

# LETTER TO A FRIEND

J-Ross

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I want to thank you for our conversation the other day in your office. When you shared about the article you read in *The Times* over the weekend regarding the young RPA operator, it was kind of you to omit the majority of the graphic details. The little you did share was enough, though. I know you noticed me shaking a little, but there was more going on that day than you knew. When you recognize in that story a bit of what I've been through, I know that you see me. Here at the Academy, we navigate a world that is largely oblivious to the darker side of these past twenty years of war, of things I have seen up close. But, no, I wasn't shaking because of what you shared. There was something else I was fighting to keep out of my mind. Yesterday morning the memory that had me shaking in your office came bubbling to the surface.

I awoke early from a tumultuous night of dreaming—nightmares I can't remember that left me with feelings of agitation, futility, and frustration. I climbed out of bed around 0430 and stumbled into the kitchen for my first cup of coffee. Then I lit the candle in my home office and began my morning routine. The calm music playing softly through the headphones in my ears nearly covered the sound of the small water feature on the bookshelf. With the lights out, the candle burning, and the cup of coffee in my hand, I began my ritual of time-traveling to wherever it is my troubled psyche will carry me. Seconds after sitting, a memory came flooding into view—and with it, all of the sense of agitation, futility, and frustration that marked my

recent dreams.

I happened upon a news headline Saturday morning. It mentioned *justice* for—and named two specific people. I instantly recognized the names and stared at my finger hovering over the piece's title on my phone, uncertain whether I should tap on it or not. I felt panic. And fear. And a sinking sadness and despair in the pit of my chest. Those names belonged to two of a group of four hostages my previous organization had attempted to rescue. I thought it better not to read the article. Instead, I decided to stay present with my family. I suppressed all that was trying to surface. Until Sunday evening. There in an email with news stories was the same title staring me in the face. Apparently the militant responsible for kidnapping the four unlucky hostages had been tried and convicted—perhaps sentenced to some long prison term. I don't know. I still haven't read the article. Covert capture and extradition operations overseas were a common part of our repertoire, and terrorists suddenly appearing in courtrooms in New York to answer sealed complaints typically elicit only a knowing smirk from me. This time I didn't smirk. Sitting there in my office, I closed my eyes while the soft gurgle of the water feature faded away. A series of vivid images populated my mind. I felt my heart pounding inside my chest, heard the blood whooshing through my head, and the constant ringing in my ears became louder.

*A Joint Operations Center (JOC), large screens with MQ-1 Predator video feeds, a map—of some distant part of the world I can't mention—with icons of small helicopters, a C-130, and, some distance to the east of the others, RPA—the Predators—slowly converging on a target. The dim blue-white fluorescent lighting, uniformed people sitting at computers with their headsets, the quiet bustle of a hundred disparate pieces of an operation working in unison, and me—in my Army-issued OCPs standing at a desk in the back right corner of the room. It smells*

*of precision: ozone from all the electronics, clean, sterile—wires and circuitry carrying videos and voices from the other side of the world to our own front row seats for the mission. I had written the ISR plan for this operation a week earlier.*

I remember the tasking from my boss to report to the planning cell, the drive to—another organization’s headquarters—the exchange of identification cards and security badges, entering the building, and walking into a room full of Army, Navy, and Air Force special operators. The task: plan a rescue mission in hostile territory. We had intelligence specialists, AFSOC aircrew, personnel from the rescue force’s command element, a variety of Army special operations helicopter pilots, some lawyers, and a team of people who had spent the last several years of their lives studying the country whose sovereignty we were about to disregard. The biggest question for everyone in the room was an important one: How strong would the enemy be when the rescue team arrived on the objective? We had recent satellite imagery from the compound where intelligence believed the hostages to be, but it was impossible to ascertain how many enemy fighters would be there on the night of the rescue. For that, they needed airborne ISR over the target. That’s where I came in.

