

## Stuck Points

“They had just started a new crop cycle, which meant flooding their fields and adding a 90% humidity index to the Helmand River Valley’s 110°+ days. Second and fourth platoons had only been on the ground performing our battalion’s advanced operations for a week, but our cami blouses already had salt crystals outlining the sweat’s progression around our gear from daily patrols of at least 30 clicks.” Sebastian turned the page of his green write-in-the-rain book and stifled a stuffy breath in under his plague mask, “The air was heavy with desert moondust kicked up by our maneuvers and impacting rounds. I set down at the corner of a compound behind a stack of opium stalks for concealment.”

“We were covering the western flank until third squad finished moving up the road and set in to start suppressive fire to cover us while we closed the door on the river to the west and first squad advanced to their forward observer positions to the east. There were locals spectating outside their compound doors, assessing where their allegiances would lie, undeterred by the steady stream of machine gun and rifle fire and sporadic RPG blasts. Across the plowed field, in my sector of fire, two men knelt down behind a compound wall with their attention focused on the intersection third squad would soon be passing to the east. They were both holding long objects, but I couldn’t make out if they were combatants or just farmers waiting out the firefight behind cover. Our company only had enough machine-gun optics to equip the 240’s, so the SAW-gunners used the standard iron sights and had to rely on the riflemen with ACOG scopes to make positive identifications for us. The rest of my fireteam were busy clearing out the compound behind me; the only one around was our platoon corpsman frantically pacing back and forth searching for his purpose.”

*DOC! I need a p-id! Compound at 9 o’clock! 500 meters!*

“Doc raised the ACOG on his M4 to identify the targets, *They’re Haji!*, and let off an uncontrolled burst from the rifle he hadn’t even bothered to zero at the range with us.”

*Fucking shitbag devil docs.*

“Doc’s rounds impacted close enough to alert the targets, but were too inaccurate to pose any real danger to them. The figures stood to egress, but I was already trained in on them behind my SAW, waiting for the confirmation. I let off three rapid fire bursts; my trigger finger was finely tuned to the diddy embedded in my head.” *DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE!* breathe, one, two *DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE!* breathe, one, two *DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE!*

“The bipods on my SAW kicked up a cloud of dust from the opium stalks and obscured my view, but I could make out the figures keeling over behind the screen. Two more silhouettes appeared to pull them out and I let out four more rapid fire bursts.” *DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE*

*MOTHERFUCKER, DIE!* “Three more silhouettes appeared. Rinse and repeat. After that, Corporal Marak came out to find me.”

*DENT! We’re moving! On Sanchez!*

“I dumped the rest of my drum into a stack of opium chaff across the field to set it on fire with my tracer rounds and reload before our movement. I stood up and found my team stacked on the wall waiting for me. Doc was attaching himself to first team, unaware of his infraction. Before I joined my team, I snatched Doc by the carrying handle on his plate carrier and had him on the ground with my barrel shoved in his face before he had time to react.”

*If you ever try to steal my kills again, I’ll send a burst into the back of your dome. Stick to your band-aids and Motrin and leave the combat to the Marines you navy faggot.*

“We continued moving and clearing the AO, but the enemy combatants had already begun disengaging. The firefight was over shortly after that and we made our way back to the schoolhouse. A week or two after that, we were conducting a patrol in the area and came upon a spot where I got a vague sense of *déjà vu*; everything was familiar, but nothing aligned quite right to verify my memories. I looked over to my left and found a pile of burnt ashes on the edge of a field. I looked behind me and there was a large Alder tree with multiple series of holes imbedded in the trunk. I reversed the azimuth of the holes and looked out across the field of budding corn stalks and found the compound I had set down behind. This was where it happened, except I was standing where the mujahideen had set up. It was textbook grazing fire. 500-600 meters. Every round imbedded between 0.5-1.8 meters high, the average height of a man. One in every five holes was charred from red-phosphorous-backed tracer rounds. There was a dark-brown discoloration around some of the holes and I reached out my hand to inspect the oddity painted onto the papery bark.”

