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Author photo by Michael Patrick Brown

Written and developed in association with Tekno Books, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Designed by Dean H. Renninger

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc. 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

Published in association with the literary agency of Sterling Lord Literistic, New York, NY.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Odom, Mel.

Apocalypse crucible / Mel Odom.

p. cm. — (Apocalypse series)

ISBN 0-8423-8776-5 (sc)

1. Rapture (Christian eschatology)—Fiction. 2. End of the world—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3565.D53A855 2004

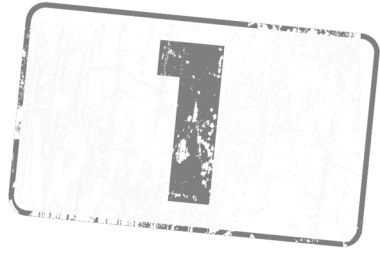
813'.54—dc22

2004000464

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04

5 4 3 2 1



**United States 75th Army Rangers Temporary Post
Sanliurfa, Turkey
Local Time 0403 Hours**

“Incoming!”

First Sergeant Samuel Adams “Goose” Gander heard the cry from the spotter/sniper teams he had set up along the nearby rooftops. As the warning was repeated over the radio communications system his team used, he gathered his thoughts, feeling the adrenaline slam through his system.

“All right, Rangers,” Goose barked over the ear/throat headset he wore, “stand sharp.”

“Standing sharp, First Sergeant,” one of the nearby soldiers responded. Others chimed in, letting Goose know they had heard him. Despite the constant threat they had been under for days, all of the men stood tall and solid. They were men Goose had trained, men he had placed on special assignment, and men he had promised to die with if that should become necessary.

Goose stood behind the barricade of cars and farm equipment the Rangers had set up at the edge of the city when they had arrived in Sanliurfa two days ago. The soldiers had barely escaped an avalanche of Syrian troops—Soviet-made tanks, a horde of infantrymen, and squadrons of jet fighters.

Since then, United States military personnel as well as the remaining local citizenry had added to the barricade, using abandoned vehicles and everything else that came to hand. The military teams and the locals fighting for their homes stayed busy filling sandbags and shoring up the defenses. Sandbags filled the cracks and crevices,

made machine-gun nests, and reinforced primary buildings used for defense and tactical information. For the time being, all roads south out of Sanliurfa were closed.

The Syrians were coming. Everyone knew it. Their arrival was only a matter of time. Apparently, that time was fast approaching.

Goose closed down the manpower and equipment lists he'd been reviewing on his PDA and tucked the device inside a protected pocket on his belt at his back. The low-lit LCD screen had temporarily robbed him of his full night vision, but he had to check it. A sergeant should always know where his men and materials were, and where they were needed. The PDA made that task almost doable.

He ran a practiced eye down the line of soldiers who stood at battlefield positions along the barricade. Like him, they wore the battle-dress uniforms they had worn for days. All of the BDUs showed hard use in the form of rips and tatters covered by a layer of the ever-present dirt and grit that shifted across the sun-blasted lands. Every man in the field had been under fire during the last three days.

They'd had neither the time nor supplies to allow them the luxury of rest or fresh clothing. Thankfully, they'd had plenty of socks, and Goose had seen to it that each man changed socks frequently. A foot soldier was only as good as his feet. An infantry that couldn't march was no help to an army seeking survival and was often a burden.

Goose took pride in the way his men stood at their posts despite their hardships. His unit was undermanned, underequipped, and too far away from reinforcements that wouldn't have been sacrificed on Sanliurfa anyway. Sanliurfa, the City of Prophets, was a stopgap, a strategic position that would be given up at a dear price when the time came. The American forces planned to give the outlying troops a window of opportunity, a chance to put together a counteroffensive against the Turkish juggernaut rolling up out of the south. Despite the knowledge that they were already paying a hefty blood price for something they could never hold, Goose's Rangers stood tall and proud and vigilant.

Holding his M-4A1 assault rifle in his right hand, his finger resting on the trigger guard and not on the trigger, as his father had trained him even before he'd first put on the uniform of a United States fighting man seventeen years ago, Goose trotted down the barricade line.

His left knee ached as he moved. He'd sustained the original injury years ago in a war with Iraq. The military doctors had put everything back together as best they could, declaring him fit for duty. Then, only three days ago, he'd reinjured his knee, just before the Syr-

ian army's unprovoked attack against the Turkish army forced 3rd Battalion's 75th to retreat from the Turkish-Syrian border. During that engagement, in what Goose believed to be a completely unrelated happening, a large percentage of the world's population had disappeared without explanation.

