

TIGER 5

The Punishers' Last Ride

Anthony Davis

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the individuals who have paid the ultimate sacrifice. Not only soldiers and Marines, but their parents, spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends, sons, and daughters. And of course, their friends.

Real heroes' stories are mostly lost to history and never get the telling they deserve.

- Anthony Davis

FORWARD

I was terrified to write this book, but I felt compelled.

For those that know me, I loathe arrogance. Before you start reading, it does help knowing my career was a bit of a dumpster fire.

I don't want to ruin the surprise, but I'm not the hero in this book.

My career in the Marine Corps was not exactly a resounding success. That's ok. My struggles made me who I am and I'm grateful for all of it. Without our struggles our lives wouldn't make such great copy.

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There is nothing else in the world like the smells, sounds, and extraordinary sensations of tanks.

Tanks really are awesome.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the experience, not the story. The story is just along for the ride.

The details blend, but be assured the experience you read is authentic.

I promise to deliver it as I lived it and as best as I can write it.

My recollection is mired by fear, discomfort, and fatigue.

The reality of combat is not the details anyway, it's the experience.

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Sorry about the language. This is how we talk.

I tried to tone it down a bit, but not at the expense of authenticity.

I left the language mostly as is.

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If I leave someone's name out, it's probably because I forgot it or it might be on purpose.

I admittedly burnt a few bridges in my day and I'm sure this book will stoke some of those smoldering ashes.

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Finally, it's not a Wikipedia article. If you don't understand a nuance or a piece of gear, then hang on, I'll get to it. I'll explain things as I go. I do this so you don't get sucked into a boring history lesson during each part.

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Now, mount up!

You better be REDCON ONE by the time you turn the page.

PART 1

The Beginning

WELL... WE HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE

I was standing in the Alpha Company office.

I was a brand new 2ndLt checking in. I was in my Alphas and getting ready to meet my first boss.

My anxiety stemmed mostly from the fear of saying something stupid. You don't get first impressions back, especially in the Marine Corps.

A wise man once said, "Better for people to think you're an idiot, than to open your mouth and prove them right."

A Gunnery Sergeant, usually just "Gunny," casually strolls in from the back hatch. He got about two feet from me, paused, and looked at me with a squint of intrigue.

He punched me in the stomach. "Welcome to Tanks sir!"

He walked out the front hatch like nothing happened. I don't think anyone else in the office even turned around.

This happened two years prior to this deployment. I include it because it's the most authentic introduction to the Marine Tank Community that there is.

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I had returned from Operation Iraqi Freedom a year earlier and was a tank platoon commander in Alpha Co, 1st Tanks.

Don't get too excited. I spent nearly the entire war in the back seat of a Humvee.

My Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF 1) experience was one of mostly confusion, new sensations, and fear.

Like a new penny though, the excitement of the Great War had worn quickly.

It did not take the Marine Corps very long to fall right back into its normal rhythm of Fleet Operations.

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I hadn't impressed anyone and certainly didn't stand out.

My first boss was very good at lauding praise on his war time Lts and reading books about his exploits in the “Great War”. It was a clique I didn’t have much of a chance of joining. One of the Lts stuck around to be the XO, then he was the Company Commander for a short period. His name was Lt McLaughlin. He was a bit different from the rest of the bunch. He was humble and I think related to the new guys more than the old.

It only takes someone going to bat for you once for them to stay in your story. McLaughlin took a good ass chewing for me. The Battalion Commander was hot when I hit a 7-ton with my tank. It was during gunnery, and an accident, but I should’ve been more careful.

Gunnery is like going to the rifle range with your tank. Everyone’s hand wringing over safety and lauding over dumb stuff like having the correct range flags up.

I had come around a corner a bit fast with my turret facing downrange. The backside of the bustle rack caught the side of a 7-ton and its trailer. The crunching noise was audible, but of course, the tank didn’t even flinch.

I saw the Battalion Commander giving McLaughlin a loud counseling over it. McLaughlin turned, walked over to me, and said, “Yeah, don’t hit shit with the tank.”

I spoke. “Got it.” And that was the end of it. He’s a good dude.

I ended up bailing him out a time or two so I think we’re even.

Most of the generation that were in OIF 1 had had their fill and there was a great drawdown. Those that stuck around had big chips on their shoulders. They tried to be humble but mostly failed miserably at it.

I ended up stumbling my way through the training regimen of a junior tank officer and had performed ok. This means I hadn’t gotten fired.

I did my best to keep off the radar and survive.

I was promoted to 1stLt, which is a gimmee if you don’t get in trouble.

McLaughlin called me into the office.

“Davis, you’re going to the 3-Shop.”

I had been a platoon commander for almost a year. My only real accomplishment was that I hadn’t gotten fired. Don’t get me wrong, that’s actually a thing in Tanks.

There isn’t much remediation when it comes to the tank community. If you suck, you’re usually gone pretty quick.

I was only in the Battalion Operations section (3-Shop) a few days when the newest Captain checked in. His name was Lance Langfeldt and he was going to be the OPSO (Operations Officer). He was given the assignment just until he took over a tank company.

The sitting OPSO had found himself a sweet individual augment (IA) gig on a staff in Iraq for the drawdown. So, Captain Langfeldt was taking his place here at the Battalion.

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Cool, how hard could this be?

Good lord, I had no idea...

This was the first time in my life that I would get to the end of the day and say, "Fuck it, I'm going to get fired tomorrow anyway. I might as well go home."

There is a tipping point of responsibility in which you grow out of doing a "good job" and transcend into feeling lucky if you make it one more day.

"This guy sounds like a jerk." My wife would try to console me as I collapsed on the couch each night.

"Yeah, I guess... Good news is he is getting ready to take over one of the companies so he won't be my boss for much longer."

The Battalion Adjutant (ADJ) poked his head in the 3 Shop. "Davis, the Battalion Commander wants to see you."

"What? Me? Oh shit. What's this about?"

"I don't know but he's got the OPSO in there."

Your mind races when your name comes up in the military... for anything.

I made quick inventory of my latest gaffs and stupid remarks when drinking too much. I couldn't pin down just one thing off the top of my head. There were plenty.

The Adj scurried off back down the hall.

I instinctively rubbed my face to make sure I had shaved. Like it mattered at this point. I patted down my pockets to make sure I had a pen at least. I told myself, relax, it's probably something dumb. Nothing to sweat.

And with a deep breath I knocked on the hatch.

"Davis, come in, sit down."

I must admit, I thought it was kind of cool the Battalion Commander knew my name. I thought I had done a pretty good job of laying low in the

Battalion.

Tanks is a minefield, best to tread carefully as a junior officer.

“Congrats, you are going to be a Company XO.”

He continued. “I know you will do great; you already know Lance.”

The Battalion Commander smiled.

I didn't even look at Captain Langfeldt, who was sitting in the chair next to me.

The pit in my stomach gaped open and the rest of my torso began to be devoured by it.

I could feel my head spinning as visions of court-martials and ridicule certainly awaited me.

Shit...

Of course I wanted to be an XO, but I wanted to live through it as well.

My mind was racing about how this was going to go. I was already over-tasked, disorganized, and felt like I was barely holding on as the Assistant OPSO.

Work for Captain Langfeldt? Like full time? Uh... I'm thinking to myself, I don't even know if that's possible.

Working for Captain Langfeldt was already a nightmare. I knew it was about to get a lot tougher.

I'm thinking, this is going to be horrible.

It was.

“God dammit Davis! You are the fucking Training Officer and it seems that you are the least enthused about training! You do realize the XO is the Training Officer, right?”

“Uh, yes sir.”

It was near 0100 in the morning and I had just gotten back from leading a dismounted patrol out of the mountains of the Cleghorn Training Area.

I was standing tall in front of Captain Langfeldt, in the middle of the Desert of 29 Palms, in the dark...

I was drenched in sweat, dehydrated, and felt sick from not having eaten in hours.

It was a moonlit night. Everything glowed with an eerie blue sheen, a reverent to *The Color Out of Space*.

As I'm standing there, I can't help but wonder, what are we doing out here? I didn't know anyone even used this part of the base.

It was basically a big blank spot on the map between the mountainous training areas of the east and the giant public recreational lands to the west. This is where cartographers usually write the names of places or add other random boxes of text.

The map makers are like, well no one is going there. Why bother?

The area we were training in was awash with a maze of windswept dunes and dead-end canyons. At night it looked like the surface of the moon. Except, it was hotter than the moon.

We had been walking for about three hours when we finally got back to the assembly area. Our tanks were arranged in a chuck-wagon circle facing outboard.

I will be honest with you; I don't remember whose brilliant idea it was to do some "dismounted" security patrols on this field op.

We've got 14 Tanks out here and we're walking around like fucking morons. This made no sense and I was hot, tired, and hungry.

I am cautious though. I don't want to throw too much blame, because it was probably my suggestion and I just forgot about it. I was just trying to sound motivated in the planning meeting.

I was a bit dejected, and primed for making a verbal miscue.

And so, I did.

Literally all I said was, "Sir, since the last patrol was 'until mission complete,' we should do the second patrol by 'time completion.' That way we know when to head back if it starts getting late."

I really meant early, like 0300 in the morning. Then I said, "I think the Marines could use a break."

Captain Langfeldt lost it.

"Gunny! Come here. Are the Marines tired?"

"Uh, I think they're doing alright." The Gunny turned to slink away back into the darkness.

I believe he had the right idea. He already knew that the CO was fired up and it was best to walk away softly. I mean, who didn't? The dark masked the formality of the event but not the yelling.

"Hey, I didn't dismiss you."

“Uh, sir?” The Gunny stood a bit dumbfounded. Officers don’t really say stuff like this in real life. It’s more of a movie thing. So, when it does happen, it’s more of an event of confusion than reprimand.

“Ok, you know I’m not a dick. I just don’t want things to get too informal around here, we’re deploying in a few months.”

“Yes sir, I got it. Can I go check on the boys?”

“Of course.”

The Gunny turned and glided away. If you squinted, you could probably see he was shaking his head, like WTF was that about?

Captain Langfeldt turned back to me.

I’m glad it’s dark, because honestly, I didn’t want to see his face. It would've made it worse.

“Now get your next patrol ready to go... Fucking time instead of mission... You disappoint me Davis...”

Captain Langfeldt is an intense dude.

I guess after working for him for a few months we hadn’t quite made it to “drinking buddy” status yet. Fingers crossed though...

I always had a personal rule, even at this young age in the Marine Corps. You could be a dick, but only if you were good at your job.

I hate to admit it, but Captain Langfeldt was pretty good at his job. But yes, he was still kind of a dick.

But still my boss.

And yeah in hindsight, I guess I was being a bit of a pussy anyway.

But really? Another 3 hours of this shit? Ugh...

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“Davis, get in here. Check this out.” Captain Langfeldt summoned.

The Company Commander from the previous deployment was showing Captain Langfeldt some videos on his laptop. Captain Langfeldt wanted me to see what all the hoopla was about.

The other Captain opened his laptop and set it on Langfeldt’s desk.

This was the company before us. The rotation was going back and forth from 1st to 2D Tanks, so we were taking over for the tank company that was deployed right now. This was the company commander from the company that had just gotten back.

The other company commander was drooling over his own awesomeness, “Ok, check this out, this is where we are shooting into the city.”

The video was a first-person view shot from the loaders hatch on the tank.

I assume it was the loader with a shitty camcorder. The clip was of the tank commander just sailing .50cal into the town of Fallujah from almost a mile away.

Again, the company commander was like, “Ooh, ooh, check this one out. I shot like 3 HEAT rounds.”

The video clearly showed the tanks sitting a couple kilometers outside of the city just lobbing rounds at fictitious, or at best, phantom enemy insurgents.

The proud Captain slapped his computer closed and left with an air of accomplishment.

Captain Langfeldt looked kinda serious...

He paused then said, “Uh what do you think about that?”

I could tell it was probably a real question and not just the normal baited trigger for an ass chewing.

I hate this kind of conversation; I probably should’ve been more reserved but oh well...

I crossed my arms and took a deep breath, “I think they are a bunch of dudes lobbing HEAT rounds into a town in which they aren’t even going into... They think it is a fucking game... Look, I’m no war hero sir, but I saw some of this bravado bullshit when I was there two years ago. That was the “March Up.” I could understand a little reckless abandon was warranted then. What he just showed, isn’t really combat, that’s just a turkey shoot. I bet they write everyone up for Bronze Stars and pat each other on the backs for being war heroes... It’s bullshit, we’re not doing dumb shit like that... Sir...”

Captain Langfeldt leaned back in his chair.

His response was curt.

“I know you have got work to do, so have at it.”

I was a bit surprised. Was that a thinly veiled complement? From Captain Langfeldt? No way... not possible. It was more of a non-negative.

I’ll take a non-negative at this point. It was at least was a tick in the right direction.

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Those dudes did write each other up for Bronze Stars. War heroes all around.

These same dudes told war stories that would permeate through the small Marine tank community. I even heard a few several years later, by some random dudes who had heard these miraculous tales.

These types of bullshit war stories tend to grow wings.

The true keepers of the faith are always the Senior Staff Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs).

Nothing ruins a good war story like someone that was there. Especially a senior enlisted Marine.

I would come to learn quickly in my career, you can have a chest full of medals, but in any tank community, everyone knows who is legit and who's a dooshbag.

This goes for all the tank communities across the military.

Marine Tanks is a tiny community, your reputation precedes you whether you like it or not.

It is better to have people say you're a slacker in the open than a complete fucking moron behind your back.

Marines afflicted with dooshyness never really shed it. These are the same dudes still on Facebook to this day talking about how it was in "their day." And of course, how awesome combat is.

Don't worry, it all comes full circle, and the SNCOs are like oracles. They're faithful to the truth pretty much forever.

When it comes to who's who in this small community, I'm glad to catch a cursory smile from some of the old legends. It makes me remember, it is not a game, and they know who did things for the right reasons and who was just screwing around.

I COULD USE THE BREAK

Our last field op, before our deployment, was a large-scale live fire event known as CAX or Combined Arms Exercise.

I jumped off the tank. Hitting the desert floor with a thud that reverberated through my blistering headache. I was still a bit dizzy from dry heaving a few minutes ago.

Jumping off the tank is a bit of an art. There are several techniques but my favorite was stepping onto the front slope, by the driver's hatch, and sliding down one of the front fenders. If you got it down you could do it in one fluid motion and almost look cool.

Of course, we all eat shit occasionally, especially when getting off the tank. The trick is not to say a word, or even look back at your crew laughing their asses off. We've all done it.

When you're dehydrated and sunburnt, don't throw in a dip first thing in the morning. It's not as forgiving on the body as a cup of coffee. I didn't have any coffee though. My head was pounding and the heat of the morning sun was already intrusive.

Obviously, I felt like shit. So, my morning was already a mess.

It was going to get worse...

I see the Battalion Forward Air Controller (FAC) and one of the live-fire controllers talking over the hood of a nearby Humvee. The exercise controllers are called Coyotes and they're even more arrogant than pilots, if that's even possible.

A few others we're milling about. I had to interrupt because I needed to figure out where to put the Headquarter tanks for the next event.

The two officers are now joined by a few others and they are all having a great fucking morning.

These guys are drinking coffee, chatting like schoolgirls. I knew I had to interrupt so I listened and waited for break in the conversation.

One of the Forward Air Controllers (a pilot) in his clean cammies and shiny wings was holding court.

“So SERE school isn’t that bad, I knew they couldn’t hurt us so... Blah, blah, blah...”

He was obviously talking about Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape (SERE) school. This is school that most pilots and other idiots go to for some good old-fashioned institutionally sanctioned hazing.

I listened to this droning about hardship and pain from a one of our winged ground warriors for a few minutes until I couldn’t take it anymore...

“Excuse me gentlemen. Fuck me... I’d love to go to SERE school, I could use the break.”

That’s when I realized why so many people had started to congregate around the hood of the Humvee.

Everyone took a small step back so they could see my face. The Tank Battalion Commander being one of them.

Silence...

Fuck, I’m so screwed...

“Davis, Davis, Davis, I know Langfeldt is a hardass, but you managed not to get fired yet. None of us thought you’d last this long, so you must be doing something right...”

He shook his head. “You could use a fucking break...” He laughed. It almost broke the tension.

Everyone knew Langfeldt at this point. And unfortunately, now they all knew me. Especially the Battalion Commander.

“You could use the break.” The Battalion Commander shook his head and smiled again.

So much for laying low in Tanks.

THE TURNOVER

I was riding down from the airfield at Al Assad Airbase in a small van someone had procured. This means it was stolen.

“Ok, see over there? That’s the Tank Ramp. And over there, that’s where we’re all shackled up.”

The company before us was from 2D Tanks. I’ll be honest with you I don’t remember which one, but it doesn’t really matter. The CO was Captain Meyers and the XO was Lt Markley.

Fucking Markley...

I literally can’t say his name without smiling to this day. He is, a character. A great dude, but a character.

I had arrived at Al Assad Airbase after about 5 or 6 days of traveling from the Continental United States (CONUS).

I was there with only a handful of our Marines. I was the “Advanced Party,” a term for the small contingent that deploys early to get everything set up for the main body’s arrival.

I was excited to deploy early. It meant a 3-week break from Captain Langfeldt.

The bad news was, I knew if things weren’t wired tight, I would be in serious trouble when he got here.

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So, to start things off; Markley is driving this van like he stole it.

We are flying through the outside part of the base. We come barreling into the tent area where we’ll be staying.

I could hear a dude behind us as we passed the makeshift entrance to the camp. “Hey! Slow down Devil Dog!”

“Your tent is right there, chow hall is over there, and don’t worry I’ll come find you when Captain Meyers wants to sit down.”

“Thanks man.”

Markley was excited to see us. I could tell he was ready to go home.

Let me clarify. These guys are the Marines who went into Fallujah proper. The big Fallujah battle. The real Fallujah.

There were two big Fallujah battles, the first one, and the second one. Everything else in between was meh...

Hence the dudes lobbing tank main gun rounds into the city from miles away in the previous story.

This tank company had been in the second and final big Fallujah battle. They were a huge contrast to the jokers who just sat outside the town their whole deployment.

After Fallujah, which was about three months earlier, they re-located further north, here at Al Assad.

Markley didn't even mention it. When I did ask, he would just shrug, "Yeah, no big deal."

Any experienced dude in the military will tell you; true warriors don't really do war stories.

I liked these guys already.

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Markley gave me the cursory tour of Al Assad.

He said, "We haven't even been here that long. We tried to steal as much a shit as we could for you guys.

Once again. I liked them already.

Markley took me around to the new tank ramp. It was an old maintenance pad for aircraft. And by a pad, I mean a giant parking spot. There was no roof or anything covering the area. It was a big empty concrete space and it did make a good tank ramp. It was probably for a big airplane like a bomber or something.

Markley had grabbed some of his gear from the hootch to stage on the tank.

"Uh, Markley. Is that a fucking tomahawk?"

"Oh, this thing? We all got tomahawks."

He said it like tomahawks are basic issue...

They are not...

"It turns out if you find the NSN you can order anything you want."

I'm perplexed. "Anything?"

He stopped and looked at me, "anything..."

The NSN is the government stock number for stuff. There's a giant catalog with everything you can think of in it. It's like the JC Penny Christmas Wish

Book for those old enough to remember that glorious thing. I think NSN stands for national stock number, but I'm not sure and really don't care.

That's when I started getting a twinge of fear.

If Captain Langfeldt thinks I'm playing it fast and loose when he gets here, he's gonna loose his shit. I started to wonder how our gear turnover was going to go.

These guys didn't seem to be too concerned with math, budgets, or restrictions on tomahawks.

I love telling this story because shit... I wanted a tomahawk. They were fucking cool. I thought about it for a second. Then snapped back to reality. No fucking way Captain Langfeldt is going to let us order tomahawks.

I laughed to myself.

Markley took me around to see a few other things and we headed back to the chow hall for dinner.

I sat down with Markley and his boss, Captain Meyers.

The best way to describe Captain Meyers is that he not only looks like, but also kind of acts like he Dread Pirate Roberts in The Princess Bride. He's suave, arrogant, but all around an awesome dude.

And yes, of course, he had a cheesy pencil-thin mustache. Markley was working on an obnoxious out-of-regulation mustache himself.

Both Markley and Meyer's gear looked like it had been through hell.

Their flaks were torn and Meyer's flak had stuffing coming out of the top around the neck. I barely noticed it at first, but it almost looks like a bullet hole.

No way. I bet he just ripped it on the bustle rack or something.

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Markley popped his head in our hooch. "Hey, we're planning on going to Hit tomorrow. We can left-seat right-seat."

I said, "Cool, sounds good."

Left-seat right-seat is a real thing in Tanks. When you do a turnover, the new guy replaces the loader in the left seat. Then eventually you switch, and the new guy is the tank commander and the old guy is the loader.

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First thing the next day I headed to the tank ramp. Markley eventually showed up...

“Hey Markley, I’ll be honest, I don’t remember the last time I loaded the main gun. Is that a big deal?”

“Psst, of course not... who fucking cares, we’ll figure it out. Just don’t shoot me with the 240G and we’ll be fine.”

The loaders position on the tank has a 240G machine gun mounted on a ring around the hatch. It’s not really that useful because a 240G bounces all over the place and this shitty mount wasn’t going to help. The 240G could be helpful if you really needed to spray and pray close to the tank. Or, maybe shoot at a roof top above you.

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Later that afternoon we hopped on the tanks.

I settled in as Markley’s loader.

I turned to see Markley pull a shotgun out of the sponson box.

“Whoa, what the fuck is that?”

He looked at me and said, “Uh, what do you mean, it’s a fucking shotgun, what does it look like?”

If you have not figured it out yet, nobody in the entire fucking Marine Corps has shotguns in their Table of Equipment (TE); especially not in tanks.

I’m dumbfounded and I have no idea how this came to be.

I replied, “Yeah, no shit man. What the fuck do you have a shotgun for?”

Markley looked at me and smiled, “It’s for killing bad guys, it’s what we do man.”

Fast and loose is an understatement when it comes to Markley.

- FOB Hit -

We got down to the Forward Operating Base (FOB) at Hit and dropped some of our stuff in the hooches.

Markley comes back over to the tanks. He had just talked to the Commander of whomever was there. I assume infantry of some sorts.

“They’re fucking too scared to leave the FOB. So, let’s go check shit out.”

And with that, we started mounting up to conduct a “patrol.”

In their defense, it turned out to be just the shifty commander at the time that was a bit shy.

No bust on the grunts there. Reservist commanders can be a mixed bag.

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To this day, I've never ridden through an area on a tank with such reckless abandon.

We went tearing through the town of Hit like it was a monster truck rally. We led the "patrol" with Captain Meyer's behind us.

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I braced myself for the impact. "Markley! You just drove over a fucking car."

Over the screaming engine he yells, Well, I guess he won't be parking on the street anymore!" Then just laughs.

Holy shit... Captain Langfeldt is going to fucking kill me.

I'm thinking, at least I'll get fired at the turnover. That way I can just sit on the Regimental Staff or something for this deployment.

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We get back from our whirlwind tour of destruction. Then we hung out in one of the rooms of a concrete building.

We're getting settled to watch a movie on someone's laptop while we ate MREs.

I must ask," what's with the stuffing coming out of your flak jacket? Up there by the neck piece."

He looked at the flak that was now sitting up against the wall. "Oh that, just a bullet hole or something."

I am thinking to myself, or something?

You got fucking shot in the neck and you were just like, no biggie?

Markley chuckled and said, "You wouldn't believe that story."

