

Chapter 20

The sand was everywhere. In his eyes, in his boots, hell, it was even in his skivvies. Shamus O'Reilly, now "Sarge" to his squad, couldn't have been happier.

He checked his position on the GPS unit, and then looked through his olive drab Steiner binoculars at the company of Iraqi Republican Guard Soldiers moving across the brilliantly bright sand dunes. A light artillery unit and an escort of three tanks accompanied the infantrymen, and they were positioned a mere thousand yards in front of his Marine Recon squad.

O'Reilly couldn't hold back a small grin as he realized he was exactly where he wanted to be.

Four years ago, when Judge Bodane had offered him a chance to join the Marine Corps, Shamus had figured the opportunity beat the hell out of juvenile detention. Once in boot camp however, he quickly realized that this was the life he wanted to live. The life of a Marine. The opportunity to join Force Recon permanently cemented his commitment to the Corps.

During his first enlistment he had been promoted four times meritoriously, and had advanced to the rank of sergeant when he re-upped a few months ago.

With his strong, square, and slightly dimpled chin, tall blonde stature, finely chiseled physique, compliments of the Marine's highly challenging training regimen, and his striking blue eyes, he could have easily been a poster boy for Marine recruitment posters. Or a Playgirl centerfold for that matter.

Those who looked closely at him couldn't help but note the fire in his eyes. Many were the stories told in the back-street dives from Okinawa to Oceanside California and Jacksonville North Carolina, by some of the unlucky individuals who had the misfortune to find themselves on the painful receiving end of his wrath. Individuals who had no difficulty imagining Shamus in another time and place, swinging a bloodstained broadax; a Norse Berserker gone amok.

Even more were the whispered murmurs from ladies of the night in those same far-flung locals. Whispers from hookers afraid that another night as the object of his brutal form of lovemaking might be their last.

He'd been training with most of the squad that surrounded him for nearly two years, and they were a tight group. Corporal Tom Larson, the squad's second in command, had served with him since boot camp, and was probably only the second real friend he'd ever had, Brian Hogan being the first.

Larson had been a body builder since junior high, and while only five foot ten, he was built like a Sherman Tank. He had trimmed down since joining Force Recon, but still tipped the scales at over two hundred pounds. His dusky Italian complexion, jet black hair, and coffee brown eyes always stood in stark contrast to O'Reilly's blond hair and blue eyes. Their fellow Marines had dubbed the best friends, "Night and Day," supposedly in reference to the difference in their respective appearances. The truth was, to those that knew them best, their personalities were as markedly different as their looks, maybe even more so.

While their nicknames were never applied separately, "Night" actually referred to O'Reilly, and "Day" to the dark and handsome Larson. O'Reilly was known by all as being a competent, and highly motivated Marine, even to the point of extreme, but his mood was always dark and brooding. A lifetime of pent-up emotions boiled just below

the surface of his cold as ice and calm demeanor, like a smoking, smoldering, snow covered volcano, ready to erupt with fiery molten lava at the first tremor of the earth's crust.

Larson on the other hand, was an open book of positive energy and emotions. Well liked by all who knew him, he had a silver tongue, that when coupled with his rugged good looks, assured him a girl in every port. It sometimes took him an hour to read all his letters after mail call, their return addresses scattered across the States and numerous overseas ports of call, each scented with the faint fragrance of a different perfume.

Larson had done his best to teach his buddy the finer points of sweet-talking the ladies, and discovered that when Shamus put on his charm he was a natural born lady-killer. But the truth was that Shamus thought charming women into his bed was too tedious.

"Better to pay 'em, lay'em and leave 'em." He'd always say with his trademark grin.

O'Reilly studied the Iraqi contingent in front of them in an attempt to determine their immediate plan of action. His squad's mission was to observe and report on enemy action while remaining undetected.

They were digging in, but what for?

His question was answered seconds later by one of his own men.

"Sarge, we've got a platoon of US Army Airborne coming in on our right flank," hissed O'Reilly's radioman, Lance Corporal Jeremiah Jacobson, Jake, as he was known on the squad.

Jake hailed from the sagebrush country of Eastern Montana, and prior to joining the Marines, had never been out of his home state. The biggest town the tall, lanky, red headed Montana cowboy had ever seen was Billings. His large bird beak shaped nose, pronounced overbite, and big green eyes that seemed to extend unnaturally from their sockets, made him remind most people of an ugly, gangly, vulture.

The first time he'd actually talked to a black man, hell, black person for that matter, was when he was yelled at by a big black Drill Instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Thompkins, when he stepped off the bus at the United States Marine Corps Recruit Depot, after being picked up from San Diego International Airport. Although he was currently performing the duties of radio operator, Jake was probably the best marksman among this elite and well-practiced group of riflemen, and proudly wore a USMC Devildog tattoo on his sinewy forearm.

