

What Really Happened to PFC Quinos Vic Sizemore

The truth has to be told, so I'm finally going to tell it. It was 24 FEB 91. The USS Tarawa was off the coast of Kuwait. At 0430, Gunny Reed shouted, "Drop your cocks and grab your socks." The berthing area lights blasted on and every Marine jumped. Nylon and canvass hissed, gear popped, ALICE packs thumped on the deck. Murmured talk and laughter rose, undulating. An excited buzz was in the air, like a locker room before a big game. They were going in-country, going to get combat action ribbons. Corporal Kline was packed. He lay in his rack and recorded everything in the journal he kept in his cargo pocket.

At 0440, they ran through the ship's passageways and chugged up stairwells—gear swishing and thumping, rifle butts banging against steel bulkheads—and ran into the dim hangar bay and curled around the heavy bulkhead and up the ramp to the flight deck and across the tarmac and onto the 46's; the helicopters lifted and swung out over the Persian Gulf. Out the back of the 46's, the Tarawa's two and a half acre flight deck shrunk to the size of a breath mint. The ship disappeared as the helicopters swung toward the sandy theater of war.

Corporal Kline had found *Red Badge of Courage* in the ship's library: Glory was a whore. Every one of the reservists wanted a piece of that whore, especially since the air war had softened Saddam's troops and the ground war was going well and the risk was light. It meant breathing real air and seeing the sky as well as getting a combat action ribbon.

The helicopters jerked and lumbered. Their ass-ends bounced like being dragged—as if they might fall out of

the sky any minute. Sometimes, they did: the Tarawa's search and rescue helicopter had crashed during training op's, killing all four men on board.

They flew in under the brown-black smoke of burning oil wells. The wells were glowing dots on the horizon with smoke widening upward like still photos of tornadoes. The smoke drifted and spread low and wet as they flew farther in—it was like they were under water looking up at a heavy oil slick; through the oil, the sun was reduced to a pale dish.

They ran off the 46's and stumbled under their gear in swirling sand. They fanned out and set up a perimeter. Nuclear winter it was being called back in the States; it looked like a movie-set surface of some bleak alien planet.

Combat engineers, they were reservists from Cross Lanes, West Virginia—college kids and working guys. Gunny Reed was the sheriff of Wayne County. The platoon was to be pulled apart and attached by squad to Golf Company platoons. With real ammo this time. Not only did they have permission to kill—to actually take human life—it was a stated part of the mission.

Corporal Kline dropped to his knees in the sand and fell forward, aiming his rifle out to the barren sand. His 60-gunner Ski dropped to his right, followed by the rest of his squad, dropping as well rehearsed as a chorus line to the prone position and aiming outward, fanning into a circle to spot threats coming from any direction, though there was nothing but dunes and wadis for miles.

Gunny Reed shouted, "Squad leaders, count your Marines."

Kline's squad was accounted for, curved at his right in the same order they stand in morning formation.

Then PFC Quinos—Kline had forgotten about Quinos—dropped heavily at his left. The helicopters lifted and withdrew toward the Gulf, their engines' hum chopped by rotors; from a distance, it sounded like boys hollering through window fans.

Kline pulled his olive drab bandana over his face and straightened his tinted goggles. Quinos lay beside him like a sea lion; he looked down at the sand and wheezed through his bandana.

Kline felt his cargo pocket for his journal. He planned to write a history of Desert Storm, an insider's perspective. He was studying history at WVU; he was going to teach high school and coach, just like his dad, except his dad coached wrestling, and his sport was soccer. His dad had edited history texts; he was going to provide the actual account. He was carefully studying everything to be accurate with the facts.

"Here we are," he said to Ski on his other side, "watching history happen right in front of us—and we're part of it."

"Damn straight, we are," Ski said. He set his M-60 machine gun on its tripod, and swiveled it around to scan the empty desert.

