

PENG WHO?

BY

Piers M. Wood

EPIGRAPH

On revisionism..."[the] historian's task should not be the defense of one of these themes to the exclusion of the other. If at all possible, he should try to explain both."

John M. Murrin

[as quoted in the *Professional Bulletin of Army History*, spring 2021]

Taiwan could become the occasion for a very nasty confrontation indeed.

[2005] Ted Galen Carpenter

America's Coming War With China

PRELUDE

It was a strange day at the headquarters. This sleepy command at the forgotten far eastern flank of NATO was abuzz. Staff flunkies ricocheted off the walls to prepare the Commander Land South East for travel to Ankara — *absent* the usual 48 hour notice required of staff sections to start any-damn-thing. American aides de camp, deputy commanders, principal staff and even the chief of staff's travel team of "recorders" were explicitly not invited. The Turkish four-star would be going to a general's conference called by the Chief of Turkey's General Staff to discuss "exclusively internal Turkish matters." Operations and logistics, which unavoidably include allied forces, would not be on the agenda. NATO's Turkish commander, at LSE, commanding three field armies — no less — was invited merely as an "observer " and advisor.

However, those factors were not what was so odd about the weekend. The disconnect was the timing. The stodginess of the army group headquarters, functioning on 48-hour-notice timelines, was Turkish doing. The US Army officer's corps could turn even the most inconsequential post into competing beehives of white knuckle life-or-death-hubbub. Mostly they did so, but not in this military office complex on the waterfront of the Aegean city of Üçkale. It was the abject failure -- so far -- of yanks and brits to animate this combined staff, that attuned everyone to cock suspicious eyebrows at this suddenly rambunctious preparation for a lofty sounding conference on a moment's notice.

The General's American aide had been tasked only the day before — at the close of business hours — to write an action brief due at noon, Saturday. All staff officers were aghast. Staffing alone should have taken three weeks. Nothing. Ever. Happened. Overnight.

The young major with the assignment was elated. Why not? Any US army field grade officer who could not describe the US military pay system -- they all knew so well -- in a few hours did not belong on a general

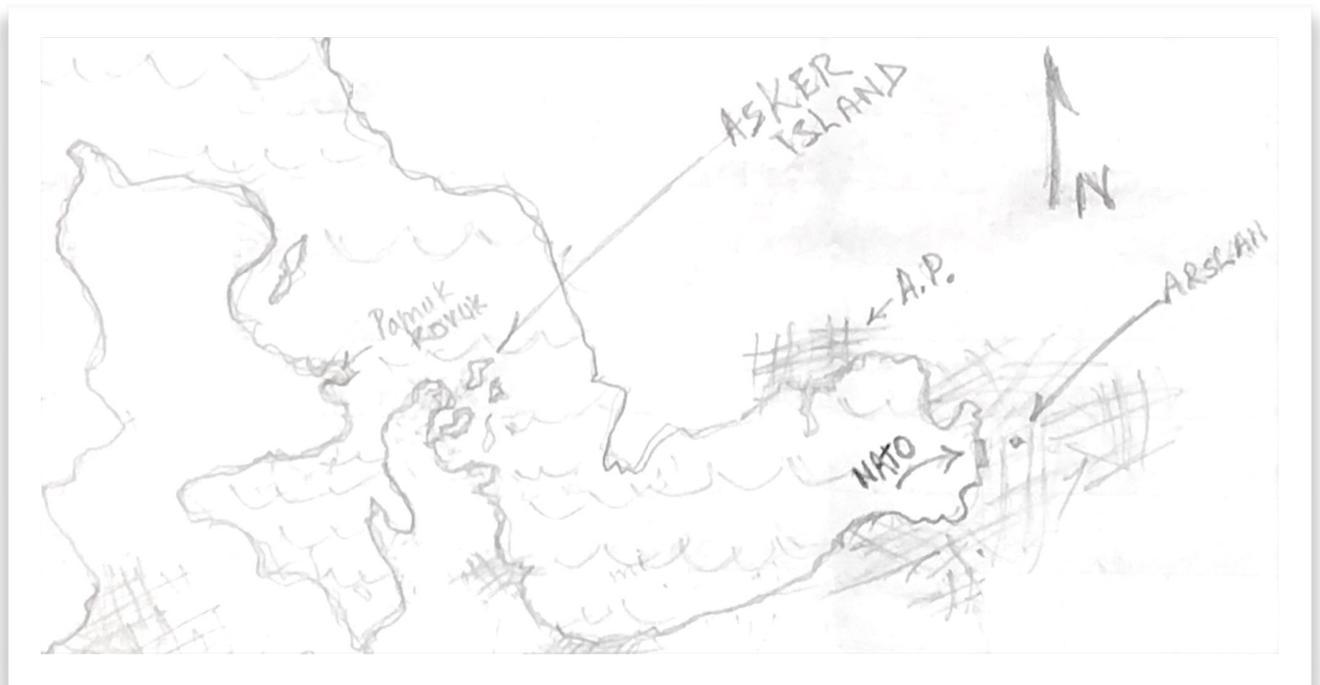
staff. After a series of quick checks with expert warrant officers on terminology and a few fine points, Major John B. Hood amazed the officer's club Saturday brunch crowd by turning in his analysis early. Even though J.B. thought it didn't warrant a four-star attaboy, he could not suppress a buzz of elation as he double stepped up to the American deputy's office to back-brief the highest ranking American on what he now knew about the conference.

Ten minutes later, his elation had been trampled down by new and darker suspicion surrounding the weekend excitement. The uncharacteristic hustle had an ominous side that the young ADC had missed in his hurry-up mode. Now, J.B. feared that he had written the Turkish four star's cover story. Old hands and the Americans with stars were checking decades old contingency plans. For old timers this so-called "conference" was too reminiscent of the "old days " when the Turkish general officer corps would hold secret meetings — not unlike this one — to coordinate coups. A half dozen or so had succeeded every dozen or so years and had run Turkey for extended periods. Democracy's return had always been peaceful, but came with a sword hanging overhead, until the Erdogan era with its relentless draconian purges. It was not only ominous this time, but deeply puzzling. Nothing at the time seemed wrong with the Turkish military policy. Nothing at least, that appeared to warrant taking the still deadly risk of staging any dissent much less a coup d'état.

The American junior officers with need-to-know clearances crowded into their top-secret skiff where the aides usually went to fetch their general's back-channels they did not want their Turkish peers to see. Sometime later when the eagerly awaited intelligence community consensus (probably NSA, considering the speed) landed, it said that the explanation for a conference in Ankara did seem a bit too contrived. The Turks had apparently truckled to the will of civilian politicians not, military necessity. The urgency was the huge sum at stake in a secret -- black -- project who's nature and purpose were still unknown to American spooks.

Skeptics who were still expecting a coup surrendered their cynicism after the first coup-free week, and weeks later, the CLSE himself let slip, in routine reception conversation over a few scotches, that huge new appropriations had been passed by the Parliament in Ankara that were secret, but causing much joy in the ranks. His knowing wink at his American aid started a hard-to-quell rumor that a new Turkish pay system — like ours — was in the works. The story was a bit too convenient and self-serving to suit the higher brass, but John B. Hood would continue to believe it well beyond the end of our story.

ÜÇKALE



PREFACE

In the aftermath of war, as Alexey lugged poor Cho's body across the snow choked taiga in the Russian Far East; and while BC's battery supported the victorious US troops in Alaska as they policed a deserted battlefield in the throes of an infamous Fairbanks winter; similar perspectives on the conflict unfolded in the sunny Aegean.

-----Ostrich Tales-----

"Two million? My witchi-pingo. Translation's *bozuk*, flawed," J.B. blurted before he thought.

"Also, I was surprised by such a big number," said Arslan. "It was on ships. Only infantry, but also all at one time, please to put away your fat-arsed witchi-pingo and I will check the Chinese translation."

"A witchi-pingo can't be fat," J.B. said.

"Since you have never described it to me, the English translation is therefore, what-you-call-it, a 'freebie.' Now hold your fire," Arslan said and turned to his ear-buds.

Major John B. (J.B.) Hood couldn't help, but grin. The exchange was so familiar. Their own pastiche of Turkish and English kept things light and was integral to the friendship. The fun he'd just had with Captain Arslan Perioglu's English was routinely reciprocated when they were speaking Turkish; perhaps more than he knew. The Turkish officer corps was scrupulously courteous, and in their company, it was unseemly to

laugh aloud or poke fun as American's did. For all he knew, this handsome young Turkish Captain and his cohorts could be finding his dated professorial Turkish to be a continuing source of merriment.

The conversation lapsed while Arslan listened intently -- one hand on an earbud and the other holding an upward pointing index finger toward him -- giving J.B. a moment to ponder why he had over-reacted in the first place to such an unexpected troop count.

Side by side in a half darkened conference room, they sat before a lighted screen displaying a slide entitled "The Alaskan Campaign." The first subheading was "The Prelude" and the third bullet down was still highlighted. It read, "The Seizure of *Peng Hu* Islands (aka Pescadores)."

He realized upon reflection that he had been napping, distracted by the thought that this momentous series of interviews with Chou had been side-tracked so early by the old man's rumination about how he got his big idea in the first place. Quite suddenly, the two million figure had turned Arslan's droning into something alarming and relevant. As the thought that he might have missed something crossed his frontal cortex, his cerebellum must have sparked the verbal recoil. Calm now, he had re-aimed his focus on a deliberate parsing of this new intelligence. It could plausibly add to the whole reason he volunteered for this job in the first place. Driving his friend crazy with these back-briefs was something he hoped would not damage their bond. An intriguing revisionist view of the Alaskan Campaign was peeking around the corner of this re-hash of the war -- an event that the 24 hour news cycle currently saw as ancient history. J.B. also vowed silently to wander down yet another potential blind alley, just in case. It was something his boss derisively called his "quest for the Truth."

"Ok, John *bey*," Arslan said signaling with a listen up gesture. The translator did ask at the first opportunity, 'did you intend to say two thousands?' And the General did refine his answer in English, 'No, it was a two attached to six zeroes.' So, John *bey*, it seems he means this big number. He knows he could be caught up wrong. Easy to do. So, maybe he is not blowing smoke. Do *you* know how many civilian

ships in PRC? Do you know how many troops can be carried on cargo ships, or tankers, or container types? How many ferries in PRC?"

As J.B. inclined his head with a shrug, Arslan smiled and said, "Need to do more research buddy."

It was a very common exchange between the two and he returned the smile with a gritty grin and said only, "roger that," using their mutual militarese to acknowledge what was said and urge the speaker onward.

Arslan caught up by reminding his re-animated listener of the historical context. General Chou's original inquiry in a Beijing headquarters many months ago had started as a desultory, un-resourced exercise to revisit the PLA's actual chances of invading Taiwan, if the US Navy happened somehow to be *absent* from the battle. The project had remained an abstraction for months, but with this new hot data it had gathered interest and new adherents. The aforementioned revelation of the Chinese merchant fleet's theoretical capability to transport hundreds of thousands of troops to Taiwan's beaches was a keystone. Once the calculations confirmed that the newly available hulls of military amphibious craft could carry a respectable load of artillery and armor, the project had been off-and-running. This along with the earlier predictions that the PLA Air Force could achieve air superiority -- absent an American strike force -- led to the first ever serious discussion of how to keep the US Navy out of any grunts-only donnybrooks in the future.

This new stuff today was a big deal, indeed. J.B.'s research over the preceding years had uncovered numerous PLA contingency plans for 'access denial' -- as the jargon termed it -- but he could recall no mention of any real prospect of entirely stopping US intervention by military means.

"So we're back to that?" J.B. interjected at a suitable pause. "A second Normandy style landing being considered as the *raison d'être* of the Alaskan Campaign. Correction ... I should have said the Alaskan Campaign's reason for being -- to use proper *International* English."

"Yes, it seems to be so," said Arslan.

“The US side of the staff could be very interested in this connection,” J.B. lied, “will you follow this line? I fear your bosses might not care as much.”

“Do you mean higher-ups worry we will not allow this subject?” The young Turkish captain said in “International” to clarify.

“Yes, my feeble Globish is failing me.”

“Yes, if you meant to say your poor -- not ‘feeble’ -- International English is slowing this back-brief, you may be correct.” The wry smile returned and he continued, “I am able to recommend urging the Turkish staff to let the old man wander a little. He seems interested in raising his profile -- as you say it. We must seem to be interested journalists so we can appear to seek exciting stories. Do I explain it well?”

“Excellent plan, *eski arkadasim*, my old friend. Maybe I could suggest a short question or two to ‘guide’ his rambling?” J.B. said smiling wickedly enough to convey a knowing excess of self interest, “I still have... correction, we still have lasting interests in such a huge operation in order to understand if we were correct before the war. Was Taiwan able to defend itself alone? Or, were we needed, but missing-in-action?”

An indulgent Arslan smiled, “No interest in a revisionist history of your latest war, perhaps?”

“Well, some lines of questioning lead to more than one objective,” he said with a self deprecating expression. “Am I overstepping some important Turkish General Staff objective in Chou’s interview?” He said, still kidding with the same mischievous grin.

Head turning handsome, Arslan was also a compact form of slender. He had more ballast than one expects in a man of middle-size and his fluid movements appeared deceptively gradual, so his change in demeanor and posture caught J.B. a bit off guard. His smile dwindled to grave as he said, “*Efendim*,” my dear sir, and he transitioned to Turkish, taking care to stay inside the 5,000 word limit in Globish -- J.B.'s formal source for International English, (also marking a fair limit of J.B.'s. Turkish).

John B. Hood's, mischievous expression also tightened. His blue eyes narrowed conveying a mute growl, but the rest of his demeanor displayed only rapt curiosity. When the monologue in Turkish ended, he nodded in understanding agreement and said, "Roger. The Turkish General Staff's ultimate objectives are a delicate matter. Your overstepping colleague hereby back-steps off your terrain."

