Put the Truck in Gear and Drive

—Micah Owen

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It is my week on QRF (Quick Reaction Force) and an announcement goes through the tent for us to gear up and be ready for a briefing in ten minutes. I jump off of my cot and hurry to suit up and grab my weapon, the M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon, aka, the SAW. The fully automatic M249 shoots the standard 5.56 NATO ammo at a rate of 850 rounds per minute. The SAW shoots so fast that it can melt the barrel if one's trigger finger is heavy. In "full-battle-rattle," our group gathers in a formation, awaiting further instruction. All we are told is that a truck got hit by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device). They don't tell us who got hit, but it doesn't matter. Our boys are out there and they're down…let's go get them. Our directions are clear: We need to get in our PLSs (Palletized Loading Systems) and get out there to recover any injured parties. The PLS is a ten-wheel-drive truck designed to carry materials loaded onto pallets across any terrain. My truck, number 303, is decorated with woodland green cammo paint and its top roof panel is unbolted, serving as a makeshift hatch for engaging the enemy.

On the "dog house" between the two seats I place five, two-hundred-round ammo drums along with a beef stew MRE (Meal Ready to Eat) and two bottles of water. I position everything in a way that will make it easily accessible from the gunner's hatch. My MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear and sleeping bag rests on top of two sandbags that have been placed on the floor boards underneath my seat. During the invasion of Iraq, our trucks lacked the proper armor. In desperate need for added protection, we placed sandbags on the floors and lined gunner's platforms with extra flack vests. These meager upgrades hardly do a proper job of stopping a blast from an IED or gunfire. But the "better than nothing" rule applies.

I have gotten used to the fact that we are under-protected. We have gone on enough missions now that the natural fear of being harmed no longer overwhelms my thoughts. I know that there is always a chance that I could get hurt or possibly killed, but I no longer fear death like I used to. Still, every time we leave the gate I say a quick prayer to my granddad, Keith Owen. I sincerely believe that he is up in heaven, watching over me. And there have been multiple times throughout this deployment that have proven my belief to be true.

With the trucks fired up and put in gear, we head out the gate. I pray to my granddad for protection of the convoy while locking and loading my weapon. The sun is standing straight up in the sky and the searing wind begins to pound my face harder and more steadily as we gain speed. Heavy traffic on the MSR (Main Supply Route) makes it difficult to relax. Civilian cars bolt in and out, trying to pass our slow moving convoy. The possible threat of a VBIED (Vehicle Borne IED) is always greater in heavy traffic. I view every Iraqi vehicle as a potential bomb and never let my guard down. My upper body is exposed from standing in the hatch and the only thing protecting my legs is the glass from the door and windshield. If my truck gets hit with an IED, there will be little chance of me coming out of it unscathed.

Aside from heavy traffic, the drive feels like every other mission I've been on. I eagerly anticipate getting to the site and the miles go by like running bare foot up a steep sand dune. The sun is hot and it unlocks the uninviting aroma of melted plastic and hot carcasses that we have all gotten used to. Making matters worse, every time I smell these smells I am reminded of one smell in particular.

We were rolling at night when ahead of the convoy I noticed a glowing fire in the distance. As we got closer, I could make out that it was a passenger bus set ablaze. Smoke spewed from the bus in thick, dark plumes like one might see outside of a lumber mill. Attached to the smoke was the heavy, pungent smell of melted rubber and something else that, at the moment, I couldn't distinguish. We slowly passed the burning bus one vehicle at a time. As the truck in front of me

made its pass, I saw the passenger point out their window towards the bus. I couldn't make out what they were pointing at, and made a note to myself to pay attention as we went by ourselves. We crept up and drove parallel to the burning vehicle. The smoke and smell got thicker and entered into the cab of our truck. I almost gagged from the taste, but was able to hold it in. Then, I looked into the yellow and orange glowing windows and saw human figures. People were still on the bus. I could distinctly see the charred, black remains of people. Some looked as if they had tried to make it out through the windows. They had become overwhelmed by the fire. I came to this conclusion because it looked like they only made it partially out. Some looked as if they were still sitting in their seats—as if the ride was not yet over. It was like a scene from a horror movie. When our truck passed the blaze, the mission continued in almost complete silence. And that smell is what consumes my thoughts the entire way to meeting up with our wounded convoy.

We arrive in the area to find the convoy halted. I can tell that they are close to where the explosion occurred because, just feet away, the crater from the blast is clearly visible in the center of the road. Massive amounts of hydraulic fluid lies splattered across the pavement, looking like spilled ink on a paper canvas. They are sitting only a hundred yards beyond the site of the blast. We position our truck in a box security formation around the convoy. I can see that it was the wrecker that got hit. Specialist Brown and Private Winters were the operators of the truck. I know them well. The wrecker took the brunt of the explosion. Nevertheless, the occupants of the wrecker received peppering to their arms and faces from the shards of glass that flew from the windshield. They are dazed, but intact. "Thank god," I think to myself.