"Dude, I ain't supposed to be here," Quinos said. "I'm a truck driver." His goggles cut into his face. He coughed. The ejection port on his M-16 was open.

"If you don't want to fucking die, you'll take better care of your rifle," Gunny Reed said as he strode behind them.

Quinos flipped the ejection port cover closed. It made a gritty scrape.

This was it. They were in-country and when the Hummers got there, they would be heading into real combat. The categorical moral imperative had been suspended: their rifles were loaded for men.

It was 15 NOV 90 when the platoon Gunny Reed had cobbled together from the Cross Lanes unit of the 4th Engineers flew out of Charleston. They arrived at Camp Pendleton, California one driver short of a full platoon, so an active duty platoon sent them Quinos. He was a driver; he was as wide as a hospital door, fat and unsat'. As he stowed his gear in the squad bay, Gunny Reed said to his squad leaders, "In the old Corps, we didn't mind the big boys."

Those big fuckers can hump the heavy loads.”

On 1 DEC 90, the platoon loaded onto the Tarawa and sailed for Hawaii to load an air wing. Christmas was spent in the field at Green Beach, Subic Bay, Philippines. New Years Eve, they partied with the bar girls in Olongapo City.

The morning after, the platoon was in formation on the dock in front of the Tarawa, still drunk and reeking of booze, but clean-shaven and in uniform. Gunny was going over general information: third squad was on head duty, the chow hall needed two PFC's for scullery duty.

“Kline?” Gunny said.

“Yes, Gunny.”

“Send two of your Marines down to the chow hall this morning.”

“Yes, Gunny.”

Then Gunny's eyes rose and looked out over the platoon, his creased face distorting into astonished disbelief. Kline leaned out and looked down the row of Marines. Quinos, wearing shorts, a stretched white t-shirt and tennis shoes with no socks, had just stumbled in from liberty and fallen in at the end of his squad. He had an embarrassed grin on his puffy pie face.

Gunny Reed marched over to Quinos, grabbed a fist full of his shirt and bitch slapped him. Hard. The crack of it echoed back from the iron hull of the Tarawa. He shouted, “Where the fuck do you think you are?”

“Sorry, Gunny, I—”

Gunny slapped him again, harder, and shouted, “Shut your cock sucker.” He let go of Quinos' shirt and slapped him on the other side of the face, making him take a step back. “If you're ever late for formation again, I swear I'll fuck you up.”

Gunny took two steps back, looked down at the deck, and then said in a quiet, almost conversational voice: “What do you think we're going over there to do, Quinos?”

Again Quinos began, “Sorry, Gunny—” but shut up when

Gunny stepped toward him cocking a fist behind his hip.

“Some raghead is going to put a bullet right in your fucking skull, and it’s not going to change your brain waves.” Gunny put his finger in Quinos’ face. “I’m not going to let you get one of *my* Marines killed.” He returned to his place in front of the platoon, letting his shoulder slump. “Go square yourself away,” he said in a calm and weary voice.

“Yes, Gunny.” Quinos ran for the Tarawa’s loading ramp, loose civilian clothes and fat swinging on his frame.

Ski stood beside Kline shaking his head. “Jesus, Joseph, and Mary,” he said. “How’d that sack of shit even get through boot camp?”

Ski was what Gunny Reed called a hard-dick Marine. His grandfather had been in WWII and his father in Vietnam. He was tall and lanky, all points and angles, as if he’d been drawn with a ruler. He kept his hair cut in a high and tight, a sharp horseshoe on top of his head, the stubble above his ears only slightly heavier than that on his jaw in the evenings.

This was his war, as he’d said, just the way things were supposed to be, each generation getting their shot at glory. He was in ROTC at Bowling Green and was planning on going to OCS. He studied his Green Monster; he worked out with Kline in the ship’s gym. He was collecting memorabilia: a desert camo New Testament, letters addressed to any serviceman coming from the patriotic frenzy back home, any extra gear he could pick up.

