# Chapter 1

“Two months!” Jean-Francois Durand complained.

The Frenchman was tall and slender, though not unhealthily so, with a high forehead and cheekbones, and bright, intelligent eyes, in spite of their current, sunken condition. A narrow moustache clung to the contours of his upper lip, while his collar length chestnut hair was tied back with a black ribbon.

Over his shirt, britches and boots he was clad in the off-white smock of the physician. Though regularly scrubbed by camp followers to erase the worst of the gore, it was stained with a legacy of countless amputations, and musket balls and shrapnel extracted from human tissue. It had been pristine at the beginning of the campaign.

It was the afternoon of May the tenth, seventeen ninety-nine. Jean-Francois could speak because there had been some two hours respite in the artillery barrages. The shelling had began at dawn that day, and the period of silence meant the main assault had to be well underway.

The surgeon kept vigil by the opening of a large, canvass tent, a medical pavilion. He gazed out on a muddy track, where a cannon with a broken wheel stood sentry just outside another tent that obscured the view beyond. The medical pavilions were part of a hospital depot situated on Mount Carmel, some twenty miles south-east of the walled city of Acre, in the Holy Land. Occupied by a strong garrison of Ottomans, the city lay on the shores of the Mediterranean, and for the past two months, it had been the subject of a siege by Napoleon.

“Two months we’ve been stuck on this god forsaken hill,” he continued.

The man Jean-Francois made his complaint to was his assistant, Louis Joubert, a ruddy-faced lad in his early twenties, with wiry, reddish sideburns. Louis should have looked more at home on a farm than in an operating theatre, however rudimentary it was.

Louis pursed his lips in sympathy.

“I know, I know,” he said.

“I mean two months!” Jean-Francois continued. “It was supposed to have been two weeks.”

“I know, I know,” said Louis.

Jean-Francois sighed and gazed back into the pavilion. Near the entrance were a pair of wooden benches fitted with straps. Low tables nearby held bowls of water, rolls of linen, and surgical instruments awaiting the anticipated influx of wounded. Otherwise, rows of mostly empty bunks awaited patients. One or two were occupied by officers convalescing from injuries sustained during the earlier assaults on Acre, which had been repelled by stubborn Ottoman forces. The defenders had shown considerably greater resolve than the French leadership had given them credit for.

There was a captain from Toulon, who had lost the sight in both his eyes, and whose whole head was bandaged, obscuring his features. A fellow officer, from Paris if Jean-Francois’ memory served, sat up in his bunk, jotting in a journal with his remaining hand. At the far end of the pavilion, away from the other patients, huddled a number of sweaty, shivering, miserable looking men who suffered with suspected plague. The apothecary, De Cours, a white-haired septuagenarian, tended these latter wretches with such decoctions as he had in his repertoire.

“Here they come!” cried Louis.

And sure enough, as Jean-Francois turned he beheld a horse drawn cart creak up to the entrance of the pavilion. The pitiful moans of the wounded and dying met his ears before he could lay eyes on the carnage in the back.

The driver halted the cart next to the entrance, and the soldier accompanying him hopped down and around to the rear of the cart. The surgeon observed blood seeping between the wooden slats of the cart, onto the dusty, crumbling track. The men pulled down the gate at the rear of the cart as Jean-Francois and Louis joined them to see what was in store.

Within the cart a dozen or so men languished in a bed awash with gore. These would be the first of many. Jean-Francois turned his expert scrutiny upon the patients. Two of them clearly hadn’t survived the journey up the trail, and there were five lower ranking soldiers who were breathing, but not conscious, due to a variety of gunshot, shrapnel and blast injuries. The more seriously injured but conscious patients included a lieutenant with a lump of shrapnel protruding from his upper ribcage, a corporal who had been gut-shot, and a captain suffering horrific burns up the left side of his body. The walking wounded were a private whose shin had been shattered by a musket ball, and another corporal whose hand had been gashed by his own ramrod, when he’d accidentally discharged it while reloading.

“You two find a bunk near the entrance and I’ll see to you as soon as I can,” Jean-Francois said to the latter patients.

The corporal climbed down from the cart under his own steam and helped the man with the wounded leg down. Together they entered the pavilion, with the corporal supporting the limping private.

Next Jean-Francois turned his attention to the lieutenant and the captain. He instructed the driver and his escort to stretcher them into the pavilion and they duly followed his orders. They unhooked a stretcher from the side of the cart and lifted the badly burned captain on to it first.

 Jean-Francois said to them, “Put him in a bunk and see to it that the apothecary gives him a hero’s dose of opium for his pain.”

The driver nodded gravely, knowing what that meant. There was nothing they could for his injuries, so the captain would be gently spirited away on an overdose of the drug. Jean-Francois slapped the driver on the shoulder and away they went, bearing their doomed cargo.

Jean-Francois and Louis climbed up into the bed of the cart to examine the remaining wounded. Both the lieutenant and the gut shot corporal were awake and lucid. Jean-Francois lifted the corporal’s jerkin and examined the ugly, swollen hole in the man’s abdomen, which leaked a small rivulet of blood when the sticky fabric was pulled back from it. He sniffed at the wound and nodded contemplatively.

