

Route Georgia, “Tangi Valley,” Wardak Province, Afghanistan

—Michael Conn

Summer 2008

Afghanistan: I hated you so much. All the hate in the world can't measure up to the hate I felt towards you. However, there were some positive things about your country—only a few, though. Yes, the times with my brothers of Route Clearance Package (RCP), Counter IED (C-IED) Task Force 2, 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, 206th Combat Engineers are connected to enjoyable, permanent, and vivid memories. These are very, very vivid memories, mind you. Some of these memories occur without the conscious commands to recall them. Those are the bastards. We all have memories that we “remember like it was yesterday,” and they usually bring us smiles and momentary lapses into nostalgic stupors. But what about the memories that are so vivid they trigger all five senses? *Those* are the bastards. Joe Galloway once said, “We who have seen war, will never stop seeing it” (from *We Were Soldier's Once...And Young*, co-written by Lieutenant General Hal Moore and Joe Galloway, Combat Correspondent). I will never stop seeing war and I hope to show you—my readers unaware of the darker side of conflict—my memories of fallen soldiers. You know, the blunt truth of it all.

“What the hell happened here?” I ask as I navigate my MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle) through the carnage that was once a convoy of vehicles. Some of the vehicles burn while others resemble nothing in particular except twisted heaps of metal charred black by the burning fuel.

“Fuckin' Jingle Truck massacre,” says my platoon sergeant, James Hart (A jingle truck is a colorfully decorated vehicle with bells and chains hanging from bumpers and mirrors).

“No shit, so why did they call us out here again? To oversee their recovery?”

Hart shrugs: “Something about escorting the infantry out here so they can pull over-watch for the ANA” (Afghan National Army).

“What a bunch of bullshit,” I think to myself. We have been away from the FOB (Forward Operating Base) for over a week, doing missions down these shitty-ass roads, looking for IEDs on friggin’ blacktop. I can’t see the logic in it. If the Taliban manages to get a couple hundred pounds of explosives under the asphalt without disturbing the surface, well, by God, more power to them! I shake that thought from my head, though. I know I am just getting annoyed. As a result, I am ignoring the perfectly good logic behind these asphalt missions. The Taliban often takes advantage of failing asphalt over the tops of culverts and in openings to the bare ground, burying hundreds of pounds of HME (Home-Made Explosives) and nifty, home-made ignition systems (nothing more than detonation-cord and some wire that can be triggered by an insurgent) for our convoys to run over. They are clever bastards.

Continuing through the carnage, which seems to go on forever, Hart gets his camera out and films the burning vehicles. The radio is silent as we pass the decimated trucks. We have been in country just a little over a month. While we have found and struck numerous IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), we have not actually engaged or been in direct combat with the enemy. Our wheels crush random parts of the destroyed trucks, and our entire platoon wishes the enemy would come back out for more. We want to face an armed adversary—one that will fight us in the open—not one that attacks civilian convoys and plants IEDs in the ground for us to hit so that they can claim victory over a damaged US truck. After a couple of kilometers of burning wreckage, we are instructed to pull off the road and form a perimeter around a school house. I lose track of how long we’ve waited when I finally decide to pull out my iPod. Of course, as soon as I start up my music, I hear a boom.

The sound of the explosion is dulled by our vehicle’s armor and the music from my iPod. I rip the device from my ears fast enough to catch the ass-end-

sound of the explosion. Radio chatter commences. LT (the Lieutenant) asks if anyone has a visual on the point of origin. My heart races. Have we actually been engaged by the enemy? Currently, it is impossible to tell, at least for me. One of the infantry guys finally speaks up, confirming that it was a poorly aimed RPG (rocket propelled grenade) that detonated across the road from us.

“Good God! They could not possibly suck any worse! We’re a damned stationary target. Come on,” an annoyed someone says over the radio. I look at Hart, and while I see open disapproval on his face over the comment, I can also see a measure of agreement in his eyes.

