

MATTHEW KOMATSU

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## 31 North 64 East

*April, 2012*

*Third in a stack of six men lined up on the shoot house entry door. Two PJs in front of me, three behind, M4s ready. I awaited the squeeze from the man behind; a squeeze I'll pass to the shoulder in front. A squeeze to release us into a room with an unknown number of hostiles and friendlies. Arkansas humidity bore down; sweat beaded under my helmet and ran down my cheek. Right index finger on the trigger guard. Thumb on the selector switch. Dead calm. Live. Fire. Shoothouse. Sweet Jesus. Don't fuck this up, Komatsu.*

**2200 hours, 14 September 2012**

Through my office door into the Rescue Operations Center, I see the TV screen in the corner, hear the laughter of the guys. My computer screen blurs—in two months, we've generated nearly 100 award packages already. I review every one. The ritual: check the name on the form. Check the name on the continuation page. Check the name on the citation. Now, check the social security number on the form. Check the continuation. Check the citation. The guys have learned efficiency, the administrative art of cut-and-paste. But when the Control-C/Control-V dance spirals out of control, a mis-matched name or incorrect social input can cost months of coordination. Attention to detail, gents.

I'm the commander of the 46<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, Camp Bastion, Afghanistan. My squadron of Air Force Pararescuemen, or "PJs" and Combat Rescue Officers, "CROs" fly Casualty Evacuation missions into the heart of the Helmand Province several times a day, plucking the battlefield wounded through

the doors of “Pedro,” as the HH-60G helicopters are affectionately known. Each mission counts towards the twenty total required for one Air Medal; some of my men sport twenty Air Medals. Then there are the special missions, the ones that went a little sideways, worth a bit more.

It’s September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, and we are, in theory, a few weeks from going home. I’ve flown a handful of missions, none of them special. I’ve put six of my men in for Bronze Stars with Valor; my award for this tour will be seeing them pin on those medals. But it won’t happen without the paperwork. Tonight, I’m off alert. Reserve for anything else. Anything else doesn’t happen much, so it’s a good night to catch up on awards packages.

I shuffle electrons dutifully. I click. I drag. I type. I cut. I paste. By 2200, I need a break. In the team tent next door, the guys will be up to the usual: email, movies, cleaning weapons, busting each other’s balls. I grab a soda, dip spit bottle, and head over.

### *July, 2012*

*When I first ran the loop around the Bastion runway during a 2009 trip through Afghanistan as a staff officer, it was about seven miles. Bastion was still a new UK/Marine outpost back then, Dodge City to wild southwest Afghanistan.*

*Three years later, Bastion was swollen, the loop over ten miles. I set out from the compound at two in the morning, running by feel. But everything had shifted over time. A few miles in, I hung a right and dead-ended into a cluster of airfield lights.*

*I stopped my watch. I couldn’t see much—my headlamp illuminated as much dust in the air as it did the ground below. But I could tell the perimeter was nowhere near. I turned around and eventually found the perimeter road. Running along the fence, I had a weird feeling, like I shouldn’t be there. I took my headphones out. I thought about my headlamp bobbing along in the night. One well aimed shot—that’s all it would take. I considered turning it off. Then I thought of the armed guards in the towers seeing a shadow run down the road at midnight. I left the headlamp on, and ran on, past the Harrier, attack helicopter, and Osprey areas, to the other end of the runway.*

### **Shortly after 2200 hours, 14 Sep 12**

It begins with a call over the personal radios used to notify alert crews of a mission tasking. A “tasking” that means someone on the battlefield might be dying:

“We are bunkered down and taking fire, over.”

The call comes from our HC-130 sister squadron, located down the runway. I look at the PJs. No fucking way. That's what our faces say. But as I grab my radio and head back to the ROC, my stomach tightens. Something is up. The ops center is quiet, TVs muted. Everyone huddles around the radio.

"I say again. All personnel accounted for. We are bunkered down, taking RPG and small-arms fire."

I look at Intel. Intel shrugs back. Someone says there are fires on the other side of base. Outside, an orange glow lights the horizon, silhouetting the scads of containers, tents and buildings between me and the other side of the airstrip. Camp Bastion is a small city; Anytown, USA or Wherever-ford-shire, UK depending on your point of view. On the other side of town, something is going down.

It's not a drill. The base enters lockdown: find a bunker or shelter in place. We send the guys into security positions out along the compound perimeter. The Marine HQ calls. There's been an attack, and there are casualties somewhere near the Osprey hangars. NFI—No Further Information. We're to cross the runway and find the casualties.

Three volunteers to go: Paul, Kyle, and Dan. They ready a vehicle while I kit up and hope for better intel. My stomach is knotted—we're about to step purposefully into something. I scroll through radio channels—the frequency you need is often the one you don't have.

I meet the guys at the truck, a little white Isuzu. Kyle will drive, I'll ride shotgun. Paul and Dan in the back. Before we head out, I brief the guys on the little I know. For now, there are casualties at an unknown location on the other side of the runway. Our arrival is expected but our destination unclear.

