

One Night in Iraq

—Travis L. Martin

9:00PM—30 Miles North of Najaf, Iraq.

Having already fired a flare directly towards the vehicle without success, I decide to flash my spotlight three more times. My efforts to communicate with the driver fail, and the car continues straight towards our convoy. I break two glow sticks and wave them in an “X” pattern, trying to get the driver’s attention. He slows a little, acknowledging that he sees me; but the driver chooses not to stop. The sun has just set. All of Iraq turns a grayish brown as the uncertainty of dark begins its slow creep over the once illuminated landscape. I pull out my night vision goggles, tie them to a strap on my flak vest, and set them next to the green ammo can directly to my front. Meanwhile, the car I fired a flare at transforms from a white speck into a clearly distinguishable orange and white sedan. For now, the car is not a threat. But it will have to come to a stop before our convoy can pass.

I am the gunner in a Humvee leading a convoy of military gun trucks and civilian supply vehicles. I stand looking forward with my knees locked, swiveling back and forth, bouncing off of the sides of the hatch with every little bump. My body flails against the cold steel like a small, helpless ball bouncing around in a pinball machine as the Humvee rolls along. I often let myself bounce around like this to stay awake; but I am not tired. Rather, I am bored and trying to stay alert while deciding if this seemingly innocent car in the distance poses an actual threat. My left hand rests on a crank that can swivel the gunner’s hatch left or right depending on which way I turn it. My right hand tightly grips the butt stock of an M240 Bravo machine gun and periodically I ensure that the ammo belt leading into the weapon’s feed tray is not tangled or caught in debris.

Meanwhile, below me, and in the cab of the Humvee, Sergeant Calhoun and Captain Dallas have reached a conclusion concerning the meaning of life.

My platoon-mates' bantering is a welcome relief from the nervous silence accompanying night missions. When you are the gunner in the lead truck you are cut off from everyone. The driver and convoy commander are only two feet away, but they are nestled in the somewhat secure confines of an uparmored humvee. I am exposed, both physically and psychologically. Physically, my upper torso is fair game for IED blasts, sniper rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, and that piano wire the enemy has taken to stringing up under bridges. The piano wire rests at the perfect height to decapitate gunners who think too much, like me. Psychologically, the lead gunner is under a lot of stress: It is my job to spot things in the road that go "boom". And if I fail, it can mean the death of not only me, but my friends in the cab of the vehicle below me and the vehicles behind me, people that I have come to know and love.

One thing that I both love and hate about being the gunner in the lead truck is that there are no military trucks in front of me. It can be scary when you think about the fact that you are the only one able to prevent an assault coming from the front of the convoy. And you have to take the fact that you are secure to your six o'clock (directly behind you) by faith. But there is also something about being in the front that allows you to relax from time to time. Having no military vehicles in front means that I can momentarily slip out of the war and imagine what it would be like to drive down these roads in my own car. I often find myself pretending that Iraq is just a normal place, like anywhere else. When the sun recedes and the ground takes on that grayish brown color, I pretend that the desert sand is brown grass, decaying and withering in anticipation of the winter. Sometimes, the street lights in urban areas are so like home that I imagine myself driving the night away like I used to do before I enlisted, throwing the angst and uncertainty of youth into the curves of random roads. And when Calhoun and

Dallas chatter over the headset, it almost feels as if I am out for a drive with a couple of my best friends.

I am silent most of the time, eavesdropping on their conversations. Their banter is hilarious and I only chime in when I have given particular thought to what I am going to say. They are both from the north and a little wittier than I am. Where I am from, in Kentucky, we have a different sense of humor and our approach to life is much slower and relaxed. Specifically, I am not accustomed or experienced enough to add my two cents about sexual conquests and I am not brutal enough to win a battle of insults. Soldiers don't insult one another out of malice; it is more a sign of camaraderie than anything else. I have been called every name in the book in the most loving of ways. Still, we judge each other based on the promptness and quality of our rebuttals to said insults. I usually approach insults from a self-deprecating angle; and I have my moments during our 36-hour, three-way conversations on the headsets. One of these moments led to the creation of Sergeant Travis "Cat Balls" Martin. In a flash of inspiration—deprived of sleep and in search of a cure for the tedium of driving down a route with nothing but desert for as far as the eye can see—I constructed my character over the radio. The story was simple: Calhoun and Dallas were talking about sex and various predicaments of the phallus when I chimed in with an entirely made-up fact:

"In high school the guys in the showers gave me the name, 'Cat Balls' because my testicles are abnormally small and furry."

