

Clive Cussler Ghost Soldier

By Mike Maden

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.

—Rudyard Kipling, "The Young British Soldier"

PROLOGUE

1945
North Field, Guam

The “Moonshiner” was the eighty-seventh aircraft in a line of 145 B-29B Superfortress bombers rolling down the tarmac. Their primary target was an aircraft factory near Tokyo, 1,500 miles away—about the distance from Canada to Mexico, and most of it over shark-infested waters.

Normally stationed by the “Putt-Putt” auxiliary motor during takeoff, the claustrophobic twenty-two-year-old tail gunner, Technical Sergeant Carl Jansen, had been given permission to stand near the cockpit so he could watch the takeoff through the big glass canopy.

The pilot mashed the brakes to the floorboards, his eyes fixed on the bomb-laden plane ahead of him wobbling uneasily into the sky.

Jansen mopped the sweat from his forehead but it wasn't from the heat. He'd seen enough fatal crashes during takeoff to know this part of the flight was as dangerous as the flak and fighters waiting to ambush them along the way. This would be his fourth mission over Japan. Not so long ago, he was riding a Farmall F-20 tractor in his father's cornfields near Manteca, California. Over his mother's protests, he waved his occupational service exemption to join the war before it was too late.

Finally cleared by the tower, the pilot advanced the four throttles, rattling the airframe as they powered up. He released the brakes, and the “Moonshiner” rolled forward with its crew of eight and twenty tons of munitions.

Moments later, the sixty-seven-ton war wagon was aloft.

#

In the air over Tokyo

Jansen stood in the cramped tail section compartment, his head on a swivel and his hands on the radar-assisted pedestal gunsight. Japanese interceptors preferred nighttime attacks and they especially favored hitting the big American bombers from the rear.

That put Jansen squarely in the crosshairs. It didn't matter. He had a job to do. Built for speed and increased range, the B-29B only had one gunnery station—his. If Japanese fighters closed in on his vulnerable position it just meant he had a better chance of swatting them out of the sky with his three .50 caliber Browning machine guns.

He told his mother that his body armor and helmet protected him from Japanese bullets but it wasn't true. He put more faith in his parachute despite the fact he had never gone through actual jump training.

The tail section roared with engine noise as the young gunner glanced through the large, armored glass windows. The night sky was filled with the shadows of bombers in formation—and, more ominously, hundreds of small black clouds of flak thumping all around them.

The first planes were already dropping their loads. Clouds covered the city far below, their undersides lit up by the flickering lights of exploding ordnance.

“Bombs away,” the bombardier said. His voice over the interphone was clear and measured despite the thundering flak. The “Moonshiner” shuddered as the 1,000-pound bombs released from their bay.

Jansen had once sat in the bombardier's tiny, unarmored compartment in the glass nose during a training flight back in Texas. "Best seat in the house," the mustachioed lieutenant had joked with him. Jansen wasn't so sure back then. But now, standing back here, with their P-59 Mustang fighter escorts far behind them, Jansen wondered if the bombardier wasn't right after all.

A sudden, blinding explosion tore through Jansen's compartment. Searing pain clawed at his back, shredding his parachute. With the distant shouts of "bail out!" screaming in his headphones, the gunner turned and reached for the emergency door only to see the "Moonshiner's" flaming fuselage streaking high and away as the tail section separated from the rest of the plane.

The tail section helicoptered down like a falling maple seed. Even if Jansen wanted to jump, he couldn't. Too shocked to scream, he hardly registered the ice cold wind scouring his face and whistling beneath his helmet.

His narrowing eyesight fixed on the maelstrom of light erupting beneath the hellish clouds far below.

Jansen's mind reeled in terror, his death certain.

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Unit 731 Complex
Japanese Occupied Manchuria
Four days later

Dr. Yoshio Mitomo stood in the doorway of his clinic, shivering in the biting wind as the Japanese army truck screeched to a halt. Neither his thin lab coat nor well-trimmed beard offered

any protection against the sub-zero temperature.

A burly sergeant jumped out of the cab, his boots sinking into the snow drift. He barked orders as he approached the canvas-topped rear.

