

PART 1

DEATH AND
DYING

CHAPTER 1

IN COMMAND AND CONTROL



Mother, Father, me, and Daniel in Arkansas. Fall of 1988.

OUTSIDE OF CONWAY, ARKANSAS. JUNE 1995. AGE ELEVEN.

"It's so hot outside," I complained.

Mother's voice called up the stairs again. "If you and your brother can handle running around and playing in this heat, then you can handle mowing in this heat. Remember what your father said."

I remembered. If the property wasn't mowed by the time he got home from work, I wouldn't be allowed to ride my bike into town with my friends over the weekend.

"Can't I do it later?"

"Gonna storm this afternoon." One of my younger siblings started crying.

I sighed. Out of excuses, I trudged down the stairs and outside. The air was thick, wet, and still. Only the drone of the cicadas broke through the heavy blanket of humidity. By the time I got to the shed, I was already slimy with sweat. I pulled off my T-shirt and tossed it onto the workbench, then wrestled the push mower out from where I'd hastily stashed it last time, backing it outside and filling up the gas tank with fuel from the five-gallon red jug.

I yanked the pull cord. Could never get the motor started the first time. *Yank.*

Yank.

With a roar, the mower sprang to life. I steered it toward the house, where I'd kept the grass shorter and the mowing would be easier. I kept my eyes focused three feet in front of the mower, looking for holes or thicker patches of grass where snakes might be hiding.

It took an hour of pushing the mower back and forth in the yard right around the house until I reached the end of the grass I'd kept a handle on the previous weeks. Sometimes Mother and Father let me stop there, but I could see the grass around the ponds and in the fields was long enough that I'd get an earful if I didn't hit them too. Everything grew so fast in the summertime.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed the mower toward the first pond, knowing I'd better get them over with. The areas near the two ponds

were the worst. Long, thick grass and that's where I was most likely to run into a snake. Slowly, I made my way around both. The mower quit on me twice, but luckily never made the dull *kerthunk* that indicated it had struck a reptile.

Relieved to have the area near the ponds done, I pushed over to the wooded areas. The roots were a pain, but the grass was shorter there and easier to cut. That part went fast.

By the time I finished around the trees, I could see the thunderheads building. I always loved the sight of the thunderheads: big towers of clouds—first white, and then growing into a threatening gray. Like an army gathering in the sky.

Better hurry up, I thought.

I pushed the mower over toward the pasture, which I knew would take the longest. The grass was long enough here that I had to lean against the mower at nearly a 45-degree angle to push it forward. In one thick patch, the eager, high-pitched roar of the mower changed to a lower, irritated grind. It slowed. Then it stopped.

"Come on," I muttered. My muscles were tired. It was harder to restart the mower every time. I pulled the machine back and kicked away the long grass from the blades. Wiped my hands on my cutoff denim shorts to dry the sweat.

Yank. Yank. Yank.

The mower rumbled to life again. I walked it farther back to give myself a running start, then rammed it forward. The mower seized on the longer grass, chewing it up, spitting it out. Pushing hard, I willed my eleven-year-old muscles to conquer the field. I began to see a longer stretch of mown grass spread out behind me. The sight was deeply satisfying.

Had to be past lunchtime, but now that I'd started, I didn't want to finish until I was done.

Nearly another hour subsided as I mindlessly strained against the mower, pushing it back and forth through the field of grass. My mind wandered, thinking about where we might ride on our bikes tomorrow. *The Cards and Comics shop. Get some new baseball trading cards. Buy a Sprite from the general store.*

I heard thunder rumble overhead as I drew near the dirt road. I rammed the mower through the last stretch of grass and shut it off at the mailbox. I looked back at the property. *Good*. I wouldn't have to deal with the pasture again for another two weeks. And now I could go into town with my friends.

Dust was settling over the road, a sign the mailman must have come in his truck while I had my head down with the mower. I wiped the sweat off my face and pulled down the front of our box. Several fat raindrops fell on my head and shoulders. It felt good.