“Move us up beside LT. He’s got that MK19 raining hell on ‘em” (A MK19 is an automatic grenade launcher, pronounced “Mark 19”).

“Sure thing, Habeeb” (This call sign is a nickname I made up for Hart). I maneuver the truck through the maze of our non-combatant vehicles and come up beside LT’s truck. John Melvin is LT’s MK19 gunner. He shoots the weapon in directions pointed out to him by one of the infantry officers who also has a MK19 raining death on ‘em. Apart from the IED explosions, this is by far the highlight of our combat relations with the Taliban.

We soon realize, however, that the single RPG is all we are gonna see. The Taliban’s chief means of combat relies on employing the age old tactic of guerilla warfare. They are masters of the hit-and-run. After some time, my iPod switches back to music. I use the down time to take off my ACH (Army Combat Helmet) and rub my hair (what little is there). Some of the simplest things go unappreciated in war, such as being able to go out and about without a several-pound-hat on your head. I look over and see that the BFT (Blue-Force Tracker) has received a text message from the TOC (Tactical Operations Center).

“Sergeant Hart, there’s a text on the BFT.” He had been writing in his green book and hadn’t noticed the message.

“What the hell?” he says after reading the message. I continue to look at him, waiting for an answer. “We are to escort the infantry further down this road to assist in the recovery of a disabled American vehicle.”

As he explains, LT comes on the radio, “3-7, this is 3-6.”

“Go, 3-6... You get that message from the TOC?”

I can hear the disdain in LT’s voice (him and the commander in no way, shape, or form get a long). “Ah, roger 3-6, call it.” There is a moment of silence.

I shake my head in disbelief. Once more, I’m pissed. “Here we go,” I think. Another night without a shower and eating MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). Perfect.

“Roger 3-7, let’s form up,” says LT. Within a few minutes we form up behind the infantry element. Since we are no longer on an escort mission, we elect to roll behind.

The infantry commander comes over our radios: “RCP 2, you ready to Charlie-Mike?” (Continue mission).

“Roger, Viper, Charlie-Mike.” We start to move, pulling back onto the asphalt. We travel another kilometer and the decimated Jingle-Trucks disappear behind the haze of heat coming off the road. I try to read the text on the back of the MRAP in front of me as I always do out of boredom. Suddenly the text and the MRAP disappear into a plume of black smoke. This is followed quickly by another deep boom and hail raining asphalt.

“Holy shit!” I yell as I slam on the brakes. This would normally be an opportune time for the gunner to cuss me all to pieces for the sudden breaking. No words come my way. The MRAP in front of us has been struck by an IED—a massive one—and LT breaks up the radio chatter:

“All Sapper elements hold!” The rest of our convoy comes to a stop. We all know what has happened. The dust clears, but what I expect to see does not appear. Instead, the MRAP makes it through the explosion intact. The trigger-man was a split second too late. LT makes several attempts to raise the MRAP on

the radio, but to no avail. They give us the thumbs up and Hart relays the status of his MRAP to LT.

The infantry commander comes on the radios once more, angry and demanding to know why we have stopped. LT tells the commander the situation. If the infantry commander has any genuine concern, he doesn't show it. He has good reasons, explaining that there are reports of American KIAs, and possible MIAs coming to him over the radio. A sudden chill goes through my body. The feeling is beyond my ability to describe. It still is to this day. The only response that comes from LT is "Roger."

We start moving again. Dreading the worst—the grim possibility that some of our own could be dead or missing—a new sense of urgency reveals itself in our every movement, every thought. The dread we all feel cannot be shaken. The convoy turns left, off the main road. There is a hand-drawn sign at the entrance. In English, it reads, 'Tangi Valley.' More information comes from the radio: "Sapper, this is Viper. Be advised: the roads are narrow."

"What a fucking understatement," I think to myself. As of yet, I have never been on a road this small, this dangerous. With mountains on both sides of us, our route is smack dab in the middle, bordered by small villages and wary occupants. We travel along the road for about fifteen minutes or so, working our way deeper into the valley.