"That's it!" Dallas exclaimed.

"Yes, from now on you will be known as 'Cat Balls', the sickest, deadliest and craziest gunner in all of Iraq," Calhoun added.

"And when the enemy hears of Cat Balls driving through their village they will run in fear and lock their doors because they know that my balls are small and furry. They will never understand that the slaughtering I do is not hatred for

their people, but rather, a natural reaction to having been born with the balls of a cat,” I concluded.

And so, the legend began: From then on my moniker was Cat Balls. Naturally, Calhoun became known as “Smurf Dick” for reasons that are easy to guess. Dallas simply took on the call sign “C-P-T” as an alliteration of the abbreviation for his Captain’s rank. Dallas’ nickname was partly a joke about the practice of calling a lieutenant “L-T” and it was less severe than Cat Balls or Smurf Dick because, outside the humvee, he was an officer who commanded respect. Our motley crew traversed every corner of Iraq with some sick desire to be the occupants of the lead truck at all times. Missions would last anywhere from six to forty-eight hours depending on whether or not we had a breakdown or an accident. We performed escort missions almost exclusively, getting the Iraqi and Jordanian truck drivers where they needed to be with supplies and ammunitions. Our convoys had only five or six American gun trucks interspersed throughout; the remaining twenty-to-thirty trucks were driven solely by local nationals. To kill the time, Smurf Dick and I often made calls back to the rest of the convoy:

“Never Scared 2 this is Smurf Dick 1, over.”

(Confused mumble and static)

“This is Never Scared 2, go ahead.”

“Roger, this is Smurf Dick 1. Cat Balls 1 says that there is a box on the right-hand side of the road; keep an eye out, over.”

“Smurf Dick, can you have Cat Balls describe the box? Over.”

(Chuckles overtake the static)

“Roger, this is Cat Balls 1 Actual; prepare to copy ... On the right hand side of the road, about five meters from the edge, there is a brown box that looks suspicious, over.”

“Roger, we will keep an eye out, over.”

“Roger that. Cat Balls 1 out.”

So, it is Cat Balls—the furry-testicled warrior—trying to size up the orange and white sedan heading towards our convoy. Is this the crazed suicide bomber that I dream about every night and forcefully forget before each mission? Is this the guy that people are literally dying every day to meet? I play out the scene of my own death in my mind: The car speeds up and I am caught off guard. At 50 feet away I start firing at the vehicle. I hit the driver; and with his lifeless foot on the accelerator, he speeds directly towards my humvee. At 25 feet the driver and my platoon leader start yelling at me. At 15 feet the driver of the car begins to swerve. With no way to keep firing, I throw myself down inside the gunner's hatch and the car impacts on the right side of our humvee. The impact triggers enough explosives in the trunk to level a building. Everyone (including myself) in the humvee dies; we are liquefied by the magnitude of the blast. Any remaining pieces are bagged up and mailed home. At the memorial service someone mutters to someone else that the three deaths are my fault: I failed to act. I play out this scene in my head before every mission, when I am eating chow, when I am sitting in my room, when I am brushing my teeth or staring at the stars, and especially when an orange and white sedan does not come to a stop. It only takes two or three seconds for my brain to let the whole tragic ordeal unfold. And despite the fact that I have never witnessed or been a part of something nearly so terrible, it is horrifying and real enough that I must constantly reaffirm my own place in reality.

I swivel my gunner's hatch at an angle, making it so that the shield can block me from the shrapnel of a blast while allowing my M240 Bravo to point directly at the driver's face. I pull back the charging handle on my weapon—loading a round in the chamber—keeping it trained on the car. The bolt slides back so smoothly that my right hand—the one holding the charging handle—feels a little giddy, excited from the successful execution of its simple task. Once again, I have to decide whether or not my fantasy-suicide-bomber friend is an actual-suicide-bomber friend. I have to rework the equation that turns over and over and

over in my mind every time I leave the base-perimeter wire. I have to decide if a simple orange and white sedan creeping towards me is a threat, not so much to my life, but to the lives of the people I share a humvee with. Most importantly, I have to decide whether or not this risk is worth taking a man's life and living with the consequences.