### *April, 2012*

*"Find work, guys. That's the fuckin' deal. Bro bird-dogging a door, you peel off and stack on him. Squeeze and go." The instructor was at the front of the classroom. The air was artificially dry, tangy with air-conditioning and weapons lube.*

*A prior Marine, he was skinny, short, a boiling undercurrent of lethality. Like most of the instructors, he did his time, got blooded, then got the fuck out to make some real money. Trigger time on the contract side. And there was plenty of it. "Don't just take your corner, and then stand there like a dumbass, right? The job ain't over, right?"*

*Modern mercs, these guys, but no need to overthrow governments abroad when their own needs them so badly and will pay top dollar. Over the past decade, security-related contract groups have sprung up to offer everything from tactical training to*

*overseas personal security contracts. Fat off the government dime, there's been no need for competition.*

*Now it's 2012, and even here in Tactical Disneyland, there is a sense that the good times are over. The lights are out in Iraq, a no-man's land save for the guys lucky enough to work for the State Department. Afghanistan, on the downhill slope to "mission complete." Our instructors talked about offering more for less, teaching fewer kinetic skills, moving into other areas. Find work.*

### **2215 hours, 14 Sep 12**

Crossing the runway is no joke. The flames across the base bloom out our night vision goggles and make it impossible to see the ubiquitous ditches. Driving off the pavement will park us in a 4' trench. Kyle pulls it off and we make it to the Harrier area, on the northern end of the runway. We park and take a look. Shit burns, has burned. Lights flash near the hangars, but we can't see any friendlies. We see no movement at all. It's quiet, unsettling.

We drive south toward the Ospreys. There's a fire engine on the runway near a wall of fire; could be casualties there. We don't make it too far. We hear sporadic gunfire and park behind some cover. Dan comes over with a Marine. He says bad guys are inside the wire; grunts are securing their areas. He knows nothing about casualties. As we speak, the gunfire turns into a gunfight. We drive to the fire engine.

### ***April, 2012***

*How fast can you run a mile in full kit with your weapon? Full kit: Ballistic helmet, headset, body armor, three full magazines, hip belt and harness, two radios, first aid kit, infrared marking kit, M-4 and suppressor with a full magazine. Seven minutes is flat-out for me. At the end, my hips like feel warm rubber, my legs strands of limp spaghetti, and my breath a freight train.*

### **2230 hours, 14 Sep 12**

The fuel farm blazes. Flames boil up hundreds of feet from an artificial pond holding 1.6 million gallons of aviation gas, baking and illuminating our faces. We park next to the fire engine expecting to find casualties. Attack helicopters hover overhead, unleashing fire a couple hundred yards away *inside the wire*.

A Brit runs up to Paul and Dan and exclaims, "Thank God you're here." No casualties here, he says, firefight over there. That's all he knows. A small armored

vehicle skids to a stop. The driver jumps out, talks to Paul. There are casualties up a hill past the fuel farm and he'll give us a ride.

Space is tight—we leave behind everything but medical gear. I'm next to the driver. The noise from the gunfight outside intensifies. We drive maybe 100 yards, then halt next to a large vehicle behind a tall concrete barrier. I exit to the drumbeat of multiple .50 cal's through my headset. Tracers arc through the sky in both directions. The enemy is somewhere north of us. Paul's silhouette appears. "KU, they've got casualties on the hill. They're going to provide covering fire while we run up."

I look ahead. It's a dash across open terrain to some Brit vehicles. "Where are the bad guys?"

"Couple shooters 50 yards north of us, other side of the road."

"Alright. Let's do it."

As we stack up behind the barrier, the volume of fire is suddenly deafening. Paul dashes off into the night.

"I guess we're going. Dan, then Kyle. I've got rear." I slap Dan on the ass, and he's off. Then Kyle. Then me.

I run. As hard as I can. There is gunfire above and around me. Look to my right 25 yards in. Spot the insurgent position. Consider squeezing off some rounds at them. Think better of it. Keep running. One foot in front of the other. Don't think our silhouettes in front of the fireball to the left.

I arrive, last to duck behind the cover of the first Brit vehicle.

### *April, 2012*

*Our rifle "silencers" were anything but silent. The correct terminology: "suppressor," as in "muzzle flash suppressor." I was the only guy sporting one on my rifle, and I figured I'd run a whole day of shooting with it.*

*It was now lunchtime. I needed to clean my weapon, and the damn suppressor wasn't coming off. I loosened the ratchet and gorilla gripped it. Nothing. An instructor saw me wrestling with my rifle.*

*"Hey sir, what's going on?"*

*"My suppressor isn't coming off." He grabbed it, gave it a twist. Same results. A large man, he glared at me through his sunglasses.*

*"How many rounds did you put through it?"*

*I shrugged. "I dunno, at least a couple hundred." He grimaced and sent a look right through me.*

*"Seriously?"*

"Yes."

