

WHERE BOYS BECOME MEN

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I was in fourth grade when the world trade centers were attacked. I won't forget that day, it was Grandparent's Day at my school and nobody was showing up. All the students were gathered in the lunchroom waiting for everyone to arrive and then we were all ushered out and back into our classroom. My teacher, Mrs. Woods, had the TV on in the classroom when we got in and I could see the smoke coming out of the first tower of the trade centers. None of us knew what was going on but we sat and watched, after a few minutes we all realized what was going on but no more than an eleven-year-old can honestly know about terrorism circa 2001. I sat and watched the TV intently and then I watched as the second plane crashed into the second tower, I thought that they were showing a replay for a moment and then realized that it was another plane crashing into the tower. I had no idea then what the consequences of those actions I had witnessed would have on me ten years later.

I graduated high school in 2009 and by February 2010 I was in OSUT (One Station Unit Training) for the Army Infantry. I had never shot a gun before nor had I ever harmed someone. In the 14 weeks of training I had gotten I shot thousands of rounds of varying caliber and thrown many punches learning and training to be a fierce and unrelenting warrior. I soaked in every bit of the training that I received and tried my hardest to excel, I had never excelled at anything before and I seemed to do good at this. I learned to work as an individual and I learned what it meant to be part of a team and how that being a team can make or break you.

I deployed to Afghanistan in April of 2011 with the 25th Infantry Division. I had trained for 14 months for this moment, it was what I had craved and desired since I had signed all those papers in my contract. The thought of going and fighting the enemy, the bad guys, had finally come. I had been through countless training exercises and pushed to my breaking point and beyond for this exact moment. As an infantryman there is a badge that is given out called the Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB). This badge is given out to

members of the Infantry only and only if you have received or given direct fire to the enemy. There were only a handful of guys within my platoon of 44 who had been to combat before and even less than that who had received this badge, and everyday all of us young and fearless would say, "Today is the day I get my CIB." Little did we know then that we would earn this badge many times over and that it would also be the killer among us. I received my CIB on May 11th 2011, exactly one month to the day from when we arrived at our little base in Afghanistan. This first gunfight we were involved in would be the easiest of them all. The Taliban were just testing us, learning from us and what we did.

A little background on the place we were living at, we were living in a village called Talukan, Afghanistan. It's in the Panjawai district of the Kandahar Province in Afghanistan. If you look it up on google and click on the Wikipedia link it refers to this area as the "birthplace of the Taliban". Little did we know we were going up against the most fearsome and determined warriors in Afghanistan. I read a book in my first weeks of being there called, "The Lions of Kandahar". It is about a special forces unit and their battle in the area we were located in. They talk of the look the people of the area have and how fearsome of fighters they are. Little did I know that I would soon start having my run ins multiple times a week with these warriors.

While I was there my platoon alone was involved in around 50 gunfights with the Taliban lasting between 10 minutes to eight hours. In June of that year was when we were involved in the first gunfight in which I accepted the fact I was going to die.

Our mission that day was to move to an Afghan National Army (ANA) base that was being overrun by the Taliban and kill the enemy and rescue the survivors. It was a hot day in the desert. There was no breeze around to take the edge off. We walked the 6 kilometers (KM) from our base to our first checkpoint in the southern portion of our Area of Operations (AO), from that checkpoint we moved towards the Eastern entrance of the village which funneled us into a walkway similar to a single lane road. Once we start nearing the entrance we start receiving fire from the Taliban and immediately start returning fire.

As I'm running forward to get into position to start returning fire I can hear how close the rounds are as they pass by my head, the sound is unmistakable it's like the sound of two 2x4's clacking against each other right next to your ear, you learn how to judge how close each round is to your head by this sound. These rounds are close, within 24 inches I suppose, possibly less. As I get into

