

CHAPTER 16

As the element trekked east on Jalrez's only road, Hill saw the village of Esh-ma-keyl on the Blue Force Tracker just two and a half clicks away. It was the Taliban's red line in the sand, the village where the 82nd had been so badly hit. Dog Company was better armed and better trained than the enemy, but the Taliban had the advantage of surprise and terrain. In just over six weeks' time, Hill and his men had developed a respect for these fighters. They were tenacious and resourceful, and on the whole, a cut above the insurgents in Iraq.

As the French and ANA vehicles rumbled ahead and radio chatter poured into Hill's ear, he thought about Lieutenant Colonel DeMartino's order, a "movement to contact" — essentially wading into hostile territory to pick a fight. Hill understood the psychological currency earned by taking it to the enemy. Of saying, *We're here, we're in your face, what are you going to do about it?* Hill got that. But with all their advantages in firepower and tactics, wouldn't it be better to make their first ground thrust into a known Taliban stronghold a slam dunk with a little rehearsal and planning? After all, Jalrez was practically out Airborne's front gate. Dog Company could do this op any day—every day, in fact. Only later would Hill realize that while Dog Company could, DeMartino himself could not. And that may have been the whole point.



Approaching the village, Hill could see that the narrow dirt road curved to the right. On the left, it fell away, revealing an unexpectedly lush valley with bright green apple orchards stretching away into the distance.

Out the passenger side window, he saw a steep, rocky incline, and ahead, a klatch of *qalats*—mud-walled huts and compounds—built into the bank. His truck rounded the curve and heavy machine-gun fire exploded.

The platoon net erupted. "*Contact! Twelve o'clock!*"

Enfilade fire pounded the lead truck, Taliban gunners firing directly into the windshield. Hill could see the truck shuddering, rocking on its tires under a tidal wave of lead. Gunfire shredded the ANA pickup from bumper to bumper.

The ANA tumbled out of the vehicle and ran past Hill's Humvee. Directly in front of him, 4th Platoon's gunners were already engaged. Wilson's drivers were trying to move forward, toward the fight, but the ANA truck was shot to hell and it blocked the narrow road, trapping the convoy.

RPG rounds scorched overhead, slamming into ditches, rocks, banks, each a near miss. The enemy was now engaging the convoy from three sides.

"Pull up! Pull up!" Wilson shouted orders on the net. His first section was already locked in battle at nine and twelve o'clock, due south and due east. "Rear two trucks orient to your three o'clock and engage!"

His order triggered a “mad minute”: All gunners fire upon the enemy locations until that enemy shuts up. MK19 grenades and .50 cal rounds chopped into the trees and crumbled *qalat* walls.

The enfilade ambushers ceased fire, only to reposition. Then the high and low sides of the road erupted with AK and PKM cross fire.

An RPG seared up from the low side and slammed into the bank. Wilson ordered his gunners back to their original fire sectors and saw Peake and Steinle, his cherry gunners, hammering back at the enemy as if they’d been fighting all their lives.

Hill keyed his radio. “Wardak TOC, Wardak TOC. Troops in contact! Break. Front line trace. Break. Route Montana and Esh-ma-keyl village. Taking heavy fire from due west and due north of our location. Break. Correction, taking fire from north, west, and south of our location—”

A rocket burned past Hill’s truck and exploded into a berm behind him. “Requesting CAS at this time,” he finished. “How copy, over?”

“Dog 6, Roger. Wardak TOC acknowledges all.” It was Kay. “We’ll get back to you with an ETA for CAS in a couple of mikes. And be advised, you guys are out of 105 range. Over.”

“Roger,” Hill replied. He was more than well aware.



The ANA bailed and the French pulled back. Then, enemy mortars rained on the road, launched from the heart of Esh-ma-keyl. A steady barrage of small arms fire poured in from *qalats* higher on the ridgeline and from the orchards below. Twenty-one-year-old Private First Class Michael Peake, in his first firefight, aimed his MK19 into the trees. Consciously, he let adrenaline take over, pulled his trigger again and again. He fired on anything that moved in the orchard, but had the presence of mind not to shoot an ANA soldier whose beret he saw at the last possible second.

