

Allah Willing

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I was on the tail end of the bullshit. I helped break down one of the last real Forward Operating Base's as they were known in the early part of that war. In the beginning the strategy was the same as the one employed in Afghanistan right now—move into the cities and set up bases. Towards the end of the war “mega bases” or “fortresses” were in place. Camp Fallujah was one of them. It was a monstrosity of a base outfitted with a helicopter pad and had squads of Marines patrolling its perimeter in constant vigil. You could feel the space as you rolled into it. The great expense of the sprawl seemed somehow to loom over you, looking down at you through shrouded eyes.

The base was a labyrinth of twisting gravel roads that led deep into the oasis of friendly territory. An oasis that sometimes was too good to be true. The chow hall there was unlike any other chow hall in our battle space; it was almost like being back in a real chow hall stateside. Giant plasma screen TV's played the latest sporting event, or whatever dish channel was the flavor of the moment. Paper tablecloths, metal silverware—it was enough to make the most hardened veteran drop his guard. The stark contrast between the personnel that lived on the base, and the transient convoy goers that would ravenously eat there was the reminder that home was a long way off. While personnel native to the base were clean cut and wore pressed uniforms, Marines from outside were grizzled, dirty, and carried weapons that were beat up and caked with sand. There's nothing that dispelled the mirage more poignantly than looking like a homeless person eating in a fancy restaurant.

Traveling to the entrance of Camp Fallujah you had to go by a great dip in the terrain of desert between the road and a far off ridgeline. Approaching the kilometer-long depression in the ground you got the feeling it was filled with something; but instead of being filled with water, it was filled with carcasses, the cold remnants of death. It was an assortment of every kind of vehicle on God's green earth. Every last one had been torn open and burnt to a crisp. It had never occurred to me that the blown up hulks would have to go somewhere. Here was that somewhere. Here they were, the sea. They were countless, and stretched to the eastern horizon that was along the crest of a ridge several miles out. After watching that sea fly by

you for twenty minutes you would roll underneath several checkpoints. Bases with scenes like that at their gates made it so much safer for us in the end. No one in their right mind would try to roll up in to that base, not even a suicide bomber. You just couldn't make it.

The tail end of that bullshit was a mass exodus. Everyone who wasn't attached to a battle space that was getting broken-down got pushed out of where they were. It was called, by some, an egress, or a withdrawal. Anyone who was there can describe breaking down command outposts like it was going out of style. We couldn't do it fast enough, and we weren't leaving anything behind. Not us marines; we wouldn't leave anything for the dinks, not now, not ever - except we weren't calling opposition forces dinks anymore. The names we used to dehumanize them had changed, but the concept remained the same. We made them different somehow so we could justify acting like they were no better than cockroaches that we scraped off the soles of our boots. So as we stripped the copper wire that ran all through the base we cursed them, calling them names that were not their own. We were told that we should believe everything we didn't strip would be made into some kind of killing device. Then a "terrorist" would wear it into a meeting inside Fallujah and smoke half of 1/5, or 3/5, or whoever was holding down that hornets nest of pissed off Arabs who were all out of give-a-fuck. And if it wasn't used for that, it would be strapped to some female who would bear hug an Iraqi police officer who was barely 18 and then show some love by detonating. Suicide bombers heads pop straight off like dandelions when they detonate, and that shit is just bad for business. As soon as you have haji heads blasting off around you like party streamers, you have somehow failed yourself. Somewhere along the line you let yourself down and the hajis knew it. Those clever little guys didn't pull any punches. You had become complacent, and now they were going to make you pay. They were going to bring the pain like you had never felt, in ways you had only imagined in nightmares. We were told the time to not blow it was the present. So we stripped out everything that wasn't bolted down as if it was decay in an aching tooth.

