

“The fate of unborn millions will now depend onto God, and on the courage and conduct of this army. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.”

—General George Washington

Chapter 1: First Contact

As a rule of thumb, when the battalion commander is firing his personal weapon things are going badly; and at this moment, things were generally bad all across Iraq, particularly in Iraq’s Anbar Province, especially here in the city of Ramadi, and specifically at Entry Control Point 3.

An hour earlier, I had been in one of three Humvees rumbling across the dusty courtyard in front of the headquarters of the 1st Battalion, 35th Armor Regiment—Task Force Conqueror. The outgoing company commander, a newly promoted major with a year's worth of lessons' learned from heavy fighting led the patrol. At midnight he was relinquishing responsibility for security operations in sector to the man in the trail vehicle, Captain Lou Lancon, commander of Bravo Company, 2-6 Infantry—Team Dealer. As task force commander, I was responsible for validating the company-level transfer of authority. I wanted to walk the ground with both commanders one last time before having Lou Lancon take charge. My own task force-level transition with Lieutenant Colonel Mark Lovejoy, commander of the 1st Battalion, 172nd Armored Regiment (1-172 AR) would not happen for another three days. This was my first patrol without Lieutenant Colonel Lovejoy and although he warned me to always bring my full personal security detachment (PSD) of four vehicles whenever I left the wire, I did not heed his advice. Mistakenly, I chose stealth over firepower, not wanting to draw attention with six vehicles in a patrol that normally numbered only three or four. I was looking to get in and out of Tam'eem as quickly as possible, not get into a major gun battle on my first time out.

Sergeant First Class Robert Roberts rode in the cramped back seat of my Humvee behind the driver. Growing up in Paradise, California, he wanted to be in the military since the time he was a child. After graduating Paradise High School in 1988, Roberts immediately enlisted as an Infantryman in the Marines. After completing his enlistment, he went back to the civilian world, but missed the camaraderie and the excitement and tried to rejoin. The Marines were not willing to give him his previous rank back, but the Army was, and Roberts was on his way to becoming an Army Cavalry Scout. He was already on his second tour to Iraq, having been a Senior Scout/Sniper during his previous deployment in 2004; he was serving as a section sergeant in the scout platoon a month prior, when the Army called his promotion number just as I needed a platoon sergeant for my security detail.¹ Although Sergeant Rob was doing a fantastic job whipping the pick-up team of soldiers from across the battalion into a cohesive unit, I planned to leave him back at Camp Ramadi, to give him time to complete all of his transition tasks as well. Fortunately, he insisted on heading out with us.

Our small convoy was heading literally across the street from the south gate of camp into Tam'eem, an impoverished town of 40,000 people and a hotbed of terrorist activity. The Euphrates Canal separated Tam'eem from the city of Ramadi to its east. The suburb had a unique stench lingering in the hot, dry air, one that I wished smelled like only manure, trash, or death. We moved cautiously through the claustrophobically narrow streets between dusty brown, bullet-riddled, flat-roofed buildings clustered side-by-side offering countless potential ambush positions. Overhead webbed a squirrel's nest of black wires providing the locals stolen electricity from every power pole or streetlight, as well as camouflage

for Improvised Explosive Device (IED) trigger wires. Our pre-deployment training had emphasized looking for telltale wires along the sides of antiseptically clean roads as indicator of IED locations, but that was of little help today. Instead, we focused on looking for displaced earth or potholes in the road as we weaved our way through town.

As I gazed through the bulletproof windows of my Humvee separating me from the Iraqi people, I realized that everyone, even the children, avoided eye contact with us. Their faces displayed a combination of mistrust and hatred. Most people turned and ducked into their houses as soon as they saw our vehicles approaching. Starting with Operation Desert Storm, the American-led response to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqis had been at war with America for over sixteen years. The people showed in their expressions and their body language that they were plain tired of it.

