

JONATHAN BURGESS

Chai Party

The Science of War

The blast of arid heat hit me square in the face the moment I stepped off the plane as I struggled a bit under the weight of my three bags. I straightened my back, tried to maintain positive control of my rifle, tucked my chin a bit, and engaged my legs as I willed one foot in front of the other. I surveyed the barren desert through the shimmering heat and dust in front of me. Unintelligible shouts came from the enlisted leaders, but I couldn't discern where they were or what they were saying through the cacophony of the C-130 engines and the military vehicles nearby. Our company of infantry Marines landed at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan in the early summer days of 2009. It was my second deployment, and I was only twenty years old. I had left behind my wife, who was also a Marine, in southern California pregnant with our first child.

We settled into the area, aligning our cots, establishing guard duties, and got an orientation to the camp's facilities (with strict instructions to avoid the female-heavy areas). Most of us shaved our heads within the first couple of hours. The entire company slept on old metal and canvas cots under the same giant tent. When I first laid eyes on it, I thought of fumigation tents and the old southern tent revivals. The growing sense of madness, restlessness, I felt probably germinated from the constant presence of dust and sweat in, on, or around anything and everything and pervaded all of my senses.

The suck

The usual culprits: boredom and homesickness set in. Thankfully, our leaders left us alone with the exception of the necessary and understandable control measures typical of military life.

“Stay hydrated, and keep your cot area squared away,” the company gunny would say.

“Aye, Gunny,” we’d respond. They were likely just as bored and uncomfortable as we were, and there was a resulting banality to our daily schedule. Once, this lull in rigidity afforded me a rare opportunity. I sat on my dust-laden cot, drank water, and loosened my boots. I stared at a two-sided, laminated photo I carried in my cargo pocket. One side was one of my favorite snapshots of my wife, Kelly, and the other side was a three-dimensional ultrasound printout of my unborn son, Dominik. It looked as if he was smiling at me. I smiled back as often as I could.

It didn’t take long for the usual din of heavy metal music, laughter, and rifle and machinegun parts to crescendo to a roar early every evening when the sun returned to its own trench to fight another day. The card games started, and we enjoyed a steady influx of energy drinks (oh, the joy of half-sized Rip-Its “tactically acquired” from the chow hall!) and tobacco into the company area. Hardly any of us had ever experienced combat, but all of us were itching to go farther down into the Helmand River Valley for a taste. We daydreamed, joked, and speculated about killing the enemy. As the expression goes: when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

The senior leaders, enlisted and officer, must have picked up on our restlessness and sense of urgency because the games soon began. Uniform, grooming, and weapon regulations became more strictly enforced. Aaron Cardenas, or “Cardi,” kept a close eye on me but not like the higher-ups. He was a veteran of the battles of Fallujah and Ramadi and had weathered two deployments at sea just to get back to combat. He had taken a special interest in helping, and I had, in some strange way, taken a special interest in helping him. Cardi had a twin named James, but I was one of the few who could tell them apart. He was a short, squat, unassuming Marine with a kind of ethnic ambiguity about him. He hailed from Monterrey Park, California, and always offered me an “Al Capone” cognac-dipped cigarillo at certain momentous occasions. He moseyed over from time to time in the tent to talk about Terminator, the movie Platoon, guns, or to ask me how I was doing and to see if I had my gear and my team in order.

The company began discussing the mission at hand, the terrain in which we would be operating, the enemy and his resources, and our objectives and goals. The

tacticians among us loved every second of it, but I—being at the bottom rung of the leadership ladder—just wanted to take my fire team into the bush and run through walls to kill bad guys. In retrospect: our immediate motives could have been loftier or more profound; but we were there, we were responsible for each other, and we were going to kill anyone who offered opposition.

The planning began, though, or at least in a way that was visible and immediate to me. The maps went up, the notebooks came out, and little terrain models in the sand littered the area just outside the tent as smaller units rehearsed concepts. We soon started patrolling with weapons across the base, which took just over half a day to accomplish while carrying a full pack and wearing body armor. The load was eighty pounds or more. It was especially apparent what was needed and what was not when we received our full ordinance allotment just before we pushed out into enemy territory, “Indian country,” where we would live out the rest of the deployment. The ammunition list, at least for myself, consisted of: two hundred and forty rounds of 5.56mm rifle ammunition, twelve rounds of 40mm grenades for my grenade launcher, four 60mm mortar rounds for the mortar team traveling with us, several smoke and fragmentation grenades, and flares. In other words, our packs got heavier, but morale improved.