"What the hell are they doing here Larson?" whispered O'Reilly impatiently. "We're supposed to have the sector to ourselves."

"Not sure Sarge, maybe they're lost."

"Shit! If those Republican Guards get wind of them, their ass is grass! Damn Army anyway! They should leave this shit with us Marines!"

"Roger that Sarge. But since they're here, what are we gonna do?" asked Larson.

"Jake, see if we can raise them on the radio. Use the standard frequency. And ask our boys at the rear to help us out here, this could be a real bloodbath." O'Reilly ordered.

A thousand yards away, Platoon Commander First Lieutenant Tristen Steele ordered his Airborne Unit to dig in.

"Let's go men! Intelligence reports this sector all clear, but we've got to hold this ground secure for the General's convoy."

"Sir, we're getting communication from a Marine Corps Recon squad. They say

there's a company of Saddam's Elite Republican Guard less than two clicks away! The Guard unit is apparently aware of our position, and is sending a platoon strength contingent off our left flank!" reported PFC Dickerson, the platoon's radioman.

"How long until we're met by the reinforcements from Alpha Company?" Steele asked.

"Not sure sir. There's a sandstorm coming in. It may be hours until reinforcements arrive." Dickerson answered.

"Get the Marine Recon unit on the horn and ask them to advise of their situation. Then get company command, and request air support. Have them radio General Walker's convoy with a report of the situation, and advise them to find an alternate route," the lieutenant ordered.

"Roger that," the radioman replied.

"Lieutenant Steele? The NCO in charge of the Marine contingent, Sergeant O'Reilly, reports their strength at ten men. Small-arms only. Their orders were to observe, not engage the enemy, but he will assist our mission in any way possible. Company command has replied with a negative on the air support sir. The sandstorm is advancing too quickly. We're on our own."

"Shit! Give me the radio!" Steele ordered, and tried to rid himself of the itching and burning sensation on his left arm by rubbing it across his knee.

"Sergeant O'Reilly. This is Lieutenant Steele, Platoon Commander, Charlie Company, First Airborne Division. Do you copy?"

"I copy five by five Lieutenant. Welcome to the party."

"Sergeant, I'm ordering you to retreat to our rear. It is my understanding that we have a platoon-sized contingent of Republican Guard moving directly towards your position. If you move to our rear, we can retreat and join your squad. Together we'll stand a better chance of making it back to the border. Do you copy?"

O'Reilly looked over his squad, focusing briefly on each of his most trusted men.

PFC Phil Conley, the squad giant, affectionately tagged "Slim" by his buddies. Six foot six standing in his size fifteen bare feet. Hands the size of platters, and ears sticking almost comically straight out from his head. A long sloped forehead dropped from under his dark hair, and when coupled with his thick eyebrows, gave him a caveman like appearance that belied his intelligence. He loved firing full auto, and his oversized hands could play a fifty-caliber machine gun like a Stradivarius.

Lance Corporal Sean Walsh, AKA the Joker. The platoon funny man from Detroit. Talked almost as fast as Conley could shoot. Whenever the squad needed something, the glib Walsh always seemed to be able to bullshit his way into getting it. While only five foot nine, the diminutive Marine was lean as greyhound, and when provoked, mean as a pit bull. His dark red hair and freckles betrayed his Irish heritage, and warned of his quick temper. Pure poison with a handgun, he had qualified for the Marine Corps pistol team in each of the three years of his enlistment.

Corporal David Peck. The quiet one. His nickname, Snake, came more from his dark beady eyes than from temperament, but fit either way. He was an expert in martial arts, a black belt in the little known, but extremely effective, Bushidoikan style of Karate that boasted more world champion kickboxing titles than any other style in the world. Son of a Ukrainian immigrant butcher that settled in Seattle and adopted an American sounding name, he wore a thin regulation mustache that was as jet black as the short hair on his head.

PFC Vincent Torelli, Vinny, second cousin to Larson. Light machine gunner in his

cousin's fire team, they had enlisted together. While not nearly as handsome as his higher ranked relative, he was taller by two inches, and had much finer features.

The scars on his knuckles bore mute testimony to the Italian's attempts at proving his effeminate features had nothing to do with his sexual orientation.

"What do you guys think? I say bullshit! I'm not about to listen to any damn doggie! Hell, our squad against a lousy platoon of Iraqi's? No problem huh?"

One by one the brown painted faces around him smiled and gave him the thumbs up.

"Okay, let's do it then! OOH FUCKIN' RAH! Slim, take that M-60 of yours over to those rocks, and dig in. Hold your fire until I start the party. Larson, take your fire team, and move over to that dune two hundred meters west. Wait until those rag heads are almost on Slim's position, and we'll start the dance. With any luck, we'll take out this platoon, and the rest of the fuckin' Iraqi's will think twice about starting anything else."