"Hereby?"

"Yes, as of now."

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"So our *alleged* 'Supreme Marshall' for the invasion of Alaska says he had other fish to fry?" The Colonel said from behind his overlarge desk in his spacious but under appointed office.

"Sir, we have already confirmed his rank (under restored 1950's protocols) and position." It was Major John B. Hood's turn under fire as briefer. He was standing at parade rest in front of the desk beside a full map stand with his pointer cocked ready to gain answering time by diverting attention to charts, maps or bullet points thereon.

"But, the old fart's reminiscing appears to have little to do with the Alaskan Campaign. That Campaign is your priority EEI. You *do* recall that detail. Do you not?"

"Yes, sir, it may appear to be distant from our Essential Elements of Information," but it may tell us more about the actual level of Sino-Russian collusion at the outset of that campaign."

"Level of ?" Colonel Blucher's sarcasm was leaden, "are you seriously suggesting we believe a Chinese general officer who might want to let the Russians off the hook?" He said slapping the Russian outline on the world map behind him with his own pointer. Truth was that Blucher was not intellectual, but had a world class bullshit detector and he (correctly) suspected that the Major before him was in full bore disagreement

with the Army's party line on this thing. He knew not why, but he thought he smelled a rat and gave the youngster rations of shit probably for the hell of it.

"No, sir," the Major replied, not rising to the bait, "I meant, Chou's intel questions the great disparity of national interests involved. It's hard to ignore his consistent assertions that his forces could have defeated Taiwan minus outside help. Sometimes Chou adds, "...because of US absence."

"Oh Christ. Here we go again, Hood, ever the intellectual critic. That skepticist shit again, "Alaskan Campaign was diversionary, you say. In your eyes, your country -- particularly our sister service -- was missing in action, while your allegedly helpless ROC army lay defenseless before an allegedly invincible PLA -- whom I might just insert here -- was two goddamned generations behind on development of major weapon's platforms." The Colonel's ranting was coming dangerously close to questioning J.B.'s patriotism. "This where he's taking this thing. Huh?" J.B. thought, "he gives not a crap, and says this BS because he can't handle any hint of non-conformity no matter how accurate it is. Let's allow the chips fall and see who the facts support in the end. I'm the one who'll be pissing on his grave not vice versa." Then with all the confidence of a decorated Alaska veteran, J.B. replied aloud, "No, Sir, not my sole intent at all. Whether the PLA could man-handle Taiwan's air force and army *alone* may be less important than the fact that the Chinese could have genuinely believed it to be true."

"Be that as it may," Col. Blucher said, ignoring the substance of J.B.'s round-about rejoinder, "your status as an expert on the Sino-American military balance -- whatever clever rationalizations you resort to -- may not survive being relieved of two general staff jobs in a row."

Knowing full well that this Deputy Chief of Staff could probably wrangle two firings into the record and might do it despite the repercussions from Hood's own well-placed mentors, the threat rocked him. Pulse and blood pressure spiked -- probably on both sides. "Two?" J.B. demanded, "the Turkish Commanding General's request for American concurrence to put my last job change on the record as fictitious was

approved by the American Deputy Commanding General.. sir. I volunteered to go along with the ruse as part of the deception operation and the DCG's assurances... and also because I had no idea I would be working for someone so dubious about Chou's motives."

Again choosing to address style over substance, the Colonel let his voice go cold-hard to maximize its menace and said, "Now you presume to bad-mouth me to my face. You're stepping into a shit storm Major."

"Not at all, sir, no criticisms intended," J.B. said, "it is no slight to any officer to say that he may disagree with his seniors on controversial subjects. Some are strong advocates of the position that the Taipei was subverted and could have been defeated. It's something espoused by two of the Joint Chiefs to name a few," he thought the latter about the chiefs, but left it unsaid, because it was well known that their positions were personal not professional. "Had I known how strongly you felt that the sneak attack on Fairbanks was divorced from the *political* issue of Taiwan, I simply would have demurred, not volunteered."

"You can always un-volunteer," Blucher said, perhaps too hastily. However, there was a clear break in the diatribe and J.B. seized the moment to go chin-up-and-carry-on. He popped back into bright-eyed briefer mode -- at parade rest -- pointer cocked at the map.

"Yes, sir, but that could sidetrack the whole intel op. I'm still getting cogent, credible back briefs from Captain Perioglu primarily because Arslan and I have a carefully crafted mutual language, which *does* deliver a top drawer, reliable version of what Chou actually says. Furthermore, Arslan is also going to need my wife's guidance to be a credible journalist. Ms. Hood says that's becoming more important as time goes on. When it gets close to the actual writing she's going to have to devote a lot more time to Arslan. Apparently, in journalism, there is a good deal of backtrack with the interviews and checks of specifics as you craft individual sentences." J.B. let himself motor mouth on like this knowing it was pulling them back from the confrontation, which had been foreclosing polite interchange. As the awkwardness continued to

recede, he said, "Although the Chou interview looks as if the returns might be marginal, I would like to offer three reasons why it might be worthwhile to continue to support the effort for the short term at least."

"Go on," said Blucher.

"Well Sir, General Chou rose to the highest rank in his own military. It is probably fair to presume he is no dummy. Arslan thinks, and I agree, that he is deliberately holding back on full participation. What is more, there are good indications that his reluctance may be a temporary ploy. Apparently, whenever Capt.

Perioglu asks him how some detail relates to the Alaskan Campaign, he simply ignores the question. Quite pointedly, Chou has not said a flat 'No,' nor has he said he won't address it and he certainly has not said that he does not know. There is good reason, then, to believe that he is probably waiting to see if the first proffers get into print. If so, and it's foreseeable, we might well see him loosen up and hear more of the 'good stuff' that we *and* the Turks want to hear. Furthermore," J.B. continued, "from a purely military perspective, publishing any damn thing Chou wants to say is a good way for us to convince him he's talking to the press and not only to NATO intelligence. He's likely to be perceptive enough to have considered the possibility that we suspect him of peddling mis-information and to have put our spooks in the mix. If so, then leniency with him could be prudent in maintenance of our cover for the deception. An operation he may (correctly) suspect is underway."

"Or... if we know he knows we know, he knows we know, he doesn't know shit..." Col Blucher said rhetorically, having regained some of his composure. He continued with the same sarcastic smile, to address something substantive for the first time. "Speaking of the Turks," he asked, "why do they care now, which way Chou goes? They had no dog in that fight?"

"Well, Sir, they maintain that their interest is generic, merely curiosity about all new military developments. This is, of course, imminently reasonable, but seems to me -- and our spooks -- 'insufficient to justify their obvious expenditures,' of money and personnel. Clearly, the Turks do have little interest in Chou's self

serving version of a second Normandy Invasion. However, they can be very touchy about inquiry into any other motives. Arslan made it clear to me that questions about his Commander's intel objectives with regard to strategic surprise in AKCAM, or about any of Ankara's intentions are out-of-bounds -- professionally and even between us as friends. He won't even brook joking on the matter."

"So much for British style of intel sharing," said Blucher.

"Exactly, Sir. I recommend all Americans start treating this as a *verboden* topic. Encroaching on these sensitivities could cost us access to what the Turks may be up to, and might even cut us out of the loop. So, I recommend we continue to march as before, but add discovering the Turk's real intentions to be one of our essential elements of information."

"I'll think it over," Blucher cut in, "you got any justification other than hunches, Major?"

"Yes sir, as a matter of fact..." J.B. started to say... and it went straight downhill from there and silted yet another layer of bad feeling between J.B. and the Colonel.

* * *

On the way home, he couldn't shake it off. He rewound what he had said about staying onboard with the Turks. First, reinforce the deception operation by publishing whatever was in Chou's first proffer. He now thought he probably should have called the ploy a "confidence building measure." Blucher loved euphemisms.

"Oh shit," he yanked the wheel hard left to avoid a kiddie-pool sized pothole that he knew damn well was there and should have anticipated. Saw it every bleeding night on this way home. This night had already been bad enough. The last thing he needed now was a raw rain blowing through the blackest early evening he could remember. Driving, like this, all the way around the south side of the Bay of Üçkale was the worst part of living here. He preferred the ferry, which made a straight shot across the water from the

downtown headquarters to a dock near the turn-off to Chou's mansion -- only a short mile from his waterfront apartment. It did not improve his mood to think that tonight it would have been easier had he chosen to tolerate the typical hassle of workday crowds on the boat.

Work intruded again. He repeated to himself, "The second reason I recommended continuing the line of questioning is to learn how Chou's alleged command links to the Alaskan PLA forces managed to evade the NSA." The third reason had been an afterthought. He had dredged it up just to be able to tick off a third bullet point. The urge to do so was a recurring weakness of his, the source of no little trouble over the years. Nonetheless, he distantly remembered that he reminded the Colonel that the US Army intelligence had never agreed that the PLA Air Force could achieve air superiority over Taiwan, despite their brief success over the *Peng Hu* Islands earlier. Yet Chou was steadfastly insisting that it would have been a cake walk. So, our interest in prolonging the interviews could be that he might reveal some legitimate reasons why the PLAAF was, in fact, more capable than we had believed.

"Did they have some undiscovered secret weapon's platforms or some 'black' capability that had eluded all our intelligence acquisition efforts?" That had only been his contrived logic to gain Blucher's assent. J.B. thought he already knew what gave the PLAAF the upper hand and it wasn't secret gizmos.

"However, it probably wasn't the air superiority question that made the old man go weird," he thought. It was much more likely the publish any-damn-thing first ploy, or the NSA issue."

J.B. realized it wasn't likely his own veiled threats over his two firings had had any effect. Shitting all over the messenger had been either something Blucher secretly wanted, or something he saw as unimportant, because it was only one of so many ways to milk Chou.

So, that brought J.B. back, again, to Colonel Blucher's enigmatic demeanor as the briefing ended. "Nary a word. Not a smile nor a frown," he thought, "maybe he had not been intimidated at all. Perhaps he'd just decided mid-briefing that he would be dumping me. Was the back brief with Arslan still on tomorrow?" he

thought. J.B had no stinking idea. "Was I even gonna remain on the staff that long, for Christ's sake?"

John had a keen edged recall of this moment. It's when his thinking digressed. He had caught himself -- nearly home -- and about to drag the chickenshit-shit of his job under his family's noses. As he visualized their disappointment, he resolved, "to never again pull any of that crap on them."

Those were his last conscious thoughts before the black-out. To this day, he has no idea how long he was, "not there." His first recollection was the scene through the windshield from behind the wheel as his Mustang finished the final half-second of a long, four-wheel slide. Full stop had revealed the tailgate of a horse drawn hay wagon hanging, untouched, over the hood. As the wipers banged out a rhythmic counterpoint to his temporal paralysis, the cart walked steadily away. The overhanging shelf of hay slid silently from over the hood ornament with nary a backward look and dissolved into the haze of headlights refracting the downpour.

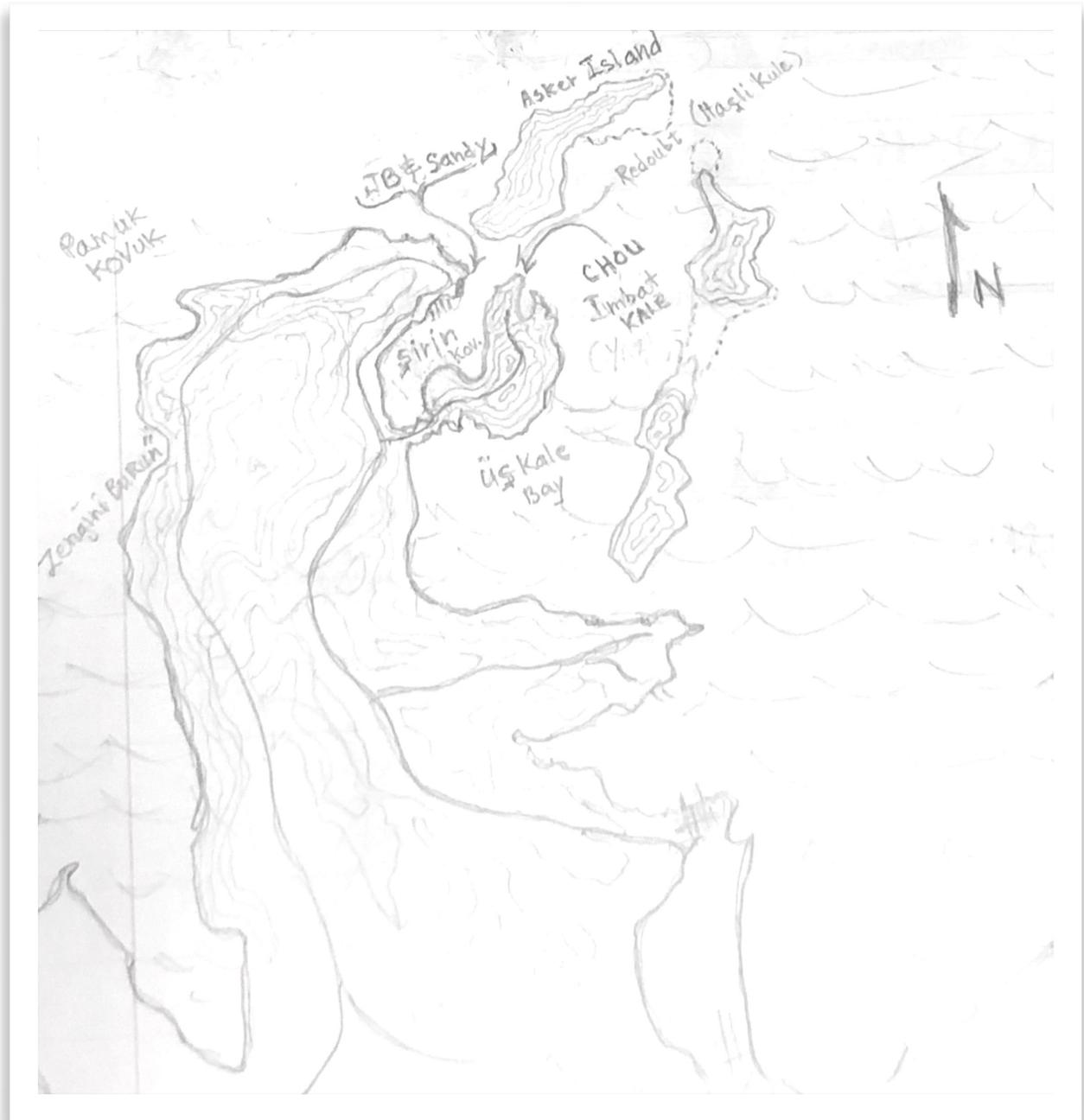
He and the car were untouched, but John B. Hood was *not* okay. He had never seen the wagon before the stop under it. Between his "crap.. again" thought and stopping dead still, he had zero memory of anything but headlights on blacktop illuminating a wet wall of mist, not the slightest recollection of braking.

