

UFO - The Battle Continues
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TARGET REACQUIRED Chapter 6

by Jeff Stone

"War is hell."

- Common saying

"For God's sake, look after our people."

- Robert Falcon Scott's final diary entry, written as he lay freezing to death in Antarctica

CENTRAL SIBERIAN PLATEAU
RUSSIAN DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION
6-39pm GMT
DECEMBER 25, 1983

In this part of the world, at this time of the year, night is a chimera. The sun never truly sets; rather, it hangs just over the horizon and casts an eternal sunset over the frozen earth.

But though night never comes, the cold is ever present.

It is a living thing, a wall of icy knives that seeks out animal warmth and saps it utterly. It is the lord and master of the tundra, the guardian of the Arctic lands, the undisputed dictator of what little life struggles to exist within its boundaries.

During the brief Siberian spring, grass and flowers will emerge from under their winter tombs of snow and greet the pale sun.

The mammoths that relied on this bounty for food are long gone now, but Nature continues. Patiently, it sits out the millennia. Time does not stand still in Siberia, for it never really existed there.

Lewis Waterman's wrist computer was registering -30 degrees C in cheery white LED numerals. When 'night' came in an hour, it would drop even lower. He had only a rudimentary survival shelter, no warm clothes save the flight suit that he was wearing and precious little food. He was a walking corpse, and he knew it. A walking corpse with a broken arm that hurt like hell, even after two shots of morphogen. The opiate took the razor edge off the pain, but it also dulled his senses, made him less aware of the cold that was slowly killing him. Awareness meant survival in Siberia. When his body's core temperature dropped below death-point, he'd probably not even notice...or care, if the morphogen lasted.

But something kept him moving; some force pulled him towards the dubious protection of the trees off in the distance. It was not in his nature to just lie down and snuff it.

He amused himself as he trudged by trying to work out what had crippled his plane. All of SHADO's SkyBolts were hardened against EMP, so they must have used some kind of non-magnetic disruption field that interrupted electron flow. Or not. So much of what the Aliens did was magic (in the Clarkeian sense, of course)...who knew what they had done to his plane?

What had Waterman baffled more, though, was why the Aliens were using their new weapons in such a bizarrely inconsistent way. Why did they let him shoot down one of the UFOs? Why didn't they knock out the SkyBolts the second they saw them? Why did they stop his missiles from exploding the second time, yet allow him to fire the damn things? And why did they not use this 'field' on all of the Space Interceptors? There HAD to be a reason!

Then the cold became impossible to blank out, and he shivered with hopelessness. Waterman gritted his teeth, and told the cold to go to hell. *Just get there and you'll be fine* he kept telling himself, over and over. *Get to the trees. You can't just keel over and die. What sort of grand bloody finale is THAT to the Lewis Waterman Saga?*

The deadly wind and the fat snowflakes that surrounded him whispered a different story. *You won't make it. And if you do, what will you do when you're there? You're already almost too frozen to walk, and you probably can't make a fire. Best to just lie down and sleep; let whoever finds your body worry about what to do with it.*

It took an effort of immense will, but Waterman ignored the urge to give up and threw himself numbly forward into the blizzard. One step after another...that was the only way to do

it. The trees were safety, the trees were life. The distress beacon in his survival pack would bring help; he just had to stay alive long enough for it to reach him.

One step after another...one step after another...

* * *

Nine miles to the northeast lay the wreck of Waterman's very expensive hypersonic jet fighter. On impact, the large tanks in the fuselage containing J-99 fuel for the turboram engines had violently ruptured. A micro-second after the tanks went, the fuel had splashed onto the still white-hot engine exhaust nozzles under the wings. This provided the 1750 degrees C temperature required to combust the hybrid SR-71 Blackbird fuel, a feat otherwise impossible in Siberian winter temperatures.

All life within a square mile of Ground Zero, from birds on the wing to dormant bacteria in the snow, was instantly eradicated in the ensuing smokeless heatball. Everything for a further five was knocked off its feet by wind pressure. The abrupt temperature spike caused fog rings of enormous size to instantly coalesce in the air; they radiated out from the blast centre in tight spirals before becoming lost in the cold.

At the thoroughly sterilized epicentre lay the heat-blasted but amazingly almost intact hulk of the downed jet. Its graveyard blackness stood out like a dark hole cut out of the white paper of the surrounding tundra.

The local air temperature plummeted below 0 again, and snow began its work of entombing the aircraft's carcass.

SKY 1 was covered up to the numeral on its tailfin by the time SKY 3's pilot found her. Captain Peter Wilkin stood, miserable, traumatised and utterly freezing, on a spot that had been too hot for any form of life only twenty minutes ago.