The rest of the Shockers’ gunners banged back in the cross fire, initially fighting alone at the front of the column. Wilson barked out fire-sector orders. Because of the abandoned ANA pickup trucks, the column was logjammed at an exposed bend in the road, certainly part of the enemy’s plan. Something needed to break. Mo and Wilson dismounted and moved down the column to find Hill. After a short discussion, it was agreed that Mo would advance on foot up the hillside and flank the *qalat* on the high ground to their north. Dog Company needed to control at least that piece of high ground in order to maneuver their trucks. Wilson bounded back to the front of the column to fight his gun trucks while Mo continued moving toward the rear of the convoy in search of more dismounts.

As Mo approached the battalion trucks, he saw DeMartino, Sergeant Major Judd, and several officers.

“Hey, how you doin’, Sergeant Major?” Mo said, as if the two were meeting at the mall. “We’re gonna go up and take out that building, but I need some guys.”

“I’ll go,” said Captain Al LeMaire, CO of Alpha Company. Another captain volunteered and the small patrol took off up the hill armed with M4s and grenades. Reaching a small compound, the team cleared a courtyard and a few rooms. Enemy fighters had already squirted out the back. Inside the courtyard fence, they found a hole in the ground, a weapons cache. Mo pulled a grenade from his vest, tossed it in and blew the cache. Then the ad hoc squad moved up to the compound rooftop, where they could see the convoy stretched east toward Airborne, thirty vehicles strong.

Then they heard the thunder.

CHAPTER 17

The Air Force A-10’s official model name is the Thunderbolt II, after the World War II P-47 Thunderbolt fighter. But flyers long ago dubbed the P-47’s namesake the “Warthog” for its homely appearance. Twin turbines the size of industrial clothes dryers ride the skinny fuselage just forward of the A-10’s boxy tail. The pilot sits in a “bathtub” of titanium armor, his cockpit roofed with a naked bubble canopy that juts from the airframe like an aftermarket part. The nose wheel is off-center, the wings stubby and straight.

The Warthog may not look sexy, but its lethal fury was known to trigger ardor in American infantrymen from the Balkans to the Persian Gulf. Wilson, a military weapons geek, revered the plane because it was the only one he knew of where engineers basically said, “Okay, here’s a big-ass Gatling gun. Now build a plane around it.” Wherever there was an A-10 raining terror on the enemy, there were soldiers on the ground cheering, “*DIE YOU BASTARDS!*”

On the road below Wilson’s element, Hill was returning to his gun truck from the front of the column when a pair of Thunderbolts checked in.

“Dog 6, this is Hog 53.” It was Major Dave Rayman, the A-10 pilot Hill had trained with at Bagram. “We’ll be on station in approximately three mikes.”

“Hog 53, this is Dog 6, copy. It’ll be hard to miss us. Our column is running from east to west on Route Montana vicinity of Esh-ma-keyl village. Two tan pickup trucks will mark our front-line trace. We are taking heavy fire from the south, west, and north. How copy, over?”

“Dog 6, roger that. We’ll be approaching from east to west, along Route Montana,” Rayman said. A-10 CAS pilots carried the same maps as ground commanders, simplifying visual reference points.

Hill transmitted a refined “front-line trace,” a set of grid coordinates intersecting Montana. Rayman echoed back the numbers.

“That’s a good copy, Hog 53. Dog 6 standing by for visual contact.”

Hill switched to his man portable radio so that he could maintain comms with the A-10’s while he trooped the line. By now most of the enemy fire was streaming in from Esh-ma-keyl village

and the apple orchard to the south. Hill bounded to the front of the column again, doing his best to keep Dog Company Humvees between himself and incoming fire. He climbed onto the roof of a Shockers Humvee, where the rookie Steinle was on the gun. Hill pointed at a mud house about six hundred meters up the slope and yelled over the rumbling firefight. "See that house with the blue door?"

