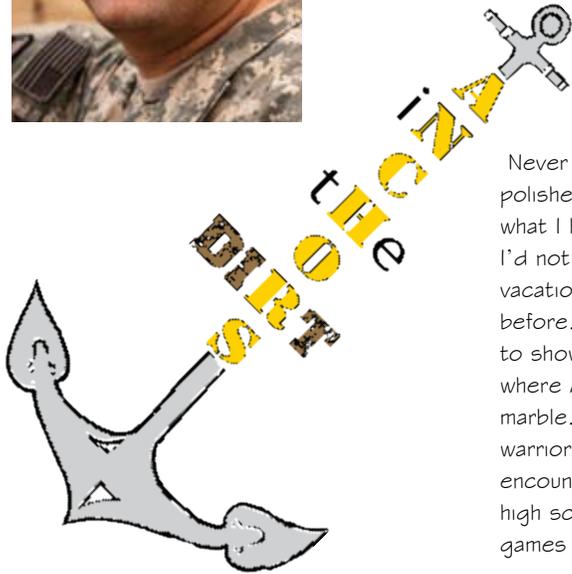




**WRITTEN BY CHIEF MASS
COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST BRIAN
NARANJO**

**PHOTOS BY MASS COMMUNICATION
SPECIALIST 1ST CLASS (SW/AW) RYAN
B. TABIOS**



hugs and sympathetic “give ‘em hell” handshakes and backslaps.

Never mind the fact that underneath my polished bravado, and promises to “do what I have to do,” I was pretty nervous. I’d not previously deployed or even vacationed to a bona fide combat zone before. And I would’ve been hard-pressed to show a geography teacher exactly where Afghanistan lies on the big blue marble. I also know without a doubt I’m no warrior; the closest thing to combat I’d encountered to that point was boxing in high school, or playing war-themed video games on my laptop.

Nonetheless, following some heart-wrenchingly awful goodbyes shared between me, my wife and kids, I was gone. A large red overstuffed suitcase took the place of the traditional Sailor sea bag. After a couple of days at my Navy Operational Support Center in Kansas City, Mo., I flew to Gulfport, Miss. to spend a few more days for in-processing and getting uniforms.

As a Navy Reservist in a Kansas town dominated by the U.S. Army, it was pretty cool dropping the A-bomb to friends and co-workers.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said to them as I made my farewell rounds. “I’m headed to Afghanistan.” Nodding my head slowly, hand digging into my pocket to retrieve an already beat-up copy of my orders, I added the next weighty statement. “I’ll be gone for a year.”

Actually, according to my mysteriously cryptic involuntary recall orders, my deployment could be up to 450 days, with 350 days actual “boots on ground.” I had no idea where I’d be working, or with what command. No one else in the order-writing process did, either. That added to the angst of leaving behind my normal way of life for an unknown land.

But the build-up was pretty cool, with the quasi-celebrity status of being counted among small-town civilians as a dude going to “war.” It brought with it impromptu lunch invitations, friendly

PART I

Allow me to digress for a moment on the subject of the outfits they issued me and my fellow Navy types. They’re Army Combat Uniforms (ACU), and are a sharp improvement over the old woodland design. I like them because they’re durable and can be worn right out of the dryer.

As I was measured for my uniform issue, I asked a fellow Chief in supply at Gulfport why we had to dress like soldiers, and he gave me his best guess. “So you’ll blend in, and the enemy won’t think you’re part of some special detail they might want to take a shot at,” he said with a shrug. It made sense at the time, but here in theater, the Marines and airmen wear their own cammies, and I see the Macedonians wearing our old U.S.-style desert uniforms. The Italians, Brits, Australians and other countries are also wearing their uniquely-patterned outfits. None of these people on my compound have ever been shot by a sniper (knock on wood). So, why can’t the Navy wear their own gear?

After being properly outfitted and declared fit for duty, I embarked to South Carolina for a three-week crash course in combat, administrative wimp style. Just southeast



A Sailor fires the Browning M2 .50 caliber Machine Gun under the eye of a range instructor during training at the Expeditionary Combat Readiness Center (ECRC) on Fort Jackson, S.C. Active and Reserve component Sailors deploying to various locations in the Middle East and Horn Of Africa complete the three-week basic combat course prior to their departure.

of Fort Jackson, there's a spartan compound known as Camp McCrady, home of antiquated open-bay barracks, the Expeditionary Combat Readiness Center and very little else.

It was here and on the firing ranges of Fort Jackson my fellow Navy deployers and I would receive a very basic three-week introduction to combat doctrine. In short, we'd become Narmy Strong.

Led by Army non-commissioned officers with brown Smokey the Bear drill instructor hats, the course curriculum included all kinds of stuff, like basic waiting in line; weapons familiarization and qualification; convoy driving techniques; Hurry Up and Wait 101; basic radio communication; basic land navigation; intermediate waiting in line; first aid; issuance of weapons and about 400 more pounds of gear, most of which I'd never use; advanced waiting in line; understanding Army cadence; and the popular thrice daily course, "eat chow in less than three minutes, after waiting in line for 20 minutes."

Honestly, including Navy boot camp, I have never stood in line or sat around waiting so much in my life. For instance, we'd go out to the firing range for 16 hours, and actually fire our weapons for 30 minutes, then spend another 30 minutes picking up brass. The other 15 hours was spent sitting around in the bleachers or trying to get warm in a tent rigged with a stove heater.

The stuff they taught us was pretty cool, but it was probably far more useful for those deploying to Iraq. Everything was desert-centric, from the improvised explosive device familiarization and convoy driving, to the first aid, which included information on poisonous wildlife in Iraq, and also Iraqi culture and politics. While it was pretty interesting, most of the information would do me no good in the mountainous region where I was headed.

The hardest thing to get used to, even now, is wearing the life-saving interceptor body armor, or IBA, and Kevlar helmet. This gear is actually critical anytime a person goes outside the wire. With the ballistic inserts, the gear will stop most any small arms fire from penetrating your soft skin. However, the downside is that once you put the bulky stuff on, you feel and look less like a Soldier, and more like a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. Still, it's essential travel anytime you go outside the wire.

I enjoyed firing my M16A2 rifle, and was relieved to qualify the first time, and not need to be deposited in the "magic lane"



Sailors bound for Kuwait make the long walk on the flight line toward a waiting aircraft at Columbia, SC Metropolitan airport in May 2009. The trip to Kuwait is the first leg in a long journey to Afghanistan.

for qualification. The drill instructors, jokingly I think, told us about this last resort, sure-fire opportunity for a non-qualifier to try again, while a skilled Army marksman stood to the side, assisting the nervous student by knocking down any missed targets with a second rifle. [Editors note: Yes, that was a joke.]

Upon completion of this three-week course, none of us considered ourselves warriors, ready to go on missions to kick in doors and kill or detain insurgents. But that wasn't the purpose. The course was designed to give Navy individual augmentees basic skills needed to handle situations they may encounter in theater.

In fact, this training actually showed me, a Navy mass communication specialist, just how complicated things are in these downrange areas, and how little I really knew about the environment in which I was preparing to spend a year of my life.

To be continued...

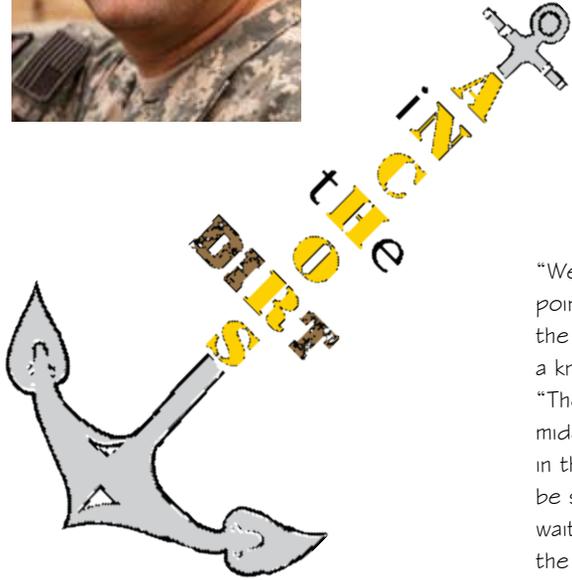


Spartan living conditions greet Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen and Marines during their processing at Camp Virginia, Kuwait. Tents and other support structures make up a large portion of the isolated camp.



**WRITTEN BY CHIEF MASS
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NARANJO**

**PHOTOS BY MASS COMMUNICATION
SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS JORGE
SAUCEDO**



PART 2

he looked back. He shrugged. "Hey man, they're doing it wrong. How was I supposed to know?"

So, thanks to my friend's erroneous information, we ended up smashed together like sardines, waiting for nearly two hours before taking off. The miserable flight to Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan lasted four hours.

When we finally landed and taxied, the C-17's aft hatch opened and the first rays of overcast Afghan morning sunlight crept into the aircraft.

We groggily stood up, straggled off the plane and boarded a bus, blearily looking out the windows at the snow-capped mountains which were barely visible through the cloud cover. From the view, the landscape could've been Colorado, or Tennessee, I supposed. It wasn't anything like I'd expected.

I thought I'd see plumes of smoke rising off distant battlefields, and hear the rumble of gunfire and the whistle of rockets and missiles nearby. Instead,

"We need to board last," he said, pointing to the opened aft section of the aircraft from which we would board, a knowing conspirator's grin on his face. "These air crew guys always fill up the middle seats first. No one wants to sit in the middle. With all this gear on, we'll be smashed together like sardines. Let's wait, and take the good cargo seats on the side. Better leg room." George, a chief hospital corpsman, winced as he flexed his sore right leg.

Following my friend's logic, George and I, and a couple other friends, fell back and waited.

But the side cargo seats filled up first. I shoved George, and glared at him when

After spending about a week in Kuwait with my fellow Navy students, attending briefings and spending a couple days learning more about improvised explosive devices and convoys (all geared toward the desert), we said goodbye to our shipmates headed to Iraq. Then, our smaller group, bound for Afghanistan, lined up on the Ali Al Saleem flight line to board an Air Force C-17. We had an early flight. I looked at my watch. It was about 1:30 in the morning. True to the nature of military air travel, I knew we'd sit on the runway for awhile before actually taking off.

We already palletized most of our gear, but wore our body armor and Kevlar helmets, and brought our weapons and any carry-on bags with us. We walked awkwardly with heavy, deliberate steps, like we were on the moon.

So imagine my consternation when my buddy George grabbed me by the strap of my armor and jerked me backwards to get my attention, almost knocking both of us down.



Instructors simulate a rocket-propelled grenade attack on Sailors during a convoy exercise at Udairi Range in Kuwait. The exercise is to prepare Sailors for situations that may occur in Afghanistan during their deployments.



Operations Specialist 1st Class Luis Vazquez pulls security during convoy training at Udari Range. O5I Vazquez will be going to Bagram, Afghanistan working for Task Force Paladin.

it looked like a typical flight line on any military base I had ever found myself.

