

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Barracuda 945

Patrick Robinson

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About the Book

Major Ray Kerman, a high-ranking SAS officer and renowned submariner, mysteriously disappears amidst a blood bath on the streets of Hebron. In the following months, a series of utterly devastating Hamas terrorist hits, stuns the British and American governments. Plainly, a military genius is at work. Kerman, intelligence chiefs believe, has crossed over to the enemy's side. When, in quick succession, the main US oil supply lines from Alaska are attacked and destroyed, without trace or clue, one of the Pentagon's worst nightmares may have come true. Has Kerman acquired a nuclear submarine, and navigated the killing machine through the treacherous straits of the northern Pacific, and on down the American West Coast? The Pentagon now stands helpless in the face of an enemy they cannot see, and cannot stop - the mysterious Barracuda 945. But Admiral Arnold Morgan, National Security Advisor to the President, and his intelligence specialist Jimmy Ramshawe, plan a massive US revenge ...

About the Author

Patrick Robinson is the author of seven previous international bestselling thrillers, including, most recently, *Scimitar SL-2*. He is also the author of several non-fiction bestsellers including *True Blue* (with Dan Topolski) and *Born to Win*. He is the co-author with Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward of *One Hundred Days*.

Also by Patrick Robinson

Scimitar SL-2

Nimitz Class

Kilo Class

H.M.S. Unseen

Seawolf

The Shark Mutiny

Non-fiction

Classic Lines

Decade of Champions

The Golden Post

Born to Win

True Blue

One Hundred Days

Horsetrader

Barracuda 945

Patrick Robinson



arrow books

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For this, my sixth techno-thriller, I drew on much of the experience and learning of the past. However, I continued to require long and careful advice from my regular tutor, Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward.

When you are trying to con a big nuclear submarine through dangerous, electronically-surveilled Arctic waters, I find it helpful to sit next to a man who has actually done it. The Admiral is not only a former SSN Commanding Officer, he was also the Royal Navy's Flag Officer (Submarines), and, of course, the Forward Commander of the Royal Navy Task Force which defeated Argentina in the Falklands War.

I am further obliged to admit it was he who declared the world's next really severe terrorist problem might be when a Middle East group acquires a nuclear submarine.

He regards all of my books as warnings to the West to stay alert, to stay on top of the game, and to stay out in front, essentially because someone might be gaining on you.

I also owe thanks to at least three Special Forces officers who were so generous with their time and expertise. In particular, *Barracuda 945* owes much to the enormous detail provided by one of them, a high-explosives expert who grappled with my complicated demolition problem for several weeks, before solving it.

Finally I would like to thank my friend Hitesh Shah who steered me, with his customary good humor, through some of the intricacies of the Muslim faith.

CAST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Senior Command

The President of the United States (Commander-in-Chief US Armed Forces)

Vice Admiral Arnold Morgan (National Security Advisor)

General Tim Scannell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs)

Harcourt Travis (Secretary of State)

Robert MacPherson (Defense Secretary)

Jack Smith (Energy Secretary)

National Security Agency

Rear Admiral George R. Morris (Director)

Lt. Commander James Ramshawe (Assistant to the Director)

Captain Scott Wade (Military Intelligence Division)

US Navy Senior Command

Admiral Alan Dickson (Chief of Naval Operations)

Rear Admiral John Bergstrom (Commander Special War Command [SPECWARCOM])

Rear Admiral Freddie Curran (Commander, Submarine Force, Pacific Fleet [COMSUBPAC])

British SAS

Lt. Colonel Russell Makin (Commanding Officer 22 SAS)

Major Ray Kerman (Commanding Officer Israeli Garrison)

Sergeant Fred O'Hara (Advisor Israeli Defence Force)

Sergeant Charlie Morgan (Advisor IDF)

HAMAS Terrorists

General Ravi Rashood (C-in-C Military Assault Division)

Lt. Commander Shakira Rashood (Precision Targeting,
Special Navigation Officer, Barracuda 945)
Captain Ben Badr (Commanding Officer, Barracuda 945)
Lt. Commander Ali Akbar Mohtaj (Commanding Officer,
Barracuda II)
Lt. Commander Abbas Shafii (Senior Submariner Iranian
Navy)
Chief Petty Officer Ali Zahedi (Propulsion)
Chief Petty Officer Ardeshir Tikku (Auxiliary)
Major Ahmed Sabah (Freedom Fighter)

