

Twilight of Honor

TWILIGHT OF HONOR *PROLOGUE*

MARCH 29, 1973 - A C-130 flew the last American combat contingent from Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon, but casualties and MIAs mounted until Saigon fell on April 30, 1975. The Vietnam War - a war which was never officially a war - was over on December 23, 1972, for Major Michael Reardon. He was first reported missing in action and later confirmed to be "killed in action, body not recovered" during a bombing mission of a strategic target on the North Vietnam border. His death occurred only six days before President Nixon halted the United States air offensive in North Vietnam. Major Reardon joined 58,000 other Americans who would not be coming home from Southeast Asia.



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Sunday, April 29, 1973, Destin, Florida

THE INVITATION READ “You are cordially invited to attend Shoreline Gallery’s Open House, Sunday, April 29, 1973, 3:00 - 5:00 p.m.”. Wynne Reardon was overwhelmed at the response to her Gallery’s first Open House as guests mingled and chatted throughout the display areas, admiring the fiber art and pottery. She felt a vitality that had been absent for months as she moved among her friends renewing acquaintances, and explaining more about the different pieces. Their gaiety and laughter were an affirmation of her dream for the Gallery. It was finally a reality and from the number of people attending the Open House, the Gallery appeared to be well received.

“Wynne, it’s your best work yet.”

She turned to see her friend, Jean Stearns, admiring the large fiber art piece hanging on the

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cedar wall. The sunburst design in orange and yellow hues on the perfectly woven mandala brightened the entire corner of the room. The yarn fibers caught the waning sunlight streaming through the louvered windows.

“Oh, Jean. What else would a good friend say, but thank you...it was the most difficult piece I’ve ever done, but I’m pleased with it.”

Wynne looked at the wall hanging with misty eyes. She had planned to give it to Michael for his study -- the colors were his favorite.

“And look at you!” Jean said, holding her friend at arm’s length. “That dress is exquisite...I’m green with envy.”

Wynne laughed and ran her hand over the fabric she had so carefully chosen for the occasion. The soft Egyptian cotton in emerald green complemented her auburn hair and hazel eyes. She had designed and made the dress especially to accentuate her trim figure. Her slim waist was belted with a self-made woven tapestry belt.

“See you later,” Jean said with a quick hug.

Wynne nodded and turned to see an Air Force Major standing by her side.

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“Now that’s my kind of art.” The distinguished looking gray-haired officer looked appraisingly at the work. “The colors...the textures...it’s a magnificent combination...”

“Why, thank you. I’m Wynne Reardon. Welcome to Shoreline Gallery.”

“Glenn Johnson. It’s my pleasure.”

She extended her hand, delighted with the compliment. But a numbing wave swept over her when she saw the cross above the officer’s left shirt pocket. She felt again the paralyzing dread, and covered her face with her hands, momentarily turning away from the Chaplain’s startled look. “Mrs. Reardon, are you all right?” the Chaplain asked as she regained her composure.

“I’m fine,” she said, but unshed tears burned her throat. “About the piece...I sketched the idea while my husband and I were stationed in Hawaii. The sunsets there are unparalleled.”

“Indeed they are,” the Chaplain agreed. “It reminds me of the sunsets I often watched from Bellows Beach. I’m sure you must have gone there, too.”

Memories of Hawaii and Bellows Beach were so real. Wynne could smell the heady and exotic fragrance of the Plumaria blossoms. They often

hung their Plumaria leis in an open window, and the fragrance would waft through the room, even when the petals were brown.

“Yes, I did...that is we...excuse me please...” she managed to say, and fled from the room to the security of her office. The laughter echoing from her guests suddenly sounded strangely out of place as she shut the door to silence it.

Would there ever be a time she could see a Chaplain without experiencing this searing panic? Would the pain always be there, ready to surface in even the most guarded times?

Michael Reardon’s face smiled up at her from his photograph on her desk. Those happy blue eyes and easy smile had always been there for her. Gently clutching the picture of her husband to her chest, she whispered, “Michael, I’m not sure I can make it.”

Wynne did not hear the door open quietly behind her, nor sense her friend’s presence until Jean slipped an arm around her shoulder.

“Oh, Wynne, please come back and join us for the Open House. Michael would want you to enjoy it.”