Our exhausted crew of enlisted and officer Sailors stuck together mostly out of habit, as we spent the day shuffling from place to place, doing the all-too-familiar “hurry up and wait” dance.

We were briefed in the terminal tent, and then removed our gear from the pallettes, only to wait around in a gym to be briefed again. I did finally learn that several of my shipmates and I were going to be in Kabul, as part of a new command: U.S. Forces, Afghanistan. I was intrigued by this information, as were the others. We made small talk between briefings, discussing the possibilities that awaited us in Kabul.

I couldn't wait to get over there, and not only because I wanted to get settled into my new job. I quickly discovered that Bagram isn't a very nice place for transient personnel. Overnight visitors are given access to huge tents filled with hundreds of cots. There's no place in these structures to secure military or personal gear, and very little indoor plumbing is available. In fact, the portable toilets-potties were great compared to the foul, clogged-up, repugnant latrines meant for transients. For those permanently assigned to Bagram, the living conditions are significantly nicer. My friends tell me that comfortable private barrack rooms are

available with decent shared shower and bathroom facilities. More improvements are on the way. The base itself is in a constant state of construction.

There's also a medium-sized exchange and a food court with Pizza Hut and Burger King. The Burger King is referred to as “Burgerstan,” since the food isn't quite up to stateside standards. They frequently run out of lettuce, tomato and sometimes even burger patties.

To be reminded I was in Afghanistan, I only needed to note the subtle and not so subtle differences.

For one, everyone, whether in military or civilian clothes, was armed.

I was surprised to see even military personnel walking around Bagram in physical training (PT) gear and wearing their weapons with magazines inserted. Up to that point in South Carolina and in Kuwait, we were told to secure our weapons when we did PT. Outside of what we used at the firing ranges we hadn't yet been issued live rounds to put in our magazines. Those assigned to Bagram apparently use the PT outfits as liberty clothing; visiting the exchange and food court and hanging out in the recreation center.

Another indication I was in Afghanistan were the signs on the perimeter fence warning of land mines. Bagram is an

old Soviet airfield built by the Russians several years ago. Apparently, the Russians didn't clean up their mess before pulling out of the country in the late 1980s. There are literally millions of mines in barren fields near the base. The danger lurks in areas a few miles from the base as well. Members of the local population have been maimed and killed by these indiscriminate explosive devices. They don't have nice metal signs to post on non-existent fences bordering mine fields in their villages. Instead, the Afghans mark known dangerous areas with painted rocks to warn others to keep away.

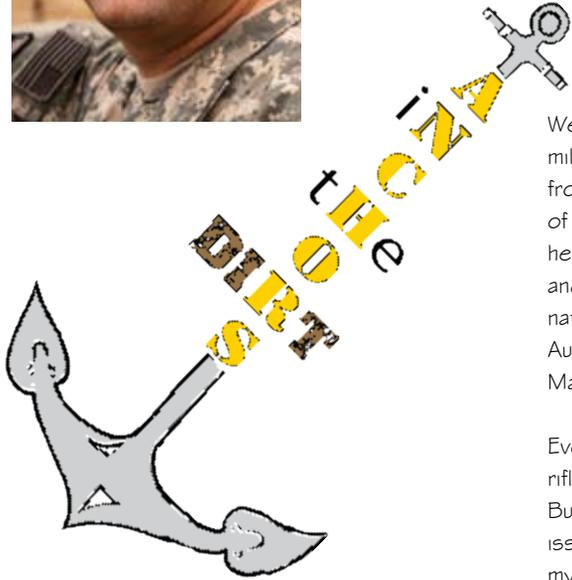
It was surreal for me to visit the exchange and eat Burger King grub in the middle of a combat zone. We had extremes from both ends of the spectrum. Stateside-brand fast food and shopping on one end, and crude living conditions on the other.

This didn't dampen my appetite though. There I sat—surrounded by mine fields and people wearing t-shirts, sweat pants and loaded weapons, on a post that's routinely targeted with enemy rockets—munching on a Double Whopper with cheese, drinking a Coke.

After finishing my meal and then hanging out for about two hours in the jam-packed transient tents with its assorted aromas of unwashed bodies, sweaty feet and cigarette smoke, I couldn't wait to leave for Kabul. Fortunately, our flight was due to depart early the next morning, which meant our show time at the passenger terminal was around 10 p.m. the same day we arrived. As my exhausted mind and body endeavored to persevere, my friends and I prepared to once again hurry up and wait.



**WRITTEN BY CHIEF MASS
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PART 3

Most combat casualties to our international forces – and to innocent civilians - come from the terrible, indiscriminate improvised explosive device (IED). It's frustrating, really.

We drive our armored vehicles along the Kabul roads on convoy missions, carefully looking for any sign of an IED. The signs are many: freshly-turned earth on or near the road, wires leading from the road to nearby brush, someone monitoring our activity with a video camera or talking on their cell phone. Beside the roadside threat, suicide bombers target international and Afghan forces with explosive-laden cars, on a bicycle or even on foot. All of these things could be signs that an attack is imminent. Or, they could mean nothing. The insurgents blend in with the local population very well.

But what can you do about that natural impulse to shoot the bad guys before they get you? Forget about it. Most of the time the people who set up the attack are long gone before anything explodes. And if they're not, how are you going to engage them? You can't fire your weapon through the reinforced glass and the windows are too heavy to roll down. On top

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters camp in Kabul is the place in Afghanistan I've been sent to spend a year of my life. Built to accommodate roughly 800 personnel, the tiny compound was bursting at the seams with more than 2,000 military and civilian personnel when I arrived.

Assigned to U.S. Forces Afghanistan, a separate entity from ISAF, I'm one of a relatively small handful of U.S. Navy Sailors living and working on the compound. We pass each other on the mostly unpaved streets with a nod, a knowing smile, and a touch of pride at the sight of the familiar Navy rank, and for those who've been in-country more than 30 days, the "Don't Tread On Me" First Navy Jack combat patch, worn on the left sleeve of the Army Combat Uniform.

Sure, we're wearing outfits identical to those worn by U.S. Soldiers here, aside from our Velcro service-unique patches. But we celebrate our unique Sailor identity in this place, getting together for monthly training, informal meals and other events.

We're part of a virtual melting pot of military and civilian representatives from 42 different countries, all part of the coalition of nations here to help establish security, governance and development to this war-ravaged nation. These include Great Britain, Australia, Germany, France, Spain and Macedonia among others.

Every military person here carries a rifle or pistol of some sort, or both. But most will never fire them. I was issued a full combat load of rounds for my M16A2 rifle, and I know that more than likely I'll be turning it all back in unfired. No doubt these bullets have traded hands a bunch of times. I'd be interested to know just how many Sailors, Marines, airmen or soldiers have loaded these same bullets in their magazines, only to remove them and bring them back to Supply at the end of their tour.

I maintain my weapon, keeping it clean and ready to fire. But this isn't that kind of war. It's far worse.





Personnel Specialist 2nd Class Glenn Kalae Paoa gives out instructions to Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Shanna Yerby, left, Sgt. Angelica Cendales, and Sgt. Jesse Blash during a mission brief at Headquarters International Security Assistance Force, in Kabul. Photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Brian Naranjo

of that, leaving the protection of the vehicle would be pretty careless.

Remember that old arcade game, Frogger? It's the one where you control an animated frog as it tries to navigate across a busy street, without getting squashed by a car in traffic. The grim, bitter joke I share with those who haven't yet driven in this place is that avoiding the IED threat is like playing Reverse Frogger. Instead of controlling the frog, you are in one of the cars, and the "frogs" are targeting you with explosives.

Although they happen from time to time (five in my first six months in Afghanistan), successful IED attacks in Kabul are rare, thanks to the collective efforts of the Afghan and ISAF security forces, who, along with explosive ordnance personnel, reduce the threat every day, throughout the country. They disable roadside IEDs before they can go off, and use various measures to capture and detain IED makers. Based on the known threats here, if not for the EOD guys and drivers' vigilance, the occurrence would be far worse; not only here, but in other locations as well.

I met a Sailor here in Kabul who, as a driver, averted tragedy for himself and his team when he detected an IED and reported it to security forces. Personnel Specialist 2nd Class (SW) Glenn Kalae Paoa's office job is as an administrative jack-of-all-trades, working for the U.S. National Support Element at the ISAF compound. However, a large part of his work involves planning and executing logistics and personnel transport missions on the dangerous roads of Afghanistan.

During his tour in Afghanistan, Paoa's been on more than 300 of these assignments - driving, commanding and guarding armored vehicle convoys in rain, snow, hail and dry heat, day or night.

On a trip through the city of Kabul last year, Paoa "quickly sighted a small metal object with brown wires attached to it," wrote Air Force Lt. Col. Patrice Moore, who was Paoa's boss at the time. "He immediately relayed this information to the drivers as well as the rest of the convoy."

"That mission in particular was very different," recalled Paoa. "At the time

we pushed out ... things didn't really add up. On most days, the streets of Kabul are crowded with pedestrians, vehicles and bicycles, but there were no people outside, and my mindset was focused on the road conditions and my surroundings."

Paoa remembered that his eyes were attracted to the metal object, as it caused the light to reflect off the road more brilliantly.

"In that quick instance I called it out to my driver, as well as the second truck, and we came to a stop. I realized that another inch or two, and we would have been in a big mess. It all happened so quickly, but it also felt like time just stopped," Paoa said.

An explosive ordnance disposal team was called to the scene, and Paoa diverted his vehicles through an alternate route and completed the mission. The EOD team disposed of the object, which was verified to be an IED.

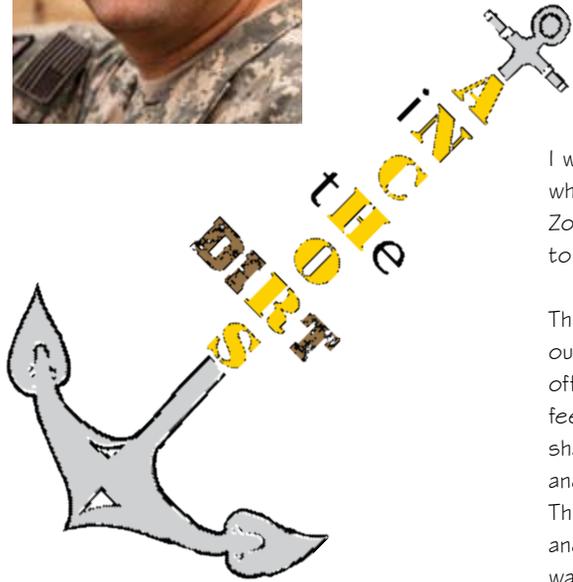
This place is dangerous and often filled with thankless hard work and long hours. However, there are good people here, doing good things, just like Glenn Kalae Paoa. And they truly make it all worthwhile.