"Sir, these suppressors are meant for a few rounds. You put it on when you need it, then take it off."

"Oh."

"Yep, chances are good you've fused this thing right on to the barrel."

Shit.

"I'll take it to the armory and see what the boys can do." He walked away with my weapon. Thankfully the guys were already at the chow hall.

After lunch, he returned with my rifle in one hand and the suppressor in another. He pointed out the layers of carbon on the muzzle. Relieved, I asked how he got it off.

He smiled. "We hit it with a fucking mallet until it came off."

### 2245 hours, 14 Sep 12

Dan and Kyle treat the wounded. The helo gun runs are done, the firefight over. Through my NVGs, I see no movement at the enemy position. My position, however, bustles. Three large Brit vehicles grumble a diesel idle. Then, there are the Brits. In and out they run, shouting at the tops of their Scottish lungs. I can't understand a damn word and it's fucking loud. A sergeant rips into their asses.

"Ef you thenk them cunts over the road canna hear ya, yer fekkinn wrong. Quiet the fuck doon!" Of course he's shouting—he's as deafened by the gunfire and explosions as the rest of them.

Dan and Kyle treat five casualties—mostly shrapnel wounds from an insurgent RPG. All serious, but nothing life-threatening. The Brits will assault the cryogenics complex across the road and ask for our help. Paul and I agree: embed with the Brits. Find work, we smile. With a little luck, we might even find the casualties we originally set out to find.

### April, 2012

*I sliced my rifle's infrared pointer through the night. Invisible without night vision goggles, I positioned the green line on a steel target 300 meters away. I sighed into the ground, felt the rifle buttstock become one with my cheek and shoulder. At the end of the sigh, I squeezed my index finger against the trigger. The M4 erupted, followed by the ping of the round hitting steel.*

"Hit," announced my spotter.

*Ping after ping. Until I expended my ammo, satisfied with my accuracy.*

2330 hours, 14 Sep 12

We're in a trench watching the cryo complex, but I focus on a small bunker the helicopters shot up during their last gun run. That bunker, meant for friendlies, now shelters enemy, or what I hope is left of them. The small slits of black—gaps between slabs of concrete—I see through my NVGs unnerve me. Ten years at war: this is the closest to the enemy I've come.

The cryo complex looks like serious bullshit. A standard barrier-hemmed conglomerate of containers, tents, and work areas, save one big difference: this one houses liquid oxygen generation equipment and storage. The liquid oxygen, used for aircrew breathing at high altitudes, is a pyro's dream down here on the ground. One container erupting in the complex would level the place. I hear Kyle from down the trench:

"Hey, I've got movement."

"Where?"

"See those small barriers?" I see them. "I saw something move behind them."

"I don't see anything, man." Then I look at Kyle. "Dude, where are your NVGs?"

"I left them in the fucking truck. Can you believe that? I took them off my helmet because they kept snagging while I drove. Forgot to grab them in the excitement."

The Brits are taking too long. Suddenly, Dan calls out two movers. Through my NVGs: two shapes headed our way. M-16s in hand. Are they wearing pajamas?

"Hands up! Get your fucking hands up!"

They respond in perfect English: "Marines! Marines!"

Calls of "Friendly" echo up the line; the two figures jump into the trench. Kyle and Dan dress some wounds and debrief the Marines. They were sleeping when the attack commenced and don't know how many insurgents are left. They hid outside the complex as long they could, then saw us and made a break for it. One of them wears boxer shorts and a tee.

We send the Marines down the line and pass the intel to the Brits. I watch the bunker and wait to assault.

*April, 2012*

*Clearing rooms and buildings. On TV, it's always dramatic. Option one: explosive breaching. Option two: battering ram. Option three: kick that damn door down. Our approach: if it's unlocked, open the door. Make entry and shoot targets as we see them in our assigned sectors of the room. Flow through other doors until there's nowhere else to go.*

*The other half of the team watched from the gangways above and the instructors recorded video as we entered. I entered the room third in the stack. First and second man shot on entry, telling me to do the same. I had time for two quick shots, then turned right. Scanned. Looked for work.*

*Second man stopped at a door. Hinges visible on the left. He moved to the left side of the door, reached across for the handle. I paused on the right edge. Someone pulled in behind me. I awaited the squeeze. I got it, nodded and the door opened. I stepped through. Target down the hall. I put two rounds into the target silhouette and kept moving.*

*After clearing the house, we debriefed while walking from target to target. When we got to the target I shot down the hall, the instructor looked at the paper target, and pointed at a hole. "Who's got the suppressor?" That would be me.*

*"What happened here?" The hole should have been somewhere mid-mass inside the printed image of the obvious criminal. Where it was: in the body of the hostage he held as a shield in front of him.*

