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about 2625 words

NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE

By Gary Beck

When the General arrived, the Sergeant of the Guard paged Colonel Hanson and announced: "General Griffin is here." They stood when the General came in and he shook hands with all of them.

"Be seated. Colonel, I'm eager to hear your report."

"Yes, sir. I'll give you the short version to bring you up to speed. We attacked an Al Qaeda safe house in Brooklyn, killed everyone and rescued a prisoner."

"Casualties?"

"Lance Corporal Moskowitz got a flesh wound and...
Lieutenant Davis was seriously wounded."

"Jed."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's hope he makes it, Sam. He's a good Marine."

"Yes, sir... We also captured a box of what may be
radioactive material." "What?"

"To be more precise, sir. The box supposedly contains
uranium 235, provided to Al Qaeda by Iran. I got this
information from the prisoner we rescued, a Russian physics
teacher who claims he was sold to Al Qaeda by the Russian
Mafia."

Griffin stared at Hanson, his mind a jumble of racing
thoughts, but foremost was the hope, however premature,
that they may have prevented a nuclear disaster.

"Now I understand the urgency of your call. Who knows
about this?"

"Everyone in this room and the prisoner."

"What about the troops who were there?"

"Only Jed saw the box before he passed out. He
understood what it meant."

"I'm glad."

"No one else knows what it is, sir."

"Good. That'll give us some time to consider our course of action."

"Excuse me, sir," Lieutenant Danowski said.

"Yes, Ski?" Hanson asked.

"Some Al Qaeda people probably know."

"You're right," Hanson said and turned to police Captain Lonigan. "Mike."

"Yes, Sam?"

"Make sure the police and fire department keep everyone out of the building. This will buy us some time."

"Yes, Sam. I'll make a quick call right now."

"I don't see how we can contain this, Sam," General Griffin commented.

"I know, sir. That's why I need you here... We really lucked out tonight, but what if they have more nuclear material in other cities?"

"A terrifying thought," General Griffin said.

Hanson nodded. "Hopefully the prisoner might have some information about that," he added.

Griffin shook off the ominous feeling that was growing. "Let's hear what your people think, Sam."

"Yes, sir. Ski?"

"I think it depends on whether or not this is the only nuclear material. I'd like to consider it longer before saying anything else."

"Mike?"

"Well we can't just dump the stuff somewhere and it's essential that we find out if there's more of it."

He looked at Captain Alexandra Kent. "Al?"

"We have to answer all sorts of questions first. For example: since it was an illegal raid, how did we get the material? We don't want to go to jail for the rest of our lives. Once that's resolved, we can bring in appropriate help: Homeland Security, Intelligence agencies, etc."

"Good point, Al," Hanson said. "We should deal with how we got the material before talking to anyone else. Also, just so we don't lose track of the big picture while worrying about saving our asses, be clear that Iran's giving nuclear material to Al Qaeda is an act of war."

Griffin nodded. "Whatever happens, there are more important concerns than our going to jail."

"I may have an explanation we can use for this situation," Hanson said.

"Tell us," Griffin replied.

"Men of apparent middle east extraction fired shots from their car at one of our patrols in the Enclave,

wounding one marine. Then they drove off and the patrol pursued them. I was nearby in my vehicle with Captain Lonigan. When the patrol radioed us we joined the chase and followed them into Brooklyn. When they got to Baltic street, the men got out and ran into a house. Captain Lonigan and I knocked on the door, but they didn't answer. We were about to call for police reinforcements, when they fired at us from a window, wounding one of my officers. We kicked in the door and demanded their surrender, but they kept shooting. We shot back and killed all of them. When we checked the house we found nuclear material and a prisoner in the basement. We didn't want knowledge of discovering a possible nuclear weapon to become public without first consulting higher authority, so we brought the material and prisoner back to my headquarters. I immediately informed my commanding officer, General Griffin, of the situation...

Comments?"

There was a minute of silence while they considered the story.

"Why didn't Captain Lonigan call for assistance right away?" Danowski asked.

Griffin nodded to Lonigan to respond.

"I didn't want to risk a shootout in the streets that might put civilians at risk."

"Why did you go into the house without backup?" Al asked.

"To avoid a siege that might cost more casualties," Hanson replied.

"There are a few weak spots to be ironed out," Griffin said. "You could be accused of rash, or even faulty judgment, but you might get away with it."

