

A soldier in a combat environment, wearing a helmet and tactical gear, is the central focus. The soldier is positioned in a crouching or kneeling position, looking down. The background features a futuristic city with blue lights and a large, circular structure. The scene is filled with dust and debris, suggesting a recent battle or explosion. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, orange and yellow tones, with blue highlights from the city lights.

BRIAN FALKNER

THE ASSAULT

RECON TEAM ANGEL: BOOK ONE

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For Henry
1964 - 2011

You were an inspiration

RECON TEAM ANGEL

This is not a history book.

The achievements of 4th Reconnaissance Team (designation: Angel) of the Allied Combined Operations Group, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, from November 2030 through July 2035, during the Great Bzadian War, are well documented by scholars and historians. Less well known are the people behind the myth: the brave young men and women who earned the reputation and the citations for which Team Angel became famous.

These are their stories, pieced together from Post-Action Reports and interviews with the surviving members of the team. The stories of the heroes whose skills, daring, and determination changed the course of history.

Where necessary, to gain a full understanding of the situations that these soldiers faced, accounts have been

included from the forces they opposed: from interviews with prisoners and Bzadian reports of the battles.

The members of Recon Team Angel changed over time, due to injury and death, as you would expect in a combat arena. By the end of the war, over seventy young people had served in the unit. They were ages fourteen to eighteen—small enough to pass themselves off as alien soldiers but old enough to undertake high-risk covert operations behind enemy lines.

At its peak, this remarkable group boasted a core of twenty-five specialist operatives. But in the beginning, there were only six:

Angel One: Lieutenant Ryan (Lucky) Chisnall—USA

Angel Two: Sergeant Holly Brogan—Australia

Angel Three: Specialist Stephen (Hunter) Huntington—UK

Angel Four: Specialist Janos (Monster) Panyoczki—Hungary

Angel Five: Private First Class Blake Wilton—Canada

Angel Six: Private First Class Trianne (Phantom)

Price—NZ

*May we always remember the names of those who fell in
the pursuit of liberty for Earth.*

BOOK ONE - RECON

WHERE ANGELS FEAR

[Mission day 1 - 2335 hours local time]

[F-35 Lightning II Stealth Bomber, somewhere over Australia]

“Angel Chariot, this is Heaven. How copy?”

“Heaven, this is Angel Chariot, clear copy, over.”

“Angel Chariot, we have zero five bogies now airborne in your proximity. Repeat, zero five bogies. Expect enemy craft approaching from your six. Anticipate interception in one seven mikes, confirm.”

“Angel Chariot confirming zero five bogies, interception in one seven mikes.”

“Confirmation acknowledged, Angel Chariot. Proceed as planned. Good luck. Out.”

The voices in his ear fell silent, and Lieutenant Ryan Chisnall glanced around at the vague shadows that were the five other members of his team, crouched together in the impossibly small space in the bomb bay of the aircraft. A space that was not designed to hold human beings.

The other members of the team couldn't hear the voices of the pilot (snug in the cockpit somewhere above them) and their mission controller (safe

thousands of miles away at the Operational Command Centre). Only Chisnall had a link to this channel, so the others did not know that five enemy jets were heading their way and the first would be right on their tail in less than seventeen minutes.

He decided not to tell them.

A ripple of fear welled up from his gut, stretching dark fingers out around his chest. His heart began to race as a tingling sensation spread from his fingertips to his shoulders.

He took a deep breath and expelled it slowly, humming to himself as he did. Panic, not the circumstances, was the killer. That was what his combat instructor had rammed home again and again. Fear is your friend, keeping you sharp. But panic is the unclean spirit, twisting your soul, consuming logic, training, and, finally, you. So Chisnall hummed to himself and, in doing so, banished the panic to the far corners of his mind.

“Okay, final sys-checks,” he said in a steady voice.

The noise inside the fuselage of the plane would have deafened a corpse. The bomb bay had been heated and pressurized for this mission, but not soundproofed. With the continuous roar from the other side of the bomb bay doors, it was like being in front of the speakers at a thrash metal concert. If they hadn't all been wearing comm units, talk would have been impossible.

One by one, each of the team members' systems checks came up on his HMDS. Five of them had sys-OK, including him, but one was showing a problem.

"Angel Three, you're showing a helmet breach. What's going on, Hunter?" Chisnall could barely see Specialist Stephen "Hunter" Huntington, although he was no more than a few feet away from him. The darkness in the fuselage was almost absolute. The only light came from the ready lights on the six half-pipes on the floor beneath their feet.

“Just scratchin’ my nose, Angel One,” Hunter replied, and his sys-check lit up before he finished speaking.