There was the usual stack of envelopes and advertisements. Then, I pulled out something different. Someone had sent us a thick magazine. On the front, there were pictures of what looked like castles: high stone walls, arched windows, looming towers. I flipped the magazine open, ignoring another loud rumble overhead. On the inside were pictures of young people wearing uniforms. I stared at them, mesmerized. They seemed like they were from a different era.

"Samuel!" I could hear my Mother calling from the now-distant porch. "Better come inside!"

Thick drops splattered onto the magazine. I closed it quickly and tucked it under my arm, then thrust the rest of the mail back in the box. Grabbing the mower, I clumsily ran it back to the shed while holding the magazine tight against my side. As soon as I shoved the mower inside, I ran toward the house, my body bent over the magazine to protect it against the rain which was now falling hard and fast.

I ran up the stairs and leaped onto the porch. *Made it*. Mother had left me a sandwich and a glass of sweet tea on the table next to the rocking chair. I took a bite and a big drink, then sat down on the steps. I studied the pictures. Who were these people?

The rain poured down, louder than the cicadas. I didn't watch the lightning. I was too interested in the pictures. Daniel found me and wordlessly sat down, studying the images with similar attention.

When Father arrived home, I was still on the front porch with the magazine open. I heard the car door slam and looked up. With surprise, I realized the rain had stopped. The only drips now were

the fat drops falling off the trees onto the lower steps and the roof of our well house. “What is this?” I called as he walked up. I held up the magazine.

Father studied the cover and smiled widely at me. “That’s the West Point catalog. I reached out to them. Asked them to send us their materials.”

He joined us on the porch and tapped the cover with his finger. “This is *West Point*,” he repeated, making the words sound weighty and important. “It’s a military academy. You could go there one day.”

You could go there one day.

I tried to picture myself in one of those crisp, white and gray uniforms. Standing in front of a castle. Bearing arms. It felt like a far cry from where I sat: shirtless, in cut-off shorts, smelling of rain and sweat. “We could?” I asked.

“Sure. Why else would we have given you boys camo uniforms and dog tags? Why else would I have you doing drills all the time? All those push-ups and sit-ups and pull-ups and long runs—that’s training.” Father took the magazine and held the cover up to both of us. “You keep your grades up and do well in sports, this could be you.”

He looked intently at both of us. “My expectation of you boys is that you’ll grow up to serve your country. That’s why I’m in the National Guard. And I would go on active duty if needed. I do that because I’m serving this country. I expect you boys to do the same.”

We nodded, sobered by this sacred destiny.

“That’s what our family is all about,” Father emphasized. “We serve in the United States military armed forces.” He paused, seeking a way to drive this point home.

“That’s what Browns do.”

* * *

KANDAHAR DESERT, AFGHANISTAN. SEPTEMBER 4, 2008. MIDDAY.



Providing security for a convoy along a remote route in Afghanistan. August 2008.

“It’s so hot outside,” Philip Kopfensteiner complained from the back seat.

“Worse up here!” Kevin Jensen called from his gunner’s turret. “What’s the temp, Kopf?”

Our Humvee rumbled down the highway running through the Kandahar desert, second in my platoon’s six-vehicle lineup. I stared out the window, watching the horizon ripple through the dry heat waves. Behind me, I could hear Philip, my Forward Observer, dig for the glass thermometer that hung on a keychain from his kit. “115,” he called up to Kevin.

Kevin swore under his breath, a word that came through clearly into my headset from Kevin’s mic. “It’s probably over 120 up here then,” he remarked, his Texas drawl thick. “Wish we were cruisin’ in one of the MRAPs. What do you think the temp is in those?”

"A perfect seventy degrees," my driver, Mike Debolt, quipped.

"Hey, Lieutenant!" Kevin called.

"What's up, Jensen?" I said into my own mic.

"Any chance they're going to fix the A/C in our Humvees soon?"

Doubtful, I thought. But that wouldn't make Kevin feel better. "I can handle it, Jensen," I ribbed. "Can you?"

"It's hotter up here," he protested into the mic.

