

The Last Patrol

A short story

By

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“Believe me, nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won.”

Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, Letter from the field of Waterloo,
(June 1815)

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Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, October 2010

The hollow just below his Adam's apple had acted like a reservoir filling as he slept, collecting the sweat, as his skin tried to cool itself in the oppressive heat. It overflowed and trickled down his shoulder, touching the hairs on its downward journey waking him with a start. He clutched at the irritation, looking for the annoying insect that had dragged him from his fitful sleep, but his hand found only moist, clammy skin.

Looking at his watch, his eyes tried to make sense of the dial. *Five fifteen*, he said to himself, as he swung his legs off the bed, *that's good enough*. His feet slipped straight into his boots. He didn't have to look. He knew exactly where they were. They had been placed in the same spot every night for the last six months; their pungent smell a reminder of their location in case his muscle memory failed.

Pulling back the flap of the tent – his makeshift home – he stepped outside, his naked torso exposed to the morning breeze instantly feeling its cooling effect. As he watched the bright red disc rise clear off the horizon, he arched his back and threw up his hands. The yawn coming from deep inside him, satisfying his body's stiffness, the act almost primeval, an offering to the new sun, which was now busy chasing away the last shadows of another restless night. *I thought*

this day would never come, he thought as he walked across the dusty courtyard and past the armoured vehicles that lay neatly parked in rows.

As he headed for the latrine, he grabbed a bottle of water from a half open box. Reaching his destination he lined himself up and relaxed his muscles, his bladder immediately recognising the signal, began to empty. He looked down and chuckled. He remembered his first piss when he had arrived. *What a novel use for traffic cones*, he had thought, *far better than blocking off lanes, much better to piss in*. The make shift urinal consisting of a bright red traffic cone which was taped to a metal pipe, the base of the plastic bollard acting as a funnel.

He twisted the blue cap off the transparent water bottle, took several gulps and poured the rest over his head. The tepid liquid ran easily over his closely cropped hair and onto his lean, muscular torso, bronzed from a summer under the Afghan sun. It engulfed him, his skin breaking out in a freshening eczema. *It's going to be a hell of a day*, he thought.

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They all stood around the map. Their camouflaged bodies acting like some surreal frame to the plastic coated, multi coloured paper that was held down by magazines full of brass and grenades, to stop it from becoming a sail in the hot dry wind. The sergeant spat. His spittle darkened by the chewing tobacco creating a small puddle in the arid dust. It was the signal for the brief to begin.

He had heard it all before: actions on ambush, red smoke for casualties, the route, the radio frequencies. It went on and on, each snippet an essential element in what was now a well-rehearsed and choreographed plan of action. But today he couldn't concentrate. His mind was elsewhere. He was home, walking up the drive to his house, stepping over the red and yellow tractor - his son's favourite toy, feeling like a teenager on a first date, the butterflies in his stomach reminding him that he hadn't seen his wife in six months. He was about to knock on the

door when he heard his name. Softly at first, as though carried on the wind, but then like a thunderclap. ‘MARTINEZ!’

He looked down at the sergeant, who - resting on his haunches to be closer to the map - reminded him of an oversized bullfrog, waiting to leap on unsuspecting prey. He searched the man’s brown, weather-beaten face for an indication of his mood. The NCO straightened his frame, turning his head as he did so to purge his mouth once more of the juice from the tobacco that was tucked firmly behind his lower lip. Their eyes met, the young Marine readying himself for the torrent of abuse that he was sure would come his way – his punishment for daydreaming. His indiscipline.

But the man, who had hounded him for the last six months - pushed him to the very limit of his endurance and beyond, began to laugh, his teeth stained from years of over indulgence with chewing tobacco clear for all to see. The tension disappeared in an instant. The rest of the men joining in with the lighter atmosphere, their merriment clear as they shook his hand and jostled him with horseplay. Today was his day. It was his turn. He was going home.

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Mustafa had not been able to sleep, tossing and turning in a bed that was comfortable enough but that gave little respite from an over active mind. His companions had checked several times on him through the night. He knew they were there, alerted to their presence by the creak of the door. The chink of light from the opening, giving just enough to illuminate the contours of his small motionless frame. On each occasion choosing to feign sleep to ease their concerns. A cockerel began to crow. The whispers in the next room grew louder. He heard the footfall. It was time.

His hands cupped water from the small ceramic bowl that lay on top of a rudimentary table, above it a token mirror, its cracked glass held together by a simple frame and splashed the

cool liquid all over his face in an attempt to wash away his fatigue. As the water ran down his face he paused and stared at his reflection. His beard – if you could call it that – was sparse, more a collection of youthful tufts, a contrast to the thick appendages that his teachers sported. But his hair was thick – the sign of things to come?

