



BY NICHOLAS ANDERSON

PROLOGUE

Courage is a quiet sound made with grace, heard by those who behold it.

I'd free-fallen blindly through dense rain clouds from a HALO (High Altitude, Low Opening) jump from 30,000 feet for approximately 2½ minutes with 60 lbs. baggage at a speed exceeding 160 miles an hour with temperature below 50F before opening the parachute at under 4,000 feet). The Chinese-made Chuji Jiaolianji trainer turboprop AC (aircraft) with extra fuel tanks added, and false Chinese insignias had returned south to Peshawar, Pakistan, following the windy peaks that separated the USSR and China.

My marker was a plastic-looking blurred ink spill, a distant lake called Zhaysang koli, on a white carpet. I'd tugged the cord and spun uncontrollably before settling into a slower descent by black parachute at night into Soviet Kazakhstan.

The plan was to get to Semipalatinsk, 200 miles away and I'd done so by commercial bus routes over the next two days. My photo identification in Cyrillic stated that I was a cadet in *Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily* (VVS, the Soviet Air Force) and attached to *Dalnaya Aviatsiya* (Strategic Aviation, the wing for long-range bombers). Documents showed I had graduated from a *Sovetskaya Akademiya Vozdushnye Sily* (Soviet Air Force officer training academy) near Moscow, that I was from Rostovskaya Oblast and the signed *Yuridicheskaya* (from the Judiciary) stated I was "temporarily transferred to an unspecified VVS air station." Best still, I carried a week old copy of *Shchit y Mech gazeta*, the KGB's Shield & Sword weekly newspaper.

In a countryside of Slavic peasants that couldn't read, I had the accent and demeanour of a high-class apparatchik, even in my plain clothes. Those few authorities in these barren lands who could read wouldn't dare question my papers and attitude. If they did I was fully authorised to practice my SAMBO

(Samozaschchita Bez Oruzhiya or Self-Defence Without Weapons, a Russian form of 25 different hand-to-hand combat systems) with no questions asked. It never came close to application and at no time did I feel overly apprehensive but I did have to take several necessary common sense precautions at critical junctures and situations.

Using a long-range portable telescope I had duly verified that there were 40 long-range high-altitude Tupolev TU-95 (Bear-H designated by NATO) strategic reconnaissance bombers equipped with nuclear warheads on standby, discreetly parked inside hangars at a secret VVS base near Semey. The satellites couldn't spot them through the steel roofs so somebody had to go to see it at ground level. The tail numbers of the front half dozen that I could observe were duly memorised (one, I concede, couldn't exactly be recollected later).

Phase One completed, it took another five lonely days to get my arse from there to the desolate location for Phase Two.

That was six time zones east of Moscow and several hundred miles north of the mountainous borders where China and Mongolia meet. Eight hours of wretched trekking and just east of Chita railway station. The *khanovey* – *the wind of winds* in Siberia – was wailing white soot every which way.

Through the fog, at minus eight degrees Fahrenheit, the town of Amazar in the Russian Far East was empty, bar the thousands upon thousands of forlorn dark steam engines standing obediently in unmoving queues as far as the eye could see, an eerie graveyard for the state's retired iron locomotive servants dating to the previous century. It was so cold that flocks of greyish frozen birds looked like they were still in flight as they laid dead on the canvas of the snow.

Blending into my background with only my breath to signal my presence, I shifted from my perch in the hills overlooking the strange foreboding sight two miles away, and hung the binoculars momentarily around my neck to adjust my hardened *shapka* (a fur hat with ear muffs tied around the jaw). The satellite picture expert in London had explained that, according to information received from the imaging craft and due to months of unclear weather in this region, it was believed the Soviets had used the opportunity of a 'free roof' over their heads to reconstruct a previously obsolete silo. It was now perceived to be a hidden home to hundreds of warheads from the Soviet Union's long-overdue to be dismantled and recycled SS-18 ICBMs (Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles). It was supposed that they were hidden around here somewhere.

As a party of one ferret, my assignment was only to identify its exact location and get on the next *Transsibirskaya Magistral*, the Trans-Siberian Railway, still in civilian dress, to the necropolis of Vladivostock, which was frost-bound for an average of 110 days a year. Afterwards, my mission was to make my way to the commercial port next to the naval shipyard at nearby Daizavod, rendezvous with a corrupt Japanese merchant navy second-mate who would clandestinely arrange my boarding an ice-cutting freighter to Hitachi and home – bringing the data in my head. Another miserable uncomfortable week or so before reaching safety. What a bloody way to float in the New Year, I thought. It was Christmas Day, December 1977.

To my left, less than half a mile below me, a covered Ulanjov jeep skidded into a clearing, then stopped. It wasn't any of the armed-forces vehicles that I recognised. Four men, whom I initially thought were *kolkhozniks* (collective farm workers) – tumbled out. However, as I spied upon them through the field glasses, I observed that two of them were joined by heavy leg-irons and all had one-half of their heads shaved. From their dirty striped garb, I could only surmise this skinny group was comprised of either *katorzhniki* or *poselentsi* –

hard labour convicts or penal colonists exiled to these sparse outposts – now on the run.

Then, the bunch of monkeyshines pulled out some poor sod in a uniform – perhaps a prison guard. Based on the clouds of smoke vented from his mouth, he was squealing at the top of his lungs. They stripped him bare like hyenas ripping meat, and then, two of the bastards forcibly stood the shivering fellow on top of what was left of a chopped tree.

The fettered duo laughed drunkenly as they poured bottles of mineral water from a crate in the boot over the naked man, and within minutes he was a bowing ice statue on an imaginary cross – minus the crown of thorns.

Then the goons enjoyed a frenzied party of sorts – sucking down what remained of the *mineralye vodi* (mineral water) pretending it was vodka, dancing around their sculpture of liquid marble. It was probably a long time since they'd had even reasonable water and even longer since they'd been treated like human beings; they no longer acted like humans.

After the sickest hour or so I've ever witnessed, it was their time to be off after they'd all had a piss.

Before they got back in the stolen jeep, one of the fuckers snapped off one of the dead man's arms and waved it around like a trophy to the cheering triad. Then, he threw the slowly dripping hard meat in the back of the getaway vehicle as if it was a memento of their brief visit to hell, and off they disappeared in a swirl of milky dust. I was left staring at the white scarecrow with an overcoat of ice and the single outstretched limb – alone in a cemetery of one.

As hard as I searched for the next 48 hours I never did find the whereabouts of that damn silo. I stayed as an uninvited guest in a deserted *izba* (log cabin with a corrugated roof) – perhaps some factory manager's summer hut – with that pathetic glacial effigy still there waving at me when I left for the railway station and the *Transsib* again to make my own escape from this frigid netherworld.

Before reaching the safety of Japan I had already concluded that this entire deep cover exercise was only to discover whether or not I could survive extreme conditions, as well as return home in one piece for some extended operation in the future.
