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The Killer Elite

Meet the Marines of Bravo Company - proud, hardened professionals who deal in that most specialized of American exports: ultraviolence. The true story of bullets, bombs and a Marine platoon at war in Iraq

EVAN WRIGHT

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The invaders drive north through the Iraqi desert in a Humvee, eating candy, dipping tobacco and singing songs. Oil fires burn on the horizon, set during skirmishes between American forces and pockets of die-hard Iraqi soldiers. The four Marines crammed into this vehicle — among the very first American troops who crossed the border into Iraq — are wired on a combination of caffeine, sleep deprivation, excitement and tedium. While watching for enemy fire and simultaneously belting out Avril Lavigne's "I'm With You," the twenty-two-year-old driver, Cpl. Joshua Ray Person, and the vehicle team leader, twenty-eight-year-old Sgt. Brad Colbert — both Afghan War veterans — have already reached a profound conclusion about this campaign: that the battlefield that is Iraq is filled with "fucking retards." There's the retard commander in their battalion who took a wrong turn near the border, delaying the invasion by at least an hour. There's another officer, a classic retard, who has already begun chasing through the desert to pick up souvenirs thrown down by fleeing Iraqi soldiers: helmets, Republican Guard caps, rifles. There are the hopeless retards in the battalion-support sections who screwed up the radios and didn't bring enough batteries to operate the Marines' thermal-imaging devices. But in their eyes, one retard reigns supreme: Saddam Hussein — "We already kicked his ass once," says Person, spitting a thick stream of tobacco juice out his window. "Then we let him go, and he spends the next twelve years pissing us off even more. We don't want to be in this shit-hole country. We don't want to invade it. What a fucking retard."

The war began twenty-four hours ago as a series of explosions that rumbled across the Kuwaiti desert beginning at about six in the morning on March 20th. Marines sleeping in holes dug into the sand twenty miles south of the border

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with Iraq sat up and gazed into the empty expanse, their faces blank as they listened to the distant rumblings. There were 374 men camped out in the remote desert staging area, all members of the First Reconnaissance Battalion, which would lead the way during considerable portions of the invasion of Iraq, often operating behind enemy lines. These Marines had been eagerly anticipating this day since leaving their base at Camp Pendleton, California, more than six weeks before. Spirits couldn't have been higher. Later that first day, when a pair of Cobra helicopter gunships thumped overhead, flying north, presumably on their way to battle, Marines pumped their fists in the air and screamed, "Yeah! Get some!"

"Get some!" is the unofficial Marine Corps cheer. It's shouted when a brother Marine is struggling to beat his personal best in a fitness run. It punctuates stories told at night about getting laid in whorehouses in Thailand and Australia. It's the cry of exhilaration after firing a burst from a .50-caliber machine gun. Get some! expresses in two simple words the excitement, fear, feelings of power and the erotic-tinged thrill that come from confronting the extreme physical and emotional challenges posed by death, which is, of course, what war is all about. Nearly every Marine I've met is hoping this war with Iraq will be his chance to get some.

Marines call exaggerated displays of enthusiasm — from shouting "Get some!" to waving American flags to covering their bodies with Marine Corps tattoos — "moto." You won't ever catch Sgt. Brad Colbert, one of the most respected Marines in First Recon and the team leader I would spend the war with, engaging in any moto displays. They call Colbert the Iceman. Wiry and fair-haired, he makes sarcastic pronouncements in a nasal whine that sounds a lot like David Spade. Though he considers himself a "Marine Corps killer," he's also a nerd who listens to Barry Manilow, Air Supply and practically all the music of the 1980s except rap. He is passionate about gadgets — he collects vintage video-game consoles and wears a massive wristwatch that can only properly be "configured" by plugging it into his PC. He is the last guy you would picture at the tip of the spear of the invasion of Iraq.

The vast majority of the troops will get to Baghdad by swinging west onto a modern superhighway built by Hussein as a monument to himself and driving, largely unopposed, until they reach the outskirts of the Iraqi capital. Colbert's team in First Recon will reach Baghdad by fighting its way through some of the crummiest, most treacherous parts of Iraq. Their job will be to screen the advance of a Marine battle force, the 7,000-strong Regimental Combat Team One (RCT 1), through a 115-mile-long agricultural-and-urban corridor that runs between the cities of An Nasiriyah and Al Kut filled with thousands of well-armed fedayeen guerrilla fighters. Through much of this advance, First Recon, mounted in a combination of seventy lightly armored and open-top Humvees and trucks, will race ahead of RCT 1, uncovering enemy positions and ambush points by literally driving right into them. After this phase of the operation is over, the unit will move west and continue its role as ambush hunters during the assault on Baghdad.

Reconnaissance Marines are considered among the best trained and toughest in the Corps. Maj. Gen. James Mattis, commander of the Marine ground forces in Iraq, calls those in First Recon "cocky, arrogant bastards." They go through much of the same training as do Navy SEALs and Army Special Forces. They are physical prodigies who can run twelve miles loaded with 150-pound packs, then jump in the ocean and swim several more miles, still wearing their boots, fatigues and carrying their weapons and packs. They are trained to parachute, scuba dive, snowshoe, mountain climb and rappel from helicopters. Many of them are graduates of Survival Evasion Resistance Escape School, a secretive training facility where Recon Marines, fighter pilots, Navy SEALs and other military personnel in high-risk jobs are put through a simulated prisoner-of-war camp with student inmates locked in cages, beaten (within prescribed limits) and subjected to psychological torture overseen by military psychiatrists — all with the intent of training them

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The advertisement features a dark red background. At the top, the Rolling Stone logo is in a stylized, metallic font. Below it, the text 'PRESENTS' is in a smaller, white font. The main headline reads 'Live From New Orleans Rotary Downs, Dax Riggs & MC Trachotomy' in a white, serif font. Below that, 'Check It Out' is written in a large, bold, white font. At the bottom, it says 'Brought to you by Captain Morgan' in a white font, followed by 'Check 100 Proof SPICED RUM' in a smaller font. On the right side, there is a bottle of Captain Morgan rum and a glass of rum and cola with a lime wedge.

to resist enemy captivity. Paradoxically, despite all the combat courses Recon Marines are put through (it takes a couple of years for them to cycle through every required school), almost none are trained to drive Humvees and fight in them as a unit. Traditionally, their job is to sneak behind enemy lines in small teams, observe from afar and avoid contact with the enemy. What they are doing in Iraq — seeking out ambushes and fighting through them — is something they only started training for around Christmas, a month before being deployed to Kuwait. Cpl. Person, the team's primary driver, doesn't even have a military operator's license for a Humvee and has only practiced driving in a convoy at night a handful of times. Gen. Mattis, who had other armored-reconnaissance units available to him — ones trained and equipped to fight through enemy ambushes in specialized, armored vehicles — says he chose First Recon for one of the most dangerous roles of the campaign because "what I look for in the people I want on the battlefield are not specific job titles but courage and initiative." By the time the war is declared over, Mattis will praise First Recon for having been "critical to the success of the entire campaign." The Recon Marines will face death nearly every day for a month, and they will kill a lot of people, a few of whose deaths Sgt. Colbert and his fellow Marines will no doubt think about and perhaps even regret for the rest of their lives.

