

**FOREVER THE
COLOURS**

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**FOREVER
THE
COLOURS**

RICHARD THOMAS

For my father the storyteller.
My inspiration.

“On the 30th October [1878] the ultimatum was despatched to Sher Ali, informing him that, unless his acceptance of the conditions were received by the Viceroy not later than the 20th November, he would be treated by the British Government as a declared enemy.”

—Field Marshal Lord Roberts, 1897

“The battle is now joined on many fronts. We will not waver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail.”

—George W. Bush, 2001

Prologue

It was just out of reach, no more than a hand span away. His fingers desperately clawed at the sand and gravel, fingernails tearing and ripping off. With a desperation made of pure will-power, he levered his body forward using his elbows as pivots and managed another couple of inches towards his target. ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, Hail Mary, full of grace,’ he choked in between sobbing breaths.

He reached out and winced at the sudden electrifying pain that exploded between his shoulder blades. Once again he reached back to try and remove the object that had been so cruelly punched into his back, but found he couldn’t. His legs were useless; he hadn’t felt them for some time now, and they were dragging along behind like unwanted passengers. He tried to take a breath but only managed a lung full of sand and dirt; he coughed and nearly fainted with the pain.

It was close now. His vision was dimming, the day turning to twilight, but through the tears he could see just how close it was. One more push and he would be there. He lifted himself again, shakily onto his elbows, his strength ebbing swiftly, and he found he could hardly keep his head up. ‘Hail Mary, full of grace,’ he pulled again, gritting his teeth at the agony emanating from his body. He slumped down, face resting in the dirt. He was going; he knew he didn’t have long. He listened to the sounds around him, the screaming and laughing. He was taken back to May Day celebrations: the screaming boys and girls, whirling around the maypole on the village green, good food, ale, games and Annie. He would miss Annie.

He lifted his head weakly. There it was, right there in front of him. He pushed his hand out toward it, closer, closer. His fingers touched the material. He caressed it, grabbed it in his fist; relief washed over him and he smiled despite the pain. He gently pulled the once-colourful cloth toward him. It slipped, so he gripped it harder; it was difficult as it was wet, covered in warm butter, he thought.

Not far now. If he could just rest his head on it, he was sure he would feel better. It stopped, and found he couldn't move it. A curious pain, a new pain, crept up from his fist. What now, he thought, and looked to find his fingers being broken and crushed by a sandaled foot. It was grinding and pushing his broken bones into the dirt. He sobbed, not for the pain, but for the loss of the precious article he had given his last breaths trying to reach.

'Gawd help me.'

The soldier didn't feel a thing as the blade swooped down and plunged into the back of his neck...

Chapter 1

Shaman

Sweat!

He could feel it sliding down his right temple and down his cheek, to disappear inside his collar, which was already soaked with body oils. He sniffed and found he was starting to smell like his dog's bed blanket. What a fucking dump! Thomas 'Tommy' Evans was twenty-four years of age, a carpenter's son and a soldier, and the last place he wanted to be at that moment was where he actually found himself. There wasn't one redeeming feature about it, and the words hot, dusty, shit-smelling, fly-infested and pig sty sprung to mind. He had never gotten used to the smell of cow or goat shit, or whatever the hell shit it was; it stank. *They* seemed to use it for a wide variety of things. "The main one," he thought, "is building their homes. And what makes it worse are the flies. Millions of sodding flies, big, fat, bloated flies."

Why the hell anybody wanted to live in a shithole like this, let alone fight over it, was beyond his reasoning. He could have been in Germany or Canada or somewhere like that, getting pissed and wooing the local females with his god-like qualities. But no, here he was, living it up in downtown fuck all!

'Why do I have to be a bloody target for em? Bastards,' he mumbled. He slapped at a fly on his neck for what he thought was the hundredth time – and missed again. 'Bastards,' he said, again, a little too loudly.

'Eh, shut it dickhead,' whispered a sneering voice that sounded as though it was full of phlegm. 'You wanna get us all killed or what?'

The voice belonged to Sergeant Andy “the Arsehole” Adams (though the arsehole in question didn’t know that was one of the loving names his platoon had given him). He was probably the most disliked soldier in her Majesty’s own Fusiliers. 6’, 6’1”, he was broad in the shoulder, with a face that spoke of a link to the lost one, knuckles that dragged on the floor and an all-around nasty piece of work; and it also didn’t help that he had the broadest scouse accent ever.

‘Sorry Sar’nt,’ Tommy replied ever so quietly. ‘I’m being eaten alive. Have you seen how fat these fuckers are with my blood?’ Truth be told, he wanted to tell Adams to poke it right up his fat Neanderthal arse, but he was going for his first stripe when he got back, so thought better of it.

‘Youll be sorry when I come over there and crack yer head for ya,’ spat Adams.

Tommy was lying behind a rough, broken wall made of dried cow or goat shit – Yes, he was sure that was what they were made of – in an Afghan village with a name he couldn’t even pronounce. The usual day’s events included searching for ragheads with guns, or insurgents as *they* are called on the news, oh, and not getting any of your body parts blown off by IEDs, especially the most valuable bit! He didn’t call it the Kaiser for nothing.

With Adams in charge, Tommy’s section was covering this part of the village, and the rest of the platoon was with Lieutenant Richard Dashwood at the north end.

‘How long we gotta sit here for, Sar’nt?’ asked Jacko, in his Peckham accent.

‘‘Til I say we can fucking move, shithouse. Now shut it,’ was the curt reply.

