

# P R O L O G U E



*“The world outside had its own rules, and those rules were not human.”*

*~ Michel Houellebecq*

## **Sunday, 13 July 2014, 7:50 pm CST, 14,000 feet over Southeast Oklahoma**

Captain Jacob Nesbit fought back a yawn and shook his head. He had spent the weekend showing his F-16 Fighting Falcon to the public. He and his aircraft were part of the static ground display for the annual Star-Spangled Salute Air Show at Tinker AFB, Oklahoma. Weekend duty of any kind was not exactly top-shelf entertainment for the young captain, but it wasn't as bad as he had expected either. He would have preferred a weekend admiring bikinis on the beaches of South Carolina near his home base of Shaw AFB. Instead, he'd spent the past two days explaining the performance of his aircraft along with the role of his unit, the Fifty-Fifth Fighter Squadron, to what, mostly, was an enthusiastic public in Oklahoma. With the country enduring a long war, many in public were forgetting about the young people still fighting. Impressing the taxpayers with a display of his unit's and aircraft's capabilities was every bit as important as a bomb right through Hajji's cave window. Nesbit believed in what he was doing, and he knew it was easy for many people to forget about all the troops still fighting in Afghanistan. Those guys over there needed him to be at his best here, just as much as they did when he used his F-16 to clear a group of Taliban off their backs in combat.

The many attractive local girls who had stopped and viewed his aircraft during the display pleasantly surprised him. He'd made a point of telling them his F-16 was the same aircraft the USAF Thunderbirds were flying while performing their aerial demonstrations over the weekend. Although there were no bikinis on the flight line, the long hot summers of Oklahoma made for some

very nice tee shirt and shorts combinations on many of the young women visiting the air show. On both Saturday and Sunday, shortly after the Thunderbirds finished their performance, a few of the ladies who had visited his aircraft earlier returned, giving him their Facebook information and, sometimes, even phone numbers. There were certainly some very interesting young women there. *Oklahoma wasn't bad. I may have to return one day*, he thought, smiling to himself. Passing 14,500 feet, Captain Nesbit prepared to level out at 15,000 feet to stay under the commercial air traffic headed into and out of DFW airport to his south. He would hold this altitude until the Low Sector Controller in Ft. Worth, Texas, cleared him to 25,000 ft. Once he was at his planned cruise altitude, they would hand him off to a Memphis High Sector Controller; at that point, he would be well on his way home. Eager to get back to Shaw, he looked at the darkening terrain below him. The further he got away from Tinker AFB and Oklahoma City, the sparser the population and the smaller the towns became. *Sheesh, what the hell does a guy do down there for fun on a Saturday night?* These were the last leisurely thoughts he would ever have. Nesbit's aircraft made a loud Bang, followed by an ominous silence with the absence of engine noise. Immediately, the automated female voice pilot called Bitching Betty started her robotic chant of "WARNING! WARNING!" in his helmet's speakers. The words also appeared in his Heads Up Display or (HUD). Nesbit was no longer the bored captive of a cross country flight; the aircraft now had his full attention. The experience from hundreds of hours of flying in simulators and the endless training flights in F-16s, as well as his real-world combat operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, now kicked in. Captain Nesbit took a deep breath and calmed himself. Yes, he was a little rattled, but he was also an experienced and battle-tested fighter pilot.

He galloped through the steps to restart his engine. His left hand automatically pulled the throttle back to idle and switched on his Emergency Power Unit (EPU) from NORMAL to ON. The hours of training were paying off. Nesbit quickly went through the many steps required to bring his aircraft's F-110 GE-100 engine back to life. The powerful turbofan seemed to respond. He was about to breathe a sigh of relief when his engine went dead again. Single-engine, single-seat

aircraft require one engine to do all the work and one person to do all the thinking. It occurred to Nesbit that in his haste to get a restart on his engine, he had failed to inform air traffic control of his status. He quickly keyed his microphone, transmitting to the Ft. Worth Air Traffic Control Center. "Ft. Worth, this is Shooter 5-5 declaring an emergency." Ft. Worth was busy with Sunday evening departures and arrivals because he didn't get an immediate response. Deciding not to take any more chances, he broadcast his dilemma on the Emergency VHF frequency. "Ft. Worth Control, this is Shooter 5-5 transmitting on Guard." He also dialed a code 7700 into the emergency transponder. As he did this, he also attempted a second restart on his engine; no luck.

