

Polar 44

Ring 5

A Novel

Copyright © 2010 Edwin W. Biederman, Jr.

Dedicated to the men and women who served our country in the Arctic during the Cold War.

ONE

Second Lieutenant Kenneth Milton James, Jr., AO 2234462, mashed his B-4 bag into the overhead rack and dropped into his seat in what could be termed an attitude of soldierly relaxation. The Pennsylvania used older cars on the half-fare runs from New York City to Camp Kilmer, but age had not relaxed the austere angle of the red plush seats. This wasn't bothering Ken James—in fact, the Pennsylvania station for all its filth and noise was something familiar to hold on to. It would be a long time before he set eyes on that impersonal masonry, and his mind strived to absorb the minute details—everything from the flattened chewing gum irrevocably squashed on the platform to the cast iron designs on the side railings of the stairway. Before he had hobbled down the steps to the train level with his bag, he had studied the red and gold sign that announced the departure time of the Lehigh Valley's passenger train, The Black Diamond 1055.

On that very train four and one half years before, he had launched his college career as a nervous freshman. The university had taught him a great deal, but when he had first looked out upon the Jersey meadows he had had no idea of what collegiate life would require. From this same railroad station he was now beginning another time of trial that was not destined to be commonplace.

The train staggered forward with a series of short jolts. Coal dust dropped from some of the old-fashioned lights in the middle of the car, but nobody complained or even noticed. The passengers were all servicemen whose thoughts clung to everything that was remotely familiar and whose eyes swallowed up as much of this parting as they could. Even the darkness of the tunnel under the Hudson River seemed friendly compared to the void of the unknown which was the only marked characteristic of the future. The coach burst into the sunlight and rolled through the greatest melange of industrial smells in the world. Each of a thousand chimneys added a different waste product to the air of a clear morning in February. On this particular morning the scent of the Seecaucus Pig Farms and the essence of burning rubber predominated. The New Jersey Turnpike with its gentle slopes and lengthy crossovers smiled upon its congested predecessor, the Pulaski Skyway.

The Newark station cut off the view, but through the circular windows across the platform on Ken's left, the sunlight drew an elliptical pattern on the cement.

This carload of G. I.'s was more quiet than most. They weren't celebrating anything; rather, they were like a group of sea shells set afloat by the tide on a calm day. As soon as the hot wind of war rippled the surface they must either sink or go on to survive. Korea was a hot war and the question now was where next?

Ken studied the terrain and wondered whether his four years of collegiate training as a major in geology would be of any conceivable use in his new assignment. This thought and several others danced around the gnawing subconscious question: Would he ever see this friendly countryside again? This trite idea lurked in the dark recesses of the busiest mind. The Air Force printed orders that allowed the recipient a minimum of information: 2nd Lt. Kenneth M. James, Jr., was assigned to the 6033rd Air Base Group. The grapevine information placed this station in Northern Greenland.

A few pairs of silver rails branched off to the right and on to South Plainfield, Allentown, Bethlehem, and eventually to Buffalo. Ken had never gone as far as Buffalo, but he knew the stops by memory. The other set of rails pointed to Philadelphia, Washington, Harrisburg, Altoona, Pittsburgh, and Youngstown. He had been farther west than Youngstown on that road, but his thoughts stopped at a hospital where in a plain room a girl shifted the position of her pillow so that she could read more easily a letter written in a long slanting hand.

She was not beautiful yet she was strikingly pretty. Ken thought of their first meeting and recalled that it had been as unique as the two participants.

A brilliant moon bucked the clouds that rushed forward with the October wind, carrying the scent of woodsmoke and apples on the ground, as Ken and his roommate, Cal, pushed open the cumbrous door to the Lakeside Club and joined the students who were waiting in line for food. The club which hugged the shore of Haven Lake served hot sandwiches and soft drinks to those who could spare the time from their studies. In the rough-beamed dining room, laughter and light talk overflowed from the groups around the wooden tables in the middle and filtered around the tables for two that overlooked the ruffled reflections of the lake.