Gunny Reed turned his back to the platoon; he seemed to be addressing the gray side of the ship, “In ‘Nam, we fragged unsat’ motherfuckers like that.”

Ski nodded his enthusiastic agreement.

After formation, as the other squad leaders walked up the loading ramp, Gunny Reed stood almost touching noses with Kline, breathing his boozy breath into Kline’s nostrils; snuff spittle flecked Kline’s lips as Gunny carefully announced: “Corporal, don’t you fucking ever make me square away one of your goddamn Marines again.”

The next two months were spent in periods of classroom instruction: minefield breaching Vietnam style with the obsolete mine detectors they still humped; first aid topics, such as how to use an ID card to treat a sucking chest wound and how to use a gauze bandage to put internal organs back into someone without getting sand in the body cavity; desert survival classes, like how to make a solar still to purify urine for drinking.

In his free time, Kline tried to read through what classics he could find in the ship's library. He wanted to be ahead of the game when he got back to school. He worked out every morning with Ski, trying to stay in shape for soccer. He kept notes in his journal for his history of Desert Storm. It was a Moleskine and fit in his cargo pocket.

Tetris on the new Gameboy was the rage in the berthing area. Marines were obsessed with the hand held video game. When scullery duty came back around to Kline's squad, he assigned Quinos. Quinos didn't show, and instead of letting Gunny Reed find out about it, Kline went down and washed pots for twelve hours himself. When he came back up to the berthing area, Quinos was in his rack playing his Gameboy.

The berthing area reeked of body odor. As Kline sidled into the berthing compartment, Quinos lifted his leg and farted. His berth was the bottom of four, flush on the deck.

Kline bent over, grabbed him with both hands and dragged him out. "I just pulled your scullery duty, Quinos."

Quinos's rolled onto a knee, then slowly stood and mumbled something in Spanish. He was suppressing a grin and his breath was hot and moist and smelled of beef jerky.

Kline hit him with an uppercut into his solar plexus, which doubled him over, then hit him again, square on the left eye socket. As he swung he said, "I am not your fucking baby sitter, Quinos." He made contact with Quinos's gut on the *not* and with his eye on the *fucking*.

Quinos fell back against the bulkhead, ripping one of the girly pictures that were taped up. His Gameboy hit the deck

with a sharp crack. He slid down, pulling the photo with him, and sat on his ass, his hairy knees out like frog legs. He put both hands over his face.

Kline's squad had all taken off their earphones and stopped playing Tetris to stare out of their berths. Ski nodded with a satisfied smile.

"You cannot do this to me," Quinos said into his hands. "I got rights, Corporal Kline. You know. I got rights. You and Gunny. You got no right—"

"You ain't got no rights, *Queeno*," one of Kline's squad members shouted.

Quinos was silent.

Ski's grin stretched tight and toothy across his skull. "You fell, PFC," he said. "I saw it. Corporal Kline wasn't even here—were you Corporal?" He gave Kline a nod of hollow-eyed innocence.

"Yeah," another squad member said. "Nobody hit you."

"You fell, Quinos."

"Tough shit, Quinos."

"Lose some weight and maybe you wouldn't fall down, dude."

Kline silently unlaced his boots, pulled them off, threw his shower shoes onto the deck, stepped into them, grabbed his toiletry bag and towel, and stalked to the head. His shower shoes slapped at his heels.

On 24 FEB 91, after the helicopters were gone, Gunny shouted, "Form it up," and they fell into platoon formation and humped across the desert hour after hour, following the boots in front of them, heels chewed down from snappy marching on Paris Island parade decks. "Keep it moving," Gunny Reed shouted. "You'll pass out before you'll die." He made long strides; everybody made long strides; the war was going well and they didn't want to miss it.

Seven endless hours of humping through soft sand, then the platoon crested a wadi, and the staging area appeared out of the blank desert, from behind a dune. Hummers and six-

bys and heavy equipment all surrounded by concertina wire and 50-cal gun emplacements built of fresh blond timber. The platoon hummers were waiting there, gassed and staged, ready to roll. They staged their gear and slept in and around the trucks and set out at 0430 the next day.

