This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Wheels of Fire

Terence Strong

One

The phone rang at just gone three on that late-October morning.

It drilled into my skull and shattered my dream, unrelenting until I reached for the handset on the beside table.

They say it's the calls you get in the small hours that are the ones you will never forget. Well, I guess they're hardly likely to be bringing good news.

But I wasn't thinking of that as I cleared my throat.

'Hallo. Hawkins.'

I kept my voice low, not wanting to disturb Marcia in the twin bed next to mine.

The voice at the other end was familiar, the Adjutant of the Parachute Regiment. 'Hi, Jimbo, sorry to disturb your beauty sleep.' He wasn't quite his usual chirpy self; he sounded a little weary round the edges.

'What is it, Bill? World War Three broken out?'

'Nah, that stuff's all over now, Jimbo. You really must keep up with things.'

My first name isn't Jimbo or even Jim. It's Jeff. But with a surname like Hawkins it was inevitable that someone would see the initial J. and make the Treasure Island connection. So it had been 'Jimbo' to my army colleagues ever since my induction to the Parachute Regiment as a boy soldier twenty-four years earlier – before I took the 'scenic route' in my career, finally making Warrant Officer First Class before being commissioned.

'Stop pissing about, Bill,' I said, 'and spit it out.'

'How soon can you be ready to leave?'

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

I glared down at the handset in the dark. 'I'm not on standby ...'

'I know. How soon? This is an emergency.'

I threw back the duvet and swung my legs off the bed, now fully awake. 'I don't know. Forty-eight hours.'

'Make that twenty-four, will you? There's a lot of hairy shit going down in Bosnia just now. I've had a call from the MOD, asking for you personally. I've got to confirm back immediately. Someone's getting their knickers in a twist.'

I was surprised. 'I'm flattered.'

Suddenly the bedside lamp behind me snapped on, throwing the bedroom into twilight. Marcia was awake and I could smell trouble already.

'Who is it, Jeff?' She sounded anxious. 'Is it my mother; the kids?'

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. 'Everything's fine. It's just Bill. Something's come up.'

'That's ridiculous, you retire next year. Can't they leave you alone?'

I didn't reply, just turned my back on her and returned to my telephone conversation. 'So, what's happened?'

'A liaison officer with the Royal Wessex in Una Drina has gone down with acute appendicitis. Emergency casevac. Bad timing. They want someone with experience to fill his boots. Your name came up.'

Now I knew. The Hereford connection – a while back I'd done a three-year tour with 22 Special Air Service Regiment.

'Liaison' in this context meant negotiating cease-fires with the warring factions, doing some hearts-and-minds and accruing intelligence. Some of the exact qualities that are honed during SAS service.

And, of course, the fact that my step-mother originally came from Belgrade – I'd spent a lot of childhood holidays in the former Yugoslavia – and spoke the lingo fluently was on their records. Sometimes it's said that Hereford never really lets go of its former members.

Nevertheless, infantry battalion liaison officers – or LOs – were invariably drawn from the same cap badge or brigade. Pulling in an 'outsider', and a Para at that – even if I did have specialist knowledge and experience – was hardly going to make me flavour of the month.

'How long's the deployment?' I asked.

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

'The Royal Wessex have been there for three months. So you're looking at another three. There's a midday flight out of Lyneham for Split tomorrow. I'll get back with more details.'

I said, 'Can't you count? That's more like nine hours, not twenty-four.'

'Go with flow, Jimbo. It'll win 1 Para some Brownie points with the MOD.'

It was pointless to resist. I said, 'OK, Bill. Cheers.'

'One more thing.'

'What?'

'Pack your thermals. It can get bloody freezing out there. Ciao.'

I shook my head and smiled to myself as I replaced the handset.

'What the hell's happening, Jeff?' Marcia demanded. 'Where are they sending you? Not bloody Bosnia?'

