2021

The Same Flight

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The commute to Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune was short, but once inside, I had five miles of live ordnance range to cross on the way to French Creek, home of the Second Medical Battalion. Along the way I passed the gas chamber, where twice a year we donned masks in a toxic environment and compared snot when we were done. When I parked in my designated space, my sonic metallic blue Mustang sat nose to nose with the armored personnel carrier captured during the Gulf War, now displayed in front of our headquarters building. Every part of my daily journey provided a reminder we were in the warfighting business.

As chaplain, my job was to ensure the warfighters were ready to do their jobs. In early January 2003, amid rumors of war, I visited the commanding officer for guidance. A straight-talking, honorable man with a great sense of humor, he got right to the point.

"If the Iraqis deploy a chemical or biological agent anywhere in theater, our unit will provide medical care for the marines exposed to it, thereby contaminating us." He looked right in my eyes. "Anyone exposed to such an agent could not return to the US if doing so would jeopardize the health of those back home. Chaplain, I am telling you this because it will be your job to help our personnel understand and cope with this reality should it occur."

"So, sir, we would stay in theater until we are no longer contagious, or we're dead?"

"Yes. I don't know how one gets prepared for that, but just do it. Oh, and here, I made you some foo-foo coffee. What do you think of this flavor?"

"It's better than your tasking, Skipper."

With the holiday leave behind us, and an uncertain timeframe for deployment, our unit got right to work. The Second Medical BN corpsmen and marines erected decontamination tents on the grass outside the headquarters building. Several times I volunteered to play contaminee, knowing how important it was for them to learn to do this right. Once the process became muscle

memory, they containerized that equipment and moved on to practicing with the Field Resuscitative Surgical System (FRSS), a mobile unit designed to provide surgery anywhere in under an hour.

Every shop, from admin to transportation, prepared their area of responsibility to go mobile. For the Command Religious program, this meant filling our allotted containers with the items on the inspectable packing list: Bibles, missalettes, kippahs, Korans, altar cloths—all the things necessary to supply a variety of faith groups for worship. I balked at candles—knowing they would melt—but as they were a requirement, we wrapped them to keep the wax from ruining the other stuff. We also packed board games and cards.

After work each day, I focused on getting myself ready. A natural list maker, I started there. Dogs, funeral, close up the house, personal items to pack, mail, bills, important papers—I tried to think of everything. Chester and Mouse watched intently. They knew something was afoot. I'd had Chester for fourteen years. Who would want an old, smelly, loveable beagle? Mouse, a younger and more energetic mutt, would do well with children. I couldn't bring myself to take her to a shelter.

I moved on to my funeral, since that would be easier to do. I gathered my dress blues, my white alb, and my woven stole and drove to the dry cleaners.

"Special occasion, Chaplain?"

"I'm deploying soon. To Iraq. For the war."

The dry cleaner took my uniform and robe, tagged them, and walked to the back. When she returned, I handed her my stole. "You didn't get this one."

"Looks like you've worn that a lot. The woven pattern is beautiful."

"It's my favorite."

"Lots of parishioners hugged you on the way out of church while you wore it, didn't they?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, many."

"If this is what you are choosing for your burial, how about we not clean it? Let's leave all those hugs right where they are."

I took it home and hung it in the closet where I would soon hang my cleaned burial clothes. Then I attached a bag to the hanger. In it, I placed a list of the hymns and scripture readings for the service and a copy of my resume to help whoever would officiate. I also enclosed a handful of photos to display in case it needed to be a closed coffin.

At the end of the week my boyfriend, Ken, arrived from Michigan to help.

"Where's your gear list? I'll get started on that." A naval reservist, he knew the drill.

I showed him the pile of stuff I had been issued. "If it isn't here, they didn't have any more. I don't know what to do about that."

"I'll check military surplus stores while you're at work." He picked up a pair of pants. "Men's XL. These won't fit you."

"That's all they had left at supply."

"Go try them on, and tomorrow I'll take them in for you."

We spent the next two weeks alternating between dating and preparing for war.

"It should be me going, not you. What kind of country sends a middle-aged woman to fight the enemy?"

"I'm a New Yorker. I have an attitude and I know how to use it."

"Have you ever fired a gun?"

"I'm a noncombatant. I'm not permitted to use a gun."