"After all," Hanson explained, "we're heroes. We may have saved New York City from a nuclear disaster. The powers that be might cut us some slack..."

"Only if they believe you," Griffin said.

"What do you think, sir? Does it sound plausible?"

"I hope so. Unless someone comes up with a better idea, this at least covers the basics."

"I'm sorry, Sam. It won't work," Al said.

"Why not?"

"You and Mike may manage the explanation, but what about the troops? Even if you prepare them thoroughly, I don't think they'll be able to deal with an investigation."

"She's right, sir," Hanson confirmed. "Maybe we can come up with something better."

They tried to think of a better story for fifteen or twenty minutes without coming up with anything that sounded credible.

"We should give it a rest, sir," Hanson suggested, "and try again later."

Griffin nodded agreement.

"What do we do next, sir?"

"I'm working on it, Sam. Give me a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Hanson took everyone else aside and focused on the main problem. "The big questions are why we went there in the first place and why we didn't request assistance from various government agencies, especially the police department. We don't have to worry about what happened once we went into the house, because that course of action is clear. If we find good enough answers, we can be heroes and we won't face jail. I suggest we all wrack our brains until we have a good explanation.... By the way. It has to be soon, because we can't sit on the discovery of nuclear material for much longer."

"What if we can't come up with anything, boss?"

Danowski asked.

"Then our next posting will be at exotic Fort Leavenworth," Hanson answered with a sardonic grin.

Griffin called them back to the table. "Regardless of how we got the material, I must notify the Commandant of the Corps immediately and inform him that we have a crisis

situation. I won't go into details, but I'll tell him that we got the material in a raid on an Al Qaeda safe house. He will be obligated to immediately inform the appropriate civilian and military authorities, as well as Homeland Security and the intelligence community. This will panic the Beaumont administration and Valerie will probably wet her panties in the White House." He paused a moment for the expected snicker, then continued. "The usual turf struggle will start, but Homeland Security will probably take primary responsibility and assign tasks to the F.B.I. and C.I.A. Once they stop blaming each other for what might have been a catastrophic intelligence failure, they'll look for a scapegoat. That's us, unless we have a damn good explanation for our involvement... I heard your reference to Fort Leavenworth, Sam. Frankly, I'd rather not spend my remaining years there... I'm going to cell the Commandant now. Get some answers fast."

"All right," Hanson said. "You heard the man. Let's get to it. Does anyone have an idea?"

"Nothing yet," Al replied.

Danowski shook his head. "No, boss."

"What about you, Mike?"

"I may have something. I haven't worked it out completely..."

"Let's hear it."

"Okay. This is how it started. I was with Colonel Hanson when I got an anonymous call informing me of a possible Al Qaeda safe house in Brooklyn. The caller was very excited and warned me that they might be evacuating the house within the next hour. He gave me the address and disconnected. There wasn't time to go through police channels and organize a raid, so I asked Colonel Hanson to assist me in checking it out..."

"Hold on, Mike," Hanson interrupted. "That's taking the brunt of responsibility on yourself."

"What's the difference, Sam? We're either heroes, or we're going to the clink."

"But we don't have to involve you. You didn't go into the house."

"It doesn't matter. Too many people saw me go there with you."

Hanson considered the alternatives and couldn't come up with anything else.

"It might work, Sam," Al said. "It explains why you went to the house. At least it sounds quasi-legal."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we may have a chance."

"Al's right, boss," Danowski added. "We don't have anything better."

After weighing their options, Hanson decided that it was their best choice. "All right. We'll try it. Al. You and Ski don't have to know it, because you weren't there..."

"We're as involved as you are, Sam," Al objected.

Danowski supported her. "I agree with Al, boss."

"You're both missing the point. If only Mike and I knew about the confidential tip and we were the only ones who made the decision to go to the safe house, no one else can contradict our story. The worst that higher authority could do would be to accuse us of overly aggressive decision making. But how could they fault success?"

The explanation seemed reasonable and they felt the beginning of a sense of ease, since there was a real possibility that the story might be acceptable. Some of their tension dissipated and they sat back and tried to relax while they waited for General Griffin to finish his first round of calls.