The truck gate slammed open and the large body of an American was tossed out. He lay in the snow, groaning as two soldiers leaped out of the back and began hitting him with the butts of their rifles, shouting for him to get up. The big American cried out in pain as he curled up in a fetal position to protect himself.

“STOP THIS!” Dr. Mitomo shouted as he stumbled through the snow. “I order you—stop this, now!”

The sergeant barked another order and the two privates stopped their assaults.

The doctor stooped down close to the American. The flyer was only dressed in a ragged flight suit stained with blood, some of it fresh. His left leg appeared to be broken.

“Help me get him inside before he freezes!”

“Yes, sir!” the sergeant barked.

The two privates grabbed the American roughly and yanked him to his feet.

“Careful! This man is injured—”

“So what? This man is a war criminal!” the sergeant said. “He bombs innocent civilians!”

“Do as I say, Sergeant—or else.”

The sergeant’s snow-flecked face reddened from the bitter cold and his barely contained rage. He studied the doctor’s implacable gaze before finally giving a curt nod and uttering a

guttural “*Hai!*” He barked more orders to his men. They gently lifted the flyer to his feet.

Barely conscious, the tall American draped his arms around the necks of his diminutive guards and used them like crutches to steady himself. He turned to the doctor and whispered in a barely audible voice, “*Thank you.*”

Mindful of the still raging sergeant, Dr. Mitomo fought back a smile but nodded an acknowledgement. His eyes caught the name tag printed on the flyer’s chest:

TSGT. JANSEN

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Jansen sat tall in a chair in Dr. Mitomo’s office. His Chinese-made cotton pants and shirt were several sizes too small for the big-boned Dutchman but clean and warm. Over the past two weeks, his broken leg had been properly set and cast, his infected wounds stitched and dressed, and a steady diet of healthy food, water and tea had proven as restorative as the antibiotics and vitamin supplements Dr. Mitomo had provided. A pair of crutches leaned against the wall.

Jansen was certain he was being sent to a death camp after his capture and abuse by Japanese home guards. His initial prison stay on the outskirts of Tokyo had been a living nightmare, and his transport into the frozen north was itself nearly a death sentence. Guilt haunted him, convinced the rest of the “Moonshiner” crew were all dead.

His only consolation was to witness firsthand the utter devastation the U.S. Army Air Corps had wrought upon the enemy.

Sitting here in a sterile, well-lit room with Dr. Mitomo was strangely calming as the doctor read through a thick file on his desk.

“According to my records, you seem to be on a rapid road to recovery,” Mitomo said. His English was faultless having studied biochemistry at UCLA for three years before the war.

“I feel pretty good. And if I haven’t said it before, I’ll say it now. Thank you for your kindness.”

“Of course. I’m a medical professional.”

“We were told that American prisoners were not well-treated.”

“Unfortunately, that is often true, as you yourself experienced before arriving here.”

“So tell me, Doc, why am I here?”

Mitomo shut the file folder.

“Your American air corps has destroyed most of our medical facilities on the mainland. Here in China we have escaped your wrath. It is one of the few places where any kind of decent medical care is possible for American POWs.”

“When do I get shipped outta here?”

Mitomo pulled open a drawer and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

“Smoke?”

Jansen waved a big paw. “Nah, thanks. Never liked ‘em. But you go ahead.”

Mitomo nodded, flicked a lighter and lit up. After taking a few puffs, he continued.

“I’m still working on finding a camp that will be less harsh than the one you are bound to be sent to.”

Jansen shrugged. "I appreciate that."

Mitomo smiled. "We're not all monsters, you know." He blew a cloud of smoke. "I would like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

Jansen frowned. "You know, the Geneva Convention only requires me to give you my name, rank and serial number."

"Which you have kindly provided. We have also determined that you belong to the 314th Wing based out of Guam, and that your aircraft was named 'Moonshiner,' if I'm not mistaken."

