

Smoke Signals

Nolan Capps

“Hey Sar’nt Felix, you got a cigarette?” I asked my squad leader as he emerged from the armored truck that stood in the center of our outpost. He dug a pack of Pall Mall blues out of a pair of filthy gray cammies that were ill-fitting on his thin frame. Red-eyed, he said nothing as he lit one and passed me the pack. The truck behind us, a quarter-million-dollar hulk of depleted uranium armor, had been retired from running missions and now served as Panda Ridge’s command post where Gunnery Sergeant Ross and the squad leaders monitored the company radio in shifts.

“What’s going on out there?” I gestured to the southward-rolling ridge we straddled. Invisible in the dark, that ridge divided Alpha company’s area of operations into two valleys: a smaller, sandy, desolate western valley, and the massive Helmand River valley to the east, two miles across and dotted by a dozen mud brick villages. In the daylight, you could nearly see the company headquarters of Habib miles to the south, bathed in a brown haze. To my surprise, Felix came off his shift with news.

“Captain Sullivan wants us to hit the 60s Series hard tomorrow.” Sullivan, in his headquarters at Habib, had a special map called a grid reference guide that assigned numbers to every bone-white cluster of buildings in the Helmand River valley. I had never seen the GRG, but like all the Marines of Panda Ridge, I was intimately familiar with the 60s Series buildings. I turned to the north, where the buildings lay in the dark a mile away. They stood at the foot of the ridge, a honeycomb of irregular ancient huts hard as concrete and organized around one open courtyard which seemed as large as a football field. Even from the high vantage point of a

flat section of the ridge we called the Crown, we could see little of the insides of the compounds.

But we knew they were a nest of Taliban fighting positions, and any time a patrol from Panda came within sight of the skeletal cluster of the 60s Series, we were harassed with hot bullets. I had led several patrols up the empty western valley to the backside of the Crown, then crept over that high ground on hands and knees with fine yellow dust in my eyes and lips and nostrils. Despite our digital desert camouflage, faded, like the landscape, from hard use, as soon as we reached the edge of the Crown and became visible to the 60s Series below, we took heavy effective fire from hidden Soviet machine guns and AKs.

Against a backdrop of the strip of vegetation clinging to the river, the compounds appeared static even as they discharged rattling chains of lead into the dust below us and the sky above us. Ears ringing, I would train my rifle on the black twisted windows of the huts and walls a thousand feet away, filling the air with the sick scent of carbon smoke as I squeezed the trigger desperately again and again at no one. In those moments, with the taste of copper and dust on my lips, I felt a burning hunger to revenge the death of Jack Fosse, who had wailed like a wild animal as the Crown's fine dust drank the blood out of his lungs. A figure, all in black, sometimes appeared, darting from building to building below to render aid to the fighters within.

When I saw the distant flesh and blood enemy, my fragile manhood eclipsed the memory of Fosse's death and whispered in my ear, "If you want to be a real Marine, you gotta kill that motherfucker, Nolan." I would shoot at that darting shadow, that ghost, but I never satisfied the cancer of my ego or my burning need for revenge. Though we outgunned and

probably outnumbered the enemy below, their simple chain of rock-hard compounds had kept them protected.

While pinned down on the Crown under waves of machine gun fire, we had called in artillery on the 60s Series buildings, we had peppered them with 50 Cal and Mk-19, and we had even seen an F-18 drop a guided bomb on them. The 500-pound GBU had missed and left behind a massive crater at the southwest corner of the compounds. The jet circled again, but the shooting had stopped, the Taliban had already escaped through a network of ditches and tunnels that spanned the northern part of the valley. No one, Marine or pilot, had eyes on enemy fighters, and because of rules of engagement I despised, the pilot refused to drop another bomb.

Just lie, I thought as I watched Sergeant Felix on his elbows in the dirt with the radio against his thin rodent face. *Just tell 'em you see a guy with a gun in the building.* "I don't see anybody down there," Felix said, "I think the enemy's egressed, how copy?" The jet returned to FOB Edinburgh in the south, and the 60s Series remained standing to house the Taliban another day.

I turned back to Felix as I took a long drag off my cigarette. Its orange glow broadcast a distress signal too remote for the rest of the world to notice. "What do you mean hit the 60s Series hard?"