Finally, after coming around a sharp turn, I see smoke—black smoke. As we get closer, and as we make our way through the soldiers running back and forth to over-watch positions, I see another burning, twisted heap of metal. This time, I immediately recognize it as an American humvee. Once more, a chill goes down my spine. The idle talk in our vehicle ceases. In front of us, the frame of a vehicle lays awkwardly side-ways in a massive crater.

We are Counter-IED, RCP. We have seen many vehicles disabled by IEDs, even some of our own. It is our job—our everyday activity—to search for and destroy IEDs, even if that means triggering the bombs ourselves, taking the hit.

As we gaze at the former humvee in front of us, the true capabilities of our enemy are revealed in cruel, genuine form. We are suddenly thankful to have our jobs: as an RCP platoon, we have the privilege of using the military's toughest, IED-resistant vehicles and equipment.

I pull my vehicle into position as directed by Hart, putting it in park. Our attached EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) element is summoned by the commander on the ground. We soon find out that the destroyed vehicle has MK19 rounds cooking off from the intense heat. This means that we have to place charges around and as close to the vehicle as possible to ensure proper destruction of the munitions. We have to act before recovery operations can begin. Hart gets out of the truck and I ask my gunner and passenger to switch places. I do this so that the gunner can take the wheel. I want to help outside. I walk with Sergeant Hart to EOD's Jerrv (a vehicle most often used by EOD teams due to its storage space and extra explosive resistant armor). They have the det-cord out, preparing the charges. I take a couple of blocks of C4 and make an incision down the C4's center. I insert the cord. Once all the preparations are made, EOD proceeds toward the humvee.

Only then do I notice that there are bodies still in the vehicle. I can see the gunner still attached to his harness, head resting on his IBA. His Kevlar had slid down his forehead, covering his eyes. I cannot see any legs—there are no legs. Behind the gunner I see a passenger who has been charred completely black. One of the EOD guys blocks my sight as he moves the charges into position. A look of anguish takes charge of his face as he turns around to face us.

All is made ready. The EOD team leader makes the call over the radio: "Fire in the hole." The phrase is normally spoken with audible, excited anticipation, but not today. There is no excitement here, simply a cruel requirement. We cannot recover the bodies with munitions cooking off, but how does one justify this task? Despite what I think—how necessary it is—I am disgusted with all of it, myself, and at all of us. We honor the dead and this seems barbaric.

The explosion simply happens. So, we subject the occupants of the vehicle to yet another desecration. After a few minutes of waiting, EOD conducts a quick inspection, declaring the scene to be safe and clear.

We move in. I approach the vehicle, expecting to be further horrified by what we have done. Instead, I see that the bodies are in the same condition as before the blast. The feeling of disgust and horror slightly abates. No one says anything. We knew what had to be done. We find out that there were five passengers, three of them still in the burning vehicle. One has been evacuated and another, reportedly, has been dragged off by insurgents. The final occupant has no form left to his or her body. The blast of the IED completely reduced this passenger to nothing more than small fragments that have since been scattered throughout the area. As we fan out to pick up debris, a grim truth is soon revealed: There are pieces of human flesh scattered throughout the area, intermingled with the exploded parts of the vehicle. We pick up every bit. This was a brother and we will not leave him behind to decay in the damned Afghani sun.

After some time, more people arrive via Blackhawk. The occupants are CID (Criminal Investigations Command) and others we cannot identify. At this point, we don't care. We continue to pick up bits of brain, skull, and whatever else we can find. The CID guys bring body bags and we place all we have recovered in a single bag. Next, we turn to the task of removing the bodies from inside the vehicle. The gunner's head did not change position in the second blast. His chin is still resting on his IBA—eyes closed—as if sleeping. In the hell that surrounds him, he looks peaceful. I will never forget his face. We untangle him from the harness, gently pulling him from the ruin. He is carried with the most profound feeling of honor any of us have experienced in our military careers. Although we further added to their hell by setting off the second explosive charge, our shoulders carry less of a burden knowing that we are able to aid these men in their return home.

