

## The Death of Hector

‘It’s hot’, corporal Merrick observed, ‘fucking hot’. This drew no response from corporal Cream, whose attention, as ever, was focused on the view seen through his Bausch & Lomb sights.

Indeed it was very warm, and the sun not yet up. The belly hide, wherein the two men lay, was scooped from the rubble of an old shepherd’s hut on the bare slope above the town, stones eased free to provide apertures for marksman and observer.

‘Quiet enough though’, he continued, ‘Aye’, came the response, ‘but that’s not ‘cos they’re sleeping in, bastards are just waiting’. Below, the ‘bocage’ that girded the maze of alleyways and jumbled, dun buildings of the town proper; a confusion of tired orchards, surrounded by a warren of sandstone walls, bisected by irrigation ditches.

Nobody was kept waiting long, a column of dust and noise proclaimed the arrival of A Company, their LandRovers stripped and bristling with .50 cal. Brownings. ‘Showtime,’ Merrick announced unnecessarily. He spoke partly from nerves, that flutter in the belly, the presages contact and partly to hide the awe his companion inspired.

Private Cream was not cast in the heroic mould, a Geordie from one of the more insalubrious suburbs of Tyneside, of average height and thin build, almost anonymous in close-cropped hair and drab fatigues. Yet he was never dirty and he did not sweat.

Cream was, in the context of 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment, something of a celebrity, a product of sniper training, a singular talent the army had teased out from apparently average material. A killer, one who could bring his man down at a thousand metres or more, who never missed and whose victims never survived to disturb the peace a second time.

‘Ho, ho and it’s off we go’, he continued as an RPG streaked toward the column, the

dusty air now rent with the rattle of AK's. The lead vehicle veered from the track as the rocket grenade sprayed a deadly shrapnel of shards. 'Third alley on the left', Cream was already traversing the rifle, 'come on lad, don't be shy'. As though on cue a figure appeared from the dim recess, half in the blinding light, to take aim. The PM Super Magnum cracked in the foetid air of the hide, the distant shooter plucked backwards, as though by an invisible hand.

A file of Ghurkas was scrambling across the lattice of ditches, one man stumbled and toppled on the baked earth, writhing in a snake of bright red, arterial blood. His comrades scabbled to drag him clear. 'Christ', breathed Merrick, but Cream was already reacting, both had spied the tiniest glint from a blank upper window, the arc of a spent case.

The sniper fired again, Merrick straining to view. For a long instant, nothing, then a rifle appeared at the opening, cast aside, and began its fall, almost in slow motion, to the ground. 'Soviet SVD', he confirmed, 'bye bye Taliban.'

Camp Bastion, in the violet and gold of the evening, a clear light that shadowed the rise and cleft of distant peaks but failed to improve the appearance of the tented fortress, drab canvas, wire and watchtower. Cream was cleaning his rifle, the daily ritual, components laid out upon a sheet, gleaming and functional.

'That's the trouble with automatics,' he confided to Merrick, 'fucking cases go everywhere. Might as well put up a sign.' His friend was already aware of this, had seen the careful manner Cream drew back the bolt and extracted each spent case.

'I make it seventeen kills,' he replied, all confirmed, 'nobody else comes close. Taliban means 'student' you know.'

'All just ragheads to me mate'.

'Do you never wonder what we're doing here?'

‘I thought we were digging the Yanks out the shite as usual.’

Merrick was the product of a private education, from some way further south than Cream, his joining up had largely been an act of rebellion, a University place awaited.

‘That’s the trouble with education,’ Cream continued, ‘makes you think, and for fuck’s sake don’t go philosophical on me. Our job is just to find the bad guys and shoot the cunts.’

