

## Some Fought For Each Other

I've been sitting here for what feels like an eternity. My head is throbbing from the incessant scream of the jet engines combined with the tremendously uncomfortable seating arrangements. All twenty-eight of us passengers are crammed in the chopper meant to hold twenty-four. My fellow Marines and I are sitting face-to-face, side-by-side, on bench-type seats made with red, seatbelt-type straps crossed over each other and bound to the aluminum framework. The Marines in front of me are so close that our legs are interweaving. I sat impatiently and stared out of the back of the helicopter into the night. The noise, along with the excitement of finally arriving at our place of duty, made it virtually impossible for me to fall asleep. I thought a lot about what we were doing here and about how proud I was to be in the United States Marine Corps.

I joined the Marine Corps in the midst of a Bush-friendly era. 9/11 was still fresh on everyone's mind and we, as a country, were red hot and out for blood. It was a time when we were proud to show the nation's resolve and the brute strength of our unwavering military. Ever since I was little, I wanted to be an "army guy." The idea of serving my country, wearing the uniform, and being looked at as a hero was appealing to me. Now, with a nation pushed back on its heels and many other people stepping forward as heroes, I had the opportunity. Our arrival in Iraq meant that my journey through the Marines was about to reach its pinnacle. I would be one step closer to people telling me that I'm a hero, or at least remembering me as one.

Finally, I stepped off of the helicopter, into the darkness, and that's when I knew that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I was greeted with a deafening hum, and I was blasted with seventy mile per hour winds. Immediately, I could feel snot running from every orifice in my head as it

was quickly replaced with carbon monoxide from the 53's exhaust. Almost immediately, I heard a barely audible, "Strudas, let's go!" as if someone were yelling at me from behind a hundred closed doors, or with their head buried in a pillow. Sooner than I could recognize who cried out my name or the foul taste of sulfur and powdery sand that filled the air, someone grabbed me by the strap of my MOLLE pack, pulled me as if I were a ragdoll, and threw me to another Marine. This young "Devil Dog" I recognized immediately. It was Matt.

Matt Langlois was my roommate in French Creek on Camp Lejeune. He left on one of the advanced flights into Iraq to train with the platoon that my platoon would be replacing there. He was a handsome young man with a quick wit and a contagious smile. His hair was obviously a golden brown military fade that topped a face full of faint freckles and oversized teeth. In the short time that we had known each other, he had already gone far out of his way to be a good friend to me. I was really happy to see him. Matt had a look of nerve-wracking excitement on his face as he led me toward the hangar, his clammy hand draped over the back of my neck.

As we were walking, I could hear random faint thumps in the distance and almost feel their arrhythmic concussion in my chest. Matt stopped me as we neared the hangar, pushed the cumbersome mass of gear strapped to my back so that the weight would force me to do an about face, and then pointed into the distance. What I saw next was the most paralyzing fireworks show that I had ever seen. The only problem was that the pyrotechnics were not scripted. This was most definitely not a Disneyland-type attraction. The sinister sky was not filled with neon red, white, and blue. It was most definitely not painted with shapes like flowers and spirals and hearts. Red was the predominant color. Never white. Never blue.

Between the darkness and the near blinding flashes, a flood of dirty smoke could be seen blanketing the red night sky and shattering any star's dream of shedding light on our new temporary home. Those sporadic concussions were no longer a mystery but a menace beating me on the chest from the inside-out, reminding me that I am not here to make friends, but to accomplish a mission. The thought of sleeping that night was almost laughable; however, it was an absolute must. If I wanted to smother at least part of the agony that was a twelve hour, 140 degree day, a couple hours of shut-eye would come in handy.

There was a red sky in the morning. The smoke and pollution from the burning plastic, trash, and ammunition were as evident after daybreak as they were when I had first witnessed the firestorm. Only minutes prior to my arrival at Al Taqaddum airbase (TQ), an Iraqi militant took a chance and fired a rocket (or mortar, we'll never know) out of a homemade tube from the bottom of the sixty four square mile plateau that was TQ. He managed to hit our ammo supply point. Lucky shot. Generally, the Iraqis don't know if they will hit anything of importance; they just know that ninety-five percent of the time, they are going to hit somewhere on our base. This was called "code red," indirect fire, or incoming. The attacks on our base were frequent and happened like clockwork.

