Deep Black

Andy McNab

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From where I was hiding, the bottom of the valley looked like no man's land on the Somme: acres of mud churned up by tank and heavy vehicle tracks, mortar craters filled with dirty water. Here and there a dead hand clawed at the sky, pleading for help that had never arrived.

It was a grey and miserable day, not yet freezing, but plenty cold enough to have robbed me of a whole lot of body heat over the last three days. Even so I was still luckier than the scattered corpses, half buried in the mud. Judging by their state of decomposition, some had been there since the summer.

I was about a hundred Ks north of Sarajevo, dug into the treeline at the base of a mountain. My hide looked across the valley to what had once been a cement works, precisely 217 metres away. The problem for the owners was that it had been a Muslim cement works. The perimeter fence had long since been flattened by Serb tanks, and not a single part of the complex had been left unscarred by the bitter fighting. Most of it had been reduced to rubble. A three-storey building that I guessed had once been a block of offices was just about standing, heavily pitted by artillery and small-arm rounds. Black scorch marks framed the holes where there'd once been windows.

I'd counted maybe thirty or forty Serb troops through my miniature binoculars, and I could see they were as cold and pissed-off as I was. Smoke billowed from an annexe, mixing with the occasional burst of diesel exhaust; one or two of Mladic's boys were starting the vehicles, so they could get warm inside the cab.

I could only guess that, like me, they were waiting for the general's arrival. Ratko Mladic, the commander-in-chief of the Bosnian Serb Army, had been supposed to show up the day before, but that hadn't happened. Fuck knows why. Sarajevo had just told me to wait where I was, and that was what I'd do until they told me to lift off the target.

I was up to my ears in a Gore-Tex sniper suit, a big, bulky overall with a camouflaged outer and a duvet-type lining. It had kept me warm for the first few hours, but prolonged contact with the ground was steadily draining me. I had about two days' food left, but being so close to the target, I was on hard routine. I couldn't heat up food, or make a brew. Still, at least I was dry.

I raised the binos and scanned the ground again, controlling my breathing. It wouldn't take much of a vapour trail for someone to think I was having a cookout.

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The coffin-shaped scrape I'd dug after moving covertly into the area was about two feet deep and covered with camouflage netting. I adjusted it again to make sure the objective lens at the front end of the LTD [laser target designator] had a clear field of view to the factory. When Mladic arrived to do whatever he was going to do in the middle of nowhere, I'd call it in. The Firm, getting shelled to shit by the Serbs back in Sarajevo, would green-light a fast jet loaded with a 2000-pound Paveway laser-guided bomb. About fifteen or twenty minutes later, depending on how long it took the platform, as we said in the trade, to deliver, there'd be a top-level vacancy in the Serb high command.

After the hit, I'd get the fuck out as quick as I could. The Serbs weren't fools; they knew these precision bomb strikes were man-in-the-loop technology and they'd be out looking for me.

Apart from the LTD and my daysack, everything from the sniper suit to the plastic bags of shit and petrol can of piss would stay in the hide. It wouldn't matter if the Serbs unearthed it: this wasn't the first time they'd been marked, and it wouldn't be the last. They knew who was doing it, but would blame the Muslims anyway. I'd rather have left the LTD as well, but there was a difference between the Serbs knowing they were getting designated and being able to prove it.

After extracting myself from the immediate area, I'd just hit a road and become Nick Collins, freelance reporter, again. I carried a Sony Hi-8 video camera and a Nikon 35mm SLR in my daysack. On the way in to the job I'd mixed with the local population here and there to make sure I had plenty of shots. If I was caught, I wanted to look the part.

Nick Collins had an Irish passport for this job. Irish or Swiss, they're the safest documents in the world. Who's ever pissed off with Dublin or Berne? With a name like Collins but a London accent, I'd have to say I came from Kilburn. Dad just never got round to taking Brit nationality when he finished working for McAlpine in the early seventies.

Freelancers like me were two a penny out here. Young guys, and the occasional girl, trying to make their fortune with bang-bang pictures and footage that might be good enough to be syndicated round the world. I'd joined a cast of hundreds who'd booked an air ticket then headed to Dixons in search of a decent SLR camera and a few hundred rolls of film. Once incountry, they asked where all the chaos was and made for it like bees to a honeypot.

Shouts were coming from the factory. I raised my head slowly and squinted through the dull, grey light. Agroup of Serbs were playing football again to warm themselves up. They were in a ragbag of uniforms. Some had camouflage; some were in what looked like German army-surplus parkas. Some were wearing wellington boots with thick, knee-high socks folded over at the top; some had decent calf-height boots. I'd seen better dressed and better organized Serb troops; maybe these were the cooks and bottle-washers. Whatever, they had a new football today.

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I'd watched as these guys killed two Bosnian 'soldiers' the morning before - an old man and a boy of about fifteen. They'd taken them into the factory. Judging by the screams, they'd probably interrogated them, then brought them outside and shot them in the chest. I thought it strange at the time; why not in the head? That was what normally happened. I found out why at afternoon kick-off.

The whole thing over here was a fuck-up from start to finish - if there ever was a finish. I thought about the young girl I'd met a few days before, shivering at the roadside with a much older woman. She spoke a bit of English, so I asked their permission to take some photographs to fill up another roll of thirty-six for my cover story. She smiled shyly and told me her name.

'Where you going, Zina?'

She shivered again and motioned down the road. 'Sarajevo.'

What could I say? She was jumping out of the frying-pan and into the fire. The Serbs had had the place under siege for over two years. As well as constant sniper fire, they were lobbing about four thousand mortar and artillery shells into the city every day. The UNPROFOR troops who controlled the airport had their hands tied. About the only thing they could do was fly in aid for the half-million or so Sarajevans who were trapped. Thousands had been killed, but maybe this lot would be among the handful who made it through the Serb front line and into somebody's basement. I hoped so. If we both got to the city I might get my jacket back.

Even in this fucked-up place, some situations were more fucked-up than others. The old woman had been wearing a once-pink anorak many sizes too small for her. Her face was barely visible under the hood's fringe of white nylon fur, but I could see in her eyes that she was dying.

'Here.' I was still several Ks short of the cache - where the LTD and all the other kit I'd need had been dug in by the Regiment as soon as the cement works became a possible target - but I couldn't just leave the young girl like that. I took off my red ski jacket and gloves and handed them over.

She thanked me. Then, as if she had forgotten her plight for a few seconds, she struck a pose, right shoulder towards me, head flicked to the side as she zipped up her new jacket. 'Kate Moss, no?'

I brought the camera up to my eye but I couldn't bring myself to press the shutter release. Tears were suddenly streaming from very clear brown eyes and down her face. She was already back in the real world.

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