

# IN the TALONS of the CONDOR

## FALKLAND ISLANDS

April 1, 1982

The fishing trawler dropped its commandos eight kilometers from the targetpoint and the three Zodiac rafts proceeded landward. Lieutenant Roland Sabatini had trained eight years for this mission, but the denials of sleep and food, the gnashing elements, were small rigors now that the day had come.

When the rafts came to within a thousand meters of the shoreline, the engines were cut. Sabatini and Comandante Enrique Cisneros would now swim to shore alone, maintaining radio silence. Automatically Roland's hands moved over his body, checking his equipment in the near-total blackness. Knife, wrist compass, flashlight, wristwatch, whistle, depth gauge, weight belt, flare, shark repellent, Beretta nine-millimeter automatic sealed in plastic. After another check of his scuba gear he was ready to enter the water.

Comandante Cisneros pressed the buddy line against Sabatini's chest. After fastening it to his wrist Roland gave it one tug. It tugged back then Cisneros slipped into the frigid water as silently as a sea lion. Sabatini shivered briefly as the forty-five

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degree water penetrated his wet suit where it would be warmed by body heat and provide an insulating layer. He ignored the cold and began checking the comandante's scuba gear. He ensured all check valves were working and all hose connections were secure. Cisneros took a few breaths under water and gave the thumbs-up. Now the procedure was repeated for Sabatini. This was as familiar as the two men ever got.

Cisneros was a professional, aloof and quick to lash out at error. At thirty-five, he was no longer as agile as his junior officers but he had something which could not be taught—the sense which tells one of impending danger. He had acquired tremendous peripheral vision while playing soccer as a child in the Buenos Aires slums. He knew who was behind him at all times, where their hands were. But Sabatini had learned well. He had been chosen by Cisneros to swim with him as his pacer on this historic mission.

The men submerged and swam toward land. Once on shore they would take bearings and guide in the reconnaissance team. They, in turn, would take depth soundings, record the beach gradient and check for mines, charting safe passage for the amphibious assault group that was now waiting on the mainland of Argentina for the invasion of Las Malvinas in twenty-four hours. With only a few dozen Royal Marines defending the islands, little resistance was expected, but every contingency had to be accounted for.

When they reached the shore, Cisneros immediately detached his tether and let it drop. Sabatini reeled it in without taking his eyes off the rocky land. His night vision was excellent and he could see the outlines of seals stirring some yards away. Cisneros removed his flippers and walked twenty meters along the shore to compensate for current drift. He pointed his unlit flashlight down the length of the beach and read the

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baseline bearing off the compass mounted on top of the flashlight. He then calculated the right angle bearing, the angle perpendicular to the length of the beach. After setting his compass on the right angle bearing he signaled Sabatini to do the same and made sure the flashlights were aligned. Sabatini then proceeded to the water's edge at the landing point and shined the orange light out to sea on the RAB. Because the reconnaissance team was to proceed on his left flank he strobed the light, careful to keep it pointed seaward at all times. Cisneros walked several meters landward and flashed his light on the RAB, then walked laterally, still signaling, until his beam was aligned with Sabatini's.

When the eighteen-man recon team sighted the range lights they swam in at twenty-five meter intervals along a marked tether. Each swimmer was equipped with a leadline and hand-held sonar. Readings of surf zone, depth, beach gradient, obstacles, sandbars and height of breakers were recorded on each man's Plexiglas slate.

Lieutenant Sabatini scanned the hinterland. It was desolate. Six hundred thousand sheep and two thousand humans. It had not changed much since 1833 when the British seized it and called it the Falkland Islands. The wind whipped unencumbered over the treeless landscape while the cry of skuas and penguins provided the few signs of life. This solitude was exalting, he thought. But in the solitude of the mind there was no surf or simple animals. He wanted to stay in this sparse place, in eternal night. Here there was tranquility.

When the team arrived at the water's edge they shifted twelve-and-a-half meters and turned back, again twenty-five meters between each man. In this way the entire landing zone could be mapped.

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When the two men reentered the water, the tether again connected them.