*I wouldn’t touch that if I were you.*

Sergeant Gomez was the only seasoned combat vet in our squad.

*Why?*

*That’s Haji blood. You’ll probably get AIDS if you fuck around with it.*

I took a step back and confirmed that the brown discolorations were the same pattern as what I imagined splattered blood to look like. A smile crept over my face. I had done it. I hadn’t impotently fired my rounds in the air and given into the innate human aversion for killing like the books had warned us about. I had performed my duties flawlessly and this was my proof. I was so proud I had Sergeant Gomez halt the squad so that I could take a picture in front of the tree. I was smiling from ear-to-ear. My platoon began calling that spot the Tree of Death and used it as a landmark for our patrols. Every time it was mentioned in patrol route briefings, or I heard it called out over the radio as a POS-REP, I would swell with the same pride. There was

never any remorse. So proud. I had been initiated and found worthy, and all it had cost was a handful of Afghani lives.

*And that's...* Dent paused to look for the next line.

*“And that's...”* Sebastian hesitated to think of more.

“And that's the story of my first murders.” Sebastian shamefully hung his head low and stared at the darkened pool of tears that had been mindlessly flowing into the carpet below him.

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

Sebastian glanced up at his new therapist, Victoria, but returned his gaze back to the darkened stain in the carpet still seeping out from under his feet.

“I want to acknowledge how hard it must have been for you to be so honest with me about that.” Victoria was one of the VA’s newest resident doctors, with a beautifully-soft face that hadn’t been creased and worn yet by years of absorbing others’ burdens. There was no judgement in her gentle green eyes yet. “I can see that’s been weighing on you for a while now.”

Victoria reached across the table to offer the box of Kleenex at her side. “I noticed that you used the word murder. There’s a heavy implication with that, no?”

“I used to tell myself that it was just war,” Sebastian raised his arm and smeared ragged, snotty lines across his Carhartt jacket’s sleeve, “that we were all consenting adults giving ourselves over to the excitement of the orgy...but that’s not really the truth, is it?”

“And what is the truth?”

Sebastian sighed, “that they were just farmers and kids fighting off an invader with soviet-era ordnance and AK’s with broken sights. And we were war demons, trained for years to crave combat, fighting with unlimited ammo, night vision, air strikes, artillery strikes, and coordinating over encrypted radio channels. They didn’t stand a chance.”

“I notice that you describe the war in terms of ‘we’, but whenever you talk about what you perceive to be your wrongdoings, you only use the ‘I, me, and my’ pronouns.” Victoria’s tender voice reached out across the void to caress Sebastian as he shirked away from her.

“I know what you’re doing, and I understand why you have to do it,” Sebastian choked out his thought, “but I hate that you’re doing it.”

“And what am I doing?” Victoria’s question was sincere, without confrontation in her tone.

"You're trying to humanize me." Sebastian diverted his gaze further away from the doctor, pondering how many others must have sat there in that same seat, shedding the same tears, seeking the same absolution.

"And you don't want to be humanized because you don't believe that you deserve forgiveness for what you've done?"

"Would you forgive him? If that boy was here right now, fighting for his kills, celebrating his...his murders; would you forgive him?" Sebastian questioned how many of the others were truly contrite. He *knew* his own tears were merely performative; a conditioned response he must meet to become one of them again. But how could he be truly repentant if he was so sure of himself? So proud?

Victoria measured her words, "The point of this treatment isn't about seeking forgiveness from others, but seeking forgiveness from yourself."

"Yeah, ok." Sebastian's head sank lower as he turned further inwards.

"I can see that you aren't convinced. That you've already made up your mind that *you* are solely responsible for that guilt. But I've already identified several stuck points and external factors that you've chosen not to incorporate into the framework you've built. We're going to explore those and challenge those stuck points and try to reframe those memories, together."

