

DANGER CLOSE

DEDICATION AND DISCLAIMER

This story is dedicated to my wife Takako. It is also dedicated to all the men and women, past, present and future, who go into harm's way to serve our country in the armed forces.

The story is not merely pure fiction, but wild fantasy, and to the author's knowledge, nothing that even remotely resembles it has ever, or ever will, or even possibly can, occur in real life.

So, suspend your disbelief, strap on an F4E Phantom II supersonic jet fighter aircraft, and get ready to pull some hard Gs.

INTRODUCTION

Mark is a U.S. Air force fighter pilot. Yuki is a Japanese nurse. Love brings them together in a war torn hell called Vietnam.

THE AIRSHOW

Mark is participating in an aerobatic competition at an airshow. His father is a U.S. air force fighter pilot who flew P-47 Thunderbolts in WW2 and F-86 Saber Jets in Korea, and retired as a brigadier general. He started to teach Mark how to fly when Mark was six years old.

Mark has won many aerobatic competitions and has a bedroom full of trophies. He doesn't need another trophy. What he does need is to pull off an elusive tumbling maneuver that no one has ever been able to do before, and is so extreme that it doesn't even have a name.

As his last stunt in the competition he attempts the maneuver. He almost makes it, but not quite, and is able to pull out and regain control of his aircraft. Many points are deducted from his score, and he "wins" third place instead of first which he could have had easily.

Mark doesn't know it at the time, but an aircraft capable of performing the maneuver does not yet exist.

FATHER, MOM AND FRIEND

Mark arrives home. His father is very proud of his performance at the air show. After all, it's not about games and trophies, it's about pushing the envelope. Dad gives Mark a big hug, and tells him that he will pull off the maneuver next time.

Mark's friend Brian walks in. They have been friends since birth. They were almost inseparable, except that Brian doesn't like flying. Among other things, they have gone hunting together many times, and both are crack shots.

They talk about the war in Vietnam. Brian announces that he has been drafted into the army and wants to be a LRRP (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol). Mark mentions that he applied for air force Officer Candidate School (OCS) and wants to be a fighter pilot like his father. Dad tells them about some of his buddies from Korea who also flew in Vietnam and are living in various parts of the country.

ACCEPTED AT OCS

Mark gets a letter saying that he has been accepted at OCS. Dad and Mom congratulate him, but hide their apprehension because they know he will end up in Vietnam and may not come back.

AWOL

Mark calls home from OCS, and his father tells him that some of his Korean War buddies who have also flown in Vietnam are in Mark's area. Mark applies for leave to visit them. His request is denied.

Mark knows that information he might get from these veteran pilots could mean the difference between life or death in Vietnam. He goes AWOL, visits them, and gets some vital information. Upon return to base, he is punished for going AWOL. He spends a large amount of time visualizing scenarios and planning tactics in his mind based on the information he got from the veterans.

BOYD

During the 1950s, John Boyd dominated fighter aviation in the U.S. Air Force. His fame came on the wings of the quirky and treacherous F-100 Super Sabre; the infamous "Hun." Boyd was known throughout the Air Force as "Forty-Second Boyd," because he had a standing offer to all pilots that if he couldn't defeat them in simulated air-to-air combat in under 40 seconds, he would pay them \$40.

Like any gunslinger with a name and a reputation, he was called out many times. As an instructor at the Fighter Weapons School (later to be renamed "Red Flag") at Nellis AFB in Nevada, he fought students, cadre pilots, Marine and Navy pilots, and pilots from a dozen countries, who were attending the FWS as part of the Mutual Defense Assistance Pact. He never lost.

Boyd was famous for a maneuver he called "flat-plating the bird." He would be in the defensive position with a challenger tight on his tail, both pulling heavy Gs, when he would suddenly pull the stick full aft, brace his elbows on either side of the cockpit so the stick would not move laterally, and stomp the rudder. It was as if a manhole cover was sailing through the air and then suddenly flipped 90 degrees. The underside of the fuselage, wings, and horizontal stabilizer became a speed brake that slowed the Hun from 400 knots to 150 knots in seconds. The pursuing pilot was thrown forward and now Boyd was on his tail radioing "Guns, Guns, Guns."

Boyd was equally famous in the classroom where he developed his "Aerial Attack Study." Until Boyd came along, fighter pilots thought that air combat was an art rather than a science; that it could never be codified. Boyd proved them wrong when he demonstrated that for every maneuver there is a series of counter maneuvers. And there is a counter to every counter. Afterwards, when fighter pilots attacked (or were attacked), they knew every option open to their adversary and how to respond.

FLIGHT TRAINING

Mark soars through basic flight school effortlessly, graduating at the top of his class. No surprise there, he's been flying since he was six years old. He is sent on to jet fighter school.

He goes flat out learning everything he can about fighter tactics and the Phantom F4 aircraft that he is being trained to fly. He obtains all of the operational manuals for the Phantom and systematically devours them from cover to cover. He is weeks ahead of his class, and is totally absorbed in studying a copy of Boyd's Aerial Attack Study that he got from one of the veterans.

Boyd is Mark's idol, and the Aerial Attack Study is his bible. Mark is reprimanded by an instructor for clandestinely studying Boyd's manual in class instead of paying attention to the current lesson, which for Mark is kindergarten level.

Mark picks up the call sign "Tool", a term used at universities to describe a student who studies obsessively to the exclusion of everything else. Not exactly a flattering moniker for a fierce warrior, but one that perfectly describes the mindset that is molding Mark into one of the most fearsome adversaries who ever strapped on a combat aircraft and took off looking for something to kill.

FIRST JET FLIGHT

Mark absolutely excels at everything. On his first flight in a Phantom the instructor puts him through the basic exercises. Within minutes Mark gets the feel of the aircraft. He performs the basic exercises effortlessly and with total perfection.

Mark and his father played aerial combat games on many occasions and Mark has mastered all of the conventional tactical maneuvers. He has flown many aircraft, both fixed and rotary wing, but has never before had access to a full blown military jet fighter.

The instructor is so impressed by Mark's performance of the exercises that he decides to try him out on tactics. To the instructor's surprise Mark pulls off numerous advanced maneuvers with the same ease and perfection that he performed the basic exercises, one of which includes a sophisticated twist from Boyd's bag of tricks. The instructor even springs a difficult emergency procedure on Mark which the class will not be exposed to until weeks ahead. Mark pulls it off perfectly.

The instructor's mind is blown, and he does the unthinkable. He authorizes

Mark to go supersonic on his first flight.

Mark pushes the throttle forward into the stop and engages full afterburners. He experiences near ecstasy as the burners kick in and he feels the raw power of the twin General Electric J79 jet engines putting out over 36,000 pounds of thrust. He is slammed back in his seat and watches the reading on the Mach-meter move up through 1.0. Everything goes silent except for the sound of the instructor's voice over the intercom. The meter goes to 1.1, 1.2, 1.3...

The instructor says "Good flight, take us home". Mark is still feeling an intense adrenaline rush as he makes a perfect, one-chirp touchdown on the exact center of the runway number and taxis off the runway. He has not merely achieved complete mastery of the aircraft, but he and the Phantom are at one with each other in "the zone".

During the debriefing Mark introduces the instructor to Boyd's Aerial Attack Study. The instructor has heard of Boyd but has never seen a copy of the manual. He asks to borrow Mark's. Within a few days all of the instructors have made copies of the manual for themselves and are intensely studying it.

Mark still has much to learn from the instructors, and eagerly gobbles up everything they have to offer. The instructors recognize Mark's great potential and dedication and push him harder than any student has ever been pushed before.

Mark deeply appreciates the instructors' kindness and the unprecedented opportunity that they are giving him, and responds by pushing himself even harder than they are pushing him.

He knows that his next destination will be Vietnam, and that upon arrival he will be engaging highly skilled and experienced enemy pilots who will try their very best to kill him. He intends to be as prepared as possible.

Above and beyond Mark's training, he and the instructors work together to understand and implement the tactics from Boyd's manual. At times it seems more like a mutual study group than the instructors teaching Mark.

The final exam is a week long mock air battle between the students and the instructors. On the first day Mark goes up against the best instructors in the school and beats them all. Except for one!!

HUMILITY

Mark is good, and he knows it. But today he's going to find out how good he isn't.

He takes off for his last flight of the day. Almost immediately an instructor appears on his tail preparing to take a shot. Mark breaks hard and gets the instructor off him briefly, but no matter what he does the instructor is still on him. He hears a call over the radio "guns, guns, guns", and realizes that the instructor has scored a simulated kill.

The exercise continues. Mark tries everything he knows to get an advantage, including some sophisticated moves from Boyd's playbook, but it seems like no matter what he does the instructor is several moves ahead of him.

At one point the instructor lets Mark get on his tail, but just as Mark is ready to press the firing key, the instructor's plane disappears and reappears on Mark's tail. Again, the sickening call "guns, guns, guns" over the radio.

By the end of the exercise the instructor has scored a humiliating four simulated kills on Mark.

DISBELIEF

Mark goes through his debriefing, and at the end asks for the name of the instructor who beat him so soundly. Mark can't believe the answer. The instructor's name is John Boyd.

Boyd is not only an incredible fighter pilot, he also a genius aircraft designer and military strategist. He has just finished almost single-handedly transforming the F-15 project from an ongoing disaster into one of the most successful fighter aircraft designs since the P-51 Mustang.

Boyd is exhausted. The air force wanted to give him a week's leave to relax drinking Margaritas on an island somewhere in the Caribbean, but Boyd isn't happy unless he's going flat out. The compromise was to give him an easy week at Mark's school having fun flying rings around a bunch of student pilots. And that's exactly what he did with Mark.

JACKPOT

Mark can't believe his good fortune. He will not only get a chance to meet his idol, but learn from him for the rest of the week.

He can't move fast enough to get to the officer's club where Boyd is relaxing, introduce himself to Boyd and offer to buy him a drink. Mark desperately wants to blurt out how much he admires Boyd and wants to learn from him. He hopes that he can get Boyd to give him some personal time and help him understand some of the extremely esoteric aspects of the Aerial Attack Study. But Mark knows better, and that he must be cool and make haste slowly.

But unknown to Mark, he didn't have to worry. During the instructors' debriefing, Mark was one of the main topics of conversation. Boyd is flattered that Mark is not only trying so hard to master the Aerial Attack study, but is working with the instructors to benefit all of them. Boyd is just as anxious to meet Mark as Mark is to meet him.

Although Boyd cleaned up the sky with Mark, he is impressed that although Mark is just a student at the jet fighter school, he is already better than many of Boyd's advanced students at the Fighter Weapons School. After a few drinks, Boyd makes Mark's dream come true by deciding to become his mentor.

The rest of the week goes quickly, with Boyd spending one-on-one time with Mark, helping him understand the Aerial Attack Study and even giving him some extra flights.

Mark and Boyd have very different personalities. Whereas Mark is quiet and reserved, Boyd is flamboyant, boisterous and aggressive. It seems like Boyd is constantly talking, always about one topic; jet fighters.

But when they strap on a jet fighter plane, they become exactly the same.

They are the perfect match. Boyd loves to talk, and Mark is happy to listen. And it seems that every time Boyd opens his mouth, Mark learns something new. It seems to Mark that it can't get any better.

Boyd doesn't neglect the other students and instructors, but is very interested in Mark. Boyd has never before seen a student with so much talent and determination. Under Boyd's expert teaching, Mark's ability increases exponentially.

By the end of the week, Mark finally understands, at least intellectually, the Aerial Attack Study in its entirety. But he knows that this is just the beginning. It will take much more time and effort to put the principles into actual practice, and even more time to internalize them and commit them to conditioned reflex.

On the last day, Mark flies against Boyd again. They take off, and immediately go at each other full bore. The observers on the ground can hardly believe that it is only a training exercise. If they had live ammunition, one or both of them would certainly go down very hard.

Both men land in a cold sweat, totally exhausted. Neither of them was able to score a kill. Mark is the only fighter pilot, ever, to fight 40 second Boyd to a standstill. Boyd has a big smile on his face as he hands Mark two \$20 bills.

SCHOOL'S OUT

Mark graduates at the top of his class after setting numerous school records, none of which have ever been broken by any student, even flying future generation aircraft having aerodynamic, avionic and ordinance capabilities that make Mark's Phantom look like a relic from the Stone Age.

He is offered a position as an instructor at the jet fighter school, but respectfully declines on the grounds that he is not qualified; his skills have not yet been tested in actual combat.

BURNOUT

Mark's training is finished. He put absolutely everything he had into it, spending many sleepless nights going over manuals and tactics and visualizing scenarios while his classmates were relaxing at the officers' club.

Everyone has their limit, and Mark went past his. His last flight against Boyd took him way over the edge.

He is completely exhausted and running on sheer willpower or "konjo". He's so drained that he has to struggle to keep from passing out at his graduation ceremony, especially since he is called forward again and again to receive every achievement award the school has to offer.

Boyd insists on personally handing Mark his graduation certificate and pinning the jet fighter wings on his chest. Boyd is very proud of Mark, but is also proud of himself for creating a monster who gave him the fight of his life.

Predictably, Mark's next assignment is Vietnam. However, the school commander recognizes his near superhuman effort and how much it took out of

him, and gives him two weeks leave after graduation to visit his family and recover.

Mark goes home. His parents couldn't possibly be more proud of their son, but are of course apprehensive about what will be waiting for him in Vietnam. Mark sleeps almost continuously for the first 48 hours of his leave.

Mark is extremely grateful for his time with Boyd. He does not look on Boyd as a rival. He looks on him as a mentor, teacher and friend.

Mark knows that he will never pass up Boyd, and doesn't care. Mark is not a multi-faceted genius like Boyd. He will never design a cutting edge aircraft or formulate a sophisticated military strategy. He is a simple fighter pilot who just wants to achieve his personal best. And after all, Boyd not only has a huge head start, but he literally wrote the book that Mark is trying so hard to understand.

WELCOME TO VIETNAM

Mark arrives in Vietnam and is introduced to his squadron. His reputation from flight school precedes him, but he still has to prove himself in actual combat, which he does immediately by shooting down a MIG on his first combat mission. And after flying against Boyd, he can hardly believe how easy it was.

Mark has arrived. He's drawn his first blood. He's barely out of jet fighter school, but is already one of the best fighter pilots in the world, possibly even in the top five.

It's late in the war, and Mark soon understands how fortunate he is to fly a model "E" Phantom. The military geniuses in Washington decided that close range dogfights using guns were obsolete, and that all future engagements would be at long range using missiles.

The "C" and "D" models did not have a gun. They were equipped only with heat seeking missiles for close range engagements, and radar guided missiles for long range.

The problem was that the missiles didn't work. Only a small percentage of missile launches were successful. Most of them either didn't detach from the rails, didn't arm, or didn't track and went off somewhere into gooney land. A pilot's worst nightmare was trying to land his aircraft with an armed missile precariously dangling from the rail which could detach and/or detonate at any time.

Those pilots were flying essentially unarmed in an extremely lethal environment, and many were killed because they had no real means to defend themselves. In some squadrons as many as half the pilots died due to the stupidity of their "superiors" who sent them into harm's way with inadequate weaponry. Mark feels very sorry for them.

EARLY FLIGHTS

Mark's training and planning pay off. The information he got from the veterans, and the special lessons from Boyd and the other instructors were worth their weight in diamonds. The missions are intense and potentially lethal, but Mark is on top of them. He constantly strives to more deeply understand and internalize

the tactics from Boyd's manual and integrate them into his own repertoire.

Mark's unit is a flight of four F4E Phantom II aircraft, and its primary missions are low level, precision bombing and close air support. Each Phantom carries a single gun, a Vulcan M61-A1 20mm rotary cannon (a highly improved six barrel Gatling gun driven by a hydraulic motor), which fires 6,000 rounds per minute (100 rounds per second). The Phantoms are also equipped to carry a variety of missiles, rockets and bombs.

The tremendous power and rate of fire of the 20mm cannon provides a huge advantage in aerial combat. However, the downside is that the Phantom carries only 1200 rounds of ammunition. This means that the gun can be fired for only 12 seconds.

Mark has a great natural talent for situational awareness; visualizing the operating theater in three dimensions, knowing where all the players are, anticipating what is going to happen, and planning his moves ahead of time. This is the essence of Boyd's strategy.

In military terms, "danger close" refers to putting ordinance on an enemy that is so close to friendly forces that the action poses a substantial danger to the friendly forces. It is often applied to close air support, and in extreme circumstances is used as a last resort.

Mark's specialty in the unit is MIG suppression (dog fighting), and he is fiercely passionate about bringing every man back home. But he also performs low level bombing and close air support (often danger extremely close) for ground troops.

The close air support missions are actually his most challenging because of the tremendous concentration and extreme precision that they require. He comes back from each of these missions completely exhausted and in a cold sweat.

Mark distinguishes himself immediately, and is soon appointed leader of the unit.

SOLO

The Phantom II is a two seat aircraft. The back seater is a Radar Intercept Officer (RIO), also known as a Weapon System Officer (WSO) or "Bear". Mark has a very good RIO for his early flights, but he is so far ahead of everything that information from his RIO is after the fact for him and distracting.