position next to the heavy machine gun I get crushed in the face by the dirt of the rounds hitting by me, they are close now, within one foot. Shit. There is no cover to stop them from hitting us. We are in an open field in the desert right before the walkway. They have the terrain advantage on us and the knowledge of the land. They are shooting at us from three different angles right now. I can hear at least five different rifles shooting at us and there are only 13 of us, only 12 of us can shoot back because the doc isn't allowed to by Geneva Code. This isn't our first gunfight now, we have all been in about 10-12 now in the past two months, we are seasoned veterans in our minds, we have killed about 15 Taliban on the low end, in those fights, this is just another walk in the park now. We keep returning fire and I see him running. He's about 220 meters in front of me running right to left, I can see him shooting as he's running, I move the machine gun ahead of him and plan for the shot, I practiced this one countless times before I deployed, it's just a simple mover target anticipate the movements and wait for the opportune moment to take the shot and bring him down. So I move my target line left 30 yards and wait, I see him still moving in the same direction and I know how long it takes these bullets to travel that far, so I pull the trigger from the machine gun and shoot nine rounds just like I'm taught, I watch them fly through the air I red round for every four normal rounds, I got two this time and I see all the rounds moving at him and where he is going to be. Then it happens, three of them hit him. He topples over, no longer shooting at me or my brothers.

See that's what these guys to my left and right are to me, my brothers. I was born with only one brother and one sister, but here I've got 12 other brothers with me on this patrol. They are always my focus, not myself. I'd give my life for theirs at any moment, I wasn't trained to be a martyr nor was I born to be one but I would do anything for these guys. Men. That's what we all are, most of us are no older than 22, hell I'm only 20 at this point. But here in this land, fighting these fights with each other, we're brothers. And it's a bond you can't take from us. It's one you can't imagine. See I don't like or get along with most of them outside of this realm right here, but once we take step outside those dirt filled walls we live in out there, I'd die for every one of them and I know they would do the same for me.

I watched countless war movies when I was younger, I didn't understand the true principles of what went on during those times in the movie. I took it at face value and saw the movie as a movie and that's it. When I was within a month of leaving I saw the first documentary style movie of the War in Afghanistan. It was called

Restrepo, it showed the men of a certain unit in the mountains in Afghanistan fighting people you couldn't see most the time. They were fearsome and brutal warriors. They were relentless in their fight against the Americans and the goal is easy to see, kill the Americans and get them out of the area. This is when I first realized what actually goes on over there. See you train for the fight but you can never depict how the fight actually is.

Most of the gunfights are like fighting a freaking ghost because you can't see them, they know this land better than us and they hide while they fight.

After that there is another Taliban taken down by one of my other brother's. This creates a lull in the gunfire, a time for us to reload and check one another. So we move and check the others around us, see me, I like to eat in these times, I don't drink a lot of water out here, I tried to turn myself into a camel so that I could last on as little water as possible. Food though, you never know when you could eat again, shit I might die on an empty stomach and that would be a shame. So I check my buddies around me and then I get back in my spot and open my bag, inside I have Nature Valley bar, and mind you it's the classic granola so its crumbly as hell. I open it and try to eat as much as I can at once without choking on the tiny granola that's crunched up in the package. I try eating as much as I can so that I can have some energy restored. I pull one of the two bottles of water out and open it up. I go to take my first drink of it again and CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!, there it goes again. Right when they fired those shots I see the dirt kicking up around us and they have us pinned, we are all getting hit by debris from the rounds. And of course, wouldn't you know, I drop my freaking water bottle so that I can start returning fire. As I'm returning fire I'm also watching my water bottle pour water onto the dry ground in front of me. I know what happened, we stayed still too long trying to refit before we move into the village. This gunfight goes on for another 15 minutes or so and then it stops. We take two minutes and re-consolidate and then start pushing into the village. The path is 150 meters long and about 9 feet wide, on my left side is a wall about 6 feet high and on my right, there is a wall about 3 feet high. All 13 of us are on the path now moving in.

We get about halfway through the pathway and there it is again. Gunshots. It's close now, they are within 75 meters of us. I turn left to where it came from and fire my first two shots instinctively.

During OSUT we went through team drills and the first thing they taught us was the two shot method. Every time you heard enemy fire you would turn in that direction and fire two shots right away. It helps keep bullets toward the enemy, even if it wasn't close, which would always help to give us a second to really find them and locate them.

These two shots do nothing but hit the wall in front of me. I'm only 5'9" so my short ass hit the wall with the first two rounds. My squad leader, Rudy Rodriguez, right next to me, stopped and laughed at me as we are getting shot at because I couldn't shoot over a wall.