Later, he would tell the story and relate his considered surmise that he'd hit that wagon and died in those out-of-time seconds. Perhaps in a parallel (or... adjacent) dimension his consciousness transitioned instantaneously through a universe of innumerable simultaneous dimensions containing all possibilities allowed by the wildest stretch of the laws of physics to a new "here." Perhaps he was dead in all those other times and remained conscious only in this single extreme case. Or, maybe he had somehow seen a faint something in the fog, which triggered a newly autonomous right foot to brake in time. Maybe? It certainly had not *felt* that way.

Drained, he had driven on -- slowly. He desperately needed to settle his mind after the near miss.

Watching a sunset over the hills might have done it. But, this black night blocked the splendid view across

JB & CHOU



the water to the nearby islands and trapped his unease in a roil of incredulity. At some added expense, they had moved out here, because of that view. The few island mansions were hidden among stands of

cedar that seemed to sprout from the rocks themselves. The combination made the islands seem wild enough to resemble a postcard from the Maine Coast. Unlike Maine or the Georgian Bay, however, bleached tan beaches highlighted the niches between caramel stones piled into embankments, crags and formations whose tops were bedecked with overflowing thatches of umber flecked evergreen -- the Turkish version of the Cedars of Lebanon.

It occurred to him that this medley of rock, pine and water must be in his DNA. His reaction to it was so profound. The mental image alone triggered endorphins from some innermost cortex, which had nudged him into unwinding. It only got better round the bend near home.

Once past the little isthmus, which made a peninsula of *Inbat Kale*, a sea breeze cliff, it got better still. The higher elevation and steeper cliffs seen over the *Sirin Kovuk*, serene cove, made the General's exclusive compound look priceless. That the Turks would have allowed Chou to build there was a measure of his importance to them. That alone could have persuaded J.B. and Sandy to get on the bandwagon. Their fluent Turkish had given them insights denied to their countrymen hunkered down in their all-American enclaves. Those folks would have needed a guide, translator and tour bus just to get this far out of downtown.

His smile at his own hyperbole brought another measure of endorphins up to slacken the tension knotting his upper thorax. As his mood slipped gently back toward equilibrium his peripheral field drifted involuntarily toward the unseen cliffs. That subtle shift meant that he saw the flash -- not the reflection.

The stab of light snapped his head hard right to catch the smack full-on. The surprise of such an unexpected flash-bang had all the more effect because it had so abruptly reversed the easing that had been suffusing those very organs that were now receiving jolts of adrenaline, again.

The whip-saw made J.B. distrust his own senses. What? Was this another missing-moment sensation? If it had been an explosive, it was damn near to the *Haçlı Kulu*, crusader tower, which was, in turn, damn near

Chou's residence. He thought, "Holy shit, did the Chinese hit their highest ranking defector? Was Arslan over there with him?" He knew they *did* do unscheduled interviews at all hours.

Grim to grimmer associations flooded through his amygdala stoking the raw tissues with fight-or-flight responses that he could already feel were leaving him drained. Worse yet, he couldn't pull the "limp-rag" bit at home. He'd have to report his eye witnessing of such an event. Sandy, ever the reporter, would demand an account of what she too had surely heard.

That chat would bring him around to the impact of this shit for them. Just that thought jacked his alarm to new heights. What it could mean was that if Chou went missing -- whether absent permanently or temporally while dodging the next attempt on his life -- there would be no work for J.B. Blucher's dream come true. John would have to downplay today's events to Sandy, but the outlook would still be wretched. Then if Arslan was hit, how would he -- they -- ever explain it to Musi, his wife. To the best of John's knowledge, she was entirely out-of-the-loop. Too damn much to process. He refocused on the road or there'd be a collision this time.

"Still," he thought, "Maybe I could grab some downtime by interposing my son. A walk together would do it. I could assign spreading of the word to the new aide de camp and give Sandy reporter type stuff to do like contacting Musi and checking the wires." That way he believed he could carve out a quiet hour or so with the boy. The kid was so good with slow, random walks. He was an autonomous Rambler who stayed within sight and interspersed play with widely spaced monologues. When the shit did finally hit the fan and everyone at headquarters wanted more, "eyeballs" on the scene, Sandy would be at full situational awareness and be more receptive. By then, he'd be ready to saddle up. He was feeling better already...

But then, "Feelings, my ass," he thought yanking his frontal cortex into the present. All the introspection had carried him down the road he knew not how far. "So where were you when you saw the flash, Major?" He heard some future query echoing in his head. J.B. spun a one-eighty on the deserted road -- looking

hard his time, and hoped to spot the “flash site” -- in the dark, coming from the other way. Eyes flicking across the road to catch familiar images, he fumbled with unfamiliar dashboard touch screens to fire up the G.P.S. Surely, he could find that monster pothole.

-----SORTING-----

“ No, tiger -- 1930 hours is *not* too late to go for a walk,” J.B. couldn’t help but smile.

“ But Mom said...,” young Bert said.

“Think your Mom’s upset by the blast. Maybe she’s just jealous you guys missed it.”

“Dad...mm,” he said in a tone mimicking his Mother’s scolding sarcasm.

“Ok, not so fun, but we are hoping Captain Arslan and Daddy’s job are going to be alright. It’s too soon, kiddo, to get hyper when we don’t even know yet whether anything was blown-up -- the flash looked high to me.”

No answer from Bert. The little guy had already turned to stamping puddles. He let him go even though some of these puddles could swallow a lawnmower. “What the hell. The kid could swim,” he imagined himself saying to needle Sandy who was still a bit over-protective of her only child. “But, one damn fine mother,” he thought and knew he was one lucky S.O.B.

“You can throw rocks in the pond. But you gotta tell me you can actually see the shore in this dark...” he added aloud to re-attach the invisible tether to his son’s loose-leash meander.

The dying winds had warmed the drizzle back-lighted by their condo’s lighting. Hands jammed into a rain hoodie, John Hood could take a more leisurely inward browse through his memory of the last hour or two. As he had hoped, he had managed to suspend demands on his time and he felt an escapee’s surge of glee to think about whatever he chose. He was bemused that it was his recall of Sandy’s commentary that

pushed to the front. Was it because it was so macho-like-pragmatic and uncharacteristically callous of her? Not all that surprising since there was so little love lost for Chou who soaked up so much of her husband's time. She had zinged right in on the news story she might get published if Chou did not turn up.

As she saw it, the long term intelligence value might well be lost for the Army, but what she knew -- of what Chou had revealed so far -- could still be a hell of a story. It fed a fresh backstory into the on-again-off-again reporting about the skeptical interpretations of the Alaskan War party-line.

They met her a quarter of an hour down the path. From her side of the picnic table, still at it, she ticked off the salient points -- ignoring J.B.'s head rocking in disbelief at her temerity -- touching consecutive fingers of the open left hand with the forefinger on her right, "Staying unclassified, as the expression goes, there's the satisfying two million number with its human interest backstory," she said, as she touched her left forefinger. The plans to use oil platforms. All those new ports and airfields. Don't forget the unprecedented use of GPS and high resolution terrain mapping for beach landings. That's new too. Then there's the biggie," she added flipping out the rest of her left fingers. "The phased invasion plan with its alleged supporting deception operations -- one of which we *do* know about, though, the one that has already worked in Alaska. And of course -- lest we forget -- there's that compelling historical angle about how AKCAM could have been the grand distraction by the Chinese that paralleled by Hannibal's hike over the Alps and Pearl Harbor -- both, in turn, correlating so well with central precepts of the inimitable Sun Tsu. How am I doin so far?"

J.B. could only shrug with a give-me-a-break-grin. She was momentarily out of control. Noting that his son had sidled up to witness this mommy spectacle, he picked the youngster up. Pressed him into his lap and looked back at Sandy with mock, rapt stare.

"There's even a follow-up feature story," she continued, "remember how you and Arslan rolled your eyes at Chou's lecture on the economics of subsidizing the replacement of every fishing boat in the battle. Some

people, dear husband, just love that doo-do,” she misspoke and with a quick glance at her son rattled on, “adds great credibility to the whole thing about expropriating commercial shipping and a whole fishing fleet to launch something like a second Normandy invasion. Civilians would dismiss the notion out-of-hand as improbable unless it was undergirded with some down-to-earth plausibility they can relate to. Why do you think ol' Chou belabored this with you two? Clever old fart knew more about public perceptions than you two grunts.”

“Mommy said poo and farts,” Bert squeaked, and while the adults laughed him out of his pout, J.B. took his boy’s hand, reached over for hers, and then without a trace of irony, looked her straight into her intense hazel bubbles and purred, “Well said, Mrs. Hood.”

As they walked back together, J.B. cautiously addressed substantive gaps. As the boy broke free and ran ahead to speak Turkish with the condo's *kapici*, doorman, he expanded upon some generalities that he had used weeks ago to prepare Sandy for her work on Arslan’s interviewing skills. In full constructive critique mode, he reminded her that things which were to obvious to the revisionists circle they circulated among would have to be explained more explicitly in such an article. He also maintained that she would be forced to anticipate obvious criticisms from both the Pentagon and Security Council. There were things he pointed out that would be plausible enough to readers and would slide by civilian editors, but might be seriously undermined if the Pentagon public affairs machine decided to enter the fray. One does not want to be on the wrong side of an avalanche of “dispatches-of-distain” dumped by the White House, State and Department of Defense. They have more money for public affairs than all newspapers and think tanks combined.

For instance, John opened up for her the gaping holes in US intelligence's knowledge about the PLA's amphibious operation plan. "We believe we've filled in some holes, like the armada of transports carrying two million troops, finding new uses for existing IT gizmos, the thousands of junks filling in for the PLA

landing craft etc., etc. Those do make for an unexpectedly effective looking amphibious force, but it would've been all for naught if the US Navy had shown up. We revisionists hinge our argument on the presumption that the main objective of the AKCAM was to keep our Navy out of the picture, but the 'how' of this is still flaky," he said. Those details were still in the wind, and harder to nail down since Taipei capitulated so precipitously -- making the amphibious landing unnecessary.

Sandy had nodded her understanding saying, "but we still *do* believe -- as you've said -- that the only way to Taiwan for the Chinese was through Fairbanks," and then silently urged him on. That led him to point out also that nothing disclosed so far explained how the PLA's air force presumed it could gain air superiority over the straits of Taiwan. Again, a hurdle for her civilian readers. He confided that even some military officers did not realize how air superiority is *absolutely* critical to success in any amphibious operation. Without it amphibious assaults are simply aborted.

"That's doctrine, not experience," he said. "In fact, this was to be our next area of inquiry if there is another session with the old guy."

He then outlined for her the political shortcomings of their current data. He had pointed out that General Chou Chin had called the previous year's dust up over the Spratly Islands "Phase I" of the Taiwan invasion. J.B. had said then, "There could be something really crucial there."

"Because the Spratly's are so far away from Taiwan's main island?" Sandy asked.

"Indeed, I can't help thinking that there was more to the concurrent 'demilitarization' of the off-shore island of Kinmen than has been spelled out by anyone so far."

"Ok, So what?" She said.

"Agree, may not really be that necessary to your story line, but would reveal an important flaw in the conventional wisdom, if we could uncover yet another successful PLA deception operation. And what's more, even if the General is missing, it's probably something a lil' research can unravel. I mean, who's

really looking at the operational implications of something that happened..." J.B. paused to count on his fingers, "ten, months ago, before the first hint of any Chinese troop presence in Alaska..."

"And eleven months before the Taiwanese bowed out," Sandy said helpfully cutting in, again, and then nodded impatiently with a glance ahead toward little Bert. She was clearly hoping there was better news to come.

He took his cue from her testiness and skipped over the whole issue of Chou's insinuations about a second similar deception operation during the hostilities with Japan three months later over the Senkaku Islands.

He thought it could also be a big deal, integral to the whole main island invasion. After all, that episode also had many moving parts, several of which were still unexamined in the context of Taiwan's precipitous surrender. More research would probably do the trick. His bet had always been that the so called "attack" on the Japanese Navy in March was just as much of a phony distraction as the earlier PLA Navy's gross encroachment on the Spratly Islands. But -- a big 'but' -- to what end? "Distract" exactly who?

J.B. let all that pass and instead reemphasized an issue that he'd perhaps treated too lightly in their first run. His main point was that her story could hardly ignore the much vaunted NSA capabilities. He asked her again, "If PLA was in fact cranking up a two million troop transport fleet, mustering all their combat aircraft, and mounting a logistical equivalent of the three Gorges Dam project, not to mention conducting some kind of 100,000 man transport to Alaska, why the hell didn't the NSA 'see' all this? I'll grant you the PLA obviously got to Alaska undetected, but the 'status of the Straits' -- for heaven's sake -- was reported annually to Congress and had to be in the top five EEI. You do recall that first 'E' stands for 'essential.'"