While the general population of Ramadi might have been tired of war, the Anti-Iraqi Forces (AIF) were hitting their stride here and across Iraq. The AIF label lumped together any and all who fought against the newly established democratic government in Iraq. In Ramadi, this was a mix of a relatively small number of Al Qaeda jihadists bent on the destruction of the Great Satan, and a large number of local Sunnis considered by the locals as the *mujahedeen*, or “honorable resistance.” Both groups opposed the new Shiite-centric national government in Baghdad, seeing it as a pawn of the Sunni's bitter enemy, Iran, and American presence in their country. The mujahedeen consisted of some of Saddam Hussein's former hardline loyalists and large number of disenfranchised former Ba'athists. By June of 2006, the AIF controlled most of Anbar province, declaring Ramadi the center of “The New Islamic Caliphate,” making the city a rallying point for Sunnis opposed to the Baghdad government, and jihadists worldwide eager to bring “Death to America.”

The civilians with the means to leave town were getting out as fast as they could. Five-ton platform cargo trucks jammed the streets, streaming out of Ramadi in a steady parade. Oversized vehicles that normally hauled livestock or commercial goods now bore mothers, fathers, children and all their worldly possessions. The man of the family sat behind the wheel, furiously chain-smoking, while six to eight of his sons packed into the cab as a sign of status. Wives covered from head to toe in black burqas with a two-inch slit for their eyes sat next to young girls in colorful dresses holding infants while sitting high atop the family's belongings heaped in the truck's bed, looking like Arab versions of the *Beverly Hillbillies*.

The scars of war marred the scene much as they darkened the faces of the Iraqis we passed. Craters from previous IED explosions pockmarked the streets while the sounds of explosions and gunfire rang through the air; ten times more common than the call to prayer. Every day, more blasts tore the city apart while the terrorist intimidated the civilians with threats and brutality to obey their will. It was no wonder they were leaving.

The AIF remaining in Ramadi planted IEDs with a speed and precision that a NASCAR pit crew could only envy. Coalition forces had already killed all the slow terrorists; the remaining ones were battle tested and good at it. Every pothole, dirt mound, or trash pile was a potential hiding spot for the deadly roadside bombs. Complicating our task today were the local construction crews laying sewer pipe along the sides of the blacktop streets in a U.S.-funded reconstruction project. What concerned me was a lack of Coalition or Iraqi forces supervising the workers. How did we know for sure that terrorists were not using the project as a cover to pre-plant IEDs across the entire city?

A powerful shockwave slammed into us just before we heard the blast. Judging by the sound, it was a massive explosion. In seconds, the FM radio in my Humvee monitoring the Task Force command net came alive, reporting a suicide attack against Entry Control Point 3 (ECP 3). Immediately our patrol

began working our way towards the checkpoint, searching for IEDs as we rolled as fast as we dared down the narrow, poorly paved streets. Looking to the midday sky, I saw the grey mushroom cloud taking shape over what minutes earlier had been an Iraqi army checkpoint. As we cleared the three story buildings of southern Tam'eem, the road's surface changed from blacktop to dirt, making it even easier for the terrorists to emplace IEDs. Transfixed, I watched the thick smoke turn from gray to black as it swelled hundreds of feet against the clear blue sky, making it nearly impossible for me to scan for IEDs. The billowing mushroom shape reminded me of the movies documenting above ground atomic bomb testing from the 1950s. I wondered if anyone would be alive when we arrived.

The control point consisted of a half dozen silver, 20-foot shipping containers surrounded by Texas barriers—twelve-foot by six-foot portable concrete walls—along the Euphrates Canal that formed the boundary between Tam'eem and Ramadi. A hundred-yard serpentine of smaller Jersey barriers—three-foot by six-foot concrete walls like those at a road construction site—led to the position in an attempt to prevent suicide bombers from getting up a head of steam before ramming the gate and detonated their deadly cargo. Two sandbag-covered steel-frame observation posts rose from the corners of the position as well, providing the defenders excellent observation and clear fields of fire in every direction. One of the shipping containers served as the U.S. command post, while immediately adjacent to it was the living quarters for the five-man U.S. combat advisor team, the next container served as a command post and sleeping area for the Iraqi officers, while the remaining containers served as quarters for the under-strength Iraqi army infantry company defending the position. An eighteen-inch layer of sandbags blanketed everything with a roof, providing overhead cover from indirect fire. Tan-colored desert camouflage nets strung inside the walls formed a makeshift roof over the position, providing shade from the blistering sun. Lieutenant Colonel Mark Lovejoy had given me a tour of the position two days prior. I remember thinking it was not the *best* defensive position I had ever seen, but it was the better of the two Iraqi army checkpoints I had inspected up to that point.

