

TALES OF THE RANCH
PHOENIX RISING

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Thank you for taking the time to read it. Enjoy

TALES OF THE RANCH – PHOENIX RISING

“Incoming!” screamed my Platoon Leader immediately after the first mortar shell landed. They were smaller caliber than what we had before, sixty mil or so, but dangerous nonetheless. I immediately hit the ground and covered in the larger crater serving as my defensive fighting position, waiting for the current barrage to stop so I could continue trying to find overhead cover. But we also knew the mortars were typically followed by a ground attack. We needed to stick our heads up long enough to check our assigned sectors before jerking them back in at another explosion. I checked on my battle buddy assigned to the same foxhole before looking out. Nobody was approaching in our sector for the moment and I was content to pull my head back in after a shower of dirt hit my helmet.

“Anything?” my new battle buddy asked.

“No,” I said, still getting to know him after my original partner was killed during the landing on the beach. Not really during the landing as he hadn’t even made it to shore. We huddled down together as the explosions continued, both of us silently thanking the stars it wasn’t anything bigger than the annoying mortar rounds.

“You think we’re going to hold?” he asked, a little scared.

“I think we should be able to,” I said, trying to be brave, but the fear showing out in my voice despite my efforts to the contrary.

We both prepared for the expected assault as the mortar fire died down once again. But it never materialized and was just more harassment. However, we both knew it was a matter of time before the IU massed enough infantry, armor, artillery, aircraft or various combinations thereof and struck us once again. It had happened before, it certainly will happen again before we get done here I thought as I continued peering forward into the growing light of the beach at Normandy. The clouds were breaking up a bit, but the winds still swept though the lines with the same ferocity they had since right after we landed. I tightened my grip on my rifle as I saw a figure moving through the woods towards our position. My new buddy, Private Matthias Blain from Missouri was heard doing the same thing. However, as the figure appeared, I saw it was one of our listening posts coming back in from the front of the lines. He made his way towards our position before being stopped and admitted.

“What’s going on out there?” I asked, hungry for information.

“Lots of troops, like at least a battalion worth! Coming this way! I’ve got to get to the command post!” he exclaimed after drinking down half a canteen of water.

“Where’s Smitty?” I asked.

“Dead, got caught by an artillery round,” he said and scampered off towards the rear where our command post was.

“We can hold?” asked my buddy.

“Absolutely,” I said.

“What’s your name again?” he asked after a moment.

“Sergeant Donald McIntyre, from Georgia,” I replied. I knew he was making small talk because he was nervous and I tried to remain calm. But I was nervous as well and it probably showed. We were a day and a half into the invasion of mainland Europe in the largest amphibious operation since the last time Americans had come across the beach in Normandy. However, this time, things weren’t going so well for us. We had our backs to the wall, literally, and were holding on for dear life. Rescue wasn’t coming anytime soon as the planning was out the window four hours after the landings started, but we held on. We were cornered animals fighting for our very survival on these beachheads and knew there were only two ways out. Fight and possibly live or cower in a hole and certainly die...

CHAPTER 1

“Grandpa? Mom said you were in Operation Phoenix,” said my grandson. “Were you there?”

And as soon as he asked the question, the memories came into my head. Vivid memories I had stored away for a long time. Suddenly I could hear the screams, feel the wetness of my uniform after wading ashore and taste the sand in my mouth after diving to avoid certain death. I could smell the acrid smoke of the fires after the bombardments, hear the zing of a near miss of a round fired at me, feel the heat generated by a nearby explosion. My chest involuntarily clenched as I felt the round that should have killed me impact my body armor. Memories flashed into my head like bolts of lightning in a storm, faces I hadn’t thought about for so long suddenly were as clear as the day I saw them. Just the mention of Phoenix was enough to release the torrent of memories associated with it. And the emotions as well.

I hadn’t ever talked to my family about being in Operation Phoenix, the Free Nation Coalition landing in France during the Islamic Union occupation and I was surprised my grandson asked me the question. It was a little strange of him to be asking, but the memories clouded that question as I thought back about the time before and during the beginning of the operations to liberate Europe once again...

Z Day Minus 4

“And as a reminder, don’t fire on civilians as many will welcome us with open arms for being liberated. This concludes our rules of engagement training, are there any questions?” asked my platoon leader, Second Lieutenant Brandon Axe.

“Sure sir, what about those civilians that converted to Islam and attack us?” asked a Corporal assigned to Second Squad.

“Fair game as far as I’m concerned; but make sure you sort the wheat from the chaff,” said the Lieutenant.

“And remember, we aren’t interested in prisoners, none of this aim to maim stuff. You pull the trigger, you shoot to kill,” said my Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant First Class Al Winfield. He spoke in an impossible Boston accent even though living in my home state of Georgia for a long time. But he was a good platoon sergeant, going back to his service in the Army prior to the Fall and serving since then. He had served in Iraq back in the day and knew a lot about the enemy we faced. The Islamic Union divisions facing us in our planned landing zone was originally from Iraq. So it gave us comfort knowing our leadership knew something about the enemy we faced.

“If there’s nothing else, they’re all yours Sergeant Winfield,” said the Lieutenant.

“Okay troops, take fifteen to tend to personal needs then reform here for weapons inspections,” he said as a way of dismissal. Collective groans were heard from my platoon as the weapons inspections were continual and getting aggravating. Even though we had cleaned them day in and day out since the proficiency firing two weeks prior, we still had them inspected. And somehow, Sergeant Winfield managed to find that one small area we had missed somehow.

I headed over to the outdoor latrine in our encampment north of Weymouth England. I ended up standing in line as the mandatory water breaks made us all end up needing latrine breaks far more often than we ever thought possible. Again, Sergeant Winfield ensured we were “properly hydrated for the coming battle” and ended up having us drink down one of our canteens at least every hour. I finally got my turn and headed into the wooden open pit latrine and joined the line inside. I felt kind of sorry for the females in our platoon since it was far easier for us to go. But hey, they want to serve, gotta take the good with the bad. But I was happy to have some of them since they were just as good as some and better than others.

After I came back out, I broke down my M-465 designated marksman rifle into its basic components and laid it out on the cleaning rag at the base of my bunk. I knew it was as clean as a whistle and the night sight had fresh batteries. As designated marksman for the squad, I knew my weapon had to be in tiptop shape no matter what as the rest of my squad and my platoon depended on me to make those precision shots. I also broke down my pistol, a non-issue Inglis Hi-Power that supposedly great grandpa used the last time we happened to be over here. According to the story, he swapped a German Luger straight up with a Canadian officer and got the Hi-Power in trade. And in hearing I was about to be shipped out for Europe, my Grandfather gave me the pistol since he “couldn’t think of a better weapon than one that’s been used over there already.” So they gave me a good supply of magazines, a holster and I happily went on my way to Europe knowing I at least had a sidearm. And since it wasn’t issued? The officers in my unit didn’t care about that as long as you had enough of the parts and magazines. There just weren’t enough pistols around for everyone to have one so they turned a blind eye to the “other” weapons folks brought from home. And even the company commander had an old H&K USP at his side. But even though it wasn’t issued, it was still subject to inspection like everything else.

The rest of my platoon filtered back in and started dismantling their various rifles, carbines and light machine guns. My squad leader, Staff Sergeant Dennis Gilbert gave our weapons the once over before the arrival of the platoon sergeant. He corrected a few things on the spot, but we didn’t have much time as we were first squad and were first in the batting order. Sergeant Winfield arrived and started inspecting, and again, finding those impossible places we had carbon build up or rust appearing.

“Rust on the flash suppressor...dirty hammer...optical sight needs batteries...dirt build up on the rails...dirty butt stock...op-rod needs oil...pistol magazines need cleaning...insufficient lubrication...” and the list went on. He finally arrived at my bunk and I knew I would fly through this inspection.

“Dirty bolt...carbon build up on the bolt carrier...pistol rails need lubrication...pistol sights dirty...dirt in lanyard loop,” said Sergeant Winfield as he moved on to the next bunk.

I thought I had hit the areas, but apparently not quite enough. After he went to the next bunk, I immediately grabbed my cleaning kit and started hitting the areas he specified. I checked the bolt carrier and sure enough, there was about a pinpoint sized area of carbon that had appeared. And subsequently, had transferred over to the bolt itself. How he managed to see that small of a detail, I'll never know, but that's what he did, catch details like that. And instead of complaining about it, we knew the little details would keep us alive so we scrubbed once again.

“Okay, not bad, but still a fail on your parts. I expect these weapons to be clean. So clean your mamma would serve Christmas dinner off them. There is no good reason in the past two weeks you couldn't have these things spotless. But better make sure you get enough lube on them, the Sergeant Major found some extra ammo and we are going to fire tomorrow, so the cleaning cycle starts all over again,” said Sergeant Winfield before departing in the gentle rain that had gone on for the past month and a half.

“Okay guys, get 'em cleaned,” said Staff Sergeant Gilbert with a sigh as he went after his own carbine and started hitting the areas he had missed as well. After finishing up, we presented them to him for a recheck and were sent on our ways. I gathered my partner in crime, Private First Class Johnny Lomax and headed towards the chow tent to get in line early. With an entire brigade on the camp, it paid to get in line early. We had no idea what was being served and typically weren't even sure after we ate what was being served. But it was food and we knew we were going to go on rations soon enough once we hit the beach.

We managed to get a good place in line, right behind an air assault outfit that was pre-staged at the base. It never really had a name, at least an official one. It was called Camp 1118, although we all referred to it as “Foggy Bottom.” So named because of the dense English fog that typically rolled in whenever you didn't want it to like during night land navigation. But anyway, I knew it was a temporary home and a means to an end. At least a transit point before we finished this war and headed to wherever we all call home. Our unit hadn't seen the fighting yet in Iceland or in North America. The Brigade had first seen combat in the United Kingdom, and some of us had seen action during the later parts of that invasion. But others were too young to participate in any of the operations, however, I did get my militia training when I turned fourteen as required. So I wasn't behind the ball game when I was drafted, at least from a military skills perspective. The first action I saw was in lower England against the rear guard of the retreating IU defenders. It wasn't easy, but at least it had helped give some of us an indication of what we would face in the future, at least what we hoped we would face.

We headed through the line, getting a lump of meatloaf (we thought it was meatloaf) into our mess kits. Funny thing about those mess kits, same design my Dad carried in his time in the service and the same one my grandfather carried and probably my great grandfather as well in Europe for the last big party they held over here. Same steel or aluminum design, still made a lot of noise with the cutlery set inside and still impossible to destroy. At least the side dishes of runny mashed potatoes and hard black eyed peas could be eaten. And cornbread for a change. Not as good as my Momma used to make, but not bad since we only got it after begging the

cooks, kidnapping folks and holding them for ransom or paying off someone. So in the cornbread, we knew something was probably up. We found seating under the tent area just as another typical British drizzle started coming down. We ate quickly because we knew the remainder of the units would be cycling through soon enough and sitting space was at a premium. As we ate, we heard the standard chow hall rumors flying around.

“I heard we are going tomorrow morning...”

“Supposedly there’s a big conference going on and we’ll be delayed until next spring...”

“I heard it from a friend who has a friend in headquarters, we’re going in three days...”

“I heard we might get shipped into Iceland for security there...”

I chuckled at the rumors, never taking part in them myself. It was funny to listen to everyone speak of things they really had no control over and try to prepare for the invasion. I knew we weren’t heading for Iceland and hopefully wouldn’t be here until the next spring. The next opportune time for us to go would be in the next week. Maybe we would, maybe we wouldn’t. No sense worrying about it I thought as I covered the meatloaf in ketchup and got down to eating.

“You think we’re going soon?” asked Lomax.

“Maybe, no sense losing sleep over it,” I said.

“Just wondering,” said Lomax. “I mean, everyone’s talking.”

“Each and every time the tides and the moon are right, people talk about when the landings will be. It’s like clockwork,” I said and picked at the meatloaf.

“Yeah, they do don’t they?” he asked.

“Nothing to it,” I said and took another bite. Lomax was brand new, fresh off the plane and only having been in our battalion for three weeks. He had been “given” to me by Staff Sergeant Gilbert to train up. Overall, he wasn’t a bad soldier, just a little green. Probably not unlike me when I first came into the unit. But he was learning quickly and I attempted to teach him the “right” way instead of the “book” way he learned in training. Just like every other war before we’ve fought, there’s the way that’s taught and the way that actually keeps you alive. Some things never change in the military...

We finished eating quickly and washed out mess kits in the large containers set out for that purpose. And he wrapped his flatware in the bandana just like I taught him on the very first day. Little things like that which would keep him alive. I did manage to sneak back into the line and grabbed a cup of coffee in my canteen cup before we left. Heading back to the tent, I spent the next hour showing him a few more tricks of the trade before we were interrupted by Sergeant Winfield.

“Okay First Platoon! Grab your gear and weapons! Time for some shooting!” he announced into our tent. We looked a little stunned since we weren’t expecting it until tomorrow.

“Tonight in the rain Sergeant?” asked someone close to the end.

“You think we only fight in the daytime and under sunny skies? You think those camel jockeys are going to schedule an appointment to fight when the weather is good? Up and at ‘em. It’s a great day to shoot,” he yelled into our tent. I never knew how he could make his voice project like that, but somehow he did. It was like he was on both ends of the tent at the same time and in stereo. We quickly grabbed our body armor, helmets and field gear and shuffled out of the tent, joining the other three squads gathering outside.

“We waiting on the trucks Sergeant?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Figured we’d ruck on down there. Nice night for a walk,” replied Sergeant Winfield.

“In the rain Sergeant?” asked the Lieutenant under his breath, but we all heard it.

“That’s why the taxpayers spent so much money on that nifty waterproof gear Lieutenant,” he replied and pulled on his pack. We happened to notice he wasn’t wearing his rain gear. We all silently wondered if a raindrop dared even touch his clothing, much less get him wet. We formed up into our ranks and were given the commands by him to right face, forward march and at ease march. This was the usual procedure as we were passed by second, third and fourth platoons riding out in trucks to the range. Jeers and calls were given as they passed us by and some of the younger troops asked why we were walking.

“Because when we hit the beach, there ain’t gonna be any nice trucks to carry us to the battle,” answered a Sergeant Fire Team Leader.

And it was true. Sergeant Winfield kept us in tiptop shape. No matter the weather, no matter how hot or cold, rain or shine, we always did our physical training. It was like he knew we weren’t going to be able to ride everywhere and was conditioning us to walk. So we grumbled about it from time to time, but I knew it was one of those little things that would keep us alive when the hot metal started flying. We arrived at the range where the other platoons were already lined up and getting their ammunition. It wasn’t much, only sixty rounds, but it was proficiency firing. I only got thirty rounds for my rifle since it was a different caliber and was lucky to get another twenty rounds for my pistol. While the pistol ammo was separate, the rifle ammo was already put into the magazines. And for only thirty rounds, I had five magazines. Another trick of the trade for Sergeant Winfield was to scatter the rounds into magazines with odd numbers so we would have to reload. Again, I suppose it conditioned us to getting better at reloads so none of us argued.

Heading on down the firing line, I put the magazines I carried as my security load into my patrol pack and started loading up the pistol magazines with the rounds. We always carried at least two full rifle magazines around the base since the threat of the IU Special Forces teams was always

present. We had only been hit once, but there was always that chance of getting hit again, especially with the invasion looming. There were plenty of raids stopped at the beach by the British home guard units, but others still managed to get on shore and attacked the targets of opportunity.

Night was falling rather quickly and we got into our firing positions. I flipped on the night scope of my rifle before a hand came down and flipped it off.

“Not tonight Corporal. Tonight we do it the old fashioned way,” said Sergeant Winfield.

“Sergeant?” I asked.

“What happens when your batteries die? Or your scope gets damaged and doesn’t work? You have to know how to adapt and fire without them,” he said and moved on down the line announcing to everyone to flip off their night vision. It was different as we had become dependent on the scopes to give us the edge over the IU, but he was right. Sometimes things happened and we weren’t able to use technology to our advantage. So we flipped off the scopes or removed them from the weapons and prepared to fire. Second and Third Platoons were already in line and just waiting for us. We were finally complete and ready to fire. As the firing commenced, we waited for a moment to adjust to the darkness and were firing far slower than we were used to. I managed to pick my targets on the range, anywhere from fifty to six hundred meters and fired, closest to farthest. I was on one of the four hundred meter targets when my rifles stopped firing. I immediately started the reloading process and slapped a new magazine in, chambered a round and tried to make out the dark targets against a dark background. It wasn’t easy making out the distant targets, but I managed to find and fire at three before my rifle went empty once again. I started the reloading process when someone thoughtfully sent up several slap flares which illuminated the targets somewhat. I at least managed to find the six hundred meter targets and sent a couple of rounds that way as a just in case measure. And I moved the targeting back to the shorter range targets before I went empty once again.

I managed to finish off the thirty rounds and waited for everyone else to complete their allotted rounds. I wondered how I scored on the electronic machines, but would have to wait like everyone else. Eventually we finished up and lined up by point numbers to receive our scores.

“Adams, twenty-five...Murphy, seventeen...Robinson, thirty-five nice job...Simms, eight, massive fail...Gilbert, forty-seven, nice shooting Tex...Lomax, fourteen...McIntyre, twenty-one...Castro, thirty...Norris, twenty-two...”

I wasn’t at all disappointed with hitting twenty-one out of thirty especially in the dark with no night vision. However, Lomax probably needed additional time on the simulator if we could schedule it since he hit fourteen out of sixty. Not a good showing and he really needed the practice. The line official continued until our platoon was finished and moved on to Second and Third Platoons. After he was done, those of us with pistols or other weapons got the opportunity to fire off the rounds we had been given. I knew time was short and ended up loading two magazines and fired them off at random targets set up closer in from the ten meter line to the fifty meter line. Others fired their personal defense weapons and shotguns. The targets weren’t

scored like the others were, but again, it gave us a little more proficiency in our weapons. After finishing up, we all started to gather our gear for the walk back to our tents when Sergeant Winfield stopped us.

“Hold short troops, we’ve got more training to do,” he said and was joined by the Lieutenant.

“Sergeant Winfield?” he asked.

“Called in a few favors and got some of those spec-ops guys to bring down some other toys,” was all he said.

“The Captain and First Sergeant know about this?” asked the Lieutenant.

“We sure do,” they said from the rear of the Lieutenant as they planned on getting the class as well. For the first time I noticed a flatbed truck with four guys sitting on the dropped tailgate. They had put up their ponchos over the tailgate and were busy loading magazines. As soon as Second and Third Platoons moved away, Sergeant Winfield got up in front and the lights surrounding the shooting lanes came on.

“Okay boys and girls, I pulled a few strings and got some additional ammo for you. However, not what you are thinking. We’ve had our foreign weapons familiarization, but no pro firing. These fine folks from the 14th Special Operations Battalion had some spare rounds and are willing to let you guys burn it up for them. Gentlemen and lady, all yours,” he announced.

“Okay, who am I speaking with again?” asked the large man.

“First Platoon,” said one of our Squad Leaders.

“First who?” asked the man. “Who are you again? Bunch of pansies or some straight BAMFs ready to rip out of the heart of the IU and eat it for breakfast?”

“First Platoon!” called out Sergeant Winfield. And as one we answered “First to lead! Last to fall!” followed by war cries, growls and cheering.

We had garnered the phrase since we were the first in everything practically. First Platoon, Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Brigade of the 1st AFNAS Infantry Division. And the cherry on top? In I Corps and First Army. And furthermore, I was on First Squad, Alpha Fire Team. It just didn’t get anymore tip of the spear than that. The cheering quieted down and the instructor continued.

“That’s more like it!” announced the man. “I’m Lieutenant Jones and this is my team of Sergeant Major Carlson and Staff Sergeants Davis and Davis. We’re going to give you a quick down and dirty on the AK system as well as the PKM machine gun, RPG and P90 type system. These are all weapons you will probably end up seeing when you hit the beach. We don’t have any live rounds for the RPG, only training shots. But we have enough for you to get a little more familiar with the others. Machine gun ammo won’t be enough, but we can at least show you

how to load, fire and unload. And I like what your platoon sergeant has us doing. We've only got twenty rounds per rifle, and he had us load it into four magazines, so you will have to reload at least three times."

"So, let's start with the AK. Someone please point me to the safety," he started and the platoon started answering the questions. We knew the nomenclature well enough from the familiarization class and moved into the harder parts of loading, unloading, clearing and malfunctions. There were tables set up with dummy rounds where we had to go through the motions. We weren't horrid at it, but having used the AR type systems for the most part, we did have some issues. But nothing we couldn't get over as we moved by squads in a round robin type fashion and headed to the next area of RPGs and P90s. The instructor was kind of cute I thought as she went through the process of showing us the loading and firing steps in the old RPG. And as we finished, we headed over to the machine gun table where we learned about that one as well. And finally brought us to the point where we got to fire. Since there were only eight rifles, it might take us a little while to get through the lines. But again, we did it by squad and were able to fire the twenty rounds.

As expected, the platoon had a little trouble with the steps, but were quickly adapting. Same thing happened with the machine gun as we were not used to loading the gun from the right as opposed to the left. However, we managed to make it through that okay as well. I was getting ready to load and fire the P90 when the instructor stopped me.

"No, your magazine isn't locked," she said.

I looked and found I hadn't slapped the magazine into the weapon fully. I felt kind of foolish as I slapped it down and took aim at the targets, shooting the twenty rounds before handing the weapon back to her.

"Saw your shooting earlier. Nice job," she said as she took the weapon.

"Thanks," I said.

"I could give you a few tips later on if we get the chance," she said.

"I'd like that," I said, eager to learn a little bit as well as get the chance to talk to her. I kind of wanted to say more, but really didn't get the chance to as another of my squad bumped me out of the way. We finished firing off everything and one of the lucky members of our platoon actually got to let an entire magazine of the P90 go at once. Another got to finish off the hundred round belt of PKM in another go. Too bad we didn't have any grenades for the RPG which would have been the icing on the cake. Sometimes we didn't mind having extra training like now. We all had big grins even though we were soaking wet from the rain.

"Gentlemen and lady, we are grateful for you taking the time to do this for us," said the Company Commander.

“Anytime Captain,” said the Lieutenant in charge. “Speaking of which, can we make arrangements to stay? We aren’t due back in to Bassingbourn until tomorrow and will have to stay the night here.”

“Sure, we can scrape out an area for you,” said the Captain after confirming with the First Sergeant. “Just meet us back at camp, tent row Delta, number thirty.”

“Roger that, we’ll get cleaned up here and head on down,” said the Lieutenant.

“Don’t worry about the brass. One of the penal platoons does the brass sweep,” said the First Sergeant.

“And why didn’t we think of that back home?” laughed the visiting Sergeant Major.

We shouldered up our packs and headed back to the main camp. It was late evening now and the rain didn’t seem like it was stopping anytime soon. Lucky enough, our tent had a floor built into it from old pallets and scrap lumber gathered from Lord only knows where. So our things were off the ground and out of the mud for the most part. We quickly changed out of our wet uniforms and into our dry ones we had stashed away. And we got to cleaning our weapons as usual. Mine was a little easier to clean since I hadn’t shot off that many rounds and the chrome plated actions of my rifle were far easier to clean since I could see the carbon build up. I finished before everyone else and saw the visitors coming in from the range and setting up in an adjacent tent for the night. I rapidly finished, oiled the weapon and headed down to my squad leader.

“Staff Sergeant Gilbert?” I asked in deference of the others. When we were alone, it was just “Gil” to me and others that knew him pretty well.

“Yeah, Donnie,” he asked as he looked up from his M-4A4.

“We need to get Lomax some additional time on the simulator if we can,” I said.

“Yeah, I saw his shooting wasn’t that great,” said Gilbert.

“His day fire is okay, but night fire needs a lot of work,” I said.

“How’s the rest of his training coming along?” asked Gilbert.

“Fairly well, he’s just green. But he’s picking things up pretty well,” I said.

“Okay, we’ll see about the sim time,” said Gilbert.

“Roger that...” I said and my voice trailed off.

“You got something to say?” he asked.

“I was wondering if I could go grab a cup of coffee,” I said.

“And go see that marksman from Cider?” he asked. Cider was the informal name of the Surveillance, Detection and Reconnaissance detachments of the North American Union. Formed as long range teams, they went deep behind enemy lines conducting intelligence gathering, spotting targets for air raids and conducted raids of their own. Their initials, S-D-R were pronounced “cider” like the drink. “I noticed she had a marksman tab.”

“Sorry Sergeant?” I asked.

“You want to see that female from the Cider team. She offered you a few tips right?” he asked.

“Umm, yeah,” I answered, trying to figure out how he knew my plans even before I did. I kind of planned to grab two cups and see her, but really hadn’t made my decision yet.

“Make sure Lomax is cleaning right and head on down,” he motioned with his head. I went back to my bunk, retrieved my rain coat and web gear and looked over Lomax’s work.

“Hit there around the bolt face. You need a good lock in the chamber to fire,” I said.

“Right here?” he asked and looked at the bolt face.

“Right around the lugs,” I said and pointed.

“Got it,” he said. “You off somewhere?”

“Just grabbing a cup of coffee,” I said and wandered out into the drizzle once again. The chow hall was more or less twenty four hours and I overfilled my cup for two portions and managed to talk one of the cooks out of some sugar and creamer packets. I headed back to the tents where the Cider guys had set up for the night and saw the lady rolling out a sleeping bag on one of the cots.

“Excuse me, Staff Sergeant?” I asked, poking my head in the door. Both the Staff Sergeants looked at me and I finally connected they were brother and sister.

“Yes,” answered the male.

“I meant the lady Staff Sergeant,” I said as the other three looked at me like I was an intruding raccoon on a hen house.

“Can I help you?” she answered.

“You offered some shooting tips,” I said and let my voice trail off as I continued to get the eyeball from the other members in the tent.

“Oh yeah, the marksman out on the line,” she said.

“If it’s a bad time, you don’t have to,” I said. She looked at her Lieutenant and got a shrug of his shoulders.

“Just don’t be out too late and turn into a pumpkin,” he said. I got another evil look from the brother as she grabbed her rifle and walked out of the tent. I guess sometimes brothers continue protecting their little sisters even in the military, but I wasn’t a threat to her virtue.

“Buy you a cup of coffee?” I asked and suddenly realized just how cheesy that probably sounded. We really didn’t get out that much, but it sounded funny when I thought about it on the way over.

“You got it for free from the mess hall,” she replied with a smirk.

“Okay, got me,” I laughed. She went back into the tent and returned with a cup of her own and opened the top. I dropped about half the cup into hers as we headed for a dry spot out of the rain as well as away from prying eyes and ears.

“So Corporal, about night firing,” she started.

“You can call me Donnie if you like,” I said.

“Okay, I’m Heather,” she replied.

“Ma’am?” I asked.

“We aren’t real formal on rank in Cider. Call me Heather,” she said.

I wasn’t real certain of calling an NCO I barely knew by her first name, but she gave me permission. We started talking shooting techniques and I picked up a trick or two. The NAU Marksman school was a first rate class, far superior to the one taught by the Alliance of Free North American States (AFNAS) military. While it wasn’t a full blown sniper course, they still taught advanced shooting techniques from close quarters battle to the long range precision fire.

We headed over to the chow hall and refilled our coffee mugs, continuing to talk until well into the evening. The conversation moved onto other subjects and I found out she was a part of one of the more decorated teams in Cider. I hadn’t realized it until then, but she was a seriously good at her job. A true decorated hero from all accounts. I read the press announcements on the teams she served with and always placed them somewhere up near legendary status. But she seemed really down to earth. And I was just happy to be able to speak to an attractive lady for the first time in a while. Sure we had females in our unit, but the leadership absolutely prohibited any kind of socialization with them and they strived to meet up to the expectations. They were “one of the guys” so to speak. But this lady was different. She managed to keep her femininity and still be a stone cold killer when she needed to. So I enjoyed talking to her and being normal for a change.

“You heading back to your base in the morning?” I asked.

“First thing. We’ve got some training to do soon,” she said.

“You seem pretty well trained as it is,” I said.

“Thanks,” she replied. “You’re not half bad for a straight leg either.”

“I guess that’s a compliment,” I replied.

“Well, as much as I might like to continue this conversation, we should both be getting home,” she said.

“So you’re turning into a pumpkin soon?” I asked, trying the humor route.

“Yes, I certainly am,” she said with a laugh. “And as flattering as I find your flirting, I need to get going. We have training tomorrow at my base.”

“I wasn’t flirting!” I protested. As least I didn’t think I was.

“I kind of took it that way. No big deal, you’re a good looking guy and all. Have to work on your humor a bit, but I’m not interested in a relationship right now,” she said.

“I wasn’t thinking anything like that!” I protested.

“Okay,” she said and must have picked up on my subconscious mind. Of course I was interested in her, but there was a war on and now wasn’t the best time to be getting involved. “Walk me back to my tent?”

“Sure,” I said. We gathered our things and I walked her back to the tent area. After we arrived, she turned to me and thanked me for the evening.

“I should thank you,” I said. “For giving me the pointers and all.”

“And for making me feel a little normal for a little bit,” she replied. “Look me up after all this is over, maybe something’s there.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “Good night Heather.”

“Good night Donnie,” she said and shook my hand. I headed back to my tent where I got razzed by the few guys who saw me out with her. I took it in stride and headed back to my bunk to finish up for the evening and headed off to sleep.

CHAPTER 2

Z Day Minus 3

We woke up as usual and did our PT as dictated by the Battalion Commander. Again, he wanted us in tip top shape so we headed out into the morning drizzle and into battalion formation, getting ready to do the daily dozen and head out on our customary five mile run. It was entirely normal for the physical training that morning and we finished in a little over an hour and a half. Afterwards, we knew we had the showers first along with Second Platoon and grabbed out ditty bags, towels and fresh uniforms and scampered to get the first shot of hot water before it was all gone. And we wasted no time getting cleaned, shaved and changed into fresh clothing.

Heading back to our tents, we grabbed our mess kits just as the remainder of the company was coming back from chow. Typical English morning of rain mixed with drizzle and misery. I had learned to hate the English weather and wondered if the sun actually ever shined on this island. But we grabbed our rain coats and headed over to the second misery of the morning and ate our breakfast and listened to the local grapevine in the chow hall and passed small talk of our own. As we returned to the tents, we were actually in for two treats in one morning. First was the fact our laundry had been returned and second was mail call. We still had somewhat of access to e-mail, but on a camp with an entire brigade of soldiers along with the various support elements, getting computer time wasn't easy. So back to snail mail we went. I got two letters and a package that morning along with clean drawers. It was shaping up to be a fine day.

"Whatcha got?" asked Corporal Devons from the heavy weapons squad as he watched me open my package.

"Mind your own business Devs," I said with a grin.

"Come on, gots to share," he prodded me.

"Killing me," I said and decided to open the letters instead and read them so the others might leave me alone. He finally went back to his own letter and started reading it. I got one from my mother, which was typical and another from my uncle living in South Carolina. He wished me well, told me how proud he was of me and to stay safe. A little about the farm and how everything was going there with my extended family. Nothing critical to the turning of the planet, but it was nice to hear from my extended family. My Mother's letter had several photographs included and they dropped into my lap as I opened the folded paper.

"Now who's that?" asked Sergeant Winston from Second Squad on the opposite bunk of me.

I looked down and saw a picture of my sister lying on my lap. I wished my mother hadn't included a picture of my sister. She had recently turned nineteen and was becoming an attractive woman. And I had never let on to the fact I had a sister...not really at least...or the fact others found her attractive.

“Holy crap Donnie! She’s hot!” announced Winston. “Why have you been hiding her from us?”

“Come on man, that’s my sister!” I warned him. Certain lines weren’t to be crossed.

“Come on, you *have* to pass that around!” he exclaimed. “At least let me borrow it to warm up.”

“Leave it alone man,” I said as he had garnered the attention of others in the tent and they started circling for a chance to sneak a peek at the picture. It was like vultures hovering over a dying carcass as they looked at the pictures I had held against my chest. But unlike vultures, I couldn’t just shoot one to make the others leave. But I quickly weighed the options in my mind as I let the others take a look. It might have been a mistake, but they would have pestered me incessantly had I not. But even Gil got in on the nonsense.

“Hey Donnie, I know I’m married, but you know, maybe those Mormons have the good idea about multiple wives,” he laughed.

“Okay, enough gawking for you buzzards,” I said and put the picture into my foot locker. The other was a family portrait and I saw how big my little brother was getting. He was coming up on fifteen and was already involved in just about everything military. He wanted to be just like me one of these days, but I hoped the war would be over before he got the chance to put his skills to the test. The letter was a compilation from Mom, Dad and my two siblings. Dad told me to go forth, shoot straight and destroy those who threatened and attacked us. There was more to it than that, but that was pretty much the gist of it. My little brother told me about his first militia weekend and how much he was looking forward to joining me one of these days. My sister was in college now, studying to become a nurse and hopefully join up to serve in the AFNAS military. Again, I hoped it would be over long before that occurred, but we had a long road ahead of us. My Mom’s letter was far more in depth as her “baby” wasn’t safe and she wouldn’t get a good night’s sleep until I wasn’t “over there.” She worried about me, which was normal and pretty much like most mothers are, so I took it in stride.

I finished reading and went back to my package. Opening the box I found a newspaper from my hometown on top and several small bags of candy underneath. And a box of hand loaded ammunition for my pistol with a note from my grandfather explaining this load worked great for him before and should work just fine for me as well. I set it off to the side and found another surprise underneath.

“Cookies! You got cookies!” exclaimed Devons who had returned.

“Is there no such thing as privacy in your world?” I asked him.

“Not when it comes to homemade cookies!” he exclaimed.

“You guys are killing me,” I said dryly. I knew I would end up sharing with my platoon since it seemed like my mother fixed enough for the entire Corps. And of course, the note of “make sure everyone gets one, I made extra” was evidence of her support for the troops. I grabbed two out

as the vultures started circling once again and passed the container over to Devons who took one and started passing it around. They were my mother's famous chocolate oatmeal cookies. Some people called them no bake cookies, but I spelled them H E A V E N. And she certainly hadn't lost her touch on this batch.

"Your family looking for another child to adopt?" asked Devons with a smile. "Thanks bro."

"No problem," I said and ate one myself. Yeah, my mother could make a good cookie. The container was eventually passed back to me, still about a third full. Sergeant Winfield arrived with five large packages carried by five of the penal soldiers and set them down near his bunk.

"Okay, listen up...are those cookies?" he asked and looked at the faces around the room still savoring the sweetness.

"Umm, yeah Sergeant. They're from Donnie Mac's family," said a voice from the back of the tent, completely selling me out.

"And I wasn't invited into the little cookie party?" he asked.

I grabbed the container and handed it over to him. He looked at it suspiciously and sniffed at the interior before grabbing two for himself and taking a bite. Apparently the savage beast of Sergeant First Class Al Winfield could be tamed every so often by the well placed application of chocolate. He finished it off and turned to me.

"Okay Donnie, you can secure those in my footlocker so these other heathens don't get any ideas about stealing them," he said with a straight face. "I'll take care of them for you and make sure they're safe and sound. And of course, eating one every day to make sure they don't go bad."

"Sir, with all due respect...if you weren't a Sergeant First Class, I might tell you to bite me. But since you are my platoon sergeant and higher ranking, I'll have to kindly decline," I said with the same straight face. The look I received wasn't promising until he broke out in a grin himself and shook his head side to side. The tent erupted in laughter as we were all feeling pretty good right then. Sometimes Sergeant Winfield was a pretty normal guy, other times, he was a pure evil creature. But one thing he had going for him; he never put us through anything he wasn't willing to go through himself. Any training problem, he was right there with us, any obstacle course, he was helping out, any ruck march, he was at the head of the formation, pulling us forward with his motivation. And we were thankful as we saw other platoon sergeants sitting behind the lines watching as their soldiers went through the various training tasks while sipping on coffee and waiting for them to finish.

"As I was about to say, we have good news and bad news. Good news is, everyone got two sets of new uniforms," he said. We were pretty happy with that since many of our uniforms were starting to show serious signs on wear and tear. You could only mend them so many times and we all had just about become master seamstresses by this point in our military career. And being able to get new ones was entirely helpful.

“And the bad?” asked a Sergeant from the heavy weapons squad.

“Bad news is you aren’t going to be able to wear them yet. I want you to have the best clothing when we hit the beach and one further thing,” he said and pulled an odd looking machine out of an old ammo crate. “We are going to weatherproof one set entirely.”

The device as I could see was an old vacuum sealer. He had several rolls of the plastic sheeting needed to seal whatever we placed inside of it and set them off to the side. “So here’s what we are going to do. You also get new socks, t-shirts and underwear. We’re going to seal them up and pack them into your assault packs. I know it seems like a bad idea, but I want you to have nearly new clothing when we get into combat.”

“We heading out soon Sergeant?” a voice asked from the rear of the tent.

“Soon enough,” he replied.

“So we have a slim chance of landing in three days?” asked the AFNAS General.

“The weather should break in three days. We’ll still have rough seas, but the landing craft should be okay,” said the Colonel in charge of the weather forecasters.

“Should be okay?” asked the U.S. Admiral in charge of the landing fleet.

“Moderate to rough seas, but nothing the landing craft weren’t designed to handle,” said the Colonel.

“How much of a window are we looking at?” asked the General.

“Maybe twelve hours, ten at the least, sixteen at the most,” said the Colonel.

“Can we land sufficient troops in that amount of time?” asked the Texan General in charge of the forces landing at Griffin Beach.

“The relays of departing England and hitting the beaches in France, turnaround and heading back and reloading takes about five hours,” said the Admiral. “So three waves give or take.”

“And this is assuming we don’t lose half the craft in the first wave,” said the Texan General.

“The Navy and Air Force will bring bombardment of the coastal areas two hours in advance of the landings. There shouldn’t be a thing moving on those beaches when you land,” said the NESAs Air Force General tasked with covering the invasion.

“Again, assumptions that are putting my soldier’s lives at stake,” said the Texan General.

“It’s not going to be easy General,” said the Admiral. “We all know that but are prepared to give you all the firepower and support you could need as well as additional assets tasked with on call demands of your forward air controllers.”

“For each beach?” asked the Mexican Colonel leading the Mexican Regiment on Griffon Beach.

“Yes,” said the Admiral. “We have three battlewagons: *Seguín*, *Crockett* and *Bowie* which will be in direct support of the five main landing areas. The *Austin* is still down for repairs, but we will have at least another thirty surface vessels including your gun cruiser the *Veracruz* ready for on call support. And this doesn’t even include the aircraft involved in bombing or on call.”

“So twelve hour window. What about that hurricane in the Atlantic?” asked the NAU General in charge of Minotaur Beach.

“It’s not really a hurricane any longer General,” said the Colonel.

“Winds are still over a hundred miles an hour,” said the General. “That’s a hurricane.”

“It actually is termed as an extra-tropical cyclone, not really a hurricane,” said the Colonel.

“Semantics, it’s a bloody hurricane,” observed a British Colonel.

“Shouldn’t be a factor,” said the Colonel. “By the time it reaches the beaches, it should be marginal in force. It should be broken up by that time and little more than rain and winds.”

”Far too many ‘should not’s’ and ‘should be’s’ for my taste. I mean, we dream about living in a perfect world of unicorns and rainbows, but then reality smacks us in the face,” said the Texan General.

“I tend to agree. Twelve hour window of landings, a possible hurricane or tropical storm breathing down our necks, assumptions our naval forces will suppress the beaches enough for the landing to go through and five hours turnaround time at a minimum before the next wave comes in? I’m not comfortable with this,” said the NAU Marshal.