International Strategists

Admiral Zhang Yushu (Senior Vice-Chairman, Peoples'
Liberation Army/Navy Council, China)
Admiral Vitaly Rankov (C-in-C Russian Navy)
Admiral Mohammed Badr (Iranian Navy)
Senior Ayatollahs and Hojjats (Iran)

US Navy SEALs

Lt. Commander Bill Peavey (Team Leader Operation, Main
Assault Group)
Lt. Patrick Hogan Rougeau (2 I/C Operation, Team Leader
Recce Group)
Lt. Brantley Jordan (Bomb-lashing Chief)
Lt. Zane Green (Overall Command Group)
Lt. Brian Slocum (Overall Command Group)
Chief Petty Officer Chris O'Riordan (Diver and Combat SEAL)
Petty Officer 2nd Class Brian Ingram (Combat SEAL and
bodyguard to Lt. Rougeau)
Petty Officer Mich Stetter (High Explosives Expert and
assistant to Lt. Commander Peavey)
Petty Officers Joe Little and Tony McQuade (Landing Area
and Materiel Security)

Navy Air Wing

Lt. Commander Steve Ghutzman (Senior COD [Carrier On Delivery] Pilot)

Close Connections

Kathy O'Brien (Fiancée and Personal Assistant to Admiral Morgan)

Mr and Mrs Richard Kerman (Parents of Major Ray Kerman)

Rupert Studley-Bryce MP (School friend of Major Kerman)

PROLOGUE

Sunday, February 19, 1995

CAPTAIN RAY KERMAN was shivering. Frozen half to death, he was shaking uncontrollably, lying down on the frigid concrete floor of his cell. At least he thought he was lying down, but in fact he had assumed the fetal position, curled up tightly, striving for warmth, his backside resting in a three-inch deep puddle of cold water, or worse.

They had taken off the hood, but the Captain wore no boots, just ripped, bloodstained socks. His pants and shirt were coated in mud. His warm military jacket had been confiscated. And now the hallucinations were growing worse, and he was drifting along in a no man's land, somewhere between reality and mirage. He could no longer ascertain whether his eyes were open or closed in the sullen, icy darkness of the cell.

There was a jug of water somewhere, but he was too afraid to grope in the darkness to find it, in case he knocked it over. And so he remained tightly coiled, his mouth parched, his entire body racked by cold so painful he thought it might freeze his heart and cause it to stop beating.

They came for him at 2 a.m., dragging him up, shoving him down a corridor, and throwing him into a room. Both of his captors wore the uniform of some eastern European army, and now they aimed an arc-light into his eyes. Two young officers marched in, wearing similar foreign uniform, and one of them cupped his hand under Ray's chin and said in heavily accented English, 'You will tell us your mission and that will save you being beaten half to death . . . that's

my speciality. I beat snivelling little spies . . . *What were you doing out there on the moor . . . ?*

'I'm 538624 Captain Ray Kerman . . .' Number, rank, and name.

The officer moved to the back of the room and returned with a wooden truncheon. 'You see this . . . I'm going to deliver one blow with this . . . straight across your mouth and you're never going to look the same again.'

He raised it high across his body and screamed *'Tell me . . . or I'll rearrange your ugly face . . .'*

'I'm 538624 Captain Ray Kerman.'

They kept him there for three hours, alternately threatening and bargaining. Threatening to execute his companions, threatening to jail him for twenty years. Bargaining for his knowledge about the Abbey.

After one hour they dragged him back to his cell, bound him again, and placed the hood over his head. At midnight, he heard the sound of marching feet, then the unmistakable sounds of a man being punched, beaten, the sound of a fist smacking against the flesh of a face. Then thumps of boots slamming into a human body. Moans, then screams, terrible screams, a pleading voice, *'Please no . . . please no . . . please no.'*

And then someone booted his cell door open. And hands grabbed him, and the hood was removed and someone took him firmly by the hair. 'Right, and now we try something different.'

And the screams along the corridor grew louder. And now the unseen man was begging, begging for them not to beat him again.

'I'm 538624 Captain Ray Kerman . . .'

All through the night, they kept him awake, firing questions, demanding, threatening, always threatening. The same officer marched about with the truncheon. Another swished a riding crop. They gave him water, but nothing else.

They threatened to torture Andy. They told him it hardly mattered anyway because Charlie had broken down and told them everything. They just wanted his confirmation as the officer. Just the details of the mission on the moor.

'I'm 538624 Captain Kerman . . .'

