

## Mackenzie “Mac” Pattersen

**M**ac’s head was still reeling from the first blow. Fortunately for him, his assailant hadn’t tried to kill him (at least initially) but instead had tried to knock him out. And Mac was a very big man. The kind of man you didn’t willingly square off against unless you were very sure of your capabilities or you had orders. Orders had to be behind this, of course. Not that Mac’s opponent was lacking in talent. Far from it. No, Hector, the grizzled Mexican holding the knife, was all too good, as the numerous cuts on Mac’s arms and chest could attest. But something else was driving Hector, too. He acted with a fevered pitch Mac associated with true believers.

“Damn,” Mac silently cursed as Hector’s blade sliced open another gash in his right arm. There’d be plenty of time to figure this all out later. If he could keep himself alive by keeping his mind on his opponent and his deadly blade right here and now. As the two men squared off, it was apparent to both that only one of them would be walking away from this, assuming they didn’t kill each other in the process.

With that first blow, all bets were off. Mac somehow managed to both unbuckle himself and fight his way free. His first thought was to get the .45 revolver he always kept hidden under his seat. But Hector, who seemed to know exactly what Mac was thinking, pressed his attack the moment Mac’s eyes weren’t right on him. In the end, Mac

was forced out of his seat and back toward the wing, while Hector jealously guarded the only way back to the cockpit.

At this point the fight assumed more of a wait-and-see approach, as each man knew instinctively that the other would capitalize on any momentary hesitation or mistake. Mac made several short lunges, but his opponent wasn't falling for it, as several additional superficial cuts could demonstrate. The fight was not wholly one-sided. Mac may not have had any weapons, but he was far from helpless. And he was not above using his size and reach against the smaller man. Throwing caution to the wind, he jumped over several cargo boxes and caught him unaware. Hector, like most of those who witnessed this spectacle, was surprised that such a large man could be as fast and agile as he was strong. The blow was glancing, but a glancing blow from a man nearly a hundred pounds heavier than you was not something soon forgotten, and Hector was anything but forgetful. From that point on, he kept the knife firmly in front of him at all times.

For just a second, Hector looked at Mac's right arm, the blood still dripping from the open wounds, and smiled as if to say, "If the fall doesn't kill you, the infection will." He was right, of course. Even if Mac did somehow survive the fight, he had hundreds of miles of jungle to crawl through, with God-only-knows what diseases running rampant. Not to mention any of a hundred different predators who'd just love a midnight snack of a certain handsome and charismatic pilot.

Mac had to end this quickly. But a straight-up assault wouldn't do; there simply wasn't enough room. Here in the tightly cramped fuselage, Hector and his small stature had the advantage of maneuverability. Fortunately, Mac knew this plane (a German-made Albatros L 72) like the back of his hand. When his opponent had opened the cargo door earlier for the supply drop, Mac hadn't thought anything of it. But in all the turmoil afterward, neither man had closed it. If Mac was right (and he always was when it came to this kind of thing), the door was five feet behind him. Now if Mac could just lure him to the back, maybe he could remind him of the dangers of an open door in the middle of a flight, over a trackless jungle, in the dark...

But before Mac could make his move, the Mexican started to laugh. "You're wondering how to get me to the back of the plane, eh, *señor*? Maybe you are thinking you will throw me out? You are, after all, much bigger than I." Hector unconsciously stretched his jaw, then thought better of it as the pain made him wince. But he left the statement to hang in the air, defying Mac to make some pitiful attempt at subterfuge, while acknowledging its futility. Mac had to hand it to him; Hector was much smarter than he looked.

"I am glad to see you will not insult me by pretending that wasn't exactly what you were thinking. But what if I said you would get your wish? I will throw myself out the door, leaving you alone with your plane."

Mac didn't respond, because he'd already realized the knife in the Mexican's left hand was now accompanied by

a gun—Mac’s very own .45 revolver, which he had hidden carefully under his pilot’s chair if he wasn’t mistaken—in his right.

“Of course, you may not be in any condition to save yourself...or the plane.”