In Captain Meyers defense, he later explained the whole context of the situation and it was not only super complicated, but crazy he walked away from it.

Somehow, he was off the tank and he took a round to the neck.

No biggie?

Fuck me.

I'm never getting off the tank.

Ever.

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The rest of the gear turnover was stressful but ultimately uneventful. Besides, it turns out gear accountability procedures don't normally account for a unit with a wildly out of control supply section.

Crazy enough, ordering shit like tomahawks, Benchmade knives, and a bunch of other extraneous gear doesn't really affect the important inventories of weapons and equipment.

Thank God.

I didn't want to get fired before Captain Langfeldt even showed up.

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One afternote is funny here.

About halfway through our deployment we heard about a strange occurrence.

The Battalion Commander, of Meyer's and Markley's unit, called in whoever was left in charge after a few months.

Or who was still at the Battalion. After a deployment most folks scatter to the winds due to re-assignments.

Anyway, the 2D Tank Battalion Commander had a box on his desk.

It was a box of 9mm silencers.

Someone had ordered 9mm silencers.

Fun side note. The postal service is good at finding deploying units when they use the PPO type addresses. These are like floating addresses that find you even if you move around. It turns out that since their tank company had re-deployed, which means they went home, all their mail started forwarding back to their home unit.

Their home unit was 2D Tanks.

So sure enough, there was a box of 9mm Silencers on the 2D Tank Battalion Commander's desk.

Real silencers, like out of a fucking James Bond movie. Silencers...

This box was sitting on the desk and he was going to find the person responsible for this ridiculous and reckless use of the Military Supply System.

Of course I have no proof who ordered 9mm silencers.

But seriously, I think we all know...

We all know.

34TH DENTAL BATTALION

It didn't take me very long to learn some of the basic procedures in and around the Marine base.

Basically, if there was any type of dumb rule or procedure, Markley would see how far he could push it.

1st and 2D Tanks are the only two active-duty tank battalions. There's 4th but it's the reserves and they don't deploy as a unit. At least not since the Korean War.

The point is there's only two Tank Battalions in the Marine Corps. Ever since "The March Up" which is Operation Iraqi Freedom 1 which was like 2 years ago, there's only one Marine Tank unit deployed at a time. It's safe to just call any Marine tank that you saw "Tanks" and you'd be technically correct. Pretty simple to remember. It's not rocket science.

At Al Assad Air Base, where "Tanks" is currently located, there are a few dumb procedures and even more dumb rules.

One of the primary rules of the base was that the gate guard had to "verify" which unit you were with before allowing you to get back onto base.

Of course, Markley had to find out how far this would go.

I had been with Markley about 2 weeks now and we we're wrapping up our left-seat right-seat turnover. We had driven off and on base a couple of times. We had been through the gate enough for me to figure out what Markley was doing. And admittedly I saw the humor in it.

When the gate guard would ask which unit we were with, Markley would always reply with something ridiculous. At first it was subtle like 57th Armor or 4th LAR.

Obviously, the joke is that we're sitting 8 feet in the air above them on the most lethal combat vehicle ever designed and the guards would be like,

"I dunno man, I can't figure out what unit they're with."

Then it became Combat Camera or "we're just the Bulk Fuel guys we don't really have a callsign."

Every time the young Lance Corporal or PFC would call the Regimental Headquarters, we would hear them answer back. "Who, what?... That

doesn't make sense." Then the guard would glance our way and say in a low voice into his mic.

"They're on tanks, there's like four of them."

A squelchy reply would always come back, "Oh whatever man, just let them through."

We would get the cursory wave and through we would go.

So, Markley thought this was the funniest thing in the world.

I thought it was pretty cringy but I must admit, it was mildly clever.

We would just sit there, and Markley wouldn't budge.

"Yeah man, we're like bulk fuel. I can't believe this."

Lance and Meyers would be behind us with their hands up in the air. And Markley would just motion like, "I dunno, the gate guard seems confused."

I would just shake my head.

I'm thinking, if fucking Captain Langfeldt finds out we're up here telling the gate guard that we're with Bulk Fuel he's going to punch me in the face. I'm thinking about how I'm going to get fired immediately and must tell this humiliating story to everyone. It's going to be called why I'm stuck on Regimental radio watch for the rest of the deployment.

The last time through the gate was the most ridiculous.

I was in the tank commander's hatch and I'm getting ready to just say, "We're with tanks dude. It's obvious."

Instead, Markley yells right past me. "Yeah, we're with 34th Dental Battalion. The Regimental Commander called us in for a special mission."

I'm literally fucking dying inside. Of course, Captain Langfeldt is already on the radio.

"Black 5, what's the holdup?"

With my hand covering my eyes I'm rubbing my forehead. I key the mic.

"Uh yeah, just a sec, they're said their checking or something."

"Tell them we're fucking tanks. This is ridiculous. I'm coming up."

"No sir, no sir, we got it. We got it..."

Oh dear God, please don't come up here.

"They're letting us in right now."

Markley is fucking dying at this point and I'm just trying to keep my shit together.

I look over and he's laughing so hard he's having a hard time breathing.

I'm basically surfing the line between terror and fury all at the same time.

Finally, the gate guard sees Markley laughing and keys the Regimental radio mic.

“Yeah, these fucking assholes. They’re tanks.”

The Marine on the other end, “Oh, why didn’t you just say so. Let them through.”

Fucking Markley, still to this day, has no idea he was literally playing with my life... Langfeldt would've fired me on the spot... without question.

I’m sure he’s still laughing...

-

At least the turnover is over and I haven’t gotten fired...

Yet.

A QUICKY ON CALLSIGNS

Feel free to skip this if you're familiar with the gist of military slang.

To the layperson, military shorthand can be a bit overwhelming and confusing. I believe a little context will help with the language I use in this book.

In the military we use different terms to reference the same things. We usually do it unconsciously. Nuanced military vernacular often shows subtle differences in context.

The ancient Greeks liked their words. They were experts at language and often referred to the same things with different words depending on the context. Military slang is very similar.

During the duration of the story in this book, I am assigned as the Company Executive Officer (XO), Alpha Company, 1st Tank Battalion.

Let's start with the textbook callsigns for each of these units. The XO is referred to as the 5 tank. The Company Commander / Commanding Officer (CO) is referred to as the 6 tank. If we were talking about the Battalion Commander it would still be the 6 tank. The CO of most military units is referred to as the 6.

I am the XO of Alpha Company. You will hear me refer to myself, and my tank, by several derivatives of the number 5. These can include: Tiger 5, Alpha 5, Black 5, or just 5. All of these are technically correct. Tiger 5 would normally be for the Battalion Executive Officer. Since we are the only tank unit in the Area of Operations, we can assume the Battalion's Callsign as opposed to just a company callsign.

Infantry units often create their own callsigns which are derivatives of the Battalion's callsign. In tanks, callsigns are more generic. There are only 3 Tank Battalions in the Marine Corps at the time of this story. As of this writing there are now 0.

1st Tank Battalion is "Tiger". 2D Tank Battalion is "Ironhorse". 4th Tank Battalion is "Panzer"?

The company's generally go by their respective phonic spellings; Alpha, Bravo, etc.

Inside of a tank company is Red, White, Blue, and Green. These usually refer to 1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, 3rd Platoon, and attachments respectively.

The Headquarters element in a tank company is referred to as Black. i.e. Black 6, Black 5.

This is how the additional units can pick up additional numbers. This is why in the case of Company Maintenance, or the First Sergeant the additions can be Black 8, 9, or 10.

During this deployment, we were the only unit from tanks so we generally used the 1st Tank's callsign Tiger. Hence the name of the book "Tiger 5."

In the story however, Captain Langfeldt and I are usually talking back and forth. Therefore, I usually refer to Captain Langfeldt as Black 6 or Tiger 6. Captain Langfeldt is the boss, so he can technically call me whatever he wants. In most of these stories it depends on how pissed off he is at the time. Usually it was just "5" or "Davis". When he was really pissed off, it would usually be preceded by an expletive.

Finally, we also often reply with our callsign. So, you'll hear me say things like, "5, rodger." Or "Black 5." In responses.

All the other stuff is mostly common sense and you'll pick it up along the way.

PART 2

Haditha

A MAJOR DEBACLE

One of the first things we did, once the turnover was done, was a battlefield circulation.

One of our first trips was to Haditha Dam where we had our 2D Platoon, led by Lt Gary Slater.

We stopped into the Battalion Headquarters to see what we were supposed to be doing before we linked up with 2D Platoon.

We drove straight to the top of the dam and dismounted.

-

First off, Haditha Dam is guarded by the Azerbaijanian Army. Weird, right?

I found out later that the Azerbaijan Government was who built the dam. They were making sure it didn't get blown up. This was Azerbaijan's contribution to the war effort. I'm sure it took half their military just to provide gate guards at this place.

The Azerbaijanis wear these ridiculous WW I helmets that make their heads look like giant penises. And of course, they don't speak a lick of English.

What's the worst that could happen?

Ok, in the Azerbaijanis defense, they don't wear those helmets anymore because when I looked it up, I couldn't find a picture anywhere.

Just ask anyone that was at Haditha Dam though.

Those helmets were ridiculous.

-

My gunner, Corporal Kowaleski "Ski" and Captain Langfeldt's gunner Sergeant Alvarez, held down the fort while we jump off the tanks.

We swung open a rusty old door and started heading into the bowels of Haditha Dam. We were looking for the command center for the battalion, known as the COC or Command Operations Center. It was located only one floor down from the top, so we didn't have to go far.

I turned the corner at the bottom of the stairs and started to unravel the mystery in front of me.

There were 4 or 5 Majors milling about wringing their hands. They were arguing, pointing at the map in the center of the room, and telling the radio operators to do stuff.

I'm thinking to myself, what the hell is this?

Lance spoke up and cleared his throat, "uh who is in charge here?"

This was the funniest part.

Not one of them raised their hands or really did anything. They all looked at each other then back at us.

I step around so I can see this bizarre situation play out.

I also didn't want to look like a kid standing behind his dad in a "grown up" conversation. Capt Langfeldt is a big dude. I have to do this fairly often.

To break the stagnant pause, they started discussing the question amongst themselves.

"Well, I believe the senior man is the CAT Commander."

"No, no, I'm the senior man."

"No, the senior man is at the battalion level."

And so on...

I couldn't believe this shit. I thought to myself how does a Marine unit not know who the fuck is in charge?

I'm still young in the Marine Corps but not that young.

One of the many Majors blurts out, "Get Major White." Then they point to the back of the room where there is a partition.

A bleary-eyed Marine Major stumbles out of the dark.

He had obviously been sleeping. He squints his eyes as he comes around the corner and puts his glasses on.

He walks up to Lance and says, "Hey man, I'm the OPSO, you must be the Tank guys."

Lance replied with a quick "Yes sir." all while motioning with his head towards the debacle in the background.

"Uh, who are all those guys?" The Major motioned us to follow him towards the back of the room away from the all the confusion.

"Oh, they're all reservists."

Lance goes, "Ahh, that makes sense."

That's how I was introduced to the Marine Reserves in this conflict.

I had seen a few reservists during my first deployment, the "March Up", but not this many in one room.

It's a clear and funny memory that always stuck with me. Maj White was the only active-duty Marine there. He was the active-duty Operations Officer in the reserve unit.

Most reserve units have much older guys, hence the much more senior ranks.

It turns out, we were looking at pretty much every commander in the unit.

Ever since, I now explain to others, in a reserve unit you should expect everyone to be at least one rank above what is normal and sometimes more.

-

A caveat to this quickie. More than a few years later, I ran into Col White at the Pentagon.

He said he didn't remember that story, but he remembers meeting Captain Langfeldt.

Everyone remembers meeting Captain Langfeldt.

FIRST BLOOD

BOOM!!!

Holy shit, I'm in charge...

This was the first thought that came into my mind as I saw Captain Langfeldt's tank disappear into a cloud of concrete shrapnel.

The blast of the IED pushed my goggles into my face so hard that it cut my nose.

My head hit the back of the commander's hatch.

The IED had gone off right next to my tank.

How far? I have no idea. The last thing I remember seeing is the rear grill of Lance's tank before both of us were engulfed in a supernova of dirt and concrete.

As the cloud of debris began to dissipate, I saw the contorted bodies strewn all around us.

We'd only been in the country for a few weeks, let alone been on an organized mission.

I'd been a bit relieved when the main body of the Company arrived.

I felt like we were finally in charge after a sketchy turnover with 2D Tanks.

After the 2-week turnover we headed immediately to Haditha Dam to touch base with Lt. Slater who was our Platoon Commander at Haditha Dam.

We were only there for a day before we were asked to support some random mission.

Haditha Dam is a huge hydroelectric dam that towers hundreds of feet from the valley below.

The town of Haditha sits in the direct shadow of this relic. It was a symbol of a more prolific era. Like a monolithic Aztec pyramid, the dam is a shell of its former glory. The giant turbines were silent. All but one of the six

monster generators even moved. Miraculously, the dam did produce electricity, but only a spark.

Brownouts were a daily occurrence in the towns of Haditha and Barwana directly downstream. Barwana was on the east side of the river and Haditha was on the west. Just to the south of those was Haqlanya and the Oil Refinery.

The HQ Section, Captain Langfeldt and I, had just arrived at Haditha Dam the day before, hence the Major debacle story.

The infantry had asked us to go help an Iraqi patrol. All we had heard was that it was a patrol of around 30 Iraqi soldiers and was moving towards Haqlanya, which is directly south of Haditha.

Haqlanya already had a reputation. It was a haven for the local insurgent militia.

The Iraqi patrol was being advised by two Marines, who there to avoid exact situations like this.

Everyone knew not to go south of the city and despite the Marine's best efforts, the patrol continued its passionate inertia.

The primary reason we were on our way to help was the embattled Marines said things were "getting out of control."

They said that the Iraqis were talking about "revenge" or something. Translations were always a challenge, but we knew that these Iraqi units were culturally grouped such as all Sunnis or all Shiites. These groups were sworn enemies of each other because of years of violent conflict, oppression, and Saddam's ruthless control. It was known that they loved terrorizing each other especially if it looked like it was sanctioned by us. It never was.

We arrived to find the patrol moving south along the main road exiting Haditha, headed toward Haqlanya.

Neither Captain Langfeldt nor I had any idea what these areas were really like. We had only seen them on a map.

Even in passing though, the Marines were like, "uh that area sucks."

As soon as we arrived, I knew the situation was tense.

We talked to the embedded Marines, and they said that the patrol was on route to Haqlanya.

Our arrival only emboldened the Iraqi patrol. They had been quasi-looting the houses and shops along the road. They had begun confiscating any

weapons they found along the way. They already had a fair collection and began stacking them on the front deck of my tank.

Locals were permitted to have a small number of weapons, presumably to protect their families.

I knew we weren't winning any hearts and minds by ransacking local shops and nearby houses. I could tell Captain Langfeldt was uncomfortable.

I was as well.

Through translation, we were told the patrol was only going to go to the end of the road. This was only several hundred meters ahead. Then the patrol was going to turn around.

We got to the end of the road, which was an intersection that marked the end of Haditha and the outskirts of Haqlanya.

The road split and went left downhill and right uphill. The left went across a bridge into Haqlanya proper, and the right went up a hill to a small market area.

We turned right.

We got to the top of the hill which was in the middle of the market. The Iraqis haphazardly started grabbing the civilians in the market. Shop owners, random civilians, who knows...

I remember the Iraqi soldiers lining up the terrified civilians. They began making them stand against the wall to my left, which was adjacent to a shop.

We were all on edge, because we knew we were going to have to intervene if, God forbid, they started shooting civilians.

That's when bizarrely, the Iraqis started cheering, yelling, and chanting.

They started firing their weapons into the air, obviously trying to intimidate the locals.

I thought to myself, well if that's the worst they do then "whatever".

I didn't really care, I just wanted to get out of there.

As soon as one started firing, they all started firing.

That's when my loader, LCpl Slater, looked at me and I lowered myself into the tank. He followed my lead and began getting down as well. I remember thinking I didn't want to get hit by a stray bullet or worse have a broken power line fall onto my tank.

The melee finally subsided. The Iraqis seemed satiated of revenge and ended their misguided celebration of anarchy.

The patrol began gathering back up and began heading back along the road. Captain Langfeldt went around me and re-took the lead position.

I saw his tank pull in front of me, and I started to move to turn around.

That's the last thing I remember before the blast.

Captain Langfeldt's tank disappeared into a cloud of concrete and asphalt.

I was looking over the left side of my turret at his tank when it happened.

I had stood up in my hatch to see how to get out of here.

So, I was standing exposed, when I felt my head hit the open hatch.

-

The blast was deafening.

The feeling of dirt traveling at more than a hundred miles an hour is like someone hitting you in the face with a bat wrapped in sandpaper.

Surreal is an understatement.

When your consciousness turns back on, you're in a brown world of mayhem.

The ringing is incessant and your brain struggles to reconnect with reality.

The world around you is completely different than it was 5 seconds ago.

Your brain starts to re-boot. Something has happened... Something that has ripped reality and slowed the world around you.

To your crew it's an unfamiliar jolt of violence. For the tank commander, who is exposed to the shock wave, it's just a flash of light.

Your crew is feeling the reverberations through a vehicle that doesn't move, even if struck by a car. It's unsettling and they know something is up.

To anyone exposed to the blast, it's a fucking punch to the face.

Ask any boxer and they will tell you; you don't feel the punch that hits you. You only notice the break in time.

Instantly engulfed in a sea of dirt, I searched for any sign of something outside of the tank... Anything.

That's when I started seeing bodies.

One, two, three, shit... They're all over the place.

I saw bodies strewn all around my tank. Some were writhing, some obviously dead, and some were only parts.

I look to the front and see that Captain Langfeldt's tank is still there.

I see Captain Langfeldt poke his head up and look back at me. The look said it all.

We were both unhurt and our tanks were merely scratched. After a quick radio check between us, both of us started looking for targets.

It didn't take long.

My gunner, Cpl Kowaleski, comes to life on the intercom.

"Sir, movement! 400 meters!"

"Hold."

I ducked down and peered into the tank commander's sight.

I saw the 410m designation at the bottom of the reticle. I poked my head back up and eyeballed the range and the direction of the turret.

What we we're looking at was an area between Haqlanya proper and the Oil Refinery. The area was an urban expanse that resembled the Favelas of South America. It was just a shantytown of structures melding one into another.

The target area was on the other side of a 200 ft deep wadi that lay between us and the urban sprawl. It was a good range.

I radioed Black 6 and told him about the movement. He gave a curt, simple acknowledgement.

"Sir, they've got weapons!" Ski rattled.

I knew this was it. I was going to take a shot.

A real shot.

Tank main gun.

I popped down and looked again. I caught the tail end of several insurgents dressed in all black running across the alley. I saw the familiar silhouette of a machine gun.

I said, "hold on, there are dudes all around our tank."

I popped my head up, leaned over and yelled at the top of my lungs. "Get the fuck out of the way! I'm going to fire!"

I knew I was giving the insurgents time to set up that machine gun but I didn't want any more Iraqis around my tank to get hurt.

Any infantryman knows that you still have at least a few seconds when someone is running with a belt fed weapon. They also know what's coming next. He was going to lay that thing down and start firing.

The surviving Iraqis we're wailing, screaming, and wandering around still trying to figure out what the fuck just happened. After a few more waves and expletives, the Iraqis moved behind the turret.

"Troops HEAT!"

"Identified!"

"UP!"

"Check the range."

"410"

"FIRE!"

"MISFIRE! MISFIRE! MISFIRE! --- MASTER BLASTER!"

The singing of the breach is followed by the familiar KAWUMP! PLINK, PLINK, PLINK... The entire tank shudders, then makes its familiar lurch back and forth.

20lbs of explosive reverberate through steel like a church bell.

I immediately popped up and searched for effects. The obscuration from the shot always takes several seconds to clear.

As the dust abated, I see no effects...

WTF?

Seriously?

I tried to figure out what had happened.

That's when I looked at the main gun. I realized it was pointed about 30 degrees higher than it should be.

"We're over the back deck! Fuck!"

The gravity of my mistake hit hard.

The tank was still facing uphill, and the turret was positioned about 45 degrees off the center of the back deck. The gun won't fire when over the back deck. This is what caused the misfire.

That's why Ski instinctively bypassed the main trigger and went to the Master Blaster.

The Master Blaster is like one of those old timey toy ray guns, that sparks when you pull the trigger. Except this ray gun sends several volts of electricity to the breech and detonates the main gun round.

"Arnold! Pivot Turn, Left!"

The hull glided over the smooth pavement.

Pavement is the only place you ever pivot steer a tank. Ever... Any other terrain and a tank will throw track immediately.

Lance is screaming at me at this point, and I try to respond, trying to point at the insurgents across the wadi.

I'm stuck between the broken comms, chaos, and my boss clearly looking at me from 50 ft away with fury.

I take a deep breath and gather my thoughts.

I just launched a HEAT round into the stratosphere... now what?

Fuck it... Re-engage...

Captain Langfeldt sees me point across the wadi again, just outside the town of Haqlanya.

He drops into his tank. He's scanning the area to.

I took another deep breath.

Arnold had the tank positioned correctly and Ski was already scanning the same area looking for targets.

I thought I'd totally fucked up my first engagement and lost my chance. I'm coming to grips with my colossal fuck up when...

Never underestimate the idiocy of those that don't understand how tanks work.

I can only guess that the insurgents didn't realize I had them spotted and thought I was shooting at something else.

"There back!" Ski yells.

I think to myself, no one is that fucking stupid. No one...

I dropped back into the tank.

My eyes glued to the commander's sight. I felt the hot fire of sweat and smoke from the first shot searing my eyes.

I yell at Ski, "Where are they?"

"Right there sir, behind that wall."

The reticle rested on the corner of a stucco wall. It was on the left-hand side of a short alley going up a hill. The hill rose from the far bank of the wadi and sloped up into the town on the other side.

That's when I see it.

A head and rifle poke out for a mere fraction of a second.

Moral of the story here, it's a bad idea to peek at a tank.

I said calmly "Come left."

Ski, just as calm, "Roger."

Nothing is like the implicit communication between tank commander and gunner.

The muscle memory of countless hours of training together creates a symbiotic understanding that needs few words. Ski knew exactly what I was thinking.

The reticle smoothly traversed left about 6 feet inside of the edge of the wall. We both knew the insurgents were getting ready to lay down that machine gun we had spotted.

I'm sure they were loading that belt of ammunition only to look up to find they were already in their holy land.

Calmly this time.

"HEAT Troops..."

"Identified."

"Up!"

"Fire..."

"On the way..."

KAWUMP! Plink! Plink! Plink!

The shot was clean.

The breach sung and a bell rang as a fireteam of insurgents just got their wings.

The sweet familiar smell of ignited shell and powder filled the turret.

We had a second to reflect.

That shot was clean and we knew on target, everything slowed down a bit.

The adrenaline had found its apex of intoxication. I knew we had a great shot.

I emerged from the TC's hatch.

Half of the town, where our round found its mark, is now engulfed in black smoke. The HEAT round left little of the original structure; or even the block.

We had just vaporized a group of insurgents, taking the wall, the corner of the house, and half of a city block with them.

-

The immediate aftermath of the scene around my tank was a mess.

Captain Langfeldt was still repositioning and looking for targets.

I told Ski to keep looking for targets.

I now turned my attention to the chaos around us.

There were Iraqis dragging bodies and picking up parts of their friends. I was shocked at the effectiveness of the IED.

