

CHAPTER ONE

Have a Nice Day



In city—yes. In city—okay.

“Mosque—*No!*” argued an animated, bearded Shi’a Moslem at the very front of a gathering mob.

April 3, 2003, 6 A.M. The Shi’a city of Najaf in southern Iraq.

“In city—yes. In city—okay. Mosque—*No!*” From everywhere, Moslems in Najaf, Iraq, raced into the narrow, bannered street leading to their historic gold-domed Ali Mosque. Boasting tall twin minarets, reaching for the heavens, this structure is among the holiest Islamic sites for all Shi’a Moslems. Ali was the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Mohammed. The mosque holds his tomb in a massive gold-embazoned cube. By Shi’a tradition, this is also the burial place of Adam and Noah. The crowd menacingly pumped their right arms in defiance, with the anger of centuries in their eyes, pressing forward against a too-thin cordon of Shi’a clerics, arms barely linked, trying to calm them down.¹

Facing the frenzied mob, eyeball-to-eyeball, was Lt. Col. Chris Hughes, a simple-spoken Red Oak, Iowa, man, 42 years old and an elite war fighter. Hughes was battalion commander of the lethal and legendary Second Battalion, 327th Infantry of the 101st Airborne,

which had thrust through the desert to secure Najaf, spearheading away from the main columns pouring into Iraq.

“In city—yes. In city—okay. Mosque—No!” By now the crowd had multiplied to several hundred chanting zealots, egged on by Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath loyalists secreted in the crowd. “They are coming to invade the mosque!” screamed the Ba’athist instigators in the throng. “They will invade the mosque!”² That was false.

“No mosque! No mosque!” railed the angry group with vehemence as they edged closer and closer toward Hughes, even as spread-armed clerics were losing the battle to hold them back. Hughes tried to reason with the mob, explaining he was not there to invade the mosque or infringe on any holy ground, just to provide protection to their leader, Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Sistani. For years, Ayatollah Sistani had been under house arrest, just down the street some yards toward the revered Ali Mosque. In those first chaotic hours between flight and occupation in the Second Gulf War, the Ayatollah Sistani had, through intermediaries, requested American military protection. But now, no one in the street understood that. They feared the worst—American defilement of their sacred mosque.³

Mustered behind Hughes was Bravo Company, about 130 strong, plus a platoon of a dozen troops armed with deadly vehicle-mounted antiarmor missiles, plus a Special Forces “A Team” of 12 commandos, psy ops advisors, a linguistic team, and some intel operatives amorphously described as “other government organizations”—about 200 men in all. American snipers peering through their high-magnification scopes searched for *fedayeen* snipers—rooftops, windows, rooftops, balcony, rooftops. Hughes himself was armed in full desert combat array: Kevlar vest, contoured Kevlar battle helmet, in his hand an M-4 rifle capable of firing 700 to 1,000 rounds per minute, and a 9-mm Beretta strapped tight, gunfighter-style, to his right thigh. A wooden crucifix blessed by his sister-in-law’s church in Dubuque was still wedged inside Hughes’s front breastplate.⁴

Fired up by the Ba’athist agitators, the screaming crowd, now squeezed into the width of a narrow street, roiled out of control. Rocks were thrown. Bravo Company, armed and ready, watched sharply. The tense scene was a candidate for a bloodbath.⁵

Hughes stayed calm. “I didn’t have time to get nervous. I figured I had just a few minutes to make a decision,” he remembers. “Do I fire a warning shot in the air? Do I negotiate? Do I explain?”⁶

Now the clerics could barely restrain the mob.⁷



Days previously, the Second Battalion had stormed out of its Camp Pennsylvania staging area in Kuwait, 880 warriors, traveling unarmored for speed, but heavily armed for ultimate firepower. They headed straight for Najaf through the rippling heat along what the charts called a jeep track, but what seemed to Hughes like nothing more than a goat trail. The Second is one of America’s most deadly units—dubbed “No Slack.”⁸

Originally formed during World War I, the unit went on the heroic offense at Meuse-Argonne. In World War II, the Second fought valiantly at Normandy, then pushed on to Bastogne, where they earned the name “Bastogne Bulldogs” for their dogged defense of the city. During the Battle of the Bulge, they gained immortality when they held out against a relentless Nazi siege. The German general offered them an ultimatum: surrender or death. The divisional commander sent back a famous one-word answer: “Nuts.” The German general never understood. “Nuts?”⁹