Wilkin could derive no shelter or assistance from the wreck, but the still faintly visible '1' on the fin was a bizarrely defiant gesture of human existence in this inhuman place. It made him smile despite the agony of the cold.

He got out his entrenching tool, pulled himself up onto the mound covering the plane's nose and dug crazily at the snowdrift covering the cockpit window. As he dug, Wilken was wondering one thing constantly in the frenzied way only the exhausted and the dying can wonder. *Oh God, say he ejected, come on, PLEASE, man. Don't still be in there...*

The ejection capsule was gone. The entire nose of the plane was still structurally intact, if utterly skeletonized, and it was possible to see that the capsule had indeed left the plane before impact. *Thank God.* He slid back down to the ground and tried to rub some feeling back into his badly chilled legs. It didn't help, but the briskness of the activity gave him some comfort. It proved he was still alive. Wilkin let out a heavy sigh and pursed his chapped lips. Which way to go? The SkyBolt's ejection capsule was designed to land as close as was safely possible to the plane itself; it made finding the downed pilot easier, apparently. A big bloody crater in the ground was a more visible target than a human being.

He wiped at his eyes, and only succeeded in making them more glazed up with half-melted slush. Angrily, he clawed bluntly through his gloves at his face, and managed to clear his vision. There were some large trees off in the distance...maybe Lew had made for them?

"Finding the capsule would help," he muttered to the wind, as if he expected the driving gale to offer it up in recompense for his long walk. "Ah well, lay on, MacWilkin."

He moved off; behind him, SKY 1 finally sank beneath the white ocean.

RESCUE ALPHA OVER THE URAL MOUNTAINS 7-00pm GMT

KILL STRAKER KILL STRAKER KILL STRAKER KILL...we'll be landing at Norskaya in ten minutes, Colonel. SID reports a sudden flareup in sunspot activity, might make the search harder.

Paul Foster jumped; had he said that? No; it was Lt Baker with the duty schedule. He stared at Baker for an embarrassingly long time, before clearing his throat and looking downwards. Foster spent an agonised moment frantically wondering if he'd said his dream-thoughts out loud.

"Ah, er, right. Thanks."

Foster took the schedule, looked it over briefly, and handed it back. He already knew what he had to do, anyway; co-ordinate the AV-22 Osprey search teams. He'd have preferred to fly aerial recon, but then tiltrotor planes were never his thing.

Baker, apparently unaware of anything strange, moved off down the aisle. Foster flicked his eyes over the aircraft's interior.

Captain Robinson was fast asleep in the seat across the fuselage from him. Her gentle snoring provided an an oddly comforting counterpoint to the hollow, continuous rushing of jet engines. Straker was poring over a siterep of the search area with Captain Shroeder. Did either of those guys ever sleep? Foster wondered. The blonde hair they both shared made him wonder if it wasn't some Aryan side benefit.

He got to his feet and poured himself another cup of coffee; no-one was watching, so he took the opportunity to drop a Multabloc tablet into the swirling brown liquid. He downed the very hot drink in two gulps, hardly noticing the sour-sweet taste of the drug. Coffee finished, he walked his seat, slumped down into it and gazed distractedly out the window. The jagged tips of the Urals were now long gone and the plane was passing over some large industrial city. Ahead lay Norskaya, where the rescue mission would begin in earnest.

Foster took a moment to close his eyes and listen to his own thoughts. There was no sign of the Voice, and he sighed happily. The Multabloc had banished it...for now.

He got the Voice every so often. Dr Jackson had told him that it would probably always be with him, but that it would not hurt him. "What does he know?" Foster had often muttered to himself. "He doesn't have to put up with it night and day." The Voice had been put there by the Aliens, and it spoke of nothing but death. Sometimes, it would make him overreact to something Straker had said, tugging at his normal skepticism about some of the commander's ideas and turning it into a full-blown feeling of hatred. Whenever this happened, Straker and the others would look at him with that look that people give the insane or the mentally handicapped; a look that said 'we know why you're saying that, and we know you can't help it.' For a while, it had got to the point where Colonel Lake or whoever would start looking for the pepper spray if he didn't say 'Good morning' cheerily enough. They were good people, the best, but even they couldn't grasp the true horror of it all.

Most of the time, though, The Voice just chanted it's two word litany at him in unguarded moments, until he felt it would cave in his skull.

KILL STRAKER...no reason why, no emotion, just the simple command. His reason struggled against the manic imperative, a sane mind trying to live with an insane one inside the same head. When he had received the directive from the Aliens, he had felt the enormity of

their cold, ruthlessly pragmatic intelligence pour into him. As with all experiences of this kind, the profound immensity of the moment never completely left him. It was the root, the anchor that the Voice clung on to as SHADO's best scientists tried to drag it free.