That was the guy Rudy was. He was always there to find something funny around and help ease your mind. This was his third deployment, so it was nothing new to him. While we would sit around inside base and have some sort of down time he would tell us about his last deployments and talk to us about what to expect. He carried around a notebook in his back pocket and you could always see the top of it sticking out and instead of his name it simply said B.A.M.F. bad ass mother fucker. To me that's what he was, he had taken the role of older brother to me and he trained me and mentored me. I learned a lot about the army and life from him. A few months after this incident we were involved in an explosion that knocked out my buddy and I but, it took Rudy's life. The last thing I saw before he died was him laughing at a joke we had made.

So, then I was on my tip-toes trying to shoot back at them, there were at least three of them in the poppy field shooting at us. As I was shooting I couldn't help but notice that it sounded like I was getting shot at from behind me now too, at first I thought it was just the echo of the all the bullets but it wasn't. I could see the dirt hitting the wall behind me and around us. Ambush. Shit. They baited us right into it.

See people think that the Afghani are dumb, but they aren't. They can create 150 pound explosive bombs that can't be detected by metal detectors and buried in the ground so that they can kill multiple people at once or take out armored vehicles, all by the age of 12. How many 12-year-old American kids can do that? They can create the perfect trap and use your own techniques against you to make sure that you walk right into it, and that's exactly what we did.

I was the first to notice it. I called it out and we split, it's not the first time we've run a drill like this. It sounds like a battle from the World War II movies going on right now. I turned to the right wall and there they were, at least 15 of them shooting to kill and looking to capture. They are moving in on us from both sides now. We are outnumbered and out gunned. We are starting to run low on ammo now too. This is the third engagement we've been in already in the past two hours and this one is intense. I can hear the grenades being thrown now, we are in worried status now. They are getting closer and aren't letting up.

I look over to my buddy on the right. I've known him for a year now. He's a 6'4" Jersey boy, we couldn't be more different, but right now we are the same. We take a knee and look around, about 10 of us are on a knee right now trying to get cover behind this three-foot wall. The bullets are still ringing from both sides. Everyone kind of looks at each other and gives slight nods in acknowledgement, I look back at my buddy on the right and give him a hug and tell him thanks. The bullets are closer now on both sides, they haven't let up yet and they are still advancing in on us.

It was in this moment that I saw boys become men, boys that won't ever have their innocence back, boys that won't ever be the same again. It was at this time that I lost mine as well. I saw the Devil then, I told him I would see him soon, it wouldn't be much longer until I would walk that fateful walk with him.

Then I took a breath and turned again and went back to the fight, we gave them hell. Over the radio I hear something, it's not one of our voices it's something different. I listen more intently as I continue firing harder this time. More determined to kill with every shot. Then I hear it again, "Burnout 1-1 checking on station, I hear you could use some aerial support." Then he goes on to list how many rockets and bullets he has to fire but I tune it out. Help. Thank fucking God, we have help. He flies overhead one time and the firing lets up some from the enemy as they hide from him. Then he calls over the radio again as he starts to turn around, "Assassin 3-7 your guys need to take cover because I'm coming in danger close with rockets, I need your approval for danger close." I can then hear my platoon sergeant on the radio giving his initials as the OK for the danger close rocket mission. He calls it out to us for us to take cover and we all lay down, I tuck up against the base of the wall that had been my only small safe spot for the last 30 minutes. Now we wait for the rockets to come in, it's a blessing and a worry. We are so close that if he's off by any little bit it will kill us instead of

the enemy. Then we hear it, the rockets which sound similar to a shotgun going off in the distance, mere seconds away now. Boom! Boom! Boom! They all hit everyone looks to make sure we are all okay, the gunfire ceases now and we turn back over the wall and look through the dust that rising from the explosions, we don't see anything anymore. We have to move back now, everyone is low on ammo and we need to make sure that we have enough in case we are to get into a gunfight again on the way back. We start moving back quickly as possible. Everyone's exhausted, the adrenaline from the fight is starting to wear off. I can feel the sluggishness of my legs as we are moving back.

All of these incidents, every one of them, they wear you down. They start changing the way you are on the inside, it takes something from you when you see another's life being taken away in front of you, regardless of friend or foe.