

FORCE THREE RISES

An Amos Mead Adventure Novel
by

Tom Gauthier

CHAPTER ONE

Associated Press Dispatch, Jan 1950—Truman's Secretary of State Dean Acheson confirms Korea and Taiwan are outside American Far East security cordon.

Jilin Province, Manchuria—April 1950

The bright crystalline light of the full moon failed to penetrate the deeper woods as Harmon Wetmore groped his way through the trees, oak branches clawing at his flight suit, moving away from the direction of the noise of the excited Chinese. A deadfall grabbed his foot and sent him headlong into the tangle of dense undergrowth, sending a sharp pain through his lower back. Briefly he thought of how bad that injury might be, but the sense of panic he was squelching overrode it. In seeming slow motion he scrambled back to a low crouching run, suddenly breaking into the silvery light, stepping into a small rushing stream.

He stopped, dropped to a knee and peered up and down the streambed's opening to the sky. Leaning back into the underbrush, he listened, letting his breathing slow. Nothing. No sound but the usual night rustles and calls of the woods—the sharp chic-chic of reed-warblers and the scurry of rodents sounding far too loud to his adrenaline pumped ears. He concentrated hard to slow his breathing, and gather his thoughts ...

Only moments before Harmon Wetmore was flying in a CIA aircraft from a base in Sokcho, South Korea. This veteran of combat in WWII—and earlier—showed more wear than his mid-forties age should have. His 5' 9" frame carried a stout, muscular body scarred from combat. His hair grey and brush-cut, his eyes clear and steely blue-grey, Wetmore was a formidable adversary. He maintained his condition as "battle ready"—he liked to say.

But now he is in a place he should not have been, flying a mission he should not be on, pushing the envelope of his job description to unthinkable places. But he had a very personal reason for being here.

A reason connected to his past—and now to his future.

The weather calm, the skies cobalt blue and the snow-speckled fall foliage on the hillsides grows distant as the plane climbs toward the north. Harmon Wetmore takes note of these details as a mental tool to stave off succumbing to complete exhaustion.

The flight from Washington, D.C. to Seoul, Korea, and on to the tiny airstrip at Sokcho, nearly twenty hours long, had Wetmore badly in need of a change of clothes—and some real sleep.

Instead he found himself volunteering to replace an injured crewman on the very mission he had come to observe. With no time to train a replacement, Wetmore pulled rank on the station chief and got on board the mission aircraft—an action that he increasingly is coming to regret.

Harmon Wetmore, Deputy Director for Operations, CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) had been in this part of the world before. As a "China Sailor" he fought alongside the Chinese Nationalist forces against the Japanese before they attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. Initially recruited by U.S. Naval Intelligence, he moved on to serve with the OSS (Office of Strategic Services—predecessor to the CIA).

But both of these assignments were cover for an ongoing and highly secret mission known to only a very few people.

Wetmore spoke two Chinese dialects fluently and as the Second World War progressed he was once more sent to Southeast Asia as an OSS agent along with Major Amos Mead, USMC, on a special assignment for the president of the United States. This assignment nearly claimed his life and ended his active military career in a hospital. Though he'd grown to respect the Chinese, from his hospital bed he swore he'd stay away from China until *they learn to quit making war among themselves*.

The airplane carrying him to Manchuria had seen better days. His gaze went up to the monorail that extended beyond the open rear doors of the C-119 "Flying Boxcar." The doors, called *clamshells*, which usually enclosed the rear of the cargo bay, had been removed and a cable run from a winch bolted to the aft deck to a pulley on the end of the overhead monorail, ending with a large weighted hook. The other CIA aircraft crewman was trained to use this new aerial pick-up system and had provided Wetmore with a quick and all too brief lesson.

Wetmore sat on a canvas troop seat that ran the length of the cargo area, his back to the left side of the plane, near the open edge, securely buckled into a five-point harness. The other crewman, a former U.S. Air Force loadmaster, showed total ease in this environment as he walked to the edge of the open space, running his arm around the loading jack for support, and watched the world move by below them. Both men wore the requisite parachutes. Wetmore shouted over the cacophony of engines, slipstream, and rattling rivets, "Have we crossed into the north yet?"

"Coming up on it," the crewman responded. "Then another hour until we make it into Manchuria."

Wetmore just nodded and turned his gaze back out to the passing scene of the rugged Manchurian mountains, his eyes growing heavy, his gray bristled chin finally nodding onto his chest, succumbing to his body's demand for sleep.

This all began when Harmon Wetmore made the hurried trip to Korea when word came that a CIA team of five ethnic Chinese that parachuted into the Jilin region of Manchuria in July had made contact with a dissident general from the Red Chinese PLA (Peoples' Liberation Army). The team requested air exfiltration—first for the courier sent in to verify the contact and who possessed the documents to prove the general's identification and operational documents, and then the general himself. An earlier message, secretly encoded and routed to him through Naval Intelligence sources, had triggered his eagerness to be where he was.