Wynne nodded, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and returned to the main gallery with her friend to visit with the other guests.

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Five Months Earlier - December, 1972

ONLY FIVE MONTHS ago in early December Wynne had been jubilant -- Michael was finally finishing his tour as a fighter pilot in Vietnam. She had spent endless days and nights getting the Gallery ready to open before his return. No more working out of a studio at home. Shoreline Gallery was the culmination of her dream -- of their dream. But Michael was not entirely a dreamer -- he had insisted on an exhaustive feasibility market survey for the Gallery's location. The Destin area appeared to meet all of the criteria for success.

They had purchased an abandoned candy factory in Destin, a community in Florida's Panhandle, for a reasonable price. The bargain purchase had left enough funds to remodel, and decorate the interior into the rustic fiber art and pottery gallery she had always wanted. And now Michael would be home to share her joy. He would be stationed close by at Eglin Air Force Base for at least three years. This would be enough time to get the gallery established and find a director. Then it would be here when they were ready for

retirement. Life was indeed full of promise for the Reardons. The long year of separation was nearly behind them, and the New Year held excitement and anticipation.

The news had been filled with reports of heavy U.S. bombing in Southeast Asia, and she had worried about Michael's safety.

"Don't worry," he had written. "I'm an experienced warrior...nearly enough missions to come home..."

In October Presidential Advisor Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho had conducted cease-fire talks in Paris. President Nixon would surely announce an end to the war soon. Michael's homecoming would then be assured.

She tried to explain what was happening to their children, Stephen and Lauren, although their understanding at ages 11 and 9 was somewhat limited.

"Our President is trying to end the war," she told them one morning at breakfast, "so Daddy can come home soon."

"How can they do that?" asked Stephen with the inquisitive look that only an 11-year-old boy could have.

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“Presidential Advisor Henry Kissinger is in Paris talking with officials from Vietnam,” Wynne said.

“What’s an official?” Lauren asked, her blue eyes staring at her mother.

“It’s someone who represents the government of Vietnam,” Wynne explained.

“Can he send Daddy home?” Lauren asked as she wiped milk from her mouth.

“Of course he can,” Stephen said. “Officials make decisions!”

Wynne smiled at Stephen’s authoritative tone. He had always tried to be older than his years.

“Stephen’s right,” Wynne agreed. “The official can decide to end the war so Daddy can come home.”

“Yippie!” Lauren said, jumping up, and hugging her mother. Stephen shyly put his arm around his mother’s waist, too.

WYNNE WENT THROUGH the first two weeks of December in a state of euphoria. She worked

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diligently at the Gallery to put the finishing touches on the interior while trying to keep abreast of all of the news reports from Vietnam and Paris. Her spirits, too, were boosted by the headline in the morning paper on December 30th: PRESIDENT NIXON HALTS UNITED STATES AIR OFFENSIVE ACTION AGAINST NORTH VIETNAM ON DECEMBER 29th AS PEACE TALKS PROGRESS. Michael's homecoming was imminent!

Sunday, December 31, 1972

THE DOORBELL AWAKENED Wynne from a deep sleep on Sunday morning. She glanced at the clock, and noted it was only 6:30 a.m. *Who could that possibly be at this hour, and on New Year's Eve?* She groggily reached for her robe. *Jean probably ran out of milk,* Wynne mused as she walked to the front door, expecting to see her best friend, who was also her neighbor.

When she opened the door, two uniformed Air Force Officers stood on the front porch in the yellow light of dawn. Behind them, a blue staff car

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loomed ominously in the driveway. Wynne's eyes were transfixed by the cross above the young 1st Lieutenant's shirt pocket.

"Mrs. Reardon I'm Colonel Rutledge," said the taller, graying man, the Squadron Group Commander at Eglin. "This is Chaplain John Turner. We have some news about Michael..."

Wynne felt her strength going, as hot and cold shivers of dread reverberated through her body. She had been a military wife long enough to know a Commander and Chaplain visiting at such an hour would carry bad news. *Not Michael!* she prayed silently.

Chaplain Turner reached for her arm to steady her.

"May we come in?" Colonel Rutledge asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, please do."

Wynne led the men to the living room and sat on the sofa, dazed, suspended in uncertainty, afraid to know.