O'Reilly keyed the mike on his radio, "Lieutenant Steele, I did not copy your last. Repeat, I did not copy your last transmission. Signal is breaking up. O'Reilly out."

"Sergeant Yockum! Do you have a visual on the Marine Squad?" asked Steele.

"No sir! Oh, wait one. Yes sir, I have a visual on one light machine gunner moving to a position in the rocks sir. Now I've lost him. There go four more sir! They're moving to a position in the dunes, two riflemen, one light machine gunner, and one rifleman with a M-203 sir!"

"And the Iraqi's?" Steele questioned.

"They're bearing directly towards the first machine gunner sir."

"How far away is the Marine squad's position from ours?"

"Maybe fifteen hundred meters sir. It doesn't look like the Iraqi's have spotted them."

"Let's hope not. I'd say it sounds like the Marine's just told us to fuck off, and stay out of their way. Okay. I want all squad leaders here ASAP!"

"Sergeant O'Reilly! If you can read me, I see your intentions. Be advised that after your ambush, my platoon will attempt to mount a two-stage assault directed towards the enemy's front and right. Good luck you stupid jarhead! Steele out!"

Steele looked over his squad leaders. Every one of them looked solid. "Here's the deal men. We've got a company of Iraqi Republican Guards sitting two clicks away. Remember, these are Saddam's bad boys. They obviously know we're here, and have dispatched a platoon to our left flank. They don't know that a Marine Recon squad is apparently setting up an ambush for them. Damn jarheads anyway! I suspect that if their ambush is successful, the Marines will continue on, and directly assault the main Iraqi force from their left flank.

"We're gonna follow up with an attack directed at the Iraqi's front and right oblique. I want all Stinger's directed at the tanks with the first volley. Mortar fire should be directed at their light artillery. Questions?"

O'Reilly heard the Army Lieutenant's last transmission, and had to smile in spite of himself, as he scratched his arm. Evidently this Steele had some balls. He'd need 'em too, 'cause it looked like the shit was really gonna hit the fan.

Damnit! This dry desert air must be getting to his skin, because the birthmark on his left forearm was itching and burning like hell.

The platoon of Iraqi soldiers advanced steadily in a rough column four abreast without bothering to send out scouts, evidently convinced that their far superior numbers gave them an insurmountable advantage.

Shamus waited until the Iraqi's had advanced to a position in point blank range of PFC Philip Conley's M-60 light machine gun, and then touched off a three round burst of automatic rifle fire directed at the two non-coms slightly off to the left and towards the rear of the Iraqi unit.

Before the sound of gunfire even reached the Iraqi troops, the staccato bark of Slim's M-60 began to reverberate through the small valley, and milliseconds later a loud pop could be heard over the din as Larson's fire team popped off a M-203 round into the middle of the Iraqi platoon.

The Marine squad continued their relentless and deadly barrage of automatic rifle fire, while the Iraqi unit seemed to implode on itself in bloody chaos as shrill screams of pain and terror competed with the thunder of gunfire echoing across the dunes.

Although they were met by very little, and completely ineffective, return fire, the squad of Devil Dogs refused to show quarter until the final few Iraqi soldiers left alive stopped running around, and threw their weapons to the ground and their hands to the quickly darkening sky.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" O'Reilly shouted to be heard above the pandemonium of battle, and the steadily increasing howl of the wind. When his men had all stopped firing, he turned and reached over to grab the radio mike from Jake, "Larson, Slim, you copy? Report!"

"Read you loud and clear Sarge. We're cool here. You want we should double time over and help you round up the bad guys before this sandstorm gets out of hand?" Larson squawked back in return.

The radio was quiet for just a second before Slim's voice came through the increasing static. "I'm good to go Sarge, but this here wind is kicking up something fierce. Request permission to regroup."

"Larson, wait five, then return on the double to our position. Ditto Slim. I want you all to stay where you are to cover us. If you see any aggressive movement as we advance, fire immediately, do you copy? I repeat, you note any hostile intent, grease the motherfuckers!"

O'Reilly didn't wait for their replies before shouting orders to the men positioned near him. "Walsh, Peck, Greene, get over there and take those sand niggers into custody! Jake, you stay put!"

Walsh and Peck both looked at him with big shit eating grins, gave him a thumbs up and sprinted the hundred yards to where the last of the Iraqi soldiers were still standing. PFC Keith Greene stood up, acted like he was half pissed off at something, and even started to open his mouth, as if he was going to make a comment, before shaking his head and following his comrades, who were already putting their captives to their knees.

Shamus followed his men's action with his binoculars, and noted with satisfaction the way they had separated the captives from the scattered bodies that littered the ambush zone. They were good men, and they were following proper procedure to the letter.