*I explained. When I took the shots, I never saw a hostage.*

*"Well, the good news is, you were accurate. The bad news is, you shot the hostage." He turned to address the rest of the team. "Take a sec before you engage and ensure you know your target."*

*I felt bad. But our job was to save lives, not take them. We weren't SEALs. We got into a shoot house maybe once every couple of years. But it stung regardless. If there was any solace in the moment, this thought: we're never gonna do this shit anyway.*

### **0100 hours, 15 Sep 15**

The flames play tricks in the night. Behind us, the fuel farm burns, dancing shadows as six elements of three or four men advance south through the cryo complex. My element hugs the west side, weaving in and out of containers. We advance until we reach the end of the complex. 20 to 30 yards away is that bunker. It's small, maybe 10' long, 5' wide, camo netting above the back. Airstrikes hit it once before, but who knows if it's clear. I stare at the black under the netting, unnerved. Even my goggles reveal nothing in that space. I cover down behind a container and level my rifle at the bunker.

Paul whispers from my left. "I've got movement in that bunker, KU." We relay the info to the Brits. An element of Brits chops free to clear the bunker. I am relieved that none of my men are on it. From outside the complex, a machine gun fires into the bunker. Then the clearing element lines up outside the bunker. They enter. The lead man gets inside. Two more enter, still a few outside. Shouting, then sustained

automatic gunfire. The team exits, trailing smoke. When lead man entered, one of several insurgent at the back of the bunker threw a grenade. But it bounced back and detonated among him and his shithead friends. Lead man then squeezed his trigger until his rifle went dry. Somehow the Brits emerge without a scratch.

A few minutes pass. Elements bound past us to leave the complex. I watch the bunker; smoke seeps out the back. When it's our turn, I run with two Brits. I make it no more than a few steps when I see flash from the bunker. A round tears into a barrier nearby.

"CONTACT LEFT," I shout as I turn, run behind a shitter, and back to cover. This is not the way to react to near contact. The standard operating procedure: turn to the threat and assault through. The Brits do my dirty work for me and clear back through the bunker to kill the rest. All told, five insurgents die in the bunker.

### *April, 2012*

*It was strange to lounge in the early Arkansas spring and listen to the pop-pop of gunfire from inside the shoothouse. Back in Alaska, I supposed it was Easter. A time of year also known as "Breakup." All the snow finally melting away, exposing Anchorage at its ugliest: awash in mushy dog shit and graveled roads. Every morning, a dusty haze rising inside a temperature inversion, until it could rise no more. I closed my eyes and saw it, flat across the sky, an apparition.*

### **0130 hours, 15 Sep 15**

I take a pull from a large arm bottle of water and pass it along. We are still outside the cryo complex, which continues to burn. Insurgent ammo in the bunker burns and cooks off, sending rounds overhead. We're headed back inside to clear two more areas. We stack again and move swiftly. Mine and one other element take the liquid oxygen area; Paul and Dan head elsewhere.

Moving amongst containers marked "HAZARDOUS," we are one stray round away from a fiery death. I clear an office trailer with two other Brits. No Marine would leave a workspace in such disarray. Computer screens lie on the floor, lights knocked over and papers strewn as a child might. Before I exit, I slap the door frame and say "Friendly." Exiting, I look down the barrel of a British rifle. The trooper behind it sees me, then points elsewhere.

I'm relieved when we finish and exit to line up behind some small barriers. We can see across the open ground to the north that ends with the Harrier hangars. It's a "pause in the action." Drink water, check your ammo, and take a deep breath.

I hear rotor blades overhead and have an idea. I lie on my back, my head against the barriers, and pull out my radio. I scroll through my programmed frequencies until I find “RIGHTEOUS,” the call sign for the Marine attack choppers. Pause.

“Any Righteous, any Righteous. This is Varsity One-Actual.” Wait.

My radio comes to life. “Varsity One-Actual, Righteous. Go ahead.” We exchange situation reports. They’re about to hit five insurgents near the Harriers. They talk me on to the position. It’s near a Brit vehicle. I request they hold off, pull the vehicle back, then clear Righteous.

“Roger, in hot. One minute.” I advise the Brits, and we wait.

Streams of machine gun fire appear from the sky over the airfield. Over and over again, the helicopters hit the insurgents. Cheers go up and down the line.

“Fuck yeah, mates!”

“Light ‘em up!”

When it ends, Righteous says all but one look dead. Time for us to move out. We’ll move on the road, using the vehicles for cover until we get to the Harrier area, then clear through the hangars. We line up and wait.