I figure that since the man is slowing down, he must not be bent on killing anyone. But then again, I am going to get yelled at if he does not stop and I let him go by. I am the lead gunner and it is my job to make sure that all traffic comes to a stop and that no one sneaks a VBIED (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) into the heart of the convoy. I basically demanded this job. I figure if someone is going to be up front it should be me. Other guys get trigger happy; other guys fall asleep in the hatch; other guys are complacent. But not me. I read the words "Complacency Kills" on the wall every time I leave the base, and like a good little soldier, I take the words to heart. Perhaps I am egotistical to feel responsible for the lives of everyone in my vehicle, every civilian I pass, and every truck behind my own; but I know I will probably pay for it before the end of the deployment. After all, if someone is going to run over a bomb, get shot by a sniper, get his head cut off by piano wire, get crushed in vehicle a roll-over, or run into a VBIED, it is more than likely going to be the lead gunner.

My hands shake from Red-Bull and caffeine tablets; but I am not nervous. The ill-effects of caffeine, taurine, B-vitamins, and sugar are a welcome relief from deadly fatigue. Pointing my machine gun at the Iraqi's face, I accept the fact that circumstances are beyond my control. I have to come to terms with this fact each time we go on mission. I tuck the fact that my control is illusory—that little metal bullets will do little to stop a vehicle bent on running itself into my vehicle—neatly away in the back of my mind. Ultimately, the driver of the sedan is going to choose his own fate. I am simply another cog in the machine. Depending on my degree of resistance to military indoctrination, I am mindless; I am not supposed to think. And every time I hesitate—choose not to immediately

fire at my perceived enemy—is a moment in which I am disobeying orders and putting my friends' lives in jeopardy. This resistance has become a horrible habit that I am finding hard to break.

The driver of the sedan can't see me. All he can see, possibly, are the streaks of light from my glow sticks in the distance. He has no idea about the thoughts rushing through my head. He is absolutely and unequivocally foreign. He did not grow up in a small Kentucky town in the Bible belt. He does not understand how hard he is making my life just by driving down an Iraqi road. And he is probably confused about why I just shot a flare at him and why I am waving glow sticks around in the air like a madman. He is blind. But I can see him clearly: He is a man on his way home from work, rushing to his wife's embrace and the warmth of children hugging at his legs. At the same time, he has waited for this moment his entire life: It took him months to put together the explosive materials weighing down the rear end of his orange and white sedan. He lost three fingers toying with old mortar shells and land mines and electrical wire; he hates me with every bone in his body and he suffers from a mental disorder that is shameful in his culture. Death is the man's only respite; and, to him, I am simply an easy ticket to martyrdom.

The man with two distinct identities is stopping, but not fast enough. Normally, one of two things would happen at this point: (1) The Iraqi stops or (2) the soldier begins mercilessly pumping rounds into the car. But I expected this sort of thing and prepared a third option before the mission. Picking up a rock from next to my ammo can, I take aim and launch it at the driver's windshield. The sound of glass breaking is loud enough that the rest of the people in my truck hear it. They laugh and the Iraqi comes to halt. It was really the only choice I had; it was either the rock or I would have to shoot the man. I have every right under the rules of engagement to fire on any vehicle that gets this close to my convoy; at least, this is what I am told.

Essentially, I am an ordained minister for the would-be-god otherwise known as the United States Army. I interpret this false god's laws, dictating life and death and separating the innocent from the wicked. But I am a generous dictator: It is my job to determine who lives and who dies, but I believe that if at all possible no one should have to die. I use jokes to keep people from realizing I've never fired on anyone with the intent to kill. I mockingly call myself "God's gift to war" or repeat a saying that I read inside a port-o-john in Kuwait: "Truck drivers pay no toll at the gates of Hell." That is what we are, in case you are wondering, just truck drivers. I am not in a combat arms unit or a trained killer. I am just a lowly truck driver. However, I am in a position where I pretend to be an infantryman every night. In the lead truck I am a gunner, I decide the fate of every Iraqi man, woman, and child passing in front of my vehicle.

