

The War of 2076

by [Jim Coles, III](#) (July 2022)



The 2000 Yard Stare, Thomas Lea, 1944

2076-East

The late afternoon breeze was blowing inland atop the Eastern Atlantic's cold currents, bringing cooling relief and a dense, wet fog that hid the stony beach from the view of the village elders as they gathered for their evening social time.

About twenty old men sat on cushions made of woven rugs placed around the fire pit built into the floor in the center of the former Spanish governor's beach house. A single old woman, Miriam bin Brori, brought steamed beans and roasted fish for the old men's supper. This day's dried beans came from the dwindling stock that had been carried to the coast months earlier by the last camel caravan from Morocco. The young men of the village had cooked the fresh-caught fish and the beans that day, as they did six days week, as a sign of respect for the elders.

Old Miriam was the only woman in the village allowed to enter the building where the gray beards were gathered. Their voices were low and soft, but the matters they discussed were serious, and as the old men ate, they leaned toward each other and spoke of things long gone, what might have been—and the dire circumstances now facing their isolated town. After eating, they smoked the dried seaweed that now substituted for the tobacco they could no longer obtain, closed their eyes and remembered the heady days of the Polisario Revolution that had forced the Spanish to quit the land now called Western Sahara.

Fadel Ismael, most senior of the elders, finished his seaweed pipe then lit a small tab of locally mixed hashish, savoring the tarry, acrid smoke he drew from the hookah tube. As the yellowish smoke filled his lungs, his mind drifted to the

glory days some 65 years earlier when all the Men of Islam stood behind the great Iranian Imam Hussein al Ibrahim to challenge the infidels and bring the true faith to the entire world. Other hookahs were lit and the room filled with the pungent smoke as the old men sought to blot out the drudgery and hollowness of daily life by remembering what almost was.

Outside, the breeze freshened as the cold waters of the ocean's rising evening tide pushed steadily against the rocky beach. It seemed to the ancient warriors as if the rest of the world had dropped off the edge of the green-black ocean. If there were other people remaining in other places, they hid themselves well. To the gray beards the sea was now their only source of food and sustenance.

Ten-year old Rani, one of the few children in the village, ran along the beach, his sandal-clad feet beating against the wave-smoothed, fist-sized stones that stretched inland as vast, lifeless fields as far as one could see. Beyond the stones lay the Great Sand desert. Although he had few playmates, Rani was a happy, carefree boy who paid little attention to the Mullah's prayer calls or to the Islamic rules for good behavior. He rounded the little finger of land that jutted into the shallow bay and found himself facing the stone building where the elders gathered every evening. He knew he shouldn't enter, but his curiosity drove him and he slipped in through one of the side doors. There in the dim, smoky light of fish oil lamps, he saw the gray beards slumping on their rug cushions, piles of fish bones stacked around the fire pit in front of each man. The revered elders were nodding into drug-induced snoozes.

For Rani, the opportunity was too good to pass up—without considering his actions, he burst into the room and shouted, “wake up old men,” which so startled them that some of the men toppled over, legs flailing into the air as their feet sought purchase, and some shouted back in surprise “Huh, wha ...?”

In a flash, old Miriam was on the boy. She grabbed the collar of his tattered hemp robe, and began dragging him—and chastising him, her own eyes wide and her voice clearly projecting fear.

“Be quiet, boy,” she hissed, “do you want the Americans to get you?” He instantly sobered and followed the old woman from the room without protest.

The Americans? What were these monsters that caused the people of the village to cower at the mention of their name? Rani didn't know, but he knew that everyone feared the Americans, and that when anyone broke the rules, the threat was always that the Americans would capture and punish them.

Once outside, old Miriam shooed the now chastened boy away, telling him to go home and wait for his grand uncle, then she went back inside to try to settle the startled old men, hoping that none of them would die from the shock or excitement.

Rani took his time as walked along the beach toward the great stone near the center of the town of Cap Boujdoun. The stone rose more than 150 feet above the shoreline. During the course of many centuries hand and foot holds had been gouged up its entire height so lookouts could scan the horizon for the village fishing fleets, the ocean's great storms, or for marauding enemies. A bench had been carved into the leeward side of the base and there, the younger men gathered nearly every evening to lament their misfortune at living in the poorest, most desolate place on Earth. When he arrived he found the place empty. The cold, wet fog had driven the men inside.

Rani's mother lived very near the Cap's great stone in her uncle's domed house, which was made of smooth beach rocks joined by mortar made of ground seashells and sand. The sea had taken his father—and most of the eligible men—shortly after Rani's birth. His mother, Naoma, had never remarried. He

didn't quite understand all of the adult talk, but he'd heard Grand Uncle Fadel talking to another of the elders about Naoma's trouble.

Grand Uncle had said there were no men of her age who were not already married, and no one in this village could afford to feed two wives, much less a woman with another man's child. Fadel had said he loved the woman as if she were his own child, but he thought it unfair to her and to himself that she and Rani had to live in his house. With her man long dead Naoma spent most of her time taking care of the old man, and though she was grateful to have a good home for herself and Rani, Naoma thought life had treated her badly, too.

More than an hour had passed since Rani had upset the old men's dinner, and as he walked through the low door arch, he saw that his mother was agitated.

"Miriam was here. She told me what you did. Grand Uncle Fadel will be angry with you. Now go to bed and be quiet! I'll try to calm him," she said angrily and pointed toward the corner where Rani slept. The boy didn't protest. He went to his corner and lay down on the pallet where he'd slept nearly every night of his young life. He fell asleep quickly and heard nothing of the conversation between the two adults.

Grand Uncle Fadel shook Rani awake just as the new day's light began to brighten the deep gray of the morning tidal fog.

"Get up," the old man said softly, "we must talk young man." Although the town of Cap Boujdoun lay at the edge of the great sand desert where daytime temperatures soared to more than 115 degrees and could kill an unprotected person in a matter of minutes, the morning tidal fogs were so cold they could make your teeth hurt.

Rani rolled over, pulled his tunic and robe on, stretched woolen socks over his feet and donned his sandals. The old man waited patiently until Rani had dressed, then he slowly

shuffled through the arched doorway and began a plodding walk into the sea cloud that hung over the village. Rani ran and quickly caught up to his elder benefactor.

“Grand Uncle, I am sorry I acted bad last night but—”

“Think nothing of it, Rani. I had more fun last night than I’ve had in years. There is little enough to laugh about these days, but seeing those old farts kicking the air, rolling on the floor and choking on their smoke made me laugh until tears fell from my eyes, so, I forgive you...but don’t ever do that again...I’m afraid some of them might die from such a fright! Oh, and you must apologize to el Hassam ... he was so frightened, he shit his pants and had to back out of the hall,” the old man chuckled.

Fadel placed a hand on Rani’s left shoulder then pointed down the beach, “We’ll walk to the old mosque ... and we will talk. There is much that I must say and you have little time to learn all that you need to know.”

The morning tidal fog swirled around them, at times limiting their vision to a few paces, other times opening to reveal fields of gleaming-wet stones along the beach. After several minutes, Grand Uncle Fadel spoke again.

“What I have to say is serious. I should not have to say these things to so young a boy and make you become a man when you’ve hardly had time to be a child, but listen well and learn. We are dying here, Rani. Every year there are fewer and fewer of us. We are two seasons now with no new babies in the village, and for some years many of the babies born here were deformed or weak, and died soon after birth. Until a few years ago five or six camel caravans came each year to trade, but gradually their numbers shrank until last year there was only one camel caravan from Morocco—and none so far this year. Maybe they won’t come anymore,” the old man said.

Rani thought for a moment then asked, “Grand Uncle, do these

things happen because of the Americans?”

“No,” the old man said, “it is because of us ... because of what we did that we have this trouble. The Americans make our trouble worse, cursed dogs, but we did this to ourselves.”

The two walked on slowly, saying nothing more for many minutes until they reached the pile of broken limestone rock that had been the grand mosque of the nation of Western Sahara many years before. Tired from his exertions, Fadel sat on a cut block and motioned for the boy to sit beside him.

“It is time you learned our history. There is no school now. I know your mother tries to teach you, but she’s a woman and teaching is a man’s work...the Prophet himself taught that to our ancestors. So, now, listen carefully and learn.

“When my father was a boy, probably not much older than you are now, this land was held by people from a place called Spain. This Spain lies far to the north in a place called Europe, where the people are fair-skinned and cruel. They are infidels, who worship a false god, but they were rich and stronger than the sand people and they sent armies of men who carried powerful weapons that broke our swords and lances, and for many generations they made our people slaves in our own land. But even though we were a conquered people, we held onto our faith and not one of us knelt to their false god. But they worked us hard, and called us Muslim dogs, and they took the only thing of value we had – Iron. Someday I will take you to the great pit where they made us dig out the iron ore that they took back to Spain to make even stronger weapons.

