

CHAPTER CHAPTER ONE

CYPRUS 1991

‘Corporal Richard Cole reporting, Sir.’

‘You’re late, Cole. Get on board now, the transport leaves in twenty minutes.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Cole’s kit was already heavy and the extra burden of running for the plane left him breathless. He thought he was fit at twenty-five, and he should have been, but apparently, he still needed extra exercise. He bolted up the steps and boarded the transport plane, taking the seat next to a young soldier who was far too wrapped up in a magazine to notice him.

Richard removed his cap, revealing a short haircut for the trip, as deserts were not the place for hair that touched shirt collars. In the intense heat, he stroked the back of his head. His hands returned wet and his face dripped droplets of sweat, which fell onto his fatigues. He looked around as he leaned back on the rough seat. He was about the same size as most of the other soldiers but his youthful looks made him look younger than his age purported and that of his companions. His face also appeared well-tanned compared to the pasty expressions of some of his fellow travellers. And like Richard, all were in uniform and kitted up to their eyeballs. Everyone buckled in and waited for take-off.

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It was February thirteenth. The Gulf War, Part One, had begun just over a month ago and the air-war was in full swing. The despot Saddam had been as stubborn and ruthless as the day he invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1990. The diplomacy that followed by various countries and the UN was going nowhere, so the order to initiate an airstrike came on January sixteen. The ground war would soon follow. It was where the aircraft was headed.

War had never occurred to Richard when he first signed up. Sure, the Falklands had stirred the patriotism of the British people and made the country proud again but although the Falklands was a bitter and bloody conflict it was a domestic affair between two countries, Argentina and Britain, and if most 'Brits' were honest at the time, not many of them knew where the fucking Falklands were anyway. It was, after all, Maggie Thatcher's Waterloo and it worked for her.

This Gulf War had much wider and sinister connotations. Not only were the 'Brits' involved but also most of the free world, with the US fronting the adventure. For whatever reason was given, there was no doubting Saddam was dangerous for the world, with the implications for the Middle East frightening. Under this cloud of uncertainty and fear, the green and pleasant land of England would seem a million miles away, even though they were only just a few hours from the hot scorching desert of Kuwait.

En-route to Kuwait they stopped in Cyprus, landing at the civilian airport in Paphos, as the military fields of Akrotiri and Dhekalia were already full to overflowing with combat aircraft of all types and sizes.

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At Paphos, the plane touched down around 4pm, the sun still hot as the troops left the aircraft and thumped down the metal stairs to the awaiting trucks, boarding twenty men at a time. Richard took the last place at the back of his truck. The engine roared with life and with all formalities of customs and immigration dispensed with, it began to rumble along the coastal road out of Paphos. After all, this was war, albeit secretly hosted on Cyprus.

This was Richard's first visit to the island and from what he could see from the back of the truck it looked like a fine place to visit. From his small vantage point at the back, there seemed to be a good deal of activity going on, with lots of cars and people hurrying about. And amongst them was a collection of Greek Cypriot soldiers kitted out in green camouflage uniforms waiting along the roadside.

In this tourist-like atmosphere it was all too easy to forget that this was a divided land, invaded by the Turks in 1974, after an unsuccessful coup by the Greeks led by then-President and Archbishop Makarios. The island was divided by a thin green line which ran from the North to the South and was policed by the UN. Under such circumstances the fragile peace inevitably seemed vulnerable, yet it held.

The green line was a constant reminder to the Cypriot people in the south that their island was occupied—at least some of it including the wonderful beach resorts of Kyrenia and Famagusta, which were cut off and entrenched with mine fields and guarded by Turks.

These resorts had once been deemed to be among the classiest in the Mediterranean, with hotels and restaurants patronised by tourists from the world over. Only now, these fine accommodations and eateries were home to the rats,

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snakes and scorpions that occupied them. The analogy of vermin in these occupied resorts was a good description of the occupiers for many Greeks. Still, it remained a sad and sorry state of affairs that those who were about to become involved in a new conflict could not resolve this one first. Perhaps one day they would try.