The IED had ripped through the patrol and killed at least six Iraqis instantly. Several others were being attended to by their friends.

One of the Iraqi soldiers was walking around with an Iraqi flag.

He stopped and placed it over a body right next to the tank. I remember watching as the Iraqi knelt next to his friend now draped in the flag.

The moment is still crystal clear in my mind nearly 20 years later.

I saw a line of blood emerge from under the flag and begin tracing down the hill. It started as a line and then thickened as its width grew. It traced the crevice of pavement. It would pause, build, and continue.

I was stuck in that moment.

I still am sometimes.

-

The crimson of real blood is a color not easily recreated. It's dark, viscous, and very ominous.

It doesn't fade and it doesn't act like anything else.

It sears into your memory forever.

It's a color that is never matched in the movies.

-

The radio cracked with the familiar voice of my boss. "Maintain security. This is now an CASEVAC. Tracks are on their way."

"Rodger." My transmission was barely audible.

The adrenaline was wearing off and the reality around me began to close in.

The situation always trails the action. The world around me had started to become real again.

-

With the tracks loaded with casualties, we made a B-line back to the dam.

Upon arrival, I was met by a Marine Major.

I hadn't even had a chance to get off my tank.

I recognized him from earlier. He was the Judge Advocate General (JAG). The Lawyer.

I thought, really?

I'm in trouble?

I was intrigued but not uncomfortable. I knew it was a legit engagement.

He yelled up.

"Before you disappear, I need the names of your crew."

"Why?"

“We heard everything on the radio, we’re already writing the award! You guys are fucking awesome!”

I wish I could make this up, or exaggerate, but the JAG really met me there.

I certainly didn't feel like a hero... I was just glad to be back.

-

Shit. I was tired.

This is the part that movies get wrong.

Crazy shit doesn’t come with dramatic pauses in between. It keeps happening whether your sleep deprived mind can handle it or not.

Upon our return we immediately got a call to re-depart.

We were to link up with the Marine infantry company that was preparing for an operation on the West side of Haditha.

I don’t remember the last time I slept.

I had no idea I wouldn't sleep for the next 2 days.

THE LONG NIGHT

As I slipped in and out of awareness my eyes noticed something I hadn't seen before. Was that there when we pulled up? Of course, it was.

Is that part of the light pole or is that added on? Why does it have wires coming from underneath it? If it was a junction box, wouldn't the wires go into the pole? Wait...

Oh shit!

I'm literally staring at an IED that is strapped to the light post right next to the tank. It was about 8 feet above the ground which put it at the same height as the top of the tank. I told Slater to get down.

I had Arnold pull up another 20 feet or so.

Sleep deprivation is a unique animal.

To the lay person, sleep deprivation is working a long shift or staying up all night studying for a test.

That's not the type of sleep deprivation I'm talking about. The type of sleep deprivation I'm talking about is when you begin to have breaks in time and space melds into a cognitive fog.

Time breaks are when you physically become aware that you don't remember a chunk of time that either just happened or was recent. These breaks have a very unnerving effect. When you experience one of these you are worried you missed a radio call, or something could have happened.

You look around and spend the next 5 minutes trying to figure out if you missed anything.

A mindmeld, on the other hand, is where daily events begin to blur and blend. You begin to lose your concept of time, and all events big and small, start to blend.

Mindmelds are unnerving because you begin to recall things that didn't happen and things that did happen but are now blended with other memories.

Just after the IED event in Haditha, in the previous story, we had a quick turnaround to go help another infantry unit.

With little information, we headed back out and linked up with this infantry company on the outskirts of Haditha.

We pulled in and the grunts were preparing for a clearing operation into the area we had engaged the insurgents earlier.

The grunts said the whole area was a stronghold and it was going to require a methodical and careful clearing operation.

This situation does have a bit of historical significance. It was Zarkarwi that fled the area after my errant tank round. He wasn't captured or killed until several years later.

So, I might have had an inadvertent effect on history here.

Sorry.

-

We were briefed on the basic scheme of maneuver. It was going to be our job to figure out the route.

With that, Lance mounted up and called over the radio.

"We've got to find a route through the wadi between us and the area we're going to clear out."

So began a mind-numbing drive in and around the wadi area. We spent at least 3 hours trying to find a way through the sandy drop offs on both sides. It was in the middle of summer, so water was not a problem, but the loose and steep terrain was.

We finally decide it's a wash, no pun intended, and we return to tell the Infantry we're going to have to take the long way around. This alternate route around the wadi would take a solid 2 or 3 hours on the hardball road.

By this point we had the engagement earlier, then drove around for 3 hours, and we still had another movement to the assault position as soon as it gets dark. I remember wondering when I had slept last. It had been more than a day and half. I tried to get a power nap before we took off, but it wasn't to be. It quickly became dark out.

I'm no expert, but I do know this is when you can nod off and not even realise it. That's what makes it super sketchy.

Notice I don't mention the time. It's because I didn't even know what time it was... I never really did.

As we headed out, I remember telling Arnold that this was not going to be easy. He'd have to stay awake and aware the whole time. We were all out of it and mind numbingly tired.

-

The consequences of your driver falling asleep can be catastrophic. During OIF 1, a Marine tank had flipped upside down into a river, trapping and drowning its entire crew.

The thought of their demise still haunts me to this day. The tank had flipped off an Army pontoon bridge.

The driver had most likely fallen asleep then woke up suddenly. Witnesses say that the tank jerked violently to one side and the back corner slipped off the bridge. The tank immediately flipped and was at the bottom of the river in seconds.

There's even more to this morbid story that even I won't repeat out of respect. Those guys probably had minutes to comprehend the hopelessness of their situation and their imminent drowning.

Tanks and water don't mix... at all. Ever.

-

I knew this would be a tough road march for all of us. It was going to require a group effort to stay awake.

Not only was it pitch black outside, but also ridiculously hot. The problem with road marches in general is that the monotony of the situation plus the vibration of tracks on pavement is the perfect mix of sleep conditions. It's basically the same thing as those baby cribs that vibrate infants to sleep.

Here's another strange tank phenomenon. As soon as the sun goes down, the tank gets even hotter. I believe it has to do with the metal absorbing all that heat during the day. As soon as the temperature changes the heat moves in the other direction. The tank expels this built-up heat in all directions. This includes the inside.

These are some of the situations that go untold due to their monotony or seemingly unimportant nature. The reality is different.

These are usually the most dangerous times for anyone in combat. This is why we follow repetitive training exercises to train our brains to operate on autopilot.

I had to catch myself several times unknowingly leaning on the .50 Cal trigger, luckily on safe. But still. Not only is it awkward trying to hold the monocular night vision to your eye but you're trying to rest your arms somewhere on the turret to create a stable platform. You're doing all this so

the phosphorous green picture was more than just a blur of greens bouncing and melding into the background.

To this day I can't remember how long that road march took. It's still as much of a gooey blob in my memory as it was when I was there. It was several hours I think, who knows.

I specifically mention this part because in a 21-year career this haphazard memory of hallucinogenic fragments was one of the worst sleep deprivation situations of my life.

Between my crew, I don't think any of us really remember that road march. But we made it. Somehow.

Together we were able to piece together the conscious effort to make it without driving off the road. The consequences of driving aimlessly into the desert off the main road were probably null but still a cognitive experience worth mention.

We finally made it to the assault position. An assault position is the term for the last position before you advance your primary attack.

In the very early hours of the morning, Captain Langfeldt and I advanced slowly forward into the town.

The tracks followed closely behind. As the tracks were getting ready to dismount, we heard several explosions. There were sparks emanating from all the power lines, then back to darkness.

"What was that?" Slater looked as confused as I did.

Tank commanders and loaders have a wild expressive relationship. Being the only two outside of the tank we constantly look at each other for visual cues that we're not fucking crazy.

In most cases it turns out we both have no idea what's going on.

I believe that the explosions were the insurgent's great ambush falling apart in real time. My guess is that the insurgents had planned a complex attack and were going to initiate it with a barrage of IEDs.

Only two IEDs went off, but the engineers found several that didn't detonate. We pushed into the small town. Mabey flushing out Zarqawi disrupted their plans. Once again, lost to history, we'll never know.

After we pushed into the town for the infantry to gain a foothold, that's when I noticed that there were IEDs strung across most of the light posts. These are probably the ones that never went off. I assume the sparks were caused by the power turning on which was supposed to activate the IEDs.

What it did instead was just fry the local power grid and detonate several transformers.

Things stayed quiet despite the constant flurry of intelligence reports that said that the insurgents were “beginning their attack” at any moment.

Slater was readying a flare to shoot at an oncoming vehicle if it didn’t stop. I specifically said, “Aim down this time, so it doesn’t catch anything on fire.”

The car slowed but didn’t stop. Slater fired the flare by hitting the back of the red carboard tube. Just like a roman candle, it struck perfectly about 10 feet in front of the car. I was impressed with the shot.

I thought for once Slater had gotten it right until...

Sure enough, somehow that flare skipped off the pavement and straight back into the air. It sailed about 300 yards and landed on a roof of a building.

Shit... Well at least it didn’t catch anything on fire.

Shit... The building is on fire...

“Anyone see the fire on the buildings about two blocks in?” The radio squelched.

We all looked at each other. We burst out laughing... Then just went back to our monotony.

I wish there was a cool ending to this part of the story. But like most real war stories this one ends with a fizz.

There was a small incident that happened but doesn’t make for great copy.

We kept receiving reports that Intel said that the insurgents were regrouping and readying an attack.

Normally this wouldn’t raise more than an eyebrow but at some point, we realized that by driving back and forth and up and down from the curbs we’d needed to replace an end connector.

So, we spent the next 2 hours replacing an end connector, or 2, while under threat of an imminent attack that never came. I’ll be honest, I can’t remember why it took so long. End connectors can be tricky sometimes. Anything can be especially tricky whe you’re stupid tired.

A LEAP INTO THE DARKNESS

“All men are afraid in battle. The coward is the one who lets his fear overcome his sense of duty. Duty is the essence of manhood.”

George S. Patton

I'm having a hard time seeing through the night-vision monocular. With my hands shaking, the uneven pavement, and the infinite darkness, the phosphorescent-green picture just looked like a mishmash of random buildings and fireflies. They weren't fireflies though. The situation was already confusing, the streaks of tracer rounds made it even worse.

“There! That’s them sir. I can see their helmets. It’s the three-story building right in front of us.”

“Ok, at least we know which building it is.”

In the darkness there was a multi-story building that stood out in the distance. With the tank bouncing on the broken pavement, I try to key my mic.

“Black 6, it’s the building right in front of us. The 3-story building.”

“Got it 5. Follow my lead.”

“5, Roger.”

There were fucking tracer rounds all over the place. In my night vision monocular I couldn’t tell which direction they were going because of the sheer volume. They just looked like green lines filling my green vision.

I knew the Marines were in the building directly to our front so that’s where we’re going. As Lance pulled in near the building, he immediately turned his tank to the right. He was now facing outboard in the direction of the high volume of fire.

I pulled onto his left flank and faced the tank into the same general direction.

The volume of fire had slowed but there were rounds still going everywhere.

I poked my head up to get some situational awareness only to hear the plink and hiss of rounds ricocheting off the turret.

Ok, that was a bad idea.

I'll figure out what's going on from here. Instead of just standing up, I poked my head up just enough to see over the lip of the cupola. This is the ring of vision blocks around the Tank Commander's hatch. I could see figures darting back and forth in the distance. Most of the gunfire was now coming from the building with the Marines, into the adjacent structures in front of us. We could see the direction they were shooting.

Captain Langfeldt shot his first HEAT round and the shockwave was earth shattering.

BOOM!

I could feel the heat on my face, shockwave in my soul, and the flash lit up the whole scene for a split second.

I dropped back down onto the commander's seat.

"Ski! Any targets?"

"Yeah, right there."

"HEAT Troops!"

"Identified."

"Up!"

"Fire."

"On the Way"

KAWUMP! Plink! Pling...Pling...Pling...

The familiar plinking of the aft cap bouncing around in the turret and rock of the tank settling felt reassuring. We had gotten the round off quickly.

Ski wasted no time. "There."

"HEAT Troops"

"Identified!"

"Up!"

"Fire."

"On the way..."

KAWUMP! Plink! Pling...Pling...Pling...

The tank hadn't even settled when Lance squawked on the radio.

"5, what the fuck? What are you shooting at?"

"The building. There's movement in the building."

"Well fucking stop..."

"Rodger."

The gunfire then slowed to a trickle. I was confused why Captain Langfeldt had sounded pissed on the radio. I assumed it was because he expected my first round but not my second.

Captain Langfeldt came back on the radio. "Ok, there's several wounded and the tracks can't get into the courtyard. Breakdown the wall."

"5, rodger."

I take a deep breath and explain to my driver LCpl Arnold.

"Arnold, we need to push over that wall to our left. Backup. Ok, now hold left. Ok, slow. That's the wall. We're pushing, not ramming."

"Got it sir."

We crept forward and we could feel the front of the tank touch the wall.

Our mechanics had created a giant bumper of sorts on the front of the tank for just this kind of situation. It was just a steel I-beam latched into the front 2 tow points on the tank. It looked straight out of Mad Max. The first time Captain Langfeldt saw the modification he surprisingly was like, "Fuck yeah, that stays."

The engine slowly winded up as Arnold bled on the throttle.

The wall collapsed and we lunged forward over the rubble pile.

"Driver back up. Ok, stop..."

"Sir. I can't see."

"What?"

"I can't see shit; the vision block is covered."

I stood up on the commander's platform and stepped back and up onto the second step of the platform to see clearly.

The tank commander stands on a platform that has 3 levels. 4 if you count sitting on the cupola which looks cool as shit but is an invitation to tumble over the side of the tank. The platform has the base, then a fold down step (that is held up and out of the way with a spring unless you push it down with your heel), and finally the seat. You don't stand on the seat. Nobody wants mud all over their backside. Instead, the back of the seat folds down and you stand on that. When you're standing on the back of the seat, you're about chest high in the cupola, usually plenty high to see everything around you. If not, then raise the stupid seat. You get the idea.

I leaned over the front of the .50 Cal in front of me.

I could see the entire section of wall had collapsed backwards onto the front slope of the tank. The rubble was piled on top of the driver's vision

blocks.

I said “Arnold. We need to drive forward and slam on the brakes. Give me a second to brace. Everyone gets ready. This is gonna suck. I hope it works.”

It did work.... But it took three tries and the tank sounded like it hated every second of it.

The brakes on a tank work exceptionally well. The tank also has about 100 times the surface area touching the ground than your car. When you slam on the brakes at any speed, you stop like you’re hitting a wall, and it’s violent. What makes it even worse is that the driver is getting jolted forward as well, so he’s slamming on the brake pedal that much harder. This is why you meet some tankers with fake front teeth. Their real ones are somewhere in a tank turret after they ate the .50 Cal in front of them. I still have my front teeth. Thank God.

That’s when Slater came over the intercom with a nervous tone.

“Sir, I think we’re on fire.”

“What! You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

Then I smelled the distinct scent of fuel. A lot of fuel...

Shit... This night keeps getting worse and worse.

The pages had slowly come into focus. The green book on my lap was open but I don’t remember even starting to read it before I fell asleep. I think I was just trying to figure out what day it was.

There were a few Marines running down the hall.

I closed my green book. And craned my neck.

I watched and listened for a few seconds more.

“There’s two dead, and they’re taking casualties!”

Fuck, I better get to the tanks. We all know what happens next.

I could tell by the hulking stature of the shadow it was Captain Langfeldt that was walking out of the darkness on the adjacent side of the courtyard.

He B-lined straight towards me and caught me before I even had a chance to get to my front slope.

We were in a building the infantry had commandeered as their temporary headquarters. We we’re somewhere in the middle of Haditha. I honestly have

no idea where.

Captain Langfeldt doesn't skip a beat. "Ok, there's a bunch of Marines pinned down. We're going. Get everyone REDCON 1. All I know is that there's a couple dead, and they're taking heavy fire."

The sense of dread washed over me.

This was the first time that we were driving straight into a gun battle and no one knows what the fuck is going on.

My mind is racing, my heart is pounding, and my hands are shaking as I throw on my flak jacket.

As I'm putting my helmet on, I paused... lowered the helmet in front of me and said to myself, breathe... just breathe.

I took a deep breath and let it out. Again...

Then I heard my inner voice say. Ok, we've got this. Just keep your head up and ready for the mess we're driving into.

This was admittedly the first time I can remember being scared. Like really scared.

It's not the fight, it's not the danger, it's the sheer chaos of the unknown unravelling around you that makes it fucking terrifying.

I had only woken up about 45 seconds ago and I knew we were going into it. Right here. Right now!

In the dark...

Like black dark.

From the top of the tank, I squint in the direction I hear the gunfire. I see a few flashes on the horizon.

The sky was an inkblot blue melding into an empty expanse of darkness all around us.

The Marines were yelling back and forth as they were donning their gear.

"There are two dead! RPGs! A shit ton of RPGs!"

There are random beams of lights as Marines struggle in the darkness.

Another fragment of yelling, "I don't know if they're being overrun! They said they need everything we got!"

Amongst the chaos, the firefight in the distance started to become more distinct. I had heard an explosion and some random fire but the intensity was rising. Explosions and heavy machine gun fire continued to echo in the distance.

There were Marines running toward the tracks.

Gear was getting tossed into and on top of vehicles.

No planning, no prep. Just go.

“Black 6, we’re REDCON ONE.”

“Ok, all I’ve got is that the Marines are pinned down in a building by RPGs and heavy guns. We’re going in and we’ll figure it out on the way.”

“Rodger, I’m on your flank and I’ll break off once we get there.”

“Cool, we’re moving...”

Ok, so we’d already put 3 main gun rounds into the building. We had broken down the wall of the courtyard. The Grunts were conducting the MEDEVAC.

That’s when Slater came over the intercom with a nervous tone.

“Sir, I think we’re on fire.”

“What! You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Then it hit me. I could smell fuel. Lots and lots of fuel.

This is bad. Really bad...

Without any more dialog, Slater took off his helmet, jumped up, and sat on his cupola. I could see him lean over. Left, then back, then front.

I immediately understood what he was talking about. I could smell the fuel. It was strong, and didn’t make sense. All I could think about in that moment was how bad it’s going to suck when the tank bursts into flames.

I popped up onto my cupola as well. I yelled at Slater.

“Anything?”

“No sir. I don’t see anything.”

“Hop down and walk around. I’ve got you covered.”

I had already grabbed my M4, which sits in the sponson box within arm’s reach. I aimed at where we had shot into the adjacent buildings earlier. I cant the weapon to the left. I ease the bolt back to make sure I could see the brass of the chambered round. I pushed it back with seating button to make sure it was tight.

I see Slater hop back up on the tank and start screwing around behind the bustle rack.

He then slides back into the turret, grabbing his helmet. He keys the mic.

“Sir, there are fucking bullet holes in everything. The jerry can was leaking fuel onto the back deck and into the engine compartment.”

“Fuck, that’s crazy.”

“Yeah, I could see the steam. It looked like the fuel was boiling off as it went in and around the air intakes.”

If this was tank fuel (JP8), which is basically diesel fuel, this story would be sketchy but mundane.

This isn’t JP8... This is actually MOGAS which is like the unleaded you put in your car. It’s stupid explosive so in hindsight I don’t even like recalling this story because it gives me the creeps. It should’ve ignited.

Only God knows why it didn’t.

The jerry can holding this MOGAS is just extra regular fuel to power the Auxiliary Generator that sits in the bustle rack on the back of the turret. The Auxiliary Power Unit (APU) is to charge the batteries if for some reason they go dead. It’s usually a useless addition. You never use it and when you do it’s been dormant so long it never wants to start. This is unique to Marine tanks. The Army ditched that piece of extra gear years ago.

Ok, none of this really made much sense. There is fuel all over the place and somehow, we’re not all burning to death. We got lucky again.

By now the firefight had slowed to only a few random shots and I could see the grunts loading bodies into the tracks (Assault Amphibious Vehicles).

Captain Langfeldt came over the radio.

“5, ok they could be regrouping or maneuvering. Let’s push out.”

“Rodger, on your 6.”

We both turned around and I see his tank take off down the road to my right. I followed suit. Only a few seconds later we were already 2 or 3 blocks from the original building.

On Company TAC (the infantry company’s radio net) I hear. “Ok, air is inbound; we’ve got the insurgents targeted in a building directly to our east. I’m not sure if they are regrouping or what.”

Wait a minute...

Didn’t we just tear off to the east?

Wait, where are we?

Company TAC. “IP inbound.”

“Shit! 6, I think they’re targeting right next to us.”

I could hear the realization in his voice. “Shit, button up!”

There was no button up. I barely had time to drop down into the tank before the first bomb hit.

The projectile cracks through the air with a very distinctive hiss.

Shh... BOOM!

Shit!

The shockwave rattled the gear in our tank and sound split through my head. A layer of dust kicked up from every surface.

I hear Lance come over the Company TAC. "Hey, abort! Abort! We're right next to your impacts!"

Another hiss and cracking through the air.

Shh... BOOM!

Lance starts backing up. I had already started.

"Hold left. Keep going. Ok. Forward. Go right. Move out!"

We quickly turned around and were headed straight back to the building.

In only minutes we were back in the courtyard we we were minutes earlier.

On Company TAC I hear. "Uh, tanks, where are you guys?"

Lance comes on. "We're right next to you! Shit... now, but about 5 minutes ago we were in the sights of your air support."

"Ok, rodger."

When someone holds the mic down you can hear everyone behind the guy keying the mic for a few seconds. I hear in the background.

"You guys see tanks?"

Someone else, "Tanks, where are the tanks?"

A faint reply. "We've got tanks?"

The moral of this story is don't go blazing into glory the same direction that the Forward Air Controllers (FACs) are getting ready to target. In the heat of the moment, FACs think they are the closest thing to the target and don't really pay attention to who else is moving around.

It was another close call.

-

We had just enough time to gather ourselves. Captain Langfeldt decided we should push out again. Slower this time. I agreed.

Slower was probably prudent.

I followed his tank until we got to the next block. I then peeled off to the right and down an adjacent alley.

This type of maneuver was second nature. Tanks try to spread out whenever possible, even if that means there are a few buildings between you and your wingman. You try to stay online. You keep your tank positioned so it is still easy to get to if you need to be dragged backwards.

I stopped at the entrance to the alley. I cocked my head to the side like a dog does when it's confused.

Well, looks wide enough... Right? I held out my hand, like it made a difference.

I learned long ago the only surefire way to get a tank unstuck is; don't be a fucking moron and get it stuck in the first place.

"Black 5, where are you? Push up."

I guess we'll find out. Looks wide enough to me.

It was not...

Arnold slowed down when the scraping sounds began.

There was a building to my left and an 8-foot wall to my right. I kept waiting for someone to pop their head above that wall. It made me super nervous. Nothing but trees and inky blackness on the other side of that wall. I really didn't need any more surprises.

We slowed to a crawl. Then stopped. Arnold came over the intercom.

"Sir, do you want me to push?"

"Uh, sure."

The engine whined and we moved about 4 more feet.

The wall to my right was giving way, but of course, not how I'd hoped.

The right track started crawling up the wall and the wall was cracking in the middle. It was causing the tank to start to lean unsteadily to the left against the building.

We went for a few more feet.

Shit!

"Arnold stop. Ok... try to back up. Straight back."

The tank was super angry at me at this point. The transmission grinded into reverse. Clank! Clank. Clank. Crunch... Then the engine started to whine. When we started going backwards the track started to climb up the wall again.