All of us in the Humvee were wearing the same thing: full sleeve uniforms, body armor, and gear on top of that. Each of us carried our own "kit," packed with the supplies we needed to carry out our individual roles. My kit included both my platoon network radio, strapped to my chest, and a larger radio strapped to my side which I used to stay in touch with Company Command, and—if we were close enough to be in range—Battalion. If we were farther out, I needed to use a third radio to reach Battalion: a large box radio, located next to me in the Humvee, shoved in between my seat and the driver's.

I shifted in my seat, trying to get comfortable. At six feet, four inches in height, there was never enough room for my legs in the passenger seat area.

Kevin started piping some of his good ol' Texas country music into my ear: "On the Road Again" by Willie Nelson. I grinned at the tune and, more so, at the sign of his changed morale. Kevin and I used our own private radio channel internal to the vehicle so that he could report anything noteworthy that he saw from his gunner's turret down to me, the platoon's leader. He had spruced up our setup by rubber banding one of the earbuds of his iPod to his little mic boom, which played the music through to me. My own personal DJ. I began tapping my finger where my arm rested next to the blast-proof glass window.

"Can't wait to get back to KAF and get out of this steel box," Philip remarked. After being out in the field for two weeks, we were packed up and set to return to Kandahar Airfield, a.k.a. "KAF," the closest thing to comfort we experienced during deployment. We'd head there as soon as we finished the afternoon's mission.

“Showers.” Kevin sounded deeply satisfied. “And a real bed! Bet you’re going to be glad to get off that stretcher, LT.”

“Ha! True.” A few weeks ago, right after arriving at our desert outpost Forward Operating Base, my platoon had discovered we were one cot short. For the last fourteen days, I’d been sleeping on a stretcher which I propped a few inches above the ground on MRE boxes—“Meals, Ready to Eat”—to avoid the camel spiders or other desert creatures that roam at night.

“A shower and a mattress sound pretty amazing,” I agreed. “I’ll shower last though. Cause the rest of you smell like shit.” This comment had my intended effect: good-natured scoffs, mock offense, and a few choice remarks about my own subpar hygiene.

“If I smell bad, it’s cause I was workin’ up a sweat catching LT’s touchdown pass last night,” Kevin remarked.

“I didn’t need to work up a sweat,” Mike Debolt called back up to Kevin. “Sergeant Roszko’s passes came right to me.” He glanced over at me. “No offense, LT.”

“No point trash talking now, Debolt,” Philip said, leaning forward. “You guys *lost*.”

Good, I thought, pleased at the signs of positive morale. I didn’t want the guys thinking about the compromised security of our mission that afternoon, even though it was heavy on my mind. *Let’s keep everyone focused on the good things waiting for us at the end of the day after we get the job done.*

My mind began to wander as I stared out at the vast desert landscape stretching in every direction. I liked being reminded of last night’s football game. It had been one of my favorite evenings so far over here. After we’d finished chow and our other duties to prep for today’s mission, I had grabbed the football I’d brought along to the Combat Outpost. “Sergeant Roszko,” I’d called to Anthony. “You Captain one team. I’ve got the other.”

Safe behind the blast-proof barriers, we’d stripped off our jackets and body armor. As we did so, we’d also taken off all the visible signs of rank. In our T-shirts, pants, and combat boots, running around

in that gravel circle used as a Helicopter Landing Zone (HLZ), the weight of the deployment had momentarily lifted. It felt like we were back home, talking trash, eager to complete a pass, and looking to beat our opponent.

I'd laughed every time we dropped into formation, because Kevin—crouched next to me—was opposite Vincent Winston, who had some fresh new insult every time. It wasn't the ribbing itself that was funny—Winston was maybe the smallest guy in our platoon, but a great athlete, so he could have backed up his boasts. The funny part was hearing the trash talk come out of *Winston*. Vincent Winston had a heart of gold. He felt like everyone's kid brother and his ribbing was hilariously unexpected.

Equally funny had been Kevin's attempted responses—his thick drawl struggling to catch up with Winston's new choice remark. Every time, he'd only gotten out half a response before Anthony or I hiked the ball and we were all in play.