Some weeks prior on a Tuesday around lunchtime my boss had asked me to collaborate with an RPA pilot to draft an intrusive ISR plan to gather intelligence on a site where we believed a group of hostages—including two Americans—was being held. The nation we would be intruding upon had sophisticated and active air defense systems in many regions, and we could only consider unmanned assets for the job. Happy to be untethered from the normal grind of reading and responding to hundreds of staff emails, managing griping contractors, and listening to our subordinate organizations quibble over the tenths of an ISR orbit up for grabs across our global operations, I settled into our conference room with the young RPA pilot who had recently

joined our directorate. "Jimmy," I said, "you're the RPA expert here. How do you think we should do it?" Jimmy was a nice, slightly round senior Air Force Captain. He had light red hair and a pale complexion, likely bleached by screens during his thousands of hours in dark RPA Ground Control Stations. He had never been overseas, never seen small arms fired at him from some faceless enemy on the ground, never heard the sound of a missile warning system signaling his possible demise within the next five seconds. Jimmy was book smart, but he had never read about intrusive ISR operations in hostile environments. He went for a cup of coffee and didn't come back. So there in that room, sitting at my computer, I concocted a three-phase scheme by which we would poke our surveillance noses across a border by progressively increasing increments. The whole ridiculous plan was based on the hope that the target nation would be so bored or otherwise occupied that they wouldn't think much of one lone Predator transgressing their borders to spy on a compound run by terrorist militants. When I finished, I was pleased with my operational plan—with its multiple steps and new terminology I had invented. It seemed utterly absurd. "That's what they get," I said aloud, "for giving a task like this to a U-28 pilot with no experience in intrusive ISR." Later that afternoon someone from the J3, our operations directorate, called with a random question or two regarding the plan and the slides I'd made. Then I heard nothing more about it.

When I got curious the next week, I called the J3 to ask what had ever become of my draft O-Plan. I expected to hear that it had been filed away in the "good idea repository"—that would be a trash can. Instead, they told me that it had been printed on a presentation board and taken to the White House the day after our last phone call. The plan was apparently so brilliant that our leaders couldn't wait to put it into practice. On the other side of the world, the air component commander's staff for that particular theater was throwing around my newly-

invented terminology like it was established air doctrine. Someone in the White House liked the plan so much that he wanted to skip straight to the end by sending the Predator directly to target on the first day. So we did. Seven miles into that country's airspace, our \$20M, sensitive piece of American intelligence equipment was blasted out of the sky. I guess they noticed.

I opened my eyes to confirm what my hands were telling me: my coffee cup was empty. I stumbled to the kitchen for a refill, then returned to the darkness of my office and the sound of the water gently gurgling on the bookshelf. I had long since forgotten about the music coming out of my headphones, and soon the sound of the water was replaced by the sterile quiet of the memory. The warmth of the coffee cup normally grounds me in the here and now, but this time it vanished from existence as soon as *I closed my eyes and the JOC returned in my mind's eye.*

*This time I was standing in the larger JOC adjacent to the air component's smaller room we used for command and control functions during operations. I was in one of the final planning briefings on the day prior to the rescue mission.* In just over twenty-four hours, our forces would take off from a small airfield in a country adjacent to our objective. That country had agreed to allow the operation, so long as everything was kept quiet and their involvement was never mentioned. That was how it always went—a one time good deal that nobody would ever mention. *The Package*, as it was called, would penetrate the border and fly low-level directly to the target accompanied by a special operations C-130 to serve as an aerial refueling platform. ISR would launch from an established base many hundreds of miles away and fly at max endurance airspeed through a less densely defended region for nearly twelve hours before finally arriving overhead the objective only three minutes prior to the arranged time-on-target

(TOT). The Predators would have to fly a 24-hour mission in order to provide just thirty minutes on target. The rescue force would fight their way to a safe insertion at the compound, enter the building where the hostages were last known to be, liberate them, and return back to where they started.