As he damped down his thick black mane his memory began to wander - thoughts of his mother and how she would sing when she combed it. The game. His pretend struggles to get away and how with every attempt of escape she would hold him tighter, the reward - which he loved - for his mischievous behaviour. His mother winning without exception. The outcome always the same, the parting on the left that was as straight as an arrow.

This was one of his favourite memories, it always made him smile. But today there was no grin on the face that stared back at him. As he searched closer, looking for the memory in the cracked mirror, he was hit with a wave of fear. The pangs of nausea buckling his knees, making him reach out for the table. ‘Mustafa. Are you dressed?’ inquired the voice in the next room, the question pulling him back from the abyss of terror to which he was slipping into. ‘Coming’, he answered instinctively, breaking the spell.

It was time for *shahar imanz* - the first prayer of the day. Drying his hands thoroughly on the threadbare towel, he took his clothes down from the wire coat hanger. They were new. The undergarments, the sandals and of course the *shalwar kameez* – the baggy trousers and long flowing shirt in a brilliant white cotton – all brought from Pakistan especially for today. ‘Come Mustafa,’ the voice repeated again in the early morning stillness, ‘we have work to do.’

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The men climbed on board their metal beasts. The sand painted, fourteen ton, half million dollar, mine resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles, which they used out of necessity to negotiate the local terrain. To the local population, who had only just become accustomed to

vehicles of any sort, these huge mobile fortresses that now roamed their ancestral home - churning up the dirt roads and demolishing their mud brick structures - were a complete anomaly. Their occupants, faceless men with features hidden by dark sunglasses and helmets like visitors from a different planet.

But the mobile fortresses that bristled with heavy armaments and technology, were deemed the best way to save lives by a hierarchy desperately trying to salvage public opinion, against the constant loss of sons, husbands and fathers. Tough times had needed drastic action. The MRAP was it.

He grabbed his harness and strapped it on; making sure it was anchored securely to the 'D' clip of the cupola with a few tugs. He hadn't worn his harness at first. But when he heard of another Marine, who had died after being thrown out of the revolving turret located on top of the MRAP when the vehicle had 'rolled', he had changed his mind. It was heavy and the straps cut into his shoulders and groin, but if it was going to protect him and take him back to his family, he didn't care, he would put up with it.

The driver engaged the gears and the beast lurched forward. The crew bracing themselves against the rocking motion of the now mobile gun platform. To steady himself, he reached out and took hold of the black hunk of metal that lay within easy reach of his gloved hands, his fingers instantly moulding to the hulk of matt black steel. This was his weapon. He cared for it lovingly every day. He knew every nook and cranny of its chiselled form, every application of the parts it held within its brooding frame, a fifty-calibre machine gun, known respectfully by its operatives as just the '50'.

As the Afghan policeman raised the red and white barrier allowing the three-vehicle convoy to exit the camp, he grabbed hold of the 'cocking' handle and pulled it back smoothly. When fully to the rear the gun's mechanism - pushed forward by an internal spring - picked up an oversized brass round from the belt of ammunition and fed it into the breach. His right finger flicking on the safety catch instinctively, to complete the well rehearsed movement. *An hour,*

maybe two, he thought as he waved at the policeman, *and then he could relax*. It was close. So close that he could taste it.

Their advance was slow. The convoy's position marked by a huge dust cloud that hung in the air, its particles settling like a shroud on all that it came in contact with, stinging the nose and lining the throat with its lifeless haze. As the suspension reacted to the potholes, the vehicle groaned and creaked, the antennas whipping back and forth, testament to the surface's unevenness. Whilst inside, the shelves tightly packed with the provisions the Marines thought essential to sustain life - MREs, ammunition, and an endless supply of energy drinks - tried to empty themselves onto the floor, their attempt to obey the law of gravity thwarted by rubber fastenings.

The computer screen – the global positioning system - which was attached to the dashboard in front of the vehicle commander, marked their progress. The blue dot - their current location, jumping forward every few seconds or so as the computer received new instructions from the unseen satellite, many miles above them. *The progress was painfully slow*, he thought, *but at least they were going in the right direction*.

The movement caught the corner of his eye. The hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, as the adrenaline started to course through his body. He could see them. A group of young men hiding behind a cluster of mud brick buildings that lined the right hand side of the road 100 meters ahead. In answer to the threat he traversed the turret to his right, the long black barrel of the '50' arcing round, as it zeroed in on his target. As he flicked off the safety he tried to swallow but the reflex wasn't there, his mouth too dry to follow the instruction. His hands gripped the handle, both thumbs placed lightly on the paddle trigger awaiting the command.