A football field's length to the south of ECP 3 stood a neglected railroad bridge spanning the Euphrates Canal that had not seen a train since Saddam Hussein was in power. The tracks leading to the bridge ran atop a 20-foot high berm, separating the strongpoint from a small village of a dozen houses we called University Park, with Al Anbar University further to the southwest. To the north stretched a mile of nothing except sand, trash, and scrub brush leading to the southern end of Tam'eem. Directly to the west lay a concrete plant surrounded by open fields and the road network leading to the control point. To the east stretched fifty feet of reed-covered Euphrates Canal bank, with the densely packed houses of Ramadi looking back at us a hundred yards away across the water.

Al Anbar University students living in Ramadi used the bridge as a pedestrian crossing, making the daily walk across between campus and the southern part of the city. It amazed me that these kids were trying to continue their education in spite of the violence. Months earlier, the intelligence staff at brigade headquarters deduced that terrorists also used the bridge as an infiltration route to smuggle arms and ammunition into Ramadi from Syria. The control point monitored who and what crossed the bridge.

Throughout Anbar province, Al Qaeda suicide bombers had systematically attacked Iraqi government facilities for months, trying to destroy the nation's security forces and fledgling government. They employed these well-planned, spectacular attacks for a number of reasons: to break the will of Iraqi troops, to prove to the population that the Iraqi government was incapable of protecting itself, let alone civilians, and to make headlines on the nightly news across the Middle East and back in the States. Al Qaeda typically recruited a foreign fighter; usually a Yemeni, who was willing to die for the jihad, tossed him the keys to a ten-ton dump truck loaded with 500 to 1,000 pounds of explosives, and send him on his

holy path. The truck bombs were lethal to anyone in their way, but their most devastating effect was on the morale of the Iraqi army and the people of Ramadi.

As we pulled off the dirt trail and onto the hard packed sand just north of ECP 3, intense, if inaccurate, machine gun and AK-47 fire spattered the ground around us. From open turrets atop each vehicle, our gunners searched for the enemy across the canal. Looking out my passenger side window, I saw a half-dozen small fires burning in the field outside Iraqi position, with more smoke billowing above the concrete walls. The blast burned a ten-foot scorch mark into concrete near the entrance, marking the site of the explosion. The only evidence of the suicide bomber's truck were a couple of five-foot smoking pieces of blackened, twisted steel laying ten yards in the desert.

The gunner on my truck yelled down, "There are guys with guns across the canal shooting at us. What should I do?"

I grimaced, trying to remind myself that this, after all, was our first firefight. It seemed that, at some point, all the training in Germany and in Kuwait on Rules of Engagement just confused the soldiers.

"Shoot back!" I told him.

"OK," he replied.

He was a good kid, but I decided right then that I was getting a new gunner as soon as we got back to camp. I turned to Sergeant First Class Roberts, wedged helplessly in the back seat, unable to influence the battle. For a moment, I was afraid that he was going to have an aneurysm.

"I got it," Roberts assured me. "I got it."

Moments later, the M240 machine gun atop the Humvee erupted in a soothing hum. In the next moment, the gunners on all three vehicles blazed away, laying a furious barrage of suppressive fire on the terrorists across the canal. I keyed the handset of the FM radio to report the situation to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) back at Camp Ramadi and to direct the relief effort.

"Conqueror Main, Conqueror 6." I called.

No answer.

"Conqueror Main, Conqueror 6, over," I barked again into the handset.

Nothing.

I could hear the TOC transmitting across the radio net, but they could not hear me. Keying the handset on my second radio, tuned to our internal patrol frequency, I called no more than 30 feet to Captain Lancon, instructing him to take charge here and get in contact with the TOC, while I assessed the damage inside the ECP.

I yelled back to Roberts "You got this?"

