

THE BEST MEAL  
A JACK HAGEE STORY

By: C.J. Henderson

I was standing in the early evening darkness at a public phone stall, just about to swap a few pieces of change for the ability to see if anyone had called my office without actually going there, when the voice snuck up on me.

"Burger! Hey, buddy--I don't believe it."

My fingers spasmed around the receiver, my blood running uncomfortably cold. A number of reactions jammed their way to the front of my brain, all waving their hands frantically, begging me to call on them first. Disbelief and anger kept bouncing against each other, though, holding the others in check long enough for more words to come flying out of the air and dash against my back.

"Man, who'da ever thought we'd see each other again? Or," even more words were added in a tone that implied the speaker thought I might agree with him, "that we'd be happy about it? Huh? Huh?"

Disbelief got shoved to the back of my mind as if shot out of a cannon. Telling anger and all its pals to head in the same direction, I turned my head far enough to confirm what the icy knives digging into my neck had already told me.

"Captain Thomas," I muttered, "You're looking prosperous."

He'd changed. A lot. His curly brown hair had thinned and grayed considerably. His once clean features had been covered over by a wiry, graying beard, just as his gut had been layered over with a good thirty-five, maybe even forty extra pounds.

He did look prosperous, however. His suit smacked of the loving touch of a Hong Kong tailor. His overcoat was an expensive bundle of well-put-together leather as hand-

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made as his shoes. Even his tie looked like it cost more than my car. And, old as it is, my car's not that bad.

But, let me clear a couple of points. First, my name isn't Burger. Not anymore, anyway. That was my code name back when I was with Military Intelligence. Now I just go by Hagee. Jack Hagee. And second, whereas I might not have ever thought I might see Thomas again, I certainly wasn't happy about it happening.

"I don't believe it. I come up to stand in line--wait my turn to make a call, and--bam--outta the blue. You and me--standin' on the same corner, breathin' the same air. After all these years."

I was just about to tell Thomas what I thought about having his used air in my lungs when he cut me off, adding,

"God, Jackie, boy, the times the bunch of us had--Gizmo, Memphis, Scissor, Jughead ... oh, man ... hey, do you remember 'the best meal?' Do ya?"

"Yeah," I admitted, unconsciously cradling the receiver back into the pay phone. "I remember."

Stepping away from the booth, out onto the sidewalk, I remembered it right down to the bullets and the running and the color of our dead friends' eyes. One of the worst things about my life has been the fact that I've never been able to forget it. Not a moment of it.

That memory had lodged itself within me about a year before I resigned my commission. We'd been sent back to a bit of Southeast Asian jungle to clean up a job we'd left half done--a miscalculation caused by Captain Thomas' ineptitude. "We" was a covert operations group officially known as Red Dog Team, but which was more accurately known as the Suiciders. The job we'd botch was a mission to clear drug lord Tai Sing's poppy fields. We'd taken out a quarter of it and escaped with all bodies intact.

Command didn't like those figures. As they made quite clear, nobody was paying us to stay alive. So, we went back to try again. Back to a spot that had been hard

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enough to hit when the enemy hadn't been expecting any trouble. Back to half of our deaths, led there by a man none of us liked, and fewer of us trusted.

Seeing the Captain there on the street flooded me with memories. Despite how I felt about Thomas himself, the reference to "the best meal" took me back to the night we'd played that particular game out, flying to a drop zone over two thousand acres of poppies everyone denied even existed, protected from bombing by their being situated in a "friendly" country--one apparently friendly enough to take our money but not friendly enough to earn it.

'The best meal' was just one of those silly games people play on long trips to help pass the time. The eight of us had sat in the back of a DC-10 so old they'd had to put duct tape over the rust to keep in from falling out in foot square sections. It was Scissor that had started it.

"Okay, everybody," she said, smiling at me in particular, "everybody name their favorite meal."

"Favorite?" asked Memphis. "Dat ain't gonna be easy."

"Okay," agreed Scissor, knowing when she'd asked to much, "not your favorite meal ... let's say the best meal you had in the last six months."

"Hey, sure," responded Gizmo. "I got one."

"Shoot," I told him.

"London--okay? Chinese place. Right in the middle of a row of gray board pubs, nothin' but warm ale and greasy fish and chips as far as the eye can see--and like I said, smack in the middle--the Fat Boy Eat Shop. Oh, what a meal. I order crabs and fried rice--I'm not expectin' anything special--right? Whata mistake. They brought me a platter of crabs--'bout ten inches high--steam still rollin' off 'em. Disha red vinegar on the side, little pieces of green pepper floatin' in it. Oh, yum. And the rice--the rice--oh, God, yum. Snow peas, regular peas, roast pork, Chinese sausage, straw mushrooms, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, carrots, oh, and them little baby ears of corn--you know the

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ones I mean? Yeah--oh, it was just one of the best meals I ever had. I coulda ate a wheelbarrow full of them crabs."

Jughead went next. He regaled us with a story of an omelet made for him by one of his latest conquests. His story had more to do with the sex the night before it, and how he and his short-term friend used each other for plates, but it had us laughing, and took our minds further away from where we were heading, so no one complained.