I have never had to shoot up one car, never had to point the gun at a man and take his life. And I thank God (the real God, not the Army) every day for this. Sure, I have returned fire after explosions; and we have been shot at, blown up and generally harassed. But I've never faced the enemy and been in that situation I expect to happen any day now. In place of adrenaline and a fight for survival, my war is an algorithm. My response to any given situation is little more than a cold, calculated solution derived minutes, days, weeks or even years prior to the time of an actual event. My reactions are a struggle between personal morality and years of combat training and experience. The whole war thing is an equation for me: Every rock I carry—each broken windshield and fit of ensuing laughter—is equal to a life saved.

It is not that Captain Dallas, Calhoun, and the others are evil. They are in the same predicament as I am. As the convoy commander, Captain Dallas has about as much knowledge of each passing car as I do. His only course of action is to have his gunner follow the Army's rules and keep his men safe. No matter which way you look at it, the burden falls on me. I am to shoot every car that gets within 25 meters of the convoy. But, and to be fair, there are a lot of little rules

that lead up to this event: First, I have to flash the car with the spotlight; then I have to shoot a flare in the general direction of the approaching vehicle; then I wave the glow sticks, and if that does not work, I am supposed to bring the car to a halt using any means necessary. But traveling at full speed through busy streets makes all of these rules—these standard operating procedures—null and void. So, I throw rocks. Sadly, if the higher brass finds out that I am throwing rocks through windshields I will likely get in more trouble than I would for decimating a vehicle full of people.

The “Standard Operating Procedures” or “Rules of Engagement” (as they call them) are not practical. For instance, often a car will pop up on the other side of a curve and I will have to think fast. I figure 99.9% of these guys are just on their way home from work; so I throw a rock through their windshield instead of killing them. There are those that would argue—in light of the imposed curfew—that anyone caught out in the middle of the night is up to no good. But no one has ever blown up when I am in the front. I figure that I am doing everyone a favor through restraint. If I kill one innocent Iraqi, his three children will just grow up to be terrorists who will, in turn, be killed and produce three more terrorists apiece. In all actuality, each windshield I break gets rid of at least nine terrorists. This is what I tell myself when I think about the violent smash of my rock penetrating a windshield and hitting an infant—little baby brains meshing with the broken glass. I see imaginary-infant quite often when I am doing my calculations. Sometimes, the infant is replaced by a woman or a pre-adolescent boy or an Iraqi man who supported U.S. troops before being violently accosted. But these are all just variables. I know that bullets kill for certain.

Such is the irony of my war. Innocent people get killed every day, legally, under the pretense that the killer could not determine whether or not there was an actual threat. So long as the spotlight is used, the glow sticks are waved, and the flare is shot, a gunner can shoot anyone he or she wants. Of course, this is not how they teach it to you in the meetings. But enough “what if” scenarios are

brought up so that those in charge basically say what I have said happens through a wink and a nod. Think about it: Lives are just winked and nodded away.

My schematics are little more than an attempt to justify my actions. But I suppose everyone looks for a sense of self-justification when they are forced to make life and death decisions. I simply try to ignore everything the Army taught me about the morality of killing for one's country and do what I think is right (there's that ego coming back into play). I don't follow the same logic as some of my fellow soldiers. A couple of weeks ago, a Reserve unit arrived on the base that I am stationed on and started performing escort missions similar to our own. However, these guys were ill-equipped. They did not have spotlights or glow sticks and likely, they did not know how to shoot a flare. So what did they do when a car came up to their convoy? They followed the rules of engagement to the letter and shot it. I know this because I witnessed it. I was in the lead truck in our convoy and we left the gate soon enough after them. We were so close that I could see their last truck. At every intersection—every turn—I would hear gunfire and see a disabled civilian car on the side of the road a few minutes later.

Now, I am not saying that everyone they shot at died; but, in all likelihood, some of them did. I elevate myself to something better than these confused or scared or possibly trigger-happy “new guys” by believing that, if I had been the lead gunner on their convoy, those cars would have only gotten a rock through the windshield as a worst-case scenario. I also try to tell myself that these Reservists don't know any better—that I can't really know what is going on up the road—despite having travelled the exact same route hundreds of times. The scary thing is that I have heard people talk about how this kind of thing is funny and actually brag about how many times they have shot cars. These same people will go home and tell their friends that they “engaged the enemy” countless times. But I know, and they know, that they just killed some guy on his way home from work.