“If we miss this opportunity, how long before conditions are right again?” asked the AFNAS General.

“Seven weeks,” said the Colonel. “And three months after that.”

“So we go in three days and hope conditions don’t change or we wait anywhere from two to five months before attempting another landing,” said the General as a statement to be discussed rather than a valid question.

“Five months puts us well into winter,” warned the German Colonel. His English was impeccable, but he was typically very blunt. “No offense, but can your troops withstand the winter weather during an invasion?”

“They can because they are good soldiers,” said the Texan General. “But I understand your point and agree to an extent.”

“Three days, seven weeks or wait until next spring?” asked the Admiral.

“We can’t wait until next spring,” said the AFNAS General.

“We have to make a decision right now,” said the Admiral before turning to the Supreme Allied Commander who had remained silent until this point. He was originally from Alabama and would have rather been leading a company in the assault instead of trying to make everyone happy in the coalition. A Company Commander was about the best spot he had ever filled since you still got to go out and get muddy with the troops and not worry about shining a desk with your butt or the other Mickey Mouse items associated with staff work.

“What’s the weather going to be like in seven weeks?” he asked.

“Typical weather is pretty bad for that time of the year. Fall and winter starts to set in and the seas get a lot rougher,” said the Colonel.

“And you can guarantee the twelve hour window?” asked the General of the Army.

“Nothing in the weather world is ever guaranteed sir,” said the Colonel.

“Your best guess is that window?” asked the General of the Army.

“Conditions are looking favorable,” said the Colonel.

“And how long before the invasion starts would we have to call it off in case it changes,” said the General of the Army.

“We have to start putting out the embarkation orders in the next six hours sir,” said the Texas General. “Plus getting the special operations in before the invasion.”

“Gentlemen and ladies, we have a little over four hours to make a decision. I want a current order of battle briefing between now and then for the last minute changes. I will make a decision based on the forecast at that point,” said the General of the Army as he stood to leave the conference room. The remaining staff stood up and watched as he left. Heading down the hallway, he was lost in thought as he turned out into the courtyard of the large mansion they used as his headquarters. He wasn’t even aware he wasn’t alone until his wife came up to him.

“Robert?” she finally said after catching up.

“Hmm,” he said. “Oh, sorry sweetie.”

“Lost in thought over something?” she asked.

“Big decisions,” he said.

“They will come to you,” she said. “I reminded you of that when you took this appointment.”

“I know,” he said and went back to his thinking.

“Trust them to do their jobs?” she asked.

“I do,” he said.

“Do they trust you?” she asked.

“I hope they do,” he answered.

“Then what’s the problem? Make a decision and stick with it,” she offered.

“And that’s the problem. My brain says hold off but my gut tells me to move forward,” he said.

“Are these the same gut decisions that kept us alive after the Fall?” she asked.

“They are,” he replied, seeing how she was about to trap him.

“Then go with them,” she said and gently squeezed his shoulder.

“Not that easy,” he said. “If I make a bad call on the part of my gut, thousands of kids get killed. Thousands more could be taken prisoner and the entire invasion is set back at least a year if not more.”

“And if it turns out to be the right call?” she asked.

“Then we succeed and start liberating Europe,” he said.

“You trust anyone else to make the decision?” she asked.

“I do and I don’t,” he said. “They put me in this role to make the tough decisions and I suppose it’s tougher than I imagine when it comes down to it.”

“Honey, make a decision. This is no different when you were but a wee little Colonel in Afghanistan in charge of a Regiment of Marines. You made decisions then that might have resulted in the death of your troopers, make the same decisions now,” she said.

“I plan on it,” he said. “But either way, your visit needs to be cut short. Make plans to head out tomorrow and I’ll have my staff arrange the transportation.”

“I feel guilty coming over to see you since your soldiers can’t have the same option,” she admitted. “I wish they could see their families as well.”

“We do what we can on the video teleconference, but just can’t keep up with demands,” he said.

“When’s your next meeting?” she asked.

“Two hours I get an order of battle briefing,” he replied.

“Well come on Marine, buy me a cup of coffee and let’s forget about the world for a few minutes,” she grinned.

“I’m not a Marine any longer,” he said.

“You’re still a Marine to the core,” she laughed. “Just trapped in an AFNAS Army uniform.”

“Just about freaked out when the AFNAS said they weren’t standing up a Marine unit,” he laughed. “Felt like a part of me died.”

“Are those kids as good as your Marines were?” she asked.

“Probably so,” he said.

“Then who cares what they call themselves? They are warriors and will not fail,” she said.

“Reading my mind again?” he laughed.

“You’re predictable,” she laughed.

“Let’s hope not,” he laughed and they headed towards the garden where the coffee was served twenty-four hours a day from a small kiosk. They had a seat under a large canopy and talked over the little things and got his mind off the decisions for a little while. But he also knew he would be right back at it in less than two hours.

“Order of battle?” asked the General of the Army.

“No significant changes from the last briefing,” said the Director of Operations.

“Give it to me again,” he said and got comfortable in the seat.

“Sir, order of battle as follows:”

“Griffon Beach will be hit with the Combined Armies of the Central American States 1st Infantry Division and the Mexican 98th Infantry Regiment.”

“Sphinx Beach will be invaded by the AFNAS 1st Infantry Division and the NESAs 12th Light Infantry Brigade.”

“Minotaur Beach will be hit with the NAU 2nd Freedom Guards Division and the BENELUX Combined Infantry Brigade.”

“Pegasus Beach will be invaded by the Texan 1st Marine Division and the Pacifica 2nd Marine Regiment.”

“Centaur Beach will be invaded by the German 1st Infantry Brigade, French 3rd Infantry Regiment, British 11th Infantry Regiment and the Irish Dublin Guards Regiment.”

“Gorgon Beach will be struck by the ANZAC 5th Infantry Division and the Brazilian 5th Infantry Brigade.”

“Airborne operations, planned for twelve hours prior to the landings will be conducted by the AFNAS 82nd Airborne Division, US 101st Airborne Division, Cuban Parachute Brigade and the Argentine Parachute Regiment.”

“Follow on forces will be as follows: the Mexican 12th Infantry Division for Griffon Beach, the AFNAS 2nd Infantry Division for Sphinx Beach, the Pacifica 9th Light Infantry Division for Minotaur Beach, the U.S. 1st Marine Division for Pegasus Beach, the British 2nd Infantry Division for Centaur Beach and the Texan 1st Infantry Brigade for Gorgon Beach. The units will follow on as transportation assets allow and are expected to be in position no later than H plus twelve,” announced the Director of Operations.

“We are expecting to move fourteen divisions worth of troops within twelve hours? Actually sixteen divisions including the paratrooper units?” asked the NAU Marshal.

“We have the assets. We are projecting a thirty percent loss of transportation assets and even at that loss rate, we will still be able to move the follow on forces,” answered the Director.

“And strategic reserves?” asked the Texan General.

“Strategic reserves will be the French 2nd Brigade, German 5th Mechanized Infantry Brigade, Polish Airborne Brigade, Belgian Armored Brigade, German Parachute Regiment, Pacifica 7th Infantry and 11th Armored Divisions, NESAs 91st Infantry and 3rd Armored Divisions, the Norwegian Regiment, the Italian Brigade, the Swedish Airmobile Brigade, NAU 100th Freedom Guards Airmobile Brigade and the Spanish Mech Infantry Regiment. These forces, if not committed sooner, will begin landings at the designated beaches at Z plus two or at the ports by

Z Day plus four. Infantry units will land on the beaches and armor units will embark for the secured ports to be unloaded. Airborne and airmobile forces can be dropped to threaten strategic assets or as reinforcements for committed units.”

“Landings will have full naval gunfire support up to two hours prior to the landings as well as on call gunfire support during the landings. Aerial bombardment will commence four hours prior to the invasion and continue up to the landings. Also, on call close air support will be available during the landings.”

“Special operations raids will be conducted starting three days prior to the landings and continue until the landings secure the beachhead. Targets are communications bunkers, supply depots, headquarters units and other targets of opportunity. The teams are comprised of the various units detailed to the Joint Special Operations Directorate and are fully briefed on their missions and target packages. After striking the targets, they are to make their way north to the landing sites, make contact with friendly forces and be sent back to England for additional taskings.”

“Are there any questions?” asked the Director of Operations.

“Are we going to be able to maintain the supply channels as well as the reinforcements throughout the invasion?” asked the General of the Army.

“Based on the calculations of loss of landing craft, we are looking at thirty percent casualties and loss of equipment, we will still be able to provide reinforcements as well as supplies to the landing forces before they move inland,” answered the Director.

“And the naval gunfire support?” asked the General of the Army.

“Will be provided until the boats are empty sir. The ships have orders to continue to provide gunfire until they no longer can,” said the U.S. Admiral.

“And close air support?” asked the General of the Army.

“Will be provided no matter what. We have kept our all weather attack aircraft back and gotten them ready for this. For the past month we’ve kept our mission rates low enough to give the maintainers a chance to get the aircraft ready for Phoenix,” said the NESA Air Force General.

“Strategic Objectives?” asked the General of the Army once again.

“Sir, strategic objectives are Caen, Le Harve and Cherbourg. Once the beaches are secured, they forces move south, west and east to those objectives,” said the Director of Operations.

“Weather?” asked the General of the Army.

“No change sir. We are still looking at the storm moving northward and possibly impacting the edge of Ireland. But nothing we need to be concerned about,” said the Colonel.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we go in three days. Send out the warning orders,” said the General of the Army, making a snap decision in his head.

But often in wartime, conditions change rapidly. Weather becomes worse, reinforcements are moved into the area undetected, fortifications are a lot stronger than planned, the terrain isn't as easy to traverse as expected, casualties aren't as projected...just several things that could and would go wrong. And Operation Phoenix was little different than these past large scale operations. As the order of battle had forgotten, one additional person was setting off with the units tasked. He never showed up on any unit roster or ship or aircraft, but he was surely there all the time.

And Murphy was a man who liked to pop up at the least expected moment.

CHAPTER 3

Z Day Minus 2 days, 12 hours

“We believe the invasion will commence in the next seventy-two hours,” said the Islamic Union General in charge of intelligence operations.

“And what gives us this idea?” asked the Marshal in charge of the French beach defenses.

“The operatives in the United Kingdom and Ireland had stated there are thousands of troops preparing to move to their embarkation points along the coasts. Aerial bombardment is at an all time low since they occupied the British Isles. Naval forces are departing their ports and we have an increase in message traffic all over the country as well as back to North America,” said the General. “We believe this only points to an invasion. Weather reports state there will be clearer conditions in the next three days, but only a brief window.”

“How brief?” asked the Marshal.

“Maybe eight to sixteen hours,” said the General.

“Enough time to claw out a beachhead,” said the Marshal.

“But afterwards, the weather will turn worse. What is left of that hurricane in the Atlantic could possibly move towards the beaches,” said the General.

“And this helps us,” said the Marshal.

“This certainly helps us,” said the General. “Weather works in our favor.”

“And our defensive plans?” asked the General.

“We would like to make some modifications based on the assumption the weather will change in our favor,” said the General in charge of operations.

“Modifications such as?” asked the Marshal.

“We would like for the landings to go relatively unopposed for the first two hours. We catch them on the beach and destroy them in place,” said the General.

“What purpose does this serve?” asked the Marshal.

“It will be several years until they have the resources and manpower to attempt another invasion. Airborne operations are much the same. We wait for them to land and cut them to shreds as they

float out of the sky. We have withheld our best fighter aircraft as well as our remaining submarine forces in order to preserve them for this day,” said the General.

“What exactly are you proposing?” asked the Marshal.

“We withdraw the main body of troops from the beaches, leaving only a token fighting force in place to defend the beaches. After the landings have commenced, we move the forces forward to destroy what they have landed. The beaches are designed to be defended by a division sized force, but we have been holding two divisions there for training purposes. If we limit the amount of forces on the beach and quickly move them into position afterwards, we can toss them back into the sea and set back their invasion plans for at least eighteen months, most likely longer,” said the General.

“We let them land unopposed?” asked the Marshal.

“Not unopposed, but give them a false sense of security about the landings,” said the General. “With the main concentration of our forces behind the lines and secluded from naval gunfire and aerial bombardment, we can preserve them in intact formations and use them to our advantage. If we allow them to be bombarded at will on the beaches, it only serves the purpose of letting them be demoralized by the shock of the naval gunfire as well as the aerial attacks. They would be destroyed piecemeal before getting the opportunity to fight,” said the General.

“What kind of token resistance are we planning?” asked the Marshal.

“We have identified six beaches where we believe they will land. The same beaches plus one they used in World War Two. We can have brigade or regiment sized forces to fight a holding action until the main concentration of forces arrives,” said the General.

“And we believe this will work?” asked the Marshal.

“Our best tacticians have been planning for this. We created a blue team of sorts that have been trained by the American military a long time ago to think through the situation out of the box so to speak. They believe the FNC will have hopes the invasion forces are progressing as planned as we wait for weather conditions to worsen. If they weather turns, which our forecasters believe it will, aerial assets will not be as effective, naval forces will be forced to deal with rough seas and the land forces will be cut off from further resupply,” said the General.

“And the airborne forces? The FNC has a great amount of airborne troops available to drop right on top of our heads,” said the Marshal.

“With moving our best divisions back from the beaches, we can catch these airborne forces as soon as they land and destroy them in place. They will have little chance to capture the assets we have marked as vital to the invasion,” said the General.

“How soon before we move them?” asked the Marshal.

“I would start moving them immediately, at least the heavy assets like armor and mechanized infantry. The foot infantry can be moved say...twelve hours prior to the weather changing,” said the General.

“And the simulations?” asked the Marshal.

“The computer simulations show us victorious eighty percent of the time. We have attempted to put every conceivable variable into the scenarios we can think of,” said the General.

“And the twenty percent?” asked the Marshal.

“They succeed and establish a beachhead forcing us to draw additional forces from the rest of the continent. However, this scenario has been planned out as well as the simulations show us being able to defeat them after maybe one to two weeks of fighting,” said the General. “And it puts them back into the same boat as if we destroyed the invasion fleet on the beaches.”

The Marshal thought about the situation for a moment and decided it was probably the best idea. The General had never led him wrong and had a good head on his shoulders when it came to tactics to defeating the FNC. The plan seemed like a good one and well thought out. The fact the weather only provided a small window made it even more attractive since the FNC was hoping to catch them off guard during that time period.

“Implement your plan immediately. We do need to be careful however, with the French spies in our midst. Notify all commanders, kill anyone looking at our convoys. Shoot them on sight and jam all non-military related radio and telephone traffic in and out of the Normandy area,” ordered the Marshal.

“Yes sir,” said the General as he went off to implement the plans. It would be such a surprise to the infidels when they found out the best units hadn’t been destroyed in the initial landings or the bombardments. He would give all the money in the world to see the look on the faces of the commanders when the Islamic Union arrived in force to destroy them. And in this operation, they had no plans on taking prisoners.

Z Day minus 2 days, 12 hours

“We’re heading in,” said the Captain assigned to the U.S. 7th Special Forces Group Operation Detachment Alpha. “Targets haven’t changed.”

“The invasion following soon?” asked the Master Sergeant assigned as his Team Sergeant. He had seen the increased activity around the compound as well as the base.

“We’re going to be on our own for a few days, but we should be fine,” said the Captain.

“Initial invasion forces are depending on us to strike hard and fast. We cannot let them down,” said the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of a squadron of F-15H Super Eagles. “We are to strike target package Delta-Golf Two Nine and Three Zero. The Operations Officer has the plans and assignments. But make no mistake about it ladies and gents, we cannot fail to destroy those targets.”

“What’s going on sir?” asked a brand new Lieutenant recently assigned.

“The day we’ve all been waiting for,” said the commander.

“Set course to 1-0-0, ahead two thirds,” said the Captain of the Mexican cruiser *Veracruz*.

“Course set to heading 1-0-0, ahead two thirds, *si senior*,” said the helmsman.

“New heading Captain?” asked the Tactical Officer.

“We are joining up with the remainder of the fleet,” said the Captain.

“And course after that?” asked the Tactical Officer.

“Towards the coast. We have a replenishment vessel joining as well. Make sure we top everything off, we might not get another resupply for a while,” said the Captain.

“We can expect additional security threats as well as potential rear area actions against our bases. We have upgraded the Threat Condition to Charlie in the U.K., Ireland and Iceland. Additionally, there is a communications blackout in effect for all nonessential media,” said the Brigadier General in charge of base defenses in the U.K.

“What kind of threats could we see sir?” asked a Major.

“Probably missile and rocket attacks, but also raids and sniping activity,” he answered.

“And how long are we going to be in Charlie sir?” asked another Major.

“Until we get done with Phoenix,” he answered.

“And when is it going to kick off?” asked a Naval Lieutenant Commander.

“Soon,” was the only reply.

“Watch your sectors of fire,” I said as I watched the five folks on the line in the simulator firing their nighttime course. They were getting better, but it was still not as good as I knew they were capable of.

“Can we use our night vision at least once?” asked a new Private assigned to Third Squad.

“Not until you get the basics of night firing down,” I answered as I watched them through my own NODs reloading and continuing to fire at the darker screen. It wasn’t entirely realistic as the weapons they were firing only projected lasers and bursts of air with no muzzle flashes, but again, it was better than nothing and they were being conditioned to find their targets in the dark. They had finished the latest scenario and had the sim operator loading up another one. Their scores were improving as they started another round.

Suddenly the lights came on as the sim operator got on the loudspeaker. The screen went blank and the weapons were put into standby. “Sorry for the intrusion guys, but you need to head back to your unit immediately.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t know and just about got my head removed by your platoon sergeant when I asked the same thing. Just told me to tell you to get back like right now,” said the sim operator.

“Okay guys, clear them out and turn them in,” I said as I grabbed at my rifle leaned against the back wall. We handed the weapons back over to the Sergeant in charge of the simulator and grabbed our things to depart.

When we arrived at the camp, it was utter chaos. People were running this way and that, carrying crates of ammo, ordnance, rations and other supplies we typically didn’t get while in base camp. It spurred us on harder and we headed into our tent where we found the chaos inside as well.

“Who’s got my e-tool?”

“Anyone seen my sleeping bag cover?”

“Mags, who needs some spares?”

“I can’t find my sewing kit!”

We saw various crates of supplies and ammo stacked up neatly in the aisles near the Lieutenant’s and Sergeant Winfield’s bunks. It hadn’t been touched as of yet and I saw a handwritten note of “Do not touch or else” with Sergeant Winfield’s name underneath. I immediately grabbed Staff Sergeant Gilbert and found out what was going on. “Gil?”

“We got a warning order for embarkation. Get your assault pack ready and the rest of your things ready for shipment,” he explained.

Lucky enough, I already had my pack ready, having put in the new uniform that morning after getting it sealed up and putting the old one in the bottom of my footlocker. “You sure this isn’t just another alert?”

“They won’t hand out live ammo for just an alert,” he explained.

“So this is the real deal?” I asked.

“About as real as it can get,” he said and turned to the other squad leaders to form a plan.

“Alright guys, listen up. Take your rations out of your assault packs. We’ve got new ones to issue out, but you are doing the same thing as before. You’re going to take it apart and pull all the things you don’t need like the cardboard and whatnot and reseal it. Just set the old one off to the side, we’ll probably end up using it,” said Staff Sergeant Thompkins, the Third Squad Leader and highest ranking of the foursome.

We stopped what we were doing and waited for Gil to come by and hand us new rations with a late date of packing on the box. Lucky for us, these were the AFNAS rations and not the Texan rations. Texan rations just ended up with too much pepper on everything I thought. But I wasn’t so lucky and ended up getting a second one, a Texan one, just the same. I immediately set to getting the extra cardboard, plastic and packing materials separating it as well as the extra things I knew I wouldn’t need like the Tabasco bottle and set them into a box. The Tabasco was claimed by someone else as well as the other little items and I sealed the smaller packages down with duct tape.

“You get the rations handed out?” asked Lieutenant Axe as he and Sergeant Winfield appeared.

“Yes sir,” said Thompkins. “Getting them sorted as we speak.”

And the tent got quiet as we expected a great proclamation from one of the two. Maybe a pep talk...just something besides the silence that was deafening.

“Okay, come on around me troopers,” said Sergeant Winfield as the Lieutenant looked to him as well. “Come on, get close, I don’t want to have to shout.”

We shuffled in tighter in a group as he stood in the center and got ready to tell us the information we had all been waiting for. Or it was just an exercise and for us to stand down.

“The Lieutenant and I just got back from Staff Call. The Brigade got the warning order to embark. Now this is just the warning order and they have all the way up until we see the beach to call it off, so no sense getting your panties in a wad before then. But for right now, it looks like we’re on,” said Sergeant Winfield. “Lieutenant?”

“Okay squad leaders, we need a complete pre combat check and inspection done by 2100 tonight. Start getting the magazines loaded up and topped off. We might get more ammo tomorrow, but don’t count on anything until we actually have it in hand. I also need a count of what exactly we are short on, be it ammo, rations, batteries, explosives, uniforms, socks or toothbrushes. I need that ASAP, so get on it. And just what we aren’t meeting for minimums, not what you’d like to have. Everyone else, just remain calm,” said the Lieutenant, starting to take a more active role in the unit. He had been under the wing of Sergeant Winfield for a few months now and was rapidly learning how to lead the platoon and not just be the platoon leader. We trusted him a lot more now that he had some seasoning and he trusted us to do our jobs as well. I headed back to the bunk and got my gear ready for inspection. We typically kept it that way, but with the actual combat loads, some things would change.

“Donnie?” called Sergeant Gilbert.

“Yeah boss,” I said and walked over.

“You’re now Alpha Fire Team leader,” he said and started getting his own items out.

“What happened to Kane?” I asked.

“As soon as the word came around, he came unglued. Complete breakdown. We managed to get him to the field hospital before it spread to others,” said Gilbert.

“That sucks,” I said.

“It happens. It’s like it’s a game until the folks find out it’s the real deal,” said Gilbert.

“Are we going with three?” I asked.

“No, we are getting a replacement from the penal section,” he said with a tone.

“Right before we go into combat? A dreg who can’t hack the mustard in normal times and someone completely unknown to the platoon?” I asked.

“Sergeant Winfield says he’s okay and will be fine when the lead starts flying,” said Gilbert. But I got the idea he wasn’t so sure himself by the tone in his voice.

“When’s he getting here?” I asked.

“He’s getting reissued his stuff and should be here in the next half hour. Give me an honest evaluation,” said Gilbert. “You got your stuff?”

“Yeah, checking one last time,” I said.

“I’m going to depend on you a lot out there. You have a fairly green fire team so I hope you can pull them up to your standards,” he said.

“I’ll do what I can,” I said and went back to unpacking my gear for inspection. I laid it out on the bunk for him to come by and started checking on the remainder of my new fire team. I wasn’t entirely comfortable with the job yet, but knew what to do. We all trained in the next position up just in case something like this happened. But still, I wasn’t exactly ready for the promotion, much less the reasons behind it. I worried about the invasion myself, as I suspected all of us did. However, it wasn’t something we could avoid and just had to deal with.

“Corporal?” a voice asked from behind me while I was still lost in thought and checking the gear of the remainder of my folks, letting them know what to take and what was “supposed” to be taken according to regs, but was dead weight and could be left behind.

I turned to find a thin soldier with no rank whatsoever on his sleeves. Apparently my dreg had arrived. “Yes?”

“I’m Private Johnny Delacruz,” he said and handed over an official form. “I’m assigned to First Platoon now.”

“Head on over to Sergeant First Class Winfield and Lieutenant Axe and report in,” I said and nodded my head in his general direction. Ammo crates were about to be broken open and the rounds handed out. I saw the Private pick up his bags and head over to check in with Sergeant Winfield and Lieutenant Axe. Sergeant Winfield gave him a once over before shaking his hand and pointing in my direction. He came back over to me and announced himself once again.

“Hang on, we’ll get you a bunk,” I said and noticed someone had already set up a new bunk near mine. He headed over and started unpacking his things and setting them out for inspection. I did happen to notice his rifle looked fairly worn, although everything appeared to be in working order. I would check it as par for the course and learn a little more about my new soldier.

The ammo was passed out and we immediately set to loading magazines and stashing them in our web gear. Mine wouldn’t take as long since I had less rounds to load, so I took the opportunity to look over my new soldier’s weapons. I saw he had a non-issue pistol, which was fairly typical, and looked it over first. I knew about the Sig-Sauer P220 since my father owned one as well and quickly took it apart and inspected the interior workings. Everything was clean

as a whistle and oiled properly. Now it certainly wasn't a Sergeant Winfield inspection, but with the quick once over, everything looked in order. His issued rifle, an M16A6, was again as clean as the day it left the factory floor and properly oiled. While battered slightly, everything was maintained as prescribed in the regulations. His fixed blade knife was as sharp as a razor and looked like it had seen some work at some point. The remainder of his gear looked like it had seen some service and was worn, but worked with little problems. It appeared Private Delacruz had been around the block a few times, but for what reason had he been punished I wondered.

"You'll want to check this one as well Corporal," he said and pulled a compact Ruger SP101 from the small of his back and handed it over. It was unloaded and I checked it as well. I wasn't all familiar with revolvers, but it appeared to be clean, but in an unusual caliber.

"You have the ammo for this?" I asked.

"I've got a box of fifty," he said. "My father reloads the brass and sends it to me."

"Not exactly a normal caliber," I observed.

"The .32 Mag will do just fine for a last ditch, have to kill someone right now caliber," he said as I handed back the pistol.

"I suppose it will," I said.

"Do we compact our rations Corporal?" he asked me.

"Yes, and if you have any leftover items, just toss them into the box at the end of the row. Someone can use them," I said and went over to check Lomax's gear and saw it needed some work. Still a lot to be done with my battle buddy and I knew time was short. I pointed out several items and left him to fix them as well as finish loading his magazines. I headed over to Gil who was busy loading his own. I grabbed a box of the ammo for my rifle and started to load the magazines as I spoke.

"So what's the deal with this guy?" I asked.

"Winfield says he's good to go, but wouldn't elaborate further. You can ask him if you want," said Gilbert.

"You don't mind?" I asked.

"Nah, you might get more out since you are directly responsible for him," said Gil.

I headed over to Sergeant Winfield's bunk where he was also busy loading magazines.

"Sergeant Winfield? You have a moment?"

"Donnie Mac, sorry we had to put you in the hot seat, but you're the next ranking Corporal to take a fire team leaders position," he replied.

“I understand sir and I won’t let you down,” I said.

“And you are wondering about your new member?” he asked.

“I was wondering why we would take a chance on a guy from the penal outfit right before we head onto the beach,” I stated, more of a comment than a question.

“He was vouched by a friend of mine. If you are uncomfortable with it, I can have him transferred into another team and put someone else on yours,” suggested Winfield.

“No Sergeant, they already have their team bonds. I wouldn’t want to do something like that,” I said. “I’ll give him a go if you believe I should.”

“He might surprise you Corporal. Anything else?” asked Winfield.

“No Sergeant,” I said and returned to loading my magazines and preparing my gear. It had already been given the once over by Gil, but he checked it once again. Finding nothing else to do besides worry, I started cleaning my rifle once again and was joined by the rest of my team. Since we were unsure of when we would embark, I decided to over oil the actions just to make sure everything was in working order.

“Nice pistol,” said Delacruz.

“It was my great grandfather’s when he was over here the last time,” I said.

“Can I see it?” he asked.

I handed it over and he cleared it with experienced hands. Looking over the sights, he snapped the trigger and saw it had been customized.

“Someone spent some coin on this,” he observed.

“How so?” I asked.

“New trigger, actions are a lot smoother than they should be for a pistol at least seventy years old, new sights. Probably sent it in at some point and had it reworked,” he said as he handed it back over.

“You know about that stuff?” I asked.

“My Dad was or rather is a gunsmith,” he said.

“Cool,” I said, not finding anything else to say about that. “I need to know something.”

“Sir, I’d rather not talk about why I was in the penal company. It’s behind me now,” he said.

“Listen, you’re on my team and we are heading in to combat. I need to know what kind of troops I have under me,” I said.

“I won’t disappoint you, but I really don’t want to share my faults,” he said.

“I have to know,” I repeated.

“Just know I won’t let you or the squad or the platoon down,” he said and started cleaning his own rifle. I let the matter drop for the moment, but still worried since he hadn’t been vetted by our unit yet. And we had no time to evaluate his skills either. I would just have to go on blind faith he knew what he was doing. After finishing up the cleaning tasks, I remembered not having supper that evening. I grabbed up Lomax and headed for the chow tent. They were not serving the regular meals right then and had sandwiches to grab and go. I snatched up two and we headed back to the bunks where we ate in silence and watched as the remainder of the platoon got finished with the inspections. A last minute call for supplies went out and we all started turning in for the night. However, even as we tried to fall to sleep, none of us were capable of catching anything more than a few winks here and there. I laid on my back listening to the remainder of my unit tossing and turning as we all thought about the impending invasion.

CHAPTER 4

Z Day Minus 2

We woke that morning to reveille and started to get our PT gear ready to go. However, in our early morning stupor of our restless night, we were stopped by Sergeant Winfield.

“Not today troops. You finally get a day off,” he said and rolled back over to go back to sleep.

“Sergeant?” the Lieutenant asked since it seemed like sacrilege not to perform our morning PT.

“We need everyone as rested as possible when they hit the beach. I can flat guarantee you not a single member of this platoon with the exception of me got a decent night’s sleep. We cannot take them into combat fatigued,” he explained.

“Training schedule for the day?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Weapons cleaning, final gear checks, last minute supply run and possibly some tabletop exercises with the platoon,” he said.

“No field exercises or anything?” asked the Lieutenant, worried he wasn’t up to the task of leading the platoon in combat.

“Not unless you specifically want. But today, we need rest more than anything,” said Winfield.

The Lieutenant ended the conversation and decided that getting a nap that day sounded perfectly fine to him. He stopped pulling on his running shoes and headed back into the bed himself. The remainder of the platoon did the same thing. We saw a few units doing PT that morning, but nothing like the typical massed formation runs we had been doing since the day we arrived. It seemed like everyone had the same idea to just sleep in, get caught up on rest and complete the tasks of getting ready to hit the beach. Even as tired as I was, I was still hungry and felt the overwhelming urge to eat something before trying to get another cat nap that day. I noticed Delacruz was sitting in his bunk looking at me.

“Want to grab a bite to eat?” I asked and saw Lomax was already back asleep.

“My thoughts exactly,” he replied and grabbed his rifle. Morning chow could be attended in PT gear although you still had to carry your weapon. I grabbed my rifle as web gear and joined him at the door. We headed to the mess tent and found they were serving a decent breakfast. Biscuits, eggs and sausage. There was even shredded cheese out on the line so it was something to behold. We were almost at the front of the short line when we were cut off by a base security patrol grabbing a quick meal before heading on out. They were dressed out in complete combat gear and looked ready for the infrequent IU raids against the bases. We finally got our turn and

filled plates before heading for a table. After making our sausage, egg and cheese biscuits, I got to know my team member a little better.

“How long have you been around?” I asked.

“Got into AFNAS 2nd right before we hit Scotland,” he answered. “And you?”

“I was assigned right after the fall of Birmingham,” I replied. “You’ve been around a while.”

“You see any action?” he asked.

“A little,” I answered. Three engagements with the IU rear guard counted as action I supposed. “And you? You see much action?”

“A little,” he said and took another bite of the biscuit. I saw we weren’t heading in any particular direction so I changed the subject.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Florida and you?” he asked.

“Georgia,” I replied.

“You live there during the Fall?” he asked.

“Yeah, north of Atlanta near Tennessee and North Carolina. Where in Florida?” I asked.

“North central near Tallahassee,” he replied and added with a laugh. “I would start signing that Chattahoochee song, but that might be a little too cliché.”

“Yeah, that’s the part I’m from,” I laughed in return.

“I never lived anywhere near the mountains until I went to basic up in Camp Asheville. Kind of rough for a flatlands boy like myself on the first run,” he said with a laugh.

“I imagine it could be,” I laughed with him. He was different than the other soldiers, but it wasn’t something I could put my thumb on. Maybe it was because he had been around for a while, but it was something else. He had a calmness about him and I just couldn’t figure out why. Everyone in our unit was jumpy since the unofficial figures for the casualties during the invasion were running at sixty to seventy percent. Of course, the “official” figures were running at thirty percent, so I figured the true number was somewhere in between the two. But either way, it was like he was calm about the whole thing and accepted the fact he might not be alive a week from now. But it was more, like a compressed spring just waiting to be released. Just looking at a spring you wouldn’t know it was under tension. But when you removed whatever weight is on it, it snaps and releases all the energy. Delacruz was a mystery to me.

“You have any spare barrel patches I can steal?” he asked me, bringing me back to the present.

“I don’t, but I have a spare Boresnake,” I said. “Need to give mine a once over myself.”

“Fired recently?” he asked.

“Yeah, day before yesterday,” I replied.

“Wish I could have gotten out of the penal company before then,” he replied.

“You keep making comments like that and it gets a person curious,” I said.

“Let’s just say I have an alcohol problem,” he said cryptically.

“Such as?” I asked.

“One’s too many and twenty four’s not enough,” he replied.

“Is this going to be a problem?” I asked.

“Nah, can’t take it with me anyway since it’s dead weight. I’d rather carry more ammo,” he replied. “The other cat on the fire team, he fairly new?”

“Yeah, been with us about four months. Hasn’t seen any combat yet,” I replied.

“Want me to take care of him?” he asked.

“He should be good to go, he’s pretty much up to speed,” I replied.

“But when the lead starts flying?” asked Delacruz.

“Haven’t the first clue,” I said. “You’ve been there before; you know you can’t tell what a person will do until being put in that situation.”

“I was scared half to death the first time I heard a shot fired in anger,” he laughed.

“I just knew for a fact some IU soldier had a bullet with my name on it,” I laughed in return.

“What’s the squad leader like?” he asked.

“Staff Sergeant Gilbert? Pretty good. He joined the Division during the last days in North America, saw his first action in Virginia I think. He gives the team leaders their assignments and lets us do what we need to do. Only gets involved when he needs to,” I replied.

“And the platoon sergeant?” he asked.

“Sergeant First Class Winfield has been around the block a few times. He was in the Army over in Iraq before the Fall and joined the AFNAS Territorial Guard afterwards. Joined up in the regular Army after the North American invasion. Declined a promotion to stay with the platoon for this operation. He’s smart as they can be and hasn’t made a bad decision yet that I know of,” I replied.

“Sounds like a good guy,” said Delacruz.

“He’s tough but fair. Our platoon is the best in the Brigade, maybe even the Division,” I replied. “First to lead, last to fall; that’s our motto.”

“And Axe?” he asked.

“Good Lieutenant. He knows what he doesn’t know and relies on Sergeant Winfield to help out. He’s not one of those officers that automatically starts giving orders without any prior experience. Just joined after our last combat in lower England and has come a long way since then,” I replied.

“He hasn’t seen combat yet?” asked Delacruz.

“No, but in training he seems to do just fine. And for the situations he doesn’t know about, he gets help from Sergeant Winfield,” I replied. “But he makes good decisions and doesn’t put us at risk unnecessarily.”

“Better than my last Lieutenant. He wanted to win medals and thought nothing of sending us charging into a fortified position while he hung out behind the lines and directed,” he said.

“Sounds like a real winner,” I said.

“Platoon Sergeant was just about as bad. Likes his coffee and doughnuts and kissing behind to get noticed. He didn’t care for soldier skills, but enjoyed making us look pretty,” said Delacruz. “He was bucking for a promotion to Company or Battalion.”

“We don’t have any of that around here,” I said.

“Seems like I came to the right outfit,” he replied. “Ready to head back?”

“Yeah, let me grab a cup of coffee,” I said and grabbed my canteen cup and filled it. We headed back to the tent where several members were up and about, but the majority was still sleeping. It was kind of a foreign concept to us, the being able to sleep in part. We got a few days off out of the year, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving (even though we were the AFNAS, we still celebrated the U.S. holiday) and a couple of others like our Independence Day. But to have just a normal day off to sleep in? A foreign concept since we did PT even on holidays. It was just weird. Anyway, I dug into my footlocker and pulled out my spare Boresnake for the 5.56 caliber and handed it over to Delacruz. Even though his weapon seemed clean, he still took it apart and started cleaning it. I decided it was best for me to do the same thing with my rifle, finding the

carbon had seeped out once again and gotten onto the chrome bolt and carrier. It was an easy fix and I finished cleaning and was about to start oiling when I was stopped by Delacruz.

“Try this,” he said and handed over a bottle of oil.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Motor oil from the HMMWVs. It’s synthetic and works great,” he said.

“Seems kind of heavy for gun oil,” I remarked.

“It takes a couple of shots to warm up, but works perfectly fine. I mean, ever hear of a HMMWV failing because of a seized engine?” he asked.

“No,” I said and decided to give it a try. He seemed to know what he was talking about and I figured I could take a small chance. I generously lubed up the internal workings of the rifle and put it back together, function testing it before setting it off to the side and doing the same for my pistol. After cleaning, it did seem to work better, the slide snapping forward a little quicker than it had before when I used the standard CLP.

“Here’s a spare bottle I stole from the motor pool,” he said and handed over the small squirt bottle filled with the oil. I took it and packed it away with the rest of my cleaning gear and set my rifle off to the side.

“That one of the new mods?” he asked.

“Yeah, the one with the burst feature on it. I don’t really care for it since it is a precision rifle, but better to have and not need than need and not have,” I replied.

“I heard the accuracy went down on them,” said Delacruz.

“I got an old style barrel with the new actions. Works just fine out to 800,” I said.

“I hope we keep them out that far,” he replied.

We continued cleaning as others got up and headed for breakfast. After cleaning, I decided to catch a nap and rolled up my poncho liner and went back to sleep almost immediately. I had no idea how long I was asleep for until loud alarms woke me up. I didn’t realize what it was until I recognized the signal as an air raid. I grabbed my gear and ran for the nearest bunker without putting on my boots. Sure my feet got wet, but at the same time, it was better to put them on under cover rather than wait until a bomb landed right on top of my head while I was lacing them up. The platoon crowded into the concrete bunkers as we heard the Patriot Missiles launching on course to intercept the inbound threats. However, it seemed like not all of them were successful since we heard three large explosions in camp somewhere. And final smaller explosions that sounded like firecrackers going off. We had three direct hits from single warheads and one from a cluster bomb unit.

“Alarm Black, Alarm Black, Alarm Black, post attack reconnaissance now authorized. Report any UXO to Brigade Command Post using channel Alpha One. Utilize channel Alpha Five to report casualties. Alarm Black, Alarm Black, Alarm Black,” announced the loudspeaker system about ten minutes after the last explosion was heard.

“Donnie Mack! Get your team and go clear the Company area,” yelled Lieutenant Axe from the other end of the bunker.

“Alpha Team, let’s hop to it,” I announced and started making my way to the door. It wasn’t easy since the area was crowded, but my team of Lomax, Delacruz and Arnold was waiting at the entrance. “We’ll check the bunker area and adjacent areas and head into the sleeping area. Delacruz and Arnold, go clockwise covering six o’clock to midnight. Lomax and I will cover six to noon. You have the radio?”