Jackson's intensive psychotherapy (which involved the combination of psychotropic drugs and more standard methods of neuro-linguistic engram reduction) had turned the 'volume' down on the Voice, and even enabled him to banish it completely for days at a time. But, like an old nemesis creeping up from behind, it would come back eventually and demand that he KILL STRAKER. It was the cross he bore, and it wore heavy on his soul.

But now, it was time to apply oneself to the task at hand. He rose from his seat and moved over to where Straker was sitting.

"I'd better get down to the cargo bay," he muttered, aware that he only had a tiny fraction of the commander's ever-distracted attention. Straker, his ear seemingly welded to his mobile phone, merely nodded. For a fleeting second, a desire to take the phone and smash Straker's vulnerable head in with it came over Foster; he blinked it away and shuffled off towards the bowels of the plane.

Robinson was woken up by the thud-squeal of tyres hitting tarmac. *How long have I been asleep? God, I hope I didn't drool...* A quick touch of the lips confirmed she had not committed this potential public crime. She checked her watch...just after 7. Outside, the frantic rush of white and black had slowed down to a steady crawl. There still wasn't much to see though; snow and night. How had Shroeder landed a huge plane like this in these conditions? Compared to this, setting a Harrier down on the HMS Invincible in a Force 3 storm at midnight with the carrier's lights out (as she had during the Falklands) seemed a veritable doddle.

She watched Foster slope past, looking perturbed. Odd guy, that Foster...ahhh, maybe he just felt as bad as she did. But the sleep had done some good, and with a hot cup of Blitzkreig strength caffeine delivery system she'd be ready for duty.

Straker was suddenly at her elbow and she got up hurriedly, patting down her jumpsuit. *Shit, shit...*

"At ease, Captain, this isn't the Air Force. And especially not now; there are men to rescue."

"Yes, sir." She coughed and straightened smartly.

"Now you've studied the flight plan?"

"Yes, sir. Straight triangulated search. The weather will make it hard, especially with tilt-rotors, but we'll find them." Alive or dead...dead was getting more and more likely.

Straker looked at a paper in his hands. "Now, we won't have an active InterWeb uplink to SHADO or SID for another forty minutes, because the Russians have the wrong damn connector leads, can you believe it- so you'll have to wing it with standard radio guidance and a projected search pattern til then. We're funnelling as much data as we can thorough this plane's coom system, but.. well, you know the score." Indeed she did; sunspot activity at this time of the year, this close to the Pole, made radio tracking and communication a nightmare. And a huge storm-front covering the search area didn't help much, either. "We know the general crash positions, so any course changes down the line won't be too burdensome on fuel." Straker looked back down at his papers, giving a clear sign. Nothing more needed to be said.

Robinson made to leave, remembered she'd forgot to salute, went to do so, realised she didn't have to, and made off in an embarrassed hurry. Straker hadn't noticed; he was back on the phone to SHADO HQ.

SHADO HQ

7-05pm GMT

"MAJIC have just told us that they already have an AWACS plane in the area, so they've offered to run the search for the North Pole UFO."

Freeman paused to glance at a report Colonel Lake was helpfully holding up like a cue card. "And the Australian Air Force in Antarctica has just put up two of their Orions to look for the South Pole one. They would've taken off sooner, but they had to be refitted with sidescan radars. They've never had to look for a virtually radar-invisible target before." Straker's reply was delivered in a low and urgent tone. "What are MAJIC doing flying an AWACS plane round in that area?"

"Beats me. Is it important?"

"Maybe, I'm not sure." Then it was all business. "Convey my thanks to the Aussies, and see if you can get me Colonel Romanov. We're just about to start the search."

In the background, Freeman could just hear the sound of tractors unloading the Osprey aircraft. "Ah...Colonel Romanov's on board the AWACS, actually."

"What?!" A few moments of confused anger, then: "Either this means that MAJIC has gracefully decided to help us out for once, or they're playing some game."

"I would think the former, Ed."

"Ah well, you always were an optimist." Someone said something to Straker. "That's my curtain call. I'll contact you when we're over the search area."

CLICK Freeman put the phone down and rubbed his chin. Colonel Lake was still there, her face politely asking for information. "The search planes are leaving Norskaya now," he said. A thought struck him. "SID's totally dedicated to the UFOs, right?" "Right. Couldn't fit another command into it's memory. Trying to locate four UFOs at equidistant global positions through a haze of sunspot flaring with only one satellite AND watch for a surprise attack from space takes up a lot of runtime."