He turned the binoculars back over his right shoulder to check on the Airborne platoon. The sand storm was beginning to affect visibility, and had obviously muffled the sounds of the battle raging behind his position.

He could see all three tanks belching flames as they fired missile after missile at the beleaguered Army platoon. Geysers of sand, some mixed with twisted limbs and helmets, were erupting all through their precarious position in the dunes.

"Shit! Jake, change over to the common frequency and see if you can raise that

Airborne Lieutenant again.”

But before Jake could hand him the radio, and too late to do anything but drop to the ground, he heard the unmistakable whistle of incoming artillery.

Jake saw the look on his face and followed him to the ground, both of them yelling “Incoming!” at the top of their lungs in a futile attempt at warning the rest of the squad.

Greene happened to be in a position to see O’Reilly’s dropping action from the corner of his eye, and instinctively jumped towards Walsh and Peck, knocking them both to the ground, while somehow managing to keep his M-16 pointed at the twelve kneeling prisoners.

Walsh and Peck were both spitting sand and cussing Greene when they heard the whistle overhead.

The explosions that followed were deafening, and the debris raining down on their backs was filled with bits of blood and gore.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the barrage was over.

Lance Corporal Walsh was the first to roll over to check out the damage. “Holy shit!” he yelled, as he tossed a shredded bloody stump of an arm from off his back.

One of the prisoners jumped up off the ground and started to bolt towards the main Iraqi unit.

The rat-a-tat-tat cough of Slim’s .30-caliber machine gun traced a crimson line across his back and knocked him face first into the sand.

Greene keyed the mike on his portable radio, “Sarge, Corporal Larson, you okay? And I already know your lanky white ass is okay Slim. Nice shootin’.”

O’Reilly heard Greene’s transmission, but didn’t bother to reply as he jumped to his feet and raced across the small valley towards the position held mere minutes before by Larson and his fire team. A position now marked by a large crater in the sand.

And although the storm was now making it very difficult to hear anything from even a few yards away, O’Reilly’s roar of “No! No! Goddamnit No!” echoed through the wind.

Jake held his position, and watched O’Reilly through the binoculars the Sergeant had tossed down when he jumped up.

He watched the rage distort his squad leader’s face, then noted with a small chill, the look of resignation that replaced it. When O’Reilly started back down the incline to where the prisoners were being held, Jake decided he’d better join them.

None of O’Reilly’s men wanted to meet his eye, each of them in a state of shellshock. Their squad leader’s loud shout broke them out of their collective catatonic reverie, “Motherfuckers! Those motherfucking rag heads! Jake! Did you get that lieutenant on the horn?”

“Yeah I did Sarge. He said they were getting the shit kicked out of them, but he wanted me to let you know he was impressed with the way our ambush worked out. He also said, if we wouldn’t mind lending them a hand, they could sure use the firepower.” Jake now had to yell to be heard even faintly above the wind.

O’Reilly just shook his head, and grabbed the binoculars from the radioman. “Shit, they can still see us through the storm. Greene, go pop a few smokes upwind from us. Now!”

“Sarge, what good is that going to do? There’s no way in hell any choppers are gonna get to us for an extraction in this shit!” The PFC started to protest, and then a look of realization came into his bloodshot brown eyes. “Damn it Sarge! They are our

prisoners! They've surrendered to us Goddamnit!"

Welsh and Peck reached the same conclusion regarding O'Reilly's intent. PFC Peck jerked his head upwind, "You heard the Sarge, go pop the damn smoke Greene!"

Welsh stepped up beside the squad leader and brought his rifle to port arms in obvious support of O'Reilly.

"Shit! This ain't right!" Greene yelled, but he turned and walked a short distance away before pulling the pins on several smoke grenades and tossing them into the wind.

His back was still turned when the sound of O'Reilly's 9mm Beretta popped once, then again.

When he swung around despite himself, he watched in horror as each of the three Marines stepped up to a kneeling Iraqi, and fired a round into the back of their heads, killing them execution style, their bodies jerking spasmodically in the blood and brain splattered sand.

He bent over and fell to his knees as his last meal came hurling out his throat.

Two of the prisoners decided they would have better luck in the raging storm and jumped up, but only made it a few yards until Slim's watchful machine gun cut short their ill fated attempt at escape, gore bursting from their chests and throats before their wasted bodies could fall to the ground.

Now the storm had reached a fevered pitch and the visibility was closing in on them.

O'Reilly signaled for Slim to join the rest of the squad, and aimlessly wiped a bloody hand across his face, the red smear adding detail to the blood lust in his eyes.

When Slim reached their position, the sergeant simply nodded at each of his men in turn, then spun around and started double-timing towards the main Iraqi unit.

A story as old as time, the alpha male leading his pack of Devil Dogs on the hunt.