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By Phil Mitten

It was a searing hot and dry day. I still hadn't acclimatised to the overwhelming heat, and even after four days, I couldn't believe how intensely bright the sunlight seemed on the desert sand. Sunglasses and shadows were my new best friends. I felt as though the air just wasn't dense enough, and at 109 F, the temperatures were easily the highest I had ever experienced. If only I was wearing shorts and a shirt instead of combats, body armour, and kevlar helmet.

Camp Bastion's air strip was a furiously loud and busy place. In the waiting area, it was only too easy to tell whether the soldiers around me were arriving or departing by their facial expressions, their kit and the way they carried themselves. Some pairs of eyes stared a thousand yards away into nothingness. Their minds were further still.

My face harboured the obvious signs of an outward Chinook flight; fresh faced, clean-shaven, pasty white skin, focused, and receptive of all around. However eager and confident I felt, I still had an overwhelming instinct to keep my head down and eyes front. It was as if paying a subconscious respect to those around me - those who had obviously been through a tough time up until their arrival back to the relative safety of the base.

A movements Corporal appeared holding a clipboard.

'FOB K?' He called loudly. 'Wheels up at 1440hrs.'

Less than a half-hour to wait. I went through a plan in my head, tackling the task of getting all of my kit on board in a single trip as there wasn't time to make more. I'd dump my bergan in the centre of the bird once past the tailgate entrance, then find a space to sit and place my rifle on the cargo-net seat... I stop myself from thinking about crap and reflect that I'm thinking too much about bullshit purely because I was nervous as hell.

Nine minutes to wheels up. The stench of the place is beyond my comprehension. Even the outer edge of camp stinks so badly of shit. I was already sick of coughing up what I'd heard christened as 'dusty shit-breaths.' Maybe the Forward Operating Base would smell better? This sort of question would be out of line to ask of the arriving men and women around me.

Not long to wait now. I could hear and feel the massive twin-rotors powering up. A sense of exhilaration rushes through me as I think to myself about what lay before me. This shit gets real in less than ten minutes and I'm glad there is no doubt in my own ability, or those

around me. I just have to stay switched on. Very switched on. I smirk as I remember one of my civvi mates trying to impress a local chick back home by telling her that mistakes cost his business thousands. Here, mistakes cost lives. Pride kicks in as I anticipate the challenge ahead.

*I wonder if I'm fundamentally broken at the core for feeling excited,* I muse as I get up to blindly embark on what was to be the worst five months of my life.

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I'm left shaken and momentarily confused after a thunderous explosion a short distance from the FOB. The explosion rocked the mortar-proofed roof above my rugged, dust covered sleeping space with such energy that I was briefly stunned. No sooner had I realized that this one was a controlled ammo dump destruction, I felt robbed - I was having a rare and blissful dream of being back home on the piss and dancing badly with the fiancée. Some fucking alarm clock that was! I tried to cherish every single detail of those moments before I awoke, struggling to keep the details of her face and the echoes of her laughter etched in my mind. It had been six weeks since the satellite phone connected to her mobile. Thoroughly gutted and frustrated as the memory begins to slip from my grip, I force myself to get up and face another long, hot, repetitive, and detestable day.

On an early and relatively cool Friday morning, I used some time to hand wash some kit. Once the sweat stains were just about removed I gave myself a five-minute break and plonked my ass on a pile of old sandbags, a slow trickle of sand escaping through the tattered burlap.

In typical introverted fashion, I had taken to people watching as an anti-boredom tool, speculating on the daily business of others from behind my Oakley sunglasses. What are they thinking and feeling? Were they headed somewhere important or like me, just taking a

break from the monotony of another day on the FOB? So I sat there. Observing. Thinking.

In the moment's inactivity, I slip into the negativity of the situation at hand. I'm officially, unreservedly sick of this total shit hole; sick of randomly speeding up, slowing down, changing direction, and stopping at wall edges just for the menial task of getting to the portaloos. Still, with the threat of incoming enemy bullets from the surrounding desert sands, nothing was going to stop me from this furtive technique.

Life here really is fucking grim. By now, I was acclimatised and couldn't care less about the brightness of the sun or how hot it was sure to get later that day. Prolonged exposure to the conditions, the threat, the repetitive workload, the makeshift latrine pit, the ever-hating locals, the mundane cookhouse food, and the sun all combine to make the experience as dreadful as can possibly be.

A short-term visiting officer, who I was unfamiliar with, emerged from a building in the middle distance ahead of me, took two steps and stopped in his tracks only a meter or so from the doorway. From across the dusty open space, I watched as his face shifted from placid contentment to one of shock and disbelief. Suddenly, he was thrown violently backwards. Then, a noise I knew only too well reached my ears. In a split second, all three components from the sound of a single sniper round reached me. *Whip, crack, thump*. He'd been hit straight to the chest from an unknown observation post and was knocked clean off his feet into the doorway, his body armour cracking under the release of energy against his ballistic plates. Silence followed. Time seemed to slow to a near standstill.

I threw myself to the floor beside the sandbags. I wasn't wearing any protective equipment, furious with myself for getting complacent.

'Contact!' Somebody bellowed, his voice booming across the FOB.

'Where the fuck d'that come from?' A voice from inside the doorway called out as he

dragged the casualty deeper into the darkened, unlit room.

'Not seen,' I replied. 'Stay there, check him.'

'I got 'im.' The voice retorted, sounding freaked out.

'Anyone else hit?'

'Nothing heard!' I scanned the area around me, 'Nope!'

The whole base is a hive of activity as the radio net kicks in. One by one, voices report on their findings. Nothing heard or seen all round. Very soon after, I hear the request for a medical emergency response heli to come and pick up the casualty over the radio. I knew that meant we would remain on high alert for some time now, ready to react to any further enemy bullshit. I clutched at my rifle and thought about crawling the fifty meters or so to my armour, but I knew there was no point. If it hadn't been a random pop-shot from enemy snipers, it would have been a grenade tossed over the wall by the hand of a civilian-clothed enemy. I reflect on how much hatred I have inside me these days. A startling mixture of bristling rage coupled with a constant and prolonged hyper-sensitivity to my surroundings. In that moment, I wonder if it's an unhealthy balance.

My thoughts return to the casualty. Had his kit saved him? Was he gone?

\*

Back at Camp Bastion air strip I was relieved to only be carrying my protective equipment and rifle. Everything else had been burned as it was no longer required, a task that I deeply enjoyed carrying out. I was getting out of here, hopefully never to return. The air strip is still a hive of activity, but, now, it all seems muffled somehow. Those of us who are preparing for our return have very little to say. Nearby, I hear an energetic and bright eyed

soldier talking of the foul smell in the air. If only he knew what was to come. As I exit the waiting area, I read a banner hanging over the exit gate; “When you go home tell them of us and say: for your tomorrow we gave our today”.

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