

Exploiting the shadows of the narrow, deserted streets, Niles led the others through Hayy al Sollom. Fighting had ravaged the district throughout the preceding decade-- the attacks of the Phalangists early in the civil war, the Israeli artillery and air strikes of 1982, the small arms battles of the Shiites and Israelis during the occupation, then the street battles of the Shiites against Shiites. Streets had become piles of rubble. Many buildings had lost the upper floors or the balconies overlooking the street. Every shop, every tenement, every wall, every rusting street sign bore the marks of war-- the pocking of bullets and fragments from shells and rockets of all calibers and types.

The residents had rebuilt and repaired again and again. Walls had become abstract mosaics of bricks scavanged from rubble. Scrap metal became shacks. Wood and steel members from fallen buildings reinforced the walls and roofs of damaged buildings. Then, to stop bullets and shrapnel from explosions, the residents had added sandbags.

Thick walls of sandbags protected shops. Sandbags stacked on balconies and blocking windows provided safety for families on the upper floors. Sandbag bunkers on the street corners and rooftops protected the militiamen who guarded the area from other militias.

Niles led Alavez and the Lebanese Air Assault volunteers through the deserted streets. Listening for Hizbullah patrols, his eyes scanning the windows and moonlit rooftops, Niles walked silently, his hand on the pistolgrip of his Kalashnikov. He faked the arrogant swagger of the Syrians he had observed.

## RECON

Unless his voice or face identified him as an American, no militiaman would fire at a Syrian uniform. The militias feared the Syrians. If a gunman shot at a Syrian patrol, the patrol answered with rockets, then artillery, irregardless of civilian casualties. The Syrians had no Rule of Engagement other than overwhelming firepower.

Twice, when he spotted look-outs watching the streets, he had ignored them, keeping his face turned. Hussein and Gamal had waved as they passed. The look-outs had not left the safety of their bunkers to question their comrades and the Syrian officers.

Niles knew Hayy al Sollom. He had first come to the district in the winter of 1982. After training Lebanese soldiers throughout the day, he changed into civilian clothes and walked through the districts of South Beirut. He carried a camera to pass as a journalist. Practicing his first words of Arabic, he went from street stalls to shops to cafes, watching the people of the war-shattered district. Years before, he had enrolled in through-the-mail anthropology courses with the University of North Carolina. He studied and wrote when his duties permitted. Learning of the Shiite position in the Lebanese society, he thought he might write a graduate study on the transistion of the minority to majority.

He had felt closer to the Shiites of this ghetto than the Christian bourgeoisie of East Beirut. In East Beirut, wealth and traditional privilege kept the civil war far away. The Christians of East Beirut still enjoyed French restuarants and expensive shops and clean streets. Here, the Shiite people suffered with every shift in alliances, yet they continued to open their markets and peddle their products and answer the prayer calls to the mosques.

At first, the Marine force at the international airport brought the common people of the district some safety from the wars between the militias. The people

## RECON

greeted Marine patrols with flowers and cold soft drinks. But later, the American administration in Washington openly supported the Christian minority against all the other ethnic factions of Lebanon. This involved the United States in the ruling elite's denial of the right of a democratic government-- representing the actual populations of the country's non-Christian communities-- to the people of the nation. Lebanese of all faiths saw the Marines as only one more militia in Beirut.

As late as June, Niles still had friends in Hayy al Sollom. He visited cafes and made awkward conversation in Arabic or talked with acquaintances who spoke English. He took notes and photos. Some of the Shiites knew he served with the Marines at the airport-- he had trained their sons. One young soldier had introduced him to a widowed cousin. He and the soldier and the young woman-- a mother of two children-- talked in a cafe and laughed at his very bad Arabic. Later, when the soldier invited Niles to his family for a dinner, he saw the woman only for moments as she carried food to the table and dishes away. The soldier assured him that in a few years, his father and the woman's father would see that the American might make a good husband for the young widow.

The shift of power from the nationalist Harakat Amal Shiites-- originally known as The Movement of the Deprived-- to the pro-Khomeini Islamic Amal militias had ended his visits to the ghetto. No foreigner from Europe or the United States could walk in safety after the radical Islamic Amal took control of the streets. The radical militias-- reinforced by Palestinians returning from exile-- began the sniping and mortaring of the Marines. Then, in September, the Syrians and Iranians appeared with their allies the Hizbullah. The Harakat Amal leaders organized an evacuation of the district's civilians and the war began. After months of continuous fighting, Niles returned to streets he had once enjoyed, streets now deserted: by night, the domain of fanatics.

## RECON

The empty streets reassured Niles. With the civilians hiding in their shelters and the militia look-outs staying in the security of their bunkers, the disguised Americans and Lebanese feared only a face-to-face encounter with a Hizbullah patrol. And the only patrols they saw passed at a distance, blocks away and in vehicles, the militiamen cruising the district in cars and trucks. No foot patrols challenged them.

