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**Field Manual**

**FM 7-8**

This copy is a reprint, which includes  
current Pages from Change 1.

**INFANTRY RIFLE PLATOON AND SQUAD**

**HEADQUARTERS  
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY**

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**BATTLE DRILL 6. ENTER BUILDING/CLEAR ROOM**

**SITUATION:** Operating as part of a larger force, the squad is moving and identifies an enemy force in a building.

**REQUIRED ACTIONS:** (Figures 4-9 and 4-10.)

**NOTE:** The discussion that follows assumes that the infantry squad is supported only by the platoon's organic weapons. The preferred method of entering a building is to use a tank main gun round; direct-fire artillery round; or TOW, Dragon, or Hellfire missile to clear the first room. Additionally, some MOUT situations may require precise application of firepower. This is true of a MOUT environment where the enemy is mixed with noncombatants. The presence of civilians can restrict the use of fires and reduce the combat power available to a platoon leader. His platoon may have to operate with "no fire" areas. Rules of engagement (ROE) can prohibit the use of certain weapons until a specific hostile action takes place. The use of hand grenades and suppressive fire to enter rooms may be prohibited to preclude noncombatant casualties and collateral damage. All leaders must be aware of the ROE. They must include the precise use of weapons in their planning for MOUT missions. This includes how the platoon will employ its organic weapons including snipers and other weapon systems it may have in support; for example, AC 130 or AH 64 aircraft. They must coordinate the use of marking systems to prevent casualties due to friendly fire. FM 90-10 and FM 90-10-1 provide additional techniques for platoons and squads in MOUT.

***1. The fire team initiating contact establishes a base of fire and suppresses the enemy in and around the building.***

You're traveling north on MSR Tampa when a roadside bomb strikes your convoy, peppering the last Humvee with shrapnel. None of the six vehicles is immobilized. Usually, your platoon blows through similar attacks, so you think you'll still make it back to base in time for hot chow: thick, greasy patty melts on buttered Texas toast. Best meal in the rotation. This time, though, Lieutenant Jennings orders all the vehicles to stop on the highway, as if taking the attack personal.

Find the triggerman, the LT says over the radio.

You realize the unlikelihood but follow his command. You order your driver to turn into the neighborhood east of the highway. The same one you found yourself trapped in last week, when your small kill team was pinned down on a rooftop. You think about Santos. How before Iraq, the two of you were drunk and fought over a free strip club T-shirt—“liquor in the front, poker in the rear.” How a week ago, the two of you, plus Staff Sgt. Watkins and Cpl. Spencer, had fought off dozens of gunmen after your position was compromised. How the QRF didn’t respond quickly enough, and with no rounds left and Santos dead, and Watkins radioing for help, and Spencer plugging the stairwell with bodies, you had curled into the fetal position and cried.

You fiddle with the rifle in between your legs—*Safe, Semi, Safe, Semi, Safe, Burst.*

Pfc. Baker steers your Humvee onto a street of blocky, dust-colored homes.

“Hajj, ten o’clock,” says Spc. Adams, manning the turret.

One block up, you catch a glimpse of several military-aged males running around the corner. You yell at Baker to keep driving. He guns the vehicle forward, but pauses at the intersection.

“The fuck you stopping for? Go.”

The truck turns left and creeps down the empty road. The houses are protected by outer walls, their metal gates shut. You glance into the rearview mirror and confirm that Sergeant Watkins is covering your six. The other Humvees push past his and follow your lead.

You scan the streets, your head snapping at the sudden sight of movement in your periphery. On the roof of a house, white linens blow in the wind. You take a deep breath. Remember running through the mango-scented sheets your mom hung on the clothesline? As you grew older, you became embarrassed she didn’t use a dryer like everyone else’s mom.

“I see ‘em, sar’nt,” Adams says. “Up ahead.”

Your turn back to the direction of travel. A man peeks around the wall, then quickly ducks back behind cover. Seconds later, the muzzle of a rifle juts out and sprays bullets in your

direction. You flinch, but quickly remember you're behind three-inch thick, bulletproof windows. Pussy.

"Three enemy," you confirm over the radio.

Adams lets the Fifty loose. *Thud-thud-thud. Thud-thud-thud. Thud-thud-thud.* Your truck is rocking back and forth from the recoil of the Ma Deuce, an 84-pound beast of a gun with an intimidating 45-inch-long barrel. Its .50-caliber rounds bloom into dust flowers as they smack the wall.