“Picking your nose, you mean,” Private First Class Trianne Price said.

“This is Angel Five. I have visual confirmation, over,” Private First Class Blake Wilton said. “He was definitely picking.”

“Mate,” Sergeant Holly Brogan said, “if Hunter could pick his nose, would he have picked that one?”

Hunter’s voice came immediately in Chisnall’s ear. “Angel One, I wish to report Sergeant Brogan for breach of regulations, subsection C, paragraph six—intentionally dischargin’ a joke that’s older than my grandmother, without regard for the safety of others.”

“Is not Price your grandmother?” Specialist Janos “Monster” Panyoczki asked.

“Bite me,” Price said, and there was a muffled thump on the comm.

Chisnall grinned. Nearly eighteen, “Phantom” Price was the oldest member of the team.

The pilot’s voice cut across the banter. *“Angel One, this is Angel Chariot, how copy?”*

“Angel Chariot, this is Angel One. Clear copy,” Chisnall replied immediately.

“Angel One, I have six greens showing on my board. Please confirm you are ready to Echo Victor.”

“Angel One confirming six sys-OKs. All angels ready to fly, over.”

“Echo Victor in approximately one four mikes, confirm?”

“Confirm Echo Victor in one four mikes.” Chisnall checked his pulse again.

Fourteen minutes until the EV, which was just a short way of saying they were going to be ejected from a fast-moving jet at 32,000 feet.

“Four mikes! That’s crap,” Wilton said. “Let’s go now. I can’t wait to stick it down those Bzadian throats. Booyah!”

Chisnall thought he could hear a tremor in Wilton’s voice, despite all his bravado.

“You know we can’t,” he said. “We have to wait until the pilot fires off chaff. As soon as one of the Pukes gets missile lock on us, we are out of here.”

“So hit the chaff and let’s go,” Wilton said.

“Wilton, ya plonker,” Hunter said. “If Angel Chariot releases chaff before one of the Pukes gets missile lock, then the Pukes start saying to themselves, ‘What’d he do that for?’ And the last thing we need is a bunch of suspicious Pukes on our six.”

“Yeah, and if the Puke gets a shot off before we EV, then we’re CFC!” Wilton said.

“CFC? What is this CFC?” Monster asked. “Not in the SMTPA manual.”

“Crispy fried chicken,” Holly Brogan informed him.

Chisnall shook his head. “If we don’t jump in the chaff, then we might as well take out a front page ad on Google, telling the Pukes we’re on our way.”

“I know it, LT,” Wilton said. “But that don’t make it any easier to sit up here with our butts hanging out

waiting for the first Puke fast mover to kick us where it hurts.”

“You think?” Price said.

Silence spread like a thick cloud through the confined space. This was it. The real thing. A combat drop over enemy territory. A first for all of them. Chisnall couldn't see their faces, but he could sense their tension.

The timing had to be perfect. A second wrong either way and the mission was compromised or they were dead. Which pretty much amounted to the same thing.

The Operational Command Centre, with its all-seeing satellite eyes, was back on the comm to the pilot of their aircraft.

“Angel Chariot, this is Heaven. How copy?”

“Clear copy, Heaven.”

“Interceptors passing through two zero kilo feet. Anticipate interception in zero eight mikes. Looks like type ones, over.”

Intelligence had identified four different types of enemy fast movers since the start of the war. Type ones were smaller, lightly armed but faster. The first of them was already over 20,000 feet, on its way to blow Angel Chariot out of the sky in less than eight minutes.

Chisnall stretched his legs as much as he could in the confined space. His knees were jammed up against the hard-plastic shell of his half-pipe. It had been triple-checked before take-off, and the green ready light in the Centre of the case glowed dimly.

A minute passed, and another. Chisnall ticked them off on his HMDS. Three minutes, four minutes, five.

The pilot spoke again in his ear. "*Angel One, this is Angel Chariot.*"

"Angel One receiving," Chisnall replied.

"*Assume launch position. Confirm.*"

Chisnall looked at the vague shapes around him. "Okay, team, grab your bags, stick your heads between your legs, and get ready to kiss your butts goodbye."

There was a proper protocol for telling them they were about to launch, and that was not it. But protocol or not, they all reached down and grasped the handles on their half-pipes, rolling onto them and lying lengthwise to reduce the impact of the slipstream once they dropped.

“Angel Chariot, this is Angel One. Launch position confirmed, over.”

“Stand by for pressurization.”

“Standing by.”

There was a hiss and his flight suit compacted slightly as the air pressure in the bay increased.

“I’m not getting paid enough for this,” Wilton said.

“You’re getting paid?” Brogan asked.

“Stand by. Stand by.”