"Wynne, the news about Michael isn't the worst, but it's not good either...he had to eject during a mission over North Vietnam on December 23rd. His parachute was sighted going down in enemy territory. It was a vital mission...he was

bombing a strategic target. We don't know any more at this time."

Wynne was too numb to reply. She sat mute, staring at the officers. *A vital mission? What was more vital than Michael coming home? The words missing in action* raced through her thoughts. *Not dead, but missing in action! Just missing. There was still hope.* Her vision blurred from tears as she reeled from the news. She couldn't see the officers' faces clearly, and the words *missing...missing...missing* echoed in her thoughts.

"Is there anything we can do for you...a friend we can call?" Chaplain Turner asked as he placed a hand gently on her shoulder. Wynne shook her head and managed to find her voice.

"When will you have more information?"

"We should have another intelligence report by tonight. We'll let you know," Colonel Rutledge replied. "There is a cease-fire in effect with the North Vietnamese," he added. "This will help in any rescue attempt since his parachute was sighted going down in enemy territory."

Yet Wynne knew his unspoken words were, "Rescue behind enemy lines was very hazardous."

"Thank you," Wynne whispered. The room seemed to whirl in a blur of tears.

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“Let us call someone to be with you,” Colonel Rutledge urged.

“Yes,” Wynne mumbled. “Please call Jean Stearns. Her number is by the telephone in the kitchen.”

Wynne heard Chaplain Turner’s muted voice from the kitchen as he spoke on the telephone. He returned to the living room and said softly, “She’ll be right over.”

In a moment there was a knock on the door. When the Commander opened it, Jean rushed past him to her friend, embracing her.

“Michael’s missing in action,” Wynne said with a sob. “Missing...”

“He’ll be all right...he’ll be all right. Wynne, everything will be all right,” Jean assured.

Wynne nodded, sobbing as Jean continued to embrace her.

Jean made coffee -- “Everything looks more positive after coffee.” -- and the officers joined them at the kitchen table, asking gentle questions about family, former assignments, perfunctory questions one asks upon meeting new friends.

Wynne could only answer yes or no in a voice that didn’t sound like her own. Jean filled in the

details. They were like sisters, having known each other since their husbands' first tours of duty.

"We'll be going now," Colonel Rutledge said as he stood. "Here is the official report from the Casualty Office at Randolph." He handed the typewritten sheet to Wynne who took it, and followed the men to the door.

Chaplain Turner placed his hand on her shoulder. "Please call if we can be of any assistance."

"I will," she assured and closed the door. She then opened the letter that seemed heavier than anything she had ever held and read the message.

Dear Mrs. Reardon:

It is with deep personal concern that I inform you your husband's plane was shot down in North Vietnam on 23 December, 1972. He was a pilot on board a F-4 Phantom, which crashed after apparently being struck by hostile fire. His parachute was sighted going down in enemy territory. Other details are unknown at this time. However, they will be furnished to you as soon as they are known. Pending further

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information, he will be listed officially as missing in action. If you have any questions, contact our Casualty Assistance Officer. Please accept my sincere sympathy during this period of anxiety.

*Sincerely,
Major General Timothy Arnold, Commander
Air Force Military Personnel Center
Randolph AFB, TX*

Wynne held the report to her chest, tears streaming down her face. Jean placed her arms around her friend and the two sobbed uncontrollably.

“Wynne, could I call your mother and Michael’s mother for you?” Jean asked quietly, dabbing at her eyes.

“Of course, that has to be done,” Wynne said, wishing she could spare her mother and mother-in-law the agony she was feeling. “Their numbers are by the telephone.”

“Should we awaken the children, too, and let them know?” Jean asked.

“No, let’s wait until later,” Wynne said.

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Jean hugged Wynne and slipped into the kitchen, returning a few minutes later to her anxious friend. "Your mother said, she'd come if you want her to. She's waiting to hear from you."

"She doesn't need to come," Wynne said. "Michael will be found soon. They'll be calling to let me know before long." Her voice broke, betraying the doubt she was trying to deny.

Jean put her arm around Wynne's shoulder.

"Won't he have a great war story to tell us when he gets home?" she asked. Her lighthearted laughter sounded more like crying, and finally they both wept quietly together. Jean dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "I'll take Jon and Emily to school, and be right back."

The house was very quiet after Jean left until Stephen and Lauren awakened.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Lauren asked as she saw her mother's tear-stained face.

