

## Not So Brave

"Rocket attack. Rocket attack. Rocket attack."

Despite the recruiting videos, war movies, and visions of Thermopylae, Robert spent ninety percent of his workday staring at a computer. Ten percent of a shift he ate, but he usually took his meals at his desk. He had work on his computer, technically; really, it amounted to busy work. If he didn't do these endless spreadsheets, the war would go on. The patrols and convoys would still roll out of the gate.

Most of all, the "hajis" would still fire rockets at the base.

"All stations in this net, this is No Shame, Radio Check, Over."

Private First Class Robert Carpenter waited his turn.

"No Shame this is Bulldog CP, got you Lima Charlie Over."

"Bulldog this is No Shame, Roger."

"This is Crazyhorse, Good Copy."

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With the first rocket, with the first radio call, without planning, Robert's instinct kicked in. Instinct: pull the flak jacket over your head and adjust the Velcro across the ceramic plates. Instinct: don Kevlar helmet and clip the chinstrap—can't be John Wayne even during a rocket attack. Instinct: put glasses back on—you couldn't "get in full kit" while wearing them. Robert practiced this against his will once, twice, even three times a day when the rockets flew.

A thought flashed through the back of his mind as he gripped the radio handset, *You know, no one ever told me I was the last in line during a radio check.* That had become instinctive as well, "No Shame this is Crusader TOC, Roger Over." Perfect radio etiquette. Never say "loud and clear" (or the modified forms "Lima Charlie" and "Lickin' Chicken"). Always use the right format: you this is me. Always end a transmission with "over." His Drill Sergeant spent weeks teaching this in the loudest possible way last year. It was a habit everyone else broke quickly; Robert felt if this was worth doing it was worth doing right. *If* it was worth doing. His fellow Soldiers had spent the last six months reminding him that he was a just a POG—Personnel Other than Grunts. Maybe he was a filthy POG, but someone still had to man the

radio during rocket attacks. Someone had to let the others know when it was safe to come out of the bunkers.

While Robert completed his radio check he was alone in the tent. Instinctively, his Commander, Executive Officer (or XO), and First Sergeant joined the majority of the camp in the bunkers at the first explosion. These personnel included the Grunts.

Robert stared at a praying mantis clinging to the inside of the canvas, propped his feet up on his First Sergeant's chair, and considered his position. None of this had seemed strange to Robert until last week. Then again, pretty much anything makes sense in a Forward Operating Base (FOB for short). It made sense to check your radios first when the "hajis" shot at you, it made sense that they never came close to their target, and it made sense to sit in canvas tent and monitor a radio while the Grunts hid in the bunkers.

Of course, you weren't supposed to call them "hajis." It was racist or insensitive or something. "Haji" was nothing more than the term for one who took the pilgrimage to Mecca. He learned this perfectly common Arabic word in the Arabic classes the Army paid for before Afghanistan. They didn't speak Arabic in Afghanistan and they weren't "hajis." Somewhere, to someone, it all made sense. Those on the FOB, who had learned that the rocket attacks usually coincided with the Call for Prayer in the nearby village, called them "hajis"; the high-ranking officers in Theater Headquarters had the luxury to call them insurgents. There was something perverse in saying "the insurgents are rocketing us."

Last week was the first time Robert realized none of this made sense. It was finally his turn to go to Kandahar Air Field (KAF, acronyms made sense) for a night. He bought a real cup of coffee, ate a real meal, and took a real shower in that order. Besides, he was low on razor blades, and, water or not, he must shave every morning.

Robert was in the Post Exchange (PX) holding two packages of razor blades deciding whether he wanted the four pack or eight pack. A siren and automated voice (they were high tech here) called "Rocket—Attack" the obligatory three times. This also was some unspoken rule someone else understood. Robert sighed and put the razor blades down. He'd have to wait to buy them until after the

hajis—that is insurgents finished their pointless and poorly aimed rocket attack.

At the end of the aisle, Robert stopped. Everyone else was laying on the ground. Naturally, this was the correct posture during indirect fire. His Drill Sergeant had spent a good deal of time reminding him of that fact last year as well. Robert stared at the others and several of them stared at him. The correct instinct was to drop to your stomach (create a low profile), place your hands over your ears (guard your eardrums against concussion), and close your eyes (to guard against debris). If something was worth doing it was worth doing right. On the other hand, he hadn't heard the rockets explode. The saying was, "If you don't hear the rocket, either it didn't hit you or it did." Instead, Robert led the way to the bunker outside.

Today, he had his feet up on a chair inside a canvas tent listening to explosions at the other end of the FOB and a radio at the other end of his desk. The FOB Commander ordered the artillery to return fire, and Robert listened with mild interest to the coordinates and corrections. The howitzers (cannons, the only weapon a Soldier may call a "gun") were logically positioned to fire directly over Robert's tent. This was more FOB logic. With the first radio call of "quadrant zee-row one-na fife tree," Robert inserted his earplugs. He couldn't hear the gun chief yell "fire," but he felt the concussion as the one-hundred-pound shell rushed from the "tube" literally as fast as a speeding bullet. It was beautiful in its way; it was incredible in all ways.

Inside, every piece of dust layered on the canvas went airborne. Robert pushed his laptop away from the edge of the desk instinctively. Instinctively, he checked everything else on the desk. Each "quadrant" and "fire" moved every item in the tent—computers, radios, and especially dust. Unwatched, they would eventually fall to the floor as the guns kept firing. Only two things did not move: Robert and the praying mantis.

Sixty days later, Robert filled his other duty by putting everyone in his unit in for the Combat Action Badge (CAB). Robert's Commander felt this only made sense; everything makes sense on the FOB. So Robert wrote a memorandum with ninety-two names, those firing the guns, those hiding in the bunker, and the Robert Carpenter: the lowly Radio Telephone Operator (RTO).

Thirty days after the memo, ninety days after the rocket attack, and ninety-seven days after Robert realized none of this was really worth doing, every available member of his Battery stood in neat ranks and files on the FOB. Robert felt this as less a "formation" of people than an inviting target, but this was the right way to give awards. Everything made sense; everything was worth doing right.

After the ceremony, a Sergeant sneered at Robert. "What's that on your chest, Carpenter?"

Robert snapped to "parade rest" per the eternal mantras. "What do you mean, Sergeant?"

"Why did you get a combat action badge, Private?"

"Sergeant, the Combat Action Badge is awarded for engaging or being engaged by the enemy."

"Since when does Haji attack POGs?" the Sergeant asked. "You jumped up and defended your keyboard with your life? That it?"

"No, Sergeant."

"Then why you wearing it?"

"Everyone got it, Sergeant."

The Sergeant scoffed and sneered again. "Yeah. Sure looks that way." The Private Second Class and Specialist with him laughed and traded jokes like equals as they left Private First Class Carpenter standing at parade rest and alone.

The next day, his First Sergeant demanded, "Where's your CAB, Carpenter?"

Instinct: snap to parade rest. "In my bunk, First Sergeant."

"If you have it you wear it."

"I . . . uh. . . I broke it, First Sergeant." Robert lied, but he felt off his chest was where it belonged.

The First Sergeant opened his mouth to mentor and scold the young Soldier for his irresponsibility, but the radio interrupted with, "Rocket Attack. . . ."

Instinct: vests, helmets, bunker. Alone in the tent again, Robert confirmed that the radios worked, watched the praying mantis, and wished he had the chance to be brave.