“Got it,” said Delacruz as he held up the radio before making sure it was on the proper channel and sliding it into a pouch on his web gear. We first checked the immediate area around the bunker and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary before meeting back up and going our different ways around the tent area. We headed out, covering the seven large tents our Company used as home. It took us a while since we had to go through the tents as well as around it, but we finished within a half an hour, not finding anything. Delacruz and Arnold didn’t report any finding either as they finished about five minutes later.

“Command, this is sector Delta Three-Zero, over,” I said over the radio after waiting for another sector to clear the channel with their report.

“Sector Delta Three-Zero, this is Command, go ahead,” announced the female voice.

“Sector Delta Three-Zero is all clear, I say again, Delta Three-Zero is all clear. No damage to report and no casualties,” I reported.

“I copy, Delta Three-Zero all clear, no damage and no casualties. Be advised, UXO hazard in Sector Alpha-Alpha One-Zero through Five-Zero. Additional hazard of possible UXO in Sector Tango Four-Four through Tango Four-Niner,” she said.

“I copy Alpha-Alpha One-Zero through Five-Zero and Tango Four-Four through Four-Niner off limits,” I replied. “Delta Three-Zero out.”

We headed back to the bunker while we waited for the all clear to be sounded. Apparently not everything was kosher, but we heard the EOD teams detonating the unexploded bomblets over in the camp somewhere. An additional team was disarming the thousand kilo warhead of another missile that didn’t detonate properly. It didn’t take that long as they had a lot of practice over the last months as the attacks intensified against our bases. But after a half an hour, the “all clear” was sounded and we were allowed to head back to our tents. As soon as we arrived, I changed out my socks and got them ready to turn into the laundry.

“No laundry services anymore,” announced Gil.

“What?” I asked.

“Packing up and getting ready to move. You won’t see them again. I’d suggest cleaning them in the basins,” he said. I thought it was a decent idea and got them ready along with my t-shirt and underwear from the previous days. However, that idea was intercepted by Sergeant Winfield.

“Okay guys, additional packing list,” he announced. “Pack another two rations in your assault packs and an additional three in your rucks. Here’s the ruck packing list.”

He handed out four sheets of paper to the squad leaders and in turn, they saw the new items to be added. Not a big deal as we start unpacking our rucks for the umpteenth time and repacked it in accordance with what was provided. Additional rations, batteries and new cartridges for our water filters were handed out to be packed. We packed in more food than I thought was necessary, increasing our rations to five days worth, two in our assault packs and another three in our rucks. I thought it was a little extreme, but had never found anything wrong with the directions we had been given. I packed up the remainder of the items and looked over my team’s rucks as well. Everyone was packed away and taking the extra packing material to the garbage can by the door. It finally struck me as to the packing of our rucks and was curious about one point.

“Sergeant Gilbert, we aren’t going to be carrying these on the assault are we?” I asked.

The Lieutenant overheard me and answered to the rest of the platoon. “No, they will be loaded into a container and delivered after we have secured the beach. Also, make sure your footlockers are ready to be transported as well. Another supply unit will be storing it and shipping it when we end up moving bases, so make sure it’s locked and you’ve got the key.”

We continued to finish packing and were given last minute items when the telephone rang in our tent. Sergeant Winfield answered and spoke for a couple of moments before hanging up. “Staff call in twenty minutes.”

“Where at and what kind?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Battalion and at the theater,” he said. “You, me and the senior squad leader.”

“Have everyone complete the packing and be ready for us to return. Get chow to go if you get it,” said the Lieutenant. “Nobody goes wandering off until we return.”

“Got it,” said Gil.

“And have everyone write a letter home. To loved ones or those they care about,” said Sergeant Winfield.

“Sir?” asked Gil.

“Write a last letter in case we don’t get the chance after we get back,” said Winfield and the implications of the letters were immediately known. He wanted us to write our families just in case we never got the chance to write another letter period. I grabbed a notepad and started jotting down some thoughts I had, nothing serious and nothing to indicate we were heading into the beach soon. I didn’t really have a rhyme or reason to what I was writing, but just random thoughts I had been thinking of for a while. I didn’t even realize the Lieutenant and Sergeants Winfield and Thompkins had come back until they announced their presence.

“We head to the port in six hours,” announced the Lieutenant after we all got quiet. And afterwards, you could hear a pin drop in the tent.

CHAPTER 5

Z Day Minus 36 hours

“Everyone have everything they need? We aren’t coming back,” said Sergeant Winfield as we slung up our rucks and were walking towards the door. “Also, grab a ration on your way out and stow it in your cargo pocket, you’re going to need it.”

Everyone turned and looked one last time at their bunks just to make sure they had everything they needed. The remainder of our items were packed away into our foot lockers or in a small shipping container just outside of the tent and locked up. Nothing we could see was needed at the time and we started shuffling towards the door as trucks were pulling up.

“We get to ride for a change? Figured we were walking all the way to France,” quipped one of the members of the third squad.

“Keep it up and I’ll make it happen. All the way under water,” laughed Winfield, showing a little humor despite our fears of eventually storming the hostile beach.

“Except for you Sarge, I hear you walk on water,” laughed another member of the platoon.

“I get no respect,” he laughed. “Load up by squads and help each other out.”

We got into the trucks, helping each other in turn and stowed our rucks in the middle of the bed. The ride to the port shouldn’t have taken that long, but massive military convoys were all out on the roads in Southern England and the MP detachments assisting with traffic control were hard pressed to keep up. But we managed to get to our ship and got ready to board after the other units already ahead of us. I don’t even know if the ship had a name, it just looked like a boat to me. Eventually someone from the ship arrived at our location and gave us the down and dirty about what we could and couldn’t do, where we should go and where we should stay away from and actions in case we were attacked. We really didn’t know exactly what we would do sitting on a large target in the middle of the ocean, but figured he had to do his job and we didn’t mind.

He finally finished and we were directed to a container near the ship. We ended up shedding our heavy rucks and stashing them away inside. I made sure my tags were on correctly since a few thousand ruck sacks tended to look the same when lined up. The container was sealed and a crane immediately swept it up and loaded it on the deck of the ship. We were marshaled over to the gangway and started loading the ship. We ended up being slightly off balance since the boat itself was rocking with the tides and the gangway slipped under our feet. It also had something to do with carrying the massive loads we were carrying for the invasion. We had our standard three day assault packs with spare uniforms and clothing, rations, extra ammo, extra water, water filter and purification tabs, spare batteries, ditty bag, weapons cleaning kit...the list continued with the dozens of items a modern soldier carries into battle and puts some serious weight on their shoulders. However, our PT had always conditioned us to withstand the weight and we

knew we could function with it. But also added in the body armor and web gear we had on, our loads were considerable. But at least we had the newer body armor with the lightweight plates. So instead of thirty pounds of body armor, we only had fifteen.

We got onto the ship where another sailor pointed us in the right direction of our company and battalion. We ended up having a battalion on the ship and were informed to “just hang on, we’re getting there.” We were all nervous about the mission and several of our members had to already use the head. I mean, I wasn’t much better since I hadn’t faced this kind of action either. But I was responsible now and needed to set the good example. I looked over my team, seeing Lomax and Arnold looked pretty nervous even though we hadn’t even left the port. Delacruz just had an even look on his face and wasn’t really showing much. I didn’t have a mirror handy, so I had no idea what I must have looked like right then. I was nervous, sure, and I wished I had more training. At least a few weeks to get more comfortable into my new job as fire team leader. Sure, I’d been put in charge of the random exercise, but nothing more frequent than every so often.

I knew if it had just been me, I could accept the consequences, but when I was in charge of three others that could die at the decisions I made, it got a little trickier. So I had been racking my brain since being put in charge of what I would do and how I would do it, trying to plan for each and every conceivable scenario. I still wasn’t sure what I would do if we ended up...strike that, when we ended up on the two way firing range and the thoughts continued to pound my brain.

“Okay folks, eat,” said Lieutenant Axe as he came around. He must have seen the concern on my face and came over to me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine sir,” I said.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“A little,” I admitted.

“I’m the same, wondering whether or not I can cut the mustard or whether or not I’m going to make a bad decision that ends up with a bunch of folks dead. Sometimes it happens whether we make all the right choices or not. It doesn’t make the decisions any easier, but just something we have to accept. And no amount of training will ever give us the confidence of leading men into battle. Only the test itself will give us that,” he said.

I saw he was just as nervous as I was, probably more so. I was responsible for a single team of four. He was responsible for over forty personnel who could all be ended at one moment if he made a bad call. I saw I had it easy, but it still didn’t really help my concerns.

“Thanks, L-T,” I said with half a grin.

“Eat up, we aren’t moving anywhere for a while,” he said and patted me on the shoulder and moved on to the next small group.

I grabbed the ration out of my cargo pocket and ripped it open, finding a meal I actually enjoyed for a change. While others found the ham slice to be pretty horrid, it was one of the ones I could tolerate as long as I put it on the crackers. Dad told me about the meal once and I wondered if this probably wasn't the same recipe or maybe even the same rations. I chuckled to myself and ended up trading my wheat bread away for a pack of crackers. I found comfortable seating on the hood of a HMMWV sitting on the deck and started eating. My fire team gravitated toward me and we all ate in silence. Eventually, we must have all been loaded and we heard the ship's engines start up and a lot of commotion on the deck as sailors went this way and that doing whatever chores they had planned. But we weren't the only one. I never thought to see a traffic jam in a port before, but we certainly had it. The ships all seemed to be moving at the same time and heading out into the deeper water. We watched as the various ships carrying thousands of men and women headed out to sea, but never colliding with each other.

"Okay troopers, come on around," said the Lieutenant. We all gathered in on his and saw other units doing much the same. As soon as we were collected, he started in on his briefing.

"We are heading into the coast as planned and invading Sphinx Beach along with the NESAs 12th Light Infantry Brigade. There is going to be a brief window of opportunity tomorrow morning where we can invade. Our sector for the company is Sphinx Blue 4. We are to clear beach defenses and continue on inland with Vierville being our initial objective. After that the leadership will give further instructions. Additionally, airborne forces are supposed to help clear the way for us heading in by attacking strategic objectives behind the beaches, so hopefully it will draw troops away. I want to read to you what the General of the Army sent to us. He sent it out this morning and it's...just let me read it to you."

"My fellow soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen. Today marks a turning point in the war which we all have been waiting and training for. This operation will begin the liberation of mainland Europe and the release of the citizens of those nations from the tyranny they have been facing each and every day for the past several years. The hopes and dreams of millions are counting on you to succeed and to push the enemy back where they came from. Our own nation's hopes and dreams are counting on you to succeed. We have not been invaded in two hundred years by an enemy from the outside and furthermore, we have never faced an enemy so bent on destroying our homes, our families and our way of life. We have pushed them off our shores and out of our homes, but now it the time for us to continue pushing them further away and restoring liberty to the oppressed. Just like your fathers, grandfathers and generations of your families have done before, you are here for a liberation. A reckoning that will tell the Islamic Union we will no longer tolerate their continued occupation of those yearning to be free."

"To our valiant allies serving from the occupied nations and our other friends and allies from around the world. We appreciate the restraint you have showed while we have built up our forces to complete this invasion. We understand your families and friends have been under great hardship since the Islamic Union has forced their way into your homes. But now is the time to deliver them from the clutches of evil. The bells of liberty are ringing all over the world and very soon, your homelands will hear the sounds of triumphant release from tyranny."

“I know as we begin this campaign, we will prevail over those who would destroy the lives of so many in such a dastardly fashion. I would like to take the time to thank you all for your service and the sacrifices you have made thus far in this war. And finally, I would like to say I am proud to be serving with you during this important time in history. May God be with us and protect us as we begin this battle. R. J. Martin, General of the Army, Commanding.”

“I can’t really think of anything to add to that, but I will say this. Remember that these are the same people who have killed our brothers, sisters, fathers, mother, aunts and uncles. Our family and our friends. I want you to remember that a burn it deep into your minds when you hit the beach. I want you to kill them before they get another chance to kill anyone else. And we will not fail,” concluded the Lieutenant. “Sergeant Winfield? Anything to add?”

“Remember your jobs, keep your powder dry and remember the soldier next to you. When we hit the beach, all you have is each other to stay safe. Keep each other alive and Godspeed,” said Sergeant Winfield.

“Try to get some rest as best as you can,” said the Lieutenant.

“The forces have been moved away from the beach. All that remains are regiments where divisions are supposed to be,” said the IU General.

“You disagree with the plan?” asked the IU Marshal.

“Americans are quite stubborn and cannot take a hint,” he chuckled. “No matter how many times we attack, they will not get the message to die.”

“Can you think of a better option rather than having our troops getting bombarded by their battleships and aircraft?” asked the Marshal.

“No,” admitted the General. “I believe we can force the issue. But this weather system causes me concern. The weather will decrease the efficiency on both sides.”

“And it works better for us since they cannot resupply,” said the Marshal.

“And our own forces will have to fight through the winds to attack,” said the General.

“I have great confidence in you to attack through them and destroy those beachheads. It will set back their plans for at least a year and maybe even cause them to rethink their strategy. Plus, we will be able to see their tactics and be better able to counter them in the future,” said the Marshal.

“And give them the hope they will succeed. After they establish a beachhead, they will have the optimism of winning. And a positive mindset is dangerous in an opponent,” said the General.

“It is too late for any other plans,” said the Marshal.

“We will strike hard at the infidels and drive them back into the ocean,” said the General.

“Go with God and destroy the nonbeliever,” said the Marshal.

“The weather isn’t looking good,” said a Captain in the FNC Headquarters in Manchester.

“We will be fine,” said the Colonel in charge.

“That storm is moving in,” said the Captain.

“I think this high pressure system will move in quicker than we expect and keep it well south of the invasion forces,” said the Colonel.

“Sir, I’ve seen this before, this system will not get any faster. The weather over Europe is somewhat predictable. This system will stall right over the top of our troop’s heads,” said the Captain.

“And I believe otherwise,” said the Colonel.

“You should at least advise the staff it is a possibility,” said the Captain.

“The invasion is already too far along to stop,” said the Colonel.

“It can be called off until the first troop sets foot on that beach,” said the Captain.

“You need to learn your place. The forecast is set and we will not worry about this storm system. It will stall south of our troops,” said the Colonel.

“And this decision can and will get people killed!” objected the Captain.

“Get out of here!” growled the Colonel. The Captain left and the Colonel looked at the updated forecast before putting it into the shredder and continuing with his brief to the Combined Staff.

Z Day Minus Six Hours

Aircraft thundered down the runways at over one hundred bases in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The entire fleet of attack and interdiction aircraft had been held back the previous weeks for this moment. As they orbited overhead, they continued checking their mission packages and waiting for the order to head south. Tanker aircraft were orbiting overhead and already starting to refuel the fighters and bombers so they would have full fuel tanks heading into battle. Naval ships were moving into position along the coast and getting their weapons systems online for the initial bombardment of IU positions along the coast.

Transport aircraft, C-17 and C-130 types, were already heading south in formations. Filled to the maximum with airborne troops, they had their targets and were preparing for the largest airborne drop since World War Two. Their targets were strategic in nature and intended to draw off the IU forces away from the beach as to give the landing forces enough of a chance to claw out a beachhead. Their mission was dangerous, but it was something they accepted with pride. They knew they could not fail and would be victorious at the day's end.

“Their airborne forces are orbiting and getting into formation. Their landing craft have departed the ports and are heading south as well,” said the IU Colonel.

“Are our fighters ready?” asked the Marshal.

“They are sir,” said the Colonel.

“And the surprise packages?” asked the Marshall.

“Already airborne,” said the Colonel.

“As soon as the cargo aircraft start heading south, launch the fighters and destroy them,” said the Marshal. “Keep the attack aircraft in reserve.”

“And the landing ships?” asked the Colonel.

“Will be targeted by the attack aircraft and the submarine force,” said the Marshal.

“It will be done,” said the Colonel as he departed the office. The Marshal let out a great sigh and wished he could have gotten more sleep that afternoon. He wished the FNC had been more accommodating with their timing and launched the attacks later in the morning so he could have gotten a few more hours of sleep.

“All Phoenix units, all Phoenix units, standby for incoming packets,” said the General on board the EC-11 aircraft. Designed and built as an airborne command post, the 767 aircraft was packed to the gills with communications gear of all sorts and could probably talk to the little green men on Mars if they wanted to. The packets were transmitted to the orbiting fighters, bombers, cargo aircraft, tankers, search and rescue units and AWACS aircraft. Upon confirmation of being sent, the General got back on the radio and keyed the transmitter for the launch of one of the largest air battles in history.

“All Phoenix units, this is Zeus. Implement Phoenix Plan Alpha. I say again, implement Phoenix Plan Alpha,” he said and hoped his voice didn’t crack under the stress.

Thousands of aircraft started moving south towards the mainland upon receipt of the transmission. The day they had all been training and waiting for was finally upon them. Z Day. Invasion day. Since historically D Day had been used and we didn’t want the invasion to be confused with that date and X Day was already taken by the amphibious operations to secure the United Kingdom and Ireland, we had to pick a name. I guess the Generals, Marshals and Admirals needed a catchy name. So Z Day it was.

We were on board our transport heading south along with hundreds of other vessels. Word quickly spread throughout the crews as well as the soldiers that we had received the “go” code and were heading for the beach. Some people looked happy, others went to the side of the ship and vomited and others still had looks of sheer terror on their faces. I tried to keep my own face neutral and knew this day would eventually come for me, for us. We also knew we had several hours before hitting the beaches before we would actually be impacted by the message, but I thought it was just enough time for the fear to grow in all of us.

“Activity picking up! The large blips are the cargo aircraft, probably with the airborne drops. The smaller blips are probably the fighters,” said the controller at a radar screen.

“When they get over the Channel, send the fighters north. Target the transport aircraft. Ignore the fighters,” said the IU General.

“Yes sir,” said the controller as he started sending out messages to the other individuals controlling the orbiting fighters.

“And send the surprise packages north now,” said the General.

“Shabah units, you are cleared to engage,” said the controller after finding the appropriate channel and sending out the encrypted message. He received eight confirmations.

“All units! All units! This is Sentinel 5! Drop fast and hit the deck! Inbound bandits!” shouted the controller on board the E-11A AWACS aircraft as over a hundred fighter type aircraft started appearing on the edge of the screen and heading north. And more were appearing with each passing moment. The entire IU Western Theater was being launched to meet the threat. “All Apollo units! Be advised, count of inbound bandits at...one hundred eighty and increasing. Disregard last, count is at two hundred twenty and climbing! Go gate and intercept!”

Each and every controller on the flight started tuning on their sets to the inbound threats. The other AWACS were notified and also started dispatching fighters their way. But the problem was the airborne drops were scattered out and getting the fighters into position wasn't an easy task. But the units charged to meet the threats and faced a wall of radar and infrared guided missiles as they headed in. The air battle for the invasion was starting a bit early as alerts went out to the units in the U.K. and Ireland for additional support. Pilots who planned on being airborne just prior to the invasion suddenly were jolted out of their sleep and informed of their new task. They raced to their waiting aircraft and thundered into the sky, getting intercepts as soon as they were airborne. But they were badly out of position and would take time to catch up to the massive battle now raging over the English Channel and Northern France.

The fighter escorts on the transport aircraft were fighting to survive as much as they could. But the IU fighter concentrations were just too much. But they did manage to down more than their fair share, but for every kill, one more slipped through the fighter screen and towards the lumbering transports at full power.

“Cougar One through Four; turn to two-six-five for intercept. Be advised, bandits at level twenty, range forty miles,” said the controller as she watched as the flight turned towards the flight of JF-17 Thunder fighters getting into position on a group of C-130s. “Nike Five through Eight; bandits are at your ten o'clock, altitude fifteen, thirty miles.”

She continued dispatching fighters towards the threats. A sudden blip appeared on her scope and suddenly disappeared. Her eyes came wide open as the blip reappeared and a radar threat warning appeared on everyone's scope. And suddenly, two smaller blips appeared on her scope.

“Dragon Flight! Inbound bandit! Eighteen miles, altitude thirty-five!” she screamed into her microphone. “Inbound threat! Vampire! Vampire! Vampire! Activate the jammers!”

The pilot automatically had flipped the switch on the active jammers as soon as he heard the warning tone in his headset. He additionally activated the chaff and flare dispensers which started automatically. However, the missiles kept coming towards the aircraft, homing in on the powerful radar of the craft itself. And at a speed of Mach 4, the AWACS had no chance of running away to safety. The first missile impacted on the large dish, tearing it off the mounts and crashing into the tail of the aircraft. The impact caused severe electrical disruption in the aircraft and the jammers shut off to preserve themselves. The second missile lost the guidance and switched automatically to the active radar homing and saw the large target in its computer brain. It impacted just above the left wing root and tore the wing completely off the aircraft.

Dragon Flight, tasked with protecting the AWACS saw the destruction in vivid detail. They activated their onboard radars and turned towards the threat, not finding anything on their scopes. But they lit their afterburners and charged down the last known path of the bandits. The F-16I fighters never saw the aircraft on their radars and reported the loss of the AWACS into the main invasion headquarters in Manchester.

Three others AWACS suffered the same fate until the last shut down its radar and turned north towards England and the improved radar coverage there. The fighters over the beaches of Normandy were on their own for the moment and attempted to engage as best as they could. However, without the airborne radar providing them intercept solutions, they had to rely entirely on their on board sets and attempt to locate the enemy fighters. Powerful ground based jammers and SAM units started picking them off as well since the IU fighters stayed below a certain altitude intercepting the transports, leaving the higher flying fighters as targets for the SAM systems undetected until that moment. It was mass confusion to say the least over Northern France.

“Target destroyed,” said the pilot of the HESA Cyclone aircraft as he watched the flaming wreckage of the AWACS falling towards the ocean below. Designed and built in secret, this was the IU answer to the F-22 being produced at a slow rate in the FNC. Stealthy and fast, it lacked the sophisticated electronics of its American rival. But it barely showed on radar and even the most sophisticated FNC sets could barely make out the aircraft at ten miles. It was a trait the IU planners knew about and used to their advantage.

“Shabah Four, we copy target destroyed. You are free to engage targets of opportunity until bingo fuel,” said the ground controller in the massive Western European Command Center. “Sir, the American AWACS aircraft have been destroyed.”

“Send the message to command in Stuttgart. Also advise them the transports are being destroyed as we speak,” said the General as he looked over the composite radar image of Northern France. “Send additional units out for fighter sweeps targeting the maritime aircraft. Our fleet will be arriving shortly. Also, put the bombers and attack aircraft on alert. They will have further targets soon.”

The Captain started sending additional units out over the North Sea looking for the P-8 aircraft currently looking for the IU submarine and missile boats coming out of the German and Danish harbors. Most of the submarines were already in position and starting to head towards the English Channel. The FNC submarine force had already claimed a number of the diesel electric boats, but others slipped through, getting ready to target the assault ships as they entered the Channel.

Also, the bomber and attack aircraft were sitting in hidden bases around France, Benelux and Germany. They were rough field capable aircraft which could take off from long meadows and roadways rated as such. And with the highway system being built under the old NATO specifications, they were perfectly capable of launching and landing the aircraft. The ships, even those protected by the Aegis systems, would be large targets as they unloaded the soldiers waiting to come on shore.

The pilot on Shabah 4 saw the brief glimpse of the F-16 fighters tasked with destroying him pass by. He turned his aircraft after them and prepared to fire his other missiles. While he could only carry two of the massive AA-28 missiles, he still had four AA-26 IR guided missiles in the forward rotary launcher and his internal cannon. He vectored in on the closest fighter and waited for the IR seeker to lock before firing a single missile from three miles. It homed in as intended and the F-16 exploded from the impact. He drew his fighter to the left as he watched the second F-16 start a turn towards him. Luck and vectors were with him as he fired the 23mm cannon and raked the fighter from the nose all the way to the tail. Flames started coming from the engine as the pilot clawed for his ejection handles. He was wounded, but managed to activate the system before his fighter exploded in midair.

“Command, Shabah 4. I need additional vectors,” said the IU pilot.

“Shabah 4, turn to heading 200, multiple targets at one hundred kilometers,” said the controller.

The IU pilot would make another four kills that morning, another fighter and three cargo transports. It was not the end of the downed aircraft from the FNC.

“Inbound threat! Seven o’clock and coming fast!” shouted the flight engineer on board the C-17 transporting two companies of airborne troops. The engineer was a last minute addition to the transport to handle the specialized equipment needed for the airborne drop. He also handled the electronic warfare equipment.

“Time to drop?” shouted the pilot.

“Still eleven minutes!” shouted the engineer.

“Are we feet dry?” asked the pilot.

“Yes!” came the reply from the co-pilot. “Two minutes ago.”

“Time on intercept?” asked the pilot as he flipped the warning lights to red in the cargo area, notifying the loadmaster of the impending drop.

“Two minutes until they are within missile range!” shouted the engineer.

“Get rid of the cargo!” shouted the pilot to the loadmaster as the cargo bay was suddenly opened.

“Stand up! Hook up! Get to the doors!” shouted the loadmaster.

“What’s going on?!” demanded a Captain.

“We are being intercepted by fighters! We have to get you off this plane!” shouted the loadmaster as the light started flashing red.

“We aren’t over our drop zone!” protested the Captain.

“You can wait around until we get shot down or you can maybe survive by jumping early! Your choice Captain!” shouted the loadmaster over the air blowing through the cargo bay. Final safety checks were omitted as the troops hooked up their static lines and got ready to head out into open space. The light turned green and the loadmaster gave the signals for the group to get out of the aircraft. “Go! Go! Go!”

The Captain hesitated for a split second before deciding it was better to get on the ground and attempt to fight instead of being helpless inside this aluminum can. He lead the way off the rear ramp and the static line activated his parachute. He was jolted into position as usual and got ready to land. They were barely fifteen hundred feet above ground and the trip down was thankfully short.

Hundreds of other transports had the same idea as they were being targeted by IU fighters, SAMs and AAA. Thousands of paratroops were being dropped over Northern France in other places than their drop zone. Funny thing about history; sometimes, certainly when you really don’t want it to, it repeats itself. And just like the last large airborne operations in Normandy, the paratroopers were spread out between hell and Jesus and typically nowhere even close to their intended targets.

But the aircraft weren’t as lucky. Fully half the cargo aircraft flying into the mainland were severely damaged or destroyed that night. And those that returned couldn’t fly back into the zones without heavy fighter coverage. They ended up meeting their fighter escorts over the Channel, but by then, the damage had been done.

“Sir, the airborne battles aren’t going as planned,” said the NESA Major General in charge of the air battle. “We aren’t sure of the exact counts, but it looks like we might have lost up to half the transports. Plus, the airborne drops were scattered all over Normandy.”

“We planned on a thirty percent attrition rate,” said the General of the Army and hated sounding so cold about the deaths of the soldiers assigned to him. “What’s this going to do to our plans?”

“Depends sir. We don’t have the communications with all the airborne troops yet and it appears the GPS signals are being scrambled,” said the Major General.

“Scrambled? How?” demanded the General of the Army.

“We don’t know sir. We are picking up signals from over the continent itself. It appears the IU has a new form of jammer that can scramble the GPS signals,” said the Major General.

“Sir, the thing is useless,” remarked the First Sergeant to his Company Commander.

“What’s going on First Sergeant?” asked the Captain.

“If we were to believe this device, we are anywhere from Antarctica to Brazil to Siberia. The signals are scrambled,” said the First Sergeant.

“How can they scramble the GPS?” asked the Captain as he looked at his own device as a map of the middle of the Pacific Ocean was loaded.

“Can’t answer that sir,” said the First Sergeant as he dug out his compass.

“So where are we?” asked the Captain.

“I have no idea sir,” said the First Sergeant. “We dropped way early so there is no telling.”

“We do it the old fashioned way then,” said the Captain. “Can you get us a location?”

“I’ll give it a try, but with it being dark out, there is no telling,” said the First Sergeant.

“Sergeant Major, would you gather the platoon leaders and senior NCOs so we can set out a perimeter,” said the Captain.

“Lieutenant Marks is injured. Twisted his ankle in an Amber Landing,” said the Sergeant Major.

“Anyone else hurt?” asked the Captain.

“Not that I am aware of sir,” said the Sergeant Major.

“Okay, go ahead and grab everyone and have Marks limp over here if he can,” said the Captain.
“And Sergeant Major? Thanks for the help.”

“Roger that sir,” said the Battalion Sergeant Major, feeling out of place attached to the Company level. But like many senior enlisted NCOs, he enjoyed getting the chance to play soldier for a bit and would assist the Captain however he could. He gathered the various Lieutenants and Platoon Sergeants for the meeting and passed the word for the soldiers to get prepared to set out a perimeter. He returned to the Captain and the First Sergeant. “Sir, I’ll go ahead and start getting the troops into hasty fighting positions.”

“Thank you Sergeant Major. Remind them we might have more friendlies wandering around out there,” said the Captain. “First Sergeant?”

“Almost done sir, I think,” said the First Sergeant. He heard the Sergeant Major getting the men into hasty fighting positions and creating a perimeter. He had almost figured out where he believed they were when gunfire was heard from the east side.

“Contact three o’clock!” screamed a squad leader and fired his weapon. Return fire was heard, the crack of an AK on full auto being unmistakable. The fight had commenced as the Sergeant Major rushed towards the shooting to get the positions into line since the remainder of the leadership was gathered at the makeshift command post. A loud scream was heard as the first artillery round impacted inside their perimeter. Additional rounds were heard slamming into the area they were in, some set for delayed action and others for airburst.

“Incoming!” shouted fifteen voices at the same time as everyone went to ground at the indirect fire. It seemed to spur the IU soldiers on as they commenced a headlong attack into the FNC positions. They were well trained and advanced with a purpose, keeping the FNC Company locked in position under fire as others moved forward. And since the defenders never had an opportunity to get a viable defense set, they were quickly being overrun.

“Sir! The command group bought it! Direct hit by an artillery round!” screamed a Specialist after running up to the Sergeant Major.

“Survivors?” asked the Sergeant Major.

“None sir!” said the Specialist as he fired towards the attackers.

The Sergeant Major saw they were being attacked by at least two companies, maybe even more. The IU screamed loud war cries as they advanced and continued and more of the airborne troopers were hit. The flanks were under attack now and they were quickly being overwhelmed. There was only one option for the moment.

“Retreat, nine o’clock!” shouted the Sergeant Major as he grabbed at the first two soldiers he could find and pushed them that way. “Retreat two hundred meters to the west and regroup!”

He could see soldiers getting up, grabbing packs and running away from the incoming attack. There was no shame in retreating as they planned to fight again once they were able to regroup and establish a chain of command. He fired again at the retreating IU soldiers and saw the remainder of the company falling back in his night vision. There were no further survivors and

he ran himself to his spot designated. He didn't realize how far he had run until being challenged by a sentry in the outpost. "Halt!"

"Aardvark! Aardvark! Aardvark!" shouted the Sergeant Major, giving the running password. "Everyone ruck up right now and prepare to move!"

Everyone scrambled to gather their things and prepare weapons. He took a quick headcount and saw he only had thirty troops left out of the original hundred assigned to the company. "Where's your weapon soldier?"

"Hit by a round Sergeant Major," said the Private with a squeaky voice.

The Sergeant Major unstrapped his holster and handed it over with the magazines for his pistol. "I want that back soldier. Give up your rifle magazines to your buddies who need them. We'll get you a rifle from a dead IU trooper when we kill one."

"Where are we heading to sir?" asked the senior squad leader, a Staff Sergeant.

"As soon as we get ready, we move north," said the Sergeant Major.

"Where are we at sir?" asked the Staff Sergeant in a quiet voice.

"We don't know yet soldier," said the Sergeant Major.

"And now?" asked the Staff Sergeant.

"As a wise General once said, we'll start the war from right here," said the Sergeant Major. "Get the troops into formation. We head north."

And the battle for Normandy began much like this very same scene. Airborne operations all over Northern France were dropped far from their intended locations and ended up being surprised by the IU formations that had been pulled back from the beaches. Many were overrun in a matter of hours after the airborne drops, but small bands gathered together and started fighting as best as they could. Platoon and Company sized formations started fighting the war from where they happened to be rather than where they were supposed to be. Many, if not most, of the units were nowhere close to their intended targets. But they started fighting the IU and caused some concern by the IU staff. But overall, the troop concentrations were not anywhere near the size to where they would cause great harm and the majority of the IU formations waited eagerly for the main invasion to start.

CHAPTER 6

Z Day

Suddenly it was raining. Not from the low hanging clouds, but rather from the explosions that started in the water adjacent to our landing craft. While the war was bringing serious technological advances to the battlefield, we still used the old fashioned landing craft used for generations before. Some were modified Higgins Boats (although slightly larger) like we were while others traveled in style in hovercraft and AAV7A3s. But no matter what, we were heading to shore after unloading from our ship and getting into the well deck underneath. It was finally upon us and we knew there was no turning back.

But as we crept closer to shore, fighting the increasing surf and the winds, the IU had different ideas on their mind since they were shelling us and attacking us with bombers and other aircraft. The protective SAM ships were hit first by antiradar missiles and the landing craft soon came under attack as well. I guess lucky or unlucky the larger ships made more plentiful targets and received the brunt of the IU aerial attacks. As did the larger landing craft, medium and landing craft, tank and the hovercraft. Lucky or unlucky, we were under heavy bombardment. Apparently the Air Force and the Navy weren't as effective as they thought they were going to be.

I tried to cringe lower in the craft, but how far down could I go when the death was raining in from above? I peeked upwards as more shells hit nearby and rained more seawater into our boat. A hand clasped down on my shoulder and I didn't even realize I had a death grip on my rifle before then.

“Relax, we'll be on the beach soon enough,” said Gil.

It sounded reassuring enough, but I could see the concern written all over his face as well. And while his hand was supposed to allay my fears, he was clamped down pretty hard as well. I had come in at the tail end of the fighting in England and had never been subjected to the heavy bombardment we were under at that time. Oh sure, we had mortar fire and some artillery rounds, but nothing like the large caliber shells landing around us. A near miss rocked the craft upwards in the water and I thought it might capsize before settling back down on the path towards the beach.

Lighter explosions supplemented the larger guns as mortars and automatic grenade launchers started ranging out to hit us. Heavy machine gun fire was interspaced with the explosions, some hitting our craft. I really hoped the engineers knew what they were talking about when they said the hulls were designed to withstand the heavy machine gun fire currently peppering the exterior of the craft. I peeked out the side and saw the craft to our left get hit by an antitank missile fired from somewhere on shore. It ripped into the thin hull and exploded among the two platoons waiting inside to depart the craft. Our own missile defense system fired from the front of the craft, intercepting another missile before it got us. The mesh screen deployed as advertised and

exploded the warhead twenty yards in front of our craft. The remains pinged off the bow armor as I looked at the scene to our sides once again out of the only window available.

Another craft further down received two direct hits, one from a 122mm rocket and a 240mm mortar. It seemed to come apart in the water as soldiers spilled out of the burning craft, trying to shed the heavy equipment before they sank to the bottom. I could see dozens of smoke plumes up the coast as the bombardment was taking its toll on our landing forces. An AAV-7 in front of us was hit by another antitank missile fired from a shore battery and sank below the surface quickly with no survivors emerging. More machine gun fire was heard slamming into our hull and a flight of IU attack aircraft screamed by overhead, dropping their cluster bombs and heavy ordnance onto the formations before being chased away by FNC fighters. However, some returned and targeted us with their cannons as their buddies battled the fighters in the air. I thought it was pretty dangerous to be flying around in the middle of an artillery bombardment, but if it hit the IU fighters, I could have cared less.

“Two minutes!” announced the coxswain before our boat was rocked by five explosions from one of the automatic grenade launchers. It hit right in the middle of the control area and killed the coxswain outright and wounded those in the rear of the craft. Some were hit in the body armor while others had superficial wounds. Others still weren’t as lucky as their wounds were far more serious. I wondered if they might have been the lucky ones since they were out of the fighting now and didn’t need to worry about being hit.

I saw the Company Commander and the First Sergeant scrambling to the controls trying to figure out how to steer and control the craft as others tended to the wounded in the rear of the craft. At less than two minutes to landing, I hoped they quickly learned the controls or at least how to stop the thing. More rounds pinged off the armor as the general purpose machine guns starting sending out their green lines of death towards us. It appeared the IU had plenty of ammo to spare and didn’t worry about wasting rounds. More explosions rocked all around us, slamming the craft back and forth. I could hear the Captain and the First Sergeant going back and forth trying to figure out the boat.

“This!”

“No, this one!”

“We need to pull back on the throttle!”

“Drifting left!”

“Engine controls! Got ‘em!”

“Pull back on the throttle!”

The engines suddenly cut back and the craft tossed us forward since the resistance of the water suddenly came back into play. I could see more smoke plumes from the horizon as many of the

landing craft never even made it close to shore. It looked like something out of the deepest parts of Dante's Inferno as I stared at the extended scene of hell to my sides.

"The throttle is jammed closed!" shouted the First Sergeant.

"Wade in! We are only fifty yards! We're sitting ducks out here!" shouted the Captain as he located the release controls for the doors on the front of the craft. The doors started opening and it looked like the shore was a lot further than the fifty yards as planned. It looked more like a mile at the time.

"Get to the beach! Remember your sectors and assignments! Regroup on the beach!" shouted the Captain as he and the First Sergeant scrambled out of the control area.

While we didn't especially want to leave the relative safety of the craft, we knew we would eventually be ranged by the machine guns and would be killed. And since I was at the front, I ran towards the bow and jumped towards the water. However, while in midair, I suddenly realized I had no idea how deep the water was and how I would be able to float with all the gear I had on if I needed to. Sure, I had that little rubber thing around my neck, but I'm pretty sure it's only going to delay me from sinking to the bottom rather than keep me from certain death. But lucky for me, it was only up to my neck so drowning was put into the back of my mind for the moment. I started moving forward as the waves lapped over my head. It wasn't easy moving forward, like something out of a dream where you are trying to run away and your legs don't really work that fast. The situation as it stood was certainly surreal and nothing like I had ever imagined or experienced before.

I didn't remember the explosions, the bullets zinging by or the water. I didn't hear the flight of F-15s fly by and drop their bomb loads on targets just off the beaches. I couldn't tell you when the friendly artillery fire was lifted on the beaches as we waded ashore. The only thing I remember was *forward*, ever forward. Move forward. A primal instinct to move towards dry land. I had a goal, a single accomplishment in life at that given moment in time, forward to the beach. I think subconsciously I knew it had to be safer than waiting on the tide to come back in and drown us all, so I moved forward as training took over. I could see several landing craft starting to turn and head back to the ships to pick up the second wave of troops. Some were hit on their return trip as they just were unlucky. But I also knew we needed to claw out enough real estate to get them to land without the troubles we were currently facing.

And I saw we weren't the only ones that had to wade into shore. There were more than a few craft in our predicament and troops were trying to make it to shore. Gunfire zipped by me once again and I dropped to a knee in the water. Lucky for me, I was in waist deep water by then and most of my body was covered. I knew the rounds could go right through the water and still kill me, but I wasn't concerned with it at that point in time. Survival was my only concern. I got back up and headed towards the shore again as the IU started concentrating on the troops that had already arrived on the beach and ignored us for the moment. The water still slowed me down and made our gear impossibly heavy, but I now saw the method in the madness of Sergeant Winfield in having us train while wet. I thought at the time he was just being cruel, but

I could see he was conditioning us to be able to perform under any conditions. And I understood why he insisted we put in extra drainage grommets into our gear.

