

12:03 PM, Wednesday, March 23, 2003
An Nasiriyah, Iraq

Everything rumbled and vibrated as Captain Fletcher ducked below the commander's hatch and took a drink from a small khaki colored rubber hose connected to his personal Camelback. The nearly empty Camelback was stuffed between his seat and heated the hull of the vehicle. He drank the warm water greedily, saving the last mouthful to try and dislodge the grit accumulated in his mouth. He swished the water around several times and swallows hard. *Like swallowing mud.* He popped his head back up and squinted, as sand pelts his combat goggles and stung his exposed face. He yelled into his headset microphone over deafening growl of the Amphibious Assault Vehicle's 400 horsepower diesel engine.

"All Zombie Three tracks, this is Zombie actual. Interrogative. Does anyone have contact with Zombie One or Zombie Two on battalion command? Over,"

Captain Fletcher used the tactical VHF radio net reserved for communication between his Amphibious Assault Vehicle commanders and Charlie Company leadership stuffed inside his convoy. All communications on this radio net were transmitted via headset to his right ear. The battalion command channel hissed static from his left earphone.

He continuously scanned the street and buildings ahead of his vehicle, straining to keep as much of his head from poking out of the commander's hatch. *No need to give them a better target.* The volume of enemy automatic weapons fire drastically slackened over the past few minutes, but Captain Fletcher didn't want to catch some freedom fighter's lucky shot with his head. They had just endured close to ten minutes of intense, constant enemy fire while running straight down "Ambush Alley," in the far western side of An Nasiriyah. Miraculously, none of the vehicle or infantry commanders report any casualties. *Amazing. Pure fucking magic.*

He strained to see through the dust ahead of his own vehicle. He expected his vehicle to very shortly clear the larger buildings, and entered a less densely packed area, with scattered, low structures. The bridge loomed just beyond that, where he expected to see Zombie Two's AAV's and tanks in defensive positions on the other side of the bridge. *God I hope they don't shoot at us.* All Zombie Three tracks report "negative radio contact" with any other units." *Fuck I hope they don't shoot us.*

"Zombie Two, Ghostbuster Two, this is Zombie Three approaching objective Tombstone, over."

Captain Fletcher hears no response, only static on the battalion command net. He's mainly concerned with Ghostbuster Two, Zombie Two's tank escort. Three M1A2 Abrams battle tanks. They tended to hit what they targeted, and one mistaken hit would turn an AAV into a twisted heap of burning aluminum wreckage. *Where are these guys?*

Zombie Three, comprised of the ten armored vehicles carrying Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines (Call sign Banshee) and heavy elements of the battalion's weapons company, lost contact with Zombie Two's convoy five minutes after crossing the first bridge over the Euphrates River. Zombie Three, with Captain Fletcher in command of the vehicles, reasonably assumed that Zombie Two had skirted around to the east of the city, according to plan, and had reached the far bridge.

After closely consulting with Captain Tony Sanchez, Charlie Company's commander, he decided to push his vehicles straight through "Ambush Alley," one of An Nasiriyah's main streets, and the most direct route to the bridge.

The battalion commander, call sign Dracula, had made it crystal clear, in his final mission briefing, that all decisions would be aligned with “his” objective: To secure both bridges over the Euphrates before the enemy could react. Both Captain Fletcher and Captain Sanchez, sitting in Zombie Three Zero, the lead vehicle transporting Charlie Company to the far bridge, agreed that this road best supported the battalion commander’s intent. Three minutes down this road, Zombie Three lost radio contact with all other units. They had no idea that Zombie Two never made it to the bridge, and was instead stuck in a sewage flat, far south of the bridge.

He had expected light opposition along the route, but resistance from Fedayeen and regular Iraqi soldiers, in the immediate vicinity of their route, had briefly exceeded his expectations. Captain Fletcher saw dozens of poorly aimed rockets streak toward the column’s AAV’s, from all angles on the confined streets, and accepted the distinct likelihood that it was only a matter of time before one his twenty-three ton vehicles took a hit and was instantly transformed into a twenty-three ton smoldering roadblock. He started to second guess his decision to push through the road, when just as suddenly as the gunfire erupted, it slackened. Captain Fletcher allowed a wave of relief to wash over him, but it was not enough to overcome the sinking feeling that had been building since he lost contact with battalion, and every other unit outside of his convoy.

Alex glanced back at the high voltage power line towers still visible through the dust, over the tops of the buildings.

“RPG team, 10 o’clock!” he heard over the internal communications channel.