"Is this the same CIA/NSA Team," Sandy grinned broadly, "that failed to predict the end of the Cold War and the invasion of Kuwait?"

With an exaggerated shrug and feigned grimace, J.B. pitched her a nerf ball, "They've got, they say 'exponentially more capability than last century.'"

She obliged his proffer with, "hasn't some military genius (who is unaccountably still a major) repeatedly said that U.S. intelligence agencies have always gotten better and better at intelligence acquisition but have never, ever caught up with analysis of the mountains of 'shit' they accumulate? In fact, wouldn't it be possible that they'd be more likely to be drowning in data."

"Again, well said, Ms. Hood. Misters Snowden and Assange couldn't have said it better. However, I believe my point still pertains since you're not writing for military geniuses and international icons."

"Point taken," Sandy conceded, "but then who but Chou, or someone very much like him, is going to definitively tell us?"

Adopting her conciliatory tone, John conceded, "We were doubtful that we'd ever get the NSA part from Chou...."

She had saved him from filling in the next sentence by turning to scold her son in order to rescue the *kapici* from interrogation by Bert speaking in his family's best Turkish pronunciation. That gave J.B. a moment to think to himself, "why then bring up this litany of considerations in the first place?"

He followed his wife and son up to the apartment. When Sandy herded the boy straight to his bedroom, he exempted himself from night-night rituals and grabbed a stiff single malt on his way to his favorite perch on the balcony, overlooking the water. As he had expected, there was a good deal more to see than earlier when the apartment light had refracted the obscuring drizzle before the black sky. Since then, the *kapici* had turned off all those houselights to improve his tenant's view of the spectacle. One half mile seemed a lot closer under these conditions. J.B. could see searchlights aimed at Chou's mansion, flashlights darting about and even the inevitable glow of cigarettes being puffed in groups, which roughly outlined the perimeter of what he presumed must be the impact area. He was wondering who must be in charge of the

bomb damage assessment when the lights shifted in a way that triggered a flood of memories. Out of the rapid splatter of fraught images -- including several views of a certain hay wagon -- the residual image of the burst in his windshield stood out. It was *not* hemispheric as one ought to expect from a ground blast. The fleeting memory was a fat teardrop with the tail to the left. Or, as he estimated now, in retrospect, it resembled an elongated afterglow of a teardrop coming from the northwest over the open water of the Bay of Üçkale. It all seemed so close to him in that moment. He thought about driving back, yet again, to the spot where he had seen the explosion to confirm this flashback. In addition to the implied movement to the southeast, the fireball seemed to have been higher than the lights prowling the woods on that cliff top. That was when it occurred to him that it might well have been a missile and that would complicate the hell out of things. Their NATO air defenses were a source of Turkish pride and Chou's main reason for moving to Üçkale in the first place had been safety from air attacks. The implications crackled like slow heating popcorn under his skull. He realized that at minimum, he was going to be a real pain in the ass to those poor investigators. He had just enough information to provide plausible suppositions and sufficient Turkish to make him hard to ignore, but was also possessed of such nebulous evidence that he could easily muddle their conclusions.

"Perhaps," he mused to himself, "it might be a good idea, after all, to get tangled in the inquiry. He might learn more about old Chou -- missing or not -- with more access to personal staff, maps, files, flash drives, etc. The Turkish officers in particular might appreciate having a knowledgeable, Turkish speaking American around as a buffer. Those long suffering NATO professionals watching, in place, as US personnel rotated in and out through the HQ knew they were bound to encounter some stereotypically abrupt, too brusque US investigators who had never darkened the door of a foreign language class room and could not begin to conceive of the problems *everyone* had with a second tongue. That made him wish again for the hundredth time to hear Arslan's voice. "If only the Turks trusted their own civilian phone system more, so

he could at least call him," he thought. However, as it was, Arslan would not speak of anything remotely related to his work, and in his absence, his wife or kids would also fear to say anything -- as in any-damn-thing -- substantive for fear of generating criticism from on high that might be prompted by the ever vigilant listeners who were allowed access to all officer's personal phones. "Hell," he thought, "'their polite-but-paranoid 'pashas' still classified standard topographical maps -- hard copy as well as digital.'" It added depth to his gloom to still know nothing about his friend.

They had known each other since language school in Monterrey. As a Chinese and English speaking Turk, Arslan had been the rising star of a new exchange program. The idea was to expose students in both armies to "genuine" combatant counterparts using the military jargon and academic seeming euphemisms, which bedeviled them so in class.

He chortled at the recollection of how Arslan had endeared himself to his American classmates on the occasion of his first dinner party at their house. J.B. and Sandy had sought to include him in the social whirl, which inevitably surrounded officers temporarily released into a schoolroom from the more arduous demands of troop duty. The class members were all dying to know what kind of regulations this exotic Turkish army had that permitted him to wear his thick black hair in the then current civilian long style. When he had replied with a dead-pan sincerity that it was *not* allowed at all, the other officers had roared in unison. The laughter had continued not unlike a prolonged standing ovation, as the buzz-cut group marveled to each other at his audacity. He had won them over by having the stones to defy the global military establishment's persistent, perverse desire to keep its young people out-of-step with the rest of the world. It had been particularly funny that he would probably get away with it, simply because of his distance from home and the relative obscurity of his posting.

The civilian linguists who taught Arslan knew very well of his transgressions, but gave not a damn, either.

For the remainder of his days in California, Arslan had more invitations than he could accept. The fact that he was at the time a geographical bachelor and therefore a collective concern of Army wives (partly genuine hospitably, but mostly rotating “guard duty” on behalf of Musi, whom the Turkish Army would not pay to accompany her husband), which meant that he probably never ate anything, but breakfast, alone. “What are you laughing at?” Sandy said, startling him out of his reverie.

“Oh just remembering Arslan’s infamous disclosure about his hair. And, of course, how all of you had kept the poor guy on the straight-and-narrow. Little did you know at the time that you’d meet her face to face -- or face-to-veil as you gals imagined back then.”

“Not so,” Sandy said, “absence of veils on the Aegean coast was one of the first items on my Q&A at the ‘initial condescension-to-dependents’ in-briefing. Besides Musi’s a lovely, bright woman that your too-hot-for-his-own-good buddy is lucky to have. I’ll always be glad that I never needed to equivocate when telling her about life in Monterrey.”

He stifled a knowing smirk and brought his wife up to date on what he had seen across the water and moved on to what they would have to cover to save time on her research for the story she could be writing sooner or later -- depending on Chou’s luck this night. There were operational basics she had been absorbing since West Point that she would now have to understand in a lot more detail. Military things that may have been zipping by her since they married. She grasped them well enough, in context, to follow with genuine interest. However, writing about a subject drenched in tradition and chocked with euphemisms was quite another thing. Not at all beyond her grasp by any means, but guided research could certainly speed the process.

-----PENG HU ISLANDS-----

With the boy fed and bedded, they settled into one of Sandy's easy but elegant candlelight meals with a view of the light show out the window. While she'd been cooking, J.B. had decided that a didactic approach would only vex her and vowed to try to be more socratic about her big piece. To him that meant a broad brush of the big operational factors, which supported the plausibility of Chou's bold claims. He would remind her of Carl Sagan's saying that, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Then instead of lecturing about these factors, he would try to pick the hardest and most salient questions that military pros would be most likely to ask. As she dug for answers, he hoped she might be more open to exploring the many details that otherwise might have sailed by her in past cocktail conversations.

After a perfunctory toast and chat about the child's day, they'd opened the conversation with Chou's claims to have repurposed a number of existing technologies to improve upon America's mastery of amphibious warfare. From the list, which included such things as offshore artillery platforms, overnight airfields, stealth "beach" drones, etc., J.B. decided to emphasize the ubiquity of GPS as a key game changer. After the brief overview of how much it simplified the herculean complexity of getting troops and equipment to the right place on the assault beaches, he posed the questions he hoped would keep her on the right track.

"They'll probably ask how commanders could possibly control troops aboard fishing junks who can all find their own way? Why won't each soldier find his/her own way -- *all of the way* out? Other's might grant you the efficacy of GPS in some cases, but question its use to effectively control 30,000 civilian junks milling about under fire. They're also likely to ask you to defend the fishing junk's likelihood of survival on the beach compared to the standard military landing craft. Both claims are defensible, by the way, honey. history of the standard Higgins boat and..."

"And," Sandy broke in, "ask the questioner, if he has doubts about spreading out formations, how on earth the soldiers were kept on the battlefield after they were released from the Civil War style ranks," she recited

with mock seriousness. "As one master of the military art has ranted to me several times, the entire nineteenth century officer corps fully expected every last soldier to bolt -- never to be seen again -- if he were to be released from the discipline of marching in step, shoulder to shoulder, in files and columns. Yet smaller groups of fighters somehow cohered, stood their ground and fought as teams scattered all over WWII battlefields. This is what you're leading up to. Is it not?"

"Yes, indeed. I had no idea you were listening so closely all these years. 'War stories' like that seemed to bore you and every other civilian within earshot."

"Just keeping up appearances. Any more on the new gizmos aspect?"

"Only to follow through," he said, "with this point by emphasizing that the new level of discipline required in this case speaks to the very heart of the new way of war the Chinese are thrusting onto the rest of the world. And, most telling of all, it probably had a lot to do with how the PLA got 100,000 men 3,000 miles from the Amur River to Fairbanks intact. That tidbit," he added, "should help get your project over an editor's desk."

They lit a fire, noted the growing intensity of the flashing spectacle and moved their conversation fireside with port and chocolate. He had begun by telling Sandy what he had concluded about the possibility they were watching the aftermath of some kind of missile strike. And, if that were the case, it increased the possibility that Chou had survived, because it was such a high burst. If so, that could diminish the urgency they were feeling tonight.

As he ticked through his list of military keys to amphibious warfare, she had quietly assessed her own command of each subtopic and settled on the importance of air and sea superiority, suspecting there was more to them than she'd heard in cocktail conversation. Sandy had a much more solid grasp on the other aspects of the operation. She understood the import of deception to achieve surprise. She could appreciate the military value of secondary attacks for the psychological advantages they brought to an

operational equation. Most of all, she was up to speed on new evidence about how AKCAM fitted into the whole PLA scheme of maneuver, which supported the revisionist idea that the true purpose of the Alaskan Operation was to draw the US Navy away from the straits of Taiwan. That ploy -- in its turn -- was *the* pivotal operation imperative. No Alaskan distraction, no war.

"Air superiority is just as crucial to success as a sufficiency of troops, but not as obvious," he began sounding more professorial than he had intended. "For example, amphibious undertakings are inherently offensive in nature and therefore, one must have three to one advantage at the point of attack. That's advantage in combat power as measured in troop numbers *and* firepower. Think that through. As you research, try to imagine how unlikely it is that seaborne strangers could ever expect to get those odds on someone else's home shore."

"Think surprise," J.B. added, "because as the attacker you must also control the sea, so you can land where the enemy is not. The enemy knows not when nor where you will come in. It's a must. No sea control, no landing. With surprise almost any navy can control the waters. But, how do you find out where the enemy is not -- where he's weak? That -- you can imagine -- is less obvious, but air superiority has always been how it is done -- so far."

"Got it," she said, "but everyone knows that the U.S. F22s in Taipei's Air Force are hands down the better fighters. So how is it that Chou can be so damned confident?"

"The short answer is airfields. To be more specific, ask yourself, What good are one hundred high performance, air control fighters, if only fifty of them they can get off the ground?"

"Ok," she said, "so what if the Taiwanese F22's shoot down all the Chinese sub-optimal planes before they get to the island's airfields?"

"Good try, that's how you start the process of figuring how Chou's larger numbers of second stringers lose the air-to-air battle but win the air war. Again surprise is prominent, but in the air it's more easily attained --

first, one must give the mainland planes the edge on day one by presuming a successful massed rocket attack on all airfield facilities followed immediately by a relatively unimpeded low level air attack on those same targets (mostly with older MIG fighters). After that, you should follow through with a stubby pencil style tally of sorties. Go ahead and give Island's air power a three-to-one success rate in air to air combat, but then tally the entire PLA (air force and navy planes) with 3 sorties per day (be sure to include thousands of old clunkers flying short round trips against airfields from the *Peng Hu* islands -- by that time in PLA hands). Compare those numbers of mainland Chinese strikes to the probable kills by the remaining Taiwanese F22s and F16s flying only *one* sortie per day, *because their fields are such a dammed mess*. This kind of reckoning is, of course, conjecture not prophecy, but it is a valid analytical exercise to get sound planning estimates. My for-the-record prediction is: in such an air war, the *fuel truck drivers* will take more casualties and be bigger heroes than the fighter jocks."

J.B. continued saying, "However, that's only about preparing the battlefield. The big thing to remember is to keep focussed, laser-like, on what happens on the ground where the campaign is won or lost. It's always a matter of armed men standing on foreign soil directly imposing their will on an unwilling population. All the rest is supporting operations. That demands that you, Sandy, can explain what air support does that makes it so indispensable to ground pounders."

He walked her through one approach to the answer by dismissing the popular presumption that gaining air superiority meant merely strafing the enemy at will. It helped that Sandy already knew, as well as J.B., that one's enemies are not bombed into submission. He also assured her that critics would remind her that Taipei's army -- like the mainland -- had a trained and equipped two million man force in the field with many well supported tanks. Moreover, all of them were *on Taiwan*, not ninety sea miles away.

"That begs the question. Doesn't it? Once fighting one-on-one, how would an evenly matched PLA even get a foothold ashore? Military professionals would know at once that it's air superiority that would give the

PLA the edge. Finding out why it was so obvious to them," he said, "should be a big priority in your research." J.B. hoped that sorting this out on her own would allow Sandy to teach herself the details, the dreary hard way. Nothing, but nothing, beats preparation on your own.

Knowing better than to ask, "Why so?" at the end of each sub-topic, Sandy asked something instead that caught her husband off guard and changed *his* own thinking.

