PART

I

Caught by the Chill

1

No Guns, No Glory

> Anyone who has ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war.
>
> Otto Von Bismarck

When the orders came over the radio, both of the young Marines were worried. First Lieutenant Ben Reid, and the platoon's other officer, Second Lieutenant Fred Pokorney, talked quietly about the sudden change of strategy from battalion headquarters. A month had been spent working out a detailed plan to bypass the Iraqi city of Al Nasiriyah after Charlie Company had crossed the Euphrates River. Three companies of Marines, Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, were to secure three separate bridges on the north and south sides of Al Nasiriyah.

Already, though, something had gone wrong.

"If we don't take those bridges now, regiment will give away our missions." The battalion commander's voice over the combat network was clear, and distinct. "So, we are going to run the gauntlet. Alpha, you take the southern bridge. Charlie, you take the northern bridge."

Reid and Pokorney spoke privately, acknowledging their fears to each other, but not their troops. Pokorney, though, had no doubt about what the orders meant.

"We're dead," he told Ben Reid.

Tanks, which were supposed to provide them armored support, had just been called away on a rescue mission, and still Charlie Company was being ordered to go straight up "ambush alley," a main thoroughfare in the center of Al Nasiriyah. Commanders had decided there was no time to wait for the return of the tanks. Al Nasiriyah needed to be controlled by the Americans, and neither Pentagon planners nor the White House was exhibiting much patience for a more calculated approach to battle. There was tremendous political pressure to prove that a small invasion force had the strength to move quickly and decisively on to Baghdad.

The stretch of road in front of Charlie Company was known to be occupied by Iraqi irregulars and Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen fighters, who had set up firing positions, were hiding in buildings, and waiting to attack. This information was the reason leadership had chosen a strategy of skirting the city after taking the southern bridge over the Euphrates. Alpha and Charlie Companies were then expected to close on the two northern bridges across the Saddam Canal.

A few hours earlier, Ben Reid and Fred Pokorney had gotten their first look at combat. Charlie Company, positioned at the rear of a column advancing up the main supply route, had moved northward as part of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade at 3:00 A.M. Around first light, the two young men saw Iraqis firing at the approaching Marines.

"From what I remember," Reid said. "First contact with the enemy was a few mortar rounds the Iraqis were shooting at us from the rooftop of a building. The front of the column also came into contact with machine guns, and I remember the anxiousness of the Marines in contact to employ their weapons systems."

As he listened on the radio, Reid gathered information on enemy positions, unfolded his map, and marked Iraqi and friendly positions with blue and red dots. Information off the combat network radio led

him to believe the Marines out front were doing a good job of hitting their targets. Reid was encouraged. In the middle of the night on the Iraqi desert, while his platoon was preparing to move out, Ben Reid had spoken with several soldiers in a huge convoy moving through his own company's lines. He was surprised to learn that none of the personnel, junior officers, or senior staff noncommissioned officers had any maps of the area in which they were being deployed. Reid was pleased that he and Pokorney seemed to be more prepared for the coming challenges.

The morning of March 23 was already expected to be significant in the military career of Fred Pokorney. Not only was he getting his first combat experience, the 6 foot, 7 inch Marine was scheduled for promotion to First Lieutenant. Ben Reid had told his friend to plan on a brief ceremony acknowledging Pokorney's rise in rank, after they had accomplished their mission of taking the northernmost bridge over the canal.

Pokorney and Reid had become friends on the long ocean voyage from the United States to Kuwait. The two had shared a stateroom on the ship with several other junior officers. Pokorney was with Bravo Company and had been attached to Charlie Company to serve as an artillery forward observer in an infantry rifle company. Standard Marine procedures, these types of rotations are designed to give officers experience in a number of different military disciplines. Pokorney might have remained with his artillery unit and been relatively safe in the rear, but he asked for a change of orders.

His wife, Chelle Pokorney, did not learn of her husband's plans until he was preparing to leave for the Persian Gulf.

"After September 11, Fred was very eager, and willing to do something about what had happened to our country," she said. "But he didn't tell me he was going over with the infantry until the last minute. He was in the infantry before he became an officer and joined the artillery."

