

Above and Beyond

a short story in visual form

by Todd VerBeek

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Synopsis:

On the tenth anniversary of an act of global heroism, new information about the event rewrites the history books, and re-opens an old wound in the soul of the hero's friend.

High Concept:

Apollo 13 meets *EC Comics*.

Setting:

The United States, the year 2030, ten years after an asteroid on a collision course with Earth was deflected by the selfless heroism of an individual.

Format:

Short story.

Rating:

For Mature Readers: mildly vulgar language, mature themes.

Major Characters:

Terry Crawford – General, Air Force, retired. Ground commander of the mission to deflect the asteroid.

Jacob Marshall – Captain, Air Force, and astronaut. Pilot of the shuttle sent to blow the asteroid off course.

Britney Fernandez – Anchor for NBCNN, a popular TV news channel.

Vasily Zakharov – Colonel, Russian military. Nuclear weapons specialist on the mission.

Deng Jiang – Major, Chinese military. Nuclear weapons specialist on the mission.

Splash page.

A montage of scenes from around the world, including a modern urban city in central Africa*, a small town in France, the great pyramids in Egypt*, downtown Tokyo, a small tropical jungle village*, New York City, etc. Make sure the *African scenes get prominent placement. The year is 2030, so the cars on the streets are a mixture of future models and old 90's and 00's models. The “modern” buildings are a little run-down and there's some post-modern architecture here and there. The streets are decked out for a major holiday/event, with banners in the local languages and/or English: “International Jacob Marshall Day” “10th Anniversary – June 11”. Some signs have portraits of **Jacob Marshall**, or images of a NASA space shuttle. (Marshall was an astronaut, a former air-force pilot. He was in his mid 40's at the time of his death.) There are people going about their business festively, some greeting each other, probably saying “Happy Marshall Day”. Hair styles and clothing fashions are different from today... maybe the 1970's look is back, but with some new twists like suit coats with no lapels, or knickers instead of bell-bottoms, or young guys are wearing pigtails. Use your imagination.

BIG TITLE
“Above and Beyond”

CREDITS
by Todd VerBeek

1- Half-page panel of a small town American Main Street, also decorated for Marshall Day, with cheerful people like in the other cities. There's a generic 30-ish man with his 6-year-old son pointing at one of the banners, explaining what they're about. There's also a 60-ish man in a suit, walking by himself; he's not cheerful.

2- Same scene, medium shot from above, focus on the older man. He's talking on his mobile phone, which is the size and shape of a ballpoint pen. This is **Terry Crawford**. He's a retired general with a conservative haircut and one of the same civilian suits he's been wearing (when off duty) for 30 years.

CRAWFORD

Yeah, that'll be fine.

Sure, that's what I was figuring on.

3- Close-up of Crawford. He's clearly unhappy, but resigned to what's happening.

CRAWFORD

I can do the interview online from my office here.

I'll answer your questions, but I want to make one thing clear:

4- Extreme close-up. There's grim determination on his face now.

CRAWFORD

I will *not* cooperate with a hatchet job against Jacob Marshall!

1- TV screen (HDTV format, 16:9 ratio) with **Britney Fernandez**, an attractive latina news anchor, sitting behind a desk. Banner type next to her face reads “Jacob Marshall: The Untold Story”. There's an ad for some new car along the right edge of the screen, and a transparent NBCNN logo in the lower left corner. The advertising is there for authenticity, not satire, so it shouldn't be over-the-top. It should change periodically in future shots of the screen.

FERNANDEZ

Good evening, and welcome to this special edition of NBCNN Headline News.
I'm Britney Fernandez.

2- In-studio shot of Fernandez seated at her desk on the set.

FERNANDEZ

Today is International Jacob Marshall Day,
and the world is celebrating the 10th anniversary of Capt. Marshall's heroic sacrifice.

3- Back to the TV screen. Now there's a photo of Jacob Marshall in dress uniform suspended next to Fernandez's head.

FERNANDEZ

But new revelations about that fateful day have come to light.
Revelations that call for a painful re-examination of the events of that day.
And a new understanding of the man celebrated by billions for his heroism.

4- Same shot. Now there's a photo of Crawford next to her, showing him in his office.

FERNANDEZ

We'll be speaking live with Terry Crawford,
Captain Marshall's commanding officer and close personal friend.
What we will show you, and what he has to say, will surprise and shock you.

5- Big panel filling the rest of the page. Snazzy graphics showing a montage of Marshall's face, his spacecraft (a Shuttle with some extra engines attached), a hurtling asteroid, a view of Africa from orbit, and an explosion in space. “Jacob Marshall: The Untold Story” is plastered across the screen.

