

The Cargo

by J.A. Moad II

Nothing but the wind churning up dust and sand. And from the cockpit, sitting here on the ramp, we can't tell where the ground ends or the sky begins. The dust storm is gaining strength, the sky churning into a rolling cauldron of burnt orange and gray. And so we wait, hoping it will clear, but like everything in Afghanistan, the weather is unpredictable and violent.

Overhead, the roar of another C-130's engines tells me everything I need to know. Rodeo 22's last attempt to land, but the visibility is near zero. They never had a chance to get down. The thumping sound of propellers fade in and out as it climbs, corkscrewing upward to avoid the small arms fire and missiles in the mountains.

I envy Rodeo 22's escape, and I'm angry at the wind and sand conspiring to keep us here on the ground. Absurd, I know, as I resign myself to waiting for the storm to subside and for a radio call—a new directive from command post I don't want to hear.

I glance over my shoulder toward Nick, our navigator, both of us aware of what's next. We won't be going home as planned. He unzips his flak vest and rummages through his flight bag. We're the only aircraft available now, and odds are we'll get tagged to pick up the rest of Rodeo 22's mission. Nick tosses a handful of sunflower seeds in his mouth and starts chewing. Neither of us has ever done *that* mission before, but it was just a matter of time before it was our turn.

Intel briefed us on a riot yesterday inside the compound—a former Russian military base during their decade-long war. The makeshift prison held a few hundred Taliban fighters, and when the food ran out, things got out of control. They managed to detonate a few grenades, killing a young guard and an Afghan interrogator. The riot was cut short by a group of Special Forces troops—*snakeaters* who've been working and dying alongside the Northern Alliance since the invasion last fall. The prisoners who survived—the worst of them—were locked in metal cages, but rumor has it that they'll be moved to a secure site. This can't happen again, the Intel guy said. Not again.

"Looks like it's our show now," my loadmaster, Skinner, says over the intercom from the back of the plane. "They got some bad motherfuckers to deposit in Stan-land, and I'm thinkin', *tag, we're it.*"

“We’ll see,” I say, not ready to commit to anything. I keep glancing outside the windows thinking that this has to blow over soon. Skinner was outside when the storm rolled in, and he jumped inside the and buttoned us up nice and tight. He said the sand was toxic. Too much of it can make you sick and crazy or both. The particles so fine they can get inside you and fuck with your lungs and mind. “You’re never right after too much of that shit.”

But the thing is, it’s hard to take a chain smoker’s health concerns too seriously. He runs the show in the back of the plane, and as a nicotine and Mountain Dew junkie, his mouth is always running ahead of his brain. Once he got the doors closed in the back, he came into the flight deck with a scarf covering his mouth, walking back and forth and checking the windows and vents for leaks. He stared outside as the brown-orange clouds tumbled over us, rambling on and on, saying that once the shit gets inside you, you’re fucked.

We should’ve been airborne two hours ago, but our cargo was late. And now it’s waiting game—always the worst part—the uncertainty of what’s next, coupled with the sound of RPGs and small arms fire that’s keeping the whole crew on edge. The thin aircraft skin doesn’t provide any real protection. One or two properly placed mortars and we’re a smoking fireball. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. We’re just a reservist crew who volunteered to fly support missions for ninety days, play our part, get our medals and go home. Rodeo 22 should be the one to carry these guys to Ashgabat, the air base in Turkmenistan, where they’ll be conditioned at a secure site for interrogation. We were here to just pick up the bodies, a pair of Human Remains—HRs—as Skinner, always corrects me. Twenty years my senior and the only member of our squadron with any Vietnam experience, he likes to call me *kid* and remind the crew that this is nothing—a piece of cake compared to those last few months in Saigon.

“They’re HRs Captain,” he laughs, and shakes his head, because this is my first deployment, and I’m still getting used to things. But the truth is, I prefer saying *bodies*, even though more often than not, it’s just body parts iced up inside silver boxes for the long trip home. They’re onboard now, strapped down and ready to go.

We’re not supposed to combine missions and carry the dead on those *High Value* flights, but standard ops keep being waived for necessity. Deep down I know Skinner’s probably right, and I can feel any illusion of control slipping away. It’s March 19th, and I imagine the whole crew is thinking about what they’d be doing in a few days if this

really is our last mission and we get to go home. In moments like this it's easy to lose focus and get ahead of ourselves, to forget the real reason we're here.

