



By Ethan McCord      The smell was unlike anything I've smelled before, a mixture of feces, urine, blood, smoke, and something else indescribable.      That day started out much like many days in Iraq. We were woken up about 230 am to prepare for a mission one of many that seemed to be pointless. Our Battalion commander called them "Ranger dominance" But many of the soldiers such as myself dubbed them "Ranger dumbass" These missions consisted 2 company's walking through new Baghdad unprotected from snipers and IEDs. We dreaded them and despised our battalion commander because of them.

That morning we gathered up at the gate of FOB Rustamiyah preparing for our "death march" into town. It was now about 0400 when we heard the sirens for incoming. BOOM first one not very far from where we were gathered. BOOM this one a little closer. We were used to this by now, and although afraid inside we knew that if we ran for cover wed look like cowards in the eyes of some of our NCOs.

So the majority of us just stood there, praying that a mortar wouldn't land on us. The bravado of trying to look "hard" was what we lived by. WE ARE INFANTRY, the queen of the battle; WE are 1st infantry, the toast of the army the favorite son. WE are 2-16 Rangers. We prided ourselves on being tougher than anyone else! But looking into the eyes of these 18 and 19 year old kids you could see the fear, the uncertainty. Finally the mortars stopped.

"They know we're coming!" said one private in my squad. I tried to reassure him that they didn't know we were coming; it was just coincidence, although not believing my own statement myself. We began our march in the early morning hours, there was hardly anyone on the streets. It was quiet, almost peaceful, you could get caught up in the silence if you weren't so afraid of being shot in the throat or in the thigh by a sniper. Snipers usually went for these areas, because they were unprotected. The throat for obvious reasons, and the thigh for your femoral artery. Many of us usually walked with the butt stock of our M-4s close to our neck for an almost futile attempt at protecting ourselves.

Our mission that day was to cordon off an area of new Baghdad and perform what is called “knock and searches” which basically consists of us knocking on the doors of homes, “asking” to search the home for militia related materials, weapons, or bomb making materials. Although it was more of a demand and if they refused it gave us proper cause to destroy the home by searching more vigorously.

The hours passed of doing this; we were finding nothing and getting extremely hot and agitated. Some of us began messing around taking pictures of us doing so.

Finally we were informed that we were “closing up shop.” I remember being thankful for that. It was over 110 degrees that day and the hot water we were drinking was providing no relief. We started funneling into an alleyway to leave the area, when some locals on the roofs above us started firing their AK47s at us. We took cover along a wall and were returning fire. We could hear other fire coming from another platoon just a few blocks from us as well, on the net we could hear that they were taking small arms as well as RPG fire.

That’s when I heard it....the very distinct fire of an Apache 30MM cannon. And again. and again. over and over. It was very close. “WE NEED TO MOVE TO THAT POSITION NOW!” was screamed over the net. Myself and the team of soldiers I was with began running in the direction where we heard the Apache fire, I was not even close to prepared for the carnage I was about to walk on to!

Myself and the team I was with were the first dismounted soldiers to arrive on the scene. I saw what appeared to have been 3 men on a corner, It was an extreme shock to my system, They didn’t look human, I know they were at one time but the destroyed carnage that I was looking at didn’t appear to be human. Then there was the smell, the smell was unlike anything I’ve smelled before, a mixture of feces, urine, blood, smoke, and something else indescribable. I saw an RPG next to the men and an AK47.

Crying!, I hear crying. Not cries of pain, but that of a small child who had woken up from a horrible nightmare. I saw that there was a mini van and the cries appeared to be coming from it. Myself and another soldier a 20 year old private, walked up to the passenger side van, we looked inside,

The private I was with reeled back began to vomit, and quickly ran away. What I saw was a small girl about 4 years old on the passenger side of the bench seat. She had a severe belly wound and was covered in glass. The glass was in her hair and even in her eyes. Next to her half on the floorboard with his head resting on the seat was a boy about 7 years old, he wasn't moving and from the severe wound on the right side of his head, my first thought was he was dead.

In the drivers seat was who I immediately concluded must have been these children's father, by the way he was hunched over the children in a protective way to shield the children. There was no way the father survived. I immediately grabbed the little girl and screamed “MEDIC!” The medic and myself went into a house behind the van. There was a local man hiding in the kitchen area of his home. I yelled out to him “MOOMKIN TISA'ADNI” (help me) He stood up and quickly grabbed a bucket of water which the medic and I used to clean the girl off , I pulled as much glass from the eyes of the girl I could.

The whole time thinking FUCK WHAT THE FUCK!? THESE ARE BABIES!. See my son was born May 31st 2007 I hadn't been able to see him yet. And I had a daughter who was barely older then this girl. The medic radioed in that she needed to be evacuated because there was nothing else he could do here. I handed the child to the medic who then ran the girl to a waiting Bradley armored vehicle. I walked back to the van, I don't know why, or what told me to go back to the van, there was just something making me go to the van. I looked inside the van again...Did the boy just move? holy shit the boy just moved!.. I grabbed the boy from the van and held him against my chest. I was screaming at this point “THE BOY'S ALIVE!! THE BOY'S ALIVE!”

I started running to the Bradley in hopes it wasn't leaving already. At that time the boy looked up at me, then his eyes rolled back. My heart sunk, “Its ok I have you, its going to be ok, don't die, don't die”. I squeezed him just a little tighter. I put him into the Bradley as gently as I could.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING MCCORD!?” It was my platoon leader. “YOU need to quit worrying about these FUCKING kids, and pull security!” he screamed. “Roger that sir” I said and immediately went to a roof top to pull security. While on the roof one of the soldiers took a picture of me, I didn't realize that the blood of the two children was all over me.

Ever since that day I live with this, its burned into my head, I still hear the cries, smell the smells, when its quiet and I close my eyes I see the carnage, like a slideshow. I'm hoping one day, I can sleep a full night without the memories coming back to haunt me, the innocents lost, the friends lost. Hopefully one day I won't be so angry.

