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G-Day

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I stirred and grumbled in my sleeping bag as the fire watch kicked at my feet. I was burrowed deep in the sand, still chilled despite wearing my uniform under my chemical protection suit. We had gone to Mission Oriented Protective Posture (MOPP) Level 2 (charcoal-lined oversuit and rubber overboots) the night before. Saddam had threatened to use chemical warfare during the Mother of all Battles, and the battle was getting ready to start.

In the dark, I kneeled in the cold sand to roll up my sleeping bag and shove my meager belongings into my pack. The stars in the incredibly clear desert sky provided enough light to work by. All around our gun position, my brothers packed their gear, broke out MRE meals, or wandered to the front of the truck to take a leak. A couple might have been praying.

Throck pulled the hooks off his ears and gathered us around. "Alright, boys, today is the day that the Wild Turkey Express earns our pay. Ammo truck will be here in thirty, and we move out in sixty. Do what you need to do to get ready."

I poured water from a plastic Jerry can into my canteen cup so I could get in one last shave. It would be pretty shitty to have beard stubble breaking the seal on my gas mask if we got hit with nerve or blister agent. Nothing like the bracing chill of almost frozen water on the face to wake up and start the day. I was tired but wired. It's pretty hard to get a good night's sleep the night before a war starts. Shaving with that cold water, combined with the adrenalin waves of excitement, got me raring to go

I chucked my half-eaten MRE into my pack as the ammo trucks rolled into our pos. An all-terrain forklift brought us a pallet of powder cylinders, a mix of 155 mm projectiles, and fuze cans. As the ammo team chief for Gun 5, the Wild Turkey Express, I made sure the rounds were loaded on our truck where we could get them easily at our first firing pos. We then prepped our howitzer for travel, four of us heaving the pintle ring up onto the truck's hitch. We rolled back

the truck's thick canvas top to expose the bed and climbed aboard. Ten Marine reservists, ranging from nineteen to twenty-five years old, several college students, a fire fighter, two cops, a poultry salesman, and some blue collars. All bound to a brotherhood, about to get tested by fire. We were off to see the elephant.

We were leaving our home for the past month, a spot in the desert with no one around but the occasional Bedouin goat herder and semi-regular mail and chow delivery from battalion. During that time we'd conducted training movements and emplacements until our battery functioned as a well-oiled machine. We also had a lot of down time. Scorpion fights were always fun and could add to the combat pay of the lucky owner of the victorious arachnid. Now those days of waiting and wondering were over.

As Shapiro fired up the big diesel, I climbed over Marines, ammo, and gear to make my way to a spot at the front of the bed, and leaned out over the spare tire and cab, my M-16 at the ready. Shapiro joined in the battery convoy, tear-assing across the desert. I clutched to my perch as the truck bounced and jostled through the rough terrain, half terrified of bouncing out and half exhilarated by thoughts of where we were headed. My eyes watered from the sand, brisk wind, and diesel smoke, but I wouldn't have been anywhere else in the truck. I had the best seat and could see everything. The only thing that could have made it better would have been a ring mount for our Ma Deuce .50 cal. machine gun that was wrapped in a tarp with all the other gear in the truck bed.

Nearing the Kuwaiti border, the sun rose to reveal lines of tanks, AAVs, towed and self-propelled artillery pieces, Humvees, and trucks, all in a mad dash for the two narrow routes that engineers had blown through the border minefield. Still manning my spot over the cab, I couldn't

help but imagine the frenetic strings of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries. Robert Duval had nothing on us.

The travel lanes narrowed and slowed to fit through the minefield breaches, as if a masochistic traffic engineer had designed the Mother of all Highway Merge Lanes. If the Iraqis had targeted this junction with their artillery, we would likely have steel and high explosives raining down on us at any minute. Shapiro brought our truck to a juddering stop. I turned to face my brothers in the back of the truck. Their looks were a mixture of fear, excitement, and just blank. No telling how I looked to them. I couldn't help myself. The sudden stop culled it up from deep in my psyche. I hollered out to them, in my best Slim Pickens voice, "Aww Hell! One of you boys go back and get a whole shitload of dimes!"

The lines of combat-ready Marine vehicles merged slowly but surely in stops and starts. As we crossed the border, everyone in our truck faced outboard, M-16s at the ready. We crept along, passing over the defensive trench that the Iraqis had dug just inside the border. Rumor had it that after strafing and bombing runs by our flyboys, engineers had rolled up in armored bulldozers to fill in the trench line before we came up. How many dozens or hundreds of Iraqi soldiers were buried beneath our wheels? Moving into the minefield, stakes delineated the safe route that the engineers had blown through. MPs kept the lines moving and stood watch with their Humvee-mounted 50s, ready to defend us in that fatal funnel. Apaches and Cobras patrolled overhead watching our proverbial six. If Shapiro steered off course, just a few feet beyond the marked lanes, we would likely hit a mine and if lucky, be delayed from getting to the action while our truck or howitzer got repaired. If unlucky, well, it had been a good life, but mines that can stop an armored vehicle would shred an open 5-ton truck.

Clearing the minefield, the rows of vehicles spread out, each moving toward its assigned objective or mission. Shapiro floored the gas and broke off with Gun 4, 2nd platoon's Fire Direction Control team, and the XO's Humvee, our small group making up the battery advance party. As we raced across the desert, I kept my spot at the front of the bed, alert for any threat. We passed countless still-smoking hulks of Iraqi tanks and equipment. Burnt corpses draped across the turrets and shrapnel-riddled bodies lay where they'd fallen in the sand. The coalition air forces had really prepped this section of the desert for us.