Staring out the window now, heat rising in ripples over the desert, I smiled at the memory. The sun had started to set as we chased each other around the gravel "field." Even when the light faded in the dusk, Sergeant Steven Smith had turned on a floodlight to keep the play going. Debolt had been right about Anthony's passes: they were strong and well-aimed. He hit his mark. My passes had been nearly as consistent though—one wobbly pass, notwithstanding. Anthony wasn't about to let me live that pass down. He gave me shit about it the rest of the night: "Didn't they teach you how to throw a spiral at your fancy military academy, LT?" Still—I'd thrown the pass that Kevin caught for the winning touchdown. That had felt good. My team cheered the victory while Anthony and his team demanded a rematch once we safely returned to KAF the next day.

I breathed a sigh of deep satisfaction. *Living the dream*, I thought to myself. This was what I'd worked my entire life to do—to serve in the US Army. I'd trained my mind and body to be an effective soldier. And, I led my troops by setting the standard of excellence, earning their respect, and providing the support they needed to accomplish the mission.

Now, it was happening. I had arrived. And the possibilities for my future in the military seemed as endless as the desert horizon.

Our Humvee hit a pothole in the pavement and my knees banged against the dash. That partially gravel-filled hole was only one of many pockmarks scarring the newly paved asphalt. The Taliban had a habit of planting Improvised Explosive Devices, or IEDs for short, in culverts running underneath the road, detonating them when they saw opportunities to harm their enemies. Dimly, I wondered if anyone had been hurt in the blast that left that particular pothole.

I studied the satellite navigation system in front of me. In military vehicles like the Humvee we were in, the driver always takes navigation from the passenger seat. It's not like you can glance down at a GPS map right by your steering wheel, the way most of us do when we're driving in the States. Out there in the desert, our rugged GPS navigation systems worked via a grid system where the numbers combined to define a specific point on a map. The grid was located in front of the passenger seat and—because of all the gear and machinery packed into the vehicle—the driver couldn't see it. He had to take directions from the passenger.

It wasn't easy to tell where we were by looking out the window. The desert in Kandahar is one vast, blank expanse, bordered by mountains in the distance and peppered with small villages made of dried mud that blend in with the earth. No signs. No city skylines. But according to the rugged digital mapping system, we were close to the mission staging area.

I held up the platoon radio and spoke into it. "3-4, this is 3-6. Our turn is approximately 200 meters in front of you."*

The radio buzzed back. "3-6, this is 3-4. Tracking." The music in my ear abruptly stopped. Now that we'd reached the mission area, Kevin's DJ time was over.

* A few notes on radio call signs: Comanche was my company's call sign. Ramrod was the Battalion call sign (higher up). "3" meant 3rd platoon; 1 through 4 designated a specific squad, and 6 meant leader of that unit. So, when people called through the radio to "3-6," they were addressing me.

Mike turned right off the paved highway onto a dirt road that stretched for several kilometers into the rugged mountains on the distant horizon. A cloud of dust arose from the lead vehicle. The “road” wasn’t more than tire tracks in the desert, mostly made from our own activity in the area two weeks earlier, when the convoy had first passed through.

I didn’t like seeing the evidence of our tracks.

When the convoy had headed into the mountains, they hadn’t been subtle about it. The combined number of vehicles to carry new turbine equipment to a dam on the Helmand River in the neighboring province was rumored to be the largest military convoy since World War II. It was a massive international mission, all intended to bring electricity to parts of the country that didn’t yet have it, in order to help the Afghan people and make the new Afghan government appear to be legitimately providing services for its citizens. The only problem was, these huge trailers and trucks got the attention of every single person in the area—including plenty of Taliban.

Now, the convoy was preparing to return along the same route it had come in on, through the area our Infantry Battalion had command and control over—and no friendly forces had been able to watch the road continuously between the convoy trips. Our region was large. For most of the previous two weeks, my platoon and others had been on assignment working in villages, trying to build goodwill and gathering intel about ways we could help provide resources to the local Afghan people. No other troops had been available to monitor the route on this particular stretch of desert.