Kline sat in back with his squad on wooden benches. Quinos drove. They fell into line with the other two Hummers and the platoon from Cross Lanes, West Virginia, joined the race to the front. It had already become a running shooting gallery as Saddam's troops collapsed and waved white flags and abandoned their tanks to flee.

The minefield had been breached as wide as a four-lane highway, and they cruised through at 60mph. The terrain was hard and uneven so that Quinos kept hitting spine-jarring potholes. Marines listened to their Walkmans and played Tetris. On either side of the breach, three-pronged anti-personnel mines perforated the stretching desert. Six-bys coming the other way were loaded so full of surrendered Iraqis that in the dark of the oil smoke, their heads looked like piles of black melons stuffed into the backs of the trucks.

An endless line of trucks. Scuttlebutt was that Sadam's tank army was crumbling, his elite Republican Guard imploding. "Combat action today," Ski leaned over and said to Kline.

Quinos hit a bone-jolting hole.

"God damn you, Quinos," a Marine shouted.

Ski pulled his headphones down around his neck. "I'm going to frag your ass, Quinos." He pulled his headphones back on and looked back down at his Gameboy. He said, "Shit, I wish we'd get there."

"The war's gonna be over," another Marine said.

Kline rifled around in his asspack and pulled out *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. He hooked his flashlight in the chin strap of his Kevlar helmet and began reading. They pulled through a fueling station and everyone got out and pissed and grabbed bottled water from a pallet beside the tanker as the Hummers refueled.

The day was not getting too much brighter with sunrise because of the oil smoke; the dark was shifting from black to brown-black. They pulled back into the line of trucks racing toward the war. It was as busy as an interstate highway, headlights one direction, blurred red taillights the other.

At 1200, for reasons known only to Gunny Reed, their three Hummers veered out of the line of trucks and drove across the dunes for a while and stopped. “Form it up right here,” Gunny shouted, and the Marines clambered out of the Hummers and fell into formation. Quinos unfolded himself from the front and rubbed his back and his eyes and fell in at the end of Kline’s squad; he let out a wide yowling yawn and stretched his arms into the air. Ski slung a bandoleer of M-60 rounds over his shoulder and stood tall.

“Shut your pie-holes and listen up,” Gunny shouted. He had his 9mm out; he waved it towards the dark shapes behind him, twisting on his toes like a ballerina, and said, “Behold what’s left of the fifth largest tank army in the world.”

Iraqi tanks, Soviet model T-62, sat abandoned all around in the midst of small square structures with their gun barrels pointing off in every direction; some were intact, some had huge charred holes bored into their centers. Some were ripped in half, the turrets popped off like bottle caps.

“Fuck with the bull,” Gunny said with satisfaction, “you get the horns.”

He turned to the platoon. “Our job is to clear these bunkers. There isn’t likely to be anyone left alive, but don’t let your guard down. Booby traps are always a possibility, so if you don’t want to leave a leg here, watch yourself. And I said there probably aren’t any ragheads left alive. We don’t know that for sure—that’s why we’re here. Ackmed might be hiding down there waiting to Jihad your ass.” Gunny paced, stopped, and waved over the area again. “Spread out and clear these fuckers.”

The bunkers were dark squares against the rolling dunes; whether the wind had uncovered them or there was rock

under the sand here, they were half exposed. Shelter from sandstorms maybe, but certainly not aerial bombardment.

Ski adjusted his goggles and said through his brown bandana, "We have arrived."

"The supply bunker is mine," Gunny shouted. He pulled his empty pack out of the front of the first Hummer and strode toward what appeared to be the center structure; it looked like eight or nine of the small bunkers pressed together, the roofs not quite matching up, like shantytown row houses.