Back to tonight's mission, the one where I just threw a rock through a guy's windshield and everyone thinks it was the funniest thing in the world. I select about 10 rocks for each mission. They are big rocks; and they do a considerable amount of damage when they hit a car going at full speed. But I'm not killing anyone. I am better than those guys in that Reserve unit. Right?

Allow me to clarify: Tonight's mission came with a warning in the intelligence briefing. Apparently, the locals are mad because they believe American soldiers are shooting unarmed civilians (big surprise). We are to expect an ambush of some sort as retaliation. But other than the windshield I just destroyed, there has been no action. There is a man outside of his vehicle cussing at our convoy in Arabic and I hear people chuckling over the radio. But other than that, it is the same monotonous trip that we always make.

Three hours and six rocks later we have escorted the supplies to where they need to go and are on our way home. But somewhere along the way the map shows that we have taken a wrong turn. We stop the convoy and everybody is on guard, scanning their sectors and making sure that no one approaches. I am in an awkward position. The road is going straight and our convoy is parked along the side. But our truck, the lead truck, has turned right and gone about fifteen feet onto an adjacent road. The main road is running parallel with the rest of the convoy, and I am out of position to stop traffic from the front. There are no buildings and the dark envelops the living and everything else more than twenty or thirty feet away. At first, there is no traffic and I silently pray that I am not called on to act from my current position.

Then it happens: a car just like the one I threw a rock at earlier comes towards the convoy. I spotlight and wave and do everything I can to get its attention; but the driver does not see me until he gets within about twenty feet of our trucks. At this point, I should have already opened fire. He must know that he has happened upon an American convoy and that he has no business coming any further. At the same time, he must be confused and unsure about why an American convoy is on

this particular road. He stops about twenty meters away from my truck and just sits there. I have gotten complacent—too used to not killing people—and I am hoping that this guy does not come any further as I put on my night vision goggles. The lights from his car screw up my vision; but I can distinctly see the driver, someone in the passenger seat and what looks like three little heads bobbing around nervously in the back. Every car is a complex equation to be solved: It will haunt you for the rest of your life if you get the wrong answer.

I think to myself, “If this guy is going to become a martyr, and get however many virgins when he gets to heaven, he would most likely not bring his wife and kids.” I think this, but I also see Dallas returning on foot from behind. He has been sorting out the directions and gives me a disgusted look while asking, “Are you just going to sit there and let this guy blow us up or what?” This is ridiculous, I think. But without hesitation I fire a couple of warning shots right in front of the vehicle and yell at the guy to move out of the way. Well, I yell the Arabic word for stop, which is one of the only Arabic words that I know. In actuality, our would-be-suicide-bomber friend follows my directions perfectly.

The guy does not move an inch. In fact, he lights a cigarette and just stares at me. I hear from inside the convoy, “What the fuck, Martin? Seriously, if you don’t have what it takes then I’m going to find someone else.” I don’t want to kill this guy and his kids. I think this is a worthwhile notion; but I don’t say it out loud. Dallas is not angry that I haven’t shot the car. He is angry that I have let it get this close to our convoy. I have failed in my job as lead gunner. I explain that there are kids in the back and he starts to question how I know they are kids, attempting to diffuse my argument. Luckily the Iraqi slowly backs away before I get the order to fire. Dallas gets back into the Humvee and we turn the convoy around, exiting the area from the way we came.

The whole ride home I get made fun of: “Yeah, Martin, that guy punked you out back there.” I try, as usual, to turn the whole thing into a joke at my own expense. They call me a pussy, a bad gunner, and every other name in the book,

and I just take it. This is my cross to bear. I deprive trigger-happy kids from getting their bragging rights. People see through to my massive ego; they believe that I think I am better than everyone else (although, I don't see it exactly that way) and they resent me. Whatever the case, I have been doing this for four months now and no one dies while I am in the front.

We get back to the base and I dismount my gun and carry it into the tent. Everyone else has their own air-conditioned connex, but we sleep in a big tent. Tents are stifling hot, regardless of whether or not you have an air conditioner. But we sleep all day and pull missions all night; so it really does not matter. I slide my machine gun under my cot and roll my sleeping bag out to lie down on. I take off my boots but leave the rest of my clothes on. A night full of deciding who lives and who dies, of doing the work of the would-be-Army-god has made me very tired. I close my eyes and fall asleep instantly.