Three panels running vertically down the left side of the page, perhaps overlapping the fourth. The fourth panel is full height along the right side.

1- TV screen showing (in addition to the ads and logos) an artist's rendition of a T-Rex distracted from gutting a small Brontosaurus by a huge fireball in the sky, heading toward the nearby hills.

FERNANDEZ (voiceover)

Over the eons, the Earth has experienced several cataclysmic asteroid collisions,
including the one that decimated the dinosaurs.

2- TV screen shows a huge chunk of rock dominating the foreground, with a small blue-and-white Earth in the distance, a tiny moon behind it.

FERNANDEZ (voiceover)

Astronomers had said it was only a matter of time before another one hit.
But we were still taken by surprise when an amateur sky-watcher noticed it.

She named the asteroid Mjolnir, after the mythical hammer of the gods.

And within a few short weeks it would be too close to deflect, by any means known to humanity.

3- TV screen showing an oblique shot of Africa from low orbit.

FERNANDEZ (voiceover)

The impact site: central Africa.

The projected death toll: hundreds of millions, even with an unprecedented evacuation underway.

The ecological impact: unknowable.

The economic cost: priceless.

4- *Endeavour* launching from Cape Canaveral, with an extra set of oversized solid-fuel booster rockets strapped on the sides. We are now returning to actual scenes from the past, so alter the panel borders to suggest a flashback.

FERNANDEZ (voiceover)

No country in or near the impact site had the resources to protect themselves from this doom.

But the space-faring nations hesitated only briefly before launching a joint mission to deflect Mjolnir.

Endeavour, the last ship in the old shuttle fleet still in service, was hastily refitted to intercept it.

It carried Captain Jacob Marshall, mission specialists Colonel Vasily Zakharov and Major Deng Jiang,
and a cargo bay packed with nuclear ordnance, to a rendezvous with the hammer of the gods....

1- Medium shot of Marshall at the controls of *Endeavour*. **Vasily Zakharov** (Russian, male, mid-50's) and **Deng Jiang** (Chinese, female, 40-ish) are visible behind him, suiting up to go out to the depressurized cargo bay.

MARSHALL

I'll be finished with the final vehicular systems check in about 20 minutes,
and we'll be lined up for final burn in 30.

Notify me as you finish your checks of the firecrackers, so I can update Mission Control.

DENG

Roger.

2- Exterior of *Endeavour*, from “above” with the shuttle extending off the edge the panel. It's in a fairly high orbit with the full circle of the Earth visible behind it (and unlike regular shuttle missions it's not orbiting upside down). The cargo bay is open, revealing a full payload of nuclear warheads. The tiny figures of Zakharov and Deng are visible at the front of the bay.

DENG (over radio)

Everything looks secure back here, Captain.

Colonel Zakharov and I are starting the weapons checks.

MARSHALL

Roger, Major. Things are looking good here, so...

OH, FUCK!

3- Exterior of *Endeavour*, from above rear, with enough distance to show a big blast from the top engine of the trio at the rear of the ship. It rips apart the engine's exhaust cone, but doesn't damage the structure of the shuttle itself. One of the mission specialists (Deng) has lost her grip and is floating free, her tether pulled tight and snapping as the shuttle lurches forward. The other (Zakharov) is clutching the interior of the cargo bay.

1- Medium shot on Deng, her tether floating uselessly, unattached. She's horrified, and gasping for breath. Her face plate is badly cracked and visibly leaking air.

ZAKHAROV (radio)
Jiang!

2- Medium shot of Zakharov. He's still in the cargo bay, unclamping the rocket pack used for spacewalks.

ZAKHAROV
Jacob! Jiang's off tether! I'm going after her!
What the *chyort* happened?

3- Medium shot of Marshall at the controls, frantically checking his instruments, puzzled.

MARSHALL
I... I don't... know. Sudden build-up of pressure... in the ignition chamber of engine 3.

4- Close-up of Marshall. He's grim. Motionless.

MARSHALL
Vasily, I'm getting telemetry from Jiang's suit. Air pressure's near zero. And... no pulse.

ZAKHAROV (radio)
Chyort!

1- External shot of the shuttle. Zakharov is pulling himself hand over hand along the edge of the cargo bay, evaluating the vessel and its cargo. The rear of the cargo bay is not visible in this shot.

MARSHALL (radio)

I'm stabilizing the ship's attitude with maneuvering thrusters.
How's it look back there?

ZAKHAROV

Engine 3 looks like a loss, and the ship will never handle re-entry,
but she appears fit to continue the mission.
I'm taking a closer look at the warheads nearest the engines.

2- Close-up of Zakharov. Through his faceplate we can see his teeth clenched. Blisters are forming on his skin.

ZAKHAROV

Urgghhh!