If the Marine Corps' advertising agency had ever stumbled across Fred Pokorney Jr., they might have used him as the new,

national poster board Marine. Pokorney's dark eyes conveyed the kind of determination Marines have used to accomplish history's most difficult military goals. A photo during his days as an enlisted Marine showed him kneeling in front of three officers holding the company banner on a guidon. Pokorney's size and command presence, even from a ground level, dominate the picture and diminish the natural resolve of the officers arrayed behind him at attention.

Discipline was not what Fred Pokorney was looking for in the Marines. He already had that characteristic. Born with a hardened will, no one had ever heard him indulge in remorse or self-pity. Things were just what they were, he believed; you learned how to deal with circumstance, not make excuses, and if you were determined enough, you excelled. Pokorney was probably hoping the Marines would become his family. As a child, his existence was disrupted by the divorce of his parents and the nomadic nature of his father's work. Fred Pokorney wanted a permanent home.

After a promising basketball career was ended by an injury during his freshman year in college, Pokorney went to work in the silver mines of Tonopah, Nevada, where he had attended high school. In a few years, he enlisted in the Marines; his focused self-discipline and rigorous attention to detail brought him a quick promotion to sergeant. In Pokorney, Marine commanders knew they had a natural, and they offered to pay for his college education, which, ultimately, qualified him to become a commissioned officer after attending Officer Candidate School (OCS).

Wade Lieseke, a decorated Vietnam veteran who became Pokorney's adopted father, was worried about his son joining the Marines.

"I remember when Fred said he was gonna be an artillery officer, I was thinking, 'Oh God, at least he'll be safe.' The artillery is in the rear. It never occurred to me they'd have an artillery forward observer. In my day, airplanes did that.

"But he wanted to be a Marine," Lieseke said. "He said they were the best and he wanted to be part of the best."

Before the Marines sent him off for an education at Oregon State University, Fred Pokorney was stationed at the Bangor

Marine Barracks in Washington State, a submarine base. He met Carolyn Rochelle Schulgen (Chelle), a nursing student, and they married. Around the time he earned his degree in history and political science, the Pokorneys learned they were going to be parents. After Chelle pinned his officer's bars onto his shoulder at a commissioning ceremony, the young family, Fred, Chelle, and their daughter Taylor, went east to the Fleet Marine Force at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He spent more than a year in OCS and artillery training. Upon completion of those courses, Fred Pokorney became a "Mustang," an enlisted Marine who had earned the rank of officer. He had finally achieved the stability that had been missing from his childhood; the honor and pride of the Marines fortified his already strong personal character. The Marines were his family, and his devotion to the corps took him away from Chelle and Taylor.

During the two hundred kilometer roll from northern Kuwait to the Jalibah Airfield south of Al Nasiriyah, where the Marines were to encamp, Pokorney frequently brought up the subject of his wife and daughter to Lieutenant Ben Reid. Inside the amphibious assault vehicle, as the tracks ground against the desert sand and the rank smell of diesel filled their lungs, Fred Pokorney was sharing pictures of his girls playing in the snow back in the Carolinas.

"Here we are, advancing on the enemy, and he's showing us all pictures of Chelle and Taylor," Reid said. "He was so proud of them and loved them so much. Fred was a great husband, and the most honorable guy you could ever meet. He had good, strong values. This was the kind of guy you would want your own daughter to meet and marry."

He was also the kind of Marine that Reid wanted in his unit as they approached enemy fire. Up ahead, the tanks from Marine Task Force Tarawa had been sent forward to rescue soldiers from the 507th Mechanized Company, a maintenance and technical support group from Fort Bliss, Texas, which had lost direction and had fallen victim to an Iraqi ambush. Lacking adequate communications, with their automatic weapons jammed by desert sand, the mechanics

were pinned down by withering Iraqi fire until the Marines pulled them out for evacuation to the rear. A series of wrong turns had led the 507th to disaster.

On the combat radio network, Reid heard a voice claiming that the 507th was attacked by Iraqi soldiers faking surrender. The description of events indicated the Iraqis had been waving white flags to lure the Americans into a position where they were easy targets for machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. Although there is no evidence or narrative testimony to prove the deception actually occurred, the information was repeated by battalion communications headquarters, picked up by embedded journalists, and dispatched to the United States as fact. Before the day of March 23 had concluded, the story was also used to explain what had happened to the fifty-four man platoon commanded by Lieutenant Ben Reid. But nothing of the sort ever happened to either the 507th or the Marine companies. Neither the Army nor the Marines offered any understanding of where the story originated, or why it was never clarified.