One of the RIOs gets rotated back home, and the squadron is shorthanded. Mark gives his RIO to the Phantom that lacks one and flies the next mission solo. This is much better.

Several occasions arise which could result in Mark getting his RIO back or getting assigned another one. But he keeps manipulating the roster so that each new RIO gets assigned to another Phantom. After a while everyone gets the message and stops trying to fill Mark's back seat.

COMMANDER AND WIFE

The squadron commander is married to the daughter of a United States senator. She is very strong willed and will do anything in her power to promote her husband's career. The commander is headed for the Pentagon, and doesn't want to fly missions himself. He tells the pilots that their attrition rate is 50%, and that they should be proud to die in the service of their country. Mark blows up and tries to punch the commander. Some other pilots restrain him.

The commander tries to volunteer his pilots for the most dangerous missions in order to make himself look good. One is so outrageous that all of the pilots refuse to accept it. The commander calls them cowards, and decides to save face by flying it himself. Mark and two others go with him to try to keep him from getting killed.

They are attacked by MIGs. The commander panics, breaks formation and tries to escape. A MIG gets on his tail and gets a radar lock on him. The commander sees the lock indication on his panel and is terrified. Mark takes out the MIG with his 20mm gun a second before missile launch, and the other MIGs disengage. The commander aborts the mission and they return to base. The commander never flies again and leaves the pilots alone to conduct their operations.

The commander's wife is his perfect counterpart. She raises the concept of "abuse of position" to lofty heights. She thinks that the other dependent wives exist to serve her like the pilots serve her husband, and that everyone who isn't in a position to further her husband's career doesn't deserve to lick her shoes.

WINGMAN DOWN

Mark's unit is attacked by MIGs. A MIG gets a radar lock on Mark's wingman Matt. Mark sees it coming but is engaged with another MIG and can't get to Matt in time. Matt gets hit by a missile. His plane is on fire but he thinks he can make it back to base. Mark yells into the radio "Matt, you're on fire. Get out of there right now ... Eject, eject, punch out, PUNCH OUT !!!".

Matt ejects, and a second later his Phantom explodes. The blast pushes him hundreds of feet sideways through the air, but his chute opens and he drifts down into the jungle. Mark takes out a MIG with his gun and the others disengage. The Phantoms make several passes over Matt's position but can't see anything under the jungle canopy, realize that they can't do anything else, and head away to get help.

IMPOSSIBLE CARRIER LANDING

Mark orders the other Phantoms back to base. There is nothing he can do for Matt with a fighter plane, but he spots an aircraft carrier off the coast and heads toward it.

Mark radios the carrier, reports his wingman down, and requests a helicopter rescue. The carrier declines saying that they can't spare the resources and that

Mark should try elsewhere.

Mark desperately needs a chopper, and the only one in the area is on the carrier. He requests permission to land on the carrier even though his Phantom is not a navy model and is not equipped with a tail hook. The carrier declines in dismay and tells him to stay away.

Mark approaches the carrier lined up with the flight deck just a few feet above the water. He dumps fuel to lighten his aircraft and prevent a fire in case he crashes. The carrier looks like a mountain above him.

As Mark almost reaches the carrier he pulls back hard on the stick to trade airspeed for altitude. He goes into a steep climb rising up from the water toward the flight deck. He can't see anything, just flying by feeling. The Phantom climbs just above the carrier flight deck and stalls out.

Mark deploys full flaps and air brake and pops his drag chute. As the wheels touch the deck he slams down on the brake pedals. The Phantom comes to a screeching stop inches from the end of the flight deck in a cloud of smoke from burning tire rubber and brake pads.

The carrier captain comes down and is furious at Mark for disobeying his order and endangering his ship. Mark salutes him and repeats his request for a helicopter rescue for his wingman. The captain calms down and respects Mark's dedication to his comrade and his unbelievable flying ability. He orders a chopper crew to scramble for a rescue mission.

HELICOPTER RESCUE

Mark instructs his pilots to head for a certain type of terrain feature for extraction if they are ever shot down. Mark knew where Matt went down and where he will go.

The chopper approaches the extraction site. Matt hears the rotor noise and energizes his ELT (Emergency Locator Transmitter). The chopper homes in on the signal. Many Viet Cong (VC) also home in on the signal and race to reach Matt before the chopper.

Some VC find Matt. Matt shoots several with his .45 Colt automatic pistol. The chopper is over the site and Mark sees the firefight on the ground. Mark grabs an M16, puts on the winch harness, and tells a crewman to lower him down.

The crewman balks, saying that the zone is too hot and they have to abort. Mark pulls out his .45, fires a round an inch from the crewman's head, and aims at his chest. The crewman turns on the winch.

Mark jumps out of the chopper and is lowered down, firing at the VC on the ground with the M16 in one hand and his .45 in the other hand. He gets to Matt and they grab each other. The crewman reverses the winch and starts to pull them up. The VC fire at them as they go up. Mark and Matt fire back. Matt gets hit with several rounds. Mark spins so that his body is between the VC and Matt, and also gets hit. They get pulled into the chopper, and depart.

Blood is gushing from Matt's wounds. The chopper crew and Mark work furiously to try to stop the bleeding, with Mark ignoring his own wound. A crewman tries to pull Mark off Matt, but he won't go. In spite of their best efforts, Matt dies in

Mark's arms. They land on the carrier, with Mark devastated.

Mark's wound is not serious, and he gets patched up in the carrier's sick bay.

The captain has great empathy for Mark, and invites him up to his stateroom. They are both experienced fighter pilots and have very similar mentalities. Mark and the captain have only a short time together, but they bond deeply.

The captain orders his mechanics to give Mark a souvenir. They partially convert his Phantom to the Navy configuration with a tail hook, so just in case he has to make another carrier landing it will be a lot easier and safer.

They also modify Mark's nose gear so that he can make a catapult takeoff. The carrier crew, including the captain, line up and salute as he launches for home.

The tail hook and modified nose gear add weight and slightly slow down Mark's Phantom, but he doesn't have the heart to take them off.

FRUSTRATION

The pilots are informed that many key targets in North Vietnam are off limits for political reasons, e.g. schools, hospitals, etc. However, many of these are actually military facilities that are camouflaged as civilian sites.

Mark is very frustrated by the orders to not take out the camouflaged targets. He spends many hours staring at maps and devising plans and counter plans, again visualizing scenarios. His men join him, although to a much lesser extent, and they devise plans A, B, C etc., and variations for many scenarios.

SUPERSONIC FLYOVER

Mark realizes that although he is not allowed to use weapons against the camouflaged targets, the orders do not expressly prohibit flying over them. Mark's four Phantoms fly over a key ammunition storage facility that is disguised as a school at treetop level, going supersonic just as they pass over. The shock waves blow out all the windows in the facility. The NVA inside are either killed or knocked out by concussion, or run around screaming with blood coming out of their eyes and ears.

The unit returns to base. Mark is severely reprimanded for endangering the Paris peace talks, but shields his pilots by taking full responsibility.

SUICIDAL POWER DIVE

The unit is attacked by MIGs. One of Mark's men gets a MIG on his tail and has to break formation to escape. Mark is engaged with several other MIGs and takes one out. The other Phantoms get the engagement under control, and Mark goes looking for the endangered man.

Mark determines that the man is 30,000 below with the MIG still on his tail. He inverts his aircraft to get a full view of the ground through his canopy and goes into an inverted spiral dive. He's frantically scanning the ground to spot his man.

He finally sees two tiny specks moving above the jungle canopy. He rolls upright, slams his throttle into the stop, and sets up an intercept course for the trailing speck.

Mark holds his pipper dead on the trailing speck, but is way too far away to launch a missile. He kicks in full afterburner. Bye, bye envelope.

He's way overspeed, with audio and visual warning indicators going off all over the cockpit. At this point he's so far outside the performance envelope of the aircraft that the only foreseeable conclusion is a big flaming crater in the ground.

But he doesn't care. Mark is almost always the master of the situation, but at this time he's terrified that he won't be able to get down fast enough to take out the MIG before it can kill his man.

He is finally able to identify the Phantom with the MIG preparing to launch a missile. He gets a tone (radar lock indication) on the MIG, but it's weak and the two aircraft are close together. He holds back for another two seconds that seem like an eternity.

He finally gets a strong tone and in rapid succession fires all missiles, throttles back the engines, extends the flaps and air brake and pops the drag chute.

Mark's missiles streak off toward the MIG, and the combined reaction and drag forces hit Mark's Phantom like a giant sledgehammer, slowing the plane down. The flaps fold back from excessive dynamic pressure and collapse in a spray of leaking hydraulic fluid. The drag chute rips off. Mark watches in horror as the MIG launches a missile just before his missiles reach it, and yells "NO !!!!!".

The MIG's missile hits the Phantom just as Mark's missiles hit the MIG. The Phantom and the MIG blow up in huge fireballs. There is no chute or beeper (ELT) signal from the Phantom. The pilot didn't get out!

Mark is still way overspeed and the ground is rushing up fast. He eases back on the stick to try to pull out without stalling. The wings bend upward from the massive G-overload. Rivets holding the wings to the fuselage are popping off. The electrical system is shorting out. The Phantom is literally ripping itself apart at the seams.

If Mark pulls back more on the stick he will stall from excessive angle of attack and go straight into the ground. As it is he is pulling more G's than anyone dreamed the aircraft or the pilot could possibly stand. He starts to black out but fights it off with sheer willpower. It is incredibly hard to pull back on the stick due to the huge G-force, but he somehow continues to do it.

The Phantom miraculously holds together and levels off a few feet above the rice paddies in excess of Mach 2. As it passes over, a huge rooster tail is blasted hundreds of feet high by the Mach cone smashing against the water in the paddies.

The massive G-overload loosens the wings on the Phantom and blows out the stability augmentation system.

As Mark pulls up, his Phantom starts to porpoise. The loose wings make a sickening noise as they visibly move up and down relative to the fuselage at the tops and bottoms of the movements. Mark fights to get control of the plane. As he is doing this a MIG, which is painted bright red, comes up on his tail.

Mark has flown against several models of MIGs, including the older MIG-15s and MIG-17s, but this one is the newest state-of-the-art MIG-21. Mark knows that the pilot must be elite.

Mark is helpless, and the MIG has an easy shot. Mark reaches for the ejection handle.

Real war is brutal and cruel. Most aerial kills are ambushes from behind. Chivalry is virtually non-existent.

However, instead of firing, the MIG pilot pulls up next to Mark. He is amazed that Mark doesn't eject, but is fighting so hard to save his broken aircraft.

There are other MIGs in the area, any of which could effortlessly blow Mark out of the sky. But the red MIG pilot shields Mark from them, and escorts him out of North Vietnamese airspace.

The MIG pilot looks at Mark, salutes, says over the radio "Next time" in English, and flies away. Mark learns later that the red MIG pilot is the top ace in the North Vietnamese air force.

Although the red MIG pilot's action was an act of unheard of chivalry, he has an ulterior motive. He wants to be the one to take out Mark, but wants it on his reputation that he does it in a fair fight.

Mark somehow overcomes the porpoising and gets control of the Phantom. Mark is bingo (critically low on fuel). He gets on the radio and locates a tanker plane. He flies up to the boom and locks on. The boom operator looks down in amazement and radios, "Jesus Christ, your wings are coming off".

Mark gets filled up, disengages from the tanker and flies back to base, fighting to maintain control of his aircraft. He announces his approach and condition and requests emergency services. The tower orders him off and tells him to find a friendly place to eject. But Mark will not give up his aircraft and decides to land anyway.

He begins to lose control on final approach, and the Phantom starts to porpoise. He fights to get it back and succeeds. He makes a clean touchdown with emergency vehicles racing alongside. He is the first pilot in the history of the air force to land a modern generation fighter plane without stability augmentation.

A crewman on the ground moves one of the wings up and down with his hands, to everyone's amazement. Mark is reprimanded for disobeying orders, but is returned to flight status because he is desperately needed.

EQUIPMENT

Mark's ground crew chief is a grizzled veteran who knew his father. They hit it off immediately. The chief shows Mark a beat-up Phantom that he plans to cannibalize for parts. Mark looks at the serial number and remembers his father telling him about how three prototype Phantoms were produced with ratings way over spec to maximize the manufacturer's chance of getting the air force contract. Mark checks out the serial number and finds out that this is one of the prototypes. He tells the crew chief to make this his new aircraft and cannibalize the current one for parts.

Mark and the chief scheme and work together to make the prototype into a hot rod. The chief takes Mark aside in confidence and shows him a missile that came in but does not appear in the supply records. Mark tells him to put it aside for a rainy day.

FUCK IT

One key prohibited target is a massive SAM missile and anti-aircraft gun complex camouflaged as a hospital. There are a number of designated military targets near it, but they are strategically located such that any attempt to reach them would be within the defense range of the SAM site. The air defense capability of the site is so dense that any attempts to attack the other targets would be considered suicidal, especially since the pilots cannot attack the site even if they are fired on by it.

Mark is sitting in the ready room staring at maps and visualizing scenarios. He is extremely frustrated at not being able to attack the SAM site. Something inside him snaps, and he can't take it any more. He says "Fuck it", calls up his crew chief and tells him to prepare his Phantom for a local equipment test flight.

Mark gets to the flight line and meets the chief. He asks the chief if the "item" he showed him before is still around. The chief says yes. Mark says "Today is the rainy day". The chief salutes sharply, says "YES SIR!" and orders the missile to be mounted on Mark's Phantom.

Mark takes off and heads for the SAM site, inches above the treetops at full military power. The blast created by the plane's movement plows a deep furrow in the jungle canopy below. An NVA on the ground spots the Phantom and radios a warning to the SAM site. The site scrambles and prepares for the incoming threat.

Mark has no delusions about surviving this flight. Even if by some miracle he does, he will certainly be court-martialed and spend the rest of his life in Leavenworth penitentiary. But he doesn't care.

The most dangerous adversary on any battlefield is a skilled warrior who knows he is going to die. He has nothing to lose, no inhibitions, and no feeling except a ferocious urge to inflict as much carnage on the enemy as he can before he goes down. This is Mark now.

The site does not anticipate being attacked itself, and points the missiles and guns in directions which would be appropriate for an attack on the other targets. Mark takes advantage of this and heads toward one of the other targets.

Without warning Mark makes a sharp turn and heads directly for the site. The site finally gets the message and swings all weapons around toward Mark. Every AAA gun in the site opens up and throws a huge wall of flack into the air. The site gets a radar lock on him and manages to launch one missile.

The missile is coming straight out of the site at Mark. He flies head-on directly toward the missile. At the last second he makes a slight turn and the missile streaks by. Mark is now lined up directly with the site.

The command and control building has a big red cross painted on it. Mark puts his piper on the center of the cross. He waits until he is at point blank range and fires his missile. It is a direct hit with huge secondary explosions.

Mark radios his base and tells them to scramble the unit. The missile site is dust and they have a number of approved targets to take out. The radio operator at the base tells Mark to get on a secure channel. Mark says "It doesn't matter. They know we're coming and they're going to hit us with everything they've got".

Mark lands at the base to refuel and rearm and assembles the pilots for a fast briefing. They've been ready for weeks, and know all the alternative scenarios by heart. Mark lays out the plans, and they take off. They split off in different directions to confuse the NVA, regroup in unexpected ways and hit the targets by surprise. They get some opposition, but manage to take out all of the targets and return to base with no casualties.

The generals and politicians in Washington go ballistic, and Mark begins to mentally prepare for his court-martial. However, it doesn't happen. The leaders in Hanoi are embarrassed at having their "hospital" exposed as a weapons facility and don't want to endanger the protected status of the other prohibited targets. After considerable and very secretive negotiation at the highest levels, Hanoi and Washington mutually agree that Mark's flight never happened.

DIVERSION

Mark's unit is returning from a very challenging mission over the Hanoi/Haiphong complex. The opposition was extremely heavy, and it was almost a miracle that none of the Phantoms were shot down. The pilots are exhausted and low on fuel and ordinance. Mark has the most ammunition left because he won't take a shot unless he can guarantee a hit.

They hear a desperate call on the emergency frequency. Due to faulty intelligence, a squad of marines is being ambushed by a much larger contingency of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regulars and has no chance of survival without heavy fire support.

Mark orders the rest of his unit to return to base. He radios the sergeant in command of the marines and gets the coordinates of the main NVA attacking force. He makes a pass, spots it, and makes an extremely surgical hit on it with his gun.

The NVA were barely 20 yards away from the marines and moving in on them fast. A few seconds later and the marines would have been overrun and all of them killed. This was far beyond danger close. It was more like threading a needle from a mile away.

Mark flies over the area making several additional runs, identifying more enemy units and taking them out.

He runs out of ammunition about the time most of the threat to the marines has been neutralized. Then, he makes the stupidest mistake of his career.

Compared to what Mark has just come back from, this diversion was almost effortless. His Phantom took a few hits from small arms fire, but it was nothing compared to the MIG pilots, anti-aircraft gunners and surface-to-air missile controllers who had tried their very best to kill him over Hanoi. This momentary lapse makes him complacent.

