



Gorden Schweers

WAR 2010

*War is the most potent opiate invented
by human kind*

Chris Hedges

It had been a difficult ten hour shift for Corporal James K. Parrish. Yet once he turned his T-Bird coupe down the long drive way that led to his ranch estate, it all seemed worth it again. Easing his foot from the gas pedal, Parrish took a moment to gaze across his ten acres of irrigated pasture. A small orchard of fruit trees flourished behind an artificial lake that shimmered with the imperceptible breath of a warm Santa Ana wind.

The car waited for his further command as he sat back, relaxing in a leather bucket seat, gripping the polished walnut steering wheel with his two powerful hands. This immaculate ranch with its fences and paddock was his refuge from military duties and a haven for the flocks of birds sailing down to the mirror of his oasis of pampas grass and clean fresh water.

Outside the air conditioned cockpit of his T-Bird, a transparent veil of heat spiraled off the earth. Inside the car, with the radio playing some soft Sinatra, Parish was sheltered in a cocoon of wealth and privilege.

Ahead, his eyes scanned the acreage until they found his quarter horses resting under the shade of a tree in the farthest corner of his third pasture. An instant later he was distracted again by the lithe figure of Caroline crossing the lawn in her shorts and swim suit top, tossing her blonde hair in the intense heat, moving across the lawn as a beautiful uninhibited female.

Corporal Parrish had been trained by the military to take in every aspect of any combat situation, evaluate, and act decisively on the data provided. Nevertheless the landscape of his ranch, just a mere hour or so from headquarters, filled him with emotions that all the military training in the world could never impede. He paused on the edge of his property, surveying what he owned and loved and lived for with every ounce of his life and soul.

Before climbing a ladder in the orchard, Caroline Parish bent low beneath the canopy of leaves to see her husband

in the drive way, and she waved towards him in such a way that it translated to a light pressure on the gas pedal. The car rolled forward with its smooth inhalation of horse power.

In a few seconds, he slipped past the gate with its sign – *JIM & CAROL'S ALMOST HEAVEN FARM* - flanked by the design of two prancing horses on either side of the letters. Once again he was home and could stop referring everything to files marked TOP SECRET and CONFIDENTIAL, and forget it all, leave it all behind himself for another day. Yet when he wheeled in to the driveway to enter the enclosed space of his garage, Parish instinctively slammed down the brakes. Coiled in the centre of the floor, staring at him with lethal intent, was the largest rattler he had ever seen.

This farm land was, after all, a mere 30 feet above sea level, an arid plain of black desert soil that deep well irrigation had turned in to Gardens of Eden such as with his own ranch and orchard. But pit vipers were not uncommon. During the flash floods on the American River, rattlers washed down from the foothills in large numbers and spread across the open rural and urban areas, crawling in stealth beneath useless fences. This was

however the first time Parrish had ever seen one in his own garage, coiled in its cool shade. Neither the serpent nor the man moved, though he knew it was watching him, its pupils focused on him in a moment of mortal apprehension. Caroline could come through the garage door at any moment to greet him - and the viper strike her. In the next instant - Parrish reacted.

Roaring in to the garage, he slammed on the brakes at the last instant, waited a few seconds (just long enough for the viper to uncoil and attempt to crawl away from beneath the wheels) then backed out again with the howl of Goodyear rubber. It worked! His right front tire had found its target and crushed the filthy deadly creature. From behind his windshield, Parrish watched dispassionately as the snake twisted and convulsed, dying in front of him. Whereupon it all came back to haunt him: The Disaster that his day had turned in to at work. A **Code Five** that had turned in to a complete if unavoidable catastrophe...