They took him back to his cell at 0700. Gave him stale bread. And then awakened him every half-hour until midnight, making thirty-four different entries into his cell. Then at midnight, they piped earth-shattering music into the cell, cheap rock'n' roll. Ray had to sit with his fingers pressed into his ears to lock out the sound.

They changed his cell, pushed and shoved him down into a cellar with deeper puddles of freezing water. They left him to his misery, and short fitful sleep, for two more hours, then hauled him out again, and poured a bucket of ice-cold water over him, and dragged him back to the interrogation room. And now Ray was trembling uncontrollably.

And this time there were four lights aimed at his eyes. And two men, one obsequious, reasonable, bargaining. The other, an unshaven brute, threatening violence and torture. He kept hold of Ray's chin, staring at him, insulting him, yelling at him.

And Ray just kept saying over and over, *'I'm 538624 Captain Kerman . . .'*

Now he had no idea whether it was night or day. He no longer had a grip on time. He had no idea what day it was, where he was, whether he was. Stripped of his dignity and most of his clothes, starving hungry, shaking with the cold, no longer with any grip on his words or actions, he knew he was on the verge of breakdown.

All he had left was defiance. Obdurate, hard-nosed, stubborn defiance. They could not get that out of him. But they kept trying, marching him to the interrogation room. Shouting and screaming, taking him back to the cellar, throwing him down in the water, which seemed unaccountably deeper. There was nowhere dry to sit, and he

just lay there, shivering, trying to sleep, trying to ignore the screams of the tortured men, the ones that now ventured into his dreams.

He thought it was dark when the two interrogators came clumping down the stairs and booted the door open. But he could not tell, and they manhandled him to his feet, dragged him up the stairs, and stripped off his hood. He found himself facing the senior officer, crisp in a different uniform.

Hallucinating quite badly now, he answered instinctively, unaware of whether he was in a dream or reality, muttering, *'I'm 538624 Captain Kerman . . .'*

And to his amazement, the officer held out his hand. 'Hello, Ray,' he said. 'Welcome to the SAS . . . and will someone turn off those bloody recordings out there . . . ?'

'Now, Ray. Come on down to the officers' mess. It's five o'clock in the morning. You can have a bath, and some breakfast, and then sleep for the day. We have a clean uniform ready for you, and I thought we'd fly back to Hereford around 4.30 this afternoon.

'You've done very well . . . very well indeed . . . but I regret it was not a vintage intake . . . of the eighty men who applied only five made it.'

'Anyone I know?'

'Yes. That young Paratroop Officer you started with, Lieutenant James, stuck it out. So did that Corporal you were on the moor with, Charlie Rider . . . we lost a lot of chaps towing them across the moor behind the jeep. Your other pal, the Sergeant, Bob, I think cracked about two hours ago under interrogation.'

'Jesus, you guys know how to put someone through hell . . .'

'We also know what we're looking for. And no-one pretends that courage on this scale is all that common.'

'No, sir . . . I suppose not.'

1000 Monday, February 20, 1995

CO's office, Stirling Lines, Hereford

Captain Ray Kerman stood to attending in front of Lieutenant Colonel Russell Makin, the Commanding Officer of 22 SAS. 'It is my very great pleasure to welcome you to this Regiment, Captain Kerman. I see from your record that you won The Sword at Sandhurst a few years back, so you are used to excelling. And I am sure you will find ample outlets for your undoubted talents here in the Special Air Service.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'You have seen from your training and indoctrination process what we demand. And I hope it will be of some reassurance that every single man here has passed the courses which you have just undergone. We are not like other Regiments, but when the bugle sounds for our style of warfare, I think you will find yourself working among the supreme practitioners of our profession.'

'Yessir. I am sure that is so.'

The Colonel then stepped forward, and handed to Captain Ray Kerman the distinctive, coveted beige beret of the SAS. On the front was the cloth badge of the Regiment, the upright winged dagger. Beneath it were the words, '*Who Dares Wins.*'

Thus at four minutes after 10 o'clock on that Monday morning, Captain Raymond Kerman was accepted into one of the two top fighting military units in the world, the other being the US Navy SEALs, four members of which were in residence at Hereford when Ray wore the beret for the first time.

He saluted the Colonel, made an about turn, and left the room. No-one else had been present to see the little ceremony, and only those who had served in the SAS would have understood its significance - but a soldier's own soul is an iron taskmaster, and there was a smile on the face of Ray Kerman.