He feels so good about being able to save the marines that he momentarily forgets about calculating fuel for his return to base. He flies over the marines in a continuous roll with his wingtips almost brushing the treetops. After passing over the marines he points his Phantom straight up and punches in full afterburner.

The Phantom blasts up like a rocket and disappears into the sky to the delight of the marines who are not only ecstatic about still being alive, but are treated to a brief but spectacular airshow that they will keep telling their children and grandchildren about as long as they live.

Mark levels off, heads for base and sets up altitude and airspeed for minimum fuel consumption. At this point, reality hits hard and he realizes how badly he screwed up. That impulsive afterburner blast expended a huge amount of fuel and squandered the last chance he had for making it back to base.

His fuel level is bingo and approaching flame-out. On top of that, he has no ammunition and no fuel for a dogfight, and if he gets jumped by MIGs, every option is unthinkable.

One engine flames out. Mark compensates steering for the dead engine and keeps his Phantom pointed at the base. The other engine flames out.

Mark knows that he cannot make it to base. He remembers a clandestine Air America landing strip within his glide range. Using flaps, air brake, drag chute and wheel brakes he somehow manages to make an extremely hard "smash" landing on the short dirt strip. Although the landing gear is completely shredded, there is astonishingly no other major damage to the Phantom.

This was not good!! A huge Sikorsky Sky Crane helicopter has to be called in to pick up Mark's Phantom and carry it back to base.

Mark feels like the stupidest person who ever walked the planet. Neither he nor the marines mention the "airshow" in their official reports, and Mark is actually praised this time for his performance on the mission. But inside he knows how badly he screwed up, and vows to never again get carried away and let emotion cloud his judgment.

FRIEND IN TROUBLE

Mark hears on the radio that a squad of LRRPs is under serious attack in the jungle, but the helicopters will not try a rescue because of low visibility due to fog. The squad leader's name is Brian. Mark's brain clicks and he races for the nearest chopper. The helicopter crew chief grabs Mark and tries to stop him, and they fight.

Mark tells the chief that his childhood friend is going to die unless he gets the chopper. The chief says "Shit, why didn't you say that before? Lets go.". They get in the chopper and take off.

Mark has over flown this area many times and visualized it many more times on the map. He knows where he is and where the LRRPs are. They approach the location and make radio contact. The chopper hovers overhead, and the rotor wash blows the fog away. Brian and his little squad of LRRPs are on the top of a hill with a hoard of VC scrambling up the slopes, some mere yards away from the LRRPs. This gives a whole new meaning to "danger close".

Mark radios, "You guys better be dug in, because Charlie's all over you and you're going to get the closest air support you've ever seen".

Mark's chopper is now a clear target and is taking heavy ground fire. The crew chief is firing back with the door gun. Mark angles the chopper down above the hilltop, and spins it around while firing his guns and rockets into the slopes. The impact rocks the hilltop. Many VC go down in a hail of lead and fire.

Mark lands on the hilltop and waves the men into the chopper. They jump in and return fire from the doors. Mark and Brian spot each other but don't have time to talk.

One man is on the ground wounded and cannot get up. He extends his hand in a plea for help. The LRRPs are pinned down. Mark yells "Get that man in the ship!", but nobody moves. He yells "Goddamn it, we're all going home." and dives out of the chopper onto the ground. He reaches the man and pulls him back toward the chopper. The LRRPs lay down covering fire. Mark throws the man into the chopper and jumps in himself.

Mark throttles up full emergency power, but the chopper is heavily overloaded and won't move. A fuse blows out in a main power panel. Mark grabs a bayonet from a LRRP and jams it into the panel to complete the circuit. The bayonet turns red hot, and the panel begins to smoke.

Mark calls Brian over and tells him to have half the men get out of the chopper and push, and climb back on when it's moving. The chopper is barely flying a foot above the ground when the men get back on. The chopper makes it off the hilltop in the midst of a furious exchange of fire between the LRRPs and the VC.

The chopper is hit badly and won't last long. It's belching fire and smoke and the engine is failing. Mark heads for the nearest U.S. firebase. The chopper gives out and they crash land in the jungle several miles out.

The men collect their weapons and wounded and head for the firebase with a horde of VC hot on their trail. They reach the concertina wire around the firebase. The soldiers in the firebase spot the VC behind them and open fire on everyone.

Brian risks his life by standing up and waving to the soldiers in the firebase. They see him, signal the LRRPs to come in, and lay down covering fire on the VC.

Mark and most of the LRRPs make it through the wire. Mark hears a scream behind him as Brian gets hit and goes down. Mark goes back out, picks up Brian and carries him toward the firebase. Mark also gets hit, and struggles into the firebase with Brian on his back.

Mark and Brian's wounds are serious, but not critical. The wounded men get emergency first aid from a corpsman in the firebase, and a dust-off helicopter evacuates them to a field hospital.

There is a network TV camera crew in the firebase taking newsreel footage. They get footage of Mark and the LRRPs which is aired on TV in America, Japan and other countries.

YUKI

Yuki is a Japanese trauma nurse who is working at a U.S. Army Hospital in Japan. She is very highly trained and motivated and assists the doctors in the most critical situations.

Her father is a powerful industrialist who was an elite combat officer in the Japanese army in WW2. He comes from an old Samurai family, and raised Yuki as a Samurai daughter.

Although the Samurai class per se was officially abolished during the Meiji restoration, their spirit lives on in their descendents. Yuki is one of them.

Yuki has been casually dating a salary man who her father thinks is a wimp. Yuki and her father are at home and happen to watch the TV newsreel of Mark and the LLRPs coming through the wire. The father, who is at this time kind of drunk, looks at Yuki and says "ANO hito to kekkon shinasai (marry THAT man)".

THE HOSPITAL

Mark, Brian and the other seriously wounded men are transported from the field hospital in Vietnam to Yuki's hospital in Japan. Yuki walks into Mark's ward for the first time, and their eyes meet. She is wearing a prim white nurse's uniform, with no makeup or accessories. She is an attractive woman, but not like a glamorous cover girl. But there is something about her clean beauty that takes Mark's breath away.

Yuki is surprised to recognize Mark from the TV, and thinks "ANO hito desu (It's THAT man)". Mark is overwhelmed and thinks that he's looking at a goddess. They do not speak to each other.

Yuki is very compassionate toward the patients, especially the most seriously injured ones, and spends most of her free time talking and reading to them while most of the other nurses are in their station relaxing. It is late at night, and Yuki is comforting a patient who, in spite of his medication, is in too much pain to sleep. Yuki feels that something is wrong, excuses herself, and walks quickly through the ward checking each patient.

Yuki's feeling was right. She finds a patient who has lost heartbeat and respiration. She calls code blue, bags him and starts compressions. Mark and some other men wake up and watch sadly, thinking that they are going to lose another comrade. Another nurse responds to the code blue call and rushes in with a crash cart. Yuki tells her to get the doctor fast.

The nurse runs to the emergency room where the only doctor on duty is struggling to save another critical patient. He says that he cannot come, and that the nurses should do the best they can.

The nurse comes back and reports. Yuki says that the man is dying, and to try again to get the doctor. This time Mark and some of the other men go with the nurse to try and get the doctor. The doctor says that he can't come but the nurses are authorized to do anything possible to try to save the man.

The nurse and the men come back and the nurse reports the authorization to Yuki. Yuki tells the nurse to get the paddles. They prep the patient, Yuki says

"Stand clear", and administers the shock. Still no pulse. They try again with more power. Nothing. Again. Nothing.

Yuki says "Adrenalin!" while continuing compressions. The nurse prepares the syringe, and Yuki administers the injection into the man's heart. Mark and the other men look on, this time with sad resignation. Yuki says "Shinanaide (Don't die!)" Still no pulse.

Yuki has lost patients in the past who were so badly mutilated that they were beyond any medical help. All she could do was comfort them in their last hours. She hated it every time it happened, and will do everything in her power to not let it happen again.

She is desperate and has exhausted all of her options, except for one which is unthinkable for a nurse.

Yuki had once assisted the doctor in a similar case in which he administered open heart massage. The doctor's performance was brilliant and Yuki watched every detail closely.

Yuki says "Scalpel - rib spreader" while continuing compressions. The other nurse is astonished, but hands Yuki the instruments.

Yuki knows that what she is about to do will end her career and possibly subject her to serious criminal charges. But the only thing that matters to her is to save her patient's life.

She puts her hands together in prayer and says "Kamisama" (God help me). She makes an incision in the man's chest and opens it with the rib spreader. She inserts her hand, finds the heart, and begins the massage. The heart starts to beat.

The doctor is finally able to break away from his other emergency and comes rushing in. He is astonished to see what is happening, and is amazed that Yuki was able to pull this off.

He takes over, and he and Yuki stabilize the man and close him back up. Before leaving, the doctor looks at Yuki and says, "For a nurse you make one hell of a doctor".

Every man in the ward is in absolute awe of Yuki, including the most hardened combat veterans. Never before have any of them seen someone fight so hard to save a man's life, and ultimately succeed through sheer willpower, with full knowledge that the consequences will be brutal.

As Yuki leaves the ward to clean up, the men line up and bow to her. Mark looks at Yuki with deep yearning, and can hardly believe that a woman like her could possibly exist in this world.

YUKI'S FATHER

Mark is absolutely enamored with Yuki, but hesitates to approach her. He needs an excuse.

The soldier who Yuki saved is a veteran with long and varied experience in Southeast Asia. He worked with Special Forces units training and fighting with Montagnard tribesmen. On one mission he saved the life of a tribal chief who gave him his royal necklace in gratitude. The soldier wore it always. It is his most prized possession, and is also a major status symbol.

Mark and the soldier are getting better, and are able to leave the hospital for short periods of time. They talk and decide to visit Yuki's home and thank her for saving the soldier's life.

They knock on the door, and Yuki's father answers. They very politely ask if they can talk to Yuki. Her father doesn't really like foreigners, and asks gruffly what they want with his daughter. The soldier says that he wants to thank her for saving his life. The father lets them in reluctantly and calls Yuki.

They sit down with Yuki and her father in the traditional "seiza" position. The soldier bows to Yuki, thanks her for saving his life, and asks her to accept his prized necklace as a token of gratitude. Yuki protests that she cannot accept such a precious gift, but the soldier insists and Yuki takes the necklace.

Mark and Yuki's eyes meet, and they are both overwhelmed with feelings of desire. They bow again, and Mark and the soldier leave.

During that brief encounter, several powerful things happened, including Yuki's father changing his attitude toward Mark and the soldier. He recognizes them as honorable warriors, and says to Yuki, "Ano hitotachi wa makoto no Samurai desu" (they are true Samurai).

And most importantly, Yuki receives her father's blessing for any relationship she might want to have with Mark.

The TV footage included a close up of Mark firing an M-16 at the enemy while carrying his wounded comrade, covered with blood, after almost single-handedly pulling off an incredible rescue. This image made a huge impression on Yuki, and was imprinted in her mind.

Mark became her dream warrior. She never imagined that she would ever actually meet him; but there he was, in her ward and under her care. And he was in her house, talking to her father. She wants him as much as he wants her.

Yuki says to her father "ANO hito desu yo" (It's THAT man who you said I should marry). This goes past her father who was drunk at the time he made the remark and doesn't remember.

THE WARD

Yuki wears the necklace to work at the ward. Every soldier sees the necklace, knows that Yuki is someone very special and treats her with great respect. Mark and Brian catch up on old times, and Mark tells Brian about his attraction to Yuki.

THE DATE

Mark is to be discharged from the hospital and return to Vietnam the next day. He is madly in love with Yuki and needs to be with her. She comes over to his bed during her rounds to ask how he is feeling, and they talk. He gets up the courage to ask her to accompany him on a visit to a famous Japanese garden. She accepts.

They meet at the garden and stroll through admiring the beauty. They sit down on a bench and start talking. They are both overwhelmed with desire but

hesitate to act. They gradually move closer to each other until their lips are almost touching. They kiss softly and then back away slightly.

They can't hold back any more. They kiss again, this time passionately, but tenderly. They start getting carried away, but realize that they shouldn't act like this in public and disengage with great difficulty.

Yuki is still a virgin. Her prior sexual experience with men consisted of being kissed once on the forehead. She shares her family values, and no man she has ever met before has come anywhere near meeting their standards. But deep inside, she is a full blooded woman who knows exactly what she wants, and Mark is it.

No words are needed. They clasp hands and race to a cab. Yuki tells the driver to take them to the nearest "ryokan" (Japanese inn). They can't wait and start to make out passionately in the back of the cab, with the driver watching with astonishment in the rear view mirror. They reach the inn and struggle to restrain themselves while they check in and are shown to their room.

They close the door behind them and immediately start ripping off each other's clothes. They fall down on the futon and go wild, making passionate love until the wee hours of the morning.

Yuki was a virgin, but this is what she has been waiting for all of her life. All of her womanhood comes out with no inhibition. As a nurse she knows all about sex theoretically, but now that she is experiencing it for real for the first time, she is absolutely insatiable and leaves Mark breathless.

SAYONARA

They wake up in each other's arms and make love again. They get dressed and exchange addresses, vowing to be together again as soon as possible and write in the meantime. Saying sayonara is the hardest thing either of them has ever had to do.

Mark meets Brian at the airport. They embrace, say "take care", and board their respective planes for Vietnam.

YUKI FIRED

Yuki has deep respect from most of the doctors and nurses in the hospital, both for her performance in general, and in particular for saving the soldier. She is on the short list for head nurse. But the inevitable happens.

There is another nurse who is jealous and wants the head nurse job. She files a formal complaint against Yuki for performing surgery without a license.

Yuki is brought to a tribunal in the hospital, in which the doctor and most of the staff and patients protest the charges and argue that Yuki should be nominated for sainthood instead of being accused of doing anything wrong. The doctor especially testifies that he authorized Yuki to do anything possible to try to save the soldier, and that she was following his direct orders.

Ironically, Yuki doesn't want to be head nurse. The head nurse is also the triage nurse. Triage is one of the most heartbreaking jobs in medicine, and is a place where Yuki never wants to go.

Yuki's father is very proud of her for what she did, and wants to go to the hospital and defend his daughter's honor. But the hospital is an American military facility, and they won't even let him on the base.

The jealous nurse and hospital bureaucracy prevail. Protocol has to be followed, and Yuki is fired from the hospital and has her nursing license revoked. But due to the huge protest, no criminal charges are filed.

What she did was beyond heroic. She sacrificed her career and risked prison to save a man's life. And that made a huge impression on Mark and many other people.

THE ISLAND

Mark and Yuki exchange letters and desperately need to be together. They make plans for Yuki to come to a small island in the South China Sea which has an abandoned runway long enough to accommodate a Phantom, where Mark will pick her up and take her back to his base in Vietnam.

Yuki's father gave her a Samurai dagger called a "kaiken", and instructions to use it if she ever has to defend her life or honor. She carries it with her always.

The dagger was crafted by a master sword maker hundreds of year ago, and is quite valuable. It has been passed down through her family for generations.

Yuki arrives at the island and takes a cab to the airstrip. The cab driver opens the back door of the cab, but instead of helping Yuki out, climbs in and tries to molest her. She fights him off and tries to get out the other door of the cab. The driver grabs her and drags her back. He pulls out a knife, holds it at Yuki's throat and tries to get her clothes off.

There is no doubt that the driver intends to rape and kill her. Yuki pulls out her dagger and stabs him in the heart.

She gets out of the cab with the bloody dagger in her hand, crying and covered with blood. She finds a stream, washes off the blood, and puts on a clean dress. She is very scared and stands waiting by the runway.

The runway is covered with mist and the visibility is near zero. The runway is just a faint outline. But that will not stop Mark, especially not now.

Yuki hears the whine of the Phantom's turbines and the sound of wheels on the runway as Mark touches down. A figure in a flight suit emerges from the mist like a dream. They see each other and rush into each other's arms.

Yuki is terrified to tell Mark about the cab driver, fearing that his love will turn into revulsion after he learns what she did. She summons up all of her courage and does it, explaining carefully what happened and why she had to do it.

Mark checks out the scene, and tells Yuki that he is so sorry and it was all his fault for bringing her to such a place. He says that she had no choice, and did what she had to in order to survive. They embrace again, with Yuki feeling a great weight taken off of her.

Mark helps her into a flight suit and helmet. He wanted to get her a G-suit, but couldn't find one small enough. He gets her strapped in to the back seat of the Phantom.

Yuki is packed into a tight space surrounded by an intimidating array of

instruments, controls and switches. She doesn't know what any of them are for, and just puts her trust in Mark to get them to their destination safely. They take off, and Yuki is overwhelmed by the speed and power of the Phantom.

MILK RUN

Mark chose the return route carefully. There should be no military activity within hundreds of miles. It should be a "milk run". But Mark underestimated Communist military intelligence, and a lone Phantom is a prime target.

