

# The Patrol

Ray McPadden

**T**here is a good chance that if I mess up today, Matt will drown in the Yellowstone River. The thing is, he doesn't strike me as the life vest type and his left leg is titanium, the original flesh-model destroyed by a pressure plate in Afghanistan. Titanium can't be great for buoyancy, so I've been worrying on his behalf. Six months ago, I met Matt on the shooting range, where I quickly decoded his life history from his limp, young age, and the Purple Heart license plate attached to his truck. When I pointed to my own Purple Heart plate, he was quick to raise his pant leg and showcase the hardware.

In this part of Montana, shooting leads to fishing, or fishing to shooting, so today we are going to throw flies into the Yellowstone near Pine Creek. After a stint in Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Matt got out of the Army and took up welding, something I'm conscious of when we shake hands at the fishing access point, as grad school turned me sadly white collar, with exquisite palms.

It seemed tone-deaf to suggest wade fishing to a man with one leg, so I brought the raft for this outing and am now pleased to find no ice on the ramp. Matt is wearing a vet ensemble: tan quick-dry pants, a riggers belt, hunting jacket. He ground guides my trailer into the water, which after a warm stretch in October, is around fifty degrees. We finish rigging up.

As a resident of Livingston, the 'Stone is my home turf,' so today I carry the burden of assumed expertise.

Matt asks, "What fly are you putting on?"

"Black sparkle minnow. Try a green one." I grab a life jacket and hold it up. "Want a vest?"

"Nah, I'm good."

I stash two vests beneath the cooler. Before I can extend a hand to help Matt, he's in the raft, taking the fishing seat in front. We arrow into the current, me on the oars, saying river things, about entomology and hydrology and fish psychology, whatever that is.

We round the first bend and Matt offers, "I can steer. You go 'head and fish."

"No," I say. "You first."

"Honest, brother, I'm just glad to be out here. You go 'head."

"Stop being polite. We'll switch in 30 and keep rotating."

He's a good dude and I'm sure he means well. Still, I suspect we're playing the same game, two men fishing together for the first time, unsure of each other's prowess. Mutual scrutiny is further heightened by the set up on my raft, wherein the oaring seat faces the fishing platform, the two situated just four feet apart, so that every mistake by the caster feels like it must be explained to the oarsman, "Aww, wind."

The other benefit of oaring first is that I get to evaluate Matt's sea-legs, and generally look out for his well-being. So far so good. A mile downstream, he hooks up with a nice rainbow that tail dances across the surface. Matt puts the fish on the reel and before he can get it to the boat the fish goes aerial again and breaks loose. Matt reels in to make sure the streamer is still on.

I ask, "You still talk to dudes from your unit?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"I mean, here and there on social media. I'm a reluctant user. I'm on there for my welding business."

"Social media sucks. I do Facebook. My mom comments on all my stuff. Like everything."

Matt says, "Once a year, on the day I got blown up, dudes from 10th Mountain hit me up like, hey bro, how you doing? I answer *great*. And that's it, that's all there is to say. They don't care. Not really."

"Not sure I agree."

"It's like the Facebook birthday, you know, a computer told you to do that, it's not real."

"It's something."

"It's crap. So, get this, I set my birthday to the wrong date in my profile, and then I get like 400 *happy birthdays*, six months after the fact, so I say, "Hey assholes, it's not even my birthday."

"You're a dinosaur, dude."

We approach a hard turn, where the river piles up against riprap, rolls back on itself and rushes away in waves and breakers, as if angry for having been denied its course. The spot is class two minus, though if you really try, you can make it class three-ish. The current is strange here, and more than once navigating it, I've felt the boat rise and hover, felt the sharp tug of an eddy line trying to flip us. In summer, more than a hundred boats negotiate this spot daily, and for a minute in those boats, I imagine, everyone gets solemn.

Once in a while something goes wrong.

I say, "You might want to sit down for this bit."

Matt refuses. He looks back at me and ahead to the turn and keeps on casting. As we close on the turn, he leans into the thigh bar and keeps on casting, letting out a whoop while I dig

with the oars to keep us off the riprap. We slide into a trough and rise to meet a white-topped wave, which sends a sheet of water over the tube and across the raft's floor.

Matt says, "Only one foot gets cold."

The first half of the float, I am hawkish about him with that leg. Important to know, I was an infantry officer, and for four combat tours, it was my business to keep guys like Matt alive, and more importantly, to make sure they were set up for the kill. Now I'm doing it on a trout stream for the first time and it feels good.

The sun wheels between clouds. In the distance, wind sends curls of snow off the summit of Emigrant Peak. We switch places and I fish for twenty minutes. No bites on the sparkle minnow have my confidence down, so I switch to a stonefly and pheasant tail double-rig then cast sidearm into the wind, determined not to make excuses. Ten minutes later I've created a bird's nest for the record books.

The wind dies off, and with the quiet and the river all to us, it's easy getting reflective. I get to thinking fly fishing is supposed to cure guys like us. There's zen simply in being on the water, and of course, in the cast. Something like that. But I'm too young to be happy just watching water go by.

I ask Matt if he still thinks about Afghanistan, and whether fly fishing means anything in the equation. "Impossible not to," he says, then, "Fly fishing is a hobby." He asks me the same, to which I reply, "Fly fishing, being one of the more obtuse and aesthetic and rhythmic pursuits, seemed worth a shot. To admit that fly fishing helps, though, is admitting that you need help. That's not where I am."

"Likewise."

Pointing to a riffle ahead, I say, "Probably gonna scrape a bit. Might want to sit down. On the far end, pop up and hit that seam."

I point toward a fleet of boulders guarding a shoulder of soft water that's green with depth. Once again, Matt does not sit. He merely grips the thigh bar with one hand. We bump along, to the zipper-like sound of rocks testing industrial plastic on our underside. I ding the oars a few times maneuvering the raft within striking distance of the seam. Now on the cusp, Matt straightens his stance, leans into the thigh bar and snaps off a 40-foot cast that lands perfectly. I pull on the oars, just a few strokes, to help his drift.

Matt's rod twitches. Water sheets off the line as he sets the hook. I drop the oars, put a knee on the tube and ready the net before plucking an 18-inch Rainbow from the seam. The iridescent band on its lateral is purple in the late light of day.

"You want a picture," I ask.

"No, that's disrespectful."

Once unhooked the fish darts away and Matt and I switch positions. My drought goes on. Matt doesn't comment on my lack of fortune, just keeps on driving. When it's time for the next rotation, Matt says, "We don't have to switch."

I say, "Fair is fair."

By day's end, Matt's got three Browns and that 18-inch Rainbow. Never mind what I got. A mile above take-out, we pause on a gravel bar to piss, and I slip on a rock in knee deep water and manage to dunk myself. Shocked by the cold, I let out one of those stupid gasp-yells that everyone does when hit with frigid water. I spend the last dregs of the float shivering violently.

Matt must have seen me looking miserable, for at one point, he says, "Wind blowing up your skirt?"

We arrive at the ramp, where Matt hops out and pulls us onto sand. As we break down our gear, Matt says, "What are you doing next weekend?"

"I'll be around."

"Wanna go to the range?"

"Sounds good."

**Ray McPadden** is a four-tour combat veteran who served as a ground force commander in the elite 2nd Ranger Battalion during the Iraq and Afghan wars. He was awarded a Purple Heart, two Bronze Stars, and a medal for valor. He is the author of the acclaimed novel *And the Whole Mountain Burned*, winner of the W. Y. Boyd Literary Award in 2019, and a best-selling memoir, *We March at Midnight*. He lives in Alaska with his wife and children.