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Cold War

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Prologue

That mittens outwork gloves was a lesson learned, growing up in Montana—sure knowledge more aptly confirmed when an Air Force assignment landed me at a radar site in Alaska, three degrees north of the Arctic Circle. There we were issued mittens top-covered with animal hair—caribou, I believe. That way you could swipe at your streaming nose in frigid cold to be able, in seconds, to remove the collected frozen matter by striking the fur with your other paw. Not encountering scientific explanations as to why mittens perform in their superior way, I have had to fall back on my dead father's stated notion that mittens worked to warm fingers in the way that Eskimos sleep together naked beneath seal hides. "And by the way," he went on, "should you visit, the husband will invite you to sleep with his undressed wife to keep you warm in the igloo." It was a friendly custom Eskimos maintained, he claimed. As a kid, it didn't occur to me to ask where he had received this cold weather info. As an adult in Alaska, though, it became expressly clear that we are creatures of restricted temperature and that flesh of the human sort is in particular susceptible, dependent upon exposure, to virtually any mark below 32°F.

It's been widely reported that the "Russian Winter" was primary in bullying Napoleon's *Grand Armée* retreat from Moscow in 1812. Also reported is that a French

surgeon erroneously instructed the frostbitten to rub snow on their affected parts, a procedure that proved nearly as damaging as direct heat from fire.

Modern medicine calls for painkillers to dull the rewarming of frostbitten flesh in a whirlpool bath of 104-107°F, hydration with warm fluids, a high-protein diet, and a course of antibiotics. Besides rubbing frostbite with snow (a slight improvement over the scorching of frozen flesh over roaring campfires), Napoleon's troops worsened their damaged feet and hands, ears, noses, and genitals by thawing extremities, only to have them refreeze.

The radar base camp where I was stationed in central Alaska sat beside the Indian River that connected to the Koyukuk, a primary northern tributary to the mighty Yukon. There was an Indian fishing village, where the Koyukuk met the Yukon. During the winter, when the Indian River froze, the fishermen would drive their snow machines up the frozen river to play cards and drink liquor. They'd drink up then head back to their village, swerving and whooping in the refrigerated dark. There was an older Indian, who when he arrived, came by way of dogs and sled. He'd drink, then go outside to sleep with his animals. It could be 40 or 50 below and he'd trudge out. You'd hear the dogs yipping in the mornings—at 4 or 5 o'clock—as he tossed them frozen fish. Once when he'd mushed up for a night, I asked, "Why don't you drive a snowmobile?" He looked at me. Then: "If your snowmobile dies, what are you going to do—eat the engine?"

In point of fact, Napoleon's army suffered as much damage from the heat of the Russian summer as from the rigors of the winter. Tens of thousands of cavalry and artillery horses died before Napoleon ever reached Moscow; tens of thousands of men dropped out of the ranks through sickness and heat exhaustion before the Battle of Borodino was fought. The hot weather of July and August was as much to blame for Napoleon's defeat as the frosts of November and December. Indeed, the conditions pertaining at the outset of the retreat were far more favorable than might have been hoped for. The first severe frosts were encountered only on November 12, and these gave way to an unseasonable thaw that proved even more embarrassing to the French as they approached the crucial Berezina crossing, producing muddy roads, impassable countryside and swollen waterways instead of firm going and frozen rivers. . . . Indeed, the real effects of winter were experienced only after December 4, when the temperature plunged many degrees below zero. Well before that date, the Grande Armée *had been reduced to a shadow of its former self. However, it*

is true that the cold served to increase the scale of the disaster during the final state of the retreat when the strategic outcome had already been long decided.
—David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*

Of the 655,000 soldiers who marched toward Russia in 1812, at least 570,000 were lost to the battlefield or to illness and exposure. Napoleon was unable to mount such an army again. The falsehood that the French had been defeated by the "Russian Winter" was initiated by the Emperor himself. "My army has had some losses," he modestly admitted to the Senate on December 20, "but this was due to the premature rigors of the season." Napoleon had abandoned his troops in the field on December 5 to return to Paris. He accomplished that trip in a horse-drawn coach.
—see Chandler, Ibid.

As that young officer at the radar site in Alaska, I refused to exchange an unopened bottle of Jim Beam with the old Indian for a pair of seal mukluks. How now not to feel that I should have taken the offer, Federal regs aside?

One Christmas Eve at the radar site, one of our senior NCOs, drunk and stripped bare, armed himself with a rifle and the warning that any officer to follow to retrieve him would be shot dead for the effort. Then out Travis went into the Alaskan night. It was one or two in the morning, and wind chills were flirting with 60 below. In the North, Jack Frost hardly nips at you: your toes, your nose. In the North, real cold will eat you whole. It will, as my father would say, *outmuscle* you, basing this on his father's—my grandfather's—stories of the Yukon. We waited until "Doc," our medic, said that we really couldn't wait much longer. We found Travis headfirst in a drift. He had dropped the rifle. "Doc" kept him hydrated, blanketed, and sedated until a C-130 could press in through the weather. Travis was medically discharged and returned, as we understood it, to his hometown: Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Travis had run the little crafts center at the radar site where most of us, over the darkened winter, created kiln-finished ceramic chess sets, wallets, and hand-tooled belts. Travis claimed that his best childhood pal had been none other than Glen Campbell, the future country and western star—the "Rhinestone Cowboy." I have always hoped this was true. What I knew was that "Tennessee" Travis hated what he called *DEESE DEPLORABLE VINTERS*! Why he would announce this in what amounted to a Transylvanian or Jewish accent, nobody had a clue.

At times the sky cleared completely, and sun on the snow was blinding. As evening fell, the shadows became steel blue, yet the sun on the horizon was a tomato red. The condition of almost all soldiers, not just the wounded, was terrible. They limped on frost-bitten feet, their lips were cracked right open from frost, their faces had a waxen quality, as if their lives were already slipping away. Exhausted men slumped to the snow and never rose again. Those in need of more clothes stripped corpses of clothing as soon as they could after the moment of death. Once a body froze, it became impossible to undress.

—Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege, 1942-1943*

Soviet divisions were not far behind. 'It is severely cold,' Grossman noted as he accompanied the advancing troops. 'Snow and the freezing air ice up your nostrils. Your teeth ache. There are frozen Germans, their bodies undamaged, along the road we follow. It wasn't us who killed them. The cold did. They have bad boots and bad coats. Their tunics are thin and look like paper. . . . There are footprints all over the snow. They tell us how the Germans withdrew from the villages along the roads, and from the roads into the ravines, throwing their arms away.' Erich Weinart, with another unit, observed crows circling, then landing, to peck out the eyes of corpses.

—Ibid.

The death rate in the so-called hospitals was terrifying. The tunnel system in the Tsaritsa gorge, redesignated 'Prisoner of War Hospital No. 1', remained the largest and most horrific, only because there were not buildings left offering any protection against the cold. The walls ran with water, the air was little more than a foul, sickly recycling of human breath, with so little oxygen left that the few primitive oil lamps, fashioned from tin, flickered and died constantly, leaving the tunnels dark. Each gallery was not much wider than casualties lying side by side on the damp beaten earth of the tunnel floor, so it was difficult, in the gloom, not to step or trip on feet suffering from frostbite, provoking a hoarse shriek of pain. Many of the frostbite victims died of gangrene, because the surgeons could not cope. Whether they would have survived amputation in their weakened state and without anesthetic is another matter.

—Ibid.

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. Toohulhulsote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men is dead.

It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food. No one knows

where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead.

Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.

—Surrender Speech by Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce

The freezing hell of Stalingrad will claim more than 700,000 lives—Germans and Russians, soldiers and civilians—during the winter of 1942. Among the trapped Germans there is evidence of cannibalism. As the "Noose of Steel" tightens, some Russian soldiers admit to pity as they themselves were well dressed against the cold and well fed. Of the 300,000 German troops in the noose, two-thirds will die. One million Russians had flanked the German 6th Army just as winter arrived with the vengeance of -20 degree temperatures. Of the 33,000 Germans to survive for surrender and work camps, one-third died while traversing the Soviet Union in unheated train cars, in which they were fed but every three days. The survivors worked in remote factories and mines (coal and uranium) where temperatures often dipped to -75°F. Only 6,000 German soldiers ever make it back to Germany. In other words, in Stalingrad, 50 grams of bread a day, coupled with minus 50°F weather, claims more victims than enemy action. There wasn't enough clothing, fire, dead horses, dogs, or cats to keep them alive.

—see Beevor, Ibid.

The Carpathian campaign of 1915, frequently dubbed the "Stalingrad of the First World War," pitted the million-man armies of Austria-Hungary and Russia in fierce winter combat that resulted in hundreds of thousands of soldiers succumbing to frostbite and what came to be known as the "White Death."

For Second Army troops, noncombat casualties continued to outnumber battlefield losses. Indicative of this, one unit lost 150 men to enemy fire, 200 to frostbite. Troops were forced to use snow for cover and protection, which increased the likelihood of frostbite. The 27th Infantry Division found itself hampered by up to two meters of snow, while the strength of the XIX Corps dissipated drastically. With no relief in sight, troops became even more demoralized. Suicide remained a viable solution for some troops.

—Graydon A. Tunstall, *Blood on the Snow: The Carpathian Winter War of 1915*

Another use of the term "White Death" was the nickname the Red Army accorded to a Finnish sniper who recorded 505 confirmed Russian kills. In temperatures reaching -40°F, camouflaged in white, using an ordinary rifle without telescopic sights,

Simo Häyhä carried out his missions. In the spring of 1940, during combat, he was shot in the face by a Russian soldier. The exploding bullet crushed his jaw and blew away his left cheek. He survived and lived until 2002. At war's end he was promoted from corporal to second lieutenant. One of his tricks, he said, was to keep snow in his mouth so that the vapor of his breath would not reveal his position.

—see Allen F. Chew. *White Death: The Epic of the Soviet-Finnish Winter War*

On 23 January we rushed forward in the icy hell of the Carpathian battlefield. We stormed the Uzsok, Verecke and Wyszkov Passes, but on the northern slope of the mountains, the troops encountered a blizzard. . . . Everyday hundreds froze to death. The wounded that were unable to drag themselves forward were left to die. Entire ranks were reduced to tears in the face of the terrible agony.

Each night the 21st Infantry Regiment dug in until the last man was found frozen to death at daybreak. Pack animals could not advance through the deep snow. The men had to carry their own supplies on foot. The soldiers went without food for days. At -25°C, food rations froze solid. For seven days straight, the 43rd Infantry Division battled overpowering Russian troops with no warm food to sustain them. For a full thirty days, not one single man had any shelter.

—Colonel Georg Veith, see Tunstall

Three million Finns holding out against a nation of 171 million? In the famous battle of "Killer Hill," 32 Finns battled 4,000 Soviet soldiers. Simo Häyhä accomplished his 505 kills in 100 days, before he was shot himself. Just for the record, when he was shot in the face, Häyhä managed to retrieve his rifle and shoot the Russian who had shot him.

—Chew, Ibid.

An Obergefreiter *will be court-martialled because he is supposed to have deliberately allowed both his feet to get frozen. Before they brought him to the medics he told us that following a Russian attack he had saved himself by playing dead. In order to avoid being detected by the enemy, he had spent the entire night in a snowdrift. When another combat unit freed him the next morning during a counter-attack, his feet were two blocks of ice.*

—Gunter K. Koschorrek, *Blood Red Snow: The Memoirs of a German Soldier on the Eastern Front*

Today's Finnish Army keeps 700,000 pairs of skis ready to wax for the precise snow conditions that might accompany an invasion. Beginning at age twenty, every Finnish

male must serve two years in the army. Every soldier and every officer learns to ski and fight at the same time.

The Finns remain on the cutting edge of military ski technology. They have developed relatively long, wide, heavy skis, ranging from 210 to 250 cm, and 80 to 100 mm in width. Wider than most alpine skis, these tools of war have no side-cut. This seeming awkward design keeps soldiers always on top of the snow, so they never have to break trail through deep powder while approaching or fleeing an enemy.

The Finns's armored personnel carriers feature two cabs setting on four separate tracks, with a rotating power linkage between. The two halves twist and turn independently through the snow, while the vehicle's narrowness lets it squeeze between trees. Each machine can carry twenty-four men and tow another twenty-four on skis.

—Tom Wolf, *Ice Crusaders: A Memoir of Cold War and Cold Sport*

On January 28, the Russians divided the city into three sectors: the Eleventh Corps was isolated around the tractor plant; the Eight and Fifty-first Corps around an engineering school west of Mamaev Hill; the remainders of the Fourteenth and Fourth Corps were in the downtown area around the Univermag.

At the Schnellhefter *Block, across from the tractor plant, Dr. Ottmar Kohler had run out of morphine. Wallowing in filth and blood, he operated under flickering lights and in incredible cold. Outside the building, lines of soldiers crowded the entrance, looking for a place to sleep. An officer went to the door and begged them to go away because there was no room, but they said they would wait until morning.*

At sunrise, the visitors were still there, huddled together against the below-zero temperature. During the night they had all died from exposure.

—William Craig, *Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad*

April 2012. An avalanche that buried more than 120 Pakistani soldiers in a Himalayan region close to India has spotlighted what critics refer to as one of the world's most pointless military deployments: two poverty-wracked nations engaged in a costly standoff over an uninhabitable patch of mountain and ice. Since the massive wall of snow engulfed a Pakistani military complex close to the Siachen Glacier, rescue teams have been unable to dig up any of the buried troops. The conflict over Siachen began in 1984 when India occupied the heights of the 49-mile long glacier, fearing Pakistan wanted to claim the territory. Islamabad also deployed its troops. A 2003 cease-fire largely ended skirmishes on the glacier, where troops have been deployed as high as 20,000 feet, but both armies have remained encamped. Temperatures as low as minus 76°F, vicious winds and altitude sickness (the region is just east of the world's

second-highest peak, K-2) have killed far more than the artillery fire. The avalanche plowed into the Pakistani headquarters at the entrance to the glacier, and buried the complex under more than 70 feet of snow. Publicly, the army has held out hope of survivors.

—see <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/04/10/us-military-experts-to-assist-pakistan-avalanche-rescue-efforts/?test=latestnews#ixzz1rfoQQneq>

It was freezing cold, with a fog that caught your breath. Two large searchlights were crisscrossing over the compound from the watchtowers at the far corners. The lights on the perimeter and the lights inside the camp were on full force. There were so many of them that they blotted out the stars.

With their felt boots crunching on the snow, prisoners were rushing past on their business—to the latrines, to the supply rooms, to the package room, or to the kitchen to get their groats cooked. Their shoulders were hunched and their coats buttoned up, and they all felt cold, not so much because of the freezing weather as because they knew they'd have to be out in it all day. . . . They went past the high wooden fence around the punishment block (the stone prison inside the camp), past the barbed-wire fence that guarded the bakery from the prisoners, past the corner of the HQ where a length of frost-covered rail was fastened to the post with heavy wire, and past another post where—in a sheltered spot to keep the readings from being too low—the thermometer hung, caked over with ice. Shukhov gave a hopeful sidelong glance at the milk-white tube. If it went down to forty-two below zero they weren't supposed to be marched out to work.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

After all, the work norm *was senior in rank to the length of the workday, and when the brigade didn't fill the norm, the only thing that was changed at the end of the shift was the convoy, and the work sloggers were left in the woods by the light of searchlights until midnight—so that they got back to camp just before morning in time to eat their dinner along with their breakfast and go out into the woods again.*

There is no one to tell about it either. They all died.

And here's another way they raised the norms and proved it was possible to fulfill them: In cold lower than 60 degrees below zero, workdays were written off; in other words, on such days the records showed that the workers had not gone out to work; but they chased them out anyway, and whatever they squeezed out of them on those days was added to the other days, thereby raising the percentages. (And the servile Medical Section wrote off those who froze to death on such cold days on some other basis. And those who were left who could no longer walk and were straining every sinew to crawl along on all fours on the

way back to camp, the convoy simply shot, so that they wouldn't escape before they could come back to get them.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, III-IV*

And on their feet the tried and true Russian "Lapti"—bast sandals—except that they had no decent "onuchi"—footcloths—to go with them. Or else they might have a piece of old automobile tire, tied right on the bare foot with a wire, an electric cord. (Grief has its own inventiveness. . . .) Or else there were "felt boots"—"burki"—put together from pieces of old, torn-up padded jackets, with soles made of a layer of thick felt and a layer of rubber. In the morning at the gatehouse, hearing complaints about the cold, the chief of the camp would reply with his Gulag sense of humor:

"My goose out there goes around barefoot all winter long and doesn't complain. . . ."

—Ibid.

But Stalin, in the execution of the broad brushstrokes of his hate, had weapons that Hitler did not have.

He had cold: the burning cold of the Arctic. "At Oimyakon [in the Kolyma] a temperature has been recorded of -97.8 F. In far lesser cold, steel splits, tyres explode and larch trees shower sparks at the touch of an axe. As the temperature drops, your breath freezes into crystals, and tinkles to the ground with a noise they call 'the whispering of the stars.'"

—Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*

Kolyma is where the bulk of Russia's gold is. Over a span of two decades, starting in the early 1930s, more than two million prisoners were sent to mine that gold. The region quickly became legendary for its remoteness, its extreme cold, and its high death rate. Kolyma lies far beyond the reach of a railway line; getting there required crossing all of Russia on the Trans-Siberian and then traveling by ship for another week northward through the icy sea of Okhotsk. Hundreds of thousands of underfed Kolyma prisoners perished from malnutrition, from mining accidents, and from the bitter cold. . . . Kolyma is the coldest inhabited region on earth.

—Janusz Bardach and Kathleen Gleeson, *Man is Wolf to Man: Surviving the Gulag*

Blizzards could last not just for hours but days. The bodies of prisoners who got lost weren't found until springtime, often with one hundred meters of the zone. As a storm dispossessed the camp of it landmarks and reminders of lost freedom—the watchtowers, the work sites, the barbed wire—it also obliterated our sense of being locked in. Sometimes

I fantasized that the blizzard would free us, that its power would wipe away the zone, the camp, all of Kolyma, and that when it was over we would be free.

—Ibid.

The little town of Hagaru lay in a cleft in the mountains that otherwise appeared to the Marines to occupy the entire surface of North Korea. For those brief winter weeks of 1950, when it was occupied by the Americans, Hagaru resembled a nineteenth-century Arctic mining camp. Snow coated the peasant houses, the Marines' tents, the tanks and the trucks, the supply dumps and artillery pieces and command vehicles. The local sawmill was kept in perpetual motion by the engineers, cutting timber to strengthen positions and assist in the vital labor of airfield construction. Thin plumes of smoke from a hundred fires and stoves curled into the air on the rare days when the air was still. More often, they were whipped aside by the driving wind that stung every inch of exposed human flesh. At first, men marveled at the depths to which the thermometer could sink: -10, -14, -20 at night. Then they became as numb to the misery of the cold as to everything else. Many said that it was not only their capacity for physical activity that diminished, but even their speed of thought. General Smith himself found it increasingly difficult even to move his jaw to speak. The simplest action—loading a weapon, unbolting a steel section, rigging an aerial—became a laborious, agonizing marathon. The jeeps were kept running continually. In some cases their headlights were run on cables into key positions such as the sick-bay and operations tents to supplement the feeble Coleman lanterns. To start an engine required hours of work—thawing its moving parts, persuading its frozen oil to liquefy. Blood plasma froze. Medical orderlies were obliged to carry morphine Syrettes in their mouths to maintain their fluidity. For the men, the miraculously effective space heaters in the tents became the very focus of life. All this, before the enemy had even begun to take a hand.