I turned back to look at her. A year younger than me, Marcia hadn't been a bad-looking woman when we'd met and married after I passed out in the Paras. But she'd never been good army-wife material and always resented the way it had become the third partner in our marriage. After our two kids were born, she'd neglected herself and had steadily put on the extra pounds. Long dyed-black hair now framed a still-pretty but pudgy face that seemed to wear a continuously sour expression as if she'd just sucked a mothball.

'At least someone loves me,' I said, standing up and pulling on my dressing-gown. But she missed the sarcasm.

'They said you wouldn't see active service again,' she muttered.

Too bloody true. Due to be pensioned off at the tender age of forty-five, I'd been driving a desk round Aldershot HQ for the past year and it was doing my head in. 'It wasn't a promise,' I pointed out.

'And we've got Ralph and Celeste coming round for supper on Saturday ...'

Marcia's bridge-club friends. Well, that was one damn good reason to head for Bosnia. I said, 'You'll just have to manage without me. Like you always have.'

I left for the bathroom.

As I ran the shower I stared at my own image in the mirror as the glass began to mist. Forty-four years old, fairish hair that was thinning a little and grey at the temples, a face a little too weathered for my years due to a lifetime in the outdoors, too many cigars and too much booze. But I could still recognize a light of

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

mischievous humour in the blue eyes and the same crooked smile that had been there in the years of my misspent youth. My body had survived better: still muscular, lean and taut from a job that involved relentless physical activity.

I leaned more closely towards the mirror and ran a hand over the bristles on my chin. 'Well, Jimbo, life's full of surprises,' I mumbled under my breath. 'Thought you were on the scrapheap – now suddenly you're getting another slice of the action ... last-chance saloon ...'

Of course, there was no way I'd get back to sleep. So after my shower I went downstairs to the living room of our three-bedroom semi on the outskirts of Aldershot, poured a slug of whisky into a mug of black coffee and lit a miniature vanilla cigar. I'd given up cigarettes years before and didn't need to inhale on these strong little fellas to get my nicotine fix.

I started to go through all the tedious domestic paperwork I'd have to clear before I left – bills to pay, a letter from the bank that needed a reply, car tax renewal form – but my mind wasn't really on the job. In those days in the early nineties, television and the newspapers were full of Bosnia: the mayhem, the fighting, the massacres, the ethnic cleansing, the refugees and the humanitarian aid effort by the United Nations.

Of course, being in the army and knowing some of our lads were deployed there wearing the blue berets of the United Nations Protection Force, UNPROFOR, I took a particular interest in the situation. Whereas most of the general public threw up their hands in horror at the complexity of the situation, I made it my business to get a general understanding of what was going on.

At the end of the Cold War, the disparate Balkan states that been held together under the yoke of Communism to form Yugoslavia fell apart, each seeking independence from the dominant Serbs. Slovenia had managed to slip from Belgrade's grasp early on and Croatia's large and antagonistic population made it impossible for the Yugoslav Army to control for long. Thereafter the real battle was for who controlled the largely Muslim region of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the centre, and its capital, Sarajevo.

The situation wasn't helped by the fact that over the years all the ethnic groups had spread throughout the region, with enclaves or villages or towns full of one group living within an area run by another. In Bosnia there were Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Serbs, and in some places Bosnian Croats!

It made the Northern Ireland problem look simple.

Germany had been first to officially recognize Bosnia-Herzegovina, soon followed by the rest of the EU countries. Eventually the United Nations followed. At that point the UN was rather obliged to step in with humanitarian aid and try to stop everyone from killing each other. That's when UNPROFOR was formed, to which Britain made a large contribution.

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

By the time I'd finished my domestic admin, it was seven o'clock and Marcia was up, stomping round the kitchen as she made her morning tea. She had this incredible, almost telepathic way of letting you know she was in a petulant mood and that you were the reason for it. Negative energy seemed to emanate from her very being until her hostility tainted the air like ozone.

