rooms.

The briefing space would be needed, both to give the SAR crews their morning brief and post-mission de-briefs, but also for the press in between.

The press were nowhere to be seen that day, but Steve had a hunch that this SAR was going to get press attention. Most of them did, even if only the local paper or radio station. The bigger ones attracted scores of reporters from the national media, CBC, CTV, The Globe and Mail, but dealing with the press on SARs was not a job Steve enjoyed. He found it a distraction from getting the job of finding people done. Any gaffes in front of the press invariably made national headlines, while the job of searching didn't get much coverage at all. It was pretty much unheard of that the press contributed positively to a search. Steve considered the press at best a no-win situation. They usually didn't help find anyone, but they could hinder the operation.

The other part Steve dreaded was dealing with the relatives of the missing people. If they were all from out of the country then so much the better, perhaps they wouldn't show up at Search HQ at all. It was always hard to say the right things to the families, knowing that most searches don't have happy endings. It could also be a challenge to keep the family members from wanting to be on the search aircraft, or being hounded by the press when there just weren't any answers. Then there was the challenge of keeping the search crews and the families apart. Most SAR crews dealt with their job with a sort of black sense of humour and that often didn't go over well with the families.

The actual searching wasn't that hard a task compared to all the other things that the searchmaster had to deal with. *That's what makes the job the “fun” that it is, on each different search*, Steve thought to himself.

Steve was happy with the results of getting the trailer set up. Everyone had worked hard and things were in good shape now. The team

was all sitting in the office area and they looked to Steve to let them know what would happen next.

“I’ve been talking to RCC,” Steve began, “they will turn over control to us at 0830 hours tomorrow morning. Meanwhile they’ll continue to run the search and get aircraft in place. They think this is going to be big, so we’ll have lots of help. We have two Buffs and two Labs from 442, with maybe a third Buff for tomorrow, if the squadron fixes it in time. We have a Twin Huey coming from 408 Squadron Edmonton. They’ll probably be here tomorrow too. There is another Twin Huey on the way from Base Flight Cold Lake but they won’t be here ‘til late tomorrow. The BC Government’s PEP boys have offered us a couple of light aircraft, which we can use. We have the Comox ground search team available if we need them and also a civilian ground search team from here, too. Right now I don’t have anything for them to do, but maybe we’ll need them later on.”

“We are looking for a blue and white 1965 model Cessna 310.” Walt already had a generic photo of a 310 pinned to the wall and a stack of copies ready to hand out to the search crews. “It’s a six-seater, but we know from the flight plan that it had four people on board. We’re still trying to figure out who the passengers were, although, based on info from the airport manager who saw them before they left, RCC thinks they were all from out of country and that they were on some kind of fishing trip. The aircraft is owned by a commercial operator, Northern Island Air Services. We still have to find out more, but it looks like the company is a one man operation – the company owner was the pilot, J. Schmidt from Campbell River. So this operation is going to be called ‘SAR Schmidt’. I am going to try and track down any relatives through the airport manager tonight on the phone and see what else we can find out about the pilot or the flight.”

Brenda, Sylvia, Tim and Walt watched Steve as he continued, “You’ve all done a great job here setting up. The next few days are going to be chaotic to say the least. Let’s try and keep a sense of humour about it all, at least until we get settled down into a daily routine. As I said, this thing could go on for a while. Meanwhile let’s get some supper and get checked into the hotel.”

Steve looked at Brenda. “Can we get a cab?”

“It’s on the way,” she said, privately pleased that she was ahead of Steve, still.

“Okay...” Steve started slowly, he wasn’t used to how she anticipated what he needed next. It was a bit uncanny. Most admin types needed more definite direction before they would do things. MCpl Fineworth was a real “self-starter”.

Could be a lot worse, Steve thought. “Have you looked into a rental car for us?”

“I booked one nine-pax van and a mid-sized Malibu at weekly government rates to be picked up tomorrow at 0700 from the National office in town,” Brenda said, matter-of-factly, “I figured there would be freight and crews to move.” She smiled, challengingly.

“Great work, Brenda,” Steve said, adding, “there may be a medal in this for you.”

He turned to Sylvia. “Did you see Mac about the rental of this trailer?” Steve gazed at the chipped walls.

“He took a PO, it's all handled,” she said, looking at her boots.

“Thanks.” Steve said. Her shyness was a bit unnerving too, but Steve knew that it was just part of Cree culture. He didn't push it. He knew that you had to treat everyone carefully if you wanted to get the best work out of them all. Roughness didn't work very often.

Steve indicated to Walt that they could go over deployment details for the aircraft at the hotel and asked if there were any questions from anyone else, but everyone just looked hungry. They left the trailer, Walt locked the door and pocketed the key.

The cab had just pulled up outside the fence and so they filed through the gate to get to the “ground-side”.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1742 hours

The group arrived at the hotel lobby and checked in. The hotel was right downtown, near everything, restaurants, bars and the Prince George nightlife, such as it was. The desk clerk wore one of those corporate-mandated smiles, but she did seem pleased that SAR Schmidt was filling rooms at what is usually a slow time of year in the city.

Everybody's misfortune benefits someone, Steve thought as he filled in the registration card and guaranteed the rooms on his credit card.

Walt wrote down all their room numbers so everyone could be found in a hurry, if needed. Steve said, “Five minutes, restaurant.” Everyone nodded and went to drop their personal gear in their rooms.

Steve unlocked his room, flipped on the light switch and looked around. He had stayed at this hotel before and not much had changed. It was one of those hotel brands where all the rooms looked the same. Every bed had the same framed print of a farm scene over it. The hotel was predictable, but at least it would be a comfortable base for the next few

weeks.

Steve threw his parachute bag and helmet bag on the bed, snapped off the light and walked back to the elevator for the ride down to join the others in the restaurant. Brenda Fineworth was already in the elevator. She smiled when the door opened on his floor and Steve entered.

“Are we going to find them?” she asked.

They were alone in the elevator as it creaked downwards.

“Officially?” Steve started, “we will do our best, using all the resources we have available and the most up to date scientific methods, of course. Unofficially, between you and me? Bad weather, no ELT signal and more bad weather coming, the odds aren't good. I have done dozens of these like this, here in BC. Most aren't happy endings.”

“Are you always right about everything?” she asked pointedly.

“That's why I am here doing this,” Steve said. He wasn't hurt by her question. People questioned him all the time, he figured that was their right to do so. He got things done because he knew what he was doing and he was almost always right. He couldn't afford to be otherwise, he reasoned. The SAR world is not the place for people who aren't right all the time.

The elevator door opened and they walked across the lobby to the restaurant entrance. It wasn't busy and Walt already had a table for them. Steve was getting to like Walt's efficiency. He got things done right and quickly.

Outside the stars were bright, but the first signs of a layer of cirrostratus cloud were beginning to dull and diffuse them. Today's good weather in Prince George would not last.

Sunday 23 September 1984

1815 hours

The team was eating dinner. Everyone was hungry and the food kept them quiet. Steve looked at the others while he ate and wondered how things would progress. He was determined to get the best out of each of them. The secret was in learning enough about each person to be able to do that, all while focusing on getting the job done, finding the search object.

Steve washed his steak down with a gulp of beer. The duty day was pretty much done, no harm in a beer at this point.

“Tonight is pretty much a night off,” Steve started. “There really isn't much more to do at this point, other than be ready to go in the morning. Let's plan on breakfast here together at 0730. What about our

ground transport?”

Brenda said, “That’ll work fine, Sylvia and I will get the vehicles at seven and join you back here then. That should put us at the airport by 0830 at the latest.”

Steve nodded in silent agreement.

Lance and his Buffalo crew walked into the restaurant, two pilots, navigator, flight engineer, loadmaster and two SAR techs. The seven of them pushed some tables together next to Steve's group. There was a lot of noise as they sat down.

“We figured you'd already have the party started,” Lance said with a smile.

Steve looked at him questioningly.

“Nothing but moose out there today,” Lance responded. “It ain't over yet.”

“Well I'd hate to have you spoil the fun by finding them before we even got set up,” Steve said. “What did you hear from RCC?”

“That as of 0830 we are working for you. No one else saw anything either.”

The waitress was taking orders from Lance's crew. They were ordering beer. Air Transport Group rules require 12 hours between drinking and flying, so that meant that drinks would have to be done by about nine o'clock at the latest. Everyone was talking about the SAR, previous SARs and the NHL hockey season that was about to start. Would the Edmonton Oilers be able to repeat their previous season when they beat the New York Islanders in the Stanley Cup final in just five games?

Steve left the restaurant at 2000 hours. There was nothing more that could be done tonight and he had some phone calls to make. He motioned Walt to join him.

As they walked to the elevator, Steve explained that they should call RCC and work out the destinations for the two helicopters on their way in from Alberta. Walt nodded, thoughtfully.

Sunday 23 September 1984

2005 hours

Back in his room, Steve zipped off his boots and tossed them into the closet. He sat at the small desk, where the phone was located. Walt sat on the only other chair. He looked at the framed print over the bed of a barn and cows under a blue sky.

“Ya know, I think this is the same print in my room,” he said,

nodding towards the picture.

"Yeah they bought 500 of them," Steve replied emptyily, dialing the number for RCC, "very imaginative."

Walt listened as Steve talked to RCC. Steve was nodding and making some notes on the hotel pad on the desk.

"Okay, thanks for all that," he said into the phone, "yeah, I've been thinking about where to put those two helicopters. Send them here first, we'll definitely send them west of here, so they might as well get briefed here before they go. I'll work out the best spread."

Steve finished talking to RCC and hung up. "Well," he started, "the big news is that no one found anything. Hardly a surprise, though. Rene didn't get too far up Butte Inlet because of the fog. Sounds like today was the best weather we're going to get for the next few days. Let's figure out where to put everyone, at least initially."

Walt was already writing and had spread out a couple of maps.

"We already have one Buff here and one out of home base," Steve said, referring to Comox. "We have one Lab already out of home base as well and another one ready to go in the morning. We should put a helicopter up this end somewhere, in case we need them, although I think the chances are what we are looking for didn't get past the rocks. What do you think?"

Walt looked at the maps. "I agree with you. I think the best bet is on the coast, Butte Inlet and that area. The chances of finding them up this end are probably minimal. So since the Labs are both already in Comox, why not leave them there to work the coast areas? No point in giving the glory to the other units. Besides, if the other helicopters are both coming from Alberta, we might as well use them up this end and cut their transit time."

Steve smiled, "You won't be popular with the Lab crews, not giving them even a night away from home."

It was Walt's turn to smile now, "Too bad, so sad, gotta get the job done." Walt flew Buffs, not Labs.

"Okay," Steve said, "that actually works out well, because we will only have one Buff here and the rest of the 442 crew will all work from home. That'll actually help me out."

"How is that?" Walt asked.

"Do you know who our 442 Det Commander is?" Steve asked wryly.

"Who?" Walt responded, his eyes darting, trying to think of the worst case.

“Payne, the pain,” said Steve.

“Hey, having all but one of his planes in Comox should give him no reason to come here. That would be a bonus!” Walt exclaimed.

“My thinking, too,” said Steve slowly. “Okay what else?”

“Okay, that leaves us two helicopters and the PEP boys. How about one Twin Huey here and one...” Walt was looking at the map, “...in Williams Lake?”

“We have four PEP aircraft for this week, two here, one in Williams Lake and one out of Pat Bay,” Steve said, referring to the private light civilian aircraft with volunteer crews, flying under the BC government's Provincial Emergency Program. DND paid their gas money. They were inexpensive resources, but limited in what they could do. They were best employed searching in less mountainous terrain. Pat Bay was the old name for Victoria International, at the southern end of Vancouver Island. Steve was curious to see what Walt would recommend. This was all good searchmaster training for him.

Walt looked at the map again. “Well, in that case, since we have a PEP aircraft in Williams Lake, how about one Twin Huey here and the other one in...Lillooet?”

Steve laughed out loud. “Glad that isn't a 442 crew, you won't be popular.” Lillooet was a town of about 2000 people, about half of them native. There wouldn't be much night life for the crew there.

Walt smiled, “Well, that is the perfect place for the 408 Squadron crew, then isn't it? They have an airport right near town with gas and a hotel to stay at. What else can you ask for? Besides those Tac Hel guys are used to roughing it out in the woods with the army. A SAR isn't a vacation, anyway.”

“I'm going to see that your next posting is to 408 Squadron on Tac Hel,” Steve laughed. That was pretty unlikely for a third tour for a Buffalo pilot. It was far more likely his next job would be at an RCC somewhere. It was an amusing threat, however.

Walt smiled back, Cheshire cat-like. “I could short-sheet your bed, if you like.”

“Oh good, pranks,” Steve said dismissively. “Okay we got a plan, then. The Cold Lake and 408 crews will both come here for a briefing at some point tomorrow – plan to handle those both, then we will put 'em to work. I'll ask Brenda to find some rooms in Lillooet for the 408 boys. Your job for the morning can be to get a detailed weather briefing together. Think about whether we'll need a Met Tech up here, too. We may be able to get one. I am wondering who else we will need, like public affairs or

some logistics people.”

“Oh, great,” sighed Walt, “public affairs would be fun: 'yesterday's disinformation tomorrow'. Why would you want to share your party with them?”

“Because if this blows up they can handle the press,” said Steve. “One less thing for you 'n me to do. Anyway we got a plan – so time to call it a night. Us old guys need our sleep.”

Walt looked at his watch. It showed almost nine o'clock. He shrugged. “Okay see you at breakfast at 0730. I'll have the weather together.” He left, latching the door behind him.

Steve waited until he heard Walt's footsteps recede down the hall. He picked up the phone and dialed a local number. It rang three times and then a women's voice answered.

“Hi Ellen,” Steve said.

Sunday 23 September 1984

2110 hours

“I didn't think I'd hear from you again,” Ellen said, warily.

“Not a day goes by that I don't think of you,” Steve responded, trying to sound positive.

“You never make anything easy, do you?”

Steve chuckled. “You want things easy or interesting?”

“Where are you, anyway?” Ellen said, changing the line of the conversation, “not at home, I gather?”

“No, I am here in town,” Steve said, “I'm here looking for a little lost airplane. I'll be in town for a couple of weeks, I suspect. Looks like it might be a long one.”

“So what do you want?” she said pointedly.

“Let's get together and talk, okay,” Steve tried.

“Okay, but not tonight, it is already late. Call me tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, as soon as I get done,” Steve responded.

“Talk to you then.” She hung up.

Steve shrugged out of his flying suit and hung it up in the room's closet. It was actually a good thing Ellen didn't want to get together tonight; he felt tired out. Maybe it was the effect of getting older or the pace of doing yet another SAR. It had been a long day.

In the bathroom he filled the sink with warm water and washed his face. Grabbing a white towel off the stack on the rack he dried his face. He was 53 years old and, looking at his face in the mirror, he really thought

that he looked that old. It rather surprised him. Steve always thought of himself as “still young”, but the face in the mirror seemed creased with years of flying, worries, conflicts and time.

He carefully hung the towel back on the rack, returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed. He threw the two pillows into a heap and lay down, thinking, listening. The hotel was alive with the sounds of its inhabitants. People walking in the corridor, the brief voice of a young child running, TVs on in other rooms, the hum of cars on the street outside. People everywhere, coming, going, doing. It reminded him of living in a multi-level ant colony.

He thought about his son, Patrick, who was now 20 years old and away at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and his daughter, Virginia, who lived in Toronto. Her two-year-old marriage didn't seem to be going well, but it was hard to tell. He could feel the turmoil everywhere all around him, the uncertainties, the rush and confusion. The ant farm made him feel isolated and alone.

Enough of this, he thought and picked up the remote control from the bedside table. He snapped the TV on and flicked through the channels looking for the weather. He found a channel showing weather maps. It didn't look good, a low was spinning down out of the Gulf of Alaska, in typical fall fashion. It was bringing low ceilings, reduced visibilities and rain to the north coast and the interior of BC. It wasn't going to be fun for the crews that would be flying in the morning.

He tried to focus on the survivors. SAR crews made jokes about flying rescue operations, but it was just their way of dealing with what they often found at crash sites. You had to have a sense of humour to be the first one on-scene each time, as the SAR techs usually were.

After years of searches Steve tried to think about the successful ones he had been on. That hunter they found last fall who had been out four days on his own, after his ATV had broken down. He had been very happy to see the bright yellow Lab. His wife had written a very heartfelt handwritten letter to the squadron. It was still pinned to the bulletin board in the canteen.

There was the successful medevac he had done from CFS Holberg, the radar station on the northern tip of Vancouver Island, just a month ago. That one was a vehicle roll-over, but it had a happy ending, the military driver had survived and was doing well in hospital in Vancouver.

These were all good-news stories from the SAR world, but there were always the rest, perhaps 90%, where the best response just wasn't enough. There were many aircraft crashes that just weren't survivable,

where SAR crews took risks to look for people who weren't going to be rescued. They were the coroner's problem then. There were medevacs where the patient was not going to live to get to the hospital, those flights even the flight nurses called "parts runs". The worst were the calls for assistance when there were no serviceable aircraft to be sent.

The news came on at ten o'clock. The lead item was about the new Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, naming his cabinet. The federal election had been just 19 days earlier. Politics. Steve punched the remote's button and the TV went black.

He tried to think about the survivors. Where were they? Could the SAR crews get there in time to help them? He had no idea who they were or if they were even still alive. After years of doing this, it was a struggle to care about still more lost people.

That was dumb weather that they were out flying in, Steve thought.

He considered being retired and playing golf instead. It would be a relief to watch a Buff launch and not even be carrying a beeper. Let someone younger take over responsibility for hauling bodies out of the trees.

He awoke with a start. The room's lights were still on. The digital alarm clock on the night stand said 1:16. Steve felt disoriented. He got up and brushed his teeth, set the clock to wake him up at 0600, undressed and got into bed. He snapped the light off. The room was lit by the street lights outside, a sodium glow. The hotel was quiet now, the sounds of the ant farm replaced by the mechanical sounds of the air conditioning. Sleep took him like a large ocean wave.

Monday 24 September 1984

0730 hours

The crew was all at breakfast in the hotel coffee shop by the time Steve arrived. Everyone was eating and talking. The two women had picked up the rental car and van without any problems.

"I talked to the overnight RCC controller this morning, there's nothing new to report so we're hot at 0830," he said to the group. He regarded his assistant "How does the weather look?"

"Crap," quipped Walt through a piece of toast. "Most of the week looks pretty bad on the coast and here inland, too. There is this big low in the Gulf of Alaska that is going to spend the week spinning down the coast."

"Perfect," said Steve. "We'll just have to do what we can."

Outside a light mist was settling around the city, cutting visibility. The mood around the table was upbeat, bad weather or not, everyone was out on an operational mission, away from the mundane routine of the base.

“Let's look at putting the planes where the weather is least bad today. Block out some search areas based on the weather picture and assign what we have there. Make sure that the PEP assets aren't in over their heads. I'd rather leave them on the ground than have them out there in trouble. Actually that goes for the military assets as well,” Steve added to Walt. It was important to not kill any searchers on a SAR, particularly when you don't even know if the missing people are alive.

“There is going to be lots of information coming in thick and fast today,” Steve addressed the whole group, “Let's make sure it all ends up in the searchmaster's logbook. Paul Reynolds from RCC is supposed to have some more info on who we're looking for today, which will help, hopefully.”

The waitress handed out bills just as Lance's Buff crew arrived. “Hey, aren't you going to give us a ride to the airport?” Lance shot at Steve as he and the headquarters crew left the restaurant.

“Grab a cab,” Steve smiled.

The crew piled into the two vehicles and made the short drive to the airport in silence. Everyone knew it would be a long day and that there would be more of them to follow.

Monday 24 September 1984

0815 hours

At the trailer everyone got to work quickly. Walt was completing the assignment of aircraft to search grid areas on the master search map. Tim O'Brien got the VHF and HF radios set up and running while Brenda and Sylvia got the administration and finances ready to go for the day.

Steve called RCC and talked to Paul Reynolds, writing quick notes. When he was done he thanked Paul and hung up. “Okay, we are on,” he announced. He asked Tim to do a radio check with RCC on the HF radio.

Lance's Buff crew were in, along with the two PEP crews, in their civilian flying clothes. Walt was going over search areas for the day with the captains and everyone was copying maps. Walt had assigned the PEP crews to search two grids close to Prince George, if the weather cleared. Looking at the forecasts it seemed likely that they would have a few hours in the morning when it would be VFR for searching. The Buff crew would go further afield to cover an area west of Williams Lake, hopefully before

the weather from the approaching system moved in.

Walt had finished his briefings. Steve asked him if he had covered the search object and Walt indicated that he had and given out photos of the Cessna 310. Outside the mist was hanging down around the airport. It would delay take-off for all the aircraft in Prince George.

Steve addressed the gathered aircrew. "Welcome to SAR Schmidt. I want to take a few minutes to give you a rundown on who we are looking for," he began, "but first I want to emphasize that I want a safe search here. Always keep in mind that we have no way of knowing if the people we are looking for are alive or not. I don't want to kill any searchers looking for what may turn out to be dead bodies."

"Second item: the press," Steve continued, "leave them to me. That means if you are approached by the media, here or at other places you land, put them in touch with me – nothing more. Don't make any statements or give them any pithy sound bites. If you get really pressed hard then tell them that we are all searching hard and doing our best, then send them to me to talk to. Do not, under any circumstances make any statement about the odds of finding them. I don't want blubbing relatives seeing stuff like that on TV."

"Speaking of relatives, we may have some show up here, although I hope not. Smile, be professional and leave them alone. They are going to be worried and I don't want them to hear any SAR graveyard humour, okay?"

"Since no one is going flying right away," Steve said glancing out the window, "let me give you a quick sketch of our search object. Captain Ashbury has already given you pictures of what we are looking for: a blue on white 1965 model Cessna 310. You have a photo of a 310 and I think you all know what they look like. If you see anything use the proper NOCL message format – assume that you are being listened to on the radio, because you probably will be. Don't go shouting "we found them" on the radio, or we will be overrun by press at just the most delicate time in the operation. We have copies of the NOCL format if you don't have it," Steve said, looking at the PEP crews in particular.

"I have some background on the individuals who we think are involved," Steve said, picking up his notes from RCC. "The aircraft belongs to Northern Island Air Services and it departed Campbell River for here, at 1606 hrs on Saturday. It sounds like they were on a fishing charter all over the province. The pilot was the owner of the company, a guy by the name of Jan Schmidt, age 53. He lived in Campbell River and that's where the plane was based. I am going to try to find out more about

him and the business, in the hopes that we may get some clues as to what his usual routes were, was he conservative as a pilot or a cowboy, that sort of thing. The more I can find out about him, the more it may help us find him.”

“The passengers were all from out of the country. That alone is going to result in more press attention, we may even get the foreign press coming here, who knows. I need to find out more about these people to see if they had survival skills or anything else that might affect the search. The passengers were Benjamin MacKinstry from the USA, Edward von Richthofen from Austria and Joseph Cepucci from Italy”, Steve said. “That MacKinstry name sounds familiar....”

“Hey, maybe we are looking for ze Red Baron,” Lance added quickly, grinning.

“Yeah, I’ll let you know,” Steve replied. “In the meantime look for a blue and white 310, not a red Fokker Triplane, okay. No flying until you think you can get the day’s work done safely,” Steve added.

“Captain McBain?”

Steve turned, it was Brenda Fineworth. “Yeah?” he said not without some annoyance.

“Press, for you on the phone,” she stated flatly.

Monday 24 September 1984

0830 hours

“Search headquarters, McBain, speaking.”

“Good morning, George Withers, from the Citizen. I wanted to see about an interview with you today.”

“The Citizen?” Steve said, searching his brain for what media outlet he was talking to.

“The Prince George Citizen,” Withers clarified.

Local paper? Steve thought, *I thought I would be talking to the Globe and Mail by now.* “Yeah, sure, we’re just getting things rolling here, can you come by around 1030 or so and I can give you a run down?”

“That will work, fine,” Withers replied.

“Do you know where I’m set up?” Steve added quickly.

“Sure they told me that you are using that old trailer at the airport Shell dealer.”

“Yeah, that’s our ‘media centre’,” Steve said, a little dryly, “see you then.” He hung the phone up.”

Steve turned to Brenda, she looked concerned. “That was fine,

pass the media requests to me, but if anyone wants to come by for a briefing today try to get them to just show up at 1030 and I'll brief them all together. Kinda hoping we will get a bit more attention than just one local paper."

Steve returned to the briefing area to find the Buff crew gone and the PEP crews marking their maps. "I hope I didn't sound too brusque there," he said to the group of them. "We've got a lot of ground to cover on this operation."

One of the PEP pilots shook his hand. "Mark Abercromby, PEP, Prince George," he said. He looked to be in his sixties, as did the rest of the two crews. They all had gray hair.

"You guys done this before?" Steve asked.

The PEP crews looked at each other and smiled. "Yeah, about fifty times," said Mark.

"Okay," snapped Steve, "I'll assume that you know what you are doing unless you let me know that you have a problem, then. What are you guys flying?"

"Cessna 182," said Mark. The other pilot added, "172". Steve nodded, those were common private aircraft and suitable search platforms.

"You guys all retired?" Steve asked.

"I own a metals company, so I can get away any time I want. Besides this is more fun than budget season," Mark responded. The others just smiled and nodded. Outside the mist was clearing. "We can give you the rest of this week, anyway and see about some replacements for next week. We like doing this stuff. Any good excuse to get out flying."

"I'm glad to have your help," Steve said. He knew that the military job would be harder without help from the PEP boys. "Just don't push anything beyond your comfort levels. I don't want to have to start looking for you, too." Everyone smiled and nodded, they had heard this from every searchmaster since the program started. They gathered up their gear and left the trailer.

Walt finished up writing in the log as Steve returned to the office area. He looked up as Steve entered. "Since you were busy there I checked in with Snake Ops."

"...and," Steve said.

"The Comox-based Labs and the one Buff are on their way to their search areas for this morning. The weather isn't great, especially in the northern part, but we'll see what they can get done."

"Did you talk to Payne the Pain," Steve asked.

"Yeah, I thought I would spare you the pain," Walt smiled. "The

Buff he is waiting for is being worked on, no word on whether it will be up today or not. Prop governor snag.”

“You are always saving me from the hard parts. Good job,” said Steve. “Anything else?”

“Still waiting to hear from our other PEP crews and the two helicopters,” added Walt. “Let you know when I do. Brenda has lunches on order for everyone.”

“Guess I can take the day off,” Steve said with some humour.

Monday 24 September 1984

0842 hours

Henry Elliot, a Nuxalkmc, was out with his 16 year old son, Jack, in his fishing boat on the Dean Channel between the settlements of Bella Coola and Ocean Falls. They had made an early start to check their crab traps. From listening to the weather forecast on CBC Radio Henry knew that the weather would only worsen throughout the day and already drizzle was starting to fall, swaddling the coast mountains in their common mantle of fog and mist. They both wore the rain gear that every north coast dweller has.

They had departed the dock at what Henry called the Nuxalk village of Qomqots, which the government called Bella Coola. The Dean Channel, joining with the Bentinck Arm, connects Qomqots to the waters of the Hecate Strait, the islands of Haida Gwaii and, eventually, the Pacific Ocean.

They motored west through the waters of the steep fjords that have been home to the Nuxalkmc for thousands of years. On both sides mountains arched up into the ever present clouds, their peaks obscured for much of the year in the weather of the north coast. Creeks raged down the gullies of the ranges, mixing their fresh rainwater into the saltwater of the channel. Great trees, hundreds of feet high and mere inches apart, grew right down to the edge of water along the fjords, leaving no beach in most places. The undergrowth between the trees was a tangle of impenetrable dead fall, creepers and lush growth, fed by the abundant rainfall. In this lonely part of BC there are few places that a man can walk ashore and penetrate more than a few yards into the bush before reaching a wall of imperturbable plant life. Here humans have carved out villages on the small spaces available, such as Qomqots on the delta of the Bella Coola River. Man lives on the fringes of this place and travels on the water, not on the land. Before the roads and the airplane, all travel was by water or

not at all.

They reached the area of his crab traps. Henry throttled the boat back and pulled up alongside the bleach bottle float. Bobbing lightly in the disturbed water, Henry could see it had his licence number on it. Jack grabbed the float as it brushed by the bow of the boat and hauled the plastic trap up from the bottom, heaving the 75 feet of rope into the boat, hand-over-hand. His efforts were rewarded as the trap contained four large Dungeness. His father grinned at the catch and Jack carefully transferred the crabs into a saltwater-filled plastic bucket and replaced the lid. He was well practiced at handling the crabs after years of helping his father on the boat. This was a good year for crabbing.

Jack returned the trap to the water and watched the rope feed out as it sunk to the bottom again. Henry increased the throttle and they moved to where the next trap's float bobbed in the chilly water of the channel. The visibility was now five miles in mist and very light drizzle.

They both looked to the west as the sound of a motor could be heard. Coming down the channel at low altitude, an airplane could be made out, as it loomed into view. It passed by them, just a few hundred feet above the water, a yellow and white Cessna 185 Skywagon on amphibious floats. The crabbers both waved and the pilot dipped his wing as he passed the boat. The plane was low enough to see the pilot in the left seat, his green headset over his baseball hat.

The two Nuxalkmc knew the plane well, it belonged to Wilderness Airlines and regularly flew out of both the dock in Qomqots and also the Bella Coola airport's asphalt runway, at Hagensborg. The small plane regularly brought people in and out of the community, as well as supplies. It was a better way of getting into that remote part of British Columbia than driving the rough road from Williams Lake, through Alexis Creek and Anahim Lake.

The sound of the Cessna's propeller faded into the mist to their stern and Henry pointed the boat towards the next crab trap. There were many more traps to clear and the swells on the channel were increasing with the wind. The weather was closing in.

Monday 24 September 1984

0905 hours

Steve checked his watch, it was after nine. He picked up the phone and dialed RCC Victoria. One of the clerks answered and he asked to speak to Paul Reynolds. Paul would have started work at 0800 and would

by now have all the immediate tasks under control. With SAR Schmidt turned over to Search HQ, things should have calmed down at RCC, he calculated.

“Hey Paul, how are things there this fine morning?”

“Just fine now that you guys are doing all the work. Any problems?”

“Not yet, got everyone out searching while the weather allows. Man, this is going to be slow, unless the weather picks up a bit. Anything from CMCC?” Steve asked, referring to the Canadian SARSAT ground receiving station.

“Not a thing. I'll let you know the minute they hear a bleep. It's pretty unlikely anyone is going to pick up an ELT at this point, but you never know, stranger things have happened.” Paul added. “By the way 408 Squadron has offered you a Kiowa with a pilot and observer, if you want it.” The small four-place CH-136 Kiowa helicopter was not usually used on searches.

“A Kiowa?” Steve asked, wondering why 408 would want to send one.

“Yeah, they want to provide more help, but there are no more Twin Hueys available. It's yours if you want it. Since they made the offer to me, I can have it tasked.”

“Let me see what Walt thinks of that, hang-on,” Steve said. Walt was on the other phone right beside Steve. Steve nudged him and he asked the other caller to hang on.

“Want a Kiowa?” Steve asked him.

Walt cast his eyes up for a second and then said “check out sighting reports? Sure why not.”

Steve nodded, that made sense. “Sure, we'll use them for checking out sighting reports if any come in. Send 'em on up here and we'll figure out where to put them then.”

“Okay, you got it, probably tomorrow at the earliest before they get there,” Paul said, “Anything else?”

“Yeah, what have you got on the pilot and passengers, did the next-of-kin get notified yet?”

“Nope, we haven't located them. The list of passenger names came from the company AME, he found it in the manifest book in the office. Names and countries, that's all. We have calls into the embassies of Austria and Italy, I'll follow that up. They had to be here on passports. I'll call the US consulate in Vancouver, too if you like and follow up on that American.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” Steve said. “We really could use a bit more to go on here, I guess we had better start with that AME and any other contacts that you have.”

“The AME's name is 'Sparky' Smith, I kid you not. His actual name is Harold, but I was warned not to call him that. Let me grab his number for you. Transport Canada coughed up the licensing info on the pilot, Jan Schmidt, including home address and phone number. I called there, but no answer and no answering machine. I don't know, maybe he is single. Pretty typical of these small operators, it looks like a one-man-show, no one else to talk to about it. I also have the name of the Transport Canada inspector responsible for inspecting the company, he might have some more info if they did an inspection recently. I called the Canadian Aviation Safety Board as well. No need to talk to them again until we find something, but at least they have been warned to stand-by to go to work.”

“Yeah, okay give me all those numbers and we'll get onto it, maybe we can find some next-of-kins that way.” Steve sighed. These were never neat.

Steve concluded, “If you hear from anyone looking for them, then put them onto us.”

“Will do,” Paul said, “have a really fun day!”

Steve hung up, just as Walt hung up the other phone.

“I talked to the other two PEP crews,” Walt said. “We have a Cessna 172 out of Victoria. I sent them to do a block near Campbell River, including the under-fly area. The other aircraft is a Cessna 206 out of Williams Lake. I sent him to do a block west of there in the flats.”

“How did they sound?” Steve asked.

“Good. All experienced search crews. They seem to know their weather limitations. We may lose the 206 later this week. It's a company plane and may have to go elsewhere on business.”

“Okay. We've got a ton of phone calls to make this morning, so let's split the work up, before I have to play 'meet the press' at 1030,” Steve said. Walt grabbed his notebook.

Steve pulled out the searchmaster's checklist book. “We need to contact the airport manager just to tee up ramp space requirements, warn the RCMP, the provincial coroner and let the hospitals know that we may have work for them, just in case. We should call the Prince George volunteer ground search team too, just to let them know we're thinking of them, even if we haven't got anything for them to do right now. Those are the dull ones, you want to handle those?”

“Sure.”

“Okay that leaves me the interesting parts, tracking down the next-of-kins and trying to find out some more about who we are looking for,” Steve said. “Paul at RCC is following up with the embassies on the foreign passengers. We need to take a hard look at whether we need some more help here, too. The press interest hasn't been overwhelming yet, but if the weather is going to be such an issue perhaps some 'met help' would be useful. Let's get the phone calls done first.”

They both set to work, Walt making the routine calls to alert the local authorities that they might be faced with a need for hospital space, coroner services or police help. Steve called the AME.

“Smith here,” 'Sparky' Smith answered the phone. His voice was old and gravelly, much as Steve expected. He sounded like he wasn't into taking any nonsense.

“Good morning, Captain Steve McBain here. I'm leading the search for Jan Schmidt's Cessna 310. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Sure, I told everything I know to that guy from RCC yesterday,” Smith said. “I went and checked his office trailer and found the passenger manifest on his desk, just names and countries, that was it.”

“When did you last see Jan?”

“It was over a month ago, back in August, I think. I am just on contract, he calls me when he needs something done to the 310, a fifty-hour inspection or something.”

“Oh, I thought perhaps you were there all the time. Maybe I don't understand how Northern Island Air Services works,” Steve suggested.

“There isn't much to it. Jan started the company in the spring of this year, after he quit flying for the last place, said he wanted to work for himself. He bought the 310 and rented the trailer at the airport and got the business set up and running. He didn't have the chance to fly much this summer, spent most of it getting all the paperwork in place. That is why he called me to work on the 310 for him, Transport Canada needed to see an AME on the operating certificate to licence the operation.”

“Okay, I see,” said Steve. “What kind of shape was the plane in?”

“It was okay for its age, it's a '65 model, so it is almost 20 years old. I did the annual inspection on it in August, took a week.”

“So it hadn't flown much?” Steve asked.

“Nope, just a couple of charters in late August and that was it, as far as I know,” Smith said.

“How well do you know Jan Schmidt?” Steve was careful to use the present tense.

“Not that well, really. Met him in June when he was getting the

company set-up. I was there at the trailer maybe three times, other than for the annual. He did give me a key for the trailer. Seemed like a nice enough guy. In his 50s I would think, not young, for sure. Has a German accent, so I think he was born in Europe.”

“I am trying to track down next-of-kin, relatives, to make sure that they know what is happening, do you know if he was married or anything.”

“Divorced.” Smith pronounced, “I met her one time, she came by during the annual. She wasn't in a good mood, either.”

“Do you know where to find her?” Steve asked.

“Somewhere here in Campbell River I think. Let me see, he said her name was Lorraine. If you like, I can ask around and see if I can find a phone number for you. Campbell River is a pretty small place.”

“Yeah, that would be really helpful, thanks,” Steve said. “Is there anything else you can think of that would help us on this search?”

“Nothing more I can think of,” Smith responded with a rasp, “I'll see if I can track her down.”

Steve gave Smith the number for search headquarters and hung up. Brenda Fineworth was holding up the other phone and looking at Steve. “Insurance guy for you,” she said. “The first day always seems to be this nuts,” she added with a quick, neat smile.

“This one is,” Steve smiled back, taking the phone.

“Captain McBain, Search HQ.”

“My name is Malcolm Sorley, I am a claims adjuster working on behalf of World Underwriters, the company that holds the policy on the 310 you're looking for.”

“I guess you guys have a vested interest in the fate of the hull,” Steve began. Hull is the insurance term for the aircraft itself, “hull insurance” protects the aircraft against losses.

“In most cases yes, but Northern Island didn't have hull coverage on the plane, just liability. So we aren't interested in the hull, so much as the passenger liability and perhaps any third party liability if it hit anything of value. There is \$25,000 coverage for wreckage removal, too, but I understand that isn't your worry.”

“Yeah, we don't rescue airplanes, just live people,” Steve said. “We rescue the survivors, the plane belongs to the CASB and then you guys, any bodies belong to the coroner.”

“Except with no hull coverage, whatever is left of the plane doesn't belong to the insurance company, beyond our liability for wreckage removal. Of course you have to find it first, right?” Sorley said.

Sorley was annoying McBain. "First things first then, we'll find it. Don't worry, no one will move it without your say so. I am sure you'll want to do your own investigation anyway."

"Just as far as the liability issues go, we'll leave the rest to the CASB," Sorley pronounced.

McBain squinted, thinking, "Tell me one thing, why would a commercial aircraft not carry hull insurance?"

"Good question, just about all of them do," Sorley said, warming up to his favourite topic. "The liability coverage is required, but the hull coverage isn't, that's up to the company that owns the plane. If the aircraft was purchased with a loan, using the aircraft itself as collateral, which is normally the case, then the bank will insist on hull insurance to cover their risk. It is the same when you take a loan to buy a car, right? The bank insists on 'collision coverage'. If you borrow money to buy a plane and have no hull coverage and then crash the plane, how are you going to pay the bank back? No hull insurance means that the company owned the plane outright. The only reason to not carry hull coverage is to save money, but you are essentially 'self-insuring' instead. You eat any loss, but save on premiums. Maybe the owner's a millionaire and isn't worried about the potential loss."

"Maybe," Steve responded, thinking.

"Anyway, when you find them give me a call and I can get started on the liability and wreckage removal angles." Sorley said.

"If you don't hear from me, we haven't found them," Steve said. Sorley left the searchmaster with his number and hung up.

Steve added a summary of the conversation with Sorley to the searchmaster's log. The notebook was filling up quickly. Steve glanced out the window at the sound of a piston engine aircraft taking off. The earlier fog had lifted into an overcast layer. It wasn't a bad day, at least in Prince George.

Monday 24 September 1984

0936 hours

Sylvia Cardinal had gone out and bought a coffee pot for the SAR HQ. The smell of the coffee was filling the trailer. Steve poured coffee into a paper cup.

"Sylvia, you are a genius," Steve said. She smiled shyly at his compliment. "This is exactly what we needed, good work."

"Can't work without coffee," Sylvia said.

“Well, I think when this show is all done we'll keep that pot for the SAR deployment box, that way we will have it next time.” *Or at least the next SAR HQ team will have it, I'll probably be golfing instead.* He smiled to himself at the thought of that. This was probably his last SAR and his legacy to the whole CF SAR world would be Sylvia's coffee pot deposited in the SAR box for the next crew. *Maybe it should be engraved,* he thought, half seriously.

Walt took the log from Steve and completed his own entry, listing the phone calls he had made.

“All done?” Steve asked him, taking another sip. Walt nodded. “I want to get onto Transport Canada and see what else I can find out about Northern Island Air Services.” He had almost an hour before the newspaper guy showed up. Steve asked Brenda if any other journalists were coming. She shook her head.

“No, that is it, so far,” Brenda said, “but then the phones have been so tied up, perhaps the CBC and Globe and Mail can't get through.” She smiled impishly. “At least your face will be known all across Prince George.”

“I am really not trying to become famous,” he responded to her, coldly, “I am just trying to get a job done here. The press can sometimes help that process.”

Monday 24 September 1984

0940 hours

Rescue 306, a twin-rotor Labrador helicopter, was assigned a contour crawl in Knight Inlet, the fjord to the north of Butte Inlet. Already the winds were picking up and the stratus clouds that are so much part of the landscape in this corner of British Columbia, were obscuring the upper half of the mountains.

Captain Rene Leclerc's crew were concentrating on their work. He read the map, while his co-pilot, Lt Gary Grady guided the big twelve ton helicopter along the slope of the fjord. In the back, the SAR techs were taking 30 minute watches alternating with volunteer spotters, peering into the gloom, trying to see into the trees on the slopes. They had already done one pass on the block just below cloud base, knowing that it would come down during the day. The Lab yawed in the turbulence in the lee of the mountains.

“Right-hand spotter, I have something on the right side, slash in the trees, something down there.” It was one of the volunteer spotters

sitting in the Labrador's right bubble window.

Grady was flying from the left seat and couldn't see anything on that side of the aircraft. Rene motioned to him with a hand signal to make a turn to the left, into the empty part of the valley, to return to the location. Grady nodded, looked over his left shoulder and started the turn. The valley reflected the sound of the Lab's rotor blades as the helicopter banked and came back around to the same spot. Grady picked up the space in the trees and brought the nose up to slow the helicopter, as he made a careful low pass, putting the slash mark on the side of the observer. They drifted passed the spot at 50 knots.

"Definitely something down there," the spotter said. Rene looked carefully as the helicopter came past the area, as did one of the SAR techs, who had moved to another window.

Rene motioned an overshoot and another circuit. He was well practiced at this and didn't need to say a word to his copilot. Grady eased up on the collective and lowered the nose on the tandem rotor machine and it accelerated as he banked into the valley again.

"Any volunteers from our studio audience?" said Rene over the intercom.

"Ready to go," responded one of the SAR techs as the other one checked his equipment over. The flight engineer had the rescue hoist set to lower the SAR tech down. "Clear door?"

"Clear to open the door," came the pilot's reply on the intercom.

Downwind to the site Gary briefed the crew from his hoist checklist and brought the Lab into a stable hover over the slash in the trees, guided by calls from the flight engineer in the right hand doorway. The Lab was 20 feet above the trees and some 110 feet from the ground. The crew had practiced hoisting many times in training and actual rescues, it was a well-oiled drill. The SAR tech was hooked up to the hoist, lowered to the ground and the cable brought in. Gary overshot the Lab again, to give the SAR tech a quiet and rotor downwash free environment to assess the site.

The radio came to life as soon as the Labrador was clear. "Rescue 306, Rescue Ground."

"306, go ahead, " Rene responded.

"Rescue Ground, alpha: negative," the SAR tech reported, indicating that it wasn't the search object.

"Okay, coming back for you." Grady completed the racetrack circuit, returned to the hover over the slash and the flight engineer retrieved the SAR tech from the ground with the hoist. Once he was safely

back on board the flight engineer closed the right hand door and Grady once again overshoot from the hover.

With the SAR tech plugged back into the intercom, Rene waited for the story. "It was a nice plane wreck all right," he said, grinning. "Looked like it was a Cessna on floats that piled in."

"And..." Rene said, waiting for the punchline to the story.

"It had a 'found' placard on it," the SAR tech said, "dated 1964." Old wrecks that remained in the bush were placarded with their dates to make sure that they weren't reported twice. The coast of BC was dotted with them, one for every known crash site.

"Now where were we?" asked the copilot, picking up his previous route along the mountain slope as the spotters resumed their positions.

Monday 24 September 1984

0941 hours

Steve was on the phone to Victoria, talking with Maurice Bordreau, the Transport Canada inspector responsible for inspecting Northern Island Air Services.

"Thanks for taking my call. This is probably a bit out of the ordinary but I need some background information on Northern Island Air Services. I guess you heard that we're looking for their 310?" Steve begun.

"Yeah, I heard Schmidt was overdue, I hope you find him soon," said Bordreau, unconvincingly.

"I thought if we understood more about the operation, his usual procedures, that might increase our chances of finding them more quickly. How involved were you in Northern Island?"

"I was it, basically. I have the whole file for all the small aeroplane carriers on the island here. Schmidt approached me in the spring when he was thinking about setting the company up. We talked on the phone a couple of times. I got him some examples of ops manuals so he could get his own together. We have some generic versions to help small carriers get going. I approved the manual when it was done. I visited his trailer twice in Campbell River, once in June and again in August when the plane was finished its annual inspection and I did his check ride. I issued his ops certificate."

"Does his ops manual specify routes? I am trying to figure out how he would have approached the problem of a VFR flight from Campbell River to Prince George on a low weather day."

"The ops manual is just 'boilerplate', all these small companies

have the same words in them. It doesn't much matter because they don't follow them anyway. If it was up to me I wouldn't allow these one-man companies. If you can't run a proper airline with actual staff, you shouldn't be flying. And he shouldn't have been flying in the weather we had on Saturday."

"But you issued his ops certificate anyway?" Steve asked.

"Oh, he wasn't any worse than any of the others. I had to hand-hold him through all the paperwork, making sure he had the basics there. He wasn't even going to have an AME on staff."

"Yeah, I talked to 'Sparky' Smith already," Steve said really wanting to move the conversation along. "So was he safe, or not?"

"About as safe as all the others. Look at it from my end, for a minute. He met the requirements, so I had to issue the certificate. Now I'm going to have to answer thousands of questions because he piled in with some rich foreigners on board. The last thing I want to do is a ministerial inquiry on this."

"Would it help if we find them?"

"Not much. A crash is a crash and the questions will be asked about why the operation was flying in the first place."

Steve tried a different tack, "You flew Schmidt's check ride, how was he as a pilot?"

"Oh, he was fine, knew the aircraft really well, but then he had a lot of 310 time. We did all the usual stuff, single engine overshoots, electrical failures, you know the usual stuff. He did fine. It wasn't his piloting skills I was worried about, it was his ability to run a company by himself, organize the maintenance, the paperwork, the record keeping and dispatch control, that sort of thing. That's what makes for a safe airline."

"Did he say anything about why he started this company? It seemed a bit of a shoestring."

"Yeah, it was. Have you seen the trailer he worked out of? The usual reasons I guess. He flew for another small carrier for several years, didn't like the long hours and low pay, thought he could do it all better on his own. Thought he was smarter than his old boss."

"And was he?"

"Yeah, in this case he was. The last company had some problems, very high turnover, for the usual reason."

Steve asked: "The usual reason?"

"Management," Bordreau stated flatly.

"Which company was that?" Steve asked.

"Southern Island Air Services, but don't bother looking them up,

they folded in July – gone.”

“You don't sound surprised.” Steve suggested.

“These little companies come and go all the time, that one lasted longer than most, six years.”

“Is there a connection between the company names? They sound too much alike.” Steve wondered.

“I think that Schmidt was just trying to get in a dig against the old company – looking to compete, I guess. I don't think the company name was all that important to him.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because the only place that it appeared was on the ops certificate, the manual and maybe his insurance policy,” Bordreau said. “There was no sign on the trailer, or on the plane. He didn't even have any letterhead. The place looked like 'Air America'.”

“Is that normal?” Steve asked. “Don't most new carriers at least put up a sign?”

“Beats me,” said Bordreau, “just cheap I guess. Maybe he would have put up a sign if he had made some money at it.”

“You mentioned insurance,” Steve said, “I was talking to the insurance adjuster, did you know that he only had liability insurance, no hull coverage?”

“Just cheap, I guess, we don't get involved in that sort of thing. I have to see an insurance certificate that shows the minimum third party and passenger liability before I issue the ops certificate. Hull insurance is the company's problem.”

“I'm told that means that he owned the aircraft, that he couldn't have had a bank loan or he would have had hull coverage.”

“I guess so. We really don't get involved in the economic side of it. We don't really care who owns the aircraft. Our job is safety and it stops there. We let other people worry about the rest,” Bordreau, said, obviously tiring of the line of questioning.

“Doesn't it seem odd to you that he had such a shoestring operation, old trailer, no signs, no hull coverage, ex-wife, but he owned the aircraft outright?” Steve pressed.

“You know pilots, buy an airplane and to hell with the rest of life,” Bordreau stated resignedly.

“Is anyone else involved with the company, or is all a one-man operation?”

“It was strictly a one-man operation,” Bordreau stated.

“I am wondering if there may be some clue at Schmidt's residence.

You don't have a home address listed as a contact do you?" Steve asked.

"All I have is the airport box number, which was the trailer. I have no idea where he lived," Bordreau said, "I never get invited over for dinner in this job."

Steve noted Bordreau's constant use of the past tense in talking about Schmidt. "You don't think we are going to find them, do you?"

"What do you think?" said Bordreau.

"I'll find them, dead or alive. Schmidt may have screwed up, but I don't," Steve stated very firmly.

"Well good luck then. Call me if I can actually do anything worthwhile for you." Bordreau hung up.

Monday 24 September 1984

1015 hours

Steve reviewed the search log, having made a note of his conversations with Smith, Sorley and Bordreau. The first day of a search was always like this, there was more to be done than could be done in one day. Walt had been doing a good job keeping the log up to date and it saved Steve time to just read his entries, rather than have Walt brief him.

Steve consulted his checklists. The one outstanding item was contacting the next-of-kin. Smith was going to track down Schmidt's ex-wife and get back to him.

An ex-wife really isn't "next-of-kin", Steve noted, but perhaps she could tell me who I should contact.

Then there was the problem of the foreigners, Paul Reynolds was supposed to be tracking them down. He would have to follow up on those, too. It wasn't usually like this. Usually there was a crowd of concerned relatives camped out on the doorstep by the start of the first day. He was happy for the break that the situation afforded.

Steve entered the briefing area to find a civilian already sitting there. Steve appraised him quickly. He was an overweight man in his forties, with serious reading glasses, who needed a haircut. He was flipping through a notebook. When he saw Steve he rose to his feet.

"You must be George Withers," Steve said, trying to sound buoyant.

"That would be me."

"Well I am glad to have the gentlemen of the press here to cover this story," Steve said with some irony and introduced himself to Withers.

"If it is any consolation for the low turnout, this story will go to

CP,” Withers said, referring to the national news wire service, the Canadian Press.

“Yeah that’ll help,” Steve said brightening a bit. “I know that you need your story, but the press is a great help to us in these searches. We can get sighting reports and such from the public through the coverage.”

“You probably get less useful help, as well,” Withers said.

“Yeah occasionally the oddballs show up, but we are pretty good at filtering those out, we have been doing this sort of thing for a while,” Steve said, trying to instill confidence. “Where do you want to start?”

“All we want are the facts, ma’am,” Withers said doing Joe Friday.

“You like this job, don’t you,” Steve said, smiling.

“Best one there is,” Withers rejoined, with a slightly dour look.

“Well this job can be pretty good too, on a good day,” Steve tried.

“What’s a good day?”

“The one where someone’s wife bakes us cookies for hauling her husband out of the bush in one piece,” Steve said.

“I like that, I might use it,” Withers said, writing quickly.

Steve gave him a quick run-down on the SAR, the plane and its route, the weather and the search effort underway. He told Withers that he couldn’t give out any of the missing flight’s crew or passenger names pending notification of next-of-kin. Withers indicated he understood that limitation and Steve promised to tell him the moment that the NOK were notified and the names could be released.

Withers seemed satisfied with the briefing. “The main story for me is really going to be about the people involved, who they are and what they were doing in Canada, so let me know when we can talk about them,” he added.

“Those are my next calls, just as soon as we’re done here,” Steve said.

Withers looked around at the old trailer, with its collection of mismatched office furniture. “You certainly aren’t wasting the taxpayers money on this search, are you?” he said with a chuckle.

“Just getting the job done,” Steve said, looking at the place with a new eye. It did look shabby, but he liked its aura of frugal functionality, “We are all dedicated airmen and airwomen here, we’d happily do this job from a water-logged trench,” he lied.

“Can I meet the rest of your team here,” Withers asked.

“Certainly,” Steve said. “As long as we don’t keep them too much from working. I’m just here to run interference with the press.” Steve laughed. He introduced Withers to the SAR HQ team in the back of the

trailer. They were all looking busy. Brenda and Sylvia were working on a fuel contract, Tim was talking to the airborne Buffalo on the HF and Walt was on the phone. They all smiled when introduced.

Taking a business card from Withers, Steve showed him out of the trailer and onto the ramp.

“Are you going to find them?” Withers asked.

“We are doing everything that can be done to find them,” Steve said in his most assured voice. “You can quote me on that.”

Monday 24 September 1984

1056 hours

'Sparky' Smith was on the line when Steve took the phone from Brenda Fineworth. She and Sylvia went outside the trailer for a smoke break. Steve checked his watch, the day was passing very quickly.

“Smith here,” he said in his usual gruff voice, “I found Jan Schmidt's ex-wife, at least I have a phone number for her here in Campbell River. Her name is Lorraine, Lorraine Schmidt, I think.” He gave Steve the phone number. “That's all I have,” he concluded.

“Okay, thanks,” Steve said. “If you think of anything else let me know. The more we can find out the better.” He hung up the phone and immediately dialed the number Smith had given him.

The phone rang twice and a woman answered. She sounded fairly upbeat until Steve introduced himself.

“I'm looking for Lorraine Schmidt,” Steve said.

“Well I used to be her,” Lorraine responded, an edge creeping into her voice.

“I'm Captain Steve McBain, the military searchmaster assigned to lead the search to find your husband. Did you know he has been missing since Saturday? I am trying to locate his next-of-kin to notify them.”

“Ex-husband,” she corrected, sharply. “Yeah, I heard he had jumped ship again.”

“He's been missing before?” Steve asked.

“Just as far as I am concerned,” she said with a snort of indignation, “he owes me child support and spouse support. He is always hard to find.”

“His aircraft and three passengers have been missing for two days,” Steve said, trying to gauge what she was referring to.

“Well that is a new angle,” she replied with an ironic laugh, “usually he just doesn't answer the phone.”

"Would you be his next-of-kin, then?" Steve asked, trying to at least be able to check that box off.

"Not me," Lorraine responded. "Look, we split two years ago, he is always behind in the money he owes me, we don't get along and haven't done so in a long while. We were married for seven years, I don't use the name Schmidt anymore, it is too embarrassing."

"I guess you have a right to be angry," Steve tried. "Since Jan was spending money on his company and his airplane, instead of paying you what he owed you." Steve was trying to be empathetic in an attempt to calm her down a bit and get something useful from her.

"Look I can only get part-time waitressing at a diner in this shithole town. I need the support he owes to eat and pay the rent and maybe even one day move someplace better. Yeah, he spent some of what he owed me renting that trailer at the airport, I guess, although if you had seen it you wouldn't have thought it was costing him much. But the money he owed me didn't go into that plane. That was my first thought when he got it. I went out and saw it there in August when they were working on it. I told Jan that I was going to talk to my lawyer about having his plane seized for the money he owed me. He said he he hadn't paid a nickel for it, that it wasn't his plane, that it belonged to an investor."

Steve thought through what she was saying. "Do you believe that?" he asked her.

"Yeah, he may be a bum, but he wasn't liar, at least I don't think so. I believed him and didn't call the lawyer. He charges me \$50 bucks every time I phone him, so I try not to, unless I know it is worthwhile."

"There is just one odd thing," Steve started out, weighing his words carefully, "he didn't have any insurance on the plane, beyond the required liability coverage. That made me think he must have owned it himself to accept that risk of damaging it. That doesn't add up if someone else owned the plane, they would have insisted on protecting the value of the plane, don't you think?"

Lorraine paused. Steve could feel her considering his question. "Until you find Jan I guess you would have to ask the guy who paid for the plane. If Jan crashed it then that guy would be out the money, right?"

"I would think so," Steve said, "I wonder who that would be?"

"Jan told me once during an argument. I thought he was just trying to put me off calling my lawyer."

What was the investor's name? Perhaps I can track him down and solve this?" Steve said, hoping she remembered the name.

"MacKinstry," she said.

Steve silently considered that piece of information.

"Do you know where to find him?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Steve.

"I guess I am not going to get what I am owed too soon, am I?" she said directly.

"It doesn't look like it," Steve responded, thinking. "We are doing the best we can to find him and the plane. That is probably all we can do for now. Hopefully he is okay and then you can talk to him when we get him home."

"You've done this sort of search before," she said with the edge returning to her voice, "what are the chances of finding him out there?"

"I really couldn't say, ma'am," Steve said, "each search is different. Some have happy endings."

"Well I hope you find him so I can grab him by the throat," She said venomously. Steve thought that she meant it, too.

"We will do our best." The conversation was coming to an end. Steve had a quick thought. "Do you know where Jan is living?"

"Yeah, in that trailer at the airport. Look I have to go, I am covering lunch," she said.

"One last thing, who would be Jan's next-of-kin?" Steve asked.

"His daughter, Ruby."

"How would I find her," Steve asked.

"I don't think she needs to know at this point," Lorraine said.

"Why is that?"

"Because she is only three years old," Lorraine said flatly, "and I have to drop her off at the sitters."

Steve could only say "oh..."

"She doesn't see Daddy much anyway, so she isn't going to miss him for a while. I'll tell her when the time comes."

"Does he have any other relatives?"

"Just a brother in Austria. His parents were both killed in the war when he was 12. There isn't anyone else that I know of."

"Do you know how to get in touch with this brother?" Steve asked hopefully.

"No clue," she said, "I gotta go or I will be late for work." She hung up.

Monday 24 September 1984

1206 hours

Brenda and Sylvia had just returned with a large take-out order of lunches for the HQ staff and the Prince George-based search crews. Their timing was good as the three aircraft were coming back in for fuel.

Mark Abercromby and his Cessna 182 crew were down first and he was giving a short debrief to Walt. "I'd say we covered the block pretty well, 20% coverage." That was about as good as could be hoped for. "The weather looks like it is coming down to the north, though."

The PEP Cessna 172 was down next. Lance's Buffalo touched down on runway 06 and taxied to the ramp. The radio operator, Tim O'Brien, had a radio on the external speaker, monitoring tower, so everyone could hear the traffic coming in. Other than the search call signs it was a quiet day at Prince George Airport.

Soon the Buffalo crew was in the trailer and everyone was eating lunch and getting ready to fly the afternoon's patterns. The trailer was loud with the large group of people there. They spilled out onto the ramp outside the trailer.

Steve took a sandwich and sat outside with the others. The day was becoming leaden overcast, with a noticeably cool wind from the east, a sign of rain to come. Up in the Gulf of Alaska the low pressure area was inching closer, growing and spreading its spiral arms of rain and low cloud into the northern interior of BC. Walt had weather maps pinned to the bulletin board, so the crews could see what was developing. Everyone was keen to get back in the air while the weather allowed and so lunches were grabbed up and once the aircraft were fueled they launched again.

All three aircraft taxied to runway 06 to depart into the freshening breeze and continue the search. Steve sat outside watching them go. He knew that they would be lucky to get their assigned search blocks done that afternoon before the weather closed in.

Walt joined him outside, away from the phones. It was just the two of them on the ramp outside the trailer. He looked at Steve and grinned. "Whew, what a morning," he said.

"It'll settle down once we get everything into a routine," Steve replied.

"I hope so, it's been pretty nuts so far."

"Maybe someone will spoil the fun and find them," Steve offered, flippantly, watching the Buffalo turn westbound after takeoff, heading to the search area. Steve could hear Lance's radio call to tower, clearing the control zone. "Rescue 462 is clear to the west." And Prince George Tower's response, "Roger Rescue 462, good hunting." The Transport Canada tower controllers understood the gravity of these flights. After that the radio was

silent.

“Think so?” Walt asked.

“Everyone always asks that, the press, the ex-wives who are missing their support payments, everyone,” Steve responded, looking into the western distance. “How the heck should I know? If it were up to me I'd find all of them every time. I really do like happy endings. The moment I hate is when we have to 'reduce the search,’” McBain replied with a bit of annoyance. Steve used the official SAR term for ending the search. Technically the search was never ended until the search object was found, but once it was 'reduced' no one was actively looking. Crash sites that were found after the search had 'been reduced' were usually stumbled upon by hunters or loggers years later.

“Sorry,” Walt said, “I didn't mean to hit a nerve.”

“Not your fault,” Steve sighed. “Maybe I'm just getting too old for this crap. Maybe it is a good thing that this is going to be my last search before I retire. I had to walk out on a perfectly good round of golf to come here yesterday morning. That seems a shame to me, unless we find them. Since this is my last kick at it, I really would like a good ending to this one.”

“Let's see what we can do,” offered Walt.

“I wish it were that easy,” said Steve. The east wind was freshening.

“RCC for you,” Sylvia called out to Steve from the trailer door. He got to his feet and climbed the three steps into the trailer.

“McBain,” Steve said into the phone.

“Yeah, Steve, Paul Reynolds here at RCC. I made some progress on the foreign passenger NOK notifications. I thought I'd let you know where we stand.”

“Sounds good, you are saving me some time there,” Steve said.

“No problem, things are very quiet here, just one or two media calls. I told them what I could, just to keep them off your ass! I talked to the US Consulate in Vancouver about Ben MacKinstry. They are following up through the State Department to notify next-of-kin. It seems he's a well-known person in the US, at least they had heard of him. Apparently he owns a vast corporate empire all centered around the auto parts industry, has his own corporate jet, that sort of thing.”

“Oh great, just what I need, a missing foreign VIP-type,” said Steve. “This will bring the press out of the woodwork. What about the other two?”

“I talked to the consular departments at both the Italian and

Austrian embassies in Ottawa. They said that they would get back to me on it. No other info on them at this point. It sounds like the passengers were all on a fishing trip together, scheduled for the next week, so it is possible that no one is going to really miss them until the weekend, or until they get the phone call.”

“I am thinking that this could get real busy in the press department. I had one brief interview from the local paper today, but he submits to the Canadian Press, so it should all be out on the news wires this afternoon. I didn't give him the passenger names or nationalities, pending notification. I am thinking once the names and foreign connections get out there, that things will get hotter here,” Steve said, thinking it through.

“Do you want someone from Public Affairs up there?” Paul offered.

“Yeah I think that would be very helpful,” said Steve. “Can you arrange that or do I have to go through squadron and base HQ?”

“Naw, it'll be quicker if I make it happen from this end. We're regional and so are DND/IO. Besides we have lots of sway here, this is about the only operational thing happening right now. Public Affairs won't want to be left out.”

“Sounds good. I think I could use a met guy here too. The weather is going to be a factor for the next while and some help there would be useful.”

“You're better off hitting up the base for that,” Paul said.

“Yeah, I figured. Will do,” Steve replied. “Thanks for your help on the NOK issue. Let me know when you have more on that.”

“No problem.”

The office area was empty now, except for O'Brien manning the radios. He was scribbling in the radio log while keeping in touch with the military aircraft on HF and the civil PEP aircraft on the VHF radio.

“How are you doing there?” Steve said, once O'Brien had finished writing in the log.

“Just fine, sir. This is a blast. I love doing real operational work.”

“Well you are going to be busy for a while there, so pace yourself,” Steve said.

“Will do, sir.”

The rest of the crew were now all sitting outside at the old battered picnic table. Brenda and Sylvia were smoking cigarettes and Walt was talking with them. Steve sat down on the steps.

“I was talking to RCC, we're going to get a bit more help here, two

more bodies to come,” Steve said to the group, “We are going to have a Public Affairs person from DND/CI in Victoria. RCC is arranging that. When we get a confirmation of arrival here perhaps you can find him a room?” Steve indicated this to Brenda who quickly nodded.

“Walt, can you check in with Snake Ops and ask them to get us a met tech? I need someone who can do briefings, not just a weather observer,” Steve said. “Once they identify a name perhaps we can arrange transport from Comox to here for them. If Payne's Buff comes up perhaps he could come out with them, or if not maybe VU-33 could zip him up here.”

“Will do,” Walt replied, “that will give me a reason to see how Payne's plane is coming along anyway.” He got up and went back into the trailer to make the call.

“How are you two making out?” Steve asked Brenda and Sylvia.

“Having a ball,” Brenda replied, “this beats sitting around the orderly room back home.” Sylvia nodded in agreement.

“Well this could go on for a quite a while, so let me know if that creates problems for you,” Steve said, “the aircrew will start running out of hours within a couple of weeks and we will have rotate them home then.”

“If you're staying, we're staying, right Sylvia?” Brenda said flashing her infectious smile. Sylvia just nodded again. “We wouldn't want to miss all the fun.”

Monday 24 September 1984

1310 hours

Walt returned with news, “Ops will work on getting us a met tech and the Buff is still broken. They don't think it will be up before tomorrow at the earliest.”

“No sweat.” Steve exchanged a knowing glance with Walt. Anything that kept Payne in Comox and out of their hair was good.

The phone ringing brought Brenda to her feet and back into the trailer to grab it. Their break essentially over, the rest of the crew followed her inside. Steve and Walt studied the maps pinned to the walls, plotting out the blocks to be searched next. They knew that they would have to constantly shift priorities as the weather allowed some areas to be searched and not others. Steve decided that Walt was doing a good job organizing the details of the search. It was a relief to have that covered, leaving him to take care of some of the bigger issues.

Brenda hung up the phone and came back to the map area to let

Steve and Walt know the news. “That was a Major Krepinski from DND/IOI. He is coming up to join us here tomorrow, via airline, ETA 1030.”

“RCC moves in mysterious way,” Walt noted.

“Yeah they are quick – they have connections,” Steve added. “Can you book him a room and all that?” Steve said to Brenda.

“Already done,” she responded quickly. “We’ll even go and pick him up over at the terminal.”

“You’re spoiling me,” Steve said.

“Trying to,” Brenda replied, smiling brightly.

Steve avoided her look, it worried him in some undefinable way. “Well, it will be medals all around when we get done,” he joked. Steve turned to Walt. “Any sign of those extra Hueys, yet?”

“Haven’t heard a thing,” Walt responded. “I can check with their Ops, if you want to know where they are?”

“That might help us plan what to do with them and when,” Steve said, looking at the deployment list Walt had pinned to the wall.

Walt flipped through his notes to find the number for 408 Squadron Ops in Edmonton and dialed the number. Steve went through his checklists once again to make sure nothing had been missed and looked over Walt’s plan for the search. It all looked complete enough at this stage.

Walt was done on the phone. “408 says that the Twin Huey should be here pretty soon, it’s only 320 nautical miles from Namao. They could almost make it here on one tank of gas, but with the headwinds they had to stop in Hinton for fuel. They left at 0800 this morning Alberta time. He should be able to get to Lillooet today, it’s only two hours more flying time. I am going to assign them a block to search on the way there, if they get here in time to do that before dark.”

Steve considered Walt’s planning. “Okay, that all depends on them getting here in serviceable shape, too,” he said slowly, “did you talk to Cold Lake?”

“Briefly,” Walt stated. “They have a little further to come, obviously, so it looks like they’ll be here closer to dark today. I was planning on sending them out tomorrow.”

“Do we have rooms for them all booked?” Steve asked.

“Brenda has it already done for here and for Lillooet too.”

Steve nodded thoughtfully, “Of course she does.” *Considering the complexities, it is all running smoothly, he thought, deceptively smoothly. Maybe I am just getting old and cynical, but most searches don’t work this well, things have to get worse here, sooner or later.*

In the distance could barely be heard the distinctive “thump-

thump” of a Huey helicopter. Walt looked up. “That will be the boys from 408, I would expect.” The sound grew louder.

The phone rang and Brenda Fineworth answered it. She called Steve, “A Mr 'Sparky' Smith for you.”

Steve took the call.

“Smith, here again. I found something I thought you ought to know about. A courier package just came in today. When they couldn't get a hold of Schmidt they called me. I opened it up, it is the Cessna 310's ELT. It was out in Victoria for servicing. I had no idea it had been sent, but then he didn't need me to remove it or put it back in. Thought you'd like to know.”

Steve considered the information. “I don't suppose he had two of them?”

“No,” Smith said, “Did you get a hold of Lorraine Schmidt?”

“Yes, I did,” Steve answered, leaving it at that.

“Was she any help?”

“Not a lot, but it was a worthwhile lead.” Steve replied, “‘no stone unturned’ is our motto on this search. Thanks for the information. Keep in touch.”

“Okay.” He hung up.

Steve joined Walt outside and they watched the fat green shape of the Twin Huey make a quick flaring 'button hook' turn into wind and touch down on the ramp, not far from the trailer. The thumping sound of its blades ceased as the pilot wound the throttles down to cool the engines before shutdown. One of Mac's Shell jet fuel trucks was waiting nearby for the quick sale. *No doubt he is cleaning up*, Steve noted.

After the blades sailed to a stop with help from the rotor brake, the flight engineer lassoed the rotor blade with the tie-down strap with its tennis ball threaded on the end and quickly tied the blade down to the tail of the Huey. The fuel truck moved in close to the right hand side of the helicopter.

With the noise abated Steve mentioned 'Sparky' Smith's phone call to Walt. Walt laughed out loud. “Man that is funny, are you sure this guy wants to be found?”

“Well he hasn't really made it easy on us. If you think about it though, what's the difference between an ELT that didn't go off on impact and one that wasn't installed in the first place? More than half of them don't go off when the plane hits the ground anyway, broken antennae, aircraft upside-down on top of the antennae, aircraft sinks in the water or burns up. No difference, really in my mind. This doesn't change our job at all.”

“Was that even legal to fly without it?”

“Doesn't matter a lot at this point, because we still have to look for them, but yeah, the civil Air Regs don't require it, if it is out for maintenance. Amazing, isn't it, eh?”

The pilot from 408 Squadron strode purposefully over to the trailer while the rest of his crew refueled the aircraft and inspected it to fly again. He was wearing a dark green flight suit with a Canada Goose badge on it and blue squadron baseball hat. He was a very young-looking Lieutenant, shorter than Steve. The rest of his crew had slunk off to use Mac's washroom.

Steve introduced himself. The 408 pilot said, “I'm Lt. Gary O'Dale, 408 Tactical Helicopter Squadron, we're here to find your missing plane for you.”

Steve and Walt couldn't help exchanging smiles – toy soldiers.

Steve decided to try to mitigate this Tac Hel attitude with a more Air Transport Group style, “We're very happy to have your help here on this search. It could be a long one as we don't have a lot to go on and there is lots of ground to cover. We are going to deploy you and your crew to Lillooet to work out of there. You'll be given a search task on the way down south, so we can put you to work right away. My deputy here, Captain Ashbury, will give you all the details, and MCpl Fineworth has your hotel reservations.”

“Thank you, sir,” O'Dale said. “We are here to fly.”

“Well you will get lots of that, if you don't mind flying lines back and forth,” Steve smiled. “Did your crew get lunch?”

“Namao's finest box lunches enroute, sir.”

“Good, we don't want you to go hungry.” Steve left Walt to brief O'Dale and walked away, shaking his head.

When O'Dale was briefed and the Twin Huey was starting up. Walt and Steve sat at the picnic table and watched them go.

“Well..?” Steve asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Oh I think they will be okay. They had their own maps at least and brought a couple of techs for spotters. I'll check in with them regularly and make sure they don't get into trouble. If it looks like they aren't handling the remote location well we can move them back here and send the Cold Lake bird to Lillooet instead. That will probably be a somewhat older crew.”

“Okay,” Steve said. They both burst out laughing.

“Man those Tac Hel types need to loosen up a bit,” Walt said, shaking his head. “Too many field deployments to Wainwright I think.”

Wainwright was the army exercise area an hour and a half east by Huey from their home base in Edmonton. It was where 408 Squadron crews spent a lot of their lives.

“So maybe a hotel in Lillooet will be a vacation compared to Wainwright for them?” Steve offered.

Walt was still chuckling to himself. The Twin Huey lifted into a hover and accelerated across the ramp into the east wind. It turned sharply south and climbed away. As its roar and thump died away into the distance the airfield was bathed in an eerie silence, punctuated only by the sound of the wind. Steve felt the odd quiet loneliness that seemed to fill the space where the Huey's rotor noise had been.

Monday 24 September 1984

1625 hours

The afternoon was passing quickly and the constant supply of coffee helped. Steve knew that there was much still to do. He was waiting for more information on the nexts-of-kin from Paul at RCC and for reports from the aircraft out searching. *Running a search is mostly about waiting*, he noted. *Of course the people we are looking for are also waiting, at least hopefully they are waiting.*

The search HQ team seemed to be working well together, Steve observed. Of course it was only the first day in what could be a long operation. As he knew from past searches, things could get tense after a couple of weeks, tempers get frayed. *Just things to watch out for*, he thought to himself.

The pressure was all self-imposed. Everyone wanted to be a hero and get the job done successfully, but as long as the search was conducted by the book and all areas covered, no gaffes in front of the press or relatives, then there would be no admonishments from the military chain of command, even if the search object was not found and no one actually rescued.

That the pressure was self-imposed indicated the real risk. Wanting to succeed made the crews take chances and that could lead to mistakes. Steve knew it was all due to wanting too much. The key thing was to follow procedures, fly the search patterns by the book and complete the tasks. Finding the survivors was almost a bonus for flying the procedures right. Anything else could be dangerous, in more ways than one.

Still, Steve knew that this was his last kick at it. The temptation to want to succeed was strong. Who wants to retire and be known as “the guy

who followed procedures well”? Better to be a success and leave at the top of your game.

All these thoughts ran through Steve's head as he waited for the day's search reports to come in.

Monday 24 September 1984

1703 hours

Walt was taking phone calls from the aircraft captains as they reported in at the end of the day's searching. The reports all indicated “nothing found”, but a fair amount of ground was searched to a reasonable degree of coverage. Steve read over Walt's shoulder as he updated the SAR diary from his phone notes.

Most of the searching had gone routinely. There was Rescue 306's hoisting of a SAR tech to check out the one old crash site. The other Lab had become unserviceable shortly after lunchtime and had returned to Comox. They hadn't got far from base when they had a hydraulic system caution light. After landing the technicians had discovered that it was a failed pump. The aircraft would be back serviceable by the next morning.

“Lance” Lancemeir's Buffalo would recover in Comox for the night for an inspection and pick up the met tech the next day and bring him to Prince George.

The PEP Cessna 172 that had flown out of Victoria International hadn't been able to complete its afternoon patterns on Vancouver Island due to the weather. They had done what they could and returned to Victoria. Walt had noted what remained to be completed there. It was mostly in the “under-fly” area, that part of the search that covered the possibility that the aircraft crashed before even turning to go towards destination, essentially on the other side of the airport, the wrong way. The chances of finding them there were statistically slim, but the book said that it had to be covered. Walt had assigned the 172 to cover dry land, not wanting to send the small, single engined aircraft to check the islands in the Straits of Georgia. He had detailed the islands to the military aircraft with their twin engines, life rafts and survival gear.

Now, late in the day, it was raining in Comox. Further north along the Pacific coast and in the Queen Charlotte Islands the weather was coming down in fog, drizzle and rain.

The two Prince George-based PEP aircraft and the Cessna 206 from Williams Lake all had landed safely. Mark Abercromby had passed his report in person at the trailer and had headed home. The PEP crews

seemed to be enjoying themselves and the chance to fly on a real search, instead of just training flights.

With the last of the day's reports entered, Steve called RCC Victoria to give them an update. As he talked he could hear the telltale thump of a Huey helicopter approaching, its sound emerging from within the east wind, already close to the airport. Hanging up the phone Steve looked questioningly at Walt.

"Cold Lake," Walt said in response to the look. Steve went outside the trailer to see them arrive.

Like the 408 Squadron Twin Huey, the one from Base Flight Cold Lake made a sharp 'button hook' turn and landed into the wind on the ramp. Mac's fuel truck was ready. This helicopter was painted the same dark green and gray camouflage as the 408 one, but its large, sliding passenger doors were painted yellow, one concession to its local SAR role at CFB Cold Lake.

The Twin Huey sat on the ramp with its main rotor blades at flat blade pitch, its twin Pratt and Whitney PT6 engines whistling at idle for the prescribed two minute cool down period. Finally the pilot snapped the throttles off together and the sound died away, leaving nothing but the wind's song across the airport ramp.

The Cold Lake crew's flight engineer tied the blade down, while the captain walked over to the trailer. Steve watched him approach, by his walk he was obviously an older man than the 408 aircraft captain had been. As he got closer Steve recognized him as Captain Mike Bertkowiz, a pilot from the same T-33 flight training course Steve had graduated from at RCAF Station Gimli in 1956. They had often crossed paths over the years in Officers' Messes and on Boeing service flights going to courses.

"Hey Mike," Steve said, happy to see an old face. "Looks like an old farts reunion!"

"Steve, it's a good thing that you're Searchmaster on this one, 'cause you are too old to fly." Mike shook Steve's hand and slapped him on the back.

"Don't I know it, I am done at the end of the year. 1985 is going to be a big year for golf."

"I guess it will be, I have two more years. I'm having too much fun in Cold Lake," Mike said. "I'm running a B&B on the side up there, get lots of fisherman in the summertime. Say do you need us to fly anywhere now?"

"Tomorrow," Steve said.

"Button her up," Mike shouted across the ramp to his crew. They

pulled out the engine inlet bungs and the high-wind tie downs and readied the aircraft to spend the night outdoors.

"Let's pack her in for the day," Steve said to Walt, who had followed him onto the ramp. It didn't take the SAR headquarters crew long to lock everything up for the night and get ready to go. It had been a long day and everyone was ready for a break.

"We don't have hotel reservations, where are you staying?" Mike asked.

"I suspect that you do have reservations," Steve said wryly, looking at Brenda, who was sitting at the picnic table, next to where Steve was standing.

"How many in your crew?" Brenda asked.

"Just three of us," Mike replied.

"You're booked," she said quickly.

Mike turned to Steve. "I'm impressed, you run a tight ship here."

Steve just smiled. "No choice, it runs itself. We'll even give you a ride into town. We have a van."

"Ah, a full-service SAR," Mike said with a laugh, "My kind of holiday."

Monday 24 September 1984

1810 hours

Back at the hotel Brenda had ensured that Mike Bertkowiz's crew got checked in.

Steve and Walt went to the hotel bar and took a table. Steve ordered a beer and Walt a ginger ale. They went over the day's events. Steve was pleased, Walt was working out well as Assistant Searchmaster, which left Steve more time to look at the bigger issues of the operation, like manpower and the next-of-kin problem. Having Walt there was saving him time and effort.

They discussed the deployment of aircraft. Steve was quite concerned about the rookie 408 Squadron crew in Lillooet. Walt had talked to the aircraft captain after they had landed in Lillooet and O'Dale had checked in from a pay phone at the airport.

"How did he sound?" Steve asked.

"Fine," Walt shrugged. "They covered their assigned square okay on the way in there. They got refueled okay and they had Brenda's hotel reservations in hand. They seem to be able to work all right on their own. What are you afraid of?" Walt asked.

"I just don't want any screw-ups on this SAR. Maybe I just don't trust those Tac Hel guys to stay out of trouble," Steve responded.

"Maybe we should give them a break and see what they can do there? We always have the Cold Lake bird we can swap into Lillooet if need be," Walt reminded him, matter-of-factly, "I am keeping a close eye on them, you know."

"It isn't you I don't trust," Steve said, "I just want to get this SAR completed neatly, without playing 'Face the Press' over something dumb."

"I hear you," Walt responded, "just try not to get too nervous on me, okay?"

Steve snorted. "What about this Kiowa?" he asked.

"Last I heard from 408 they ought to be here mid-day tomorrow. My thought was to hold them here and use them to chase up sighting reports. That should reduce the need to divert the other aircraft from their patterns unnecessarily. I don't see what else we can use them for, really."

"Well, plan to keep them as busy as possible. I don't want them underfoot, bugging us cause they aren't flying enough," Steve said with a note of indignation in his voice.

"Sounds to me like you don't want to share your SAR here with the Tac Hel boys."

"It isn't a matter of 'sharing my SAR', it is a matter of getting the job done without too many unneeded problems," Steve said. He didn't like Walt challenging him on his running of the show. They were both of the same rank, but Steve felt that his age and experience gave him authority, after all he was almost twice Walt's age.

"All we can do is keep an eye on everyone," Walt offered.

"I just don't want to be spending valuable time talking to local police and judges this time." Steve was growing agitated with the conversation.

"Roger," Walt said, to try to close the subject. "Going for dinner?"

"Got plans," Steve said, clipped.

"Have fun," Walt responded. Steve finished his beer, got up and strode out of the bar.

Walt shook his head, wondering what was eating the old guy.

Monday 24 September 1984

1907 hours

Back in his room Steve kicked off his boots and hung up his flying suit.

He sprawled out on the bed. The room was darkening quickly in the evening gloom; the curtains had been left closed by the cleaners. The room smelled of that disinfectant that hotels seem to prefer, lemon-something. It wasn't an unpleasant smell, but Steve thought that it was intended to give the impression that the room had been cleaned better than it really had been.

He felt annoyed and he wasn't completely sure why. Even knowing that annoyed him. He picked up the remote control and snapped on the TV, flipping through the channels. The news programming was all done and the evening had been relinquished to sitcoms. After a few minutes he felt calm enough to call Ellen.

He picked up the phone and dialed her number. She answered on the second ring and sounded noticeably different from the night before.

"Hello Steve," she said, without the harshness or suspicion in her voice that he had heard last night.

"Hey there," Steve took the lack of opposition as an invitation, "How was your day?"

"Oh, it was okay, same office, same staff, you know. Did you find your lost plane?"

"Not yet, it will probably take a while, not much to go on this time," Steve responded, "Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I haven't. I didn't feel very hungry when I got home from work. What have you got in mind?"

"Why don't I get some Chinese take-out and bring it over?" Steve offered.

"Why don't you take me out instead?" Ellen countered.

"I can do that, give me twenty minutes and I will be there."

"Okay, see you then."

Steve showered and dressed in a yellow polo shirt and Levis and the one non-uniform jacket he had packed. He carefully transferred his wallet, hotel key and the rental car keys from his flying suit to his jeans.

Outside night was gathering in the evening sky. The air smelled cool and moist on the fresh easterly breeze. Steve took the rental car and drove the short distance to Ellen's neighbourhood.

Ellen's was a working class area of houses built in the 1940s. It always reminded Steve of the PMQ housing at Comox. The houses were all the same three designs, clapboard siding all painted different colours. The area was what a real estate agent would call 'an established neighbourhood', with mature trees, sidewalks and straight streets. It lacked the cul-de-sacs and crescents of newer subdivisions built in the 1970s and

80s. Styles in housing change, but Steve liked Ellen's neighbourhood. He had visited it many times over the last eight years and it always felt as much like home as the PMQ patch in Comox did.

Steve parked the car in the street outside Ellen's bungalow. He walked to the front door on the short path from the road. The flower beds still had the flowers of late summer in them, Icelandic poppies, roses slowly decaying and dropping petals on the ground.

Ellen opened the door before Steve had a chance to ring the bell. She had obviously been watching for him. He smiled when he saw her. A fit, solidly-built woman of 44, Ellen was dressed in blue jeans and an Indian-style blouse. She wore a nylon jacket. Her collar-length blond hair framed a round face with obvious blue eyes. Steve was always amazed how pretty she really was, how well the years seemed to treat her.

She gave him a brief hug. He stopped her and kissed her, but she pulled away, laughing and said, "let's get some dinner, I'm hungry."

"Okay," Steve responded. "You look great, you know."

"Does that surprise you?" she said smiling at her feet.

"You always look great," he said, taking her hand, "I just like pointing it out to you."

She slid into the right seat of the car. Steve started the motor and pulled out. "Where shall we go?" he asked.

"How about The Waddling Duck?" she tried, naming a downtown pub.

Steve didn't want to drive back downtown, where he might run into members of the search HQ or aircraft crews. "How about that Italian place, just outside town?"

"Sure, that will do," she said.

He tried to engage her in conversation, but she seemed a bit detached.

"So what is new at work these days?" he tried.

"Not a lot, you know the insurance business, lots of phone calls and customers all day long." She laughed at how trite it sounded. "I don't have the exciting life that you have, looking for lost airplanes and hunters, rescuing drowning fisherman all day long."

He took the conversational bait, knowing it was a dead-end, anyway. "Well it may sound glamorous from a distance, but it is really just like any other job," he started. "Take this operation, for instance. Okay we have a lost airplane that we are looking for. But do you know how I spend my days?"

"How?" she asked, warming to the safety of the conversation.

“Sitting in an office, talking on the telephone to people.”

“You aren't flying?”

“Nope, not this time,” he said with some relish, “I'm relegated to office work, just like you are, except my office is an old trailer.”

“Ah, you love being in charge, even if you aren't actually flying.”

“It's okay, if you like talking to sarcastic Transport Canada employees all day long on the phone.”

“When you find them, you'll get the credit for it all,” she said with a warming smile.

“I'm really not convinced that we will find them, though,” Steve responded, seriously, “there isn't much to go on with this search. No good leads, no ELT signal, no one has seen a thing so far and now the weather is going to slow us down.” Steve turned on the wipers, the car's windshield was accumulating some drizzle, light, barely perceptible tiny drops.

“I don't know how you can go out there looking for people you think you won't find. It baffles me,” Ellen said, watching the streetlights passing distorted through the now wet windows.

“I guess it's like selling insurance, really, isn't it? Most of the policies you sell are never used, never collected on. Some searches aren't successful either.”

Ellen suppressed a laugh. “Ah, but that's the point. We hope to not pay out on policies. I thought in search and rescue the point was to find the people you are looking for.”

“Hmm, yeah, I see what you mean there,” Steve said thoughtfully. “You sell policies hoping they don't pay out; we look for lost airplanes hoping that we find them.”

“So what keeps you looking when you don't think you will be successful? Is it just 'hope' or 'caring' for those who are missing?”

Steve thought about Ellen's question. He parked the car at the restaurant. The parking lot was nearly empty, but then the hour was late for dinner and it was a drizzly Monday night in Prince George. It was unlikely to be busy, especially here outside town.

Steve answered her question, “I think it is just 'dogged perseverance', that keeps us looking, when the odds are bad, maybe 'duty'. We pride ourselves on not giving up.”

The restaurant was dimly lit by small wall-mounted lamps and table top candles mounted in old wine bottles. To Steve the atmosphere seemed perfect for a romantic dinner on a wet night. There was only one other couple in the restaurant, talking very quietly to themselves in a far-away corner.

As they shook the drizzle from their jackets they were met at the door by the hostess, a teenage girl with long, dark hair and slim, pretty features. Without a word she guided them to a table near the window and left them with menus. They settled into the small table. The drizzle, now heavier, coursed from the window panes, taking the lights of the street far away. The candle on the table flickered as they breathed.

Steve knew that the restaurant closed at nine o'clock. As they had sat down he had glanced at his watch; it was just after eight. That left them enough time to eat, but not dawdle all evening there. Steve had plans to take Ellen home.

The restaurant staff were keen to close on time and so dinner orders were taken promptly. A bottle of red wine was ordered and quickly brought to the table by the dark-haired hostess.

After she had ordered, Ellen excused herself to go to the washroom. Steve stared out the window and the dark street and the intimacy of the drizzle, the gloom. The candles reflected in the window and lit the droplets of water there.

Steve thought back over his relationship with Ellen. They had met in 1976 when Steve was on his first tour at 442 Squadron in Comox. She was then 36 years old and had been in Courtenay BC, on Vancouver Island, celebrating her recent divorce with a holiday. She had been visiting a girlfriend in Victoria and decided to drive to the northern part of the island to Port Hardy on her own, to see how far she could get. After a day in Ucluelet and Long Beach on the Pacific side, she had found herself in a bar in Courtenay.

Steve had been just coming off his ground tour as an RCC Controller in Victoria and was in Comox doing Lab helicopter refresher training prior to starting his posting there. Linda had still been at their home in Victoria and Steve had been on his own in Comox.

Ellen had been a carefree divorcée then, happy to be free of a bad marriage. Maybe she was just looking for some freedom and fun that night. After some drinks and a few dances they had spent the night in her motel room. Steve recalled lying next to her after they had made love, stroking her blond hair, letting it run through his fingers. It seemed like an hour or two's happiness. She had looked at him and asked, "Okay, so now what am I going to do with you?"

Steve remembered that conversation. He had said to her, "Well you could just throw me out, or I could come up to Prince George whenever I get a chance and we can see where this goes." She had thought about it for a few moments and then simply said, "Mmm...okay, I'm willing to give that

a try, but no promises.” On that they had agreed.

Ellen knew he was married, but on that night in 1976, she didn't care. She had lost respect for the concept of marriage during her own excursion into that institution. They had managed to get together a couple of times a year while Steve was in Comox during those years from 1976 to 1979. Then Steve had been posted to a ground job at Air Transport Group HQ in Trenton, Ontario in the summer of 1979. He had only seen her twice in that period, before returning to Comox in 1981. Since Steve had been posted back to Comox they had seen each other five times, usually on searches or cross country trips, but not since 1982. The opportunity just hadn't come up. The other aircrew in 442 knew that Steve liked to go to Prince George whenever he could, but they all had their own favourite places to go, so why would they say anything?

Did Linda suspect anything? Steve wasn't sure. She was often hard to get any real information out of. Linda could be sweet, could be distant, too, in an instant. She had once said it was to keep him on his toes. He visualized both women in his mind. Ellen was blond with fair skin and Linda was darker, with brown hair and brown eyes. He realized he didn't understand either one of them enough to be sure of what they would do.

Ellen had returned to the table and Steve was brought back from gazing out the window and the cold drizzle to the dim womb-like warmth of the table. She smiled at him and asked him what he looked so lost in thought about.

“I was just thinking about you,” he replied, “how we met and what I know about you. Sometimes I don't think I know a lot about you at all.”

She laughed. “There isn't that much to know, really, but perhaps 'all will be revealed' in due time,” she said with a put-on air of mystery. “I like that I don't know all that much about you, it stops me worrying about what you are up to when we aren't together.”

“I didn't know that you even thought about me when we aren't together,” Steve said with a small hint of indignation.

“Maybe I don't,” said Ellen, smiling the broad friendly smile that she had, teasing him.

Dinner arrived, brought by a young waiter, perhaps the owner's son. He brought pasta and bread in turn. They stopped talking to eat, immersed in the mounds of spaghetti that steamed into the night air.

Monday 24 September 1984

2105 hours

They had spent the evening talking about old times, laughing at the stolen moments they had found over the past eight years together. The candlelight, wine and the cool, wet night outside, motes of drizzle on the window, all created an introspective, intimate dinner.

Steve kept feeding Ellen memories, as though they were chocolate truffles. The light of the single candle on the table made her eyes sparkle. In the low light their light blue hue was lost to the darkness and the effect made her look darkly mysterious, like someone he had only just met. She seemed nostalgic and dreamy, but perhaps it was the effect of the wine, Steve thought. She was normally a pragmatic and sensible woman, at least in the time Steve had known her. In the early days she rode an undercurrent of bitterness towards relationships, but Steve always knew that it was a vestige of the divorce and the years before that and nothing he had personally done. He had worked hard to make things simple and devoid of the cynicism that she had felt then. For her part, she seemed to want something simple and sexual, robbed of the romance and intimacy that now seemed to envelope them like a fog cutting out the world.

Ellen laughed over a story that Steve was reminding her about. They had been together in Prince George and had run into Ellen's ex-husband on the street one evening, while going to dinner. Her ex had been unnecessarily rude to her, considering that they had split up fully six years before that meeting. Steve had defended her, pushing him away and leaving him in the street with the simple remonstrations, "Man, you blew it and gave up this great lady. Your loss, my gain, now get out of the way." It could have turned ugly fast, but the ex was too stunned to say anything. Steve had taken Ellen's hand and lead her away. Ellen was laughing over it, not because Steve had defended her, but because her ex had phoned her at work the next day and apologized for the encounter. He admitted that Steve was right, that he had been foolish to have lost her. She had laughed at him then and hung up on him. After years of making her miserable, she was now free. To Ellen it was funny because her ex had never admitted he had made a mistake in his life.

The staff of the restaurant were now pointedly cleaning up, sweeping floors and stacking chairs. Steve looked up from the candlelight, saw that the other guests had long gone and that the staff were keen to go home, too. He paid the bill, pointedly left a generous tip and took Ellen out into the drizzly night.

She seemed a long way away during the short drive home, staring out the window into the darkness. The lights from passing cars painted her blond hair with white light and then, as they passed she was again

immersed in the green light of the dashboard, creating a ghostly effect.

Steve pulled the rented car into Ellen's driveway once again. He felt buoyant, confident from the evening's reminiscences and the dreamy state that Ellen seemed to be in. He was counting on the closeness of the wet night, the candlelit memories, laughter, wine and food to work on her. He could already smell the scent of her skin close to him. He turned off the ignition and snapped off his seatbelt.

"Look, I can't invite you in," Ellen said, "thank you for the dinner and the laughs."

Steve was surprised and his face must have shown it, because, after looking at him, she continued without a pause.

"We've had a great time over the past eight years, but things change and I have to call it a day on all this. It really has been fun, but it couldn't last forever" She was turned in the seat, looking directly at Steve, the streetlight showing the blue in her eyes. She no longer looked dreamy, but determined now. She smiled at him in an attempt to show him that there were no hard feelings, that it wasn't his fault.

"I don't get it," he stammered, shaken, "what changed?"

"I really don't want to go into details," she said, "look, you don't know everything about me. We kept it simple and detached, which was fine. It helped, even. But I'm getting married at Christmas. I feel healed and you have been a big part of that."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, opened the car door and left. The door closed with a final clunk behind her. On the porch she had her keys in her hand quickly, opened the front door and let herself in. She didn't look back.

Steve was at a loss for words, even to himself.

Sitting in the driveway he felt the heat of eyes looking at him, neighbours, Ellen's fiancé whoever he was, everyone. He started the car and backed it into the deserted street and drove away slowly.

Ellen had been his safety net against the harshness of the world. He could not believe that she was gone. For the past eight years they had a secret together, a covert life of sorts, a concept he could count on, even when he didn't see her for a long time. She was a source of strength in his life, just being there, not making demands, not needing attention all the time. Their relationship was a constant in an ever-changing and slippery world.

For half an hour he drove the quiet, wet streets of Monday night Prince George. The houses in the residential areas had their lights on, they looked warm and safe, happy places, the blue glow of TV sets reflecting

from ceilings across the city.

Married? Steve thought. *Was she kidding me? She doesn't believe in marriage, she had said that so many times. She always wanted to be free instead. What changed?*

His head swam with the contradictions. He thought back over every meeting that they had had over the years, searching for a clue pointing to this event, but there was none. He shook his head and steered the car into the hotel parking lot.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

0725 hours

The morning was dim and gloomy, with a light rain falling from a thick layer of steel-gray nimbostratus cloud onto the asphalt parking lot outside the hotel. The parking lot had been well planned and in most places the rainwater found its way quickly to the grates and swirled into the city's storm water runoff system. Only in a few places, where patches had been applied to the parking lot, did water pool, showing the concentric circles of rain falling into the puddles.

Steve sat at breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, with the rest of the search HQ team and Mike Bertkowiz's Cold Lake helicopter crew. He had slept some, but his night had been filled with dreams of sinking, drowning in an ocean of black water that had the thickness of syrup. Swimming in it was exhausting and it always dragged him under.

As usual the hotel coffee was bad, but at least the toast was edible. Steve ate two slices with raspberry jam and idly considered the little packages of jam, peanut butter and marmalade that were stacked in the small chrome rack on the table. All the coffee shops had them. *Where did these coffee shops all get those identical chrome racks?* He wondered.

The others were talking about their evenings, enthusiastic with the excitement of the search operation and the new location, far from home. Steve listened to them laughing and talking and thought they all sounded like tourists on vacation. He felt distant and detached from their world.

Sylvia and Brenda had gone to see a movie. Walt was asking them about it.

"What did you finally see, that Muppet movie?" Walt asked.

"Har, har," replied Brenda with sarcastic emphasis, "We are more cerebral than that. They had a special showing of the top film from Cannes this spring, *Paris, Texas*.

"And how was that?" Walt inquired.

Sylvia answered him: "It was the saddest movie I have ever seen. Amazingly lonely."

"So that is good or bad?" Walt queried them.

"Good," Brenda and Sylvia both said together.

"I cried all night," Sylvia added.

"Sounds like an entertaining way to spend the evening," Walt added with a smirk, trying to be good-natured about it, even though he couldn't see the point of going to the movies to cry your eyes out.

"I suppose you just hung around the bar all evening?" Brenda jabbed back.

"Not at all," Walt said. "Tim, Mike's crew and I all went to the ballet." Walt touched his fingers over his head in a serene gesture that suggested the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Mike Bertkowicz grinned over his coffee.

"Ya know, pole dancing is not *true* ballet," Brenda shot back and they all laughed.

Walt retorted, "someone has to be the designated driver." He turned to Steve. "You're quiet this morning, boss. What did you get up to last night?"

"Hmm? Oh, not much, just went to catch up with some old friends," Steve said, absently.

"And did you?" Walt asked.

"Did I what?" Steve wasn't paying attention.

"Catch up with them?"

"No, not really," Steve said looking to deflect the line of questioning, "they were tied up."

"Another night, perhaps," Walt suggested hopefully.

"Have you looked at the weather for today?" Steve changed the subject to the search.

"You bet. This is it pretty much it for the whole search area for today and probably early tomorrow as well – below VFR and rain. I'll get the complete picture when we get to the trailer."

"Well we have lots to do at the trailer this morning," Steve said to the group. Turning to Mike, he added, "You guys may as well hang out here today, no need to sit around the trailer watching it rain, you can do that here. We can leave you the car if you like."

"Sounds good," Mike said. "We'll save our strength for the better weather, hopefully tomorrow. I have to go and buy my wife an anniversary gift anyway, even if I won't be home for it next week."

"Souvenir of Prince George?" Walt laughed, "that sounds

potentially pretty high class!”

Mike joked, “Hey you don't know my wife, she is really appreciates mining and logging.”

Steve suddenly realized that he hadn't called Linda last night on their anniversary.

“Come on,” Steve said to his HQ team, “let's get to work.”

Tuesday 25 September 1984

0825 hours

At the trailer everyone settled into the work that they had to get done quickly. Brenda and Sylvia were dealing with fuel invoices prior to going over to the terminal later that morning to pick up Major Krepinski from the airline flight.

Tim O'Brien got the radios tested, up and working. He managed to contact Lance's Buff, already airborne IFR out of Comox for Prince George on the HF radio. They were estimating being on the ground at 0945 hrs.

Steve asked Walt to check on where that 408 Squadron Kiowa was, after he got a complete weather briefing. With the weather down, it was likely that they would be stuck somewhere enroute, if they had even left yet.

Crews were checking in from Lillooet, Williams Lake, Victoria and 442 Ops in Comox. Everyone was stuck on the ground for weather. Steve talked to most of the crews, while Tim O'Brien caught a couple of the calls. For 45 minutes the phones were ringing.

Once Walt had the weather briefing he let Steve know the news. “We're pooched for today over the whole search area,” he pronounced, “maybe tomorrow afternoon.”

“Any reason to have the crews check in after lunch to see if it is going to get better?” Steve asked. Walt just shook his head. There was no point in having everyone on edge if the weather was not going to cooperate.

“Okay,” Steve said, “give the crews a day off and have them check in tomorrow morning.”

More calls were made to make sure the crews understood the weather picture. Steve talked to Major Payne at 442 Squadron Ops. His Buffalo had been fixed, a new prop governor had been installed and the aircraft ground run. Payne would test fly it when the weather picked up, probably tomorrow. Steve checked the status board and saw that Walt still

had that aircraft slated to search from Comox. *That's good work*, Steve thought, *we are on the same page when it comes to Payne*.

The Labrador helicopter that had returned to Comox with the hydraulic pump failure was also fixed, but needed a test flight as well.

There was lots going on, as usual.

Brenda interrupted Steve's thoughts. "Captain Reynolds for you," she reported, holding up the phone.

"Good morning, Paul," Steve said, "I guess you heard that we are stuck on the ground until at least tomorrow for weather, eh?"

"Yeah, no surprises there. Hey it is the "wet coast" after all."

"I see you have had your coffee already," Steve rejoined.

"Yeah, have to, there is lots going on here," Paul said.

"Another search?"

"No just working on yours for you. We heard back from the Austrians and Italians late last night. In both cases notifications to the families have been done. We had to give lots of the usual assurances that everything will be done, utmost skill and resources employed, blah, blah, blah," Paul said.

"Sounds pretty standard," Steve replied.

"I think you can expect some relatives to show up this week, by the sound of it. Just so you know."

"Hmm, it has been way too quiet here on that front compared to most searches, anyway," was all he said.

"It sounds like both those passengers were bigwigs in the auto parts industry as well. Perhaps that is where they all knew each other from. In the good ol' USA the MacKinstry family has been informed too. Sounds like lots of excited reactions going on there. Could get crowded in Prince George."

"That is funny, on the pilot's side I tracked down his ex-wife and no one seems very concerned there, except about support payments," Steve said.

Paul continued, "we have been getting press calls as well, CBC, CP, CNN, that sort of thing. I gave them the backgrounder on this, which isn't much. Expect some calls today, maybe even from the European press. Sorry, I can't keep them off your back permanently."

"No sweat, I have that DND guy coming here at 1030. I even have a vehicle detailed to pick him up at the terminal," Steve said, "I'll be counting on him to take the media heat. It sounds like we can release all the names involved to the press, if all the nexts-of-kin have been informed."

"Sounds safe to me at this point," Paul responded. "Anyway, gotta go here. Do you need anything else?"

Steve considered the question. "Not at this point, but keep your pencil sharpened."

"Will do." He hung up.

Brenda was waiting for Steve with another phone call. She held up the phone, with her hand over the microphone. "CBC, Toronto," she said.

"Please let all the media that call know that we'll hold a complete briefing at 1300 hours," Steve told her, "That'll let Major Krepsinski handle it all and give me a chance to brief him on it all first."

"Sounds good," she replied.

By now, the phones were ringing almost continuously. Earlier it had been the crews calling in, now it was the media. Soon the families would be phoning, too. Everyone was working hard taking the calls. As soon as there was an open line Steve grabbed the phone and called George Withers at the PG Citizen.

"Citizen, Withers here."

"Good morning George, Steve McBain here at SAR headquarters. I have the list of names of the people we are looking for and I can release them to you at this point."

"Oh good," Withers began. "Go ahead." Steve read him the list. "Any news on the search that I can print? I guess you aren't flying today, are you?"

"Quite true, the weather will delay the search until at least tomorrow," Steve confirmed, "We are going to do a full press briefing at 1 pm today, but it is mostly going to be background for those new to the story. You can show up if you like. I can't say there'll be any breaking news, though it might be a chance to ask some more questions."

"Okay, if I can be there, I will," Withers said.

Steve looked at his watch. It was quarter to ten already. The morning was going very quickly and there wasn't even any flying going on. The smell of coffee wafted through the trailer, keeping the dampness at bay. The windows on the east side of the trailer were splattered with rain.

Steve poured a cup of coffee from Sylvia's coffee pot. "You are a life-saver, Sylvia," Steve saluted her with his cup. The finance clerk looked up from her invoices, smiled and blushed.

Outside the rain was driven by the wind from a leaden gray sky. People stayed indoors as much as they could to avoid the day.

I wouldn't want to be out there camping in this weather, Steve thought to himself.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

0947 hours

“Lance” Lancemeir was letting his co-pilot fly the instrument approach to Prince George. *Nothing like getting some real-life actual instrument time*, he thought with a smile.

Lt James Charny gripped the controls of the Buffalo, righting it in the turbulence as it bounced around. He was hand-flying the ILS approach to Runway 15 at Prince George for the first time since arriving at 442 Squadron that spring. Lance was giving him every opportunity to gain experience the hard way.

“Rescue 462 is cleared the ILS approach runway 15, report the ZXS beacon to tower on 118.3.”

Lance replied to Vancouver Centre, “Rescue 462, cleared the ILS, over to tower at the NDB.” He looked at James, who was visibly sweating, while following the needles of the ILS. Outside the windshield the world was a sheet of gray and rain.

With briefings for the approach complete, all that remained for Lance to do was monitor the approach and take over to land the aircraft at 200 feet, hopefully. If they didn't see the ground, it was around for one more try before heading back to Comox. The latest actual at Prince George was reporting a ragged ceiling at 200 feet and one mile visibility, very close to limits, so they might get in, they might not.

The Buffalo passed the NDB and the ADF needle swung from nose to tail on the indicator. Lance called Prince George Tower while James did his pre-landing 5T check and called for half flap to be extended.

“Prince George Tower, Rescue 462, by the ZXS for landing.” Lance sounded relaxed as the Buffalo hit a bad bump and James levelled the wings smartly once again.

“Roger Rescue 462, cleared to land, wind zero-nine-zero at 15 gusting to 20. The missed will be the published missed approach if you need it.”

“Runway lighting strength five, please,” Lance requested the brightest intensity to help penetrate the low cloud and fog.

“They are up all the way,” came Tower's response.

Lance counted the altitude down as the Buff descended on the electronic glideslope of the ILS. “One hundred above,” he pronounced carefully. The view out of the windshield was still obscured by cloud. Then a bit of ground hove into view and disappeared again, then another bit.

“Minimums, I have control,” Lance said crisply and James dropped the controls limply, looking up to see the high intensity approach lights leading to the dim outline of the runway in the rain.

The windsock was showing a strong crosswind. Lance deftly lowered the left wing and slipped the big transport into the the wind, pushing opposite rudder to line the fuselage up with the runway. Flaring the plane over the numbers Lance carefully put the left main wheel down and rolled the Buffalo on one wheel while slowing and cranking in more aileron to held it in that position. He carefully lowered the right main and lastly the nose wheel down and called for reverse thrust.

“Welcome to Prince George,” Tower said. “Right turn on Delta, contact ground on 121.9.”

Pulling off the runway onto taxiway Delta, James dialed the VHF radio over to Ground Control. The rain beat down and the copilot adjusted the windshield wipers to a slower speed for taxiing.

Setting the brakes on Apron II, Lance cooled and then shut the two General Electric CT64 engines down.

“Good approach,” Lance said to James. “Hope you brought your umbrella.”

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1040 hours

The rain fell, splashing and filling puddles in every low spot, driven across the airport's ramp by the east wind. The feeling of the oncoming wet BC winter was in the air. It was on search days like this, when no searching could be done, that Steve often thought about where the crash survivors could be. Were they huddled under a piece of tarp, unable to even light a fire to stay warm or were they already dead? Not being able to get on with the job of finding them annoyed Steve.

Lance's crew had closed up their Buffalo, left it chocked on the ramp in the rain and after checking in at Search HQ had gone to the hotel to kick back and relax. While Steve had been happy that they had made it back to PG, he was more happy to have them out of the trailer when there was nothing for them to do there. He had asked Sylvia to take the van and drop the crew off at the hotel and then go over to the airport terminal to pick up Major Krepinski. It was getting very busy.

Lance's Buffalo had brought Sgt Dave Szerzy, the met tech, from the base at Comox. Szerzy was a large, balding and amiable man and Brenda had found some space for him to work in the trailer. In the end she

settled on borrowing a small table from Mac's Shell hangar for him. The office space in the small trailer was getting crowded. Walt and Tim moved the dividers back a couple of feet, making a bit more room, but eating up briefing room space.

Walt gave Szerzy a run-down on the operation and then left him to set up his maps and draw his surface analysis charts. The meteorology technician confirmed that the next 24 hours would be a washout, but that gave him time to get ready for tomorrow, when he would brief the crews at 1000 hrs. Hopefully the weather would become flyable after that.

Steve watched his operation getting bigger. So far it was manageable, but it was growing fast. Brenda was working on getting some table space for Major Krepinski, who would be arriving shortly. For that, Tim had retrieved yet another small table from Mac's hangar. This one was a different height from the others and didn't fit well so they decided to leave it in the briefing area, rather than move the dividers once again, solving the problem. Another phone line was run to that desk and an old phone retrieved from the containers on the ramp.

Things were almost arranged when the trailer door flew open and a large man entered. Major Krepinski was followed into the trailer by Sylvia Cardinal. He shook the rain from his coat and looked around at the dingy trailer.

Steve watched the Major take his coat off. He was dressed in an army combat uniform and carrying a thick hard-sided attache case. McBain was counting on the Major to take some of the media heat from him. Steve had spent a good part of the morning answering the phone, along with everyone else there. Media attention on the search was building.

Steve met the Major at the door. "Nice of you to come, sir," Steve said, shaking hands with Krepinski.

"Well this looks more operational than sitting in a navy office dockside," Krepinski said looking around.

"Yes, we have quite a media show brewing here," Steve added, "I can use your help handling them, so I can get on with running the search."

"Pretty much as I figured," Krepinski said. "No problem, I can keep the media busy and out of your shorts."

"That'll help a lot, but we do use the media to help generate leads as well from sighting reports, it is a bit of a two-way street, kind of like police work."

"Well, let's get started," Krepinski said, "when can I get brought up to speed?"

"We have a media briefing scheduled for 1300 and it looks like we

may have a crowd, so we better get you briefed right away,” Steve said, looking at his watch. It indicated 1105 already. “The most important thing to remember is not to promise results. We are here to try to find the survivors, but we can't guarantee that we will. Especially in this part of the world, a lot of missing aircraft never get found.”

“Got it,” Krepinski pronounced. “No promises.”