—Max Hastings, *The Korean War*

The cold was if anything a more determined enemy than the Chinese. It was pervasive and never let up, and if the natural cold registering on the thermometer up there on the Manchurian heights wasn't bad enough, most of the time they were in a kind of Manchurian wind tunnel where the cold had a constant extra bite to it. The men came to look like Ancient Mariners who had sailed too close to the North Pole, all of them bearded; their beards, filled with ice shavings, told the story. The cold made men want to quit and give up—made it hard to want to fight and live for another day—and yet every day they kept fighting. Years later, when one of the senior NCOs visited Chesty Puller at his home outside of Washington, Puller greeted him and said, "Hey, Sarge, thawed out yet?"

—David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*

On the forward positions the cold was so appalling that an extraordinary improvisation, perhaps unique to this campaign, became necessary: the introduction of "warming tents," a few hundred yards behind the front, where every two or three hours men retreated to thaw themselves a few degrees, to restore circulation to their deadened limbs, in order that they might be capable of resistance when the Chinese came again.
—Hastings, Ibid.

As night fell on November 27, tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers came out of hiding, attacking American soldiers and Marines at all points around the Chosin Reservoir. The two companies dug into the west of Yudam-ni were freezing in makeshift foxholes when the overwhelming force attacked. In the darkness the Chinese swarmed the hill, coming within yards of the embattled Marines to toss grenades among them with deadly effectiveness. In one sector of the American perimeter, protected by two machine-guns, the horde quickly overran one of the key defensive positions. When a grenade landed near the only remaining machine-gun, Staff Sergeant Robert Kennemore stomped his foot on the grenade to push it into the snow, the subsequent blast throwing his body into the air. The Marines somehow held through the night. Sgt Kennemore was found, the stumps of his legs frozen in blood-caked snow, still alive, the severe cold having prevented a bleed-out.
—see <http://www.homeofheroes.com/brotherhood/chosin.html>

"Frozen Chosin" was the site of the worst winter weather in Korea in 100 years. Add to that the surprise attack of some 120,000 Chinese soldiers . . .

The winter at Valley Forge generally conjures images of half-naked, starving soldiers battling the elements. This was not the case. This imagery is largely the result of early, romanticized interpretations of the encampment story which were meant to serve as a parable about American perseverance.
—<http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/battleswars16011800/p/valleyforge.htm>

The cold was worse on the clear nights. They camped on a flat place beside a river, almost within sight of the enemy on the other side. As wretched as the days were because of the cold and the fear and the sickness, the night was terror. The rivers froze, and at night the Chinese or the North Koreans would inch their way across it, one or two at a time, and do their killing with knives. It was legend, those killings, designed to terrify.

That night, or maybe it was morning, an assassin crept into his group, as he slept, and killed a man just inches away. My daddy reached out to shake him, and felt the blood that had leaked from his neck.

He scrambled out of the shelter and into the biting cold, and saw him, the killer, on the ice.

The man lay flat on his belly, to keep the ice from breaking, and slithered and squirmed like some kind of slow-moving reptile, just a few feet from the bank. My daddy ran down to the river's edge and, unthinkingly, straight out onto the ice, slipping down hard on his hands and knees, hearing the ice crack. But he lunged forward and grabbed the man. They fought, frantic, crazy. My daddy must have lost his rifle because he never mentioned using it, and if he pulled his knife he never said. He knew the other man had a knife, had to have one, but my daddy did not see it. Maybe, in his rage, his terror, he did see it and didn't care.

Finally he fought to his knees and pushed himself on top of the man, and the ice popped and cracked again. The other man clawed at my daddy's face, screaming, and finally fought free. He tried to do the impossible, to walk on that thin ice, and plunged straight through it.

The man rose up, his hands clutching the edge, and although he didn't know it, he was already dead. The cold, that unbearable cold, would take him even if he could get out of the water. My daddy could have left him that way, could have let the ice have him. Instead, he reached down into the water and put both hands on top of the man's head and pushed him down, again and again, till there was no need anymore.