The Phantom cuts through the air smoothly toward Vietnam. The scenery on the ground is extraordinarily beautiful. It's like a dream. Yuki says over the intercom "It's so beautiful and peaceful, like the ocean on a calm day".

But Mark gets a sickening feeling that there are sharks in this ocean. Four MIGs came out of nowhere and converge toward the Phantom. Mark can't believe it, and tells Yuki to hold on tight.

Under normal circumstances Mark could out-maneuver the MIGs and escape easily, or even shoot them all down. But either of these options would require pulling extremely hard Gs.

Yuki has never experienced G-loads, and doesn't have a G-suit or the training that goes with it. If Mark pulls that kind of Gs it could seriously injure or even kill her.

Mark breaks into a hard turn as smoothly as he can and takes out one of the MIGs with his gun. Yuki looks on with amazement. The other MIGs out-turn Mark and get on his tail.

There is a mountain range below, with a tiny valley meandering between the peaks. The range is covered with fog. Mark dives as smoothly as he can and heads directly into the fog.

Mark knows this valley very well, having flown over it many times and studying it on the maps. The visibility in the fog is near zero. Mark throttles way back and heads into where he knows the valley will be at very low altitude with the three MIGs on his tail. Mark flies the valley almost blind based on feeling and visualization.

He follows the twists and turns in the valley. But even with his great restraint the Phantom is pulling hard G's in the turns. One by one, the MIGs fail to make the turns and crash into the valley walls.

Mark pulls up out of the fog and calls for Yuki over the intercom. She doesn't answer. Mark is terrified. There is nothing he can do for her in the air, so he goes into full afterburner to get her down as fast as possible. They land with the Phantom approaching bingo fuel.

Mark pops open the canopies and rushes to pull off Yuki's helmet. She's unconscious but has a pulse and respiration. The G-loads were too much for her and she blacked out. She begins to wake up. Mark kisses her on the forehead and helps her out of the plane.

Yuki never doubted that Mark is an excellent fighter pilot, but she had never actually seen him in action. He has always been so kind and gentle with her that she had no idea what he is really capable of. But now she knows, and it rocks her

world.

Yuki finally realizes Mark's awesome power and skill. She never dreamed that anything approaching what he did was humanly possible, but she saw it with her own eyes.

She also experienced the extreme G-loads that Mark endures on a daily basis, while performing complex maneuvers and tactics and dealing with MIG pilots, AAA gunners and SAM operators who are all trying their very best to kill him.

Yuki was terrified and almost sure she was going to die. But Mark pulled it off and she is safely on the ground.

Yuki comes from a family of elite warriors, and grew up surrounded by them. She knows quality in a man and is very hard to impress, but Mark is off the top of her scale. She experienced a level of tremendous violence and power that she never dreamed could exist; and the thing that impressed her most is that Mark was in complete control of it.

Yuki's respect for Mark has always been very high, but now it is absolute. She looks on him as a god, just as he looks on her as a goddess.

HOME

Mark knows that his commander's wife would not let him live with Yuki on the base, so he prepared a small house at the edge of the jungle for them.

Both of them are totally burned out. They arrive, clean up, and quietly climb into bed, so happy to be alive and together.

The next day the commander's wife and her entourage come to look at Mark and Yuki's house. The wife is very disdainful and arrogant, and tells Yuki that she does not belong here and should go back where she came from.

Due to their location Yuki needs to be able to defend herself in case something happens. Mark befriends the top gunsmith in the armory and arranges to present him with a case of Jack Daniel's finest. In return Mark receives an incredibly accurized, sub-MOA M16 rifle and a case of match grade ammunition for Yuki.

The gunsmith is also a master engraver, and artistically engraves Yuki's name on the gunstock so she can quickly distinguish her rifle from others.

The Chinese character for her name means "snow" in Japanese, and the gunsmith inlays it in gold. He does such a beautiful job that it almost transforms an instrument of death into a work of art.



Mark teaches Yuki how to shoot. In addition, they both get valuable instruction from the gunsmith, who is himself a champion marksman. The shooting lessons are followed by a delicious dinner prepared by Yuki and copious libations. Needless to say, the gunsmith looks forward eagerly to the lessons.

Yuki has a natural talent, and practices shooting seriously every day. She becomes deadly accurate in a short period of time. She is no Annie Oakley, but can give an average military sniper a run for his money.

She keeps her rifle by her side always, with a fully loaded magazine in the well and a round in the chamber, together with a bag of loaded magazines. Her weapon is fully armed and ready at all times.

RED MIG AGAIN

Mark's unit is flying a mission and is attacked by MIGs. One of them is the red MIG. Mark engages it, and the other Phantoms engage the other MIGs.

Mark and the red MIG get into a furious dogfight. The MIG pilot is the best adversary Mark has ever had in actual combat, and it takes everything he has to hang in. They finally come at each other head-on.

The MIG gets a radar lock on Mark and fires a missile. Mark waits until the missile is almost on him and then pulls two aileron rolls in opposite directions with his 20mm gun firing continuously at 100 rounds per second.

The missile can't match Mark's turn rate and streaks past. The MIG pilot sees an almost solid wall of muzzle flashes in front of him, and pulls his ejection handle. The mechanism fires, and he and his seat are launched hundreds of feet into the air.

Seconds later, the MIG pilot is rocked by the force of thousands of heavy 20mm bullets passing underneath him. They continue on and literally shred his aircraft. His parachute deploys, and he drifts down watching pieces of his MIG fall toward the earth.

There are some U.S. ground units that were strafed by the red MIG, and a number of soldiers were killed. Some U.S. soldiers see the pilot drifting down on his parachute and open fire at him with their small arms.

Mark sees this and heads into a steep dive toward the ground forces. He strafes very close to their position, sending them diving for cover. He gets them on the radio and tells them that the MIG pilot should be treated as a respected prisoner of war, and that he will come back around and kill them all if they shoot at him again. A sergeant calls back and says "Wilco, you've got it sir. Sorry sir, we shouldn't have lost it".

Mark makes a slow run back toward the MIG pilot and salutes him as he passes by. The MIG pilot recognizes Mark and salutes back. Mark makes several more passes to make sure the pilot is safely taken into custody when he reaches the ground. He makes a final pass over the pilot and his captors in a continuous roll and heads back to base.

THE JOURNALIST

Mark has a problem with one of his new replacements named Peter. This pilot is the son of a senator, but is not arrogant. He got into the flight program due to his father's urging and influence, but he is not cut out for it. His flying ability is very low and he is scared all the time.

Peter is a huge liability, and Mark wants him to go back home. He knows that he will get killed and probably take some other pilots with him. Mark talks to Peter and tells him gently that he has served his country enough already and that it is all right to go home. But Peter does not want to disappoint his father, and says that he will stay.

A female French journalist arrives at the base and wants to get a ride in a Phantom during a combat mission. She says she has done it before and can handle the G-loads. The commander orders Mark to take her along. Mark refuses.

Another pilot, who is also not very good, offers to take Mark's place, and the other three pilots in the unit, including Peter, reluctantly agree to go along. Mark realizes that the unit's chances of surviving the mission would go way down without him, and he changes his mind and accepts the mission with great reluctance. He tells the journalist that they will have to pull hard G's to survive, and he will not hold back for her. The journalist agrees.

They take off on the mission and are attacked by MIGs. Peter picks up a MIG on his tail and immediately panics. He breaks formation and climbs to try to outrun the MIG. No way.

Mark and the other Phantoms are engaged with the other MIGs. One MIG gets on Mark's tail while he is in the process of taking out another one with a missile. Mark pulls Boyd's "flat-plating the bird" maneuver, which is extremely violent and high-G, ends up behind the MIG, and takes it out with his gun. The journalist blacks out.

There is one remaining MIG. Mark's wingman gets a missile lock on it and takes it out.

Peter is in deep trouble. Mark looks for him. The journalist wakes up. She actually is kind of tough.

Mark spots Peter with the MIG on his tail 15,000 feet up. He goes into full afterburner in a near vertical climb. It feels to Mark like the Phantom is moving in slow motion. He mutters "Come on, bitch, move it!".

Mark gets a radar lock on the MIG. He fires a missile which hits the MIG just as it is launching a missile at Peter. The MIG's missile just barely emerges but is engulfed by the explosion of the MIG and itself explodes. This is the most exciting thing the journalist has ever seen.

Peter is terrified and dysfunctional. Mark flies next to him, calls him on the radio and gets his attention. Mark talks him back to base and they land safely.

Mark takes Peter aside and gently says "It's over. You can go home now". Peter says "Yes, you're right. Thank you for everything".

The journalist is ecstatic about her experience and wants to call in her story as soon as possible. But her request is denied.

The official reason is that the mission was classified. But the real reason is that the incident has to be covered up because it can't be disclosed that the son of a senator panicked and froze in combat and had to be saved by another pilot.

If the journalist leaks the story without permission, her press credentials will be revoked immediately and she could possibly face charges of espionage.

The journalist has been with many men and wants Mark REALLY bad. She starts to make a move, but sees Mark and Yuki together, and the way they look at each other. She realizes that she doesn't stand a chance, thinks that Yuki is the luckiest woman in the world, and gets on the next flight to Saigon.

INVINCIBLE

Mark has relentlessly juggled accomplishing the missions, getting his men and equipment back home as intact as possible, and honing his skill by comprehending and incorporating Boyd's teachings into his own tactics. Boyd is a genius, and his concepts are deep and often hard to fathom. But it's all coming, and Mark sees light at the end of the tunnel.

Aerial combat is one of the most lethal environments in the world, and the ways that a pilot can get killed are limitless. Even for the most skilled pilot, survival depends to a great extent on luck. Nobody knows this better than Mark, and when he's flying, his brain is deep in hyperspace trying to anticipate the threats and avoid or overcome them.

Nobody is ever invincible, but for a few brief moments Mark feels like he is.

Mark is on a mission and is attacked almost simultaneously by three MIGs and two SAMs. He fights using pure reflexes, and Boyd's tactics come out. Within a few minutes, Mark almost effortlessly shoots down the MIGs and avoids the missiles.

Mark has just neutralized five deadly threats, any one of which could have killed him in a heartbeat. There is a huge adrenaline rush as survivor's euphoria kicks in, and with Boyd's tactics engrained in his reflexes, Mark feels at that moment that he can kill anything in the sky and that nothing can touch him.

But Mark is not stupid. As his wheels touch down at home base his mind as well as his aircraft have come firmly back down to earth. He realizes what a close call he had just survived, and if humanly possible becomes even more vigilant on future missions.

MORE THAN A GODDESS

The commander's wife and her entourage set up an off-base picnic. Of course, Yuki is not invited. There is no enemy activity reported in the area, and they think they are safe.

They are set upon and captured by a group of VC, who immediately shoot one woman and begin to torture another woman while making the others watch. The commander's wife is terrified, and falls to her knees sobbing and whimpering.

Yuki hears the gunshots, grabs her M-16 and bag of magazines, and runs toward the sounds. She comes out of the jungle and sees the VC and the women. She takes careful aim and fires at the VC with rapid, single shots.

Yuki, with her formidable marksmanship skill, accurized rifle and samurai mindset, is a fearsome adversary on any battlefield. One shot, one kill, again and

again until all the VC she can see are down. Yuki rushes to the woman on the ground and immediately begins emergency first aid.

There are two VC snipers in the trees who begin shooting at Yuki. She continues the first aid with bullets hitting the ground inches away.

When she gets past the critical part of the first aid, she reaches for her M16, locks into a stable firing position, sights in on one sniper she can see, and coolly fires a carefully aimed shot. The bullet streaks toward the VC, hits him, and he falls out of his tree onto the ground.

Yuki knows that there is another sniper, and that the sane thing to do would be to run for cover, but she is a nurse and a samurai woman and won't leave her patient.

Mark has just landed from a mission and hears that the dependents are under attack. He grabs an M16 and races toward the location. He sees Yuki and runs to her side. They spot a muzzle flash in the trees from the other sniper and both fire at it. Both bullets find their mark and the second sniper goes down.

The security squad and an ambulance from the base arrive and are surprised to see the dead VC and Mark and Yuki back to back against the world, scanning the tree line for more snipers. There are none. It's over.

The commander's wife recovers composure and is deeply ashamed for the way she treated this incredibly brave woman who just saved her life. She walks up to Yuki and offers her thanks and also says that Mark and Yuki would be welcome to live on the base. Yuki politely declines.

Although the situation was extremely dangerous, the snipers were armed with relatively inaccurate AK-47 rifles, had little training and practice, and were totally outclassed by Yuki. They had about as much chance against her as a typical MIG pilot has against Mark. But she knows that the fact she is still alive is due in very large part to sheer luck.

Mark and Yuki go home. Mark thinks that Yuki is more than a goddess and that he is the luckiest man in the world.

COIN

There is a saying that opposites attract, but with Mark and Yuki this is not the case. They are not opposite sides of the same coin; they are the same side. They are male and female versions of each other.

They are normally very polite, humble, kind, soft spoken, and primarily driven to protect and nurture life, but the warrior blood flowing through them makes them capable of extreme violence when necessary. Anyone stupid enough to mess with either of them would be buying themselves a world of hurt.

And they share something else; "konjo", loosely translated from Japanese as being capable of performing beyond normal human limits using sheer willpower.

They are desperately in love, extremely passionate, and can't get enough of each other. Their feelings are made even more poignant by the knowledge that Mark has one of the most dangerous jobs on the planet, and the possibility that he will not make it through the next day alive is very real. Either would kill or die

for the other without the slightest hesitation.

They never argue or fight. They are struggling to survive one day at a time, and are completely on the same page. They want to make the most of every second they have together.

IN THE BLOOD

Did Mark's mother ever think, when she was holding her newborn baby in her arms, that he would ever be on the other side of the world, screaming through the sky at a terrific speed to engage another mother's son in a fight to the death?

Actually, yes. Her husband did the same thing decades before. It's in their blood. They are warriors. It's what they signed on for.

Her husband made it back alive every time. She prays that her son can do the same.

SLAUGHTER

A group of U.S. bombers is on a mission to take out a weapons manufacturing facility in the Hanoi/Haiphong complex. They were supposed to have a fighter escort, but due to a communication failure, the rendezvous did not happen.

They are flying straight into the heart of the most dense air defense matrix in the history of the world without a fighter escort. Turning back is not an option. They have passed the point of no return into the perimeter of the system, and are already being painted by AAA, SAM and MIG ground control radar.

All they can do is continue on and do as much damage as they can before they are shot down, try to make peace with their creator, and that hope their lives will have meant something.

Mark is in the communications center planning for his next mission. He hears a desperate "Hail Mary" call from the bomber group over the radio. Radar shows an entire squadron of MIGs converging on the bombers.

Mark orders his unit to scramble. Microseconds could mean the difference between life or death for the bomber crews.

Mark and his crew chief have continually disobeyed standing orders and keep Mark's personal aircraft fully fuelled and armed at all times. Mark calls his crew chief and orders him to make his aircraft ready to fly immediately.

Standard policy requires pilots to personally run preflight checks on their own aircraft prior to takeoff. Mark completely agrees with this and has always complied.

However, there is nothing standard about this situation. Mark orders his crew chief to run the preflight checks without him, and start and warm up the engines. The crew chief is a long time veteran, and Mark has complete confidence in his ability.

Mark commandeers a jeep and races for the flight line. He gets to his aircraft, climbs into the cockpit, and pushes the ladder away. The crew chief stands beside

the aircraft in a formal salute.

Mark snaps a quick salute to his crew chief and taxis at full speed to the runway and takes off for the most challenging battle of his life.

Mark reached his aircraft before the rest of his unit. He doesn't wait for them, and is wheels-up long before them on an intercept course for the attacking force at full military power.

Mark puts his Phantom flat down on the deck and underflies the MIGs and their control radar undetected. He pulls a maximum performance inverted climb and rolls out level behind them. He is almost so close that the jet wash from the MIGs could cause a compressor stall in his Phantom, and if that happened one or both of his engines could flame out. But he has limited ammunition against many adversaries, and has to guarantee every shot by firing at point blank range.

He presses his firing key again and again, and each time a burst of 20mm rounds goes up a MIG's tailpipe. A number of MIGs are flaming toward the earth before the rest even know that they are under attack.

It is near the end of the war, and most of the MIG pilots have little training and combat experience. In addition, in Soviet style, they are controlled by radar operators on the ground.

When they realize that they are under attack, the MIGs panic and scatter, and most of them break away and run for home. This is perfect for Mark; he is operating alone and doesn't have to worry about who is the enemy. They all are, and they are all fair game.

Mark gets on a few more and takes them out before the rest escape and get out of range. Mark outclassed the MIG pilots by so much that even though it was one against many, it was not even a fight; it was a slaughter.

Mark's unit arrives at the location, but the skies are empty. The battle is over.

What Mark did was absolutely spectacular by any standard. In fact, never before in the history of aerial combat has a lone pilot taken on an entire squadron of enemy fighters and ripped it to shreds.

Mark lands, gets debriefed, and goes home to Yuki. He doesn't know it and doesn't think about it, but this was his finest hour. For him it was just another day at the office. He doesn't give the action a second thought.