Ken scanned the coeds with casual thoroughness. In his wallet were two tickets to the Boston Symphony Concert and, up to that moment, he had found no sweet young thing who wanted to hear serious music.

“Let’s bother Brother Kodell over there.”

“Where is he, Cal?”

“Behind that post... . Get a load of the girl he’s with...” Ken stepped sideways to get a better view, and in one short glimpse he saw a face that he liked immediately. He followed Cal closely. “Friar Kodell, may we join you?”

“Well, if it isn’t the closet case twins. Cal Fenway and Ken James, Miss Jane Worth.” The how-do-you-dos were perfunctory, but Jane’s low, warm voice resonated in Ken’s memory. The symphony tickets seemed too insignificant to win the prize of her company, but they were his only advantage. After a while he withdrew them from his pocket and placed them carefully on the table as if he were showing a royal straight flush.

“What you got there, Ken?”

“A couple of Boston Symphony tickets—anyone want to go?” He looked directly at Jane.

“Oh yes, I would... What day is it?”

“Thursday night.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Kodell changed the subject rapidly but Ken had scored successfully.

When he returned to his room, his whole being was charged with anticipatory pleasure.

Cal fumbled his way over to his desk near the window. “That was a little stratagem of the first order you just executed.”

“Thought it was pretty clever myself.”

“For once you faked out the opposition with unusual poise, but it was a lousy trick.”

“You’ve got a date for the concert, haven’t you?”

“O.K.. I read you so don’t go any further. I’ll have to pick her up for you... oh, say around 6:30.”

“Stop the black beauty in front of the field house. I’ll be out of the locker room by seven.”

“That’s going to be a heck of a run to get to the Memorial Auditorium by 8:15. I’ve got to play by ear to find it.” Cal unbuttoned his shirt and looked into the closet for a hook.

“You know, Brother Ken, I kind of admire that little number myself... but then, that would be too much effort. Anyway I’m runnin’ out of white shirts,”

Ken climbed the stairs to the dormitory and stopped momentarily at the landing to watch the cumulus clouds gather way and cruise across the moon. The dormitory was unheated as usual, and the northwest wind passed freely in one window and out the other across the center aisle but the cold sheets felt good. He lay back and listened to the muffled breathing of his fraternity brothers while his thoughts probed the future. She was a magnificent creature.

• • •

The evening song lingered in the dark blue of late sunset after library chimes were still. At this time of evening the University paused to listen to what would someday recall memories grown more bright with age.

Football practice continued under the lights and faded red jerseys steamed with sweat until the trainer had finished the last wind sprint.

Ken looked up at the locker room clock. He had ten minutes to take off his uniform, shave and dress for the concert. The wet cloth of his practice jersey clung to corners on his shoulder pads like tentacles. One of the competes moved quickly.

“Unhook this thing.”

“Got a hot date?”

“You might say that.”

“Better save the speed for Saturday.” It was ironic that the compet should say that. The varsity hadn’t needed him on Saturday afternoon for two whole seasons and the chances were excellent that they would never need him. He played with the Rinky Dinks as the J.V.’s had dubbed themselves,, and their practice consisted of scrimmaging against the varsity defense, using the expected attacks of future opponents.

The varsity defensive platoon played with rough confidence in cleanly mashing the Rinky Dinks into the frozen turf. Ken had seen the arc lights seemingly whirling around his head many times. He didn't like the smell of ammonia, but it usually brought the world of reality back into focus. He could always hear the trainer yelling, "Get up off that ground:"

The Rinky Dinks ran a new set of plays every week which ranged from Columbia's innumerable pass patterns to Princeton's buck—lateral series, but they never were really accomplished at any of them. This educational system seldom allowed pride to reach unnatural proportions.