Hanson mused aloud about something preying on his mind. "I haven't really worried about nuclear issues since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran threatened to nuke the Saudi oil fields in 2009. If it wasn't for that rogue scientist, A.Q. Khan of Pakistan, who created a nuclear weapons black

market and supplied any country that could afford his services, especially enemies of America, nuclear proliferation wouldn't be such a threat. Now it's come to our shores and we have no idea what else is out there... We were lucky tonight. Let's hope we'll be lucky next time."

"Did you look in the box, boss?" Danowski asked.

"No. I don't know how to handle nuclear material."

"What if there's nothing in there?"

"Then we have a big problem and Mike and I will be in real trouble."

Before he could go further, Griffin finished his calls and rejoined them.

"I informed the Commandant and stayed on the line while he made emergency calls. Once he was informed, the National Security Advisor briefed Valerie, who ordered Homeland Security to take charge, assisted by the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. The finger pointing has already begun and the F.B.I. is blaming Homeland Security and the C.I.A. for allowing nuclear material to be smuggled into the country. The F.B.I. also accused you of exceeding your authority by not requesting them to come to the site immediately."

"That's ridiculous, sir," Hanson said. "If we stayed there, Al Qaeda would have known what happened right away

and they might have sent suicide bombers to destroy the evidence."

"I know, Sam. I'm just trying to give you an idea of what we're in for. I only told the Commandant the basic details, so you better have your story ready when the suits get here."

Hanson quickly outlined the explanation that only involved him and Lonigan.

"That sounds much more functional," Griffin said. "In this case, the powers-that-be may decide that the ends justify the means, although this administration is dangerously lacking in moral conviction and courage. One more item. I have been ordered to turn the prisoner over to the F.B.I. and they will lead the investigation."

"That's a big mistake, sir," Al protested. "This is too important to leave to them. We should do the interrogation. We'll get everything he knows from him."

"I understand your thinking, Al, and I agree with you. However, orders are orders and these come from the top."

"He thinks Colonel Hanson saved his life. Can we at least keep him for a few days?"

"No, Al. From now on we have to cooperate completely with higher authority, regardless of how we feel... We have to be realistic and accept the obvious. We're not qualified

or equipped to take this investigation any further. We'll have to rely on the F.B.I., Al."

"Yes, sir."

The emergency alert circuits on Griffin's phone went off, a rasping buzz rarely heard outside of readiness drills. Griffin turned aside and all Hanson could hear was "Yes, sir. Yes, sir," repeated over and over. Griffin's face was taut with suppressed anger when he disconnected.

"These are our orders," he said tersely. "I am to return to Washington immediately and report to the Commandant. Colonel Hanson. You will isolate anyone who may have knowledge of the presumed nuclear material and provide suitable facilities for the F.B.I. to question them. You will cease any military operations that go beyond the parameters of your mission. You and your staff will cooperate fully with the official investigation. You will confirm to the investigators that you celled me and requested permission to assist Captain Lonigan in investigating a suspected Al Qaeda safe house, which I approved..."

"That's not right, Charlie," Hanson protested. "That will leave you holding the bag."

"Don't worry. It was the Commandant's suggestion, Sam."

"Oh."

"The Corps looks after its own. I've got to go. Good luck."

They watched General Griffin stride out the door, back straight, head high, ready to face the brewing storm on the Potomac.

"You heard the man," Hanson said. "Let's get organized. You may as well stay here with us, Mike. The F.B.I. will expect it."

"Fine, Sam."

"I have a suggestion, Sam."

"Go ahead, Al."

"Everyone who was with you on the raid saw the box, right?"

"Yes. But they didn't know what was in it."

"That doesn't matter. You ordered them not to discuss anything with anyone. They're not stupid. They know it was something important..."

"Make your point."

"If only five of us know about the box they could easily disappear us. It's more complicated to dispose of us if there are twenty-five of us who know."

"Your suspicions of your government might be considered unfounded by some... But not by me. It's a good

idea. Now there's nothing more we can do right now, except wait for the inquisition to arrive."

Doctor Carver celled just then. "Jed is still critical and in intensive care, but I think he'll pull through."

"That's great news, Carv. Thanks."

"I wish I could do more. We got some of them, didn't we, Sam?"

"Yes. We got the planners and their nest. Thanks for all your help."

"We'll rest easier now."

"Go home. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Thanks, Sam. I might be able to sleep tonight."

Hanson looked at his friends. "Carv says he'll sleep tonight. I wonder if we'll ever sleep well again, worrying about more nukes out there."

End.