But there is someone who sees it very differently. The bomber group commander is a veteran of WWII and Korea, but has never seen anything in his long military career that even remotely resembles Mark's performance. It seems like everywhere he looked there was a MIG going down in flames.

The commander is on the short list for general, has considerable clout at the Pentagon, and as soon as he is on the ground he is on the phone to learn the identity of the pilot who single-handedly saved his bombers from certain death. He wants to recommend Mark for the Congressional Medal of Honor, which he in fact deserves several times over.

The commander gets a copy of Mark's gun camera footage and plays it back. At first he can't tell what is happening, because the camera is only on while the gun is firing, and each frame sequence lasts less than two seconds. Several last no more than one second. He gets his technical people to make a copy with the motion slowed way down.

When he plays back the slow motion copy he can't believe what he is seeing. He counts an incredible 13 confirmed kills in less than 3 minutes, all with the gun.

The commander sends the footage to the Pentagon along with a recommendation that Mark be awarded the Medal of Honor. The footage is viewed by many high ranking officers, including all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The phone rings in the Oval Office. It is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff telling the president that there is something that he might like to see. The footage is screened again, this time with the president watching.

Everyone who sees the footage is in absolute awe. None of them has ever seen anything that even remotely resembles it, and can't believe that what they are seeing with their own eyes could even be possible. To a man they want to bring Mark to Washington to receive the Medal of Honor from the president on national television.

But there is a big problem. Awarding the Medal of Honor involves an extensive background check and publicity, and the generals in the Pentagon clearly remember how they had to scramble to avert an international incident when Mark took out the protected missile site.

Their compromise solution is to award Mark the distinguished flying cross, which is one level down from the Medal of Honor and does not require a background check. Of course, Mark cares about medals as much as he cared about trophies from the air shows back home. But he has gained one of the most powerful friends in the world.

Mark is currently a first lieutenant, but is given a battlefield promotion to lieutenant colonel, skipping the ranks of captain and major. This makes him the second highest ranking officer on the base and one of the youngest lieutenant colonels in the air force.

But he doesn't care about rank, and for him nothing really changes. For him it's all about the flying and the combat. He feels that he still has not achieved his full potential, and wants to take it all the way.

MARK'S REFLECTION

There are several days of very bad weather, during which no missions are scheduled. Mark has time to reflect on his life and situation.

Although the big shots in Washington view Mark as a great war hero, which he actually is, he does not share their opinion. He knows that the only reason he was able to pull off what he did is because it's near the end of the war, and the enemy pilots were poorly trained and inexperienced.

It was like a wolf in a chicken coop. The MIG pilots didn't stand a chance. If even one of them had anything near the ability of the red MIG pilot, the outcome could have been very different.

Although Mark's job is fighting and killing the enemy, he has great regard for human life. Most fighter pilots only think about surviving the current mission, but Mark thinks about collateral damage from all of the missed bullets, missiles and crashed planes coming down on innocent civilians.

The result of a single stray 20mm bullet hitting an unprotected human is pink

mist. Mark always tries to bring a fight to an unpopulated or sparsely populated area. He doesn't always have this luxury, but at least tries to do so whenever possible.

There is something about his last mission that bothers him deeply. He enjoyed it. He got caught up in the blood lust of killing the enemy and felt good about it. He worries that he is losing his humanity.

The MIG pilots are young men just like himself, only on the opposing side. They are enemy combatants who are trying just as hard to kill him as he is to kill them.

Just like Mark, they went through grueling selection and training to earn the privilege of climbing into the cockpit of a supersonic jet fighter and flying off into mortal combat, and are there because they want it more than anything else.

Mark is fully justified by his country, and in fact it is his duty, to kill the enemy. If he hesitates for even a fraction of a second, he and most probably some of his comrades will die. He does his job, but feels sorry that he has to take the lives of brave and dedicated young men.

After each mission, he prays for the souls of the pilots whose lives he had to end. This impresses Yuki very much.

Mark decides to do what countless warriors have done before him. In future missions he suppresses all emotion. This actually works out well, because it makes him even more focused on his job.

CALL SIGN

A fighter pilot cannot choose his own call sign. It is chosen for him by the other pilots in his unit.

A group of pilots get to drinking in the officer's club. In the wake of Mark's spectacular performance in defending the bombers, they think that Mark's call sign "Tool" is no longer appropriate. After considerable alcohol consumption, they come up with a proposed new call sign "Berserker", after the Viking storm troopers.

They spring it on Mark. He doesn't like it. The operating procedure of the Viking Berserkers was to get completely intoxicated on Amanita Muscaria mushrooms and rush into battle without any armor, sometimes naked, and kill everything in sight. This sometimes included their own people.

This is the complete opposite of Mark, who goes into battle with a perfectly clear mind and attacks enemy aircraft with a careful strategy. In addition, he learns something new from every maneuver in every engagement, and debriefs himself after every mission after his formal debriefing. He is constantly learning just as he did in flight school, and is still in every way a tool.

Mark presents his case to his fellow pilots. In the end they agree with him and do not make any further attempts to change his call sign.

KAI

Kai is a female Viet Cong sniper. Mark and Yuki are pretty good with a long range rifle, but Kai makes them look like toys. Kai is easily in the same league with the legendary U.S. marine sniper Carlos Hathcock, and is approaching the number of confirmed kills of female Russian sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko (309; of which 36 were enemy snipers).

Most snipers operate in teams of two; a shooter and a scout/spotter. However Kai, like Hathcock, prefers to operate alone. She and Hathcock had actually hunted each other for a brief period in the past, but disengaged when they both realized that they were so evenly matched that neither would ever be able to get an advantage over the other.

Kai's weapon is an accurized Remington model 700, 30.06 caliber rifle with an Unertl 8X scope that she took from an American sniper after killing him in a duel. Kai has incredible eyesight and almost superhuman patience and endurance. She has spent days stalking a target and lying motionlessly in wait, being eaten by mosquitoes, ants and leaches, to line up the perfect shot. When she puts her crosshairs on someone, that person's life is over.

Kai was a very sweet, sensitive and fragile young girl until several years before when she was gang raped by some American soldiers. That experience completely traumatized her. It was months before she could even speak again.

She wants revenge, and decides that the best way to get it is to join the Viet Cong. They give her basic weapons training. But she has such impressive natural talent with a rifle that her commander sends her north for sniper training.

Her instructor is an aging Russian sniper named Sergei. His eyesight is failing, but he fought alongside Vassili Zaitsev in the battle of Stalingrad and has great knowledge and experience.

He and Zaitsev stood beside each other in the Kremlin to receive the Hero of Russia medal (Russia's highest military honor, equivalent to America's Congressional Medal of Honor) from Joseph Stalin himself.

Sergei is an absolutely superior teacher, and recognizes Kai's great potential. He becomes her mentor and teaches her everything he knows; marksmanship, stalking and field craft in both jungle and urban environments.

Kai throws herself into her sniper training with the same drive that Mark did with his flight training. The difference is that whereas Mark is driven by desire to be the best fighter pilot he can possibly be and service to his country, Kai is driven by pain and rage.

Sergei senses Kai's great suffering and tries to reach out to her and give her some comfort. But the effort is in vain.

If the incident hadn't happened, Kai might have turned out to be much like Yuki. But she has been damaged so deeply that she now hates American soldiers and wants to kill them all. And Sergei's expert teaching has transformed her into one of the most dangerous assassins in the world of either gender in any ground environment, and she now has the means to fulfill her goal.

FRUSTRATION

Mark has shot down so many MIGs that the high command in Hanoi wants to eliminate him at any cost, and sends word to the VC to take him out. Kai is sent on this mission.

Mark's base is large, and there is only one spot where Kai can get close enough to the flight line to take a shot at him. The range is about 600 yards.

Mark gets a mission, approaches his aircraft from the opposite direction, and is shielded by it until he climbs into the cockpit. This is the only time his entire body is exposed, and the best time to take the shot.

Kai is in position. She has calculated the range to the target, read the wind, and doped the elevation and windage into her scope.

Mark approaches his Phantom and quickly climbs into the cockpit. It was too fast for the shot. The bullet would still be in the air before Mark is down in his seat.

The only remaining option is a head shot in the cockpit. At 600 yards a human head is an almost invisible speck, even with an 8X scope, but Kai's specialty is impossible shots.

Mark straps in and performs his preflight check. Kai lines up her shot and smoothly presses the trigger. Her aim is perfect. The bullet is on a trajectory toward the center of Mark's head.

Just as the shot goes off Mark presses the switch to lower his canopy. When the bullet hits, the canopy is low enough to cover Mark's head. The bullet has lost enough energy from the long flight that it deflects upwardly off the curved surface of the canopy rather than penetrating. Mark reports the incident to command and proceeds to take off.

Another extremely close call for Mark. If the canopy lowered a split second later he would be dead without having the slightest idea what hit him. But it's just another day at the office in Mark's world.

Security on the base is greatly increased. Permanent patrols are assigned to sweep the periphery of the base. Kai had only one chance, and now it's gone.

Kai is extremely frustrated. Failure is not an option for her, but it happened. She makes a strategic retreat to her base to report the bad news.

Hanoi asks that Kai be chastised for failure, but her Viet Cong commander shields her. Kai is one of the VC's most high value assets, and they will not do anything to disparage her or jeopardize her commitment.

KILL YUKI

In spite of its highly controversial nature, the Phoenix Project generates a wealth of intelligence about the infrastructure and operations of the Viet Cong. This information includes a sketch of the history and tactics of one of their top snipers, a woman named Kai.

Since it became known that Kai unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Mark, the Phoenix operators make her dossier available to him so he can take measures to attempt to forestall another attempt.

Kai is humiliated and frustrated by her failure to kill Mark. She knows that the security at his base has been increased to such an extent that she will

probably never get another shot at him.

The high command in Hanoi comes up with a plan and passes it down to the Viet Cong. The plan is that by killing Mark's woman, his capacity will be diminished to the point that the MIG pilots will have a chance of shooting him down.

As one of the Viet Cong's top snipers, with superior knowledge of the target area and Mark's movements, the mission is given to Kai.

Kai signed on to kill American soldiers. She did not sign on to kill women or children. No woman has ever done anything to hurt her. This mission goes against everything in her being and she desperately doesn't want to do it.

She bitterly protests the assignment and begs her commander to release her from it. But there is nothing he can do. The order comes from the highest level in Hanoi and was approved by Ho Chi Minh himself. There is no way out.

PANIC

The Viet Cong provide Kai with the location of Mark's house. Mark is returning from a mission and flies over the house. He sees Yuki peacefully working in her garden. But a few hundred yards away he sees something that sends him into sheer panic; a sniper moving into position to take a shot at Yuki.

Mark rolls his aircraft inverted and power dives on the sniper with his cannon roaring. Normally, Mark is in complete control and briefly presses the firing key to fire a short, carefully aimed burst at a target. But now he is so terrified that he's on the key with a death grip and holds it closed until hundreds of rounds go down on the sniper's position.

Kai's mind isn't yet in "the bubble" (a kind of tunnel vision where the only things that exist are the sniper, the rifle and the target) and she is still keenly aware of every aspect of her environment. She spots the aircraft diving toward her, picks up her rifle and bolts for the cover of the jungle. She makes it to the tree line just as the first rounds hit.

Yuki runs to the cover of the house, grabs her M-16, and scans the perimeter for an enemy.

Kai spots a big tree and scrambles to take cover behind it. 20mm rounds rain down hard all around her, each one like a sledge hammer from hell, shaking the earth, some hitting mere inches away. She feels mortal terror as the heavy bullets shred the jungle around her, literally chopping down trees. When the shooting temporarily stops, she runs for her life as far away and as deep into the jungle as she can get.

Mark sprays the area of the jungle where the sniper went in. As his Phantom gets dangerously close to the ground his reflexes kick in. He gets off the firing key, recovers from the dive, pulls an absolute maximum performance turn back toward the house that pegs the G-meter, stresses the aircraft and its pilot almost to their breaking points, and sends a mayday call to the base.

Mark pulls in for another run, frantically scanning for the sniper. The jungle is triple canopy and all he can see is green. He saturates the area where

the sniper went in with 20mm cannon and rocket fire.

Kai is extremely fortunate that Mark thinks napalm is inhuman, and at one time risked a court martial by refusing to obey a direct order to carry it. If he had it he would have incinerated her jungle and turned her into a human torch.

The personnel at base security remember Yuki very well from her heroic rescue of the dependent wives, and especially her coolness under fire that would impress even the most hardened combat veteran. When they hear that she is in danger, every available man grabs his weapon and races toward the house.

Mark continues to circle the area looking for the sniper until he receives a radio call that the Yuki is safe and the area has been secured.

Mark has had many close calls, but never anything like this. He was a heartbeat away from losing Yuki, and it absolutely terrified him.

Mark and Yuki have remained aloof from the high ranking officers and wives at the base for the way they treated Yuki in the beginning, and insisted on living in their serene love nest off-base. But that ends abruptly. They are relocated to a house in the most secure area of base housing, with the commander's wife throwing a lavish housewarming party for them.

Mark wasn't the only person to experience panic. Kai can't believe the world of hurt that came down on her from the sky. It was an absolute miracle that she was able to escape without getting hit.

Kai's base is part of the extensive Viet Cong tunnel network. She races for an opening and screams for the guards to let her in. She dives into the tunnel and scrambles for the deepest and innermost chamber. She hugs the ground in the fetal position, and it is hours before she is able to stop shaking.

THE RIFLE

At this point Mark is almost single-handedly decimating the North Vietnamese air force, and every high ranking official in Hanoi and many in Moscow know his name. They are desperate to take him out at any cost, and Hanoi calls on their Soviet supporters for assistance.

They want to launch a multi-pronged approach, and their best chance on the ground is still Kai. But the only area of approach with her current weapon has been eliminated.

The effective range of Kai's Remington 700 rifle is about 800 yards, but an extremely skilled marksman like Kai can push it out to almost 1,000. The Soviets call on their very best scientists and firearms designers to produce a rifle with range and accuracy that up until now has only been a fantasy.

They start with borrowing scientists from the space and nuclear programs to develop an experimental cartridge that is very large caliber, slightly smaller than the American .50 BMG round, and with a previously unheard of high ballistic coefficient and accuracy. The bullets are made of depleted uranium. Simultaneously they work on an extremely high power optical scope with unsurpassed clarity and accuracy.

They then design an experimental rifle around the cartridge, and produce several prototypes. The resulting rifle is absolutely superb, and decades ahead

of its time. It has an extremely flat trajectory, an accuracy of ¼ MOA and an effective range of 2,000 yards. One of the prototypes is sent to Vietnam and issued to Kai along with a case of the experimental ammunition.

Kai was devastated by her last encounter with Mark. At this point in her life she no longer wants to kill Americans and just wants to disappear. But this is not an option. She is one of the Viet Cong's highest value assets, and they will never let her go.

If she tries to escape, they will surely track her down and find her, and not only subject her to severe "re-education", but kill every member of her family to set an example for anyone else contemplating desertion. She has often thought about turning her rifle on herself, but the Viet Cong would treat it the same as desertion and her family would pay the same price.

The tour of duty for an American soldier in Viet Nam is one year, or in the case of a fighter pilot 100 combat missions. For a Viet Cong fighter, there are only two ways out; the end of hostilities or death, whichever comes first.

Kai is trapped. Her only way out is "through the top", but she can't do it by herself.

The rifle is extremely powerful, and even with a muzzle brake and a thick shoulder pad it has a recoil that even the strongest man would consider brutal. Kai is a petite woman, but she endures the extreme punishment and fires almost one hundred rounds through the rifle to compile a precise range table of elevation and windage values out to 2,000 yards. At the end of the process her shoulder is a mass of deep bruises and on the verge of dislocation. But she does her duty without complaint.

CAPTURE

The Phoenix operators learn about Kai's new rifle from their informants in the Viet Cong. This bumps up the seriousness of the situation by orders of magnitude. Although Mark and Yuki are safely shielded by buildings while they are on the base, the greater range of Kai's new rifle gives her more vantage points from which she can line up on the flight line.

Even more serious is the fact that while the Phantom's fuselage provides protection from the .30 caliber bullets fired from Kai's previous rifle, the new rifle shoots a much more powerful bullet that is capable of penetrating the fuselage and the canopy. This means that Mark is vulnerable not only while approaching his aircraft, but also for the time in the cockpit required to complete his preflight checks. And also during takeoffs and landings.

Phoenix calls in several SOG ("Studies and Observation Group", a euphemism for "Special Operations Group") units with the sole mission of finding and neutralizing Kai.

SOG scours the jungle for weeks trying to find Kai, but she is able to evade them. However, the SOG patrols are so effective that Kai is not able to make an approach for a shot.

An outbreak occurs in another area which is so serious that the SOG operators are called away to deal with it. This leaves only base security to

protect the perimeter. Whereas the SOG operators are highly trained and experienced jungle fighters, the base security personnel have no such capability.

Mark learns about the departure of SOG and the greatly increased threat to his life. It is completely alien to his character to live in fear and sneak around. Although he is under strict orders to never leave the base, he decides that he has had enough and takes matters into his own hands.