The route, in fact, that we were driving on.

We had returned for the same reason we’d first come: two platoons were needed to provide security along the route while the convoy moved back through our Area of Operation (AO), shielding it from any attacks.

Providing security didn’t bother me. What *did* bother me was that this massive convoy was coming back on the same route they’d used coming in, a violation of the principles of security I’d been taught in all of my military training. You *never* go in and out the same way.

That's inviting an ambush or hasty attack. On top of that, the convoy had been delayed in its return by over a week, providing plenty of time for any bad actor to bury landmines and IEDs beneath the tire tracks left in the dirt.

The radio chatter had quieted down now that we were in a high-risk area. I took a sip of water from one of the plastic bottles I'd grabbed out of the back of the Humvee. It was around the same temperature as the air outside: hot.

I scanned the long, flat expanse, my eyes always returning to the mountains in the distance. *That's where we'll see them. That's where the convoy will emerge.* Only a few more hours.

A massive *BOOM* suddenly ripped apart the horizon, causing it to disappear into a cloud of dust which swallowed up the vehicle in front of me. Pieces of the MRAP truck in front of us were blown off, somersaulting through the air. The realization hit me with the same force as the percussive blast. *They're hit. My guys are hit.*

"IED! IED!" I yelled into the radio. "React to IED battle drill! I'll take twelve o'clock! Let's *move!*" I yelled to Mike. "Drive around the right side, get up to the twelve o'clock position. Make sure we've got security at the front of our convoy!"

Our vehicle careened around the MRAP as I kept screaming into the radio. "3-2, go to three o'clock! 3-3, you're at nine. 3-1 and 3-7, you hold security in the rear!"

I quickly switched to our company radio channel. "Comanche 6, this is Comanche 3-6! 3-4 just hit an IED! We are currently executing the React to IED battle drill. More to follow, over!"

We abruptly came to a halt as the dust from the explosion began to settle. With the lurch of the brakes, I registered with shock what had just come out of me. I never yelled into the radio like that.

Taking a breath, I tried to settle. "3-4, this is 3-6, report your status. Are we dealing with fatalities?" There was a pause. My heart rate spiked again. "Come in, 3-4. Are we dealing with wounded or fatalities?" I peered through the settling dust at the exploded Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle. Known as an MRAP, they were

specifically built to withstand explosions, but we'd never taken a direct hit before. I didn't know how well they'd actually hold up. Had the IED penetrated the vehicle's armor?

The squad leader of the hit vehicle spoke through the radio. "3-6. This is 3-4." There was a long pause. One of the doors to the MRAP opened, and hung there outstretched, like a broken wing. No one got out.

"3-4, *what is your status?*" I demanded. "Do you have accountability of your guys?"

After another pause, his voice came back. "3-6, this is 3-4. Give me a moment." He sounded out of it. Was that just my imagination?

"Stand by," his voice came through again.

By now, the dust had settled enough that the MRAP's condition was more visible. Kevin's voice came through my headset. "LT, the rear axle and wheels have been blown off. Back of the vehicle looks pretty jacked up too."

"Gotta be deadlined after that blast," Philip mused quietly behind me.

We waited. I imagined the commander of that vehicle yelling into the back of the truck, getting a headcount, asking for a description of how everyone was doing. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe deep. *Why is it taking so long?*

Finally, I heard his voice again. "3-6, this is 3-4. We're all accounted for. Doesn't appear that we have any casualties or wounds. Just a little shook up and dazed by the blast."

I exhaled, feeling enormous relief. But as the fear of losing my guys dissipated, anger took its place. Who would *do* this?

I called through the radio to the rest of the platoon. "This is 3-6. Let's secure the site. We're going to be here for a while." The circle of vehicles which had gathered around the MRAP slowly made themselves permeable, soldiers and squad leaders hopping out, gathering around the smoking vehicle in the center. I jumped out of the Humvee, still inwardly fuming, only now my anger had turned toward my own higher ups. *I KNEW this was a risk. I told them this route was not secure.*

At the center of the action, the soldiers in the MRAP began climbing out. They were wobbly and seemed rattled, but I was relieved to

see them moving under their own power. I put my hand on each of them as they walked over. “You okay? No blood? No broken bones?”

