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9/11 at Barksdale AFB

George Mason's Discontent

Why He Refused to
Sign the Constitution

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open to receive
the oppressed
and persecuted
of all Nations
and Religions.'

—George Washington

OCTOBER 2006

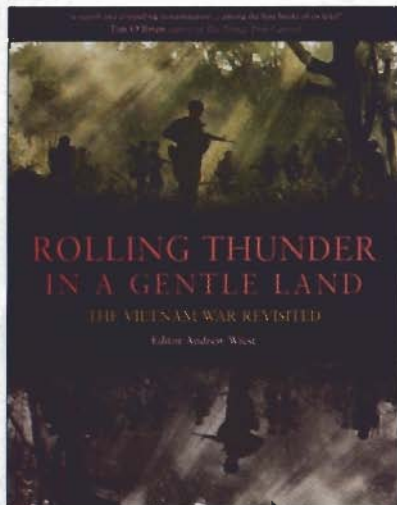


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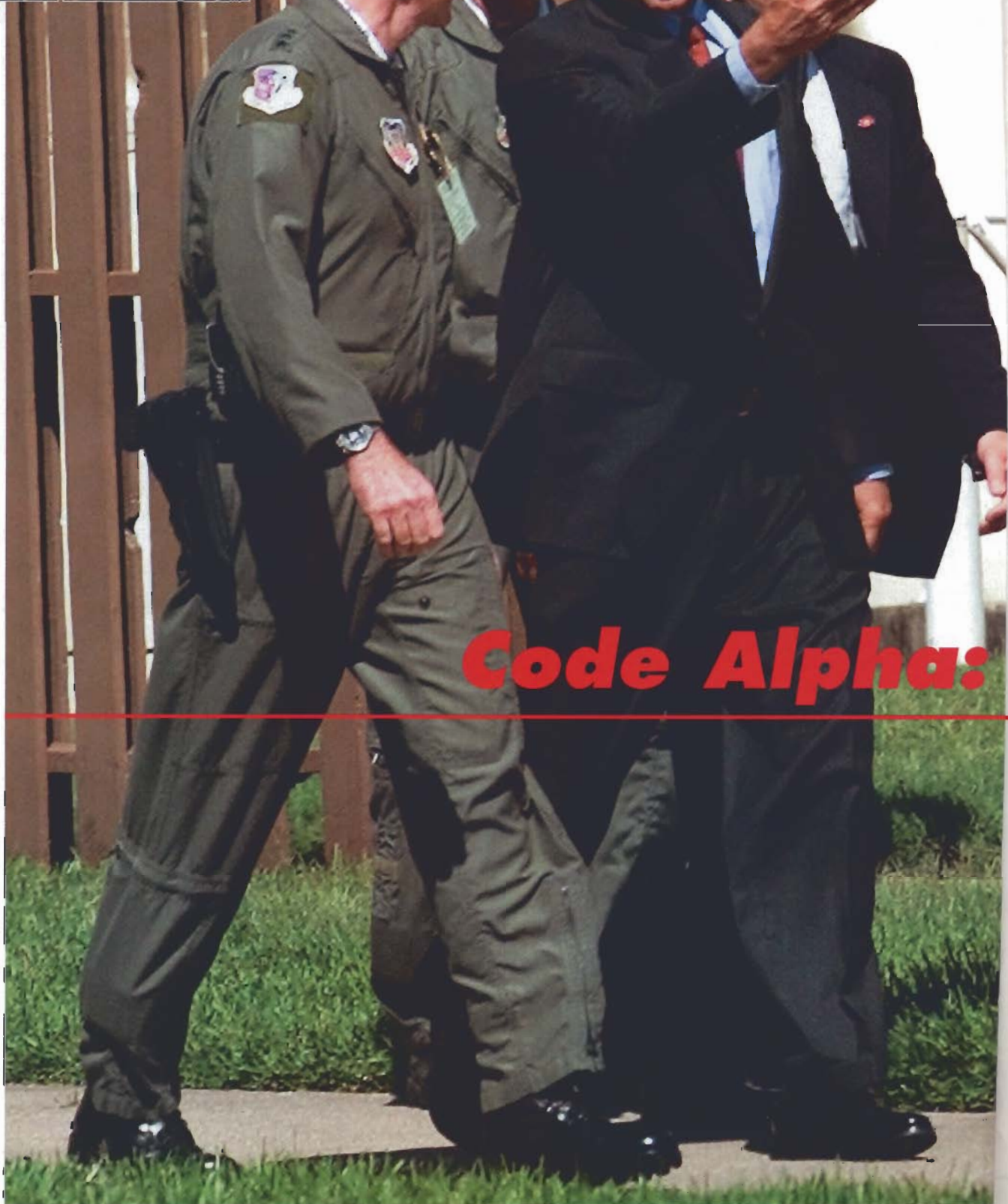


