

The Great Military Adventure

Dustin T. Jones

My mind churned with doubts and fear as I stood at the head of the line at the position of attention, eyes locked forward, chin up, back straight. In front of the concrete building ahead of me, another private was clinging to an iron handrail with a death grip, pulled horizontal by a screaming drill sergeant. The private was also screaming. I was screaming with him, silently. I clenched my teeth so hard that my jaw began to hurt. I was trapped by dread. It took two more drill sergeants to finally drag him away. I knew there was no escape for me as I donned my gas mask and sealed it. My line of recruits herded into the concrete building, where we stood in a dimly lit room. The door slammed shut behind us. The sound of my breathing in my mask deafened me. Tear gas is not a lethal substance, but standing in that room mired in it, I did not feel reassured. I had heard stories about this day, the day all recruits fear even among all other fear-filled days of basic training. Stories about how much it burns. Two drill sergeants moved through the haze like specters, one hunched over the gas-emitting device. I knew behind their masks they both sported devilish grins in anticipation for what would happen next.

“Take off your masks!” one barked.

I heard the room erupt into coughing and retching around me as the mask left my face, the gas immediately taking my lungs and eyes from me. It ravaged the pores of my face with a fearsome eagerness, lighting my face aflame. I coughed so hard—a great whooping, hoarse affair—that I began to see black spots. I could not think, only feel those primal instincts when one is utterly trapped. *Pain. Terror. Fight. Escape.* When they finally, mercifully opened the door ahead, I ran towards the light. Once I broke out into the open, I kept running, even though I

was safe. My vision swam with tears; my insides churned. I finally stumbled and slammed into the ground on my side, skidding to a halt, my face wet with tears, snot, and saliva. As I lay staring at the grass and leaves, my coughs subsiding, one thought rose to the surface in my mind: *I'm alive*.

For the first time in a long time, I was.

Later, as we marched through the rain and back to the barracks, our gas chamber outing complete, I remember thinking to myself what a grand adventure the military was.

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I think what killed that sense of adventure that I associated with the military was meeting the boy in the pink backpack. I remember sitting in my Husky, an armored mine-clearing vehicle, staring down at him from on high through the ballistic-glass windows. I thought of all the other Afghan children I had passed on the road over so many days. They would rush to the side of the road as our convoy passed, mouths agape in glee, waving, throwing up peace signs, and whatever else they had learned from the troops who came before us. At first, I found this charming. I felt like they cared for what we were doing over there when most other locals did not. As time passed, I realized that I was lying to myself. Those hand signals and the facade of joy: all learned behavior, like a dog repeating an action, hoping for a treat. All that those children saw in us was a chance at bottled water, Gatorade, or leftovers from our field rations. I began to see them all as the same, faceless child, wearing a mask in the expression of a smile. I thought I could not care less about what happened to them.

But this one was different. He lay on his side in the dirt, facing away from me, still attached to his pink backpack. He was limp and unmoving. Killed by a roadside bomb. Maybe this child was different because he had tripped over a tripwire meant for me. Maybe it was the fact he was on his way to school when it had happened—this instantaneous stoppage of youthful expectations, this theft of hope in less time than it takes to blink, the time it takes for a circuit to close. A

group of several Afghan locals milled about ahead of our convoy, some staring at us, some at the boy. Some were picking up rocks, and eyeing the gunner of our front gun truck with malicious intent. The gunner in the truck ahead of me lifted his M-4 rifle menacingly. His left hand shot up, holding up one finger, then three as he shouted, “You throw one, I throw *three!*” I could tell in the razor edge of his voice over the radio that he meant it. The boy had affected him, too. I leaned forward in my cramped seat, my tongue running unchecked over dry lips. I could not blink.

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I've gone through life like clearing a room. *Once you kick open the door, you always follow the path of least resistance.* But you can only sidestep so many obstacles—you can only avoid so much responsibility—before you trip along the way.

Move as quickly as possible, and get out of the kill zone. Sometimes you don't move fast enough and the adventure ends. Sometimes you move too quickly, you miss something, and someone pays the price. Sometimes there are enemies waiting; sometimes there are none.

React to contact quickly and efficiently. Kill the enemy before he kills you. Sometimes you don't know who the enemy is. If you don't kill the enemy, you will die, but if you attack before confirming who is in your sights, you might make a mistake. You might shoot down someone without maliciousness, but become a murderer of innocence. If you let these doubts and fears freeze you in indecision—if you can't squeeze the trigger—then it won't matter. You'll have the rest of your life to think about it, however short that may be.

Then, in the aftermath of chaotic battle, or in the relief of an empty room, you look down and spot something bright and colorful, discarded in the dust and dirt among the dull shades of brown. The pink backpack shines so bright. The boy wearing it lies on his side, just as I had so many years ago, and suddenly I'm that

young recruit again, outside of the gas chamber. One thought rises to the surface of my mind: *I am not alive.*

