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A Halloween to Remember

It's midnight and a man has just finished paying off the Iraqi Police to turn their backs while he performs some "road work." He gets in his truck and drives about half a mile until he finds a pothole suitable for his purpose. The beat-up pickup sputters a little as he dims his lights and parks on the shoulder of the road.

It is my first mission as a TC (Truck Commander) and as far as I know, I am the first Specialist in my company to ever be in charge of a gun truck and its crew. This privilege is more of an apology than anything else. A few days ago, I was informed that after months of studying for the E-5 Board, and then being drilled by some of the top ranking Non-Commissioned Officers in my battalion, my promotion packet had been lost. I would have to go through the whole thing again: sucking up, studying after 30-plus hours outside the wire, locating and maintaining a clean uniform—this would be my way of life for yet another month.

It wasn't until I looked around and saw that all of my friends—some of whom I had gone to basic with, others I had known since I got to the unit in 2003—were now wearing sergeant stripes that I decided to quit being a slacker and play the army game. To be fair, the fact that my friends were now telling me what to do bothered me more than anything else. Nonetheless, I had buckled down and done everything required of me to get promoted. But now it was all for nothing. However, I was now officially in charge of a gun-truck crew, at least for one night. So I decided I would make the best out of the situation.

Our mission was to be a routine one. A handful of us from our company were lent out to a National Guard unit to escort a supply convoy from Camp Duke to Camp Dogwood. From there, we would escort the same convoy to Iskandariah, and then back home. This was easy stuff, especially for me, because I would just be sitting there monitoring the radio while the other guys did all of the work. This was one of the shorter trips that we made, only about three hours. Usually, we would do the all-nighter to the Jordan border and back. Not only was the Jordan mission grueling, but it was dangerous.

That route had been dubbed “IED alley” and was one of the hottest places in Iraq in 2005. But that was not where we were going tonight. Tonight it would be any easy run to Dogwood and back. As an added incentive, I would get to sleep in.

I often felt nostalgia when I visited Dogwood. This was the first home for me when I got to my unit in March of 2003. This was back when I was still a truck driver, still delivered supplies, and our presence in Iraq was still considered a war. Now my unit’s purpose was almost exclusively performing escort/protection missions with armored Humvees. We watched other units and Jordanian contractors deliver our supplies for us. What’s more, in 2005 the mission had been renamed Operation Iraqi Freedom III. As if the sequel was not bad enough, the powers that be went out and made a third one.

These are the type of things that I am thinking about as we roll in the gate to Dogwood. An hour has passed in my first night as truck commander. It’s so easy, you just sit there and tell the driver to stay awake and the gunner to scan his sectors. To think, E-6’s were going to put themselves in for Bronze Stars for doing this while people like me were going to get nothing, except maybe a certificate of appreciation and a gratuitous speech from some officer.

The supply trucks are having their loads taken off by forklifts while the rest of us head to the fuel point to top off our Humvees. It is then that I decide to make my first command decision. In my first deployment, the staff-sergeant I drove for (when I was just a lowly private) would often order me to steal away from everyone else and find the chow hall. While everyone else sat around awaiting orders, we would be stuffing our faces with as much food as we could get our hands on. On the way back from the “fuel point” we would quickly discard the evidence by throwing it out of the window into that vast trash-can that we called Iraq. I would watch the Styrofoam blow away and think, “Someday, when this place gets back to normal, there will be little hippies running around picking this stuff up and cursing the Americans.” I didn’t really care, though. I would be long gone by then. Besides, what was one more piece of trash when every road line is already covered with it?

Back in the present, I take my crew, Knowles and Giuliani, over to the mess tent to get a plate of food. Because Dogwood exercises light discipline, we drive with our lights off through the “moon dust.” Moon dust is not quite

minus the smell and the desire to have it spread all over your body. It fills the air anytime something moves in it. You breath it in; it gets in your nose, your clothes, your water bottle, and before you know it, you don't even mind the gritty taste as you chew your food.