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V

Code Alpha:

Lieutenant General Thomas Keck unexpectedly found himself at the president's side on September 11, 2001, and now for the first time reveals his full inside account of those dramatic first hours when America was under terrorist attack. *By Gregory A. Freeman*

> AS IN MUCH OF THE COUNTRY, it was a beautiful, blue-sky day in Shreveport, Louisiana. Lieutenant General Thomas Keck sat inside a windowless command post at Barksdale Air Force Base monitoring its part in a worldwide but routine drill in which ground crews were practicing all the steps necessary to get a fleet of B-52 bombers fueled, armed and on their way.

Even though it was only a drill, the command center was tense, everyone proceeding as if the planes would soon take off on bombing runs, instead of just idling at the end of the runway. At precisely 8 a.m. CDT, an alarm sounded across the base and

say, 'Sir, this is an exercise input,' and then you give me the information."

"No, sir," the junior officer replied as he pointed to a television monitor showing breaking news on CNN.

When Keck saw the smoke pouring from New York's World

The President Is Coming!

the crews raced to their planes. As the commander of the Eighth Air Force intently observed the action on a video monitor, a younger officer stepped up to Keck and tapped him on the left shoulder.

"Sir, we just had an aircraft hit the World Trade Center."

"That's not the way you interject a situation into a training exercise!" Keck said, thinking the young man was adding a dimension to the drill. "When you have a scenario injection, you

Trade Center, his first reaction was the same as most people's: *How could such a terrible accident happen?* And then, just as millions of others watched in horror, he saw the second plane hit. Keck realized the United States was under attack.

"Lock it down!" he yelled to his staff, signaling that the drill was over and the base was now in a real-world crisis situation.

"At that point we went to Threat Condition Delta, our highest," Keck said later. "With the years and years of drilling and training, there wasn't a bit of confusion. People just knew what to do."

It was a fortunate twist of fate that the crisis unfolded on a morning when the Barksdale base was already on its best footing, ready for the worst. When Keck and his crews started out that morning, a major military crisis was imagined. As the imaginary crisis turned into reality, the general knew he was already several steps ahead: His base was secure, all hands were primed to respond to his orders, battle staffs were up and running, and his top officers were already at his side.

The command staff immediately ended the drill but left the

Lieutenant General Thomas Keck escorts President George W. Bush across Barksdale Air Force Base on September 11, 2001, about three hours after the terrorist attacks. Because of the heightened threat level that day, Keck wore his sidearm on base, something he ordinarily did not do. The president had been in Sarasota, Fla., when he learned of the tragedy unfolding in New York (insets).

fueled and armed planes where they were. For the crews in their bombers, ready to roar off at a moment's notice, all they knew was that something very serious was happening, and they were not being ordered to stand down.

"We decided to leave the crews in the aircraft because we didn't know what was going on, and if for some reason we had to evacuate the base, they'd already be there, ready to leave," Keck recalled.

Keck left the command center where he'd overseen the drill, and raced to the Eighth Air Force battle staff to get briefed on reports coming in from Air Force headquarters: *Two planes into the World Trade Center. The Pentagon has been attacked. Other planes are unaccounted for.* Though already at Threatcon Delta, Keck ordered the base perimeter locked down as well. The Delta order had sent crews scrambling to erect the concrete and metal barriers that prevent vehicles from charging the perimeter gates; Keck's additional order prompted them to enforce the highest form of checkpoint security. Armed sentries stopped everyone trying to enter or leave the base, scrutinizing credentials closely and barring entry to anyone with no explicit reason to be there. Even though many airmen on the base didn't know exactly what was happening, they realized it had to be big to call off a world-wide drill by the Eighth Air Force.

Keck monitored all the information flowing in from military commands across the country and was bombarded by phone messages—airmen reporting the latest intelligence from the Air Force, and status reports on base security. Among all the critical data flying at him, a seemingly innocuous bit of information grabbed his attention: A plane inbound to Barksdale had radioed ahead requesting 150,000 pounds of fuel, 70 box lunches, 25 pounds of bananas, 40 gallons of juice, bagels, muffins and coffee.