Sebastian winced at Victoria's self-inclusion.

"I'm not saying that you're going to fully forgive yourself, but what if we were able to remove just ten percent of that guilt? Reduce those symptoms by ten percent? Would that make this treatment worthwhile for you?"

Sebastian considered the immeasurable mercy his therapist was offering him. It was more than he should expect, considering the responsibility he would have to discard.

"That sounds nice, but I wouldn't deserve it."

"That's one of your stuck points talking. Do you believe that we can get there though?"

Sebastian looked up into Victoria's face. Why was this ethereal creature so adamant about helping him even after knowing what he was?

"I believe you, but I don't know if I want it."

"That's ok. As long as you believe enough to fully participate in the treatment, then that's enough."

"Ok."

"Should we move onto the next impacting event?"

"Yeah." Sebastian wiped his eyes and turned the page in his little green range book.

## Chapter 2

Today's patrol was a monstrous patrol. Today, we had the 81's on patrol. These guys were the heavy mortars that usually set up at the rear bases and reach out for fire support, and we didn't need or want them out on a presence patrol with us, but they were terrified. They were terrified because it was only the second week in country and it seemed like our two line platoons they had sent in as early presence were going to soak up all of the combat and grind up all of the Hajji before heavy weapons got a chance to do anything cool. So they demanded that we take them outside the wire, got their First Sergeant to talk to battalion command and make it happen.

So we set out with two platoons of Marines, my platoon with heavy mortars and heavy machine guns attached to us without their crew-served weapons. We had set out on patrol long before dawn, and we had already wandered far from the last pre-established patrol checkpoints; it seemed like we were determined to make this a contact patrol for these guys, and kept chasing probing gunfire across the misted fields.

*Where are they?!*

I remember I used to call the third fire team leader VanAsshole because the dumbass was a fuckup from head to toe, but he was staff sergeant's little pet...so what're you gonna do?

*They're right fucking there! Treeline! 700 meters!*

I shouldered my SAW and sent a lined burst of forty rounds kicking up dirt from the freshly plowed fields directly in front of us all the way to the tree line in the distance I had already dropped half a drum of hate into.

*I still don't see them!*

*That's because they're all down dumbass.*

I pocket my M249 SAW under my shoulder and jog back over to Sanchez and VanDumbass covered behind a mud wall.

*That treeline? You didn't see anyone there.*

*Does it really fucking matter?*

*Shut the fuck up VanDumbass.* Sanchez already found our squad flank for me and him to post up. It's a nice spot, lots of shade from the leafy tree overhead and a mud wall for me to sit against and lean into a modified supported kneeling firing position that takes the weight off my knees. *The only reason you're sniffing around over here is cause combat camera was following us around.* Sanchez hands me the rest of his cigarette. *You weren't going to do shit with that .203 so go sniff up Staff Sergeant's ass.*

Sanchez is sitting behind his rifle spotting me from the shadiest spot. He had gotten chosen from our squad to go to the Designated Marksman course run by the battalion snipers and was gifted his own modified SASSR Jr. to carry around Afghanistan, which made our squad leaders feel more high speed and gave PFC Sanchez some clout.

*SERGEANT T! WE GOT THREE MORE RUNNERS! SAME TREELINE. 900 METERS!*

*You're making shit up.*

*Go play team leader with the others VanDumbass. Sgt. T's balls are probably real sweaty from all this patrolling and need a good licking.*

Sanchez loved to infantilize all of the team leaders playing their preschool games to decide who got to be in charge, and Van's post this morning was probably the silliest to date with the mortarman team of five attached to us. Because second team had already lost Torres, Sgt. T decided to split them up and attach Hufford to first team for extra fire support and sent Van to our fire team of three. Being unable to bear the weight of not being in charge, VanDumbass immediately appointed himself patrol team leader of the mortar section they had buffered into the middle of our squad. Because he was Staff Sergeant's pet though, nobody but Sanchez really said anything to him about it and Sergeant T., Carroll, Z-Bo and the outranking mortarman sergeants said nothing about the dirty little PFC running around barking orders around them.