In 1967, in Vietnam, one of their finest was slain just before rotating home. His favorite adage was “cut the enemy no slack.” Since that day and in his honor, the unit has been known as “No Slack.” Hughes explains, “Our mission is simple. We are the guys who knock the door down and kill the enemy. We get around the battlefield in Blackhawk helicopters, make contact with the enemy, and kill them. We’re the ones.” That was Hughes’s assignment as he sped toward Najaf at the end of March 2003.¹⁰

The drive across Iraq’s hostile desert was a long one—54 hours. Riding in Hughes’s Humvee was Kadhim al-Waeli, an Iraq-American dual-national hailing from St. Louis. “The drive gave me an opportunity to listen for 54 hours,” remembers Hughes. “I had already studied the Koran when I was on the investigating commission following

the bombing of the USS *Cole*. Before 9/11, I was in the joint anti-terrorism task force, and I traveled around the world making vulnerability assessments. I had read several books on Mohammed the Prophet and understood the concept of *jihad*. But I was heading to Najaf and now I had to carefully listen to Kadhim, to understand much more about the Shi'as and Islam."¹¹

Four days before the incident at Ali Mosque, Hughes and company had conducted deliberate attacks against the western outskirts of Najaf. In one intense three-and-half-hour battle, Abrams tanks were firing rounds in front. Above him, every form of aircraft, including merciless F-16s, B-52s, and British Tornados, were hailing hellfire down on enemy positions, and his troops were shooting intense volleys. Saddam snipers on rooftops, seemingly in every direction, threw a torrent of bullets and rocket-propelled grenades at Hughes's men. Three Iraqi artillery pieces, ensconced on the high ridge, lobbed one shell after another. With bullets whizzing, grenades exploding, and shells arcing overhead past his position, Hughes ordered some 56 tube-launched missiles to be fired against windows to take out snipers and against the ridge to kill artillery. Helicopter guns took out the third artillery piece.¹²

Suddenly, in the middle of the fierce fighting, through the smoke of war, the stunning gold mosque gleamed. "I had seen a lot of mosques," remembers Hughes, "but this was the first one with a gold dome." At one point in the campaign, Hughes heard a thud. It was Kadhim, right next to him, prostrate in the dirt at the very sight of the Ali Mosque. "Kadhim told me I had brought him closer to God, just to see the mosque, visually, just to see it," recounted Hughes. Emotional and almost overcome, Kadhim blessed Hughes and his children for generations. "Now, when I die, I will go heaven," cried Kadhim.¹³

"I'm a Catholic," recalls Hughes. "I had to relate it to Catholics coming upon Vatican Square, or Jews at the Wailing Wall. Kadhim couldn't stop thanking me. Okay, I get it. This mosque is important—very important."¹⁴

As the firefight continued, Kadhim tugged on Hughes's elbow to announce it was 30 minutes until the call to prayer. But the battle was still raging. Nonetheless, Hughes called for the speaker trucks to advance from the rear. Through Kadhim, Hughes announced to the enemy, "We will not fight you during your prayer and we will not

hurt your mosque. We are not here to steal your religion. We are here to get rid of Saddam Hussein.”

White flags began appearing on the ridge as Iraqi men started filing right through the field of fire and into the mosque for their prayers. Hughes’s men, as ordered, did not fire. “I did not want to attack in a way that would threaten the mosque,” recounts Hughes. “I was going to keep that mosque safe. Special Forces told me that the Shi’a Ayatollah Sistani was there as well. He is like their pope. I wanted to make sure his residence and the mosque were not in my surface danger zones.”¹⁵

The city’s Ba’ath Party headquarters had been pulverized into rubble with a 2,000-pound laser-guided bomb from a B-1 targeted so precisely that a nearby hospital was untouched. Helicopter gunships chased or blasted away pockets of resistance. An elderly man pointed out a swath of 69 antitank mines; 20 of those were neutralized with pop-and-drop C-4 charges until demolition experts could detect the planting pattern and defuse the rest. Saddam’s great statue, this one as a charging horseman, was detonated into twisted wreckage by another unit. Soon, the Iraqi forces disappeared altogether. They fled, except for entrenched Saddam supporters, especially fedayeen and local Ba’athists, who oozed back into the city.¹⁶