It was common for military planes to stop over at Barksdale for fuel and other supplies, and they occasionally carried distinguished visitors, or DVs, such as senators and congressmen. But 25 pounds of bananas? Keck paused. "I said to my people, 'Who the heck is this?' and they told me they didn't know, that the plane wouldn't identify itself except to say there were DVs on board and it was Code Alpha."

The plane's pilot then reported that the DVs on board were four congressmen. But Code Alpha meant top priority, and on a day like this no Air Force pilot would throw that term around casually. The supplies requested, including the 25 pounds of bananas, clearly meant this was a big plane and that the passengers might be on board for quite a while, or going to a remote destination. This wasn't just a plane carrying four congressmen, Keck surmised. It didn't take long for it to sink in that, in the middle of the most deadly attack ever on American soil, his base would soon become the temporary safe haven for the president of the United States.

Air Force One had landed at Barksdale in recent years, with all

the hoopla and hassle that accompanies any presidential visit. But on September 11, 2001, Keck had just 20 minutes to prep for the commander in chief. No time to paint the grass green and roll out the red carpet. This presidential visit to Barksdale would be all business—of the most crucial kind: *Would there be more attacks? Was Air Force One itself targeted by the terrorists?*

➤ AT 9:30 A.M. EDT, the president addressed the nation from Emma E. Booker Elementary School, in Sarasota Fla.; the official motorcade then rushed to the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport. Meanwhile, a third hijacked plane had crashed into the Pentagon in Washington. At 9:54, just over an hour after the first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade Center, *Air Force One* left Sarasota. Taxiing at high speed and then taking off at a much steeper angle than normal, the *Air Force One* crew's goal was to get the president airborne as fast as possible, where the sophisticated plane could keep him safe.

At about the time that *Air Force One* went wheels-up, the WTC's south tower collapsed. Roughly 10 minutes later, a fourth airliner went down in Somerset County, Pa. Originally the president's plane was bound for Washington, D.C., but given the continuous incoming reports of disaster, the possibility that Washington might still be under attack and that there might be a threat against *Air Force One*, it was soon diverted westward.

The plane flew a meandering course, the Air Force crew keeping its destination secret. Air traffic controllers passed the giant aircraft from one to another with a simple admonition that went unquestioned: "Don't ask where they're going. Just clear the air-space for them."

The president decided that he must speak again to the American people. He ordered the 747's crew to put the plane down somewhere, so he could go before the cameras and address a nation now gripped in crisis.

When Keck realized the president was coming, he ordered his staff to make all the arrangements for receiving a large inbound aircraft. Barksdale was used to servicing "transient" planes, those stopping over for fuel and supplies while on their way somewhere else. The only difference that morning was that the transient was *Air Force One*. Across the base, crews immediately began preparing the fuel delivery and other supplies for the big 747's arrival.

While Keck felt certain it was the presidential aircraft, he and his colleagues kept a lid on the plane's identity as much as possible. Many on the base knew only that a big plane was headed in with some DVs on board. The commander did, however, alert the base military police unit that the incoming plane would need a full-on security detail the moment it came to a stop on the runway. His staff reported that they had arranged for the base's conference room to house the inbound DVs while the plane was being serviced. Keck approved, as he knew it was the largest

➤ 'Don't ask where they're going. Just

workspace available for the president and his entourage. Ultimately, Keck knew his job was to ensure that the president would have the entire base at his disposal.

As soon as the 747, with its baby-blue paint and presidential seal, became visible on the horizon, everyone knew this was no mere congressional delegation on its way home. President George W. Bush was landing at Barksdale in the middle of an unprecedented national crisis.

The Barksdale crews were now all business, the usual fanfare replaced with plenty of anxiety. The plane touched down at 11:40 a.m. EDT (10:40 in Shreveport) and rolled to a stop as dozens of helmeted military police wearing flak jackets and carrying automatic weapons raced to surround the aircraft. The presidential party was hustled off the plane practically as soon as its wheels stopped. Keck, heading toward the tarmac, met the president and his aides just as they were entering the base conference room.

Skipping pleasantries, President Bush said to Keck, "I need to get to a secure phone."

"Come to my office," Keck said as he led him quickly away. "Tell me exactly where I am," the president said. "Sir, you're on the east side of the Red River, Bossier City, right across the river from Shreveport," said Keck.