**WRITTEN BY CHIEF MASS
COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST BRIAN
NARANJO**

PART 4



(These were my thoughts which I compulsively wrote down in the aftermath of a vehicle-borne suicide bomb attack on the main gate of International Security Assistance Force Headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan. I was in the barracks nearby when it all happened.)

There's a huge crater the size of a swimming pool in the road where the guy melted himself under the heat and pressure of hundreds of pounds of explosives.

Such things I will never understand. What is it that drives someone to commit such a horrific act? It certainly goes beyond the borders of state politics and likely deep into the realm of insanity. There's nothing left of Ahmad, which I know was the guy's name. I know this because before the crater had even stopped smoldering, the Taliban e-mailed us a press release praising Ahmad's work. I read it when I went to work. I think we're all pretty shaken up on this compound, in the jittery aftermath of all this.

I work the night shift, so I was asleep when he rolled through the Green Zone streets, looking for somewhere to strike.

The explosion actually knocked me out of bed. I had just finally dozed off, and woke up on the floor. I could feel everything around me vibrating, shaking through my arms to my neck and head, then back to my very core. The building swayed like an accordion and my teeth chattered in rhythm. It was like a loud, sustained episode of thunder, accompanied by a massive earthquake. In the darkness of the room, I instinctively pressed my body against the floor, using my available senses to feel what was happening.

Mortar attack? Rocket? Assault? None of these seemed plausible.

As I tried to wrap my groggy brain around the situation, everything subsided. There was dust everywhere, but it was eerily quiet for about 30 seconds.

And then I heard someone shouting, cursing, screaming to get out of the building, we're under attack! Get to the bunkers!

It was surreal. My door had been blown open, and I momentarily just lay there watching figures move by in the dusty subdued light streaming in from the new holes punched in the walls and exit ways. I scrambled to my feet, and absently grabbed some pants and shower shoes, threw on my dog tags and ID pouch—and staggered out into the hallway.

The hall was filled with so much dirt and dust that I couldn't see anything but the shadowy movements of people working their way down to the exit. All the barracks doors had been blown open, it seemed. We all went room to room, a stunned mob, peering into the rooms through the haze, calling out to people, listening for a response and then entering the space, always glad to find an empty space without an unconscious comrade, or worse.

The terrorist didn't get any uniformed troops that day, but he did kill some local civilians who'd been in



British and Afghan security forces hold the line after suicide attack rocked ISAF Headquarters in Kabul.
©2009 Derek Henry Flood.



the cleaning lady who cared for the female barracks. I could see how scared and weary she looked. She was crying, and the two Macedonian soldiers, also female, held her hands and comforted her with soothing words.

I remembered hearing before that this woman had personally seen the cruel insurgency violence in the recent past. She'd been forced to watch her husband die, murdered by the Taliban in her village, when she was 8-months pregnant. I felt horrible sorrow for her.

That's when it hit me how close we'd all come to buying the farm today. Just a little closer, just a little more explosive, a little more dumb luck and we'd have been toast.

How can you train to sleep defensively? How can you protect yourself from a, fanatical enemy that will stop at nothing, including killing themselves and innocent civilians, to get to their target? You can't. You just roll the dice.

the wrong place, at the wrong time. I found the person who had screamed for us to get out of the building. This one Chief was standing at the exit wearing only a t-shirt and short pants under his Interceptor Body Armor and Kevlar helmet. He was quite a sight with his loaded M-16 pointed at the ceiling, screaming as he waved his rifle, "Get out of here! Now! We're under attack! Get to the bunkers!"

you?" His reply was his usual, "Never better."

Then he just kept walking, and I followed him out to the bunkers. People were calling out, "Look for secondary explosives! Watch where you walk!" as we made our way outside in the dusty haze of filthy sunlight. We still didn't know what had happened.

The sunlight hurt my eyes, and I saw a black plume of smoke churning into the air, right over the wall closest to our barracks. I saw a lieutenant colonel that I know, and followed him down the outside stairs. A grizzled, middle-aged Army man, he looked over at me and asked, "You doin' okay, Chief?"

The female barracks is right next to ours, and it was far worse off. There were gaping holes in the bulkhead, literally exposing barracks rooms to the open air. I could see the beds, the knick knacks and toiletries and other personal belongings thrown on the floor by the concussion.

It's funny because that's the same thing he says to me whenever I pass him on the narrow streets of the compound. Not really a question so much as a greeting. But this time, I think he was really asking me if I was okay.

We sat there and mustered in the makeshift bunkers. There were 13 disheveled people in one bunker with me, and eventually the squawking Chief joined us as well.

I shrugged my shoulders and rolled my eyes, like this was no big deal, and said, "Yes sir, I'm fine. How about

I thought of the local Afghans who clean our building, and asked myself, did one of them plant an IED? I was suddenly filled with rage and distrust. Then I noticed, sitting in our bunker between two Macedonian soldiers,

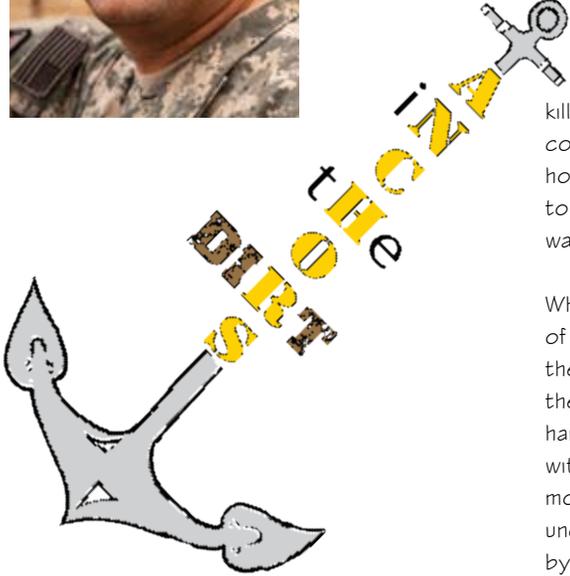




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**PHOTOS BY CHIEF MASS
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PART 5



Note: In this article, you'll see references to Americans who are identified only by their first name. This is necessary to protect their identities, because of the nature of their jobs.

During my chief petty officer induction several years ago, a grizzled old master chief taught me integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is looking. I've carried that lesson everywhere life and the U.S. Navy have taken me since then.

However, in Afghanistan, I've found that for the local people, their hard choices revolve around doing the right thing even when everyone is looking – particularly armed insurgents.

Insurgents openly threaten Afghan citizens throughout the country, promising death to anyone who cooperates with international assistance forces. Their threats are reinforced by cruel tactics of indiscriminate death and destruction. Suicide bombers blow themselves up in markets and other public places,

killing civilians. Militants fire at coalition forces from mosques or local homes, forcing innocent bystanders to remain inside and yet still in harm's way.

When civilians are killed as a result of the militants' actions, they turn on the propaganda machine, trumpeting the tragic deaths of civilians at the hands of coalition forces. Speaking with total candor, I can tell you on more than one occasion, I've been uncomfortably close to deaths caused by the militants.

This may sound like amped-up rhetoric, but these guys are intent on keeping Afghanistan in violent disarray, even as the 43-nation International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) works to help this country get on track by promoting security, governance and development.

A key component of our mission in Afghanistan is giving the

local government the tools to independently govern and protect the people. Our friendly forces spend a lot of time training and mentoring Afghanistan National Police officers and the National Army soldiers. These efforts seem to be bearing fruit, with the creation of the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF).

The APPF is an Afghan-led program that will provide enhanced security to designated districts in key provinces, bringing greater stability and strengthened-community development.

I had the privilege of watching 243 brave young men from Wardak province be the first to graduate from the APPF program.

Wardak is an extremely violent province in Afghanistan, and some of its young men were selected as the pilot class for APPF, in part because of the local citizens' commitment to freeing themselves from the Taliban's grasp. The volunteers went to Mether Lam province for training by an Afghan National Police cadre, who are in turn mentored by ISAF personnel.



19-year-old Afghan Abuzer Beheshti waits for a ceremony where he and 242 fellow countrymen became the first members of the Afghan public protection force.



Fox News reporter Conor Powell interviews Afghan national police Col. Asar Mohammed, the deputy commander of the ANP training facility at Camp Methar Lam in eastern Afghanistan.

U.S. Forces-Afghanistan provides logistical funding, complementary community projects and mentors for course trainers. However, the Afghan Ministry of the Interior bears the ultimate responsibility for the APPF.

Even as volunteers sweated during physical training and learned basic law enforcement techniques through classroom and hands-on instruction, militants were busy terrorizing the recruits' families. They were leaving messages on the doors of the volunteers' dwellings that more or less said, "Enjoy your training, because when you come back, we are going to kill you."

Abuzer Beheshti's family received one of these notes, but the 19-year-old was determined to continue with the training. His commitment to protecting his village was more important than his own life, he told me.

"I want to help my own people," he explained. "There are a lot of Taliban in Wardak, and they take our young boys and make them join up. We have to make the situation better. We need schools and hospitals for our children, and I want to do what I can."

Think about that for a second. The Taliban knows this guy and his family by name, and they're openly threatening their lives. Abuzer no doubt knows he has a huge Taliban

target on his back but he and his other APPF graduates just seem to take it in stride.

I could see the smoldering determination in the students' eyes. They've been there, done that; growing up with horrific violence and oppression and losing friends and family to militants' actions. No matter how real, the threats will not dissuade them.

After a rigorous three-week training program, the graduates proudly received their certificates of completion in front of a large audience that included high-level officials from the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Wardak province elders, then-Commander of the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, and other distinguished guests.

Conducted at Camp Methar Lam, an Afghan National Police facility in eastern Afghanistan, the graduation ceremony ushered the men into new lives of community service.

"This is Afghans training Afghans for the security of Afghanistan," said Mark, a chief training adviser for U.S. forces in the area.

McKiernan calls APPF "a purely Afghan initiative to develop a bottom-up approach; a community-based

approach to improve security and to give a voice to the provincial government. We are very optimistic in our support of this program."

APPF participants must be an Afghan citizen between the ages of 25 and 45, physically fit, drug-free, have no criminal record and live in or be from the district selected to work in.

APPF members work closely with Afghan National Army, police and coalition forces to protect their local community. They maintain security on approaches to highways within their district, protecting key government facilities and personnel, disrupt militant attacks and deny insurgent safe havens. The force also provides crisis response to natural disasters and facilitates economic development in the district.

Elwood, a U.S. military adviser, said he was impressed by APPF students he observed.

"These guys are motivated," he said. "They have a spirit to protect what is theirs. This is what Afghanistan needs. They want to take their country back. Enough is enough."

The program is expected to grow and expand to other provinces.

McKiernan offered encouragement to the graduating class, noting the new force can rely on the support of all the country's security assets. "I applaud the courage of these men to step forward in representing the community, but they know if they run into problems, they can call the Afghan National Police, Afghan National Army or international forces that are out there," he said. "So they're not on their own."