Sabatini would have to pick his moment carefully. If he killed Cisneros while close to the other swimmers they would be alerted. If he fell back trying to widen the gap, then Cisneros would become suspicious. Sabatini removed the tether from his wrist but retained it in his left hand. With his right hand he pulled on the Velcro strap that secured the handle of his knife to the sheath. If he pulled it all at once the sound would travel. A little at a time with every exhalation, as he had practiced so many times. Finally the knife was free. Sabatini swam closer to Cisneros. As soon as he could discern the luminous dial of the comandante's wrist compass he knew he was within range. He thrust his knife towards the other man's diaphragm. It missed its mark, inflicting only a flesh wound. Instantly, a knife slashed across the chest of the younger man, slicing his wet suit. Sabatini gripped Cisneros' wrist, halting the arc of his blade. Cisneros reached for his pistol. Sabatini took his time cutting the airhose—Cisneros would not be able to cock the gun and pull the trigger through the plastic bag with one hand. Sabatini stabbed the commander in the kidney and jacked the serrated blade up and down until the other man released his gun. The lieutenant clamped his hand over Cisneros' mouth and surfaced. In the dim light Roland Sabatini could see Cisneros' eyes searching, asking. Sabatini plunged the point of his blade into the base of the commander's skull then twisted the knife, scrambling the brains as Cisneros had taught him. He disemboweled the body to produce maximum bloodletting, then removed his weight belt and strapped it around Cisneros' chest. Sharks would take care of the rest within twenty minutes. He removed his commander's mask and looked into his face for the last time, then the living man and the dead sank beneath the blackness of the waves.

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Twenty five thousand feet above the Amazon River, John Muir was vomiting. He had never had a strong stomach but the combination of third-world breakfast and small-plane aerobatics now made him heave his guts.

When he returned from the restroom, he contemplated the Amazon River below him.

Four thousand miles long, two hundred eighty miles wide, two hundred fifty feet deep, it was the greatest river on earth, draining an area larger than continental United States. Muir wished he could be more impressed with these facts, but the most compelling reality was that for the next two years he would be living among snakes, mosquitoes, yellow fever and malaria. That it was in the name of God didn't impress him either. Muir felt that he had been forced here as the river below him swept so much detritus.

At nineteen, it was time for Muir to answer the Call. Like nearly all males in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it was time for him to go on a mission. This mission.

Once in Belem, he and his companion would travel to the upper Amazon to bring the Word to the Guraite, a primitive tribe discovered twenty years earlier by the anthropologist, Dr. Regis Kettle. From what little Muir knew of these people, they had scant need of his righteousness. In their language there was no word for "murder" or "hatred". According to Kettle, they were the most benign and forgiving people he had ever encountered, offering help even to members of invading tribes. Then again, to remain a respectable member of his community, to have his choice of wife, to prosper

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in Salt Lake City and work at Dad's law firm, he had to answer the Call. That came straight from the heart.

From reading the books of Tristan Jones he knew a few things about his destination, Belem. It was a port city, a favorite among sailors for its friendly people. And it had the largest whorehouse in the world, with over five hundred girls.

He savored his last moments of privacy as the plane approached the runway.

One Edson da Silva would be waiting to take him to the mission branch where he would meet Dr. Richard Tallis, president of the mission branch and the man to whom Muir would answer for the next two years.

When the plane's door opened, the tropical air, thick with palms and slow limbs, hit him in the chest. The midday sun had made the tarmac gummy and the land gave up his footsteps reluctantly.

He was the last one left at the luggage carousel when the conveyor stopped. A little inquiring revealed there were no more bags on the airplane. Furthermore, his bags were still in Caracas.

"When will I have my bags?" asked the American.

"In a little while only senhor," said the ticket agent. "The next flight from Caracas is in six hours." As he walked up the arrivals ramp he saw a man holding a placard that said MUIR. *Not yet.* He hid under his hat and walk past da Silva with the crowd. Muir called the office of Richard Tallis and explained that he had been delayed in Caracas and would be arriving on the next plane at eight thirty p.m. He then watched while Edson da Silva was paged and sent home. For the next six hours the city and solitude were still his.

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He took a cab to the center of town. The city had been an old Indian slave settlement and later, a rubber town. The Belem-Brasilia highway had brought prosperity and high rises and turned Belem into a center of commerce.

As he exited the cab small children besieged him, immediately pegging him for an American. He had not had a chance to exchange money and he appeased the crowd by giving out a dollar. Now the others redoubled their pleas. He dismissed them and set off to find lunch.

His textbook Portuguese would be of little use here. Using sign language he ordered two hotdogs and bottled water at an outdoor café called O Cristobal.

While he waited for his food he observed a band of eleven-year-old boys stealing motorists' wristwatches at the intersection. All windows were rolled down on this hot day and elbows were foolishly sticking out of windows while waiting for the light to turn. A boy would simply run up to the car and rip the watch off the owner's arm. Some crafty drivers wore their watches on the right wrist. The thieves countered this ploy by burning the driver's left hand with a cigarette, waiting for the other hand to reflexively reach over, then snatching the watch.