“After more than two hundred years of Spanish rule there arose among us a great leader–Mohammed ibn Fahaad–who taught the people how to fight the Spanish, and after many years of resistance, my father’s father helped to drive the Spanish out. But after just a few years of freedom, and before my father grew into a man himself, the Moroccan Arabs came with

their Sunni Islamic army and conquered us. We are Sahrawi people with our own Sahrawi Islam, which is the true way of the Prophet, but again we became a conquered people. And on the day when my father married the daughter of a Berber trader—my mother—word came that the Moroccans had killed ibn Fahaad and soon, all resistance against the Moroccans died too,” the old man stopped speaking and his eyes misted for a moment.

“That is a sad story, Grand Uncle. Is that why we live here in this awful place?” Rani asked.

Old Fadel straightened, gathered his dignity and looking into the boy’s eyes said, “this is a hard place, Rani, but it is not awful. This is the land of our ancestors ... brave warriors of Allah, great seamen whose sails were feared all along the African coast. The sea gives us food and most of the things we need to live. We live here because we are the Sahrawi—people of the desert by the sea.”

Rani sat quietly for a few seconds, considering this new knowledge, then asked, “But Grand Uncle, what of the Americans? How did they hurt us?” Rani pleaded.

“Ahh, the Americans. Well, I was born in the year following my father’s marriage, and four brothers followed me into this life. My father hated the Moroccans, but the Sahrawi have always been few and the Sunnis of Morocco were many. About the time I was five my father saw a man on the television who promised to lead Muslims of all sects to victory against all infidels—he said, *InSh’alla*—God willing—that we would vanquish the Christians and Jews, to make the Islamic world strong and proud again, and to break the infidels’ power forever so that they, too, would call Allah their god.”

Rani broke in, “what’s a tele, ...tele?”

The old man chuckled, “television...it was a box that captured moving pictures and sound from the air. And Christians ... they

are greedy and bad people who worship a little god named Jesus who is less than Allah. And the Jews ... they were evil people who stole the lands and holy sites of Islam and killed true believers for sport.

“Anyway, this man, Hussein Abu Sinnini, was a very holy man and over the years many Muslims from all over the world began to follow him. But there were false prophets in the land, too. Men like Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, and Al Morsi of Egypt. All were from far to the east of our lands, but their words came to us over the radio—a small box that captures words and music from the air—and they beguiled us and we welcomed their mullahs and Imams into our lands. They were part of a group called the ‘Muslim Brotherhood,’ men who sought political power and personal wealth but hid behind the words of the Holy Quran. They wanted to create an Islamic government for all the lands of Allah, and eventually the world.

We didn’t know it at the time but these were false prophets who took the sacred cause of Islam and bent it to their sick desires. They tricked many people and they used the righteous Muslim hatred of the Europeans, Jews, and Americans for evil. They sent young people into the lands of the infidels to kill their women and children and to bring terror into their homelands.

“But this was a mistake. We were not ready yet to make war with the infidels. We were not strong enough yet, and the infidels fought back. I remember my father saying that his father told him that the Spanish were hard to defeat but they were as weak women compared to the Americans. In my own time I saw the American armies on television—and they were fearsome. They had great machines that flew through the air and others that made huge fires and brought death from miles and miles distant. They hunted Bin Laden like the cursed dog he was and they killed him and most of his followers. Hussein’s armies they crushed and they took his lands and captured his

people—then they hanged him ... and the Brotherhood movement was butchered to the last man. Mostly, the Americans were soft and addicted to their rich life and sinful pleasures. We believed they were weak but we were deceived by their decadent ways. But once we attacked, we learned that they were without pity or mercy. No army could stand against them and all that dared to resist the Americans were killed. This happened even though at one time they had a leader who favored Islam and tried to hold the Infidels back. In the end, he failed and was disgraced among his own people... and the Americans again resumed their wars against us.”

Rani’s eyes grew huge and his face whitened as his uncle spoke, his fists clenched involuntarily until his knuckles grew white and the muscles in his hands and arms grew tired and sore.

“Grand Uncle, machines that fly? Nothing can fly ... I’ve heard the older boys say this,” Rani blurted out.

“Yes. Nothing flies now because the Americans will not permit any nation but theirs to have flying machines, but when I was boy there were many flying machines, and pictures and voices in the air, and lights without flame at night, and many other things we do not have now,” the old man said adding, “Now, none of these things are allowed to us.”

“Is all of this so just because the Americans say it?” Rani asked tentatively.

“Yes, boy, the Americans forbid us to have any power. They’re watching even now, we don’t see them, but they are watching and if we go beyond what they allow, they strike us—hard. We never speak of it but it was the Americans who killed your father and the other men of the village.

“Following the great war, the Americans generally left us alone and allowed our fishermen to sail their fishing boats out about five miles—but not much further. In that year the

fishing was bad near the shore so the men sailed further to sea than the Americans allow ... and one of their flying machines attacked our small fleet killing most of our boys. One man survived the attack and floated back to shore on some debris, but these cold waters had sucked most of the life out of him. He lived long only enough to tell of the attack then he died," the old man said, his pride clearly crushed.

Rani half pleaded, "But how, Grand Uncle? How did this happen? Why would the Americans do this to us?"

The old man cleared his throat and began again.

"This all began when I was but a small boy. The Americans were rich and powerful and we Muslims hated them because they had no respect for us. A group of brave—but misguided—warriors led by bin Laden attacked their greatest city and killed many of their people. The Americans' anger seemed to rise from the ashes of their city and they began to hunt down and kill the people who made the attack.

"Then the Americans made war against Saddam Hussein the leader of a country called Iraq, which is far, far away from our home. After the Americans defeated Hussein they stayed in Iraq for many years—although for a time they were pulled out by their leader, but when fanatical true believers rose up the Americans returned. Some of the believers resisted for a while, but the Americans eventually crushed that resistance and in time the people of Iraq fell under the wheels of the American war machine and were driven into the ground.

"After a time, the Brotherhood, which was born deep in the Great Sand Desert to build an army of fanatics—attacked the Americans in their camps and tried to drive them from the holy lands of Islam...but the Americans were too strong. They killed the Brothers by the thousands and chased them back into the sand. The final battle was a total slaughter...not one man from Brothers' army survived. And for many years, the spirit of all

Islamic people was broken.

“But Abu Sinnini was the true prophet of Allah. He worked quietly and spread his new faith of Islam throughout the whole Islamic world until everyone was united behind him and he became the great leader, the head of all Islamic people and all of our nations. He became known and respected even in the infidel nations of Europe and America, where he was thought to be a man of peace.

“In those days the Americans needed something that Islamic nations had much of—a black liquid called oil. They gave us much money for this oil that they used to power their war machines and light the great cities of their unholy country...and for the cities of the Europeans and the evil Jews. Abu Sinnini was wise. He appeared not to challenge the infidels but he took their money and he used it to secretly build war machines that rivaled those of the Americans.

“My brothers and I followed Abu Sinnini in all ways. We joined his great army and we trained for the war that had to come. I was chosen to command a group of war machines called tanks, and my brothers were trained as Jihadis—holy warriors. They learned the language of the Americans and went to live among them. We had thousands of Jihadis living there, all trained to act as one giant sword when the time of war came.

“And one day in my twenty-fifth year, Abu Sinnini decided that the time for attack was right and millions of Muslims rose up as one. My group attacked the Americans in their camps in a place called Oman. My attack was like thousands of others on that day throughout the Islamic world. We killed most of their men, and our flying machines chased their flying machines and their ships from our skies and our seas. The few Americans who survived we made into slaves so that their suffering would be long and their arrogant spirits broken. Only when they begged for death did we allow them to die in the desert.

“And the Jihadis in America attacked in their cities on the same day our attacks began. Our televisions told us that millions of Americans died in their homes and on their farms and in their places of work, but even though we had wounded the Americans we hadn’t killed their ability to fight. In the months that followed all of our Jihadis were hunted down and killed. The bones of my brothers lie in the foul soil of America. They were brave and they did their duty for Allah, but the Americans showed them no mercy. And Muslims over there who weren’t in the Jihad were captured and put into camps. I remember an All-Arab Television report that said innocent Muslims in America were murdered or left to starve after our Jihadis attacked. But that’s the price of war...there are always innocent victims.”