The CIA trained on the unique method of picking up agents, but this mission is the first attempt at a real operation. The technique involves flying the aircraft in low and slow while reeling out the cable rigged in back and hooking a line elevated between two poles on the ground. The line between the poles is connected to a harness worn by the OSS agent. Once the picked-up subject is airborne, the line is winched into the aircraft.

For this flight the two pilots had received special training from Civil Air Transport Company (CAT)—the CIA's not so secret air operation. The two winch operators also trained with the crew for their part of the operation. But with the last minute injury to one of them, Wetmore insisted on filling the slot—over the objection of the station chief.

Now the C-119 transport plane lumbered along on its two Pratt & Whitney R-4360 engines at a cruise speed of two-hundred miles per hour, making the flight just over three hours. The plane lurched and Wetmore's head snapped up with a start, the thick backlit grey mist swirling into the cargo compartment further disorienting his already sleep-foggy mind. The other crewman laughed.

“We just flew into some cumulous ... a little bumpy for a while. But I’m glad you’re back with me, sir. Let’s run through this rig’s operations once more—won’t be that long ‘til we go live.”

Wetmore popped the central release of his five-point seat belt with the heel of his hand and stood unsteadily, stretching his back. Before he moved toward the crewman and the retrieval rig in the open door he tightened the straps on his parachute harness, causing him to shuffle-walk with a stoop. He knew the alternative of leaving it loose, and what would be the painful consequence if he had to jump out. The plane lurched again then emerged from the cloud into the clear evening sky. As Wetmore watched the rising, nearly full moon, he knew that visibility for the air snatch would be good.

They ran through the procedure one more time then sat down to await the pilot’s signal. The crewman opened a survival kit that had been shoved under the troop seat, withdrawing a .32 caliber pistol and noting that it was not loaded. He mouthed toward Wetmore, “No ammunition.”

Wetmore smiled, patted his shoulder holster containing his trusty 1911 Colt .45 and mouthed back, “Loaded.”

They flew on into the gathering night, the passing landscape taking on ethereal qualities in the moonlight. The crewman held a hand to his headset, listening to the pilot’s verbal alert that the target was close. He reached out and tapped Wetmore on the knee, shouting over the din of engines and wind, “Show time, sir!”

Moving to the aft edge of the open fuselage the two men moved a parachute-rigged bundle of supplies and equipment needed for the aerial pickup into position for drop. The crewman clipped the static cord that would open the chute to a D-ring near the edge. Keeping a good grasp on the loading jacks for support they peered down at the silvery landscape. As they reached the designated area the pilot called the crewman on the intercom, “Recognition signal from the ground checks out ... drop the load.” The crewman put a shoulder to the bundle and pushed it over the edge. The parachute deployed, taking on a ghostly appearance as it drifted toward the small group of men on the ground that were now in view of Wetmore and the crewman.

Something caught Wetmore’s eye—the strange, seemingly out of place mounds of earth on each side of the drop zone. He didn’t know why they bothered him, but his years of surviving on instinct had the hair on his neck raised. He strained to see them as they faded into the gloom. *What’s wrong with me? Too tired? But this doesn’t feel right.*

The pilot flew the aircraft away from the area to allow the ground team time to set up the poles and the cross line for the “snatch.” Orbiting the location the aircraft came back over about thirty minutes later and received a *ready* signal. The pilot dropped down and flew a dry run over the pickup point, serving as a way to both orient the flight crew and alert the man being exfiltrated that the next pass would be for him. As they passed a couple of hundred feet above the target, Wetmore saw five people on the moonlit landscape below, one of them in the pickup harness, facing the path of the aircraft. The man raised a hand and waved at Wetmore and the crewman.

This time Wetmore concentrated on the mounds. They were not right, not natural—but why he couldn’t figure out. His mouth was dry, his lips sticking together. He continued to peer at them as they climbed into another orbit.

On the final pass the C-119 came in low at tree-top level for the pickup, flying just over its stall speed. Wetmore felt the rush of adrenalin clearing his head as he braced for the unfamiliar action. Seldom—maybe never—did he feel *not in complete command* of a situation. This time *he* was the rookie. As he peered down, the scene began to change before his eyes. The world seemed to go into slow motion as he finally realized what was about to happen.

Suddenly, the mounds erupted. White tarps camouflaging two antiaircraft guns on the snow-flecked terrain flew off. Blinding gunfire flashed into the night, arcing death toward him. Straddling the plane's flight path, they raked a murderous crossfire into the defenseless aircraft. A crowd of men emerged from the woods, firing AK-47s at the lumbering plane.