And I'm as guilty as everyone else, already thinking about what it'll be like to settle back into old routines and put all this shit behind me. This time of year I'd be getting the lawn mower ready, changing out the oil, putting in a new spark plug and sharpening the blade for that first cut. I can see myself in the garage, back in Colorado Springs, going through all the steps to get ready for the season. Throwing the ball to our German Shepherd, Tiki, and watching her race toward the Aspens in the bak yard, the hills rising up in the distance toward Pikes Peak. I miss the sensations of spring work in the yard, digging out my old green-stained tennis shoes, the tulips inching their way into the sky, and the wet grass from my skin as I view the perfectly manicured lawn. For a moment I'm almost there, and I imagine Chase, coming home from baseball practice—tossing his spikes and glove on the back porch as I guide the lawnmower to the garage.

But that's half a world away. And we're still waiting in the dark, wondering what's next when Nick taps his boom mike twice—a hint for me to make eye contact. There's something he doesn't want the whole crew to hear. We lock eyes, and he holds up the folder of flight pubs, opening it to show me an empty slot. The approach procedures for Ashgabat's runway aren't with us, and without the right instrument procedures, legally we can't go there. My expression lets him know we'll solve that problem if we get to it.

"I'll have to reconfigure things back here," Skinner says. "They like to strap down these Haji fucks good and tight."

"Hold on," I say as I catch a glimpse of a vehicle turning onto the ramp. It's an old Soviet transport truck moving away from the hanger. Barely visible through the blowing sand.

"I'd like your take on things back here," Skinner goes on, but I'm only half listening as a dozen armed soldiers surround the truck with their weapons. I can see their bearded faces and the civilian clothes beneath the outer Afghan garbs. Five of them are wearing combat boots—more *snakeaters*, I think, as they force three handcuffed men in orange jumpsuits and down onto the tarmac. One prisoner fights to stay upright before being hit in the head and driven hard onto the pavement. The wind shifts once again, obscuring the view, and I stop breathing for a moment, the hair on the back of my neck standing tall.

“I’ll come back in just a second,” I tell Skinner as I open the cockpit window and strain to hear or see a little more. I imagine the scene unfolding in the shadows just a hundred yards away, but the sand and dust starts seeping inside. My copilot looks at me—wide eyed without saying a word. *I don’t want to do this*, I’d like to say, but I’m in charge, and those are words I can’t speak. I’m playing my part and doing what I’ve been trained to do: keep my crew safe, get the mission done, and bring everyone back home alive.

We’ve been lucky so far, and our missions have become routine, maybe a little too routine. Carrying a few caskets and flying out the wounded is about as real as this war gets for us. From the sky, it’s easy to become distanced from everything on the ground, the villages and the bases from the air, the fragmented cities and the bombed out buildings, but I never see the people. At times, I imagine the enemy hiding in the mountains, waiting in the shadow of the white, jagged peaks filling the horizon day after day. I can feel their presence, like the statues of ancient warriors watching us from a place we can’t see or touch. I know they’re out there somewhere amid the great Hindu Kush—the defiant mountains climbing upwards of 24,000 feet, nearly two miles higher than Pikes Peak.

The scene is a reminder of what’s waiting for us out there. Why we usually keep our engines running after landing, kick open the ramp, upload our cargo and hit the sky as soon as possible. You don’t expect to be here this long, and my crew is quiet, eyes scanning the edges of the airfield. We’re big green target, after all, a bull’s-eye in a sea of gray and tan just waiting to be hit.

Today was supposed to be easy, our last flight in country—my final combat mission—short enough for us to get back in time and catch the weekly rotator flight to Germany and then onto the U.S. If everything went as planned, I’d have a beer in my hand in twenty-three hours, be home to catch Chase’s first baseball game of the season. He turned eleven a few weeks back and is pitching on open day.

We’ve been in theater for six months now, and it’s moments like this, the times waiting when I think about him. He felt betrayed and angry when I volunteered to deploy, or, as he put it, *leaving us all during the holidays*. I can’t recall how or why things escalated, and it’s the idea of not understanding what went wrong that eats at me. He wouldn’t talk for days, and on the night before I left, he stopped me in the hallway and held up the model of a C-130 I’d given him years before. We’d built it

together, glued the pieces in place, painted it camouflage green, and played with it as if we were flying our own missions together.

“Dad,” he said, looking down at his feet and then past me, like he was stuck trying to find the right words. He kept tapping the airplane against his leg as Tiki rolled back and forth between us with a tennis ball in her mouth. I waited, but the words didn’t come for either of us. In the end, we did our best to hug away the distance. “Be good, listen to your mother, and do the right thing,” I managed to say, holding his shoulders in my palms and finding his eyes.