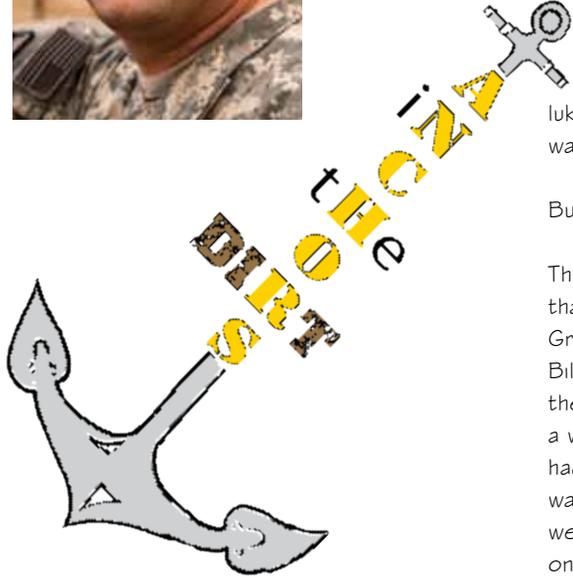
Good luck, Abuzer. The Taliban may be watching, but your country is counting on you. I know you won't let them down.



**WRITTEN BY CHIEF MASS
COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST
BRIAN NARANJO**

**PHOTOS BY CHIEF MASS
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BRIAN NARANJO**

PART 6



There's not a lot of free time in a combat zone, even for admin staff guys like me. It's a daily grind of get up, go to work, go to sleep. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Over and over and over and over. To help people stay in shape and burn off stress, there is a small gym on the International Security Assistance Force compound for workouts in between work and rinse cycles. But to use the gym, you have to first get past the dirt-phobic maitre d' who works the door. The guy won't let you in unless you bring a spare pair of shoes. So you see a lot of people going to and from the building wearing shorts and tan combat boots, with running shoes draped over their shoulders. Pretty comical, in a combat zone sort of way. I'm talking about the rule, not the fashion statement. I mean, we wouldn't want to get any (ahem!) dirt on the floor or in the equipment, in a country that is nothing but dirt, dust and rock. Too bad that same keep-it-clean attitude isn't applied to our shower and bathroom facilities. I wish Mr. Dirt Phobia at the gym had a flair for plumbing! We could put him to work, and I could stop taking

lukewarm showers in stagnant, black water.

But I digress.

There's a running joke in Afghanistan that every day is the same, like Groundhog Day. A lot of us feel like Bill Murray, waking up every cycle to the same stuff. We work seven days a week, and there is many a time I've had to look at my old faithful Casio watch to figure out what part of the week it is. Not that it matters. The only way to get through a tour in Afghanistan is by focusing on one day at a time. Forget about yesterday, and don't worry about tomorrow. Today is all that matters – especially when you never know where the next rocket or suicide bomber will hit.

But for being in a combat zone, aside from enduring the occasional rocket attack, and vigilantly driving the hazardous streets on logistics missions, we don't see much combat. The old saying in the Navy

is, "Choose your rate, choose your fate." Well, I'm a paper pusher, and that's just the way it is. And I'm doing my part to bring peace and stability to this devastated country, I guess.

The best thing about this experience are the people with whom I serve. Regardless of service, we're all enduring it together. We live, work and eat together. We take care of business and then we find ways to break up the monotony. We have small birthday observances to celebrate the special days of our comrades, gather for hail and farewell barbecues, observe national holidays with special meals and music, hold re-enlistment ceremonies, and even sometimes mix it up on a small makeshift volleyball court. Several friends and I even make it a point each Thursday to enjoy movie night, gathering around a small computer, eating popcorn, drinking soda and watching classic flicks like *Hustle and Flow*, *Juice* and *Pulp Fiction*.

Practical jokes are another fun pastime. For lack of other conveniences like television and radio, we're allowed to access the social



Chief Mass Communication Specialist Brian Naranjo pauses on the back of an Afghan National Army pick-up truck with Cdr. Benjamin Nicholson, commander of Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah Province, Afghanistan, during a fact-finding patrol.



Right: Army Sgt. Josh Leonard, of the U.S. Forces Afghanistan public affairs office, recites the oath of reenlistment in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Below: Members of the U.S. Forces Afghanistan public affairs office burn off some steam with a Friday night volleyball game at the International Security Assistance Force headquarters compound in Kabul.

never had so much fun at work. Any deployment requires patience and a good thick skin, or you'll never get through it. Across the board, every Sailor, Marine, Airman or Soldier I've talked to calls this the toughest environment they've ever endured. We'd all go nuts without the good-humored releases. Business always comes first, of course.

When all is said and done, and I'm safely reunited with my family and friends, I know I'll remember the tough days filled with loneliness, fear, anger, frustration and all the other challenges. But I will also never forget the moments of levity and camaraderie provided by a strong supporting cast of brothers and sisters, from the United States and other nations. We're here for the people of Afghanistan, but this difficult task would be impossible to bear if not for the friends who surround us.



networking site Facebook. Just don't leave your workstation unlocked! My boss left hers open when she went to a meeting, and when she returned, she found that her profile had been updated literally about 100 times with the phrase "I like cheese!" She laughed it up with the rest of us, and vowed to never again leave her workstation unsecured.

I've been "got" a few times myself. Like the e-mail I received from Youmama Isafatti, demanding an apology for comments I made to the media about a combat operation in the east; and also attacking my writing skills, citing a couple of novels I've authored. It freaked me out, at first. Who was this person, and how did they know about my books? After I figured out the subtle humor in the name, and noticed the message came from a Gmail account, I replied with a humorous message of my own. We went back and forth a few times, until I discovered the author of the messages was my roommate, and we laughed ourselves into near-hysterics.

Another time a couple of my co-workers hung several wanted posters containing a photo of me wearing a traditional Afghan hat, warning everyone to be on the lookout for the infiltrator, who was known as a

connoisseur of Rice Krispie treats and pre-cooked nonperishable bacon.

I will spare you the details of the infamous Jolly Rancher war, or the battles we've had using hand sanitizer. That stuff will shoot a good 20 feet if you hit the dispensing spigot just right!

I think one of the funniest things done at my expense occurred early one morning as I slept. I have quite the reputation as a snorer, and early one morning my loud snort-filled breathing woke up both my roommates. Instead of commiserating about the noise and then covering their ears with pillows, they decided to make lemonade.

The next day, I was tagged in a homemade video on Facebook. The premise of the clip was two wildlife enthusiasts warily creeping into a growling bear's cave. I innocently played the starring role of the bear. They shot it with very low light, and it was hilarious. And I never even noticed their actions – slept right through it, in fact; but I laughed with everyone else in my office when it was viewed. My wife found it quite amusing, too.

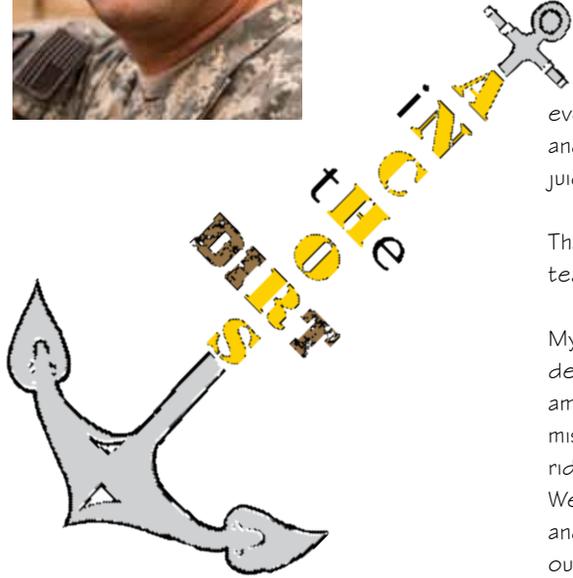
Honestly, despite the intense environment and looming threats, I've



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PART 7



events, the activities in Afghanistan and Iraq have given media all kinds of juicy stories to sink their teeth into.

That's where military public affairs teams come in.

My job in Afghanistan is on the press desk at U.S. Forces Afghanistan. I am on a team of professionals whose mission is to counter the often ridiculous Taliban claims with the truth. We research information on combat and humanitarian operations, putting out the facts, which include the news of coalition troops killed in action. In this business, the insurgents who

hold little to no regard for fact, have it far easier than we do. They have no interest in the truth. They often put out releases detailing incidents where they wiped out entire forces, including American tanks, which we don't even use in this theater. In actuality, the only tanks in this country are the hundreds, if not thousands of rusting hulks of the erstwhile Soviet combat machine, stripped of any recyclable parts by locals. The craziest query I received was about a plane hijacked in China, which somehow made it to Afghan airspace and was forced by military jets to land at Kandahar Air Field. No truth to that whatsoever!

DON Henley, legendary member of the rock band the Eagles, put out a solo tune in 1982 called "Dirty Laundry," about how news reporters sensationalize death and destruction to get ratings. In one of the verses, he sings, "It's interesting when people die, give us dirty laundry." Nearly thirty years later, his words have proven prophetic. Good luck finding a newspaper, radio report or television newscast these days that doesn't feature some kind of tragedy with massive headlines and "on the spot" reporting.

Among other large scale world



For us, the truth is the cornerstone to every piece of information we put out. The challenge in this is that the Taliban is not held to this same standard which puts the burden of truth on us to respond. We get daily calls from major international media such as CNN, ABC, NBC Al Jazeera, Wall Street Journal, London newspapers, and even media representatives in the Philippines.

However, we don't comment on alleged Taliban activities until we have the facts. In the





world of 24-hours-a-day news reporting there is constant competition among media to get the latest scoop, while accuracy may not be a prime concern.

This is my opinion from working nearly 20 years in this business. I think Don Henley was right. We, who work in public affairs, are often at odds with journalists in our efforts to report the facts. They like the gritty stories where coalition forces supposedly killed a group of civilians in Farah, or our aircraft bombed a stolen fuel truck killing innocents in the process.

The hardest days are when we lose people. I get really angry seeing

flags on our compound flying at half-staff. The anger is intensified when a reporter calls asking "Is this the bloodiest month for America since the war began?"

I want to scream at this reporter, but I don't. Instead, I grit the teeth, keep a professional air, and patiently explain that every death is a tragedy.

The worst part of my job is tracking the daily and cumulative death toll at the end of each shift, and forwarding it on to the Pentagon. It's a sobering reminder there is the cost in human life the freedom for Afghanistan demands.

Death is awful. Every individual life lost of a friendly Afghan or allied military member is absolutely the hardest cost to get over. A line from the Bible reads "This too shall pass." And that applies here. We'll recoup the money and time and equipment, but in the end, those killed can never be replaced in the hearts of their friends and family. My eyes water



occasionally at the thought of all this, and sometimes I privately shed tears as I just shake my head.

War is hell; not headlines!

