

Provocation

DAVID GLEDHILL

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Published by DeeGee Media Ltd

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ISBN-13: 978-1515382584

ISBN-10: 1515382583

This book is dedicated to the servicemen and women who fought and won
the Cold War on the ground and in the air.

DeeGee Media Ltd.

<http://deegee-media.webnode.com/>

First Published 2015.

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PROLOGUE

RAF WILDENRATH, WEST GERMANY, MARCH 1983

Carl Pocklington rested his heels on the balcony rail and kicked back in his chair. Wassenberg was quiet at this late hour as he watched a car make its way down the gentle incline into the centre of town its cold engine pushing out a cloud of exhaust smoke. Their lovemaking had been urgent and unfamiliar feelings were stirring which had been dormant for too long. He nursed the bottle of Grolsch lager, its presence more a comfort than a necessity.

In the bedroom Anneliese Kolber was sleeping soundly. It had been a whirlwind since he had met her four months ago and he realised that he was head-over-heels in love. There could be no disguising the depth of his feelings for the attractive young German girl despite the age gap but he could not have anticipated the turn of events which had unfolded that evening. Sitting at a quiet table in the local restaurant, the wine flowing, she had at first coaxed but, increasingly, cajoled. From the outset her story had gripped him. She was born and raised in Ismaning, a small suburb of Munich, or so she had said, and her strong Bavarian accent seemed to back up the story. Tonight, however, she had ended the subterfuge. Her family's roots were indeed in Bavaria but, towards the end of World War 2 they had headed north to avoid the devastating attacks on the city and become trapped between the Allies advancing from the west and the Russians pushing from the east. Their flight had stalled in Magdeburg where they had, reluctantly, settled. When the Inner German Border finally split the

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two halves of her country, the family was trapped on the wrong side of the fence. Life for her parents had been hard for the following years but there was a reluctant gratitude towards the occupying Soviet forces who allowed them to rebuild their shattered lives, albeit in the austere concrete jungle of the shattered city. The young Anneliese had known only a life under occupation and the drab concrete blocks of flats were what she called home but she had always borne hopes that one day she could return to her family roots in the south of her divided country. Whether it was a good thing or a bad thing for the ambitious young girl, her good looks and sharp intellect had singled her out and she attracted the attention of the local Stasi representative who had cultivated her. She had flourished and, when she was offered a chance to train as an agent with the prospect of working in the West, she had taken the chance willingly. With no doctrinal loyalty to the puppet Government in East Berlin she hid her overwhelming desire to escape despite intensive scrutiny during training and indoctrination. Treading the fine line had become a driving motivation in her life and she had, finally, seen a potential route out. Nevertheless, if she was ever to flee to the West and remain there permanently she would need money. Her new role was hardly lucrative and her freedom was limited by the latitude her handler allowed. If he suspected even a hint of treachery she would be recalled to East Germany leaving Carl and his embryonic hopes and desires behind. In the meantime she plotted.

For Carl with his right wing views and his unadventurous upbringing in an expensive boarding school in Surrey, the contrast could not have been starker. He felt immense sympathy for her plight and an overwhelming urge to give her the money she had asked for. After all, it was sitting in the local bank doing very little other than earn a few Deutschmarks in interest. The earth-shaking revelation had been Anneliese's admission that she worked for the Stasi which would mean that his hard-earned cash would be bankrolling the very people he was supposed to be fighting against. If the Station Provost Marshal at Wildenrath picked up the slightest hint of his links with her, he would be removed from his post within hours. She asked a lot. His job on 60 Squadron seemed to an outsider to be a nice little backwater ferrying VIPs around Germany and, occasionally, back to the UK. The aging Percival Pembroke commuter plane was slow and the job undemanding; well, at least on the face of it. It was a far cry from the mayhem of a Buccaneer cockpit where he had learned his trade before

losing his ejection seat category a few years ago. The reality was that whenever the small plane flew on its regular trips into Berlin, either he or a fellow navigator sat in the small cabin armed with the latest photographic equipment and his role was somewhat more clandestine. At least once a week the Pembroke made its way down one of the corridors into RAF Gatow in West Berlin and the cameras snapped away as it went. The pictures taken during the sorties provided a significant piece in the jigsaw puzzle identifying the military intent of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany which were ranged across Eastern Europe. One of the first indications of the outbreak of World War 3 would be military manoeuvres, probably captured on film by a Pembroke crew or maybe by the BRIXMIS Military Liaison Mission, as Soviet forces massed on the border. He was the instrument for collecting that intelligence but was, suddenly, intricately involved as a piece of the intelligence jigsaw.