Captain Fletcher turned his head forward, and immediately scanned the area just to the left of where his vehicle was pointed. *Three of them, one with an RPG. One looks like a...*

Alex barely processed possibility that one of them looked like a young boy, before the turret on his AAV thundered, and fired a long sustained burst of .50 caliber steel over his head, and into the group huddled near the side of a one story concrete shack. The sound was deafening, as bullet’s slammed into both the shack and the RPG team. Sand and dirt from the ground is sprayed everywhere around the group, and concrete fragments from the building showered the road ahead of Captain Fletcher’s AAV. The enemy fighters are obscured by the airborne cloud of debris. *That group’s gone.*

Just as he forms this thought, the vehicle’s turret belches one more sustained burst of fire into the cloud of dust where the enemy team had assembled. The second burst added to the sand and mess settling over the group, which now appeared to be no more than a lifeless tangle of twisted, dust-caked corpses. He glimpsed a bright red pulsing stream of fresh arterial blood from the achromatic heap of shattered bodies. *Fucking ripped them apart.*

He looks back at the turret. Corporal Reyes has popped his head up out of the turret, and is signaling him with a thumbs-up and a huge grin. Captain Fletcher returned the thumbs up.

“Nice shooting Reyes,” he said on the internal communications net.

“Just keep ’em coming sir,” Reyes replied.

Captain Fletcher gave him another thumbs up without looking back, and ducked down into the AAV. *Just keep ’em coming.*

12:10 PM, Wednesday, March 23, 2003

An Nasiriyah, Iraq

“Reyes, can you see the bridge?” Captain Fletcher said into the AAV’s internal communications link.

“Standby...yes sir, I can barely make out the bridge. The dust is clearing a bit. I don't see anyone else there, unless they're dug in good sir,” replies Corporal David Reyes.

“Alright, I see it now too. The dust is clearing. Fucking A, I think you're right. I don't see any other units. No foot mobiles or vehicles.” *At least we won't get shot by the tanks, but what happened to Zombie Two.* Captain Fletcher switched from the internal net to Zombie Three Tactical.

“All Zombie Three tracks, All Banshee units, this is Zombie Three actual. I have the bridge in sight. There is no sign of Zombie Two. Looks like we're the first unit to reach the bridge. Break. All Zombie Three tracks deploy Banshee on the far side of the bridge and coordinate fire support with Banshee. Watch your sectors exiting the city. Report when you have crossed the bridge. Report any enemy contact on far side of the bridge. Zombie Three Zero increasing speed to make run over the bridge. Keep standard spacing and stay off the road on the other side. Good luck. Out.”

Captain Fletcher ducked down into the AAV, leaned forward and slapped the driver, Sergeant Manuel Flores, on the shoulder.

“Hit it Manny, get me over that bridge,” he screamed over the noise.

Sergeant Flores gave him a quick thumbs up, and Captain Fletcher felt the AAV speed up. He poked his head up again and looked toward the bridge. *Nothing on the other side.*

The dust had dissipated enough for him to clearly see the rapidly bridge approaching. The bridge was a simple flat concrete structure spanning the Saddam Canal. The canal itself measured no more than 50 meters at its widest point near the bridge. The terrain around the bridge consisted of thickly vegetated swampy patches, drainage ditches and tall grass. Beyond this, the land was flat, providing little cover or concealment. To make matters worse, the road beyond the bridge was raised. *Sitting ducks on that road. Come on, get me across.*

He turned his head to look back over the AAV. With the turret offset to the right side of the vehicle, and his commander's position on the left side, he had a fairly unobstructed view back at the line of AAV's exiting the northeast corner of An Nasiriyah. Several Banshee riflemen protruded from hatches of his vehicle, partially blocking his view. These rifleman kept the enemy along “Ambush Alley” from causing any significant damage to his column, during their sprint through the city.

Most of them stood on the troop benches inside the AAV, exposing themselves to enemy fire, in order to unleash a deadly fusillade against the ambush. Captain Fletcher didn't feel quite so invincible. He turned his head to face forward when a large explosion reached his ears. He simultaneously felt the concussion of the explosion, and it caused him to duck inside the AAV for cover.

“Zombie Three Nine is hit! I say again, Zombie Three Nine took a massive hit! They're on fire, still moving!”

The voice on the net was frantic. Alex took a deep breath.

“This is Zombie Three actual, calm down, take a deep breath. Repeat your last and identify yourself, over.”