But after an hour of zigzagging through the center of the district, they had seen nothing of a massing of militiamen-- no trucks, no crowds of men with rifles. Niles signaled the others into the doorway of a gutted shop.

"Willing to walk down to the streets facing the airport? Where they're shooting at the line? The crazies will be down there. In numbers." "You taking a vote on this, sir?" Alvarez asked.

"You're all volunteers. Those streets will be serious. It'll be more than a walk through. Just listen--"

They all heard the distant hammering of automatic weapons.

Gamal answered first in his slow, awkward English. "Why talk? We volunteer to fight. We fight or lose our country."

Hussein nodded. "We volunteered."

"It's cool," Alvarez added. "Their security is way, way loose. We walk in, we walk out. No problem."

"Not quite. I want to take out some of the snipers."

Alvarez nodded. "Yeah, why not? We did okay last night. They won't know what happened to them. Walk in, walk out."

Niles mimicked the sergeant's nodding. "Walk in, walk out. Uh, huh. Come on ...."

Stepping out of the doorway, Niles led them a block north. He found a

## RECON

one-lane alley, a short-cut he remembered. A stripped and burned-out truck and heaps of trash clogged the narrow lane. The stink of burned wood and rot came from a boarded-shut furniture workshop. The buildings on the south side of the alley blocked the moonlight, forcing the four men to step slowly through the darkness. Rats scurried across their boots. The sound of firing came clearly as they came the end of the alley. Niles went to a crouch and looked out. At that moment, white light seared away the night, the scream of a one hundred fifty five millimeter artillery shell coming an instant later. By reflex, he dropped flat.

A flare. Niles shifted to put himself in shadow, then looked out again. The magnesium-white light illuminated a street of dust and broken concrete. To the east, the street continued into the empty district. To the west, the street ended one hundred meters away at an intersecting street of tenements. There, the Hizbullah militia had built a bunker on the ruins of a shattered building. Salvaged bricks and beams reinforced the walls and roof. The bunker had a direct line of fire on the northeast end of the airfield and the Iranian-trained snipers continuously fired Kalashnikovs and heavy machineguns at the Marine outposts. Return-fire from the Marines punched into the sandbags without effect. Some rounds went over the bunker and ricocheted along the deserted street. At the street corner across from the rubble, he saw another sandbagged checkpoint. But he saw no one manning the position.

The tenements on each side-- inhabited or not-- made the approval of an artillery or gunship strike unlikely. Despite the terror bombing of the Landing Team headquarters, Niles knew that the Marine commander would not authorize counter-attacks which might kill civilians.

As the parachute flare drifted down, Niles had minutes of magnesium daylight to examine the doorways and windows of the devastated street. He saw

## RECON

no sentries. Behind him, the others waited for his signal as they watched their sectors-- the other direction of the street, the alley behind them, the rooflines.

Shadows slid up the street's buildings as the flare descended. Niles waited, watching the building next to the bunker. White light backlit a form moving along the roof. The flare finally sputtered out and darkness returned. Niles did not move.

A flashlight waved in the darkness. The light revealed an entry through the wall of the building. Two militiamen carried a heavy case from the building as another militiaman lit the path for them. They went into the bunker.

"Vatos coming from the east," Alvarez hissed, using the Los Angeles barrio dialect of his youth. "Jeeps, cars. We are not alone out here ...."

Not taking his eyes from the bunker, Niles waited for the militiamen to reappear. The militiamen did not exit. But a glow of light remained in the building's entryway.

"They're coming this way .... "

The Marines and Lebanese eased deeper into the alley as headlights approached. A line of vehicles rattled past-- a Lebanese Army jeep crowded with Hizbullah, a Mercedes taxi, and a Japanese pick-up truck. Militiamen fired wildly, their Kalashnikovs flashing straight up into the night. The pick-up dragged something, a thing of rags and gore. Niles leaned out. In the red light of the taillights, he saw an arm flail as the corpse jerked at the end of the rope. The Hizbullah turned the corner.

Watching the street and bunker for a few more minutes, Niles finally turned to Alvarez. "They've got that position on the ground. I think there's more of them in the building. I saw one on the roof and I think they're firing from up there, too."

"What's the plan?"

## RECON

"Walk in there and persuade them to stop shooting Marines. But I want a look-see on that roof first. Officers, advisors, whoever."

Alvarez nodded. He briefed the Lebanese in whispered Arabic and English.

During a fury of counter-fire from the Marine perimeter, Niles left the doorway. He stayed close to the shopfronts for cover, watching the roofline above the bunker. The rooftop flashed with the backblast of a rocket-- and a rocket shrieked toward the Marine perimeter.

