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

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different form.

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



The strength of the Pack is the Wolf.





## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Because the U.S. Military has partially embraced a conversion to the metric system, Marines measure distances in meters and kilometers, but still use inches and feet and speak of driving in “miles per hour.” My account of the invasion retains these inconsistencies, switching between the metric and English systems as the troops did. Keeping track of this is simple: A meter (which equals 39.3 inches) is roughly 10 percent longer than a yard, and a kilometer (which equals 0.6 mile) is just over half a mile.

Some men are identified in this book solely by the nicknames awarded to them by fellow Marines.

# IRAQ

## and the Middle East Region



# LEADING THE INVASION

## First Recon's Movement North into Iraq





# PROLOGUE

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IT'S ANOTHER IRAQI TOWN, nameless to the Marines racing down the main drag in Humvees, blowing it to pieces. We're flanked on both sides by a jumble of walled, two-story mud-brick buildings, with Iraqi gunmen concealed behind windows, on rooftops and in alleyways, shooting at us with machine guns, AK rifles and the odd rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). Though it's nearly five in the afternoon, a sandstorm has plunged the town into a hellish twilight of murky red dust. Winds howl at fifty miles per hour. The town stinks. Sewers, shattered from a Marine artillery bombardment that ceased moments before we entered, have overflowed, filling the streets with lagoons of human excrement. Flames and smoke pour out of holes blasted through walls of homes and apartment blocks by the Marines' heavy weapons. Bullets, bricks, chunks of buildings, pieces of blown-up light poles and shattered donkey carts splash into the flooded road ahead.

The ambush started when the lead vehicle of Second Platoon—the one I ride in—rounded the first corner into the town. There was a mosque on the left, with a brilliant, cobalt-blue dome. Across from this, in the upper window of a three-story building, a machine gun had opened up. Nearly two dozen rounds ripped into our Humvee almost immediately. Nobody was hit; none of the Marines panicked. They responded by speeding into the gunfire and attacking with their weapons. The four Marines crammed into this Humvee—among the first American troops to cross the border into Iraq—had spent the past week wired on a combination of caffeine, sleep deprivation, tedium and anticipation. For some of them, rolling into an ambush was almost an answered prayer.

Their war began several days ago, as a series of explosions that rumbled across the Kuwaiti desert beginning at about five in the morning of March 20. The Marines, who had been sleeping in holes dug into the sand twenty kilometers south of the border with Iraq, sat up and gazed into the empty expanses, their faces blank as they listened to the distant thundering. They had eagerly awaited the start of war since leaving their base at Camp Pendleton, California, more than six weeks earlier. Spirits couldn't have been higher. Later, when a pair of Cobra helicopter gunships thumped overhead, flying north, presumably on their way to battle, Marines pumped their fists in the air and screamed, "Yeah! Get some!"

*Get some!* is the unofficial Marine Corps cheer. It's shouted when a brother Marine is struggling to beat his personal best in a fitness run. It punctuates stories told at night about getting laid in whorehouses in Thailand and Australia. It's the cry of exhilaration after firing a burst from a .50-caliber machine gun. *Get some!* expresses, in two simple words, the excitement, the fear, the feelings of power and the erotic-tinged thrill that come from confronting the extreme physical and emotional challenges posed by death, which is, of course, what war is all about. Nearly every Marine I've met is hoping this war with Iraq will be his chance to get some.

Marines call exaggerated displays of enthusiasm—from shouting *Get some!* to waving American flags to covering their bodies with Marine Corps tattoos—"moto." You won't ever catch Sergeant Brad Colbert, the twenty-eight-year-old commander of the vehicle I ride in, engaging in any moto displays. They call Colbert "The Iceman." Wiry and fair-haired, he makes sarcastic pronouncements in a nasal whine that sounds like comedian David Spade. Though he considers himself a "Marine

Corps killer,” he’s also a nerd who listens to Barry Manilow, Air Supply and practically all the music of the 1980s except rap. He is passionate about gadgets: He collects vintage video-game consoles and wears a massive wristwatch that can only properly be “configured” by plugging it into his PC. He is the last guy you would picture at the tip of the spear of the invasion forces in Iraq.