At the beginning of my first seven month tour, the indirect fire was a cause for concern. We would all don our Kevlar helmets and FLAK jackets, and run out of our leaky, kerosene-soaked canvas tents and into the sandy concrete hangar where we worked. The Lieutenant would get accountability of everyone in the platoon and call our numbers in to the Regiment. We would wait an hour or so for the "all clear" and then head back to work or go back to sleep. The Iraqi militants were so frequent and unsuccessful with their attempts, we became desensitized to the whole situation. After a while, if we were sleeping and heard incoming rounds, my fellow

Marines and I would drape our FLAK jackets over our bodies, like ballistic blankets, fall asleep again, and wait for another Marine from our platoon to come and give us the “all clear.” Only part of our lackadaisical response due was to the predictability and the inaccuracy of these futile attempts. Sleep in TQ is hard to come by.

Each half of our platoon shared twelve hour shifts. If you were lucky enough to sleep during the night when a “code red” mostly occurred, the sunshine was waiting just around the corner to melt the tarmac and heat everything around it to roughly one-hundred-seventy degrees by the time you showed up for work. There was a breeze, but it was most definitely not welcome. That, too, was heated like a blow dryer full of powdery sand and flies. The air was so dry that the moisture in your sweat was evaporated before it reached the surface of your skin. In order to prevent heat stroke, we were taught to lick the skin on the back of our hands, or forearms, because you could taste the crusty remnants of salt. Many times, people who worked on the base would collapse from heat stroke or heat exhaustion before they even knew that they were dehydrated.

If you were one of the unfortunate fools who were “volun-told” that you would be working nights, it was worse. In the summer, inside of the tents where we slept, the heat was comparable to standing on the blacktop. Each filthy canvas tent slept a dozen exhausted Marines in bunk beds which, at most, were three feet away from each other. Many of the bunk beds were pushed side-by-side with a poncho draped between them in order to give the “Leathernecks” on each side more room to dress or relax when they are not sleeping. We spent a lot of time reading and rereading mail and holiday cards sent from home. During each holiday that we spent overseas, each member of our platoon would hang the Thanksgiving hand-turkeys or red Valentine’s Day hearts that he received, in an attempt to forget about being away from home. I

suppose it helped a little, but it wasn't quite like the real thing. We would proudly pass around pictures of our family and gloat about how great they are. There was enough moisture inside the tents from sweat, during the summer months, to give each "Devil Dog" his own pool of perspiration at the foot of their bed to wade in. There was enough rain, in the bitter cold winter months, to soak our mattresses completely and leave an ocean of water everywhere. Physical, mental, and emotional misery were all doled out to us, in uniquely horrifying ways, every day for the next seven months.

I think some people believe that Marines, Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen, etc. carry out our missions because we are mindless drones who cannot think for ourselves, or we wholeheartedly believe in the reasons that our American forces are occupying Iraq. Part of that emotional and mental anguish we endured came from literally screaming, until our eyes were bloodshot red, at the television when Bush was re-elected. Many times it came from within, in the form of conversation with other Marines, trying to reason with each other as to why the United States is in Iraq in the first place.

When I joined the Marine Corps, I admit, yes, I was roped in by the propaganda of 9/11 and weapons of mass destruction. Yes, I am guilty. I felt the insatiable need to stand alongside my brothers, kick down doors, and seek revenge for what was taken from us that day. However, before my first deployment to Iraq, I became a little bit more familiar with the facade that was Bush's political propaganda. The sheet was no longer pulled over my eyes, but the fact that I would soon be departing to a third world country was still very real. Instead of our political mission, I realized that my efforts needed to be focused on the well-being of my fellow Marines and other Marines that I didn't even know. Airmen. Sailors. Soldiers. Civilians who were seeking refuge. Guys like Matt Langlois. I didn't mention him because he played an essential

role in my story, I mentioned him because he has a name. He has a face. He has a wife, Missy, and would soon (a year in the future) have a child on the way, named Andrew. Many real people went into that hellhole together to defeat an uncommon enemy, and to obtain uncommon goals. Some fought for freedom. Some fought for revenge. Some fought for each other. They all had families and friends who wanted them home just as bad, if not worse, than mine did. Why should I be so selfish as to lay back and watch my brothers die? Because I don't believe in the American political agenda? They don't either.