In the media, it's often just an opportunity to bring in ratings or sell papers. For us, it's about survival. Of course the natural instinct for us is to stay alive, but our goal is also the ultimate survival of the Afghanistan citizens. We can all just do our jobs until properly relieved.

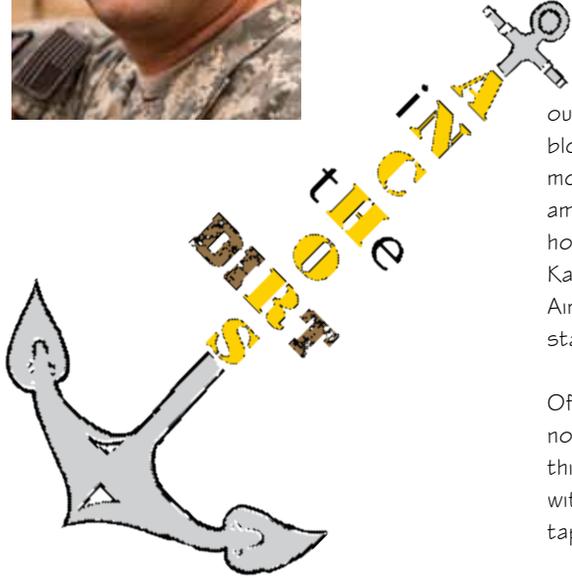




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PART 8



The events of the early morning hours escaped my consciousness – mainly, because I was unconscious through most of them.

I blinked my eyes and groggily took in my surroundings, looking around without moving my heavy head off the pillow. I was in a large room with beds and beeping monitor equipment. My right hand felt heavy. I looked down to see the back of my hand was attached to an IV tube, feeding some kind of solution into my body from a clear bag on a mobile stand next to my bed.

The bed had raised metal rails to keep a patient from falling out. Hitting the floor would be a bad thing.

I quickly saw I was in a hospital, and was horrified to feel the heavy bandage wrapped around my head. Suddenly, from a dark recess of my mind, a faint memory emerged. I vaguely remembered a dream that I was on the wooden floor in

our large tent, covered in my own blood. My tent-mates frantically moved around me, yelling for an ambulance. This tent was my new home, after I'd moved to the North Kabul Afghanistan International Airport compound to work on the staff of the ISAF Joint Command.

Of course, my bloody memory was no dream; the prime evidence of this was the fact I was in a hospital with an IV and a peculiar gauze and tape contraption stuck on my head.

What caused this? An IED? Rocket attack? Earthquake? None of the above. I had simply rolled off my bed from the top rack in our 16-man tent.

It was a five-foot drop. Judging by the dark purple bruises on my right shoulder and arm, my head wasn't the first thing to make contact with the hard plywood floor, thankfully.

I should explain the mattresses in Afghanistan aren't much like mattresses at all. They're more like box springs (the springs actually cut through the material in places), and the sides collapse as you get close to the edge.

Unlike the hospital beds, there are no rails to keep a person from rolling right off the side.

My friends were awakened by the crash in the pitch-black tent, and immediately came to my aid. Of course, that's all I can really remember. In addition to bruising my arm and shoulder, I'd ripped a pretty good gash in the top of my head, which explained all the blood.

Fortunately, there's a French hospital nearby on the compound, and someone immediately sprinted



there to get some medical attention for me. Others gingerly examined my wound and applied pressure to stop the bleeding. Then my semi-consciousness faded to black.

Eventually, an ambulance came to bring me to the hospital. They gave me a CAT scan and X-rays to evaluate the damage. The doctor's diagnosis? A concussion. Duh.

At one point, as a nurse stitched up my head, I came to, glared at her, and demanded to know, "Why are you speaking French?!" Then I went to la-la land again. One of my friends relayed this amusing bit of information to me the next day. I recall nothing of the sort, of course.

The next day, I mostly slept, waking up for a few minutes before dozing off again. Finally, late in the afternoon, I woke up for an extended period, and my heart was warmed to see Maj. Kevin Inglin and Sgt. 1st Class Melissa Novakovich standing near my bed. I work with them, and they were two of many visitors I had throughout the next couple days.

There's nothing lonelier than being sick in a faraway land, separated from loved ones. I can attest to that, as can many others, from the many bouts of stomach ailments that plague troops in Afghanistan. It's a dirty, dirty environment. But worse than that is being hospitalized.

However- I've said this before, and I'll probably say this again; despite the misery and danger in this country, the people I serve with make it all worthwhile. And being in their thoughts, prayers and capable hands during a very dark episode (literally) was very comforting.

My friends brought my laptop and my global mobile phone to the hospital to pass the time. They also brought food and snacks and kept me company. We just made small talk, but I hope they realize how much it meant to have them there. The visitors crossed all the lines of



service: officers, enlisted, Navy, Air Force and Army. They all came to say hello and wish me a speedy recovery.

With my Blackberry, I was able to take pictures of my predicament, post them on facebook, and quickly made light of the situation. I mean, it was pretty ironic to consider I'd survived an IED attack relatively unscathed, only to sustain a serious injury by rolling out of bed!

I found out from a doctor I'd fared far better than I could have. In his heavy French accent, he told me, "If not for your arm and shoulder breaking your fall ... " His grim face and shake of the head finished the sentence. In fact, I learned from him, a Soldier at Camp Phoenix had suffered a similar fall, and was in a coma for 10 days. I silently counted my blessings.

In the bed next to me lay an Afghan contractor who'd been clipped by a car in a hit-and-run accident. He had busted up his knee pretty good, and initially sought help in a local Afghan hospital. But all they did was take his wallet and money, and kick him back out on the street.

Another Afghan, a child, wheeled around in a wheelchair, his right leg a stump. This little boy was the victim of a Taliban IED. He cruised up and down the hospital hallways, yelling out the only English word he knew: "Hallllooooo. Hallllooooo!"

Like they did with me, the French medical staff took excellent care of these patients. Again, I counted my blessings.

After a two-day stay at the hospital, my friends helped me back to my tent. I was relieved to see they'd moved me to a bottom rack. For the rest of my tour in Afghanistan, I laughed at the many jokes and comments made at my expense. It was all in good fun.

I had to keep the bandage on my head for another week, mainly to keep the stitched wound clean and safe from the foul air.

People would ask me what happened, and I'd tell them. Their response was always the same. "Oh! You're THAT guy!" Apparently the "Legend of the Fall" had made its way around the forces in the area.

My funniest interaction was with an Army general who asked me, "Hey Chief. What the hell happened to you?" "Oh, well, sir, I kind of fell out of bed."

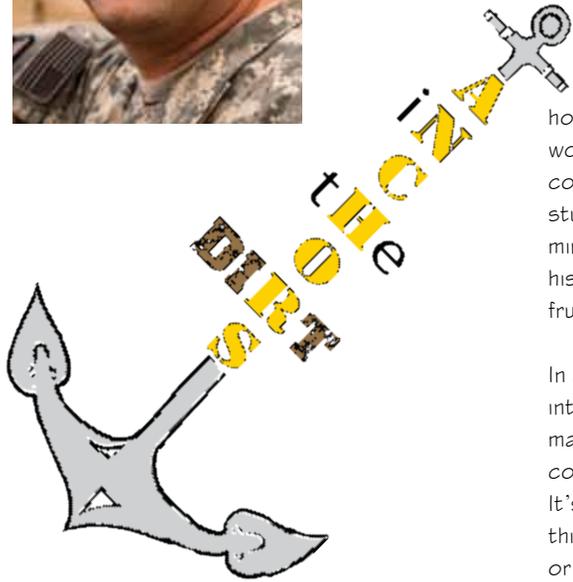
The general's face went dark, and he shook his head. "Oh no. Don't tell people that." In a moment of inspiration, he smiled, and said, "Just tell 'em you got shot."





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PART 9



Several months ago, when we gathered in Kuwait for some administrative drills and final training, a commander spoke to our group of individual augmentee Sailors about life in a combat zone.

That seems like an eternity ago, but one piece of insight he gave us stuck like glue. Pacing back and forth in the front of the briefing tent, the officer told us, “Life in a combat zone is a lot like life in a minimum security prison. Everything you do is regulated. Your movements outside the wire are carefully scrutinized and monitored. On the compound, you’re going to work some hard, long hours, seven days a week. You’ll have precious little down time, and you’re never alone.” He paused to consider his next words. “It’s a dangerous environment, filled with stress, fear and frustration, and just about everyone you meet is going to be packing some kind of firearm.”

I’d never been downrange before, and really had no idea at that time

how accurate the commander’s words would prove to be. I’ve never committed a felony or found myself stuck in a state or federal prison—minimum security or otherwise—but his description of the stress, fear, frustration and long hours all ring true.

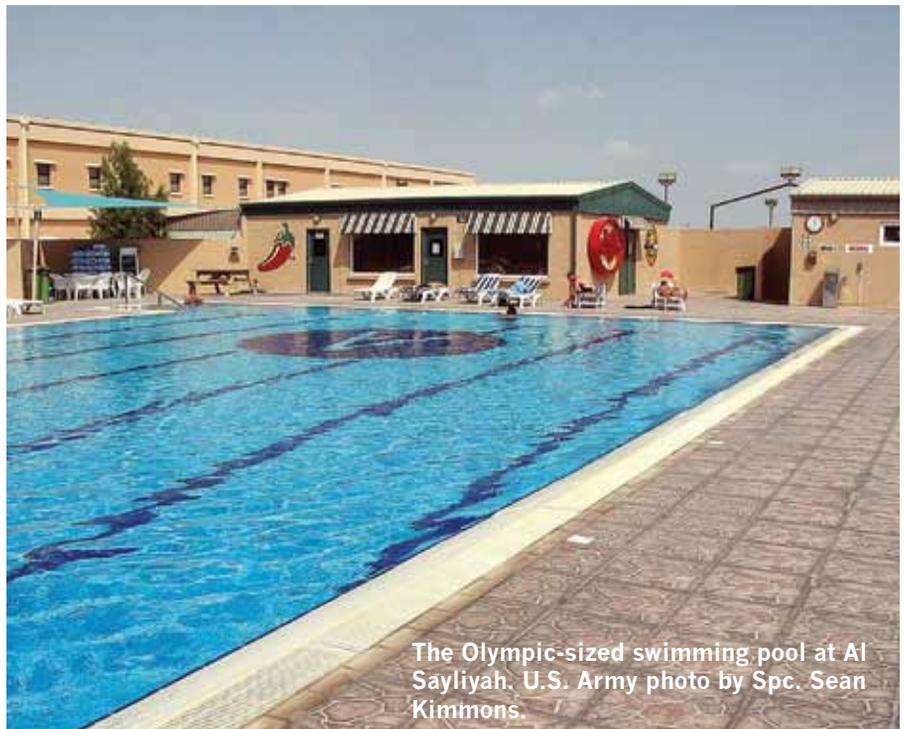
In a combat zone, every day requires intense focus. Tomorrow doesn’t matter in the least; for it may never come. Also, forget about yesterday. It’s over and done with. Dwelling on things that happened in weeks, days or hours past is a luxury no one has. It’s a constant battle just to give your very best effort and keep a positive attitude throughout the non-stop cycle and it wears you down. A lot.