“This is Banshee Three Six.” *Third Platoon's Commander. Probably in the track ahead of Zombie Three Nine.*

“Banshee Three Nine took an RPG hit. They're on fire, but still mobile.” *Zombie Three Nine? Shit. This guy sounds frazzled.* Alex understands why. They all felt like sitting ducks in the back of the thin shelled AAV's.

“Roger, check in with Banshee Six to report further information, over.”

“This is Banshee Three Six, roger, out.”

“Zombie Three Nine, this is Zombie Three Zero, over,” Captain Fletcher yelled into his helmet microphone. He looked back and could see smoke rising from the rear of his column. *Damn.* He simultaneously heard the sound of automatic weapons fire crescendo to the rear. *Here we go again.* He ducked down into the AAV and glanced back to the troop compartment. He saw Captain Sanchez hunkered over his radio, yelling into the handset. Captain Sanchez looked up at him and yells.

“They’re hit bad!”

He could barely hear him over the screaming noise of the AAV’s engine, and had no desire to continue a shouting match. Captain Fletcher pointed at a handset hanging on the side of the AAV, and then pointed to his own helmet. Captain Sanchez immediately took the handset attached to the vehicle.

“They’re hit bad, several casualties, the thing is on fire, but still moving toward the bridge,” Sanchez told him over the internal circuit.

“Roger, I don’t have any comms with the vehicle. Tell your Marines to stay on board as long as they can and tell the crew to get that vehicle across the bridge. I don’t want anyone stuck on the other side. If they can’t get across, I need to know ASAP so we can go back across to give them cover and get them on another track.”

“Roger that Alex. What a fucking mess. Any luck getting Dracula on the net?”

“Negative. All Comms outside of Zombie Three are dead. Fucking beautiful eh?”

“Roger,” Sanchez grunted and replaced the handset.

Captain Fletcher popped back up through the hatch, just as his track crossed the bridge. Two other AAV’s are crossed behind him. He could clearly see the wounded AAV lumbering along, thick black smoke billowing from the rear troop compartment. *Jesus.* Sergeant Flores turned the massive AAV right, and moved along the river, staying at least 50 meters from the river bank and the dangerous terrain hidden by the long grasses and reeds. Although amphibious, and fully capable of crossing the river. The heavy AAV did not perform well in swampy grass or deep mud.

“Dracula, this Zombie Three, over.” *Nothing.*

“Zombie Two, Zombie One, this is Zombie Three, over.”

Nothing. Son of a bitch. A brief lull in the fighting descended on the scene, and Alex heard the very distant rattle of automatic weapons fire, punctuated by muted explosions. *Sounds like a mean firefight. Zombie Two? Fucking far away that’s for sure.*

Alex stepped on his seat, and stood through the commander’s hatch. Standing this way exposed him from the waist up, but gave him a higher vantage point. He still couldn’t see over the gun turret, which blocked part of his view of the city. The AAV’s turret was trained toward the low buildings they had just escaped, moving slowly back and forth. Corporal Reyes methodically searched through his optics for targets. Alex saw that most of the AAV’s had crossed the bridge, and he started to receive crossing reports from all of Zombie Three tracks. Zombie Three Nine limped slowly to the southern foot of the bridge, and labored across. Captain Fletcher was concerned that it would explode, killing most of the Marines onboard. *Come on guys, Just a little further.*

“Zombie Three Five, this is Zombie actual, over.”

Zombie Three Five carried Captain Fletcher's senior platoon commander, 1st Lieutenant Daniel Farraday.

“This is Zombie Three Five, over.”

"Three Five, I am dismounting to take a look at Zombie Three Nine. Monitor all traffic on battalion and local tac. Wave me down if you make contact with any other units," said Captain Fletcher.

"Roger, sir," Farraday replied.

Alex announced on the internal comlink that he is leaving the vehicle to check on Zombie Three Nine. He squirmed past his seat, into the troop compartment, grabbing his M-4 rifle on the way. He exited the hatch, passing Lance Corporal Wayne Hillock, assistant crew chief. He nodded to Hillock on the way out.

"Don't worry, Daddy won't be gone for long," Captain Fletcher yelled to Hillock.

Hillock smirked, and put a closed fist to his right eye, pretending to wipe tears from his eyes.

Captain Fletcher flipped him the bird, and trotted away toward the bridge. On the run over to the bridge, he passed Captain Sanchez, who was huddled with his platoon commanders. Sanchez kept looking up at the burning AAV that lurched dangerously slow across the bridge.

"Sanchez, what's your company's status?" he asked.