Specialist Rodgers quickly attaches the downed vehicle to the backup wrecker QRF bought for recovery purposes. After the damaged truck is secured, we move a ways down the road to wait on Scouts. They will escort us to the nearest post. We need to get off of the MSR. We are sitting ducks waiting here. The longer we

wait, the longer the enemy has to plan another attack.

Each passing car is a potential threat, a target to size up and evaluate. We are on high-alert and our assholes are still puckered tight as we think about the IED that struck the vehicle. We are not scared, but we know that the enemy is likely still in the area. We are in a state of constant hyper vigilance. The Scouts reach our position around 1500 and brief our leadership on the route we will take. Finally, it is time for us to get off this damn MSR.

Our new convoy consists of the original units sent by our unit, the local national truck drivers they were escorting, the QRF, and the Scouts. The length is massive, and a large convoy means a slow convoy. Even with the added protection of the Scouts, I do not feel any safer. Though our numbers are high, our gun trucks are spread out amongst the local national truck drivers that we are escorting. We are vulnerable. Our convoy moves from the open desert into Fallujah. Now that we are in a tight area, it will become difficult to maneuver and get support to those who need it. My job as a gunner becomes much more difficult.

We turn off the MSR and into Fallujah. This simple left-turn takes what seems like a century because of the size of our convoy. What's more, we essentially advertise to all of Fallujah that we are on our way. As the long convoy makes its way into the city, I am towards the rear of the line. There is another PLS, a five-ton with a mounted, .50-caliber machine gun, and two Scout Humvees behind my truck. At first, I am not sure why we needed the Scouts. But entering Fallujah and knowing what a dangerous place it is, I welcome the grunts.

Ahead of me is over a mile of military and civilian vehicles trying to make their way through the heavily populated city. On both sides of the road there are three-to-four-story buildings lining about five or six blocks. A small parking lot takes up the area directly to my left. Tight quarters and urban areas are something that I am not used to. Mostly, our missions have been strictly on the MSR or

across open desert. Nevertheless, training and natural reactions kick in: I know that I have to scan the roof tops, windows and balconies for snipers and RPG's. I begin sizing up potential VBIED's and walkers among the populace.

There are hundreds of Iraqis lining the streets. I scan my sectors as they pop in and out of markets, jump out from beside parked cars, and generally create confusion. They are all potential threats and if something bad happens, potential targets. For now, my job is to simply sit in the hatch of the PLS, wielding my M-249 SAW and make my presence felt. I am nervous as hell. But who wouldn't be at this point? Then, the convoy stops. Why the hell did we just stop?

The reason we are stopped is too far up ahead for me to see. The wait seems to last forever. I smoke two, maybe three cigarettes one after another, trying and calm my nerves. As my last cigarette goes out, I bend down into the cab of the truck to grab another. I rustle through the clutter of ammo drums, MRE garbage, and duty gear, finding the pack of smokes resting on the floorboard. I position my body where I can reach down to recover my cigarettes when I hear a loud, metallic bang.

I scramble—weapon in hand—to the top of the hatch. I expect the worse. Small arms fire explodes from the rear of the convoy and I look to see where the return fire is directed. I don't see any burning or exploded military vehicles, only confusion. The Iraqis lining the streets—men, women and children—are all running for their lives. Shit has just hit the fan and I'm in the middle of it. I raise my weapon and start to scan.

Amongst the chaos, I look for any one brandishing a weapon. I scan left, right, up and down. In the parking lot to my left, a man in a light brown gown runs toward the convoy. He is approximately forty yards out, tall and slender, with a thick black beard and white turban stained from exposure to the desert. He clutches something wrapped in cloth around his mid-section.

I fix my sights on the man because he is running toward the convoy while concealing something in his clothes—he looks suspicious. The man shambles

forward awkwardly and the hidden object drops. He franticly tries to catch whatever it is, but it slips through his fingers. It is round in shape and dark in color; it doesn't bounce, meaning it is likely made of metal. Finally, I put two and two together:

"Grennnnnnaaaaade!" I yell. With gunfire all around me, I realize that I am the only one who can hear me. Training kicks in. I can't let him get away. I can't let him get close enough to the convoy to uses his grenade effectively. In my mind, the Iraqi has made the transition from "potential threat" to "enemy." Three red flags help me come to this conclusion: One, He is running towards the convoy when all other civilians are either running away or hiding. Two, the man is holding an object that appears to be a grenade. And three, he is so concerned with what he is holding that he is willing to risk life and limb to recover it.

I begin firing three-to-six-round bursts. Hit. The man falls but is not dead. I must have hit him in the shoulder because he gets back up, grabs the round object, and tries to find cover. I fire again; but he won't fall. He is getting close to a generator which I recognize to be his closest form of cover. He is only five feet away from escaping my sights. I aim again for his bottom right foot, leading my bullets about two feet in front of him for effect. I fire one more time, spraying a wall of lead and ripping across his upper right thigh and back before decimating his left shoulder. He falls and does not move again.

