

## Chapter One - Bedcheck Charlie

As Bedcheck Charlie rumbled overhead, PFC Wylie Cypher cowered in the latrine, fearing that his life would be over during his first week in war-torn Korea.

Wylie crouched in the center of the small frame building as though glued to the rough oval wood of the seat, listening to the drone and sputter of the enemy aircraft. He massaged the brown stubble of his military haircut and clamped shut his eyes, trying to ignore the icy feeling in his bowels, trying to shut out nameless fears. Danger was on every side.

Sweat dotted his brow as he focused on his greatest concern — how to survive a sixteen-month tour of duty in battle torn Korea and stay alive.

Thoughts of Judy kept interrupting. Brimming with self-pity, he thought, Jesus, my plans sure haven't worked out very well so far. Here I am in combat with the strong possibility of getting my ass shot off. What's my life expectancy as an infantry leader? What's ...

The sound of Bedcheck Charlie's sputtering engine intensified. The latrine walls shuddered. That would just be it, he decided. That fucker drops his bomb on this latrine and my worries are over. His throat tightened and his buttocks went numb. He felt vulnerable, impotent, constipated, and frightened. It sounded as though the airplane was landing on the roof.

His nemesis, named for the hour of its arrival, was a Polikarpov PO-2, a small Russian biplane. That evening, like many evenings before, its pilot intended to drop bombs by hand on enemy troop concentrations. He focused on the replacement depot in Uijongbu, close to the latrine where Wylie cowered.

More seasoned troops at the depot had departed vulnerable areas for trenches and foxholes and fired on Bedcheck Charlie with M-1 rifles and carbines. A few aimed 45-caliber pistols at the plane's engine, an elusive target that might, however, succumb to a few well-placed ounces of lead and steel. The troops did not consider it sporting to use heavier arms. It would be like shooting deer with a howitzer, as happened the week before when an overzealous forward observer confused some grazing animals for a group of Chinese volunteers on the attack.

Kim Ky Yung, pilot of the Polikarpov, was not enthusiastic about this mission. With undiagnosed myopia, he had failed all aspects of Russian flight training in North Korea with the exception of the biplane he now controlled. Although instrument reading was easy, his haphazard approach to target sighting and abysmal navigation were serious drawbacks, but not enough to ground him. His coolness under fire counter-balanced those failings. His instructors were thoroughly impressed with his bravery, not realizing he could not see the puffs of smoke from weapons discharged below.

Pilots being in demand at this stage of the conflict, he sputtered forth almost every evening searching for targets beyond the lines of conflict but not too far from home.

Kim hazily noticed the latrine and buildings below and tried to ignore the buzzing of steel hornets rending the fabric of his wings. He concentrated on finding a suitable target below. There it was— large, dark, shimmering, and very hard to miss. With practiced movements, Kim tossed his dirigible shaped bomb over the side behind his lower wing, and headed north toward home.

Wylie had already heard references to the ungainly biplanes that harassed troops along the front lines with early evening bombing raids. UN troops almost considered them a joke because their erratic flight patterns made them seem awkward as gooney birds. In the first year of the war, the small, wooden Polikarpov biplanes provided by Russia to its North Korean clients flew slowly in darkness at such a low altitude they eluded allied radar and attacked their enemies with impunity. Though outdated Russian trainers from World War II, they were highly effective night bombers.

The United States Air Force tried to stop this deadly nuisance with Saber jets, but they were day fighters and flew too fast to neutralize them. For half a year, they tried other planes to destroy Charlie but the equipment was too sophisticated to do the job. Finally, in the first months of 1951, Marine pilots flying Corsair night fighters succeeded in killing Charlie.

With the number of their Polikarpovs diminishing, the North Koreans selected allied targets close to the front lines and deployed Charlie at odd intervals. Kim understood that the early, golden days of biplane combat were over and that now, in the spring of 1953, he could well become an easy kill for a Marine Corsair. That accounted for the hasty selection of a large target and the abrupt turn north.

The dark, shimmering mass that attracted Kim's attention was the lagoon next to Wylie's latrine. Frogs, leeches, and small fish populated it, and herons stared bleakly into the wind-ruffled water. The sudden appearance of a cylindrical object falling from the sky alerted the herons, but the frogs, leeches, and fish continued business as usual. Wylie, hearing the plane leave, felt it might be safe to venture from the latrine. As he raised himself from the seat, an explosion rocked the little building, followed by a geyser of dark water containing recently demised fornicating frogs, small fish, and other forms of detritus. Eerie plopping noises accompanied the sound of water striking the corrugated roof above him.

His senses already on edge, the impact of the bomb blast heightened Wylie's feeling of vulnerability and utter inability to control his life. He feared he might be wounded and, in the dim light, took inventory, patting himself from head to foot, searching for holes and wetness. None. Relieved, he wiped drops of sweat from his brow and relaxed, finally using the latrine for its intended purpose.

Kim, meanwhile, was dealing with control cables severed by small arms fire and severe buffeting as wind whistled through new holes in the plane's fabric. He passed over the 38th Parallel and sighed with relief at the sight of flickering lights illuminating the airfield below. Now, if only his wheels remained intact.