Marines rushed to empty their packs into the backs of the Hummers making room for war booty. Then the only movement was the members of Kline's platoon, spreading from the parked Hummers, half-running, stumbling over sand, toward the abandoned fortifications to gather or kill any hangers-on and to collect souvenirs. As they moved away, they lost detail under the oil smoke, becoming shadowy, ghouls in the dark, out rummaging for loot.

Quinos settled against his Hummer's back tire and started eating something—beef jerky—yanking at it with his teeth; he twisted a bottle of the Saudi Alwadi health water into the sand beside him until it stood on its own.

Kline yelled, "You coming, Quinos?"

"I been driving since zero four thirty," he said. "I'm tired."

Kline pulled out his light and trudged to the nearest tank. It had been blown in two: the turret was upside down beside the tracks, a burnt and hollow shell. The tank itself was peeled open, wires and metal melted together, a light coat of sand blown over it.

Beside one of the tracks were several metal ammo boxes a little bigger than car batteries. One of them was open with a white plastic grocery bag in it, full of dirty potatoes and one tomato gone soft and black on the side and ready to explode. Other ammo boxes actually had ammo, what looked like 20mm rounds, big as a man's middle finger. Strands of rounds were strewn all over; old pineapple shaped fragmentation grenades lay apparently where they'd been

dropped.

Ski jogged up and stood beside him. “Corporal Kline, if we find any ragheads alive, let me kill them.” He held his M-60 at his hip.

Kline pulled his goggles up onto his Kevlar helmet and readjusted the Velcro on his Kevlar flak jacket. “Do you have your G-2?”

“My what?”

“Your Interrogator-Translator card. From 1st Marines.”

“I’ll let Christine here translate for me.” Ski patted his 60. “She knows the international language.”

Kline shook his head and stepped over the scattered ammo and walked toward the bunkers to the right of the supply bunker; they dotted the sand unevenly about every two-hundred yards, running out into the dark desert. Jets roared overhead above the oil smoke.

Ski skipped up beside him. “Tell me she doesn’t, motherfucker.” He squatted and hefted the machine gun onto his skinny leg as if ready to let the rounds fly.

They approached two dark humps on the sand, piles of rags or something. Ski pulled his goggles up and his bandana down and squinted. Kline trained his light at them.

“Mary, mother of God,” Ski said. “Kline, you see that?”

The two walked up to the first humped mass and stared down.

“Ackmed don’t look too good,” Ski said.

The Iraqi soldier lay on his back with his hands at his waist as if hiking up his pants. His face was black and crusted like the charred skin of a roasted pig. His open mouth was full of sand. At first it looked like his head was half buried inside a little hole, but it wasn’t. His head lay flat—shrapnel had clipped off a clean chunk right behind his ears. Other than that, he was pretty much intact.

Kline stared at the dead man, running his light slowly over the figure.

“Shit, Kline, come look at Hagi.” Ski had moved on to the

second clump.

Kline stared at the spot on the sand lit by his flashlight as he walked the small distance until the other Iraqi slid into the beam. The dead face bore a maniac grin, all top teeth and gums. The bottom teeth, lips, and chin were gone. One leg was gone altogether. An arm lay about thirty feet away, with ragged clothing and meat hanging off one end of it; at the other end, the hand was curled into a gentle fist with index finger out, like a sleeping baby's; there was a thin white stream of sand along the crease of the palm.

Ski turned toward the other figures moving behind them among the bunkers and tanks. He shouted and waved his arms until the figures began to turn and move in their direction.

Kline's squad arrived first.

"Holy shit."

Ski said, "This is Hagi." He pushed the carcass over with his boot heel. The torso was ripped open, and as it stiffly turned, a twisted bundle of intestines and organs blobbed out, picking up a coat of sand like fish rolled in corn meal.