Tommy couldn’t help but chuckle, quietly of course, because although he couldn’t see Jacko, he knew he would be mouthing all sorts of silent colourful replies. To say that Jacko hated Adams was probably an understatement. He despised him. Most did, but make no mistake, Adams was a true soldier, and a leader to some extent. It’s just that, well, he was an arsehole!

After fifteen minutes of watching the cluster of mud huts for anything a little more dangerous than women and children going about their daily lives, Adams stood and bellowed at the section to move out and start the search of the area.

This was a massive relief for Tommy; just to be moving was a release from the blood suckers, and, moving up with Jacko on his left, he started towards the nearest hut. He looked sideways at Jacko, who had an angry expression on his face.

‘What a twat,’ said Jacko after a few moments.

‘You can say that again,’ replied Tommy.

‘What a twat.’

Tommy smiled. He had been working with Lance Corporal Paul ‘Jacko’ Jackson for the best part of three years now. This was their second tour of Afghanistan and they were close friends. The loss of comrades on their first tour had built a strong bond between a lot of the lads, and especially between these two; they almost always stuck together when on patrol and today was no different. Tommy and Jacko moved with the confidence built on solid friendship, although Jacko had tested that friendship on quite a few occasions, the last being the time they had both been on leave and had pulled a couple of birds down the local pub.

The night had gone well and had ended up with Tommy and this girl, over the bonnet of a VW Passat, up an alley. What Tommy didn’t know, but Jacko did, was that the girl he was entertaining, the sister of Jacko’s interest, was in fact the wife of Sergeant Andrew Adams. Well, he did find out, as he lay slumped on top of her, breathing like he’d just ran a marathon, while Sergeant Adams bellowed in the road adjoining the alley, drunk, and looking for that ‘fucking old slapper.’ Tommy had been confused as to why the girl had shoved him off and frantically started to yank her knickers back up. The statement, ‘Fuck it, that’s my husband,’ had haunted Tommy ever since, but what made it worse was when Jacko had come hurtling down the alley whooping like a school girl, went flying past Tommy and shouted, ‘Fucking leg it!’ Tommy had taken off after him, desperately trying to put away the now fear-shrunken Kaiser

into his pants whilst simultaneously attempting to pull his trousers up. A couple of miles down the road, with a few cuts and bruises from all the short cuts Jacko led them through, they were back at the base; and Jacko could still hardly breathe for all the laughing he was doing. It had been the rumour ever since, and the main joke in the platoon, that the Sergeant's wife had a new taste for German salami!

Adam's voice echoed around the village, 'Don't forget lads, hearts and minds, hearts and minds; we need these fuckers to love us, long time.'

'Bleedin' 'ell, is he talkin' about us or the natives?'

'Come on Jacko, you know you love him deep down.'

'Yeah, about as much as I love having the squits.'

After about half an hour of checking dried mud-shit dwellings and animal stalls, and attempting to talk with the locals – which was pretty hard considering most of them didn't want the soldiers there, and the endless children begged for chocolate or sweets – the section were told to take a ten-minute break before moving on to the next village, about two kilometres away. The two friends found a bit of shade below one of the endless cow-goat shite walls and dug out their canteens. Slaking his thirst, Tommy then gave the local kids a packet of Polo mints to share and politely told them to piss off. He felt sorry for these kids. Well, most of them, anyway; they certainly had nothing. Sometimes, though, he had to be wary of them. If they weren't spotting for the insurgents, they were hiding them, though usually under duress.

'I can't stand much more of that twat, you know, mate, and if he calls me shithouse once more, I swear to God, I'm gonna kick his head in.'

'You shouldn't let him get to you, Jacko; he's just a bully. I just let it wash over me, mate, it's just bravado bullshit, that's all. Just try and picture me and his missus over the bonnet of that Passat.'

'Yeah, I know.' Jacko's smile didn't last. 'But the longer this tour goes on the more wound up I get, and I reckon I'm gonna end up knocking him out.' He laid his helmeted head back

against the wall and sighed. 'What we doing here, Tommy, eh? Nobody wants this place, apart from the smackheads, anyway, and no bleedin' army has ever won here.' He looked at his friend. 'It's a shithole and a total waste of time.'

Tommy smiled. 'Mate, we're freeing these people from the Taliban; al-Qaeda, the muja-whatyamacallits, and all those other mad mozzzy bastards. We're the British Army, mate, freeing the world, protecting the innocent. Queen, country, honour, the regiment and all that jazz.'

'The regiment? What, some poxy colours? You might wanna die for the flag, Tommy, but I fuckin' don't.' Jacko spat angrily into the sand at his boots.

'I didn't mean it like that, mate. Calm down, eh.'

Jacko sighed again and nodded to Tommy. 'I'm sorry, mate, I just have a real lousy feeling this time around, like it's gonna go properly tits up.'

'Mate, we all think that at some point, it's normal. Listen, we get this tour out the way and we fuck off home.'

'Yeah, but this time feels different...like something's gonna happen.' He sighed again and sat forward, took his helmet off and poured water from his canteen over his head. 'Bollocks, I sound like a right nut job.' He looked at Tommy with a wry smile. 'You know what, mate, me and her sister could see your arse pumping away like a jackhammer down that alley.'

Tommy was about to reply when they heard raised voices coming from the back of one of the dwellings on the opposite side of the road. And one of the raised voices was that of Adams himself.

'That don't sound too brilliant, does it, mucka?' said Jacko as he put his helmet back on and started to get to his feet. 'Think we best go see, eh?'