### *April, 2012*

*“Here’s the deal, guys.” My team stood in the barracks, jocked up. Brock’s team had departed to exercise the same training mission. It was a Blackhawk Down type of scenario—worst case. Helicopter down in an urban area, entrapped patients requiring extrication. Certainty of enemy presence. Within a minute of moving on-site, a town square with numerous avenues of approach impossible to cover, we were decisively engaged by role players playing Taliban insurgents. We took a beating for an hour. The men were anxious for payback.*

*“We’re gonna act as a response force for the other team. Once they hit the objective and decide they need backup, they’ll radio for us. We’ll insert and it will be game on. Secure a perimeter and create some breathing room.” The men beam because Brock and I worked this out without telling the instructors. Which meant the role players had no idea we were coming. “Whatever we got for ammo, bring it. Load every magazine you can.”*

*The guys jammed mags with 5.56 rounds identical to what we’d carry in combat, save one important difference—the round was plastic, filled with paint. Travelling at a couple hundred of feet per second, it would bruise, but not kill, leaving tiny spurts of blue and yellow paint to mark hits.*

*My radio crackled: “Guardian 2, Guardian 1. Request response force insertion.”*

*Time to go. We loaded two trucks, and moved out. In the mock village a half-mile away, 20 fake insurgents armed like us were wreaking havoc on the other team. The trouncing we took was fresh in my mind.*

*We took fire from a role player in the window of a building on the village edge. I flicked my selector from safe to full automatic. Raised my weapon, put the front sight post on the window. Then I squeezed the trigger and held it until my weapon stopped firing. The insurgent silhouette disappeared.*

*The staccato, sustained, jolted the PJ next to me. His eyes widened. "Did you just go full auto?" I reloaded.*

*"Yep."*

*He raised his weapon and did the same.*

*Once in the village, we secured a perimeter, and my team emptied magazine after magazine into diminishing waves of enemy. One fell to the ground after two of my men shot him. I shot him in the groin, and then his head. I heard a muffled "I'm down! I'm fucking down!" After 20 minutes, the site was secure.*

## 0230, 15 Sep 12

There is nothing stealthy about the silhouettes of twenty troops walking up a road next to oversized diesel dune buggies. After the half-mile patrol, I jump into a ditch with the command element. What I can see: the Harrier area is a half-mile long and adjacent to the runway. One line of small shade structures for single aircraft parallels another row of large maintenance hangars. The insurgents cut a swath down the middle. Several Harriers have burned to the ground along with their shade structures. Smoke drifts along the ground. Every aircraft is either destroyed or damaged.

Klaxons wail into an empty night. Flashing lights warn us of a danger we hope has passed. It's a surreal picture, something out of a video game. Righteous is down to re-fuel and re-arm, so we're on our own. Paul and Kyle chop to a team of Brits to take the hangars while Dan joins an element assigned the shade structures. The command element will take the leftovers. The teams move out.

A volley of gunfire. "Threat down," says Dan over the radio. Of the group of five Righteous shot up, Dan has put a round through the head of sole survivor. Paul's team clears the first hangar, moves on to the second. My element moves up. A Brit calls out a large pool of blood at the door to the second hangar. My first instinct: wounded insurgent, one we didn't know about. The blood leads inside.

After Paul's team moves on, I have a moment to take a look at the streaks of blood leading through the hangar door. There is large pool of blood on the hangar floor. I

step in the streaks as I enter the door, then consider. The hangar exterior is shot to hell, evidence of the helo gun runs and something else. RPG-scarring, small arms holes in the walls, the blood leading inside the hangar: I replay it in my mind. The insurgents huddled and died at the concrete barrier—why would one drag himself inside the hangar?

An insurgent wouldn't, but one of ours would. I picture a Marine exiting the door to engage the insurgents. He is hit, bad. His buddies drag him inside while providing covering fire. Render aid. It's a large pool of blood, crimson on gray concrete, curdling and congealing in the dry night air. It's American blood, has to be. I walk out, careful to avoid the blood, but see my footprints in the streaks and realize the blood is on my soles.

Dan's element clears through the smoking wrecks and burned out shade structures ahead. When they reach the Harrier squadron building, Dan asks for the commander. A Marine major says, "I guess that's me. The commander is dead."

I arrive to find the roof of the Harrier building bristling with the silhouettes of Marines on watch. Tall concrete barriers surround the small building. The light inside is too much. I take off my helmet and cradle it in the crook of my left arm. My eyes adjust to the sight of any office on base, a dusty mishmash of office furniture furnished by the lowest bidder and what's been assembled by hand. I ask a Marine in full battle rattle for a phone, and he looks me up and down. For a moment, I am self-conscious.

He points towards a desk. "Right over there, sir." I walk into an adjacent room, its television blank. Two Marines with M-16s sit and regard my entrance vacantly. I give the ROC a status update, then hang up and ask the guys for the XO. A slim major with a shaven head appears. I shake his hand.

"I hear you have a casualty."

"Yes. It was the CO."

"Where is he?"

"We've got him in a supply closet." He motions towards a door and opens it. Through the doorway, I can see the lower part of a body covered in a green wool blanket. I resist a need to walk into the room.

"I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry." He regards me evenly, but says nothing. "Look, if you're worried about his body being in front your men, I can get Pedro in here to evac his remains over to the hospital."

"No," he says, "That's unnecessary. We're not ready to let him go at this time."

