

PROLOGUE

by Rich Kolker

The C-47 transport rocked in gusty crosswinds. Heavy sheets of slush pelted the wings, windows and windshield of the military DC-3, crystals of ice built into a weighty coating on the fuselage and tail. In the cockpit the pilots wrestled with the protesting aircraft as it sunk closer to the frozen wasteland. A wasteland at war. A wasteland called Korea.

"She's going down."

"No kidding."

"Well, there goes a couple of dozen thousand bucks."

"Don't worry about the plane--you hurt the big shot doctor back there and you'll be lucky if they let you pilot a kite."

"Forget about him..."

"How can you?"

The pilot grunted. "Head honcho of the biggest project since the A-bomb-- they say treat him gently as an egg, then they put us through this scrambler."

"I'll go back and tuck him in."

"Hurry, I--"

Several tons of twin engined transport plowed into a hillside, just south of the 38th parallel. Wings sheared from the fuselage and the tail-planes skidded forward as the nose anchored against a tree.

Three seemingly lifeless bodies occupied the wreckage. In the silence of a cold Korean night, one opened his eyes, sensed approaching figures, and the eyes once again slowly closed.

"Dealer takes two..."

The nightly "no casualties in pre-op, let's play poker" game was underway in the swamp. Sitting in around the improvised table were Hawkeye Pierce, B.J. Hunnicut, Colonel Potter, Radar O'Reilly, Corporal Klinger, and Father Mulcahy. As usual, none were the big winners, except Father Mulcahy, who claimed to have learned poker from his big sister in her pre-convent days and had never lost the touch.

"Full house, queens and eights."

"I don't get it, Father. I was poker champion of the med school at Androscoggin. I beat these losers regularly. Then you get in the game, and 'poof!', bye bye paycheck."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways, Hawkeye. Besides, you're still ahead."

"That's true, but I hate to clutter up a speech with the facts. Picked that up from Joe McCarthy."

A cutting blast of frozen air mixed with snow surged into the tent as the door opened and Frank Burns entered, leaving the entranceway ajar.

Hawkeye glared up at him. "Cold enough for you Frank? Or are you waiting for your pet polar bear?"

"You think you're so smart." Burns slammed the door.

"Frank's been keeping warm tonight, I'm sure," B.J. chimed in.

"Tell me, major, how's the major?"

Before Frank could retort, a corpsman flung open the door.

"Hey!" came the assorted yelps of protest as the playing cards fluttered in the cold blast of wind.

"Loudspeakers are out," the corpsman panted, short of breath. "Incoming wounded, they need you in pre-op."

Three surgeons and Frank Burns burst into the scrub room. Major Margaret Houlihan was already halfway through the scrub-up ritual.

"What's the story, Major?"

"A company took it about ten miles north of here, Colonel," she answered grimly. "They're chopped up pretty badly."

"You'd think they'd have the common courtesy to attack when the weather's nicer," B.J. said.

"Haven't you heard?" Pierce put in. "Neither rain nor snow nor gloom of night. We got 'em in combination."

"Can it, Pierce, there's work to be done."

"You know, colonel, sometimes you can be a real party poop."

The doctors and first casualties entered the operating room at the same time.

"Okay, get the gas passing on this one."

Skillfully the surgeons of the 4077th pieced together what several hours earlier had been young soldiers. Most came out of it alive. Some didn't. Some split the difference.

"Hawk, I need your help."

"Right." Pierce moved to the other table, and quickly assessed the situation. "What a mess. Chest wound. Wish Trapper were here." Hawkeye's skilled fingers felt into the wound. "Uh-oh. Close him up."

"Howcum?"

"Piece of shrapnel behind the heart. Can't get at it where it is. So we close him up and hope it moves somewhere else. Meanwhile we pump blood into him, and keep him alive to fight another day. Close him up, let's go." Hawkeye looked down at the boy's face. "He's a young one, isn't he?"

"Seventeen."

"How can you tell?"

"Okay, Klinger, move him out." B.J.'s eyes locked with his friend's. "What's my name, Hawk?"

Hawkeye started to reply, puzzled. "B.J. Hunni..."

"Full name."

It took a moment. "Bernard Jerome Hunnicut."

"The patient's name?"

Klinger answered, reading off the patient tag just before he wheeled the cart away. "Jerome Robinson."

"Same Jerome. Our grandfather." He paused as Hawkeye reacted. "That's my cousin Jerry."

The mess tent was a welcome sight after six hours of surgery. The snow had stopped, but the wind still whipped through the heavy canvas. B.J. grabbed a cup of coffee and headed for the nearest available seat, opposite a stranger.

"So," B.J. began conversationally. "You're the miracle man."

"What?" The stranger looked up.

"A plane is splattered across about 100 acres of prime Korea, the two pilots nearly die in the crash, and you walk away without so much as a bruise."

"Just lucky, I guess." The man smiled.

B.J. estimated the man at about 40. Dark hair turning grey. Broad shoulders. A twinkle in his eye...