"I still don't know where that came from," Reid said. "It was just on the comms net, and the reporters started broadcasting it. A lot of stuff that's been in the media about what happened to us and the 507th, is wrong. It needs to be cleared up."

As Reid and Pokorney's unit edged up the road with their company just south of Al Nasiryah and the Euphrates River Bridge, they saw Cobra helicopters and F-18 Hornets making passes near the city. The helicopters fired at a tree line, and red smoke from the trail of their Zuni rockets floated across the sky. Reid, the fire support team leader, wanted to know who or what was being engaged by the aircraft, and radioed battalion for information. The positions of the targets might be valuable when he began to coordinate his own combat fire. Although he reached commanders on the combat network, Reid got no answers. Just short of the bridge over the Euphrates River, Charlie Company came upon burning T-55 Russian tanks. A few, unmanned, also appeared untouched. Several vehicles belonging to the

Army's 507th Mechanized were in flames. A ball of fire consumed a large, armored truck used for logistical support.

Alpha Company, which had taken the Euphrates Bridge, had set up in a herringbone position to protect their location, and as Reid and Pokorney's Marines moved through their ranks to cross the river, sporadic small arms fire was audible on the edge of the Iraqi city. Original orders for Charlie Company were to follow Bravo Company to the east and avoid "ambush alley." Unfortunately, visual contact with Bravo had been lost, and simple radio communications failed.

"I hate to say this, sir," Ben Reid explained. "But you gotta remember, our radios were built by the lowest bidder. We had all kinds of problems with our combat comms network. And once all these different companies started taking fire, there was an unbelievable number of people trying to talk on that one combat net. Anything you wanted to say kept getting stepped on by other people jumping on the air."

As a result, Reid's company commander had no idea what had happened to Bravo after it had crossed the Euphrates. If Bravo was stuck in the mud off to the east, Charlie was certain to jeopardize the mission of securing the northern bridges by taking the same route. Everyone might end up bogged down, immobilized, and exposed to Iraqi attack. Reid was told by his commander that it was likely Bravo had made a run up "ambush alley" to get to their objective of the first canal bridge. But he didn't really know what maneuver had been executed by Bravo. Immediately, Reid knew what that meant and when new orders from battalion command passed over the net confirming his fears, Charlie Company began moving into the city of Al Nasiriyah, making a direct course up "ambush alley."

Very quickly, Reid and Pokorney's men encountered small arms fire. Their ten amphibious assault vehicles (referred to by Marines as amtracks, or tracks) and two Humvees were armed with .50 caliber machine guns and nineteen 40-millimeter grenade launchers. Returning fire, the convoy hurried through the crude urban

reaches of Al Nasiriyah. Bullets pinged off the side of the Americans' tracked vehicles, and enemy fire dramatically intensified the further north they traveled into the city. While the Marines configured their armor in a combat-oriented position, on their right, to the east, they saw modest, low structures, mud huts uncommon in more developed cities. The other side of the road was lined with office buildings, and architecture slightly more typical of the commerce of a mid-sized city, though few structures rose to more than four or five stories in height. Iraqi gunners had set up fields of fire from hidden posts inside of mud huts, and the more modern, small office structures.

Ramp doors at the rear of some of the tracks were partially open. Lieutenant Fred Pokorney, and the mortar men, who would not be active until the convoy stopped, were using their M-16s to return Iraqi fire. Pokorney called out that a track, just to the rear of the one in which he and Reid were traveling, was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, and caught fire. Four Marines were wounded. But the platoon kept pushing up through Al Nasiriyah. Exposed through the open door, Pokorney was hit in the right arm by a bullet and fell to the floor.

"Hey, I'm hit," he yelled to Reid over the intercom. "Hurts like hell. I'm fine. I'm fine. I was just nicked. I'll be all right. Don't worry about it."

Still under attack from RPGs and small arms weaponry, Reid's platoon crossed the two northern bridges over the canal. In the center of the road, 200 meters north, a track was burning. Reid's own track #C-208 stopped between the bridge and the burning vehicle. The remaining vehicles in his platoon quickly parked in a combat position on either of the road. As Reid hastily jumped down, he saw dusty agricultural fields and drained swampland spread beyond the canal and the raised roadbed. Iraqis were directing machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades at his platoon from a few nearby buildings.