They stood, checked their rifles and hurried across the dusty road, covering each other at all times, and moved around a building that was probably the biggest in the village. They found a small enclosure with a few chickens in it – well, they looked like chickens, just more bone than meat – and a door to the rear of the property. They both went to different sides of the

doorway, listening, and, after a moment or two, and feeling safe to enter, Jacko used hand signals to indicate that Tommy should enter first, with Jacko, rifle raised, following close behind.

To say the circumstances in which the two friends found themselves were awkward would possibly demean the situation. It was extreme shit. Adams was there, towering over an old white-bearded bloke, his fist pressed against the man's sunken cheek, and a young Afghan was doing a terrific impression of a dying fly while managing to piss blood all over somebody's prayer mat from a split lip. He looked at Tommy with pleading eyes.

The Sergeant was attempting to talk native, in a broad scouse accent.

'You is fucking Taliban,' he screeched. 'Where are the fucking boom booms?'

By 'boom booms', it was assumed he was asking where the IEDs were hidden. Improvised Explosive Devices, scourge of the Allied troops, or rather the British, Commonwealth and US troops. The closest some of our European friends got to the action was a martini and a blow job from some dusky-skinned sexbomb.

To the left of Adams was Private Bell, aka 'Dinga', who was pissing himself with laughter. To say that Dinga was dislikeable was probably unfair; he was an arse-kisser of the best sort and had attached himself to Adams's arse like a limpet. You could not speak about anything noteworthy in front of Dinga for fear of it getting back to the Sergeant. Plus he was a ginger, and the one thing Tommy knew for sure was that gingers were a different breed and could not, under any circumstances, be trusted.

There was also the problem of not being able to understand Dinga, as he was a foreigner, you see, from an exotic place called Newcastle. In fact, just as Tommy had entered the building, he heard Dinga say;

'Wy man, gi it fuckin te im, da fuckin oold twet.'

Which, roughly translated, probably meant, 'I say old boy, now don't make it hard on yourself.'

He managed to say this while flicking spit all over the old man.

Given the size of Adams, and the temper he was in, the old geezer, with the imposing Santa beard and skin like leather, was doing an admirable job of not shitting himself; he was just smiling benignly back at the hulking Sergeant, which was winding him up even more. The old man looked at Tommy and held his gaze for a few moments. What Tommy felt right then, he could not explain: understanding, maybe sorrow. And not for himself.

'I'm not gonna ask you again, Abdul,' exploded Adams. 'I know you can speaky de English, shithouse.'

Tommy attempted to defuse the situation. 'What's up, Sar'nt,' he asked, in a pleasant voice, though he knew only too well the methods of questioning Adams used, especially when he was convinced the person he was talking to was related to the Bin Liner himself. Tommy smiled at the old man, to try and reassure him, and the old man smiled back.

'I am asking this wrinkled old fart, lad, where he has hidden those nasty little things that separate your legs from your body.' He walked over to Tommy and Jacko and put his nose tip-to-tip with Tommy's. The hatred in Adams's eyes right then confirmed to Tommy that the Sergeant knew he had bumped his wife. 'Now while me and Dinga sort this out,' he growled, 'you and your mate shithouse there, go and sweep the rest of the buildings, savvy? Now, chop chop.' And with that he turned and walked back to the old man, who was still on his knees, and fetched a hard slap to his leathery cheek.

Weak as he knew he could sometimes be, Tommy turned, grabbed Jacko's arm and pulled him through the doorway back into the street. They stood facing each other in the heat and dust, and listened as another slap resounded through the doorway, accompanied by a muffled squeal, which was possibly Dinga laying the boot into the young Afghan.

Tommy was breathing hard. What he had just witnessed wasn't nice and he wished he were someplace else. 'You alright, Jacko? You look pale,' Tommy said with concern, because Jacko had indeed lost all colour in his face. 'Jacko, are you alright?'

Jacko was staring straight into Tommy's eyes, though not seeming to see him, and his lips were trembling slightly. 'I can't leave it like this, Tommy,' Jacko said. 'We can't leave that poor old bastard in there with those fuckers. They'll kill him.'

SLAP!

Jacko shivered.

'What exactly do you think we can do? Oh, I know! We'll just walk right in there and ask him to stop, eh? Get a fucking grip, mate, you can't touch him. We're losing too many guys out in this shithole. Do you think the brass are gonna worry about one old man and a kid? Just do your job, don't get killed and go home. Don't try to be a fucking hero.'

SLAP!

'I can't take this, mate. I'm gonna have him, sorry.' And with that he turned round to re-enter the building.

Tommy, seeing his friend was about to pop, jumped in front of him and placed a hand on his chest. 'Hang on, hang on, stop, wait. Listen, you fucking idiot, we do it our way and we survive.'

He was shoved to the side as Jacko stormed through the door.

'Oh, sod it!' he said, and quickly followed behind.

As Tommy entered, his friend was nose-to-nose with Dinga, who, with a smirk on his face, had stepped in front of Adams and squared up to Jacko.

'Wots ya fuc'in problam meet?' Dinga said to Jacko. 'If ye fuc'in want sum, am reet ear.'

Tommy quickly surveyed the scene. The old man was pushing himself up off the floor.

'So what you two love birds back for then, eh?' said the Arsehole. 'Well??? Oh, it's like that is it, a fuckin' rescue mission. Well why don't ya piss off and mind ya fuckin' business?' Adams waited for any reaction from the two friends. 'Nothing to say, no? Didn't think so.' As he ended this sentence, he pulled back to strike the old man again, and the man, already bleeding from the nose, was still looking him straight in the eye, smiling.