She asked, "Why then didn't the Chinese Air Force need air superiority to take Kinmen at the outset? I know the mainland's overall effort against the Spratlys was stymied, but the PLA *did* get on to Kinmen Island despite all those high performance fighters. Did they not?"

"True, though the outcome was complicated by a diplomatic cease-fire settlement, you're right from a *military viewpoint*. The 'neutrality' or 'denial' – whatever you want to call it – effectively gave Beijing de facto control and took that Taiwanese outpost out of the equation. Also true, Taiwan's air force flew mostly unopposed in the air over the littoral. Always seemed kind of unsurprising -- at the time -- considering the mess the mainland's navy and air force made out of their foray against the Spratlys," he added.

"So," she persisted, "Taiwan had air superiority over Kinmen, but the mainland's ground forces landed troops there anyway? That's the military bottom line as you are inclined to say."

"Well... technically you're right," he said, "but Taiwan's air force did also get badly waxed by ground-to-air missiles and other anti-air fire. Taipei lost a shit load of high performance aircraft, which they had a hell of a time replacing." J.B. became thoughtful, gazing heavenward as he added absentmindedly, "And, they might well have still been trying when Fairbanks was..."

"So," Sandy interrupted, "amphibious assault landings *are* possible without air superiority?"

"Seems so, technically. But, don't forget Kinmen is a very close-in coastal Island. Shit, you can practically walk to it at low tide. It's more like an Oklahoma river bottom in summertime."

"Ok," she shot back, "then what's doctrine and what's not?"

"Wait a minute," he said, "you've got an excellent point there. What *doctrine* applies? Maybe Kinmen was *never* considered an amphibious landing in the first place. Maybe it was treated as a *river crossing* all along. Sure looks like one in retrospect. Shit, that's perfect, for the PLA," J.B. added hitting his head with the heel of his hand. "In a river crossing -- I'm belatedly recalling -- one needs only *air parity* not superiority. That's the doctrine dammit. And, what's More, the PLA did get parity from massed ground-to-air fire... blimey, sweetie that's beautiful," J.B. almost shouted, grabbing his wife in a spontaneous bearhug.

"What if," he revealed, loudly, "keeping the PLA's planes out the air battle was intentional? Planned all along, knowing that they were not needed, especially if the generals knew they could bring so much anti-air fire to bear. In fact, it's possible, nay likely, that the whole thing was cooked up with a secondary objective of wreaking havoc on Taiwan's air force with minimal losses to their own." He held her by the shoulder and looked into her eyes as he said, "That, in turn -- my sweet -- would have set the Taipei back and made them vulnerable to the more crucial air superiority battle later over the Peng Hu's, which -- if you recall -- the mainland *did* win. That tussle inflicted still more losses of hard to replace aircraft. All alone that might have turned the tide later-on in an air war over a full fledged assault on the main island -- had it occurred."

Dropping his hands and moderating his voice to a more thoughtful tone he added, "The whole notion of intentional deception over Kinmen adds logic to our claim that Kinmen was actually the main objective in the whole Spratlys episode and makes the whole idea of a staged Normandy style invasion seem all the more plausible." He turned to her again, "Sorry hon, this was supposed to be for you -- your article -- but I think I got more from this chat than you did."

"Great," She said, "how about *you* doing the dishes?"

"Big Kiss, come here... sure... you're worth it."

"Aren't you sweet," she whispered, but he got a quick jab in the ribcage anyway.

"Intentional," J.B. couldn't sleep for the persistent echo of the word, intent and its tantalizing implications. Big day tomorrow. He was suffering the usual tussle between the need to rest and the benefits of rehearsing. A series of questions, popped-up full-blown and unbidden. "So, was China's whole thrust into the Spratly Islands merely a cover for their real intention on Kinmen? Had the media hype distracted everyone from the actual military objective? Kinmen, after all, was militarily relevant and the Spratly's were not. It had been relevant as hell ever since the early fifties when the ROC clung fiercely to Quemoy (as Kinmen was known then) despite months of bombardment. Taipei knew -- even then -- that it would be a major thorn in the back-side to any cross straits invasion."

This elaborate deception could have been underway since the earliest days in the early teens of this century. If one wanted to give the Chinese credit for being meticulous, he thought, "Why not? There was always a tidbit of truth to stereotypes."

It had all come together in the moments before he slipped under. The project would not depend so much on Chou to spell it out. They would themselves look for deliberate deception especially amongst those apparent inconsistencies that kept cropping up. They could credit the Chinese military with more sagacity and premeditation than before. They would use his testimony only to provide a path to hard facts revealing valuable details such as archived satellite photos; documented analyses revealing large scale movements of air defense weapons from remote areas before the fall of Kinmen; cataloged shipping records noting major increases in "commercial" traffic to new ports or port facilities opposite Taiwan; or perhaps even indexed State Department reports of unexplained "buy-backs" of older MIG aircraft from Chinese client states like N. Korea. This might be possible now that such things could be unclassified because the focus

in the Pentagon had shifted so dramatically to Alaska, and no one cared so much anymore what had been going on in mainland China.

He slept, not long, but well. Seven hours later someone who would aid and abet his plans in surprising ways was rising to his last well rested day for several weeks to come.

----Caffeinated Foot Soldiers-----

“There goes my sleep time,” thought Zack, “or my prep time, or both. Never fails when one plans to get to some must-do things on a plane.” It irked him that he was ensnared by FOMO. Fear of missing out was a tyrant of his teen years, which ought to damn well *remain* an adolescent phenomenon. Yet, here was a genuine unparalleled opportunity – a beautiful younger woman seated beside him on a two-seat row. How often does that actually happen to a divorced, forty-something? On and overseas flight -- no less. Better still, she was animated and well-read with that special light behind those deep brown eyes. This was not just some fortuitous distraction from a long bore. This was one of those "nevahh-hoppen" moments that says, "Drop-what-you-are-doing." With that thought, he let slip research detailing the run-up to the Alaskan war plus the added possibility of a three hour snooze. He did so with nary a backward glance.

When her engaging face reappeared on her return from the ladies, he slipped over into her window seat to grant her the treasured aisle seat. Tara's highlighted bob looked darker from a distance, which worked well with her necklaced cleavage over an ivory blouse draped by a dove gray suede vest topping black pants. They were the only pair on this huge jet who could have gone straight to a reception without changing. Her walk hijacked his entire visual cortex for the intervening twenty seconds.

“Hey,” she said, “you didn’t have to put me on the aisle.”

“You’re welcome. We could change over again if it gets rowdy over there.”

“Not likely up here...,” she said as she sat and busied herself putting her purse and earbuds away. Turning full on with her subtle perk aglow, she added, “Not much for us to say about this rookie, solo tourist. I *want* to talk about you. You said journalist, right? What kind?”

“Internet, I’m afraid. Just a website streaming -- a kind of interview show. Very esoteric stuff though not pitched to academia. On camera, I meet historians (not exactly household names). We get a coffee and talk while we walk.” Zack shrugged with his near palm up, and with an apologetic grimace said, “It’s called, ‘Historians Afoot, Getting Coffee’... a spinoff.”

She batted not an eye, was attentive, and looked curious -- even fixing him with an interested smile.

Encouraged, he explained how Jerry Seinfeld -- a decade ago -- had a popular website, which spun off so many celebrity greet-and-gab-off-set shows that it achieved near genre status. By the early twenties, it had become a way to showcase all kinds of notables. He made sure to add that his own program had stayed online and never went mainstream, emphasizing the temporary nature of the work for him. Leading upwards soon. He hoped.

When she asked how well received his website was, Zach answered by itemizing a few high spots, which he and the producers believed had permitted the effort to get enough new funding to survive. Striving for brevity, he listed the “Greatest Hits” with their niche viewers and tagged each one with a succinct profile. She knew of Francis Fukuyama and nodded along with his explanations of why scientists like Jared Diamond and E.O. Wilson qualified for airtime. She nodded with surprise when he told her about their near disaster with the racial ruckus over the interview with Stonewall Jackson's biographer. Zach conceded that the show defended Civil War generals, perhaps a bit more than necessary. The show had advocated for facing up to history's unavoidable realities but should have left the criticisms unanswered

--- he noticed her smile broadening. After the firestorm of hate mail dissipated, it turned out that the attention brought more hits and “likes” than ever. “Seems there’s merit,” he said, “to the old adage about merely spelling your name right... “

She beamed, “Now I know where I’ve seen you before. It was a video clip on some newsy shows deploring all kinds of racial insensitivities. As I recall, you were struggling to say something sensible sounding in the face of some pretty stern political correctness.”

“Struggle is right, but I’m glad we went lower profile after that. Much of the bigger audience that checked us out afterwards appears to have stuck around for the long-haul. By the way, you never said you’d recognized me.”

“Yeah... but wouldn’t I have sounded like some kind of celebrity hound? So, what are you doing now?” she asked. “This flight... work or play?”

“ Mostly work, they are sending me with a crew -- cameras, audio, a producer, and so forth -- but we’ve got extra days for some 'play' and I’ve never been to Turkey,” said Zack. “The chit-chat and coffee could be a total bust this time but, just in case, we’ve got another show in the can. So...”

“Who?”

“Valenti Sarayev. It’s strait-laced narrative history. How the West ‘lost’ the Ukraine – no controversy.”

“No, I meant who’s your interview in Istanbul?”

“Oh, it’s actually in Üçkale (near Ephesus) and I am supposed to chat up a Chinese general named Chou Chin.” He is an alleged history maker not an historian.”

“Oh yeah, Üçkale its near that resort *Yaçıltepe*. I almost put that one on my tour. But, never heard of the general or any Chinese soldier --- come to think of it -- except that guy Din Hai from the war. What’s the deal here, are you consorting with the enemy?”

“Enemy? Hardly, the war's over and let's be clear,” he said in a faked pompous tone, “for this gig, I am leaning heavily on my role as a *journalist*.”

“OK, I won't report you to the pilot,” she said with a smile. “But still, who's this Chou guy?”

“Well, that's kind of the whole point. He apparently thinks you *should* have heard of *him*, not Din. Chou is now a defector who may have left town over that dispute. At the office, we believe he may have something new to tell us about the Alaskan Campaign -- something substantive, if we're lucky. Maybe even something plausible. But then, who knows? That's why we have backup.”

“But,” she said frowning, “the Alaskan war isn't exactly history. Is it? And, we've been hearing about nothing else -- TV, papers, internet, books even -- seems like for years. Hard to believe anybody has anything new. I mean, I know nothin', zip, about war and yet I am up to here,” she lifted her chin slightly with the edge of her hand.

“Well, Ms....uh?” he asked.

“Wilson,” she offered,

“Well, Ms. Wilson, don't hold back on my account. You should just tell us what you really think about my life's work,” he said trying on his first sardonic grin.

She gave him a self-deprecating head cock with a polite chuckle.

Zack continued, “Actually, Chou's supposed to expound on pre-war stuff (twenty teens). Insists he was Din's boss and the real mastermind. Claims that Moscow played no role -- zip -- in what we thought was oh-so important back then. The Senkaku's, Spratly Islands, ABM site near Fairbanks, etc. were merely deliberate distractions by the Chinese -- 'planned deceptions,' he calls 'em. 'China really had other goals,' he says. We'll see.”

“So,” she said, “all that handwringing over the South China Sea take overs, freedom of the seas, and even nukes were bogus? What, pray tell drove them?”

“Taiwan.”

“Oh, so you’re flying all the way to Turkey to hear someone say Taiwan did not throw-in-the-towel before we could raise a finger?”

“Apparently, so. My producers tell me it’s more complex than it seems. They didn’t tell me why. Seems it looks more authentic, if I seem genuinely surprised about something on air, but his story better be good. Like you, I am a tad skeptical. However,” Zack held out a palm to hold the floor, “ascending -- as we are -- to this level of complexity requiring full sentence paragraphs and big words, it sounds too much like work. So, why don’t we change the subject? You haven’t told me what you do.”

“Late blooming lawyer resting up for a bar exams.”

“Go on”

Zack lost track of Tara Wilson when his corporate buck-security-pass sped him past her at customs. He was now deeply preoccupied with plowing through a mob, while struggling with a large choice of drivers offering him rides. He planned to try for the best English speaker in hopes of avoiding the infamous hassles on the dodgy drive from Ataturk International to downtown Istanbul. He had beckoned two likely candidates to follow him when he heard an ear-catching sound. A voice spoke in faultless, barely accented English. “Mr. Zachary Marcy,” it said. “I recommend the Tepe Palas.” Major Arslan Perioglu, sporting a new mustache and dressed like the others -- hatless with jeans and well wrinkled leather-like jacket -- knew he had his quarry at the first try. “I’m Hamit.”

On the way to town, he used the standard cabby ploy to extend the fair. He convinced Zack his visit would go much more smoothly if he could become this first-time visitor’s sole means of transport. He promised to pick him up at any appointed time, recommend the best places, drive him around town, and get him from the Tepe Palas to the airport two hours before his flight out.

After Zack had agreed to the general plan, they spent the remainder of the trip considering his food and entertainment preferences. Arslan, giving a good impression of Hamit the cabby, sprinkled his “business” conversation with tour guide praise of his native city, while subtly trying to learn more about his rider’s work and more near-term plans. After he failed to convince Zack to stay a few more days to tour the city, they settled on a restaurant within a short walk of the hotel and a 2100 pick up there for a one-stop club tour followed by an early nightcap at the Palas’ version of Rick’s bar from *Casablanca*, complete with the bartender’s white dinner jacket. The lounge featured ceiling fans turning slowly over nineteenth century decor -- every detail a piquant reminder to visitors that they were at the actual terminus of the Orient Express. It was an unabashed tourist trap, but no less fun despite its brazenness.

As Arslan returned his rider’s luggage, he popped a question he had been saving for last. “So, *efindim* where is your plane headed to tomorrow? “

“Üçkale.”