"Getting final defensive orders out to the platoons right now. Weapons company mortars will deploy about 50 meters back, over there, in a slightly depressed area. It should give them cover from incoming small arms fire fire."

He pointed further south to an area that appeared to have a few small sand dunes protruding from the hardened ground. Alex looked out to the position and nodded. He saw a group of several heavily loaded Marines emerge from one of the AAV's on the other side of the road, and start running over to the prospective mortar position. While looking up, Captain Fletcher viewed the entire deployment of his AAV force. Four vehicles were set up along the road past the bridge, in a blocking formation intended to stop any enemy vehicles from breaking through. *Textbook. I sure hope they don't send any vehicles at this bridge.*

The other AAV's, including his own, were set up parallel to the river bank, ready to support the infantry with heavy weapons fire across the river, which he perceived as their primary threat sector. He saw Marine infantry taking cover in positions facing the other side of the river, and to the west. He also saw a few heavy machine teams digging gun positions, along with one Dragon anti-tank missile team. *Good. At least something they have could possibly break up an armored assault...or at least part of the attack.* Zombie Three's deployment looked good.

While taking in the entire picture, Alex suddenly realized that this wasn't his show anymore. He got Charlie Company here intact. Holding the bridge for the rest of the battalion was Charlie Company's task. His armored vehicles would play an integral role defending the bridge, but Captain Sanchez's Marines would anchor the effort. Alex needed to acknowledge this transfer of command.

"Captain, let me know what you need from us. We're deployed according to plan, but you may want more of my guns along the river. The vehicle commanders directly for any movement. They know the deal."

Sanchez gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up.

"Thanks Alex, I may move them if we start taking a lot of fire from the city. I'm also worried about the light structures to the west. Might need some heavy suppression their too."

"No problem. I'll see you at the bridge," Captain Fletcher said to Sanchez.

"Roger, be there in a minute."

Captain Fletcher sprinted to the bridge as Captain Sanchez continued issuing orders to his platoon commanders and non-commissioned officers. He caught up with all three Navy

corpsmen at the end of the bridge. They were poised, ready to treat injuries. They were focused on the burning vehicle, which neared the end of the bridge. Alex could smell the burning metal, as smoke poured over them. The smoke stung his eyes and nose, and he pulled his goggles down over his eyes. One of the corpsman pulled a dark green scarf up over his nose and closed his eyes as a heavy wave of thick black smoke blanketed them.

Captain Fletcher stepped through the smoke onto the road, and pointed to the driver of the AAV, who was trying to get as much of his body out of the driver's hatch as possible, while still maintaining control of the dying vehicle. Black smoke poured from his hatch. The track commander was sitting on top of the AAV, holding an M-4 rifle at the ready, and looking back at the open hatches, as Marines climbed out of the top of the vehicle. Marines threw heavy ammunition cans over the side to prevent secondary explosions inside the vehicle. Several infantry Marines ran past the AAV on the bridge to retrieve the dumped ammunition. With their supporting units absent, everyone knew they might need every last round they could salvage. The driver nodded to him, and Captain Fletcher stood in front of the vehicle, walking backward, and guiding it to a resting stop just south of the bridge, to the left of the road.

Once across the bridge, disheveled Marines, faces blackened, poured out of the burning wreckage, some tumbling from the top hatches onto the pavement and hard packed desert sand. Coughing and hacking, they immediately struggled to the rear of the AAV to help other Marines, who emerged from the shattered, burning rear hatch, carrying and pushing the casualties through the jagged opening. Marines from the closest AAV rushed to assist the evacuation effort, and Captain Fletcher raced around the front of the vehicle to join them. 2nd Lieutenant Devon Reese jumped down from the vehicle, onto the ground in front of Captain Fletcher, landing on his left side and smashing into the ground holding his rifle. Captain Fletcher pulled him to his feet, and grabbed him by his shoulders.

“Good work getting that thing across! You OK?”

“I'm fine. Everyone is off the track. I think Keady's dead. His position was right where the RPG hit.”

He started to pull away from Captain Fletcher, looking back at the crowd of Marines. Alex let him go and immediately followed. Moments later, they arrived amidst wounded and dazed Marines. Captain Sanchez was already at the scene directing the effort. Within moments, the three Navy corpsmen took charge of the situation and started to triage the wounded Marines. Petty Officer 2nd Class Bobby Helstrum led the effort.

“Back up. Make a hole. We're gonna set up the aid station behind that AAV. If you're not carrying or helping a Marine, you need to get back to your assigned positions. We got it from here!”