Batter up

It wasn't long before a Sergeant Major and a general (I recalled their names as well as they recalled mine) came down to see us. That's how we, the grunts at the bottom, knew it was getting close and getting serious. This meant we were in for an over-the-top and obligatory pre-combat motivational speech. There was the usual shouting, knife handling, and boisterousness that we hoped the enemy could somehow hear miles away from the base. We were coming for them, and we wanted them to know it. We wanted them to be ready. We wanted a worthy opponent. We wanted a good fight. The order was given, and we commenced with more planning and training. Soon, we were told to pack up the bags we wouldn't get until later in the deployment when we had cleared a safe area. Cameras and phones had to go into the bags as well, and the only things left were our armor, weapons, and the packs out of which we would soon be living.

Word already started getting around about little skirmishes with the enemy here and there, and we couldn't go more than a day or two without hearing rockets being launched from another part of the base. The base increasingly ceased any and all external communication in something commonly referred to as “River City.”

No phone calls, emails, video calls, or letters could leave. Thankfully, I had already said “goodbye for now” to my wife and various other family members. Then, the time came to stage the entire unit on the airfield at the other end of the base.

We were going to launch in the dead of night; so we waited around with our packs and armor all lined up in neat rows just a hundred feet or so from the helicopters. We chatted, took pictures for posterity’s sake, smoked cigarettes, and milled about the area looking for our buddies in other companies within the battalion. I found a friend of mine, David Baker, perched on top of a dirt berm conversing with several British soldiers. I joined in, and we joked until the glow of our cigarettes became the only indicators of our presence there on our little dirt island of normality. Someone said through the darkness, “I wish I was where I was when I was wishing I was here.” Everyone laughed.

I looked at David’s silhouette and said, “Man, if I ever make it out of this place and manage to get out of the Marine Corps, I’ll dye my hair green.”

Everyone laughed again. David said, “Promise?” Several months later, I would hear David died in a cornfield after stepping on a landmine set by the Taliban.

Before I wandered back over to my squad’s staging area, I traded 40mm grenades with one of the Brits. I gave him some sort of parachuted flare, if memory serves, and he gave me one of my most prized possessions at that time: a 40mm red phosphorous grenade. It took a place of honor on my armor and would be reserved only for the most special occasion.

Once I returned to my team, I approached my squad leader, Aaron Denning, and told him there was a folded American flag in a large plastic bag at the bottom of my pack. I trusted him with my life and would have followed him anywhere. He was the young, stout-hearted kind of Marine, a man’s man. There in staging area, I squinted through the dusk sunlight at him, and he squinted back, the usual 5 o’clock shadow threatening his clean-cut appearance. With as little melodrama as possible, which was a feat for me in those days, I asked him to take the flag from me if I died and to give it to my son. He gave a firm reassuring nod and said, “No problem, brother. I promise.” He raised a pack to his face and pressed a Marlboro between his lips, and we left it at that.

The Art of Survival

We filed in and sat on the hard seats shoulder to shoulder with our packs and weapons on our laps or between our legs. The high-pitched whir of the helicopter engines assailed my ears. The smell of fuel, body odor, foot powder, and Copenhagen Long Cut tobacco pervaded my nostrils. There was a soft glow of round, green

circles when we lifted off as men started turning on and testing on their night vision monacles one last time.

The midflight signal came from a dark, helmeted silhouette to make our weapons ready and a brief roar of shouting followed. I flipped my night vision monacle down over my left eye and looked across the green interior of the compartment at my friend and fellow team leader, Josh Ibanez. He ripped his rifle's charging handle to the rear chambering a round, slammed a 40mm grenade into the breach of his grenade launcher, and slapped the butt stock of his rifle. I laughed in spite of the churning in my stomach. I swallowed what felt like a large ball of cotton and looked over at my teammates. I raised my left thumb. The three of them responded in kind with a thumb up or a raised fist.