### **Sunday, 13 July 2014, 7:55 pm CST Ft. Worth Air Traffic Control Center, Ft. Worth, Texas**

Barry Welsh rattled out of his comfortable groove, guiding the aircraft in and out of his assigned operational zone in the low sector. The words "*transmitting on guard*," quickly followed by a transponder alarm, grabbed not only his attention but also the attention of the Senior Controller. Welsh quickly replied, "Aircraft transmitting on guard, please repeat emergency." He knew already from the transponder information on his screen that it was a USAF cross-country flight out of Tinker AFB, Oklahoma, passing through his zone on its way to the East coast. The reply he got back from Shooter 5-5 was not good. "Roger Ft. Worth this is Shooter 5-5. I am a single ship Fox 16 out of Tinker. I have suffered an engine failure, and two failed restarts. I am now passing 11,000 feet and attempting a third restart." "Copy Shooter 5-5, maintain current heading for restart; advise after attempt." The F-16 pilot replied he understood with a simple, "Shooter 5- 5."

Welsh's supervisor, Tim Starnes, was glancing over his shoulder to aid his controller to bring the situation to a happy ending. Tapping Welsh on the shoulder, he said. "This isn't good, Barry. At his altitude, if he doesn't get that engine lit, he doesn't have a prayer. Talihina is about twenty miles behind him. He's about to cross over into Arkansas and he's at least twenty miles from Mena as well." An instant later, the radio brought the news nobody wanted to hear. "Ft.

Worth; Shooter 5- 5, negative on the restart. You guys wouldn't be hiding a nice runway anywhere in the immediate area, would you?" It always amazed Welsh at the way pilots sounded calm and collected in situations where he would already be in panic mode. He responded with, "Shooter 5- 5, your best chance at your current heading and altitude is Mena Arkansas at your two-o'clock and 20 miles course is 098."

After releasing the microphone switch, a wave of regret hit Welsh. He was almost certain the distance was too far. "Roger, Ft. Worth. Looks like I may take a nature walk shortly. The area is heavily wooded and hilly. I'll get as low as possible before I punch out. It's getting close to dark. I have lights at my two o'clock about fifteen miles ahead."

"Roger that, Shooter, that is Mena," Welsh replied with a knot in his stomach.

"Okay, Ft. Worth. No way I'm going to make that. Let them know I'll need a ride home, though," Nesbit said with as much humor and bravado as he could muster.

"Roger, Shooter, we are advising emergency services in that area of your situation and location. You should see Highway 88 off your left wing. You are coming up on Queen Wilhelmina State Park as well."

As Welsh released his microphone button, he looked over at his boss, who was busy informing a long list of emergency contact organizations, starting with The Mena Police Department and Volunteer Fire Department. With his next transmission, Nesbit's voice was displaying some of the stress he was under. "I'm going to get as close as I can to them, but clear of any built-up areas, to avoid hurting anyone or their property. Thanks for your assistance, Ft. Worth... I'm going to be a bit busy now." That was the last transmission from Shooter 5- 5.

"Roger, Shooter. Good Luck," replied Welsh as he grimly looked up at his supervisor.