CHAPTER ONE

1900, Wednesday, May 12, 2004

SAS Training Camp (Counter Terrorist)

Southern Israel (Location: CLASSIFIED)

MAJOR RAY KERMAN, on his second tour of duty with the Regiment, stared westward out towards the desert city of Beersheba. In the setting sun, the heat still rose shimmering along the foothills of the Dimona Mountains, despite the eternal wind. A long line of Bedouin camels heading for the last oasis north of the river, moved symmetrically across the sandy wastes, not 100 yards from the SAS stronghold.

Ray Kerman stood almost in the long shadows of the caravan. And he watched the black-hooded men, swaying to the tireless rhythm of the camels, their wide hooves making no sound on the soft desert floor. The nomads of the Negev desert turned neither right nor left, acknowledging nothing, especially a swarthy broad-shouldered Army officer in Israeli uniform. But Ray could feel their hard, dark eyes upon him, and he understood he would be forever an intruder to the West Bank Bedou.

He usually found the tribesmen were different, trading at the Bedouin market in Beersheba, where the hand of friendship was frequently offered to any prospective buyer. But as his Sergeant, Fred O'Hara had mentioned, 'These blokes would rush up and french-kiss Moyshe Dayan if they thought they could sell him a second-hand carrot.'

Ray however saw them differently. Before making this first tour of duty to the near east he had read the works of the important Arabist, Wilfred Thesiger. And he had arrived in the Israeli desert filled with an unspoken admiration for the

noble savages of the wide, hot, near-empty Negev desert . . . men who could, if necessary, go without food or water for seven days, who could not be burned by the pitiless sun, nor frozen by the harsh winter nights. Men who could suffer the most shocking deprivations, yet still stand unbowed. They were men who accepted certain death only upon the collapse of their camels.

The English officer had not forgotten the first tribesman he had met in Beersheba, a tall robed nomad, trading goats and sheep in the market. The man had been introduced, and he had stared hard, without speaking, into Ray's eyes, the traditional mark of contact in the desert.

Finally he had touched his forehead and gracefully arched his hand downwards in the Muslim greeting. Softly, he had said, '*As salam Alaikum*, Major. Peace be upon you. I am Rasheed. I am a Bedouin.'

In that split second, Ray Kerman knew what Wilfred Thesiger had meant when he had written about the Bedouin's courtesy, his courage and endurance, his patience and light-hearted gallantry. 'Among no other people,' Thesiger once wrote, 'have I felt the same sense of personal inferiority.'

Ray recognized that as high praise. Not only had Thesiger been one of only two white men ever to make the murderous journey across the burning wastes of the 'Empty Quarter' in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula, he had won a boxing Blue at Oxford University, and served in the SAS during the war. More telling yet, the craggy, teak-tough Thesiger had been educated at Eton, England's school for its highborn, a place which in 560 years had never produced a pupil who felt personally inferior to anyone, never mind a camel driver. Ray knew about Etonians. He had attended Eton's 'upstart' rival public school, Harrow, alma mater of Sir Winston Churchill, founded as recently as 1571 as a Protestant school in the reign of England's first Protestant Queen, Elizabeth I.

And now Ray stood watching the camel train head westward, into the shifting sands, into the silence. He knew they would remain at the oasis overnight, before heading into the market at first light. He held his Heckler and Koch machine-gun lightly in his right hand, the barrel downwards, and he shook his head as he contemplated tonight's mission.

And he muttered inaudibly to himself, 'I really do not want to end up shooting these people. I wonder if I ever should have accepted this command?'

The truth was Major Kerman, with his immaculate SAS record, and inescapably Jewish surname, was not precisely what he seemed. Major Kerman's parents had both been Iranian, brought up as Muslims, and descended from nomadic Arabs in the southern city of Kerman, on the edge of Iran's vast southern desert, Dasht-e Lut.

But when the downfall of the ruling Shah appeared to be inevitable, back in the early seventies, the wealthy couple had emigrated with their infant son, Ravi, to London. And there they began importing from the family's carpet manufacturing business in their home city.

The booming British economy during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher was perfect for the family. Mr. and Mrs Reza Sharood quickly became Mr. and Mrs Richard Kerman, taking a new name from an old place in the manner of many Middle Eastern families far from home.

While dozens of tribesmen stitched and wove the elegant patterns in the hilly regions north of Bandar Abbas, Richard Kerman opened a string of warehouses in southern England, and then invested in a small shipping line to transport the costly wool and silk floor coverings up through the Suez Canal and on through the Mediterranean to Southampton.