I don't have time to think about what just happened. I don't have time to comprehend that I just took a man's life with the fight still going on around me. The only thing that I think about (as I hear the crackling of small arms fire all around) is ammo. I bend down into the cab of my truck to grab another ammo drum. I reach for the one closest to me and notice my driver, SPC. Morgan, panicking and crying out in terror. "She's froze-up," I think to myself. Protocol for this type of situation would be for the driver to have their weapon out the window, scanning for threats and being conscious of the convoy ahead of them. She's not doing anything but screaming out in terror. I take a second to look at

her closely. I don't see signs of injury or damage to the cab around her. I switch back to fight mode.

I get back up in the hatch and see that fire is being directed at the gray, concrete building to my 0730. I see other elements firing at a second floor balcony. The building turns to dust as the small arms strikes tear into it. I focus my sights at the windows and fire four to five more bursts. I'm not sure if I'm hitting the enemy; but at the very least, I am providing covering fire for whoever needs to reload or reposition. The firing stops and I glance back at my first target as I reload my weapon. The body is gone and I see a large blood trail from where someone dragged him off or from where he crawled away. The pool of blood is large, thick and very dark. I stare at it for a few moments, locked in a type of trance.

Amidst the screams and cries of the civilians, I hear the panicky cries of SPC Morgan louder than anything else. I kneel down to see if she is in pain. "Maybe she did get hit," I think to myself.

I look at her and scream above the noise and confusion, "Morgan, are you okay?" I have to scream because of the intense ringing in my ears.

"Why are you shooting at them? Why is this happening? Why? Why?" Morgan is angry at me and has a stream of tears flowing down her face. Her reaction makes me furious. How could she be so blind to what is happening?

"These are loving people, why are you shooting at them?'' Morgan asks. Her hands cover her face as she bawls at the top of her lungs. This is the wrong damn time and I am the wrong damn person to be arguing with about the morality of war. I get angry as I think of her closing her eyes the moment lead started to fly. I see a naïve little girl imagining her own little fairy tale of us being the bad guys. I can't believe what I am hearing.

"God damn it, Morgan! These people fired at us…so fuck yeah we're shooting at them." I can't understand why she is mad at *me*. How could she worry more about these people—people who are trying to harm us, I might add

—than those of us trying to keep her alive? I see the convoy starting to move and Morgan's face still buried in her hands.

"Morgan," I say in a calmer voice. "Put the fucking truck in gear and drive." She doesn't respond and then rage and desperation kick back in.

"Morgan, put the fucking truck in gear God damn it!" She lifts her head, sniffling and whimpering. She looks forward with a blank stare coming from her ghostly white face, watching the truck in front of us pulling away fast.

"Drive!" I yell. The ringing sensation moves from my ears to bouncing around in my brain. She slowly comes back to earth, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and puts the truck in gear and drives. The sun is starting to go down and we are moving at a snail's pace.

"For the love of God get us out of this fucking town," I say to myself. I think I am special, but I know that this is what everyone on our convoy is thinking as well. I quickly reload my weapon and keep scanning my sectors. Still standing in the hatch, I glance down at my feet and see all the empty brass that collected in the cab during the ambush. I start to think more about the Morgan situation. Although I am still angry with her, I understand that she was just scared. But I can't understand why she blamed *me*. She was in the truck, but she did not experience what I had just experienced, nor did she have to make the same decisions that I had to make. She is lucky that she wasn't forced to pull the trigger and take a man's life. I guess, in a way, I am jealous: I envy her.

We finally get out of Fallujah and to our destination. After a debriefing and quick ammo count, the commander allows us to bed down. I roll out my sleeping bag on the back of the flat rack on our truck. I take my boots off, place them next to my vest and helmet, then lay on top of the bag. The weather is still too warm to crawl inside. My M-249 and a fresh drum of ammo rest on bi-pods parallel to my bag. I replay the actions of the day over and over in my head like a coach reviewing game film. Just when I think I have justified every little action—accounted for every little detail—a switch goes off like the pushing of a rewind

button on the VCR. I can't get it out of my head and get a sick feeling in my gut every time I see the image of that man falling to his death. I still get that same sick feeling today. My heart pounds when I think about it. I can see that day in Fallujah as clearly in my mind now as if it happened yesterday.

I lay there with my feet crossed and my hands resting interlaced over my stomach, staring at the millions of stars flickering above. I'm alone and enjoy the solitude. In the background I hear soldiers telling each other of their actions that day. Some are laughing and cracking jokes and others are just there to listen. The best thing is that we are all here to talk about it. We all made it out of Fallujah. I focus my attention back to the stars and pick one in particular: "Thank you Granddad."