*The briefing was solemn. All around the room serious faces looked at one briefer after another as the details of the mission received one last review. Finally, it was time for the lawyers to give the rules of engagement for the rescue force. The JAG briefed the standard legal terms, defined what constituted hostile acts, and was on her way to discussing the status of captured American forces should something go terribly wrong when our commander interrupted her. Silence fell over the place. He never interrupted anyone. This kind man, a Ranger Lieutenant General, always kept his composure. He was soft spoken, gently assertive, and eminently capable. I imagined he was what any Eagle Scout would be like, who had gone to West Point, commissioned in the Army, become a Ranger, and climbed the ranks by way of leadership, character, and combat experience to command the most elite special operations organization in the U.S. military. For the first and only time ever, I saw his face writhe with some dark emotion. He choked out a few imperceptible words, then cleared his throat and started over. "I'm not worried about killing too many of them. I'm worried about not killing enough of them!" His face wore the weight of memories of personal combat with members of this particular terrorist group—the cruelty and remorseless horrors these people are capable of. His comments brought the briefing to an abrupt end.*

I opened my eyes momentarily and shuddered before taking a sip of the lukewarm coffee. As I stood up in the faint light of the not-yet-risen sun, the dimness of the morning

reminded me of the darkened JOC, illuminated almost exclusively by the glow of a wall of screens in the front of the room. My body stiffened into the serious posture of that evening. *I stood poised, focused, hopeful and confident in the face of an uncertain outcome. Tension and fear churned in my core. I felt the weight of the implications of this operation for the American hostages inside the target building. My eyes focused on the screens in front of me, watching for the first glimpse of the objective, still just beyond the visual range of the Predator's full-motion video sensor.* And just as I had done early that evening in the JOC at the end of an already full work day, I planted myself in my seat to watch what would happen. *The screen of my own eyelids came down over the scene in my office, and in my mind I was there on the ops floor once again.*

There is a strange sense of helplessness that consumes you while watching operations from a JOC. As with so many missions I merely watched from afar, my work was complete long before the rescue assets launched from their respective bases. There is nothing left for me to do but trust that each individual—from the RPA aircrew member sitting in a GCS somewhere in the world, to the helo pilots and gunners, to the elite Special Forces commando ready to jump out the door on the objective—will perform their duty with precision, enthusiasm, and the utmost skill. When I flew my U-28 on challenging missions, I was energized with the sense that I could give everything I had and ensure the best possible outcome. When things went awry or the unexpected occurred, I was there to leverage the full weight of my training, experience, and ingenuity against the situation. I knew without a doubt that everything that could possibly be done was being done—and with excellence and personal sacrifice. I gave my country and fellow Americans all I had each and every time I flew. Sitting in the JOC behind a computer screen of

mIRC (Intel Relay Chat) windows, watching a wall full of moving map displays and full-motion video feeds from airplanes with no human beings in them, you feel miserably less certain. As the small helicopter and RPA icons on the screen near convergence over the target, my anxiety and the weight of anticipation become unbearable. I have difficulty hiding my shaking.

As planned, three minutes before the designated TOT and some thirty minutes after the air-refueling C-130 had topped off the helicopters and turned back toward the neighboring country's airbase, the two Predators unlatch their sensors from the forward stowed positions and slew them down just below the horizon to give us the first look at the target. There are several clamshell-type buildings, a handful of two and three-story rectangular concrete buildings, and some elevated observation towers overlooking the area from the compound's perimeter. Small clusters of warm, black bodies wander around in the towers and on the ground below, all against the dull light gray background of the cooler surroundings on the Predators' infrared cameras. One Predator turns slightly to enter an orbit flight pattern around the entire compound. The other sets up a different type of orbit to the south, keeping the entrance to the target building in sight and focusing on the rescue force's intended insertion points inside the fenced perimeter. On the giant screens in front of me I watch the same real-time imagery intelligence the rescue force is watching on small tablets and video screens inside the helicopters. There are enemy fighters dispersed all around the compound. Everyone in the JOC collectively holds their breath. Only the whirring of tiny cooling fans in our laptops pierces the silence. I imagine the operators in the helos charging their weapons and focusing their eyes on the work ahead through their night vision goggles.