"Hell yeah, that's what's up," Baker says, like this is Hollywood. "Get some."

You order him to push ahead. He zips the truck to the end of the block. You're breathing as fast as your heart is beating. Across the street, on the corner lot, you see a two-story home surrounded by a large wall pockmarked from bullets and shrapnel. The black, metal gate is closed but still wobbling. You radio this intel to Sergeant Watkins and await the next move.

***2. The squad leader determines that he can maneuver by identifying—***

***a. The building and any obstacles.***

***b. The size of the enemy force engaging the squad.***

***c. An entry point. (Assaulting fire teams should enter the building at the highest level possible.)***

***d. A covered and concealed route to the entry point.***

Over the net, you hear Sergeant Watkins order Lawson's team to dismount and maneuver to you. You know you're going in. You're not sure you want to. Remember when you lost your virginity days before your 14th birthday? You had jogged a few blocks to the girl's house. She snuck you in through her bedroom window. Your prick was swollen, throbbing, ready. You thought you'd feel like a man, but you walked away minutes later, embarrassed and ashamed.

***3. The fire team in contact—***

***a. Destroys or suppresses enemy crew-served weapons first.***

***b. Obscures the enemy position with smoke (M203).***

***c. Sustains suppressive fires.***

You step out and brief Sergeant Lawson, telling him you think the shooters ran inside the

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compound. He calls over his SAW gunner and points with poise at a second-floor window on the house's west side. Spc. Arellano plants the bipod legs of his M249 SAW on the front hood, the automatic weapon now locked on the objective.

***4. The squad leader directs the fire team in contact to support the entry of the other fire team into the building.***

Sergeant Watkins fetches your assault team: Johnson, Gray, and Jimenez. A second group led by Spencer, now a sergeant, will back you up. Sergeant Watkins reminds Lawson to provide suppressive fire. He sticks his tongue out and gives a thumbs up. Everybody huddles behind your truck for cover, waiting for the green to go from the Lieutenant.

***5. If necessary, the supporting fire team repositions to isolate the building as well as continue suppressive fires. [...]***

You order Adams to protect the left flank—in case a car bomb tries to attack. The heavy machine gun atop your truck has more stopping power than the rest of the platoon's arsenal. He spins the turret away from the house, aiming the .50-cal toward the intersection and down another road leading in from the highway. The other gun trucks are evenly spread down the street, blocking off the remaining points of entry.

You suddenly feel trapped. Like you did when you were stuck on that rooftop. Sometimes, you play back the ambush in your head, the video looping, the outcome always the same:

It had started with the slamming of a car door. You peeked over the rooftop running wall and noticed a gang of men below trading AKs and RPGs. You quickly crouched back down, thinking they knew your vicinity but maybe not your exact location. While Sergeant Watkins was radioing battalion, a blast smacked the brick wall to your back. By the time the ringing in your ears had stopped, fuzzy silhouettes of gunmen were pushing up the stairwell and spilling onto the rooftop. The sharp snap of rounds zipped by. You fired back, watching as they tripped over the steps then themselves, but quickly ran out of ammo. You couldn't hear yourself think; only the shrill shrieks and the sputter of gunfire as another wave of men came crashing toward

you. The pop of rifle fire had been ceaseless—seemingly from all sides, homing in, louder, closer. Santos was propped up on a knee, ready to lob a grenade, when he was hit. You dove away and onto the floor, and curled into yourself. The blast from his grenade trembled up your spine. Chips of concrete rained down. You could hear Spencer yelling for you, Sergeant Watkins for the QRF, the jihadis for their cause. You pressed down on your ears and squeezed your eyes shut, hoping to quiet the echoes of fighting ricocheting inside your head.

***6. The squad leader designates the entry point of the building. [...]***

Lt. Jennings finally gives the OK.

Sergeant Watkins, a real by the books guy, points at the black gate. “Point of entry.”

No shit. You’re not climbing that wall. You’re weighed down with at least 50 pounds of gear, including an IBA vest strapped down with seven 30-round magazines, two frag grenades, an MBITR radio, one Camelback half-drained of water, and a first aid kit; two tourniquets are already pre-strapped above your thighs—just in case.

“Everybody ready?” Sergeant Watkins says.