At the corner, he glanced inside the sandbagged checkpoint. No one. He stepped inside the chest-high rectangle of sandbags and sat on an empty ComBloc ammunition crate. Hollow concrete blocks set sideways in the sandbags provided firing ports. He peered out through a port, watching for movement on the intersecting street.

A hundred meters away, a building had lights in the windows overlooking the street. He saw the tailgate of a pick-up truck stacked with crates. He saw no one at the pick-up.

Leaving the checkpoint, he walked back to the others and motioned them forward. Niles kept his craggy Anglo features turned away from the street.

Alvarez and the two Lebanese followed him to the corner. Inside the rectangle of sandbags, Niles crouched so he could not be seen from the street or adjoining buildings. He explained their next action as the others eyed the area:

"There are some of them on top and some in the bunker. I will go up to the roof position first. You three will wait behind the bunker. Do not follow me. You fellows look exactly like the opposition. I could get confused. And kill you. Understand?"

"Up to the roof?" Alvarez asked. "Alone? No back up?"

"Move faster on my own."

"Maintain radio contact ...."

Keeping his face down, Niles crossed the street to the rubble-strewn lot. The deafening noise of automatic weapons reverberated between the buildings. In the pauses, he heard return fire cracking into the front of the bunker. Alvarez followed him, then Hussein and Gamal. The four-story tenement shadowed the lot, keeping the area in darkness. Niles went to the adjoining tenement. The others found concealment in the weed-overgrown rubble.

Bombs or artillery shells had blasted through the walls of the building. Flickering amber light revealed smashed concrete walls and floors hanging by strands of reinforcing steel. Niles stooped down and ran his fingertips over the bricks and broken mortar. He felt the flattened, hard surface of a pathway trampled through the debris. Continuing inside, he stood still and listened.

A radio. Using the tips of his boots, he felt his way through the debris, finding the path the militiamen had cleared to a hallway. Amber light and the voices of an Arabic language broadcast came from a room. He understood that the announcer reported on the bombings of the American and French peacekeeping forces. Niles advanced slowly, extending a boot and testing the sandy concrete floor for debris or trash before transferring his weight and beginning the next step. At the open door, his back pressed to the wall, he listened. He heard snoring and the rustling of plastic.

Easing down to a crouch, he looked inside. A kerosene lantern hung from the ceiling, the wick turned down to a glow. Stacked cases of ammunition--stencilled with the Cyrillic letters of the Soviet Union, marked over with Arabic--lined the walls of the room. He saw a battery-powered transistor radio on one of the cases, rags and a can of crankcase oil on another. Splintered wood and cosmoline-slick packing paper from opened ammunition crates covered the floor.



Leaning farther, he saw boots.

Infinitely slowly, silently, he stepped into the room. A wounded militiaman-- his left arm wrapped in gauze and tape-- slept on packing crates of RPG-7 rockets. Bearded, wearing dirty fatigues, the militiaman clutched a clear plastic tarp around himself as a blanket. A Kalashnikov with a folded stock lay on the concrete floor. A prescription bottle had spilled out pills. The militiaman shifted in his sleep and mumbled in a drugged stupor, then snored again, his head back. The announcer on the radio continued reading the news of the bombings. Then the program cut to a tape of a celebration. Over the screaming of a crowd, Niles recognized a speaker proclaiming victory, victory.

Niles took an oily rag from the floor. Then, slipping out his Marine combat knife, he bunched the rag around the knife where the blade met the hilt. He aimed the point slightly to the left of the militiaman's sternum and pushed the point through the ribs, using all his strength and weight to drive blade through the man's heart. As the man reflexively jerked, already dying, his eyes opening and his hands grabbing at the stranger leaning on his chest. The hands released Niles and he heard the militiaman exhale in one long, shuddering sigh.

The rag had blocked and absorbed the gush of blood. Only a small spot marked the wound. Niles crossed the man's injured arm over the blood and rolled him on his side, putting his face to the wall. The dead man looked like he slept.

Niles went to the door and listened for movement in the hallway. The autofire continued outside. Stepping into the hallway, he followed a pathway to concrete stairs. Voices and the sounds of men moving came from the roof. He looked up and saw the night sky four floors above him. Pausing for a moment, Niles quickly rechecked his web gear and pouches-- the magazines of ammunition for his Kalashnikov, the Syrian Army pouch containing U S-issue grenades, his

## RECON

sheathed knife, the concealed C B radio. He confirmed the OFF setting of the radio switch. Nothing rattled. He went up the stairs.

