

Larry Gene Clark, III, Guest Writer

The Day That Changed My Life Forever

May 6th, 2007 started like any other day in that God forsaken country called Iraq. I woke to the thick drawl of a Georgia accent, my team leader Sargent Jason Harkins.

I heard his voice saying, “Hey brother get your lazy ass out of your rack and get ready for our mission this morning.”

I slowly but, regrettably began to open my eyes and saw Sgt. Harkins, who already fully dressed in his ACU's; however, instead of his issued patrol cap adorning his ginger colored head, he wore his prized white Toyota baseball style cap, and he was staring down at me. When he noticed that I was no longer asleep, he smiled.

“Did you sleep well you hairy gorilla!?” he asked.

I nodded that I had, indeed, slept well and started to remove myself from my sleeping bag. Once sitting on my bed trying to gather my senses, I began to notice the rest of my platoon in the hustle and bustle of preparing for today's excursion into the chaotic city of Ba'quba. At this moment Harkins spoke up, again, gaining my full attention, “Make sure you and Alex grab some chow before you start heading down to the truck.”

“Roger that Sgt.!” I replied.

Harkins again, looking at me through his thick vision corrected clear Oakley M-Frame ballistic lenses, smiled and nodded, signaling me to go ahead and carry out the tasks he had assigned me to do. After getting dressed, I grabbed my little black bag, which, held my personal hygiene gear from under my issued cot and slung my M-4 carbine over my shoulder. Then

proceeding to make my way out of my platoon's crowded tent, I headed to the portable restroom that we shared with rest of our parent unit, Attack Company. Just before I reached the door, my squad leader and best friend, Staff Sargent Vincenzo Romeo, stopped me and asked if I was heading to breakfast after I had finished shaving. I told him that was my intention.

“Alright Larry I'll wait for you outside then,” he said.

“Sgt. Harkins told me to bring Alex with me to chow so he'll be coming with us,” I added.

Romeo regretfully acknowledged, and accepted that Specialist Matthew Alexander would be joining us for breakfast this morning. “I just hope he won't say anything too annoying while we are eating.”

“He will be fine I promise,” I retorted.

Matthew Alexander, “Alex” for short, was a little too geeky sometimes, and Romeo could only handle him in small doses. Romeo had an extroverted yet, unique personality, always telling a funny joke whenever he could, yet was serious when it was prudent to be so. He originally hailed from Calabria, Italy but, ever since he was three years old he called Lodi, New Jersey home; on the other hand, Alex was a twenty one year old introverted gamer from Gretna, Nebraska who always seemed to chuckle under his breath at just about anything. This constant chuckle would irritate Romeo to no end, which is why he avoided Alex as much as he could. Their relationship was strictly business in nature unlike my relationship with Romeo. Alex was currently assigned as the acting gunner for our Stryker. He took up this position because Spc. Mitch Archer, our regularly assigned gunner, was currently back in the United States handling

personal business and was not due back for another week. So I, for the time being, was unofficially responsible for his well-being when Sgt. Harkins was unavailable.

After my chat with Romeo about breakfast, I proceeded to the restroom again. Once I finished cleaning myself up, I headed back to my platoon's cramped, dingy, and dusty tent. The sandy brown colored tent would have been comfortable for about fifteen soldiers, but Alpha Company only had four of them to divvy out to the five platoons in the company, which, averaged about thirty men per platoon. So, we had no choice but to live in the less than ideal conditions. Our new quarters were in the process of being completed soon. I had toured these new barracks a few days back, and I was quite excited about moving into them. Little did I know that this would be the only time I would walk through them. Once I returned to back to my cot, I put away my black bag and grabbed my Oakley M-Frame ballistic glasses and tactical gloves. These items were mandated to be worn at all times by the unit in charge of Forward Operating Base Warhorse. While grabbing my gear, I saw Alex, and told him we had 45 minutes till we had to be at the truck. "Lets go to chow," I said. I didn't want to go "outside the wire" on an empty stomach.

