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Going Home

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The Iraqi Summer had not been good to us in 2016. ISIS had caught much of the military off guard and were making astonishing gains in both Syria and Iraq. Mosul had been in the hands of ISIS for about two years and after all the work it had taken to seize the city the first time, the joint chiefs were getting anxious to take it back again. Given how seemingly outclassed the Iraqi military was by comparison to the militants it became obvious that this would be a problem for the United States. Needless to say, it was a busy summer for the reconnaissance section. When command first assembled the recon section there were twelve of us, drawn from the battalion fresh out of whatever training section the army had allotted for us: infantry school, combat medic, airborne school, pathfinder, and the no selects from the Special Forces Q Course and Ranger Assessment and Selection Program. We formed an interesting band of vagrants and castaways, to say the least.

We arrived in Iraq in March 2016 in relative high spirits. It was the first time we had been to Iraq for all of us but one. Hamza Dar, our radioman, affectionately called “Skips” by recon section. Skips had immigrated with his parents to America in late 2002 when he was nine years old in advance of what was to come when the US coalition rolled through Iraq a few months later. No one knew how his family had managed to get into the United States, but they left behind everything to start over, including Skips’ older brother who was in the Iraqi army and his two uncles who didn’t want to leave home. “Home” was on the outskirts of the city of Masad, west of Mosul, now in territory the hands of ISIS militants. Skips joined the army in part to pay his dues to the country that had taken his family in. He also hated ISIS more than any man I had ever met, and had surprisingly strong memories of the terrain from his home country, so he fit right in. When Skips left, he never thought he would see his house again let alone what was left of his family. Last he heard his brother had died during the invasion fighting the American
Invaders and was buried in a plot of land near what was left of his house. The rest of his extended family had fled out of the country or were feared to have not survived the occupation. Now he was a few hours’ drive away from his old haunts from childhood.

It was obvious that Skips was distraught at this prospect of being so close to home and yet having it remain just out of his reach. At first it was obviously a fool’s errand, and he knew it. The city was miles behind known territory controlled by militants and there was probably little of his home left after the coalitions war and years of civil unrest that had plagued Iraq since Saddam was ousted. We were a dozen men at most; it would be a messy affair to go out and fight in the open with the militants and not what we were equipped to do. Eventually Mosul and the surrounding area would be brought back under the control of the Iraqi government, but it was obvious that Mosul with a population of over a million citizens were the priority; Masad would have to wait.

The wait ended abruptly on a particularly miserable afternoon in June. The section and I had just returned from twelve weeks outside the wire looking more like ghosts than people. Two weeks of sifting through the dirt and ruins of civilizations long gone with names no one had heard of outside the Bible or a history textbook will do that. It was exhausting work under ideal conditions and the Iraqi summer was in no mood to be kind to us. We were tired, hungry, and had enough sand in our boots, bags, and gear to fill a regulation size beach volleyball court. We had the rest of the day to recover, then tomorrow morning the colonel wanted our report. Prior to this assignment our battalion commander had been living the high life of luxury before bad luck on his part saddled him with us. He was a West Point graduate and his first taste of leadership experience was running combat operations for the Seventy-Fifth Ranger Regiment during the famous “Black Hawk Down” incident in Somalia. He was running his own section office as a
major back in regiment ’til he fell out of graces with his higher ups and was sent back to “Big Army” as they called it. He went from being a man no one in regiment wanted to being our commander for reasons to this day unknown. As such his arrival to non-special operations line infantry with gravel agitators like us was one he particularly abhorred. It was a known fact that unless you were from the regiment or had a ranger tab, he didn’t have time for you; recon section he barely tolerated. We were halfway through our report when the colonel lost interest and informed us we were being re-tasked. Command’s directive was to try and encircle ISIS around Mosul to the north near Badush. He was going to Baghdad tomorrow to iron out the details with the rest of command and staff and would be back in less than a week. We were to shift reconnaissance efforts west of Mosul and have actionable intelligence by the time he got back. How we went about this and accomplished this mission was left to my and the team leader’s discretion. To his credit, Skips waited till the rest of the team had broken for recovery before he approached me about it.

“I know what you are going to say, Skips, and we are not going.”

“Sgt., don’t make me beg, we can be there and done in a few hours.”

“And if we get hit on your jaunt through memory lane? How are we going to get support if things go bad that far behind the line? There is nothing there for you and you know it.”

Skips looked gutted, like a man who had suddenly lost everything. At his core he knew there was nothing for him in the ruins of his old town. No family waiting beyond the door for him to come home like in days gone. The desire to see it one last time still stuck in his mind like a barb in the far reaches of his conscious nothing could relieve, though. Skips was a shrewd soldier and had one trump card in hand he knew he could play. With a wry grin like a demon just
released into the material realm, he breathed his reply into physical space. “Sgt., if memory
serves, you still owe me one for Mazar-i-Sharif.”

Mike Tyson in his prime could have time traveled back to that exact moment and
delivered a full powered haymaker and it would still have been less devastating than what Skips
dropped at my feet. What seemed like a lifetime ago, Skips had pulled me out of the wreckage of
what used to be the Humvee I was riding in after an RKG-3 anti-tank grenade blew us off the
road. Other than some ringing in my ears that had never stopped I walked away from that, thanks
to him. Skips’ Muslim upbringing frowned sternly on debts, both personal and financial and
although I was indifferent to the cares of his culture and religion, there was unfortunately more at
stake. Primarily, I was not about to allow there to be a loss of confidence in me while on mission.
Squabbles and things were fine back on garrison Stateside, but under no circumstances could
there be a loss of confidence in me while in country, either perceived or actual. Secondly and
more personally, Skips was right. He was my friend and had likely saved my life. No matter how
different we were before the military brought us together, my failure to live up to his
expectations as his friend and senior would have far-reaching personal consequences. It was a
tough spot to be in, but it took all of a second to make up my mind.