\*\*\*

Sprawled in the rubble behind the bunker, Sergeant Alvarez listened to the militiamen curse the Marines. He thought of all the hours with language tapes and books, struggling with the strange phonetics and meanings-- only so that he could understand some locals bad mouthing him. Looking up, Alvarez saw the ventilation ports flickering with muzzle flashes. Only a few minutes had passed since Captain Niles entered the building and in that short time the militiamen had fired hundreds of rounds from their rifles and machineguns. The cold night air stank of cordite.

A 40mm grenade popped on the other side. The autofire ceased for a moment. Alvarez heard a militiaman laugh. Yeah, laugh loud-mouth. Won't be laughing tomorrow.

The Marines tried L A A W rockets next, the first rocket tearing past the bunker and exploding against a ruined building on the opposite side of the street, collapsing a section of wall into the intersection. The second rocket scored a hit. Bits of brick and concrete rained down on Alvarez and the Lebanese. Dust filled the narrow area between the tenements. The hit had no effect. The militiamen waited until the wind carried the dust away, then fired again.

Alvarez crawled over the broken concrete to Hussein and Gamal. "We've got to get out of here," he whispered to the Lebanese soldiers. "They hit that bunker with forty mike mike and Law rockets. Next thing up is a dragon--" He meant a Dragon Anti-tank/Assault Missile. The Dragon, much heavier than the small LAAW rockets, destroyed heavy tanks or penetrated a meter of reinforced concrete. The

wire-guided Dragon missiles could be fired with great accuracy.

"-- and chances are, we'll be the jokers who get wasted."

Trucks approached. Alvarez heard the revving of engines and downshifting gears before he saw the headlights appear around a corner. He pressed himself into the rubble as a stake-side truck passed. Hizbullah militiamen stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the back. Posters of Khomeini decorated the doors of the truck's cab. White cloth banners-- spray painted with red Arabic script-- hung on the sides of the truck.

"What does that say?" Alvarez asked Hussein.

"Praise the martyrs of 23 October."

The truck continued down the block and parked. A second truck passed. The truck carried crates of munitions. Militiamen sat on the crates. Others crowded the open cargo area. Parking behind the first truck, the militiamen followed the others into the building.

A white Mercedes raced down the street, then braked to swerve around the concrete in the street. Alvarez saw a tinted window roll down. A bearded face peered out, then the Mercedes continued. Voices came.

"That is not Arabic," Hussein whispered.

A few seconds later, the bearded man-- in a suit and slacks, carrying a folding stock Kalashnikov-- approached the bunker.

"Foreigner," Hussein whispered.

A second man in a suit-- but wearing a vest of magazine pouches over the suit coat-- stood at the sidewalk, watching the foreigner and the street. The foreigner walked past the rubble concealing the Marine and Lebanese without a glance and continued into the bunker.

Shouting stopped the autofire. Then a teenage Shiite militiaman

accompanied the foreigner out the doorway. The foreigner shouted and gestured at the Shiite teenager until they reached the street. The foreigner pointed at the sandbagged checkpoint and shouted out his commands. The teenager went into the checkpoint. The foreigners walked out of sight. A motor revved and sped away.

"Iranian," Hussein told Alvarez. "Syrians speak Arabic. His Arabic was not good."

"What did he say about trucks? He told the punk to watch for trucks?"

"Yes, trucks will come soon."

"Who will be in the trucks?"

"He said only trucks."

"This is it ... come with me." Watching the sentry across the narrow street, Alvarez crawled through the broken concrete and reinforcing rod to the blown-open wall of the next building. He directed the Lebanese soldiers to take positions at a side of the passage through the shattered apartment.

Taking out his C B hand-radio, he keyed the transmit twice to signal the captain. No response came. He keyed the transmit again. No response.

"Oh, man. I got to go get him. We found what we came looking for."

\*\*\*

Taking the time to make every step silent, Niles slowly, patiently approached the roof. The shooting continued, but he did not risk exploiting the noise to cover a rush to the top. Only one more floor, two more flights, and he would be there.

A flashlight beam waved over the walls. Boots ran down the flights, equipment and weapons clattering. Niles rushed up the stairs to meet the Hizbullah militiamen. The first gunman saw the Syrian uniform and beret Niles wore and pointed the flashlight into his face.

## RECON

In the last second of his conscious life, the first militiaman saw a tall man with hard angular features, his face aged by years of sun and exposure. The foreigner in the Syrian uniform had darkened his skin with brown paint, but his blue eyes and Marine hair-cut hair betrayed him as an American.

A shout almost cleared the Shiite's lips. But Niles rushed up the steps and drove upward with the stock of his Kalashnikov, putting all his strength into a perfect rising buttstroke to the underside of the militiaman's chin. The blow smashed the man's jaw closed on his tongue, shattering the teeth and lower jaw, the impact throwing his head back as the stock snapped off the rifle.