The Marines fell into a party of hoots and cheers. A Marine squatted and dug in Ackmed's pockets. "Hell yeah," he said when he found Iraqi coins and dog tags. He stood and shoved them into his own pocket. Another Marine nearly had to take the laces out of Ackmed's boots to get them off his hard feet. He shoved them into his pack. Two other Marines took Ackmed by his arms and shoulders and lifted him like a piece of lumber. They both dug in their ass-packs for cameras.

Gunny walked up and stood at the edge of the revelry, setting down his pack, now stuffed full, and crossing his arms. He blew a burst of air out of his nose, which appeared to momentarily throw his head back; then he stood and watched with an expression of bored indulgence.

Upon seeing Gunny Reed, Kline counted his Marines; his squad was all there, except for Quinos, whom he'd left sitting on the ground beside the Hummer.

One of the Marines with Ackmed accidentally pulled out his Gameboy. He laughed and said, "Wrong thing," shoved it back in, and found his camera.

Kline's platoon took turns standing with their arm around Ackmed's shoulder like he was an old school chum, his dead eyes squeezed shut in his cooked face, his sand-filled mouth open.

A Marine pulled the boot off of Hagi's one leg and set out looking around. "If anybody find's Hagi's other leg, I call the boot," he shouted.

"Kline, here." Ski was holding out his camera. In his other hand was the severed arm. He stepped back and posed with it as if he and the arm were shaking hands; he had a wide toothy smile on his sharp face.

"Okay," Gunny Reed yelled. "Fun's over." He stepped in between the two Iraqi's. Ackmed was again on his back. A Marine unzipped the pants and tugged them off Ackmed's hips, then alternated legs, jerking the pants off.

Gunny stepped to Hagi. With the heel of his boot he rolled the teeth-grinning carcass over and stood with his hands on his hips looking at it.

Ski said, "My dad said that in 'Nam they'd cut off ears and dry them and wear them around their necks as trophies. You ever do that Gunny?"

A Marine unsheathed his K-bar. "I'm gonna get me an ear," he said.

"I want one," another Marine said, also unsheathing his K-bar.

Gunny said, "I told you the fun was over. Get back to the mission."

"Gunny," another Marine said. "Let me get a shot of you and Ackmed together."

Two Marines again stood the cadaver up, now naked from the waist down. The penis skin had shrunk up tight, and the thing looked like a hard little mushroom cap under a mat of black pubic hair.

Kline turned and looked out at the desert; the bunkers

stretched on. The platoon dispersed back toward the shattered tanks and the supply bunker, laughing and chatting.

Gunny put his arm around Ackmed's shoulder and said, "Fucking cheese."

Two hundred yards and more between them—Kline walked past two bunkers, then three. Then four. He walked into the dark desert. He came to the last bunker in the chain; there was nothing visible beyond it but white dunes and wadis under a brown sky. Jets flew above the smoke. Kline stood till the last of their sound had been swallowed by the gusting wind.

The last bunker was like the others: square, cinderblock with a corrugated tin roof held down with more cinderblocks thrown across the top. Above the entrance, the tin roof was ripped; it banged against itself every now and then when the wind picked up. Two more pineapple shaped grenades lay on top of the bunker roof, and a bent piece of pipe with a bicycle handlebar grip pushed onto one end.

Down four cinderblock steps was the entrance. At the opening, a plywood floor was visible with a threadbare rug on it. The rug had an orange and yellow pattern of lined up diamonds with four smaller diamonds inside each one.

Kline stepped silently down to the entrance. He shined his light in, backed away and waited.

Nothing.

He shined his light in and turkey-peaked.

Two cots. Shadows.

Again he leaned back and waited.

After a couple of minutes he shined his light in and looked around: cots, rug, a blanket folded on one cot, a small box under the same cot. Nothing else.

Kline stepped inside. The air was heavy with the smell of human sweat; the animal gone from the lair, but its smell still strong, the living dangerous animal—sweat: not the smell of dead men, but men very much alive.