“How long will it be?” He wanted to know.

“I’ll be back in time for Baseball season.”

“That long?”

“It’ll blow by before you know it,” I said, realizing that for a boy, six months might seem like an eternity.

He didn’t say anything, just a quiet doubt in his eyes—a doubt that lingers with me still.

Over the last few months, I’ve wondered how he’s grappled with everything—a young boy with thoughts and ideas evolving and taking shape in my absence. Although we’d sheltered him from the story of 9/11 and realities of this war, he knew we were hiding things. He wanted answers to questions he didn’t know how to ask... a degree of certainty—something to cling to so it would all make sense.

The wind is dying down now, and I glance at my watch: 12:05 pm—not enough time to do both missions and catch the flight out. The shuttle back to Germany only comes through once a week, and I can feel the opportunity slipping through our hands. If they tag us with Rodeo 22’s mission, I can decline it, though. Regulations say we can’t depart for Ashgabat without the instrument approaches, and that just might be my ticket home. I cling to the possibility.

“I’m going to the back,” I say, unstrapping my flak vest and setting it at my feet. I catch Nick’s eyes and sense his stress as I descend into the cargo hold. One of his main jobs is to make sure the flight pubs are onboard, and it’s uncharacteristic of him to make that kind of mistake. He knows he’ll be the one to take the hit if we don’t do the mission. The kind of thing that can kill a career.

Nick’s quiet and solid, a guy you usually want making sure the details are right. He’s doesn’t play along with our navigator jokes. No matter how often we remind him that navigators are a dying breed, replaceable by GPS, he just smiles and gives us his version of reality.

“A GPS can’t read the stars when the power goes out or tell you where you are when the system locks up or shuts down,” he likes to remind us. “If you lose track of where you are, then you can’t know where you’re going.”

It’s a favorite line of his, one we all laugh about, but quietly accept. Out here, if something goes wrong with the GPS, the only backup is what Nick has learned long ago—a way to plot your place in the world by understanding where you are in relation to the stars. You have to be aware of your exact location to know where you’re headed next.

In the back of the plane, Skinner’s sitting on one of the silver boxes reading the cargo manifest. The cold from the metal floor works its way through my boots and into my legs. He’s smoking, halfway through a fresh pack of Camels, and I can tell something’s bothering him by the way he avoids my eyes. He’s been quieter than normal lately. Without acknowledging me, he drops the cigarette into a soda can and smashes it with his boot. Smoking inside the plane is against regulations, but I don’t say anything. Without nicotine and Mountain Dew, Skinner’s a mess, his hands tremble and he loses focus, so we look the other way. During long flights he sits on the cargo ramp near the outflow valve. The smoke gets vented overboard, but he can’t hide the stink of it on his breath and flight suit.

“I’ll have to reconfigure the whole god damn thing,” he says, tapping the coffin. “Ain’t supposed to be any of them ragheads on the plane with these guys. We need to separate ‘em.”

“Looks like there’s three of ‘em,” I say, picking up a roll of tie down straps. It’s rare for me to be in the cargo hold on these flights. I seldom leave the cockpit in the middle of a mission, and Skinner can tell I’m out of my comfort zone.

He hands me the cargo manifest to review and sign. I look at the silver boxes, but I don’t feel anything. No emotion, just HRs in a box. It sounds heartless, I know, but I’m at that point when everything feels normal. You adapt pretty fast. Cargo in—food, bullets, newspapers, grenades, toilet paper—whatever the troops need, and then the cargo out: empty pallets, miscellaneous equipment, and the bodies, warm or cold. There’s no point in losing myself in the details of everything else. It won’t help me get the mission done.

Outside a series of gunshots rattles off a little closer than I’d like. “Jesus!” I stiffen and look toward the back of the plane. Skinner’s opens the cargo door and the loading ramp lowers into position, ready for a

quick upload. In this configuration, we're the most vulnerable, and everybody knows it.

"Ak-47s," Skinner says, unfazed as he thinks out loud to himself, wondering how to arrange the cargo load. I can't explain it, but seeing him trying to solve the problem relaxes me. He's been in the Reserves for over thirty years, and we've flown on hundreds of missions together. This is his last deployment, his farewell tour, he likes to say, before he retires this summer. I know him better than most, and despite his experience, I can tell he's troubled. Over the years, we've shared many late-night conversations, and I know about his divorces, his difficult children, and the months he spent in rehab. It took three shots of whiskey for him to tell me about his biggest mistake: a fight with his only son after the kid came home drunk with a dent in the truck's front bumper. It escalated fast, ending with a punch to the boy's face—a hard, tooth-breaking fist to the teen-aged son Skinner loves more than life itself.

