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Post Awesome

Chip Lauterbach

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I felt the kick, but it might not have been the first. “Get up. We got a brief with Staff Sergeant Lopez.” I opened my eyes; Larr looked down on me with his death stare. “Hurry up, be in the COC in five.” He hurried out of the tent. My watch read 2040. I got up silently. Aside from the other team leaders rising, the tent had an eerie stillness while the rest of the marines slept.

They looked dead, but also happy. I longed for that deathlike sleep; we had only been here for few hours after patrolling from Saipan all day long, zigzagging through the streets, talking to the locals. I cracked my neck, pulled my notepad out of the utility pouch on my plate carrier, and joined Marty and Dicarlo outside. Crunching over the gravel courtyard through the damp darkness, I lit a cigarette.

COP Turbett, the home of the command element of Lima 3/9, was named in honor of Corporal Jacob H. Turbett, a combat engineer who died a year ago during the initial assault on Marjah. His portrait was placed beneath the flagpole as reminder. A hastily thrown together outpost, Turbett was situated on the northern edge of the city’s massive local marketplace, the only thing still somewhat standing from the pre-Soviet era.

The combat outpost consisted of two abandoned mud brick compounds merged into one via a knocked-out wall. There were two entry points: one for vehicles, one for foot mobiles. Marines manned five of the six guard posts, the last one was occupied by the ANA to show that the marines were simply here helping the glorious and successful Afghan National Army. If the Taliban wanted, they could easily toss a hand grenade over a wall and ruin the tiny gym that the marines had here.

The dog and pony show was strong at COP Turbett. Aside from FOB Marjah, this was the only location that State Department officials and members of Congress visited. Haircuts,

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shaves, boot blousings, and bunk checks were of more importance than maintaining a combat mindset. For a lot of guys, this was not the place to be.

I followed Dicarlo and Marty down a long corridor in the center of a maze of rooms that included living quarters for the company staff, the command operations center, a briefing room and, most importantly, the morale, wellness and recreation room. The MWR was a sacred site, home to the only computers with internet, a luxury for those of us who had only snail mail and satellite phones that rarely worked.

We entered the COC to await further word. I leaned in the doorway until a hand grabbed my shoulder from behind.

“Hey, Fatty, the snacks are over in the kitchen area. This is where decisions get made; you must be lost.” I spun to give Sills a big hug, the first time in two months that I’d seen him.

Sills asked, “You guys are gonna be going along with first platoon on this snatch and grab?”

“I guess.”

“Lopez is supposed to brief you guys any minute now. Did you talk to Karen on Valentines?”

“Yeah. She’s good. We chatted on the sat phone back at Saipan, but it kept cutting out.”

Staff Sergeant Lopez stuck into the COC. “Alright, dummies, we’re moving this brief down the hall.”

I shook Sills’ hand. “I’ll come find you later tonight, try not to get killed sitting in the air conditioning.”

“Don’t die on the toilet like Elvis, you fat bastard.”

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We filed down the dark hall into a red-lit room to gather around a small table and an open map. Lopez checked over his notes one last time.

“Everybody here? Duke, Conrado, Larr, you guys got all your team leaders here?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant.”

“Staff Sergeant, we’re all here.”

“Kill.”

“OK, do we have the guys from CAAT here? Where are my vehicle commanders?”

“All good, Staff Sergeant.” In the back of the room stood a few marines from the combined anti-armor teams, vehicle-mounted tank destroying boys with enough firepower to take over a small country. Afghanistan had no serious heavy armor threat, so these killers were relegated to providing blocking security and running the mail.

“Pay attention ’cause I’m only doing this once. The rest of the company is going to be joining India Company while they push to open up their AO. Meanwhile, we get the fun stuff. We’ll be setting in a cordon and search in the center of this cluster of compounds to our west. Corporal Larr, you and your guys will be in the outer cordon providing security with CAAT. Your job is to set up checkpoints. Keep an eye on anybody going in and out of that area. Sergeant Conrado, your squad will be on the inner cordon. You will be the support element for Duke’s squad. Sergeant Duke, you and your guys will search this compound that we believe, based off of intel, is where the Taliban are hiding either an IED cell, a high value target, or both. Since this was just handed down the grapevine to me, the operation is going to be called OP Lopez because I wrote the damn order. Questions?”

Staff Sergeant surveyed the room. “The time on deck is now 2105. We step off at 0200. Get some rest.”