Reid and Pokorney, like the men serving at their side, had little intelligence about the military strength of their enemy. Political

pressure from the White House had led commanders of the U.S. invasion of Iraq to portray an excessively optimistic and expeditious campaign. Briefings in advance of the attack on Al Nasiriyah indicated the operation to secure the bridges and control the city was expected to take about six hours. Instead, fighting went on for eight days before the Marines were able to take complete control. Intelligence was supposedly unclear on Iraqi troop numbers in the region, and whether the soldiers were Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen fighters, Republican Guard, or Iraqi irregulars and citizens, who often acted as observers or carried bombs.

Foreign intelligence sources later reported the Americans were battling an estimated 40,000 troops of the Iraqi 3rd Army Corps. Armaments deployed against U.S. soldiers, most of them oblivious to what they were confronting, included 250 tanks, approximately 100 mortars and 100 artillery, as well as 1,000 rocket-propelled grenade launchers and anti-tank guided missiles. In terms of sheer troop strength, the Iraqis doubled the number of American soldiers approaching from the south in the U.S. 3rd Motorized Infantry Division, though the U.S. offensive was supported by considerably more armor; 200 tanks, 150 artillery pieces, and 600 armored vehicles. By doctrine, U.S. military planners always try to have a three to one force ratio against an enemy. In this case, the Americans were simply outnumbered.

Grabbing the maps he had marked and his flak jacket and helmet, Reid threw them to the ground as he jumped. The ramp at the back of the track was still up and he banged loudly to order his men out of the vehicle to take cover below the roadbed along the canal. Reid began linking up his mortars to return fire on enemy locations. Using the guns on the tracks first, he got one of them to focus on a huge building near the T-intersection on the east side of the road. The two other weapons mounted on the track were pointed back to the southwest in the direction of Al Nasiriyah, where Reid assumed most of the heaviest fire was originating. Over the noise of explosions, he shouted at his Marines to pick up the pace of their fire.

The mortars began to hit the targets Reid had selected. But there was trouble with the fire support team on the track.

Radio communications were not working.

"We've got no comm. on arty conduct of fire or our 81s," Pokorney told Reid.

"Okay," Reid answered. "Let's forget those nets. Take a look at this map." Lieutenant Reid pointed at spots he had marked. "We need suppression or duration suppression on these positions. See if you can pass them over the battalion net."

"Got it," Pokorney answered.

"I'm going to fight our 60s," Reid said, as he left the safety of the track. "They're all we've got right now."

Outside, Reid moved along the road, trying to find targets. One of the Marines in his platoon pointed out a group of vehicles, and Reid ordered all the guns on the tracks to try to take them out of the fight. Directed fire from the Americans did not appear to reduce the intensity of the Iraqi attack.

Staff Sergeant Phil Jordan ran up the road to talk to Reid.

"Sir, Torres has been hit," Jordan said.

There was no way Reid might have prepared himself for such news. His first time in combat, the young lieutenant was stunned by word that one of his men was down. Briefly, Reid admitted, he lost his focus. Jordan, who must have seen the shock on his commander's face, offered reassurance as RPG explosions and rounds from small arms filled the air.

"Don't worry, sir," Jordan said. "I've already killed two or three Iraqis, so we're even."

"Okay, Staff Sergeant," Reid answered, regaining his composure. "I need you to run and get the fifty cals focusing their rounds back into the city. Have them fight the close fight. I'll get the mortars to take on targets 2,000 meters and beyond."

As Jordan ran off to find machine gunners, one of Reid's forward observers was coming down the road with the radio. Another platoon had called asking for fire support because they were taking

incoming rounds from Iraqi mortars. On the radio, Reid said he had all of his weapons in the fight, and he was doing everything possible. Seconds after the Marine had left with the radio, Reid found himself on his back, looking up at small arms rounds cutting through the air.

"Get the fuck down," Fred Pokorney screamed. "You're getting us all shot at."

Reid had been tackled by Pokorney, the Tonopah, Nevada All-Star football player. Before leaving to call in the artillery missions, Pokorney had noticed that Reid was standing up and seemed almost oblivious to the danger he was attracting to himself and the rest of the Marines.

"I was glad Fred told me I was being an idiot," Reid said. "He probably saved my head from getting blown off."