"I guess Sullivan's tired of the bait and switch. We're gonna fuckin' try—" he adjusted the cigarette in his mouth—"to catch 'em with their pants down. We're sneaking straight up the valley tomorrow right to their front door and raiding the whole complex." Though I wore a thick, coyote-brown fleece to break the cold November wind, the Pall Mall trembled in my fingers as I smoked.

"Am I going?" I asked.

"Capps, everyone's going." Felix smiled. He pointed south, to the mouth of the western valley. "See that?" Miles away, a set of headlights shimmered in the velvety blackness. "Weapons Company," he said, "Sully's got them coming, too. Case some heinous shit pops off. Try to get some rest, Capps, we're pushin' early." He flicked his smoking butt over the wall of burlap sandbags at the edge of Panda Ridge and walked away as its embers danced over the rocks and died.

In the sandbag and plywood hooch I shared with Paul Bellamy, Michael Quinn, Doc Garcia, and Chris Chelsey, my sleeping friends' breaths hung soft and visible in the air, but I was as restless as the skittering rats that darted across the dirt floor, sweating and straining the canvas cot under me as I tossed and turned. I imagined the danger of walking point into those compounds, the sanctuary of all the greatest threats to my life. I held little fear of a bullet, but my waking nightmares were full of the prospect of an explosion vaporizing my legs and shearing the dick off my body. Or a 50-gallon drum of gasoline igniting as I step on a tripwire and scorching my body with gouts of flame.

I imagined my future self, in my dress blues, receiving a purple heart for the inevitable accident. My hideous face, roasted and bald as a moon, studied the rows of worthless medals on my chest.

That night I barely slept, and my dreams were full of leather-tough Taliban fighters jumping out at me from behind rocks and doors. I stared into their faces, thin, hard, and merciless, and as they pointed their guns at me, I tried to shoot them dead. My trigger wouldn't budge. The dark, oily iron flashed, the wooden stock of my dream-enemy's Soviet rifle recoiled

into his skinny shoulder, and I stared, frozen with horror, into his unblinking eyes, bloodshot and black as anthracite. I woke up gasping just before the shining copper bullets riddled my body.

Thin streams of light, white and focused as if through a magnifying glass, pierced through the chinks in our hooch and made little white patches over my still-sleeping compatriots. Bellamy, snoring against a plywood wall bedecked with the raunchy pages of a porn magazine, rolled on his side under the prying rays. The dappled sunlight illuminated the waist-high layer of sandbags that circled our dwelling, and the heavy wooden beam, balanced directly in the center of the dirt floor, which supported our warping plywood roof.

I was too anxious to squeeze any more sleep out of the morning hours before patrol. I fished my long johns out of the bottom of my sleeping bag. They were so cold I couldn't tell if they were dry, but I pulled them on over my unwashed legs and began dressing myself in the same dirty cammies I had worn for weeks. From their organized stack at the foot of my cot, I grabbed my flak vest, belt, my gray Kevlar helmet, and my rifle before I left behind that chamber full of the gentle snores of my friends.

I noticed how light the M4 felt as I staged my gear near the flat circle of gravel at the top of the ridge where Felix delivered his briefs. I remembered a flash of last night's dream, of me holding the very same rifle, sleek and black but delicate as a toy. Everything had been the same, the hard plastic stock in my shoulder, the ridges of the handguards in my palm, the cool black metal on my cheek—everything but the frozen trigger. I cleaned my rifle and chain-smoked the last of my Pines in silence until Felix marshalled the Marines of Panda for a quick meal before the raid.

"Alright boys, this is pretty simple," Felix said as he looked the gathered boys over.

Behind him, the ridge sloped down from the line of sandbags and razor wire at Panda's east

border for a few hundred meters until it reached the edge of Chorga, a large, circular village of mud brick huts, tight alleyways, and hundreds of milling Afghan farmers and children. "We're conducting a two-pronged attack on the 60s Series buildings. Weapons Company is preparing to push to the Crown."

He pointed to the five rumbling heavy trucks, desert-tan, at the bottom of Panda Ridge near our west post. Like a herd of cattle in their pen, they waited to be driven up the empty western valley. Each one of them boasted a turret where a faceless young Marine gripped the spadelike handles of heavy machine guns that were terrifying in their simplicity. Long belts of armor piercing 50-caliber rounds or 40-millimeter grenades hung from the iron slabs of the weapons' bodies.