I took the opportunity to escape back to the bedroom to pack my bergen. It wouldn't take long, it was permanently half-full with essentials and I had a checklist of stuff I'd need for any type of climate and mission.

The only downside to this sudden deployment was that I'd miss Christmas with the kids. Lucy and Joe, born just a year apart, were both away at university and had gone to Ibiza to work as club reps over the summer, so I hadn't seen much of them that year. Carefully I put a small framed photo of the two of them on the top of my bergen. Then I strapped it up before realizing that the picture of Marcia I always took with me on deployment was still on my beside table.

I left it there and drove to town to pick up a few crucial provisions I guessed would be in short supply in Bosnia. Whisky and vanilla cigars would be two of them.

When I walked back into the house a couple of hours later the phone was ringing.

It was Bill with the final details. I was a bit surprised when he told me I'd be met off the C130 Hercules transport at Split airport on the Croatian coast by no less than Brigadier Alan Stowell, the Commander of British Forces in the Balkans. It seemed that, in typical British fashion, the MOD had appointed its own commander between our deployed units and the UN general whose orders they were supposed to follow. It was our way of letting 'Johnny Foreigner' at the United Nations know that we didn't fully trust him to play with our soldiers.

I was mystified. My role was to be a fairly humble battalion LO to the Royal Wessex, reporting to its CO on local matters. Brigadier Stowell, on the other hand, as CBF had fielded his own independent network of UKLOs – mostly special forces guys – to report to him direct.

So why was the Brigadier and his G2, the intelligence and security chief, going to meet me for the briefing as well as my opposite number, the UKLO in Una Drina?

Marcia came down the stairs just as I hung up. 'Well, I'd better be off,' I said.

Her expression didn't change a fraction. 'I suppose you must. RAF Lyneham, is it?'

I nodded. 'I'll write. And call when and if I can.'

It was my way of saying, don't hold your breath. But I knew she wouldn't anyway.

She gave a bleak little smile and offered her cheek for me to kiss. 'Take care,' she said. She didn't wave me off.

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

By five o'clock that night I was high over the Adriatic, sharing the noisy, cold RAF C130 with a huge mountain of urgent military supplies that sat under a cargo net in front of me and half-a-dozen other 'replacement' personnel. It seemed that yet again a British government had salami-chopped our armed forces at a time of increasing commitment, so we were topping-up unit strengths in theatre by poaching members from other regiments and increasingly relying on the Territorial Army to plug specialist gaps.

As I felt the distinct cant of the aircraft's wings and its nose dipped for descent over the Croatian coast, my own sense of anticipation soared until the adrenalin rush of old was back the same as ever. I had thought my days in action were over; now it seemed they might return – with a vengeance.

We hit the tarmac with a thud and the old workhorse trundled down the runway towards the terminal building until we gradually came to a standstill and the four propeller-engines wound down. There was a ten-minute delay before the rear ramp went down and I peered out of one of the ports while we waited. It was a dull, pinky-grey twilight, but I could see a frieze of ragged mountains in deep relief on the horizon, beyond the war-damaged perimeter fence of the single-strip airfield. On the grass there were a few old waterlogged artillery-shell craters and several of the administration buildings were pock-marked with bullet holes and in bad repair. I could smell the war and sense the extent of the devastation even from inside the aircraft.

I'd been to Split before. With Marcia in the late seventies on a package holiday. It had been a lot different then, a much happier place.

I heard the whine of an electric motor and the tail ramp began to lower, revealing the bizarre and incongruous sight of Croatian airport officials setting up a wooden picnic table and a chair, complete with forms and a rubber-stamp for our passports. Instant immigration control. The message was clear: new arrivals might know that the Serbs had knocked the shit out of their airport, but it was still Croatia's airport and the Croatians were back in control.

Passport quickly dealt with, I shouldered my bergen and moved towards the gathering of military personnel and vehicles waiting for the new arrivals. I rubbed my hands together against the chill air as I scoured their ranks in search of my reception committee.