One of them gave me a shaky grin. “Don’t worry, LT. I’ve been in bar fights worse than this.”

I felt relieved at the joke. Their vehicle commander, one of my squad leaders, walked up to me and turned back to survey the vehicle. “That was a hell of a blast and the MRAP took it all. None of us anything more than concussed.”

We walked toward the vehicle and bent down to examine the damage in the rear. Looking at the undercarriage, I had to appreciate the design of the MRAP. The underside of an MRAP is built of extremely heavy-duty steel armor, angled like a V away from the vehicle’s center, deflecting the power of a blast outward and to the side, rather than absorbing the blast the way a flat-bottomed vehicle would. It was a shame we couldn’t all travel in MRAPs, but they were so new to the war in Afghanistan, our platoon only had two. The rest of us were in much less armored and flat-bottomed Humvees.

The angled undercarriage of the MRAP was blackened from the blast, but still mostly intact. Then my eyes spotted the back axle. It was badly damaged. “Deadlined,” I said quietly to myself. This vehicle wasn’t going anywhere.

“Bet you regret turning down the MRAP now, LT.” Staff Sergeant Anthony Roszko’s voice pulled my attention out from under the vehicle. “You could have enjoyed a hell of a ride.”

“No kidding,” I mused.

I thought back to the conversation with my Company Commander several weeks earlier, when he had strongly recommended platoon leaders ride in the MRAPs. I didn’t agree with his recommendation. In my mind, the two MRAPs in my platoon needed to be where the danger was greatest. Historically, the threat of IED blasts was highest in the first and last positions of our platoon’s convoy lineup. Our practice had been for the platoon leader to be in a vehicle somewhere in the middle of the convoy—that way, the platoon leader could keep eyes on the front and give directions about what was coming up.

“Are you suggesting that platoon leaders ride in the first or last position?” I had asked my Company Commander.

“No,” he said. “You keep your position in another spot in the lineup. But I suggest you should be in an MRAP. You platoon leaders need to be protected in the most heavily armored vehicles.”

Immediately, I dismissed the recommendation. I wasn’t going to have the last vehicle in my convoy be a Humvee, which was far more vulnerable to enemy attack. I also wasn’t going to prioritize my safety over the safety of my guys. In my mind, their lives were more critical to the mission than mine. They were the ones actually *doing* the fighting and carrying out the work; I was simply the one doing mission planning and resourcing. And if anything happened to me, I had excellent Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) who could lead in my place. Either of my Staff Sergeant squad leaders, Anthony Roszko or Steven Smith, could easily take charge.

I didn’t make a big deal about the vehicle order in the meeting in front of the other guys, but later, when it was just me and the commander, I explained I didn’t intend to ride in the MRAP. “Sir, I just want to let you know that because of the risk to my guys in more highly vulnerable positions as we patrol in our vehicles, I intend to be in a Humvee. I’ll use my MRAPs for my lead and my trailing vehicle.”

After I finished explaining my rationale, the commander shrugged. “Lieutenant Brown, you can do what you think is best.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“But as I mentioned before, I would prefer to have you in an MRAP.”

I felt satisfied. We could agree to disagree. There wasn’t necessarily a right or wrong answer except to us as individuals, and I was free to take the course I felt was best. When I gave the platoon sergeant instructions about which squad was going where, in what vehicle, I put the MRAPS in the first and last positions. I put myself in the number two spot—in a Humvee. But Anthony knew the CO had wanted me to be in the MRAP.

This conversation was fresh in my memory as I stared at the dead-

lined MRAP. Tearing my eyes away from the destroyed vehicle, I looked over at Anthony. “What the hell, right?” I said quietly.

Steven walked up to join us. “What the hell?” he repeated.

“This is exactly what we said was going to happen,” Anthony fumed. I was gratified to hear the same anger in his voice that I felt. “We told them over and over that this route was compromised. How many more IEDs have been planted along this route? Battalion should have listened to you and taken this to the higher-ups who planned this mission. They should have had our back.”