*Dent, light up the tree line again.*

I held up my SAW and let out a rapid-fire burst across the treeline.

*DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE MOTHERFUCKER DIE!*

I don't see any shadows floating through the treeline as the moondust settles around me, but I see Van's H-E round impotently explode in the field, hundreds of meters shy of the intended treeline. Sanchez just bust out laughing.

*Get outta here Van before you embarrass us some more. I was just having him probe for me.*

Van just kind of skulked away. I propped up my bipods and set my machine gun down. Pulled out a can of wintergrizz from my shoulder pocket and packed another thumb into the gum pocket I had just washed out with the water bottle from my drop pouch. Me and Sanchez sat there shooting the shit and trading insults for a few minutes until Carroll returned from the team leader meeting.

*Ok we're posting up here while second squad advances and closes the door.*

*Sounds good to us.* It was already well past high morning and me and Sanchez had already settled into our listening post around the corner of the compound our squad had taken over that gave us a clear 180 view of our patrol's rear flank while the rest of the squad recuperated around the corner.

That's when the mortarman sergeant came up to Carroll.

*Hey, we're moving.*

*No we aren't. Who told you that?*

*Van did.*

*No, we're supposed to post up here. Van is probably trying to move your team to a new cover position.*

The sergeant looked kind of confused but just shrugged his shoulders and went back around behind the compound wall to join the rest of the squad. Carroll sat back down with us and rested against the wall sucking on his camelback. We could hear the chasing gunfire running further and further away as we joked away. It took about twenty or thirty minutes, but Carroll quietly got up and went around the wall to get an update from Sergeant T. before quickly coming back to us.

*They left us!*

Me and Sanchez just looked at each other and laughed. *Welp, glad I packed enough dip.* I pulled out my leatherman and started pounding away at the retention pin that kept coming loose on my bipods while Sanchez packed his can of Copenhagen longcut. That's when Carrol tackled both of us from behind.

*Shut the fuck up!*

Me and Sanchez just kind of looked at each other confused.

*Are you sure they're gone Carrol?*

*I don't know but wait here while I go check the perimeter.*

Carrol just kind of trotted off along the compound wall in the opposite direction. These compounds were like little self-contained villages, so it was at least 500 meters to the end of the wall he was headed down.

*Do you really think we got left behind?*

*Dude, Carrol's fucking with us. I mean he's dumb, but there's no way he's running around this compound by himself if he thinks we're alone.*

*Good point.*

Me and Sanchez just kind of sat there, quiet. Neither of us truly believed the prank, but neither of us could ignore the very real possibility that Carrol was in fact that stupid. Carrol returned around the opposite corner out of breath about ten minutes later.

*They left us!*

*So what are we supposed to do?*

*I don't know.* Carrol squawked on his radio but there was nobody in range.

*Ok so according to the lost Marine steps...*

Me and Sanchez exchanged another look. *What do you mean the lost Marine steps?*

*You know like if we get separated from the patrol...*

*Yeah, we understand what it is, but why were we never briefed on lost Marine steps?*

Carrol just kind of shrugged it off.

*They told us about that when we were headed out from Leatherneck.*

Me and Sanchez looked at each other again, angrier.

*We weren't there. Nobody ever told us the lost Marine steps.*

*Oh well, they start with staying at your last known position for the next hour....*

*And then what?*

*I'm not sure. We either head to the last known patrol checkpoint or we head east until we hit the Helmand River.*

*Well which one is it?*

*I'm not sure...*

*Which one's closest?*

*I'm not sure. I didn't pack a map.*

*Jesus titty-fucking Christ.*

*Hey! That's Jesus titty-fucking Christ, Lance Corporal to you!*

Sanchez laughed at Carrol's ineptitude and turned away from us. He only really turned to talk with me after that. We sat there for two, three, four hours, long enough for the rest of the patrol to chase their contact, find their remaining checkpoints and return to base before realizing they left us during the final patrol count and sprint back after us. I remember things being different during those hours. Like we were playing mouse and trying to stay out of sight within the irrigation ditch we had sank into.

