

Diary of a Desert Storm

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(Photos by the author)

“Un-fucking-believable!” Seventy-two hours ago I was sleeping in my own bed, in my own home, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and now I was preparing to sleep in a hole in the sand. I threw my shovel down and walked a few steps into the desert and continued my rampage. “Line in the sand my ass! I don’t get paid enough for this shit.”

I looked back waiting for a response, a reinforcing statement, anything that would give me more of a reason to bitch, but got none. The fellow who was helping me dig the foxhole was waist deep in it, whistling, and chopping relentlessly at the hard shoal and clay with a pick axe.

The sun, the dirt, the flies, oh God-the flies; they were incessant. Now I knew why those little African kids on the discovery channel didn’t wipe them off the corners of their eyes: it was pointless. I moved; the flies followed. I shoed them; they came back. I ignored them; they conquered me.

The flies beside my eyes.

At least the guy who shared my foxhole was interesting. Rod had transferred from Europe to our unit just two weeks before we were deployed. I thought he was an unlucky bastard but he didn’t seem to mind. He was an intelligent, articulate man who was fond of abstract philosophical debates, particularly aesthetics. He told me that he was an artist and his genre was the female form in charcoal. He had sold some of his drawings at art shows and spoke of writing a book on the aesthetics of charcoal. But here, his artistic talent had been reduced to dull pencils. Rod drew on cardboard boxes or whatever else he could find, and his little sketches appeared everywhere.

While taking a break from our labors, I offered him a smoke. He rejected it with a wave of his hand saying, “tobacco is a foul weed that steals your freedom.”

I agreed while fumbling with my lighter. “So you’ve never smoked?”

“No, I believe the highest form of worship is to become more than that which you are. So I don’t do anything that could make me less than what I am. That’s why I read philosophy and draw. These things allow me to expand my mind, to become more,” Rod explained.

He had made sergeant in less than two years, mostly due to his college education. It had taken me almost four. I had to admit, though, Rod did not seem like a paratrooper, and he sure didn’t belong here, in this place. I was a high school drop out that drank too much and he, judging from what he had told me so far, just joined the army for the college fund it was offering. He was

only nine hours short of a Bachelor of Arts degree and was planning on getting out of the army and continuing his education. He was the smartest guy I ever met.

Late in the evening of our first day, after the fighting position was completed, we sat on sand bags and ate our first meal. The military called them Meals Ready to Eat or MRE's; we called them "Meals Rejected by Ethiopians." Mine was ham and chicken loaf, Rod's was beans and franks. I tried desperately to trade the entrées while he laughed and told me that once, he had given his dog the ham and chicken loaf and the dog turned up his nose and walked away.

In the quickening twilight Rod talked of his past. He was a male model in Europe as a part time gig and said that he had a portfolio and some possible leads for modeling jobs after he was done playing soldier. He was a handsome man in a Nordic kind of way: cold blue eyes, high cheek bones, blonde hair, and a lean physique. He was far more personable than what I first thought.

"Hey man, guess how many flies are on your face?" I asked. There were at least a dozen.

Rod ignored my question and walked a few steps into the desert and spoke reverently. "I've always wondered why the people like Moses and Jesus and such went out into the desert. Now I know. The desert clears your mind; it subtracts all that isn't necessary and leaves you freer. This place is beautiful."

"Tell me that in a few weeks ace," I said uninterested, "this place sucks."

"Maybe, maybe not," Rod said. "You know, you should read more books. I have one titled *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Victor Frankl. He spent four years in the concentration camps during World War Two. He says that we are free to choose how we will bear our burdens, whether we will suffer miserably or proudly and that there is always someone watching and, He would not expect us to suffer miserably."

The desert was taking on a chill quickly. I pulled my poncho liner around me and told him that he had first watch.

"Cool," he said and began a quiet whistle.

The sun rises: the sun sets. Everyday is the same nothing, the same waiting, the same thinking, fighting the same flies.

The flies behind my eyes.

Our conversations have been reduced to matter-of-fact statements. The last real conversation we had was about how many days we've been here, and I don't recall how long ago that was. Rod and I just sat and stared into the vast expanse of emptiness that was the desert. One can only daydream for so long, then everything seems pointless and you have to take a long look into yourself and hope you can live with what you see.

The sun rose on the forsaken nothingness. God forsaken! That's what this place is: empty, barren, lifeless and uninhabitable. A sea of sand and clay, devoid of color, of life, of beauty. I could look for miles in all directions and see the same thing, nothing. The great nothingness...



"There are going to be a lot of changed people when they get back home," Rod quietly said to no one.

His words split the thundering silence and spoke volumes to my soul. Home, ya, we'll be home soon.