Shit... Well, if someone comes over that wall. We are so screwed.

After another 10 minutes of abuse on the transmission we were finally able to back out of the alley.

I pulled around and came up next to 6's tank on the other side. The left side this time.

"5, quit fucking around, where were you?"

Really? All I could do was laugh to myself.

The tank was stopped, we had gotten online. I wasn't in the mood for a lecture. That's when it happened. As if right on cue.

PING! Crunch... And the tank lurched to the left.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!"

Every tanker in the world knows what that was...

Fuck!

A torsion bar? Now?

Mysteriously, torsion bars only break when the tank is stopped. It's one of those mysterious and ominous events that all tankers know about. The torsion bars are like the springs in your car. It's what supports the shocks. You can fucking abuse the shit out of them and they won't even make a noise. But you stop the tank, and only at the worst possible moments, "Ping!" and the tank lurches to one side.

I told Arnold to back up a few feet. He put it in reverse. The engine whined and the crunching sound of metal on metal began.

It sounds like a lot worse than a torsion bar. It sounded as if the transmission was eating itself alive from the inside out.

Feeling the legs of your vehicle get shakey is terrifying. If the tank breaks down out here, it's gonna suck. It's also going to be a security nightmare. The idea of a burning tank on Al Jazeera is an insurgent's dream.

I was getting frustrated and I didn't want to make it worse. "Stop! Just fucking stop..."

I took a deep breath. You never want to take out your frustration on the driver. Its bad tank etiquette, bad juju, and they are just doing what you tell them. So technically if the driver does make a mistake, it is your fault anyway.

Captain Langfeldt came on the radio.

"Ok, let's push up to the next block."

"Ok, rodger, I think I'm having transmission problems."

"What, like what?"

I'm not a fucking mechanic. I think about how to describe the metal on metal orgy I can hear and feel underneath me.

“I don’t know, like really bad crunching noises?”

“You’ll be fine.”

Thanks coach... shit.

“Rodger.”

I pushed up to the next block with 6. The sounds got worse. Way worse.

“6, 5, I’m thinking this may be a serious one. I think my transmission is getting ready to shit the bed. I need to check it out.”

Between the adrenaline hangover, the crunching noises, and a fatigue headache all I could hear was the mechanical demons dancing around in my head. "You're gonna get stuck! Ha Ha Ha"...

“Ok, hang tight.” Tiger 6 broke the trance...

I could assume Lance was working on an update from the infantry. The CASEVAC was done. The firefight was over. And the only sounds were our idling turbine engines and a few random dogs barking in the distance.

This is the most common sound I hear in my memories of this place.

It’s creepy... The engine is whining at idle and there is always a random dog barking in the distance. And of course, a lingering odor of burning trash. You get used to it but never forget it.

Surprisingly, you can hear a lot of ambient noise even when the tank is running in idle. Or maybe I was just hallucinating.

“Ok, 5, lead us back.”

“Rodger.”

“Arnold, driver move out.”

The sounds were horrible but the tank was moving.

We pull into the courtyard where the infantry had their headquarters. This is the same place we left from hours earlier.

I hop off and find our mechanics. “Look, no idea, but the sound is terrible...”

“Davis! Get over here.” Lance looked pissed. What was this about?

“Davis, don’t ever fire indiscriminately like that.”

“What? You mean at the building?”

“Yes, at the fucking building. Legit targets only. I said, one round...”

I remember him just saying fire, but whatever...

You know you’re tired when you’re completely apathetic to getting yelled at.

Captain Langfeldt was pissed. I was fucking exhausted.

I was too tired to explain or honestly, care. I knew he wanted to make a point.

I got the point. I was apathetic, but I got the point.

-

It turns out it was just a torsion bar...

Of course, it was...

Big fucking surprise.

Oh look, the sun is coming up...

WHEN JESUS WAS A LANCE CORPORAL

I poked my head in the back of an amtrack, just trackers...

“Where is this meeting I’m supposed to be at?”

Captain Langfeldt loved to send me to infantry get togethers he couldn’t be bothered with. This was one of those “quick huddles” that the grunts always want because they don’t understand what radios are for.

I’m wandering around the outskirts of the Oil Refinery, moving in and out of the row of amtracks. I finally see some grunts smoking outside a small building, or hut thing.

When I shimmied my way in, I couldn’t help but notice how packed it was in this small space. It reminded me of a séance. Everyone was in a circle, some crouched, some sitting, some leaning against the walls. There are grunts strewn about, in corners, under tables.

Anytime grunts are in buildings they immediately assume the position of sitting against a wall holding their weapon across their chest. This is so they can try not looking like they’re sleeping.

And there he was...

To my right, several dudes over, there was this old man. I mean, like old. But he was in cammies. I saw he had Captain bars on his collar. It was dumbfounding and I was fascinated.

The meeting was about next actions. One guy piped up. “I’ve got my Barret; I can see out to 1000 meters.”

I said “Hi, I’ve got a big gun as well, I can see out to 8000 meters.” The company commander looked at me, rolled his eyes, he wasn’t amused.

I thought it was clever.

The meeting droned on. I wasn’t really listening until the company commander said “Ok, the FAC here (pointing at the elderly gentleman) will

go with you guys. He's good to go, I mean this guy was in the Marine Corps when Jesus and him were Lance Corporals."

To this day I still love that saying. I've heard it many times since but it's never quite as timely or funny as it was that one time in a tiny concrete house at the Oil Refinery south of Haditha.

PART 3

Al Assad Airbase & Baghdadi

AL ASSAD AIRBASE

Al Assad Airbase was a former Iraqi Airforce mecca.

It was a huge series of airstrips on a mesa with a complex base below. Most of the base, including all the former storage areas for airplanes, was actually below the airfield.

This was advantageous when the Iraqis used this base. It separated and somewhat protected the aircraft from a direct attack on the airfield.

However, this wasn't great for us because the expeditionary fuel delivery points were on top of the mesa in giant blivits. Blivits were giant fuel bladders that could hold thousands of pounds of fuel.

The problem with this design was that if the blivits were ruptured or hit by an incoming rocket, then there would be a giant cataclysm involving a flaming tsunami of jet fuel into the base. Once again, sleep well though, I'm sure that could never happen.

Al Assad was our Company Headquarters' home for the preponderance of the deployment. Although, we spent most of our time at our platoon locations. 1st platoon in Hit, 2D Platoon in Haditha, and 3rd platoon in Al Quaim.

We affectionately referred to ourselves as the highest paid tank section in the Marine Corps. This was because 90 percent of all Marine Tank operations were conducted at the section level. This meant that during almost all operations the tanks would operate in their respective pairs. Each platoon has 2 sections or 2 pairs of tanks. The headquarters is made up of the Company Commander's tank and the Executive Officer's tank.

The platoons were attached to their respective infantry battalions at the towns. We, Captain Langfeldt and I, were directly attached to Regimental Combat Team 7.

Enough with the formalities. The point is that Captain Langfeldt's and my tanks were based out of Al Assad. We had the bulk of our maintenance crews and motor-t guys with us at Al Assad as well.

We had only turned over a few weeks when someone in passing said.

"Uh sir, did you see what Alvarez and Ski did to the tanks"

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Sir you should probably check it out before the CO sees it, just in case.”

I needed to get down to the tank ramp immediately.

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I can see the giant Punisher skulls blazoned on the turrets of both tanks.

Oh shit. I better give Captain Langfeldt a heads up.

Too late...

“Davis did you see what Alvarez and Ski did?”

“Yes, I’m seeing it now.”

“Fucking cool right?”

I was hoping it wasn’t a baited question. It turns out it wasn’t. Captain Langfeldt loved it. He turns to me and speaks.

“Fucking Punishers. Badass...”

I must admit. It was cool.

Even though we’d been working together for months now, I was till cautious about what I thought the boss would be cool with or be like , "Absolutely not."

-

Gunners in the tank community are usually given the honor of naming their tanks. I always felt this was sacred ground and would always defer to my gunner. But of course, they would always want the whole crew on board.

I saw both of our tanks had already been blazoned with our tank names from home.

Captain Langfeldt’s tank was “The Penetrator.”

My tank was “Iceman.”

You’ll hear me reference our tanks or my tank, but the tanks are the entire crew’s. As tankers we take great pride in naming our machines and treating them as such.

The more you love your tank, the more it loves you back.

Instead of explaining the nuances of each tank I’ll cover it during the stories themselves. The basics are that our tanks were M1A1 SEP1s. There was a series of sight enhancement packages (SEP) that came out over the years. This was the first major one in the series I believe.

And no, there’s absolutely no air-conditioning. That’s the Army’s M1A2s. Just wanted to quell that rumor up front.

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Al Assad had very few amenities. It did have a Green Bean Coffee shop. This is the very Green Bean Coffee shop in which we were almost banned for life.

Turns out, driving the tanks directly up to the Coffee Shop and parking in the courtyard is frowned upon, by pretty much everyone... It does look super cool though. We did that exactly one time.

I guess it's not exactly Mos Eisley.

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We started the deployment living in the big group tents but eventually got to move into small modular berthing. This was affectionally called the CANS. It's like living in one of those mini hotels you see on the Discovery Channel in Japan. It's a tight fit. You can fit 2 people in one CAN but it's miserable. Thankfully I got my own.

It also helps to figure out who the poor bastard is that has gotten stuck being the "Camp Commandant." You want to get on their good side immediately. Never make fun of a Camp Commandant. It's a super shitty job and they are the ones that can either make you or break you when it comes to living arrangements.

There was a ramshackle gym in a building that the Sea-Bees built. The Sea-bees are the Navy Construction guys. They deploy to build stuff. They are amazing. They can build an entire building in a day. I know I'm dating myself but, they're like the Doozers from Fraggles Rock.

Daily life wasn't too bad at Al Assad but my days were mostly spent checking on maintenance statuses, or tracking down parts at the airfield. I must admit I got pretty good at rummaging through shit at the airfield to find parts we ordered. It's an XO thing. I also tried to stay out of the office to avoid Captain Langfeldt's incessant, "What are you working on? What are you doing today? How are the tanks? Where's everybody?"

He was good at staying on top of all the stuff going on "above" us which was great. But man, when he was in my shit, it was like walking on eggshells. Every answer I would give would be followed by 3 more questions. I'm not complaining, but it's the part of being an XO that sucks.

Thank God we had a First Sergeant. First Sergeant Harvey was a towering figure. He was the perfect match for Capt Langfeldt. They were close and had a great relationship.

The First Sergeant is the CO's right-hand man. He's the Senior Enlisted advisor to the Company Commander and he does a fantastic job of keeping the Boss doing boss stuff.

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I would stay on top of delivering spare parts to the platoons and making sure tanks across the company were always "Up."

I would assign Marines to take parts on helicopters and physically hand it to one of the mechanics at each platoon. This was the best way to make sure critical parts made it to the platoons. This is because to a poor helicopter crew chief, every fucking box looks the same. They appreciate when we would hand deliver stuff so they didn't have to figure it out.

The helicopter routes in the Marine AO were like busses. They would follow a ring route a couple of times a day. You could go pretty much anywhere but you had to know who to talk to and know when to get off. There are a lot of stories of Marines hopping off helicopters at night only to discover they're in the wrong place after the bird is long gone.

The hardest lesson I ever learned about helicopters was on a quick trip up to Haditha Dam. I needed to get some parts to 2D Platoon and could always use a break from being stuck within tasking range. Once again, sorry I don't remember exactly which battalion it was because they moved around. But at the time I believe it was 3/25 (3rd Battalion 25th Marines).

I climbed in the helicopter and took my seat. I started to pat myself down praying I didn't forget my ear plugs.

Shit.

Oh well, how bad could it be?

I heard ringing in my ears for at least a week after that experience. Never again.

Ever since, I'll rip a label off the wall or find some notebook paper to wad up. I never rode in any helicopter without ear pro for the rest of my career.

It's probably why I hear the familiar buzz of tinnitus in my ears as I write this. Oh well. One more thing for my VA claim.

The sound of a CH-53 helicopter is almost bearable when it is idling on the ground. These things are the size of a Greyhound bus. They're freaking huge. When they're running it's like a million parts moving at 100 mph all around you.

When I was at the Basic School as a Lt, I remember our Land Navigation Instructor was a CH-53 Pilot.

I distinctly remember him saying, "This is a lensatic compass. It is 3 moving parts manufactured by the lowest bidder. Don't confuse it with a CH-53 which is 1 million parts moving at 100 mph manufactured by the lowest bidder." The point is that CH-53s are ridiculously big and loud. They also break sometimes.

So, I thought, this isn't so bad, it's only a 20 min flight.

I knew I was in trouble the second the pilot started to idle up for takeoff. Even with my fingers plowed up against my eardrums it was like someone was trying to split my head open with a tuning fork. It's like the opera singer that can break a wine glass. It's excruciating.

Take a screaming baby, multiply the volume by 20 and put it right next to each ear. That's what one of these monster machines sounds like without hearing protection. It turns out that most helicopter crews wear ear plugs under their communication helmets to double up on protecting their eardrums.

I can only imagine the retired Boeing aerospace engineer laughing to this day while telling his buddies, "So I was like let's crank the volume up on this bitch, yeah, like that!"

Good Lord, CH-53s are unbelievably loud.

I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT COMBAT ENGINEERS DO.

“Black 5, where the fuck are you?”

“I’m over here, right next to you... and... you’re driving through wet concrete.”

“What?! What are you talking about?!”

I’m traveling about 40 kph through choppy desert terrain as I try to keep up with Black 6.

He’s cruising down MSR Uranium, the main road back to our home base at Al Asad, and leaving screaming Marines and a rooster tail of wet concrete in his wake.

We usually travel in line with each other.

Except this time. I got off as soon as I realized something was up.

I realized what had happened as I saw the concrete spraying from his tracks. I immediately pulled off the road and started driving along next to the road.

I had a hard time talking on the radio.

The tank was flying over the undulating terrain of the desert floor. We were bouncing around as we tried to keep up with Black 6. I was primarily trying to keep from losing my front teeth to the .50 Cal. This is exactly the type of situation where you’re ripe as a tank commander to face plant into the .50 Cal. I was trying to catch up when he called over the radio asking where I’d gone.

I couldn’t find the words. I assume we had just destroyed a significant amount of work for the engineers, and they were furious. We didn’t even slow down.

We returned to base.

Later that day I learned a valuable lesson in business etiquette.

The lead engineer never said anything. I thought the whole incident was forgotten.

I was wrong.

The lead engineer waited patiently for the Regimental staff meeting later that evening. He prepared to execute his plan.

Right as the Regimental Commander asked for an update from the engineers, the lead engineer pounced.

This was his chance. He began to berate both Captain Langfeldt and I, on how we destroyed the engineers' work to repair several sections of the road.

The problem here is that he waited till the meeting to say something.

He never said anything to us. All he had to do was, come talk to us and I think it would've gone a different direction.

This poor guy. Even I hated bringing up stuff to Lance. But at least I'm not fucking dumb enough to try to throw someone twice my size to the wolves. What a dumb move. It obviously backfired.

And good God, this was one of those golden insights I learned from my boss.

Sure enough. Captain Langfeldt waited patiently for him to finish and then just said,

"Uh, wow... Sorry about that. I guess I didn't recognize that you guys were working on the road because no one was wearing their protective gear... I mean, I did see a few guys laying out working on their tans, but I didn't want to say anything."

The tables had turned so quickly that everyone in the room fell silent.

Our Regimental Commander was a big stickler for not letting your guard down outside the wire.

The lead engineer fumbled for his words, but it was too late.

The moral of this story is don't try to throw someone under the bus in front of the boss.

It will never go the way you want it.

And even if it does, it's JV at best.

We never had issues with the Engineers again.

CONVOYS AND CAN ROUNDS

“Is he shitting? He’s shitting, isn’t he?” “Davis! What the fuck!”

So, Captain Langfeldt had a thing about unnecessary stops when we were escorting convoys.

Convoy escort was a boring job, but it was certainly effective.

It was very unlikely that a convoy with a tank escort was going to get ambushed. It was clear to the insurgents it wouldn’t be a good life choice for them to fire on a convoy we were in.

It was especially poignant that we had just received the first CAN rounds in combat.

The CAN round was a newly developed tank round that was the equivalent of a shotgun shell for the tank. Except, instead of BBs or Lead Pellets, our rounds were filled with 1-inch tungsten-steel balls.

We got a chance to test fire these new rounds at Al Assad a couple of days before.

We created a makeshift tank range facing into the open desert and tried out these toys of death. It’s funny because we were unimpressed until we went and looked at the targets afterwards.

We set up some cardboard cutouts of people and put them on Hesco Barriers. These targets are called "Ivans". Look it up. I’m not explaining it, it’s dumb anyway.

When we fired, the rounds just seemed to disappear. This was far from the football on fire of a HEAT round or the lazer-beam shot from a Sabot.

It just went poof. Well, boom! Then, poof...

Then we went and looked at the targets.

Expectantly, they were filled with holes, duh!... But the wild part was there were no steel balls.

Huh? We started digging into the Hesco barriers only to be disappointed. The steel balls must have gone at least a foot into the raw sand of the Hesco.

“Holy shit dude! Those steel balls are way the fuck in there.”

Ski looked back at me and we both smiled.

“Well, I think it’s fair to say that’s an ambush killer.”

We chuckled nervously. I’m going to make the mental leap and say we were both thinking the same thing.

“Let’s not squeeze one of those off in the wrong direction by accident.”

Back to the convoy.

Thine crewman shall remain nameless in this brief tale to minimize the embarrassment and to maintain plausible deniability when Captain Langfeldt reads this book.

We were about 10 miles into a 30-mile convoy operation from Al Assad to Haditha Dam, I think. It’s hard to keep track of the seemingly endless convoy operations we conducted.

We had made this trip at least 10 times already so it was pretty much a routine trip that we expected nothing to happen. It’s also mostly open dessert so bad guys sneaking up on us was very unlikely.

One of my crew said, “Uh sir, I don’t feel good.”

I looked at him and said, “What do you mean, like throw up, or something else?”

“Something else.”

He said, “Well I can find an MRE bag or something, but’s it’s going to happen.”

I said, “The Fuck it is...”

I have always had and will go to the grave with a “no shitting in the tank” policy.

I have heard many a story from my peers about how it was too dangerous to get out.

I firmly disagree.

I will position the tank, get out myself, groundfight bad guys, throw grenades, or whatever... to avoid anyone shitting whilst in my tank.

I knew Langfeldt wasn’t going to like this.

“6 this is 5.”

“What?” (by far my favorite response...)

“I need a tactical pause. One of my crew is sick. I just need a second.”

“Ok, Davis but this better not be because someone needs to take a shit.”

I said, “Of course not 6, he just needs to hop off to upchuck or something, we’ll only be a minute.”

I looked at my crewmate and said, “Hurry, go! And don’t make it obvious”

So, my crewman throws his helmet off, scrambles over the side of the tank. He does all of this while trying to strip off his gear as quick as possible.

The good thing here is that Tanker CVCs, our normal attire while on the tank, has a zipper flap in the butt area for just this occasion. You try not to use it, because as tankers we’re always afraid it might not get velcro’d up and be walking around before you noticed it.

-

I hear the familiar crackle of the radio, “Is he shitting? He’s shitting, isn’t he?”

I take my own tactical pause on the radio, hoping it’s a rhetorical question.

It was not.

“Davis! What the fuck!”

“Oh, rodger, yeah we’re loading up now.”

I scramble on top and over the tank as to not silhouette myself because I know Langfeldt is probably looking at me through his binos at this point. I quickly scramble over to the loader’s side and look over the edge.

“Hey, hurry up, I think Black 6 is coming!”

Sure enough, I can see the dust of a vehicle moving off the road, turning around, and coming up the side.

He’s able to finish up in record time and hop back on.

“Driver, go!”

We start creeping along.

“Uh, Black 6 we’re Oscar Mike.”

I look forward, squinting in the blinding desert sun, and see the dust start to abate.

He must have moved back to the road.

He looks at me and goes, “Thanks sir, that was a close one.”

I said, “for you and me both brother.” I chuckled then breathed a sigh of relief.

JB WELD AND IEDS

There are a lot of things I am admittedly not very good at, but 2 stand out; fixing hydraulic lines and finding IEDs.

The Regiment asked us to escort an operation into a small area just outside of Al Assad called Baghdadi.

Baghdadi was one of those random small towns between Hit and Haditha.

Our understanding was that this area was generally benign but used by the local insurgents to meet up and coordinate between Hit and Haditha.

We staged the tank at the front of the convoy. Captain Langfeldt's tank was in the middle.

If something is going to break on the tank it is very often right before you begin an operation.

Departing for an operation is generally referred to as LD (Line of Departure). This term is used loosely across different situations. Sometimes it's a time on the watch or a countdown of sorts. It can also be used as a verb; i.e. "We just LD'd or we're about to LD." That kind of thing

As the 20-30 vehicle convoy staged behind us, we were about 15 minutes from LD.

I looked at Slater. "What's that smell?"

Ski turned around. "Dude, that's hydraulic fluid..."

I take another deep whiff.

"Shit. Of course, it is. Right on time... just before LD"

The problem with hydraulics on basically any piece of machinery is that it is under extremely high pressure. This means that any type of leak is probably going to be a nightmare to fix.

I radio Captain Langfeldt. "Sir, can you have Griff run up here, we've got a hydraulic leak."

The response was one I knew before I heard it. I mouthed it to Slater as it came of the radio.

"This better not delay LD... He's on his way."

I shook my head. Oh man...

I'll tell you more about LCpl Griffith in a bit. All you need to know right now is that he's Lance's loader and a shit-hot tank mechanic.

Inside the tank we're all looking at each other. The general vibe is that it sucks to be the tank commander right now.

Everyone hates hydraulic leaks. Everyone hates missing LD even more.

Hydraulic fluid has a very distinct smell. It smells a lot like the antifreeze you put in your car. It looks kinda like it as well. It's a translucent neon green. Its distinctive sweet aroma is now wafting throughout the tank.

We found the leak as Griff was running up. It was a pinhole sized geyzer creating a mini cloud of toxic fumes quickly filling the turret. It was right by Slater's leg. There's a tiny hydraulic line that wraps with the turret behind the loaders chair.

Griff's head appears in the loader's hatch. "Shut it down sir. Slater hop out."

Griff was in the turret in seconds. He had already ripped open a small package with his teeth.

I'm of course sweating bullets that this is going to be a project we probably don't have time for.

Griff turns and can see my concern.

"Sir relax, this is an easy one."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah, you think we ground airplanes every time they have a hydraulic leak? It's when they quit leaking when you should be worried."

"What is that?"

"Duh, it's JB Weld..."

I had seen JB Weld a few times but had brushed it off as a bit of a gimmick. If Griff can stop a gazillion pounds of hydraulic pressure with what looks like a wad of chewing gum, I was ready to buy stock in the company.

This was the JB Weld putty stuff. He took 2 small sticks of it and mashed it together blending it thoroughly like a tiny loaf of bread. Knowing Griff, I'm surprised he didn't just chew it.

Griff made quick work of the job. He put the putty over the area that was leaking and in one motion wrapped it with the duct tape he had on his flak jacket.

He's out of the tank in a flash. He pokes his head in one last time.

"Sir, you better hurry up. Don't want to miss LD." He smirked.

-

“Arnold, start it up!”

The engine began its distinctive whine.

Slater and I watched that little piece of tape around the hydraulic line like it was a firecracker getting ready to explode.

Nothing....