Richard's sea-going freighters led him to oil tankers, and to the gigantic profits which were commonplace during the 1980s. His Iranian carpets led him to expand his importing empire. But he stuck to what he knew, shipping superb

Iranian dates out of Bandar Abbas . . . tons and tons of them, all grown in another town in the province of Kerman, the tree-lined twelfth-century citadel of Bam. Most of the dates were cultivated by his Rashood relatives.

Soon the Kermans owned an expansive gabled house on North London's fabled Millionaire's Row, The Bishop's Avenue, next to the old Cambodian Embassy.

Twin Rolls Royce Silver Ghosts occupied the garages. And, not so far away, fifty-five miles west down the M4 motorway in the Berkshire village of Lambourn, six highly-bred thoroughbred flat horses were expensively in training, doing battle during the summer months under Richard Kerman's jet-black and scarlet-sashed silks.

And young Ravi, whose first sight of the world had been the hot, dusty streets of the depressed urban sprawl of his hometown in the desert, was renamed Raymond.

Raymond Kerman, after a six-year junior education in one of the most expensive preparatory schools in London, now owned a British passport and at the age of thirteen, would enter Harrow, admitted, even by Etonians, as probably the second best fee-paying school in the country, and a long established haven for the sons of Middle Eastern ruling families.

On the entry form, Richard Kerman had declared the boy's religion as *Church of England*. In the space for birthplace, he had filled out *Hampstead, London*. No formal birth certificate had been required. Nothing to reveal that Raymond Kerman was really Ravi Rashood, born Iranian from the south-east of that country. It was Richard Kerman's view that in England it was unwise to be different from the majority. The more patrician tribes of London society found it disquieting.

Indeed by the time young Ray entered Harrow it was assumed he had more or less forgotten anything he ever knew about the religion of Islam. And he had. More or less. But his mother, the former Naz Allam, was a great deal more devout than her husband, and she had, when Ravi was

aged around seven, sent him to a series of private tutorials with a senior Imam at a North London Mosque. She would sit quietly with him while he learned simplified rudiments of the Koran, God's revelations to the Prophet Mohammed, detailed over 114 chapters.

When those lessons had concluded, shortly before Ray began prep school in Knightsbridge, his Muslim groundings came to an end. And Richard Kerman took care they did not begin again. Later on, his son Ray attended all church services at Harrow with the vast majority of the school in the Church of England faith. Never once was he a part of the small group of separatists, whose parents, Roman Catholics, Muslim or Jewish, insisted they remain exclusively within their denominations.

It was widely assumed, within the confines of the great school, that Ray Kerman probably had a Jewish grandfather, or something like that. But Harrow is a bastion of racial equality, and no-one ever asked him. In any event, Ray was one of the toughest boys in the history of the school, a thunderous fast-bowler in the school cricket team, and a brutally-strong front-row forward on the rugby team, which he captained. Those kind of kids *never* had to answer questions.

His entry forms for a scholarship to England's Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, were prepared by his headmaster, utilizing school records. And Ray entered the British Army without a trace of his very early background in the official records. So impressive was his school record, written and signed personally by the Headmaster of Harrow, they never even asked for a formal birth certificate.

He was 2nd Lieutenant Raymond Kerman, first in his year at the Academy, a top sportsman at Harrow School, the son of wealthy, well-known North London parents, heir to the Kerman shipping line. Religion: Church of England.

His first Regiment was the Devon and Dorsets, an infantry outfit whose soldiers were historically drawn from south-

west England. And it was from there he had first entered the SAS, fighting his way through the brutal, soul-searching indoctrination process, before serving for four years, with immense distinction, in the Kosovo Campaign, and then earning the coveted Queen's Gallantry Medal during an SAS rescue mission in Sierre Leone the following year.

He'd returned to his Regiment as Captain Kerman, an acknowledged SAS 'hard man', expert in unarmed combat, skilled in the use of explosives and demolition, an efficient satellite communications operator. He was trained in Close Quarter Battle (CQB), short-range missiles, navigation, strategy and specialized SAS transport over all terrains. Break-ins to enemy compounds were his speciality. The Regiment had him taught Arabic at the secret Army language school in Buckinghamshire. At thirty-four, he had not yet married.

Recalled to the SAS for a second tour of duty in 2002, Ray Kerman had been personally selected to command a small highly-trained SAS team, training members of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) in counter-terrorism procedures. The operation, highly classified, was funded by the Israeli Government. Ray's team contained six senior non-commissioned officers, each of them vastly experienced in a wide range of military skills and techniques.