Colbert's first impression of Iraq is that it looks like "fucking Tijuana." It's a few hours after his team's dawn crossing into Iraq. We are driving through a desert trash heap, periodically dotted with mud huts, small flocks of sheep and clusters of starved-looking, stick-figure cattle grazing on scrub brush. Once in a while you see wrecked vehicles: burnt-out car frames, perhaps left over from the first Gulf War, a wheel-less Toyota truck resting on its axles. Occasionally there are people, barefoot Iraqi men in robes. Some stand by the road, staring. A few wave.

"Hey, it's ten in the morning!" says Person, yelling in the direction of one of the Iraqis we pass. "Don't you think you ought to change out of your pajamas?"

Person has a squarish head and blue eyes so wide apart his Marine buddies call him Hammerhead or Goldfish. He's from Nevada, Missouri, a small town where "NASCAR is sort of like a state religion." He speaks with an accent that's not quite Southern, just rural, and he was proudly raised working-poor by his mother. "We lived in a trailer for a few years on my grandpa's farm, and I'd get one pair of shoes a year from Wal-Mart." Person was a pudgy kid in high school who didn't play sports, was on the debate team and played any musical instrument — from guitar to saxophone to piano — he could get his hands on.

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Becoming a Marine was a 180-degree turn for him. "I'd planned to go to Vanderbilt on a scholarship and study philosophy," he says. "But I had an epiphany one day. I wanted to do my life for a while, rather than think it." It often seems like the driving force behind this formerly pudgy, nonathletic kid's decision to enter the Corps and to join one of its most elite, macho units was so he could mock it, and everything around him. A few days before moving out of its desert camp in Kuwait to begin the invasion, his unit was handed letters sent by schoolchildren back home. Person opened one from a girl who wrote that she was praying for peace. "Hey, little tyke," Person shouted. "What does this say on my shirt? 'U.S. Marine!' I wasn't born on some hippie-faggot commune. I'm a death-dealing killer. In my free time I do push-ups until my knuckles bleed. Then I sharpen my knife."

As the convoy charges north into the desert, Person sings A Flock of Seagulls' "I Ran (So Far Away)." He says, "When I get out" -- he's leaving the Marines in November — "I'm going to get a Flock of Seagulls haircut, then I'm going to become a rock star."

"Shut up, Person," Colbert says, peering intently at the dust-blown expanse, his M-4 rifle pointed out the window. Colbert and Person get along like an old married couple. Being a rank lower than Colbert, Person can never directly express anger to him, but on occasions when Colbert is too harsh and Person's feelings are hurt, the driving of the

Humvee suddenly becomes erratic. There are sudden turns, and the brakes are hit for no reason. It will happen even in combat situations, with Colbert suddenly in the role of wooing his driver back with retractions and apologies. But generally, they seem to really like and respect each other. Colbert praises Person, whose job specialty is to keep the radios running — a surprisingly complex and vital job for the team — calling him "one of the best radio operators in Recon."

Obtaining Colbert's respect is no small feat. He maintains high standards of personal and professional conduct and expects the same from those around him. This year he was selected as team leader of the year in First Recon. Last year he was awarded a Navy Commendation for helping to take out an enemy missile battery in Afghanistan, where he led one of the first teams of Marines on the ground. Everything about him is neat, orderly and crisp. He grew up in an ultramodern house designed by his father, an architect. There was shag carpet in a conversation pit. One of his fondest memories, he tells me, was that before parties, his parents would let him prepare the carpet with a special rake. Colbert is a walking encyclopedia of radio frequencies and encryption protocols and can tell you the exact details of just about any weapon in the U.S. or Iraqi arsenal. He once nearly purchased a surplus British tank, even arranged a loan through his credit union, but backed out only when he realized just parking it might run afoul of zoning laws in his home state, the "communist republic of California."

But there is another side to his personality. His back is a garish wash of heavy-metal tattoos. He pays nearly \$5,000 a year in auto-motorcycle insurance due to outrageous speeding tickets; he routinely drives his Yamaha R1 racing bike at 130 miles per hour. He admits to a deep-rooted but controlled rebellious streak that was responsible for his parents sending him to military academy when he was in high school. His life, he says, is driven by a simple philosophy: "You don't want to ever show fear or back down, because you don't want to be embarrassed in front of the pack."

With Colbert located in the front passenger seat, providing security off the right side of the vehicle, left-side security is provided by Cpl. Harold Trombley, a nineteen-year-old who mans the SAW machine gun in the rear passenger seat. Trombley is a thin, dark-haired and slightly pale kid from Farwell, Michigan. He speaks in a soft yet deeply resonant voice that doesn't quite fit his boyish face. One of his eyes is bright red from an infection caused by the continual dust storms. He has spent the past couple of days trying to hide it so he doesn't get pulled from the team. Technically, he is a "paper Recon Marine," because he has not yet completed Basic Reconnaissance course. But it's not just his youth and inexperience that keep Trombley on the outside, it's also his relative immaturity. He caresses his weapon and says things like, "I hope I get to use her soon." Other Marines make fun of him for using such B-movie war dialogue. They're also suspicious of his tall tales. He claims, for example, that his father was a CIA operative, that most of the men in the Trombley family died mysterious, violent deaths — the details of which are vague and always shifting with each telling. He looks forward to combat as "one of those fantasy things you always hoped would really happen." In December, a month before his deployment, Trombley got married. (His bride's father, he says, couldn't attend the wedding, because he died in a "gunfire incident" a while before.) He spends his idle moments writing down lists of possible names for the sons he hopes to have when he gets home. "It's up to me to carry on the Trombley name," he says. Despite some of the other Marines' reservations about Trombley, Colbert feels he has the potential to be a good Marine. Colbert is always instructing him - teaching him how to use different communications equipment, how best to keep his gun clean. Trombley is an attentive pupil, almost a teacher's pet at times, and goes out of his way to quietly perform little favors for the entire team, like refilling everyone's canteens each day.

The other team member in the vehicle is Cpl. Gabriel Garza, a twenty-one-year-old from Sebastian, Texas. He stands half out of the vehicle, his body extending from the waist up through a turret hatch. He mans the Mark-19 automatic grenade gun, the vehicle's most powerful weapon, mounted on top of the Humvee. His job is perhaps the team's most dangerous and demanding. Sometimes on his feet for as long as twenty hours at a time, he has to constantly scan the horizon for threats. Garza doesn't look it, but the other Marines credit him with being one of the strongest men in the battalion, and physical strength rates high among them. He modestly explains his reputation for uncanny strength by joking, "Yeah, I'm strong. I've got retard strength."