At first I didn't recognize the tall, grey-haired man in DPM camos in the poor light. It was that soft Edinburgh brogue that gave him away.

'Captain Jeff Hawkins, I believe ...'

My mouth dropped. 'Bloody hell! Dave McVicar, you old bastard! What're you doing here?'

McVicar had been a senior sergeant when I'd done my tour in the SAS; it seemed like he'd been with them since dinosaurs walked the earth. Nothing had diminished the

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

devilish twinkle in those grey eyes. 'Staff sergeant now, Jimbo. And G2 to the CBF.' The smile became more stiff and he turned to introduce the man standing just a step behind and to one side of him. 'Sir, this is Captain Jeff Hawkins. Jeff – Brigadier Alan Stowell, Commander of British Forces ...'

I saluted and Stowell responded lackadaisically. 'Pleased to meet you, Captain Hawkins.' He was a fairly short and slim man, his body bulked out by extra layers beneath his DPMs. His David Niven voice with its crisp but perfectly enunciated vowels and his black toothbrush moustache were straight out of 1940s Pinewood. 'Jeff, is it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'OK, Jeff. Glad to have you aboard. Impressed you made it at such short notice.' He glanced around the airport and grimaced. 'Welcome to the arsehole of the world! Well, the arsehole of the moment. I expect you've seen others at different times. I know I have.'

I smiled. I was taking a liking to him already. A big man inside a small one.

'Right, it's fucking freezing here. Let's get back to the hotel. At least the electricity came back on today and there's heating.' We started drifting towards a white-painted UNPROFOR Land Rover Defender. 'Have a hot toddy and give you a bit of a briefing. Afraid Cuthbert couldn't make it.'

I frowned. 'Cuthbert, sir?'

'Cuthbert's your oppo in Una Drina. Nigel Cuthbert. He's my UKLO there. Foreign Office wallah – well, you know, MI6's man really, more than mine. In uniform, but actually he's a civvy now. Ex-Guards. He and Captain Wells – not so well as it turned out, poor chap – shared the Liaison Office at A Company. Cuthbert was due to be here and drive you back to Una Drina. But the Bosnian Serbs have launched an unexpected offensive from the west and virtually cut the town off. Road in is under artillery, mortar and small-arms fire.'

I didn't understand. A Company had armoured fighting vehicles. 'What about the Warriors, sir? Couldn't one of them get Cuthbert out through the fight zone?'

Brigadier Stowell stopped beside his Land Rover and turned to me. There was a twitch of a smile at one corner of his mouth. 'Apparently the OC, Major Tring, doesn't think so. You're a Para, Jeff, right? And a former Hereford hooligan?'

I nodded.

'Well, you might find that Major Tring isn't quite as robust in his thinking as you are.' He opened the driver's door and slipped behind the wheel. 'And he hates Paras ... Hop in!'

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

Dave McVicar threw a knowing glance my way, offered me the front passenger seat, then scrambled into the back.

Apparently Stowell liked to do his own driving and he drove the way he spoke, fast and furious, punctuated by hard braking and jerky little turns of the wheel. He explained that his British HQ was at the Divulje Barracks – known, in the typical squaddie way of handling an unpronounceable name, as DJ – next to the airport, but he wanted to speak to me somewhere more private.

'Trouble is, Jeff, HQs are always the worst rumour-mills.' Stowell explained. 'Nature of the beast. Everyone knows too much and they all know too many faces. As a Para filling-in as an LO with the Royal Wessex, you're goin' to stick out like a dog's bollocks. So I want to bypass HQ completely and slip you in quietly. Won't stop the tongues wagging, but hopefully they'll have something else to gossip about by the time you get noticed.'

McVicar added: 'I've found you a room in a small hotel in town. It'll do until Nigel Cuthbert can pick you up.'