Wynne sat Stephen and Lauren on the sofa beside her. "I need to tell you about Daddy," Wynne said, her voice tensing. "He had to bail out of his airplane, but I'm sure he's fine."

"He's still coming home isn't he?" Lauren asked, her chin quivering.

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“Sure he is!” Stephen said, his own eyes clouding with tears.

“Of course, Darling,” Wynne said embracing both children and holding back tears. “We’ll just have to wait a little longer.”

Wynne somehow managed to get through the day listening expectantly for the telephone to ring with news from the Commander’s office. But the telephone was ominously silent except for several calls from her mother.

January, 1973

THE EARLY WEEKS of January were a blur for Wynne as the days passed without any further word on Michel’s fate. As the peace talks proceeded, even Michael’s beloved Miami Dolphins won the Super Bowl on January 14th. She imagined his loud whoop when he read the clipping she’d mailed, *Miami Dolphins 14, Washington Redskins, 7*.

On Saturday, January 20th, Wynne watched the TV news as President Richard Nixon and Vice-President Spiro Agnew were sworn in for their second terms of office. It gave her even more of a

sense of assurance Michael would be home soon as she watched the glittering inaugural activities at the nation's Capitol.

During a fitful sleep, she dreamed of seeing Michael ejecting from a burning plane. His parachute seemed to disappear into a dark forest. She cried out to him, but received no response. She awakened, lay awake for hours, and found herself staring at the snapshot of Michael she kept on her bedside table. It had been taken the first year they were married --the eager young officer with his new lieutenant's bars looked back at her with the confident smile she had thought would always be there for her. She held on to the picture momentarily before replacing it in its accustomed place, and turning off the bedside lamp.

WYNNE WAS LINGERING over a second cup of coffee the next morning after she had taken Stephen and Lauren to school when she heard a knock on the kitchen door. She saw Jean's husband, Ray, through the curtains and opened the door. Ray was also part of Michael's 58th Tactical Fighter Squadron from Eglin. The majority of their group had been

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deployed to the Thai Royal Air Force Base in Ubon, Thailand.

He fingered his hat nervously, yet his erect military bearing reminded her so much of Michael.

“Ray...do come in, and join me for a cup of coffee.”

“Wynne, I felt you would like to hear about the rescue attempts.”

“Attempts? Then they’ve...” Wynne’s said as her spirits lifted.

“No,” he quickly added. “They haven’t found Michael. I just thought if you knew how it was done you’d feel better.”

Wynne nodded and sat back down at the kitchen table as Ray sat across from her, his face etched with concern.

“There’s a coordinator for the rescue team,” Ray explained. “They have airborne and ground radios and radar. With this information they can direct the fighters and choppers to the correct position of the downed crewman.”

“How do they keep the enemy from getting there first?” Wynne asked, her body tensing as she could see Michael fleeing for his life in the jungle.

“We have the 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group. They coordinate all search and rescue efforts. They send a pair of A-1 Skyraiders known as Sandies to contact the downed airman by radio. Another rescue helicopter goes in -- probably a HH-3 Jolly Green Giant. Other aircraft fly protective cover for the rescuers.”

“Can they really protect and rescue him?” Wynne asked.

“They do an incredible job, Wynne. If there’s a chance that he’s still alive --even though it’s in enemy territory, they’ll do their best. Those guys don’t give up.” He hesitated for a moment and then added, “Of course, Wynne, you have to be prepared for the fact that sometimes the enemy uses the airman’s emergency survival homing device to lure SAR helicopters into a trap. So the fact there may have been a radio transmission doesn’t prove that Michael is alive.”

Icy fear seized her heart.

“That’s all I want to say,” Ray said. “Just wanted you to know our boys are out there for him.”

“I know that...” Wynne whispered as Ray stood to leave. “They will find him...I have to believe that.”

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LATER ONE EVENING as she read a newspaper account of President Lyndon Johnson's funeral, she couldn't help but notice the coincidence of the date of his death at the LBJ Ranch on January 22nd. It was one month after Michael's plane was shot down. This war that had divided a nation had essentially cost Lyndon Johnson the presidency, as its burden had made him choose not to seek re-election in 1968.

And what was this war going to cost her? Not Michael, dear God. Please not Michael!