"This weekend I'm taking you to the range. You need to be familiar with a weapon, if for no other reason than to know how to unload one. Or if things get ugly and you decide to forgo your noncombatant status."

The following week I went for my pre-deployment medical screening. I failed it. The lump on my breast that medical had been monitoring for two years had gotten larger. The doctor said based on the quick growth, it was probably cancerous. In his opinion, I needed to address the issue immediately. I told him the medical unit needed a chaplain. Against his advice, I presented the findings to my CO. "If we are likely to die from chemical or biological agents, what difference would it make if I have breast cancer?"

With a promise to see the doctor as soon as I was back in the US, the CO signed off on my screening. Then he made us coffee.

"How you doing with all of this?" He leaned back in his chair and took a sip.

"About as good as you are."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Coffee's good, though."

Later that week, my friend Belle called to say she had talked to our friend Barb about the dogs. Barb agreed to adopt Mouse and Eileen, another friend, a veterinarian, said she would adopt Chester as her office greeter dog. Since those women were in New York, Belle and husband Sal, who had already planned to drive down to see me in North Carolina before I deployed, would deliver the dogs on their way home.

The next call came from my mother. "Your father and I will be there this weekend. I didn't want to, but your father insists on saying goodbye."

"Ken, Belle, and Sal will be here."

"I like Sal."

"Drive carefully." After I hung up, I added another item to my to-do list: Warn the others about the pending weekend entertainment. Thinking about the list reminded me I had not yet called the insurance company to put my car in "garaged" status. I dialed USAA. After politely changing my coverage, the agent ended the conversation by telling me she would pray for my safety in Iraq. If only my mother were that concerned.

Belle and Sal arrived first. A retired postmaster and now ordained United Methodist clergywoman because of my bad influence, Belle got down to business.

"Get out your paperwork and bills. Here is the change of address form so that your stuff will come to me while you're away."

"I've set up web bill pay so the bank will pay all my regular bills automatically. You'll only have to take care of the odd stuff, like car registration, if I'm away long."

"Even better. Less work for me." She stuffed my well-organized file in her briefcase.

That evening my parents arrived. My mother walked into the house mid-complaint. It started with heavy traffic and asshole drivers and ended with: "And that bitch is not going to do your funeral." She glared at Belle.

I gave my father a hug. "You survived."

"Barely. Nice to see you."

The next day Ken laid down the law. "We're here because we love Laura. If you can't put aside your differences, you'll have to leave."

"Oh, so now you love my daughter? I don't even know you." My mother followed this statement by feigning a heart attack. Ken, a retired police officer, grabbed her wrist, took her pulse and announced he was about to call an ambulance. Sensing EMTs would likely call her

bluff when all she wanted was attention, she felt much better. Sal pulled out a set of UNO cards and started dealing. The six of us played for a few hours with only a break for a meal. The next morning, my parents headed to their car for the trip back to New York.

In the driveway, my father turned toward me. “You know I love you, little girl. Be safe.”

“I love you too, Dad. Good luck.” He rolled his eyes and slipped into the passenger seat.

Belle and Sal stayed until the next morning. When they left, they took Chester and Mouse. I tried to be stoic when I hugged my dogs for the last time, but I failed.

“All that remains now is to wait.” I held Ken’s hand tightly as my friends drove away.

A few days later I came home from work with news. “15 February.”

“I have news, too. My reserve unit called. I’m being activated that same week. Sigonella, Italy.”

“Can you stay until I leave?”

“It’ll be tight, but yes.”

At 0300 the day after Valentine’s Day, Ken made breakfast while I got ready. For a few minutes, we shared a meal like people who could do this together every morning. Then I took a slow walk through my house, looking not at my belongings, but at who I was and wondering who I would be if I returned. Don’t think. Just do. Don’t think. The words propelled me back toward the front door.

“I’ll stop back here after you leave and make sure everything is closed up correctly. Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” Ken opened the door for me, and I walked out into the darkness.

Before the sun rose, we were on the base. Soon others from my unit arrived. Most formed tight circles of family and friends on the parade field across from Med BN Headquarters. Near us, a young mother buried her tear-streaked face in the soft yellow blanket wrapped around

her infant as she wept. Her young husband's eyes were wet as he stared. He would soon care for their child alone. Across the way, siblings teased their deploying brother as proud but worried parents tried to look cheerful. Several couples stood locked in embraces, swaying as if to music. My assistant kissed his wife's pregnant belly. He swept his toddler into his arms to hold him close. A few people had no one to lament their departure. One, a chief, walked by on his way to check on the buses.