Chisnall gripped the handles on his half-pipe tightly. His pulse was racing, but there was no trace of panic. Not now. They had done this dozens of times in training and hundreds of times in the simulator. Reflexes took over. His mind was on autopilot,

preparing for the sudden drop and the shocking blast of air.

Only seconds now.

“Angel Chariot, this is Heaven. We are seeing zero two bogies forming up in attack position on your six. How copy?”

“Clear copy. I see them, Heaven.”

More seconds passed.

“What are they doing?” Wilton’s words came through gritted teeth.

“Cut the chatter and prepare to Echo Victor,” Chisnall said.

“Missile lock! Missile lock! Deploying chaff. Echo Victor. Echo Victor. Echo Victor.”

One moment there was a solid floor beneath them, and the next, nothing.

The bomb bay doors slid away instantly, and the pressure inside blasted them from the aircraft in a kick of rushing air. They were out, the F-35 pulling up and to the right. Chisnall clung to his half-pipe, trying to meld himself with the device as they rode the angular, bomb-like shapes out into the night sky.

The cold was immediate and shocking, like needles of ice all over his body, despite his thermal flight suit. His breath fogged his faceplate for a second before the suit's internal mechanisms took care of it. The slipstream tore at his helmet and the heavy leather of his flight gloves, trying to rip him from his half-pipe. Chaff cylinders were exploding around him as he fell through twirling spirals of metal that turned the sky to silver.

Six highly trained Special Forces soldiers falling through the night.

One air-cushioned equipment canister full of supplies.

Zero parachutes.

* * *

[2350 hours]

[Early Warning Radar Centre, Uluru Military Base, New Bzadia]

The glow of the radar screen added its light to those of the others around the circumference of the room, casting a green haze over everything and everyone.

Inzusu's eyes were fixed on a dot on the screen. Just a few glowing pixels, but at that moment every cell in his body was focused on them. A human jet, invading Bzadian airspace. The first he had seen in almost two years of radar duty.

It was beyond reason that the scumbugz, the humans, on the verge of being wiped from the face of the planet, would dare to send an aircraft here, to the heart of New Bzadia.

“You're sure there's just one intruder?” Czali, his supervisor, leaned over his shoulder.

Inzusu rotated the three-dimensional display around to the horizontal.

“There’s just a single return, and if there were two of them, there would have to be some horizontal or vertical separation. I’m sure it’s a single plane.”

“Makes no sense,” Czali murmured. “It’s not an attack, and they don’t need recon; they have satellites to do that.”

Every move they made on this god-forgotten planet was closely watched by the satellite eyes of the natives.

“By Azoh!” Inzusu said as a bright flare appeared where the dot had been.

“It’s just chaff,” Czali said. “Where are our interceptors?”

Inzusu pointed at a group of red dots on the screen, each marked with a number and a call sign. “We already have missile lock. The chaff won’t help them.”

Czali made a murmuring sound of agreement.

“What’s this?” Inzusu asked, pointing at a faint flicker on the screen.

Czali leaned forward. Inzusu rotated the display up and down, trying different angles and zooming in.

Whatever it was, it was dropping from the chaff cloud, just the faintest of ghostly echoes.

“Empty chaff canister?” Czali suggested.

“There’s another one,” Inzusu said. “Parachutes? Have the scumbugz pilots bailed out?”

Czali shook her head. “Parachutes give a much bigger return, and these are falling, not floating. Just debris, I think, but keep an eye on them.”

“We’re firing,” Inzusu said, forgetting the ghosts. He watched with excitement as two tiny dots detached from one of the interceptors and streaked toward the intruder.

* * *

Three seconds into the fall, Chisnall thrust the half-pipe away and starfished, the webbing between his arms and legs grabbing at the air and slowing his fall. Not much, but enough. His half-pipe, sleek and angular, continued to fall, disappearing below him.

He was through the chaff cloud now and encased in a dark blanket of night. Below him, Australia, the great

desert, stretched on forever. Only a faint thumbprint of city light far to the south interrupted the vast emptiness. Somewhere near him were the five phantoms that were his team members, black shapes in a black sky over a black land.

“Missile launch. Missile launch. Deploying flares, breaking high and right.” The pilot sounded impossibly calm in the sky above their heads.

Chisnall did not respond. There was nothing to say.

The enemy radar systems were highly sophisticated, much more advanced than their own. But the small half-pipe dropping away somewhere below him was the ultimate in stealth technology: all flat surfaces and plasma screening and a built-in radar detection system that would activate small fins on the casing and turn the half-pipe away from any radar sources. At night, it was all but invisible. Likewise, his stealth flight suit would automatically orient itself to present the lowest possible radar profile to the enemy.