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He entered the dimly lit room, the four men with their backs to him - gathered around a small kitchen table - halting their conversation abruptly as they were alerted to his presence by the creaking door. They turned to meet him; their serious faces illuminated by a solitary naked light bulb.

Ibrahim - the man who had befriended him, and taken him into the *madrasa* - was the first to greet him. 'You look beautiful Mustafa,' he commented as he kissed him on both cheeks and showed him off to the other men as if he was a work of art.

Mustafa loved the flattery that Ibrahim had shown him when he had first entered the *madrasa*. So much so that he had worked hard to maintain its constant flow. However the praise that was given him never really satisfied his appetite. His craving was for love - the emotion that had ceased suddenly when his family had been killed by the 'plane with no pilot', that stalked his homeland - but he knew that it was as close as he could get.

He had become *hafez e quran* - a scholar that could recite the Holy book, every chapter, every, verse from cover to cover. The teachers, impressed with his efforts, had heaped their accolades on him. Whilst the other boys had whispered in small groups as he passed, looking at him as if he were a giant come to visit amongst them.

It made him feel wanted and he enjoyed it. 'He was special', Ibrahim had told him. The continual acclaim finding a ready home in the heart of a vulnerable young boy who had cried himself to sleep for many months after his loss. The only thing left of his family, memories, fading recollections of being tucked up in bed by a doting mother and sitting on the knee of his father, proud at how his son was growing. It was because of this yearning - the constant search for the essential emotion he had lost - that when they had asked him, he had agreed.

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The rocks smashed into the side of the lead vehicle. Its slow moving mass, an easy target for the boys who broke cover from behind the wall and launched their attack. He knew it was coming. It happened every time. The first attack six months ago had been inaccurate. The youths launching their missiles hastily before darting for cover like lizards searching for the protection of the shade. But they had become brazen. Their contempt obvious, as they stood their ground and jeered as the projectiles found their mark.

His reaction was to hide - to duck for cover inside the cupola, but he couldn't. He was the protection for the vehicle and the Marines - their 'eyes and ears' - without him they were blind. So he gritted his teeth and as the rocks smashed around him - their mass no match for the thick armour plating that caused them to splinter – he waited for the blow.

His jaw relaxed. His grimace turning into a smile as he realised that they were out of range, the boys' attention moving swiftly to the next MRAP in the line of three. The youths were behind him. History, like the last 6 months. The heat, the cold, the thirst, the anxiety and most of all the fear. Yes the fear. The emotion that would suddenly strike him like a hammer, paralysing his body, numbing his brain, as it sent shards of terror like electric shocks, to every nerve ending in his exhausted limbs. Its control relaxing only after an extreme effort that left him bathed in a cold sweat. He was leaving it all behind like the angry boys, their forms – like his memories – quickly disappearing in a haze of lifeless barren dust.

But not yet, he said to himself as he looked at his watch. The worst was over, but there was still half an hour to go, through the town, and then to camp and the waiting helicopter. The metallic beast that would swallow him up in its huge belly and effortlessly lift him to safety and into the arms of his beautiful wife and son.

*

He stood with his arms outstretched as the two men began to fuss around him. Delicately they picked the combat vest up from the table placed, placed it on his shoulders and as one held it in place, the other tightened the buckles so that the deadly garment fitted him as tightly as possible. He remembered his training; “there must be no movement,” his instructor had told him as they had practised back in the *madrassa*. “You, with the help of Allah will decide the moment; it cannot be left to chance or accident.”

It was lighter than he remembered and less bulky. The deadly material in the rectangular chest pockets, moulding easily to his wiry torso. Over the top they placed his white oversized white shirt. The one he had brought with him - the outer layer - the camouflage needed to pass the checkpoints. ‘Hold this,’ Ibrahim said, as he gently placed the plastic switch in his hand. Its benign, domestic appearance in total contrast to today’s lethal use. From the switch ran a cable that went up the baggy sleeve of his shirt, into the vest and the detonator. The device that would trigger a catastrophic chain reaction and explode the deadly material that his body was now encased in.

‘You must now be brave my son,’ Ibrahim whispered to him as he sat astride the small motorbike, its engine alive with a low purr. ‘You will soon be with Allah. He will reward you and your family. Your mother and father will be so proud of you.’

But as he gripped the handlebars of the motorbike, its bright red fuel tank gleaming in the early morning sun, another wave of fear crashed over him. His body becoming numb as the panic spread through every fibre of his young existence. He looked up at Ibrahim and searched the man’s eyes, looking for a response, an answer to his internal agony. But there was nothing. The eyes were void of compassion. There was no remedy for his agony there, only the final realisation that he was going to die. He wanted to scream, one last signal for them to share his agony. But he couldn’t. The anguish that raged in the pit of his stomach unable to connect with his vocal chords.