Steve introduced Krepinski to the rest of the HQ team and explained what everyone did. The Major wrote quick notes as he listened. He seemed to Steve to be conscientious about getting the details right. He even double checked the spelling of everyone's names.

After a quick overview of the SAR operation and search object itself, Steve left Walt to give the Major the complete run-down on the aircraft deployments, areas already searched and other details. Brenda had already reserved a hotel room for him. Everything looked to be under control for now.

Brenda approached Steve. “I was thinking we should pick-up some lunch again today, subs. Saves time instead of everyone going out for lunch.” It didn't sound like a question.

“Sounds fine to me,” Steve responded. “Is this going to be a problem for the claims?”

“Nope,” Brenda cut back, “bulk claim, Sylvia has it all handled.”

Steve managed a smile. “I am glad you are on our side, I'd hate to fight a war against your amazing logistics.” She looked very tiny and slim, even compared to his five foot eight inches of height. Steve wondered if she even weighed 100 pounds. She seemed to be a dynamo inside, however, always one step ahead of him.

Brenda flashed a quick smile, “I always say, if you can't be efficient then you should just stay in bed.”

Steve considered her words and chose a response carefully. “So, you are just a bundle of efficiency from the moment that you get out out bed each day?”

“Ha,” she said, “even before that!” She left to organize lunch. Steve just had to smile and shake his head. *When does she slow down*, he wondered, *when the coffee runs out?*

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1134 hours

“Walt, did you track down that Kiowa yet?” Steve asked, looking at the aircraft status board.

"Let me call 408 on that, I've been kinda tied up here," Walt responded, indicating Major Krepinski and Sgt Szerzy.

Steve gazed out the window of the trailer at the rain pouring down. *'Liquid sunshine' the people of BC call it*, he noted.

"I found that Kiowa," Walt said, jolting Steve from his thoughts, "408 says that they checked in from Jasper. Probably stay the night there and get here tomorrow, with the weather and all." Jasper was a tourist town, renowned for its skiing, but would be fairly quiet at this time of year.

"Jasper, eh?" Steve replied. "Talk about holiday trips! There would be nothing for them to do here anyway today. We'll put them to work when they get here. Maybe we'll have some sighting reports by then for them to chase up."

Major Krepinski was diligently working on his notes at the table Brenda had found for him. He didn't seem to mind the austere conditions in the trailer. Despite the cold, wet day, the trailer was reasonably warm with the heat of the people working and the coffee pot, which was plugged in all day long. Krepinski studied the maps of the areas searched and the trace of the whole search area to be covered.

Brenda interrupted Steve's thoughts. "A Mrs MacKinstry on the phone for you." This was the start of the calls Steve hated most – dealing with the relatives.

"Searchmaster, Captain McBain, speaking."

"I told him to not go on these flying fishing trips, I told him that they were too dangerous, but he always insisted and now look what's happened. When are you going to find him?"

The speaker had a mid-western American accent. Steve took a deep breath. "Ma'am, we are doing our best to find the missing aircraft, we have a lot of ground to cover and it may take some time. Whom am I speaking to?"

"Loretta MacKinstry, I'm Ben MacKinstry's wife, you have to find him quickly, he has board meetings next week and our oldest daughter is getting married in less than two weeks. If he ever listened to me that would be the first time ever. No, he has to go on this silly fishing trips, he never listens. How many aircraft do you have in the air looking for him today?"

The question caught Steve off guard. "Um...none today..." he managed.

"What?" she screeched.

"Mrs MacKinstry, the weather here is awful today, pouring rain and fog, the search crews wouldn't be able to see anything out there. As soon as the weather is good enough we will be out there again, I promise

you.”

“You obviously don't have the right people or equipment up there. I'm going to phone a friend of mine who is a senator and get you some American search planes right away. I'll be there myself this afternoon by company jet to make sure everything is done right.”

“Your husband's company has an aircraft?” Steve asked.

“We have three, actually,” she snorted, “three jets all based here in Tulsa, we use them to run the company, they are not toys you know.”

“I'm sure they aren't, ma'am. Do you know if the company owns any Canadian aircraft?”

“No of course not, what would we need Canadian aircraft for?”

“Just checking, ma'am,” Steve said.

“I'll be there by the end of the day. You just find him.” She hung up.

Walt was sitting there grinning at Steve. “Nice people?” he asked innocently. She was loud enough that he had heard her tirade from where he sat.

“Oh, yeah,” Steve began, “the most genteel and polite. I am sure her presence here will be a real asset. I think I will have some extra work for the good Major to take care of.”

Walt laughed out loud.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1206 hours

Brenda had brought lunch and the newly expanded Search HQ crew sat in the trailer eating, while the deluge fell in sheets outside. The HQ now consisted of seven personnel working in the trailer. Unlike yesterday's lunch, today's was less a group event; most of the staff ate at their desks, answering phones and listening out on the radios.

The Major was assembling his briefing notes into a press release and typing it up for the press conference at 1300. The reporters would be arriving soon.

Steve and Walt sat together in the briefing area, eating and going over the plans. Steve didn't want the press to ask any questions that he couldn't answer with confidence. He hated getting caught out by the press and that often seemed like their aim. The key was confidence and preparation.

The deployments looked fine, the areas to be searched organized by priority. The rain beating against the flat roof of the trailer explained the

lack of plan execution. The windows of the trailer were steamed up. Between the weather and the lack of useful activity that it imposed, the day felt oppressively gloomy, the optimism wrung out of it.

The Major left to go over to the hangar to make copies of his press release on Mac's photocopier. Steve had read the single page backgrounder before he went and told the Major it looked fine.

Walt ate his lunch in silence and Steve listened to the rest of the crew chattering in the front office. On the other side of the dividers they sounded far away, in a different, more cheerful world.

The rain hissed on the roof and gurgled in the drains. Steve's thoughts drifted away. He knew that the press would all be arriving soon and he allowed himself the luxury of some private moments, knowing he would have to be focused again very soon.

Steve thought about Ellen. Her being here in town was the main reason he had put the Search HQ in Prince George in the first place, rather than left it at home to work out of the 442 Squadron hangar. *Well not quite*, he thought, *It was always nice to be away from base and have some autonomy and space to work*. But those were mostly excuses and Steve knew that. Ellen was gone and that made the whole trip a bit of a washout.

Did I really take her for granted, Steve wondered, *or was it just the way the world works, too much distance and not enough time available?* He decided that Ellen splitting was inevitable. Perhaps he should have been better prepared for it, but it had to happen sooner or later, there was nothing he could have done, given the circumstances. *We had some fun, but I knew it couldn't last*, he thought. He decided that the best approach was to just wish her happiness in life and leave it at that. He committed to raising a glass of beer in honour of her new life and the fun they had had, the next time he had a glass of beer in his hand. Case dismissed.

Steve thought about his wife Linda. She would really be miffed that he forgot to call her on their anniversary. She was already not pleased that he was away. *Did she know about Ellen?* Steve wondered. *Not a chance*, he decided, *how could she?* Besides he hadn't done anything for her to be mad at, not on this trip.

No, he decided that Linda would be miffed that he was out of town for their anniversary and double-miffed that he didn't call. But being away for important dates was part of the job. She knew that there was no guarantee that he would be home for birthdays, Christmas, children's births or any other events. It was just part of the deal – 'No Life Like It' the recruiting ads said these days. *Ain't that the truth*, Steve smiled to himself.

No matter, he would think of a good excuse why he hadn't called.

After all they had been married 29 years, it was a long time to not give each other at least a little slack, especially where work was concerned, wasn't it? He would definitely call her tonight and apologize for missing the call. 'Exigencies of the mission'. That would be fine, he decided. She accepted that his career was much more demanding than her job selling ICBC at the insurance office in Courtenay.

The rain continued its hum on the roof. Walt was studying the map on the wall. Steve thought about retirement. Only a few months to go. He calculated that his last day for work would be December 15th. That would be good – guaranteed to be home for both Christmas and New Year's this year. Then a new year and a new life. Golfing would start in earnest in March, although getting in a few games in January or February was not out of the question - not in Comox anyway. But first they would have to find a new place to live. Retirement meant being kicked out of government housing once all his leave and other time had run out some time next year. No matter, they had been half-heartedly looking at houses for sale in Courtenay and Comox. They had quite a bit of money saved up and sitting in the bank for just this, finding a house and buying it should be an easy task, early in the new year.

What would it be like being retired? Steve wondered. It could a life of just Sundays and nothing else. That sounded attractive. Sleep in, play golf, maybe mow the lawn at his new house, have his golfing buddies over to sit on the patio and drink beer. *Doesn't sound too bad at all.* He knew some people who had retired and dropped dead within six months. *Just couldn't make the transition,* Steve decided. You need the right attitude and not to feel guilty for not going to work. *At some point you have done enough work and you have earned a break.* Steve felt like he needed a break often these days.

What about the job at hand? Steve thought about the SAR. On some levels it was an annoyance. *How stupid do you have to be, going flying with paying customers on board in rotten weather without an ELT and crashing out there in the bush somewhere? Why should I go and look for you?* Steve knew that no matter how stupid Canadians could be, that the government had pledged to go and find them. *Okay, fair enough,* he thought, *But could you at least leave us a clue as to where you are?* He felt like a detective, like Joe Friday, working on a case. *Not much to go on, ma'am.* He smiled to himself at that thought.

His thoughts went on. Did he really care about finding them? It was his job and he was certainly dedicated to that job, but was he literally 'his brother's keeper'? No, he didn't know these people who were missing

and he just couldn't picture them, couldn't care about them on a personal level. He was being paid to do a job and he would do that job. Fair enough. The search lines would be flown, the right boxes ticked off and the checklists completed. If he found them then that was a coincidental bonus of doing the job right, plus some dumb luck, mostly on their part.

There was one nagging doubt, though. He was done soon and there would be no more SARs for him. This was probably going to be his last big one, his last SAR. He wanted to go out at the high point of his game, not with nothing to show for it. Airplanes lost – one. Airplanes found – zero. It just didn't sit right.

He thought about it. When he would walk into the Officer's Mess on a Friday night in the summer of 1985, in his golfing clothes, he wanted the young SAR pilots to whisper to each other. “You know who that is? Steve McBain, the famous searchmaster! Just before he retired he found that missing Cessna 310. Yeah, they were gone two weeks, no ELT, no clues, nothing. He just had this weird intuitive hunch and pulled them out of the bush. They were cold and hungry, but still alive when he found them. Just like magic. No one knows how he did it.”

That was it. He wanted this one. He decided he would find them at any cost.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1253 hours

Krepinski opened the door and came in out of the rain. He had his press releases wrapped in a plastic bag to keep them dry. Right behind him were the first of the press to arrive, a CBC-TV crew.

Steve was awoken from his thoughts. *Back to reality.*

With the news crews gathered, George Withers from The Citizen and Steve chatted as the others were getting set up. Everyone was trying to squeeze into the small trailer and shake off the rain. The floor quickly became wet.

Withers told Steve that the search was big news in Prince George and was sharing the front page of the local paper only with the discovery of a woman's body on the banks of the Neehako River.

All the major news outlets were represented: CBC, CTV, Globe and Mail and the Canadian Press as well as a few smaller papers. *A good turnout*, Steve thought.

The Major started the briefing by handing out the background press releases and then launching into a briefing on who was missing, the

flight they had been on and the measures taken to date. He was sharp and to the point. Steve sat at the back and watched him hold the attention of the press corps and was actually quite impressed. He had been concerned that the Major would be over his head, not on dealing with the press, but with the subject matter, but he was doing well.

When the questions started about plans for the search the Major introduced Steve as the searchmaster and had him field those questions. Steve outlined the general search plan and emphasized that the weather had to cooperate to carry it out. He took the opportunity of standing in front of the press to mention that they needed the public's help, that they wanted people to call in with sighting reports of twin-engined aircraft seen in the area on Saturday. He finished his point by handing out the HQ phone number.

The press were very subdued – there were no difficult questions, except one. The CBC reporter had asked Steve why the pilot had been flying in the bad weather on Saturday. Steve had smiled inwardly at the question. It was tempting to be sarcastic, but he controlled the impulse.

“Hopefully we'll find the pilot soon,” he began, “and you can ask him that question yourself. In the meantime we can't second-guess what happened. We can just look for them.”

A number of the crews wanted footage of aircraft flying. Steve suggested that if they come back the next afternoon they should be able to get the pictures they wanted for their reports. In the meantime the Major offered to get them stock footage that his office had available.

Major Krepinski told everyone that they would hold a press conference everyday at 1300, but that they could call anytime for updates. With that statement, the meeting wrapped up quickly, everyone had deadlines to meet and equipment to pack up and take out into the rain again. When the camera crews had gone George Withers stayed behind.

“I wanted to interview some of the relatives, if that's possible,” he said to Steve, “I thought I might get beyond the bare news story and try to get at the people behind this, you know the stress, the trauma.”

“You may get a chance,” Steve replied, “I have a suspicion that we will have some of the relatives turning up here soon.” Steve was thinking that having Withers take up some of Loretta MacKinsty's time might not be a bad thing.

“Perhaps you can give me a call when they do?” Withers asked.

“Perhaps,” Steve said, “or you can drop by and see for yourself.” Steve was aware that arranging to put the press and relatives together might be seen as 'not a good thing', as much as it might work for him.

When the press had gone, Steve and the Major debriefed.

"You handled that really well," Steve started.

"Thanks, I was glad to have you here to back me up on the technical stuff," Major Krepinski said. "We'll get better at these over time."

"My experience has been that if we keep 'searching' and not 'finding' that the press will lose interest pretty quickly. 'No news is no news', you know. I think once the relatives start showing up here that may cause some more interest," Steve said. He was thinking that he might have trouble finding enough for the Major to do in a week's time.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1522 hours

The afternoon had grown quiet. With no aircraft searching there were no reports to process. Brenda and Sylvia were busy with their paperwork. Walt was reading a book. Tim was idly playing with the HF radio. Steve watched the rain fall. He was thinking of sending most of the team back to the hotel, since there was little to do here. They might as well take a break and sit in the hotel hot tub before dinner.

"Hey, listen up," Steve announced to the office. "In the interests of conserving manpower I am going to send you all back to the hotel in the van. Leave me the car and I'll man the phones here until five. I'll see you in the hot tub."

The instruction was met with quick action as everyone packed up their work for the day. Sylvia had the van keys and would drive everyone back.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Walt asked.

"Naw, that is fine, take a break," Steve responded. "There is nothing happening here right now anyway. The check-ins with Snake Ops and RCC are done, you might as well get some rest."

When they had all left, the trailer seemed very quiet. The only sound was the pelting of the rain on the roof and windows. There was no sound of aircraft movement, the weather was too bad to fly.

Tim had left the radios on and the tower frequency crackled to life. It startled Steve as he hadn't expected to hear anything for the rest of the afternoon.

"Prince George Tower, Gulfstream November 556MC is ten back with you on the hand off from centre, ILS Runway 15."

"Roger, November 556MC, you are cleared to land, no other traffic, do you have the latest weather."

“November 556MC is cleared to land, affirm on the weather.”

There were a few minutes of silence and then Steve heard a jet increasing thrust and flying over the airport. He looked out the window, but saw nothing. The rain and fog were thick.

“November 556MC is on the missed approach.”

“Roger, November 556MC, switch Vancouver Centre, 133.8, good day.”

Steve had a hunch that he knew what that was about. He smiled to himself. He might make it to the hot tub that evening yet. He picked up the phone and dialed the number for the Prince George control tower.

“Tower.”

“Captain Steve McBain here, I'm the searchmaster for SAR Schmidt. I just wanted to check with you on that American Gulfstream that just missed. Where were they from?”

“They were out of Tulsa, Oklahoma and were supposed to clear customs here. Looks like they are going to Edmonton now.”

“I have a feeling they will be back tomorrow,” Steve added.

“We have one of your aircraft inbound, by the way.”

“I think all of my planes are on the ground today, we don't search in IFR weather,” Steve replied.

“Well I have a VFR inbound flight plan on a Rescue 6246.”

“VFR? When is he due in?” Steve asked, puzzled.

“Estimating here on the hour.”

“What is the aircraft type?”

“BH06”

“What's your latest weather?” Steve asked.

“A hundred and a half in rain and fog.” Indicating a 100 foot ceiling and a half a mile visibility.

“Okay, thanks,” said Steve, “park him over here near the Twin Huey if he gets here.”

“Okay.”

Steve was thinking. 'BH06' meant Bell 206, which in this case meant that 408 Squadron Kiowa. *They wouldn't really be trying to get here in this weather*, Steve wondered, *what would be the point in that?*

As the time neared four o'clock Steve listened to the tower frequency, 118.3 MHz, on the VHF radio and looked out the window. They would need to stay clear of cloud and have at least a half a mile visibility to get in legally. It looked close to that visibility, although it was hard to tell where the ceiling was.

The radio crackled to life. “Rescue 6246, ten miles to the east

along Highway 16 for landing, with information Victor.”

“Rescue 6246, Prince George Tower, current weather is 100 feet overcast, one half mile in rain and fog, what are your intentions?”

“Rescue 6246 will be landing at Prince George, the weather out here is fine, good ceiling and vis, must be just foggy around the tower, request Special VFR.”

“Special VFR is approved until 2330 Zulu. Call airport in sight.”

“Rescue 6246, roger, airport in sight.”

“Confirm you have the airport in sight now?” The tower controller sounded surprised, “Where are you now?”

“Rescue 6246, affirmative airport in sight, just crossing Geddes Road.”

“Okay...no other traffic, cleared to land on the ramp your discretion, park near the Twin Huey already there.”

Steve listened. The Kiowa crew were flying along the Yellowhead highway low enough to read road signs. Soon he heard the Kiowa's tail rotor whine and the small helicopter flared onto the ramp beside the Twin Huey already parked there. The Kiowa sat there idling through its two minute cool down period.

Tower said: “Rescue 6246 your flight plan is closed. How was the weather coming in?”

“Rescue 6246, it definitely got worse in that last mile here, you built your airport in the wrong place, it is a fog magnet.”

Steve figured that he might as well lock the trailer up and give the Kiowa crew a ride to the hotel. He snapped off the radios and packed things up for the night. Out in the rain the Kiowa crew was tying down the rotor blades. Dripping wet, they finally made it to the trailer and Steve ushered them inside.

Steve shook hands with them both. The pilot was a very young lieutenant by the name of Erik Aitkinson, accompanied by a crusty old armoured corps observer, Sgt Al Nilan. This was a normal arrangement with Kiowa crews, pairing first-tour pilots with experienced army observers.

“Looks pretty quiet for a search,” Aitkinson remarked.

“We don't usually search in this kind of weather,” Steve smiled.

“Great helicopter VFR weather!” Aitkinson said.

“Except that we don't want to miss the search object in the fog,” Steve said, “I gather you just flew down Highway 16 from Hinton?”

“There's no hell like Tac Hel,” was Aitkinson's response. “We'll fly whenever you need us to.” Sgt Nilan just snorted and said nothing.

“Well, hopefully later on tomorrow we will be back at it when the weather picks up. You'll get a full briefing in the morning from my deputy.”

“So what will we be doing?” Aitkinson asked.

“We don't usually use Kiowas on SARs, but thought we could employ you doing sighting reports.”

“Sighting reports?” He looked unsure.

“Yeah the public will start calling in reports of things that they think they saw, airplanes crashing, smoke plumes, suspicious stuff, that kind of thing. Usually we divert a search aircraft from doing patterns to go and check those out and they turn out to be dead ends, so it slows the search down. Since you guys are here, we can leave the search aircraft to do patterns and send you to check out the sighting reports,” Steve explained patiently.

“Sounds keen.”

Keen? Steve thought. “Come on, let me drive you to the hotel.”

They threw their wet bags into the rental car while Steve locked the trailer.

The young lieutenant said, “This is our first search.”

“I guessed,” Steve said.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1652 hours

At the hotel Steve took the Kiowa crew to the front desk and was not surprised to discover that Brenda had made reservations for them. Not having the crew's names, she reserved rooms for them under “Kiowa Crew”, which made eminent sense.

Steve left Lt Aitkinson and Sgt Nilan to check themselves in and headed to his room. Unlocking the door he was immediately assailed by the unmistakable smell of room deodorizer, a sure sign that housekeeping had been there. The room looked very neat and sanitized, once more.

Steve unzipped and kicked off his boots, shrugged out of his flying suit and hung it up. He lay down on the bed in his underwear. The day has been slow-paced but largely unproductive. They weren't getting anyone located by sitting on the ground.

He thought about his wife Linda. He knew he had to call her and have a good excuse for not calling on their anniversary. He had decided earlier that it would have been 'exigencies of the mission' that had prevented him calling. Hopefully she wouldn't be too upset. She tended to

get defensive and, at least to Steve's way of thinking, too concerned with details, like anniversaries.

Steve checked his watch, it was barely five o'clock – too early to call Linda as she wouldn't be home from work for at least another half hour. He calculated the best time to call her. As soon as she got home wouldn't be good. If she had had a hard day at work and hadn't made dinner yet then she could be annoyed. Besides, calling early made him look desperate and not busy enough on the search, it defeated his argument that he had been too busy last night. He decided to call later, when she might have calmed down a bit, had something to eat and possibly relaxed a bit. He would call her around 2000 hours, after dinner, but well before her usual bedtime. *That is the best plan*, he thought.

With that decision made Steve decided to take a shower and then go downstairs and sit in the hotel hot tub until supper time. That sounded like a reasonable idea and a lot less work for more benefit than the previous night had been. That still stung and he suspected it would for a while. The world seemed a lot grayer with Ellen gone from it. As the water from the shower coursed over him Steve tried to let it wash the whole situation away, nothing that hot water and soap couldn't clean up.

He emerged from the shower feeling more awake and renewed, put on his bathing suit, hung a towel around his neck and, taking the room key, headed to the hotel pool and the hot tub.

Entering the pool area he let the door close itself and it banged shut, echoing through the tiled room. The place appeared empty of people. There was no one in the pool and the water was almost calm, with only a slight undulation that rolled though it. The room was large and high-ceilinged in that typical fashion of hotel pools. The back wall had long windows that reached to just above the blue-tiled floor line, giving a view of the city as the day waned and night came on. The room was predominantly blue tiling and water, with a few plants carefully placed to muffle the echoes. The hot tub was in the back corner and partly screened off by some potted palms. Steve walked around to it and noticed that there were two people in the hot tub, sitting close together and whispering as if sharing a secret. As he got closer he realized that it was Brenda and Sylvia. They seemed to be laughing. They noticed Steve's reflection in the window.

“All closed up shop?” Brenda quipped with her quick smile.

“Yes indeed,” Steve replied. He was actually pleased to see the two of them there, instead of some travelling salesman who would try to make small talk. “Our Kiowa crew from 408 made it in.”

"In this weather?" Brenda asked. "Good thing I had rooms for them." She and Sylvia slid apart, breaking whatever secret they were sharing, as Steve slipped into the hot tub. The air injection system was making lots of bubbles and the sound of it added white noise to the pool area. The water felt immediately hot, the bubbles forming a tickling veil that enveloped him. As the bubbles burst on the surface of the water they formed a slight mist in the air above the hot tub.

"Yeah, I left them at the front desk checking in," Steve said, sinking into the heat of the water.

"So," Brenda said with a note of earnestness in her voice, "how is the search going?"

Steve laughed at her question. "Well other than that fact that no one did any searching today, I would say swimmingly. You two have things at the trailer running smoothly."

Brenda and Sylvia both smiled at his answer. "How long do you think we'll be here?" the finance clerk asked.

"You never know. We could find them tomorrow afternoon and be home on Friday or we can have a lot of bad weather that will prevent us getting the coverage we need on the search areas. Then we could be out here 6 weeks at most. Don't worry, if it lasts that long we can rotate people home. The aircrew will be all out of flying hours long before then and need trading off."

"We want to stay 'till it is over," Brenda said quickly. Sylvia nodded in agreement.

"This is more fun than working in Base Finance," Sylvia added.

"I guess it would be," Steve noted, "Not all military jobs include the romance and glamour of sitting in a trailer in the pouring rain in Prince George, like SAR does."

A silence settled over the hot tub, punctuated only by the hiss of the bubbles bursting and the hum of the air-injection pump. The three of them settled into the water. Steve closed his eyes and thought about the whirl of the day. Suddenly the air pump stopped and the pool area was quiet in the absence of its noise. The last of the air bubbles fizzled, popped and the water of the hot tub cleared quickly. They all looked up at the end of the noise and bubbles, but the water was warm and it held them in its seductive grip. None of them was willing to venture over to the remote timer switch on the wall twenty feet away and set it for another twenty minutes. The noise of people walking in the hotel hallway and of traffic in the street could be heard from the warm cocoon of the hot tub.

Steve closed his eyes and tried to stop the day. All he could think

about was the events of the previous evening. He shook his head reproachfully and tried to think of more positive things.

Sylvia pulled herself up out of the hot tub, her one piece bathing suit clinging wetly to her brown skin. "I'm getting hungry," she announced, "are you going for dinner?" She was looking at Brenda.

"Mmm, yes soon, honey," Brenda replied lazily, her head back, leaning against the rim of the hot tub, her eyes closed against the bright lights that illuminated the pool area. "Be a sweetie and set that timer, will you?"

Sylvia walked to the switch, dripping on the deck, and gave the timer a twist. Immediately the two remaining bodies in the hot tub were engulfed in bubbles as the pump started up again. Sylvia got her towel and left. Steve watched her leave, noticing that she looked a lot better in her bathing suit than in her workdress uniform, which hid her slim-waist and large breasts.

Steve glanced at Brenda who was watching Steve watching Sylvia. "Cute isn't she?" she said, punctuating the question with her quick smile. Steve considered an answer, but decided that almost anything he said would sound like harassment, so he said nothing.

Brenda tried another tack. "You seemed a bit distracted this morning."

"Getting a search set up and running, new people coming onto the team, dealing with the press, there's a lot to do. And with all that I forgot to call my wife yesterday on our anniversary," Steve admitted.

"I think that is understandable," Brenda said carefully, "after all, you had a lot on your mind. I am sure your wife would understand. It's all part of being married to the military." Being a clerk with 442 Squadron, Brenda had met Linda at several Christmas parties and other unit social events, although Steve didn't remember seeing the two of them ever talking.

"Well, I am not so sure," Steve started, "she wasn't happy that I had to leave on Sunday, all over this anniversary thing. You'd think after 29 years she'd be used to the 'exigencies of the mission' and all that. I'll call her later this evening and sort it out, not to worry." The bubbles of the air hissed on the surface of the hot tub. The water seemed to be getting warmer the longer he sat in it.

Brenda fixed her gaze on Steve. "You were out pretty late last night."

"I didn't realize I had a curfew," Steve retorted.

"I signed for the car. I like to make sure it's okay," she responded,

circumspectly.

"The car was just fine."

"I think your evening stressed you out a bit."

"Are you always this nosy?" he asked.

"Generally," she smiled, impishly.

"So is it genuine concern or just a desire for lurid tabloid-newspaper details?" he asked.

"Definitely both," she said with a laugh, enjoying this game.

"You and Sylvia seem very cozy," Steve turned the tables on her.

"Why Captain," she responded with mock shock, "I'm a married woman, besides, are you always this nosy?"

"Generally," he stated deadpan.

Brenda pulled herself up out of the hot tub and clambered to her feet. "Aren't you getting hungry yet?" she asked, dripping on the pool deck.

"Getting there," he responded, looking at her in her two piece bikini bathing suit. She was short, slim and slightly built, with slim hips, a slimmer waist and small breasts. Her skin was very pale and seemed almost translucent under the harsh lighting of the pool, drops of water running down her legs.

"Do you always stare at girls this much?" she asked.

"Generally," he said.

She laughed, went and got her towel and left. Alone now in the hot tub he watched her disappear behind the potted palms. Eventually the timer clicked off and the bubbles abruptly stopped once again. Steve listened to the hiss of them dying away, as they had done last time. The water cleared. The room had become quiet, lonely, deserted. The only sound was the water in the main swimming pool, gently lapping at the edges.

Steve shook his head, thinking about the events of the day and Brenda's flirtatiousness. He decided that she just enjoyed being provocative and playful. *I have no idea what her game is, but she doesn't seem to have a boring life*, he thought.

He left the hot tub, the air feeling cool after the heat of the water. Steve jumped into the pool's deep end, the shock of the cold water waking him up from the contemplative mood he had been in. He surfaced and started to swim in a breast stroke, gulping in the air that had been shocked from his lungs. He swam two laps like that, feeling his arm muscles singing after the day's inactivity. It brought back a sense of life to the silence of the pool area. Steve reversed himself at the shallow end and front-crawled a lap.

The door to the pool room opened suddenly and three young

children accompanied by their parents entered. The children were immediately loud, shrieking with delight and the noise cut into Steve's thoughts. He climbed out of the pool at the end of the lap, retrieved his towel, dried quickly and went back to his room to change for dinner.

Tuesday 25 September 1984

1956 hours

Steve had joined most of the rest of the search HQ team for dinner in the hotel restaurant. He listened to them talking and joking, but couldn't find the desire to participate. Sylvia and Brenda sat at the opposite end of the table, laughing together. Major Krepinski was engaged in a long and animated conversation with Walt on Steve's right side about controlling the press during wartime. Steve felt isolated, a sense of disquiet and agitation.

Finally he excused himself, paid his bill and went to his room to make that phone call to Linda. He wasn't looking forward to it, certain that she would be annoyed.

Back in his room, he carefully closed the door and sat down on the bed, rehearsing what he wanted to say. 'Exigencies of the mission'. He didn't want to give her the opportunity to start a fight over this or anything else.

He dialed his home number and held his breath. The phone rang once, then twice. The third ring puzzled him. The fourth ring caused Steve to wonder, is *she out or just too miffed to answer the phone?* After the fourth ring the phone was picked up, but it was his own voice on the answering machine cassette tape. He listened to the message and breathed out. Should he leave a message or hang up? Leaving a message was safer.

"Hi honey, just me checking in, guess you are out this evening? Sorry I couldn't call last night, we had meetings until late getting this search all set up and I didn't want to wake you up. Looks like it may be a long search this time. Anyway happy anniversary, love ya, talk to you soon."

He hung up. Leaving a message was a relief. He had completed the task sufficiently and avoided a fight. *Best possible outcome*, he thought. He snapped on the TV with the remote control and flipped around looking for the weather forecast.

There was a knock on the door. Steve opened the door to find Walt standing there.

"Thought I'd go over the plans for tomorrow with you, if that's okay?"

“Sure,” Steve responded leaving the door open and they sat down. He was happier thinking about the search. They went over the plans for the next day in detail. The latest weather information showed that the coast and much of the interior should be searchable by lunchtime as the system affecting the area was expected to move out. They agreed to bring the crews all in to brief in mid-morning. Major Krepinski would handle scheduling press conferences, which was a relief to both of them.

Steve mentioned Loretta MacKinstry to Walt and described the radio conversation he had heard and they laughed over that. Steve knew that she would be there by noon or so, as it didn't seem likely she would give up and go home. Handling relatives always took a lot of time on a search. Steve let Walt know that he would handle them, but that meant Walt would make more of the routine decisions on the searching.

“Sounds good to me, boss,” Walt said in response to that announcement, “SAR crews I can handle, you can deal with hysterical relatives.”

“Maybe we should swap duties every other day?” Steve mused.

“Naw, that would just confuse everyone.” Walt knew Steve was kidding.

There was a light knock at the open doorway. They both looked up to see Brenda there, with her usual smile. “Just want to make sure that everyone is doing okay with the admin stuff – hotels, food, cars,” she said.

“Haven't heard any complaints,” Walt responded.

“We were just going over plans for tomorrow, if you want to join us?” Steve said, indicating a spare chair.

“Wouldn't want to intrude,” she said and disappeared.

Walt watched her vanish. “She certainly enjoys her work.”

“I think everyone is just happy to be part of a real operational mission and do something useful,” Steve said hopefully.

“I think most of the crew are just enjoying the time away from Comox.”

“Probably true,” Steve said, “probably true.”

When Walt had gone Steve watched the news on TV. The previous Thursday the Iranian-backed Hezbollah group had blown up the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut, killing 22 people and it was still getting wide news coverage. Their search was on the the CBC National News, too, after the international news was done. It was a quick spot and didn't say a lot, but it would help bring in the participation of the public, maybe generate some more sighting reports.

Steve slept better that night. Leaving the phone message had

helped. The mission came first, there would be time for personal problems after it was over.

Wednesday 26 September 1984

0825 hours

Search Day 3 and the rain was still coming down in Prince George. As he settled into the old trailer with the rest of the crew for another day, Steve looked through the dirty windows and across the airport ramp. The visibility did seem to be improving somewhat.

Once everyone was settled in, Steve held a short morning staff meeting, with everyone sitting at their desks, or on them. He wanted to make sure they knew what was happening.

Sgt Szerzy started with a briefing on the weather. The coast was already clearing out and the Comox-based aircraft would be able to get into the air soon. In PG the break would come closer to lunchtime. The good news on the weather was that they could look forward to some good searching days, with no further weather problems forecast before Saturday night or Sunday.

Going around the room everyone else gave a quick rundown on their own areas. Major Krepinski was holding another press briefing at 1300 hours, Walt showed his traces of the afternoon's search areas, Tim had nothing to report.

Brenda was to the point, "if everyone else is happy, then we're happy." She spoke for Sylvia as well who just nodded.

The PG crews had all been asked to come in later in the morning. "There is no point in getting out of bed early when you don't have to," Steve had said. Mostly he didn't want a trailer full of bored aircrew with nothing to keep them occupied.

The briefing was done in 15 minutes and everyone got to work. Walt was on the phone talking to Major Payne, the Ops Officer and Det Commander for the search in Comox, outlining the areas to be searched that day. Payne would then brief the rest of the Comox crews and save Walt from having to talk to each aircraft commander individually.

Steve was avoiding Payne, it made his days easier. He cornered Walt once he was off the phone.

"How is Major Payne doing?"

Walt smiled, "Chomping at the bit to get flying. He wants to be out here in PG, but I told him that since the bulk of the squadron resources are staying on the coast, that you want him to stay in Comox."

“And how did he take that?”

Walt laughed. “I think he saw the point but I also think he'll find a reason to turn up here anyway.”

Steve pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Well let's try and delay the inevitable, if we can can.”

“Will do,” was Walt's reply.

“Is his Buff fixed yet?”

“Just waiting for weather for a test flight. I gave him a search area for this afternoon in the hopes it will come up serviceable.”

“And the Lab that was down for hydraulics?”

“Same, same. They should both be up this morning.”

Wednesday 26 September 1984

0935 hours

Steve was writing in the searchmaster's logbook when Lt Erik Aitkinson walked in. Steve didn't look up, “You're here early.”

“You got work for us?” Aitkinson snapped back.

“Yeah we have some sighting reports we saved for you, just need the weather to launch you.”

Aitkinson looked out the window and shrugged. “Well if you tell us where to go, we'll figure out when to go.”

“See Walt,” was Steve's reply and he wrote in the logbook. He knew that there were a few sighting reports contributed by the public to check out, drawn in by the media coverage the search had been getting.

It was just after ten when Steve heard the trailer door bang shut again. Aitkinson had left. The rain had stopped and the ceiling, while still low, showed signs of lightening. The low pressure area was passing at last. Tim confirmed that the first Comox-based aircraft had checked in on the HF.

Steve asked Walt about Aitkinson. “Well, he seems very keen to get out there,” Walt said. “He made careful notes about the siting reports. He seems serious about getting the job done.”

“Always a positive sign,” Steve said, “he just seemed to be in a hurry when he left.”

Walt nodded in agreement. “I just put it down to 'keenness'. I did impress upon him that they should wait until after lunch to head out. No point in chasing down siting reports in the fog.”

“True,” said Steve, “where did you send him?”

“Well, so far we have six sighting reports to check out. There are

two close together, off Highway 20 near Tatla Lake, only a few miles apart as far as I can tell. Those look like they're right near the trackline. The first was a fellow who called in that he saw a low-flying aircraft north of the highway while driving there on Saturday afternoon. It was pretty foggy then, I guess. The second was a trapper who lives in the area, called in some crows circling in roughly the same area, north of a trail off Highway 20. Both are plotted on the map. We don't have any other aircraft working that area right now so I sent them down there. Even with their aux fuel tank they will have to transit to Williams Lake inbound and outbound. It'll take them all afternoon and part of the evening to do that. I warned them that they may end up in Williams Lake overnight. The other four reports are further afield and less likely."

"Did you warn them not to push the weather? I don't want to have to start searching for search aircraft."

"Yeah, I warned him. I think he got the message."

"Where was his Sergeant?"

"I didn't see him," Walt responded.

"Does that strike you as odd? I thought their observers did all the navigating?" Steve asked, furrowing his brow.

"I have no idea how they crew that aircraft," Walt said with a shrug. Steve nodded thoughtfully. Brenda interrupted his thoughts by waving the phone receiver. She said one word, "Tower".

"McBain here."

"Prince George Tower, I thought you'd like to know that that US aircraft, Gulfstream November 556MC, is flight planned back here, landing at 1930Z."

"Yeah, that is useful to know, thanks." Loretta MacKinstry was on her way back to PG and due in at 1230 local time, just in time for the media circus. The Gulfstream probably wouldn't miss the approach this time. *Great*, Steve sighed, *just one of the most fun parts of the job*.

Outside the sky was lightening up noticeably, the wind was blowing freshly and low scud raced across the stratus clouds above them.

The SAR crews were arriving for the briefing. Mark Abercromby and the PEP crews were already there. They were joined by Lance's crew and Mike Bertkowiz, too. The trailer quickly filled up. The briefing started with Sgt Dave Szerzy giving an overview of the weather. It looked like the next few days would be good for searching. Walt then handed out search assignments. The aircrew mood seemed buoyant as they were now able to start getting on with the job they came there to do. Steve finished with a short comment on safety and everyone departed.

Outside on the ramp the flight engineers and other crew members were drying out and removing covers and tie downs from aircraft, inspecting the aircraft and getting them ready to fly. Lunches were being packed on board to eat enroute. Through the trailer window, Steve watched, pleased at the activity.

The Kiowa was the first one airborne, off southbound to Tatla Lake. The PEP Cessna 182 and 172 departed next, followed by the Cold Lake Twin Huey and finally the yellow Buffalo. In the trailer Tim's VHF radio was set to "tower" and on the speaker. It was alive with aircraft departing, all with rescue call signs. Once the Buffalo cleared the control zone the radios fell silent.

Brenda and Sylvia had organized lunch for the HQ crew again and it was nearly noon. Steve took a sandwich and sat outside. The wind was slowly dropping and patches of blue appeared in the overcast. Although still cool, the day showed promise of some of the warmth that was still possible in late September in Prince George.

"It's dramatic, isn't it?" Brenda asked.

"What's that?" Steve responded without turning to look at her.

"How quickly the aircraft all leave and then how quiet it is after they are gone."

"I guess I don't notice the silence anymore." He finally turned to her. "I've been doing this for a while."

"Don't you wish you were flying on this operation," she asked, "instead of sitting in a trailer?"

"Naw," he laughed, thinking about the searches he had flown on in the last year. "Flying searches is pretty dull work. It is all just lines in the sky, back and forth, just like plowing a field. The spotters do the hard work. I have done all that for so many years that I like to do searchmastering instead now. It's a thinking job, always changing, keeps your brain alive and working."

"I guess it keeps you from thinking about other things in your life that are going on, too?" she asked, a serious note to her voice.

He ignored her comment, considering it unnecessarily intrusive. "Are you interested in doing a flight as a spotter on the Buff? I could arrange that. It would give you a break from the office for a morning."

She laughed. "It would keep me from asking you embarrassing questions."

"True. Okay, tomorrow morning you can fly with Lance. They'll be back at lunchtime anyway."

"Deal," she smiled.

Wednesday 26 September 1984

1234 hours

Steve was outside the trailer talking with Major Krepinski about the 1300 press briefing when the Gulfstream touched down on runway 15. It taxied to the ramp in front of Ken McLeod's Shell and shut down. Steve had a clear view of Mac's ramp rats as they drove a golf cart out to the plane and unrolled a length of red carpet in front of the airstair door.

Definitely not my kind of flying, Steve thought to himself, spitting on the tarmac.

Major Krepinski was concerned about feeding information to the media in a way that would keep them coming back day after day. Steve knew that this would be a very difficult trick. If the search didn't produce some tangible results within a few days the TV crews would drift away to other assignments, leaving maybe the print journalists. In another day or two there would only be the local media, at least until something happened. At least today there would be something to photograph, as the search aircraft would be back to land later in the afternoon.

Interviewing teary-eyed relatives would hold the media for a day or two as well, Steve knew from experience, but he would rather keep the relatives and the media apart. It wasn't a symbiotic relationship. The media wanted shock and dirty laundry and many of them didn't mind running pictures of upset people crying just for the value of holding viewers to watch the commercials that followed. On the other hand far too many relatives either said uninformed things that hampered the search or else used the cameras to try to press the searchers to do things differently. Steve knew that the search was being conducted in the most efficient manner possible under the circumstances. Any changes in priorities or procedures would only slow things down, not speed them up.

Steve told Major Krepinski that he might have to entertain the media on his own. Steve was eyeing the activity around the Gulfstream. The Major followed his gaze.

"Trouble?"

"Special guest," replied Steve circumspectly. "The wife of one of the missing passengers on the search object. I'm going to try to keep her away from the media if possible."

"Makes sense," responded Krepinski, "don't want her to have to be subject to the demands of the press?"

"Probably the other way round," Steve said.

“Okay, I see.” He got ready to brief the press as they gathered in trailer.

Steve had planned to intercept Loretta MacKinstry and he didn't have long to wait. Within 15 minutes of the Gulfstream shutting down she was headed for the trailer, guided by Mac's ramp crew who had helpfully pointed out the Search HQ trailer from the bottom of the Gulfstream's airstair door. Steve waited and saw her coming, a large, imposing, round-shaped woman, wearing flat-soled shoes, but still perhaps two inches taller than Steve. She wore a brightly patterned outfit and the immediate impression was of a hurricane when she walked. She was accompanied by a young woman in an immaculate gray suit, trying to keep up to her while walking in high heels.

Loretta MacKinstry strode towards the trailer from in front of Mac's hangar, Steve walked towards her with the intention of taking her back to one of Mac's briefing rooms.

“You must be Loretta MacKinstry,” Steve began.

“And you are who?” Loretta MacKinstry said pointedly looking him up and down.

“Captain Steve McBain, I am the seachmaster.”

“Well I need to talk to the General in charge here, not his aide.”

“I am in charge of the search,” Steve said, his gray eyes like steel in the afternoon sunshine.

“Harrumph,” she said, “and have you ever conducted a search before?”

“Madam, I can assure you that I have been in charge of dozens of searches.”

“But have you ever found anyone?” she said eyeing him suspiciously.

“Any time that there is anything worthwhile left to find,” he said. The younger woman smiled wanly. She looked quite nervous.

Loretta MacKinstry smiled down upon him. “Well I like you already,” she pronounced. “You will find my Benjamin, won't you.” It didn't sound like a question.

“I have a lot of people doing their best to accomplish just that, ma'am,” Steve said evenly. “Why don't we go and sit down, I am sure that you have lots of questions for me.” He guided her back the way she had come.

“I thought that little trailer was your headquarters?” she asked.

“We have some briefings going on right now, it will be more private if we make use of one of the rooms in the hangar.” Steve was

surprised that she didn't object. The young woman in the gray suit trailed behind them both, trying to look composed.

In the FBO hangar Steve quickly found a briefing room that wasn't in use. *It's much nicer than the trailer anyway*, Steve noted. He offered Loretta MacKinstry a chair and she sat down without comment. Steve had a close look at the younger woman. She was very pretty, carefully made-up, deep brown eyes, her long blond hair pinned up in a manner that looked serious and professional.

Steve attempted to introduce himself. He held out his hand. "Steve McBain," he said to her.

She seemed a bit startled to be acknowledged. "Oh, um, my name is Charlene, Mrs MacKinstry's personal assistant." Steve noted her accent.

"You don't sound like you're from Oklahoma," he said with a tone that was as kind as he could muster.

She looked embarrassed. "Tennessee," was all she said. She then added, looking at her feet, "Is there a washroom here?"

"Oh, yes," Steve started, "Just down the hallway." He motioned out the door and to the left. Charlene excused herself, Steve noticed that she walked with a slight limp.

He turned to Loretta MacKinstry. "Can I get you some water?"

"That would be very appreciated," she responded, brightening.

Steve left her alone while he sought out the FBO front desk. As he returned with a glass pitcher of ice water and some plastic cups a few minutes later he ran into Charlene in the hallway.

"I take it you found the washroom?" he asked. She looked very young, perhaps twenty.

"I did," she responded, "thank you."

"You're limping."

She burst into tears. "I fell off my heels and twisted my ankle," she blurted out, her southern accent suddenly gone. The words came tumbling out, "I just started this job on Friday, after Mrs MacKinstry fired her last personal assistant. That last one was her niece," she sobbed.

"I gather your boss is a bit hard to deal with?" Steve suggested. The girl nodded through her tears. "Look, go ask at the front desk – they have an aircrew rest room. Why don't you let me handle her for 30 minutes and you can take a break? I'll come and get you when we're done." She managed a smile and her tears had stopped flowing. Steve took the water jug and cups and left her in the hallway.

In the cool space of the briefing room Steve poured ice water for Loretta MacKinstry, which she accepted with an agreeable smile.

"I get so dried up flying," she said, "I don't know why."

"It's the dry air found at high altitude," Steve explained. "In that Gulfstream you are breathing compressed and heated outside air and it is almost totally dry. It dehydrates you."

"You seem to know your airplane stuff."

"Yes, ma'am," Steve said, "I've been flying almost thirty years. In this job you need to know everything about aircraft. It helps you fly them as well as look for them."

Loretta MacKinstry put a 35 mm print photograph on the table. It showed a big man in his fifties, sitting in a fishing boat. "This is a photo of my Ben. I thought it might help you find him."

Steve studied the photo. "Thank you, ma'am. This will hopefully help us at some point." He tucked the photo into his notebook cover and put it back into his flying jacket pocket.

"What did you do with my assistant, Charlene?"

"She looked pretty tired so I suggested that while you and I talk that she take a rest in the crew lounge. She hasn't gone far."

"Maybe flying wears her out? I am still breaking her in, you know, she just started last week. They don't seem to make staff like they used to. Wear out too easily these days. No resilience."

"Mmm, I gathered she was new with you," Steve said non-committally.

"It is so hard these days to get any employees who know what they are doing. That's why I need Ben back. He runs the company and makes it all work. Without him there things are going to fall apart." She inhaled deeply and heaved a long sigh. "When can I expect to get him back?" She looked right at Steve, but he met her piercing gaze.

"If it was just a matter of going and picking him up then we would have already done it, I can assure you," Steve began, "I have a dozen aircraft out looking, now that the weather is good enough. We have some of the most experienced crews out there and we are using the most scientifically valid and up to date methods to conduct the search. Normally when a crash like this happens we have an electronic beacon, called an ELT, to home in on. This time it didn't go off so we have to search visually. We have a big area to cover, from Campbell River on Vancouver Island to here. I wish it could be done quicker, but the truth is that it is going to take a while."

"You'll be getting some more help, I called a good friend who is a US Senator and he is going to get you some more aircraft, she said, rather quietly. "Ben has board meetings next week. Our oldest daughter is getting

married in less than two weeks, if you don't find him we are going to have to postpone the wedding.”

“Ma'am, I can't tell you how to organize your life, all I can tell you is that we are doing our best here. More help is always useful and if we get it, we'll use it, of course.” Steve had heard many people over the years promise to get more aircraft for searches. It rarely translated into any additional aircraft and usually it resulted in lots of phone calls and nothing else. “If it were my daughter's wedding I wouldn't postpone it, but that is your family's call.”

Loretta MacKinstry looked tired and crestfallen. “I don't know what I'll do without Ben here.” She looked up at Steve and he thought he saw some moisture in her eyes. “What is going to happen?” Steve took a few moments to collect his words. He already had an answer but he didn't want to jump right at her – not while she was on the verge of tears.

“All I can tell you is that there are four possible outcomes. One: that we find him, haul him out of the bush and he is fine. Two: that we find him and he is injured and we have to take him to a hospital to receive treatment and recover. Three: that we find him and he didn't make it. Four: that we don't find him. Obviously we are hoping for the first outcome. In our world we live for happy endings as much as anyone does. We don't like bad news.”

“But which outcome is the most likely?” Loretta MacKinstry asked.

“I wouldn't say it is a matter of 'most likely'. I prefer to think of it this way: the aircraft and its passengers are already out there somewhere. If they are okay then they will survive until we find them. We will find them as quickly as humanly possible.”

“You think the outcome is preordained?”

“I guess you could say that, we just don't know what it is yet. I am not a fatalist,” he added. “We are working hard here.”

“I'm sure that you are very dedicated to finding everyone,” she started, “It just all feels so personal to me.”

“Yes, it does, I'm sure.” Steve said, trying his best to sound empathetic. He glanced at his watch, the press conference would probably have broken up by now. “What about you? Are you planning to stay in town long, do you have a place to stay?”

“I'll be staying as long as it takes to have this all over with,” she said, “Charlene has reservations in town for both of us. I am going to send the jet home, the company has other work for it, no use it sitting here with the crew, if this is going to take a while. Where is that girl?”

"I'll locate her for you, you both probably want to go and check into your hotel and get cleaned up." Steve gave her his standard 'relatives briefing': "My headquarters is always open to you. My staff and I will do whatever we can to make sure you know what is going on. Come and see me any time."

"I appreciate that," she said.

Steve left to find Charlene, it gave him an excuse to end the interview. He found her in the crew rest room, alone, lying in a reclining chair in the dim gloom. She was fast asleep. He cleared his throat in an attempt to wake her up. He didn't relish having to do more than that. She stirred at the sound and opened her eyes. "Time to get going," he said, motioning back down the hallway.

"Okay," she stretched, "thanks for letting me sleep for a few minutes. I'll be okay now, I promise."

Steve smiled quietly. "We're all done, so perhaps it would be best to collect Mrs MacKinsty and get her checked into her hotel."

Charlene stood up clumsily in her shoes and straightened her suit. As interesting as it was to watch her move, Steve left her to sort out the rest of her day and headed out the main door back to the trailer. He trusted Walt to keep things running smoothly, he didn't like being out of the loop while the search fleet was flying.

Wednesday 26 September 1984

1345 hours

The press conference was breaking up as Steve arrived back at the trailer. A couple of the TV crews were setting up outside to catch some shots of the search aircraft when they returned from their patterns later in the afternoon. Steve brushed by the press corps with his head down, in an attempt to avoid being interviewed.

On the steps leading into the trailer he encountered Major Krepinski and questioned him with a raised eyebrow. The Major gave him a surreptitious thumbs up. Steve nodded as they passed. He appreciated having Krepinski there, he was taking a lot of the workload of managing the press away. Entering the trailer Steve acknowledged to himself, *doing searches isn't that hard, managing the press and the relatives is the hard part.*

Walt caught Steve as he entered the office area. "Success?" he asked.

"Close enough," Steve responded with a smirk. "If I can keep her

out of our way that will be success. Anything happening?"

"Search weather is pretty good, the aircraft are covering the ground okay, by the reports," Walt said. "It looks like we have more help coming."

"Oh yeah?" Steve asked.

"RCC called, the US Coast Guard want to lend us a Pelican."

"A Pelican?"

"Yeah, you know, one of those Sikorsky HH-3F helicopters," Walt explained.

"Well I'll be darned," Steve muttered, "what did you tell RCC?"

"I told them we'd gratefully accept. I figured you wouldn't want to turn them down."

Steve thought for a moment, "No that is fine. Do you have a plan for placing them?"

"Not yet, I wanted to see if you would object first."

Steve smiled, "does that sound like me?" Walt just shrugged.

"We can have them first thing tomorrow. Let me look at the plan and see what makes the most sense at this point in the game," Walt said.

"Okay, you let me know." Steve read through the searchmaster's log to see what had happened while he was out. There wasn't much entered. Walt had indicated that Major Payne's Buffalo had test-flown serviceable and had been assigned a block to search. The previously broken Labrador had come up serviceable as well. *All good news*, Steve thought. He checked with Tim O'Brien, the radio operator and read his radio log over his shoulder, nodding in approval. Tim was ensuring everyone checked in regularly on HF, except the Kiowa and the Cold Lake Twin Huey, which weren't equipped with HF. The Twin Huey was working fairly close to Prince George, but the Kiowa had been sent down south to near Tatla Lake.

"Any word from that Kiowa crew, Rescue 6246?" Steve addressed Tim O'Brien.

"I had a relay from Williams Lake Radio that they made it that far."

The weather was clearing up and the fleet was all serviceable, the patterns were being flown, even the press was engaged. *It seems too smooth*, Steve thought.

Major Krepinski entered the trailer and sought out Steve right away.

"What's up?" Steve asked.

"Have a look," Krepinski gestured to the far window, facing the hangar outside.

Steve peered out the dirty trailer window. He could make out a knot of people on the ramp talking loudly, although he couldn't hear what was being said.

"What am I looking at?" Steve asked.

"A media scrum."

"Well if they aren't talking to you or me, who is it?"

"Your Mrs MacKinstry. Do you want to intervene?"

Steve laughed cynically. "Not a chance. If the press is looking for 'tearful widow' stuff then I don't know who is going to get the worst of that one." He walked away from the window shaking his head. Major Krepinski just watched him walk back to the office area.

"I can't wait to see the headlines tonight," the Major said to the now empty briefing room.

Wednesday 26 September 1984

1548 hours

"Powell River," Walt pronounced, looking at the search map pinned to the trailer's wall.

"Planning a vacation?" Steve said, wondering what Walt was talking about.

"Thinking about where we ought to put that Coast Guard HH-3F," Walt responded, "We really need to get into the higher country east of there up around Ts'ly-os Park and there are just no bases closer to that than Powell River. I wish there was an airport at Tatla Lake. It leaves a big hole there in the centre."

Steve looked at the map, with the pins showing where all their aircraft were based. "We have so many aircraft working out of Comox, which is just over the strait from Powell River. How about Bella Coola?"

Walt examined the map and considered the suggestion. "Bella Coola is really far north of track."

"Are we going to lose that PEP Cessna 206 in Williams Lake later this week?"

"Oh yeah, I had forgotten about that," Walt looked puzzled. "I'll have to check with Mark Abercromby when he gets back and find out what the score is with all the PEP aircraft."

Brenda interrupted them. "Sorry to bother you, a gentlemen from the US Coast Guard on the phone."

Walt looked at Steve who gestured indicting that Walt should take the phone call. Walt went into the office area, leaving Brenda and Steve

alone.

“How are you doing today?” She looked directly at him.

“Oh it's been a busy day, but I am doing okay,” he tried to reassure her, not completely sure why he felt that he had to. “This is a pretty typical pace for an op like this, it is always go-go-go.”

She smiled her quick, impish smile. “I just want to make sure everyone is hanging in there,” she said directly.

“I appreciate that. Keep an ear out amongst the troops and let me know if anyone is having problems, you know, with the strain or with personal stuff. Let me know what you hear. I need everyone working well and if people are having trouble, there are things we can do to either 'tune them up' or send them home.” He spoke in a conspiratorial tone close to her. “Mostly I am concerned about Sylvia, she seems so quiet.”

“Oh, I am sticking close to her,” she said, watching Steve. “I'll keep an eye on everyone and make sure they aren't flaking out, even you.”

“Don't worry about me,” he stated, but not totally displeased, “That's why I get paid the 'big bucks' to make sure everything all runs smoothly, including me.”

“If you say so boss,” she quipped. “Just don't pull a *Gregory Peck* – *Twelve O'Clock High* on me.” She disappeared into the office area.

Steve shook his head. *Mother hen type*, he thought.

Walt had returned. “I need to talk to Abercromby before I know where to send that Pelican. It will be available first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Where are they out of?” Steve asked.

“Coast Guard Air Station Port Angeles,” Walt stated. “Pretty local.”

“Okay, talk to Abercromby and figure it out. They should be back soon.”

Wednesday 26 September 1984

1645 hours

Low on fuel, the last search aircraft touched down at Prince George. There wasn't enough daylight to make it worthwhile refueling and heading out again that evening.

Lance's Buffalo, Rescue 462, had completed a low and slow, ramp-down pass with the two orange-suited SAR techs sitting on the Buffalo's ramp for the media's cameras. Once on the apron near the trailer Lance set the Buff's brakes, parking the transport next to the Cold Lake Twin Huey

and the two PEP Cessnas. Once his two-minute engine cool down was complete he pulled the engine levers to cut-off and the props spun to a stop. That was the whole search fleet in PG that evening.

Lt Erik Aitkinson and Sgt Al Nilan remained in Williams Lake with their Kiowa and wouldn't return that evening. They had checked the sighting reports and phoned their results into the search HQ. The first sighting report had yielded nothing at all. The report of crows had turned out to be accurate and required a landing. They had found a deer carcass and nothing more.

The big yellow Buffalo sat on the ramp, glowing in the late day sunshine, the engines radiating heat.

After a short media tour of the big freighter for some interior shots, the Buff's crew had had enough for one day. Engine bungs and prop tie downs were installed by the flight engineer, refueling was carried out by Mac's line boys and the aircraft secured for the night.

Today had signaled the beginning of a period of good weather and all the search crews knew that the next few days would be busy, working to get the search areas covered before the weather inevitably closed in again. Searching in BC in the fall or spring was always like that. It was all about the weather: the coastal fogs, clouds draped around the interior peaks, the rain falling, filling creeks with torrents of water, low visibility and low ceilings. The weather has always been the biggest single factor behind aircraft accidents in BC and it is the biggest factor in slowing down the search afterwards. The ever-present weather means that the working commercial pilots can't ignore it, can't wait for a better day. In many cases the weather will stay the same for days, or even weeks. They push the weather, hoping to find the gaps, make it yield to their need to get the load delivered. Most of the time they succeed and their local knowledge overcomes the fog and rain. But the coast and interior of BC is littered with more than 1500 aircraft wrecks, a mute testimony to power of the weather and its ability to extract bad decisions from the pilots who challenge it.

Everyone on each search crew on SAR Schmidt was watching the weather all the time, it is just intrinsic to the nature of flying in BC.

Wednesday 26 September 1984

1710 hours

Steve updated the searchmaster's log as Walt annotated the transparent map overlay to indicate percentages of coverage. This was the daily routine of running a search, a large measure of planning followed by

a larger measure of bookkeeping. At least the TV crews who had remained got their footage of the search aircraft and had departed happily.

Mark Abercromby's crew and the rest of the PEP aircraft had returned safely. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, doing lots of flying while the government paid the fuel bills. Abercromby was on the phone to the Cessna 206 crew in Williams Lake trying to figure out the PEP crews' availability for the next few days.

"It looks like our Cessna 206 has to get back to work," Abercromby pronounced.

"No sweat, it has been great to have them as long as they could stay," Walt said to him, "When are they gone?"

"Tomorrow morning," Abercromby said, looking uncomfortable.

"Yeah, no problem, we have a US Coast Guard helicopter we can slot in to replace them," Walt added.

"Really," Abercromby asked, "how did you swing that?"

"Connections in Washington," Walt stated, with a sidelong glance at Steve.

"Hey, that's great," Abercromby seemed cheered by the thought. "We may lose that Victoria-based 172 on Friday, but the two of us here are good until next week, as long as you guys are paying the bills."

"Actually it is Master Corporal Cardinal who is paying the bills, but it'll get taken care of," Steve added.

"Well then she must be doing a fine job. We're still flying," Abercromby chuckled and then finished with, "time to head home for some supper, I think."

Everyone was packing up to head out to the hotels. Steve reviewed the day. It had run remarkably smoothly. He had even had less trouble from Loretta MacKinstry than he feared he would. *Maybe this will be a textbook search after all*, he thought. The planes were flying, the areas were getting searched, even the press was relatively happy. There was just the small matter of finding the search object. *All in due time*, Steve thought.

With the radios turned off, last phone calls to 442 Squadron Ops and RCC completed, logs packed away and finally the trailer locked up, the search headquarters' crew piled into the two vehicles for the short drive downtown to the hotel.

As Steve drove the rental car, the sun was getting low in the western sky, but the sky was now completely blue and promised a good flying day for the morning.

Wednesday 26 September 1984

2033 hours

Steve sprawled on his hotel room bed, playing with the TV remote control, flipping from channel to channel, looking for a weather forecast.

Dinner had been eaten in the rib place down the street. That was Lance's idea – “spreading the wealth” he called it, meaning that the economic boom that the search brought to town shouldn't be all spent in one place. Even if the search turned up nothing it wouldn't be a dead loss, with federal expense money pouring into the town. That September Prince George could use the boost, the tourist season had been flat and the resource industries of forestry and mining were in recession. The search was an economic bonus that helped fill hotels in the off season and kept restaurant staff working. Between the Buffalo, the Twin Huey crews and search headquarters there had been eighteen of them for dinner. They had kept the serving staff running, but the tips they left were worth the effort.

Over dinner Steve had mentioned to Lance that he wanted to send Brenda along with him on the morning flight as a spotter. The tall, good-looking Buffalo captain was happy to oblige.

“The more the merrier,” Lance said. “We like giving new people the wonderful experience and hours of excitement of a real search, especially our own squadron clerks.” He pointedly winked at Brenda, who was intently listening to the conversation from her seat next to Sylvia, further down the crowded restaurant table.

“Well, don't make it too exciting,” Steve retorted. “I need her back at her desk in the afternoon in one piece.”

“Ah yes, how are ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm once they've been to Par-ee?”

“I don't think you can compare four hours in the ass-end of a Buffalo to Paris. Hell that thing won't even hover,” Steve shot back, not without a measure of humour.

“Mine hovers,” Lance rejoined, a mock hurt look on his face.

“Just don't, okay.”

“You're the boss, boss,” Lance said with a decided smirk. “One very boring Buff flight coming up. I will deliver her back to you, fast asleep.”

“Well, at least I have assurances that she will be well rested upon her return,” Steve sighed. Brenda just smiled at them both.

Steve had felt very tired by the time he got back from dinner. This search seemed to be more wearying than past ones. Usually dinner out with the crews left him feeling invigorated, just from the camaraderie and

exuberant conversation, but even two beers didn't help lift the sense of fatigue and he felt distant and detached from the world, listless, adrift.

Maybe I am just getting too old for this shit, he thought. *I think this retirement is coming at the right time. SAR used to be so much fun when I started, but it just seems to drag these days. I need a change of pace, more golfing and less restaurant food.*

There was nothing on TV worth watching, he decided. He tried phoning home, but again there was no answer. This time he didn't leave a message. *Odd*, he thought, but dismissed it as unimportant.

He decided to take a swim and changed into his swimming trunks. He looked at himself in the full length mirror on the closet doors. He thought he looked fit enough, no excess fat or flab there, good muscle tone, a testimony to his exercise program, but the face he looked at was older than he remembered, more lines and crow's feet around the eyes. *Man, I need a holiday*, he thought.

He hung a towel around his neck and headed to the hotel pool.

The pool was busy with small children, too many to count as they ran on the deck, inadequately supervised by the parents there. Once he saw how busy the pool was Steve considered skipping the whole thing, but the hot tub appeared quiet from the door, as far as he could tell and so he walked the periphery of the pool deck. Behind the potted palms the hot tub was empty of people and the water looked warm and inviting. Steve dropped his towel on a chair, cranked the timer to 20 minutes and slipped into the effervescent waters as they came alive with bubbles.

The sound of the air injection pump made white noise and mostly drowned out the sound of the children. Steve floated in the water, his eyes closed. The sound changed from that of children shrieking and playing to that of parents collecting them up. *It must be their bedtime*, Steve thought as the pool area door banged shut and silence descended upon the place, like an echo of itself, reverberating though the room. The sound of the water sloshing in the pool quickly dampened out and behind the potted palms Steve heard nothing but the air injection pump and the sound of millions of tiny bubbles frothing. The warm water massaged the knots from his shoulders and legs and held onto the empty silence of the pool.

Steve sensed that he was slipping into a detached doze, only his face out of the water, floating, drifting with the currents. These sorts of SAR operations left little time to be alone. They were characterized by teamwork, leadership, talking, noise, direction. Still at some point during the day everyone involved needed some time to pause, breathe, stop having to talk, think and relate.

He felt himself losing focus in the silence. Where was that missing aircraft, its pilot and passengers? Were they still alive out there? Who really cared about them and wanted them found? The search crews would look until they found them or found nothing, but it was their job. The searchers didn't know these people. Lorraine Schmidt? Loretta MacKinstry? Hard to tell. Maybe it was just three year old Ruby, maybe she missed her father? Maybe they were looking for the sake of the survivors themselves, assuming there even were any? He watched his thoughts swirl from a detached distance. These were not helpful thoughts, he knew. SAR is not about caring, it is about getting out and doing something. The consequences come later. In many cases years later, when some hunter finds the wreck that the SAR forces had missed. There were still 1500 aircraft out there, missing in BC since 1940, never found, their stories unknown. They may stay unknown, as the planes corrode to aluminum powder, the human remains disappear and the dense temperate rain forest claims all record of the crash.

Waste of time thinking about these sorts of things. He thought about his golf partners, Woody, Scott and Butch instead. They probably finished the round on Sunday without him. Even through the golf game was only four days ago, it seemed an inconceivable distance away from the hot tub in Prince George. Steve wondered who had won that round, chuckling to himself. It never really mattered.

The door to the pool area banged shut. Steve heard footfalls on the tiled pool deck and opened his eyes. The light seemed immediately harsh. From where he sat in the hot tub the potted plants blocked his view. The wall clock showed almost nine thirty.

Brenda Fineworth peered around the palms, a white hotel towel around her neck.

"It's almost creepy down here at this time of night," she said, "I'm glad you're here."

Steve looked up at her from the warm, bubbling waters. His dream state barely parting for the intrusion. She wore the same two piece bikini bathing suit that he had seen her in the previous night. She still looked just as good in it, too.

"I thought I was adding to the creepiness," he chuckled.

"Nope," she said directly. "You never know who you are going to run into down here. You're actually making me feel less creeped out here." She gave the timer on the wall a twist, dropped her towel on a chair and slipped into the hot tub.

"What did you get up to this evening?" he started, sitting up a bit.

"Oh just talking with Sylvia, mostly," she said with a smile.

"You two seem to get along well."

"I get along with just about everyone."

"I noticed that. I could learn some things from you, like how you do that," he said, dreamily.

"It's not that hard. I just listen to people, figure out what they want from life, try to help them find it."

"You sound more like a social worker, than an admin clerk."

"Maybe I am," she said teasingly, "I don't work at it, I just like people a lot. I find them all interesting."

"Kind of a hobby?" Steve asked, his eyes closed, he let his legs float in the warm bubbling water.

"More like a calling, I can't help myself, really. It is just me," she quipped.

"I tend to rub people the wrong way," he replied, "I think I need to learn more diplomacy."

"You seem to be doing fine on this op," Brenda said, considering.

"Ah this one's been easy," he responded dismissively, "everything is running so smoothly and everyone is basically getting along, doing their jobs. We almost don't need anyone in charge right now."

"You sound like you expect that to change."

"I always expect things to go to hell at some point. You put a bunch of people in a pot, add a bunch of stress, bad weather, frayed nerves and they end up at each other's throats sooner or later. Either that or they make dumb mistakes and there is a price to pay for it."

"Has it ever occurred to you that you might be too cynical about human nature?" she asked, her eyes closed, floating in the warm bubbling water.

"Yeah, it has," he said, "but I usually turn out to be right about it."

"Mmm," she said, "being right is important. Sometimes people behave in the way we expect them to. 'Treat them like kids and they act like kids'. You know."

"I'm not sure I believe that. I think it is more a matter of leadership. If you push people you can get the best out of them."

"Is that what happened on Monday night?"

"What do you know about Monday night?" he snapped back, opening his eyes and looking at her. She floated a few feet away, her eyes still closed and playful smile on her lips.

"Oh, not much, really," she said slowly, "I guess I know that you looked a bit stunned and shell shocked on Tuesday morning. I figured 'girl

trouble'."

"Harrumph," he retorted. Steve closed his eyes and laid back. The sizzle of the air bubbles provided a sense of unreality to their conversation. "I just never seem to be able to understand women. How can a woman say for years that she has no interest in marriage and then suddenly runs off to get married?"

"That is a good question," Brenda said, thoughtfully. "Sometimes people change their minds, or sometimes they never completely come clean about what their goals are in the first place."

"Yeah, but why not?" He pronounced the last two words slowly and with exaggerated emphasis.

"What were you looking for?" she asked.

"What I found for a while there, just a friend to have some fun with, I guess," he responded, floating, thinking about it, trying to understand.

"Well there is nothing wrong with that. Perhaps she changed and you just didn't notice?"

"Don't you think I wouldn't have tracked these sorts of things?"

"Apparently not in this case."

Steve thought about what she had said. It made Ellen's rejection seem worse, like it was his fault. *How can you neglect someone in a casual relationship?* He wondered.

"I think I have been in here long enough," he said. He climbed out of the hot tub, took his towel and gave himself a drying off with it, his back to Brenda. "See you at breakfast," he said and left.

"We'll talk more," she said after him, floating in the warm, bubbling water.

Back in his room Steve tried calling Linda once again. The phone rang, but there was no answer.

Thursday 27 September 1984

0910 hours

The morning weather looked good. Met tech Sgt Dave Szerzy had briefed the crews that he expected a mostly clear day, with some coastal fog in the morning and late evening and a predominantly zonal flow. Tomorrow was looking fairly good over the search area, too, but the weekend was doubtful, with another low pressure area forecast to arrive from the Gulf of Alaska.

Steve had noted how intent Brenda seemed while one of Lance's

SAR techs had run her through a short course on spotting techniques. Much as Steve had expected, she seemed all up to speed and ready to go by the time the SAR techs had checked their gear and the flight engineer had the Buffalo ready for engine start-up. He watched the freighter start engines, close its rear ramp and taxi for Runway 24.

The PEP Cessnas were airborne first into the freshening westerly breeze, turning to head towards their assigned search areas. Then the Buffalo trundled towards the runway. Lance seemed intent to practice his STOL take-offs, lowering the flaps as he taxied to the runway. Once in position on the threshold he set the brakes, ran the big General Electric CT64 engines up to a roar and released the brakes. The Buff pitched up with brake release, rolled about three aircraft lengths and leapt into the air, climbing away quickly.

Steve shook his head and returned to the trailer. Even without Brenda there the office area was still a beehive of activity. Corporal Tim O'Brien was talking to the airborne aircraft, establishing communications, now they were on their way to their search areas. Master Corporal Cardinal was working on paying fuel invoices, while Sgt Szerzy drew a surface analysis chart. Major Krepinski was working on a press release at his table in the briefing area.

Silently, Steve motioned to Walt to join him at the maps pinned to the wall in the briefing area.

"Let's go over where we are," Steve said, "I know we have the PG aircraft all out working. What's the word on the rest?"

Walt consulted his notebook. "I talked to the US Coast Guard this morning. Their HH-3 had a snag, but they expect to be in Williams Lake this afternoon. We can have them out searching later on today. The Cessna 206 there is gone, so that area won't be covered this morning, but we did get some good work from him. He may be available again later next week, if we are still at this."

Steve nodded and considered the situation. "Unless we get a very lucky break, we'll still be here doing this."

Walt added, "The Kiowa is going to check out a sighting report west of Quesnel, near Kluskoll Lake Park. There is no shortage of reports for them to chase right now, I am just prioritizing them and trying to keep them working on the ones that are grouped together. All they found yesterday was a dead deer. I guess that is good news. Man, I hate sending people after reports of circling crows and stuff. You never know what you are going to find, but it isn't usually pleasant."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Steve said remembering. "I was on

a search a few years back, we were sent to check out some circling birds. It turned out to be the actual crash site, just a couple of miles off the highway, but it wasn't pretty when we got there, no survivors." Steve paused and considered getting a cup of coffee. "Still it's better to find some dead bodies than nothing at all."

Walt continued, "The Comox birds are all airborne, except Rene's Lab, which is down with a suspected crack in the forward transmission."

"Oh great, that sounds like it will be down for a while." McBain crossed his arms across his chest. "Do they have a spare?"

"No and the machine has only a few hours until periodic anyway. I have to check with Maint, but my guess is that we won't get it back. That leaves us one Lab left out of Comox, unless we can steal the school's Lab out from under them."

"We can try," Steve said. "What about the one in inspection now, when can we expect that one out?"

"Don't ask, it is hung up on parts," Walt added. "I did ask about the one at Boeing Arnprior, but that one isn't forecast back until the end of October. At least we won't run out of Lab crews with only one in use."

"Let's find out if we can free up the school aircraft."

"That would mean talking to Major Payne," Walt indicated. "Be my guest. He isn't flying this morning, he sent a different crew out."

"Yeah, okay, I guess it is my turn. What else? How is our Twin Huey in Lillooet?"

"I talked to O'Dale there late yesterday and again this morning. He seems to be doing fine and is getting the assigned areas flown."

"You sound like you have a concern there," Steve said.

"Well he just sounds so damn, I don't know, official, not to mention young. I'm afraid his own crew may frag him if he doesn't lighten up a bit."

"What do you want to do?"

"Maybe swap him out for the Cold Lake crew soon."

"The weather is looking like we may lose a day or two over the weekend."

"Yeah, I have to figure out if we want to pull them back here before it hits or after. Let me think about it. You want me to break it to Mike Bertkowiz?"

"Catch him at lunch," Steve said. "Maybe we should pull that 408 crew back here before the weather closes in tomorrow and then send Mike's crew down when it clears. Not much will happen in between and it would save someone having a 'down weekend' in Lillooet."

“That would work, I think,” said Walt, pondering the map. “Once we get it all sorted out that will leave us rescue-capable helicopters in Comox, Williams Lake, Lillooet and here. That's a pretty good spread, in case we need them.” Walt continued to look at the map and particularly the trace that showed the areas that had been covered.

Steve considered the obvious open stretch in the centre of the map. “I think we need to get better coverage in this area here.” He tapped the map.

“Yeah, I know,” Walt started, “That is Mount Waddington.”

At 13,186 feet, Mount Waddington is the highest peak in British Columbia and part of a very high section of the coastal range. It lay not far north of the straight track line between Campbell River and Prince George. Waddington is well known as a magnet for bad weather and also for aircraft. Walt knew that the high country had to be searched while the weather allowed. “I have one Buff up there this morning. I was planning to swap them and put the other one up there this afternoon. That part of BC always gives me the creeps, it is just so unforgiving.”

“Mmm, I know what you mean. I have done a couple of hoists off the big hill there in crappy weather. It can be dicey at the best of times, but it fogs in quickly,” Steve said. “Tomorrow may be our last chance to send someone up there for a couple of days.”

“Yeah, I know it,” Walt sighed. “I'm just going to spread the mountain work around the aircraft that we have available. Did you hear that we lost that Victoria-based PEP 172? He had to get back to work. He's available for the weekend, but I told him to take a break. The weather doesn't look like it will be good enough and we pretty much covered everything on that end that a 172 can do. I won't put him up in the high country or out over the water.”

“I agree,” Steve responded quickly looking at the map. “Not much point having him search and re-search the same places on the island, anyway. I had better phone Major Payne.”

“Good luck,” Walt smiled, with unnecessary emphasis.

Thursday 27 September 1984

1016 hours

“Good morning, sir.” Steve was on the phone to Major Mark Payne, the 442 Squadron Ops O.

“It would be a good morning, except that I'm sitting here in my office while someone else is flying my plane to search Waddington,” he

snapped back.

Steve had little time for Payne's problems. "I hear we have lost Lab 306."

"Yeah, the forward tranny is cracked, she is grounded. I talked to maintenance and they want it in inspection anyway," Payne said.

"I thought they had one in periodic inspection already, they can't handle two at once. How about robbing the transmission from the periodic bird instead?" Steve suggested, annoyed.

"They just put it back in, besides that's why they want 306, to rob some parts off it to get the one in periodic out. They have been waiting a while for parts."

Steve saw the logic in that, to some extent. "Okay, then when can we expect that one out?"

"Two weeks, probably, by the time it is test-flown."

"I don't mean to sound unreasonable, but it is hard to run a search without aircraft. I just lost two PEP aircraft, too," Steve was trying to sound calm. "What about the school Lab?"

"It stays with the school," Payne said, getting annoyed, too. "They have a course in house and they need the machine. I can't take it away from them. If theirs goes U/S you may lose your last Lab, or have to share."

"This is going to slow down this search," Steve said slowly.

"Look McBain, don't get greedy," Payne shot back, "You have enough resources to get the job done. I am looking at your current list here. You have two Buffs, one Lab, two PEP Cessnas, two helicopters from 408, one Cold Lake Huey and a Coast Guard HH-3. I can't steal the school's one last Lab when you have eight aircraft flying."

Steve was silent, he knew when he was not going to win and wouldn't give Payne the advantage of seeing him beaten.

Payne continued, "I have good news, though. I am rotating Lance's crew home for the weekend. Their Buff needs an inspection anyway. I'll bring a replacement aircraft to Prince George myself. I need to get away from the phones here anyway and do some flying. We'll recover Lance and 462 here tomorrow night and I'll be in PG by the end of the day. I'll just have Ashbury give me an area to search that will allow recovery there at the day's end, instead of here."

Steve cringed at the thought of Payne in Prince George, looking over his shoulder. He tried to think of a reason why it wouldn't work.

"Right now our weather guy is telling us that the weekend is going to be a wash," Steve said, carefully. "Rather than spend the weekend here not flying, perhaps it would make more sense to bring Lance home on Friday

and then for you to come out when the weather clears, on Monday, instead?"

"We'll see. I never trust weather forecasts," was all Payne said.

"It would give you a weekend at home," Steve offered.

"There won't be much to do around here this weekend anyway, if it is raining again. I was trying to get out sailing or golfing, if I stayed home." He didn't sound happy.

Steve needed to break the impasse. "Well let me call you around 1330 hours tomorrow and we can look at how the weather is shaping up and make a plan then."

"Okay, do that," Payne said and hung up.

Steve turned to Sgt Szerzy, who had just finished putting the finishing touches on his latest surface analysis chart.

"So, how are we shaping up for the weekend?" Steve asked.

The met tech looked at the prognosis charts and pointed to the 500 millibar progs. "I think we're okay until Friday." Szerzy regarded the searchmaster for a moment, "but, we've got another storm coming for the weekend, just like last time. Rain, fog, the usual that we expect for this time of year."

"I wish I could say that the crews need the rest time, but at this point we really need the search time more," Steve said.

"I don't make the weather, sir," the met tech said. "I just report on what I see."

"Yeah, I know, it is good to have you here to brief the crews and keep us ahead of what's coming," Steve replied. "I'm just trying to plan out when to send a Buff back to Comox for an inspection and that all hangs on how long we are going to be below VFR."

Sgt Szerzy looked though his prog charts once again. "I don't have a lot beyond 48 hours right now, which just takes us to Saturday morning, but I would say that conditions will improve on Sunday at the earliest and maybe Monday. It all depends on how much it slows down when it gets here. You can never be totally sure. I can tell you with a high degree of certainty it will be a wet weekend."

"Okay, keep an eye on how it's developing and let's look at it tomorrow morning. We may have to shuffle some aircraft around before the weather gets here."

As Walt made an entry in the searchmaster's logbook, Steve read over his shoulder. "Have we heard from our Kiowa?" he asked.

"Not yet. They should be on their way back here from Williams Lake," Walt stated, finishing the entry off. The office was quiet without

Brenda there. Sylvia worked silently on her invoices, checking them off one by one.

"I had them check out two more sighting reports on the way back and that slowed them down," Walt said. "The reports have been coming in pretty steadily since we got the media attention earlier this week. It hasn't amounted to anything, but at least we have them out looking." Walt lead Steve into the main room of the trailer to look at the large maps pinned to the wall.

"I was going to send them out here, this afternoon," Walt continued. "We got a report of some smoke just south of Vanderhoof, but the forestry people said there was slash burning in that area too, so it's a bit of a long shot. There was a report from a hunter of some clipped treetops in this area." He pointed out a place north and east of Prince George, by some 30 miles. "It's outside our area and beyond the usual overfly."

"Yeah, I agree," Steve said. "We don't need to check the really far-fetched ones, even if we have the aircraft to do it."

"This is interesting," Walt said. "We got a call this morning from a commercial fishing boat captain. He reported seeing a fuel slick on the water."

"Pretty unlikely to be them this late, it would have dispersed by now, don't you think?"

"Well normally, yes, but he saw it last Sunday morning."

"And he's just telling us now?"

"They were outbound and didn't think much of it. It was only when they got back into port last night that he heard about the crash and reported it."

"Where was it?"

"Here," Walt said, tapping the map, "just northwest of Tumour Island, opposite Alert Bay."

Steve put on his reading glasses and peered at the map. "That's about 80 miles off track," he said. "They would have had to be really lost to pile it in up there."

"Yeah, I guess so," Walt said, thoughtfully. "I didn't bother sending anyone to check it out. It was five days ago. You wouldn't see anything now anyway."

"That had to have been a marine spill, some boat lost a jerry can overboard or something. I wouldn't waste our resources on stuff like that. Put it in the logbook as 'noted - action - nil'."

"I already did," Walt said, with a smile. "I just wanted to show you the kind of stuff we are getting on this one."

Steve laughed. "Glad this is all entertaining you. How many more sighting reports do we have to chase down?"

"Probably half a dozen right now," Walt said. "I can give you a run down, if you want."

"Nah, don't sweat it. I trust you to pick the worthwhile ones to chase up." Steve then added, "you're doing fine."

"Thanks," Walt said. "Sometimes I'm not sure if I am making the right calls or not."

"Well, once I retire you can fill in for me full time and be a great searchmaster, almost as great as I am," Steve joked.

"Hmm," Walt mused, "I don't think I have the imagination to create that kind of aura around me." Steve punched him in the shoulder.

Sylvia interrupted them. "Phone call," she said, looking at Steve.

"Who is it?" Steve asked.

"Italian Embassy, Ottawa," she responded.

Walt and Steve looked at each other. "I guess that shouldn't be a surprise, can't expect RCC to keep them off our backs forever." He walked into the office space where the phone was sitting on a table.

"Captain Steve McBain, searchmaster," he said, with some degree of trepidation.

"Hello Mr McBain, this is Alphonzo Fucilla. I'm with Consular Affairs at the Italian Embassy." The voice was that of a younger man and had no Italian accent, which surprised Steve. "I understand you are leading the effort to find a missing aircraft on which Joseph Cepucci was a passenger?"

"Yes sir, that is quite correct," Steve said. "What can I do for you?"

"I am acting as a sort of liaison for the family of Mr Cepucci, back in Italy. I have been talking to the kind people at the Rescue Coordination Centre and they have been giving me information as things progress."

"That is good of RCC to do that," Steve said.

Fucilla continued, "I am sure that their efforts have helped you get on with your job of running the search. I appreciate that, in fact I really didn't want to bother you at all there. Mr Cepucci has a large family at home and they are very worried about his whereabouts. I guess you have been told that he's head of a large automotive parts company."

"I had heard that all the passengers on this flight were in the auto parts business. Certainly the American passenger on board is. I think that is how they all came to know each other."

"Ah, you are speaking of Mr MacKinstry. Yes he apparently knows Mr Cepucci through business, in fact Mr MacKinstry bought out Mr

Cepucci's company, Fonte Automobilistica Italia, this year. It was quite a big news story in Italy," Fucilla continued. "Mr Cepucci stayed on as the titular head of the company. The story of this missing aircraft has been getting fairly good press in Europe, as I am sure you can imagine. Friends and business associates keep phoning the family for news and this makes them more worried. They keep phoning me as well. Everyone is worried."

"Well, Mr Fucilla, this is all very interesting..." Steve's patience was wearing out.

"I am sorry, you are very busy, I know. Let me get to the point here. Mr Cepucci has a very large family who are very concerned. They are threatening to all fly out to Prince George to find out what is going on. That is probably a dozen or so people that I think you will not need underfoot."

Steve agreed, "They're always welcome if they want to come, of course, but it's a bit of a zoo around here. What can we do to help keep them at home?"

"They are just looking for the most up to date information. They want to know that every effort is being employed to find the missing aircraft."

"I can understand that," Steve said. "Perhaps you can tell them that we have every available aircraft out searching, a very senior team in charge of the search and that no Canadian government expense is being spared. We even have assistance from the US Coast Guard."

"That is good," Fucilla said. "Is there anything you are lacking, anything that you need?"

"Just continued good weather for searching at this point," Steve said.

"Can you tell me when you will know the outcome?"

"That is the most difficult question to answer," Steve said, thinking carefully. "We will keep searching until we have found them or until we have looked everywhere they might conceivably be. You can tell the family that I have good confidence that we will find what we are looking for."

"Dead or alive?"

"We'll let you know as soon as we know."

"I think if I call you once a day that this may keep them happy enough to wait for news at home," Fucilla said.

"If you can do that, ask for Major Keith Krepinski, when you call. He is my information person here and will have the latest news. He'll be able to give you statistics if that helps too, aircraft search hours flown, that sort of thing."

"Thank you, sir, you have been most gracious with your time and information," Fucilla said.

"Well, call back anytime." Steve hung up the phone. Walt was watching him.

"Problems?" Walt asked.

"Just trying to keep the number of Italian family members here in town to a minimum," Steve said, not smiling.

"The Chamber of Commerce won't appreciate your efforts," Walt quipped, but Steve didn't hear him.

Thursday 27 September 1984

1040 hours

Lieutenant Erik Aitkinson brought the Kiowa helicopter down to treetop level to start the expanding square search pattern over again. He and his observer, Sergeant Al Nilan, had flown to the latitude and longitude given for the sighting report and done an expanding square search at 500 feet, from the location given. They had seen nothing after working outwards to five miles.

"You are sure we are starting at the right place here?" Aitkinson asked over the helicopter's intercom.

"Dead sure," Sgt Nilan said, his right index finger on his topographical map at the sighting report pinpoint. He double-checked his landmarks, the bend in the creek, the hill to the east and the small camp of Nazko on the lake in the river valley to the west.

"Because we can go back up if you want to recheck it," Aitkinson continued.

"No need, sir, we are in the right place." Nilan was losing patience with the young pilot. Everything always had to be uncertain and rechecked instead of getting on with the job.

They flew a left hand-hand square to give the observer the best view down in the turns. Nilan looked out at the expanse of trees as they whizzed by at 80 knots. They were looking for what had been reported as smoke, seen in the area the day before, by a civil aircraft transiting. The pilot had reported it to the Flight Service Station who had passed it to RCC and finally to the SAR Schmidt search headquarters.

Their search area this morning was part of the great interior plateau of British Columbia known as the Cariboo. Its terrain undulated with small hills and gullies, with creeks almost dry at this time of year. Aitkinson took the Kiowa up and down as the land varied. The snarl of the

Kiowa's tail rotor drowned out the light thump of its main rotor blades and penetrated the dense brush below. The area had been recently logged in places and the open areas and slash piles made searching difficult.

Aitkinson turned the Kiowa left and left again as the square expanded outwards. He was smooth and kept the bank angles down to make searching easier. Neither of the crew said a word as they concentrated on navigating, flying and looking at the ground. They flashed past a lake and the surrounding swamps before turning again. A moose looked up and then resumed foraging.

"Hang on," Nilan said as they came out of one turn, he twisted his body around to the left and craned his neck to look backwards through the rear door's window. "Bring it further left, further left."

"What did you see?" Aitkinson asked, blind in the left turn.

"Clear left, clear left," the sergeant said. "I don't know, it looked like a break in the trees, probably nothing, so don't go nuts here."

The green and gray painted Kiowa circled to the left until it came over the area.

"Slow it down," Nilan said and the lieutenant flared off speed, lowering the collective to reduce power. The Kiowa climbed 50 feet anyway.

"There it is," Nilan said, still looking left.

"What have you got?"

"Not sure yet, straighten out, okay right ahead 150 meters." As they came by the area the observer looked right down into the cavity in the trees. "Fallen tree," he pronounced.

Aitkinson picked up the initial heading they had been on and resumed the pattern.

"That's another five miles, the hard way," Nilan said, tracing the coverage on his map and noticing they were down to the fuel level to return to base, "We're bingo fuel, 150 lbs."

"Okay, I guess we are 'nothing seen' for this one again," said Aitkinson. "That is zero for two." He climbed the under-powered Kiowa at the bottom of the yellow EGT, which gave barely 500 feet per minute climb. The Kiowa's ADF was tuned to the 'X-ray Sierra' NDB; the needle pointed northeast towards Prince George. Aitkinson turned the Kiowa until the needle was on the nose. Sgt Nilan called search headquarters and let Tim O'Brien know the search results and that the aircraft was inbound to PG for fuel and lunch.

As the small helicopter cruised northeast at 90 knots, the sounds of its departure echoed across the clear cuts, trees and lakes two thousand feet

below. As the day progressed towards noon the sunlight became more vertical and shone deeper into the small gaps in the pine trees of the BC Cariboo plateau, bathing the land in a deep golden veil, but nothing more.

Thursday 27 September 1984

1215 hours

Steve and Walt were eating lunch at the picnic table and discussing the weather issue with Mike Bertkowiz, whose Twin Huey had just landed for fuel.

Bertkowiz said, "Well the weather is holding out fine. Even the wind isn't bad today. We'll just grab some gas and lunch and get back out there."

"How is the coverage?" Walt asked.

"The leaves are starting to come off the deciduous trees and that helps, I'd say we are getting a good twenty percent," Bertkowiz said.

"Are you seeing much?" Walt queried.

"We have had to make a few circles and low passes for cuts in the woods, missing treetops, that sort of thing, nothing worth mentioning."

"It looks like we are going to lose some or all of this weekend to weather again," Walt started, "we want to rotate the 408 Twin Huey back here and send you to Lillooet in their place. It'll give you some variety over the terrain around here and besides I'd like a more senior crew down there."

"Worried about the Tac Hel kids, eh?" Bertkowiz said with a snort. "I don't blame you, really. But listen, forget Lillooet, put us in Pemberton instead."

"What's wrong with Lillooet?"

Bertkowiz just laughed. "You can't fool me, I've been there before. Put us in Pemberton and you have a deal."

Eating his sandwich, Steve was closely watching Walt deal with the exchange.

"I guess I can just use a Buffalo to fill in the gaps," Walt said.

"Good lad," Bertkowiz responded with a laugh. "We'll go tomorrow afternoon, just give us a search area on the way down and we'll recover there."

"I was thinking of pulling the 408 crew back tomorrow and sending you down when the weather clears up on Sunday or Monday, that way you can have the downtime here."

"What, and miss a weekend in Whistler?" Bertkowiz, said

laughing out loud. He slapped Walt on the back and walked back to his aircraft, having taken enough sandwiches for his crew and then some.

"Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it," quoted Steve, watching Walt.

"MacKenzie King?" asked Walt with a sigh.

"Eisenhower," pronounced Steve. "You did okay there, even with an old salt like Mike Bertkowiz. Sometimes as searchmaster you have to be pigheaded, but sometimes you don't. His crew will be happier in Pemberton and we probably need to shift the search a bit further south anyway. Have you talked to the 408 crew?"

"I'll catch them tonight when they check in," Walt said.

"Any word from the Coast Guard?" Steve inquired.

"They're supposed to check in when they get into Williams Lake," Walt said, "I have an area for them to go over this afternoon."

They were suddenly aware of a commotion and both looked towards the airport fence line at the same time. There were three women walking rapidly towards the trailer. One was unmistakably Loretta MacKinstry in a bright outfit, different but similar to the one she had been wearing the day before. The second woman, trailing behind and trying to keep up in her heels, was Charlene. Steve didn't recognize the third woman. Loretta MacKinstry was talking loudly. Walt looked at Steve.

"This one's mine," Steve said in a low voice.

"Oh, good," Walt responded. He made no move to leave, though he did say, "I think I could learn something from this." Steve pursed his lips and almost nodded.

The party of women arrived at the picnic table like the tide coming in.

"Captain McBain," Loretta MacKinstry started out with a very large smile, "how good to find you here. What news do you have?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs MacKinstry," Steve said carefully, standing up. "Things are progressing very well, all aircraft are out searching."

"But have you found anything?" she asked.

"No ma'am," Steve said. "You would be the first to know if we had."

"No matter," Loretta MacKinstry waved her hand dismissively, "I can shorten your search considerably. We know where they are." She nodded towards the third woman in the party. Steve noted that she was a middle-aged woman with very dark hair and intense dark brown eyes. She wore a well-tailored suit with a large gold broach on the lapel. She said nothing, but cocked her head elegantly at Loretta MacKinstry's reference to

her.

Steve set aside his trepidation and held out his hand. "Steve McBain, I'm the searchmaster."

"This is Madame Petulengro," Loretta MacKinstry introduced her while the woman smiled and gave a small bow.

"Pleased to meet you. Your connection to this missing aircraft is..." Steve said.

"Madame Petulengro is a medium and psychic," Loretta MacKinstry said challengingly. "I hope you don't object to help from the world beyond." It wasn't a question.

Steve suppressed the urge to smile. "Of course not," he began. "We can always use all the help we can get." He looked at his watch. The press corps, at least those that were left in town, would be arriving soon for the 1300 briefing. "Would you like to come inside for a few minutes?" The group of women, Steve and Walt trooped into the trailer. Walt gave Steve a questioning look. Steve just smiled serenely and when the others weren't looking held up his index finger, indicating that Walt should wait and watch.

Once in the briefing area of the trailer Madame Petulengro spoke: "Mrs MacKinstry asked me yesterday to contact the spirit world and find out where your missing aircraft, pilot and passengers are. The spirits told me that they are not with them."

Her accent sounded eastern European to Steve. He smiled in what he hoped was a warm manner. "Well, that is good news, right?"

Madame Petulengro continued, "indeed it is. It means that they have not departed this world."

Steve listened, but didn't say anything to encourage her. Major Krepinski had entered the trailer, the photocopied press releases for the afternoon briefing in his hand. He ignored the knot of people and sat down at his table in the corner.

Madame Petulengro closed her eyes and spoke in short sentences. "They are safe for now. Not in any danger. No one is hurt seriously. But the aircraft was damaged badly. There was no fire. You will not find them where you are looking. You must look elsewhere."

Loretta MacKinstry listened carefully and nodded intently as the psychic spoke. Charlene was looking the other way, watching Major Krepinski quickly checking his duplicated press releases.

"We would be happy to look anywhere you think we should," Steve said, leading the party over to the large composite map on the wall. "I have a special helicopter that is on its way back here right now. We use it just to

check out individual sighting reports, rather than fly the search patterns that we have the other aircraft fly. Just show me on the map where I should send the helicopter and they will go there as soon as possible and pick the survivors up.” Steve smiled broadly, with a sideways look at Walt, who saw that Steve had cleverly defeated the psychic.

Madame Petulengro studied the map carefully. “We are here?” she asked pointing a long fingernail to the dot that was Prince George.

“That’s right,” Steve said, waiting.

She looked longer at the map, studying it carefully. “And they started from here,” she said, pointing generally to Vancouver Island.

“Yes, that’s right, too,” Steve intoned, patiently watching her, saying nothing more.

She ran her fingers over the map as if feeling its contours. “I don’t feel them on this map,” she pronounced, dropping her hand from the paper. “I must go home and concentrate on this problem some more. I will come by again and give you a place to look.”

“Sure, no problem,” Steve said. “We’ll be here, come back anytime. We have another meeting in here pretty soon, so I should probably just show you out.” He led the party to the trailer door and out onto the ramp area. The sun was still shining brightly and small cumulus clouds were popping all over the azure backdrop, forming white bursts of cauliflower.

As the party spilled onto the ramp, Mac the fuel dealer walked into the trailer, a sheaf of papers in his hand. “Thought I’d deliver these fuel invoices to Sylvia personally,” he said to Steve as they passed. On seeing Madame Petulengro he said “Oh hi, Jennifer.” She managed a wan smile and Mac disappeared into the trailer, his boots echoing on the hollow wooden floor inside.

Steve dutifully shook hands with the three women. To Madame Petulengro he said, “May the force be with you,” and smiled broadly. Steve then returned to the trailer with Walt. Loretta MacKinstry had spotted a CBC crew she had talked to the day before, arriving for the press briefing and motioned them over.

Once in the trailer, Walt said to Steve, “man that was amazing, you just took that psychic right out.”

“Watch and learn, kid, watch and learn,” Steve said with a self-satisfied smile.

“Of course they are talking to the press now...” Walt noted looking out the trailer’s window.

“Let ‘em talk,” said Steve. “It can’t do any harm. If it keeps Loretta

MacKinstry busy that would be a good thing. I didn't say anything I wouldn't be afraid to tell the CO."

Walking towards the office area they met Mac coming out, his hands empty.

"Sylvia said they would get paid right away," Mac said with a pleased tone in his voice.

"I guess you're cleaning up," Walt said.

"Just doin' my part for the search effort," Mac responded with a broad grin. Steve motioned them both over into the back corner of the trailer.

"That woman you saw outside, do you know her?" Steve asked in a low conspiratorial tone.

"Oh sure," said Mac conversationally. "Jennifer Salter manages a restaurant downtown. We're just about neighbors, her house is just down the street from mine. She has a great rose garden."

"Where is she from?" Steve asked.

"Not from around here," Mac said contemplating. "I think she told me that she was born in Port Coquitlam, down near Vancouver, why?"

"Just checking my sources," Steve said.

Thursday 27 September 1984

1330 hours

The day was wearing on and the search aircraft were flying their hours of patterns out over the trees and coastlines of British Columbia. Steve had noted that the daily press briefing was over quite quickly. The number of reporters had dwindled already as the news services were losing interest with the lack of developments in the story, good or bad. CBC had sent a crew and George Withers from the Prince George Citizen had showed up each day. The others would probably return if something happened that they could slap up on the evening news, beyond "and in BC the search for a missing aircraft continues".

The news conference over, Major Keith Krepsinski dropped his bulky form down next to Steve McBain at the picnic bench outside the trailer.

"It looks like we're losing our press corps," the public affairs officer announced.

"Inevitable, really, at least until we make a rescue or the alternative," Steve responded, staring into the distance. He could hear the hum of a turboprop twin to the south. Judging by the low sound it made,

Steve guessed that it was Lance's Buffalo coming back for gas and a late lunch. He wondered how Brenda had made out. Perhaps she had spent the whole flight barfing. Some new observers couldn't handle the sideways seating and the ground rushing by, along with the frequent steep turns. Steve quietly smiled at that thought. Brenda was far too cocky, she could use bringing down a notch or two.

"Yeah the 'alternative' would make for some dramatic press and the vultures would lap it up," Krepinski said.

"They always do." The Buffalo was in sight now, its yellow shape bright in the sunshine. It seemed to be level at 1500 feet above ground and was moving fast, for a Buffalo.

"I'm wondering how much longer you will need me here?" Major Krepinski continued.

Steve didn't take his eyes off the Buffalo. "Yeah, I guess it is feeling like it is tapering off on the press side," he said, "I am probably going to put you to work handling more of the relatives, if possible. Similar work, but more sensitive, if you like. You might find it a challenge. I would like to hang onto you until next week if your office can spare you. Things can get very hot very fast when something happens. I just hope it is something positive. Then we can get some 'hero shots' for the papers, that sort of thing, before we all go home."

The Buffalo made a level turn to line up with runway 33. As the aircraft reached the spot over the runway's threshold Steve watched as the Buffalo rolled into a 60 degree bank turn. He could hear the power come back and the big props flatten out.

Major Krepinski looked up. "What's that all about?"

Steve laughed, "Voodoo-style overhead break arrival."

"Are they allowed to do that?"

"There's no rule prohibiting it," Steve said watching the big plane roll out on a very tight downwind leg, its nose high and landing gear coming down. "Master Corporal Fineworth is up with them today as a spotter. I think Lance is just trying to make her barf before he sends her back to the trailer here."

"Recommended procedure for admin clerks?" Krepinski asked.

"Just perfect ones," Steve responded as the Buffalo's flaps came all the way down. Lance dumped the Buff's nose to hold speed and the aircraft came down at a very steep angle, the props windmilling. "Lance wants to be an airshow pilot. This is his overhead-break-to-STOL-landing-routine."

From its steep approach the Buff rounded out well down runway 33, near taxiway delta, floated for just a second and then the main wheels

touched down, quickly followed by the nosewheel. The sound of the props going into full reverse reverberated across the airport and the big cargo airplane was stopped in little more than its own length, shuddering with the effort. As soon as the Buff stopped it started rolling backwards as the props bit into the air. Once it had backed up past taxiway delta the noise changed as the props were moved to forward thrust and the Buff taxied to the ramp by the trailer.

"I think he should do the airshow circuit," Krepinski offered.

"I'll write him a commendation," Steve said wryly. "I am just concerned that my clerk is going to be so nauseated that I won't get any work out of her for the rest of the day. She'll have to just go lie down."

Once the Buffalo had shut down the crew and spotters hopped off the rear cargo ramp. Mac's jet fuel truck was there immediately to fill up the aircraft. Brenda was walking with the rest of the crew. *Well at least they didn't have to carry her off the plane*, Steve thought. As they got closer Steve noticed that she didn't look particularly green.

Steve addressed Lance, "Nice landings, airshow boy. Did you make my clerk sick?"

"Hey, I only made one landing and it didn't bounce," Lance put on a mock-hurt look. "You're just jealous because that trailer of yours can't hover like my Buff can. As for your clerk, ask her yourself."

"Okay, how was your flight?" Steve asked Brenda.

"Just awesome," she grinned. "I got to sit in the jumpseat up front for that landing."

Steve looked doubtfully at her. "So you didn't barf?"

"No way, I was having too much fun. What's for lunch, I'm starved?"

Lance smiled at Steve, "I guess you won't get much work out of her this afternoon. I could use an extra spotter tomorrow, you know."

Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Get your own spotters. You'll wipe out my headquarters if they have too much fun flying with you and, believe it or not, we actually do have work to do."

Thursday 27 September 1984

1505 hours

Long mare's tails of cirrus cloud filled the western horizon, although above Prince George the sky remained mostly blue, punctuated only by some small fair weather cumulus.

Steve looked at the prog charts that Dave Szerzy had obtained by

fax and had pinned up to the bulletin board in the briefing area. The weather looked like it would allow searching over most of the province's interior until later in the afternoon Friday. On the coast, especially the northern part of the coast, the day would be shut down earlier. There was much to plan before the weather closed in for the weekend.

Brenda was hard at work, despite her morning flight. After telling the story of her Buffalo flight to the office crew, while Steve had bemusedly listened in, she had eaten lunch and then worked to quickly catch up with the morning's accumulated administrative tasks, including shuffling hotel reservations for the crews who were moving tomorrow. From the briefing room Steve could hear her on the phone to the hotel.

He could also hear Walt talking on the phone. He moved down the wall to check on the aircraft status board that Walt had just finished updating. Lance's Buffalo, Rescue 462, would head back to Comox for an inspection after completing its afternoon search patterns tomorrow. With 442's maintenance crew working through the weekend the aircraft should hopefully be available again on Monday and would then operate out of Comox, probably with a fresh crew.

Walt had convinced Major Payne to stay in Comox until Monday, when his crew would search their assigned area and then recover in Prince George for the night. Walt had not been successful in convincing Payne to stay home altogether, however. *I have to give him some credit for that small success, though*, Steve thought.

Steve studied the deployment notes that Walt had scrawled beside each aircraft. Mike Bertkowiz would take his Cold Lake crew to Pemberton on Friday and sit out the bad weather there, ready to get back to searching the southern part of the area, as soon as the weather improved again. At the same time Gary O'Dale's 408 Squadron crew would bring their Twin Huey to Prince George to wait the weather out at search HQ. Steve chewed on his lower lip. The question was going to be when during the day to bring O'Dale's crew back and that would depend on how the weather unfolded tomorrow. He knew they were an inexperienced crew and he didn't want them out there in the weather trying to finish the day's assignment. On the other hand pulling them too soon would lose worthwhile searching time.

Erik Aitkinson's Kiowa was currently pursuing sighting reports and would remain flying out of Prince George. Steve had been carefully monitoring their assignments, concerned about the pilot's inexperience. The notation beside their line simply said "sighting reports". McBain made a mental note to check with Walt and see what tomorrow's plans were for

the Kiowa.

The US Coast Guard crew were flying from Williams Lake with their Sikorsky HH-3F Pelican helicopter and would stay there over the weekend. The remaining Buffalo and Labrador were still serviceable and flying from Comox, where they would stay.

The PEP crews had helped out quite a bit, but the search was down to just the Cessna 172 and 182 flying from Prince George. In total there were still ten aircraft on the search, which Steve felt was adequate to get the job done without too much delay.

"How does it look?" Walt was off the phone and joined Steve looking at his handiwork.

"Fine," Steve responded, still examining the aircraft list. "Any news from the US Coast Guard crew?"

"I talked to them at lunchtime from Williams Lake and were gassed up and ready to go. The aircraft captain is a Coast Guard Lieutenant Hutchison. He sounds pretty senior. I gave him a search area near Big Creek for this afternoon just to get them started. Tomorrow morning I'll send them up higher to have a look at Ts'yl-os from the eastern side. I have one Comox-based Buff up there on the western half this afternoon. I really want to get a good once-over there before the weather clamps down again. I would hate for anyone to have to spend a wet weekend up in that country. Payne's crew is working the coastal areas today."

Steve nodded in agreement. "What have you got for that Kiowa to do tomorrow morning?"

"Nothing at this point, actually," Walt admitted, "I have used up all the sighting reports for now. Hopefully we'll get something more today. Otherwise I will just hold them here on standby. They have probably seen enough crows and deer carcasses."

"Okay, I just don't want to send them out into this weather, once it starts coming in."

"Roger, that," Walt said.

"Phone call for you." It was Brenda looking for Steve. "RCC, it is Captain Reynolds."

Steve walked into the office area and picked up the phone. "What's up, Paul?"

"I hear you have been talking to psychics."

"Are you just calling to needle me?"

"Not at all, not at all. I have been doing lots of good work on your behalf, I just wanted to tell you all about it."

"I can't wait."

"You'll be happy to know that I have been fending off more relatives on your behalf," Paul said, "although I wish I could report that I kept them all at home."

"No such luck?" Steve asked.

"Well the Cepucci family seem just happy enough to stay home for now. I was talking to Alphonzo Fucilla at the Italian embassy after he talked to you. He seems to be doing okay as a go-between on this," Paul said. "The von Richthofen family have been in touch, too, through the Austrian embassy. It looks like they will be sending the missing passenger's brother out to join you."

"Well we can easily handle one more relative right now," Steve said. "I only have one on the ground here and she seems to spend all her time talking to the media and psychics."

"Yeah I have seen her on CTV and CBC a few evenings. She is upstaging you, you know."

"Fine, who cares?" Steve retorted. "I'm not here to be on TV, I am here to get a job done. She got me a US Coast Guard helicopter, so that's some help."

"Yeah, relatives really are a mixed blessing on a search. Has Mrs MacKinsty asked to go flying yet?" Paul asked.

"Geez, don't give her any ideas, will ya?" Steve responded sharply.

"Not me. Oh, that von Richthofen family, they are distantly related to Manfred von Richthofen, by the way. Just thought you ought to know."

"And this is important to me because..." Steve said with a note of annoyance.

"Because the press will eat this up and pound on your door for updates on finding him, but no pressure, hey?"

"Well thanks for the warning, anything else?" Steve demanded.

"Yeah, don't bite my head off when I am trying to help you, okay?"

Steve thought about it for a second. "Yeah, I appreciate your help."

"What did the psychic give you?"

"Nothing useful, really. I challenged her to point out on the map where we should look and she backed down. Said she would have to think about it. I don't think we'll see her back here. According to the locals, she is a fake anyway," Steve said.

"Aw, that's too bad, really," Paul said.

"How's that?"

"Well, because if she was genuine then she could have my job and I could get back to flying for a living."

Thursday 27 September 1984

1810 hours

It had been a long day of searching under quite favourable conditions and the aircraft were now all on the ground, debriefs completed, crews gone for dinner. The rest of the HQ staff had taken the van and gone for dinner too at 1700, leaving the car for Steve and Walt. They were completing the records, noting results in the searchmaster's logbook and on the map overlays.

Standing back to look at the coverage areas and percentages on the map, Steve noted that the search week had been quite successful to date, considering the weather. There was still much left to do, though, with many areas not even covered once, at more than a quick survey level.

Looking at the map, while Walt put his last entry in the diary, Steve thought, *SAR is a tedious process consisting mostly of flying lines over the ground and bookkeeping, lots of bookkeeping. Man, it is hard to stay focused on the point that this is to save people's lives. We just have to find them first.*

To Walt, Steve said, "come on let's get going, I'm getting hungry." Walt gathered up his belongings. They closed the windows, checked everything was secure and then locked the trailer door. Turning towards the car they were confronted with the image of Loretta MacKinstry and Charlene walking towards them on the ramp. The low sun angle lit up Loretta MacKinstry's unmistakably colourful outfit. Walt looked at Steve with the same sense of dread as watching a prairie thunderstorm roll in. Steve held up his right index finger indicating calm. They held their position on the steps, at the door to the trailer.

Just as Loretta MacKinstry reached comfortable voice range Steve greeted her. "Ah, Mrs. MacKinstry, how nice to see again so soon."

She looked doubtful, Steve could see. "What news do you have?"

"Well we flew many, many hours today, including some by the US Coast Guard, thank you for arranging for them to be here. We covered many hundreds of square miles..."

"But did you find anything?" she demanded.