The first rounds come from the door gunners on our helos. They zoom across the Predators' sensor fields of view, pouring hot metal rounds down on and around the guard



towers. Black sparks spatter the towers and the ground surrounding the fighters. The enemy fires back from their elevated positions and dispersed locations within the compound. The towers engage our quick-moving helos for a brief while, but by the second or third pass, the towers fall silent. Dozens of warm black bodies that were once erect and postured to fight are now lying still. Fighters on the ground inside the compound scatter in all directions, systematically dropping as the helicopters engage them from the air. When only a few remain, attempting to organize a resistance to the rescue force, two helos set down inside the compound adjacent to the target building. "So far, so good," I mutter to myself. Nobody knows how many more enemy fighters are waiting inside. The familiar sight of our "Eagles"—the good guys—pouring out of the helo doors in that organized, professional tactical fashion I know so well stirs in me the feeling of exhilaration and focus I had experienced so many times when overhead of these types of operations. The rescue force breaches the door of the target building and files inside with an air of determination and brutal force I can identify on the video feed from thousands of miles away. There is no sight in this world that compares to that of our Special Forces taking a building! "Good luck and Godspeed," I whisper.

*The rising sun peaked over the houses across the street and streamed through the top of my office window. A beam of light hit the glass on some framed certificates across the room and reflected onto my eyelids. I looked up through the dark shade of the memory and wondered what time it was. Had anyone heard me talking to the past just now? The coffee cup was cold. I set it down on the table beside me and strained my eyes to focus on the clock and remember what I'm supposed to do today. Do I teach today? No. What time is my appointment this morning? The weight of the memory held me firmly. I squinted, trying to read the hour and*

*minute hands. Five-thirty. I don't have to leave for two hours. The wife and kids won't be up for thirty more minutes. I closed my eyes and fell back into my seat in the JOC. Pain in my chest and head reminded me to breathe.*

The minutes of waiting are intolerable. The rescue force has entered the building, and the helicopters are airborne again to deter an enemy counterattack. The SATCOM radios are silent. Few if any rounds are fired on the objective. Everyone watching in the JOC sits motionless, barely breathing lest they miss any of the radio communications in their headsets. I know that the team is taking care of business inside the building. I've waited through these same moments before. Will they find the hostages? Alive? Do they know that their country is coming for them? Have they already given up hope in the months they've been captives? My mind drifts back to the missions I have flown—far into hostile environments, beyond easy range of our search and rescue assets—in a single-engine civilian airplane modified for military use. Even back in our original SERE training, they ingrained in us the belief that as American service members we would never be left behind. The civilian hostages—kidnapped aid workers—do they hold the same faith in our country? Do they know that anyone cares? That our organization has been tracking them and monitoring their situation since shortly after their abduction? Who am I kidding? How could they know? They don't have the same training I do. They aren't mentally or physically prepared for a long and brutal captivity. Even I understood that my best chances if I found myself on the ground with an enemy like this lay in a complex equation involving time, distance, and the amount of ammunition I carried on my vest and in my go-bag.

There is static and a chirp on the SATCOM radio. Everyone perks up in their seats. A pause. Nothing. It's just stray electrons. I imagine the scene inside the target building—elite

Special Forces commandos storming each room, surprising the enemy captors, instantly rendering them harmless in a symphony of precisely aimed carbine rounds. A moment of terror for the hostages, confusion, panic, then the relief of hearing American voices and seeing the American flag velcroed to a tactical vest and body armor. Would they walk out on their own, or would the rescue force carry out wounded bodies? The waiting is excruciating. It becomes more painful by the minute because we all know too well what these extra quiet minutes could mean.

Dark figures mill about on the periphery of the screen in front of me. The enemy looks confused, disorganized, and hesitant to move closer to the rescue force or the target building. The helicopters continue to pass through the feed at regular intervals, their machine guns aimed outward from the target building to discourage any brave enemy fighters. As we wait, our faith begins to waver. All we can do is watch. The Predators' precious minutes of on-station time are dwindling down. Soon they will have to turn away from the compound to begin their long trek home across unfriendly skies. When they do, we will lose all situational awareness on the target, and the rescue force will be on their own.

*I sat impatiently on the couch in my office. The weight of hope, fear of the worst, and utter helplessness overwhelmed me. I strained to hear anything from the radios, but the ringing in my ears and sounds of my own pulse in them made it impossible to hear anything else. I leaned forward, aching to hear a familiar tactical brevity word indicating that the team had found the people they came for. Time was suspended, and I buckled under the weight of what could be happening inside.*

Suddenly the team emerges from the building. I count—one, two, three...and more.