As the truck started to move out of town, the convoy meandered along the picturesque road towards the base at Episkopi. The sun had begun to dim and the road became windier, as the trucks struggled round and around the bends, slowly at first then accelerating through the gears to gain momentum. The driver purposely crunching the gears from time to time just to make sure none of his occupants had fallen asleep. The inside of the truck was hot, the new temperature something the soldiers were not yet acclimatised to. As the convoy reached a tight bend, one of the guys at the front looked out of the canvas window and shouted to the rest of his companions. 'That's Aphrodite's Rock.'

Richard looked out of the back of the open truck and saw one large rock embedded in the shore and two smaller ones rooted in the sea. The sun reflected on their colour, making them shimmer against the stunning blues of the Mediterranean. The white tufts of surf lapping against the base of the rocks as if licking them.

'Petra Tou Romiou the Greeks call it, birthplace of Aphrodite. Goddess of LOVE,' purposely accentuated to make an impact.

'What, those old rocks?' came Richard's somewhat bemused retort.

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‘Yep, that was where she was born, they say, came out of the sea, just there.’

‘Bollocks.’ Richard’s astute friend of the magazine made his contribution.

‘Precisely, that is what she’s made of, some Greek god’s bollocks, well, dick actually, cut off and thrown into the sea from which came Aphrodite. *Aphro*, meaning from the foam.’

‘You’re a scholar then?’ Richard asked his learned friend at the front.

‘No, just read it in the guide book. Amazing what you can learn from these things.’ He passed the book down to the back of the truck.

Richard opened it to the page on Aphrodite’s Rock, nodding his thanks.

Magazine man raised his head. ‘Must be an omen, seeing that today, what with it being Valentine’s tomorrow, maybe we’ll get a shag.’ The last comment was lost in the laughter that now enveloped the rest of the truck as the convoy wound its way higher up the hill and over the escarpment of Aphrodite’s Rock, which had finally slipped out of sight.

As the trucks entered the gates at Episkopi they had their first good view of what the place was like and on seeing it, it felt as if they had never left England, for Episkopi appeared just like England in every detail. True, the Cypriots drove their cars on the same side of the road as in England, but this wasn’t just about driving. All the houses, the signs and the notices were as if they were still in Aldershot—brick-built quarters and barracks, road signs in English, with little or no concessions to the Greek language. There was even a café that served all-day English breakfast.

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Around the base were a few Cypriots but most of them wore some form of uniform or another, be it cleaner or military. Richard hoped there would be time to look around before the harsh reality of war cut into his tour of the emplacements and the night life.

Valentine's Day brought home the true reality of the War. In Baghdad, a coalition air raid had hit a civilian bunker, killing 314 men, women, and children. This was the true cost of war but why should it be waged on the innocent? Richard mused over the report.

The next few days involved training and retraining with weapons and chemical apparatus, as the threat of a chemical attack was very real. But in the quiet corridors of politics there seemed just a glimmer of hope that they might not have to fight. Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Deputy Minister had flown to Moscow to try and stop further conflict by negotiating with the Russians.

No luck.

By the 21st of February all practices were over and the troops were ready, gear stowed and stacked on board with helicopters eager to fly into the fury. There were already covert ops going on in the desert on a need-to-know basis and which, most of those in the camp, didn't need or want to know. Those commandos kept themselves to themselves, and never contacted other divisions, unless they had to.

The daily training had toned and honed muscles and Richard was now fighting fit, at least physically. His mental state however needed further training. The waiting was playing on everybody's nerves, but this game belonged solely to the politicians. The suspicions emanating around the camp were that soon it would begin for Richard and all

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those with him. The next day, February 22nd, President Bush ordered the withdrawal of enemy forces from Kuwait. It didn't happen, and Richard was on his way.

Disciplined energetic soldiers gathered on the parade ground en-route to whatever fate lay in store for them. Orders given, the assembled troops swiftly moved to the waiting helicopters. The Chinook Copters rose slowly into the air, then banked turning out towards the sea. Silence ran through the crowded aircraft. Only the chug-chug engine sounds and the whirling blades could be heard as they whisked through the air with force and velocity. The night began to creep in and the horizon faded to a black stillness as the helicopters slipped out to sea hugging the coastline. In the distance, Richard caught a glimpse of Aphrodite's Rock, which he had seen just over a week ago. The moon that had now settled, cast a beam that beckoned to him and he thought of this as a homing signal. Could the Goddess be telling him that she would bring him back safely? In silent prayer, he urged her that she would. But would she hear him?