I surveyed the horizon with laser optics, and the sun glinted off something in the shimmering distance. A building? There is none depicted on the map. But yet it is, here in the middle of nowhere. *Why?* I will go there someday soon.

Heat waves danced as I approached the structure. It was a mosque, a holy place. This place, however, didn't look very holy: it appeared as if no one had been there in years. There wasn't a road for miles. *Maybe Allah will be at home.* I walked through the arched opening.

He wasn't.

A wind worn, old circular mosque built of stone for a God who doesn't

even live here. My footsteps echoed mournfully in the emptiness. Through the solitary window with no glass, I gazed upon the barren desert and felt as if it were gazing into me. Nothing looked upon from the other side is still nothing. Above the window, on the domed ceiling, was an inscription in Arabic. I wonder what it said? Probably the Arabic words for nothing. I copied them down anyway. As an afterthought, I loaded the location into my global positioning system as waypoint one. No one would damage a mosque so this would be a good landmark in an otherwise featureless place. Driving back to camp, I thought: *why was it there, for what purpose and who built it?*

My name was not spoken at mail call today. They look at me with fabricated empathy now. *How long has it been since I received a letter from my wife?* I stopped counting at 60 days. Mail call was the most anticipated event we had. Smiles of joy filled the faces of the lucky ones, and the unlucky, various stages of despair. In my heart only pitiful, demoralization remained. There is nothing here, and there will be nothing at home. The great nothingness of this place has emptied my soul. I am becoming the nothing man.

Sunday, a day of rest. For everyone but the unlucky few. I was assigned to go the ammunition supply point and verify some discrepancies in paper work. The sun was already relentless at the early hour of seven a.m. I walked alone the two kilometers to the supply point. As I approached I could see a seven-ton crane backing up with no front ground guide. These vehicles require both a front and rear ground guide so I knew that I was going to chew some ass on safety procedures when I got there. The guide in the rear of the vehicle wasn't paying attention, he was just standing there looking at the sunrise. I screamed a warning but my voice was powerless against the desert. I ran as fast as I could but running in the sand was like running in lead boots. I got there too late. The crane had pinned him against a pallet full of ammunition crates.

The face of the crushed man was frozen in a look of terror and disbelief, like a shivering denizen of hell in a childhood nightmare. I held onto him and told the driver to pull the vehicle forward. This wasn't the correct action but help was at least ten minutes away. I laid him gently on the sand and sent the driver to get the medics. Then we were alone, just he and I. His entire chest had been crushed. He was going to die. I knew it and felt as though he did too.

I elevated his feet and tried to assess vital signs. I realized that I was going to miss hot chow because of this. *That is not an appropriate thought.* I turned as if to reply but we were alone. That voice had come from within. I looked back down and realized that I was alone. Strange, I had a passing acquaintance with this guy for at least two years. I could remember the day he returned from ranger school with a cocky attitude and a toothy smile, but I

couldn't recall his first name. I was glad that I did not have to write a letter to his mother explaining that her son was killed by his own stupidity.

Never in my life have I seen it rain as it did yesterday. A choking deluge of water so intense, it flooded my foxhole and turned the desert to a sea. At least the rain was something.

It was just after midnight. We had been briefed that it had already begun: the air war. I could hear the distant engines of the planes overhead and feel the distant thunder. Finally, it would all be over soon.

All day and all night the planes flew overhead; all day and all night I wondered what kind of resistance we would face, all day and all night the rumors flew: of minefields and flaming trenches, of chemical agents and scud missiles. All day and all night the flies whispered.

Finally, the first operations order. I was anticipating something like this, but I still was not prepared for the mission I received. As I walked away from the briefing all I could hear were the voices of those who advised me in my career choices. "Go to landmine warfare school," they said. "It will help your career," they said. "You will have fun and can get drunk every night," they said. They forgot to mention that I would actually have to clear minefields. I had thirty-six hours to prepare my squad.

I powered up the night vision goggles and began the slow crawl to the first mine. The goggles made everything an eerie green, but I could see the mine. It was a Russian Tm-57 anti-tank mine, and I could even see the trip wire. *What kind of amateur installed this?* I wondered as I put my linesman pliers to the wire. *Wait!* that thought was thundering, *is this the type of booby trap that has a tension release or the reverse spring? Shit, I wish I wouldn't have gotten drunk every night in that school.* If it is tension release, then cutting the wire will detonate it. *There is no suffering in death only in life.* I turned as if to reply, but that thought came from within. No suffering in death, and the flies won't matter—fuck it, I cut the wire. I was almost disappointed in the silence. I moved to the next one.

During the after-operations review they told us that five men from our sister unit had died in the minefields at Al-Samyon airfield, that they had been blown up. They told us the names – I knew them all; went to landmine warfare school with two of them; got drunk every night with them. They must have made the wrong choice; or maybe it was the right choice.

