

THE GREATER GOOD

Jolted into wakefulness, I fumble for the bedside light and flick the switch.

Nothing.

The darkness closes in like a choking black fog, transporting me back 20-odd years. Just as then, the source of the danger is under the bed. Only this time, there's an all-too-real, growling, presence.

I hesitate, a wiry six-footer reduced to the stature of a frightened five-year old. Worse. This time, my parents aren't in the next room.

Convinced the monster is about to grab my wrist, I reach down into the blackness.

Water! A good inch of swiftly running cold water.

I'm still not sure what's going on, but I know it's time to make a move.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, gasping as my feet enter the freezing water. The wooden floor is juddering. Heaving and rumbling. Slowly, as if balancing on a swaying log, I rise, unwinding like a coiled spring. Poised. Ready to lash out.

But at what? The darkness is total. My heart thumps, panic threatening to unhinge me.

What's that?

Voices rise above the clattering din. I can't make out the words, but somehow, I know they're calling for me. My pulse slows.

The blinds to my front and door to my right are suddenly edged in a flickering yellow. At last, a way to get my bearings.

'Colonel?'

I latch onto the word, repeated, again and again, and can't help but smile. The Yanks never could get to grips with Group Captain.

Another jolt. Better get out of here, Len.

I edge across the heaving floor to the locker, feel for my flying suit and scrunch it into the bag on the adjacent chair. Beneath it, my boots are on their sides in the water.

A violent impact rocks what they jokingly call a chalet. It begins to sway. I throw the boots in the bag, open the door and, thankful that I'd slept in at least my underpants, step out.

Torch beams blind me. I shield my eyes like a startled convict, and squint at a sight that confirms my worst fears. Beyond the few yards of decking, an angry torrent of boiling brown water flows past at startling speed.

Over the last few days, the typhoon has devastated much of the Philippine Archipelago. When it reached us yesterday evening, I joined the others to watch the spectacular sound and light show, and the rainwater. It was gouging great channels, Grand Canyons in miniature, millions of years of erosion replicated in a few hours. When I eventually turned in, I'd been relieved the nearest watercourse was well clear of our cabins.

How wrong could you be?

The growl that woke me was stones scouring the underside of my sleeping quarters. And now, large boulders pile against the upstream wall, threatening to push the flimsy construction down the slope.

A heavy collision drives the point home, making the cabin shudder and lean.

Twenty feet away, hands reach out, their owners hidden in darkness behind the torch beams.

'Jump, Colonel. Jump.'

What the... I'm a pilot not an Olympic long jumper.

But they're right. There's no other way. I fling the bag. One of the torch beams sprays about wildly and dies. Mumbling an apology the owner has no chance of hearing, I edge back inside the chalet door, take a two pace run up and launch myself from the decking.

I'm surprised at my own athleticism, but still only clear two thirds of the distance, landing in about two and a half feet of swiftly flowing water. Before I can stand, the current washes my feet from under me. I begin to topple.

Energised by fear, I throw my upper body toward the bank, reaching out as far as I can. My legs rush downstream and I gasp again as the icy water closes over me.

Poor old Len. Made a brave attempt, but...

Strong hands grip my wrists and drag me from the water.

After a few moments resting on my elbows, coughing and retching, I regain my breath and roll over. Concerned faces look down.

'Are you okay, Colonel? Thought you were a goner.'

My mouth's full of grit and a foul taste, and my feet and legs have taken a pounding, but I don't think I've broken anything.

'Yes, I'm fine, thank you.'

A loud thump draws my eyes to the chalet. The latest collision is too much. To the accompaniment of cracking noises, it slides into the water, grounds briefly, then bobs up and sets off downstream, rapidly gaining speed. All too soon, it outruns the torch beams, leaving only eight splintered posts stabbing the air. I shudder at what might have been.

Had the others faced similar dangers, and, if so, had they all survived? There's quite a crowd around me, but even if I'd known all 12 of them well enough in the first place, it's just too chaotic to make a head count.