I felt the helicopter plunge deeper into the darkness. I kept waiting to hear the sound of bullets peppering metal, but it never came. We touched down, and everyone stood up to file out. I stood as well, but the weight of my pack sent my small frame careening right onto my face in the floor. I panicked as I saw boots walking away from me, but I flipped up my night vision monacle, braced myself on the metal floor, and tried to stand. Claudio Patino, one of our snipers, pulled me up from the floor and shoved me forward. He had a hard, clean shaven jaw and a warrior's gaze. I felt his face over my shoulder as he shouted into my ear, "You okay, bro?" I turned, gazing into the abyss at the end of what felt more like a subterranean tunnel than the inside of a helicopter. I turned my face back and shouted over my shoulder, "Yeah! I'm good, man! Thanks!" Patino would die in a bold and selfless act several miles north of that place in a gunfight eleven months later.

I stepped out into the black void without knowing where my foot would land. I sank immediately into about five feet of water falling forward yet again, and Patino landed squarely on top of me. I panicked again, but Patino pulled me up a second time after swimming his way to stable footing. I had become acquainted with Patino a bit at the base but not well enough to create all this extra work for him. I wound my arm around his, pulled myself up letting go as soon as possible, and raised my weapon to an alert position. I swore under my breath. If survival was an art, I was dabbling in the abstract.

As we waded through the flooded field, I straightened my helmet and flipped my night vision back onto my face. I caught sight of several men darting through a tree line just outside a nearby compound. I considered shooting them but couldn't see any weapons in the mix. They were gone as quickly as they had appeared prompting me to lower my rifle halfway back to the ground. I trudged onward and started scrambling to find my Marines and Corpsman. We managed to reunite

and reorganize in the chaos of the rotor wash from the helicopter as it lifted off leaving us there in black, muddy ditches. We spread out and formed a large circular perimeter, and a preternatural quiet settled through the ranks. I caught myself missing the dry, barren desert as I kept sinking into my grassy, muddy position. Aaron Denning came around and told us the plan was to wait for daylight just a few hours away before we began the push north. Until then, we were supposed to take turns sleeping. Half of us went to sleep first while the other half stayed up. As Aaron crept away into the night like a heavily-armed Cyclops, I thought to myself: *No one in his right mind would, or even could, go to sleep right now.* As if on cue, someone from another platoon began snoring almost like a whisper in the darkness to my right.

The push

The next morning, we rose from the wet field soaked and pining for a gunfight, and we started walking. The sun crested the tree-lined horizon and prompted the onset of humidity and temperatures above the nighttime norm of ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit to hover without mercy around one hundred and twenty. The night and following dawn had been relatively quiet, but I wasn't convinced. We moved from one flooded field to another avoiding the usual, natural routes of travel, which were likely booby-trapped or prime ambush territory. We shifted under the weight of our packs and strolled along through the flat, grid-like fields in a wide formation. The sun began a slow boil as we crossed an open field to a tree-lined ditch filled with stagnant water. My point man and my automatic rifleman moved into the open field on the other side of the ditch.

Three eruptions of dirt just a few feet in front of their boots halted us in place. As I felt a rush of blood to my face, my mind recognized the three snaps in front of us to be bullets. I scanned the most likely direction and source but couldn't see anyone. "Get down!" I yelled at the two of them simultaneously motioning with my hand to Doc Welsh, the Corpsman beside me. The four of us slinked into the concealment of the trees and took cover in the ditch as a few more pop shots rang out. I got on the radio and informed Denning we were being shot at from an unseen enemy and asked if we could engage. Another squad leader, Daniel Avalos, spoke out over the same frequency, "Did you just ask if you could shoot back?" I felt my cheeks flush and tugged at my body armor. Daniel was one of the few experienced combat veterans among us and one to be emulated. He had fought in Iraq a few years earlier.

I spotted movement in the far tree line just behind the ledge of a low dried mud wall across the open field. I raised my rifle just as Joshua Ibanez shouted, "He's got

a gun!” Josh launched a 40mm grenade at the target as I decided against the rifle and slipped my left hand down to the trigger of my grenade launcher. I already had the range in my mind. Apparently, Josh and I weren’t the only ones with the same idea. Two other grenades were launched, and all four impacted the enemy position in quick succession. Debris flew in every direction as a violent concussion broke the morning stillness yet again. Nothing remained when the dust settled. We picked up and pressed on.