During the last two days in Sanliurfa, he and his men had gleaned from the sporadic news coverage that the world at large was as confused about the disappearances as his troops had been when it happened. Goose, of course, had developed his own theories about what had happened. But, according to the media, several possible explanations were being advanced for the mysterious disappearances that left empty clothing in piles where men and women and children had been.

Children.

The thought of all the missing children brought a sharp pang to Goose's heart. His five-year-old son, Christopher, had been one of the children who had disappeared without a trace. So far, although the facts hadn't been confirmed, it seemed that every young child on the face of the planet had vanished.

Goose hadn't been able to say good-bye to Chris. He hadn't even known until many hours later that he had lost his young son. He could only trust that Chris was in good hands—*is in God's hands*, he desperately reminded himself—because he struggled to believe the boy was in those hands. Everything had happened so suddenly.

"Eagle One," Goose called over the headset. "This is Phoenix Leader."

"Go, Leader. You have Eagle One." The reply was crisp and confident. Eagle One was Terry Mitchell, a career man with ten years service under his belt and one of the best spotter/snipers Goose had ever worked with.

"Where away, Eagle One?"

"South-southwest."

Goose reached the end of the barricade section that sealed off the street. The barricade stretched twenty blocks, backed by everything the Rangers could cobble together for defense. Heavy cavalry in the form of M1 Abrams tanks and Bradley M2 and M3 armored personnel carriers backed the barricaded sections in strategic locations. Supporting the tanks and APCs, scattered jeeps, Humvees, and Ranger Special Operations Vehicles (RSOVs) operated as couriers for ammo and stood ready to offer quick transportation for wounded. Several of their vehicles had been lost during the Syrian border attack, and his

men had appropriated anything that was running for their defense of the city.

"What do you see?" Goose started up the metal fire escape that zigzagged up the outside of the three-story apartment building that stood as the cornerstone of the barricade.

"A line of vehicles. Tanks, APCs."

"ID?"

"Confirmed, Leader. Syrian. They're flying colors and proud of them."

"Any sign of aerial support?"

"Negative, Leader."

Goose pounded up the fire escape. Despite the cortisone shots he'd been given for the pain and inflammation, he felt the weakness in his knee. The pain had dulled to bearable, but his movements felt mushy and a little uncertain. So far the limb had held beneath him. He forced himself to go on, reaching the second-floor landing and hauling himself around to continue up. "How many vehicles?"

"Thirty or forty. Maybe more. Hard to say with all the dust they're stirring up. Daybreak's an hour away. Probably get a better look then."

Unless they're in the middle of us by that time, Goose couldn't help thinking. Despite the coolness that usually came with the fading sun in the evenings, perspiration beaded on his forehead and ran down into his eyes. He knew he was running a slight fever from the inflammation in his knee. The fever, like the pain, was familiar. He often felt it when he was pushing himself too far, too fast.

But that was the pace that dealing with the Syrians required. During the last two days, the Syrian army and air force had harried them mercilessly, probing and exploring the strength of the U.S. forces' hold on the city. The battalion's primary assignment from the Joint Chiefs was to hold the line against the Syrians in Sanliurfa while the cities of Ankara and Diyarbakir resupplied and got reinforcements.

Goose switched the headset to another frequency. As first sergeant, his personal com unit came with auxiliary channels that he used to communicate with other divisions of the Ranger companies. "Control, this is Phoenix Leader."

"Go, Leader," Captain Cal Remington's smooth voice answered immediately. If he'd just been shaken from slumber, his words showed no trace of it.

"We've got movement." Goose was currently the second-ranking officer among the companies since the first lieutenant had been

killed in the border clash. Remington had chosen not to fill that post and kept Goose in his present position of sovereign command after him. Goose had more years experience as a soldier than any other man in the unit—most of those years with Remington, first as a co-staff sergeant and later as first sergeant after Remington completed Officer Candidate School.

"That's what I heard. I'm on my way there. Be with you in two."

"Yes, sir," Goose replied. Only slightly winded from running full tilt up three flights of switchback stairs in full gear, he reached the rooftop landing and stayed low. He switched back to the battlefield channel. "Eagle One, this is Phoenix Leader."

"Go, Leader."

"I'm at your twenty."

"Come ahead, Leader. Heard you coming up the fire escape. Eagle Three confirmed your ID before you reached the first landing."