"No madam, we have not found anything worthy of note yet," Steve said. Loretta MacKinstry had arrived at the stairs to the trailer, but Steve did not yield the ground to her, determined to get going and get some dinner rather than have her shepherd them all into then trailer for some lengthy discussion.

"What about the location that Madame Petulengro gave you, you

did check that out, didn't you?"

"I am still waiting to hear from her, as soon as she calls or drops by and gives me a place to look, then I have an aircraft standing by to go out there and see what we can find," Steve said directly.

Loretta MacKinstry glared directly at Steve. "Captain McBain, are you taking this seriously or not?"

"Deadly seriously, madam, I assure you, deadly seriously," Steve said, returning her direct gaze. "If Madame Petulengro gives me enough information to send an aircraft to a place, then I will send it."

"So she hasn't called you?" she sounded incredulous.

"Not a peep," Steve responded, softening his tone.

"I don't know what I am paying that woman to do," she said to herself, "You'll have something soon, really soon." Loretta MacKinstry turned and walked quickly away. Charlene smiled a soft smile and shrugged to Walt and Steve, who could only smile back. Soon she had walked away, too, in her high heeled shoes.

Once they were out of earshot Walt turned to Steve. "She's going to hurt herself walking in those shoes, you know."

Steve chuckled. "She already has. I just hope she is being well-paid for all this dragging around. Come on, I am really getting hungry now."

They walked to the parking lot, Steve unlocked the rental car, they got in and drove north along the Old Cariboo Highway, onto the Yellowhead route, towards Prince George's downtown.

"Did you talk to the 408 crew in Lillooet?" Steve asked, as they drove.

"Yes, I did," Walt responded, "I gave them their search area for the morning and told them that I would give them an area on the way back here for after lunch. They won't get much searching in on the way back here, even if the weather is good, it is a long way. It'll take them three hours to get here."

"Any complaints from them about coming back here?" Steve asked.

"None at all. I think they found the bar scene there a bit rough anyway. They seem to be ready for a change."

"You're doing a good job here," Steve said to Walt, as they drove in the gathering gloom.

"Thanks," Walt said. "I am never sure if I am getting it right or not, there is so much to be on top of all the time. What about this psychic stuff?"

Steve smiled at the thought. "This sort of thing has come up on

about half the searches I have ever done. I have yet to get anything useful from any of them. Mostly they are just scammers who prey on the families, but the book says we have to play along so as not to offend anyone. If we reduce the search without finding the search object, we don't want the family going to the press saying that we missed doing something that they think we should have done. I am just glad that we have that Kiowa to send on these wild goose chases, so that the actual search aircraft can get on with the job."

"Psychics never come up with anything?" Walt asked.

"Ah, you don't believe in that mumbo-jumbo, do you?"

"Well, no, but you'd think that just by luck they'd guess right some of the time."

"I've never seen it," Steve said. "In fact I don't remember ever even sending an aircraft out after one of their guesses before. This could be a first if we do. Back in the sixties we would just refuse. In these 'touchy-feely' days we have to be more 'sensitive' to the families. Mostly these psychics never give you anything concrete enough to actually check out." Steve adopted an eastern European accent, "I see your husband, he is alive and standing beside a tree near a lake. You must look for a tree beside a lake." Yeah, right, in BC that narrows it down a lot. Basically they want to sound mysterious and smart enough to get paid, but not precise enough to get found out. They live on 'planet vague'."

Walt smiled broadly at the accent Steve was imitating. "Sounds like a waste of jet fuel to me."

"Not at all, not at all," Steve smiled, the lights from the oncoming cars illuminating his face now. "If it keeps Loretta MacKinstry off my case for a day, then it is money well spent. Gotta keep the relatives happy, you know and if they're happy I'm happy."

"You really don't think we are going to find them do you?"

"You know, mostly what I think is that a nice sunny day and a freshly mowed fairway would be just heaven about now."

Friday 28 September 1984

0810 hours

Steve and Walt drove the short run along the Yellowhead highway out of Prince George, east, back to the airport trailer that had become home for the past week. The newly-risen sun shone in their faces, forcing both of them to lower the rental car's sun visors, in addition to the aviator sunglasses they both wore. Behind them, the western sky was a veil of lacy

cirrostratus, that fall harbinger of poor weather.

Everyone involved in the search was aware that the weather would change today and cost searching time. Steve McBain knew that much of the day's plans and outcomes would centre around their met tech. When Steve and Walt arrived at the trailer Sgt Szerzy was already at work, pulling reams of paper off the fax machine as he prepared for the day's briefings. A fresh surface analysis chart was pinned up in the briefing area of the trailer, carefully coloured to show the edges of the cloud associated with the low pressure area.

"You want a quick rundown?" Szerzy offered when Steve entered the trailer.

Steve looked at his watch, time was getting short until the morning crew briefings, "I'll just catch your brief to the crews and quiz you on anything else I need to know after, how's that?"

The met tech nodded and returned to his weather charts.

The van had arrived, driven by Sylvia. The rest of the crew were quickly busy opening everything up, turning the radios on and getting the day started and it wasn't long before the welcome smell of coffee drifted through the trailer. Pouring a cup from Sylvia's coffee pot Steve watched the hum of activity in the trailer and then walked out onto the ramp to observe the preparations there.

Outside the crews were getting the aircraft ready to go, removing covers and taking advantage of the morning dew to wash windows. Puddles of dew appeared under aircraft as the activity dislodged it from the surfaces on which it had condensed overnight.

The great yellow Buffalo dominated the corner of ramp. The Buff's flight engineer, assisted by the SAR techs, was removing the engine inlet covers and untying the props. The two PEP Cessnas, being much smaller, required less effort to prepare for flight. The pilots were washing windows, doing walk-arounds and collecting their maps.

Finally Steve watched the helicopter crews getting their aircraft ready to launch. Sgt Nilan was removing the windshield cover from the small Kiowa while the Cold Lake Twin Huey's flight engineer undid the high wind tie downs that had pinned the Huey's main rotor level overnight and he tied the big blade to the tail boom alone. Intake and exhaust bungs and covers were stowed in the Huey's back compartments, the flight engineer clambered all over the wet shape of the helicopter to pull them from the cavities they had protected all night.

Sipping his coffee, Steve felt like the conductor of an orchestra that was just warming up for the performance. As the crews continued their

work preparing the five Prince George-based aircraft to search, Steve knew that the same scene was being repeated by the US Coast Guard crew to the south in Williams Lake, the 408 crew on their last morning in Lillooet and the three 442 Squadron crews at home in Comox.

In the trailer the five aircraft captains had gathered to get the latest rundown on the weather and receive their search areas for the day. Steve sat at the back while Sgt Dave Szerzy gave the weather information, his overhead projector slides shining on the trailer wall.

It looked like the weather would move in, as expected, from the northwest, making the late part of the afternoon in Prince George unusable. The bad weather would encroach into the southern search area later in the evening. Typically it would bring a day or two of fog, low cloud and rain to BC. Szerzy thought that it might be flyable again as early as Sunday afternoon, but that all depended on the speed with which the system cleared out of BC and took its rain into Alberta.

Walt briefed the search assignments quickly, by block identification. Steve decided to say a few words to the crew captains.

"I know everyone has been flying hard this week, but we are going to get a few days break here courtesy of the weather. Let's make sure we use that opportunity to rest up and be ready to get back at it as soon as it clears up. Don't push the weather this afternoon, if conditions deteriorate then head for home and let's all wait it out on the ground together. We're going to be shuffling some crews around, so everyone will see some new faces. The crew from Cold Lake are heading to Pemberton this afternoon, Lance's Buffalo crew are going to take 462 back to Comox for an inspection and we will get a replacement Buff and crew when the weather clears. The 408 Twin Huey that has been in Lillooet will come back here this afternoon."

"And when the music stops everyone will fly the aircraft they are sitting in," quipped Lance to Mike Bertkowiz.

"Look we're not doing this for fun," Steve snapped.

"You need a break, too Steve," Lance shot back.

"Soon as we are done here," Steve said with a forced smile. "Have a nice flight home."

"Don't worry, I will. Want me to say hi to Linda for you?" Lance added.

Steve ignored Lance and continued. "Since they aren't leaving us, I just wanted to add a special thanks to Mark Abercromby and his PEP crews, they have been invaluable on this search so far and unlike the rest of us, they aren't getting paid anything more than gas money to be here. Good

hunting and most of all, be careful out there.”

As the meeting quickly broke up and crews made ready to depart, Lance approached Steve. “Hey sorry to give you a hard time there,” Lance said.

“Yeah, no sweat really, this has just been a tiring week, that's all,” Steve replied. “I hope you get a break at home. Maybe I'll see you back here later on in the week?”

“Rather have me here than Payne, eh?” Lance said.

Steve just smiled a small, bitter smile. “Yeah I need all the help I can get. Listen, though, you had an idea there. Maybe you can drop by my house and check up on Linda. I haven't been able to get her on the phone since I left and I just want to make sure she didn't fall down the basement stairs and break her neck or something.”

“Yeah, okay I'll give you a call when I track her down or at least ask her to give you a call.”

“Thanks,” Steve said. Outside the right engine on the Buff was already starting up, turning over and running. “Are they leaving without you?” Steve added.

“Great copilot, James is, he'll even warm up my seat for me.”

Steve watched Lance walk across the asphalt and hop onto the back ramp of the Buff, which closed behind him. The big yellow freighter started taxiing even before Lance made it to the cockpit and Steve saw him slide into the left hand seat as the aircraft rolled. Steve just shook his head and turned back to the trailer.

The Buff, Twin Huey and the two Cessnas departed in different directions for their assigned search areas, leaving only the small green and gray Kiowa with its rotor still tied down, on the ramp, looking a rather forlorn sight.

Friday 28 September 1984

0915 hours

Through the dirty haze of the trailer window Steve McBain watched the 408 Squadron Kiowa crew sitting on the picnic bench, soaking up the sunshine. Nilan was silently smoking a cigarette, the blue smoke hanging in the still morning sun like fog. Aitkinson seemed to be shuffling maps.

Walter Ashbury hung up the phone and went looking for Steve in the briefing area of the trailer.

“That Kiowa crew looks a bit bored,” Steve observed. “Still no

work for them?”

“Actually I have something that just came in, see what you think, whether it is worth sending them out,” Walt said. “I got a call from the guy who owns a hardware store here in town. He thought of calling us because he saw Loretta MacKinstry on CBC last night. He said it saw a 'loud American woman' on TV talking about a missing aircraft and I figure it must have been her. On Wednesday he had a local trapper in his store, a guy named 'Wolverine Taylor', who mentioned something about seeing a low flying aircraft back on the weekend. He said that it had flushed some deer near one of his trap lines.”

“'Wolverine Taylor' – that sounds like the Mad Trapper of Rat River. Pretty far-fetched,” Steve noted. “Is this guy still in town?”

“No, the hardware guy said he went home again,” Walt replied, knitting his eyebrows in thought. “Yeah, it does all sound like typical Cariboo local colour, doesn't it? He is a bit of a hermit, lives up on Tatuk Lake, just at the head of the Chilako River. But he says that if anything goes on in the woods up here this guy knows about it.”

“Where the heck is that?” Steve asked. “Show me on the map.” They walked over to the series of Visual Navigation Charts pinned to the wall.

“I haven't plotted it. Let's see,” mused Walt as he ran a finger over the map. “Here I think.” He pointed out a small lake 75 miles southwest of Prince George.

“How on earth does he get in there, by helicopter?” Steve asked, pulling his reading glasses out of the breast pocket of his flying suit and squinting at the map.

“Well there are logging roads, up past the old radar station at Baldy Hughes and then up along the Euchiniko River,” Walt noted. “I guess he drives. Apparently his house is up on the river between the two lakes here. It should be easy to find. The hardware guy says there is only one house way out there.”

“Yeah, I guess that would be just one. Well it isn't that far,” Steve said, thinking out loud. “We have the crew, and they could use the work, sure why not. Brief 'em and send 'em.” Walt nodded and went outside to summon the Kiowa crew.

“Phone for you.” It was Brenda, standing at the grimy office divider that separated the briefing area from the office area in the trailer.

Steve took the call in the office as Walt brought the Kiowa crew to the map on the wall and gave them their assignment.

Friday 28 September 1984

0946 hours

Steve could hear the whine of the Kiowa's Allison 250-C18 engine starting up by the time he finished his phone call and joined Walt outside on the picnic bench.

"Any problems?" Steve asked.

"None at all – they are keen to get out flying, especially on a nice day like this. They should be back by lunchtime, hopefully."

The Kiowa lifted off the ramp and they could hear Aitkinson call the Prince George Control Tower on the radio speaker that Tim O'Brien, had turned up. Once cleared to depart, the Kiowa accelerated quickly across the ramp into the wind and disappeared to the southwest, the snarl of its tail rotor fading into the distance, leaving the airport quiet once again.

Steve began, "Looks like we've got another relative joining us tomorrow."

"Who is that?" Walt asked.

"George von Richthofen, brother to Edward von Richthofen. And yes, before you give me a hard time, apparently the Red Baron was a distant relative, so RCC tells me." Steve sounded slightly annoyed.

"I wasn't going to ask," Walt smirked. "When is he due in?"

"Tomorrow, it seems."

"Well he can share a nice wet weekend with us."

"Yeah, that will give the press a chance to jump on him, if any of them stick around for the weekend. I noticed that the daily briefings are getting thinner and thinner."

"How did he sound on the phone?" Walt asked.

"Pretty reasonable, I guess," Steve intoned. "Naturally he is worried about his brother, but I think he understands the score on that. It looks like the family back home elected him to be the one to come and see what is going on, since he speaks English. There seems to be a connection to auto parts amongst all our missing passengers. I wonder how they all met in the first place?"

"That and fishing," Walt noted.

The slam of a car door in the parking lot broke their thoughts and both Steve and Walt looked in time to see three women leaving the lot and walking towards the trailer. It was the same three from the day before.

"Here we go again," Walt said nodding in their direction.

"Mmm," Steve managed. "This is getting to be a bad habit. I guess

we are in for another séance. Let's see if we can at least keep this short." Resignedly he stood up as the group approached.

"Good morning Mrs MacKinstry," Steve smiled. "Ladies," he nodded to the other two women. Loretta MacKinstry was dressed more soberly, in a brown suit, a contrast to her more usual florid outfits. She was not smiling. Charlene trailed along as usual. Steve thought Mrs MacKinstry's assistant looked shorter than the last time he had seen her and noted she was wearing flat-soled shoes that looked new. Jennifer Salter wore the same suit she had worn the day before. She looked serene and unruffled.

"I think we have some progress," Loretta MacKinstry said as she and her party breezed past Steve and Walt and up the trailer steps.

Walt gave Steve a look of puzzlement as they passed. Steve just shrugged in response and shook his head. They filed into the trailer one at a time, Loretta MacKinstry leading. Charlene managed a smile as they waited to get through the doorway. Steve glanced at her feet. "New shoes?" he said to her in a low voice. Charlene just made a momentary grimace. Steve nodded knowingly.

Inside the trailer Major Keith Krepinski was at his small table, working on the daily press briefing. He looked up as the crowd entered, watching the scene as the American woman led them to the map on the trailer's wall.

"We had a long session together last night and as a result Madame Petulengro has something for you to follow up on," Loretta MacKinstry announced, with a sweeping gesture of her hand. "Please tell them what you know." Madame Petulengro still looked serene.

The psychic walked to the map and then turned to face the assembled group. "Mrs MacKinstry and I contacted the spirit world last night for exact guidance..."

Walt interrupted her, "You held a séance?"

"Call it what you will," Madame Petulengro continued in an eastern European accent, without looking at Walt. "I have been told with certainty that the location of the aircraft crash can be found easily by looking in the correct place. Once you look in the correct place it will be easy to find."

Steve glanced at Walt, whose face had a look of grave doubt. Steve tried to look interested, but it took some effort that he hoped wouldn't show.

Walt spoke, "Hey that is great, where do we look?" Loretta MacKinstry scowled at him. Madame Petulengro turned to look at the map

and dramatically stabbed her finger to a place on the map. "Here," she simply pronounced. Steve stepped forward and offered an object to Madame Petulengro.

"What is this?" she asked, looking confused.

"A map pin, please mark it for us," Steve said guilelessly. "Our helicopter is out checking out a sighting report right now. They will be back soon and once they get back we will send them to the place you mark with the pin."

Madame Petulengro turned back to the map and pushed the pin into the map at the place she had stabbed her finger at.

"We'll let you know what we find there," Walt said.

"There is no need to do so," Madame Petulengro stated with a practiced insistence both Steve and Walt found both amusing. "You will find the crash there." Loretta MacKinstry looked confidently at Steve and Walt.

There was an awkward silence, which Steve broke. "We will have a helicopter on the way as soon as we can. We will waste no time checking out the place you have indicated. Anything that will speed up the search and let us get on with the rescue is appreciated." He smiled confidently.

"I am pleased that you take this so seriously," Loretta MacKinstry smiled.

"Indeed we do," Steve said, "I think you have to remember that we want to find these people and get them home, too. We use the search methods we do because we think they work, but anything that shortens the process would be a good thing. We'll let you know what we find at that location."

The conversation seemed to be done so Loretta MacKinstry led her party out of the trailer. Steve went as only as far as the door to see them out. "Thank you for all your work, Jennifer," Steve said nonchalantly to Madame Petulengro. She gave him an annoyed look that Loretta MacKinstry didn't see. Filing out last, Charlene smirked silently at Steve.

"Enjoy your shoes."

"Oh, these shoes are made for walking," Charlene said back to Steve conspiratorially, as she walked through the door.

Major Krepinski sat at his table, turned in his chair to look at Steve return to the room once they had gone. "Are you really going to send a helicopter after that tip?" he asked.

"Yes indeed, can't disappoint the family, you know," Steve replied smiling.

"That's a whole bunch of taxpayers' money to do that, don't you

think?"

"Well it is just a small helicopter, doesn't burn much gas," Steve said. "I am just following the book."

Major Krepinski looked doubtful. "Hey I know, how about I generate some press interest by writing up the story, '*SAR by Séance*'? That would make a great press release."

Steve laughed. "Funny guy. Besides, Loretta MacKinstry has probably already phoned the story into CBC. Chances are by the time our Kiowa gets there, there will be a camera crew already on site."

"Look at this," Walt said to the two older officers. "Her pin isn't even the search area. It is northeast of here."

Steve and Major Krepinski went over to the map and everyone looked at where Madame Petulengro had stuck the pin. It was near a feature marked 'Sentinel Peak, 8193 feet', 100 miles northeast of Prince George.

"What's that line running though the mountain?" Steve asked.

Walt looked at the map more closely. "It looks like the time zone boundary."

"That is well out of the search area," Steve said. "They would have really had to have been lost to fly 100 miles past PG and hit a mountain up there."

"What do you want to do?" Walt asked.

"Send the Kiowa out there anyway. I think at this point we are kind of committed. It's within range for them," Steve said, calculating, "Besides I really would like to expose this fraud. If we don't, then we'll get dozens of them coming out of the woodwork next time."

"You'll be retired by then," Walt pointed out.

"Then I am doing it for you, Mr Future Searchmaster," Steve replied with a laugh. "You can thank me profusely when this SAR is all wrapped up."

"And the press coverage on this trip?" Major Krepinski asked.

"Let's just list it as a sighting report checked out. If Loretta MacKinstry blows it up on national TV and the media asks us if we checked out the psychic report we'll just say 'we check out all sighting reports'. I really don't want to make a big deal of it, especially when the Kiowa comes back empty handed. That would just embarrass Mrs MacKinstry and I don't see any real reason to do that. She did get us a Coast Guard helicopter, after all."

"Okay, you're the boss," Major Krepinski said. "I'll just save this episode for my memoirs."

“Deal,” Steve said back.

Friday 28 September 1984

1230 hours

The PEP Cessnas had been first to land for gas and lunch, followed by Mike Bertkowiz's Twin Huey and finally Lance's Buffalo. Aitkinson's 408 Squadron Kiowa had been the last back.

The clouds were gathering in the western sky and the sunshine was gone from the Prince George airport, but ceilings and visibilities remained respectable enough for the afternoon search patterns to be flown. The trailer was a beehive of activity as the morning's reports were passed in, sandwiches grabbed for crews who were servicing aircraft and everyone getting ready to launch again.

Sgt Dave Szerzy posted the most recent weather information and the storm system seemed to be slowing its approach.

“I think we'll be able to get in an afternoon's searching in all but the north-coastal areas,” he briefed.

It was already raining in the Queen Charlotte's and Bella Coola. The good news was that the late arrival of the weather would allow more time for afternoon searching and moving crews around. The bad news was that the low pressure area might linger over BC as a result.

Walt was taking reports from the PEP and military crews on their morning searching, annotating the searchmaster's logbook and updating maps. Mike Bertkowiz's crew would conduct a brief search enroute to their new base at Pemberton Airport. Lance's crew would complete a search block in the high country near Ts'yl-os Provincial Park before heading to Comox, IFR if necessary. They would leave two of their four SAR techs in Prince George to work with the 408 Twin Huey and join the new Buffalo crew that would arrive hopefully on Monday. Lt Gary O'Dale's 408 Twin Huey would arrive from Lillooet later in the afternoon, with the intention of beating the bad weather into Prince George. It was a careful ballet.

Steve was debriefing the Kiowa crew as they ate lunch together at the picnic table. Lt Erik Aitkinson described their trip.

“We found this guy's cabin, no problem, just between the lakes. He is the only one living up there at the end of a dirt road so he wasn't hard to find at all. We did a couple of circles and picked a little meadow near the house and landed there. Man, you should have seen the truck he has, it was like a 1948 Fargo or something. I wasn't even sure he was there, but we shut down and had a look around. Then this mountain man appeared from

the bush with a rifle pointed at us!”

“I guess he wasn't keen on guests?”

Aitkinson continued, “It seems like it. He threatened to shoot us if we didn't leave.”

“I gather you didn't get shot?” Steve said, amused.

“Not quite. Sgt Nilan offered to skin him and gut him with his survival knife if he didn't put the rifle down. It was tense for a moment there, but he did,” Aitkinson said. The sergeant was actually grinning through this part of the story.

“And then?” Steve asked.

Nilan finished the story, “I offered him a smoke and now we are great buddies. You just have to know the language.”

“What information did he have?” Steve asked.

Lt Aitkinson continued. “I guess he had been hunting deer in the bush on Saturday when a plane flew over quite low and scared the deer he was stalking. He says the weather was not good. He says the plane was single engine, red and on floats, so it wasn't the Cessna 310 we are looking for.”

Steve sighed, “I guess not. Well, thanks for checking out another red herring.”

“No sweat, it was a fun trip,” Aitkinson reported.

Steve thought for a moment, “I have to ask, was his name really 'Wolverine Taylor'?”

Sgt Nilan answered the question. “I asked him about that, we had to make sure he was the right guy. He said his name was actually Mortimer Taylor, but that no one took him seriously with that name, so he made up the name 'Wolverine' himself. He said it sounds dangerous and gets people to leave him alone. He has only been up here ten years. He said he used to be a stockbroker in Toronto, but lost his voice from all the shouting and got tired of the crowds.”

“That is funny,” said Steve chuckling. “Another self-made legend of the Cariboo is born! Well thanks for chasing him down. Believe it or not it's important to rule-out sighting reports like this one.”

“That's all we have been doing is ruling out mistaken sighting reports,” Aitkinson said, disconcertedly. “It has just been dead deer, ravens, crows and people who don't know what they saw.”

“Yup, that's right,” Steve responded, “but each one of these is important to check out. I would hate to not bother checking one oddball sighting report and miss the survivors. You two are such a help to this search because normally we have to divert a Buffalo or Lab to check these

reports out. With you two here I can leave them doing search patterns. Your efforts really do count.” Steve tried to motivate the Kiowa crew.

“I guess,” Aitkinson shrugged.

Steve continued, “I have one more for you and then you can beat it back here before the weather clamps down and take a couple of days off while it rains all weekend.”

“No problem,” the pilot perked up. “Where are we going this time?”

Steve circled the location on Aitkinson's map, near Sentinel Peak. “We don't have an exact location for this one, but it is probably a wooded area, so any crash site should stick out as a slash in the trees. The terrain rises to the east in that area.”

Sgt Nilan looked at the map. “Geez, that's on the western slope of the Rockies,” he said.

“It is a problem getting in there?” Steve asked. “It should just be a quick look and get back fast. No big deal, the weather will be fine, just go fly it.”

“No problem, can do,” Aitkinson said.

Nilan looked at the map again, doubtfully, “No hovering up there, okay?”

“Deal,” Aitkinson said.

Steve McBain looked at his watch. “Okay we'll see you back here around 1500 then.”

Having finished lunch, the two Kiowa crew members gathered their maps and got up from the picnic table to get going.

“There are no roads or anything in that area. Who called in a sighting report way up there?” Sgt Nilan asked as they started to walk to the helicopter that sat waiting on the ramp.

“A psychic,” Steve said in a low tone.

“Great,” said Nilan flatly and walked away. Aitkinson hadn't heard the question or the answer, he had already walked over to the Kiowa.

Steve watched them untie the Kiowa's main rotor blade, strap in and get started. As the Allison engine turned over, its igniters clicking, Walt joined Steve at the picnic table carrying the searchmaster's logbook. The engine fired and the rotor blades accelerated until they were a blur. After running up and calling tower on the radio, the Kiowa lifted up, departed into the northwest breeze and then turned to the northeast.

Steve looked at the gathering clouds, now blocking out the sun entirely in the southern sky. The western horizon was looking dark and indistinct. The low pressure area was definitely coming in.

"Off to check that psychic report?" Walt asked. Steve nodded. "Any concerns?" Walt added.

"No, they'll be fine. I told them to be careful and not push the weather," Steve said. "What does Sgt Szerzy say?"

"We will probably see it start to rain here around 1800 or 1900," Walt reported, "The system has slowed a bit."

"That should give us a chance to get everyone swapped around and settled down for a day or so."

"I brought the logbook out, I thought you might like to write up your Kiowa mission."

"Thanks," Steve said, taking the book and retrieving a pen from the holder on the leg of his flying suit. He wrote in the logbook for a few minutes. "So Lance is off to Comox and Mike is off to Pemberton. We are expecting the 408 Twin Huey here this afternoon and the two PEP Cessnas should be back as well, along with the Kiowa when they get done. Any changes?"

"Yeah I heard from Major Payne, the one remaining Lab we have went U/S this afternoon with a hydraulic snag. It should be back up in an hour or so and get in a short mission this afternoon. The two Buffs are hanging in there."

"I didn't ask Major Krepinski if he needed any input for the press briefing," Steve said.

"They are in there now, Walt remarked, "but he seems to be doing fine. There aren't many media types there any more. I guess the story is a bit stale by now."

"They will only come back when we find something." The door to the trailer opened and the media crews emerged. There were only four people this time. Steve recognized George Withers. When George saw Steve at the picnic table he came and joined them, while the TV crew packed up and departed.

"It looks pretty quiet here," Withers said.

"Everyone's out searching this afternoon, taking advantage of the weather while it holds out." Steve replied.

"Yeah I heard it was going to rain all weekend," Withers said. "That figures when I have two days off."

"You can clean out your basement," Steve said wryly.

"Apartment," Withers said, equally wryly. "How is the search really going?"

"On the record or off?" Steve asked, knowing that everything said to the media is on the record.

"Well let's make it 'off'," Withers said.

"Actually it is going well, Steve said. "The public has been very helpful calling in sighting reports. We check them out and our aircraft fleet is searching thousands of square miles every day."

"You never quit, do you?" Withers said.

"Not me," Steve smiled.

"Okay," Withers responded. "What have you found so far?"

"Some dead deer carcasses and a couple of very old aircraft crash sites that were previously plotted, nothing really worth reporting."

"When are you done then?"

"When we have thoroughly searched all the places that they are likely to be," Steve responded flatly, repeating the what the manual says.

"And that will be...?"

"Dependant on the weather mostly. With the current weather system moving in we will lose this weekend. If everything goes well and we don't lose more time for bad weather and the search fleet remains serviceable, then we probably have another two weeks of searching to do."

"And then you go home?"

"You sound like you are in a rush for us to leave Prince George?" Steve said.

"Not at all, just trying to get a feel for how long it will all take," Withers replied.

"We never actually quit a search. We never give up. After all the areas are covered several times we 'reduce the search'. That means that we still alert aircraft flying here that the search object is still missing in the area and we may be able to hold a future search exercise here and keep looking. Searches are never 'closed' until the aircraft is found."

"But some never get found."

"Some haven't been found yet," Steve corrected.

"You will let me know when you 'reduce your search'."

"You bet, but I am hoping that we can tell you that we have found the aircraft instead, before we get to that point."

"You never give up hope?" Withers asked.

"I am paid not to."

Friday 28 September 1984

1428 hours

As the afternoon wore on, the day darkened and the breeze picked up. Brenda and Sylvia finished up the administrative tasks they had been

doing and took a smoke break outside. It was cool enough to require jackets. The sun was gone and the breeze felt icy and damp.

Steve joined the two women outside. "Still smoking?" Steve said to Brenda.

"Trying to quit," she replied, looking at the cigarette critically. "I am down to four a day."

"Yeah," Sylvia said elbowing her, "down to just smoking mine now."

The sound of the phone ringing had Brenda's attention. She stubbed out her cigarette and jumped to her feet, but Sgt Szerzy came to the trailer doorway. "Phone call for you, Captain McBain. RCC."

"It never ends," Steve said, as he got up from the picnic bench and went inside the trailer.

He picked up the phone. "McBain."

"Hi Steve, Paul here, CMCC just called, they have an ELT going off, not far from where you are, although it is well out of your search area."

Steve thought out loud, "I wonder if that is our long lost airplane? Where is it?"

"First pass only, roughly North 54 53 West 122 00," Reynolds replied.

"I'll have to plot that, where are we talking here?"

"Northeast of you, about two thirds the way from Prince George to Tumbler Ridge."

"Shit!" Steve exclaimed.

"Do you have an aircraft up that way?"

"Yes, that Kiowa from 408 is up there checking out a sighting report," Steve said quickly, thinking. "Do you have anyone who can get up there to have a look, before we get weathered out here this afternoon?"

"You have everything that's available," Paul replied. "Do you have anything you can send?"

"I'll get back to you as soon as we sort that out," Steve hung up. Walt was now in the office area. Steve said to him, "we have an ELT. Where are our helicopters right now?"

"Hmm, let me see," Walt said, "The US Coast Guard are working an area southwest of Williams Lake, the Cold Lake Twin Huey is on its way to Pemberton, if they aren't there yet. The Kiowa is northeast of here and should be on their way back, the Labs are all down U/S and the 408 Twin Huey should be here soon. Where is the ELT?"

"Northeast of here, it may be our Kiowa," Steve said. He gave Walt the scrap of paper with the coordinates. "Plot this on the big map and let's

see where it is.” Walt quickly went into the other room.

Steve turned to the radio operator. “Can you raise the Kiowa?”

O'Brien was quick to respond. “I have been trying since you picked up the phone. I got everyone else in the air on HF except them, but they are VHF only, so it could be just the distance.”

“Are you talking to the 408 Huey?” Steve asked.

O'Brien nodded. “I have them on the VHF now, they called in 40 miles south.”

“Okay, tell them that we need them here fast to check out an ELT to the northeast. I am assuming they will need gas?”

“They asked for fuel on landing,” O'Brien said.

Brenda Fineworth was back in the trailer listening to all this. She picked up the phone and called Mac to alert him of the need for a jet fuel bowser.

Steve hurried into the briefing area, where Walt had the position plotted. “It's up on the western side of the Rockies, east of MacKenzie, if this lat and long is close to accurate.” Walt said.

“Shit,” Steve muttered. “That's exactly what I was afraid of.” He looking at the pin on the map. It was just a few miles from the pin that Madame Petulengro had placed. “RCC has no resources, so I am going to send the 408 Twin Huey up there if the weather allows it.”

Sgt Szerzy was listening in. “Should be doable, as long as they get going right away, although the higher ground will be obscured.”

Steve was trying to consider all possibilities. “Where are those two SAR techs that Lance left here?”

Brenda, standing in the doorway formed by the dividers, answered the question. “Hotel, I think.”

Steve looked at her, “Get them here.” She went for the phone.

“You are going to send a 408 bird to look for a 408 bird?” Walt asked.

“No choice,” Steve said. “Hopefully it will be a rescue.” Walt nodded slowly in agreement.

“Okay the Twin Huey crew, Rescue 5106, acknowledged and they are on the way inbound,” O'Brien said.

Brenda hung up the phone. “I found them at the hotel. I can go pick them up with the van, if you want.”

“Do it, but don't get a ticket, the Huey will take a few minutes to get fuelled up anyway,” Steve said quickly and she was out the door, the keys in her hand. He turned to Walt. “Helicopter, gas, SAR techs, am I missing anything you can think of?” Walt shook his head. “Okay I have to

call RCC back,” Steve said, picking up the phone to call Paul and outline the plan.

Steve completed the call quickly. He looked concerned.

“You want me to call 408 Ops and give them a heads up?” Walt asked.

“Too soon,” he said. “Let's wait until we know what's going on. It could be a false alarm or a hard landing, anything. You had better dig out the crash checklist, though and make a list of all the numbers we need to contact if it turns out to be a worst case. 442, 408 Ops, NDHQ Directorate of Flight Safety, all that.” Walt pulled out the Searchmaster's Handbook and sat down to make the list. He hoped they wouldn't need it.

The Twin Huey Captain, Lt Gary O'Dale, had made his radio call to tower while ten miles to the south. Steve stepped outside the trailer to listen for them. The airport was quiet except for the sound of the gathering northwest wind. He spotted the dark green Twin Huey before he heard it, laboring into the headwind. Finally its characteristic rotor thump could be heard and it flared onto the ramp, completed its two minute engine cool-down and quickly shut down. Mac's fuel truck was there as soon as the flight engineer had the blade tied down.

Steve caught O'Dale still sitting in the right-hand seat, before he had finished filling in the logbook.

“The radio operator said something about an ELT?” O'Dale said.

“SARSAT picked it up about 75 miles northeast of here, where Atkinson's Kiowa went to check a sighting report. I need to send you out to check on it. I've got two SAR techs on the way here from the hotel to go with you. When can you be ready to go?” Steve asked.

“Just as soon as we get gassed up and find a washroom,” O'Dale responded.

“Washroom is in the hangar there,” Steve pointed. “You can stow your personal gear in the trailer to lighten you up. The terrain is pretty high where you are going.”

Steve saw the van pull into the parking lot and the two SAR techs, dressed in their distinctive orange flight suits, were quickly on their way across the ramp to the Twin Huey. Once back from the washroom O'Dale gathered his crew around the helicopter and Steve gave them a rundown on the mission to check out the ELT. They had to move quickly, the day was wearing on and the weather was deteriorating.

The Twin Huey fired up, completed its run-up, called tower and departed into the northwest wind and turned northeast, in the same direction that the Kiowa had departed a few hours ago. The sound of its

wide-chord blades thumping receded slowly as the green Bell helicopter made headway across the wind. When it was a small dark dot on the horizon, it could be heard no more and the airport once again fell silent under the gathering gray clouds that had blotted out the sun.

Friday 28 September 1984

1610 hours

The minutes crept by, agonizingly slowly. The search headquarters team worked silently in the trailer. Sylvia Cardinal processed invoices for fuel, hotels and meals, while Brenda Fineworth completed reports and returns. Even the radios were silent. The phone rang and Walt Ashbury quickly picked it up. It was Mike Bertkowiz calling in to say they were on the ground at Pemberton. Walt retrieved the searchmaster's logbook to enter the call and Steve asked him to leave a blank page there and write on the next page instead. Walt flipped the page and started writing.

Steve McBain looked over the list of phone numbers that Walt had collected, numbers that would have to be called if their fears proved correct. Steve thought to himself, *there are lots of reasons why we might get an ELT now. They may have had a chip light and had to land out, the ELT would be their only way of letting anyone know. No, that wasn't true, they could have radioed an airliner and passed a message via flight service. Perhaps their battery had died before they could make contact with anyone by radio?*

The phone rang again and Walt answered it. He handed the phone to Steve. "RCC," he said.

"McBain here."

"Paul here," Paul Reynolds said. "Any word on what's going on yet?"

"I'm still waiting to hear from the Twin Huey we sent up there."

"The ELT is still going off and we have a more refined position after a couple of SARSAT passes." Steve copied the new latitude and longitude and handed the paper to Walt who went into the briefing room to plot it.

With nothing more that could be said, Steve hung up the phone and joined Walt at the map. Walt indicated a point only a mile from the previous position, with a shrug. "I don't think that will make much difference," he said. "The initial plot was pretty close to this one."

Cpl Tim O'Brien was tuning the HF radio closely. "There was something there," he said, "but I couldn't make it out. It might have been

nothing.”

Another twenty minutes passed before a radio call came on the VHF set.

“Search HQ this is Rescue 5106”

“Rescue 5106, this is Search HQ, go ahead.”

“Rescue 5106, November Oscar Charlie Lima” O'Dale gave the phonetics for a Notice of Crash Location message. Steve set his jaw, while O'Brien copied the message.

“Search HQ go ahead your November Oscar Charlie Lima.”

“November Oscar Charlie Lima, Alpha, Affirmative, Bravo, 5450 12200, Charlie, two black...” The report went on until it was complete. Steve stood there shaking his head, reading the notes O'Brien made as he wrote them down. The report indicated that they had found the source of the ELT, that it was what they were looking for and there were two dead at the scene. Steve looked up and noticed everyone in the trailer was silent, looking at him. Steve thought, *It is really going to get busy now.*

To O'Brien, Steve said, “have them return here as soon as they are able.” He then picked up the phone to call RCC, while Walt called 442 Squadron Ops to inform them.

Wide-eyed Sylvia looked at Brenda, who just shook her head, imploring her to say nothing. Except for the sound of the phone calls, the trailer was silent.

Friday 28 September 1984

1706 hours

The initial flurry of phone calls was complete. Steve and Walt had informed RCC, 408, 442, DFS and several other agencies that needed to know. In turn 408 would inform relatives, base administration, chaplains. Casualty reports would be sent to NDHQ. It was a spider's web that fanned out from the trailer at Prince George Airport.

Outside the light was failing with the dark sky and the late hour of the day. The immediate work done Steve and Walt sat silently at the picnic table waiting for the Huey to land. In the voice of the wind they could hear the bark of the rotor blades as the Huey descended for landing. It touched down as the first spits of rain began to be felt. Steve asked Walt to have the crew all come into the trailer for a debrief as soon as the aircraft was secured. Walt walked over to the Huey while the main rotor blade was tied down by the flight engineer, while Steve returned to the trailer. The first person he saw there was Major Keith Krepinski.

"I guess we're going to have to release some information for the press," Krepinski said.

Steve nodded, thinking. "Let's get the debrief done and we can look at getting something out, probably tomorrow, I guess. You know the drill on releasing names, next of kin first and all that."

The major nodded in agreement. "I'm really sorry you have to go through this."

"Yeah, me too," Steve said. "This is going to unavoidably impact the search, but I am going to try to keep everything focused on that and leave the accident to DFS and the coroner's office. I'm going to need to keep you here for a while, I suspect."

"No sweat," Krepinski said.

Their aircraft tied down with covers installed against the wind and rain, the Twin Huey crew and the two SAR techs trooped into the trailer and sat down, dropping their gear on the floor.

Steve started out by thanking them all for flying a difficult trip. He turned to Lt Gary O'Dale and asked him to give a rundown on what they saw and did. O'Dale seemed different than before, changed by the event, less formal.

"We got up there okay," he started, "the weather wasn't great, some rain and the ceiling getting lower. There was a slash in the trees at about the 4000 foot level on the side of a hill. The Kiowa was at the bottom of the slash, upside down. It had burnt."

One of the SAR techs, Cpl Dennis Jones finished the story, "Bruce and me sky-genied onto the ground and checked the site. There was no need for first aid, no one got out. There wasn't a lot left, so we covered up what we found for the coroner with a tarp, put a tag on a tree to show that it was found and left everything in place and hoisted out." The other SAR tech, Cpl Bruce Knowles, just nodded in agreement.

"You just left the bodies as they were, right?"

Jones stated a standard SAR tech maxim: "We don't rescue dead people."

"True, true," Steve said. "We will have to get the coroner's office on it ASAP."

O'Dale continued the debriefing, "we had to hoist them up and get going, because the weather was fogging in up there. We tried to call you on the HF, but I wasn't sure it was working right. The VHF worked fine, once we got closer."

"Yeah, no sweat on the radios, thanks for getting the job done," Steve responded. "There are going to be a whole bunch of people who will

need to get up there soon, but we aren't going to be able to get back in there until the weather clears up. I'll need you back on the search once the weather lifts, so I am going to see if we can get some support for the accident from somewhere."

"One last question," Steve said. "The Kiowa was up there checking out a sighting report. Did you see any indication of another crash site in the area?"

O'Dale looked thoughtful. "No, but the weather was pretty bad there, so we didn't get a really good look around."

"But the crash site you found was easy to spot?"

"Very easy, we saw it from some distance away, it just stood out up there."

Steve looked at his watch. It showed quarter to six. Outside the trailer the large drops of rain were starting to form puddles on the pavement. "I think your crew has done enough today and you haven't even checked into the hotel yet. I'll get you a ride into town."

The five members of the Twin Huey crew gathered up their gear and personal baggage from the trailer and Sylvia took the keys for the van to give them a lift to the hotel, while the rest of the search headquarters staff cleaned up for the night.

As they were getting ready to go Steve stopped O'Dale and took him aside. "How well did you know Erik Aitkinson?"

O'Dale didn't look up. "We share a house in Edmonton with another pilot from 408," he said.

Steve considered the information. "I'm sorry to hear that. Let me see if I can get you rotated home."

"I'm okay to stay and keep flying on the search," O'Dale said, looking up at him.

"Let's see how it looks in the morning," Steve responded. "I think we are going to have a day or so on the ground, so let's talk then." O'Dale nodded, slowly and then joined the rest of his crew heading to the van.

Steve looked out the trailer door as they left. The rain was starting to really fall now, the light was all but gone and the wind was picking up, driving the rain against the hangar wall opposite. The air smelled cold and icy and Steve closed the door to keep what warmth the trailer held in. He went back to the office area, where most of the headquarters team were quietly making ready to close up. Walt handed him the searchmaster's logbook. Steve looked at it and stuffed it into his bag. There was too much to write since his last entry and it would take a while to get everything down.

Steve looked up from putting the book away and noticed everyone was staring at him, expecting him to say something. He turned to Cpl O'Brien. "Is everyone down?" he asked. O'Brien nodded, but didn't say anything.

Steve addressed the assembled group. "Today has been a very long day. Thanks for all your work getting through all of this. Unfortunately things are only going to get busier over the next few days. We are going to have to deal with an accident investigation, coroners and a lot more crap as well. I'm going to try to keep all that away from here so we can get this search done through the melee, but there may be a lot of people around. Just to add to the fun, we have more relatives who will be showing up tomorrow, too. The next couple of days are going to be pretty wet and we won't be flying, so if you don't need to be here at the trailer then take some time off and rest up. Once the weather picks up we'll be back at it and you may not get another chance for a while." He couldn't think of anything else to say. He looked at them all, hoping someone would say something, break the silence that descended.

"Well I for one, will be doing laundry tomorrow," Brenda chimed in, a bounce to her voice.

Steve brightened up at her remark. "That's the spirit. We have lots left to do."

The trailer door opened and Sylvia walked in, shaking the water from her jacket. "It is really raining out there," she said.

The crew finished closing up the trailer and one by one made a dash for the van. Steve and Walt were the last out, locking the door. They walked to the rental car and got in out of the rain, watching the van depart ahead of them.

As they left the parking lot and turned onto the Old Cariboo Highway, Walt said, "You know that is an odd thing."

"What's that?" Steve asked.

"That place on the map that the psychic indicated? She was dead right – she said it was the crash location."

Friday 28 September 1984

2110 hours

Steve McBain sat amongst the clutter of his normally neat hotel room. This evening the room was a mess, the desk, chairs and bed strewn with clothing and paper. He was still dressed in his flight suit, having kicked his boots off into the closet. In the dull glare of the table lamp, he

sat in the one chair that was available of the room's two chairs and put his feet up on the bed. Steve retrieved the Searchmaster's Logbook from his bag, put his reading glasses on and opened the logbook to the page where the entries started for September 28th.

He began by reading Walt's entries, which outnumbered his own that day by a large margin. Walt's handwriting was round and clear, not like his own small, tight writing, which even he had trouble reading sometimes. Walt was doing a good job and his entries reflected the care with which he planned, acted and recorded what he had done. At 27, Walt was just about half Steve's age. Steve looked up for a moment and realized that Walt was closer in age to Steve's own children. The blank page was there in the middle of the day.

Walt had spent the past hour in Steve's room as the two of them had gone over the events leading up to the Kiowa crash, the response and the calls they had made to follow it up. They had reviewed the checklists in fine detail to make sure nothing had been missed. It all looked complete. As they were at the end of running through it all, the phone had rung. It was the CO of 442 Squadron, Lieutenant Colonel Braithwaite. Initially Walt had sat back in the chair waiting for Steve to finish talking, but Steve had addressed the caller as 'Sir', making it easy for Walt to figure out who Steve was speaking with. The CO was the only person Steve called 'Sir'. He was one of the few people on the squadron who was older than Steve. Walt could see that the conversation would go on for a while, so he got up made a mock salute and went up to his own room, leaving the door to Steve's room slightly ajar when he left.

LCol Braithwaite, commanding a Transport and Rescue Squadron, knew he didn't have to be directive with his senior staff. He saw his role as more to make sure the administration and support worked well and counted on the depth of experience that the unit had to get the everyday work done. He wasn't afraid to intervene when he needed to, but preferred to let his subordinates figure out their own way of getting the job done.

The CO had called, it seemed to Steve, mostly to be supportive, rather than to get to the bottom of the crash. He spoke quietly, asking Steve how he was doing, how the rest of the search was going, how the Search HQ team was bearing up with the hours and the work.

The conversation had gone on for twenty minutes or so. Steve thanked the CO for calling and promised to keep Squadron Ops informed about how the crash response was progressing. After hanging up Steve got back to reading Walt's logbook entries from the day.

Steve recalled a conversation one Friday evening a few months ago

in the Comox Officers' Mess with several of the other "old-timers" of 442, the 50-something Captains and Majors of whom there were quite a number on the squadron. One of them, Steve couldn't recall who, had started complaining about the young pilots on the unit, 'punk-rockers' he had called them. The usual complaints against young people were leveled – irresponsible, cowboys, hotheads, not serious enough. All the common complaints. Sitting there in the hotel room, reading Walt's logbook entries, Steve wasn't proud of his own contributions to the round of condemnation. Walt seemed to be an exception to the list of failings that young pilots on 442 suffered from. He couldn't be accused of not being up to the job or of not taking it seriously.

Maybe some of these kids are turning out all right, Steve thought, while scanning through the entries. Some of the writing seemed to record too much detail, he thought. *I'll have to ask him to cut it down a bit in future*, Steve decided, *no point in writing a novel*.

Maybe it is time to retire, Steve considered, *pilots like Walt are up to the task, even here where it really counts*. Staring at the framed print of the farm scene on the wall over the bed, Steve smiled to himself. The picture showed a threshing team working with a belt-driven steam engine in early turn-of-the-century Canada. In the picture the harvest was being gathered, it seemed, but the work was never complete, a moment frozen in time. Steve knew that the job was wearing on him and he felt tired.

Reaching the end of the entries for the day, Steve backtracked until he found the blank page. He considered everything that was not yet recorded and tried to sort in his own mind the events which needed to be written down and those which could be omitted. He pulled a well-worn hotel pen from the pen holder on his flight suit leg. The pen was the same as the one that the hotel left in every room and with the same hotel logo on it, but years older. He looked at it thoughtfully, turning it over in his hand. It must have come from this very hotel during one of his visits to Prince George several years ago. Probably he had picked it up on a visit when he had seen Ellen.

Ellen, Steve thought, *there was an odd subject*. He hadn't thought about her in a couple of days. He wondered if he would ever hear from her again. Did it matter? The phone rang and as he reached for it, Steve thought that perhaps it was Ellen, bidden to call him by his thinking of her. With a sense of anticipation he lifted the receiver. It was "Lance" Lancemeir.

"Hey Stevie, I heard about your action there today," he began, in his usual jubilant mood. He sounded like he had had a couple of beer.

"Hi Lance, well, yeah, we have had better days on this search,"

Steve said, disappointed.

"Look you asked me to check on Linda, remember?" Lance said.

"Yeah I remember. I've called a couple of times and can't seem to find her."

"Yeah well I phoned her from home this evening and there was no answer, so I took a walk past your house and rang the doorbell. No answer."

"That's odd."

"It was almost nine when I was there, there were no lights on at all, looked like no one was home. Is she working late? Did she go out of town?"

"Naw, she works in insurance, they never work late. I don't know what is going on there. I'll have to track her down. Listen, if you hear anything around town about her let me know."

"Yeah, will do," Lance said.

"Are you coming back here on Monday?" Steve asked.

"Doesn't look like it. They want to give another crew a kick at the can," Lance responded, "I'll let you know when I know."

"Well, thanks for all the work you did here and also for checking up on Linda," Steve said.

"No sweat, what are friends for?" Lance hung up.

Steve felt annoyed. What was Linda up to? Why did he have to worry about her when he was away on a search? She had disappeared before, when she felt neglected enough. A few years ago when he was on a course, she had gone on an impromptu road trip with three girlfriends to Harrison Hot Springs on the mainland for four days without telling anyone. Steve remembered tracking her down by guessing who she was with and calling the husband of another woman on the trip. He knew where his wife was.

Screw it, Steve thought. If she wants to play games she can do that. She is probably sitting in some spa somewhere with a bunch of friends. I'll worry about her when I get back to Comox.

Steve moved the phone back to the bedside table, sat back in the chair and picked up the searchmaster's logbook once again, turning to the blank page which Walt had left him.

Picking up his pen Steve began to write out his narrative about the dispatch of the Kiowa. He knew that the logbook would be scrutinized by the accident investigation board and it had to reflect that he had not pressured Aitkinson and Nilan to fly the mission or get the job done at any cost. He remembered sitting with them on the picnic bench after lunch,

briefing them for the trip. There had only been the three of them sitting there together. Steve was sure that Walt hadn't joined him there until the Kiowa crew had gone to the aircraft. He wrote in the logbook that he had briefed the Kiowa crew, detailing how he had emphasized to Aitkinson and Nilan not to take any risks or push the weather as they were just following up a psychic report and therefore of low reliability and low priority. He wrote to the end of the page, so there was no empty space at the bottom.

He flipped to the end of the day's entries and wrote about talking with Loretta MacKinstry. She had run into him going into the hotel restaurant on his way to join some of the other members of the crew for dinner.

"Did your helicopter check the place that Madame Petulengro showed you?" she had asked.

"Yes they did," Steve had managed.

"... and?" she had continued.

"The helicopter crashed there while searching."

"I hope no one was hurt." she had said, visibly shocked.

"Two crew members died," Steve had said rather flatly, tired and hungry at that point.

"That is terrible news." Steve nodded in solemn agreement. He told her that they had managed to get a second helicopter to the accident scene before the weather closed in.

Her final question had been, "did anyone find anything there?"

Steve shook his head gravely for emphasis. "No," he had said to her. She had said nothing more and retreated to her room quickly.

He finished the logbook entries and read them over, the events all seemed to be in the right chronological order there. He closed the book and placed it carefully back in his bag to go to the trailer in the morning. Looking at his watch he could see it was nearly quarter to ten. There would be no flying tomorrow, but the search headquarters would have to be open to receive phone calls. Then there was the crash to deal with. DFS would be sending an investigator and an accident investigation board, too. It would be a busy day, even without any flying going on.

Steve looked around the room, which was a mess, he observed. Things in general were getting too complicated. He liked searches to begin, have a middle and a clear ending. The messiness bothered him, but he decided he would impose some order tomorrow.

Friday 28 September 1984

2145 hours

There was a light knock on Steve's hotel room door and Brenda Fineworth opened the door.

"Um, the door was open," she said, still holding onto the door. "Do you have a minute? I mean, are you busy?"

Steve couldn't help a smile at the admin clerk. Dressed in civilian clothes, she looked surprisingly small and tentative, not her usual brash confident self. She wore blue jeans and a casual white button-up blouse, her long brown hair in a loose ponytail, instead of her workday fashion of wearing it tightly pinned up. In bare feet she looked noticeably shorter than when in her uniform boots.

"Sure," he said, getting up to move a pile of paperwork off the other chair, "What's up?"

"Well I'm sorry to trouble you with this, but Sylvia needs to go home right away," she said sitting down on the chair Steve had cleared for her. He noticed that she had to point her toes to reach the floor when she sat down. "They took her youngest to the St Joseph's in Comox tonight, they think it's appendicitis."

"I didn't even know she had any kids," Steve said surprised.

"She is a single mother, two kids. Her youngest, Thomas is three, the older one is five," Brenda filled in.

"Single mother?" Steve thought out loud. "Why was she sent on this op?"

"Well everyone has to do their part, you know," Brenda explained. "If someone in her section can't do deployments then someone else has to go twice. That wouldn't be very fair to married people having to be away all the time to cover for single parents."

"I guess not," Steve said. "Who's taking care of her kids?"

"One of the guys in the Base Fin Section's wife babysits them when she has to go away."

"Why didn't anyone tell me about this before, perhaps we could have found someone else to cover this op?" Steve asked.

"Sylvia didn't want that, she wants to do her job. She doesn't want special treatment." Brenda explained patiently. "She wasn't even going to tell me, but she looked so worried this evening when I saw her, that I dragged it out of her. She doesn't really want to go home, but I thought she should. She wasn't happy when I told her that I was going to see you about sending her home."

Steve considered what Brenda said. "Well you are quite right to have let me know. She does need to be there with her son. We'll have to

figure out how to get her back to base.”

“There is a Pacific Western flight out at 0930,” she said.

Steve shook his head in amazement. “You always have all the answers, don't you?”

“I try to. No point in just bringing you problems without the answers, now is there?” she smirked.

“Who is going to cover her financial work?” Steve asked.

“Oh, I can do that,” Brenda replied. “I have been working with her on it and I know how she has it all organized. You'll still have to sign the requisitions and such, but I can do it.”

“You aren't too busy already?”

“Hardly,” she said with a laugh. “I can do it.”

Steve didn't need to consider the problem for long. “Well then go ahead and book her out. I'll have to let her boss know tomorrow that we are shipping her home and all that.”

“Will do,” Brenda jumped to her feet.

“Let me know how Sylvia is doing with all this,” he added.

“Okay,” she said as she flashed out the door, leaving it ajar as it had been when she entered.

Steve looked at the room. He decided to put all the paperwork that had been spread around the room on the desk in one pile. He picked up his civilian clothes from the bed, having never had the chance to change that evening anyway. He thought about changing and going down to the hotel bar for a beer, but decided to call it a night instead. The lure of late nights on the town that seemed so attractive even a few years ago just seemed tiresome these days, not worth the effort. *Probably just a sign of old age*, he thought.

He decided to wash his face and brush his teeth. He splashed cold water in his face from the sink faucet, lathered some of the over-scented hotel soap in his hands and rubbed it onto his face, rinsing it all away with more handfuls of cold water. The water woke him up a bit and the smell of the soap was oddly reassuring. He studied his face in the mirror. It was more of a Lee Marvin that looked back at him from under the graying crew cut than Paul Newman, he thought, serious, rugged. He looked at his face from left and right, his own gray eyes returning his gaze. *Not too bad, really, for the age*, he thought. At the sound of the room door closing Steve turned around and was surprised to see that Brenda had returned.

“I didn't expect you back,” he said.

“You told me to let you know how Sylvia is doing.” She sat down on the chair that she had used before and put her bare feet up on the bed.

"Well that's true," he responded. "I just expected to hear more at breakfast, after you had booked her flight."

"It's already booked," Brenda said with a quick smirk, "She's okay, just worried about Thomas. It looks like they will need to operate, probably before the time she gets home. She ought to be there when he gets out of recovery, though."

"I'm glad you let me know and that you booked her home," Steve said, relieved that at least one problem seemed to be resolved. He sat in the other chair.

"She put up a fuss about going home. She really doesn't want to go. I didn't see it that way, as far as I'm concerned family always comes first, especially when it involves kids. I told her that Thomas needs her more than we do here and we'd get by without her. In the end she agreed and seemed relieved that I had talked her into it."

Steve realized that he didn't know anything about Brenda either. "You must have kids of your own to feel that way?" he wondered aloud.

"Me? No, no kids," she laughed. "I am too irresponsible. I'd forget them on a bus or something. How about you?"

"Yeah I have two, but they are both grown up. One lives in Toronto and the other is in university in Vancouver."

"So I guess you don't see them that often?" she said studying him intently.

Steve thought about that. "Not lately. We used to be a close family when they were all at home." He became lost with that thought.

"You seemed to be going though 'family issues' there earlier this week," Brenda asked, trying to be careful.

"Oh just the usual stupid home stuff," Steve said. "My wife is playing at vanishing again, that sort of thing."

"Can't get a hold of her?"

"No, but she has done this before, taking off with her girlfriends while I am away, I can't get too concerned about it. Last time it happened I got all worked up, afraid something happened to her and it turned out that she was sitting in a spa in Harrison Hot Springs the whole time. Not worth worrying about."

"But you looked worried anyway." Brenda attempted, leaning back in the chair, stretching.

"Oh, that was something else entirely," Steve replied, putting his feet up on the bed, too, at an angle to hers.

"Different woman, same problem?"

"Mmm, something like that," Steve admitted. "I guess sometimes

things don't work out like you want them to. It can be a bit demoralizing at times.”

“Well that is quite true, sometimes they just don't,” Brenda said, sinking into the late-evening dream-like state that the room seemed to beckon her into. She closed her eyes and sunk further into her chair. “Sometimes other things appear in their place, however.”

“I guess you will miss having Sylvia here? You too seemed to be quite close,” Steve asked.

“Mmm, well that's true, we have had some fun while she has been here,” Brenda said, dreamily, “I'll probably catch up with her when we all get home to Comox.”

“Some fun?” Steve asked, wondering just what she had meant by that and thinking that by switching the tables to talk about her it would keep her from asking about his week even more.

“I like girls,” she admitted, eyes closed. “I like them a lot. It is sort of a hobby, I guess.”

“I thought you were married?” Steve asked.

“Oh I like boys, too,” she stated. “Bob knew what he was getting himself into. He doesn't exactly suffer because of me. Sometimes I bring my friends home.”

“You do?” Steve looked at her. Brenda's eyes were closed and her had a dreamy look on her face.

“Sometimes, but mostly I don't.” She laughed, “I warned you that I was irresponsible.” She moved her foot on the bed so that it was resting against his foot. “There are just things that I like and I usually don't hesitate to go and get them when I want them. I guess that I am just selfish, really.”

Steve smiled to himself, she wasn't very subtle. He could feel himself growing hard with her teasing conversation. “Do you often play games like this?”

She opened her eyes and looked directly at him. “Oh I never play games. No deceit, no games. I like what I like, when I like it. That's all.”

“And what is it that you like?” he challenged her, giving her the chance to advance the dance.

“Sex,” she said, still looking at him, her eyes very green in the dim light of the hotel room, pronouncing the word slowly, like it was the name of an exotic and deadly venomous snake.

He chuckled at her directness. “And when did you want that?”

“Now,” she said.

He reached over to shut off the bedside lamp and the room was

overcome with darkness.

Saturday 29 September 1984

0558 hours

The increased sound of the rain on the hotel room window pane woke Steve McBain early. He opened his eyes and could see the droplets of water running down the window in the light from the street. The hotel clock-radio's red numbers showed that it was almost six o'clock. There was no need to be up that early, but he was awake now and he knew that he wouldn't sleep any more. He carefully rolled himself onto his back, quietly so as not to wake Brenda, but quickly realized that he was alone.

Steve sat up on the edge of the bed, snapped on the bedside light and looked around. The bed was a mess of sheets and pillows, but Brenda was indeed gone, having taken all sign of her presence, her clothes, everything. He turned the light off, lay down and pulled the covers over himself. *I must have been out cold when she left*, he thought, *or was she even ever here?* He considered whether he imagined it all, in the darkness that was a possibility. *Wet dreams at this age? Pretty unlikely*, he decided, smirking to himself. He put his hands to his face and he could smell her on him, the scent of her skin, her hair, still present there. She had been there all right, no doubt about that. He lay there remembering it all, but didn't fall back asleep.

Slowly the quiet hotel was coming to life on that Saturday morning. Somewhere a toilet was flushed and the water ran down a pipe that was near his room's wall. A shower was started and the hot water that flowed made the pipes in the wall tick as they warmed up. Eventually he decided that he had to get out of bed, tidy up the room and reluctantly wash the smell of her off him. He had always found that an uncomfortable ritual after a night with a woman. He liked the reminder of her on his skin, but it had to go, washed away, as if it all never happened.

The headquarters crew would meet for breakfast at 0730, of course and plot the requirements for the day over breakfast, but both Steve and Brenda would have to pretend that last night hadn't happened. After all, she worked for him, they were in the same squadron, he was an officer and she a junior NCO, they were both married to other people. Lots of married military personnel had affairs while away from base, he knew, but the unwritten rule was to never talk about it or acknowledge it.

Showered, dressed, the room cleaned up, Steve took the elevator down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. As he rode down alone he

thought to himself, *that actually was really good sex, perhaps things are looking up. Perhaps.*

The restaurant was quiet, which Steve had expected that early on a Saturday morning. Walt already had a table and Major Krepinski was there, along with Sgt Szerzy and Cpl O'Brien. None of the aircrew were there, but then, Steve thought, they might as well get some more sleep and do some laundry while the weather doesn't allow any flying anyway.

"Looks like almost everyone is here," Steve observed, taking a seat.

"The girls were just leaving as I got here," Walt said, "something about Sylvia going home?"

The sleepy-looking waitress handed Steve a menu, but he refused it, asking for just coffee and toast.

"Yeah, family emergency at home, I sent her out this morning on Pacific Western. I thought they'd go after breakfast, but I guess there are tickets to pick up and such."

"Everything okay?" O'Brien asked.

"Her youngest is in the hospital, looks like appendicitis," Steve explained. "It sounds like he will be all right. He'll be better with his mom there, though."

"Ouch," Walt exclaimed. "Are we getting a replacement for her?"

"Brenda will handle the accounts," Steve said. "We can make do with her for now."

"I think it is going to be a busy day," Major Krepinski pronounced, "even without any flying going on."

Steve just nodded. No flying, but one relative arriving, the aftermath of the crash to deal with, investigators, the press. It would be busy, all right. The waitress brought Steve his order. Everyone else was almost done eating. "I guess we can pack everyone in the car and get down to the trailer." His eye noticed an unmistakable flash of orange enter the restaurant.

"Morning, boss," Cpl Dennis Jones, the SAR tech said, arriving.

"You two can just hang out here, I don't think we'll need you today," Steve said. Jones looked serious, unusual for him, or any SAR tech for that matter. Normally as a group they prided themselves on their unconcerned unflappability.

"Sorry to bring you bad news, boss. Bruce is in jail," Jones said.

Saturday 29 September 1984

0747 hours

"You are just trying to make my day, aren't you?" Steve said to Jones wryly. All conversation around the breakfast table had stopped and everyone was looking at the SAR tech. "What happened?"

"We were in a bar last night, you know, figured with no flying today it couldn't hurt to go out for a bit. This drunken local civvy came up and wanted to pick a fight. I told him to go home and he wouldn't lay off, you know. So Bruce decked him for me and then the cops arrived."

"I think you are skipping over a few parts there," Steve said.

"Maybe, but Bruce is still in jail this morning."

Steve was mulling over his response. "You know we are here in Prince George to do a search for a missing airplane, don't you?" he said quietly. Jones just looked at his feet. "Man, Agent Orange, you guys sure know how to make an impact in a town like this. Well, if he is in jail then we don't have to worry about where he is, do we? I'll go and see if we can spring him later on this morning. I mean I wouldn't want him to have to get up too early now, would I? But if I can get him out, and I mean 'if', then you are going to owe me a better story, okay? Oh and you can phone the CO and tell him what happened, too, cause I am going to be too busy trying to spring Cpl Knowles to make that phone call."

Jones brightened at the prospect. "Yessir, you bet." Like all Transport and Rescue Squadron COs, LCol Braithwaite was soft on disciplining SAR techs. He recognized that he couldn't the job done without them and that meant putting up with them and their shenanigans.

"But first I am going to drive everyone to the trailer and let them get to work, I got a full car, so you'll have to hang out here. Just try to stay out of trouble, okay?"

"You bet, boss," Jones said and left the restaurant.

The headquarters crew had been dead silent during this exchange and with Jones gone the silence in the restaurant was noticeable. Walt was grinning ear to ear.

"What are you laughing at?" Steve shot at him.

"Knowles did this the last time we had a major search, remember in Penticton that fight at Slack Alice's?" Walt laughed. The Major just shook his head at the exchange.

"Yeah this is getting to be a habit with him," Steve noted. "Come on let's get going, we got too much to do already."

The crew dutifully paid their bills and trooped out into the wet morning for the drive to the trailer. The rain was coming down and the morning was still quite dark, despite being well after sunrise. They all

quickly squeezed into the car to avoid the torrent. They drove in a solemn silence, the windshield wipers pounding out a beat as they threw water from the glass.

Steve was thinking, *Well this day just got busier yet.* He tried to organize it all in his head as he drove.

Saturday 29 September 1984

0825 hours

Arriving at the trailer the rain was still coming down. The morning was ominously dark, although the low clouds were becoming visible in the slowly lightening gloom. Walt lead the dash to the trailer door, armed with his key to let everyone in before they got soaked. Steve locked up the car and let everyone else try to get in the trailer door all at once, following well behind. By the time he got in the rest of the crew were standing in the briefing area, shaking the water from their jackets.

Sufficiently dry, everyone set to their morning jobs. Sgt Szerzy was tearing off strips of faxed actuals and forecasts. Major Krepinski started in on the electric typewriter composing a press release on the accident. Corporal O'Brien warmed up the radios, although there was no one to talk to and Walt started in on the routine tasks he had to do, beginning with an entry in the searchmaster's logbook.

Steve McBain considered leaving the SAR tech in jail until Monday. *At least I know he won't be in any trouble there and I won't need him until then,* he considered. He sighed inwardly, knowing if he didn't make all attempts soonest to solve the situation, that he would get no help from the SAR tech 'union' on this search. A call to the Prince George RCMP detachment confirmed that they were holding Knowles and that he had been charged with assault.

Shit, Steve thought, *usually these things can be solved quickly if no charges have been laid.* The RCMP constable suggested that there was nothing he could do and that Steve ought to contact the Crown Prosecutors' office on Monday. Steve smiled to himself, now he had a good reason to let the jailbird stew until Monday.

Steve called the Crown Prosecutors' Office and left a message with the answering service. It might not speed things up, but it was worth a shot.

Walt was smirking to himself when Steve hung up the phone. "These SAR techs just make your job easier, don't they?"

"Well they come in useful for scrapping bodies out of wrecks, but

they bug the fuck out of me when they are on the loose.” Steve said, annoyed.

“You need me to call the JAG?” Walt asked, indicating the military legal department.

Steve narrowed his eyes. “That’s Plan ‘B,’” he said through gritted teeth. “I probably can’t get them either on a weekend. Let me see if I can just solve this one myself.”

“Sure, no sweat,” Walt said, “just trying to help.”

They were both distracted by the trailer door banging shut. Loretta MacKinstry entered with Brenda right behind her. Mrs MacKinstry blocked the doorway, shaking off her umbrella and Brenda dodged around her, giving Steve a very brief smile as she scooted into the office area. Major Krepinski looked up for a second and went back to his typing.

Steve took the opportunity to end his conversation with Walt and greet Mrs MacKinstry. “Good morning Mrs MacKinstry, nice to see you.”

“No its not, on both counts,” she retorted, handing him her coat. “Are your aircraft out searching for my husband?”

“Of course not,” Steve rejoined. “You can’t see anything out there in this weather, but I assure you as soon as conditions improve we will be back at it.” He folded her wet coat over a chair.

“I can assure you that the US Coast Guard will be out looking today.”

“I can assure you,” Steve emphasized, “that they are sitting on the ground where I put them, in Williams Lake right now waiting for the weather to improve.”

“Hurmph,” was all she said.

“Mrs MacKinstry, I am doing everything I can to find your husband and the others on that aircraft. If there was more I could do, I would already be doing it.”

Brenda interrupted him. “Phone call for you.” She waved the receiver at him.

“Can you give it to Walt?” he asked, annoyed.

“Crown Prosecutor,” she said, slowly.

“All right. Excuse me a minute, please,” he said to Mrs MacKinstry and took the phone call.

The call was short and Steve wrote down the address he was given. After hanging up the phone Steve turned to Walt. “Can you entertain Mrs MacKinstry for an hour or so, I have to go downtown and see if I can spring Knowles. This is getting complicated.” Walt just nodded in agreement. They returned to the briefing area.

"Mrs MacKinstry, I have to go into town to solve a touchy situation, so I am going to leave my Assistant Searchmaster, Captain Walter Ashbury here to brief you." He didn't wait for an answer, grabbed his flying jacket from the peg by the door and exited into the pouring rain.

"Well, I never," Loretta MacKinstry said out loud. Walt just smiled wanly as the door slammed shut behind Steve.

Saturday 29 September 1984

1045 hours

The morning had aged considerably by the time Steve returned to the trailer. He arrived in a slight lull in the rain, but as he walked briskly from the parking lot to the trailer he noted that the fog had thickened in its place. He entered the trailer, hung up his jacket, noted how quiet it seemed and went and poured himself a cup of coffee. That accomplished, he noticed Walt was looking at him expectantly.

"Come on, let's sit down and I'll brief you," Steve said and they adjourned to the briefing area.

"You got Knowles out?" Walt asked.

"Yeah, it will happen once the paperwork is done. We'll have to send someone down in an hour or so to the RCMP lock-up to get him. You don't want to know what was involved in getting him out."

"They dropped the charges?" Walt inquired.

"Yes, they did, but I had to endure an excessively long lecture about keeping control of my pets, not letting them damage the place and harm the citizens, bringing the Dominion government into disrepute, and so on, on and on." Steve looked tired and annoyed. "Give me some good news."

Walt thought. "Well, Mrs MacKinstry went back to the hotel."

"I'll take that," Steve said, with a small unenthusiastic smile. "You scared her away?"

"No, I just reassured her to death, I think," Walt said, with a laugh. "I don't think she could take anymore. She really is having a hard time you know. Not only is her husband missing, but her assistant quit. I think she is coming a bit unglued."

"The blondie one with the shoe problems?" Steve asked.

"Yup. Apparently she flew home yesterday. Surprise, huh?"

"Hardly," Steve said. He thought for a second, then raising his coffee cup in a toast said, "Well I wish her a life of better shoes in Tulsa, then." He added, as an afterthought, "I wish Loretta MacKinstry the same."

Anything else?"

"I got a call from a Major Mason at DFS. He will be arriving Monday along with the board of inquiry people. There is even some good news there – he is planning to stay out of the way of the search as far as possible. They don't want office space here, they will work out of one of the hotels and they won't be staying at our hotel, either. They don't even want one of our helicopters, they are going to rent one locally to get the job done."

Steve was listening closely. "Say, that is good news. I thought they would come screaming in here and bugger up my search."

"Well the only bad news there is that the BC Coroner will need a helicopter, but hopefully just for Monday morning."

"No problem, just give them the 408 Twin Huey for the morning."

Walt pointed to the aircraft status board on the wall, which said: Twin Huey – Coroner'.

"Okay, good," said Steve. "You're keeping up. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Walt said, hesitating. "Major Mason said that there is going to be a collateral board."

"A collateral?" Steve asked slowly, thinking, "Why?" The military usually reserved collateral boards of inquiry for incidents and accidents where there was a suspicion of some sort of wrong-doing. The safety board would only investigate the causes of the accident. Disciplinary and command problems fell within the mandate of the collateral board.

"Mason said he didn't know, he did say that they are becoming routine these days for every aircraft accident," Walt reported.

"Did he say who was heading that up?" Steve asked, trying to anticipate what was happening.

"He didn't know anymore than that, which, when you think about it, is probably the case. They do like to keep these two types of boards as separate as possible."

"True," Steve said, "Does the CO or RCC know about this collateral?"

"Not that I know of," Walt said, "I haven't talked to either RCC or the squadron while you were out."

Steve nodded thoughtfully. "I had better let them know." He picked up the phone to call RCC first.

Saturday 29 September 1984

1110 hours

The phone calls made, Steve called the RCMP detachment and confirmed that the paperwork for Knowles' release was complete and that someone from SAR HQ could pick him up. The RCMP building was downtown, only a few blocks from the hotel. Steve considered leaving Knowles to walk the distance, but then he noted that the rain had begun again in earnest and that he might need some future cooperation from the SAR techs. He asked Brenda to take the van down to the RCMP lock-up on Brunswick Street, retrieve Knowles and take him to the hotel.

"You don't want to see him back here?" Brenda asked.

Steve just shook his head slowly. He was afraid that he might say something he would later regret. "Just tell him that I'll talk to him later tonight at the hotel," he said and as an afterthought added with some force, "and tell him to stay out of trouble or else."

It was getting very busy, especially for a non-flying day on the search. Krepinski had been in touch with his office in Victoria. He let Steve know that NDHQ had issued a press release on the Kiowa crash to the national media. He showed the fax to Steve. The item was brief and lacking detail, including names.

"Have the next-of-kin been notified yet?" Steve asked the major.

"Not yet, it sounds like they are having some trouble locating them," Krepinski reported.

"Well I am glad I don't have to do that part," he said. The major showed Steve the press release that he had written for the afternoon press conference. It had a bit more detail about the search they were engaged on, but no real detail about the crash or the crew. It did state that an official military investigation was underway.

"It looks fine," Steve said handing it back. "Are you expecting a crowd?"

"This may well have perked up some interest by the media," Krepinski reported.

"It is just sad that we have to crash another aircraft to keep the press's attention for more than a few days," Steve stated.

"Sadly, dead bodies are always a news story," Krepinski said. "Are you going to be available to talk to the press about this? It may help to have you here."

Steve was not keen to face the press over the crash. There was nothing to be gained by it, really and there was always the chance of saying something wrong or something that the media might jump on. All the press really needed to know was what Krepinski already had written down in the press release. Still he couldn't leave Krepinski to deal with the media alone

on this sort of issue without a good reason and he didn't have a good reason on a non-flying day like this. "Sure, I should be there," he said.

"Captain McBain," Corporal Tim O'Brien, the radio operator called to him, "phone call for you." With no one to talk to on the radios O'Brien was handling the phones while Brenda was out.

Steve excused himself to the major and took the call. It was George von Richthofen.

"Good day Captain," he began, "I wondered if it might be convenient for me to meet with you today." His English was very precise, with a slight German accent.

"Certainly," Steve said, "where are you now?"

"I am here in Prince George, downtown. I arrived today. It has been a bit of a long trip, but I will come to the airport to meet if you like."

"Sure that will be fine," Steve said, thinking about the press conference that was soon approaching at 1300 and thinking it would be good to keep him away from that zoo. "Have you had lunch?" Steve asked.

"I am not sure what day it is, let alone what time of day," von Richthofen replied, "but I am thinking about getting something to eat before coming to see you, if that would help."

Steve made a quick plan. "Our search aircraft are not flying today due to the weather, so perhaps it would be better if I pick you up and we go for lunch together in town. I can fill you in on where we are with the search and answer all your questions without being interrupted."

"If you can spare the time, that would be appreciated," von Richthofen said.

"Well on a normal search day I would be too busy, but I think I can make it happen today without any trouble." Steve copied down von Richthofen's hotel location information and arranged to pick him up right away.

"Sorry Major, but I have to attend to a newly arrived family member of one of the missing passengers. I won't be back for the press briefing, I hope you can handle it?" Steve said, on his way to get his jacket.

"Who is that?" Krepinski asked, as he considered the prospect of handling the press on this sticky issue without McBain there.

"George von Richthofen," Steve said. "He just arrived from Austria, brother of one of the passengers."

Well I guess I can make do without you," Major Krepinski said slowly, considering his options. "Can I call upon Captain Ashbury for technical assistance, if need be?"

"Sure, just don't let anyone speculate on the causes of the accident.

That is up to the board to find out.”

“Roger,” the major said somewhat reluctantly and Steve was out the door into the gathering fog and drizzle.

Saturday 29 September 1984

1214 hours

Steve sat opposite George von Richthofen at a small table in Carpaggio's restaurant in downtown Prince George. Their orders had been taken by the one teenaged waitress on duty. Outside the rain was starting to replace the drizzle once again and it ran down the plate glass window at the front of the restaurant. The street looked wet and gloomy and there were few people about. Between the time of year, well after the tourist season and the weather, the restaurant was almost deserted.

George von Richthofen was a short, well-dressed man whom Steve guessed was in his late thirties. Steve had been expecting someone older.

“My brother Edward is the oldest. He is 51,” George explained. “I am the youngest in the family of four boys.” His spoken English was clear, if a bit formal.

“Your English is very good,” Steve said.

“These days most Austrians learn English in public school,” he explained. “But I went to university in the UK, too, which helped.”

“Cambridge?” Steve tried. He was trying to give him reason to relax, realizing that this must be a stressful time for him.

“London School of Economics, actually,” George said.

“So you are an economist, then?” Steve asked.

“Well that was my training. My father wanted us all involved with the family automotive business, Leistung Automobile. The company makes components for all the major European car makes, but especially BMW and Mercedes. I did work for the company for a while, but I quit to follow my first love which is painting, instead.”

“Sounds like a quieter life than the auto parts business, but do you make any money at it?”

George laughed, “Most people don't ask that question, but I suppose they want to. I make a little bit at it now and then. My wife has a good government job and we have simple tastes in life, which leaves us the opportunity to be poorer, but happier than some people in my family, I suppose.”

“Didn't your family give you a hard time about not working in the

family business?" Steve asked.

"Well, yes, at first they did," George answered, thinking about it, "But it was soon forgotten or at least forgiven. You see my brother pretty much forced out or bought out everyone after our father died ten years ago. He is very competitive and seemed to think that he knew better how to run the company than the rest of the family. I am afraid he pretty much alienated the members of the family, except my mother. She still thinks he is her golden child."

"So if you didn't get along with your brother why did you get the job of coming here, now?" Steve asked, sensing some oddities in the story.

"It was my mother who wanted someone to come here to find out what happened to Edward, because he is the sole-owner of the company now, everything depends on him. My mother is a very forceful person, too, but her health is not good these days, which is why she did not come herself. You will be grateful that she didn't, as she would make your work here more difficult."

"Yeah, I already have one of those. I am glad you are here instead of her, then, but you didn't answer my question of how you got the job."

"Well the rest of the family were unable to get away from work. My two other brothers are in important jobs, my mother is not well, only I seem to have the time to be here, at least everyone else thinks so."

"I see," Steve stated, "because you are a painter they think of you as unemployed?"

"Yes, basically that is it, but my mother paid for the airline ticket to send me here and I had a gallery show close two weeks ago, so I really had no reason to refuse her request, not that she would have accepted any excuses anyway." He shrugged slightly in apology.

"You don't sound too excited to be here," Steve said.

"My mother is not a person to be refused," he explained, "my brother has not always been the easiest person to get along with, but I have a family obligation to help out."

"I see," Steve said, considering George's situation. As far as the searchmaster's job went George was a boon or at least not a hindrance. He seemed like he would not create a lot of problems or complications for the search and that was good. Steve needed to know a bit more, if only to make the lunch last longer.

The waitress brought their lunch orders and carefully placed them on the table. She was a dark-haired girl of perhaps 18. She seemed very shy, said nothing and didn't make eye-contact with either of the older men. Outside the rain continued to fall and through the front window the day

looked remote and colourless from inside the warmth of Carpaggio's.

"Your brother, Edward," Steve began again, "is he married?"

"Oh yes," George said, "he is married to Mathilde."

"And she didn't want to come with you here?" Steve asked.

"My mother told her that she would not go here," George said leaning forward across the table confidentially. "It is better for you that my mother had insisted that. Mathilde would have made your job here much harder still."

They ate lunch and talked mostly about Canada. George had never been to the country before and he asked many questions of Steve about that part of the nation that they were in, the wildlife, the terrain and the pursuits of the local people. After lunch Steve gave him a rundown on the search effort to date, spreading out a map of the search area, once the table had been cleared of dishes. Steve went through the stats from the search, the number of aircraft, hours flown, percentages of coverage achieved and the weather. He finished by indicating that all areas would hopefully be searched in about two weeks time. George listened carefully, but made no notes and asked no questions when Steve was done.

Steve checked his watch and felt fairly confident that he could go back to the trailer and miss the end of the press conference there. He asked George his plans.

"I will stay for a week or two and report back to the rest of the family what is going on every day or two," he said. "I will try to stay out of your way while I am here."

"You won't be in my way," Steve insisted, thinking that the rather quiet, reticent artist was much less obtrusive than Loretta MacKinstry. He didn't look like the type to confer with psychics, fake or otherwise. "You are welcome down at the trailer any time. I am there usually from 0830 to dark every day."

"But I want to make sure that you have the unimpeded time to carry out your duties," George said.

"Taking care of the relatives of missing passengers is very much part of my duties," Steve responded with a note of sincerity.

They made ready to leave the restaurant. The rain outside was beating off the pavement and running in rivers down the gutters of the street. In the relative dry environment of the rental car Steve drove George back to his hotel, pulling up under the roofed entrance.

"What type of painting do you do, anyway?" Steve inquired.

"Mostly landscapes," George responded.

"I don't think I have ever seen any von Richthofen landscapes."

“Well,” George explained, “the von Richthofen name is a disadvantage in Europe. Everyone expects miraculous things, so I paint under another name. It saves a lot of trouble in the long run. Der Rote Baron was really a very distant relative and as far as I am concerned, best relegated to the history books.”

“Will you be painting while you are here?”

“No, I didn't bring my equipment with me, it is all a bit bulky. Besides, my mother would have been not in favour of me painting here. That isn't why I was sent. But I will probably take many photographs and I may do some sketches, if it stops raining.”

“Monday,” Steve pronounced and left the Austrian at the door.

Saturday 29 September 1984

1410 hours

“Ah, there you are.” Steve heard the voice as he entered the trailer, shaking the rain from his jacket after the dash from the parking lot to the door. The person who spoke was George Withers, the correspondent for the Prince George Citizen. Steve observed him warily as he hung up his jacket. The briefing area was otherwise empty.

“I thought the press briefing was over?” Steve said.

“We missed having you here,” the reporter replied. “It wasn't the same without the boss here to answer the tough questions.”

“You can ask all the questions you want, but I may not have the answers,” Steve retorted. “Coffee?”

“Um, sure,” Withers said. He obviously hadn't been expecting the offer and it caught him a bit off guard.

“Let me grab you a cup.” Steve headed into the office area. Brenda and Sgt Szerzy were the only ones there. There was a half a pot of coffee on the warming plate of the coffee maker. Brenda looked up from her paperwork questioningly when Steve came in.

Steve held up the carafe and looked at the contents. It looked pretty dark. “When was this made?” he asked.

“At lunch,” Brenda suggested.

Steve resignedly poured two cups from the pot. In a low voice he asked Brenda, “where is the major?”

“Went to do laundry,” she reported quietly. “There really isn't much happening this afternoon.” She gestured to the airport scene outside the window. A view of fog and rain shrouded the scene and obscured the nearby tree line. The visibility was probably 1/8 of a mile and the view was

oppressively dark and gloomy. Steve just nodded in understanding, took the two cups and returned to the briefing area.

"Sorry you were left alone here," Steve said to Withers, placing the coffee cup on the table so Withers could pick it up. "Sorry I wasn't here for the briefing, too. I was with relatives of the victims, newly arrived in town."

"I had heard that there was a fellow in from Austria, brother of one of the passengers?" he asked.

"Word travels fast in this town, I see," Steve said. "I won't say 'leave him alone', because that wouldn't be fair, but just consider that he is a pretty quiet little guy a long way from home, elected by his family to come here to find out what is going on. Just take it easy on him, okay?"

"I promise not to eat him for lunch, if that's what you mean. Where do I find him?"

Steve smiled thoughtfully. "I thought you had sources? I'll tell you what, I'll give him your number, how is that?"

"Thanks heaps," Withers said with a note of resignation. He sat on one of the stacking chairs. "I am trying to help you on this search you know. We have stirred up some good sighting reports from the public, haven't we?"

"Yes you have," Steve said. "None of them have panned out, but that's hardly your fault. They seem to have trailed off recently, though."

"Yeah, well we haven't been writing much about the search in the last few days, 'no news is no news', ya know. Besides anyone who thinks they saw something has probably come forward by now."

A wind gust rocked the trailer, causing ripples in the coffee. Steve drank a bit of his coffee. It was pretty CF-standard, he decided, not the best. Withers ignored his.

The reporter continued. "This latest accident can probably give us the opportunity to help you some more. It will generate more community interest. 'The Sacrifices Made In The Name Of Helping The Missing', that sort of thing."

"So what are you looking for?" Steve asked warily.

"Krepinski gave me the facts, as far as they went, but all I got really was that a helicopter from Edmonton was out looking for the missing airplane and crashed while searching. That isn't enough for more than a photo caption, if I even had a photograph to put it on, which I don't. I need some human interest to make it worth telling, to engage people. Who were the crew, what were they doing, why did they crash? I know that the accident happened northeast of here, which is not where you have been

spending most of your time looking.” Withers gestured towards the maps pinned to the wall. “It doesn't even look like they were searching in your mapped-out search area to me.”

“I really want to be able to give you more detail, but in some ways I am rather limited. The next-of-kin haven't been notified as far as I know yet, so I can't give you any names, hometowns, that sort of thing, not yet anyway. The aircraft was a CH-136 Kiowa from 408 Tactical Helicopter Squadron in Edmonton. They were checking out sighting reports that had come in. They had done dozens of them over the past week. Some are in the main search area, but if others seem plausible we will check them out, even if they are out of the area. We don't want to ignore a tip from the public and have it turn out to be what we are looking for.” Steve paused to let Withers finish his notes. “We don't know what went wrong on this flight, that is why there will be two investigations into the accident. Until they are done we won't know what happened.” Steve was getting annoyed by the line of questioning. Withers stopped scribbling his notes and looked up at Steve.

“Two investigations?”

“Apparently the military has just started routinely doing both a safety investigation and an independent secondary investigation to consider things that are outside the scope of the safety investigation,” Steve explained.

“What is 'outside the scope of the safety investigation'?” Withers asked, writing.

“The safety investigation focuses on accident causes. Their mandate is to prevent future accidents.”

“Oh, so they don't touch liability, fault, blame, that sort of thing?”

“There are lots of things they don't cover, blame would be just one of them,” Steve said, trying to keep the annoyance he was feeling out of his voice.

Withers closed his note pad and stuffed it into his bag. “Well that gives me something to work with. When do the investigations start?”

“Monday, I think. They have to get here before they can get started,” Steve said.

Withers made ready to go. “One more thing. Who called in the sighting report the helicopter was chasing? That area is really remote, no roads, no cabins up there. I can't imagine there was anyone up there at this time of year.”

Steve considered the question carefully, biting his lip.

“Unfortunately I can't tell you that. Sighting reports are all confidential. If

people thought the press might come and bang on their doors after they call one in to us, then they might not make the call in the first place. Most people are just trying to be helpful, not get publicity.”

Withers put on his jacket and moved towards the door. “I kind of thought you would say that, but I thought it was worth a try. You wouldn't tell me if the report came from a US spy satellite, would you?”

Steve laughed out loud. “A US spy satellite? I wish! Maybe one day we will do searches by satellite, but today we still do old-fashioned eye-ball SAR.”

Withers looked doubtful. “Well it was worth a shot,” he said. “It would make a really good story, you know?” Steve just shook his head smiling. Withers departed for the parking lot, the rain continued falling as he went.

Just as he was about to close the door on Withers departing form, he saw a familiar figure bolt from the adjacent hangar. He held the door open for Walt as he took the three steps into the trailer in one bound.

“Thanks,” Walt said, getting in out of the rain quickly, “new retirement job?”

“What's that, talking to reporters?” Steve asked as Walt took his jacket off and hung in on a peg protruding from the trailer wall.

“No, 'doorman',” he said, laughing.

“Funny kid. Where were you anyway?”

“Bathroom,” Walt said.

“I guess that is allowed,” Steve replied, testily. “If there is nothing happening, maybe we should call it a day and lock up soon here.”

“Suits me,” Walt said. “There isn't a whole lot going on at all.” They went into the office area where Walt picked up the searchmaster's logbook and handled it to Steve. The last entry was in Walt's handwriting and simply said, 'press briefing by Maj Krepinski, six in attendance'. Steve wrote quickly, 'Passenger relative meeting, George von Richthofen, Press briefing George Withers, Prince George Citizen'. He put the book back on his desk and turned to Sgt Szerzy, who was putting the finishing touches on a hand drawn surface analysis chart.

“How does it look for getting some VFR weather?” Steve asked. “Tomorrow?”

Szerzy shook his head. “Very late tomorrow,” he said.

“How late?” Steve asked.

“Midnight,” he replied.

Steve addressed the other three in the room. “Unless any of you have any pressing reason to stay here, we can probably lock up for today

and head to the hot tub.”

Saturday 29 September 1984

1613 hours

The hotel hot tub was often empty in that time before the dinner hour. Most of the search headquarters crew met there as Steve had indicated and by shortly after four o'clock he was there, along with Brenda, Walt, Tim O'Brien and Dave Szerzy. The water was warm and quickly lulled them all into a relaxed state.

“What happened to Major Krepinski?” Steve asked.

“Laundry,” Brenda replied, her eyes closed and her head leaned back on the edge of the hot tub.

“You'd think he would be done by now,” Walt quipped.

“Well everyone had better take a break tonight as far as possible, tomorrow, too,” Steve said to no one in particular. “Once Monday comes we'll probably be back to a full flying schedule, we'll have Major Payne and his Buff crew here and the boards of inquiry will be here, too. It is going to get totally nuts.”

Walt considered everything. “What are we expecting for weather next week?”

The met tech spoke up. “It looks good for the rest of the week. You should get some serious searching in.”

“Well that is something positive,” Walt added.

They heard the door to the pool area bang shut. The two SAR tech Corporals Jones and Knowles appeared. Steve regarded Knowles warily. The two of them were sizing up the hot tub as they kicked off their flip-flops.

“Which end is the deep end?” Jones asked Knowles.

“It doesn't matter, it all looks deep enough, just dive in,” Knowles quipped. They both took a running jump at the hot tub but stopped short and laughed when Brenda startled with a splash. The two SAR techs looked fit and strong in their bathing suits.

“Are you two just going to screw around or are you actually going to get in?” she scolded.

“Coming mother,” Knowles said.

“Yes, mother,” Jones said. Brenda gave them both an annoyed look. “Arg, she's melting me with her heat vision,” Jones retorted.

“Anyone know these two?” Brenda asked to blank looks from the rest of the crew.

“Hey you jailbird,” said Jones to Knowles, “you didn't thank the boss for springing you from the big house.”

Knowles addressed Steve in a gangster voice, “Tanks fer springing me, boss. I wuz goin' stir crazy in there.”

Steve just waved dismissively. “Just stay out of trouble.”

“The other guy started it,” Knowles said to Steve, “he insulted your mother and I was sworn to defend her honour.”

“Just don't,” Steve said sharply, not rising to the bait or falling for Knowles lack of seriousness. “Next time I won't get you out, I'll let you rot there.”

“You da boss,” Knowles said.

Brenda pulled herself out of the hot tub, her slim bikini-clad body dripping water on the deck. She could feel everyone looking at her and grabbed her towel from the chair she had left it on. She wrapped the towel around her and said to the group, “are these two always this annoying?”

“Pretty much,” Walt said.

“Always,” Tim added.

Brenda left the pool area, dripping water on the decking and the carpet. She decided it was better to drip on the floor than rub herself down with the towel in front of the collection of men there. She made her way back to her hotel room, via the deserted corridors.

Back in her room she pulled the towel from her shoulders and tossed it onto the bathroom counter. She pulled her bikini bottoms down and stepped out of them, tossing them into the sink. She shrugged out of the bikini top, too and tossed that in the sink. After rinsing the chlorinated water from her bathing suit she then wrung them out and then stood on the edge of the bathtub to allow her to reach the shower curtain rail, where she hung both bathing suit parts. As soon as she was just sure they wouldn't fall from the rail, the phone rang. Naked, she left the bathroom and flung herself across the bed to grab the phone handset from the bed-side table. The curtains were open, but the shears drawn and the view was across the back parking lot anyway.

“Hello,” she said.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come up for a pre-dinner apéritif.”

“Well now there is an offer I can't refuse,” she said. She grabbed the white hotel terrycloth dressing gown from the peg behind the hotel room door, put it on, slipped her room key into the pocket and left her room in bare feet.

Saturday 29 September 1984

2010 hours

Steve lay on his bed flipping TV channels. CBC news was carrying stories about Marc Garneau, a Lieutenant Commander in the Canadian Navy, scheduled to become the first Canadian in space next Friday on the American Space Shuttle Challenger. *Why is the navy in the space program instead of the air force?* he wondered. He punched the TV off and the room went quiet.

Steve recalled the late part of the day. With the weather eliminating flying he had thought the day was going to be dull, but it hadn't gone too badly after all. The lunch with George von Richthofen had been okay, even low-stress, considering how meeting relatives of the victims can go. Even the conversation with Knowles in the hot tub had been as successful as possible, he judged. He had been able to be firm with Knowles, without embarrassing either of them and it saved him the trouble of going to see Knowles in the evening to express his displeasure. Ultimately you could never really win with the SAR techs, he knew. If there was an actual rescue to do then you needed them to get the job done and you had to put up with their games to keep that capability available. Steve smiled to himself. He had a plan to get even with Knowles – he would send him on the Twin Huey on Monday to assist the coroner. That unsavoury job would keep him busy and out of trouble.

After the hot tub incident he had spent a pleasant hour or so with Brenda. Steve found her exceptionally enthusiastic about sex, quite different from his previous relationship with Ellen. Brenda liked lots of different positions, liked being on top, liked working up a sweat. Ellen liked it slow, she was expressive but never seemed prepared to put a lot of work into the sex, she liked one position and liked falling asleep afterwards. The relationship with Ellen had gone on for a long time and he had felt that it had had an emotional component to it, at least at one time, anyway, he thought they had cared about each other. With Brenda the sex was much more physically intense and energetic, but there was nothing emotional about it at all. It just seemed to be something fun for her, a hobby. That was okay, he thought, it took his mind off Ellen's rejection. With Brenda it wasn't a relationship, it was just some fun. Steve found it was somehow energizing, enjoying her enthusiasm. He felt he could handle that, although there was no saying how long it would go on.

Take it while it lasts, he thought.

Even dinner that evening had gone well. It had started with just

Steve, Brenda and Walt at the hotel restaurant table. Steve and Brenda had gone to dinner together after cleaning themselves up. The restaurant was nearly deserted, but when Walt joined them they had to be careful not to arouse his suspicions. Walt seemed absorbed in the problems of the search, as that was all he wanted to talk about and didn't seem to notice anything else. *That was good*, Steve thought. They were later joined by just about everyone on the search. It seemed no one was willing to venture outside the hotel in the pouring rain to somewhere else for dinner. Within a half hour they had pushed several tables together and had the search headquarters crew, O'Dale's Twin Huey crew of three, plus his two technicians there as well. That made eleven of them at dinner. Eventually the two SAR techs joined them, although they both kept clear of Steve and sat at the other end of the row of tables. The conversation had been noisy, but the waitresses didn't mind. SAR Schmidt was propping up the economy of Prince George.

Most of the group elected to go to the movies after dinner, even if it meant a foray in the rain. Tired, Steve returned to his room alone to put his feet up.

Indeed, it hadn't been a bad day after all, he decided.

Steve wondered: should he risk trying to call Linda again tonight?

He considered the problem, the pluses and minuses. He hadn't talked to her since he had left home last Sunday, now seven days ago. He had tried calling her several times. Lance had walked past the house but hadn't come up with anything else. *Where was she? Probably in Harrison Hot Springs again with her girlfriends. That would figure*, he thought.

The pluses: things were quiet and he didn't really need her to do anything for him, 'let sleeping dogs lie' sort of thing.

The minuses: did he really want to talk to her and risk a potentially nasty conversation when the day had gone so well? Of course it was possible that something had happened to her. Maybe she was in the hospital? *If that were the case you'd think that someone would have let the squadron know and they would, in turn, have called me?* There didn't seem to be a good reason to talk to her, especially if she didn't want to talk to him, which seemed to be increasingly the case.

Against his better judgment, though, he picked up the phone and dialed his home phone number. The phone rang once.

I really shouldn't bother with all this, he thought, *I am trying to run a search here.*

The phone rang a second time. *I really could find a better way to spend my time than playing her game*, he thought, annoyed.

The answering machine picked up and once again he heard his own voice sounding too cheerful. The pick-up after two rings meant there were messages on the machine. He punched in the access code for the machine and checked the messages on the tape. There was just his own message from earlier in the week. He hung up. Linda always erased messages when she had heard them, besides if she had even listened to it, the machine would have rung four times, not two. It seemed to indicate that she hadn't been home all week and hadn't checked messages. Now he really felt annoyed.

He sighed to himself. *Time for the next step*, he thought. Who could he trust? He rummaged through his bag, found his address book and flipped through it to Scott Forbes' home number. Scott, the VU-33 T-bird pilot and golfing partner, lived just down the street from Steve's PMQ. Was it worth the risk? Steve thought so. *I need to know what is going on so I can get on with this damn search in peace*. He dialed Scott's number and listened to the phone ring at the other end.

"Hello," a female voice answered.

That would be Scott's wife, probably, Steve thought, searching for her name. "Hi, is that Carly?"

"No it's Cynthia," she said.

Oh, hi, I was looking for your father," Steve said. "Is he home?"

He could hear the phone being dropped and the voice yelled, quite loudly, "Dad, phone".

Finally the phone was picked up. "Hello?"

"Scott?" Steve asked.

"Steve," he responded, "where the heck are you these days?"

"Prince George, doing that search I got paged for on last Sunday. Cynthia is sure getting big, she sounds like her mother on the phone."

"Yeah, she does. Hey you missed a great end to that game, buddy. I did that par three eighteenth in two shots, the drive left me with a two foot putt. Too bad you weren't there to see it."

"Yeah, sorry I missed it," Steve said. "I promise you all a re-match when I get back."

"So how is the SAR going?" Scott asked.

"Oh, just fine, we haven't found the search object yet, but we did crash one helicopter looking for them, two dead."

"Yeah, I heard. It was on TV, although no names released yet. That's really rough."

"Well the whole SAR has been a real treat, but I'll tell you the story when I get home in a week or two. In the meantime I have to ask you

a favour. Are you tied up now?" Steve asked.

"Nothing special, just watching TV with Carly. What do you need?"

"Since I left on this SAR Linda has dropped out of sight, I can't get her on the phone. Have you seen her around the PMQ patch?"

"No I haven't, but I haven't been around much either. Do you want me to ask Carly?"

"Not really, I'd rather keep this quiet if I can, at least until I figure out what happened to her. A couple of years ago she took off on an impromptu holiday while I was away. But that was only a long weekend. I haven't been able to get in touch with her since I left a week ago. Maybe she did that again, but I am afraid that maybe she had an accident or something."

"Another guy?" Scott asked.

"No that time she took off was with some girlfriends, nothing serious. She just didn't tell me that's all."

"No sweat I can keep it quiet. What do you want me to do?" Scott asked.

In the backyard at my PMQ there is a metal shed. Inside the door at the top right, up against the roof on the inside is one of those magnetic key keeper boxes with a back door key in it. Even Linda doesn't know about it. Just let yourself in and have a look around the house, see if she fell down the basement stairs or something or if there are any clues as to where she went, a note, anything."

"Yeah, no sweat," Scott said. "I'll go do that now, it won't take me more than a few minutes. Where do I call you back?"

Steve gave him the hotel phone and room numbers and they hung up.

After feeling nicely relaxed earlier, Steve was now feeling tense and jumpy. *I don't know why I let her stunts bug me so much*, he thought, turning on the TV again.

Saturday 29 September 1984

2107 hours

"Sorry to take so long to get back to you." The phone ringing had startled Steve in a way that surprised him, he had muted the TV sound with the remote control and grabbed the receiver.

"Hey, don't worry about it, what was the problem?"

"No problem really," Scott started. Steve could hear the hesitation

in his voice. "I should have brought a flashlight. The house was dark and the outside lights were all off. I couldn't see a thing in the shed and it took me a while to find the key box by feel. My fault."

"So you got into the house, okay?"

"Once I found the key. I turned some lights on and had a look around. The good news is that there was no accident scene or anything, no blood, no signs of forced entry or anything like that. The place looked clean and neat. Living room furniture was all there, stereo, TV. I didn't see any notes or anything, checked the fridge and such."

"Well that is a relief," Steve said with a bit of annoyance.

"In fact everything looked pretty normal. I had a look in the fridge and it was pretty empty, no milk or other perishables. I thought you wouldn't mind if I took a look in the closets – that sort of thing."

"Good thinking," Steve said, hoping Scott would get to the point.

"I couldn't find any women's clothes hanging up, just your stuff in the bedroom, the closets were half empty. The bed was made. In the kitchen it looked like there weren't many dishes or pots and pans in the cupboards."

"Huh?" Steve said, "she cleaned all her stuff out of the bedroom closets?"

"It did look like it, really."

"That sounds like she's serious."

"Yeah I checked both bedrooms – no sign of her stuff."

"Hmmm," Steve said, "anything else?"

Yeah, just one thing," Scott said, a bit apprehensively. "On my way out I looked in the bathroom by the back door. There was something written on the mirror, it looked like red lipstick."

"What did it say?" Steve asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

"Fuck you," Scott said.

Steve sighed. "Well that explains her clothes missing I guess. Is my Impala there at least?"

"It's sitting in the driveway. The tires aren't even flat!"

"Well there is a miracle," Steve exhaled. "Did you lock everything up when you left?"

"Yeah, lights out again, door locked, key back where I found it. Sorry to bring you bad news."

"Okay thanks. It could have been worse news than that. Listen, please don't tell anyone else what you saw, especially Carly. I don't want it all over town before I get home."

"She just heard what I said now, but I'll ask her not to tell anyone," Scott said.

"Well thanks for doing all this for me. I owe you one," Steve said.

"No problem, but you don't owe me anything. I wish it had been better news, that's all."

"I'm hoping this SAR will be done in a week or two, unless we find them sooner. I'll buy you a beer when I get home. Maybe we can finish that golf round? In the meantime can you just keep an eye on the PMQ and give me a shout if you see anything going on there or if you see Linda in town?"

"I sure can."

There wasn't anything left to say, so they hung up the phone.

Steve lay on the bed. He considered phoning his daughter Virginia. Perhaps she had talked to her mother and knew what was going on? She lived in Toronto, though and it was already well after midnight there.

Too late to call, he thought, *perhaps I should call her tomorrow?*

The TV program came to an end and was replaced on the screen by a beer commercial. *That's what I need*, Steve thought, *a beer*. He put his shoes on, checked his pocket for the room key and left for the bar downstairs.

Fuck you too, you stupid bitch, he thought as he walked down the silent hotel hallway.

Sunday 30 September 1984

0900 hours

The search headquarters crew all settled down to work silently, the lights were all on in the trailer to ward off the lingering darkness of the Sunday morning. The search was a week old now, but it felt like they had been in Prince George a lot longer. Days lost to the weather had slowed things down considerably. Only the coffee pot that had been left behind by Sylvia made any noise in the cool trailer, dripping and hissing occasionally. It was a reassuring sound with the fog and drizzle enveloping the trailer, a reminder of civilization in an inhospitable climate.

Tim O'Brien stayed at the hotel to do laundry. With no one on the radio to talk to he wasn't really needed. Sgt Dave Szerzy drew yet another surface analysis chart. Steve watched over his shoulder as he positioned the low that was bringing all the rain to BC. It was moving off. Szerzy added a movement arrow showing its velocity, southeast, 15 knots.

Steve broke the silence. "Still looking at VFR late tonight?"

Sgt Szerzy studied the chart he was almost done drawing. He scalloped in the edge of cloud layers, red for the areas of really poor weather below IFR, brown for middle cloud. He measured the edge of the low cloud to the north part of the system with his coloured pencil. "Yes I still think so," he said, "I think I said 'midnight' before, but it may be even a few hours before that, but still after sunset here for sure."

"How does the morning look?" Steve asked.

"Some risk of fog, but otherwise it will clear out pretty quickly over much of the search area, starting from the northwest naturally. I think there may be enough cloud cover overnight to keep temps up and prevent widespread fog from forming."

"Sounds good to me," Steve nodded. "We'll get everyone spooled up to start in the a.m. then. I think they have all had a long enough break now," Steve pronounced. "What about the rest of the week?"

"It looks really good, actually," Szerzy said, looking at the fuzzy faxed prog charts. He pointed out the 48 hour chart. "This is Tuesday morning, and it looks like a large high will be set up. I am thinking sunny and above average temps for the week."

"Suits me," Steve said. "We gotta get on with this."

Walt hung up the phone. "Well I have some bad news, looks like we lost the last of our PEP planes."

Steve poured a cup of coffee for himself and filled a cup for Walt. He sipped the coffee and waited for Walt to explain.

"That was Mark Abercromby on the phone. He has had a death in the family and has to go to Toronto tomorrow, which will take out his Cessna 182. They were doing an oil change on the 172 yesterday and found some metal in the oil. They are going to ground it while they check it out. On the plus side that Williams Lake 206 may be available again mid-week, but we won't know for a few days."

"Well I guess that is better than having another accident, but that leaves us pretty short for this week," Steve said. They walked into the briefing area to look at the aircraft status board. "We'll have only seven aircraft, it just isn't enough to take advantage of this good weather and get the job done. I had better talk to RCC about this." Back in the office area he handed Walt the searchmaster's logbook to update it.

Steve looked at his watch, picked up the phone and dialed RCC.

"Rescue coordination centre, Captain Leblanc speaking."

"Bonjour mon ami, c'est Captain McBain," Steve said. That was all the French he knew. Brian Leblanc was another ex-442 alumni who was working shifts at RCC in Victoria. The running joke at 442 was that

despite his last name, he wasn't French and didn't speak a word of the language. People were always looking at his name tag and trying French on him first. It annoyed him to no end but he didn't take the bait. Steve didn't like dealing with him because he wasn't what Steve termed a 'team player'.

"Good morning Steve," he said without enthusiasm. "How is the weather in PG?"

"Lousy, but thanks for asking," Steve said. "At least we're all getting our laundry done. Got a problem here, though, we are running out of aircraft. What can you do for us?"

"Well if you wouldn't crash them, you'd probably have enough," Leblanc said yawning.

"I haven't crashed any myself yet, but we are losing our last two PEP aircraft, that is going to leave me just seven machines. Can we get some help?"

"Hmm, maybe," Leblanc said. "Let me make some phone calls and see what I can do."

"No pressure, but the weather is supposed to be good for tomorrow morning, so that would be a good time to get something here to help out."

"I'll call you," Leblanc said without much enthusiasm and hung up.

Walt gave Steve a quizzical look. Steve shrugged. "Don't call us, we'll call you, I guess. Give me Abercromby's number, I had better give him a personal thank-you call, or we won't get those guys back again next time," Steve said. Then he added for emphasis, "volunteers."

Sunday 30 September 1984

1048 hours

The morning in the trailer was passing quietly. The rain had given way to drizzle and fog, driven by a northeast wind. Outside it wasn't pleasant, but at least pedestrians didn't get drenched, unlike yesterday.

Steve and Walt both knew that tomorrow would bring a quick jump in activity and they worked on designating the areas to be searched first once the weather cleared and which aircraft would be assigned to search them. They were looking at the the aircraft status board when the phone rang. Brenda answered it and then called Steve.

"RCC," she said. Steve took the phone from her without comment.

"Leblanc here, I have scrounged around and have managed to get you a Twin Otter from 440," he said, naming the Transport and Rescue Squadron in Edmonton/Namao, "Where do you want them?"

“Well that's good news,” Steve responded. “We can use them flying out of Williams Lake.”

“Okay I'll let 440 Ops know,” Leblanc said. “You should have them tomorrow morning, or at least by noon I would think.”

“Thanks for doing that, what about other options? How about 435?” Steve asked, naming the Hercules transport squadron from Edmonton/Namao.

“No-go,” Leblanc responded, “not available.”

“Well thanks for trying,” Steve said. “At this point we'll take what we can get, we just have to get on with this search, once the weather clears.”

“Call me if I can help,” Leblanc said without enthusiasm and hung up.

Steve mentioned the Twin Otter to Walt who entered it on the board. They agreed that they could use the “Twotter” in the higher mountain country to the west of Williams Lake, once the high ground weather cleared out.

“I sure wish Leblanc had got us a Herc from 435,” Steve said, “They can really cover the ground in the flatter areas fast and we'd get this thing moving then.”

“Why didn't 435 offer the standby SAR bird?” Walt asked. “This is SAR after all.”

“Leblanc didn't say, just said they weren't available,” Steve explained. “The trouble is that I am not sure he put much effort into it. He is a lazy bastard sometimes.”

Walt squinted thoughtfully. “Let me make a phone call,” he said.