Ten kilometers south of the Euphrates River, Khamisiyah bunker complex. If I had only known beforehand what this mission would be like, I would have called in sick. Ninety-nine bunkers, 100ft. by 100ft. and 30ft. high, half dug into the desert and surrounded by blast berms. Double reinforced concrete outer walls with an inner blast wall running the distance around the interior. They were packed full of high explosives, missiles, and rumored chemical rounds. I had my two tallest men tape a flashlight to the barrels of their weapons. In combat you will naturally shoot high, and since it was so dark around the inner blast wall it should work. I explained to my men that this technique would draw enemy fire to the light and give the low man time to acquire targets. My troopers looked at me like, *I hope you know what you're doing*. Shit, I hoped so too.

I selected a two-man team to go left and took my team right. My teammate put his weapon with the flashlight attached around the corner of the inner blast wall high and I simultaneously went around low with my weapon and no flash light. With all the explosives, one wrong bullet and we were all gone.

Bunker after bunker, day after day, for three days, and my nerves were shot. I didn't even care anymore. God, I was tired of going into those bunkers even though they mostly just surrender now. Once the bunkers were all cleared we took one day to rig the bunkers with explosives to destroy them. We backed off 5 kilometers and blew the bunkers in place. It was a good fireworks show until the artillery rounds stored in the bunkers started to fall on our position. Boy did we miscalculate the minimum safe distance. We unassed the area quickly.



The flies were in the shoe polish as I inspected the boots. They were a dead man's boots. I had volunteered to shine them for the memorial ceremony. While I was shining the boots I couldn't stop thinking about the ceremonies we had for our fallen comrades after Panama. The way the executive officer would call the names from our duty roster in alphabetical order. I could still hear the silence that settled once he called the name of the first man killed in action. I remembered his name being called out three times. That silence signified that he had paid the ultimate price and that he would forever be a part of our unit's history. Very soon, our unit will add another name to the long list of names in the Hall Of Heroes at the 82nd Airborne Museum at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The name of Sergeant Paul Burt.

"It's time for the ceremony," my lieutenant said. He looked tired. I knew he had written a letter to Sergeant Burt's wife. I walked to the stone that we had erected. On it, someone had spray painted his name in black, Sergeant Paul Burt. I fixed his bayonet under the barrel of his M-16 and stuck the blade into the ground, made sure it was straight, and placed his kevlar helmet on the butt of the weapon. I placed his boots like they were standing at attention, heels together and toes pointing out at a forty-five degree angle and took my place in formation.

The First Sergeant called us to attention and presented the company to the Commander. The commander droned on endlessly about honor and bravery. That's funny, I didn't remember him in the minefields. I must have missed him in those terrible, nerve racking bunkers.

Then the chaplain began, "...and Gods will, though we may not understand..."

Gods will, yeah, I'll tell you about Gods will.

"But God's love is enduring," the chaplain continued, "as far as the east is from the west nothing can separate us from his love..."

Really? Where did the love of God go in Panama last year? Where was it two nights ago? Explain God's love to the widows and children.

I dare you.

I was so lost in the musings I missed the executive officer taking his position. I knew what was coming next. How many of these have I been to? *How many more of these will I have to attend?*

The first name of the roll call stopped the dissenting voices in my head. "Private First Class Jonathan Anderson," the XO called out.

"Here sir!"

"Staff Sergeant Thomas Ballintine,"

"Here sir!"

“Sergeant Paul Burt,” the XO called out.

There was only the silence – the deafening, bitter, black silence.

Again his name was called, “Sergeant Paul Burt.” Again, the silence. It thickened, becoming blacker. This was a different kind of silence, only because I knew what was coming next. I’d been to enough memorial ceremonies to know. A third time, his name was called.

“Sergeant Paul Burt.” An eternal moment passed. Then from the formation, a solitary voice.

“He died on the field of battle sir!”

Another eternal moment. Then taps was juxtaposed next to the silence, was enveloped by the silence, it became the silence.

Even the flies were silent.



We were released from the ceremony and went our separate ways. I walked into the desert and sat on a rock, lit up a smoke, and wondered if Paul's wife knew he was dead yet. *There is no suffering in death—only in life.* His suffering is over—hers has just begun.

Sitting in my familiar nothingness, I took out the unopened letter from my wife. Two weeks I've carried it, too afraid to read it. Afraid of what the words would say, afraid of what they wouldn't say. Afraid of yesterday, of tomorrow, too afraid to live and too afraid to die. I read it once. One-half a page, hand written. I dug a hole with my boot heel and placed the letter inside. I stood up. I lit a smoke, took off my wedding band, dropped it in on top of the letter, and buried them both. My M-16 was looking more appetizing then ever.