"My name is Carl Jansen, my rank is technical sergeant, my serial number is—"

Mitomo waved a hand. "No need for all of that. You don't have to confirm or deny anything. All of that information was taken from the tail section of the plane you arrived in." The doctor laughed and shook his head. "It's a miracle, you know? How did you survive such a thing!"

The doctor's infectious laughter caught Jansen off guard. He couldn't help but smile himself.

"God himself must have set me down in those trees. Momma prays a lot."

"I am very pleased that you didn't die. You must have been in prime physical condition just to survive the mental stress of the ordeal."

"We ate pretty good back on the farm. Dad always said, 'Food is medicine.'"

"A wise man. Now, the questions I wanted to ask you were simply about your medical history such as whether or not you ever had smallpox. That sort of thing."

Jansen's eyes narrowed.

Mitomo smiled again. "I'm not trying to pry out of you any military secrets about smallpox or the quality of American medical care. No offense, but I'm probably already better versed in such matters than you are."

"Then why do you want my medical history?"

"I said that you are on the road to recovery but you're not quite out of the woods. I need all the information you can give me so that I can be sure I'm treating you properly. For example, are you allergic to sulfa drugs?"

Jansen shrugged. "I don't think so."

Mitomo took his response as a good sign. He opened the file back up and made a notation. He asked several more questions about childhood diseases, previous injuries, and his military vaccination record. Fifteen minutes later, he shut the file again.

"So, overall, how do you feel at the moment?"

Jansen rubbed his scruffy chin. "I could use a shave."

Mitomo stroked his well-groomed face. "I bet you could grow a fine beard."

Jansen grinned. "My mother made me promise not to. No tattoos, either."

"Ah, yes. Mothers." Mitomo stabbed out his cigarette. "Perhaps I can arrange something. In the meantime, I have one other favor to ask."

"Sure."

"I'd like to run a series of tests. Hearing, eyes, breathing. I want to make sure that we're

not missing anything that might prove harmful or even fatal later on. I can't promise you quality healthcare once you leave this place. Is that acceptable to you?"

Jansen shrugged and nodded. "Yeah, that's fine."

"And then I can get you that shave."

#

Jansen sat in a small, enclosed glass booth with headsets perched over his ears. It almost felt like the tail gunner's compartment.

"Can you hear me?" Dr. Mitomo asked on the other side of the glass. He sat at a small desk with a control station and spoke into a microphone.

"Loud and clear, Doc."

"Good. The test will begin momentarily. You will hear a series of tones, sometimes in the left ear, sometimes in the right, sometimes in both. If you hear a tone in your left ear, lift your left hand; if the right ear, the right; and of course, both hands if the tone rings in both ears. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Let's try it. Ready?"

"Ready."

Mitomo pressed a button on the control station.

A moment later, Jansen raised his left index finger.

"Very good, Carl. It looks like we're all set. Ready to begin the test?"

Jansen nodded. "Ready."

"Then let's begin."

Mitomo adjusted several dials and knobs for a few moments, then pressed the first tone button. Jansen lifted his right hand. Two seconds later, he lifted the left.

Jansen's face paled, his breathing shallow.

"Is something wrong?"

"Doc...I don't feel so good."

"Tell me what you're feeling."

Jansen bolted out of his chair but his splinted leg gave way. He fell back onto the desk, gasping for air, his panicked eyes pleading with Mitomo. He screamed for help but the sound caught in his mouth. He clutched at his throat as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

The big American airman crashed against the glass and crumbled to the floor.

#

Dr. Mitomo held the cigarette in his lips as he examined Jansen's open chest cavity. The corpse lay on a steel dissecting table.

Lieutenant General Ishi stormed into the autopsy room. He was the commander of Unit 731, officially known as the "Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department of the Kwantung Army." In reality, it was Japan's testing center for chemical and biological warfare.

"What have you discovered, Mitomo?" the mustached surgeon asked.

"My aerosolized Botulinum has worked perfectly on the American specimen."

He poked at the musculature around Jansen's lungs with his scalpel.

"The diaphragm, abdominals, intercostals, scalenes—even the sternocleidomastoid. All hard as Vulcanized rubber. Total paralysis, and nearly instantaneous."

Jansen had been selected because he was considered a prime example of American biology.

