



GENERATION KILL

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

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Grateful acknowledgment is made to *Rolling Stone*, where portions of this book first appeared in different form.

The second line of the dedication is from Rudyard Kipling's *The Second Jungle Book* (1899).



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TO THE WARRIORS OF HITMAN-2 AND HITMAN-3:

The strength of the Pack is the Wolf.

TWENTY-ONE



A FEW MINUTES BEFORE SUNSET on March 31, First Recon reaches its objective: the bridge that serves as the main road out of Al Hayy. It presents another strange juxtaposition typical of Iraq. After moving all day through primitive hamlets, the Marines now stand at the foot of a span that, with its long, graceful concrete lines, wouldn't be out of place on the German autobahn. Bravo Company is tasked with setting up the blockade on the highway at the north end of the bridge. The rest of the battalion pushes a kilometer farther north up Route 7.

Colbert's team and the others in the platoon pull their Humvees up to where the guardrails start at the foot of the bridge. They point their main guns toward the bridge, which rises in a slight crest about 200 meters from their position, where it stretches over a canal. Beyond that, the highway drops out of view, as it descends toward Al Hayy about two kilometers to the south.

Three Marines sprint onto the bridge with a bale of concertina wire, which they stretch across the roadway. They run back to the Humvees in the last minutes of daylight. The area around the highway where the Marines have their blockade is a barren no-man's-land. The ground is saturated with salts that push up to the surface, forming a white crust on the mud. In the twilight gloom, all you see is the pale whiteness of the salty flats. Fick walks up, grinning. Even loaded down with his vest, flak jacket and bulky chemical-protection suit, he displays his characteristic bouncing

stride. Right now it's more buoyant than usual. "I feel like for the first time we seized the initiative," he says, surveying the roadblock. Everyone seems to be swaggering.

After nearly two weeks of feeling hunted, the Marines have done what they were supposed to do: They assaulted through resistance and took an objective. Psychologically it's like a game of king of the hill, and they now occupy the high ground. This small band of young men controls the key exit from a town of 50,000.

First Recon Battalion is completely alone. The Marines are twenty kilometers north of the nearest American unit, RCT-1. They are thirty kilometers south of Al Kut, home to approximately 15,000 Iraqis in a mechanized division. There is nothing between them and those thousands of Iraqis but a straight, narrow highway. Only later will it become clear that most regular Iraqi forces won't fight; on the night of March 31, that fact is unknown. Adding to their sense of isolation, First Recon has lost communication with its air cover this evening, as the result of a technical glitch. If the battalion is attacked, it will have to fight on its own.

ONE THING THE MARINES haven't trained for, or really even thought through, is the operation of roadblocks at night. The basic idea is simple enough: Put an obstacle like concertina wire in the road and point guns at it. If a car approaches, fire warning shots. If it keeps coming, shoot it. The question is: Do the Iraqis understand what's going on? When it gets dark, can Iraqi drivers actually see the concertina wire? Even Marines have been known to drive through concertina wire at night.

The other problem is warning shots. In the dark, warning shots are simply a series of loud bangs and flashes. It's not like this is the international code for "Stop your vehicle and turn around." As it turns out, many Iraqis react to warning shots by speeding up. Maybe they just panic. Consequently, a lot of Iraqis die at roadblocks.

The initial killings at First Recon's roadblock come just after dark. Several cars approach the bridge with their headlights on, coming from the direction of Al Hayy. Bravo's .50-caliber gunners fire warning bursts. The