“You know someone at 435?” Steve asked. Walt just nodded. “Hey, listen, don't implicate me for going past RCC on this one.” Walt smiled an ingenious smile. Steve knew that 435 Squadron's SAR stand-by Hercules transport aircraft belonged to RCC Edmonton and not RCC Victoria. The two RCCs generally swapped equipment and supported each other, but sometimes personalities and politics interfered. Besides, RCC Edmonton was unlikely to give up their SAR standby bird and leave the region with no SAR quick reaction capability. Leblanc would have called RCC Edmonton looking for additional aircraft and taken what they had offered. Steve was sure he hadn't by-passed RCC Edmonton and talked to anyone at the squadrons – it just wasn't done.

Walt checked his watch, it was already noon in Edmonton. Steve left him to his phone call, not wanting to hear what he was up to.

What's the worst that could happen? Steve thought to himself as he

went back to study the master map on the wall. *If he doesn't get us anything, then so what? If people get pissed off then I will get yelled at. I could deny I put him up to it, but I'll be retired in a couple of months, so who cares? Let's just get the damn job done regardless of the cost.*

Forty minutes later Walt was done on the phone and found Steve sipping coffee and talking with Major Krepinski in the briefing area.

"Well?" Steve asked.

Walt gave him a smile.

"You got something?"

"Maybe," Walt started. "I phoned a classmate of mine from Moose Jaw who is on Hercs at 435. He wasn't on SAR standby, but put me onto the standby crew captain. He couldn't help me, they're locked to RCC Edmonton and RCC isn't going to let them out of Alberta if they can help it. So I talked to my friend again, who made some calls."

"...and?" Steve said, hoping Walt would get to the point.

"They can send us a Herc on a 'training trip' tomorrow morning, but they don't want to fly off their own training hours or spend their own TD on it."

"So your plan is what?" Steve asked, not seeing how this would work.

"Once they arrive, we get them tasked by RCC," he explained.

"Maybe, maybe," Steve said, "but Leblanc is never going to do that for us."

"That is why we wait until they get here tomorrow," Walt said, "because Paul Reynolds is on tomorrow."

"That might work," Steve agreed, "but what is our excuse for them turning up here if we didn't invite them?"

"They are on a training trip. We can just purloin them once they get here."

"But they won't be equipped for SAR," Steve protested.

"Sure they will, if the training trip just happens to be a SAR training trip, SAR techs and all," Walt explained, still smiling broadly.

"Okay, fine, we'll give it a try," Steve said with some annoyance. "Why do I care what happens? I'll be retired soon anyway."

"It'll work, have faith," Walt said, carefully.

Steve just shook his head. "Okay what do we have to do?"

"It's done," Walt explained.

"We'll see," Steve rejoined, "we'll see. If you get away with this you can have my job." He looked at his watch. It was nearly noon. "You want to do a pizza run for lunch?" Something hot would be good on a cool,

damp day, Steve judged. Walt agreed.

Sunday 30 September 1984

1305 hours

Like the day, the press conference had been a wash-out. Krepinski had been expecting the CBC and CTV crews from the previous day to return, but only the local press had dropped by. George Withers was the sole attendee.

"I would have thought that the national press would at least be interested in the names of the crew in that helicopter crash," the major said, looking at the empty room, "I got authority from NDHQ this morning to release the names. I guess they were able to notify the nexts-of-kin."

"Actually Ottawa faxed that information out along with bios on the crew members last night to everyone who cares," Withers said.

"So what brought you out in this weather?" Steve asked.

"Dedicated to the story that much?"

"It's Sunday," Withers offered in explanation. "It's my day off, but my wife had some things she wanted me to do around the apartment, so I made an excuse and here I am."

"Well thanks for your dedication to duty," Major Krepinski laughed, "What can I do for you, then?"

"Well have you flown any more hours since Friday?" Withers asked.

"No," the major admitted.

"How about a cup of your award winning coffee, then?" Withers said.

Steve laughed, "Man you are desperate not to go home aren't you?" Steve went into the office area and poured him a cup, returned and handed it to him.

"I hate fixing toilets," Withers admitted.

"Yeah, plumbing isn't my thing, either," the major said.

Steve left the major and Withers chatting idly and went back to the office area to update the searchmaster's logbook. Walt was looking through his notes and Sgt Szerzy was organizing his faxed sheets of forecasts and observations, before starting to draw a new surface analysis. Brenda was totalling figures on a calculator, jotting down numbers and looking puzzled now and then. The pace of activity was very slow and no one spoke, although they could all hear the conversation in the next room.

The phone on the table next to where Steve was writing rang and

reflexively he picked it up.

“Searchmaster.” As the days wore on he was getting more and more brief.

The voice at the other end of the phone said, “This is Mrs MacKinstry. I am glad I found you there. I wanted to find out how the search is going today.”

Steve tried to mask his annoyance at the interruption. “Because the weather is too bad today to see anything we are stuck on the ground, but I can tell you that we have managed to have the military add another aircraft to the search effort which will join us as soon as the weather allows them to. We may have another aircraft as well after that.”

“That is it?” she asked, “no real progress?”

“Well there has been lots of progress, through carefully searching we have ruled out about half the possible search area with a high degree of confidence, including some of the highest terrain out there. When we rule out where they aren't it reduces the remaining area to be searched.”

“You don't seem to be finding them quickly enough,” she stated with some force. “It is wet and cold out there and they will all die of exposure before you get there.”

“I assure you that we are doing the best we can given the bad weather, Mrs MacKinstry,” Steve said, trying to be calm. “Starting Monday we will also have two boards of inquiry going on but we will still continue the search as quickly as the areas can be flown.”

“I just want my husband found, Captain McBain.”

“That is what we all want, Mrs MacKinstry, that is what we all want. If we find them then everyone can go home.” He was going to add 'go home happy', but realized that finding them didn't necessarily mean finding them alive. “I think sometimes you fail to account for the fact that we are all on the same side in this operation. We all want them found as soon as possible. If I could wave a magic wand I would have done that the first day.”

She considered his remarks. “I should see if Madame Petulengro can tell us anything new.”

Steve burned. “Do me a favour, Mrs MacKinstry, skip the psychics and let us do our job, okay? I think we have had enough for one week.”

“Fine, if you don't want to make use of everything that is available then do your job and find him,” she said indignantly and hung up.

Steve was left holding the dead telephone receiver. He quietly hung it up on the cradle and stared out the trailer window before returning to his logbook.

The drizzle accumulated on the trailer windows, blown by the wind. It formed a translucent film that slowly became droplets and then ran down the glass surface. The fog blew in across the airport, reducing the visibility to an eighth of a mile or less. Steve looked up from his writing and noticed Brenda gazing out the window.

"Dismal, isn't it?" he said.

"Oh, I love foggy days," she said. "We don't get enough of them in Comox so sometimes I drive over to Tofino to see the fog roll in. It reminds me of home in Nova Scotia."

"I guess it would," Steve offered, "but I can tell that you are no SAR pilot. We don't like days like this, no flying, no searching, no rescue, no medals."

"You have to enjoy what you have," Brenda said quietly.

"I suppose we have no choice," Steve responded.

Eventually the trailer door banged shut, signaling Withers' departure and the major entered the office.

"Gotta a minute, Steve?" the major said.

"Sure," he responded, finishing his entry in the logbook. They adjourned to the briefing area.

"Do you have any work for me?" Major Krepinski asked.

"I was just thinking about that," Steve admitted. "The PR seems to have faded out on this search. I think we have lost the press's attention after a week. I am guessing that we won't have another PR push unless we find the wreck. If we find the wreck."

"Yeah I am thinking that too," Krepinski said, sitting on one of the stacking chairs, "I was thinking that perhaps you could send me home and call me back if you need me. For that matter if it is just a small item or two I could do it from my office in Victoria. I think I know enough about this search now to speak about it."

"Yeah, okay, deal," Steve said. "I can't justify keeping you here with this lack of media interest anyway. Even the families haven't come out of the woodwork as much as I thought they would so let's send you home then." The Major nodded in agreement and Steve lead him into the office area.

"Hey Walt," Steve called, "do we have anything that we can send to Victoria?"

"Hmm, let me see," Walt responded. "No, not really."

"You want me to book him home commercial?" Brenda said. Steve nodded.

"Bill it to the search budget," Steve added, as she was already on

the phone.

A few minutes later she had the flight booked. "Pacific Western tomorrow at nine, I'll drive you to the terminal," Brenda handed a sheet to the Major.

"You're fast," he said, glancing over the sheet.

Brenda beamed, "Try to be."

Sunday 30 September 1984

1530 hours

The mountains of British Columbia hold many secrets. Over the years they have given up some, but, like a jealous spouse, they hold others close to their heart and won't even whisper of them.

The province is a complex piece of geography, with mountains as its most obvious feature, but there are also fjords, great raging rivers, streams and brooks, plains and high plateaus, grasslands and even deserts dry enough to spawn cactus, rattlesnakes and sagebrush. There are also towns, roads and even sprawling cities eating into the landscape, but humans really live at the edges of this land.

Even the mountains are not of one type. Most people equate BC with the Rocky Mountains, but they do not actually cover much of the province. Those well-named, young, sharp-toothed peaks, with their glaciated horns and cirques, only some 65 million years old, run down the far east side of the province, with much of their range over the border in neighbouring Alberta.

There are many more mountains in BC than the Rockies. There are the northwestern Skeenas, the Cascades, Selkirks, Monashees, the Cariboos and even the Cassiers in the far northeast, amongst other ranges. The Coast Mountains that Vancouver-dwellers can see on any clear day loom over that city, hemming it in to the north. Then there is the sharp spine of the insular Vancouver Island Range. Many of BC's mountains are soaring peaks with alpine meadows that fill with grasses and flowers in the springtime, saddle ridges separating the steep valleys that hold their broad rivers, like the Columbia, Fraser and the Thompson.

Not all of BC is fresh young mountains, though. The plateau west of Highway 97 is surprisingly flat, a place of grass, ranch lands and grazing cattle. The central Okanagan Valley is rimmed with old round hills that surprise visitors with their brown colours through most of the year and only carry snow in mid-winter. These smaller hills look nothing like the expected knife-edged snow-covered peaks of BC postcards. All of BC is

full of surprises - secrets and surprises.

The Pacific laps at the Coast Range's edge, drinking from the various straits and bays, the Straits of Georgia, Juan de Fuca, Queen Charlotte Strait and, further north, the Hecate Strait, named for the Carian goddess of wilderness and childbirth. The tribute to Hecate is appropriate, for the area is a bridge to Haida Gwaii, the islands of the whaling people, the Queen Charlottes, and the coast there is thick with treed fjords, Douglas Firs hundreds of feet high and mere feet apart. A place of wilderness, impassable and impenetrable to humans in most places, birthplace of salmon: Sockeye, Coho and Chinook, feeding ground of the Orcas.

The Coastal Range holds many secrets. For much of human time the waters that border it have been used as a route of travel north and south, of trade canoes, war canoes and, later, ships and airplanes. The Coastals and its waters do not tolerate humans' mistakes and the place swallows vessels and aircraft, along with their crews, like a predator, without even the pretense of apology.

In a thickly wooded place in the Coastals lies the remains of an airplane. Today the drizzle forms on it as if from an unseen source, almost like dew. It gathers on the rivet-lines and along the wing roots, pooling in the aircraft's interior, wetting the seats and floor, gathering into a lake in the belly, promoting the corrosion that will one day finish turning the aircraft into aluminum oxide dust. This one has never been found and it has been here a long time. There is nothing left of its crew but bones and the forest and its creatures do their work of turning the gift that was given to them into compost, dust.

This aircraft is a North American B-25D Mitchell bomber. It was built in Kansas City and rolled out of North American's Fairfax Airport factory on April 11th, 1943. It was test flown, the bugs wrung out of it and then it was turned over to its ferry crew for delivery as a lend-lease aircraft to the Soviet Union. Instead of its more common US white stars or British red, white and blue roundels, this Mitchell wore red stars.

With three crew members on board it flew to the US west coast, to Seattle and on to Vancouver before setting out for Juneau, Alaska next. Its ultimate destination was the European Eastern Front where it was intended to be flown by Russian pilots against the invading Germans, but it never arrived. Like so many aircraft it was lost enroute, high in the Kitimat Range, inland of the Hecate Strait. The inexperienced crew had been surprised by the extent of the fog and, in attempting to climb up through it, had run first into Douglas Firs and then the ground. The canopy of trees

closed over it, concealing its secret. The bomber, in its Russian red star markings, was not seen again. It was just one of many that met the same end here in the temperate rain forests of BC.

The British Columbia mountains hold many secrets and give up very few. Much of what has been lost here over the years, will never be found.

Sunday 30 September 1984

1707 hours

Steve was making note of the last of that day's decisions in the logbook. It had stopped drizzling an hour or so earlier and the fog seemed to be abating, leaving a leaden sky of stratus blown before the north wind.

He paused while writing, gazing out the window. The stratus seemed to be turning into broken stratus fractus. He looked more closely at the sky through the dirty trailer window pane. *Is that blue sky*, he wondered, squinting into the distance.

He called to Sgt Szerzy, "Hey Sergeant, have a look at this." Szerzy looked up from his page of observations and moved over closer to the window.

"Well I do believe we are through it," he said with a pleased note to his voice. He went back to his desk to find the latest faxed satellite photo. "I really don't see much behind this cloud," he said, looking at the paper he held.

Walt joined them looking out the window. "Launch the fleet!" he said.

Steve looked at his watch. "Little late for that for today, don't you think?" Walt laughed out loud. Even Brenda looked up from the claims she was working on.

"Still looking good for the a.m.?" Steve asked Sgt Szerzy.

The met tech nodded. "It looks good for the rest of the week."

"Well let's pack this in for the day and get out of here for a break. Tomorrow is going to be a long one," Steve pronounced. The four staff that remained started packing up their paperwork and cleaning up for the night. When the door to the trailer banged shut everyone looked up. The 408 Squadron Twin Huey captain, Lt O'Dale, walked into the office area at a brisk pace.

"The weather is picking up, are we launching?" he asked, out of breath.

Amused, Steve saw that O'Dale was alone. "You didn't bring your

crew with you,” he noted dryly.

“Well they thought it was too late in the day, I couldn't motivate them to get out of the hot tub, but I wanted to check.”

“It's too late in the day,” Steve agreed, suppressing a smirk. O'Dale looked a bit crestfallen. Steve added: “But I am glad you came down, because I wanted to give you a rundown on what we need you to do tomorrow morning, special trip.”

They sat on the corners of the tables in the office area while Steve quickly outlined the morning's requirement to get the coroner out to the crash site. Steve explained that the two SAR techs would cut a helipad with chainsaws and then assist the coroner with the crash-site removal of the remains.

“They've done that sort of work before,” Steve added in reassurance. “It might be best to run them up there and let them do the chainsaw work, while you come back for the coroner. That way it will save you having to find some place out there to put down and wait and the coroner can just hop off the Huey instead of having to be hoisted in.”

“Well that sounds doable as far as the mission goes,” O'Dale said slowly, “but I can't do the trip?”

“Why ever not,” Steve asked annoyed.

“My tasking message from 10 TAG for this is to come here and do a SAR. This isn't part of the mission. I could get in deep crap for doing other stuff not on the tasking,” he explained with a shrug.

“But it is support to the crash of your own squadron's aircraft,” Steve said, irked that this was necessary to explain.

“I still need a tasking for it,” O'Dale said, resolute.

Steve held up one finger, picked up the phone and dialed RCC. Captain Brian Leblanc answered.

“Brian, I need a 10 TAG tasking to send a 408 Twin Huey on a coroner mission to that crash site first thing tomorrow morning. Okay just fax it to us when you get it.” He hung up the phone and turned to O'Dale. “Plan on doing the trip and the paperwork will be here before you go.”

“Wow, you guys are fast,” O'Dale said.

“In the SAR world every minute counts,” Steve explained with some patience returning. “Now, we were getting ready to go back to the hotel. I am expecting tomorrow to be a busy one.”

The rest of the crew was ready to go; Walt was making a final update to the aircraft status board. They locked the trailer and left for the night. Out on the ramp Steve and Walt walked together, looking at the sky. The overcast was showing signs of breaking up and the fog was gone at

last. Tomorrow they could get back to work.

Sunday 30 September 1984

2103 hours

To celebrate the end of the rain, the six members of the search headquarters crew picked a new restaurant for dinner, a pizza place three blocks from the hotel. This gave them the chance to walk a bit without getting soaked for the first time in a couple of days and also have dinner without having to accommodate the Twin Huey crew and the SAR techs, too. Those groups were left to their own devices for dinner. The restaurant had proven of acceptable quality and the dinner was much quieter and more subdued than the previous night when the crowd at the table had been bigger, busier and noisier.

The headquarters excuse for going off without the other military crew members in town had been that they were saying goodbye to Major Krepinski, who was going home in the morning. A week's work didn't justify any speeches or toasts, just a simple thanks for coming to Prince George to help get the job done.

Steve and Brenda both made a point of avoiding each other while out with the others. They didn't sit near each other in the restaurant and didn't walk together on the way there or back. The military game was always to avoid suspicion, all suspicion. The group of six had walked back to the hotel together under a very clear and starry sky and cooling temperatures.

"Wow, this is more like it," Walt remarked, looking up, "I think we are going to have an amazing day tomorrow."

Sgt Szerzy added, "I don't see any reason why we won't have an amazing week from the prog charts."

"Suits me," Walt responded, "This wet weather has been getting me down. We all came here to get this search done and we are due for a chance to do it."

To Steve, keeping to the margins of the group, morale seemed to be good, buoyed by the clear night. They all looked in the shop windows as they walked down the street, remarking and joking about the things they saw to each other.

"I need to get a souvenir of Prince George for my girlfriend," Tim O'Brien said.

"How about a t-shirt?" suggested Walt.

"How about a bottle of PG perfume," Brenda offered. "Eau de

Pulp Mill.”

“Hey, we should get special t-shirts made up for this SAR,” O'Brien responded.

“Man if we did that every SAR I'd have a house full of them by now,” Steve contributed, suddenly remembering that his PMQ now had some excess closet space anyway. The thought annoyed him, *why couldn't she leave things as they were? It had all worked fine.*

“Yeah but that's just cause you are so old,” Krepinski laughed, carrying on the conversation. “You've been at this too long.”

“Yeah but not for much longer,” Steve responded. “This should be my last one.”

“So I guess you want a good result for this one to retire on?” the major added.

“Yeah that would be nice, go out at the top of my game, but I ain't holdin' my breath,” Steve retorted. “This one is already going on too long, its getting a bit tedious and we haven't got much to show for it so far.”

“Aw, it's just the rain that has been tedious,” Walt chimed in. “You'll feel more like it again in the morning, when you see how sunny it's going to be.”

“Yeah Monday morning: sunshine and two boards of inquiry, that's what I need,” Steve said, gloomily.

“And coffee and a Herc to help out, too,” Walt chipped in, trying to put things into perspective. “We'll do it all, just fine.”

Steve just shook his head, not many things were going smoothly enough.

Brenda handed Steve an envelope. “I forgot to give you this earlier,” she said. Steve put the envelope into his windbreaker jacket pocket, without looking at it, unopened and without comment.

At the hotel the group split up, heading to their own rooms.

Steve felt annoyed with the evening, the search and the people. Once in his room, he kicked off his shoes and lay down on the bed, flicking on the TV from the remote control. The program was a retrospective of Pope John Paul II's recent tour of Canada and focused on the smaller-than-expected crowds at his masses.

Who gives a shit? Steve thought and flipped on through the channels. He found the new all-sports channel, TSN. It had just gone on the air at the beginning of the month and wasn't even available at home in Comox yet. *How about that,* he thought, *all sports all day long. That should be good for some marriage split-ups.* The channel showed a car race in progress.

After a few minutes of watching the race, Steve remembered the envelope that Brenda had given him. *What was that?* He wondered, *Probably the major's claim advance to be signed off before the morning.* He got up from the bed and went to the closet to retrieve the envelope. Tearing it open he discovered it contained a key wrapped in a folded piece of paper. This puzzled him and he looked at the key. It was a hotel key from the hotel that they were staying at, but not his room. Then he realized it was Brenda's room number engraved on the key. He opened the sheet of paper, it had just one word printed neatly on it - "Waiting!" He couldn't help a smile, she was impetuous all right. He tossed the key into the air and caught it again, turning it over in his hand. *I guess there is nothing better to cheer a guy up than a horny woman,* he thought.

He mulled over the offer. He couldn't really not show up, he reasoned. He decided to make her wait a bit and sat down to watch the car race for a few more minutes, before going to take a shower.

Feeling cleaner and a bit refreshed, he put on clean civilian clothes, locked up his room and went down the stairs instead of using the elevator. He figured that there was a reduced chance of running into anyone else on the stairs. The corridor on her floor was deserted and quiet. He came to her door, having been unobserved. He considered knocking, but decided that she would want him to make use of the key. *Why else would she have given it to me?* he reasoned.

Her room was dark, except for the light of a single small candle on the table. He quietly closed the door. He could see her shape in the bed, on her side, her back turned to the doorway, the sheet that covered her outlining the seductive curve of her hip. She didn't stir. *Is she asleep?* He wondered, *maybe I made her wait too long?*

He undressed quietly, dropping his clothes on the chair at the desk and slid into bed beside her. He reached out and touched her shoulder, but she still didn't move. He ran his hand down the line of her shoulder, ribs, waist and up the curve of her hip. She was naked under the sheet. As he scratched his fingernails across her back she stretched, cooed quietly and moved into him.

Without turning to face him, she said, "I thought perhaps you weren't coming."

With his left hand he touched her hair, "Oh I am coming all right. I wouldn't want to miss the chance to do you, now would I?"

Monday 01 October 1984
0613 hours

The bedside clock said it was just almost quarter past six and the first light of dawn was creeping past the closed curtains of the hotel room. Steve woke up lying on his side and at first couldn't remember where he was. Was this his room or Brenda's? Had he gone back to his room or not? The rooms all looked the same, so it was hard to tell, the same print of farm scenes in the same place in every room. Without moving he could see the remains of the small candle in an ashtray on the table.

Okay this is Brenda's room, he concluded, I really didn't intend to stay the night, I should probably just get going, so I don't embarrass her by still being here when she wakes up.

He carefully turned over onto his back, not knowing how far away she was in the bed. He expected to see her still sleeping and then slide out of bed, get quietly dressed and go, like she had done. When he was able to make out her shape in the dim light from the window he could see that she was lying on her back, her eyes open, intently watching him.

"Good morning," she said softly, warmly, stretching herself out.

"Well hi there," he responded to her warmth, "I guess I fell asleep. Sorry, I didn't mean to be here all night."

"Oh, that's okay," she responded, moving closer to him. "I'm glad that you're still here, actually. I hate sleeping alone, it gets too chilly, if you know what I mean?" Her voice was soft, quiet, intimate, close.

He put his arm around her waist and cuddled her close, acknowledging that there was no quick escape for him. He would have to stay a few minutes and talk with her, but he reasoned, it was probably worthwhile as the hour was still early and besides perhaps this would lead to some more sex tonight.

A worthwhile investment of the time, he thought, so he cuddled up with her, held her warm body closely. She slid her head onto his shoulder and could smell the sweet warmth of her hair against his cheek.

"That was really great last night," she said. "Maybe we can do that again tonight?"

"Suits me fine," he said, running his hand across the curve of her left breast, "we all need a break from the day's work."

"Mmm, that's what I was thinking. Since Sylvia left it has been a bit dull around here."

"I guess you like her?"

"She is fun, in a shy sort of way," Brenda said with a sigh.

"I guess I am a good-enough replacement?" She quickly bit him on the neck for that remark.

She let go of his flesh. "I don't replace people, they are all just fun to have around. I have lots of friends."

"Ow, okay, I see," he said. "Doesn't that make things tense at home for you?"

"Never, she said, shifting her body to make herself closer to him. Steve could feel the warmth of her skin, from sleeping, the comfort lulled him and he relaxed and enjoyed the physical contact with her, the sweet smell of her. She continued, "Bob and I just do our own thing, that is our deal. I never would have married him if I thought I had to behave myself. I don't believe in compromises or giving things up for someone else's rules."

"I guess not," he observed, "but doesn't it irk your husband that you are fucking other people?"

"No, why should it? He doesn't own me. The deal is the same for him anyway. We just have fun with life."

Steve just smiled at the thought. "I am glad you have something that works for you." *It seems to work for me too, at least for now*, he thought to himself.

She shifted her small frame slightly and stroked his neck with her left hand. He ran his free hand down her back and touched the base of her spine. The skin was seductively soft there.

She changed her line of thought. "How are things at home for you? Did you ever get a hold of your wife?"

"Crappy, I suspect," he admitted, stroking her softly. "No I didn't. I think she moved out this week."

"Well that sounds like a drag." "What brought that on, this?" She indicated the two of them with her finger.

"No, no," he responded. "No one knows about this. She is always pulling some shit or another, disappearing with girlfriends for a weekend, or threatening to move out or something. I don't know what's with her, really."

"What does she say?"

"I don't ask her."

"Well maybe you could try that," she suggested softly, running her nose across the stubble of his cheek. "I never understand why people just don't decide to cut each other some slack and get along. I'd like people to be happier than they are."

There in the warmth of the bed, with the smell of her, Steve considered that suggestion. "I guess what you say makes some sense," he allowed, "but perhaps I don't want to know."

Brenda just gave a small shrug, which he felt across his chest as

she was half-sprawled on him now, soaking him in.

"You want to get together again tonight?" he asked, touching her.

"Definitely," she pronounced. "Keep that spare key and just come down here anytime after nine. I'll be here."

"Well now, there is an offer I can't refuse," he said with a smile. He kissed her and made to get out of bed. She let him go.

The clock showed that it was nearly quarter to seven. "I guess we had better get this SAR underway again." He dressed and moved the curtain slightly to see how the day looked. The sunlight streamed in through the small gap he left there. He made to close it again.

"Just leave the curtain," she said, squinting at the light. "In fact you can open it a bit more. I love the sun and we haven't seen much of it lately." He pulled the curtain open to create a gap of about six inches and the room was lit with the early golden light that entered.

She lay in bed watching him move. When he was ready to go, he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "Tonight, then," he said.

"Deal," she said back with a smile. He could see the look in her green eyes.

Steve opened the heavy door to her room without a sound and entered the corridor. He turned and very carefully closed the door, rotating the handle so the whole operation was totally quiet. He turned to head the few steps back to the stairwell and saw Walt right there, five feet in front of him. Walt was wearing track pants, running shoes and a sweatshirt. He had obviously returned from an early morning run. On seeing Steve's stealthy closing of Brenda's door he said nothing but smiled and raised his eyebrows in a question.

Steve looked him in the eye. "Not a word!" he said quietly, holding up one finger. Walt just chuckled silently, shook his head and continued on down the corridor to his own room.

Monday 01 October 1984

0845 hours

The morning work increased quickly and Steve made notes to keep everything organized. First and foremost there were the search aircraft to get into the air from bases at Prince George, Comox, Pemberton and Williams Lake. The crews all required briefings and search areas assigned. After that there was the 440 Squadron Twin Otter that would be arriving later that day to integrate into the program and perhaps the Herc from 435 Squadron, if that could be made to work out, too. Then there were the two

boards of inquiry due to get started, the Twin Huey flights for the coroner and finally there was Major Payne's Buffalo that would arrive around lunchtime.

We're certainly paying for the two days off, Steve thought.

The search headquarters crew divided up the work and quickly got on with what needed doing. Cpl Tim O'Brien got the VHF and HF radios working, including making some repairs to the portable HF antennae strung up outside the trailer.

Sgt Dave Szerzy probably had the easiest job that day, as the weather was clear, cool, perfect and promised to stay that way for the week. His forecasts were easy and he pinned a sheet over his table that simply said: "Forecast – VFR – Go Fly".

Steve and Walt divided up the crew briefing tasks, with Walt briefing the Comox and Pemberton crews and Steve briefing Lt Gary O'Dale and the Williams Lake US Coast Guard Sikorsky crew.

O'Dale's crew had taken the longest to brief as their mission was non-standard. The rest were just a matter of assigning grids; the crews knew what to do from there. With clear weather Walt had indicated that they should concentrate on the most mountainous area within the search boundaries while they could do so. Steve agreed and they planned to send the two available Buffalos to the high country, along with the Twin Otter, when it arrived later in the day. Lance's Buffalo was still unserviceable from the weekend, but the parts should be in soon, maintenance had said. One of the two Buffalos was Payne's and he would contour search a section of the Coastal Range's eastern slopes, covering the steep mountain sides at every 500 feet of elevation, before landing in Prince George in the afternoon.

With the concentration by the other aircraft on the high country Steve was hoping the Hercules would become available, as it couldn't really be used in the mountains and there was lots of flatter land to be covered yet in the eastern portion of the search area. The Hercules would be perfect for that and could cover the ground quickly.

Steve watched as O'Dale's crew got the dark green and gray Twin Huey started up and into the air. They would take the two SAR techs up to the crash site, who would then Sky Genie in off the rescue hoist hook. Sky Genie was a faster way to descend than the slow hoist. Using chainsaws the SAR techs would cut a clear area and build a flat helipad from the fallen trees. While that was happening the Twin Huey would return to Prince George to pick up the coroner. The wooden pad would allow the helicopter to land at the site next time and save the coroner from the onerous task of

having to be hoisted in and later out again. Later on, the board of inquiry helicopters would use the pad and the use of further search resources in support of the inquiry shouldn't be necessary. Walt planned to use the Twin Huey out on the search again that same afternoon.

Steve and Walt both completed their phone briefings at the same time, just as the Twin Huey lifted off.

"Whew!" Walt interjected. "At least they're all on their way."

Steve just nodded. He was wondering when he would hear from the Boards of Inquiry and how much interference there would be. The trailer door banged open and Brenda Fineworth entered.

"The major has gone home," she announced and sat down at her desk to sort through the piles of paper that were accumulating there.

"Did you kiss him goodbye for us all?" Tim O'Brien laughed.

Brenda just stuck her tongue out at him. Steve noted that Walt just shook his head at the playful banter and said nothing.

Monday 01 October 1984

1010 hours

"I just talked to your Hercules on the VHF," the radio operator said to Steve. "They should be on the ground in a half an hour."

Steve still looked doubtful about the whole endeavour.

"You want me to call RCC next and get them tasked?" Walt chimed in.

"Oh, you will get to call them at some point, but not yet," Steve weighed. "Let's talk to the crew first and make sure that there are no hitches going down."

"Aw, you're too conservative," Walt protested.

"There are old pilots and there are bold pilots," Steve rejoined, adding, "besides they have to come here first anyway, so it won't speed things up regardless."

Walt shrugged. "That was the 440 crew that phoned. They're on the ground in Williams Lake, going to get something to eat and head out. I gave them a search area on the north side of Ts'yl-os for the afternoon. It should be ideal for them."

Half an hour later the Hercules touched down on Prince George's runway 24. Ground control had them park on the ramp, just down from the trailer. The growling buzz of the four-engined transport was deafening on the ramp, its props at fine pitch. The Hercules jerked to a halt, the engines were cooled and then all four cut at once. They spun down to a stop

quickly.

Mac's jet fuel truck was there right away. Steve could hear the fueller's gleeful chuckle in his mind.

The Hercules captain made his way across the ramp to the trailer. Steve met him at the picnic table where the pilot introduced himself as Major Knowles.

"It's good to have you here," Steve said. "We have a SAR tech named Knowles already on this search, do you know him?"

"That's my brother," Major Knowles said. "I do hope he has been staying out of trouble?"

Steve smiled, "Nope, but it has been manageable."

The major laughed. "Well that is my kid brother for you. We're here to help out on your search, have you got a tasking for us, yet?"

"Not yet, but as long as you're in, then we'll get it right away. I should have it sorted out by the time you get some lunch."

"Sounds good," the Hercules pilot said. "We'll probably just go over to the terminal for a bite and then plan on getting to work." With that settled, he departed back to the transport aircraft to get his crew fed lunch.

Walt had joined Steve in the sunshine on the ramp. The day was very clear, but the breeze had a chill to it, even close to noon.

"You're on, kid," Steve said to Walt, as soon as the major had gone. "I have to run an errand, so sort it out with RCC. I should be back in a half an hour or less."

"Will do, boss," Walt responded with a smile, heading into the trailer for the phone. "You just watch the magic touch at work here." Steve just shook his head and made for Mac's hangar.

Once inside the FBO hangar Steve found an empty briefing room with a phone. He was looking for some peace and quiet to phone his daughter, Virginia, in Toronto, before she left for work. He checked his watch, it was just after 1100 hrs, the timing should be good. He pulled out his telephone credit card and dialed the number.

"Hello."

"Hey Ginny, how are you doing?"

"Dad?" she asked, "hey, great to hear from you. Where are you?"

"I'm on a search in Prince George," he replied, "but I wanted to give you a quick call when I thought I could catch you at home."

"I only have a minute before I have to catch my bus, Dad," she sounded rushed. "What's up?"

"Well I was hoping that you had heard from your mother recently," he said matter-of-factly, "I have been here a week and I can't seem to get a

hold of her.”

“Well...” she started, slowly. “I have talked to her this past week, but....”

“But she swore you to secrecy?” he guessed.

“Yeah basically,” she responded, a forlorn note in her voice.

“Can you at least give me a hint?” he asked. “I am pretty worried about her. I just want to make sure she is okay. I don't want to put you on the spot, though.”

“Um, well,” she stuttered. “She's okay, but she's pretty pissed at you. I think the best thing would be, like, um, if you give her some space for a bit. Maybe she'll come around.”

“Okay,” he said. “Do you know what this is about, because I don't? Do you know where she's staying?”

“She didn't give me any details, just said she was okay and to ignore anything you tell me.”

“How are you doing, anyway?” he asked her.

“Oh, well, you know, not that good really. I can't really get into it on the phone right now, but I'll write you a letter soon, I promise.”

“Okay,” he said, carefully. “When I figure what's going on, I'll let you know. Does your brother know about this?”

She said, “I don't think she called him, but I'm not sure of that. Listen Daddy, I gotta run and get to work here. Please don't worry too much, it'll all be okay. Love you.” And she was gone.

Steve thought about what she had said. The situation was a mess, Linda had told Virginia some of it and then asked her not to tell him. *It wasn't fair to bring the kids into this.* Whether it blew over or not, they'd be worried. He wondered if his son Patrick knew. There was no point in calling him, he would be in class at Simon Fraser in Burnaby. The apartment he shared with two other students didn't have an answering machine. He would have to try another time.

He considered calling Linda at work. It was nearly 1130 and she didn't go for lunch until 1230 most days, as the office staff at the insurance agency staggered their lunch hours. He thought about it while the Twin Huey started up again outside. He noted that would be the trip to take the coroner into the crash site.

He picked up the phone again and dialed Linda's office number, entering his credit card number at the prompt.

“Aitken's Insurance, Jennifer speaking, how can I help you?” the voice said.

“Can I please speak to Linda McBain?” he asked, trying to sound

casual.

“Whom may I say is calling?”

“Steve McBain,” he said.

“I’m sorry but she is not accepting any calls today, Mr McBain.”

“Not accepting any calls or not accepting any calls from me?”

“She isn’t available right now.”

“Okay, fine,” he said exasperated. “Listen, don’t bother mentioning this call then, okay?” He hung up.

She was already co-opting the kids and her own co-workers. It didn’t look good.

Well screw her then, he thought, we’ll sort this out when I get home. I am not going to look like I am groveling. Let her make the first move if she is going to be a jerk about it.

Monday 01 October 1984

1142 hours

Steve walked the distance back from the corner door on the hangar to the trailer. The sunshine was warm, but the wind still had a cool bite to it. Out of the wind though you could almost believe it was springtime and not mere weeks from a west coast winter setting in. On the ramp Steve took in the clear view of the sky. The whole vista was clear azure from horizon to horizon, no cloud and no haze at all. *I hope all those aircraft are in the air really looking hard, because it doesn’t get any better than this, he thought.*

Back at the trailer things were busy. Steve ran into Walt first, just on the steps of the trailer.

“Did you get the Herc?” Steve asked.

“Yup,” Walt said, “but not quite the way I intended.”

“So I am in shit, I suppose?”

“Nope, we got bailed out.”

“Do I want to know?” Steve asked and then said, “look just give me the short version.”

“Well, I talked to Paul Reynolds and his original response was ‘not a chance, don’t try that crap on me’. Then he said he had to check something out. When he called me back we had our tasking message, smiley faces and all. We may get more aircraft, too.”

Steve looked doubtful. “So what changed his mind?”

“All he would say is ‘politics’ and not to worry about it.”

“I wonder what kind of politics?” Steve asked. “The one thing I

don't have is friends in high places.”

“No idea. He said we should just get on with the job. I figured that would suit you.”

“Yeah, fine, as long as I am not facing a firing squad over this. What else?”

“George von Richthofen is here and so is Loretta MacKinstry.”

“Where?” Steve shot back. Walt indicated the trailer. “Together?”

“Well they are talking, if that is what you mean,” Walt admitted. Steve rolled his eyes and entered the trailer.

George von Richthofen and Loretta MacKinstry were sitting on stacking chairs in the briefing area. Steve hung up his flying jacket on the peg by the door.

“It is nice to see you both,” he said, shaking hands with George, as is the German custom every time they meet someone. “I trust you have found much to talk about?”

Loretta MacKinstry answered, “George and I were discussing art. Did you know he is a famous painter?”

“Well, hardly famous,” von Richthofen said, looking down, “one day perhaps.”

“It looks like we have another aircraft added to our search. I suspect that was your work Mrs MacKinstry?” Steve probed.

“Not this time, Captain McBain,” she said. “I got you one helicopter and that was it. I drove down to Williams Lake on the weekend and talked to the US Coast Guard crew there, they seem to think that you are making good use of their skills and equipment.”

“I would hope they would think that,” Steve said with some annoyance, “but if you didn't pull some strings to get us more help then I wonder who did?”

George spoke up, “Well, when I talked to my mother yesterday she did indicate that she was going to bring it up at lunch in Bonn with Helmut.”

“Helmet?” Steve asked.

“Kohl,” George said. “They go way back and she is often in West Germany. I imagine he talked to Mr Mulroney.”

“That might explain it,” Steve said slowly, considering the implications. “Well thank her from me when you talk to her next.”

Steve gave them both a briefing on the areas covered, aircraft deployments and areas yet to be covered with the intention of impressing them both that things were well in hand. They both listened attentively.

When his briefing was complete Loretta MacKinstry spoke, “I am

afraid that I am going to have to go home tomorrow. Our oldest daughter, Jennifer, is getting married on Saturday in Tulsa and I just have to be there. I asked her to delay the wedding until her dad is found, but there are over eleven hundred guests coming and things just can't be delayed. I am so upset that I have to leave but there is nothing to be done about it. I have called the company jet to come and get me."

She seemed quite distraught. Although Steve was pleased that he would be rid of her, he tried not to show his happiness at her imminent departure.

"I think that's perfectly understandable," he said. "I am sure your daughter will need you there with her. Please do call us here if you want any information."

"Actually it would be better if you can call my service if there is any news. They can find me anytime day or night," she said, pulling out a business card and handing it to Steve. "I am planning to come back, just as soon as I can do so. I want to be here when you find my Benjamin."

Steve took the card and put it into his flight suit breast pocket. "I will certainly call you if there is any news," he assured her, thinking that it would be better if she weren't in town when they found the remains. "Is there anything else that I can do for you before you go?"

"I understand that I can go on one of the search aircraft. Is that possible this afternoon?" she asked. "I would really like to see the area where he went missing."

It was true that the searchmaster could authorize family members to fly on search aircraft, but the policy was to keep them off helicopters. The danger of putting family members on a helicopter was in the helicopter finding the crash site and having to put a SAR tech down to confirm everyone was dead – not a nice place for family to be. He looked at the aircraft status board and it confirmed that the only fixed wing aircraft would be the Herc and perhaps Payne's Buffalo, if it arrived. The Herc was a safer bet.

"I can probably arrange to have you fly this afternoon," he said. "I just have to check with the aircraft captain and be sure there are no problems." He looked out the window and could see the Herc on the ramp, but no sign of activity. "They'll be leaving around one o'clock, so you may want to get some lunch before that."

"Wouldn't it be better not to eat first?" she asked with some anxiety.

"A full stomach is definitely better than an empty one," Steve said. Loretta MacKinstry left to get some lunch and Steve turned to

George von Richthofen, who had sat quietly listening to the exchange between them. "How about you – interested in going on the search?" Steve asked him.

"Well, thank you for offering," he said, "but I am not sure that I would be anything but in the way there."

"It's entirely up to you," Steve said. "It is no trouble either way."

"To be completely honest, flying makes me very nervous and I am not sure that I would stomach it all that well, flying in circles," he admitted, making a circling gesture with his finger. Steve laughed and George replied, "I know, I am not much of a von Richthofen, really."

Steve added: "Actually, I think you are doing fine here, really. You don't have to fly. I'm staying on the ground, too for this search."

They were interrupted by Brenda Fineworth asking about lunch. "I was going to do a lunch run."

"Okay, good idea," Steve said to her and then to von Richthofen, "do you want to stay and have lunch here with us?"

"That is very kind of you, but I should stay out of your way. Perhaps I can come back here at the end of the day and see how the searching went." Since he had come to the airport with Loretta MacKinstry, Brenda offered him a lift back into town and they departed together.

Steve found Walt in the office area. "Has that Herc crew been tasked yet or assigned a search area for this afternoon, yet?"

"Just figuring that out," Walt pointed to a fax on the table. "The tasking is in."

"Good. They'll have to come back here for a briefing. They need to be working in the flatlands and you can assign them at least two blocks as they will be able to do at least five hours. When you assign them the areas tell them that Loretta MacKinstry will be going with them and that they should make her comfortable."

"Okay," Walt said slowly and suppressing a smile. "Here are the areas I was going to give them, straight lines, no contour searching. How does that look?"

Steve looked at the chart. "Fine," he said. "See if they object to the area or not."

"What about the passenger?" Walt asked.

"They don't get to object to that."

Monday 01 October 1984

1314 hours

The Herc left with Mrs MacKinstry on board. Major Knowles and his navigator had taken the briefing from Walt while the rest of the crew had readied the aircraft. With the addition of a group of four local PEP spotters they were ready to go searching. Major Knowles had said nothing when informed he had a family member as a passenger, just nodded knowingly. He knew enough to brief his crew to not make morbid remarks, even though that was part of the aircrew way of dealing with the stresses of the SAR job. They would put it aside and be polite for the sake of the passenger.

Walt and Steve both went out onto the airport ramp to watch the big four-engined transport depart from runway 24, leaving four smoky trails as it flew straight out to the west and its search blocks. By the time it was out of sight a yellow Buffalo had joined downwind for 24.

"There's trouble," Walt said. Steve just snorted loudly.

"Phone call for you," Brenda said, standing on the trailer steps. Steve and Walt exchanged glances.

"Maybe that is Payne calling to say he isn't coming." Steve tried, getting up from the picnic bench to go inside.

"Bet you it isn't," Walt said. Brenda joined him at the picnic table and lit a cigarette.

"I thought you were quitting?" he asked.

"I am," she said.

By the time she had finished her smoke Steve was back. The Buffalo was on the ground, parked just down the tarmac from the trailer, its engines cooling at idle.

"That was a Major Blair from the collateral board," Steve sighed with some resignation. "They are in town already and working out of the Sheraton downtown. They want to interview everyone in the search HQ starting with me. I give him all the names and room numbers."

"When does that start?" Walt asked.

"Tonight," Steve said. "He sounded a bit grim, but he wants to do all the interviewing in the evenings to not interfere with the search."

"How many are there?" Walt wondered.

"Just two, both majors. I don't know either one, which is no surprise. I didn't think that they would actually send out some friend of mine from Winnipeg."

"I guess not," Walt replied. "Still, what's the problem? Everything was done by the book, everything is documented, so let them talk to anyone they like. I'm sure they would rather be home than doing this here,

anyway. They'll probably just ask the questions they were told to ask and go back to AirCom HQ to write their report and everyone will be happy."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Steve said. "It's just an 'X' they have to fill in."

The yellow Buffalo had shut down and its crew spilled out onto the ramp. Steve could see that Mac's jet fuel truck was right there immediately to sell them a load of fuel. Mac was certainly making money from this SAR, more than the hotels and restaurants combined. *Good on him*, Steve thought, *at least he hasn't run out of fuel or let us down in some other way, he deserves to make some money at it.*

Walking across the ramp towards the trailer was the unmistakably tall figure of Major Mark Payne, his blond hair very noticeable in the sunshine.

"Not a single word," Steve warned Walt in a low voice. Walt just let out a low chuckle to himself in response. Brenda headed back inside the trailer. Steve stood up as the major approached.

"Good afternoon, sir," Steve said with a reasonable degree of politeness. "Good flight down here?"

"We didn't find anything worth mentioning, if that is what you are asking," Payne shot back.

"Walt here will give you your next search block for this afternoon. Does your crew need lunch?" Steve was being exceptionally cordial.

"Yeah we'll grab some lunch at the terminal and then get back at it," Payne said, eyeing the trailer. "Is this what you have for a search headquarters?"

"Yep," Steve replied, "we're saving the government a whole bunch of money on this search, all right."

"It sure looks like it," Major Payne said doubtfully. "You have room for office space for me there?"

"You bet," Steve said. Once inside he showed Payne the table that had been set up for Major Krepinski. Payne looked around the trailer, including the office, where Brenda, Tim O'Brien and Sgt Szerzy were working away.

"Not exactly luxury, is it?" he determined.

"Exactly," Steve said, with hardly a trace of sarcasm at all.

Payne signaled Steve aside. "Has the board started working yet?" he asked.

"Yeah they are both in town and setting up, but they have promised to mostly keep out of our way."

"Oh, that is right, AirCom sent a collateral," Major Payne said,

nodding. "You could really be in shit this time, McBain, if they pin this one to you."

"There is nothing to 'pin' on anyone. It was an accident, but thanks for your support on the issue."

"We'll see," Payne said, "we'll see." He left to get his crew off to lunch.

Walt only entered the trailer when Payne had gone. "What was that all about?"

"Just the good major spreading glee and joy around," Steve said calmly.

"And making our job easier here, too, right?" Walt asked.

"Mine anyway. Forget him, let's keep him up flying 24/7 and get this job done."

Monday 01 October 1984

1520 hours

Steve was sitting in the briefing area talking with Major Mason, who was heading the Directorate of Flight Safety assigned accident investigation board.

"We are all on the ground and working now," Mason explained. "This is essentially a courtesy call just to let you know what our plans are. I have been instructed to keep out of your way as much as possible and let you get this search wrapped up, but we will need to interview everyone in your headquarters as we go along. We can do that in the evenings so you won't be short of staff during the day." He was formal and serious, but not discourteous with Steve McBain.

"I appreciate that, sir," Steve replied. "My staff aren't going to get much of a break, the collateral want to interview them in the evenings as well."

"No surprise, really," Mason said. "We will try to not overtax your people and I am sure we can coordinate with the other board to avoid conflicts. We aren't supposed to talk with them anyway except for admin requirements. As you probably know we are both looking for answers on the same subject, but our aims are quite different." Steve merely nodded. "Perhaps we can start by talking to you this evening."

"The other bunch already booked me for this evening," Steve reported.

"Okay, tomorrow night, then, bring your searchmaster's logbook. Perhaps we will start with Captain Ashbury and Corporal O'Brien tonight

then if you don't have other plans for them.”

Steve thought. “No that will work fine. Give me a schedule and I'll make sure everyone is available when you want them. Are you finished at the crash site?”

“Not quite,” Mason said. “I guess you haven't been up there to see it? The coroner got done by early afternoon and took the remains out after photos were taken. There wasn't a lot to recover. I have to thank you for the use of the Huey and the SAR techs. The SAR techs especially did a great job and we have a useful helipad there now. We were able to get the chartered AStar in without any problems and do our site survey, photos and measurements. We'll get the wreckage slung out of there tomorrow and brought back here. We have some hangar space rented where we can lay it out and then box it up for shipping out.”

“It sounds like you have everything in hand. How long do you expect to be in town?”

“I am not sure at this point, probably until the end of the week. I have to tell you that there isn't a lot to look at. The Kiowa hit the ground while moving fairly fast, the parts all seem to be in the crash site area, so it doesn't look like anything departed in flight. Looking at the compressor damage, the engine was producing lots of power at impact so it wasn't an engine failure. The main and tail rotors were turning at normal rpm when it hit, the drive train was intact and seems to have been working. We still have to see what we can make out of the hydraulics and a few other systems. You may have heard that there was a fire on impact. It is a bit of a charred mess. I'm not sure how far we will get.”

Steve bite his lower lip, and nodded. “We are going to keep on working on the SAR, then. We'll likely still be here when you go. I don't think we'll get it wrapped up until the end of next week and then only if the weather holds out. If there is anything we can do to help you along in your investigation, please do let me know.”

After the major had gone Walt joined Steve and as usual they went out and sat at the picnic table. The sun was still shining and the wind had dropped to only a few knots. The day now seemed warm. The airport was quiet since Payne's Buffalo had departed, even the local flying school's aircraft were not doing circuits. The sky was completely empty, except for a few crows flying towards the city.

“How does it all look?” Walt asked.

“It sounds like the crash site was a mess, high speed impact and then a fire. It doesn't sound as if there was much left,” Steve said, gazing at the western horizon.

“Any sign of a mechanical problem?”

“By what the major said, not much sign of anything. The parts are all there and they were all turning when it hit.”

“So it will go down as 'Personnel-Pilot-Judgment' or something like that?” Walt speculated.

“Actually, at this point I would put money on it going down as 'Undetermined,’” Steve replied with an ironic laugh.

“That would be bad,” Walt indicated, shaking his head.

“Why's that?”

“Because it means that nothing will be learned from that accident.”

“You're are still too idealistic, kid. 'Undetermined' would suit me just fine.”

“What about the collateral?” Walt asked.

Steve just shook his head. “They don't assign cause factors, they just recommend that either charges be laid or not, as far as I know. The closest thing I think they have to 'Undetermined' would be stone silence from AirCom, which would also suit me just fine.”

Walt thought about it. “Gee, Dad, I hope one day I can grow up and be old and cynical like you!”

“You should work on it,” Steve retorted with a snort. “The chicks really dig cynicism.”

Monday 01 October 1984

2253 hours

Steve turned the TV news off. It was too depressing to bother with, he decided. Most of the news was taken up with analysis of the bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut that had killed 22 people on September 20th. The rest of the news focused on negotiations between Britain and China over the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, scheduled for 1997.

It had been a long day. Aside from getting the search back in the air, dealing with the relatives, integrating the newly-arrived Twin Otter now flying out of Williams Lake and the Herc into the search, then there had been Major Payne's arrival and the meeting with Major Mason of the safety board. It all seemed like a blur compared to the easier pace of Sunday.

Steve recalled that the high point of the day was probably when the Herc returned. He smiled to himself thinking about it. He had expected Loretta MacKinstry to come back to the trailer with some complaint or another when the flight was done, that this or that wasn't done right or that

the crew made morbid jokes or something similar. But the Herc had landed just before dark and she had immediately headed straight to her rental car, sat in it for a while and then driven away. Steve had waited for Major Knowles to come to the trailer to provide his report of areas flown and coverage rates, but he had sent his navigator instead, while the rest of the crew secured the big four-engined freighter for the night. The navigator, a young captain, had given his report to Walt, who had plotted it on the charts, entered it into the searchmaster's logbook and thanked him for stopping by.

When that was done Steve had scooped up the logbook for the evening's meeting. The navigator had not mentioned his passenger, so Steve had him asked how she had been, just as he made ready to leave.

"I think she barfed her head off for the whole flight, she used up almost every bag we had," the nav had laughed.

Steve just shook his head.

I guess she'll be happy to get home tomorrow for that wedding, Steve smiled to himself. Hopefully she'll just stay home. I could really use things a whole bunch simpler around here.

The low point of the day was undoubtedly the meeting with Major Blair and the collateral board. The board was just two people, Blair and another Major named Burton, both from AirCom HQ. Steve didn't know either of them, which wasn't a surprise, but it was evident that neither had a SAR background. The air force generally don't assign your friends to investigate you, unless it is intended to be a whitewash from the start. Obviously this one wasn't.

While the meeting earlier in the day with Major Mason of the accident investigation board had been professional, it wasn't unfriendly. The meeting with Blair and Burton was more like a POW interrogation.

They had arranged to hold their meeting in a small conference room at one of the downtown hotels. The evening weather was pleasant, so Steve had walked the two blocks after dropping the rental car at his hotel and having a quick bite to eat.

There were very few pleasantries involved. The two Majors wore dress uniforms and sat on the other side of a table from Steve. Major Blair had read an introductory statement from a sheet, explaining that their investigation was not a safety investigation, but a disciplinary one, that military members were compelled to testify, that he could have a lawyer present if he wished. Steve was trying to be personable, but they gave him a form to sign saying he understood everything they had said, including waiving his right to having a lawyer present, which he dutifully signed.

There was a tape recorder sitting on the table, running throughout the whole session.

They asked Steve questions for over an hour, focusing on whether he thought the Kiowa crew were ill-trained, unprofessional or fighting with each other during the time they were assigned to the search. They asked about the concept of employing a Kiowa on the search in the first place, pointing out that it was unusual. They asked whose idea it was to send the Kiowa. They had to change tapes several times.

Steve recalled that he had answered their questions calmly. To that last one he had said that RCC had offered them the Kiowa and he had indicated he could make use of it. He couldn't say whether the squadron had offered it to RCC or whether RCC had asked. Steve had politely suggested that they would have to ask RCC that question. The two majors had indicated that Victoria would be their next stop when they were done in Prince George.

Steve thought that their line of questioning seemed to suggest some sort of theory that the Kiowa crew shouldn't have been there in the first place. They focused on the fact that 408 Squadron had no training program for SAR-qualifying their Kiowa crews, unlike their Twin Huey crews. Steve had pointed out that that he was unaware of 10 TAG training requirements, but that the Kiowa crew had not been employed doing search patterns, nor were they expected to do any rescue work. He had patiently explained their tasks – checking out sighting reports, which simply consisted of navigating to a point, looking there and reporting back. Nothing as complicated as the normal recce role that they did with the army, he had said. The two majors wrote a lot of notes and the tape recorder hummed.

Next they had turned their attention to Steve's role in the employment of the Kiowa. They asked him in several different ways if he had pressured them to fly into high ground in adverse weather. Steve had explained that he had not. He said that he had briefed the mission himself and had emphasized that they should not press the weather, especially in the high terrain. The majors had pushed the point. In response Steve had pulled out the searchmaster's logbook and showed them his writeup of the briefing he had given them. Major Burton took the book and read the entry out loud for the tape recorder. It indicated that the Kiowa crew had been instructed not to take any risks or push the weather as they were just following up a psychic report and it was therefore of low reliability and low priority. Major Burton looked up from his reading of the logbook

“A psychic report?”

Steve had explained that the wife of one of the passengers on the

missing aircraft had hired a psychic, who had picked out a possible crash site.

"And you sent an aircraft there on that basis?" Major Burton had asked, writing notes.

"It is policy to do so," Steve had replied. "We check out all leads, no matter how far fetched some people may consider them. After all, if the search is reduced without finding the search object, we would be pretty negligent if the survivors had starved to death at a location that had been reported by whatever means, but not investigated. In SAR we have a professional obligation to check everything."

"Would you say that aircraft are sent on these psychic reports to keep relatives quiet?" Major Blair had asked.

Steve sensed a trap there. "No I would say that we do it because we have a professional obligation to check all leads."

"You wouldn't say that giving credence to these psychics is unprofessional?" Major Burton had asked.

Steve was losing patience with this line of questioning. "I would say that being professional means using every means at your disposal to get the job done," Steve had stated rather strongly and then added, "Is this line of questioning leading anywhere, because if so, can we get to the point?"

The two majors exchanged glances and made notes.

"All right, Captain McBain, do you think it is justified to send aircraft out on the report of some psychic?" Major Blair had asked.

"It is Air Transport Group policy to do so. Instead of sitting behind a desk in Winnipeg, sign yourselves up for the Searchmaster's Course at 426 Squadron in Trenton and find out how we conduct searches for yourselves."

More note writing.

Major Blair had one more question. "Regarding that logbook entry describing the briefing of the Kiowa crew before the accident mission: was it written before or after you knew that they had crashed?"

Steve answered without hesitation, "it was written just after I briefed them, but before we found out that they had crashed, of course. On a SAR too many things happen too quickly to let the logbook get behind events. We have to keep it up to date as the day progresses. You can't just take it back to your hotel room and try to reconstruct the events of the day later from memory."

The two majors made careful notes and left Steve sitting on the other side of the table in silence for a few minutes. Then Major Burton said simply, "thank you for coming, you can go now, but we may need to recall

you later in the week. Oh and one more thing, don't talk to the members of your staff about what we have discussed here. We want to get an untainted version of events from them, too.”

Steve had got up and left, without comment and walked back to his hotel. The night was clear and starry, the air cool with the crisp feel of autumn to it. The ornamental trees planted along the sidewalks were losing their leaves and crunched underfoot.

Back in his room he had realized how late it was, close to ten o'clock by the time he got in. He had pulled out the second hotel room key, the one to Brenda's room. He thought about it, weighed the late hour and the chances of running into Walt again and decided he was just too tired. He had picked up the TV remote and turned on the news instead.

Now, later, with the TV off, the room was quiet. The whole hotel seemed to have gone to sleep, no sound of water running, of footsteps in the hallway. Steve made the effort to get up and go into the bathroom and brush his teeth. He wondered about the two majors and what they were really up to, what their instructions had been. Had he given them enough information to satisfy them or did they suspect something?

He turned the lights off and got into bed. The board interrogation bothered him. He thought that he had everything covered well enough, but what about the rest of the staff? It wasn't Brenda, Sgt Szerzy, Cpl O'Brien or even Major Krepinski, if they chose to track him down in Victoria, that he was worried about. It was Walt. What would they ask him and what would he say?

Steve slept a night troubled by dreams of being pursued through deep, dark pine forests. He could hear them crashing through the brush after him, but never saw them. He awoke at 0515 hours, wet with sweat and unable to get back to sleep.

Tuesday 02 October 1984

0915 hours

Like Monday, Tuesday promised to be a fine autumn day across BC. The last of the aircraft were airborne and heading to their assigned areas. Sgt Szerzy promised the weather needed for a good day of searching. In fact, he had said, he couldn't see any weather in the next five days.

That is very good news, Steve had thought with a smile to himself. *Now we can really get on and get those blocks 'Xed' off.*

After last night's less-than-perfect sleep Steve had decided to go

for a run before breakfast, the first really serious exercise he had done since arriving in Prince George. The streets had been dark and empty at 0530, but the stars had been bright and the early light of the dawn was an inspiring sight. He had run about three miles and felt it had done him some good; now he felt ready to take on the day.

Maybe I should get up early and go for a run every day, he considered. *Maybe. At least then I will be fit and ready to deal with getting home, whenever that happens.*

Breakfast had been a bit funny, in a way. He had been the second person from the search headquarters in the hotel coffee shop. At the time that he had arrived only Brenda was sitting at the table.

“Hey, was that you I saw coming back from a run this morning about a quarter past six?” she had asked.

“That was me,” he said.

“Well good for you, I should get into that again, I have my Express Test coming up,” she responded with genuine enthusiasm, naming the military fitness test everyone has to pass annually.

From where they sat, they had both noted Walt entering the restaurant. Brenda quickly whispered a one word question, “Tonight?” Steve had just nodded slowly as Walt arrived, taken a chair and picked up a menu to order breakfast from.

They had not spoken again. The coffee shop had filled up quickly with the Herc and Twin Huey crews, as well as more members of the headquarters. Steve and Brenda just ignored each other. It was safer, they both knew.

Major Payne's Buffalo crew were not there at breakfast, Brenda had thoughtfully booked them into a different hotel. When the major had asked her why they were in a different hotel, she replied that they were trying to spread the financial benefits of the search around the city. He seemed accept that, especially after she had reserved another van for his crew. Steve hadn't learned of this until breakfast time, when Brenda had explained it to Walt who had noted the Buffalo crew's absence. Walt was concerned they had overslept.

“Not at all,” Brenda had explained.

Now, at quarter past nine, Steve was on his third cup of coffee and studying the aircraft status board on the wall in the briefing area of the trailer. Today he had nine aircraft on the search. The board showed three in Prince George: the 408 Squadron Twin Huey, Herc and Buff; three in Comox, two Buffs and the one remaining serviceable Labrador; two in Williams Lake, the US Coast Guard Pelican and the Twin Otter, plus the

Cold Lake Twin Huey in Pemberton. The 408 Twin Huey had been back on the search since Monday afternoon, the coroner having finished his part of the job at the crash site. The accident investigation board had their own chartered Aérospatiale AStar helicopter, so were no factor in the search and the collateral board seemed to be uninterested in going to the crash site.

Maybe they just don't need to, Steve thought.

The deployments looked pretty close to optimal, given the areas still to be searched. Steve was pleased, Walt was doing a good job managing the search areas and aircraft covering them. The helicopters were well spread out in case one was needed anywhere for a rescue, although that need dimmed everyday.

“We may get that PEP Cessna 206 back tomorrow.” Walt had joined Steve looking at the board.

“That would bring us back up to ten aircraft.” Steve sipped his coffee.

“True enough, but keep in mind when we had ten last week that included three Cessnas and the Kiowa,” Walt explained. “We have more search power, now.”

“Search power?” Steve laughed. “Yeah, okay I get what you mean.”

“We’ve been at this over a week now. What do you think our chances are?” Walt asked.

“You mean of finding anyone alive?”

“Yeah.”

“Ask me after we get home.”

“I mean statistically, from your experience,” Walt asked.

“Let’s see,” Steve calculated. “BC, autumn, missing now eleven days. Maybe 95%.”

“Of finding them?”

“Of not finding them. The first 72 hours are usually ‘it’ for a live recovery. After that we’re mostly just stealing from the crows.”

Steve left Walt at the board and went outside. The sun was higher now and the morning dew had evaporated. The sky was a daytime blue and the faint breeze carried the smell of pine forests across the airport asphalt.

We are not going to find dick-shit, Steve thought, *we’re just down to going though the motions now.*

With a rumble a jet accelerated down runway 33. At first he could only hear it, and then it came into view, just as it lifted its nose wheel from the pavement and soared into the blue sky. Steve recognized it as

Gulfstream N556MC, Loretta MacKinstry's aircraft. He chuckled to himself. *She left and didn't even say goodbye after I arranged that Hercules flight for her.* The Gulfstream turned right after takeoff, heading southeast.

Tuesday 02 October 1984

1322 hours

Major Mason from the accident investigation board had dropped by at lunch time to ask Steve if he could spare the time to come over to the hangar where the Kiowa wreckage had been laid out. Later, Steve had said, maybe after lunch.

Outside the sun was shining, the wind was almost non-existent and the day seemed quite warm for October. Steve noted that he hardly needed his flying jacket on. He walked across the asphalt ramp to the hangar that the board had rented space in.

There were two Cessna 150s in the circuit, practicing touch and goes. Steve heard the engine on one die away to nothing suddenly, the silence attracting his attention immediately. He stopped and watched the small two-seater quickly bank towards the runway, losing height. It made the runway, touched down smoothly and then its engine spluttered to life as the student pilot advanced the throttle and took off to go around for another practice forced landing.

The warmth of the sunshine was immediately cut off as Steve entered the side door of the flying school's maintenance hangar. The hangar was dim and cool after the sunlight and smelled of aircraft, fuel, hydraulic fluid, oil. Near the front of the hangar a Cessna 172 in school colours had its engine cowls off and seats removed, probably for its annual inspection. A V-tailed Beechcraft Bonanza was up on jacks, an aircraft maintenance engineer running its landing gear through cycles of extension and retraction, each one a hum and a series of clanks as the gear and doors opened and closed.

In the back corner of the hangar the accident investigation board members looked over the wreckage. That corner of the hangar was illuminated with stand-mounted work lights, that cast sharp shadows whenever anyone moved between them and the wreck on the floor. It made an eerie scene in the otherwise dim light in the back of the hangar.

Major Mason greeted Steve, introduced the other four board members and the DFS professional accident investigator, Captain Shack. Steve knew Shack, he had been at DFS a long time and seemed to be

assigned to deal with all the helicopter accidents.

What remained of the Kiowa was appalling. It was laid out on the floor in an arrangement that was close to how it had looked when it was together, tail boom parts at the back, skids and nose at the front. It was all small parts, the biggest recognizable piece being only about three feet in length. Even the rotor blades were mostly in small pieces, with more parts in cardboard boxes. Shack pointed out some of the key parts, instruments, seat frames, the tail rotor blades, which had sheared off near the hub. The seat belts were partly melted from the post crash fire and the belts that weren't melted had blood stains on them. Most of the centre of the aircraft ahead of the tail boom parts and behind the crew seats where the fuel tank was, had burnt.

That is a grim end to an aircraft and a crew, Steve thought, taking it all in.

Shack explained, “the aux fuel tank burst on impact and the fuel caught fire. Did you ever see where it was mounted?” Steve only shook his head. “It sits on the back seat.” Shack showed him the page from the Kiowa operating instructions illustrating the aux tank installation.

“Not a great place to put all that fuel, is it?” Steve remarked, shaking his head.

Shack continued, “the aux tank didn't cause the accident, it was intact until impact.”

“Any ideas, then?” Steve asked.

Shack shook his head. “It looks like everything was turning under power when they hit the ground.” He pointed out the sheared tail rotor, shattered main rotor parts and the compressor from the Allison 250-C18 engine, which he picked up to show Steve. The compressor blades were all sheared off. It had obviously been working hard when it came to grief.

“Hydraulics?” Steve asked.

“Hard to say, that system is all roof-mounted and it got torn out on impact and then mostly burnt. From what I can tell it looks like it was functioning.”

Major Mason added, “we are hoping to have the toxicology report from the crew remains back by the end of the week. Not sure how much good information we will get from that, though.” Steve just listened. Mason added, “I just wanted you to see all this. Let's sit down this evening and go over the details.” He agreed and left to walk back to the trailer.

Steve ducked out through the door that he had come in through, stepping over the high sill. Outside the sun was still shining and one Cessna 150 still practiced circuits. Even after the burnt remains inside the

hangar, the day was the same outdoors.

Back at the trailer Steve found Walt making a plot on the main map. "Anything happening?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, sort of," Walt replied. "Mike's crew flying out of Pemberton found something in a canyon here. He called us on the HF." Walt pointed out the location, on a tributary of the Toba River. "I gave him authority to hoist into it if he needs to."

Walt changed the subject. "Any chance I can go over and see the Kiowa?"

"I guess you could, but I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why is that?"

"Because it is fucking grim, kid."

Undeterred, Walt left the trailer to have a look at the Kiowa. He was back in under fifteen minutes.

"Well?" Steve asked.

"You were right, it is fucking grim, Walt said, subdued. "I wasn't expecting that much dried blood. I'm wishing this search was over."

"It will be soon enough," Steve said, with a note of finality.

Cpl O'Brien interrupted them, "Sorry to bother you sir, I just got a call from Rescue 5143. They checked out the place they were hoisting to and determined it was an old wrecked military jeep."

"What? Up there?" Walt asked, looking at the map, "Who would drive a jeep into that country there?"

Steve just shook his head. "Maybe it was dropped out of a Flying Boxcar years ago."

"Didn't you start off flying Boxcars?" Walt asked.

"1957 to 1963," Steve said.

"Know anything about that jeep?"

"Not me," Steve said.

Tuesday 02 October 1984

1513 hours

Steve had been looking for a quiet spot in the afternoon to talk to Walt about the collateral. He knew Walt was supposed to meet with them that evening. Shortly after three o'clock the phone calls and other work had slackened sufficiently to take a break. There were no sighting reports coming in now, too much time had elapsed since the accident aircraft had gone missing. No one was calling any more.

Once again Steve and Walt sat at the picnic table outside the trailer.

The sun was sinking into an almost clear western sky. There was a small amount of cirrus cloud in the east, a lace handkerchief of immense detail, crocheted from interwoven filaments of ice crystals.

They discussed the aircraft and crew deployments, reviewed the areas to be searched the next day, the general plan for the rest of the week. Walt had it well in hand, a good plan, as long as aircraft stayed serviceable and the weather held out. The weather could be forecast with some degree of accuracy, aircraft serviceability was another matter.

Walt brought up the visit to the hangar to see the wreck. "I've seen wrecks before," he said, "but not like that one. There was almost nothing left."

"You're probably used to seeing fixed-wing aircraft crashes," Steve explained. "Plus being a Buffalo driver you never really get that close to crash sites. In the helicopter world we get right down in there a lot of the time."

"I guess that's true," Walt allowed. "I'm starting to think that's a good thing, though."

Steve continued "besides Kiowas are made like aluminum beer cans, designed for one use and then you throw them away. They weren't built to last and they weren't built to crash, either."

Walt nodded in agreement. "I was going to ask you how the board went last night or am I not allowed to ask?"

Steve had been hoping that Walt would bring it up. "They didn't ask me not to talk to anyone else, but I wouldn't mention that we talked about it, if they ask, it might reduce your credibility. They were pretty vicious actually, playing hardball. I wasn't really expecting them to be so unfriendly, so I'm glad you asked about them. At least it won't be a surprise for you if they seem a little hostile."

"Great," said Walt. "Sounds like I have a fun evening coming up tonight."

"Well, I doubt they'll keep you as long as they kept me there," Steve offered. "So you might get a beer in afterwards, before bedtime."

"What was there to talk so long about?" Walt asked.

"Oh, I don't know. They wanted all the details on just about everything, really. They mostly seemed to focus on some theory of theirs that the crew wasn't trained properly or that they didn't get along with each other or something like that. Maybe they think there was a fight in the air, I honestly don't know. They don't tell you much about what they are up to."

"Well," Walt began, thinking back, "I didn't see them fighting or anything, but that army sergeant was a pretty quiet type."

"The board thought chasing psychic sighting reports was bogus, too. Neither one of them are SAR types, so I don't think they realized that is an official part of the job here."

"Aw I remember being taught that on the Searchmaster's Course," Walt protested. "That is basic stuff, we have to keep the relatives happy."

"Actually we don't do it for that reason, we do it to make sure that we have searched everywhere. We would look pretty silly if we didn't check a psychic report and that is where the crash site turned up."

"Has that ever happened?" Walt asked.

"No, but I wouldn't want to be the searchmaster on first case when it did," Steve said laughing.

"Yeah, but..." Walt started.

"Ah, save that all for tonight," Steve said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "The only thing they seemed to focus on about us here was whether the crew was briefed properly and when the entry in the logbook was written, before or after the crash was known."

Walt thought back to Friday. "Well I wasn't the one who briefed them for that trip, I think I was tied up with the other crew debriefs, if I recall right."

"Yeah I briefed the Kiowa crew, because I was the one who got the psychic's report. I warned them not to push the weather or terrain. I put it in the logbook too, right after I briefed them, remember? You may want to re-read the book before you go. No need to take it with you as they already copied it."

"Good idea," Walt said, "there's been so much going on that I forget just in what order it all happened now."

"Which is why we keep such good records," Steve explained. "I don't think anyone could figure what we had done afterwards if we didn't. Why don't you meet me in the hotel bar when you're done and I'll buy you a beer?"

"They don't want to see me until eight, but I hope to be out of there by nine. Sure I can meet you then, why not," Walt said with some enthusiasm.

Tuesday 02 October 1984

1907 hours

The sun had long set and the gloom of night enveloped the city. Outside Steve's room the street lights cast an orange light on the dry sidewalks. The evening, in this hour after dinner, was cool and few

pedestrians were seen. The hotel was full of noises from the guests and their children.

Steve sat in his hotel room after dinner, finishing up the entries in the logbook from the day's events.

The afternoon had gone relatively smoothly, with the sole exception of the return of the Buffalo to Prince George after its day searching. Unsurprisingly, Payne was proving to be a pain.

First off Payne was the 'Detachment Commander' and therefore responsible for all 442 Squadron aircraft assigned to the search. Currently there was one Labrador helicopter and two Buffalos all flying from Comox and the major's own Buffalo flying from Prince George. To Steve, Payne's presence in PG made no sense, as the SAR forces Payne was supposedly exercising operational control over were all located elsewhere, except for his own aircraft. In truth, Steve didn't care, but Payne was making his own job difficult, as Walt would hand assignments to Payne for the Comox aircraft and it was up to Payne to pass those instructions along by phone. In many cases, so far in the past week, Payne had been up flying when instructions were required and so Walt or Steve had to communicate directly with the aircraft captains in Comox, essentially doing Payne's job for him.

If he wants to be Det Commander, Steve thought to himself, then he should be on the ground in Comox where his aircraft are, otherwise he's just getting credit for work we're doing on his behalf.

Thinking about it in those terms, the whole problem irked Steve. Technically the Det Commander worked for the Searchmaster, even though Major Payne outranked Steve.

But the main problem was Payne's belligerence and smugness. He was acting like he was contributing more to the search than just being an aircraft captain, which is essentially all he was actually doing on the search.

When Payne's Buffalo had returned from the day's searching he had sent his navigator to debrief Walt on the areas and percentages covered for the day and Walt had plotted them all on his master SAR map and updated the logbook. Walt had already worked out the search areas for all the aircraft for Wednesday. Steve had had him write them out in a table format on paper so they could be given to Payne for his "detachment". It would be up to Payne to then pass that information to the aircraft captains in Comox, by whatever means he wanted. Steve had intended to force Payne to do his job, rather than have the search headquarters do it for him.

The Buffalo navigator had arrived at the trailer first, Payne

followed a few minutes later. He hadn't seemed to be in an especially good mood.

"How was the day's searching?" Steve had asked, meeting him in the briefing area of the trailer.

"The usual," the major had replied, dismissively.

Steve had grabbed the table of assignments that Walt had made up, while Walt was still going over the debrief with the navigator. "Here is where we want your detachment working tomorrow," Steve handed him the paper.

Major Payne looked the sheet over. "Yeah, fine." He had tried to hand it back to Steve, who didn't take it. "You can send this to Snake Ops," Payne added.

Steve wasn't having anything of it. "You're the Detachment Commander, remember?" He had then walked away. Payne had snorted audibly and walked into the office area, handed the sheet to Brenda and asked her to fax it to 442 Ops, which she had done cheerfully.

Payne had accosted Steve in the briefing area at the map posted on the wall, where Steve was studying it carefully.

"You know, Captain, making my job harder is not in your best interests," he snarled.

"With all due respect, sir," Steve had started, "I am trying to do my job and run this search here. All I am asking is that everyone assigned to work for me do their jobs as well, so we can complete this search. If you prefer to have one of the Comox-based aircraft captains be Det Commander because you're too busy, then please do call the unit and let them know. I am sure there are a number of people who would do the job."

"I know that you're just being mouthy because you are short to retire, McBain," Payne had shot back, "but you should watch your ass. The collateral board is after you and I am talking to them at seven. You should be a little easier to get along with."

"I'm not worried about any boards," Steve had said, excessively sweetly. "They're here to do a job, too, just like I am."

Payne and his navigator had left together. Walt had joined Steve in the briefing area. "What was that about?"

"Oh I think he was just practicing being belligerent, in case he has to do it for real some day. He is just being a 'Payne'," Steve said. "Come on, let's pack it in for today and get some dinner."

The headquarters crew had all left the trailer together and gone straight to the restaurant.

After dinner Steve had headed directly to the accident board

interview. That had gone much more smoothly than the previous night's meeting with the collateral board. To Steve the accident team seemed to just be honestly looking for answers amongst the burnt remains of the Kiowa. Major Mason had asked him to reconstruct the events of last Friday and Steve had related them chronologically, referring pointedly to the logbook, when needed. He thought it made his statements look more authoritative.

The board interview hadn't lasted more than a half an hour. There were no probing questions about the employment of the Kiowa crew and none about how the crew got along. They seemed focused on putting the mechanics of the crash together and waiting for the toxicology reports to come in.

Steve had asked Major Mason if they had any theories on the cause at that point but Mason had merely said that they were keeping an open mind, adding that no clear cause factors were emerging. Mason indicated that they would be able to wrap up in Prince George by the end of the week, but that the final report would be several months away. That was all to be expected, standard operating procedure. Like any bureaucracy, the gears of the military move slowly. Likely he would be retired before the report was written and signed off by the various levels of command that had to review it.

Steve had no problems with the conduct of the accident board, they were getting their job done. Looking at the evidence that they were working with, Steve couldn't see any clear answers either.

Best to just write it off as 'Undetermined' and leave it at that, he thought, *nothing learned and no one to blame.*

In his room Steve wrote carefully in the logbook, summarizing the day's events. He considered and decided not to bother writing anything about his conversation with Payne. *Too trivial to note*, he decided. On the board interview he simply recorded that he had attended, the same as he had recorded for the collateral board the night before. He was very cognizant that the logbook would remain as a legal record of the search long after he had retired. *It must be beyond reproach*, he thought, writing carefully.

His last logbook entry complete, he hung up his flight suit and took a shower. The warmth of the water brought a sense of life back to his body. He flexed his biceps and thought, *pretty good, the tone is still there.* He dried off and dressed in casual civilian clothes, golf shirt and slacks. He put the key to Brenda's room in his pocket along with his own room key and wallet.

Glancing at his watch he noted it was almost 1930 hours. Just about the right amount of time to go and do Brenda before meeting Walt at the bar at nine and find out what the collateral board was up to.

Tuesday 02 October 1984

2117 hours

The small hotel lounge was mostly empty as Steve sat, nursing a glass of beer and waiting for Walt to show up.

The sex with Brenda had been good. *That girl is a real talent*, Steve thought. *I should find a way to keep this one going after the search is over. With Linda acting loopy, I could use it.* He sipped his glass of beer with a languid, warm and satisfied feeling.

Eventually Walt arrived and sat down. In the deserted bar the sole waitress was there immediately to take his order.

"Man, I could use something to drink," Walt said when she had gone.

"Long interrogation?" Steve asked.

"Interrogation is right," Walt replied. "We were late starting but it still went on for an hour and a half. I felt like I was answering the same questions over and over again."

The waitress brought Walt the glass of ginger ale that he had ordered. He took a couple of quick sips.

"So what was the aim of it all?" Steve asked.

"I'm not supposed to say anything," Walt reported.

"Don't worry, I'm cleared and I won't tell."

"There was lots of the usual stuff, going over events, but there wasn't a lot I could tell them anyway, I didn't brief the crew for their last trip. All I had was background stuff from talking to them earlier, really."

That sounded positive to Steve, from a damage control perspective. He sipped his beer and let Walt go on.

"Like you said earlier, they seem mostly focused on the crew conflicting with each other, whether they were trained and whether we pushed them into bad weather."

"And you said...?"

"I never saw them not get along, I don't know much about their training in the first place, but then we didn't have them doing search patterns, just checking out sighting reports anyway."

"That was pretty much what I said on those subjects."

Walt continued, "I didn't think there was much else could be

added.”

“What about the 'pushing into weather' accusation?”

“I told them what I knew, which is that I didn't brief them, but that the logbook indicated that they were properly briefed. To be honest I told them that I didn't think it mattered anyway. I think they were surprised by that, but I explained that the aircraft captain is the aircraft captain and he is responsible for whatever happens to the aircraft, not someone on the ground.”

Steve laughed. “You'll blow their theories.”

“Well come on, these board guys are supposed to be pilots, right? I told them that they ought to know all this stuff, too. Anyway that was about the end of it. I think they want to see Cpl O'Brien and MCpl Fineworth tomorrow evening.”

Steve was surprised. “I wonder why they would want to talk to them? I mean, sure I can understand that they would want to see Sgt Szerzy for the weather rundown and all that.”

“Well I think the radio communications would be of interest to them. Not sure why they want to talk to Brenda, admin stuff I guess, fueling, that sort of thing. Personally I think they're grasping at straws. I'll feel happy when they go back to Winnipeg and write their report or whatever they plan to do.”

“Oh, there will be some kind of report,” Steve mused. “They can't spend a week in sunny Prince George and get away with not writing a report. The Commander of AirCom will think they were here on holidays or something.”

“Not much of a holiday, if you ask me. I hope I don't ever end up conducting a collateral. It doesn't seem to be a good way to make friends.”

“Well stay out of AirCom HQ and you'll probably be fairly safe. They don't seem to use unit officers for those, although I have occasionally seen people from one unit tagged to investigate a different one. They always seem to use Majors anyway, so you're safe for now, just don't get promoted, like me.”

Steve drew the waitress's attention and indicated another round.

“This air force seems to have too many 'X's to get all the time, it interferes with getting the real work done,” Walt noted.

“I'll drink to that,” Steve said, holding up his glass. He was satisfied with what Walt had reported. The board could have all the theories they wanted, but they had no evidence that anything wasn't done right. The report should be brief and then stuck in a file folder in AirCom HQ and forgotten.

Steve changed the subject and they spoke about the search instead.

"When do you figure well be done here?" Walt asked.

"You in a hurry to get back to flying?" Steve ribbed him.

"Naw, it isn't that. It's just that Laureen is pregnant and she has been having a hard time with sciatica. I'd really like to get home to help her out."

"Sorry, I didn't know. I would say end of next week, the way we're going, unless we find the crash site sooner. How far along is she?"

"Just two months to go."

Steve thought back to Linda's pregnancies with their two kids.

"Yeah, we should be home by the end of next week I would think."

"You don't think we are going to find them at this point, do you?"

Steve just sadly shook his head. "Tomorrow is 12 days without a peep. How long would you like to be out camping in October?"

"Let's get the job finished then, unless you just want to stay in PG," Walt added.

Steve smiled. "Nothing here that isn't at home, kid."

Steve was surprised to see Major Mason from the accident investigation board walk into the lounge. He was wearing civilian clothes and quickly looked around the room. He spotted Steve and Walt in the nearly empty room and headed to their table.

"Glad you could join us, Major," Steve said offering him a seat at the booth.

"Thanks," Mason said "I was lucky I found you." The waitress was immediately there at the table and Mason ordered a glass of draft.

Steve watched the major, he looked like something was bothering him. Once she was gone Steve went to the point. "You look troubled," he said directly. "Problem with the investigation?"

"The investigation is going fine," Mason said and then qualified his remark. "Well as good as can be expected, I suppose. We aren't any closer to finding a cause factor, but that isn't why I wanted to find you. It's Lt O'Dale."

Steve sat up and paid closer attention. "What about him?"

The major paused as the waitress brought his order and placed the glass on a paper coaster on the table.

Mason continued once she had gone. "I interviewed him this evening, just to get what he saw at the crash site, the usual stuff. Do you know that he was pretty close friends with the accident pilot, Erik Aitkinson?"

"Yeah I understand that they shared a house in Edmonton," Steve

said.

“They were at military college together, they were roommates there, too. They have known each other about seven years I think,” Mason stated. Steve wasn't clear where this was leading. “I don't think he's dealing really well with his friend's death. He broke down in tears tonight and I didn't get a lot of sense out of him after that. I wasn't pushing him at all, just asked him to relate what happened and he couldn't. You know he flew the rescue on the crash and the coroner missions, too?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “I sent him on the rescue when we got the ELT signal. There wasn't much choice, his Twin Huey was the only helicopter within range. I assigned the coroner trip to him yesterday and personally briefed him on it. He didn't seem to have a problem with doing the trip, but I had to get RCC to arrange a 10 TAG tasking message for it as it was outside the mission he was assigned here for. I didn't really notice any problems.”

Major Mason considered what Steve had said. “I don't think he should be flying right now.”

“Based on what you said, I agree,” Steve conceded. “I'll send him home tomorrow and ask RCC to get us a replacement pilot from 408 ASAP. Problem solved.”

“Okay, thanks for acting on that,” Mason said, leaning back and taking a sip of his beer. “I don't want to wind up doing a second accident investigation here.” Steve nodded thoughtfully in agreement.

Mason gave them a brief rundown on the investigation to date, mostly a list of factors that they had ruled out. The Kiowa seemed so far to have been serviceable when it hit the ground, so the investigation was focusing on the human and environmental factors. There was no weather observing in that area and the toxicology reports weren't back yet. There wasn't much to go on. The major finished his beer and then left.

When he was gone Walt spoke up. “Well that was a lot of fun.”

“Veritable barrel o' monkeys,” Steve retorted. “Well no sweat. If O'Dale can't hack it we'll rotate him home and get a replacement out here. I need that helicopter in the game. I'll call RCC in the morning and set the ball rolling. Want another one?” Steve held up his empty glass. Walt shook his head.

They both drank up and headed upstairs.

Wednesday 03 October 1984
0915 hours

Wednesday proved to be another fine day for searching. On the drive to the trailer Steve had noted that the morning sky was virtually free of clouds again for the third day in a row. At the morning weather briefing Dave Szerzy had confirmed that the high pressure area showed no signs of dislodging. He had marked the big “H” on his latest surface analysis as “QS”, indicating quasi-stationary.

“Suits me,” Walt had said as the briefing had concluded.

The search aircraft had departed Prince George enroute to their assigned areas. Major Payne's yellow Buffalo had been first into the air, followed by the big silver and white Hercules shortly after it. Only the Twin Huey remained on the ground.

Steve had tracked Gary O'Dale down in his room late the previous evening. O'Dale had answered the knock on his room door quickly, but Steve had declined to go in. Steve had just told him that he was going to rotate him home and ask 408 to send a new pilot. O'Dale had protested that he was fine, but Steve left no room for negotiations. He let O'Dale know that the Twin Huey was to stay on the ground until a replacement pilot was found.

Now, looking out across the ramp at the Twin Huey still tied down, Steve knew he had made the right decision.

I'm not going to wear having a second helicopter pile it in out here, he thought.

Now that the search aircraft were airborne he could call RCC and get a new pilot arranged for the Twin Huey. Paul Reynolds answered the phone at RCC.

“Good morning Paul,” Steve said.

“Another search day, another eighty hours flown?” Paul said.

“Not today,” Steve announced. “We're short one aircraft, but I need your help on sorting out a crewing issue. The pilot of the 408 Twin Huey here needs to go home. His house mate was in that Kiowa crash and it's affecting him.”

“Yeah, I guess it would,” Paul responded. “No problem, I will get a hold of 408 and set it all up. I'll let you know when we have some news.”

Walt caught Steve's attention as they both hung up the phones at the same time.

“Looks like we may be without that Twin Huey until tomorrow,” Steve noted. “Paul is checking on rotating the pilot out.”

“Well I have some good news, then,” Walt announced. “Remember that Cessna 206? It's back, at least until Monday.”

“Hey that is good news,” Steve said. “When are they available?”

“After lunchtime. They will be able to work out of Williams Lake again and they have their own PEP spotters.”

Steve consulted the aircraft status board. “That will give us more aircraft working out of Williams Lake than here,” he noted.

“Just until we get the Twin Huey crewing situation cleared up, hopefully tomorrow,” Walt responded. “That’ll bring us back up to ten aircraft. That’ll give us three aircraft each in Comox, here and Williams, plus one in Pemberton. Now that is well-balanced.” He looked pleased.

In checking the map, the deployments still looked good to Steve. With most of the western and northern parts of the search area pretty well covered, they needed to shift more to the south and finish off those sectors anyway.

“Speaking of Mike in Pemberton, did you talk to him this morning?” Steve asked.

“Yup, just briefed him an hour or so ago. They seem to be doing fine down there. They’re getting their areas covered each day well enough. I think they’re having too much fun in Whistler, mind you, but at least the ski season hasn’t started yet so the town should be pretty quiet.”

Steve recalled a previous night in another ski-town a few years ago. They had left the big yellow Labrador on the grass airstrip in Banff, Alberta and had spent Halloween in the ski-town. There was no snow anywhere and, other than the locals and the hotel staff, there was hardly a soul in town. The helicopter crew had the downstairs bar, ‘The Works’, at the Banff Springs Hotel, to themselves. The staff seemed to have been engaged in amusing themselves, dressing up in costume for the occasion. In a way ski-towns were more fun when the ski season wasn’t in full swing. He had had a fling there with a girl whose name he never learned. The memory brought a smile to his face. “Yeah I imagine Mike and his crew are having too much fun there, even if there isn’t any skiing. At least I don’t have to worry about them selling heliskiing rides.”

Walt pointed out a series of transparent overlays he had prepared for the main map. Steve pulled out his reading glasses and Walt flipped the traces down, one at a time as he talked. “I made up a plan to finish all the coverage in all the primary and secondary search areas. Each day is on a separate trace. If we get the Twin Huey back tomorrow, we should be able to complete the search at the end of next Wednesday. Each aircraft is a different marker colour.” He dropped the last transparency into place.

“Hey that is a neat idea,” Steve exclaimed. “Personally I always just plan one day at a time.” He flipped the traces backwards. “You may have over-planned this, though, what if we lose an aircraft?”

"I thought of that," Walt said, brandishing his set of coloured markers. "Watercolours!"

Steve had to laugh. "Man that will take a lot of spit to fix if you need to. Fine, you just go ahead and we'll see how it works out."

Steve looked the map over closely, peering through his reading glasses. With the Hercules on the job the flatter search areas were getting covered fast. That freed up the two Buffs to work more in the high terrain. Everything had been well covered once and they were now covering the same areas again from lower altitude and with the search lines closer together. Many areas had already been done from 500 feet.

Steve looked over Walt's plan. It did look like about a week's worth of flying left to do to finish it off. As Steve looked at all the areas searched though it became increasingly obvious to him that chances were diminishing. The general wisdom in the SAR world is that the first search patterns, higher and further apart, are to allow survivors to signal the search aircraft with fires, flares or heliograph mirrors. The second, lower, more tightly spaced passes, are so the spotters can find a wreck. That phase isn't a search for survivors. *At this point if we are lucky we'll find the wreck, if not then we'll find nothing.* Finding anyone alive was remote now.

Steve thought back over the last few days. When did he make the transition from hoping to find survivors to realizing that was now unlikely? He couldn't pick a time that his change in thinking happened, but the fact that the master search map now showed all areas had been covered once brought home the realization. Of course the key thing is to not show this 'change in hope' to the relatives. As far as they are concerned efforts towards a rescue continue as before.

Steve sipped his coffee. Relatives. He only had one left to deal with directly since Loretta MacKinstry's departure. George von Richthofen was no trouble at all. He seemed to spend these sunny days touring around taking photographs and only dropped by the trailer once a day or so. Walt was passing daily reports to Alphonzo Fucilla at the Italian Embassy and that seemed to be keeping the Cepucci family happy or at least at bay, which was close enough. With Loretta MacKinstry now gone the place was starting to feel deserted and the trailer spacious. Perhaps sensing that there was little hope, the press had lost interest in the story. Even George Withers, the local reporter, hadn't been seen since Sunday.

No ravens, no crows, one relative and no press, Steve considered. *This search feels like it's winding down already.*

His coffee was getting cool now and he finished it with one gulp. *This is the important time to stay focused. People get tired, realize the*

search is in its last phases and get sloppy, if you don't watch them carefully.

Wednesday 03 October 1984

1117 hours

Paul Reynolds was on the phone. "Problem," he stated plainly to Steve.

"What now?"

"408 has no one to replace O'Dale."

"Dammit, I need that aircraft," Steve said, frustrated. "What are the options then?"

"Just 'keep him' or 'send him home', as far as I can see."

"Wait a minute, you mean that if I send him home because he is in no shape to fly, then he has to fly the Twin Huey home and if I keep him here then he'll keep flying on the search? Those are my choices?"

"Yeah that's about the size of it," Paul agreed. "What do you want to do?"

"Let me think, 'rock, hard place, rock, hard place', give me another option, man."

Paul considered the problem. "Well you could park him there until he is doing better."

"Yeah and his crew as well, that'll make them all happy. I know you think you're helping..." Steve said. "Okay here is what I am going to do then. I am going to go and talk to him and see what he thinks, because the choices you've given me suck."

"Yeah I know," Paul said with a chuckle. "No choice, though, really. Don't get too stressed out over it though. I don't have any options here either."

"Okay, well thanks for trying. At least I didn't drop this one on Brian Leblanc."

Paul just laughed at that suggestion. "Well let me know, when you do. Keep the buttered side up," he hung up.

Steve just held the telephone receiver looking at it. *Great*, he thought. Brenda gave him a quizzical look from her desk and Steve just shook his head in disgust. She smirked to herself as Steve left the office area, put on his jacket and left the trailer without a word to anyone.

Wednesday 03 October 1984

1145 hours

Walking into the hotel lobby Steve ran into Gary O'Dale going the other way. He was dressed in civilian clothes.

"Where are you off to?" Steve said. He must have sounded too harsh because O'Dale visibly jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Umm, lunch, I think," he responded rather weakly.

"Sorry I didn't mean to startle you," Steve said in a conciliatory voice. "I have a problem and the solution has to involve you."

"How is that?"

Steve lead him from the lobby into the bar, which was empty, even the staff were absent at this early hour. "Look, Major Mason told me that you are having a rough time because of the crash. Fair enough, it's never fun to have friends killed and have to do the clean-up. I know 'cause I've done it on several occasions. I figured you needed a break and should go home, that your unit should send out a replacement. My idea was to swap you home by airline and give you a break from flying until you get over it all."

"Yeah, but the rest of the Huey Flight are all away right now," O'Dale protested.

"So I found out this morning," Steve said dryly. "So the options I have been given are to either have you fly your Twin Huey home to Edmonton or have you stay here and keeping flying on the search. Either way you won't get a break from flying. What do you want to do?"

"Stay and fly on the search, of course," O'Dale said. "My crew would be pissed if we went home before this search is over."

Steve regarded him closely. "Are you really up to flying on this search, I mean really?"

O'Dale was obviously choosing his words carefully. "Look you are a helicopter pilot like me. If one of your friends was killed flying would you want to go home and take time off or get back to flying?"

"Yeah okay, I get ya, kid," Steve said. "Can you get your crew together to fly this afternoon then?"

"You bet," came the reply and O'Dale went to leave but Steve grabbed his jacket sleeve.

"Get some lunch before you see Walt for a search area assignment." Steve let him go.

"Yessir," O'Dale said and disappeared.

Driving back to the airport Steve had to shake his head. *I guess the kids these days aren't that different.*

Back at the trailer lunch was underway. Brenda had ordered pizza. "I saved you some," she said when Steve walked in the door.

"Thanks," he said after hanging up his jacket and taking a slice.

"We have to get this search done so I can get back to eating better."

"You'll just have to run further," Brenda said.

Steve turned to Walt, "That Twin Huey will be flying this afternoon."

"On the search?" Walt asked.

"Yeah, just find him a search block not too far out."

Walt glanced at the map on the wall, considering. "What changed?"

"I took the rock," Steve said dismissively. "Just get on with it and let's get this search sewn up soon, okay?"

Wednesday 03 October 1984

1509 hours

By mid afternoon activity at the trailer had slowed to a crawl. The aircraft were all out searching and no one had reported any unserviceabilities. Gary O'Dale had quickly collected his Twin Huey crew together and, after a very quick lunch, had reported to Walt for a search block. By 1315 they were out of the control zone, heading west to their assigned patrol beat, the distinctive thumping of the Huey's main rotor fading into the distance.

Payne's Buffalo had returned just after O'Dale left, to refuel and get some lunch for the crew. The Herc just took lunches and everything else they needed when they departed after breakfast and searched all day long, the luxury of having more than ten hours worth of fuel on board.

Steve labelled Brenda's plan of putting Payne and his crew into a different hotel, an act of genius. It worked out so well, in combination with Walt's search assignments, that Steve had hardly seen Payne since the last run-in they had. For Steve that was a good thing, but he was still looking for a reason to convince Payne to go back to Comox.

Outside the weather was gorgeous, well over 15C in the middle of the afternoon with little wind. There were a few bright white cumulus clouds drifting across the city, giving the scene a summer-like feel, although the clouds lacked the sharply defined flat bottoms found in May or June.

Thinking about clouds motivated Steve to check Sgt Szerzy's prog charts, hanging on the wall in the briefing area. The maps of BC showed

the high pressure area slowly moving off into Alberta during the four days the charts covered. They would have at least a few more days of ideal searching weather.

Man this weather is too good to pass up, he thought, I wish I had time for a round of golf this week. The fairways would probably be nice and dry by now, too.

Steve's golf daydreams were ended by the sound of the trailer door being opened. He turned to see George von Richthofen enter the trailer.

"Well gute afternoon," Steve said.

"Herr Kapitän," George acknowledged, with a smile. "It certainly is a beautiful day out today. I presume that the search continues well?"

"Everyone is up searching this afternoon," Steve explained. "We have even added another aircraft to the search, flying out of Williams Lake."

"Well that is good news," George agreed. "This is the tenth day of the search is it not?"

Steve mentally counted the days. "Yes it would be the tenth day since we set up shop here, although there was searching done even one day earlier than that, on Sunday the 23rd."

"And the aircraft has been missing now for 12 days?"

"Yes, that is right," Steve agreed. "Do you want a cup of coffee or something?"

"No, no I am fine, really," George stated. "I was out walking most of the morning at West Lake Provincial Park, west of the city. It is really beautiful there up near the old radar station and rather replaces the need for coffee in the diet. I took a good many pictures from some of the higher lookouts along the way."

Steve pulled out a chair for von Richthofen and they sat in the dingy briefing area.

"It looks from the map you have on the wall there," George indicated the master map, "that there is not much ground left to cover."

"Well it is true that we've covered the whole search area once over and many of the parts have been covered twice or more, but we aren't finished yet, there are still lower patterns to be flown over quite a bit of the area."

"I appreciate your efforts greatly and, in talking to my mother, it is obvious that she and the rest of the family, while very worried, are also appreciative of what is being done here. I have to assume that you are looking in the right places, of course."

Our methods are all based on the best scientific research we have

available on search area probabilities, plus the fifty years of SAR experience that the air force has accumulated doing searches all over Canada,” Steve rejoined.

“Oh, I have no doubt that you know what you are doing here, looking for lost airplanes. You seem to be very well organized and coming from an Austrian, that is a compliment. I am really just concerned that after a certain period of time that hope starts to wane that anyone will be found alive out there.”

“Obviously we always aim to get the searching done quickly with the intention of a fast rescue, but we do keep going until the area is completely searched to the accepted level of reliability. In other words, we don't give up after any particular period of time, but when the area has been covered and there is little chance that we have missed something we should have seen,” Steve tried to make himself more clear.

“When do you think that all the areas will be searched then?” George asked.

“Well if the weather and the aircraft serviceability holds out, it looks like another week will be sufficient. Of course that could be cut short at any point by a rescue, which is what we hope will happen.”

“Of course, of course,” George said. “I just need to give my mother some indication when I am likely to be coming home. I shall tell her perhaps in a week, then, if not sooner.”

“You are planning to stay until the end of the search then?” Steve asked.

“We all have our duties to perform.”

“You don't seem very concerned?” Steve asked.

“What is there to be concerned about? You are doing a fine job of searching here. The weather is good, the aircraft are out flying and my mother is happy I am here. As for me, I am getting many good ideas for some landscape paintings, so even when you turn up empty-handed I will not return home with nothing.”

Steve was a bit perplexed. “You don't seem to have much hope that we will find anything here and you seem very calm about that.”

“At this point, no I don't think you will find anything. I think if there was anything to be found, you would have done so by now. And, well, yes, I don't feel any sense of panic. My brother was always doing boorish things and it doesn't surprise me that it may have got him into trouble. My mother and his wife are doing enough panicking for our family. I know that Mrs MacKinstry seems overwrought enough for her whole family. I don't see the benefit of adding to the distress, myself.”

"I guess not," Steve added thoughtfully.

"Have you heard from the other families?"

"We have heard from the family of Joseph Cepucci, the third passenger. They live in Italy and so far have not sent anyone here. We have been keeping them up to date through the Italian Embassy in Ottawa."

George considered that information. "Well, I guess that is better than sending someone here to photograph landscapes or to perhaps get into your way. It is not like we can speed up the search process here, is it?"

"You aren't in my way, George," Steve said with a smile.

"What about the family of the pilot, Mr Schmidt himself, after which the whole effort is named?"

"He doesn't seem to have much family," Steve began. "I did talk to his ex-wife last week, but she was only concerned about support payments, not really about how he was doing. He has a daughter but she is very young, just three years old. He is supposed to have a brother in Austria but we haven't been able to track him down."

George was interested in that information. "Truly? A brother in Austria? Where does he live and what is his name?"

"We don't have that information, actually," Steve explained. "His ex-wife told me that he has a brother and that his parents are both dead, other than that I don't have any information."

"Well perhaps I can help track him down," George said.

"Someone named Schmidt, no first name, who lives in Austria," Steve enumerated. "Don't you think that is a bit lacking in detail?"

"Well I admit that will be a challenge, but it will give my mother something positive to do instead of fretting all day long. Let me see what I can accomplish in that regard."

"Sure, it can't hurt," Steve admitted. "Let me know if you do find out anything. It would be best to have someone official explain to him what has happened, if you are able to locate him."

"I understand perfectly," George agreed. "I will see if he can be found first and then pass you the telephone number or address, if that would suffice?"

"That would be perfect," Steve agreed.

With that assignment George left Steve to his afternoon, driving his rental car back to town.

Sure, find a guy named Schmidt somewhere in Austria, well that will keep someone busy for quite a while, which can only be a good thing. Besides finding the aircraft is more pressing than finding the relatives. This search has been on TV all over Europe, so if anyone cared they would

have called by now. Maybe there is no brother, or maybe they don't get along, or maybe he died years ago, too. Who knows?

Wednesday 03 October 1984

1748 hours

The day was growing late and darkness was settling over the Prince George airport. The western sky showed the glow of the recent sunset, orange, ocher and gold.

In the Search HQ trailer the day's activity was at high pitch. The aircraft were all down and reports were being given on the day's results. Both Steve and Walt were on the phone, scribbling notes. With a mission endurance of only three and a half hours, O'Dale's crew had been the first down. They had been debriefed and had gone for supper almost an hour ago. Likewise the Herc crew had reported in and gone to the hotel.

Steve had been talking by phone to Mike Bertkowiz in Pemberton. His crew had also landed a while ago, but he had waited until he got to his hotel room in Whistler to call. They had seen nothing worth reporting. That task done, Steve hung up the phone. Walt was on the phone with Lt Hutchison of the US Coast Guard crew.

Major Payne was in the briefing area impatiently waiting to pass in his own report. Outside in the growing darkness of the ramp his Buff crew were getting the aircraft bungs and covers in place for the night, securing the aircraft.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Major," Steve said. "It's been a busy 45 minutes."

"I'll bet," Payne said. "Getting anywhere?"

"Sure, we are getting the areas covered and with this weather, the coverage rates are about as good as they get."

"But not finding much?" Payne asked, rhetorically.

Steve ignored the remark. Searches were not measured by successes, but by covering the ground efficiently. Especially in BC you could never count on finding what you were looking for anyway and Payne knew that. "Anything to report?"

"Nothing worth mentioning," Payne said. "Mostly I wanted to see about getting a better search area tomorrow."

"You didn't like the one you did today?" Steve asked a bit incredulous.

"No it was too low down, too many straight lines in flat country. Why don't you leave that to the Herc and your PEP plane and let us to the

contour searches in the rocks?"

Steve burned at the suggestion that he and Walt weren't assigning aircraft optimally, but he kept quiet. It was too late in the day and he was working on the theory that Payne was just trying to goad him into a fight. Steve pulled out his reading glasses and looked at the master map on the wall.

"Well, let's see," Steve started, tracing his finger over the roughest terrain he could find in the search area. "We could use another coverage pass through Mount Waddington, Ts'yl-os and the Homathko Icefield area. How about I ask Walt to assign you a block of contour patterns up there?" Steve knew it would be a long transit and was more easily covered out of Comox, but it would keep Payne and his crew busy in the hardest terrain in the area.

Major Payne didn't bother to squint at the map. "That's more like it, better use for a Buff up there."

"It would probably make sense then to have you get lunch and refuel in, say, Tatla Lake," Steve said, running his finger to the nearest town to that region.

"I think we would do better somewhere where they actually have an airport," Payne said, now squinting at the map, which clearly showed no airport symbol at Tatla Lake."

"Well we used to drop in there quite often," Steve said with a pleasant smile. "You might as well plan on recovering at Williams Lake, then."

Payne looked at the map again, perplexed. "Well maybe in a helicopter you can visit these exotic places with no airports. Yeah, okay, Williams it is, then."

Steve played him some more. "Okay, well that should work fine then. You're sure that your crew won't get dizzy contour searching Waddington, then? It is 13,000 feet high, you know?"

"We'll be just fine," Payne shot back putting his jacket on and leaving the trailer and not closing the door behind him.

Steve walked over and watched him steaming across the ramp to his crew van. Steve gently and silently closed the trailer door and sat down in a stacking chair, shaking his head and laughing to himself. He looked up to see Walt watching him.

"What the heck was all that about?" Walt asked.

"Hard to explain," Steve said still laughing. "Payne just tried to tell me how to run my search and asked for a better search area tomorrow. I found a way to give him just what he wanted and still get the better of him.

He didn't even have a good come back except to stomp out."

"Sounds like you won," Walt said with some obvious trepidation, "but you still have to deal with him again."

"Oh, I won all right," Steve said, still chuckling. "As far as the rest goes, screw him. I am retired soon enough that I don't care what the good major thinks."

"I can see that," Walt said, shaking his head. "You want to get some dinner?"

"Yeah, sure," Steve put his jacket on. "Let's wind it up and put this day to bed." The rest of the search headquarters crew packed up quickly and headed out into the BC evening.

Wednesday 03 October 1984

2215 hours

"Are you sure it is such a good idea to bait Payne like that," Brenda asked Steve. The two of them were lying together in her hotel room double bed, the sweat drying on their bodies after an intense session of evening sex. The candlelight cast flickering shadows across the room. Brenda cuddled into him, placing her head on his shoulder.

"Oh so you heard that all, did you?" Steve chuckled once again.

"Everyone in the office heard that exchange," she said.

"Well good," Steve decided. "At least they all know I am not going to take any shit from that idiot. If he is going to tell me how to run my search then he can get publicly chewed up."

Brenda shifted trying to find a comfortable spot for her head on his bony shoulder. "Yeah well okay, but what about when we all go home. Aren't you afraid what he'll do then?"

"Like what? He asked for a different assignment and I gave him one. He should be happy. Besides I am outta here in a couple of months. He can fume all he wants, I'll be golfing."

"In January?" she asked.

"Sure if it isn't too wet or snowy. I got in two rounds last January. Gotta have some fun if you live in Comox."

"Yeah, well, great for you. What about the rest of us?"

"This has no connection to you. If he is pissed it will be at me, not the rest of the crew. I don't expect anyone to defend me, especially after I am gone from the scene," Steve said.

Brenda pulled the corner of a pillow over and slid that between her cheek and his shoulder. "I just meant that all this arguing contributes the

general level of grumpiness around the squadron.”

“Well if things get too pouty for you we can always get together for a cheering-up-fuck.” Steve said brightly.

“Well that is a nice thought, but I’m not allowed guys in town, just girls,” she responded.

“I can always take you down to Victoria for the weekend sometime, that is out of town.”

“What would your wife say?”

“By the sound of things, not much,” Steve admitted. “It looks like she moved out while I was here. I have to figure out what that is all about. But this is all too good to pass up.”

“Well I think you may have to, anyway,” Brenda added. “If I want to keep up these games I have to play by the rules. You should too.”

“Rules are for fools,” Steve said, stretching. He could feel himself cooling as the sweat evaporated.

“You don’t care much about anything but winning, do you?” she asked, running her finger down the wet skin on his chest and belly.

“Winning is good,” he said. “What else is there?”

“You going to stay over?” she asked.

“You wouldn’t like it,” he responded. “I snore.” He slipped out from under her and started getting dressed. “Tomorrow night?”

“Why not?” she smiled, watching him dress. “Gotta have fun while I can.”

Steve slipped on his polo shirt, while Brenda, sprawled out under the white hotel sheet, watched him carefully.

“You don’t want to leave right now,” she said, coyly. “You haven’t even asked me about the interview with the collateral board earlier this evening, yet.”

Steve pulled on his sweatpants, looking at her. “That’s right, I haven’t. They undoubtedly told you not to talk to anyone about it.”

Brenda pointedly pouted. “Well that is mostly true,” she said slowly, “but you could ask me questions and I could nod or shake my head.” She demonstrated.

“Okay,” he said, sitting on the end of the bed. “Was it boring?” She nodded gravely. “Do they think I sent two people to their deaths in the frightening mountains chasing a psychic report?” She thought about that one, furrowing her brow and shrugged. “Do I care what the fucking collateral board is thinking or doing?” She nodded gravely again. He leapt on her and pinned her arms to her sides under the sheet and put his forehead against hers, looking unblinkingly into her green eyes, while she

laughed. "That is where you are wrong, I don't care what they think, they have nothing to go on."

His kissed her on the forehead, let her go, got up from the bed turned and left, making sure the key to her room was in his pocket with his own key. As he silently closed her door he could hear her giggling to herself.

There was no one in the corridor and Steve slipped up the stairs to his room unnoticed. Once inside with the door locked he undressed again and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. *Sometimes I think I am just too serious*, he thought to himself, *or perhaps she is just too frivolous and that makes everyone else look too serious in comparison. I wish I could figure out how to make that one last, though.* He slept well that night.

Thursday 04 October 1984

0915 hours

Major Mason was sitting in the trailer's briefing room, speaking with Steve. Outside on the ramp the frost was almost gone as the day's sunshine crept into the shadows. The three Prince George-based military search aircraft had just departed, leaving a hollow silence echoing across the the now deserted airfield. The weather was once again perfect, promising a good day's searching for all of them.

Steve handed the major a cup of coffee. "So is this an official call or just social?" Steve asked rhetorically. He knew that there were no social calls while working on an accident investigation.