Like everyone around me, I pull myself through this challenging time through regular milestones:

missed birthdays of loved ones back home; holidays that are briefly observed; daily (sometimes hourly) prayer; and the many evolutions that come and go within a single day.

The best milestones occur when one of your comrades finishes their tour and goes home. I think I’ve mentioned before that it feels like we’re all in a giant candy dispenser; and as each person comes and goes, you find yourself moving up in the stack, getting closer to your own chance for fresh air and freedom.

Also, for those on a 350-day boots-on-ground rotation, there’s the 14 days of leave to any destination in the world, paid for by the Department of Defense. Many people just go home; but some of my friends went to Greece, Spain or Italy, meeting



The Olympic-sized swimming pool at Al Sayliyah. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Sean Kimmons.

their families there for an all-too-brief fortnight of downtime.

Until recently, we also had something else to look forward to: either one or two four-day liberty passes to the resort-like desert atmosphere of the As Sayliyah Rest and Recuperation Center in Qatar. A year-long tour in Afghanistan, Iraq or the Horn Of Africa would earn you two trips; six-month deployers earn one trip.

For U.S. service members in Afghanistan, the program was discontinued due to the extreme difficulty of air travel in this theater. Often, this four-day break turns into a 14-day nightmare, with lots of cancelled flights and extended stays in the Qatar passenger terminal, or worse; a few nights in the foul-smelling, filthy, sweltering, overcrowded tents at Bagram Air Field. Because of the logistics issue that caused the policy change, I missed out on the chance for a second trip but was fortunate enough to make the first one. The R-and-R opportunity dried up only a few weeks after I returned. Some guys I know didn't even get that.

Getting there and back was definitely a pain in the butt. And the customs searches in Qatar were unreal. Believe me when I tell you that U.S. customs procedures make way more sense! We had to stop at two different places for identical baggage search processes. It's tough to find patience when you badly need a shower and haven't slept in a couple of days. But everyone in my group, conditioned by the deployed lifestyle, just grinned and bore it, taking it one small step at a time. Funny how that works.

I'll spare you all the details of my four total days in transit coming and going, and focus instead on the awesome experience of just being in Qatar, relaxing in civilian clothes after several months of non-stop work, clad in Army camouflage.

First of all, Qatar is one hot enchilada. The thick air and searing



A service member rides a personal watercraft in the Persian Gulf as part of the U.S. Central Command rest and recuperation pass program at Camp As Sayliyah.

hot sand made me feel like an egg frying on the sidewalk. But it was awesome, because no matter how thick or humid the convection oven-like air – it was clean. No tiny burnt particles of rubber, plastic or human waste to breathe into my poor lungs, just pure desert air.

The heat didn't bother us much, because once we got briefed, released and cleaned up in the immaculate open-bay berthing facility the cammies were stowed and out came shorts, t-shirts, sandals and shades. There were no formations or musters, no dragging weapons or body armor around, no schedule to keep. It was just (pardon the cliché) a lot of fun in the sun.

There was so much fun to be had in that four-day respite, and at the same time, no work to get done. I bowled, went swimming, took a cruise in the Persian Gulf, had a beach picnic, went driving on the sand dunes, sang karaoke, played pool, ate at Chili's and went to the mall. I also enjoyed the lightning fast free Wi-Fi internet service, and reveled in the fact that I could finally download and install the multitude

of software updates that had eluded me over all that time in "The Stan." The staff and facilities at the USO are simply first-rate. Most of them have been deployed to either Afghanistan or Iraq before, and so they relate to weary deployed troops in a way no one else can. They really pulled out all the stops to show us a good time. It was very evident that the excellently-funded and fully-staffed program really is about rest and recuperation. It was a very liberating, and much appreciated experience; one that I'll always look back on with a smile.

The time in Qatar went quickly, but I wouldn't have changed a thing. I found it hard to fathom that only the week before I'd contemplated not even going because of the difficulty getting there and back. An outstanding Air Force captain, who never even had a chance to go herself, encouraged me to take the time and make the most of it, regardless of the haphazard travel scenario. I'm so glad I went through with it. I came back to work feeling refreshed and tanned, shaking my head at the casual world which existed only a few hours flight time away from the mountains and dust of Afghanistan.



MCC Brian Naranjo

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ANCHORS IN THE DIRT

PART 10

I could barely believe it. Almost eight months since arriving in Kabul, Afghanistan, I was actually packing up to go home. Not permanently, of course. It was time for my mid-tour leave. I'd requested to take it as late as possible. I wanted to eat through the bulk of my tour on the front end, so I wouldn't have a lot to face after returning. As things stood, I'd only have about three months left in Afghanistan after my two-week break.

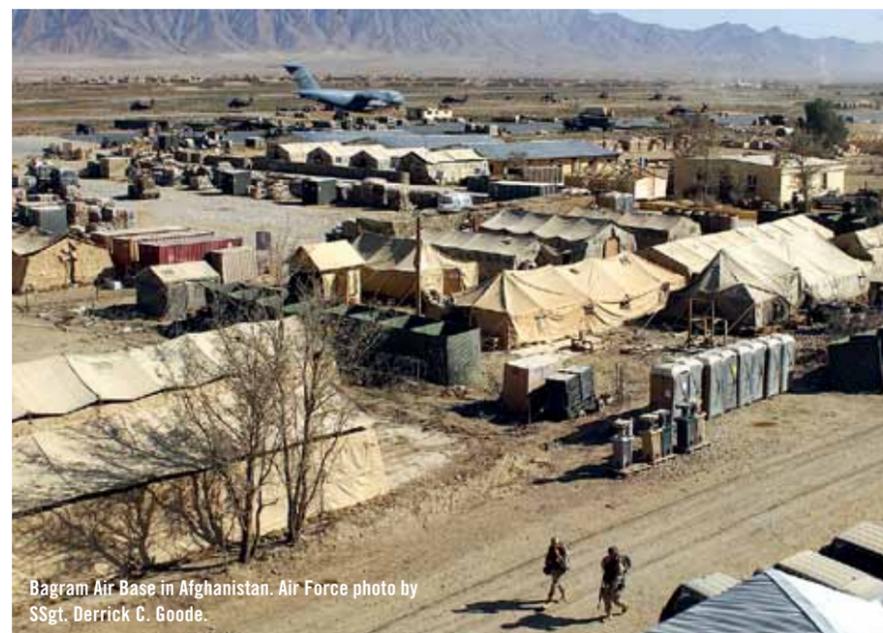
Needless to say, I was excited, but heeded all the warnings of friends who'd gone before me. Their advice included travel tips: Pack light. Lock up your weapon in your locker. DO NOT take it with you. Bagram sucks. Stay out of the transient tents. Don't forget your cover and reflective vests (we don't use either in Kabul). The cops at Bagram will bust you after dark if you are not wearing them. You'll probably get stuck a day or two in Kuwait. Bring a book and lots of extra batteries for your music or gaming devices.

Then, for my arrival home, they offered these pearls of wisdom: Make the most of it. Get in some down time. Don't try to do too many things that will only put unnecessary stress on you and your family. Fifteen days will go fast, but don't ruin the last few days by thinking of this place. It will all be here when you get back.

The biggest hassle of taking leave? The travel, of course. As I'd already learned on various trips around this country, it isn't exactly the friendly skies. Everyone, their brother and their

dog are all trying to get somewhere. There are limited aircraft missions and available seats to accommodate this large number of people.

I got lucky and caught a quick flight to Bagram early in the morning on my first day of travel. I caught the morning travel brief. I had the dubious honor to be named the non-commissioned-officer-in-charge (NCOIC) of my group. This was because I was the senior enlisted person on the flight. So I served as the right hand man for the chalk commander of our flight. My job was to ensure good order and discipline on the way to our destination, and keep a muster to ensure no troops got left behind.



Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Air Force photo by SSGT. Derrick C. Goode.

On this flight we were a boisterous group of nearly 60 people, in our case all bound for the U. S. of A. Others choose to go elsewhere because the Department of Defense picks up the roundtrip travel cost to anywhere in the world for all military serving in our neck of the woods. Talking to some of those who chose this option, they said meeting their families in a vacation spot rather than home would make it easier to come back here.

The people in my group and I reached the consensus that Dorothy was right. There's no place like home!

Saying it is one thing; doing it is another. Getting to the U. S. was quite the hassle. Our flight out of Bagram to Kuwait got cancelled or delayed three separate times. It took quite a bit of good-humored patience to wait out those long hours in the over-crowded terminal.

We finally started flying to Kuwait, sweating under the weight of our gear in the hot, stuffy compartment of a Canadian C-130 aircraft. We sat uncomfortably on the cargo net seating, and everyone tried to get some rest. Once we landed, the entire "hurry up and wait" evolution was quickly implemented. After several hours, we secured all of our heavy gear in a massive bag drag. The gear included Interceptor Body Armor and ballistic plates. It was all painstakingly catalogued and stowed in various compartments, where it would be awaiting us on our return. Each person was cautioned against losing their inventory form, which guaranteed big trouble. I looked around at the young, eager faces around me, and predicted a 50 percent loss rate on the paperwork going home.

We attended a few travel briefs and went to SATO for final travel itineraries and electronic ticket issue. Then we bedded down for a few hours of rest before our early morning muster.

At that muster we were informed the flight was cancelled, and went back to the tents to kill time. Our next muster was at 2 p. m., when we were surprised and delighted with news of a scheduled flight. We went through an extremely thorough customs inspection and personnel search. Then we boarded a nice double-stack commercial airplane and flew relaxed and in style to Germany. There were no incidents requiring the action of the chalk commander, or his NCOIC, thankfully. I slept like a baby.

During our stop in Germany, I could feel the excitement beginning to build. Our uniforms were a little worse for wear, we all needed showers, and our bodies were weary. Despite all this, morale was high and we all gave knowing looks. Next stop: The United States.

Landing in Dallas, we were overwhelmed by a large and appreciative crowd of men and women. They cheered wildly for us when our group spilled into the main terminal at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. Goosebumps formed on my arms and tears welled in my



Soldiers are greeted upon arrival at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport in Texas. Photo by Cherie A. Thurlby

eyes; it was a completely unexpected welcome home. I will never forget that welcome. People handed us snacks, sodas and stuffed animals.

In Dallas, I was officially relieved of my NCOIC duties. Bidding the commander farewell, I found a phone in the USO and called my brother, who lives nearby. We ate lunch and made small talk. After he left the airport, I found my gate and took another nap in preparation for the hour-long flight to Manhattan, Kan. Almost there!

I will spare you the details of my arrival in Manhattan and my two weeks of leave. As predicted and expected, it went way too fast. I will also spare you the agonizing farewell with

my family. I will say only this: it was much, much worse leaving the second time. I think most who've gone through an experience like this would agree with that assessment.