*October, 2012*

*During my post-deployment leave, I barely left the house. I dragged myself out once a day to run in the crisp air, then called it good. Jen learned to avoid asking me about the deployment. I learned the art of angry, silent withdrawal.*

*Jen and I went to dinner one night at a popular restaurant/theater venue near our house. I dragged my feet getting out the door and we arrived too late to eat; she had to work an after-dinner event on the theater side. She was upset, then I was upset. We were barely seated when she had to leave me alone and withdrawn in the light and noise and jubilation of the restaurant.*

*I carried out food but ran into security for the show. I nearly choked the half-smile off the fat fuck who barred my way. I seethed my way to Jen, then erupted when I found the restaurant didn't include flatware with the to-go boxes. Jen finally told me to go meet up with Paul and some guys for beers. I walked through a light snowfall, and drank with friends from a distance.*

**0400 hours, 15 Sep 12**

It's over. At least it feels over. I take my helmet off behind a barrier and look down a line of aircraft hulks, the smoke acidic in my nose. One dead Marine, maybe one more. The blazing fuel pit in the distance: One mile, I estimate. One mile separates where tonight began from where it ended. If it even ended at all.

Paul and I look at the dead insurgents, who wear white sneakers, ballcaps, and US Army uniforms. RPG rounds protrude from their packs, belts of PKM ammunition drape from their shoulders. AK-47 magazines. Grenades. Surgical masks hang from their ears. The dead men's faces are tinted green; cans of spray paint spill from one man's pack.

"They were huffing paint to get high," observes Paul.

The uniforms are complete, nametapes and rank present. Some even wear Velcro unit patches. God damn it all.

I want to do something inhuman, something strictly forbidden by the Rules of Engagement. I want to spit on their heads, now malformed and open. I want to empty a magazine into their grotesque angles of repose. I want them to burn, like their friends back at the bunker.

But instead I pause, Paul at my side. I spit on the ground. "Fuck you," I say. Then we walk away, carrying our helmets and rifles.

*November, 2012*

*We left Fairbanks and pulled into our Anchorage garage eight hours later, our newly-adopted dog, Bonnie, in the backseat. A diminutive black and white border/shepherd mix bred to mush by an asshole who shot underperforming dogs in their kennels to make way for new talent, Bonnie was nearly feral from neglect when Carol liberated her; after two years teaching Bonnie to trust and obey humans, Carol agreed to adopt her to us.*

*The garage door was open when I let Bonnie out of the car, and she darted into the alley. She stopped when I called for her, then I called again: Come, Bonnie. She looked at me, then down the alley. Back at me. Then she darted into the brush at the alley's end. I called after her, louder. Panic squeezed my ribs. I shouted, pleaded, but she was gone.*

*I took off after her, a black dog at midnight. Me on foot, Jen in the car, we combed the neighborhood. Then I spotted Bonnie frozen under an intersection streetlight. I shouted and she bolted again. I sprinted after her, panting directions into the phone.*

*Ahead of me by two blocks, Bonnie slowed to a trot, hit a dead-end, then stood foxlike in a front yard. She panted like a wild animal, her tongue curved up at the tip. I paused yards away. She was stiff, coiled. I took a step and she sprinted around the side of the house. I followed into a backyard that fell away steep and wooded. I slipped on some leaves and fell short of a fence that enclosed the yard. Jen drove in front of the house and waited. Bonnie had to be somewhere back here—be ready, I said, for her to emerge up front. Jen was armed with treats and a leash.*

*The brush stirred; a shape bolted along the fence, then stopped. Bonnie sat down uphill and stared at me. I approached, but she shifted and looked for an exit. I slowed and sat down. The incline was steep, slick with the detritus of autumn. I dug my heels into the earth. I smelled fresh dog shit.*

*For 30 minutes I spoke softly and inched closer. I understood her confusion and her fear. It's okay, I said. We're family now. Closer still. We are going to take care of you, I said. A few feet now. The fecal scent grew stronger. Jen and I—we're your new mom and dad. Arms reach. It's okay, I said, it's okay. I stroked her head while she panted and lay down. Then I wrapped my arms around her and picked her up. She had soiled herself and it spread from her backside up her tail. Now it was all over my jacket. I kissed her head and carried her up front, where Jen placed a collar and leash on her. I kept her in my arms while Jen drove us home.*

0415 hours, 15 Sep 12

The Marines will send the commander to the hospital by ground. Dan will escort the remains, as he has countless times from the battlefield. He climbs into a British vehicle while the Marines carry the commander, covered and strapped to a backboard. Dan asks for a US flag, and the XO returns with one. He climbs up into the truck with Dan and they place the flag carefully between the backboard straps and the blanket covering the remains. I can't hear over the diesel engine, but the XO leans towards commander's head. His lips move. His hand moves to the body. Then he returns to the other Marines. They watch in silence as the vehicle rolls away.