Driving at night on a strange base (they had moved things around a bit since 2003) is a task in itself. Knowles, the gunner, navigates from outside the gunner's hatch using his night vision goggles. The base is mostly barren except for a few tents sparsely spread here and there; the danger of hitting anything is minimal. We get to the chow hall and the two go inside while I monitor the radio. When the convoy commander calls, I will have to think of something to say quickly. After all, we are just supposed to be refueling.

The Iraqi man is shaking with fear. He knows that if he is caught digging in the middle of the road at midnight, he will likely be shot on sight. Despite his fear, he is convinced that Allah will protect him while he carries out his small part in the holy war against the Americans. At home he has a wife and three hungry children waiting on him. His wife does not know about the meetings that he attends late at night, about the two or three weeks he spent in Iran, or what he was doing with a blue satchel, an empty propane tank, and a spool of electrical wire in the back of his truck when he left. She is not concerned about the war or her husband's doings; she only knows that without him, she will not be able to provide for her children—that they are already getting by one day at a time.

Finding the chow hall, getting the soldiers inside, and disposing of the evidence takes more than an hour. The convoy commander calls me on the radio to find out what the holdup is. I tell him that we got turned around after finding the fuel point but that we have directions and are now en route to their location. He leaves it at that and tells me to take my place as the rear gun truck in the convoy when I arrive.

I never would have gotten away with this in one of my unit's convoys. My platoon sergeant, Sergeant Alexander, has to have everything under control at all times. He is an effective leader, but his strict discipline is a morale dampener for his soldiers. Actually, the man is probably crazy. While the other platoons are sleeping or playing Xbox or enjoying their free time, we

are doing drills, having miniature classes, checking the Humvees alongside the mechanics, always something. He wanted to ride in the back seat of my Humvee tonight. He wanted to keep an eye on me—make sure I was doing my job correctly. Luckily, Sergeant Ford, my squad leader, had talked him out of it. Basically, to be the truck commander, you have to know how to perform all of the functions of the vehicle. I had a resumé that qualified me for the job: I was the driver for that Sergeant Mac (the E-6 we talked about earlier), I had served as the gunner for Captain Sheets (our platoon leader) for the majority of this deployment, and I was good with the radios, the tracking system, and the routes we commonly traveled. I guess that Sergeant Ford told Sergeant Alexander all of these things, I don't know. I only know that he isn't here and that my tardiness is about to become a problem.

I am expecting a formal "ass-chewing" when caught up with our convoy, but nothing is said. It is getting close to one in the morning and I am guessing that everyone is getting tired. I tell Knowles and Giuliani to put their flak vests, their helmets, and their headsets back on because we are about to roll out. We don't even stop moving when we catch up; we just fall in line as the trucks are heading out of the gate. With any luck, we will be back at Camp Duke in three hours. It is officially October 31st, Halloween. I tell Knowles and Giuliani this on the way out the gate. They don't care. Holidays are meaningless when you are in Iraq.

The freedom fighter has been hard at work. In the pitch black he has managed to dig a three foot deep hole in the center of the road. And he does all this while ducking behind the bushes every time a vehicle or military convoy comes by. The fact that the Iraqi Police are controlling traffic just half a mile away probably has something to do with his success.

Now he sets about the crucial element of his task. He opens his blue duffel bag and takes out some explosive material he has collected from artillery shells, some C4, and a detonation device. Meticulously, he engineers his blow against what he sees as tyranny. He carefully packs the explosives, twenty-two pounds in all, tightly into the hollowed out propane tank. He inserts the electrical wire that his wife saw him with earlier into the detonation device. He unravels the cord as he walks away from the hole to about two hundred feet from the road. The Iraqi then sets a stone on top of the wire and leaves the trigger exposed so that he can find it when he finishes his preparations.

questions what he is about to do, but only for a second. A lifetime of being told that the Americans are evil and the weeks he had spent training for this night in Iran quickly assuage any guilt that he might be feeling. When he gets back to the hole, he covers it over and gets back into his pickup. Then he drives over to the rock where he had left the trigger, gets out, and begins praying for his blow to be true while awaiting the next convoy unlucky enough to come his way.

