

A Mean Day

Saturday
September 28th 2024
10:37A.M. EDT
Southern Ohio, near Toledo

The birds always noticed first.

Startled by the tremors humans couldn't sense, the sparrows burst from their tree roosts in dark swarms, hugging the ground.

The new rumble could have been mistaken for distant thunder from an unusual mid-morning rainstorm, but at once the vibrations leapt to a roar as the two F-16's, Block 70/72 models went "wet", dumping fuel from specially built injectors into the exhaust systems themselves, the superheated mix accelerating the aircraft to over eight hundred miles an hour. The planes, made in Greenville, South Carolina, ripped across the tree tops, the sonic boom tearing through the humid atmosphere behind them.

Burning eight thousand gallons a fuel a minute, the fourth generation fighters changed their angle of ascent from zero to eighty degrees in two heartbeats, climbing at fifty thousand feet per minute. Sustaining this climb for seventeen seconds, the Falcons, armed with Sidewinder 9M air to air missiles, shot southeastward toward their quarry.

With the large plane in sight, the F16's streaked down either side of the target, then climbed and looped, bleeding off speed. A few seconds later, they were at Angels 32, off the target's "6", behind it in the morning sun, creeping forward.



"Where did they come from?" Pilot Chip Haley said over his cockpit radio, searching for the two fighter jets now tailing his converted Boeing 757.

"From nowhere," shouted his copilot, straining hard to look out her window. They're invisible."

"You bet they are in all of that blue sky, Nichole. Almost—" The decorated pilot glanced at his emergency communication module, then looked up, straining to see out of the left side window. *The jets came up on them unannounced, in midcourse. What—*

"There. One. Single seater," he said.

"I've got one coming up my wingtip as well."

"Co-Pilot," Haley said, turning his head left, right, then left again, struggling to keep his voice level, "we have two F-16's, one off of each wingtip."

"I see them now. About one hundred feet off—"

"Jesus," Nichole said, her eyes agape, voice escalating. "They just dropped their tanks. Jesus Lord, they both dropped their fuel tanks."

At once Haley's shirt was wet. "That happens for two reasons, he said, struggling to control his voice. "One, they are declaring a safety emergency—"

"Well Chip, I don't think that they're are the ones in trouble."

"Or two, they are ready for a dogfight."

"With us?"

“I don’t see anybody else up here on my scopes do you.”

“No. no. no.. Chip you have to call a ‘Mayday’ and get some good guys up here. One hit from an AMRAAM and we are—”

“Air Force Two, Air Force Two,” the scratchy voice came over the cockpit radio, the static unable to disguise the southern drawl.

“Here it comes,” Nichole said. Her voice recasts, and Chip Haley thought this one belonged to the dead.



“Did you just get this?” the Vice President of the United States, code name “Providence” said, studying her phone from one of several leather swivel seats in the forward compartment of Air Force 2. “It’s from Julian,”

“Julian?” Nari Jeong, Vice Presidential Chief of Staff said, sitting in the second leather chair, a soft drink in her hand. “Julian Samuels?”

The VP handed her phone over.

Nari put the Diet Coke down and studied it, the vice president watching her small delicate hands scroll through the screens.

”What does he want for this?” the chief of staff said, looking up.

Right to the point as always. “Hopefully a solution, like we do. You see he has spoken to others. This may be for real.”

“At least it may be a new start on gun control. Does the president know?”

“He does now,” the VP said, forwarding the message to the Commander in Chief.

“Madam Vice President we can’t get too excited about this.” She scowled.

The VP sighed, then with a smile, said, ”When they take this job away from me, I shall miss your passion for paranoia very much.”

Nari smiled back. “You need it. It’s a cloak of protection, shielding you from the real world,” she said holding the VP’s phone up.

“Isn’t that the truth.” The vice president took the phone back, shaking it in the air. “Maybe it’s a ‘Fomin maneuver’,”

Nari sighed. “The ‘Fomin maneuver’ was the Russians coming to the Kennedy administration with a political solution to the ’62 missile crisis. What we have here is an overture from a Republican senator that will likely be a distraction.

“If we go down this rabbit hole,” Nari said, new wrinkles appearing in her forehead, “it could be an embarrassment for you and the administration.”

Of course, Nari was tough, the VP thought. BA at Berkley, MS at MIT, MA then a PhD at American University, *Hard to not get sliced up on that razor sharp mind.*

“It was a maneuver to help break a logjam that left unbroken, would have killed over one hundred million people. I admit that the gun control issue in this country is not so titanic, but the knot of contention is tied just as tight.”

Nari nodded, picking her glass up from the vice presidential coaster, “Well, Senator Samuels is known as a little bit of a renegade. Plus, according to this, he has lined up two other Republican senators plus five Republican house members to begin a quiet conversation.”

She crossed her legs, shaking her head. “He’s taking quite a risk sending this to you.”

“Maybe not,” the vice president said. “Isn’t he good friends with the Senate Minority Leader?”

“They share an alma mater.”

The VP looked out the window. “I wonder if the Senate Minority Leader himself is behind this, using a trusted friend to send us a message.” She leaned forward, “Like Khrushchev used Fomin.”

Nari sighed, shaking her head. “Ok, what will you do?”

“I will suggest a plan to the president and see—“

The VP stopped, feeling a new vibration ripple through the giant jet.

Nari shook her head “Don’t say anything about this when we land in Chicago.”

“We may not make it,” the vice president said, now staring out of the window, “It feels like something’s up. Plus we have some new friends.”

“F-16C’s,” Nari said, looking out of the window on the left side of the plane. “At least they’re on our side.”