One minute and thirty seconds since he had burst through the locker room door, his uniform lay in a wet pile on the concrete floor. Eight minutes later, he looked into the mirror that was nailed to the blackboard and combed his hair carefully. As the minute hand reached the one in twelve, he grabbed his coat and ran out the door. The black Chrysler was parked close to the front door in one of the slots marked "Coaches." He fullbacked his way into the back seat and slammed the door as the vehicle jerked forward.

"Congratulations, you made it."

"Thanks, Cal."

"Jane's back there somewhere."

Ken could see her sitting primly in the corner of the back seat, "Here's your dinner." She held out a shapeless lump wrapped in wax paper.

"Thank you. Did you bring this for me?"

"Cal's responsible for that."

"It was the best I could do at the house," said Cal over his shoulder. Ken unfolded the paper and found a leg and breast of fried chicken.

"This is going to be quite an operation. You didn't happen to bring a napkin or two?"

"Doctor, I suggest rubber gloves." Ken looked at Jane.

"Nurse,—scalpel! —"

"I'm sorry, Doctor, my knife is in my pocket book, and you're sitting on it."

"Oh,—yes—er—do you always carry a knife?"

"Not unless I'm out with a football player. It's for cutting chicken, of course."

Ken began his meal in the sporadic light from passing cars. Where the highway straightened out, he could feel the Chrysler tremble. He couldn't see the speedometer from where he was sitting, but he didn't care to look. It took an hour to reach the sodium lamps at the beginning of the descent from the escarpment outside town.

The clock over the door to the Auditorium read 8:14 as he removed the tickets from his wallet. They reached their seats seconds before the conductor strode to the center of the stage and mounted the podium.

Previous to this moment, Ken had regarded the Egmont Overture merely as an example of stark Beethoven orchestration. Now he wanted to remember the moment in all its

particulars. He concentrated on each phrase and sensed a heroic grandeur in the passages that contrasted the deep rhythmic beats of the strings with the woodwinds' flowing melody. He wanted the music to describe the girl sitting at his side. There was an urgency in this that he could not understand. He felt like a man rushing about in his burning home, trying to save things of value.

The second half of the program featured a tone poem by Richard Strauss, and the performance was brilliant. As a gigantic wave of applause began, Ken looked at Jane and was surprised to see a tear run down beside her nose.

"Anything wrong?"

"No, I guess it was the music."

Now they both were struggling in wars of survival. Hers was a private war against the tubercle bacillus. His was a public war in the defense of a nation. In both wars the risk was high.

two

"New Brunswick!" Duffle bags and their owners plugged the aisle as the whole mass inched toward the door. Ken lugged his bag over the platform and down the stairs that led to the underpass beneath the tracks. The tide of khaki-colored humanity carried him through the station and to the bus stop. The buses to Camp Kilmer were lined up in a single file that disappeared around a corner to his left. After a minute's pause he was swept into the nearest bus and jammed between two corporals. This group of men was more raucous than those who had stared out the train windows.

The Air Police at the main gate gave up the identification routine as an impossible task and waved the full buses through without delay.

Ken tried to remember the turns and avenue letters but he felt like a man lost in a cave. He did grasp the fact that Avenue C branched off the main drag but that was all. After climbing up a slight incline, the bus stopped and deposited its load in a new environment.

His orders said to report to the Commanding Officer of the 2225th Personnel Processing Group. As in all things remotely military, he knew that the next step was to follow the crowd. The busload of G.I.'s proceeded slowly around the corner of the barracks and up the street to form a line outside another cream-colored barracks which displayed the 2225th in yellow letters on a blue background. It didn't matter where he went, there was inevitably a mass of men who had to pass through an administrative orifice one by one. He stepped up to the end of the officers' line and decided to wait his turn. The sergeant at the sign-in desk handed him a sheaf of literature and told him to proceed to Building 303 for billeting. He walked outside and followed his instructions mechanically, —two blocks over and one to the right. Building 303 looked like all the other cream-colored barracks that squatted on the red clay. The bulletin board outside the entrance was covered with alert notices. He wondered how long he would stay before they found space for him on a plane bound for Pitugfik. The billeting clerk handed him two more pages of practical information which included the following statements in the lower left-hand corner, Sir. Your BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters) is number 342 Your bed is A-14.