So it was then that Tommy, who wasn't the one threatening to pop, stepped in.

Before anyone knew what was happening, Tommy had covered the prayer rug in two strides and placed himself in front of the old man as Adams's backhand connected with his right temple. He staggered slightly and saw little lights dancing in front of his eyes, but he didn't go down. After this, it all became rather chaotic. Jacko's helmeted forehead connected with Dinga's nose and mouth just as he was about to utter another incomprehensible mouthful, and a second later Tommy's right boot went into the ascent and squeezed Adams's left testicle against his inner thigh. The noise he made as he dropped to his knees was like air escaping from a punctured inner tube. On his way down he was rewarded with a knee to the forehead, which flicked his head back, and he tumbled onto his arse. Meanwhile Jacko was attempting to remould Dinga's Playdough face with his right fist into something more attractive to the animal kingdom.

Luckily for the two friends, a few of the platoon, on hearing the raised voices, entered the room as the scene was reaching its climax, and managed to jump on the two before they could seriously put the boot in. With both of them now restrained, Adams attempted, in a crab like fashion, to get out of the door, whilst making veiled threats of death at Tommy. But nobody was taking him seriously when he was talking like Joe Pasquale, so he was promptly ignored.

'Hthou futhin nick'ed, ye broork thme futhin nors ye naa,' was all anybody could make out of the ramblings of Dinga as he staggered after the Sergeant.

It all went quiet for a few moments.

'Well, that's you two fucked when we get back to camp, boys,' said the thickset lad called Terry, from Coventry. 'The Arsehole ain't gonna let this one go.'

'Fuck him, he's just a bully, him and that fucking dickhead Bell. He's been pushing us all around for too long, and you lot would have done the same given the chance.'

‘Wanting and doing are totally feckin’ different, ye eejits,’ drawled Private Kerr, from Northern Ireland who everybody called Wayne even though his first name was Ian. ‘We would all love to kick the shite outta those two, but rules is rules and all dat.’

With that statement left hanging in the air, the other soldiers turned and went out the door, leaving the Tommy and Jacko alone.

Tommy was gutted. ‘Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,’ he kept saying, over and over. ‘How the hell did that happen? Jesus Christ, we’re finished, Jacko, it’s all over. Shit, bollocks, twat.’

Tommy slumped onto an old crate and hung his head in his hands, knowing without a doubt that his career was over, as was Jacko’s. As soon as he could manage, Adams would report to the Lieutenant, who in turn would report to the CO back at the base. Before anyone could say ‘court martial’, they would be on their way home and to the nearest unemployment office.

The old man was kneeling on his rug and chattering away in Pashto to the young Afghan, whose nose was now swelling, courtesy of Dinga, and was gesturing towards Tommy.

‘My grandpa wishes to thank you, soldier, for helping him,’ said the young Afghan.

‘Yeah, well, tell him bollocks in buggi buggi ’cos that’s me job gone down the swanee, mate,’ replied Tommy.

Unperturbed, the young man continued translating into English what the old man was saying. ‘My grandpa says that your journey is about to be cut short, but he will help.’ The old man moved closer to Tommy and held out both his hands toward him.

‘What’s he gonna do, give him a job?’ said Jacko, who was standing by the door.

Tommy stood and stepped backwards involuntarily. He didn’t know what it was about this guy, but he gave him the creeps. He looked about a hundred years old.

The old man continued gesturing to Tommy to take his hands. ‘What’s ’e bloody after, money or what?’ he said to the young Afghan. He tried to sound confident, but he couldn’t understand

why he was so spooked. It's his eyes, he thought, bright blue and piercing.

The old man continued to chatter on, looking at Tommy and gesturing and doing little hand signals.

'My grandfather says a real friend is one who takes the hand of his friend in times of distress and helplessness. He says he will guide you through what will be.'

The old man fell silent and gave Tommy a beatific smile.

Softening, Tommy sighed and held out his hand for the old man, though it was shaking slightly. The old man gripped the outstretched hand in both of his, which were surprisingly hot and strong, and, again speaking in Pashto, he stared straight into Tommy's eyes. These were not the eyes of an old man any more. There was fire in them, and passion, a knowing look that had seen much, travelled far and could tell many a story.

'My grandpa says you will travel far but will not move. You will lose but will gain much more. He also says do not despair, for there is a path to even the tallest mountain. Look for him on your journey and your return.'

Tommy pulled his hand back. It felt as though an electric shock had gone through him. He tried to sound cocky again.

'My return? Ha, I don't think so, mate. I'll be down the local job centre. But anyhow, say thanks for the advice.'

With that, he turned to Jacko and they both tumbled out into the sunlight.

Chapter 2

Contact

Some say that if literacy rates were measured by a nation's proverbs and poetry, Afghanistan would be one of the most literate countries on earth. But to Private Tommy Evans, walking along a dusty road with his mate Jacko to re-join the patrol, what the old man had said made about as much sense as Dinga in his Geordie patwa. Jacko was staring at his feet as he walked, like a condemned man, and as he glanced up under his helmet, he noticed all the lads gathered round Dinga and Adams. A medic was taking a look at Dinga's nose while Adams was squatting about five paces away from everybody else and looking a little red in the face. Well, more purple, really.

'What's gonna happen, mucka, do ya think?' Jacko mumbled under his breath.