"Well, MoonBase will have to do it, then."

"Do what?"

"Spy on MAJIC."

Lake looked bemused. "Care to let me in on what's going on? I thought we were after Aliens and SHADO people here."

"Ed has a hunch, and so do I." He bent forward and asked Ford to get Lt Ellis back.

Lake looked down at the latest computer grid map of Earth taken by SID. It showed four projected targets, their rough positions forming a diamond on Earth's surface. North Pole (under ice), South Pole (on the land), East and West Equator Points (under sea). What in HELL were they up to?

MAJIC AWACS 1

THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

7-07pm GMT

Far above the roiling clouds flew a lonely quintet. A mother and her chicks, sailing north for the winter. The black-painted, heavily modified B-1B Lancer and the equally sable squadron of F-117A Nighthawk Stealth fighters were even more invisible at this hour than their special airframes normally made them.

The swing-wing Lancer lead the way. Coasting behind and slightly below were the fighters. The white contrails from the bomber's engines made a bridal train in the sky, under which the Nighthawks seemed to hide. They of course left no trails; silent assassins never do.

"It started about a minute ago, and has been broadcasting at full strength since then. We didn't even need a positive fix; it's as close to being bang on Magnetic North as it's possible to get." Lt Morrison shook his head. "Most of the time, we're lucky if we get a half-second blip off a UFO. But not this one." He adjusted a control on his panel, and the radar view zoomed in closer. The ULFSLR (Ultra Low Frequency Side-Looking Radar) located in the spinning disc-antenna atop the AWACS plane brought up a three-dimensional image of the submerged UFO. It was motionless, now at a depth of ninety fathoms, putting out enough hard EM radiation to raise the local water temperature five degrees. If it hadn't already been in the centre of the radarscope image, the target would make a perfect bullseye.

Colonel Romanov stared at the blip on the radar screen, not really accepting what was being shown. The UFO was just SITTING THERE, under the ice, beaming out a 'come and get me' signal like a lemming with a radio set. There wasn't room to pace in the refitted bomb bay of the plane, but somehow she managed to do so, making Morrison feel more than a bit tense. "It's a trap," she declared at long last with a sigh. "Has to be. An obvious trap, at that."

"Looks that way, ma'am," Morrison offered. *Stop pacing!*

"Well then, there's one way to deal with this, isn't there?"

"Ma'am?" *You're going to wear a hole in the floor!*

She finally halted in mid-step and smiled humourlessly. "Straker's not going to like this, but to hell with him. Get me Captain Leolo at once."

"Yes, ma'am."

Romanov straightened up and brushed imaginary dust from her uniform tunic. All her life, she'd prided herself on getting the job done with the minimum amount of fuss and bother. Riddles did not interest her, results did. And what she was about to order would have a very definite outcome.

The radio crackled. "MJ-AWACS 1 from Strike Force Command Leader." Romanov bent forward and keyed the mike. "Strike Force Command Leader, prepare to accept target co-ordinates."

There was a pause, then Leolo came back. "Ready, MJ-AWACS 1." At Romanov's command, Morrison transmitted the location of the UFO to the NightHawks Leolo commanded. The six planes were now far below the AWACS, skimming the ocean to further blanket their already tiny radar signature from any Alien detection.

"I am authorising a full-scale stand-off attack on target co-ordinates. Authentication code Alpha niner eight zero. Confirm."

"I read you Alpha niner eight zero. Confirmed, MJ-AWACS 1."

"Following missile launch, you are to proceed immediately to Refuel Point S-2."

Acknowledge."

"Orders received and acknowledged, MJ-AWACS 1."

* * *

Captain Leolo led his NightHawks up to an altitude of 2,000 feet and gave the order for his men to assume Stand-Off Attack formation. The eight planes fanned out to form a rough arrowhead, Leolo's craft at the tip. Once this was achieved, the squadron increased speed and raced towards Launch Point.

NORTH POLE
ARCTIC CIRCLE
7-10pm GMT

For the past ten minutes, the rate of the light pulsations emanating from the UFO had been slowly increasing; now, the orange glare was stroboscopically constant. The ice ninety fathoms above the spacecraft was cracked and shifting about, pummelled by a combination of heat and sonic energy.

And still the pulsation rate increased. The UFO's glow began fading from blood-orange to a brilliant white....

LAUNCH POINT
ARCTIC CIRCLE
7-12pm GMT

A AGM-90 tactical cruise missile dropped from the bomb bay of each Nighthawk and surged forward at breathtaking speed as the weapons' rocket motors caught. As they vanished into the night, the fighters peeled off and made for home. Their work was done. One piece of the latest Alien jigsaw was about to go up in nuclear fire.