"They'll be staged on the opposite side of the Crown, out of sight of the 60s Series, until we let 'em know we're at Phaseline Red. That is, in position to assault the compounds. Keene, you're gonna be our primary sweeper." Like a strong beer, the warmth of relief flushed through my belly. I wouldn't have to walk point. "Capps, you bring your metal detector, so we're prepared to split into groups, if need be." He turned to Keene, first squad's point man, who had already found a dozen IEDs with his bare hands. "Now, you know that big fuckin' ditch just north of Chorga?"

"Yes Sar'nt," the first-string sweeper nodded.

"We're gonna approach Chorga from the south, cut through town to that ditch, and try to follow it until we get as close to the 60s Series as we can." He sighed. "Obviously, we don't want them getting eyes on our patrol, so you assholes better stay low when we start getting close. Any questions for me?" Felix regarded us with his tired blue eyes before he lit a cigarette. Doc Garcia, our hot-tempered Navy Corpsman, was the only man to speak up.

"Yeah, I got a fuckin' question. How many times is Sullivan gonna send us up north to get killed?" He slung his weighty flak—*crunch*—to the gravel. "I'm getting tired of going on suicide missions, tired of getting shot at, tired"—he kicked the dirt—"of seeing my fucking friends *die!*" He folded, sobbing, to his knees against the sandbag wall. Garcia had been there when Fosse died. He had sealed the wound in the boy's chest with duct tape that shone against the dull ochre of his blood. I was unsympathetic, calloused from a year of abuse at the Marine Corps' heavy green hands. *Where are your balls, man?* I thought as I watched the sweat stain on the back of Garcia's cammies rise and fall with his gasping tears. Nothing came out of Felix's mouth but a thin stream of Pall Mall smoke.

Garcia composed himself and we hoisted our flak vests over our greasy, tanned heads and secured the armor around our bellies. We formed a long line, a ranger file, we called it, with Keene at the head. He marched toward our south post, following a hard-beaten footpath that split the ridge into two rivers of round rocks and crags. The path gently sloped upward until it reached the squat bunker of our south post, where a lucky Marine had been chosen to stay behind and guard Panda Ridge against an unlikely assault from the vast, rugged grayness before us.

"You wanna trade places?" Chris Chelsey asked the Marine in the bunker. I was afraid, but not enough to opt out of the mission. I considered the only thing worse than risking my life on a patrol to be the slow death of boredom on a lonely, one-man post. We passed our outpost's southernmost point and turned east to descend the steep slope to the valley floor.

I was unwieldy under my gear on the scree of rocks and dirt. The thick heels of my boots dug rivets in gray ground that matched our cammies well. As I looked to the north and failed to distinguish the 60s Series buildings behind the ridge's brown fingers and gullies, I became

certain we were invisible to the guerillas within. But the villagers on the south side of Chorga saw us clearly. Below vivid rags that fluttered atop the thick, crumbling adobe walls ahead, a man and his son were building onto their compound. The old man, stooped and turbaned and grey, delivered a wheelbarrow full of rocks to a half-built wall. Like most of the elders of Musa Qala, he was numb to war and ignored our march around the perimeter of his home. His son, with mean eyes under a shock of black hair, studied us as he leaned on his shovel.

Ahead was Chorga's old graveyard of rock piles and faded flags, and then a wide expanse of empty, harvested soil the color of cigarette ash. There was no cover in that farmland beyond a few twisted trees and a single adobe pumphouse that stood in the center of the bare fields. If we crossed them, a lookout in the 60s Series would spot our patrol a kilometer away from their walls. Instead, we turned into the village. Keene led us over streets littered with straw and bits of shining trash. Our patrol twisted between crude buildings where men in burlap vests and robes lounged in their rough-cut doorways.

We took a left down a wide street toward the northern edge of the village, a dirt knoll ringed with a few shriveled yews and topped by a group of sun-bleached compounds. On the other side of the knoll I heard the bleating of lean sheep and the Pashto cries of the shepherd. Midday prayers from a mosque's loudspeakers reverberated through the stone veins of the village. "*Allah... Akbar,*" they proclaimed. God is great.

By the time the booming prayers ceased, Keene was entering the ravine at the bottom of the knoll. It was a five-foot trench at its deepest, with a floor of soft yellow dust that yielded to the weight of my flak and Kevlar, my rifle, the collapsed metal detector in my drop pouch, and my flesh and blood and bone. Though the soft dirt was perfect for holding an IED, I didn't

expect an explosion. The stale human turds, still rank on the ravine floor, suggested we were in one of Chorga's latrines, and nobody boobytraps their own shitter.