We never spoke of it again, but like many things, these are the stories we bear with us, the ones we unpack slowly behind a few beers in the weeks and months on the road. At times I've marveled at Skinner's resilience, and how he coaxed his son back home and pieced their world back together. Nothing was ever the same, of course, but Skinner managed to salvage what he could from the relationship, keeping it alive, and staying in his son's life despite the odds against him. Standing here, I realize what I want more than anything is a sense of perspective—to know that despite all our mistakes, everything will work out in the end. Watching him struggle to solve our cargo problem, though, I wonder if it's possible to find that now—here in this place and time.

"I'll put the HRs on the cargo ramp. It can hold thee weight," Skinner says, finally finding what he's been looking for. "That'll keep 'em apart. What do you think?"

"It's your call." I take off my gloves and set them next to the troop door. A quick read through the cargo manifest, detailed information on the HRs—a twenty-seven years-old sergeant and a nineteen year-old private. The private was the one who caused our delay. He was expectant—alive, but without any hope of living. A few pieces of shrapnel penetrated his skull and the internal bleeding slowly killed him. Beyond a few extra shots of morphine, the medics here couldn't do much. It just took longer than everyone expected for him to die.

"Is your son gonna play ball," I ask.

“No,” he says looking toward the silver boxes. The short answer tells me all I need to know, and before I consider a response, a succession of fresh gunshots makes me drop to the floor. Close—too close. Skinner doesn’t move, though. He just stands there and his eyes meet mine before he looks away.

“He’s joining the fucking Army,” Skinner says, pausing to analyze the sound of the gunshots as I dust off my flight suit. “An M-4 or maybe an M-14,” he adds as he bends over, grabs a tie-down strap and stretches it from one side of the plane to the other. “He e-mailed me the other day. Says he wants to serve.”

“What about the Air Force?” I say, but as the words leave my mouth I want to reach out and take them back. He’d never pass the entrance exam. It’s the truth, but it didn’t need to be said. The Army will take any warm body to fill its ranks, but the Air Force has the luxury of being picky and sticking to standards most of the time. It’s all too awkward and I’m a little rattled by the gunfire, but Skinner bails me out.

“He wants to do things his own way,” he says. “Ain’t nothing I can do. Once a guy gets that idea inside his head, it’s a done deal.”

I find myself searching for the right words to say, something to ease the tension, but I don’t have anything to offer. I sign the cargo manifest and hand it back to him, finally understanding his silence. I can sense a kind of slow pain working its way through him—a reminder that maybe the consequences of some mistakes can’t be reversed.

He takes the clipboard and taps the coffin next to me. “They usually promote them to corporal, you know... posthumously.”

“What?” I say, catching a glimpse of Nick climbing down from the cockpit.

“The privates who die,” Skinner says. “I guess *corporal* looks a lot better on a tombstone than private. Gives folks the illusion that they served quite awhile. Before...”

“Need anything else,” I say as Nick motions for me to join him.

“Nope. Me and the guards will get things right back here,” Skinner says. “It won’t take long.” His voice has a tone that makes everything seem like an ordinary mission, as if this was all simply part of our normal routine.

Up front, Nick tells me what we expected—we’re tasked us with 22’s mission. “The weather’s perfect in Ashgabat. No ceilings—clear and a million,” he says, meeting my eyes and conveying a silent agreement he’s already signed onto. “The storm’s starting to blow over.”

Nodding, I resign myself to what it all means. “Okay, let’s do it,” I say. The clear weather means we can fly a visual approach into Ashgabat. No approach procedures necessary. It’s not legal, but what’s probably expected, and besides, I’m not putting anything or any of my crew at risk. We’ll be halfway there before my copilot figures things out, and at that point, it won’t make sense to turn back. As for Nick, he can feign ignorance, and I’ll laugh it off, reminding everyone just how useless navigators really are.

“I’ll let command post know,” Nick says. “The cargo’s on its way.”

Before I climb up into the cockpit, I turn and notice Skinner in the back of the plane. He’s kneeling by the right troop door talking to one of the *snakeaters*. The soldier leans in, his M-4 slung over his back, and his beard almost touching Skinner as they whisper words I can’t hear. *Ghost passengers*, I remind myself—no paper manifest to mark the presence of anything or anyone except the two HRs already aboard. Nothing left to sign or do back here. I climb up into the cockpit.

