

A Walk in the Sun

By Phillip Kuhn

Chapter 1

Well it all started back when I was 16 years old I was working on our farm in the hot July heat I had just plowed 2 acres of field with our 1970 farmall modal A tractor which unfortunately for me did not have a cab and so I was feeling the heat firsthand on that day I was just sitting on the tractor taking a break when my dad came out and told me that we were going to town to pick up some groceries and that the field could wait for a little while.

So I cranked up the tractor and drove me and my dad drove back to the house I parked it in the barn and went into the house I showered and dressed and then came downstairs where my parents were waiting for me my brother and I walked to the car and he asked

my dad "can we get some ice cream when were in town" he said in a pleading voice my dad said " I think that can be arranged Jake" jakes eyes lit up as he hugged my dad. We all climbed in the family pickup truck and started the 20 minute drive into Louisburg the town that's closest to our farm when we got to Louisburg my dad dropped my mom of at the Hudson's market and then took my brother to the ice-cream shop that was just down the street.

Since I did want any ice cream I walked down the post office to check our mail that little decision would alter my life forever.

I walked into the post office and standing by the letter rack was a tall man in uniform he was at least 6'5" and had more muscles than I had ever seen in my life he turned around and saw me staring at him he smiled as I stood there mesmerized by this sight of military bearing and neatness the uniformed man broke the silence "how ya doing son my name is Shelton Harvey U.S. Marine Corps" he stuck out a meaty hand and I took it and we shook hands he had the strongest handshake of any body I've ever met.

After we shook hands I said " My name is Reed. Jason Reed. So what on earth is you doing here in this little

town," He said "I'm the Marine Recruiter for this part of Kansas and this little post office is my main base of operations for my correspondence around this area."

I new about the marines of course I had read books and seen parades but I had never seen one up close decked out in dress blues before. In fact my dad was in the marine corps and had fought in Vietnam but he never talked about that part of his life and so I had never asked him about it.

Well I got to talking with Shelton and he told me all there was to know about the marines from boot camp to some basic history and I new in that moment that I wanted to be a marine.

I asked him how old you had to be to join and he said you had to be at least seventeen to join but if you were 17teen then you had to have both parents signatures in order to join but if I waited one more year then I could join all on my own.

He gave me some information and then said goodbye as he had to leave on an appointment I thanked for his time and said goodbye.

I watched him walk out of the post office and get into his car and drive away and in my mind I was thinking that I wanted to be just like him someday.

Well about a year and a half later I was 17 and I was in my last month of high school and I was so excited because in less than a month I would graduate from high school and I could finally join the marine corps like I had been dreaming about since that fateful day last year when I met Mr. Harvey in the post office.

Since then he was reassigned to a different section of Kansas and so I only saw him a few more times before he moved away. In those few visits he gave me all of the things I would need to know to make it in the marines including academic and physical requirements.

I had wanted to join on my 17th birthday but my parents wanted me to finish my high school education and I don't think they really took me seriously until I started getting myself in really good shape.

Being a farmer I was already in very good shape but I needed to build my endurance and capacity to run at least 3 miles in 20 minutes.

Now I was to my goal I could bench press 250lbs. at my high school and I could run 3 miles in 19 minutes. By this

time I had grown to about my dad's height which put me at an even 6'3" I weighed 230lbs. and it was I am proud to say all muscle.

I graduated high school with a 3.57 GPA and I was very proud, the neatest thing about it was that Mr. Harvey had been assigned to Louisburg again and he signed me up. I'm glad that he's the one that got the credit for my enlistment because he's the one who took the time with me that day to explain all about the military life and about the marines.

I worked the whole summer after I graduated and planned to join in the fall. Then the whole world came crashing down.

The date was September 11, 2001 I had just gotten home from my job and I was sitting in the family room watching the news to see what the weather would be like. as I was sitting there there was a special bulletin about an accident in New York City that involved several buildings including the World Trade Center. As I looked at the screen I was horrified to see the top floors of the south tower engulfed in flames and I thought how could this have happened? In our technological age how on earth could a plane crash into a building in broad daylight?

Then as I sat there watching the news castor yelled that there was another plane heading for the north tower. I sat there in shock as the second fully loaded 747 plowed into the tower sheets of flame came from the impact area and at that moment I knew that this was no twist of fate or a freak accident. This was a deliberate attack on American soil, at this point I knew that I had another for going into the marines. I wanted to exact revenge on whoever did this awful deed.

One week later I was in Mr.Harveys office and he was signing me up for immediate active duty with the marine corps fleet marine force. I told him that I was joining now not just to wear the uniform but now I had joined to fight and I would destroy those who dared to attack America on her own soil.

Mr. Harvey looked up at me with a a sadness in his eyes. He told me that ground combat was one of the worst things that you will go through in life and to not wish for it. He then told me briefly about what he had gone through in Vietnam as a young marine in combat and he really did make it sound terrible.

He must have sensed the uncertainty in my eyes because he said that he could destroy my papers and we could forget

that I ever wanted to sign up, but I was committed. I had worked hard to get in shape for the marines and I wanted to go and be one.

Well he signed me up and I went home and packed and a week later I said a tearful goodbye to my family and boarded a greahound bus bound for Memphis Tennessee.

It was an uneventful busride and in Memphis I boarded another bus which took me to Charleston and from Charleston I arrived at bootcamp Parris Island, North Carolina.

When the bus arrived all of my fellow marines to be were very sleepy form the long night time bus ride and so many of them were slumped down in there seat when we pulled through the gate and came to a stop next to a large, paved area next to some buildings.

As soon as the bus came to a stop four yelling cursing drill instructors jumped onto the base and screamed at us to wake up and get of the bus. All of the sleeping people were just about shocked to death to wake up with a strange man cursing at you like that.

Well we got of the bus and were told to stand on the yellow footprints that were on the ground outside the bus

I thought about all the other recrutes that had stood where I standing. As I was thinking this the D.Is. (drill

instructors) were yelling and screaming at the young men who needed some extra encouragement to stand at the right posture.

Well the DIs finally got everybody into what they deemed an acceptable position they then told us to march double time to the nearest building across the paved lot.

I don't think I've seen seventy young men move as fast as I saw them tonight and I must confess that I was one of those people who were moving as fast as I possibly could across that little piece of blacktop.

When we got into the building there were medical corpsmen lined up in three rows armed with syringes.

Now I've never liked shots very much but I never the less walked up to the corpsmen and stuck out my arm, I must say that was the fastest shot I think I have ever received in my entire life, before I could feel the pain of the shot I was out the door on the other side of the building and was being herded along with the others recruits toward a building that when you looked at it the first thing you think of is a nazi death camp during WWII.

When I got inside the building it turned out to be the supply building where we lined up and stripped of our civilian clothes and put all of our personal belongings

into what they call sea bags where they would be packed into storage and after basic training we would get them bag but for the next 12 weeks we would have nothing other than what the marine corps gave us while we did our training.

After we stripped our civilian clothes of we went, naked, through a isle where we were handed our clothing and and boots underwhere and sox we were told to dress and after we had done that than we were all given shaving equipment, soap, towel and deodorant.

We left the supply office carrying an armload of stuff while trying to listen to the DIs yelling at us and at the same time trying to run with a load the size of a coffee table.

After a few minutes which seemed like and eternity we arrived at the barracks building and were assigned to a rack(marine language for bed) then we were told to put our stuff into a foot locker that was at the foot of our bunk beds.

After we had done this then the DI told us how we would address our drill instructor while we were in boot camp.

"while you ladies our on my island the first and last words out of your filthy sewers when your addressing your drill

instructors will be SIR is that clear!" that is pretty close to what he probably sounded like but it was much dirtier I'm sure than what I have mentioned here. Then he proceeded to show us how to make our racks the marine way. We had to stretch the sheets and blanket so tight that a quarter would bounce off the top of the bed covers. I remember going to sleep that night thinking what have I gotten myself into this time.

Chapter 2

I was just finishing a dream about home and the bright sunshine when I was rudely awakened by a very angry-faced drill instructor who was yelling things at me which I will not write down here incase there are any children that are present at the reading of this book. It was not pretty. I

was trying to get out of bed as fast as I could but my blanket was hooked over the front of my bed frame and so what started out to be a very quick, neat exit from my rack ended up to be a fall from 8ft high onto a hard wood floor.

The D.I. grabbed me by my shoulder and pulled me up off the ground. He was so strong that he actually lifted my 250lbs. frame about a foot off the ground. He yelled in my face "you think this is boyscout camp recruit? You think I'm here to wipe your little nose for you? Go get in formation screw-up and if this every happens again I'll have you do so many pushups that your sorry little excuse for arms will pop out of there sockets! Now sound off!" Sir yes Sir I yelled as loud as I could "bull\$#!% I can't here you private now

sound off like you got vocal chords" I yelled the same thing so loud that I thought my throat would bust open. I doubled timed to where the other recruits were lined up in rows trying to suppress there laughter after watching me get a dressing down from the drill instructor. I had the last laugh in this case because one recruit near the front of the line couldn't control himself and let out a little giggle. Bad idea.