The thought that a sniper, even one his Rangers, had placed him in rifle crosshairs—even for the few seconds necessary to identify him—made Goose uneasy. Friendly fire wasn't, and all too often it was initiated by fatigued troops stressed to the breaking point from living in fear.

The U.S. Rangers—accompanied by remnants of the Turkish Land Forces and the United Nations Peacekeeping teams that had survived the brutal attack along the border—had lived under those conditions since they'd retreated to Sanliurfa. The Turkish army, under Captain Tariq Mkhian, and the U.N. Peacekeeping teams, led by Colonel John Stone, backed the Rangers' efforts. Those troops hadn't fared any better than Goose's own. During the last few days, Captain Remington had proven to the two commanders that the Rangers were far better suited to the urban brawl that the Syrian army was forcing upon them than their own units. It had been a long, arduous fight, Goose knew, but Remington was a man who had consistently proven he could get his way.

During the last two days, scouting units had tagged and made contact with Syrian scouts pushing into the area. With the world in chaos from all the disappearances, the Syrian government had chosen to take as much land as possible before the world returned to some semblance of the status quo.

Goose kept his head low as he hauled himself up onto the rooftop. He glanced automatically to the north, east, and west.

For the most part, Sanliurfa was dark. With the blessing of the Turkish army, Captain Remington had imposed a dusk-to-dawn cur-

few on the city in an effort to control the looting. So far, because Sanliurfa was going to be offered as a sacrificial lamb to the invading Syrians while defenses in Ankara and Diyarbakir to the northeast and northwest were shored up and hardened, no one in the Turkish government had seen fit to tell the United States fighting men that they couldn't die in their places.

Pockets of soft golden light marked civilians gathered around lanterns or campfires. Looters moved among them, too, a reminder that primitive impulses lurked just below the surface of most people. The fear and uncertainty those people had experienced had brought those old instincts to the forefront.

The Syrian air force had made an unexpected raid the night before that had resulted in a number of casualties. Goose could make out the darker cavities in the city where that strike had compounded the destruction of the SCUD missile strikes that had hammered Sanliurfa in the opening minutes of the undeclared war. The Syrian fighters last night had mainly targeted Sanliurfa Airport, finishing off what the SCUD attacks had started. The enemy pilots had also targeted homes and businesses, areas where the U.S. forces had gathered to relax or sleep while off duty. A third of the city lay in ruins.

Syrian snipers had kept the perimeter guards busy as well, killing nineteen more soldiers and wounding forty-three. The Rangers and marine snipers had confirmed twenty-two kills among the Syrian snipers themselves, but no one took any solace in that. Compared to U.S. casualties and the two hundred and twelve confirmed civilian lives lost to bombs, the Syrians had come out on top during that attack. Goose was pretty sure their body counts were reasonably accurate, despite the carnage from the initial air strikes. Search-and-rescue teams could tell the difference between the newly dead and the early kills because the bodies were fresh as opposed to those that had lain there decomposing since the first attack. The wounded that night numbered over eight hundred, most of those also civilian.

Before the Syrian attack, two hundred and eighty thousand people had lived in Sanliurfa. With the addition of the Ataturk Baraji Dam, named one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World, as part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project, the city had grown by leaps and bounds. Wealth and privilege had flowed into Sanliurfa, and it was no surprise that the Syrians wanted to capture the city and create a psychological advantage in their undeclared war.

Turning his attention to the south-southeast, Goose took his 10x50 binoculars from the front pack attached to his Load Carrying

Equipment harness. He dialed in the magnification, moving the binoculars slowly to where the Syrian advance stood out against the dark horizon. They stirred up gray-brown dust clouds as they traveled. There was no mistaking the blocky lines of the Soviet-made tanks and APCs.

"Do you think this is it?" Mitchell asked. He hunkered down beside Goose and kept one hand clamped over the pencil mike of his headset so his voice wouldn't be broadcast over the com. "Do you think they're going to try to rout us tonight?"

"Not in the dark." Goose put confidence in his voice. That was part of his job as first sergeant, to make the troops believe there was never a situation he hadn't seen, never an enemy he couldn't out-guess. "On a hit-and-git mission, darkness is their friend. But trying to take over an urban area filled with hostiles—they'll want the light of day."

"So what's up with this?"

"Pressure," Goose responded. "Just knocking on the door and letting us know they're still out there. This is designed to keep the kettle primed and boiling hot. They can put a few men in the field and keep this whole city awake at night."