The old man had to stop, his voice began to crack and tears welled up in his eyes.

Rani sat transfixed, his eyes still open wide, as he waited for his uncle to speak again, but instead of speaking the old man reached inside his tunic and retrieved a small goat stomach water bottle and sack of cured dates—one of the few crops that would grow along the desolate coast. He drank deeply then began to slowly chew two of the dates before offering the water and soft fruits to the boy.

Rani gulped down several swallows of the cool well water and inhaled several dates, almost without chewing, then seeing that his uncle was ready to speak again, turned rapt attention to the old man’s words.

“The Americans were gone from our lands and we were happy. Without the Americans, the land of the Jews, called Israel, and all of Europe were open to us. Our first conquest was of Israel. The Jews fought hard, but we were too many and too strong and, in the end, we killed them all—down to the last woman and baby.

“Those were heady days, Rani. To be at war then was holy. The world trembled at the sound of our war drums and the injustices done to us for so long were righted. For more than two hundred years our people had feared the Spanish because we thought the Spanish were strong. But we saw that the Europeans were really weak, corrupt, and proud without reason. They had lost the will to fight—or to even stand up for their own cause. We took most of Europe because the Europeans stopped having children and we out-bred them ...

“After destroying Israel, Abu Sinnini’s armies crossed the middle sea, conquering and killing until we came to an ocean of ice. We burned the cities of Europe, laid waste to the land and their holy places. Abu Sinnini forced the Europeans who survived our invasion to accept Islam...those who did not we killed.

“Then we turned eastward, fighting and marching for a thousand days. We combined with Muslims who had fought the Russians for generations and we fought our way across vast plains, leveled the great cities of a land called Russia and took slaves from every race until we came to a land filled with small men. They were too many for us, so we stopped our conquest at their border.

“We had no contact with the Americans for about ten years. No one heard anything from the Americans’ cursed country. As we drove deeper into Europe we almost forgot our hatred for the American devils.

“Those were great days, Rani. After the war I took four wives—and I could afford it, too, as the military governor of a province of Algeria. Two were from a place in Europe called France, one was Arab from Libya, and one was Berber from Morocco ... she was the mother of your mother’s mother. Ireana was her name ... she was the widow of one of my brothers. In all, I had fourteen children, plus my brother’s daughter. I was a rich and proud man.

“In the years that followed our conquests in Europe we sent many spies to America and the nations around it, but we heard little from them. The Americans had pulled their armies and navy away from Europe and the rest of the world when we attacked Israel. They sealed themselves into their country and they made no effort to help the Europeans.

“With our empire secure Abu Sinnini again turned his attention to the Americans. He taught us that they were cowering in their cursed land. We began building a great fleet and many flying machines. We planned for half of the fleet to sail across the Atlantic in the west and the other half to sail across the great eastern ocean—the Pacific. The Americans had always been proud and strong but since they had retreated for so long we believed that their strength was broken. Abu Sinnini said that we would invade the impure land of America and bring that nation to its knees before Allah.

“But that day never came. Instead, the Americans struck back before we were ready to launch our attacks. I remember the day it all ended for us as if it were yesterday. The Americans had been silent for nearly twenty years, but their attack burst upon us without warning from above the sky. We heard reports on television that thousands of strange flying machines came straight down from the sky and that they were attacking and destroying our cities and bases in Europe and along the Middle Sea coast. Then there was a bright light high in the sky above our city and my house exploded all around me. When I woke up, only your grandmother and I were left alive—all the rest of my wives and all of my children died in that great flash.

“Our city was broken and burning ... even the limestone blocks of the minarets were aflame. The corpses of the people in the street were burned to a black ash and a great cloud that rained down cinders hung over the land. I took your grandmother and we fled to my hunting range where we hid in a small cave. This cave was the place I where would go when the women and children became annoying so I had plenty of food and

water there. In the days that followed the American bombing she and I both became ill and running sores opened on the skin of our hands but after a time we got better and the sores began to heal.

“We hid in the cave for nearly two months before our food began to run low forcing us to forage along the edge of the desert. One day when we were digging roots we saw the American army with their red-white-and-blue flags fluttering roll through the rubble. We stayed low, hiding behind a small bush. I’d never seen vehicles or weapons like those before...the vehicles floated on air and made only a soft humming sound. Other survivors of the attack raised their fists in anger and threw themselves at the hated infidels, but the Americans turned their weapons on the people and shot red beams of light that made the people explode into flame and vapor.

“We hid again in our cave for several days until we were certain the Americans were gone from our area, then we circled around the remains of the city, looking for other survivors and a way to escape the area. While we were searching we came across a group of soldiers—many of them from my old unit. I begged them to come with us into the sand, but they wanted revenge. I could not stop their attack and could only watch as my men threw themselves against the Americans, firing their rifles and charging the enemy formations. But the Americans hardly seemed to notice our attacks ... they just turned their guns on our men and blasted them into nothing. They paid less attention to our attack than you do to a sand fly on your arm ... then they moved on to the next town.”

Rani could see that telling this story pained the old man, but he also saw a sort of pride in the old man’s eyes when he spoke of his people’s courage. Grand Uncle Fadel drank more water then began his lesson again.

“After the attack we walked long into the night. We were hungry and thirsty, but since we had no more food or water at

the cave we had to go on. We ran into some Bedouin who shared what little they had with us. That group's leader—el Hassam, the man who shit himself last night—saved us. The trust and bond between us was instant and I knew that el Hasaam was a good man. After I rested and we agreed upon a meeting place and time, I left your grandmother with him and I went back to fight the infidels. After many hours I came to a wadi where several hundred men had gathered. Some had rifles but most, like me, had nothing but our hatred. I told them about the Americans' weapons but our hatred demanded that we kill the Americans and they wouldn't listen. We went toward the ruined city but the Americans were gone. Instead, we found large signs written in Arabic and posted all along the broken roadway. The signs warned that they would light up our skies with bombs for forty days if we resisted. We didn't know what that meant, but we thought it must mean something bad. So, with no one to fight, we returned to the destroyed cities and towns to look for survivors. We dug through the rubble with our hands to save the people, but we found almost no one alive and many of the men I was with began to bleed from the mouth and nose. Within minutes their hair began to fall out and bleeding sores opened—and they died piteously amid the broken stones of the city. I seemed not to become ill, maybe it was because your grandmother and I had tasted a little of this strange disease earlier. But as I watched the men die I knew I had to get away, so I ran from the ruins.

“Finally, exhausted, I headed for the meeting place to meet Hassam. After walking for three nights and sleeping in the sand by day, I found Hassam and his band. We decided to head deep into the desert where the women and children would be safe and on the second day of our march, a white light burst far behind us, followed by another and another and another...and every few minutes, by another. The sky lights streamed from high in the heavens, bursting into a brightness so white it hurt my eyes...and after a while we heard a deep, far away rumbling and felt the earth move slightly under our feet.

"Night was the worst time of all ... we could see the lights bursting far behind the horizon and we knew that our people were dying a horrible death. After about two weeks we came to a tiny oasis town. An old man had a battery-powered radio. He was listening to an American military news report in Arabic that came from France. We learned that after the initial attacks with huge city killer bombs, the Americans had changed to a different kind of weapon—radiation bombs. In all, the radio report told us that more than ten thousand of these bombs had been dropped on Abu Sinnini's empire since the counter-offensive had begun. We also learned that all organized Islamic resistance had ceased, and that more than two-thirds of the enemy—us—had been wiped out around the world," the old man said sadly.

"You need to understand this, Rani, so you'll know the size of our loss. Once the people of Islam were as many as grains of sand on this beach, but by the time the war ended we were few ... and as each year goes by we become even fewer, still."

Rani interrupted, "Grand Uncle, what is a radia-shun ... uh, what did the Americans use?"

"Oh—ray-de-a-shun bombs ... I don't know exactly what they are, but the bombs make a strange disease that kills people. And some kinds of radiation remain to poison the land and water for years. And when this poison gets inside the body it eats their innards away. You can't see or smell this poison and it collects in pockets, and if a person wanders into a poisoned area he will fall ill and die, all eaten up on the inside. Or if they don't die, then the children they make are often born sick and deformed.

"The Americans dropped many of those bombs over many months, and even though the death area from each bomb is small they dropped so many that pockets of the poison made the whole land dangerous. So, we stayed at the oasis and out of the Americans' way for several months. We heard the radio reports

from France almost every night and the story they told was terrifying.

“While we conquered Europe, the Americans were recovering from our Jihadis’ attacks. As I told you, they brought all of their armies back to their land and closed their borders. None of the spies we sent were ever heard from again and try as might we could learn nothing of the Americans’ activities. Besides, our war in Europe took all of our resources and we could do nothing about the Americans anyway.