“Üçkale? That’s my hometown...”

“So, that’s how I got the chance to drive him here, put him in your apartment building and know his every move around our town.”

"Hey Arslan, ol' buddy," J.B. laughed, "you've really bounced back from your fall from grace with the 'Supreme Marshal.' Better not let him see you squiring his interviewer around."

“Thanks, wise-ass. Still do not think I should have got all the blame. How was it Arslan who was responsible for a submarine missile to knock down half of the Marshal’s villa? I am lucky -- maybe – that only three were wounded and family on the bottom floor not hurt. Also, lucky, high burst was bad decision by People's Navy. Steel roof and top floors took most of the blast. Guess Chinese spooks do not expect such a high rank people to sleep in bottom of his house.”

“Not many homes,” said J.B., “have the pool on a lower ledge with the family quarters dug-in to the cliff behind it. Being original, saved this cool General’s butt.”

“Ok, so as you know I am out of loop, as you say. Chou won’t catch me with Mr. Zack because I am not driving him in Üçkale. My boss agreed to let me have my vacation at my family’s home. My brother, Lieutenant Attila Kuçuk, is pretending it. He will drive Mr. Zack everywhere. It’s normal here to hand-off good job to family.”

“True, but no American would know that. However, he won’t care as long as you your price stays low and your so-called brother is on time. Presume your intel staff has a way to keep a record of everything.”

“Don’t worry, we will get every word -- on the internet show and remainders not shown to public. They will use wireless microphones.”

J.B. leaned slightly forward and rolled his hand before his chin, urging Arslan to finish the thought by putting words in his mouth. “And...say it... 'we will share same with our old friends and loyal American allies...’” He said, with a rising inflection denoting a question, politely requesting confirmation with a guilty grin.

“So... on the substance of our opening chat...” said Zack, “you are encouraging me to be curious about hard evidence to explain how China could have taken Taiwan anyway, absent a US rescue, something no ‘sane’ U.S. general believed possible before or since the AKCAM.”

“Correct,” said Sandy, “that issue could be the hook because there’s a dispute -- as you know -- about why PLA invaded Alaska in the first place.” They were meeting in Zack's work space in a second floor suite of tiny offices near the city center park.

“And...,” Zack said, cutting-in to be helpful, “thus, the objective of distracting US forces was easier – not to mention more plausible -- than taking out our best ABM defenses. All this means what again? You said it earlier.”

“Means that all along everybody's been only half right,” said Sandy Hood, “about the outcome of the war. Despite a brilliant US win in the battle for Fairbanks, maybe China actually got what it wanted.”

“I guess how that boils down to specific questions is my problem...” Zach said. “Not to mention my other problem, your warning about our hosts,” he added frowning, “you say, if the Turks could, they'd classify the time of day. So why did they even allow me to do this interview? ”

“Well,” said Sandy glancing around the walls and ceiling of his tiny office, “seems as if there are things Turkish spooks want to know that they believe he is holding back. They're afraid he might tell the whole world before any military intel agencies -- anywhere -- can censor him. Seems better they *let* you do it on their turf, something they believe they can control.”

“Any military, you say. China and who else? “

“We believe Chou thinks the US might also want to shut him up. And there's some truth to that. US and Turkish Intel are both in the process of 'debriefing' him. Allegedly to keep the NATO alliance -- like a good ally should -- safe from any sinister capabilities the Chinese may have developed during the last war. My husband thinks these two intel shops have different goals, but he doesn't know *exactly* what the Turks want.”

“And, the generalissimo's going along so far,” Zack said, “because the Turks are protecting his rogue ass from The People's assassins. What about us? What do our spooks want?”

“J.B. can't tell me. The EEI, essential elements of info, are highly classified – legitimately so – in my view.”

“OK, nothing I can do about that. What else you got for this overseas neophyte in the way of local knowledge? By the way, pardon if I sounded blasé just now. I’m just a tad overwhelmed by the work and underwhelmed by the support he gestured at their tight surroundings. So, actually, I am most grateful for your time. You’re being very generous.”

“You are welcome,” Sandy said with a little nodding, mini-Bow. “Chou is not experienced enough at this TV stuff to do the best prep. Ideally, he should have done print reporter interviews or mock interviews so he could learn to abbreviate his main points. He won’t do it, so I suggest you prepare yourself and your crew to go along. Let him blabber on in military speak. J.B. tells me he’s well-versed in NATO jargon (like all generals) thinking that it’ll make him sound more authoritative.”

“Yeah, I’ve already seen that sort of thing. Confidence choke. But, their titles alone drench them in credibility. Our audiences believe any damn thing they say as long as they start with the adjective ‘military.’”

“Indeed,” said Sandy, “I presume you can edit most of it later. My paper, by the way, will pay for out-takes if you’re selling.”

“No sweat. We’re used to this. We spend big bucks, nowadays, on post production. Also, we have two cameras and do tons of B-roll so we have backgrounds -- exotic ones in this case – to cut to, which smooths out the abbreviating of the audio -- even in-town horse carts, for heaven's sake.”

“Great,” said Sandy gathering her stuff, “I’ll just get out of your hair.”

“One more thing,” he said. “would you listen in to the live feed with my producer? She’ll be talking in my ear and we would welcome any quick suggestions.” Then, Zack pursed his lips in a silent shush and gave his head a slight, secret “no” shake.

Picking up on his intent, Sandy took the note he was handing her under the table and put it in her purse without raising her hand above the table level.

“I’ll do it,” she said without missing a beat. “Have her call me.”

"Jennifer," Zack added.

"Jen, ok, seeya. It's been good working...."

"You're a pro, Sandy."

She waved the four-finger tickle. In the basement Arslan turned to his head-phoned tech sergeant and said, "Got all that?"

"No gaps, *binbasa*," my major.

"S'cuse me," Tara said as she held up Sandy just outside the door, "I'm Tara Wilson do you know where I can find Zack Marcy?"

"Certainly do and I am reasonably sure he'd want me to tell *you* where he is. Next door to the right, see the handwritten sign. By the way, any friend of Zack's is welcome here," Sandy said holding out her hand, "Sandra Rosen Hood. Just finished meeting with him. You staying in town?"

"Well ya... not far from here..." Tara said taking the shake.

"*Yaçiltepé?*"

"How'd ya know?"

"Easy guess. Gorgeous place. My husband -- in an office on the ground floor here -- is also working with Zack. Probably see each other again."

"Hope so."

J.B. was standing at the stairwell watching them part and waited there for Sandy to join him, knowing she was headed for his office. "Hi, I was checking on her," he said anticipating Sandy's question and gesturing at Zack's now empty doorway.

"Geez," she said, "and, I was thinking you came up here only to escort your lady to your humble abode." Then with a mock scold expression added, "So, you know her? If so, from where?" "Naw, she just looked so very familiar, I thought maybe I could figure out where I'd seen her before. And, my dear, I

did. She had that same intense look then as when questioning you just now. I saw her months ago in the 'space available' passenger terminal in Erzurum. Remember that trip?"

"Indeed," she said, "you were alone. Tell me why's this Tara so memorable."

"Ahhh so that's her name," he said feigning interest. "Actually I only noticed her because she bumped me from an allegedly empty Turkish Air Force flight. Found out later that she flew as the only passenger on a 'special mission' to the Russian Far East. My source called it the 'Vladivostok region.' Wonder why she's talking to Zack?"

"So, wise guy, how did you know that's Zack's office?"

"That, my dear," J.B. said trying to look inscrutable, "is my job."

"Why am I doing this, you asked me?" Said Chou raising his voice. Seeing Zack's shock, he added, "Ok, we go off the record?"

"It's not really normal at this stage," Zack said. "Once we have our coffee in hand -- walking together toward that lovely park -- it's supposed to be a friendly conversation," Zach added, as he was thinking, "oh, shit, fricasseed from the get-go."

"This is a low-level office work type question. Not to our agreement. Also, you name me 'general' I believe there is a good English word for those officers who command generals."

"Generalissimo?" asked Zack.

"No, marshal, is acceptable."

Zack stiff-smiled a nod, thinking, "Sandy never mentioned this shit. She called him 'general.' It's going to be a long gawd damned day."

“Marshall Chou, thank you for having coffee and a walk in this pleasant green neighborhood -- Sirin Yer -- in the center of downtown Üçkale...” The balance of Zack’s routine introduction and warm-up went better than expected considering the stumble-bum start. Then he did his customary shift to something that would disquiet his listeners. “Marshall, we have reliable reports that you have said your country never intended to invade the USA...”

“Well Zack,” thought J.B. Hood as he pushed his earbuds inward, “when you cease circling, you do take a center shot.” From his ground floor work office, he wondered how all the others listening in the building and back in the office were taking this. In addition to Sandy on the podcast crew’s audio, Arslan’s spook techs were tapping into the feed from their basement one story down, and J.B.’s own intel shop had hooked him into the Turk’s re-broadcast to NATO headquarters, as agreed.

“I do not approve the English word ‘invade.’ It makes people think China wants to occupy and annex USA territory. Not so,” said Chou, “our army’s march last fall to cross at Bering Strait was *support* attack only. We wanted US forces to ignore Taiwan and to concern only with Alaska. This is only reason for this minor border *penetration*. If US Navy thinks only of Alaska and moves sea assets to there, our attack succeeds. If China won not one battle in Alaska, that is ok. American military say, ‘*not so*,’” he said sarcastically, “‘not then, not now.’ After today even, they will continue to say Taiwan forces all alone could have defeated any main island attack by China, if they had wanted to fight.”

"Why is that?"

“Hubris,” Chou said.

“Got some pre-loaded words,” Zach thought. But, said aloud, “that’s a broad term. How would arrogance of US weaken Taiwan?”

“Taiwan never was as strong as China. US for too long had too low opinion of our people’s army. Your country for too long say Chinese can’t ‘project forces beyond border.’ Not true.”

“So,” Zack said, “you say our generals underestimated your armies and you did project large forces abroad. Was that really on your own? What about help from Russia?” He added.

“Negative. No help,” Chou replied, leaning more on his closely studied US military jargon.

“Your generals are blinded by high-tech. How can US say we have less high-tech than Russia? Our People's Army can go nowhere? This is not serious. Transport needs not high-tech. Did they not know how many thousands of civilians cargo ships and cargo aircraft China has?”

“Presume you are referring to crossing the strait to Taiwan,” Zack said, “if we concede that point, what about the Bering Strait? Did you transport your own forces -- undetected -- all the way to Fairbanks unaided? In civilian ships and planes? Without Russian help?”

“You have video of US military quotations of 100,000 of our troops in Fairbanks, orrect?”

“But how?”

“We marched. It was second ‘*Long March*’.”

“So, your troops marched across Russia without Russian assistance -- as so many of your captured troops have insisted for the last four months. Many of our listeners will still judge this as propaganda to hide Russian collaboration.”

“We used scientific methods in preparation and execution. But, only normal tech, ‘from the shelf,’ as you say it.” Chou Chin jutted a concessional half smile and said, “Of course, some Russians, some peoples helped, but not Russian state – not Kremlin.”

“Holy Shit. Nailed it!” J.B. blurted aloud and then thought, “Who the hell helped them in the RFE? prewar insurgents? No damn way...” that thought was interrupted by an ever so slight static and Major John Hood's allegedly covert intercept went silent. In the silence, he heard Sandy talking from atop his desk through the open connection on their smartphones. “This, Jen, is big,” Sandy was saying to the producer next to her, “could confirm a lot of suppositions. John will love this...”

J.B. dropped his earbud and picked up his phone, originally intended only for him to prompt Sandy. From this point on, he heard only one woman's take on what was transpiring and not a single word --live -- of the ongoing interview.

Without him, the interview chugged on. Later analysis by contingency planners revealed a remarkably well-prepared interviewee who stubbornly dodged any further questions about the Alaskan Campaign and stuck to a script, extolling the astuteness of *his* Taiwan invasion plans and preparations.

As NATO analysts prepared upcoming briefings, the American officers noted that their outlines of the interview looked very much like Army Staff College textbook instructions for formulating an amphibious assault operation plan: Tick A: Strategic surprise; Tick B: Tactical surprise; C: Sufficient lift; D: Superior mass (manpower plus firepower at point of attack); E: Air superiority; etc...

As the bullet points emerged from the back-and-forth of the interview and after scrubbing Zack's attempts at eliminating the obvious powerpoint-pitch feel of it, the PLA's assault plan began to look more plausible to military doubters.

Those who were on record as dubious about China's capability to win a cross straits war *alone* had hinged their skepticism on three key factors: the inability of PLA Air Force to gain air superiority over those flying top US aircraft; the mainland Navy's lack capability to lift sufficient troops across straits (especially artillery firepower to gain fire superiority on beaches); and the People's Republic's lack of wherewithal to gain surprise.

Chou had addressed these qualms in surprising ways. Starting with his reply to Zack's question (after J.B. dropped out), "all sources agree that Taipei's military is the *same* size as your assault force-- two million strong. Even if you could sea-lift two million, as you said, how could you have gained necessary three-to-one superiority necessary to win on any beach landing?"

"Surprise. Taiwan's military would never know when or where. Their army had to stretch over 400 kilometers..."

"That's 250 miles," Zack cut in, "sounds like a lot more beach than the Normandy invasion of 1944."

"Yes, we did not have to plan for six million to win 'beach head' as you call it. With surprise and air attacks, we are thinking to cut-off and fight not more than 300,000 enemy troops."

"But, Marshal, sounds too difficult to hide all of your troops on -- maybe -- 2,000 to 3,000 ships until a D-day."

"Ok, but you think of it as one mass attack. *Not* so."

And Chou's next sentence dumbfounded the myriad covert listeners. "It was to be a three phase campaign. Two phases were completed before start of US so-called AKCAM, Alaskan campaign."

"So, you finished two phases of preparation for the landing in secret? Are you saying China was 2/3 ready and no one knew a huge battle for Taiwan was even underway?"