That evening they dined on curry and chips, complimented by a watery ale. Corporal Clark was a scion of the same sink estate as Cream. Being of mixed race he had, from an early age been christened ‘Clarkie the Darky’. He bore this without rancour for indeed none was intended, the curse of political correctness and its arid mantras of diversity were yet to penetrate onto the Ridges. He and Cream had shared much in their young lives mostly involving brushes with the law

‘Some tosser whacked Foster from 2nd platoon’, Clark informed, ‘clean shot thro’ the head. They’re calling the towel head bastard Hector.’

‘Hector, who?’

‘From the Trojan War’, Merrick advised ‘mythical hero, what did they teach you Geordies up there?’

‘As far as I can see, fuck all.’

The death of a comrade weighed heavy and talk continued in a desultory manner into the dark of a scented night, the great sprawling encampment a blaze of light and watchfulness. They were ostensibly there for hearts and minds, but night belonged to the enemy. Friends in the light became foes in the dark.

Days passed in cramped hides within and around dusty villages whose names, Gereshk, Sangin and Nowzad blended into a common landscape of dust and squalor, of cramped and sweltering shelters, endured beneath a fierce, hot and unrelenting sun.

Corporal Clark from B Company died around the middle part of June, sniped whilst on patrol, on the approaches to Sangin, the fatal round fired by the marksman who had already claimed several kills. He was borne back to Bastion in the back of a Landrover, bouncing stiff beneath a bloodied sheet.

When Cream drew back the covering he struggled to recognise his friend, the rear of the skull blown free, a garnish of bone and issue, with the head distorted, swollen almost to twice the size. 'Fuck', was all he said.

Battalion was happy to send marksman and observer to Sangin, the enemy sharpshooter was something of a local hero, his victories a boost to their morale, something had to be done and none would have disagreed that corporal Cream was the ideal something.

For three days they lived in the hide, an earthen chamber patiently dug from the baked clay fringe of a dried up riverbed, just enough elevation to give a view of the bare plateau between them and the town, perhaps 1200 metres distant.

'He's in no hurry' said Merrick at the beginning of the fourth day, 'nor are we' rejoined Cream. The sniper had changed he thought, not noticeably but he was, if anything, harder, more focused, their faceless war had taken on a new and personal dimension.

Ahead, as the sun was climbing, the ground was stripped and harsh, devoid of cover. Some 200 metres before the usual huddle of buildings a line of ditches and tumbled walls, ideal cover, but no sign of movement had flickered, through all the long hours they had watched.

Around noon, they were joined by Lt. Gordon, battalion IO, squeezing uncomfortably between them. 'Any sign?' The officer enquired. A typically daft Rupert question, which did not merit a response.

After a while he left, wriggling back through the rear flap down into the dry riverbed. The officer was clearly unused to such undignified scrambling, allowing his head to show for the flicker of an instant. Sufficient enough for the crack of a high velocity round to shear off an ear and plough a furrow across the skull, the wounded man thrashing bloodily.

'Well then,' breathed Cream, sweeping the ground, 'I'd say that was dead on and dead ahead.' His scan focused on the dry ditch, to the left the burnt out hulk of an old Soviet troop carrier, rusted and gaping, on the right, along the line of the ditch, some tumbled walls. 'In the APC?' queried Merrick, 'too obvious, our lad's too clever for that.'

He worked along to the right, scanning the lip of the ditch, about half way, an abandoned sheet of what looked like plywood, had been dumped, half spanning the ditch. 'Gotcha, time for the Indian head massage'.

Merrick's job was to worm clear of the hide and, with infinite care and slowness, raise his helmet into view, his hands clammy on the stick, his breathing shallow as though the enemy marksman would hear. An ecstasy of waiting, just the crown poking above the parapet. The helmet was suddenly snatched away and Merrick, on cue, rose and then tumbled back screaming.

Cream fired almost in the same instant.

At Dusk, they approached the shelter and recovered the Taliban corpse, half his head gone, otherwise unremarkable. 'Bring that jeep', Cream ordered, as he lashed the dead man's ankles together, securing the rope onto the towing hitch. 'Let's show these fuckers a local hero.'