Just as soon as the water drained out of my pack and web gear, an explosion knocked me over and back into the water. Sudden panic took over as I was weighted down under water, but remembered all I had to do was stand up. I wasn't having the best of luck making it to the beach, but I knew I needed to get there quickly to support my team and my friends on the beach. Someone, I have no idea who, grabbed me and helped me up. I realized I had continued holding my rifle the entire time and never lost it so one training condition that was helpful. I finally reached knee deep water and was able to run a lot faster than my slow progress to this point. And it was then I noticed the tracer fire from the various positions on the beach. The green lines of death heading this way and that into preselected points of death that had been programmed years before by the Islamic Union. And test fired since then to make sure they were properly positioned.

And what of the naval and aerial bombardment you might ask? Well had they built the positions on top of the cliffs our artillery fire might have taken out more. But the main defenses were built into the side and the base of the cliffs, obviously a lesson learned from the last war. I managed to get out of the water and started running for the first cover I could find, a crater from one of the naval shells on the edge of the beach. I dove in behind the deep walls of the crater just as a line of tracers flew over my head. I quickly checked my rifle and removed the barrel cap before pulling the bolt back to make sure the water had drained from the barrel and chamber. I released the charging handle, sending a round into the chamber and preparing it to fire. I peeked up over the wall looking for targets to put some effective fire on. Pulling the scope cover off, I saw it had managed to make the journey without any serious malfunctions either. I started peering through the optic looking for a target.

But honestly, there were everywhere and nowhere. I couldn't pick out one to start and watched as another line of tracers flew onto the beach. I saw where they began and where they ended, right into a fire team just getting ashore. The explosions were constant, the firing nonstop, the screams of the dying filled the air, the acrid smoke choked our lungs. It was like sensory overload and nothing we had accomplished in training could ever prepare us for what we faced. I looked around, trying to find anyone from my unit. I saw nobody I recognized from my team, squad or platoon. Checking behind me, I couldn't see the remainder of them wading ashore. I saw more than enough soldiers on the beach, but again, nobody I recognized. I started taking aim at the nearest bunker, trying to focus in on the machine gunner currently sending fire out towards the incoming troops. More explosions made me cringe back into the crater and I repositioned myself to get a better angle on the shots.

However, by me moving, I put myself right into the line of fire from another machine gun nest. As soon as I started bringing my rifle up, a round tore through the actions, destroying the weapon. And another managed to hit me right in the trauma plate of my vest. It knocked me silly and ended up taking the breath out of my lungs. I fell over backwards and just laid there for what seemed like a long time until a combat medic came by to check my vitals. I waved his hand away from my neck and started to sit up, making sure I was still below the line of fire from the enemy nest.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, took a round to the plate,” I replied.

“Okay, just make sure you-” he started to say and was cut off by the round that impacted just below his helmet in his neck. It came from the rear and out the front and I saw his lifeless eyes as he hit the ground in front of me. I checked his pulse and found he was dead from the round that had ripped through his neck. I ducked down just as several others ducked into the same crater I was in to seek cover from the incoming fire. I knew I needed a weapon and I grabbed at the medic’s rifle and started removing the magazines from his web gear. I put my other ammo inside my pack, knowing I would eventually find another marksman rifle and be able to use the ammo. Or I would be able to pass it on to someone who needed it.

I put the new magazines down into the pouches and quickly checked the rifle. It hadn’t been fired yet and water spilled out of the barrel. I was glad I checked it since an exploding barrel would just be the icing on the cake for me today. The M4A4 was familiar to me, but unfamiliar at the same time since it had been quite some time since I fired one. The balance was a little different, but it would go bang and send rounds at the enemy so I didn’t worry about the weight difference. I concentrated my fire on the nearest bunker and sent several single shots through the opening. I don’t know if I hit anything, but hopefully I gave them something to think about. I remembered I had others in the crater with me and turned to see them cowering behind the wall.

“Get up and fire! That’s the only way off this beach!” I yelled at them. They looked at me like I was crazy, but jumped up and started firing wildly at the cliffs, not aiming at anything in particular. It was then I noticed the diverse types of weaponry they had. The female soldier quickly emptied her MP7 at the nearest bunker on full auto, changed magazines and started repeating the process. Another was blasting away with a pump action shotgun and another had no long gun whatsoever.

“Who are you guys?” I asked.

“288th Support Battalion!” one answered.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Got mixed up when we embarked. We were supposed to be in the third wave!” he answered.

“Go gather rifles and ammo! Those weapons are useless out here!” I ordered.

“Where at?” he asked me.

“Right there!” I said and pointed at a group of dead soldiers with their weapons lying nearby.

“Go out into that?” he asked and his eyes got big.

“Yes, go out into that. Only one way off this beach today and that’s through the defenses,” I said and quickly grabbed at the female as she was preparing to fire another magazine, her fifth.

“At least aim your shots!” I said. “Go with them and get those rifles and ammo!”

“Sir! We aren’t infantry! We’re just supply!” she objected.

“Ain’t no such thing as just supply today. Today we’re all infantry! Now you can sit here, waste all your ammo and cower in this hole or you can come with me and fight our way off this beach. Now what’s it going to be soldiers? Fight and live or sit here and die?” I shouted at them over the constant explosions. It seemed like I had jammed a cattle prod up their rear ends as they all scampered out of the hole and started grabbing just about every weapon within reach. And they made a second trip for the ammo as well and grabbed whatever looked useful. On the way back, one of their number was hit, but not mortally. I could see them searching for their first aid kits, so that was a good sign. Their own training was taking over and they were getting into what Sergeant Winfield liked to call “combat mode.”

“Which one of you is the best at first aid?” I asked.

“I am,” said one of their number.

“Okay, you, you and you come with me,” I said and pointed at the other three. “You stay behind and treat that guy. We’ll send more wounded back your way along with a medic. Got it?”

“I’m not a medic sir!” he objected.

“Again, we’re all medics today,” I said. “You guys get those weapons ready and get those harnesses on!”

They scrambled to get the web gear on and nervously grasped at the rifles they had gathered before looking at em and wondering what to do next. I peeked out over the beach and saw a group of soldiers starting to gather at the seawall near the cliff.

“We’re going forward! Follow me!” I yelled and jumped out of the crater and dashed forward towards the seawall. I hope they were following me as I dashed this way and that, trying to avoid being hit. Eventually I made it to the seawall with my new fire team and found a surprise.

“You made it!” said Staff Sergeant Gilbert. “I thought you bought it when that artillery round hit next to you!”

“No, just startled me. Where’s the rest of my team?” I asked.

“Lomax didn’t even make it to the beach. Arnold got hit just coming into shore. Don’t know about Delacruz,” said Gil and shook his head. “Who are these folks?”

“Support battalion. Somehow got mixed up with the first wave,” I said.

“Can they fight?” asked Gil.

“They will today,” I said and hoped they would perform under pressure. “Game plan?”

“Get rid of these bunkers one at a time so we can consolidate the holdings here. And at least stop this direct fire,” said Gil. He nodded towards the nearest bunker and I immediately started looking around for something to take it out with. I spied an antitank rocket, an M72 type, nearby and got ready to head towards it before Gil stopped me.

“No, we need to get this wire cleared first as well as gathering up additional stuff to take them out. Gather explosives and anything that will go boom!” he said.

I grabbed my new fire team and found they knew what crates carried what and were eager to get the weapons instead of charging forward into the bunkers to our front. It wasn't any safer going back out into the exposed areas, but maybe it made them feel safer. They started running relays back carrying all different types of explosives, antitank weapons, grenades and mines. The rest of us were still returning fire on the bunkers as best as we could while they quickly gathered what they found.

We were somewhat protected from the artillery and mortar fire being this close to the cliffs. It still impacted to our rear and we could see several groups still stuck out in the middle of it trying to inch their way towards safety.

“Here Sarge!” said one of the supply troops as they handed over a device to Gil.

“What's this?” he asked.

“Line launcher. You can attach a charge to the end of the line and it will carry it over the wire,” said the Specialist

“You know how to work it?” asked Gil.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Then you're nominated to clear that wire,” he said. “Here's the explosive and the prima cord. Get it over that wire to our front. The rest of you start getting the weapons sorted out.”

The Specialist didn't know exactly how to prime the explosives, but figured the Staff Sergeant or someone would help him out with that. But he did know how to operate the line launcher since they had used them frequently in base tossing lines up and over rafters in the buildings. And generally fooling around with them when nobody was looking. He attached the explosive filled line to the cord and aimed up over the wire emplacements. There wasn't really much aiming he needed to do and the line was carried over the wire where it hung loosely.

“I don't know how to detonate this!” he said.

“Give it to me!” said Gil as he slipped in the blasting cap into the end of the charge. Rolling out the electrical wires, he tossed the explosive filled line over the top of the seawall and prepared to fire. “Fire in the hole! Fire in the hole! Fire in the hole!”

Everyone dropped behind the wall and covered up as best as we could. He flipped the safety off on the old style M57 firing device, still the most reliable means of detonating a blasting cap to this day.

The seawall was rocked by the manmade thunder and sand flew back at us from the area he had just finished detonating in. Gil and I both looked at the opening in the wire. It was about a three foot gap in the wire leading right to the base of the cliff and the relative safety it provided.

“Clear that bunker!” Gil yelled at me. I took aim with the M72, making sure I had a clear back blast area before pushing down on the trigger and launching the round. It flew right into the bunker (although too fast for me to see it) and exploded inside. Flames shot out of the insides and the machine guns inside fell quiet for a moment. Several soldiers immediately started rushing the wire to get through.

“No!” screamed Gil as he saw lines of tracers reach out from the adjacent positions and fly right into the group. They were hit badly and the IU continued shooting them up until they made sure they were dead.

“We need to take out at least two more of those positions,” said Delacruz who had just arrived. It was nice to see some of my team had made it through.

“Donnie, grab Delacruz and two teams and head east up the beach. Take something that will knock out those positions,” said Staff Sergeant Gilbert. “I’m heading west to take out the ones in that direction.”

I immediately grabbed the first three infantry I could see while Delacruz grabbed three more. My surrogate fire team immediately asked to be included.

“Come on Corporal! We can help!” objected the female Specialist.

“Grab your gear and let’s roll,” I said and grabbed at another antitank launcher. The other seven followed me as I headed down the lines with soldiers continuing to pour fire onto the defenders in the bunkers. They had managed to take out the lower bunkers around this area and all that remained were the higher bunkers in the middle of the cliff.

“Delacruz, take your team and start pouring some covering fire on that bunker,” I said, knowing he at least had been under fire before and designating him as unofficial fire team leader.

“Got it boss!” he yelled. “You, you and you. Let’s go and bring that SAW.”

They managed to get into position and started sending in aimed fire, hoping to suppress the defenders inside. This was a larger bunker and had several firing ports for the occupants inside. The female Specialist came back up to me.

“Try these,” she said and handed over several of the 40mm grenades.

“You got a launcher?” I asked. She scanned around and found an unused M203 lying close to a dead soldier. “Fire them into that puppy.”

She took a moment to figure out the sights on the weapon and loaded a round into the chamber. She wasn't at all familiar with the workings of the weapon, but it was a pretty simple operation to figure out. Aiming down the quadrant site, she launched one of the rounds inside and I saw it sail into the opening. And nothing happened for the first three seconds. A dud I imagined, getting wet from wading into shore. But suddenly a roar was heard and flames shot out of the inside of the bunker along with ejecting one of the IU soldiers down the cliff.

“What are those things?” I asked.

“Thermobaric bomblets,” she said with an evil grin as she reloaded and sent a second round into the same position with the same results.

“Give some to Delacruz,” I said.

“I'd rather do it myself,” she objected.

“Go, nobody's holding you back,” I said and started firing at the second opening. She fired another round into the position, but saw as it bounced off the grenade screen to the front of the position. We all hit the ground as the fuel air explosive was set off just outside our position and covered us in sand once again.

“We need one of the rockets to take out that screen!” yelled Delacruz. Another weapon, this time an M136 type was handed up and he cleared the screen with a thunder as the shrapnel bounced off our body armor and helmets.

“Kind of close with that one,” I remarked.

“Sorry boss,” said Delacruz. “Let her rip girlfriend!”

The Specialist took aim once again and fired through the now open mesh in front of the position. It sailed inside as the others had done and exploded after filling the enclosed space with the charge inside. She followed up again with a second round before a shot hit her in the side and she fell screaming. I immediately went to her and checked her vitals, finding the bullet had gone between her vest and the protective plates and ripped into her belly.

“I'm fine sir!” she grunted through gritted teeth.

I checked the third opening and didn't see any fire coming from it. It was a possibility they had been knocked out by the previous two explosions, but I wasn't in the habit of taking chances like that. "Delacruz, you a good climber?"

"Got it," he said and grabbed a second person. Lucky for him, the cliff wasn't as steep as it could have been and he was able to reach right under the opening before tossing in two hand grenades and waiting for the explosions. He managed to pull himself up over the edge and dropped inside the bunker. Dead and dying IU soldiers were inside the main firing area and the lighting was still working inside despite the explosions. The second member of the team climbed in after him.

"What now?" he asked.

"Now we check the bunker," said Delacruz as he started searching the area. Some of the dying IU soldiers attempted to fire at the two, but quick shots ended those futile attempts and they pressed on further into the nest. Delacruz saw one soldier attempting to run away. He fired one round from his M16A6 before it ran dry. Instead of trying to change magazines, he quickly transitioned over to his pistol and fired two more rounds hitting the IU soldier. They continued past him and found he was the only person still alive in the bunker. Eventually they had cleared the main areas, but not the tunnel connecting it to the surface. Delacruz headed back to the opening and yelled down.

"Don't shoot! It's Delacruz!" he yelled.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Main areas are clear! There is a tunnel that leads to the surface, but we need more people to clear it!" he yelled and appeared in the opening.

"Hang on," I said and started looking for anything that could assist us in getting to the surface. Delacruz passed down a rope he had found inside after knotting the middle so we could climb up easier. It seriously helped out and I was the first up the makeshift ladder and into the bunker.

"Who's watching the tunnel?" I asked once I was inside.

"The other kid," said Delacruz as he grabbed the hand of another member climbing in. "Go into the hallway, turn right and find the other guy."

The soldier, even though he outranked Delacruz, didn't argue as we all knew we needed to work together to get the remainder of the bunkers cleared. He headed up and kept a watch on the door from the inside. More troops were climbing in and getting ready to take positions inside to go up the tunnel.

"Corporal! We found another tunnel leading down to the other bunker!" announced one of my team.

“Grab three guys and check it out,” I ordered as more troops seemed to be aware of the opening in the lines and headed our way from the beach. I could hear them opening the trapdoor and dropping in grenades before heading down inside and checking out the interior of the lower bunker. Eventually I had enough troops to move up the tunnel in sufficient force and prepared to open the door. I did happen to notice the walls were lined with sandbags and how rounds fired into the bunker would typically bury themselves inside without hurting the occupants.

“Delacruz, get the door,” I said and loaded a fresh magazine into my rifle. He headed over and grabbed at the large handle before yanking it back. The expected shots never came and he used a mirror to peer around the side.

“Clear!” he announced and headed around the corner with his team in tow. I had no choice but to follow him and we headed up to a ninety degree angle in the tunnel. He used his mirror again before gunfire erupted in the area we were in.

“Three guys, one with a machine gun,” he announced for the benefit of us all.

“In the open?” I asked.

“Sandbagged position,” he said.

“Can’t use the thermobaric bombs in here,” I observed.

“Mexican standoff,” he said. “Got a claymore?”

One of the supply troops handed up one of the bags containing the antipersonnel mine to Delacruz. Lucky enough it was equipped with a radio detonator although the bag was wet.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Using this as a large hand grenade. Get the rest of the team down the tunnel to the starting point, this might not be that safe,” he announced.

I sent everyone back down the tunnel and stayed behind with him. He turned and saw I was still standing there. “You need to go.”

“You need someone to cover you,” I said.

“If I get fragged, you will know it was a bad idea,” he objected.

“Just get the thing ready to go,” I said as another burst from the machine gun erupted from the tunnel. He quickly got the detonator installed and tested the radio device. It seemed to be in working order and he prepared to throw the mine. I leaned around at the same time and fired a long full auto burst from my rifle while he tossed it down the hallway like a Frisbee. It managed to land right behind the nest and I heard yelling in Arabic before he hit the detonation button. The mine exploded and some of the shrapnel ended up all the way into our area of the tunnel.

And if our hearing was diminished from the constant gunfire and explosions we had that morning, it was certainly gone now.

“Did you get them?” I asked in a yell.

“What?” he yelled back.

I pointed towards the tunnel with a curved finger. He grabbed his mirror again and saw the machine gun nest was destroyed and the three IU soldiers were probably dead.

“We got ‘em!” he yelled back at me. The remainder of the team joined us although I couldn’t hear a darn word they were saying.

“What?” I yelled as someone mumbled behind us.

“I said, let us take the lead going out of here!” yelled a Sergeant First Class that had come off the beach with another group. Our exit off the beach was working out great for the landing forces and we could start rolling up the defenses now.

“Right!” I yelled and tapped Delacruz on the shoulder.

“What?” he yelled.

“Move over!” I yelled and looked at a full squad of troops headed around us and up the tunnel. More followed as we attempted to head back and find the remains of our teams. We finally caught up with them and were handed our assault packs we had dropped before heading into the bunker.

“You okay sir?” asked the female Specialist.

“You’re wounded!” I yelled back at her, wondering why she was in the bunker.

“Just a scratch,” she said and pointed at the dressing someone had applied.

“No, you need to get seen by a medic!” I yelled at her.

“Why is he yelling?” she asked a nearby soldier.

“He and D-Dog were too close to an explosion. Their hearing is gone for the moment,” explained Corporal Devons. At least some of my platoon had made it through the madness alive.

“You need to get to a medic!” I repeated.

“She’s fine!” yelled a man with a combat lifesaver bag. He had gotten in front of me so I could read his lips. “I checked her out!”

“You did what to her?” I yelled.

“She is okay!” he yelled accenting his words.

“Oh, okay!” I yelled back. “Get together, we have more troops out there!”

We gathered up and started heading up the tunnel. By the time we reached the surface, we found the other squad had already set out a perimeter and was quickly getting a game plan to head to the adjacent bunkers. A Captain had appeared at some point and was giving orders.

“Sergeant Neely, take two squads and head over to the nearest bunker to the east. Who’s the next ranking individual out here?” asked the Captain. I barely could hear him but started reading his lips as best as I could.

Everyone turned and looked at me although I could easily see a few Sergeants mixed in with the squads that were departing. “Sir, I’m only a Corporal!”

“You’re a Sergeant now,” he said and grabbed one of the departing NCOs. He took off one of the rank tabs quickly from his collar. “Battlefield promotions are authorized in extreme cases and the way you got this bunker cleared was perfect. If anyone asks, you tell them Captain David Walters 1st of the 114th pinned those on you.”

“Form your troops here into two squads and take command soldier. You head west and take out the next bunker,” he ordered me as he quickly pinned on the rank and yanked off the Corporal tabs. “Move in five minutes.”

I quickly organized the various members into fire teams and found I had barely enough for four. We had exactly eighteen to take out another bunker like the one we had just finished off. But I knew it should be enough to get the job done and it took us closer to the remaining member of my squad I knew was alive. Lucky for us, we could see the entrance through the scattered brush that had survived the initial bombardment and got into tactical formation. While some of the troops were not used to doing tactical movements, they learned quickly as we went towards the entrance and saw IU soldiers starting to come out of the rear.

We dropped in position and started firing on them as they ran. They were in the open and there were few areas they could seek as cover. We ended up hitting seven of their number, although another five escaped. We located the tunnel leading into the bunker and tossed in a grenade for good measure before clearing the bunker systematically. Lucky for us, the IU had departed and we saw the remains of the antitank missile we had shot off earlier.

“Clear!” was announced by several members of the team as we finished clearing and started heading towards the entrance once again. I checked out the front of the bunker and saw troops were heading towards the now destroyed positions and climbing up ropes and ladders brought in to scale the small obstacles. We finished up and went back out, preparing to move towards the next position. However, the Captain returned and gave us additional orders.

“Those are cleared already and you are out of position to help further down the beach. Head out three hundred meters and set up a defensive perimeter. We are holding our lines here until we can get the chance to evaluate the situation and consolidate units. I’ll send additional troops your way, but until then, hold the line,” said the Captain.

“Roger sir!” I yelled, my hearing still not what it should be.

I quickly analyzed what forces I had. I had a few NCOs in my midst, but not that many and one of the Sergeants was part of the supply outfit we had assimilated. But still, we were all trained to be riflemen and soldiers so each and every one of them should be able to pull the trigger when it came down to it. Before the Captain departed, I made a request of him.

“Sir, two things,” I said.

“Yes?” he asked, seemingly in a hurry. “Best be quick, I’ve got a lot of things to do.”

“I have a wounded person who needs medical attention behind the lines. She got hit but is gutting it out. Can I get a replacement for her?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said and turned. “You! You are now assigned under this Sergeant.”

A soldier came running up and stood by with the remainder of the group. The Captain turned back to me for my second request.

“I have another troop I’d like a battlefield promotion for. He was busted some time ago, but has proved his skills under fire and was instrumental in taking one of the bunkers,” I said. “I need some fire team leaders out there that know what they are doing and he fits the bill.”

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Delacruz! Front and center!” I yelled. His hearing probably wasn’t back to normal either and had to be prompted by one of the other members before running over. I handed the Captain the ranks he had pulled from my shoulder earlier.

“Sergeant...what’s your name again?” asked the Captain.

“McIntyre sir,” I said.

“Sergeant McIntyre seems to think you’ve got what it takes to be a leader out here and said you were pivotal in taking the beach defenses down. If it’s good enough for him, it’s certainly good enough for me. Here you go Corporal, don’t let him down,” said the Captain as he pinned on the ranks on his empty sleeve.

Delacruz looked at me and back at the Captain before shaking my hand. He went back over to rejoin the group and the Captain turned back to me. “Anything else?”

“Resupply and reinforcement sir?” I asked.

“We’ll work the resupply bit and the next wave is due in sometime in the next couple of hours. We are holding the beach by a thread so they have to get here right quick. I’ll see what else I can scrape up and send this way as well,” he said. “Now get that line established and try to link up with the units on your right and left.”

“Huah sir!” I yelled and headed off to get my team established. But first things first. “Come here trooper.”

“Sir?” asked the wounded female from supply.

“You are replaced for the moment. Report back to the battalion aid station and get looked at. No arguments either, we need you there more than here,” I said.

“But Sergeant!” she objected but noticed my raised finger pointing back towards the beach. She headed back that way, grabbing her rifle and walking slowly.

“NCOs, gather on me,” I said and got ready to implement the orders from the Captain. The moved with a purpose and circled around me. I saw two Sergeants and four Corporals. “Okay, guys. We are to set up a defensive line three hundred meters inland. Sergeant, no offense, but you’re support. Unless you challenge the decision, I’m putting you under one of the other guys here.”

“No problem,” he said. “I ain’t even supposed to be here!”

We all laughed at the moment of levity and I continued. “Okay, Sergeant?”

“Flowers,” he said.

“You grab three as well as taking Corporal Devons here. Dev, you take three as well. Form second squad,” I said.

“Got it,” they said although Devons looked a little nervous.

“Corporals...” I said.

“Battle, Sergeant,” said the first.

“Martin,” said the second.

“You guys take three apiece and will form first squad. You with the radio? That thing work?” I asked.

“I think it does sir,” said the nervous looking Private First Class.

“Check it,” I said. “And you’re my new RTO.”

“Roger that Sergeant,” he said and immediately started fiddling with the radio.

“Ammo consolidation and resupply?” asked Delacruz. “Plus we could use some heavies.”

“Go ahead and consolidate mags,” I said and saw three soldiers wandering eastward down the beach. “Hey you three! Come here!”

They looked at me and started meandering their way towards us. I was surprised when Devons snapped at them. He was typically easy going, but had transformed during battle into a hard individual who didn’t like their casual attitude.

“Move with a purpose troops! An NCO just gave you an order!” he barked at them. It spurred them into running as they headed up to me.

“Yes...Sergeant,” said the first as he figured out my rank. It was two Specialists and a Private First Class.

“What are you guys doing and where were you heading?” I asked.

“We were looking for our unit sir,” said the unofficial leader.

“You know where they are at?” I asked.

“No Sergeant, we think they might be down that way somewhere,” he replied.

“Hold off on that for the moment. You’re assigned to another detail,” I said. “I want you three to head down to the beach and get as much ammo and ordnance as you can and bring it back here. Also, check for some rations as well.”

“Where at Sergeant?” asked the Specialist.

“Down on the beach,” I said.

“Is there a supply point put up yet?” asked the Specialist.

“Not yet that I know of, but there are plenty of dead troopers that don’t need their ammo. But I’m sure they would want us to have it so we can stay alive,” I replied.

“Sir, we really need to find our unit,” said the second Specialist.

“And we really need a resupply of ammo,” I said.

“And heavies,” said Devons from behind me.

“What kind?” I asked.

“Three 203s and three SAWs. We only have one apiece,” he replied.

“Sergeant, let me go. Leave one of these cats here and I’ll ride herd on the other two,” said the supply Sergeant.

“You sure?” I asked.

“I ain’t even supposed to be here, remember,” he laughed. “I can get what you need.”

“Go,” I said and pointed at one of their number. “You stay behind on his team.”

“Yes Sergeant,” he said although I still wasn’t comfortable with the title. He took the other two and headed towards the beach as the remainder of us formed up. A sudden gust of wind blew in our faces as we started off in tactical formation, heading out to set up the defensive lines near the edge of a hedgerow while the remainder of the troops consolidated the position and we would move on our next objective.

CHAPTER 7

D Day plus two hours

“Sir? I have some bad news,” said the Colonel in charge of the weather detachment sheepishly as he stood in front of the General of the Army’s desk.

“Yes,” he said and looked up.

“I uhh, the storm has changed course once again,” said the Colonel. “Prevailing winds are pushing it northeast.”

“To where?” asked the General.

“Warmer currents are still keeping it strong enough to have hurricane force winds,” said the Colonel. “And massive rains as well.”

“Which doesn’t answer my question,” said the General.

“It...is heading right towards Normandy sir. Looks like the leading edge will hit our invasion forces in the next two hours,” said the Colonel averting his gaze towards the floor.

“Can we get the second wave in there?” asked the General.

“Sir, we are loading as we speak, but the destruction rate of the initial landing craft is sitting at around sixty percent,” said a General from the United States. “And the craft report rougher seas already. Maybe with the hovercraft, but with the Higgins Boats and the remaining armored vehicles? The hovercraft and armored vehicles were hit badly in the initial landings with an attrition rate of seventy and eighty percent respectively.”

“So much for the projected thirty percent,” said the General. “Can they make it to shore in time to reinforce what’s already there? In the Higgins Boats?”

“No sir, by the time the storm arrives, they will only be halfway to the destination,” said the U.S. General. “They could easily capsize. And we need to move the landing ships out into deeper water where they can get some sea room.”

“And with the weather, our air cover is gone,” said the General of the Army.

“They will have a hard time supporting the troops sir,” confirmed the General from the NESA.

“Get me in contact with the senior most officer on the beach, right now!” shouted the General. He felt like throwing something right then, but having a temper tantrum in front of his subordinates wasn’t what was done. The radio patch went through almost immediately.

“Phoenix Six, this is Sphinx Six, go ahead,” said the AFNAS General on Sphinx Beach. Out of the Generals assigned to the beaches, he was the most senior.

“Nate, got bad news for you,” started the General of the Army.

“I could use a little good news right now instead,” said the AFNAS General with a tone.

“How are things going down there?” asked the General of the Army.

“We’ve managed to clear the beach defenses in our sector along with Griffon Beach and Centaur Beach. Gorgon, Minotaur and Pegasus are still mopping up, but should be complete in the next hour or two,” said the AFNAS General.

“Any contact with the airborne forces?” asked the General of the Army.

“Sporadic at best. It appears most didn’t land where they were supposed to and were ambushed shortly after landing,” said the AFNAS General. “There are some strongholds, but not many.”

“And how strong are your defenses right now?” asked the General of the Army.

“We’re sitting okay for the moment, but we cannot press forward without reinforcements. Same goes for the other beaches. We’ve been through three minor counterattacks from the forces assigned to the beaches, but nothing serious yet. We can try to consolidate if we can and push out a little bit, but wishful thinking unless the second wave comes in,” said the AFNAS General. “And the bad news?”

“The storm’s turned and heading your way. Reinforcements are not going to be coming anytime soon,” said the General of the Army.

“This the same storm that rat faced Colonel said ‘shouldn’t be’ a factor?” asked the AFNAS General.

“Same one,” said the General of the Army.

“Remind me to wring his neck when I get the chance,” he replied.

“Can you hold?” asked the General of the Army.

“For the moment, yes. We took thirty five percent in casualties across the board, but we should be able to hold. Defenses weren’t as strong as we imagined. Indirect fire is still a concern and landing pretty regularly, but we are holding for the moment,” said the AFNAS General.

“What about your armor assets?” said the General of the Army.

“A lot of it was destroyed before landings or soon thereafter. We’ve got plenty of man pack stuff, but it depends on how long we will have to hold,” said the AFNAS General.

“Sir! We’re showing increased formations heading towards the beaches! Armor, mechanized infantry and regular infantry,” said an intelligence analyst as he looked over the satellite photos in real time. “Looks to be coming out of garrisons previously unidentified.”

“I’m putting you on speaker Nate,” said the General of the Army as he hit the button. “You there?”

“Right here,” said the AFNAS General. “Colonel, thanks for the brilliant forecast on the storm. Now how long until we can get the second wave in?”

“Impossible to tell. The storm should last only about twelve to eighteen hours. Unless it stalls,” said the Colonel.

“And if it stalls?” asked the AFNAS General.

“No telling. I am not going to make a bad decision here,” said the Colonel.

“How long before we can reinforce?” asked the General of the Army.

“Eighteen hours at the least,” said the Colonel.

“And the most?” asked the General of the Army.

“I can’t say sir,” said the Colonel.

“Then get out of here!” shouted the General of the Army. “You are relieved!”

“Sir! I’m giving you my best guess here!” he protested.

“I don’t want to hear best guess! You’ve got plenty of fancy equipment and should be able to tell me when a mouse farts in Tokyo! Get out!” shouted the General of the Army and turned to an aide. “Get me a forecaster in here right now!”

The aide quickly ran out and returned in less than a minute with an out of breath Captain. Overweight and out of shape, he had one trait that kept him in a job, his ability to make sense of the weather patterns over Europe.

“Captain, I want a forecast and I want it now!” ordered the General of the Army.

“Sir, I was in the stages of getting a new forecast when I was summoned here. Give me two minutes and a computer and I’ll give you what I believe will happen,” said the Captain, still gasping for air. The aide pointed him and an unused computer in the corner and the Captain immediately got to work.

“How about an air drop of critical supplies?” asked the AFNAS General.

“Probably not a good idea with the winds and all. It could easily get blown into the Channel. Plus, you are only holding what? A thousand meters of space?” asked the General of the Army.

“We’re holding about a click and a half in some places. The other beaches aren’t as lucky and have barely made it off the coast,” said the AFNAS General. “We managed to push that far out, but barely. And we haven’t linked up with the other beaches.”

“When can you link up?” asked the General of the Army.

“Impossible to say. The flanks are being very stubborn. The easiest way of taking out those positions is with the antitank weapons. But we need to hold those in reserve for the armored threat. So it’s taking a lot of time,” said the AFNAS General.

“What other assets do you have out there?” asked the General of the Army. “What are you using to hold the lines?”

“Sir, we’ve got everything from special ops and airborne units that made their way back to us to cooks and clerks sitting in foxholes. We could, strike that, should consider the idea of consolidating the beaches and even abandon some to hold the others. We could make plans to consolidate down to Sphinx, Pegasus and Minotaur and abandon our positions on Griffon, Centaur and Gorgon,” said the AFNAS General.

“I don’t like having to pay for real estate two times,” said the General of the Army. “And it puts us out of position to take Le Harve and Cherbourg in a timely fashion.”

“If we cannot be resupplied, better to have three strong positions that can put up a fight rather than six that will be taken piecemeal,” said the AFNAS General.

“We can take that under advisement,” said the General of the Army seeing it was a better plan to have a unified strong defense on one front rather than six weak ones.

“Sir, based on the current data, I can make a forecast,” said the Captain.

“Let’s hear it,” said the General of the Army.

“Based on the winds coming out of the north and a high pressure system following it, the storm will stall. It’s going to move into the Normandy area in the next two to four hours and hit this system here where it will cease its north east movement. Now when that happens, it will stall and swirl around this area here,” he said and circled a large portion of northern France and southern England on the large computer monitor on the wall. “Winds will be eighty miles an hour with gusts up to one hundred miles per hour, but decreasing as the storm loses strength over the next two days.”

“The significant problem will be the rain and the seas. We are looking for at least twenty inches of rain, probably more over a two day period if we go off historical data. And the seas will have swells of up to twenty feet with average tides of eight feet. Far too much for landing craft and possibly even for overloaded troop ships. Larger ships like the battleships and heavy cruisers should be okay, but going through gale force winds and seas and trying to accurately supply gunfire will not be a trivial task,” said the forecaster.

“How certain are you on this forecast?” asked the General of the Army.

“Fairly positive and this is worst case. It could clear up sooner than expected, but I doubt it. Once it stalls, it has to release the energy before it dissipates. Now we could, and I stress could, see this thing move on in twenty four hours if this system behind it nudges it eastward. But I believe this high pressure system is too strong and will lock it into place. I think you are looking for the term between a rock and a hard place when it comes to this storm,” said the Captain.

“I want an update every two hours from you and you alone. I want to know the minute the storm dissipates enough to land reinforcements,” said the General of the Army.

“Sir, I have others on the staff that are just as proficient as I am,” said the Captain.

“No, Major, I want the forecast from you and you alone. If those boys and girls on the beach don’t get any sleep, you won’t either until they are safe,” said the General of the Army.

“Hadn’t planned on sleeping much anyway General,” laughed the newly promoted Major.

“The Major has unlimited access to me any time of the day and get that man some oak leaves to pin on,” said the General of the Army. “Nate, in light of what we just said, what’s your plan?”

“Like I said, consolidating the beaches would be our best option over the long run if we can’t be resupplied. We’ll continue trying to link up and I can get the reports from the other beaches. I can even coordinate some attacks with the other beaches and attempt to open a hole in our flanks. But again, I would rather see one large beachhead with decent defenses rather than six that can be broken up easily. We have no retreat option here,” said the AFNAS General.

“I’m putting the staff on alert to start assisting in that area. Plus, we’re going to try as best as we can to get you air cover,” said the General of the Army.

“And the naval gunfire?” asked the AFNAS General.

“We’ll keep the battlewagons in the Channel for the time being as well as the *Veracruz*. The destroyers and others will have to move into the North Sea where they can weather the storm,” said the General of the Army.

“Anything will help,” said the AFNAS General as a new round of artillery fire against the beach started. “Need to go sir, looks like we have another attack coming.”

“Stay in touch,” said the General as he clicked off the line. “I want the staff working on plans to consolidate the beaches down to four, three, two and one. We will hold at least one beach out of all of this. We will not have sacrificed our brave men and women to fail. We will not fail ladies and gentlemen. I want plans on holding the beaches at all costs including implementation of Operation Jericho,” said the General of the Army.

The staff looked at each other with concern. They knew the use of nuclear weapons was always a potential, but at the same time, they didn’t want to have to use them unless absolutely necessary. Operation Jericho was the FNC plans for utilizing nuclear weapons and was built into each and every plan they came up with. However, it was typically at the back of the index when it came to planning. They broke up and departed the office. After leaving, they heard a very loud thump against the wall and the intercom called to request a replacement computer monitor be delivered as soon as possible.

“Continue digging into your positions,” I said to my gathered team leaders as another team made its way from the rear to me. “Yes?”

“Sergeant, we were sent here to assist in the defense,” said the Sergeant Fire Team Leader.

“Okay,” I said. “Right now, you’ll be mobile reserve, but our guys could use some help getting our defensive lines set up.”

“Roger that,” said the Sergeant. “Also, some supply guy said your stuff was being sent out here soon. He said you’d know what I was talking about.”

“Sure do,” I said and was thankful he hadn’t forgotten us. The squads went back to digging into their positions and keeping a watchful eye out on the areas we didn’t control. I didn’t really have enough information about the defenses out in that area and decided to put out some listening posts for additional security. “Sergeant?”

“Yes,” he said before departing to assist in the defensive works.

“Change of plans. I need some eyes and ears out there. Pair off and put in listening posts here,” I said and pointed. “And here. Grab a radio from the RTO, he has a couple.”

“Got it,” he said and grabbed up his other three individuals before setting out. Two of the soldiers I had seen earlier came huffing up along with two others in tow, carrying heavy packs and crates between them.

“Got your stuff Sergeant,” the Specialist announced. They set down the crate and unloaded the heavy weapons I had asked for. I grabbed Delacruz and had him go ahead and start designating the special weapons folks on the two squads. An elderly M-240B was brought out, having been

taken off a destroyed AAV7A3 on the beach. There was limited ammo for it, but having a heavier machine gun was always a good thing. “And he said to say Merry Christmas.”

The Specialist handed over a M465 like the one that had been destroyed. While it wouldn't be zeroed for me at extended ranges, I could work my magic with it once the shooting started once again and would be fine for the closer in work we would be doing.

“Sergeant Williamson,” I called. The other NCO assigned to the squad came over and I passed my 5.56mm magazines to him. “Have two of your guys start distributing the ammo and let's pick a position for the machine gun. Have we tied into the adjacent sectors?”

“We have into one, but not the other. There's about a two hundred meter gap right now,” said Sergeant Williamson.

“I hope someone happens to notice,” I said.

“I would suggest we put the M-G in this position here,” he said and pointed. “It's got the best field of view and we can put in a final protective line across the front.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “How much ammo for that thing?”

“About three hundred rounds for the moment Sergeant,” said the Specialist as he continued to unload the supplies.

“What happened to the supply Sergeant?” I asked.

“Got conscripted by Battalion to set up a resupply point. Got a better job I guess,” chuckled the Specialist. “Some Lieutenant Colonel said he would send a replacement as soon as possible.”

“Got the weapons handed out,” said Delacruz as he came back.

“And the positions?” I asked.

“Hasty scrapes for the most part. I have the guys continuing to dig down, but I think we need overhead cover more than anything,” he said.

“Make it happen,” I said and heard artillery hitting the beach to our rear. “And make it quick, artillery generally gets followed up by an attack.”

“Got it,” he said and headed off to continue fortifying the positions.

“You four go ahead and grab something to eat and you will become our reserve force,” I said.

“Sir, the Colonel said he wanted us back as soon as possible. We are the only runners he has for the moment,” said the Specialist.

“Okay, go ahead and grab a bite first though,” I said.

“Gladly sir,” said the Specialist and pulled out a ration before grabbing his buddies.

“Contact the Company we are assigned to,” I told my RTO. “Let them know we still have a gap up here.”

“Roger that Sergeant,” said the RTO who had reestablished contact over the radio with the proper units. I found we were in 2nd Battalion, Charlie Company’s sector after we landed. And I hadn’t seen anyone from our Company or platoon since we landed. I had no idea what happened to Staff Sergeant Gilbert after we split up on the beach or any of the remaining members of our platoon. I had two squads from seven different units. “Sir, Battalion says they are sending additional troops up.”

“We can use it,” I said and headed over to help out on one position that was having issues with getting around some of the rocks in the ground. We were attacking it pretty good when I heard a voice from behind me.