“So while we fought, they developed new power sources and new war machines and they had learned how to fly high above the earth and how to attack from above the sky. They jumped far ahead of us while we were fighting the last war with the last war’s weapons—and we knew nothing of it until they attacked.

“The voice from France told us that after the Americans attacked us they had gone on to attack and destroy other Islamic countries. I think they wanted us to know what they were doing and that we were totally defeated. We all thought they would come again to hunt us down. But the reporter said that their leader had decided that North Africa would be sealed off ... that no one could get in or get out. He said that American forces would surround the Great Sand Desert and Arab North Africa would be left to wither. Their war against us, he said, was over ... they would hunt us no more but they would never allow Muslims to have power again. They didn’t need our oil anymore, so they would box us in and leave us to our fate. Now, we know it would have been kinder if they had killed us then,” Fadel said bitterly.

The morning tidal fog began to clear. The rising sun’s rays warmed the air and dried the broken stones of the old mosque; still Rani felt a deep chill that left him almost frozen deep in his soul.

Grand Uncle Fadel continued, “After a time we all wandered

south of the sand desert to a place called Mauritania, a land of black savages and deep forests. The Americans had built a base there for their flying machines. The machines were huge, but made little noise and they seemed to float into the air then they'd speed away faster than anything I had ever seen and they climbed so high into the sky that we couldn't see them at all. Hassam could speak some of the American language and he learned that the American leader had promised the savages that the Arabs would never threaten anyone again. He learned that the Americans planned to forbid Arabs to ever have electricity or oil or to dig new wells or build factories and cities again. The Americans bragged that if it took a thousand years all Arabs would eventually be exterminated as punishment for their crimes. Crimes is what they called our love of Allah, and the defense of our homes.

"Well, Rani, that all happened nearly fifty years ago. In the years since the war the other men and I have tried to reach the other towns along the coast and each time we tried American boats or those strange flying machines would appear and force us to turn back. I think ours is the only village left on the coast of Western Sahara. They're still out there, watching—and waiting. Even now I sometimes see the cloud trails their flying machines leave as they travel across the sky, and every once in a while, when I was younger and could stand on top of the great rock, I could see their ships far out to sea.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you these things, but in a few years there will be too few of us left here to offer you and the other children a life. Now you must give up being a child and learn well the lessons of the prophet, and how to fish and sail a boat along the coast, and how to build with stone and wood and how to plant dates and other small crops because you, my nephew—you must lead the other young people out of here to find a place where the Americans can't get you...there must be Arabs and Berbers on the earth ... Allah has said this, and so

it must be," the old man said proudly.

Rani sat stunned for a moment, his mind a confused whir, and within that jumble a dark emotion he couldn't name was born. And even though he was only ten and illiterate, he knew that Allah's will must be done and that he would someday lead the children of his village to a new life, to a new place where the Americans would never find them—and that someday, maybe long after his lifetime had passed, the Arabs would pay the Americans back, *InSh'alla*.

2076-West

Jack Dotson sipped the ice-cold lemonade as he half-listened to his granddaughter's chatter, but he was more interested in watching the waves roll onto his private stretch of Alabama's Gulf of Mexico coast. The brisk landward rush of cooling breeze brought relief from September's heat and humidity and helped to blot out the torrent of words flowing from the woman's mouth.

Eleanor Dotson-Summerall's three children lounged beside the pool adjacent to the covered porch where great-grandpa Jack and their mother were sitting. It was moments like this when the old man wondered why he'd ever allowed his first wife to have children. Still, seeing the third generation of his line enjoying his hard-won prosperity gave him a sense of satisfaction—and pleasure.

After a while Jack interrupted Eleanor's monologue.

"Ellie, help me out of this chair. I gotta pee," he said extending a hand so she could help him rise up from the fabric porch chair. With some effort he was able to stand, then brace himself on his cane.

"Thank ya, darlin' girl. I can take it from here," he half-

chuckled as he began his shuffling walk into the house and his first-floor master bedroom and bath. As he walked deeper into the house Jack could hear his granddaughter aim her barrage of words toward her children.

“Poor li’l scoots. It’s not right that they have to hear her crazy talk ... take pity on the Arabs, my ass. All those rag head bastards can burn in hell as far as I’m concerned,” he muttered as he reached the toilet, took aim and relieved himself.

Pleasant sensations worked their way to his brain and a contented “Ahhhhh,” rose from deep in his chest. He smiled a conscious smile, looked into the small mirror mounted above the water tank and chuckled aloud, “I may be ninety, but I can still piss pretty hard.”

As he washed up, he heard Betty, the second Mrs. Dotson, calling that supper was ready and he hurried toward the dining deck as quickly as his rebuilt knees and hips would allow. Three generations of the Dotson clan were gathering for one of those increasingly rare family dinners. Assembling on the deck were Thomas, Jack’s younger, brother and his wife; Jack’s son from his first marriage, Jon—along with his wife, their son Michael, and the young man’s new wife. And then there were Eleanor’s parents—Jack’s other brother, Martin and his harping wife, Sharon. These last two Jack wished would just go away. Still, Jack thought, even though Eleanor talked too much, she was a nice gal and her husband, Navy Captain Mark Summerall, was a prince of a guy. Even the three Summerall children were polite and well behaved.

As Jack shuffled his way toward the “grown-ups’ table” the adults, except for Martin, all rose to greet him. As he looked at his family, Jack smiled and motioned for them all sit.

Betty Dotson was thirty years Jack’s junior. A still attractive sixty, her lithe and nimble motion and remarkably

firm body still brought a gleam to the old man's eye—even though he wasn't having much success with her in bed anymore—the old joke about assault with a dead weapon flitted through his mind, but still he smiled. As the family took their seats Betty finished placing the food on the table and began pouring her famous lemonade over the vodka ice cubes in their glasses. Finally satisfied that all was now ready, Betty Dotson sat down beside the family patriarch.

“General,” she intoned seriously, “we're all here now. Will you say grace, please?”

Jack's prayer asking for blessings on his family and for America's brave fighters was brief but heartfelt and sincere. After his “Amen,” he brightened and cheerfully commanded, “Now let's all eat. Betty worked hard on this all day.” As with most family meals the food began to move chaotically around and across the table as conversations sprang up, ended and moved on to other topics. After a few minutes the din had dropped to a low hum as the generations concentrated on their meals and chatted amicably among themselves.

It was Marty who brought the congenial group's talk to a sudden halt.

The drink he held slipped from his grasp as his arm convulsed, spilling the sticky-sweet lemonade down his shirt, into his lap and onto the stub of his right leg.

“God damn it,” he shouted, startling the others whose gazes turned toward him in time to see his torso spasm. “Fuck, fuck, fuck ... damn it all ... bitch,” the profanities spewed from his mouth in a torrent as he fell deeper and deeper into a seizure. His arms flailed the air and smashed onto the dinnerware and food bowls, upsetting Betty's beautiful table setting.

Within seconds Thomas and Sharon had sprung to their feet, rushed to Martin's side and pulled him back from the table to

minimize further damage to the meal or to Martin's broken body. Thomas laid his brother onto the deck. He forced a wooden tongue depressor between Marty's teeth while Sharon reached into her bag to extract a pre-loaded syringe of neural depressant which she then deftly injected into her husband's carotid artery.

Within seconds Marty's violent shaking began to subside and the stumps that had been his legs began to slow their uncontrolled thumping against the deck.

"He'll be OK in a few minutes," Thomas advised the family. Only the three Summerall children seemed upset at the sight of the old man's fit.

Sharon called out, "Y'all go on and eat. I'll take care of Marty. Tommy, will you help me carry him over to the chaise lounge? Yeah, that's the way ... now, let's lift ..."

The adults at the table seemed to exhale in unison as Uncle Martin was carried away to recover. Only Jack had anything to say.

"Alright, let's get back to eating. But remember, Uncle Marty may be an asshole about some things but he's a patriot...his service is what made him that way. Let's all show him respect...a toast! To Marty!"

Everyone at the adult table raised their glasses and called out, "to Marty!"

The rest of the dinner was only slightly subdued, and everyone sneaked surreptitious glances toward Martin in order to reassure themselves that he was coming around. As the meal and talk progressed, the sun seemed to drop into the Gulf's emerald green waters and lights began to twinkle on in the luxury homes along the beach and inside the big boats anchored off shore.