Dan rides alone with the remains to the hospital. Blinking in the sheltered fluorescence as the remains of Lieutenant Colonel Christopher "Otis" Raible enter the hospital, Dan stands inside the door. His chin forward, eyes ahead, he raises a salt-encrusted sleeve. He salutes while nonchalant hospital staff mill past.

It's time for Paul, Kyle, and me to go home. Brits give us a ride back to our little truck, abandoned where we left it in the light of the burning fuel farm. We unload, reload, and retrieve Dan from the hospital for the short drive back to the compound. Only the two of us in the back of the truck, the world is quiet and dark around us. Dan and I should probably be on our NVGs, scanning. Instead, I take my helmet off and slump in the truck bed next to him. Dan slaps my shoulder. "You alright?"

My mind is on loop, tugging at the threads of the past six hours. Two dead Marines. At least 11 dead insurgents. Hundred-foot fireballs. Harriers burned to the ground. Clearing the cryo complex. US uniforms. Huffing paint. Warning lights and wailing klaxons. Shouting Brits and growling vehicles. Blaring radios and barking guns. All I feel is regret. Regret that I never fired my weapon.

Home after six hours, the guys see us enter the team tent and scramble to help. One of them looks at me, expectant and asks how it was.

"Fuck." That's all I've got. I kit down. Someone asks me if I need anything, shoves a small cup of coffee into my hands.

"It's strong, sir. Just brewed it."

The four of us debrief, stories spilling out, questions, clarifications. Where to begin. We walk over to the ROC, debrief again. More spillage. After, I've got nothing left. I shower, change, and fall into the sleep tent. On my back in the darkness, I close a partition in my mind and fall asleep. If I dream, I will not remember.

*December, 2013*

*Jen and I were in the car when she asked about That Night. Weren't you guys put in for awards? My chest tightened. An ember flickered in my gut. Yeah, Bronze Stars with Valor. When will you get them? No idea, could be years. Who knows. Who cares.*

*She prodded further about That Night. My brow creased. I crawled into a place behind my eyes. My answers clipped. Blocks from home now. She asked something else. I refused to answer. She ought to know this shit already. Goddammit, stop asking me about it. We made a left, a sharp right, another right. Then right down the alley, and into the garage. My anger, unaccountable, drew my lips tight.*

**1300 hours, 15 Sep 12**

After six hours I wake as if I never slept. The tent is hot under a mid-day sun. At the alert brief, we learn the base is still in lockdown, but analysts have pieced a few things together. 15 total attackers breached the wire, one taken prisoner. You can still see the smoke rising across the runway. The brief concluded, I place my alert gear out on the helo and head back to the tent to eat a MRE.

I'm about to open the pre-packaged spoon when my alert radio keys up. "Attention on the net. SCRAMBLE. SCRAMBLE. SCRAMBLE." Goddammit. Dan, Matt, and I run into the ROC. Time is ticking. Intel gives us what they've got. Suicide IED at a FOB. Two Marines, godfuckingdammit, both Cat-As. Time to go.

We sprint out the door. The two alert helicopter rotors spin. The crew waves us into the cabin. I barely kit up before we lift off. We're over the fence by the time I unfuck myself and settle into the 15-minute ride. I am an endorphin smoothie pushed down the drain of exhaustion. Everything is too bright, too loud, too intense, too fast.

Then we're orbiting over the LZ. Two patients are ready for transport, littered and packaged. Our helo lands. We run to the litter teams, and while Matt and Dan work a patient hand-off, I lead the litter teams under the spinning rotors to load the patients.

Dan and Matt jump in, and as we close the cabin doors, we lift off. Over the intercom, one word: "Buster." It means get us to the hospital as fast as you can. A patient will die if we don't.

Dan and Matt treat the Marines. We maneuver around the cabin, careful not to step on IV tubing or a wounded limb. It's borderline claustrophobic, deafening, chaotic. Can't stand up all the way, best thing to do is knee my way around and retrieve the medical supplies Dan needs.

Both Marines are fucked up, but at least they have their limbs. For now anyway. One of them is tubing fast. The other Marine, in better shape, rolls his head to the side. He reaches for his buddy's limp hand. His lips move but I can't hear what he says. His buddy responds with a subtle tightening, but his lips do not move in response. Then his hand falls away.

I see this, clap my hands for Dan's attention. Dan sees the Marine losing it, and kneels down by his head. He pushes on his chest, shouts loud enough for me to hear over the turbines. No response. Goddammit, he's dying on us.

Dan pounds the Marine's chest with a closed fist and shouts again. Jesus, a little movement now. Fuck. Dan looks up at me. I can't see his eyes behind his sunglasses. There's sheen of sweat on his tanned face, drops run down his prominent jaw. He shouts something. What? He motions for IV tubing. I pull what he needs while he grabs a needle and draws from a vial.