With a slight grin, never breaking stride, Bush said, "I put you on the map today." "Yes, sir, you sure did," Keck replied.

➤ KECK'S OFFICE WITH THE secure phone was in a different building, so he walked the president outside, trailed by senior advisers Karl Rove and Andrew Card, several other aides, half a dozen Secret Service agents and the officer who is always within a stone's throw of the president with "the football," the case containing the top-secret plans and codes for a nuclear attack. Base security offered to put the president in a Humvee for the short ride, but Keck waved them off, and instead the group piled into a minivan used by the base's supervisor of flying. The van was simply more practical because it could hold more people than the Humvee. Loaded with radios and antennas, the decidedly un-macho minivan's call sign on the base was *Soccer Mom*. (It was later rechristened *Air Force One*.) *Soccer Mom* led the way, trailed by four other cars carrying the nearly 20 people accompanying President Bush.

There were, indeed, four congressmen traveling on *Air Force One* that day with the president. They and about 25 members of the media, also aboard, were ushered into a base administration building.

President Bush and his team went to work in Keck's office, using the secure phone to talk with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, adviser Karen Hughes and others in Washington. At the same time, Keck remained in

his office monitoring base security and keeping abreast of the latest information coming from Eighth Air Force Command, getting reports from his colonel in charge of intelligence.

"I gave orders that we were not to confirm that *Air Force One* had arrived," Keck said. "I looked up and saw it landing on CNN, but I still said we would not confirm it was at Barksdale.



AP PHOTO/THE WHITE HOUSE, ERIC DRAPER

President Bush looks out a window of *Air Force One* while en route to Barksdale. The president's plane was considered a potential target of the yet unidentified terrorist attackers.

At that point there was still a very serious concern that *Air Force One* might be targeted."

The Eighth Air Force commander remained at Bush's side the whole time the president was at Barksdale, both of them working intently. Keck has since stated that he was impressed by his commander in chief. "If you read some reports, they make it sound like he was a deer caught in the headlights. That's not what I saw that day. He was totally in command, very much in charge and not being led around by anybody."

At one point, the president's aides brought him a draft of the speech he was about to make to the American people. After editing the speech for a few minutes, making corrections and changes, President Bush said, "I use the word 'resolve' twice in this speech. Shall I say it twice?" No one else in the room spoke up, so Keck offered, "Mr. President, I think the American people want to hear that we have strong resolve and reiterating it is probably a good idea."

Bush replied "OK" and continued working on the speech. At that moment, Keck realized he had just contributed to what would be an historic statement by the president.

Soon after, sitting on the sofa in Keck's office amid a whirlwind of activity, President Bush watched for the first time a replay on CNN of the towers coming down. Visibly saddened and angered, he turned and spoke directly to Keck. "I don't know who this is, but we're going to find out and we're going to go after them, and we're not just going to slap them on the wrist.

clear the airspace for them.'



On the ground at Barksdale, *Air Force One* is protected by armed guards. "Freedom itself was attacked this morning," said President Bush in an address from the base (right). "The resolve of our great nation is being tested."

"We're going after them."

"Yes, Mr. President," Keck said, feeling assured by the president's determination. "We're with you."

Keck recalls the moment as intensely genuine. In a room abuzz with activity, the president of the United States was telling him, one on one, that these acts would not go unpunished. "It was not rehearsed. No one told him to say it. It just came out when he saw the tower come down. He was sitting right there on my sofa, and I knew he meant every word."

Though he was at the disposal of his commander in chief, Keck still had plenty to do that day to ensure that the air base was secure and that his crews were ready to respond to whatever the next crisis might be. As the minutes passed that morning, it seemed as if everyone in the country, including Keck and his officers, was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Of immediate concern was the big, attractive target sitting just

outside Keck's office. *Air Force One* was parked near some B-52s as crews refueled and loaded it with provisions for the rest of its journey. Keck was responsible for protecting the plane and the president from any attack while they were on his base, which was already a prime target because of its key fleet of B-52s. Attack on the base by a hijacked airliner was never among the anticipated scenarios, however, so the base's air security was light.

Other bases might be able to put up a perimeter of fighter jets fairly quickly, but Keck realized that he had only the lumbering bombers to launch, and they couldn't do much against a terrorist attack by air. Something had to be done to provide cover for the base and *Air Force One*, so he got on the phone with Brig. Gen. Jack Ihle, commander of the 917th Wing of the Air Force Reserve at the base, and asked for help.