Now, in the midst of this ambush in a nameless town, Colbert appears utterly calm. He leans out his window in front of me, methodically pumping grenades into nearby buildings with his rifle launcher. The Humvee rocks rhythmically as the main gun on the roof turret, operated by a twenty-three-year-old corporal, thumps out explosive rounds into buildings along the street. The vehicle’s machine gunner, a nineteen-year-old Marine who sits to my left, blazes up the town, firing through his window like a drive-by shooter. Nobody speaks.

The fact that the enemy in this town has succeeded in shutting up the driver of this vehicle, Corporal Josh Ray Person, is no mean feat. A twenty-two-year-old from Missouri with a faintly hick accent and a shock of white-blond hair covering his wide, squarish head—his blue eyes are so far apart Marines call him “Hammerhead” or “Goldfish”—Person plans to be a rock star when he gets out of the Corps. The first night of the invasion, he had crossed the Iraqi border, simultaneously entertaining and annoying his fellow Marines by screeching out mocking versions of Avril Lavigne songs. Tweaking on a mix of chewing tobacco, instant coffee crystals, which he consumes dry by the mouthful, and over-the-counter stimulants like ephedra-based Ripped Fuel, Person never stops jabbering. Already he’s reached a profound conclusion about this campaign: that the battlefield that is Iraq is filled with “fucking retards.” There’s the retard commander in the battalion, who took a wrong turn near the border, delaying the invasion by at least an hour. There’s another officer, a classic retard who has spent much of the campaign chasing through the desert to pick up souvenirs—helmets, Republican Guard caps and rifles—thrown down by fleeing Iraqi soldiers. There are the hopeless retards in the battalion-support sections who screwed up the radios and didn’t bring enough batteries to operate the Marines’ thermal-imaging devices. But in Person’s eyes, one retard reigns supreme: Saddam Hussein. “We already kicked his ass once,” he says. “Then we let him go, and he spends the next twelve years pissing us off even more. We don’t want to be in this shithole country. We don’t want to invade it. What a fucking retard.”

Now, as enemy gunfire tears into the Humvee, Person hunches purposefully over the wheel and drives. The lives of everyone depend on him. If he’s injured or killed and the Humvee stops, even for a moment in this hostile town, odds are good that everyone will be wiped out, not just the Marines in this vehicle, but the nineteen others in the rest of the platoon following behind in their Humvees. There’s no air support from attack jets or helicopters because of the raging sandstorm. The street is filled with rubble, much of it from buildings knocked down by the Marines’ heavy weapons. We nearly slam into a blown-up car partially blocking the street. Ambushers drop cables from rooftops, trying to decapitate or knock down the Humvee’s turret gunner. Person zigzags and brakes as the cables scrape across the Humvee, one of them striking the turret gunner who pounds on the roof, shouting, “I’m okay!”

At least one Marine in Colbert’s Humvee seems ecstatic about being in a life-or-death gunfight. Nineteen-year-old Corporal Harold James Trombley, who sits next to me in the left rear passenger seat, has been waiting all day for permission to fire his machine gun. But no chance. The villagers Colbert’s team had encountered had all been friendly until we hit this town. Now Trombley is curled over his weapon, firing away. Every time he gets a possible kill, he yells, “I got one, Sergeant!” Sometimes he adds details: “Hajji in the alley. Zipped him low. I seen his knee explode!”

Midway through the town, there’s a lull in enemy gunfire. For an instant, the only sound is wind

whistling through the Humvee. Colbert shouts to everyone in the vehicle: “You good? You good?” Everyone’s all right. He bursts into laughter. “Holy shit!” he says, shaking his head. “We were fuckin’ lit up!”

Forty-five minutes later the Marines swing pickaxes into the hard desert pan outside of the town, setting up defensive positions. Several gather around their bullet-riddled Humvees, laughing about the day’s exploits. Their faces are covered with dust, sand, tar, gun lubricant, tobacco spittle and sewer water from the town. No one’s showered or changed out of the bulky chemical-protection suits they’ve been wearing for ten days. Since all mirrors and reflective surfaces have been stripped from their Humvees to make the vehicles harder to detect, most of the men haven’t seen themselves since crossing the border. Their filthy faces seem to make their teeth shine even whiter as they laugh and hug one another.

The platoon’s eldest member, thirty-five-year-old Gunnery Sergeant Mike “Gunny” Wynn, walks among the Marines, grabbing their heads and shaking them like you would when playing with a puppy. “All right!” he repeats in his mild Texas accent. “You made it, man!”