After dinner, Betty and the women began clearing the table as the men moved from the deck to the flag pole that stood near the swimming pool. Michael, the youngest of the Dotson men, picked up the folded American flag then switched on the spotlights at the base of the flagpole. About the time Michael joined the men, the women and children joined the group just outside the circle of white painted rocks encircling the illuminated pole. Sharon wheeled a still weak Martin to the gathering.

Jack leaned on his cane then began the familiar ritual.

“My beloved family, we are here today to remember the seventy-fifth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. Just as my parents remembered the attack on Pearl Harbor, which brought our great country into World War Two, these cowardly attacks against innocent men and women drew my generation into the Arab-American Wars. We are also here to pray for young Michael, who will leave the safety of his home tomorrow to begin training as a warrior in defense of liberty. Michael, please raise our beloved American flag ...”

Michael stepped over the row of painted rocks, attached the flag's top and bottom clips to the flagpole rope and began hauling the banner up the staff, and as the flag ascended everyone in the group placed their hands over their hearts and began to recite:

*“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of
America,*

*and to the Republic, for which it
stands, one nation,*

under God, with liberty and justice and for all.”

When the flag touched the top of the pole, Michael began to lower it until it reached half staff, then he tied it off, placed his own right hand over his heart and bowed slightly in remembrance of the thirty-two million Americans who had died in the three quarters-century since those original attacks.

After a few moments the family began to drift away and soon only Jack, Jon, Thomas, Martin, Sharon, and Michael remained near the flagpole. They stood silently, each lost in private thoughts. It was Jack who broke the silence.

“Mike, come on over by the pool. We want to talk to you. Mike, you take Marty. Sharon, thank you for staying, but we need to talk to Mike so would you please join the ladies on the porch?”

Sharon nodded and began walking away, as Michael placed his hands on Martin’s wheelchair and began pushing him toward the pool.

The walkway made pushing the chair difficult, especially since he had to follow slowly behind his shuffling uncle and his own father. The men arrived at a patio table beside the pool a few seconds after the automatic lights in the pool bottom had clicked on. Their faces reflected the blue-green pool water light as Michael parked his uncle’s chair and the four ambulatory men took seats.

Although Marty was still somewhat dazed, Michael could see that he was trying hard to focus. He and the other men all looked directly at the younger man, making Michael feel more than a little self-conscious and also curious about this gathering. It was Jack who began.

“Mike, tomorrow you go off to join the AeroSpace Force. You will continue our family’s tradition of military service to America. I know you’ve studied American history in school and you understand why we still confine the Arabs, but we—all of us—decided that you should know our family’s history in this

war and why we think it's so important for you to serve.

"You know, there's a lot of talk these days about forgiving the Arabs and Muslims. Even your Aunt Ellie has joined that crowd...they call that bunch 'the noble tribes of the desert.' They seem to think it's wrong to keep them boxed in. This bunch even wants the government to begin sending in food, anti-radiation medicines, and to create reservations so that the remaining Arabs can live in dignity under our benevolent guidance.

"Well, we're here to tell you that the whole idea is nuts and an insult to the millions of Americans and Europeans those bastards slaughtered. You need to know the whole story about their treachery, their savagery, their barbaric butchery of innocent men, women, and children. You need to know these things and you need to know about your family's part in the war so that if you're ever ordered to kill any of those '*noble tribesmen*' you'll know why and you won't hesitate to do your duty. Tom, will you begin, please?"

Thomas Dotson, the middle son of Ray and Esther Dotson, had been a lanky and cheerful boy, but decades of war and war's aftermath had left him a stern and taciturn man who seldom spoke unless he had to. But he agreed to begin the family's war story when the idea of telling the saga to young Michael had emerged several months ago. Tom had practiced his portion of the story inside his head hundreds of times, but now that the time was here, his tongue felt heavy and his mind seemed to run at the speed of cold molasses. Still, he wanted to tell his nephew this story, so he began...tentatively at first.

"Mikey, no, it hardly seems right to call a pilot in training Mikey...that was your kid name wasn't it? But you're a man now, so here goes. Jack, Marty and I were little kids when a man named Osama bin Laden and his little gang of terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the old Pentagon buildings. Jack was about ten, I was eight—I remember that—and

Uncle Marty was about five or six. We saw it all on TV. I didn't understand exactly what had happened, but Mom and Dad were real mad—and Dad...well, he was really pissed because he knew that he would be called up by the Air Force Reserve. Our dad was an airline pilot and he made good money flying people around the country. But he was in the Reserves—he flew a big bomber called the B-1 and he knew that sooner or later he'd have to leave the airline and we'd have to make do on his captain's pay. The more he thought about it the madder he got at "those fucking Arabs," as he called them.

"Anyway, about a year after those attacks he was called up. His unit left their base in South Carolina and Dad went away for a long time. Then one night the President made an announcement on TV that our forces were attacking al Qaeda and other radical Muslims called the Taliban in a desert shit hole named Afghanistan and in a few days we saw news reports about our planes bombing those guys. Mom even said she saw Dad's airplane on the news and that we should be proud of Daddy because he was paying back the bad Arabs for killing all of those people in New York and Washington. We still didn't understand the war, but we understood that Arabs were bad.

"Dad came home a few months later but he didn't go back to work for the airline and pretty soon we moved onto the airbase because Dad had joined-up for full-time flying duty. Then he went away and we didn't see him again for a long time because he was assigned to an airbase in Spain so he could be closer to the Arab world—what he called the target area. Lots of pilots and crews went to bases in Spain and Eastern Europe.

Tom turned toward Jack and asked, "is this the right order? You're older, you might remember more about Dad." Jack nodded solemnly and said, "You're right on target, Tommy. Keep going."

"Well, our side kicked butt, as we used to say, and we beat the crap out of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, then

the next year America attacked Iraq and its leader, a really bad guy named Saddam Hussein, and his army of murdering scum. Mom watched the war on TV and she looked for Dad's brother, Uncle Michael, who was in the Army. I don't think she saw him but he sent a letter to Mom after the war there began. He wrote that things were tough and that there was a lot of fighting all the time but that the Arabs were bad soldiers and our guys were wiping up the desert with the Iraqi army. Mom wouldn't let us watch the war on television but our guys killed the Iraqi military in just a few weeks. Mom said it was 'awesome,' and she said she was glad that Dad was a pilot and not a ground soldier because the desert was a horrible place to fight.

"After we won the war we tried to help the people of Iraq, but al Qaeda terrorists set off bombs and made other attacks for several years making it very hard to help the Iraqis. Most people in America felt sorry for the Iraqis because Saddam had ruled them through fear and torture and terror and in those days most Americans didn't know how much the Arabs really hated us. There was some more fighting for a while but eventually the Army tracked down Saddam and his followers and killed them all in a big battle way out in the desert, then they captured Saddam and hanged him. After Saddam was gone, Iraq became a quieter place and our military missed a lot of the signs that even bigger trouble was waiting for us out in those desert sands. We even pulled out of Iraq because our leaders thought they could govern themselves...that turned out to be a huge mistake.

"Dad and Uncle Mike got to come home for about six months then they had to go back for up to two years at a time. This happened several times and we boys grew up on the airbase without Dad or Uncle Mike. Uh, Jack, you wanna pick up from here, please?"

Michael turned to face his uncle. "Funny," he thought to himself, "I've never really looked at Uncle Jack before." Even

at ninety Jack still showed some of his former physique. His full head of white hair was pulled back without a part and hung in a short ponytail to just below his shirt collar. A flowered, open collar cotton shirt hung loose on wide shoulders, now thin and frail looking, but had at one time been heavily muscled. Age spots stood out from the old man's sun-browned hide, and loose skin hung from a jaw line that had been firm. But the old man still stood more than six feet tall. Age and bone diseases that had required a number of surgeries had left his legs spindly, with long scars running vertically along from mid-shin to above the line of his cotton Bermuda shorts. But it was the clear, blue eyes gleaming behind rimless glasses that gave the old man a look of alertness, even if his body was now failing him. Lost in his musings, Michael hadn't heard Jack's opening remarks.

"...and that's when the Army caught up with bin Laden. I was in high school then and I was planning to join the Army like Uncle Mike. Osama had been hiding out for years along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and I really wanted to be one of the guys who found that bastard...I dreamed about putting a bullet into his brain. But an American Special Operations force found him living openly in a Pakistani city.

"With Bin Laden dead, the enemy leadership was badly disrupted but not done ... several more years of fighting in Afghanistan followed but eventually the traitor President Barack Obama, who was secretly both a Muslim sympathizer and a Communist, pulled our forces out of Afghanistan, which allowed the surviving Muslim thugs time to regroup and align themselves with a Pan-Arab/Pan-Muslim movement ...