3- Wider shot of cargo bay. Zakharov is floating, looking down on the warheads. About ¼ of them at the rear of the cargo bay are cracked open. They're glowing faintly.

ZAKHAROV

25%... damaged...
radiation... lethal levels...

4- Medium shot of Marshall, shouting, and clutching the microphone on his headset (the closest he can get to actually grabbing Zakharov).

MARSHALL

Get out of there, Colonel!
We need you alive!

5- Shot over Marshall's shoulder of his console. One of the displays has Deng's name along with several lines tracking her vitals: all flat. Another display has Zakharov's name along with several lines tracking his vitals. The pulse indicator has just flatlined.

6- External shot of shuttle, from a distance.

MARSHALL (audio)

Houston... we... we have a problem.

1- TV screen. Britney Fernandez is at her desk. Portraits of Deng Jiang and Vasily Zakharov float next to her head.

FERNANDEZ

In one short minute everything changed.

The explosion on *Endeavour* and the deaths of Deng and Zakharov rendered the original plan impossible.
Too few functional bombs to deliver the punch needed, and no one to plant them.

Central Africa would die.

Many expected Captain Marshall to take refuge on Space Station Beta
and wait for a ride home from the Europeans or Chinese.

2- TV screen. A graphic of *Endeavour* on a collision course with Mjolnir.

FERNANDEZ

But we all know that NASA and Captain Jacob Marshall didn't give up.

A new plan – a daring, radical plan – was drafted.

Jacob Marshall would slam *Endeavour* into the asteroid at maximum acceleration.

3- Fill the rest of the page. *Endeavour* crashing into Mjolnir, its shape barely visible as it evaporates in a huge explosion. Mjolnir is breaking apart.

FERNANDEZ

By using the ship as a wedge into the giant rock, he would split it apart,
with a simultaneous nuclear explosion deflecting enough of the fragments to spare the heart of Africa.

Earth still took a pounding, but with far less loss of life and land.

Captain Marshall died, so a continent would live.

3.1- Inset a panel showing Marshall at the controls, teeth gritted.

FERNANDEZ

The scale of the threat helped the peoples of the world draw closer together.
And the United States shed its reputation as a global bully through the symbolism of
an American soldier's voluntary and selfless sacrifice.

1- TV screen. Britney, now intently serious; here's her scoop. Still shots of: Marshall (at the controls on *Endeavour*, taken by a camera on his console), and younger Crawford (at Mission Control, taken from his desk cam).

FERNANDEZ

But that's *not* the complete story.

We've recently uncovered this segment of video from shortly after the accident, recording a conversation between Marshall and Terry Crawford, his friend and commanding officer.

In an NBCNN exclusive, see this never-before-revealed footage:

2- Video comm screen. Same proportions as a regular TV screen (i.e. not wide-screen). Terry Crawford (10 years younger than when we'd seen him earlier) is at his desk, alone. He's not making eye contact with the camera/Marshall.

CRAWFORD

We've developed a new mission plan. It's rather drastic, but I think we can pull it off.

But it's... we need... I need to ask you to do something very difficult.

3- Video comm screen. Marshall is reacting with shock.

MARSHALL

You want to send me on a suicide mission, don't you!

The only way you can figure out to make this work is to kill me!

CRAWFORD (audio)

That's right, Captain.

4- Video comm screen. Marshall is on the verge of tears, frightened. He's not going to go along with it.

MARSHALL

No! I can't..

There must be some other way!

Damn it, Terry! There has to be!

5- Video comm screen. Crawford is in pain. This is the hardest thing he's ever had to do.

CRAWFORD

I wish there was!

You know damn well I don't want this!

But... oh, hell, Jake, there's no easy way to say this...

1- Video comm screen. Marshall is dumbfounded.

CRAWFORD (audio)
You've already had a fatal dose of radiation.
You're partially shielded by the ship's bulkheads, so you'll last longer than Zakharov did.
But at best you've got a few days.

2- Video comm screen. Marshall is downcast. He can't meet Crawford's eyes.

MARSHALL
So... I... I'm dead... no matter what.

3- Video comm screen. Crawford is weeping openly, still not looking at Marshall.

CRAWFORD
Yes, Jake.... I'm sorry.

4- Video comm screen. Marshall looks up at Crawford, looking for some hope.

MARSHALL
Even if I abandon ship... leave *Endeavour* immediately?
Can't they send up a Soyuz or a Shenzhou to get me...?

CRAWFORD (audio)
It's too late.

5- Video comm screen. Marshall looks up from his lap, his brow furrowed with anxiety, trying to pull together up the courage for this.

MARSHALL
You really think it'll work?

CRAWFORD (audio)
Yes, *it will*.
And it really *is* Africa's only hope.
We need you.
Please, Jake.