Helstrum pointed to the closest AAV's along the riverbank, just fifteen meters away. Given the open terrain, the corpsmen didn't have a lot of centralized, protected choices for a triage site. The petty officer's instinct lead him to choose a position shielded from the most likely source of enemy fire across the river.

“Roger that Doc! You heard the man! Get the wounded over to the aid station and get back to your positions. You ain't gonna do them any good standing around taking up their air. Let's go!”

The unoccupied Marines scattered at the sound of the Staff Sergeant Jefferson's voice. Jefferson was one of Charlie Company's Platoon Sergeants. Standing well over six feet tall, with limbs as thick as tree trunks, when SSGT Jefferson barked an order, the Marines jumped to execute it.

Captain Fletcher followed two Marines carrying what looked like the most critically wounded Marine. It was one of Charlie Company's guys, a corporal with most of his lower left leg mangled, and severe burns to the rest of his legs and lower torso. The Marine was unconscious.

The next two wounded Marines escorted to the aid station were also severely burned, with no other apparent injuries. Alex scanned the group for Corporal Keady. Two Marines picked up the last Marine lying near the AAV, and started to move him to the aid station. The Marine's head was bent forward at an extremely unnatural angle, and he suddenly realized that the Marine's entire uniform was soaked dark red. Oddly, he didn't appear burned at all. Alex started to jog over to help them, but was stopped by an arm pulling on his shoulder. Annoyed, Captain Fletcher turned his head to see Petty Officer Jensen.

"He's dead sir. Took most of the blast from the RPG. Gone instantly. Nothing anyone could do. Nearly decapitated. I'm really sorry sir," said Petty Officer Jensen.

"Thanks doc."

Alex paused and watched as they carried Keady's body past him to the station. The sight was ghastly. The bulk of the explosion had apparently struck him between the upper back and head, nearly vaporizing his neck. He shook his head, feeling dizzy. He'd seen dozens of mutilated bodies on the way up, mostly on the side of the road. Victims of Task Force Tarawa's Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) Company. But this was one of his men. He turned back to Jensen, but the corpsman was already helping to stabilize the severely wounded corporal from Charlie Company. *I better get back to my track.*

Just as he finished this thought, most of the .50 caliber machine guns on the AAV's opened fire simultaneously. The methodical thumping of the heavy machine guns pounded his ears, as the gunners engaged targets on the other side of the river, with short, controlled bursts of fire. Captain Fletcher grabbed his binoculars and scanned past the outgoing tracers. He saw several small groups of armed para-military men moving slowly toward the river. By his own estimation, they were still well outside of effective small arms range, and judging by the silence of Charlie Company's rifles, he was not alone in his assessment. Most of the Marines had scrambled to their defensive positions, scanning the far side for targets. Alex started to run toward his AAV and made it half way back, when the first incoming artillery rounds hit the Marine's position.

Two large explosions rocked an unoccupied area 100 meters east of the nearest Marine infantry position, skyrocketing chunks of dried mud, grass and dust at least 30 feet into the air. None of the debris fell into the perimeter. Any Marines out in the open quickly found a covered position, and pressed their bodies as low to the ground as possible. Most of the terrain around the bridge was flat and open, punctuated with an occasional dirt berm, drainage ditch or natural outcropping of rock. The area provided very little useful cover to the Marines, and judging by the smaller size and force of the explosion, Captain Fletcher guessed that they were just attacked by enemy mortars from inside the city.

He continued sprinting toward his vehicle, which was the closest to the impact of the mortar rounds, and saw several Marines run toward the AAV's. He reached his own vehicle's rear hatch and was pushed aside by a 1st Lieutenant, who scrambled on top of one of the troop benches, and heaved himself up onto the top of the AAV. He stood up and started to frantically search for any sign of the enemy mortar position.

Alex entered the troop compartment of the vehicle and yelled to Hillock.

"Close one of the back hatches and stay on comms. We may have to move quick."

The corporal didn't respond, but he immediately closed right hatch. Alex squeezes through to his position, replaced his M-4 next to his seat, and reconnected the comms cable to his helmet. One headset sprang to life.

"Zombie Three Five, this is Zombie Three actual, I am back in my track. Break. Interrogative. Any joy raising the other units?"

"This is Zombie Three Five, negative contact, over."

"Roger. Break. All Zombie tracks. Make sure your gunners conserve ammunition. We may have to hold this bridge indefinitely. Engage machine gun and RPG teams clearly within range of your guns. Leave the lighter stuff for Banshee. Out."