I was becoming increasingly puzzled by all this secrecy by the time we got into the town. The thoroughfares of Split were mean and bleak, the street lamps were off and the few people about were fleeting, hunched grey ghosts in the shadows. In the headlight beams I could see the shell damage to the buildings from earlier fighting. Apparently the town was bursting with refugees, filling every hotel and apartment block.

Finally, the brigadier turned into a fairly narrow cobbled side-street. A couple of minibuses and white UNHCR Discoveries were parked half on the pavement outside a hotel that looked as though it had been converted by knocking through three or four old houses. A faded sign above the glass double-doors proudly boasted Hotel Seavu. But my guess was you'd have to be standing on the roof to view anything at all, let alone the sea. Lines of washing hung from many of the upstairs windows, suggesting that this place, too, was now also home to a substantial number of refugees.

Stowell led the way into the lobby and got me signed in at a reception desk that was squeezed under the staircase to the first floor. The red carpet that ran throughout was threadbare, the walls were in dire need of a fresh lick of paint and there was a lingering smell of mildew in the air.

'Drop your kit in your room,' McVicar said, 'and join us for a drink.'

His last words were almost drowned out by a sudden explosion of boisterous laughter from the bar room to the left. It sounded like quite a party.

'British convoy drivers from UNHCR,' Stowell muttered disparagingly. 'Bunch of bloody pirates.'

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

McVicar just smiled gently and gestured to the 1960s plastic-wood door on the right. 'We'll meet in the lounge. Bit quieter.'

And a bit quieter it was when I joined them ten minutes later. There was no one there apart from the three of us. The lounge was all tired, deflated armchairs in red imitation leather, dusty pot plants and a sense of being trapped in a time warp. A waitress brought us three toddies of coffee and slivovitz as Brigadier Stowell spread out his map of Bosnia-Herzegovina on a tiled coffee table.

'Right, Jeff,' Stowell said, getting down to business. 'BiH – Bosnia – as you know, is geographically a triangle turned point downwards which rests on the Adriatic coast. The whole bloody thing is an invention – there's never been such a place historically, but that's politicians for you.

'After the fall of Communism, Yugoslavia shattered into five pieces. Serbia and Montenegro became the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Macedonia gained independence without bloodshed. But it was different with Slovenia, Croatia and then Bosnia. Trouble was, the various ethnic groups were scattered all over the place. I mean, it was a fully integrated state under Tito. The predominating Serb leadership in Belgrade didn't like this break-up at all – Serbs do like order. They wanted things to continue as before.'

I knew all this stuff. 'Belgrade moved against Slovenia.'

McVicar smiled gently. 'Who gave the Serbian Yugoslav Army a bloody nose with a bit of Austrian help. Belgrade also deployed units all over Croatia but in the end they realized it was too big to hold down and they reluctantly had to let go.'

'So then Belgrade turned its attention to Bosnia,' Stowell went on, 'because this was much more contentious. The majority of the population in so-called Bosnia is Muslim.'

McVicar added, 'The Bosnian Serbs living there, led by Dr Radovan Karadzic in Pale, were furious at this independence thing. And, of course, they got the backing of the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade to put up a fight against it.'

'And so this awful mess of a civil war began,' Stowell said with a grimace. 'Of course, most of the warring militias are locals, peasant farmers who used to form the old territorial defence reservists in the Communist era. All their arms were held at the local police stations and there's no young blood in the officer corps. Promotion used to be by dead men's shoes and Buggin's turn. It's rare to find a unit commander under forty, but there are several in their sixties – or older!'

'That's why the battle lines are so static.' McVicar explained. 'Like the trenches of World War One. Old, poorly trained officers, farmers who've got no real stomach for a fight, and no one anywhere who's got a clue about attack. The old territorial reserve only ever studied defence. That's also why there are so many bloody mines about.'

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

I asked, 'But out of all of them, the Bosnian Serbs are winning?'

Stowell scratched his moustache. 'That's putting it a bit strongly. Predominating, more like. Often depends in a local situation whose side Croat forces are on, Muslim or Serb. But the Bosnian Muslims are between a rock and a hard place. No doubt about that, they're being squeezed.'