6- Video comm screen. Marshall is marshaling his resolve, staring destiny in the face.

MARSHALL
OK... I'll do it.
Send me the flight specs.

MARSHALL
And I better get a fucking parade for this.
Marshall out.

1- TV screen. Crawford (the present-day version) is sitting in his home office, a comfy den with lots of books, framed photos, and spacecraft/aircraft models on the shelves. He's not terribly happy to be here. It's embarrassing to have this information disclosed, and he'd rather just put this painful episode of his life behind him.

FERNANDEZ

With us live tonight is retired General Terry Crawford,
the person we've just seen deliver this stunning news to Captain Marshall, 10 years ago.

2- TV screen. Fernandez is stern, not over the top, but she's caught this guy in a web of lies, and she's going to nail him for it.

FERNANDEZ

Captain Marshall got his parades, to say the least.
He became a global hero, with monuments, statues, and schools dedicated to his memory.
But this revelation drastically undermines the picture most world citizens have of Jacob Marshall.
What do you have to say for yourself, General Crawford?

3- Drop the TV-screen format, or this is going to get visually dull. Close-up on Crawford, squirming a bit in his seat, but holding his ground. He's here to defend the memory and honor of his friend.

CRAWFORD

Jacob was a hero.
He saved an entire continent, countless people, precious ecosystems....
Isn't that enough?

4- An angle shot of Fernandez, leaning forward toward the camera for an assertive posture.

FERNANDEZ

But you've known all along that his so-called sacrifice wasn't nearly so noble.
It was the unwilling last resort of a man about to die.
And you've maintained this lie for ten years!

5- Another medium-close angle on Crawford. He's not apologetic. He's stating the facts, offering his explanation, and that's all there is to it.

CRAWFORD

The people of the world wanted their perfect hero.
I didn't want to deprive them of that.

1- Fernandez is ticking off points on her fingers, looking skeptical.

FERNANDEZ

But wasn't that just a calculated political spin from the U.S. Government and its allies?
NASA records include *no mention* of Captain Marshall's radiation poisoning.
Monitoring stations operated by the European Union and Japan disclosed *nothing* about it.
They've provided telemetry which supposedly indicates that he was healthy and safe.
Russia – either completely in the dark, or in on it – was even scrambling a Soyuz to bring him home.

2- Fernandez is leaning forward, pointing a finger at Crawford for emphasis.

FERNANDEZ

That's a massive global cover-up, and the diplomatic implications alone are astounding.
People will be asking: What did the presidents and prime ministers know, and when?
What *more* are you hiding from us?

3- Crawford's composure has cracked, and he's slack-jawed with surprise. He had no idea the interview was going to take this direction. This thing's about to explode, and it's up to him to stop it.

FERNANDEZ (audio)

Just how vast a conspiracy was this?

4- Crawford pounds his fist on the desk to interrupt her. He's only got one card left now, and he's going to play it: the truth.

CRAWFORD

One!

A conspiracy of *one*.

1- Fernandez, with a whatchootalkinbout expression.

FERNANDEZ

You expect us to believe you doctored all this evidence yourself?
That's the most preposterous....

2- Close on Crawford, shaking his head with exasperation. He's trying to rein her in and get her back on track toward the true story.

CRAWFORD

No, no, no... that evidence is all *legitimate*.

FERNANDEZ (audio)

That hardly seems possible...

3- Medium shot on Crawford. It pains him to say this, but he's got to make this point, and make it clearly.

CRAWFORD

Don't you *get it*?

It's *true*!

He *was* healthy.

But there was only one way to save Africa.

Captain Marshall had to die, and he wasn't ready for that.

So *I* made a decision.

4- Long shot on Crawford. He's slumping in his chair, in a combination of shame and relief at finally sharing this horrible secret.

CRAWFORD

I *lied* to to him.

5- Close up on Fernandez, shocked and slack-jawed.

CRAWFORD (audio)

I tricked Jacob into piloting *Endeavour* to his death.

1- Fernandez recovering her composure, and resuming the offensive.

FERNANDEZ
So... so, who ordered you to do it?
Who authorized it?

2- Crawford, also resuming the stature of an officer, but looking downward.

CRAWFORD
No one.
I take full responsibility.

3- Fernandez cocks her head, to suggest something with a bit of sarcasm.

FERNANDEZ
I see.
So this makes *you* the hero?

4- Crawford is now sitting at attention, the façade of his military composure back in place.

CRAWFORD
Of course not.
I don't *want* any parades.
I don't want to remember that day.

5- Distant shot of Crawford, still at attention, but looking very small, isolated, and alone.

CRAWFORD
I just did... what had to be done.