The battle above their heads was intensifying. The type ones, the enemy craft, were faster and more agile than even the best human aircraft, and Angel Chariot had no way to evade them.

But hiding in the sky was a surprise for the Pukes.

* * *

“Multiple signals!” Inzusu screamed. A swarm of dots had suddenly appeared on his screen. He stabbed at the comms button. “Multiple signals, right behind you. Immediate evasive maneuvers!”

The pilots of the interceptors reacted immediately, breaking formation and streaking into different parts of the sky.

“Where in Azoh’s name did they come from?” Czali asked behind him, an accusatory tone in her voice.

“Out of nowhere.”

“They’re not aircraft; they’re missiles, hunter-seekers,” Czali said, examining the screen.

“Hunter-seekers? The scumbugz don’t have hunter-seekers!”

“They do now. Must have got hold of one of ours and reverse-engineered it.”

“Azoh!” Inzusu hit the comms button again. “Get out of there, now! Multiple hunter-seeker missiles right behind you. Repeat, multiple hunter-seekers right on your tails.”

Already, the tiny hunter-seekers were accelerating to attack speed and targeting the closest interceptor. He could imagine the shock on the pilots’ faces as they suddenly realized the danger behind them and broke off the attack on the scumbugz to fight for their own lives. Their planes had sophisticated antimissile systems, but the enemy missiles were hunting in packs.

Czali swore as two of the red dots blinked, then disappeared from the screen.

* * *

Two more flashes lit the sky above Chisnall, fading into the distance as he fell.

“Heaven, this is Angel Chariot. I have two confirmed hunter-seeker kills. How copy?”

“Clear copy, Angel Chariot. Confirming two kills, over.”

“I have three-way missile lock. I am breaking low and left, heading for home,” the pilot continued dispassionately, then his voice changed. *“Missile launch! Missile launch! I have multiple inbound missiles. Confirming zero six missiles, over.”*

Chisnall’s heart sank. The remaining enemy craft had closed within range. There were six air-to-air missiles swarming toward Angel Chariot.

The second wave of hunter-seekers hit their targets with three explosions and three blasts of light. That was the last of them, but it was too late.

The voice of the pilot was back in his ear in quick, unemotional sentences. *“Countermeasures deployed. Missiles are closing. Going for the moon, over.”*

The pilot had tipped his jet back and was now rocketing skyward, vertically, like a rocket lifting off, hoping to leave the missiles below him. But it was not going to work. It was never going to work.

“Missiles still closing. Missiles—”

There was another boom.

Chisnall cursed under his breath.

Angel Chariot was now fragments of metal and exploding fuel tanks, a fiery meteor falling back to Earth. But it had played its part. It had given the enemy radar something to focus on, a distraction, as the six angels fell toward the desert floor below.

* * *

There was silence as the last of the red dots blinked and faded from the screen. Inzusu gritted his teeth. They were not just dots. They were comrades. Bzadians. Killed by the scumbugz that infested this planet.

“We need to wipe this planet clean,” he said.

“Disinfect it,” Czali agreed grimly.

Inzusu turned his attention back to the ghostly echoes fading in and out on his radar screen. Still no sign of parachutes. The echoes were falling like stones. Just to be sure, he kept watching until the faint signals crashed to the sand of the New Bzadian desert.

* * *

Chisnall continued flaring his arms and legs. Already the others would be accelerating down away from him. It was standard operating procedure to stagger the landings, for safety reasons. He would be the last of his team to land so if things went wrong, he would have a few more seconds to figure out what to do, although in reality that probably just meant a few seconds longer to live.

He checked his timing, tucked his arms and legs into his body, and felt the acceleration as he dropped faster and faster. Already he was falling as fast as a human being could fall: terminal velocity.

“Angel Six down, all Oscar Kilo.” Price—the first to land—sounded winded, but that was normal for this type of jump.

“Angel Five down. Oscar Kilo, Oscar Kilo.” Wilton was also down and okay.

Chisnall’s eyes were glued to his HMDS, waiting for the signal from his own half-pipe. There it was: a yellow light and a pip, pip alert in his ear. His half-pipe

was due to impact in three, two, one . . . The pipping stopped. There was a moment's silence, followed by a screech inside his helmet and a red flashing light.

The half-pipe had failed to deploy.

He punched at the manual override. Another screech, and the red light was still blasting at him. His landing gear had failed.

Those panicky hands were back around his heart and nothing was going to persuade them to loosen their grip. Lieutenant Ryan Chisnall of the Allied Combined Operations Group, Reconnaissance Battalion, was now falling toward the barren Australian desert at terminal velocity.

Very terminal.