Anxiety returned to replace my disgust as we left the village behind and traversed a landscape of rolling red and brown dunes and scrub pines. Keene, meticulous and patient, would spend minutes at a time investigating each squeak his minesweeper made as he waved it over the sandy bottom of the ditch while we waited in a long file behind him. I studied the Marines to my rear as I pulled my camouflage trousers, dark and soaked with sweat, away from my chafing thighs. My flak ate into my shoulders, and my fear faded again, eclipsed by discomfort. We pushed on, until Keene emerged from the ditch between two dunes. The young sweeper crawled out to take cover behind a weathered pumphouse a sprint away from the 60s Series courtyard wall. We had arrived.

Felix muttered instructions into the battered radio on his flak. "Able Weapons this is Panda 2, break, we have reached Phaseline Red. Alright Keene," he said, "When I see those trucks on the Crown, I'll give you the go-ahead. There's a fuckin' breach in the wall up ahead, that's where we're coming in." The rest of us waited in a prone position at the edges of the ditch or under cover of the dunes. Ten feet to my left, Chris Chelsey fidgeted nervously behind a tan berm.

"Ay Chris, gimme a cigarette," I whispered.

He sighed and took his eyes off the empty gray compounds in the green zone to the northeast and pulled a pack out of his faded trousers. He whipped them at me, irritated I interrupted his mortal ideation to ask a favor.

"I need a lighter, too."

"Goddammit, Capps." He dug in his trousers again and flung a blue Bic at me. I licked some of the salty dust off my lips before I held the flame to the sizzling end of the Marlboro. Holding the lungful of menthol smoke reminded me of the natural respiratory pause in which we were trained to slowly squeeze the trigger at our foes. And then I remembered the broken trigger of my dreams.

"Keene, now!" said Felix, and the patrol struck. I felt as though I had only taken two strides beyond the pumphouse when the file of gray-clad Marines in front of me bunched up in a sudden halt.

"My fuckin' batteries are dying!" Keene said as he took a knee in the flat field and cracked open the handle of his metal detector. In a rare moment, my training served me well.

I dashed to the front of the file and stretched the telescoping shaft of my own minesweeper without missing a step. Before the red and green flashing lights in its handle indicated the device was ready, I was flying over the open ground toward the monstrous, wide tombstone of the courtyard wall. I was lifted by a rush of exhilaration, and by the pressure of the running Marines behind me. I screamed a vicious war cry, and for a moment, I felt invincible.

I hooked my arm around the buttstock of my M4 and wedged the weapon firmly in my armpit so I could manipulate it with one hand while the other held the useless metal detector. I reached the breach in the courtyard wall and screamed, "I'm going left!" before I crossed the Taliban threshold.

There were no dark Taliban fighters shooting from the doorways and windows, no tripwires, no earth-breaking explosions. The raw red floor of the courtyard was wide-open and empty, littered with yellow straw and chaff and bits of trash. Three ornate wooden doors stood in the courtyard wall opposite me. The wall to the right opened to a roofless storeroom that

overflowed with straw. A despondent wooden wagon stood rotting in the middle of chamber, and behind it, a wide gap in the wall revealed a set of carved stone steps which descended to a lower level of the compounds.

Without thought, I turned to the left, sweeping the muzzle of my rifle over the huge open chamber until I arrived at the courtyard wall closest to the Crown. This wall, at the narrow end of the irregular courtyard, held only one open doorway. I bumped into the left side of the opening and the wall was rough and hard as cinderblocks under my shoulder. I took a backward glance and saw Stephen Dodds had followed me.

"I go left, you go right," I said before I swung my rifle through the open doorway and followed it outside. On the other side of the thick exterior wall, we were under the shadow of the armored trucks and machine guns hundreds of feet above us on the Crown. I had seen this stage before from their vantage point, the low rock wall to the left, the isolated adobe tower in front of us, the grey backdrop of courtyard wall and the cluster of buildings further to the north, I had seen them all from the Crown. I realized with wonder that I had witnessed black-clad fighters emerging from the same doorway I had just used. They had darted back and forth across the gladiator sand where I now stood.

I retraced the steps of my enemies toward a door hewn into the rocks of the little tower just ahead. The entrance was tight, built to accommodate smaller men than us. There would be no "I go left's, you go right's" here. My gear scraped and rasped against the sandstone of the opening as I forced my way inside. I was blind as my eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness.