“Who’s the fucking retard who sent us into that town?” Person asks, spitting a thick stream of tobacco juice, which catches in the wind and mists across the faces of several of his buddies standing nearby. “That sure tops my list of stupid shit we’ve done.”

Trombley is beside himself. “I was just thinking one thing when we drove into that ambush,” he enthuses. “Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. I felt like I was living it when I seen the flames coming out windows, the blown-up car in the street, guys crawling around shooting at us. It was fucking cool.”

CULTURALLY, these Marines would be virtually unrecognizable to their forebears in the “Greatest Generation.” They are kids raised on hip-hop, Marilyn Manson and Jerry Springer. For them, “motherfucker” is a term of endearment. For some, slain rapper Tupac is an American patriot whose writings are better known than the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. There are tough guys among them who pray to Buddha and quote Eastern philosophies and New Age precepts gleaned from watching Oprah and old kung fu movies. There are former gangbangers, a sprinkling of born-again Christians and quite a few guys who before entering the Corps were daily dope smokers; many of them dream of the day when they get out and are once again united with their beloved bud.

These young men represent what is more or less America’s first generation of disposable children. More than half of the guys in the platoon come from broken homes and were raised by absentee, single, working parents. Many are on more intimate terms with video games, reality TV shows and Internet porn than they are with their own parents. Before the “War on Terrorism” began, not a whole lot was expected of this generation other than the hope that those in it would squeak through high school without pulling too many more mass shootings in the manner of Columbine.

But since the 9/11 attacks, the weight of America’s “War on Terrorism” has fallen on their shoulders. For many in the platoon, their war started within hours of the Twin Towers falling, when they were loaded onto ships to begin preparing for missions in Afghanistan. They see the invasion of Iraq as simply another campaign in a war without end, which is pretty much what their commanders and their president have already told them. (Some in the military see the “War on Terrorism” merely as an acceleration of the trend that started in the 1990s with Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo: America cementing its role as global enforcer, the world’s Dirty Harry.) In Iraq the joke among Marines is “After finishing here, we’re going to attack North Korea, and we’ll get there by invading Iran, Russia and China.”

They are the first generation of young Americans since Vietnam to be sent into an open-ended



conflict. Yet if the dominant mythology that war turns on a generation's loss of innocence—*young men reared on Davy Crockett waking up to their government's deceptions while fighting in Southeast Asian jungles; the nation falling from the grace of Camelot to the shame of Watergate*—these young men entered Iraq predisposed toward the idea that the Big Lie is as central to American governance as taxation. This is, after all, the generation that first learned of the significance of the presidency not through an inspiring speech at the Berlin Wall but through a national obsession with semen stains and a White House blow job. Even though their Commander in Chief tells them they are fighting today in Iraq to protect American freedom, few would be shaken to discover that they might actually be leading a grab for oil. In a way, they almost expect to be lied to.

If there's a question that hangs over their heads, it's the same one that has confronted every other generation sent into war: Can these young Americans fight?

As the sky turns from red to brown in the descending dust storm outside the town the Marines have just smashed apart, their platoon commander, a twenty-five-year-old lieutenant named Nathaniel Fick, leans against his Humvee, watching his men laugh. Lieutenant Fick, a Dartmouth graduate who joined the Marines in a fit of idealism, shakes his head, grinning. "I'll say one thing about these guys," he says. "When we take fire, not one of them hesitates to shoot back. In World War Two, when Marines hit the beaches, a surprisingly high percentage of them didn't fire their weapons, even when faced with direct enemy contact. They hesitated. Not these guys. Did you see what they did to that town? They fucking destroyed it. These guys have no problem with killing."

Several Marines from Colbert's vehicle gather around Corporal Anthony Jacks, a twenty-three-year-old heavy-weapons gunner. Jacks is six foot two, powerfully built, and has a smile made unforgettable by his missing two front teeth (shot out in a BB-gun fight with his brother when he was sixteen). The Marines' nickname for him is "Manimal," not so much in tribute to his size but because of his deep, booming voice, which, when he yells, is oddly reminiscent of a bellowing farm animal. The platoon credits him with pretty much saving everyone's life during the ambush. Of the four heavy-weapons gunners in the platoon, Manimal alone succeeded in destroying the enemy's prime machine-gun position across from the mosque. For several minutes his buddies have been pounding him on the back, recounting his exploits. Howling and laughing, they almost seem like Johnny Knoxville's posse of suburban white homies celebrating one of his more outrageously pointless *Jackass* stunts. "Manimal was a fucking wall of fire!" one of them shouts. "All I seen was him dropping buildings and blowing up telephone poles!"