"Sorry, I haven't introduced myself. BJJ. Hühnicut."

"Dr. Emil Vaslovik."

"Medical?"

"Among other degrees."

"Would you like to sit in on a surgical shift?"

"Love to, but I warn you, I haven't been in an operating theater in years."

B.J. shrugged. "That's okay, we have some doctors who should have never been there in the first place. So, if you haven't been doctoring, why are you in Korea?"

"That, new friend, is classified."

"Army one, Hunnicut nothing. Okay, let's try again. What have you been doing that's unclassified?"

"Research into the human body, what makes it tick, why is it alive-- part of my work is leading toward eventual artificial replacements for blood vessels, heart valves, other vulnerable parts of our anatomy."

"You a heart specialist?"

"I was. Now I'm trying to branch out. Apply what has been done with the circulatory system to the other areas of the body."

"That's fascinating. But...I've got to go. Promised I'd check on some orphans. How about tonight for your tour into the medically misfit world of the 4077th?"

"Fine."

"And take it easy, there is such a thing as delayed shock, you know. And you were in a plane crash last night."

"I promise, no parachute jumps, football or dancing on the mess tables for at least a couple of days." B.J. returned the man's broad grin.

The day advanced. The wind died, and the sun shone on the fresh snow, quickly ground into slush and mud.

"I tell you, Hawkeye, the man's fantastic! I checked up on him. Doctorates in Medicine, Electrical Engineering, physics, half a dozen others, not counting the honoraries.

"B.J...."

"And nobody knows about him, it's as if he didn't want the publicity."

"B.J., your cousin's worse. We've got to go in tonight."

"X-rays?"

"The shrapnel's moved, but not enough. And it's stopped, lodged against the muscle. There's internal bleeding. Temperature 102, pressure 80/50."

"So we go in tonight?"

"Tell me about him."

"Not much to tell. Graduated high school at sixteen, enlisted--he tried for radio school and tested in the top, so with the Army's usual efficiency they put him in the infantry. He's got a ham radio rig at home that'd blow your eyes out. He wanted to go to college, but his folks can't swing it. Shame too, he has a real talent with electronic gear."

"Looks a lot like you."

"I'll show you some old high school pictures of mine, he's a dead ringer. Freak chance of heredity. We've been close because of it."

"You want to back out, I'll handle the surgery."

"No, I'll do it. But I'll need you to assist."

Hawkeye nodded. "Right."

The operating room was strangely quiet. Only one table. None of the sounds of meatball surgery. No joking, screaming or banal conversation. The sounds of working doctors. B.J., Hawkeye, Nurses Houlihan and Able, the anesthesiologist, and Father Mulcahy.

"Rib spreaders...okay, sponge, get some of the blood out of there."

"What a mess," someone muttered.

Without a sound, Dr. Vaslovik, dressed in surgical whites, entered the operating theater.

B.J. looked up. "Welcome, doctor. We may need your help."

"Can you get at it, B.J.?"

"No, it's still too far back, Hawk."

"Let me try." But it was impossible. The talents that saved thousands of lives could not save this one. The boy was slipping away.

"I don't know what to say, B.J., we did our best. It's what Henry used to call the rules of war. Rule one is 'young men die' and rule two is 'doctors can't change rule one'.

"Nurses, leave the theater." It was Dr. Vaslovik.

"But..." the nurses began to protest.

"No buts. Go. Now. You too." He pointed to the anesthesiologist.
"Father, you can stay."

"What is this?" B.J. demanded

"Gentlemen, you must promise me that you won't tell anyone what you are about to see. Not even the Army." He paused. "Especially not the Army."

With that, Vaslovik set to work at a remarkable speed. Using techniques neither doctor had ever seen, he removed the buried shrapnel from the boy's chest.

After the surgery, with the boy safely in post-op, the four talked.

"That could revolutionize surgery," B.J. was saying.

"It will, but not now. You three must accept that there is a reason that I do not explain further. You would not believe why I am here. If I told you how I happened to be here, at this place, at this time, with these people. Perhaps someday, Dr. Hunnicut, your cousin will know."

A fresh blanket of snow gave the Korean countryside a Christmas-like look from the vantage of the 4077th's chopper pad. Three men squatted on its edge as the helicopter that would take one of them back to "civilization" settled on its skids. Slowly the rotor ground to a halt, sagging as it lost lift.

Hawkeye was the first to speak as the din subsided.

"Have a good trip home, Doc. Try to stay away from low flying trees."

Vaslovik rose to his feet, then tripped slightly as he took his first step.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, it's just a little stiffness. Sign of old age approaching. But the mind is still sharp. And that's what's important, isn't it? Dr. Hunnicut, can I speak to you privately for a minute?"

Hawkeye left the two.

"I know about your cousin's interest in electronics."

"But how...?"

"Never mind. There's a scholarship waiting for him at Cal Tech. Promise me you won't tell him the source."

"But..."

"I've made more money than I'll ever need. Let me spend it as I choose. You won't tell him?"

"I won't."

End Part I