Sebastian sighed as he looked up from his notebook,

"You know, I've been really trying to think about what we talked about last week, you know, connecting with the emotions, trying to remember and understand the thoughts running through my head, and I think those hours waiting were some of the worst I ever experienced in Afghanistan."

Victoria stopped her notetaking to return Sebastian's stare.

"And what were those thoughts and emotions?"

"I was terrified." Sebastian broke the eye contact first. "I was terrified for myself, but not in the way you would think. I already understood that I wasn't allowed to die there and that the bullets weren't allowed to touch me, but I was still terrified of waiting for that contact, hearing those rounds overhead."

"If you didn't feel you were in danger, then what was the source of your fear?"

"I was terrified because if we received contact, everything within a click of me and Sanchez was going to die. That's why I remember each goat-herding child that spotted us and whipped his goats along faster in vivid detail. I remember the groups of curious old men that would wander past our post with their hands behind their backs after hearing the children's reports. I remember what all of them were wearing, I can hear their exact conversations, but I'm unable to repeat them. Dozens of faces I can remember clearer than my biological family's. My brain was imprinting targets."

Sebastian was looking back at Victoria, but something had departed within his eyes, like he was sending himself far away.

"I can feel the sun getting hotter and hotter as the tree's shadows retreated. I remember how Sanchez would stop talking and stare at them from behind his rifle whenever they got too close. I think he silently understood it too. That we were going to massacre all of these people and it was all going to fall on me and him. It wasn't a question of who would die. We were war demons set out with the intention of chaos and destruction and we weren't trained to leave a firefight with targets up."

Victoria shifted in her chair, refocusing Sebastian's gaze,

"And was fear for these people the only emotion you were feeling?"

"No. I was furious. Furious because we weren't even supposed to be there. Furious at the incompetence that led us here to the precipice of ending dozens of lives and in turn sacrificing ourselves on the NJP blade because Lance Corporal Carrol was sure to throw us under the bus whenever he needed to."

Sebastian laughed and returned back to Victoria's conversation, back to her soft emerald eyes,

"And writing all of this out for you, it's so many layers of incompetence that led us there, it's almost enough to make you believe in some divine order, some external force that's bespoken an exquisite layering of fuck into your miserable existence that you can't seem to escape."

Victoria pulled Sebastian's hand across the table,

"I think we're moving into an unhelpful direction. I want to hear what happened to the three of you."

Sebastian chuckled some more,

"About what you would expect from our unit. Soon enough, Carrol's radio had chirped to life and the platoon found us. So much of the returning patrol was defeated and dead, drenched head to toe in sweat from all of the extra running, and most of them somehow angry at us for leaving us behind.

By the time we had returned to the schoolhouse, they had flown in a Battalion JAG from Leatherneck to interview all of us returning. He interviewed everyone from the patrol commander and platoon sergeant down to Sergeant T. and all of the team leaders. Everyone lied just enough to where the slipup wasn't really anyone's fault.

He interviewed me and Sanchez, and I remember he felt relieved, almost as if the conversation was over when he asked us if we'd fired our weapons or killed anyone while separated and we responded 'no'.

I remember his final question to us was to repeat the lost Marine steps; me and Sanchez stumbled our way through the first two that Carrol had repeated and then didn't know what else to say. The JAG officer just gave us an 'uh-huh' and made a note in his notebook."

Sebastian chuckled some more,

"To this day, no one's ever told me what the lost Marine steps were for Nawa, Afghanistan. I think there were like seven or eight of them."