But that's not the picture that got sent up to battalion. No sir. It didn't get a picture of how our fine boys were "egressing," or "getting the fuck out of there." Battalion got pictures of me on the front berm of the FOB, parking my vehicle between post one and two. We hadn't remembered to take any pictures that patrol; the sand storm was so thick you could cut it with your bayonet. All we had done was drive around for four god-forsaken hours in a brown out, not seeing, not doing a damn thing. We didn't even

watch the haj because those little brown men didn't come out in that weather; there was no point. We got back to the FOB, and realized, "Oh shit. Higher is all about us getting picks of current operations, because we're the squad that's digging weapon caches out of the ground like it's an Easter egg hunt and we're some kind of idiot savants who can feel where the steel is buried in the ground." So we posed on a berm inside of the actual FOB itself, and got a picture that made it all the way to higher, of me standing in front of the humvee, in the base. But you can't tell that in the pic, so battalion was happy. And that made America happy. That made every disgusting jerk off who was getting laid as high, wasted and happy as a pig rolling in its own feces.

The Marines that were there at the tail end of the bullshit knew better. Everyone knew better except the people who weren't there. They hadn't even thought to care how our leaving would be handled. So we just bounced. We did so short handed, and we put people in positions that were sloppy, unprofessional, and dangerous. We left entire companies in logistical darkness about how they would not be receiving supplies, or how they would manage a small command post with three quarters of their strength gone and no help on the way.

I remember waiting for my team leader, Rose, a tall man of twenty three with a good humored laugh and friendly-face, to get out of a patrol briefing that I was pointedly not invited to so we could get on the road. While I waited I sat on my bunk, in jail cell sized room I shared with five other men. I sat reading the parts of Orwell's Animal Farm where the pigs started to rewrite the rules and walk on two legs. In the chalk talk, our crooked Sergeant assigned Rose and I to the south end of a double blockade that would cut all traffic off on both sides of the road in order to cover the engineers who were tearing down the berm and gathering up the razor wire. The way things broke down left our Sergeant no responsibilities and plenty of time to sleep at the north end of the roadblock. As we walked out of the FOB to the trucks, the smell of diesel, dirt, and the nearby latrines wafted rudely through our noses; Rose informed me that we were doing it severely undermanned. He knew I was going to be pissed that we were getting hung out to dry in the center of the town, with no boots on the deck to haul our asses out of the fire and back to the half-torn-open FOB if Allah willed his children to play rough with us. I hadn't known at the time why I had been black balled from the meeting; looking back it was an amateur mistake not to realize what was going on.

We hit the center of town like we owned the place and threw up the first roadblock of concertina wire that would tangle people and even stop

tanks by getting in their tracks. The second one required us to dismount and stand in the streets; just Rose and I, because we only had an undermanned Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle at our end the blockade. Then it was Larkin and his huge nose in the turret, and Doc Martinez as the medic. Medics aren't supposed to be used in aggressive roles according to the rules of war as set by the Geneva Convention. We had to bend the rules a little bit, and left Doc guarding the back door of the MRAP, with Larkin in the turret behind the machine gun. That left no one in the driver's seat—the vehicle dead in the water—as we cleared out an intersection of cars that had for some reason stopped and refused to move.

With all of this on our minds we dismounted. We didn't just get out of the trucks. We exited our vehicles like UFC fighters entering the ring for the championship bout. I hit the ground with my 9 mill already out and in my drop pouch that hung from the right side of my body armor. This is where Marines excel: violence and intimidation. It was up to Rose to keep his head, and talk nice with whomever could be talked into compliance. I was there to put bodies in motion.

Rose took the right side of the street. I wasn't about to talk to the family he was going to kick off of their front porch and make go inside for the remainder of the night. There were few people outside of their homes playing soccer or mulling about, and we were glad for that. Out of their cars people were generally harder to deal with. I took the left side with the southbound cars standing still in it, stacked two abreast and more than thirteen deep. I had to move these cars south across the intersection so we could set up the blockade. I went up to someone's car, and motioned him forward. No one would move so I pulled out my pistol and started asking questions angrily. A shop owner who had walked outside to see the commotion clued me in that a giant convoy was sitting across the intersection. The haj could tell we were trying to clear the streets, and I think they wanted us to get the giant convoy out of there as well. The sooner they could go back to gutting animals and readying them for the evening meal, the happier they would be.