The brigadier jabbed at his map. 'Our job, UNPROFOR's job, is to protect innocent civilians and refugees and maintain the flow of aid, negotiating cease-fires and safe passage, escorting the convoys as necessary. Not to get involved in their war. To fire back only if fired upon. Thankless bloody task, but some silly sod at the UN thought it was a workable idea.'

'Where exactly are the Royal Wessex deployed?' I asked.

McVicar pointed a pencil at the top half of a roughly diamond-shaped area in the centre of Bosnia that was nearly all Muslim-controlled territory. 'The main aid-convoy route into this region enters from the south-west near Una Drina, where you'll be based at A Company. As you can see, Sarajevo is almost parallel in the south-east – with a near-starving population of three hundred thousand plus, and surrounded by Bosnian Serbs. The route from west to east is a big dog-leg through Donji Vrbas – known as DV – the CO and main body of the Royal Wessex are there. And then on to Zenica, the second biggest city. Then finally through to Sarajevo itself. Some of the convoy drivers call the whole area the "Devil's Triangle".'

Brigadier Stowell pulled a face at that and glanced at his watch. 'Look, I've got to get back to HQ – got a bloody early start for Zagreb tomorrow morning. I'll let Dave fill you in on the detail. Thing is, Jeff, the whole of the Royal Wessex deployment area is key to the failure or success of the entire UN mission in Bosnia. After all, along with UNHCR, it's responsible for feeding and securing the capital and the second largest city. And, frankly, its losing its grip.'

So this was what it was all about. I raised an eyebrow. 'Sir?'

There was an awkward moment's silence as Stowell tried to find the right words. 'Let's put it this way. The CO of the Royal Wessex is a decent bloke. Colonel Rathbone ... But he's no Bob Stewart and the battalion is no Cheshires. Man's got no fire in his belly, just his eye on retirement. Trouble is, as always in fighting units, the rot starts at the top. Spreads down to junior officers and the ranks.'

I asked the obvious question. 'Can't he just be replaced, sir?'

Stowell twitched his nose as though his moustache was irritating it. 'Imagine it, changing the CO when the world's media attention is on the British Army's work here. Well, sod it, Jeff, yes, I would! But the suggestion has been firmly turned down by the Defence Minister. And for that you can also read the PM himself.'

McVicar added, 'Personally, I think the rotten apples have spread too far. But if we can't even replace the CO, then we certainly can't replace the entire battalion.'

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

I wasn't at all sure I was liking this. 'Look,' I said. 'I'm just one man and I certainly can't change the attitude of the entire battalion.'

McVicar smiled at that.

Stowell said, 'Won't have to, Jeff. The LOs' work is crucial. You and the other LOs advise the CO on what action to take, you try and negotiate the cease-fires, you do most of the talking between the militias. You are the CO's eyes and ears on the ground. You can influence decisions more than anyone else in the battalion. And you are my choice.'

I had a feeling I was Dave McVicar's choice. 'But I answer to the CO of the Royal Wessex, sir, not you. And as a Para I'll be resented from the off.'

Stowell shrugged. 'Can't be helped. I've had a quiet word with Colonel Rathbone. Explained your experience, special qualities and fluency in the lingo. Told him you've come highly recommended and that I'd appreciate it personally if you are allowed free rein to be a little more proactive than your predecessor.'

'The colonel knows you're not happy with the battalion's performance?' I asked.

'He's not a fool, Jeff. He can read between the lines like anyone else.'

'He'll also be my CO, sir.'

'Yes,' Stowell acknowledged. 'But I am asking you to make a difference. And I will back you to the hilt all the way as CBF here. With your experience, I want you to be independent and to push that independence to the wire. Even if it ruffles a few feathers in battalion HQ ... You retire from the army next year, Jeff, right? Unless you do something bloody stupid, you're not going to get court-martialled or demoted. Falling out with Colonel Rathbone – if that's what it takes to get this job done – can hardly hurt your career prospects now, can it?'