Just a few moments later, after clearing a neighboring compound, we were invited inside a gentleman’s home for a bit of chai tea. After having an early morning gunfight in his backyard, we all sat around sipping tea in the floor of this man’s home and spontaneously erupted into fits of giggling at the absurdity of the situation and our surreal morning. I moved from room to room surveying the mud palace as our commander sat in the floor conferring eye to eye with the generous host and his family with the help of an interpreter. I noticed ornate rugs rolled and precariously stacked in one room from floor to ceiling. There were hefty white bags of some sort of grain stacked high and deep in the next room. A couple of women dressed head-to-toe in burqas huddled with five small children in a far room. One woman gripped the shoulders of a small child at her feet, the pair gazing at me with a mixture of fear and curiosity in their eyes. The child wore a small cap, dirty rags for clothes, and a thin pair of durable looking sandals that seemed homemade. Some of the other children were squatting alongside the second woman. Their nervous mumbling amongst themselves contrasted sharply with the buoyant, inviting tone of our host.

I seem to remember the gentleman brought out several clear, glass cups—some with a short, thick stem and base—and served hot chai tea from a polished metal kettle with a wooden handle. He looked around at the rough dozen of us and to our hands to see who had a glass. His corners of his mouth dropped and his forehead tightened a bit before he went back into another room with the interpreter and returned with more cups. It hadn’t occurred to me then, but he was more nervous about following an ancient custom than the dirty, armed Americans in his living room.

We had retained a cursory amount of the cultural education mandated by our commander before the deployment, and a portion of that was the prehistoric honor code by which the Pashtuns had lived for centuries. It was called Pashtunwali, and that gentleman was following it to the letter, providing us shelter and sustenance as we were pursuing and had been pursued by our shared enemy. It was the only

shred of civility for miles, and I had no idea how to behave. I had come prepared to perform like an animal, but I found myself dumbfounded at the cultural contrast, the difference between preconceptions and reality. However, this was the same code that would later allow the local Pashtun tribe to exact revenge on us for the unfortunate death of a young boy named Mahmoud, killed during a nighttime firefight.

The quiet and civility didn't last long, and we soon moved on, finding ourselves in a few more gunfights. I was more comfortable roaming through a field single file with bullets impacting the dirt in front of our patrol than I was in our former host's home. Another platoon nearby spent a few moments of their afternoon getting hammered by enemy machinegun fire. We all fought well, and the enemy was—from a strategic perspective—running away from us. They didn't want to fight us. At least, they didn't want to fight then or there. We moved a few dozen miles over the next few days, and the absence of clean water and food soon became just as dangerous as the cowardly Taliban fighters in the area. We still hadn't been able to get a substantial resupply; everyone was hungry, dehydrated, filthy, and tired.

The sun hammered the top of my head and the back of my neck from its position in the cloudless sky, unforgiving in the lush humid landscape. We moved from tree line to tree line, in and out of compounds, and I pined for shade from the exposed, open fields. I became a bit dissociated from my limbs and stared down at my mud soaked legs a few times wondering how they were moving. I wasn't particularly amazed or impressed with myself, but I looked around at my brothers and willed myself to not let them down, to keep moving, to be as equally inspiring to them. Once during a movement to try to help another platoon in a firefight Cardi, my team, and I skirted the outside wall of a tall, mud compound. As we reached the corner, Cardi stopped suddenly and said, "Wait, wait, wait. Burgess, do you see that? What is that?" We all looked left out at the open, green field as if on cue. There stood what appeared to be a big coyote or a wolf. "Is that a fucking jackal?" Cardi asked me over the mound of gear on his left shoulder. "That's a fucking hyena," someone said behind me. We turned back to the corner and headed on about our business.

At night, we would stop for a few hours of rest and lay in a prone position altogether forming a circle. We placed claymore mines several meters in front of us in avenues by which the enemy might approach, and we took turns sleeping. Lapsing into a coma didn't seem so far-fetched at that very moment. The soft, high grass lapped at my face and all about my exposed arms just below my crusty, folded sleeves, and the soft mud and flattened grass made a nice bed. I kept looking at

my three teammates occupying concealed positions nearby hoping they were okay, hoping they were resting but ready. The end of my watch never seemed to come fast enough.