I walked over to a beat up blue Toyota and told the driver to pull forward. He looked me in panic. "What are you talking about? Have you lost your mind?" I could read it all in the man's sun worn face as sweat dripped down it. He wasn't so much upset with the question as the idea. If I got it into my head that he was going to ram a car, he knew I was going to make him ram another vehicle in order to clear a path. He understood this. I understood this. Everyone on that street understood this. They also knew

that I wasn't going to just start smoking innocents. They didn't know one hundred percent for sure, but it could be assumed I probably wasn't going to redecorate his dashboard with the beef cranberry of his brains just yet. That just wasn't on the menu as things then stood. So the car sat there, and the people standing in the dusty street stared at me. I felt heat rise up my back into my head, my pulse made my vision distort in a rhythmic twisting, and I became angry at the world as one thing became certain: I was going to move that man.

Jackie the Iraqi was going to be the link in the chain that forced the cars in front of him forward, and lead the charge for the cars behind him. It was going to be heroic for this middle age haji to summon forth the intestinal fortitude to do this, but I was going to help him. I was going to storm over to my vehicle. I was going to tell Larkin to cover me. He was going to say "I've got your back." I was going to throw open my door, and toss the nine on the seat. I was then going to grab my M-16 A4 service rifle, and slam a thirty round high capacity magazine into it. And that's exactly what I did. I drove my heels into the deck on the way over. Larkin told me that it was Apocalypse across the intersection - the unit call sign for battalion personal safety attachment, the small army that guarded the Battalion commanding officer. My nine clanged off the metal of the middle console, and the first round in my magazine slid into the chamber like a finger into a virgin on prom night. I was ready to bring the law to those who had it not.

The courage welled up in him. It started as a bubbling first as I started to drive my heels into the deck back over to him. I was about to make this man a fucking hero. Someone who was so brave he would no longer sit idle in line at the intersection to his town. He would advance forward, and brave the waiting guns of the unit who unbeknownst to him had the call sign of Apocalypse and that man was going to stand before them, an emissary for those who would no longer let the Americans impose on their personal lives. He tried to plead with me through the open car window, calloused hands flashing in panic as he conveyed his terror to me. I would like to think he was pleading for the angel of death to pass over so that he could go on to take part in some greater glory, that Allah had come to him, and told him that some day he would be used for some other purpose than standing up to those who thought they could tower over him. But I don't think that's what he was saying to me. I think he was saying that he wasn't ready to pull forward. Not until his path was clear of not only cars but also gun trucks.

That he wasn't ready to be a hero.

I looked at him and I thought no.

This day was the day that he was going to be hero. It was his day to step forward as a man, and lead his people. He didn't know it, but I was not going to give him a choice. As my weapon leveled at his head and hung in the breach of his half opened car window, he knew he was going to be a leader that day. He knew that was the day that Allah had chosen for him to step forward, ahead of his peers and younger countrymen. He became a man as defined in the Koran, a man of honor and courage.

I looked at him and whispered "No," and then "Forward."

He became the man of his forefathers' youths, and he did pull forward. The cars ahead of him started moving, and the cars behind him followed. In that way, the south-bound traffic was cleared. I walked over to the truck and Rose told me that the people he had been talking to hauled ass inside as soon as I racked my rifle and put on my business face.

We were happy. We were happy because higher would be happy. Battalion was happy with pictures, it was happy with cleared intersections. It would never occur to anyone that if I was doing a job that could only equate to something as ridiculous sounding as "Gestapo traffic enforcer," than my skills were being implemented in a manner so ingrained with the life of the community it was nothing if not intrusive. I thought about that briefly before I fell asleep in the truck, behind the roadblock, curled into a ball in the driver seat, dreaming of a sweet nothing that wasn't the bad dream that I was in my waking.

And that's how the west was won. It was a victory that hinged on us leaving as quickly and efficiently as possible. And that's how I helped win that day, by being a traffic cop that flew all the way around the world to tell a people that they were wrong in their resistance of a foreign entity existing in extended presence in their land. All of the sacrifice, the tears, the blood, the lives and limbs that were left there -they were part of that victory also. A way of saying that America could go anywhere, and do anything it wanted. It could walk into your country and make it "democratic," and if you didn't have the courage to like it, we would bequeath you that courage from the 5.56 millimeter hole at the end of our rifles.