Only seconds after Pokorney had rolled off of Reid, Phil Jordan returned to ask his commander how they might be able to improve their combat posture. The two Marines agreed their mortars needed to be more widely dispersed.

"Espinoza, come up here and take my place spotting," Reid yelled. "I'm going to take Garibay's gun south."

Reid ordered Corporal Jose A. Garibay's mortar crew to follow him down toward the canal, a spot about sixty meters south of their present location, but still north of the bridge. Staff Sergeant Phil Jordan followed with two cans of ammo. As they ran, Reid failed to notice their positions were being bracketed by Iraqi RPG gunners. One round landed long. The next fell short. The subsequent explosion was long, but closer to the Americans. The Iraqis were walking their shots onto target by adjusting off of each previous explosion.

As Reid and his men set up the mortar, they realized they did not bring a wiz wheel, which was needed for calibrating the range of their targets. A Marine ran back to grab the device while Reid put in the aiming stake. His men, however, were unsure of shooting without precise calculations from the wiz wheel. Reid told the mortar crew to estimate an elevation based on previous missions fired. The lieutenant grabbed a round and dropped it in to sink the base

plate. Down range, they spotted the location of the explosion, and Reid dropped two more rounds into the tube to make corrections on the targets based on where the previous rounds had landed.

"I guess that was kind of stupid," Reid said later. "I had no idea really where those rounds were going to land. But I wanted to get a round out there quickly and adjust off of it. Besides, I didn't want to just sit there and do nothing, while we were under fire, other than wait for a wiz wheel."

When the Marine returned with the wiz wheel for the mortar, he was trailed by Fred Pokorney. Most of the gun crew was provided protection in a partial defilade around the mortar. Reid was up near the aiming stake, spotting the mortar rounds. Iraqi RPG explosions were coming closer, each concussion registering more powerfully on the Marines' eardrums.

"I got those nine arty missions passed over the battalion net," Pokorney yelled to Reid.

"Are they the positions I gave you?"

"Yeah."

A few seconds after Pokorney had spoken, an explosion knocked Ben Reid back onto the road. The force of the blast was felt in his arm, which Reid thought had been blown off. When he saw his arm still hanging at his side, Reid assumed it had been broken by the explosion. The lieutenant lay in the road waiting for the ringing in his ears to cease.

The first words he heard were devastating.

"Sir, Buessing is dead."

Ben Reid, the young Annapolis graduate, in his first combat command, had suffered an initial death among his men. Turning, Lieutenant Reid saw Lance Corporal Brian R. Buessing and recognized from the wounds that his Marine had been killed instantly. Buessing died serving in the same Charlie Company mortar squad in which his grandfather had won a Silver Star during the Korean War.

Reid was uncertain what to do next, both fear and responsibility for the rest of his men racing through his head. Two other bodies

lay not far from where Buessing had fallen. Reid ran to the nearest and rolled the Marine over to see who it was. Staff Sergeant Phil Jordan was also dead. The other man down was Second Lieutenant Fred Pokorney, his hulking frame lay twisted near where the round had exploded. Reid assumed Pokorney had also been killed.

"I didn't go check on Fred," Reid said. "I just assumed from the way he was laying, he was dead. I know he wasn't moving. But I couldn't see any physical injuries. I know he was at least injured by that round. I just made an assumption about Fred. Maybe it was a bad assumption."

In a moment of doubt, Reid worried that his men had been hit by his own improperly calibrated mortar rounds. On the road, the men were slightly down range from the mortar positions, though they were considerably offline from the guns' directions. Reid also feared that he had given Pokorney the wrong coordinates of Iraqi targets to radio into artillery operations.

"I don't think that was it, though," Reid explained. "If an artillery round had landed there, it would have killed all of us. And I know I wasn't off by five kilometers on the coordinates. There's no way I could have missed by that far."

What Reid described as a "magic round" had also wounded three of this other men, including Coporal Garibay, Corporal Jorge A. Gonzalez, and Private First Class Tamario D. Burkett. Uncertain of the extent of injuries to his troops, Reid ordered Garibay to keep everyone in place until he returned with medical assistance. RPG rounds were consistently exploding closer and closer to Reid's platoon. Crouching down, he turned and ran in the direction of his track.

In the low sky to the north, an American A-10 Thunderbolt jet, known as the "Warthog," and the "tank killer," made a turn and lined up for a gun run down the raised canal road where Reid's men had fallen.