Alex steps up onto his seat and looks up at the turret. He could see the back of his gunner's helmet. The turret panned slowly to the left.

"Got anything Reyes?" Alex says.

"Nada, sir. We hit a couple, but the groups on this side pulled back out of range. I can see some movement out at maybe 1000 meters. I could maybe hit them. Hold on sir, here comes a group of four...no five, making a dash for a clump of trees."

The .50 caliber gun jumps to life, pumping a sustained burst toward an anticipated spot ahead of the enemy group. The nearest AAV, which is staggered 10 meters closer to river, started to fire at the same group. Alex watched as each turret fired two more bursts toward the group. Tracers barely visible in the day, crisscrossed in front of the enemy. The first rounds impacted short of the group, but the next few bursts landed among the fighters, dropping two of them immediately. Alex watched through his binoculars, as another man was hit by a burst of fire and tumbled several feet before stopping. The guns fell silent.

"You see that sir! Fucking got two of them. Three One hogged the rest."

"Good shooting Reyes, I confirm two. You see any heavy weapons?"

"Negative sir."

"Roger. We need to conserve ammo Reyes. I don't know when Zombie Two is going to arrive here to reinforce us. If they even arrive. Leave any more small groups like that for Banshee."

"Aw sir, that ain't no fun."

"I know, but we could be here all day repelling attacks. Let me know what you see out there so I can pass it on to Banshee."

Captain Fletcher yells to the 1st Lieutenant standing on his vehicle.

"Lieutenant! What's your call sign?"

"Banshee One Six, 1st Platoon sir! I'm looking to give our mortars some business!"

"Roger that," Alex replied.

Alex trained his binoculars to the southeast, past the corner of the city, hoping to see signs of Zombie Two. *Nothing. No smoke, just nothing.* He could no longer hear the distant sound of fighting over his own battle.

His thought were shattered by several explosive concussions. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the ground explode, then felt the explosive concussion of two 82mm High Explosive mortar rounds, which hit a lot closer than the first two, but still not on top of any Marines. The shockwave tensed his body as four much larger detonations rocked the Marine's defensive position. The artillery shells hit roughly 100 meters north of the bridge, landing on or near the road leading out of An Nasiriyah. Chunks of concrete, rock and dirt geysered upward and outward from each explosion, unleashing a shower of debris over the AAV's and Marines near the bridge. Nobody was injured or killed by the first artillery salvo.

Captain Fletcher was now truly worried about their situation. The approximate casualty radius of a 152mm artillery round was 100 meters. The effective kill radius was 50 meters. The first artillery salvo had landed on the edge of the casualty radius. *God knows where the next salvo will fall.*

He lowered himself down into the AAV, keeping his head exposed so he could see 360 degrees around his vehicle. Even the young platoon commander on the back of his track lowered himself further into one of the top hatches. Alex saw the other top hatches closing, as Hillock moved methodically to shut them. He turned his body to face the rear of the track, and glanced at Zombie Three Seven. Zombie Three Seven is furthest north along the road.

“Zombie Three Seven, this is Zombie Three Zero, reposition your track to screen the aid station from the rear. Bring it in as tight as you can. Break. All Zombie Three units, use your optics to help Banshee find the mortars and artillery. Stay buttoned up. Out.”

The platoon commander disappears down into the vehicle.

“He’s headed back to his platoon sir.”

“Thanks Hillock.”

Several 152mm high explosive shells simultaneously landed within 75 meters of the bridge, centered around a spot 25 meters to the east of the road. Dangerously close to the weapons company’s mortar position. Shrapnel banged off the sides of nearly every AAV, followed by concussion waves that shook all twenty-three tons of his vehicle. Shrapnel from rounds landing any closer to the AAV’s could easily penetrate the thin aluminum armor. Alex instinctively ducked his head back inside the vehicle as the last of the explosions darkened the sky. He reluctantly lifted it back up to visually check the other units.

“Everyone OK back there?”

Each crewmember from Zombie Three Zero checked in with Captain Fletcher. Nobody was hurt. He checked his watch. 12:42. *We’ve been here just 30 minutes.*

“Zombie actual, this is Three Five. I’m moving over to the west to provide suppressing fire for 3rd Platoon. Bad guys moving in from the structures directly west of our position, on this side of the canal, over.”

“Negative, stay in your position, we are going to redeploy sectors and positions, over.”

“This is Three Five, roger, out.”

On the internal circuit, Reyes announced a visitor.

“Looks like 1st Platoon’s commander needs to talk to you.”

“Roger that. Hillock, tell him to grab the internal handset.”