The di must have been at least 12 ft away but he still must have heard it because he flew over to us and yelled "who laughed! Which one of you slimy little pukes laughed huh! So we got a fricking comedian in the ranks. Well he doesn't confess this instant I'll have all of you running laps until you drop dead from heat stroke!" the recruit I must hand it to him he was at least honest he said "sir I did laughed sir"

That recruit did 80 pushups on the deck in front of us right there. The di made us count how many as the poor recruit struggled to fill his quota. He did but he puked a few times along the way.

From that moment on our di referred to him as "gomer pile" our whole platoon had to then cleanup the vomit off the deck with omonia toothbrushes and our bare hands. It was not very fun needless to say.

We then doubled timed over the parade ground where the di told us what we would do that day he told us "the first thing on our agenda was a 4 mile run around the parade ground starting now!" he started calling out cadence and we all fell in behind him this is a little of the cadence he sang as we ran a steady pace "One two three four I'm in the

marine corps. One two three four I love the marine corps" and we did that for two miles with him calling out cadence from his seemingly endless list.

I learned more about myself on that run than probably any other thing I did at boot camp I was pushed to the very limit of my endurance and I stuck with it and finished the run I felt really good about keeping the pace with our di. I guess all that working out that I did at home was starting to pay off.

After we completed the run we came back to the barracks and did pushups and situps until our bodies felt like they would fall apart.

We picked ourselves off the floor and were ordered to form up outside on the blacktop outside the barracks. We were then told that we would go to chow, the di laid down the ground rules for the chow line. There was no talking and we had to stand at attention with our food trays tucked against our sides until it was our turn to go through the food line, but there was one all important rule: always eat whatever you take, if you don't you will be forced to eat it. So needless to say we were very careful about how much food we took when it was our units turn through the food line. One unlucky recruit from another platoon was caught

itching his head while standing in line and he had to put his tray on a table and do 20 pushups in front of the whole room of recruits. We were learning very quickly that around here disobedience even in the smallest things is highly frowned upon.

Well the days turned into weeks and pretty soon we were on our way to the rifle range. The whole time that I had been at boot camp so far paled in comparison to how much I wanted to be given a marksmans medal and I wanted to graduate at the top of my platoon and mabeey at the top of the whole recruit pool that had fired that year. The first week at the rifle range was spent "snapping in" Its in this training that we learn how to quickly aim our rifles should an enemy approach quickly. This was probably the most boring faze of training because we had no ammo to fire because we were just practicing holding our guns the right way. We did this for about a week and then finally we went to the actually firing range for our week of live firing. Safety was paramount. If a recruit pointed a firearm even if it wasn't loaded toward a di or another recruit he was immediately thrown of the field and was flunked from the course. Me and my platoon mates were very careful from that

moment on and no one in my platoon were accused of doing anything wrong that entire week of firing.

We fired all week and I shot pretty fair on all of the courses and I was very confident that I could bag the medal that I really wanted.

The courses that we fired were 10 rounds slow fire at a target 100yards distant and then we repeated that only we used rapid fire then we fired the same number of rounds but we fired at a target 200 yards distant we repeated this using rapid fire.

Those were the main events and I can still see the bright sunshine that was glinting off my sights which made it almost impossible to get a clear sight picture at the target.

I was pretty nervous on this fateful day because today I would do or die. If I shot good today I would get my medal and be promoted to pfc (private first class) right out of boot camp that would boost my pay and give me a better chance for promotion.

There was no wind that day and the weather was perfect for shooting. I was excited. We did the first event came I fired and I became one with my weapon and we were making some

good hits on the target. On the first event I fired a perfect score, that news boosted my confidence and I fired a perfect score on the next event. Well I was on a role now and I went on to fire an almost perfect score on the next events and somehow I don't know but I fired a perfect score on the hardest and last event and that was awesome when I got my score for the day. I was not only going to receive my medal but I had fired the highest score out of the all the recruits.

When we left the range I was so happy and full of confidence that I felt I could take on the world and whatever the my di could throw at me. I felt that I had accomplished

something for the first time in my life. When I graduated high school I felt that I had done something good but never had I felt so proud of myself until this day. I had proven myself to my fellow recruits and my drill instructors.

Well we marched back to the barracks and we cleaned our rifles, which was a pretty big task because the m-16 service rifle we were using has more nooks and crannys to clean than an erector set. What was worse is that we would be inspected by the company commander. All of our packs,

rifles and gear were going to be put through the commanders watchful eye and any infractions were paid for with pushups and crunches.

Several recruits had not cleaned there equipment as well as they could have they did quite a few pushups that night.

After we were completely done with the whole firing range faze of our training, next we would concentrate on field exercises in which we would learn the skills of patrolling in enemy territory, sentry duty, assault positions, defending positions and some very primitive field medicine. We would spend two weeks learning these aspects of being a marine and I really enjoyed all of them. we camped out in the field while we were on these exercises and it was like camping out with a bunch of drill instructors yelling at you when you made a mistake but other than that aspect of it it was a very good time for me as far as the instructional benfit is concerned and little did I know that in just a few short months I would be using these skills while under fire and I am very glad that I paid attention and listened.

Well we got done with out field training and marched back to the barracks, next week we would graduate and boy was I ready for that!

Finally the big day came and we lined up and were inspected by the commander and we had been preparing our gear for the last week, practicing close order drill and marching all in preparation for this momentous day in my history.

We went through the graduation ceremony and the colonel pinned the marksman medal on my shirt and promoted me to PFC while my parents, who had come down from Kansas to see my graduation, looked on with pride. My dad especially was proud of me because he had been a marine and even though he had a lot of baggage that he carried with him from the Vietnam war he was still very proud that his son packed the gear to serve in the marine corps.

After the graduation I was given a 30 day leave to go home and get my things in order before I would do continued infantry training and would eventually be sent over seas to help with the takeout of Saddam Hessian. My parents treated me to dinner at a local steakhouse and then we started the long drive back up to Kansas, along the way we talked and talked about what was ahead of me and all the good memories that were behind me.

We arrived back on the farm at around 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday and our church met that night when I arrived at

church I got a lot of handshakes and proud slaps on the back when I wore my uniform with my PFC stripes and my marksmen's medal and I was very proud of that uniform. We had quite a few retired servicemen in our church but only a quarter of them had been in the marines the rest had been in either the army, air force or the navy so only a few people actually knew what I went through during boot camp and so the most congratulations came from former marines because they knew exactly what it takes to become a marine and they were very proud of me.

Chapter 3

"And as we let go of this young man today we are reminded again of sacrifice and courage and we pray Lord God almighty that you would bring Jason back to us safely from the jaws of danger we pray this in Jesus name, Amen."

That was how pastor Jackson finished his sermon that Sunday that I was there while I was on leave. It was a little embarrassing at first but I was thankful that I had somebody that was in good with the almighty praying for me

before I left. By this time things in the middle east were escalating and I knew that I would see combat a lot sooner than I originally had bargained for.

I had to go no town that afternoon because earlier that morning mom had told me I needed to get some groceries for the house, but I had another reason as well I was going to a sporting goods shop to get my knife that I would use when I went to war. Let me explain. I was issued with a fighting knife when I joined the marines but I was kind of a tradition that you picked out your own knife as kind of a good luck piece and it was believed that someday your knife you save you skin.

When I got there I was greeted by an old friend of mine from high school, Ted Johnson. He said "HI! Jason what are you doing around boy! I thought you was down in the Carolinas getting your butt kicked by the marines!" I laughed as he said this. Ted had a way of talking that could make anybody laugh he was a very carefree young man who I had grown up with and gone to high school with. I said "No I back here for about another

week before I get shipped over seas for Saddam's butt-kicking party, but you can help me with what I did come for"

Ted said "why shore thing what can I do fer ya"

I then explained what I had come into the store to get and he looked at me with wide eyes and said "well you reckon that you may need it so save your life some day Jase'" I said "yup that's what I'm getting' at"

He then proceeded to show me a large selection of knives that they had there. After looking at all of them I finally chose a fixed blade survival knife that was made by Ka-Bar the same company that made the famous Ka-Bar fighting knife that the marines before me used when they fought the Japanese in the south pacific more than 60 years before. This knife was basically the same as what they had only I had a wider blade and it had a better edge on it. Diamond tipped to be exact.

I paid \$100 for this little beauty and before I left the store Ted stuck out his hand and I took it and we shook hands he said "well I'll be seeing you when you get back. Stay safe and don't be a hero Jason, remember you still owe me a fishing trip for that girl I got you a date with in 11th grade. And I expect to be paid" he smiled and I laughed

remembering that incident that now seemed so long ago, like it was in a different lifetime almost.

Well I said goodbye and left the store, walked to the truck and drove home.

I spent the next week wrapping up all the loose ends that I could and getting all my affairs in order for my departure the following week.

Well the time finally came when I had to say goodbye. My mother wept as she hugged me and said " I love you son. Remember I'll be praying for you. Don't forget god and make it back safe." My father wasn't a very emotional man but today was the first time that I had ever seen him cry. That's one thing that always baffled me about my father is that he seemed impervious to pain. I remember once he cut his arm so bad that you could see his bone underneath but he didn't cry. But now as I was leaving I saw tears rolling down his brown face as he hugged me. I didn't what to say I didn't think it was that big of a deal but maybe it was to my father, who had been in Vietnam as a marine. Maybe this

scene was bringing back memories of him having to say goodbye to his parents when he left.