"Shut up, guys! It ain't funny!" Manimal roars, pounding the side of the Humvee with a massive paw.

He silences his buddies. They look down, some of them suppressing guilty smiles.

"The only reason we're all laughing now is none of us got killed," Manimal lectures them. "That was messed up back there."

It's the first time anyone has seriously raised this possibility: that war is not fun, that it might, in fact, actually suck.

In the coming weeks, it will fall on the men in this platoon and their battalion to lead significant portions of the American invasion of Iraq. They belong to an elite unit, First Reconnaissance Battalion, which includes fewer than 380 Marines. Outfitted with lightly armored or open-top Humvees that resemble oversized dune buggies, they will race ahead of the much larger, better-equipped primary Marine forces in Iraq. Their mission will be to seek out enemy ambushes by literally driving into them.

Major General James Mattis, commander of the First Marine Division—the bulk of the Corps'

ground forces in Iraq—would later praise the young men of First Recon for being “critical to the success of the entire campaign.” While spearheading the American blitzkrieg in Iraq, they will often operate deep behind enemy lines and far beyond anything they have trained for. They will enter Baghdad as liberating heroes only to witness their astonishing victory crumble into chaos. They will face death every day. They will struggle with fear, confusion, questions over war crimes and leaders whose competence they don’t trust. Above all, they will kill a lot of people. A few of those deaths the men will no doubt think about and perhaps regret for the rest of their lives.



MAJOR GENERAL JAMES MATTIS calls the men in First Reconnaissance Battalion “cocky, obnoxious bastards.” Recon Marines belong to a distinct military occupational specialty, and there are only about a thousand of them in the entire Marine Corps. They think of themselves, as much as this is possible within the rigid hierarchy of the military, as individualists, as the Marine Corps’ cowboys. They evolved as jacks-of-all-trades, trained to move, observe, hunt and kill in any environment—land, sea or air. They are its special forces.

Recon Marines go through much of the same training as do Navy SEALs and Army Special Forces soldiers. They are physical prodigies who can run twelve miles loaded with 150-pound packs, then jump in the ocean and swim several more miles, still wearing their boots and fatigues, and carrying their weapons and packs. They are trained to parachute, scuba dive, snowshoe, mountain climb and rappel from helicopters. Fewer than 2 percent of all Marines who enter in the Corps are selected for Recon training, and of those chosen, more than half wash out. Even those who make it commonly only do so after suffering bodily injury that borders on the grievous, from shattered legs to broken backs.

Recon Marines are also put through Survival Evasion Resistance Escape school (SERE), a secretive training course where Marines, fighter pilots, Navy SEALs and other military personnel in high-risk jobs are held “captive” in a simulated prisoner-of-war camp in which the student inmates are locked in cages, beaten and subjected to psychological torture overseen by military psychiatrists—all with the intent of training them to stand up to enemy captivity. When Gunny Wynn went through SERE, his “captors,” playing on his Texas accent, forced him to wear a Ku Klux Klan hood for several days and pull one of his fellow “inmate” Marines, an African American, around on a leash, treating him as a slave. “They’ll think of anything to fuck you up in the head,” Gunny Wynn says.

Those who make it through Recon training in one piece, which takes several years to cycle all the way through, are by objective standards the best and toughest in the Marine Corps. Traditionally, the mission is highly specialized. Their training is geared toward stealth—sneaking behind enemy lines in teams of four to six men, observing positions and, above all, avoiding contact with hostile forces.

The one thing they are not trained for is to fight from Humvees, maneuvering in convoys, rushing headlong into enemy positions. This is exactly what they will be doing in Iraq. While the vast majority of the troops will reach Baghdad by swinging west onto modern superhighways and driving, largely unopposed, until they reach the outskirts of the Iraqi capital, Colbert’s team in First Recon will get there by fighting its way through some of the crummiest, most treacherous parts of Iraq, usually far ahead of all other American forces. By the end of the campaign, Marines will dub their unit “First Suicide Battalion.”