A few years ago, you and your mom were in the recruiting office staring at a short block-build of a man. You had been on the verge of dropping out. Your recruiter—a fellow immigrant, though a Salvadoran—had encouraged you to get your diploma, then ship off to basic training. Your mom felt better but not completely at ease. He promised her you’ll be more focused, more disciplined—a *real* American. She cried. You were frightened. You both signed the papers. *So help me God.*

***7. The squad leader and the assaulting fire team approach the building and position themselves at either side of the entrance. (Soldiers should avoid entering buildings through doors and windows, because they will normally be covered by enemy weapons inside the building.)***

Spc. Arellano opens up with the SAW, a sick little belt-fed weapon that can spit out 200 rounds per minute at a rapid rate of fire.

*Brrrap. Brrrap. Brrrap.*

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You pop a smoke grenade and chuck it into the street. Purple fog blows in all directions as it climbs toward the twisted utility lines above. You hope the haze will mask the doubt that must be on your face.

You dart across the road, cutting through the smoke screen, its odor like the singe of a recently struck match, and crash into the outer wall. Johnson, Gray, and Jimenez follow like ducklings and line up behind you. Goddamn, it's hot. Your balls feel like silly putty stuck to your thighs.

You signal the others.

Spencer's team, with Sergeant Watkins bringing up the rear, crosses the street, their weapons shouldered high. You lean against the wall, eyes on the gate. The concrete barrier protects not only those inside, but you too. As long as you remain here. But you won't.

A hand claps your shoulder, signaling that both teams are stacked up behind you now. You wave the last man forward.

Spencer steps up, a battering ram in hand.

You stuff dirty foam plugs into your ears and muffle the noise of the outside world. Listen to your breathing—a soothing sound, like a baby in the womb.

***8. Allowing cook-off time (two seconds maximum), and shouting FRAG OUT, the lead soldier of the assaulting fire team prepares and throws a grenade into the building.***

You grab a grenade from your vest, and twist and tug the ring until the safety pin is out. *One*, you signal with the trigger finger of your left hand. Your other hand, the one holding the explosive metal plum, is shaking. *Two*. You look up at Spencer and notice a boyish grin on his face. *Three*. Spencer crashes the battering ram through the metal door and shatters the silence. You release your thumb from the grenade and watch the spoon fly off from the spring action.

<b>DANGER</b> _____ <b>If walls and floors are thin, they do not provide protection from hand grenade fragments.</b>
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Two seconds maximum, the Field Manual recommends, but you only trust one. You reach around the entrance, toss the grenade inside the compound, and shout, “Frag out.”

Hear the bang, feel the thud.

Flip the selector lever on your M4 from *Safe* to *Semi*.

This is it.

**9. After the explosion, the next soldier enters the building and positions himself to the right (left) of the entrance, up against the wall, engages all identified or likely enemy positions with rapid, short bursts of automatic fire, and scans the room. [...]**

You maneuver through the courtyard, scanning the area with your rifle. Seeing no enemy movement, you rush to the front door of the house. Your team quickly stacks up in the same order for the same drill.

You radio for Lawson to lift fire. The SAW soon goes silent.

OK, *this* is it.

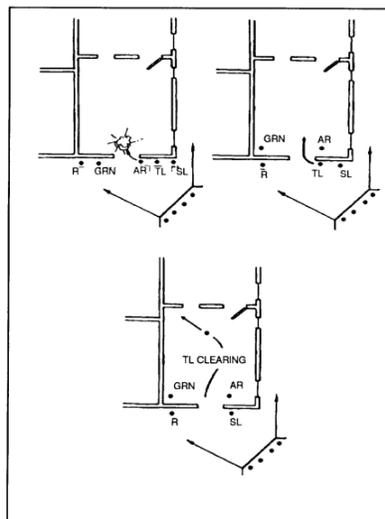


Figure 4-9. Enter a building (squad).

In basic training, you had practiced this exact drill—well, not exact, but close. You had stumbled into the room and found no enemy inside, just a cardboard cutout of a blond woman pointing a pen at you. “Good job, private,” the drill sergeant had said when you failed to fire your weapon. Easy not to shoot when you know someone won’t be shooting back.

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***10. The assaulting fire team leader shouts COMING IN (RIGHT or LEFT), enters the building initially moving left or right and against the wall, and positions himself where he can control the actions of his team.***

Step 10 calls for you to be last in the chute. Again, you're the first. Lead from the front. Spencer slams the battering ram against the front door. You slice through the shadow, your weapon raised at the ready. Your eyes are drawn immediately to a door to your left, but you pivot right, sticking to the battle drill, and follow the rifle barrel to the near corner. No threat there.