Corporal Parrish had taken his place at his console that morning at 5 am. It promised to be another long day as he fuelled up with his first cup of black coffee. With the time difference, he had to remind himself that it was early

evening in Afghanistan. The drone he would be flying for the next several hours had been assigned to survey the rugged badlands above the Pahjwai district. At his early morning briefing, Colonel Epstein had stood at the map with a pointer in one hand, indicating rectangular white lines superimposed over the grid of the 3d map. This area, the OIC had told Parrish, is known for its enclaves of insurgent Taliban. They hide like ticks in amongst the rubble and caves, only to crawl out at night to plant IEDs. The pointer shifted to an X marked on the map and Epstein said, We surprised two to them on this road a few nights ago and vaporized both of them. That's the last time those scum will ever pull that off.

Parrish settled down in his module soon after the briefing and his flight commenced. His drone soared erratically and the screen was distorted until he took full control of the unmanned aircraft, noting the speed of the winds, the cloud cover, relative humidity, and weather forecast for the next 24 hours. He made adjustments to the ailerons and rudder, using the buttons in the arms of his chair, starting with a shift in the flight path to the north by northeast to accommodate for wind direction and regain crystal clear clarity on his video screen. To get more

visual definition, he dropped the altitude of the drone by some 600 feet very slowly, as to remain imperceptible in the evening sky. The landscape rebounded with brilliant resolution. Parrish felt he could almost reach out and lift a few of the large boulders that were visible on his screen and the images of the destroyed Russian tanks that lined the dirt roadway, the detritus of ten years of horrific war littering the country and visible to his drone every day it overflew the terrain. Nevertheless, he watched, examined, evaluated. He shifted his modern bird of prey back and forth over any and every image he was confused about, seeking out the suspicious movements of his human quarry with his air borne camera and his payload of bombs. On the road, a few carts drawn by donkeys shuffled past each other and he noted carefully the men in those carts raise their hands in salute to each other. Was that just a greeting, he asked himself, or some covert sign that warranted a lethal strike? Finally he decided against destroying the two men and he let them pass for a moment, knowing that ultimately his task was to search out and destroy. After another sip of coffee, his drone followed the thin line of a road to a hill top tribal village. There would be more activity there, he told himself, and

he could watch for anything unusual - a split second later Parrish saw the unbelievable! A group of Taliban had assembled at the doorway of one house, apparently waiting for their ring leader to show up. They then moved away, down the narrow mud walled streets, and gathered more strength from others who left their homes also. The ring leader was in the centre of the group of men. Parrish counted no less than a dozen turbans. This was it, he said to himself, This is the big one. His fingers tightened and the sweat suppurated on his forehead. To his credit, he waited and watched.

The numbers of Taliban involved grew even as his drone circled in silence above their village. A dozen had become twice that number. The rabble came to a corner in the village and turned to the left, walked another 100 yards, and entered a large building. Parrish noted everything from the sky, sent out a **Code Five**, and continued to watch. Epstein was at his side in a few seconds asking, what's up? We have a large gathering of men, same age, about 30 at average, entering Target. The Colonel sat down next to his screen and replayed the same footage: the men gathering at the doorway; moving off in large numbers down the lane to the Target. Good

work, Parrish, was his response. After watching the main screen, he asked, Are they moving or what?

Not yet, Parrish whispered. Switch on to your night vision and watch! We want to snub out as many of these lice as possible, all at once. Then the Colonel was gone again and Parrish relapsed back in to the stress of a **Code Five**, watching every second pass as in slow motion. In the darkness of the night, more insurgents slipped in to the Target field, doubling their number. Parrish waited for the door of that building to open and the Taliban start to leave. Minutes later he revised his combat strategy, deciding that if no one left in 45 minutes, he would deliver a message to those bastards down there in that mud walled hole that they would never forget. At 25 minutes, the strain was wearing on Parrish and so revised his strategy a second time. Four minutes passed and then Corporal James K. Parrish, sitting at his console, launched his all out airstrike. The impact from the incendiary bombs lit up the evening Afghanistan skyline. Chaos broke out in the village. Flames from the Taliban stronghold roared crimson in the darkness for an hour or longer. Finally Parrish closed his file, made his report on

the same screen, showing the co-ordinates, location, and result: Annihilation by Fire. Date*Number* Close File*