When the thing was done, my daddy, freezing, crawled back to where he guessed dry ground was, to the shelter, peeled off his wet, freezing gloves and shoved both hands between his legs to warm the numbness away.

If there was satisfaction in what he had done, he didn't say.

—Rick Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Under the direction of Washington's army engineers, his wintering soldiers constructed over 2,000 log huts laid out along military streets. In addition, defensive trenches and five redoubts were built to protect the encampment.

—see<http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/battleswars16011800/p/valleyforge.htm>

Winter fell onto us like a cold, suffocating weight. I woke up one morning to see high, feathery cirrus clouds blowing fast across the sky. By noon the next day, the empty, blue skies of autumn had been replaced by a leaden gray. That night it started snowing, covering the valley with a deadening blanket of white. Then the cold came and it was like some kind of monster, crawling into your lungs, settling in your bones. We huddled around our

kerosene heater, and the stink of it permeated everything. There was kerosene in the food, in the water. The world filled up with that sour chemical taste.

—John Haggerty, "Tumbleweeds"

That winter was a bad one. It would have been hard without the war, but the combination of cold and combat was disastrous. At first, we would see little bands of travelers, but as the grim weather kept on, we saw fewer and fewer people. Temperatures had been below freezing for two straight weeks when we found the first tumbleweed. There had been a refugee party passing to the east a day earlier, and I guess he had been with them. I called Atkins over when I found him. An old guy in shabby cotton clothes, curled up, frozen and stiff. I found myself getting angry at him—this pathetic, frozen, gray little man. What right did he have to come and die up against our fence? Why did he pick us, when there were so many other places in this terrible country he could have done it? Death was everywhere. Death was the air we breathed and the water we drank. Why did we have to have one more reminder?

—Ibid.

Epilogue

Bill Secours ran the power plant at the Air Force radar site in Alaska, the plant consisting of seven diesel engines, five of which were the minimum to keep the site heated and lighted. A Chicago son, Secours had worked in Alaska since his discharge at the end of World War Two, already some 30 years earlier by the time I met him. He was a big man who kept to himself. Half his scalp and one ear were gone. He spent most of his time in the power plant or in his room, which was situated next to mine in the pre-fab barracks arrangement where we (the officers and senior civilians) lived. Bill had a console record player on which he played what must have been every high-fidelity album ever submitted by Les Paul and Mary Ford (*Vaya Con Dios*, *How High the Moon*, *Mockin' Bird Hill*, et al.). New Year's Eve ("Tennessee" Travis one day gone) Secours showed in the Break Room to play dominoes with me, the commander, and the fire chief. I was a newly minted Captain, the commander a Lieutenant Colonel, and the fire chief, a Senior Master Sergeant. We were, all told, 115 men assigned to Indian Mountain Air Force Station situated in the Brooks Range, beside the high-flowing Indian River, electronically scanning the sky for the Russian Bear. Unlike the rest of us, Bill Secours wasn't serving a year-long involuntary tour; he'd been at Indian Mountain, voluntarily, for what seemed to the rest of us, forever. That night at dominoes I asked Bill if he'd ever taken a vacation to visit home. He grunted. A bit later (and drunk) I asked what'd happened to his head. *Grizzly*, he said. The regulation at the site was

that you were not to move beyond 200 yards of your dwellings without a weapon (of at least 350 magnum), something to stop a bear or moose. Bill had been armed when the grizzly attacked. He'd owned a Weatherby of the sort hunters cart to Africa to hunt rhinos or elephant. *Elephant*? I asked. *Yes*. It was the most I'd heard Secours talk, so I pressed. I asked if he'd tried to shoot the bear. *He had*, he said*, but before he could manage*, *the bear ate the thing*. *Ate it*? I said. *Yes*. He meant the Weatherby, not his head. I asked for advice to survive in the North. *Don't eat yellow snow*, he advised, serious as a bear attack.

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