"Still means they'll be coming soon."

"Affirmative," Goose said. Keeping the confidence of the troops also meant never lying to them.

"How far do you think they'll push it tonight?"

"As far as they can." Goose surveyed the approaching vehicles. They weren't coming with any speed, and maybe that was a good thing.

Lowering the binoculars, he glanced at the Chase-Durer Combat Command Automatic Chronograph he'd gotten as a Father's Day gift from Megan and the kids. He needed a watch in the field, and though the timepiece was an expensive one, Megan had insisted on giving it to him, telling him that she knew he took care of his gear. She also knew that he would never check the time without thinking of her and Joey and Chris.

"They're stopping," Mitchell said.

Goose glanced back up and saw that the advancing line of military armor had indeed stopped. "Spotter teams," he called over the headset.

When the spotter teams acknowledged, Goose said, "Eyes on the skies. In case this is a feint for another aerial attack."

The spotter/sniper teams affirmed the order.

"Phoenix Leader."

Goose recognized Remington's voice at once. "Go, Control. You have Leader."

"Tach Two, Leader."

"Affirmative, Control. Oracle, this is Phoenix Leader."

Oracle was the com designation for Second Lieutenant Dan Knoffler, who was next in line for command of the company after Goose. Knoffler was currently sequestered in another part of the city, ready to take over at a moment's notice if Remington and Goose were both injured or knocked out of the com loop.

Knoffler also managed the constant flow of vehicles drafted into medical service to transport civilian and military wounded to Ankara. Planes and helicopters were used only in cases of extreme emergency.

"Go, Phoenix Leader," Knoffler radioed back. He was in his mid-twenties, innocent in a lot of ways, but a dedicated warrior all the same. He'd missed the latest Iraqi war, and this action in Turkey was the first actual combat he'd seen. If he lived through the coming firefights, Goose knew the young lieutenant would grow into a command.

"You're monitoring?" Goose asked.

"Affirmative. Oracle has the sit-rep."

"Oracle has the ball," Goose said, letting Knoffler know he was going to be overseeing the city defenses for the time being.

"Affirmative. Oracle has the ball."

Goose switched channels. He stared across the harsh terrain at the line of vehicles hunched like predatory beasts in the distance. "I'm here, Captain." He stepped away from Mitchell so even his side of the conversation would remain private.

"I'm looking at Syrian heavy cavalry, Goose," Remington said.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me why."

"Don't know, sir."

Remington was silent for a moment. "C'mon, Goose; you and I have been around the block a time or two. We've tramped through some wars in our time. What does your gut tell you?"

"The Syrians didn't show up just to remind us they're out there."

"They could have," Remington said. For years—while they'd been privates together, then corporals, and later, sergeants—they had always played the devil's advocate for each other. If one of them came up with an exercise or a combat plan, the other did his level best to tear it to shreds, looking for weaknesses. They'd always been a good team.

We just don't always agree on things, Goose reminded himself. Corporal Dean Hardin was a good case in point. Goose put that sore point away.

"No, sir," Goose said. "I don't think that's the answer."

"Then what?"

Goose looked at the line of vehicles in the distance. Even though he didn't know for sure where Remington was, he felt certain the man was watching the Syrian cav with the same anticipation he was. "They're here to make a statement, sir."

"Being out there on the horizon isn't enough?"

"No, sir," Goose answered, "not hardly. After that attack last night, they should have been content to leave us alone for a while. The local people we're trading with, sir, we know they're trading with the Syrians, too. Those traders give the Syrians information just as they give us information."

That was why traders were met at the gates and not allowed to run unsupervised throughout the city. Trading for supplies was acceptable, but allowing them access to information about the city's defenses to sell to the Syrians was out of the question. Even so, Sanliurfa was huge. Policing the whole area while managing ongoing rescue and salvage operations was impossible.

"Think maybe we should put a bird in the air, Goose?" Remington asked.

The support aircraft from the marine wing that had arrived from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit—Special Operations Capable MEU(SOC) out in the Mediterranean Sea had AH-1W Cobra attack helicopters in their ranks. The Whiskey Cobra was a piece of serious hardware. After seeing the marines and the Cobras in action, Goose had a healthy respect for the pilots and their machines.

"We'd be risking the helo," Goose said. "And the pilot and gunner."

"Every military action is an investment of risk," Remington countered. "Whether you advance, fall back, or wait, you're at risk."

"Yes, sir."