Romeo was waiting exactly where he said he would be, smoking a cigarette and standing next to the Hesco barriers, large baskets of dirt used to protect soldiers from indirect enemy fire. "About time you two showed up," he said as Alex and I came into his view.

The dining hall was not much of a walk for us since it was just across the gravel road from our barracks; on the other hand, the wait on getting into the dining hall usually was a matter all of its own, but today the line to get in seemed to be running more smoothly than usual and was almost nonexistent. We looked at each with surprised expressions once we noticed how lucky

we were to beat the morning rush of “fobbits,” those soldiers who never leave the FOB thru the duration of their deployment.

“Maybe Greywolf actually started doing their jobs for once,” I said jokingly acting as if that was a rational explanation for our current fortune.

Alex and Romeo both chuckled at my conclusion, knowing all well that I was giving our host brigade too much credit.

We tried to make the most of enjoying our breakfast, but, due to the nature of our work, we never knew when we might have to head back out into the chaotic city of Ba’ quba. Ever since our initial push into the city, we had been operating at an extreme pace. Spending usually a week in the city and, then returning to FOB Warhorse for only eighteen hours. However, we soon learned to not always expect those few hours of rest. So, we ate quickly and kept what conversations we did have to a minimal. I told Alex, after about 15 minutes at breakfast, that it was time to go. Alex nodded and started collecting his things, but I could tell from his sluggish movements that he was in no hurry to leave. I could sense that the stress from our current mission tempo was getting to him; consequently, I didn’t bother to motivate him to move faster. It was getting to me also; hell, it was getting to us all. Even Harkins’ stoic nature was starting to show signs of fatigue. The notion of having three of our squad mates wounded while under his watch really bothered him, but,, like always, he did his best to live up to that unofficial infantry motto of, “When shit happens, suck it up and drive on!” I admired him for his ability to do that. Now it was getting a little harder to hold up under the relentless pressure.

Once outside of the dining hall, Alex and I started to make our way to our truck to get it ready for the mission. Lucky for us, our walk to the truck was not that far. Our platoon’s

Strykers were parked just across the street from our barracks. They were close enough that I could spot them from the dusty parking lot of the chow hall. There were four muddy green eight wheeled armored personal carriers that weighed in around 25 tons in their current augmented configuration. Each Stryker had an armour package that was designed to defeat rocket propelled grenades which, we called “the birdcage,” due to its resemblance to one. Inside the two foot gap the birdcage left between the cage and the vehicle itself were about a hundred or so cases of one liter water bottles. We thought the water bottles would provide some protection against a certain type of improvised explosive device threat, the explosive force penetrator or, EFP for short. More than likely it provided no actual protection other than to ease our minds when we traveled about the city. On each side of the lower sections of the birdcage were several five gallon water jugs full of mud attached by heavy duty zip ties. These also were intended to provide some makeshift protection from the EFP threat. We had also removed all of the recovery equipment from the two bench seats that sat opposite of each other and, in its place were as many ceramic body armor plates we could fit. These, too, were to help defeat the threat of an EFP. The essential recovery equipment was secured to the outside roof of the truck.

On the way to the trucks, Alex and I went back to our barracks to get our helmets and to get my set of keys to the two padlocks that secured the interior of the vehicle from unwanted visitors. Once obtained, we went back to the truck. I removed the two restraints on the vehicle while Alex secured the triangle shaped chalk block used to keep the truck from rolling if the emergency brake failed. Once inside my driver’s area, I went through the operating procedures to turn on the two batteries, engaged the 350 horsepower Caterpillar in-line six cylinder turbo engine, and lowered the rear ramp of the vehicle. Then Alex and I went through all of our checklists to ensure everything was in working order. This included checking all of the gear

secured on top of the vehicle, securing the main weapon, a Mark 19 Automatic Grenade Launcher, to the Remote Weapons Station, and numerous other tasks not worth mentioning. This usually took a skilled two-man crew about fifteen minutes, but for us it was more like twenty-five minutes. Alex was unfamiliar with all of the procedures so, I had to pick up the slack and coach him through everything. After that, all we had to do was wait for the rest of the squad to get there. Alex and I took our prospective positions: Alex in the very cramped gunner's area, and me in my cozy driver's "hole" (slang for the driver's area). Once settled in, we chatted to pass the time.