The hotdogs were excellent. They resembled large, split kielbasas with very spicy mustard on the side. Before long, an urchin materialized before him. Perhaps ten, the boy simply stared. When the child showed no signs of leaving, Muir began reaching for his wallet. The waiter then appeared and yelled 'Embora!' and the vagrant ran away. The man then seemed to apologize for the incident and Muir summoned his favorite phrase in any tongue.

“Nao ha problema.”

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Muir was not comfortable with poverty. He was not callused to it, merely realistic. He would be making no major contributions to humanity and he considered himself lucky to know this early on. Just as important as deciding what you are going to do with your life, is knowing what you will not do. No Nobel Peace Prize. No library extension at Harvard. Perhaps not even a wife or kids.

He took another cab to the wharf. Open-air markets sold Japanese radios, puma hides, French perfumes and endangered parrots. Mongers discarded putrid fish that was immediately recovered by beggars and amputees. Urubas, vultures that nested atop condominiums, battled for whatever remained. Nothing was wasted here but lives, thought John.

Young girls of fourteen and fifteen in lipstick and shorts were soliciting sailors. Bars promised nude dancers, beer and good times. He walked past these establishments feeling the closeness of their corruption, inhaling the beer and warm sweat exuding through the doorways. There was no denying it: he was fascinated by the underside of humanity.

He continued past the oily ships, and stood looking at them for a long time, their black monolithic prows rising from the water like newborn islands.

Once again, he was doing something he did not want to do. At eighteen he had wanted to join the Marine Corps. His father had forbidden it because this would have precluded John's going on a mission at nineteen, the usual age. Father and son collided. In the end the young man yielded and enrolled in college to study law, another of his father's strong recommendations.

He didn't know what he wanted to do with his life, only that he didn't want to

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live in his father's house anymore. He didn't want to be a lawyer. He didn't want to be a missionary.

At nine O'clock Muir and his bags walked into the office of Richard Tallis. A grim man of fifty-two, Tallis' Saxon features were ill-adapted to lifelong missionary work in the tropics. He was bald with the sides closely cropped. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt and a red and blue striped tie, flawlessly knotted and dimpled, a carryover from his twenty years as operations manager for Levy's Meat Company.

The office was Spartan, furnished to accommodate brief sitting and intense listening. One side of a bookshelf contained the Book of Mormon, Doctrines and Covenants, A Pearl of Great Price; on the other were generalities—an anthology of poetry, a history of the world—within which were hidden the complexities of a man.

John adjusted his smile to show an extra pair of teeth and extended his hand.

“John Muir—I'm very glad to be here at last, sir.”

Tallis gave him a mild handshake and pointed to a chair.

“This is no ordinary mission you've been called to,” said the older man, without banalities. “It is difficult to get permission to visit Indian lands these days.

Authorization from FUNAI, the national Indian foundation, was obtained through the offices of your companion's father, no small feat in itself.

“You'll be on your own almost the entire time. That is, you and your partner. Discipline is of the utmost importance and it is what I demand. You are here to bring the Word of God to those who have not heard the Word. That is all. If you do that with your heart, then whatever else you don't accomplish won't matter. Except for going to the bathroom you are not to leave your companion's side for two years. There are

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several reasons for this, all of them obvious. Where you are going it will be dangerous. There are unenforceable laws in the jungle, which means no law. Romantic involvement with anyone, however innocent, is expressly forbidden. This compromises the integrity of the entire Church. We are dealing here with faith. And faith in God sometimes begins with faith in men. You must be worthy of the faith of the people who will hear you. If you ever lose that you might as well go home, and go home you will, to disgrace.”

“I understand all this, sir, and have since I was ten years old.”

“Your shots are in order, I presume.”

“Yes sir.”

“You will report to me every month by letter. Yes, that means you'll have to hike all the way to civilization to mail it. It's the only practical way we can maintain contact and be assured that you're still alive. Sending in missionaries to relieve you would put more people at risk, not the least of whom are the Indians who are highly susceptible to colds and influenza. It would also be unacceptable to FUNAI. How is your Portuguese?”

“Nao ha problema.”

“Good. Your companion speaks fluent Portuguese as well as English and Spanish.”

“I look forward to meeting him, sir.”

“That will be right now.” Tallis walked around his desk and opened the door to his study. He motioned in a young man in his early twenties. Even through his loose-fitting white shirt and tie Muir could discern the powerful muscles. The young man's face, which he noticed last, was serene but purposeful.

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“John Muir, this is Roland Sabatini.”

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