Mattis began hatching his plans for First Recon’s unorthodox mission back in November. The General is a small man in his mid-fifties who moves and speaks quickly, with a vowel-mashing speech impediment that gives him a sort of folksy charm. A bold thinker, Mattis’s favorite expression is “Doctrine is the last refuge of the unimaginative.” On the battlefield, his call sign is “Chaos.” His plan for the Marines in Iraq would hinge on disregarding sacred tenets of American military doctrine. His goal was not to shield his Marines from chaos, but to embrace it. No unit would embody this daring

philosophy more than First Recon.

In the months leading up to the war on Iraq, battles over doctrine and tactics were still raging within the military. The struggle was primarily between the more cautious “Clinton generals” in the Army, who advocated a methodical invasion with a robust force of several hundred thousand, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his acolytes, who argued for unleashing a sort of American blitzkrieg on Iraq, using a much smaller invasion force—one that would rely on speed and mobility more than on firepower. Rumsfeld’s interest in “maneuver warfare,” as the doctrine that emphasizes mobility over firepower is called, predated invasion planning for Iraq. Ever since becoming Secretary of Defense, Rumsfeld had been pushing his vision of a stripped-down, more mobile military force on the Pentagon as part of a sweeping transformation plan.

Mattis and the Marine Corps had been moving in that direction for nearly a decade. The Iraq campaign would showcase the Corps’ embrace of maneuver warfare. Mattis envisioned the Marines’ role in Iraq as a rush. While the U.S. Army—all-powerful, slow-moving and cautious—planned its methodical, logistically robust movement up a broad, desert highway, Mattis prepared the Marines for an entirely different campaign. After seizing southern oil facilities within the first forty-eight hours of the war, Mattis planned to immediately send First Recon and a force of some 6,000 Marines into a violent assault through Iraq’s Fertile Crescent. Their mission would be to seize the most treacherous route to Baghdad—the roughly 185-kilometer-long, canal-laced urban and agricultural corridor from Nasiriyah to Al Kut.

Saddam had viewed this route, with its almost impenetrable terrain of canals, villages, rickety bridges, hidden tar swamps and dense groves of palm trees, as his not-so-secret weapon in bogging down the Americans. Thousands of Saddam loyalists, both Iraqi regulars and foreign jihadi warriors from Syria, Egypt and Palestinian refugee camps, would hunker down in towns and ambush points along the route. They had excavated thousands of bunkers along the main roads, sown mines and propositioned tens of thousands of weapons. When Saddam famously promised to sink the American invaders into a “quagmire,” he was probably thinking of the road from Nasiriyah to Al Kut. It was the worst place in Iraq to send an invading army.

Mattis planned to subvert the quagmire strategy Saddam had planned there by throwing out a basic element of military doctrine: His Marines would assault through the planned route and continue moving without pausing to establish rear security. According to conventional wisdom, invading armies take great pains to secure supply lines to their rear, or they perish. In Mattis’s plan, the Marines would never stop charging.

The men in First Recon would be his “shock troops.” During key phases of the assault, First Recon would race ahead of the already swift-moving Marine battle forces to throw the Iraqis further off balance. Not only would the Marines in First Recon spearhead the invasion on the ground, they would be at the forefront of a grand American experiment in maneuver warfare. Abstract theories of transforming U.S. military doctrine would come down on their shoulders in the form of sleepless nights and driving into bullets and bombs day after day, often with no idea what their objective was. This experiment would succeed in producing an astonishingly fast invasion. It would also result, in the view of some Marines who witnessed the descent of liberated Baghdad into chaos, in a Pyrrhic victory for a conquering force ill-trained and unequipped to impose order on the country it occupied.

Mattis did not reveal his radical plans for First Recon to its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Ferrando, until November 2002, a couple of months before the battalion deployed to the Middle East. Ferrando would later tell me, “Major General Mattis’s plan went against all our training and doctrine, but I can’t tell a general I don’t do windows.”