Colbert's team is part of a twenty-three-man platoon in Bravo Company. Along with First Recon's other two line companies — Alpha and Charlie — as well as its support units, the battalion's job is to hunt the desert for Iraqi armor, while other Marines seize oil fields to the east. During the first forty-eight hours of the invasion, Colbert's team finds no tanks and encounters hundreds of surrendering Iraqi soldiers — whom Colbert does his best to avoid, so as not to

be saddled with the burden of searching, feeding and detaining them, which his unit is ill-equipped to do. Fleeing soldiers, some of them still carrying weapons, as well as groups of civilian families stream past Colbert's vehicle parked by a canal on his team's second night in Iraq. Colbert delivers instructions to Garza, who is keeping watch on the Mark-19: "Make sure you don't shoot the civilians. We are an invading army. We must be magnanimous."

"Magna-nous?" Garza asks. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Lofty and kinglike," Colbert answers.

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Garza considers this information. "Sure," he says. "I'm a nice guy." Colbert and Person mostly pass the time monitoring the sins committed by a Recon officer they nickname Captain America. Colbert and other Marines in the unit accuse Captain America of leading the men on wild-goose chases, disguised as legitimate missions. Captain America is a likable enough guy. If he corners you, he'll talk your ear off about all the wild times he had in college, working as a bodyguard for rock bands such as U2, Depeche Mode and Duran Duran. His men feel he uses these stories as a pathetic attempt to impress them, and besides, half of them have never heard of Duran Duran.

Before First Recon's campaign is over, Captain America will lose control of his unit and be investigated for leading his men into committing war crimes against enemy prisoners of war. A battalion inquiry will clear him, but here in the field, some of his men fantasize about his death. "All it takes is one dumb guy in charge to ruin everything," says one. "Every time he steps out of the vehicle, I pray he gets shot."

Aside from Captain America's antics, there's an inescapable sense among Colbert's team that this is going to be a dull war. All that changes when they reach Nasiriyah on their third day in Iraq.

On March 23rd, Colbert's team, in a convoy with the entire First Recon Battalion, cuts off from the backcountry desert trails and heads northwest to Nasiriyah, a city of about 300,000 on the Euphrates River.

By late afternoon, the battalion becomes mired in a massive traffic jam of Marine vehicles about thirty kilometers south of the city. The Marines are given no word about what's happening ahead, though they get some clue when, before sundown, they begin to notice a steady flow of casualty-evacuation helicopters flying back and forth from Nasiriyah. Eventually, traffic grinds to a halt. The Marines turn off their engines and wait.

During the past four days, no one on the team has slept for more than two hours a night, nor has anyone had a chance to remove his boots. Everyone wears bulky chemical-warfare protection suits and carries gas masks. When they do sleep, in holes dug at each stop, they are required to keep their boots on and wear their protective suits. They live on MREs (meals ready to eat), which come in plastic bags about half the size of a phone book. Inside there are about half a dozen foil packets containing a meat or vegetarian entree, such as meatloaf or pasta. More than half the calories in an MRE come from candy and junk food such as cheese pretzels and toaster pastries. Many Marines supplement this diet with massive amounts of freeze-dried coffee — they often just eat the crystals straight from the packet — chewing tobacco and over-the-counter stimulants including ephedra.

Colbert constantly harps on his men to drink water and to take naps whenever there is a chance, even questioning them on whether their pee is yellow or clear. When he comes back from taking a shit, Trombley turns the tables on him.

"Have a good dump, Sergeant?" he asks.

"Excellent," Colbert answers. "Shit my brains out. Not too hard, not too runny."

"That sucks when it's runny and you have to wipe fifty times," Trombley says conversationally.

"I'm not talking about that." Colbert assumes his stern teacher's voice. "If it's too hard or too soft, something's not right. You might have a problem."

"It should be a little acid," Person says, offering his own medical observation. "And burn a little when it comes out."

"Maybe on your little bitch asshole from all the cock that's been stuffed up it," Colbert snaps.

Hearing this exchange, another Marine in the unit says, "Man, the Marines are so homoerotic. That's all we talk about."

Another big topic is music. Colbert attempts to ban any references to country music in his vehicle. He claims that the mere mention of country, which he deems "the Special Olympics of music," makes him physically ill.

The Marines mock the fact that many of the tanks and Humvees stopped along the road are emblazoned with American flags or moto slogans such as "Angry American" or "Get Some." Person spots a Humvee with the 9/11 catchphrase "Let's Roll!" stenciled on the side.

"I hate that cheesy patriotic bullshit," Person says. He mentions Aaron Tippin's "Where the Stars and Stripes and Eagles Fly." "Like how he sings those country white-trash images. 'Where eagles fly.' Fuck! They fly in Canada, too. Like they don't fly there? My mom tried to play me that song when I came home from Afghanistan. I was like, 'Fuck, no, Mom. I'm a Marine. I don't need to fly a little flag on my car to show I'm patriotic.'"

"That song is straight homosexual country music, Special Olympics-gay," Colbert says.

Colbert's team spends the night by the highway. Late in the night, we hear artillery booming up ahead in the direction of Nasiriyah. The ground trembles as a column of massive M1A1 tanks rolls past, a few feet from where the Marines are resting. Out of the darkness, someone shouts, "Hey, if you lay down with your cock on the ground, it feels good."

A couple of hours after sunrise on the 24th, they tune in to the BBC on a shortwave radio that Colbert carries in the Humvee and hear the first word of fighting up the road in Nasiriyah. A while later, Colbert's platoon commander, Lt. Nathan Fick, holds a briefing for the three other team leaders in the twenty-three-man platoon. Fick, who's twenty-five, has the pleasant good looks of a former altar boy, which he is. The son of a successful Baltimore attorney, he went through Officer Candidate School after graduating from Dartmouth. This is his second deployment in a war. He commanded a Marine infantry platoon in Afghanistan. But like Colbert and the six other Marines in the platoon who also served in Afghanistan, he saw very little shooting.

Fick tells his men that the Marines have been taking heavy casualties in Nasiriyah. Yesterday, the town was declared secure. But then an Army supply unit traveling near the city came under attack from an Iraqi guerrilla unit of Saddam Hussein loyalists called fedayeen. These fighters, Fick says, wear civilian clothes and set up positions in the city among the general populace, firing mortars, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and machine guns from rooftops, apartments and alleys. They killed or captured twelve soldiers from the Army supply unit, including a woman. Overnight, a Marine combat team from Task Force Tarawa attempted to move into the city across the main bridge over the Euphrates. Nine Marines lost their lives, and seventy more were injured.