“And who authorized you to do that?” asked Sergeant Winfield.

“Sergeant Winfield!” I remarked. “I didn’t realize you had made it!”

“You think some IU soldier was gonna get me that easily?” he grinned. And I saw the new rank as well. My eyes got big as he further explained. “Yes, they made me an officer.”

“Can’t get out of the limelight now sir,” I grinned. Second Lieutenant Winfield just sounded funny, but I knew for a fact we were in great hands.

“So who screwed up?” he asked.

“Screwed up on what sir?” I asked.

“Made you a Sergeant,” he remarked and grabbed at my collar.

“A Captain Walters sir,” I said.

“It fits,” he remarked. “Now give me the low down. This is now my sector and your squads are being assigned to my new platoon.”

I gave him the down and dirty of the area the two squads were in and the gap in the line to our left. He informed me I would retain First Squad as my own and the other Sergeant would continue as the Second Squad leader. And Lieutenant Winfield had brought two additional squads to supplement us.

“Looks good Donnie,” he said. “Glad you got everything covered.”

“Any word on our reinforcements?” I asked. He nodded his head to walk away and I followed at a close distance.

“The weather is turning once again if you hadn’t noticed,” he started and I realized the winds had been picking up and the dark clouds were filling the horizon. “The seas are picking up and the ships can’t make it into shore.”

“We aren’t getting reinforced?” I asked, my voice elevating.

“And this is what we want to avoid. Fear can get out of control if we let it. We are digging in and attempting to connect the beaches for the moment. Plus, the airborne drops were scattered all over the place and they have been ordered to move north. We put in quite a few special operations teams and airborne units prior to the landings. Some might be dressed in different camouflage and have IU weapons, so keep a sharp eye out. We don’t need any friendly fire out here and you best make darn sure of your targets before pulling the trigger. So we need to be wary of them reentering the lines,” he said.

“But we aren’t getting resupplied or reinforced,” I remarked.

“Resupply is different. We have enough supplies from the beach to make up for what we’ve lost so far,” said Winfield. “And reinforcements are coming, but we’ll have to hold out until they can get here.”

“What happened to Staff Sergeant Gilbert?” I asked.

“Took over a platoon from Delta Company,” he answered. “Didn’t get a promotion like yours, but he’s filling the spot.”

“And the remainder of the platoon?” I asked.

“Right now...” he started to say and let his voice trail off. “Looks like the guys you got here and Gil are the only ones left. The Lieutenant bought it coming onto the beach and the other squad leaders soon after. Seems like the IU was targeting the leadership deliberately. As for the rest of the platoon, there could be more out there. We were scattered all over the place.”

Shooting was heard to our right, down the line more towards the beach. Sergeant...Lieutenant Winfield immediately took to getting the two additional squads into position and the remainder of us got into ours. I headed over towards Delacruz’s position as he hunkered down looking out the front of his hasty scrape.

“We getting more troops coming up?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I replied.

“Later?” he asked.

I shook my head slowly as not to alert the trooper next to him. It was one of the support battalion folks still on the line with us. Delacruz's eyes got a little bigger as a raindrop was heard hitting outside our position.

"Looks like rain," he observed.

"We've got a storm moving in," I said. I didn't realize the duality of my words until much later.

CHAPTER 8

Z Day Plus 4 hours

“Tango Fox Nine, give me a SITREP, over,” said the voice over the radio.

“Golf Delta Four-Four, be advised, enemy troop column approaching, size, battalion strength, activity, approaching sector Sphinx Red 4, location, grid reference Sphinx Papa one-five, uniform, Islamic Union regulars, time now, equipment, infantry heavy forces with company sized mechanized vehicle support. How copy, over?” said the observation post into the radio as I listened in. Sphinx Red Four was the sector adjacent to ours.

“We copy, battalion sized formation,” said the voice at the Battalion command post.

“Continuing to observe. E-T-A to Sphinx Red Four is approximately ten mike,” said the observation post.

“Alpha-Tango Six, this is Golf Delta Four-Four. Did you copy last transmission?” asked the command post.

“We copy, request additional forces and indirect fire, over,” said the young sounding voice in the adjacent sector.

“Troops heading for the neighbors sir,” I said as Lieutenant Winfield appeared.

“Best bet they are heading this way as well,” he said. “They rarely travel alone.”

And as if by magic, the internal radios came to life. “Alpha-Charlie Six, this is Alpha-Charlie Seven-Six. SALUTE report over,” said our listening post.

“Send it,” I said.

“Size, company...no, two companies, activity, preparing for assault, location, approximately one thousand yards to your front by Target Reference Point Juliet Four, uniform of IU Regular army, time current, equipment, armored vehicle support, ten BTR 80 type vehicles,” said the LP/OP.

“Keep them in place?” I asked Winfield.

“No, bring them on in,” he said.

“Alpha-Charlie Seven-Six, fall back to our position,” I said over the internal radio as Lieutenant Winfield relayed the information up to the Battalion command post. He was informed the reserve company was being sent towards us and indirect fire support was being arranged. It was raining pretty hard now and the winds were picking up even more than an hour prior. It wasn’t

the best weather for a battle, but we would fight and stand our ground waiting for the reinforcements to show up.

“Pass the word, friendlies coming up from the rear,” said Winfield as he went to the other squads and checked on them. The LP/OP came back into view and headed past the line of positions so the enemy couldn’t track in on them. They came crawling back forward below the line of sight. Suddenly indirect fire was heard. Incoming rounds.

We all ducked into our positions as the mortar and artillery rounds fell to our front, maybe five hundred meters. It appeared the IU didn’t know exactly where we were at and were just dumping random fire into preselected points hoping to make a hit. But they were walking the fire forward and coming closer to our positions. I ducked a little deeper into my foxhole, wishing for the world I had more overhead cover. But I could hope in one hand and...well, you know the old saying.

The rounds impacted closer in now, hammering away at the ground as delayed fuses were mixed in with airburst rounds. The ground shook at the heavy guns continued to pound the areas until they were right on top of us. We heard additional rounds heading by overhead, friendly fire going towards the enemy concentration. We couldn’t tell how effective it was, but at least someone was doing something to help.

“Best bet the infantry is right on the heels of that artillery barrage,” yelled Lieutenant Winfield.

“They would have to be crazy to be right behind this,” I yelled back. “How do you know?”

“Because that’s what I would do,” he yelled in return over the increasing noise of the rounds. The ground shook violently below our feet and I was tossed into the side of the foxhole. A near miss sent us all into the ground and a sheet of dirt swept over us. We heard screaming for a medic coming somewhere from the right. We couldn’t send our medic right then since the rounds were still impacting randomly. But they were starting to move towards our rear and the pounding got a little better. I could hear the rounds from the friendly guns hitting to our front, but they just didn’t seem that large.

We waited for the charge by the IU to begin. Maybe Lieutenant Winfield was wrong this once and the forces weren’t right on the heels of the explosion. But we were expecting them at any time. Just like my granddaddy once said, you don’t put on your dancing shoes if you ain’t gonna waltz. And I figured the IU wasn’t going to send two battalions forward for no reason.

“That’s the last of the wounded we can safely transport,” said the AFNAS Air Force Colonel in charge of the CV-22 being loaded. The Colonel himself had flown the mission to let the General know nobody else would be coming. Nobody else could be coming when flying through a hurricane strength storm.

“It’s something,” said the AFNAS General. “Appreciate you bringing in the supplies.”

“Least I could do,” said the Colonel as he saw a person fighting to be released from the loading.

“I’m just fine!” protested the female.

“You need to go! You’re the last that needs to go!” ordered the doctor.

“I can hack it!” she yelled once again and gained the attention of the General and the Colonel.

“What’s the problem here?” asked the Colonel.

“Sir, the young lady refuses to be medevaced out,” said the doctor.

“What’s your problem trooper?” asked the AFNAS General.

“Sir! I’ll be fine. I just got a scratch!” said the Specialist.

“A scratch that’s showing signs of peritonitis!” exclaimed the doctor. “It’s a gut shot that needs to be treated and she needs surgery to fix her perforated bowels!”

“I’m okay!” she yelled over the rotors.

“Specialist, I admire your courage and willingness to stay behind, but you need to get treated in a proper medical facility,” said the AFNAS General.

“My unit is here and I should be here!” she protested.

“And in time you can rejoin them,” said the General. “But you need to get your skinny behind on that chopper and get to England to be treated. The more time you waste here is more time it takes to heal.”

“I can hack it sir!” she pleaded.

“I wish I had a whole division of you out here,” said the General, very fatherly like. “But I need that same fighting spirit on the next wave coming in. You go back, get treated and I’ll guarantee you a place on the next wave after you get released. Deal?”

“You promise?” she asked.

“Absolutely soldier,” said the General. “Now get on that chopper.”

She turned and was assisted in getting on the back ramp, heading to the only space left available. An IV was started immediately in her arm as the Colonel shook hands with the General and ran

back to the craft. Five other CV-22s had already departed and he lifted off just in time as more artillery shells started hitting the beach and the shoreline.

“Heading for Southampton,” said the Colonel.

“Hospital is full in Southampton. We are diverting into Eastbourne,” said the copilot.

“That bad?” asked the Colonel.

“We were the last of nineteen flights,” said the copilot. “And we still didn’t get all the wounded. Did manage to bring in some additional troops and supplies though and move out the worst of the wounded.”

“Something tells me those folks are going to need it,” said the Colonel as the aircraft buffeted around the sky from the incoming storm.

“Pilot, crew chief,” said the Tech Sergeant over the intercom.

“Go ahead Roger,” said the Colonel.

“We need to pick up speed, the last passenger just fell unconscious,” said the crew chief.

“Go ahead and get the medic on the horn to the hospital and let them know what’s going on,” said the Colonel. “And keep her alive if you can.”

“Fighters coming in from the continent,” said the copilot as he scanned the AWACS image from Southern England. The AWACS had reestablished control after the landing began, although they were far north of where they needed to be.

“Let’s get down to fifty feet,” said the Colonel.

“Doesn’t give us much room in these winds,” said the copilot.

“I trust you’ll help keep me out of the water?” asked the Colonel as the aircraft headed downwards, getting slammed by the increasing winds.

“My mother warned me there would be days like this,” said the copilot. “Altitude one hundred feet...seventy five...fifty. Level out.”

“Inbound threat, our interceptors are moving into position,” said the copilot. “Dropping down a tad, bring the nose back up sir.”

“Got it,” said the Colonel as he nudged the controls upwards. It was dangerous flying around in the storm, but he certainly wasn't going to make his troops do anything he wasn't prepared to do himself.

“Hospital’s been alerted sir,” said the crew chief.

“She’s a feisty one, make sure she makes it,” said the Colonel.

“What’s the big deal with her anyway?” asked the copilot.

“You see that General back on the beach?” asked the Colonel.

“Yeah,” said the copilot.

“That’s his daughter,” said the Colonel.

“He evacuated his daughter out of the fighting?” asked the copilot.

“No, the doctor evacuated her,” said the Colonel.

“Did the doctor know that was his daughter?” asked the copilot.

“Probably not, she uses her mother’s maiden name so there isn’t any favoritism,” said the Colonel.

“And how do you know all this?” asked the copilot.

“Because she’s my niece,” said the Colonel.

“Whole family is involved,” remarked the copilot.

“Knew another one like that,” said the Colonel. “Father was killed a few months ago. Wife and both kids are still over here I think.”

“How did she end up out there anyway?” asked the copilot. “She was wearing a supply MOS badge on her uniform.”

“Some of the units got mixed up when they departed for the invasion. Some were supposed to be in the second and third waves ended up in the first. Like that field hospital that was set up on the beach. They weren’t supposed to be there,” said the Colonel.

“Fairly amazing,” said the copilot.

“The fact many of them are still alive is amazing,” said the Colonel. “And I hope they continue to amaze by holding out against all odds.”

“The winds are picking up,” said the IU Colonel as he prepared for the attack. “It will not be easy to attack in these conditions.”

“The storm is moving in,” said the Division Commander. “But it will affect them just the same.”

“We are almost in position,” said the Colonel.

“Attack in force and find the lines. I will have the divisional artillery ready to support your unit and will have the follow on brigades push through the holes in the lines you create,” said the General.

“And our objective?” asked the Colonel.

“Drive through them to the beach,” said the General. “And then back into the water where they came from.”

“Fire mission complete sir,” said the forward observer. “Don’t know if we hit anything and the ships are ordered to move into deeper waters.”

“We needed something besides a destroyer and a cruiser. Where are the battlewagons?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of one of the battalions on the beach defenses.

“Supporting Gorgon, Pegasus and Minotaur. Apparently the IU has already counterattacked in force in those sectors,” said the forward observer.

“And the Mexican cruiser...what’s it called?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel.

“The *Veracruz*,” said the forward observer. “It’s supporting Gorgon as well.”

“Someone needs to tell those navy pukes we could use some help over here as well,” said the Lieutenant Colonel. “All our indirect fire except the small stuff was lost in the landings.”

“Contact,” I said and saw the initial lines of IU infantry moving in towards our positions. It was going to be our first attack. I saw at least two companies of infantry moving along with armored vehicles in support. I really hoped the antitank weapons had arrived from the beach as I had no desire to let them get close enough to engage with the lightweight stuff we had.

“Fire when they get to three hundred,” said Lieutenant Winfield over the internal radio. “Keep the machine gun in hold status, but everything else is fair game.”

I acknowledged in turn as the other squad leaders did. Since Lieutenant Winfield had come back, I had been demoted so to speak and back in charge of a single squad. Not a big deal though as I really wasn't ready for platoon level leadership. I was barely ready for squad level leadership although I was about to get a trial by fire.

The infantry moved forward cautiously but with a purpose. They had not followed the initial bombardment as expected and were unsure of where our lines were at exactly. I watched and heard incoming mortar fire against them. It appeared our Company Commander had waited to catch them in the open and had sent for the mortars. We didn't have a whole lot, but hopefully it would break up the formations of the IU. Additional streaks were seen as antitank missiles ranged out and hit the BTR-80s in the front. Six were automatically disabled before the remaining ten switched on their smoke generators and stopped in place. Six more missiles ranged out and caught another five despite their efforts to conceal themselves. The remaining five turned around and departed back through the holes in the hedgerows.

The mortar fire wasn't being very effective since the attack was at least a battalion size and many of the troops were advancing forward away from the barrage. We got lucky though as a flight of F/A-18Es swept in from the north and dropped their ordnance on the leading formations. The cluster bombs weren't that effective as they had been dropped from a minimum altitude and didn't have the chance to fully deploy before striking the ground. But it did enough damage as the first wave was hit hard. Five SAMs were sent after them, downing one of the number as the pilot bailed out over friendly lines and pointed his aircraft south to crash. The remaining three returned and dropped their loads of 500 pound unguided bombs on the formations and assisted in breaking up the attack. I saw one turn and fire off an antiradar missile at one of the SAM vehicles and heard an explosion.

I saw another flight of F-15Fs heading out around the other sector. They too were dropping iron bombs and cluster munitions on the advancing column. But they also turned and sent several antitank missiles towards the armored threat. There were about a dozen black smoke columns rising from that sector, evidence of more armored vehicles burning. I heard the antitank HMMWVs leaving from the sector to rearm and be on call for the next attack. The F-15s finally cleared after making several cannon passes and expending their ground ordnance. The F/A-18s came in doing the same thing, but it wasn't as easy to fire on individual targets with the fast moving aircraft as it seemed. It accomplished little, but did give the IU something else to think about.

“Last run Kilo November 6,” said the pilot of the lead F/A-18. “Winds are getting too strong to fly close air support.”

“Roger, your wingman bailed out and is being picked up by friendly forces,” said the forward air controller.

“Thanks for picking him up,” said the pilot. “If you start getting into something you can’t handle, give us a call and we’ll try to make it out. Be advised, there’s also four ships on call in case you need them. They aren’t bugging out until after this attack. I’ll transmit the data to your device.”

“Thanks for the assist,” said the forward air controller as he saw the incoming packet from the pilot. “That’s the last air mission for a while, but we have some ships waiting for us.”

“Better than nothing. Which ships?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel.

“A cruiser, a frigate and two destroyers are waiting for this attack to end before heading out to the open seas. They are waiting for us to call with coordinates,” said the forward air controller.

“Give them the plot by grid and adjust,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Hotel-Hotel Nine-Nine, this is Kilo-November 6 Echo,” said the forward air controller.

“Six Echo, this is Nine-Nine, send it,” said the fire direction supervisor on board the Burke Class destroyer PSS *Sterett*.

“Target by grid, over,” said the controller.

“Send it,” said the supervisor.

“Target, infantry and light armor, grid reference one-nine-nine-seven-four-nine. I will adjust, over,” said the controller.

“*Churchill*, *Kauffman* and *Anzio*, you copy grid reference?” asked the supervisor as he got the other ships online that had stayed behind until forced out of the area.

“We copy,” the three answered in turn and started training their gun mounts onto the coordinates given by the forward air controller.

“*Sterett* will fire first,” said the fire direction supervisor as he saw the plot was complete and the gun was trained. He hit the button to fire the gun. “Six Echo, shot over.”

A moment was spent while the shell traveled in flight. It landed close to the intended target, but behind the enemy formations. “Splash over! Drop one hundred and fire for effect!”

The cruiser, destroyers and single frigate went into rapid fire on the guns. While the three inch gun on the USS *Kauffman* wasn’t as effective as the five inch guns on the larger vessels, it was still providing some help as the newer airburst shells was breaking up the infantry attack. The five inch rounds landed in and among the infantry before they backed off and retreated back to the starting point.

“Nine-Nine, this is Six Echo, cease fire over. Troops are retreating to starting point,” said the forward air controller.

“We copy cease fire,” said the supervisor and relayed the message to the other ships. The last rounds were fired and came in among the retreating troops, killing and wounding a few more before the firing stopped. I could see them heading back through the gaps in the hedgerows created by the application of high explosives and fire.

“Got them on the run now!” I said with a grin.

“Just the first wave,” said Lieutenant Winfield.

“It’s something,” I said, but I didn’t realize the indirect fire wasn’t going to last forever.

“*Sterett*, this is *Kauffman*,” said the Captain on the frigate.

“Go ahead,” said his counterpart on the destroyer.

“Be advised, we are getting slammed in here and need to head to deeper water. We are already taking rolls of ten to fifteen degrees,” said the Captain.

“Roger, head west to Point California,” said the Captain on the *Sterett*. He watched as the *Perry* Class Frigate turned slowly and started heading out to the open ocean and away from the shallow water where the wave action would be worse. “How’s our own situation?”

“We’re taking some pretty heavy swells, Captain,” said the helmsman. “Winds are at thirty knots and increasing. We can’t fire at forty or more. We should think of heading out here soon.”

“Can we get another mission in?” asked the Captain to the fire direction supervisor.

“We can get maybe another five minutes in,” said the supervisor. “Let me get a point.”

“I don’t want to leave the Channel with rounds still in our magazines. I want us empty,” said the Captain.

“I’ve got a request that’s just in range,” said the supervisor.

“Fire it up, rapid fire, send everything we’ve got,” said the Captain. “Send the coordinates to the other ships as well.”

The three ships sent another ten minute barrage on another target somewhat close to the beach. But the winds were rapidly growing and the rounds were not being corrected. Fully half of them missed the mark entirely and fell into open space. However, the other half delayed an attack against the eastern flank of Griffon Beach, giving the soldiers there time to complete fortifications and attempt another attack against the beach defenses to open a supply route into Sphinx Beach. The cruiser and destroyers finished their fire missions, down to nearly a quarter

of what they were supposed to have in the guns. While they weren't empty, they were somewhat content they had served as long as possible. The larger ships, the Texan battleships and the Mexican cruiser would stay behind and assist as long as possible. The ship Captains all knew they were desperately needed, but knew their gunfire would be ineffective in the growing winds.

The other four ships that had supported the other sector were leaving as well. The three cruisers had depleted their ammo stores and were heading towards the open waters where they could get some room between the vessels and weather the storm. We hated seeing them leave, but we also knew if they were sitting on the bottom because they capsized, they would do us little good.

We were feeling pretty good about then since the artillery fire had stopped what could have been a major attack against our positions. And we desperately needed that time to get our own fortifications complete and finish our resupply. While we had plenty of ammo, we also knew it went fast and we would have to make all the shots count. Runners came in with additional munitions and passed them out quickly before heading back and doing the same thing for additional sectors across the lines. We loaded up our ammo pouches and waited for the next attack to appear.

CHAPTER 9

Z Day Plus Six Hours

“More IU forces gathering,” said the Colonel to the AFNAS General.

“Which flank?” he asked.

“To the south this time,” said the Colonel and pointed at the old style map. Unusual since the battlefield was largely electronic now, the paper map was a tried and true principle that didn’t need power or batteries and wasn’t fragile if dropped. “Looks to be a brigade assault here.”

“Forces in the area?” asked the General.

“Two battalions more or less,” said the Colonel.

“More or less?” he asked.

“The remains of three partial battalions that were slapped together into one and another just forming up,” said the Colonel.

“Have we overextended our lines?” asked the General.

“Not yet sir,” said the Colonel. “Once we get through to Griffon and Minotaur we can send those forces back to the flanks. We already have them pinned in place, but we have to surround them in order to take them out and that takes more manpower.”

“Like they have us surrounded,” remarked the General with a smirk.

“Plus we’ve had some airborne units coming in through the perimeter. Nothing more than squad sized elements, but it’s something,” said the Colonel.

“Like slapping a band aid on a gunshot wound,” said the General. “Make plans to pull back three hundred meters in those sectors we are out to a click and a half. Put those airborne troopers and special ops guys onto building the next line of fighting positions...here, here and here.”

“We can hold this ground,” said the Colonel.

“And we can hold this better. It slopes upward, giving us the defensive edge,” said the General.

“Rain and winds are a concern as well. The last battle on the western sector wasn’t easy,” said the Colonel.

“Our backs are against the wall, literally,” said the General. “We have to make sure our shots count and are on target.”

“The 5.56 is betting blown around pretty good,” said the Colonel.

“I know and I told them I thought we should go to the 7.62. But did they listen to me? No, of course not. ‘No General, we already have the production ready for the 5.56’ they told me. And as sure as shooting, no pun intended, we are having issues with that light round getting blown around. Speaking of which, how are the supplies coming along?” asked the General.

“We’ve just about gotten everything off the dead and out of the water. The weapons that could be salvaged have been stripped from the armored vehicles we lost and we have supply points set up for every sector. Antitank weapons we are still short on for the most part, but we can still hold our own for a few engagements,” said the Colonel. “Small arms ammo should hold for a while as well.”

“For how long?” asked the General as an orderly came running up.

“Sir! We’ve broken through to Griffon Beach!” he announced.

“Where at?” asked the General.

“Along the shore! IU units are in retreat in that area and we are in pursuit!” he announced.

“Tell them no further than a kilometer inland. Once they hit that magic number, pull up and start digging in. Consolidate and tie in the lines with the forces in that area,” ordered the General as he observed a map and indicated where he wanted the troops. “And get me online with the Nicaraguan General commanding in that area.”

The orderly scurried away to get the Latin American General on the radio and relay the other orders. The General continued to look at the map and the gathering forces in the area.

“I’m kind of surprised they haven’t hit us in force yet,” said the General. “Not that I’m complaining or anything about the piecemeal fashion they are throwing their units in here.”

“Satellite recon shows divisional sized formations here and here. One looks to hit Gorgon Beach and the other hitting Pegasus,” said the Colonel.

“Not going to be pretty,” said the General. “It’s a bar fight with no holds barred.”

I watched as the lead IU formations started coming through the gaps in the hedges again. Not like before, but this time with a purpose and deliberately doing their tactical movements.

Provided they were being pushed around by the winds and were having a hard time staying in a tactical formation, but they were advancing. The rains and winds were coming harder now and I wondered why on earth we had ever attempted an invasion knowing this kind of weather was coming in the aftermath. We could hold the ground as long as we were properly supplied and had additional manpower. But getting said manpower and supplies in this storm was going to be impossible.

I peered through my scope at the advancing lines and knew throwing one of my bullets out towards them would be a total waste of ammunition unless I got really lucky. First it wasn't sighted for me and the winds would make a plaything of my round, even the vaunted 6.5 round. But I had managed to battle sight both the iron sights and the optic and would be able to refine the placement one the shooting started. But the Lieutenant Colonel we were assigned to told us not to fire until we saw the whites of their eyes. Kind of an odd historical lesson there, but one that was worth repeating and one that should be able to help us conserve ammunition and make kills instead of misses.

I continued peering at them as my radio operator shifted uncomfortably in the position. We had added some overhead cover along the way which helped protect us a little from the artillery fire. It was falling again, somewhat sporadically since the winds pushed them around as well, but it did give us pause for thought.

"Find any targets?" asked Lieutenant Winfield.

"Plenty sir, but at this range?" I said.

"What are they sitting at?" he asked.

"About nine hundred," I said. I could have made that sort of shot in normal calm conditions and with a rifle I was comfortable with, but not now.

"Open fire at two hundred. We hold them by the nose and kick them in the crotch," he said and moved on. He seemed to be spending a little more time near my squad, probably because I was the most junior of squad leaders. And not that I minded and I preferred to have a little more experience around when the shooting started. I found out most of the other squad leaders except Staff Sergeant Gilbert had bought it coming across the beach. And Lieutenant Axe had been hit and had been medevaced away to England on some of the last flights out. He seemed pretty promising as a combat leader, but sometimes all it took was that lucky shot.

They moved closer now, again, hampered by the winds and the sheet rain that was coming down pretty hard. It made life miserable in the positions as we were starting to deal with the mud as well as the puddles of water in the bottom of the positions that were getting deeper. Luckily enough, the rain had helped wash the salt water out of our uniforms and we were not as uncomfortable as before. But we were still wet, cold and fighting back the chills associated with same. But right now we concentrated on the advancing units, another battalion sized attack. Further south there were reports of a brigade level assault and the rumors said the other beaches were preparing for divisional engagements. I hoped they could hold and heard sporadic reports

we were tying into Griffon Beach on our left flank. At least we had some relief so to speak and things were going a little more as planned. Pegasus Beach and Centaur Beach had already linked up, but were under heavy counterattack.

The range was now at five hundred. Again, a distance I would have enjoyed engaging at since the IU officers were more noticeable in the weather directing their troops. I tended to go after the leadership and the heavy weapons as those were my target listing, but for now I had to wait. An automatic grenade launcher sent out several bursts, the grenades getting blown all over the place as well as some exploding in midair from the impacts of the rain. But they did manage to give the IU something to think about. They still pressed forward, obviously they knew our weapons were just about as useless at range as theirs were.

“Keep moving!” ordered the IU Major as he pushed against the rain blowing in from the side. He knew it was madness to try and attack in this weather, but then again, the FNC hadn’t been very accommodating to invade at that point in time. But he knew as soon as they swept the forces clear of the beach, they could return to their garrisons and attempt to weather out the storm. But the FNC forces were being persistent and not really dying off like they should have.

“We believe the lines are to the front! Six hundred meters!” yelled a Lieutenant.

“Keep pressing forward and find them. Once we get them locked into place, the second battalion will hit their flanks,” he yelled in return to be heard over the howling winds. More grenades landed in the area and the troops hit the ground. “Tell them to get moving! The sooner we can kill those infidels, the sooner we can return to garrison!”

“Yes sir!” yelled the Lieutenant and shouted the orders over the radio.

“Leading elements are at three hundred sir,” I said into the radio.

“Roger, we wait for the main body to get to two hundred and open fire,” said Lieutenant Winfield.

That would put the scouts within a hundred meters of our position, but they could be taken out a lot easier at that range than the extended range. But it still gave the main body thirty seconds or thereabouts to close the gap with our lines at a full charge. We were cutting this one pretty close I thought as the main body crept a little closer. The lead platoon diverted its path slightly as it headed more towards second platoon’s ground than ours. But eventually the forces were almost in range when a shot was fired. The main body was at two-fifty, close enough I supposed as

more forces started firing. A general call to open fire was sent across the front and we engaged the targets in our sector.

I took aim at an officer or NCO who seemed to be prompting the troops. Since I hadn't fired my rifle yet, I could see the round strike a little low and right of where I wanted it to. I made some quick adjustments on the scope and sent another shot towards another leader who had emerged. It hit closer to center this time and I started firing faster since I could guide the shells in rather than try to adjust the scope more. I concentrated and found several leaders as well as machine gunners. I took aim at another machine gunner who was attempting to set up his PKM machine gun and fire across our lines. A single shot wounded him and the assistant gunner tried to take over. He also was hit by someone else as the firing increased from our lines. It was like we were all aware it was the last of the ammunition so no burst fire was heard. Semi-auto was the rule of the day and we started finding our marks despite the weather.

A squad was advancing towards my position. They had us bracketed and were starting to pour some effective fire onto us. I fired again at an advancing infantryman and ended up hitting him before shifting targets and missing on a second. My buddy was firing as well and managed to hit two himself. We continued to fire and reloaded until the attack started to waver. The winds were just too strong and they were being blown off their feet as they tried to advance. We continued firing at them as they attempted to move forward, but the winds were just too strong. I could see officers and NCOs calling them back as the small groups attempted retreat.

We continued to fire even though they were leaving since we knew for a fact they would return again. It was better to kill them now rather than wait around for them to come back when the weather was good. But eventually they were out of range and firing slowly died down over the line.

“Get a LACE report from our guys,” I said to my RTO.

He began calling the foxholes of my squad and found the liquids were still okay, ammo expenditures were minimal, only one casualty which could be treated on scene and all equipment was accounted for. I passed these numbers on to Lieutenant Winfield and immediately started making more corrections to my scope based on seeing where my rounds impacted during the brief battle. A resupply runner came by, dropping off two full magazines for the RTO and another twenty rounds of loose ammo for me. Another dropped a ration apiece for us and headed off with the other to finish the resupply run I reloaded the rounds and put a fresh magazine into my rifle while looking over the ration to decide whether or not I wanted to eat right then.

“Looks like you're doing okay,” said Lieutenant Winfield as he approached my position.

“Only one casualty,” I said. “Guy in Bravo Fire Team got hit in the arm, but he's okay and going to stay on the line.”

“He can head back and get checked out by the medic,” said Winfield.

“I'll let him know,” I said and got out of my foxhole. “Start finishing the overhead cover.”

“Roger that Sergeant,” said the RTO as he got his rifle and started getting out of the hole. The rains were coming down hard now as I checked on the other foxholes. Delacruz already had the Private assigned to him completing his overhead cover.

“Going to take more than that to get through us,” he said with a grin.

“This storm’s ruining their attacks,” I said. “Once the weather clears, it’s a different story.”

“Once the weather clears, the second wave will be here,” he said.

I hoped the Generals, Marshals and Admirals were planning on that. I figured there were several thousand troops sitting in England right now plenty mad they weren’t here in the fighting. But then again, they didn’t have to deal with the rains or winds like we were. I knew this fight wasn’t over by a long shot and eventually they would get their chance to experience what we were going through.

“We cannot attack through this weather! My troops are getting blown off their feet!” exclaimed the IU Lieutenant Colonel after he returned to the forward command post.

“You must attack!” growled the IU General.

“Sir, we have to have armored support to at least get within striking distance to the infidel’s lines. Our troops must fight through the weather and are exhausted by the time they reach within range of their weapons,” said the Lieutenant Colonel sensibly.

“We don’t have the vehicles to spare,” said the General.

“Then bring up a unit that does!” growled the Lieutenant Colonel. “My people are dying for nothing!”

“Watch your tone Colonel!” growled the General.

“I will not continue to watch my boys fight and die for nothing! We cannot continue this attack unless we have armored vehicle support bringing us closer to the fight!” he shot back.

The General contemplated relieving the insubordinate officer on the spot, but he knew he was right. There was no sense in continuing the attacks until they could get the proper support they needed. With the winds, artillery fire was sporadic at best and generally blown off course before it detonated. And they were throwing their troops into battle piecemeal and having them hacked up, piecemeal.

“Get me General Malik on the radio,” he ordered to one of his staff. “See to your battalion. Consolidate and prepare to join with Second Battalion.”

“Sir, General Malik is on the radio,” said a Sergeant as he handed over the handset.

“What are you going to tell him?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel.

“The same thing I said before and what you just reminded me of. In order to defeat this invasion, we must strike hard, but with planning and in superior numbers,” said the General.

“Sir, the link up is complete and we have consolidated the lines with Griffon,” said a Captain in the Sphinx Beach command post.

“Are we spread thin?” asked the General.

“Not especially,” said the Captain. “We are still sorting out the defensive arrangements.”

“And the other beaches?” asked the General.

“Still having trouble with Minotaur. However, Gorgon and Centaur have linked up as well as Pegasus and Centaur,” said the Captain.

“Can they hold?” asked the General.

“Gorgon was hit pretty hard, but the ANZAC division there is holding their ground. Centaur is in slightly better shape. Pegasus and Minotaur are holding fast, but under heavy counterattack. Griffon seems to be okay for the moment,” said the Captain.

“So we haven’t seen the worst fighting?” asked the General.

“Most of the armored attacks have been against Gorgon, Pegasus and Minotaur. We’ve only had infantry attacks with light armored support,” said the Captain.

“When can we expect the link up with Minotaur?” asked the General.

“The battalion commander thinks the last positions should fall within the next hour,” said the Captain. “After that, the lines should open between us and Minotaur.”

“Who’s doing the assault?” asked the General.

“The Dutch light infantry battalion sir,” said the Captain.

“Good troopers,” said the General. “Continue to punch through. We need to get those lanes open.”

“Sir!” shouted a major from a computer terminal. “Forces are massing on our southwestern flank!”

“What kind and how many?” asked the General as he went to the terminal.

“Looks to be an armored battalion of tanks, type unknown,” said the Major. “As well as a mechanized infantry battalion and maybe another forming up here.”

“How good are the defenses in this sector?” asked the General.

“They’ve had a couple of minor attacks, but nothing armored yet,” said the Captain.

“Anything else shaping up?” asked the General.

“Nothing in our sectors. Another infantry attack against Griffon on the western flank,” said the Major. “Maybe another forming up against Minotaur near the gap in our lines.”

“Trying to push into the beach?” asked the General.

“It’s what it looks like sir,” said the Major.

“Release the Scorpion company and get them ready to roll,” said the General. “And the remainder of the antitank vehicles as well.”

“Yes sir,” said the Captain.

“Not looking good sir,” said the Major as he continued to watch the enhanced satellite imagery coming from inland in France.

“We didn’t expect it to,” said the General.

“Would have been a lot easier had we gotten reinforced,” said the Major.

“We’ll hold,” said the General. “We’ll hold not because we have to, but because we can.”

CHAPTER 10

Z Day Plus 16 hours

“Incoming!” shouted someone up the line as we heard the shells impacting once again. And unlike before, we didn’t even hear them coming down as the winds were horrible right then. It wasn’t easy controlling a squad in such weather, or any other unit for that matter. But we knew the IU was positioning to attack again since they started sending in the artillery shells into our positions. They probably wouldn’t be hitting anything, but the randomness wouldn’t help us at all and we hunkered down into our positions.

“What’s heading in?” asked my buddy, Private First Class Hal Marks.

“Don’t know yet,” I said, almost yelled, in return. The weather was really bad.

We continued to watch as best as we could, but with the sheet rain falling, we weren’t really able to see much to our front. The radio announced our current troubles. It was breaking up slightly and the operator had to yell to be heard, but what we heard concerned us.

“...advised...thirty tanks and infantry fighting vehicles...advancing...displacing at this time, over,” said the voice of the LP/OP over the radio.

This time we wouldn’t be facing a purely infantry threat with some armored vehicles as support. This time we would be facing tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Not good for our situation. I could hear the rumble of engines somewhere nearby and hoped we had sufficient antitank weapons to deal with the threat. We had some of the man pack stuff, the M136s, M72A9s, FGM-148s and the M150 Broadsword antitank missiles. The M150 was relatively new, slowly replacing the Javelin system as it was smaller and lighter, but packed the same punch as the older system. But I really hoped they wouldn’t get close enough to us to be put into use. And with the winds, the weapons weren’t going to be easy to fire since they would get blown off course very easily. We would have to wait until they were uncomfortably close to fire.

The diesel engines were louder now, straight indications they were IU vehicles since our tanks all used gas turbine engines. Ours were a lot quieter than theirs and we knew it only meant trouble. But something else was heard, something like a huge zipper being pulled somewhere close by. I had no idea what it was until I saw the streak of an A-10C Warthog screaming by, way lower than it should be. It didn’t seem to be flying that well, but I saw the nose dip once again and another cannon burst come from its nose at some target beyond the tree line. It came up once again and turned skyward, getting pushed by the winds as it did before the pilot had to level off to attempt to get the aircraft under control. Another A-10 was repeating the process on the IU formation, but at a higher altitude.

I saw the aircraft come around once again, but the winds seemed to be pushing them all over the sky. I knew they would be of limited use, but the fact they were up there gave us hope. But our

hope started dying down as we saw an antiaircraft gun unit shred the second A-10 with its 23mm cannons as it started another run. The aircraft went away trailing smoke from both engines and a fire started on the left wing. The pilot popped out fairly close to our positions after turning back south. The aircraft eventually crashed somewhere beyond our visibility and we heard the detonation of the unexpended munitions on board. The first A-10 circled around before firing once again and the tracer fire chasing it out over our lines. The pilot made one last attempt to dive in, but had to pull off and lowered his altitude before heading back north.

“Cover me!” I yelled as I saw the pilot being blown around pretty good and coming in for a hard landing near our foxhole. I saw Lieutenant Winfield and another member running that way as well. I managed to get there just as the pilot hit the ground.

“Friendly coming in!” I shouted at him as I was running full speed. The artillery was still dropping randomly in our sector and I wanted to make sure the pilot got to safety since his skills would be needed again in the future. I got to him just as the parachute started wrapping him up and blew him to the ground. As I approached, I pulled out my strap cutter and saw the pilot attempting to get untangled from the material and getting more tied up as he did so.

“Hold on! I’m going to help!” I shouted to be heard over the wind. I started cutting the random cords and material and heard a very feminine voice cussing enough to make a sailor blush under the material. She finally stopped struggling and I managed to cut away enough of the material for her to assist. Once she realized we were friendlies, she let us finish cutting away the parachute before another impact of an artillery round caused us to seek cover in the nearest crater. We were dashing that way when she suddenly stopped and ran towards her seat.

“I’ve got to grab something!” she yelled at me as I followed. The yelling of Lieutenant Winfield for us to stop and come to the crater could be heard over the storm, which I found pretty impressive given the weather conditions. She grabbed at her survival kit and unstrapped the MP7 before following me back to the crater while the shells landed nearby.

“Are you two certifiable?” demanded Winfield as we dove into the crater as another four shells landed in quick succession nearby.

“Had to grab my weapon,” said the pilot.

“Coulda waited!” he yelled in return. “You okay?”

“Already getting sore,” she returned. “Cheryl Pearce.”

“Al Winfield,” he returned and shook her hand. “We’ll try to get you an escort back to the rear.”

“All for it,” she replied as another shell landed nearby. She shucked off the G suit and prepared the weapon just in case she needed it. The rain was coming down harder now as we heard the diesel engines coming closer.

“Any more aircraft coming in?” asked Winfield.

“Probably not,” she replied. “There were four of us that tried to get in. One had to divert early because of an engine flameout from the rain, the second had to turn back after getting a lightning strike that destroyed the electronics and my flight leader and I were the last two. We were seeing if it was even possible to fly support in this weather. We’re not doing a whole lot of good up there with these winds and probably can’t come back until they die down.”