He sat on the cot and let his eyes adjust. From inside, the weak, smoke-filtered sunlight appeared as a pale rectangle at the door, brown sky on the upper half, cinderblock steps on the lower. What Kline thought was a folded blanket turned out to be a wool sweater; it had the imprint of a head on it. The sweaty smell rose from it. Kline shoved it into his pack.

He pulled the box from under the cot. There was a coffee mug behind it. It was white and said *Ovaltine* on one side. The other side said presumably the same thing in Arabic. The name *Benny* was scratched with an ink pen on the bottom in English. He shoved that into his pack too.

The box was a green cardboard box, six inches square, bulged out on the sides from having something stacked on top of it. Kline stuffed the flashlight into his armpit and gently shook the top off, the bottom dropped onto his lap.

It was just full of toiletries. A tube of toothpaste, the old kind in the aluminum tube that holds its shape when its rolled up. The brand name *Amber* was also printed in both Arabic and English, made by the Iraq State Enterprise for Vegetable Oils. Smelled like mint: smelled like toothpaste. There wasn't any toothbrush.

Two old razors both with faded and cracked plastic handles, one red, one green —the kind with a two-piece metal top that screwed apart and off the handle for changing blades. The blades were the old flat kind people in movies used to slit their own wrists. They were rusted in spots and there were no replacements.

With the razors was a lather brush with a broken wooden handle, blue paint crackling and breaking off in tiny chips. Papers with Arabic writing. A small leather bound book in Arabic, the title on the back, the back of the book being the front, the language so indecipherable that Kline couldn't begin to guess what it was, as he could have with German or French or Spanish.

Kline undid the Velcro of his flack jacket and pulled his Alwadi water from his pack.

Inside the book, possibly being used as book marks, there

was a 25 Dinar bill, crisp and unfolded, and a flyer that had been dropped by aircraft. The 25 Dinar was turquoise and had a picture of a young Saddam Hussein looking out over a mass of Arab warriors on horseback riding hell-bent into battle.

On one side of the flyer had two cartoon pictures: in one picture, an Iraqi soldier is surrendering and presenting that very flyer to an Arab-looking Coalition soldier; in the second picture, the surrendered Iraqi soldier is with other Iraqis, wearing now instead of helmets, turbans, boots off, sitting around a huge tray of fruit, drinking tea. The Arabic Coalition soldier stands with his arm out, apparently having just finished a joke, as they all seem to be laughing.

The other side of the flyer was covered with writing over a watermark of the Joint Forces symbol: the earth under small swords and cradled by what looked like fern fronds—olive branches. Kline took out his journal and slid the papers in.

The only other thing in the box was a small photo of a soldier. There was some kind of rank insignia on the collar of his white shirt. He had a thick mustache like Saddam Hussein. He was attractive, had chiseled jaws, a cleft chin, and serious, deep eyes. Impossible to know if he was Hagi, but he wasn't Ackmed. His jawbones were too thick and strong.

Someone approached above, heavy boots and rattling gear. Kline flipped off his light, buttoned his journal back into his pocket and sat in silence. The boots pounded, a purposeful stride.

Kline laid his journal on the cot and pulled his M-16 around and sent the bolt home, chambering a round. The ejection port cover flipped open on his thumb, the crack of the bolt rang in his ears. He set it on three round burst.

The boots stopped.

Kline slowly raised his rifle and aimed at the rectangle of brown light. His rifle smelled of CLP cleaning oil. He twisted to better face the door. His heart pounded in his ears.

The boots took a few more scuffling steps and were above the entry.

Kline sat in silence. Breathing. Slowly breathing.

The person above shuffled with gear, un-slung a jangling weapon; it sounded as if he were sitting down, settling in. It could be an Iraqi coming back from the desert, unaware that his comrades have died or surrendered, the man who made the sweat smell that seeped now out of Kline's pack, the owner of the toiletries spread beside Kline on the cot, the owner of the cot. The strong-jawed Iraqi in the photograph.