**DANGER**

**While clearing rooms, soldiers must be alert for trip wires and booby traps. They should not expose themselves through open windows or doors.**

Though you trust that the last man through the fatal funnel has eyes on that door you just ignored, you still imagine somebody jumping out of it with an AK and shooting you in the back. You try to ignore the unknown, and rotate left and push forward, sliding down alongside the wall. With no sign of danger ahead, you stop halfway up the room and finally look to your left. The door's still shut. Behind you, Johnson is standing in place, swinging his rifle left and right like a goddamn sprinkler, just waiting.

***11. Once the room is cleared, the team leader signals to the squad leader that the room is cleared.***

All seems quiet. "First room, clear," you report over the radio. You bend over and place your hands just above your knees and suck in deeply. Your team did as trained. You're relieved—for a moment. You have to continue clearing the entire house. Room after fucking room, each door a new threat, not an opportunity.

***12. The squad leader enters the building and marks the entry point in accordance with SOP. The squad leader determines whether or not his squad can continue to clear rooms and still maintain suppressive fires outside the building. Normally, it takes a platoon to clear a building.***

Sergeant Watkins strolls into the room twirling a pair of un-cracked chem lights tied to five-fifty cord. He takes a quick look around, then radios for Bravo Team.

**13. The squad leader and assault fire team move to the entrance of the next room to be cleared and position themselves on either side of the entrance. [...]**

Spencer's team rushes inside. Sergeant Watkins points to the door ahead. It's Bravo's turn. They line up next to the door. You take the battering ram and stand on the other side of the jamb. On cue, you bust the door off its hinges. Bravo charges ahead. Through your earplugs, you hear several quick rounds, one after another, like the sound of a woodpecker tapping at a telephone pole. Spencer yells, "Alpha."

You drop the battering ram and shout, "Friendlies coming in."

**14. The squad leader directs the team to continue and clear the next room. The squad leader rotates fire teams as necessary to keep the soldiers fresh, to equitably distribute the dangerous duties, and to continue the momentum of the attack.**

You step into the room and find a man sprawled out on the floor. He's twitching in a pool of blood, an AK nearby. You look up, notice Spencer waving at you. With his rifle trained on one door, he flashes a finger and points at a second one. Don't wait for the battering ram this time; kick it open. He does the same.

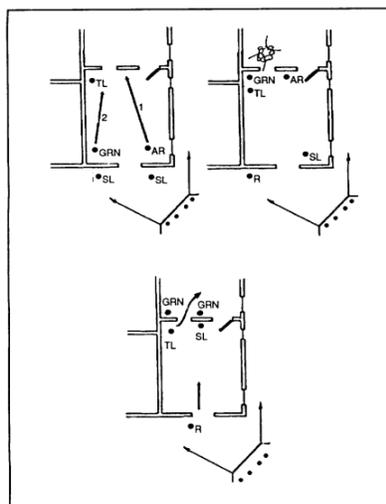


Figure 4-10. Clear a building (squad).

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***15. The squad leader follows the fire team that is clearing to ensure that cleared rooms are properly marked in accordance with SOP.***

A man stands in the open, his hands in the air, an AK at his feet. He's shivering, full of fear, as you had been on that rooftop—as you are now. You center the barrel of your rifle on his chest, tracing its rise and fall, each breath quicker than the last. You're in sync—two sides of one equation. He screams in Arabic, the same loud, fanatical sound from those who ambushed you.

You jab your rifle at him, as if this were bayonet drills. “Shut the fuck up!”

He steps back, trips over the AK, and falls to the floor.

Someone grabs you by the shoulder. You jerk your head back and notice Sergeant Watkins standing behind you. “Gonzalez,” he says, “lower your rifle.”

You're short of breath and your vision is blurry. You feel like you do just before a fistfight, when you find that you can't express yourself any other way than like a child shouting and sobbing. You tighten the grip on your M4. “This fucking fucker. He deserves—”

“It's done, sergeant. We'll haul his ass back, and let the MPs handle him.”

The Field Manual defines a battle drill as a “collective action rapidly executed without applying a deliberate decision-making process.” As if letting you off the hook for actions that you have little, if any, control over. You know better. You weren't stupid enough to promise that you'd bring Santos home, but you still feel responsible, inadequate.

