

A Defining Moment in Time

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We crossed from Kuwait into Iraq in a convoy more than 100 vehicles long. From my seat in the last vehicle, I saw the wreckage of war in the desert heat, people ruined by Saddam Hussein's hand and our bombs. I heard no noise and saw things in slow motion. Children no more than two-feet tall—standing barefoot on the black tar road, waves of heat rising—begged for any food or water that the U.S. soldiers would give them. I watched, unable to do anything to bring them hope or comfort. My heart ached and still does as I think about that moment.

We pushed north and soon entered Baghdad, not because it was on our route but because we had gotten lost. My lieutenant had taken us into the heart of the Saddam loyalists, into a public market where people spat and shouted at us, calling us "donkey." They were just feet away, close enough to touch me, able to do potential harm if I wasn't armed.

As night approached, we were finally leaving Baghdad when our convoy stopped. A tire had blown on the truck carrying our critical equipment. In the soft light before dusk, with the sun casting long shadows, I radioed the vehicles ahead of us but got no response. Dead silence. I ordered everybody to dismount and set up a security perimeter as I assessed the situation. Within a minute we were taking harassing fire. Nothing accurate, just enough to send us a message.

My mechanics told me they only needed ten minutes, tops, and they could have us rolling. I was the senior non-commissioned officer with the stopped vehicles. The forward portion of my unit had no idea that we had stopped and wouldn't for some time. As I talked to my mechanics, I heard a soldier shout: "Sergeant Sandoval! We're being surrounded on our right flank!" I ran to my

soldiers and saw them excited and scared, so scared that two of them were peeing themselves.

These eighteen-year-old boys, from middle-class neighborhoods, who had never faced a dangerous moment in their lives, were now facing an imminent ambush. It would be simple, tactics-wise, for experienced soldiers. But I had young soldiers who couldn't think clearly because fear had gripped them. I called for a SALUTE report—size of enemy force, activity, location, unit markings, time, and equipment—which made them focus enough to give me the information needed to make a good decision.

Time seemed to stand still; minutes stretched for hours. Finally, my mechanics yelled that the bolts were going on, just a couple more minutes, when I heard: "Sergeant S, I'm taking him out!" My heart dropped as I saw a man in the distance, stumbling toward us, yelling inaudible words.

My kids, as I call my soldiers, were pale. I saw the elderly people and children around us potentially being used as shields for the attackers. *Whose parents did I want to be accountable to? Did I want to possibly harm innocent people held in a situation beyond their control? Or did I want to go home and have to face the mothers of these boys and answer this question: Why? Why did my boy die? How did he die?* As I approached the man, I told my soldiers the only way they were authorized to shoot was if I was shot or if I shot first. I didn't want them to have to make a decision that would haunt them for the rest of their lives. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't looking forward to making that decision myself, either, but I wasn't going to let my soldiers have to carry that burden. I was the NCO. I was the leader. And I wouldn't ask them to do what I wouldn't do myself.

As I approached the man, he continued walking toward us. I heard soldiers shout, "He has a bomb!" But in a split second I recognized that, not only did he not have a bomb, he was wearing a shirt three sizes too small. He wasn't

attacking. He was too stinking drunk to know the danger of his actions. I was mad. Mad that he was testing my humanity, testing my resolve.

That moment stays with me. Every day, it is that moment I wake up to and, truly, every day I wake up and get out of bed is a good day; there have been many times when I wanted to give up and not see another old man or little Iraqi child's face in my dreams. That moment with the old man pushes me to make each defining moment in time worthwhile. How had I come to killing him, with my finger on the trigger, trying to protect my soldiers? How different my life might have been if I had a shot him. Never in my life, before or since, have I been faced with a decision like that.

I can make a difference so that nobody else's child is put in that position and has to make that choice. When the light at the end of the tunnel is so dim that it seems almost non-existent, I know that the light is still there, no matter how many times I feel like I'm beat and done. It's these invisible wounds that I am trying to shed light on, so that I can help others who are suffering find comfort and purpose.