## **Sunday, 13 July 2014 7:59 pm CST, 4,000 feet over Oklahoma Arkansas Border**

Nesbit started dumping excess fuel; he wanted to get as much out of the aircraft as possible before he ejected. He also delayed ejecting until he was close to impact. This would ensure that his chute would

bring him down within reasonable proximity to the crash site. He would be easier to locate near where the jet impacted, should he be injured. Had he been over prairie or desert, he would have already ejected. The terrain below was hilly and heavily forested, and he was certain that even with a clean ejection, the landing was going to hurt like hell. He let the aircraft's nose drop a bit, trading the altitude for a little more speed. The whining EPU motor was all that was keeping his aircraft alive, supplying electrical and hydraulic power to the crippled bird.

At 1000 feet, Bitching Betty started her chant again, railing against the low altitude. "WARNING! WARNING! PULL UP! PULL UP!" Glancing over his left wing, he could barely see the road FT. Worth Control had informed him of—*nobody on the highway. If I need help, it may be slow in coming.* He thought to himself. A few seconds later, he spotted a large complex and parking area on top of the ridge to his ten o'clock. *That must be part of the State Park Ft. Worth was telling me about. That means people and help if I'm injured.* At a thousand feet, he jettisoned his two external wing tanks carried under the wings. He didn't want the 2400 gallons of jet fuel they contained adding to the mix when his aircraft impacted and exploded in flames.

Nesbit aimed his nose for the valley floor between the two ridges. It looked to be carved out by a creek. Passing 600 ft, he prayed there would be no people below. After deciding he'd done everything, he could keep the carnage of the crash to a minimum. As his plane dipped below the two ridgelines, Nesbit prepared to eject. He removed his hands from the throttle on the left console and the joystick on the right. Tucking his legs and arms in as tight to his body as possible, he reached down and grabbed the yellow ejection handle between his legs and pulled. The Aces II ejection seat worked to perfection; explosive squibs cleared the bubble canopy. An instant later, the rocket motors in Nesbit's seat fired him and his seat up and away from the F-16.

**Sunday, 13 July 2014, 8:00 pm CST, Polk County, Arkansas, 12 miles west of Mena, Arkansas.**

The ejection was much more violent than Nesbit expected. Fighting off the effects from the force his body had just endured, he looked

down as he hung by his chute. There was a huge fireball boiling on the ground where his jet had impacted. He could feel the heat and smell the burning jet fuel as he floated down. Suddenly, shrill screaming noises assaulted his ears. *What on earth?* Looking down, he could make out movement on the edges of the fire. As the smoke blew clear, pushed by the westerly breeze, he saw figures engulfed in flames and flailing in agony. Feeling the bile rise in his throat, he nearly threw up. *Oh no, please, Lord, don't let me kill any civilians!*

Nesbit was convinced his disabled aircraft had fallen in the middle of campers or hikers, forcing a fiery, agonizing death upon them. He lost sight of the figures as the treetops became eye level with him. The sudden impact of the ground was painful, and again, he was momentarily disoriented. Struggling to his feet and hastily unhooking his chute, his only thought was to hurry to the edge of the fire where he'd seen the people burning. He wished for his own death at this point. With his chute released, he pulled off his helmet and gloves, threw them to the ground, and began sprinting towards the crash site. He only made fifty feet when suddenly he was knocked flat on his back. Confused and gasping for breath, he looked up into the eyes of a nightmare. His brain could not comprehend what he was seeing. A large, heavy hand grabbed him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. There was a sharp snap of pain, then dark nothingness. For Captain Jacob Nesbit, his last wish had been granted.

The nightmare that took the life of Captain Nesbit wasn't the only horror stalking the Ouachita National Forest now. The fire caused by the crash of the F-16 was fast becoming a nightmare in its own right. Years of lower-than-normal rainfall combined with the strong, dry, westerly winds were working the flames into a tree and vegetation devouring inferno. As one tree burst into flames, the winds carried its embers into the next tree. The updrafts from the fire caused a swirling effect, sending the embers to the north and south, engulfing those trees in flame as well. The only safe place was directly west or behind the fire.