I finally broke away from my father's embrace and I shook his hand and told him that I would have to come back because someone had to take care of his old carcass. He laughed at that and I asked him not to worry. Then the bus pulled up and I was gone I waved once and then did not look back, I did not want my dad to see the tears in my eyes as I left.

Well it was a long ride to the nearest air force base where I would catch a flight out to camp Pendleton in sunny California, which was the largest Marine Corps recruit depot in the country.

When I landed in L.A. I caught a taxi for Pendleton and as we rode there the cabby talked with me a little bit. He was an older man and I was surprised to learn that he had been a marine and had fought in the Vietnam War around the same time as my father had which was kind of eerie. As we talked he said with his thick southern accent " Son I,s glad that you had the guts to join the marines but son don't let um

mess you up." I looked at him quizzically for a minute and then he explained. "Son right now you,s all gung ho and everthin' but when you've been in for a while you'll know what I'm talking about. Now you mentioned you're a christen and all and that's right purty but the crotch(marine corps) can take all of that away if you let it. Its taken me 30 years to get back the same level of faith as I had when I first jined up so just remember to keep close to God and don't stray from the path because it sure as heaven hard to get back on."

He went back to driving and didn't say another thing for the rest of the trip. When we pulled up to the big forbidding gates that marked the entrance to the base I got out of the cab, pulled my suitcase from the trunk and was just about to pay the cabby when he stepped out of the front seat stuck out his leathery hand I took it and he said "names Earl partner"

"Jason" I said.

"Well Jason I hope that you come back in one piece, and as for the cab fair, well, call it a goin' away present from a fellow marine" I looked at him incredulously. I said "at least let me pay for the gas" but he stood his ground. He

shook my hand again, climbed back in the cab, waved once and drove off.

I have never seen Earl since that day but I will always remember his accent and the advice he gave me in that run down taxi on the way to my destiny and I thank God that he put him in my life at that moment because his advice sure saved me from a lot of heartache in my future life.

Well I walked through the gates after showing the guard my I.D. card and was immediately hit with how huge this place was. Think about 20 football fields plus more. It was massive.

I was directed to the barracks and got myself settled in for what would, essentially, be a weeklong layover while all my gear arrived by truck and our ship was loaded. We would be traveling on the U.S.S. *Rafferty* which was a troop ship converted from a Vietnam-era destroyer.

The week passed without incident and the time finally came to pack my bags and gear and board the ship that would be my home for the 2 week cruise halfway around the world to the far-off lands of Kuwait and Iraq.

The first day aboard ship was kind of fun. It was like going on a fishing trip the water was calm and so the ship just had a gentle pitch-and-rolle to it but the second day out, Oh god save my young hind end, I was seasick like none other. We hit very rough water around the Caribbean and I puked my guts out several times I'm not exactly sure.

That's about as miserable as I've ever been in my life. And what made it bad is that there were thousands of marines just like me on board and so there were puddles of vomit in the

hallways and the marines in the same room with me were all puking. So it was basically a giant puke bowl for about 2 days.

We finally made it through the storm and cleaned up the ship and it was a good feeling to know that I was "salty" a term that means just what it sounds like. It meant that I now was an old hand at shipboard life and that I was no longer an FNG. (The last two letters stand for new guys)

We finally got to our port in Kuwait and it felt really good to have my feet on dry ground for a change although it did take awhile to get rid of my sea legs.

After we got off the ship my unit the "fighting 5th" marine division, who earned its nickname for being the main unit to fight in the pacific in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, boarded a convoy headed for the border of Iraq. I was very proud to have been assigned to this special unit and I was determined to live up to the image of the marines that have gone before me.

Because the war hadn't officially started yet all we did is sit around in a tent farm in the middle of the desert called *Camp Matilda*. Then we got word that we would be smashing across the border into Iraq right behind a special forces unit called the Recon Marines, which were in essence, very highly trained marines who were capable of just about anything and they would be spearheading the assault. On the last night in the tent I prayed and asked God to keep me safe in the ensuing months. I felt uneasy that night as I dozed off. "Oh well" I said to myself. Tomorrow was D-Day and I'd better get some sleep.

Chapter 4

"Hit the deck!!!!" someone yells as the sky erupts in a ball of fire over to my left as I bury myself in mother earth. The shock waves ripple out from the mortar explosion like an earthquake. For the next few seconds I am bombarded with chunks of falling sand and shrapnel. When things calm down a little bit I stick my head up from behind the berm where I was hiding to see who yelled the warning. It must have been the sergeant. "Reed! You okay!" he yells from about twenty feet to my right behind a burned out tank shell which was probably a relic from the gulf war. How ironic. The very thing that the Iraqis used to attack us in

that war was now giving us protection from the Iraqis in this war. I yell back "I reckon I'm finer than frog hair over here sir" "ears is ringing that's 'bout it" the sergeant yells at my six other squad members who are behind one of the humvees in our convoy. After waiting a few minutes we all gather to where we were conducting a meeting before the kindly Iraqi forces decided to interrupt. This incident happened about ten minutes after we crossed the Iraq border coming from Kuwait with the rest of the marine forces, who were spearheading the invasion of Iraq. I cannot describe the pride that I felt in being a U.S. Marine doing what I had trained for. The convoy my squad was attached to had five hummers and we were heading along a pretty good clip when mortars began to hit danger close to the convoy. The squad leader called a halt and we all dove out of the humvee as fast as we could and tried to find any available cover to hide behind. A few seconds later is when the big one hit near us. I swear it was huge, at least and 81mm (you probably don't know what this is but take my word for it. It was massive.)

I thanked God again that he made the Iraqis such terrible shots as we all climbed back into our vehicles. All of us were somewhat wary after that incident but we drove on for another 30 minutes without a problem.

We were about an hour into the invasion when we got a call on the squawk box (marine jargon for radio) from HQ telling us that an F-16 pilot had radioed in that there was a large group of hostiles in a village about 2 miles down that road from our position. We radioed back our thanks and then sergeant Friar called a halt to our convoy and for the next 10 minutes we went over tactics that we would use when entering the village. My humvee carrying my squad and me would enter the village from the north side while the rest of the convoy would enter at the front and then we would perform a pinscher movement on what ever enemy force was left alive.

I locked and loaded my m4 rifle and made sure my pistol was in working order as did my squad mates then we piled into the hummer and started off toward the small town.

When we were about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the town we started to take small arms fire from what looked like a water tower near a small stream on the western edge of the village. PFC Tyrone John opened up from the lead humvee with his mark 19 (a

40mm automatic grenade launcher) the tower and the militants on it seemed to dissolve as he poured a shower of high-explosive rounds onto it. It was the first time that I had seen a man die, and that image will stick with me for my whole life. I saw through my binoculars the men on top of the tower, they had ak-47 rifles and were firing at us on full auto. When the first round hit it blew a huge chunk of shrapnel into the chest of the man I was watching. It blew all of his internals out and they splattered against the wall of the tower behind him. I

was almost feeling sorry for him when I realized that if I was within range and he had a gun, he would have killed me without a second thought. After this realization came to my mind I suddenly felt good about us killing him and I shouted "Get Some!" along with my fellow marines.

Well my squad split off from the main convoy and headed toward the south side of town and was almost into it when the stuff started hittin' the fan.

We were just about to dismount from the hummer and do a ground sweep of the town when a RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) whooshed over our hummvee and hit the wall of a hut about ten feet away. It had missed our vehicle by literally inches. The explosion showered us with shrapnel

but nobody was seriously injured. We immediately exited the hummer and began to scan the roof tops in search of the would-be sniper. LCpl. Baker shouted from behind an earthen wall "Reed look to your right 3 o'clock on top of that hut!" I looked and saw a man holding an RPG, just as he was about to fire a shot rang out. I saw the man jerk backward as the bullet slammed into his torso the weapon flew from his hand as he was knocked backwards off of the hut.

"I got him!" yelled Baker "Nice shot!" I yelled back with enthusiasm. A few marines shouted "Get Some!!" and the exchanged was over. We carefully approached the area where the body had fallen and when we got there we saw a divet in the sand where he had hit the ground, the sand was soaked with blood. We followed a trail of blood to a small hut about 10' away from where the man had fallen. We were a little hesitant approaching the door. No one else wanted to be the first through the door so I volunteered.

I readied a flash-bang I kicked open the door and through the grenade in and covered my ears, after the blast I charged into the room with my m4 on 3 round burst mode. When I entered I saw two things in the dim light, a man

with a chunk of his torso missing lying on the dirt floor of the hut and just behind him was a man wearing a turbine and holding a rifle. Which was pointed at me! My training kicked in and I reacted without thinking I leveled my rifle at the man and pumped three rounds into his upper body. He snapped back and the rifle flew from his hands and hit the ground a few feet from his body. I waited but the man did not move. After checking to see that the rest of the hut was clear I called for my squad to come in. They poured into the hut to see what damage I had done. My eyes had adjusted to the light by now and as I bent over the man that I had just shot I was stunned to see that he was just a boy, probably 14 or 15. I suddenly felt very cold inside like somebody had just poured ice water down my spine. I had just killed a boy as old as my younger brother. My squad mates were cheering and patting me on the back, I got the first kill in my squad and now I was something special. I felt terrible. Something died in me on that day when I looked into the dead boys expressionless, staring eyes. I will have remembered that my entire life and it still haunts me to talk about it now.

