

Expendables

a short story by Bruce Bethke

Foreword

28 August 1998

I wrote this one in 1986 and sold it in 1988, for publication in early 1990. This certainly isn't the most polished thing I've ever done, but for some reason it's been much on my mind, these last few days.

BRB

Expendables

The troops bounced in on lorries a week before the demonstration. Two hundred and forty select Afrikaner guardsmen secured the area and established a perimeter; only when Upington was certified safe did the C-130s leave Johannesburg.

Ryan came on the first plane, cursing the noisy, jarring ride. As soon as he had both feet securely on the ground again he switched to cursing the heat and the dust, and grimly predicting their effects on hand-wired circuitry. Vittorio stayed silent, trying to fan himself with a floppy straw hat too scratchy to wear. The rest of the passengers -- engineers and observers, mostly -- filed slowly off the plane, blinking nervously at the machine guns and concertina wire.

The second C-130 carried hardware, as did the third. Airborne Command was too large to land at Upington so it stayed on at Johannesburg. Still, Ryan and Vittorio had trained their crews well and by week's end 15 small, shark-like aircraft, their stubby wings bristling with weapons pods, sat assembled in the launch cradles. In deference to Ryan, the noses stayed shrouded. Vittorio called Joburg and announced they were ready on schedule.

The 747 flew serenely through the clouds, miles above the South African veldt. A small cadre of technicians moved through her aft sections, testing and tweaking computer systems and microwave datalinks. The nose cabin, a walnut-panelled lounge with plush carpet the color of ripe avocados, contained a party of perhaps 30 people. Lieutenant Colonel Neal Meredith, U.S.M.C., Retired -- a strong, stocky man of about 60 years with a lot of gray at the temples and too many memories -- straightened his tie, put on his professional lobbyist smile and his native West Texas accent, and eased down the spiral staircase from the flight deck.

An old Cole Porter song was drifting up from the piano bar, and Meredith relaxed a notch. He made a mental note to tip the piano player later. The hostess, recently hired away from a Las Vegas casino, handed him a Manhattan as he came off the stairs. He politely took it, but did not drink.

A wave here, a nod and a smile there: with long-practiced skill he

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