Kline's back began to ache. He stood slowly, slowly as to be silent. But the plywood warped up and banged the cot pole. There was sudden boot-scuffling movement above. He was trapped. One of those grenades chucked down is all it would take—Kline would be done for, his carcass ripped open and his guts spilled out like Hagi's.

There were more interminable minutes of silence.

By the time the wide, backlit form came huffing down the cinderblock steps, Kline was in a state of sheer, unthinking panic. He pulled the trigger four times.

Quinos's Kevlar flack jacket was hanging open, but at such close range it wouldn't have stopped the rounds. All twelve cracks hit his chest. The dull light seemed to wrap around Quinos as he fell, his head canting back. He landed on his knees so hard his jowls jerked and shook back into place. A slimy wad of chewed gorilla bar was lodged between his teeth. Carbon hung heavy in the bunker like fireworks residue. Kline climbed over the body and ran out across the dark desert screaming over and over again, "Shots fired, man down," as if he were in a television cop show.

Operation Desert Storm ended on 28 FEB 91. The platoon of reservists from Cross Lanes, West Virginia, went back to the staging area and set up their hooches in tank traps. They celebrated with Tetris tournaments and football. They sat around drinking the bottled water from Saudi Arabia, *Alwadi Wadi Fatima Water Makkah*, as if it

were cold beer.

Kline sat on his Kevlar helmet and watched his platoon playing ball against a Golf Company platoon. The other guys were skins; their upper torsos were sweaty and covered in sand. The field was marked off by tent poles with olive drab skivvies shirts flapping on top.

Gunny Reed strode up from behind him and squatted, balancing elbow on knee. He had traded his Kevlar helmet for his soft cover, and his desert camouflage uniform was clean and pressed. He brushed sand off his shined boots, took out a can of Copenhagen, dipped out three fingers full of snuff, and pressed it between his bottom gum and lip.

Through snuff-tightened lips, he said, "Kline?"

"Yes, Gunny?" Kline stared at the football game. Gunny held the open can of snuff in front of him, and he said no thank you without looking away from the game.

"Here's how it happened," Gunny said. "Quinos was ordered to stay back at his Hummer. He didn't. Those two ragheads shot him, and we blew the hell out of them." Gunny chuckled and said, "You should see what a SMAW can do to a body at thirty yards." He flicked snuff off his fingers and almost lost his balance. "The report's been filed. It's already in the books," he said, "Understand?"

"Gunny—"

"Goddamn it, Corporal, get your shit together and listen to me: This was war and these things happen." He dropped his snuff into the breast pocket of his camouflaged blouse and shifted his weight to the other knee. "Nobody has to go down over this. It's over and we're out of this God-forsaken desert. You hear me? We're headed home." He spit and it rolled to a sandy pebble in front of Kline. He said, "Lance Corporal Kawalski has already testified."

"Ski?"

"You change your story, and he goes down. I've written the report. You're going to sign it. Understand, Marine?"

"Yes, Gunny."

Gunny said, "Where's that little damn book you write

in?”

“Left it.”

“In the raghead’s bunker?”

Kline nodded.

Gunny Reed nodded. He watched the ballgame. A short PFC from Golf Company made an end-run and streaked down the sideline and scored. Gunny laughed and said, “You see that motherfucker run?” He stood up and adjusted his cover. He said, “Good God, he’s a fast little fucker.”

The teams separated to their respective ends of the field and lined up between the green skivvies flapping on the poles. A Marine kicked the ball and it wobbled high over Kline’s platoon. A PFC scurried back and snatched it up, and the others formed a wall for him, and he curved in and ran behind them. Gunny Reed laughed and shook his head and slapped Kline hard on the shoulder. The two sides came together, grunting and slinging one another down in the sand.

My name is Robert Kline. My life since has been a good one. Two marriages, three fantastic children, two of them up at WVU, and one at Poca Middle School.

I don’t believe in heaven or hell. Quinos—I never knew his first name—has been dead for eighteen years. I shot and killed him.