At the time of Ferrando's initial planning meetings with Mattis, the battalion possessed neither Humvees nor the heavy weapons that go with them. To the men in First Recon, trained to swim or parachute into enemy territory in small teams, the concept of fighting in columns of up to seventy vehicles, as they would in Iraq, was entirely new. Many didn't even have military operators' licenses for Humvees. The vehicles had to be scrounged from Marine Corps recycling depots and arrived in poor condition. The Marines were given only a few weeks to practice combat maneuvers in the Humvees, and just a few days to practice firing the heavy weapons mounted on them before the invasion.

What made Mattis's selection of First Recon for this daring role in the campaign even more surprising is that he had other units available to him—specifically, Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) battalions—which are trained and equipped to fight through enemy ambushes in specialized armored vehicles. When I later ask Mattis why he put First Recon into this unorthodox role, he falls back on what sounds like romantic palaver: “What I look for in the people I want on the battlefield,” he says, “are not specific job titles but courage and initiative.”

Mattis apparently had such faith in their skills that the Marines in First Recon were kept in the dark as to the nature of their mission in Iraq. Their commanders never told them they would be leading the way through much of the invasion, serving more or less as guinea pigs in the military's experiment with maneuver warfare. Most of the men in First Recon entered the war under the impression that they had been given Humvees to be used as transport vehicles to get them into position to execute conventional, stealthy recon missions on foot. Few imagined the ambush-hunting role they would play in the war. As one of the Marines in First Recon would later put it, “Bunch of psycho officers sent us into shit we never should have gone into. But we came out okay, dog, even though all we was packing was some sac.”



THE MARINES OF FIRST RECON have already been living in a Spartan desert camp for six weeks when I first meet them in early March, about a week before the invasion. Their home is a tent city called Camp Mathilda, located in the moonscape desert of northern Kuwait about fifty kilometers below the border with Iraq. The desert here is covered in fine, powdery sand almost like talcum powder. By day it presents an endless vista of off-white tones, both dull and blinding in the harsh sun. Surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, Mathilda looks like a prison camp. About 5,000 Marines from a variety of units live in hundreds of putty-colored tents encircled by a gravel road, lots filled with hundreds of military vehicles, and rows of shower trailers and diesel-powered generators that fill the air with an incessant growling.

I arrive at about noon on March 11, on a bus from Kuwait City provided by the Marine Corps. I'm the only reporter slated to embed with First Recon. Another was supposed to come as well, but he dropped out after going through mandatory chemical warfare training provided by the Marine Corps in Kuwait City. Marine instructors had scared everyone by talking about nerve gases that, as they put it, will "make you dance the funky chicken until you die"; blistering agents that will make your skin "burst up like Jiffy Pop"; and the risks of suffocating in your gas mask if you vomit. "If it's chunky," an instructor had said, "you won't be able to clear it through the drain tube of your mask. You'll have to swallow it or risk choking on it." It was this last point that got to the other reporter. He suffered an acute attack of sanity in our hotel a few hours later and left the embed program to fly back home.

War fever, at least among reporters, has been running pretty high. Before coming to Kuwait, while staying at the main media hangout hotel by the Navy's port in Bahrain, I'd witnessed two colleagues get into a smackdown in the lobby over the issue of war and peace. A Canadian wire-service reporter bitterly opposed to the war, knocked down a loudly patriotic American photographer in favor of it. While stunned Arab security guards looked on, the Canadian peacenik clenched the American patriot into a sort of LAPD chokehold and repeatedly slammed his head into the back of a chair. The American was saved from further humiliation only after several tough women from Reuters and AFP waded in and broke apart the one-sided combat.

When I watched the broadcast of Colin Powell making the case for war to the UN, I was aboard a Navy ship in the Gulf with a group of American reporters who cheered whenever Powell enumerated another point building the case for the invasion. They booed when European diplomats presented their rebuttals. Being among reporters here has sometimes felt like the buildup to a big game, Team USA versus The World.

The first Marines I encounter have other issues on their minds. I meet them in a dingy mess tent, a few guys in their late teens or early twenties killing time in the shade before dinner. As soon as I enter, one of them asks me if it's true that J.Lo is dead. Rumors of her death have been circulating through the camp for more than a week. The commanders told the men the story is not true, but one of the Marines I talk to, a twenty-year-old in an infantry unit, pesters me. "Maybe she really did die, but they're not telling us to keep our morale up."

When I tell him the rumor is false, he shakes his head, not quite believing me. You get the idea he



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