“Who are we?” Steven asked sarcastically. “Decisions about the convoy were made by leaders echelons above us. We’re just the knuckle-draggers who have to execute when the higher-ups from this multi-national coalition blow off the fundamentals.”

Inwardly, I seethed. *They make the decisions, but they don't suffer the consequences. They're not out here in harm's way. It's MY guys that have to execute their terrible plans. We don't have influence or power, but we have to deal with all the consequences.*

I knew I shouldn't say my thoughts out loud—I didn't want to add fuel to the fire when I could tell Steven and Anthony already agreed with me. I gave them a look that showed them I was just as pissed as they were. “Unfortunately, very predictable. And now we're down one of our MRAPs.”

Steven shifted his demeanor. “Sir, there's a cluster of mud huts close by. Now that we've got the vehicle secure, we should probably do a quick sweep of the compound here to look for anything or anybody that could still pose a risk to us or those who will be following us later.”

That made sense. I nodded. “Go ahead and take your squad to check it out. We'll keep security out here and you guys can run through it and report back. Let me know what you find.” Moments like this always made me appreciate the fact that Steven and Anthony had prior deployments. Their experiences in combat gave them a streetwise savviness that benefited our platoon constantly—especially me as the leader, still cutting my teeth on my first deployment.

My company radio popped. “Comanche 3-6, this is 1-6.” I heard

the familiar voice of Austin Wallace, another platoon leader in Charlie Company and my former classmate at West Point. “Everybody okay?” I was grateful to hear the concern in his voice.

“1-6, 3-6,” I returned. “Looks that way. Only casualty is the MRAP.” I lifted my eyes to the horizon, back in the direction we’d come. I could see Austin’s platoon idling on the highway: six unscathed vehicles, all in a row. The First Platoon had been charged with providing security for the southern part of the route—the area where we were currently stuck—and my platoon was supposed to head north. *Supposed to*. Once we cleaned up our mess.

“Roger that. We’ll hold our position here while you guys cross-load. Let me know if you need support.”

“Thanks, 1-6.” I appreciated Austin. He was a good friend and a solid, steady leader.

I checked my watch. Thankfully, we still had several hours before the convoy was due to arrive. Nobody needed to rush north just yet.



My ride. That's Kevin Jensen in the gunner's turret and Mike Debolt at the front of the vehicle. The man sitting down is the Afghan interpreter who had been left back at the FOB on September 4, leaving me with an empty seat. This picture was taken earlier in the deployment, around August 2008.

Steven's voice came through my radio on our platoon's channel. "LT, we're inside the mud compound, and it's totally empty except for a sketchy-looking individual we found hanging out in here... We've got him secured. He's missing some fingers and a leg."

These details immediately aroused my suspicion. Missing limbs were often a telltale sign of a bombmaker. Steven's voice piped up again. "It'd probably be good for you to come in here and assess it for yourself."

"On my way."

I jogged toward the compound, thinking of my translator with regret. Due to the plans to return to Kandahar Airfield that evening, all the translators had been left behind at the forward operating base. I didn't know what kind of intel I'd be able to gather without him.

As soon as I entered the compound, it was obvious it had been abandoned for some time. The walls were bleached and cracked. There was no furniture, no fire pit with coals, no signs of activity or life—just a barren group of misshapen mud walls. On the northern outer wall, there was a smaller enclosed area. It looked like the kind of structure that, in an inhabited compound, would have been used as the latrine. Thin sticks lay on top of the walls to provide a bit of shade. That's where I saw my soldiers. They were standing around a lone Afghan man.

He wore traditional clothing—light-colored, baggy pants; a long sleeved tunic, and a dark colored vest. His turban was black: the sign of affiliation with the Taliban.

I walked up to him. He had deep-lined wrinkles and gray in his beard, his face weathered and beaten by the sun. He stared at me coldly.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, gesturing to the rest of the compound.

His face remained expressionless, the only visible emotion coming from his eyes which glowered like a thunderhead. He gave no indication that he understood anything I said.