Bacon and Memphis went next. It turned out they shared their latest best meal. They had been back in the World down in their home state of Texas. They had gone with Memphis' uncle to a chili cook-off and spent the day gorging on one chili sample after another. The deal was you walked the fairgrounds, tasting one entry after another. Then, you paid an up-front price for a bowl after the contest. When the judging was over, the chili they'd bought into turned out to be the winner.

Bacon claimed it was his superior taste buds that led them to the winner's table while Memphis credited Devine intervention. I still remember the tears of laughter rolling down my face as he stood in the back of the lumbering transport, shouting the end of his story over the roaring engines,

"True--all true. I tell you my brothers and sister, the Lord himself, not cherubim or seraphim, but the Lord God almighty parted the clouds and send down a blinding ray of sunshine to bless the holy chili He had picked to win that day. Creamy smooth and yet still fiery--it burned but soothed at the same time, not unlike His holy grace. It was not a chili made of mortal hand, oh no, not the work of some Earth-bound sinner, but a love chili sent by God to save a weak and weary world."

"Yeah," I asked, "then what're we doing in this damn plane?"

"Doing the great chili's work, my son," answered Memphis, forcing his mouth into a sincere line, trying hard not to laugh. "So that all men might know the brotherhood of the jalapeno."

"So," Scissor asked after we finished applauding, "who thinks they can top that?"

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None of us could. I told of the fish sandwiches they had at the Ritz Hotel, a place in my home town. I'd gone there with my old man a few months earlier when I was on leave. He had a hamburger, of course, all he ever ate--but I had gone for the fish. An entire loaf of Italian bread slit down the middle and filled with the fattest, hottest, freshest filets anyone ever saw. The story couldn't compare with Memphis' epic legend of the lost chili, of course, but it was the best meal I'd had in the previous six months, so I told my tale and let the next guy tell his.

Him turned out to be her. Scissor went next, relating the story of a New York City pizza parlor called Spumoni Gardens. She made their pies sound so good everyone swore they would try the place if they ever got to Brooklyn. It didn't beat the chili saga, either, though, so everyone turned to the Reverend and Eel. The Reverend grinned, saying,

"Well, I had a really good piece of toast the other day." As everyone booed, he added, "No, really, I even used butter."

Reverend was the thinnest of us all, a man I had to admit I had never seen eat more than an apple and a slice of cheese at one sitting. After we all threw a joke or two in his direction, we turned to Eel to see if he could do better.

Eel was Captain Thomas' code name. He usually wasn't one to join in with our nonsense, and that night proved to be no different. Checking his watch, he shouted over the engines,

"Sorry, kiddies, but we're about five minutes out from the jump zone. Time to forget about your bellies and get ready for a little midnight gliding. So, grab your gear and line it up. It's time to burn us a little terrain."

Jumping was the last thing that went right that night. The very last thing. We went down into a sea of darkness that seemed like perfect cover. It wasn't. Warlord Sing had scores of men waiting for us. The results weren't pretty.

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Gizmo went first, shot down before we even knew we had company, before he had a chance to blink. The rest of us disappeared into the fields, low crawling through the short plants. The disadvantage their size presented us was also an advantage in that those attacking us had been forced to stay outside the fields to remain hidden. Catching up to Thomas, I snarled,

"We've been set up, Captain! They were waiting for us!"

"Thanks for the news flash," he shouted back. "Tell me something I don't know and then I'll start dancing."

Enemy fire slaughtered through the air, tearing up the ground in every direction. I emptied my Car 15 in seconds, using up my reserve clips faster than I could count. The gel charges we needed to burn the fields had landed too far away for me to get anything near them. All I could do was hunker back to back with Thomas and try to keep the enemy from getting too close. Every second that ticked by made it look more and more like a losing battle.

By the time I was down to grenades, I saw Memphis get hit by heavy fire. They'd moved up some kind of crusher gun--at least a .50 cal. His body flipped up in the air, over and over, before a final burst tore him completely in half. I was just unpinning the last of my grenades when I heard Jughead through my headset. Barely able to make out what he was saying, I yelled,

"Punch it up, man--what the Hell you talking about?!"

"Clear out," he repeated, loud enough for me to catch that time. "I'm history." A ragged noise banging through my headset told the story. What I had thought was static before turned out to be dark, blood-filled coughing. The Jug was down--almost out. When he could talk again, he snarled,

"Listen--The Rev and me are up against the charges. Scissor is in the drainage ditch toward the jungle. We think Bacon tumbled in after her. Whatever--we're giving you a thirty count and then we're blowin' this shithole to Dixie!"

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I sighted the parachute flagging the napalm in my night goggles. Jughead and the Reverend were there, looking cut-up and drooping. Just as the Eel turned to look at me, we both heard,

"Thirty ... twenty-nine ..."

Instantly we crawled. Bullets tore up the night, a line of lead cutting across the ground directly in front of us. Plants and mud splattered against my face, blinding me. Tearing my goggles down so that my vision was cleared but the equipment wasn't lost, I started crawling again. The Eel was already yards ahead of me.