The VP nodded, but, with a new dry mouth and rapid pulse said nothing.



“Air Force Two. Air Force Two. This is the Lt, Col. Buckley of Noah’s Ark. Are you reading me?”

“We sure are, Lieutenant Colonel.” His mouth raspy and dry, he continued. “This is Captain Haley. What can we do for you?”

“We are the ‘friendlies’ off each of your wingtips, representatives of the 112th fighter squadron, Ohio Air National Guard. Good morning.”

“Roger.” His mind raced. Escorts weren’t standard for Air Force Two, and certainly not starting halfway through a flight over the continental US.

He stared out of the window again. They were sleek and elegant from afar, the staple of the air force for decades. holding their positions with ease, But now, up close and personal with air-to-air missiles on their wingtips, the Falcons looked damn deadly.

“Captain Haley, Sorry to startle you. We were told to take our foot off the brakes to get up here. I’d come in closer to show you my ID, but I don’t want any mid-air misunderstandings.”

Haley smiled, his stomach relaxing. “Understand Lt. Col. Buckley. Pleasure to make your acquaintance. We are heading to Chicago. Care to join us?”

“Good to meet you, too, Captain. Uh, given the radio chatter I picked up before coming up here on this fine, fall day, I think we’d better keep this per protocol. Do you copy, sir?”

“Copy.” He wanted no trouble with these General Dynamic/Lockheed Martin performance fighters.

“Air Force Two, would you please switch over to frequency two-greenstreet-three-seven-savoy-niner?”

“Will do.”

“How often do we get an escort, Captain?” his copilot asked. She was top of the line, knew her protocols, and he saw by the patina of forehead sweat that she was nervous.

“Sometimes, when we have several dignitaries on board, they might order one up.”

“She looked at him. Just seems strange doesn’t it, that our orders are coming through the air force and not the White—”

“Sir this is Lt. Col. Buckley, the static-free voice of the fighter pilot filling the cockpit. We’ve been ordered to provide an escort for you. This comes from both the Attorney General of the United States and the Chief of Staff-Air Force.”

“Do you have new orders for me?”

“I have information plus new orders, sir. The president of the United States has been admitted to the hospital in critical condition. We need to return you to Joint Base Andrews. Are you ready to change course?”

“Just need a vector.”

“Coming to you now, Captain. We’re going to need you to kick it up some though. What’s the maximum speed on that crate”

Haley smiled. He knew the F-16’s could attain Mach-2. They’d run rings around him. “We can race there in eighty-three minutes but I’ll back off if you need to keep up.”

Buckley’s chuckle came through loud and clear. “We burned some gas getting up here, but I think we can keep up with you to JBA.

“Now that we’re one big happy family, we’ll give you some room off your wingtips. Air Force Two, you are now cleared in at 29,000 feet on an initial course of two-degree. My buddy and I will parallel. Do you copy?”

“Copy. Thank you Lt Col. I hope commercial aircraft know that.”

“Oh, I think they’ll get the message, one way or the other.”

“Pleasure to have your company.” He knew the Falcons with their AMRAAMs plus the ability to pull nine G’s without external fuel tanks would be good friends in a street fight.

“We’ll plow the row, Captain. Thanks for your cooperation.”

“Roger. Where you from Lt. Col.?”

“Living in Toledo for now, but grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina.”

“Winston-Salem for me.”

“Piedmont Triangle.”

“Go Tar Heels.”

“Feels like a mean day, Air Force Two. Better keep your heads down. Noah’s Ark out.”

He turned to Nichole. “Copilot, take the airplane. I’ll inform our customers.”

“I’ve got the airplane, Captain.



Nari stood. “This is unusual.”

“And we’re about to find out what’s going on,” said the vice president as she heard the cockpit door open then close. The air force didn’t use their essential fighters to deliver good news. She swallowed.

The vice president turned her seat to face the pilot who had just appeared, taking a napkin to wipe her brow. “Hey Chip, how’s our plane today?”

“Good as can be,” the tall trim man said, all smiles. The VP couldn’t find the usual gleam in his eye.

“What are we flying, Madam Vice-President?”

“Boeing C-32, a modified 757, operating under the 89th Airlift Wing.”

“Ha. Great job.”

They both smiled.

“Now can I take a turn flying this thing?”

“Not today, Madam Vice President,” the pilot said, “I’m afraid that I have bad news. The President of the United States is critically ill.”

“What?” Nari said, crossing her arms and taking a step toward the pilot. “Assassination?”

“I don’t know. We’ve been instructed to return you to Joint Base Andrews.”

The VP, pulse now steady, in an even voice said, “Ordered by who, Chip?”

“The Attorney General and the head of the US Air Force.”

“Very well. Thank you.”

When the pilot returned to the cockpit, the VP and COS looked at each other.

“The AG’s involvement suggests a succession issue,” Nari said.

The Vice President closed her eyes. “Jesus. Maybe. Probably. We’ll have to see. Meantime, absent any other information, we should rest. And pray.”

“You do that, Madam, You’ll likely need it. I’ll inform Chicago of our change in plans without giving a reason.”

The VP watched Nari walk to the rear of the plane to meet with staff.

Short and trim with close cropped hair and no trace of a Korean accent, they’d met in California, four years before the 2020 election.

The VP turned her head to the window, squinting in the bright autumn sun, Fiercely loyal, disciplined tight as a

snare drum, and able to reading her reactions, the COS kept her on track.

Be ready for everything, all at once. This Nari truism, driven into her over the years, emerged and flew around her mind, like a bird with no place to land.

But before any other thoughts, fears, frights and opportunities could overwhelm her, the Vice President was fast asleep.