I connect the tubing. Dan inserts the needle and slowly pushes a clear liquid into the tubing. He hands me the expended needle and I place it into a sharps container. He gets back into the Marine's face. I hear him this time.

"COME ON. STAY WITH ME, MARINE."

The Marine opens his eyes. A bit of white, a sliver of pupil. It's enough for now. I check his vitals, write them on a strip of white taped to his chest. The pilots come over the radio.

"One minute out." The gunners look back and extend their index fingers to us. I stick mine up in return. I look out the cabin window, see the fence line of the base approaching.

I check the Marines to prepare them for the move. The Marine on the brink has a blast wound to one of his legs. At one point, he had a tourniquet, but it was changed out for a pressure dressing by the time we got him. Pressure dressing protocol: pack gauze into the wound. Pack the wound until no more gauze fits. Then wrap a dressing around the limb. Tight.

Between the tourniquet and the pressure dressing, the rest of his leg is mottled, a rising purple color. I recall I used to wrap strings or rubber bands around my fingers as a kid at school. I tightened them until my fingertips turned hard and purple, then released the strictures to feel the warm rush of blood return to the flesh.

We're about to land. We secure the patients, then we're on the ground and running them to ambulances next to the helo pad. We load the Marines, close the doors, and we're off for the 30 second drive to the emergency room doors. When the doors open, hospital staff rush the patients into the ER. Matt and Dan talk

to the doc, tell him what they know. The doc receives the info while assessing the patients, moving back and forth among a rush of multicolored scrubs.

I stand there, blinking in the white fluorescence, breathing in the chlorine. I feel out of place in my sweat-soaked uniform and kit. The doc scribbles notes then looks up: "Alright guys, We've got it."

Dan and Matt head my way. We pause for a moment outside the flurry of activity. I feel shaky. Then we head out the double doors we entered.

*Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013*

*"Ladies and Gentlemen, please rise for the publication of the orders." The commander turned his head and said, "Major Komatsu. Post." I left where I stood next to Paul and Kyle, marching straight lines and turning crisp corners to join the commander in front of the flags.*

*Jen was in the front row, holding an iPad above the swell of our unborn child. I saw my parents on the screen, watching from their apartment in Ahmedabad, India. Behind Jen, rows of people here for the ceremony.*

*Matt Kirby read the citation from the podium. His voice rose and fell with emotion over 12 lines of text at 12 pitch font. Mandatory opening and closing sentences. Somehow, it was all supposed to come down to this.*

*Then it was quiet. The commander and I turned to face each other. He pinned the medal on my chest. Spoke words of congratulations in low tones. Proffered the citation. Take. Shake. Salute.*

*We turned. Smiled for the cameras.*

**2200 hours, 18 Sep 12**

It's been ten years since I last attended a ramp ceremony. There have been plenty of opportunities to see the dead off on the first of many flights to final resting places stateside. But I never went.

I need to be there tonight. Lt. Col. Christopher Raible and Sgt. Bradley Atwell, both killed in the attack, are going home. Protocol: the aircraft that will transport the caskets will sit on the runway, lights off and silent, aircrew inside and waiting. All on base are welcome to attend the ceremony: show up early, in uniform. Form two uninterrupted lines from where the ambulance will show up with the caskets, facing inward. Stand at attention. Salute the casket as it passes. Taps will play. The aircraft ramp will close. Then the formation will break up, and life will go on.

A thousand of us show up 30 minutes early to get into place. Paul, Dan, Kyle, and I walk over and settle into lines several people deep. We form up by the instinct

of Day One, Basic Training. Arm's length behind the man in front, even with the man to your right.

The night is quiet when the ambulance arrives, caskets inside. All air traffic has been diverted, all ground movement on the runway silenced. Two caskets come out covered in flags, and a thousand people come to attention and raise their right hands in salute. The pallbearers carry Raible and Atwell past without a sound. Taps plays as the aircraft ramp closes. When it's over, we drop our salutes, and walk away.

*October, 2013*

*I walked alone through Arlington Cemetery on my last day in DC, headed to Section 60, Site 10217. The app on my phone showed satellite imagery of the plot. It was outdated, nothing but a bare patch of dirt. Skirting white headstones that stretched to the horizon, I arrived at my destination.*

CHRISTOPHER  
KEITH  
RAIBLE  
LIEUTENANT COLONEL  
US MARINE CORPS  
AFGHANISTAN  
AUG 18 1972  
SEP 15 2012

*I stood awkwardly in front of the lithochromed marble until I took off my backpack, and sat in the grass in front of his headstone. I should say something, I thought. But I couldn't think of anything to so say. I tried to take a rubbing with a pencil and paper, but the pencil repeatedly broke through the paper. I found a thicker piece of paper and used a pen instead. It came out all right. I looked up at the sky, stared at the headstone some more. I listened to the traffic on the nearby Memorial Parkway. I took a picture on my phone. I stood and place a patch in front of his headstone. Then I kissed my hand, placed it on his grave, and walked away.*

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