Mark knows that he doesn't stand a chance against Kai on the ground, and that going after her is sheer suicide. She can out-stalk him and put a bullet through the center of his chest from half a mile away, and he will be dead without having the faintest idea what hit him.

But he doesn't care. Mark is extremely disciplined, but like with the camouflaged SAM site, there are rare occasions when he just can't take it anymore. He has to go even though he knows that if he actually finds Kai, she will almost certainly kill him.

After Kai's last encounter with Mark she is terrified, demoralized, and operating at greatly diminished capacity. And Mark knows it. But he also knows that on the worst day of her life, she is still 100 times better than he is.

Mark obtains a map of the base and surrounding areas, and studies it in great detail. He identifies the locations which are most likely for Kai to line up a shot. He disobeys orders, leaves the base, and goes off hunting into the jungle.

He spends several hours scouting the locations, being careful to be as invisible as possible. Finally, he spots a lone young woman carrying a very large rifle. He quietly maneuvers behind her. He could easily take her out from behind with his .45, but finds that repugnant. Instead, he moves in close and rushes her. He knocks her down on the ground and takes her rifle away from her. He stands over her with his .45 pointed at her head.

The woman of course is Kai. Mark has no delusions about having out-stalked her. She actually spotted him a mile away and left a crude trail leading to herself. She could have easily avoided or killed him. She is very strong for her size and could have put up a good fight, but she does not resist.

Kai knows as much about Mark as he knows about her. She knows that it was him coming, and allows him to capture her. She feels that Mark is a good man, and wants him to be the one.

HEARTBREAK

Mark knows Kai's history and has great empathy for her and admiration for her prodigious skill. The worst part is that the atrocity committed against her was done by Mark's own comrades in arms. He desperately wants to let her go, but knows that if he does that, the Viet Cong will force her to continue killing American soldiers.

The other alternative is to turn her over to the South Vietnamese ARVN forces, but he knows that if he does that they will torture her for information that she will never give up, and she will die slowly in terrible pain. He cannot do that to her.

Until now the war for Mark has been a gladiator duel in the sky between

highly trained and motivated adversaries who want to be there more than anything else. That is what he signed up for. He did not sign up for this.

Most people looking at Kai would see a vicious assassin who has killed many American soldiers. What Mark sees is a beautiful and sensitive young woman who was tragically traumatized by the cruelty of war, and also a highly trained and skilled adversary who is worthy of his greatest respect.

They look each other in the eyes, and their minds meet. Mark starts to panic, realizing that she is not begging him to spare her life; she is begging him to end it.

Mark's mind is racing, running every scenario he can think of trying to find one that is even remotely acceptable. But they both know that there is none and there is only one thing that has to happen.

Kai closes her eyes. She shows no fear. On the contrary, her countenance is peaceful and serene, having faith that Mark will do the right thing and her suffering is finally going to end.

Mark desperately doesn't want to do it. He still hesitates. Kai opens her eyes and stares into Mark's. She gently nods her head in acceptance and closes her eyes again. She is ready.

There is nothing more. It has to happen. Mark struggles to fight back the tears as he pulls the trigger.

The base security personnel hear the gunfire and converge on the scene. They find the lifeless body of one of the best snipers who ever walked the planet, with her rifle lying on the ground beside her. But Mark is nowhere to be seen. He is off in the jungle crying his heart out. And no matter how hard he tries, he can't stop.

The Air Force wants to give Mark the silver star for single-handedly taking out one of the Viet Cong's top assassins. He risks a court martial by refusing to accept the award.

Even if it was for something that he didn't deeply regret, he doesn't care about medals or awards or promotions. All he cares about is his performance as a fighter pilot and his love for Yuki.

MEMORIUM

The base commander plans to order his men to dig a hole out in the jungle, unceremoniously dump Kai's body into it, and fill it up without any marker. Mark can't let that happen, but the commander is his superior officer, and Mark can't go against him by himself.

Mark read about how when Manfred Von Richthofen (the Red Baron) was shot down behind allied lines in World War I, the commanding officer, Major Blake, had such respect for him that he arranged for him to be buried in a military funeral with full honors.

Mark and Yuki know that the base commander resents them and will never do anything for them. But his wife owes Yuki her life, and although Yuki has never asked for anything, the commander's wife has long been looking for a way

to even begin to repay her.

Mark and Yuki approach the commander's wife and ask her for a huge favor. She is grateful for the opportunity, and places a call to her senator father in Washington.

Her father was one of the people who watched the footage from Mark's gun camera, and deeply appreciates the incredible service that Mark is performing for his country. He asks for an audience with the president, which is granted.

The president also remembers the gun camera footage and completely shares the senator's feelings. The president deeply regrets that circumstances did not allow him to award Mark the Medal of Honor, and is grateful for the opportunity to do anything he can for him.

Mark's commander is astonished to receive a call directly from the White House. He is ordered by the president himself to arrange a funeral for Kai with full military honors. The order also includes instructions to the Phoenix operators to use their contacts to get word to the Viet Cong that the funeral for Kai is to honor her as a greatly respected enemy combatant who was killed in battle, and not because she collaborated with the Americans in any way.

Mark leads the honor guard at the funeral. Although he only met Kai briefly and at the end of her life, his heart is very heavy. Regardless of her motivation, she was a warrior of the highest order, and is in fact responsible for many more enemy kills than the Red Baron. In spite of the fact that she came closer to killing Mark and Yuki than anyone else, Mark will remember her with compassion as long as he lives.

Thanks to the actions of the Phoenix operators, the Viet Cong is able to use Kai's story as a powerful propaganda tool; a simple peasant girl who rose to become one of the most elite fighters in the Viet Cong, and died so heroically in battle fighting one of their most fearsome enemies, that the Americans gave her a military funeral with full honors. And the Viet Cong makes it a point to take especially good care of her family.

Of course, the U.S. armorers have a field day reverse engineering Kai's rifle and ammunition. But the weapon system is so advanced, it will take years before its full potential is even understood.

OPEN HEART

Mark still can't believe that the only good thing he could do for Kai was to end her life. He has never talked to Yuki about the incident, and she knows better than to ask him about it.

The night after the funeral Mark decides to open his heart to Yuki and tell her the details of what happened.

Mark hates what he had to do, but knows deep inside that it was the only way. Yuki tells Mark very gently that in her samurai warrior culture, what he did was an act of extreme kindness. It makes him feel a little better, but not much. He has nightmares and wakes up in a cold sweat for months into the future with the vision of Kai closing her eyes for the last time before he pulls the trigger. And it will haunt him for the rest of his life.

NEW COMMANDER

Mark has plans for additional missions that will inflict yet more severe damage on enemy forces. He constantly goes to the commander's quarters to ask permission to implement them.

However, the commander has found a new hobby; opium. He doesn't want to get involved in actual combat operations, and knows that the war will be over soon. He doesn't want to risk anything that would jeopardize his chances for a cozy job at the Pentagon with a fast track chance for promotion when he gets back home.

He is always high and has the same answer for Mark; "No, too risky". But this time, he is almost completely out of it and is tired of being pestered by Mark. He just wants to relax in his opium haze. His reply is "Ok, I don't give a fuck. Do whatever you want. Just go away and don't bother me again".

Mark doesn't think of himself as a leader, and doesn't want to be one. He would much rather fight alone and not have to worry about anyone else. But he has just been made acting commander of the base, and is fully capable of rising to the occasion.

Mark assembles the squadron and informs them that the commander has become "temporarily incapacitated" and has placed him in charge.

Under Mark's command, morale in the squadron couldn't possibly be higher. Mark leads by example, and in every engagement is the first to fly into the heart of the fray. With few exceptions, every pilot in the squadron would give everything he has for the chance to follow Mark through the gates of Hell.

Mark is finally unleashed. As Yuki's father said, Mark is a true Samurai. He is totally committed to doing everything in his power to win the war. Of course he can't do it single-handedly, and his squadron is just a small part of a huge theater of operations. But his goal is to bring the North Vietnamese air force to its knees, one MIG at a time, and destroy as much of the military and industrial infrastructure of the enemy as possible.

He plans to do this by flying deep inside the Hanoi/Haiphong complex and hitting the enemy where he lives. His mindset is not blood lust; it might be described as tightly controlled rage. The enemy made it personal when they tried to kill his woman.

Mark increases the number of sorties dramatically, and also the danger level by going after much harder targets. He plans each mission meticulously, spending many hours considering every detail and attempting to foresee every contingency so that all of his pilots will accomplish their mission and make it back home as intact as possible.

He makes full use of stealth and deception, creating diversions in one direction and attacking from another. He uses surprise, speed and violence of action in all of his operations.

As a result, whenever Mark's aircraft invade North Vietnamese airspace, the North Vietnamese never know from what direction an actual attack may or may not come from, and scramble their facilities all over the country.

Mark likes to make a game out of this by sending his pilots on “training missions” to just barely enter North Vietnamese airspace from several different directions simultaneously and then turn around and come back home. As a result, the North Vietnamese are constantly “crying wolf”, which dulls their awareness and makes them more vulnerable when a real attack comes.

He leads his pilots into the heart of the Hanoi/Haiphong complex, practically at will, to places no one else would dare to go. Anything relating to the military or war support is fair game.

Mark’s attacks are fierce and brutal, but he tries his best to maintain his humanity by operating his weapon systems with pinpoint accuracy and minimizing collateral damage as much as possible. Countless residents of Hanoi huddle in fear in their homes during Mark’s attacks and watch a factory or other military target across the street get smashed into rubble, with their own home remaining untouched and intact.

Although the SAM sites and AAA batteries operate at full potential, there are rarely any MIGs in the air. Mark’s tactics are so devious that the MIGs can’t be scrambled fast enough to get to his location before he has wreaked his havoc and headed out of the area.

Every pilot and airman in the North Vietnamese air force knows that they have a better chance of survival flying into a shredder than going up against Mark’s Phantoms. They are reluctant to sacrifice precious aircraft and pilots’ lives for nothing.

Mark and his men further increase the danger level by going in at very low altitude to maximize the precision of their bomb, rocket and gun attacks and minimize collateral damage. They are easily within the range of small arms ground fire, and the Phantoms often return home riddled with holes from AK-47 bullets.

Mark loses a few men, and it breaks his heart each time. But his casualty rate is far below that of any other squadron, including those that perform only minimally dangerous operations.

Whenever a pilot goes down, Mark gives him a military funeral with full honors, even if his remains cannot be recovered; followed by an appropriate send-off at the officer’s club.

His most heartbreaking job is to write a notification letter to the pilot’s family back home. He takes great care in writing these letters to praise the pilot’s individual achievements, and let his loved ones know that he died a hero in service of his country. These letters are cherished by the families, and give them at least some small comfort as they mourn their loss.

Mark wants to bring as much destruction on the enemy as fast as he can while minimizing communication with Washington, because he knows that when they find out what he is doing they will want to shut him down. The “chicken hawks” in Washington are more concerned with placating the Russians and Chinese at the Paris peace talks to keep them from entering into open conflict than they are about winning the war.

These times are taking a terrific toll on both Mark and Yuki. Mark works long hours, late into the night planning missions, and then leads his pilots into

one of the most lethal environments in the world. He is physically and mentally exhausted, and constantly fighting burnout.

But at least Mark knows what's happening all the time. Not Yuki. Every time Mark kisses her goodbye and walks out the door, she has no idea if she is ever going to see him again. Every second he's gone, she doesn't even know if he's alive or dead. All she can do is hope and pray that he will survive the mission and come back home to her. The waiting is sheer torture and seems to never end. The stress is almost unbearable.

ATTACK IMMINENT

Following Kai's failure to kill Mark and Yuki, and the stepped up air operations under Mark's command, the leaders in Hanoi are desperate to neutralize Mark, with Yuki as a secondary target, by any means. The only alternative left for them is a direct attack on the base.

An air attack is out of the question. Any enemy aircraft approaching the base would be detected and intercepted very far away.

The base is in a remote region, deliberately located far from the main battle areas. Mark's friends at SOG are monitoring the enemy very closely. They sense a buildup of both VC and NVA forces in the area. There aren't too many of them, but they are preparing to launch a "Hail Mary" attack with everything they have, and don't care about casualties.

There aren't many US ground troops in the area either. There is the SOG unit, a few ranger and regular infantry units, and as Mark will find out, a LLRP unit led by his friend Brian.

SOG communicates with Mark and the LLRPs. Mark requests the LLRPs to perform a detailed surveillance of the area. The result is highly disturbing. The enemy forces are consolidating and moving toward the base. An attack is imminent.

As a token formality, Mark follows the chain of command and knocks on the commander's door to request orders. There is no answer. The commander is passed out on his couch in an opium stupor.

Mark gets on the radio to area headquarters and declares an emergency. It turns out that Mark's latest promotion made him the highest ranking functional officer in the area, and it his duty to coordinate and lead the defense. He assembles the base security force, tells them what is coming, and gives them instructions.

He finds Yuki and explains to her that he will have to be gone for a while, and sternly orders her that no matter what happens, she is to stay with the other women in the relative safety of the housing area.

Mark has to get his brain into hyperspace and keep it there to juggle an infinite number of variables to suppress the attack on the base. The last thing he needs is to have to worry about Yuki. He kisses her very sweetly and sets off for area headquarters.

Upon arrival, Mark immediately starts to coordinate all forces at his disposal. Brian's LLRPs have done an incredible job of mapping out the enemy

positions and movements. Mark has a very good idea of what forces the enemy has and where the attacks will come from.

Mark has little formal training in ground warfare, but applies the principles of aerial combat to the situation at hand. He decides to clandestinely infiltrate enemy territory and attack from the rear, with a pincer around each flank, and essentially encircle the enemy. The opposing forces will be attacked on three sides by Mark's ground troops, and repelled by base security on the other side.

Actually, this is Mark's plan B. Plan A is to put his ground forces into position, return to base, and lead his Phantoms in a devastating air-to-ground attack with all of their armament; bombs, rockets, guns. This should be extremely effective because the enemy positions are known. All that should be left for the ground troops is to mop up a few survivors.

MURPHY'S LAW

Mark's forces are in position. However, Murphy's Law again proves that it is absolute, and something happens that was totally unexpected; a monsoon moves into the area.

It is God's gift to the enemy. The weather conditions quickly turn to zero-zero (minimal visibility and ceiling), with heavy rain and extremely high winds.

Air operations are impossible. Mark's Phantoms are grounded. Defense of the base must be conducted entirely on the ground.

AGAIN

In spite of Mark's meticulous planning, he and Yuki were ambushed on their way from the island to Mark's base in Vietnam, and Mark was forced to fight for their lives. It is happening again. Enemy scouts detect Mark's forces behind their lines and report to their commander. Time is critical for them, and the commander orders all of his troops to immediately charge the base and kill everyone in sight.

DARK YUKI

The attackers take advantage of the weather conditions and begin their assault on the base. There aren't too many of them, but since it is all of them at once it is a formidable hoard. They know it is a suicide mission, but are highly motivated and prepared to fight fiercely to the death. Their single mission and purpose in what remains of their lives is to find and kill Mark or Yuki.

In view of this development, the personnel at the base are going to take the full brunt of the enemy attack. Mark's troops are racing as fast as they can to try to overtake the enemy forces and engage them.

Yuki initially does what she was told and remains in the secure area of base housing with the other women. But she hears a large volume of gunfire from the perimeter. She listens for several minutes, and then something snaps

insider her and she can't take it any more. She runs to her house, grabs her M-16 and bag of loaded magazines, and races for the front lines.

She views the battlefield, briefly puts her hands together in prayer, and says “yurushite” (God forgive me). She sees a group of defenders behind a pile of sandbags firing at the attackers.

She joins them. At first they think she is a VC and think to shoot at her, but then a soldier recognizes her and shouts "It's the lady from the picnic. She's with us".

Yuki's awesome marksmanship and coolness under fire kick in. As soon as an attacker comes into sight, she puts him down with a single, deadly accurate shot to the center of his chest.

At one point, she sees a soldier run out of ammunition with several VC charging at him. The attackers move behind cover, and she can't get a shot at them. She yells at the soldier to get his attention, and throws him her last loaded magazine. He does a speed reload and puts down the attackers.

Mark's troops are attacking from the rear and sides. Many of the attackers have been killed, and they and the base defenders are running out of ammunition. Although there are still a few rounds flying, it is turning into hand-to-hand combat with bayonets and rifle butts.

Yuki is out of ammunition. She puts down her M-16 and draws her Samurai dagger. With no hesitation, she races directly into the heart of the fray.

Yuki is a true Samurai woman. Her father had her trained well in the use of her knife and body. At his insistence, she received extensive instruction from some of the best martial arts teachers in Japan. Her skill with the knife is even more formidable than her skill with a rifle.

She moves fast, constantly changing direction to prevent being hit with an aimed shot. She charges directly at the enemy fighters, killing them with a slash or thrust to the neck, heart, or eyes.

At this point, the defenders are outnumbered and their situation is desperate. They're a heartbeat away from being overrun and killed. They can't wait for Mark's men to reach them from the rear. They have to do whatever it takes to survive.