An hour or so later, Parrish got the call even before his lunch break was over. All of the chief pilots at the Drone Coordination Centre had gathered in the boardroom, seated around the table on both sides with Colonel Epstein standing at the end. We are doing an outstanding job, all of us, the OIC commenced, and ultimately we will bring peace and stability to this part of the world. However, in the process, we must come to terms with the fact that there will be at some point in time collateral damage. Epstein cleared his throat, Such as today. The pilots looked across the table at each other, confused by what was being implied. Then the news came out. Colonel described an injudicious assault on a particular village but never named any personnel directly: Parrish's drone strike had inadvertently annihilated dozens of innocent people at an Afghan wedding, killing women and children, young and old men, and the groom and his raven haired bride as they exchanged their vows before the entire community. Further, the Colonel, insisting on confidentiality, bluntly told everyone in the room that the incident had been leaked to the press as the

act of a deranged suicide bomber. The pilots stared across the table at each other, in disbelief. The silence allowed them to absorb the fact that their Command was lying to the media as a means of protecting their own program. Wherein that big mouth Private Dijon spoke up and asked: But is that believable? Bombing their own relatives and family at a wedding?

Parrish went back to his console and let the incident pass. Subsequently the rattler incident transpired when he arrived home hours later in the day. He was still sitting in his coupe when Caroline tapped at the car window and asked, What gives? She had come around the side of the garage with its clinging trellis of roses and not through the garage door, fortunately not witnessing the rattler dying in convulsions on the floor of the garage. Parrish pressed the button which allowed the driver's window to roll down and smiled up at his beautiful young wife. Just relaxing after a long stressful day, he told her, Be in the house in a moment. Well hurry up, she said, I need help.

Caroline was still in the house when he came in, and she talked of the events of her day as an endless procession of incidents and connections, as if he had not seen her for

weeks. Without even waiting for a reply, she left again, returning to work in the orchard.

Parrish was about to change out of uniform and in to his work clothes but first remembered the dead snake on the garage floor. It might panic his wife if he left it out like that, and the thought it could just as easily have slithered out to the orchard from the garage floor while still alive would upset her greatly. So he resolved to get a shovel or better a pitch fork and toss the thing in to the nearest available ditch, away from their fenced property, before Caroline even caught on. Moments later when he entered the garage, there was nothing there! He looked around the perimeter in the remote chance the snake had convulsed itself to one side or another of the concrete floor. At the same time he found himself standing staring at the clean floor where his right front tire had crushed the snake and he had watched it die on him. Perhaps some other animal had carried it away as food – there was however no stain on the floor, nothing, not a trace of anything, not even a loose scale. The floor was spotless. Parrish looked at the parked coupe facing him now: it seemed to be staring back at him with the same intensity

as that rattler had when he resolved to destroy it. I am losing my mind, he said to himself quietly.

Back again in to the house, with his hands trembling as if before combat duty, he reassured himself, Its okay, Soldier, this will pass. Now changing in to his work clothes so he could join his wife in the orchard, Parish was stepping out in to the passage of evening heat when he halted suddenly. It was out there, hovering in the distance. Only his trained eyes could have detected the difference but it was there, plainly in sight. It made its way above the trees of the dry river bed, scanning every inch, every boulder and bush, subsequently to his horror turning towards his own ten acres. He stopped breathing as his mind ran through its programmed responses; first a right turn; then a sharp left, again a right; as its flight pattern decreased with even smaller and more decisive adjustments. Though still a thousand feet above the ground, the drone was inching closer to his own property. It could well appear to inexperienced eyes as the flight of any common vulture. Parish however knew exactly what it meant. With only a few seconds left, he began to frantically wave his arms and scream to his wife -

*For God's sake, Caroline, get in the house! Run! Quick!
Drop what you are doing and get in the house! They're
here!*

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX