

Not Our Day to Die

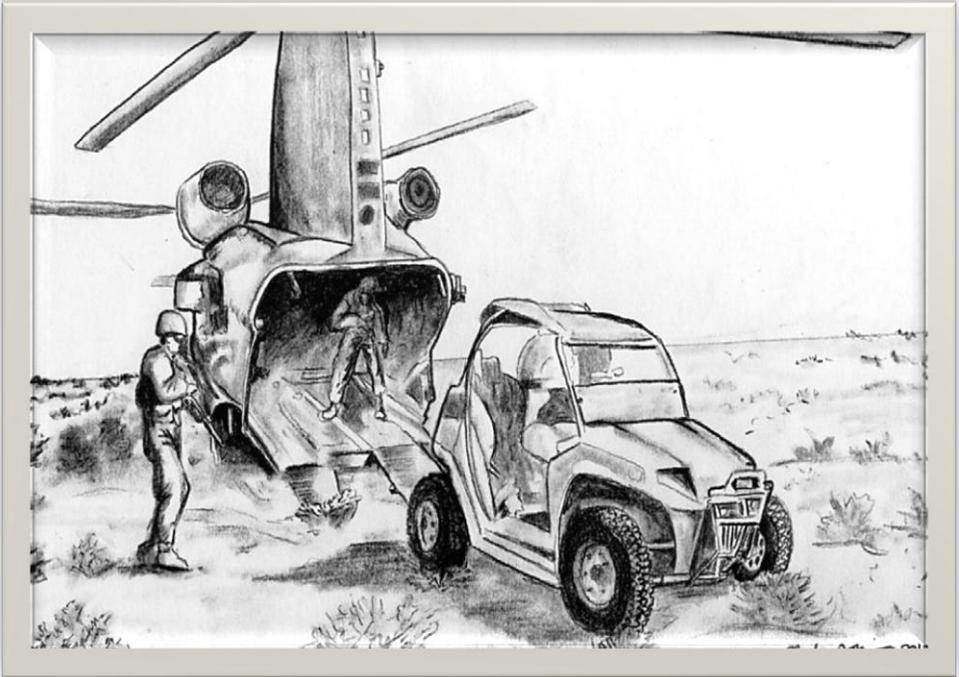
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On the afternoon of 24 July 2011 I was informed by my company commander that I had been tasked to fly to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Blessing, near the village of Nagalam in Pech River Valley, Afghanistan. My task was to conduct a relief in place with my company executive officer. He had been there for the past several days, performing logistical coordination for the reception of supplies. I was also to monitor the service contracts of the local companies that were working on the FOB.

I began to pack my ruck with everything that I thought I would need for my two-week stay: sleeping bag, extra uniform, a change of socks, t-shirts, hygiene kit, and my iPad. I took a shower, believing this would be my last opportunity for a while. I called my parents and chatted with them about the usual stuff. At the end of the call, I told my dad I was going out on a mission and I would call when I got back. Since it was six in the morning in Hawaii, I sent Shahlaine an email, letting her know I was going out on mission and, if she woke up in time before I left, that she should try to get a hold of me through Skype. I never got a hold of her before I flew out.

In the middle of the night I carried my gear to the landing zone and waited for the Chinook to arrive. It was pretty dark and there was a decent amount of cloud cover blocking the moon's illumination. I noticed the occasional flash of lightning to our southeast, though not the direction we were headed. The helicopter arrived, dropped its ramp, and a dozen or so soldiers began to load gear and supplies. I watched as they pulled "sleds" of shovels, pick axes, and other construction equipment onto the helicopter. One soldier drove a John Deere Gator up the ramp and parked it in middle. Once all of the supplies for the FOB

were loaded, the seven passengers (including me) walked up the ramp one by one, placing our ruck sacks and other gear in the bed of the Gator or on the floor.



We sat on benches on the sides of the helicopter, facing inwards. In the dim light I looked directly across from me and saw two of my soldiers, mechanics tasked to load and unload the Gator and the gear before returning to FOB Joyce on the return flight. The helicopter lifted off and I looked out the window as the base disappeared into the darkness.

Ten minutes later, we landed at Combat Outpost (COP) Honaker-Miracle. We quickly unloaded one passenger and took off again into the night. I closed my eyes, trying to mentally block out the obscenely loud noise of the helicopter's engines. A short time later, and after a much shorter flight than I expected, one of the gunners peered out of the side door to visually check our elevation so that we could land. As the helicopter slowed for its descent, I heard a "pop" and saw a sudden flash of light to the right of me, near the rear of the helicopter. My first

thought was that someone had inadvertently shot a flare, or that a flare had been shot into the helicopter. There was no loud noise, no obvious blast, and no one seemed overly worried or panicked. Then, we all noticed a fire under the Gator.

My thoughts turned to the fuel lines. I thought something on the Gator had combusted. An instant later, a fireball shot across the floor, over the feet and legs of the passenger sitting to my right (who was closest to the Gator), and over my feet and legs. I looked down in disbelief and saw that my boots and pants were not on fire. Still, I felt as though my right foot had been burned. I noticed a member of the flight crew grab a fire extinguisher, fumble around with it, and eventually put it down because it wouldn't work. The small flame under the Gator quickly turned into a large, out-of-control fire, engulfing the Gator, our gear, and the rear half of the helicopter.

My two soldiers were seated across from me. They got up and huddled as close as they could to the front of the helicopter with the other passengers. I fumbled around, trying to find the buckle on my seat belt that had slipped under my body armor. The passenger to my right hurdled over me and ran to the front of the helicopter. It was at this moment that I first felt afraid. The fire raged no more than three feet from me. I feared that another explosion would burn me or that I would be hit with shrapnel because I was trapped in my seat. Completely forgetting that I had a knife attached to my body armor, I yelled out for someone to help me. As I yelled, I managed to find and unlatch the buckle. I pushed my body up against the other passengers in the front of the helicopter, trying to put as much distance between myself and the fire as possible.

During all of this, the pilot managed to land the helicopter and a flight crew member opened one of the side doors. One at a time, we exited the helicopter and ran about twenty-five yards into a dirt ditch. Our chalk leader, a captain, started taking a head count to make sure that everyone had gotten out. I tried to stay as low as I could to the ground, looking back at the helicopter to see the fire completely engulf the back end before moving forward. I watched the blades of

the front rotor hit the ground and hoped that they wouldn't break off and come flying towards us. Thankfully, they didn't.

Then, the distinct sound of small-arms fire rang out. I saw tracer rounds above and off to the side of our group. I couldn't determine who was shooting at what. Once we had accounted for all eleven people—passengers, flight crew, and pilots—we pushed out another seventy-five yards from the helicopter. At this point, someone tried to establish communications with the base Tactical Operations Center (TOC). Because we were still in an open area and the ammunition inside of the helicopter was starting to ignite, we ran farther away from the helicopter, up a dirt berm, and braced ourselves against a stone wall.

The fire was now lighting up the night sky. Two soldiers with radios continued trying to establish communication with the TOC. Someone tried to determine if we had casualties. One soldier was throwing up and had severely sprained his ankle while running from the helicopter. I wanted to tell someone that my right foot felt like it was burned. But I figured it wasn't serious enough to warrant attention. The captain started setting up a perimeter and asked who had weapons. My soldiers were the only ones who had M-249s (machine guns), but they were still in the helicopter. All we had to defend ourselves with were a couple of M-4s (rifles) and M-9s (pistols). I overheard the flight crew try to reason out what had happened. They asked if anyone had seen us get shot at. The pilot said that whatever it was occurred while we were four-hundred feet off the ground.

From a watch tower we heard someone call out, "You okay?" From the accent we could tell that it was an Afghan National Army soldier. One of the flight crew members ran over to him, conversed, and then ran back to us to inform us that the wall we were taking cover against was the perimeter of FOB Blessing. He informed us that we could climb in through the window of the watch tower and then we would be inside the base. We climbed in through the window and one of the Afghan soldiers said that we could regroup inside one of

the barracks. As the captain retook a head count to make sure everyone had gotten inside the FOB, I took the opportunity to take my boot off and assess my foot. That's when I saw that my sock was stained with blood and had burn holes in it. As I peeled it off, I saw a bulge on the top that was bleeding. "The passenger to my right" was looking at his own wounds when he saw mine and said, "Yeah, you definitely got a piece of shrapnel in there."

U.S. soldiers made their way down to us and escorted us into the TOC. It was hectic as sergeants and officers tried to figure out what had happened, who was hurt, and relay all this information back to the Battalion TOC at FOB Joyce. That's when we learned we were attacked with a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and that it wasn't the Gator that had combusted. In fact, it was the Gator that saved our lives by absorbing the blast.

I had my wound bandaged by a medic and was driven down to the helipad where the MEDEVAC helicopter was waiting for me and the passenger to my right who also had shrapnel in his leg. We were flown to the Field Surgical Team at FOB Wright, Asadabad. I had x-rays taken of my foot, anesthesia administered, and underwent a twenty-minute operation to have the shrapnel removed and the wound flushed out. I asked to keep the shrapnel and the doctor handed it to me in a plastic specimen jar. I slept the rest of the day and was flown back to FOB Joyce later that afternoon.

Back at Joyce, I was told that the helicopter had been attacked with two RPGs and small arms fire. The two insurgents that attacked were caught running away by the Scout Weapons Team and killed.

I've been told many times over the last few days how lucky we all were. I don't doubt it for a second. It's a miracle that the Gator was parked in the perfect spot to absorb the two strikes, that two wildly inaccurate weapons struck the helicopter in relatively the same area. The fact that all eleven on board were able to walk away without any serious injuries, that the fire didn't trap anyone inside, and that the pilot was able to safely land the helicopter is unbelievable. Too many

things went right that night for it all to be a coincidence. It's ironic that the Army's code word for a downed helicopter is "fallen angel." I believe that each one of us had an angel by our side that night. Looking back on it all, I thank God that we were able to walk away to tell our story of how it wasn't our day to die.