“Copy that sir.”

Alex ducked down into his hatch and looked back into the troop compartment. The platoon commander grabbed the handset.

“Captain, I’m sending a squad and a 240 over to set up due east of our position to cut off any enemy that may have crossed the canal. Some of my Marines swear they saw some swimmers down there. Can you back them up with one of your tracks?”

“No problem. I am going to redeploy several tracks, I’ll send one east to tie in with your Marines. 3rd Platoon is already engaging the enemy due west of our position, our side of the canal. This is going to be a long day lieutenant.”

“Tell me about it. Closing in from all sides. A juicy shit sandwich, sir.”

“You said it. I’ll move that track for you now. Good luck.”

The platoon commander grinned and replaced the handset. He set off back to his position along the canal bank. Two more mortar rounds hit near Fletcher’s vehicle, spewing dirt and rock

all over the vehicle. The rounds landed about 20 meters north of his position, an obvious refinement of the two previous salvos. *They are right on top of us now. Heavy artillery and mortars. And we don't have shit for fire support.* Just then, Charlie Company's 60mm mortars started firing. Alex hoped they were firing at the enemy mortar position. So far, he heard no casualty reports over the tactical net.

"All Zombie tracks, this is Zombie actual, standby for redeployment orders. Break. Zombie Three Five, move back from the canal and tie in with 3rd Platoon elements to your west. Your new sectors are as follows. Continue to cover west of the road across the canal to west of your position on the north side of the canal. Give Three Seven a clean line of fire to the west if possible. Break. Zombie Three Six, move to the west and tie in with 3rd Platoon. Your new sector is due west, north of the canal to due north, covering the northern approaches to the road leading to the bridge. Break. Zombie Three One, move to the east and tie in with 1st Platoon elements. Your sector is due east and north. Take targets of opportunity south of the canal. These are the only changes. How copy over."

"Three Five, roger, out."

"Three Six, roger, out."

"Three One, on the move, out."

"This is Banshee actual, thanks for the quick move. Out."

All of the vehicles start to maneuver to their new positions.

"Here they come!" Corporal Reyes announced over the internal communications circuit.

All of the gun turrets in Captain Fletcher's Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAV) company started firing at once, sending a continuous maelstrom of heavy caliber bullets and high explosive grenades across the river. A few seconds later, assault rifle fire erupted from the Marines along the Euphrates River bank, joined by bursts of light machine gun fire.

Captain Fletcher turned his attention to the other side of the Euphrates Canal. Two hundred meters back from the opposite side, he saw droves of disorganized enemy fighters rushing forward through the palm groves and dilapidated shacks. Hundreds of tracer rounds reached the onrush, as rifles, machine guns and grenades pulverized the oncoming enemy troops.

"All Zombie tracks, continue to your new positions. I say again, move to your new positions," Captain Fletcher reinforced. *They have to move.*

A salvo of several high explosive artillery shells landed fifty meters closer than the last barrage, spraying shrapnel at anything exposed nearby. This encompassed most of the AAV's and over half of Charlie Company's Marines. The shockwave from each successive blast rocked the AAV's and pulsed through the prone Marines. The last artillery shell in the barrage landed two meters behind one of the AAV's near the bridge, and blasted through the thin armor, shredding the rest of the vehicle with shrapnel. The AAV immediately ignited from the heat of the explosion.

One of the explosions threw Alex sideways, and the right side of his helmet struck the lip of the hatch opening. Dazed, he regained his balance and spun around to scan the impact area. He could barely see the damaged AAV through the descending dirt and debris. *Shit.* He saw the gunner jump down from the turret onto the front of the vehicle, and help the vehicle commander get out of his hatch.

"Zombie Three Eight, this is Zombie Three actual, over." *Come on guys. Someone answer.*

Captain Fletcher scanned the vehicle again, and assessed the damage as a mission kill to the AAV. He didn't think anyone in the rear compartment could have survived the blast. Several

infantry Marines rushed from a nearby position to the burning AAV, and a corpsman from the nearby aid station joined them. Within seconds, they started to carry the vehicle commander to the aid station. From his stretcher, the vehicle commander frantically pointed to the back of the AAV, yelling something to the other Marines near the vehicle. Two Marines entered the damaged rear hatch of the burning AAV, which was consumed with flames, and pulled a limp human form back through the hatch. As the group moved to the aid station, several mortar rounds fell into Charlie Company's perimeter, spraying dirt and creating havoc, but mercifully failing to injure any Marines.