## Chapter 3

It's an early morning patrol. The patrol's been getting real engagement from Hajji all morning, but my squad's been buffered in the middle of the patrol all morning, providing supporting positions for the other squads maneuvering around us.

I see a squad assaulting a compound 500 meters to the north of us where there was reported small arms fire. I can see the lead man toss a grenade over the wall and the second man rush in without waiting for it to explode. The story I got later on was that was Sergeant Woods from first platoon and he forgot to pull the pin on the grenade. It doesn't matter, the rest of the squad rushes into the doorway because they start receiving RPK fire from the tree line that extends directly out from me and covers the targets from my field of fire.

I'm on my squad's flank so I've been oriented north while the rest of my squad is facing east, covered behind a sitting wall on the edge of a field. We've been moving with second squad all patrol and I know that they're to the southeast of us, moving around a village compound. I hear sustained engagement to my left and see a fireteam of Hajji firing on them from a treeline that was on a diagonal from our own. I swing around and give them a burst, but the geometries of our treelines shield the combatants from my fire. It's still enough to scare the shit out of them and I keep letting off sustained bursts to give second squad some cover. My team leader, Carrol, comes up with the LAW he just unstrapped from Sanchez's back. I keep laying down suppressive fire while he bungles with the tube next to me.

*Back blast area all clear!*

I hear the snap of the blast behind us, but I don't hear the rocket detonate. I look out at the field and find Carrol's rocket smoking in the field less than fifty meters away from us; he didn't even shoot it far enough away to arm the rocket.

*That's ok. We got air support coming in. You'll get them next time.*

It's Sergeant T talking Carrol up. I remember catching a glance from Sanchez in the prone behind them that said the same exact thing I was thinking. *What kind of Mickey Mouse bullshit is this? You're going to give this fuckup another try? When Sanchez humped it in? When we have a limited ammo supply because your executive officers are fucking up the schoolhouse logistics? When team leaders keep calling in our limited ordnance on fucking dogs?*

*Get your team on the flank Carrol.*

Sergeant T crouches off to go find Staff Sergeant and call in our air support. Carrol puts me and Sanchez on the flank, in the prone behind the wall. My field of fire is directly up the treeline that bends to the left a hundred meters away. There's sporadic rounds popping off overhead as they impact the wall behind us, rounds from the combatants that I was suppressing and Carrol failed to finish. Some of the rounds slice off green leaves from the trees overhead before they crash into the wall, and these leaves are gently falling around us. I sat up in a cross-legged sitting position and propped my SAW's bipods into the wall.

*Carrol what are we doing?*

I look over at Carrol and he's crouching down behind the wall like it's *Saving Private Ryan* or something. The rest of my squad has fields of fire that cover the Hajji shooting, but everyone's crouched down behind the wall. The only one that's shooting is Cato, one of the other SAW-gunners, and he's just pretending he's Duke Nukem and cynically dumping drums so he doesn't have to hump as much weight back to base. Carrol grabs me and pulls me awkwardly back to him.

*Get down! Carrol's terrified like these guys pose a threat; like this isn't just like a 400-series range.*

*Carrol what are we doing? Why am I flank when I can just lay down hate while you and Sanchez take the treeline to these guys?*

*We're calling in fire support! Take your field of fire!*

There's more green leaves gently helicoptering their way between us as I give him that empty stare. I lump my way back over to Sanchez and we wait for Staff Sergeant's air strike to come in. It takes about five minutes, but a couple of harriers fly overhead and blast their engines but don't drop any ordnance, it's just a show of force. My squad cheers as second squad overtakes their compounds. The teams of Hajji in the treeline across from us disengage to regroup. I look over at Sanchez and he has the same look that I'm thinking. The firefights continue growing further away with the other squads in the distance as second squad moves forward to pick up Staff Sergeant and my squad waits to maneuver back to the flank.

