

The Battlefield

Jonathon Travis Rape

The sweat burned as it trickled into my eyes and the desert sun beamed down. I took a deep breath and yelled a sharp command to the soldiers on the battlefield. Within an instant of the words leaving my mouth, twenty-two men sprang into action against each other. The whistle blew; the play was dead, back to the huddle as both the offense and defense planned their strategy. All the while, a real war waged over the wall.

It seemed like years since I had seen a familiar face from home. The truth is, I had started to forget what people looked like. Sometimes I would try to picture my own parents' faces but struggled to make out images of old memories. It was my second deployment to Iraq in three years. I was about to spend my twenty-first birthday far from home; I guessed it would feel a lot like my nineteenth birthday, which I had also spent in Iraq.

This deployment was far different from the first time many of us went to Iraq. It seemed much more real the second time. We were older, more experienced, and wise to the tactics of the enemy. Many faces had changed in our unit; there was a certain respect for those faces I recognized from the prior deployment. Of course, there were other faces which always danced in our memories, the faces of our friends that left us on a cargo plane rather than a passenger plane.

It had been a rough start to that first deployment, when the insurgents perfected the use of roadside and car bombs. Not only had we learned hard lessons, they had done the same. Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, seemed like it was the biggest city in the world as we would drive in three-vehicle convoys. The streets, like in any Iraqi city, were covered in a filth that could always make me gag. The children would run along the side of my truck and

scream, “Yes, yes, America. Saddam donkey, Bush good,” and as soon as we would pass, those little brat-kids would all throw rocks at us.

A day off was finally here and I had one thing on my mind. I knew today would be our day, as my platoon would face third platoon in a flag football game. We diehards were at the patch of sand and dirt that would serve as our field about an hour before the game would begin. I threw a couple of tosses to warm up my arm. It felt good to have the bright sun beating down as I warmed up.

It was kick-off time, and the entire company of over 150 soldiers stood on the sidelines to cheer. There was a huge explosion outside the wall where a mortar or car bomb must have detonated, followed by a huge explosion of applause on the football field. The ball was in play and no one paid any attention to the chaos. I stepped on the field with one goal: Today I would be the General and I would lead the charge down the field.

“Hut, Hut,” I barked to the center. I caught the snap sure handed and stepped back to survey the field. Without thinking, the football was out of my hand and into the air. My best friend, Caleb, snagged the ball out of the air and was off to the races with some determined defenders.

The game went back and forth all day. We had some plays that could have made ESPN Iraq, if there was that sort of thing. The other team seemed to understand our playbook a little more with every down. As the clock dwindled down to the final minutes, we had to score to earn our bragging rights.

My first two passes were on the money and I could smell victory. I dropped back to pass on a much-needed third down play and was forced to run for the first-down marker. I scrambled, picking my way through the defense until I realized my flag was pulled. I had passed the first down marker and begun rushing the guys back to the line so we could run one more play. As soon as everyone was set, the ball was hiked and I looked for the storybook ending. I saw a man open and I pulled the trigger on that worn-out football. It seemed to fly an eternity, floating on every cloud in the sky. It was up for grabs, and it was a

complete pass. I had made throws like that countless of times, all of which were on my Xbox; however, I was shocked to see that it was the defender on the other end of my completed pass.

We had lost the game and, as the quarterback, I was to blame. We all shook hands and headed off to use the Internet and phones as we all did on days off. We walked together, talking of the highlights of the game. As I rounded the corner to the Internet café, I saw that it was closed due to an American death in the city. The military stops all communication out of Iraq when a soldier dies and until the soldier's family is notified the proper way. We all shrugged our shoulders and turned around, still talking of the game.

Later that night, while trying to sleep, I could not help but smile. Today I had been Peyton Manning and today I was far from Iraq.

R.I.P. Jonathon Rape

**You were
Peyton Manning
on that day.**