Knowing I had only a few months left in my tour did little to give me solace as I once again found myself in the Manhattan airport, sadly preparing to get on a plane and start over once again. The trip back was the exact opposite of the trip home. By the time we arrived in Kuwait and claimed our gear, grim faces, slumped shoulders and war-weary nods had replaced the excited energy of a half-month previous. It was time to get back to business.

AT THAT MUSTER WE WERE INFORMED THE FLIGHT WAS CANCELLED, AND WENT BACK TO THE TENTS TO KILL TIME. OUR NEXT MUSTER WAS AT 2 P. M., WHEN WE WERE SURPRISED AND DELIGHTED WITH NEWS OF A SCHEDULED FLIGHT.



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ANCHORS IN THE DIRT

PART 11

I remember the awe-striking misery that greeted me when I first arrived in Afghanistan. And I remember staring at the calendar, just dazed by the number of days, weeks and months that remained in my tour. How could I do it? How did ANYBODY get through this? Moot questions, of course. But when faced with a situation like this, you find yourself asking these questions. And eventually, you get answers.

Somehow, I did get through it. The experience changed me in a number of ways, no doubt. Some good, some bad. It also taught me a lot about myself, and about others with whom I serve. Some good, some bad. There is so much I want to say, and so little space. Let me just tell you that packing up my stuff, and then staring at my empty rack, brought up a number of feelings: relief, joy, sadness, nostalgia, and even anger.

Those of you who have served in Afghanistan, and those of you who may, will certainly understand the words above. You might even add a few to the mix; some of which would be unprintable.

I have the benefit of hindsight now, and can safely look back on my time in Afghanistan with clear eyes. With that vision, I would like to share my list of "10 Things I Think—I Think." If you're a fan of sports, then you know I'm stealing that title from NFL guru Peter King. But he's a patriotic guy and I'm sure he won't mind.

So, here they are, in no particular order:

1. People. Those with whom I served ran the gamut from being the best I've known to the worst. Being in a combat zone and the arduous conditions that go with it certainly make the true self rise to the top in a person. Ultimately there is no place to hide your character. For some, that's good news. Not so for others. Enough said.

2. This ain't the movies! There's nothing romantic about death. Usually there are no telling last words, or a person cradled in a buddy's arms as they expire. Dead is dead, and usually in Afghanistan it's

pretty gruesome and scary, regardless of a person's status: coalition, civilian or even an enemy.

3. Fear sucks. While in Afghanistan, I was blown out of bed by an IED, my aircraft was shot by small arms fire and when we had to make an emergency landing I experienced numerous rocket and mortar attacks. One of those rockets landed very close to my tent, leaving a huge crater. Rockets hiss when they pass overhead. I wish I didn't know that. I have never been as conscious of my own mortality as I was over there. I will never again go to a fireworks show. I sometimes talk to young



U.S. Special Operations troops lead the way during an investigative patrol following a clash between coalition troops and insurgents in southern Afghanistan.



▲ A small child observes the aftermath of a major battle in Farah Province, Afghanistan. American and British flags hang alongside one another on the International Security Assistance Force headquarters compound. An elderly Afghan woman loudly prays following a battle in Farah Province, Afghanistan.



Soldiers (I live in an Army town) who are raring to go and experience the "thrill" of a combat zone. They can have it!

4. Don't believe everything you read or watch. The media has a tendency to focus on those things that will sell a story. The focus isn't always an accurate portrayal of a situation. Take their reports with a grain of salt! I try to avoid news stories about Afghanistan these days.

5. Afghanistan is boring. It can be, anyway. We whiled away the days sometimes by playing practical jokes on each other, or using Facebook as an outlet for our downtime. See Thing No. 1. The people make all the difference.

6. I miss my friends. Again, see Thing No. 1. Yeah, those conditions are tough. But people are tougher, and I have never had such good friends in all my life. We talked, we laughed, we cursed and yelled, and sometimes we cried. But we were there for each other, regardless of the situation. I will never forget you guys. Stay in touch!

7. The mail never stops! Mail runs every day in Afghanistan. That which isn't stolen or inevitably lost will find its way to your compound, and brighten a day. I will forever be indebted to those people who sent me packages. Family, friends, high school buddies previously 20 years out

of touch, and complete strangers, all sent me boxes while I was there. These little bundles of joy were always shared with my friends serving with me in harm's way. The first package for me came on my 10th day in theater. I took it back to my room, and sat there on my bed, alone, staring at it, tears running down my face. I sat that way for awhile, not wanting to open it, because then the moment would be over. That box represented a piece of home. The importance of mail in a combat zone can never be over-stated!

8. What day is it? Who cares?! When you work every day, there's no significance of a weekend. Every day is Groundhog Day. You just plug through it, and get it over with. I remember that sense of dread each and every day as I tied my boots and strapped my rifle over my back, ready for just another day. I always said a prayer at that moment, and another one when the evolution was over, and often many in-between. Time passes quickly, although it doesn't seem like it while you're there.

9. Pets are Pets. There were plenty of friendly cats and dogs around, and they

sure made for a pleasant diversion. I often wished it were possible to take a few home with me. Regardless of the situation around us and how calloused a person has to be to get through it, things were just easier when I could pet a dog or cat that lounged nearby. For a moment, it was like being back home. Even in Afghanistan, animals like people, and people like them.

10. People are people. This may seem repetitive, considering Thing No. 1, but I feel people are the single most important factor in what we are trying to do in Afghanistan. I served with people from many nations, and all branches of service. I even ran into a U.S. Coast Guard petty officer, who was long since weary of the exclamations of "Coast Guard! What the hell are YOU doing here?" Regardless of their service, or even country, people are people. And I served with some good ones. When I left, I traded patches with an Aussie, and will always look at it and smile.

My next column will talk about my eventual arrival home, and the long-lasting effects of a year spent on deployment in Afghanistan.

I HAVE THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT NOW,
AND CAN SAFELY LOOK BACK ON MY TIME
IN AFGHANISTAN WITH CLEAR EYES.



MCC Brian Naranjo

Chief Mass Communication Specialist Brian Naranjo enlisted in the Navy in Dec. 1990 and is a graduate of the Defense Information School. While on active duty he was stationed in Guam and Japan. Naranjo earned his anchors Sept. 16, 2002. He has been mobilized twice since Sept. 11, 2001, serving in Chinhae, Republic of Korea and Kabul, Afghanistan. Naranjo has written two novels, and resides in Manhattan, Kan. with his wife and two children.

ANCHORS IN THE DIRT

PART 12

Anyone who comes through the International Security Assistance Force Compound—here in Afghanistan—for more than a day will need to trudge up stairs to the billeting office at least once. Permanent party folks like me make many trips up there. It's much more than a billeting office. It's a place to check-in, check-out, pick up security badges, get linen chits, verify security clearances, etc.

The office is manned by American, Australian and Italian personnel. Like everywhere else on the compound, the billeting office is a melting pot. This pot was stirred by a soft-spoken, hard-working, father-figure of a man: U.S. Army Master Sgt. Jose Crisostomo.

Meeting him on my bone-weary, bleary-eyed first afternoon in Kabul, I quickly made the connection from his name tape, with a previous tour I'd enjoyed in Guam. Crisostomo is a fairly common name on the tiny Pacific island. I made small talk with the 59-year-old soldier, telling him about my three years on his home turf, and explaining both my kids had been born there.

"Crisostomo" can be a mouthful to get out in conversation, so everyone called him "Master Sgt. C." Due to his highly-visible position and quiet, friendly demeanor, the elder soldier was a popular man on campus. Everyone knew him, and no one could find anything negative to say about the man.

He and I discussed the indigenous chamorro-style barbecue and marinade ingredients, and he invited me to his next outdoor office get-together for some island-style fare. I never made it to one of these events, but I always knew when he was cooking. When Master Sgt. C was standing in front of his rusty grill, a flavorful charcoal aroma drifted up from behind the barracks, piercing the otherwise rancid atmosphere filled with microscopic particles of rubber, plastic and excrement.

As our shared time in Afghanistan slowly stretched into weeks and then months, I conversed more with Master Sgt. C. I learned he had voluntarily returned from a quiet retired life with his family in Washington state, to take a role in bringing peace and stability to this nation.

DUE TO HIS HIGHLY-VISIBLE POSITION AND QUIET, FRIENDLY DEMEANOR, THE ELDER SOLDIER WAS A POPULAR MAN ON CAMPUS.

He lived on the same floor as I did in the barrack Freedom Hall. I would run into him in the common latrine; where I would see him stand in front of a mirror, patiently shaving the sides of his head and trimming his gray-speckled hair on top into a high-and-tight.

I teased him late one night as he performed this weekly ritual, asking, "What, the barber shop here not good enough for you?" "Nah," he replied, eyes never leaving his reflection as he carefully worked the razor up the left side of his head. "The difference between a good hair cut and a bad one is two weeks. And I don't have time to wait in line for something I can do just as well for free."

The fit-and-trim soldier was a busy man, whether he was jogging on the dusty compound roads, organizing a barbecue for his troops, juggling his duties as the compound first sergeant and billeting office manager, or heading out on the dangerous Kabul streets in support of a logistics mission.

Three days after our barracks had been rocked by a bombing, Master Sgt. Crisostomo took a trip outside the gates, where a suicide bomber ended his life. It had already been a tense month, with the national Afghan elections, and the Taliban's constant vows to disrupt the process with violent acts. Not to mention an attack on our front gate—the impact of which blew me out of bed.

Working the press desk in public affairs, I took note of the 18 attack, which killed Crisostomo, many civilians and some United Nations troops. Of course, as I updated the dry erase board in our office space, I had no idea the seasoned Master Sgt. was among the casualties. For me, it was just another mission of secure phone calls and e-mails with our operations folks, fact-collecting and preparing a news release about an attack on our forces. I tracked the American death for the report I e-mailed at the end of each night to the Pentagon.

Bad news spreads like wildfire in a small town, and it was only a few hours after the attack that everyone on the compound was murmuring the awful truth. "Master Sgt. C had died!"

Upset by the news, I tried to shrug it off and just focus on work. But I couldn't deny the all too familiar helpless, hopeless anger that bubbled up within me; from hearing the news that another one of our own had been taken. Immediately after the incident, the road conditions were downgraded to "black," meaning only mission essential travel was authorized on the Afghan roads. Two days later, still thinking about the death of my friend, the Afghan elections were being held. The elections were marred by violence

and black road conditions were still the rule of operations. It wasn't easy as I quietly watched my buddy Matt strap on his body armor and fasten his helmet that day. He was preparing to depart on a mission-essential journey to pick up a member of our staff from the Afghan election headquarters in Kabul.

**ALL GAVE SOME.
SOME GAVE ALL.**

We exchanged typical sarcastic small talk wishing we didn't we need people out on the roads during such a desperate hour.