“Holy shit, Griff is a miracle worker. Again...”

Ok, all the tank mechanics that read this are laughing at how dumb us regular tank dudes are. I know I’m not the only one that didn’t think that a piece of duct tape and JB Weld would hold.

It did...

That piece of duct tape and JB Weld is on a tank somewhere in the military right now. We never even replaced the line. It held the rest of the deployment, which makes me guess it’s still holding on a re-built M1A1 tank somewhere.

-

We got out of the gate. On time. Barely.

We pulled into the main area of Baghdadi which had an intersection in the middle.

I guess I was on IED duty that day because I was tasked with going into the intersection to look for IEDs.

First off, IEDs can look like absolutely anything. Insurgents were already putting IEDs in dead animals at this point so I’m looking for anything suspicious.

I still to this day remember leaning over the side of the tank, inspecting the curbs and dirt-covered areas of the road.

A friend of mine had been killed a year earlier in this exact scenario. He was doing exactly what I was doing right at this moment. Except he saw the IED.

He had turned to push his loader into the tank when it detonated. That’s how the shrapnel had entered under the back of his helmet. He was conscious when they pulled him off the tank. He died on the helicopter.

I wasn’t fucking around. I wanted to get this right.

I did not...

Thank God no one got hurt.

I reported I didn't see anything, but the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) dudes should probably check it out, just in case.

The EOD dude ran up in the Bomb Suit to take a quick look. He immediately spotted 2 IEDs.

Shit... I suck at this.

Then they sent the robot. They found a 3rd.

Well, that just about covers how good I am at spotting IEDs...

Unnerving is an understatement.

After detonating the IEDs in place, which took at least an hour, the rest of the operation was uneventful.

I still sweat that moment.

I'm glad that judgement call didn't result in anyone getting hurt.

Later, some would...

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How in the fuck could I miss 3 IEDs?

DEMO DERBY

Someone comes up with the brilliant idea of clearing one of the main surface roads in our area of operations by shooting everything that looks suspicious.

“So let me get this straight. They want us to fire a main gun round into every abandoned or wrecked car along the way.”

Lance looks at me and replies.

“Yeah, sounds like a great idea, right?”

I’m conflicted. This sounds like an easy operation, but also a total waste of time and money.

The idea of driving the tanks a ridiculous distance just to shoot at a few random abandoned vehicles sounds excruciatingly boring...

But... this is why I'm not in charge.

“Sure sir... You know this is going to be boring as shit.”

“Yeah, but it’s better than sitting around here.”

Meh... I don’t know. This is probably going to suck.

The idea was to insure there were no IEDs on this route almost no one takes.

This sounded like a boondoggle from inception.

But again, whatever, I just work here...

"Ok sir, you know me, I'm always onboard..."

He smiled. "You damn right you are. And you're going to have a better attitude about it."

We both smiled. As I leaned back in my chair I gave the cursory boy scout 2 finger salute.

"Yes sir..."

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It’s Lance and I, the M88, and a few support vehicles with us. We drive down this road that goes directly west to a shantytown nicknamed Korean Village.

It’s literally a trip into the abyss of open desert to the west. Basically, look between Haditha and Fallujah on the map, then go west into that area of

nothingness. That's it. That's where we're headed.

There's only one reason I bring up this story.

It's because one of the most bizarre things happened to me on this trip. Besides blowing up one of my road wheels.

-

The operation was boring. I'm sure it was cool for the mechanics to see us blow up a few cars but it was hardly the Fulda Gap. Not exactly the last great tank battle of our century.

We're driving along, going west, and cars are passing us in the opposite direction on the highway. No big deal, right?

Then, this one truck pulls by us and in the back, there are like 10 guys with AK-47s.

They look straight at me. I look straight at them.

I'm like, "Wait, what was that?"

"Slater, did you see that?"

"Huh... what sir?"

"You didn't see that?"

Slater looks at me.

"See what sir?"

So, I'm the only one that just saw a truck full of insurgents drive right past us like it's no big deal?

I look back and see the truck disappearing in the distance. I look up and down the convoy and realize I'm the only one that is high enough to see into the back of the truck.

I shrug my shoulders.

I'm dumbfounded.

To this day, I'm pretty sure that a squad of insurgents simply drove right past us.

Probably a good call on their part they didn't raise one of those weapons.

That truck would've been vaporized by a HEAT round at that distance. Or at any distance honestly...

So on the way back one of the end caps that are on the road wheels on my tank breaks.

It turns out, if you don't notice and continue to drive at 50 mph, that's how you melt aluminum road wheels.

2 Lessons in one day... saweet.

This deployment just gets more and more bizarre.

PART 4

Hit

THAT WAS A HUGE IED!

BOOM!!!

Holy shit!

What just happend?

The shockwave was violent and reality shattering.

The blistering effect of a powerful explosion is something that cannot be recreated in movies or print. The visceral invasion of your internal organs transcends both pain and disorientation. This initial destruction of your sense of reality is followed by nausea and confusion. So, as you try desperately to put together the pieces of your world you're also fighting the urge to throw up.

I first thought of my loader Slater. I knew he was more exposed than I was and had been shoulder high out of his hatch. As the dust and my perception cleared, I turned to see him uncurling from the floor. I peered down just as he was removing his goggles.

Like Wiley Coyote after a blast with TNT, his face was completely covered in dirt except for the outline of where his goggles had saved his eyesight.

Just seeing him move calmed my initial shock.

He turned and said, "I'm good, I'm ok."

In my shock, all I could think to do was yell at him, "You just took a fucking IED to the teeth!"

As you know, we had been in country for a couple of months but we had only been down once or twice to see our 3rd Platoon. Commanded by Lt Ronan, 3rd Platoon had deployed with a skeleton crew of active-duty Marines and was augmented to capacity with reservists from 4th Tank Bn. I

had experienced Hit briefly with Markley but it was time for Captain Langfeldt to get some initial “eyes on” the area.

We parked next to the 3rd platoon tanks inside of Forward Operating Base Hit.

After a cursory meeting with the base’s senior Marine, Captain Langfeldt met me and Ronan already leaning against a tank.

He was already speaking as he walked up. “Well, that was fucking useless.”

Ronan acknowledged, “I told you sir, the Commander and his Sergeant Major are both clueless. They don’t go outside the wire.”

This is much more common than you may think. Yes, even amongst Marines sometimes. It’s usually the toughest talkers and the most war-story-filled personalities that usually sat on base hand wringing over how they could avoid any actual danger.

There were common excuses: “I’ve got a ton of work to do here.” Or, “My boss has me tied up planning for the upcoming operation.” And my favorite, “We need to get our base better prepared to avoid being fragged by constant bombardment.” Occasional mortar fire and rockets were common at the small hardened base at Hit. But let’s be honest, more sandbags can only do so much.

The irony was obvious as Ronan showed us where the base commander has set up 3rd platoon.

The tank platoon had been given an outbuilding with a flimsy metal roof. The commander of this small base had conveniently created his dwelling on the bottom floor of a two-story building, on the end, with an adjoining stairwell.

Proverbially, these are the types of actions that scream louder than words.

Like Captain Langfeldt, Ronan is a big dude. They both kinda dwarf me.

I tried to stand on my toes to see what they are looking at on the map. These fucking ogres... They had laid the map out on the front slope of Lance's tank and were talking about our planned tour of the area. I looked like a kid holding my plate at the grown up table. I finally decided fuck it, I'm going to be following anyway. I quit trying to stand on my toes to see the map.

It would be a “Cannonball Run” of sorts but I expected a more cordial pace than the monster truck rally that Markley had taken me on a month or two before.

The plan was simple enough. We would cross the main road that is in front of the FOB to access the Main Service Road (MSR) Uranium.

There are several “IED Alleys” throughout the countless stories of Iraq but this main road we were crossing over to get to Uranium was one of the legitimately named areas. The direct route on the main road between the FOB and the town of Hit had been IED’d so much it looked like the surface of the moon. It had countless craters and a perpetual pulverized concrete dusting.

After we got over to Uranium, led by Ronan’s tank, we would enter the city at the main traffic circle. Then a quick trip down one of the main roads to the southern part of the town, comeback around, and exit through the traffic circle.

Should be easy, right?

-

We exited the FOB and took a winding maze of trails through a hilly part of the desert to the west. We take Uranium to the south, turn into the traffic circle, and enter the town.

It looked just as it did when I was there a month or two earlier with Markley and his boss. The town looked like it was any other day.

Shop owners peddling cans of gas and various other wares.

Most towns in this area look like a giant flea market that never closes. There is a mix of lounging old people smoking hash from hookahs and kids running around barefoot with dirty clothes.

No sense of urgency, just poor people fly batting, tea drinking, and simply existing.

We drove through the traffic circle then took a right on the main road. We then cut into the town a few blocks in and continued south.

As we popped out of the thick urban sprawl, there is a large area of darker desert to the south. It looked like a giant construction site that no one had gotten around to building on. It reminded me of cleared land with random roads intertwined but little to no plan.

As we drove through the area, the moondust was immense and I had a hard time even seeing Lance’s tank in front of me.

We turned back on the western-most main road.

My tank’s confidence started to waiver. An analogy obviously... it’s what it feels like when your tank goes into protective mode.

Protective mode is an automatic function of the M1A1 where the computer limits the RPM of the engine to minimize damage due to a problem. Protective mode can be symptomatic of a few common problems but most are easy to diagnose and fix.

I reported to Captain Langfeldt that my tank had gone into “protective mode” and that we were struggling to keep up.

Of course, it was somehow my fault. I laughed to myself. I think our relationship had finally made it to bigbrother status. How the fuck was I supposed avoid the 2 tanks in front of me kicking up half the desert into the air. We briefly discussed our options.

I wanted to simply stop, rev the engine. This would blow out the air filters. The Tank is fitted with an array of huge air filters. When removed, they look like giant honeycomb rectangles the size of a common office desk. One of the brilliant designs of the M1A1 is its ability to ingest a shit-ton of dirt and miraculously continue to run. Even a piece of debris as small as a penny could destroy a commercial jet engine yet the M1A1 sucks in all this garbage and somehow runs.

Well, it can ingest a bunch of dirt but even it has its limits.

Of course, there are several tricks built into the M1A1’s complex power system.

Part Dyson vacuum cleaner, church organ, and K&N filter, the tanks respiratory system starts with dynamic filtration. This system is affectionally called the “P-JAZZ.” I don’t know how to spell it, that’s a phonic interpretation. Cut me some slack, I’m not a mechanic.

The system alternates between air filters using one for an intake while blowing air the opposite direction through the others. This allows the tank to clean two of its filters while it uses the other one. It does this in a cyclical process, but the process needs clean air at some point.

Having aspirated the same plume of Captain Langfeldt’s rooster tail dust for half an hour, I knew that as I coughed and choked, the engine also needed more air.

The simple answer in this situation is to, stop, then rev the engine. This activates the PJAZ (sic) and enables clean air to power the process.

We were back on the main road headed towards the traffic circle so the dust had abated but my tank had already gone into protective mode.

When the tank goes into protective mode, it slows way down. When I mean slow, you go from a top speed of around 45mph to about 5mph.

You can run a tank in protective mode indefinitely but the idea is that it's a stern warning from the original designers to get your shit together and fix the problem.

Our three tanks slowed to a crawl as we headed back toward the traffic circle. We discussed options and Captain Langfeldt didn't want to stop.

I didn't disagree now that we had made it back on the main road but I needed to do something.

I didn't want to stop either but I didn't want to drive through town at a snail's pace inviting attack.

Lance had assigned our top tank mechanic to his tank as the loader. While not technically a tank 'crewman', it was common practice to stack the deck with talent and anyone can learn to load. Tank company commanders always stack the deck.

LCpl Griffith wasn't a shit-hot mechanic. He was the shit-hot mechanic. If you can picture a Call-of-Duty game character named "the Mechanic", You already have a good idea of what Griff was like. An athletic dude with lofting light hair, a wrench always adorning his flak jacket, and perpetually covered in grease.

I remember watching Griff rebuild a tank engine, in the field, at the tank range. Someone asked, "Are you sure we're aloud this echelon of maintenance?" He smartly replied, "Dude, I was a fucking jet mechanic, everything's my echelon."

I always pictured Griff outside the Marine Corps having a giant mullet and Commaro transmission in his bathtub. He could fucking fix anything.

As it turns out, he was getting ready to boss-level educate all of us. Again.

And save my life...

After a frustrating back and forth between Captain Langfeldt and I, Griff took directly to the radio. He told Captain Langfeldt "Let me talk to Ski."

He talked directly to Ski through Lance's helmet to my helmet. Then Ski handed my helmet back.

Ski got on the intercom and said "Ok, Arnold, listen up. I'm going to tell you what to do." He relayed the information to Arnold.

And fuck no, I don't remember the sequence but it was complex.

It reminded me of the up-down, up-down, left-right, left-right, A-B, A-B, A cheat code in Contra, the 1990s video game.

My tank engine roared to life and I exclaimed. “Holy shit! How in the fuck did he do that?”

We immediately picked up the pace. I believe we put the tank in tactical-idle mode which runs the engine at an even higher RPM than normal. The extra torque enables the air filter system to kick into overdrive.

The sense of relief was palpable as we approached the traffic circle. Ronan took the left and Tiger 6 was right behind him.

Ronan said the traffic circle was the center of most enemy activity and we should “be ready” anytime we drove through there.

The last thing I remember noticing is that the area around the traffic circle seemed so dead, devoid of the activity we saw on the way in.

And running. Someone was running...

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The blast was biblical. The size of which I couldn’t comprehend till later.

After checking on Slater and the rest of the crew, I radioed to Captain Langfeldt that we were ok.

I said specifically “Contact! IED. Continuing.” Not to sound cheesy; that’s what I said because it was the only sentence I could form.

In that moment I was trying to gather my composure and I could barely talk.

“You good?” Lance cracked.

I said “Yeah, I think we’re good. I’m not turning around though.” I laughed nervously.

Fuck me... That was fucking scary...

He said, “Good, I don’t want to deal with that shit today. They’ll be gone by the time we get there anyway.”

Arnold had instinctively “floored it” the moment he felt the blow to the front of the tank. As we sped away, I looked behind me to see a mushroom cloud probably 100 feet into the air.

There is no way any of us were walking away from a blast that big.

The positioning was off by inches. If it had gone off a second later it would have been catastrophic.

We later surmised by the scrapes on the front of the tank that it had detonated somewhere around our right fender.

I'm 100 percent confident that if we had gone through that area at 5 mph you wouldn't be reading this.

Upon arrival back at the FOB around 5 miles away, they said that the indirect fire alarm, attached to the small counter battery radar, had gone off.

They said, "That thing must've been huge! It set off indirect systems from here to Al Asad and it shook our building." That's never happened before.

It was fucking huge.

Who really knows what it was. Because of the vertical trajectory of the blast and mushroom cloud, I assume it was anti-tank mines stacked on top of each other. But I'm no explosives expert... amongst other things.

Real anti-tank mines are designed to blow a concentrated blast directly into the bottom of a tank. One anti-tank mine can split a tank in two.

Upon our return, several of the Marines came up and asked, "Whoa, what happened?"

In classic Captain Langfeldt fashion he goes, "Nothing much. Pretty quiet."

All I could do is smirk, shake my head, and mumble under my breath, "Oh, nothing much, Davis's tank almost got vaporized, but you know, no big deal."

"What was that?"

"Nothing sir."

Captain Langfeldt then turned to Ronan. "You guys got internet? I need to check my email?"

Fuck me... I'm going to double check on Slater. This is going to be a long deployment.

I'm thinking, at least I'll have a ton of shit to talk to a therapist about when I'm older.

IS IT HOOLIGAN OR HALLIGAN?

I started to feel sick to my stomach. This is a sure sign of dehydration.

I hesitated to ask what the ammo temp gauge said.

I leaned over.

130! Shit that's hot.

We had frozen all our water bottles.

This seemed like pure genius at the time. We took them straight from the freezer and threw them into the cooler on the bustle rack, right before LD.

It turns out that Igloo makes quite a fantastic product.

This was brilliant right up to the point where I'm getting ready to throw up and all we have is frozen water.

I looked like a fucking idiot trying eat a giant ice cube.

I'm surprised I didn't slice my finger open trying to cut the bottle in half with my Benchmade knife.

I knew it looked kind of dumb and I thought no one was really paying attention.

Then Ski laughed, "It's not a fucking snow cone sir."

"Ski... go back to your home." He laughed again.

Then Slater started laughing.

There was a cacophony of laughter and the world was beginning to spin around me.

"They're all going to laugh at you! They're all going to laugh at you." I really was Carrie, stewing in my pity as I continued to scrape the giant cube with each bite.

I was making very little progress.

I gave up. "Fuck it."

Once again, the entire crew burst out laughing.

I popped my body out of the turret as I stood on my seat.

I'd rather go down in some fresh air than in this fucking pizza oven.

I let my eyes adjust to the blinding sunlight and looked around to see if the grunts had made any progress.

It was slow but they were getting it done. We might move up another 10 feet in next 30 minutes or so.

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We were in the town of Hit for a clearing operation. I'm not even sure which one. It was pretty mundane, but hey, it pays the bills... This is basically what a day job looks like for tanks.

Welcome to the real world of supporting grunts as they clear up a street. It's super slow.

I was loathing in my own dehydrated self-pity when I saw it.

It snapped me out of my dizzy realm.

"What is that?"

The grunts next to my tank sat against a wall and stopped to drink water. I was used to seeing the junior Marine in a fireteam carrying the SAW, but this was entirely different. It was like a tool roll of sorts but instead of wrenches there were crow bars and sledgehammers.

I leaned over the side, "Hey man, what is that?"

"Uh, it's the hooligan kit..."

Hooligan kit? I'd never heard of it.

I was used to the ram thing that cops use to bust down doors. The grunts always had those with them. This kit of crow bars was new to me.

I bent my mic near my face, "Hey, any you guys heard of a hooligan kit?"

Slater said, "Yeah it's the thing that crunchies use to bust doors down."

"Huh, I've never heard it called the hooligan kit. That's a weird name."

"Halligan sir, Halligan..."

Ski's voice manifesting from the intercom silence.

"Halligan... its what firefighters use to break open doors. It's named after the dude that made it. Halligan."

The indignity of his tone told me that everyone already knew this, and I was the last to find out.

In my dehydrated stupor, I decided it best if I just sank back onto my seat.

I had a second water bottle thawing on the turret, and my ice cube had born a few more drops.

I sat there trying to crunch on that frozen chunk of ice for the next hour or so, lost in thought.

Maybe it's a Halligan tool in the hooligan kit? Or is it a Halligan kit?

Humph. I dry heaved again in my drunken dehydration.

I thought about asking again, but I had already sounded dumb once this hour, I'll just find out later.

If I make it... Ugg...

This is the type of heat that a small breeze just makes worse.

As you sit there panting, trying to catch your breath, someone puts a hairdryer in your face and says, now how is that? Just wonderful huh?

Real heat like this is unbelievably miserable.

It's funny how every time you're super cold you think; I'd rather be burning up than this.

Then of course every time it's stupid hot all you can think about how you'd much rather be freezing.

I used to tell myself to just wait until my t-shirt has soaked all the way through. Then I'll be way more comfortable. It's true, once you have a layer of sweat laden cloth between you and the next layer it peels off just enough heat to help a bit. Just a bit though...

I never understood how grunts don't wear t-shirts. I never got it. Even when I served as an infantryman years later, I always wore a t-shirt. To this day, I think not wearing an undershirt is dumb. That thick cammie blouse feels like shit directly on your skin. Especially under body armor. But once again, let grunts do grunt things. Who am I to judge?

Maybe I'm wrong, but you need something between a 50 pound flak jacket and your skin. The heavy-duty fabric of the blouse or CVCs is not as forgiving as good ol' Fruit-of-the-Loom cotton.

If you've ever wondered why flak jackets, which is just body armor, weighs so much it's not why you might think. Yes, the plates inside have some heft to them but it's nothing compared to the 45lbs of ammunition you stuff in your magazine pouches.

Another movieish situation is the amount of ammo you see everyone shooting. Each magazine can hold up to 30 rounds. Each one weighs about 7.5lbs. 6 magazines is the standard load everyone carries. So 45lbs plus the weight of the armor plates.

You could make the armor out of fiberglass and it still wouldn't help that much. Try running with 60lbs and you get to feel what it's like to be a real infantryman. Trust me on this one, it ain't Call of Duty. No one is running around like in that game. At least not for more than a few seconds.

As a tanker, I carried a vest that had all my ammo on it. It was always draped over my hatch. So, when I did have to get off the tank, I would just throw that vest over my flak and I'd be good to go.

Sorry, I must explain about the flak. There have been a lot of variations of the body armor Marines wear over the years. It's called body armor. The reason everyone calls it a flak jacket is because the earliest versions of this type of armor was used by pilots in WWII.

These vests would provide some minimal protection to the pilots from airborne artillery, known more affectionately as flak.

The name stuck and newer generations just kept calling them flak jackets. Most youngsters in the military couldn't tell you that's why they're called that.

Tankers used to wear a lighter version of the flak jacket called a spalling vest. Spalling is what happens when a tank round goes through a tank. The incoming round is traveling so fast that it melts the metal armor as it penetrates and the tiny molten balls of metal bounce around inside the tank.

I never really got it. If a tank round comes through the tank with enough force to cause spalling, then the sheer over pressure is most likely going to kill you anyway.

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By the way... it turns out it is Halligan.

And I'm pretty sure hooligan is just something I made up in my trip to the dehydration spirit world.

I've never seen any sane grunt carry that giant fucking tool bag since.

God bless firefighters, because God didn't make that type of shit for grunts.

This is how God punishes Tankers. I swear every time I've started feeling sorry for myself being hot or sickly dehydrated all I need to do is look over the side of the turret. I see grunts hauling ridiculously heavy equipment in the same searing heat as I bake in.

I'm pretty sure every time a tanker dry heaves in dehydration, a grunt gets his wings.

God bless those fuckers. While I'm losing double digit pounds baking in the iron beast, there is always a grunt besting us in the endurance of ridiculous misery next to my tank.

The way grunts always shove it in our face is by not only somehow performing in these conditions but doing it with a sick twisted smile on their face.

Those fuckers are psychopaths... There, I said it. Grunts are crazy...

That's why we might give those dudes a hard time, but tankers generally don't fuck with grunts.

MARINE SNIPER IN HIT

There is a dead man on the ground in front of my tank and three shifty local dudes around him looking at me. They are holding their hands up like they're under arrest.

I say on the radio "Ok, explain this to me again, I'm confused." The response was of little help.

"The dead guy is a sniper and they are trying to carry him away. One of our guys (Marine sniper) got him and they (the insurgents I'm staring at) already took his weapon."

I said, "Ok, so what exactly am I supposed to do?"

"Ok, you need to roll all of those fuckers up so we can question them."

An awkward pause...

If I had been in country for a few weeks, I might have tried to do what they suggested. But I had already learned off the tank I'm probably just a danger to myself and everyone around me. And it turns out, you look like a fucking idiot with an M4, a comm helmet, and CVCs on. I'm not falling for that one again.

Earlier in the deployment I had gotten off my tank to clear a vehicle once.

I had realized afterwards I had no idea what I was doing and it was dumb as shit. So, no matter how much they ask, I'm not doing it again. Tankers don't dismount. It's always a bad idea. Ask Captain Meyers.

I came back, "Yeah, no... we don't do 'roll up' we're tank dudes."

They replied "Ok, well hold them there and we'll send some folks up."