Mitomo had put out an urgent request to the army for any captured Americans. Jansen had arrived in such terrible shape, however, that Mitomo was compelled to restore his health so that the test could be properly administered.

"And how many specimens have you tested?" Ishi asked.

"This is the fifth American. He's a perfect specimen with an excellent health record and no co-morbidities. He showed no resistance to the Botulinum whatsoever."

"Then we can proceed with Operation Black Chrysanthemum?"

"As soon as we produce sufficient quantities of the neurotoxin."

"Excellent. I will inform our superiors. Well done, Mitomo."

"Thank you, sir."

"When you have finished your examination, burn the body, as you have all the others."

"Of course."

Ishi clapped Mitomo on the shoulder.

"Thanks to you, we shall yet win this war!"

Chapter 1

Niger, Africa
Present Day

The long convoy of armed Toyota pickups loaded with Nigérien troops raced north in a line through the desert on a hard-packed road bracketed by thick stands of gnarled acacia trees. A howling wind clouded the air with fine powdery sand, red as rust in the late afternoon sun.

The column was still three hours away from the village where the regional commander of the Islamic State faction was reportedly hiding. The Nigérien soldiers were far beyond the safety of their fortified base but they were coming in force. The local fighters were armed with little more than AKs and rode air-cooled motorcycles. Their preferred targets were unarmed villagers and helpless farmers, not soldiers.

“C’est comme la surface de Mars!” said the driver, a first sergeant. He wore the scorpion

patch of the 1st Expeditionary Force of Niger (EFoN). His American military surplus camouflaged uniform was covered in dust.

Lieutenant Wonkoye, the mission leader, grinned at the sergeant's comment.

“So you have been to the Martian surface, Sergeant?”

The sergeant flashed a blindingly white smile beneath his oversized helmet and shook his head.

“It's what the Americans used to say.”

“Americans used to say a lot of things.”

Wonkoye instantly regretted his comment. He actually liked the Americans, especially the operators he trained with. But American soldiers were mostly gone, thanks to the military junta that now ruled his nation. The only Yanks left occupied the massive American-built drone base in Agadez but its personnel were forbidden to leave it.

The American special forces trainers were fearsome warriors with great knowledge and combat experience, yet they were humble, unlike the French *paras* who had fought alongside them over the years. Wonkoye remembered the big Americans training them hard but still coming down to the Nigérian camp and playing *le football* with them—unlike the swaggering French who, despite their easy smiles and common *langue* held the Nigérians in quiet contempt.

No matter, Wonkoye thought to himself. Those days are long past. The Americans and the French had been expelled on the orders of Niger's new president, himself an army general. Wonkoye, a fervent patriot, quite agreed with that decision, perilous as it was.

The Islamist plague was exploding across the region, he thought. Over the years, both the

Americans and French had spent a great deal of money to fight the jihadis in Africa. Their efforts were nationalistic, not humanitarian. They fought the terrorists in Africa so that the war would not be brought to their own homelands.

Both western countries had partnered with Niger, one of the poorest nations in the world, in the long, bloody struggle. It might have been better if the west had sent aid instead of guns, Wonkoye had often thought, but those were matters for his superiors. He was a warrior and his only duty was taking the fight to the Islamist enemy whose numbers grew daily.

Rumors of a grand alliance between competing Al-Qaeda and Islamic State factions swirled in the capital, Niamey. Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Gabon had all fallen to military juntas in recent years, all driven to act by the corrupt and incompetent governments supported by western powers in the name of security. Other African governments were on the brink of toppling as well, including mighty Nigeria. The jihadists were poised to exploit the pending chaos.

So were the Russians.

Now the precarious future of all of Africa lay increasingly in the hands of Africans. Even Mali—now also led by military men—had expelled the 15,000 UN peacekeepers based there. Niger's fate would be determined by Nigerians and the EForN, Wonkoye's unit, was the tip of his nation's spear in the war on jihadi terror. The proud young lieutenant well understood the risks. He was a professional soldier.