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First Recon has been ordered to the bridge to support Task Force Tarawa, which barely controls its southern approach. Fick can't tell his men exactly what they're going to do when they get to the bridge, as the plans are still being drawn up at a higher level. What he does tell the men is that their rules of engagement have changed. Until now, they've let armed Iraqis pass, sometimes

even handing them food rations. Now, Fick says, "Anyone with a weapon is declared hostile. If it's a woman walking away from you with a weapon on her back, shoot her."

At 1:30 p.m., the 374 Marines of First Recon form up on the road and start rolling north toward the city. Given the news of heavy casualties during the past twenty-four hours, it's a reasonable assessment that everyone in the vehicle has a better than average chance of getting killed or injured in Nasiriyah.

The air is heavy with a fine, powdery dust that hangs like dense fog. Cobras clatter directly overhead, swooping low with the grace of flying sledgehammers. They circle First Recon's convoy, nosing down through the barren scrubland on either side of the road, hunting for enemy shooters. Before long, we are on our own. The helicopters are called off because fuel is short. The bulk of the Marine convoy is held back until the Iraqi forces ahead are put down. One of the last Marines we see standing by the road pumps his fist as Colbert's vehicle drives past and shouts, "Get some!"

We drive into a no man's land. A burning fuel depot spews fire and smoke. Garbage is strewn on either side of the road as far as the eye can see. The convoy slows to a crawl, and the Humvee fills with a black cloud of flies.

"Now, *this* looks like Tijuana," says Person.

"And this time I get to do what I've always wanted to do in T.J.," Colbert answers. "Burn it to the ground."

There is a series of thunderous, tooth-rattling explosions directly to the vehicle's right. We are even with a Marine heavy-artillery battery set up next to the road, firing into Nasiriyah, a few kilometers ahead. There's a mangled Humvee in the road. The windshield is riddled with bullet holes. Nearby are the twisted hulks of U.S. military-transport trucks, then a blown-up Marine armored vehicle. Marine rucksacks are scattered on the road, clothes and bedrolls spilling out.

We pass a succession of desiccated farmsteads -- crude, square huts made of mud, with starving livestock in front. The locals sit outside like spectators. A woman walks past with a basket on her head, oblivious to the explosions. No one has spoken for ten minutes, and Person cannot repress the urge to make a goofy remark. He turns to Colbert, smiling. "Hey, you think I have enough driving hours now to get my Humvee license?"

We reach the bridge over the Euphrates. It is a long, broad concrete structure. It spans nearly a kilometer and arches up gracefully toward the middle. On the opposite bank, we glimpse Nasiriyah. The front of the city is a jumble of irregularly shaped two- and three-story structures. Through the haze, the buildings appear as a series of dim, slanted outlines, like a row of crooked tombstones.

Nasiriyah is the gateway to ancient Mesopotamia, the Fertile Crescent lying between the Euphrates, just above us, and the Tigris, a hundred kilometers north. This land has been continuously inhabited for 5,000 years. It was here that humankind first invented the wheel, the written word and algebra. Scholars believe that Mesopotamia was the site of the Garden of Eden. After three days in the desert, the Marines are amazed to find themselves in this pocket of tropical vegetation. There are lush groves of palm trees all around, as well as fields where tall grasses are growing. As Marine artillery rounds explode around us, Colbert keeps repeating, "Look at these fucking trees."

While two First Recon companies are instructed to set up positions on the banks of the Euphrates, Bravo Company waits at the foot of the bridge, about 200 meters away from the river's edge. No sooner are we settled than machine-gun fire begins to rake the area. Incoming rounds make a zinging sound, just like they do in Bugs Bunny cartoons. They hit palm trees nearby, shredding the fronds, sending puffs of smoke off the trunks. Marines from Task Force Tarawa to our right and to our left open up with machine guns. First Recon's Alpha and Charlie companies begin blasting targets in the city with their heavy guns. Enemy mortars start to explode on both sides of Colbert's vehicle, about 150 meters distant. "Stand by for shit to get stupid," Person says, sounding merely annoyed. He adds, "You know that feeling before a debate when you gotta piss and you've got that weird feeling in your stomach, then you go in and kick ass?" He smiles. "I don't have that feeling now."

Marine helicopters fly low over a palm grove across the street, firing rockets and machine guns. It looks like we've driven into a Vietnam War movie. As if on cue, Person starts singing a Creedence Clearwater Revival song. This war will need its own theme music, he tells me. "That fag Justin Timberlake will make a soundtrack for it," he says, adding with disgust, "I just read that all these pussy faggot pop stars like Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears were going to make an anti-war song. When I become a pop star, I'm just going to make pro-war songs."

While Person talks, there's a massive explosion nearby. An errant Marine artillery round hits a power line and detonates overhead, sending shrapnel into a vehicle ahead of ours. A group of six Marines is also hit. Two are killed immediately; the four others are injured. Through the smoke, we can hear them screaming for a medic. Everyone takes cover in the dirt. I lie as flat on the ground as possible. I look up and see a Marine cursing and wiggling, trying to pull down his chemical-protection suit. The pants don't have zippers in the front. You have to unhook suspenders and wrestle them down, especially tough when you're lying sideways. It's a Marine in Colbert's platoon, one of his closest friends, Sgt. Antonio Espera, 30. Espera grew up in Riverside, California, and was, by his own account, truly a "bad motherfucker" — participating in all the violent pastimes available to a young Latino from a broken home and raised partially in state facilities. With his shaved head and deep-set eyes, he's one of the scariest-looking Marines in the platoon, but Espera makes no show of trying to laugh off his fear. He's wrestling his penis out of his pants so he can take a leak while lying on his side. "I don't want to fucking piss on myself," he grunts.

The Marines took a combat-stress class before the war. An instructor told them that twenty-five percent of them can expect to lose control of their bladders or bowels when they take fire. Before the war started, many in First Recon tried to get Depend diapers — not just for embarrassing combat accidents, but in case they have to wear their chemical-warfare protection suits for twenty-four to forty-eight hours after an actual attack. These never arrived, so they piss and shit frantically whenever they can.

The guy on my other side is another Bravo team leader, Sgt. Larry Sean Patrick, 28, of Lincolntown, North Carolina, and he's looked up to about as much as Colbert is. I ask him what the hell we're doing just waiting around while the bombs fall. His response is sobering. He tells me the platoon is about to be sent on a suicide mission. "Our job is to kamikaze into the city and collect casualties," he says.

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"How many casualties are there?" I ask.

"Casualties?" he says. "They're not there yet. We're the reaction force for an attack that's coming across the bridge. We go in during the fight to pick up the wounded."

I don't know why, but the idea of waiting around for casualties that don't exist yet strikes me as more macabre than the idea of actual casualties. Yet despite how much it sucks here — by this bridge, taking heavy fire — it's kind of exciting, too. I had almost looked down on the Marines' shows of moto, the way they shouted "get some" and acted all excited about being in a fight. But the fact is, there's a definite sense of exhilaration every time there's an explosion and you're still there afterward. There's another kind of exhilaration, too. Everyone is side by side facing the same big fear: death. Usually, death is pushed to the fringes of things you do in the civilian world. Most people face their end pretty much alone, with a few family members if they are lucky. Here, the Marines face death together, in their youth. If anyone dies, he will do so surrounded by the very best friends he believes he will ever have.