As Roberts nodded in agreement, relieve he could finally get into the fight. I jumped out of the Humvee and sprinted the 20 yards into the Iraqi position, passing the charred corpses of two Iraqi sentries. I needed to assess of the extent of the damage while ignoring the thick, stinging smoke. Chief Warrant Officer Jason D. Forgash, the advisor team's intelligence officer, met me at the entry. Forgash had spent the past frantic minutes trying to rally the Iraqis to defend the position, literally pulling them by the collar and pushing them into fighting positions before the terrorists overran the checkpoint². Judging from the look on his face, I am certain that Forgash was both glad to see me and surprised that the first help to arrive turned out to be the Task Force commander.

"Chief, whatya got?" I asked.

He replied with the concise, detailed report of a professional intelligence officer, despite mortar rounds knocking him to the ground minutes before in the initial attack. "Sir, it was a complex attack. They hit us with mortars and small arms fire from the north, and from across the canal. When they got

everyone's head down, they drove a big-ass dump truck into the gate. It was probably AQ. The T-Walls held, but the blast was next to the Iraqi officers' hooch. They're both dead, along with the two burned-up guys you passed on the way in. The fireball jumped the wall and caught the camo nets on fire, and the Iraqis went to pieces. The command post and all my vehicles are burning inside, so I got no comms. We need to get the hell out of the checkpoint and establish a perimeter until we can get more help and put out the fire. Your two guys, Rinehart and Garza are hit, but they're going to be all right. A couple of the Iraqis are wounded as well, but they'll be all right too."

In Ramadi, "all right" meant the wounded had all of their limbs and were not going to die right then. For the moment, my assessment was we were outgunned, caught in the crossfire of a complex attack, next to a burning Iraqi checkpoint, and needing evacuation for the U.S. and Iraqi wounded. Frankly, if I had encountered a scenario like this during our train-up in Germany, I would have complained that it was simply unrealistic. It was a worst-case scenario that had a certain *Kobayashi Maru* feel to it. Although the M240 machineguns on the three Humvees still chattered away at the AIF across the canal, the situation was far from under control.

Staff Sergeant Rinehart was one of ten NCOs and medics that we had recently assigned to augment the advisor team. Having received reports that an attack on the outpost may be imminent, he had spent the morning feverishly repairing a MK-19 40 mm grenade launcher in the American shipping container. Hearing mortar rounds exploding on the position, Rinehart instinctively grabbed his Kevlar helmet and body armor and was heading to the door to help defend the position when the suicide bomber detonated his five-hundred pound payload just on the other side of the T-Walls. The force of the blast hurled him to the ground. After a few moments, Rinehart regained his senses and dashed out of the shipping container to get into the fight, only to have shrapnel from the mortars tear into his shoulder and hip. Already disoriented by the effects of the blast, Rinehart tripped as he raced to the command post, and became entangled in the falling camouflage nets. With the rapidly spreading fire inching closer, he writhed on the ground but was unable to free himself until an Iraqi soldier escaping the inferno stopped and pulled Rinehart out of the tangle. Once back on his feet, Rinehart started getting the Iraqis to safety and back into the fight.

I saw a dark red bloodstain running down the back of Rinehart's Army Combat Uniform (ACU) below his body armor.

"You're bleeding," I said.

"I'm good. Got my bell rung, that's all really," Rinehart replied. By the blast "ringing his bell", I now realize he probably had suffered a serious concussion³.

Rinehart tersely offered me his assessment of the situation: although the Iraqi company defending ECP 3 was a good unit, the loss of both officers left it in no shape to fight. Unlike in the U.S. Army, Iraqi NCOs did not take charge in difficult situations; only the officers lead.

Rinehart, unfazed by his wounds, moved out to gain control of the Iraqi soldiers along with Forgash, Garza and Sergeant Greg Krill. Although most of the Iraqis were uninjured by the initial blast, they had not immediately started fighting back. Corporal Ignacio Garza III limped up carrying his aid bag. A Task Force Conqueror medic, Garza had enlisted in the Army Reserves in 1983 while still in high school, making him one of the oldest soldiers in the Task Force.⁴ He had been standing outside of the living quarters when the mortars hit, taking shrapnel in his face, arms, back, and shoulders. Despite his injuries, Garza was mobile and alert, and seemed unfazed by the violence going on all around. I looked him over quickly, discerning that more than anything else, he was pissed-off at getting hit.

"Garza, you alright?" I asked.

"I'll be fine," he replied.

"I guess." I replied skeptically, "Get over to my truck and have them take a look at you."

It sucks when the medic is shot, but every soldier in the Task Force had received combat lifesaver training. I knew my crew could patch him up until we got some more help, but if they were working on Garza, they were not fighting. We needed to get reinforcements here quickly.

For a moment, I watched some of the Iraqis wailing and crying uncontrollably and knew the advisors had their work cut out for themselves today. I ran back to my Humvee, intending to report on the situation back to the Task Force tactical operations center (TOC), under the cover of the young gunner, who had now found his groove against the enemy. I wanted the quick reaction force (QRF) out here immediately to secure the site and to evacuate the wounded. I also wanted a Predator Drone overhead to make sure other terrorists were not sneaking up on us beyond the railroad berm. Although we lacked the capability to watch the Predator's real-time video on site, the TOC could do so, and give us a heads-up when they saw something.

Garza sat on the ground against the rear passenger-side tire of my Humvee while SFC Roberts treated his wounds. Roberts looked up, explaining: "We've been trying to get the TOC but can't get an answer. We can hear them, but they can't hear us. I think the new radios are broke."

Our radios were broke and the ones inside the ECP were on fire. For the time being, we were on our own.

Captain Lancon had already ordered his platoon in Tam'eem to move to our position via his company radio net. Sergeant First Class Ray Poore and his wingman were the first to arrive in their hulking, woodland camouflaged Bradleys, tracked infantry carriers with a turret mounted rapid-firing 25 mm Bushmaster chain gun and a coaxially mounted M240 machinegun. We now had three Humvees with M240 Machineguns and two Bradleys laying suppressive fire, and the attackers seemed to have backed off for the moment.

By now, the interior of ECP 3 was burning uncontrollably, ammunition cooking off with loud, irregular reports, much like a bag of microwave popcorn. So far, the only good news was the presence of the Bradley's we brought with us from Germany—I knew everything on them worked. Over the next few minutes, we restored communications with the TOC from the back of Poore's vehicle, and more help began to arrive. The first to roll up were other Task Force Conqueror officers and senior NCOs who had been conducting their own transitions in sector and had moved to the sound of the guns; next was the remainder of the Team Dealer platoon, led by Lieutenant Ian Blackstone, which Captain Lancon had ordered to our location.

Now that we had enough forces to form an actual defensive perimeter around the position, I told Captain Lancon to take charge of securing the scene, and then got out of his way. I walked around checking on the wounded Iraqis, while trying to assess the damage to ECP 3. I realized that if Al Qaeda felt the need to blow the place up, the control point must represent a real thorn in their side, and we needed to get the position operational again as soon as possible. I was unwilling to give up the checkpoint even for a minute, knowing that if we did, the enemy would occupy the position, make a propaganda video on their glorious victory over the Americans for release to the media and the internet, plant a crop of IEDs to await our return, and quickly pull out again.

The Light QRF, consisting of four Humvees and sixteen soldiers, came roaring up moments later escorting the Medical QRF. The medics in particular were a welcome sight since the wounded had been there for a while and needed treatment back at Camp Ramadi. The Medical QRF consisted of four boxy M113A3 Armored Personnel Carriers with M2 .50 caliber machine guns mounted on top. A mix of

medics and mechanics crewed the vehicles, with the non-medics manning the machine guns. While the Geneva Convention required ambulances be unarmed, it also prohibited shooting at them; and unlike the terrorists, the Coalition respected the rules. We did adapt a lesson from our predecessors by taking the four-foot red crosses off the sides of the ambulances and calling them “non-standard casualty evacuation vehicles.” Why kid ourselves: if given the chance, the terrorists would certainly attack unarmed ambulances. In addition, a big red cross on the side made a natural bull's-eye for AK-47s and RPGs.

Things had stabilized surprisingly quickly, with the suppressive fire from the Bradley's and vehicle-mounted machine guns driving the terrorists off. In general, the enemy was not big on sticking around and fighting, preferring guerilla tactics over toe-to-toe combat.

Staff Sergeant Rinehart was briefing his former commander, Captain Lancon, when Lancon pointed to a group of Iraqi soldiers heading away from the ECP.

"Rinehart, where are they going?" he asked,

Sergeant Rinehart sprinted to catch the Iraqis, who were making for a concrete factory a few hundred yards away. The Iraqi soldiers had decided among themselves that the owner of the factory had played a hand in the terrorist attack, and they were heading to execute everyone in the plant. By the time the wounded Rinehart caught up, the Iraqis had the five employees lined up against the factory wall and were ready to open fire. Sergeant Krill was yelling in Arabic to put the weapons down and placing himself between the Iraqis' rifles and the prisoners. Rinehart began slapping rifle barrels towards the ground and pulling weapons out of the Iraqi soldiers' hands. After several tense moments, Rinehart and Krill restored order, and the Iraqis came back to the ECP to help establish a defensive perimeter and evacuate the wounded⁵.

Despite the string of explosions rocking the air as the interior of the checkpoint continued burning out of control, igniting ammunition, fuel, and grenades, I felt the situation was under control. We began evacuating the wounded and formulating a plan to secure the scene. Rinehart was already loaded into the back of a M113, with a wounded Iraqi soldier next to him, closest to the open back ramp. I was helping three soldiers load a litter bearing another more seriously wounded Iraqi into the armored evacuation vehicles when the Iraqi soldier sitting next to Rinehart rose to help guide the stretcher into the crowded cargo compartment. Before reaching his feet, he fell back and grabbed his thigh. The man had only minor wounds to begin with, now clutched a quarter-sized hole in his right thigh, doubling over and screaming⁶.

Rinehart grabbed the Iraqi's weapon and threw it out of the vehicle before he could hurt some else. We both assumed the soldier had shot himself with a “negligent discharge.” One thing I had learned in my short time in Iraq was that the Iraqi soldiers never put their weapons on *safe*. They were convinced that it took less time to return fire with their weapons already set to *automatic*, an assumption that was not only false, but led to countless rounds fired into the air, the ground, or wherever the muzzle of the barrel happened to be pointed. The Iraqis never worried about negligent discharges, believing that if a stray round hit one of them, it was the will of Allah. It was very hard to argue with that kind of logic.

The medics and I put the stretcher down, as they rushed to tend to the freshly wounded Iraqi. Rinehart rambled out of the back of the vehicle, clearly upset with the latest attempt on his life. As we watched them work, I noticed the crackling sounds around us increasing, and assumed the fire inside the ECP must be about to burn itself out. I turned to Rinehart.

"Sarge, the ammo is really cooking off. The fire must be really raging, but it sounds different than before," I remarked.

Rinehart turned his head and listened for a second, squinted, and said matter-of-factly, "That's incoming."

We looked at each other for a split-second, when the gravity of his words hit us both at the same time. The enemy had resumed the attack. We both shouted to the exposed Iraqis and the Americans to take cover, ducked ourselves, and started scanning for targets from behind the hood of a nearby Humvee. More small arms snapped from the houses across the canal as the attackers' firing rose to a fusillade. Turning to my left, I saw First Lieutenant Dan Downs, the executive officer (XO) of Charlie Company 40th Engineers directing soldiers to covered positions. Abruptly, he crumpled to the ground motionless. I thought he was dead. Without hesitation, his company commander, Captain John Hiltz, sprang from his covered position behind a Humvee into the hail of enemy fire, pulling Downs to safety while small arms fire zinged off the shattered pieces of concrete, vehicles, and the sandy ground.

My mind raced as I instinctively tucked the collapsible stock of my M4 rifle squarely into my shoulder, head canted so the tip of my nose laid on the charging handle, left eye closed, scanning for an unseen enemy. In that split second, I began developing a plan to repel the enemy's attack. With the canal blocking us from a direct counterattack, we would need air support to reach the terrorists. I had to get to the radio and call the TOC to coordinate additional support. I began mentally composing my message, knowing from experience that in a crisis, a soldier has to think about what he is going to say over the air before he starts talking, or he ends up rambling. My thoughts were taking form when Rinehart interrupted my strategizing.

"Cover me," he said.

"What the hell did you say?" I asked.

Rinehart cocked his head and looked blankly at me, apparently surprised I did not catch on the first time. "I said, 'cover me.'" he repeated slowly.

It still took me a couple of seconds to process his words. I knew very well how to provide covering fire, having been a Cavalry Scout since summer of 1983. However, that was 23 years ago when I was a private, and now as a lieutenant colonel, the idea of using buddy-fire techniques with a staff sergeant on an advisor team who only kind of worked for me seemed oddly foreign.

"OK," I replied.

My thumb pushed the selector switch to *burst*, and began firing quick volleys into the scrub brush, and trash heaps to the north, responding to the AK-47 and machine gun fire that still peppered us from that direction. This was not the "big picture" armored battle that I had spent 21 years preparing for. There was no grand maneuvering of Abrams tanks and Bradleys, or the synchronization of artillery and fighter jets in support of a ground blitz across the fields of Western Europe or desert sands. Instead, what I needed to do was shoot the enemy directly in front of me with my M4.

Rinehart ran back to hector up the remaining Iraqis to assist in the defense of our position. Disregarding his own wounds, Corporal Garza grabbed his aid bag, raced into the hail of gunfire across the 20 yards of our three-quarter moon perimeter to where Lieutenant Downs lay, and began treating him as incoming rounds zipped through the air.

I remember thinking that Garza was a lot more *Hooah* than I had initially suspected.

As soon as Rinehart was gone, I sprinted to the back of Sergeant Poore's Bradley, grabbed the radio mike, and called the TOC for air support.

Most of the 20 or so uninjured Iraqi army soldiers had finally responded to Rinehart, Krill, and Forgash's leadership and were helping secure the perimeter. I was glad to see the Iraqis finally showing some backbone as they found fighting positions and began returning fire.

While remaining concerned about the situation, I allowed myself a moment of pride as the past eleven months of training was paying off. Corporal Garza, Rinehart and Roberts, and the men of Team Dealer

were all setting examples of courage and leadership under fire. Realistic training means replicating the violence and chaos of combat so a soldier can learn from their mistakes, and that is extremely difficult to do. Soldiers should not be thinking about the dangers of combat, but instead reacting to events around them and relying on their training. We were now in an extremely violent environment and my soldiers were fighting their asses off.

The firefight raged for another fifteen minutes, with quite a bit of Bradley 25 mm chain gun fire, machine gun volleys, and the M4 fire of individual soldiers all letting the enemy know we were not going anywhere. A British Tornado made a *show of force*, screaming over our position well ahead of its engine noise, so low that I flinched when I saw it out of the corner of my eye. In a split second, the fighter roared across the canal and over the heart of the enemy's base of fire. Frankly, the jet scared the living daylights out of me and I was sure it did the same to the terrorists across the canal. Moments later, the firing ceased completely.

Sergeant Rinehart came up to me with the wounded Iraqi's AK-47 rifle and showed me a bullet mark on the weapon's receiver. The Iraqi had not shot himself, but instead, a bullet had passed between the medics and me into the vehicle, ricocheting off the Iraqi soldier's weapon and into his leg. Had the Iraqi not stood up, the round would have hit Rinehart in the head⁷.

"Sarge, we need to play the Lotto today," I joked to Rinehart.

"Not sure where to get a ticket," Rinehart said, looking around at the carnage. "Conquer or Die," he added, taking the rifle and going back to work.

"Move out and draw fire," had been my drill sergeant's favorite saying in basic training. I now finally understood what he meant. We were still three days from officially taking over, but we had already paid a high price. Now we had another three Americans wounded plus a blown-up checkpoint with four dead and seven wounded Iraqi soldiers.

Ramadi, I thought, was not at all like Desert Storm.

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In short order, we loaded the wounded, set the perimeter, and let the ECP burn itself out. Although still fuming over the communications failure, I had a chance to think about the afternoon's events as we maneuvered the four miles back to Camp Ramadi. While today had not been a textbook outing, everyone reacted well during the Task Force's first sustained fight. We did OK, but I knew we had to do better next time.

I checked in with the TOC while spewing a torrent of profanity in the general direction of my signal officer, Captain Elliot Thomasma. Elliot quickly figured out that improper installation was the cause of the new radios' limited range

After talking over the events with the TOC crew, I headed to the brigade aid station, Charlie Med, to check on the wounded. Charlie Med was really just a 30-foot x 20-foot plywood "Southwest Asia Hut" (called a Seahut), the Iraq War's equivalent of the Quonset hut. It had an open-bay treatment area, three litters serving as treatment stations and a two-table operating room⁸ with enough surgical equipment to give wounded soldiers a fighting chance until they could get to the field hospital at Balad. It may not have been sterile or state of the art, but it was effective. Charlie Med also boasted a brilliant team of Navy surgeons who undoubtedly saved hundreds of soldiers' lives during their tours in Ramadi.

By the time I arrived, Lieutenant Downs was already stabilized and waiting for the MEDEVAC flight to Balad. He was in a separate holding room, sitting in a hospital bed eating Jell-O. After talking to Dan

for a couple of minutes, I realized that the docs had treated his pain, and he was just plain loopy. Downs, an avid distance runner who always finished at the top of the monthly camp-wide 10K races in Kuwait, was at least six foot five and weighed maybe one hundred and eighty pounds soaking wet. I kidded that Dan he should have turned sideways so the enemy could not see him.

The morphine made all my jokes funny. The fact that they hit him in the ankle was a miracle shot.

Rinehart and Garza were stitched up and being held overnight for observation before their return to duty in the morning. I found the two NCOs sitting on the edge of a green cot discussing the day's events in a dimly lit tent off to the side of the treatment area. After some small talk, I looked them both in the eye.

"Look guys," I said. "I understand if you want off of the advisor team. You two have already done more than your part. Just say the word and I'll send your asses back to your old units. No questions asked."

I still doubted the value of the advisor team, or for that matter, the Iraqi army in general. Throughout the history of combat, soldiers have always fought for their buddies, and in June 2006, it did not seem to me that the Iraqi army was our buddy.

Rinehart looked back at me. "The Iraqis are the only way we're going to win this fucking war. I'm staying put," he said.

"Me too," Garza declared, nodding in agreement.

I admired their resolve, but I thought they were nuts for sticking with that thankless job. To me, advising the Iraqi army was an unglamorous role that no one in his right mind would want. I doubt that I would have stayed on the advisor team if I were in their position, yet these two exceptional soldiers understood what needed to happen to win the war. Both Rinehart and Garza would earn the Bronze Star with V for valor and a Purple Heart, as well as my uncompromising respect. More importantly, they would go on to prove that their role as advisers would turn out to be the most essential job in the theater if we were to have long-term success.

The sun had set by the time I started the five-minute walk back to the Task Force TOC, the temperature cooling off to a bearable level. I reflected on the events of the past week and our upcoming mission. We were by no means going to lose the war by traditional standards—the enemy was not going to overrun us and kill us to the man. However, wars can be lost in other ways. In the States, public support for our mission was rapidly dwindling, and I feared we would spend the remainder of the deployment fighting and dying, only to have the politicians declare victory and then leave Iraq in chaos. Unless there was a dramatic change in the course of the war, we faced the possibility of a humiliating defeat in Iraq like the one we had suffered in Vietnam. I really did not want to be part of that.

I was grateful that we were fighting with a new brigade headquarters, the 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division. Its commander, Colonel Sean MacFarland, had some fresh ideas on how to *win* in Ramadi, and we were going to put his plan into action. MacFarland was one of the few senior officers I met who talked about actual victory, not just managing withdrawal or turning responsibility over to the Iraqis. He exuded a quiet confidence that made me have faith in him. Despite being in the most dangerous city in the world⁹, for some reason, I was optimistic of what was going to occur in the coming months.

Every Army unit has a motto, and I thought that my battalion had the coolest in the Army: "Conquer or Die." Now the gravity of those words was sinking in as a cold, hard truth:

We were in for the fight of our lives.