I wondered then, and still wonder now, what Master Sgt. C had thought as he climbed into his vehicle, only a few days before. I'm sure he did so with the resolute heart of a professional soldier, just doing his job, no matter the circumstances or outcome.

And so Matt and I slowly walked up the stairs and outside into the foul air, from which there would be no more respites offered, courtesy of Master Sgt. C's cooking smoke. I handed Matt his rifle, and as he walked away, he

turned and looked at me, delivering a telling statement that summed up all too well the frustration we felt.

"If I die out there today, tell my wife ..." his voice trailed off.

I will never forget that moment. I nodded my head, and then shook it in sympathetic understanding, wondering to myself if he'd make it back. As his tail lights came on and his truck pulled away on the gravel road, I silently prayed to God that he would.

Thankfully, he did.



MASTER SERGEANT JOSE CRISOSTOMO

AUGUST 29, 1949 - AUGUST 18, 2009

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!



ANCHORS IN THE DIRT

PART 13

MCC Brian Naranjo



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One of my favorite Bible verses is part of a collage that hangs on the wall in my home office. It reads, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.”

More than a year had crawled, walked, ran and then flown by. After the full range of seasons on the calendar, came the season I’d dreamed and prayed about.

It was the season of sweet reunion and relief. Looking back at those final moments of separation, I see me walking off that small airplane in my dirty, faded soldier’s uniform, crossing the bridge (both physical and metaphorical) to safe familiarity. Seeing the faces of my friends and family. Oh, that sweet anticipation as I waited for all those people to get their luggage out of the overhead compartments.

The word homecoming has such a wonderful, tear-jerking ring to it. I still get choked up when my mind’s eye replays the faces of the dozen or so who came to greet me at the small Manhattan, Kan. airport. They even brought homemade signs and balloons! The three most important faces in that crowd? My wife and our two children, of course.

The scene marked a culmination of a difficult and extremely challenging season. But

suddenly I was home. Weary, damaged and ragged, but home. There were hugs, kisses and tears.

Ironically, it was not all that different from my farewell dinner in Afghanistan—minus the kisses, of course. But aside from the warm camaraderie and fellowship of those with whom I served, I experienced my darkest days in Afghanistan. I hope to never smell the air of that place, feel the dull, clumsy weight of a Kevlar helmet and Interceptor body armor, or fear the threat of a roadside bomb again.

An M16A2 rifle weighs about 14 pounds, and some days I can still feel its downward pointed barrel slapping against my butt when I walk, slung for chow. The last three digits of my issued rifle were 6-2-8, coincidentally

AFTER THE FULL RANGE OF SEASONS ON THE CALENDAR, CAME THE SEASON I’D DREAMED AND PRAYED ABOUT.

the same numbers that correspond to my daughter’s birth month and day. I wonder who has my rifle now? I hope they are taking good care of it. Sometimes after a bad dream, I wake up, covered in sweat, reaching for it. That’s kind of strange, because after desert training in Kuwait, I never fired my rifle again. But I am told post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is funny like that.

The significant weight of a deployment isn’t only felt downrange. For more than a year, my kids were without a father. My wife was a single parent, juggling a full-time job with wrestling meets, doctor appointments, school activities, family meals and the minor crises associated with raising two teenage children. On top of that, she sent me a package every week. Every single week. And yes, I cried like a baby when I received the first one.

I have come to realize a year-long deployment is really a two-year, two-part process. After that sweet homecoming honeymoon period, things don’t just snap back to the way they are remembered. People change and grow—particularly teenage kids. Both the Sailor and family have a fair set of baggage to go through after all those hugs and kisses level out.

In Afghanistan, there’s nothing more precious than “Me Time.” For this Sailor, that Me Time



▲ L: Sign at the entrance to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Headquarters complex in Kabul. R: One of the many bunkers at ISAF Headquarters.



was about two hours before going to sleep after work. I would quietly arrive back to my luxury CONEX box or tent (I lived in both during different stages of my deployment), put on the headphones and watch a movie or television shows on my computer, read a book, or just blare some loud music into my brain. That time was precious, and people left me alone. I did the same for them during their “me time.” Everyone knew and respected each other’s limited privacy.

One night, I remember finding myself alone in the tent. It was around 7 p.m., and all my tent mates were either still at work, out doing PT, or at chow. I showered, came back to my small bed, put on the headphones and lay back, letting the music work out the kinks of another long day. I guess about 45 minutes went by. I was quite relaxed.

Suddenly, the door of our dwelling flew open, and an Army captain was standing in the doorway, yelling and gesturing at me. I couldn’t hear a dadgummed thing he said, but noticed he was decked out in the latest body armor fashions. Finally, I took off the headphones, and realized he was saying, “ROCKET ATTACK,

CHIEF! GET TO THE TERMINAL NOW!!!!” I shook my head, said a couple of unprintable words, hopped up, nodded in affirmative to the officer, threw on my shower shoes, grabbed my rifle and headed to the terminal, which was the only hardened building nearby.

Wasn’t I freaked out a mortar had landed just 50 feet from my tent? Sure, a little. But hell, they missed didn’t they? Leave me alone! That’s my Me Time!

On another day, I stood outside with my Army Sgt; a motivated young guy who could have a bright future. I was offering him some deckplate leadership that may have included some polite suggestions from me on how he might improve his attitude. I was right in the middle of this discussion with my young non-commissioned officer, when BOOM, we were both nearly knocked off our feet from a large explosion very close by.

No gunfire or other explosions immediately followed, and I considered what to do next. “Sgt. O” looked at me, and I shrugged, then we got back to business. “See Sgt. O, you gotta get it to together.” He good-naturedly nodded

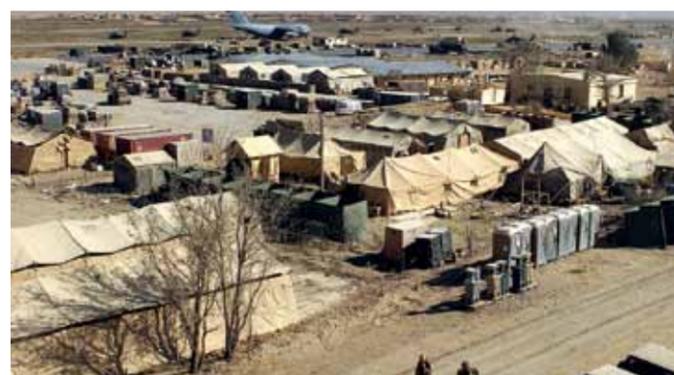
his head. We simply ignored the fact a mortar round had just blown up so close to “home,” and continued our discussion. The Taliban wasn’t invited to our mentor session out there on the porch, and I would be darned if they were going to make me lose my train of thought.

The most scared I have ever been in my life was when my guys were out on the road during a suicide bomber attack on multiple targets in the city. When we heard and felt some of those explosions, my heart tried to escape through my throat. After realizing the futility of trying to reach the drivers by cell phone or radio for a sanity/accountability check (due to the electronic jamming equipment used to impede using phones as trigger devices), I hauled butt out to the North gate. I impatiently waited behind some sandbags with some very motivated (and very heavily armed) Belgian soldiers manning their post. We kept our eyes open for bad guys and friendly vehicles incoming, and eventually my guys showed up safe and sound, albeit understandably a little rattled (like their chief).

These are the memories I brought home with me. The fact that those memories bother me



▼ L: Instructors simulate a rocket-propelled grenade attack on Sailors during a convoy exercise. R: Bagram Air Base.



◀ Chief Mass Communication Specialist Brian Naranjo poses on the back of an Afghan National Army pick-up truck with Cmdr. Benjamin Nicholson, commander of Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah Province, Afghanistan, during a fact-finding patrol.

has me seeking treatment from the Veteran’s Administration (VA). Contrary to popular stereotype, there are some good caregivers at the VA, and they are helping me get through part two of my deployment to Afghanistan.

Like so many before me, I tried to just get back to business right after I came home. But after several months and a number of postcards in the mail prompting me to do so, I finally filled out the post deployment health re-assessment questionnaire, which is required for Reservists returning from deployment.

Immediately after coming home, I went to my civilian family doctor for issues with my lower back, directly related to my time in Afghanistan. I just trusted her more than the reputation of the VA system, and was willing to pay for her care.

However, the diagnosis and treatment of my back became really expensive, really quick; and I reasoned that taking the online questionnaire, doing the follow-up phone interviews, and seeing some government doctors would give my Uncle Sam a chance to fix it. But it turns out my back may be the least of my short-term problems. Today I’ll tell you with a grimace and a yawn that the system is working for me, though it is a long, long process.

What caused my PTSD? Was it the suicide bomber that blew me out of bed? Was it the trip to a site where people had violently died, and the grisly images my professional eye captured with my camera? Was it simply the daily tally of

coalition deaths? Maybe all of the above, and then some. Honestly, I don’t give a crap. I just want to put all this behind me, sort of. Some of it. Most of it.

At my farewell dinner, I tried to express my thoughts on that year of my life that my comrades and I had spent together. I said some pretty funny stuff, good-naturedly roasted a few good friends, and then I got serious.

I expressed to those people, some who were in their first week of their year-long journey, the importance of not selling yourself short; to always, ALWAYS do your best; and never be the weak link in the chain. I wanted to be the guy who could be depended on to get it done, in a room full of people with the same motivation. Looking back that night, my knees buckled as I realized it was all almost over. Finished. Single Digit Midget! Short! And I hadn’t let myself or others down. I hadn’t quit. I’d made it through without compromising my work ethic, integrity or resolve to contribute fully. It is amazing to me the quality of those Sailors, soldiers, Marines and airmen who serve so well, and with such pride, in adverse conditions, every single day.

What amazes me more, is there’s not a Sailor serving today who hasn’t enlisted or re-enlisted without understanding the current ongoing need for our service on that side of the world. As I write this, the rotating schedule continues. There are Sailors on active duty, being issued gear and preparing to leave the borders of the

United States; there are those with freshly-issued orders getting their home affairs taken care of; and there are those already in Iraq and Afghanistan, preparing to wrap things up and come home. There are literally tens of thousands of our Reserve shipmates who have deployed, or are getting ready to re-deploy. And they keep on coming. Gives me goose bumps.

Afghanistan will always be a part of me. Always. And the people with whom I worked will always be close to my mind and heart. Any of my fellow cohorts reading this are welcome for a nice visit to Naranjo Manor anytime. And I promise to serve you something better than microwave food and Coke Zero. That’s an inside joke; just one of many that make me smile.

As I write this, I see that same biblical quote in the framed collage on my wall. And I know that it’s time to close this season of columns.

But, before I put the cap on the pen, I would like to say thanks to the editorial staff at TNR magazine for their support and encouragement these past 16 months. Thanks especially to my CPO brother Jim Vorndran for approaching me about doing a column, way back when. Also, thanks to you, the reader; you, the Sailor; you, the family member. You are what makes our Navy community what it is today. Hoorah! Thank you, shipmates!