As mortars continue to explode around us, I watch Garza pick through an MRE. He takes out a packet of Charms candies and hurls it into the gunfire. Marines view Charms as almost infernal talismans. A few days earlier, in the Humvee, Garza saw me pull Charms out of my MRE pack. His eyes lighted up and he offered me a highly prized bag of cheese pretzels for my candies. He didn't explain why. I thought he just really liked Charms until he threw the pack

he'd just traded me out the window. "We don't allow Charms anywhere in our Humvee," Person said, in a rare show of absolute seriousness. "That's right," Colbert said, cinching it. "They're fucking bad luck."

A fresh pair of Marine gunships flies overhead, firing rockets into a nearby grove of palm trees. Bravo Marines leap up after one of the helicopters fires a TOW missile that sends up a large orange fireball from the trees. "Get some!" the Marines shout.

For nearly six hours, we are pinned down, waiting, we think, to storm into Nasiriyah. But after sunset, plans are changed, and First Recon is called back from the bridge to a position four kilometers into the trash-strewn wastelands south of the city. When the convoy stops in relative safety, away from the bridge, Marines wander out of the vehicles in high spirits. First Recon's Alpha Company killed at least ten Iraqis across the river from our position. They come up to Colbert's vehicle to regale his team with exploits of their slaughter, bragging about one kill in particular, a fat fedayeen in a bright-orange shirt. "We shredded him with our .50-cals," one says.

It's not just bragging. When Marines talk about the violence they wreak, there's an almost giddy shame, an uneasy exultation in having committed society's ultimate taboo, and doing it with state sanction.

"Well, good on you," Colbert says to his friend.

Person stands by the road pissing. "Man, I pulled my trousers down, and it smells like hot dick. That sweaty hot-cock smell. I kind of smell like I just had sex." Despite the cold, Bravo's Sgt. Rudy Reyes, 31, from Kansas City, Missouri, has stripped off his shirt and is washing his chest with baby wipes, every muscle gleaming in the flickering light of a nearby oil fire.

Reyes doesn't quite fit the image of the macho brute. He reads Oprah's magazine and waxes his legs and chest. Other members of the unit call him "fruity Rudy" because he is so beautiful. "It doesn't mean you're gay if you think Rudy's hot. He's just so beautiful," Person tells me. "We all think he's hot."

The Recon Marines are told they will be pushing north through Nasiriyah at dawn, along a route they've deemed "sniper alley." At midnight, Espera and I share a last cigarette. We climb under a Humvee for cover and lie on our backs, passing it back and forth.

"I've been so up and down today," Espera says. "I guess this is how a woman feels." He's extremely worried about driving through Nasiriyah in a few hours and even admits to having second thoughts about coming to Iraq at all. "I asked a priest if it's OK to kill people in war," he tells me. "He said it's OK as long as you don't enjoy it. Before we crossed into Iraq, I fucking hated Arabs. I don't know why. But as soon as we got here, it's just gone. I just feel sorry for them. I miss my little girl. I don't want to kill anybody's children."

Past midnight, Marine artillery booms into the city. Back in the Humvee, Trombley once again talks about his hopes of having a son with his new young bride when he returns home.

"Never have kids, Corporal," Colbert lectures. "One kid will cost you \$300,000. You should never have gotten married. It's always a mistake." Colbert often proclaims the futility of marriage. "Women will always cost you money, but marriage is the most expensive way to go. If you want to pay for it, Trombley, go to Australia. For a hundred bucks, you can order a whore over the phone. Half an hour later, she arrives at your door, fresh and hot, like a pizza."

Despite his bitter proclamations about women, if you catch Colbert during an unguarded moment, he'll admit that he once loved one girl who jilted him, a junior-high-school sweetheart whom he dated on and off for ten years and was even engaged to until she left him to marry one of his closest buddies. "And we're still all friends," he says, sounding almost mad about it. "They're one of those couples that likes to takes pictures of themselves doing all the fun things they do and hang them up all over their goddamn house. Sometimes I just go over there and look at the pictures of my ex-fiancée doing all those fun things I used to do with her. It's nice having friends."

Just after sunrise, First Recon's seventy-vehicle convoy rolls over the bridge on the Euphrates and enters Nasiriyah. It's one of those sprawling Third World mud-brick-and-cinder-block cities that probably looks pretty badly rubbled even on a good day. This morning, smoke curls from collapsed structures. Most buildings facing the road are

pockmarked and cratered. Cobras fly overhead spitting machine-gun fire. Dogs roam the ruins.

The convoy stops to pick up a Marine from another unit who is wounded in the leg. A few vehicles come under machine-gun and RPG fire. The Recon Marines return fire and redecorate an apartment building with about a dozen grenades fired from a Mark-19. In an hour, we clear the outer limits of the city and start to head north. Dead bodies are scattered along the edges of the road. Most are men, enemy fighters, some with weapons still in their hands. The Marines nickname one corpse Tomato Man, because from a distance he looks like a smashed crate of tomatoes in the road. There are shot-up cars and trucks with bodies hanging over the edges. We pass a bus, smashed and burned, with charred human remains sitting upright in some windows. There's a man with no head in the road and a dead little girl, too, about three or four, lying on her back. She's wearing a dress and has no legs.

We drive on, pausing a few kilometers ahead for the battalion to call in an airstrike on an Iraqi armored vehicle up the road. Next to me, Trombley opens up an MRE and furtively pulls out a pack of Charms. "Keep it a secret," he says. He unwraps the candies and stuffs them into his mouth.

At ten in the morning, first Recon is ordered off Highway 7, the main road heading north out of Nasiriyah, and onto a narrow dirt trail, to guard the main Marine fighting force's flanks. There's a dead man lying in a ditch where we turn off the highway. Two hundred meters past the corpse, there's a farmhouse with a family out front, waving as we drive by. At the next house, two old ladies in black jump up and down, whooping and clapping. A bunch of bearded men shout, "Good! Good! Good!" The Marines wave back. In the span of a few minutes, they have gone from kill-anyone-that-looks-dangerous mode to smiling and waving as if they're on a float in the Rose Bowl parade.

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"Stay frosty, gents," Colbert warns. "No matter what you see, we're in backcountry now, and we're all alone."

The road has dwindled down to a single narrow lane. We crawl along at a couple of miles per hour. There are farmhouses every few hundred meters. The Marines stop and toss bright-yellow humanitarian food packages at clusters of civilians. As kids run out to grab them, Colbert waves: "You're welcome. Vote Republican." He gazes at the "ankle biters" running after the food rations and says, "I really thank God I was born American. I mean, seriously, it's something I lose sleep over."