'Well, I say we go over and pretend nothing happened, and perhaps everyone will forget we were ever here. What do you think's gonna bloody happen, you dickhead?' seethed Tommy under his breath 'The CO will have us out as soon as look at us.'

Jacko looked despondent. 'I'm sorry, mate, I couldn't help it, and I couldn't stand by and watch. Or listen even.'

'Oh crap, don't look now, Dashwood's walking up the street.'

Jacko looked beyond the group to where Tommy indicated. The Lieutenant and his section were indeed walking up the street, and he had a face like thunder. Walking next to him was one of the lads who had witnessed what happened in the house; he must have skipped to the other side of the village to report what had occurred.

‘Bollocks, he looks happy.’

‘Well, that’s that then. We’re in a world of shit now, mucka,’ whispered Jacko. ‘The Dick will go by the book on this one.’ The Dick was the name some of the lads used for Dashwood, a shortened version of his first name – and because he is one.

‘Just keep your gob closed and see where the wind’s blowing,’ whispered Tommy. ‘We can try and figure out what to say back at base. Maybe we can get some witnesses to say what those wankers were doing back there.’

They reached the group just as the other section did. Before anybody could say anything, Dashwood pointed and said, in a decidedly clipped tone, ‘Sergeant Adams, a word if you please,’ and then moved to a small walled-off area about twenty feet away. Adams stood and, after a bit of wheezing, looked at the two friends, smirked and lumbered off after the Lieutenant with a slight limp.

All eyes were on Tommy and Jacko, some with pity, some with admiration, some non-committal. The big, strapping lad Terry moved over to them.

‘Best not say anything here, lads, and wait till you get back to base. You know, get your story straight and all that.’ Terry dipped his head and moved back to the group, and on his way accidentally tripped and stood on Dinga’s hand. The screech was quite feminine sounding.

The two friends moved away and crouched down behind a wall to get some shade. Tommy was starting to feel the pressure as the minutes ticked by. *It’s strange,* he thought, *how your comrades give you a wide berth when you’re in the shit.* He looked over at Jacko and was rewarded with the same downtrodden look he himself wore.

‘Oh well, mucka. I always wanted to be a florist anyway,’ Jacko said with a smile.

‘Oh, you’re dead funny, mate. You know what, I can hardly breathe with all fun I’m having.’ Tommy stood suddenly, his anger building. ‘How many times have you got us in the shit now, eh? Once, twice, a thousand – I’ve lost count, you twat.’ He looked up at the sky and sighed. ‘Well, you’ve done it this

time, for both of us.' He turned and moved away a couple of feet.

Jacko looked crestfallen but didn't get a chance to say anything because Dashwood, the Sergeant in his wake, started to make his way back to the group. Jacko jumped to his feet and stood next to Tommy, looking as if he were on a parade ground.

'Permission to speak, sir,' he said as the Lieutenant drew closer.

'Denied,' stated Dashwood matter-of-factly. 'Right, gentlemen, we will move on and make a sweep of the next village.' He stopped and consulted a map that one of his section had supplied out of thin air, and after some frowning and pursing of lips, he looked up.

'Right, I want the same again as we move across those fields,' he said, indicating by pointing. 'This time I will take the Sergeant's section, Smythers and Daniels will go with Sergeant Adams, and you two,' he looked directly at Tommy and Jacko, 'will be coming with me.'

'Yes sir,' came the booming reply.

'We will be moving in a northerly direction, and I want you and your section to move up the east side of the field. Do it by the book and take it steady and keep in contact.'

'Sir.'

Still consulting his map, he said, 'Right. It is approximately two kilometres to the next village and it's quite a large field with lots of scrub, so there is the possibility we will lose sight of one another. Maintain radio contact at all times.'

Adams was rolling his eyes as Dashwood continued.

'If you make contact before me, hunker down and wait until we move up, clear?'

'As crystal, sir.'

He folded the map away and tucked it into his top pocket, 'Right, gentlemen, let's be about our business, and remember to keep your bloody eyes open. Nobody wants any surprises. Alright, marvellous.'

With that, Adams and his section moved out, first heading towards the end of the street before turning north and entering the fields. Dinga tried to smile at the two friends but his fast-swelling mouth just looked like a cat's arse. He gave them the bird instead and hurried off after Adams.

As the Lieutenant moved off, he called Tommy and Jacko to his side. When they had trotted up to him and continued at a brisk pace towards their end of the village he said, 'Gentlemen, I do not care for this sort of behaviour and I will not stand for it, do you hear? This sort of thing is unbecoming a British soldier.' He took a deep breath and continued in a softer tone, 'For the love of God, haven't we enough problems with the bloody enemy trying to destroy us, without you two throwing your bloody fists around. I cannot have my soldiers behaving like, well, like, I don't know, the bloody *Yanks* or something.'

'Sir, it was my fault,' blurted Jacko, 'Tommy had nothing to do with it, he was just trying to break it up and...'

'Shut up, Jackson,' warned Dashwood. 'If I wanted to hear your version of events, believe you me I would have asked for them.'

'But sir...'

'Enough. You can recount your epic tale to the old man after I give him my report on what Sergeant Adams told me. In the meantime, shut up.' He stopped and took a deep breath. 'Right here we are. You and Evans will take point and keep your bloody eyes peeled, all right? Do not think, gentlemen. Do. Marvellous.' He waved his hands like he was shooing away birds, indicating the direction he wanted them to go.