Niles rammed the muzzle of the Kalashnikov into the solar plexus of the second Shiite, doubling him, driving him backwards onto the steps, the only sound the gasp of his breath exploding from his throat. Niles hammered both militiamen with the twisted metal and splintered wood end of the rifle.

The Shiites rolled down the concrete steps. Niles cut their throats and took a Kalashnikov-- the barrel and receiver still warm from firing-- to replace his broken rifle.

Rushing to the roof-level stairwell housing, he listened to the militiamen. Some fired Kalashnikov rifles. Two others shouted to one another as they fired a machinegun. Niles paused for one precaution. He found his valved hearing-protectors and jammed them into his ears. Then he took two US-issue M67 fragmentation grenades from his pouch. Slipping off the safety clips, he straightened the cotter pins. Letting his new Kalashnikov hang by its sling, he stepped out of the stairwell housing.

The Hizbullah positions viewed the northern half of the International Airport. Their lines of fire included the airport terminal, the Marine outposts, the vehicle yards, and both runways. Riflemen fired through fist-sized holes hammered

through the concrete walls. The two militiamen working the PKM belt-fed machinegun fired from a gap in the wall. All the positions had been reinforced with sandbags. Only a perfect shot with a bullet or rocket could hit a rifleman, only mortars or artillery could knock out this militia position.

Niles slipped the pins from the grenades and bounced the olive drab spheres across the roof. Retreating to the cover of the concrete stairwell housing, he took out two more grenades and slipped the safety clips. A man shouted. A rifle scraped concrete. The bangs of the grenades stopped the movement.

An instant later, Niles let the levers flip free, then tossed the next two grenades to the other end of the roofline. After the two bangs, Niles waited, listening.

A man groaned. Slipping out of the stairwell, Niles circled around the housing and a series of heating flues. He scanned the roof for movement. None of the sprawled forms moved. Moving toward the dead men, he crouched to stay under the continuing fire from the Marine perimeter.

One of the machinegunners clutched at his wounds to his chest and throat. The other militiamen lay motionless in spreading pools of blood. Unless the Shiite militia leaders commissioned a forensic examination of the scene and the dead snipers, the Marine riflemen and their grenade launchers would get the credit for the kills.

A rifle clattered against the concrete stairs. Niles unsheathed his knife and went to the stairwell housing. Waiting, the knife ready, he listened for the boots of militiamen. Metal clinked. Niles crouched down and tensed to drive the knife up into the heart of the man who stepped out of the stairwell housing.

"Hey, capi??tan. Hey Zoot esta?? aqua."

"Hey, Zoot the Noisemaker. I told you to stay down there," "And I advised

you, sir, to keep your radio on. We got trucks of crazies coming in. With Iranians."

"Let's get this done. The ammunition room on the first floor--"

"Saw it--"

"The two dead ones on the stairs go in there. Don't worry about noise.

We're alone up here."

Niles jerked the dying machinegunner away from the sandbags. He dragged the man to the stairwell and threw him down to the landing. The lung and throat wounds would explain the blood. He stomped down on the back of the man's neck until the vertebrae broke, then dragged the second throat-cut rifleman down the stairs to the ground floor. Alvarez crouched in a doorway, his Kalashnikov ready.

"Captain, we--"

"Move it. I'm torching the dump."

Dropping the second corpse half-in, half-out of the room, Niles stepped over the dead man and grabbed the kerosene lantern. "Captain!"

Niles broke the glass shield, unscrewed the fill cap, then tipped the lantern over on the oily rags. Flames spread over the crates. Alvarez stood outside.

"Move it!" Niles repeated.

"Out there--"

"What?"

"There's a sentry at the checkpoint."

"Why," Niles looked back at the flames and smoke coming from the burning crates of ammunition. "Didn't you tell me that before I--"

"Move it, sir."

They continued into the concrete wreckage where Hussein and Gamal crouched. Niles glanced out at the Shiite rifleman. He went back to the others and spoke with Hussein

## RECON

"The sergeant and I will hit the bunker. Watch the guard over there. Give you odds, three to one, that he will come to us."

Staying low in the rubble, Niles and Alvarez crept to the back wall of the bunker. The Shiite riflemen continued spraying autofire as before. A machinegun fired short bursts. The Marine return fire had slacked off. Niles passed the sergeant two of the M67 grenades. He went to a rifle port, Alvarez went to the bunker's door.

"Marines on the line down there," Alvarez prayed. "Do not send the dragon--"

"Now ...."

Dust exploded from the door and ports as the four grenades ripped the interior. Silence. The teenager left the protection of the checkpoint and ran across the street.