Outside, the old Soviet transport-truck begins to move, circling slowly toward the back of the plane. Two Humvees follow behind, and I tell myself that it’s just a few more flights—just another week and I’ll be home. It’ll all be over soon.

Missing Chase’s game is a small thing, nothing to get worked up about, right? It’s insignificant, but I can’t help thinking about his disappointment and how things must have changed for him. He knows I didn’t have to go away. I could have stayed home instead of volunteering, but I like to think that someday—years from now, he’ll have a whole new perspective on everything.

These are the ideas I take with me as I strap on my flak vest and get comfortable up front. It can’t last forever, I think, as I put on my helmet and start running the checklist. By the time I’m finished, a quiet optimism begins to settle over me, a hope born from the thoughts that we’re getting the mission done despite everything working against us.

“Pre-flight checks are complete,” the co-pilot says as I search for my gloves.

Nick’s talking to command post on the radio. “The cargo’s secured,” he says. “Just waiting for Skinner to get back on headset and button up the ramp.”

And that’s when I realize I left my flight gloves in the back. I hesitate and consider not wearing them. I don’t need them, but there’s a comfort

in flying with gloves, a secure feeling on the yoke and throttles—a sense of control that isn't there without them.

"I left my gloves in the back."

"I'll grab 'em," Nick says.

"That's okay," I say, climbing out of my seat and stepping down the ladder.

In the back, I'm caught off guard by the scene before me. A cat's cradle of tie down straps and chains stretch from left to right, connecting one side of the plane to the other. I've never seen the back configured like this, and I'm unsure of what to think. Two hooded prisoners are tied to the cargo floor, their bodies intertwined with the straps and chains. I start looking for the third prisoner when I realize Skinner is sitting on the floor in front of the prisoners. He's smoking, exhaling into their hooded faces and talking—words spoken too softly for me to hear or understand. Before I have a chance to react, Skinner sees me, jumps up and moves forward with my gloves in hand.

"Here you go, boss," he says. "Got 'em both strapped down good and tight."

"Aren't there three?"

"Umm... they only brought two." He shrugs, half-grinning, and looks back over his shoulder.

"Just two?" I glance at the men standing beside the troop doors on the right. Their dark, tired faces meet mine, unfazed by the implications in my questioning gaze. Their eyes are the eyes of dead men, and I wonder for a moment about all the things they've experienced here—things I can't begin to imagine or understand. I push back against the questions building in my mind. "Is it safe? I thought they'd be chained down in the seats," I say, defaulting to old instincts, everything I've been taught, as I consider the safety of everyone onboard—even the prisoners.

"They're not going anywhere. Don't worry about 'em... We're safe," Skinner says.

"We are?"

"Yep." His voice is wrapped in a quiet urgency, pressuring me to get back into the cockpit.

"Okay then... I guess we are." I turn and climb back into the flight deck.

Up front, I glance outside and take a deep breath as the storm subsides falls away for now.

“Looks like the we’re going into extra innings,” my co-pilot says. “Sorry you have to miss the opening game.”

“It’s just his first one,” I say. “There’ll be more.”

The clouds crawl across the sky toward the west, and I can see the mountains taking shape all around us. The early afternoon sun reflects off the dust and sand in the air. I open my checklist and brief the tactical departure to the crew—a tight turning spiral above the airfield to get as high as possible in the shortest amount of time. It will keep us relatively safe from small arms fire. Beyond that, it’s all about how I react to any other threats, and whether or not we’ll need to use the chaff and flares.

“We’re ready to button things up,” the engineer announces. He flips a switch and the hydraulic pumps spin the pressure up into the green. He gives me a thumbs up and clears Skinner to raise the cargo ramp.

“The flight plan’s loaded,” Nick says. “We’ll be there before you know it.”

The weight of the plane shifts as the ramp closes and locks into place.

“We’re buttoned up and secure,” Skinner says. “Let’s get the fuck out of this shithole.”

My co-pilot stifles a laugh.

I pull down my visor, and I picture the silver caskets on the cargo ramp, the dead soldiers concealed inside, and those hooded prisoners facing them. But most of all, it’s Skinner who I can see so clearly. It’s as if I’m back there, standing beside him, a cigarette dangling from his bottom lip as he paces back and forth, maneuvering somewhere between the two, like a German shepherd keeping watch.

Up front, the whole crew is waiting for me now, antsy and ready to get underway. I slip into my flight gloves and glance over at the co-pilot. He’s so wrong, I think. This isn’t extra innings. It’s a whole new game