The demeanor of the civilians we pass has suddenly changed. They've stopped waving. Many avoid eye contact with us altogether. Over the radio, we hear that RCT 1 is in contact with enemy forces at a town a few kilometers to the north. As we continue along the road, we begin to notice that villagers on the other bank of the canal are fleeing in the opposite direction. Two villagers approach a Humvee behind Colbert's and warn the Marines through hand gestures that something bad lies ahead.

The convoy stops. We are at a bend in the road, with a five-foot-high berm to the left. Shots are fired directly ahead of us. "Incoming rounds," Person announces.

"Damn it," says Colbert. "I have to take a shit."

Instead, Colbert picks up a 203 round — an RPG — kisses the nose of it and slides it into the lower chamber of his gun. He opens the door and climbs up the embankment to observe a small cluster of homes on the other side. He signals for all the Marines to come out of the vehicle and join him on the berm. Marines from another platoon fire into the hamlet with rifles, machine guns and Mark-19s. But Colbert does not clear his team to fire. He can't discern any targets. About two kilometers up the road, where First Recon's Alpha Company is stopped, suspected fedayeen open up with machine guns and mortars. Alpha takes no casualties. The battalion calls in an artillery strike on the fedayeen

positions.

The team gets back in the Humvee. Trombley sits in the back seat eating spaghetti directly out of a foil MRE pack, squeezing it into his mouth from a hole in the corner. "I almost shot that man," he says excitedly, referring to a farmer in the hamlet on the other side of the berm.

"Not yet," Colbert says. "Put your weapon on safety."

Nobody speaks for a solid ten minutes. A vicious sandstorm is kicking up. Fifty- to sixty-mile-per-hour winds buffet the side of the vehicle. Visibility drops, and the air fills with yellow dust. The battalion is hemmed in on narrow back roads with enemy shooters in the vicinity.

RCT 1 is now waiting outside a town about six kilometers ahead. Its commander has reported taking fire from the town, and First Recon plans to bypass it. Colbert explains the situation to his men.

"Why can't we just go through the town?" Trombley asks.

"I think we'd get smoked," Colbert says.

Fifteen minutes later, we start moving north. Everyone in Colbert's vehicle believes we are taking a route that bypasses the hostile town, Al Gharraf. Then word comes over the radio of a change in plan. We are driving straight through.

Colbert's vehicle comes alongside the walls of the town, which looks like a smaller version of Nasiriyah. The street we are on, now paved, bears left. As Person makes the turn, the wall of a house directly to my right and no more than three meters from my window erupts with muzzle flashes and the clatter of machine-gun fire. The vehicle takes twenty-two bullets, five of them in my door. The light armor that covers much of the Humvee (eighth-inch steel plates riveted over the doors) stops most of them, but the windows are open and there are gaps in the armor. A bullet flies past Colbert's head and smacks into the frame behind Person's. Another round comes partially through my door.

We have barely entered the city, and it's a two-kilometer drive through it. Ahead of us, a Bravo Marine driving in an open Humvee takes a bullet in his arm.

The shooting continues on both sides. Less than half an hour before, Colbert had been talking about stress reactions in combat. In addition to the embarrassing losses of bodily control that twenty-five percent of all soldiers experience, other symptoms include time dilation, i.e., time slowing down or speeding up; vividness, a starkly heightened awareness of detail; random thoughts, the mind fixating on unimportant sequences; memory loss; and, of course, your basic feelings of sheer terror.

In my case, hearing and sight become almost disconnected. I see more muzzle flashes next to the vehicle but don't hear them. In the seat beside me, Trombley fires 300 rounds from his machine gun. Ordinarily, if someone was firing a machine gun that close to you, it would be deafening. His gun seems to whisper.

The look on Colbert's face is almost serene. He's hunched over his weapon, leaning out the window, intently studying the walls of the buildings, firing bursts from his M-4 and grenades from the 203 tube underneath the main barrel. I watch him pump in a fresh grenade, and I think, "I bet Colbert's really happy to be finally shooting a 203 round in combat." I remember him kissing the grenade earlier. Random thoughts.

I study Person's face for signs of panic, fear or death. My fear is he'll get shot or freak out, and we'll get stuck on this street. But Person seems fine. He's slouched over the wheel, looking through the windshield, an almost blank expression on his face. The only thing different about him is he's not babbling his opinions on Justin Timberlake or some other pussy faggot retard who bothers him.

Trombley pauses from shooting out his window and turns around with a triumphant grin. "I got one, Sergeant!" he shouts.

Colbert ignores him. Trombley eagerly goes back to shooting at people out his window. A gray object zooms toward

the windshield and smacks into the roof. The Humvee fills with a metal-on-metal scraping sound, which I do hear. Earlier that day Colbert had traded out Garza for a Mark-19 gunner from a different unit. The guy's name is Cpl. Walt Hasser, 23, from Taylorstown, Virginia. Hasser's legs twist sideways. A steel cable has fallen or been dropped over the vehicle. Another one falls on it and scrapes across the roof.

Colbert calls out, "Walt, are you OK?" There's silence. Person turns around, taking his foot off the gas pedal.

The vehicle slows and wanders slightly to the left. "Walt?" Person calls.

"I'm OK!" he says, sounding almost cheerful. Person has lost his focus on moving the vehicle forward. We slow to a crawl. Person later says that he was worried one of the cables dropped on the vehicle might have been caught on Hasser. He didn't want to accelerate and somehow leave him hanging from a light pole by his neck in downtown Gharraf.

"Drive, Person!" Colbert shouts.

Person picks up the pace, and there is silence outside. We are still in the town, but no one seems to be shooting at us.

"Holy shit! Did you see that? We got fucking lit up!" Colbert is beside himself, laughing and shaking his head. "Holy shit!"

Trombley turns to Colbert, again seeking recognition. "I got one, Sergeant. His knee exploded, then I cut him in half!"

"You cut him in half?" Colbert asks. "That's great, Trombley!"

"Before we start congratulating ourselves," Person says, "we're not out of this yet."

We pass a mangled, burned car on the right, then Person makes a left into more gunfire. Set back from the road are several squat cinder-block buildings, like an industrial district. I see what looks like white puffs of smoke streaking out from them: more enemy fire. Person floors the Humvee. Colbert and Trombley start shooting again.

"I got another one!" Trombley shouts.

There's a white haze in the distance: the end of the city. We fly out onto a sandy field that looks almost like a beach. There's so much sand blowing in the air - winds are still at about sixty miles per hour -- it's tough to see anything. There's gunfire all around. The Humvee drives about twenty meters into the sand, then sinks into it. Person floors the engine, and the wheels spin. The Humvee has sunk up to the door frames in tar. It's a sobka field. Sobka is a geological phenomenon peculiar to the Middle East. It looks like desert on top, with a hard crust of sand an inch or so thick, which a man could possibly walk on, but break through the crust and beneath it's the La Brea tar pits, quicksand made of tar.

