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Essay

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After the Jets Crashed

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Indian Springs, Nevada, is 41.4 miles north of downtown Las Vegas. It is not much of a town, mostly spread-out trailers, two gas stations, and a couple of bars, one white-stuccoed, the other log-cabined—all this scattered among the cottonwoods which I can see from at least five miles away, driving along the dusty blacktop. On a March morning, with windblown clouds rushing away above the desert valley floor, Route 95 offers only slight intrusions to the bleak desert. The splotch of last night's jackrabbit red-ribboned across the asphalt, the silver-white wire mesh of the Nevada State Prison a quarter mile off the road to the west, a glimpse, rapidly closing, of the Nellis Air Force Base ranges, or the edges of them, at least, pockmarked with eraser stubs of bomb craters. The ranges lunge outward in a triangle into northern Arizona, southern Utah, eastern California, and nearly half the state of Nevada. The Nellis range complex is a never-ending, rock-infested dust bowl which serves as a tomb for jackrabbits and unexploded ordnance.

Indian Springs Auxiliary Airfield lies at the southern tip, the entry point to the vast bombing ranges beyond and the infinity of gray-blue sky above. A right-hand exit off the interstate leads to a close huddle of single-level World War II-vintage buildings, all wooden, all painted a drab desert brown, each singularly indistinguishable from the rest of its neighbors, except for the sprayed-brown metal placard in front of each small building announcing what it contains.

The air policeman at the gate salutes and waves us through. "The base commander's office is in that building straight ahead, Colonel," comes a voice from the back seat of my staff car. The voice belongs to Master Sergeant King, the audiovisual specialist for the United States Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron (Thunderbirds). The other passenger is Bill Graves, a building contractor specialist from the base civil engineering office back at Nellis.

The base commander, Major Madison, is expecting us. He and I have talked on the phone several times, but we've never met in person until today. After introductions and some chit-chat, the four of us head for Building T-29, a small ramshackle structure adjoining the flightline. Madison takes out some keys and unlocks a padlock on a side door.

"I'm afraid the inside isn't much to look at," Major Madison apologizes, flipping a light switch. The bleak, colorless interior is in stark contrast to Sergeant King's dark blue trousers, matching jacket, and a red, white, and blue scroll of the word Thunderbirds across his back.

King surveys the interior and shakes his head. "I know the generals want to film each practice and air show from now on, Colonel, but I can tell you we don't need a permanent facility here. The pilots debrief back at Nellis, sir. The runway here is unsafe for jets to land, except in emergencies."

Major Madison nods. "Sergeant King is right, Colonel. The runway needs major repairs and we're low on the priority list. The Air Force is satisfied if they can land C-130s here."

Sergeant King looks me in the eye. "Frankly, sir, it is a waste of money to fix up this place."

I silently agree with both men, but since the generals have suggested a permanent audiovisual facility at Indian Springs, we're looking into a permanent audiovisual facility at Indian Springs. So Bill Graves measures and tapes and writes down figures and dimensions on long sheets of paper and compares them to the faded blueprint of Building T-29.

"I'd like to tear this building down, not refurbish it," says Major Madison. My gut feelings, again, agree with his.

The one room we're in is cobwebbed along every wall, the linoleum is pulled up, and there are empty milk cartons in the corner. A brown sock, two pairs of camouflaged fatigue pants, an empty Pepsi can lie scattered around a weather-beaten blue table. There is the stink of stale urine from a toilet in an alcove just to the right. Rusty water drips from what was once a white pipe along the ceiling. "The grunts sleep in here occasionally," Madison says, "when they're waiting to deploy up range for a joint Army/Air Force exercise."

It will cost Uncle Sam some bucks to salvage even one room in this rattrap, I think to myself. But Graves goes on taping, and penciling, and numbering, and figuring. When he's done we go outside to the wind-whipped hard desert dirt. "I need to check exact prices, Colonel, but I'd guess 10 to 12 thousand to get the room in acceptable condition. Air conditioning and shelving will cost extra, of course. I'll have an itemized breakdown ready in a day or two."

Sergeant King grunts and bites his tongue. I look at him and decide to shift gears. "Sergeant King, I'll need your estimate on the best state-of-the-art VCR cameras, lenses, cases, playback equipment, editing stuff. Whether here or at Nellis, I'll need a precise breakdown."

"Finished it last night, Colonel," he says, spitting downwind. "Complete package is $71,411. We can go over it, item by item, when we get back, sir."