One week before they left Hereford, bound for an unidentified Army base in the Negev, Captain Kerman had been summoned to see the SAS Commanding Officer. There he was told the Ministry of Defence had issued a special authorization for his promotion to Major. 'I may say, we are all delighted,' the CO had told him. 'You've earned it.'

Ray Kerman was already a very special man in a very special Regiment. And now he had been in the desert for several weeks, mostly confined to the wire-surrounded, camouflaged SAS compound, with its custom-built urban area, designed to prepare the Israelis for house-to-house combat in city streets.

The SAS enjoys a towering reputation in the Israeli Army and Major Kerman, a stern and uncompromising officer, was deadly serious about the ruthless nature of his business. He was not particularly liked, but he quickly earned a full measure of respect. Like his father, he had little humor, and he possessed the same ruthless streak in his chosen occupation, and this he endlessly tried to drill into the Israeli recruits. He worked them right out on the edge, forcing a supreme fitness upon them, urging them on, driving and cajoling them, hammering home the SAS creed, 'Train hard, fight easy.'

Only rarely did he venture into the nearby desert towns, Beersheba to the east and a few miles further north to Hebron, the volatile flashpoint of so many murderous Arab-Israeli clashes, intensified always by the city's sacred place in the scriptures of Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. This is the burial place of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The city's holiness has always added fuel to the incendiary atmosphere between its Palestinian and Israeli populations. As long ago as 1929 Muslim extremists massacred the entire Jewish minority in Hebron. And ever since then, both sides have initiated endless bloodshed. In 1994, a Jewish extremist gunned down thirty Muslim worshippers. And nothing much improved after 1997 when the western part of the city (H-1) became a Palestinian autonomous zone. Riots and hard military restrictions continue to dominate the last resting place of Abraham.

Ray's first visit to ancient Hebron was in fact his first close encounter with an Arab populace. With his tall red-haired Irish Sergeant Fred O'Hara he had wandered through the criss-cross alleyways of the *casbah*, watching the Palestinian traders, robed men sculpting olivewood, heating and blowing the city's famous colored glass, selling fruit and vegetables. Ray and Fred both wore civilian clothes, trying hard to blend in as strolling tourists, each of them eating

from a bag of pale, sweet Hebron peaches, reputed to be the finest in the world.

The trip was essentially business. The two SAS men were trying to familiarize themselves with the layout of the city, because as ever there were rumors around that the Palestinians were once more stockpiling weapons and bomb-making materials. Ray carried with him a tourist guide and throughout the afternoon he made careful notes inside the little book.

The Major of course realized that he too had been born in a similar town, not so steeped in culture, but nonetheless on the edge of a vast desert, among people who wore robes, of the Muslim faith. Like these Hebron Arabs, his own people must have toiled for little in a similar hot, dusty urban trading center. And he wondered whether, deep in his subconscious, there was a remembrance of another place, like this, where the infant Ravi Rashood had eaten peaches and walked with his mother Naz, wearing her long black *chador*.

But the years in London, in English schools, in the officers' mess, in exclusive Western civilization, had driven any vestige of his birthright deep into the past. He was Major Ray Kerman, and these Arabs were foreign to him, though their closeness did jolt a certain recall of stories told to him by the bearded Saudi in the North London Mosque a quarter of a century ago. He could remember some of them clearly, but one stuck in his mind, a quotation from the Koran which the Imam had asked him to learn:

*Cling one and all to the rope of God's faith
And do not separate.
Remember God's blessings,
For you were enemies
And He joined your hearts together
And now you are brothers . . .*

He supposed that all these robed and bearded men around him knew the same words. And he found that strange. And, in addition, there was another difference Ray experienced in Hebron – different, that is, by the standards of other visiting Englishmen. He had a distinct feeling of *déjà-vu* among the buildings of the city. He could not remember ever having seen houses like this, not the flat-roof symmetry, nor the archways, nor the sheer narrowness of the streets. And yet it seemed familiar to him, the yellow brick and stonework of the buildings, some of it exposed by a crumbling cement outer shell.

Ray was only faintly aware of this curious sense of having visited before, and he pushed it to the back of his mind. Meanwhile he and Fred compared observations about the possible locations of snipers who would undoubtedly show up when the Israelis began any cordon-and-search mission in the Palestinian areas of the town.

