

PAUL VAN DYKE

A Sliver of Blue

The iPod in the lead humvee played nothing but Irish music that morning. The play list was organized by my lieutenant, Dan Kingsley. He sat in the passenger seat. Kingsley was a goofball with a spot-on Jerry Lee Lewis impersonation. He was built like a single solid muscle, and when he wore his glasses we called him Clark Kent. He was full-blooded Irish and had a shamrock tattooed between his shoulder blades. On his shoulder, he wore a Ranger Tab, so he knew his shit backward and forward.

What I liked most about Kingsley was that he had no interest in becoming a career officer, so his decisions were never based on a need to cover his ass or rack up promotion points.

And the morning the Irish music played, Dan Kingsley saved my life.

With the sun still low on the eastern horizon of a cloudless late-summer sky, our humvee led a file of four gun trucks off the pavement of Supply Route Uranium and onto the sands of Iraq. It was just over a kilometer from the road to a railroad bridge where we were going to search for signs of a sniper.

I drove the humvee into a dried riverbed which led to the bridge, and I had to maneuver a shallow ditch about two feet deep and two feet across in order to reach it.

I wasn't buying the story about the sniper, and I knew I wasn't the only one on the patrol who felt that way. I'd been traveling Uranium for five months without seeing so much as a rodent stir on that bridge. There were convoys though, that claimed to take small-arms fire as they drove past.

The bridge was a perfect place to pretend to be attacked from; it was far enough from any real civilization that nobody could contest the claims, and because the desert around Uranium was a minefield in the Saddam-era, it was considered too dangerous to safely react to an attack. I figured all these claims of small-arms fire were other units inflating their statistics and making sure all their people got their combat awards. It wasn't my job to decide if the sniper was real or not. My job was to search the bridge.

Having crossed the shallow ditch, I drove to the western end of the bridge where Kingsley and I dismounted and searched on foot. In the shadow of the bridge was a small village; just a cluster of hovels. Nobody was out, and the people were probably still sleeping. We looked around for a few minutes, checking the tracks for any shell casings, loose rounds, or other signs a sniper might have been there, but we didn't find anything. We mounted back up.

I drove underneath the bridge and grape-vined the support pillars from east to west. Private First Class Gerry Perkins was my gunner that day. He was a nineteen year old aspiring cage fighter who managed to get himself in trouble every chance he got, and always had about a pound of Skoal chewing tobacco stuffed in his lower lip. Perkins didn't know much, but he knew his Mark II Browning .50 caliber machine gun—the Ma Deuce—as intimately as a lover.

Perkins stood tall in the turret as we searched, which negated the protection provided by the turret shield, but afforded him a better view as he scanned the pillars and trusses above. While he searched high, Kingsley and I searched low. We looked for triggers, suspicious dirt mounds, wires, debris; basically anything that might go boom.

We didn't find anything.

Kingsley called in our findings—or lack thereof—and told me to find a path back to Uranium.

An Irish folk song titled *Whiskey in the Jar* played in our headsets as we approached the ditch. I had heard a cover of the song by Metallica on the *Garage Days, Inc.* album, but was touched by the sincerity and simplicity of such a bare bones rendition.

Now some men like the fishin'
And some men like the fowlin'
And some men like ta hear
Ta hear the cannonball a roarin'

I found a spot to enter the ditch that looked like it would be relatively smooth. The front end of the Humvee dipped into the trench, then launched skyward in a single violent, chaotic heartbeat. I slammed chest-first into the steering wheel with enough force to bend the steering shaft. The steady rumble of the engine was gone. My ears rang and it felt like I swam too deep underwater. The windshield was black and warped, in some places melting. Everything happened so quickly that I couldn't put anything together.

Then I heard screams.

They sounded distant with the din in my ears, but I knew Perkins' voice and could tell they were coming from the turret. Smoke was pouring into the cab through the radio mount and dashboard vents, so I couldn't see my gunner. I had to allow my ears to paint the picture in the fog. Judging by the pain and fear I heard in his cries—the cries which haunted me for years—the scene was painted crimson.

In my mind's eye, a red haze surrounded him but I could still see his face. Skin flayed. Blood everywhere. He appeared more monster than man, like Freddy Krueger without the wide-brimmed hat.

Without realizing it, my hand instinctively went to the ignition switch. The engine was dead and we needed to be moving, to be anywhere but right there. I quit hitting the switch when I realized what happened.

IED. Our truck blew up.

Kingsley reached across and put a hand on my shoulder. He was alive. Gerry was screaming in the turret. He was alive. I was alive. That made all three of us. Thank God.

"Van Dyke! You okay?" Kingsley screamed.