“Allright, Skips, fine. You win. Mom didn’t raise a quitter. We give the gang twenty-four
hours to rest up and those that want to go can go. This is off-books and I am not going to order
them on this. You and I will go alone if that’s what it takes.” Skips nodded his approval and
walked off, seemingly satisfied.

The next day the section assembled and I broke the news about what was to come. The
choice was simple, either stay back at base and get another day or two of rest before we had to
go back out into open country, or leave with Skips and I for what I called an “extracurricular”
activity. What followed was what an old platoon sergeant of mine had once called a “robust discussion” about tactics, available support, and why this was even a consideration in the first place. It was about five minutes in when the question finally was asked: “So, Sgt., just to be clear, why are we doing this?”

It was a fair question that deserved an answer. I had been wrestling with it since Skips and I had talked the day before. I owed Skips, not them, and it was a large hesitation to gamble with the section on a personal quest like this.

“Quick show of hands, who has had tanks roll through their house?” I asked. “In four months, we get to rotate stateside and go home. Skips, though, Skips is home. In eighteen years, this is the closest he has been to being home and if a brief side op is what it takes to get him some closure on the life he left behind, I’d say it was a worthwhile deployment.” It was hardly the rallying call to arms I had hoped for, but it seemed to have the desired effect. After a brief discussion of the best plan of action, the room was unanimous. We were all leaving at dusk the next day. I could have sworn I saw Skips tear up on his way out the door.

The great redeeming quality of being in reconnaissance section was the lack of command oversight. Case in point, when we left the next day no one really gave it any consideration. Of course, that was the easy part. Once we got to Masad, things would get much more difficult and support—air, artillery, medical, or otherwise—would be a lot harder to explain. Especially if the commander got wind of it and wanted to know what we were doing and why. At best I would be called insubordinate. At worst I was looking at demotion or, depending on how he was feeling, AWOL charges for the entire section. At the end of the day, it was a consequence that didn’t bear consideration. Internally, though, I hoped the flimsy shield of him saying the mission plan was up to me would hold if things were to go sideways. The plan was relatively simple; we were
heading north to Mosul, going to make a quick detour for Skips, then continue on the route. Charts showed high ground elevation near two of the main highways into Mosul with decent elevation over the city itself. We get there in the dead of night, settle in and radio our position back to battalion, then hold there for reconnaissance for a few days. Any trouble we pack up and head south unless support arrives. We would ride to near Masad, then walk the rest of the way under cover of night to avoid detection.

The ride took the better part of forty-five minutes. Skips was silent in the passenger’s seat the entire time. I could tell from the pained look on his face he was thinking about his older brother. His mind was painting a picture; none of it was pleasant as he dwelled on words he could never speak to a brother he had once admired and who he feared died despising him. As we got close, he finally perked up with some directions. Thankfully, the major landmarks and streets had not changed much since the days of his youth. After some touch and go navigation in the dark, Skips indicated we were half a mile out and the spot we were looking for was at the top of a hill before us. I had everyone pull over off the main road. We were as close as we were going to get with the vehicles. The infiltration on foot was to be a small affair. Just myself, Skips, and the sniper team since they had one of the night vision rifle scopes. Everyone else was directed to hold position and wait for us to get back. I capped time on the objective at thirty minutes: Ten to travel there and back and twenty minutes on-site. Our luck was holding so far; we had not seen another soul anywhere and certainly no ISIS militants, but I was in no rush to change that.

The walk to our destination was thankfully a short one but made difficult by steep uphill gradient in the shifting Iraqi sands. As we crested the hill my fear was realized. Whatever structures had once stood there were long gone. Reduced to rubble and splinter, turned bleach
Going Home  Charles Williamson

white under the hateful gaze of the desert sun an indeterminate amount of time ago. It looked like the remnants of an old neighborhood or at the very least several buildings that served as part of a larger estate. So complete was its destruction it was impossible to give its former size or function to any of the former structures. The only thing that remained was a large acacia tree in what I assumed was at one point a backyard with what looked like an oddly formed rock in the green-black of my night vision near the base of the tree. I gave Skips a nod. The sniper team and I fanned out in the opposite directions to give him space. Skips seemed to handle it well enough. He walked past the rubble, only pausing once as if some long-forgotten treasure in the rubble caught his eye. He worked his way slowly to the acacia tree and stopped in front of it. He then leaned over the rock and placed both his hands on it. Skips stayed there, frozen in time for what seemed like an eternity.

I checked the time. we had to be back with the section in ten minutes. I give the sign to the sniper team then started walking toward Skips. As I got next to him, I realized what had him so enthralled. The odd shaped rock near the tree was a headstone. This was where his brother had been buried after he had died in the coalition invasion fifteen years ago. As I stood next to him Skips stood up, walked around the stone, and faced south, placing the headstone between himself and Mecca. He offered a short prayer, then nodded at me, picking up a piece of his old house and putting in his pocket as we left. Skips didn’t say anything on the walk back, but it was obvious he was a changed man. His steps seemed lighter, like he was at peace at last; like the wound in his soul was finally allowed to heal. We arrived back with the rest of the section with six minutes to spare to begin heading north. Twenty miles to the east flames engulfed the night sky as Mosul burned.