Everything was by the numbers and was bound to stay that way. Barracks 342 was located about one hundred yards farther down the street, but Ken had doubts as to whether it was worth the effort. He opened the screen door to Barracks 342 and stepped inside. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he could see that almost every bed in the two rows of double-deckers was occupied by a lieutenant. Some were sleeping off that last fling, others were reading anything that they could get their hands on, and still others lay on their backs and stared at the raw beams in the ceiling.

Ken dragged his bag up the center aisle until he was opposite A-14. It was an upper, but this was just what he had expected. Nobody seemed inclined to talk and the sound of his bag hitting the floor was quite alone. He hung his trench coat and blouse on two twisted wire hangers and raised himself into the upper. Reading through the various mimeographed sheets that had been handed out so freely was heavy going. He read about the pleasant day rooms for the use of transient officers, about the rules of the officer's mess, about the rules governing activities in New Brunswick, in addition to reading a great deal of information that was only vaguely related to his situation. He noted that chit books had to be bought for all items purchased at the Officers' Club and figured that they were not losing money. Even in the few minutes he had been in the barracks, he was already restless.

After dinner at the Officer's Mess, Ken wandered over to the Officers' Club. He checked his cap with the Master Sergeant at the door and strolled into the main ballroom. Couples seated on the couches chatted aimlessly as though waiting for some event. On the second floor balcony that encircled the ballroom there were five phone booths that were in constant use. A line of officers waited impatiently to tell their wives that they had been alerted and were scheduled to leave at 0800 the next morning. The bar was surrounded by another group who were trying to forget that they were leaving the security of their homeland. Out in the halls, second lieutenants wandered around like loose electrons, never seeming to find a place that would quiet their incessant thoughts.

At 1900 sharp, a swarthy major mounted the platform at one end of the ballroom and invited those present to buy cards for a bingo game. The game got under way, but it seemed that very few people were really enjoying themselves. The young couples who were trying to cram their hours before separation with happiness were learning that it can neither be bought, nor sold, nor hurried. The atmosphere was charged with hurt, despite the outward hilarity, and no one could change it by gulping down martinis or by telling off-color jokes.

Ken picked up his garrison cap and walked wearily back to Barracks 342, bed A-14. As he raised himself up to his bunk, he discovered why the uppers were even more undesirable than he had supposed; 200-watt bulbs were installed at regular intervals directly above the bunks. The only switch was located near the door, and every man who staggered in at various hours turned on all the lights. He solved his immediate problem by unscrewing the bulb over A-14 and ignoring the lights on either side. Morning in the barracks proved to be any time from 4 a.m. until noon.

Each individual owned an alarm clock which by itself could wake up a battalion. At 4:00 a.m. the alarm bells began to chatter at five-minute intervals.

It was at Camp Kilmer that Ken began to get a preview of the small and apparently inconsequential items that can either make life comfortable or miserable. Paragraph 3 of one of the pieces of paper handed to incoming transients declared. "We are desirous of making your stay as comfortable and pleasant as possible." This was undoubtedly true but someone had their signals crossed. At 6:00 a.m., he walked to the shower room with the idea that a warm shower was one pleasure they would not deny. He was learning, however, that all such assumptions are usually invalid. Fresh clean air from a February morning blew through a broken window pane on one side of the shower room. The hot knob when turned on full produced ice water. There was no doubt that this was a good indoctrination for Greenland. A few minutes later he discovered that the shortage of hot water was matched only by the shortage of toilet paper.

He returned to the double-decker and saw that the man in lower A-14 had given up the quest for sleep.

"Don't bother takin' a shower. There's nothing but ice cubes."

"Yea, I know."

"Say, I'm Ken James."