"In the final battle before we pulled out of Afghanistan there was fierce fighting which lasted several days. The ground guys had about six thousand Arabs and Taliban trapped in a high valley and the bastards fought back hard until the Air Force bombed them to pieces. Dad told us later that his plane made five bombing runs against the valley, and when the fight was

over not one of the enemy force survived—but their sons and brothers lived to fight on later.

“By the time I graduated from high school it looked like the wars were over. Saddam and his army were destroyed. Bin Laden and his killers were all dead. Iraq was seemingly pacified, and the only possible source of trouble was a crazy asshole named Morsi whose movement took over Egypt, most of North Africa, and Syria. He led a group called the Muslim Brotherhood, and claimed to have visions from Allah. He was a brutal and crazy Imam and political leader and he attracted all the crazies in the Muslim world, but he was far away from our troops and I don’t think anyone was too concerned about him and his band of fanatics. Since it looked like the real fighting was over I decided to go to college and learn to be a pilot. I joined the Air Force ROTC and majored in aerospace engineering. We seemed to be at peace and nothing much was happening all during my five years of college. When I graduated, I was commissioned but my request for flight school was rejected because I was too tall to pilot a fighter and my legs were too long to fit under the instrument of a bomber. Instead of a combat job I was ordered to a research lab in Texas—West Bum Fuck Texas, at that.

“I knew my life was over...I knew I’d never see any action. I was depressed and unhappy for a long time until I realized that the research we were doing could give us a super weapon and I threw myself into the project. I had no idea what we were really building...that what we were making would not only power our weapons but it would transform our entire society. Still, I was more than a little jealous when I learned that Tom had been accepted into the weapons officer flight program and that Marty had dropped out of high school to join the Marine Corps...and he’d even qualified for the Force Recon program. So here were my brothers, both younger, and both headed for action jobs while I was stuck in a lab that only a few people knew about.

“Even now, half a century after our discovery, how Dark Energy converters work is still a closely guarded secret.”

“Anyway, my brothers went away for training and I didn’t hear much from either of them or Mom for several years. Then one night the alert siren at the base went off, and the entire lab and security staff assembled in the main auditorium to hear the news that the Brotherhood’s army of crazies had wiped out the small garrison at Sharm el Batette, Syria, and that they were moving against the security compound near Tikrit, Iraq. The briefer told us that the CIA’s intelligence estimate of the Brothers’ strength was no more than two thousand men armed with old Russian weapons. Taking this band of crazies out would be a cake-walk, the briefer said, but that’s not the way it worked out.

“The Brothers’ force was actually about one hundred fifty thousand men. He had a main force and dozens of cells spread all around North Africa. They were armed with the latest South African weapons—armor, light helicopters, self-propelled artillery and a secret communications network. His people had also dug up the weapons of mass destruction—including Russian tactical nuclear weapons—that Saddam’s people had buried in Syria before we invaded Iraq. The Tikrit security garrison was small, only about fifteen hundred men but the bureaucrats at the Pentagon ordered our force to attack.

“Our air and ground forces attacked the leading edge of the Brothers’ main force just inside the Iraq border but that encounter was a trick to lure our guys into a wide valley where they pinned our force down and popped a nuke, killing all of our allied ground force and catching many of the ground attack airplanes in the burst. Now the way to Baghdad was open for the killers, and all throughout the Arab world his cells inflicted severe casualties on our small stabilizing force garrisons. If The Brothers’ army reached Baghdad the government we had so carefully built would have been toppled and we would’ve been forced out of Southwest Asia, which meant

our oil supplies could be in jeopardy. Two Marine Expeditionary Units were pulled from their patrol areas off East Africa and hastily pushed through Kuwait into Iraq.

“We’d been caught with our guard down and we knew a lot less about the Brotherhood forces than we needed to know, and we were in real peril of losing control of the oil fields. It was a desperate time that required desperate tactics.

“Since the Brothers had already used a nuke, we attacked with stand-off weapons until the leading units of his salient were wiped out, then Marine armor and Force Recon units working with close-air slammed his column’s flanks. It took the Marines five days and almost three thousand dead from chemical attacks to turn the Brotherhood columns but finally the Marines pushed the Arabs back into Syria. By that time an entire Army corps had arrived—more than fifty thousand me—and they joined the Marines in finishing-off the Brotherhood army. We called it the Battle of 64 Easterling. The Arabs just called it a disaster. Not one Brotherhood man survived the fight. Then detachments from the main force spread out all over North Africa to clear out the fighters who had attacked the stabilization garrisons, and we eventually killed all of them. The Little War lasted a little more than a month, but when it was over all Arab resistance was broken for years. We knew that this time we’d finally broken the back of Arab extremism and that there would be peace in the Middle East and Southwest Asia...but we were wrong, of course,” Jack said.

Tom spoke up again. “Marty was in the Force Recon unit that broke the Brothers’ back. That’s where Marty earned his first Silver Star—and his first Purple Heart. By the time of the Little War, I had just finished weapons officer school but hadn’t been assigned to a squadron yet. Boy, I was mad. I figured that all the fighting was over and that I’d spend the next ten years flying around in empty air with nothing but camels and fishing boats to shoot at. When I was ordered to a base in Texas that I’d never heard of, I was only mildly

disappointed. I had no idea that Jack was there and I couldn't have known that I'd been picked to be part of the test pilot program for a new series of aircraft.

"I ran into Jack at the officers' club about three months after arriving at the base. We consoled each other about missing the war and we talked about all sorts of things—mostly women—but neither of us talked much about our work. We were working on the same project but neither of us knew it for several years. Jack met JoAnna Hill while we were assigned out there. She was a chemist in one of the partner labs. They hit it off and since both were isolated out there they got married—mostly to keep from being alone in their rooms at night, I think. After work hours, after the club closed, that was the worst part of being out there. We all knew pretty quickly that the marriage was a disaster, if ever there was one, but the fighting gave them both something to do when they weren't working," Tom said, and almost laughed out loud, but a stern look from Jack made him swallow a guffaw.

"Well, we'd been out in the Texas wilderness for almost five years before we were granted leave. Jack was a major by then and I was a junior captain. Jack and JoAnna and I went home to South Carolina. Dad was a full colonel by then and was talking about retiring; but as squadron commander, he had to serve one more tour overseas before he could punch out. He and his bomber crews were bored. All they'd done for several years since The Little War ended was to fly around in empty air. Dad probed us about our jobs but we avoided giving him any details. Still, we had a good visit and we all went back to work feeling good about our family. Marty was still overseas somewhere and we missed him, but the visit was worth the long trip.

Jack picked up the story.

"A couple years after the Little War ended a new mullah named Hussein Abu Sinnini began to draw a large following. He called

himself 'The Peace Mullah' and he offered a new kind of Islam that centered on peaceful coexistence with the West. Word came down from the Pentagon that Abu Sinnini and the US government had reached a peace deal and as part of it most of the restrictions against Arab immigration would be lifted. We all thought we were at peace and that it was time to forgive and help the Arabs rebuild. Thousands of young Arab students swarmed back to American universities and Arab laborers worked on government civil works projects throughout the country. The young Arab men and women worked hard and seemed to be everywhere—except on our base.

“Abu Sinnini even visited the White House and he won a Nobel Peace Prize. With peace assured, the Air Force made plans to cut back on our research program and I decided to get out of the Air Force so I could get a Ph.D. in physics. Then the whole country blew up. Those Arab students and laborers attacked—everywhere. They set off small nukes in Chicago, Nashville, Dallas, San Francisco and Atlanta. And they popped dirty bombs—conventional explosives wrapped in low-grade radioactive material—in Denver, Kansas City, and several other cities. They blew up bridges and skyscrapers. They set off bombs in schools and they murdered people in their homes and at work. They blew up police stations and TV stations and destroyed much of the phone network.

“And we didn't know it then, but they attacked our garrisons and airbases all over the Middle East. The surprise was complete on both sides of the ocean. Abu Sinnini had lulled us into a false sense of security then his terror armies had attacked with savage force. It took us a while to recover, but we tracked down every one of those murdering bastards and killed them where they stood. The national feeling toward all Arabs and Muslims was hatred and we locked up every surviving Arab we could find. But to our surprise, the American Muslims were just as angry as we were about the attacks and it didn't take the authorities long to realize that these Arabs and

Muslims were loyal Americans who wanted revenge just as much as we did. And in the years that followed hundreds of American Muslims risked their lives to infiltrate their ancestral countries and pass accurate intelligence on to us. So far as we can determine, not a single American Muslim ever turned against America after Abu Sinnini's sneak attack. Some of them became counter intelligence agents living in Canada and Mexico. They spotted Abu Sinnini's spies and that allowed us to kill or capture hundreds of his agents. Others were infiltrated into North Africa from submarines and they fed us mountains of accurate intelligence.