I'm thinking to myself how ridiculous the whole situation is. I've got three of these fuckers 15 feet in front of me. They are looking at me like I'm holding a gun to their head, which technically I am.

But to me, I'm not. Because they are unarmed, I'm not going to shoot them if they run away. Plus, I never actually saw said crime anyway.

I do have to add, it didn't matter what we had in the gun tube. All I had to do is tell Slater to arm the gun and me or Ski could pull the trigger. The blast alone would turn everyone to Jello.

A few minutes of conversation on the radio passed and that's when I started doing the math. Wait a minute...

I looked over my right shoulder behind me and the nearest building was at least 1000 meters away. That's when I had to know.

I keyed the mic. "Hey, wait a minute, you're telling me that Marine snipers are on that building that is like a click behind my tank.?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Fuck me, is that some type of record or something?"

Still to this day I don't know the specifics of this engagement. The infantry quickly pulled up and rolled everyone up. But ever since I've always wondered about these official, "long distance sniper records" because I was there on this one and this was a long fucking way. It had to be close to whatever the record is.

I did several double takes and looked back and forth from the building behind me to the dead dude in front of me. I'm not sure exactly how far it was, but it was a long way. To this day my best guess is that it was 1000m plus.

Chalk this one up to "We'll probably never know, but it was a damn long way for sure. "

I'll go on record to say it looked like at least 1000 meters to me.

CONTRACTOR RECOVERY

While visiting the Forward Operating Base (FOB) at Hit again, Black 6 and I were talking to Lt Ronan, our 1st Platoon Commander.

Like Lance, Ronan was an imposing figure. With a thick New York accent, and a giant stature, Ronan was a bit stoic but highly respected by his Marines.

This was the first time we had been down to Hit in a month or two.

Ronan had established a strong relationship with the infantry unit there and was escorting security patrols on a regular basis.

Hit is a wild area. In contrast to Haditha, Hit seemed quiet but it was not due to lack of insurgent activity. As you look at the layout of the towns in which we were operating, Hit was the furthest south. Being the closest to Fallujah, it was where most of the high-level insurgent leaders probably moved.

You've probably heard a similar saying, but in the insurgency world, bad guys don't like to fight where they live. Same as "don't shit where you eat." This was most likely what was going on in Hit.

The insurgent leaders liked to live in Hit, plan in the towns between there and Haditha, and fight in Haditha. All of this while intermittently lobbing mortars and rockets at the FOB at Hit.

The FOB at Hit was on an almost constant alert for indirect fire. They took mortars on almost a weekly basis.

This indirect fire happened several times while Captain Langfeldt and I were there.

I distinctly remember walking around with Lt Ronan and seeing the different areas of the FOB. It was standard fare. There was a fuel area, a vehicle maintenance area, and tank maintenance area on the outskirts of the built-up area on the interior. I saw a Marine under a Humvee and a few others leaning into the engine compartment.

We were wrapping up a conversation with Ronan when the indirect fire alarm went off. We immediately ran to the nearest concrete building and jumped into the stairwell on the end. The explosions were unnerving to say

the least. Real mortars make a very distinct sound when they impact and explode. It's a very distinct KAWUMP!

Mortar explosions are very misleading. The shrapnel they deliver is not. They don't make a lot of smoke but the shrapnel, although almost invisible, is lethal.

During that run to the nearest building, I heard the distinctive KAWUMP! sound several times.

Make no mistake, you can always distinguish a soldier or Marine that has experienced a real indirect fire attack and one that has been through a few drills.

Anyone that has experienced a real indirect fire attack is running their fucking ass off. Anyone trying to look brave or nonchalant is full of shit, they've never experience real indirect fire before.

An Indirect fire attack is terrifying. Usually, the first rounds are already impacting when any type of alarm is going off. You hear explosions but don't really see much. Why these explosions are so deceptive is because they are not designed to make a big explosion. They are designed to sling hot, sharp, jagged metal chunks as far as possible.

During this attack we had just made it to the building when we heard the succession of several explosions. Rattling the stairwell we had made it to, we could see the dust kick off the floor each time a round impacted. The experience is unnerving.

Eventually there is an abatement of explosions and you dare peek into the open. On this occasion, I didn't see the normal walking around and survey of damage. Instead, we saw Marines running and yelling. Not good.

I see several Marines carrying someone from the vehicle maintenance area to the center of the courtyard. He was immediately loaded into a Humvee ambulance and there was a flurry of activity inside.

Whenever a Marine is hurt and there's not much you can do, it's best to stay out of the way. This is not the time for morbid curiosity, it's usually life and death. Today it was death.

I couldn't believe it was literally the Marine I saw 20 minutes earlier under the Humvee. Even under a vehicle is not safe from mortars.

My heart sank when I heard a Marine yell, "Get the Chaplain!"

Nothing good comes from a situation when someone says that.

Dustoff made their way to the area and was on the ground in minutes. Off they went and the stunned silence commences. We'll talk about Dustoff a bit later. Dustoff is the name and callsign of the MEDEVAC helicopters.

No one needed to say a word. We all knew exactly what we had just witnessed as the Chaplain consoles several Marines. A few others gathered and started to gather up gear and pick up the medical trash that had been strewn around. This is the part no one tells you about. This is the kind of stuff that is the hardest to forget.

The silence of Marines walking around then pausing, each to reflect in their own way, is deafening.

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We had just cracked open a few MREs and were sitting with Lt Ronan. He was explaining the situation in the area and obviously the constant barrages of indirect fire. He explained that the insurgents had the timing down to launch an attack, pack up, and move all within minutes.

The insurgents would pre-plan their fire trajectories for a target and "drop and pop." They would lay their mortar tubes, fire a few rounds, then loaded up and were gone before any of our equipment could even determine a general direction it came from.

One of Ronan's Marines popped his head into the room and said the Infantry was asking for him.

Ronan returned shortly after as we were finishing up our MREs.

He told us there was a weird situation developing and they were trying to get more information. Something about a convoy was ambushed. We knew we were the only military vehicles moving around that day so we tried to figure out who it could've been.

Eventually we get word that it's a civilian convoy that was being escorted by military contractors for security.

There is a lot about military contractors in war zones that is not widely known. For one, it looks cool, but those guys have absolutely no backup.

When they get in trouble it's usually far too late for the military to bail them out.

A traditional military convoy has a backup plan. Even if it takes time to execute, it's at least in place.

We were the only backup that was anywhere near this convoy.

We tell Ronan to convey that we'll head out and send back as much information as possible on our way.

We were out of the gate of the FOB in about 10 minutes. Our tank crews always stayed close to the tanks. The tank becomes your home. You tend to gravitate back to it wherever you are. If the crew isn't on the tank, you can be assured they're nearby and someone knows where they're at.

One of the advantages of being near the tanks is that indirect fire is not nearly as dangerous than being out in the open.

The order out the gate was Lt Ronan, Captain Langfeldt, and me.

We headed directly across the Main Service Road (MSR) to get over to MSR Uranium, which is a secondary road that traces through the desert. The main MSR had become so saturated with improvised explosive devices that it was completely unusable. MSR Uranium ran parallel the main road but cut through the desert. Being much more in the open, MSR Uranium was difficult to emplace IEDs on without being observed. In short, it was a bit safer.

Once we were adjacent to the town of Hit we turned in. There really isn't any other route to the area where this convoy was ambushed.

We cut into the town of Hit through the traffic circle. Yes, the same traffic circle where I almost got vaporized before. I'm obviously not a big fan of this area.

We headed south from there without knowing the exact location of the convoy. We were driving fast. We drove through an area that had several fires burning but we didn't think much of it until we popped out into open desert on the southern side of Hit's urban sprawl.

That's when we figured out that we had driven right through the area where the convoy supposedly was.

To give you an idea of how bad this ambush was, when we drove through the area the first time, not one of us thought that could be it. There was nothing there, only a few small fires.

Upon returning to the area, we were able to now see that most of those small fires were vehicle hulks and random material from trailers and cargo.

We set up security by facing outboard and then contacted the infantry unit to see what exactly they wanted us to do. They asked us to set security on the area while they determine what follow-on actions would be.

As we had time to reflect and look around, that's when we realized what we were looking at. I was now facing back to the north to Hit. Ronan's tank

was facing south. Captain Langfeldt was facing west.

We quickly realized the scene was much more macabre than we first thought.

There were several vehicle hulks that had burned down to the frame. This is why they didn't stand out when we drove by the first time.

We also realized that what we thought was a simple pile of trash was a pile of dead bodies charred beyond recognition.

There was a vehicle with two body's still burning right off the road. There was a controversy on what to do at this point. The main concern was that these burned-out hulks could be laden with IEDs to catch us off guard.

The insurgents could've set up a few IEDs knowing we would survey the area.

It had quickly turned from dusk to night.

We had a section of Cobra helicopters check in on station and start to observe the area beyond what we could see. We could only see as far as the first layer of buildings off the road.

The Cobras identified several "suspicious" vehicles to our North. I'll be totally honest, I don't know how suspicious these vehicles were. It sounded a lot like the Cobras just wanted to blow something up. But of course, I'll give them the benefit of the doubt.

The Cobras set up for a Hellfire missile shot on the suspicious vehicles.

I'm not sure where the confusion was but once again, we we're all sleep deprived and just trying to stay awake. I heard the Cobras line up and "cleared hot" for a missile shot.

I popped up out of the turret and turned to watch the Cobras. The Hellfire flew from behind us over top and into the vehicles several hundred meters away. The light completely lit up the scene around us. Hellfire missiles create a brilliant long-tail flame as they fly. Missiles are far different from any other type of ordinance from aircraft. They are expensive, rare, and really fucking cool.

This missile shot completely took Captain Langfeldt by surprise.

So, as I'm sitting on my cupola watching the light show. The Hellfire flies right over us.

All the sudden Captain Langfeldt comes frantically over the radio, "RPG! RPG!"

I remember looking directly over to his tank with an inquisitive look. Do I say something? He's just going to be pissed. I tried to be as tactful as possible.

"Uh, that was the Hellfire..."

Captain Langfeldt is never actually wrong. So, he comes back immediately on the NET.

"Uh, no, no, there was an RPG."

I'm literally looking directly at his tank and the empty abyss of nothing happening around it.

My inner voice said, let it go man. Just let it go...

But I just couldn't...

"It was the Hellfire..."

"Dammit 5! I saw a fucking RPG!"

"Rodger, Rodger, got it..."

In his defense, he was facing the opposite direction and I think he was on one of the other nets trying to figure out what we were supposed to be doing.

All the while I'm just sitting on top of my tank, in the dark, watching this entire surreal scene play out. Slater looked at me and laughed. I smiled, then rubbed my eyes.

"Good lord, how long are we going to be out here? There is literally nothing we can do..."

Slater just nodded. I don't think Ski or Arnold were even awake at this point.

Eventually we headed back to the FOB.

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Post note here.

We found out that this was a civilian convoy that was being escorted by an international military contracting company. Once the ambush had begun, only a few people escaped. One of the contractors stole a vehicle and drove south until he ran into a military checkpoint. That's how we eventually got the word that something was going on.

There was very little we could do. This is a good example why it's a bad idea to rely on private security in this type of environment. If you had asked the Marines in this area of operations (AO), they would've told you that this area was benign.

That's the problem. Insurgents would flow in and out of these types of areas looking for soft targets like this. They were most likely long gone by the time we made it there.

LAR? I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THEY WERE OUT HERE.

The blast was far away. It still shuddered the tank. The deep vibrations of real explosions carry a tremendous distance. We all instinctively started squinting into the distance.

There was an eerie silence as we all continued to stare in the direction of the sound.

“There!”

Deep into the distance we could see a stream of dark black smoke. Dark smoke was always bad. Explosives make a light grey. Wood fires make a thick white. Building fires a dark grey. And vehicles make a black acrid plume.

This looked to be black smoke but not a tremendous amount.

We waited anxiously for the radio traffic we knew would soon follow.

We switch our auxiliary radio over to battalion. We immediately caught the back and forth.

“We’ve got three urgent and one priority casualty.”

We gathered quickly that it was a Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) that had hit a mine. We listened intently and they were certain it was a mine.

I look at Slater and Ski. “Dude, I didn’t even know LAR was out here.”

Mines are weird.

Although I had seen plenty of these round shoebox-sized explosives, I’d never seen anyone hit one. I believe the IED that nearly vaporized my tank was two or three of these stacked on top of each other. We were lucky. It sounds as if these LAV crewmen were not.

Me and Lance conferred, wondering if there was anything we could do to help.

Another thing about mines is the situation is benign after the event, except for the possibility of there being other mines. So, running over there as quickly as possible is not always a good idea.

After a short back and forth with battalion we decided to link up with the M88 Tank retriever in the company field trains then head cautiously to the area.

Once again. Mines are weird. If you hit a mine in the middle of the desert, it's probably a holdover from another war. If it's on a road, then it's obviously being used as an IED.

We realized as we approached that this was in the middle of the desert. Not good.

I doubt they planted just one. That means it might be an old minefield.

We get within about 50 yards of the struck LAV and stop the tanks. Lance, myself, and one of our company mechanics started to walk towards the vehicle area being cautious to look for anything in the windswept desert road.

The road looked like any other offroad path you'd see in the middle of the desert. It was soft sand but still visible due to the deep impressions from the long past tracks.

I'm not going to lie, we all looked dumb kneeling down probing with our knives or anything else we could find that was pointy. I remember having a stick, but I have no idea where it came from. It might have been from an old range flag we had in the sponson box.

If you want to know what it's like probing for mines a few inches away from your face, it's sketchy. The situation was also compounded by the fact not one of us had ever probed for mines, let alone had any training in it.

How hard can it be?

It's a pain. I think we all kinda came to grips with our fate and just stood up and started walking.

I thought to myself. If it's an anti-tank mine, even if I step on it, it shouldn't go off without more weight.

I turned to our small contingent at this point and said, "Hey! If it's an anti-tank mine, even if you step on it, it shouldn't go off without more weight."

"Not helpful sir..."

I laughed to myself.

Then I said.

"Well at least you won't feel it."

The Staff NCO nearest me shot me an "Eat shit" look.

I'll just shut up.

In the excruciatingly bright desert sun, it's hard to see faces. And with all your gear on you just go off stature usually. I don't to this day remember who was with me as we pushed up to the giant hole in front of us.

It looked like a fucking meteor had hit the desert floor. The sand was black. The crater was about 15 to 20 feet across. The LAV was on its side. One of the front wheels was missing. It wasn't sitting somewhere nearby. It was gone. Probably vaporized into the ether.

We walked around the edge of the crater to the other side of the vehicle. There was a black Marine standing there with a real thousand-yard stare.

That's when I realized he wasn't black. He was a white dude covered head to toe in grease or soot, or both. I could literally only see his eyes.

"Holy shit! Are you hurt?"

The Marine replied, "No sir, I think I'm ok."

This one kinda freaked me out. I know in a traumatic situation you may be missing a limb and not even realize it. I couldn't figure out how he got so covered in what looked like grease. The Marines started to peel his coveralls away from his body and I could at least see some colors of fabric underneath. I breathed a bit of relief that he wasn't just burnt all the way through or something.

Then we hear the MEDEVAC bird coming in hot.

I yell to one of the Marines, "Pop smoke!"

He said "Where?"

"Anywhere! We're in the fucking desert!"

I said it in a lighthearted tone. I knew that the smoke was helpful to pilots to make sure they're at the right site but they're going to figure out where to land. You don't have to put the smoke anywhere in particular.

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Dustoff is a special kind of animal in the military world. It's like running into a unicorn in the middle of nowhere.

It goes without saying that being a tanker is glamorous on the battle field. Everyone literally looks up to you to talk and you're standing in the world's most lethal machine.

But... Every ground dude, yes even tankers, are kind of fanboy infatuated with Dustoff.

Dustoff is the callsign of the MEDEVAC helicopter and escort that shows up when you have a casualty. They always come.... No matter what.

With bullets flying, bombs going off, whatever... They always show up and they come in hot.

I've experienced a good amount of CASEVACs in my career. They all seem to be damn near the exact same.

Nobody can remember the Nine-Line format to ask for a CASEVAC. But higher always helps. "They" say Dustoff won't launch until you figure out the first three lines, but the reality is they're usually off the ground the moment they have a direction to point in.

They're fucking awesome.

This case was no different.

They came blazing in full sandblasted glory. They land, grab the two kids that looked confused, and were getting ready to launch when the crew chief scanned across all our faces with a thumbs up.

We returned the favor to signal to Dustoff they had everyone that needed a helicopter ride.

And off they went.

Once again, we're all looking around in amazement. Every time those guys show up, they are super fucking cool.

And yes, everyone loses their shit if one of the crew is a female. Good God, and if she's the pilot... I'll let you use your imagination the conversations that happen right after they lift off.

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Then someone broke the daze.

"Anybody know what we did with those guys weapons? Did we throw them on there? Did they grab them? Fuck? Every time..."

I shook my head and chuckled to myself. I had to. I was a Company XO. I know exactly what just transpired. Everybody gets all goo-goo eyed when Dustoff shows up and nobody remembers about weapons. It is going to cause some poor Lt a few days on the telephone trying to find those weapons...

They're probably in pieces on the desert floor somewhere. Well... maybe that Lt will be on the phone for more than a few days.

So now we're all standing around wondering about the next part of the story.

"How in the hell are we going to get this thing outta here."

The LAV was absolutely torn apart. The front right section of the vehicle was gone. Where there used to be a wheel and suspension is now a gaping wound like that of hockey player's gums after a good brawl.

We brought up the M88 after declaring the route safe from mines. This was confirmed by our collective minutes of mine-clearing experience.

We thought about towing it with the M88 but the transmission was shot and the axles seemed seized. We then thought about putting it on a flatbed truck. But how in the world are we going to get this 26-ton armored vehicle on a flatbed?

The tank mechanics said, "Let's just pick it up with the M88."

Of course I give my opinion. "What, that's fucking crazy, a M88 can't lift an entire vehicle. Can it?"

M88s are designed to tow tanks and replace engines on tanks. They are great at pulling vehicles and stuff out of sticky situations but there's got to be a limit, right?

The tank mechanics huddled and we all kinda watched them with raised eyebrows. No way are they going to be able to pull this off.

Now in defense of the M88, I've seen it lift the corner of a tank off the ground before. You sometimes use the M88 for this if you need to replace one of the front roadwheels, fix broken track, or replace a torsion bar. But that's the corner of the tank. If you do the math, that should be only 1/4 of 72 tons. That's a lot but it's not an entire vehicle. Especially not an LAV.

I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. The fucking M88 (Hercules) lifted the entire vehicle off the ground. The mechanics just needed to lift it up enough for the flatbed to pull underneath it, but the mechanics decided to settle this question once and for all.

No shit, they lifted that thing up until it was hanging a foot or two off the ground.

Holy cow, the M88 really is an amazing vehicle.

That thing is a beast.

The mechanics were high-fiving each other as the rest of us just stared in amazement.

PART 5

Al Quaim

THE BRAVEST THING I'VE EVER SEEN

“We’re still missing one! I’m going in to get him myself”

The radio traffic was rushed but not panicked. The gunfire had begun to slow down. There was a resolution to the statement that the infantry Lt made.

After a furious few seconds of back-and-forth radio chatter and gunfire, the Lt had determined there was one Marine left in the building.

Without pause, or regard to his own safety, he made a decision. He was going to get that Marine, his Marine, even if it did cost his life...

Operation Matador began with an iconic scene.

Over 50 vehicles were moving through the desert in the pre-dawn hours of the day.

Led by the familiar lethally smooth silhouette of tanks in their natural habitat. The tanks cut across the desert in a wide dominant formation. 1st Platoon led the initial assault with Lance and I tucked in behind. We broke off to lead the Battalion Command Center to its initial overwatch position.

The multi-day operation, into the hornet’s nest of insurgent activity, was to be initiated by tanks and followed with an overwhelming force of infantry.

This infantry battalion was commanded by LtCol Munday, known for his proficiency as a commander he comes from a long lineage of legendary Marines. To this day the Munday name is recognized by almost every senior Marine in the organization.

The tanks lead the Blitzkrieg across the open desert to the edge of Al Quaim. A campaign of shock and awe would begin with the detonation of four mine clearing line charges known as MCLCs (pronounced Mc Licks). The MCLCs were probably a ridiculous overkill, but the idea was they would detonate any nearby IEDs that were waiting at the entrance to the town.

I believe it was more of a definitive statement to start the operation.

As customary of a supporting supported relationship, our 1st Platoon would lead the march into the initial fight and we (Lance and I) would follow and either support or replace them when they needed us.

Lt “Wild-eyes” James was the 1st Tank Platoon Commander. He had been in Al Quaim the whole deployment and this was his third major operation. James was called “wild-eyes” because of his furious blue eyes that made him look surprised, or just plain crazy. His hyper demeanor exacerbated the effect. 1st Platoon had been attached to this infantry battalion for the deployment. 1st Platoon was the resident tank unit at the Al Quaim Base which was built around a large train station. It was built about ten miles outside of the town. There was only one large compound, which was a cement factory, between the base and the actual town of Al Quaim.

The trip, in the darkness, from the base to the edge of town was uneventful. There was some sporadic gunfire when the tanks arrived at the edge of town, but nothing to get excited about.

The detonation of the line charges was biblical. I had seen these line charges many times in training but never down a residential street. The overpressure could be seen well before it was heard. Lance and I were with the Battalion Command Unit which was perched on a lone hill about 1000m from the edge of town. We had a clear view of the devastating blasts. I could see the cursory fireball that arose out of the urban canyon of the street. The shockwave pulsed violently across the desert towards us. We were met with an overpressure wave of violence that shook everything in sight. It made anything not weighed down fly into the air.

When a large shockwave hits you, it feels like the entire world is taking in a deep breath as it passes.

Most explosives don’t make a fireball. It’s usually just a shockwave of dust and debris. MCLCs on the other hand are a different story. The sheer volume of C4 in a MCLC creates a shockwave and a giant fireball.

Shortly after the beginning of the assault we heard the report of tank main gun.

Lance is like a Doberman, ears tuned and nose pointed to the sound of violence. I’ve always been more, let’s at least wait a few seconds and listen to the radio. The bad guys will still be there. Lance always acted like there were only a few bad guys to take out and he was going to be pissed if there wasn’t anyone else to fight.

It quickly became obvious we were going to get in on the action one way or another. Without direction from the Battalion, Lance's tank rolled over the front face of the hill and started towards the point of entry marked by the MCLCs.

I remember thinking to myself. Here we go. We're going to conduct a follow and assume mission whether James wants it or not.

It was going to result in a call from the Battalion Commander, one way or the other.

We naturally created distance, and speed in the open desert. One, it's good tactics and two, it kept me from being sugar coated by Lance's rooster tail of jet wash. No protective mode today, thanks.

Once we made it to the town we slowed down and fell into a supporting position behind the front line of troops and tanks. At this point it was only James's section that was leading the assault. The other section had been dispatched around the right flank to block enemy reinforcements from the back of the urban sprawl.

Finally, James came on the radio and said, "I could use a re-supply of tank main gun (ammo)."

Once again, shaking my head and smiling I knew exactly what was coming next. Lance quickly kackled over the radio "Alright Wild-eyes, we're coming in." I knew it meant the Punishers were in the fight.

We arrived at the forward line of troops where the infantry had already begun to consolidate their gains from the day. I remember seeing several bodies of insurgents on the sides of the road as we crept up to the infantry hardpoint.