Ammunition popped inside the building as the flames finally heated the crated cartridges. Stopping in the path, the teenager watched the dust billowing out of the bunker. He cautiously continued. When he realized the noise of the exploding ammunition did not come from bunker, he rushed to the doorway. Alvarez smashed him in the head with a brick.

"In there." Niles pulled the pin on another grenade. Alvarez threw the unconscious militiaman inside the door. Five seconds later, no one remained alive in the bunker.

"Don't know how it happened," Niles commented to Alvarez. "But someone put a forty millimeter grenade through one of those little holes. Whoever he is, that Marine most definitely deserves a marksman's medal."

"Scored on a six inch target at almost four hundred yards. A miracle."

"That's it. A miracle."

"Now take a look at the crazies down the street."



## RECON

Signaling to Hussein and Gamal, Niles rushed to the street. The white Mercedes had parked behind the trucks. From his angle, Niles saw the Mercedes, two trucks, and the pick-up. The building had a shattered marquee and display windows: a theatre. Niles remembered seeing crowds of teenagers lining up for kung-fu movies and Egyptian romances. Now guards paced the sidewalk in front of the ticket booth. He scanned the buildings overlooking the street. Hundreds of possible look-out positions viewed the street-- windows, balconies, shellholes through the walls, rooflines. A sentry could be anywhere. Niles did not like the odds of approaching the theatre by the street.

"The Iranians came in that Mercedes," Alvarez had to raise his voice to speak over the noise of the popping ammunition. "And the boss Iranian told that punk to watch for the trucks that were coming."

"What trucks?"

"Didn't say. Said trucks were coming."

"Guards down there. Can't walk up to that address."

"Ah, yes sir. Do not like the looks of this street. Even in our Syrian camouflage."

"Instead, we will detour."

"To where?"

"Out into the fields. Cut behind these buildings and come back across from that theater."

"Sir! We got men with starlite scopes pointed this way. And they will shoot us."

"Didn't hit these Hizbullah."

"They had mucho concrete between them and the incoming."

"Then we'll stay low. No other way."

"We got Vatssek back there with an M-sixty. And he does not miss."

"The street or the fields."

Engines approached. Niles and Alvarez went flat in the rubble. Trucks clanked and rattled along the broken stones of the street. Ranks of bearded militiamen in white headbands and camouflage uniforms stood in the backs of two slat side trucks. As the trucks passed, the militiamen looked toward the smoke and noise of the burning munitions. The trucks stopped at the theatre. Militiamen leapt from the trucks, crowding the sidewalks and street, many running toward the Americans.

"You talked me into it, sir."

They doubled back to the bunker. In the noise of the burning munitions, they could not hear if the Marine perimeter positions continued firing on the bunker. A pathway curved around the bunker. Niles went first, running along the path, his feet scattering hundreds of empty rifle and machinegun cartridge casings.

The area behind the ruined tenements had become a dump. Past the bunker, pathways forked out, one path cutting across the fields, another path paralleling the rusted tangle of wire and posts that had once been a fence. But the path along the fence offered no cover.

Niles scrambled over the broken concrete and trash, glass and slivers of shrapnel cutting his hands, then turned to confirm that Hussein and Gamal followed. Alvarez came last. To the west, Niles saw the darkness of the runways and the Marine perimeter. Niles knew Marine snipers would have their starlite scopes focused on the bunker-- and at any soldier in the area.

Bullets confirmed his assumption. An old bottle shattered. Sheet metal crackled. Dust and ashes sprayed. A bullet tore past him and ricocheted into the tenement.

## RECON

"Down!" Niles warned the Lebanese as they passed him. He found the C B hand-radio and extended the antenna to full length. Curling into a mound of trash, he pressed the transmit and whispered: "Victor. Victor the Russian weight lifter. This is Actual. Old Man Actual."

A scratchy voice answered. "Yes, sir. This is Victor."

"How's the shooting?"

"Repeat, sir."

"How is the shooting?"

"Ah ... great. Got some ragheads in the lines now."

"Do you have a positive identification on those individuals? Be advised they may be soldiers from another nation."

"Alright! I'll request artillery."

"Victor, please don't. Be advised their identities may be in doubt."

"Question, sir. Am I familiar with this gang of payback warriors?"

"Affirmative. ?Entiendame?"

"Si, se@or."

"So pass the word, okay? I don't have a land line here."

Slipping the hand-radio back into his Soviet ammunition vest, he heard Alvarez hiss to him. Then he heard the voices from the bunker. Flashlights swept across the firing ports, the Hizbullah shouting and cursing as they found the corpses. A Kalashnikov jutted from a port and sprayed wild autofire in the direction of the airport. Niles crabbed across the slabs and stones and litter. The shooting covered his noise. "Contact with Vatsek?" Alvarez asked.

"Said he had us in his sights."