“It helps some,” said Lieutenant Winfield. “Private, escort the pilot back to the beach.”

But more artillery landed nearby denying the two to make the break for safety. They jumped back into the crater with the pilot landing right on top of Lieutenant Winfield spread eagle. He seemed a little embarrassed, but set her down gently as more shells landed.

“Sorry,” she said.

“No problem,” he grinned back. The shelling lasted two more minutes before it came to a stop and gave us our opportunity to get back to our positions. The Private led the pilot off on the quick trip to the beach where she would probably serve some purpose with the staff in the rear. I had no idea what the others were doing that weren’t infantry but I supposed she could maybe help in the hospital which was starting to overflow. I ran back to my foxhole and found the one in a million shot had landed right inside the position. It’s one thing to have overhead cover from splinters, but another when the delayed action 152mm shell lands right in the middle of the position. All that remained of my foxhole was a deep crater, blackened by the explosion and resulting fire. It scared me to think I could have been in there when the shell landed, but I had more important things on my mind right then.

I heard the diesel engines of the tanks moving forward and looked to see if any of the antitank weapons had survived the blast. I couldn’t find any of them and called over my internal radio to Winfield and let him know I was down a man already. He was on both the radio nets and sent one of our reserve fire teams to help cover the gap in the lines. Once they were in place, I headed over to the position with Delacruz and whomever he happened to be with. It was bad that I didn’t even know half my squad’s names and certainly not something that they ever taught you about. I could see infantry running through the gaps in the hedgerows and towards our lines. However, instead of the typical IU camouflage pattern, they were wearing the digital camouflage of the U.S. forces. About half carried AKMs and the others carrying FNC issued weapons. They were running at full speed screaming at the top of their lungs as they approached.

“Aardvark! Aardvark! Aardvark!” I could hear over the winds coming in. I told Delacruz to cover me and went forward slightly to figure out who they were. If they were running that fast, I knew the IU had to be hot on their heels. They saw my waving arm and started heading towards our position, running faster and still stumbling from being blown around in the winds.

“101st Airborne coming in!” shouted one of their number as he helped someone up and continued running towards my position. I sent them behind the lines and saw Winfield running towards them as well. The leader saw the last man come through and turned to me. “That’s the last one, nobody else is friendly.”

I informed Delacruz to start lighting up anyone else that came through the line behind them. Lieutenant Winfield was behind the lines speaking with the leader of the party.

“Lieutenant Winfield, AFNAS 1st of the 1st,” he said.

“Sergeant Major Dunham, U.S. 3rd of the 502nd,” said the Senior NCO as he emptied a canteen and caught his breath.

“Where did you guys come from?” asked Winfield.

“We were part of the airborne drops the night before the landings. Got dropped way off course and were ambushed not long after landing. We’ve fought our way here,” said the Sergeant Major.

“What’s behind the hedgerows?” asked Winfield.

“Looks to be a battalion sized armored attack, maybe more. We hit a few crews to clear a lane to get here,” said the Sergeant Major.

“We’re expecting an attack at any time,” said Winfield and as he spoke, a tank broke through the hedgerow, followed quickly by a dozen more heading towards our position. They hadn’t fired yet, but they knew we were there. “Can you help fill in some gaps on our line?”

“Absolutely,” said the Sergeant Major as he started dividing up his troops and Winfield designated the positions for them to go to. He kept a squad back as reinforcements once again and started going back to our command post. I headed back to Delacruz and saw our antitank vehicles once again including two M1305s. Another new design, it was a standard Stryker vehicle with a GAU-8 30mm cannon like the A-10s carried. As soon as they pulled into position, the cannon started firing, sounding for the world like a large zipper and I saw the lead tank get peppered with the depleted uranium shells. It came to a stop before the hatches blew open from the exploding shells inside. They continued to engage as M6 Scorpion light tanks came forward and engaged the lighter vehicles with their 90mm cannons. More anti-tank missiles were sent downrange, fighting the winds as they flew towards the targets. Some were hit while others were blown off target and exploded nearby.

The infantry was spilling out of the vehicles, still well over a half a click away, but we started firing at them. It was a full sized battalion attack being sent our way and the infantry was starting to attack through. More anti-tank missiles were sent from positions and sent out to the armored threats. The IU infantry focused in on the back blasts created and started massing their troops towards that threat. One of the Scorpion tanks exploded from a direct hit by an IU T120. It was avenged by two of its comrades as the hypervelocity penetrating shells destroyed the tank.

The armored threat was being dealt with and we started concentrating on the infantry advancing towards us. They were within 300 meters now and we started firing at the targets as they appeared. The IU wasn’t being very friendly as they were shooting rocket propelled grenades

towards the positions. Lucky enough the winds were strong enough to blow them off course, but it was still unnerving to watch as they headed towards our lines. A BMP-4 fired off its 30mm canon towards one of our positions, shredding the occupants inside before a LAW hit it right below the turret and destroyed the vehicle. The infantry dismounted, now within two hundred meters and started rushing our positions. Their charge was short lived as bursts from the machine guns found their marks and pinned them in place in the open fields.

Another of the Scorpion tanks was destroyed by an antitank missile fired from the far hedgerow. Our automatic grenade launcher saw the launch site and sent in a burst of grenade fire before moving on to the remaining infantry. The IU attack was being broken up, but the numbers were still on their side as they charged forward even more. I fired additional shots at whatever targets happened to be in my field of fire, ignoring the standing rules of firing on the leadership and machine gunners. I knew we had to stop them all before the regular riflemen overran our positions and it was a moot point to try to stop the single targets. I reloaded and saw Delacruz come out of the position for a better angle on the attackers.

We were side by side firing almost nonstop. Smoke was seen coming off my barrel and I knew my shots were starting to go a little wild since the rifle wasn't designed to be fired for prolonged periods of time without having the chance to cool. I saw another advancing infantryman and fired another two shots at him, connecting with one before the next magazine needed to be loaded. The infantry was getting far closer than I really wanted as I continued to engage as fast as I could. I continued firing as the infantry advanced even closer.

My rifle ran dry just as the attack seemed like it was going to overwhelm us. I immediately dropped the empty magazine while reaching for a reload out of my web gear. But I was shocked when I found none were left and I had gone through my entire load this engagement. I slapped at all the pouches just to be sure and found I had no magazines left. I immediately dropped the rifle and grabbed at the pistol at my waist. I knew it wasn't long range enough to take out the advancing enemy, but up close it would be fine. Delacruz continued firing at the advancing enemy and seemed to sense I didn't have a rifle any longer and left the shorter range targets to me. Now firing at a hundred meters isn't an easy task with a pistol, but I would at least give them something to think about.

They advanced quicker than usual and I continued to fire and reload. It looked like the right flank was about to be overrun and my pistol went dry just as I saw an IU infantryman coming to our right. I knew I didn't have enough time to reload before he shot Delacruz, but I spied the revolver in the small of his back. His uniform top had come up enough to where it was visible and ready to be pulled. I grabbed at it and aimed down the sights before squeezing the trigger on the man just as he swung his AK around. The pistol bucked in my hand as I repositioned and laid my arms across his back and sent another two shots at the man. His attack stalled and he fell to the ground dying from the small magnum loads.

“Cover me!” I shouted and put the revolver back into his holster. I loaded my pistol as I ran and grabbed at the AK rifle lying ten yards from our position. I gave him a shot to the head as he was attempting to grab at his rifle and attack us once again. The web gear was easy to pull off

since it was connected by straps I managed to cut with my knife. All the while, shots zinged by me as I scampered back to the foxhole, still covered by Delacruz.

“You know how to use that?” he asked as he fired another burst at an advancing infantryman.

“Absolutely,” I shouted as I started to check the chamber by pulling back the charging handle slightly. There was a round ready and I changed over to semi-automatic and looked out over the line for targets.

“Check to ten o’clock, squad coming in!” he shouted.

I looked and sure enough, another IU squad was bearing down on our defensive works. I aimed and fired, not knowing if the rifle was even sighted or not. I managed to hit the first man in the shoulder and figured out the Kentucky windage after about half a dozen shots. I managed to start hitting center mass before long and continued to fire and reload as the attack started stalling and the attackers were pulling back to regroup. We continued firing although they were in retreat and managed to hit more after they disappeared into the hedgerow.

“Ammo check!” yelled Lieutenant Winfield after the firing died down. Each person started looking over what ammo they had left and getting ready to relay that information to the runner going between the holes. A reserve platoon was sent up from the beach and quickly took up the positions in the line with the wounded and dead being sent to the rear to be patched up or put with the others. I received the reports from my squad of six effectives and relayed the reports to Lieutenant Winfield over the radio. While we had won, we were being worn down by the sheer numbers the IU was sending at us as our platoon of four squads was now down to about two squads of soldiers.

“What are you guys sitting at?” asked a Private as he came by our hole. He was a resupply runner sent in loaded down with ammo in his pack.

“Down five mags, I need two-ten to top off,” said Delacruz.

“I’m out of 6.5, need two-fifty to get fully loaded,” I said.

“No more 6.5 to be had for the moment, but I’ll keep checking,” he said and dropped off two boxes to Delacruz. “This’ll have to do for the moment.”

“It’s something,” he said and immediately started filling the empty magazines at his side. I helped out and we finished reloading in record time. Lieutenant Winfield came by for a quick visit.

“You guys hanging in there?” he asked.

“I’m out of ammo for my rifle Sarge...I mean Lieutenant,” I said.

“You got that AK, use it,” he said.

“Need more ammo sir,” I said.

“Sounds like you just volunteered to head out and get more,” he nodded at the dead and dying IU infantry. “Gather your squad as well as a fire team from Second. Get as much as you can, rifles, machine guns, ammo, grenades, whatever goes bang.”

“Got it,” I said and rallied my guys to head out and gather the weapons and ammo. It was bad that we had to rely on the IU weaponry to fight, but it was better than a pointy stick. I set one fire team for security and the other two started stripping the dead and dying of their gear. Instead of sorting out what they had in their web gear, we just took it off and sent it back as a whole unit for someone else to sort out. Packs were also picked up and I saw a team starting to strip the vehicles that weren't burning for machine guns, ammunition and anything else that was useful. I saw one taking out the charges for the autoloading tank cannons. While we didn't have a good way of detonating them, they could prove useful somehow. Others were stripping off the secondary heavy machine guns and the ammo belts before running back towards our lines. We didn't have a fifty cal assigned to us, but with the addition of the IU DShK heavy machine gun, we now had something capable of turning cover into concealment.

As soon as we got our packs and hands full, we shuttled back to the lines, depositing it at the makeshift command post and immediately returned for more. We found a few wounded and got them behind the lines to be interrogated. In a half an hour, we heard shells starting to fall close to our sector and immediately gathered what was closest and got behind the lines. We found Lieutenant Winfield already had others reloading the IU magazines and handing out rifles to the units still on the line. I took my acquired AK and got seven magazines along with the three I already had. Delacruz and I returned to the line, himself having gotten an AK to use in case his own ammo ran out before he could be resupplied.

“This makes three big attacks and they still haven't gotten past us,” he remarked.

“Got a little closer this time,” I said.

“Nice shooting,” he said and dug out three rounds to replace the ones I'd fired out of his revolver. He unloaded the cylinder and put the fresh ammo back in before sliding it back into the holster and checking his other arms.

“Does just fine for a last ditch, have to kill someone right now caliber,” I grinned.

He laughed along with me as we listened to the indirect fire to our left flank. The company in that sector was getting hammered pretty hard. Lieutenant Winfield came by for another visit.

“Have to steal Delacruz from you Donnie,” he said. “But I've got a replacement.”

“Where am I heading sir?” asked Delacruz.

“Taking over a squad from Bravo Company. They are fresh outa talent,” said Winfield.
“Congratulations Sergeant, you just got another promotion.”

“Isn’t the first time sir,” he grinned.

“Make it the last time,” Winfield laughed in return. “Grab your things and go over to Lieutenant Young. He’ll show you where to go.”

“Roger that,” he said and grabbed at his pack, weapons and scurried behind the line heading towards Bravo Company’s sector.

“Come on over troop, Sergeant Donnie doesn’t bite,” said Lieutenant Winfield as he waved at the Private to his rear. The soldier dropped into the foxhole and looked a little nervous. “Private Matthias Blain, meet Sergeant Donald McIntyre, your new squad leader.”

“Any more replacements coming sir?” I asked.

“Not yet, Private Blain here is actually a finance specialist that somehow got mixed up and landed with the rest of us. But I’m sure you’ll help him along,” said Winfield.

“I’ll keep him alive,” I said. “You know how to use an AK?”

“No sir,” he stammered, a little nervous about being on the front lines. Sure they told them they could all end up there during basic training, but few ever expected to be on the front lines facing an entire division of pissed off Muslims who wanted nothing more than to kill us. And the fact they hadn’t yet grated at their brains since we were being far too persistent in our defense.

“Don’t worry, I’ll teach you how,” I said with confidence, hoping to allay his fears.

“I’m sending out Smitty and Jenkins for a listening post right into the edge of that hedgerow. Keep an eye on them,” said Lieutenant Winfield as got ready to head up the line and check it once again. I saw the two figures depart from the front of the lines, making a mad dash to the obscured area to our front, at least four hundred meters out. I watched as they disappeared and headed into the hedges, watching and waiting for the new IU attack against our lines.

“Sir, we’re simply overwhelmed by the numbers of wounded,” said the doctor in charge of the field hospital set up on the beach. “We cannot keep up.”

“What are we supposed to do?” asked the AFNAS General.

“We could arrange for a cease fire and send them over to the IU. They will probably abide by the international conventions and treat our wounded. They do it for pilots and others shot down, so they should do it now,” said the doctor.

“I’m not sure about that doctor,” said the General.

“Either we attempt to get them treated by the IU or they will certainly die here,” said the doctor.

“I’ll have my chief of staff set it up,” said the General after hearing more of the screaming of his soldiers coming from the aid station. While each and every soldier carried a first aid kit, there was only so much one could do with the few bandages they carried. The soldiers needed better medical care and a prisoner of war would receive better care than certain death on the beach.

“Sir, all beaches except Pegasus and Minotaur have linked up,” said a Chief Warrant Officer.

“Any idea on when they might break through?” asked the AFNAS General.

“The Dutch Battalion was hit pretty hard on the last assault. Two companies from the Pacifica Marine Regiment will be trying again in the next hour,” said the Chief.

“Can we lend them any support?” asked the General.

“Not without hurting our own positions. We are down to a little over a company of armor, seventeen tanks to be precise and limited antitank ammunition and missiles for the remainder of our forces. I’ve got the tank crews heading out and checking the IU tanks to see if they can still fire or be worked,” said the Assistant Division Commander for Support. He had taken over as the maneuver commander when the other Brigadier General was killed during the landing.

“Ammunition for our antitank systems?” asked the General.

“Minimal,” said the Brigadier.

“Fuel?” asked the General.

“Minimal,” said the Brigadier.

“Man pack weapons?” asked the General.

“Minimal,” said the Brigadier.

“Anything we aren’t short on?” asked the General.

“The enemy,” said the Brigadier with a sad smile.

“Then we’re in combat,” said the General. “What’s next?”

“The storm isn’t letting up. It stalled just like that forecaster said it would,” said a Major.

“You think we could get some good news?” asked the General.

“The good news? We are holding for the moment. We’ve taken serious casualties, but we are holding the ground,” said the Brigadier.

“For how long?” asked the General.

“Again, we are taking casualties, but we are also getting some of the airborne troops in to help with the defenses. What we’ve lost, we’ve almost regained with them,” said the Brigadier.

“Which will run out eventually,” said the General.

“Breaking through to the other beaches helped out a lot and once the last link up has been made, I would suggest we start looking at consolidating the beaches,” said the Brigadier.

“Already planned on it,” said the General.

“Sir! Looks like another attack is forming up!” announced another Major.

“Size?” asked the General.

“Looks to be another brigade level assault on the southern sector,” said the Major. “Showing armored vehicles and infantry massing.”

“Back to work and get some reinforcements into that area,” said the General. “It’s going to be a long night.”

CHAPTER 11

Z Day Plus 28 hours

“Be advised, heavy infantry and armored support taking cover near our position,” said Private First Class James Smith into the radio. The rains were coming down in sheets right then making the attack thoroughly impossible to accomplish.

“Are they moving forward, over,” asked Lieutenant Winfield.

“Negative, attempting to take cover from the weather,” said Smitty.

“We might be getting a rest for a few minutes sir,” said Lieutenant Winfield to the current Battalion Commander, a Major.

“I’m reinforcing your platoon and the additional platoons with some of the airborne troops that came into the perimeter recently. Try and get your folks some rest, I figure they’re going to need it,” said the Major.

“Roget that sir,” said Winfield.

“Also, you’re now the Company XO. Lieutenant Young is acting commander and the next ranking officer is just too junior to take over. I need some experience out there,” said the Major.

“Kind of happy being just a Platoon Sergeant sir,” said Winfield.

“And I’d much rather have your kind of experience in the coming fight,” said the Major.
“Besides, the retirement’s better.”

“If I live to collect,” said Winfield.

“You’re too stubborn to die,” chuckled the Major. “Your last company commander had some choice words over your mulish streak.”

“Some might call me a jackass instead of mulish sir,” grinned Winfield.

“Works both ways Lieutenant, works both ways,” grinned the Major. “Let me get over to what’s left of Delta Company.”

“Hit pretty hard?” asked Winfield.

“Took the brunt of an armored battalion. They have to be replaced entirely and I’ve got less than a platoon left,” said the Major.

“Won’t hold you back sir,” said Winfield as he went back to seeing over the defensive arrangements even in the roaring wind. The additional squad arrived as planned and was quickly put out on the line. I got one additional fire team and put them back into the gap in the line with Second Squad. We weren’t even trying to dig in at this time and used the craters from the artillery strikes instead. Luckily the artillery had stopped for the moment since the winds were blowing it way off target. The last round was about an hour before and blew the rounds completely off target and into the IU lines. It was kind of nice knowing they got a little steel rain on their heads instead of ours.

I wondered how everything else was going in the other sectors and how the second wave was faring. I kind of hoped they hadn’t been put on the boats yet since it wouldn’t be easy out in the ocean during all this, but then again, they probably had a roof over their head instead of sitting out in the rain like we were. I had changed uniforms during a brief lull in the fighting to get rid of the uniform that was still impregnated by the salt water and had been comfortable for all of about fifteen minutes before getting wet and miserable again. But at least the cloth didn’t chafe at me like before. Even though the rain knocked a lot of it out, it still was built up in places that would make you uncomfortable. However, I got to change everything out and was happy for the fact Lieutenant Winfield made us vacuum seal a set of clothing to make it watertight.

I heard an artillery barrage somewhere to the east. Heavy guns pounded the area and I wondered if the IU had moved in some heavier stuff to try and take us out. I couldn’t see the explosions, but could hear the deep rumbles even over the wind. And I continued to watch and wait for the expected attack.

“Sir, we’ve got a possible contact, bearing zero-nine-five, range maybe six thousand, maybe making five knots,” said the sonar operator on the NASS *Grundy*. The destroyer was on picket duty on the eastern edge of the English Channel and was having a hard time detecting anything since the storm was battering the ship pretty well. But they attempted to find the contacts since submarines didn’t worry about the surface action. They couldn’t use the towed sonar array and had to rely on the simple sonar set attached to the bottom of the hull. But the weather was making it extremely hard to do anything.

“No firm contacts?” asked the Captain.

“Not really sir. It’s possibly an electric boat,” said the operator. “Send out active pings?”

“Get the aircraft into position,” said the Captain. A radio call was sent out to the nearest P-8A Poseidon patrol aircraft since it was impossible for their own helicopter to fly around in the 80 MPH winds right then. Not impossible to fly, but completely impossible to land after taking off as the weather would make it a plaything. Also since they had to be a lot lower than usual to pick up the signals from the sonobuoys, they stood a good chance of getting blown into the

water. So they had to rely on the aircraft which flew slightly higher and were inherently more stable than the helicopters.

The aircraft eventually came down below the clouds and was quickly being buffeted around by the winds. But Boeing had built a tough product and the aircraft was stable for the moment. The crew dropped a series of passive sonar buoys along the line where the submarine might be.

“Nothing,” said a sonar operator from the back of the aircraft. “Let’s drop the next below the thermocline.”

Again further buoys were dropped and nothing was heard. Either the contact was false or the craft was very quiet. They expected it to be somewhat deep since the wave action wouldn’t be easy to deal with.

“Drop a line of active buoys. Three above and three below,” said the pilot. The sonar operator adjusted the sets and dropped the lines in as directed. He immediately got a contact.

“Contact! Target bearing two-six-five, range four thousand yards, depth two hundred,” shouted the operator. “Contact on passive buoy three! His torpedo doors are opening and tubes are flooded! Additional signal on buoy two!”

“*Grundy*, you copy? He’s almost right below you!” shouted the pilot.

“Hydrophone effects! Torpedo! Torpedo! Torpedo!” shouted the sonar operator on the *Grundy* as he heard the expulsion of two torpedoes towards the ship.

“Flank speed! Hard right rudder! Deploy the countermeasures!” shouted the Captain, but he knew it was too late. With the storm working against them, the submarine had been able to creep up and get into perfect firing position prior to strike at the ship. The range was under two thousand yards and the torpedoes were fast for their design. They struck fifteen feet apart and broke the ship in two. The Captain ordered the ship abandoned as he attempted to get out of the CIC before it flooded.

“Target destroyed,” said the sonar operator on the IU submarine.

“We still have the aircraft to deal with,” said the Captain.

“Might I suggest we head north before heading back west, Captain?” said the First Officer.

“Yes, good idea. They will expect us to head south or west and attempt to strike at the battleships. Head north, full speed for ten minutes to clear the area,” ordered the Captain.

“Madman! Madman!” shouted another sonar operator on the P-8. “Positive contact on magnetic detector! Smoke bomb dropped!”

The sonar operator dropped the small smoke bomb before the aircraft started a turn. However, the winds made a plaything of the light device and blew it far off course. The smoke was also quickly dissipated by the strong winds and the crew lost all contact with the marker.

“We’ll come back around and cross reference,” said the pilot as they started a pretty sharp turn in the winds. He lost control of the craft once and started flying a little more conservatively as they lined up for another run.

“Lost contact on buoy three and active DICASS,” said the sonar operator.

“Drop another line to the west. I want this sub,” said the pilot. He could hear the radio calls going out for rescue helicopters and ships, but if they didn’t act fast, it would be extremely hard to get them into position before the crew drowned. He pulled his aircraft around again and the winds blew it off course slightly before he was back on his heading again.

“Lost contact on all buoys sir,” said the operator after fifteen minutes of searching.

“Which direction?” asked the pilot.

“If I had to guess, he went back out east. The Channel is no easy place for a sub,” said the operator. “But he already made it past the initial line at Dover, so there’s no telling.”

“Let’s head west then,” said the pilot as the aircraft bounced around the sky once again.

The IU submarine had crept away from the scene as it had gone north at full speed. The newer design had incorporated much of the German engineering that brought about the Type 212 submarines. When they were entirely safe, they restarted the diesel engine to provide new power to the batteries.

“Course Captain?” asked the Exec.

“Set two-two-five at eight knots towards Normandy,” said the Captain.

“They are surely tracking us towards that location,” said the Exec.

“Our orders are clear. Our forces are being shelled nonstop by those floating fortresses they call battleships. We are going to sink them,” said the Captain.

“Aye, aye. Set course two-two-five at eight knots,” said the Exec, not entirely comfortable with the mission. But orders were orders and they could take pride in saying they sank one of the large FNC battlewagons. The crew was almost finished reloading the torpedo tubes from their encounter and they knew it would take more than the two they had used in the prior engagement.

“Reverse course so we can remain in contact,” said the Captain of the Mexican heavy cruiser the *Veracruz*. “Prepare the guns for inspection as we are turning, the crews have been lax in that department.”

“Si, Señor,” said the helmsman as he relayed the orders to the bridge. The *Veracruz* was built as a general purpose heavy cruiser after the invasion of North America. Armed with a variety of land attack and anti-ship missiles, it also had two three gun turrets of twelve inch guns and twelve additional five inch guns, six on each side. It was built primarily as a landing support vessel as well as an anti-ship platform and had served since the early days in the war. But along the way, they had other improvements including the installation of the Standard SAM system and the mini Aegis radar for self protection and additional protection over the beach. The design was so unique, the Pacifica and AFNAS Navies were attempting to build their own copy for their landing forces. Two ships existed in the Mexican Navy, but one was currently down for repairs since the fore gun turret had been damaged during an IU missile attack.

After the final rounds had been fired in support of Gorgon Beach, the safety inspectors in the two turrets started checking the bores and firing mechanisms to ensure the guns were still safe to fire. And even then, they would think very hard about putting a gun out of commission until it was absolutely necessary.

“Captain, we have additional targets,” said the Executive Officer.

“Can you send them to the CIC?” asked the Captain. It was delayed by exactly two seconds before the new coordinates of the targets came onto the screen. “What am I looking at here?”

“Captain, a headquarters for at least a battalion, maybe even a brigade. The second set is a supply depot for one of the divisions attacking Centaur Beach. And the third target is a mechanized battalion massing for an attack,” said the Executive Officer.

“Target the headquarters first then the battalion. The supply dump can wait until we get the boys on the beach some relief,” said the Captain.

“Si Señor. I am preparing the target listing at this time and sending it to the fleet commander,” said the Executive Officer.

“Get the coordinates put into the computers,” said the Captain. “I want to be able to fire as soon as those guns are inspected.”

“Si Señor. The Turret 2 is complete with the inspection and is reloading at this time. The starboard five inch turrets are already online and waiting for an assignment. Turret 1 will be another two minutes on the inspection and reloading,” said an ensign.

“Is the headquarters in range of the five inch guns?” asked the Captain.

“Barely Señor. Might I suggest we use the main guns in a delayed action configuration and the five inch guns with cluster munitions?” asked the fire direction officer.

“Will the winds not blow the cluster munitions out of the area and possible have them coming down on top of our troop’s heads?” asked the Captain.

“No Señor. We are using the new design and even then, the targets are far behind the lines,” said the fire direction officer.

“Then please destroy them Paco!” exclaimed the Captain. “Use the heavy guns to dig them out and the cluster munitions to kill them!”

“Captain, we have another alert about that possible submarine contact from the fleet commander,” said a communications officer.

“Do they know exactly where it is?” asked the Captain.

“Based on the former course, it could be within five miles,” said the communications officer.

“We have to keep the pressure on the IU ground forces. No submariner is crazy enough to attack in these seas,” said the Captain.

“Thirty seconds on the reloading cycle of Turret 1 Señor,” said the ensign.

“Prepare to fire on the targets indicated. Three salvos from the main guns and three from the secondary guns,” ordered the Captain. But the firing would never commence.

“Five thousand meters,” said the Captain of the IU submarine as he peered into the periscope. “Prepare to launch a full spread on my mark.”

“Captain, we are far too close to the surface,” objected the Operations Officer. The submarine was already taking rolls from the surface action. “We are only at fifteen meters.”

“We will fire on this battleship and get lower,” said the Captain. “We cannot launch deeper until we get more compressed air.”

“Generated bearings matched sir,” said the sonar operator.

“Fire tubes one through four and reload,” ordered the Captain.

The torpedoes fired from the tubes and the crews started their reloading cycle. They immediately noticed the large blip on their seeker heads and started towards the *Veracruz*. However, the stormy seas caused them to shift several times and their seeker heads lost contact several times. But two managed to continue tracking the cruiser and impacted on the bow and mid ship.

“Two good hits!” announced the sonar operator.

“Prepare to dive and get us away. Heading zero-two-zero at two thirds,” said the Captain. But the wave action had raised the boat far too close for comfort towards the surface.

“Captain! We’ve breached the surface!” announced the Operations Officer. In the attempt to fire on the cruiser, the submarine had lost control of its depth and had surfaced the vessel involuntarily. And in the seas they were currently in, diving again was not going to be easy.

“Prepare for emergency dive!” ordered the Captain.

“Surface contact!” yelled the gunnery officer on the *Veracruz* as a blip appeared on the radar screen. “Just came up! Appears to be an IU class submarine!”

“Damage report!” yelled the Captain.

“We are taking on water in compartments one through four and seventeen through nineteen. Boiler two is offline at the moment and fires in compartments three, four and eighteen!” said the Lieutenant in charge of damage control.

“Can we still fire?” asked the Captain.

The question was asked and the answer was quick. “Sir, Turret 1 and 2 are online. Secondary Turrets 4 and 6 are offline, but Turret 5 is ready,” said the gunnery officer.

“Sink that target!” ordered the Captain. The Turrets were loaded with a mix of high explosive and cluster munitions. Whether or not they could or should be used on surface contact had never

been asked, much less tired. However, the gunnery officer came through with the solutions and started pointing the large guns in the direction of the submarine.

“Emergency vent! Flood the tanks and get us back under the surface!” shouted the Captain as the lighter submarine rocked in the waves of the rough seas.

“Flooding all tanks!” yelled the Executive Officer. He had pulled the handles on the ballast tanks and was preparing to get under the ocean once again when an explosion rocked the boat over thirty degrees to port.

“What was that?” demanded the Captain as another explosion rocked the craft once again.

“The target...is shooting at us!” shouted the sonar operator. Another smaller explosion and the craft felt like it was being peppered by a hailstorm on a tin roof. Another of the same occurred before a larger explosion rocked them once again.

“Close!” said the gunnery officer as he corrected the windage once again. “Turret 1 is reloading at this time.”

“You have three more shots Paco, make them count,” said the Captain.

“Señor! Fires are out in compartment three and eighteen! Automatic extinguishers activated!” said the Lieutenant.

“Casualties?” asked the Captain.

“Being treated at this time,” said the Lieutenant.

“Paco?” asked the Captain.

“Getting it set now Señor,” said the gunnery officer. He expertly put in the numbers and fired another round from the main guns, hitting within twenty yards of the submarine. He had the secondary turret sending out the cluster munitions and liberally raking the craft. However, one of the larger rounds would be all that was needed.

“Our bow planes are jammed! We cannot dive!” said the Executive Officer of the submarine.

“Are we reloaded?” demanded the Captain.

“Two more minutes on tube one sir!” yelled a specialist from one of the control panels.

“Work faster! We will be dead in two minutes,” said the Captain as he wished the Naval brass had listened to him when he suggested they have more than four torpedo tubes on the craft. But the design had omitted the extra pair of tubes for more torpedo storage space. “Fire the tubes as soon as they are loaded!”

“Firing!” yelled the gunnery officer as he sent the final round towards the submarine. It would be another twenty seconds for at least one of the main guns to be reloaded and another minute for all in Turret 1 to be complete. However, they could tend to the damage of the ship as he saw the large caliber round impact on the submarine and tear a gaping hole after penetrating the hull. The submarine rolled onto its side before disappearing below the surface and sinking to the shallow bottom.

“Target destroyed Captain,” said the gunnery officer.

“Send a message to the fleet admiral. ‘Have been torpedoed and taking on water. Sunk one IU submarine at current location.’ And request a tug be sent to our location,” said the Captain as he departed to see to the damage of his ship.

“The *Veracruz* can still float for the moment. They have the flooding under control, but will need major repairs,” said the Naval Admiral to the General of the Army.

“What’s this do to our fire support?” asked the General of the Army.

“We still have the three Texan battlewagons. The Captain of the *Veracruz* wants to stay, but cannot move unless assisted by a tug,” said the Admiral. “One has already been dispatched.”

“Can we move her into position down the coast?” asked the General of the Army.

“Inadvisable sir,” said the Admiral. “She needs to get to port and get repaired.”

“Which docking in this weather is nigh on to impossible,” said the General of the Army.

“It won’t be easy,” admitted the Admiral.

“Is the Captain on the *Veracruz* a good sailor?” asked the General of the Army.

“He’s done a pretty good job so far,” said the Admiral. “The Mexican Navy has put their most senior officers on the cruisers since they serve as the flagships of the fleet.”

“Then let’s trust him to know what’s best for his boat. Have the tug tow him into a position he can support the beachheads,” said the General of the Army. “And have the tug remain so they can move him around if they need to.”

“Aye aye sir,” said the Admiral as he left to transmit the message.

The sheer tenacity shown by the FNC forces was beginning to grow as they sailors knew the soldiers on the beach needed them more and more since the aircraft were grounded for the moment. The sailors knew if the soldiers were holding their own there was no reason for them to turn tail and run at the sight of a storm. They knew they were desperately needed to continue providing support and would empty their boats of shells or sink before turning back.

CHAPTER 12

Z Day Plus 36 Hours

I could hear a firefight somewhat near our positions. I had no idea who or what was fighting and our LP/OP hadn't called in yet to let us know. We had come under some sporadic artillery fire at best but the expected ground attack hadn't emerged yet. We had gotten reinforcements and they were busy digging in as best as they could in the winds and rains that were still whipping around the lines. My own squad of seven had been reinforced by one additional body, an airborne trooper that had come through the lines. I assigned her to one of the non-infantry bodies and they commenced to finishing out the position as best as they could. For non-infantry types, they were catching on to the concept of combat and infantry skills pretty quickly.

"Whiskey-Tango 61, this is Whiskey Tango 88 over," said Private Smith from the LP/OP.

"Go ahead 88, over," said Lieutenant Winfield.

"61, this is 88. I have friendly forces requesting pass through of the lines," said Smitty.

"88, this is 61, I'll send a ground guide up," said Winfield. I saw a pair of members from Second Squad head towards the front lines, fighting against the wind before disappearing into the hedgerow to our front. They reappeared several minutes later with a large group of individuals in tow, thirty-two individuals in total. They sure didn't look like the airborne troops that we'd been seeing recently.

I didn't know if they knew, but they were probably better off out wherever they came from than inside our perimeter where we were getting constant harassment from the enemy. They looked to be one of the special operations outfits sent in to France in the days prior to the invasion, cutting communication lines, destroying command centers and generally harassing the IU before we landed. And furthermore, they looked tired as many of us did, but still alert. They were loaded to the gills with equipment, ammunition and packs, but not wearing any body armor or helmets like the rest of us. Their soft caps, camo paint and IU weaponry were a testament to their job behind the lines and they stuck out like sore thumbs with our normal infantry unit.

The leader of the group was met by Lieutenant Winfield somewhat close to my position and the two talked briefly. I snuck in a peek at the leader as he looked over the lines. His team departed towards the rear to replenish their supplies before hopefully they might spell us for an hour or two so we could get some sleep. I hadn't slept in...I couldn't remember how long right then, but I know it was all I wanted to do. Over the past day and a half, repeated adrenaline rushes and crashing back to earth were taking their toll on me. It was probably well over two, maybe even three days since I got any sleep. I felt like if I was able to catch a nap...just for an hour...I might be fine. Just a nap, I continued to think and didn't realize I was dozing off until I was addressed.

"You okay trooper?" asked the leader of the team that had just entered the lines.

“Yes sir,” I said, unsure of his rank and figured “sir” would suffice for the moment. I shifted uncomfortably in my position, waking up and sitting more erect.

“Holding up okay?” he asked. He obviously knew I was heading for the land of sleep, but didn’t yell or scream at me about it. I felt he probably understood how tired we all were since he looked to be that way himself. And in talking to me, he was keeping me awake.

“Yes sir, just keeping watch in my sector,” I replied.

“You keep up the good work,” he replied with a pat on my back. “We’re going to relieve you in a little while so you can catch a nap. Think you can hold out for another couple of hours?”

“I can hold out as long as I need to,” I said with conviction. If he could brave jumping in behind the lines in advance of the invasion without support, I surely could be brave enough to show him I could hold my position. I saw him taping a piece of duct tape to his gear after writing in his name, service, rank and blood type onto the front. Other than that, his uniform was devoid of any indications he was a part of the military except for the really nice gear and common IU weapons.

“That’s what I like to hear,” he said as he finished patting down the tape.

He peered out of the lines, taking into account the terrain and fields of fire. His unit would probably be assisting us in the defense. Most of the teams and airborne units were being resupplied and put immediately back on the line since we were on the short on everything except the enemy. And I think he picked up on my subconscious thoughts somehow.

“Hold the line, reinforcements are due in by tonight,” he said before pulling back from the edge of my position.

“I’ll keep you safe sir,” I said and continued my watch. I heard the man leave behind me and caught a look at his name tape as he left. I thought I had heard the name before, but couldn’t remember when or where at that moment. It finally hit me in my tired brain after thinking for several minutes. I finally realized this man and his unit were bona fide rock stars. At least it was something to tell my kids about one day if I survived this little part of my life. Yep, I met Major Thomas Dayfield and his team in Normandy. I helped protect them while they slept. He even gave me a pat on the back for doing my job. Sure did.

I let the thoughts go as I started looking back out at my sector again, watching and waiting for the next attack to form. His promise of reinforcements didn’t really give me any comfort since we were supposed to be reinforced six hours after the main invasion and had been promised more each and every hour since then. There had been attempts at airborne drops, but getting the C-130s in under the weather wasn’t easy and I ended up seeing some of the supplies being blown right out into the Channel. We didn’t have a great deal of real estate to be getting airborne drops, but at the same time, they had to try.

But maybe he knew something I didn't and knew we were about to get reinforcements. And in thinking that, it gave me comfort to know we weren't all going to be forsaken and die on this beach in a land far away from home. It gave me pride knowing my country was sending help and wouldn't leave me to die there. Even though we were all from different nations in North America, we were working together to defeat a common threat. I heard more traffic from the LP/OP.

"61, this is 88," I heard Smitty say. I could also hear the dull thumps in the distance of additional artillery fire.

"Go ahead," I heard Winfield say.

"Be advised, I can hear armored vehicles massing to my front," said Smitty.

"Can you observe, over?" asked Winfield.

"Negative sir, not without exposing my position," said Smitty. The remainder of his transmission was cut off by massive explosions just past the hedgerow to our front. Large caliber artillery was falling on the front trace but missing the main defensive lines for the moment. I heard Lieutenant Winfield call for the LP/OPs to displace and come back into the lines. But they were pinned by the artillery for the moment and unable to move. More explosions were heard to our rear as the IU was liberally sending in fire to attack us. The winds were blowing it off course, but put enough shells downrange into our positions and eventually they might hit something. It wasn't hard to liberally rake the area we happened to be in since we didn't have enough room as it was.

"Incoming!" I heard Lieutenant Winfield yell immediately after the first mortar shell landed on our positions. The large scale explosions were stopping and the smaller rounds were an indication of an impending attack. They were smaller caliber than what we had before, sixty mil or so, but dangerous nonetheless. I immediately hit the ground and covered in the larger crater serving as my defensive fighting position, waiting for the current barrage to stop so I could continue trying to find overhead cover. But we also knew the mortars were typically followed by a ground attack. We needed to stick our heads up long enough to check our assigned sectors before jerking them back in at another explosion. I checked on my battle buddy assigned to the same foxhole before looking out. Nobody was approaching in our sector for the moment and I was content to pull my head back in after a shower of dirt hit my helmet.

"Anything?" Private Blain asked.

"No," I said, still getting to know him after my original partner was killed during the landing on the beach. We hadn't gotten much of an opportunity to bond, but in the previous attack, he had done just fine. We huddled down together as the explosions continued, both of us silently thanking the stars it wasn't anything bigger than the annoying mortar rounds.

"You think we're going to hold?" he asked, a little scared.