"No one knew," Chou smiled, "two-thirds ready for *main* attack. Do not forget others were fighting a support attack against Alaska before 'Phase three' was scheduled to launch." He paused as Zack was stuttering to formulate a rejoinder to the unexpected disclosure, then said, "Also, preparations not so secret as you are saying. We get soonest tactical objectives done in open view -- on TV. Did you, Zack, not see the Chinese versus US plus Japan plus Vietnam plus Australia in fights over what you call Spratly Islands and later, over what Japan calls Senkaku Island?"

"Holy shit," Sandy's voice intoned from J.B.'s phone, "unbelievable, here it comes..."

"What?" J.B. pleaded.

"Shhh..." she still had not realized he was cut off.

Zack partially recovered and said, "But, that was... Didn't your side back down? Didn't the Chinese navy retreat from both encounters?"

“Yes, to both questions.”

“So?”

“So, as TV watch Spratly Islands, the People’s Army -- in Phase 1-- killed many enemy aircraft with anti-aircraft fire over Kinmen (also called Quemoy) and on that island, secured our landing force's rear area for future Phase II and III landings. Also, while world TV watch, Japan’s Navy made landings to fortify Senkaku Islands, the People’s Air Force showed Chinese ableness to secure air superiority over Taiwan air space. At same time, the People’s Navy and Marines, execute ‘Phase II’,” Chou held up two fingers, “we secured south flank of beach landings by taking many *Peng Hu* Islands. By the way, this also added -- for China -- six of what US calls 'unsinkable aircraft carriers.’”

“Unsinkables close to Taiwan beaches,” Zack said in awed surprise.

“Cannot believe we didn’t see this,” Sandy whispered half to the phone and half to herself. “J.B. you knew every piece of that puzzle,” she continued to herself -- then aloud -- said, “seems so obvious when you hear someone else say it.”

“Hear what?” asked J.B.

“Shhh...,” Sandy said again turning to face Jennifer, twirling her forefinger urging speed,
“No *known* island occupations. Tell him.”

“Yes Sir...” Zack drew it out, “ok then... please explain how you used close-in islands as 'aircraft carriers' when the UN cease-fires -- imposed after these clashes -- did not allow Chinese forces to ‘occupy’ either Kinmen or the Peng Hu Islands.”

Chou calmly nodded with another sly smile. He explained that the texts of the UN Security Council's Cease-fire Resolutions specified generous time for troops and ships to withdraw from the "defensive positions" they had taken up earlier -- despite Taipei's strenuous objections -- to support China's military maneuvers allegedly made to take over the Spratlys.

He had said that it seemed perfectly logical to him that Chinese forces, in fact, took all this time and more to leave the islands. Since the UN resolutions also kept Taipei's forces out of both areas, the PLA and People's Navy had quasi-legal but *de facto* – though temporary -- control on each. Exploiting the UN cease-fire, he explained, permitted them to squelch the local press, upgrade the necessary ports and build temporary airfields on *Peng Hu* islands for Phase III. Chou made it clear that there were no serious disputes over any of the poorly enforced UN agreements, because the PLA was able to hold off any big troop increases until a very few days before Phase III was to begin. By that time, of course, the Republic of China had capitulated and the territory in question became Chinese. The People's air and ground forces landing for the third phase of a cancelled invasion ended up occupying their own new islands. Chou seemed particularly pleased to note that military infrastructure preparations for war served just as well in peacetime. He chuckled at his own use of the Pentagon euphemism "cost avoidance."

The multiple surprises kept Zack's earbud buzzing, but this was not his first time round the quad. Ignoring Jen and Sandy, he plowed a new furrow, "Tell me, Marshal Chou, why live in Turkey?"

"Have you been to the coast of the sea near this place?" Chou said, turning to look into Zack's eyes for the first time -- more at ease than he had been so far. "I hear American's spend millions of dollars to visit Greek islands. Just so for 70 years. But, you know, the land shapes of those beautiful places are not changing when they cross the Turkish border. So, like so many of your citizens this land pleases me -- much so."

"Better than Chinese islands like Hainan or the Paracels? One would think perhaps someone of your rank and accomplishments could be more comfortable in your own culture. That is to say, your status could do more than money to enrich your lifestyle there."

"Some people might think this way. All may not agree. Life is sometimes more complex."

“Are you implying that you have political disagreements with the Chairman or the Central Military Commission? Do you disagree with policies back home?”

“Geez,” Sandy said aloud into her phone, holding her left hand over her mike, “he’s pressing hard and going off the reservation. What’s going on?”

“Dunno,” replied J.B., still in the dark, but cooperating, “‘maybe, just ‘TV ratings tax.’ Ya ‘know, jazz-it-up before his audience falls as...” then cutting into his sentence she snapped, “Listen...”

“I can’t...” J.B. started to say as Sandy turned her phone off.

Ending a grumpy preamble as Sandy tuned back in, Chou said, “...so Chinese field marshals do not deviate in politics.”

“Does this exclude disagreements in your system over purely military matters?” Zack said, “perhaps, with your other high-level officers, let’s say?”

“Turkey is *not* this Field Marshal’s exile place.”

“Ok, no dissent, no exile perhaps, but how about some strong *misunderstandings* between colleagues?”

“Wow...,” said Sandy, “I barely mentioned any of this shit in passing.” Then to herself she said, “No evidence for that, Zack. Pure supposition on J.B.’s part. Surely not something worthy of repeating on air for heaven’s sake. Must be more careful what one lets slip-out in front of a TV host... Dummy.”

But Chou was not done. He proceeded to turn supposition into fact, saying, “Most important, the People’s Liberation Army made a plan and prepared our operation so big, so correct, so formidable (using the French pronunciation)...”

Zack prodded, “So overwhelming!...”

“Ok... that Chinese forces had victory with no need to fight. This -- your military officers who listen will know -- is what the great Sun Tzu has named as the best victory of all -- US caught in battle far away, enemy surrendered, and no fight, nothing better.”

“Classic historical reference. He’s rehearsed this,” thought Sandy. “Something more to this,” she said aloud to Jen. But then, a new cloud of synapses connected, “Wow,” Sandy thought and gasped a whisper into Jen’s ear, “what he means is that it’s a bigger deal than the Alaskan Campaign.”

As if on cue Chou said, “Some not in the military 'big picture' forget that support attack is only one part. One movement -- no matter how wonderful -- is not the symphony.”

Passing on Sandy’s “wow,” Jen finished her prompt to Zack saying, “... And the honcho for Alaska's PLA, Din, is now chief of all People’s Liberation Forces...”

“Who knows,” said Zack, raising both outward palms to shoulder level, “maybe this broadcast and listening historians will praise this new perspective and that might alter the world’s fascination with General Din’s campaign.”

“Marshal Din,” said Chou with a frown.

“Right...,” Zach said as a placeholder for another course change. “I am still reeling from that two million-man lift. Tell us more, please. How would so many troops get from such big vessels to the beaches?”

“Fishing boats,” said Chou curtly.

“Any boat? I’ve seen tuna boats that were...”

“10 to 20 meters, old ones,” Chou interrupted.

Zack’s charm eventually prevailed and Chou’s ugly mood ebbed enough to hold forth about the thousands of fishing junks, which were able to make rendezvous with the correct ships using GPS and

smart phones. He added credibility to the People's Liberation Army's Navy amphibious plan by introducing details that had eluded US military analysts.

For instance, it has not yet occurred to our Navy planners that the junk landing fleet could make up for the great speed differences between troop ships and small craft by preceding the main fleet by days. Since fishing boats were designed over the centuries — for lingering in one small area to fish for extended periods, they could simply wait without undue strain on their minimalist crews, which were also standard for any fishing boat that wanted to bring home a really big catch. Fishing, of course was the obvious cover for the presence of a junk fleet just offshore of Taiwan. Surely they would be seen, but the People's Liberation Army's Navy Intelligence correctly predicted that the actual scale would be missed. They knew no one was watching that closely, the mass junk flotilla tactic had been so thoroughly dismissed decades ago.

In addition, it had not occurred to critics of junk landing tactic that boats could simply be left on the beaches and the hulls used as cover. No need for the classic back-and-forth movement of traditional navy supply craft. Logistics would come ashore in similar one-way junks. When asked how he obtained so many "disposable" junks, Chou replied that the People's State Government gave every voluntary skipper a voucher for full replacement of every lost boat with a new, powered fishing boat. This measure not only guaranteed recruitment of sufficient numbers, but served to upgrade the nation's fishing fleet and ensure maximized fish harvests well into the future.

When Zack asked how such small craft got tanks and artillery ashore, Chou reminded him that the People's Navy was *not* without conventional landing craft. As Western analysts never failed to note, the People's Republic of China (the mainland) had too few of them to carry both men and equipment; however, they had just enough to get sufficient heavy equipment ashore if every last bottom — including converted troop carriers — was devoted exclusively to tanks and cannon. The biggest surprise in this discourse was the revelation that some of the important, very heavy artillery would be mounted on oil platforms offshore,

just out of range of all but the few of the island's longest shooters (and some less accurate ballistic missiles). The platforms had been scheduled to be towed across the straits by ocean going tugs and not sunk upright until "H" hour minus eleven in full darkness. This was additional fire power that could conceivably have tilted the balance of fire superiority in China's favor on the beaches.

-----FRACTURES-----

While Zack took a break to greet a Turkish park ranger crossing their path, Sandy seized the moment to reconnect. She pushed auto dial for J.B. He'd be sitting patiently in total audio blackout, not calling her back because he could imagine how frenzied she must have been in her new role as a producer's assistant.

"Hello Dear, what happened?" he said picking up the handset.

"What d'you mean? I called you for the military take on what he's saying."

"Sorry Honey. Turk's 'lost' my feed – maybe cut it off. Anyway, haven't heard anything since you hung up my second hand listening post."

"Shit, so sorry for that. I was sure you were listening with Arslan.

"Yeah.. well, now I will be depending entirely on you to reconstruct all this after the fact, cuz now, I am afraid that the Turks might have cut me out intentionally and could hush-up any recordings that get out of country including Jen's intake."

"Ok, full turdnado, as they say. You can be certain, sweets, I won't be cutting you off again."

To relax the man, Zack had let Chou ramble on to set him up before he dropped another big one. "Tell me, Marshall, how did the NSA – reputed to be all seeing — miss all this activity? You're saying that the agency that is believed to parse every stray electron failed to detect 100,000 troops walking 3000 miles;

new port and airfield construction opposite Taiwan; hundreds of junks massing. Not to mention, two million troops assembling for combat.”

“Not so strange, Mr. Zack. Most of what People’s forces did were visible, not hiding. By hiding many and gathering most in the open we *did look* like we were preparing to occupy Spratly’s and Senkaku. NSA surely did see this.”

“How does that explain the huge swarm of small boats near the Republic of China or the mass of men sweeping across the Bering Straits?”

“Today, I tell you what any can see on TV, if looking close. In future, these things all your historians will not miss. But, the NSA secrets you will not hear from Marshall Chou, this day or any other.”

“No comment, on NSA deception...” whispered Sandy into phone. She could almost hear J.B. thundering “Shit!”

J.B.’s imagination reverberated with the echo of a loud “Pis Kopek!,” dirty dog, certain to be shaking walls in Arslan’s listening post.

Unaware of the disappointed expectations amongst his closest listeners, Zack’s interview trotted on. “Marshall, let’s revisit why you were able to deceive the US military.”

“No secret, this.”

“Why so?”

“American military is foolish in love for highest tech. Please now... who is testing a mechanical man before learning all things GPS can do for battle and maneuver?” Chou asked, holding up his free hand to forestall interruption. “But, this is well known. Ask your US military advisor Major Hood. He can explain Chinese use of GPS in all combat phases,” Chou said, pausing to change subjects, “deeper problem for US military schooling is attending to history.”

“You mean Military History?” Zack was licking his chops considering the boost Chou was giving his core audience.

“ Yes and international relations history, also.”

“Marshall, you have our attention.”

“So, you must know, Mr. Zack, American officers would not so much underestimate China if they were reading more Chinese history. Do you also know most US officers still believe People’s Liberation Army surprise attack in Korea...”

Zack came in, “Red Army crossing the Yalu in 1950. Correct?”

“Correct, too many think China only wanted to protect North Korea. But, not so. Not the main reason. Your nation has well known Professor who know early as 2024 and write books telling People’s Liberation Army Operation was deceptive operation permitting China to occupy Tibet. Not rescue of Pyongyang.”

“Ok, I do agree about this new scholarship. So? Are you implying similar deception applies to D-day over Taiwan and the Alaskan Campaign?”

“Exactly,” Chou said returning Zack’s grin.

“Also,” Chou said taking Zack’s turn to speak, “the American Nation’s system lacks discipline at the highest levels.”

“The White House?”

“ No, highest military level. When America executes war operations, Pentagon uses too many not necessary types of forces. Before Alaska worst example was 1991...”

“ Desert Storm?” Zach interrupted.

“Yes, your Navy prepared a mass amphibian flotilla for desert warfare. Fooled no one. Also cost too much time and manpower.”

“Are you saying then that the US Navy could’ve gone to Taiwan Strait instead of Bering Strait?”

“Alaska campaign was land warfare like 1991 desert war. You have proverb, I think you say in English, ‘Like moth to the flame.’ We know US Navy would hurry to Bering Straits and Chukchi Sea close following your 82nd Airborne Brigade landings. We also expected they would also hurry transports to Hawaii, with big escorts, to bring extra infantry to battle in Alaska. We believed they would be fastest surface transport to reinforce the war, but not so. Your army's militia surprised us.”

“Did your People’s Navy count on this? Seems like one big assumption – a chancy one indeed.”

“We, the Chinese Military, study American Military History very close. Is it not a good idea to study most powerful world military? Did not your nation study British navy and Napoleon very, very carefully when those nation’s were most powerful in the world? Best history example, Hannibal did so...”