The revelations stunned him. He had an irresistible desire to help his pretty German girlfriend but what would he do? Could he betray his country even for love? He took another long draught of beer. The coming months would tell.

CHAPTER 1

THE CENTRAL BERLIN CORRIDOR, EAST GERMANY

The Pan American Airlines Boeing 727 descended to 10,000 feet overhead the radio beacon at Wolfsburg and turned onto east. John Peterson cross checked his VOR radio navigation system, the figures “270” staring back at him from the small dial, the steering bars rock steady, reassuring the former fighter pilot that he had set the correct heading. His Air Force callsign “Shooter” seemed truly redundant in the cockpit of his new machine. Flying around Europe he could afford to be more casual with the accuracy of his navigation but along these 20 mile wide corridors that converged on Berlin, precision was paramount. The warnings on his navigation chart were stark:

“Aircraft deviating from the corridors may be intercepted and fired upon without warning.”

The view through the windows from the confined cockpit of the jetliner was limited and he stared blankly at the featureless terrain, hankering for the days when he flew the F4 Phantom from Ramstein Air Force base near Frankfurt. Although the operational pace had been hectic and the hours wearing a gas mask tedious, the rewards were enormous and fond memories were still fresh. His new life as an airline pilot was comfortable and predictable but, arguably, less fulfilling.

It was some time yet before he would initiate the pre-landing checks and begin the let down into Berlin Tempelhof. Alongside him, the co-pilot scribbled a few notes on his chart oblivious to the world outside despite

their precarious situation. There was a gulf between the pace of life in this cockpit and that of his Phantom, Peterson reflected. The radio crackled into life.

“Clipper 324, Berlin Centre, you have converging traffic, northwest range five miles closing, showing similar level.”

He screwed his head around but the intrusive bulkhead behind the cockpit window blocked his view. In his Phantom he would already be manoeuvring to spot the approaching track but, if he did so now, he would spill those precious gins and tonic down the back and antagonise his passengers.

“Roger Berlin Centre, no tally,” he responded, reverting unintentionally to “fighter speak”. “Keep talking.”

“Northwest range two, closing rapidly, showing 10,000 feet.”

He glanced at the altimeter which showed precisely the same height. Whatever it was, it was a collision risk and he stared intently, straining for a pick up. His wait was short.

The increased chatter from the air traffic controller was both redundant and distracting. The pilot needed no prompting. He had a problem. Far from being a collision risk, the burnished, silver Mig-21 Fishbed, which had slotted onto his wing and moved into tight close formation, was a clear and present threat of a different type. What he could not see was the wingman who had slotted into position one mile behind, well inside weapons parameters for the AA-2 Atoll infra red guided air-to-air missiles which hung beneath the delta wing.

The Mig dropped from view and his heartbeat quickened. So far there had been no interception signals from the other cockpit but the wait was brief as the fighter pulled up ahead of the wing line of the Boeing and slotted alongside, agonisingly close. The dark visor of the Mig pilot hid the face behind, his white flying helmet framed against the blue sky. The Mig jockeyed for position his presence affecting the airflow around the larger airliner. Behind him Peterson heard the click of a shutter as the co-pilot snapped a shot of the aggressor, apparently oblivious to the severity of the situation. The Mig pilot attempted a few ungainly hand signals but he was

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too close and his hand quickly returned inside the cockpit as the Mig gyrated alarmingly coming very close to colliding. The American pilot disengaged the autopilot fighting the urge to draw away despite fearing imminent contact. The radio was quiet as the controller lapsed into silence, presumably in frantic discussion with his Soviet counterpart in Berlin. The standoff continued for what seemed like hours but, in reality was only minutes before the Mig eased out into a loose formation alongside. Far from improving the mood, the manoeuvre raised the tension in the cockpit.

Without warning, the second Mig which until now had been invisible, appeared from under the nose and pulled up, entering a vigorous climb as the afterburner lit, filling the windscreen with its delta wing planform. The dramatic image was transitory as it separated at high speed, disappearing from view. The airliner rocked in the wake turbulence and Peterson clicked on the seat belt signs in the cabin only now realising his omission.

As quickly as the incident had begun, it was over. No shots had been fired but the message had been clear. The ordered routine of life in the airspace over East Germany had been suspended.

“Clipper 324, Berlin Centre, radio check”.

As Peterson engaged the nosewheel steering after completing his landing roll at Tempelhof airport and eased the airliner onto the fast access track, sweat glistened on his forehead. The incident had unsettled his normally robust demeanour. He was relieved to be on the ground at his destination rather than at an East German military airfield. He suspected that the extensive reports he was about to file would delay the flight back to Frankfurt. He had been party to what might be the opening gambit of World War 3.