Ibrahim, sensing the tension, spoke, his words as always measured. Their delivery smooth, like honey to a sore throat. ‘Be strong my son,’ he said as he took hold of his wiry young

shoulder, ‘you will soon be with your family; they will all be so pleased for you. Remember... you have chosen *jihad* for them, to avenge their deaths and you will soon be reunited... a family once more’. His well-rehearsed tone, nurtured over so many martyrdoms was unhurried, its effect like a pain relieving tonic, washing away his young students fear. ‘Go now and may Allah be with you. Allah Akbar – *God is great*,’ he said loud enough for the entire small group to hear. ‘Allah Akbar,’ the group repeated as Ibrahim patted Mustafa on the back. Mustafa gripped the silver lever on the left of the handle bar, slowly pulled it back, whilst with his right foot he pushed down and engaged the gear.

*

The sparse desert landscape began to yield to habitation. The mud brick buildings - in their adobe fashion - growing ever more frequent the closer they got to the town. From his vantage point - almost four metres above the road - he looked down and smiled as at the shepherd boy’s frantic efforts to order his flock, as the startled animals ran in every direction to escape the metal monsters that were now amongst them.

The shopkeepers waved as they always did, pointing to their wares, which fronted their shops and lined the road. The elaborate pyramidal displays of the earth’s harvest an indication to what season it was and what crop was ripe. Today it was pomegranate. The make shift tables – the base for the intricately designed displays - shaking from the vibration, as the MRAPs 10 litre diesel engines created mini earthquakes as they thundered by.

The bridge was ahead, he could see it, *the last obstacle*, he thought as he pointed his heavy machine gun down the axis of the road directly towards it, the narrow, single lane bridge, the last hurdle in his six month marathon. But as they drew closer his attention was drawn to a slow moving yellow and white taxi - its battered appearance an indication of its mechanical prowess - as it laboured towards them over the narrow channel. *Not good*, he said to himself as he waved his arms frantically, his anxious movements willing the speed of the taxi to increase.

‘Never stop’, the Drill Sergeant had told them on their pre-deployment training. ‘If you do, you are vulnerable. You are a target’. They had stopped, just short of the bridge. The three khaki towers of steel now standing motionless in the baking Afghan sun. The street that had only minutes before been a hive of activity, now eerily empty, naked of its inhabitants. The only noise that of an unseen motorbike approaching at speed.

The movement caught in the corner of his eye, as the motorbike emerged from a road to his right. He tried to swing the barrel of the machine gun round towards the threat, but it wouldn’t move. It was jammed. A frayed piece of his harness – the equipment meant to save him from danger - wedged in the mechanism of the turret. He tugged at it in a furious struggle, his eyes incapable of breaking the stare, transfixed on the onrushing bike. He could see the rider clearly. His white clothes flowing in the wind, their radiance reflecting in the perfect sunshine, and he could see the face. But it wasn’t a man, it was a boy, and he was smiling.

*

The black saloon turned into the street, its progress slow as its occupants searched for the house numbers on the mail boxes that stood like sentries at the bottom of each manicured lawn. As it came to a stop the curtains in the nearby houses twitched. The female hands clutching the fabric, petrified that their slightest movement might attract the attention of the unwanted visitors.

The doors opened. The driver a woman, first out, her camouflaged uniform a stark contrast to the man who exited from the passenger door, the small crosses on the collars of his khaki fitted uniform shirt glinting in the sun. The chaplain checked the number on the mailbox to the information in his notebook and adjusting his headdress; he strode off up the garden path. Half way up he stopped. His progress blocked. He checked his pace and stepped over a child’s toy - a red and yellow tractor.

*

Ibrahim clapped his hands for his student's attention, the class stopping their rhythmic study of the Holy book to look up at their teacher. 'This is Ali', he continued as he gently ushered the small-emaciated frame of a young boy to the front of the class. 'He has lost much... as you all have. But his suffering is at an end,' he continued as he placed his hand tenderly on the boy's head and stroked his unkempt hair - its coarseness a result of months of dust and grime. 'He will be joining us. We're his family now', he continued.

Ali looked up at Ibrahim. The only human being that had shown him kindness since the day his family had been lost to him. Tears welled in the young boy's eyes as he turned away from the class and grabbed hold of Ibrahim's legs in an attempt to hide his weakness from his new classmates. Ibrahim held the boy in return and patted his back, 'Allah Akbar,' he murmured softly. 'Allah Akbar', replied the students.