No more bullets came at the four men. But they continued moving in dashes from cover to cover, running a few steps, crawling through garbage. Rats

## RECON

scattered. Twice they passed the ventilation pipes of shelters-- music and the voices of the hiding families came up the pipes. The windows in the buildings remained dark. No one above ground risked lights. Niles counted the buildings they passed. After approximately a block, he stopped Alvarez and the Lebanese troopers.

Behind them, new militiamen had taken the place of the dead. Kalashnikov muzzles flashed as the Hizbullah sniped at the distant airport lights. Accurate Marine return-fire cracked into the bunker. Sprawled in the cover of a trash heap, Niles risked a whisper:

"We kill them and there's more."

"Call for the dragon. Waste that place."

"The leaders, we got to hit the leaders."

Searching two buildings for an entry, they found a faint path leading to a heavy wood plank door. Niles pointed to another building. Alvarez shook his head, no, and held up his hand for the captain and the others to wait. They crouched at the sides while Alvarez felt around the edges of the door. Then he gently pushed again and again. Finally, he reached in his pocket. Silver flashed as a blade snapped out of the push-button knife.

Alvarez slipped the knife between the planks. He motioned the others back, then flipped up with the blade and shoved the door as he jumped to the side.

The door swung open. They waited-- expecting the blast of a booby-trap-- for a minute before glancing inside. Nothing moved in the dark interior of the tenement. Alvarez shone a penlight across the walls and floor of a narrow passageway. He went in first, his Kalashnikov leveled at the darkness. The Air Assault troopers followed. Niles pulled out his C B hand-radio again: "Victor, this is the Old Man."

## RECON

"Victor here." Static blurred Vatssek's voice.

"Be advised that hot spot needs the dragon. Delta, Romeo, Alpha, Golf, Oscar, November. Zero bystanders. Many crazies. Hit them."

"Received. Will request dragon zap. Be advised that requests don't mean shit."

Niles followed the others. He heard the chanting immediately. A slow, rhythmic beat accompanied the incomprehensible voice of a crowd.

The passageway entered a long, narrow courtyard open to the sky. Three levels of walkways lined by steel railings overlooked the concrete central courtyard. Laundry hung on lines stretched from rail to rail. A mortar hit had torn away a short section of the fourth floor walkway. Boards bridged the gap.

Families struggled to survive here. Walls of sandbags surrounded several apartments on the ground level to provide makeshift bomb shelters. Light and radio voices came through the vents. Smoke drifted from one vent, the smell of spices and cooking oil filling the courtyard, almost covering the stink of the old tenement.

Narrow steel and concrete stairs creaked with the weight of the four men. The chanting covered the noises. Alvarez led the group up to the top floor, then motioned Niles forward. On the fourth level, the apartment windows and doors stood open, the interiors empty. Hussein and Gamal watched the apartments, their Kalashnikovs pointed at the shadows and doorways.

"Roof door open," Alvarez whispered.

Running his hand along the steps, Niles felt grit at the sides of a step, only worn concrete at the center. He continued up a step at a time, sweeping his fingers over a step, then the next and the next. Others had used the steps recently, but that meant nothing in a crowded building. Then he found the empty

## RECON

cartridge casing. By touch, he identified the short, tapered casing as 7.62ComBloc. He continued up the last stairs to the roof and slowly raised his head, listening for any movement. The chanting continued. He scanned the roof. Laundry swayed on lines, the sheets and chadors moving with shifting of the soft wind. Niles examined every silhouette and shape for movement, or the form of a militiaman, or the distinctive outlines of weapons. He checked the rooftops of the neighboring buildings.

Within reach, he found more cartridge casings and an empty cardboard tube. Other tubes lay on the concrete. The tubes had contained RPG-7 rockets. Militiamen had fired on the Marine perimeter from this building.

He finally left the stairs, Alvarez moving up to watch as Niles slow-stepped across the roof, his boots silent on the old tar and concrete. Mortars had punched holes through the roof and destroyed the rooms below. Standing behind the blowing laundry, Niles peered over the lines at the section of roof overlooking the street.

Explosions had shattered a section of the facade, littering the roof with chips and blocks of concrete. His angle of sight did not allow a view of the rooftops across the street. He signaled the others up, then motioned for Hussein to accompany him.

They crept forward toward the break in the facade, dropping to a crouch, then going prone and snaking through the debris. Niles checked his student's progress. Though the chant and beating noise would cover any sound, Hussein carefully removed the chunks of concrete, then brushed aside the dust and chips as he crawled forward. The young soldier had learned to move silently.

Hammering came from the bunker a block away as the gunmen aimed sporadic bursts of automatic fire at the airport. Niles and Hussein inched forward

to the drop off. Across the street and one floor lower, they saw the curved roof of the theater. Light fanned from the open door of a stairway. Militiamen in the white headbands of the Hizbullah watched the street. Two Syrian soldiers and a man in a casual suit stood apart. The man in the suit wore a Syrian Army ammunition vest over his coat. Niles could not see the features of the men.