“What is your name?” he said to the man.

“Ju-Jules,” the wounded man answered.

“I don’t think your gut is perforated,” Jean-Francois said to Jules, “but that musket ball needs to come out quickly if you’re going to witness another dawn. You’re first up on the operating table.”

The corporal gulped and nodded, while the lieutenant looked on, nonplussed.

“I will attend to you next,” Jean-Francois informed the lieutenant.

“But I outrank him,” the lieutenant protested.

“Nevertheless,” said Jean-Francois, grunting as he and Louis lifted down another stretcher and rolled Jules on to it. “His injury requires more urgent attention than yours. Rest assured, Lieutenant, as long as your shrapnel remains where it is, you won’t bleed to death. I’ll have the driver and his escort make you comfortable while you wait.”

At this point, the driver and his escort were indeed returning with the empty stretcher.

Jean-Francois indicated the lieutenant, “Him next, put him on a bunk by the entrance.”

Jean-Francois and Louis then lifted down the stretcher with the corporal on it and took him inside. The other corporal, with the wounded hand, awaited by the entrance. He nodded to Jean-Francois as they came into the tent.

“You don’t mind mind waiting do you?” Jean-Francois said to him.

“No, no,” replied the corporal, and looked back to the private who was sat with his wounded leg stretched out on a bunk, who gave an okay sign in return.

He turned back to Jean-Francois, “You take all the time you need.”

Jean-Francois and Louis lifted the corporal up on to the operating table and slid the stretcher out from under him, while the driver and his escort brought the lieutenant in on a stretcher, glaring as he passed them. Across the table from Louis, Jean-Francois rolled his eyes at this.

“That conscience will land you in hot water, Jean-Francois,” Louis observed with a shake of his rugged head. “You know the new triage rules state officers and men who can be returned to battle first, then those with lighter wounds, and lastly the most seriously injured.”

“Bah!” Jean-Francois dismissed him. “My business is to save lives, not feed the war machine. Now, attend, get his shirt off, and hand me the scalpel.”

Jean-Francois grabbed a bottle of cognac from the table next to him, took a swig, offered the patient a swig, who took the bottle from him and complied. He recovered the bottle and poured a slug over the wound site, which caused the patient to wince so violently he sat bolt upright. In a fluid motion, Jean-Francois thrust a well-gnawed lump of wood between his teeth and pushed him back down.

Louis handed him the long bladed scalpel.

“Very well my friend,” Jean-Francois informed his patient. “This will pinch somewhat.”

Earlier that morning, Captain Remy Grunier crouched in a defile with his company of infantry. He was a dashing, clean-shaven young officer, in his thirties, with quick blue eyes and well-trimmed, fair sideburns peeking out from beneath his helmet. His infantry were part of Reynier’s Division that would lead the assault on the city.

It was the eighth time he’d been in this position in the last two months. Every other attempt since they’d arrived at the accursed city had resulted in the French being repelled by naval bombardments from the British ships blockading the harbour, and their own artillery, which had been captured by the garrison of Albanian Turks defending the city and turned against them.

Everything was dry, so dry and baked beneath the merciless sun of the eastern Mediterranean. The British had blocked the entrance to the bay, so the French were experiencing difficulties getting resupplied. Water was rationed, food was rationed, ammunition was rationed, hope was rationed.

Today was apparently going to be different though. Today the French had brought up new artillery, deployed on a ridge somewhere off to the south-east of Remy’s position. The ground shook and grit and sand rained down on the captain and his men as a series of deep, concussive impacts struck the walls of Acre, some three hundred yards ahead. That had been happening every few minutes, without respite, since dawn.

“Surely this time?” said Lafarge, Remy’s squat, lumpen-faced and battle-scarred sergeant.

“You would think so,” Remy replied.

The captain shook a small avalanche of grit from his tall, flat topped helmet, and brushed the remainder from his epaulettes.

“Help me up, Sergeant,” he said, and commenced clambering up the side of the defile.

The sergeant set down his musket and leaned his back into the wall of sandy earth, where got his meaty hands under the soles of Remy’s boots. He boosted his captain up so that Remy could peer over the edge of the defile.

Remy looked out over the plain to the city, where the smoke began to clear. His eyes widened in awe as a section of the thick, stone wall, some twenty yards across, lazily bowed outwards from foundation to ramparts. The wall section separated from the whole and plunged to the ground, coming apart in a shower of masonry and the tumbling, frail, dark specks of screaming defenders.

As tons of falling blocks struck the ground, the whole side of the wall was obscured by a great, billowing plume of dust and sand. Remy then looked around to his left and right, where fellow French officers also stared agog. After a brief lull in which the spectacle sunk in, and the smoke and dust cleared somewhat, a mighty cheer issued from the French lines.

Surviving Turks on the intact sections of wall started sniping at the French lines, so Remy dropped back into his defile and seized Sergeant Lafarge by the shoulders.