We keep patrolling on for another few klicks down some new enclaves that we had never been down before. I remember them being beautiful in an Edenistic kind of way. There were homes on one side, with their ten-foot terracotta walls; The locals had trained pomegranate and other fruit trees to grow over the 5-foot wide path we were on. On the other side of the path, there was an irrigation canal, that was levied by earthen walls until their poppy, corn, and cannabis fields needed to be flooded again. There were shrubs and young green trees growing along the levy that blocked the sun wanting to pierce in. Watermelon vines were starting to overtake the edges of some of their fields. The rest of the patrol

was supposed to be in that direction but we had lost visual contact and could only hear them every now and then.

There were children that would poke out their smooth, brown faces from behind the doors fashioned from sheet metal and framed into the earthen walls. The children would giggle and run further inside as a faceless figures in hijabs would shoo them away. There was an old man sitting outside the walls, on the edge of the field, next to one of the old concrete water wells stamped with a signature CCCR. Our interpreter went up to talk to him, to ask him what he was doing, and if he saw anyone running with guns. From the man's body posture, it seemed like he was just there to enjoy the show, like the fireworks were just a part of life. I remember him uttering the phrase *Inshah Allah* several times, a peaceful way of saying god-willing. There was no real resolution with the old man and we just kind of pulled security around him and refilled our camelbacks from the well.

The squad awkwardly waved at the old man as we shuffled past and he just waved us on with a placating smile. We walked another couple of field lengths and reestablished visual contact with the patrol when we crossed over a main canal way that ran north and south and consisted of two eight-foot high bermed roads with an irrigation canal in between.

*SNAP! SNAP! SNAP!*

We were taking sniper fire from across the canal we just crossed but this guy wasn't very good and just had first team dance a little as they finished running across. The patrol flank we had just made visual contact with starts to receive fire from a click to the north. Sergeant T. has Cato and Parrot post up on the road and start harassing the sniper with their SAW and .203 combo. Carrol comes over to me and hears the Hajji engaging to the north. He has me set up laying along the berm wall to cover the north and east while the rest of the squad egresses back west across the culvert we just crossed to engage the sniper.

*Carrol, when am I supposed to cross?*

I look back again and see that I've been positioned on the squad's flank, by myself, with no one near me because Sanchez has already been called up by Sergeant T. to perform his designated marksman duties.

*We're going to set and have you cross when second team is down on the other side.*

Second team is already getting up and crossing the road. The crossing's about fifty meters away from us.

*Carrol, we don't need cover here.*

*Just stay here until I call over for you.*

Cato and Parrot are already across the road and it's just me and Carrol. Carrol pushes me back down into my field of fire as he stands up and starts his trek across the road. I waited there behind my SAW while they crossed. My position sucked – completely exposed to a one-eighty around me and a blind wall behind me. I saw the patrol flank move away from us and deeper into the enclave's treeline. I waited there a long time, I think, ten? Fifteen? Twenty minutes?

*Carrol.* I arched my head and called Carrol's name across the canal at a conversational level but no one responded. I pushed my position up the sloped wall until I could see across and called out again, this time a little louder.

*Carrol!*

*SANCHEZ!*

No response

*CARROL!*

*SANCHEZ!*

*THIRD SQUAD!*

No answer. I was calling at my firing range pitch, if they couldn't hear me, they were out of earshot. I remember sliding back down that berm wall and sinking lower into the tall grass next to it. I remember seeing figures moving within the treelines but they weren't Marines, not enough gear. I could see the schoolhouse radio tower in the distance. From its size, it looked to be about ten to twelve clicks away. I remember shrinking myself smaller so the figures wouldn't see me and come to investigate. I wasn't scared, but I knew I didn't want a firefight. I just sat there, for an hour probably, watching the figures in the treeline and thinking about the position I was in.