"I think that one is an Iranian," Hussein whispered. "He spoke Farsi with the other one."

The chanting and the slow, rhythmic beat echoed in the street. Niles listened and realized what he heard.

In the theater, Shiites beat their chests with their fists as they proclaimed 'Allahu Akbar'-- 'God is great'.

Easing forward, he looked down on the street. Four stake -side cargo trucks lined the curb. He saw three Mercedes sedans and a Land Rover with a pedestal-mounted 12.7mm heavy machinegun. Groups of Hizbullah sentries guarded the front of the theater.

Niles had seen more than seventy militiamen in two trucks. He doubled that to guess that somewhere between one hundred twenty five and one hundred fifty Hizbullah militiamen had arrived in the trucks.

Other words emerged from the chanting. Someone in the theater raved. Niles could not follow the screaming. He turned to Hussein "What is the preacher saying?"

"I can only understand ... attack. He is telling them to attack the enemies of God."

Attack the enemies of God. A full company of chanting, suicidal fanatics less than five hundred meters from the few Marines manning the isolated sandbag outposts along the airport perimeter. Niles pointed to the Syrians and militiamen

on the opposite roof.  
talk with Alvarez."

"Watch them," he told Hussein. "I got to

Moving back, he crossed the roof to the sergeant and crouched down with him. "Hear that?"

"The voices? Oh, yeah. God is Great. Spooky shits."

"Four troop trucks. I calculate maybe one fifty of them in there. And there's a mullah or whoever telling them to attack."

"Attack who?"

"The enemies of God."

"Call for the cobra."

"Go up there. Watch them. I'm going to try to call down payback with this toy radio." Continuing to the back of the roof, he looked down at the lights of the airport as he extended the C B radio's antenna.

"Victor. The Old Man calling Victor."

The line-of-sight transmission gave him clear reception of Vatssek's reply. "Victor here. Be advised no dragon. No authorization. Cannot break policy. Read, chickenshit. Highest actual wants dragons held in reserve. There's talk about tanks. Those shee-its out there can shoot at us forever."

"This is different. Put Mr. Marvel on the radio."

A moment later, Colonel Devlin spoke. "Marvel here."

"Aforementioned nationals confirmed. Repeat, your information is confirmed."

"Be advised mission complete. Withdraw field personnel."

"I want an airstrike."

"Not possible. Repeat, not possible."

"There is a company of crazies staging for an attack. Repeat, one five zero



## RECON

crazies. Most definitely out for blood. I want a cobra strike."

"What is the source of this information?"

Aware that his broadcast might be monitored, Niles switched to Spanish.

"Agentes Se@or Ojo y Se@or Oreja." Eye and ear.

"I read. I will request. Be advised of report of tanks."

"Then time is most definitely of the essence. Repeat, one-five-zero crazies on their way. Hit them here or they hit the perimeter."

"Wait, actual. I will request. Over."

Crouching on the rooftop, Niles scanned the darkness between the tenement and the Marine lines. The Marine role as neutral peacekeepers denied the use of the mine fields, barbed wire, and interlocking fields of fire required for a secure perimeter. The Marines in the outposts had only their rifles and a few squad automatic weapons. Niles had seen the trucks of militiamen. Now the Vatsek and Colonel Devlin told him of the reports of tanks. The Hizbullah in the theater might be only one of many groups gathering in the slums around the International Airport.

The Marine force had lost almost four hundred men, dead and wounded, in the bombing. This left the Marines in the airport complex without reserves. The bomb had also destroyed stockpiles of ammunition and rockets.

Though the battleship New Jersey waited on call offshore, its 16-inch guns could not be used on Hayy al Sollom. The battleship's secondary batteries of 5-inch guns could only be used on the open fields outside the Marine perimeter. The support ships Iwo Jima and El Paso also waited offshore with Cobra attack helicopters and with more weapons. But Niles doubted the value of the gunships in a defense of the airport. Militia automatic-weapon fire had damaged the Cobras the few times the gunships appeared. And if the attackers entered the complex,

## RECON

the Cobras could not fire without hitting the Marine defenders. The battle for the airport would be rifle-to-rifle, hand-to-hand. Niles knew the Marines would annihilate the attackers, but at what cost? How many more young widows and orphans? How many more families would lose sons?

A fifteen-second airstrike on the theater by a Cobra could eliminate four truckloads of the fanatics before they attacked the Marines.

Waiting for the authorization, hoping for the sound of helicopter rotors, Niles listened to the Hizbullah chanting their prayer of hate.