"Twenty-two ... twenty-one ..."

I could smell the stink of the drainage ditch through the ever-thickening curtain of burning powder filling the air. My entire body covered with mud, I found myself moving faster, sliding across the ground like a meatball through gravy.

"Fifteen ... fourteen ..."

I saw the edge of the ditch, some hundred yards off. Thomas was half-way there, slithering forward as fast as he could. He had scattered all of his equipment, even his helmet.

"Thirteen ... Twelve ..."

I pulled along after him, teeth clamped hard against the gagging mud, ignoring the numbers in my ear counting down the lives of two of my best friends.

"Eleven ... ten ..."

Blood filled my eyes as a branch ripped open my forehead. Its aroma gagged me, the taste of it rolled over my lips.

"Nine ... eight ..."

My uniform stuck to me. I was moving faster than ever, but the mud and sweat and blood congealing against my body felt as if it were gluing me to the ground. I could hear Jughead's labored breathing. It panted in my ear, filled with pain and blood.

"Seven ... "

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Then, the numbers cut off, disrupted by another spasm of violent coughs. Agony filled my ears, the pain of the Jug's life oozing out through the airwaves. I shut my eyes against it, crawling forward through the nightmare cacophony of gunfire and enemy shouting. And then, Jughead's voice suddenly returned. Jamming his words together, he shouted,

"Sixfivefourthreetwoone. God bless America and kiss my rosy red ass!"

I tumbled forward into the ditch seconds before a howling blast of searing orange flames cut the world above into two sections. From that moment on I had no idea of what was happening overhead. I swam for all I was worth on my first lungful of air, crawling along the bottom of the ditch, hoping to outdistance the blast circumference before I had to surface. Somehow I made it.

When I broke the water, I had just passed the burn perimeter by about three yards. Moving further along I eventually found the others--the half of us that now comprised "the others." Bacon had taken two chunks of lead through the arm, Scissor one in the hip. The Eel and I had managed to keep things down to bruises and scrapes.

Jug and the Rev's sacrifice had sent the enemy to Hell or to cover. Whichever, I really didn't care. Just as long as they stayed out of our way. The four of us dragged each other to the pick up point and made it home. All in all, not one of my most pleasant memories. Abandoning it, I returned to the present.

"The best meal," Thomas' voice cackled. "Those were the days, eh, buddy?"

And then, something snapped within me. Maybe it was some different note in the Eel's tone, or some half-hidden glimmer in his eye. Whatever, it made me ask him,

"Hey, you know ... you never told us what your best meal was."

"You're right," he answered. Stroking his sparse, wiry beard, he said, "Jeez--lemme think."

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Somehow I kept the suspicion out of my voice. The growing certainty and hatred boiling in my gut begged for release, but I sat on them both, staring at the expensive cut of the Eel's clothing, trying to make my dripping anger look like envy.

How I want to be you, I thought, aiming the lie at Thomas. How I wish your suit was mine, your smarts, your savvy, your life.

I let the foul idea repeat in my head until the stink of jealousy was pouring off me. Buy it, you bastard, a voice growled in the back of my brain. Hushing it, not daring to wise the Eel to where I was going, knowing in the pit of my soul the food that would taste best to him, I said,

"Com'on, Captain--even a high roller like you has a memory tucked away of the best meal ever."

And then--bingo--I had him. I saw the lights click in the back of his eyes. Spreading a grin across his face that shouted what a chump he thought I was, he said,

"Yeah, if it has to be one meal in the whole world, I remember one. It was back in Hong Kong ... a restaurant off Moody Road ... what was the name of--oh, yeah, I remember, Green Leaves By The Door. What a meal ..."

"I remember that place," I told him, seconds away from being myself. "Tai Sing owned it--didn't he?"

"Yeah," he admitted, not realizing where I'd led him. "Man, he threw some wild parties for a buncha us back ..."

And then, Thomas stopped talking. His eyes lit up, giving away that he understood what he had revealed. Without waiting, I snapped my hand forward, catching him by the throat. Slamming him into the back of the phone booth with a twist and a shove, I said over my shoulder to the crowd,

"Whoa there, man, you shouldn't drink so much."

I scanned those behind me from the corners of my eyes. Typical concrete crawlers, they saw nothing, heard nothing--their concerns the only ones in the world.

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Thomas, of course, was already dead. He couldn't have expected less. He hadn't screwed up the first raid because he was stupid. He'd done it because he'd been in collusion with Sing. They'd been ready for us the second time because he'd warned them. I'd always thought we'd been lucky, not being hit.

Yeah, I'd been lucky all right--lucky to have landed next to the last man who jumped--the one they knew they weren't supposed to shoot at.

Once I was certain I had the Eel wedged into the shell around the pay phone to where he looked like he was making a call, I wiped off the receiver and then backed off into the crowd. Blending into its flow, I disappeared into the stream of people flooding down the street. As I walked, I whispered to the air,

"The best meal? I'll tell you what the best meal is, 'buddy.' It's every one you get to eat."

And then I headed for dinner, suddenly far hungrier than I could rationally explain.