“They’ve done it! They’ve done it!” he laughed. “It’s breached!”

Lafarge scooped up his musket and addressed the column of troops, who despite their fatigue stood alert and awaiting commands. Just one last push.

“Attention ladies, this is what all the bother has been about. Drummer! On me!” Lafarge bellowed.

A boy barely in his teens pushed through to the front, to the sergeant’s side, sticks at the ready to drum out a marching beat for the soldiers. The clarion notes of bugles rang out over the parched landscape. Lafarge nodded to the boy, and the refrain of the bugles was replaced by the pounding of drum skins and boot leather.

Remy laid his fingertips upon the medal on his chest, won at the Battle of Jaffa, earlier in the campaign, and set his jaw grimly. Following that victory, the atrocities the French troops had inflicted on that city’s civilians were far from glorious, and he had no desire to see the same repeated at Acre. That black day was in part why the defenders of Acre had proven so committed in their resolve, for they knew the people of Jaffa had received no quarter from the invaders.

“When we take this city today,” Remy announced in a loud clear voice, “you will behave like professional soldiers and not bandits and looters. Any man under my command who engages in looting, or the murder or rape of civilians, will hang for it.”

Lafarge surreptitiously rolled his eyes at this, then picked up from where Remy left off, “You heard the Captain! No nonsense after the battle, but right now, show those Turk bastards your steel boys! Move out!”

The company moved out in a column, four abreast in the defile. The ground rose up sharply and they emerged on to the open plain before the city. All around other companies of infantry were doing the same. Colours unfurled, eagles came to the vanguard, and the French army commenced the short march across the plain to the shattered walls of Acre.

Turkish riflemen lined up on the walls and readied their weapons, while more defenders gathered at the breach. The other French columns spread out as they neared the opening, so they had a broader front with which to return fire more effectively. Remy’s company would be the first through, so they remained in a tight phalanx. The first Turkish volley scythed into the French lines, and men crumpled in a wave, some wounded and wailing piteously, others already dead. Despite this, the French marched on to the beat of the drum, flowing over and around the fallen without missing a step. Napoleon’s infantrymen were rightly famed for their ability to manoeuvre under fire.

Remy understood well that it was a grim lottery for the men, but he and the other veterans knew that if they could hold formation long enough to close with the enemy, the battle would be theirs. On they pressed towards the breach. A second volley hammered down from the ramparts and another swathe of men staggered, slumped to their knees and went over. One more volley and they’d be upon the defenders.

Remy drew his sabre and picked up the pace. The depleted column trotted along behind him while two more companies of the French infantry sent a couple of volleys up at the Turkish riflemen, to encourage them to keep their heads down. The action had little effect, and another round of fire pounded Remy’s assaulting troops. Next him, Lafarge stumbled and coughed up a gout of dark blood, as a crimson stain blossomed on his white tunic.

“I’ll see you in the next life, Lafarge!” Remy shouted over the din of battle, then to the troops. “Fix bayonets! Charge!”

The well-drilled column of Infantrymen fanned out, moving at a quick trotting pace as they closed the gap on the Turkish lines. They drew long, needle pointed bayonets from their belts as they ran, and clipped them over the muzzles of their Charleville muskets. The drummer boy melted back through the ranks, his job done.

Defenders rushed from amidst the rubble to meet the French charge. A full moustachioed Turk, clad in white and tan loose fitting garments rushed at Remy uttering an ululating battle-cry. The captain drew his pistol and fired, the shot smashing through the Turk’s cheekbone just below his eye, and blasting his brains out the back of his yellow turban.

And then another was on him, and he barely ducked a vicious scimitar cut that whistled past his ear. He thrust up with the sabre into the fellow’s charge, the enemy combatant taking his full weight on the point which pierced his liver below the solar plexus. Remy pirouetted, hauling his blade free of the soldier, and in a fluid move, brought the blade crunching down through the shoulder and collar bone of the next man in line.

He yanked the blade up and slashed the man across his unprotected face for good measure, then staggered back on his heels to slow the momentum so he could take stock. Remy’s infantry flowed around him like a river, discharging their single shots at will into their opponents’ bodies, before wading into the fray to pierce with their bayonets and club with the butts of their muskets.

Yard by bloody yard the defenders were forced back through the breach. Above the French, one or two Turks were able to fire down from the shattered battlements. When a shot grazed Remy’s epaulette, scattering a puff of golden threads, he drew his other pistol and fired up at the Turk who had taken the shot. The fellow clutched his stomach with a groan and tumbled from his perch, to strike the piles of broken stone with a sickening, wet thud.

“We’re through,” Remy cried.

He scrambled over the collapsed masonry and into the city proper, while the defenders of the breach fled before his company. The captain stepped into the streets of Acre, and before him, there rose up another wall. It was clearly a new construction, hastily erected since the siege had started, but ever thicker than the outer wall. The Turkish stragglers escaped up ladders and ropes which were pulled up behind them.

“Why?” moaned Remy, and dropped to his knees, while around him his men let fall their muskets and gazed up in desolation at this new, insurmountable obstacle.