Like most Japanese women of her generation, Yuki is “hazukashii”. She tries her very best to appear prim and proper at all times, especially in public. Anything that makes her look like other than a pristine, respectable lady could cause her shame in Japan.

But this not polite Japanese society. It is a bloody battlefield, and the only thing that matters is to kill or be killed.

Yuki does the unthinkable. She resorts to an old trick used on rare occasions by the “kunoichi” (female ninja) hundreds of years before. She takes off her blouse and bares her breasts. She continues to engage and kill attackers, and is soon covered in blood.

The trick is effective. The attackers are so shocked to see a naked woman charging at them with a knife that they tend to freeze or at least hesitate and give Yuki a huge tactical advantage. The blood on her bare skin creates an even more

fearsome appearance.

Yuki runs wild through the battlefield screaming like a demon from the depths of hell and slaughtering enemies. She scares even the US soldiers who know she is on their side.

Then something extremely dark happens inside her; she feels blood lust. She is enjoying the killing and can't get enough of it.

Yuki and the other defenders continue to fight until all the attackers in sight are down. But Yuki's blood lust is out of control, and she runs around the battlefield looking for more enemies to kill. There are none, it's over.

Mark's troops are still mopping up in the rear, and the two sides haven't yet come together.

DARK GODDESS OF MERCY

Yuki is completely exhausted from the fight. She's hyperventilating and struggling to keep from passing out. She rests briefly to get her strength back and let her mind come down to something resembling normal.

The battlefield looks like a scene from hell, littered with bodies of the dead and wounded. Yuki wipes the blood off her dagger and puts it back into its sheath.

The medical personnel begin to arrive and treat the wounded. Yuki puts her blouse back on, finds her precious M-16, slings it over shoulder, and goes off to help the medics.

The medics are going through the battlefield treating soldiers at random. Obviously, none of them are trained in triage or even know what it is.

This is Yuki's greatest nightmare; the time she prayed would never come. She was trained in triage in nursing school, but hoped that she would never have to be involved in it.

But she knows what she has to do. She was not allowed to practice medicine at the base hospital, but is familiar with the facility and understands its resources and limitations.

She runs to the hospital, finds the triage tags, and puts them into a bag along with trauma instruments and supplies. She returns to the battlefield and goes through it in a grid pattern, evaluating each wounded soldier and attaching a tag to him. Each time she meets a medic, she quickly explains what the tags mean and what action to take.

Triage was invented in World War I to allocate medical resources to a situation in which the number of patients greatly exceeds the facilities available to treat them. The patients are graded according to the severity of their wounds. Those with minor wounds are left to be treated later. On the other end of the scale, those with extremely severe wounds who might be saved if unlimited resources were available, are also left. The available facilities are distributed to treat the patients in the middle.

The result is that the maximum number of patients receive treatment and are saved. But Yuki's heart breaks every time she has to attach a black "deceased/expectant" tag to a soldier who is still alive, because she knows that

she is condemning him to death. She fights back the tears as she says a brief prayer for him, and moves on to the next. After performing triage, she joins the medics to administer treatment to the wounded.

The medics finish treating the wounded with red (immediate) and delayed (yellow) triage tags and make another pass through to tend to those with green (minor) tags.

Yuki goes back to look for those with black tags. All of them have died except for one, who is horribly mutilated, in terrible pain and beyond any medical help.

Yuki does the most merciful thing she possibly can for him. She injects him with a lethal dose of morphine to take the pain away and end his suffering as quickly as possible. She holds his hand and talks to him. He spends the last few minutes of his life in a state of euphoria in the arms of a beautiful and companionate woman.

This time it's Yuki's turn to cry. Even as a veteran trauma nurse, this was too much for her and she can't hold back.

The man was her patient, although just briefly. There was nothing more that she could do for him. She knows and understands this, but it still breaks her heart. She sobs quietly as she feels the life drain out of him.

As painful as it was for Yuki, she performed the triage operation perfectly; precisely matching the capabilities of the medical personnel to the wounded on the battlefield. But the faces of those that she had to black-tag and leave behind will haunt her for the rest of her life.

Finally, the operation is over and the major loose ends are cleaned up. Mark finds Yuki and they walk home hand-in-hand with M-16s slung over their shoulders for some desperately needed rest. Both are covered in blood. Mark got into some hand-to-hand himself.

They walk past the commander's wife and the other women. The women watch in silence. There is no way to put into words what they feel.

FAILED MISSION

The monsoon passes by and the sky is clear the next day. Mark is on the radio aggressively coordinating a final mop-up operation. Brian's LLRPs, as always, provide superior intelligence about the small pockets of surviving enemy troops. Mark concisely maps out their positions and deploys his assets to attack them.

Finally, Mark is able to put his Phantoms into the air. They bomb and strafe the survivors into near extermination. The ground forces finish the job.

They capture some high-ranking survivors, and Mark, surprisingly accompanied by Yuki, "debriefs" them personally.

The survivors are face to face with the monsters they were ordered to kill, but failed. In addition, all of the aircraft on the base are intact and fully operational.

Although Yuki is completely demure and doesn't even speak, they see the dagger at her side and know who she is and what she did on the battlefield. They

are even more afraid of her than they are of Mark, and are sure they are going to die.

Yuki draws her dagger and walks toward the men. They feel mortal terror, but are brave and show no fear. They quietly prepare to accept their fate.

Yuki walks behind them and cuts the ropes that bind them. She puts the dagger back in its sheath and walks away.

Mark looks them in the eyes, and orders them to report to Hanoi that their mission was a complete failure, and that his Phantoms from hell are coming back at them with a vengeance to kill them all. And anyone who attacks the base again will become a martyr to nothing.

The captives are released physically unharmed, but dread how they will be treated by their superiors when they return with Mark's message.

Yuki's father will never know what she did that day, but if he did, he could not possibly be more proud of his daughter.

MAD MINUTE

Mark gets on the radio again, and invites Brian and his LLRPs to a night at the base. They happily enjoy a hot shower, a night of good food and libations at the officer's club as Mark's honored guests, and a soft bed with clean sheets.

Mark introduces Yuki to his childhood friend and his comrades. They all like her and think she is a very sweet, young Japanese lady. But as warriors they instinctively feel that deep under the surface there is something very different about her. They don't know what it is, but their instinct is right.

Before coming on base, Mark joins them for a traditional "mad minute". LLRPs have to remain silent for long periods of time when on reconnaissance to avoid being detected.

When their patrol is over, they like to let off steam by firing their weapons into the air, yelling at the top of their lungs, and generally making as much noise as they can for a solid minute. They walk onto the base feeling much better. Although the LLRPs are enlisted men, Mark treats them like high ranking officers.

THE REPORT

Although Yuki was the fiercest warrior and most prolific healer in the battle, no mention of her appears in the official report. Ironically, as commander, it was Mark's job to write the report.

But at the time, he had no knowledge of Yuki's involvement. He thought that she stayed behind the lines with the other women, and just came out to help with the medical effort.

He thinks that all the blood on her body came from treating the wounded. If he knew what she was really doing, he would have been terrified and so worried about her that he would have been incapable of functioning at anywhere near his full capacity.

Of course, Mark finds out later and is shocked. But nobody tells him the part about the nudity. Nobody would dare.

YUKI'S REFLECTION

Yuki experienced the same blood lust that Mark did in the incident with the bombers. She thinks of herself as a kind and gentle person who is devoted to nurturing life, and this is who she wants to be. She can hardly believe what she did and that she had anything like that inside her. But given her Samurai bloodline and training, it's hardly a surprise.

Blood lust is something that exists in the darkest reaches of the human spirit. It comes from our animal nature, and is evolved through millions of years of humans into hunters and warriors. It was not only condoned, but praised on ancient battlefields where all combat was hand-to-hand with bladed and blunt weapons.

It was rare, but not unknown, when the warrior was female. Although some such women were revered, others were branded witches or worse by jealous and/or intimidated male counterparts.

Yuki hates the darkness inside her, but does not deny it. Her actions might have made the difference between victory or defeat in the defense of the base.

There is no doubt that she saved the lives of many US soldiers, albeit at the expense of many attackers. She has no remorse for what she did. Yes, she went out of control, but it was war and they were under attack by people who were trying to kill them.

Her altered state of mind made her more effective in battle. But she prays for the souls of the brave enemy fighters whose lives she had to take.

She doesn't tell Mark what happened. She just wants to put it behind her and hope that it never has to come out again. She returns to being sweet, demure, nurse Yuki, and thanks God for the chance to be that person again.

MARKSMANSHIP

The M16 rifle is capable of two modes of fire; semi-automatic (single-shot) and full automatic. Thousands of our troops are killed by Viet Cong ambushes conducted from the cover of the jungle canopy.

In many cases, our troops cannot see the enemy, and their only option is to put their weapons on full automatic and spray the area where they think the enemy is located. The great majority of the rounds do not hit anything. As a result, it is estimated that approximately 20,000 rounds are expended by our ground troops to kill one enemy soldier. In sharp contrast, for the snipers, the ratio is about 1.5 rounds per kill.

Yuki has never switched the fire selector on her M16 to full auto. All of her shots are semi-automatic and carefully aimed. She has very tight fire discipline and will not pull the trigger unless she has a clear shot and can guarantee a hit. For her, the ratio is very close to a perfect 1.0, and it has always been under extreme stress.

THE BOUNTY

Yuki overhears the wives talking. There is a huge bounty on Mark's head, and every MIG pilot in North Vietnam is personally out to claim it.

To put it in perspective, the bounty on an average marine sniper is the equivalent of about US\$8.00. The bounty on Carlos Hathcock was \$30,000. The bounty on Mark is \$500,000.

It's time for Mark to leave on a mission. Mark and Yuki embrace. Yuki is really scared now, knowing that this might be the last time she ever sees Mark. She fears that her world is about to be shattered.

They look into each other's eyes. There is nothing to say. Mark heads off for the flight line.

Mark's four Phantoms take off and fly over the base. Yuki watches them fly off. She is on her knees in prayer.

A VC in the jungle monitors the takeoff and radios out a message. Shortly after, hoards of MIGs take off from multiple locations, all after one target.

Mark's unit tries to accomplish a low altitude bombing mission. It is absolutely impossible. They are attacked and overwhelmed by many MIGs. They evade and are barely able to escape using extreme flying ability, cunning, and a tremendous amount of luck.

Yuki searches the sky for Mark to return. The waiting is excruciating. Finally she sees a faint dot. The dot slowly turns into several dots. Finally Yuki can count the dots. There are four. Her heart soars when she realizes that they all making it back.

Mark returns home. Yuki was absolutely terrified that Mark would not survive. Her fears nearly came true. It was the closest call that Mark has ever had, and it is a miracle that he and his fellow pilots are still alive.

Yuki is the product of hundreds of years of severe samurai culture, and has great discipline and composure. But this was too much even for her. She breaks down and rushes into Mark's arms, sobbing uncontrollably with tears of joy and relief.

THE WAR'S OVER

Things are getting really bad. The dependents, including Yuki, are being evacuated to Japan on a transport plane. It has a fighter escort headed by the commander. He sobered up enough to fly. He looks at it as a vanity mission, and doesn't expect any incident.

The American military is extremely hostile to its personnel associating with "indigenous" women, of which Yuki is one. But the commander's wife asked her senator father to personally sponsor Yuki for an immigrant visa, which he did, and it put her on the fast track for a green card, which is issued to her.

Mark's unit is on a close-in, limited mission out of reach of the MIGs. They receive a radio call that the war is over, and to abort the mission and return to base. On the way back they monitor the radio and hear that the dependents' plane is under attack by MIG pilots who don't know that the war is over, or don't care.

Mark orders his wingman to take the unit back to base and breaks off toward

the transport. The other Phantom pilots disobey the order and follow him. Mark tells them that they don't have enough fuel, and that this is a one-way trip to the bottom of the South China Sea. They say "we're going".

They engage full afterburners and head for the transport. The dependents on the transport are terrified to see a hoard of MIGs heading toward them in the distance.

The commander's flight consists of three additional pilots who are loyal to him. Needless to say, they are the worst pilots in the squadron, who have flown the lowest number of missions and have no MIG kills. The dependents feel that they don't stand a chance and are going to die.

The commander has a MIG on his tail and panics. The other escorts get into dogfights with other MIGs. The dependents watch the show in horror out the windows of the transport.

Their spirits soar when they see four specks come over horizon on an intercept course with the MIGs, closing fast. Yuki is glad that her man and his comrades are coming to save her, but knows that they are in full afterburner and won't have enough fuel to make it back to land.

Mark's unit reaches the fray. Each pilot picks a MIG and fires. Four MIGs blow up almost simultaneously and create a blast wave and flame front that push the transport sideways and briefly cover it in flames.

Mark's Phantoms make a maximum performance turn and come back in for a second pass at the remaining MIGs. The MIG pilots see the Phantoms coming at them again in tight formation and are so terrified that they disengage and head out as fast as they can.

Mark's wingman has taken a hard hit, but keeps on fighting. During the second pass his plane catches on fire and he is forced to eject. Mark watches him drift down with a good chute and notes his location.

The transport and its passengers, as well as the pilots (with the exception of the wingman) are intact. The fight is over.

FLAME-OUT

Mark's unit is almost bingo. The escort planes are also close to bingo due to the fuel consumed in the dogfight. They search for a tanker, miraculously find one, and head for it.

The commander reaches the tanker first, pulls rank, and gets on the boom. He tries to get filled up completely while the other planes wait and run out of fuel. Mark fires his gun close to the commander's Phantom, and radios him to get off the boom or he won't miss the next time.

The commander gets off and flies back toward the transport. His wife watches this cowardly act with disgust. She has known for a long time what he was really like, but didn't want to admit it. But this was it!

Mark is closest to bingo, but orders several other planes on the boom ahead of him. They get a squirt and get off fast. They can fill up later.

Finally it's Mark's turn. He cut it too close and is already bingo. He moves

into position to engage the boom. Inches away both engines flame out and the Phantom starts to fall.

The boom operator yells "Slalom, slalom", and the tanker pilot puts his aircraft into a maximum performance dive. Mark pulls back on the stick to try to convert his little remaining airspeed into altitude, but just barely doesn't make it to the boom and stalls out. The Phantom drifts down further and further away from the boom.

Mark realizes that it is hopeless. He radios "Thanks guys, but no cigar". The tanker pulls up and Mark glides down toward the ocean in a steep dive.

Yuki watches in horror and disbelief. She's back in hell! She silently screams "It was supposed to be over!!".

Mark glides down to his wingman's location and ditches in the water. He makes it out of the plane with an emergency raft. He inflates it and gets in. He finds the wingman and they tie their rafts together.

THE PIRATE BOAT

There are pirate boats in the South China Sea which are converted trawlers. They have doors on both sides, and look the same as any other trawlers when the doors are closed. The pirate boats have 3 inch guns mounted inside which can be fired out the doors when they are open.

A pirate boat approaches the rafts. The pirates would love to capture U.S. pilots and hold them for ransom after having a little fun with them. There are several pirates on board. Mark and the wingman swim underneath the boat and come up on the other side. They launch a violent surprise attack and kill the pirates with their .45s.

Inside the boat they find a horrible sight. There is an old woman that the pirates captured and tortured for fun. She is in terrible pain and beyond any medical help. She begs them to kill her.

Mark flashes back to the incident with Kai, and starts to feel sick. He desperately wants to save this woman, but knows that he can't. There is only one thing he can do for her, and he hates it, but mercy requires that he do it quickly.

He pulls out his .45, moves behind her, and points the gun at the base of her skull. She says "Thank you". Mark pulls the trigger and watches the life go out of her. But this time he doesn't cry. This was so horrific that it left him numb and beyond any feeling.

They dump the pirates' bodies over the side. Mark and the wingman put their hands together in prayer as they gently commit the woman's body to the ocean. They wash the blood off the decks. After a while they see another pirate trawler approaching from a distance. They close both doors and load the 3 inch gun. When the other boat comes alongside and hails them, they open the facing door and fire point blank. The other boat explodes in a fireball and sinks.

THE DESTROYER

Word about the downed pilots reaches the carrier on which Mark made his

no-tailhook landing. The names of the pilots reach the captain. When the captain realizes that Mark is one of the pilots, he does the unthinkable; he orders half of his destroyer screen to break off and join the search for the pilots. This leaves the carrier theoretically vulnerable. (Actually this is a more of a breach of protocol that the captain will have to answer for than a real threat).

No American carrier has ever been attacked by North Vietnamese aircraft, and any that attempt it would in reality be shot down many miles out. But the captain orders general quarters on the carrier and the screen destroyers, and puts all hands on the highest level of readiness.

The pirate boat is spotted by one of the search destroyers. The destroyer captain perceives the pirate boat as a threat to the pilots that should be dispatched summarily. The destroyer begins firing on the boat and the shells are hitting very close. Mark and the wingman stand on top of the boat in their flight suits waving their arms wildly. A lookout on the destroyer spots them through his binoculars and reports to the bridge. The destroyer captain orders cease fire.