The major half smirked, "Actually it is another courtesy call. We're packing up and I just wanted to let you know that we will be gone by the end of today, that's all."

"That is good news, isn't it?" Steve asked.

"It's news, that's all," the investigator responded, evenly, without sarcasm. "We have some shippers coming in to box up the wreck and send it to QETE for a more detailed look, but as far as I am concerned that is mostly a formality. We've had the best helicopter investigator DFS has on this and he hasn't picked anything worth mentioning up. Unless QETE finds something we missed it'll go down as an undetermined."

Steve nodded gravely. "That is too bad really, you can't learn anything from that verdict. Any thought of a suspected human factor?"

The major shrugged. "We have discussed that possibility, 'suspected personnel-pilot-something', but what? It could be disorientation, distraction, information processing, who knows? We have nothing much

that points to anything there, so it would just be guessing and I am not sure that helps anyone.”

Steve nodded slowly. “Well good luck with your report. Any idea when it will be out?”

“Probably not until the new year, I would think,” Mason said. “We still have to wait for QETE's strip reports first. Regardless of all that, I wanted to thank you and your crew for being so professional and fitting our requirements into your search here.” The major seemed quite sincere and he offered Steve his hand.

“No problem at all,” Steve said shaking the major's hand firmly. “We knew those guys, we want to get to the bottom of it as much as anyone does. I don't suppose you know if the collateral are going too?”

“Not a clue, we've been staying away from them and their work as far as possible.” The major turned to go. “Oh, I almost forgot,” he added. “The toxicology reports came back from the coroner's office – all negative.”

“Well that will be a relief to the families, if nothing else,” Steve said seriously. The major nodded in agreement. They both knew that for family members losing a son or husband was bad enough, but for it to be blamed on drug or alcohol use was much worse. It was a good thing for everyone when that verdict could be avoided.

Steve saw him to the door. “How is your search going?” Mason asked, almost as an afterthought.

“Looks like it will go down as 'undetermined', too,” Steve replied. They shook hands again and the major left.

Back in the office area Steve addressed Walt, who was recording the day's crew assignments in the searchmaster's logbook. Steve noticed that Brenda was listening to what he said. “Well that was Major Mason from the DFS team. They are done and headed home today.”

“I gathered,” Walt said. “Looks like 'undetermined', eh?”

Steve shrugged. “It looks like like it.”

Walt made a face, “that would be too bad, really.”

“Well it is always nice to have answers, but sometimes life doesn't work that way,” Steve responded paternally. “Sometimes you just have to take what you can get from a situation and move on. Speaking of which, let's get this search sewn up as expeditiously as we can.”

“No word from the collateral board, is there?” Walt tried.

“I am not going to call them,” Steve said. “Everyone here been interviewed by them?” There was a series of nods from Brenda, Tim O'Brien, Sgt Szerzy and Walt. “Well, me too,” Steve said. “Don't worry

that is all I am going to ask. I am just trying to figure out how close to done they might be. Sounds like they are there to me. Now then, Sgt Szerzy, how does tomorrow look?"

The met tech glanced at his surface analysis chart. "It looks like we're in for some cloud tomorrow and Saturday as a small disturbance tracks through here, just middle cloud over most of the area. The peaks may be obscured in the higher ground, but that is about it."

"Precipitation?" Steve asked.

"Nothing that I can see here."

"Good," Steve pronounced. "We can live with that. What's the long range?"

Sgt Szerzy pulled down his clipped prog charts. "Sunday and Monday look sunny again and then another small disturbance looks like it may be here for the middle of the week. Too early to tell if we are going to get anything significant with it, though."

"Sold," Steve said.

Sgt Szerzy looked pleased. If the forecasts panned out then his job for the rest of the search would be relatively easy. He resumed putting the finishing touches on his most recent surface analysis chart and, when it was done, pinned it up.

Thursday 04 October 1984

1310 hours

Major Mark Payne's Buffalo touched down on Runway 24, taxied off at Runway 01 and then via Taxiway Charlie to the ramp near the trailer, its flat pitch props biting into the air and creating an overwhelming din.

Post lunch, Steve and Walt sat at the picnic table and watched the Buff come to a stop and its props go to idle for the required two minute cool down. Abruptly they were both pulled to cut off at the same time and the props coasted down. Once again the airport was quiet, the only sound the buzz of a Cessna 172 doing circuits on the short Runway 19. Compared to the roar of the Buff while it had been taxiing, the Cessna was merely part of the background noise. Mac's jet fuel truck crept out towards the Buffalo, before the props had stopped.

"Man he doesn't miss a call, does he?" Walt gestured towards the fuel bowser.

Steve chuckled. "I really blew it, you know. I should have got this trailer for free and had Mac pay me a commission to base the search planes here. I think he's been making more money per day than I make in a year,

especially since you scared up that gas-guzzling Herc.”

Payne's crew were now at work getting the big twin-engined plane refueled and inspected to fly again. Steve watched nonchalantly as the Buffalo's flight engineer peered closely at the left engine nacelle, went and retrieved his folding ladder, climbed up and unlatched the engine cowling. Major Payne emerged from the cockpit and stopped to confer with the flight engineer. Steve and Walt could see them both looking up at the engine. Some of the Buff crew members left to take their van from the parking lot, presumably to fetch lunch for the rest of the crew. Payne headed towards the trailer.

“Maybe we should look busy,” Walt offered.

Steve countered, “I am busy. I'm thinking and I can do that right here. I don't have to move for him.”

Payne strode across the ramp and was upon them at the picnic table quickly. Neither one stood up as he approached, Walt following Steve's lead.

“You two look underemployed,” Major Payne said as soon as he was in earshot.

“Just planning our deployments for tomorrow,” Steve said with a smile. “Looks like you have a problem there.” He indicated the open cowling on the Buffalo engine.

Payne waved his hand dismissively. “Oil leak, within limits, nothing to worry about.”

“That's a Buff for you, if it isn't leaking, it's empty,” came Walt's peace offering.

Payne ignored him. “Speaking of Buffs and deployments, it doesn't make much sense having me as Det Commander here when my aircraft are in Comox.”

Steve nodded politely in agreement. “Well that sounds true to me. I can always deploy you back to Comox and you can take control of your Det there.”

“I have a better plan. I was looking at your maps this morning and your coverage is much less complete at this end than on the coast. I'm moving another Buff here tomorrow morning.”

Walt looked carefully at Steve. He knew Payne was being far out of line with this pronouncement. Aircraft locations on a search and especially areas of coverage are strictly the prerogative of the Searchmaster and not the Det Commander. Walt expected Steve to explode all over Payne or at least snidely take him apart. He braced for the explosion.

Steve looked right at Payne. “Quite true,” he said. “Let's do that.”

Payne stuttered, "Um, okay, do you want to let him know or shall I?"

"Let who know?" Steve asked with a smile.

"Lancemeir, it will be his crew coming here."

"I can do that," Steve said. Payne looked a bit bewildered and he quickly retreated to his aircraft to gaze at the open engine cowling once again and wait for lunch to show up.

As he departed Steve looked at Walt. "You should probably close your mouth," he said.

"You just gave in, like that, when he stepped on your toes."

"It was more like I opened the door quickly when he was taking a run at it."

"He did fall on his face, didn't he?" Walt admitted. "Why did you do that? I thought you liked winning?"

"Did I lose that one?" Steve asked.

Walt looked at the yellow Buffalo gleaming in the sunshine. The cowling had been closed and only the flight engineer was in sight, folding up his ladder. "No I think you won that one, I'm just not sure how."

"I wanted that Buff back here anyway," Steve explained. "I just tricked him into doing it for me. Remember 'Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it'?"

"Oh yeah," Walt said nodding, "I remember: Mackenzie King. You really are a master."

"Eisenhower," Steve said with a smile, getting up and returning to the trailer. From the trailer doorway, he said to Walt, "Call Lance and have him recover here tomorrow after his morning patterns."

"Airshow time!" Walt responded. Steve just shook his head and went inside.

Thursday 04 October 1984

1533 hours

"This is getting to be a regular appointment," Steve said to George von Richthofen as he entered the trailer.

"Well I figure that this time of day to check in is probably a good time. Your airplane fleet is in the air and the administration seems to be quiet," George said. "I really am trying to not slow down your work."

"Well you picked the right time of day all right, although you are welcome anytime, even when it is busy," Steve added. "Do you want some coffee?" He held up his own cup.

George demurred. "No that is fine, I just had some in town."

"I don't blame you," Steve looked at the colour of the coffee in his cup. "Do you want a rundown on how we are doing?"

"Well, you recently gave me the rundown on all the best statistics from your search, so perhaps I can save you that effort. Perhaps, is there any news?"

"Not much to report, really," Steve said. "Our Labrador helicopter working on the coast did a hoist into a site they couldn't identify from the air, but it just turned out to be an old mining exploration location. This sort of thing happens quite often, I'm afraid. Then, back in Comox the Labrador went unserviceable with a hydraulic problem that cost them a couple of hours, but I am pleased to report that they are back in the air now."

George smiled dolefully, "I am sure that your crew are all doing a marvelous job. It must be very dull flying lines in the sky for all this time."

"Well, that is our job," Steve remarked. "We live for this sort of flying even if it gets a bit dull. Sometimes we get to do a rescue and that really does make the the hours of flying lines worthwhile. It sure beats sitting in a tent with some Tac Hel squadron in Wainwright."

"Wainwright?" George asked perplexed.

"Never mind," Steve smiled vaguely. "I must be a bit tired this afternoon. I was going to ask if you had spoken with your mother."

"Oh, yes, indeed I have," George reported. "She thinks that there may be an opportunity to track down Mr Schmidt's brother, even without a name or an address."

"Is that even really possible?" Steve asked, surprised.

"Well, she thinks so. If I can get some information about when Jan Schmidt came to Canada then she thinks she can trace his emigration paperwork through the ministry responsible and that would indicate family members. Then they could be traced through tax records."

"That wouldn't be public information, would it?" Steve asked.

"Goodness, no, she has her contacts in the government though, who could find this out for her, because it is a matter of an emergency situation, it could be done, I think."

Steve pondered the plan. "Well we can certainly get you that information. I guess it can't hurt to give it a try, can it?"

George smiled broadly. "Being helpful will make my mother very pleased, which is good for my whole family."

"I'm glad that I can do that much for her," Steve said circumspectly. "Let me see what I can do about finding that date." He went

into the office area and gave Walt the assignment of calling Lorraine Schmidt to see if she knew what date Jan Schmidt had come to Canada.

Steve returned to talk with George. "I guess you have been busy today?"

"Oh, yes, the weather has been lovely, so I have been all over taking photographs and even doing some sketches. I was in Summit Lake, north of here this morning. It was very beautiful there and the boats are still out on the lake. Do you even have winter here?"

Steve chuckled, "Oh, yes, here they have winter, snow and everything, but not yet. Come back here in a month or so and it will be colder and probably snowier. I live in Comox on the coast and you can golf all year round there, though. It's a different climate than here in the interior."

Walt interrupted them. "July 1st, 1964." He looked rattled.

Steve looked at him. "Are you sure about that?"

Walt glanced at George and then back to Steve. "Oh yes, very sure. She said it was Dominion Day in '64 and then tried to rip my head off. It was a short call, but I did say 'thank you'."

Steve smiled. "Now you know why I had you call", he said sweetly.

Walt smiled weakly, "I'll just add that to the logbook."

George was jotting the date down. "Well that will get her started, all right." He addressed Steve, "I think this may take a while to get a result. I think it is unlikely to result in an answer next week, just so you know."

"Hey, I'll be happy to get any information out of this at all," Steve said. "Let her know not to fret, any result will be appreciated, whenever it happens. If it is after we are done here, then you can call me at the squadron in Comox." He wrote down his office phone number and gave it to George. "Anything at all would be helpful."

George folded the piece of paper and put it in his wallet. "Well at this point anything that keeps my mother occupied would be helpful. There may well be no result at all."

"I think we may have to live with that reality all around," Steve replied.

Thursday 04 October 1984

2153 hours

Brenda cuddled into Steve and sighed. He looked at her closely. He couldn't tell what colour her eyes were by the dim tea light candle that lit in her hotel room, but he could feel the coolness of the sweat already starting

to dry on her skin. She smelled good after the last hour of sex together.

"I realize that we don't have a lot of time left," he said, "given that this search is not far from being done."

"Shh," she said, "I am having fun here and now. I can't get worried about the future."

"I should be more like you, forget tomorrow and just enjoy screwing your brains out tonight."

"That would be my advice," she said, with a giggle. "What could be better than this?"

"More of this," he responded, biting her neck.

"Don't get greedy," she laughed. "Do you really think we are near the end of this search?"

He took a deep breath. "Yeah, mid week I think we will have to pack it all up and go home."

"Empty handed?" she asked.

"Well we'll always have Prince George," he said with an ironic tone. He ran his fingers over her ribs and she jumped when he poked her there, making her small breasts jiggle. "Personally I would just like to get that collateral board off my ass."

She sat up slightly, jamming a pillow, folded in half, behind her shoulders. "They seem to have interviewed everyone at least once," she said, frowning in concentration. "I have been keeping a careful note of who they interviewed. People like talking to me."

"I noticed," he said. "Have they called some people back twice then?"

"Yeah, Dave Szerzy and Tim O'Brien."

"I wonder what that is all about?" he mused. The candle flickered, playing shadows across the ceiling and across Brenda's face, making her look distant and mysterious.

"Well as far as they would tell me, not much really. Dave was called back to give more weather information from the day of the accident. Tim was called back to go over his radio logs a second time," she explained, stroking his crew cut hair.

"Ah, it still sounds like they're grasping at straws," he suggested. "Or they're trying to make it look like they are doing something constructive when they aren't."

"Are you worried about them?" she asked with concern.

"Nah, they have nothing to go on, they are just trying to put an 'X' in a square."

The tea light candle flickered down and the room quickly dimmed.

Then it went out, leaving the room cast in darkness, except for the hotel hallway light that leaked under the room's front door. Steve could smell the smoke from the scorched wick.

"Now that is dark," Brenda said. "You want another candle lit?"

"Naw, I have to go soon anyway," Steve responded.

"I was going to ask you something. I was talking to Sylvia tonight on the phone."

Steve thought about that. "How is her kid doing?"

"Much better apparently," she said. "You know how quickly they bounce back at that age. Sylvia wants to come back and finish the job here."

Steve considered that idea. "We're almost done. Is there any point?"

"Well actually there is. The final bills have to all be organized and paid, hotels, jet fuel, all that. And the invoices have to be packaged up for base, along with the ledgers before we go home. Actually they have to all be sorted out after we get back as well."

"So I gather you don't want to do all that?" Steve theorized.

"I'm 'admin', that's 'fin'," she said.

"Yeah, but you have been doing fine so far on it," he said, challenging her on a hunch he had.

"It would help a lot and she wants to come back. She feels bad that she had to duck out at all. Give her a chance to finish the job, okay?"

"Okay, she can get on Lance's Buff in the morning and they can drop her off here at lunchtime. She'll just have to be a spotter for the search patterns they will be doing before they get here, then."

"That is what I figured you'd want to do, so I already arranged it." Brenda said in a low voice.

"Are you always this well organized?" Steve asked, amazed.

"Yup," she said, snuggling down into his arms and kissing him on the cheek.

"You don't want her back here to do the books, you want her here for the sex."

She chuckled to herself. "Wow, you are suspicious, aren't you? Actually, for both. It works out well, you see."

"For you, maybe," Steve said, miffed. "We only have a few more days here, what do I have to do to see you, make an appointment?"

"Remember in kindergarten, when you learned how important it is to share?" she laughed.

He pinched her ass. "Well, what if I don't want to share this new

piece of ass I have. Did you think of that, huh?" She jumped when he pinched her.

"Well I say 'tough'," she said, backing out of his reach and fending him off. "Besides if you feel cheated then I will just have to think of a way to make it up to you. Some form of compensation."

"Like what?" he asked, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her close to him again.

"Well, if you behave and don't put up a fuss, then maybe I'll organize a threesome in your honour."

"You are really trying to compromise me, aren't you?" he said, biting her shoulder playfully.

"Oh, okay, if you aren't interested, then I won't bother asking."

"Okay, what the hell, I'm in," he admitted.

"Good, it'll be worth your while, but you have to behave nicely, no being jealous and all that."

"You are going to have to keep this very under wraps," he scolded her.

"Always do," she said and kissed him on the forehead.

Friday 05 October 1984

0730 hours

Walt sat down opposite Steve at the small table in the hotel coffee shop and picked up the menu that the waitress had left there. Steve looked up from the morning *Vancouver Sun*, Walt just looked tired. Outside the sun was just up, but it cast no shadows as the sky was overcast. Instead the day just slowly lightened, from black to dark gray to a lighter shade of gray.

"Late night?" Steve asked.

Walt looked up. "Yeah a bit. I ran into Payne's crew last night at the bar down the street. The SAR techs and flight engineers kind of lead me astray, I guess. Didn't get in until almost one. I'm just tired, that's all."

"Payne's crew?" Steve asked, perplexed.

"Payne wasn't with them, they were just out beating up the town. I knocked on your door before I went out around nine, didn't see you around the bars either."

"It's too late in this game for bar-hopping nights for old codgers like me. I need health nights these days. I was probably out for a walk when when you knocked. I got up early and ran four miles this morning, too," Steve replied, circumspectly. "You should give this healthy lifestyle a

try sometime.”

Walt yawned. “Yeah you are right, I should. Man I don't know how many bars we were in last night, too many for a school night. I don't drink and I still feel pooped.” The waitress brought Steve an order of toast and coffee and stopped to take Walt's order.

“Did you check the weather?” Steve asked.

“Not yet, it looks cloudy outside though.”

Steve studied Walt. “Are you going to make it though today?”

“Oh, I'll be fine, just need some coffee in me,” Walt assured him.

Steve took a sip of his coffee and lifted up his newspaper. He was reading the sports summaries.

Walt interrupted him, reading from the front page. “Hey I see that Marc Garneau is going up today on the Challenger. Man, that is a job I should apply for!”

Steve looked at him. “No way, you are in the wrong service, space flights are only for navy guys.” Brenda Fineworth and Tim O'Brien entered the coffee shop together and sat at the small table next to Steve and Walt. As usual Brenda said nothing more to Steve than a bright 'good morning'. Steve gave her a short, non-committal reply and went back to reading his paper.

He thought, *it is a drag but it has to be that way and she knows it too. What a game.*

Friday 05 October 1984

0835 hours

Sgt Dave Szerzy was giving his weather briefing to the assembled crews. Lt Gary O'Dale was there for the Twin Huey crew, but Majors Knowles and Payne had both just sent their navigators. Szerzy expected cloud over much of the search region, particularly the interior. It would be overcast, but the ceilings were forecast to be mostly above 10,000 feet, so it wouldn't affect searching, except in the highest ground, although the light would be flat, which would make the spotters' jobs harder. When he was done there were no questions.

George Withers, the reporter for the Prince George Citizen quietly entered the trailer as Szerzy was summing up. He closed the door silently and moved over to the back of the room where Steve was standing watching the proceedings. Steve gave him a quick nod and they both stood together listening.

Walt was on next. He looked organized and relatively alert now,

Steve noted. *Coffee must have done its thing*, he thought to himself. Walt gave a wide overview of the search areas to be covered, mostly to let the crews know where the other aircraft would be searching near them. He pointed out the bases in use, Prince George, Williams Lake, Pemberton and Comox and quickly pointed out the areas for the morning and afternoon for each aircraft. He handed detailed sheets to the crew representatives. Still no questions.

Usually that was it for the morning briefing as they aimed to get it done as quickly as possible, get the aircraft in the air and on their way. Steve decided to say a few words to the crews. He strode to the front of the room and looked down on the seated crew members, all very young faces.

"Today is Friday and we have been at this search now for twelve days. I know crews are flying a lot and getting tired. Flying search lines is a tough job, but we have people who are counting on us to get the job done. And remember let's be careful out there."

The Buff and Herc navigators just looked at each other, suppressing a laugh. They gathered up their notes and maps and left the trailer.

Gary O'Dale approached Steve, looked in the direction of the door that the two navs had just departed through. "Well sir, I appreciated your thought there. I intend to get my crew home in one piece." Then he left too.

Withers was next in line to speak to Steve. "Good morning George, good to see you. We haven't had much press coverage around here lately. To what do we owe this early morning visit?"

"That is true," George started out. "There hasn't been a lot to write about here really, at least since the last crash. I'm working on a sort of summary piece on the whole search since I hear it may wrap up soon."

They were the last people left in the briefing room, except for Walt, who was studying Steve's handling of the press. "It'll wrap up next week probably," Steve said, leading him over to the master map on the wall. "That is unless we carry out a rescue sooner than that."

"Any reason to think that may be the case at this point?" George asked.

"Boundless optimism?" Steve tried.

Withers chuckled. "I guess you need that in this SAR game," he concluded, scribbling on his note pad. "As I was mentioning I am going to do a sort of longer piece, probably for next Saturday's edition and cover a whole bunch of different aspects to the story, including the missing aircraft, the people, the searchers and their aircraft and the economic and human cost of the search."

“...and benefits,” Steve added.

“How is that?” Withers said, looking up from his pad.

“The economic benefits that have come into the community from the search.”

Withers paused in thought. “Okay, I hadn't considered that angle to it.” He wrote it down. “How much money does a search like this bring to a place like Prince George?”

“Consider all the hotel nights, especially in this shitty economy, the meals eaten, rental cars, aviation fuel, not to mention souvenirs and that sort of stuff. I can get you some figures,” Steve explained.

“That sounds like a lot of money being poured in here,” Withers admitted.

“Not just here, either, but Williams Lake and Pemberton, too. We even had an aircraft in Lillooet for a bit.”

“That does sound like a lot of hotels and restaurants,” Withers calculated, writing quickly. “I'll bet the bars do well from the search as well.”

“Oh probably, I would imagine,” Steve said, realizing that might not be a good part of the story to get out, “but the biggest money is probably in fuel sales.”

“Yeah I saw the big transport planes. I'll bet they burn lots of gas flying all day,” Withers said. Outside on the ramp the Herc was just starting up, its Allison T56 engines whining to life. “I'll have to go and see Mac at the Shell here at the airport and get his take on it. Maybe I'll title that segment 'Save Your Community – Get Lost'. Any other aspects to this story that I'm missing?”

Steve considered what he hadn't mentioned: arrests for fighting, SAR romances, marriage break-ups back home, kids in the hospital, conflicts and political intrigue, the inquiries ongoing. “I think that just about covers it,” he pronounced.

“Well that is good,” Withers said. “My editor won't give me space for more than that. It always gets cut down anyway. They sell an extra furniture store ad and half my story gets axed. That's journalistic integrity for you.”

“Must be frustrating?” Steve asked, trying to sound sympathetic.

“Naw, it would be if I was freelancing – they only get paid for what gets printed. I'm on salary, so I don't complain when stuff gets cut. Makes no difference to me how much filler they put between the ads,” George said. “You mentioned something about some dollar figures?”

Steve asked Brenda to come out to the briefing area. He introduced

George to her.

"We met the last time you were here," she said, shaking his hand again.

"Mr Withers is looking for some numbers on how much money we have been putting into the community here," Steve explained.

Brenda frowned seriously. "Even if we could release that information the bills aren't close to in yet," she said.

"Well then just give him some rough estimates, okay?" Steve said, annoyed.

"Will do, rough estimates," she agreed and lead Withers over to her desk, where she pulled a chair up for him.

Outside on the ramp the aircraft were departing, O'Dale's Twin Huey was the first off, followed by Payne's Buff and finally the lumbering Hercules made its way to runway 24, took-off and climbed out to the west.

Friday 05 October 1984

1022 hours

Steve had been wondering when he would hear from Major Blair and the collateral board. Being Friday he thought they would want to get home to Winnipeg and not spend the weekend in Prince George if it could be avoided. Steve was not going to call them however, *the less contact, the better*, he reasoned. And then, mid-morning, Major Blair walked into the headquarters trailer, as always wearing his dress uniform.

Steve and Walt had been conferring over the master map, looking at the gradually diminishing numbers of areas to be re-searched as indicated by hashed lines on Walt's overlay-of-the-day. When Blair entered the trailer Walt decided that would be a good opportunity to update the searchmaster's logbook and headed for his table in the office area.

"Good morning major," Steve said, noncommittally.

"Good morning," Blair looked around the trailer. He had been there before, but he regarded it as if seeing it for the first time. "You certainly don't have opulent quarters here, do you?"

"It's adequate, sir," Steve said, "and it saves the taxpayers some money. Besides that, the location is perfect for our operations here."

Blair changed the subject. "I just wanted to let you know that Major Burton and I are done our work here in town and will be leaving this afternoon. We won't need to interrupt your work to talk with anymore of your staff."

"Well I hope you got all the information you needed?" Steve said.

"Let's just say that I think we got all that is available."

"So what happens next?" Steve tried.

"On Monday we sit down and start writing our report," Blair explained. "I suspect that will be done in a week or so. Once approved by AirCom, it goes to Commander Air Transport Group and on up from there. Whether they act on it is not my say so."

Steve just nodded carefully. He wanted to ask Blair what he would be recommending but he wasn't likely to even give a hint. "So I'm guessing that any action from your report will be taken by year end?"

"That is not my part to say," Blair said. "I am just writing the report."

Steve thanked him for stopping by and saw him to the door. "I am just writing the report," Steve mumbled to himself, after the door had closed. "More like filling in squares with 'Xs'." He went into the office area and poured himself another cup of coffee. Brenda was working on a pile of invoices, Tim was talking to the aircraft as they made their 30 minute checks and Sgt Szerzy was out of the office.

"Bad news?" Walt asked, looking up from writing in the logbook.

Steve chortled. "I would say not, overall. They are done and going home to write their report and toss it into the great HQ paper shredder. We'll see if anything comes out the other end."

"You don't sound worried," Walt offered.

Steve sipped his coffee. "I'm not," he said.

Friday 05 October 1984

1144 hours

"Buffalo inbound," Tim O'Brien said in general to the office.

"Payne's?" Steve asked.

"No sir, the other one, Captain Lancemeir's," O'Brien replied.

Walt looked up. "Airshow time!" he said.

Steve sighed audibly. "Where is he?"

"Just entering the zone from the west," O'Brien responded.

The whole crew poured out of the trailer and into the flat light of the cloudy and cool day.

"I don't see him." Brenda noted, looking. O'Brien pointed out the slim smoke trail in the western sky to her. Everyone peered that direction. The Buffalo appeared to be going flat-out, its nose in the slightly low attitude that the CC-115 takes on at high speed.

"I guess he'll take it downwind for 24, although he looks kind of

tight there,” Walt said, watching his progress.

Cpl O'Brien had put the tower frequency, 118.3 MHz, on the outside speaker. “Rescue 462, Tower, wind 280 at 10, cleared downwind left for 24, call turning final,” the tower controller said, nonchalantly.

“Rescue 462 request a modified circuit to 19, if available.” The voice was not Lance's, but his co-pilot, meaning that Lance was probably doing the flying and the co-pilot was handling the radios. Runway 19 was the short runway, only 3770 feet long and was quite crosswind on this day.

“Rescue 462, approved the modified circuit to 19. Be advised that that runway is only 75 feet wide. Wind 280 at 10 to 12.”

“Roger the width, we are looking for some practice on narrow runways and crosswinds.”

“Tower, roger, your discretion, cleared the full stop runway 19.”

“Rescue 462, check cleared, our runway.”

Walt looked at Steve, who just shrugged. The Buffalo tore directly overhead the ramp, its engines came back to idle and the nose came up quickly to slow it down. Lance levered the yellow transport around the 230 degree left turn to the runway and the flaps and landing gear all came down at the same time. Finally he completed the tight, level turn onto final approach, the flaps fully down, but with the aircraft very high for its position relative to the runway. From that position the nose was briskly lowered and the Buffalo descended like an elevator. From the ramp where the headquarters crew were standing it looked like a vertical drop, but in slow motion.

As the aircraft came down Lance twisted the right wing down into an into-wind side slip. The round-out was rapid and the right main gear contacted the runway surface, but the aircraft didn't bounce, it just held there for a second, rolling on one dual main gear and then the left main touched down and last the nose wheel, in quick succession. The props were run into beta range, reversed and the Buff shuddered to a stop in about three of its own lengths, its nose lowered with the braking action.

The Buff's ramp was lowered and three figures, two of them in orange, sat on the ramp, their legs hanging over the end. The aircraft taxied the rest of runway 19 and then down taxiway Charlie to the apron, completed its engine cool down and shut down.

“I hope Sylvia is okay,” Brenda said with some concern. Steve gave her a quizzical look. “Well that was a pretty 'barfy' looking landing, if you ask me,” she explained.

Payne's Buffalo was also entering the circuit now, only for a landing on the longer and wider runway 24. His circuit was totally

different, wide and long with a conventional, shallow final approach.

While his crew refueled the plane Lance walked up to the trailer, with Sylvia in tow. "I brought your package," Lance said to Steve, indicating the finance clerk walking with him.

Brenda gave Sylvia a hug.

Steve thought, *how is it that socially women can just get away with that sort of behaviour? It doesn't seem completely fair.* He elected to punch Lance on the shoulder playfully. "Well thanks for the delivery, now we can get all our bills paid."

"You okay?" Brenda asked her friend.

"Oh yeah," she assured her. "Just a little wobbly really from the flight."

"You mean from the landing?" Brenda asked her.

"Actually that part was fun. I did spotting, too," she said with a big smile. "I could just use some lunch, that's all."

Lance chimed in, "Actually, if you lend me your van I can take my crew into town for lunch and get back in the air pronto."

Steve thought about it, twisting his face, until Brenda chimed in. "Let me and Sylvia take the car and we'll pick up some lunch for the HQ crew."

Steve conceded. "Okay, just go and do it then."

Brenda tossed Lance the van keys and took the rental car keys from Steve. She and Sylvia dashed off to the parking lot, the latter seeming to get her land-legs back pretty quickly, Steve noted.

Lance eyed the second Buffalo pulling up beside his on the ramp and starting its engine cool-down. The fuel truck backed away from his own aircraft, its job done and waited for the other Buff to shut down. "Hmmm, I think I had better take your van and get my crew to lunch. Payne might be a pain." Steve indicated agreement.

"If you time it right you could be back here and airborne and miss him again after lunch, too," Steve mused.

"Good plan, boss," Lance said, tossing the keys for the van in the air, catching them, punching Steve on the shoulder harder than he had been punched and departing to collect his crew. He left his Buffalo with the ramp down, not the normal way to leave it parked on an airport apron.

Steve sat on the picnic table and watched the action. Lance's crew were gone into town before Payne's crew had started refueling. As earlier, the flight engineer pulled out his ladder and had the left engine cowling opened up. Major Payne appeared and stopped to confer with him before heading straight for Steve at the picnic bench.

"Don't you have anything better to do than warm that bench?"

Payne growled as he came within earshot.

"Just supervising my search operation, sir," he said.

"Sure," Payne shot back, looking around. "Where is Lancemeir?"

"I lent his crew my van, so they could get some lunch and get back on the search," Steve said casually.

"I figured he was still here, he left his aircraft wide open," Payne jerked his thumb towards the open ramp. "I heard him on the radio with his crosswind, narrow field landing practice bullshit," Payne said. "That kind of horseshit screwing around is not on during a search. Did you tell him that?"

"I must have missed seeing him arrive," Steve responded. "Too much paperwork to do, you know? I believe that he said he left the ramp down to air out the plane. We're keeping an eye on it for him."

"Bullshit, McBain, you are running a far too undisciplined operation here. You have already had one crash."

Steve considered that accusation and took a breath. "Well let's see if the collateral board have me charged for that one."

"Before Lance goes flying again this afternoon I want you to firmly debrief him on that landing – no more screwing around, understood?" Payne said firmly, looking directly at Steve.

"No can do, sir," Steve said carefully. "My job is running this search, Lance doesn't work for me. You'll have to take this complaint up with the Det Commander, instead."

Payne threw his gloves on the ground. "Look, Captain, if you set a better example by doing your job, then the other people on this operation would probably follow suit."

"Sir, if you have a problem with my performance here I would suggest that you take it up with my boss. I am presently on detachment and working for the Commander of RCC Victoria. I can get you his phone number if you like and lend you a telephone as well."

Payne thought about it for a minute, picked up his gloves, spat on the ramp and walked back to his Buffalo. The refueling was complete and the jet fuel bowser was returning to park in front of Mac's office at the hangar.

Walt sat down beside Steve at the picnic table. "What was that all about?"

"Oh, Payne didn't like Lance's arrival," Steve explained.

"He wasn't even here," Walt pointed out.

"He heard it on the radio," Steve added.

“And, the result is?” Walt asked.

“I won again. It's like shooting fish in a barrel with him. I think he should have saved his money going to Queen's and gone to the School of Hard Knocks, like I did. He might have turned out smarter.”

“Don't you think that this little war might get, uh, testy, when we all get home?”

Steve considered the comment, noticing that Brenda and Sylvia had returned with a box of subs and were walking across the ramp towards the trailer.

“Well,” he started, thinking about it carefully, “fuck him, then.”

Friday 05 October 1984

1727 hours

The long day was nearly at an end and both Steve and Walt were taking telephone debriefing reports from the crews that had landed back in Comox, Williams Lake and Pemberton. The Prince George-based Twin Huey crew had reported in person and left for town already. The PG-based Buffalos were the last down, even after the Herc was parked and secured for the night.

“Buffalos inbound,” Cpl O'Brien said to the office.

Walt peered out the dirty window of the trailer from where he was sitting. “Oh, this is different,” he said with interest.

“What's that?” Steve asked, looking up from going over the map overlays for the next day.

“I'll show you,” Walt said, getting up from his chair at the table and heading outside. In response to Brenda's quizzical look, Steve shrugged and followed Walt. The rest of the HQ staff followed suit.

Outside Walt was looking west and pointed out two sets of landing lights. The two Buffalos were returning to Prince George in parade formation. They passed to the south of the airport and made a gentle turn to position themselves over the threshold of runway 24. Lead commenced a level break maneuver followed by the second Buff ten seconds later. Spaced out now they completed their landings on runway 24 in sequence, the first neatly clearing runway 24 at the runway 01 cut-off before the second touched down. Then they taxied single file to the ramp, parked, completed their cool downs and then shut down together, their props winding down to stop almost at the same time. The search headquarters crew watched the show in silence.

Steve turned to Walt, “analysis, Mr Spock?”

"I think someone kissed and made up," Walt tried.

"I think you might be right. I guess we'll find out when they both come to debrief."

The HQ staff all returned to their desks to finish up their work for the day. Once the engines were shut down, the fuel truck inched its way to the first Buffalo.

Steve was expecting to see both Payne and Lancemeir come to the trailer to file their reports of search areas covered, but they both sent their navigators instead, again. Walt took their reports and plotted the data on the maps, which were starting to look quite complete.

Both of the young navigators were in a hurry to get going off to dinner, but Steve stopped them before they made it to the door.

"That was quite an airshow coming in here," Steve said to them.

One navigator just shrugged while the other one said, "I guess so. We joined up about 50 DME out, I guess they needed the formation practice." Steve let them go and they walked quickly off to find their crews and dinner.

"Did you get anything?" Walt asked.

"No, but apparently peace reigns, which is good enough for me today. If you're done let's get this trailer locked up and go and eat."

As usual the crew were quick to stack up their paperwork, shut down their radios, put away their maps and get ready to depart on this Friday night. Steve stayed at the door, key in hand to lock up. Sylvia was the first one out, followed by Sgt Szerzy, Cpl O'Brien, Walt and Brenda last. Steve turned out the lights and locked the door. With the knot of staff dissipated across the tarmac Steve and Brenda followed the last of them.

"Tonight?" he asked cryptically.

"Not a chance," she responded with a quick smile.

"Okay, then, let me know."

"Oh I will, I will," she said. "You'll be the second person to know."

Friday 05 October 1984

2220 hours

After dinner with the HQ crew at a local spaghetti restaurant Steve had returned to his room alone to watch TV and finish up his paperwork. He realized that George von Richthofen had not put in an appearance that day.

Perhaps he got busy doing something, Steve thought to himself. Of

course it was pretty cloudy to be doing photography.

It seemed odd, after the last number of days, to be spending an evening alone instead of having sex with Brenda. *I could probably use the break, anyway*, he rationalized. *She wears me out most of the time.*

The Canadian TV news coverage was all about the ongoing Space Shuttle mission. The *Challenger* was in orbit and Marc Garneau was the darling of the Canadian media. Steve turned the channel to CNN instead. They had only brief coverage of what was, to the Americans, a fairly routine Space Shuttle mission, STS-41-G. The *Challenger* had been flying for over a year and half and the first shuttle orbital flight had been three and a half years ago. It was old news and they only got passing notice these days. There was a longer news segment on Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer who yesterday had become the first Australians to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Steve watched that with some interest. *Now that's a real accomplishment*, he thought.

Snapping off the TV Steve listened to the sounds of the hotel, the running of water and footsteps out in the hallway. For some reason he found himself thinking about his son Patrick in Burnaby, where he was attending Simon Fraser University. He really ought to call him, he decided. Steve found the number in his notebook and dialed it. At the other end the phone just rang. There was no answer from Patrick or his roommates and no answering machine either, as he knew there wouldn't be.

Maybe I should buy him an answering machine for his birthday? Steve wondered. He looked at his watch. *Kind of silly to expect a 20 year old university student to be in at 2230 hours on a Friday night, I guess.*

A quiet evening had become a rarity on this search and Steve decided he liked the break from the search itself, his wife's odd behaviour, bar-hopping, the noise and demands, even the sex with Brenda. *Maybe I just need a real break from everything?*

He got off the bed and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. *A break is coming*, he thought, *I just have to hang on until the end of the year and I can finally retire. I really just have to avoid all the bullshit until then. How hard can that be?*

He turned off the lights, got into bed and thought about it. *Yup I will start off the New Year with a celebratory game of golf and that's just the beginning. After that I am going to do stuff for me. No more dragging though the valleys and mountain tops of BC looking for little lost pilots, hunters and snowmobilers. No more people who need rescuing. The young bucks, like Walt, can take up that torch instead of me. And they can deal with the shits like Payne, too. It will all be someone else's problem. They*

can deal with the relatives, as well, the Mrs MacKinstry of the world and their whining demands, psychics, corporate jets and lapdogs.

That last thought made Steve smile, lying there in the dark of his hotel room. *Ah, Mrs MacKinstry, I wonder how things are going for her? Did her daughter's wedding happen on schedule? Was the groom a no-show? Did they have to call SAR to find him? Who would want someone like her for a mother-in-law, anyway? Too many questions.* He rolled over on his side. *Not me that is for sure. I just hope she doesn't come back here before we can get this show wrapped up. That would be almost as good as being retired! Even better, I'll take both – retired, no Mrs MacKinstry and no more fake psychics!*

Steve drifted into sleep, dreaming of golf greens on sunny days in Comox. Every other player on the course seemed to be Mrs MacKinstry, but his long drives left them all behind, until he strode after his ball and stood all alone on a long, smooth and dry fairway under a clear, blue sky.

He awoke after midnight. The bedside LED clock said 12:47. The hotel was dead quiet except for an odd noise. He got up and went to the bathroom, went back to bed and lay awake listening to the noise. At first it was a rhythmic bumping, that make little sense alone. Then he heard a woman gasping for breath and realized he was listening to someone having sex in the adjacent room, the bed smacking into the wall. His first through was that he was listening to Brenda and Sylvia, but then he considered, their rooms were far from his. Besides, this didn't sound like two women, but he couldn't be sure. Would they be gentler with each other than that? Probably.

He considered banging on the wall, but which wall? Maybe it was the ceiling. With these concrete hotels you could never really be sure where the sounds were coming from.

There was one last gasp and a muffled moan that went on for longer than he thought it could and then just silence. *Well, problem solved,* he thought. Steve slipped back into unconsciousness and didn't awake again until the morning had come.

Saturday 06 October 1984

0523 hours

Fifteen year old Toby Steele opened the front door of his house and crept out into the darkness, closing the door quietly so as not to wake up the other members of his family. Looking north and south on Harper Street the neighbourhood was quiet, still and very dark. No cars moved, the sky

appeared cloudy and no stars could be seen. The streetlights created pools of amber light on the sidewalks and cast the houses of the block in shadows that made the night seem even darker than it really was. Toby had lived in this Nechako Flats neighbourhood west of downtown Prince George all his life.

He sat on the front steps of his house as he had done every day since late spring at this time of day and stifled a yawn. It was hard work getting up this early in the morning. The concrete front steps were cold to sit on and he shifted to put his weight on the doormat instead of the bare cement. He noticed that the front lawn of his family home was thick with frost, as were the lawns of the other surrounding houses. Similarly the house roofs were white, but the road and the sidewalks seemed to be free of it.

The cold air was waking him up quickly and, without gloves, his fingers were getting cold. He went to work, using his Swiss Army knife to cut the yellow plastic straps that held the bundle of fifty papers that had been left on the front steps. As much as he hated getting up that early the papers were proof that his boss had been up even earlier to drop the bundle on his doorstep, as well as the doorsteps of the other paperboys in the western part of the city. With the strapping cut, he began folding the papers into thirds, tucking the open ends of the sheets into the pocket that the fold made so that the individual papers would stay together and could be tossed onto his customer's doorsteps. Sometimes he threw them from a greater distance than would qualify as a "toss".

Toby was proud of his work – he had never had a single complaint from his fifty customers about where the papers were found. If he missed the steps, he would dutifully go and retrieve it from the bushes and place it carefully where it should be. This was a Saturday morning and he knew that his customers would be mostly not going to work, they would retrieve their morning copy of *The Citizen* from the front step in their pajamas and often bare feet. They would be unhappy if they had to step outside and look for it, he knew.

The Citizen was a thin paper compared to the *Vancouver Sun* or the other big city papers. Carrying fifty of them wasn't too big a chore, he could manage it, although the route up and down Harper, over on Gillett and a couple of houses on Freeman Street got easier as the papers were delivered and the weight was progressively reduced.

With all the papers folded and stuffed into his carrier bag, Toby set off south on Harper. With more than six months at the job he knew which houses got papers by heart and didn't need to consult his list, although he

carried it anyway, just in case.

The sidewalks weren't slippery, but some of the front walks were under his running shoes and he slid a bit on the first house's paving stones, three doors down from his own. His hands were blackened from the newsprint and without gloves on the sub-zero morning his fingers were getting numb. After the next house was a gap of five houses who didn't have delivery and after tossing the paper onto the porch steps of the last house before the gap, he jammed his hands quickly into the pockets of his jeans to warm them up before the next house came up.

It was very clear to Toby that winter was coming on and he thought about the paper delivery job in that light. It had been easy in the spring and summer, clear and bright mornings in May and June, except when it rained. Overall the job was a drag, hard work and very early mornings. It wasn't that bad in the warm months, but he thought about folding and delivering papers when it was -20C. Prince George could get that cold in January. The thought made him shiver. The problem was that he liked the regular paycheques and he was making as much money as any of his friends were babysitting. The best part was also the worst part – the early morning aspect of the job made getting up difficult, but it left his evenings free, unlike babysitting. Besides babysitting was for girls.

He continued on down the cold dark street, ducking up walks to get just close enough to surely toss the paper onto the front step. At the McGillvery house he saw a familiar sight, the orange tabby cat was sitting on the step looking longingly at the front door, waiting to be let in from his night out. Toby went to toss the paper from thirty feet away, but seeing the cat, thought better of it. The cat watched him approach and stood up looking from Toby to the door and back again. He dropped the folded paper beside the cat and gave the cat a pet on the head as he did most mornings.

“Good morning Rusty,” he said. He had no idea what the cat's name was, but the orange cat didn't seem to care what he was called and arched into the pet he received. The cat felt cool to the touch. The cat said “Mrrow,” and looked at the door again.

“Sorry guy, you'll have to wait,” Toby said to the cat. “I can't let you in.” As Toby retreated back down the walk the cat sat down, licked his paw and wiped the newsprint ink off the top of his head. The gesture looked like a salute to Toby as he looked back at the cat while turning the corner onto the sidewalk. He returned the cat salute and carried on his route.

It was almost an hour later that Jack McGillvery opened his front

door onto Harper Street, let the cat in and picked up his newspaper. Both the cat and the newspaper were cold. Jack McGillvery was 85 years old and lived alone, except for the cat.

The cat stopped to sniff the shoes in the entrance way by the hall closet.

“Come on Marmalade,” Jack said. “Breakfast time.” The cat trotted to its bowl in the kitchen already filled with crunchy-looking cat food.

Having made his coffee and a bowl of oatmeal, Jack sat at down at his kitchen table and opened the newspaper, undoing the careful fold that Toby had made. Predictably the headline proclaimed *First Canadian in Space*.

Down at the bottom of the front page was a teaser:

Search Winds Down This Week

The biggest search flown out of the city in many years will end this week, without finding the missing aircraft they were looking for. The Citizen's George Withers brings you the whole story, where they searched, who they were looking for, who was involved and what it has meant to Prince George. The losers will be the relatives of the missing, the winners may well be the city merchants who cleaned up – Next Saturday.

Saturday 06 October 1984

0932 hours

Steve had just hung up the phone from talking to the Commander of RCC Victoria when George von Richthofen walked in the door of the trailer, carrying a portfolio case.

“You're here early, today.” Steve said.

“Is this a bad time?” George asked.

“Not at all, the planes are in the air and the morning's reports are all filed. You want some coffee?”

“No thank you, I am fine really,” George said hesitatingly.

“I didn't see you yesterday, were you out doing some more photography?” Steve asked.

“It wasn't the best day for that, with the cloudiness,” George explained. “Of course today is no better. It looks like it will be overcast all day.”

Tomorrow looks better,” Steve offered. “We should be back into the sunshine for a couple more days, I think.”

“Well I think I have all the photos I need, really, anyway. They will

keep me busy painting for several years, based on what I have seen here. Canada is a wonderful place for landscape painters.” He removed a large sheet of paper from his portfolio and handed it to Steve. “I made you a sketch,” he stated. The drawing showed the four military aircraft, the Herc, Twin Huey and two Buffalos parked on the ramp, with the trailer in the background. The drawing was done in pencil and showed a remarkable amount of detail.

“That is beautiful,” Steve was taken aback by the quality of the sketch. “What are you going to do with it?”

“No, that is a gift for you, for all you have done here for my family. You will be packing up soon and I thought you should have something from this search.”

“Hmm,” Steve agreed, “we don't have much else to show for the search really.” He studied the drawing. “You forgot to sign it!” he remarked and turned it around, putting it on the briefing room table. George pulled out his pencil and wrote his name carefully in the bottom right corner.

“No pseudonym?” Steve noted.

“Not this time. All yours,” George said, sliding it back over to Steve. “I am planning my departure, too. I was thinking that I should get back home soon. I don't think there will be any point in waiting until you have gone. You are really just putting the finishing touches on your search.”

“Well that is true,” Steve said. “We will be finished soon if nothing else intervenes, but it is possible that we may find the crash site in the last few days.”

George smiled, “Possible, yes, but unlikely, I think. It is close to the time for all of us to go and get on with our lives. I have booked my flight home for tomorrow. It takes a long time to get to Vienna from here.”

“Will you drop by again?” Steve asked.

“My flight leaves in the morning quite early. I have to drop my rental car back downtown in the morning and then catch a taxi to the airport. It probably won't be practical to come by again then. Besides I have to be there at nine o'clock, it would conflict with your morning briefings.”

Steve thought about it. “Well then, here is an idea: you need a ride to the airport, it would be my pleasure to give you a ride from town to the terminal.”

George looked doubtful. “I have to come this way anyway,” Steve added.

George protested, “You will miss your morning briefing.”

“That is why I have an assistant,” Steve pointed out. “Walt can easily handle the show tomorrow.”

“All right, then, since you are insisting,” George conceded. They arranged to meet for breakfast the next morning at George's hotel.

When the Austrian had gone, Steve motioned Walt away from his table where he was re-plotting his trace for the next day and into the empty briefing room.

“I was talking to RCC this morning,” Steve started out. “We have to start thinking about the plan to reduce the search soon here. The most important thing is to make sure that we have documented that we have completed all the search areas. I don't want someone two years from now, when some hunter blunders over the crash site and the file gets pulled, to be able to say, 'oh look you missed searching that place'. So the records have to be really complete, the coverage has to be shown to be complete. I am going to leave that end of it to you to document on the maps, traces and in the logbook, but I will check it all over when we are done.”

Walt nodded. “No problem, can do.”

Steve continued, “The reason we are starting now is that the paperwork will take awhile. Back home we can take some time to write the final post-op reports and all that, but the maps and the logbook will have to be complete when we get home. Now, I was looking carefully at the weather and it is looking like Thursday next week is going to be pretty rotten. What are your estimates for how much time we need?”

Walt looked at the master map on the wall. “Well, I still think we'll be finished on Wednesday, maybe even at lunch time, the way things are going. I just hope we don't lose an aircraft down U/S or it will screw up my plans. I did look at the prog charts and I agree with you that later next week is looking less-than-ideal for flying weather. It looks like we can expect another low through here. Actually, I'm surprised we have had such good weather this week.”

“Yeah I figure we have been on borrowed time, too. We'll do whatever it takes to get the last 'X' in place, even if we have to stay longer,” Steve said thoughtfully.

“What else will need doing?” Walt asked.

“Oh, the usual checklist items, we should probably have a look at them and make sure it all gets done.” Steve nodded towards the desk and said, “Grab the checklist book will you?” Walt retrieved the binder from the office area and flipped to the page for shutting down the search:

10. SHUT DOWN OPERATIONS — load up SM KIT

- a. Complete all paperwork, final SITREP to be completed at home base.
- b. Consider inserting an ad in the local paper(s) thanking all parties concerned for their assistance, dedication, etc...
- c. Return all offices to a better than received condition (DET CMDR can contract for minor repairs, replacements, painting...)

Note: Search Reduction

Personally brief the NOK and media as to reason for the reduction, it is important they understand the reason for the reduction with the emphasis that “all that can reasonably be done ... has been done”.

“Hey, I like that idea,” Walt exclaimed. “We should buy an ad in the paper. Maybe we should talk to George Withers about that?”

Steve laughed, “Man after all the money we've pumped into this little town they should buy an ad in the Totem Times thanking us!” referring to the CFB Comox paper. “Or better yet, they should buy us a case of beer as a thanks.” He shook his head and smiled quietly. “Yeah, what the hell, go ahead and organize it, but not before the Thursday edition and don't buy a full page for heaven's sake.”

“Okay, will do,” Walt said with a smile. “It'll be a break from doing maps and briefings.”

Steve scrutinized the list. “I think Mac can paint his own damn trailer, given the millions in fuel invoices we have processed. I think we will need to call a press conference and give one last statement on the shutdown. Let's organize that for Wednesday afternoon. The next-of-kin will be easy, George von Richthofen will be briefed by me before he goes, because I am taking him to the airport myself. Oh, by the way you can handle the a.m. briefing tomorrow on your own. I'll talk to the Italian embassy and I'll bet we hear from Mrs MacKinstry sooner rather than later anyway. I think that takes care of that. Maybe one of us should call Lorraine Schmidt, too. That will be fun. Since you talked to her last perhaps I'll make that call. Everyone can help pack the containers with all the kit and other junk and load it on the Buff to go home. We should start with a briefing to the HQ crew I guess. Let's do that Monday. I should probably give the CO a call then too.”

Walt made notes. It was all a matter of following the checklist.

Saturday 06 October 1984

1320 hours

"I'm thinking about taking a drive," Steve announced to the office, once lunch was finished. Today it had been pizza eaten in the briefing area. The weather had turned out to be as cloudy as forecast and, with a northwest breeze and cool temperatures, it hadn't been pleasant to sit outside.

"Where to?" Walt asked.

"I was thinking that it would be a good idea to visit the boys in Williams Lake about the time they get down," Steve explained.

"Problem?" Walt asked, with a note of concern.

"No, it is just that we are getting near the end of this little op here and I haven't even met the US Coast Guard crew in person yet, although I have talked to them over the phone enough. Then there is the 440 Squadron Twin Otter crew and the PEP Cessna 206 for that matter. I just didn't think it would look good sending them home without an official visit from SAR HQ."

"Wish I could go – sounds like fun," Walt added thoughtfully.

"Well I'd love to take you, but I need you to mind the store here," Steve responded.

"Yeah, I guessed that," Walt said ruefully. "When are you going?"

"Well it'll take 2.5 hours to get there and I ought to be there for 1630 to catch them when they all get down, so in about a half an hour I guess. If you talk to any of them on the radio or phone let them know I'll be down there. I'll probably stay for dinner and buy them all a beer or something. I don't expect to be back until ten or eleven."

"What do we do if something comes up while you are on the road?" Walt checked.

"Handle it," Steve retorted.

British Columbia Highway 97 is known as the Cariboo Highway, and between Prince George and Dawson Creek, it is called the John Hart Highway. It runs all the way from Watson Lake, Yukon in the north down through Fort St John and Dawson Creek, before it turns west and leaves the Peace River country to pass through Chetwynd and onto to Prince George. Continuing south it follows the Fraser River route to Williams Lake, 100 Mile House and Cache Creek, where it heads east to Kamloops and the Okanagan Valley. It ends in a run through the dry desert landscape and that valley's biggest towns, Vernon, Kelowna, Summerland, Penticton and Osoyoos, finally becoming a US State Highway south of the border at Oroville, Washington.

For most of its route Highway 97 is a leisurely road, rarely more than one lane in each direction with the occasional passing lane on the upslope of some of the hills to allow cars to get by the large trucks that ply its length. Compared to the more modern freeways found in some parts of Canada, Highway 97 is a slow road, snaking through many twists and turns, with slow speed zones through sleepy hamlets, most of which had been made even smaller by the economic recession of the previous few years.

The portion of the road that Steve set out south on from Prince George is two-lane blacktop and it meanders along the contours of the Fraser and its tributaries, the Nazko River, Baker Creek and Narcosli Creek. The highway passes through several whistle stops that appear clearly on the map, but are hard to discern as settlements on the road, before eventually passing through Quesnel on its way to Williams Lake.

There are a number of Indian reserves on the route starting near Quesnel, most with names such as Rich Bar IR number 4 or Dragon Lake IR number 3. The highway meets Williams Lake's Airport Road three miles north and east of the city itself which eliminates the need to drive through Williams Lake to get to the airport when approaching from the north, as Steve would do.

Leaving the Prince George airport, Steve guided the nondescript rental Malibu out of the airport parking lot and onto the Old Cariboo Highway. Three miles south of the airport it joined the newer section and became Highway 97 proper.

With the car's radio off Steve could hear just the noise of the wind and the tires on the road. He knew this trip wasn't really necessary, although it was fairly easy to justify. Mostly he wanted a chance to think and the five hours round trip on the road would give him that. The last few weeks had been hectic, very hectic, as all searches are, and he felt tired out from the constant requirement to interact with too many people, taking, listening, planning all the time. The sex breaks with Brenda were nice, he reasoned, but in a way it was just another commitment, not quite more work, but more talking anyway. Last night was a break from the sex and tonight would be, too. He knew he would be keen to get back to it. *Perhaps tomorrow night?* he thought.

That led him to thinking about Brenda's promised threesome. The more he considered it the more he really wasn't sure it was a good idea. *Too many people involved, too many chances of word getting out. I have enough problems at home without that leaking,* he reasoned. *Well, what the hell, if it happened that was okay, you have to live once in a while.* His indecision on the issue made him feel a bit uncomfortable. *Any guy would*

jump at this chance, right? he asked. Maybe it is just creeping old age? Nah, probably just feeling tired from this search – it has been pretty grueling.

He passed Red Rock and the bend in the highway near the Fraser River as it heads into Stoner. *Weird name for a town*, he thought. *Must get a lot of jokes about it.*

What about home? he considered. *What the hell was going on there anyway?* He looked at the evidence: it seemed that Linda had moved out, but where had she gone? She seemed to still be working at her job at Aitken's Insurance Agency, which meant she was staying somewhere in town. *Perhaps she just got lonely with me being away and went to stay with a girlfriend? No that didn't seem to add up with the lipstick message left on the mirror. She was angry about something, but what? It was impossible to say, could be anything. It was possible that she might just come home on her own, clean the mirror and not say anything about it. Well that would be best*, he decided, *hopefully that is what will happen.*

Then there was the question of who she had told. Definitely some people at her work, definitely Ginny. How about Patrick? No way of knowing there. Hard to find out, too. If I even get a hold of him how could I ask him about that? Perhaps he would just tell me? Hard to say overall. Way too many variables there in that whole situation.

Ginny said that she would write me a letter, perhaps that will clear things up? Maybe Linda will just be at home when I get there or maybe I can track her down and ask her? What should I do if I get home and she isn't there – do I go looking for her or not? Why go looking for a fight? Way too many questions and not enough information to figure anything out.

The highway sign said that this was the community of 'Woodpecker', but there was no sign of it, not a single building there. The gray overcast was completely featureless, but the first raindrops impacted the windshield and ran up the glass surface. *Odd*, thought Steve, *Sgt Szerzy promised us no precip from this system.* The rain started to fall a bit harder now, requiring him to turn on the wipers.

Thinking about Linda and home was no help, he decided. He turned, instead, to the problem of wrapping up the SAR. *Ah, just follow the checklists*, he thought. *I'm going to make Walt do most of the work, he needs the practice anyway, because I am going to be gone soon and he will get to play searchmaster for himself next time, instead of just assistant. I should write him a good recommendation*, Steve thought. *He has done a good job and deserves the credit. Besides if, after this SAR, he isn't ready*

to go it on his own, then he never will be.

Then he considered the job of writing 'nice memos' for all his staff, not to mention for the crews that had been borrowed for the SAR. *Well that should keep me busy until retirement, he estimated. I'll just sit in my office and write memos and letters until I collect my pension. After this last, long SAR, it will be a nice relaxed break, he thought.*

He drove on and the rain soon stopped. *Embedded TCU, he noted. It is unlikely that there will just be one of them out here. Probably find some more rain showers on the way.*

Traffic was light and the Malibu was stable and easy to drive, if a little dull. The road was flowing and curvaceous enough that Steve wished he had a small sports car to drive instead. He smiled at that thought. *Oh yeah, let's have a mid-life crisis to add to things next, he thought mockingly.*

Brenda. Brenda. Man she is a bit intoxicating, he admitted to himself. I am really enjoying doing her on this trip. Too bad I couldn't just trade Linda for her full time. If only there were a way to do that. Linda is okay, but just too moody to get along with consistently. Brenda just likes to fuck a lot and have fun, doesn't take life too seriously. Maybe I could get Brenda to give Brenda-lessons to Linda?

He chuckled. Brenda was younger and prettier, he didn't think Linda would be impressed with that idea. He tried to imagine what the first class would look like, but couldn't do it. He just shook his head laughing to himself.

He noted a dead porcupine at the side of the road. "You are road-kill, buddy," he said out loud to no one. The speedometer said 112 km/hr. Spots of rain appeared on the windshield again and he turned on the wipers and the radio. Cyndi Lauper was singing *All Through the Night* and the mood of that song seem to Steve to fit the personality of the largely empty highway on that gray day. He whistled the choruses quietly. Finally the distance yielded his destination up from the road.

Saturday 06 October 1984

1620 hours

The Williams Lake Airport is a smaller facility than the Prince George Airport, consisting of a single 7000 foot runway, some individual general aviation hangars and an air tanker base that is home to a forest fire fighting fleet in the summer months. When Steve pulled the rental car into the parking lot the airport was ghostly quiet and there was no sign of the

Pelican or Twin Otter.

Steve parked in the lot beside the terminal building, which offered a limited view of the ramp and the runway. From that vantage point he could see a Cessna upside-down in the infield. His first thought was that it was the PEP Cessna 206 they had flying on the search, but a closer look showed that it was a 172 and not the longer-body 206. *Must be a story there*, he thought.

The Pacific Western Airlines counter was closed and other than one cleaner mopping the floor, there was no one else around. He decided to check with the Transport Canada Flight Service Station, at least they would be able to tell him when the aircraft would be in, hopefully.

The Flight Service Station was at the front of the terminal building and offered a good view of the ramp and the single runway. As he walked in the door the single Flight Service Specialist on duty swiveled her chair away from his radios and looked at Steve in his military flying suit.

“What can I do for you?” the FSS operator asked, not getting up.

Steve looked the overweight middle aged woman over quickly and introduced himself. “I’m the searchmaster for SAR Schmidt. We’re working out of Prince George, but I’m down here to meet with the crews from my three aircraft based here.”

“Ah, well,” the FSS operator said. “I should thank you for all the traffic, it’s been keeping my movement total up this fall. Beats being bored, too.”

“Glad we could do some good, for someone,” Steve retorted.

“Oh, even though you haven’t found the plane yet, the search has done lots of good around here. I have a friend who owns a bar in town here and it’s been a real boon there.”

“Same in Prince George,” Steve added with a laugh. “We’re just the economic engine of the BC interior this fall. Any sign of my three aircraft?”

The specialist checked her flight plan strips. “I have that Coast Guard H-3 planned back here at 2345Z and the DHC-6 just behind him. The 206 is due in on the hour. Looks like it’ll be an air show.”

“Better not be,” Steve assured her. “What’s with the Cessna in the in-field? Odd place to park. We haven’t had a lot of wind lately”

“Not that much wind, anyway, not like when I used to be based in Lethbridge. We found it that way one morning,” the specialist explained. “It is locally based and was tied down the night before.” She gestured over towards the general aviation hangar row. “The RCMP think that it was an attempted theft. I think it was just a bunch of drunken teenagers out to

break stuff. Chronic problem in this town.”

“I guess it was different in Lethbridge, then?” Steve suggested.

“Not much, but at least we had a fence to keep them off the airport. These small towns need to find something better to keep the teenagers busy.”

“Maybe I could train them to be SAR spotters?” Steve offered.

“Well if it gets them out in the evenings drinking with the SAR crews then that would probably make it all worse,” the specialist said morosely. “How much longer is your search going to last?”

“Not much longer at all,” Steve admitted. “We almost have the whole thing covered, so later on this week, I think, as long as the weather holds.”

The specialist squinted at the prog charts hanging on her clip boards. “Well it looks good for the next few days, but might be a problem later on next week. That figures, I have Thursday and Friday off and was going to do some fishing.”

“It looks like you may have the fish all to yourself, then,” Steve tried.

“I guess I will,” she said glumly, fish don't seem to mind the rain, for some reason.”

The radio buzzed to life. “Williams Lake Radio, Rescue 8001, twenty back for landing.”

The specialist turned back to her radios. “Well looks like your air show is inbound.” She spoke into the microphone, “Rescue eight thousand and one, Williams Lake, wind is 270 at eight, altimeter 29.84, no reported traffic.”

“8001, planning the downwind for 29, will call mid-field.”

“Williams, roger.”

Steve gave the specialist a cursory salute, left her to her radios and headed back through the terminal to watch the Twin Otter land. Outside the wind was cool and the sky still quite gray, but there was no sign of any more rain in the area.

The de Havilland Canada Twin Otter is capable of very short STOL landings, but the 440 Squadron captain opted for a normal approach and touchdown on runway 29, rolling to the central taxiway. Once the twin PT-6 engines had cooled and were shut down, Steve could hear the sound of the US Coast Guard Pelican inbound as well. He had forgotten how unlike the Twin Hueys the HH-3F Pelican sounded. The Twin Huey, with its two main rotor blades thumped the air, whereas with five main rotor blades the HH-3F produced a rapid whirl instead. It sounded much more

like the Labradors he was used to, with their twin tandem rotors and a total of six blades.

Soon the HH-3F was on the ramp – just the 206 to wait for. Steve wandered out to meet the crews and have a look at their aircraft. The Coast Guard crew were friendly and after handshakes all around offered a tour of the large helicopter to their fellow helicopter pilot.

Before the crews were all done bunging up the aircraft and tying down rotors and props the PEP Cessna 206 had turned up as well. The 206, being locally based, was pushed into its own hangar down at the general aviation end. Steve and the three aircraft crews gathered in the terminal building and did a quick debrief. They had all covered their assigned areas and had encountered a few embedded rain showers in the afternoon but in the day's flat light had seen nothing worth mentioning.

Steve thought the crews looked tired. He suggested that they all head into town and eat dinner together and everyone quickly agreed. All sixteen crew members plus Steve left the terminal for the various rental cars in the parking lot and left for town.

Saturday 06 October 1984

2052 hours

Steve had to make several excuses to pull himself away from the party at the restaurant, but once on the two hour and a half drive back to Prince George he wished he had left earlier. His departure was further delayed by the need to get some gas in town. With the overcast conditions, no moonlight or starlight, the night was very dark and the rural highway offered no street lighting past the airport road. This was fall and there were deer about. At one point he had to slow down as he passed three whitetails standing on the shoulder, they remained totally still in his headlights, staring at the car, their heads turning to follow him as he passed. He found the deer around nervy. You were never sure they would stay still and not run onto the road right in front of you.

Further up the road was a dead deer, half on the shoulder, that some earlier motorist had hit.

Once on the open highway it wasn't too bad, he knew that he just had to slow down when he saw deer ahead and be prepared for them to jump out in front of him.

The dinner had gone well. The crews had obviously spent most evenings in the restaurants and bars together, but at least they were staying out of trouble. *You have to have some fun on this SAR*, he thought. Other

than the crew members asking how long the search would go on there wasn't much business talk over dinner. Mostly it was just old flying stories being told, the comradery of aircrew on time off in a strange town. He felt it was worth the trip, to meet the crews, listen to their stories and mostly take a break from the HQ routine. Steve kept his evening to two beer, mindful of the long drive back to PG.

With the radio on low Steve guided the car around the curves of the Cariboo Highway north-bound. *This really would have been more fun in a sports cars, or even in my 64 Impala SS, he thought, but at least if I hit something, it will only be a rental car that gets dinged.* He passed the sign for the Deep Creek Indian Reserve Number 2 and saw two native teen-aged girls hitchhiking at the side of the road. He didn't slow down. *Man that is madness, hitchhiking out here in the dark, especially for Indian girls to be doing that. Just trouble.*

The lights of a few farms on the east side of the road hove into view at Hawks and then he passed the intersection at the Williams Lake Cut Off Road and the turnoff to Soda Creek IR 1. Everything in that part of the country off the highway looked abandoned and desolate, a world of backwoods gravel roads. He drove on north in the direction of Quesnel where the highway slowed down and became a meandering network of city streets, finally spitting the car back onto the rural highway again at the north end.

What this town really needs more than anything, is a by-pass, Steve thought to himself of Quesnel, *of course then no one would stop here at all.*

He checked his watch – it was going to be after eleven when he got in. *Too late to go and see Brenda, he thought, besides she is probably 'occupied' this evening anyway.* He felt the key to her room, safely in his flight suit pocket and considered crashing that party. *Discretion is the better part of valour,* he decided. They may not be happy to see him. Besides that he was really feeling tired. A quiet night's sleep was looking very attractive after the evening's party atmosphere.

Steve considered his earlier thoughts on the trip down there, Brenda, Linda, the SAR itself, his kids. He decided to think about happier things, like retiring. *Now that really is a happy thought, no more getting up in the mornings, no more putting on a uniform and going to work, no more pagers and interrupted golf games. That would be worth it right there – to actually start a round and finish it without a call-out. No more missing airplanes and stupid relatives.*

He breathed deeply and could almost smell the dew on the greens

in the early morning air, sweet and cool, the way the day warmed up on the east coast of Vancouver Island as the sun made its way from the mountains to the straits, lunch with couple of beer in the club house and a leisurely afternoon at home, maybe sit in the back yard, go for a swim.

Some realities intruded. *Of course I have to find a place to live after Christmas, can't stay in the PMQ past the end of my leave, but at least the military will pay my move, I can just stand back and let the movers box it all, put it on the truck and unpack it at the other end.*

But where was the other end? Linda and he had always intended to stay in Courtenay-Comox and buy a house with what they had saved up from years of PMQ-dwelling. *Was that all shot? I just hope she is there when I get back. It is going to be stupid if I have to give her half of our savings, that'll totally pooch getting a house. Maybe I should just plan on her being back there and work on that basis. What else can I do? If she isn't there then I'll figure it all out later. In the meantime I am just going to think about golfing, maybe take a cruise this winter. That would be fun if Brenda could go instead of Linda – it would count as 'out of town', after all.*

The road slowed though the little community of Hixon and then snaked into a series of wide curves. It was getting late now and the traffic on the road was widely spaced, there were whole gaps of minutes with no lights from other vehicles visible.

Too bad this SAR looks like it will end up dry, with nothing to show for it other than some positive press on how we financially propped up a few interior towns. It would be so nice to end it this week with a rescue, or even a crash site find without a rescue, just to have an ending to the story. It wasn't likely, he knew. Most SARs were either quick rescues or slow methodical misses that found nothing. It was always the trapper or hiker that found the missing aircraft the next spring when the snow melted or the spring after that.

Maybe that is something I can do when I retire, he thought, find this missing plane, or a bunch of them that we never found, but where would I even start looking? We always cover all the ground carefully and then someone else finds them years later by accident, if they are ever found at all. I wish there was a better way to do that, some kind of metal detection or something.

Finally the lights of Prince George loomed on the horizon, reflecting from the overcast cloud layer. Steve opened the window a bit and could smell the pulp mill odor of the city, but the cool night air rushing into the window kept him awake for the last few miles. The city streets

were quiet and the last distance went quickly.

In his room the LED clock said it was 11:35. *Well past time for bed*, Steve thought. He brushed his teeth, hung up his flying suit and slept in his underwear.

Sunday 07 October 1984

0641 hours

The sun was just coming up and Steve was out running. Despite the late night, he had been unable to sleep past 0600 hours and so had decided to get up and go for a run. The almost five hours of driving the night before had left him feeling stiff and sore.

Must be just creeping old age, he thought when he got up in the morning. *I used to be able to drive a lot longer than that and not get stiff from all that sitting.*

He had put on his sweats and runners and gone out into the early morning air. The temperature was just below zero and the clouds seemed to be dissipating. It was dark when he left, but the sun was just creating a warm glow in the eastern sky as he was getting near the end of the three miles.

He was breathing heavily, but three miles seemed to be a good distance. It gave him a chance to get warmed up, shake the stiffness and yet finish in under half an hour, which meant it didn't go on too long. It didn't leave him feeling pooped for the rest of the morning, either.

In the last half mile the sky lightened perceptibly and Steve could see that the clouds were indeed scattering out. It would be a good search day today. He was nearing the hotel now, a few blocks away and picked up his pace on the hard concrete of the city sidewalk. When he had left the streets were very quiet, but now early morning commuters were about and he had to dodge a few that he passed from behind on the sidewalk. They seemed sleepy and lethargic, whereas he was feeling energized.

The search was officially two weeks old today, he considered. It was dragging, the crews were tired, but they were getting close to done. Many of the crews were also close to their maximum allowed flying times under their various home group regulations, despite some crew swaps to spread the flying time around. He needed to look at the maps with Walt and work out whether they needed to keep everyone until the bitter end or whether some could be sent home early. With bad weather on the way later in the week that would make sense to do, if possible. Today would be a planning day.

He breathed the cold air deeply as his feet propelled him over the concrete.

He thought about Brenda. *Am I missing her? Not sure*, he quickly concluded. *I sure miss the sex with her, that is worth the price of admission. Gotta to figure out when we will get together again, threesome or not. Time is running short, only a few days left until things get back to normal – whatever that looks like. Gotta get another piece of her, while there is still time to do it.* He tried not to consider the problem of the supply of sex. In a way it was better here than at home, here in Prince George things were mostly predictable, at least.

He stopped running after he crossed the last street before the hotel and walked the last block to cool down and get his breath back. An older lady with gray hair who was leaving the hotel held the front door open for him as he entered. He thanked her and felt pleased that he had decided to walk the last half block and wasn't panting when he got there.

Walking past the front desk to the elevators he punched the 'up' button and checked his watch. There was still enough time to shower, get dressed and get over to George's hotel for breakfast and then take the Austrian to the airport in time for his flight. Military precision planning.

Steve arrived at the George's hotel, two blocks away and located the coffee shop off the foyer quickly. These small city hotels were all the same and without surprises, he noted. The coffee shop looked the same as the one in the hotel where he was staying, same pastel paint scheme. He looked around, there were some military search crew members in one corner and Steve recognized them as the navigator and a couple of the SAR techs from Payne's Buffalo. He hadn't considered that this was the same hotel that Brenda had booked that crew into. No matter, he waved to them from the doorway and then saw George, who was sitting at a table alone, drinking coffee and reading the *Prince George Citizen*.

"Good morning, Herr Kapitän," George said, standing up and offering a handshake. German people always seemed to want to shake hands every time they met someone. The waitress was there quickly and Steve ordered coffee, toast and two eggs.

"Aren't you eating?" Steve asked as they sat down.

"Flying upsets my stomach," George admitted. "I'll just stick to the coffee for now."

"I hope it is better than what we have been serving you at the trailer, at least?"

"No, not really," George admitted. "I don't know if it is this whole nation or just this city of Prince George, but I haven't really had good

coffee since I got here. Back in my part of Austria we have lots of Turks living there and they make the coffee.”

“I guess if you are used to Turkish coffee than this is probably closer to dishwater.”

“Precisely,” George agreed. “You seem to be back in the news this week.” He indicated the teaser banner on the bottom of the front page of the paper, advertising the next weekend's promised SAR feature.

“Yeah we are famous, all right, gotta give the press something to write about. Have you talked to your mother or your brother's wife recently?” Steve asked.

“Well, yes, both my mother and Mathilde, early this morning,” he explained.

“I guess you have to account for the time difference?”

“Yes, I can't phone them in the evening here,” he admitted. “They seem happy that I came here to 'supervise' things. They seem to think my presence here has been useful in some unspecified way and they also seem happy that I am coming home today, although I don't think that either of them have really understood exactly what it means, that I am coming home without Edward with me.”

“Not really accepting that, are they?”

“It is more like they haven't really considered what it really means, I believe,” George detailed. “I don't want to have to explain it to them, to confront them with reality. It will take some time to sink in. Perhaps they are thinking that he will turn up shortly.”

The waitress brought Steve's toast and eggs. After the run he found himself quite hungry and he ate quickly.

“Do you want me to talk with them and explain where we are at?” Steve offered.

“No, I think it would be best if I do that once I get home,” George said. “Neither of them speaks much English to be honest, but even if they did, I think they may have to come to their own conclusions over time. My mother is working on the problem of the Schmidt brother. I think it makes her feel involved in the search somehow, although my own assessment is that whether she is able to locate him or not, it will not alter the outcome.”

Steve nodded in agreement, his mouth full.

“Still if even small gestures like that make her feel useful and give her hope, then I am not going to be the one to burst her bubble, so to speak,” George continued.

After breakfast they walked the two blocks back to pick up the car. George had two suitcases and so Steve carried one for him.

“This isn't very heavy,” Steve noted.

“I didn't bring very much to take back,” George said wistfully, “although I have many photographs to take home with me. This place will stay with me for a long time. I will probably paint some of the scenes here and that will keep me busy for much of the wintertime.”

The sun was higher now and bathed the downtown street in warm peach light. The frost was leaving the ground and clung only to the unlit corners in the shadows. They reached the parking lot. Steve tossed George's two bags into the back seat and they left for the short drive to the airport.

“What are you going to do when you get home?” Steve asked.

George smiled, thinking about it. “Well, first I will kiss my wife and then maybe have a good cup of coffee.”

“And then call your mother, I would guess,” Steve added.

“I suppose so. I will probably go and see her and also Mathilde, too. I took some photos of the search aircraft and had them developed here and so I will show those to them to assure them that everything was done. I am really not looking forward to that part, I have to tell you.”

“You are probably more looking forward to the coffee.” Steve stated.

George chuckled. “That I am,” he admitted. “I will not remember Canada as a place of good coffee.”

They were almost at the diminutive Prince George air terminal, where Ellis Road becomes Airport Road.

“You don't much miss your brother, do you?” Steve asked bluntly.

“My brother was what you would call a 'pain-in-the-tail'.” George's tone was very matter-of-fact. “I wouldn't wish him to come to any harm, because I wouldn't want to have to live with that guilt, but the fates decide these things, not me. I just am now the bearer of bad news, but not the author of it.”

Steve just nodded in understanding as he pulled up in front of the terminal. He held out his hand. “It has been good having you here, George. Please do call me anytime if you need any information or if I can do anything for you.”

George took his hand. “I will.” was all he said. He took his bags from the back seat and disappeared into the building.

Steve completed the circuit on the ring road and parked the car in the parking lot nearest the trailer. With George gone, the search was really feeling like it was winding down. As he locked up the car Steve noticed that the four locally based aircraft were all running, last minute

preparations and checks being done before another day's flying began. He had to shake his head as Payne's Buffalo taxied.

Is this really worth the effort at this point? he asked himself. *We're just going to find zip.* He put the thought aside and walked from the parking lot to the trailer to start the day.

Sunday 07 October 1984

0910 hours

The Herc started taxiing as Steve entered the trailer, the sound of it on the nearby ramp drowning out all thoughts outside. Once in the trailer he closed the door quickly which cut out most of the sound and rendered it a dull drone instead.

"Mrs MacKinstry called," Walt said as soon as he saw Steve enter the office area.

"Oh good," Steve responded. "I was afraid that she might have forgotten."

"Forgotten what?" Walt asked, sipping his coffee, perplexed.

"To call," Steve said flatly.

"Oh did she say she would call, then?"

"No, it was just a guess on my part. Actually, she said she wouldn't call," Steve said, laughing sarcastically. "Some people are just predictable. What did she say?"

"Just that she wanted to talk to you and find out what was going on."

"Didn't you brief her, then?" Steve asked.

"Yes, I did," Walt said with a note of exasperation in his voice. "But she wanted to talk to you anyway."

"Well that figures," Steve said. "Fine, I'll call her. Did she say anything else?"

"Just that she wanted to fly back up here again."

"Great, perfect," Steve said. "Let me see if I can talk her out of that. She'll slow down packing things up, perhaps dramatically so. I don't want a media zoo as we bug out of here, either."

Steve found the phone number and checked his watch. With the two hour time difference it would be after 1100 in Tulsa already. He sighed and dialed the number.

A female voice answered on the first ring. "Mrs MacKinstry's office," she said.

Steve explained who he was and why he was calling. "Ah yes,

Captain McBain, we were expecting to hear from you. I'll put you through," he was told. *That woman seems to have an entire staff just for herself*, he thought. It brought an odd sardonic smirk to his face thinking that he was holding up this self-important person all this time, by failing to find her husband.

"Loretta MacKinstry speaking," she said with exaggerated dignity.

"Captain McBain, here, from search headquarters."

"Oh yes, I am glad you called," she said. "Things have been so frightfully busy here up until now and so I haven't had time to find out what is going on there."

"I thought Captain Ashbury explained where we are at on the search?"

"Well he said you were making good progress, 96% and all that, but I need to know if you have actually found anything."

Steve inwardly sighed to himself. "Yes Mrs MacKinstry, we have found lots and lots of things, old aircraft we have been looking for for years, lost jeeps, all sorts of things, but there has been no sign of the missing Cessna 310, nor of your husband."

She sounded affronted. "Well there must be some news by now," she said, not making it a question.

"We are continuing to do everything that we can and soon we will have that task complete. It won't be long before we have looked everywhere that we can look, everywhere that they can be. Then we have to stop and go home."

"But if you haven't found him, then you haven't looked everywhere, have you?" she responded forcefully, "because he has to be out there somewhere."

Steve took a slow breath. "Mrs MacKinstry, on the last day you were here you flew along on our Hercules, you sat in the clear plastic SAR doors and had a look at the ground we are searching. Did you see anything except trees down there?"

"They were going too fast to see anything. They should do it all again and fly slower next time," she replied with more than a little desperation in her voice.

"I know that this is all very hard for you," he tried. "It is hard for us, too. You may not consider this but we do lots of these searches and every time we are looking for someone's loved ones. We know that and we care very much about that. That's why we all do what we do. We could be accountants or auto parts executives, but we do this job instead, because it is important to us. We are really quite good at it, but you've seen the

terrain. We often don't find the people we are looking for because the woods are deep and dark, down there. If the missing people can't signal us then the job is very difficult. I have searched areas extensively and had hunters walking in the woods find the aircraft a year later, by tripping over it. They said they didn't even see it while walking. British Columbia eats airplanes and they are hard to find here."

There was silence on the end of the phone line. Steve was afraid that he had pushed it too far.

"I want to come back out and see that everything is being done there," she said, slowly.

"Of course you can come back to Prince George, if you want to come back," Steve said, trying to inject a tone of caring into his words, "but, you won't see anything that you didn't see last time you were here. In the morning the search aircraft fleet go out and in the evening they come back. It is pretty quiet all day while they are away searching."

He could hear her thinking about it. "But maybe if I help them look better, more efficiently, or something." Her voice trailed off.

"He isn't here in Prince George, Mrs MacKinstry," Steve said quietly.

She sounded like she was sobbing. "I know that, I know that. But where is he...?"

Steve let the silence last a few moments. "We are going to be reducing the search a bit later on this week, probably on Wednesday. By that time we will have looked everywhere he could possibly be at least twice. Some areas will have been searched up to ten times. We will have checked every single sighting report, every hunch, anyone who even thinks that they might have seen something. There will be no where left to search."

"Reduce...?" was all she said.

"We never stop looking for any aircraft. We reduce the search by sending all the aircraft now looking, home, but the search remains open, aircraft transiting the area will keep an eye out and we may be able to schedule exercises in the area in the future, during which we will search again for it. A lot of these aircraft are eventually found, you know."

"But no one is found alive, not months, years later. Winter is coming."

Steve took another breath. "No, not usually alive," he admitted.

"I understand," she said with a sob and then gathered her breath. "I know that you have done your best looking for my Ben, I know you have. I just need him back here, that's all. I guess there is no point in coming back,

then, I would just be in the way.”

Steve considered the conversation. “How was your daughter's wedding?”

“Oh, it was splendid, really it was,” Loretta MacKinstry said, a tremble in her voice. “The sun shone, the bride looked radiant.” She pronounced the word as if it were three syllables. “Even the groom turned up.” She chuckled ironically. “But it really had this sad pall hanging over it, the empty place at the table.”

“I guess it would have,” Steve admitted. “Still I'm glad to hear that it went well and that the rain held off. Your family really deserves a break.”

“I suppose we do,” she admitted with some reluctance. “I want to thank you for calling, I may call back in the next day or two, if that is all right?”

“Of course, please call any time and once we are no longer here in Prince George you can call me in Comox at 442 Squadron, if you need to.” Steve hoped that last part of that message was clear enough.

Steve hung up the phone. Walt was giving him a quizzical look.

“Man, I hate that shit,” Steve said to him. He noticed Brenda was watching him from her desk. Sylvia was working on receipts. Brenda just gave him a little sympathetic smile and turned back to her work.

Walt shook his head. “Something I get to look forward to,” he said. “You going to call Lorraine Schmidt?”

Steve shook his head, “Not on a Sunday, I'm not. I will do it, but tomorrow.”

Sunday 07 October 1984

1205 hours

The day was sunny and warmer than the last few had been. The sky was a transparent azure that gave promises of some days of warmer weather before winter arrived with its snow and gloomy days of short daylight.

Most of the SAR headquarters crew were sitting at the picnic bench eating lunch or on chairs dragged out of the trailer briefing area. O'Dale's Twin Huey crew were there too, taking a break from the two-bladed helicopter's fatiguing vibrations before going out again in the afternoon.

Sgt Szerzy asked a question. “Captain McBain, are we really packing it up this week?”

“As long as we get the remaining areas covered adequately then the

answer is 'yes', but Walt can tell us how we are doing on that.” He held his hand out, palm up, passing the issue to his assistant.

“Um, well yes,” Walt started. “According to my traces we should be done the search on Wednesday, subject to RCC's blessing, of course, since we are working for them.”

Steve nodded. “I was talking with the RCC CO this morning, and he's happy with our progress so far and agrees that it can be shut down once the last few areas are done. But that comes back to you, sergeant, are we going to have the weather?”

“Well that was kind of why I wanted to know in the first place,” Szerzy explained. “I don't want to create charts and other products for a period after we are gone. But, yes, conditions are looking good for Monday through Wednesday. Thursday less so. There is a system forming up in the Gulf of Alaska and we should get it some time on Thursday. At this time of year I can't guarantee it will bring just rain, either.

“Well hopefully our timing should be good then,” Steve said, understanding the implication of snow possibly coming.

Snow is not uncommon in the BC interior at this time of year, particularly in the higher ground. It would probably would not last long, but it would cover the ground and greatly reduce the chances of finding any search object.

Brenda spoke next. “If it is going to snow then I am all for going home to the nice warm coast. I didn't bring my long johns.”

Sylvia nodded in agreement with Brenda, but added, “I brought mine.” She laughed. “Where I come from we wear them all year round.”

Steve addressed the crew as a group “We'll have a complete redeployment briefing tomorrow at 1400 hours after the aircraft are airborne for the afternoon. In the meantime think about your own areas and what will need to be packed up, replenished or fixed, cleaned-up, bills paid and any other considerations.”

Gary O'Dale was listening to the conversation from his chair on the outside of the group. “What about the aircraft and crews?”

“You get to fly yourself home, hopefully before the snow falls,” Steve said.

O'Dale added, “If we fly three more days we won't have enough crew hours to get home. Maybe we'll have to stay here and have an end-of-SAR party?”

Steve considered the the problem. “Well if you stay here for the party, you could be pretty lonely, because we'll be gone. So I could send you home early or I could call 10 TAG and get you an extension.”

O'Dale leaned back on his chair. "I want to keep flying, so I'll take door number two, please." The rest of his crew looked at each other, but no one said anything.

Steve nodded to Walt. "We'll see what we can do tomorrow morning then. I don't want to get 10 TAG HQ out of bed this early on a Sunday afternoon now. If you want a party then it'll have to be Monday or Tuesday night, because we will probably all bug out Wednesday or maybe Thursday morning. There will be flying the next day, so it won't be that much of a party."

"I guess we'll take it, then," O'Dale said. He indicated to his crew that it was time to get going on their afternoon search areas and the Twin Huey crew headed off to the bathroom for one last stop before their three hour flight.

When they had gone Walt asked Steve, "You really want to throw a party for this search?"

"Not really, I would prefer to pay our bills and skulk out of town quietly," Steve said thinking it through. "I don't think the locals will see it as worthy of a celebration if we are going home empty-handed, but if the boys want to have a little piss-up then I am not going to stop them."

"You're the boss," Walt responded.

The green and gray Twin Huey started up its first engine. The flight engineer, standing out front, wound up the rotor tie-down and checked the engines for leaks and fires. The blades turned faster and then the second engine was started. After run-up checks the Huey was ready to take-off and the HQ team could hear the radio call to tower on the outside speaker over the rotor noise. The helicopter lifted into a hover increasing its rotor bark and then transitioned to forward flight, leaving the ramp enveloped in the silence that washed in after it.

Lunch now finished, the headquarters crew returned to the trailer and their individual tasks. Steve picked up the searchmaster's logbook, now on its second volume and even that one close to full, the black-covered, hard bound, lined book now looking fairly worn and dog-eared. The state of the book looked familiar to Steve, the sign of an old search, nearly done and not much to show for it. He thought about other searches he had been on. Some were shorter and successful and some even longer than this one and, like this one, where what was lost was not found. *That was most of them*, he thought. The feeling was one of nostalgia, so many searches, starting with his first one in 1958.

Steve recalled that first search. He had been co-pilot on CC-119 Boxcars for only a year then, always doing transport missions, hauling

freight and doing parachute drops for the army. An RCAF Harvard trainer had gone missing on a flight from Centralia, Ontario on its way to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, on the leg north of the lakehead. It had been May, usually a month of warm weather in southern Canada, but not north of Lake Superior as he had learned that year. The snow squalls were thick and blanketed much of the terrain, making searching hard and it had taken three days to locate the crew and drop jumpers to rescue them. The crew had been okay, as well, which was the best part. They were extracted by a Vertol helicopter the next morning. That first search had hooked him on doing SAR, the immediacy of the mission, the life or death outcomes, it was dramatic, in fact about as dramatic as it got in the peacetime RCAF. The inability to get down on the ground to carry out the rescue convinced him to apply for helicopters on his next tour and he was accepted, trained and sent to fly the brand new Labradors in 1964. *Ironic that my first search would have been over so quickly and happily successful and my last not so.*

In those days the Labs still even smelled new, he recalled, *like a new car. Now some twenty years later they smell of old oil, hydraulic fluid, urine, blood, something, the strange smells of old machinery.* He shrugged it off, nostalgia wasn't getting this search finished, but then there really wasn't that much left to do, let the flying all play out until the map is all coloured in, gather everything up and head home. He didn't want to think beyond that moment. This search no longer held any drama for him, but it was all he had that was certain, that much he knew. It had become familiar, known and even predictable, at least in its outcome, he guessed.

Steve found himself staring out the trailer window at the quiet airport ramp, empty coffee cup in hand.

"You want some more?" Brenda snapped him out of his daydream.

"Huh?" was all he could manage.

"Coffee?" she held up the almost empty pot. "I was going to dump it out."

"No, that's fine, go ahead," he said, changing his grip on the cup he was holding, from holding it by the handle to holding it overhanded, by the rim. "I was just going to clean this out."

"No problem, I can do that too, while I am over there," she said holding out her hand for the cup and smiling. With no water in the trailer they had been washing cups in Mac's hangar next door.

"I'll go with you," Steve said. "I could use some air."

Brenda just smiled her quick smile and headed for the door. Steve gathered up another dirty coffee cup sitting on a table in the briefing room and, carrying them both by the handles in one hand, followed her onto the

ramp. In a few steps he caught up with her and they walked to the hangar in silence together. She reached the corner door first and opened it for him. Inside was an empty corridor that lead to the staircase and the briefing rooms where he had had his conversation with Loretta MacKinstry, what seemed like years ago now. As she entered behind him, he turned on her and as the door closed pinned her up against the wall, his right knee between her legs. She looked up at him, unperturbed by the attention.

"I really want you," he said, kissing her longingly, a kiss that she returned with interest.

When the kiss ended she laughed, "Me, too, but things have been busy, you know with Sylvia here, you being away and all that."

"How about tonight?" he tried.

She thought about it. "Okay, make it after 2130 then."

"Am I on second shift?"

"No, no," she smiled. "I'm not that greedy or that energetic, I just promised someone dinner."

"What about this threesome?" he asked, still holding her against the wall, looking into her green eyes from very close range.

"Don't know yet, but I'm working on it," she shrugged.

Somewhere in the hangar a door slammed and it echoed into the stairwell. He let her go. Brenda tossed her head and smiled up at him and then walked on down the hallway to the utility room where the sink is.

Nothing seems to bother this girl, Steve noted, recalling that while some women seem to like being pinned up against a wall, others seem to react badly to it, at least in his experience. He had no idea why that was, just that it seemed to be unpredictable. He had taken a chance on doing that with her.

In the utility room they washed the pot and cups quickly and went back towards the trailer without another word.

Out on the ramp Steve heard his name called and turned to see Mac following him. Brenda carried on to the trailer without looking back. Steve admired her sense of discipline, *she makes these affairs a high art form*, he thought as he waited for Mac to catch up to where he was standing. The overweight man was puffing by the time he got there.

"Still cleaning up on gas?" Steve asked while Mac caught his breath.

"Sure, but that is what I wanted to check with you on. I have to make a jet fuel order today for delivery Wednesday. How long will you still be here?"

"Sorry, I should have let you know earlier. Our best guess right

now is that we will probably be done by end-of-the-day Wednesday and then head home either that night or Thursday morning.”

“The Herc and everyone?”

“I assume so,” Steve stated. “I won't be keeping them here after that, so as long as they don't break down they ought to be heading home, too. Of course if they do break down then they won't need gas anyway.”

“Okay, well I'll chop back the order then over last week's amount,” Mac said, calculating the numbers in his head.

“I guess you've done okay on this search?” Steve said.

Mac ignored the tone. “Yeah, you bet, in fact I'd like to do something to show my thanks for all the business.”

“That's not required,” Steve responded.

“Well, I want to anyway,” Mac explained. “How about a beer call here at the hangar?”

“You know that might actually work out nicely, since a couple of my crews were talking about an end-of-search-party. I'm really not keen on holding that in town, I just don't think it sends the right message somehow.”

“How is that?” Mac asked.

“Well there really isn't anything to celebrate, you know? Some of the locals might take exception to a celebration of a failed search.”

“Well I wouldn't consider it a 'failed search',” Mac said.

“Maybe not from a fuel sale perspective,” Steve laughed, “but we haven't actually found the missing aircraft, so it is a little hard to argue that it was a success.”

“Most searches don't find the aircraft, do they? I always think of it this way: that you came here to do a search and you did do a search, so the job is done, right? Finding the plane is a bonus, isn't it?”

Steve shook his head at the logic of the statement. “Well, I appreciate that perspective,” he said. “When do you want to do this beer call, then?”

“Well, how about Tuesday after your planes are back down?”

“Okay, that'll work for me.”

“You won't have too much paperwork to do?” Mac asked.

“Yeah, we always do, but that can wait until we get home to solve. Things will be dull then.”

Mac made to head back to his hangar blister office. “Yeah, nothing beats Prince George for excitement.”

Steve wasn't completely sure if he was joking or not.

Sunday 07 October 1984

2113 hours

Steve lay on his hotel room bed in his flying long underwear with the TV on in the background, finishing his entries in the searchmaster's logbook. The book was looking fairly ragged, he noted again, but he judged it would have enough pages left to finish the search, provided Walt didn't get too carried away in his entries. He had Cpl O'Brien's radio logbook as well, on the bed beside him. There was nothing worth noting there, all routine aircraft 30 minute checks and such, but he cross referenced it to make sure he didn't miss anything and also to make sure the two logs agreed. *You can't be too careful with the record-keeping*, he thought. He had seen civil court cases develop in the past from searches, particularly ones where the wreck was found and there were injuries or deaths. Relatives seemed to expect the courts to enforce the need for miracles and therefore good records are essential.

Steve re-read his entry for the afternoon. The latter part of the day had been quiet and rather dull. The sunshine had persisted and the wind stayed light, making it a pleasantly warm autumn day. But still there was the smell in the air of dead leaves, dropping from the trees, crushed underfoot and rotting to humus. Even in its warmth, the day had a smell of colder weather coming, of snow that was not far away and would blanket the fallen leaves soon. Winters in the BC interior are wet, snowy affairs and, due to the proximity of the mountains, bring windy and complex weather.

As he got older Steve was happier to be living on the coast and not in the interior. The coast was a much softer climate, especially in the rain shadow on the east coast of Vancouver Island, where the legendary BC rain is less evident than in Vancouver. The feel of winter coming on was making Steve want to get back to the coast soon.

You know, he thought to himself, *I used to enjoy the winters back east in Manitoba, Ontario and Prince Edward Island and even Gander, Newfoundland, with its snow, skiing and all that. But the older I get the more I appreciate living on the coast and not having to shovel the stuff or even look at it too often. Maybe I'm just spoiled after three tours in Victoria and Comox, or maybe it is just that as you get older your blood gets thinner?*

He would have to think about the practicalities of going home soon. What would he find there? Nothing out of place, he hoped.

It occurred to him that if Linda wasn't there, that his car was at

home parked in the driveway and that he would have to either burn a ride with his gear or haul it the distance to the PMQ on foot. His bag wasn't that heavy, but it seemed like an indignity to end a search that way, walking home.

Screw it, he thought, the CF will pay for a cab coming home from TD, maybe I won't even phone Linda, I'll just catch a taxi and surprise her, at least if she is there, that is.

The whole problem annoyed him. Why was it that her problems were his problem to solve? According to the military view of things, civilian spouses were provided with housing and all the comforts of home on the base so they could be a help to the military members, not a hindrance.

It used to be that way back when I joined, he thought. In the fifties the system worked much better and wives understood where they fit in then. They took care of the house and the kids and didn't go disappearing for no reason. Wives have just become unreliable in the last twenty years. That is the problem: social decay.

It was a popular problem discussed at the mess, he knew. There were lots of opinions, particularly from military members of his age, but no good solutions.

The news item on the TV changed. On the third day of his flight on board the Challenger, Marc Garneau was giving yet another interview from orbit, Steve punched the remote control off.

The logbook entries done, he checked his watch. It was almost 2130 hours. *Just time for a quick shower*, he concluded and went to the bathroom to turn on the water and let it warm up. Like many hotels there was always hot water, but it seemed to come from a very long way away in the building and so letting the water run for a couple of minutes was prudent.

He undressed and stepped into the warmth of the cascading deluge. The shower had an immediate relaxing effect on him and he could feel the tension coming out of his shoulder muscles.

Feeling cleaner, Steve dressed in a polo shirt and slacks. He checked the bedside clock, which said 9:42.

Time to get going, I don't want to keep her waiting too long, he decided.

He considered putting on his watch and his shoes, but decided not to bother. *Just have to take them off again as soon as I get there and then put them back on again to come back here and the hallways aren't dirty enough to require shoes.*

He made sure he had both hotel room keys in his pockets. They both looked the same, so he checked them carefully and put Brenda's room key in his right front pocket and his own in the left.

No point in trying to figure them out in the corridor, he planned. I want to make this as efficient as possible, slip in quickly with minimal fuss. He smirked at his own unintended double entendre.

Let's get going, he thought, quietly closing the door to his room behind him.

Steve covered the distance to the stairwell without being spotted, descended the stairs and opened the door and checked the corridor. There was no one there either. *So far, so good.* As he got to Brenda's room he removed the key from his front right pocket, pushed it into the lock, twisted it clockwise, opened the door, entered and closed the door behind himself, all in one motion and all silently.

There were no lights on and with the door closed the room seemed very dark. *She must be waiting for me in the dark,* he surmised. That would be the sort of playful thing she might do. The thought stirred him, he enjoyed her sense of fun. *Okay, I'll play her game.*

He stood by the closed door in the dark and listened, but the only sounds were from outside the room, water running somewhere, kids running down the corridor on the next floor above. The hallway light under the door was providing some feeble illumination and Steve waited while his eyes became adapted to the low light.

Finally able to see a little, Steve felt his way along the wall to the corner of the room where the entry corridor widened out into the bedroom section, a point where he knew the bed would be three feet in front of him. He took a step, then another and felt the edge of the bed. He crawled onto it and felt his way across it to the other side. It was empty. Was she sitting in one of the chairs by the window, instead, suppressing a giggle at his search for her? He had had enough of the game and didn't like looking foolish, especially at the hands of a girl hiding on him.

Working his way to the top corner of the bed he carefully felt for the corner of the bedside table. He could see where it was because it had the same clock radio on it as in his room, showing the time in LED numbers: 9:51. From the clock he found the bedside lampshade and at last the lamp switch on its base, without knocking anything over. He snapped on the lamp. The three chairs in the room were empty, there was no one there.

Steve sat on the edge of the bed.

Well at least no one saw me stumbling around in the dark, he

concluded. *But where is she? Late, I guess.*

He felt annoyed. How long should he wait for her before giving up and going back to his room?

He looked around the room. There were candles on the table, but no lighter. She probably had that with her, he concluded. There was a clutter of papers on the desk. He shuffled through them: a three day old newspaper, some tourist pamphlets from the local area, a take-out pizza menu, nothing of great interest there. Her clothes were hung up in the closet. It appeared to him that she had brought extra hangers from home for that purpose. *Good idea, they never give you enough hangers in the these hotels to hang up more than a couple of items.* He admired that advanced planning. *Not very spontaneous is she?*

Her suitcase was sitting unlocked on the rack the hotel provided for that purpose. He lifted the lid of it up, listening carefully for footsteps in the hallway, but the hotel had gone quiet. The suitcase was half empty and contained the usual things, underwear, socks, an unopened package of pantyhose. Her dirty laundry was lying in the closet in a CF-issue green string laundry bag. More planning ahead. The suitcase's right side pocket contained a dispenser for birth control pills, half of them were gone. *Well that is a good thing,* he thought. He approved of that kind of planning ahead.

The left side pocket revealed a zip-lock bag of shredded green-brown leaves. He opened it and smelled it. *Yup,* his suspicions were confirmed, *marijuana.* He resealed the bag and carefully put it back. He noted that there were rolling papers in the pocket as well. *Not really surprising,* he thought. He never used the stuff or any other illegal drugs for that matter. Even if he had been interested that would be a very bad idea for military aircrew. He had done a drug bust once on the island in conjunction with the RCMP, flying out bales of the stuff on the Labrador's hook. He knew the smell of it. Idly, he considered whether he should turn her in.

That would be the right thing to do, of course, but there are two potential problems with that course of action: one, I can't really explain what I am doing here in her room in the first place, looking though her suitcase and two, turning her in would seriously cramp future chances of getting some more pussy out of her.

He set the idea aside and sat down on the bed.

The bedside clock now said 10:01. Steve wondered how long he should wait for her. She was already a half an hour late. This was annoying. *If I had known she would be late I would have brought*

something to read. He picked up the first section of her newspaper, the Prince George Citizen, dated Friday October 5th. He ignored the front page, with its predictable photo of Marc Garneau and flipped though to the op-ed section. He hadn't brought his reading glasses, but by holding the paper at nearly arm's length he could read it. He was curious if the search was getting any press beyond the threatened exposé for the following weekend. Most of the letters seemed to be on the subject of a proposed highway bridge project. Just local noise, he concluded.

He flipped to the end of the section, not finding anything very interesting there. The clock now said 10:14. It was getting late, he concluded. Even if she showed up now there wouldn't be much time to do anything before he would have to go and get some sleep.

He carefully replaced the newspaper and found a notepad of hotel stationery by the phone, along with a hotel pen. He scribbled a short note: "I was here, but you weren't, I'll be here tomorrow at 2130." He didn't sign it, folded it in half and left it on the bed. He left the bedside light on, too.

Going to the door he listened carefully, the hotel was still very quiet. He made one last check of the two keys in his pockets and then opened the door. Checking the corridor and finding it empty, he exited, closed the door and made it to the stairwell without being seen.

Monday 08 October 1984

0706 hours

Steve was once again out running.

This SAR has been good for at least one thing, he concluded, *at least it has got me out getting some exercise in the mornings again.*

His pace was getting faster each day, he calculated and that was a good thing. The running was hard work but it made him feel fitter, taller and less tired in the afternoons and evenings. That was worth the price. Besides that, the other members of his headquarters team knew he was running and he knew that earned their respect. He knew that Walt was running and that Tim O'Brien was working out, lifting weights in the hotel gym. The rest didn't seem to be getting much exercise. Well that was their problem, he was setting an example.

That is what leadership is all about.

Steve had almost covered his three mile route and was heading back to the hotel. The air was cool, probably close to freezing again, perfect for running, he decided. That was actually the main reason he had stopped running at home, it had been summer time and it was just too

warm most days. He liked running in the cool air, by far. In considering the nonsense that might be going on back home, he thought maybe he would keep up the early morning runs when he got home. *That's gotta help.*

He ran as lightly as possible, the balls of his feet hitting the concrete of the urban sidewalk. The streets were still deserted that early in the day, with few cars and no pedestrians for blocks.

He was thinking about retirement. *Man I can see that now, next spring, get up early, run four miles, eat breakfast, a round of golf, a late lunch, sit around the clubhouse, go home have a nap or read the paper. Man that is going to work just fine, never mind all the other crap.* He felt reassured running, and stopped a block short of the hotel to catch his breath and cool down.

It was going to be a good day for weather, Steve could see that. The winds were calm and the steam from his breath hardly moved in the stillness of the air. The sun was already up, casting a yellow light on a swath of cirrus cloud in the eastern sky. He breathed deeply, feeling the iciness of the air, its clean snap in his lungs. This was a good life, Steve knew at that moment.

Reaching the hotel he walked through the lobby, passed a nonchalant wave to the night desk clerk, a pretty young brunette. He headed straight to the elevators and his room for a shower before breakfast with the rest of the crew.

Steve was the last one at breakfast and took the last chair at the table set for six. It was the same table the HQ crew sat at every morning. Brenda was at the other end of the table sitting with Sylvia. She didn't even look up from her menu when Steve sat down.

She is so amazingly cool, he thought with grudging admiration.

Walt made up for Brenda's disciplined disinterest. "Hey boss, out running this morning?"

Steve was happy to answer that question, Walt gave him the chance to show up the out-of-shape crowd without looking like he was bragging. "Oh I ran a bit this morning, it's too nice out there to stay in bed."

"How far did you go?"

"Oh, about five miles," Steve said convincingly.

"Man you are always out-distancing me," Walt protested.

"Not bad for an old fart, eh?"

"I seem to always miss running with you, which way did you go?"

"North and then west," Steve replied, putting on his reading glasses and glancing over the menu. It looked the same as every other day, an unchanging and unyielding hotel coffee shop menu. The waitress was

pouring coffee from a carafe and taking orders. Steve ordered the same thing as he always did – toast and coffee.

“That explains why I missed you then, I went east. You must have had the sun in your eyes on the way back.”

“It doesn't bother me,” Steve retorted. “You must have had it in your eyes on the way out.”

“Naw,” Walt explained. “It wasn't up then.”

“I think you are bragging,” Steve needled him.

“I wouldn't do that,” Walt said with a broad smile.

Steve stole a glance at Brenda from the rim of his coffee cup. She was engaged in a quiet conversation with Sylvia over the table.

Girls, he thought, *who can figure what they are up to?* The coffee was hot, which is the most positive thing that could be said about it.

The waitress began placing plates in front of everyone and the conversations ended. He looked around the restaurant, as most mornings they had the place to themselves, at least for now. After his first slice of toast Steve addressed the table.

“Well it looks like another decent flying day out there today.” He looked to Sgt Szerzy for confirmation, who gave him a nod. “Don't forget 1400 we will meet and put our redeployment plan together, so bring your notes.” He paused and looked around the table. People were eating but listening. “One last thing, some good news, actually, Mac wants to host a party tomorrow after work at his hangar. This will be strictly us and the aircrew only. Mac just wants to say thanks for all our hard work.”

“You mean for all our fuel invoices,” Sylvia said with a giggle.

“Yeah, that too,” Steve admitted. “Point is he's buying, so plan to be there tomorrow. I know we're all tired, but we wouldn't want to look ungrateful.”

“Designated driver?” Brenda asked.

“Good idea. Okay that sounds like a plan then,” Steve summarized.

Monday 08 October 1984

0835 hours

After Sgt Szerzy finished his short weather briefing to the crew representatives, Steve addressed the room.

“Following debriefing tomorrow there will be an end-of party put on by Mac's Shell in his hangar. Mac's buying the beer, so let the rest of your crew know. No press, no politicians, no outsiders. We'll provide rides to the hotel afterwards with our van, unless you have a crew designated

driver. It's been a long deployment and I don't want to see any accidents at this late date."

The three young navigators from the two Buffs and the Herc – plus Gary O'Dale from the Twin Huey crew made notes. With their search assignments handed out, they left to get airborne. Lance's Buffalo was already running, waiting for his navigator to get on board.

The last one out the trailer door, Gary O'Dale, reminded Steve, "you were going to check with 10 TAG HQ about our extension."

"Yup," Steve assured him and checked his watch. "As soon as you get going I'll call them and catch them before they all go for lunch in St Hubert."

Once O'Dale had gone, Walt reminded him, "you were going to call Lorraine Schmidt today as well."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I know," Steve said, with some annoyance. "I'll try her right after I call 10 TAG. One problem at a time."

The call to 10 TAG was short. Steve informed Walt of the results. "10 TAG Ops didn't want to extend O'Dale's crew any more than is necessary, given the search is almost done. Would you believe they wanted them aborted from the a.m. mission and sent home today? They were only going to authorize a flight home. So I made them a deal; they'll fly the morning mission they are on and then sit it out. I wanted to keep them here for the party, but I told 10 TAG I would hold them in reserve for a rescue, even though there is a fat chance of that. They can go home on Wednesday morning. How is that going to wreck your trace?"

Walt pulled out his last couple of transparencies and put them over the map, one at a time. "I think we will be okay with that. I had planned on using one Buffalo here," he said pointing out the area, "but that's a pretty small area for a whole morning, so I'll give him this area as well to cover. I built in enough slack in the plan just in case something goes u/s or this sort of thing."

Steve looked the plan over quickly. "Fine, do it, then." It was obvious that there were very few areas left to be done and the search was almost finished. Steve knew that this was the worst part of a search. All hope is gone and everyone is just going through the motions to get the 'Xs' checked off, the map completely shaded in as 'covered'. He knew there wasn't a morale problem, the crews were happy to be out flying everyday, but it was a bit pointless, overall.

"Putting off that other call?" Walt asked Steve.

"No, I'm on it," Steve shot back and then added more good-naturedly, "unless you would like to make that call yourself?"

"No, that's okay," Walt assured him with a quiet chuckle. "I got chewed up by her last time, remember?"

Steve smiled, picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"Hello Ms Schmidt, this is Captain McBain from the search headquarters. I just wanted to let you know that our search is just about completed and that we will be reducing the search in the next few days. Call me if you have any questions." He hung up.

"You left her a message?" Walt said, amazed.

"Hey, her not being there was a gift, I just accepted it," Steve said in explanation.

"The book says that kind of news should only be given in person, you know?"

"Well the book needs some amendments for specific cases, like her," Steve shot back.

"Chicken."

"Look you can call me an opportunist if you like, but not a chicken," Steve said evenly. "Wait until you have done a few more searches. You will find that sometimes the smartest way is the easiest way."

Walt considered Steve's words. "Think she'll call back?"

"No."

"You're probably right," Walt said resignedly.