I pointed in the direction of our smoldering MRAP, not quite

visible over the outer wall. “Do you know anything about the bomb that just went off?”

The man spoke a few words in Pashtun, his tone even, his eyes boring into me.

I had no way to effectively question him. I was stranded without my interpreter—the only Pashtun phrases I knew were greetings or commands to stop. I stared at the man’s hands. He was missing two of his middle fingers on his right hand and on his left, he was missing the pointer. Underneath one of his baggy pant legs, I saw what looked like a wooden stump. He had to be a bombmaker. Was this the man who had tried to kill my soldiers?

Frustrated, I spoke into the company radio. “Comanche 6, this is 3-6 with a status update. We’ve secured an individual in the mud compound near where the IED took out our MRAP. He’s missing parts of his body that look like old injuries. There’s no one else here... No signs of life or work equipment. Not sure why this guy would be here unless he was associated with the blast. Over.”

“Comanche 3-6, this is Ramrod HQ.” *Ramrod*—I was gratified to hear the call sign of the Battalion. That meant the higher-ups were tracking the situation and would provide support now. The voice on the other end continued. “Do you have any evidence that he set off the IED?”

I knew they were going to ask that. “Only circumstantial,” I conceded. “He’s missing limbs like a bombmaker. Black turban. He’s got no apparent reason to be here, other than setting off bombs on us. Guessing he was alerted to the massive convoy approaching from the north and came here to set it off when they drove through. Or, who knows, maybe he just finished planting it and hadn’t cleared out yet. But...” I paused. “But...no evidence to prove it.”

“Does he have any weapons on him? Any bomb-making materials?”

“Negative. But we don’t have our interpreters, so we can’t properly question him. Do you want us to detain him and bring him back to the FOB for additional questioning?”

The radio remained silent. I spoke again. “Command, what do you want us to do?”

Another pause. “Comanche 3-6, this is Ramrod HQ. If there’s no evidence to justify detaining him any further, let him go.”

I caught Steven’s gaze and could tell we were both thinking the same thing. There was no doubt in either of our minds that this guy was most likely responsible for the blast that nearly killed our soldiers. But we had no authority or legal power to do anything about it.

I jerked my head to my soldiers. “Let’s go.”

As we turned our backs on the Afghan man and started walking out of the compound, I suddenly recalled the warning we’d seen earlier that morning. Before we’d packed up for KAF and headed out to the convoy route, my platoon had gone out to the village to do a routine visit. But it hadn’t been routine.

I could easily recall what Anthony had reported through the radio: “Lieutenant, we’re seeing some fighting-age males moving quickly between buildings. Large groups of women and children appear to be exiting the area in a hurry. Heads up. Something might be about to go down.”

Nothing had ended up happening in the village that morning, though we’d been on high alert. But walking out of the compound, I thought of his words again. They rose up in my mind like gathering storm clouds.

Heads up. Something might be about to go down.

I pushed the thought out of my mind.

Focus on the mission, I told myself. Clearly, our route had been compromised. What was my next move to mitigate the vulnerability of my guys? It was my job to lead and protect them. There were plenty of external factors outside of my control, but I intended to render control wherever I had the influence to do so.

I didn’t need to worry. There was no point. Besides, wasn’t this what I had prepared for? Wasn’t this the culmination of the vast majority of my life? I’d played army in the woods around my house since childhood. I grew up watching Rambo in Vietnam. I spent my entire adolescence preparing for West Point, then I sought leadership positions throughout my West Point years. Then came Ranger School, then all the training prior to our deployment.

This is what I had been trained and equipped to do: Lead my troops. Complete the mission. Bring my soldiers home safely.

And if I was doing what I was supposed to do, and I'd prepared for what I was supposed to prepare for—what could stop me?

Not a bombmaker, or a deadlined MRAP. Not poor security planning, or all those “fighting-age males” that had run around the village earlier in the day. I'd spent my life preparing to take on all of them, and more.

I strode forward with the unshakeable confidence of a man who knows he is in command of capable warriors, and in control of his own destiny.