"Hey Larry what time is it?"

"It's 8:30 in the morning. The guys should be here any minute now." I replied.

"What are we doing again today?" Alex asked, not being able to remember the briefing we got from Romeo last night on today's mission.

"We are going to check up on some IP station in the city to see if they're dirty cops or not," I answered.

"Why do we have to do that? Doesn't battalion know by now that the whole damn city is dirty?" Alex said in disgust.

"Hey brother I'm with you on that but, you know that we do what we are told if we like it or not." Right when I finished with my conversation with Alex, the rest of our platoon started to make its way to the trucks. "Hey Alex, get squared away. Romeo and the squad are on their way...well two thirds of them anyway. Faulkner seems to be missing in action. Hmmm...I wonder what's up with him."

Alex said jokingly with his trademark chuckle, “Hmpf...hmpf...that sounds like more like a fire team than a squad...hmpf...hmpf.”

Alex was right in his judgment. Since we had lost Holbuz, Conroy, and Turner, our wounded squad members on Saint Patrick’s Day, we had been quite shorthanded. We had only received only one new replacement, and he had only been with us for about two weeks. Private First Class Michael Pursel was one highly motivated 19 year old soldier but, at no fault to him, was very green in experience; however, Romeo assigned him under the tutelage of Sargent Harkins. So, we figured he would do just fine, but he would have to learn fast with no room for error. Ba’ quba was not the best training environment for a new soldier. So, even with the addition of PFC Pursel and Archer away on leave, my squad was just only six members strong instead of the typical eleven.

Once Romeo and the rest of squad made it to the truck, Romeo asked if we were ready to go. I answered him in the affirmative and then asked him what had taken so long to get here. I did this to commence our tradition of continuous trash talking while we were in the truck. He returned the banter, which, in the intervening years, I can no longer recall.

“Where is Faulk?” I asked

“That bastard is sick and had to go to sick call! This is the first time he has ever been to sick call!” Romeo replied.

“Well at least it’s on a mission when it’s not really necessary for him to be here. It’s not like we’ll run into anything we can’t handle without him. Also, who are the civilians I saw walking up to the trucks?” I added.

“They are two reporters from the Associated Press I think”, answered Romeo. “Hey also, Bradshaw and Lewis will be riding with us today, providing extra firepower with their M240B since we are so shorthanded now.”

“Thanks for the heads up Romeo.” I replied. Right after I finished talking, our Platoon leader, Lt. Williams, came over the platoon radio frequency.

“All victors this is 3-6. Send me your REDCON status.”

Romeo began the secession of replies with his radio callsign, “This is 3-2 Actual. We are REDCON 1!”

This let Lt. Williams know we were ready to leave FOB Warhorse and proceed with the mission. After all of the trucks replied, Lt. Williams told the platoon to begin to make its way to the gate.

While driving to our objective and, listening to the small talk on the truck’s internal communication system, I noticed that the city of Ba’quba was showing some signs of improvement since our arrival to the city in mid-March. The streets were beginning to show signs of life, the markets were open and bustling with people, and some people waved at us when we drove by, which, only a few weeks before, would have been a death sentence; however, our job was far from being over. We had only secured a small part of the city from Iraqi Al Qaeda. Most the city was still under their control. So, for the time being, we would try to reestablish order to the areas we had liberated which, lead us to our current mission: to determine which Iraqi Police stations were dirty, and which ones were worth investing effort into strengthening.

After fifteen minutes of driving, we arrived at our destination. The police station was a white two story building with a blue stripe wrapped around the upper portion. The station was manned, from what I could gather, by only a handful of police officers. The squad excluding Alex and I, dismounted the truck and met up with Lt. Williams; we would sit and man the truck. I reached up into my little cubbyhole and, grabbed Alex's copy of, "Angels and Demons" by Dan Brown that I had borrowed. I only had a couple chapters left after starting it two days prior. So, I thought I might as well finish up the book while waiting.