The carrier captain dispatches a helicopter to pick up Mark and airlift him and his wingman to the carrier, where they enjoy a warm reunion. He then arranges an airlift for Mark and his wingman to rejoin their unit and the dependents.

REUNION

The dependents' plane lands in Japan and they disembark. The commander is waiting for his wife. She sees him, gives him a look of total contempt, and walks away from him forever.

Mark's aircraft touches down and taxis to the tarmac where Yuki is waiting. Mark walks down the stairs. Mark and Yuki rush into each other's arms and embrace.

A NEW LIFE

Mark and Yuki board a plane hand in hand. The marking on the plane reads "Pan American Airlines". It's really, finally over and they're headed back to "The World".

There is a personal letter waiting for Mark at his parents' house from the President of the United States. The war and the Paris peace talks are over, and Mark's incident with the protected missile site is on the verge of being forgotten. The president was bombarded with recommendations from senior military officers to award Mark the Medal of Honor. These include the carrier group commander (now an admiral), the bomber group commander (now a general), John Boyd, and all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Notably absent was a recommendation from Mark's own commander, although Mark had saved his life on several occasions and did his job for him at the base during its most desperate hours. But finally even he added his recommendation to the growing pile after being placed under tremendous political pressure that could shatter his dream of an assignment to the Pentagon.

For all of his failings, the commander is not stupid. Immediately on his return

from Vietnam, he requested two weeks leave, which he used to check himself into a discrete rehab center. He emerged ready for his new assignment to a safe, comfortable desk in the Pentagon.

The senator told the president about Yuki's heroic action in saving his daughter and the other wives from being ravaged by the Viet Cong. The president can hardly believe that a young woman with no formal military training could take on an entire squad of battle hardened Viet Cong fighters, including two snipers, and kill them all. And that she performed emergency first aid on a seriously injured woman that most certainly saved her life, while under heavy enemy fire.

But there is no doubt whatsoever that she did it all. There is a group of military wives, including a senator's daughter, who are extremely grateful to Yuki for saving their lives, and will all gladly tell exactly the same story.

Yuki is not an American citizen, so the president is unable to give her a military award. But he wants to honor her in some way. He was also made aware of the exemplary service that Mark's father performed for his country in the past, and that a suitable award is long overdue.

The president issues an executive order waiving the background check for Mark to receive the Medal of Honor. The letter is an invitation for Mark, Yuki, Mark's parents and also Yuki's parents to the White House for Mark to receive the Medal of Honor and his father to receive the distinguished flying cross in a private ceremony. Yuki and her parents have been vetted by the secret service and cleared to meet the president.

The president is no "chicken-hawk". He served as an infantry officer in Korea and was awarded the bronze star for saving a wounded comrade under heavy enemy fire. But he is in absolute awe of Mark, and wants to meet him more than anything else.

Mark, on the other hand, has no use for politics and politicians, and doesn't care about meeting the president or getting another medal (even the Medal of Honor). But the president is still his commander-in-chief, and declining the invitation is not an option.

Yuki calls her father in Japan to tell him about the president's invitation to the ceremony. Her father fought bitterly against the United States in World War 2, and is reluctant to accept the invitation. But at his wife's urging (actually merciless nagging), he decides to give in and they board a plane for America. They are met at the airport by Mark and his parents, given a warm welcome, and settle in at Mark's family home.

They all go to Washington and stand beside each other in the oval office to receive the awards from the president.

The president issues the awards to Mark and his father. He also extends his hand and thanks Mark's mother for supporting her husband through his extended deployments in two wars, and for raising a son who is fully worthy of the highest military honor the country has to offer.

He presents Yuki with a letter of appreciation from a grateful country, bearing the personal seal and signature of the president, for her courageous action in saving the lives of American citizens in Vietnam.

He also heard about how she sacrificed her career to save the life of an

American soldier in the hospital in Japan, and issues another executive order to reinstate her license as a registered nurse in all United States military hospitals in the world. He also exerts his tremendous influence to get her licensed to practice in civilian hospitals in the United States.

The president also offers to grant Yuki immediate American citizenship. But she respectfully declines. She is proud of her heritage and wants to remain a citizen of her native Japan. The president extends his hand to Yuki's parents and thanks them for raising an awesome daughter who so bravely risked her life to save American lives.

Yuki's father never dreamed that he would ever stand in the highest office of his former mortal enemy and watch his daughter be honored by its head of state, and shake his hand, but it is happening.

The president has looked forward to meeting Mark and Yuki. He feels very comfortable with Mark, knowing that he is a highly disciplined (although with some very notable exceptions), lieutenant colonel in the United States air force who has sworn an oath to defend his country and its president, and has done so on countless occasions with great valor. In all, Mark flew 186 combat missions in Vietnam, almost twice the number that he needed to go home.

Given Yuki's history, the president pictured her as a large, aggressive and intimidating woman. But she is nothing like what he expected. She is petite, standing barely five feet tall, extremely feminine and sweet, and completely demure. She even put on a little makeup to make herself look prettier.

Although the president knows rationally that Yuki has no intention of harming him, he senses the capacity for explosive violence that lies under the surface. He feels on a deep primal level that this is no ordinary woman standing in front of him. She is someone to be taken very seriously.

The president likes Yuki, but the most powerful man in the world who is surrounded by an army of secret service agents, any of whom would take a bullet to protect him, can hardly help being a little bit afraid of her. And he doesn't even know about what she did in the defense of the base.

Later they are all treated to a private, but lavish dinner with the president, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and numerous other military and civilian dignitaries in the White House.

NGUYEN

With the danger, stress and responsibility of combat things of the past, Mark has time to reflect on his life. The red MIG pilot was his most formidable adversary, and he wonders what happened to him after he was shot down and captured.

Scuttlebutt moves fast in the military. Although Mark is virtually unknown in the civilian world, he is a superstar in all branches of the armed forces.

Yuki, of course, is an elusive myth known only to a very few, although her image in the minds of those who fought alongside her in the defense of the base is something they will never forget; or wonder if it was something they hallucinated in the fog of battle.

The soldier whose life Yuki saved by throwing him her magazine survived the war and made it home safe. He kept the magazine and had it mounted in a display case in a place of honor on his mantle. He will always remember her with reverence, and doesn't even know that it was her last loaded magazine.

With Mark's new status and powerful friends, he decides to try to find the red MIG pilot, if he is still alive, and if not, what happened to him. Mark's friends have contacts in the CIA, and call in big favors to get the answer.

Intensive probing turns up that the pilot's name is Nguyen. After being shot down, he was "aggressively" interrogated by the CIA, but never said a word. He was then turned over to the South Vietnamese ARVN forces, who tried their best with the same result.

He was then sent to the infamous "Coconut Tree" prison camp at An Thoi on Phu Quoc island, where he was held and tortured for months. In spite of the most inhumane torture imaginable, he still remained silent. The only thing that kept him alive was the wealth of North Vietnamese military intelligence he carried in his head that they still hoped to get from him someday.

As the war was ending, Nguyen was becoming of less interest to the South Vietnamese. They were about to execute him, but the CIA for some unknown reason decided that they wanted him back. He was transported to the United States and held in a CIA black site where he has languished ever since. They still can't break him, and don't know what to do with him.

OLD ENEMY, NEW FRIEND

After learning about Nguyen, Mark really wants to meet him. He is in absolute awe of what Nguyen endured without betraying his country. Mark doubts that he could have taken even a fraction of that torture without breaking. Again, favors are called in, and Mark is finally allowed a meeting at a location near the black site, with Nguyen in shackles and under heavy guard.

They never before met face-to-face; only briefly in the sky. Nguyen is very guarded at first, which is no surprise given his long history of torture. But as he and Mark talk, he gradually opens up, and there slowly emerges a feeling of kinship that only elite warriors can understand.

They were in the same place at the same time doing the same thing. The only difference was that they were on opposite sides, fighting each other.

Even though their meeting was brief, Mark bonded strongly with Nguyen and needs to get him out of the black site. But none of his friends have the power to make it happen. In sheer desperation, Mark requests an audience with the president, which is granted.

FREEDOM

Mark presents his case to the president, telling him about how Nguyen spared his life in the skies over Vietnam, and how he returned the favor. He tells the

president about Nguyen's almost superhuman loyalty to his country, and the torture he endured without giving up anything. Mark also makes his case that Nguyen no longer poses any threat to the United States, and deserves to be released.

The president agrees, and calls a meeting of his legal advisors. Nguyen's status is nebulous. He is technically a prisoner of war, but is being held clandestinely by the CIA without formal charges.

The president calls in the director of the CIA, and tells him that he wants Nguyen transferred into the custody of the Department of Defense. The director balks, stating that Nguyen is still a threat to national security and must remain in CIA custody for further interrogation. The president gives the director a choice; release Nguyen or be replaced with somebody who will.

Mark is an officer in the United States air force, and as such a member of the Department of Defense. It is decided to transfer Nguyen into Mark's personal custody. There is still the issue of Nguyen's immigration status, but it is something that will be worked out later. In the meantime, Mark collects Nguyen and they head for Mark's family home where Nguyen is welcomed as a greatly honored friend and guest.

Mark introduces Nguyen to Yuki. They bond instantly and deeply. Although they come from different parts of Asia, their warrior cultures and mentalities are very similar. Although they share no actual experience, it is like they have known each other forever. They feel close, but rarely speak to each other. They don't have to.

THE WEDDING

Especially with Yuki's parents in town, Mark and Yuki decide that it is an auspicious time to get married. They get together with Mark's parents to plan the wedding. It will take place in an idyllic garden overlooking the ocean, and be presided over by a Christian minister.

They send invitations to a number of friends, including the president. He would like to attend, but urgent affairs of state prevent him from doing so. He sends the first lady in his place, who arrives in Marine One.

She is certainly most welcome, in spite of the fact that she is accompanied by a gaggle of secret service agents who make a nuisance of themselves and annoy all of the real guests under the pretense of "national security".

John Boyd also receives an invitation for himself and his wife. The invitation includes a request that Boyd be Mark's best man. Boyd immediately clears his calendar and tells his wife to get packed. He would not miss this for anything.

The ceremony and reception go very smoothly in spite of the secret service presence. Mark, his father and Boyd wear their air force officer's dress uniforms, complete with all of their decorations and ceremonial swords. The admiral and the general are also invited and are pleased to attend in full dress uniform. Yuki wears a beautiful kimono that her parents brought for her from Japan.

The general has waited eagerly for a long time to meet Mark and thank him personally for saving the lives of himself and his bomber crews. Mark is happy to meet the general, and after a long and cordial chat makes sure that he is provided

with the wedding's best single malt.

Boyd takes an instant liking to Yuki, and completely understands what Mark sees in her. He is very happy for his top protégé, and proud to see the Medal of Honor on his chest which he played a significant role in putting there.

Yuki's father never dreamed that he would walk his daughter down the aisle in the heartland of his former mortal enemy and give her away to an officer of its military, but it is happening.

Mark and Boyd send their minions far and wide to find an authentic copy of Nguyen's North Vietnamese air force officer's uniform. At the last minute, they come through.

The officers raise their swords to form the traditional ceremonial arch, with Nguyen in the North Vietnamese uniform standing next to Boyd. Mark and Yuki proudly walk through it.

The uniform is owned by a collector of military memorabilia. He graciously agrees to loan it to Mark for the ceremony. He gets it back, professionally cleaned and restored to pristine condition, together with a framed photograph of it worn by North Vietnam's top fighter ace standing next to two of America's best military pilots.

Mark also adds a signed letter describing his experience with Nguyen in Vietnam. These items become an absolute one-of-a-kind centerpiece of the man's collection that makes all of his collector friends drool with envy.

Everyone enjoys the festivities, and with the exception of the secret service agents, gets at least a little drunk on good champagne. Mark, Boyd, Dad, Yuki and Nguyen are inseparable into the wee hours of the morning until the newlyweds adjourn to their chambers to officially consummate their marriage.

FULL CIRCLE

With the bustle of the wedding over, Mark's Dad has a surprise for him; a new airplane. It's a Pitts Special, a state of the art aerobatic biplane that is capable of maneuvers that were never before possible. Dad invites Mark to take it for a spin.

Mark spends a blissful hour carving up the sky with Dad's new toy. He then gets an idea.

He attempts the tumbling maneuver that had eluded him so frustratingly in the past. He pulls it off on the first try!

It was actually rather easy. All he needed was an airplane that was capable of doing it.

Mark asks Dad's permission to offer Nguyen a flight in the Pitts, which is granted gladly. Nguyen experiences near ecstasy as he puts the aircraft through practically every aerobatic maneuver known to man, including the tumbling maneuver. He gets so carried away that he almost runs out of fuel, but easily makes it down for a safe landing.

With this, Mark has gone full circle. He achieved his childhood dream of successfully performing the tumbling maneuver. He also trained harder than anyone else and became one of the best fighter pilots in the history of aerial combat, and proved himself over and over again by totally dominating one of the

most lethal environments that ever existed on the planet.

And now he's not only back home safe with his family and friends, but with an incredible woman from the other side of the world. If there's anything better, he can't imagine what it might be.

FINALLY BACK HOME

Nguyen's legal and immigration status are still nebulous. Finally, the president clears away all red tape and offers Nguyen complete political asylum and a permanent United States visa. But unknown to everyone, Nguyen has a wife and family in Vietnam.

Nguyen is extremely grateful for the offer to live in the United States. However, now that he is finally free, he wants to go home.

Mark arranges transportation for him, which isn't easy because America and Vietnam do not yet have diplomatic relations. But the CIA uses its back door contacts in the Vietnamese government to ensure that Nguyen will be received benignly.

The Vietnamese government vets Nguyen deeply, and are in absolute awe of what he went through out of loyalty to his country.

Mark and Yuki see Nguyen off at the airport. They miss him and hope that they will have an opportunity to meet again.

Nguyen is astonished to receive a hero's welcome in Hanoi. His wife and children thought they would never see him again, and are filled with joy to have him back. Nguyen can hardly believe it himself, and is finally happy after so many years of torment, reunited with his loving wife and children.

There is a price, although a relatively small one. The government uses Nguyen as a propaganda tool for several months, parading him around the country as "the iron fighter pilot who couldn't be broken". But the novelty is soon over, and he is let go to live a quiet life with his family. The government, however, provides him with a generous pension for the rest of his life.

Nguyen is free to return to his favorite pastime; painting. He started painting as a small child, and is actually quite talented and accomplished. He soon acquires the necessary materials and begins to create.

Nguyen wants to forget about the war, but occasionally feelings come back and he paints scenes depicting its horror. These are very disturbing, but are critically acclaimed, and some of them find their way to art museums around the world.

One day when Nguyen is feeling especially good, he paints a scene of himself and Mark standing together as comrades, with their aircraft in the background. This one is, of course, harshly censored, but copies clandestinely find their way out of the country. One ends up on Mark's wall and brings back fond memories.

During the war, Mark had extensive knowledge of North Vietnam's air capabilities, both from his intelligence sources and from the many sorties he and his pilots flew over the country. There are some things that Nguyen knew that Mark didn't, but not many. Mark didn't have the heart to tell this to Nguyen, because it

would imply that he endured all that torture for nothing.

But on the other hand, it was Nguyen's knowledge and the hope that he would someday be broken and give it up was the only thing that kept him alive and escape execution on numerous occasions. And it is what finally brought him back home.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Mark's enlistment is almost over, and he has decided to resign his commission and accept an honorable discharge. The air force tries very hard to convince him to re-enlist, offering him an immediate promotion to full colonel, with fast track to brigadier general, and a position as commanding officer of the Fighter Weapons School. This is one of the most prestigious jobs in the air force.

But Mark isn't interested. As much as he enjoys flying and the challenge of aerial combat, after the incidents with Kai and the old woman on the pirate boat, he doesn't want to have anything more to do with war.

Mark has a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, which qualified him to become an officer in the air force. He hits the books hard and sits for the college board (SAT) exams. He applies to the graduate school at the elite Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, hoping to get the chance to earn a master's degree.

His SAT scores are very good, especially considering that he has been out of school for so long fighting a war, but borderline by MIT standards. MIT gets many more applications than it has places for students, and the applications come from the very best and brightest young men and women from all over the world with SAT scores pushing the top of the scale.

The admissions board is very impressed by Mark's military record, especially as a Medal of Honor recipient, and has already decided to accept him in spite of his marginal SAT scores. But then they receive a letter from White House bearing the personal signature of the president of the United States. The president heard that Mark was applying to MIT and sent a letter of recommendation to the admissions board.

Of course the president has no authority over MIT, but after reading the president's letter, the dean of admissions can't move fast enough to prepare a formal letter of acceptance, send it off to Mark by special courier, place a personal call to him to congratulate him for being accepted at MIT, and welcome him to the Institute.

Mark and Yuki find an apartment in Cambridge and settle in for several years of peaceful life in academia. Yuki gets a job as a registered nurse at a nearby hospital in Boston. It's a very welcome change from their life in Vietnam where danger was always close.

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F4 Phantom Back Seat (Yuki's View)





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