

J. SCOTT SMITH

March 25th

Franklyn was a big guy from Florida who got stop-lossed while at the University of Florida. We all thought that was funny, but no one would ever tell him to his face because we'd always call him, "Frank the Tank!" Franklyn could be pretty scary sometimes. Franklyn was also manning the gun in his hummer—what we call "trucks"—when we got ambushed on March 25th. When we got ambushed that morning the truck behind me thought we were dead because they saw an RPG go in, and only smoke come out. And I thought Franklyn was as good as dead when his truck drove into the berm where the ambush was coming from. That's where the RPG, mortar, and AK fire was coming from, too. Franklyn didn't die but the men shooting at him either missed or froze, and instead of killing him, they got killed by him. Franklyn had SLAP rounds in his .50 cal and shot a guy point blank all over the body. That's like being hit by hundreds of piano keys at supersonic speed. Corty stepped out of the truck and started rounding up prisoners when Franklyn yelled, "What the fuck are ya doing! Get the hell outta the way!"

But Corty didn't and so the prisoners lived, even though we thought they should've died. Corty looked pretty shaken up after the whole thing, and I couldn't tell how Franklyn looked because, after shooting the .50, everything shakes. It puts cracks in the ground and tears off flesh if a round comes within close enough range. When their truck drove through that opening in the berm, Lt. Tosh and Cybert dismounted, while Mac stepped out with his 9mm pistol.

I was still screaming when they charged the trenches because I could still feel the shrapnel singeing my skin, crawling down my back, finding a new home. Pucket told me to be quiet.

“Shut the fuck up Smith! Calm down!”

So I did and grabbed Quintero’s cargo pocket and patted him on the leg thinking that my touch would soothe his damaged innards, hoping that he’d stop rolling around and moaning like some mental patient. In between all that I’d start to moan and whine too, but how a little kid would after scraping his knee, all worried and scared, even though I hadn’t been shot or wounded, only burnt and shaken up.

The Abrams tanks were firing into the berm and little red balls would bounce and skip across my windshield. The earth hiccupped in shallow deep breaths as fiery angry wasps zipped through the air, zinging and snapping in straight lines, cracking like a whip the closer they got. Before the RPG came a-knocking, I held my 9mm up and looked from left to right for any movement. When the RPG left I picked up my M16 and swung it wildly until it hit my temple and cracked the skin.

“Whoa, Smith, dude! That’s going to be a cool looking scar!”

But I couldn’t manage to tell them that while our corpsman tumbled lifeless to the dirt, all I did was drive in a straight line and pet the leg of my dazed and wounded gunner. All I did was drive in a straight line.

Enemy fire hit the tanks on their turrets like flies hitting a windshield. The crack and pop of AK fire was interrupted by the even bursts of .50 and 240 fire, there’s a distinctive difference. I didn’t shit or piss myself, but I whined and nervously looked from left to right. I went from yelling to myself, to yelling into the handset,

“They’re all over the place...like fuckin’ ants...we need support!” then Keeney responded,

“Roger that, Smitty,” and hearing his voice and the fatherly assurance he carried with it made me feel better, even though he was an asshole. But Johnson was already dead, his whole body charred and molded like red and black clay left out in the sun to bake and peel.

Tosh, Mac and Cybert ran along the trenches and past all the warm plates of rice and hot tea still steeping, plates upturned and black puddles growing in size like rich oil seeping from the ground. Lt.’s rifle jammed so he gave it to Cybert.

“Fix this!” and Cybert did what they taught him in boot camp.

“Tap, Rack, Bang,” he later told me.

Lt.’s rifle got fixed but Cybert hung onto it anyway.

“You should’ve seen it, Smith. They were all huddled together against the berm, with their hands up in the air, so I just kept shootin’ and they just kept gettin’ smaller and smaller.”

I don’t know what Tosh or Mac did because they didn’t tell me, and I didn’t ask. There was a rumor that Tosh picked up an RPG and shot a bunker full of Iraqis, killing them all and saving the day. That did not happen. He shot an RPG for the hell of it and watched it fly off into the distance. It hit the ground with a small thud. Soon after there was already talk that Lt.’s truck was getting silver and bronze stars. Johnson was dead, and they were getting silver and bronze stars.

A lot of people died that day, and because a lot of people died, Tosh was awarded the Navy Cross, the second highest award you can be given in the Marines. Cybert and Mac were both awarded the Bronze Star, a pretty prestigious award as well. Quintero got the Purple Heart for taking an RPG across the stomach. Johnson got the Purple Heart for being killed by an RPG when it hit him in the head. Franklyn and every other Marine and Corpsmen that day got the Combat Action Ribbon. Corty got made fun of for protecting the prisoners, and later that night, Major Navé was run over and killed by one of our own Tracks in his sleep. He was awarded nothing.

J. SCOTT SMITH served in the Marines as a TOW gunner from 2000 to 2004 where he deployed to Iraq for the invasion in 2003, and again in 2004 as a combat replacement. Since then he has taught English in France, earned a bachelor’s degree in English from St. Louis University. Recently accepted to the Iowa Writers Workshop, he is at work on a novel about the war.