I read for several hours with an MRE break around 11:30 am. When I was nearly finished with lunch, I heard a sudden commotion in the back of the truck. Romeo and the squad had returned to the Stryker with the AP photographer which, at the time I was unaware of. Romeo said in a commanding voice, "Hey Larry get the truck started and ramp up now! We need to roll time now!"

"What in the hell is going on!" I said in confusion, wondering what could cause such a stir.

"Battalion says that a UAV has spotted several armed men implanting a large deep buried IED just a few blocks away and, we have been tasked to clear it....3-6 this is 3-2 Actual we are REDCON 1," Romeo said.

I replied sarcastically, "Oh how lovely! This is going to be one hell of a day!"

I drove as fast as it was safe to do. Within a few minutes, we arrived at an alley way completely covered in trash. This area was familiar to us since, we had been here a week or so ago, emplacing concrete road barriers like those commonly found on interstate highways. During the drive, I had to switch off my ability to monitor the platoon's frequency because, there

was too much chatter on the radio and from inside the truck. I could not hear Romeo's directions clearly enough and, I did not want to make a driving error at this critical time.

Romeo yelled, "Keep an eye out for two white vehicles! One is a white pickup truck, the other is a car!"

"What kind of fucking description is that!? That describes the color of about seventy five percent of the vehicles in Iraq" exclaimed Alex in disgust.

"Don't you think I know that dammit...It is the best we have got right now," Romeo replied in frustration. "Larry, herringbone!"

A herringbone is a maneuver where you pull the vehicle to the side of the road to the opposite side of the vehicle in front of you. Once executed, several vehicles matching that description came into view from various entrances. I could hear Romeo swearing under his breath due to the incompetence of our fairly new Company Commander, Captain Huber Parsons. Not knowing exactly how to act, due the vagueness of his orders, Lt. Williams pushed our platoon to a better defensible position, a four way intersection near the center of the alleyway. This position was right next to a large yellow stone Mosque. We had heard through the local populace that this Mosque was not to be considered friendly and most likely actively involved in Iraqi Al Qaeda operations. With 1st squad's truck pulling through the intersection, Romeo told me to take the road that was perpendicular and, to the left of 1st squad's position. 3rd squad was facing in the opposite direction of our position while 4th squad covered the platoon's rear. We held this position for a few minutes so Lt. Williams could decipher what Capt. Parsons wanted us to do.

While I was waiting, I recognized the barrier that was about fifty yards away from me. It just so happened to be the barrier my squad emplaced about a week ago; however, it had been moved by someone so it no longer could perform its reason for being there, to block off traffic to Trash Alley.

A few minutes passed, and Romeo came back on the internal communication system and said in an unsure and regrettable manner, “OK, Larry, let’s go. Pull up past the barrier. This is a suicide mission.”

This last phrase puzzled me for a second, and I was about to ask him why he said that, but I never got the chance. Once I started to pass by the barrier, all of sudden I felt the most tremendous pressure and the force of being lifted in the air and hearing the deafening sound of metal being torn open. I saw my three hundred pound driver’s hatch, which I had combat locked, blow open. I can only describe seeing everything with as a pinkish haze, the horrific view of my truck at that moment being perpendicular to the ground, and, that was the last thing I remember.

I awoke to the sight of my thermal imaging screen used for night operations being upside down. At that moment I realized that what I thought was a dream was very real. Also, I had noticed that I was sitting on my driver’s hatch with my back resting on the batteries’ switches and my thumb, forefinger, and middle finger were pinned in the rear of the hatch. I looked back behind my seat and saw blue sky where the floorboards of the truck should have been. I cried out in desperation, “Romeo...Harkins...Alex...Anyone...please answer me!” After the eerie sound of silence I realized my friends were gone. I knew then that their short lives had been extinguished in an instant; my life would no longer be the same as it once was.