"Of course I am right," Steve said, "I know how women think."

"Especially pissed-off women..."

Especially," Steve admitted with some pride. "That is the hard stuff." Steve noted Brenda giving him a sidelong glance, before she quickly returned to her paperwork.

"...And if you are wrong this time?"

"I never am. But let's just say I was, then I would say that you can take that call."

"Cluck, cluck," Walt said.

Steve just walked away to refill his coffee cup.

Monday 08 October 1984

1015 hours

Steve was sitting alone at the picnic table. The SAR headquarters crew had come out to sit in the sunshine for their coffee break, but when it was done Walt, Tim and Dave Szerzy had returned to the trailer, while the two women had gone over to the hangar to use the washroom. Steve

studied the sky, while he drained the last of his coffee cup.

Why do women always seem to go to the washroom in twos? he wondered.

The small amount of cirrus cloud that had been present earlier in the morning had disappeared, leaving the sky an almost completely even blue colour, from horizon to horizon.

After the poor weather early in the search, it is amazing to have these unbroken fall days of better conditions, Steve thought.

In BC you could never count on the weather. The combination of the province's mountains and valleys, aligned mostly north and south across the prevailing winds, along with its location on the western edge of the continent where it receives weather unimpeded from the open Pacific, renders it a place that both receives the weather sent to it and makes its own weather as well. Steve recalled past searches done under sunny skies for weeks on end and others where each mile track-crawled was done in appalling conditions: rain, fog, snow, low cloud clinging to the mountains and spilling into the valleys. Even when the weather was bad it could be better in one valley than in adjacent ones. That made sending crews to the right places to get the maximum searching done a difficult task. Sometimes you had to search where the weather allowed searching, rather than where the searchmaster thought the best chances of finding the search object were.

A Pacific Western Boeing 737 powered up its engines on Prince George's Runway 06, sending a deep rumble across the airport. Steve could hear it long before he saw it. At last it appeared half way down the runway, just lifting into the air, tucking up its landing gear and climbing into the clear sky. The wind was light, Steve noted and so the Pacific Western captain must have taxied to the western end of the airport to take off on runway 06 for a reason. The plane climbed straight out to the east without a turn. Steve guessed it must be heading to Edmonton, making the slightly longer taxi to use 06 worthwhile in exchange for a straight-out departure.

As the rumble of the 737 dissipated in the eastern sky, quiet returned to the airport, as there were no other aircraft within earshot. Even the flying school's Cessna 150s and 172s seemed to be on the ground this Monday morning.

There is a pity, thought Steve. *They should be making use of this great weather, while it's available.* He was thinking about the forecast of stormy weather for later in the week. Szerzy had reiterated that in this morning's briefing. Now was the time to fly.

Brenda and Sylvia were returning from the hangar, walking across

the ramp together. To Steve's eye they looked like they were telling stories, Brenda laughed at something Sylvia had said. When they approached the picnic table Sylvia carried directly on to the trailer and Brenda stopped and lit a cigarette.

"I thought you were quitting?" Steve asked.

Brenda looked at the offending item critically as it burned. "I am," she said. "It just takes a while to do it."

"Discipline? Motivation?" Steve suggested.

"Definitely motivation," she agreed. Brenda looked around and confirmed that they were not likely to be overheard. "Listen, sorry about last night. I must have just missed you," she whispered in a low conspiratorial tone.

"No sweat," Steve said in an equally low voice. "You get lost?"

"Nothing sinister," she said. "We just got talking and forgot the time."

"You and Sylvia?"

"Yeah, who did you think I was having dinner with?"

"No idea," he said, adding, "not my business."

"We were just joking around."

"You two seem to have a lot of fun together."

"Yeah we do, but how about tonight?" she asked.

"Will you actually be there?"

"Promise."

"Okay," he agreed somewhat reluctantly. "What about..." he looked for a useful euphemism, "...that deal you mentioned before?"

She butted out the cigarette in the tin can ashtray on the table. "Working on it." She gave him a quick smile and headed into the trailer, opening the door as Walt came out. Walt looked back at Brenda and then joined Steve with a questioning look. He was about to ask something when Steve interrupted his thought.

"Lorraine Schmidt call back?" Steve interjected.

"Ah, no she didn't," Walt admitted.

"You owe me a beer."

"Hey, I never bet you she would call," Walt said defensively.

"Well I should have bet you," Steve said, gaining the upper hand. "I know how women think."

"And where did you learn all that?"

"School of Hard Knocks," Steve said with some pride.

"Sounds about right," Walt noted without explanation. "I was talking to Mike Bertkowiz earlier this morning when I gave him the areas

for the day.”

“Oh, yeah,” Steve said, glad that he had successfully changed the subject away from Brenda and even women in general, “and how are things doing there in Pemberton?”

“Well, that is just it,” Walt explained. “I mentioned that it was too bad that his crew wouldn't be here for the party and he said he was pretty much done there and wanted to come up here anyway. I checked the plots and he is pretty close to right there. I only have an area for him to do tomorrow morning and then that whole sector is done.”

Steve considered it. “Do you have anything on the way here that needs redoing?”

“No, not really, we have good coverage already.”

“Well they have to come this way on the way back to Cold Lake anyway, so sure, why not. It won't cost any extra flying time. Where have you got them working tomorrow morning?”

“West of Pemberton, in the big hills.”

“Okay, then, they finish that in the morning and then come back here after lunch. Get Brenda to book them some rooms here and let Mike know when you debrief him tonight.”

“That's kind of what I had in mind,” Walt said. “Glad that you approve.”

“Yeah, fine, just go ahead and do it.”

Walt returned to the trailer, leaving Steve alone again at the picnic table under the clear blue skies.

Monday 08 October 1984

1400 hours

Steve addressed the five other members of the headquarters crew in the office area.

“I want to start off by saying that I am proud of what this team has accomplished. This has been a pretty long SAR and it has gone really smoothly overall, certainly more than some searches I have been on.”

Brenda commented, “of course we didn't find the lost airplane.”

Steve didn't attack the remark, even though it struck him as unfair.

“Quite true, we didn't, but that isn't the point. Everyone here did their part right. I have good confidence that the search crews did their part right, too. Sometimes it just works out that way. Sometimes the aircraft doesn't get found, but we still did the best job possible, followed all the procedures and so no one can be faulted for not finding the search object.

Some missing aircraft are just crashed so well that they will never get found. I know that probably none of you have been at a crash site, even Walt, because he flies fixed wing, but I have been on the ground at a number of them. Some are obvious and others are only found years later and even then when we go out there they are just a hole in the ground underneath a tree or a rock. Some of them you could walk over top of and never see them, so it isn't surprising that we come out here and don't find them all. The op was still a success, as far as I am concerned. Besides that, at this late date, while it would be nice to find the crash site to give the relatives some relief, I think it is safe to say that the people on that plane don't need our help anymore."

He paused to look around the room. He got a few nods of agreement.

Steve continued, "Regardless, we are here to come up with a plan to pack up and leave. Right now it looks like we will be done searching on Wednesday and we will be able to leave on Thursday morning. I would prefer not to rush it. Basically everyone and everything is going to go back on one of the Buffs to Comox. We still have the shipping containers for all the deployment gear beside the trailer here. It's just a matter of making sure everything goes back and in as clean a shape as possible. The kits will all get torn apart back at the squadron, replenished and all that, but the easier we make that task the better. After all, you might be the one to fix the kits back home."

"I know I will get to do all the new pens, paper and forms for the kits back home," Brenda added.

"Okay, so we will make sure they look as good as possible when the leave here, then just for Brenda," Steve smiled benignly. "Otherwise let's go around the room and see what everyone has to repack." Each member of the team then went through a short list of things from their own section of the operation, in turn.

"So what is left?" Steve asked.

"Personal gear," said Tim O'Brien.

"Hotel bills and claims," added Brenda.

"Returning the rental vehicles," offered Walt.

"Good point," noted Steve. "Brenda and Sylvia can take care of that one."

There was nothing more mentioned.

"I guess we have to clean-up the trailer," Walt added.

"True, the checklist even suggests painting it," Steve said. There were some laughs at that suggestion. "Yeah I know, it wouldn't look like

home if we did. Let's get a professional cleaner to come in when we're gone and take care of sprucing the place up a bit." There was general agreement that that was a good idea. No one relished doing cleaning at the end of a long deployment.

"Brenda..." Steve started to say.

"I already have a list of cleaners," Brenda chimed in and then added, "I got them from the yellow pages." Sylvia laughed at that remark and Steve just shook his head.

"Okay, good work, then," he said. "Since you have the list you can pick one and have them come in and do the work after we are gone, maybe Thursday afternoon. Have them send the bill to us at 442."

After a few more details were discussed and settled, Steve was ready to call an end to the meeting.

"What about the party?" Brenda asked.

"Not much to tell, really," Steve replied. "End of op party tomorrow after work at Mac's hangar blister right over there. He's buying, so be there."

"What about rides?" Walt asked.

"Oh, yeah," Steve recalled. "I told the aircrew we would provide rides, so we should organize that. Who wants to drive?" Unsurprisingly there were no volunteers. "Walt?"

"Sure," Walt replied.

"Okay then," Steve noted down, "Walt and I will drive everyone home afterwards. Anything else? No? okay, class dismissed."

The team went back to work.

Steve took Walt aside. "I didn't want to bother everyone with the minute details, but have you thought about that newspaper ad we talked about?" Walt retrieved two sheets of paper from the table that served as a desk and handed them to Steve. One was a faxed sheet of ad rates for the Citizen and the other was a proposed text. Steve looked it over.

"Yeah that looks fine," Steve said, he examined the ad rates.

"Quarter page?"

"It's not our money," Walt reminded him.

"I'm Scottish, okay?" Steve looked the sheet over again. "Okay half page, then, but if the bean counters give me a hard time you can explain it to them, okay."

"Deal," Walt replied.

"When?" Steve asked.

"I was thinking of next Saturday. After all, we'll be gone and the paper is running that summary of the op. I thought if we buy a half page

they can put them next to each other and besides that if we buy an ad perhaps they will take it easier on us in the review.”

“Hmmm,” Steve thought. “Okay, I approve, make it happen. Invoice to 442.”

Monday 08 October 1984

2128 hours

Steve was being careful not to be late. *Can't keep the lady waiting*, he reasoned, *even though she kept me waiting last night and was a no-show to boot. The things we go through to get a bit of pussy now and then...*

He made his way down the familiar stairwell, as he done in the past. Getting to her floor he heard voices in the corridor, perhaps a couple of people waiting for the elevator? Was that Walt he heard? He stayed in the stairwell, away from the slim single window in the door. He heard the chime of the elevator and then its door open and finally close. The hallway sounded quiet again. He took a quick look through the window and then opened the door slowly. The corridor was empty. Steve walked briskly to her door, silently in his sock feet, pulled the key from his pocket, unlocked, opened the door and closed it behind himself, all in one very practiced motion.

Things certainly looked different from the night before, he noted. Instead of darkness he was met with the soft glow of several tea light candles placed around the room. The room looked neater, as well, without the clutter of newspaper and such on the table.

As he left the short entrance hallway and entered the room itself he saw Brenda sitting up in bed, the covers pulled up under her armpits and the candlelight making her bare shoulders appear to glow with golden translucidity. Her eyes were closed, but not in sleep, he judged, but in meditation, calmness or perhaps in anticipation, he hoped. Her expression was that of calm detachment, like a stone buddha. He watched her for a few seconds, her breathing was slow and measured and then she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

“I’m so glad you could make it,” she said evenly, her eyes clear and mirthful. “Why don’t you get undressed and come here and give me a kiss?” He did as he was told.

She was in fine form that evening and the sex took his breath away. Finally they both lay together, rivulets of sweat running down both their bodies and the covers that she had needed to keep her warm earlier pushed

to the end of the bed. Now she lay facing away from him, snuggled into his hips and he touched her softly, feeling the moisture on her skin.

He stroked her hair and she rubbed her head against his hand.

“How did you get so good at fucking?” he asked her, petting her like a cat.

“Well, two reasons,” she said, with a degree of conspiracy to her voice.

“And those would be?”

“Mostly because I always wanted to be, it just seems worthwhile to want to be good at that, so I am,” she explained.

“That's only one reason,” he pointed out, kissing her shoulder.

“You said that there were two?”

“Practice,” she said, “lots of practice.”

“I don't think I want to know about that.”

She laughed, “No probably not, but if that scares you how about this, then?” She slowly lifted her self on her elbows and turned towards him, composing a look of virgin innocence on her face, as if it were a painting she was creating on the spot. Her mouth was open and her lower lip quivered just perceptibly. The candle light shone and reflected in her eyes, making them, deep, liquid. She stared deeply into his eyes. The effect was unnerving to Steve, but he couldn't look away.

“Hey you do that wide-eyed innocent bit pretty well,” he joked, in awe of the power of that one look.

“You think so?” she asked, closing her mouth and smiling at him.

“I can do lots of things.”

“I am sure you can,” he said. “You do that virginal thing remarkably well. Where did you get all this talent?”

“Oh just lucky, I guess,” she said, putting her head on his chest, removing her eyes from his gaze. “I just enjoy life when I can.”

He ran his thumb across the lower curve of her right breast. His finger traced the perfect arc in space it made there.

“What about this threesome, you keep mentioning?” he asked her softly.

“Hmm,” she responded to his caresses, cooing and purring like a cat. “Actually you just mentioned it now.”

He continued to stroke her and said nothing more.

“I don't think there is the necessary, let's see, how best to put it, 'buy-in', to make it happen,” she tried, biting her lip.

“On my part?” he asked, trying to understand what she meant, as he continued to pet her, moving his hand to scratch her small round belly.

She writhed under his touch. “No, not on your part. Guys are never

a problem in organizing a threesome with two women. 'Do you want pussy or more pussy?' No, no problem there."

"On your part?" he asked.

"No, no, no. I am always good for that sort of thing." she responded.

He ran his hand onto her ribs and felt them under her skin. She had very little fat on her and her ribs were clearly defined. He rubbed his knuckles over her ribs, lightly and then increasing the force until she jumped.

"Hey," she exclaimed.

"I don't think you even tried to organize that, I just think you wanted some leeway to see us both here. You probably told her the same story."

"Ouch, hey," she pulled away from his grasp, laughing. "Well if that is what you suspect of me, then you can ask her yourself."

"Oh right, I would look pretty foolish if she had no idea what I was talking about, wouldn't I?"

She smiled her little smirk. "It does look like I have all the cards, doesn't it?"

"Yes, you do," he admitted with a small measure of unease.

"Well let me explain it to you this way," she said slowly. "Did you get more pussy than you were expecting in Prince George?"

"Sure," he admitted.

"Then don't complain."

"Oh, I am not complaining," he assured her. "I am honoured to have had this opportunity to screw your brains out."

"You are quite welcome," she said with excessive formality.

"Are we going to get together again here?" he asked her.

"Well tomorrow night is this party, so that is out. How about Wednesday night for a last run at it?"

"Why is tomorrow out after the party?"

"Because I intend to have some drinks and that would leave me vulnerable to have you take advantage of me."

"Well, yeah, that is the idea," he pointed out to her.

"Okay, well I'm busy after the party."

"You are just alternating us, aren't you?" he said, running his finger over her ribs again lightly.

"Oops, found out," she said sarcastically. "Only deal available, take it or leave it."

"Okay, boss, I will have to take it then, but you owe me."

“I refuse all debts to everyone,” she pronounced.

He got out of bed and put his clothes back on and made ready to leave. “I bet you do, don't you?” He looked at her naked form, stretched over the surface of the damp white sheets, her slim profile making one long continuous series of curves down her neck, across her shoulder, waist, hips and legs to her feet. He went back to her side, bent down and kissed her. “The problem with you is that you are far too damn sexy to refuse anything to.”

“Man, you know all my evil plans,” she said darkly and then laughed.

He ran his hand through her hair one last time. “I am going to miss you, you know. Any chance of us getting together back home?”

“I really wish there was.”

He kissed her on the forehead, leaving the room quickly and quietly.

Tuesday 09 October 1984

1035 hours

Steve and Walt sat at the picnic table, going over the checklists for reducing the search. The day was overcast with high cirrus cloud, after having started off sunny at dawn, the wind staying almost calm mid-morning. A Cessna 172 was doing circuits on the short runway 19, which took it nearest to the trailer as it was climbing out, its Lycoming O-320 engine buzzing as it sought enough altitude to turn crosswind and go around for yet another practice landing.

“Did you take care of that newspaper ad?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, all done, they'll invoice us, thirty days net, the usual thing,” Walt reassured him. “They couldn't guarantee the placement on the same page as the article on the search for Saturday, just because the article's length hasn't been finalized yet. There might not be room for both, but it will be somewhere near the article, within a page or two.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “I'll mark it here as 'done', then.”

“Have all the phone calls been made?” Walt queried.

“Hmm, let's see, I talked to the CO of the RCC in Victoria this morning and Lieutenant Colonel Braithwaite yesterday afternoon along with our much-beloved Ops O, left a message for Lorraine Schmidt or whatever she calls herself, talked to wazhisname at the Italian Embassy in Ottawa, Loretta MacKinstry and George Von, before he left. Man, I am tired of talking to people.”

"I guess," Walt said. "What did Colonel Braithwaite have to say?"

"Not a lot really, he called me. It was really just a pep-talk more than anything, blah, blah, blah, good job all around, that sort of thing," Steve explained. "The talk with the RCC CO was more in depth really, just going over the daily reports from the last week and me assuring him that we had checked off every box on every form available for every reason. He really wanted to be sure nothing was missed. We have the formal authorization to redeploy home at our discretion, so he is obviously happy with the work we have done."

"Or the forms we have filled out," Walt said.

"Same thing, really," Steve explained. "Once the flying on the operation is done there'll be nothing left to see, read, fight over or sue people about, except the paperwork. The pieces of paper become the history and all that'll be left of this SAR will be nothing but history."

"Wow there is some philosophy," Walt was awed. "So we are writing history here then."

"Yeah when it is all done some historian can write a book about this SAR and how dull it was."

"Or a newspaper reporter will. Are you worried about what the *Citizen* is going to say about this?"

"Naw," Steve said dismissively. "Should I be?"

"I dunno," Walt admitted. "It just seemed like George Withers was really focusing on the economic aspects to the SAR."

"Instead of what, the heroic rescue we did?" Steve asked. "I am not sure that when you get down to brass tacks that this SAR, in hindsight can be considered more than regional welfare for Prince George."

"And Pemberton and Williams Lake, too," Walt added.

"And Pemberton and Williams Lake," Steve agreed.

"Sort of: 'We came, we saw, we ate some donuts'?"

"Well, not so many donuts, mostly beer and hotel nights," Steve added.

"And jet gas," Walt suffixed.

"Yeah, most of the money probably went for jet gas," Steve agreed.

The Cessna 172 climbed out again, its rising engine and propeller noise drowning out their conversation for a minute or two, before it turned right onto its crosswind leg and away from the trailer and the picnic table.

Walt was thinking. "You know I got into SAR because I thought it was the best job in the peacetime military, getting out there doing real rescues under difficult conditions, saving people's lives, that sort of thing. I thought it was going to be way better than being a Cold War warrior,

showing the Russians how ready we are for them by going on exercises and doing lots of camping in Wainwright or Petawawa.”

“You’re quite right, this definitely beats camping in Wainwright, Pet, Shilo, Valcartier or even Ipperwash,” Steve said, “but I think you have to agree that even when we don’t find the search object that the job is more fun than playing with the army.”

“Yeah but I wasn’t looking for ‘fun’, I was looking to do something worthwhile,” Walt protested. The Cessna 172 turned on final for runway 19 again, its flaps down for landing, silently ghosting, its engine at idle.

“But that was my point,” Steve said directly. “We are doing something worthwhile here, even when we don’t find missing planes. We are contributing to the economic wellbeing of this province. What could be more important than that? I mean, can you imagine all the tips our breakfast waitress has made in the last two and half weeks?”

“I guess that we just see life differently,” Walt said with some dejection.

“Well that’s true, you’re young and idealistic, with a pregnant wife, your life before you and all that, while I am just old and cynical, but at least I see some good coming from these ops. Ultimately, no SAR is a failure. We got some flying done, had some fun, spent a whole bunch of federal bucks on a worthy cause...”

“And really filled in some forms with great pizzazz,” Walt added, without enthusiasm.

“Exactly,” Steve remarked. “Now this week we can go home with the knowledge of a job well done all around.”

“Unless you’re sitting out there in the bush next to a wrecked Cessna 310 waiting to be found.”

“Unless you’re sitting out there in the bush next to a wrecked Cessna 310 quite dead,” Steve corrected. “You will recall that we don’t rescue dead people.”

“And you’re sure that they are dead?”

“What do you think?” Steve asked. “They’ve been missing since September 22nd and we have heard...”

Walt thought it over. “I guess it is time to go home, isn’t it?”

“Having completed a job well done,” Steve added. “I am sure you want to see your wife by now?”

“Yup,” Walt agreed. “Only two more months to go.”

“Hey, well there is something to think about. When is the due date?”

“December 7th, actually.”

“A day that will live in infamy, I am sure,” Steve joked. He added, “don't worry they never arrive on the due date, especially the first ones.”

“Yeah, you're right, there is lots to go home for,” Walt admitted.

“After all,” Steve punched him on the shoulder, “I have mountains of paperwork to do, post-SAR and I am counting on you helping out.”

“Great,” Walt said, again without enthusiasm.

Tuesday 09 October 1984

1712 hours

The search aircraft were all down safely on the ground at Prince George. There were two Buffalos, one Hercules and two Twin Hueys bugged up, their rotors or props secured, all in a line, on the ramp outside the trailer. Mike Bertkowiz's Twin Huey, 'Rescue 5143' had arrived last, after everyone else was down for the day. The other Twin Huey, Gary O'Dale's from 408 Squadron, hadn't moved since being grounded for crew time the preceding lunch. Neither O'Dale nor the rest of his crew had complained about having a day and a half in the hotel; they needed the rest after the days of Huey-shaking they had endured flying the two-bladed helicopter.

Walt took the debrief from Mike Bertkowiz on his morning search and his afternoon transit, while Steve debriefed the last Buffalo crew down, which was Payne's. Recently Major Payne had been sending his navigator for briefs and debriefs and had avoided going to the trailer entirely, but today he accompanied his young nav, hanging in the background as the navigator gave the information to Steve. The debriefing was routine and completed in five minutes.

“Thanks for the info,” Steve said. “I hope you and your crew are coming to the party Mac is throwing?” The nav indicated that they would be there, and as Steve pointed out, it was on now, so they could all go directly there. The navigator departed leaving Steve facing Major Payne.

“Looks like a successful day,” Steve tried. “Good weather and good coverage.”

“Are you sure this party is a good idea?” Payne said, changing the subject.

“No,” Steve admitted, “but it seems the lesser of two evils. Some of the other crews wanted to have a bash in town. I remember a search I was on back in the 1960s where something like that turned into a brawl between the local roughnecks and the SAR crews. I think the locals figured a party at the end of an unsuccessful SAR wasn't respectful enough of the

missing. Too many dishes got broken. So, no, I wasn't keen on the idea at all, but then Mac told me that he was throwing a bash out here at the airport and that sounded like a better idea. It's his party, though, not mine. We have rides laid on, so there won't be any drunk driving. I don't think we can do better than that."

Payne considered the information. "I guess so," he concluded.

"No attack?" Steve asked.

"Nope," Payne admitted. "I am tired of clashing with you over things that don't matter. I have just decided it isn't a worthwhile use of my time."

"Well there is a deal," Steve admitted. "Bury the hatchet, you mean?"

"Yeah, sure, why not," Payne said. "Look, I find you a difficult sonofabitch to get along with, but since you are out in three months, it isn't worth the effort, so let's just make your last little while at 442 and mine, easier?"

"Okay," Steve responded. "You have a deal." They shook hands.

"I just want you to have a happy retirement," Payne said.

"And sooner better than later, I gather," Steve added.

"Exactly," Payne agreed.

With the last of the debriefs completed and the aircrew all gone from the trailer, the headquarters team cleaned up their workspaces ready to call it a day.

Steve noted that Sgt Szerzy was taking some extra time looking over his charts.

"Not keen to pack it in?" Steve asked him.

"I am a little concerned about this system," the met tech said, pointing out his latest hand-drawn surface analysis. "It's sucking a large amount of cold, wet air in off the Gulf of Alaska and it is moving faster than it looked to be this morning."

They were the last two left in the trailer, as the rest of the crew had wandered over to Mac's hangar blister, but this had Steve's attention. "What do the prog charts show for the storm?" Steve asked.

"Well the latest ones show that there won't be any weather from it hitting the coast until late tomorrow night and not here until Thursday noon at the earliest."

"Sounds okay to me," Steve said.

"Yeah, but I don't believe it," Szerzy explained. "I just finished drawing this chart and I put the centre of the low further south than the prog does for 12 hours from now and the central pressure is lower too. I

suspect it'll probably pick up speed rather than slow down."

Steve looked at the chart. What Szerzy said was true, if the chart was to be believed, but then Szerzy had drawn it himself. "So what is your best guess then?" Steve asked.

"I think we could have low cloud and rain on the north coast by morning and here not far into the afternoon."

"Rain here, too?" Steve checked.

Szerzy put the 500 mb analysis on the table "It's going to be close, but looking at what's going on in the upper atmosphere I think there is enough cold air there that we could get snow here instead. Guessing whether it will be rain versus snow is about the hardest part of weather forecasting, when the temps are close it is easy to be wrong."

"Well if you are right about that, it could shut us down early tomorrow," Steve said, gesturing broadly at the charts.

"How much more is left to search tomorrow afternoon," Sgt Szerzy asked.

"Well that is the key question," Steve admitted. "I will have to check with Captain Ashbury and see what the story is. How long will this system keep us on the ground?"

"Here? Probably until Saturday morning. On the coast Friday afternoon will probably be flyable," Szerzy stated.

"Well I guess we have to play the cards we are dealt. We'll make it work."

Steve locked up the trailer and the two of them walked over to the hangar blister. The small room was noisy with aircrew in their flying suits and Mac's Shell linemen in their blue coveralls, all talking. The beer was in two large fishing coolers on the floor next to the desk. Steve retrieved one stubby beer bottle out of the crushed ice and opened it with the bottle opener on the side of the cooler. *Well I am driving, so this is my one beer*, he thought. *Better sip it slowly*.

Mac was behind the counter looking for rolls of paper towel and Steve saluted him with his bottle of beer.

"Thanks for doing this," Steve said to him.

"The least I could do," the large round man laughed. "After all you guys have a done a lot for me." He gestured towards the large banner hanging on the wall. It was obviously printed by a computer on tractor-feed paper and said 'SAR Schmidt, it's been a gas'.

Steve shook his head, "Man, I am glad we aren't doing this downtown."

"Why is that?" Mac asked.

"Some people might get the wrong idea," he said, waving dismissively.

"It's still good for business and that is good for PG," Mac said, pouring some potato chips into a plastic bowl. "We make up signs for all our special occasions." He pointed to the corner of the office, where a beige box sat with a computer screen on the front of it. A keyboard sat in front of it and on the shelf nearby was the printer with a ribbon of paper running into it.

"I just got that earlier this year," Mac explained, "It's an Apple Macintosh."

"Sounds fruity," Steve said, taking a careful sip of his beer. "It looks expensive just to make signs on."

"I do all my accounting on it too," the FBO operator explained, as he poured out some peanuts into a bowl. He handed the bowl to Brenda who took it and a roll of paper towels and moved both to a table across the room.

"That one is helpful," Mac said indicating Brenda. "You should hang onto her."

Steve looked after her. Brenda had put the bowl down and was talking to Sylvia. She shot Mac and Steve a smile. "Yeah she works in our squadron orderly room. I just borrowed her for the search. She makes everything hum along, all right," Steve admitted, taking another small sip. The room was a cacophony of people laughing, telling stories.

"We should probably get some food into them, before they drink too much beer," Mac noted. Steve could only nod in agreement. Mac called one of his linemen over, a young blond-haired lad who looked like a high school student and sent him to the crew room. He returned a minute later carrying a large sheet cake and slid it carefully onto the counter.

"Let's see," Mac said. "I must have something to cut this with."

Steve regarded the cake. It was huge, covered with white icing and looked like it came from the bakery department of a large grocery store. The cake's decorator had drawn a large generic-looking yellow airplane in flight on the cake. The wording said 'Happy SAR'.

"They mostly do birthday cakes," Mac explained.

Man I am really glad we aren't doing this in town, some people would just not see the humour in this, Steve thought and he looked around to the room. There was no one visible who didn't seem to fit in, all military aircrew and Mac's crew. No politicians or reporters.

Walt came over to have a look at the cake, just as a commotion started at the front door. Steve was surprised to see US military uniforms.

"That'll be the US Coast Guard crew," Walt explained.
"Hutchison's crew."

Steve was about to say something when Walt answered the question, "I figured I had better invite them to come up from Williams Lake. If I didn't we could have had an international incident."

Steve considered that. There wasn't much that he could say in objection. "What about the 440 Twotter crew?"

"Oh they are here, too," Walt directed his gaze to the door where they were arriving. The room was now very busy and noisy.

"How did everyone get here? I hope they didn't fly? I'll never be able to explain that away," Steve said, with some exasperation.

"Naw, they drove two vans up," Walt explained.

"Hmm," Steve said, "now we just have to make sure they get home okay tonight in time to fly tomorrow morning."

"You worry too much," Walt said.

"Hey, I'm still responsible here," Steve sighed. There was little he could do about it at this point anyway. He recalled that he needed to talk to Walt on another subject. "I was talking to Sgt Szerzy just before I came over here, he seems to think that this low pressure area is going to cut off searching tomorrow sometime around mid-day. We may lose our searching weather a lot sooner than we had originally thought. How much do we have left to cover? Can we get finished by noon tomorrow and get out of here?"

Walt thought about it. "I think we will need all day tomorrow to sew up the last areas that need coverage, especially with the one Huey not flying, unless you want to skimp on it? When is it expected to clear out again?"

"Saturday," Steve said. "That'll mean a lot of sitting around to get a small last bit done."

"Let's look at it in the morning," Walt suggested. "There is bugger-all we can do now anyway."

"I guess," Steve said. "We should be able to get the morning's flying in, at least here in the interior. The coast may get shut down earlier in the day than that."

Outside the sky was growing dark as evening came on. No stars showed though, as a layer of cirrostratus covered the entire sky.

Steve made the rounds in the room, talking to people, shaking hands. *It feels like a farewell party at the mess*, he thought. He talked to Lt Hutchison and the rest of the US Coast Guard crew, whom he had met down in Williams Lake on the previous weekend. Mike Bertkowiz and his

crew seemed happy to be heading home to Cold Lake, having finished their coverage of the southern interior area around Pemberton. They would leave in the morning to get ahead of the weather coming in from the west.

Another crew that would be going home in the morning would be O'Dale's. They would set out for Edmonton at the same time that Bertkowiz's Twin Huey would. Other than one Labrador out of Comox that would leave only the Coast Guard Pelican in case they needed a helicopter in a hurry. Steve thought that was pretty unlikely, but it would make him look foolish if they found the crash site on the last day and had no helicopter nearby.

Steve made a point of wading into the knot of orange flight suits in the back corner. He knew that peace with the SAR techs had to be re-established before they got home again. The Herc captain, Major Knowles was in the group, too, talking with his brother. They were both laughing about something when Steve reached that part of the group.

"This guy isn't giving you any problems, is he?" Steve asked the Major in mock seriousness. "I certainly have had my problems with him." Steve punched the SAR tech in the shoulder.

"Who, me?" Cpl Knowles said, pleading innocence. "I have been staying out of trouble."

"Of course he has," Major Knowles indicated. "As long as I am in town to keep an eye on him, he is as good as a gentle lamb."

"You have been a great influence, sir," Steve said with a overly dramatic flourish. "Perhaps we can get you posted out to 442, so you can babysit full time."

The major laughed at that suggestion. "Well I would love to get posted to Comox on Buffs, but I'll have to see about getting my baby brother here posted somewhere safe beforehand."

"You mean like Petawawa?" Steve suggested the army base in Ontario where the SAR tech had started his career in the Airborne Regiment as a paratrooper.

"I was thinking of Alert," the major said. "I think some time at the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, scant miles from the north pole would do him some good."

Cpl Knowles seemed to take the ribbing as good-natured. "Hey you know, going to jail is just all part of the risks of being a SAR tech. I wouldn't trade this job for anything."

"Okay," Steve said. "All is forgiven son, you can come home." They shook hands on it.

The room was crowded, warm and noisy and it seemed to Steve

that it was getting more noisy as the evening wore on. Passing the door to the ramp he took the opportunity to step outside into the darkness. Taking a few steps to the south from the doorway, the side of the hangar was bathed in shadows. The air he breathed in was deliciously cool compared to the blister lounge. Looking up he could see no stars.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, Steve noticed the glow of a cigarette further off along the side of the building.

"I thought you were quitting?" Steve said.

"Yeah, I really should," Brenda replied. She was standing all alone in the dark. "I think I might be hooked, though."

"How are you doing?" he asked with a sense of seriousness.

"Oh, okay," she said. "It's a good party, but just kind of busy and hot in there. It looks pretty cloudy now."

"Yeah I think we are going to get some bad weather tomorrow, I'm just trying to figure out how early in the day it will happen. We'll take another look in the morning and let everyone know the plan, It is looking like we won't get all the areas finished until Saturday," Steve explained.

"Would we sit it out here until then?" she asked, drawing another puff.

"Don't know yet, I'll have to see what's left to do," he responded. "You ready to go home?"

"Yeah, I think so," she said, wistfully. "It has been fun being here, but it would be good to go home soon. My husband's birthday is Saturday. I really should put something nice together for him, after all he does for me."

Steve tried to sound magnanimous, "Well that sounds sweet of you."

"I mean it," Brenda explained. "He lets me have all this fun while I am away, I couldn't do it all without his agreement."

"He must be a swell guy."

"Yeah, he is," she insisted. "He's my sweetheart, really."

"You have a strange life, girl."

She thought about that comment. "I think you may find that by the time you get home you have a strange life, too."

"Yeah, you're probably right on that count. It is a mystery to me what that is going to look like."

"Well good luck with the pieces," She dropped her cigarette on the ground, stepped on it and left him standing there in the darkness.

Man I was hoping that we would still be here tomorrow night and get another romp with her, Steve thought. *That doesn't sound much likely,*

either due to the weather or the girl. Oh well fuck her then. It was fun, now it's done.

Someone was approaching where Steve stood in the darkness.

"Howdy boss," Walt greeted him. "I just passed Brenda heading back in there."

"Oh, yeah she was out here for a smoke," Steve explained. "How about you?"

"I just found it was getting darn hot in there. I needed some air."

"Looks overcast," Steve tried, changing the subject.

Walt looked up. "Yeah, it sure does. I guess that is that system coming in. Man the weather here in BC is something to get used to."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Winnipeg."

"Geez, talk about getting used to weather," Steve said.

"Yeah, but at least it doesn't rain all summer there," Walt protested. "What are you going to do about Brenda, now that we are all just about done here?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, everyone can probably get a few days off after the search and then it'll be back to work, probably on Monday. You and I will have to do a bunch of reports, Brenda goes back to the orderly room," Steve explained carefully.

"No, I mean about you and her," Walt asked.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Steve said evenly.

"Come on, everyone knows about this little fling here, you haven't exactly been too discrete about it."

"Walt I don't know what you think you know, but Brenda? Come on, give me a break. Let me put it this way, given the chance, I wouldn't even fuck her with your dick, okay?" Steve said.

"Okay, go ahead and stick to your story, I just wondered if you two were going to carry this on back home, that's all."

"Ready to go back in?" Steve asked.

"Sure," Walt said, "actually we can probably start clearing some of them out and taking them into town."

"Kinda early isn't it?"

Walt checked his watch. "After nine. We should probably let Mac and his crew get home."

"Yeah okay," Steve said. "I have a feeling it will be a long day tomorrow. Are you good to drive?"

"Sure I am."

"How much have you had to drink?"

“Nothing.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m a non-drinker. I thought you knew that? That’s why I thought you asked me to drive.”

“Okay, right,” Steve recovered. “Well let’s slowly get this show on the road then.”

Wednesday 10 October 1984

0735 hours

Steve was first at breakfast and sipped his coffee while he carefully read the restaurant menu. Eventually Walt arrived in the hotel coffee shop.

“I think everyone slept in,” he explained.

“Looks like you did,” Steve remarked. “Late night?”

“Oh well, you know. The SAR techs wanted to go bar-hopping after we got back here from the airport party and it just kind of went from there.”

“How late were you all out?” Steve asked.

“I didn’t really check,” Walt said. “I just went to bed when I got back to my room.”

Steve didn’t believe him, but was past worrying about it. As long as everyone was airborne on time then any other consequences were immaterial. “Any problems in town?”

“Nothing that I saw,” Walt said, glancing at the menu and ordering hot oatmeal and an English muffin when the waitress came by to take their orders. Steve ordered toast as usual.

“Well, as long as there were no arrests this time, I will be happy,” Steve countered. “I would really like to avoid doing all that again.”

“Or press interviews, too,” Walt interjected.

“Any risk of that?”

“Well, I did run into that reporter from the *Citizen* last night at one hotel bar, but he wasn’t working on a story at that point, I don’t think.”

Steve gave Walt a sideways glance. “Withers, you mean? What did he say?”

“Oh, I didn’t talk to him,” Walt explained. “I just waved to him as we left.”

“Where was that?” Steve asked.

“Not sure, we were lots of places last night.”

“I guess you know you aren’t being very helpful here?”

“Next time I will make some notes,” Walt smiled back.

Brenda and Sylvia arrived at the same time as the food. Steve noted that they both seemed chipper and upbeat. They completed the table for four.

“Good morning ladies,” Steve started out.

“Well, good morning to you,” Brenda said brightly, her maritime accent sounding more obvious this morning than most days. Sylvia just smiled in her shy way and said nothing. Steve found that irked him this morning. *Maybe that is because she spent the night with Brenda and I didn't*, he noted.

“So did you get up to no good with this reprobate,” he indicated Walt, “and his travelling SAR tech circus?”

“Not me,” Brenda said, without further explanation.

“Not me either,” Sylvia added.

Steve knew enough not to push the situation. Homosexuality was still reason for dismissal from the CF and he just didn't want to have to be involved in that. Cpl O'Brien and Sgt Szerzy joined them at the next table and talk quickly turned to the weather.

“What do you know so far?” Steve asked the sergeant.

“Well I have to look at the prog faxes out at the trailer, but I made a couple of calls and talked to our forecaster in Comox. He agrees with what I was looking at last night, the system has sped up and will hit the coast this morning and here near midday. I'll have the details worked out for the briefing.” Steve just nodded in a manner that he hoped looked thoughtful.

The later arrivals ordered breakfast quickly and, since they were running behind schedule, ate rapidly and got on the road to the airport shortly after eight o'clock.

Once at the trailer everyone set to work without complaint. The key person was Sgt Szerzy, as his news would drive the plans for the day. Steve had a quick look at the prog charts and motioned Walt into the briefing area. Outside on the ramp the aircrew were getting the aircraft ready to fly, pulling bungs and untying props and rotors.

“Let's do some concurrent activity here,” Steve said directly. “The progs seem to support what the sergeant was saying yesterday.” He looked over the tops of his glasses at Walt. “We are going to lose our weather on the coast by mid morning and here around lunchtime. It looks like it will be Saturday before we can pick it up again. The question is what are we going to do?”

Walt had been considering the problem. “Well, I have looked at what we have left to search for full coverage, which is the other half of the

equation along with the weather. Because we lost the 408 Twin Huey the other day we're behind on the plan, but we did get the southern area completed and we have the Cold Lake Twin Huey here now to fill in."

"Give me the bottom line, if we have to quit at lunchtime, how much will be left to do?"

Walt looked over the charts again. "Well I am thinking about 16 aircraft hours worth of searching."

"I don't mind sending the fixed-wing boys home IFR in the weather, but what if we send Mike's crew home now to get ahead of the weather instead of using them to search this morning?" Steve asked, a plan formulating in his head.

"I guess we would have about 19 hours of searching left then," Walt estimated.

"Okay that is a half a day," Steve said.

"I gather that you don't think it is worth sitting out two and half days here to search a half a day?" Walt concluded.

"Exactly," Steve said. "Give me 'Plan B' then."

"Okay, how about we send Mike's crew home now, as you mentioned, along with O'Dale's crew too. That will leave us one helicopter on this side of the hills in case we need to actually do a rescue. The two Buffs, Herc and Twotter can search as much as possible and then head out when they have done what they can do. They can report back to us by radio or from home when they get there."

"I think we are thinking along the same lines," Steve remarked. "What about the Coast Guard?"

"They will have to head out when they can – they have to go west anyway, so they may get stuck, or not. Can't help that at this point. We're footing the bill so they shouldn't complain too much."

"And us here?" Steve asked.

"Last Buff to Comox? I would guess, after lunchtime."

"Okay, good," Steve concluded. "That only leaves us the problem of the areas that need the coverage flown."

"Have to do it on Saturday out of Comox, I guess," Walt concluded. "If we can get even two Buffs and a Lab that should get it done in one day, hopefully. Then we can close the file."

"Okay, I am sold. I think that makes the best sense," Steve said. "Now I just have to sell RCC on that for a plan and they just might say 'no', too."

"I think you will have to sell the CO, too," Walt added.

"True," Steve considered, "true. Okay I have some calls to make

then. You get on and assign the areas for this morning. Put the emphasis on this end of the route as it will be easier to cover more westerly from Comox, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Walt said. “Okay, will do.”

Steve left Walt to detail the areas for each aircraft and called RCC. Captain Brian Leblanc answered the phone. “I’m looking for the CO,” Steve announced.

“Not in yet,” Leblanc responded.

Steve briefly explained the dilemma and the plan they had put together.

“You might as well save it for the boss,” Leblanc said dryly.

“Decisions like that are above my pay level.”

“So when will he be in?” Steve said with some annoyance.

“Beats me, but I will have him call you.” Leblanc was his usual helpful self, Steve noted after he had hung up.

Steve’s next call was to the CO of 442, Lieutenant Colonel Braithwaite. “He is in met briefing,” his secretary announced. “Is there a message?”

“No that’s okay, I’ll call him back.” The search met briefing had started anyway and Steve wanted to hear Sgt Szerzy’s details.

Steve infiltrated the back of the briefing area while Szerzy was running over the weather picture in front of an audience of navs and most of the aircraft captains. The forecast for ceiling, visibility and precipitation did, indeed, not look good. Walt was up next giving the general picture of the day’s search areas and handing out assignments.

Steve decided to address the group.

“As you can tell by the weather and the assignments we are looking at a short day today. Rather than have two and half days of sitting on the ground we are going to send everyone home at noon and finish the few remaining areas to be covered from Comox on the weekend when this all clears up. We’ll have lunches for everyone here to facilitate getting in the air for home.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Major Knowles said, “but since we have the gas we’ll just do our areas and then head straight for Namao.”

Steve nodded in agreement. “Okay we’ll skip lunch for you then. Thanks for coming out and joining us.” The meeting broke up quickly, with the new plans there was much for the aircrew to do.

Wednesday 10 October 1984
0916 hours

“Well they both bought it,” Steve announced to the office after hanging up the phone from the second call. The room was empty except for Walt.

“That’s good,” Walt said. The rest of the crew were outside packing equipment in the containers.

“Yeah, it would have been a bad scene if the answer was ‘no – stay and finish the job’. Everyone would have to bring all that stuff back in here,” Steve admitted.

“So what did RCC say?” Walt asked.

“Well the RCC CO wasn’t totally happy, but he saw the logic in sewing it up at this point. We are going to hold the files open until the last ‘X’ is done and then package it all up and send it to Victoria. He doesn’t want it handed back until the job is finished. Our own CO had no problems with our plan. He didn’t see any point in holding everyone here watching it rain. I think it helped that it is already raining in Comox and getting foggy there, too. The Comox-based aircraft are already on the ground now.”

“I wonder when we’re going to lose our weather here,” Walt was looking at his watch.

“I suspect that the aircraft working west of here will let us know by knocking it off out there and heading back in,” Steve noted. “Then we will know we have an hour or so left.”

Outside on the ramp one of the two Twin Hueys was starting up. Steve had gone out to say goodbye to both Twin Huey crews and thank them for being part of the operation. Mike Bertkowiz had invited Steve to come and visit in Cold Lake, once he had retired. Steve had promised to do that, but not until the summer. “Winter in Cold Lake just isn’t my scene, you can keep the -40C stuff,” he had said and Mike had called him a ‘West Coast Wimp’.

Tim O’Brien was busy helping Brenda and Sylvia load the admin supplies into one container. The radio gear would have to wait until the aircraft were down and so Tim had left the radios on external speaker. It always surprised Steve, after hearing so many ‘Rescue’ call signs for so long on a search, when the aircraft switched to their own call signs to go home. The reason for this was simple, they were off the search and so weren’t entitled to the priority air traffic control handling accorded to a ‘Rescue’ call sign. Instead of ‘Rescue 5143’ Bertkowiz’s Huey checked in with Prince George Tower as ‘Canadian Military 5143’. To Steve it was the sure sign of a search in its last hours, a forlorn sound.

After Bertkowiz’s Twin Huey had departed, Gary O’Dale’s was

next and Steve heard him check in with Tower as 'Gander 54', hover taxi to the edge of the ramp and depart for Namao. 'Gander' was for 408 'Canada Goose' Squadron, a nickname the squadron had picked up when it was a bomber unit in World War Two.

With the racket of the two Twin Hueys over the horizon, the airport grew quiet once again. Steve looked out the trailer window at the dull gray sky outside and the windsocks indicting an east wind once again. *This airport is going to get a lot quieter once we are gone, probably the whole town will, as well*, he thought.

He turned to check up on Walt, who was carefully plotting out the traces of the areas that would be left to search and their percentages of coverage achieved to date. All the areas that would have to be done after the weather cleared had been searched to one degree or another, 10% coverage, 20% coverage, just not enough to be checked off as complete. Steve was convinced it was just a fill-in-the blanks exercise and that they would find nothing more of the search object than they had so far.

Sgt Szerzy had left his latest surface analysis on the table, along with the prog charts out to 48 hours while he had taken the car to return to the hotel room to pack up his gear there. Steve looked over the charts. The system was inextricably rolling in, blanketing the north coast, the Queen Charlotte Islands and the northern half of Vancouver Island in its wet mantle. Steve thought about the military electronic spy station up in the Queen Charlottes at CFS Masset. He had visited it many times by Labrador helicopter, a beautiful and lonely spot on the edge of the north Pacific Ocean. *I'll bet it is raining hard there today.*

"I am going over to see Mac," Steve announced to Walt.

"I guess I can hold the fort," Walt responded, gesturing at the total lack of activity save the packing up outside, although the radios and phones had to be manned while flying was still going on.

Steve put on his flying jacket and left the trailer. Outside the wind had a raw quality to it and the temperature was already not that far above the freezing mark. He proceeded to the west end of the trailer to have a look at the progress on the loading of the SAR kits.

"Almost done?" he asked.

"Well it would have been quicker, but these containers were wet inside," Brenda indicated the large metal boxes. "We had to up-end them to drain them and then dry them with some paper towels."

Sylvia held up a wad of wet and dirty paper towels as evidence. Brenda explained, "It was a mess. Maybe we should drill some drain holes in these for next time?"

"I guess we should have put them in Mac's hangar," Steve admitted. "I'll add that to the checklist for next time."

"Or include a tarp in the kits," Tim added.

Steve proceeded on to Mac's hangar blister office where the party had been the previous night. Walking in the front door from the ramp he noticed that it had been cleaned up and the banner had been removed from the wall. Mac was behind the counter.

"The place looks cleaner than we left it last night," Steve remarked.

"Oh, it didn't take long to straighten out," Mac said. "Military people are neat compared to some groups we get in here. You should see what it looks like when we get forest fire evacuations coming into town. I had to repaint the walls after last year."

Steve helped himself to coffee as Mac's was better than what they had in the trailer. "We have some bad weather on the way and so we are going to be leaving later on today, I just wanted you to know that you can have your trailer back."

"Oh, no problem, we don't have any plans for that trailer anyway, unless another flying school gets started here. That doesn't look too likely, the other one on the field isn't that busy."

"We have arranged for a cleaner to come in and straighten it up after we've gone," Steve added.

"Hardly necessary," Mac said, waving his hand dismissively, "but if you have already hired them then that is fine, more federal government money spread around town is always a good thing."

Steve smiled at the thought. "It is all business to you, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah mostly," Mac admitted. "This town is hurting these days, we need all the help we can get. Conventions, meetings, forest fires, searches, it all helps make up for the downturn in forestry and mining."

"As long as you aren't setting the fires or losing the aircraft to whip up the business..." Steve added.

Mac laughed. "No I'm not that kind of businessman, although I think some of the fires last summer weren't as accidental as some people think. I've never heard of anyone losing an airplane just to sell gas though."

"That's probably because all the PEP spotters we use are all volunteers, unlike in the fire fighting game, where they pay people to get out there and fight the fires. That motivates more fires, if you ask me," Steve said, "but if you were to lose an airplane to sell gas then you'd want to really lose it well, like this one was."

"Why is that?" Mac asked.

“Because the ones that aren't really well lost are the ones we find pretty quickly.”

Mac laughed out loud. “Are you guys that good? I thought you didn't find most of them?”

Actually in the past five years I think we are close to fifty-fifty here in BC,” Steve said. “424 Squadron in Trenton finds about 90%, but that is no challenge, their area is flat and they mostly spend their time rescuing weekend boaters. Anyone can do that stuff. Out here in BC is the hard SAR.”

“Well there is no doubt that most of this province is rough country,” Mac admitted. “It's probably the best place this side of Borneo to lose an airplane. I've lost lots of things since I came here twenty years ago.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, “like what?”

“Well my first wife for sure,” Mac laughed. “She couldn't take the rain on the coast.”

Steve made a dismissive gesture at Mac's joke. “More likely she didn't like your sense of humour.”

“That, too,” Mac was still laughing. “Of course if she couldn't take a joke she shouldn't have married me in the first place.” One of the linemen looked into the reception area to see if he was okay.

“That goes for all of them,” Steve said. “I gotta get going here. Thanks for the use of the trailer. Send us your final bill.”

“Don't worry, I will,” Mac was still chuckling. “Have a good flight home. If I see that missing 310 I'll give you a call.”

Wednesday 10 October 1984

1115 hours

The Hercules had been searching an area west-northwest of Prince George and was the first to report they were quitting because of the weather.

“Rescue 311 is knocking it off,” Tim O'Brien reported to Steve. “They are reporting vis down to 3 miles in snow in their area.”

“Okay,” Steve acknowledged, “anything else?”

“They changed their call sign and filed IFR to Namao,” Tim said.

“Okay that is the third aircraft done, then,” Steve calculated. Walt had removed the aircraft status board from the wall and now had it on his table. He changed it to show that the two Twin Hueys and now the Herc had departed.

"I'll just have to get Major Knowles' report when they get home, so I can figure out what was completed and what is left to cover," Walt added, writing in his notebook. "That leaves just the two Buffs out of here."

A few minutes later Major Payne's Buffalo checked in. "They are reporting the weather is down in their area as well," O'Brien reported. "They are asking if you have a ride home, as they have enough gas to make Comox from where they are."

"No that is fine," Steve said to Tim. "We'll get Lance to pick us up here." Then to Walt he said, "Given a choice I'd rather not have to ride with Payne, anyway."

"Okay, he acknowledged and they are filed IFR to Comox, then," Tim said.

"You had better get Rescue 5462 and let them know they're our ride home," Steve said. The rad op made the call.

"What about lunch, boss?" Brenda asked.

"At this point looks like we will just need enough for us and Lance's crew. Can you take care of that?" Steve asked.

"No problem," Brenda said.

Tim O'Brien had finished the radio call to Lance's Buff. "They'll be on the ground here in about 30 minutes."

With Brenda and Sylvia gone to pick up lunch and the last of their gear from the hotel, the remainder of the HQ crew waited at the trailer. With the packing mostly done there wasn't much left to do.

Outside the sky was leaden, the colour of dirty dishwater and the wind swept out of the east bringing an icy chill to the airport. The temperature remained near the freezing mark, but the wind and the dampness in the air made it feel colder.

Steve was watching Sgt Szerzy arranging faxes and paper. "I think we are done," Steve said to him.

"Well I figured that the Buffalo crew giving us a ride home would need a met briefing," Szerzy explained.

"True," Steve admitted. "How does it look?"

"Well Comox is down in fog and rain, but it will stay above approach limits."

"Where is good for an alternate?" Steve asked.

"Victoria is going to be VFR all day. This just isn't going to get that far south today."

After the weeks of activity, the late stage in the operation brought an uneasy waiting time. Walt fished a novel out of his bag and sat back to read.

At last Lance's Buffalo, Rescue 5462, called tower, ten miles back from entering the control zone.

"Airshow time!" Walt announced.

"I hope not," Steve said and then added. "As long as he doesn't pile it in and we can get out of here I'll be happy. If he breaks that Buff I'll kill him."

Walt put his book away and headed outside to watch. With the wind and cool temperatures, no one else followed him.

The phone rang and Steve answered it. It was from the US Coast Guard crew, on the ground in Williams Lake. Steve confirmed that they were done, released and free to head home on their own time. He also thanked Lt Hutchison for their help.

"No sweat, we'll have to have you come down to Washington State and do a search for us next time," the American replied, "I think we may be able to out-do that party of yours."

"That shouldn't be too hard, but okay you're on," Steve said, adding, "but unless it happens before New Year's I won't be there, gone, retired."

"Well there is a deal," Hutchison replied.

Hutchison indicated his crew would get things cleaned up and head out that same afternoon, to try to stay ahead of the weather and make it home to Port Angeles.

As Steve hung up the phone Walt came back into the trailer.

"Hey you should see this," Walt said, indicating outside.

Steve grabbed his flying jacket on the way out the door. "What did Lance do now, forget to put the gear down?"

Out by the picnic table Walt gestured towards the parked Buffalo. The ramp was down and the crew were starting their post flight inspections. Mac's fuel truck was there too, of course. Steve spotted two out-of-place figures, walking across the ramp from the direction of the Buffalo towards the parking lot. They looked like young women, maybe teenagers or early twenties by their manner of dress.

"They were on the Buff," Walt explained.

"Ah," Steve said, making a palm-down dismissive wave, "let 'em have their fun. Don't sweat it."

"Okay," Walt said with a shrug, "I think those are the two strippers they met downtown last night. We ran into all of them after the party at the Shell. I think his SAR techs picked them up."

"Jones and Knowles?"

"Yup."

“I guess Lance figured that he owed them a ride.”

“I guess.”

“Believe me, you don't want to know any more,” Steve assured him. “Now that they are down safe and sound let's get this thing sewn up.” Steve indicated the parking lot, where Brenda and Sylvia were walking back with two boxes of take-out food. There was nothing more to be done on the ramp and the air was cold out in the wind. Walt and Steve returned to the trailer.

In the briefing area Walt arranged the tables and chairs for lunch as Brenda and Sylvia arrived with the food, placing the boxes on the tables.

“Who were the teenyboppers?” Brenda asked. Steve surmised that they had passed them in the parking lot.

Walt had his mouth open and was about to answer her when Steve jumped in. “No idea who you mean,” he said.

Brenda smirked. “Sure you do, you were watching them too, I saw you. They were on that Buffalo.” Walt had closed his mouth and now it was his turn to smirk, watching Steve 'handle' this one.

“Groupies,” Steve pronounced carefully.

“I had to ask,” Brenda said to no one in particular. Sylvia giggled to herself.

“Okay, then, lunch,” Brenda said, opening the boxes of sandwiches. “I thought we would raid the deli downtown for a change.” The Buff crew arrived just in time for the food. Lance was the last one in the door.

“You didn't bring your groupies for lunch,” Brenda said to Lance.

“Huh?” was all Lance said.

Amongst the lunchtime confusion, Cpl Knowles, pulled Brenda aside. “We didn't tell him about them, so don't spoil the fun, okay?”

“You mean they were on the whole time and he didn't know?” Brenda asked.

Knowles gave her a thumbs up and grabbed another sandwich, making a stack of three of them.

Wednesday 10 October 1984

1232 hours

Steve was looking at the aircraft status board on Walt's desk, while out in the briefing area lunch carried on in noisy fashion. He had just hung up the phone.

“Was that the Twotter crew?” Walt asked as he entered the office

area.

"The PEP boys," Steve explained. "They're down in Williams Lake. I released them, thanked them for all their work and told them to send us the bill for the gas from the past week."

"I guess that they will be happy to send that in," Walt remarked.

"Free gas is about as close to free flying as they can get," Steve pronounced. "Hard to think that there are people who do all this for nothing and think it is fun."

"Good thing that there is," Walt added, eating a cookie he had brought in from the other room. "Otherwise we would have to do all this searching ourselves. Have you talked to that Twin Otter crew at all yet? They are the last ones down."

"No I haven't and I was asking the PEP crew if they had seen them and they hadn't." Steve added. "Where did you have them working this morning?"

"Southwest of Williams, north of Lillooet," Walt replied.

"I hope that they are okay out there," Steve checked the radio log book and noted that they had made their 30 minutes 'ops normal' check almost a half an hour ago.

"The weather is probably still okay down in that area," Walt said, checking the map. "It isn't even down here yet." Steve pointed outside where snowflakes were blowing past the trailer's window.

"Maybe I should try them on the radio," Walt said looking at the snow with some surprise. "I thought we would only get rain here."

"Give them their 30 minutes," Steve decided. "I don't want to rush them if they are getting useful work done."

Steve went back to the briefing area to see if any of those cookies remained. The room was beginning to empty out as the Buffalo crew went about getting ready to leave. The aircraft had been refueled, Lance and his nav got a weather briefing from Sgt Szerzy.

"You about ready to go home?" Lance asked Steve.

"Still got one aircraft in the air we have to locate," Steve said.

"Not those Coast Guard wing-nuts?"

"I guess you met them, did you?" Steve said with a laugh.

"Yeah at the hangar hoe-down."

"Naw I sent them home already. It is the 440 crew I'm waiting for."

"Geez those guys from Edmonton are always slow, slow plane, heck the gear doesn't even fold up on that thing."

Steve looked at his watch. The Twin Otter was overdue for its check-in. He turned to Tim, who was helping Brenda and Sylvia clean up

lunch. "Can you get a hold of that Twin Otter and find out what they are up to? They should have checked in by now." He headed for his radios.

After lunch was all cleaned up, Brenda surveyed the place. "Man I am glad I don't have to clean this whole place," she said. "It's a wreck."

Tim was back in a few minutes. "No joy VHF or HF," he said. Steve went to the office and picked up the phone, dialing the number for the Williams Lake Flight Service Station. It was answered on the second ring.

"Captain McBain here at search headquarters in Prince George, I'm looking for my yellow Twin Otter."

"Just landed," the Flight Service Specialist reported. "They are still taxiing. Do you want me to ask them to call you?"

"Naw," Steve said, "they'll call once they get shut down, but thanks anyway. Incidentally that was the last flight for this search, we are done."

"Well that is too bad," the FSS operator said.

"Yeah I guess you will miss all the traffic we generated," Steve remarked.

"Actually I meant it was too bad that you didn't find the missing Cessna 310 you were looking for."

"That is true, too," Steve replied. "We have a few areas left to cover from Comox, once this weather clears up to totally to finish the search off, so maybe we will luck out and find them still."

"I hope you do, we lose too many aircraft up this way. It is really sad when they never get found at all."

"Hopefully we will find something yet, you never know," Steve said, dodging. "I wanted to thank you guys there at the Williams Lake FSS for all your help during this search. We appreciate the support."

"No sweat," the FSS operator said, before hanging up.

"Found them?" Walt asked.

"Yeah they are down at Williams Lake," Steve explained, "I guess they forgot to check in as they were landing."

Walt marked them off the list. "That is everyone down then."

"Okay good, now I just have to talk to the Twotter crew and send them home and we can go too." Outside the snow was swirling past the window, but the ramp stayed wet as the surface was still too warm for it to accumulate.

"It looks like winter out there," Walt remarked.

"It's too early for winter, even up this far north," Steve said, watching the large flakes whirl in the wind. "Still it will be nice to get back the coast and summertime, compared to this."

"The actuals look pretty cool in Comox, too, rain and all that," Walt replied.

"Ah, it is still +11C there and by the weekend we will be out golfing again."

"That is a nice thought," Walt added, "but if we are going to send the fleet out to finish the SAR I think we'll have to work this weekend."

Steve considered that. "I was thinking we'd just brief them and let ops do the flight following and that stuff."

"You think Major Payne will go for that?"

"That is a good question," Steve admitted. "Maybe I can translate our new-found friendship into a favour?"

Walt laughed. "I think we are going to be working this weekend."

Wednesday 10 October 1984

1402 hours

The CC-115 Buffalo lifted off Prince George's runway 06 into a sky swirling with flakes of snow the size of potato chips.

The departure had been later than Lance had been aiming for, delayed by loading the SAR HQ containers onto the Buff's ramp. Even Vancouver Centre had been slow coughing up his IFR clearance.

To save time Lance had opted for an intersection takeoff from where runway 01 met 06, the remaining two thousand-odd feet of runway being sufficient for the lightly-loaded Buffalo. The aircraft was into the thick of the weather before it reached 800 feet and had commenced its turn towards Comox enroute. No one on board saw the city of Prince George one last time before the aircraft entered cloud.

The thick, wet clouds were smooth inside, at least until the Buffalo climbed over the high ground west of Prince George and then it found some turbulence. Leveling off, the flight was in cloud the whole way to Comox.

In the cargo area seating the SAR HQ crew had time to rest enroute. After 17 days on SAR Schmidt they now had nothing to do except listen to the thrumming of the General Electric CT64 engines and the big Hartzell propellers.

Steve sat near the back of the Buffalo, in the last seat before the ramp, next to where the containers were tied down with large ratchet straps two inches wide. Steve noticed that the yellow webbing vibrated in sympathy with the whole airframe. He didn't often sit in the back of any aircraft and there wasn't much of interest back in the cargo hold of a

freighter. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the sideways-facing red nylon sling seat against the insulation blankets between him and the aircraft's outside skin. The seats were impossible to get comfortable on, but he put his feet up on a bundle of cargo in the centre aisle. Thankfully the flight would be a short one.

This is where I came in, Steve thought, sitting in the back of Lance's Buff, but it feels like a lifetime ago. Man, I felt younger then or at least less tired than I do now. It hasn't even been quite three weeks. We all had such high hopes then, hoping to find the missing plane and hoping to go home with a job well done. Home. There is something else that has probably changed. What is that going to look like? I am not sure I want to know. Hopefully she has just come home, cleaned the place up and things will carry on as normal once again. I probably should have tried calling again this week, but I really didn't want to know. Maybe she just needed some time on her own to sort out some stuff? As long as she is back, then who cares what it was all about? All is forgiven, yaddah, yaddah, et cetera, and they all lived happily ever after...

That line of thinking didn't lead any further, the realities of life in Comox were beyond his grasp for an hour or so. Steve thought about other things. *What are the next few weeks going to be like? There is going to be a lot to do, he thought, starting with unpacking all this SAR junk, laundry, the final SAR ops report to write, the searchmaster's logbook to sew up, archives to create of everything associated with the SAR to ship off to RCC, financial reports to gather up, letters of thanks for all the crews and the HQ staff, the CO will want to talk to me, I am sure, oh yeah and finishing the actual search.*

He tried to list in his head all the people who would need 'nice letters'. These letters were not mere social pleasantries, but were pretty much obligatory for military members as they were used as inputs to their PERs and thus postings and promotions relied on them. To Steve they were a waste of time, but had to be done, nonetheless. The list quickly got too long to remember, so he pulled out his notebook and started making a list. First were the aircraft crews, they could get one letter per squadron, except for his own squadron: Base Flight Cold Lake; 440, 435 and 408 Squadrons from Edmonton and the US Coast Guard from Port Angeles. The PEP crews were another matter. One 'nice letter' would have to be sent to PEP itself in Victoria, but letters would have to be sent to the crew leaders as well. He decided that two letters there would do, one for PEP HQ and one for Mark Abercromby, mentioning everyone involved. Abercromby could make copies for individual PEP pilots and members if he wanted to.

408 was a problem, too. O'Dale's crew would get a letter, but what about Aitkinson's crew? Something would have to be said, perhaps a letter to the 408 CO, extolling the fine work the crew did? It wouldn't do anything for their PERs, Steve noted dryly.

Was that a bad idea? There were still two investigations going on into that crash, would a letter be seen as an attempt to influence them? No that was paranoid thinking, Steve decided. These letters were always routine and filled with standard language, more obligatory noise. Okay, he decided, he would have to send something to 408 about Aitkinson's crew. This was new to him as he hadn't written a letter under these circumstances before. Perhaps the 442 orderly room had an example of a past letter he could crib for language.

Okay, who else? Steve asked himself as the Buffalo jolted in turbulence. Writing notes under these conditions was an art that he had mastered years ago. *For sure everyone on the HQ team: members of other units: Major Krepinski from DND OI at Region HQ in Victoria, of course, Sgt Szerzy and MCpl Cardinal from the base. And the people borrowed from his own squadron: Walt would get a detailed letter and most others would get shorter ones, Cpl O'Brien and MCpl Fineworth. Hmmm, what to write about Brenda?* he wondered. *Just keep it standard and perfunctory,* he decided. *Who else? Major Payne, the detachment commander? I guess so, he decided – just keep it standard. What about the SAR techs Cpls Jones and Knowles? Hmm, just include them in the blanket letter for their crews. It is not like they did anything useful on this op anyway. No credit where no credit is due,* he decided.

Was that it? The 442 crews that actually flew on the search would get a letter per crew. He would have to go back over the records next week and see who actually flew on the search, probably just about everyone not involved in the school operations did. Even then it was possible that Lab student trips had been done searching. *Screw it, he decided, if they did they'll just get course reports and that is it.*

Steve looked at the list and sighed. It was a long list. He had sample form letters and would just copy them out longhand and have the orderly room do all the typing. No rush, it wouldn't take him long to do the drafting, but the typing could be done over a month or so, if need be. *Maybe I'll just make up a form and fill in the blanks for the typists. Here is another wrinkle,* he thought as the Buff lurched again, *I can't have Brenda type her own letter. I'll have to make sure someone else does that one.* Check with Chief Clerk, he noted next to Brenda's name.

The Buffalo wallowed again in the rough air over the mountains

and Steve looked forward. Most of the HQ crew were fast asleep and the rough air didn't wake them. Only Brenda seemed to be awake and when she saw him looking at her she flashed him a quick smile.

What to do about her? Steve wondered. *She had made it pretty plain that we can't continue this back home. That is too bad really, because she is really quite good. I really want to find a way to do her at least one more time. Have to work out a way of making that happen some time.*

He closed his notebook and stowed it away. That was enough work for now. The flight was getting too rough to do more writing anyway. *Must be over the big hills.* He looked out the small window, but there was nothing but cloud to be seen, thick and gray.

One more search done, he thought, probably my last one and amen to that. After all these years of doing this it was time to do something else, play golf, anything else. How long had it been? He wondered. *Let's see, I joined the RCAF in 1950, got my wings in 1956 and started flying SAR in 1964. Man that was twenty years ago, no wonder I have had enough of dumb pilots getting lost and crashing their planes! I am just glad this one is nearly done. One more day of flying and then the paperwork and we are finished. Everyone can get on with their lives.*

Everyone can get on with their lives. He considered that statement. *Okay the dead people on that plane can't and neither can the relatives yet, although I guess they will get used to it over time. They will have to, won't they?*

What about the relatives? Loretta MacKinstry – she will get over it and probably already has, with her bombastic way of charging around with her Gulfstreams, personal assistants, psychics and all that. Lorraine Schmidt or whatever her name is now? Well Lorraine will miss her support payments, but then it sounds like she wasn't getting any of them anyway even before the accident. What about Ruby, Schmidt's three year old daughter? Too young to even understand. Jan Schmidt's brother in Europe? What brother? If he cared he would have shown up or at least called. The Cepucci family? Never met 'em, not my problem. That leaves only the von Richthofen family. I never met the wife or the mother, but if George was any indication the brother won't be missed a whole heck of a lot. The company will elect a new chairman or whatever and get on with life, which is what we all should do. You can't get bogged down in the details. People die every day, we did our job now everyone else has to get on with it.

The note of the Buffalo's props dropped in pitch and Steve knew

that they were on their way down to Comox. Lance flipped on the seat belt sign and the loadmaster walked his way through the cargo area checking everyone to make sure they were buckled in. He motioned to Brenda to wake up Sylvia who was still asleep. CF rules – everyone has to be awake for landing.

As the descent continued Steve turned to watch out the small window. It was still white outside. Then they were clear of the cloud and the world was all water outside, mist and rain. The landing gear doors opened under the engine nacelles and the long gangly gear emerged. The flaps were run down to an intermediate setting. The familiar cliffs of Cape Lazo flashed underneath the wheels and soon the Buffalo was in the flare, held off the runway and then struck the ground with a loud crash, shaking baggage loose, although the Buffalo didn't bounce. Props were reversed, the plane shuddered to a near halt and then pulled off the runway and taxied the long way to the 442 ramp.

Once shut down the passengers and crew all exited by the ramp and the 442 ground crew, working out in the rain attached a tug to the aircraft right away, intending to unload it in the dry hangar instead of on the ramp.

Out on the asphalt Steve caught up with Lance, walking in the rain to the squadron ops blister.

“Nice landing,” Steve said sarcastically.

Lance pointed to his co-pilot. “It was his turn to crash the plane this time.”

“Good job,” Steve said to the co-pilot.

“Hey at least we're home,” Lance offered.

“You going to fly the last day on SAR Schmidt on Saturday?” Steve asked him as they reached the door and ducked out of the rain.

“Not me,” Lance said. “If it is good enough to fly it is good enough for golf and I have earned some days off.”

Wednesday 10 October 1984

1634 hours

The Buffalo had arrived back at CFB Comox near the end of the regular squadron work day and the ground crew had the big yellow freighter in the hangar quickly. Once it was inside and out of the rain, the SAR HQ team all retrieved their personal gear from the aircraft.

For its part the CC-115 dropped rainwater on the hard surface of the coated concrete floor. The water dripped from the wings and especially

from the flaps, it ran in small streams down the long landing gear legs and puddled on the floor. The raindrops that fell from the high T-tail almost 29 feet above the hangar floor made an audible plunk as splashed down.

“What about the SAR containers?” Walt asked.

“Servicing can just unload them, leave them in the corner of the hangar here and they can get repacked tomorrow,” Steve said. “I’m not going to worry about it.”

“You need a lift home?” Walt asked.

“Yeah, actually that would be good,” Steve admitted. “Got a car here?”

“Laureen’s coming to pick me up. Are you ready to go?”

“Hmm, I should dump my gear in my office and perhaps let the CO know we made it back. When will she be here?”

“Ten minutes?”

“Okay I’ll make that work,” Steve said. “Meet you out front.” He left to drop his helmet bag in his office locker.

Upstairs in the hangar, the office area was quiet, most of the squadron personnel had gone for the day. In his own office, Steve noticed that nothing had changed, except perhaps more dust on his World War II-era desk. The last time new furniture had been procured for the unit Steve had resisted giving up the old wooden desk and its matching oak chair with the green canvas cushion, for the modern steel, plastic and particle board offerings. *Soon this old desk can accumulate all the dust it wants, he thought. They will probably burn it when I leave and replace it with some plastic piece of junk.*

He made his way to the end of the hallway to the colonel’s office. In the outer office his civilian secretary was just putting on her coat.

“Colonel in?” Steve asked.

“Just a minute and I’ll check if he is available,” she replied, shifted to the inner doorway and said a few words into the inner office. She gestured that Steve could enter.

Lieutenant Colonel Braithwaite was sitting at his desk as Steve entered.

“Back from the war so soon?” he said in a jovial voice.

“Yes sir, SAR Schmidt is all done, except for that one more day of flying we discussed, probably Saturday.”

“Well good work,” the Colonel said. “Are you heading home right away?”

“Yes sir,” Captain Ashbury is giving me a lift.” Steve glanced at his watch for emphasis.

"Well you have earned a break, are you taking time off until Saturday, then?"

"I'll have to see how it looks, still lots to sew up including planning the last day's worth of flying. You won't have to order me out on leave, I'll take the first good golf day off, I promise."

The Colonel laughed. "Okay, well you are old enough to know when to take time off. I guess we are losing you soon, aren't we?"

"Yes sir, at the end of the year, I'll be golfing full time."

"If you can afford the green fees, I suppose. Well I won't keep you. I am sure that you will want to do some laundry. Say hello to Linda for me." The CO knew every member of the squadron's spouses' names and always made a point of asking after them.

Steve left the CO's office and headed for the front of the hangar. *That is why I never got to be a Colonel, he surmised, I never learned all the wives' names. Too busy flying SARs for that kind of social stuff.*

Leaving the hangar on the street side Steve noted that Walt and his wife were already there, waiting in the car, with his wife sitting behind the wheel. Steve surmised that in her state of pregnancy she probably didn't want to get out of the car more than was needed. Steve carried his parachute bag to their car, walking faster to get through the falling rain.

"Sorry to keep you waiting for me," Steve said as he dropped his bag into the backseat and slid in beside it. Walt introduced her to Steve and he leaned forward to shake her hand.

"I am sure we met at the Squadron Christmas party," Steve said.

"I think so," Laureen replied. She was a pretty blond girl in her mid-twenties, Steve noted and she seemed to be quite large for seven months pregnant.

"How are you doing, anyway?" he asked, looking for something to say. "Not having twins are you?"

"Sometimes it feels like it," she responded with a weak smile. "Two more months to go, though."

"Well I am sure you will be happy when it is all done," Steve said.

"I am just looking forward to a quiet family Christmas at home," she concluded.

"Sounds like a nice plan," Steve said.

"I'm just trying to make sure that I have some time off stand-by over Christmas," Walt added. "I wouldn't want to be scrambled."

"I am sure that we can work something out," Steve said. "Perhaps a NOTAM cautioning all civilian pilots in BC not to crash."

"Ditto for the boaters," Walt added.

Laureen drove to Steve's PMQ, while Walt gave her directions. "Looks like you need to cut your lawn," Walt quipped.

"Yeah as soon as it stops raining," Steve responded dryly. "Thanks for the lift." To Laureen he added, "Hope your delivery goes well."

The black 1964 Impala was there, parked in the driveway, but there was no sign of Linda's car.

Steve lugged his parachute bag to the doorstep and fished for the keys in his flight suit pocket. He purposely did so slowly, until Walt and Laureen had gone, not knowing what he would find when he opened the door.

Wednesday 10 October 1984

1712 hours

The front door opened into a dark, chilled and silent house. Steve tossed his wet parachute bag into the foyer and listened.

"Hi honey, I'm home," he tried as a gambit.

There was no response and he wasn't really surprised.

He closed the front door behind himself and pocketed the keys. He took his boots off and left them in the hall closet. The wooden flooring in the hallway creaked loudly as he walked on it, making the place sound empty and abandoned. The house smelled a bit musty, like it hadn't be aired out in a while. The furnace had been left set low and the air was cool. He bumped the thermostat up and the furnace came to life, starting itself up with a growl.

Steve hesitated, not sure where to start. He needed to figure out what was left behind and decided on the kitchen. Scott had been right, the place was neat and clean, but about half the pots, pans and dishes were gone, about half the cutlery, too. The fridge was pretty much empty, just some old bottles of salad dressing, ketchup and mustard from last summer's barbecues. There wasn't much in the freezer, either, he noted.

Steve quietly crept from room to room, not wanting to disturb the evidence, if any. In the living room Linda's collection of "Canadian Living" magazines was gone, as was one picture from the wall.

What picture was that, anyway? He tried to remember. *Couldn't have been very important if I don't remember it*, he decided.

In the dining room the 'good' table cloth was gone and two of the chairs. The table cloth had been a wedding present from her parents, of that much he was sure, a rather garish embroidered affair with flowers on it.

She is welcome to that, he decided, but who takes two chairs from a dining room set?

Upstairs in the bedroom he checked the closets. As Scott had reported, her clothes were all gone to the last item, even her wedding dress, which she hadn't had unwrapped in years and she couldn't get into now, even if she wanted to.

Bad sign, he thought.

The linen closet was the same story – about half the towels were gone as were sheets, pillow cases and her sewing machine.

Well I think I can rule out a weekend out with the girls, he thought. No one takes a sewing machine and a 30 year old wedding dress that she could never squeeze into, on a trip like that.

He had saved the bathroom for last, remembering what Scott had reported in their phone conversation of twelve days ago. He tentatively looked into the bathroom downstairs and checked the mirror, but saw only his own face. He noted that he looked tired. Had Scott been mistaken about the writing he had mentioned? He couldn't have made it up, could he? That was a mystery. He checked the garbage can and saw one section of balled up paper towel there, which he gingerly retrieved. He carefully unfurled it. The centre was smeared in a read substance. The smell was unmistakable, Windex and lipstick. Had Scott rubbed it out or had Linda? If Scott was going to remove it, surely he wouldn't have mentioned it, would he? Maybe he changed his mind and came back the next day? Steve would have to ask Scott if he erased it or not.

He dropped the paper towel in the garbage can again. Looking out the back door's window he could see the rain still coming down.

That grass does need cutting, he agreed, I wonder if she took the lawnmower, too? He looked at the shed sitting in the bottom corner of the garden, its door slid shut. That would have to wait for a drier day, he decided. He wasn't that curious about an old lawnmower. *At least the shed is still there.*

His brief reconnaissance of the main and upstairs floors complete, Steve decided to change out of his flying suit. He returned to the bedroom and emptied his pockets, placing each item on the dresser. The furnace had finished warming the house up and had shut itself off, plunging the place into silence once again, except for the ticking of the steel ducts as they cooled and contracted.

Man this place is quiet, he thought as he pulled on sweat pants in place of his flying long underwear.

It was getting dark and he was aware that he was becoming hungry.

Steve went down to the kitchen and looked through the cupboards. There was some dry pasta, but no sauce, some cans of soup, but no crackers or even bread. *But when she got there the cupboard was bare and so the poor dog had none.* That thought brought Steve a slightly grim smile. Like the dog, he was on his own.

The options were slim, either go to the store and buy some food, eat out or order something. There was still a pizza menu stuck to the fridge, where it had been for the last couple of years. Steve pulled it from the appliance and the magnet holding it fell to the floor. He picked it up. It was a magnet in the shape of a horseshoe magnet, a souvenir of Magnetic Hill, New Brunswick, from a trip many years ago when they had been posted to Summerside, PEI. He turned it over in his hand. *That was quite a trip,* he recalled. *Things certainly were better then.* He dismissed the thought. It wasn't helping. The priority was to get something to eat.

Steve picked up the phone and dialed the number, ordered a large pizza to be delivered and hung up. *Okay that is taken care of. Gotta make this place look more lived in, get some things done, life goes on ya know,* he reminded himself.

He noticed the light on the answering machine blinking and punched the 'play' button.

"Steve or Linda, someone give me a call when you get home." It was Scott. That was the only message and it was tagged yesterday. Steve wanted to get his thoughts together before talking to anyone. They would have questions and he wouldn't have any answers. Outside the rain came down relentlessly and darkness was arriving with determination.

Steve went to the stereo and checked his collection of LPs. They all seemed to be there. Linda never had any LPs, just cassette tapes which she played mostly in her car. His 64 Impala still had its original AM radio, no FM, no tape deck, all original and no need for tapes. The tapes were all gone from the living room stereo cabinet, but the LPs were still there. If she had left, she seemed to have just taken her own stuff, he concluded.

It doesn't look like she was too pissed at me, or else she would have done some damage, thrown my stuff out or taken stuff that wasn't hers. He recalled one pilot on his squadron who had come home from a trip to find the PMQ totally empty and his stuff in a pile on the lawn, soaking wet. That was doubly bad, the stuff was wrecked and everyone in the neighbourhood knew what was going on, to boot.

He knew Linda had a temper and could be malicious, but the time to be concerned with her wasn't when she was actually mad, because she always calmed down eventually. No, the time to be worried about her was

when she wasn't mad, when she had time to think and plan things out. That was when she could be malicious. Everything he saw at the PMQ said that she was being methodical. *Not good, again.*

Something had to be done to the silence. He thumbed though the LPs and pulled out the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*, slipped it out of the album cover, the dust jacket and placed it carefully on the record player, on 33 1/3 rpm and set the needle. The first 'mighty opening chord' of the title song exploded from the speakers and Steve turned it up. The silence was gone. *That is better.*

In the small story and half PMQ the music filled every room, every crevice. Its long-time familiarity made the deserted house seem more like the home it had once been. Steve recalled the first time he had heard that song, while on his Labrador helicopter training course at 442 Squadron in Comox in 1964. He recalled that the Labs were new back then, they smelled new, like a new car, not the smell of sweat, blood and hydraulic fluid and oil they had now. That summer seemed fresh. The two of them had been married nine years and were getting along fine. In 1964 Virginia was five, just starting kindergarten; 1964 was also the year their second child, Patrick, was born. After the course Steve and the young family were posted to Summerside, PEI for the entire late sixties. Throughout that period the world was in tumult, the Vietnam War, draft dodging, protests in the US, hippies, the 1967 'Summer of Love', the drug culture. It all passed little sleepy PEI by completely, with no sign of it at all there.

The LP moved into the second song, *I Should Have Known Better*. Steve took his parachute bag downstairs and dropped it on the concrete floor. The music followed him down the stairs and flowed through the basement.

Steve surveyed the scene. The washer and dryer were still in place and still connected to the water and the exhaust hose, respectively. There was still laundry soap on the shelf Steve had made from scrap lumber and installed over the washer. He emptied the parachute bag onto the floor, roughly sorted the clothing into piles of darks and lights and stuffed the light-coloured items into the washer, added soap and set it going. The noise of the washer competed with the music from upstairs. *That sounds more like it.*

The rest of the basement was a workshop area and storage, piles of cardboard boxes. Everything in the workshop seemed to be where he had left it.

Needs dusting, he noted, *looks like it hasn't been done in a year.*

"What's missing from those boxes?" Steve asked himself out loud.

The stacks seemed to have been all rearranged and there were fewer boxes there, at least it looked that way. Had she been though all those boxes of old magazines, coffee cups, clothes from by-gone epochs and other junk? If so, what did that mean? Something was planned, at least it seemed so, but what, or more to the point, why? Was that a question that should be asked or avoided?

He was awoken from his basement thoughts by an intermittent buzzing sound. What was that? Was the washer about to quit or was it the stereo? *Better not be my hi-fi*, Steve thought. Then he realized: *The front doorbell*. He vaulted up the stairs, ran down the hallway and yanked open the front door. There was a teenage boy standing in the rain with his pizza.

"Geez, sorry to be so slow answering the door," Steve said in apology and ushered him in out of the rain, "How much?"

"Eight bucks," the kid replied, nonchalantly, over *I'm Happy Just To Dance With You*.

"Hang on," Steve took the pizza box, went to retrieve his wallet and turn the music down. "Here's ten, keep the change."

"Thanks" the kid said pocketing the bill. "Enjoy your party." Steve let him back out into the darkness and rain.

Turning up the music again in time for the last song on the side, the instrumental version of *And I Love Her*, Steve flopped down on the sofa, placed the hot pizza box on his lap and opened the lid. The smell of ground beef and onions filled the room and the warmth of the pizza penetrated the bottom of the box, warming his legs pleasantly. He pulled one wedge free from the rest and took the first bite, recalling the noise and crowded scene in Mac's hangar blister just 24 hours ago.

Now this is my idea of a party, he thought. Putting his feet up on the sofa, *actually this isn't bad at all, in fact I kinda like it, no squabbling and the whole pizza all to myself*.

He took another bite as the album side ended and the silence returned.

Thursday 11 October 1984

0630 hours

Steve hadn't set his alarm clock. He didn't need to as he was always awake by this time anyway, but the illuminated numerals of the clock confirmed the time.

He lay in bed a few minutes enjoying the warmth under the blankets and considered what to do with the day. He certainly was entitled

to take the day off, finish his laundry, get some groceries and take a break after working 18 days straight on SAR Schmidt. No one at 442 would give him a hard time over taking the day off. In fact, he considered that they might give him a hard time over coming into work and not taking a day off.

The thing that bothered him was that the SAR wasn't over; as soon as the weather cleared it would resume and there was undoubtedly planning to do for that. He wasn't released by RCC personally yet, he was still working for them and not for the Lab Flight Commander, Major Thiessen.

The silence in the house bothered him, too. At this hour it was quiet again, no sound of aircraft flying from the base or even cars on the road. Still too early. The only sound audible was the the hiss of the rain on the roof above his head and the gurgle of it in the gutter that ran down the corner of the house, just a few feet from the bed.

Steve turned over onto his side. *What to do? Spend a rainy day at home and pick up some groceries or go into work?* He mulled it over, he could certainly get some groceries later, after work. The house was too haunted, too quiet. If he stayed home he knew he would spend the day mostly watching TV and that seemed like a waste of the day, no matter how gloomy and wet it was.

He stretched and his joints protested. *I am going to miss those early morning runs in Prince George*, he decided. *Actually there is a lot I am going to miss from Prince George, the thrill of the search, dealing with relatives and the wily games with the press, but mostly the regular pussy I was getting.* Comox seemed a bit lackluster in comparison, especially with the rain.

He closed his eyes tight for a few seconds and then opened them again. The morning was still gloomy and the rain was still hissing off the roof.

Well if I can't keep all the benefits of PG, perhaps I can keep what I can.

It occurred to him that he needed to be more daring, less complacent. *I'd start with staying fitter, rather than getting older*, he decided. That left him with the option of a run, there was still time before the 0830 met brief.

Run in this rain? He protested silently to himself. *Discipline, my boy, discipline. It will be worth it in the long run. Well*, he agreed, *people will be impressed if they see me out running in this weather.*

Steve got out of bed, parted the curtain and looked outside. The morning was still solidly dark outside at this hour. In the amber glow cast

by the streetlight outside the house he could see the rain splashing in the puddles and a wet fog that hung like a set background to the scene. He dropped the curtain, reminding himself how good it had felt to be out running in PG.

After a trip to the bathroom Steve returned to the bedroom to find a nylon tracksuit. It wouldn't keep him dry, but it would be easy to hang up in the basement when he got back. By the time he was dressed and lacing on his running shoes he was wide awake. He left the house through the back door, walking the short path to the street around the side of the PMQ and starting running from there.

The rain came down steadily, soaking him through in a few minutes, but he kept warm by moving fast, generating some heat. The uneven road was covered in puddles and he made no effort to avoid them, his shoes splashing sprays of water as he ran. As he warmed up and breathed deeply he felt stronger for the running, more powerful. The water streamed down him, he could feel it down his back, but he ran on, keeping a fast pace.

The streets of PMQ-land were empty, no cars, no other joggers on this morning. He reveled in the specialness of it. *I am out here and the rest of them are still asleep or eating breakfast, hiding from life. Well this is it, running in the darkness and rain, there is no hiding.*

He thought about how good a hot shower was going to feel when he had finished his run and the prospects of making some hot oatmeal for breakfast. He was sure that he had seen some in the cupboard last night. *It would be easy to just eat the leftover half of that pizza for breakfast, but life needs to be tackled with more discipline than that, more determination,* he decided. His Scottish ancestors had survived a climate like this on oatmeal and he would too.

As he covered the distance he became determined to maintain his own sense of discipline. He would have to, he knew retirement loomed and it had killed enough ex-military people. Doomed by the removal of the discipline imposed on them by the military they grew fat, despondent and died early deaths.

Not me, he thought, I can do better.

By the time he returned to the house Steve had covered over four miles. He kicked his soaked runners off at the back door, proceeding to the basement he peeled off his wet clothes and hung them up to drip. Naked now, he walked up the stairs to the bathroom and wrenched on the taps. Wet and waiting for the shower water to warm enough, he resisted the urge to shiver and instead looked into the mirror.

Pretty good, he decided.

Thursday 11 October 1984

1206 hours

Steve sat in the squadron canteen eating a sandwich. As was expected at lunch time, the room was busy and noisy. With the foul weather, there was no morning flying programmed and that left the aircraft in the hangar with a push on rectifying snags, an activity that was keeping all the maintenance personnel very busy.

"I thought you were taking the day off?" Steve said as Walt sat down in the seat opposite.

"I thought about it, but there's just too much to do, so I just got my laundry done and came in late today," Walt replied. "I thought you would take the day off."

"Yeah, you're right, there is too much to do, like plan out our last day or two on this SAR. I don't want to be doing that on the fly on Saturday."

Walt nodded in agreement. "I was going over the maps, traces and the aircraft availability. I think if we can get five aircraft we can get it all done in one day."

"We'll never get five aircraft. Even if there are that many serviceable, we probably don't have any crews left."

"True," Walt said, pulling a sheet out of his clipboard. "Ops says they can muster three aircraft and crews from the flights, one Lab and two Buffs."

"So are we all going to have to work Sunday as well?"

"I have a plan, but I wanted to see what you thought of it before I went too far."

"Well I'm impressed that you've got as far as a plan," Steve said, only half in jest. "So what have you got in mind?"

"Well the Lab school have unofficially said that they would take an area with their school bird."

"Really? I would have thought they would be behind and would want to do training once the weather clears" Steve said.

"Actually, they aren't really that far behind. They are doing an IFR trip to Victoria and back this afternoon. I talked to Rudy and he is willing to do it with a student if Ops okays it. You know how he is, he can only take doing so many approaches or autos to overshoot before he wants to get out there and do something for real."

“Okay, good,” Steve agreed. “What else?”

“I was wondering what you think about tapping PEP for another sortie or two?”

“Sure,” Steve agreed, “nothing wrong with that. Those boys like flying for free gas.”

“How do we do that, do I have to go through RCC and PEP HQ then?”

“Naw, let's bypass that crap,” Steve decided, sitting back in his seat. “As far as I'm concerned the SAR is still on, I am still the Searchmaster and we can task them directly.” He held up the second volume of the searchmaster's logbook for emphasis.

“Okay as long as you are sure we can do that,” Walt responded. “I'll call Mark Abercromby in PG then and see if he thinks they will have a plane and spotters available.”

“You know what I always say: 'It's easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission', so go for it. If RCC squawks at the gas bill, I'll plead ignorance,” Steve said.

“And then retire during the inquiry?”

“Exactly,” Steve agreed, finishing his sandwich.

“I missed morning met today, how is the weather looking to finish the SAR?”

“You didn't miss much,” Steve said. “Half the aircrew are on days off after the SAR or just didn't leave home in the rain this morning. The weather briefing was pretty straightforward: crap today, more crap tomorrow and VFR starting Friday night, probably. Sunday looks fine too, although cooler. I'd really like to wrap this up sooner rather than later, though. I was going to come in and brief the crews on Saturday morning and then just go golfing.”

“Ha, you think the SOPSO will come and babysit our SAR on a Saturday, while you golf?”

“Well you would be here with him,” Steve said. “Besides he and I are great buddies now.”

“More like a 'nonaggression pact',” Walt retorted.

“Well you scare up a PEP aircraft and I'll talk to Payne about the rules-of-engagement for Saturday, then. By the end of the day we'll have to get him a plan so he can print it for tomorrow and so on.”

“I am getting confused here, is Major Payne still the SAR Det Commander, or the SOPSO again?” Walt asked.

“Both I guess. I certainly haven't released him from the SAR, just like RCC hasn't released me. I'll just detail him to mind the store with you

on Saturday and catch you upstairs in the office in a few minutes. We'll sort out the final details."

Thursday 11 October 1984

1307 hours

Steve found Walt in his the office he shared with four other junior officers. He was alone, the remainder of the office occupants presumably had the day off.

"You get a hold of Abercromby?" Steve asked, sitting down on a plastic chair at a vacant desk.

"Yup," Walt replied.

"...and?"

"Just waiting for him to call me back and let me know what the score is, but he sounded optimistic they could find a plane and crew for Saturday. What did the Payne say?"

"That I am still the Searchmaster and he is still the Det Commander."

"So what does that mean?"

"He programmed himself to fly on Saturday and told me I couldn't use the school's Lab. They are saving the hours on that bird to stagger the maintenance," Steve admitted with a sigh.

"Ha ha, that is funny, sounds like him to go flying and leave us here. 'Never give up without a flight'," Walt laughed. The phone on Walt's desk rang and he picked it up.

"Captain Ashbury," he said, "okay...really? Wow, okay. That is great. I'll have exact areas by phone then Saturday a.m." He hung up.

"Well?" Steve asked.

"They want to fly four aircraft on the SAR," Walt explained. "The original 172, we had along with Mark's 182, the 206 from Williams and another 172 out of Williams as well."

"That doesn't really surprise me, it'll be a nice VFR Saturday at the flying club and everyone is going flying anyway – might as well have us pay for the gas. Probably their last chance this year," Steve said. "At least that'll make up the numbers we need. The question I have is: can you use them all?"

Walt looked at the master map on his desk. "Probably. There is enough space to be covered up that end of the track to keep them going most of the day, at least, and it will save sending the Buffs that far from home just to start their blocks. I'll figure out a plan to make it work."

"Okay, brief me on it when you have it sorted out." Steve left for his own office, just down the corridor. When he walked in the phone was ringing. *If that is Walt with a plan already then I am going to make him Searchmaster on Saturday.* He snatched up the phone.

"McBain." Steve said as tersely as possible.

"So you're back?"

"Hi Scott, not up flying?"

"Just got on the ground, actually. I had to take some parts to Vancouver for a stranded Tracker there."

"Man you guys should use Federal Express, instead of that bagged out old T-bird." Steve said.

"T-bird is cheaper," Scott explained. "All comes out of the training budget. If we couriered the parts the unit would have to pay for it."

"So how was the weather getting in here?"

"Right on PAR limits," Scott laughed.

"I'll bet it was," Steve agreed, shaking his head. "Could you see well enough to taxi?"

"Had to get vectors to the VU-33 ramp," Scott explained, still laughing. "When did you get in?"

"Yesterday," Steve admitted. "I got your phone message. I was going to call you. What's up?"

"Have you seen Linda, is she at home?"

"Not a trace," Steve admitted. "Why?"

"I'd rather not talk on the phone," Scott said surreptitiously. "Why don't I drop by after supper tonight?"

He was right, Steve thought, the base phones were always subject to monitoring and you never knew who might be listening. "Sure drop by anytime. I have to get some groceries and stuff but I'll be home by six at the latest."

"See you then." Scott hung up.

Well it sounds like someone knows what's going on. Steve concluded.

The afternoon went slowly. The school Lab could be heard out on the ramp starting up and departing into the murk for its training trip. Steve went down to the hangar floor to see if the SAR containers had been taken care of. They were gone from the hangar and were in the store room where they usually stayed in between uses. Steve walked into the store room and found Brenda restocking stationery supplies.

"Oh, hi," Steve said when he saw her.

"Good morning, sir," Brenda responded, looking around and

seeing that they were alone.

"I thought you'd take today off?" he asked her.

"There's so much that needs doing," she explained, holding up pads of paper and pens for emphasis. "I couldn't leave some other clerk to take care of all this. Besides I had the list of what was missing. You never know how soon these will be needed again, now do you?"

Steve checked the doorway. The door was half closed and blocked the view of the two of them from the hangar floor. He stepped closer to the container to speak more quietly with her. "Man do I miss you," he said softly.

"Well that is sweet," she responded, carrying on with her work.

"That's it?" he asked, "just sweet?"

"Yup," she said, meeting his look. "As I mentioned, this is now on permanent vacation. Can't see you here in town."

"So I have to plan a trip then?" he asked.

"Yup," she said again with a sympathetic smile and spoke cryptically, "not my rules, but needed to keep things in a stable state, here at home, you know." Her maritime accent seemed suddenly much more apparent. She continued, "and I have to have a pretty good reason to go on it, too."

"Oh, I'll give you a reason to want to go," he said. She just smiled and went back to her work. It was obvious that the conversation was over. Steve left the store room before her ignoring him became too apparent.

Back upstairs Steve ran into Walt in the hallway carrying a roll of maps and traces.

"I was just coming to see what you think of all this," Walt said. Steve ushered him into his own office.

"You have a plan already worked out?" Steve asked.

"Umm, sure, with these trace overlays it only takes a few minutes to change it all."

"You are going to have to patent your method there," Steve retorted, "before someone steals your ideas."

Walt laid out the maps and showed Steve the areas to be covered. Of the seven aircraft available all would be used. The sole Labrador would cover the closest area to Comox, the two Buffs the high ground and the PEP aircraft various blocks on the other side of the rocks. Steve looked critically for flaws in the plan. He pointed out one southern block.

"Is that new 172 out of William's going to do this block?"

"Yes," Walt said, looking at the upside down map and hesitating slightly.

“He won't have enough gas to get there, do the area and get home.”

“He should be able to get down there, do the block and recover at Kamloops.”

“But is there avgas at Kamloops this week?”

“Kamloops always has avgas,” Walt stated, perplexed. “Are they out of gas there then?”

“Beats me,” Steve said. “I am just playing devil's advocate to your plan. You had better check the NOTAMs and see.”

“But otherwise the plan is good?”

“Yeah if you check that, then it is approved. Get the squadron requirements to Payne and he'll have it scheduled for Saturday morning then.” Walt left to do that.

Man I hate being hard on him, but he needs to watch the details a bit better, Steve thought to himself. He checked his watch. The afternoon was wearing on. He decided that he had better get going home early and pick up some groceries at the CANEX on the way. He needed to go to the bank as well. He considered making a list. *Can't be bothered,* he thought, *I'll just wing it.* Then he remembered, *I had better swing by the post office too and empty the mailbox, there are probably bills to pay. I'd better do that before I hit the bank. Okay, post office, then the bank and then the grocery store.*

Thursday 11 October 1984

1827 hours

For supper Steve finished off the last of the pizza from the previous night. *Man I hate microwaved pizza,* he thought, *I am going to have to figure out a better way of heating that so that it doesn't make the crust mushy like this. Maybe if I put it on the BBQ? Maybe I should just stop buying pizza, instead?*

The groceries were put away, but even the four bags of items he had bought at the Canex didn't make much impression on the empty cupboards and they remained mostly empty.

At the post office Steve had opened the mailbox to find it stuffed full of paper. He had carefully extracted the first few pieces one at a time from where they were wedged, to allow the rest to be pulled away without tearing things. He had quickly sifted out the bills in the car and left the rest for later. At the bank he had paid the Visa bill and the gas and electrical bills, too. Both of those were due a few days earlier, but the teller had stamped his bills as paid and the lights and the heat were still on.

I am sure they would send out a late notice or something, before they cut you off, he mused.

He had never had late bills paid before, ever. It wasn't like Linda to have not taken care of all that. It looked like the mailbox hadn't been emptied in two weeks, perhaps. It was hard to tell.

Steve sat on the living room sofa again with the remaining three slices of pizza, soggy as they were and the pile of mail to sort through. He held the pizza carefully in his left hand while sorting mail with his right. *Junk, junk, junk, coupons, flier from the CANEX, hmm, bread is on sale next week, more junk.* He confirmed that he had not missed any bills in the pile of paper. *I wonder what happened to the phone and cable bills?* He asked himself, *maybe they were paid before I left? If Linda took them I hope she paid them and isn't just sitting on them somewhere to annoy me.*

The last piece of mail was a letter, an actual, real letter, from Ginny, the one she had promised to write when he had talked to her on October 1st. The postmark was smeared and unreadable, so he wasn't sure when it was sent. He was curious whether she had written it that same evening when she got home after talking on the phone, or later in the week. He turned it over in his right hand while finishing the piece of pizza he was eating. She had addressed it by hand in her distinctive sloped printing. Finally he wiped his hands on a piece of paper towel and carefully opened the letter. It was written on stiff powder blue stationery, both sides of the sheets, in long-hand with a ballpoint pen.

October First

Dear Daddy,

Ever since Mom called I have been thinking about you and then, you called this morning. I am sorry that you were away when all this happened, you sounded quite baffled. I don't blame you, I am pretty baffled, too.

I'm writing this on my lunch hour, if I don't get it finished I'll probably stay late after work and finish it because I want to get it in the mail to you and I don't want to take it home tonight. The apartment hasn't been a good place to get things done lately, but I will get to that a bit later on here.

As I mentioned on the phone, Mom called me about a

week ago, the day after your anniversary. She sounded really calm, which always makes me nervous when she is upset about something. You know how she is, if she is yelling and stuff you know she will eventually calm down and be fine, but if she is calm then she is really mad. She really didn't tell me what this was all about and I really didn't think it was my place to ask. She just told me that her mind was made up and that she was leaving you and the military behind. It seemed to be something about your anniversary and your trip to Prince George, but she didn't give me a lot of details. She just said she had had enough, ever since the insurance convention in Kamloops two years ago and that if you ever went back to Prince George that was it. I don't understand it any more than you do.

I asked her where she was going and she said she was looking for a new place, but she didn't say where. She did say that she was staying on at Aitken's, so I assume that she is still living in Comox or Courtenay or somewhere nearby. She said that she would send me the address, but I haven't heard anything yet. I don't even have a phone number for her.

That is really all there is that I know. I hope that helps you?? Oh yes, I did ask her if she was planning to call you or write to you or see you when you got back and she was pretty emphatic that she wouldn't, but I hope she changed her mind and at least explained things to you. Better yet - I hope that you two made up! Maybe you just need to take her out for a belated anniversary dinner?? It makes me very sad to hear that you two are fighting.

I think that the main reason I am having so much trouble dealing with Mom's phone call is that Mark and I may be splitting up, too. Sometimes it feels like the whole world is falling apart!! The last six months have just been awful. It was just about on our second anniversary that I found a love letter from his ex-girlfriend, the one he was dating before we met. It was hidden in a book and I found it while cleaning. I know he still has some old love letters from her and I really didn't mind if he kept them, since that is ancient history or at least it is supposed to be, but this one was dated only a week before I read it. It was pretty bad, really. So I didn't tell Mark, instead I phoned her up and told her to leave my

husband alone. She said that I should do a better job of keeping him satisfied and then he wouldn't have to spend so much time with her. Then she just laughed at me and hung up. I have to admit that I was pretty stunned.

I showed the letter to Mark and told him I had phoned her and basically he admitted that he had never stopped dating her from the time we first met. It was like we were never married in the first place. I told him that he had to stop right now or we were through, but he won't talk about it. I'm going to counselling, but he won't go. I was thinking that I might have to pack up and come home, but now it looks like there is no home to go to.

I am so sorry, I am going to have to finish this later on. I have to get back to work now.

October Second

Sorry about that break there, it is now Tuesday lunchtime. I'll get this finished and in the mail to you today. I hope you get home soon and can sort this all out.

Last night Mark made me a special dinner, he was really kind to me for the first time in a long time. That is the problem, as I really still do love him, you know. I asked him if he had stopped seeing her, but he still won't give me a straight answer. I really feel foolish staying here and I don't know what I am going to do.

I don't want you to worry about me. Please get back together with Mom!!!!

Love, Ginny □

Steve read the letter through twice. What she described seriously angered him. This was his oldest child, the little girl he had taught to play catch when she was three and this prick was still dating the girlfriend he had before he met Ginny? *Good thing they live so far away*, Steve thought, *he may be younger than me, but I am a lot tougher than he is. Man I'd like to belt him one for putting my little girl through this bullshit.*

His thought was interrupted by the door buzzer.

"Am I too early?" Scott Forbes asked.

"Nope, right on time," Steve replied, showing him in from the rainy darkness outside. Scott slipped off his shoes and Steve hung up his raincoat over the closet door to dry out a bit.

"You want a beer?" Steve asked.

"Sounds good." Steve retrieved two bottles from the fridge, opened them and placed them on the coffee table in the living room.

"I think I interrupted your supper," Scott pointed out the two slices of pizza getting cold on the table.

"No sweat," Steve said, adding, "you want one?" He picked up one piece and chewed on it.

"No, that is okay," Scott said doubtfully, looking at the congealed mass.

"So your flight went well?"

"Yeah, it was raining like hell, but the clouds were smooth as glass and not much ice to speak of. I just wish they had put a door on that old plane instead of a canopy. It just isn't really made for wet weather."

"I'll just design a mod for the T-bird," Steve laughed. "Let's see, two doors and a high wing to keep the rain out, how's that?"

"Sounds like a Cessna to me."

"Okay it wouldn't be as sexy as your little silver jet, but what do you want, to look good or stay dry?"

"You been flying since you got back?" Scott asked.

"Not in this weather. I haven't been up in three weeks now. Hopefully next week, before my 30 days runs out. That's the trouble with having a responsible job, no time for fun and frivolities."

They each took a swig of beer.

"So I take it that you haven't talked to Linda yet?" Scott asked.

"Nope. No idea where she is. I'm not even sure I want to talk to her right now, even if I could. I got a letter from my daughter in Toronto. She said that her mom wasn't planning on talking to me."

"I hate to ask," Scott started slowly, "but any idea what brought all this on?"

"No clue. Maybe she joined a cult or something."

Scott shook his head in wonder.

Steve asked, "did you have something specific for me?"

"Well I did want to let you know that I saw Linda here in town, on the street, down in Courtenay."

"When was that?"

"On the weekend, Saturday. She looked like she had been doing

some shopping or something.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“No, I was on the other side of the street. I don't think she saw me at all. I just thought that it meant she hadn't moved to Burma or somewhere.”

Steve smiled at that. “I was going to ask you something. You mentioned on the phone that Linda had written something on the bathroom mirror?”

“Yeah, it looked like lipstick, it was red anyway.”

“Did you wipe it off?”

“Fuck, no,” Scott said. “I wanted you to get the whole picture. Why?”

“Hmm,” Steve wondered, “because when I got back here yesterday it had been erased. I found a paper towel in the garbage with red something on it. I thought maybe you cleaned it.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I dunno. To protect my feelings.”

Scott laughed. “You are about the toughest sonofabitch I know. You're never too sympathetic when I drive one into the rough, why would I try protect your feelings?”

“Well that is true,” Steve admitted with some pride. “Whatever she can dish out I can take more.”

“Well it said 'Fuck you' and I didn't erase it, in fact I haven't been back here until now, so if it was gone when you got here, then someone else did it.”

“Pretty unlikely some burglar broke in and did it. She must have come back and rubbed it out.”

Scott looked perplexed. “Well I don't get that, then. Why would she leave a message like that for you and then come back and erase it?”

“Dunno. You'll have to ask her next time you see her.”

Scott laughed at that notion. “You have to fight your own battles on that one. I am just playing reporter.”

“I guess,” Steve retorted. “Hey are you good for a round this Sunday? It looks like I will have to work Saturday, but the weather looks good for Sunday all day.”

“Sounds good,” Scott said, “but it'll have to be early, I am tied up in the afternoon.”

“Stop bragging about your sex life,” Steve said verbally jabbing him. “Okay, I'll book us a tee-off time as early as I can get, maybe eight or eight-thirty then, hopefully the course will have dried out by then. Are

Butch and Woody around? Maybe we can finish that round we were playing three weeks ago?"

"I think so. Give me the tee-off time and I'll give them a call and see," Scott said. "Incidentally we did finish that round, you just missed it."

Thursday 11 October 1984

2213 hours

Steve brushed his teeth in preparation for bed. He had had a pleasant evening with Scott, hashing over everything that had happened around the base while he had been away, at least as much as Scott knew.

In the bedroom Steve parted the curtain and looked outside. The wind seemed to have diminished, but the rain still came down like darts impacting the puddles. By the streetlight he could see that the road was heavily puddled and rivers were running into the storm drains. *Man, people get poopy about the rain here, but it's a fair trade for being able to golf on New Year's most years. At least you don't have to shovel it.*

He dropped the curtain into place, got into bed and turned out the bedside table lamp. The room was instantly dark until slowly his eyes became accustomed. The hiss of the rain on the roof seemed less loud than it had been the previous night. The sound of it was calming and smoothed over the day's contortions.

Actually that wasn't a bad day, he thought, for my first day back in civilization. At least no one at work ribbed me about Linda, that is something. But man that is bugging me: what happened to the the writing on the mirror? That is a mystery. At least I ruled out Scott as the person who rubbed it out. I am never sure if I can trust him to make a fair ball drop, but I think I can trust him on this.

So if he didn't do it, who did?

Steve rolled over onto his side and rearranged the pillows. *That is one bonus with having the place to myself, I get all four pillows, if I want them.*

The most obvious explanation is that Linda wrote it and then came back and erased it. Let me see, though, am I missing anything? Could someone else have done it? There are only three keys: I have one, Linda presumably still has one, since it doesn't seem to have been left behind and there is the one hidden in the shed which Scott used. So if someone else found the hidden key they could have done it and that could have been anyone. That seems pretty unlikely, though. After all who else would find the key, get into the house, erase that and then apparently take nothing,

lock the place up and leave? At least I am assuming that the stuff that was missing was all taken by Linda and not someone else. Nah, if someone broke in they would have taken the stereo and my LPs, not a bunch of old stuff from the basement. Unless they took my golf clubs?

He thought hard about it, but couldn't remember seeing them tucked into their corner of the basement, beside the row of boxes. He sighed. Now he knew he wouldn't sleep until he checked. He turned over on his other side, but it was no good. He snapped on the light, put on his slippers and went downstairs to the main floor and then the basement, turning on lights as he went. Finally in the basement he walked to the far corner, beside the row of boxes and, sure enough, his golf bag was still there. Just to make sure he unsnapped the cover and counted the clubs. They were all there.

Could use a good cleaning, though, he thought. He noted that Linda's clubs, which were usually leaning against the wall behind his, were gone.