Lance called James on the radio and said "Great job Wild-eyes, re-arm, re-fit and meet us back here when you're done."

The next day and a half, or so, was a blur. The sleep deprivation was quick to set in. I believe we crept forward with the infantry for the next 24 to 48 hours. I remember our tank section consolidating a few times for a few minutes of rest and chow. We would simply pull the tanks back behind the forward line of troops (FLOT) and pull inside a courtyard or behind a wall.

Rest is a bit of an overstatement. Really all we would do is take our flak jackets off and lay down on the front slope for a few minutes. We'd have just enough time to rat-fuck and eat an MRE. You never really know when you're going to hop back in the fight. The trick is to get the essentials done, then use

any extra time to chill. Check the weapons, eat something, hydrate, then make sure you're not missing anything. Usually in that order. Sometimes not.

We would break out some MREs and try desperately to find some shade. The next big event wasn't until the next day.

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The infantry was making quick work of clearing through the houses and random buildings. Then they hit a pocket of resistance. Lance immediately responded to the report of gunfire with a quick radio call to the battalion, "Tanks are pushing up." At this point I didn't even need any heads up. As I hear Lance's tank fire up, I immediately wake up everyone and say;

"Hey fuckers, let's go! We're moving."

I'll be honest, it would sound so much cooler if it was "Punishers mount up! Or, let's go punishers, time to fight like a champion." Or something else cool like that, but the reality is that your tired as shit, time is a blur, and you're more concentrated on not forgetting your weapon or something else mundane.

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We navigated through the town. The company of infantry was in contact with a persistent group of insurgent activity. There was an ornate grave yard to our left as we emerged into a large open area. The open space was about the size of a sandlot baseball field.

When we popped out, we immediately moved into our normal staggered formation. I was a few yards behind and to the right of Lance. The funny part is the tracks had already moved forward and they had their ramps down.

I could hear the familiar report of gunfire to my left and right. The Marines were pushing up through the buildings toward a compound to our direct front. Ski asks, "What the hell are the trackers doing?"

I said, "What they always do, they're sitting on the back of the track with the ramp down, completely oblivious to the sporadic rounds coming from all over.

"Should we say something?"

I replied, "Nope. One, they won't hear us, and two, they probably don't care." Trackers are trackers, infamous for being like lizards. The moment the track stops they find their way, as quickly as possible, to a warm spot to lay out and shed their gear. They're so good at it in training, they without fail, do it in combat. Every time.

As the sporadic gunfire began to intensify, the trackers begrudgingly started putting their gear back on and making their way back into their turtle shell. I said, “See, self-correcting in combat.”

Ski just shook his head. I laughed to myself.

The conversation on the radio turned toward the compound directly in front of us. The infantry was having a hard time finding a way in. Apparently the eight-foot wall we we’re all staring at went all the way around the compound. There was some talk of a “breach” or maybe a ladder over the wall.

Then Lance cracked in, “Uh, just get the fuck outta the way, you’ve got tanks for a reason.”

Anytime tanks are getting ready to go active main gun the air becomes static with excitement. You can hear it in the Marine’s voices on the radio and we all start to get pumped. Once again, I’d like to pretend like we’re so cool that we just think it’s routine. It’s not. Tankers get even more excited than the infantry when we get to shoot something.

Prepping to fire the main gun when you have a chance to think about it, is like a fever dream of euphoria for tankers. We get in a bit of a tizzy.

There were a few more short remarks on the radio about “clearance” or something, but I knew Lance. Clearance is for dudes that need clearance. This is a lot like “rules are for rule followers.” Lance was neither someone that really needs clearance or rules.

I crouched down and sat on my seat. We all knew what was coming and I don’t care how cool it looks, when your next to a tank that fires main gun, it fucking hurts. Like really hurts. Just the few inches of dropping below the rim of the cupola takes the decibel and shockwave down a level to almost bearable.

BOOM!!!

The explosion kicked up that thick layer of dust inside the tank and Slater and I caught a glance. We both smiled.

We jumped up to see a shit-ton of dirt and debris. It was almost a minute before it cleared. We saw a perfectly cut 8-inch hole in the wall.

Despite what you’ve heard, shooting walls with a tank is kind of dumb. It is fun, but dumb.

The HEAT round always penetrates, then explodes. Even worse, if you’re too close, it won’t arm in time and will go a few walls in before it explodes.

But of course, this didn't deter Lance. He fired two more rounds and the hole expanded to about 3 feet across. I don't recollect exactly how they ended up breaking down the wall. I had lost interest after round three. I knew Lance wasn't going to let me shoot.

This was going to be a Lance only operation. I was ok with that. I enjoyed watching Lance try to figure out this problem and listen to him explain over the radio, how tank rounds worked every time the infantry was like "Uh, can you aim lower or something?"

Eventually the infantry made their way into the compound.

The three or four main gun rounds had the insurgents re-thinking opposing the Marines coming in. It took several hours to unravel the mystery of hostages, and weapons caches in the building. It had obviously been some type of headquarters for the insurgents.

The gunfire died down and the infantry started to re-group for a new push to our left flank. Lance told me to go with the push to the left and he would go to the right. I moved up literally one block to an intersection to my left.

I have replayed the next few hours a thousand times in my head. I still question my decisions and my attitude at the time.

I was exhausted at this point. Despite the wall issue being mildly entertaining we had been mostly creeping up and sitting over the last few hours. As I crept into a good blocking position looking down the street, the Marines started methodically clearing all the buildings to my left and right.

I always felt safe pushing in front of infantry Marines in a thick urban area. I knew if they were within a few buildings behind me, they could see across the roof tops. They would perch on a roof after clearing a building, then wait for Marines to appear on the next roof. They would then continue like this moving forward through the urban sprawl.

If you've got your top covered by Marines, a tank is a pretty good spot to watch urban combat going from door to door around you.

The amount of time I sat in that blocking position escapes me. I believe it was 2-4 hours but I couldn't really tell. It was crazy hot and I was having trouble staying awake, let alone focused.

I got up and sat on the rim of my cupola. I remember taking my helmet off several times and running my fingers through my hair. The only reason I felt

obligated to put it back on was because I knew if I missed a call from Lance on the radio, I'd hear about it for days.

I was trying to endure the heat and the boredom. My mind would drift, snap back, drift, and snap back.

Then there was an old guy in front of my tank.

I was dumbfounded how he got there. I was looking straight ahead and never saw him approach. I was surprised.

He was literally inches away from the front of the gun tube. He was saying something but I obviously couldn't understand his mumbling. He was excited but I couldn't tell if he was trying to tell us something or was just crazy.

I said "Hey, get back! No, no, I'm not moving! What? Dude, go away!" I motioned for him to back up or go somewhere else. I genuinely felt bad for him. He was obviously just a bystander; but he kept pointing to the house next to us to the left.

I figured it was his house and he was pissed at us crashing through the area, kicking in doors. Right as I started to think I was going to have to do something, I heard a voice behind me yell up, "I got this sir!"

When I turned around, I saw one of the interpreters that had been sitting in a track behind me start walking up.

I took my helmet off and yelled down. "Tell him to move back or something." The interpreter talked to him only for a few seconds and started walking back to me.

"He's fucking crazy or something. He said this is his house."

I said, "Tell him to go back to his house and sit down outside." The interpreter turned back to the old man and said something then the old man threw up his hands in frustration.

The old man shuffled back to his house. I could see him go through a gate and back towards the front of his house which was facing away from me.

I thought to myself, if he goes into his house, he's going to get shot when the Marines come around the corner.

My crew was completely disinterested at this point and we were all starting to really feel the heat. Ski asked if he could switch out with Slater and I was more than happy to say yes. Ski needed some time out of the gunner's hole. He took his place next to me in the loaders position and Slater slipped into the gunner's position. Something was wrong with Slater's comm

helmet. So, when they switched positions, they left their helmets where they were. I told Ski to quit fucking around with it and just throw on his Kevlar (helmet).

I figured we can't be here that much longer anyway.

I was wrong.

I made a few quick calls on the radio to the infantry company to tell them about the old man.

I couldn't tell if anyone was really paying attention or if they were just giving me the cursory "Yes, sir. We got it. We'll let them know."

As the infantry emerged from the building behind me, I took my helmet off and yelled at the squad leader. "Hey, Sergeant. There's some old guy in this house. He seems harmless, but be careful going in or at least know that he's in there."

The Sergeant looked at me and nodded. I purposely didn't make a big deal out of it, because I wanted the Marines to be careful, but not let their guard down.

As the Marines took up their positions to go into the building, I noticed they were stacking to go in. I shook my head because from my vantage point if they were stacking like that, they hadn't seen the old man. I thought, shit, oh well. I did my best to warn the guy.

After the frag (grenade) went off, the first shots were violent, loud, and confusing. I immediately dropped my head because I was sure they had just killed that old man.

The gunfire continued.

And continued...

And continued...

Then I saw the old man running away from the front of the house.

Now I was really confused.

Who the fuck is shooting? And why isn't it stopping?

Then on the radio I hear one of those radio calls that stays with you for the rest of your life.

"Man down, I've got a man down." I immediately yell at my crew and we start up the tank.

Lance comes over the radio. "What's going on?"

I said, "I have no idea, but something big is going down right next to me. I can't see shit."

I immediately pushed the tank forward and rotated the gun tube toward the front of the house. I'm weighing my options. .50cal is a no go. I'm facing back toward the infantry. I knew the rounds would skip into the buildings behind and there was the infantry company pushing up.

"Fuck." I needed to get an angle in which I could face towards the house but where I wasn't going to frag any Marines. I knew I had a few seconds but I needed to figure this out fast.

I wasn't going to be slinging any HEAT rounds with infantry right there. I told my driver to move out. There was a track right behind me so I couldn't back up. My plan was to go to the end of the road and come back around to the right flank so I could face at least parallel to the Marines.

The moment I got to the end of the road where it opened, I saw no way to go to the right. There was trash and barbed wire all over the place. There was no clear way to come back around.

So, I turned left.

I saw an open street. I figured I could just come around to the back of the house. I was wrong, again...

The moment I started down the street back towards the forward line of troops (FLOT), I couldn't understand why there were no alleys.

"Fuck, are you serious?" I told Arnold to floor it. I was going to turn back to the left at the first opening I saw. That's the thing, there was no opening... We had made it back to the beginning of the block in only a few seconds. We turned left but I felt like an idiot for going this far out of the way during a fire fight.

I finally make it all the way back around and I was nearly in the same position I was to begin with. My only consolation at this point was that the Marines were still in the house so I knew there was nothing I could've done in the meantime.

By the time I was pulling back into my position, Lance was pulling up. He took the spot I was ultimately trying to get to. So, I just pulled to his right.

I was literally right in the same spot I was before this whole shitshow started. We exchange quick conversation on the radio, and I explained that there were still Marines in the building.

He said, "Push through the wall and put your gun on the top floor. I'll get the bottom."

We had communicated surprisingly well at this point. We had really started to mind meld quickly. I knew the plan was to level the building and vaporize everything inside.

It felt like we waited for ages. Finally, the infantry said they had everyone out of the building. One of the last radio calls made my fucking heart sink into my stomach.

Once again, I fucking hate even writing the words...

"I just can't stop the bleeding! Fuck, I can't stop the bleeding!"

In a 21-year career I've never heard a Marine panic on the radio... at least about themselves. But I have occasionally had to endure the milliseconds that turned into minutes of a Marine on the radio watching one of their friends die.

This was one of those moments that makes every warrior cringe at every bullshit movie that glorifies this type of violence. This is what combat is really like, and it's fucking gut wrenching.

I just can't stop the bleeding... I'm physiologically processing the situation.

Fear turns to sickness; sickness turns to rage. Rage turns to focus.

I was ready to send these motherfuckers to the grave.

I could tell Lance was in full agreement.

I let Lance take the last few radio calls to the infantry.

He said, "don't be kinda sure, be fucking positive there are no more Marines in the building. Because it's going to cease to exist."

Over the commotion and chatter on the radio I heard "Fuck, I've got one more in the building. I don't know where he is but I'm going in to get him myself."

I will never forget that statement. I was there, and the infantry Lt said it like he meant it.

If someone ever asked me to sum up all my combat experience in one sentence, that statement on the radio would probably be it.

You won't read that on a plaque somewhere. It won't be on any t-shirts. Because it's one of those things that happens all the time, but only at the tip of the spear.

That's the type of person we all aspire to be one day.

We all wonder if we would have the guts to go into a building filled with insurgents, alone, to get your friend...

To this day, this was the bravest thing I've ever witnessed. I'm sure he'd tell you it wasn't a big deal, but it was to me.

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Finally, the call came. "We got everyone out."

"I mean everyone. We're positive."

What happened next was the most violent display of firepower I have ever experienced.

Lance and I systematically destroyed the building with 6 or 7 main gun rounds.

It happened at point blank range within seconds. The building ceased to exist.

Both Lance and I started sending main gun rounds as fast as our loaders could sling them. I remember Ski looking at me and saying.

"What the fuck is going on?"

I said, "I'll tell you in sec, just keep loading HEAT!"

He didn't say another word or even slow down to look at me. He just started dumping HEAT rounds in the breach as fast as I could say fire, and Slater could pull the trigger.

We must have dumped at least 3-4 HEAT rounds into the top of the building. I took out each corner, Lance did the same on the ground floor and the building folded like a house of cards.

Once I saw there really wasn't a second floor anymore, I waited for the dust to clear. We were so close to the building that chunks of concrete and brick we're stacking up on top of the turret.

We had just "bulldozed by fire." It took seconds, not minutes.

There was nothing left.

As the smoke cleared and violence subsided, I saw Ski slump back up against the side of the turret.

He said, "Fuck! I'm ready to switch back!"

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The next decision came straight from the battalion.

"If there is any sign of activity, put a main gun round into any building before the Marines go in."

The result was an epic amount of destruction.

I heard the term "Stalingrad" used to describe how we left that place.

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Next was one of the only real combat injuries of my career. Obviously, not counting how many times my brain has been sloshed around by IEDs, 1000lb bomb near misses, and dudes firing main gun next to my face. I'm a bit embarrassed even to mention it.

Throughout the course of the day, not just the house incident, Lance had cooked through a ton of main gun rounds. I was having to give him some of mine and I needed to get to my reserve ammo.

The reserve ammo rack is known as the "semi-ready." It's not actually anything close to semi-ready. It's a fucking pain in the ass to get to. Even more so if you're tired as shit.

The reserve ammo door is latched shut by a strange prying-type mechanism. This is where the seasoned tank crewman laughs at me. They've probably done it a hundred times. I've done it like twice. I'm pretty sure this was the second time.

Once you're done moving the main gun rounds from the semi to the ready rack you have to slam-slide the door back into place. Slam-slide. Or, whatever the fucking asshole engineers call it that designed this fucking finger chopper.

Those motherfuckers at General Dynamics decided to put a 1-inch tab of steel protruding where the door latches.

So, as I'm using all my bodyweight to slam this 100lb sliding door home, my finger gets under that tab between it and the door.

It ripped a solid inch gash in my right index finger.

It was one of those sickening moments that made me see stars for a second as the waves of pain shot through the rest of my body. I'll admit it. I'm a bitch. I don't really do real pain. And it fucking hurt.

We grabbed the first aid kit but we didn't have any tape.

So, I wrapped it in gauze and tried to tie a knot. With my now useless index finger I'm trying to tie this bandage around and around. I eventually ended up with a 2in thick wrap around my finger that looked like a giant cast.

When I got back to where we were going firm for the night everyone thought I had blown my finger off.

I was already embarrassed that I didn't know how to close my semi-ready door. I now have this giant bandage on my finger.

I found a corpsman and he replaced it with a less ridiculous dressing.

None of us had known what happened to the Marine that was shot.

It was only hours later we had learned he was killed instantly.

The story of what went down in that building is much better told by Ajax Trueblood in his book Bastards and Brothers. I admittedly, cried like a kid when I read about that firefight in his book.

I still wonder if there was something I could've done differently.

I now think that the old man was trying to tell us there was a squad of insurgents in the house.

I told him to fuck off and the interpreter just thought he was crazy.

All the while this heavily armed squad of insurgents was preparing to fight the Marines.

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During this incident my dumbass was only a few feet from the insurgents peering through the window.

I sat on top of my tank with my helmet off in a daze of unawareness.

Why they didn't just shoot me from point blank range is still a mystery.

I'm not sure how to end this story. It doesn't really end in real life. I see that old guy in my memories and hear those radio calls in my sleep.

I should probably be dead; the ensuing firefight would've flushed the insurgents.

And that Marine wouldn't have been shot in the face.

I'M A TANK

“I’m a Tank, I got this.”

“Did you just call yourself a tank?” The infantry company commander asked on the radio.

Lance had just hit an IED. I've been there. it's unsettling...

As the dirt and debris was slowly clearing, he squelched over the radio. The whole point was to tell everyone he was ok, but it turned into a running joke to this day.

Lance swears he said, “I’m in a tank, I’m ok.”

Everyone else says they heard, “I’m a Tank. I’m ok!”

I’m smiling right now as I write this, because I know Lance is going to be furious. It was funny then, and still is.

Lance is an imposing dude, so any chink in his armor is a rare opportunity.

Finally, the infantry company commanders had something to give their fellow Captain a hard time about.

And they still do.

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So, “Are you alright? Or, are you a tank?”

I must have heard this phrase on the radio at least 10 times over the course of the next few days.

THE SHARK FIN

That night the infantry was going to push through the last portion of the town. It was called the Shark Fin because the physical layout on the map looked like... you guessed it, a shark fin. Mind boggling I know.

The infantry decided that a full-blown clearing operation wasn't needed. The previous days had eliminated most resistance and everyone doubted any of the insurgents would have stuck around.

The plan was to conduct a dismounted night raid of a target building.

The mission itself was boring.

The reason I include this part is because all tankers learned from one of my mistakes that night.

As the infantry consolidated, we had started to maneuver to go back to our last secure position. Lance headed out and I started the arduous process of trying to turn a 12-foot-wide tank around in a 25-foot alleyway.

The simple answer to the layperson is to just pivot-steer around. You don't want to pivot-steer unless you must and you're on smooth concrete. I didn't have either.

As I backed up, I felt the tank hit the wall behind us.

I'm sucking my teeth, "Shit, stop!" Then silence.

I looked at Slater and said something short on the intercom. He heard me fine. Same with Ski.

Then what happened to Arnold?

Ski yelled to him and poked him with a wrench. He turned, took his helmet off and yelled,

"What? Why are we just sitting here?"

"Hey, can you not hear us?"

Great. Just what I need as all the infantry leave the area.

We're stuck out here in the dark, in an alley.

We quickly realized that Arnold couldn't hear us anymore. So began several hours of yelling at the top of our lungs as I yelled at Ski, and he yelled directions to Arnold. My voice was hoarse for a week after that night.

It turns out that the brilliant idea to put a phone on the back of the tank was an afterthought. The Vietnam era idea was not quite as bombproof as it appeared.

As a patchwork add-on to the tank, it was simply wired through the driver's comm box. When we backed up and crushed the phone, it cut all comms to the driver.

Lesson learned.

To this day, tankers take a bit more care when backing up.

My throat hurts just remembering this incident.

A TANK RAID... LIKE A ACTUAL TANK MISSION?

The hours and days are a big mush at this point. I couldn't tell you to this day how many days Operation Matador was, or even if it was called Operation Matador.

Operations' names changed so often we began to not really pay much attention to them. Technically, I believe this was Matador II or Matador 1.5, who knows.

We had been operating for several days with only a few hours of fleeting sleep each night.

In my mind, Lance's IED strike had marked the end of a day and the beginning of the next phase of the operation.

That evening we were briefed we would be conducting an armored raid on a vehicle-borne IED factory the next day.

This should be interesting.

-

This was the first time I had seen some of the newer technology of the day. They had detailed satellite maps of the area. They also had a 3D hologram map of the built-up urban area around the target.

It was something I had never seen before. I kept thinking, well this must be a big deal if they are building weird shit like this for us.

We were given simple instructions.

Go out and around the back of the town, to avoid IEDs, and come back into the target area.

Look for vehicular IEDs and destroy them.

The area is heavily laden with IEDs, so stick together and pay attention to what you're driving over.

1st Platoon's platoon sergeant (RED 4) led Lance and I into the target area because he was familiar with the route.

On the drive into the target, we couldn't help notice the large number of parked vehicles.

Lance shot a few of the suspicious vehicles.

Me and Red 4 pushed up to the main road.

The road was dicey. I mean really dicey...

We were told this part of the road is probably completely saturated with IEDs.

If you're wondering what tip toeing with a tank looks like, this is as close as it gets.

I'm as high as I can stand in the cupola. I'm looking at every crack in the road at this point. I'm looking for any spot that looks like it's a new repair or has been dug and replaced.

To this day I can't help looking down at the road and remembering this moment. I had no idea what to look for so every crack looked suspicious. This hyper vigilance is a mind fuck.

I flashback to each crack and patch I saw in the road that day.

It looked like an old concrete and asphalt mix. It was a patchwork of cracks that all looked suspicious. To this day, I have never actually spotted an IED. They were always well hidden and were only occasionally visible to a dismounted soldier on foot.

I'm probably one of the only dudes you'll ever meet that has looked at countless spots that looked ok, that blew up later. I'm officially the worst IED spotter ever.

Me and Red 4 had found the target building.

Red 4 launches a HEAT round into the building without giving me a heads up.

It stung. Fuck, it still stings. I'm literally cringing as I write this.

If there's one inexcusable party foul in tanks, it's firing right next to another tank without a proper heads-up. Fucking combat or not.

This is why we're all deaf now.

It's important to note that he probably said something, I just wasn't paying attention. But shit, we've been in combat for like 5 days straight at this point, give a brother a second radio call.

The tank main gun is the coolest thing in the world until you're right next to it. My ears were searing with a sensation of baby screams and icepicks.

It took me a second to gain my basic grasp of reality.

Getting your bell rung by tank main gun is like hitting the reset button on your laptop; your brain takes a second to reboot.

His gun tube was probably less than 20 feet from my head and I was right next to him.

I originally wrote "Shit that hurt!" here.

After 7 edits I gave up trying to describe what this is like. The closest I came up with is, "Stand still, I'll going to hit you with this sledge hammer."

I'll just leave it as, "Shit... this is going on my VA claim." It hurts.

It still hurts to think about.

-

We shot 3-4 HEAT rounds into the building in front of us and it gave me a chance to try out our MPAT-OR (Multi-purpose Anti-Tank / Obstacle Reducing) rounds. I didn't notice any significant difference than the HEAT but they did seem to rubble the building easily.

I kept thinking I'd be able to see daylight out of the backside of the building. Turns out, when you turn a building into a pile of rubble, all you see is rubble...

Upon destroying the main building, Red 4 and I crept forward across the road.

It was obvious we we're both "white knuckling" the movement.

We both crept along just waiting for the blast.

It didn't come...

Red 4 pushed to my left flank and faced outboard. I pushed forward to where I could see behind the target building.

There was a closed double door gate. Still to this day, I'm not a superstitious person but something felt weird here.

I think it was because this was the target area, and we hadn't seen anything. So, I'm thinking, are they hiding something back here?

I crept the tank forward and pushed the gate open with my front fender, careful not to bump the main gun. There was no other activity so I'm relaxed at this point.

And by relaxed, I mean comfortably numb from 5 days of sleep deprivation.

Inside of the small courtyard there was a dump truck parked facing toward us. It didn't look that suspicious, but it looked odd for a newer vehicle to be parked in such a position.