"Jack, can you give any kind of defense?" he asked the brigadier general. "You got it!" was the immediate response.

> Keck was ready to give the order to fire

While the Air Force Reserve at the base had no sleek fighter planes, it did have A-10 Warthogs—twin-engine workhorses known as “tank killers” because they can deliver a fearsome amount of firepower against tanks and ground forces.

“An A-10 is not fast, so they’d have to hustle to catch up with an airliner at high speed, but its gun is deadly,” Keck later recalled. “That’s what we had, so we parked two of them at the end of the runway on cockpit alert, with crews ready to take off at the first sign of trouble. We felt better having them there, and then NORAD sent over a couple of F-16s before long.”

Even though an order had gone out at 9:42 a.m. EDT, calling for a halt to all air traffic, some commercial and private planes slow to observe the order were still in the air, along with numerous military craft. The whole time the president was on the base, Keck and the White House aides were getting reports of unidentified aircraft headed toward Barksdale.

Under Threatcon Delta, and what Keck’s staff already knew of the day’s shocking events, there was a low threshold for declaring any incoming plane or object a threat. The Eighth Air Force



commander made sure his staff kept him closely apprised of each questionable target.

There were no precise rules of engagement established that morning, so Keck knew that he and the A-10 pilots would have to rely on their own best judgment if the moment came. If necessary, the commander was ready to give the order to fire on any plane that threatened the base.

“The rules of engagement would probably have been common sense if a high-speed airliner was coming in, not squawking and not talking to anybody,” he said. “You’d have to use common sense, and that morning it wasn’t far-fetched to think that we’d have to respond with force.”

When President Bush was finished editing his speech, Keck escorted him to the conference room where reporters who had been traveling on *Air Force One* were assembled. A horde of local reporters who had gathered at the Barksdale gate was denied access for security reasons. Keck watched as President Bush addressed the nation, then walked with him back to the office to see the tape played on television within minutes. As they were watching the address, Bush turned to Keck and said, “You know, this country is going to go from shock to grieving to rage.” He paused and then added: “Some people will even skip the grieving part. They’re going to go straight to rage.”

“Yes, sir, we can identify with that,” Keck replied, knowing he was speaking for many men and women under his command.

The president continued working the phones in Keck’s office, talking with New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and New York Governor George Pataki. Keck heard Bush offering reassurance and whatever practical support the federal government could provide. He and his team also kept President Bush and his aides informed about the intelligence coming in via Air Force channels regarding the four hijacked airplanes and the events of that morning.

➤ AFTER NEARLY TWO HOURS at Barksdale, the president and his entourage prepared to reboard *Air Force One*. As Keck stepped out into the sun, he heard the dull roar of F-16 fighter jets overhead and felt relief. NORAD’s planes were up there defending the base and the president. Keck joined Bush in *Soccer Mom* for the ride back to the waiting 747. The four congressmen and most of the reporters who had arrived with the president were left behind at Barksdale.

As the minivan and several other cars drove across the base, they passed by a row of B-52 bombers, sitting where they had been left that morning during the drill. Their crews—who had heard only the most basic reports about the attacks on New York and the Pentagon—were still aboard and at the ready, watching the president arrive unexpectedly and now depart. Crossing the tarmac, President Bush watched the huge bombers and saw each of the crews holding their hands out the cockpit windows, giving him a thumbs up.

Military police saluted and other Air Force crews cheered as the president made his way to *Air Force One*. Keck, bidding farewell to Bush at the foot of the stairs, had one more thing to say: “Mr. President, you saw those thumbs up, didn’t you? You know what that means, don’t you?” “I sure do,” the president replied.

“These troops are trained, they’re ready and they’ll do whatever you want them to,” Keck said. Bush looked the commander squarely in the eyes and said, “I know.” Then the two exchanged salutes and the president bounded up the steps.

Air Force One taxied quickly to the runway, wasting no time getting into the air. As the big plane lifted off, two F-16s pulled alongside as escorts. No one revealed the plane’s destination, but Keck had a good idea. He knew the most sensible place would be Offutt Air Force Base just south of Omaha in southeastern Nebraska, an ultra-secure location and home of the United States Strategic Command. He had been 55th Wing commander at the base in the early 1990s. Keck was good friends with the StratCom commander at Offutt, Admiral Richard W. Mies, so he went to the secure phone in his office and gave him a call.

“Rich, you’ve got an aircraft inbound,” was all he said. His friend understood. □

on any plane that threatened the base.