Maybe they took hers instead? He dismissed the idea. While hers had been rarely used as she wasn't a keen golfer, they were worth a lot less than his were and they were usually stored behind his. *It wouldn't make sense to steal hers and not mine. She must have taken hers when she left,* he concluded. *Maybe she is planing to get serious about the sport?*

He went back upstairs, snapping off the lights as he went, returning the PMQ to a state of darkness. Finally he got back into bed and turned the bedside table light off again. He noted with some satisfaction that the bed was still warm. The rain still hissed lightly on the roof above his head and made a faint gurgling sound in the gutter that ran down the side of the house.

Steve rolled on his right side and then his left, trying to get comfortable. *Okay, I think that we can rule out a break-in, because nothing of value was taken, in fact the only things that are missing at all are Linda's and I am relatively sure that she took them herself. I think that means that she was the one who erased the mirror. Assuming she was the one who wrote what Scott saw on the mirror in the first place. Could anyone else have written it and she erased it? Naw, not possible, I think, unless it was someone who was helping her move, someone who was more POed at me than she was. Who could that be? New boyfriend, perhaps? Even if she has one, why would he be POed at me? Naw, doesn't make sense.* He rolled onto his back and stared up at the sloped ceiling, just becoming visible again as his night vision returned.

Nope, I think it is most likely that she wrote it herself and then,

when she returned to the PMQ on a later occasion, erased it herself too. The unanswered question is 'why'?

Why?

The most likely reason is that when she wrote it she was angry and wanted to do something hurtful and then later calmed down and decided that it wasn't justified. Of course, as Ginny mentioned in her letter, Linda is easier to deal with if she gets mad, because she eventually calms down and ends up being close-to-reasonable. The problem is when she is icy calm, then she has a plan and there is no prying her away from it.

So I think this is a good thing, this mirror-problem. I think she was mad at first about something and then calmed down later on. That is a good pattern. This all happened weeks ago. Let me see, Scott found the writing on September 29th, which was six days after I had left for the SAR and twelve days ago. There is no saying when she moved out, it could have been the day after I left. I phoned on the 1st of October and she didn't answer the phone then, so maybe she was gone then? She was definitely gone by the time Scott checked on the 29th. So maybe she went though being POed on our anniversary, moved her stuff out and left a rude note, then cooled down after the 29th, came back and erased it. Probably by now she is totally feeling sheepish and wished she never left. I wonder why she didn't just come back then? I wouldn't give her a hard time. Well she told her friends at work, I know that, so perhaps she is too embarrassed to admit that she was wrong in front of them? Now she is stuck. Makes sense!

Could there be a guy involved? Maybe, but unlikely. She is too frigging chubby these days and never was all that interested in sex. That doesn't add up to a new boyfriend in my mind, although you never know, there are probably guys who like chubby, undersexed women, although why, I can't think. Steve snorted to himself.

Anyway it is good to know that she isn't pissed off at me anymore, just too embarrassed to come home. After all why would she be pissed at me anyway? Just because I missed phoning her on our anniversary, geez that would be no reason to leave. I mean I was out there saving people's lives for god sake, it wasn't like I went on vacation.

I wonder if I should track her down and give her the chance to come home?

Finally Steve drifted into sleep, but the rain kept falling.

Friday 12 October 1984

1336 hours

After lunch Steve sat in Walt's office going over the details for the next day.

"What's the latest from the weather guessers?" Steve began.

"I checked just before lunch and it should clear out this evening. It isn't even raining now, just some low cloud hanging over the coast and the interior."

"It would be nice to have the weather in the bag tonight and not have to worry all night whether it will clear up or not," Steve concluded. "Okay let's look at the aircraft roster."

Walt produced the aircraft assignments table. Steve put on his reading glasses and ran his finger down it, line by line. "Three military and four PEP. Man if we can't get it done in one day we aren't organized. Okay let's see who is doing what."

Walt pointed out the individual areas to be covered and named the aircraft assigned to each one. Steve nodded thoughtfully. It looked fine, military aircraft in the rougher terrain near the coast and the PEP planes in the flatter interior plain, everyone working close to where they were based, minimizing transit time.

"Okay, approved," he said. "I just dunno..." he trailed off.

"Concerns?" Walt asked. "Better to fix it now."

"It is just that I was thinking, man this is a lot of fuss for the last day. Look at these search areas." He pointed them out on the master map. "They have all been pretty well searched and they are all a long way from the primary track."

"Well we have to go and do them," Walt said intensely.

"Oh, I know that," Steve admitted, "I know that." He continued looking at the areas intently.

"So..." Walt asked.

"It is just that we are putting on this max-effort show and that is all it is, 'a show'. At this late date we aren't going to find anything, so is it really worth the trouble of launching seven aircraft and flying all those hours, giving up a day of golf, to find nothing?"

"What are you saying? You want to cancel?" Walt asked, concerned.

"What do you think the chances are that those people are still alive?" Steve tried a different angle.

"Oh, probably close to zero." Walt admitted.

"Pretty much exactly zero," Steve replied pointedly, "and we have to fly tomorrow to prove it. But it doesn't really prove it, does it? It really doesn't prove anything at all."

“So what do you want to do, then?” Walt asked.

Steve studied the map for a full minute without responding. He shook his head.

“Ah, fuck it,” he said.

“What?” asked Walt, perplexed.

“Never mind, never mind,” Steve pronounced, staring off into space. “Tomorrow we fly, we will launch the fleet, such as we have at our disposal. When we find nothing we should just recover at the mess afterwards and hold a wake. It would be the most respectful thing to do.”

“And?” Walt asked. “That’s it?”

“...And on Sunday go golfing instead.”

“Really?” Walt asked.

“Yeah,” Steve snapped back from his thoughts. “Yeah I got a date with my usual foursome for early Sunday morning. Man, I need a break from this SAR stuff. It is getting too pointless for me.” He paused and then continued. “Next week we can start in on the paperwork, package it all up for RCC and mail it off and never give SAR Schmidt another passing thought.” He looked at Walt. “You are going to make a fine Searchmaster, you know? You have done really well on this search, you know your stuff, you are organized and most importantly of all you still care about the SAR game.” Steve clapped him on the shoulder. “You will do fine, you really will. I know it.”

“Thanks for the endorsement,” Walt managed, a bit embarrassed. “Anything else we might have missed here?” He indicated the tables and maps.

“No, it looks good, all around,” Steve reassured him. “Look at the bright part, too.”

“What’s that?”

“Payne will be up flying and not bugging us. It should be an easy day of it. We will just hang out in Ops all day,” Steve concluded. “You want some time off next week?”

“Well, I was hoping...” Walt said.

“With your wife that pregnant she would probably like to have you around the house a bit.” Walt nodded in agreement. Steve continued, “Yeah I remember that stage, too. Well I’ll tell you what, I’ll start in on the paperwork and you ask your flight commander for the week off. I can survive without you, after all, it’s just paperwork.”

Walt smiled, “Okay, deal.”

“Anyway, I think we are good here, the schedule has been printed, we have a rad op for tomorrow. We even have box lunches on order to be

delivered! Can't ask for more than that. I don't know about you but I am going to go home and take a nap this afternoon and get ready to put this puppy to bed tomorrow."

With that said, Steve left the hangar for the day.

Outside the rain had indeed stopped and the clouds were hanging around the insular mountains of Vancouver Island. The air smelled fresh to him as he walked to his car in the parking lot.

This smells like a new start, he thought, just gotta wrap up a bit of old business first.

Saturday 13 October 1984

0815 hours

Steve strode into Ops. Walt was already there pinning up his maps to the wall board as the ground crew were towing the last Labrador helicopter aircraft out of the hangar and positioning it on the ramp, along with the two Buffalos, for departure. There were still some puddles on the ramp, but the morning sunshine was bright and clear and the windsock, visible in the infield through the Ops window, hung limp.

"Okay, all ready to go?" Steve asked.

"You sound chipper for this early in the morning," Walt noted, checking to make sure the map wouldn't fall down.

"Yup, had a good sleep yesterday afternoon, went to bed early, got up early, ran five miles, had a shower and a good breakfast. Now the sun is shining and I am definitely ready for whatever today has in store for us."

Walt laughed, "man, it sounds like you are on a real health kick." He set out the searchmaster's logbook and the aircraft dispositions.

"Yup started that in PG," Steve said with some pride. "You can't avoid getting old, but you can avoid getting fat and outta shape. You have to be ready for whatever life throws at you."

"So you are planning a combat retirement, then?"

"No," Steve allowed, "but I am not going to have some young punk beat me on the links, just because I am going to be retired. What's the matter, you look like you were up late last night?"

"Not up late, just got woken up," Walt explained with a tired look. "I discovered that if you sleep too close to someone who is pregnant the baby can manage to actually kick you!"

Steve laughed. "That is funny, that kid is going to be a soccer player. You need separate beds! All set to go up for briefing?"

"You bet. I already phoned in the assignments to the PEP crews."

They sounded keen to go flying at crown expense.”

“Good work,” Steve said. “Now we just have to get our guys out the door.”

They headed up to the squadron briefing theatre, where the 442 Squadron crews were gathering. The briefing started with weather, given by a briefer from the base met office. The presenter was a female sergeant that neither Walt nor Steve had seen before.

Walt commented quietly to Steve, “I didn't know that they had female weather briefers. She must be new.”

“Nothing wrong with girls doing the weather,” Steve pointed out.

Her weather briefing was short and to the point, serious and without jokes. She indicated that essentially the day should provide few surprises, with clearing skies over the province and, more importantly for the higher ground searching, light winds.

Walt provided a NOTAM briefing, an overview of the day's flying and then handed out assigned areas. There were no questions.

Steve decided to finish the briefing himself. Standing at the front of the room he surveyed the three crews assembled there, including Major Payne.

“Okay, this will hopefully be the last day for SAR Schmidt. If everyone gets their assignments completed today we won't have to come back here again tomorrow and do it all again.” There were murmurs of agreement. “So we all know that this op is getting a bit stale and there may be a tendency to cut a few corners to get it all finished up and take tomorrow off. I just want to remind everyone to be sharp and fly safely. We have already had one careless prang on this search, I don't want to have to deal with another one.”

“Don't worry Steve,” came a voice from the back of the room. “As long as you stay on the ground, we'll be safe.” It was Lance. There were a few laughs throughout the room.

Steve shot him an annoyed look. “I thought you were off today?”

“Hey, I wouldn't miss all the fun of working for you.”

Major Payne interrupted the laughter, addressing Steve from the front row, “If you are done now, let's get this show on the road, the day is wasting.”

With the briefing complete the crews emptied out, leaving Steve and Walt to gather up their paperwork and head back down to Ops. When they arrived their radio operator was turning on his radios and checking the equipment.

“You must be our rad op for the day,” Walt introduced himself.

"Corporal Pattersen," the rad op replied.

"Well we will probably have a long day here," Steve explained, "but we have ordered lunch and if the search crews get their work all done, then we won't have to come back again tomorrow."

"Sounds good to me, sir," Cpl Pattersen replied. "The VHF and HF are up and checked. Do you need anything special?"

"Nope," Steve said, just one Lab and two Buffs, 30 minute ops normal checks, unless they call something in. You can use the SAR Schmidt radio logbook if you like, that way we'll have all the records in one place for the file when we send it to Victoria."

"Wilco," was all Pattersen said. He had brought a book to read and buried his nose in it once the conversation seemed to be over.

The two pilots left the rad op to his radios and went out onto the grass outside Ops that lead to the ramp itself. Once outside Walt remarked, "If I were a rad op I think I would have my masters finished by now."

Steve nodded in agreement, "Or be a master crossword puzzler."

The morning was luminescent. The sunlight cast long morning shadows from the three yellow aircraft on the ramp as their crews prepared them for flight. As they had just come out of the hangar there were no covers to stow, but there was gear to tie down. The peach-light cast by the morning sun made the yellow SAR paint schemes on the aircraft almost too bright to look at. At the same time the Labrador and one Buffalo both started up, layering their turbine engine noise across the still morning air.

Steve cocked his head, something didn't sound right. Turbines sound smooth and even, once they get up to speed and the Buffalo's props and the Lab's blades were now turning at full speed. Under their sound was an odd bleat which sounded all wrong. A movement caught Steve's eye and a CP-121 Tracker from VU-33 lifted off runway 12 and sailed over Cape Lazo, its radial engines at take-off power making it sound like a World War Two bomber. Once the gray stubby Stoof had turned and headed west, probably on some Navy mission, the remaining sounds seemed correct to Steve.

"Man those things make a racket," Walt remarked following the Tracker's progress out of the control zone. "They are a bit of an anachronism these days."

"Ah," Steve remarked, "you young pups are spoiled flying turbines. If everyone started flying round engines you would appreciate the finer things in life."

"Like what?" Walt asked, doubtfully.

"The fine art of leaning the mixture on a temperamental radial."

"Sounds like practicing bleeding to me."

"See, I told you you wouldn't appreciate the finer things in life."

The Labrador was the first search aircraft to depart followed by the first Buffalo. The last Buffalo had just started its first engine and Steve was watching and waiting for the second one to be started.

"Hope they haven't got a problem?" Walt remarked, watching the lack of progress.

"Oh, they do," Steve retorted, turning to go back into Ops. "That's Payne's aircraft. He is always slow off the ground or haven't you noticed?"

Back in Ops Steve sat down at Payne's desk in his office off the main Ops area and started writing in the third volume of the searchmaster's logbook. He recorded the aircraft and crews for the day and their assigned search areas.

The morning dragged on, with nothing more than 30 minute checks to break the monotony.

"Man this just isn't the same, doing this sitting here in Snake Ops, you know," Walt remarked at last.

"Miss our little trailer in PG?" Steve responded.

"Well at least we had our team there, it doesn't feel the same without Brenda and Sylvia dashing out to get lunch and fuel invoices coming in and all that sort of stuff happening."

"I wouldn't really classify those two, as 'local colour', you know," Steve said, looking out the window at the mountains across the straits. "Besides this is the luxury of being on base, we get meals delivered." He checked his watch. "In fact they should be here soon."

Twenty minutes later, just after 1100 hours, a green-uniformed DND civilian transport driver walked into Ops with three box lunches.

"Three lunches for Snake Ops," the driver announced. "Who wants to sign for them?"

Walt picked up his pen and scribbled his signature on the form. "Busy day?" he asked the driver.

"Nope, you are my only delivery this morning," he said, grabbing up the signed form and leaving.

Walt picked up a box lunch and began rifling through it. "Mmm, ham 'n cheese, an apple and hey, real home-made cookies. That's new, usually we get the packaged ones." He opened the cookies and ate one.

Steve watched him and checked the clock over the doorway, which showed 1108. "Missed breakfast?" he remarked, with the slightest trace of scorn in his voice.

"Pretty much," Walt admitted, swallowing.

Saturday 13 October 1984

1217 hours

It was just after Steve and Cpl Pattersen had eaten their lunches that the phone rang in Ops for the first time that day. After exchanging shrugs with Steve, Walt answered it.

"Snake Ops," Walt said. "Yup search HQ as well." Steve was listening by now. Walt continued the conversation, scribbling as he talked, "Okay, got that, um, please ask them to stay on station as long as possible and I'll call you right back as soon as we have a plan in place."

Steve was reading over Walt's shoulder, but he couldn't make out much from his notes, beyond the phone number.

"That was Williams Lake Radio relaying. One of the PEP 172s reported what looked like three people on the ground in a remote area, waving furiously at the plane." He took the piece of paper and plotted the latitude and longitude on the master map. "Here," Walt said.

Steve took his reading glasses out of his flight suit pocket and put them on, squinting at the map. The location was south of Williams Lake, east of the Fraser River and north of Lillooet. "Hmmm," was all he said.

"What?" asked Walt.

"Later," said Steve, "tell me what your plan is."

Walt was scanning the assigned search areas and the aircraft list. "Okay the Lab is out, because I sent him up the coast here." He indicated north of Port Hardy. "But I do have Payne's Buff working only about..." he measured the distance with his out-stretched hand, "...about 75 miles to the west and he has two SAR techs on board."

"Okay, let's divert him, then," Steve said. "That was good thinking keeping the PEP plane on station as he can guide them in."

"I was more thinking of survivor morale, keeping a plane overhead," Walt said.

"Whatever," Steve retorted. "Let's do it."

Walt had Cpl Pattersen contact Payne via HF and send him to the coordinates, to contact the PEP 172 on VHF and assess the situation.

"He says he should be overhead in 17 minutes," Cpl Pattersen reported.

"Hmm," said Steve again, rubbing his chin and looking at the map on the wall.

Walt dashed back over to the map, almost knocking over a chair. "If you have concerns, let me know what they are," he pleaded.

“Just a hunch,” Steve said slowly, “just a hunch.”

“Well? What?” Walt asked.

“Well, look at the map,” Steve said haltingly. “The location is about 110 miles off the track the plane should have been on, that area is very close to 100 Mile House and the whole area is dotted with Indian Reserves. Also that place is pretty flat and was logged over in the last few years.”

“Yeah, well of course it is pretty flat, I wouldn't sent a 172 out into the hills, would I?” Walt stated, “Do you think it is someone playing a joke on us?”

“I doubt it,” Steve said, “but I'm betting it isn't who we're looking for, but you never know. Let's see what Payne says when he gets there.”

Steve sat down to write in the logbook, but Walt was obviously agitated and paced around Ops. Finally Payne's message came, Cpl Pattersen put in on the speaker. Being HF it was scratchy and somewhat distorted.

“Rescue 462, on scene, linked up with the PEP call sign and released him to Williams Lake low on fuel, we have completed a low recce. Ready for November Oscar Charlie Lima?”

Walt nodded and Pattersen said, “Snake Ops, go ahead.”

“Alpha negative, Bravo as before, Charlie four undetermined, Delta three, Echo One, Foxtrot: seems to be a group in some sort of distress, lots of signaling for help.”

Walt looked at Steve. Steve said, “Echo One, that figures that he would want to jump in his SAR techs. What do you think?”

“Someone looks like they need help,” Walt concluded. “I say let them jump.”

“Okay, might as well make them do some work. Send him back Echo approved then.”

Pattersen sent the message and then they waited for news.

Steve looked at the map. “Okay so assume the SAR techs have parachuted in, now how are you going to get them out?”

Walt was already looking at the map. Well our only helicopter today is 500 miles away. Did that Coast Guard Pelican make it home?”

“Yup, talked to the crew earlier this week from Port Angeles,” Steve confirmed.

Walt was flipping through the searchmaster's checklists. “There is a helicopter company with a base in Williams Lake.

“Well you had better give them a call and see if they have lift for hire, for six,” Steve added, but Walt was already dialing the number.

When he hung up the phone he reported the results to Steve. "They normally have a Bell 205 there."

"That would be ideal," said Steve, considering the 15 seat civil Huey, "but...what?"

"It is in California fighting fires," Walt answered. "However they have a 206B-III available now and a 206L that should be available within an hour or so."

"It'll have to do," Steve concluded, "The 206L will seat six passengers, but not with all that SAR tech gear, parachutes and junk. The 206 should be able to carry the gear, though. Did you send them both?"

"Not yet, can we authorize that?"

"Let's confirm the SAR techs have jumped, if so they will need a pick-up."

Pattersen confirmed with Rescue 462 that the SAR techs were on the ground, but there was no word yet on casualties or on the identification of the people.

"Good enough," Steve said. "Launch 'em." Walt called the helicopter company base back and gave them the coordinates.

"Told them six plus gear to pick up and take them to Williams Lake, that looks like the nearest medical facility anyway. They'll send the bill here."

"Okay that is all we can do, then," Steve said.

Walt had Cpl Pattersen inform Rescue 462 of the plan and to expect to pick up their SAR techs on the ground at the Williams Lake Airport when it was all done.

About twenty minutes later there was another call from Rescue 462. "Update on previous November Oscar Charlie Lima, Alpha definitely negative, Charlie three white, one yellow, remainder unchanged. Will provide details via Lima-Lima when on the ground."

The call was acknowledged and Steve said: "Okay, that's done, let's make sure everyone else knows that we are still looking and not calling it a day."

"How come you were so sure that it was going to come back Alpha-negative?" asked Walt, calmed down now.

"Look at the calendar, the location off the track and its proximity to 100 Mile House," Steve said, "I'm betting that we are dealing with hunters. Bet you a beer."

"I wouldn't bet you anything on this one," Walt said somewhat quietly. "You usually turn out to be right. Still it is too bad that we didn't find our missing plane on the last day of looking for it."

“Too bad we didn't find the plane on the first day of looking for it,” Steve corrected. “We might have found some people alive, which is, after all, the aim of the exercise.”

A few hours later the phone rang for the second time. This time it was Major Payne, on the ground in Williams Lake. Walt took the call. He did a lot of nodding and not much talking. When he hung up he told Steve the story.

“It turned out to be a group of hunters, not native, but white, from Vancouver. They were up there hunting deer and one of them got shot and needed evacuation. They would have driven out but their truck got stuck and that is when they attracted the attention of our PEP friends.”

Steve just smiled sweetly and said nothing.

“Yeah I know, you were right all along,” Walt admitted.

“You owe me a beer,” Steve pronounced.

“Hey, I never bet you,” Walt protested, “but if you want a beer I'll buy you one when we are done tonight.”

“So how did the hunter get shot?” Steve asked. “Took a shot at a deer and it fired back?”

“Nope,” Walt said with a grin. “Apparently he shot himself in the foot.”

“Trying to avoid being drafted?” Steve joked.

“He claims that he tripped and it just went off.”

Steve just shook his head. “We get one almost every year, dumb people with firearms and alcohol out in the woods.”

“Payne said that they he is just waiting for their SAR techs to come back from the hospital and they will get back out on the beat again,” Walt explained.

“Did he say who the SAR techs were?” Steve asked.

“Jones and Knowles.”

“That figures,” Steve looked at his watch. It was after four. “They aren't going to have a lot of daylight left before they have to head home. I wonder what kind of coverage he got?”

Walt was looking at the map on the wall. “Yeah, I was thinking that too. You don't suppose we lost enough time that we will have to come down here again tomorrow, do you?”

“Nope,” Steve said, with a note of finality.

Saturday 13 October 1984

1922 hours

It had been a long day, but at last all the aircraft, PEP and CF were down safely and the debriefings were complete. The aircraft were in the hangar now, but the Labrador was unserviceable with a high frequency vibration problem and one Buffalo had an engine oil leak that was now out of limits.

"I think we wore everyone out on this search," Steve remarked, looking at the map on the wall in Ops. Walt was shading in the traces to show the areas covered. All were now showing 100%, except for a quarter of the area assigned to Payne's Buff crew. That sliver was shaded at 80%. They had been counting on Payne to provide 20% in his report and his navigator had done so, except for the portion they missed making the call to rescue the hunters.

Shading finished, Walt stood back and looked at the results. "What now, boss?" he asked Steve.

Outside the ramp was dark, even the floodlights were off and the only lights visible were the blue taxiway lights and the internally illuminated windsock. Cpl Pattersen had long gone home, his work completed when the aircraft were all down and the radios were turned off. Similarly the servicing ground crew had towed the three yellow aircraft back into the hangar, closed the big doors, locked up and gone home for the night. The two of them were alone in the silent hangar.

Steve looked at the map. The 80% area was on the eastern slope of the coastal mountains, terrain that dropped away to the east sharply.

"What would you say the chances of us finding them there are?" Steve asked.

"About 'nil', I guess," Walt responded sheepishly.

"So is it worth sending out our last serviceable Buff tomorrow morning to search that tiny area that has been searched four times before?"

"Probably not," Walt admitted, feeling led.

Steve took the marker from his hand, went to the map and shaded the area in with 100% hatching. "Come on, let's see if there is any food left at the mess, the crews from today should be there by now. You can buy me that beer."

They packed up the last of the maps, the logbook and other paperwork, locked up the shop and Steve dropped the paperwork in his office, locking it in his filing cabinet. Then they left the hangar by the ground-side door and walked to Steve's black Impala SS in the parking lot in silence.

When Steve had parked the car at the back of the Officers' Mess, Walt asked glumly, "It doesn't really make any difference, does it?"

“Not even a nickel's worth,” Steve said. “Those guys have been dead as doornails for exactly three weeks today, ever since that Cessna 310 hit the ground out there somewhere on its way to Prince George. No fire, no ELT, no signals of any kind for three weeks. Hoping isn't going to change any of that.” He gave Walt a playful punch on the shoulder. “Come on, I have a beer to collect.”

They got out of the car and walked to the mess where a quiet group of pilots and navigators had gathered in the lower bar.

Steve surveyed the scene, the three military crews were there in flight suits and one or two other mess members in civvies, a dozen people in total. Steve strode up to the bar and rang the bell hanging there, the universal signal in all officers messes that he was buying a round for the house. Without saying a word the female bartender retrieved beer mugs from the freezer. On the bar the mugs immediately frosted with moisture from the air. She lined them up and filled them from the draft tap.

Buying gave him the opportunity to make a speech and even Major Payne didn't regard him with scorn this time. “Gentlemen I will keep this painfully short. We did our best, but, as we at 442 Squadron all well know, the mountains don't give up their dead easily.” He raised his beer mug. “To the four who perished on board the Cessna 310 we were searching for and also to the two gallant members of 408 Squadron who died in the search for them. May they all rest in peace.”

Everyone sipped their drinks and then fell into quiet conversation.

“I thought I was buying you a beer?” Walt asked.

“Ah, I was only kidding you. I bought you one instead,” Steve explained with a laugh, “you can buy the next one.”

Part Two

Wednesday 17 October 1984

1700 hours

Steve sat in a coffee shop on Cliffe Avenue in Courtenay, the western urban area of the twin towns of Courtenay-Comox. He was slowly readjusting to life after SAR Schmidt, getting back to normal.

Sunday had been a warm and glorious day, one of the west coast's best for this time of year. The golf had been nearly perfect and the fairways drier than he had been concerned they might be. He had beaten Scott at least, with a respectable 83, although Woody had outdone him with 81. Butch had managed a non-competitive 92. To Steve it felt like the game they had started on September 23rd had been completed, finishing the cycle that had been interrupted by SAR Schmidt. The sun had shone, the four golf companions had proved good and true friends and, despite the lay-off for three weeks, Steve was not out of practice and felt very much at one with the great game on that particular Sunday.

Retirement is going to be very sweet, he had thought. I bet within a year I will be shooting par.

He sipped his coffee and held up his newspaper as if he were reading it and could still feel the strength of his swing and follow through. He was sitting in one of the coffee shop's window seats which afforded a good oblique view of the front of Aitken's Insurance Agency, across the street and one door down.

Steve had left work shortly after lunch, after spending Monday and Tuesday completing much of the administration left over from the SAR, approving the last of the costs, working on the final report and cleaning up the last entries in the searchmaster's logbook.

That is always the worst part of the whole damn search. Doing all the admin is like nursing the hangover Sunday morning after all the fun of the party Saturday night.

He did admit to himself that he was making good progress on the paperwork, even without Walt's help. In fact the biggest job remaining was reviewing the whole SAR Schmidt package prior to sending it off to RCC Victoria, plus the "nice letters" that he had to write for all the participants.

Bah, I have my list and my notes. It shouldn't take that long to do.

On this particular Wednesday he had excused himself early in the afternoon from the paperwork and the squadron hangar, gone home, changed into civvy clothing and gone into town to do some 'grocery shopping and other errands'. The stake-out in the coffee shop had been carefully planned. He had been thinking about it since the weekend.

He had hoped that Linda would come back home of her own accord. Enough people who knew her, also knew he was back in town now, had probably mentioned it to her and she still hadn't made an appearance. No phone call, no letters, no contact. He wasn't going to go through the humiliation of phoning her office again.

He felt that he ought to at least make sure she was still in town.

I wouldn't want to run into her by accident and say something unplanned and stupid, now. Far better to see for myself what is going on, he thought. *The army guys always say 'time spent in recce is seldom wasted' and they're right. You can never have too much information.*

And so he 'just happened' to be taking a break from shopping in Courtenay and stopped in for a coffee, where he might just see Linda leave work. Then he might just see where she went from there. He didn't want to have to tail her with his car. Too many people in town knew what his car looked like.

He continued to casually glance out the window until he had finished his coffee. Steve checked his watch: 1716 hours.

And there she was leaving the office, he noted.

She was in that gray suit she often wore to work. She had her brown hair pinned up and his initial impression was that she looked a little slimmer. *Imagination,* he said to himself.

He left the coffee shop and walked down the opposite side of the street in the same direction Linda was going, staying about a block behind her. The Colin Thatcher case was on his mind and he didn't want anyone to think he was stalking her. She didn't look back.

Where is she going? he wondered. *If she is going to her car that is an odd route to it, since there aren't any places to park in that direction.* Besides that, Steve had previously checked the street parking and the nearby lots for her gray Chevette and it didn't seem to be there anywhere.

She walked out of the Courtenay business district and in into the residential area. *Ah,* he thought *she's moved in somewhere close to work. I wonder who she is living with? Well that shouldn't be too hard to find out.* He continued to follow her from a block behind, but lost sight of her near a three story apartment block. He didn't want to appear suspicious so he just kept walking on by the building and there was her Chevette parked in the undercover parking area. *So this is the place,* he confirmed with a silent chuckle to himself. *That was too easy.*

Feeling emboldened by his success in tracking her down, he walked back and turned into the front doorway entrance. It was a conventional apartment doorway, with two doors. The outer one was

unlocked, but the inner one was locked. There was an intercom paging system on the wall, with no apartment numbers, just last names instead. According to the list there only seemed to be twelve apartments in the building. Steve ran down the list of names quickly looking for 'McBain' or some other familiar name, the name of a mutual friend, but they were all absent. *A pseudonym?* he wondered. He ran down the list again. One name was 'Crutch'. *Hah, she is using her maiden name, that is too easy. She should have picked a less obvious name to hide out under.*

He left before someone saw him there and walked briskly away from the neighbourhood, noting the address. At the corner he glanced at the street sign to confirm the name of the street, Fitzgerald. *Got her*, he thought with satisfaction, *you can run but you can't hide.*

Steve made his way back to Cliffe Avenue via another route and then onto the small side street where he had left the Impala. He started up the big V-8 engine, pulled out onto Cliffe and headed back to CFB Comox and the PMQ. He hummed to himself, the recce mission had been a great success and he now had the information he was looking for. *Now I just have to figure out what to do with it and make up some kind of a plan.*

At the PMQ Steve thought about what to make for dinner. *No more pizza for me*, he thought. He put The Beatles *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* on the turntable and waited until the first notes of the title track emitted from the speakers, then he set the volume and went back to the kitchen. He prepared an elaborate salad with strips of chicken left over from the previous night's dinner and ranch dressing. He then took it to the living room, gracefully flopped onto the couch and put his feet up.

"Now this is the life," he said, recalling that Linda had greatly frowned on eating dinner anywhere but the dining table. He occasionally got away with it, he remembered, but there was always a price to pay, of some sort.

That is exactly the problem I have to solve, do I want her back or do I just want to get even with her? He thought about it, what did he really want from her? *An explanation, that is what I want. I would be happy with a logical explanation.* Then he added out loud to the empty room, "If there actually is one."

Friday 19 October 1984

1702 hours

By Friday afternoon Steve had a plan. He had spent quite a bit of time over the last few days working over what to do. In his analysis there

were really only two choices in dealing with Linda, either talk to her or ignore her. By Thursday night, during a walk to Air Force Beach on the base, he was leaning towards the latter for a plan. The night was clear and the stars seemed very bright over the sandy beach.

Hey, if she thinks she knows what she's doing then why not let her? Who am I to interfere with her great plans? Besides that, she obviously has some fabulous imaginary grievance, why should I want to hear about it? 'Live and let live' is good enough for me. If she has anything important to say she can call me, she knows the phone number.

Perhaps it had just been the night air at the beach and the sound of the surf on the sand that had made him feel expansive and charitable. He had slept well that night, life seemed calmer and he was getting used to the quiet solitude of the PMQ.

By the next day his perspective had changed. Friday morning was cool and cloudy and the previous night's calmness had given way to what he thought of as a distinct desire to get at the truth. As he went running in the dark and cold morning air, it all came down to one thing, he wanted to know 'why'.

Over breakfast toast and coffee he made a plan. Usually on Friday nights he would be at the Officers' Mess, but not this evening. He now knew the route she took home, he would guess the time that she would depart the office, walk the route in the other direction and 'accidentally' run into her on the street somewhere. He would be nice as pie, glad to see her and invite her out for coffee, or better yet at that hour, to dinner somewhere, and then ask her to explain things. No matter what she said, he vowed to stay calm. Given that plan, he thought it had a good chance of working. At least he would find out what was going on and could make future plans based on that information. He could even call Ginny and tell her something useful, maybe even get a hold of Patrick, too. Maybe.

Some information always has to be better than no information, he decided.

His morning was a pleasant break from the paperwork, a training flight in a Labrador helicopter with one of the squadron standards pilots. It was good to get back to the old flying routines, going through the checklists and getting the huge twin rotor machine running and into the air. The trip had gone well and Steve felt it was good to get 'back in the saddle'.

He felt that more careful planning was needed. At lunchtime he made dinner reservations for two at a downtown restaurant that he knew Linda liked. They had dined there several times in the past for anniversaries and similar occasions. It was a quiet little place with candles

stuck in wine bottles on all the tables, that sort of thing.

And if she went somewhere else after work and he missed running into her entirely? Well then, he decided, he would just go home and go to the mess anyway. *Perfect plan*, he thought. *It'll be a good evening either way.*

Steve had parked the Impala on a back street in downtown Courtenay, near the restaurant, just after 1600 hours and then walked circuitously to position himself a block west of the apartment building on Fitzgerald.

They will probably close the office spot on time on a Friday, he thought, checking his watch. It showed 1705 hours now. *H-hour, time to get going*, he decided. He walked purposefully back in the direction of Aitken's, backtracking the route she had taken on Wednesday, estimating that he would meet her near the edge of downtown, about half way home.

He covered the distance steadily, on the lookout for her, while at the same time trying to not look too suspicious. Twelve minutes later he was on Cliffe and thinking, *Well either they locked up later than I estimated, she took a different route home or she went somewhere else with someone else.*

He was now only a block from her office, passing shop fronts on the main street. Looking down the block towards her office, it didn't appear that anyone was going in or out of the door there. *Maybe they all quit early today and went home at 1630 hours?*

Steve passed the deeply recessed shop doorway of a store that had gone out of business earlier in the year and was locked up, focused on the Aitken's sign he could now see half a block away. *Wait a minute, was that her in that doorway?* He stopped in a moment of indecision. If he went back to check he might miss her coming out of the office. If he didn't check and it was her, he would miss her. He decided to take the risk and backtrack.

There she was, standing in the recessed shop doorway. She had no easy escape as the store was dark, closed and locked. She wore a brown suit that he had never seen before. She did look slimmer now that he saw her up close. He looked at her and tried a smile. She bit her lip.

"I thought that was you I saw there," he smiled in as friendly a manner as he could manage.

She looked annoyed. "I want you to stop following me."

"I was walking that way," he indicated northeast, "and you were just standing in this doorway. I don't think it counts as following you unless you're moving." He smiled what he hoped was benignly, again.

"You were following me on Wednesday and you are doing it again today. That's why I ducked in here. If you don't cut it out I'll have you arrested."

"For what?" he protested. "I live in this town, too you know, I go shopping here, I can walk down the street here."

"Just stop following me and leave me alone." She looked at him very intensely, he thought, in a way that projected her intention of melting him or at least causing him to back away.

"Since we've bumped into each other," he changed the subject, "why don't we go out for dinner? I would really like to talk to you."

She made to leave the doorway, but he blocked her, putting his arm against the glass window.

She stood her ground, exasperated. "Look, let me go. I don't want to talk to you and I am not going for dinner with you, so don't try to charm me."

"Okay, have it your way." He dropped his arm. "I'm not keeping you here. Look, I went away on a search and things were fine. I am out in the woods trying to save people's lives. I call and you aren't home and I come back and you've apparently moved out. I just want to know what happened while I was gone that brought all this about. Tell me that and you don't have to talk to me anymore if you don't want to."

She drew in a long breath and looked at him hotly. "I promised myself if you ever went back to Prince George I was leaving. You did and I did, that is it."

"What is so special about that town? Why not Penticton or Prince Rupert?"

She sighed deeply. "I know you think I am totally stupid, but I'm really not. Do you remember that insurance conference I went to in Kamloops a few Aprils ago?" He gave her a quizzical look. "It was back in 1982. Remember?" He only shook his head and went to speak but she cut him off before he had a chance to say anything. "Well, I met someone there."

"You mean that you had an affair in Kamloops?"

"No that is not what I mean. Think about it for a moment, would you? Who would I meet at an insurance conference?"

"I have no clue," he said, regarding her coolly, while she seemed to be gathering steam.

"Okay, let me spell it out for you. I had a nice dinner with a really interesting lady from Prince George who was there at the conference. Her name was Ellen. Ring any bells?"

Steve was silent.

Linda continued, "Look you don't have to admit anything, she told me the whole story. I guess she must have felt guilty or something. How long do you think I'm supposed to put up with that kind of shit?" Linda's voice took on that icy calmness that had so unnerved Steve in the past. She continued. "I promised myself if you ever went back there, I was gone. You went back there and I am gone, so get used to it."

She was fuming.

"Nothing happened, you know, she told me she was getting married."

Linda laughed out loud. "Yeah, after our long, late-night talk she said that she was going to break it off with you. I asked her what she was going to say in explanation and she told me that she would think of a reason, like maybe telling you that she was getting married." She laughed again.

"So you see," he said, holding his hands out, palms up to show that he had nothing to hide, "that is all in the past, done, over. Why not just come home now?"

"Steve, you have got to be kidding," she said with a note of exasperation. "That went on for eight years. You made a total fool of me. I am not prepared to just 'forget it' and carry on this joke of a marriage. I am done, we are done."

Steve thought about what she had said. Coldly he replied, "I see that you have your stuff, your clothes and all that. Thanks for not burning all my things."

"Look I just want out, that is all. I am not going to be stupid, vindictive or mean about it. I just want my half of everything and to get on with my life."

"So you got your half of everything then?" he asked her.

"Pretty much," she said. "There is still the matter of my share of your pension, but I will let the lawyers sort that out."

"What?" said Steve aghast. "You can't touch my pension, I earned it, its mine."

"Talk to your lawyer," she quipped, pleased to see him on the defensive. "I get half automatically, no appeals and no debates. You get no say." She brushed past him and turned, disappearing onto the street, leaving him standing in the doorway alone.

He heard the sound of her high-heeled shoes clicking on the concrete sidewalk receding until there was just the background noise of the town left. Nothing more than the sound of cars on Cliffe Avenue. Two

teenage girls walked past the recessed shop doorway laughing loudly.

"She's bluffing," he mumbled quietly to himself. "She can't take half my pension. No way."

With his composure finally regained, Steve walked to his car and drove to the PMQ on the base. He decided to change back into his flying suit and go over to the Officers' Mess. As he walked in the door the combination of the noise and the smell of beer embraced him.

Friday 19 October 1984

1833 hours

It was a typical Friday night at the mess, perhaps 60 officers were there, drinking beer, telling stories and generally ending off the week at work before going home to a weekend of spouses, children, gardening, grocery shopping and the rest of the details that make up domestic life.

When Steve arrived at the mess there was a mug-out in progress. This old tradition consisted of saying goodbye to a member of the mess who was posted elsewhere, by making speeches and engaging in drinking games. In this case an Aurora pilot from 407 Maritime Patrol Squadron, whom Steve did not know, was being posted out. Steve joined the crowd standing in a large semi-circle in the lower bar. Apparently the pilot was posted to NDHQ.

Good for him, Steve thought. Hope he enjoys the desk and the view of the Rideau Canal, with all the snow and everything.

After the speeches and the drinking songs had been completed the crowd wandered away, some into the games room to play crud on one of the pool tables and most of the rest crowding the bar. The conversation was loud as there was much laughing and story telling going on.

Steve joined the mass of people four deep at the bar all waiting to order. There were four bartenders working feverishly, now that the speeches were over. After getting a glass of draft and paying for it, Steve spotted a familiar face across the room and made his way over to near the dart boards.

Cyril Longly was an old Captain, of Steve's vintage and had been long dedicated to staying in Comox for most of his career. He was a former 442 Squadron alumnus, having flown Buffs at one time, after that he had made his way down the flight line to fly Trackers with VU33 and was now at 407 Squadron on the new Aurora patrol aircraft, having transitioned from the piston-engined Argus that was retired three years ago.

Steve approached from behind and thumped him on the back.

“Don't you ever get a ground tour, you old bastard?”

Cyril wheeled around, a balding man, near Steve's age, but with a face that looked older, showing brown age spots. “Hey Steve, I heard that you just got back from being out in the sticks?”

“That was a week and half ago, old man, your news is out of date.”

“I guess, so,” Cyril replied with a smile. “Hey, I heard that you didn't get your search finished and had to bring it home instead and then you rescued the wrong people. Sounds like a real McBain SAR to me.”

“Ah, those hunters needed rescuing anyway. You know those SAR techs, they'll rescue anyone, whether they want to be rescued or not, by force if necessary.”

“I think you're right there,” Cyril said, raising his glass. “Well then, to aggressive SAR tech tactics.” Steve clinked glasses with him.

Steve started a new tack. “Say, you are divorced aren't you?”

Cyril nodded, “Yup, happily divorced for four years now. But I have some good advice on marriage that I will pass onto anyone who will listen.” He spilled some of his beer gesturing with his glass.

“And what great words of wisdom are those, master sage?”

“Don't bother getting married, I say, instead, every five years find a woman you hate and buy her a house.” He roared with laughter.

“That is old, Cyril, really old,” Steve said, smiling warmly. “Hey look I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Okay, so I am old.”

“What is this about getting divorced and losing half your pension?”

“Not true, not true, my son,” Cyril said, shaking his balding head emphatically.

“Well that is a relief,” Steve indicated.

“Why, are you and Linda splitting?”

“Yeah, maybe, I don't know. But that is good to know that she doesn't get my pension.”

“Nope she can't touch a drop of it,” Cyril pronounced, draining his beer mug. “She only gets half of your pension from the years you were together, nothing more.”

“But what if you were together basically the whole time you were in the military,” Steve asked.

Cyril laughed gain. “Well then in that case she does get half of your pension.”

“How does that work?”

“It is in the judgment when you get axed,” Cyril explained. “Your

cheques show up every month as normal, but they are discounted 50%.”

“What if I move out of the country, like to Bermuda or somewhere?”

“You can move anywhere you want to, the good old government will send you your half, wherever you are.”

Steve sighed. “Isn't there any way out of this at all?”

“Yes, my son, there is and I have a really good angle on it.”

“Well, do tell!”

Cyril moved the two of them further into the corner of the room, with a conspiratorial air. He smelled of beer.

“There is a little understood clause in the Act,” he explained. Steve was listening carefully, not to miss anything in the noisy room. Cyril continued, “You see, if you are married when you retire and then you die, your wife will get your pension as long as she lives. This is the good part...” he said in a low voice, “but if you are divorced the rules change. In that case she only gets half your pension and only until you die. After that she gets nothing. Brilliant, eh?”

Steve pondered what he had said. “I don't get it. How does that help?”

“Elementary,” said Cyril, with a flourish, “as long as you die before you retire, then she doesn't get a goddamn cent of your pension. That is exactly my plan.”

“What plan?”

“I am not retiring until I am dead.” He laughed loudly again.

“That doesn't really help, you know, Cyril.” Steve said with a trace of annoyance. “I am supposed to retire in about two months time.”

Cyril made a serious face. “Well you had better get to work planning your funeral, then.”

“That's it? That's your brilliant plan?” Steve asked, getting more annoyed.

“Well, I have a Plan 'B' because I get the boot, too, in three years time,” he admitted.

“And what is that?”

“Well I won't be doing all that well on half a Captain's pension, so I started a business a few years back to make up the difference and keep food on the table,” Cyril said solemnly.

“Doing what, retrieving golf balls from water traps?”

“Well that would be a good line of work, if you think you have the balls for it.” He laughed again, but Steve didn't. “Nope, I bought into an ostrich farm with an old guy and now he has retired and I own the whole

thing.”

“Really?”

“Yup, really. The first Labrador that flies over it will stampede all the birds and I'll clean-up on the claim against the crown.” He jabbed Steve in the ribs with his empty beer mug. “Naw, I am kidding about the claims against the crown. There is good money to be made in ostriches: ostrich feathers, ostrich meat, ostrich eggs. You ought to look into it!”

“Thanks,” said Steve. “It sounds like you have your head in the sand. You want another beer?”

“Well since you offered, why not?”

Steve went to the now less-congested bar, eventually returning to hand Cyril his beer.

“You really going to retire in three years?” Steve asked.

“Have to, my boy,” Cyril explained. “They're gonna toss me out at 55 anyway. After that I will be riding the ranges and roping them birds all day long until I ride off into the sunset.” He made a gesture of twirling a lasso over his head, like a television cowboy.

Steve shook his head at the image of that. “You are an original, all right.”

After draining his beer Steve went home. Later that night, sitting on the living room sofa, he did the math.

“Let me see,” he said out loud, looking at the pocket calculator with his reading glasses. “I make \$60,000 a year now as a top Captain. With 35 years service and 2% per year in pension and the average of my 'best five years' that means I would make \$42,000 a year on pension. Divided two ways is \$21,000 a year. Man that is not much.” He stared at the number on the display. “There are probably no green fees at all in that income.”

Steve put the calculator down and stared out the PMQ's living room window into the inky blackness of the October Comox night.

Monday 22 October 1984

1118 hours

Monday, mid-morning, Steve sat in his office working on the 'nice letters' that he owed. Originally he had considered writing up a form letter and giving that to the Orderly Room staff, along with a list of names, but in the end decided to write individual letters. It would be more work, he felt, but also the last major task to do on this SAR. He didn't like form letters any more than anyone else did and he wanted to be remembered as

the guy who sent out unique letters, not a bunch of 'cheat notes' at the end of his career.

Walt was back at the squadron this week, after his week off. Steve was counting on his help with the letters, but Walt had been scheduled to go on a Buffalo training trip first thing that morning.

He has to get current again, I guess, Steve allowed. *I'll just save him the best ones to to. I know, he can write up the letter for Brenda! I'll let him take care of Sylvia's too.*

Over the course of the morning Steve wrote his draft letters out in longhand, using a ballpoint pen, writing on sheets of foolscap. With a clatter Walt arrived in Steve's office.

"Trip all done?" Steve asked, looking over his reading glasses.

"Yup, just IFR stuff, but at least I am feeling a bit more like a pilot and less like a staff weeny again."

"Searchmastering is pilot work, you know," Steve observed. "In fact I consider it the highest calling amongst pilots."

Walt sat down in the spare chair next to Steve's antique desk. "Oh I know, I just wouldn't want to give up flying to doing searchmasterizing full time."

"Well fortunately that isn't in the cards," Steve responded, "but since you are back at work this week you can finish your apprenticeship up by helping me write all these nice letters that we owe to everyone." He tossed his list on the corner of the desk, some of the names had been crossed off as completed. "You can also have a go-through the complete post-op paperwork package and see what it's all supposed to look like, before it goes off to RCC." He moved the large package of paper onto the corner of the desk as well.

"Looks like a lot of reading," Walt said, regarding the ten-inch stack warily.

"Actually you wrote much of it." Steve pointed out the three searchmaster's logbooks that made up a large measure of the stack.

"Oh, I almost forgot this." Walt tossed a large envelope over the paperwork and onto a clear spot on Steve's desk. "I swung by the orderly room and this came in for you. Looks like it is from the Aero Shell in Prince George."

Steve looked at the large envelope, turning it over. "It does look like it's from Mac. I wonder what it is." He opened the envelope and removed a whole copy of the *Prince George Citizen* newspaper. It was dated Saturday, 13 October, 1984. "Oh, right. This is that issue that that

Withers guy has the big article on the SAR in.” He flipped through the thin paper. “Yeah here it is: *Military Search Really a Bail-out*. They gave him two whole pages including some photos. I’ll have to have a read though it and see what he says.”

“Well lend it to me when you are done, I want to see how my ad turned out,” Walt added, peering at the article that Steve was holding up. “Should we include a copy of that with the package for RCC?”

“We could, I guess,” stated Steve. “We are supposed to send them anything related to the SAR, including press stuff, just to complete their records of the op.”

“You want to get some lunch and then get into all this paperwork after that?” Walt asked, gesturing towards the door. “We can beat the canteen rush.”

Steve checked his watch which showed 1135. “Still a bit early for me,” he pronounced. “I’ll meet you down there in a few minutes. I am just going to read this first.” He frowned at the newspaper.

Monday 22 October 1984

1202 hours

Steve pulled up a chair at the table in the squadron canteen that Walt was sitting at, placing his sandwich and drink down. The room was busy with pilots, navigators, SAR techs, air trades technicians and many other squadron personnel, all jockeying to get something to eat. The air was thick with the smell of toast and bacon cooking for clubhouse sandwiches.

“That took you a while to read,” Walt noted.

“It was a long article,” Steve observed, dryly.

Walt was just finishing his lunch as Steve took the first bite from his sandwich.

“You don’t sound all that impressed with it,” Walt suggested.

“I think Withers kind of missed the point in his article. He hardly mentioned the long hours of flying patterns over the trees, the hard work in organizing it all, or even the fate of the lost aircraft and its crew and passengers. He wrote about 90% of it on the money that it brought into the community, itemizing the hotel bills, restaurant charges, booze, fuel and everything else we bought in Prince George or anywhere else for that matter.”

“You did kind of get him to focus on that side of the SAR,” Walt pointed out.

"I just mentioned it as a passing item of interest," Steve responded intensely. "I didn't intend for him to write the whole article about that. I just thought he'd write a sentence or two on it, along with the dramatic tale of the violent crash in the woods, the desperation of the survivors, the sad-faces of the relatives of the victims, the keen and dedicated SAR crews scouring thousands of square miles of mountains, rivers and woods for the missing aircraft, the torturous weather, the wild winds rocking the helicopters as they search deep gorges..."

"The loss of life amongst the SAR forces," Walt added.

"Sure that too, to show the dedication of the SAR crews to the mission, that they would lay down their lives to get the job done and in peacetime, too." Steve continued. "Instead we get two pages of interviews with hotel desk clerks, rental car operators and gas jockeys about how much money they made from this SAR that didn't even find the search object, in poor old economically depressed Prince George. Man, it makes it sound like a Cape Breton steel mill bail-out or something."

Walt was laughed to himself.

"What is so funny?" Steve asked, "I think we got the shaft from this article."

Walt shook his head and laughed some more. "Well I was just thinking that since you're retiring soon and you obviously have the vision to see the big picture on this sort of thing maybe you should become a newspaper reporter, or at least go to work for DND/DOI making sure the PR matches the party line."

"It isn't about 'party line'," Steve explained with exaggerated patience. "There are lots of angles on a story like this, of course, but it doesn't make sense to write a story that focuses on one little minor aspect, a by-product or side-effect really, and ignore all the real-life drama going on around you. I mean he said virtually nothing about the victims, who they were, what their lives were about. This was an international story when it was going on."

"I am sure the foreign press covered all that sort of thing," Walt said, carefully. "I was just thinking maybe Withers was trying to look at it from an original angle, that's all."

"I left it on your desk, so you read and then you can tell me if it isn't skewed the wrong way and misses the real story here."

"Okay, I'll read it," Walt agreed.

"Don't bother looking for your name in there, he missed mentioning you or most of the other members of the SAR team," Steve pointed out.

"I guess you didn't get much of a mention either, then," Walt added.

"Hardly any, considering it was my SAR. That is pretty much off-base, if you ask me," Steve pronounced.

"You want the article back to include in the package for RCC?"

"Naw, don't bother," Steve said dismissively. "I don't think it is important enough to include. When you're done with it just toss it."

"Okay," Walt said. "You're the boss on this SAR."

"Damn right," Steve concluded, brooding. He resumed eating. "I left the RCC package on your desk, too. You can pass it back to me whenever you have a run through it. Let me know if you find any mistakes or problems. The main thing is that it should be complete and create a seamless picture for the legal record. There shouldn't be any outstanding questions left at the end."

"Okay," said Walt. "What about including the final reports from the accident boards?"

"Ah," Steve said, shrugging. "The DFS boys probably won't be finished for months yet and who knows when the collateral will be done. I have seen those turn up a week after the interviews, months later or even never. That one will probably take quite a while since it will have to be signed off by lots of very high level generals and such. If either turns up before the package goes to RCC and has anything relevant to the search in it, then it can be included."

"When do you plan to send the package off to RCC?" Walt asked.

"As soon as you're done with it," Steve added with a terse chuckle.

"Okay, I get it," Walt responded.

Thursday 25 October 1984

1333 hours

Walt brought the large package of paper and quietly placed it on Steve's desk.

Steve looked up. "That took you a while to go through."

"Yeah, it did," Walt agreed, sitting down on the chair next to Steve's desk. "There was a lot of stuff there and I wanted to make sure that it was all correct and complete. It didn't think you were in a big hurry for it."

"Well, I'm glad that you had a good look thought it. Anything need fixing?"

"No, it looks good enough, all the 'i's dotted and 't's crossed. The

only thing missing is the search object.”

“We can't do much about that,” Steve noted. “I could add a note 'unlocated somewhere in BC' to the last page of the logbook, although that's pretty obvious. It isn't our fault we didn't find it, no effort or expense was spared and that is really the aim of the exercise, to show for any potential future court cases that due diligence was completed.”

“I thought the aim was to find the missing aircraft.”

“I think as a future searchmaster you really have to keep in mind that our aim is to properly conduct a search, as per the applicable manuals. Finding what we are looking for is a happy coincidence, a bonus, if you like. If it happens then we get to do a rescue or at least call the coroner, but if not, we haven't failed to meet the aim. The aim is to conduct the search. That's all.”

Walt just shrugged.

“Look, it is really easy to get all emotionally involved in these SAR ops. They can be intense and engaging, all right. The trouble is that it'll burn you out if you let it. Most of the time we don't find what we're looking for. It is disappointing, but it's just the nature of the technology. When an ELT goes off we go right out and get them, no searching. When it doesn't, we have to use the old Mark1 eyeball to go looking in the woods. It isn't a very good method, but it is the best we have right now. Maybe one day we will be able to track every aircraft by satellite or something and there won't be any more doubt where any of them crash, but until then we're going to have to rely on visual searches and we are going to miss a lot of crash sites. Personally I don't like not finding missing aircraft. I wish we could find them all.”

“I guess I signed up for SAR to rescue people, not to minimize legal liability.”

“We all did. That's youthful idealism for you, but, after a few dozen unsuccessful searches, you get to be happy if it was carried out flawlessly, rather than measuring it by the number of rescues done. Success is in the eye of the beholder.”

Walt thought again about Steve's comments. “So if you don't succeed enough, then you change the definition of success?”

“Naw, that is too cynical,” Steve said quickly. “It's more a matter of being able to accept reality.”

“But doesn't all that mean that you're just happy going out doing searches and not finding anything? Doesn't that also mean that we never get better at what we do, because there is no expectation of success, nothing to strive for?”

“Not at all,” Steve noted. “ATGHQ has a cell that specializes in SAR research. They analyze all the searches done over the whole country and do their statistical work on it all and come up with new search patterns and stuff all the time. I worked there between '79 and '81, just before I came back here to Comox. We did lots of good work there. Once you get out searchmastering on your own they'll start adding your searches to the data they have and using it to make future searches better. It all counts, but you can't make the world a better place on your own, it is a team effort.”

“I guess,” Walt concluded. “Hopefully the next SAR I go on will be a live rescue, that's all.”

“We always hope that,” Steve added. “You will make a fine searchmaster, you have the knowledge and the passion for it and that is good. You are gaining the experience quickly. You will work out fine. Just remember everything I taught you after I am retired.” Steve took the package of paperwork and slid it into a large envelope.

“When is that anyway?” Walt asked. “You must be getting down to short time now.”

“I talked to the CO and it looks like I will start terminal leave on Saturday, December 15th,” Steve explained. “I could have left it until the 31st but no one wants to process me out at that time of year. I have enough leave accumulated to take me well into March, so I don't even start drawing my pension until then.”

“Have they scheduled your mug-out yet?” Walt asked.

“Last possible moment, it will be at TGIF on the 14th.”

“Sounds like you will have a quiet Christmas at home then?”

“Not really, I'll probably have to move sometime around then. They don't let you keep your PMQ past the end of your terminal leave. I may have one or both of my kids home for Christmas, too,” Steve noted. “It won't be quiet at your house either, I'll bet. How is your wife doing, anyway?”

Walt grinned, “getting bigger every day. I have to help her get up off the couch now. I think she has just about had enough, but we have about six more weeks to go.”

“It could be less than that,” Steve pointed out. “Especially with the first one, but you never know, sometimes they're early, sometimes they're late. I just know they're never on time. I hope the delivery goes easy for her.”

“Yeah, I hope so too, or this will be an only child.”

Steve smiled thoughtfully. “Don't get too nervous, I am sure it'll all be just fine, you know. You will just have a busy Christmas at home, that is

all.”

Walt gestured towards the package of documentation from the search. “You going to put that in the mail to RCC or do you want me to do it?”

“Naw, I’ll do it,” Steve responded. “I have to make some copies first anyway.”

“Copies?”

Yeah I usually make photocopies of the SAR files and hang onto them. I have a whole box of them at home from all the SARs I have done. In case I ever get sued I wouldn’t want to rely on the military to cough up the evidence for the trial.”

“Sounds like a smart idea,” Walt admitted.

“You bet,” Steve noted.

“Ever have to use any of it?”

“No, but maybe I will use them all to write my memoirs,” Steve grinned.

Tuesday 02 November 1984

0904 hours

“CO wants to see you.” Major Ron Thiessen, the 442 Squadron Labrador Flight commander stuck his head in Steve’s office door.

“Hmm,” Steve responded. “What’s that all about?”

“No clue,” Thiessen replied and disappeared down the hallway towards his own office.

Great flight commander, Steve thought. Even I could have done better than 'no clue'. He got up from his desk and made his way to Lieutenant Colonel Braithwaite’s office down at the end of the hallway. His civilian secretary was at her desk and pointed Steve into the inner office without comment, obviously he was expected. It all looked ominous to Steve. He thought that he had better come to attention at the doorway and wait to be invited in.

“Ah, Steve,” LCol Braithwaite looked up from his desk where he was writing something down. “Please have a seat.” Steve sat down, this meant it must be a longer duration conversation in the offing. The Colonel finished reading through a teletype message.

“I wanted to tell you this first hand, rather than have you hear it from anyone else,” LCol Braithwaite began, indicating the message. “DFS seem to have come to some conclusions about that Kiowa crash on your search.” Steve was sitting on the edge of the chair, trying not to look too

concerned, even though he was.

The Lieutenant Colonel continued. "I suppose in an accident like this, when an aircraft hits the ground upside down, in marginal weather, that there is an immediate inclination to come up with human cause factors and put the blame on the crew's decision-making or that of the supervisor who sent them out there in the first place. I am well aware that, in this case, that falls on your shoulders." He paused for dramatic effect and Steve could only nod thoughtfully in response.

LCol Braithwaite continued, "This time I have to give the accident investigation board and the DFS investigator some credit. They seem to have traced the accident to a cyclic hardover and attributed that to hydraulic system contamination due to a poorly serviced hydraulic test stand back at their unit. It looks at this stage like water was introduced into the test stand and that produced a corroded valve in the cyclic actuator and loss of control. When the valve failed in the open position there was nothing the crew could do to retain control of the aircraft. The Kiowa has only a single hydraulic system, no back-ups."

Steve tried to contain a smile. "That's some kind of detective work. What made them even look at that as a possibility?"

"From the phone call I got from DFS, I think it was the hydraulic control switch. It was found in the wreckage selected in the off position."

"Couldn't that have just been impact damage?" Steve asked.

"Pretty unlikely, the Kiowa has a guarded switch. It must have been selected off by the crew. That alerted them to have a closer look at the hydraulic system."

Steve considered the news. Essentially this would take all the focus off supervision issues and Steve McBain. It meant the crew were essentially killed by poor maintenance.

"What about the collateral?" Steve asked.

"As far as I have heard it has been suspended," LCol Braithwaite said. "I don't expect they'll bother writing a report, given this information, although there will be an AirComHQ maintenance investigation, I would imagine."

"Yeah, I would guess so," Steve responded. "Is all this for public consumption?"

The CO handed him the message. "The summary went out 'unclassified'," he noted. "So you can pass it on on a need-to-know basis."

"I was just going to show it to my deputy, Captain Ashbury." Steve said, "but, I will include a copy in the final report to RCC on the search, since the Kiowa was on detachment to them at the time of the accident."

“Sure, that would be fine,” LCol Braithwaite pronounced. “You can send the original to the Unit Flight Safety Officer when you are done with it, for the file. “You did a good job on this search, Steve, I am glad that DFS won't pin any supervisory cause factors to this accident.”

Steve nodded in agreement, in as serious a manner as he could muster. He took the message and left the CO's office. In the hallway he allowed himself a big grin. *This is great news*, he concluded, *really great news*.

Down in the Buffalo Flight end of the hangar he found Walt talking with a couple of navigators. Steve interrupted them.

“Looks like we have a final on that Kiowa crash,” Steve said, waving the message.

“Oh, yeah?” Walt replied. “What is that?”

“Hydraulic system malfunction due to a maintenance issue,” Steve grinned broadly. “We are off the hook for that one.”

“You mean you're off the hook, I was never on it. I didn't brief them, remember?” Walt looked at him quizzically.

Steve waved his hand dismissively, “Same thing, same thing. Not our problem. They've dropped the collateral, too. This goes into the package for RCC.”

“I guess they would drop the collateral,” Walt responded, but Steve had already headed off to the orderly room to make a photocopy of the message for the RCC package.

“What was that all about?” one of the navs asked. “He is happy that a helicopter crashed?”

“No, he is just happy that it was someone else's fault,” Walt explained, shaking his head slowly.

The navigator just shook his head, “Weird, man.”

Monday 07 January 1985

1024 hours

Steve was sitting in his PMQ kitchen taking a break from watching TV when the phone rang.

“Steve, Walt here.”

“Hey, Walt,” Steve responded, happy to talk to anyone. “Happy New Year. You back so soon after the holidays? How are things at 442 these days?”

“Actually they're pretty dull,” Walt admitted. “We haven't had a real call out since your mug-out, unless you count a couple of ELT chases

that turned out to be UNSARs. How are things with you?"

"Pretty dull, too," Steve admitted. "I was hoping to get some golfing in, but it has either been too cold and windy or too rainy. We had a nice day there after New Years, but it was mid-week and I couldn't find any partners. I guess that's the problem with being retired: no one else is."

Walt laughed. "Well I guess you're going to have to find some retired golfing partners, at least getting a tee-off time shouldn't be hard, should it?"

"Yeah, those are easy to come by in January mid-week," Steve admitted. "Maybe you are right, I just need to hook up with some other old retired farts to golf with. I am used to golfing with a younger crowd. How is the new baby doing?"

"Matthew is one month and two days old today," Walt said, pleased that Steve had asked. "He's still not sleeping all through the night but we are getting used to it. Man they grow fast at this age, it's like there is something new everyday."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya there," Steve admitted. "They tend to grow like weeds, you go to work for the day and by the time you get home they are two inches taller and walking. He'll be borrowing the car next."

"Hey don't you have to move soon?"

"Don't remind me," Steve said sadly. "I've been looking around town for an apartment, but it is hard to find something cheap in this town."

"I thought a top Captain like you would have enough money?"

"Yeah, I would have been just fine," Steve began, "except that Linda seems determined to take half my pension away. It doesn't leave much to live on."

"That's a drag," Walt responded. "Have you talked to a lawyer?"

"Oh, yes," Steve replied. "Two different ones in fact and they both said the same thing, 'that's just the way it is'. Apparently she is entitled and there is nothing I can do about it. It really sucks, because I could claim half her pension, except she doesn't have one. Good defence, eh?"

"What are you going to do then?"

"Find a cheap place to live for starters. It's funny, but the only place in my price range is in the same building that she's is living in. I might take it just to spite her."

"That sounds like a plot for a really bad sitcom," Walt indicated.

"Except this one isn't very funny," Steve noted. "My advice is don't get married, it isn't worth it."

"What if you already are?" Walt asked.

"Then don't ever split up. It's not worth it."

"Okay, Walt said. "I'll just write that down."

"You are funny, kid. I guess I am also going to have to get a job to help make ends meet. I am hoping to find something part time, so I can at least get some benefit from being retired."

"Oh, yeah? Where do you think you would be working?"

"I dunno, maybe at the Canadian Tire, at least then I can get a discount on golf balls."

"You could always work for the ARAF here on base," Walt added hopefully.

"What is that?"

"Air Reserve Augmentation Flight," Walt explained. "Sort of an employment agency of reservists who can work anywhere on base. It's relatively new. They sign up newbies like the army militia does and train them from scratch, but they will also sign up retired retreads, because they are already trained."

"Makes sense," Steve admitted, "but not sure what I could do there. I doubt they would let me keep flying Labs."

"No but they probably need some old farts to run the ARAF itself, if you are interested."

"I guess that is a possibility," Steve admitted. "How was your Christmas, anyway?"

"It was actually fun," Walt said with some enthusiasm. "We had a nice quiet time, just the three of us, although Laureen's mom and dad came up for New Years. It was kind of tight in the PMQ, but we did okay. How did your Christmas work out? Did your daughter come home?"

"Nope, both she and my son were no-shows. Ginny decided to stay in Toronto over Christmas. Her husband's parents came into town and I think he wanted her to pretend things were fine for their sake and convinced her to stick around. My son Patrick decided to hitchhike to California with some friends from university and go surfing. If he made it there and back he would have started at SFU again today, I think. My theory is that they are both avoiding Comox. Maybe they will come around next summer, I don't know. In many ways it feels like the whole family has been blown to the wind."

"Well I can see the attraction of going to California at this time of year, the weather here has been pretty dismal, really and there has been that flu bug going around," Walt observed. "You didn't catch that, did you?"

"Naw, I never get the flu, even when everyone else does. I think I was born immune or something. My father never got it either, even when

my mom was sick. I am hoping the weather picks up soon, though,” Steve noted, looking out the kitchen window. It wasn’t really raining, more like drizzle and mist.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Walt interjected. “This wasn’t actually a social call. I got a phone call from that German guy from the last search we did. He was looking for you.”

“German guy?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, George von Richthofen. He called first thing this morning.”

“Oh yeah, the little guy, the painter from Austria. I had forgotten about him. What did he have to say?” Steve asked.

“He said that he had tracked down Jan Schmidt’s brother. You remember, he was working on some immigration government angle or something?”

“Yeah, I remember that. That is kind of interesting, I guess. I wonder if he talked to the brother or not. I doubt he would have actually taken it upon himself to call him and tell him his brother is dead. I guess as Searchmaster that job falls to me.”

“Well, you are retired now and that case is pretty much officially closed,” Walt pointed out. “I can pass this onto RCC if you prefer and let you get on with your day. I just wanted you to know.”

“Naw, I don’t have anything better to do today anyway,” Steve said. “I’ll call him. Did he leave a phone number?”

Walt gave him the number.

“What else did he say?” Steve asked, writing.

“That was really it, but he sounded kind of agitated over it all. Maybe he was afraid that he would have to tell him the news, I don’t know.”

“Let me give him a call and sort it out.” Steve said.

“Okay, well let me know what you hear from him. I’ll pass it all onto RCC if need be.”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve said. “I’ll let you know what the story is either way. At least you’ll know whether you need to do anything or not.”

Steve hung up the phone. *Geez, I wonder what time it is in Austria now? It has to be something like nine hours difference, so almost 2000 hrs there. I guess I had better call now before he goes to bed. I don’t want to think what this is going to cost me, but I’ll find some way to bill it back to RCC.*

Monday 07 January 1985

1056 hours

Steve dialed the number and waited while the overseas connection clicked through. Eventually it rang and a woman answered in German. Steve asked for George and the woman switched to accented English and asked him to wait a minute.

“Is that Captain McBain?” George asked, picking up the phone.

“Hello George,” Steve started out. “How was your Christmas?”

“Well not too bad, really,” George said, but then quickly added, “but I am glad that you called me, I have some news for you.”

“Yes, I was talking to Captain Ashbury and he said that you had managed to track down Jan Schmidt's brother. That is good work.”

“Yes, well, it is a bit more complex than that and I did not know what to do about it all, so I haven't taken any steps. I thought I had best contact you, since you are in charge of the searching.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Steve responded. “I actually retired at Christmas, but I can help finish off the case details, at least I have some available time to do it now.”

“Oh, well if you are no longer with the military then perhaps I should pass this information onto someone else?”

“Ah no sweat. Technically I am still in the military but I am just on leave until the end of March. I can be the one to close up the file, so go ahead and tell me what you found. Can I guess that you tracked down Schmidt's brother, but you didn't know what to say to him, so haven't contacted him?”

“No, actually I have gone up to see him,” George began, “but this is all so complex. I had better start from the beginning here, so that I get the story right for you.”

“Okay, I don't see what would make a long story out of it, but go ahead,” Steve said.

“Well, I think I had mentioned to you when I was there in Prince George that my mother wanted to take on the job of tracking down Jan Schmidt's brother. She thought she could do it through the immigration department, using her government contacts and she was successful in this regard. It seems that their family comes from an Austrian town on the Czech border called Laa an der Thaya. It has a long name but is not a big place. It didn't take my mother's contacts long to track down the brother. He still lives at the old address of his parents. That was the address Jan Schmidt used when he emigrated to Canada in 1964. She didn't have to resort to having them comb through tax records or other such things.”

“Well that is good,” Steve said, growing increasingly interested.

“So he wasn't all that hard to find?”

“No, not really, as long as you know someone who can get into confidential government files, I suppose.” George continued, “I did call your squadron there at Comox, but this information came up over Christmas and so there was no answer. Since I only had an address for this brother, Werner, I decided that I would take a drive up to Laa an der Thaya and perhaps give him the news that his brother Jan was missing and presumed dead, or at least see if he had already heard any news of these events.”

“That was good of you to take that on, but I could have done it, or, I suppose have it done through the Canadian Embassy in Vienna,” Steve added.

“I did think of that, but since I was unable to get in touch with you I thought something should be done sooner than that. Also it occurred to me that Werner might not speak English, which turned out to be the case.”

“Well thanks for doing that,” Steve said. “I guess he was upset?”

George continued, “Well not so much upset as confused and that has also confused me. You see I went up there between Christmas and the New Year, on the 27th of December. Here many people stay home at that time of year and I thought I might find him there. He is a mill-worker and lives alone there at the old family home with his teenage daughter. The town is a very quaint place, really and not like the city where I live. There was a lot of snow about, so the trip was a little later than I had hoped but nothing too difficult. It took me two hours to get there. Since I had arrived unannounced he was rather surprised to see me at his door, but he invited me in when I said that I wanted to talk to him about his brother, Jan. He had not seen his brother in many years, but said that they still sent the occasional Christmas card. This is where it got confusing. I told him that his brother was missing in an aircraft accident and it was presumed that he had perished. He said that was very sad since Jan had been flying so many years and had just started a new life for himself, only to be killed right at the beginning of it. He asked me when the aircraft went missing and I told him that it was on September 22. He said that there must be some mistake, because his brother had sent him a Christmas card this year. I suggested that perhaps he had sent it before the ill-fated flight, but that seemed unlikely that he would send out Christmas cards in mid-September, even to Austria. This was very odd. Werner then went and retrieved the card, which was still on his mantelpiece. It didn't have a date on it and simply said in German 'Merry Christmas, thought I would let you know I have started a new life, thanks to Santa Fabiola. Peace to you all, Jan'. That was

all there was.”

“That isn't much to go on,” Steve remarked. “Anyone could have sent it and at anytime. Are you sure it wasn't a card from 1983 that arrived late? Jan Schmidt split up with his wife not that long ago, perhaps that was what he was referring to.”

“I didn't know what to think, really,” George said with some exasperation. “I thought similar things to what you said. So I asked him if he had the envelope that it came in. He said that normally he throws out Christmas card envelopes, but he remembered that he had saved it because it had a particularly pretty stamp on it. He said he has a friend who collects foreign stamps and had saved it for him. His house is quite a clutter, with no wife to keep it clean and it took him some time to find the envelope. He did give me some very fine coffee while he searched for it. Finally he found it on top of his refrigerator, with a pile of other envelopes for his stamp-collecting friend. It was fortunate that he had not just torn off the stamps.”

The story now had Steve's attention. “So what did the envelope tell you?”

“Predominantly two things. There was no return address on it, but Werner confirmed that it was Jan's handwriting in addressing the envelope. He was sure of that by the way that he wrote the town name of Laa an der Thaya. But the stamp was very beautiful, indeed.”

“Where was it from?” Steve cajoled with some impatience.

“It was a Christmas nativity scene stamp, quite well done and from Peru.”

“Peru?” Steve asked. “You mean the Peru in South America and not, say Peru, Indiana?”

“I don't believe that towns in the USA issue their own stamps,” George continued.

“No, I guess not,” Steve admitted. “What else did you get from the envelope?”

“Well the postmark was clear. It said that it was mailed on December 2nd, 1984 and was marked Huánuco.”

“What is Huánuco?”

“My best understanding is that it is a place, since it was around the top of the postmark and it said Peru around the bottom.”

“Well where the heck is that?” Steve asked.

“I did later go to my public library to check the atlas and I did find a state of Huánuco, Peru, and a town with that name also, in the middle of the country.”

“What about that remark about 'Santa somebody'?” Steve queried.

“It said 'Santa Fabiola,’” George said, “Werner had no idea what that meant. 'Santa' just means 'saint' in English, so maybe it is just an invocation?”

“Invocation?”

“Yes, you know, like 'Thanks be to God', or something like that?”

“Okay,” Steve said, writing this information down. “What else did this Werner tell you?”

“That was really about it,” George stated. “He admitted that he is not very close to his brother and has not seen him in many years. He hoped that if there is a mistake in all this, it is in the death notice. I told him that perhaps there is indeed some sort of mistake involved.”

Steve was thinking. “Is it possible that you got the wrong Schmidt, tracked down the wrong person?”

“It seems unlikely, as this Werner had a brother named Jan, who moved to Canada in 1964 and who was a pilot in British Columbia. I don't think there could be too many people with that situation.”

“I guess you are right, but it doesn't make any sense. What did he do, get lost between Campbell River and Prince George and land in Peru instead? He would have had to land in the USA, refuel, clear customs and all that. There would be records of such things that would be easy to trace. You can't land in the USA without a cross-border flight plan or they would probably arrest you on the spot on suspicion of smuggling.”

There was a silence on the line. “I am afraid that I do not have the answers to those sorts of questions,” George sighed, “but perhaps that would be a good line of questioning to pursue?”

“Of course, you're right,” Steve concluded, thinking. “Leave it with me and I will see what I can figure out. I have to ask you, though, who have you told this story to?”

“No one at all, except my wife,” George explained. “She cannot make much of it either. You see this Christmas card means to me that there is a chance that my brother Edward is still alive, so I haven't told my mother or other siblings. They are still trying to deal with his death and starting proceedings with the lawyers to address his estate problems and the leadership at the company, Leistung.”

“Yes of course, I understand,” Steve said carefully. “Things are progressing in sorting out his affairs and you wouldn't want to compound it all with odd rumours. Let me see if I can turn that into some kind of facts.”

“I think that would be best,” George said with a sense of relief.

“Besides,” Steve said slowly trying to think it through. “There are

lots of possibilities. Maybe Jan Schmidt did survive the accident, but no one else did and so to avoid lawsuits he left town as soon as he could. Maybe it's all a joke by some friend of the family or an extortion attempt, or just a mistake. Maybe the brother heard about the accident and cooked up a fraud to convince himself that his brother is still alive, who knows? I wouldn't change what your family is doing on the basis of one unverified Christmas card, but I will get to the bottom of this and call you back as soon as I find out what there is to know."

"Okay, that would be good," George said with a sense of relief.

"Just do me a favour and don't mention this to anyone, at least until I get it solved, okay?"

"Certainly, that would be a good idea," George agreed.

"I'll get back to you as soon as I have answers," Steve said. "Don't wait up for it, though, this may take a bit of time."

"Thank you for taking care of this, I will await your call," George concluded and then they both hung up.

Steve's head was swirling with the news. He decided that the first step was call RCC and see if the aircraft could be tracked in the USA at all. He dialed the 800 number.

"Rescue Coordination Centre, Captain Reynolds speaking."

"Paul, Steve McBain, here."

"Hey Steve, I thought you were retired now or are you looking to be rescued?"

"Funny guy, I am working on an odd hunch on SAR Schmidt."

"Oh, yeah, we just put that file away recently. I read through your package there, nice job on the documentation."

"Yeah thanks," Steve said. "Listen, can you do me a favour without raising too much dust doing it?"

"Depends on what it is. What are you working on?"

"Oh, it is mostly a gentleman's bet with someone, but I don't want to embarrass him too much. Can you just do a trace on that Cessna 310 from the search and see if it turned up in the USA at all, flight plans, customs, accident records, that sort of thing?"

"You think it was down there?"

"Maybe. If it amounts to anything I'll fill you in on the angle."

"And if not?"

"Then someone else loses a bet, okay?"

"Sure, no problem," Paul said. "What dates do you want checked, six months before the date it went missing good enough?"

"Actually from 22 September until 02 December, 1984."

"When did it go missing?"

"22 September."

"So you think it was stolen or something?" Paul asked.

"Something like that," Steve said. "Just don't ask too many questions okay? It is probably nothing at all, but if you turn up anything then I'll fill you in."

"Okay," Paul said. "It'll probably take 24 hours or so to get that stuff."

"Yeah, no sweat," Steve remarked. "Just give me a call here at home when you have the answers. Thanks in advance and all that."

As hung up the phone it rang again and he snatched it up.

"Hi Steve," Walt said. "I just thought I'd call before I head off for a flight and see if you need me to talk to RCC and get them to talk to Schmidt's brother?"

"No, that won't be required. I talked to George in Austria and he has already gone up to visit this brother and they had a talk."

"Oh well, that's good," Walt said. "I guess it is 'case-closed' then, is it?"

"Not really, it kind of reopens the case, actually. It seems that this brother got a Christmas card from Jan Schmidt."

"What, from this year?" Walt asked.

"Yeah, it seems so," Steve explained, "actually the story gets even better, supposedly the card was mailed from South America."

"You're kidding?"

"Yeah, probably," Steve retorted. "Look, it is probably some elaborate joke or hoax or mistake, but I am going to check it out."

"You want me to let RCC know?"

"I already talked to them," Steve said. "Listen, I think this has the potential to upset some people, especially because it probably is some sort of joke, so I think it would be best if you don't mention it to anyone."

"Yeah, I guess you are right," Walt said, thinking it over. "Just think if, waz-her-name, Loretta MacKinstry, heard about it."

"Exactly, she would have psychics all over the the 442 hangar. You would probably have a séance in your office."

"Okay, if you want to do the work chasing it down, that's fine with me," Walt concluded. "Just let me know what you find out or if you need me to do anything."

"Okay, deal," Steve agreed and hung up.

Monday 07 January 1985

1158 hours

It was close to lunchtime and Steve was getting hungry. He made a sandwich and and sat down at the kitchen table.

Man, what a morning, he thought. The phone just never stopped ringing.

I wonder what the hell this Christmas card thing is all about? It would be nice to write it off as a joke or something and just get on with life, but it would be a very odd type of joke. It just doesn't feel like a joke, either. It feels more like a slip-up to me.

I gotta make some sense of this.

It doesn't sounds like George's mother could have found the wrong person. George is right, if she had found some other guy named Schmidt then he wouldn't have had a brother named Jan who came to Canada in 1964 and was a pilot in BC. So let's assume that part is correct and they found the right guy.

It could it be a joke or a hoax, he considered chewing his sandwich thoughtfully. But who would perpetrate such a thing? It would have to be someone in Peru or who had a friend in Peru who could mail the card from there to get it stamped and canceled. But what purpose would that serve? First off it isn't funny, just spooky and second, what's the point? I don't see any.

How about an extortion attempt or something else illegal? Surely they would have sent a ransom note instead or some real proof he was alive, like a photo with a newspaper or something? Perhaps the card is the first part of some elaborate scheme to first show he is a alive, then show he was kidnapped and then demand money, when he is actually dead. Possible, but pretty darn far fetched. Besides it wasn't like Jan Schmidt has close relatives who are rich. This Werner doesn't sound well off enough and not close to his brother anyway. Poor target, I think. That just doesn't add up at all.

What next? That means that Jan Schmidt is really in Peru, or was on 02 December, which was a month ago. Unknown is how he got there, who he is with and what happened to the Cessna 310 that went missing.

What about 'why'?

Why? Why? Why?

Jan Schmidt was broke and he owed his ex-wife a bunch of money, so there is a motivation for disappearing. Better than bankruptcy, I guess.

Steve took a beer out of the fridge, went back to the living room and flopped down on the sofa, watching the mist blow in translucent

shapes past his living room window.

Okay, so maybe he got this contract to fly these fisherman and they had an accident. Schmidt survives and walks out of the woods uninjured, but everyone else dies. He thinks he will be held responsible, get sued and he doesn't have enough insurance to cover it all, because he killed a bunch of wealthy guys and he only had the minimum liability insurance. So he sees a chance to duck out on that and also on what he owed his ex-wife and hitchhikes to Peru to start a new flying operation there. Plausible.

Or perhaps Schmidt completes the charter, drops the passengers off, files a flight plan to Prince George and then flies the aircraft to South America. I'll have to wait and see if the registration turns up on any flight plan or customs records. What if he changed the registration and painted a fake US one on the plane? Customs wouldn't check it when he flew it into the country, but he would have to have fake US ID with him. That would have taken a whole bunch of planning in advance, I would think, but it is possible. No, wait a minute, if that was the case then the passengers would have just gone home, they wouldn't be still missing, so 'X' that one out.

What if the passengers all went with him? That would account for them being listed as passenger numbers on the flight plan and by name on the manifest, like he wanted the list of names found. So the passengers are either with him or dead, or else they would have turned up by now.

But why would a bunch of rich car parts CEOs want to disappear and go to South America? Well, I wouldn't have to ask that question about Ben MacKinstry, I have met his wife and I would have fled, too at the first opportunity. Steve chuckled and took another swig of beer as he thought further. What about the other two? George's brother was married, what was her name? Matilda, or something like that. From what George said, she didn't sound like a real prize, or for that matter neither did his mother. The Italian guy I never found anything out about, so who knows? It still doesn't entirely add up, you have these successful millionaire types, lots of money, successful companies, maybe bitchy wives, but so what? Buy a new girlfriend or something, too easy with that kind of money...unless it ends in a divorce and you lose it all in an endless legal battle.... Steve was thinking about his own marital situation.

What if they hid away money in some numbered Swiss account or someplace for years until there was millions piled up there, faked their deaths and then took off to South America to live the high life, no bitchy wife, no pushy mother and no more high-stress CEO job? Possible. I would bet they would have had a girlfriend on the side to bring along, too. The

perfect life, living in some villa on a golf course in a resort in Peru, with oodles of cash in Switzerland, a swimming pool and a hot babe to pour the drinks.

Yeah, that is fun, but a bit of a fairytale, I think. It wouldn't work for Jan Schmidt, anyway, he didn't have that kind of money to live that kind of life. Besides where is his motivation to give up his business and probably his plane to do that?

Something was bugging Steve as he played through these scenarios. *The plane, wait a minute, who was it that owned the plane?* He recalled a conversation with Lorraine Schmidt about the Cessna 310. *Oh yeah that is right, he recalled, the plane was not owned by Schmidt, but was actually owned by Ben MacKinstry. Shit! That didn't make any sense before, but now it does. I'll bet MacKinstry bought Schmidt the plane as part of this whole scheme. No wonder the business never did well.*

That also explains why Schmidt never put much effort into the business, never even put up a sign. It also explains the lack of hull insurance for the 310. Shit! They probably filed a flight plan for Prince George and then flew straight to Peru and are sitting around the swimming pool right now drinking beer and having a great big laugh about the whole thing. 'Man we sure fooled those military dupes into looking for us all that time, look a little further south boys, ha ha!'

Steve was getting angry. *They made us look like idiots. They made me look like an idiot. Why didn't I put this together earlier? Man I would sure like to catch those bastards.*

He envisioned the scene: a large Spanish-style villa outside Lima, Peru. Four fat, middle-aged millionaires in bathing suits lying around the swimming pool, attended to by nubile young girlfriends, who fetched beer, played volleyball and giggled a lot. Suddenly the scene is shattered as Steve leads a police tactical squad over the villa wall and onto the pool deck, scattering bimbos in bikinis. 'What is the meaning of this?' shouts Ben MacKinstry, leaping to his feet. Steve pushes him back into his chaise lounge as he calmly walks past him, looking for the ringleader. 'Jan Schmidt,' Steve says and the tall Austrian admits that is his name. 'You are under arrest.' Steve indicates the others to the tactical squad, all of them are paralyzed with fear. 'Lock 'em all up.' Steve stands triumphantly on the pool deck as they are all taken away, fingerprinted and jailed for...

For what? Steve wondered. What could they be charged with? Fraud? That isn't much of a crime, especially in South America. Fraud for what? Damn I doubt I could get the RCMP interested in a case like this, even if they were still in this country. Besides they probably didn't commit

any fraud in Peru, that was all here. Was it even fraud? Pretending to be dead when you aren't? That might not even be illegal. How about mischief? Now that sounds pretty minor in the annals of crimes, I don't think you can get someone extradited from Peru for that sort of thing. Do we even have an extradition treaty with Peru?

How about illegal entry into Peru? Maybe they didn't enter illegally? Maybe they landed at the airport, went through customs and declared whatever they had with them? Fishing equipment?

Shit, shit, shit. I can't even tell if they have done anything illegal in Peru. They sure have done here, though, they made asses out of me, the SAR forces and the CF. They made me look like a total idiot for searching for them. There has to be some penalty for that, surely? They must have broken some law.

Steve took a swig of his beer. The day was chilly outside and the wind blew against the house, a lonely sound, drawn from northern Pacific winter gales.

Tuesday 08 January 1985

1522 hours

In the late part of the next afternoon the phone rang in Steve's PMQ.

"Hey Steve, Paul here at RCC, how is your day going?"

"Just swell for another day of rain here in sunny Comox," Steve retorted.

"Man, if I were not working right now I think I would be booking a flight to Hawaii or somewhere for a nice warm vacation. Just think, palm trees and lots of golf courses."

"Yeah, swell," Steve said flatly. "Did you manage to find any news on that 310?"

"It took some doing, but I got results," Reynolds admitted. "I'm not sure which side of this bet you are on, but someone is going to owe someone."

"So what did you come up with?"

"Well, I checked flight plans on the plane's Canadian registry with the FAA, cross border and internally within the USA. I checked customs clearances with US Customs, too. There was nothing, no records. Man I made them hop, too, told them it was a part of a search effort."

"Well it is," Steve said, "in a way. Anything else?"

"Yeah, I asked them to check on any 310s that crossed the border

in that period and came up with just two US registered ones. I tracked both of the owners down and they aren't the aircraft that went missing – wrong model years. So my guess is that if it crossed the border it did it illegally, because it didn't get any customs clearance.”

“That would be pretty hard to get away with these days, I would think.”

“Yeah, I would think so, too,” Paul added. “So did you win or lose?”

“I think I lost,” Steve said evenly. “Thanks for doing all this work for me.”

“Hey, no sweat, it has been really quiet lately anyway,” Paul admitted. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about, then?”

“Of course I will,” Steve promised, “just as soon as I get back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Well, you said I needed a vacation and you are right. Comox in January is getting to be a bit of a drag, too much rain. So I think I will head somewhere a bit warmer for a while. I'll fill you in on the bet when I get back. It should be paid off by then, I would think.”

“Well have fun and don't get sunburned.”

“Thanks, talk to you when I get back, then.” Steve added, “Stay dry.”

“Hey, it isn't raining in Victoria,” Paul added.

Steve laughed and hung up. He immediately picked up the phone and dialed.

“442 Squadron Orderly Room, Master Corporal Fineworth speaking.”

“Hi Brenda, you are just the person I wanted to speak to,” Steve began. “Are you alone there, can you talk?”

“No, on both counts” she replied.

“Okay, no problem,” Steve said. “Just listen then. I've been missing seeing you, you know.”

“Well that is sweet of you to say so,” Brenda said in an overly bright voice.

“I am going to be taking a little holiday soon, somewhere warm, for a week or two. I wondered if you wanted to come along, my treat.”

“That's a nice thought,” she said, “but, I'm afraid that's not possible.”

“Well you think about it,” Steve said. “If you want to come along we could have some fun.”

“Oh, that is a sweet thought, but just not in the cards right now,”

she replied. "Have a great weekend anyway." She hung up.

Have a great weekend? Steve thought. Fine, I asked. Fuck her then, I'll take a holiday on my own instead.

Friday 11 January 1985

1847 hours

Steve cleared customs at the Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima without any trouble. Peruvian Customs were remarkably quick and efficient or at least disinterested, stamping his passport with a tourist entry and a six month validity. So far things had gone smoothly, even his one bag had arrived.

Sitting on the half empty CP Air flight from Vancouver to Lima, Steve had admitted to himself that he really didn't have much of a plan or even a checklist for this trip. He did concede that it was out of character, but he was confident in his ability to get the mission done. If he found nothing then he would have a nice two week vacation in Peru. If he found something then he would figure out how to deal with it, depending on the circumstances. Finding his search object and having them arrested would be good, but Steve was realistic.

I would probably settle for just giving them some hell, just to see the look on their faces. They may not want to be rescued, but they can be found. Well maybe, he admitted.

He knew it was a bit of a long shot even coming down to Peru to carry on the search. *Which is why,* he told himself, *technically I am on vacation and therefore this is going to be an enjoyable time. Besides, being a tourist is the perfect cover for this kind of work.*

Mostly, he admitted, dozing in his seat on the big orange DC-10 during the long flight, this trip would be a break from the crummy winter weather in BC and having to deal with the divorce nonsense that was going on at home. Paul Reynolds had been right, he did need a vacation, he had the time and for now he had some money, so why not take it? Was it more than good luck that the call to the travel agency in Comox had turned up a last-minute seat sale? Airlines often tried to sell off empty seats these days, but it seemed providential to Steve and so he took it. He had just had time to pack a few things, grab his passport and go.

He had called Walt at home, on Thursday evening. He thought he had better tell someone where he was going. In a way Walt didn't seem surprised. Steve had explained that it was time for a holiday and promised to give him a call when he got back. He had a return ticket for the 25th, but,

of course, he might just stay a bit longer.

“When do you want me to ring the alarms?” Walt had asked.

“Ah, give me a month, at least,” Steve had said. “I might like the beaches there and not come back for a while.”

“Yeah I guess it is summer down there, isn't it?” Walt had said.

“I might get some golfing in,” Steve pointed out. “According to the pamphlet the travel agent gave me, the city has seven world-class golf courses and you should see the cheap green fees.”

“How is your Spanish?” Walt had asked.

“Zilch,” Steve had admitted, “but I won't let that slow me down.” Steve had a Spanish phrase book, but to a large extent he was counting on being able to get by in English.

“Well, have fun,” Walt had concluded. “Call me when you get back. I am curious what you will find down there.”

“Me too. Will do,” he had promised.

Steve walked out of the airport terminal front entrance. Facing northeast the sky was already quite dark, although no stars were visible in the waning twilight of the city. The air was warm, in the upper 20s Celsius and humid. He noted the smell of food cooking, the scent of unfamiliar flowers in the air. The city was immediately exotic, foreign to him. For an instant he questioned what he was doing there, so far from home, from the familiar sights, but the warm breeze beckoned him out into the South American night and away from the safety of the terminal building.

Outside there was chaos on the sidewalk as several flights had arrived in close order. Relatives were picking other relatives up, friends were greeting friends loudly in Spanish, there were cars and taxis along the curbs, noise and confusion, lots of people dragging luggage away from the terminal. Somewhere music was playing.

Taxis were filling quickly, Steve hurried down the cab line with his bag. Drivers were calling out to potential customers in Spanish and fares were being arranged. A couple of drivers approached Steve speaking to him in Spanish, but Steve couldn't make out what they were offering. After a short conversation with one driver Steve determined that he spoke no English. That driver pointed him to another driver further down the taxi line. Steve tried him.

“Do you speak English?” Steve tried.

“Yes, señor,” the balding, middle-aged cabbie responded. “Enough to get by.” His English was accented but clear. “Please, come.” He opened the back door of his taxi and ushered Steve inside.

Once the car was away from the curb, amongst the busy traffic

trying to escape the airport, the driver asked him, “where are you going to? Do you have a hotel?”

“No,” Steve admitted. “I was hoping to find a hotel once I got here. Can you help me there?”

“Ah, señor,” the driver said turning to look at Steve in the back seat as he negotiated the dense traffic. “This is a busy time of year here, summer season for the tourist, you know, but my cousin has a hotel not far from here and I will take you there, no charge.”

“I guess he pays you to bring him customers, then?” Steve noted.

“Si Señor, I am the hotel shuttle for people who want to go there, or taxi if they want to go somewhere else.”

“I hope this is not an expensive hotel you are taking me to,” Steve wondered out loud, reasoning that he was pretty much at the cabby's mercy at this point, although he reasoned if it didn't look clean or was too upscale for his budget he could always go elsewhere. At least they were away from the crowds at the airport and now driving quickly through the dark streets of the city.

“No, no, not expensive. You are here in Lima tourist or business?” the driver asked, again turning to look at Steve as he turned a corner. When Steve's eyes became wide he turned back to miss a pedestrian.

“Tourist,” Steve admitted.

“Where you from?”

“Canada.”

“Ah, Canada,” the driver exclaimed, “I have a cousin in Canada. He lives in Toronto. Is winter there now?”

“Yes it is winter there, which is why I came here for a holiday. Too much rain at this time of year,” Steve explained.

“My cousin says that it snows there.”

“In Toronto it probably does snow, but I live on the west coast and it rains there.”

The driver seemed satisfied with the explanation. “You are in Lima for long time?”

“No just in Lima until I can find my way to Huánuco. Probably tomorrow.”

“Why go to Huánuco? There is not much to see there, no beaches, very hilly there, you know? It is very high up in the mountains.”

“I am supposed to meet some friends there.”

“You say tourist, not business.”

“They are here on vacation, too. I am supposed to meet them.”

“Huánuco is a good place, a very old city, 450 years old, you

know? If you are go to Huánuco you will need a tour guide, as there are few people up that way who speak English. You will get lost there. I know a perfect tour guide for you. I have a cousin, she is a private tour guide. She speaks English and will be happy to guide you to Huánuco.”

“I suppose you get a commission from her too?”

“No, no,” the driver objected, “we are all family. You will meet her, you will see how she will be helpful to you. You check in at hotel and I will send her to you.”

Sounds totally shady, Steve thought, but what have I got to lose? I can always say no.

“How far is this hotel?” Steve asked, looking at the buildings close to the narrow street in what was obviously a part of the city constructed before cars were invented.

“We are here,” said the driver with an audible smile and pulling up at the curb abruptly.

“This is a hotel?” Steve asked. “There is no sign.”

“No sign is needed,” the driver explained. “I know where it is.”

The driver left as soon as Steve had retrieved his bag and closed the door of the taxi. Steve looked up and down the street. It looked very dark there and he had no idea where he was or even which direction he was facing. It occurred to him that the driver would probably make better commissions dropping tourists here to get robbed, than to stay in hotels.

He went to the front door and peered inside. It actually did seem to have a small counter that made it look more like a hotel than an apartment building. Steve opened the door, which was wired to a chime, which brought a small man with dark hair and a similarly dark mustache to the counter.

“Si, señor?” the man said.

Steve didn't feel like constantly asking if people spoke English and so he just started out in that language and looked for signs of incomprehension.

“Your driver brought me here for a room?”

“Ah, Stefano, si,” the clerk said. “We have a room for you?”

It sounded like a question, but Steve couldn't be sure. “Can I see this room?”

“Si, si,” the clerk looked relieved and gestured that Steve should follow him up the stairs at the back of the diminutive lobby area. The stairs lead into a very narrow hallway on the second floor. Steve had the uneasy feeling that the whole thing was a trap, but he followed the clerk to the last room, he unlocked the door and presented a small but neat room, with a

double bed on which appeared to be clean sheets. The curtains revealed a very small balcony of perhaps four square feet with a wrought iron railing. The balcony gave a view of the narrow street below. Steve chuckled to himself. The whole room was actually kind of charming, down to the bullfighting lithographs on the walls. It really did look like a cheap tourist hotel. The clerk waited patiently at the door while Steve looked around. There was a sink, but no bathroom.

“Bathroom?” Steve asked and was shown the facilities two doors down, apparently shared between several rooms. The bathroom was quite small but clean.

The whole building was quiet, which was the best feature, Steve decided. He was tired and needed a quiet place to get some sleep and deal with the three hours of eastbound jet lag.

“Is good?” the clerk asked after showing him the bathroom.

Steve nodded, the short clerk looked pleased and lead him back downstairs to the lobby.

“How much?” Steve asked and the clerk named a price in Peruvian Sols that sounded high but worked out to about ten dollars Canadian. He agreed and took the room.

Steve was more tired than anything else and so he washed his face in the small bathroom and laid down on the bed. He realized that he must have dozed off when a tapping at the door woke him up.

He checked his watch, which indicated that it was just before 2200 hrs, local time.

Getting up off the bed Steve blocked the door with his foot and opened it a crack. In the hallway was a short young women with brown skin, long dark hair pinned up and shining brown eyes, dressed in a powder blue skirt suit, with a matching purse. She looked like an airline stewardess from the 1960s.

“You are the Canadian who needs a tour guide?” she asked in perfect English, with just the slightest trace of a Spanish accent to it.

“That would be me,” Steve said and opened the door wide. Without an invitation the woman strode past Steve and into the room. He checked the hallway, but she was alone. *They certainly seem to be a trusting bunch*, Steve thought.

He closed the door and turned into the room. The woman had perched herself on the only chair, a small straight piece of furniture, with a wrought iron back to it. She smiled professionally, the same smile that Steve had seen on stewardesses, accented with very dark red lipstick. She was seemed fairly solidly built as far as Steve could tell and seemed very

young, perhaps 18 or 19, maybe younger, but it was hard to tell. He regarded her with some wariness.

Aware that he was checking her over carefully, she stood up, almost jumping to her feet and introduced herself. He estimated that she was perhaps 5 foot 2 in the one inch heeled shoes that she was wearing.

"My name is Manuela," she said with a confident smile, holding out her hand. She shook Steve's hand very formally. "I was named after Manuela Saénz, the revolutionary."

"You are very well dressed for a revolutionary," Steve quipped.

Manuela laughed, "Oh, no I am not a revolutionary, I am a tour guide. And your name is..."

Steve regarded her for a second. "How old are you?"

"I am 25 years old," she said with a look that told him that she didn't see how that was relevant to the conversation.

Considering her answer Steve said: "Al McPherson." They shook hands again, just as formally as the first time.

Manuela smiled broadly. "Mr McPherson, where are you from?"

"Please, call me Al. I come from Victoria."

"Oh I know about that place, it is the capital of British Columbia."

Steve chuckled. She was well schooled. "Yes, it is," he admitted.

"Have you ever been there?"

"To Canada, no," she replied, "but I have relatives there."

"Let me guess, in Toronto?"

"No, Winnipeg, Manitoba," she replied with a slight momentary pout. "Why would you guess Toronto?"

"Oh, your cousin said that the family had relatives in Toronto."

"You are probably thinking of Stefano the driver," Manuela said, thinking. "He is not my cousin, he is my agent, though. I think he tells everyone that we are cousins. It is probably his limited English."

"Probably," admitted Steve, convinced that he would never sort out the situation and was just hoping that it turned out to be benign in nature.

"Where did you learn such good English?"

She looked pleased that he had noticed. "I went to a special language school here in Lima. I can speak Spanish, English and Japanese. I am learning Arabic next."

"Do you get many Arabic-speaking tourists here in Peru, then?"

"Not at the present, but there is a lot of money in the Arab world and so I would like them to come to Peru as tourists. I am thinking that if more people spoke their language then perhaps they would come here in greater numbers." Sitting down again Manuela clasped her hands in her lap

and changed the subject. "What are your plans for your time in Peru? I can guide you almost anywhere."

The only place left to sit down was on the bed, so Steve sat carefully on the edge, regarding the professional-looking young woman. "Well that is good to know," he started out. "I have to meet up with some friends who are already here in Peru. They left me some clues to locate them, so I have to start in Huánuco and look for them."

Manuela brightened at this assignment. "Oh, you must go to Huánuco to track these people down. So are you a spy, or a bounty hunter?"

Steve laughed out loud. "That would be a romantic type of adventure, wouldn't it? But no, I am not a spy or a bounty hunter. It may sound like a movie plot, but this isn't that much of an adventure. I just have four friends who came down here a while ago and are on holidays. They asked me to join them, but didn't say where they went, it is sort of a game with them."

"You mean like 'hide and seek'," Manuela offered.

"Yes, that is exactly what it is." Steve leaned closer, "Well actually I can tell you, since I know you can keep a secret, but it is 'hide and seek' with a wager attached to it."

She looked a bit perplexed. "A wager?"

"You know, a bet?" Steve explained, leaning back a bit.

"Ah, yes," she said. "I understand a bet." Her smile returned. "If you find them they owe you money and if not you owe them."

"Exactly," Steve smiled. "We have played these games before, it makes holidays a little more interesting and we get to see some different places while we play this game. One of us will leave some clues and then the other will seek. When we find each other we have a party and some laughs."

"This must be a big bet, then, to come all the way to Peru from Canada," Manuela said calculating.

Steve could see that she would set her rates based on his perceived ability to pay. "Yes, indeed it is a big bet, but on principle, not on money."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"The bet is for a glass of beer," Steve explained. "If I find them they must buy the beer that evening."

"That doesn't seem a fair bet," Manuela pointed out, "because if you don't find them, how will you pay the bet?"

Steve laughed again, "Well that is true, but I will owe them twice as much, next time we get together back home."

Manuela smiled. "Oh I see," she said. "Well this is a fun game, so let me help you and we will find them for you."

"Ah, well, this is the thing," Steve explained, leaning closer again in a conspiratorial manner. "They shouldn't find out that I have your help. The rules don't prohibit outside help, but they will think I am smarter if I am able to track them down on my own."

Manuela nodded thoughtfully, biting her lower lip. "But to have help wouldn't be cheating, then? Because I don't want to help you by cheating."

"No, of course not," Steve assured her. "I wouldn't ask you to help me cheat, that wouldn't be good sport, now would it."

"Okay," she readily agreed. "I will help you find them, but without cheating on the rules. What clues do you have?"

"Just one," Steve said "a card that was mailed. It had a postmark that said 'Huánuco, Peru'. So I thought we should go to Huánuco, to start with."

"The problem is that there are three places called Huánuco: the city of Huánuco, the province of Huánuco and the region of Huánuco. The region of Huánuco has eleven provinces in it, one of which is Huánuco province, which is also where the city is. Do you know whether we will be looking for them in the city, province or the region?"

"Isn't that kind of confusing having all those places with the same name?" Steve asked.

"Oh yes it is," she replied, "but it will make your game more interesting."

"What does 'Santa Fabiola' mean to you? Is that a place in Peru?" Steve asked.

Manuela pondered the question, looking pointedly at the ceiling. "I am not sure about this question. It could be a place in the city or a town in the province or the region, lots of places in Peru are named for saints, but I have never heard of it. Perhaps it is very small, but I will find out."

"Maybe we should start in the city of Huánuco, that has to be close to where we need to go."

She looked up at the ceiling again, calculating, she seemed to do this whenever she was thinking, Steve noticed. "The distance is about 350 kilometers, so it is possible to fly or take the bus. The bus is more often, but the roads are not good and it is a long trip. Flights do not go every day though, so I will have to check."

"Have you ever been to Huánuco before?"

"Once, when I was quite young. It is very high in the mountains.

Outside the city it is a very rural area and not that far from the last range of mountains where the Amazon begins.”

“Well before you get all wound up figuring out transportation, we had better negotiate a price for your services,” Steve stated.

“That depends on how long I will go with you,” she replied.

“Well, just a couple of days, I would think, just until we find my friends, then I can send you back here.”

Manuela pouted for a brief instance. “I was hoping that I could work for you longer than just a few days.”

Steve calculated now, “Well I’ll tell you what, if we find them in a couple of days then I will spend a few days with them and then come back here and give you a call and perhaps you can guide me somewhere else before I have to go home. How would that be?”

“I can do that,” she smiled. “I will give you a good deal, \$100US per day then, plus expenses.” It wasn’t a question.

Steve thought about it. “By expenses you mean meals, bus or airfare there and back, a hotel room for you, clothing? Anything else?”

“Meals, bus or plane, yes, those would be my expenses,” she explained, her eyes shining. She was obviously enjoying the negotiations. “I have my own clothes for a trip like this into the mountains, so no charge for that.”

“I guess you have something that will, ah, blend in a bit more up in Huánuco, then?”

“Yes,” she explained, “Huánuco city is nice, but the countryside is very poor so we should dress to not stand out there.” She indicated her suit, “These are my Lima clothes.”

Steve smiled at her turn of phrase, she seemed to have an answer for everything and he admired her poise and confidence. It made him think that she would improve his chances of finding his quarry.

Manuela continued, “No need for my own hotel room, I will stay with you, that is all included in the price.” She was watching Steve chuckle to himself. “Why is that funny?”

“I just figured from the start that you were really a hooker in a nice suit,” Steve explained still chuckling.

Manuela looked offended, but then quickly smiled, “I am no hooker. I am a professional tour guide and travel companion. You will see that we will have fun here in my country. I wouldn’t want you to say that you were lonely when you were here in Peru.”

Steve just shook his head, “I suppose \$100US is more than most people make in a month here.”

"That is a good price for what you will get," she stated. "You won't be disappointed, I promise." She gave her best sales smile.

"Okay, okay," Steve said. "I know I am going to regret this, but okay."

"You will not regret hiring me, Al," she said, jumping to her feet once again, formally shaking his hand and heading for the door.

"So I will see you in the morning then and we can figure out how to get to Huánuco?" Steve asked.

She turned, holding onto the doorknob. "Oh, no, I will go and get my bag and be right back. I left it downstairs. We can start right away."

"Won't the management object to you carrying on this sort of business in their hotel?" Steve asked, thinking of all the possible avenues he could for trouble to appear.

"Not at all," she explained, "The hotel owner is my cousin."

"So I guess I get to pay you for today, then, right?"

"Of course," she said with a victorious smile and disappeared into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Steve sat on the bed and considered the situation. *Man am I ever in it now. Of course if she helps me find them then it will be worth the extra trouble and the cost, too. But what if she just leads me on a wild goose chase, running up the number of days with her?* He thought about that possible situation. *Well, he decided, then I will just have to settle for having some fun and getting my money's worth out of her. Okay, that makes it a win-win for me.*

She was back in the room very quickly, tossing her soft-sided suitcase on the bed. She smiled at Steve again, who moved from his corner of the bed to the chair to watch her as she rummaged through the suitcase. She took out her toiletries bag and a silky-looking garment.

"The bathroom is two doors down," Steve offered.

"I know where it is," she said, "I have stayed at this hotel before." And she disappeared out the door of the room.

I'll bet you have, Steve thought.

Five minutes later she was back, carrying her suit over her arm and wearing a silky robe that had Japanese dragons printed on it, in a riot of red, white and black colours. The robe was short and barely covered her ass. Her dark hair had been unpinned and hung past the middle of her back. She smiled, but said nothing while she carefully hung up her clothes in the small armoire that served as a closet in the hotel room. She then rummaged in her suitcase again, removing a small zip-lock bag, finally zipping up the suitcase and standing it on end, on the floor. She moved

very quickly and with what appeared to be practiced motions.

Steve, still sitting on the chair, was silently watching her with amusement as she zipped about the room, her robe twirling about her and her long hair flowing after her, like a dance. Finally she turned around and stopped moving.

"I hope it will not be a problem," she announced, "but I always use these." She proffered the zip-lock bag of condoms.

Steve shook his head and laughed.

She looked hurt. "What, no good?"

"No that is definitely a good idea, who knows what you have been up to?"

"I am very careful," she said, turning off the light in the room, "I am a good Catholic girl."

"I am sure that you are," Steve allowed. The room was completely dark to him now, but he could hear her take her robe off, leave it on the bedpost, literally jump onto the bed and pull up the sheet over herself.

"So are you going to leave me here all alone?" she asked, trying to sound coy.

"Not at all," Steve replied, taking off his clothes, "I am just enjoying the enthusiasm you show for your job here."

"Of course," she replied from the darkness, "I am an excellent tour guide. You will see."

Saturday 12 January 1985

1030 hours

Steve awoke, the daylight shining in the window. He checked his watch and discovered it was already mid-morning. *Damn this eastbound jet-lag*, he thought, *I just lost a whole bunch of the day*. He remembered the events of the previous night and turned to see if Manuela was still asleep, but she was gone.

Steve quickly got himself out of bed and checked his pants. His wallet was still there. Checking his bag as well, the traveller's cheques were still there, too. The closet still contained Manuela's suit; her suitcase was still on the floor next to the armoire.

He lay down on the bed again. Apparently she had not just robbed him and departed. When had she left? He couldn't say. Thinking back to last night it was obvious that she was certainly no neophyte as a sex partner, whatever her real age. *Where had she gone so early on a Saturday*

morning? Church perhaps? Steve chuckled at the thought of her lighting candles.