Tommy and Jacko looked at each other for a moment and then started across the field. Keeping about fifteen feet apart, with Jacko slightly in front, they flicked their eyes between scanning the terrain ahead and looking at the ground. Getting picked off by a Taliban sniper or getting blown to bits standing on an IED was not a comfortable thought to either of them, but they were professionals and they knew their business. And they had done this many, many times before.

It was hard going. The sun was hot and the air fetid, and how anyone could grow crops in this lifeless soil was beyond Tommy's understanding. Unless, of course, it was a particular type of crop that could thrive in poor soils and under full sun, the kind of crop that, when cultivated, made a lot of money on the streets of the world's cities.

After half an hour, and about a third of the way across the first of two fields, Jacko's fist went into the air. He crouched down, quickly followed by the rest of the section.

'What you got, Jacko?' said Tommy.

Into his radio Jacko said, 'Possible enemy contact approximately two-hundred metres to front. Over.'

Tommy looked through the scope of his SA80 rifle, slowly panning around to focus on the end of the field.

'What have you got, Lance Corporal? Over.' Dashwood's voice came over the radio net.

'Unknown, sir. Reflection of some kind, possibly scope. Over.'

'Do you see anything now? Over.'

'Standby,' Jacko said. He scanned around the brush and plough furrows where he thought he had seen the reflection. After thirty seconds he replied, 'That's a negative. Over.'

Dashwood, who was perhaps forty metres behind the two on point, bit his lip, thinking. After a moment, he radioed Adams and asked how far his section was across the field, to which he was told a little further on than his own. They had also gone to ground after Jacko's transmission. The Sergeant had Private Daniels on point and promptly contacted him by radio to see if he had any contact ahead.

'Err...that's a negative, I think. Over,' replied Daniels, an eighteen-year-old on his first tour, who was a little skittish.

'Daniels, do you see any movement from the front, anything?'

'I don't see any movement to front Sar'nt. Over.'

Adams, to his credit, moved up to Daniels' position and checked the front with his scope. After about twenty seconds he keyed his mike, 'That's a negative on forward contact, I think shi—Jackson's seeing things. Over.' Adams chuckled to himself

over this, and what made it funnier for him was the fact that they could see each other quite well. The Sergeant waved to Jacko, who promptly replied by giving him the bird.

'Twat,' said Jacko to no one in particular. But Tommy had heard him.

'You can say that again.'

'Twat.' They both looked at each other and started to laugh.

'Lance Corporal Jackson,' thundered Dashwood's voice from behind, 'If it's that funny, why don't you share it with the rest of us.'

'Sorry sir, coughing. Permission to advance, sir?'

'Well, get a bloody move on then, or we will be out here all bloody night at this rate,' screeched Dashwood.

'Yes, sir.'

With that, the two friends started forward again. After about another five minutes, Tommy took a quick look to his right, past Jacko, and saw that Adams's point man Daniels had stopped, staring ahead. *What's got him spooked?* he thought. Suddenly the lad was trying to raise his rifle and key his mike at the same time. But before he could do either, young Daniels managed to throw himself backwards, landing on his back. For a split second Tommy was confused as to why he would have done this. But then he heard the report of a rifle, a loud one at that.

CRACK.

Tommy, Jacko and the rest of the platoon went face down in the dust, and Tommy and Jacko brought their rifles to bear on where they thought the shot might have come from.

'Jacko, see anything?' shouted Tommy.

'Nothing, fuck all,' screamed Jacko. 'Oh shit! Daniels has been hit.' From his dusty vantage point, Tommy could see Daniels lying on his back and thought he must be dead, until the boy raised his arm slightly. 'Jacko, we have to get over th—'

'Contact,' boomed Adams over the net, and he promptly opened fire on the scrub at the end of the field. This was enough for everybody else to open fire, and the staccato noise hurt their ears as most of the Sergeant's section let rip. Only the

two friends opened up from Dashwood's section, as they were the only two that far forward.

'Sergeant Adams, situation report! Over,' screeched Dashwood over the net.

Nothing was heard.

'Sergeant, sit-rep. Over.'

After a second or two, Tommy heard, 'Lance Corporal Jackson, situation report, if you will. NOW.'

Jacko stopped firing his rifle. 'Sir, Private Daniels has been hit. He's down but moving, and the Sergeant's section is laying down suppressing fire on a suspected contact approximately one hundred metres to my front and right. Sir, I suggest me and Tommy try and recover Daniels while the Sergeant's section keeps the contact's head down. Over.'

Lieutenant Richard George Dashwood had dreamed of this situation since he was a small boy. All through his time at Eton and Oxford, he knew he was destined to follow in his father's and grandfather's footprints, to taste and smell the theatre of war and give commands to men who couldn't, to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, and to be praised for his heroism in saving the day. But at this particular moment in time, it seemed his throat had no moisture in it and his tongue had stuck to the roof of his mouth. He started to feel the awful sensation of his bowels turning to water.

'Sir, did you get my last? Over!' Jacko shouted.

Silence.

'Lieutenant, are you receiving? Over?'

Silence.

'Right, screw this,' Tommy shouted to Jacko. 'Let's go get the poor bastard.'

'Sod it, come on then.' And the two friends jumped up in a cloud of dust and started running across the field towards where Daniels lay.

Lieutenant Dashwood watched with indignation at the two soldiers running across the field. 'What the hell do you think you are doing?' he screamed into his mike. 'Get back in your positions right now, that's an order.'

The two soldiers kept running.

'I don't bloody believe those two reprobates,' he shouted to no one in particular. 'I'll have them on a bloody charge by tonight,' he screamed.