"So, if they're a ticking clock, everything in me wants to spring the trap."

"Yes, sir," Goose replied. "One thing my daddy always taught me about hunting in the swamps down in Waycross, Georgia, Captain: A patient hunter makes fewer mistakes than a man breaking brush just because he's a little antsy."

"Do you think I'm antsy, First Sergeant?" Remington's tone was

abrupt. Despite the friendship and the working relationship they had, Goose knew there was also a certain friction between them.

Goose had chosen not to follow Remington into OCS despite Remington's best arguments in favor of the move. Having served his country for seventeen years as a noncommissioned officer—a non-com—Goose remained happy to finish out his twenty as the same. A commission meant dealing more with paper and less with people. Goose preferred the people.

"No, sir," Goose answered. "I feel the same way. It's hard to pass up a snake hole without cutting a branch and shoving it down that hole to find out if the snake is home. But the way we're set up here, sir? We're prepared to skin the snake if it was to come to us. We are not prepared to go after it."

After a brief hesitation, Remington said, "Maybe we're not ready now, but we will be."

"Yes, sir." An uncomfortable silence passed for a few minutes. Goose stood on the rooftop with his binocs to his eyes. The gentle wind out of the south brought the thin scent of possible rain and a constant barrage of dust. Nearly every meal and Meal-Ready-to-Eat Goose had eaten since arriving in Sanliurfa tasted of dust. But even the prepacked MREs had been welcome.

"Still no sat-com relays in the area?" Goose asked.

"No," Remington answered.

Only a few days before, the new Romanian president, Nicolae Carpathia, had donated use of his satellite systems to aid the United States military teams in their assessment and eventual evacuation of the border. Yesterday, Carpathia had withdrawn that support. He had decided to go speak to the United Nations to focus the world's attention on staying together on the issue of the mysterious disappearances. Syria had protested the U.S. military's use of Carpathia's satellites, saying the United States was there only to protect their own interests. According to Remington, who had somehow managed to get the Romanian president's ear, Carpathia had reluctantly agreed and withdrawn the use of the satellites.

The United States-supplied sat-relay system in place now proved barely adequate to allow communications between the U.S. forces scattered around Turkey and USS *Wasp* in the Mediterranean Sea. Captain Mark Falkirk commanded *Wasp*, the lead ship in the seven-vessel Amphibious Readiness Group. At the time of the Syrian attack, the 26th MEU(SOC) had been assigned to a 180-float in the Med.

Now Falkirk and his ships were being used as staging areas to prepare for the coming battles in Turkey if Syria didn't stand down.

A flat tone buzzed in Goose's headset. Knoffler was calling for attention. "Cap," Goose said.

"Got it," Remington replied. "Go."

Goose flipped the radio back to the primary channel.

"Go, Oracle," Remington said. "You've got Control."

Goose didn't say anything. With the Ranger captain logging on, Knoffler would know that the first sergeant was there as well.

"We've got movement, Control," Knoffler said.

"Where?" Remington asked.

Goose raked the terrain with the binocs. Gray movement slid forward from the morass of shifting dust that hovered around the Syrian cav units.

"East end," Knoffler announced.

"Got it," Remington said. "One vehicle?"

"Affirmative, Control."

"Affirmative," Goose added. "Sweep perimeter checkpoints. By the numbers."

In quick succession, the perimeter checkpoint duty officers confirmed the reported sighting of one vehicle en route to Sanliurfa. All the checkpoints on the northern side of the city confirmed there was no questionable activity.

Tension filled Goose. He always got that way before combat. Then, when the first round was fired or the first move was executed, everything inside him became unstuck and he could move again. He said a brief prayer, asking God for His help during the course of the night, praying that his men and the people they defended would get through the encounter unscathed.

Three days ago, during the retreat from the border, a pass had become impassable for a short time. While the Syrians closed in at full speed, Corporal Joseph Baker had united the men in reciting the Twenty-third Psalm. Baker had declared his faith in God, offering salvation to the men trapped on that mountain.

And in the moment before the Syrians had opened fire into the trapped military, an earthquake had split the mountain and brushed the enemy army away. The 75th had lived, and Baker had stepped into his calling among the Rangers. Whenever he wasn't on duty or helping with the wounded, Baker was witnessing to and counseling men who reached out to a faith they had never known or had somehow forgotten about.

Goose counted himself among those who had forgotten their faith in God. Wes Gander, Goose's father, had taught Sunday school in the little Baptist church they'd attended in Waycross. Goose had always been there, but he hadn't always been attentive. Now he found himself wishing he'd listened better to the lessons his father had taught.