Steinle nodded. "Yes, sir!"

"The A-10s are coming in! On my signal, I need you to put a couple of rounds right through that door so the pilots can see the impact and know where we're taking fire from!"

"Not a problem, sir!" Steinle wheeled his MK19 toward the *qalat* and held his fire.

There was no way in hell Steinle would hit that door, Hill thought, but its bright color made a brilliant target.

The A-10s, a flight of two, roared into the valley on a dry-run pass. The flight leader's voice scratched across the frequency: "Dog 6, Hog 53 on station. Confirm you have visual on us."

"Hog 53, affirmative. I see your approach," Hill transmitted. "My gunner will paint the first target for you. You'll see rounds impact on a house six hundred meters northwest of our column up on a mountainside. That will be your first target."

"Roger, we'll look for it."

Hill signaled Steinle, who aimed and fired a three-round burst. Grenades sailed up the hill, smashed directly through the blue door and...disappeared into the house. No impact. No smoke.

Hill stared, amazed. Steinle grinned. The captain rolled his eyes and laughed. "All right, smart-ass. I need you to put one *on the wall of the house* so they can see the impact. We've got to paint the target for the A-10s."

"Roger that!" Steinle said and fired again. Debris burst from the house wall, smoke spouting skyward.

"Dog 6, Hog 53, contact. We have eyes on your target."

"Roger, you are cleared to go hot."

The A-10s racetracked back and screamed in. Then a sound like a tractor-trailer in radical downshift vibrated through the valley as their cannons rumbled the *qalat*.

Hill keyed his mic. "Hog 53, Dog 6, nice work. That should do it. Stand by for next target."

Hill dismounted and turned a half step to the right in time to see an RPG streaking toward him on a rope. Arrowing across the top of the orchard from Esh-ma- keyl, the rocket was on a line

toward Hill's head. His eyes dilated. His brain clicked into slo-mo, recording each instant of the rocket's killing flight.

Then: *whooshBAM!* The RPG slammed into the soft hillside above Hill's head. Loose soil half swallowed its boom.

Hill whirled to see how close and caught Specialist Randle Henderson glaring at him, furious. Rifle in one hand, mic in the other, the Ramadi veteran threw up his arms in disgust.

"*What the fuck, sir?!*" he yelled. "Would you just get back in your vehicle, please?"

This was a specialist talking to a captain. The put-upon look on Henderson's face said, *I've got all this shit to worry about and now I have you running around out here!* Hill turned away to hide a smile. His guys could be overprotective, guarding their commander at all costs. Sometimes, they forgot he was a soldier, too.

Hill talked the Warthogs through two more passes, shredding verdant orchards and enemy fighters in the valley below. Over the next few minutes, D Co gunners were able to slow their rate of fire. Most of the enemy had bugged out or been gunned down.

This was the first all-out firefight of the deployment, and Hill was pleased with how his men had performed. He continued to stride up and down the convoy, checking on his men and directing the order of movement for the convoy back to Airborne. On his last pass, he walked nearly back to the battalion trucks, where he did an actual double take.

Lieutenant Colonel DeMartino was posing for pictures. Literally posing.

One with his arms crossed. One with his helmet off. Pulling in some staffers for a buddy shot, the smoking valley for a backdrop.

Hill cursed under his breath. Scant minutes before that RPG had nearly taken his head off, and DeMartino's truck was just four or five back from his own. Again, Hill understood bravado. Communicating it to the troops. He loved the scene in *Black Hawk Down* where an officer walks fearlessly through RPG and small arms fire, yelling into his radio, trying to rescue his wounded. Hill felt men deserved a leader who did not cower from risk, who transmitted the message *I'm going to do what I have to do, no matter the cost to myself.*

But what was DeMartino transmitting to his juniors, posing with his helmet off in the last throes of a firefight? For Hill the answer was plain: *He looks like a fucking tourist.*