Fully awake now he decided that he really had to use the bathroom and so he pulled on a pair of sweat pants from his bag, took his key and locked the room behind him. While in the bathroom he found soap and clean towels there and so decided to take a shower. The old plumbing was slow, but it did finally deliver some warm water to the second floor. He was happy to wash off the grime of the trip, not to mention the sweat from the sex last night. A lack of energy was certainly not one of her shortcomings. He let the warm water run over his head and ran his hands through his crew cut hair.

I wonder if they taught her all those moves at Catholic boarding school? He wondered, smirking to himself. *I doubt it. She is probably really 19 and has been doing all this for ten years.*

His shower finished, Steve dried himself and returned to his room. Upon opening the door he discovered Manuela unpacking a cloth bag onto the bed.

“How did you get in?” he asked her.

“Good morning, to you, too, sir,” she said in a manner that was both sweet and an admonishment of his lack of manners. “I have a key, of course.”

He shook his head. “Of course you do.”

“Coming from the west coast of Canada I knew that you would be sleeping late and so I went to get some breakfast.” She had laid out bananas, apples, fresh bread rolls and bottles of orange juice.

Chastened, he replied, “Well that was very thoughtful of you.”

She smiled at that admission from him, “As I told you, I am a good tour guide and can take care of everything that you need. You will find that I am worth the money you will pay to me and you will be able to recommend me to your friends from Canada.”

“Well you certainly did well last night,” Steve said, peeling a banana.

“I am glad that you think so. You certainly slept well afterwards. Sleeping well is very important when you are on holidays. You don't want to go home tired.”

As they ate breakfast Manuela had more news from her morning.

“I have tried to find out about this place, Santa Fabiola,” she started out. “It seems that no one has heard of such a place in Peru. Perhaps it is a name that is just used locally, such as the name of a villa?”

“Well I suppose that is possible,” Steve said, “It was just a clue that

they left for me. It might not even refer to a place, it might be a person.”

“I did find out that Santa Fabiola is a saint of asceticism and charity.”

“That sounds rather severe. I wonder if she was from Peru, then?” Steve pondered, thinking it might be an ironic name for, say, a brothel.

“I went to the library, and looked for her in the very old Catholic Encyclopedia that they have there,” she said carefully. “It says that she is a saint from fourth century Rome who renounced the earthly pleasures and gave her life to service of the poor and the sick.”

“You have had a busy morning,” Steve laughed.

“I told you I am a good tour guide. I have also checked about transportation to Huánuco,” she explained, “My sources tell me that the bus is not recommended right now. The direct distance is only about 350 kilometres, but the road length is over 500 kilometres as it is very twisted in the mountains. It is also a gravel road and in some places dirt. There are frequent washouts from storms...”

“Okay,” Steve interjected. “I get the picture, you would rather go by air.”

“I think that the bus would not please you. Besides, it would not save us much time. As there is only one bus per day and we have already missed today's bus. The bus tomorrow would not get us there until late at night.”

“And the flights?” Steve asked, wary of the cost of this adventure.

“Right now there are only two flights per week to Alférez David Figueroa Fernandini,” she explained.

“And he is?”

“The name of the airport at Huánuco.”

“I suppose it is a little airport, having such a long name?”

“Of course,” she said. “It is a very small airport.”

“Okay, when can we go?”

“The next flight is Monday afternoon, so you see the bus does not save us much time over the plane.”

“How much will it cost for us to get there?”

“You are very concerned about the money,” she remonstrated. “If you will say that we will go then I will make all the arrangements, including for a nice hotel in Huánuco. I will get you the best prices.”

“Okay, let's do it then,” he allowed. He was just going to have to trust her.

She put on her shoes. “I will make the arrangements then. This will take some time to get the best prices, but I will come back here when I

am done in a few hours.”

“Let me guess,” Steve said dryly. “You have to talk to your cousin, who is a travel agent?”

“Of course not,” she said departing. “My uncle is the travel agent.”

Monday 14 January 1985

1623 hours

Steve dozed in an over-wing seat on the Embraer EMB 110 Bandeirante twin turboprop as it cruised enroute from Lima's Jorge Chávez International Airport to Alférez David Figueroa Fernandini Airport in Huánuco. He had given Manuela the window seat so as to have a bit more aisle room to stretch his legs out. Maybe it was the summer weather or the pace of life in Peru, but he noted that just being in the country seemed to make him more disposed to napping.

Steve had been pleased to see the modern-looking turboprop Bandeirante at the airport. He was concerned that with the state of the economy in Peru that they would find themselves on some ancient Russian AN-2 biplane, or something worse, for the flight through the mountains. The Brazilian-made Bandeirante was over ten years old, but it didn't look too worse for wear, although it was close to full for the flight.

Manuela had set a daunting pace for the last two days. She seemed determined to ensure that he had the best possible tourist experience in Lima during the time until their flight departed. She had insisted on showing him the Parque Universitario, Paseo de los Heroes Navales, and the great museum with the very long name of Museo Nacional de Arqueología Antropología e Historia del Perú.

On Saturday night she had taken him to one of Lima's famous night clubs and made him dance with her. Steve hadn't cared that people were staring at him dancing with this so much younger woman. He figured that they would know that he had something worthwhile to be dancing with a young and beautiful woman, even if it was just money.

It had all been great fun, if tiring. Comox felt like it was a very long way away in time as well as in distance and he had forgotten all about the situation there.

Later, back at the hotel, after the nightclubbing, he went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. In the light cast by the bulb over the sink, he thought that the time he was spending in Peru was having a positive affect, he looked younger. He tried a smile. *It's too bad that Brenda didn't come along after all. She would have enjoyed Manuela, I am sure.* He smirked at

the thought of the two of them together. *Now that would have been a worthwhile threesome. Oh well, her loss*, he had concluded, before he had joined Manuela in the hotel bed for a second night.

Now, on the Bandeirante flight, Manuela was intently looking out the window, studying the mountainous terrain below, he noted lazily though one eye.

She is okay, really, he thought, *she has actually been a great help so far. I'll have to see how she makes out in Huánuco. She has had lots of opportunities to rob me and hasn't taken any of them, so I have to assume that she is honest enough.*

Steve tried to estimate the odds of finding his search object. *Actually*, he thought, *it really doesn't matter all that much if we don't find them, I am having fun here with Manuela, the country is good, the sex is good and overall it is much better than being at home. Maybe I will just stay here.*

He realized that he must have slept a while because the sound of the landing gear extending and locking down woke him. Manuela was holding his hand, she seemed to like doing that.

It is almost like being on vacation with a date, Steve thought. *It seems to make her happy, though.*

“Oh, you are awake,” she said pointing out of the window. “We are almost there.”

Steve blinked his eyes several times. They were below the tops of the mountains and skimming along a brown ridge on the left of the aircraft while descending. He was glad the sky was still clear, as he didn't trust this third-world airline to get them there in IFR weather.

“There is Huánuco,” Manuela was pointing almost beneath the aircraft, but Steve saw nothing from his seat except the hills flashing past.

Finally, after bouncing around in the low altitude turbulence, the Bandeirante touched down, came to a stop, turned and made its way to the ramp on the gravel runway. Looking past Manuela, the scene outside reminded Steve of parts of north eastern BC, mountainous, dry, forbidding terrain.

The airport terminal building was little more than a small collection of shacks along side the runway. The locals who unloaded the baggage seemed to Steve to be browner in hue and slower than those in Lima.

“There is more Indian blood here,” Manuela explained. “Besides, away from Lima the life is slower. There are very few night clubs up here.”

Manuela negotiated a ride to town on the only transportation

available, a small bus. She spoke quickly in Spanish to the driver. It seemed to Steve that the driver had named a price, but Manuela refused it and the driver finally gave in under her machine gun speech, threw up his hands and accepted her final offer.

“He was trying to charge us a tourist rate,” she explained. “I told him I was Peruvian and would not pay those rates.”

“And?” Steve asked.

“He saw it my way,” she smiled.

“I can understand how that happened,” Steve admitted. “You are very persuasive.” Manuela smiled in response.

They rode into town on the packed bus. Everyone from the flight was on the bus, as there didn't seem to be any other means of getting into Huánuco. The road was gravel and it wound the six kilometres into the city along the banks of the Huallaga River. The north side of the road was bounded by poor farms and above them the hills that rose 5000 feet above the valley floor to an elevation of some 11,000 feet above sea level. The day was bright and even with his sunglasses on Steve squinted at the contrast between the bare towering ochre hills on the right and the verdant river on the left, with the line of trees marking its location.

“They call this road the Huallayco,” Manuela played tour guide, “because it runs along the Huallaga River.”

“I thought this river would run into the Pacific, but it is going the other way,” Steve noted.

“This river goes north and then east and joins the Amazon River. It goes to the Atlantic through Brazil,” she detailed. “Here it is a river of the mountains and open spaces, but as it travels from here it becomes a river of the flat lands and the dark jungle. All the rivers in Peru go to the Amazon, except on the very coast near Lima.”

The hotel she had booked them into was a small place with only six rooms. Like the rest of the downtown area it was small, but, surprisingly to Steve, clean and neat. Looking for some supper they walked out into the evening air on the 2 de Mayo and then down a block onto the 28 de Julio.

“Are all the streets in this city named after dates?” Steve asked.

“I think these are the only two,” Manuela observed.

“Shouldn't there be a June street in between them?”

Manuela laughed, “These are special days to the people of Peru. 2 de Mayo is the day that we defeated the Spanish fleet with help from the Chileans at El Callao and won complete freedom.”

“What year was that?”

"1866. You don't know much about our country, do you?"

"I guess not, but that is why I am paying you all this money to teach me."

"I told you that I am a good tour guide," she said with some pride, "Now 28 de Julio is the day that Don José de San Martín proclaimed the independence of Peru. We all had to learn his words in school. He said: 'From this moment on, Peru is free and independent, by the general will of the people and the justice of its cause that God defends. Long live the homeland! Long live freedom! Long live our independence!'"

"Well that is stirring stuff all right. What year was that?"

"1821"

"But you were still fighting the Spanish forty years later?" Steve asked.

"It went on for many years," Manuela explained. "We only became a true democracy six years ago. But as you can see the country is more peaceful now, except for the Sendero Luminoso and the Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, of course."

"The who?"

"The Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. They are the main communist guerrillas operating in the country today."

"Any chance that we will run into them here?"

"Of course not," Manuela assured him. "We are on holidays."

They located a restaurant on 28 de Julio. It was small, with only eight tables, each laid out for two chairs, with a candle in a wine bottle and a plain white table cloth on each table. With evening falling and the day's light now gone the candles were all lit and it made an intimate scene through the window. The evening was quickly growing quite cool and so the front door was left closed and the two of them entered into the warmth and the smell of food cooking. The room was entirely candle-lit, there were no other diners present, but they were met by the owner, a short man with a great mustache, who greeted them both warmly in Spanish. Steve let Manuela do the talking and she did so at a fast pace. They were quickly seated, given tattered menus and left alone in the gloom.

Manuela busied herself translating the menu for Steve, explaining the various local dishes. The menu was short and it didn't take her long to read it all, even interspersed with her interpretations and stories to go with each dish. Steve noted that she tackled this task with relish.

The owner brought glasses of water, which Steve knew enough not to touch, even Manuela signaled with a small shake of her head that she

wouldn't drink the water either. She ordered wine instead and a selection of food from the menu and they were left alone again. She had ordered so quickly that Steve understood nothing of what she said.

The restaurant was now quite dim as the sun was gone, with the candles providing the sole light. Steve couldn't help noticing the way the candlelight reflected in her large brown eyes. It reminded him of so many other times from his past.

"I hope you do not mind me ordering for you?" Manuela asked, after she had done it.

Steve smiled, "No, no, you're the expert. I have to trust you to avoid food poisoning for us both."

"I chose food that they must cook well, so we should be all right, I think." She reached across the table and took his hand.

In the warm amber glow of the candles Steve could imagine that they were lovers on the run from their lives escaping here to this mountain village.

"Is this part of the service?" he asked, indicating the hand-holding.

"Not usually," she said slowly, "but with you, Al, I just feel this closeness."

Steve didn't believe her, but it was a nice gesture. He chuckled at her.

"You laugh at me?" she asked.

"No, I am not laughing at you, just enjoying your company," he explained. "This is a nice town, a pleasant restaurant, the candles are a nice touch and they make your eyes look very beautiful. It all makes me forget any problems that I might have had back home."

She blinked her eyes slowly, looking down and then made eye contact with him again across the table. "That is good," she smiled, the light catching the brightness of her teeth and the glow that seemed to penetrate into the depth of her brown skin. "The reason that you came on vacation to Peru was to relax and forget your cares, so it is working." She gave his hand a little squeeze, but didn't let go.

Steve had to smile at her words, was she just doing her job very effectively or did she honestly feel that? *She is just a pretty good and quite well-paid hooker*, he reminded himself.

"Al?" she asked, "what do you know about love?"

There was a question, he thought. *Is this just an attempt to wrangle more money out of this job?* He decided that the question just seemed like a sincere attempt to make conversation, so he gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"Oh, quite a bit," he started, "I have had quite a number of relationships over the years, I was married for 29 years, too."

"But marriage is not always love," she pointed out, with an intense look. "Here in Peru many young women are married to further the position of their families. Their lives do not have much love in them."

"It's the same everywhere. Even in Canada women marry for advantages rather than for love sometimes. But I'm not sure that marrying for love is a good idea anyway. It is something that captures you at the start, of course, but it doesn't last. All relationships become stale in time."

"So you are a cynic that doesn't really believe in love then?"

"No, I am a realist, who has been though it all many times. But you are still young, you will learn what is right for you in time," he said, trying to temper the cynicism. He didn't want to create a conflict that would result in no sex tonight. *Getting what I am paying for is definitely more important than converting a young woman to a cynical view of love.* "What about you?" he asked her. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Not since I was in grade 6," she said, laughing. She continued with intensity, "but I believe in the power of love to overcome all problems. I believe it can be found and that it can last, if you want it to."

"Have you seen that in other people's relationships?"

"No, but I still believe that it is possible. I think here in Peru that the church has too much influence on how people approach love, but maybe it is better in Canada?"

"Well," Steve pronounced, "the church has much less influence on most people in Canada, in fact almost none at all, I would think. People base their ideas about love on other things instead, like movies."

"I would prefer to base my ideas on reality, than the fantasies of American movies," she said with firmness.

"Okay, I can agree with that, but what exactly is reality?"

"Whatever I can create."

Steve chuckled at that thought. "Doesn't reality get in the way of your reality, then?"

"Not so far," she said. "I wanted to become a tour guide and so I did, by first a dream, then a decision and last by hard work and persistence."

Steve thought, *you mean you wanted to become a hooker*, but he just smiled and said nothing.

Food and wine arrived at the table and the conversation fell to silence as Steve poured the wine into stem glasses and they started to eat.

They lingered over the meal, but still no other customers arrived.

"This doesn't look like a very popular restaurant," Steve observed.

"It is still early," Manuela pointed out. "In Peru many people do not have dinner until ten o'clock. It is Monday, too and most local people eat at home during the weekdays."

After the bill was paid, the owner had some serious-sounding words for Manuela. She seemed unperturbed, though and thanked him, that much Spanish Steve understood. Then they wandered out into the dark night in Huánuco. The air was cool, but very different from Lima's. Here it smelled of cooking mixed with the freshness of the mountains and the altitude. There were couples and families strolling on the streets, people seemed to use this time of day to meet friends and walk in the cooler air.

"Is it safe to be out walking here at this time of night?" Steve asked.

"Of course," Manuela replied. "I would not take you to a dangerous place."

"So where are the dangerous parts of this town?"

"I have no idea," she laughed, taking his hand as they walked.

"That restaurant owner had something important to say to you," Steve noted, "Was he giving you a hard time about being out with an old guy?"

"I don't think of you as being old," Manuela teased. "No, he realized by the way I talk that I am from Lima and he wanted to warn me that there is an illness that has been going around the town. Several people have died from it in the last week here."

"Great, what is that?"

"He said it was a type of influenza."

"In the middle of the summertime? I thought that was a winter illness?"

"It normally is, but he seemed to think it came from birds or pigs. They haven't seen this before here in Huánuco," Manuela said. "Does it worry you?"

"Naw," Steve said dismissively. "I never get the flu. I think I'm immune."

"Well that is good. There is always some kind of illness going around."

They walked to the city's central square, with its trees, fountain and pole-mounted globe lights. There were quite a number of families in the square, everyone seemed to be in a relaxed mood. Steve found a bench and sat down. Manuela sat beside him and cuddled in closely. He put his arm around her and held her.

"This is really beautiful here," he said, listening to the evening breeze rustling the leaves.

"All of Peru is beautiful," Manuela explained, stretching her legs out. "I am glad that we came up here. It gives you a greater appreciation of my country."

Steve looked at his watch, which showed after nine, the evening was growing late for him.

"Do you have a plan to look for your friends here?" Manuela asked him.

"Sort of a plan," he admitted, "but let's talk about that over breakfast tomorrow. We can work out how we will find them and all that then. Tonight I just want to take you back to the hotel and make love with you."

"That would be nice," she smiled, squeezed his hand once again and they started back.

Tuesday 15 January 1985

0933 hours

"Okay," she said, "what is your plan to find your friends?"

They were sitting in a small café not far from the hotel. It was mid morning and they seemed to be the only tourists around. The streets were deserted and the locals all seemed to be at work or still asleep. Manuela wore casual clothes, slacks and sandals.

"I don't have a lot to go on, really," he admitted. "There was a card sent six weeks ago with a postmark that said 'Huánuco', but I have no idea if that would be the town, the province or the region."

"Do you have the postmark so we can look at it?"

"No."

"I would bet that it would be the city," she said, "and we are already here now. But you said that was six weeks ago? Perhaps they have left?"

"That's possible," he admitted, "but they would have left me another clue. If they haven't, it wouldn't have been a very fair game now, would it?"

"Of course not," Manuela readily admitted. "Your friends would be fair, of course."

Steve nodded. "Of course" he agreed. "So either they are still here or they left a clue. My friends have rich tastes, too, so I think it is likely that they would be staying at either a nice hotel, or more likely at an estate

or villa. Somewhere fancy with a swimming pool I would imagine, that sort of thing. I think they're planning to stay quite a long time, so they will want to be really comfortable."

"Okay," she said. "What else do you have?"

"I do have a photograph." Steve pulled out the photocopied photograph that Loretta MacKinstry had given him of her husband, when SAR Schmidt had started.

Manuela looked carefully at the photograph. "He is a big person, but I have never seen him before. What about the others?"

"Sorry, no pictures," Steve admitted.

"You like a challenging game, Al," she rebuked him.

Steve laughed. "I guess so."

"So how many others are there?" she asked.

"Unless they have split up, there should be four of them altogether. The one in the photo is an American. There is also one Canadian who should have a German accent, one Austrian and an Italian, all men about 55 years old."

"How tall are they?"

"Oh the American is tall. I'm not sure about the rest," Steve admitted.

"You know, Al, I don't think that you are looking for some friends after all. You have never met these people before." She looked sharply. "I still think you are a bounty hunter or a spy."

Steve laughed. "You are very perceptive, you know. But regardless of what you think, I am still here to find them, so you can help me or go home."

"Are you going to explain what this is all about?"

"It would be safer for you if you didn't know anymore than you already do," Steve tried on her.

"You are a spy, then," she concluded.

"Look, you can believe what you want, but if you want to work with me and get paid then no more questions, okay?"

"Okay," she pouted.

He leaned over the table, lifted her chin and kissed her. "Just work with me, okay and you will get paid, I promise. That is all you need to worry about, okay?" She nodded, but said nothing in response. Steve was glad they had not had this conversation last night, as he calculated that her reaction to the lack of information would have equalled no sex.

"So, Mr. Master Spy, how do we go about finding these people, then?"

"Well first off we can stick with the story that I am a tourist looking for my friends, or else things might go really sour for us both," he asserted. Manuela slowly nodded in agreement. "Next I think that in a city this size it shouldn't be too hard to find a group of four foreigners, they should be pretty obvious, unless they are really hiding out. Someone should have seen them, hotel owners, shopkeepers, movie theatre attendants, somebody."

Manuela nodded, thinking about the problem. "Do they know that you are looking for them?"

"No," Steve admitted.

"Would they suspect that anyone is looking for them?"

"Maybe, but probably not."

"Well, that is some useful information," she said, pleased to be prying something out of him. "Perhaps you are right, some questions asked to the right people around town might turn up some clues. But what if it doesn't? What do we do then?"

"I'm hoping it will, because I don't really have a Plan B."

"You aren't a very good spy, you know," she stated, looking up at the ceiling. "We could always ask the Sendero Luminoso if they have kidnapped them."

Steve considered the idea seriously. "Do you think that is likely to have happened?"

"I was kidding," she admitted. "You would have heard a ransom demand, or more than likely found the bodies if they had."

"Well let's try Plan A first and if nothing turns up then we will have to put our heads together and think of a second step."

"Is it possible that they have even left Peru?"

"Quite possible," he admitted.

"If we find nothing I would suggest that you and I just have a nice holiday together before you have to go home."

"Well that certainly is an appealing Plan B," he admitted, "but I don't want you to go avoiding finding them by having you make more money that way, so if I do find them it shouldn't take me too long here with them and I'll catch-up with you again in Lima for a few more days of fun, okay? Either way it will be worth your while."

She nodded in agreement. "What will you do with them when you catch them? Are you supposed to kill them?"

Steve laughed, "No, it is nothing like that. I just need to talk with them all and explain some things to them. They all owe something to someone and they just have to know that they need to pay up sooner or

later, that's all. They just need to understand that I know where they are. No one is going to get hurt over this, it isn't that serious."

Manuela smiled, "Okay then, I was afraid that this would be bad to be mixed up in, that people would get hurt. But it is okay, so I will help you."

"Let's finish breakfast here and get to work, then. Where do you think we should start?"

"Places like the movie theatre and the bars won't open until later on, so perhaps we should try some of the hotels first?"

Steve agreed with this and they started with the front desks of some of the small hotels downtown. These all looked too drab for what Steve imagined they would use, although if you were trying to save money, they looked like good bets. All were all fairly rundown and unlikely-looking.

After the first few places they stopped to get some bottles of soda as the day was warming up nicely and promised a hot afternoon.

"You know," Manuela said seriously, "the last two hotel people looked at the two of us very suspiciously, with me talking and you hanging back waiting like that."

"I noticed that, too," Steve admitted. "I got the idea that they didn't like the looks of the two of us together. What do you suggest?"

"Well, I was thinking that it might be easier if I went alone. I know the language and customs here. It is obvious that you don't speak Spanish and that makes people suspicious, I think."

"You are also very pretty and can probably get all these old men that work in these places to tell you anything you want, just by smiling," Steve added.

"Of course," Manuela smiled. "If I tell people that I am looking for my lost American uncle then they will be more sympathetic and more likely to tell me whether they have seen him or not."

Steve smiled at the guile of her plan. "Okay, let's give that a try for a bit. I'll meet you at the central square then, where I will keep an eye out for them, too. Meet me there in an hour and a half and we'll get some lunch. I'll give you the photo to show around, but please don't lose it. Also, no funny business, okay? No talking to the police, either. If you turn me in you won't get paid and you will have to pay your own way home, as well."

"Don't worry, I am a good tour guide, but I am a good private eye as well. I like this game you are playing and I am having fun. I will see you at the square in an hour and a half, then."

Tuesday 15 January 1985

2206 hours

She had been as good as her word, Steve agreed. According to her lunchtime report she had visited almost all of the small hotels that dotted the downtown area. Steve had found a bench at the central square and sat there casually watching the passers-by, but had seen no sight of his targets. In the afternoon the city had virtually closed down in the heat of the day and so they both called a break, went back to the hotel, made love again and napped for a few hours.

As the shadows grew long and the day started to cool off Manuela had headed out on her own to try some more places, without luck. In the evening they had made the rounds of some of the restaurants together, the sole movie theatre and one or two bars. Now, late in the evening, they had found a restaurant with an outdoor terrace. The night air wasn't too cool and they ate a late meal there together, under the sprawling trees and the lanterns. Manuela was uncharacteristically quiet.

"You okay?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, just tired," she admitted.

"I guess you worked pretty hard today, girl, but you did a good job. It isn't your fault that nothing has turned up yet. Maybe they aren't here, maybe they never were. Perhaps the postmark was just a hoax, who knows?"

Manuela managed a smile. "I just need to get some sleep and I will be okay in the morning. Tomorrow I will wear running shoes instead. How long to you think we will search like this?"

Steve thought about the ground that they had covered already. "Not too long, really. This just isn't a very big city, is it? We have covered most of the bars and hotels, the theatre and some of the restaurants. I think one danger is that we may have tipped off too many people in this city. If they have friends here listening out, then they will have heard that we are looking for them and either hidden or left the area. I don't know how to find them without asking, though."

"I didn't think of that," Manuela admitted, "but you are right, we might have scared them away, even with my 'sweet niece looking for the lost American uncle act'."

"You really are pretty good at this sort of thing, aren't you?"

"I told you I was worth the money you are paying me."

He reached over the table and took her hand, giving it a small squeeze. "I think you're great at what you do," he said, hoping to motivate

her to carry on a few more days. She smiled broadly at his compliment. "You told me that there are two flights a week here, when is the next one?"

"Thursday afternoon."

"Okay, here is the deal then: either way you'll be on that flight. If we locate them then I will stay here for a few more days and talk to them and then probably catch the Monday flight out and catch up with you in Lima for some fun before I go home. If we don't find them then I will leave on Thursday with you and we'll still have some fun in Lima before I go home. Either way it works out for you."

Manuela was happy with the plan. *She is going to make a mint off me either way*, Steve figured, *so I guess she would be happy*.

They finished their meal and walked back to the hotel.

Perhaps it was the day's work or the altitude, but when Steve got back from brushing his teeth in the bathroom Manuela was already fast asleep. He carefully got into bed beside her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She didn't stir at all, she was out cold.

He turned off the bedside light and in the darkness lay there listening to her regular breathing. The room had been hot when they had come back in and so he had opened the window slightly and it now admitted a cool breeze that played across his face. Carefully he rolled over and was asleep within a few minutes.

Wednesday 16 January 1985

1200 hours

"I found a clue," Manuela stated, excitedly as she let herself into the hotel room.

Their plan for the morning had been that she would continue her rounds of likely places while Steve would walk around the town, just keeping an eye out. They had agreed to meet back at the hotel room for lunch and she would bring in some groceries. That would allow them to talk more easily without being overheard.

Manuela had covered many more businesses while Steve had walked much of the downtown and then north up the hillside into what he imagined would be the wealthy end on the higher ground overlooking the town, but the roads turned from asphalt to dirt and the houses became mere shanties and sheds made from scraps. Finally he wound his way back to the central square as the morning started to get hot and sat watching the people walk by from a bench there. He had seen lots of people out and about, but no sign of his quarry and, in fact, very few tourists or non-residents of any

kind seemed to be in Huánuco.

“What did you find?” he asked, as she put her bag of groceries on the bed.

“I went to the main grocery store to get some bread, cheese and apples for lunch,” she explained hurriedly. “They had no apples there, but they suggested I try another place along the street. It was a wholesaler, just a warehouse really, but they had apples, so I got some for us there. I wasn't going to show him the picture, as I didn't at the grocery store, but the attendant started a conversation, he asked me if I was new in Huánuco, as he had never seen me before. I told him I was here looking for my uncle and showed him the picture. He said 'Oh yes I know this man, Ben, he drives a truck that brings us some of our vegetables for sale from the monastery'.”

“Monastery?”

“Yes, he said that there is a monastery about 15 km from here, east of the city on the north side of the river on a dirt road that runs north along a tributary of the Huallaga River. He said it is in a canyon and is quite hard to get to, but they grow vegetables there and he brings them to the wholesaler with a pick-up truck. He had seen him last week sometime.”

“That's an odd story,” Steve admitted. “Was he sure it was the same person?”

“He was quite sure,” she said. “He is an American, but speaks Spanish okay. He usually just comes to the city alone, so he didn't know about any of the others.”

“What about this monastery?”

“No one seems to know much about it, really. Peru still has quite a number of them all over the country, some are well-known, others aren't.”

“Does this one have a name?” Steve asked her.

“They just call it 'el monasterio' which in English is 'the monastery'. I guess it is the only one near here,” she explained. “Unlike in your country, people here do not ask a lot of questions.”

“So how do I get there, then?”

“The best way would be to meet this Ben when he next comes to town, I would think.”

Steve pondered that idea. “I really need to talk to all four of them, but maybe I can con him into giving me a ride up there. Did the man at the wholesaler say when Ben would be back next?”

“I did ask this question, but he said that there was no way to know. He never comes twice in the same week, but sometimes he doesn't come for several weeks. It seems that this monastery grows their own food and

when they have a surplus they bring it here to sell or trade it. There doesn't seem to be a schedule, just when they have enough to make a trip worthwhile, it seems."

"So the last time he was in town was last week?"

"That is what the man said. I did ask him when that was exactly, but he didn't remember. People here don't pay so much attention to the days of the week."

"I guess not," Steve said, thinking. "I still want to put you on that plane tomorrow, but I think I should stay and visit this monastery myself. I guess I could stake out the grocery place, but he may not come back for weeks, or at all. There has to be another way to get there. Can you make some inquiries about perhaps taking a taxi or something similar to get me there?"

"I can try," Manuela said, "but I do not like leaving Huánuco without you."

"Well I doubt you can come to this monastery, they aren't usually open to women are they? Besides I may be there just a day or so, or much longer, who knows? There is no point in you staying here for weeks. It makes more sense for you to go back to Lima. You can get on with your work there and I will give you a call when I get back there, I promise. I'll pay you before you go, that way if you are out of town with another tourist when I get back you won't be out the money."

"I don't like to leave my tourists out in the countryside. If something were to happen to you I would not hold myself in high esteem."

"But as you pointed out, I am not really a tourist, I'm a spy, so it doesn't count."

"I guess that is true," she allowed, cautiously.

"Okay, I'm hungry so let's eat. What did you bring?"

Manuela unpacked buns, a small block of local cheese and the apples she had found. There were bananas and bottles of mineral water as well. They made cheese sandwiches from the buns, slicing the cheese with Steve's pocket knife.

"So what is our plan, then?" Manuela asked, as they lay back on the bed, eating their lunch.

"First, I think we should finish lunch," Steve started out.

"Ha, ha, you are funny," she said. "If you keep on talking I'll eat yours as well."

"Then I think we should make love and take a nap, because this whole town shuts down all afternoon so we can't get anything else much done and, besides, it maybe my last chance for some sex for a while. Then,

later on, I think you ought to go out and arrange some kind of ride for me to this monastery for tomorrow sometime, a ride on that bus to the airport and a ticket for yourself out on tomorrow's flight. I will go to the bank and cash some traveller's cheques so I can pay you. Then I think we should go to dinner and have a little celebration of our success. At least I hope it is a success and not a ruse or a mistake. Then tomorrow we shall go our separate ways until we meet again in Lima sometime."

Manuela carefully peeled a banana and bit into it. "I do not like your plan, Al, but you are the boss. I will give you my telephone number in Lima. I just hope that nothing happens to you up here, you don't run into the revolutionary forces, bandits or anything."

"Ah," Steve said dismissively, "I can take care of myself. Don't worry about me. I'll see you in Lima in a week or so."

After lunch they cuddled up closely on the bed, letting their food digest slowly, dozing in the afternoon heat.

Steve realized that they must have fallen asleep for an hour or so, because when he next opened his eyes the sunshine was coming in the window from a different angle than it had been. The room seemed bathed in late-day golden light. Manuela was turned away from him, asleep. He put his arm around her waist and reached up to caress her breast through her clothes. She stirred and stretched, like a cat and cooed a little as he stroked her, bit into her neck and slowly undressed her.

Thursday 17 January 1985

1428 hours

Steve was riding in the back of the Datsun pick-up truck, with his one bag. The highway was gravel and dusty, but at least there was little traffic on it to make more dust.

Manuela had taken Steve to the central square and introduced him to the man she had found to give him a ride to 'el monasterio', or at least as close to it as possible. As she had explained, el monasterio was on the north shore of the Huallaga River, but the road was on the south and there was no bridge. The plan was that the driver would drop Steve off at the closest point, where there would be a boat to the other side and then a 3 km walk to el monasterio, at least according to some who claimed to have been there before.

"I don't get it," Steve had protested when Manuela had explained the routing to get there. They were standing in the central square along with the driver and his son, both of whom spoke no English and their

beaten up Datsun. The driver seemed to be of an indeterminable age, his face weatherbeaten and wrinkled from the sun. His son seemed quite old too. "If they are exporting food from there and bringing it to town by truck then there has to be a road to get there."

"In Canada you would think this," Manuela had explained, "but things are different here. The man with the boat is their connection to the world from there. They bring everything down from el monasterio, transfer it all into the boat, cross and then put it in their truck which stays on the south side and bring it to Huánuco."

"Sounds like quite a trip," Steve said resignedly.

"I think they want to be by themselves up there," Manuela concluded. "These sorts of methods of travel are not uncommon in this part of Peru. It will be easy, you will see."

"So they have a vehicle on the other side of the river?" Steve asked.

Manuela queried the driver in Spanish. "Donkey cart," she reported. "He has seen it from the south side of the river, but since you are not expected, you will have to walk. He says it is not far, but he has never been there himself, so he can't be sure. You can't see it from the south shore."

"I'll figure it out," he had said, kissed her and got into the back of the truck. She had watched him leave, waved once and then left to catch her bus to the airport for her flight to Lima.

Steve felt naked without her, but he wanted the answers and he was very close to that, he knew.

Eventually the truck came at stop by the side of the gravel road and the driver's son got out, mumbling in Spanish to Steve and pointing to a small boat that was tied up on the river, just a few yards away. Steve paid the man a few Sols, took his bag and walked towards the river, spitting out dust. The truck left quickly, with the sound of gravel flung by its tires and making a dust plume east on the road.

He looked around. With the truck gone, the silence was as thick as the afternoon was hot. The place on the river had a small makeshift dock, a very small shack that looked like it was built from scrap lumber and one boat tied to the dock. Steve had been expecting some sort of ferry, but this could only be described as a motor-punt, little more than a rowboat with a flat scow hull and an ancient outboard motor. What concerned Steve was that there didn't seem to be anyone here.

The river was not wide, perhaps 100 metres at that point, but the current was substantial enough to dissuade anyone, but the most

adventurous, from attempting to swim it. Behind him, away from the river, to the southeast, the terrain slowly swept up into higher ground, flat-topped plateaus. On the other side of the river, to the northwest, were 10,000 foot peaks and between them and the river, deep canyons radiating from the mountains at sharp angles. Directly opposite where he stood on the Huallaga River was a canyon that quickly disappeared from sight behind a rocky promontory. The upper reaches of the mountains were bare scree, rock, grays and browns, but the lower elevations were green forests. It was evident that a substantial tributary exited the canyon opposite and fed its waters to the Huallaga and eventually the Amazon and the Atlantic.

The sky was a relentless blue, with only a few cumulus clouds over the higher terrain to the northwest. There was no breeze at all and a few flies took advantage of the lack of wind to harry Steve. He brushed them away, cleaned his sunglasses on his shirt and walked the few feet to the small dock, surveying the scene. He dropped his bag on the dock and it made a resonant, hollow clunk when it hit the rotting wooden planks. Steve considered whether to just take the boat to the other side himself.

The sound of the bag hitting the dock obviously had some effect, as there was a noise from the shack and a boy of perhaps 14 appeared, yawning. *I guess everyone sleeps all afternoon here*, Steve thought, *but then there isn't a helluva lot else to do here*. The boy wore long pants that seemed too small for him, a red T-shirt and was fixing a straw hat to his head as he emerged from the shack. He wore no shoes, but he smiled broadly when he saw Steve standing on his dock.

“Si Señor,” he addressed Steve.

“¿Hablas inglés?” Steve tried, using just about all the Spanish he had.

The boy just shook his head slowly. Resigned to sign language Steve pointed to the boat and the other side of the river. The boy nodded and made to start the outboard engine on the boat. He gestured that Steve should put his bag in the boat and take a seat. Steve noted that the boat had no oars, life jackets or anything else in the way of safety equipment. The bottom of the boat had a fair amount of water in it. *Is that from rain or is this thing leaking?*

He took a seat on one of the two wooden benches. The boy cast the boat off and then attempted to start the engine. Steve just shook his head as the first few attempts on the pull-starter failed and the boat, caught in the current, began to drift down the river quite quickly. *Well perhaps I will get to see the Amazon, after all*, Steve thought, trying to be pragmatic. The engine finally started and the boy looked up, giving Steve a smile and a

thumbs up. Steve looked doubtful, but the boy headed the boat for the far shore, angling it upstream, across the current.

Within a few minutes they were on the far bank. There was no dock there, just a flattened gravel bar and the boy shut off the engine, coasted onto the gravel and jumped into the water pulling the boat up, allowing Steve to get out of the bow without getting wet. Steve fished out some coins and dropped them into the boy's hand. The boy did not look pleased, so he dropped some more until he smiled. Steve figured that it wouldn't pay to be cheap as he would need to get back over the river at some point and this young person may just prove his lifeline.

"Gracias," Steve said and the boy responded with another thumbs up, before casting off and restarting the engine. Steve wondered how he was supposed to signal for a ride back when the time came, but there was no way to ask that question.

Alone on the northwest shore Steve shouldered his bag and climbed up the cut in the bank from the gravel bar. It looked worn by many feet. At the top of the bank was an obvious cart track that meandered around the rocky outcrops on the flood plain and lead into the far canyon. As the sound of the boat receded the day resumed its silence, punctuated only by occasional gulps from the river itself.

Steve started the hike uphill, not knowing how far it was to his destination, or even if there was a destination at the end of the track.

What do I do if this leads nowhere, or if there is a monastery but it is deserted, or if it is in rebel hands, or something else stupid? Can't out-think the possibilities, he decided, and walked on. *I am pretty much committed at this point. There really is no easy way to turn back.*

The track continued uphill towards the promontory that hid the entrance to the canyon and slowly inched closer to the river that issued from the canyon. As the trail almost touched the tributary it afforded Steve a view of the fast-running water, that seemed clear and bright and, running over white gravel, not very deep at all.

The promontory that guarded the entrance to the canyon proved to be a kilometre from where Steve had stepped off the punt. As he rounded it he expected the view from there would offer up an answer as to where he was going, confirmation that the goal even existed. But once around the corner the forest thickened from the open flood plain and the trees hid all answers. He noted that the cart track continued on and he followed it up the canyon.

The track wound its way through woods. There was no wind in the afternoon and the woods seemed eerily quiet, devoid of even birds. *Must*

be napping, too, Steve thought, but he found the silence unnerving. Still the two-rutted track continued on, without signs of petering out. This was Steve's main concern, that the track would slowly disappear, leaving no destination.

It was obvious from the footing and from the rush of water in the tributary of the Huallaga that he was climbing higher in the canyon. He had gone another two kilometres from the rock promontory, but there was still nothing to be seen but the track, no marks, no signs, no clues. The old man had indicated three kilometres from the river, Steve recalled, at least according to Manuela. If he was right then he should be there by now. *Of course he has never been here, so that distance probably isn't better than a rumour.*

The track passed closer to the tributary, where it rushed over some rocks, chasing and gurgling. Steve was tired and hot in the afternoon warmth, which seemed to carry the sun's heat even deeper under the canopy of the overhanging trees that sheltered the track. He paused to look at the river running over the rocks, dropped his bag beside a tree and walked down the slight bank to the edge of the water. It looked clear and fresh. As it raced by he reached down and touched the water, feeling its coolness splash up his arm. He took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pant legs and waded into the water, which sparkled and played around his legs, cooling him quickly. He bent down and scooped up handfuls of the liquid, pouring it onto his face and over his head. The water dripped down, soaking his shirt.

The cool water took the urgency out of his quest and gave Steve reason to pause and think. Now cooled, he returned to the bank and sat down upon a large stone there, letting his feet and legs dry.

What was he likely to find up here? *Something or nothing. If it is nothing then there is nothing more to do. Either there is no monastery or if there is, they are not there. Then I just go back to Lima, finish my holiday with Manuela and go home.*

But if I find them up here, what then? What then? He wasn't at all sure, but he felt he needed a plan before he went any further up the track.

I seriously doubt I could get any help up here, no police, no Canadian embassy help. Why would they be interested? They are likely to treat a monastery as a sanctuary anyway and refuse to intervene. I think that I have to forget that, whatever happens here has to be all my doing and no one else's.

I won't just go home and forget it, not after coming this far. I want to know what happened, but I won't leave without at least letting them

know that they were assholes for leading us on a wild goose chase for three weeks across BC. People died looking for them. It just wouldn't be right to not at least show them the price of their own hypocrisy, their selfishness, their egomania.

Okay, he decided, that is my aim, then, at the very minimum I will give them a dose of the humiliation that they gave me. Settled.

Steve put his socks and shoes back on and rolled his pants back down. He stretched his back and arms, limbered his muscles up.

It can't be far now, he thought, I have to be ready to see almost anything when I arrive. I also have to be prepared for the fact that they might have lookouts on the trail here and that my arrival may be already anticipated. I haven't been shot at yet, so I have to assume that if I have been seen that I won't be stopped. He scanned the forest carefully as he made ready to carry on his journey, but it was mute in response to his question.

He slung his bag over his shoulder again and walked on up the track, into the darkening canyon.

After another two kilometres he was becoming concerned. Obviously the old man was wrong about the distance as he reckoned that he had traversed a total of five kilometres from the crossing at the Huallaga. *It must be that far, even allowing twenty minutes where I stopped, I have been walking over an hour.* His watch showed almost 1700 hrs and the sun was starting to sink below the ridge line above the forest canopy. *I really have to get somewhere before dark,* he reminded himself. Darkness comes early and quickly at this latitude and it wasn't far away, he knew. Then he heard the bell.

It rang clearly five times, a deep sound, not a small bell, but a good sized one and not that far away, too. He was not alone up here.

He pressed on up the track and the sides of the canyon soon widened out into a broader valley. The forest also gave away to a cleared area, a broader plain, perhaps a kilometre in width and there, in the middle of the plain was a building.

Steve stopped and surveyed the scene. The building was not what he had been expecting, which was a tall medieval-looking structure of dark stone. Instead this was a whitewashed structure, with tile roofing and of all one story, except for a very unremarkable bell tower, which was the only second story visible.

The building stood in the middle of an area of cultivated fields, a ship at sea. There were no people in sight, but smoke rose from the building, creating a picture of human civilization in this remote place.

Steve realized that there was no approach to the building that was concealed from observation, so he proceeded directly along the track that lead past the rows of vegetables. There seemed to be potatoes, beans and peppers growing, watered by wooden channels aimed from the tributary of the Huallaga River on the west side of the plain, that clearly gave this valley its life.

As he walked the 700 or so meters from the edge of the forest to the building he began to see that what had appeared to be one building was in fact a number of buildings, clustered together to meet and form a perimeter that wasn't a fort, but looked as if it could be defended if necessary. The complex was joined by a gateway of the same whitewashed material that held two wooden gates. The gates looked more decorative and, by the weeds that grew in their sweeps, that they hadn't been closed in a long time. The scene projected peace and serenity, but Steve was suspicious.

From a hundred metres Steve could see that he was being observed by a man standing in the gateway. He expected to see a monk in robes, but the man was wearing pants and a blue t-shirt.

When he got to the gateway the man greeted him with some degree of wariness, “¿Puedo servir de ayuda, señor?”

“Do you speak English?” Steve asked.

“Better than I do Spanish,” the man said. “Can I provide you with any assistance? Are you lost?”

“Perhaps I am lost,” Steve admitted and then smiled, “Saint Fabiola sent me.”

“Then you're not lost.” He ushered Steve into the courtyard beyond the gate.

Thursday 17 January 1985

1715 hours

“Have you eaten?” the man asked. Steve admitted that he hadn't. He was lead across the court yard and into a small door that lead to the kitchen.

“My name is John.”

“Alan,” Steve said and they shook hands.

The kitchen was large and not at all modern. It was clear that there was no electricity as the oven was wood-burning. John motioned him to sit down at a food preparation table and presented him with a bowl of vegetable stew.

"We have chickens here, too," John explained, "but due to the numbers we only end up with them in the diet about once a week." He gave Steve a spoon. "Where are you from?"

"Canada," Steve said.

"What part?"

"British Columbia."

"We are practically neighbours," John said with some enthusiasm, "I am from Oregon. Sorry to feed you separately from the others, but meals are silent here and it is a bit unnerving for visitors, so it is better that you eat in the kitchen here."

"Are you the cook, then?" Steve asked.

"Nope, just a helper, the cook is down sick," John admitted. "I saw you walking up the trail, so I thought I would wait for you. If I had gone in for supper with the others then the place would have looked deserted when you arrived."

"How many people are here?"

"I think it is 24 brothers, including the abbot and eleven lay-people, right now," John replied. "Lay-people or initiates are all newcomers here to try out the order, some will stay and become brothers, some will just stay for a while, but many will go home. It is a bit too austere for most people here. You have to like living with no electricity and pretty strict routines, hard work, that sort of thing. It isn't for everyone."

"I guess not," Steve remarked, eating the stew, which was quite good. "It is all men here?"

"Oh, yes," John nodded. "Lead us not into temptation, you know."

"How long have you been here?"

"Almost three years," John replied. "Most people take five years to complete the training, if they stay that long. You said that Saint Fabiola sent you here?"

"It was a recurring dream I had," Steve said. "She told me to come here."

"Wow, that is odd, most people come here because they are running from something, women, divorces, debts, wild living, that sort of thing. The simplicity here either grabs them or it doesn't and then they either stay or go. Most don't last more than a few weeks," John explained. "I love it here, really, I know what I am doing every day. Back home I was a manager at this big company that went through a bankruptcy in the recession. I got laid-off, which was the best part really, I couldn't handle the stress, you know, I needed to get away and, well, I am still here three years later. You say you actually saw Saint Fabiola in a dream? What did

she look like?"

Steve was finished the stew. "In the dreams she wore robes, you know like Romans wore."

"Wow, that is something else. I don't think anyone has ever actually seen her."

"But this is her monastery, isn't it?"

"Well, yes she is considered the patron saint here, has been since this place was built a few hundred years ago, but no one really talks much about her. I think she set the standard for austerity here, though, from what I heard. Look, you had better plan on staying the night at least, it is almost dark outside now and you don't want to be out in the woods in the dark around here."

"Why is that?"

"Snakes," John explained, "but the darkness here just creeps me out, mostly."

"Well I was planning to stay here, if there is room for a convert?"

"Oh, there is room alright, this place must have had a lot more people here a hundred years ago. Look, I'll get you a room for the night here and you can talk to the abbot in the morning. He is a nice guy, but the evenings after supper are for prayer here and so there isn't much talking, really. I'll find you a place to sleep and some washing water and stuff. You can come back here for breakfast in the morning and I'll take you to the abbot then. You can explain your situation. I am sure he will let you stay on, they never turn anyone away. We need the help here, for one thing."

John seemed nervous and jumpy, which had the affect of making Steve feel all the more calm about being there, he said little and let John prattle on. Once dinner was done John lit a candle lantern and took him to the back of the complex. He explained that everyone else would be at the chapel, which he pointed out in the darkness as they passed it. The residential buildings were low and simple, like military barracks, Steve noted, each room had nothing more than a bench, a straw-filled mattress and a crucifix. There were no pictures on the walls anywhere. There was also no bathroom in the building, but the room he was shown to had a chamber pot, a wash basin and a bar of soap. John left Steve alone while he went and filled the water pitcher.

Steve looked around the room. *Positively medieval*, he concluded with a smile. *I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto, but I like it.*

John returned with the pitcher filled. "There are pit toilets out back, we throw lime in them, but they aren't recommended at night, just too dark out there, really. There are no showers, but we do have baths,

although they tend to be a bit cold. I'll leave you this candle lantern and some matches. Take it easy on the matches though, we are a bit short of them right now. We grow a lot of stuff here and while we eat most of it ourselves, we take some into town to sell and trade for the things we don't make or grow here, like matches.”

“Makes sense to me,” Steve assured him. “I'm sure I'll be fine here, it already feels like home to me.”

“Well, that is good,” John replied. “We had a new fellow from Europe arrived a few weeks ago and he only lasted two nights before he left. He said that the nights were too dark and creepy, but I think in his case it was the lack of alcohol here that got him.” John smiled sadly. “Needed a drink, I guess This isn't the best place to go through dry-out unless you want to do it cold-turkey.”

“No sweat, I am used to all this, really,” Steve said.

Finally John left, leaving Steve alone in the small room. The hour was still quite early, but Steve was tired after the journey and the pace of the last few days in the country.

This is going to be a nice break from all that, in fact all of everything, he thought as he washed up. This is going to be fun. I am just going to feel my way through here and take my time at it.

Steve decided to blow out the candle and turn in. The straw mattress had a crunchy texture to it, but the sheets and blankets supplied were warm against the high elevation night. Without heat in the room the air grew cool and Steve quickly fell asleep.

Friday 18 January 1985

0607 hours

“You are up early,” John said when Steve entered the kitchen.

“I figured the daily routine here started early, by that six o'clock bell,” Steve explained, “besides I slept really well last night. The air up here is wonderful.”

“We start early here, alright, it is just that most new people take a while to get used to the 'early to bed – early to rise' life,” John explained. “There are bells to start the day at six in the morning, at noon for lunch and five for supper.”

The kitchen was warm with the wood stoves stoked and providing lots of heat.

“You want some breakfast?” John asked.

“You look like you have your hands full there. Maybe I should be

helping you.”

“Well with our regular cook out sick it is just me here trying to get the food on the table for everyone, so yeah, if you could help that would be great. We are making eggs and bread. The bread is already in the ovens baking.”

“You have eggs for breakfast here?” Steve queried.

“Oh sure, we have chickens up here.”

Steve found an apron hanging on the wall and put it on. He checked the ovens and found about 20 loaves of bread baking. “You got up early to get this lot on.”

“Yeah, I get up with the first cocks crowing to make the bread. That is really what I do here is baking. I used to make bread in Oregon every now and then, but here I do it every morning and every afternoon, too. I'm not very good with the eggs and other stuff.”

“Well if you want to tend to your bread and make sure it doesn't burn I can certainly cook eggs.”

“There are two big wrought iron pans there I was going to use. We need to do about 70 eggs or so for 6:30,” John added.

Steve checked his watch. “Too easy, how do you want them?”

“Over easy would be great. I always end up making scrambled the last few days, since Nick has been sick. Everyone will be happy not to have any more scrambled eggs, I am sure. You're a life saver, you know.”

“Ah, cooking is easy to do, I enjoy it” Steve remarked, putting the big iron pans on the stove top and letting them heat up.

“Well perhaps the abbot will let you work here with me, while Nick is off sick. No one else likes cooking, they all prefer to get out in the fresh air and do the farming and other outdoor work instead.”

“What is your cook sick with?”

“Not sure, really. Some kind of flu bug I think. He seems to be sleeping it off okay, but he hasn't been on his feet in three days now. He was in town last week, must have picked it up there. You shouldn't really catch anything up here, it is like isolation, really.”

“When I was in Huánuco someone told me that there was some flu going around, so maybe he caught it there?”

“Oh probably,” John said, pulling loaves from the ovens, “I hope he is back on the job soon, though, he is far better at this than I am.”

Steve noticed that an orange and white cat was sitting on the kitchen floor, watching him work. “Is that cat yours?”

“Oh, Thomas is here all the time. There are a bunch of cats here now. They brought a pair up here just around the time when I arrived.

There was a bubonic plague scare in this part of the country and there are some rats around here so they tried poisoning the rats, but the rats were too smart to eat the poison, so then they brought in cats instead, more environmentally friendly, you know?"

"Bubonic plague, in Peru?"

"Oh, they never had a real case in the whole country, it was a false alarm, pure panic, you know? But it was probably a good thing overall, as it motivated the whole of Peru to get out and get rid of lots of rats. The cats stayed, but we generally don't feed them, they go out hunting in the fields and the chicken coops. They keep the mice and rats at bay which is a good thing in my mind."

Steve regarded the cat, it looked chubby and well-fed. Steve walked over to the cat and it raised its nose to be petted, which Steve did. The cat was audibly purring. "He seems friendly enough."

"Everyone is friendly here," John added. "That cat gets lots of attention from the brothers here, he isn't neglected. Same goes for the rest of the cats. There are about half a dozen of them around here, he is just the friendliest."

"You call him Thomas for Saint Thomas?"

"No, just because he is an old tomcat."

Steve was flipping eggs expertly and piling them on a large steel platter that sat on the stove top, keeping the eggs warm.

"Hey you are doing a great job there," John noted, "you haven't broken any of them."

"It is all in how you wield the spatula," Steve demonstrated.

"I'm just glad you can do that. You're making friends already here." John was slicing up loaves of bread, as soon as they were cool enough to do so. "We may meet our schedule today, yet."

"What is the routine here?"

"Same thing everyday except Sundays, of course," John explained, "Up at 6:00 for Tai Chi..."

"Tai Chi? That is odd at a Christian monastery," Steve exclaimed.

"Aw, it works. Most of the guys here are older, like you and me, the Tai Chi helps keep them limber, you know? They've been doing it here for thirty years I was told. If you went out in the court yard right now you'd see pretty near everyone out there doing that. We have a few of the brothers who can teach newcomers. It gives the morning a calm start. Then after that, it is breakfast in the dining hall and off to work for the morning. Most of the fellows work in the fields or taking care of the chickens. It is all manual labour here, hoe farming, that sort of thing. Some will do building

and equipment maintenance, painting or fixing roofs, that sort of thing. Then lunch in the dining hall. Afternoons vary, usually start with a siesta for a bit. Then later in the afternoon non-initiates do more work if it isn't too hot out for a couple of hours. The brothers have prayers, studies and meditation. Then supper. Evenings are for prayers and meditation. Sundays are only for essential work, like cooking or emergencies, like floods."

"You get floods here?"

"Oh sure, during the wet season the river can overflow its banks and things can get a bit damp here. That is why this little spot is such a great location though, you can grow anything up here on this flood plain, the soil is rich and the floods replenish it. It is a little Shangri-La in Peru, all right."

"Doesn't the monastery get flooded out?"

"The place is actually on a bit of high ground here," John explained. "It always seems to stay dry somehow, although some years it looks like an island for a few days."

"What about the rebel movements, don't they ever bother you?" Steve asked.

"Oh, I have heard about them, the Shining Path and all that, but we never see them here. Maybe they have never heard of this place or maybe it is too far out of the way to be a target. Besides what would we have here worth taking?"

"I thought perhaps even communist guerrillas would respect a religious sanctuary?"

"Yeah, it could be that, too," John agreed. "Well we should get all this food out on the tables. I should warn you that meals are silent here, except for grace, so we will just deliver the food and then get back in here to clean things up and have a bite ourselves."

"You won't eat with everyone else?"

"Well, I could do, but it is nice to have someone to talk to, if you ask me and besides you shouldn't eat with everyone else until you have the blessing of the abbot. We should get those pots of water on the stove to warm up for cleaning everything. There will be a couple of the fellows in after breakfast for dish washing, so we don't have to do that, but they will need hot water."

They carried the platters of food out and put them on the long tables in the adjoining dining hall as the rest of the brothers and initiates were filing in. The brothers wore robes, while the rest were in an assortment of street and work clothes. Steve scanned the faces and quickly picked out Ben MacKinstry from the picture he had. *He looks a little*

slimmer and fitter, Steve thought, placing the platters of eggs, *but that is him alright*. Steve couldn't identify anyone else and didn't want to stare. John had been right, it was mostly older men in the group, although there were a few younger ones, perhaps in their thirties or so.

Well I can see why this place wouldn't attract any young men, this is not Vancouver or even Lima. Heck, young people flee Comox for the cities, because it is too dull there. Not much night life here.

Back in the kitchen Steve and John ate breakfast at one of the food preparation tables. The bread was very good quality, Steve noted, *you really could live on this alone*, he thought, finishing his third slice.

"What's your secret to this bread?" Steve asked.

"Mostly it is the flour we get. That comes from town, so we usually barter vegetables for it to the local warehouser there, he then resells the vegetables, so he makes double the profit on the transaction, since he marks it up twice. We can't really grow wheat up here, besides that, we would have to mill it and all that. I am going to take some food into Nick and see if he will eat anything today, but let me take you to the abbot's office first and at least get you started here."

John lead Steve to another building nearby. It looked like a workshop, low and quite dark. On one end was a door that lead into a small corridor. There was no receptionist and no waiting room. John knocked on the door and was told to enter. He waved Steve into the doorway. The room was very small and contained little more than a writing table and three chairs as well as the crucifix that seemed to hang in every room at the monastery.

"Father Abbot," John began, "This is Alan, he arrived last night and wishes to join us. Saint Fabiola appeared to him in a vision." He was speaking to a short man, perhaps 65 or 70 years of age, wearing robes and with a large wooden cross hanging from his neck.

"Splendid," the Father Abbot responded with enthusiasm, looking directly at Steve.

John continued, "Alan, this is Father Abbot Jules." John left, leaving Steve alone with the abbot.

"Please come in and sit down," the Father Abbot said in English that seemed to Steve to have a slight French accent to it. They shook hands and Steve sat on one of the chairs, while the Father Abbot sat on another.

"So Alan, you have travelled far to join us here." It was a statement and not a question, but Steve considered that it must be true of anyone who turned up there. "Where did you come from?"

"British Columbia, on the west coast of Canada," Steve explained.

"Ah, I know it well, I have been to Vancouver several times over the years," the Father Abbot said his face shining with a positive smile of friendliness. "And John said that you had a vision that brought you here?"

"More like a dream actually," Steve said, making eye contact. "For five nights in a row I dreamed about this woman in Roman robes, who kept telling me to come here."

"Fascinating," Father Abbot Jules said. "I have never heard of her appearing to anyone before. She told you her name in the dream, now did she?"

"She never spoke it to me, but when I woke up I just seemed to know that she was Saint Fabiola."

"Perhaps you had read about her in the past and this had caused the dream?"

"Actually I had never heard of her, although I did look her up at the library. She isn't exactly a well-known saint, is she?"

"That is true, few have heard of her," the Father Abbot Jules agreed. "She has long been considered the protector of this facility, but there isn't even a statue or picture of her here. Well that is great news if she is sending us new recruits. I assume that John has given you some information on what we do here?"

"He gave me the daily routine. He even gave me a room last night."

"The key thing to know is that we are training monks for the order here. This generally lasts five years and then we send them out to do charitable work, mostly with the poor and the sick in many places in the world. We achieve this by prayer, hard work and faith in Jesus Christ. This is really what we have learned from Saint Fabiola, an austere life leading to charity. It can be very rewarding. We are independent, but organized somewhat like the Benedictines. Self-sufficiency is our goal, but communal self-sufficiency, not individual self-sufficiency. I hope that makes sense?"

"Perfectly," Steve said.

"I came back here ten years ago and I must admit that when I took over as abbot here I used to give a long talk on how things work here to new arrivals, but, to be honest, many people who come here don't last long. I don't think it suits them and I imagine it is a bit of a culture shock to most, despite their aspirations. As a result I don't go into great detail. You can pick it up as you go along. The routines are fixed enough that it doesn't take most people long to sort it out and decide whether to stay or not. Do you have any expertise that you can offer us?"

"Well, I can cook. John indicated that seems to be a vocation that

is lacking here.”

“I saw your work at breakfast. As you can tell the new initiates do most of the cooking and cleaning work here. It gives them something to aspire to for the next two years in becoming a brother.”

“Makes sense to me,” Steve admitted. “John said he has been here three years already.”

“Well some take longer than others, you see?”

Steve smiled, thinking about John's talkative style.

“We can certainly use you in the kitchen, even after Nicholas returns from being off sick, so why don't you start there?”

“That will be fine,” Steve said softly, his tone one of assurance.

“Perhaps my work there will motivate more people to stay?”

“Perhaps,” Father Abbot Jules said with a smile. “I hope you will find much to recommend life here...”

His words were interrupted by John's hasty return to the office doorway. He was out of breath. “Father, it's Nick, he is dead.”

Father Abbot Jules' face quickly lost his smile. “Are you quite sure?”

“He was cold when I got there,” John explained, wiping his face on his sleeve.

Father Abbot Jules turned to Steve, “please excuse me.” He rose to leave.

“I can see that you will be busy for a while, father, so I will just see what can be done in the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” said Father Abbot Jules and he left with John.

Friday 18 January 1985

0920 hours

By the time that Steve had returned to the kitchen the washing up had been completed and the place was empty but still warm from the ovens. He busied himself putting things away on shelves, sweeping the floor, organizing the food supplies and cleaning counters. Looking for things, he found the place was not well organized, the myriad of cupboards containing random items. He decided to reorganize the cupboards. When the work was done it looked more like he thought a kitchen should look.

“Wow, this place looks better.” John had returned. He looked serious and sober.

“What is the news?” Steve asked him.

“Nick is definitely dead, if that is what you mean,” John said. “I

have no idea what killed him through. It might have been the flu, or maybe his heart gave out or he had a stroke or something. I don't know."

"I guess it's kind of a shock?"

"Yeah that is probably the word for it. He was fine yesterday," John explained "Well, maybe not fine. He was sick, all right, but he wasn't that bad. I didn't think that I would never see him again."

"What did the father say?"

"He said that he will get word to the medical examiner in Huánuco. He will want to come up here to check the body over, I am sure. Maybe there will be an autopsy. I guess we will have a funeral when he is done."

"Is that done here?"

"Oh sure, we have the chapel and there is even a graveyard out back, although there aren't too many plots used. Most people who come here don't die here."

"Did the abbot want to see me again?" Steve asked.

"Naw, he said you were fine to start life here, besides he has lots to do now."

Steve considered that. "I guess he does. How does he send for the coroner? Does he have a radio telephone or something?"

"No, nothing like that. We do it the old fashioned way. It sounds like Ben has a load of vegetables to take to town today anyway. So him and Jan will go and do that and then talk to the medical guy. Ben does that stuff because he speaks Spanish."

"The other guy, Jan, does he speak Spanish, too?" Steve asked.

"No he speaks German, though," John said. "You should meet him, he is from British Columbia in Canada as well. Maybe you know each other?"

Steve smiled. "You never know."

John looked around, "I hope you didn't hide too many things away? This place is a sea of cupboards and it is easy to lose things here."

Steve grinned. "Don't worry you will be able to find your bread-baking supplies. I moved them all together over here." He showed John the cupboard.

"Hey that is a better idea." John seemed quite pleased. "Saves me running here and there to get the flour, yeast, salt, bowls and stuff."

"That was my thinking. What is with all the cupboards anyway, I mean they all fit together, but so many of them are different sizes?"

"I dunno, really. I wondered that myself when I first got here. I think that maybe one of the brothers years ago was a cabinet maker and

just got carried away or something.”

“Great devotion?”

“Of a sort, I guess.”

“There seems to be masses of canned food in mason jars here, peppers, onions and stuff. Was that all done locally?”

“Yeah, we harvest all year round here, but there is a big one in March or so and we have a big canning session and save as much as we can against future shortages.”

“I did find quite a bit of stuff that I am not sure really belongs in a kitchen,” Steve pointed out.

“Like what?”

“Like rat poison, for instance.”

“Oh yeah, that. That is from the plague scare a few years back I was telling you about. I guess it's here because it's rat food. Probably keeping it in a high cupboard keeps the cats from getting into it by mistake. Safer, I guess.”

“Well as long as you don't use it in your bread.”

John laughed. “Nope just flour, water, salt and yeast, those are all the magic ingredients that you need.”

“Or knead?”

“Hey if you get up early tomorrow you can help me do that, too.”

“Maybe I will. I kind of like the disciplined life here so far.”

“Well, see if it still appeals to you in a week. Most new people don't last much longer.”

Friday 18 January 1985

1937 hours

Now that it was dark, John had gone off to his early bedtime, but the lure of doing more work in the kitchen appealed to Steve more than evening prayers and so he had lit a couple of candles and decided to scrub the tables down. He was just doing that when Ben MacKinstry came into the darkened kitchen.

“Oh, I am sorry, brother,” Ben said when he saw Steve at work. “I saw the light, but I wasn't sure who was here. I thought it might be John.”

“Looking for something to eat?”

“Yeah, actually I am. I just got back from town. Whew, what a trip, I usually do these runs in the daylight both ways, but the father asked me to go in today and I got a late start at it. Came back up that trail in the dark. I guess I missed supper.”

"No problem," Steve smiled. "Let me make you something right away." He gestured for Ben to take a seat.

"That is very kind of you."

"Oh, no problem at all, we have bread and even some chicken already cooked up, won't take me but a minute to make you a sandwich," Steve insisted.

"You must be new here. I don't think we have met before."

"Just arrived last night actually," Steve admitted, "but John mentioned that you are Ben, right?"

"That's me," he replied, watching Steve make the sandwich in the candlelight.

"How long have you been here?" Steve placed the meal in front of him. Ben said a small prayer and then started in on eating it.

"Since the beginning of October," Ben said in between bites.

"I guess the southern summers here are pretty mild, then?"

"The summers here are quite lovely," Ben admitted. "Actually this whole place is lovely. I kind of escaped a muddled life back in the States, constant pressure, problems, nagging, demands. I just couldn't do it anymore and this place has proved to be my salvation, really. It has brought my sanity back. I thought I would die from the stress back there. It is just so peaceful here and I can do gardening all day long. What could be better than that?"

Steve sat down opposite Ben. "It seems that a lot of people who find their way here are running from something."

"Not so much 'running' I would say," Ben replied, finishing the sandwich. "More like ready to leave their old lives behind and aspire to something simpler and better. Here the days are not full, but they are complete. There is time to think and to say prayers. I was never very religious before I came here but here I have learned that prayers really are listened to. There is a lot more to life than just working."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Steve replied. "Your old life sounds a lot like mine used to, too. It was too busy, too unfocused. I've only been here a day, but I can feel the difficulties that I left behind just sort of fading away."

"That is it, exactly. There are no real troubles here, you know?"

"Well I guess some people have some," Steve remarked. "I mean what about Nick?"

Ben crossed himself. "Well he has no more troubles either. He is with our Lord, now."

"True," Steve replied, "but I mean the coroner has to come up and

all that.”

“Nope,” Ben said, “he wouldn’t come. I mean that was half of why I went to town today, to talk to him. He said that they have too many flu deaths in Huánuco right now, it seems to be an epidemic. He is too busy. He said it was probably the flu that killed him and that we should bury him right away. Same goes for any other deaths, they just can’t deal with it right now.”

Steve shook his head. “Wow, just like that?”

Ben agreed, “Just like that. Father Abbot Jules said we will have a service tomorrow and then a burial.”

“I hope no one else caught what he had.”

“It is likely that they have.” Now Ben looked very serious. “A number of the brothers are already sick. Think about it, Nick was the cook, after all.”

Steve just shook his head and let out a small whistle. “This could get serious. I am glad I decided to give everything a good cleaning tonight.”

“It could be serious,” Ben agreed, “but I have learned that prayer and true belief can yield strong results, that is what Jesus taught.”

“You still hungry?” Steve asked.

“Well...” Ben said.

“No problem, let me see what else we have here,” Steve went in search of more food to keep Ben sitting there talking.

“You don’t mind doing all this?” Ben asked.

“Not at all,” Steve responded pleasantly, slicing some apple pie and placing it on a plate. “You have done a lot today, the least I can do is feed you. I was going to ask how you got here. I came the easy way, by plane from Vancouver BC to Lima and then onto Huánuco by plane. I only had to walk from the river, a pretty easy trip really, but I heard that some of the brothers suffered greatly just to get here.”

“I don’t know of anyone who you could say suffered, but for some of us it was a difficult journey, all right.”

“I guess you didn’t just fly down from the US then, did you?”

“Oh it started as an airliner flight on a vacation and then a small airplane flight and then a yacht voyage and then a very long truck trip. It is kind of a boring story to tell.” He gestured dismissively.

“So I guess you had a lot to leave behind then?”

“Yeah, too much, really. I didn’t want to leave it all behind, but you have to take the good with the bad. Running your own company can just be too much, you know?”

“What did your company do?”

“Nothing important, really, made car parts.”

“Sounds like a big deal.”

“Only from the outside.”

“I guess I see what you mean. You need to keep things in perspective.”

“That is it,” Ben responded. “I should get off to evening prayers really. Thank you for your kindness.” He coughed a couple of times. “I hope I’m not coming down with this too.”

“I hope you don’t, either,” Steve said. “I’ll be praying that everyone stays healthy from now on.”

“That will help,” Ben said before he said good night and departed.

Saturday 19 January 1985

0503 hours

“Hey you did make it up early,” John said when Steve arrived in the kitchen. The place was lit with candles as the dawn was still some time away.

“I said I would come and help you,” Steve replied, “besides I really sleep well here, so now it’s time to get to work.”

“No problem, you are just in time to help out with the second rising. We get to beat the dough down, divide it up and put it in those pans. You must have stayed late last night, the place looked even cleaner this morning.”

Steve put on an apron and got to work. “I was just doing a bit of scrubbing and then Ben showed up back from town, so I made him some supper.”

“Oh great, thanks for doing that. I really prefer not to have the brothers poking around here, you know? Things get disorganized.”

“Ben said that the coroner has his hands full and that he just wants any flu deaths buried right away. I guess the father said we would hold a funeral today, then.”

“Yeah that’s not a surprise, really,” John replied. “Things in Huánuco usually seem a bit messed up most of the time. I hope that no one else comes down with that bug here. That is really the last thing we need in a small community like this.”

Steve was rolling out loaf-sized clumps of dough. “Like this?” he asked.

“Yeah, perfect. Then just put about that amount in each pan.”

Once the bread was undergoing its second rise Steve stoked the ovens with wood. The kitchen was getting quite warm.

"Not too much, now," John cautioned. "We want a kind of medium oven, too hot and it burns before it bakes."

Once the bread pans were all in the ovens they both sat down. "You want some coffee?" John asked.

"Definitely," Steve replied. "Where do you get that from?"

"We trade for it. It comes from around here, you know." He checked his watch. Outside it was starting to get light. "Besides we've got to get some eggs on, soon, here." Steve put the big cast iron pans on top of the stoves to heat up. The oil on them started to produce some smoke.

"We have to oil them to keep the rust off," John explained. "One thing I don't miss here are smoke detectors, though." He laughed.

"Well as long as you don't burn the place down. Say, are you worried about this flu thing, here at the monastery?"

"Naw, not really," John replied. "Things like that are the Lord's work; if it comes, it comes. Besides it is the flu, how bad can it be?"

After breakfast was done, Father Abbot Jules visited the kitchen. "You two are really doing a great job here, the food has never been better."

"Well thank you father, but our new guy, Alan, gets the credit," John said in response.

"It is an honour to have found a way to help here, father," Steve said.

"Well if you can continue here for a week or so I will make sure that you are given a break then, but I fear that we are going to be in for a bit of a rough ride with this flu bug in the meantime. This morning we have three down sick, two of the brothers and Ben as well. I am hoping he gets well before we need to make another trip into town, or else I may have to go myself. It looks as if we shan't get much help from the medical establishment in town, they already have their hands full, it seems. I have told everyone that if they feel sick to stay in their rooms and not infect everyone. That is probably the best we can do for now."

After he had departed, Steve said to John: "You know I really should take some food to Ben and see how he is doing."

"That sounds like a good idea. We should probably start a list of who is down sick and organize food deliveries for them." He went to the blackboard on the kitchen wall and wrote down the three names, while Steve put together three plates from the breakfast leftovers.

Steve found Ben in his room dozing, the blankets dishevelled. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"Well my head hurts like all get out and I feel pretty achy, but not too bad otherwise. The boss wants us to stay home until we all get better."

"Sounds like good advice to me. I brought you some breakfast, I thought you might be hungry. Here is some water as well, gotta stay hydrated, you know."

"Well that is very thoughtful of you. I'll see if I can eat some of it. Can I ask you to let Jan know where I am? I was supposed to work on the coops with him today."

"Coops?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, where the chickens live, some of the wire needs replacing and we were going to do it together."

"No sweat I'll let him know. I have a couple of hours before I have to start work on lunch, I'll just give him a hand myself."

"Hey Alan, you are a lifesaver, thank you brother."

"No problem, you just get better."

Steve found the chicken coops without much trouble, they were in the last set of buildings before the graveyard and then the forest edge. Most of the other initiates seemed to be out in the fields, as far as he could see. The place smelled like chicken excrement and there were many dozens of birds in the yard that scattered when he approached. The sun was high now and the day was quite warm already. He found one person working in the coops, nailing up wire.

"You must be Jan?"

"Ya, that is me," Jan said shading his eyes against the sun.

"Ben asked me to let you know is is down sick with this flu bug that is going around. Father Jules has told everyone who is sick to stay in their cells to avoid spreading it around. I just brought him some breakfast. Since he can't help you, I thought I would give you a hand with the wire, if you need it, before I have to get back and work on lunch."

Jan looked at him. "Well I have the easy parts done with, but if you want to hold some wire for me I can stretch it out and nail it in place. Are you cooking?"

Steve grinned, "Yeah, that seems to be my lot in life here, they found out I can cook and I have been in the kitchen ever since."

"Well better you than me," Jan laughed. "I'd rather work with chickens than cook them any day."

"I heard that you are from BC?"

"Ya, I used to live there at one time, I flew out of Campbell River. Do you know the place?"

"Oh, sure, I lived in Victoria, before I came here. I have been to

Campbell River once or twice.”

Jan carefully tapped a nail into place, stood up and inspected his work. “Well this is a small world, isn’t it?”

“Always works out that way,” Steve replied. “Say you are a pilot? You are braver than I am, flying always scare the pants off me.”

“Oh, I did that for many years, the problem is that unless you work for a big airline you can’t make any money at it, just gather up lots of bills instead.”

“You weren’t an airline pilot?”

“Nope, I was a bush pilot, doing charter flying all over BC.”

“It is a rough place, lots of mountains and bad weather to deal with I would imagine. I would be afraid of crashing up there.”

The section of wire secured, Jan sat down on a small bench. “Oh it isn’t all that dangerous, really, you just have to know what you are doing all the time. That is how you get into trouble flying in BC, not staying ahead of everything. I never had any accidents, but I did ditch a plane once.”

“You mean ditch a plane in the water?” Steve feigned surprise.

“That does sound dangerous. I guess you made it okay or else we wouldn’t be having this conversation, though, eh?”

“It was actually pretty smooth. It was a retractable gear airplane so I just landed it on top of the water. Airplanes with fixed landing gear usually flip over in the water. That is how you get hurt.”

“I guess it pays to know what you are doing, then. But that wasn’t an accident?”

Jan laughed. “Well it was like an accident, but we did it on purpose. There were four of us who had to fake our deaths to come to Peru.”

“Wow, that sounds like quite an adventure. I just came down here by airliner and I thought that was enough of a scare for me. But where did you ditch the plane, in Peru?”

“No, no, in the Straits of Georgia, in BC.”

“But how did you get here then?”

“We had arranged a pick-up by a charter yacht run by a pirate in advance and then just sailed down here. It is very quiet, sailing. No one notices you.”

Steve shook his head. “I guess you must have had a pretty good reason to have to be dead before you came here. Me, I just had nothing left back home to stay for.”

“I didn’t have much left either, but there were too many people after me.”

Steve widened his eyes, "You mean like the law?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Ex-wife, that sort of thing. She never would have left me alone, unless I was dead."

Steve nodded in agreement. "I got one of those, I know what you mean."

"Are you heading back to the kitchen?" Jan asked.

Steve checked his watch. "Yeah pretty soon."

"Good, let's collect up some eggs in this bucket and you can take them with you."

"There sure are a lot of them, maybe I'll make up hard-boiled eggs for lunch or egg-salad sandwiches."

"Sounds good to me," Jan said.

"So you really had to be dead to come down here," Steve shook his head in amazement. "That sounds pretty desperate to get away. That must have taken a bunch of planning?"

"It took a couple of years," Jan admitted, "but here we are now, under the wing of Saint Fabiola."

"It is beautiful here," Steve admitted, not wanting to arouse too much suspicion by his line of inquiry. "It is worth a lot to be here."

"I'll say," Jan agreed.

"Say, if your plane just disappeared wouldn't someone have been looking for you?"

"Not in Peru, though."

"Yeah, but back in BC." They had almost filled the bucket with eggs.

"Oh, they wouldn't have looked too long or hard for us, besides that is what they get paid for. I am sure it will have all been forgotten by now."

"Yeah, you are probably right," Steve agreed. He hoisted up the bucket of eggs. For a second he considered dumping the bucket over Jan Schmidt, but instead he said, "I had better get these on the boil or we won't get any lunch. It was good talking with you. I hope we'll get to work together some more."

"I am sure we will," Jan said, standing up. "May the peace of Christ go with you."

"And with you also," Steve said and took his bucket back to the kitchen to make lunch.

Saturday 19 January 1985

1827 hours

In the kitchen, supper clean-up was complete, thanks to some additional help from some of the brothers. The five of them that had done the work were taking a break.

Steve considered that the situation didn't look good. They had started the day with three people sick out of a population of 36. By the time Nick's funeral had been completed in the afternoon there were eleven down sick, now there were almost a third in imposed isolation.

"Are you getting worried, Alan?" John asked him.

"Personally? No," Steve replied. "I never get sick. But I am getting concerned about how we are going to handle the situation here. It took six of us three hours to dig that grave, you know. If we have to dig any more we are quickly going to run out of available help. I think we need some real planning here to deal with this."

"I agree," Father Abbot Jules said, walking into the kitchen and sitting down there with the others. "The Lord has put challenges in our path to see if we are equal to them. I'm beginning to think that we should suspend all normal activities and concentrate on dealing with this flu outbreak."

"Sounds like just what we need," said Steve. "I was thinking that perhaps we should organize the remaining healthy ones of us into teams with specific duties, like cooking, delivering food to the sick, cleaning and sanitizing."

The father abbot thought about what Steve had said. "I believe you are quite right, this sort of focus is required to get through this period. What about bringing food in from the fields?"

"I would suggest that we do that only if needed," Steve said, "the eggs will need to be collected, of course, but we have tons of canned food right here we can make some use of. I can make lots of stews and soups from some of this. As long as John keeps baking bread we can keep feeding people on that while they recover. This should be over in a week or so, I would think."

The father abbot agreed that the plan made sense and so the remaining healthy brothers and initiates were divided into teams and then the teams were assigned duties. Steve was put in charge of the cooking and the father abbot took overall coordination of the teams. Steve suggested that a command post be set up in the dining hall, adjacent to the kitchen.

"This is starting to feel like a military operation," Father Abbot Jules observed.

Steve just smiled and said, "well, we have to do what works."

“What should we do about graves?” the father abbot asked Steve.
“Hopefully we won't need too many more of them,” Steve had replied.

“We should all pray that that is the case.”

Steve continued, “I think we ought to just assign people on grave-digging duties only when needed. It might be bad for morale to go out and dig a dozen holes in advance.” The father abbot nodded solemnly in agreement. No one else present said a word.

The sick were visited to make sure that they all had pitchers of water to prevent dehydration. The night was overcast and very dark out. As Steve carried a candle lantern to his cell he noted that the illumination was pretty minimal under those conditions. Getting ready for bed he felt buoyed. He had a role to fulfill and things were going very well, very well indeed. He had another sound night's sleep.

Sunday 20 January 1985

0502 hours

It was very early, but Thomas the cat was up and about. He slept much of the day and so these early hours were no stretch for him at all. He knew from experience that this was the time of day to be hunting and he silently made his way through the almost total darkness of the monastery complex.

There were other cats afoot, but Thomas preferred to hunt alone. Out behind one chicken coop he paused and listened. Something moved. He crouched down on his haunches and carefully peered around the corner of the coop. Inside he could hear the sound of the chickens mostly sleeping, but this was an outside noise. He cocked an ear and localized it. Breakfast was near, although he couldn't see it yet.

His low-light vision and the first light of the false dawn allowed him to pick up the sight of a scattering of grains behind the coop, chicken feed that the birds had missed. There was more of it at the far end of the coop, by the far corner. He thought something was there, eating the grain, but he couldn't be sure in this light.

He decided to backtrack and go around three sides of the building to get to the far corner. Despite his size he was completely silent, his sharp claws fully retracted, although ready for instant use when the time came. It wasn't far off.

The risk in circumnavigating the outside of the coop was threefold. First, of course, that his quarry would hear him and bolt. Second, that the

chickens would hear him and get nervous, make some noise and cause his quarry to bolt. Third, that another cat, also out hunting, would see him against the light side of the whitewashed coop and say something or come over to investigate.

He didn't trot or even walk, but became a shadow, moving slowly, with maximum stealth, even at the cost of speed. Whatever was at the far corner of the building was eating and would only get fuller and fatter by the minute. More desirable.

True first light now illuminated the sky and shadowed the tree line beyond the coop. The ground seemed to grow darker and less defined, depth perception was lost for those animals with daylight-only vision.

One foot flowed into another foot, Thomas poured like water around the side of the building, his tail low and unmoving, balancing him as he stepped so slowly. The air carried almost no breeze at all, but the night time inversion and what slight waft there was brought the smell of wood smoke from the kitchen ovens. He spent much of his daylight hours in the kitchen so he knew its smells well, they were home to him.

He gained the third corner of the coop and slowed his approach to the final corner. If he was right then within a couple of his own lengths of that final corner would be his quarry, if it had not already departed for a safer spot.

At the final corner Thomas paused to listen. There it was, the distinct sound of something eating chicken feed in the dawn gloom. He knew if he chanced a look that the prey might escape as he would be in no position to look and pounce around a corner at the same time. Pouncing around a corner was difficult enough on its own. The chewing sounds stopped then started again with a sound of urgency to them. Time was growing short. He decided to make a blind pounce and hope to see, identify, range and jump on the quarry all in one motion, without having seen it in advance. He liked the challenge of it.

He stored all the energy he could in his hind legs, made ready to extend his front claws and lunged round the corner.

The quarry was looking right at him when he rounded the corner of the coop, standing on its haunches, with a seed in its paws. It took Thomas a fraction of a second, in his headlong rush, to see the Peruvian Vesper Mouse, identify it, get its range and adjust his step so that he landed with his front paws right on it.

Too slow, the mouse only just started evasive action, ducking and making to dash to the right and Thomas got one paw right across its torso, pinning it almost flat. He crashed to a halt, with the mouse immobilized,

putting his other front paw, claws extended, across its lower body. The mouse squirmed but there was no escape. Thomas carefully picked it up in his jaws without killing it and set off for one of his favourite spots, under the corner of a slightly elevated shed, not far away. Here he could enjoy his breakfast without fear of interruption.

The sky was growing quite light now from the coming day and the ground absorbed some of the sky's gift of light. The few cirrus clouds in the west were already white in the high altitude daylight.

Sunday 20 January 1985

0702 hours

Breakfast lacked the usual sense of quiet purpose that it normally had at the monastery, instead there was a feeling of siege to it, the remaining healthy men concerned that the epidemic might turn into a catastrophe.

Steve took on the role of assuring everyone that the outcome would be good, as long as everyone worked together and got the job done.

"But how many of us will die here?" asked one of the monks, Brother Edwin.

"Only the Lord knows that answer," Steve said, laying down a platter of scrambled eggs for delivery to the sick. "Our job is to persevere and get through it all." The brother looked unconvinced, but he covered the dishes, stacked them and took them for delivery. "You must have faith, brother," Steve said as he left.

In the hot kitchen Steve and John were sweating. "This is getting to be hard work," John remarked.

"Well I figure that anything worth doing is worth doing well," Steve responded.

"You like crises, don't you?"

"My specialty," Steve laughed. "Regular days are just too dull for me."

"Well, the Lord must have sent you to help us through this situation, then," John added, scrapping up dough remnants from the rolling table. "You arrived just in time for this."

"Ah," Steve said dismissively, "we all get tested all the time." With all the cooking done and just cleaning left, he checked the chalkboard to see who still needed a meal delivered, packed two up, crossed them off the list and headed across the courtyard to the residential block. He looked in on Edward von Richthofen, whom he found asleep, leaving him a tray and

went down the dim hallway to Joseph Cepucci's room. Cepucci was awake and sitting on his bed coughing.

"I thought you might like some breakfast," Steve said. Cepucci held a finger up to indicate that he couldn't talk and Steve waited while he finished coughing.

"How are you doing?" Steve asked.

"It is kind of you to ask," Cepucci said. "Other than this darn cough, not too badly really. How are you, eh?"

"You say 'eh' like a Canadian," Steve laughed, leaning against the door post.

"Well I have spent a lot of time there, I probably learned most of my English in British Columbia."

"BC, eh?" Steve said, "That is where I am from. Did you live there or were you were just visiting?"

"I was there visiting." A coughing fit coursed through Cepucci's body. "Fishing mostly, a nice break from the pace of life elsewhere."

"Like home, you mean?"

"Exactly." He started coughing again.

When he was done Steve asked, "you ever fish the river here?"

"Sometimes," he gasped, "but the Huallaga River is better. The father lets us do that some days just to add some fish to the diet. He thinks we are working!"

"I can see the appeal," Steve admitted. "Anyway I have to get back to the kitchen, but get better, eh? Perhaps we can go fishing together then?"

"I'll be fine in a couple of days," Cepucci assured him.

"I'm sure you will be," Steve remarked. "You just need to stay in bed a bit. We have meals and everything worked out, so nothing to worry about."

"What is your name?"

"Alan," Steve said.

"Well, Alan, I want to thank you for all you are doing, you are a real lifesaver here."

"Ah, it is no problem at all. If I was down sick you'd do the same for me."

"Well God bless you."

Steve departed back for the kitchen, whistling to himself as he crossed the courtyard. He noticed that the morning sky was now totally clear and that it seemed bluer than most days ever had before.

Must be the clean air and the altitude up here, he thought.

Back in the kitchen the clean-up crew was in full swing, doing

dishes and Steve pitched in to finish putting the utensils and pans away. By the time they were done the kitchen looked clean again.

“Great job,” Steve said to the group as they filed out of the kitchen and into the dining hall. Steve followed and put a big pot of coffee down on a table for them.

“What's up next?” John asked.

“Well I am going to start in on lunch pretty quickly here,” Steve declared. “I think I will start a big pot of veggie stew going. I noticed that we seem to have a good supply of spices, so maybe I will see if I can get creative.”

“I appreciate all your efforts,” said Father Abbot Jules. “Together and with the grace of our Lord, we will prevail here.”

Later in the kitchen John found Steve working over a series of pots on the stove tops.

“I couldn't find one big pot, so I am using four smaller ones. They will all end up different, so we will have some variety for lunch and supper,” Steve explained.

“Sounds good,” John replied, looking over the bubbling pots of peppers, cauliflower and rice. “I see you got into the canned peppers there.”

“I couldn't pass them up,” Steve said, smiling. “They looked great, very colourful in the jars. I just hope I don't make the stew too hot to eat. I threw in some curry powder as well.”

“That does sound pretty darn hot,” John admitted.

“Well my plan was to create something that would clear everyone's sinuses out.”

“Probably a good idea, sounds like it will, too. How is the bread supply doing?”

“Not sure,” Steve replied, “but I really think a lot of bread would help moderate this stew and make up the needed calories, too. So you had better have a look and see if we need more for later on today.”

John inspected the supply. “Yeah, I guess we will need to bake some more, I had better get on it right away or we will be out entirely after lunchtime.” He recruited an assistant and set to work making more dough for the bread.

By lunchtime the kitchen was a confusion of people moving food to the sick, while Steve stood at the chalk board and assigned outgoing meals to names, checking them off as they were delivered. He delivered the meals to the four initiates who had come via BC himself, ladling stew from one particular pot at the back of the stove, which he completely

emptied into the four bowls.

"Special stuff?" John asked, watching him empty the pot out and put it in to soak.

"I just made this one a bit stronger for the worst-off people," Steve explained, stacking dishes and taking them out the door. He delivered them in short order to Ben, Jan, Joseph and Edward, whose rooms were all near one another in the same part of one building. All of them didn't seem that badly ill to Steve, coughing and congested, but not much worse. He delivered the bowls quickly, lingering only to talk to Edward von Richthofen, his last delivery.

"You must be new here," Edward managed from his bed, the congestion in his sinuses evident in his speech.

"I think I just arrived here in time for the epidemic," Steve said. "Joe said that you often go fishing with him."

"I wouldn't say often, but it is one of the compensations of being here," he explained. "I find it very meditative."

"I imagine it would be, especially up here where there are few things to disturb you."

"The serenity is one of the main reasons we came here, really," Edward sniffed.

Steve was studying him as he talked. He was really nothing like his younger brother. George was short and dark haired, quiet and introspective, while Edward was large and blond, turning gray, more brash in his manner, Steve decided. "I heard you were in BC before you came here."

"It is a lovely place," Edward pronounced. "Perhaps I will go back there one day, but it is best not to speculate. I just wish I could get rid of the aching in my joints, today." He flexed his elbows together.

"All we can do is feed you and keep you comfortable until it passes, as I am sure it will," Steve assured him.

"Oh, I am sure I will be fine. It is just a pain to waste a summer day lying in bed here."

"When you could be fishing?"

"That or saying my prayers," Edward added.

"Of course," Steve admitted. "You could say a few for the others who are sick here."

"I could."

"I was going to ask you what you did in the world before you came here, what brought you here?"

"Mostly I avoided people who asked me too many questions, because I suspected their motives. So now I neither ask or answer too

many questions and you might be advised to do the same if you are going to stay here. This is a place for study and betterment, but the lessons are self-taught through prayer and hard work.”

Steve was starting to see why George had found his older brother difficult, why he hadn't seemed that bereaved at his disappearance. “Well thank you for your kind thoughts, brother. I hope you are feeling better soon. The stew I made you should have you around quickly.” Steve left before Edward bothered to answer him.

Checking in at the dining hall with Reverend Abbot Jules, Steve discovered that there had been another death.

“It seemed to have been pneumonia, more than anything,” the abbot said in way of explanation to a group of brothers as Steve arrived and listened from the back.

“Who was it?” Steve whispered to John.

“Brother Alfonzo, one of the older monks,” John whispered back. “I don't think you met him, did you?” Steve shook his head.

The father abbot indicated that there would be a service in the chapel that same afternoon.

“I'd like to lead a party to dig the grave,” Steve said from the back and everyone turned to look at him.

“That is good of you, Alan,” the abbot said, “but you helped dig the last one.”

“I think I may be fitter than some of the others here, but I'll take five others and we will have it done quickly.”

“Do you think we should dig some others?” the abbot asked with some hesitation.

“I hope not,” Steve responded. Some of the others crossed themselves. “We'll get started as soon as the heat of the day is passed and the graveyard is in shadow.”

Monday 21 January 1985

0735 hours

The next morning the brothers detailed to take care of the chamber pots and water jugs reported that there were 18 sick and that there had been three more deaths during the night. The father abbot shook his head and said a short prayer at this news.

Brother Francis had done the last checks in the evening in that part of the cells, making sure that everyone had water for the night. “Those three were not doing well,” he reported. “They seemed worse than the

others, they all had these uncontrollable shakes and could not speak. I prayed for each of them at their bedsides.”

“We will have another service this afternoon for these three, Joseph, Edward and Jan, and consign their souls to the Lord,” the father abbot said sadly. “I pray these will be the last we have to bury.” There was general murmuring of agreement in the group, but there was a sense of fear as well. Standing with the brothers Steve could feel the fear. He showed no emotions on his face at all, they were all getting very tired, he noted.

“Father Abbot,” Steve said, “I knew these three men. I would like to lead the party to dig the graves. We could start right way, if that is all right, to avoid the heat of the day.”

The father abbot nodded slowly in agreement. “How many men would you need?”

“Give me eight and we should have it done quickly enough, before the day gets too hot.” Steve considered suggesting that they dig a fourth grave, but put the thought aside for now.

The grave digging party did not get done by the noon bell and so, after eating lunch, they continued for another hour. By then the day was warm and the funeral service was near at hand and they went back to cells to rest a bit. *Digging holes in the ground always takes longer than you think it will*, Steve remembered the infantry had always said. *They were right*, he thought.

Steve sat at the back during the chapel service. He thought it was a lovely tribute to the three initiates, those who wanted a changed life, one free from the stresses of the industrialized world. *They found their freedom*, he concluded.

The graves were ready by sunset and the bodies laid to rest. There was no embalming possible and the caskets were fashioned from local materials, packing crates and such, but it would do under these circumstances.

The day was a very long one and by the time that supper was over most of the brothers went to cells for some time to pray before an early bedtime. Steve decided to look in on the 18 remaining sick cases. Most were sleeping, but a few were awake. One or two even seemed to be on the road to recovery. Lastly Steve looked in on Ben MacKinstry. The building was quite dark, although the last brother to check on everyone had left a candle lantern burning in the hallway. Steve brought it into Ben's cell.

Ben looked to be unconscious, his body twisted from the pain he was in, but he was still breathing.

“How are you doing, Ben?” Steve tried. There was no response.

Steve took his hand, it felt warm, but he didn't stir. Steve checked his pulse. It was weak and slow, but still detectable.

Man I can't believe he is still alive, Steve thought, I fed him enough rat poison to kill a mule, plus this flu bug. He is just too tough.

Steve carefully rolled Ben onto his back, took the pillow from the bed and pressed it down hard on his face. There was no struggle. Steve listened carefully for the sounds of anyone coming but the building was completely silent.

Steve checked his watch. Ten minutes had passed. He removed the pillow. He couldn't detect any breathing and a check showed no pulse. *Job complete.* He carefully put the pillow under Ben's head and arranged him in a sleeping position, lastly covering him with the blanket. He returned the lantern to the hallway and went to his own cell in the other building.

Just near his room he saw John there.

"You're back late," John remarked.

Steve nodded seriously. "Yeah, I had to go look in on everyone and see how they were doing."

"This is really personal with you isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say personal," Steve said thoughtfully. "I just think that even showing people that you care can inspire them to recover. I know if it was me that was sick others would do the same."

"I think you are a saint, Alan."

"Ah," Steve said dismissively. "Not me. I just like looking out for my fellow man, that is all. Nothing saintly about it, really."

"How did everyone look?" John asked.

"Most were resting well," Steve reported, "I didn't want to disturb any who were sleeping. That is what will cure them, just sleep and time. I did talk to a couple of the brothers who were awake for a few minutes and I had a longer chat with Ben there."

"Oh yeah, how is he making out?"

"Much better I think," Steve said. "I think he'll be fine, now."

"Hey, that is good. Think we will have any more deaths?"

"I sure hope not."

John nodded his head. "Yeah, me too."

They parted company and went to their own cells. Steve washed his face and hands and brushed his teeth. Getting into bed, he carefully got comfortable on the straw mattress, closed his eyes and slipped into a quick and dreamless sleep.

In the morning he awoke feeling fresh and renewed.

Tuesday 22 January 1985

0603 hours

In the kitchen Steve was once again cooking eggs while John watched his loaves of bread baking in the ovens. The room had a lovely warm smell to it that kept the last of the chill night air at bay. There had been a rain shower before dawn that seemed to scrub the dustiness from the air.

“I love the altitude here,” Steve remarked.

“Huh? How is that?” John responded.

“The air just seems so fresh and clean here.”

John was pulling loaves from the ovens, tapping them and returning them to bake a little longer. “That is probably a result of just being so far from the big city as much as anything,” he said, with a sense of lethargy.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just tired, I guess,” John said.

“I think everyone is tired at this point, they're all working hard.”

“But I haven't dug as many graves as you have.”

“Well hopefully we won't have to dig any more.”

“There will be one more today.” The father abbot had arrived in the kitchen to check on the progress of the meal. “I pray that this trend will stop soon, or else there will be no one left to bury the dead.”

“Good morning father abbot,” Steve said, offering him some coffee, which he accepted, “I am hoping we are over the worst of it now. Most of the remaining men seem to be getting over it and I don't see it spreading. I am sure that things will be back to normal soon.”

The father abbot sipped his coffee silently and left for the dining hall.

“He seems a bit morose,” Steve remarked.

“I think the deaths are affecting him,” John pointed out.

“Maybe it is shaking his faith?” Steve suggested.

“Or maybe he is just as tired as the rest of us. He has done enough funerals in the last few days. I think that would give the strongest person pause to stop and think. Besides that, we are getting no help at all from the outside world here.”

“I thought that was the attraction of being here, splendid isolation?”

“Sometimes it doesn't feel so splendid, being up here, all cut off like this.”

"I guess it is all how you look at it."

"Perhaps you'll change your mind when you have been here a while."

"Perhaps," Steve conceded.

Breakfast was very quiet, as it normally was in happier times, but the pall of death seemed to hang over the meal. The father abbot announced Ben's death and once again Steve volunteered to lead the grave-digging.

"I can't believe he didn't make it. I just talked to him last night, before I turned in," Steve ventured. "I feel I owe him at least this."

The father abbot protested that Steve was doing too much of the work, but there were no immediate volunteers to take on the unpleasant task. After breakfast was done Steve lead three others, retrieved shovels from the shed and started in digging before the day got too hot. With only one hole to dig they were done in a few hours. When the others left the work site Steve lingered to square the sides of the grave, make sure that it looked professional and that the spoil was ready to be shoveled back into the hole on top of the casket, when needed.

Least I can do, he thought, looking at the finished work. *I could get into this line of work back home*, he mused, *it would certainly keep me in shape*, but *I suppose they use backhoes back there in the real world these days*.

He checked his watch and headed back to the kitchen to get lunch underway. For the last few days he had just kept the stew pots full and simmering, adding new vegetables and spices along with water when needed. It seemed like the easy solution, especially for the healthy workers as they could eat whenever they were ready.

When he walked into the kitchen to wash his hands John was sitting down at one of the large preparation tables.

"I noticed we have some canned apples in the end cupboard," Steve remarked.

"Yeah?" John didn't move.

"I was thinking that we have enough time before lunch to make some apple pies."

"Man you sure are motivated, aren't you?"

"I thought it might improve morale, yours and mine included."

"I guess."

"Come on, let's do it together, how do we make pastry dough?"

John slowly got up from his seat, with a sigh and they started in on the task. "You don't believe in breaks, do you?"

“Not in a crisis, not while we can still do better,” Steve replied. “Hey if you are too beat then sit down and tell me how to do it and I’ll do the work.”

“Naw, you are right, let’s get it done together. How many do you think we will need?”

“Ten ought to do it.”

Together they mixed and rolled out the pastry dough and had the pies in the oven before lunch was on the table.

When the pies were in the ovens, the father abbot came into the kitchen. “What is that that I smell baking?” he asked with a slight smile.

“Your morale improving,” Steve replied.

Tuesday 22 January 1985

2146 hours

Steve lay awake in the dark of his cell, drinking in the slight cool breeze that infiltrated the room. It had been a very long day, full of cooking, grave digging, another funeral and then more cooking. He had finished the day with a bath, it had felt good to shed the dirt from that particular day. *Things are definitely not boring here*, he noted, *although I am betting that they are not usually this exciting most of the time.*

He put his hands behind his head and stared up into the darkness. Events had worked out very well here at the monastery, much better than he had hoped that they would.

You have to look for the opportunities when they are presented and when they do come up, seize them. This flu epidemic was just too good a coincidence to waste. 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth'.

He was feeling quietly pleased with himself.

The next question is 'what do I do from here?' It really is a nice spot up here, with lots of potential, the guys are a pretty good bunch, even though they are a bit too much like sheep. I don't have much to look forward to back home, except a protracted battle with watz-her-name. Perhaps I should stay and see what can be accomplished here. If they had a golf course that would make the decision to stay easy enough. Perhaps we could build one. 'All work and no play makes Brother Jacques a dull boy', you know. It occurs to me that this bunch are such sheep that when the father abbot passes on I could probably replace him and run this place. Hmmm, there is a thought.

Steve smiled to himself in the dark. Finally he rolled over and slipped into sleep. In the clear mountain air he dreamt no dreams and slept

until almost dawn.

Thursday 24 January 1985

0812 hours

With breakfast done and the clean-up complete Steve went to the father abbot's office, where he found him writing. Steve knocked on the open door.

"Ah, Alan, do come in," Father Abbot Jules said, offering him a seat. "I am glad that you have come by, I have wanted to find the opportunity to thank you for all the work that you have done during this crisis. There have been no more deaths since Tuesday and all the remaining sick cases seem to be getting better slowly now. Much of the credit goes to you. You have done so much here, from organizing cooking and food deliveries to watching in on the sick ones and helping everywhere. I know you dug every grave too, the worst task that there is at a time like this."

Steve tried to look embarrassed. "I appreciate your thoughts, but it really has been a team effort here. Everyone has done his part."

"No, you have done more than your part and for that I am grateful and everyone else here is grateful, too. I believe more would have died if not for your heroic efforts. God has truly sent you to us in trying times."

Steve just looked down.

"But you came here to ask something. What can I do for you?" asked the father abbot.

"I appreciate all the opportunities that I have been given here," Steve began, "but I have decided that I cannot stay here right now. I have things left undone, back home in Canada."

The father abbot was obviously surprised by this announcement.

"I am a bit taken aback," he admitted, "but I see that you were sent to us in this crisis to give us strength and to be an example." He paused and thought for a minute. "I obviously respect your decision to leave us here, but let me give you one thought. You will always be welcome to come back here to stay anytime. When you get back to Canada I want you to promise to give that some serious thought. This will always be a place where you are welcome to return to. There may come a time when I am no longer here, but the diary of the monastery will record your contributions here during these days and all you have to do is mention the dates and the record will be opened by whomever is abbot here."

"I greatly appreciate your understanding," Steve said, "and also your fellowship. This place and the order has much to commend it. Perhaps

one day soon I will return.”

“I hope so.” They shook hands and the father abbot did not let go of Steve’s hand quickly. Steve wasn’t entirely sure that he was going to.

After collecting his bag Steve found John in the kitchen.

“You look like you are leaving,” John said.

“Yeah, I have to get back to the world for now, but I may come back here again.”

“See, I told you it all looks different here after the first week,” John replied. “I have seen many of them come and, wham, a week later they are gone. This place is just not for everyone, you know.”

Steve just punched him on the shoulder and turned to go.

The sun was just bathing the western part of the valley in its early day light. Thomas the cat silently watched as Steve made his way down the pathway that followed the tributary on its way to the Huallaga River. Steve’s step was fast and he whistled to himself as he walked. Inside the woods the shade was complete, a damp and dewy canopy of trees that overhung the trail and shielded him from all the early heat of the day. The downhill lay of the trail helped his speed and he made the rock promontory in under an hour, then he crossed the final distance of the gravel flood plain to the barrier of the river itself.

The place looked much as it had done when he had last seen it, except it was now in the mid-morning light and the shadows were drawing shorter at that time of day.

Steve had reckoned that the greatest barrier on the entire route home would be crossing the river. Would the teenager and the boat be there, or would he have taken the day off and disappeared, leaving no method of crossing? Gaining the river bank Steve looked towards the other side and saw the boat being loaded for a trip across. He need do nothing more than wait.

Too easy, he thought.

When the boat made its crossing it was not piloted by the teenager, but by an old man. It carried another old man as passenger and his load of bags. When they arrived neither spoke any English and Steve had no idea what the passenger was doing on the northwest side of the river, as it didn’t look like he was heading for the monastery. Ultimately he didn’t care, it was Thursday and he knew he had a plane to catch or else wait until Monday to get out of Huánuco.

After paying the old man on the far bank, he made his way up to the highway and looked both ways. The air was still and the road was empty of traffic, no dust even hanging in the air to show that a vehicle had

even recently been by. He began to walk and had traveled for almost 20 minutes in the growing heat when he heard the sound of a vehicle. It was a small Japanese pick-up truck of the type that seemed so ubiquitous in Peru. The driver stopped without Steve even signalling for a ride. The truck bed was full of Indian farm workers, all very young and all smiles, they helped him over the tailgate and he sat on his bag. In a blaze of gravel they were off southwest.

The truck pulled up in the market district of Huánuco. Steve offered payment to the driver, a teenager who seemed younger than the those in the truck bed, but better dressed. He smiled profusely and refused all payment. Without a working knowledge of the language Steve could do nothing more than shrug and smile his thanks.

The rest of the trip was easy and merely a matter of retracing his steps. He found lunch in a small street café and caught the shuttle bus from the central square to the little airstrip with the long name of Alférez David Figueroa Fernandini Airport. The shuttle bus ride was far more civilized than the truck bed on the gravel road had been, but Steve found it lacked the other's charm. Finally, at the airport, the sleepy station agent was able to sell him a cash ticket to Lima, although Steve was not convinced that the airline would see the money that he exchanged for his boarding pass on the Bandeirante.

The flight arrived late and left late and there was much emotional discussion between the crew and the station agent before they did leave, but Steve could make out none of it.

Perhaps it was over my fare, or just a girl, he thought. The flight was only half full, with just seven passengers and Steve had room to stretch out and sleep a bit.

Arriving back in Lima he gave the taxi driver a slip of paper with the address of the same hotel he had stayed at last time. He had taken a risk that there would be room, but the hotel was still not busy and the same little desk clerk assigned him the same room that he had had the last time. Walking into the hotel room, Steve noted with a smile that things felt nicely familiar, although it seemed a very long time since he had been there last.

Dropping his bag on the floor, he noted that it was getting on for sunset. He wanted to wash the grime of the trail and especially the dust of the open pick-up truck ride from him and get into some clean clothes, then perhaps find some supper. Before heading to the bathroom down the hallway he picked up the phone and tried the number that Manuela had given him. There was no answer.

Perhaps she is out playing 'horizontal tour guide' with someone else, Steve mused. He decided to leave a message on the answering machine. "Hello Manuela, it is Al, back from Huánuco. I made it back alive and just thought you might want to know that. I am staying at the same place, in the same room as last time here in Lima. If you have time for dinner give me a call. I'm leaving tomorrow."

He made his way to the bathroom and had a long and very hot shower.

You know, he thought to himself, *if I ever go back there the second thing I will build is a golf course, the first thing I will build are wood-burning hot showers.*

Much cleaner, Steve piled his dirty clothes up and walked back to his room, with his towel wrapped around his waist. Unlocking the room door he found Manuela lying on the bed.

"You don't waste any time," he remarked. She was dressed in casual fashion, blue jeans, a glittery top and bare feet, her shoes kicked off near the door.

"Oh Alan, I am so glad to see you alive," she exclaimed, sitting up, her breasts bouncing. "There has been this horrible epidemic in Huánuco. I was afraid that you had come down sick."

"Oh, I never get sick," he said looking her over.

"I am so glad that you are here. When do you have to go?"

"Tomorrow morning," he explained. "Do you have the time for one last date then, dinner included."

"Of course!"

"Same rate?"

She looked up at the ceiling. "Half day, half price," she decided.

"You are a sweetie, aren't you?" he said with a note of sarcasm that she missed or just ignored.

"Just how old are you really?" he asked her.

"Al, you ask too many questions," she responded, laughing, "So instead I will ask a question, do you want to go to dinner now?"

"No," he decided. "Get naked, I'll take you out to eat later on."

She quickly sipped out of her clothes and they got started. Dinner was much later on that evening.

Saturday 26 January 1985

1655 hours

Steve was in the PMQ kitchen, putting groceries away when the

phone rang.

“Hey Steve, Walt here!” The voice on the other end of the phone sounded enthusiastic, Steve had forgotten how young he really was. “When did you get back?”

“Late yesterday,” Steve explained, “I was out today paying bills and getting some groceries, but I am glad that you called.”

“Obviously you made it home in one piece, I was talking to someone who mentioned he had seen you downtown today. How was Peru?”

“It is a very nice country, actually. Other than the political problems, run-away inflation and a few miscellaneous rebel groups kidnapping people and blowing things up, the rest is really pleasant. The people certainly are friendly.”

“So you had a good holiday? What did you get up to?”

“Oh the usual tourist stuff. It was good fun, though, I am glad that I went.”

“Did you manage to track down that Christmas card?”

“Oh that? Yeah, I checked it out a bit. It was a hoax from some old friend, a practical joke really.”

“A joke?”

“Yeah, not very funny, though.”

“I guess not. Are you going to call George von Richthofen then?”

“I probably should,” Steve conceded.

“So I guess they really did die out there somewhere in the mountains of BC?”

“That is what I said all along.”

“Well I was sure you were right about that, after all you always are,” Walt stated.

“Yup, I always am.”

After hanging up Steve finished putting his groceries away. He whistled to himself as he worked. Even though it was late January the weekend weather was quite fine. It had been 8 degrees today and Steve noted that it should hit 10 tomorrow with sunshine all day. He had booked a tee-off time for 1000 the next morning and had even convinced Scott, Woody and Butch to come and play a round, not that it took much convincing on a grand weekend such as this.

Entirely pleased with himself Steve made some dinner and took it into the living room. Leaving his plate on the coffee table he put on side one of the Beatles *White Album*, flopped down on the sofa and began to eat his dinner as the first song started.

Outside the sun was setting and casting a light the colour of peaches onto the sky.

Retirement is going to be all right, he noted, but I really do want to make amends with Linda. I know: I'll call her up and tell her that I want to atone for my misdeeds, invite her to dinner and cook her a meal, perhaps some nice stew? I think that might just make an impression on her.

About the author:

Adam D. Hunt served as a military helicopter pilot between 1982-95, qualified as a CF Searchmaster in May 1991 and flew searches with 408 and 417 Squadrons as well as Base Flight Cold Lake. He is the author of eight and editor of six non-fiction aviation books, as well as hundreds of aviation articles. His articles have appeared in COPA Flight, KitPlanes, UltraFlight, Ultralight Flying!, Helicopters and other magazines. This is his first novel. Adam and his wife Ruth live in Ottawa.