Major Madison, biding his time, kicks up some sand with the toe of his combat boot. "I've got a favor to ask," he says. "In private, Colonel, if you can take a short walk." King and Graves nod and head off to the small dining hall for lunch. Madison and I walk through the dust and weeds to an area obscured by grass and cottonwood. A worn chainlink fence, growing in the weeds next to a rusting metal shed, gives the effect of a corral rather than a storage area.

Madison removes the padlock and we trudge into the storage area where several campers and RVs belonging to personnel stationed at Indian Springs Auxiliary Airfield graze in the gray light of March midday.

"What you are about to see, Colonel, is not a pretty sight. I'll let you look around before we talk."

Behind three small portable campers are the remains of four red, white, and blue T-38 Talon aircraft. They are burned-out remains, like automobiles which have caught fire first and burned along the highway. Each fuselage is nearly intact, intact enough at least to be recognizable as the largest existing slab of what was, before the January accident, the polished red, white, and blue skin of Thunderbird air demonstration aircraft.

Even in the March wind whipping irregularly at our pants and in the occasional drops of rain spit from clouds now lower in the sky, the luster of red, white, and blue is still there, though in splotches along parts of the wings that have been sheared off and in the tail sections of each T-38, detached at impact, but now mounted at the center of each pile of fuselage. Each tailpiece, #1 through #4, contains the circular emblem of the blue stars iridescent, even in the fading March light, tombstones with no epitaph. Pieces of wire dangle from the bowels of each plane like burnt spaghetti. The insides of each cockpit have been scraped clean. Only an occasional piece of shattered Plexiglas lies lodged along each canopy rail. The accident investigation team has done a thorough job.

I scuff at the hardened dirt surrounding the #2 T-38, pondering, surveying, silent at the biers, six weeks after the accident. In the tangle of rubble, I manage to read a name below the canopy, on the edge of the fuselage: "Captain Willie Mays." The white letters, stenciled within a blue rectangle, are still visible.

I peer inside the cockpit at the charred interior and imagine for a brief moment that the pilot, Captain Willie Mays, is still there in his polished flying boots. I have seen the two solo pilots, the ones who weren't flying in the red, white, and blue Thunderbird diamond formation that morning, polishing their highgloss leather boots with a rhythm mechanical, but in admiration of the final luster. The best-shined flying boots in the Air Force.

At Indian Springs, the rain has begun to fall in dull, heavy drops. Violating the silence, Major Madison asks if the aircraft can be removed, so his people can get to their campers and RVs in time for spring break at the local school. I shiver and look at him. "I understand," I mumble dryly. "I'll speak to the general about moving them…just as soon as the accident report is finished. It should be a week or so."

We turn and walk past the campers to the chainlink gate and back to Building T-29. King and Graves are ready to go, but King knows what I've been looking at.

"They pancaked in, sir, did you know that? A Line Abreast Loop where the two wingmen and slot pilot fly off the leader `cause there is only four to eight feet of separation between wing-tips. They were nearly level. They almost made it. They would have if they had a clearance of 10 more feet. Ten more feet, sir. Can you believe that?"

* * *

"Ten feet, only 10 feet from the stage, front and center," says the maitre d', a tuxedoed statue whose eyes brighten as I hand him a 10 spot and flashed a small red, white, and blue calling card. "The best seats for friends of the Thunderbirds."

The main showroom of the MGM Grand is a surfeit of comfort. Deep, crushed velvet cushions of royal purple, linen napkins monogrammed with the MGM lion logo, and two hefty cocktails of Johnny Walker Black. The show is lavish Las Vegas at its most gaudy: 80 dancers in a Broadway spectacular, a gala, extravaganzic, neon-lit choreograph of sound and sense.

The showgirls, at least 40 of them, parade in ostrich feathers and G-strings, a bevy of breasts precisely aligned, amid Crest-clear smiles all the same, all in tune, even down to the mascara which is uniformly jet black and to nipples which are uniformly beige rose buds, talcum-powdered, so they won't sweat. The salute to George M. Cohan, a red, white, and blue, all-American Yankee Doodle Dandy number would wow even James Cagney and Busby Berkeley. Pin-striped Uncle Sams, their 35" legs and 32" waists, rocket and careen among 36" busts tucked into tights stretched across midriffs flatter than…than silk on an ironing board.