Well we swept our side of the village without incident and then hooked up with the rest of the platoon and drove to the next village, which was a few miles away. Nothing really exiting happened during the drive, just a few potshots from snipers along the roadway but we kept our heads down and were just fine. When we reached the outskirts of the next village we decided to use the same plan of action that we had on the last town, namely we split up and corner any fighters into a corner of the city and then deal with them.

Instead of my squad and me splitting of alone we divided the convoy in half and entered from opposite directions. Before entering we stopped and went over tactics while we prepared our weapons. I shoved a fresh 30 round magazine into my m4, racked the bolt back, chambering a round and then checked to see that my pistol was in working order. Everything was shipshape and so we boarded the hummers and started our drive into destiny.

The ride in was quiet but it was almost to quiet. I looked around warily for snipers on the rooftops. We had just stopped near a cemetery to get our bearings and check in

with the other half of the convoy when all hell broke loose.

Sergeant Friar had just ordered everyone to dismount and set up a defensive perimeter around the vehicles. I placed myself along side Corporal Hillsby a short kid from New York who had bragged many times before of how he would "kick Saddam's ass" as he put it.

I was looking over toward a wall were I thought I saw a gun barrel poking out from behind a crack, I looked through the red dot scope on my m4 to get a better look when Hillsby said "I think I see someone over..." that was the last thing he ever said. In that instant no less than 20 machinegun rounds ripped through his body. He didn't make a sound as he was effectively cut in half by the hale of bullets from and RPK light machinegun that was positioned just 100 yards away. I dove behind a brick wall and returned fire toward the now blazing machinegun position. I emptied my magazine and was just about to put in another when I saw a man stand up on the roof of a building about 200yards away, he was

holding an RPG and it was pointed right towards my position. My blood ran cold as I saw him pull the cocking lever. I shouted a warning as rocket whooshed from the tube and spiraled toward me. I jumped up and started to run but I wasn't fast enough, the grenade slammed into the vary position I had been occupying moments before, I felt the searing heat of the explosion as I was lifted of my feet and hurled like a rag doll through the street. When I hit the ground it felt like I had been body slammed by the terminator I remember seeing stars and then the lights went out.

Chapter 5

"Jason! Jason!" It feels so good to sleep. I feel like I'm encased in warmth and comfort. "Wake up man we got to get

outa here!" Who is that shouting? Stop it. I don't want to wake from my slumber. Owwww! What was that? Side feels like its on fire! Damn! That hurts. Starting to become aware of my surroundings, I can hear gunfire all around. All coming back now I remember I got blown away by a dad gummed RPG. Ouch! Side is really hurting now feel like someone dumped molten lead on it. I see a blurry face shouting at me. Now he's dragging me over to the corner of building. Vision clearing now and Oh! Dang! There's Hillsby over there now its all coming back the machinegun the RPG the whole thing and suddenly I'm very aware of what's going on and I'm scared spitless. My savior who dragged me out of harms way is PFC Fred Keller straight from Okra, Tennessee. He's the biggest dude that you'll ever see in your life and he's got a sense of humor and care for others that match his size pound for pound. "When I seen ya over there Jason I thought you was a gone coon there for minute, but I'm sure glad to see your alive. We gotta get you to a corpsman mighty quick though you got more blood leaking outa you than sap out of a maple tree during syrup season."

"Were you able to stop any of it" I stammered weakly

"Well I used all the bandages in your field dressing kit and mine but there's still a lot leaking through. How ya feelin?"

"Just fine I guess. For somebody that just got blown away by an RPG. I reckon I'm fine as wine."

Well the truth was that I wasn't, my head hurt like a teenage hangover on Saturday morning and my side felt like it was being barbequed over a spit but other than that I was really glad just to be alive. By this time the shooting had died down and the other half of our convoy linked up with us. They had the only corpsmen in the platoon so I was very happy to see that other group of hummers pull up. The corpsmen came over and did a quick inspection and said "you were lucky son. Most of the blast went away from you and you only received a few chunks of shrapnel to your side." I was medevaced out of the village by a black hawk helicopter. I later found out through a friend that after Hillsby was killed and I had been hit with the RPG they fought off over 20 insurgents who had hidden in the nearby huts. There was only one other wound in the platoon and

that was one of the humvee drivers who had wet his pants because he was so scared. It was just a case of hurt pride. I made a full recovery and within a week I was back in the war alongside my fellow marines.

It felt good to know that even though they had tried the insurgents still hadn't killed me. Still the image of Hillsby being cut down by machinegun fire with no warning at all really made me boil with anger and even though I had felt deep remorse over killing the boy in the other village I no longer felt any kind of regret. If I had not shot him he would have shot me. From now on I was in this war for revenge and I would get it. Make no mistake.

While I was at the hospital my unit pushed forward about a mile and then bogged down in heavy fighting around the village of Al Hie. It was bad fighting in that area. We had two KIA (killed in action) and four WIA (wounded in action). The two that were killed I did not know but one of the wounded, a Corporal Langley was from near my home town and I was pretty good friends with him. He was all messed up. He took a full load of shrapnel in his side from a grenade that landed about 4' away from him. These

Casualties more than ever made me want to exact some revenge on the enemy that did this.

At this point I was feeling about as low as I had ever been in my time in the military. It was not fun anymore. I had seen people I knew be killed. I had also seen good people mangled for life. Langley would never be able to get the football scholarship that he had been offered now. How was that fair God? He was a really good guy and now he was messed up for his whole life. Why? I had no answers to these questions and I was seriously thinking about ending it all one day when our convoy stopped to reconnoiter with another unit. I got word through some of these marines that another friend of mine; LCpl. Jacobson had been hit in the chest with a chunk of shrapnel. He was dead before he hit the dirt. I had spent all of boot camp with him and knew him pretty well. We had made a promise to each other that if either of us got killed the other would let our parents know. Now he was gone. Now I had to go and tell his parents that he "died bravely fighting for country and corps" it was after I received this news that I seriously thought

that I would end it all right there next to my hummer. I had my pistol to my head.

I was about to pull the trigger but something made me stop. "don't do it Jason." I paused and listened. I didn't see anyone else around me. I remembered the promise I had made to Jacobson. I had a duty to fulfill assuming I made it home, to tell his parents. "put the gun down Jason. Come on man you got to keep your promise you made to me." "Hank, is that you?" I asked unbelievably. No one answered that question but they didn't have to. I lowered the gun and racked the slide back, ejecting the bullet that probably would have gone through my head 30 seconds ago. I put the bullet back in the magazine and walked around to the other side of the hummer. One of my friends asked "what were you doing over Jason?" I just told them "I was just cleaning my pistol" rather sheepishly trying not to appear abnormal. I knew that if anybody found out what I had almost done I would be taken out of the combat zone and sent home as a nutcase for the state mental hospital. I said a small prayer that night thanking God for not letting me take my

own life on that night in that far of land because there are a lot of things that I have done since then that I would not have been able to do.

As I lay in my bed role that night I reflected on what I had seen so far and what I had lived through. I had seen good friends messed up for life, I had seen others who paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country and corps. It saddened me to see these good men cut down. And it wasn't just that they died it was that they were so young Hillsby, who bought the farm in Al Hie yesterday, was only 18 years old. Cut down in the flower of youth. All I could think about is would I be next tomorrow? I wondered why had God spared me from the RPG blast and hadn't spared Hillsby from the machine gun? I went for a walk to clear my head and I came across the chaplain in my unit. He must have known somehow how I was feeling and he came over and put his arm around me and said "son you've seen more today than a boy your age should see. Or anyone for that matter" I looked at the ground and nodded then the chaplain who took his arm off my shoulders and took out a little new testament and put it in the front pocket of my fatigue jacket. "stay close to this book Jason, don't ever let it's words leave your mind, always meditate on God's word." I reached out

and patted the small leather bound book and looked up at the chaplain and almost whispered "thank you" he smiled and then put both hands on my shoulders "Lord I just pray for this young man right now over here fighting for our great land and I pray that you will keep him close to you and to your word and protect him from death and injury Amen." I thanked the chaplain and he said "I don't know if ill ever see you again son but remember what I said and God speed to ya lad."

For the first time since I came to this land of sand and death I felt the presence of the lord upon my life and I went back to my spot next to a Bradley assault vehicle and roled up in my bedroll it is amazing how cold it got at night in the desert. I remember briefly wondering about tomorrow's patrol then I reached into my pocket and took out the new testament. I noticed for the first time that the front cover was bound not in leather but was a sheet of steel with leather over it. I wondered why it was made that way. I was still contemplating that when I fell soundly asleep.