After we lay a shroud over the passenger, we place him into the body bag. We then move to the charred remains of the rear passenger. He looks unreal—like something straight out of Hollywood—because I have never actually seen a dead body before. As I gaze at this man, I notice something I will never forget: The smell of burning flesh fills the air. To this day, I smell that smell on a random, daily basis. No other smell can compare. No other smell exacts such permanence in your memory as the smell of burnt flesh. The man was a terp (interpreter) for the now obliterated vehicle, and he wears the uniform of an ANA soldier. Somehow, his uniform had escaped the heat of the blast. We treat him with the same respect as the American soldier, placing him into a body bag to be turned over to the ANA.

Next, our recovery vehicles move into position and hoist the wreckage onto our tractor-trailer. After this is done, me and our medic, Doc Jekyll, approach the crater. I have never seen one this big; it is nearly deep enough to accommodate my whole height. I can see melted glass. The heat had been so intense that the ballistic material was reduced to liquid form. We begin sifting through the rubble, grabbing whatever pieces of the humvee we can find. I am shocked to find a piece of skull, another, then another, and so on. We dig up one of their weapons, an M4, twisted and melted. Somehow, I am still able to make out the serial number.

After we are certain that all the pieces have been recovered, it comes time to load the fallen. Those damned Taliban bastards will find no war trophies here. We lift the bodies into our Buffalo (the toughest vehicle next to the single passenger husky). Once again, we feel a sense of honor in recovering these fallen warriors, who, like me, woke up this morning to continue their job and fight the war that they had been asked to fight. Like all men and women serving in this occupation, they were aware of the inherent risks and the fact that death's ever-looming shadow eagerly awaits to claim the next soul in this war. Despite our risks and fears, they served bravely and honorably countless hours before us.

I am home now, whatever that means. But the experience of war continues to reside in my very being. It is a part of who I am now, and it always will be. During my time in Afghanistan, the powers-that-be gave us the means of coping with our grim reality. We developed nearly emotionless personalities to prevent our normal, cognitive functions from getting in the way. These ways of being were a standard-issue, warrior survival kit. Normal, expected, and accepted emotional responses to chaos, carnage, and death is not a part of who I was forced to become. The suppression of our emotions enabled us to stoically perform and carry out our detestable duties. There is no dwelling on what was, or could be; we simply live in the moment—other thoughts to be damned.

A fellow veteran mentioned to me a theorist named Cathy Caruth. Caruth believes in what she calls a “Paradox of Trauma.” I will paraphrase her theory as it was explained to me: “The sufferer must experience traumatic emotions (anxiety, fear, flashbacks, etc.) later in life because the body is unable or unwilling to feel the pain of the event when it occurs.” Cathy Caruth has the right idea, in my opinion. It has been nearly two years since my return to the “real” world, and I have only recently been able to reflect on my other life and dissect the vivid, chaotic memories constantly intruding upon my consciousness. When I recovered those fallen soldiers I felt little emotion. I remember only rage. I also remember a fleeting instance when I was terrified and appalled, but only for a moment. My emotional survival kit kept me on track and where I needed to be. It just so happens that I needed to be emotionally sedated at the time.

I remember those burning soldiers more clearly now than when I experienced them in Afghanistan. I didn’t know them. I have no memories of these men. I only knew them in death. Still, I feel like we developed the strongest of bonds as we lifted them into their carriage. In retrospect, it felt as if I were a pallbearer, walking a dear friend on his last journey through the corporeal world. Perhaps the ability to write and reflect on this memory has had an unconscious healing effect on my former (pre-war) self. While that self has come full circle, the self that

exists today—who writes this story—is still trying to make sense of it all. I will never be the same. I think I will remain a man with terrible, haunting memories. In time, I will learn to accept what was. I may heal, but I will be forever scarred.