**Sunday, 13 July 2014, 8:50 pm CST, Polk County Arkansas, 10 miles west of Mena, Arkansas.**

With a roster of just twenty volunteers, the Mena Volunteer Fire Department, known as 'The Dragon Slayers,' responded with impressive swiftness. Being a Sunday evening, a few firefighters were at church, and others were relaxing at home. Still, others were on the way back from weekend camping or fishing trips in the local Ouachita Mountains or Broken Bow Lake to the south. The department could muster thirteen firefighters and rescue personnel. All four department vehicles, which included their airport fire truck, hurried northwest along Hwy 88. The highway, known to the locals as Skyline Drive, runs roughly atop one of the mountain ridges in the Ouachita. Department Chief Ben Jones had received seven phone calls from some of his absent firefighters, claiming they had received notification and were en route in their personal vehicles. He was also in contact with an Arkansas State Trooper and an Arkansas Fish and Game Officer who had both been in the vicinity at the time of the crash. Both were also responding to the smoke and flames.

According to the State Trooper, the lodge at Queen Wilhelmina State Park was in danger of catching fire. He had already notified his headquarters to alert all surrounding Fire Departments of the seriousness of the situation. The Chief, as well as his team, knew they were in for a fight. With the fading light of dusk, they had no trouble seeing flames racing through the valley floor and climbing up both the north and south ridges. Some said silent prayers others just stared in awe as they approached the flames. Every one of them was determined to fight this to the bitter end. Beside each of them and in all four vehicles were family members or lifelong friends. Behind them and in the path of this fire was every person they loved and cared for, as well as their homes and their jobs. They all understood; they lose this battle, and everything that mattered to them was in danger.

### **Sunday, 13 July 2014, 9:05 pm CST, Queen Wilhelmina State Park Lodge**

Chief Jones quickly got his vehicles and men deployed, trying to save the lodge. Luckily, as the lodge was undergoing renovations, only a skeleton crew staffed the lodge. Additionally, a couple of

construction workers were staying in the few available rooms. One of the construction workers approached Chief Jones, yelling to be heard over the din of roaring flames, water pumps, and men shouting encouragement to each other. He told the Chief he had seen the pilot eject and had witnessed the crash. The Chief replied that the pilot would have to fend for himself until more help arrived. Right now, he wasn't sure if he could keep the top of this ridge and the people on it safe.

Help started arriving at 9:40. Firefighting units from DeQueen, and Nashville, Arkansas, were the first reinforcements. Firefighters from Hope and Hot Springs pursued them. It forced many of these units into downwind firefighting as they fought their way through the fire, spreading to the east. By 10 PM, the fire had jumped to the north side of Highway 88 and was racing north and west, threatening Highway 59. As the fire spread, it quickly ceased to be a local or even a state problem. As it burned its way into the Ouachita National Forest, it soon became a federal problem and came under the jurisdiction of the US Forest Service and FEMA. None of this mattered to the "Dragon Slayers" of the Mena Volunteer Fire Department.

Fortunately, the high winds blowing from the east aided them in their efforts on top of the hill. They had saved the lodge and grounds of Queen Wilhelmina State Park. Over the next few days, the many agencies would use as the Command Center area to assist Arkansas with its largest disaster in years. The 'Dragon Slayers' could finally catch their breath and drink some water. What had seemed just a few minutes had taken nearly two hours. Looking around the sprawling grounds, they saw the first few of what would later be hundreds of people needed to defeat this fire completely. Arkansas National Guard vehicles were already parked on the west side of the grounds. Guardsmen busily began laying markers in treeless areas to mark helicopter landing zones. A UH-72 Lakota helicopter from the Arkansas National Guard was already flying overhead. Others, along with UH 60s Black Hawks, landed and unloaded soldiers and equipment. The portable light units set up by the National Guard troops cast an eerie glow over a large part of the surrounding terrain. Chief Jones was gazing back towards the blackened, burned landscape. Along the opposite slope, a lone figure could be seen