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Larr said, “My team leaders, hang back.” Everyone else shuffled out like cattle. “Make sure all of your guys are topped off on water and check their weapons to make sure they’ve been cleaning them. Dicarlo, you’re going to be with me doing checkpoints. Marty, your team is going to hold on the right. Lauterbach, you’re on the left. Keep MacDonald’s machine gun offset from the road covering the avenue of approach. If any vehicles rush us, light them up before they get closer than 100 meters. OK, so we know what to do? Go get some sleep.”

Walking back to the tent, Marty asked, “You guys think it’s just a little strange we’re doing a snatch and grab but we don’t know if the target is even there, or what the target is?”

Dicarlo pinched of dip into his lip. “I was thinking the same thing. Seems like a wild goose chase.”

I kept silent, not thinking about the mission at all. I was thinking about Karen. I made up my mind to call her after I checked over Mac and the machine gun. Our conversation on Valentine’s Day a few days earlier had been interrupted several times with fly overs by Apaches and Blackhawks. Maybe they had jamming instruments running, because every time they got close the sat signal dropped.

I woke up Mac up to brief him on what we were doing later that night and to make sure his gear was set. Mac was less than thrilled.

“So we’re just chilling by the road with no guarantee that we’re going to be shooting people? Not interested, see if they can do this one without me.”

The other teams started to grumble as they awoke. They moved around prepping for the mission; no one was happy about setting in a cordon during the middle of the night. The increased risk for IEDs wasn’t what made night missions hated. It was the mud, worse than daytime. That, plus the fact that even with night vision you still couldn’t see all that well.

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I left to go see my friend Stamper. He moved a stack of magazines off his bunk so I could sit with him and his roomie Wright. The three of us passed the next few hours talking about things going on in the world back home, how we missed our wives, what our plans were for when we rotated out. I left them close to midnight and tried to figure my way back through the maze of corridors, rooms, and tents. In the gravel courtyard I met Harkrider and Nanner. Both came sprinting up to me.

“Where the fuck have you been? We’ve been looking all over for you. Larr is pissed, the word changed and he sent us to find you.”

“How long?”

“Twenty minutes.”

We jogged back. I braced for the worst. Larr despised not having accountability of his marines, especially his team leader. I entered with false cheer, like nothing was wrong.

“Hey, I heard word changed, what’s up?”

“Where were you?”

“I was with Stamper and Wright in their hooch.”

“Do you have any plans to go back out?”

“Just to the MWR to use the computers.”

“Battalion said we need to have an Afghan face on this operation, and we now have to brief the ANA and the AUP and give them time to get ready. We’re not staging ’til 0600, rolling out at 0630.”

“Really? That’s good. Gives me a chance to call my wife and get some sleep. So wait. You’re not pissed at me?”

“For what?”

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“For being hard to find. Nanner and Harkrider said you were furious because it took them something like twenty minutes to find me.”

“What? The word changed, like, five minutes ago. I sent them out to find you and you ran in like thirty seconds later.” Harkrider and Nanner doubled over laughing.

With my patience thin, I made my way over to the MWR. I sat at an outdated black laptop and logged on Facebook. I had a bunch of old messages, but surprisingly there wasn't anybody on.

Afghanistan is eight and a half hours behind America, and it was just after midnight Afghan time, which meant 3:30 p.m. in the States. I sent Karen a message, posted some pictures, then jumped on one of the phones to try to reach her. She didn't answer, so I figured she was either working or training for her 10K next month. I stayed at the computer to kill time, looking at all the things I wanted when I got back, motorcycles I would never buy, rifles I would buy. I tried Karen again. Like before, it went to voicemail. What was going on? She knew anytime a weird number called it would be me. Was she OK?

I was getting frustrated that I couldn't get through. I'd called five times, sent a few messages, but I didn't get any response. I worried something might have happened. Before long it was 0530, which meant I had spent all night on Facebook and the phone, not sleeping like I should have been. I returned to the tent to get ready with everyone else for the staging area.

Someone with a lot more brass on their collar decided we would be inserted by seven-ton trucks which, given the short distance and the fact that there was always an IED risk, seemed to be a less than thought-out plan. Coming down the road in loud seven-tons would cost us the element of surprise and give any Taliban plenty of time to get out of there.

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After loading up and waiting, I smoked constantly to stay awake. I even emptied an MRE coffee pack into my lip like tobacco to get a caffeine jolt. The sun came up and we all knew this mission was a shit show. I sat in the seven-ton dazed and kicking myself for losing track of time. I told myself it was cool; I'd had sleepless nights before.

We pushed out of COP Turbett and clanked made our way down the dirt roads. In the back of the trucks we were tossed like rag dolls; the uneven roads did not jive well with the suspension of the seven-ton. After a loud arrival, things got louder as we tried to unload in an orderly manner. No one was sure what the hell was going on. After orienting ourselves and getting away from the trucks, all surprise was gone. We walked to our checkpoint and set up the M240B on the far edge of a field adjacent to the road. There, we waited.