'Robbie?'

That's the real Colonel's voice. Paul is a couple of inches shorter than me, and stockier. He too is dressed only in 'shorts', as he'd call them. He's also wet and bedraggled, his dark hair plastered over his forehead. But he still has a commanding presence.

His co-pilot, a tall young man in what the Americans call a flight suit, turns towards him. 'Yo, Skipper.'

'Is that all of us?'

'Yeah, Skipper. The Colonel's the last.'

Paul looks at me and smiles, before shaking his head theatrically and addressing the rest of the group. 'Trust the Limey to end up in the middle of a river.'

As his crew laugh, he walks over and, speaking more quietly, says, 'That'll teach you to take VIP quarters, Len!'

Only a few years older than me, he seems as composed as ever, unfazed by the dramatic start to the day. Another indication of why he's been picked for this mission.

'The bad news,' Robbie regains our attention, 'is that we've lost the crew transport.'

He points up-slope to an area illuminated by several torches. Angled at 45 degrees in another impressive stream is the crew bus, the tarmac beneath its nearside wheels washed away as easily as the dirt beneath my chalet.

Damn. Even if we can find another vehicle, the road's unusable.

While the others vent their frustration, I look at Paul. He raises his eyes to the heavens.

I'm one of very few people with the experience and knowledge fully to understand his disappointment. But, on this mission, I'm only an observer. He's the one entrusted with the responsibility of saving hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of lives.

No doubt others will follow, but he leads the vital precursor to the rest of the operation. If he fails, history will be a harsh judge.

As if following the same line of thought, he nods at me and, face full of fresh resolve, raises his muscular frame to its full height. Some of the younger faces are ashen, their owners close to crumbling if they don't receive strong leadership.

'What's the time?' he asks Robbie.

'Thirty after two, Skipper.'

'Good, at least we've had an early call.'

He looks from man to man, each visibly growing in stature before his eyes move on.

'Is everybody ready for a route march?'

After a chorus of nods, Robbie once again answers for the group. 'Should be, Skipper. A few scratches, but no breakages. And we all got out with our kit. Or went back for it.' He aims playful venom at a dark haired young man. 'Ay, Kawalski?'

Someone gives Kawalski an equally playful push, and his bashful acceptance of the rebuke breaks the ice. We all laugh.

'Right, then,' Paul reclaims our attention. 'Let's take two minutes to get ready.'

Anxious voices carry on the wind, and torch beams dance further up the slope.

Paul turns to one of the frightened young faces. 'O'Keefe, take Livingston up to the office and see how they are, and try to get a message to the airfield?'

With their new responsibility, determination replaces anxiety on the young men's faces.

'Make sure you're back in two minutes,' Paul shouts after the retreating figures. They turn and give confident nods.

Following Paul's lead, I reach into my bag and pull on my flying suit, welcoming the warmth of the dry material. No socks though. Grimacing, I pull on the sodden boots.

The wind and rain have eased further by the time O'Keefe and Livingston return.

'They're all up and about now, Skipper. It's not so bad up there. No telephone's working though, and no radio.'

Paul finishes tying his laces and stands. 'Okay, O'Keefe. Good job.'

The young radar operator's chest puffs with pride. He nods his Captain's acknowledgement on to Livingston, who smiles as Kawalski tousles his hair.

'Right. Three and a half hours. Let's get moving.'

We lift our bags and set off downhill, following the ribbon of undercut tarmac. I trot over to enter the line behind Paul and Robbie.

We've travelled barely 100 yards when frantic voices rise above the howl of the wind in the trees. The crew swing their torches to search the scrub on our right. The beams converge on a glint of white 25 yards from the road.

Bed linen lies among the ruins of a chalet, mine I think, trapped now against the bank of a swiftly flowing river. But there's no sign of the source of the screams, and the cones of light separate to widen the search.