"Brad Nielson." They shook hands warmly.

"If you've got some spare sheets of toilet paper, now's the time to break 'em out."

"I take it they're out of that too."

"Say, have you been around this place long enough to know where all these places are?" Ken pointed to the processing sheet.

"I got here just yesterday myself—I'm as cold as you are."

"You couldn't be; you haven't had your shower yet."

"We can feel this processing thing out together then; two heads are better than one."

Ken waited until his new-found friend returned from the latrine and together they walked to the Officers' Mess. Everybody who serves in the Armed Forces must one day become accustomed to the ground meat sauce spread on top of toast and the Officers' Mess was no exception. Ken was sure that this particular meal, better known as S.O.S., was an invention that was unique to military life. He could not deny that it was filling.

By evening he had completed his financial clearance, his 1-D card, his security clearance, his overseas shots, his personal history record, and had listened to the prescribed lectures.

Lt. Nielson took a train to New York to see a relative and left Ken to walk alone up and down the streets of New Brunswick. His steps led him aimlessly from one main street to the next until he arrived at a corner that seemed familiar, looked up and saw that the building was a triangular-shaped hotel. Now he remembered he had stayed there when his team played Rutgers. He pushed into the cocktail lounge and sat down on a stool at the end of the bar. He had sat in that same spot before, but this time he did not have Tom Tesord at his elbow. He remembered nursing along a bottle of beer and listening to Tom talk quietly. Tom had played quite a game for the university. The boys at Rutgers and Princeton would never forget him, but this was all past now.

Ken scratched his head as he recalled how improbable the whole sequence of events appeared to be. He stared into the mirror and watched four Rutgers seniors who were seated at the table behind him as they exchanged witticisms over a half-empty pitcher of beer. The sophisticates of elbow bending had confidence and poise in familiar surroundings. He wondered what would happen if these men were transplanted swiftly into a new and unfamiliar environment.

Outside in the fresh air he found the street crowded. Thousands of servicemen trying to forget the past or the future were jamming all places that would serve them anything that contained alcohol. New Brunswick was not the place he wanted at this moment. He got into a filled bus and returned to Barracks 342. He wanted to think and then perhaps to dream, but, as he lay in his upper berth staring at the unscrewed 200-watt bulb, he listened to the new arrivals across the aisle.

“It’ll be six lousy months before I see my wife again.”

“Yea, I’ve got the same pitch, but I don’t think it’ll be as bad for me; I’m going to England and you’re heading to Germany.”

“Look at the damned climate you’ve got in England—all that fog.”

“You’re right, but when my wife gets there I don’t care what it’s doing outside.” The speaker chuckled quietly. “She’s sure going to get tired of looking at that ceiling.”

“It’s going to be tough to wave good-bye to the old U. S. of A.”

“Cheer up troops; things could be worse.”

“Not much.”

“Forget it.” Ken turned over on his stomach.

“Say, Bud, I suppose you think it’s easy to leave your wife and kids.”

“No, I guess it isn’t.” The conversation stopped, but the air was damp and heavy. It was a poor night for sleep. He rolled over and stared up at the wooden beams trying to run the fingers of his inner mind over the keys of his memory.

•••

The main portion of the rambling hotel bordered the shores of Tomonk Lake, spreading its wings over the flatter ground. From the windows that faced the west, one could see that the darker leaves of August made the distant Catskills appear blue-black against the sky.

Ken opened the door labeled Athletic Director and moved inside. “We’ve got problems, Ted.” Ted placed his feet on top of the desk and leaned back in the swivel chair.

“What’s the beef? I’m in my thinkin’ position.”

“We’ve got to find some new caves. The guests are getting tired of going through the same caves Sunday after Sunday.”

“O.K., my boy, we’ll attack that problem immediately. According to my schedule here... let’s see...” Ted ran his pencil along the calendar in front of him. “You took the kiddies

on their hay-ride this morning and there's no lawn bowling this week so that leaves the afternoon free... Take the keys to the closet and get the candles and rope."