Wonkoye turned around and peered at the young faces on the other side of the pickup's small rear window getting jostled around in the truck bed. Their eyes were shut tight against the choking dust, their bare faces raw from the sting of the whirling sand. The back of every other

pickup was crowded the same way save for the one hauling spare tires and ammo. Each man clutched an AK-47 or RPG launcher. With their free hands they held on to whatever they could including the bed-mounted Russian machine-guns as they bounced along.

“Do you hear that, Lieutenant?” the sergeant asked.

Wonkoye paused. Over the roar of the Toyota’s diesel four-cylinder engine he could barely make out the familiar sound of helicopter blades beating the air. He had put in a request for air cover but it had been denied due to the shortage of aircraft.

Wonkoye stuck his head out of the window. The stinging sand scoured his face and watered his eyes but he could still make out the form of a helicopter in the distance to the east, high above the tree line. It was heading north but circling back around.

“That’s a Blackhawk!”

“Americans!” The sergeant laughed. “I thought they were all gone.”

“They must have seen my request.” Wonkoye brimmed with pride. He had been a star pupil of the American operators. Perhaps his reputation was even greater than he knew and his old friends had decided to join the fight after all, even against their orders.

The lieutenant’s radio crackled with a message from the lead vehicle.

“Sir! A Humvee is up ahead!”

Wonkoye and his sergeant shared a confident look. With the Americans at their side the jihadis stood no chance whatsoever.

Capturing the bloodthirsty enemy commander might even earn Wonkoye a promotion.

The lieutenant raised the handset to his mouth.

“Attention convoy! This is Wonkoye! Everybody come to a halt! The Americans are here. We will break for ten minutes. Food, water—whatever you need. I will confer with the American commander. Wonkoye out.”

The lieutenant pointed up ahead. The brake lights of the lead vehicle flared as soon as Wonkoye had given his order and skidded to a stop in the road. The vehicles behind Wonkoye had done the same.

“Go around him,” the lieutenant ordered. “I want to parlay with that Humvee.”

“Yes, sir.”

Just as the sergeant eased the wheel left to leave the road, the lead scout truck erupted in a ball of flame and shredded steel. A burning body leaped from the bed and dashed blindly toward the tree line to the west.

Before Wonkoye’s mind could process the fiery image, the same stand of trees erupted in a stream of streaking rocket and machine-gun fire.

Instantly, half the vehicles in his convoy were shattered. Heavy 7.62mm rounds thudded into Wonkoye’s truck. Blood splattered the rear window, his soldiers’ screams muffled by the adrenaline flooding his system.

The sergeant jerked the steering wheel hard right and headed for the opposite tree line for cover as Wonkoye shouted orders into his radio.

“Head east for the trees. Get to the trees!”

But it was too late. More anti-tank missiles mounted on Humvees hidden in the western

tree line had already turned nine of the eleven trucks into burning hulks. The other two were riddled with gunfire and stood dead in the sand, their tires shredded as badly as the thin steel of their doors. The few men who survived the initial attack were cut down in their tracks as they ran for cover.

The sergeant's boot mashed the throttle to the floorboard. His skillful driving avoided hitting the flaming wreck in front of them, and the shattered truck behind them blocked the rocket targeting their vehicle. Wonkoye turned around to see the bloody face of a young private now pressed against the window glass, his lifeless eyes accusing him of utter failure.

Wonkoye watched a corporal in a blood-soaked uniform rack the Toyota's Kord 12.7mm heavy machine-gun with its t-shaped handle and open fire just as their pickup dove into the tree line.

Wonkoye shoved the door open and dashed for the trees just as the bleeding corporal was tossed from the truck by a burst of well-aimed machine-gun fire. The lieutenant caught a quick glance of the six lifeless bodies heaped in the truck bed like canvass sacks of butchered meat. He bolted away, his face streaked with tears of shame and rage, his sergeant hot on his heels.

Fifty feet above the treetops the hovering Blackhawk's deafening rotor blades threw blinding clouds of choking sand. Wonkoye screamed as machine-gun bullets stitched into his spine but it was a skull-shattering round that killed him, plowing his corpse into the sand at a dead run.