With Saddam forces routed, Najaf was jubilant. Rejoicing villagers filled the streets, cheering for the cameras. “Bushgood, Bushgood,” they extolled. Children everywhere smiled brightly as they accepted candy bars and handshakes, and threw thumbs-up gestures. Thousands of Shi’as danced, clapped in cadence, and ebulliently congratulated Hughes for liberating their city. “It was like the liberation of Paris,” he said.¹⁷

Among the Saddam forces that ran were those guarding Ayatollah Sistani, until then still under house arrest. Suddenly, the ayatollah was free—and unguarded. The ayatollah wanted protection in case Saddam loyalists returned. At the same time, Hughes wanted a *fatwa*, that is, a religious decree, instructing all Shi’a people not to interfere with American forces “so we could continue to move to Baghdad,” explains Hughes.¹⁸

But who could approach the ayatollah? “We did not think he wanted to meet with infidels,” remembers Hughes. Three candidate Moslem intermediaries were transported in to undergo vetting, that is, investigated to see if they were as credible as purported. The first

was rejected as an exaggerator who falsely portrayed himself as an acquaintance of the ayatollah; he was quickly exposed. But the second was the son of Ayatollah Sistani's predecessor and a man the army believed could approach the holy man. Through other intermediaries, the esteemed son of a predecessor was cleared to carry a message to the ayatollah from Hughes.¹⁹

Ayatollah Sistani is a profound abstract thinker and mystic. He believes that *time* itself has a name, but that its elusive name varies with the concept of *place*. Moreover, he embraces very clear ideas about the nature of *requests*, believing each could be divided into three components, *ordering*, *begging*, and *asking*. Through Kadhim, Hughes became familiar with the ayatollah's teachings. Hughes and senior commanders selected their words very carefully, in line with their study of Islamic tradition and an understanding of the ayatollah's philosophy. "My message was," recalls Hughes, "we are here to seek your guidance so we don't harm your people, your mosque, or your religion. We hope you can take leadership in helping us."²⁰

Ayatollah Sistani was impressed with Hughes. He had heard that the American soldier ordered a cessation of fighting during prayers. In addition, Ayatollah Sistani admired the respectful tone of Hughes's entreaty. He agreed to meet with Hughes, both to arrange for protection and to consider a helpful fatwa.²¹

But Hughes would have to get to the ayatollah's home, located just yards from the Ali Mosque. "I thought, how do I go to his house and secure him without making it look like I'm putting him under arrest?" Hughes recounts. "I was afraid his people and the world would misunderstand. I needed to take off my weapons for the meeting. Not even a sidearm, to show absolute respect, because he deserved absolute respect as the Shi'as' supreme religious leader."²²

But first Hughes needed to get to the house. Hughes checked with his emissaries, and they repeated that he was welcome to proceed. "I told my men—200 guys—'Let's move.' " Slowly, columns of heavily armed No Slack soldiers walked through the alleys of Najaf, their neoprene-soled desert boots pressing diagonal chevrons into the sandy streets, toward the intersection leading to the Ali Mosque. Until this instant the crowds had been congratulatory.²³

But as they advanced, a crowd naturally gathered, wondering why cadres of heavily armed American soldiers were heading toward the mosque. They weren't. They were heading for the ayatollah's home

near the mosque, and Hughes intended to disarm before any meeting. “Through intermediaries, I offered a speaker truck for Sistani to advise the crowd,” recalls Hughes. “That took another hour. But then our intermediaries said Ayatollah Sistani was too afraid to come out of his home. However, he would send his students to fan out and tell everybody it was okay for me to proceed.

“So now everyone was happy and cheering because we were going to help Sistani,” he continues. But as the column took a few paces forward, the bystanders suddenly became angry and rocks began flying. Saddam loyalists screamed, “They are coming to invade the mosque!” Hughes remembers, “It all changed in 13 or 14 seconds.”

Agitated men poured into the street to confront Hughes. Someone who spoke English blared, “In city—yes. In city—okay. Mosque—*No!*” Others joined him. “This is a misunderstanding,” Hughes tried to reason. His words, like sand in the wind, simply blew past. Ayatollah Sistani’s students were struggling to restrain the irate mob, but their interlocked arms soon gave way.²⁴ The smallest provocation could now ignite the street into a deadly scene, with numerous embedded TV crews, radio reporters, and print journalists recording every moment.