The shot rang out almost the instant he stopped talking, and the bullet hit Mac right in the head, dropping him instantly. After that, there was some rummaging around (but how long this happened, Mac couldn’t really say). Then several other shots rang out, and Mac noticed the plane was starting to drift, but it was all hazy and indistinct, and he wasn’t exactly sure whether it was the plane or his own thoughts. It was as if someone were whispering about the events in his ear while he paid attention elsewhere. Through the haze, he watched as the grizzled Mexican, wearing one of the two parachutes aboard, threw a package—which looked suspiciously like the other parachute—out the door. Finally finished with business, Hector turned once more to look at Mac and, satisfied with whatever he saw, said something and jumped. Unfortunately for Mac, the head wound had scrambled his brains like runny eggs, and he simply couldn’t make heads or tails of what the Mexican had said.

“It’s about time!” Mac thought, his usual bravado shoring up the rising worry that this could very well be the end of him. He started to get up, but suddenly the world was spinning, and the blood from his head got into his eyes. Try as he might, he just couldn’t make himself get up. And then he had the worst thought of all, that if this all

went south he might just be late to the New Year's Eve party.

"I *might* need a minute," he said to no one in particular as the ground loomed ever closer out the front windows...

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If he were honest with himself, he'd have to say this whole mess began just one measly month ago, while he was working for some podunk little air show on the Oklahoma-Texas border, in a city so small its "local cop" was the county sheriff, who drove through town every three or four days on his way elsewhere.

At the time, Mac had been bumming around the Southwest for over a year, picking up shows here and there when he needed the extra scratch, but generally not setting down roots in any one place.

This particular air show had been a bust for weeks, and Mac went days at a time without flying. That was because the manager, a weaselly, corpulent little fellow who had an amazing ability to trip over level surfaces, was canceling show after show due to extremely low attendance. Not low as in "only a few showed up," but rather, "no paying customers showed up." Mac should have expected it, given that the stock market had crashed just a year before and poverty was rampant, especially in these backwater burgs. But unfortunately for him, he hadn't checked his contract closely enough prior to signing it, and he found out only

later that if the manager canceled a show—even with just a few minutes' notice—he didn't get paid.

So, Mac had exercised his own contract option—the one where he walked out because he wasn't getting paid—and hit the road. After all, Dallas was only a day's ride south, and there was certainly bound to be some job there for a hotshot stunt pilot.

Sure enough, a day later he'd found his way to Fair Park, which was, by coincidence, hosting the Texas State Fair at the time. Headlining the entertainment was The Norris Circus and Barnstorming Extravaganza. It had taken Mac less than an hour to get himself a job, owing to both his prodigious skill at the stick and the fact that their previous pilot had run off to God-knows-where with a young lady he'd met a few days earlier.

One quick contract later, which Mac again failed to read thoroughly, and he had himself another job. The arrangement had been agreeable. Mac was generally liked by the circus folk, and especially so by the Gaffer, Patrick "Bear" Norris, who found in Mac a kindred soul.

Truth be told, the only person in the circus Mac didn't get along with—or rather, who didn't get along with him—was one of the clowns, Bertram Jones. It began with a simple distaste for one another. Bertram was angry that Mac, an outsider as far as he was concerned, was thought of so highly by the Gaffer without having put in his time; he was, in addition, a notoriously ill-tempered drunken lout.

But in general they just avoided one another, and it never became an issue. Then about a week into the job, as he had on innumerable nights prior, Bertram got drunk and got involved in a game of cards with some of the other carnies. While that wasn't unusual, this particular night, he lost, badly. And then, full of liquid courage, he said some (really, many) things he shouldn't have and was eventually removed from the game.

Upset and drunk, he—much like the man who comes home after a bad day at work and kicks his dog—decided to take out his frustrations on a convenient target. Unfortunately for Bertram, the only convenient target was a paying customer.

Now, it was one thing to exact justice on a customer who got out of hand or deserved it in some way. But this man, middle-aged and bespectacled, was neither of those things. Nevertheless, without witnesses or nearby carnies, it looked like Bertram might get away with it. Until Mac happened by. Seeing the bully picking on someone helpless, he intervened. Some words were said, and Bertram—never the wisest of men—took a wild swing. Mac didn't dodge it (though he certainly could have), so that he would have a convenient excuse for swinging should he need it. But again, there were no witnesses, and with his one punch, which conveniently broke Bertram's jaw, the "fight" was over.