Colbert jumps out and runs to the other Recon vehicles, lined up now, shooting into the city. He runs down the lines of guns, shouting, "Cease fire! Assess the situation!"

Back at Colbert's Humvee, one of his superiors pounds on the roof and shouts, "Abandon the Humvee!" He adds, "Thermite the radios!" He is referring to a kind of intense-heat grenade used to destroy sensitive military equipment before abandoning it.

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Colbert jumps up behind him. "Fuck, no! I'm not thermiting anything. We're driving this out of here!"

He dives under the wheel wells with bolt cutters, slicing away the steel cables, a gift of the defenders of Gharraf, wrapped around the axle. A five-ton support truck backs up, its driver taking fire, and Marines attach towing cables to our axle. Within half an hour, Colbert's vehicle is freed and limping to Recon's camp, a few kilometers distant, for the night.

The Bravo Marines spend half an hour recounting every moment of the ambush. Aside from the driver in the other platoon who was shot in the arm, no one was hit. They laugh uproariously about all the buildings they blew up. Privately, Colbert confesses to me that he had absolutely no feelings going through the city. He almost seems disturbed by this. "It was just like training," he says. "I just loaded and fired my weapon from muscle memory. I wasn't even aware what my hands were doing."

That night we are rewarded with the worst sandstorm we have experienced in Iraq. Under a pitch-black sky, sand and pebbles kicked up by sixty-mile-per-hour winds pelt sleeping bags like hail. Then it rains. Lightning flashes intermingle with Marine artillery rounds sailing into the city. Just before turning in, I smell a sickly-sweet odor. During chemical-weapons training before the war, we were taught that some nerve agents emit unusual, fragrant odors. I put on my gas mask and sit in the dark Humvee for twenty minutes before Person tells me what I'm smelling is a cheap Swisher Sweet cigar that Espera is smoking underneath his Humvee.

The next morning at dawn, Lt. Fick tells his Marines, "The good news is, we will be rolling with a lot of ass today. RCT 1 will be in front of us for most of the day. The bad news is, we're going through four more towns like the one we hit yesterday."

There are wild dogs everywhere along the highway. "We ought to shoot some of these dogs," Trombley says.

"We don't shoot dogs," Colbert says.

"I'm afraid of dogs," Trombley mumbles.

I ask him if he was ever attacked by a dog when he was little.

"No," he answers. "My dad was once. The dog bit him, and my dad jammed his hand down his throat and ripped up his stomach. I did have a dog lunge at me once on the sidewalk. I just threw it on its side, knocked the wind out of him."

"Where did we find this guy?" Person asks.

We drive on.

"I like cats," Trombley offers. "I had a cat that lived to be sixteen. One time he ripped a dog's eye out with his claw."

We pass dead bodies in the road again, men with weapons by their sides, then more than a dozen trucks and cars burned and smoking by the road. Many have a burned corpse or two of Iraqi soldiers who died after crawling five or ten meters away from the vehicle before they expired, hands still grasping forward on the pavement. Just north of here, at another stop, Marines in Fick's vehicle machine-gun four men in a field who appear to be stalking us. It's no big deal. Since the shooting started in Nasiriyah forty-eight hours ago, firing weapons and seeing dead people has become almost routine.

We stop next to a green field with a small house set back from the road. Marines from a different unit suspect that gunshots came from the house. A Bravo Marine sniper observes the house for forty-five minutes. He sees women and children inside, nobody with guns. For some reason, a handful of Marines from the other unit opens fire on the house. Soon, Marines down the line join in with heavy weapons.

One of Recon's own officers, whom the Marines have nicknamed Encino Man because of his apelike appearance, steps out of his command vehicle. He is so eager to get in the fight, it seems, he forgets to unplug his radio headset, which

jerks his head back as the cord, still attached to the dash unit, tightens. Colbert, who believes the house contains only noncombatants, starts screaming, "Jesus Christ! There's fucking civilians in that house! Cease fire!" Encino Man pops off a 203 grenade that falls wildly short of the house. Colbert, like other Marines in Bravo, is furious. Not only do they believe this Recon officer is firing on civilians, but the guy also doesn't even know how to range his 203.

Colbert sits in the Humvee, trying to rationalize the events outside that have spiraled beyond his control: "Everyone's just tense. Some Marine took a shot, and everyone has just followed suit."

Before this event can be fully resolved — some Marines insist gunshots did come from the house — First Recon is sent several kilometers up the road to the edge of another town, Ar Rifa. Colbert's team stops thirty meters from the town's outer walls. The winds have died down, but dust is so thick in the air that it looks like twilight at noon. An electrical substation is on fire next to Colbert's vehicle, adding its own acrid smoke. Shots come from the town, and Colbert's team fires back.

But a different crisis is brewing a few vehicles down. Encino Man, who an hour ago attempted to fire on the house Colbert believed contained civilians, commits what his men believe is a more dangerous blunder. Operating under the belief that a team of fedayeen is nearby, Encino Man attempts to call in an artillery strike almost directly on top of Bravo's position. A few enlisted Marines in Bravo confront the officer. One calls Encino Man a "dumb motherfucker" to his face.

Fick attempts to intervene on the side of the enlisted Marines, and the officer threatens him with disciplinary action. The artillery strike never occurs. But the incident aggravates growing tensions between First Recon's officers and its enlisted men, who are beginning to fear that some of their leaders are dangerously incompetent.

After night falls outside of Rifa, another bad day in Iraq ends with a new twist: a friendly-fire incident. A U.S. military convoy moving up the road in complete darkness mistakenly opens fire on First Recon's vehicles. Inside his Humvee, Sgt. Colbert sees the "friendly" red tracer rounds coming from the approaching convoy and orders everyone down. One round slices through the rear of the Humvee, behind the seat where Trombley and I are sitting.

Later, we find out from Fick that we were shot up by Navy Reservist surgeons on their way to set up a mobile shock-trauma unit on the road ahead. "Those were fucking doctors who do nose and tit jobs," Fick tells the men.

A half-hour after the friendly-fire incident, First Recon is ordered to immediately drive forty kilometers through back roads to the Qal'at Sukkar airfield, deep behind enemy lines. "Well, I guess we won't be sleeping tonight," Colbert says.

The drive takes about three hours. On the way, the men are informed that they will be setting up an observation post on the field to prepare for a parachute assault that British forces are going to execute at dawn. But plans change again at sunrise. At 6:20, after the Bravo Marines have slept for about ninety minutes, Colbert is awakened and told his men have ten minutes to race onto the airfield, six kilometers away, and assault it.

At 6:28, Colbert's team is in the Humvee driving with thirty other Recon vehicles down a road they've never even studied on a map. They're told over the radio they will face enemy tanks.

"Everything and everyone on the airfield is hostile," Colbert says, passing on a direct order from his commander.