'Permission to help, sir,' shouted Terry from Coventry, and without waiting for an answer, he sprinted after Tommy and Jacko across the field.

'What the...?' stuttered Dashwood, as he watched Terry's large arse disappearing in the dust cloud he was creating. 'Private Smith, get back here, now,' he shouted again into his mike.

What the hell is going on? Dashwood thought. It wasn't supposed to be like this. They were supposed to be following his orders and saving the day and destroying the enemy with British gusto, with him in the lead, as hero.

'Well, it seems to me, sir,' came a voice with an Irish lilt, 'that the radios might not be working too well today...but to be sure the lads have got it all in hand by da looks o' things. I wonder, sir, if it might be best to move up and give them some covering fire?'

'What? Err, oh yes, yes, move up you say, yes, covering fire, yes, that's what we'll do, right. Marvellous.' With that he stood up and, like a World War Two movie star, shouted, 'Right chaps, follow me!' and, swinging his arm up and over his head and pointing forward, moved off across the field.

'What a fuckin' eejit!'

Tommy and Jacko had reached the injured soldier by this time, and they could both see I wasn't good. The bullet had taken him in the side of his face, just below and to the left of his nose, removing part of his cheek bone, the bottom half of his left ear and what looked like part of his skull, although there was so much blood, it was hard to tell. Daniels was still conscious but in shock and was shaking badly. He stared desperately at Tommy as he leaned over him.

'Up ya get, eh, lad,' said Tommy. 'What you doing, lying down on the job then, eh? The Arsehole will have your guts

for garters, mate.' Tommy smiled down at the young soldier, concentrating on the terrified eyes so as not to look at the terrible wound. Daniels tried to speak but part of his jaw may have been missing as well, for he could not open his mouth properly and just moaned loudly. When he tried to speak, some of his teeth fell out. Tommy picked these up and put them in Daniels' top pocket. *Well*, thought Tommy darkly, *they can do remarkable things with plastic surgery these days, can't they.*

Jacko moved up beside him and started to retrieve his first aid kit from his belt.

'Jeeeeeze,' he said under his breath as he beheld the injury.

'Right, me old mate, I'm gonna have to wrap your face up a bit, ok? I'll try not to hurt you but just shout out if you need to, all right?'

Daniels nodded slightly, so Jacko went to work on bandaging his face. A few moments later Daniels gave an almighty moan, which was probably meant as a scream but was the best he could manage.

'Fuck it,' said Jacko. He reached into his webbing belt and pulled out a morphine syrette and stuck it in Daniels' thigh. After a minute or so his moaning subsided. 'Thank Christ for that. That's gotta to hurt.'

The Sergeant's section was laying on short bursts at the suspected target, with the other section joining in a short time later. Terry skidded to a halt next to Tommy.

'Fuck it, boys, this is no place to be. What's the situation with the lad there?'

Tommy quietly and quickly briefed him on the extent of Daniels' wound.

'Shite,' he said, more to himself than any other. 'Right then,' he keyed his mike, 'Lieutenant, are you receiving? Over.'

'Go ahead. Over.'

'Sir, one casualty with serious wound to head, possibly life threatening. I suggest radio in for immediate heli evac. Over.'

Silence.

'Why did we have to get lumbered with this dickhead?' grumbled Terry.

The radio crackled then. 'Received. Call being made now. What is the situation with contact? Over.'

'Unknown at this time,' Terry replied. 'Suppressing fire seems to be doing the job but suggest two more able bodies with bivvy to remove casualty to a safe area. Over.'

'Standby.'

Silence.

'What a DICK!'

As Terry talked to Dashwood (and himself), Jacko bandaged Daniels' face while Tommy took up a defensive position between his friends and the contact point. He was lying on his stomach, checking the area with his scope. There was nothing to be seen and the contact could either already be dead or had bugged out, but he kept his rifle pointing the right way just in case.

'Right, here we go, transport,' said Terry. 'How close are you, Jacko?'

'Ok, I'm done, and we best be quick. He's just passed out and his breathing is proper shallow.'

Two lads from Adams's section skidded to a halt and unpacked a bivvy. Used as a bivouac normally, today it would be used to stretch Daniels to a safe area for evacuation.

'Is he good to go, mate?' said one of the soldiers, breathless.

'Yeah, let's get him on,' said Terry, and they very carefully lifted Daniels onto the bivvy. Jacko, Terry and the two others each took a corner and raised him, and prepared to move out. Just at that moment, Tommy shouted out.

'Contact from the front,' and opened fire in short controlled bursts.

'Get moving, Jacko, now!' screamed Tommy, as multiple contacts engaged the platoon from different positions.

'You had better be right behind me, Tommy,' shouted Jacko over his shoulder.

'I'm right on your arse, now fuck off!'

With the wounded soldier being moved quickly out of danger, Lieutenant Dashwood ordered the platoon to make a controlled withdrawal back towards the village whilst he

called in for air support and gave the coordinates of the hostile contacts in a somewhat panicky voice. Tommy had heard the instruction from Dashwood while he watched the lads carrying the stretcher, running as best they could whilst trying to keep their heads down. After they had gone about twenty yards or so, Tommy decided he had better make a run for it. With support from both sections of the platoon now laying down covering fire, he jumped up like a jack in the box and made like a whippet after the stretcher bearers, trying to zig zag on the way to make himself less of a target. He could hear Adams bellowing at his section for someone to open up on the bastards with the Gimpy, and a short while later came the heavy rattle sound of the general purpose machine gun as it joined in the staccato noise of the fight.