Moments later, Bear showed up and surveyed the situation. It was quite obvious that some of the other carnies had alerted him to the goings-on but had wished to

remain clear of the conflict. When Bear asked what had happened, Mac explained that Bertram (who was groaning on the ground but quite unconscious) had, in his drunken state, fallen face first on the ground.

Seeing that the situation had resolved itself, Bear commented that it wasn't the first time Bertram had slipped, and if he kept on the same path it probably would happen again, especially now that Mac was around.

It seemed as though all parties—save, perhaps, Bertram—thought the matter solved. So, Mac went about his business as usual. The next day, however, changed everything. As was his usual habit every morning after a flight, Mac went to check on the plane. This gave the engine time to cool down and, given that he had set cardboard down underneath, showed him where any leaks might have come from. While Mac was in the midst of fine-tuning the spark plugs, the passerby he had saved the previous night stopped by to talk.

Mac, mistaking the man's intent, assumed he'd come to thank him for the timely rescue. So, being the humble sort, he informed the man that no thanks would be needed. But while the man certainly did thank him, he then went on to say that it wasn't the reason he had stopped by, and it wasn't the reason he'd been by the previous night, either.

Starting at the beginning, he introduced himself as Douglas Christensen, *Professor* Douglas Christensen (stressing his title as if it were the key to conveying to Mac who he was and what he was about). Upon seeing that Mac was still uncomprehending, he finally explained.

Turned out the professor was an archaeologist who'd been working with a dig in the Yucatan Peninsula for several months now. The dig site was in a remote area surrounded by heavy jungle. Worse, it had been plagued by treasure hunters for some weeks now. They'd even killed the dig's most recent pilot in an effort to drive the expedition away.

In desperation, Professor Christensen had wired a colleague, Professor William Eccleston (who just happened to be one of Mac's best friends), and asked if he knew anyone who could help them. And that's what led him to Mac.

While Mac was intrigued by Professor Christiansen's offer, and was tempted, in truth it was the fact that Will had recommended him that solidified the deal. He packed up his gear within the hour, said his goodbyes to the carnies he'd befriended, and followed the professor to the nearby Love Field, where they were soon aboard his Albatros L 72, headed south for the Yucatan Peninsula.

The problems started almost immediately after they crossed the border into Mexico, and ranged from mysterious delays at various airports, to missing supplies along the route, and even to an attack by bandits at one point. The professor's enemies seemed to have quite a long reach. Too long, as far as Mac was concerned, to be simple artifact thieves (who were usually in it for a quick score and speedily tired of dealing with an armed and determined archaeological expedition).

Over the next several weeks, Mac got to know the people he would be working with, while at the same time dealing with the treasure hunters who seemed determined to drive off the group, the first step of which, they apparently believed, involved killing their pilot.

But despite several harrowing close calls, which included attempts to drive Mac off the road, no less than half a dozen shots at him (both on the ground and in the air), and on one particularly memorable occasion, a murder attempt while he was sleeping in his tent, the thieves were unsuccessful. A few were wise enough to simply run off, but several ended up the worse for wear, and one (the attempted murderer) paid the ultimate price.

When they discovered they wouldn't be able to make any headway directly, they decided to play dirty (or so Mac thought). They started sabotaging the plane. Fortunately, Mac's fastidiousness with regard to his machines meant that he discovered what they'd done before anyone was hurt because of it, but fixing it meant taking time away from his other duties.

As a result, their supply runs became scarcer and scarcer. Until finally Mac came up with an alternate plan: put the plane someplace safe (like a big city), and then make nighttime supply drops so the thieves wouldn't even have a chance to go after the plane. But for that, he needed an assistant. And since he didn't know anyone he could trust, the professor recommended one of the locals who'd been helping the archaeologists since the beginning, his personal assistant, a grizzled little Mexican named Hector.

It was Hector's job to make sure the supplies were dropped precisely where they needed to be, and for the first few nights, he did remarkably well, right up to the point where he smacked Mac's head with the butt of his knife and proceeded to do a pretty darn good job at killing him.

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