Chapter 6

KABOOOOOOOOM!!!! The explosion lifted me out of my sound sleep and flung me out of my whole and onto the hot desert sand where I lay there groggy, trying to remember where I had been a few seconds ago. I remembered dreaming about home and going hunting with my dad and brother. I saw a deer and knelt down to take a shot, I pulled the trigger and just when the gun would have fired is when the suicide bomber detonated his payload. The explosion tore through our camp like a bullet through whipped cream leveling all of our tents and other buildings we were using. After a minute on the ground I finally recovered my senses enough to grab my rifle and head for ground zero. As I crawled

toward the center of our camp I could here cries of "corpsmen up!" I can here the screams of the wounded. As I crawled I dreaded what I would find. I imagined all the gore I would find. I felt nauseas and reached out with my hand to steady myself I felt something soft and sticky I recoiled and then reached out again I pulled the object toward me and in the dim light as it came near my face I saw three curled, bloody fingers the rest were gone. I was holding the hand a forearm of one of my fellow marines that had been blown of in the explosion. I dropped the arm and right there just as the sun was rising over the smoke and chaos of what used to be our camp I vomited the entire contents of my stomach in one mighty heave. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve and then lay on my back and cried I cried until there were no more tears in my whole body.

I don't remember what happened after that I guess I passed out I woke up a few minutes later leaning against an APC (armored personnel carrier) my head felt like jello and I felt sick to my stomach. I looked over to my right and there was a huge smoking crater in the ground near the front gate there was a medicac chopper leaving from the

helipad and marines were running every where trying to find lost items that had been moved in the massive explosion.

I stood up and then leaned against the carrier in order to get my balance I still felt light-headed. A marine corpsmen came over and said "you okay now" I looked at you when they first found you over there near that foxhole, it looked to me like you just passed out from shock and stress, there shouldn't be any lasting consequences for you just get some rest and you will be just fine" I nodded a brief thank-you to him and then went and tried to find my gear amidst the rubble, all I could find was my back pack and my rifle I couldn't find my sleeping mat or any of my other gear.

Later that day another marine returned my mat and my other gear he said "I was over on that side of the camp a little ways taking a piss when the explosion went off I jump of the stool and dove for the ground and loe and behold this mat and belt full of bullets and gear comes down and hits me right on the head 'bout knocked me cold, after everything quieted down a little bit I looked to see if the stuff had a name on it and sure enough you were in my same unit so I just did a little asking around and found were your hole was and walked right over and here I am"

I looked at him incredulously, he handed me my gear and then put out his hand I took it and looked at him he just smiled and walked away. I thanked God right then and there for his goodness of not only keeping me alive but also keeping my stuff safe for me what more could I ask for?

Our unit moved out of the area about a week later and was told we were going on a patrol through another city that was supposedly occupied by the Baath Party. To break it down to simple terms we were to go in and kill everything that moved.

At this point in my tour I had been in Iraq for five months and I still had another seven months to go before I could go home. I started to feel depressed at the thought of so much more time that I would be away from my family. I had been writing home every week for the past five months but because the only form of mail we could get the letter home on was snail mail so it took about three weeks for my letter to get to my parents house and vice versa.

Tonight was the night before we were supposed to move out for Fallujah, which was a city of about 700,000 people.

There were so many terrorists hold up in the city that they had actually set up a temporary government just to keep the people in line now that Saddam was out of power. This would be a tuff struggle.

I walked over to were a group of marines were sitting around in a circle talking about friends they'd lost and who they would lose in tomorrows fight. I sat down near Fred Keller, the man who had pulled me to safety after the RPG blast had hit me, he nodded towards the lights of the city about 30 kilometers away. I looked that way and then he broke the silence:

"you ready fer tomara?" he asked in his smooth southern drawl.

"'cause I reckon were gonna see some serious conflict around with all the terrorists that are wholed up in that little ol city"

I looked at him in the light of the moon on the clear desert night and thought about what he had said. We had both seen so much death and destruction already I don't know how we would handle more. I don't know I can handle seven months more for that matter.

"thanks again for pulling me outa harms way in the town Fred" I said to him

"No problem buddy, we Marines gotta look out fer each other while were over here so we can have one a them big reunions fer are unit, cant have no reunion if there ain't no Marines left in the unit now can we?" I nodded my head and allowed myself a brief laugh, I think it was the first time in five months.

"Come on load up men we've gotta Go! Go! Go!" the gunny is yelling at us like a man possessed trying to get us to board the humvees so we can make the assault on Fallujah today. I grab my rifle and pack and hussle toward the humvee convoy that is lined up on the road outside where we camped last night I jump into the back of one and am happy to see Fred sitting down on some of the gear in the back "good morning" I said we both new I didn't really mean it. This morning sucked. Within an hour from now a lot of people were going to be killed and maimed, maybe even me or Fred. We just said stuff like that to keep things as cheerful as we could considering the circumstances.

A few more marines hopped inside and then we were off. The humvees diesel engine poured black smoke as it tried to start with such a heavy load. I told Fred he should get out and walk because that would lighten our load by at least 500lbs. "real funny shrimp" he said in his practiced "menacing" voice. That's one thing I found so ironic is that Fred was really a teddy bear but yet if you were threatening him or his buddies, you better watch out because hurricane Fred would make landfall on you as quick as lightning.

The whole convoy finally got rolling and it would be a little bit of a drive before we reached the city all of us in the hummer were cleaning our weapons one final time before we used them in action but we did this in shifts so that if we were ambushed some of could return fire while the others put there weapons back together.

I slid the receiver back onto the stock and snapped the pin shut and shoved a magazine in. I was ready. Today would be a big day.

Chapter 7

Ting! A bullet pings off the side of the armor as we rolled closer to the town. I looked at Fred from across the inside of the hummer, his face looked tense and hesitant as he cocked his m4 and then flicked the safety on. We were both feeling the dread of knowing that we were going into combat but one thing I noticed is that I no longer felt nausea or

light headedness before I went into combat, I'm afraid that I may be losing all sense that life is precious. I don't feel any compassion any more when I see others die, all I feel is a kind of emptiness. Sort of like all the feelings I had were pulled out of the jar of my soul, I can't explain it.

AS we watched the town come closer the captain came on the radio and told us to ready ourselves for an assault. There was nothing else for us to do except sit and wait to enter hell.

"Dismount!" the captain yells over the radio. By now were on the outskirts of Fallujah and the hummvees had ground to a stop, immidately we started taking fire from a tall building to our west. We couldn't leave the humvee until the fire stopped or else we would be cut down as soon as we left the hummer. The captain came on the radio and said "Somebody get on a goddamn fifty and take the mother out!" I stood up in our hummer and got in the turret on the roof, I was the only one trained to operate and fire the .50 caliber machine gun. I racked the bolt back to chamber a round from the 250 round belt of ammunition in a box strapped to the side of the gun. I saw muzzle flash from

the roof of the building and I immediately started putting heavy fire down on the terrorist's position, the terrorists fire was soon silenced as the huge bullets tore through the meager protection that they had erected. I laughed to myself as the other marines shouted "Get some!"

After the fire stopped we were able to get out of the hummers and form up into our squads. I was with Fred and a couple of other marines I didn't know, we started walking along a street going toward the center of the town. I was scanning the street in front of me when I remembered my previous experience with an RPG so I looked up above the street focused on the upper parts of the buildings so I could catch any would-be snipers that might be a threat to our patrol. We stopped near an intersection and established a defensive perimeter; I was looking through my red dot scope around the tops of the buildings. What happened with Hillsby also was fresh in my imagination and so I was very careful to watch for any machine gun positions that might be a threat to our squad.

"To your left Jason! Six o'clock!" I heard someone shout from my left I looked to my left and there not a hundred feet away was the barrel of a machine gun poking out from a crack in the side of a building about 20 yards away, I saw

a masked face behind the gun sight down the barrel right at me! I dove to my right behind a little pile of bricks just as a hail of bullets tore through the vary position that I was in moments before. The gunner kept firing at the rest of my squad but by now everyone else had also taken cover and so no one was even nicked by the gunfire.

I yelled to Fred "Give me cover while I get a grenade through the crack!" I saw Fred pop up from behind a burned out car and start to stitch the wall with bullets, the machine gun stopped firing almost immediately but I still saw the terrorist hunkered down next to the wall.

Everything suddenly felt like it was in slow-motion, as I pulled the pin on the grenade I felt like I was stuck in molasses. Then, Fred stopped firing. "Stoppage! Stoppage!" he yelled. Fred's gun had jammed. Now there was no more covering fire and I was standing out in the open with no cover and not even a rifle! I knew it was now or never. I let go of the spoon and pulled my hand back. I called on four years of high school football playing quarterback and chucked that grenade with all the force I could muster, I knew that I should have gotten back to cover but I had to see if my aim was good. My grenade arched through the air and landed right in the gunner's lap. He didn't even have

time to scream as the grenade detonated, tearing through his flesh and bone. The gun did not fire again.

I picked up my rifle and walked over to where Fred and the rest of the squad was hunkered down. They all cheered for me as I walked towards them and I took a stage bow and laughed. I loved these marines. These were my family away from family and even though we were killing people in some God-forsaken desert in the butthole of the world there was such a strong bond between us that any of us would risk our life for each other. I felt very good that I was part of such a great team.