“I think we should be able to,” I said, trying to be brave, but the fear showing out in my voice despite my efforts to the contrary.

We both prepared for the expected assault as the mortar fire died down once again. But it never materialized and was just more harassment. However, we both knew it was a matter of time before the IU massed enough infantry, armor, artillery, aircraft or various combinations thereof and struck us once again. It had happened before, it certainly will happen again before we get done here I thought as I continued peering forward into the growing light of the beach at Normandy. The clouds were breaking up a bit, but the winds still swept though the lines with the same ferocity they had since right after we landed. I tightened my grip on my rifle as I saw a figure moving through the woods towards our position. However, as the figure appeared, I saw it was one of our listening posts coming back in from the front of the lines. He made his way towards our position before being stopped and admitted.

“What’s going on out there?” I asked, hungry for information.

“Lots of troops, like at least a battalion worth! Coming this way! I’ve got to get to the command post!” he exclaimed after drinking down half a canteen of water.

“Where’s Smitty?” I asked.

“Dead, got caught by an artillery round,” he said and scampered off towards the rear where our command post was.

“We can hold?” asked my buddy.

“Absolutely,” I said.

“What’s your name again?” he asked after a moment.

“Sergeant Donald McIntyre, from Georgia,” I replied. I knew he was making small talk because he was nervous and I tried to remain calm. But I was nervous as well and it probably showed. We had our backs to the wall, literally, and were holding on for dear life. Rescue wasn’t coming anytime soon as the planning was out the window four hours after the landings started, but we held on. We were cornered animals fighting for our very survival on these beachheads and knew there were only two ways out. Fight and possibly live or cower in a hole and certainly die...

Z Day Plus 40 Hours

“We need to consolidate the beaches, if for no other reason than to give our blokes some rest and get a reserve force,” said the Colonel in charge of Gorgon Beach in an Australian accent. He was now the senior ranking individual on the beach after the remaining Generals had been killed.

“Can you make it over to Centaur?” asked the AFNAS General.

“We are barely holding open a route,” said the Australian Colonel.

“Start disengaging and move everyone and everything towards that beach,” he ordered.

“Centaur Six, are you still online?”

“Go ahead Sphinx Six, I’m online,” said the German General in charge of the beach.

“Can you provide any support to evacuate Gorgon?” asked the AFNAS General.

“We can provide limited support, but are in the same position as they are. We have limited reserves,” said the German.

“How long before you can start moving?” asked the AFNAS General.

“I would prefer to wait until dark, but we should start moving supplies sooner,” said the Australian. “We have limited vehicle assets.”

“We can help with that,” said the German.

“Gentlemen, it is my intention to collapse the defenses on the beaches to a manageable level. We are going to abandon our positions on Gorgon, Centaur and Griffon and collapse to Sphinx, Minotaur and Pegasus. We cannot continue to hold each beach individually and will be picked off piecemeal,” said the AFNAS General.

“We’ve come too far to abandon land we’ve paid for in blood,” objected the Texan General at Pegasus Beach, although he liked the idea of reinforcements.

“We cannot hold each of these beaches. Either we consolidate six beaches into three and get some sort of reserve force, or we get picked off piecemeal and we lose our foothold on the continent. We even need to make plans to consolidate down to two beaches if it becomes necessary,” said the AFNAS General.

“When will we move?” asked the Nicaraguan General at Griffon Beach.

“You have the most reserves and the most secure lanes into Sphinx. We will get the outer beaches moved first, but as Gorgon-6 stated, do it under the cover of dark. We’ll move his beach first and then Centaur. Your beach will be last since we have a better grip on a line running between our beaches. An orderly retreat over the next twelve hours,” said the AFNAS General.

“How will we hold the line in the meantime?” asked the Australian.

“With whatever you have available. But the wounded get moved to the next beach. Those animals aren’t taking prisoners and will kill them, conventions be damned,” said the AFNAS General.

“And the remaining defenders?” asked the German.

“Will disengage and collapse towards the next set of defensive lines. As soon as the last person goes through, slam the door shut and close off the lines. We will continue to strengthen the lines between Pegasus, Sphinx and Minotaur so we have secure lines of communication and supply,” said the AFNAS General and turned to his senior combat engineer. “Start getting new positions built here, here and here.”

“We’ll get on it sir, but a lot of my boys are up on the lines helping fill foxholes,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Grab the airborne and special ops outfits that came back into the lines to relieve them. We need those positions built more than rifle carriers,” said the General.

“Will do sir,” said the Lieutenant Colonel as he went out to carry out his assignment.

“And after we get the troops consolidated?” asked the NAU General on Pegasus Beach, silent until that point.

“We consolidate the units and get them back to somewhat of original strength. We can even look at limited counterattacks to gain some additional ground,” said the AFNAS General.

“You think that’s wise?” asked the Texan General.

“We have to give ourselves a little breathing room as it is. Positions to fall back to in case we need them in an ever shrinking perimeter. Shoot boys, we’ll all be out there on the line if it comes down to it,” said the AFNAS General.

“Imagine a bunch of Generals and Colonels filling the foxholes,” laughed the Texan. “That will give the enlisted folks something to laugh at.”

The group laughed at the momentary levity with the images the comment brought to their mind. But they also knew it was true, they could all very well end up defending the beach to the last man. They knew it was better to go down fighting rather than attempt to surrender since the IU had already shown a capacity for killing prisoners. The wounded we intended to transfer to the IU for treatment had been killed outright just after being taken into custody by the IU. It was barbaric to say the least, but it had the unintended consequence of putting steel in the spines of the defenders as we showed no remorse when dealing with the IU.

“What about supplies?” asked the NAU General.

“We’re doing the best we can, but we’re still coming up short. We’ve just about collected all we can from the dead and wounded. Some of the units on the line have taken to getting the IU weaponry from their dead. Seems like they have a lot more ammo to spare,” said the NAU General.

“Continue that practice and set up a resupply channel behind the lines,” said the AFNAS General. “We’ll use their own weapons against them if it comes down to it.”

“What about indirect fire?” asked the German General.

“We are limited on the mortar rounds we have. But the battlewagons are still on scene and providing support. The *Veracruz* took a torpedo and is barely keeping above water. They’re trying to move additional ships in, but with the storm, it isn’t looking good,” said the AFNAS General.

“And no air support,” said the Nicaraguan General.

“Very limited,” said the Texan. “And apparently they are going after the artillery and airfields instead of the attackers. They just can’t fly close air support in this weather.”

“If it gives us a bit of peace from the artillery, I’m all for it,” said the Australian Colonel.

“And armor?” asked the Texan.

“We have seven Scorpion tanks left,” said the Nicaraguan.

“We have two,” said the Australian.

“We have four,” said the German.

“None here,” said the Texan.

“And we have six,” said the AFNAS General. “Barely enough for a defense.”

“We should consolidate and withhold them until we are certain of the main IU attacks,” said the Texan. “Don’t let them get taken out piecemeal.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said the Australian. “We can have ours start heading that way.”

“We still have some man pack stuff, but the majority is coming from the IU right now,” said the Nicaraguan. “Plus the few remaining anti-tank vehicles, but they are low on ammunition.”

“Any chance of a resupply by air?” asked the Texan.

“Not in this storm,” said the AFNAS General. “Everything we’ve gotten so far has been blown out into the Channel.”

“We received a partial drop, but nothing near enough to resupply,” said the NAU General.

“Gentlemen, let’s start getting our forces in place to consolidate,” said the AFNAS General.

Z Day Plus 42 Hours

“Sir, it appears the infidels are retreating away from the beaches!” announced an IU Major as he read the report from the front line.

“Which ones?” asked the Marshal. He had two divisions poised for an attack but needed to find a weak spot to drive to the beach and divide the FNC defenses.

“The one near Trouville. They also may be moving the one near Valognes,” said the Major.

“Possibly abandoning their positions and consolidating the lines,” remarked the Marshal.

“It would make sense sir, they have been hit very hard,” said the Major.

“However, our forces in those areas have yet to break through the defensive lines. The infidels in those sectors are being very stubborn, the Latin American devils especially so,” said the Marshal. “Do we have an opportunity to exploit the lines?”

“If they are moving troops away from the beaches, it would be easiest to hit the points where they originally linked up. However, the ground there isn’t easily maneuvered over,” said the Major. “The hedgerows are holding up our armored forces.”

“Artillery?” asked the Marshal.

“Sporadic at best and mainly for harassment. The rounds are being blown around haphazardly in the storm. On three occasions our rounds have fallen on our own troops,” said the Major.

“Hit them here,” said the Marshal as he pointed at the map. “Away from the beaches they are retreating from. They will expect us to hit the areas they are retreating from and we will not give in to their wishes.”

“Sir, that area has not been easy to attack either,” observed the Major.

“I understand, they are being very stubborn. They just are not taking the hint we are serious about killing them off. Plan for a two brigade attack here and have the remaining four ready to exploit the hole we rip into their lines,” said the Marshal.

“It will take several hours to reorient the forces,” said the Major.

“Keep up the harassment and limited attacks by the forces already on the lines. Pin them in place and keep the pressure on,” said the Marshal. “And have the Damascus Martyrs ready for deployment.”

“Yes sir,” said the Major as he went off to relay the orders.

“Fire!” screamed Lieutenant Winfield as the attack finally started coming into our positions. We were lucky in the fact it was mainly infantry, but there were several tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers as well. What little anti-tank munitions we had were quickly sent downrange attempting to hit the vehicles. Lucky for us, the IU weaponry worked pretty well against their own forces. I fired my AKM at an advancing fire team, still in the mindset of trying to take out the leadership and heavy weapons first. Training was a hard thing to overcome and I wished for the hundredth time I still had my marksman rifle. But you used what you had and I managed to hit the fire team leader and possibly the squad leader.

Blain was firing as well, using controlled single shots to fire at the advancing infantry. He wasn't as used to the AK system and was far slower on the reloads than I felt comfortable with, but he was picking it up pretty quickly. Learning under fire wasn't the best time to be learning, but it was far better to learn under pressure than not to learn under pressure.

I completed another reload myself and found a machine gunner setting up his PKM preparing to fire. I started spraying the area with rounds attempting to get them under cover, but they managed to get off a few bursts as it was. However, the line of tracers were like a flashlight in the dark pointing right back to his position. Our DShK machine gun sent out its own line of death and landed the rounds right on target after a minor correction. The enemy machine gun was silenced and the crew dead. But still more infantry replaced those we had killed and more armored vehicles started appearing. Not enough to make a major difference, but enough to cause problems if they weren't dealt with.

“Where do you need us?” asked Major Thomas Dayfield as he appeared behind the lines with the two Cider squads in tow.

“Plug the gaps in the line here and here!” shouted Lieutenant Young, the current Company Commander as he took a moment to point. “We're taking a beating in that sector!”

“What about artillery support?” asked Lieutenant Rick Jones.

“What artillery support?” said Young. “We don't have such an animal!”

“We’ll work on that for you,” said Dayfield. “Rowdy, get your team in place over there with Badaa, I’ll take mine and along with Fluffy over here. Badaa, work on the fire support!”

“Got it!” said Captain Dave Lawson as he grabbed the two teams and headed for the sector of assignment. Dayfield started heading over with Master Sergeant Tim “Fluffy” Daniels and his team towards the other sector where the lines were perilously thin. It appeared the IU was serious this time and each and every person capable of handling a weapon was being fed into the defensive lines.

And as they got into position, the attack seemed to increase as more IU troops appeared and started heading towards the lines. It looked like the lines might get breached and the IU would overrun the positions this time. A desperate call went out to the Battalion command post for reinforcements and the request went all the way to the Division. Troops so recently brought off the line to catch a little rest were quickly sent back forward to try to keep the enemy at bay. But time was of the essence and the winds were not in their favor as they fought Mother Nature as well as the continued indirect fire trying to get forward in time to save their comrades.

CHAPTER 13

Z Day Plus 44 Hours

The attack picked up even more as the IU poured more forces into the line. Smoke was steadily rising off the barrel of my AKM and I even had a couple of rounds cook off while trying to find targets. Our own mortars started dropping rounds onto the enemy, a testament to the importance of the attack on our lines. The mortars were only being used for important attacks and we knew we must have had the brunt of the fighting. Private Blain continued to fire as well, screaming at the advancing infantry as he got into the psychology of the attack. It seemed they just might break through in our sector, but we were holding for the moment. Barely and by our fingernails, we were holding.

As the infantry continued to advance, I started seeing explosions, large explosions. Far larger than the grenades and light mortars we had been using. I wondered for a moment if the IU was accidentally shelling their own troops instead of hitting our lines. Not that I wanted any corrections on the fire since it seemed to be ripping the attack to shreds. The IU attack faltered and eventually broke up as the survivors either tried to take cover in place, which meant they were stationary for our own rifles or they attempted to retreat which meant they were vulnerable to the fragments spiraling out from the exploding shells. We managed to hold the lines for the moment and continued to fire at the enemy now stuck in the middle of the field to our front. The remaining forces started a full on retreat and eventually disappeared behind the hedgerows.

I didn't know exactly what happened, but I figured someone up the line did. All I knew was someone had saved us with a timely intervention of high explosives and steel fragments.

“Fire mission complete,” said the Fire Support Officer on the Texan battleship, the TSS *Juan Seguín*. “The special ops unit we had contact with they passed on their thanks.”

“They need any more help?” asked the Captain.

“No sir, the attack seems to have broken off. But we're going to remain in the neighborhood for the moment,” he replied. “However, we have a request from the *Crockett* to assist them.”

“Which is?” asked the Captain.

“They located the headquarters of an armored division they are shelling. They can't pull away from the current tasking and asked if we could take it,” said the FSO.

“Are we within range?” asked the Captain.

“We are of the main guns and the eight inch secondary’s,” said the FSO.

“Overhead imagery?” asked the Captain.

“On monitor five,” said the FSO.

“Nice big fat target,” observed the Captain as he looked at the satellite imagery of the targeted area. “Prepare the main batteries and secondary eight inch batteries. Give them three salvos of each and reassess.”

“Aye, aye Captain,” said the FSO as he started inputting the targeting information into the computer. They would remain in direct support of the forces on the beachheads along with the TSS *David Crockett* even though the submarine threat hadn’t gone away just yet. But the large battle wagons knew their primary mission was to support the ground troops and they were desperately needed to provide indirect fire. And they would remain on station as long as possible which meant they would be there until they expended their last shell.

Z Day Plus 48 Hours

We were thankful the attack had faltered and failed since it gave us another chance to somewhat rest and resupply again. As was the usual case, Lieutenant Winfield had sent out forces to gather the ammunition and supplies off the dead IU soldiers and sent out additional LP/OPs to our front. They reported the front was quite for the moment and we took the time to reload empty magazines and consolidate ammunition. Since we were at a lull, I took the time to get some basic hygiene done and pulled out my toothbrush. It was the simple things in combat that seemed to be helpful and brushing my teeth always made me more alert and woke me up. As I mindlessly brushed back and forth, I saw it was Delacruz out in front of the lines with his squad picking over the dead soldier’s ammunition. Eventually they got what they could and came back to the lines for a quick rest before going back out.

He came over near my position and I motioned him over. He came in and slumped over pulling a canteen with great effort and taking a drink.

“Long day,” I remarked.

“For certain,” he said and looked like he wanted to say more. “You asked before why I got into trouble.”

“Not exactly important now. We’re glad to have you,” I said.

“But you need to know. Someone can tell my folks if I don’t make it through,” he said.

“I’ll tell them you are a fine soldier and did your duty,” I replied.

“During the initial invasion of England, I was with the AFNAS 2nd,” he started. “We were tasked with taking out a bunker complex near Birmingham and my Lieutenant was behind us pushing us towards the area. It was a death trap, but we went anyway. I was a fire team leader at the time and a Sergeant. After we headed in, we came under serious defensive fire. I made the request for armor support and indirect fire, but the Lieutenant trumped me. He ordered us straight into that cauldron and to fight our way through. We lost two squads that day and only two out of my squad survived; me and another guy.”

“Afterwards, the Company Commander put me in for a Silver Star since I ended up taking out one of the bunkers myself. I didn’t think it was a big deal and really didn’t want the medal, but I didn’t have a choice in the matter. But afterwards, the Lieutenant tried to get it hung up and pulled since I filed a report on his actions that day. He just about got relieved over the mess and we moved south once again. We ended up with another mission against a heavily defended area and he pulled the same stunt once again...behind the lines and not taking part in the fighting himself. This time we only lost a squad, but I’d just about had enough. I got in behind the lines after it was all done and found an old bottle of gin. I got about as drunk as I can remember and the Lieutenant confronted me about it. I...lost control for a moment and ended up assaulting him as well as breaking his nose and arm.”

“Now the Army doesn’t like it when soldiers go around decking their officers, even if they deserved it. He was relieved of course and I got a Bronze Star out of that action, but again, the Army didn’t see it gave me a reason to do what I did. I would blame the alcohol, but it was something I wanted to do even sober. But I ended up getting drunk once again and did the same to my platoon sergeant. He also wanted the award stripped since I put him in a bad light in the second after action report. And waited until I got drunk and goaded me into a fight. About the same situation, I ended up putting him in the hospital overnight.”

“Now once, the Army can forgive, but two alcohol related incidents within a short timeframe? They slapped me into rehab after the court martial. Took away my stripes and sent me to the penal unit. The only reason I wasn’t bounced back to the States was because I was decorated and they knew I could be reformed if I was off the booze. So I sat in penal for a long time and got myself straight, just waiting for the chance to get back into a regular unit. I got transferred over to the AFNAS 1st where I served my time, better to get out of the Division I got into trouble in, right? When we heard about the invasion, a lot of guys were content to sit on the sidelines. But me? I ended up badgering the Captain to get me reassigned to a combat unit. I had done my time and he also knew it was where I belonged.”

“So some guy, a Master Sergeant John White figured I might work out okay on one of his friend’s platoons and got me out. I ended up getting all the paperwork cleared right before I met you,” he concluded.

“You got a Silver and a Bronze Star?” I asked.

“I’m a complete disaster when I’m off duty, but when I’m on the job, it’s like...it’s calming to me I guess. I can focus and be in complete control of myself,” he said.

“That much is certain,” I remarked.

“You’re a good soldier as well,” he said.

“Thanks,” I replied and looked out over the lines, trying to figure out where the next attack would come from. He headed out with his squad to fill in positions to our left, having been transferred back to our unit again. Actually, the Companies had been consolidated and were under the command of Lieutenant Winfield. But his words concerned me. He was talking death talk right then. The kind of conversations people talk about when they think there’s no other option and they might not get another chance. I had things I needed to say as well, stories to tell my parents, secrets that bugged me for a long time...and the overwhelming feel of dread swept over me right then.

I don’t know if I was tired, scared, exhausted, mentally confused or what, but a momentary panic attack came over me. It was something I hadn’t experienced before since we had been there, but I finally came to the realization we were not going to be rescued. The storm was lasting far longer than we expected and I knew in the bottom of my heart I wasn’t going to live past the next twenty four hours.

I was drained, both physically, mentally and emotionally. I knew our countries had let us down. They had sent us into this meat grinder knowing full well we might not make it out. And did it on purpose. I didn’t know when I was going to die, but I knew I was going to die. I knew it in the bottom of my heart.

A feeling of dread swept over me, of fear and the unknown. I had no idea what was beyond those hedgerows, but I knew it was death. Death was coming for me and I knew it. I was going to die, pure and simple. The thoughts were clouding my brain and I couldn’t focus on the present. I knew I was going to die and I could now understand why my old fire team leader lost it before the invasion. But at least he was safe back in England and I could understand what he was going through. But in that moment in time, I knew for a fact I was going to die. I just didn’t know when, but Death was stalking me from beyond my range.

I knew I had been lucky so far and escaped Death. The explosion that sent me tumbling into the water, the round that should have killed me on the beach, the artillery shell that landed on my position while I was away and at least a half dozen more scrapes since then of fragments, bullets and explosions that should have killed me. Nobody gets that lucky for that long and I knew karma would eventually find me. But the dread continued and the fear was growing.

“Well, I see you managed to make it this far,” a familiar female voice said from the side of me. I hadn’t realized until that time someone had crept up next to me.

“Sorry?” I asked and turned to look. It was the female from Cider, Staff Sergeant Heather Davis.

“I said, looks like you survived so far,” she said and scanned the line to our front.

“I have and looks like you’re doing okay as well,” I replied, trying to mask the fears I had from earlier.

“We had a few scrapes here and there,” she replied. “But we’re glad you guys are holding the lines out here.”

“You were with the team that came in?” I asked.

“Yeah, we hit a command post behind the lines before the invasion and got into a running battle somewhere near Trévières after taking out an artillery battery,” she said. “But we managed to disengage and ended up here.”

“How many more are out there?” I asked.

“I think the IU pulled all their divisions away from the beach except a screening force and put them behind the lines. We saw several large outfits heading this way,” she said. “They apparently didn’t have their best on the beaches when you guys hit.”

“They were good enough to take out half my company,” I shot back.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I meant it could have been far worse,” she said as an apology.

It was bad enough as it was. Losing a third of the division before we even got past the beach was bad. Losing half the remaining strength in the counterattacks by the IU was even worse. We were a division in name, but barely a brigade and a half of troops remaining out of four that started the journey. My so called squad was down to six effectives and the platoon barely twenty people. It wasn’t easy by any means.

“I see you got promoted,” she said and looked at the new insignia on my collar.

“Yeah, someone messed up and thought I was ready for a challenge,” I said, not really feeling like I was worthy of leadership right then since my own fears and dreads were clouding my ability to make decisions.

“I think you’ll do okay,” she said and rubbed me on the shoulder.

“Hopefully reinforcements come in soon,” I replied and we got quiet for a moment.

“I barely recognized you with all that grime on your face,” she laughed and smudged the dirt on my forehead.

“I recognized you immediately, you’re too beautiful to forget,” I said, feeling as if I should at least say what was on my mind since I could be dead in a half an hour.

“You’re horrible,” she laughed.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Flirting with me out in the middle of a battlefield,” she laughed again.

“Might as well,” I said. “And I mean it.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t enjoy it,” she grinned at me.

“Hope you enjoy this,” I said and decided to follow up my words with deeds. I grabbed her by the neck and kissed her long and deep. She apparently was taken by surprise, but decided it wasn’t bad after all and joined in the fun. I know it was a severe violation of discipline and regulations, but again, I could be dead before I got the chance again. It’s a strange thing facing death. You end up doing things you never thought you would if you knew you had another day. I remember Dad used to play that country song about “live like you were dying” or something along those lines. And I could finally see what the song was talking about. Tomorrow certainly was a gift, but for now, I concentrated in the moment and we let our passions control us. We finally parted and went back to looking over the lines.

“You’re still horrible, but thanks,” she said with a grin after we slowly slid apart.

“You aren’t so bad yourself,” I chuckled.

“At least I know,” she said.

“Know what?” I asked.

“What was going to happen if we ever made contact again,” she said with a laugh.

“Just promise me you won’t tell my platoon leader,” I chuckled.

“He’ll understand. You only live once,” she said.

A voice was heard from behind our position. “Trouble?”

“No, nothing yet sir,” I said in automatic response.

“Not you soldier,” the voice said. “You ready?”

“He means me Donnie,” she said, remembering my name. “My call sign is Trouble.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not,” I laughed.

“We get off this beach and you just might find out,” she laughed and rubbed at my neck, her fingers lingering a little longer before brushing away. Right then, it felt like pure heaven. I put the thoughts out of the back of my mind and continued my watch to the front. But right then and there, something in her touch made me feel like we were going to make it. Something as simple as her touch made all the fears go away and the dread I was feeling. It was insane to think something so simple made my mind clear up, but that’s what happened. Something in her mere presence made me feel like it was worth going on and we were going to make it.

It gave me resolve to continue fighting and winning despite the odds. It gave me a purpose to take her up on her offer after the fighting was concluded and we were rescued. I knew we could win. I knew that if we could make light in the middle of a battle and let our feelings known, we would win. But I also heard her behind the lines getting down the road from one of the senior members of her unit. Something to the effect of “we can’t take you anywhere without you showing your behind and proving you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

“You are amazing sir,” said Private Blain.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Attracting a cute female in the middle of a battle,” he laughed.

“Pure talent and skill soldier,” I laughed, feeling worlds better right then. I was alive, alert and ready for anything the IU could throw at us.

“We are going to make it sir,” he remarked. “Only to make sure you get the chance to take her up on her offer of a little trouble afterwards.”

“Donnie Mack,” said Lieutenant Winfield from behind my position.

“Sir?” I answered.

“You ever go off all kissy, huggy again with a female soldier in the middle of battle, I’ll bust your butt all the way back to basic training,” he said, but not in a harsh way.

“Understood sir,” I answered with the same grin.

“You get paid to smooch after the war,” he said and I could feel him smiling behind me.

“Roger that Lieutenant, smooching after wartime authorized, got it sir,” I grinned. “Won’t happen again.”

“You only live once Donnie; make sure you go after that one when the fighting’s over,” he said and followed with a laugh. “I’ll even give you away at the wedding.”

The mood was infectious. Apparently it only took the little things in life like a kiss in the middle of a high stress situation to make all our fears melt away. We all knew we could and would prevail. We knew nothing would ever stop us.

“Sorry about that,” said Lieutenant Rick Jones behind the lines and out of earshot of both parties concerned. “I’ll tear her a new one when I get the chance.”

“Nah, don’t bother,” said Lieutenant Winfield. “They could be dead in a half an hour and it wasn’t anything serious.”

“She has a tendency to show her butt at the most opportune times,” chuckled Rick.

“I didn’t think Donnie Mack had it in him,” said Winfield.

“Oh, I knew Heather did,” laughed Rick, feeling the mood as well.

“Well, they can get hooked up after this is all over,” said Winfield. “I’ll see to it he gets some time in England to go see her.”

“We are going to make it out of here,” said Rick. “Ain’t nothing going to stop us.”

But we didn’t know the Islamic Union’s crack infantry division, the Damascus Martyrs, was heading our way. And we had no idea they had been preparing for this assault for the past two years.

“The Damascus Martyrs are almost in position sir,” said the IU General who was coordinating the attacks against the beachheads. The attacks thus far had been more of harassment rather than serious attempts to displace the defenders. They had wanted to wear them out physically, mentally and emotionally before striking a final blow and running them back into the ocean.

“And they are going to spearhead the attack here?” asked the Marshal as he pointed at the map.

“No sir, we are going to use the remaining infantry formations to attack the lines and push in the Damascus Martyrs where we find a weak spot. We believe their weakest spot is here on what they call Sphinx Beach,” said the General. “And we have full divisional assaults planned against the remaining two beaches. They have consolidated their lines down to a barely sustainable level and we are in position to strike a deadly blow.”

“And our best units are forward?” asked the Marshal.

“Yes sir,” said the General. “Our best infantry forces with artillery support. We have found the armor is bogging down in the rain soaked ground and isn’t helping in the attacks.”

“Our tanks will not be attacking?” asked the Marshal. “Even as we know their antitank weapons are at a minimum?”

“We cannot keep them going across the ground sir,” said the General. “The mud is bogging them down and they cannot move forward effectively. The roads they need have the heaviest concentration of antitank weapons and they will be sitting ducks plodding along in a straight line.”

“But the infantry can force them back?” asked the Marshal.

“We believe so. Our best infantry units are poised to attack and our numbers are overwhelming. We will kill them or force them into the water,” said the General.

“And when will we attack?” asked the Marshal.

“Eight hours gives us our best chance to make use of the daylight left,” said the General.

“Go with God,” said the Marshal. “And destroy them.”

CHAPTER 14

Z Day Plus 60 hours

“Sir, the weather should clear in the next twelve hours. We are showing dissipating winds during that time and the rains are breaking up as well,” said the newly promoted Major. He looked exhausted, taking the General of the Army up on his orders and had not caught a wink of sleep during the time.

“How certain are you?” asked the General of the Army.

“Ninety percent sir,” said the Major. “The system moving in behind is pushing the remains of the storm out into the North Sea.”

“Best and worst case scenarios?” asked the General of the Army.

“Best case is eight hours, worst case is about eighteen to twenty, but I’m willing to bet my paycheck it’ll be in the next twelve,” said the Major.

“Conditions in the Channel?” asked the General of the Army.

“Increasingly better sir,” said a Warrant Officer brought along for his expertise in the sea conditions. “We should see the waves and surface chop die down in that time as well.”

“And we should, should mind you, be able to get follow on forces into the water for embarkation in the next twelve hours?” asked the General of the Army.

“You could load them now sir and we could push the forces out as soon as conditions are favorable,” said an Admiral.

“And the air assault troops?” asked the General of the Army.

“Same principle sir,” said a US Air Force General. “The crews have been braving the weather to make sure each and every aircraft asset is prepared for action.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I want the second wave ready for immediate departure as soon as the weather clears. That means when I give the word, they start engines and roll out of port. Those boys and girls on the beach have been through hell and we will not let them down,” said the General of the Army. “What kind of enemy forces are we facing right now?”

“Sir...” started a Colonel assigned to the intelligence branch. Her voice trailed off before she was prompted by the General with his hands. “Sir, there are indications of a serious attack against the beaches. There are at least four fresh infantry divisions being fed into the line and the

remains of nine still conducting limited attacks. It appears the IU isn't trying to break through, but merely harassing the forces on the line."

"And the chances of them breaking through? They've held out pretty good so far," said the General of the Army.

"Sir, two of the divisions facing our troops are the 177th Infantry Division and the Damascus Martyrs. Those are their premier light infantry divisions in the Western Theater and have been held back so far. We believe they were held back until our forces were exhausted and could be overrun easier. It's more of a psychological victory for the IU if they do it that way. Those two divisions alone could force the issue," said the Colonel.

"We've consolidated down to three beaches, they have to be in a better position!" exclaimed the General of the Army.

"They had to consolidate. There simply weren't enough forces to cover the ground otherwise," said another General.

"What about the support ships?" asked the General of the Army. "They're going to need some serious support for an attack of that magnitude."

"Sir, the *Veracruz* has expended her ordnance as well as the *Crockett*. The *Seguín* is still on station, but is starting to run low on shells," said an Admiral.

"What about the remaining ships? Can they move back into the area?" asked the General of the Army.

"The submarine threat is still there sir and we are trying to expand the picket line. We are also trying to resupply them, but the sea conditions are making that harder than it usually is. Plus the ships had to move out further into the Atlantic to weather the storm. It's taking time to get them back into position," said the Admiral.

"Tell them to move faster! Brave men and women are dying on those beaches and they cannot wait! Get those ships into position Admiral!" barked the General of the Army and immediately regretted it. He knew they weren't dragging their feet since the weather was affecting everything. "Sorry Bart, I know you're going as fast as possible."

"We'll move faster," said the Admiral with a nod of acceptance.

"I want the *Seguín* tasked to start strikes against those divisions forming up to attack. I know it will take away from the close support our troops are getting, but if those divisions move into position, it's the ball game," said the General of the Army.

The Admiral waved at an aide and told her to immediately transmit the orders before returning to the meeting.

“We have a limited window to reinforce the troops here. If they can hold out for the next twelve hours, we will hold the beaches. We cannot afford to let them down now. I want the second wave on board their ships and aircraft and ready to land on those beaches as soon as the word is given.”

“I also want a plan for them to force another assault against the beaches if it becomes necessary. With the limited assets we won’t be able to hit everything at once, so we need to find out which beach would be best to strike again. We need a contingency plan to be prepared for another landing on the mainland,” said the General of the Army. Before the staff broke apart, a voice was heard from the rear of the room.

“Sir, what about Operation Jericho?” asked a Pacifica General.

“Go on,” said the General of the Army.

“With limited strikes against the massing divisions, we could destroy enough of the combat forces of the IU to withstand the next attacks,” said the General.

“Are the enemy forces in position for strikes?” asked the General of the Army.

“Some are sir,” said the Pacifica General.

“And the remainder?” asked the General of the Army.

“Too close to our troops to be attacked. We could hit our own forces by mistake,” said an AFNAS General.

“And the chances of success?” asked the General of the Army.

“Pretty good sir. Limited attacks on the follow on divisions could seriously dent their capabilities,” said the Pacifica General.

“And invite the attacks in kind on our own forces,” observed the NAU Marshal.

“We don’t believe they would strike the beaches. It would destroy their own troops,” said the Pacifica General.

“Those same forces they are feeding into a meat grinder just to keep us reeling? They are sacrificing their own forces without regard. Plus, if they don’t want to hit our beaches, they can and will hit the ports and airfields with our follow on forces,” snapped the Marshal.

“I doubt they would escalate the situation that far,” said the Pacifica General.

“No,” said the General of the Army, making a snap decision. “We will not take that chance. While I have tacit approval for the release of nuclear weapons, I will not take the chance. This battle will be fought and won the old fashioned way, by blood, guts and sheer determination.”

“Just a consideration sir,” said the Pacifica General.

“A consideration I will not approve. We’ve held this long and I will not take the chances of not only losing everything we’ve gained this far by inviting attacks on the follow on forces,” said the General of the Army. “I cannot see the merits of a nuclear attack.”

The decision had been made and the die had been cast. The forces on the beaches would have to gut it out and win the battle the old fashioned way.

Z Day plus 64 hours

“Sorry Donnie, we’ve got to plug your squad back into the lines,” said Lieutenant Winfield.

“Something going on sir?” I asked since this was our first break from the lines since we landed. My squad was beat and needed a couple of hours of down time. We had been bumped back several times with new attacks and hadn’t had any significant rest since we got there. We had just departed to go for two hours of rest and hopefully sleep. But apparently the IU wasn’t being so accommodating.

“New attack forming up. Looks to be the worst yet,” he replied.

“Aren’t they all,” I replied. “Sir, we really need some down time.”

“Any other time, I might be inclined to agree. But we cannot afford to have a squad down. The weather is starting to break and we have to hold these beaches for the follow on forces. We will hold these beaches for the follow on forces,” said Winfield.

“Resupply sir?” I asked.

“Over by position six. Get as much as you can carry and a few magazines more,” he nodded with his head. “We might not be able to resupply any time soon if the intelligence is correct.”

I acknowledged and headed over towards the company resupply point. We started grabbing the spare magazines and were tossed a lot more than we originally planned. Even Blain grabbed upwards of twenty magazines, stuffing them into every available pouch and pocket. The IU ammo was fairly plentiful, a testament to the fighting over the past two and a half days since we had been stripping the dead and wounded of their ammo. And we had more than what we really needed. But as it was, ammo is something you can’t ever have enough of.

Just as soon as we finished loading up, mortar rounds started falling once again. Not being blown around like they had before and were far more precise than we gave them credit for. We were directed into the nearest positions by Lieutenant Winfield and Blain and I ended up with Delacruz and whomever he happened to be paired up with in the position. We all crammed into the small defensive fighting position and cringed down as the heavier artillery shells started to land in our sector. I could see Delacruz peek up from time to time looking for any advancing infantry.

“Anything?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he replied. “See they cancelled your vacation.”

“Winfield says this one is supposed to be bad,” I replied.

“Aren’t they all bad enough?” asked Delacruz. “What happened to your girlfriend?”

“She got sent to another sector over on Minotaur Beach,” I replied. “And not really my girlfriend you know.”

“Might have fooled me with the performance you two put on earlier,” he laughed over an explosion.

“You weren’t even there!” I laughed, wondering how word spread that quickly. It was nice to see more levity in the platoon even under the heavy bombardment.

“Donnie, you find a pretty girl on the battlefield, start making out within five minutes and expect word not to spread? We’re all slightly jealous as it is,” he replied with a laugh.

“I get no respect,” I laughed in return as I peered out. I saw movement in the far tree line as another attack was forming up. Soldiers from the IU were seen darting from concealed position to concealed position. Our heavy machine guns ranged out and started turning that concealment into death traps. I don’t know if they hit anything, but it certainly gave the IU something to think about while they were forming up for an attack.

Apparently the IU didn’t feel it was prudent to wait any longer and started rushing our positions with their traditional war cries. And we sent our traditional response in the form of lead, copper and steel. The attack wasn’t what we were used to, more of harassment rather than a serious effort to dislodge us from our position, but the fire still claimed a few of our numbers. We were able to beat this attack back fairly easily and the IU went into retreat once again. This battle only lasted for about twenty minutes and we barely used up any of the ammo we had gathered earlier.

A team from another section of the line started mopping up the battlefield and gathering the ammo and more listening posts were sent out once again. We knew all we had to do was wait a little longer and relief was on the way. The winds were dying down although still pretty strong. Strong enough that landing craft might have serious issues, but still we knew it was only a matter of time.

The squad sent out to gather the ammo and equipment from the dead IU soldiers came scampering back when a new round of fire started raining in. A runner was braving the fire to deliver some additional rounds to the positions and tossed in two magazines apiece before sprinting towards the next position. I thought he was either brave or stupid for running around like that, but lucky enough, he never got hit. We scanned the area and waited for another attack to come in.

And we continued to wait as we had before...

“Sir! Pegasus Beach is under heavy attack! They have to abandon their positions!” yelled a Captain after receiving a radio transmission.

“Can they make it to Minotaur?” asked the AFNAS General.

“They are barely holding open the lanes and are requesting any help we can give them,” he replied.

“Minotaur is facing a heavy attack as well sir!” shouted another member in the small command post. The staff had been stripped away over the preceding three days to fill in leadership voids in some of the units and was barely down to a handful of what they should have.

“Get the reserve battalion ready to go,” said the AFNAS General, knowing it was only a battalion in name and barely two companies of effective soldiers. “Hold those lanes open at all costs and have Pegasus fall back to Minotaur. Once there, have them fill in the gaps and send the remainder to Sphinx.”

The orders were relayed over the radio as the General looked over the map. The lines were ever dwindling and the forces that were holding them were stretched thin. Even with consolidating the beaches down to three hadn't helped all that much as the reserves had been committed just to hold enough ground to keep the IU at bay and prepare additional defensive works closer to the beach. Fall back positions just in case the troops had to displace. The Central American Division was barely a shell of its former self, but fiercely held their positions on the western flanks, not giving an inch and even counterattacking several times. The NESAs light infantry brigade was effectively dismantled and had been fed as replacements into his division. Even the airborne troops had not really made a dent in the dead and wounded on the beach. It was like watching a slow leak in a tire as his forces quickly were disappearing.

But still they held and by displacing from Pegasus Beach, they might stand a better chance of reinforcing the lines and continuing to hold. He had been promised reinforcements soon, but frankly, they couldn't come quickly enough. As he studied the map, he made sure his carbine was prepared for action and his ammo where it should be. While the troops on the line were

using captured armaments, he still had the original load of ammo he came across the beach with. It was unusual for a General to carry a rifle or carbine, but he felt like it was entirely possible he was going to have to use it soon.

After checking his weaponry, he moved back to the small computer, the remaining one that still had enough power to operate and typed up four quick notes, one to his wife and three to his children. His wife was still in Alabama, but his three children were serving in the AFNAS military in various capacities. They weren't long drawn out letters, but simple notes telling his children how proud he was of them and to continue their service. And the note to his wife told her how deeply he loved her and was fine. She would worry otherwise but probably knew he was there on the beach and would worry no matter what until he was safe and sound in their living room back home.

He went over after sending the notes out and looked over the map again as continued reports of large scale attacks continued to pour in from the lines on all three beaches they still held.