"Are you here by yourself, Chief?"

"Don't worry about me, Chaplain. I said my goodbyes at home. I hate these public spectacles."

Ken shook his head. "He's lying. He looked down when he answered. Sad, he has no one to see him off."

"If it weren't for you, I'd be alone, too."

"But you're not." He held me. For a moment I closed my eyes to capture his embrace. Then I looked in his eyes.

"Will we ever see each other again? I'm going to Iraq. You're going to Sigonella. We don't even have each other's deployment address."

"You have my Leatherman. Don't worry. I'll find you. I want it back." Ken paused. "The buses are here."

The chief gave the fifteen-minute warning. Around us, the small circles got smaller as families said last goodbyes. Too soon, the order came for our unit to muster in rows and for family and friends to cross to the other side of the street. I could hardly breathe as I complied. Among the crowd of faces trying to be remembered smiling, I found Ken, and he found me. Suddenly a little girl broke away and ran for her father in the formation.

"Daddy, don't go."

If we weren't crying before, we all were now. Once the cherub was back with her mother, we marched to the buses. As we did, the crowd sobbing at the curb raised flags and signs in a final salute. The last people we saw as we pulled away were a mother and her two sons running alongside, waving all the way to the intersection. I passed a box of tissues around the bus. On the way to the armory, our driver started a movie. I don't think anyone actually saw it.

The stop at the armory lasted several hours. Then a bus broke down. At 1215, with bag lunches on our laps, we finally exited Camp Lejeune for the drive along Freedom Way to Cherry Point for our flight. Familiar, now unreachable, sights passed like a dream: The K-Mart that never carried what I needed, the place I bought my blue couch, China Garden with their great fish soup, the Swansboro Historic District, home to the Elvis-themed café, and the Flying Bridge where just last night Ken and I ate lots of oysters.

The ride to Cherry Point took less than an hour. There, we lined up to pass seabags and ALICE packs from the buses to the loading area. We sat for two hours on the hangar floor, waiting for scales to arrive. I weighed in at 152 lb. without gear and 244 lb. wearing it.

The next event was a shot-ex. Although we had gotten the usual overseas requirements done a few weeks earlier, including two of the five doses of anthrax, the first of which taught me projectile vomiting is a real thing. The smallpox shot had to be given en route as it would make us contagious for a few days. Since I'd had one as a child, they gave me fifteen shots in my old scar. Those who'd never received one only got three. That math seemed off to me.

At 1800, I gathered those who wanted to share in worship for a short devotional service. Soon after, our ride arrived. We boarded the enormous 747, with its two-story seating, from the ground, which made it look even larger. The flight crew had decorated the cabins with red,

white, and blue crepe paper, small flags and handmade patriotic posters wishing us well. Once over the Atlantic, they tenderly served us a good, hot meal, cheesecake, and decaf. As the trays were cleared, a flight attendant made an announcement: She would be coming through the cabins with paper, envelopes, and pens for us to write a letter home, in case we thought of what we should have said after we left or just had one more thing to say. She would collect them in the morning and would be pleased to mail them at her expense back in the US.

Just before we nodded off for a much-needed rest, the pilot addressed his passengers: "You might have noticed a bit of special treatment from the flight attendants. Unlike civilian flights for which our crew is scheduled, flying you to war is a job for volunteers only. Everyone working this flight is here because we want to be. We know the job you are about to do will be difficult, and this is our way of thanking you and honoring you for your service and your commitment. Me? I volunteered to be your pilot because I took this same flight in 1968, only mine landed in Vietnam. So, get some sleep. You'll need it."

Settling into my seat to take the pilot's advice, his words filled my drowsy mind. The same flight. I guess that's right. The journey between home and war is the same flight, no matter the destination or the generation. Its way is marked by endless preparation, the kindness of strangers, the care and help of friends, the meanness of self-centered people, the sacrifice of naivete and the myriad losses of relationships and opportunities. We say goodbye to all we know, wondering if we will ever return, wondering, if we do, who we might be then.