We continued our sweep through the rest of the town without incident and reconnoitered back at the convoy, the captain debriefed us;

"Men. You did a good job out there today; we took no casualties and killed five terrorists. The city is not yet completely cleared but the word is that a large contingent of Baath party members will be converging in the next

couple of weeks so be on the lookout. For now we will stay here and mop up. Dismissed!!!”

I walked back to our squad area near and abandoned school, I had just sat down near Fred when we heard gunfire from the school, the ground all around us was kicking up as the bullets tore past us. A marine to my left was hit in the leg and went down with a scream. I dove for cover behind a dirt wall and started shooting through the school house window. I heard Fred yell for me to get down so he could throw a grenade through the window, I was about to duck when I felt a blow to my chest, it knocked me of my feet and onto the ground. It felt like I had been hit by a truck, I looked down at my chest and saw a hole about the size of a dime right in the center of my chest then, everything went black.

Chapter 8

I wasn't out for long, maybe only a few seconds. When I came to things were a little blurry but I could still make out the schoolhouse then I noticed that I was in a different position from where I had originally taken... The

Bullet! Then I remembered, I had been shot in the chest! I looked down I saw the hole but there was no blood! How could that be? I reached into my pocket and pulled out the New Testament that the chaplain had given me a week earlier and right in the center of it was a hole, I opened it and there was a hole through all the pages and at the other cover was the smashed bullet. I said a brief prayer of thanks to the almighty and then looked around to see what was going on.

I saw Fred just coming out of the schoolhouse with two other marines dragging the body of a boy. He looked to be about fifteen years old. As they came closer I stood up slowly, holding my chest, which by this time, was throbbing like there was no tomorrow. Fred had been looking down but when he looked up and saw me

He looked as if he had seen a ghost "I thought you was dead" he said with a shaky voice "I should have been" I said holding up the New Testament. "Wasn't for this and I'd have been a goner for sure" "Well, I'm just glad your alive. This right here is the feller that shot ya from that

school over yonder" Fred said pointing towards the body of the man that they had drug over. "I felt bad killen him but I didn't have no other choice, he was shooting at me and I thought that he had killed you!"

Fred looked at me for a long while and then at the ground "I reckon that's the closest I've ever come to losing a good friend Jason." He said.

"Well I think that's the closest I've ever come to being killed if you discount the last time that is."

"I think the big man upstairs was lookin' out for ya Jason."

We just stood there for a while and looked at each other, you know, its funny how combat can take two different men out of two totally different walks of life and make them better friends than you could ever find back home.

Because of my incident that day with the bullet and the bible I was dubbed "Lucky" by the rest of my squad, they thought that it was hilarious but I knew that it didn't have anything to do with luck that I was still alive. It was providence.

The next day we were called on to set up and roadblock on the south side of the city in order to prevent new terrorist groups from entering the city. We set up concertina wire and bricks in a kind of "S" shape so that anyone coming through would have to slow way down in order to get through without chewing there car to pieces, then basically what we would do is man the machine guns on top of the hummers and then wait for someone to try and run the roadblock.

We were told to keep a lookout for a white and silver car that was known to be in the area that belonged to a man that was suspected to be a leader of the terrorists in the city, if we could knock him of then we would cripple the area of operations that the Baath party would have in the region.

The night that we set up the block we had four cars come and we turned all of them away and then around nine o'clock just as it was getting dark we spotted a car that looked

like it fit the description the captain gave us about the terrorist leaders' car.

At that point we all put on our night vision goggles and mounted our infrared sights on our m4's, this sight was basically a laser pointer that was invisible to the naked eye but could be seen by the night vision so it gave us the advantage of having a laser sight without compromising our position at all to the enemy, it was a win-win situation all the way. When you're wearing the goggles it kind of gives you a sense of "tunnel vision" which means you're kind of in your own little world when you have them on, this can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on the situation. It's a good thing when you're out in the open being shot at and you have to find your targets and kill them in order to survive, you don't think about the bullets flying all around you because you don't have any peripheral vision. It's a bad thing when you need to scan a large area in front of you and you need your peripheral vision. On this job though they were "Just what the sergeant ordered" so to speak.

As soon as I put mine on I immediately could see the car much better in the dim light as it approached our position.

The sergeant yelled for us not to fire until we were dead sure that it was going to try and run the roadblock. What we did before that is fire warning shots over the car in order to warn the occupants that this was a checkpoint and that we didn't mess around, the only problem with this idea was that most Arab drivers were extremely reckless and whenever they heard gunfire they usually sped up to get to the roadblock quicker and when the marines saw them barreling toward them they did the natural thing, which was to keep firing with everything thing that you've got until the car is a little pile of smoking destruction.

Needless to say, lots of Iraqi's die at roadblocks.

As the car got closer the sound of gunfire split the air as George Hasser from alpha company fire his .50 caliber into the air in order to warn the occupants that this was a Marine roadblock and that they should act accordingly but despite the warning shots the cars engine revved more and it sped up. I looked over at where Fred was positioned in a crouch next to our hummer, he had his m4 at the ready as the car roared towards our position faster and faster.

When the car got within 250 yards and showed no sign of stopping all hell broke lose for the poor suckers inside

that car. Every gun in the marine company started pouring down fire onto the car. Through my goggles I saw four occupants in the car, two were in the front seat and two were in the back. I fired at the driver but missed and instead hit the man in the passenger seat. The round hit the man right between the eyes and he slumped over into the driver's lap, this must have distracted the driver because at that moment the car tried to swerve left and right. I emptied the rest of my ammo into the car which by this time was just coasting towards us since the engine block was shredded by Hasser's fifty cal. I looked over at where Fred was and saw brass casings pouring in a continuous stream out the side of his m4, man, these guys were really pouring on the coal!

Finally the car rolled to a stop about fifty feet from us and the captain yelled "Cease Fire! Cease Fire!" after the firing stopped the night seemed deathly quiet again, all we could hear was the tinkle of brass on the steel of the humvee. Then we heard it. I don't know what it was.

"Jason. Did you hear that?" Fred said from below me "yeah I did. It came from the car."

Chapter 9

I listened closer, straining my ears against the wind to here what was in the car. Surly, there couldn't be anybody alive in there? We had pumped at least a few thousand rounds of ammo into the thing not more than a few seconds ago! It sounded like a grown from inside the car. Fred yelled for the squad to hold there fire while I went out to check the car with him. We walked slowly out towards it with our rifles pointing at the car. I still had my night vision on so I could see pretty well in the starlit night. I told Fred to provide covering fire for me so that I could check the inside.

I crept toward the car. I gently reached out with my hand, holding the rifle with my other hand, and grabbed the door handle. Then I flung it open!

The inside of that car was by far the goriest thing I had ever seen in my life. The man that I had shot in the head was slumped over against the driver, his brains were sprayed all over the inside of the car.

The two men in the back seat had been hit with fifty cal. rounds there were literally body parts in the back. The back windshield was frosted over and had hundreds of holes in it. There was blood spray over every square inch in there but as I moved around to the driver's side I was surprised to see movement in the driver's seat I opened the door and out tumbled a man in brown robes wearing a turbine on his head. He hit the ground with a thud and then stood up and looked at me, I was so stunned that I just sort of standing there with my gun pointing at a man that should have been dead!

Fred couldn't believe what was happening either, then I suddenly snapped out of my stupor and pushed the man to the ground into a spread eagle position. Even though he miraculously survived he was still a threat and might kill us for all we knew.

We zippered tied his hands together and then walked him back to our roadblock when we got there I took a closer look at his face. This man was the terrorist leader that he had warned us about, this was the leader for all enemy operations in this whole region of Iraq and I suddenly felt anger. A sort of cold creeping anger. The man standing in front of me was responsible for the deaths of all of my

fellow marines that had been killed in the last few months. I wanted to kill him right then and there. I think the other marines around me knew who he was and he they saw what I wanted to do I raised my rifle and racked the bolt back, chambering a round. I put the rifle to the head of my enemy. I was just about to pull the trigger when I felt Fred's hand on my shoulder "Let it go" he said in a sad voice "Just let it go"

I put the gun down and pushed the man back. What bothered me the most is that I did not see any fear in his eyes when I had lifted the gun. He knew that we were the nice Americans who would go easy on him if he was ever captured. I hated him for that, I hated him for killing my friends but I hated even more for the fact that he showed no fear. Somehow I knew that this man would cause me even more grief than he already had so far.

Because we found no weapons on him we were forced to release under our rules of engagement, which stated that if no weapons were found we had to release any detainees within 1 hour of their capture. I know. It's pretty stupid but that's the military for Par one for the militaristic bullcrap course I guess.

So this man went free and we didn't see him again.

I was January 5. I had been in Iraq for seven months and I had seen a lot of death and destruction. My unit had since moved over to a different part of the city and we were essentially on "rest" duty. One day me and Fred were just walking around an abandoned street looking for souvenirs that we could take home to our families. We were in this one building that looked like it might have been a school or some other education center, there was the Arabic alphabet up on the wall and a blackboard and desks all around, it kind of made me feel funny to think that if none of this happened I would probably be working on the farm over in the us and kids would be sitting right where I'm standing now. Weird.