“Contact right! Company moving in!” shouted Delacruz as he fired another half a magazine at the leading platoon. The positions to their front were almost being overrun as they fired off their last ditch effort to break up the attack. The Claymore mines were being saved as the “I’m about to be overrun and just got desperate” weaponry and had yet to be fired from our positions. However, four went off in front of 2nd Platoon’s positions and managed to get the leading edge of the IU attack to stop. The firing continued as the IU rose up again and pushed forward.

A shout from our left told us we were in the same boat as additional IU forces were heading towards our position and coming fast. I peered out and saw a full squad fairly close to the Claymore we controlled. Apparently Delacruz saw it as well and fired off the mine just as they reached the minimum distance from it. The mine shredded the leading elements, but still more came.

The machine guns started firing off their final protective fires as tracers crisscrossed the front, creating a wall of death and daring the IU to cross it. But come forward they did as their dead and dying quickly filled the available landscape to our front. We continued to fire as more mines, grenades and the remaining mortar rounds were fired. As I engaged another squad, I wondered where the battleships were and why they weren't firing support for us. I wondered if finally they had run out of shells and we were on our own. But the thoughts were pushed to the back of my mind as the IU was advancing further than before. They seemed bound and determined to keep the pressure on us for some reason.

But we managed to keep them at bay, continuing to fire nonstop as our weapons smoked from the continued abuse of sending hot metal down the barrels. And again, we prevailed as the attack faltered again and the IU started retreating. But we weren't giving any quarter as we continued to fire at the retreating figures and hit more as they ran towards the scraggly trees to

our front. Eventually they were behind the visual range of our positions and out of range of our weapons.

“All positions! Listen up!” I heard Lieutenant Winfield yell from our left. “All positions! Displace and move forward! Gather all the ammo you can carry! Fill every pocket, pouch and pack you can! Get everything and get back to your positions! Don’t go any further than two hundred meters out, but get everything you can carry! Go now!”

It was unusual taking the entire company out to gather ammo, but he must have realized we didn’t have enough time to send out the smaller units as we had been doing before. We all rose and headed out, starting to gather the magazines from the soldiers as well as the spare belts for the machine guns. We also found grenades we quickly stuffed into the pouches and anything else that looked remotely useful. But we mainly concentrated on the ammo stores. I managed to replace just about what I expended and had several magazines I could consolidate. But I picked up even more still. An RPG was lying nearby and I figured it might come in handy so I darted over and gathered the launcher and the rounds packed neatly away in the backpack designed for that purpose. As we traveled further out, we found more ammo and weapons which would prove useful. Several members were found carrying back the IU copy of the P90 which would serve as a backup weapon for the machine gunners. They had full sized rifles, but the smaller personal defense weapon would be easier to handle while trying to carry the PKM machine guns as well.

I had just about filled every pocket and pouch I had and told Blain to hurry and finish up. We started back towards our positions as the remainder of the company was doing the same. Up and down the line, I saw our forces doing the same thing we were doing. As I headed back, I started consolidating two partial magazines into one, emptying one and dropping it on the ground before starting in on another. The full magazines I placed into my web gear and made sure they were facing the right direction for immediate action. For the hundredth time, I thanked Lieutenant Winfield’s foresight in having us train on the foreign weapons before coming across the beach. But even for those who didn’t know how to use an AK, they learned pretty quickly or ended up dead. I dropped off the RPG with the heavy weapons squad, not basically a reinforced fire team of effectives. They loaded it up even before I left and reoriented the weapon towards the hardball roadway to our east. I darted away from the position and started heading back towards my squad to see to the defensive measures.

As I finished another magazine, I heard several shots as apparently the IU forces were either playing possum or simply wounded. We were taking no quarter at that time for the enemy since we were being shown none of the same. It might have seemed barbaric, but again, we weren’t taking any chances with the enemy lying on top of a grenade waiting for us dumb Americans to come along and set it off. The single shots continued as our guys were finishing up gathering what ordnance they could and heading back to the lines. I again had more magazines than I figured I needed, but ammo was cheap, life was not. I sent Blain back with the belts of machine gun ammo we had collected and he deposited them with the gunners, earning their gratitude in the process. Just as he was coming back into the position, more yells were heard up and down the line, alerting us to another incoming attack.

I scanned the area and saw a massive amount of infantry preparing to attack. They were not making any great secret of coming forward to ensure we died, but these forces were far different than what we had seen before. They were moving forward with far better tactics than we had seen thus far and were using effective cover and concealment, rushing and rolling and getting prepared to cover us with fire. Additionally, their camouflage was different than the IU uniforms we had seen and I immediately recognized the distinctive pattern of the uniform worn specifically by the Damascus Martyrs. They continued forward as a new round of mortar fire started up against our positions and continued to churn the earth as countless shells had done before.

“Fix bayonet’s!” screamed Lieutenant Winfield as he recognized the threat coming towards us as well. We had been beaten down by the second rate IU forces only to face their prime units when we were exhausted. I saw the method in their madness with the continued attacks over the previous hours as they were trying to wear us down mentally and physically before slashing at our collective throats for the kill. They were still out of range, but moving forward with a purpose as the teams were very well organized and well disciplined in their tactical movements. If we weren’t on the receiving end of the attack, I might have been genuinely impressed by the performance. But I also knew those sound tactics could kill us if we weren’t careful.

They finally came into range of our machine guns as they ranged out with plunging fire. But the formations of IU soldiers weren’t stopping for anything as they continued to advance towards our positions, using the dead IU soldiers as cover as they moved forward, almost robotically towards us. The machine guns were hitting some of the members, but the remaining ones ignored their dead and dying and continued to advance. When they were within four hundred meters, a general call to open fire was sent out along the lines. I started engaging the first leadership I saw, resorting back to my training and engaging the leadership, heavy weapons and marksmen of the leading ranks.

But still more came forward as I saw the troops continuing to appear from behind the leading elements. The IU seemed bound and determined to break through and get to the beach. This was the climax of the battle we had been fighting for almost three days and it appeared they saved their best for last. The overwhelming fear of dying came over me once again as I knew this would be my final hour. I stopped firing as the fear gripped me and I knew I was going to die.

CHAPTER 15

Z Day Plus 67 Hours

“Sir! The defenses at Pegasus are collapsing! They are in a full retreat towards Minotaur!” shouted a Captain in the Sphinx Beach command post.

“Can they make it through?” shouted the AFNAS General, seeing the alarming rate his defenses were collapsing.

“The attack is against the flank, but the middle is holding okay for the moment!” replied the Captain.

“Can the General hold halfway?” asked the AFNAS General.

“The General was killed making a last stand while the field hospital was evacuated! The senior Colonel says the positions are no longer defensible!” said the Captain.

“General! Heavy action on our western flank! The defenses are falling back to the secondary positions!” shouted a Colonel from the other side of the tent.

“Southern defenses state they are fighting the Damascus Martyrs! They are in danger of being overrun!” shouted another member of the command post.

“Minotaur reports a two brigade attack on their southern flank! Their positions are taking a beating!” said another.

“Brigade sized assault against the boundary of Minotaur and Sphinx! The IU is trying to divide the beaches!” shouted another member.

It appeared the attacks were coming in from all directions in a last second attempt to destroy the defenses and reach the beaches. The IU had saved their best units for just this occasion and were feeding them into the lines in force. The defenders were tired, weary and emotionally exhausted. But still, they knew their backs were to the wall and they continued to defend the ground paid for in blood.

“Get on the horn to England! We need emergency close air support right now!” shouted the AFNAS General after taking in the reports. Action was needed right then and he made a plan by the seat of his pants. There was no longer any need for a well staffed defensive plan. This was a bar brawl, pure and simple, and the side that got there with the most first would win. “Send the reserves to the western flank and tell Minotaur to prepare to fall back to Sphinx! Have Minotaur 6 send his reserves to the boundary and keep them from getting through! The forces coming in from Pegasus Beach will continue to fight a delaying action and continue falling back! We will make our last stand right here! This is our Alamo, our Bastogne! This is where we prevail!”

The staff was energized and quickly put the plans into action. But the reports flowing in told a grim tale of the situation they faced. The IU wasn't going to stop just because they were taking massive casualties. They weren't going to stop because they were tired. They were out for the win. They were tossing the Hail Mary in the final seconds going for the win. And the FNC forces didn't have any more defenders to send downfield.

The fear continued to grip me for several moments until someone screamed in the back of my mind. I didn't know who or what it was, but something screamed for me to act. Don't just sit there and become a target, fight. And I released the fear, put it into the back of my mind and ordered it to stay there. I let go of my feelings and decided if I was going to die, I was going to die fighting and kill as many of them as possible. The fear popped out for just a moment until I slammed the door on where it came from, locking it away and tossing away the key. I started picking my targets again and fired at the nearest to the furthest. Sectors of fire were out, aiming stakes were out, preferred targets were out; we were just making sure the closest targets were destroyed first and moving back.

A group of the soldiers were within the range of the Claymores we had set out and I saw Delacruz activate the mines in a thunderous roar. They seemed to make the first rank falter a bit, but they continued on after brief hesitation. But at least something had slowed the progress of the IU for even the briefest of moments. More mines were going off down the line, expending the last supplies of those critical defensive items. Grenades were tossed out, full automatic fire was expended against the massed groups and I could hear our leadership screaming in the radio for support. But there was nothing to be had, the attacks were all over the entire southern front and we were on our own to gut it out on our own.

A squad made it within fifty meters of our position and we engaged the group as they covered each other by fire. It wasn't easy to pick targets as the enemy's fire was effectively pinning us in position, but we managed to get off enough shots to keep them from advancing further. A position to our left was able to engage their flanks and assisted in rolling up the squad, but not before being targeted themselves by additional IU forces. Just as the last IU soldier was hit, Delacruz's partner was hit and fell back into the position dead from a head shot.

I kept firing and firing at the bodies that continued to appear out of the distance. Like an ant hill we had kicked over, the IU seemed to have an endless supply of bodies streaming towards our position. Targets were everywhere as I continued to load and fire, the AKM starting to glow red from the rounds being fired. Lucky for me, the hand guards were plastic and wouldn't catch fire like the older wooden ones. Ammunition wasn't a concern right then as we were fighting for our very survival. I loaded a new magazine and continued to fire bursts at the bodies with Private Blain at my side screaming his head off in rage. Delacruz was doing much the same and I realized I was yelling as well after a moment. The IU broke through the defenses somewhere

down the line and the infantry surged forward. We were getting overwhelmed and knew we had little distance to fall back on.

“Fall back! Back towards the beach!” I heard Lieutenant Winfield yell. I fired once again and emptied a magazine at an advancing fire team of IU soldiers. They ducked down long enough for Blain, Delacruz and I to get out of the crater and started heading back towards the beach. But little did we know we were quickly getting surrounded and needed to fight our way back to the beach through a line of IU soldiers. We started falling back to the next line of defensive positions, a hundred meters to our rear. They were little more than hasty scrapes created by weary engineers with hand tools, it was better than being out in the open and offered us a chance to have some form of cover. I saw Blain take a round to the arm as he ran, but didn’t drop his weapon and continued to sprint to the position.

When we arrived, we saw the IU infantry was starting to pour through the lines about four hundred meters to our east. A reserve force sent from the beach was quickly trying to establish a defensive line in the secondary positions. We could see the IU was hot on our heels as the leading formations were already upon our old positions. We started firing once again and were taking out the leading elements of the attackers. Again, we fired at the closest targets and ignored our standing rules of engagement. If we faltered and only targeted what we were supposed to, we would have been overwhelmed in short order. So it made perfect sense in my mind. I saw the remainder of my squad was online with the rest of us as the thunder of the battle continued to rage along the front.

“Sir! Southern defenses are collapsing! The first line of defenses was broken through! We had to commit all our reserves in that sector!” yelled the Chief of Staff after receiving a radio call.

“And Minotaur?” asked the AFNAS General.

“In full retreat as well as Pegasus!” yelled a Captain. “They are retreating in an orderly fashion, but the IU isn’t giving them any relief.”

“And the attack against the boundary of our beaches?” asked the General.

“Has been stopped for the moment, but instead of retreating, the IU is in place pinning the forces there,” said another member of the command post.

“Order all reserves to their positions! Get them where they are needed the most. Zero and destroy the classified systems and put an incendiary grenade on the classified papers out back,” ordered the General as he grabbed at his carbine and looked out of the tent. The sounds of the battle were closer than he realized and growing closer. He knew the IU was heading this way and he needed to prepare his staff for the actions they would probably face in the near future.

“As soon as you give the orders, turn over tactical control of all units to the sector commanders. And get your weapons ready. I have a feeling the IU is about to make our lives miserable and we need to be prepared to defend this location. I want the G-1, G-2 and G-6 staff members at the aid station defending that location and the wounded. G-3, G-4 and G-5 prepare to defend the immediate area where we are standing. Send the MPs to the southern sectors to assist with the forces there,” he said as he returned and prepared his M110A3 carbine for action. He also made sure his sidearm was ready as the remainder of his staff gave last minute orders and grabbed their own weapons before heading out. The MP detachment guarding the command post left out, running towards the battle where they would be needed the most. The General knew the command post was no longer a concern to be defended. At this point, the only thing that needed to be defended was the sand they stood on and their very own lives.

His Chief of Staff joined him outside and chambered a round in his own rifle, an AKM he had gathered from one of his trips to the front after handing off his rounds to an infantryman.

“I sent you to the hospital,” said the General.

“If it’s all the same to you sir, I’d like to keep watching your back,” said the Colonel.

“I think I can handle that,” said the General.

“Been a pleasure serving with you sir,” said the Colonel.

“The pleasure was all mine,” said the General. “See you on the other side.”

They continued to watch and wait as the tent emptied and the remaining staff took up positions nearby. The sounds of the battle were growing closer as they waited for the first signs of the IU to appear...

“Continue falling back!” yelled my platoon leader. I didn’t even know his name as he had just been sent over an hour before the battle began. In command for two hours before this madness started and what a way to learn the job. We were halfway to the beach now and I swore I could hear the surf coming in. I knew it was my imagination since I could hear little else besides the gunfire and explosions surrounding me and filling the air. A few rounds whizzed by as we displaced once again and fell back to the next set of positions. And the IU followed...

It appeared we hadn’t even made a dent in their forces since they were still coming forward with everything they had. I couldn’t understand where all the forces were coming from and had no idea why they hadn’t committed them before now. As we ran to the next positions, we noticed a group of soldiers had already taken residence in our new positions. However, they weren’t facing the right way and were firing on the next line of defenses. I also happened to notice their

uniforms were different than ours. At some point, we had been surrounded by units of the IU and cut off from the beach.

“Alpha move right! Bravo up the middle! Delacruz, your squad keeps up the security to our rear!” I shouted as we ran forward. “Alpha and Bravo Fire Teams! Engage those forces!”

We started firing on the unsuspecting IU squad to our front, catching them from behind as we raced forward. We fired on the move and effectively killed half the squad before they knew they were under attack. As we continued forward, the IU noticed they were also surrounded and half their number turned to engage us. But we were quicker and ended up getting into bayonet engagement range before they were able to fire on us. I knew we needed to start conserving ammo and we were trained in the rifle fighting techniques needed right then. The sharp points of our weapons completed the slaughter of the squad to our front.

“Gather the ammo and continue to fall back!” I shouted as Delacruz and his squad joined us in the positions. We quickly gathered the ammo from the dead IU soldiers, just getting what we could see before continuing back to the next set of lines. But there really wasn’t a defensive line anymore. None of the lines were safe and the two forces had finally merged. It was simply hand to hand and individual battles now. We had no way of knowing where our next set of defensive works were and we had no idea how to establish a defensive line in the middle of the battle since most were overrun.

“Take them all out!” screamed Winfield who appeared to rally us on. He surged forward towards a group of IU infantry and we followed. We were still getting closer to the beach, but fighting individual units of the IU now. Forces were heading in our direction and I noticed the uniforms of the North American Union. Apparently the defenses along all the beaches had collapsed and we were starting to retreat to a common point. But we had no place to retreat to and had nothing else to do but kill the enemy. Kill the enemy to save ourselves. To defend our brothers and sisters. The primal instinct of survival raged in our brains as we shouted and surged forward to kill or be killed.

“We have them on the run! Their defenses have collapsed and they are in full retreat to the beach!” shouted an IU General.

“Overrun them and kill them all!” shouted the IU Marshal. “Destroy every last one of them!”

“Units are running low on ammunition!” shouted a Major from the rear of the command post.

“The enemy has to be running low as well! Rout them off those beaches at bayonet point!” shouted the Marshal.

The orders went out for all the remaining reserves to press forward in the attack. But most of the units were already engaged and were in the battle raging on the last kilometer towards the beach. The IU had no more reserves to throw into the line. They had gone all in on this last gamble and the only units he had left were some territorial garrison battalions to hold the lines. It was all or nothing at the moment and in the hands of the Sergeants, Lieutenant and Captains to see the battle through to conclusion.

The first IU units appeared over the sand dunes closest to the former command post. The General saw he was out of position, but the remainder of his staff engaged and started firing at the platoon, making them seek cover. Friendly forces started appearing and still firing to their rear as they found they had reached the last place they could retreat to. More IU units appeared and engaged them as both the forces started running low on ammo and resorting to hand to hand fighting.

“Fire! Help those men!” screamed the General as he started marking targets of his own and firing. But it was becoming increasingly difficult since the two forces had merged and targets were not easy to engage. He rose up and found an IU fire team heading towards his position and fired at them. They stopped to fire back before the remainder of his staff engaged them as well. The General quickly scampered towards the remains of the supply dump, since emptied of just about everything and sent to the front lines. He found another small unit of IU troops and engaged on the run, taking cover behind a small group of sandbags. The IU unit started moving forward once again, right towards his position. He noticed his staff had followed his movements and were close behind him.

“Keep firing!” screamed the AFNAS General as he fired his rifle at the advancing infantry. He continued to fire as the IU screamed and charged for the command post area. They were close enough now he could see the whites of their eyes and he fired nonstop. The entire defense force was engaged fully as they quickly mounted bayonets on the end of smoking rifles and charged out to meet the attacker. Vicious hand to hand ensued as the IU was charging ahead. Soldiers battled soldiers and worked together as they singled out opponents and fought them to the death.

The General’s rifle fell empty as he dropped it at his feet. There were no more magazines to be had and until he could get a resupply, his M110A3 carbine would be of no use to him. But he wasn’t worried about resupply right then, he was more worried about finding a long gun capable of inflicting as much damage as possible on the attackers. He spied a shotgun leaned against a table with a bandolier full of 12 gauge shells and quickly picked it up. Chambering a round, he found targets close enough and started letting the street sweeper continue the work he had started. He ran through a full tube before running out and engaging an infantryman bent on his death. Three .45 rounds from his pistol quickly ended the charge as he reloaded the shotgun and continued to fire. His Chief of Staff was battling a lone infantryman in rifle fighting techniques and he ran over to aid him. He fired the shotgun at close range and took the IU soldier off his feet before racking the slide and chambering another round.

“Look out!” screamed the Chief of Staff as the General felt two sharp pains in his back. The Chief of Staff came around and gave the IU soldier a pistol shot to the face as the General dropped to the ground with the bayonet still sticking in his back. The Chief of Staff quickly removed the rifle and attempted to aid his fallen commander.

“Leave me here and get the defense organized! We need to hold this beach!” he wheezed and coughed out blood. The rifle shot had entered his belly but the bayonet had punctured his lung.

“Let me slap a bandage on you!” shouted the Chief of Staff.

“Get out there and defend this beach soldier! We will all die here if they take this beach! Get out there and fight!” grunted the General as he coughed up blood once again. “Go now!”

The Chief of Staff got up, reloaded his rifle and let out a war cry before charging at the IU forces. More FNC infantry were being backed onto the beach from almost all directions as they continually fired at the IU infantry. The Chief of Staff got to the nearest group of soldiers and rallied them to go forward, fight and win. They rose up as one and charged into the hellish maelstrom of fire as they were energized by the Chief of Staff’s example.

EPILOGUE

Z Day Plus 78 Hours

Today marks a great tragedy in the campaign to liberate the continent of Europe from the tyranny of the Islamic Union. Our forces were pushed off the beach and their foothold destroyed today by the enemy. While they put up a brave fight, they were simply overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the enemy. But they put up a grand resistance, fighting not only the enemy, but the weather and limited resupply as well. We underestimated the time it would take to properly resupply the forces as well as the weather conditions, resulting in the enemy overrunning our foothold on the continent of Europe. This is no fault of the valiant efforts of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines in contact. The responsibility for the loss of our forces rests solely on my shoulders.

For this, I take full accountability of my actions and hereby resign my position as Commander, Free Nation Coalition Forces and request reassignment as my superiors see fit.

The General of the Army looked at the press release he had printed out and studied it once again. While there were some things he found flowery, it was simple and to the point. His Chief of Staff walked into the room unannounced.

“Sir? The press is assembled,” said the Colonel.

“Give them that,” said the General as he nodded towards a sheet of paper on the edge of his desk.

“No question and answer portion?” asked the Colonel.

“Not today,” said the General.

The Colonel walked out of the room and scanned over the press release. Again, short and to the point, the press was going to give him a hard time for not being available to answer questions. He looked it over once again and decided it was perfectly fine as they didn't need a whole lot more than that. As he entered the briefing room, he looked down at the paper and stepped up to the microphone. The press was wondering why a simple Colonel giving the briefing instead of the General of the Army, but were eager to hear any news from the beach. The embedded reporters with the landing forces hadn't been heard from since the early hours of the invasion and they knew many had ended up with rifles in foxholes during the fighting. So any news was good news.

The Colonel cleared his throat and waited for the signal from the cameraman to record the speech for posterity. After getting a nod, he started reading from the release.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’ll have copies of the remarks prepared so you can take them with you,” he said. “This comes from the General of the Army and commander Free Nation Coalition Forces Forward.”

“The nations of the world united against tyranny have started a great liberation today. Valiant fighting forces from the Free Nation Coalition have fought the enemy to a standstill on the beaches of Normandy and have persevered in the face of great adversity. The hopes and prayers of the nations under occupation have been answered by the relentless dedication of the troops in harm’s way. They have shown great courage and tenacity in the face of overwhelming odds and have triumphed where evil once stood. They stood their ground as brave warriors fighting for a just cause and have come off victorious. As Winston Churchill once said, ‘never was so much owed by so many to so few.’ Their actions and their sacrifices have enabled us to continue to hold the beach and finally reinforce them. They have kept hope alive for our continued liberation of Europe and for that we cannot thank them enough.”

“We will continue to battle the oppression of those longing to be free and will continue to win as we advance forward. While we have won the initial battle for the continent, a long road lies ahead. It will not be an easy road, but we will be victorious. For this I am certain because our cause is just and our hearts are pure. We ask the Lord to continue to guide and guard us and to take our lost into His arms so they may know peace. And we pray for victory and continuing advancement.”

“Friendly forces coming from the rear!” I heard announced as I scanned the lines to our front. We had fought the IU to a complete standstill and destroyed the entire Damascus Martyrs during their attack. They had broken through the defenses and got all the way to the beach, but we were able to fight them and win despite the odds. Hand to hand, rifle to rifle, the IU had thrown their best at us and come off lacking. We had consolidated the units and reestablished the lines. We barely held four hundred yards of ground now between the beach and the front lines and were exhausted.

“Advance and be recognized,” I said after taking up a position looking to the rear. Blain was still watching the front in anticipation of more IU troops playing possum and waiting for the opportunity to kill another American. I saw the camouflage uniform of a Texas infantryman come through the remaining hedges to our rear. And a clean uniform at that for some unknown reason. Our own uniforms were completely shredded and stained with dirt, mud and blood. I challenged him as he approached. “Taco.”

“Swordfish,” he replied. “I’ve got a company with me.”

“A company?” I asked and noticed he was a Captain and quickly added “sir.”

“We’re here to relieve you,” said the Captain as I watched him point left and right to the advancing platoons of soldiers. They were fanning out and quickly filling in the large gaps in the lines. But even more were showing up as I could see additional platoons heading down the line.

“Are you coming from another point in the line sir?” I asked as a fire team quickly jumped into my position.

“No soldier, we’re here to relieve you,” he said.

“I don’t understand sir,” I said, wondering if I had fallen asleep and was dreaming.

He grinned and nodded to his rear before looking over the area. I stared off in the direction he was indicating at the ocean. I didn’t have the best view, but from what I could see, I saw ships...a whole lot of ships. Landing craft were coming in streams from the Channel and putting massive amounts of infantry on the beach. They turned before heading back to England to get refilled and repeat the process. I could hear tanks and other tracked vehicles rumbling up the beach and heading for the few exits we had left and towards other positions. A flight of A-10s suddenly screamed overhead, going south and looking for targets. I could see other fighters further up, patrolling over the beachheads through the breaking clouds. Distant impacts of artillery shells indicated the destroyers, cruisers and frigates had returned and replaced the now empty battleships and heavy cruiser. For the first time in as long as I could remember, the sun broke through and shined on us.

“Where’s your commander?” he asked.

“I think he’s over near position four,” I replied and pointed in that general direction, still wondering if this was a dream. But he answered some of the questions in my mind.

“With the storm gone, we finally broke the naval forces in the area and have pushed back the air force enough to land reinforcements. Artillery is still a concern, but we’re targeting that as well,” he informed me. “You head on back to the beach with your unit. You are relieved soldier.”

And somehow I had made it through. A great burden had been lifted off my shoulders and I hung my head, not in shame, but in fatigue. But as I got out of the position and took what little I had with me, I walked with pride. The remaining defenders gathered together by twos and fours and headed to the beach where we would be sent back to England eventually for rest and reconsolidation. The approaching infantry stopped as we passed and cleared the path for us. Nods were sent our way, almost reverent in nature, and I nodded back with the same grim determination I had during the entire ordeal. But for me it wasn’t determination, it was relief.

The second invasion of the European mainland by American troops was a success and we had pulled it off somehow. In retrospect, I have no idea how we accomplished it, but somehow we did it. And again, I have no idea how I ended up surviving it all, but I managed to do that as well. I knew the war wasn’t over for me by a long shot, but at the same time, I had cleared a

pretty large hurdle in my path. And I knew if I could survive this, I could survive anything the IU threw at me.

We gathered on the beach and waited for the transports to return with another wave of troops. Our commander, by that time a former Staff Sergeant from Third Platoon given a battlefield promotion to Second Lieutenant, informed us we were heading back to England to reconsolidate and recuperate. Lieutenant Winfield, since promoted to First Lieutenant and in charge of the company, saw what was left of the original members of the platoon and nodded in our direction. Sergeant Delacruz made his way over to me and we hugged briefly before moving on to the others that had waded ashore with us three days prior. After we made contact with the survivors, we stood by while a Naval Petty Officer took down our unit information and assigned us to a returning craft. After getting our assignment, I slumped down on a sand dune, still blackened by the explosions from the past three days. I dropped my helmet onto the ground next to me and opened a canteen for a drink. I don't remember ever getting the water into my mouth and the next thing I remember was being woken up as we arrived in England after the ferry trip.

“Hey there old man,” said a familiar voice beside the AFNAS General. He had woken up moments before and his eyes popped open to see the white walls of a military hospital above him. He turned his head briefly and saw his daughter sitting in the bed next to him.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“In a military hospital in London,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Like someone attacked me with a bayonet,” he said dryly. “Are you okay?”

“I should be more worried about you,” she said.

“Will you just answer the question?” he said weakly.

“I'm fine,” she said. “Be out for about six weeks or so. And you?”

“I'll be fine,” he said, remembering the shot and bayonet strike in his back. “It'll take a lot more than this to slow me down.”

“Yeah right,” she said. “Even you can get slowed down pretty good.”

He remembered going unconscious at some point after sending his chief of staff away to fight the onslaught of attackers and barely remembered a medic re-inflating his lung. After that was a blank until his daughter's voice had woken him right then. He had been part of the initial medevac flights out after the NAU General had taken over the defenses and the reestablished the defensive lines. And the winds had died down long enough to start getting flights in and out.

“I’m okay, more worried about you,” he answered.

“I’m not a china doll. I’m a big girl now and got pretty tough,” she replied. “You kind of pushed me in that direction.”

“I never pushed you to be a soldier,” he said.

“But you should have known. I was always following around my brothers playing soldier so you had to realize it was going to happen eventually,” she said with a chuckle and her stomach immediately started hurting.

“How did you end up on that beach anyway? You weren’t supposed to be there until the third wave with the AFNAS 2nd,” he asked.

“Somehow got mixed up in port. We got lumped into the first,” she replied. “And how did you know I was there and was supposed to be medevaced?”

“I didn’t,” he replied. She gave him an unbelieving look before he had to come clean. “Okay, I didn’t know you were there until I saw you heading into the field hospital. My Chief of Staff quietly checked up on you and plus your loud protesting could be heard all the way to Paris. How did you end up in a bed beside me?”

“I knew you wouldn’t accept a private room and would want to be with your soldiers instead. I talked to the staff and informed them of same, however, they didn’t believe little Specialist nobody until they figured out we were related. Still took your Chief of Staff making a call before they moved you in here,” she replied.

“How did he get involved?” he asked. “Is he here?”

“Last I knew he was still on the beach,” she replied. “And I made a radio call to him on the beach to let him know you were okay.”

“How on earth did you get access to a radio in here?” asked the General.

“I flirted with the comm technician,” she smiled impishly.

“Did you let your mother know what happened?” he asked.

“Oh, she is not happy at all and you’re probably going to get an earful when you two talk. I took the chicken way out and sent her an e-mail. Her reply was colorful to say the least,” she said.

“I’m not interrupting anything am I?” asked a voice from the head of the beds.

“Sir!” exclaimed the Specialist as she saw the General of the Army had appeared.

“At ease soldier, just seeing how your old man is doing,” replied the General of the Army.

“Fine sir,” said the AFNAS General and took the offered hand. The General of the Army also took her hand and thanked her as well. The family was very familiar to him since they had rode out the Fall in somewhat close proximity in Alabama and they were friends before the Fall as well.

“Can the sir stuff Nate, nobody else is listening and your daughter has heard you call me by my first name before,” said the General of the Army.

“Good to see you Bobby,” said the AFNAS General.

“You should have ducked Nate,” he chuckled.

“It’s just a scratch,” replied the AFNAS General.

“Lot more than a scratch. Punctured lung and a gut shot? You’re going to be out for a while,” he remarked after looking over the chart.

“Maybe a couple of days,” said the AFNAS General.

“I think he needs to keep his skinny behind in that bed for a while sir, but that’s just me,” said his daughter with a smile.

“She is right. We need you to get better. Your position in the AFNAS 1st is still there, but we have to rebuild the division,” said the General of the Army.

“Lot of my boys and girls died out there,” remarked the AFNAS General.

“But they didn’t die in vain. And you helped keep those beaches secured so we could land the second wave. And to date, the invasion forces destroyed twenty-three IU divisions during the three days of fighting,” he replied. “Not bad at all.”

“We are holding?” asked the AFNAS General.

“Like a rock. The second wave had pushed out past your original lines and we are massing support to start expanding the beachheads. We’ll get the ports in short order,” said the General of the Army as his communicator beeped at him. “I’ve got to get going, but there was a reason I came down here.”

He reached into his bag and removed two Purple Hearts from his pocket and pinned them on each of their hospital gowns. Additionally he pulled out a Silver Star for her and handed it to her father to pin on. He was barely able to lean over and pin it on her hospital tunic, but he would have risked major injury in order to do so. He finally got the award clasped on and his face beamed with pride as he did so.

“Seems like there was a Sergeant from the AFNAS 1st that said you did a pretty good job out there Specialist. Said you were instrumental in getting past the original beach defenses. He wants you to join your unit if you want,” said the General of the Army.

“I just did my job sir,” said the Specialist.

“You did more than that and it helped break the defenses. Be proud of what you did,” he replied.

The General of the Army set a bag of additional decorations on the stand beside the AFNAS General. “It’s not often I get to decorate a father and a daughter so I couldn’t resist. But I figured you’d like to be the one to give some of those out to your soldiers. Once you can get up and around that is. Can you keep an eye on your old man for me?”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t overdo it,” replied the daughter.

“Got to get going. I have a conference with the FNC leadership in a half an hour,” replied the General of the Army. “You two get better quick. We need you out there.”

He departed and the two got back to some father daughter bonding time. “I was proud of you out there.”

“And I was proud of you as well,” she replied. “You kept everyone together.”

“Just part of the job,” he replied.

“I couldn’t think of anyone else I’d rather have out there,” she said.

“Grandpa?” asked my grandson after I hadn’t replied. “Mom said you were there the entire time, from the start I mean. She said you were a hero for what you went through on the beach.”

“I did go in with the first wave,” I said after reflecting on those memories so long ago. And thinking of those brave men and women I served with during those three days. I shed a tear thinking of the ones who never made it off those devastated beaches. “I wasn’t really a hero. The ones that never made back were the real heroes. The men and women I served with were heroes. I just did my job.”

It wasn’t something I ever talked about with people, even my own family. Even my wife never really mentioned it either. There is the association of Operation Phoenix members that meets every year and they like to get together and laugh at the funny things that happened to them. There apparently aren’t as many as when the association was started, but there are enough new guys still popping up to fill the ranks. There’s even talk of the group heading back to Normandy for next year’s reunion. And while there’s an association, I’ve never been as I locked those

memories of my time in Normandy into the back of my mind and never let them out. I think it's more of a psychological hurdle for me to remember and tell my story, but it's something I know I should face. It wasn't shame to lock them away, but the simple fact I never wanted to relive the terror I faced on the beach during that short period of my life that seemed to last an eternity.

But the worst memory I had of the whole ordeal, the one I hadn't thought about since the day it happened was my return to Foggy Bottom and entering the platoon tent for the first time. It was then I realized just how bad it was overall. Staff Sergeant Gilbert, Corporal Devons, Sergeant Delacruz, Lieutenant Winfield, Specialist Robinson, Specialist Rodriguez, Private Martin, Private Sawyer and myself were the only ones left out of the forty-four that had started the journey. Nine original members of our unit left. The tent was empty and void of life as we sat there looking around at the bunks of our friends that had been lost. Our comrades in arms that we had taken for granted just four days prior and never thought to stop and just talk. I remember getting into my footlocker and finding the cookies sent from home. A small reminder of my life before it was violently transformed by the three days in Normandy. I remember passing them out one last time and everyone having their fill as we emptied the container. And I remember the tears we all shed together thinking of our lost. I never could fully explain to my mother why I never could eat them again. I think my father and grandfather knew since they had been soldiers in their lives, but she never could fully understand why I would pass them over. I knew it would remind me of the aftermath of that battle I tried my whole life to forget.

I never returned to Normandy after we were relieved. Just never thought to look back and remember as I knew we had a long war ahead of us. I survived the liberation in Europe, the invasion of Turkey and the conquest of the Middle East. I was there when the defenses in Jerusalem surrendered. I led my company through tough opposition during the siege of Basra. I was near one of the blast zones of the IU nuclear weapons used when we were in the final days of the war. I remember all those things vividly. But Operation Phoenix?

I don't think I ever wanted to remember honestly. It should have been a very proud moment of my life, but I guess I never wanted to expose anyone else to the horrors I saw. The deaths I had seen and caused myself. The lives of my friends and comrades shattered in a brief moment in time. The destruction of my own...innocence would be the best word I could use to describe what I lost on those beaches. I never went to the reunions because I wasn't sure if I could face what happened myself. I know I should have out of respect to the brave souls who fought and died in that place, but never could bring myself to do it. Maybe it was past time for me to confront what happened to me and let it out, maybe a little at a time. Maybe it was time for me to release the memories a little at a time. To release my inner demons slowly from the prison I had locked them away in so long ago. Maybe it was time to tell my story.

I was surprised my grandson asked about it. I never really mentioned the fact I was there from the beginning to my daughter, but somehow she knew. I mean a lot of guys were involved in Phoenix. And those at the reunions were all involved in some way, but not many of them were on the beach. Some were support, others sailors supporting the beachheads, others were pilots and aircrews...but certainly not a lot of the men and women that fought and died in those three days of hell. Oh sure, folks wrote books, did interviews and documentary shows were made, but for the most part, the nitty-gritty of what happened in the individual foxhole was never portrayed

or discussed. It's like it was a dark secret we all wanted to suppress about the individual stories and what happened.

I think it is past time for me to tell my story. And if I couldn't share with my own family what happened, who could I share it with? It wasn't exactly the high point of my life as I was certain I would die, but it was probably the most defining moment of my life. I remember someone saying "you've never lived until you face death." I don't remember who said it, but it certainly fits what happened to me, to all of us that were there. And I think it was past time to at least explain how those three days shaped me into the man I am today.

"Come on over and have a seat," I said to my grandson and nodded towards the couch. "I'll tell you about my time during Phoenix."

Afterthoughts on Tales of the Ranch – Phoenix Rising

I sat down thinking of a few other ideas and further storylines and came across an idea of the World War III era from my “Ranch” universe. I’d always thought about what a landing in Europe would be like this day in age. I never really had an avenue to go on in this one until someone gave me the motivation to start. So I sat down and started putting some thoughts on paper as I typically do and the thoughts turned into a short story. I never planned on having a long drawn out story as I have done in the past, but rather a snapshot in time of the horrors of combat. I can’t say I can reliably say what it’s like as each man and woman that’s ever been on the end of a round fired in anger has their own story to tell, their own emotions they felt and the sheer terror that combat brings with it. But I hope I managed to show a glimpse into the world of what veterans endure and the memories that they lock away in their minds.

As this is a fictional story, I can hope it’s entertaining. But as a teaching story, it shows that soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines have inner demons that follow them around for their lives. And furthermore, psychological scars that can torment in ways not seen by anyone else. For those that never have served, it’s a teaching tool to show there are veterans that carry huge burdens around for their lives. And often times, veterans don’t like to relive those memories. They will talk about the men they served with or the funny things that happened, but rarely of the actual combat time and their lives behind a rifle. And the lessons to be learned? Those that have seen the elephant rarely want others to have to see those horrors they witnessed. In time, those stories come out, a little at a time, but for the most part, they remain hidden from the world. To protect those they love? Sometimes. Other times it’s just painful to remember what they went through. I hope I have been able to tell some of the tales so they don’t have to relive their own memories.

This story has also given me a primer into writing first person as I hope to finish up another story I’ve got in the works that will be told from a first person standpoint. It’s not easy to do as one has to effectively “get into the head” of the person they are writing about and distance themselves from their own lives. And even as short this story was, it wasn’t easy to get into the head of one Donald McIntyre. But hopefully I portrayed the character well enough and told his story as seen through his eyes.

As with most of the “Tales of the Ranch” series, this isn’t a learning story for the most part. But more of an entertainment story. And always, thanks are due on my part.

1Admin/Lowdown3 for administering survivalandpreparednessforum.com and the work he does in keeping up the site.

Melbo at Survival Monkey for allowing me a place to put up the completed works in Adobe format so folks can enjoy it at their leisure

Deena in GA and Dennis Olson at Timebomb2K for keeping up the site.

All the other Moderators, Administrators, tech gurus and staff on the respective websites as they keep it clean, real and in order.

Special thanks to BM59 fan at ICCF for bringing me to the keyboard to type this out. It's always kind of been in the back of my mind to write something along these lines, but he made the suggestion to move forward with it. So a little prodding from him made me get into the mindset and get the story started.

And always, a special thanks to the fans out there that continually supported me on the site and with messages of inspiration behind the scenes. I write because I like to. But I continue to write because of the support I get from all you folks. I cannot express my gratitude enough for keeping me behind the keyboard.

I appreciate the time the reader took to read the story and I hope it lived up to the expectations.

Grand58742

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