As the sun rose and the morning wore on, we bounced across the roadless terrain. Our small advance party convoy and destroyed Iraqi equipment were violent rents to the otherwise tranquil, endlessly rolling dunes. We came to a ridge overlooking a wide, flat canyon. After jerking the truck around so our cannon pointed north, Shapiro jumped out of the cab yelling, "Yee haw! Can't ride that bronc for free!" We bailed out of the truck, every man taking his position to manhandle the howitzer off the hitch and ready it to fire. My ammo team and I unloaded the projectiles and fuses from the truck to set them up on the right while the powder team set up their canisters on the left. Throck got on the traverse sight while Gibby ran the aiming stakes to the front to help him lay the piece on the correct deflection. Bordelon and Aylor readied the breech for firing and Ammon set the .50 on its tripod. Everyone moved rapidly, with little to say. We all knew our jobs well. As we got everything set up and ready for a fire mission, the rest of the battery came in and started setting up.

In the canyon below, dozens of Marine M60 tanks milled about, seemingly in a random paths, as if searching every cranny. Directly across from our position, the canyon wall had a pass through it. Iraqi T72 tanks roared through that pass, into the canyon with our guys. There was

nothing we could do but watch helplessly from high above. Artillery could not engage moving targets so close to friendly forces.

We let out cheers as our fellow Marines lit up those enemy tanks. We had front row seats to an epic tank battle! Iraqi tanks threw treads, they burst into flames. Turret machine gunners blasted Iraqi tankers who tried to flee on foot. Too far away to hear the blasts, we could only watch. Our tankers were winning, but tables could turn with a lucky shot or two. The Iraqi tanks scrambled to turn tail and escape through the pass. Our tanks followed in hot pursuit, as the Iraqis zigged, zagged, and generally fled in a panic. My mental soundtrack changed from Wagner to the theme from Benny Hill. Then it was time for us to go to work.

Throck was on the hooks. "Fire mission! Battery, five rounds! DPICM with VT fuze!" As he yelled out the fuze settings, powder charge, elevation, and deflection, we all went to work. I set my fuzes and screwed them to the projectiles that would unleash dozens of anti-tank and anti-personnel bomblets over the target. Aylor and Bordelon cranked their wheels to aim the barrel. Cherry and Lelux cut the powder bags. Simpson stood by as the recorder, and to jump in to fill a role if any of us were struck down. I heaved the first 102-pound round onto the loading tray while Ammon grabbed the other side. We slung the tray up to the breech while Shapiro rammed it home. I spun out of the way to get the next round as Gibby shoved the powder in behind the shell, closed the breech, primed it, and readied for the command from Throck. "Standby! Fire!" No time to get my fingers in my ears as we ran through the process four more times in less than a minute, giving those fleeing Iraqi tanks a nasty surprise as they thought they escaped to the other side of the pass.

We had done it. I could see a difference in the Wild Turkey Express. We were no longer the untested Marine reservists from Richmond. We were combat veterans, by God! Strutting

around the pos, slapping each other on the back, grinning like fools, we were unstoppable now. I enlisted at seventeen and chose the Marine Corps because I was betting on the chance to see combat. My bet was paying off, and we were a part of the Mother of all Ass Whippings.

We stayed in that position throughout the afternoon, firing several more fire missions. At one point the mission was a battery fire for effect, HE (High Explosive) and Willie Pete (White Phosphorous smoke) rounds at troops in the open. I couldn't imagine the Hell on Earth that those poor sons of bitches were feeling.

By dusk, a pall of smoke and the glow of flames lay on the horizon. During a lull in the action, I took a few minutes to cram an MRE in my mouth. The constant action of the day had overcome my hunger. First Sergeant Parker came into our gun's area. Any one of us would have followed that man into Hell. The epitome of a Marine, he was a natural leader. He gathered us around. "You men doing OK?"

"Roger that, 1st Sergeant," came a chorus of responses.

"You have chow? Plenty of water? Keeping your weapons clean?"

"We're all doing great, 1st Sergeant," Throck replied for the section. "Where do we go next?"

Parker gazed north, toward the smoke and fires. "There." He came to each of us to shake our hands or slap us on the backs before he moved off to Gun 6. He left us feeling motivated, but with a sense of unease about what the next battle might bring. We were still near the border and between the minefield belts. We hadn't even cleared the second breach yet.

The temperature dropped with the sun. The MOPP suit was too thick to get a field jacket on over it. A detached observer might have thought we were a homeless encampment with poncho liners draped over our shoulders, stamping our feet and blowing in our hands to ward off

the chill. Our outer clothing was a visual cacophony of muted patterns with woodland MOPP suits, desert flak jacket covers, and digital night camo parkas. The best-equipped military force in history, and they couldn't even get us a matched set of duds. Despite the cold and the extra layers, we still could pump rounds downrange. Throughout the night I kept the illumination rounds ready and Gibby sent them skyward to light up the battlefield for infantry contact and forward observers.

As midnight approached, we had been going for over twenty straight hours. Throck got off the hooks and called us to the breach of the gun. "Okay, we're going down to fifty percent on watch. Gibby, Bordelon, Cherry, Ammon, and Green. Find a place to bed down for a couple hours. Don't go beyond the cab of the truck, and don't waste time with sleeping bags or any of that crap. The rest of us will take first watch and if nothing happens, we'll swap off at zero two hundred. Great job today, men. You've done me proud. Semper Fi."

I draped my poncho over my stacked projectiles to use it as a windbreak. I rolled up in my poncho liner and squirmed down into the sand, trying to get a little bit of comfort. I was a combat veteran. Sleep took over.