CHAPTER 2

RAF WATTISHAM, SUFFOLK

Roy South wandered down the corridor and knocked on the office door. The Boss could be a prickly old git but the muffled response from inside sounded vaguely positive for a change so he pushed open the door and walked in.

“Roy, take a pew.”

The perfunctory wave directed him to the seat on the other side of the desk, the Boss’s head still buried in a file.

“You know “Flash” Gordon from your time as an instructor on the Conversion Unit, don’t you?” Didn’t he go through the conversion course with you?”

“He did Boss, why?” he replied with a slight feeling of trepidation. His mind slipped back to his short conversion course onto the Phantom at RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire where he had endured the pain with the young navigator as they had grappled with learning the foibles of the F4 Phantom. His time on the Operational Conversion Unit had not been plain sailing and the occasional stumble had caused more than a few sleepless nights as he had traded the cockpit of a Vulcan bomber for the tighter confines of his new jet. His young navigator had fought to come to terms with the complex and unpredictable radar but his own progress had also slowed during the air combat phase when faced with the three dimensional challenge of basic fighter manoeuvres. He struggled to link events on the course with his new role as Flight Commander on the Squadron but the conversation moved on

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swiftly solving his quandary.

“Because it looks like it’s got you a detachment to Wildenrath.”

His spirits rose rapidly. Wildenrath was the RAF fighter base located on the border between West Germany and the Netherlands. Belgium lay a few kilometres to the south and it was a superb location for a detachment. With its two squadrons of Phantoms, squadrons of Rapier and Bloodhound surface-to-air missiles and a communications squadron flying Pembrokes, Wildenrath was a bustling Station. The social life amongst the population of isolated Brits was second to none and the flying, which was predominantly low level over the North German countryside, was exhilarating.

“He’s the planner for an exercise that’s coming up and when I heard his name, yours sprang to mind. You owe him a beer because this one will be popular. I want you to lead a detachment to Wildenrath. Bold Challenge is a Berlin Corridor reinforcement exercise and this year it’ll be hosted by 92 Squadron but we’ve been tasked to provide two jets to bolster their numbers. They have a detachment to Decimomannu coming up and they can’t handle the full commitment. It seemed like a good deal so I jumped at the chance.”

“Good idea Boss, who are the key players?”

“The Americans are sending Phantoms from Ramstein and the French will provide four Mirage IIIs from Dijon. It’s a tri-partite commitment that dates back to the post war agreements which is why the Germans are not playing. The new F-15As from Bitburg were due to take part but the unit is on TACEVAL during that week so they can’t play.”

“Can I take any support with me?”

“No, the resident squadron will handle all the turn-rounds on the jets and any rectification that’s needed. They’re grateful for the extra airframes to let them prepare for their upcoming detachment. You’ll operate from Delta Dispersal at Wildenrath alongside 92 Squadron. I’ll give you a spare crew but they’ll have to get over there on the ferry unless you can scrounge two spare seats on the trooper flight from Luton. I’ll leave that to you and you can decide who you take with you.”

“When is it?”

“Thought you might ask. It’s a short fuse and the exercise begins next Monday so you’ll have to fly out on Friday to be in place and ready to go on the first wave on Monday morning.”

“No pressure then,” he replied, running through an imaginary checklist in his head.

“You need to be in the same fit as the Wildenrath jets so liaise with SENGO and have the guns fitted. Two jets and a spare in case you have a problem on start up. Here are the details of the project officer at HQ RAF Germany. Get in touch with him and introduce yourself but let 92 Squadron do the planning. Here’s Flash’s number at Wildenrath. Enjoy the exercise.”

South grasped the proffered tasking signal but the Wing Commander held his grip on the flimsy paper and met his gaze.

“Oh I should have added. The stakes were raised yesterday. The Sovs intercepted a 727 inbound to Tempelhof. A couple of Fishbeds targeted the midday flight inside the central corridor. No shots were fired but they gave the crew a fright. If I was to guess I’d say HQ RAF Germany might want to send a message back to the Sovs so expect some aggressive exercise play.”

South withdrew, his mind in overdrive. It was already Wednesday and with only the briefest details he had much to do to catch up. They would have to fly out on Friday morning to bed down the jets before the exercise. Between now and then he had a raft of things to arrange. The thought that the exercise might be a flashpoint had not yet fully registered. Maybe the Cold War was warming up.