The highlight of the spectacular review is the sinking of the *Titanic* on stage. Following a lavish recreation of the *Titanic's* main salon where showgirls parade in red, white, and blue Union Jacks, the stage darkens slowly, huge tubs of dry ice bubble, lights flash and flicker, the scene shifts to the engine room of the *Titanic* with streams of water cascading over steaming pipes, and the entire crew of 80 sinks into the subterranean depths beneath the black asphalt of the Las Vegas Strip, where the *Titanic* will not rise again until the midnight show.

There are claps, applauds, shouts, hooplas and, on the way out of the showroom, my wife purchases a red, white, and blue souvenir program as a memento.

Two days later, at 0700 hours I am back in the northeast corner of the Thunderbird hangar at Nellis where the pilots' desks are located. The one I have been using to write reports is covered with carpentry tools and debris from a new window the base civil engineers are carving in the upper regions of the hangar so the pilots can see the hangar floor below, being painted a fresh white, to accommodate the new red, white, and blue F-16s which are, in early March 1982, not yet there.

I move to another desk, a small square government-issue metal one, that has, like the other desks in the fighter jocks' end of the squadron, been painted white in an uneven texture, but solid white

nonetheless with red trim and a circle of stars in blue surrounding the numeral 2. It is Willie Mays' desk, the left wing in the diamond formation of jets that crashed at Indian Springs.

I am alone at 0700. I put my head down on the desk and ask why I, an English professor on sabbatical from the Air Force Academy who has been at Nellis for only a month and a half, should be sitting in the Thunderbird hangar. There are new silver oak leaves on the lapels of my service blouse, but no silver wings on my chest. I am neither a pilot, nor a navigator. I am, in the accepted parlance of the Air Force, Lieutenant Colonel Groundpounder. I was brought here to work for the wing commander, to edit tactics manuals for employing the A-10, F-15, and F-16 in combat situations. A simple enough task. I've done this kind of work before, having spent a tour as a tech editor in operational testing. My boss had taken me aside two weeks ago and told me I was going to help write a manual on how to fly the F-16 in the air demonstration role.

"But, General," I'd said on instinct, "I …I don't know a loop from a roll,…sir." He'd smiled wryly at me. "Don't worry," he'd said. "You soon will."

I shuffle a handful of paperwork, the initial drafts on scraps of loose-leaf paper, listing the maneuvers the Thunderbirds will fly in the F-16. The maneuver descriptions are completely blank. Looking for storage space, I open the drawers of Willie Mays' desk. All personal effects are gone, except for a half-stick of Trident Sugarless bubblegum, assorted paperclips, and a handful of loose change in the top drawer. The side drawers, too, are vacant, except for the lower right-hand bottom one which contains two cans of black Kiwi shoe polish, several blackened pieces of cloth for spitshining, and a buffing rag. I pull on the buffing rag, and out comes a small unopened plastic bag containing a Thunderbird fram: a white triangular piece of silk embroidered with the squadron emblem. The fram, with its white velcro straps, goes around the pilot's neck and is tucked down into the showsuits all the jocks wear for aerial demonstrations.

I pick up the fram in its casket of smooth plastic and place it on the edge of the desk.

As I do so, I notice the rows of ribbons on my own uniform blouse which hangs over a chair beside the desk. There is the red, white, and blue Bronze Star Medal at the top end of the upper row and the Republic of Vietnam Honor Medal First Class—a foreign decoration—at the end of the bottom row.

Late in the afternoon, I reread my report on how many of Uncle Sam's tax dollars it will take to overhaul a room in a vacant building at Indian Springs and the justifications I've written for the audiovisual equipment Sergeant King wants. I gather together my sheaf of staff work on Willie Mays' desk. I glance up at the clock on the wall. 5:44 p.m. My eyes come to rest on a small piece of paper, tacked to a cork bulletin board with a single common pin, the piece of yellow paper curled over and hanging lifeless. It is an 8" x 10" piece of graph paper which contains some writing in black ball-point. Down the left-hand side is the sequence of maneuvers for the 1982 show season: Takeoff, Diamond Roll, Trail-to-Arrowhead Loop, etc. Across the top are the dates, starting with 3 January and ending with 18 January. There are check marks beside each maneuver and under each date, except for the last date, the 18th. That column is blank.

I place my paperwork neatly in the middle of Willie Mays' desk. I pick up the fram in its plastic wrap and place it, along with the piece of graph paper, in a brown manila envelope next to my notes. It will be my memento of what happened. The manual on how to fly the F-16 in the air demonstration role is yet to come-a task that, though I do no know it now, will eventually require 16 drafts and take 14 months to complete.