Zombie Three Eight burns fiercely, along with the Zombie Three Nine, the first AAV destroyed, sending columns of thick black smoke into the air. *Maybe someone will see this and figure out we're in deep shit over here.* With two of his ten vehicles destroyed, and no radio contact with his battalion, Captain Fletcher felt an impending sense of doom.

"Gents, I really hope our counter-battery folks take out that artillery," he said into the vehicle comms. *Not likely.*

The volume of fire from the Marines picked up after a temporary lull caused by the last series of impacts, and Charlie Company's mortars fired furiously in response to the enemy mortars. He saw a group of Marines carrying a disassembled 60mm mortar, moving in the open toward the AAV's. *Sanchez is spreading out the mortars. Smart.*

They made it halfway to the AAV's, when another round of enemy artillery shells appeared to land right on top of the Marines and the mortar position they just departed. Blast waves from successive explosions jarred the AAV, slamming rock and shrapnel into the sides of the AAV. Alex heard a quick buzz near his right ear, and ducked into the AAV more out of instinct than logic. Whatever snapped by his head was long gone by the time he reacted.

"Banshee Six, this is Zombie actual, those rounds landed on our mortar position."

"Roger, sending help."

"Hillock, Manny, we have Marines down just north of the track. Let's get them out of that kill zone."

Alex disconnected his helmet cable and stepped up on the seat to pull his body out of the hatch. His driver, Lance Corporal Manuel Rodriguez, hit the ground seconds before Alex, and they both saw that Sergeant Hillock was already halfway across the dust clouded ground separating the vehicle from the downed mortar team. Alex and Manny merged with several Marines sprinting over from positions near the canal, and Captain Fletcher told at least half of the Marines to help out the mortar position, which was about twenty meters further along, just past a small rise of ground. Two of the corpsman sprinted across the area recently hit by artillery, and arrived at the mortar position to assess casualties. They split up and one headed toward Alex.

Alex and the other Marines staggered at the sight of the destroyed mortar team. Immediately, Alex could see that at least four of the Marines were dead, and the rest were seriously wounded. *Obliterated.* 1st Lieutenant Dave Pardell, weapons platoon commander, is the only apparently uninjured member of the team. He stumbled onto his feet, face blackened with dirt, and started to run toward the bridge. He was missing his helmet and rifle.

"Grab him," Alex shouted to one of the Marines closest to the lieutenant.

Mortar rounds started to hit the area south of the Marines, and straddled the AAV's next to the canal. All of the Marines hit the ground, except for Pardell. A sergeant yanked him to the ground by his left arm, and Pardell released an inhuman scream. Alex now saw that his left forearm is bent at a right angle. *Jesus.*

"That might'a hit some of 1st platoon," said one of the Marines, still hugging the ground.

Alex looked past his debris sprayed vehicle to the canal. He saw one of the 1st Platoon radiomen give a “thumbs up” to the group.

“2nd squad just checked in. They got dusted good, but no injuries,” says a Marine crouched down with a radio.

Alex considered their position in the open. This was not where he wanted to be when the next round of artillery crashes in. He waved to Zombie Three Three. The vehicle’s commander must have anticipated his next move, because the vehicle immediately sprang to life and headed toward them. *Three is now the official medevac vehicle.*

“Load all of the dead and wounded in that track, and get them back to the aid station!” said Captain Fletcher.

Captain Fletcher turned to Gunnery Sergeant Fitzgerald, a hulking black Marine feared by every Marine in Charlie Company, and Alex himself.

“Fitz, get ’em moving.”

“You heard the Captain, load ’em up and get back to your positions! Let’s go people!” Gunny Fitzgerald said and slapped one of the Marine’s helmets.

Alex met the AAV as it approached, and headed over to the right side of the vehicle. He banged on armor, and yelled up at the vehicle commander, who leaned down over the side to hear him. Bullets pinged off the vehicles near Alex and cracked overhead. None of them flinched anymore.

“You’re the medevac track. Load them up, and get back over to the aid station.”

The vehicle commander nods, and Alex looked back at the Marines helping their wrecked comrades. He saw a lone rocket-propelled grenade fly several feet above the Marines and trail off north, heading toward nothing. He stared at the trail of white smoke, waiting for it to explode in the distance. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught another trail of smoke.

He never really sees the rocket propelled grenade that strikes short of the AAV, and detonates against the hard ground several feet in front of him.

Chunks of rock and steel slammed into Captain Fletcher and hammered him against the side of the vehicle. For a few seconds, he felt like he’s been submerged underwater. Then nothing.