You wipe your eyes, then stare into the Iraqi's. As if anticipating what you've decided, he flinches. You squeeze the trigger. The earplugs soften the shot. Sounds like popping bubble wrap. You don't feel any relief. You squeeze, again and again, the recoil of the rifle digging into the pocket of your shoulder.

***16. The squad leader assesses the situation to determine if he can continue clearing the building. He reports the situation to the platoon leader. The platoon follows the success of the entry into the building.***

Sergeant Watkins is looking at you, his face stern, his brows scrunched. He stuffs a pinch of tobacco behind his lower lip. “What the fuck?”

You glance at the empty eyes of the man you just killed and worry some MP will strip you of your stripes and the American flag, and send you back home in disgrace. Your high school principal had warned you that you were headed for jail unless you straightened up. You had dismissed her as racist, later hated her for being right.

“He was reaching,” you say.

“The fuck he was.”

Sergeant Watkins walks to a window and stares out of it, as if trying to figure out what comes next. He leans over and spits out a thick glob of brown juice onto the floor, then smashes the window with his rifle. He pulls out another pair of chem lights from his pocket and snaps the plastic tubes. As he swings them from a string, they start to glow—like two large vials filled with the blood of lightning bugs. He hangs the chem lights over the busted window, marking the room as cleared, then turns around.

“What are you jokers still standing around for?” he says. “Somebody find some intel.”

The rest of the squad clears the second floor and ransacks the house. They find nothing else of use.

You look down at the dead man at your feet. His hand is half-open, the palm facing up, as if begging. His face looks young—younger than you initially thought. No more than eighteen or nineteen. You suddenly doubt that he’s one of the guys you saw in the street. There were three, right? Where’s the third? You’ve put the whole squad at risk. You crouch and reach down, as if you want to shake the man from his sleep and get some answers.

“No helping this fucker now,” Spencer says.

You stand up and step back from the body. Spencer’s right. Fuck him. You don’t want his blood on your hands.

***17. The squad consolidates its position in the building and then reorganizes as necessary. [...]***

Everybody regroups in the first room—the room you entered only thirty minutes ago. Sergeant Watkins debriefs the squad on the particulars, then leans down into the hand mic hanging from his vest. He reports two enemy KIA.

Together, the squad walks back to the Humvees.

Sergeant Watkins pulls you aside. “Don’t worry about this,” he says, and pats you on the shoulder. “Almost everything was by the book.” He then smacks the back of your helmet. “But don’t you *ever* fucking disregard my order again. Roger?”

“Roger.”

As you approach your truck, you lift your head and see Adams grinning up in the turret. “Fuck yeah, sar’nt,” he says. “You get some?”

You nod, then crack a smile. “You know it.”

You thumb the rotator switch on your rifle back to *Safe*, then drop your eyes, along with your smile, and step back into the up-armored Humvee. The mission is over, but the guilt lingers. You wonder if it will ever leave your system, if everybody else will go along with the story—if you will. Nobody tells you what to do in the aftermath; there are no field manuals for that. As if all your actions during this deployment will be neatly concluded, and you don’t have to think about them, the rest of your life is left off the page.

**POST-DEPLOYMENT****Health Assessment**

**Principal Purpose:** To assess your state of health after deployment outside the United States in support of military operations and to assist military healthcare providers in identifying and providing present and future medical care to you.

**Routine Use:** To other Federal and State agencies and civilian healthcare providers, as necessary, in order to provide necessary medical care and treatment.

**Disclosure:** (Military personnel and DoD civil Employees Only) care may not be possible.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please read each question completely and carefully before marking your selections. Provide a response for each question. If you do not understand the question, ask the administrator.

We're sitting in a small room cluttered with rows of desk chairs. One week left in country, but for all intents and purposes, our tour is *finished*. A medical officer walks in and greets our platoon before explaining the questions in front of us. I don't listen. Wanting to go back to my bunk and finish packing, I hurry up and start filling out the answers.

**1. Did your health change during this deployment?**

I look up at Lawson. He pretends to stroke himself. I laugh and check no. Guess my health stayed about the same. Maybe because I've lived what feels like the same day over and over, so any changes aren't as obvious to me as they will be to others back home.

**2. How many times were you seen in sick call during this deployment?**

Zero. There are no days off here.