An hour later, Larr came over to move pieces around. "Don't bunch up like that. Use some dispersion and give yourselves like thirty meters or some shit. Set up in the field."

"You do know that a machine gun team is supposed to stick together, right? And if we're in the middle of the field, we'll have no concealment."

"Listen, dickhead, the entire fucking city of Marjah knows we're here. And I don't give two flying fucks about machine gun doctrine. I'm more worried that if a mortar or grenade lands around here, the next thing I know, I got two dead marines who were more interested in being cuddle buddies than they were with staying alive."

Mac stood. "He has a good point. See ya, boss." He walked into the middle of the field.

I felt like nothing was working the way it was supposed to. Nothing made sense, as if we were just wandering around this war zone and running check-the-box missions to help advance someone's career. If we got lucky, or if we stumbled on the enemy, then we could shoot them

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and pat ourselves on the back. Afghanistan was turning me into a cynic. I laid down my head to clear my thoughts.

“Well, well, well, my team leader has shown his ass and is sleeping on the job.”

Mac stood me. The 240 on his shoulder reminded me of Christ with his cross.

“Fuck off, dude, I just put my head down a few seconds ago.”

“I heard you snoring all the way in the field, and I’ve been standing here for a minute.”

I was beyond horrified. If Mac could walk up on me like this, so could a Taliban fighter. I could’ve had my throat slit. Even worse, I put all my friends in harm’s way.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything.” Mac sat next to me and lit two cigarettes, one for me. “You doing OK? Why didn’t you get enough sleep?”

“I kept trying to get in touch with Karen. Before I knew, it was time to stage.”

“See, that’s why I don’t talk to Alex when we go out to do ops. Of course, because I don’t call that often, she spends a good chunk of our time bitching, asking like ‘Can’t you come home sooner?’ I swear dude, that shit makes me lose my mind.”

“I just freaked out ’cause Karen is usually good about answering her phone, I’m worried something might have happened to her.”

“If we ever get out of this fucking field, I’m sure you can get in touch.”

Mac sat with me for another forty-five minutes. We smoked, and every once in a while I walked to the vehicle checkpoint to see how things were going and avoid nodding off again.

After another two hours we received word that the targets had fled. There were no IED materials to be found. Mac and I laughed, picked up our packs, and regrouped with elements from first platoon in a small courtyard. Everyone joked that because we told the ANA, the Taliban knew we were coming.

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Instead of returning to Turbett, we humped to Saipan where we had a scheduled post rotation. It took us another three hours to make it there, just in time. Before climbing up the ladder to Post Awesome, I snatched a sat phone for one more call to Karen.

“Hello?”

“Hey, baby, how’s it going?”

“Hey, I’m good. Sorry I missed your calls. How are you?”

“I’m doing OK, about to go on post, but I just wanted to talk to you real quick. I was a little worried when I didn’t hear from you.”

“I’m fine. No need to worry.”

“That’s good.”

“Actually I’m glad you called, ’cause I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“Do what?”

“Us.”

“What do you mean? What the fuck? What happened?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore.”

“What do you mean? Are you seeing someone else?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I’m your husband. Of course it’s my business.”

“His name is Anthony.”

“Are you being serious, or are you fucking kidding me with this shit?”

“This isn’t a joke.”

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“Who the fuck is this asshole?”

“For one, he’s a nice guy. He doesn’t drink as much as you. And he doesn’t talk about killing people all the time.”

“Baby, don’t do this to me. Not while I’m over here. Please just wait ‘til I get home.”

“Chip, I’m sorry.”

She hung up. I sat on the ground. I turned at movement behind me, and for once Larr didn’t look angry. He was silent, with a friendly expression.

“Bad news?”

“The wife’s leaving me.”

“I’ve been there. Want me to talk to Staff Sergeant Medina? We can get you pulled back to Turbett. With that shit on your mind, you’ll get yourself killed out here.”

“I’m staying.”

“You sure? Need some time to think, maybe chill?”

“I’ve got post in five minutes.”

“Asshole, listen. You don’t have to pull this tough guy shit. Go back into your tent, someone else’ll stand your watch.”

“No. I’m good. The bottom line is I’m in Afghanistan and she’s in the States. Nothing I can do about that. I’d rather push on with my brothers who actually need me.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Stay sharp. We’ll drop some bodies and you’ll feel better. Plenty of fish in the sea.”

Larr went back into his hooch, and I climbed the ladder to Post Awesome.