Upstream is more matchwood from the chalet and its simple furniture. Downstream, the listing remains of a primitive hut. It balances precariously against a tiny island being undercut on either side by the roaring water. Squatting in the door of the hut is a young native girl, shielding a wriggling bundle in the folds of her sarong. Her eyes are tearless, pleading.

Far from turning to her aid immediately, Paul hesitates.

I sense his dilemma. It's like one of the tests I'd faced in RAF officer selection: 'Your mission and the safety of your crew are paramount, and time is of the essence, but you come across a group of villagers in desperate need of help. What do you do?'

I couldn't remember what I'd decided then, and I wasn't sure what to do now. But it wasn't my decision. It was Paul's. Could he jeopardise the lives of so many in an attempt to save so few? All eyes are on him.

After the briefest of pauses, he looks at his second in command and nods towards the girl. 'Give it your best shot, Robbie.'

'Yo, Skipper.'

Robbie raises a hand and waves it into the bush.

I heave a sigh. With the decision made, everything becomes clear. How could we not help the girl and her child? Whatever the greater good, to deny her assistance would be too cruel and calculating, too inhuman.

Paul's taken an enormous gamble, and one he could live to regret, but I for one will support him if it all goes wrong.

As the group surges forward, our eyes meet and I give him an approving nod. I can tell he's itching to go with them, but we hold back, prepared to jump in and help if necessary.

With the crew approaching the near bank, I notice the villagers who'd raised the alarm, sitting outside their longhouse on a larger island two canyons away. They cluster together, rain sodden and silent, powerless to provide anything beyond moral support.

Under Robbie's direction, the crew retrieve the trunks of two young palm trees from the water. With much grunting and swearing, they drag them down the bank and push them across the divide onto the sloping surface of the island near the hut, perhaps 20 feet away. The resulting bridge is flimsy, and both ends seem destined to fall into the seething maelstrom at any second.

Before Robbie can select a 'volunteer' to undertake the perilous journey, O'Keefe jumps onto the makeshift bridge. The gangly young man plants a foot on each tree and starts to edge forward, the logs rolling and shifting under his weight.

Recovering from his momentary shock, Robbie orders, 'Steady those trees.'

Hands grasp the trunks, but it seems to make precious little difference.

O'Keefe totters across, puts one foot onto the muddy slope and reaches forward. The girl holds out a wet and naked little boy, no more than a few months old. The radar operator takes the child and gestures for its mother to follow. In a frustrating twist, she refuses.

We watch helplessly as O'Keefe remonstrates and the island leans. Eventually, realising her resolve is unbreakable, he takes the struggling baby and retraces his steps.

Robbie talks earnestly to the group, his words inaudible above the sound of the rapids. As soon as O'Keefe jumps off the logs, Kawalski steps on, his burlier frame bent on retrieving the girl, whether she agrees or not. But, with her baby safe, she proves only too keen to be rescued, stepping onto the bridge before Kawalski can reach her.

As the pair approach the near bank, their combined weight causes the soil to crumble. The palm trunks drop. Miraculously, they snag on some roots and hold, swaying just above the water. Somehow, the flight engineer and young mother maintain their balance and edge forward to be grasped by outstretched hands and pulled to safety.

The heart-warming reunion of mother and child raises everyone's spirits. But, after a few pats on the back for the major players, Paul points back to the road, and the greater task ahead. We've just regained the tarmac when, with a loud crack, the island, hut and bridge are swept away.

The rest of the journey is surprisingly uneventful. We deliver mother and son to the medical centre, and ourselves to base operations.

Time is tight, too tight to allow us to freshen up much, but as I thought, the aircraft has been prepared. Flight planning and crew-in go without a hitch and we make engine start on the original schedule.

Not until we're airborne do I sense the crew relax. Standing between the pilot's seats, I can feel the sores where my bare feet have chafed on the damp leather of my boots. It seems a minor discomfort in the great scheme of things.

From the Captain's seat on my left, Paul looks back and smiles. 'Well, Len, finally, here we go.'

With that, Colonel Paul Tibbets banks the Enola Gay away from Tinian Island and sets course for Hiroshima.