**3. Did you have to spend one or more nights in a hospital as a patient during this deployment?**

Weren't they keeping record? No.

**4. Did you receive any vaccinations just before or during this deployment?**

A couple of anthrax shots, but my medical records show I didn't get the required dosage. Too late now. I check yes.

**5. Did you take any of the following medications during this deployment? (mark all that apply).**

I check Dexedrine (though to stay awake, I also chugged a shit ton of energy drinks, i.e.

Monsters, Rip-Its, and Red Bulls). They don't ask why. Hard to stay alive when you're asleep, I'd say sarcastically, thinking I'm fucking smart. But the deeper truth, the shame I don't want to reveal, is that it's hard to avoid the dream.

Santos and I are tugging at the ends of the strip club T-shirt. Blood drips from it. But instead of the barracks, we're in my backyard. I don't know why. We didn't grow up together. My mom shouts for us to stop and come in for dinner. Santos releases his grip and walks away. I scream at him to come back, to take the shirt, but he keeps ignoring me, never turning around. I wonder if he's smiling, or if he's laughing at me.

**6. Do you have any of these symptoms now or did you develop them anytime during this deployment?**

Runny nose, weakness, headache, muscle aches, swollen, stiff or painful joints, numbness or tingling in hands or feet, redness of eyes with tearing, still feeling tired after sleeping. These symptoms seem natural, not that anybody would admit to them. I check none of them.

**7. Did you see anyone wounded, killed or dead during this deployment? (mark all that apply).**

Yes-coalition. Yes-enemy. Yes-civilian. Though the distinction no longer seems clear. One moment, I'm looking at that kid screaming, just wishing I could understand what the hell he was saying. Then I blink and see Santos instead. I don't know what that means. But this question is worded very passively, as if freeing me from any responsibility.

**8. Were you engaged in direct combat where you discharged your weapon?**

This question, however, places the action squarely on me. I answer yes. And they sure as hell weren't stupid cardboard cutouts. Or green, plastic silhouettes on the range that have been shot hundreds of times, light spilling through their punctures, as if secrets tempting you through keyholes, whispering, *Come on, it's OK, many before you have entered.*

**9. During this deployment, did you ever feel that you were in great danger of being killed?**

Before deploying, I had fantasized about being shot, imagined bragging about it like a badge of honor, while my friends back home begged to see the scars. Guess I've always been melodramatic that way. Of course, back then I didn't really expect to die. But when I was on that rooftop begging for God's mercy, I realized for the first time that I just might. After that, my death felt no longer like a question of if, but when. Check yes.

***10. Are you currently interested in receiving help for a stress, emotional, alcohol, or family problem?***

Rumor is that checking yes will result in a separate one-on-one interview, and this goddamn assessment is already exhausting. I want out of this room now, wish to be back home at a bar. I check no.

***11. Over the LAST 2 WEEKS, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?***

For the same reason as above, I mark none for the following: little interest or pleasure in doing things; feeling down, depressed, or hopeless; thoughts that you would be better off dead or hurting yourself in some way. These seem like important questions to ask someone *before* sending them off to combat. Here, in Iraq? Of course, you have little interest or pleasure in doing things.

***12. Have you ever had any experience that was so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that, IN THE PAST MONTH, you ...***

Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled—no. Were feeling numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings— no. Were having nightmares or thoughts about your experiences when you didn't want to— no. Were trying hard not to think about it or going out of your way to avoid situations that remind you of it— no. Goddamn it. *No.*

What, I would've just strolled up to Sergeant Watkins and told him I didn't want to go on patrol because it reminds me of—Wait, how could you *not* be on guard here? This fucking questionnaire. I want to rip it up and throw it in the trash can and tell the pogue administering it, *Fuck you, this is what I signed up for, why are you bothering me now?*

***13. Are you having thoughts or concerns that ...***

You might hurt or lose control with someone— no; you may have serious conflicts with your spouse, family members, or close friends— no. I no longer have a girlfriend, and my family lives halfway across the country, in Dallas. The same goes for my friends. Close? I didn't feel that close to them when I visited during mid-tour leave. I'm no longer that young punk smoking weed and hoping a girl would do more than just go down on me. My priorities had shifted.