walking uphill toward an area the fire had not touched. *Who is that?* The Chief was thinking to himself. The figure stopped for a moment and glanced back toward the location of the firefighters. The eyes of the unknown figure caught the reflection of the portable lighting units and gave off a reddish-gold glow. The eye shine took the Chief by surprise. *What the hell? Human eyes don't reflect eye shine,* the Chief was thinking somewhat confused. Also, the size of the figure now became more apparent, as well as the fact that it looked to be covered in fur. *No way, no stinking way that is human!* The sight of this apparition triggered a deep sense of dread in the Chief. A primal sense of fear was overtaking him. Quickly shaken from his thoughts when one of his firemen said. "I hope these guys don't start crashing and starting more fires for us." Nodding his head toward the helicopters of the Arkansas National Guard. "Okay guys, let's get back at it. We've cut the tail off this bitch, but the rest of her is still heading toward our home. We've got to get this thing under control. Pay attention to your surroundings. No telling who or what you're liable to encounter out here." Some firefighters looked at their leader with confusion over his comments. Looking back to where he'd seen the figure, it relieved him to see it was gone. *Whatever the hell that was, I don't want to see it again,* the Chief thought to himself nervously.

### **Sunday, 13 July 2014, 11:15 pm CST, Queen Wilhelmina State Park Lodge**

Soldiers of the 77th Aviation Brigade Arkansas National Guard were working their way down the ridge from the park's lodge searching for the pilot of the crashed F-16. There were twenty of them, along with a couple of State Troopers and an Arkansas Fish and Game Officer. There was no mistaking where the aircraft had impacted the ground at the bottom of the ridge. Now that the fire had burnt itself out in the immediate area, they could easily work their way down the ridge in a line abreast formation. Using flashlights and calling out to the pilot, the searchers soon reached the bottom of a small valley floor.

SPC Walter Blevins was one of the first to reach the bottom and first to come across a sign of the pilot. He was about 60 meters west of the wreckage when he came upon a parachute, half of which was

hanging in a tree. He called to a nearby NCO, who approached along with the two state police officers and the game warden. "What have you got?" Sergeant First Class Nathan Parks asked as he and the trio of law enforcement officers approached.

"There's his chute and harness," Blevins said, pointing to the tree. Then pointing just beside it, "and there's his helmet." One of the State Troopers picked up the helmet, inspecting it. "His pilot's gloves are wadded up in it," he said with some confusion. "That means he survived the ejection and landing," Parks said as he scanned the immediate area with a puzzled look. "If he could unhook from his harness and remove his helmet and gloves, he's alive and around here some place."

"Why the hell didn't he just climb up the hill to where the cops and firefighters are?" Asked Blevins. Then he added, "That's the Air Force for you. Probably afraid he'd get dirty."

"Or he may be in shock and wandering around in the dark," Parks added, frowning at Blevins.

There was a lot of commotion coming from the area just to their east. Suddenly, over Parks' radio headset came the voice of Lieutenant Ackman. "Sergeant Parks, I need you over by the wreckage ASAP. We have bodies." "Roger, Sir," Parks said as he looked at Blevins with some confusion. "Let's go and see what the L.T. is talking about." Parks knew that the F-16 was a single-seat aircraft. It surprised him with the Lieutenant's use of the word "bodies."

His group trotted the short 50 yards to the area where a crowd was gathering near the wreckage.

Parks and his group pushed their way through the crowd to Lieutenant Ackman. "Sergeant, here is your aircrew; looks like they didn't get out," The Lieutenant said, pointing to the charred remains at his feet. Looking at the remains in the beams of flashlights and the glow of nearby flames, Parks' confusion grew. The Lieutenant was new to the Guard, and this was his first time to be in close contact with death. Parks had seen plenty in his ten years of service, which included the three deployments he had under his belt. These were not the remains of an aircrew or anything else he could think of. "These aren't people," he said to Ackman. "Besides, we're looking for a single pilot, not an aircrew."