Peering through the binocs, Goose watched the vehicle approach, picking up speed. It was an American cargo truck. A charred and tattered remnant of the flag of the United States hung from a fiberglass pole in the back. Several of the Turkish, U.N., and U.S. vehicles had been abandoned at the border because there hadn't been enough gasoline salvaged to remove them all. Many of them had been left behind, booby-trapped. This one appeared to be finding its way to them despite its fate at the border.

"Eagle One," Goose called out, knowing from experience that Remington would want him to handle moment-to-moment operations to free up the captain to see the overall picture.

"Go, Leader," Mitchell replied.

"Can you ID the driver?" Goose said. The sniper had a telescopic lens on his M-24 bolt-action sniper rifle.

"Looking, Leader."

Goose felt cold inside. Although they'd searched diligently, he knew there was every possibility they had left some wounded behind. There were over two hundred men on Turkish, U.N., Ranger, and marine MIA lists. *The Syrians wouldn't bring prisoners here just to release them.* But maybe the man was an advance scout, one who was there to convince them that the Syrians had hostages.

"One man in the cab," Mitchell said a moment later. "He's wearing one of our uniforms."

"Anyone else?" Goose asked.

"Negative."

The other spotter/sniper teams quickly confirmed the information.

Goose put the binocs away. He knelt beside the retaining wall on the rooftop and unlimbered the M-4A1. The assault rifle had telescopic sights, but they didn't have the range of the binocs. Keeping the scope on target was also problematic.

The FIRM—Floating Integrated Rail Mount—system allowed a rifleman to mount a number of optical and sighting devices. The AN/PVS-4 night-vision scope limned the world and everything in it with a green glow.

Leaning forward slightly, bracing to take the recoil of the shot if it came to that, Goose focused on the cargo truck's driver. The uniform the man wore was that of a Ranger. His face, however, remained in shadows.

"Checkpoint Nineteen," Goose called as he tracked the cargo truck's progress. "This is Phoenix Leader."

"Go, Phoenix Leader. Checkpoint Nineteen reads you loud and clear."

"Get a loud-hailer, Nineteen," Goose instructed. "Warn that truck off."

The response was immediate. "Leader, that truck could have some of our guys in it."

"Get it done, Nineteen," Goose ordered, putting steel in his voice. "If those are our people in that truck, they'll be there when we get ready to bring them in."

A moment later, the mechanical basso thunder of the checkpoint commander's voice rang out over the dark city. "Stop the vehicle! Stop the vehicle *now!*"

But the cargo truck didn't stop. In fact, the vehicle gained speed, headed directly for the barricade two blocks over.

"Sniper teams," Goose said, "bring the truck down. Leave the driver intact." Before his words died away, shots roared from the Marine Corps' .50-caliber Barrett sniper rifles as they joined the thunder of the Ranger M-24s firing on the truck.

Bullets struck sparks from the cargo truck's metal hide. The canvas over the ribbed back end flapped loose, revealing huge tears. One of the tires went flat and the truck jerked to the right.

The driver immediately corrected the truck's direction. He drove straight for the barricaded area. The truck's transmission groaned like a dying beast and the vehicle gained speed. The flat tire skidded over the rough ground and threw off chunks of rubber.

"He's not stopping!" Goose called, watching the action through the M-4A1's starlight scope. "Bring down the driver! Bring down the driver!" It was a hard decision, and it had to be made on the fly.

The truck remained on a collision course with the barricade. A split second later, the driver opened the truck door and bailed from the bucking vehicle. He hit the ground in a flurry of flying dirt. Before he'd abandoned the vehicle, the driver had evidently locked the steering wheel into position. The truck drifted a little off the approach, but remained pretty much on target.

Even as the snipers and some of the Rangers stationed along the

barricade kept up a withering rate of fire, the cargo truck made contact with the heap of abandoned cars and farm equipment. The resulting explosion blew the barricade apart. Cars, tractors, sandbags, and rocks skidded and flew backward and up into the air. The cargo truck became a mass of explosions. Yellow and red flames roiled in the air, and clouds of smoke filled the immediate vicinity.

Goose went deaf with the sudden, horrific cannonade of detonations. Even two blocks away, he was blown from his kneeling position by the concussive wave. Before he could get to his feet, a smoldering corpse landed on the rooftop near him.

Then dead men rained from the sky.