I not only was promoted to sergeant, but I'd also passed the citizenship test. The Army

had flown me to Baghdad to be sworn in. I strolled through the deteriorating glamour that was Saddam's Al-Faw Palace, looking up at the mosaic ceiling messily painted in pastel colors, the glitzy chandeliers in the hallway not quite lined up. I had raised my hand for a second time, thinking I was finally making it in the world, and that I had earned it. However, that moment of promise was rooted in Iraq, and the hope I had when I became an American soldier now feels more like a burden. I'm ashamed thinking about renouncing the things I had once felt most proud of. Yet, in a way, I've already abandoned my friends, my family, my home.

***14. While you were deployed, were you exposed to: (mark all that apply)***

Smoke from oil fire, vehicle or truck exhaust fumes, smoke from burning trash or feces, fog oils (smoke screen), loud noise, excessive vibration, sand/dust. *Sand/dust?* Do they even look at these stupid questions? Just to be smart, I don't mark any.

***15. On how many days did you wear your MOPP over garments?***

Finally, a simple question. And a simple answer: zero. I never unpacked the gear from my D-bag. Nobody did.

***16. How many times did you put on your gas mask because of alerts and NOT because of exercises?***

Why another one of these WMD questions? Thought that shit had been settled. Of course, we did strap on our gas masks the first week in Kuwait, when our squad went on a short run. Lawson thought it'd be funny. He puked and nearly passed out. He was always willing to try some stupid shit. We hadn't used them since. I mark once.

***17. Were you in or did you enter or closely inspect any destroyed military vehicles?***

I check yes. We had a few months left in our deployment. This had been after mechanics welded jerry-rigged steel plates to our Humvees. After Santos. After indifference began to settle in many of the platoon's soldiers. I had felt comfortable in a truck, wished to finish out the rest of the tour fortified inside mine. Then one day, Sergeant Watkins ordered me back on the small kill team.

Two hundred meters from the OP, Spencer and I dismounted from our Humvee and linked up with the others. Together, we marched off the road and into the pre-dawn desert, as we had done before. From a rooftop, we observed an intersection known for IEDs, watching as the

platoon drove up and down the MSR in hopes of enticing some idiots to plant a bomb. They succeeded, the idiots. Out of our field of fire, of course, but within line of sight of an Iraqi Police checkpoint.

I heard the blast off in the distance, saw a black cloud pluming beyond the horizon.

Sergeant Watkins' voice crackled over the radio: "Six-five down."

The radio went silent. My stomach dropped.

I bummed a Marlboro Red from Lawson, my first in months, and took one long drag after another as I cycled through the possibilities in my head. Then, realizing that with one of our trucks down, there was no QRF, I yelled for 100-percent security, a man on each corner of the roof.

Watkins' hurried voice came back on the radio: "All crew OK."

I should've been relieved, but I kept running back-and-forth, checking on my men.

"Relax," Spencer said. "There's a bird watching us."

I looked up, verified the silhouette of a Kiowa circling above our position, its dark rotor blades cutting through the bright sky.

Half an hour later, a sister platoon finally picked us up. We provided security while an engineer crew loaded the immobilized Humvee onto a flatbed.

During the debriefing back at base, Lawson kept shaking his head. He turned to Sergeant Watkins and said, "Shit, for a few minutes, I thought you were just another name on a bracelet."

Sergeant Watkins pointed at Spencer and me. "You should see where those two jokers were sitting."

I quietly laughed and looked away, swiping my thumb across Santos' KIA bracelet on my wrist, feeling around for the details of his death, forever etched into the metal clasp as they were in my mind. Later, I walked to the motor pool and inspected what used to be my truck—tons of steel reduced to burnt scrap metal. I crawled atop the mangled frame and rummaged through the debris until I came across a gaping hole, its sharp edges peeled back where two rear seats should've been—where Spencer and I had been only hours before. I felt suddenly exposed. Maybe it was fate, maybe dumb luck. Still, I groveled and thanked God for watching over me again, though I didn't understand why me, and wondered if I ever would.

***18. Do you think you were exposed to any chemical, biological, or radiological warfare agents during this deployment?***

I answer no. Thinking it's finally over, I start to feel some relief. But then I go back and wonder why the previous question was slipped in between No. 16 and this one. Wait, what are *they* not telling us?

Dismissed.

**Ramiro Hinojosa** is a veteran of the Iraq War. He holds an MFA from Texas State University and recently received an NEA-funded fellowship for veterans to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. His stories have appeared in *Salamander* and *Huizache*.