"They have to be people," exclaimed the Lieutenant.

"They're too big to be people," said Parks.

"Maybe they're swollen from the fire, Sarge," said Blevins.

Parks looked at Blevins for a moment, thinking... Then he asked, "How tall are you? "

Now it was Blevin's turn to look confused. "I'm six feet on the button, Sarge." The bodies were sprawled on the ground, all within ten feet of each other. Looking at the largest set of remains, Parks said to Blevins... "Lay down next to this one."

"What the hell do you mean, Sarge?"

"Lay down next to this one," Parks repeated.

"Come on, Sarge, they smell like ass."

The crowd of soldiers erupted in laughter. "Quiet!" Parks said with the menacing voice that only an NCO could do justice. "Now get your ass in the grass."

Blevins lay down about three feet from the largest corpse, muttering protest under his breath. Frustrated with his squeamishness, Parks grabbed his ankles and pulled his feet next to, and even with, the corpse. He then grabbed Blevins' shirt, lifting him and then roughly dropping him next to and almost touching the corpse.

Luckily for Blevins, this momentarily knocked the wind out of him. Ash and dust rose from around Blevins, along with the smell of burnt flesh and hair. As the cloud settled, Parks stared down at the body lying next to Blevins. It was over two feet taller and at least three times as large across the chest. Parks had heard and read about things like this. Until now, he thought they were just the products of hoaxers or active imaginations. Looking at the Lieutenant, he said. "Aircrew my ass, those aren't even people."

"It has to be black bears," said the Game Warden. With that, Blevins jumped up from the ground. Sergeant Parks could punish him all he wanted, but the stench was terrible. Not to mention, the thought of lying next to a bear, even a dead one, was more than he could handle. Parks looked at the Game Warden incredulously and said, "Bears? You know they're not bears! Where are their snouts? Look at them. They have hands and feet, not paws. I see four fingers and a thumb on all of them. How many bears have fingers thumbs? I think you know exactly what they are and just don't want to admit it." Some

soldiers started looking among themselves in confusion. Most did not know what Parks was talking about. A few, however, caught on to what Parks was thinking and started taking more interest in the corpses.

The Game Warden looking first to the two State Troopers and then to Parks, announced that the sight was officially under the jurisdiction of the State of Arkansas. Declaring himself and the two troopers, the only state law enforcement officers on sight, they now had control over the three corpses. Then he declared the area a crime scene. The two State Troopers looked at the Game Warden and then at each other in confusion. "Crime scene?" said Parks. "What kind of crap are you trying to feed us?" This was as far as the Game Warden was going to allow the conversation to go. Moving his right hand so that it rested on the holster of his Berretta 9mm, looking menacingly at Parks, he turned to Ackman. "Lieutenant, it's time you took control of your Sergeant before I place him under arrest." He continued, "You and your people are here to find a missing pilot, not trample and destroy whatever evidence remains from what is obviously a poaching sight. I suggest you and your men get back to your search mission. I'll be needing bags or blankets to cover these bears. There will be an investigation... I suggest you people keep your mouths shut. As soon as I'm back up that hill, I'll be putting in a call to my boss, who will call the Governor. He will be in contact with the Chief of the Arkansas National Guard. I'd hate to have to tell my boss that we have not yet found this pilot because you guys were playing with dead bear carcasses."

The bewildered young lieutenant did not know what just occurred between Parks and the Game Warden. He damn sure didn't want to be the topic of a negative conversation between the Governor and the Chief of the Arkansas National Guard. What nobody noticed in the exchange between the Sergeant, lieutenant, and Game Warden, was another National Guard Soldier taking photos of the bodies with his smartphone. Ackman didn't want to deal with any more of this confusing situation or the foul-smelling corpses. He started herding his troops out of the area. "Okay, enough of this crap Sergeant get a line formed we'll search back to the west then up hill. Surely this guy isn't so confused he wouldn't walk to the road. "The National Guard

troops reformed their search line facing west. As they moved away from the area, Sergeant Parks and the Game Warden exchanged looks one last time. "Just doing my job," the Game Warden said. Parks nodded, and he understood the man had to do his duty. He just couldn't figure out why his duty included hiding what was lying on the ground back there. *People should be told; hell, we should warn people.* He thought to himself.