"In the weeks and months that followed the attacks we pulled back from Europe and Asia and we closed up all of our borders. Once we realized that our stabilization forces were gone, we brought our troops home from Asia, Africa, South America—from everywhere except the United Kingdom. While the rest of the country licked its wounds, we re-doubled our research efforts and in just three more years we uncovered Dark Energy's secrets.

"But we had been badly wounded by Abu Sinnini's attacks and we were unable to help Israel, Europe, and Russia when the Arab armies overran them. Our spies and satellite intelligence kept us informed of Abu Sinnini's movements but at that point there was little we could do. We even tapped into their secret communications networks and knew of their plan to attack China.

"Tom and I learned after the war that the national leadership saw China as the 'Limit of March Line' for the Arab forces and, as tough as things were at home, they made a deal with the Chinese to stop the Arab armies at China's western border. We sent virtually all of our available military force, our best weapons and almost all of the military's fuel reserves across the Bering Strait on Russian ships to help the Chinese shore-up their western front. The whole thing was a wild gamble. We were playing with our last chips and we had nothing

left if we failed ... if the Arabs broke through and eventually took China's eastern military seaports, our west coast would have been completely exposed and almost without defense.

But the gamble paid off. The combined US, Chinese, and Russian force stopped the Arabs cold. The force didn't get home for about eighteen months so we didn't know that Marty was one of the Marines who stopped the Arab armies ... and yes, Marty got wounded again. He also earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for single-handedly stopping and destroying an entire Arab armored column," Jack said with some pride in his voice.

Michael turned to look at his legless uncle who was still working hard at listening. A slight grin came to the old man's lips, but he said nothing.

Jack continued, "Our forces had stopped Abu Sinnini's progress but we were far too weak at that point to counter-attack so the whole country stayed buttoned-up. Those first years after the national terror attacks were hard. We still depended on oil for energy and the oil was in very short supply. And with all the damage to the electrical grid and other infrastructure, millions of people struggled every day just to survive.

"For more than a decade we hid behind our borders, but our research group had made the key discoveries that eventually helped America get well. I think everyone knows the basic concept of Dark Energy—that only fifteen percent of the universe is made up of visible matter, the rest is Dark Matter and Dark Energy. As I said before, how we capture and use this energy is still classified. That ensures that we have a major advantage over all potential adversaries," Jack said, but was interrupted by Michael before he could continue.

"Yeah, Dark Energy powers the aerospace fighter that I'll fly. I'm still amazed that your group figured out how to use it. When I was kid, I knew that you worked on the Dark Energy

project but I had no idea until Mom told me last year that you were a lieutenant general and Director of the Dark Energy National Power Distribution Laboratory. Uncle Jack, that just impresses the hell out of me," Michael effused.

"Well now, don't get too excited. Once we figured out how to capture Dark Energy the rest was simple trial and error until we got it right. The real heroes are guys like Tom who put their butts on the line every day testing the application designs the lab came up with. We lost a lot of test pilots and ground crews in the early days of the AeroSpace Fighter, Orbital Bomber program, and Aerial Ground Force Suppression System. Our Dark Energy receivers and rectifiers were pretty crude and unstable back then and there were hundreds of crashes and explosions. But we eventually got the relationships and formulas right, and once we did that repairing and rebuilding the country gained a lot of velocity. Once we were on the road to recovery we began building up the new forces for our counter-attacks," Jack told the group.

Martin had sat quietly through most of the conversation because the dinner table seizure had sapped much of his limited strength. Perhaps it was the grim knowledge that this year's 9-11 commemoration would likely be the last time that the whole family could be together that had predisposed him to his worst convulsion in years. The neural suppressant drug had terminated the seizure quickly but he felt weak, drained and dazed. Just staying focused enough to understand the conversation with Michael had worn down Marty's small energy reserve. But he felt compelled to share his part of the story and so he marshaled what strength he had left and spoke for the first time.

"Mike," he said, "These lab guys had the easy part of the war. I spent the war at sea and in the mud. We had some really tough fights—especially that bit in China. Over the years I've kidded Jack and Tom about having the soft, easy life but the truth is that we'd all be wearing rags on our heads and

kissing some ayatollah's ass if these guys had failed. I didn't really understand how bad we'd been hurt at home until our group was sent to Denver to help clear out the downtown and get the reconstruction under way.

"We got there about three months after the last real big terror attack. The assholes had set off about fifty dirty bombs around town. There were about four hundred thousand starving scarecrows doing whatever they could to stay alive when we got there ... they were eating rats and bugs—and occasionally each other and I don't know how many thousands of them were dying from cancers caused by the radiation from the damned dirty bombs. We had the only fuel in the area to run our construction equipment but even then, we'd hardly made a dent in the mess by the time our fuel was gone. So, we used hand tools and then our hands to clear the rubble.

"And it was the same story all across the country in those days. Starving, freezing people trying to get things working again, living scarecrows doing whatever they could to survive and rebuild. After we pulled back from overseas the military split its time and energy between homeland defense and homeland reconstruction. Everything was broken ... everything was a mess. There are thirty-two million dead Americans spread across this country in mass graves—and some of the old city areas are still uninhabitable even now. If we hadn't gotten the D-E power we would have been too busted to recover, that's how bad it really was. I think hatred of Arabs kept a lot of people going in those days, but hate alone couldn't fuel our revenge. Once the government began sending Dark Energy power-generating teams out and electricity began coming back on people were able to convert their raw hate into focused anger and really accelerate the rebuilding process.

"During the ten years after Abu Sinnini's attacks I served in several Marine Expeditionary Units and Marine Amphibious Warfare Units. We didn't mind being sent to China because that was our first chance to strike back, and when we came home

about eighteen months later, we felt good about it. I mean, we had stopped the Arabs and when we got home things were already a lot better than when we left.

“I remember when I first saw a DE-M-4 Fighting Vehicle. Damn! What a sight that was. Our MEU was based at Camp Pendleton in what used to be Southern California when a group of M-4s were shipped in on rail cars ... damned things didn't have wheels or tracks and we didn't know what to make of them. Anyway, we are all assembled on a training range and this brigadier general told us that the vehicle in front of us was the first of a new series of American armored vehicles that would help us wipe out the Arabs. Then he pointed at the damned thing and it rose up about two feet into the air ... and it was silent. Then the vehicle accelerated down range really fast, maneuvered in ways no tank or armored vehicle had ever moved before ... then they fired that pulse gun at an old tank—bang! The tank disappeared in burst of white-hot vapor that we felt from five hundred yards away.

“And for the first time since the nation-wide terror attacks, I felt like we could win and really pay those bastards back. Those Marines and I cheered and cried and danced around with real joy. But that was just the beginning. Rebuilding the country and the military took another ten years...there were lots of false starts and false hopes during that time, but somehow, we kept the faith and when the opportunity came, we were ready,” Marty said as his energy faded and he slipped deeper into his wheelchair.

Jack picked up the lesson again. “Marty, you old fart. Now don't go getting soft on us. You're a crusty old Marine and you stay that way.”

Everyone laughed at Jack's joke, but the group turned serious again when Jack said, “I had just been promoted to lieutenant colonel when the lab commander called Tom and me into his office. Besides the general there was another senior officer

in the room, a grim looking man who stood staring out the window with his back to us. The general said that the other officer had some bad news for us. The other officer spoke without looking at us. He said his name was Wilson and that he'd been our father's executive officer at the time Abu Sinnini's forces attacked the airbase in Kuwait. Our dad, he told us, had managed to get most of the bombers off the ground and he flew the squadron toward Israel.

"They fought a running battle with Arab fighters all the way across Iraq and Syria and all but two B-1s had made it to the Israeli airbase at Haifa, but within a few days Abu Sinnini's armies attacked Israel with overwhelming force. In the battles that followed our B-1s took a big toll on the Arabs, but one by one the Arabs shot the bombers down. Dad was killed defending Jerusalem. Dad's plane was the last B-1 that was still flying. Wilson said that Dad knew Israel was lost so he'd ordered Wilson and all the ground crews to evacuate the base as soon as he launched. Dad's plane went down on the twenty-fifth day of combat but Wilson and most of the men got out on an Israeli frigate. They slipped past the Arab navies and managed to get to Liberia in about ten days where they joined a Christian resistance group that fought the Arabs to a standstill in West Africa for years. They'd only been repatriated recently. Our dad was a brave man, Wilson told us. And even though we suspected that Dad was dead, hearing it was a shock. Wilson said that as soon as he could arrange transportation he'd go to South Carolina and let our mother know. I went over to shake his hand, but Wilson pushed past me and left the room.

