

The Piper of Al Asad

During the hectic times of pre-deployment, the two corporals briefly crossed paths. One was an operator, a skilled, highly trained force reconnaissance Marine. His primary weapon was an M249 squad automatic weapon, a “SAW” in military vernacular. The other Marine was a supply man, a not so ostentatious duty, but a very valuable man himself to the scheme of things. For all the front men of a fighting unit, there are many more that support them. A warrior cannot operate without those who provide the necessary means of their trade. The two corporals were friends as one Marine to another are, mutually respectful of the other’s purpose and place in an infantry company.

The SAW Marine was looking for a new sling for his weapon. The Marine Corps had recently purchased an upgraded model and word was out that the reserve unit had received their allocation. The supply Marine found one and gave it to the operator. Supply was a busy place in the days before deployment from the west coast to the east for more training and the eventual flight to Iraq. The operator thanked the supply guy and each turned to their next tasks.

The operator was a Scot and Irishman by heritage. His supply friend was very much a Scotsman and he was gaining skill as an accomplished bagpiper. He played his pipes in the evenings during the reserve drill days following secure from work. This both annoyed and delighted his fellow Marines depending on their individual taste for the music of the Highlands.

A few moments after receiving his new sling, the operator paused in thought for a second and turned back to the supply shop. He found his friend again and asked, “Are you going to bring your pipes to Iraq?”

“Yes, I am”, the supply Marine said.

“Good”, said the operator. “If any of us gets hurt over there, I want you to play for him.”

The operator turned and walked away. The supply man stood and watched his friend for a few moments until he disappeared out of sight. They never spoke again.

Upon arrival at the sprawling base Al Asad (“Camp Cupcake” to the inhabitants) located in the wastelands of Al Anbar province in western Iraq, the Force Recon operators found their billets and immediately went into training and planning for missions in the Euphrates valley. The supply Marines for the recon company joined a supply depot at a central command in Ramadi. The needs of the recon Marines were periodically transmitted to Ramadi and items were flown to Al Asad, 90 kilometers away. The two Marine friends were nearby, but in their travels they did not cross paths.

One day in late October, two months after the recon unit had arrived in Iraq, the supply Marine was summoned to the command office.

“Marine, you are to get your butt over to the flight line ASAP. There is a helo turning, waiting to take you to Cupcake.”

“Aye, aye Sir”. Not an out of the ordinary directive, the Marine had made other trips to Al Asad, but he had never heard that a helicopter was waiting for him. He turned to go gather what he might need and proceed to flight ops.

“And Marine,” The duty officer said firmly. “Bring your bagpipes”.

The flight to Al Asad was uneventful, but strange. The supply corporal was the only passenger. A Humvee was waiting for him at touchdown. The Marine driver said nothing to the corporal. He just sped to the recon company area.

The corporal stepped out of the vehicle when it came to a stop. He pulled out his pipes and his kit bag and immediately saw the reason for his summons. The company was in formation; the Marines in their platoons stood silently and sternly at parade rest. At the front of the formation the brass stood in equal stoic stance, facing the formation. A small lectern made of MRE boxes, sand bags and camouflage cloth was set to one side.

Then the stark presence of an upturned rifle with bayonet into the ground, helmet perched on the rifle butt, dog tags swinging in the hot breeze immediately clued the piper as to the reason for his calling. He noticed the neatly placed boots in front of the rifle, heels together, toes at 45 degrees. He then noticed the SAW resting on its tripod placed next to the memorial. The piper’s heart sank.

“Who was it?” he asked of a Marine standing nearby. He didn’t need an answer, nor did he hear one. He pulled himself erect, executed a left face and marched behind the formation to the far side.

Speeches were made by the fallen Marine’s closest friends including two who had also been wounded in the fire fight the previous Friday morning. Unabashed tears flowed as they told of the heroic stance of their fallen buddy, how he saved their lives. They spoke of his intense friendship, his support for his fellow Marines, on duty and off.

The formation came to attention. All saluted, were dismissed, and in single file walked past the raised helmet. They each stopped momentarily, touched the Kevlar, and spoke silently with sad eyes before they moved on.

The piper blew into his instrument and barked out the distinctive preliminary haunting notes of the bagpipe before gliding smoothly into melody.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;
Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me home....”

“I’ve hear them liltin’,
at the ewe milkin,
Lasses a-liltin’ before dawn of day.

Now there’s a moanin’,
on ilka green loanin’.

The Flowers of the Forest are a’ wean away....”

The piper was finished and he turned back to the spot where he had arrived. He saw the Marine standing next to the same Humvee he had arrived in. He instinctively walked to the vehicle, stepped inside and was driven to the flight line. A helicopter was turning on the tarmac, rotors thumping, begging to pull the aircraft into flight. The pilot stared out the window at the piper. The piper turned to the flight ops building. A Major standing there pointed to the helo and waved with a hand motion that stated, “Hurry up and board it”.

The supply corporal never knew who had authorized the flight for him and his pipes. It didn’t matter.

Marines take care of their own.