Every silhouette of a figure in that infrared video wears a helmet, tactical vest, and carries a rifle. No more human beings than had entered. What can this mean? Are the hostages staying inside the door until the helicopters arrive to take them away? The helos land once again in the courtyard. Our Eagles quickly climb aboard, and off they fly toward the bottom of the screen. That was the last we saw of the rescue force. No additional humans came out of the building. The Predators make one last orbit to obtain what little post-op reflections they can, make their Bingo call over the radio, then turn to fly away. The compound grows smaller and smaller in the center of the video feed. Enemy fighters cautiously advance toward the target building and gather outside. The radio remains silent. Back home, we all know what has happened. There was nobody there. The hostages had already been moved.

The JOC is a cacophony of silent brooding. Some throw themselves into the after-action reports, their keyboards chattering under angry finger-falls. Others stand there staring at the screens on the wall, tense faces trying to will another outcome into existence. Each of us fails to hide our disappointment and anger. The weakest poker faces in the room excuse themselves to get some fresh air outside. I watch the small icons of the helicopters and RPA diverge back toward their points of origin. A C-130 icon moves forward to rendezvous with the helicopters on their way home. They will need to refuel to get back. After minutes that feel like hours, the radios begin to carry voices of the helo and C-130 aircrews: fuel statuses, time of flight for the return to base, aircraft battle damage reports, ETA to aerial refueling. All perfectly professional and composed. Do they have enough fuel to meet the C-130? It will be close.

Twenty minutes later, a strange report comes across the radio. One good guy wounded? One of the rescue force? No, a helo pilot. Shot in the leg. How bad? Under control, but not good. How did it happen? He was shot during the initial attack on the enemy towers. The pilot

just realized. All this time, in the excitement and adrenaline of the operation, he didn't have any idea what had happened to him.

And on a larger scale, we as an organization didn't know the truth of the situation either. A little over an hour ago, we were so certain that our hostages were in that building that we convinced the big decision makers to let us fly into this country under the cover of darkness, shoot up some bad guys, and raid a building. We had believed it for weeks. All the intelligence pointed to this place. Our actions were totally justified in order to bring our Americans home. But now, as the thrill fades away, we are left with the embarrassing reality that we have no idea where those hostages are. A new truth slowly comes into focus, and that one word we wanted to hear on the radio tonight—the one that never came—will echo on as an empty, damning silence in our minds.

*The calculus that goes into a decision to rescue hostages includes an assessment of how dire their situation is. The threat to hostages during a rescue is extremely high. There was an urgency in this operation. Their time was short, and our window was small. None of us can be sure whether or not our attempt that night expedited their murder at the hands of their captors. What I know for sure, though, is that they never came home. The "justice" mentioned in that headline will not restore their lives to them, nor their smiling faces to their families and friends. We brought so much of our nation's strength and resources to bear on that small compound in the middle of the night. Yet we took away nothing more than the weight of our failure.*

Once the aircraft are no longer in danger along their return flights, I pack up my bag and walk quietly out into the chilly, damp air. The thin tranquility of the night seems to mock our

mighty efforts to do what very few human beings can even attempt. Many of the parking lots are already empty, a lone vehicle remaining here or there. When I reach my building, my vehicle is one of a few left. I place my belongings inside and get ready for the forty minute drive to my house. The kids will already be in bed. My wife will be waiting, half-dozing on the couch with an open book in her lap where it fell. She'll want to know what was so important *again* that I had to leave early in the morning and stay so late—another day that I didn't see the kids at all—but she knows not to ask. I won't be able to tell her.

As I hit the ignition, the engine struggles to turn over. A labored attempt or two, then defeating silence. My battery is too drained to start it up on this cold night. I stand in the damp chill, listening to the wind and wondering, *how will I ever get home from here?*

**J-Ross** is a retired Air Force aviator with over 1,000 combat hours flown over Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries. He lives with his wife and children in Colorado where he teaches literature and aviation by day and tells his stories through fiction and non-fiction in the hours in between.