He had a point there.

Stowell stood up, finished his toddy in one swallow and shook my hand. 'Glad to have you with us, Jeff. I know this is an impossible task, but it's our job to make it happen. Right?'

'Right,' I echoed as Stowell turned sharply on his heel and strode from the room.

As we watched him go, McVicar smiled. 'Always reminds me of Montgomery of Alamein. But he's an alright guy.'

When we sat down again at the map he said, 'Liaison is the key to our mission here, Jimbo. Four officers at DV and the two of you at Una Drina. You guys are the main intelligence-gatherers. On the ground. Local negotiators and collectors of information that British force commanders need to make the best decisions – for their own protection and the success of the UN mission. It's used by your own local unit, of

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

course, A Company, and the Royal Wessex Battalion HQ in Donji Vrbas – DV. Then it all gets collated by me, along with independent special forces and SIS intelligence reports from the UKLOs, for the Brigadier.'

'What about UNPROFOR?' I asked. I meant did the British Army share its own intelligence with the overall UN military command?

He shook his head. 'We'll offer advice to UNPROFOR based on our intelligence, but that intelligence itself is strictly for British eyes only. I mean if some Croat commander tells you in confidence – over a bottle of slivovitz – that he's going to launch an assault somewhere, you don't want it leaking out at the UN in New York or Geneva. Trust is everything.'

'Likewise between factions?' I guessed.

'Exactly.' He looked thoughtful. 'Anything we find out from or about the Serbs, Muslims, Croats ... Nothing is ever said to the opposing sides, no one's ever tipped off. And that can be tough sometimes, believe me.'

I could see that. 'So Cuthbert and I get to know all the local militia commanders, big-wigs, politicians, string-pullers and do the hearts-and-minds stuff.'

'That's it, Jimbo. Though mostly you just want to bang their stupid fucking heads together. Negotiating cease-fires or persuading them to let convoys through is enough to try the patience of a saint. You have to be cool, calm and as firm as a slab of concrete. Otherwise they'll run rings round you.'

I grinned and lit one of my vanilla miniatures. 'So what's the good news?'

'A Company's inherited a good intelligence network but it's not as good as it was. Captain Wells, who you're replacing, let things slip a bit. Reading between the lines, I think his agents – well, informers and contacts, strictly speaking – have felt a bit let down. I expect that's largely down to A Company's OC, Major Tring, who very much has his own ideas about things and spends most of the time with his nose stuck up the colonel's arse.'

That didn't sound too promising, but I shoved it to the back of my mind. 'So how long do I stay here in Split?'

'I'm afraid it could be days, Jimbo. Until the fighting subsides enough for someone from A Company to get down here to pick you up.' He stood up suddenly. 'Well, Alan Stowell might be a party-pooper, but I'm in the mood to let my hair down. C'mon and join the drivers. There's someone I think you'd like to meet.'

McVicar ambled towards the door and I followed him into the lobby.

By the reception desk there was a young and smartly turned-out subaltern engaged in light-hearted and animated conversation with a rather tall and striking blonde. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore faded blue Levis and a natural

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster

sheepskin body-warmer over a plain rollneck sweater. Two rather expensive-looking cameras, one with a telephoto lens, hung by straps from her neck.

'Johnny Rigg's a PINFO from HQ,' Mc Vicar muttered in my ear. 'Right little wanker.'

Rigg – a Public Information Officer, whose job it was to guide and advise the media in Bosnia – turned at our approach.

'Hi, Dave. How goes it?' The voice was clearly pukka public school and Oxbridge, polished to perfection at Sandhurst.

'So-so, thanks, Johnny,' was McVicar's reply. He didn't believe in wasting words on people he didn't like.

'This is Tali,' Rigg said quickly. 'She's a freelance press photographer.' Rigg's grin nearly split his face in half; he obviously couldn't believe his luck that this good-looking creature, I guess in her mid-twenties, had been put in his charge.