I started to walk away but Fred whispered "Shhhh" I stopped and listened, over to our right I heard what sounded like footsteps up above us. Fred knelt down and pointed his rifle in the direction of the noise. I was about to go upstairs and check it when it stopped. "Let's check it out Jason" Fred whispered. He looked at me and motioned forward I started to walk towards the stairs leading up to the second floor. I started to go up the stairs when Fred said "Jason. I'll go up. You stay here and cover the door." I

nodded my head and went over to where I could cover the whole room.

Fred started up the stairs and when he got to the top the sound of his m4 split the stillness, I heard a scream and then the sound of an Ak-47 come from upstairs to. One shot. I saw Fred jerk back as he was hit. As I watched him tumble down the stairs I was in shock, I immediately jumped up and charged up the stairs, at the top I saw a man slumped on the floor with and ak clutched in his hand. I checked him and he was dead. Fred was a good shot. There was blood all over the landing and in it were foot prints, they were leading away from the landing and over into a bedroom. I desperately wanted to go down and help Fred but I didn't want to be surprised by another gunman. I followed the foot prints.

They lead to a window, it was open and I went to it. I was shocked to see the very man that we had stopped at the roadblock a few nights before! He looked back and smirked at me from the edge of the roof. Then he was gone. I ran back down the stairs to see how Fred was doing. When I got there he was unconscious. The bullet had entered through

his left armpit, the only part on his torso that wasn't covered by the bullet proof vest he wore.

He was breathing but I saw blood coming from the corner of his mouth with every labored breath he took, that meant that his lung was punctured. I lifted his head up so that the blood would drain away from his throat. I ripped his vest and jacket off so that I could see if there was an exit wound but I could not find one. That meant the slug was still inside of his torso. I grabbed the radio out of his pocket and tried to get onto the right frequency, all I heard was static No! come on work! He was really getting bad now his breathing was extremely labored and I didn't know how long he could hang on. I was desperately trying to raise a medavac to come pick up Fred. Finally I got the base on the radio.

"Bravo two zero this alpha five seven. I have a man down situation critical need immediate casevac" the radio crackled and the voice said "alpha five seven I'm going to need your operating number over" static. I could not think of our operating number. Come on! Think! God help me to think of it! I yelled not caring if the whole Iraqi army heard me. Fred groaned and opened his eyes, his breathing

was ragged. "I reckon this is 'bout as far as I go good buddy" he whispered "no Your going to be just fine" I said tears roled down my face. "We'll be just fine. Just hang in there buddy"

"no I'm done fer. I can feel all my insides is all tore up. Jason... I just wanted to say that you're the finest man I ever... served... with..."

He gave my hand a squeeze and then his eyes closed and his shredded lungs took one last breath and then he was gone. I just sat there with his head in my arms and cried. Fred no! Fred how could you be gone! He was always the rock that kept me from going over the edge. And now he was gone. Just then the radio crackled to life. "Alpha we don't need your number just give us the coordinates. Alpha... Alpha... do you copy?"

I didn't answer it.

Chapter 10

"he was a good man Jason, finest I ever knew in the corps."
Hasser says to me as the American flag draped casket containing the body of one of the best friends I'd ever had was loaded into the belly of a c-130 military transport. I saluted his casket along with all the other marines that had turned out that day to send one of their own back to the states. Ever since fred had died in that house three days ago I have been wondering, asking, agonizing over why would God take him instead of me. He was such a much better person than I was and yet his card gets punched and still here? God I just don't understand it at all.

I'm tired of this war I'm tired of all the death and destruction and good men dying when there in their prime of life, it makes want to puke. `

Even though I wanted to go home and get away from it all, a very big part of me didn't want to because I knew that I had to go to all the families of the friends I had lost and tell them what happened and then try to comfort them somehow.

That's another thing that always ragged on me was, what do you say? What on this earth do you tell a grieving about how there son died? "he was a good marine to the end.

Theres been none better than him, and by the way, heres this flag you get to have to remind you of him." I mean come on! How is that comforting at all! Nothing you can say or do will bring back there loved one and you can't really do anything. I hate that feeling of utter helplessness when you know that people are heartbroken and you can't do a dad-gummed thing.

A few days after Fred was flown home our unit moved again to "rest and recuperate" from all the fighting we had done in the last few weeks. By now all of us had been over here fighting in Iraq for a good ten months and it really showed

on the guys faces. We all missed our families and just wished this war would be over. I want to win but at what price?

Our main focus while we were resting was just to make "presents" patrols just let the local population know that we were here and that we would shoot if given a good reason, we also hoped that it would provide comfort for the people in the neighborhoods that were loyal to the U.S.

I hoped against hope that there would be no more fighting while we were in this area. Just because your commanding officer says that this is not a hostel area doesn't mean that its actually true.

The main thing I was focused on was remembering the face of the man who killed Fred, when I chased him off the roof he turned around and saw his face but with all the excitement I forgot what it looked like and I wanted to hunt that man down and kill him for what he did.

I laid in my bunk that night trying to picture the face but it was very fuzzy and I couldn't quite place it but definitely had the image in my mind I just had to place it. I went to sleep very frustrated.

I rose early the next morning in order to get my gear together for the days patrol. I sat on my bunk cleaning my m4 when another member of my unit came in and sat down at the foot of my bed. His name was Pete Shandes and he was only 18 years old. He still had peach fuzz on his upper lip. This kid didn't belong over here with all this death and destruction, he should be at home on a date with his girlfriend or down at the lake fishing, I shouldn't be here for gosh sakes! I'm only 20! I couldn't even drink legally and yet I was over in Iraq in danger of being killed!

Now how on earth was that fair? If I'm going to die for my country you'de think that I could have a drink in my hand! I chuckled to myself when I suddenly remembered that I don't drink. "what do you think will happen on the patrol today Jason?"

"I don't know pete, I just hope no one gets killed, on either side." Pete looked at me with worry in his eyes "I always think about how easy it would be for me to get killed while I'm over here. You know I got a girlfriend back home. I really miss here right now ya know." He looked down at the bed, I could see the pain in his eyes as he thought of home and all his friends, I had something

comforting, after all, I was the older, wiser one but to tell the truth I felt the same way as he did. All I wanted right then was to go home and forget all this pain and death that this war had wrought on the soldiers who had fought in it.

"just keep your head up buddy, we'll get out of here someday." He looked up at me and grinned "your right Jason, I'll come visit you when we get back to the states" with that he stood up and walked out of the tent.

I finished cleaning my gear and then suited up for the patrol. I took everything that I thought I would need but I did not take that radio. It would just be dead weight, so I decided not to take it with me. Then we all gathered around the barracks for a meeting before we went out. The basic plan was to go in groups of two and just walk around in order to let the enemy know that we were there and that the city did not belong to them.

I ended up getting paired with Pete. I was happy when the commander announced that we were on the same team. I felt

almost like an older brother to him and I knew that I should keep an eye on him while we were enemy territory. Our sector for patrol was a small block about 3 miles from our base. It was rundown and basically a ghetto. We took a lot of humanitarian rations with us to pass out to the people that lived there. We were dropped off at the end of the street by a convoy of hummers. We immediately started watching the rooftops for possible snipers. We saw nothing. We started walking, being careful to look for the telltale signs of roadside bombs that might be placed there. Many a marine had already been killed by such devices and so we knew all too well to look out for them.

I was walking point and Pete was taking up the rear, we were about halfway down the street when I noticed two men next to a ramshackle old stone house about 20 feet from the road. I motioned for Pete to stop and cover me. I knew that man's face but I couldn't quite place it. Where had I seen him before? I searched every fiber of my being and I couldn't remember him. I was about to forget it when the man turned a little more toward me, that's when he noticed me staring at him. I walked closer to them and when I was about 10 feet away I saw recognition and shock in the man's black eyes and then I suddenly remembered where I had seen

it! Fred falling down the stairs! I ran up and looked out the window and there! Running down the street had been that very same man!

Then as I continued to stare the man started to reach slowly into his robe and I saw the outline of a gun.

Chapter 11

Pete shouted a warning to me and I pulled my gun up from my hip and aimed it at the men, who, by now were diving for cover while trying to pull their guns out of their robes. I pulled the trigger on my m4 and it fired two rounds, and then jammed. "Jam! Jam!" I yelled to Pete. I was trying to find cover from the terrorists who, by now, had found cover and were returning some serious gunfire. Pete was in a culvert by the road but he could not move to help me because of the gunfire and I could not give him the cover

he needed because my rifle was jammed. We were pretty much between a rock and a hard place. I could not clear the spent shell in the chamber of my rifle so I dropped it next to me and pulled my pistol from its holste

It was a Berretta 92fs it was only a 9millimeter but it held fifteen rounds and that was more than enough for what I needed it for. I yelled at Pete "When I fire run over here as fast as you can!" I said a little prayer of hope that the people that were shooting at us didn't know English. I racked that slide back on my pistol and aimed it at the place where the men were firing from.