There was enough adrenaline coursing through me at that moment to animate a corpse, so I didn't feel even a hint of pain, only fear.

"Yeah!" I shouted back, half deaf and probably equally tone-deaf.

"We need to get the fuck out of here!" For an officer, Kingsley had some good ideas.

I tried my door handle, but the heavily armored door wouldn't budge. I started ramming my shoulder into it, but I was just hitting a wall. I could see flames rising between our seats.

I've done my best to piece together all that happened that morning, and I can remember quite a few details, but coherent war stories are a myth. Explaining what happened after that bomb went off is like describing getting my ass kicked in a dark alley. Too many shadows. Too much movement. Too much fear. All I can hope for is truth.

Here's a truth, the moment I realized my door wasn't opening and that I wasn't in the clear yet, the number of people in that truck went from three to one. It may not be valorous, but survival rarely is.

I don't know why I chose the backdoor as my escape route. Maybe with Perkins screaming, I knew I wouldn't be able to get out the gunner's hatch. Whatever my reasoning, I swung around my seat to climb out the backdoor.

What I saw when I turned around was a mess. First aid bags, gas masks, ammo cans, rifles, all these things which were so neatly organized just a minute before were scattered wildly throughout the cab. There was also something which wasn't in the truck before.

The Ma Deuce weighed 140 pounds and the hundred round belt loaded in the feed tray weighed another 25. Somehow, it had broken free of its mount on top of the humvee and ended up on the floor with only a spent shell casing wedged beneath the butterfly trigger to act as a safety.

If that makeshift safety wouldn't have held, there probably would have been four-ounce bullets ricocheting off the inside of the armored chassis at 2700 feet per second. We would've been fucking hamburger.

I was un-phased by the chaotic scene, or maybe just too stunned to react, because I climbed over the M2 with no respect for its killing power. All that mattered was getting out of that truck. There was a red beverage cooler in the backseat I had to climb over, and as I did, I felt myself get snagged.

My body armor had a strap on the back just below the collar, which made it easier to drag me if the need arose, and the strap was hooked on one of the latches used to lock the turret hatch.

I tried unsuccessfully to wiggle free, then I made the knee-jerk decision to jettison the armor. I ripped the vest open by the Velcro strip in front, and then it suddenly felt as if somebody snuck up behind me and clamped on a full-nelson.

In my panicked state, I gave no thought to a silly pair of shoulder pads I had recently been issued which wrapped around my bicep and connected to the cuirass of my armor. The fifty pounds of Kevlar and ballistic plates fell to the floor behind me, and my arms went straight up to be pinned over my head.

I was trapped.

I tried to reach one shoulder pad or the other, but it was like trying to itch the sweet spot in the middle of my back. The black smoke and dancing flames were ever-present. I was choking and half-blinded, but I could still see the door handle on the other side of the cooler.

My forward reach was less hindered than my side-to-side, and with some strain I could just barely reach my fingertips to the handle. I could put enough weight on it to click it open, but with the armor weighing the door down, I could only open it a few inches.

I saw that sliver of blue sky for just a moment, but the sight will stay with me until the day I die. It was more beautiful than any sunrise or sunset, because it was

thousands of sunrises and sunsets rolled into one. It was a flash of hope, a glimpse of survival. It was life.

Then the door swung shut again.

I don't know how many times I tried the door. I just know that every time I did, I had to watch it close. I can remember being scared and thinking I was going to die. I remember choking on smoke and the bitter acrid taste in my mouth. I remember seeing blue sky. Seeing life. I remember being angry. Really fucking angry. Twenty one is too young to die, especially by smoke or fire while I'm strung up like a goddamn marionette!

Fear. Hope. Anger. I used them all. I pushed the door open, and started kicking the cooler in a desperate fury. The cooler pushed the door open and spilled its contents in the sand as I watched the sliver of blue grow wider and wider until the whole sky opened up before me.

I was stuck, but I could breathe.

I don't know how long I hung there. It felt like forever, and sometimes it feels like I am still hanging there. If this was Hollywood, this would be the time where I reached into my boot sheathe and cut myself free with a K-bar. But this wasn't Tinseltown; it was a railroad bridge in Western Iraq. I just hung there, struggling futilely to free myself until Kingsley appeared in the doorway.

It took a simple flick of the wrist for him to un-strap one of my shoulder pads, and I was able to slip free of the other and crawl out of the humvee.

I've been told that in life or death situation, the brain goes into a hyperconscious state, basically kicking into overdrive to stay alive. Afterwards, it can shut down to recover from the exhaustion and to protect itself from immediately processing everything that just happened. It sounded pretty sensible when it was explained to me, but I could've been fed a line of bullshit and I wouldn't know better.