Every day for about a week, we walked. We stopped here and there if we got shot at, found explosives or mines, saw something suspicious, or if we wanted to search a compound because of certain pieces of intelligence relayed to us. But we walked on. I heard from someone that we had walked about thirty-two miles in five days, interspersed with fighting and what were essentially battlefield errands. One day after a little skirmish, we stopped to regroup and redistribute ammo and water. I sat between a wall and a tree-lined wadi with Cardi. He passed me a cognac-dipped cigarillo. He told me—in his own way—that he didn't look like it, but he was having the time of his life. We didn't speak for a while, even after the cigarillo, and listened to a little sporadic gunfire in the distance. It stopped after a bit, and we just sat there, aching, trying to savor the smell and taste of the cigarillos, our weapons just within an arm's reach.

There were moments when I kept walking, with my full Alice pack on my back and my body armor, and I wasn't quite sure how my feet were moving, but we walked. Sometimes, I felt detached or dissociated from my own body in a strange way. I wasn't Catholic or even particularly religious at the time, besides having CATHOLIC stamped on my dog tags, but there were times when I wondered how Jesus had managed to walk to Calvary carrying the cross. I thought about his feet and the hard cross on his shoulder. That's it; nothing else. My feet and shoulder hurt too.

The sun was merciless on my head, neck, and hands. I still tasted the salt the corpsmen had come around to shove in our palms and tell us to eat one night after we had run out of clean water. My muscles constantly ached, not just from the load, but from pivoting, scanning, examining my surroundings and watching my team. Once when we finally stopped, we pulled our week-old socks off, and most of us had white sheets of dead skin on the bottoms of our feet. Johnny Castro, our platoon sergeant and consummate Texan, was an Iraq veteran; he told us to suck it up and to stop being dramatic. "Change your socks; it'll go away. Quit being a bunch of bitches," he said. We put our socks back on and kept walking. I wasn't supposed to look tired or be tired, but my bones shook under the façade. I was so tired I was angry. I wanted to breathe smoke and walk through mud and shoot my grenade launcher. There were times when I considered turning to the side of the hot, moon dust road to launch a high-explosive 40mm round into a compound just because the men were standing outside staring at us, always staring, gaping

and gawking, and I hated it. Were they gathering intelligence? Were they scouts for the Taliban? Was I just the first American Marine they had ever seen? Later, after I had injured my back, gotten a concussion, and had to return to the U.S., I was enraged every time someone stared at me. I even snapped at my wife for gazing at me lovingly.

Outlaw war garden

The landscape began to seem less beautiful, the smell of smoking meat made me feel wild, and I wanted to choke every rooster and goat within a kilometer. We usurped a Taliban commander's compound and made it our patrol base after the long walk. We called it Patrol Base Outlaw. I believe our lieutenant named it, but I could be wrong. It sounded like something he would call it. Greg Kosh was a tall, fit, blonde frat boy type with no time for the weak and no room for the stupid. Our radio operator, an Alabama native named Gary with a constant dip in his lip, had to show him how to skin and clean a goat. I respected Kosh and would have followed him anywhere too. It was a strange thing to never get along well with someone I would have died for.

Thankfully, the Taliban commander and his family had maintained an excellent garden—in addition to their healthy supply of explosives, cannabis, guns, opium, and heroin—full of ripening tomatoes, watermelon, and cucumbers. We had our own supply of drugs and explosives, but we lacked a reliable food source. Coalition forces, presumably the Army or Marine Corps, had dropped our resupply in the wrong location a few days before. The compound was more like a compound within a compound. There were a few layers between the outside world and the center.

The house sat on the edge of a grid-like farm area much like the rest of the prominent real estate of the neighboring villages. The walls were a light-colored mud and straw composite so thick that even rockets had a difficult time penetrating. Oddly enough, the roof was made of several strata of straw mats on wooden beams parallel to the ground. It was an uneasy thing to setup a sandbag and machinegun post on top of it. There was a cooking area with a stone oven and dry storage, where the interpreters made naan bread to go with the goat or chicken and rice meal we had once. There was a large, covered chicken coup with several chambers. The garden was outside this interior compound that housed the bedrooms, cooking area, chicken coup, and goat stall. There were goat paths alongside a single outside wall that led to the 90-degree angle formed by two tree lines and a wadi. On the opposite side, a wide open field of corn and a single dirt road skirted by a stream led to the village market.

There was another chamber in this second layer alongside the garden that didn't house anything in particular, and this is where we had to dig and dig and dig with small shovels to make a bathroom. Even when we finally had some makeshift stalls and barrels with bags for the waste, we still had to burn our own human waste. The smell lingered everywhere and with everything.