"You want a couple of pairs of cover-ails, don't you?"

"O.K. I'm about to call the old man to tell 'em what we're up to." Ken opened the closet and pulled out the supplies.

"Take lots of candles and matches. This'll probably take all afternoon. Ken stuffed his breast pocket with candles. "Which one are you going to hit first?"

"The Narrows."

"That's the one that some guest got stuck in a few years ago, isn't it?"

"Roger—but he panicked."

"Cut the bull—I know that you had to drill 'em out with a jack hammer."

"He was a pretty big guy though."

"Let's go."

The caves were located in a talus pile at the end of an escarpment. Blocks of rock forty to fifty feet on a side left winding passages and little rooms between them that were large enough for a man to crawl through. On Sundays Ken led caving trips for the guests who were slender enough and strong enough to negotiate the tortuous labyrinths in stone.

It took half an hour to reach the irregular opening to the Narrows.

"Leave the rope here, Ken."

"I've never been in this one, so I'll take your word for it."

"The problem here is size and limberness. There's one spot in here that usually causes trouble. You'll see what I mean when we get there."

Ted lit a candle and then climbed agilely into the darkness. The first fifty feet consisted of two good-sized rooms which were simple to negotiate. Ted reached the far end and stopped.

"You know, every time I get to this spot, I wonder where in hell to go from here."

"You lost already?"

"Oh no. I know where we're supposed to go, but I'll be damned if I know how I get through—it's that crack over there."

"You can't get through there—"

"I've done it before."

"That's not more than eight inches wide at the most."

"Just you watch, Ted." He began to lower himself into the opening.

"I'm darned if I see how you do it, Ted." In a matter of a minute, Ken could see only the top of Ted's head in the crevice. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yea, I'm through. You goin' to try?"

“I can do it if you can.”

Ken lowered his legs into the opening and began to slide. His whole body stopped as it wedged between two unyielding walls of stone. “Ted—I’ve been had!”

“What’s the matter?” His voice drifted up from what seemed to be twenty feet beyond.

“I’m stuck, damn it!”

“Where’s the bind?”

“On my chest.”

“Can you get a grip on the edge of the crack?”

“My arms can’t bend!”

“Wait a minute. I’ll put my back under your feet. Maybe you can push up on that. Doesn’t work!”

“I guess I’ll have to go through and come at it from the other side. Take it easy! I think I can do the rest of this in about twenty minutes,”

“Take it easy: It feels like the whole mountain is pushing on me.” Ted didn’t answer. The wax from the candle covered the fingers on his left hand but it didn’t make much difference. The weight of a hundred tons seemed to be squeezing his chest ever so slowly. His breathing was hard and the sweat dribbled down his nose as every muscle writhed and squirmed. The more he moved, the tighter the vice became.

He rested now. The candle was getting too close to his hand. The stub dropped and bounced down the side and rolled out of sight. His eyes bulged, trying to penetrate the complete darkness, but he could detect neither light nor sound. A complete aloneness like that of a miner who is trapped beneath mantle that he had tried to exploit clung to the cool quiet. The panic that protects wild animals when all hope of survival is gone closed in slowly. In that moment Ken prayed in a barely audible whisper. He hung motionless and limp in time. —Then he felt the force on his chest move higher. His body edged downward and plummeted into the small space below. He lay on the rock and tried to acknowledge his indebtedness to the Creator, but no words came, “Hey—are you O.K.?” Ken could see the flickering candle above his head.

“Yea, I’m O.K., Ted.”

“How’d you get through?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’d better have some light down there.” Ken reached into his breast pocket and withdrew the candles which were bent and slightly flattened on one side.

“Body heat must’ve made ’em soft...”

“What’s that, Ken?”

“Oh, nothing,”

The memory was as clear now as it had been the day after, and he wondered if Providence would continue to light his way with good fortune.

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