A clinical term for what happened is fugue, but I'd describe it like this: I wandered, yet I didn't.

A body wandered the desert. No mind. No soul. Just an empty shell. It wore no armor. It carried no rifle. It saw nothing. It heard nothing. It was oblivious to the lessons I'd been taught concerning insurgent tactics. It walked unprotected, ignorant of the likelihood of a secondary explosive within twenty meters. It felt nothing. No anger. No relief. No pain. No fear. Nothing.

I was ripped from the bliss of unawareness when my squad leader grabbed me by my shoulders. It felt like being born again and remembering it. Everything washed over me in a single terrible, overwhelming moment. It was too much to bear with my soldierly stoicism still intact.

I reached out and hugged Sergeant Strouth. That's when the tears came. Strouth was anything *but* an affectionate guy. He wasn't uncaring, it was plain to his men we meant a lot to him. I think a better word would be callous. He's the kind of guy

who would tell you to fuck off on your birthday. That being said, Strouth didn't hesitate to hug me right back.

After purging the eyes, the stomach came next. Black chunks tainted with smoke and explosive residue came out. It tasted like a mouthful of charcoal.

Strouth took off to fetch me some water. Smith was his driver, and Strouth *screamed* at him when he couldn't figure out what he wanted.

"Get him some fucking water!"

I smiled for the first time in what felt like years.

I met back up with Kingsley, and he and I helped Perkins away from the truck. Kingsley had a hard limp, and Gerry wasn't using his legs at all. There were no bloody wounds though, which was a pleasant surprise—if anything about that day could be called *pleasant*. Having escaped without injury, I felt most fortunate of all; I also felt guilty.

Once we reached a safer spot, the other two were laid down to receive medical attention. I wanted to take off and assist my platoon in the aftermath of the blast, but Doc Ackerson forced me to sit down and get checked out. My protests that I was fine and that I knew my own body fell on ears even deafer than my own. I sat down and told him to tend to the others first.

Kingsley was just as determined to be of use. "Call in a nine-line!" He barked, "We need a security cordon. Where's Sergeant Price?"

We weren't very good at surrender.

Ackerson was taking care of Kingsley's leg when he stopped and looked at my arm.

"Hey Van Dyke, you have some blood on your sleeve."

Doc was right. I hadn't felt anything, but my right sleeve was torn and there was a bloodstain about the size of my hand. It's strange, but my immediate reaction was relief. I wasn't the only person to in the truck to walk away without an injury. I also had a physical wound to match the emotional wounds I felt; the ones that never really heal. It was only two small pieces of shrapnel, but it was easier to say I was hurt than to admit I was scared.

On the morning of 29 August 2006, vehicle W306 ran over a doorbell in a ditch which initiated the simultaneous detonation of three 130mm mortar rounds, each with a 75-meter kill radius. The rounds were wrapped in homemade C-4. The detonation occurred directly beneath the right front tire of W306. PFC Perkins sustained minor wounds when the Mark II Browning .50 caliber machine gun struck him in the legs, and was given one week off missions. SPC Van Dyke had two pieces of shrapnel removed from his right forearm, and was given two weeks off missions. 2LT Kingsley broke his left leg, and was given six weeks off missions. All three received the Purple Heart for their injuries, as well as the Combat Infantryman's Badge. 2LT Kingsley was also awarded the Bronze Star with Valor

for rescuing the other two members of his crew after crawling out his window. No secondary explosive was found. No sign of a sniper was found.

A few facts which didn't make the official report: Pieces of shrapnel more than ten inches long were lodged into the ceiling above mine and Kingsley's heads; it took our platoon more than ten minutes to pry the front doors of W306 open; engine debris was found more than 100-meters from the blast site.

This was one of those nexus moments where my life was changed so drastically that I can't help but consider the possible outcomes and be left wondering how different things would be if the slightest details were altered. The ten inch piece of shrapnel strikes my arm. Perkins is standing at the moment of detonation. The .50 Cal fires inside the vehicle. I step on a secondary. Kingsley dies and doesn't rescue the rest of the crew.. I pass the doorbell and Strouth runs it over. I spot the doorbell.

If is the longest and most dangerous word I have ever heard.

The morning the Irish music played left me with too many questions and the realization that I'll never have answers. The IED was terrible, but unfortunately, not every nightmare teaches a lesson. It is hard to draw meaning from hitting a blind bomb under a railroad bridge where no trains run while looking for a sniper that doesn't exist.

PAUL VAN DYKE enjoys writing fiction and nonfiction. His work has appeared in *O-Dark-Thirty: the Review*. He deployed to Iraq (2006-07) as part of Charlie Co. 2/135th Infantry, and is the recipient of the Purple Heart Medal.