

Post Blast

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I gag, wretch, heave, and stumble. It is the basest of human reactions. Without wanting to, I convulse; my body struggles against itself. Revulsed and disgusted, instinctively protecting itself from all the ills and evils of carrion, my body tries to launch the contents of stomach, esophagus, throat, and mouth. A contrary, equally raw, and violent physical reaction struggles to keep it all in. A British soldier from our small Team – Ritchie, renowned for his cheeky sarcasm, respected for his “devil-may-care” comportment, and remembered fondly for his devotion – is clearly entertained by my clumsy dance. Smoking his 20th ‘fag’ of the day in the precious little shade offered by the overhang of our building, Ritchie genuinely enjoys the display.

My team of explosives, intelligence, law-enforcement, and electronics specialists has just returned to our building on Camp Victory (even in 2004 we chortled at the name!) from a “post-blast” investigation. “Anti-Iraqi Forces,” that’s what we were calling them then, had detonated a vehicle-borne-improvised-explosive-device (VBIED – a car bomb) next to a long line of Iraqis seeking employment with the Iraqi Security Forces and Iraqi Police in Baghdad. Within an hour, we scoured the scene for anything of value. We gathered electronic components, car parts, explosive residue, discernable tactics-technics-procedures (TTP), vulnerabilities, best practices, witness statements, casualties, victims, terrorists. We collected evidence to field-

analyze in our building and packaged and shipped it to forensics laboratories at Quantico, VA, or the UK. Usually, within a day, we had written and published a classified report and disseminated it as widely as possible among the leaders of Multi-National Force-Iraq. *Critical Intel? Good Training Material?* Maybe just closure. Over seven months, we published hundreds of reports. Maybe we were “pissing up a rope;” maybe it was

cathartic; maybe we made a difference; maybe don’t kid yourself, there’s no way.

Returning from the scene, I notice a familiar, putrid smell usually foreign to the inside of the HMMWV (‘Humvee’). There is an anomaly in my gait; something is raised on my left heel. After dismounting, stowing gear, helmet, flak, weapons, and ammo, and handing evidence over to our lab-techs, I grab a screwdriver and head outside to investigate. Standing on one leg, my left foot on my right knee, digging, gagging, heaving, trying to maintain my balance, I cleanse my sole.

I’ve done as much as I can with the flat-tip screwdriver and agitating the sole of my boot in the lake at the bottom of our concrete veranda. *It’s wicked hot.* “They said it got up to 35 degrees today.” I hear Ritchie say.

“What’s that? Like a hundred?” I ask. “Let me grab one of those smokes,” I say, taking one as I collapse in the huge, padded, yellow-plastic-covered chair opposite and put my feet on the table and light it. “Is it gone?”

“Mostly.”

It isn’t. It won’t be. It shouldn’t be.

The veranda, for our small team, is a place of peace, respite, even joy. Our oasis in a desert mostly absent of humanity. In the evening, intense brightness and seemingly inescapable heat yield to a symphony of warmer, more mellow colors. Rose, orange, and the day’s final, muted flashes of red and yellow backlight the fading blue and gray of once-white clouds. Reflected in the lake below which it will soon disappear, the sunset defies our reality and carries a willing traveler to the fading familiarity of other, less insane worlds. Often at sunset, a General from Scotland’s Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, plays musical tribute to the day’s, week’s, month’s, (maybe just to War’s) dead. From General Graham’s bagpipes, I hear mourning I shall remain incapable of otherwise expressing. The walls of the Al Faw Palace, Headquarters for MNF-IRAQ silhouetted in the fading light offer shelter and protection to those who seek it – a barrier to seeing and to knowing. Maybe they’ll read the reports.

As a team, we decompress, smoke, talk and laugh, waiting for the next call. We violate the shit out of General Order Number ONE (the prohibition against any alcohol). We barbeque on the flat roof. The “Embassy House” gifts us steaks, sausages, and hamburgers. As our civilian teammates (intelligence and law enforcement professionals) travel to BIAP to meet with their counterparts, they pick up what the rest of us order (bottles of Jameson, cases of beer, handles of vodka, tequila, etc.). We invite others, and in doing so we are incredibly selective. *No idiots!* I used to wonder how we got away with our specifically prohibited activities - how a call-out to a post-blast investigation never came while we were in our cups.

Genuine, emotional farewells, a HMMWV, a Helo, a C-130, and a helter-skelter run (100% confident I’m not going to make it) to the commercial side of an airport in Germany where I will board my flight home to Seattle. Relieved, I stow a dusty, three-day pack in the overhead and collapse into my seat in steerage. I’m wet with sweat, and I am certain I’ve smelled better. Having arrived a few minutes early, I say hello to a very beautiful and attractive flight attendant sat casually on the armrest of the seat immediately in front of me.

“Did you just come from Iraq? Are you going home?”

Delighted, and still relieved, I say, “Yes, my wife is meeting me at SeaTac.”

“It’s so awful what they are doing to you all...” she droned on about the injustices of war – this one in particular. She asked whether I thought we’d find any Weapons of Mass Destruction, probably something about Abu Ghraib, maybe the mounting casualties. Details are scant; I had tuned out. What could she possibly know, and why would I give a shit? I wasn’t ready. For a not-short while afterward, I wasn’t ready.

I sit and look out my window. I alternate between what I see and what I remember; abject horror, disgust, and irrevocable tragedy share intimate space with memories of witnessing nature’s most precious beauty and sharing man’s most vital bonds. Each is inspired by the other. I reflect, I remember, I explore, learn, and appreciate, and I continually hope to grow. Turns out, the flight attendant was right – most likely on every single one of her points. If I saw her today, I’d want to tell her that. I would also want to tell her about watching beautiful sunsets from the veranda, listening to Gen. Graham offer funeral gifts, and humbly enjoying Ritchie poking fun at me as I struggled to remove whomever from my sole.