Hughes led one of the army’s best-trained warfare machines. For days, he and his men had been shot at with artillery rounds, RPGs, and machine gun volleys. They had never flinched, liquidating all opponents. Elsewhere, in the newer part of Najaf, they had kicked down doors without hesitation during search missions, fearlessly burst into hidden weapons caches, and overwhelmed any adversary that stood in their way. The Second Battalion and Bravo Company would never cut the enemy any slack.²⁵

But Hughes’s men were disciplined, quick-thinking warriors. This was not a time for confrontation. If successful, a fatwa would mean mandated noninterference and pave the way for a speedier victory in Iraq. If a bloodbath ensued, every Shi’a in the country would consider Americans his mortal enemy. In vain, Hughes tried to show his non-hostile intent. He turned his M-4 rifle vertical and upside down, holding it by the barrel.²⁶

No matter. The fiery crowd would not yield, and they pushed threateningly closer to Hughes and his men.

That morning, Hughes and his men found themselves trapped not only at an intersection in Najaf, but at an intersection in history. Just an hour north were the ruins of ancient Babylon, which to him was

almost unbelievable. Hughes was intensely aware and awed that he was in the cradle of civilization.²⁷

But somehow civilization in Iraq had been stopped in its infancy. It had never matured. Instead, it became a mere cradle fit for robbery and abuse by the greatest forces in history: by the most murderous barbarians, by the most powerful nations, by the greediest corporations, by the onslaught of progress that sprang from its midst and took root elsewhere, continents away, and by the ravages of cultural self-wounding that ensured Iraq would remain a prisoner of its own heritage. Indeed, for nearly 7,000 years, Iraq has been shackled to unspeakable violence, toppled pride, cruel despotic authorities, and an utter lack of self-governance. The unbreachable continuum of its legacy inculcated bitter alienation as a birthright. Rather than becoming an intersection of the most splendid and accomplished, as European civilizations ultimately became, Iraq has become a crossroads of conquest and conflict.

Then Hughes did something that had never been done in Iraq in 7,000 years. He decided, "It made no sense to hurt people just to talk to a guy. I wasn't going to do it. It was obviously a misunderstanding. So I just defused the confused."²⁸

Suddenly, Hughes called out to his men, "Take a knee, everybody take a knee." He continued, "I have taught my men, 'I will always tell you the *why* in every order—so when I don't have time—you'll trust me.' " Hughes had no time. In a split second, the seething mob could erupt. "My men were nervous and some of them looked at me," recalled Hughes. "But I held my weapon upside down, so they all took a knee." Taking a knee is the traditional resting position or low profile for an infantryman on patrol. With little pause, all of No Slack dropped to one knee as ordered.²⁹

Members of the suspicious crowd abruptly did likewise, suddenly squatting and sitting, legs folded, on the ground. What next? Hughes then issued a tactical order his men had never heard. "Smile. Everybody smile. Relax, everybody smile!" His men did not speak Arabic. The Iraqis by and large spoke no English. So dozens of heavily armed warriors began communicating by smiling. Now others in the jammed intersection were smiling as well.³⁰

"Point your weapons down," shouted Hughes. His men on bended knee, smiling hard, now pointed their weapons at the dirt.³¹

In response, the crowd became slightly calmer. Hughes noticed that the Ba'athist provocateurs in the street were unhappy. They had tried to trigger a bloodbath. Hughes pulled aside his intel and Special Forces people and told them, "Pull out your digital cameras and take the picture of the face of everyone who is not happy" about the non-violent resolution. Those people would be located and dealt with that night.³²

Although the throng's angst had receded, they were still highly flammable. Hughes could not advance to the ayatollah's house. He needed to withdraw. He told his men, "All No Slack, just turn around. Let's go." Slowly his men rose from their knees and began stepping backward away from the crowd. The crowd did not pursue. Farther back, now farther.³³

Fomenters continued their efforts to move the mob to attack. "Just turn around," Hughes repeated. No longer facing the crowd, his men simply turned and walked away. As he departed in a sweeping flourish, Hughes demonstratively swung his right arm and placed his hand flat against his heart in the traditional Islamic gesture, "Peace be with you." He added, "Have a nice day." Then the warrior peaceably walked off.³⁴

That night, the provocateurs were found and eliminated. Ayatollah Sistani issued his fatwa ordering all Shi'as to not interfere with American forces.³⁵ Armed with that and an unstoppable coalition, Baghdad fell within a week. Iraq was taken. Again.

Hughes's words still echo: "Have a nice day." Iraq has been waiting for 7,000 years.