McVicar moved with smooth charm to take the girl's offered hand and press it briefly to his lips. 'An honour, Tali,' he said in his easy Edinburgh brogue. 'I'm Dave.'

I saw the look of mild shock in her powder-blue eyes and the sudden arching of her brows that were so light and fine as to be almost invisible. Her face was a slender almond shape, but a slightly pointed tip to her nose took away conventional beauty and put character and individuality in its place. As McVicar let go of her hand, I couldn't help noticing how very long and elegant her fingers were.

'Tali van Wyk,' she said. Her voice had a soft, melodic lilt to it.

'This is Jeff.' I was glad McVicar remembered how I hated being introduced as 'Jimbo' to people outside the army, especially females.

'Jeff,' she repeated with a shy smile. McVicar's was a hard act to follow, so I made do with a firm handshake. I was a little surprised when she responded in kind. Our eyes met only fleetingly before she averted her gaze. It was almost as if she thought that to look at me for longer might give out the wrong signals. I decided then that she was fairly new to this and very unsure of herself and I wondered how the hell she'd get on in a hell-hole like Bosnia.

Rigg was saying: 'Tali's Dutch. Just arrived. Working for some of their colour supplements and magazines. Just wangled a room for her. Manager gave up his own bed. Amazing the wonders a pretty face works.'

'What subjects are you interested in?' I asked her.

This time her returning gaze held steady. 'Anything and everything. Anything that might sell. War and peace. Any picture that tells its own story.'

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong

I think Rigg was getting worried McVicar and I would take her off his hands. He intervened quickly, 'You'll find the convoy drivers in there, Tali. But watch out, they eat young ladies alive.'

A smile flickered on her lips. 'And spit out their clothes after?'

With that Tali turned and moved away, her long legs and hips moving with a relaxed and easy grace. As she opened the door the noise from the bar rose several decibels, lots of loud talking, peals of male and female laughter, throbbing background music and a loud voice that sounded like a very bad impression of Elvis Presley doing 'Jailhouse Rock'.

'God,' Rigg muttered as Tali disappeared inside. 'Look at the arse on that! And legs all the way up to her armpits. Think I've died and gone to heaven.'

'Lucky to find angels that good-looking,' McVicar agreed.

'Wants to do a photo-story on the convoys,' Rigg explained. 'I was hoping I might keep her at HQ for a bit.'

'There you are then,' McVicar said in fake empathy. 'The good Lord giveth us His angels and the good Lord taketh them away ... See you around, Johnny.'

We then followed Tali van Wyk's path into the bar, where the fug of cigarette smoke and the warmth from the crush of perspiring bodies hit us like a wall. All around faces, male and female, were flushed and shiny with alcohol, voices raised so as to be heard against the background hubbub. The men were of various ages. Some had the tell-tale cropped hair and moustaches that marked them out as ex-military, but as many others had trousers slung around the low tide mark of their beer bellies. Several bright, beautiful eyes flashed in my direction, mostly darkish-featured women whom I guessed were local and just glad to see a good time after all the bad. Tali van Wyk had disappeared in the crowd.

I glanced towards the low platform in the corner where a big guy with wild, greying fair hair and a beard to match was cavorting with a microphone in his hand. I'd been right. It was a very bad impression of Elvis Presley. And, just my luck, it seemed that this was karaoke night at the Seavu.

'Wrap your laughing-gear round that!' McVicar said, fighting his way back from the scrum at the bar with two glasses of beer held aloft.

I took one of them. 'Cheers, Dave. Up yours!'

He inclined his head towards the stage. 'You'll have seen him, then?'

A roar went up from the more appreciative of the audience, including a gaggle of beautiful young Croatian girls getting an eager front-row view, as the huge, mop-headed Elvis did his finale and the background noise thankfully died away.

Copyright © 2005 Terence Strong
Published by Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster