

GENERATION KILL

Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America
and the New Face of American War

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PROLOGUE

IT'S ANOTHER IRAQI TOWN, nameless to the Marines racing down the main drag in Humvees, blowing it to pieces. We're flanked on both sides by a jumble of walled, two-story mud-brick buildings, with Iraqi gunmen concealed behind windows, on rooftops and in alleyways, shooting at us with machine guns, AK rifles and the odd rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). Though it's nearly five in the afternoon, a sandstorm has plunged the town into a hellish twilight of murky red dust. Winds howl at fifty miles per hour. The town stinks. Sewers, shattered from a Marine artillery bombardment that ceased moments before we entered, have overflowed, filling the streets with lagoons of human excrement. Flames and smoke pour out of holes blasted through walls of homes and apartment blocks by the Marines' heavy weapons. Bullets, bricks, chunks of buildings, pieces of blown-up light poles and shattered donkey carts splash into the flooded road ahead.

The ambush started when the lead vehicle of Second Platoon—the one I ride in—rounded the first corner into the town. There was a mosque on the left, with a brilliant, cobalt-blue dome. Across from this, in the upper window of a three-story building, a machine gun had opened up. Nearly two dozen rounds ripped into our Humvee almost immediately. Nobody was hit; none of the Marines panicked. They responded by speeding into the gunfire and attacking with their weapons. The four Marines crammed into this Humvee—among the first American troops to cross the border

into Iraq—had spent the past week wired on a combination of caffeine, sleep deprivation, tedium and anticipation. For some of them, rolling into an ambush was almost an answered prayer.

Their war began several days ago, as a series of explosions that rumbled across the Kuwaiti desert beginning at about five in the morning of March 20. The Marines, who had been sleeping in holes dug into the sand twenty kilometers south of the border with Iraq, sat up and gazed into the empty expanse, their faces blank as they listened to the distant thundering. They had eagerly awaited the start of war since leaving their base at Camp Pendleton, California, more than six weeks earlier. Spirits couldn't have been higher. Later, when a pair of Cobra helicopter gunships thumped overhead, flying north, presumably on their way to battle, Marines pumped their fists in the air and screamed, "Yeah! Get some!"

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

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

Now, in the midst of this ambush in a nameless town, Colbert appears utterly calm. He leans out his window in front of me, methodically pumping grenades into nearby buildings with his rifle launcher. The Humvee rocks rhythmically as the main gun on the roof turret, operated by a twenty-three-year-old corporal, thumps out explosive rounds into buildings along the street. The vehicle's machine gunner, a nineteen-year-old Marine who sits to my left, blazes up the town, firing through his window like a drive-by shooter. Nobody speaks.

The fact that the enemy in this town has succeeded in shutting up the driver of this vehicle, Corporal Josh Ray Person, is no mean feat. A twenty-two-year-old from Missouri with a faintly hick accent and a shock of white-blond hair covering his wide, squarish head—his blue eyes are so far apart Marines call him "Hammerhead" or "Goldfish"—Person plans to be a rock star when he gets out of the Corps. The first night of the invasion, he had crossed the Iraqi border, simultaneously entertaining and annoying his fellow Marines by screeching out mocking versions of Avril Lavigne songs. Tweaking on a mix of chewing tobacco, instant coffee crystals, which he consumes dry by the mouthful, and over-the-counter stimulants like ephedra-based Ripped Fuel, Person never stops jabbering. Already he's reached a profound conclusion about this campaign: that the battlefield that is Iraq is filled with "fucking retards." There's the retard commander in the battalion, who took a wrong turn near the border, delaying the invasion by at least an hour. There's another officer, a classic retard, who has spent much of the campaign chasing through the desert to pick up souvenirs—helmets, Republican Guard caps and rifles—thrown down by fleeing Iraqi soldiers. There are the hopeless retards in the battalion-support sections who screwed up the radios and didn't bring enough batteries to operate the Marines' thermal-imaging devices. But in Person's eyes, one retard reigns supreme: Saddam Hussein. "We already kicked his ass once," he says. "Then we let him go, and he spends the next twelve years pissing us off even more. We don't want to be in this shithole country. We don't want to invade it. What a fucking retard."

Now, as enemy gunfire tears into the Humvee, Person hunches purposefully over the wheel and drives. The lives of everyone depend on him.

If he's injured or killed and the Humvee stops, even for a moment in this hostile town, odds are good that everyone will be wiped out, not just the Marines in this vehicle, but the nineteen others in the rest of the platoon following behind in their Humvees. There's no air support from attack jets or helicopters because of the raging sandstorm. The street is filled with rubble, much of it from buildings knocked down by the Marines' heavy weapons. We nearly slam into a blown-up car partially blocking the street. Ambushers drop cables from rooftops, trying to decapitate or knock down the Humvee's turret gunner. Person zigzags and brakes as the cables scrape across the Humvee, one of them striking the turret gunner who pounds on the roof, shouting, "I'm okay!"

At least one Marine in Colbert's Humvee seems ecstatic about being in a life-or-death gunfight. Nineteen-year-old Corporal Harold James Trombley, who sits next to me in the left rear passenger seat, has been waiting all day for permission to fire his machine gun. But no chance. The villagers Colbert's team had encountered had all been friendly until we hit this town. Now Trombley is curled over his weapon, firing away. Every time he gets a possible kill, he yells, "I got one, Sergeant!" Sometimes he adds details: "Hajji in the alley. Zipped him low. I seen his knee explode!"


Midway through the town, there's a lull in enemy gunfire. For an instant, the only sound is wind whistling through the Humvee. Colbert shouts to everyone in the vehicle: "You good? You good?" Everyone's all right. He bursts into laughter. "Holy shit!" he says, shaking his head. "We were fucking lit up!"

Forty-five minutes later the Marines swing pickaxes into the hard desert pan outside of the town, setting up defensive positions. Several gather around their bullet-riddled Humvees, laughing about the day's exploits. Their faces are covered with dust, sand, tar, gun lubricant, tobacco spittle and sewer water from the town. No one's showered or changed out of the bulky chemical-protection suits they've been wearing for ten days. Since all mirrors and reflective surfaces have been stripped from their Humvees to make the vehicles harder to detect, most of the men haven't seen themselves since crossing the border. Their filthy faces seem to make their teeth shine even whiter as they laugh and hug one another.

The platoon's eldest member, thirty-five-year-old Gunnery Sergeant Mike "Gunny" Wynn, walks among the Marines, grabbing their heads and shaking them like you would when playing with a puppy. "All right!" he repeats in his mild Texas accent. "You made it, man!"

"Who's the fucking retard who sent us into that town?" Person asks, spitting a thick stream of tobacco juice, which catches in the wind and mists across the faces of several of his buddies standing nearby. "That sure tops my list of stupid shit we've done."

Trombley is beside himself. "I was just thinking one thing when we drove into that ambush," he enthuses. "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. I felt like I was living it when I seen the flames coming out of windows, the blown-up car in the street, guys crawling around shooting at us. It was fucking cool."



CULTURALLY, these Marines would be virtually unrecognizable to their forebears in the "Greatest Generation." They are kids raised on hip-hop, Marilyn Manson and Jerry Springer. For them, "motherfucker" is a term of endearment. For some, slain rapper Tupac is an American patriot whose writings are better known than the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. There are tough guys among them who pray to Buddha and quote Eastern philosophies and New Age precepts gleaned from watching Oprah and old kung fu movies. There are former gangbangers, a sprinkling of born-again Christians and quite a few guys who before entering the Corps were daily dope smokers; many of them dream of the day when they get out and are once again united with their beloved bud.

These young men represent what is more or less America's first generation of disposable children. More than half of the guys in the platoon come from broken homes and were raised by absentee, single, working parents. Many are on more intimate terms with video games, reality TV shows and Internet porn than they are with their own parents. Before the "War on Terrorism" began, not a whole lot was expected of this generation other than the hope that those in it would squeak through high school without pulling too many more mass shootings in the manner of Columbine.

But since the 9/11 attacks, the weight of America's "War on Terrorism" has fallen on their shoulders. For many in the platoon, their war started within hours of the Twin Towers falling, when they were loaded onto ships to begin preparing for missions in Afghanistan. They see the invasion of Iraq as simply another campaign in a war without end, which is pretty much what their commanders and their president have already told them. (Some in the military see the "War on Terrorism" merely as an acceleration of the trend that started in the 1990s with Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo: America cementing its role as global enforcer, the world's Dirty Harry.) In Iraq the joke among Marines is "After finishing here, we're going to attack North Korea, and we'll get there by invading Iran, Russia and China."

They are the first generation of young Americans since Vietnam to be sent into an open-ended conflict. Yet if the dominant mythology that war turns on a generation's loss of innocence—young men reared on *Davy Crockett* waking up to their government's deceptions while fighting in Southeast Asian jungles; the nation falling from the grace of Camelot to the shame of Watergate—these young men entered Iraq predisposed toward the idea that the Big Lie is as central to American governance as taxation. This is, after all, the generation that first learned of the significance of the presidency not through an inspiring speech at the Berlin Wall but through a national obsession with semen stains and a White House blow job. Even though their Commander in Chief tells them they are fighting today in Iraq to protect American freedom, few would be shaken to discover that they might actually be leading a grab for oil. In a way, they almost expect to be lied to.

If there's a question that hangs over their heads, it's the same one that has confronted every other generation sent into war: Can these young Americans fight?

As the sky turns from red to brown in the descending dust storm outside the town the Marines have just smashed apart, their platoon commander, a twenty-five-year-old lieutenant named Nathaniel Fick, leans against his Humvee, watching his men laugh. Lieutenant Fick, a Dartmouth graduate who joined the Marines in a fit of idealism, shakes his head, grinning. "I'll say one thing about these guys," he says. "When we

take fire, not one of them hesitates to shoot back. In World War Two, when Marines hit the beaches, a surprisingly high percentage of them didn't fire their weapons, even when faced with direct enemy contact. They hesitated. Not these guys. Did you see what they did to that town? They fucking destroyed it. These guys have no problem with killing."

Several Marines from Colbert's vehicle gather around Corporal Anthony Jacks, a twenty-three-year-old heavy-weapons gunner. Jacks is six foot two, powerfully built, and has a smile made unforgettable by his missing two front teeth (shot out in a BB-gun fight with his brother when he was sixteen). The Marines' nickname for him is "Manimal," not so much in tribute to his size but because of his deep, booming voice, which, when he yells, is oddly reminiscent of a bellowing farm animal. The platoon credits him with pretty much saving everyone's life during the ambush. Of the four heavy-weapons gunners in the platoon, Manimal alone succeeded in destroying the enemy's prime machine-gun position across from the mosque. For several minutes his buddies have been pounding him on the back, recounting his exploits. Howling and laughing, they almost seem like Johnny Knoxville's posse of suburban white homies celebrating one of his more outrageously pointless *Jackass* stunts. "Manimal was a fucking wall of fire!" one of them shouts. "All I seen was him dropping buildings and blowing up telephone poles!"

"Shut up, guys! It ain't funny!" Manimal roars, pounding the side of the Humvee with a massive paw.

He silences his buddies. They look down, some of them suppressing guilty smiles.

"The only reason we're all laughing now is none of us got killed," Manimal lectures them. "That was messed up back there."

It's the first time anyone has seriously raised this possibility: that war is not fun, that it might, in fact, actually suck.

In the coming weeks, it will fall on the men in this platoon and their battalion to lead significant portions of the American invasion of Iraq. They belong to an elite unit, First Reconnaissance Battalion, which includes fewer than 380 Marines. Outfitted with lightly armored or open-top Humvees that resemble oversized dune buggies, they will race ahead of the

much larger, better-equipped primary Marine forces in Iraq. Their mission will be to seek out enemy ambushes by literally driving into them.

Major General James Mattis, commander of the First Marine Division—the bulk of the Corps' ground forces in Iraq—would later praise the young men of First Recon for being “critical to the success of the entire campaign.” While spearheading the American blitzkrieg in Iraq, they will often operate deep behind enemy lines and far beyond anything they have trained for. They will enter Baghdad as liberating heroes only to witness their astonishing victory crumble into chaos. They will face death every day. They will struggle with fear, confusion, questions over war crimes and leaders whose competence they don't trust. Above all, they will kill a lot of people. A few of those deaths the men will no doubt think about and perhaps regret for the rest of their lives.

ONE



MAJOR GENERAL JAMES MATTIS calls the men in First Reconnaissance Battalion “cocky, obnoxious bastards.” Recon Marines belong to a distinct military occupational specialty, and there are only about a thousand of them in the entire Marine Corps. They think of themselves, as much as this is possible within the rigid hierarchy of the military, as individualists, as the Marine Corps' cowboys. They evolved as jacks-of-all-trades, trained to move, observe, hunt and kill in any environment—land, sea or air. They are its special forces.

Recon Marines go through much of the same training as do Navy SEALs and Army Special Forces soldiers. They are physical prodigies who can run twelve miles loaded with 150-pound packs, then jump in the ocean and swim several more miles, still wearing their boots and fatigues, and carrying their weapons and packs. They are trained to parachute, scuba dive, snowshoe, mountain climb and rappel from helicopters. Fewer than 2 percent of all Marines who enter in the Corps are selected for Recon training, and of those chosen, more than half wash out. Even those who make it commonly only do so after suffering bodily injury that borders on the grievous, from shattered legs to broken backs.

Recon Marines are also put through Survival Evasion Resistance Escape school (SERE), a secretive training course where Marines, fighter pilots, Navy SEALs and other military personnel in high-risk jobs are held “captive” in a simulated prisoner-of-war camp in which the student inmates are