Sandy had been whispering highlights to J.B., “So U.S. Navy no show is due to big brass being ahistorical, unquote.”

“Big talk — if he's so damn smart — why was Chou subordinate to Din at the top?” J.B. shot back and went silent.

“Good, John B.,” she said aloud, “Jen, ignorant my ass. Why then is Marshal Din big cheese? Tell Zack.”

Somewhere between rapt and stunned, Zack had been walking in silence during the Hannibal digression. As a rule, he never interrupted. Even when edited out, ramblings had their uses — over titles, introductions, historical references. But, as Chou finished, Jen’s prompt gave him his next line.

“Fair points Marshall. Speaking of discipline, maybe it’s just a tough thing to exercise at those rarified levels. Did you have troubles in command of Marshall Din – then General Din?”

“That again,” Chou said raising his voice and repeating a memorized English cliché, “if it bleeds, it leads,” to introduce a lengthy dismissal of the substance of Din’s greater notoriety. He repeatedly assured

Zack that he alone had been the overall “boss” and history would vindicate the primacy of his role in the re-incorporation of Taiwan as a full-fledged province of China. Without explicitly addressing Din personally or professionally, he made it clear that Din was merely doing his commander’s bidding in Alaska -- operationally, logistically and technologically. Without specifically taking credit for designing new methods of dispersing, organizing the massive requirements for clandestine resupply or developing complex networks of tactical communications (with 100,000 troops spread across the rough terrain in the RFE), and planning all the other innovations that would have been necessary to conduct such an enormous undertaking, Chou let the audience infer that it was all arranged in detail at his behest.

Zack did not pursue the allocation of credit. Instead, he made Chou unaccountably uncomfortable by asking about details of the Marshal’s supervision of his subordinates in the run-up to the alleged Phase III. Where were they respectively located? How often did he inspect? Who attended command planning conferences? How did he communicate with Din securely? Any back channels? Although, Zack remained courteous, bordering on genteel, Chou became repeatedly agitated, pleading necessary secrecy. As his irritation began to undermine the show’s premise, Zack tacked again.

Extracting the full meaning of this segment would later become the “boost burn” that would lift J.B.’s civilian writing career into a new orbit.

Trying to grind out a grin through Chou’s grumpiness, Zack sought diversion in promises of rest up ahead with a tranquil view of the becalmed lake’s shimmer in the twilight marking a pleasant ending to his angst. “Let’s take a seat on that waterside bench and see if we might conclude this conversation by putting your very cogent observations into...”

A bullet’s impact on flesh induces simultaneous arousal of the senses. One does not hear it or even feel it so much as intuit the collision. It is a sensory awareness too fast to pinpoint — so vague that civilian witnesses often remain unsure that anything happened.

Zack and everyone about him stopped as if stilled by some unearthly pause button. Few knew a reason why. Even the combat veterans nearby failed to hear the follow-on crack of a firearm.

Arslan, pressing in on his earphones, was the first to say, "Silencer."

Next, Chou dropped. Zack saw and bellyflopped. The sound-man followed, and the cameraman kneeled gingerly. In the midst of ensuing commotion, Chou's valet appeared in a side-car mounted on a motorcycle driven by the Marshall's bareheaded Chief of Staff. The growing security mob parted to allow the well-known officer access to his boss.

Presuming he was wounded at best and treating the riders as rescuers, the security detail helped the valet out and put the dazed, but awakening Marshall into the side car.

Not until the snarling two wheeler turned the wrong way did anyone pause to consider what else might have been done.

* * *

As soon as he could get upstairs, after checking the latest with Arslan, J.B. burst into Zack's office cubby in the studio, "Seen Sandy? I'm her husband -- by the way. John B...," and stuck his hand out.

"Ahh, the uniformed historian. Heard about you. She left in a hurry before I got back," Zack replied with a frown. "You probably need to see her before...," he paused as if remembering something, and adding, "just see her as soon as you can..." waving off any other subjects with two hands down, while shaking his head "no".

Confused at being shushed, J.B. filled the silence saying, "What are *you* gonna do?"

"Be sometime before we get our hands back on our own video. A lot could happen to outdate this show or make Chou's eye-openers irrelevant," he said winking and nudging his head and eyes at his desk lamp.

“And if not?” said J.B., remaining oblivious.

“If it’s still thought-provoking enough down the road and if it doesn’t get bumped by something hotter, then maybe it’ll air.”

“Well, news or not, Chou’s disclosures will still be revisionist history. Show is called 'historians on foot'... is it not?”

Zack grimaced still shaking his head, “true, but Chou’s disappearance does support a counter argument that his claims are just disinformation.”

“Ok, but the fact of the shooting — attempted assassination — undermines that.”

“Well...” said Zack slumping his shoulders in dismay at J.B.'s cluelessness, "not if someone makes the case that the whole thing was a set up... He *is* still alive. Right?”

“Faked assassins – you suggesting?” J.B. said.

“Could be. At least indicative of something else going on.”

After waiting four beats for a clarification that never came, J.B. said, “So that could mean the whole thing was a dry-hole for you... However, Chou’s jittering gave *me* an inkling of...”

This time he finally stopped because Zack was holding a forefinger to his lips, shaking his head no, again, and pointing to a ceiling corner with his other forefinger.

J.B. finished the thought in his head “...How Din’s independence may have bigger implications.” Only then did it really register. “Zack knows he’s bugged,” he thought, "shit, what’re the implications of that?” He got a pen. They started writing to each other.

“Inkling?” Arslan said pressing in his earphones...

-----POSTING-----

“Man is Arslan pissed,” J.B. said as the couple met alone at home, “sounding more like this whole Zack thing was his personal operation.”

“No surprise, if it were,” Sandy said, “but until he's the cabby, Hamit, again he'll not be able to grill Zack about all this. Although Zack will know he's being recorded, Arslan will still get the last words in on the way to the airport.”

“Things could be working out ok for our Turkish friends – if Chou lives,” J.B. added, “no trace of him by the way, but still too soon to admit it, even if they have found him.”

“D'you think Turks could have done it? With Arslan out of the loop, of course,” Sandy said.

“Could be,” J.B. shrugged, “when I asked him afterwards if China, Russia, et al. could pin the attack on Turkish security services, his answer was less than convincing. He asked, ‘If any of us had done it, would we have given him a bulletproof vest and then fucked up the evacuation so badly?’ Or, words to that effect with some military vernacular added to his International English. However, if they do 'recover him' and have frightened him enough -- while avoiding blame for all the attacks -- Chou could shift out of his staunch neutrality and cut our side out. Whatever it is they want so badly may yet be theirs. Who knows?”

“We will see, eh?” she said with a conspiratorial smile.

“Indeed, my dear,” J.B. said, “but none of that's going to affect thee and me as seriously as what they might do with the recordings of the interview. Arslan's not sharing or apologizing for cutting me off. So, I might never get to hear it for myself. No slight, hon, on your version of events.”

“None taken, sweetie,” her crooked smile was ambiguous though she probably intended it to be sly.

“Apparently, they have seized everything Zack and crew have touched as if they're front-of-the line suspects. We'd do the same thing back in the states. Got to show one is doin' sumthin, however irrelevant or obtuse it might be. Anyway, access to that show, with it's oh-so-helpful content, will be on hold indefinitely. Did they 'ransack' the studio while you were still there?”

Now, Sandy's smile was unambiguous. She was in full femme fatale mode with a surprise-for-you-big-fella look. "Get ready to deliver your biggest kiss since this slipped on," she held up her left hand and twisted the diamond back and forth with her thumb.

"Naw.. unbelievable.."

"Believe it, Big Boy." She lifted her laptop and an audio symbol filled the screen as Chou's cranky voice spoke, "... is a low level office work type question.." he was saying. Sandy hit "pause" and got the sloppy kiss she expected and returned it with gusto.

"How the hell?" he whispered inhaling another scent of her hair.

"Guess Zack knew something," Sandy said, and went on to tell J.B. how Zack had sneaked the note with encryption key to her. They held hands and marveled at their luck to have audio — hence transcript — in the absence of any video. Zack's show would be delayed, giving them the luxury of time to get Chou's revelations into print — apparently with Zack's blessing — no less. She also calmed J.B.'s concerns about Zack having his own copy. The audio resided on an encrypted storage URL. What she showed him on the screen was on their own air-gapped laptop, which they could erase any time and reconstitute with her mailed home, stateside, thumb drive and memorized key. In other words, she assured her husband, all three of them could access the interview with no fear of Turks seizing it as they had done with the video.

J.B. told her how Zack had learned about the bugging from his own sound-man who had been tipped about the likelihood in Istanbul by "opposition" TV news crews. According to their exchange of notes, Zack had not devised the audio dump just for this occasion. He had been saving those untouched versions all along to prevent his editors and producers from "misplacing" little interpretive nuggets deemed by them as "not newsworthy." So-called, overly "intellectual gems" had slipped from the shows archives so often that he'd begun routinely hiding the audio raw-intake and putting it into his own encrypted safe-place.

They had agreed that this new insight into the mind of their blogger friend would augur well for a future relationship. Neither of them would be averse to walking — on camera — with their affable chum discussing their latest publication, happily crediting Zack with prying the early clues from Chou back in the ol' Üçkale days.

J.B. contrasted this prospect with their unraveling relationship with Arslan and family. "I've been feeling a coolness, too," Sandy said, "Musi can't seem to agree on up or down without checking with Arslan."

"He was downright dismissive when I saw him today – almost rude. I was waiting for him in his office. He came in and without a word, rolled up the map I'd been perusing. Although I complemented the quality of the Turkish language cartography, he only grunted and told me he had nothing to add about the 'incident.' Can you believe it? 'Incident.' Since when did we start conversing in bureaucratic euphemisms? I left without finding out why the best Turkish made map I've ever seen was of eastern Kazakhstan."

"Central Asia?" She said, "don't tell me the worn out delusions of grandeur about a new Ottoman Empire — including central Asia — have wormed their way into a NATO headquarters."

"Never occurred to me," J.B. beamed. "The cartography was their best so far. Not cheap. Big bucks..."

"For what?"

"You tell me, beautiful, as soon as you're wearing something drop-dead gorgeous and the champagne's poured. We can use the occasion to plan how I should tell Colonel Gerry-boy Blucher why we must hasten back stateside to research stuff he's sure to hate."

"I'll ask the *kapici* to keep Bert for the night."

"You are such a terrific Mommy..."

* * *

Alfresco at the thirtieth floor penthouse restaurant, hoisting their third toast of the night against a field of stars pouring down into their own reflections on the bay, Sandy and J.B. chimed, "To Zack, he's true blue..."

"And..he's steadfast under fire," J.B. finished with a whisper, leaning over the table for a kiss.

"I didn't tell you yet," Sandy said, reaching for J.B.'s near hand, "but at the very end of the audio, he dictated some ad lib notes for the show's epilogue."

"And..." J.B. said, his hand in a roll-on motion.

"I think he felt sorry for the old guy – getting shot and all. Anyway, Zack lets him off the hook."

"Didn't have the heart to tell the world that Din really is, 'The Man'... nor rub it in about Chou's not having played Eisenhower in a Normandy rerun?" J.B. asked.

"Yeah, nothing about Din, 'changing the nature of warfare' – as my hubby so eloquently puts it."

"Nothing about creating a new level of military discipline? Or about a whole new level of dispersion, spreading the phalanx again in a new century?" he asked.

"Not quite, Sweetie, not nearly so cogent."

"Cogent? Ohh, you know how I love that word. How about sober or sensible? "

She nodded upwards with the Turkish "no" and rolled her eyes, "He did — or maybe will in the final version — slam the Pentagon."

" Oh indeed?"

"Yes," she said, "he tried out several versions saying in effect this sort of research was putting an end to the worst kind of wartime lying since Vietnam."

"Bravo for him. And, bless his heart, he's still giving us plenty of room to break ground about the war and be first to say some of those important things."

“Cheers,” they sang as their champagne flutes crashed into the fireplace. J.B. laughed loudest and held up a thumb to forefinger scribbling gesture to their favorite waiter nearby, who was chuckling with them.

END

AFTERWORD

“Inkling,” Arslan thought again for the 20th time, “a word from the last 5,000 words added to the English language. The ones native English speakers hold over the rest of us.”

Still in Turkish he said aloud, “So, Lieutenant how soon will they be ready for inspection?”

“Forty minutes, Major of mine, the resupply cylinder will have 'POISON' signs, and they will be locked under camouflage. We would not find it, if we had not been watching them from the hill top. We'll still have difficulty spotting it. Things will look very different from ground level.”

“We will see. Will they move it quickly from first to second dig today without their smart phones?”

“NSA will not detect my crews. No electronics period. The ‘motocross’ bikes you see at two fingers east of the digger machine are not for carrying equipment. Any minute you will see a courier leave to coordinate -- by handwritten message -- with the advanced party at our second site.”

Switching to English to exclude guards and sergeants in the bunker, Lieutenant Kuçuk added, “Sir, I know everything about this operation, but the biggest objective. This year we'll plant cache's, prepare

water and deep-dry crossings. Next year, our Corps will trek over three thousand kilometers, eating and drinking the caches dry in ways learned from Chinese..."

"How, dammit, d'you know that distance? Why did you even say the word '*Chinese*'?"

"Sir, I am an engineer. If an engineer knows the number of caches, then he can calculate the average distance between needed to feed..."

"Ok, Lieutenant, I get the idea. What's your question? (And, be damned sure all of this including your question stays secret.)"

"If our country wants to reunite with our original homeland in the center of Asia, why do we go longer distance to a province of China?"

"Ok, listen. I'll say it once, and we will not ever speak of it again. Do I clearly explain myself?"

"Yes, my major."

"As opposed to what you might expect," Major Arslan Periōglu said with a two-beat pause, "the most important thing the Chinese taught us in the war with Alaska is that the *road to the center of Asia goes through Xinjiang.*"