Wetmore went to his knees, trying to be as small as possible as bullets stitched the forward cargo space, splinters from the plywood deck flying with the errant red hot lead up through the plane's overhead. The holes traced their way forward to flight deck, tracers igniting the fuel that leaked from the wing. The nose of the sinking aircraft came up as the pilot tried to miss the trees ahead—and an imminent crash.

The plane's speed fell below stalling and it mushed into a grinding controlled crash in the clearing beyond the trees, the twin booms of the C-119 snapping off and dropping the tail to the ground.

Wetmore and the crewman were secured to the plane with safety lines to keep them from falling out during the winching operation. As the plane impacted the ground in a grinding cacophony of screeching metal and blinding dirt and debris they both slid along the wooden floor to the end of the tethers, partially cushioned by their heavy winter flight suits.

The crewman's tether broke sending him on into the bulkhead aft of the nose wheel-well and knocking him out. Wetmore, groggy from the impact but with adrenalin coursing through his body, released his tether and got to the crewman just as he woke. With the same thought, they both rushed to the ladder going up to the flight deck, yelling for the flight crew. The flight deck above them burned fiercely and the smell of burning flesh reeking through the hellish heat forcing the pair back. The Chinese gunfire had targeted the flight deck and Wetmore was sure the crew had died in their seats.

Clearing his head with the need to survive, he realized they had to get out quickly before the Chinese covered the ground between the ambush site and where they had hit the ground beyond the trees. Wetmore pointed at the flames and yelled, "We can't help them!"

He grabbed the arm of the crewman who was backing away from the horror in a trancelike state, yelling again, "Come on! We need to get clear before those bastards get here."

Both men jumped the few feet out the open rear cargo bay to the ground and stumbled to their feet, turning to head toward the trees to the left of their downed plane. Wetmore ducked under the wrecked tail boom, scraping his head and feeling a sharp pang in his lower back. They heard the Chinese soldiers whooping and hollering, randomly firing wild rounds from their AK-47's as they came crashing through the woods along the gouged earth end-of-flight path of the wrecked plane.

Wetmore hit the edge of the woods and kept his pace as quickly as he could to move deeper into the shadows as he fended off branches with his forearms, adrenaline drowning out any pain for the moment.

Behind him, the other crewman turned his head at the sound of their pursuers and missed ducking under the tail boom, taking a nasty crack on the head and dropping to the ground. Reflexively he bounded to his feet, but as he reached the tree-line a Chinese AK-47 opened up with its distinctive report. Dirt flew all around him and tree branches were clipped off in front of the American. He slid to a stop, raised his hands, and awaited the inevitable.

Far above the crash scene, watching the unfolding action from a well camouflaged observation point dug into a nearby hill, a man noted the location of the Americans through his binoculars.

His heart pounding from the exertion more than fear, Wetmore noted the smell of rotting wet leaves at the stream's edge—pungent, but not unpleasant. His thoughts raced as he assessed his situation. By now he knew that his crewmate was not behind him. Between panting breaths he

struggles to clear his thoughts. *What was his name? John? Or was that the alias?* He could only hope that John's fate was capture, and not worse. *Damnation, I swear these people are always fighting about something. Said I'd never come back ... and here I frigging am again. Okay ... high ground—*He peered across the gurgling water, just making out the terrain rising beyond—*so here we go.* Gingerly picking his way across the stream and up the bank Wetmore moved as quietly as he could, seeking higher ground. The slope was not too steep, but rocky with sparse underbrush that he used as handholds for the climb. Snow clung to the shadow edge of rocks and brush. About a hundred yards up the slope it leveled out onto a narrow bench. Wetmore rolled onto it, swung himself around on his belly and looked over the edge to his back-trail for any pursuit. Apparently the Communist Chinese soldiers were satisfied that their one captive was all there was, as he saw no one seeking him.

Lying there in the night-cooling earth Wetmore let the adrenalin drain out of his aching body, his breathing slowing, the realization of his utter exhaustion coming fully aware. Still prone he crossed his arms under his face and let his eyes close, his body relax.

In an instant he tensed ... from ... what ... and just as he became aware of a slight sound nearby he felt the cold, hard barrel of a gun rest against his neck. He felt himself go numb at the realization of what was about to happen. A rough whisper delivered through clenched teeth accompanied the cold shock of the deadly gun barrel, “Добрый вечер, господин американский. Добро пожаловать в Манчжурию (Good evening, American. Welcome to Manchuria).”

As he felt his own 1911 Colt .45 being slipped from its shoulder holster, Harmon Wetmore knew that he'd reached the end of any ability to resist. In a haze of mixed feelings, it took him a moment to register the words.

The words he heard were *Russian*.

