

Miserable Grunts

—Wayne Heath

It is November of 2007 and we are in southeastern Baghdad, near the city of Lutifiyah. Bravo company, 2nd battalion, 502nd infantry regiment has a Patrol Base (PB) named “Copper” approximately fifteen miles from resupply at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kalsu. I am a Private on my first deployment to Iraq, and I am still becoming accustomed to the daily life of patrols and the dangers Iraqi roads have to offer. It is exciting, and we are only a few days away from a mission dubbed the “Death March,” which will consist mostly of first and second squads.

The first squad leader is Staff Sergeant (SSG) Robert Ruiz, who is arguably the best squad leader in our platoon. I am in first squad, along with Sergeant (SGT) Matt Scruton, who happens to be the best team leader in the platoon. Both Ruiz and Scruton are seasoned vets who saw lots of combat in previous deployments. As a result, first squad is always called upon for serious missions. The “Death March” is a serious mission.

We head northwest of PB Copper down a road called “North Aces.” When we arrive, we kick out the usual group of soldiers to inspect some abandoned houses. The houses are suspected “hot spots,” or cover insurgents use to shoot across the presidential canal at the corrupt Sheik Mohammed. The presidential canal separates our PB from Route Aces, and Sheik Mohammed’s house is located directly south of the houses we are searching. We patrol the houses but find nothing except for hundreds of expended 7.62mm rounds. But we decide to stick around for about two to three more hours, trying to incite the insurgents to attack us. Nothing happens.

When we return to PB Copper, we are told that at around 2400 hours we will be getting up and doing our checks in preparation for an upcoming ambush mission. The same personnel used in our previous patrol will set up the ambush

in one of the abandoned houses. So most of us go to bed and try to get three-to-four hours of sleep in preparation for the next mission. Before racking out, I am told that instead of bringing the usual 800 rounds, I will be humping 1000 rounds as well as a pack full of water and MRE's. For a small guy of 5'7" and 160-pounds, carrying a 16-pound machine gun with the additional weight is not very appealing.

We are woken by other members not going out on the mission. These individuals will be used for 12-hour rotations of force protection (four patrol base tower guards, to be exact). They show the same lack of excitement in pulling guard as we do waking up for the mission. The temperature is extremely cold and visibility is only about five feet with NVGs (Night Vision Goggles). But we try to appear motivated for the task at hand.

All of our false motivation dwindles before we even set off on the so called "Death March." The sixteen bodies used for the mission will walk around ten clicks on our pre-planned route to the house. We head out of the North side of the patrol base to cut across a farmer's land and decrease the distance to our ambush site. The weather adds a nice touch of rain to the lack of visibility and freezing weather.

After walking for one hour, we barely make it five-hundred meters from the patrol base. It is not because we are not in shape; rather, it's the obstacles and canals not shown on our maps making the journey difficult. After "hand-railing," or following the canal, we intersect another canal with a makeshift bridge built by the locals. As we cross the canal, no one notices the fifteen-foot drop under the three-foot-wide bridge. When carrying 60-pounds of gear on your back and a weapon—with five feet of visibility and slick footing—walking across a three-foot-wide bridge is a little harder than usual. What should have taken five minutes turns into fifteen minutes, and, as we cross, we see a local's house just beyond a group of berms (manmade barriers of dirt and stone).

Before getting within fifty meters of the house, someone takes a pop-shot. It “snaps” right by us. Instead of us taking cover and wreaking havoc upon the general direction of the shot, we do nothing. We actually have no idea where the round came from, and, because of the cold, miserable conditions, we just sit down on our asses and lay on the berm to rest our shoulders. After fifteen minutes of resting and seeing if we were approaching an ambush, our LT (Lieutenant Arias) determines that the very real shot is actually nothing at all and that we should not be worried about it. He orders us to “Charlie Mike” (continue mission). Pushing past the berms, we continue on the planned route given to SGT Scruton, hoping to somehow intersect with the abandoned houses.

Walking through the mud and snow flurries with limited visibility causes us to slip and fall so many times that many of our weapons become ineffective. By now, my weapon is caked with mud and no one is exercising light and noise discipline. I see tactical lights from our weapons light up one by one and start hearing the words, "fuck this shit." At this point, the LT makes a decision to cut our losses and head straight to North Aces on the same route we used on our previous mission. It seems like a win-win scenario—like all our bitching got us out of the planned route—but going this way only adds two more miles of walking. However, walking on Aces we have SOIs (Sons of Iraq), previous insurgents turned good, that we pay to watch our routes. This is comforting because it seems like every time SOIs are around we don't find or hit IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices).

By now, everyone in the area knows what we are up to. Little by little, the sun starts to rise and we pass another bridge crossing the presidential canal. Again, it is a long drop into deep water. But we cross without incident and begin our approach towards the abandoned houses. The mud is very slippery. At one point, SGT Scruton slips and falls. After ten to fifteen falls, he grabs his weapon, slams it on the ground, and says, "Fuck this stupid shit." Most of us walking behind him feel the same way. Still, SGT Scruton picks up the weapon and we Charlie Mike

towards the houses. By the time we arrive, we are all so cold that our first thought is to start a fire with whatever we can find. So, our high-speed ambush mission turns into a search for fire wood. Of course we pull security; but in all reality the security is relaxed, and if we get hit by a group of sophisticated insurgents, we will take many casualties.

We all know this is supposed to be an offensive against the insurgents in our AO (Area of Operations). But, after the plan of sneaking up on the houses covertly fails, our mission seems like a regular patrol. The “security” we pull is just one guy watching the backside and another in the front. Some of us share a sleeping bag. We do not think twice about the need to share. Devin George and I pull guard at the same time and work it out so that we can combine his sleeping bag and my blanket to stay warm.

To kill time, we all play a game SSG Ruiz played during his first deployment to Afghanistan in 2002. It is called “the movie game,” and it starts with one person picking a movie. The next person must name an actress or actor in that movie. We play the movie game most of the time we are not pulling guard. Many of us go to sleep because of the three to four hours of sleep we got the night before. We never encounter anything or anyone hostile.

Sometime later, we all assume the mission is a bust and the LT decides to cut our losses. After LT radios back to PB Copper, it is decided that we will only stay until two in the morning. At first, we are all relieved. Otherwise, we would have been miserable for the next couple days. Before we begin the walk back home, we all take turns pulling security on the roof. Being from Florida, the cold, Iraqi air is miserable. The only thought running through my head is a question: “Why the fuck did I join?” During our deployment, I would estimate that over seventy-five percent of us thought this same thought daily.

Our walk back to Route Aces is nowhere near as bad as before. I secretly hoped some kind of vehicle would be there to meet us. But our LT decides that we are “Hooah,” or good to go. He wants us to walk back, and at this point, the

bickering is not just amongst lower enlisted. Everyone is pissed off. As we manage our way back to one of the bridges crossing the presidential canal, we take it very slow because it is dark. After a couple of soldiers make it across, we take a pop-shot from one of the SOIs who are only 100 meters away. I go to my stomach in the middle of the bridge. SSG Ruiz and SGT Scruton are both behind a berm getting ready to prep a couple grenades and assault the bunkers a couple of meters ahead.

It takes us all a few seconds to realize that the shot is a mistake and that the SOIs are not the enemy. I think the SOIs are the ones responsible for shooting at Sheik Mohammed in the first place. Maybe, they made a mistake like they made when they shot at us. The SOIs had to have known we were US soldiers. Even in the dark, a regular person and a soldier with 60-pounds of crap on his back look completely different.