As always, I say a prayer on the way out the gate. I prayed every time we went on a mission. I prayed for safety: the safety of my friends, the safety of any innocent civilians, and for the chance to get out of Iraq and prove my worth to God as a civilian. I prayed. But that was thirty minutes ago, and back in the real world, we are going through an Iraqi Police Checkpoint.

The Iraqi stops his prayer as he hears the roar of our truck engines and the unmistakable procession of 20 to 30 trucks lighting up the roadway. Oddly enough, the whole thing reminds him of a funeral procession, but to him, this is fitting. He flips off the safety switch from his trigger-button. The goal is to get the last truck. His instructors taught him this: "Go for the last truck. If you can cut it off from the rest and get a prisoner, you and your family will be blessed." Even if the Americans are not killed by the blast there is a good chance that they will bleed to death before the rest of the convoy even realizes someone is missing.

I am staring at the taillights of the truck in front of me. I am in a daze. I am recollecting, as I do every mission, all of the memories of my life from as far back as I can remember. After two years in Iraq, one would think that this would get old. However, I have found that there are always new angles, new interpretation of the things I have done and have had done to me. I think about my parents, about high school, about basic training; I think about how these things relate to what I am going to eat for breakfast tomorrow. I think about God's grand plan and what makes my uniform smell like rotted vegetables. I think about what I am going to do when I get out of Iraq—about how I am going to time my leave so perfectly that I won't be caught up in stop loss; I think about settling down, starting a family, planting a garden, about a life that should not appeal to me for at least another ten years.

The bomb detonates with precision. Shards of metal and unchecked combustion pummel our vehicle; parts of the inch-thick armor are peeled away like the lid of a sardine can. One, two, three tires are pierced with shrapnel. Our communications and tracking system antennas are completely blown off. Dust, fire, smoke, and tiny bits of metal begin ricocheting around in the cab. Our headlights mix in with the fiery-smoky-sandy concoction and make it impossible for Giuliani to see. Knowles begins the pointless effort of trying to scan his sector for an enemy, but the dark is impenetrable except for about twenty meters off of the road. The two of them ask each other if they are alright and then Knowles asks me three times in a row. I am unconscious for about a minute.

The first thing I see is dust. And the first thing I feel (apart from the intense ringing in my ears) is a slight burning sensation under my left shoulder blade. But I put these things aside and ask Knowles and Giuliani if they are alright. I come to the conclusion that we have run over an IED. Now is the time to act. Now is the time to be a leader. If anyone dies, it is my fault.

I immediately try to radio the convoy commander to let him know that we have been hit. No answer. I radio again, and again, and again, but still there is no answer. I know these guys are National Guard but surely they understood the importance of monitoring a radio. It never crosses my mind that our equipment has been disabled. I hear chatter coming from all over the CB. People are saying, "Did you hear something?" or, "Is everyone alright?" But I am still dazed and it never crosses my mind to use the CB to discuss sensitive information in an emergency.

I look at Giuliani and say something inspirational, something that is the hallmark of any tried and true, combat-tested leader: "These guys are not answering." I throw the handset against the dash and ask him how the vehicle is running. He tells me that we need to stop as soon as we are out of the kill-zone, and that we probably have a flat tire. I determine that we are going to die. Our communications are gone and our truck is about to come to a halt. We are screwed. I begin to think about those lions that separate a wounded gazelle from the herd so that they can gang up on it and take it down easily. That is us—we are the wounded ones.

Finally, I decide to use the CB. Right as I start to break up all of the chatter, Sergeant Brockman, another loan from our company, radios to ask if we are alright. I simply say, "We need to stop the convoy." The convoy commander comes on and asks why. I reply, "Probably because of that IED

radio him over a secure channel and I explain to him that I have been trying for the last five minutes. This is taking too long, I think. Eventually I lose my patience and say, "Just stop the damn convoy so I can assess the damage and check my guys for wounds."

Then we come to a halt. The night is serene and the glow of a full moon can be seen over a small village in the distance. The rare smell of moisture in the desert is in the air due to a nearby stream, and as the other trucks surround ours, I feel like the safest person in the world. The herd had come back for me. Meanwhile, the lion is driving away in a beat up pickup truck and waving goodnight to the Iraqi Police on his way home.