I wasn't allowed to die, but at the same time, this was the value my platoon leadership placed on my life. About how silly it all was. I think that's when I reconnected with my subconscious and found my original intention for joining. I stood up and walked to the top of the canal and just started walking north towards the radio tower. I had my SAW at condition one, with a serious hope that I would have a negligent discharge and alert the Hajji to come and finish me off.

I was going to let them fire all of the rounds they wanted at me and not fire back. I was going to let them keep getting closer and closer without firing back. But they weren't going to take me alive. They were going to have to kill me. Otherwise, I would have to kill them and then myself.

I was smiling. I was giddy. I was free. I lit cigarettes and just kept walking and drinking from my camelback and lighting cigarettes. Must have been four or five clicks before I finally ran into them. I had actually walked right past them on the wrong side of the canal, when I heard someone from second team whisper over the berm.

*Dent, what are you doing?*

I looked across the canal and there's three or four faces from my squad just staring back at me. They've been posted up there in the shade, waiting for the sniper to reengage. I look up and down the road and see a crossing about two hundred meters south. I open my feed tray cover and set my SAW to condition four before I load it back up and close the cover as I trot back towards the crossing. Sergeant T. is sitting there at the crossing with a bewildered look on his face.

*What the fuck are you doing Dent?!*

*I was covering the squad's egress Sergeant.*

He snatches the cigarette out of my mouth and grabs my kevlar strap to yank me in towards him.

*Bitch stop with this slick-rick bullshit. What the fuck are you doing?*

My face is empty and Sergeant T registers my contempt.

*I was using the radio tower to return to the schoolhouse Sergeant. I haven't had contact with the squad for over two hours. You left me behind.*

Sergeant T's still pissed, but there's fear softening his scowl.

*Go find your team Dent.*

I trot down to the end of the squad line and find third team. Carrol is there with Sanchez.

*What the fuck Carrol? You left me behind.*

*Oh yeah sorry. We got distracted chasing the sniper.*

And that was that. We patrolled back to the schoolhouse without anymore contact and Sergeant T put me on a double shift of firewatch that night for being a slick rick.

## Chapter 4

*Dent! Ten O-Clock! 300 meters!*

I'm the last man left buddy rushing across the field, covering the squad's immediate egress to the treeline. Everyone else is covered and concealed behind the treeline, refusing to come out even though there's no real immediate danger to us. Combat wasn't nearly as chaotic as they made it out to be. I remember an RPG floating overhead and exploding fifty meters away from one of Slow-Jack's humvee's idling down the road with little Franklin trying to figure out his special booster seat in the turret.

**DENT! TEN O-CLOCK RAPID FIRE!**

I shift my weight over and orient towards Staff Sergeant's directions and find his targets. It's three body silhouettes sitting in front of a compound wall, and there are plumes of dust going off behind the wall every few seconds. One of the silhouettes stands and shouts directions over the wall to the probing mortars.

**DIE MOTHERFUCKER! DIE MOTHERFUCKER! DIE MOTHERFUCKER DIE!**

I give Staff Sergeant his rapid-fire burst. Two bodies slump over; the third is still moving.

**DIE MOTHERFUCKER DIE.**

Three bodies down. I jog over to my squad in the treeline, past Staff Sergeant.

*Nice shooting Dent. Next time with a little more urgency.*

I look back at Staff Sergeant and he's smiling at me, smiling at me like I'm the fuckup and he has to do something about it. Second and third squad leaders are around him and they start planning the assault while I take my spot at the rear of the patrol detachment and grab water. First squad is already assaulting the mortar position I just lit up. Their three radios all lit up with Sergeant Lindo's voice at the same time.

*\*\*\*Don't shoot the FO's, they're kids. Forward observers are non-combatants. How copy? Over.*

The three of them just kind of looked at me, unsure what to do but instinctually wanting to tear me down for what I had just done. Nobody ever said a word about it though, and those sleeping silhouettes are just a thought that remain with me now.