About bloody time, thought Tommy.

The stretcher bearers were slowing down, which was not surprising, really, since they were carrying dead weight, but they sped up a little when Tommy shouted breathlessly from behind, 'Get a fucking move on, you twats!'

Just as he got within a few yards of the stretcher, the dust around the lads started to kick up like little explosions, and Tommy realised the enemy had a bead on them. Without a second thought, he skidded to a halt, turned and dropped to one knee. Looking through his scope, he attempted to track where the enemy fire was coming from. Within moments he had the image of a black-garbed, heavy, bearded figure firing what looked like an AK47 at his friends. Without hesitation, he opened fire on the figure and immediately saw that his shots were on target. The figure that had once looked like a man was turned into a great, black flying thing as it disappeared arse over tit. Brown hairy mannequin legs, wearing white Nike trainers by the look of it, followed behind. Tommy could have sworn, while later recounting the tale, that he saw meat and two veg as well. It's unbelievable what the brain remembers even in the middle of a firefight.

'Have that, you fucking bastard!' shouted Tommy gleefully. 'Woohoooooo.'

‘Tommy!’

He thought he heard someone shouting his name as he continued to scan the edge of the field. Bam! Another target.

‘Right, you fucker,’ he said to the beardless skinny teenager trying to reload an old rifle. *That was the gun*, he thought, *that took Daniels’s face*.

Crack, Crack, Crack.

His SA80 rifle spat at the target. Again, he did not miss, and with the shocking realisation that he was enjoying this, he saw the head of the youth disappear in an explosion of blood, bone and grey matter. Tommy moved a few paces forward, desperate to get another target and avenge young Daniels.

He could hear the rattle of the heavy machine gun, spitting death in a wide arc towards the contact, the *Crack, Crack* sound of the combined SA80 rifles of his comrades, and Adams bellowing commands as the platoon drew back to a safer area. Tommy finally understood why he had wanted to be a soldier, and this was it. The adrenalin-pumping, hard-on-giving, mind-boggling simplicity of taking the life of an enemy. This was better than sex, better than anything he had experienced before. He was a god!

‘RPG,’ someone screamed from the Sergeant’s section.

THUMP.

The ground about twenty feet away erupted in a fountain of gravel, sand and shit, spattering all over Tommy. He blinked the dust away and, still on one knee, searched for the culprit who had just fired at him.

You’re a shit shot mate, he said to himself. *Ahoy there, my little bearded beauty. And where do you think you’re going, hey?* He spotted the figure that had fired the RPG running away, carrying the now-expended weapon. He felt confident enough to take a head shot, but just as he was about to fire the figure turned its head to look back, and he realised it was a woman.

‘Oh well, when in Rome,’ he muttered.

CRACK.

‘Tommy, you fucking idiot,’ screamed Jacko. ‘Move your arse.’

He turned and realised that in the time it took to dispatch three human beings, the rest of the section had reached cover and safety. Now his radio was starting to get through the fog of battle, and he heard the last bit of a transmission from Dashwood.

'Stop being the fucking hero and get your arse back here, pronto!'

With reluctance, he turned and started to make his way back to the rest of the section. He was still zig zagging and dropping to check for targets. This was the first time he had engaged the enemy properly, and he found that it wasn't so hard. It would be a while before he would be able to describe in clear detail every part of the boy's face that he had killed, or the woman, who would invade his dreams, looking over her shoulder and smiling.

'RPG,' shouted Terry.

Tommy looked over his left shoulder as he ran as an object moved extremely fast in his direction.

'Well bugger me,' was the only thing he could think of, and he threw himself forward towards the ground.

BOOM.

He didn't so much hear the explosion. He felt it.

It was like the time he fell off the top board at the swimming baths, trying to show off for the girls, and he had the sensation of flying in slow motion. The world became a Monet painting, an impression; he couldn't focus on anything while he was spinning through the air.

With a thump, bounced off his head and landed on his back, and he found he couldn't breathe properly. It was as though somebody was sitting on his chest. It had gone strangely quiet and he couldn't hear any gunshots; he couldn't hear anything, actually. Not voices, not birdsong nothing. He was staring up at a clear blue sky and he realised he was going to die.

Bugger! This is going to be hard on Mum and Dad, he thought, and little Amy, even if she is a teenage bitch. He could see it now, the coffin draped in the Union flag as it's carried off a Hercules transport, a big procession down the main street in town, flags

flying, the regimental colours at the head. There would be people everywhere, crying and throwing flowers on the big black cars; Mum crying and blaming Dad for encouraging him to join the Army. 'You'll have a terrific time, boy,' he had said at the time. He'd be crying as well, and blaming himself too, most likely.

Is the sky lower? Amy might be there too, maybe with that pierced fucking layabout she called a boyfriend, and probably only there because they wanted to get on TV. *Thought it was summer, but it's freezing.* He would miss Pippin though. Great dog but a little yappy sometimes. When Tommy really thought about it, he actually couldn't give two shits for the colours. In fact, he didn't want to be here at all, bleeding out in some Third World shithole.

What's with the fog? Tommy couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, and they felt as heavy as lead. *Perhaps a little nap's in order; it's been a long day.* He turned his head to the side, and just as his vision was darkening he saw the old man from the village, squatting on his haunches at the side of the field, smiling and nodding at Tommy. *Well, at least someone's happy,* he thought, and he closed his eyes.