After they had moved out of sight of the game warden, Blevins quietly asked Parks. "That was some weird and intense shit. What the hell were those things Sarge?" Parks thought for a moment and then said with some anger, "Bears, they were just dead bears. Now let's find our missing pilot so we can get the hell out of these woods." Blevins nodded in confusion. And this wouldn't be the last confusing incident on the hunt for Captain Jacob Nesbit. It would be four more long days before they brought the fire under control. It would be another five days after that before they had neutralized all the hotspots. In what they referred to as the Miracle of Mena, the menace projected on the community by Fire Propagation Models proved false when a strong Low-Pressure System settled in Missouri, turning the strong Westerly winds into strong Southerly winds. This spared Mena, but it didn't spare the Ouachita National Forest. They estimated it 7,550 acres of the National Forest were lost to the fire. An area of roughly twelve miles square east from Queen Wilhelmina State Park and northeast of Mena, Arkansas, was stopping just short of the small town of Boles, Arkansas in the east and Waldron Arkansas to the north. The Ouachita National Forest was cut in two from Highway 8 in the South to Highway 28 in the North. Wildlife fled the flames as best they could. In a panic, they moved to the path of least resistance, many of the animals moving into Southeastern Oklahoma, the far west boundary of the Ouachita Mountains.

The whereabouts of Captain Jacob Nesbit proved more perplexing than fighting the fire. Searchers came across his boots sitting on the shoulder of Highway 8 a mile and a half west of the crash area the morning after the crash. Three days later, less than a mile from the Oklahoma border, an Arkansas State Trooper noticed something hanging in a tree on the median between Highway 59 and the railroad tracks that ran parallel to the highway a mere 60 feet to the North.

Hanging 10 feet up in the tree was the flight suit of Captain Nesbit. On the left shoulder was a blue and white patch showing two dice with the fives face up and the words Fifty-Fifth Fighter Squadron. Attached to the left breast with Velcro was a name tag displaying silver USAF pilot's wings. Under the wings, the words Jacob M Nesbit Capt. USAF was printed. The flight suit belonged to Captain Nesbit. There was no doubt. They brought tracking dogs in to help locate Nesbit. To the surprise of their handlers, they laid down, refusing to follow a scent. Why the Captain crossed two highways where he could have flagged down help or stopped at any of several farms he would have passed on his travels was a mystery. A bigger mystery was how did his flight suit get 10 feet up a tree, and why was the owner obviously removing his much-needed footwear and clothing while seemingly evading rescue?

### **Monday, 28 July 2014, 10:25 am CST, Queen Wilhelmina State Park Grounds**

They called the search off after two weeks. The twenty members of the Arkansas National Guard's 77th Aviation Brigade, who took part in the initial search, were called into formation just before heading home. After Lieutenant Ackman, a very serious-looking middle-aged man dressed in slacks and a polo shirt put them at ease, stepped up in front of the formation and introduced himself as Special Agent Paul Eastman of the US Forest Service. If any of the soldiers were expecting a thank you for their efforts in searching for the missing USAF pilot. Instead, they were disappointed. They were threatened to keep their mouths shut about what they witnessed at the crash site the first night. Angered at first, most of the soldiers couldn't even remember the first night. Those who could remember could not care less about dead bears or whatever else the charred remains were. They just wanted to go home. One soldier didn't give a damn what this strutting big shot had to say. He knew what he saw and would not be intimidated by a Park Ranger. *You can kiss my ass, Ranger Bob. Bears aren't the only things that shit in the woods.* Sergeant First Class Nathan Park told himself.