Ray and Fred both spent time chatting to Arabs, and in particular Ray fell into conversation with a youngish man in his twenties, trying to trade goats. He was an obvious Bedouin, and Ray liked him, his soft, polite voice, the natural acceptance in his voice that soon he must take his camels and his herds back to the desert, which lay to the east, simmering in the oncoming summer heat. Ray thought the Bedouin might have made a halfway decent SAS trooper.

Late in the afternoon he and Fred crossed from the large Palestinian section (H-1), over Al-Shuhada Street near the old bus station and into the Israeli occupied section (H-2). From there they made their way through the market, south of the small Israeli settlement on the edge of the Old City, and on to the great edifice of the Tomb of the Patriots, the burial ground of Abraham and his family.

Ray's guide book told him that here God had bestowed upon Abraham his father-role of the Jewish people. And it might not just be Abraham, Isaac and Jacob buried here.

There could also be all twelve sons of Jacob, not to mention Adam and Eve.

It was on the rough, sandy lower ground, below the great and sacred place, that Ray felt an uneasy stirring in his mind. He was standing next to a group of seven Arabs in black robes, and he was staring, like them, at the ramparts of the massive Tomb, and he felt utterly certain he had seen it before, or at least something very like it.

His heart beat faster as he struggled to recall when, where and how. Because he knew he had never been within a thousand miles of Hebron in his life. And yet there were distant images, and he fought to summon them. He found in the recesses of his memory a long, covered bazaar filled with traders, lines of them, in a faraway land. And there was a building, a huge building, a great yellow stone edifice. He could see it from the bazaar. He remembered that.

But the details escaped him – his memory simply could not find accurate pictures of his first neighborhood, the Bazar-e Vakil, and its vaulted underground teahouse where he had so often tasted sweet pastries with his parents. The Tomb of the Patriots was jolting his brain, trying to force the image of the lofty *Mosque-e Jame* into focus. But the greatest building in Kerman's memory remained shrouded in mist. Ray's mother had carried him around it so many times, just along the street where they lived. But that part had also vanished, along with his name, and his past.

'Penny for your thoughts, sir,' said Sergeant O'Hara. 'You thinking of going inside?'

Major Kerman shook his head. 'I don't think so, Fred,' he said. 'We ought to be getting back. Whistle up the driver, will you? Tell him we're on the south side of the Tomb just near the main entrance.' And Fred immediately took a few steps away from the Arabs, and dialed up the number, issuing curt instructions to the Israeli corporal.

Which left Major Kerman once more alone with his thoughts, saying nothing, his secrets safe. Which was just as

well, because right now he was posing questions to himself which would not have been greeted with wild enthusiasm among his SAS colleagues. Nor indeed at number 86, The Bishop's Avenue.

Why do I like and admire these people so much? Is it just the influence of Wilfred Thesiger? Or is there something in my blood which I cannot understand? Why do I feel at home here in the desert?

And he wondered, somewhat dangerously, for the first time in his life, *Who the hell am I? Am I really among my own people, right here standing next to the last remaining Bedouins of the Negev?*

By 10 p.m. that evening Major Kerman was issuing his final briefing to the SAS team which would shortly embark the Israeli Army helicopter and take off for several different locations.

He stood before his men and told them, 'As you know, the situation here in Israel remains very tense. The government is under considerable pressure from the USA, the UN and the European nations to revive the peace process with the Palestinian leadership, and to commit Israel to a lasting truce with the Arab world.

'We all know it's been damned difficult. I think the Israeli Government has been trying to exercise restraint despite frequent acts of violence from terror groups like HAMAS and Islamic Jihad. The recent acts of aggression and indiscriminate suicide-murder against the Israeli people in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv have been committed by groups whose strategic aim is the wholesale destruction of the nation of Israel. That's where we come in. That's why we're here.'

Ray paused. And he paced across the front of a large map of the immediate area around Hebron.

'Tonight,' he said. 'At the specific request of the Israeli Government, the IDF are mounting a coordinated military

intervention, a large scale cordon-and-search operation against several Palestinian occupied towns on the West Bank and Gaza . . . the “A Territories,” which we have discussed before. Our objectives are simple: to flush out the terrorist leaders and seize their arsenals of weapons and bomb-making equipment.

‘Don’t let’s pretend this is going to be a neatly achieved operation, because it won’t be. In fact it will almost certainly be extremely untidy. Maybe even messy. Nonetheless, given the relative balance of forces in our favor, it will ultimately be successful. Furthermore, the Israeli Government is certain no other Arab force will come to the aid of the Palestinians, particularly in the short time frame envisaged for the operation.