I thought to myself wouldn't it be parked at least where it was a bit easier to get to? It looks oddly placed.

We were “weapons free” so the only safe bet was to put a HEAT round into it. It was a huge explosion.

I thought it may have been filled with bricks because they were landing all around me. I said under my breath, “Shit, that was close.” I looked over at Slater and he gave me that look of “maybe we should re-think shooting stuff only a few feet away from the tank.”

I didn’t ponder over it, but it was odd that a truck would cause an explosion that big. Later in the deployment we were sent a video that was taken with a drone overhead. The truck detonation was suspiciously big. It was big enough for the intel guys to pass around the video because it was so cool.

We returned from the operation to loads of praise. The embedded CNN reporter was quick to ask us about the raid. I said “We blew up like 20 vehicles so we either decimated the local IED production or really pissed off a car dealer.”

I mentioned it to Lance. He made it pretty clear to me that he didn’t find it as clever of a press statement as I did. Thankfully she didn’t say anything about it or use it in her story.

PART 6

The Darkness

Barwana

OUR DARKEST HOUR

BOOM!!! Pop. Pop. Pop.

The initial explosion was deafening. It was hard to tell what had just happened or where it was. I twisted myself around to look over the back deck.

What was I looking at?

I distinctly remember there not actually being that much to see. It just looked like a fire surrounded by trash. I couldn't see what was burning and it was a couple hundred meters away. The gravity of the situation began to materialize due to frantic calls coming over the radio. "The Track! The Track! It's fucking gone." Frantic garbled transmissions flew back and forth.

Then I heard a distinct calm voice come over the radio. "I believe the ammo is cooking off. I'm having a hard time getting any closer. I can hear the rounds hitting my vehicle. There's not much left."

I saw one of the Light Armored Vehicles, that had followed behind Lance and I, was trying to make its way closer to the fire. The smoke was a deep charcoal black and was pluming toward the sky. Black smoke is always bad. It's a sure sign of fuel or oil burning. This looked like both.

"I can't get any closer, we're going to dismount and see if we can help." It was the same unknown voice as before.

Slater, my loader, looked at me and spoke. "Sir, I think that used to be a track but it's completely gone."

That's when it hit me, and my stomach sank deeper than it ever has in my life. The sense of helplessness was palpable. I think we're looking at an entire track of Marines burning to death...

Leading this large scale attack was a big deal for me. We both knew why, and I must admit, I would've made the same decision.

This was one of those times where hitting an IED was imminent.

It's better for the wingman to get hit first than the boss. Don't read into it. Fear or bravery has nothing to do with it. When there is a big push to be

made, you don't want the boss to be the first one taken out. It would derail or at least demoralize the whole effort.

As a commander this is standard fair. When it comes to maneuver tactics it's ok to be a running quarterback but you still want to direct blockers in front of you.

Movie star heroes always lead the charge from the front. In real life it's the guys in the front who get shot first.

This was a battalion (reinforced) clearing operation into an area that hasn't been cleared or fought in before.

This entire operation was the result of a recent event in Haditha where insurgents tried to overrun a sniper team.

It could be mundane or it could be highly dynamic because the insurgents knew we would clear the area and now the Marines had good reason to.

The small town was called Barwana. It was on the north side of the river from Haditha. There were few if any bridges across the river. There was no way to get heavy vehicles across the river except to use the dam.

The operation would start from Haditha Dam and follow the main road into the town from the north.

LD was going to be at 0300.

Lance said, "Ok go get some sleep we need to be REDCON ONE at 0200 to stage for LD." I laughed.

I was nervous, which is code for terrified, and there was no way I would sleep. This is one of those situations where having to think about something is the worst.

I was ready to go. I didn't want to have to think about it for the next 3 or so hours. I didn't sleep. I don't think anyone could.

Gary Slater was the 2D Tank Platoon commander and this was his backyard. He'd been attached to 3/25 who was the battalion that was stationed at Haditha Dam.

Gary is a great dude and crazy smart. He has a much better grasp on history than I do.

Gary named his tank New Testament.

Lance saw it and immediately said, "No fucking way, change that shit right now."

New Testament was clever but even a bit outside the accepted political lines at the time. The joke was over my head. I'm a God-fearing Christian

but even this historical reference was heady for me. Lance, with a better grasp on the historical connotations said it was a no go.

We talked at length about the area with Slater. Gary had told me it wasn't a matter of if I was going to get hit by an IED but when.

He said a Barwana clearing operation had been on 3/25's radar for a while but they needed enough firepower to make it happen. The sniper incident hastened the decision.

We staged our tanks on the top of the dam the day before. This would let me and Lance worry about planning and the Marines go through and prepare the tanks.

Both Alvarez and Ski were top notch when it came to this. They would prep the tanks and all we needed to do was hop on.

I knew we were always ready to go. Both Ski and Alvarez were awesome professionals and they loved being tankers.

Lance and I never for one second thought twice about walking away from our tanks. We both trusted our gunners with our tanks and our lives.

Ski would always do the head space and timing on the .50 cal. This was my job because it was my weapon. I think he saw it as an opportunity to do a little extra. It was never lost on me. I appreciated it. He is the best gunner anyone could ask for.

- 0300 -

Lance's tank started rolling forward and I followed him out the gate. He slowed and I took the lead position. We moved at a crawl because we knew there were probably over 50 vehicles behind us. The hardest part is always just getting out of the barn.

I rested my monocular night vision goggle on my .50cal and peered forward into the desert as we approached Barwana. We got to the edge of town and took the left side of the fork in the road.

We were going to bypass the town and block it from the other side. This kept insurgents from reinforcing from the next town and kept hunkered down insurgents where they were.

Pinning your enemy down is a great way to create an early advantage. You don't want to give the bad guys options to fight another day. You want to force these shitheads into a decision.

The reality is there's always a way out but feeling surrounded can give most JV insurgents enough pause to either give up or at least pretend to not be involved.

I could swear I saw a few flashes across my front deck. I mentioned it to Lance because I thought it may be sporadic fire but he gave me a cursory gaff and told me to keep pushing.

Night vision is always a mixed bag. It's awesome but between the technological limitations and the sleep deprivation you occasionally see weird stuff in your NVGs.

I still have no idea what it was. It might have just been nerves.

I pulled through the traffic circle which marked the halfway point on the outside of the town. We stopped in our blocking position. I was elated. Not a peep. Nothing. It seemed as if the town might be abandoned.

And of course, we didn't hit an IED.

You know how you go on walks through your neighborhood and hear at least one or two dogs barking? That happens all over the world. And it happens in Iraq. So, when all you hear is the occasional dog barking you figure things are going to be quiet.

Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) pulled in behind us with their LAVs and took up positions facing into the desert.

Lance and I took up positions that faced the next small town and we could see across the river into Haditha. The morning was quiet. 3/25 had started their clearing operation from the other side of the town and it sounded super slow.

At some point, after no firefights or resistance, the battalion decided to move faster through the town. They took their reserve company and were pushing them around the outside of the town to put them into the middle of the town to clear the last part.

Since there was no resistance. It seemed like a logical decision. That's when it happened...

The explosion was earth shattering.

As you read before, I couldn't comprehend what I was looking at.

The Marines on the radio said they were trying to help but there wasn't anything that could be done.

The only unit that could even deal with the situation was us, Tanks. Technically our field trains. This was our support unit. We had a small

logistic tail element. Battalion tasked them with walking around the area and picking up human remains. That would've really messed me up.

Our Field Trains' Marines were rockstars. They didn't say much about the whole incident. They just moved forward and they did the best they could to put legs and arms into trash bags.

I never made my way back to the site. I heard it was traumatic for the junior guys but mostly everything was charcoal black so it didn't really seem like it was real.

The rest of the day was a weird mindmeld of random events. Me and the crew were all tired. We always made sure two of us were wide awake. The sun was brutal.

Lance called me over to his tank at some point. We talked. It was brief. He said we were going to link up with the infantry company in the middle of the town in a few hours.

I started slumming it back towards my tank.

BOOM!

What the fuck was that? I don't even remember where the impact was but I started running. I jumped on my tank and into my hatch.

I was like "Anyone else concerned I was almost taken out by a mortar?" Ski was already scanning back and forth on the far side of the river. He methodically scanned which made the turret steadily hum as it moved.

Ski didn't even look up. "Uh, I think that was an RPG."

Slater agreed. They said they saw it.

I didn't see shit.

It's not that the bad guys were a bad shot either. It was the fact that it must've been from at least several hundred meters away. Probably from the other side of the river. That's why I thought it must've been a mortar.

Only insurgents shoot RPGs from 300 meters away and expect to hit something. This isn't Call of Duty. Hitting something with any type of rocket is not easy and it gets exponentially harder the further away you get.

I was glad the shot missed.

A few hours later, Lance calls and said it was time to link up with the infantry. He didn't even mention the RPG that nearly took my head off.

We drove to an intersection in the middle of the town. I grabbed my gear and weapon. I hopped down. Lance had already started walking toward the infantry commander. I was squinting as I looked around. I had a clear view

for several hundred meters in every direction and I could see across the river.

Lance and the infantry company commander were already talking. They were standing out in the open and it made me nervous.

I said, "I hate to interrupt, but shouldn't we go inside one of these buildings?"

Lance and the other Captain looked at me. "We're fine. Quit being a bitch. Nobody is going to shoot at us. The town is clear and the other side of the river is at least 500 meters away."

CRACK, Crack, Crack!

I had just enough time to see Lance running toward his tank as I headed to mine.

The infantry Captain must have been the fastest of us all because I didn't even see him.

After a few minutes we dismounted again and headed into the nearest building.

I said, "Hmm, kind of nice in here."

"Shut up..." Both Lance and the infantry commander were not impressed by my cleverness. I smiled, as any vindicated Lt would.

-

Once again, we never actually knew what had happened. We wouldn't for weeks. At the time, it was just another blur of events. It would haunt all of us for years afterwards as we found out it was the largest loss of life in one incident for the Marine Corps in Iraq.

It seemed like any other day at the time, when in fact it was our darkest hour.

The Marine who tried to help by driving his LAV into the blast site became important to me later. I didn't know who he was at the time. I had just heard his voice on the radio.

His name was Lt Gordy. I would find myself sitting next to him in my office several years later. We had already become friends. A casual conversation came up about Barwana. We both looked at each other and said, "No fucking way."

Yup, we had talked on the radio and he was the brave soul that dared to try to help. I was floored by the surrealness of the whole situation.

The Marine Corps really is a small place.

PART 7

Resolution?

THE HEROES JOURNEY?

After the Barwana Operation, things finally began to slow down.

Lance had made a conscious effort to start planning the turnover with the incoming tank company. It would be from 2D Tanks.

To give you an idea of my physical and mental state at this point, I don't remember the turnover at all.

I couldn't even tell you what unit it was or who the incoming commander was.

To say I was just going through the motions would be an understatement.

Witnessing the loss of life in Barwana was surreal. It didn't even start to register with me until weeks or even months later.

We had now been across the entire Area of Operations. This encompassed almost all Al Anbar Province. We had fought foreign fighters in Al Quaim, the insurgents of Haditha and Hit, the local thugs of Baghdadi, and a few other outlier towns.

Had we accomplished anything?

I think so.

I'm not saying that it was a tactical or even a strategic victory of sorts. It was much more ethereal than that.

Warfare accomplishes very little on the battlefield. The geopolitical and psychological effects however, cause ripples that spread across the world long after we're gone.

The world had changed during this deployment.

Ajax Trueblood's book, *Bastards and Brothers*, takes place during this same time and he does an excellent job of explaining the nuanced aspect of the real story.

I highly recommend it if you want to dive deeper into this story in a more logical and frankly, more accurate way.

The experience of this deployment affected me in ways I would not understand until years later.

I felt that I grew as an individual and a Marine. I had been humbled quickly and heartedly.

I would go on to lead my own Marine tank company one day and several other combat units.

Even in my own solace I didn't have half the burden that my peers did. Lt Ronan lost several Marines to severe injuries, Lt Slater lost an entire tank crew, and Lt James dealt with some significant losses across the units he supported.

Lance left this deployment with the ultimate burden. He lost multiple Marines across the company. I would have no idea what this was like until experiencing similar losses under my command later in my career.

You can't put a good face on it. They're gone. They leave behind widows, brothers, sisters, girlfriends, and all their extended family.

The effects of death travel very far.

To this day I deal with physiological effects from these experiences. A smell, a sound, and yes even a song transports me right back to this place.

When you have visceral experiences, they sear into your brain like a cattle brand. They're there for good. They are not going away.

You can pile on new and good experiences but those scars are in there. They scab over and start to heal over time but they never disappear.

I'm lucky. These experiences haven't prevented me from moving forward in my life but the ghosts often try to drag me back.

I've never been good at enjoying the pomp and circumstance around the Marine Corps. It's there for good reason but it will never outshine the lives it costs.

I'm proud of my crew, my unit, and yes, certainly my boss.

NOTHING PUTS THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE LIKE DEATH

I should've died several times during this deployment. I'm not talking about the close calls either. I'm talking about the times where fate, be it natural or divine, saved my life. These are the times in which some small factor played a pivotal role in my survival, without which you wouldn't be reading this book. I purposely left out the philosophical take during the story. Each one of these situations has affected me.

- The giant IED in Haditha

The IED in Haditha was mammoth. The part that is lost in the translation of writing and the actual event is the size of the explosion. When I turned to see behind the tank, I was aghast at the 100 foot plus mushroom cloud of dirt and debris. The height is what struck me the most. I'm no explosives expert, but the blast was straight up. It was possibly several anti-tank mines, stacked on top of each other. I only speculate because of the trajectory of the blast. I am however, willing to bet it would've easily split the tank in half.

And yes, it fucking terrified me. I found myself feeling more fear for my crew than me. It's not a virtue signaling thing either. I was scared shitless how my mistake could cost all four of our lives.

In this case the factor of my survival was timing and a Marine being good at his job. If LCpl Griffith hadn't figured out how to get my tank out of protective mode, my tank would've been an easy target.

I talked to Griff about this incident years later. I told him I had been telling the story of how he saved my life for years.

He said, "Huh, I don't even remember that."

Exactly... This is how an event can be epic to one person and completely mundane to someone else.

- Sitting on top of the tank in Al Quaim

This one is the one that perplexes me the most. I was clearly exposed to a squad of insurgents and an easy target. There was no question. Even a small

burst of rifle fire from less than 30 feet would've been my demise.

This is where the factor of my survival doesn't exist. We'll never know why the insurgents didn't take advantage of the hours of me sitting on top of the tank only feet away from them. I could clearly see several of the windows on the top floor of the building. The insurgents passed on me, a soft and easy target, and waited for a squad of Marines to kick in the front door. It doesn't make sense.

I wanted to add how cliché it is when people say they feel as if they are "being watched." Give me a break. I wish I had that feeling. I wouldn't be feeling the guilt and regret I feel today.

- The IED that killed 14 Marines in Barwana

I drove directly over the IED that killed the 14 Marines in Barwana. I crossed the very spot a few hours before I heard the blast behind me. To this day, I can't comprehend what I was looking at. When you see death at this magnitude, it does affect you.

The factor of my survival was most likely time. It obviously wasn't a pressure plate IED. I led the formation for this assault. I was the first one over this spot. I never saw anything in the green glow of my night vision goggles. My best guess is that the insurgents weren't ready for us. We probably woke them up.

-

I felt this section was warranted because I carry these questions with me. I've tried to "let it go" but it always finds itself into my thoughts one way or another. A site, a sound, a smell.

Our Company lost several Marines during this deployment. In my career, I have lost several Marines of my own. They don't haunt you. Your decisions do.

They say the way to peace is to let go of your past. Easier said than done. Some decisions really do matter.

My only parting thought on this is that it has a profound effect on my perception of "important" stuff.

I dare not be cliché, but I do smile every time someone at work says.

"I don't think you understand, this is really important!"

Is it though?

AFTERWARD

On my drive home, I instinctually grin and shake my head...

“This fucking song...”

The music transports me instantly.

I’m back in Iraq, at the Al Assad Airbase, inside our makeshift company office.

It was an old administrative building built by Saddam’s war machine.

It was baked white concrete with window sills of chipped paint and broken glass.

The light burns through the cracks of carboard in the windows.

“Oh my god, Davis, you know what time it is!”

I look over Lance’s shoulder and recognize the orgy of 1980s leotards and women gyrating to an aerobic track. The song seems vintage but the video is crisp and colorful.

The artist and title are in the corner of the laptop screen.

Eric Pryndt’s “Call on Me.”

The song starts out with a slow pace but builds quickly into a 1980s orchestra of bass and aerobics.

So does our karaoke performance...

I go back to this moment everytime I hear that song.

Every time.

I decided to see the Marine Corps Museum as a civilian for the first time.

I went alone.

It felt very different than the times I’d been before. I felt like an outsider.

I grinned at the security guard as I walked in. He barely noticed me...

I decided to wander for a bit.

Then it hit me like a wave.

The ghosts of all the friends I’d lost...

The young Marines that I didn't bring home...
The countless Legends whose names decorate these halls.
It didn't feel like this place was really for me anymore.
I felt like a stranger.

-

My emotions caught me off guard...

-

I couldn't help wondering if they'd give it up.
Is all this pomp and circumstance worth it?
Would these Marines have sacrificed the glory, the stories, the moments?
Would they walk away from it all if they knew they weren't coming home?
Would they change the course of their lives; for one last kiss, one last hug, one last moment with the ones they left behind?

-

I tried to make it to the door without anyone seeing my emotions coming to get me.

I was about to lose it.
I felt ghosts everywhere.
These are the lost heroes looming over all of us.

-

Each day it gets a little better, but it never goes away.
Families of fallen soldiers slowly piece their lives back together.
I know the pain never goes away.
They always miss them.

-

And we, just miss our friends.

A FINAL NOTE.

If you have not figured out who the hero of this novella is, that's ok.

It's not supposed to be me.

I tried to write it that way.

I have trouble reconciling who the heroes of these experiences really are. I, like a lot of veterans, experience these memories all the time. It's not the mental pictures that are a problem. Those are mostly blurry anyway. It's the overwhelming sense of dread, or fear, or even panic that comes over me at completely random times.

My goal was to tell this story using the experience, not the details. The reality of combat and most deployments is that you only remember fragments. They are blurry from their inception and they only get more indistinct with time.

The feelings however, tend to endure.

The moments you remember are not just pictures. They are the smells, sounds, and physiological fragments.

-

The hero is the bond of friendship.

-

It's the reason you see combat veterans start hugging and crying when they are reunited.

Strangers at first. Then acquaintances. Then friends. Then brothers.

We are now bound by blood, sweat, and fear.

Everyone looked at me like I was crazy when I walked right thru the reception area at 2D Tank Battalion.

They're all thinking, "Who's this guy? I wouldn't just walk right in there..."

The XO tried to catch me. I didn't even glance at him. He said, "Hey wait..."

No one knew who I was, except one person.

The CO.

Lance still has that steely eyed persona and folks still hate working for him. That's because it hasn't gotten any easier.

But, every time we do run into each other he always exclaims, "Tony D!"

-

If you ever do get a chance to walk into Lance's office one day; I guarantee the Alpha Co guidon is on center display.

-

The bond of a tank unit is like nothing else in the world. But even more so, are the friendships with your crew.

We all begin as individuals, alone and afraid of the unknown. We are thrust into life's most perilous challenges only to find the only way out is together.

We must band together and fight as brothers and sisters.

Your friends are your clan.

That clan is your crew.

So, treat them well.

Someday, they will be writing about you.

- Tony D. 2024

ABOUT TONY D.

First off, thanks for picking up this book. It's only fair to tell you a bit about myself because it might help add a bit of context.

I was born in Atlanta Ga in 1977.

I grew up in the city and went to public school. I finished out my last 3 years of high school at a private academy in North Georgia called Riverside Military Academy. The school is still there but has a dumb new name. They took the term military out because they thought it would help enrollment. I got busted down my senior year for something dumb. You'll start to see a trend...

I went to Georgia Tech and almost failed out in record time. I applied to University of Georgia because I thought it would be easier. I didn't get in... So, I got my shit together and finally graduated from Georgia Tech in early 2001. It took me 6 years. I was a business major. I worked at Abercrombie and Fitch to meet girls and was not in any real hurry to grow up. I had to stay an extra semester to get my GPA over a 2.0 to graduate.

After going to a few job fairs and realizing that recruiters don't show up to Georgia Tech looking for students with a 2.0. I decided I needed to try something else.

I knew if I was going into the military I should at least do it right. I walked into the USMC Officer Recruiter Station right by Georgia Tech. I said "I'm interested in joining the Marine Corps."

The recruiters looked at me, almost laughed, and said, "How interested?"

I was like, "I'm serious."

"Ok. Sign here."

I'm sure they thought, "This guy won't make it, but whatever. At least he'll help us make mission this month."

I said, "Oh yeah, I got arrested a year ago for getting into a fight. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Did you win?"

"The arrest or the fight?"

“The fight.”

“Does it matter? I still had to go to jail.”

The OSO seemed apathetic. “Meh, I’m sure you’ll be fine. Who knows, it might help.”

It sounds a bit reckless and cool; I assure you it wasn’t. I got arrested and spent a day in Fulton County Prison. It was fucking terrifying. I was in a holding cell with around 30 other dudes. I was the only white guy. I’m never going to jail again. Especially not over something as dumb as a fight.

That OSO Office sent 5 candidates to Officers Candidate School with me. I was the only one to make it.

I made it through Officer’s Candidate School, which admittedly was tough. It’s funny because we all think Officer’s Candidate School or Boot Camp sucks when we’re young. Everyone in the military finds out later, things can be much worse.

I went to USMC Basic School (TBS) next. This is where the real training starts. My entire class got caught up in a huge cheating scandal and nearly half my class got kicked out. Everyone was told, “Just tell the truth and you’ll be fine.” So, everyone told the truth and most got kicked out.

My primary instructor called me into his office as soon as the scandal broke.

“Davis, do you understand what’s going on?”

“I think so sir. There are allegations of cheating on the Naval Warfare Take-home Test?”

He looked square at me. “Do you realize how serious this is?”

“Yes sir, sounds pretty serious.”

“Davis... do you realize you’re the only one in the entire company that’s not under investigation?”

“No sir... That’s weird.”

“It’s not fucking weird; you were the only one in the entire company to fail the take-home test.”

So that’s kinda how my career started out. That and my Bulgarian roommate almost burnt down the barracks cooking pork chops.

Off to the races...

I graduated in the bottom third of my class, was assigned Tanks, and shipped off to 1st Tanks. I got tanks because there were 3 tank slots, they

split up assignments across the top, second, and bottom thirds. I got the bottom slot.

I married my college girlfriend, Erin, while at TBS. We got married via justice of the peace and I promised her we'd have a proper wedding later. We've been married ever since and I have 2 amazing kids; a daughter and son.

I showed up to 1st Tanks and a talk of deployment had just started. No one knew if OIF 1 would happen yet.

It did. I was at Fort Knox at Tanks School when 1st Tanks deployed.

I graduated The US Army Armor Officers Basic Course and went back to 1st Tanks. I was immediately deployed to catch up with the Battalion. They thought they might need me as a combat replacement.

After hitchhiking on Marine convoys for 3 weeks I finally made it to 1st Tanks who were 2 weeks from the push into Baghdad. Once again, I was in the field trains the whole time. It was exciting because I had no idea what was going on but it was ultimately uneventful.

I came back with the Battalion on the USS Boxer.

Upon my return to 1st Tanks is where this story picks up.

You're all caught up.

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