The little pistol kicked in my hand and it felt very different from the m4. When I had fired off three rounds Pete jumped up and shouted "Fire faster!" I could see bullets kicking up behind him as he ran I prayed he would make it, PING! Pang! The bullets glanced off everything around us but finally he made a leap and landed right behind me looking pale as a ghost. I popped the empty clip out the Berretta and pushed a fresh one into the receiver. Pete was very good a fixing firearms and so he was desperately trying to clear my jammed rifle.

"what did you do to this thing Jason?" "I don't know I was just firing and it went haywire on me." Pete worked frantically. He tried every trick he knew but nothing worked. "just keep your ammo and I'll use it but here's my plan Jason." I kept watching the place where my two enemies lurked. I leaned back a little ways in order to hear Pete's scheme but I was still very much aware of what was going on around me. "here's what I think" Pete whispered. "Since we're down a rifle and all you got is your pistol we need to even the odds a little bit. The man we're really going after is the one in the brown-reddish looking robe, with the black beard? Ok. My plan is to get rid of the other one so we can have a clear shot at the one that you're looking for.

I know it sounds crazy Jason but I think the best way to do that is to charge them. maybe we can even capture an AK and then we can use it against them. what do you think?" I didn't know what to think. It sounded crazy but then again that's why we joined marines because they were crazy! I looked at Pete and nodded my head. He smiled and said "Let's Role" I nodded with acknowledgement at the famous statement of bravado spoken by a few men from flight 93

during the trade center bombings. when I heard that I felt a new sense of courage.

I knew that we would have to work fast in order to catch them by surprise. One thing that was bothering me was that I could not see where they had gone. Since they weren't firing I figured that they had moved behind a building to reload their weapons for another round of target practice. We had to act now! I nodded at Pete and then I cocked my pistol and we both ran toward the suspected hiding place like two cats on the prowl but when we got there all we found were some footprints and a virtual carpet of brass shells on the sand.

"Musta gone behind that building right there" Pete said, disappointed. I peaked around the corner and stuck my nose right up the barrel of a ak-47, held by the same man who had killed one of the best friends I'd ever had.

I did not even think but all my training suddenly kicked in and I threw my body to the side and shoved the barrel down, just as the muzzle spit fire inches from my chest. The bullets thudded into the ground where I had been standing a split second before. Whew! I "I swear you live a charmed life Jason" Pete said dryly as we tried to figure out what

to do next. The man had ducked back behind the wall before I could shoot. Now we had one of the worst situations that an urban fighter can have, a sharp corner and a man with a gun on the other side. I did not want to get shot coming around the corner and neither did my enemy, who, I decided to call Scar since he had a long, thin scar running from his forehead down to his chin. I said. "With a little luck and some trickery we could beat this ol' boy at his own game. Now here's the plan. I'm going to circle around behind and come in from the rear, maybe we can catch him off guard and bring him down." "Good luck" I tapped Pete on the helmet and started quietly around for the back. I made sure my pistol was ready I sure wouldn't want to be caught off guard with an unloaded pistol! When I got to the back wall I heard breathing.

I tip toed toward the corner, pistol at the ready I peeked around the corner and there was Scar and one other man. I tried to control my breathing but my adrenaline was really pumping now and I thought the whole country could hear my racing heart as I moved along the soft sand I was again glad that I had paid attention during boot camp because our training instructor had given us just this situation.

Then I had an idea. If I could grab scar's friend without scar knowing then that would give us a chance to capture scar alive! I pulled out the knife I had bought from my friend in Louisburg which now seemed like a lifetime ago. I went forward one slow step at a time hoping against hope that he wouldn't turn around and see me. I moved to within a few feet of scar's friend. I raised the knife over my head and brought the butt of the knife down as hard as I could on his head. I don't know what happened but I suddenly could not kill any more men. The man collapsed at my feet, completely out cold. I did not have long to celebrate my victory. Scar must have heard the thud because the ak in his hand suddenly started to swing around to meet me but I got to him first I swung my fist hard and it slammed into the side of his face. He toppled backwards, the rifle coming out of his hands. I grabbed it and just as scar was getting back on his feet I swung the gun butt as hard as I could at his head, but he was quicker than I thought and he neatly ducked the blow. I was off balance from the swing and before I could regain my balance he threw a hard left jab that connected just below my left eye. I fell backwards, stunned but I didn't have time to think because scar was searching in the dim light for the

AK that had fallen on the ground, he found it and swung it around pointing it right at my chest. He didn't do anything he just smiled but I heard the click of the bolt chambering a round. I suddenly remembered that I had my pistol and it was dim enough light that scar probably couldn't see me draw it if I didn't slowly. My hand inched down the side of my jacket to where the cold steel grip of the weapon stuck out of its holster. My hand closed around it and I pulled it out, he must have seen this movement because he yelled "death" and aim the gun. I wasted no more time I rolled to one side and brought the gun to bear, I saw him in my sights and pulled the trigger. I saw the AK spit fire but the damage was done my bullet had hit him squarely in the chest and he was going down the rifle fell from his grasp and dropped to the ground. Scar looked at me for what seemed like eternity, the red stain ever widening on his robe. He kept looking at me as he slowly dropped to the ground. Dead.

Chapter 12

"Well Jason we made it out ok" Pete said quietly as we bounced along inside the humvee heading for the airport that would fly us back home. "yeah I still got all my toes eyes and fingers so I figure I got off pretty easy" he said as he examined his appendages. The light was dim and it was almost eerie as we both reflected on the last 12 months. We had both been put in for bronze stars for our actions in

Fallujah but I doubted that we would ever get them. There were so many others that deserved them that died in some nameless alley on a nameless street in a forgotten corner of an unknown city.

I thought about good men I'd known and the good men I'd watched die. I had no explanation for the reason that I was still alive. I should have died so many times before but apparently the almighty wanted me for something. "I know what your thinking Jason" Pete said, looking at me. "why am I here and my friends aren't. I don't have a answer for that one."

There was sadness in his voice and even in the dim light I saw a small tear trickle down his tanned cheek. I felt exactly the way that he did. I tried to change the subject by talking about the good that had come of my showdown with scar. He was dead first of all, and second his henchman that I gave the headache to gave much valuable information about a weapons cash that the marines had been looking for for months. Pete looked up and it seemed that he wanted to change the subject also. "do think it was worth it Jason, I mean all this?" it was the same question that I had been mulling over in my mind as well. And you know what? It was

worth it! We had been through some crazy stuff and we had saved a lot of people. We did lose some good friends in the process and they will always be remembered but imagine the stories that we would have for our children and grandchildren! God had carried us through and for that I was very grateful.

Our tour through hell was finally over and we got to the Baghdad airport the next day and loaded onto a C-5A galaxy bound for Germany and after a four hour layover we were in the air again bound for the U.S. when we landed we got on a bus and were driven to Camp Lejuene, North Carolina to be processed and then sent home on our 30 day leave.

After we finally got through processing me and Pete sadly had to break company. He lived in Jerseyville, Tennessee and I lived in Louisburg, Kansas. "I'm gonna miss you Jason" Pete said as we were walking to the bus that would take us to the military airport on base. "dido that buddy" I said.

We both boarded the aging, olive drab bus and sat in silence for the 10 minute ride to the airport. We did not look at each other because I think both of us would have

started crying if we had. We had been through a lot and this was goodbye. The bus growled to a stop next to the small airstrip. "this is goodbye for awhile" I said "but don't you worry first chance I get I'm coming down there and visiting you" "you'll always be welcome around my place, that's for sure" the pain showed in his young face as he looked at me.

Just then the small military transport sitting on the runway roared to life and the crew chief motioned for Pete to board. We both broke down and cried as we embraced. I backed up a step and saluted and with tearstained hands he saluted back, picked up his pack and ran to the aircraft. Before he boarded the plane thought he gave me one final wave and smiled. He mouthed "I'll see you again" and then he was gone. The plane turned around and headed down the runway, bound for good ol' Tennessee. I turned around and headed back to the bus and into the ever darkening July evening.

"Thanks for the lift Sherm" I said as I stepped down from the 18 wheeler. "I sure appreciate it, my family

doesn't know I'm back yet and I sort of wanted it to be a surprise."

"I know exactly what you mean son" he said in his grandfatherly voice. "just make sure you don't look to somber or else they may think that you got your card punched" I nodded and his face wrinkled into a smile, he winked at me and then threw the old Peterbilt into gear, the Caterpillar diesel growled low as he pulled out onto the two lane black top that our driveway was on. He gave two quick toots on the horn and then disappeared around the curve in a cloud of black smoke.

I shouldered my bag and walked slowly up the driveway, which almost seem to be foreign to me but as I walked, ever closure to the red brick farm house and red barns around it, a flood of memories flowed back into my mind.

The grass was a brilliant shade of green, so green that it almost hurt your eyes to look at it and as I got within ten feet of the front door I noticed that that mom had made a new planter and it was full of flowers. I knocked on the front door and my mom opened it. Her face turned white as she recognized her son who had left a boy and returned a man. She screamed "Jason!" and hugged and kissed me then the rest of my family came to the door my

dad and Jake they all hugged me and we all wept. I was
home.