"The general told us to sit down. He said to us that our work on power generation systems was finished...both Tom and I were being transferred to a new weapons lab where we would help design a new class of bomb and the aerospace vehicles that would deliver them—what he called a Sky Light Bomb and the Aerial Ground Force Suppression System.

“One of the things we learned about Dark Energy explosions during those early tests with D-E converters is that they produce a form of radiation that persists in clusters rather than creating a large contamination field. I would be in charge of creating a bomb unit that produced ten million rads of lethal D-E radiation over a one-mile square area, and Tom would be the chief test pilot for the delivery vehicle. He handed us both promotion orders then called in two security guards who escorted us to a new building about a block from our former lab. The next two weeks were a blur of briefings, objectives development meetings, engineering specifications sessions and staff recruiting raids on other labs at the base.

“We had our two hundred-person team together in less than a month and we worked round the clock for just over a year. What we produced were the prototypes for the Sky Light Bomb and the D-E YF-55 ground attack aerospace fighter-bomber. We suspected, but didn't know for sure, that other labs were building other planes and other weapons, but we knew what we had—the most lethal weapon and delivery system ever created. The Sky Light test detonation went even better than our calculations suggested. The bomb was exploded at the bottom of an instrumented two-mile deep borehole. Our goal was to produce ten million rads, we produced almost twelve million, but more importantly, our bomb created temperatures and pressures that were greater than those produced in hydrogen fusion, plus the bomb was cheap and easy to mass produce. The effect on ground targets would be devastating, especially if the bombs were used in sequential cluster attacks. Each burst from the new bomb was about twenty times brighter than the sun at noon, so in addition to the physical damage and immediate lethality, the psychological effects on survivors were exceptional—most were left with a sense of deep horror and fear and they fled from us and the deadly lights in the sky.

“The Air Force immediately accepted the Sky Light program. The next test we had to pass was of the delivery vehicle. Tom's

bird had passed all the ground tests, all of the computer simulations showed excellent atmospheric flight characteristics, and the plane's orbital mechanics and maneuvering characteristics were exceptional—on paper—but Tom's actual flight demonstration sealed the deal...the bird was beyond anything that had ever flown before. The senior Air Force leadership were impressed when we demonstrated the flying prototype. Both programs were accepted without modification and suddenly, we found ourselves unemployed...production and fielding people took over. I was promoted to Brigadier General and was transferred to a new facility at Offut Air Force Base, Nebraska, where I oversaw repair of the Midwestern power grid. Tom was transferred back to South Carolina to be vice-commander of a transport wing.

"I couldn't understand what had happened. We had created a whole new class of weapons and delivery systems then we were turned out to pasture without even a thank you from our bosses. It wasn't until two years later that I found out what was going on. The bosses felt that Tom and I had been working so hard for so long that we needed a break from the research world, and they also wanted to see how we adapted to life outside of the research community. Apparently, we did well enough and I was promoted to Major General and appointed commander of Aerial Bombardment Command, and Tom was promoted to full colonel and made commander of Eleventh Special Bombardment Squadron, First AeroSpace Command; both located at Offut. Our jobs were to prepare for America's counter attack.

"The planes began arriving at Offut about two months after we set up shop. Pilots began arriving in large numbers and squadrons began forming. Dozens of simulators arrived, and special weapons storage areas grew up all over the base to house the Sky Light Bombs that arrived by the hundreds every day from the factory in Oklahoma.

"In just three years my command had grown to three wings, each with five thirty-plane squadrons. My commanders and I spent

months developing the attack plan, coordinating it and modifying it to accommodate the needs of the Navy and Army. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the original 9-11 attacks, we began to pay the Arabs back for their aggression. Ships armed with long-range standoff missiles were posted around Europe, ground forces were in position for their amphibious assaults on France and Norway, and all classes of attack and bomber aircraft were poised for launch. At 2:15 a.m., September eleventh, 2026 the President gave the attack order. At 2:22 a.m. the first Sky Light Bombs fell on the Arab centers across Europe. Our revenge had begun.”

Jack was shaking his fist and his face had turned red. His passions rose as he remembered the good feeling he'd had when word came from the combat commanders that the attacks had succeeded without a hitch. Other senior commanders at the New Pentagon and at bases around the country also breathed huge sighs of relief at word of the initial successes. But the hard part—retaking control of ground now held by the enemy—remained. In the months that followed, American troops slashed their way across Europe and into North Africa, destroying every vestige of Arab power along their route of march.

Michael spoke, “Uncle Marty, you got hurt in Egypt, didn't you?”

Martin nodded, but was too tired to speak. It was Jon who spoke on his behalf.

“I was about twelve when we counter-attacked. Mom and Dad had divorced when I was little and Mom had moved us to her family's home in Oklahoma. Mom hardly talked about Dad at all, but when we saw Dad on TV talking about the counter-attack Mom told me who he was, and she told me about Uncle Tom and Uncle Marty. Somehow flying didn't seem to be dangerous, but to be a Marine fighting the enemy man-to-man seemed very brave to me.

"We found out what unit he was in and I watched and listened every day for news of their battles. We even saw Uncle Marty once on TV just before the Marines invaded Turkey. Marty had become the Command Sergeant Major of the Second Division and he looked tough as the Marines flew their fighting vehicles just above the waves toward the shore. The fighting was hard because the Arabs were making a stand. If they could stop the Americans in Turkey, their main power bases would be safe. But our side pushed the Arabs back toward the mountains that separate Turkey from Lebanon. The Arabs had dug lots of artillery into those mountains and those guns were doing a lot of damage. Uncle Marty was up near the front just before the big push to dislodge the Arabs when one of those artillery shells exploded behind him. He lost both legs and was hit in the head by shrapnel, which left him with some brain and muscle control damage. Mom saw his name on a casualty list and after he got out of the hospital arranged to have him and Aunt Sharon moved to our house, where she and Sharon took care of him until Mom died. Dad and Tom didn't even know about Marty's wounds until I called Dad to tell him that Mom had died and that Uncle Marty and Sharon were with me," Jon said with undisguised contempt in his voice.

"Jon, Marty understands that I was just a little busy then. We've had our problems over the years since Marty got wounded, but we don't need you stirring up old hurts. Besides, Marines are supposed to get banged up, aren't they Marty?"

As tired as he was, Marty managed a good laugh and a strong, "screw you, bureaucrat." The tension seemed to break and everyone except Jon laughed at the age-old banter between the two brothers.

Jack continued, "Well, Mike, you know the rest of the story. It took almost a year of Sky Light bombing and hard fighting, but we wiped out the Arab armies, destroyed their cities and killed most of their people. We've locked them down—nothing and no one in or out. The group of hawks wanted to exterminate

them but Harriet Walker, the President at the time, wouldn't allow it and so we've had the isolation policy for nearly five decades. Instead, she decided that we'd just let them wither away. I think I read somewhere that the CIA predicts extinction of Middle Eastern Muslims within twenty years. Maybe some people are having conscience pangs about the victory and our revenge. I guess that's why the bleeding hearts want to set up reservations and give them rights and spoon feed them now. Some of the crazies here say we've gone too far and that we don't have the right to drive a whole race to extinction. No right to exterminate them, my ass, tell that to the thirty-two million Americans they killed, or tell it to the three-hundred million Europeans, Russians and Jews they slaughtered.

"So, Mike, now you know what your family did in the wars. You're going away tomorrow to continue our tradition. I'm proud of you...hell, we're all proud of you. The Dotson name means something in the Air Force and in the Marine Corps. I know that being one of us will be a load on your shoulders, but I want you to be proud of your service and be proud of your name. History has proven over and over that tyranny never dies, that evil is always waiting in the shadows for another chance to attack free people. God go with you, Mike. America will be free only so long as men like you are willing to walk in harm's way."

The old men rose, flanked Martin's wheelchair, and in unison saluted Mike, then pushing the wheelchair, the men shuffled away into darkness of the Alabama night, leaving the new warrior alone with his thoughts, and a new-found pride in being an American fighting man.

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Jim Coles, III, a Kansas City, MO, native, is a retired Army Public Affairs Officer who now lives in the woods of South Alabama, after a 35 year career that took him to virtually every corner of the planet. Coles says he writes just for fun, and is always flattered when his stories are read.

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