

Hounds of Hell

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We geared up: flak vests, helmets, ammo, weapons. The hummer had no doors and the 120-degree heat radiating from the roadway washed over us as we drove toward the Expeditionary Airfield in Saudi Arabia, moving closer to war. I thought I might cook in my gear or my clothes might burst into flames.

The heat, the gear, and the drive were exhausting. I reached down for a cool drink of water to help me stay alert, but the ambient temperature had warmed the water in my canteen well past anything refreshing. To fight back sleep I dumped instant coffee into the scalding water.

After what seemed like hours driving down the deserted roadway, we arrived at a forward operating air base in the middle of nowhere. The officer in charge said we should go inside where there was air conditioning. We might not feel it again for a year. The airbase, with its permanent structures and civilian-style amenities, was luxurious compared to the austere sites where we had slept in the open air or in temporary warehouses. But I didn't want to enjoy the air conditioning and then return to the heat and relearn misery, so I stayed with the vehicle. Perhaps it was a point of pride as much as the fear of enjoying a too brief moment of comfort.

I waited in the heat and I thought of Civil War soldiers and the discomfort they must have felt marching in wool uniforms, in horrendous heat, for dozens of miles a day, only to arrive hungry, tired, and dehydrated, just in time for battle. Our shared deprivations of war brought a strange comfort.

I scoped the area around me and saw nothing but miles of desert, the heat distorting the images on the ground and in my mind. I saw something moving in the distance. *Or did I?* Using my peripheral vision to limit the distortion, I

watched the desert. And there was a dark wavering shadow. As the phantom neared it seemed to bob slightly, up and down. I couldn't make out the object, but worried that it could be a threat, especially a saboteur.

I watched and eventually a large, black, hairy dog appeared. It was rugged, mean and wild. I wondered how it could stand the heat with its thick coat. As it neared to within fifty feet, another dog appeared out of the ground. I hadn't seen the hole prior to the dog's emergence. *Strange.*

I thought of the tunnels of Củ Chi I had read about years earlier. *Deadly.* Since enlistment I had been taught, in part, by Vietnam veterans who spared no detail about what to expect in war. "Die fighting," one drill instructor told me. "If the enemy gets their hands on you there will be nothing but suffering and brutality before you are killed." My staff sergeant had introduced me to his buddy, a major, before we deployed to the Gulf. He was covered with battle scars, both emotional and physical, from a Vietnamese sniper's bullets that removed a lung, a kidney, and yards of intestines. Perhaps he was too mean to die. I wondered if this dog tunnel was large enough for humans and my senses heightened.

The second dog looked like a greyhound. *Sleek and fast.* The two dogs smelled each other. There were no signs of enmity. Without warning, the larger dog sprang onto the greyhound and clamped its massive jaws on the neck of its prey. Death came in seconds.

"*Teufelshunde!*" I thought.

It looked at me as if it heard my thoughts. I imagined the beast as the legendary Hound of Hell that is said to have provided the Marine Corps its moniker "Devil Dog" during World War I. The animal crept toward me. Startled at the possibility that it meant me harm, I slowly raised my M-16 and chambered a round. *Shoink.* The bolt seated the bullet.

I took the weapon off safe and sighted in on the beast. It stopped, never taking its eyes off of me. *Glaring. Thinking. Calculating.* Moments passed and it took

another step. I clicked my weapon from safe to fire. The beast stopped again. Neither of us moved, not wanting to provoke the other. I peered through the front sight of my rifle, breathed slowly and increased the pressure on the trigger, but stopped short of firing.

Glaring. Thinking. Calculating. We watched each other for another long moment. Then the beast slowly turned around and moved toward the hole. Another greyhound popped out and the two smelled each other. I waited for death to take it, but the greyhound disappeared back into the ground. The beast looked in my direction then it, too, disappeared.

I released the trigger and put my weapon on safe. I watched the hole for some time. *Were these dogs symbolic of the Marine Corps or of America in this foreign land? If so, which dog were we? Were we to so easily choke the enemy and descend into the depths?* The desert surface was already hot and hellish, leaving me to wonder which of Dante's circles awaited us in the coming days. A maelstrom was coming and the dogs of war would not be denied. But Hell couldn't be down that hole. It was here, with us.