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Next to me in the rear seat, Trombley says, "I see men running."

"Are they armed?" Colbert asks.

"There's something," Trombley says.

I look out Trombley's window and see a bunch of camels.

"Everyone's declared hostile," Colbert says. "Light them up."

Trombley fires a burst or two from his SAW. "Shooting motherfuckers like it's cool," he says, amused with himself.

The Humvees race onto the airfield and discover it's abandoned, nothing but crater-pocked airstrips. Nevertheless, they've beaten the British to it. The landing is called off.

"Gentlemen, we just seized an airfield," Colbert says. "That was pretty ninja."

An hour later, the Marines have set up a camp off the edge of the airfield. They are told they will stay here for a day or longer. This morning, the sun shines and there's no dust in the air. For the first time in a week, many of the Marines take their boots and socks off. They unfurl camo nets for shade and lounge beside their Humvees. A couple of Recon Marines walk over to Trombley and tease him about shooting camels.

"I think I got one of those Iraqis, too. I saw him go down."

"Yeah, but you killed a camel, too, and wounded another one."

The Marines seem to have touched a nerve.

"I didn't mean to," Trombley says defensively. "They're innocent."

A couple of hours later, two Bedouin women arrive at the edge of Bravo's perimeter. Bedouins are nomadic tribespeople who roam the desert, living in tents, herding sheep and camels. One of the women is dressed in a purple robe and appears to be in her thirties. She is pulling a heavy object wrapped in a blanket and is accompanied by an old woman with blue tribal tattoos on her wrinkled face. They stop on top of a berm about twenty meters away and start waving. Robert Timothy Bryan, a Navy Corpsman who functions as the platoon's medic, walks over to them. Later, he'll say that he's not sure why he even walked up to the women. In recent days, Marines have grown weary of Iraqi civilians, who have begun accosting them, begging for food, cigarettes, sometimes even chanting the one English word they all seem to be learning: "Money, money, money." When he reaches them, he notices that the younger woman seems highly distraught, gesturing and moving her mouth, but no words come out. Her breasts are exposed, her robes having fallen open while she was dragging her bundle across the fields. As Bryan approaches, she frantically unrolls its contents, revealing what appears to be a youth's bloody corpse. The boy looks about fourteen. Then he opens his eyes. Bryan kneels down. There are four small holes, two on each side of his stomach.

Bryan begins treating him immediately. In the field, several men appear walking a seventeen-year-old with blood streaming down his right leg. The two Bedouin boys were shot with rounds from a Marine SAW. Trombley is the only Marine who fired his SAW that morning. There were no other Marines in the area for twenty kilometers. Bryan assesses the boys' condition, cursing loudly as other Marines approach. "These fucking jackasses," he says. "Trigger-happy motherfuckers."

The woman in purple, the mother, kneels, putting her hands in the air, still talking with no sounds coming out. The old lady, who turns out to be the grandmother, stands up, cigarette dangling from her lips, and covers her daughter's breasts as more Marines walk up. None of the Bedouins — there are about eight sitting around watching Bryan examine the boy — seems the least bit angry. When I walk over, the grandmother offers me a cigarette.

The younger boy's name is Naif. His brother, still hobbling around on his bloody shot leg, is Latif. The boys had gone out to the family's herd of camels, which had been frightened by the Marine Humvees and started running. The boys were chasing after them when they were shot. One was carrying a stick.

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Each of the four holes in Naif's body is an entry wound, meaning the four bullets zoomed around inside his slender stomach and chest cavity, ripping apart his organs.

Bryan continues cursing his fellow Marines. "We're Recon Marines," he says. "We're paid to observe. We don't shoot unarmed children." Bravo Marines are now milling around, trying to help. They hold up ponchos over the two wounded boys, shielding them from the sun. But there's not much else to do. Bryan determines that the younger boy has hours to live unless he can be medevacked. But Lt. Col. Steve Ferrando, the battalion commander, has sent a Marine bearing news that the request has been denied. Just then, an unmanned spy plane flies low overhead. "We can afford to fly fucking Predators," Bryan says, "but we can't take care of this kid?"

Just then, Colbert comes up the hill. He sees the mother, the kid, the brother with the bloody leg, the family, the Marines holding up the ponchos.

"This is what Trombley did," Bryan says. A Marine at the front of the convoy says he passed the same shepherds and it was obvious to him that they were not hostile. "Twenty Marines drove past those kids and didn't shoot," he says.

"Don't say that," Colbert says. "Don't put this on Trombley. I'm responsible for this. It was my orders."

Colbert kneels down over the kid and starts crying. He doesn't lose control or anything dramatic. His eyes just water, and he says, "What can I do here?"

"Apparently fucking nothing," Bryan says.

Within a couple of minutes, the Recon Marines have come up with a plan. They load the boy onto a stretcher to carry him into the camp. With Colbert and Bryan carrying the front of the stretcher, they lead the entire entourage of Marines and Bedouin tribespeople underneath the camouflage nets of the battalion headquarters. "What the hell is going on here?" Sgt. Maj. John Sixta, First Recon's highest-ranking enlisted man, walks up, veins pulsing on his head as he confronts what seems to be a mutinous breakdown of military order.

"We brought him here to die," Bryan says defiantly.

"Get him the fuck out of here," the sergeant major bellows.

Ten minutes after they carry the Bedouin boy off, Ferrando has a change of heart. He orders his men to bring the Bedouins to the shock-trauma unit, twenty kilometers south. Some Marines believe Ferrando reversed himself to heal the growing rift between the officers and enlisted men in the battalion. As Bryan climbs onto the back of an open truck with the wounded boys and most of their clan, a Marine walks up to him and says, "Hey, Doc. Get some."

Colbert walks off, privately inconsolable. "I'm going to have to bring this home with me and live with it," he says. "Pilots don't see what they do when they drop bombs. We do." He goes back to the Humvee, sits Trombley down and tells him he is not responsible for what happened: "You were following my orders." Already there are rumors spreading of a possible judicial inquiry into the shooting. "Is this going to be OK, I mean with the investigation?" Trombley asks Colbert.

"You'll be fine, Trombley."

"No. I mean for you, Sergeant." Trombley grins. "I don't care what happens, really. I'm out in a couple of years. I

mean for you. This is your career."

"I'll be fine." Colbert stares at him. "No worries."

(After an inquiry, Trombley and Bravo Company are cleared of any wrongdoing.)

Something's been bothering me about Trombley for a day or two, and I can't help thinking about it now. I was never quite sure if I should believe his claim that he cut up those two Iraqis in Gharraf. But he hit those two shepherds, one of whom was extremely small, at more than 200 meters, from a Humvee bouncing down a rough road at forty miles per hour. However horrible the results, his work was textbook machine-gun shooting, and the fact is, from now on, every time I ride with Colbert's team, I feel a lot better when Trombley is by my side with the SAW.

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