On our way out on patrols, Marines would occasionally stoop and pluck a fresh cucumber. I did this once and took a big bite right out of the edge. The watery juice ran down my beard and muddy elbow. It finally overpowered the burning feces and smelled like fresh produce from a farmer's market back in southern California. I could have died happy right there in a mortar attack or something. I shoved my wet hand back into my dusty glove and walked about twelve kilometers that day. My shoulders and legs didn't hurt so bad, and Daniel Avalos and I built a shower a couple of days later. The shower, about a month overdue, wasn't nearly as good as the cucumber.

We operated on shifts shared among the platoon's three squads. One squad had to stand around the patrol base, one had to go out for long patrol up to fourteen kilometers away, and one squad stayed in the innermost chamber of the compound as a "quick reaction force," or QRF. That QRF squad was also supposed to sleep because the shifts rotated indefinitely, and that would be their only chance to rest. In other words, there was no bedtime; operations were continuous, and eating and maintenance was concurrent.

The house had four rooms with curtains for doors, but the two hallways intersected and were open to the outside breeze. Once, I was resting while my squad was on a QRF shift, but the sun was high overhead. I decided against the broil and opted to go inside to bake. I established a little sliver in the breezy hallway as my bed, covered my face to block out the flies and stench, pulled my pants down to my ankles, and tried to sleep. I noticed movement through the fabric of my tan shemagh, and pulled back the veil.

I saw a group of Marines huddled around one person carrying something outside. They were snickering a little and mumbling to each other. The Marine in the center, called Crum, had something in his hands. I tried to lie back down, but my boyish curiosity got the best of me. I decided to go join in the entertainment just as someone came trotting back to the group with a small cup and a shiny metal urn. I could smell the fuel in the cup. Several of the guys chuckled at the new development.

Crum fumbled the mouse he was holding but didn't take long to recover his prey. He dropped it into the urn, and the mouse ran round and round, scratching and clawing. I was the only one not laughing, but I felt a little numb inside. I was

recovering from a bad illness that had given me a fever of about 104. I stood there watching over someone's shoulder as Crum pitched the urn side to side and jabbed at the mouse inside with his K-Bar knife. "Do it, do it," he said, not looking up. A corner of his mouth stretched towards his ear, and sweat dripped down his nose.

It seemed like the hand holding the cup of fuel didn't have an owner in the mangle of bodies. The hand doused the mouse in fuel, and Crum popped a match into the urn. Bright orange flames pierced the edge of the rim and reflected off the metal. From my stance about a meter away, I could hear the tiny squeaks and the sound of claws on metal. "That's fucked up," someone said through strained laughter. The whole group was laughing and taking turns tapping the urn. I stood there in my flip flops and tan camouflage pants, crusty lips parted, brow tense. I felt my stomach turn a little as someone tapped the urn with their boot and the charred mouse rolled out onto the dirt.

Crum knelt down and sawed at the mouse's neck, but the tail end kept flipping over. Someone knelt down beside him and pressed their bayonet against the body while Crum sawed the head off. It didn't take long, but I felt like I had been standing there for longer, silent. After he painted a rodent blood piece on the ground, Crum impaled the mouse head with the tip of his knife and held it up in front of his face. He spotted me on the other side of the mouse head and stood up to face me. His lips curled back across his jagged teeth, and he extended the mouse head towards me. I glanced at his tattooed, shirtless, lanky body and at his outstretched arm. I looked anywhere but the mouse's head, and said, "God, man."

He chuckled to himself as I turned away to lie back down in the hallway. I smelled burning feces and body odor, and I tasted my own sweat. I tried to go back to sleep, but I kept thinking about a boy someone had shot in the head a few days earlier and the mouse head on the tip of Crum's knife. Night came before I was ready. I took my post anyway. I passed the garden on my way out. But I wasn't in the mood for fresh vegetables. All the good stuff, the ripe fruit, had been yanked out anyway.

JONATHAN BURGESS served in 1st Battalion 5th Marines as a team leader on the 11th MEU (SOC) in 2007 and as a part of Operation Khanjar in Helmand Province, Afghanistan in 2009. He earned a BA in English Language and Literature and currently studies creative

nonfiction writing in Converse College's MFA program. His work has appeared in *O Dark Thirty*, *Blood & Thunder*, and *Catholic Exchange*. He lives in upstate South Carolina with his wife and four children.