‘You must remember, we are here in a very specialized role, to help and advise the Israelis. Most of their Commanders have been trained here by us, so they know what they’re doing. Nevertheless, we must be watchful and ready to move in with on-the-spot advice, probably up front, wherever it may be needed. All SAS staff will be wearing IDF combat clothing and helmets, but without insignia. You will carry a personal weapon, your H & K MP-5 sub-machine gun, strictly for your own protection. Only in extreme circumstances will you use it.’

Ray Kerman was keenly aware that this operation would be conducted under hair-trigger stress. Hebron was nothing short of superheated these days. The slightest incident could spark off an eruption of gunfire and explosive. He did not want to lose some of his best men in a senseless shoot-out in the dusty streets of the West Bank. And he had cautioned them over and over.

‘If we get through this without someone going berserk, it will be a bloody miracle,’ he said. ‘But it won’t be one of us. We will each be attached to individual attacking Israeli forces. So try to keep it down, guys. Be careful with your advice, but try to stop anyone doing anything really stupid.’

He outlined the Israeli strategy, explaining that on the following night the IDF would attack several parts of Gaza, as well as the key Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank, at Jenin, Nablus, Ramalla, Bethlehem and Hebron. They had already conducted a mass of intelligence gathering, even some minor maneuvers designed to identify suitable points of entry into the targeted territories. IDF Reservists had already been called up, and were armed and ready at their parent unit depots.



‘I will personally be attached to the force attacking Hebron,’ said the Major. ‘I will be in company with Sergeants O’Hara and Charlie Morgan. And we will be conducting ourselves in precisely the same way as everyone else. Remember also, this little war is unlikely to end tomorrow night, so let’s make the most of the opportunity to observe at first-hand precisely how the Israelis conduct themselves on a volatile operation like this.’

Thirty minutes later the Israeli helicopter took off bearing the SAS men to their destinations, flying over the Holy Land, bound first for the grim headquarters of Northern Command, where Ray Kerman, Fred and Charlie would disembark prior to joining the Golani Brigade, the tight IDF force which would provide the main cordon in Hebron.

Ray knew the drill. He’d masterminded the drill. The Golanis, backed by a squadron of tanks for extra firepower and protection, would send in Special Forces familiar with the area to conduct the search-and-sweep operation within the perimeter of the town. They would be additionally supported by a battalion of Israeli paratroopers. Search-trained military engineers were scheduled to go after the Palestinian arms caches.

Ray had stressed to all levels of the Israeli Command, the success of the operation depended entirely on the spearhead of the force inserting a steel-rimmed cordon around the target without being detected. Stealth and secrecy were paramount, and there would be a full twelve-hour briefing in Northern Command throughout the following day.

Major Kerman would officially assist in the execution of the operation from the Golani Brigade field headquarters in western Hebron.

0100 Friday, May 14

By now, the IDF battalions were fanning out over the West Bank, zeroing in on their targets. Around Hebron there was dark, quiet efficiency from the Israeli troops who made up the Golani Brigade, now approaching the city from three different directions.

The Barak Battalion, moving north along Route 60 from Beersheba, had already halted two miles from Hebron, just south of the tiny village of Beit Khagal, dismounted their vehicles and were moving silently forward through the darkness on foot.

From the west on Route 35, the Gideon Battalion had stopped near the village of Beit Kahil, and they too were walking down the deserted road, weapons raised, every sense on high alert in the pitch black of the moonless Negev Desert.

Major Kerman was with the third battalion, the Golani Buds (newest recruits) combined with men from the Egoz Reconnaissance Unit. With headlights on low beam, they skirted around the outskirts of Bethlehem on minor roads to the west, rejoining Route 60 coming in from the North at El Arub.

The Commander of the IDF force permanently stationed in the Jewish section of Hebron, had trebled his covert patrols up close to the dividing line, and throughout the Old City. And now his colleagues in the three armed battalions of the Golani Brigade advanced upon his territory.

By 0430 they were inside the perimeter. The Barak group deployed immediately from Jabal Abu Sneina, placing its cordon just south of the Old City in a line running hard down the dividing frontier between H-1 and H-2. The Gideons moved west to the Bir Al-Saba Road, and then north up to the Hebron bypass. The third battalion deployed along the whole span of the north end of the town, with the Egoz Unit moving south to occupy the inner city dividing line, then west along Al-Qarantina Street.