It wouldn't be so bad, not to be.

Gazing out into the nothingness I remembered what Rod had told me—that all can be taken from a man save one thing: the freedom to choose. To choose how you will bear your burdens, whether you will suffer miserably or suffer proudly and that there is always someone watching and He would not expect you to suffer miserably. I walked away.

The flies stayed.

Battlefield police they called it. I called it picking up the dead. It's funny: I never thought of what happens to all the bodies after the battles. The battlefield commander has the responsibility of picking up everything that was not there before the battle, including bodies. Even though these were the bodies of Iraqi soldiers, they still deserved the dignity that any other human being deserved. They would be collected and processed and delivered back to Iraqi officials with ALL the personal belongings that they were found with. Which means we had to go through their pockets and gear.

I read once some verse in which the poet said, "I don't know if God goes to church, but I know He goes to war." Surely God must ride a pale horse. It was a terrible job: some of the bodies were burned, some were hideously dismembered and bloated, and the smell, the smell was unforgettable—wet coppery rust with rot. We even had bags for the pieces that we were otherwise unable to associate with a body. There were lots of them. We got it down to a system: check for booby traps, check for maps or paper work or anything relevant to military operations, put personal belongings in a plastic bag, attach it to the zipper, put the body in a body bag and throw it on the truck.

I found a picture in a dead man's pocket, wrapped in wax paper between two pieces of cardboard. It appeared as pristine as the day it had been taken; no wrinkles, no creases or smudges were on it, other than the ones caused by my bitter hands. The face of a beautiful woman stared back at me; she was smiling.

I looked down at him; he was dirty, mangled, and dead. I looked at the picture again; it was clean, unviolated, and alive. Everything in his possession, including his weapon, was dirty and unkept, except that picture.

I didn't even have a picture of my wife with me.

I turned the picture over. I didn't have to speak Arabic to know what the words written on back said.

"What the fuck you lookin' at?" Rod bellowed.

I turned toward his voice, but I was still looking at the picture.

"It's a picture," I said. "Look how perfect he kept it."

"Let me see that," Rod said, snatching it from me. He looked at it for a brief second, then said, "Fuck her." He looked down at the dead man and threw the picture onto his chest. "Fuck him, fuck 'em both." He dug in his pocket for a moment and pulled out a smoke, lit it, and spit on the dead soldier.

"Have a little respect man," I said as I picked up the picture and wiped his spit off of it with my sleeve. "He may be the enemy, but he's still a soldier."

Rod took a long drag of his smoke and, exhaling, sighed. "I can't believe we didn't go to Baghdad and kill every last one of these mother fuckers."

We stood in silence for a moment. *Was this the same guy that once shared my foxhole?* I looked up at the sky, closed my eyes and said to him, "Yeah, there are going to be a lot of changed people when they get back home."

I looked at him. He leveled his gaze onto me and pulled the smoke out of his mouth with his right hand. We stood about five feet apart. He took a step toward me. I took one towards him and we stood face to face. His eyes were red rimmed, he hadn't shaved in at least two days, and his breath was sour. He no longer resembled that Nordic model I had met a lifetime ago. He took another drag, took the smoke out of his mouth and poked me in the chest saying, "Fuck you too." He turned on his heel and walked away.

I put the picture in the plastic bag, got someone to help me, and we threw the dead guy on the truck. His suffering was over and hers has just begun.

We'd been driving all night. They told us we were going home. Home seems like a forgotten memory to me now. Like a dream, a dream I'll never see. A sobering thought, but my soul was still for the first time. Just still. Like a still small voice whispering; be still and know that I am... That whisper was interrupted by the metallic beep of my global positioning system. I wiped the dust off of the GPS display. Way point one, 4000 meters, glowed on the digital display. The mosque. I'd forgotten all about that place.

The war was over, and I was back to my familiar nothingness. The mosque was there just on the other side of the rise in the land. As we crested the rise a fiery sun erupted from the desert floor in furious splendor, directing a symphony of color. Beginning with subtle hues of lavender and culminating in a

crescendo of violet and red. They assaulted my senses and restored my empty soul with unparalleled beauty. At that instant in time it was as if I knew the answers to every question ever pondered by man. The meaning of Gray's *Elegy* pierced my consciousness like a flaming sword: "Full many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark unfathomed cave of oceans bear; full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air." There, in what had been my nothingness, were flowers as far as I could see. So many, they seemed to cover the earth and kiss the sun. I was so small and my problems so insignificant. For the first time in my life I was truly humbled.

Later I had the inscription from above the window in the Mosque translated into English. It said, "Behold God's Face." I went to church a thousand times seeking His face. I never saw it. I saw it then.