I snatched the sunglasses off my face, but like the rest of the compounds, this chamber was bare. A hidebound Quran stood open on a lectern, and a faint leather and library smell crept off the hefty book. A twisted candelabra and a prayer rug the size of a beach towel sat on the

cold stone floor. The rug was blood red and depicted a palace of alabaster columns and red bricks. A single, spired, white dome was framed by another ornate arch, which was itself framed by a rectangular border of violets and white roses. At the bottom, a threadbare gray splash marked the spot where dozens of guerilla fighters had knelt to pray their fervent prayers.

I investigated the tiny window which permitted a pale stream of light into the mosque. I ran my hands over the worn stone shelf below it and noticed it was just the right height to support the bipods of a Soviet machine gun aimed out the window above. I put my eye in the hole and saw the Crown above, the very spot where Fosse had fallen bleeding. The spot where he had moaned, "I'm sorry—if I'd been a better Marine this never wouldn't have happened."

"Fuck, Dodds, this is a murderhole." I said. A sudden surge of anger seared my chest like the cherry of a cigarette. "Put that rug in here." I gestured to the assault pack strapped to my shoulders and Dodds crammed the bulky rug into it. *God is great, but your shit is mine.*

I said prayers of my own as we returned into the sunlight, sand, and barnyard stink of the Musa Qala countryside. I prayed for the rest of my squad to flush a Taliban fighter out of the shelter of another building, for the dark-eyed man of my nightmares to come face-to-face with me in his flight, and for us to finally draw down on one another. But in my new fantasy, it was his trigger that froze, and mine that gave me a release for my glowing fury. I imagined too, the admiring looks I'd receive from my squad as I stood over the cold flesh of the first man I'd ever killed.

My prayers went unanswered. The compounds were quiet but for the thumping of combat boots against doors and muffled commands and complaints. Sergeant Felix and a few other dusty Marines, having cleared the last compound of the 60s Series, stared off into the reaches of the valley to the north. I returned to the courtyard, where Garcia kicked a busted

door into flakes of green paint and long, sticking splinters. I wished I could share one of the Corpsman's tantrums. Instead, I knelt beside Chris Chelsey as he held security on the south side of the building.

"What's happening, Chris?"

"Ain't shit Schmapps. Nobody even fuckin' here, thank god. Somebody in Chorga must've told 'em we were coming." My nervous system relaxed in agreement with him. But then I caught the sweet smell of a bonfire. A billowing column of black smoke was growing out of the adjacent storeroom. Smoke and flashes of the flickering flames within poured from its open door. I was petrified, sure that the blaze was a beacon for Soviet mortars, if not for something worse. I was most terrified by the possibility we had swept the entire complex and managed to miss whoever started the fire. I prepared for the Taliban to materialize like ghosts, for the clever ambush that would maim and kill me and my buddies. My darting eyes found Felix's, and I saw the reflection of my own cowardice in his face.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" I said, and at his curt nod I took off to the south with the rest of our squad in tow. I was no Keene—running, with no heed to the minesweeper in my hand, I took us on a direct route through the open valley and prayed against the inevitable ambush. *Please don't hit us Please let me get home Please don't hit us Please let me get home* until I reached one of the rocky ridge's fingers. I scrambled up the slope, sweating and gasping in the open. After a hundred straining steps up the ridge's face, I was enveloped by the shadow of Panda, though the men at the back of the breathless squad had just begun their ascent.

Above me, I saw the gap in the razor wire beside our north post. *God is great.* I waited at the top of the ridge while red-faced Marine after Marine poured into the outpost. Felix, with his

rifle dangling to his waist and his hands on his knees, struggled into the wire in the middle of a lung-rattling cough. "Don't go so goddamn fast next time, we gotta stay together."

"Sorry Sarn't." He made his way, wheezing, to the gravel staging area for a debrief.

"None of you motherfuckers saw what started that fire?" the squad leader spoke around the Pall Mall in his teeth as he fumbled with the wheel of his lighter. Silence.

"Well look," he produced a dancing white flame and took a deep breath. "I don't like that shit. But if you didn't see what happened, maybe we just won't know. And I don't think fuckin' Sullivan needs to know either." Felix's eyes ran over the weary Marines in front of him. "Get some chow, I guess."

I wasn't hungry. I hauled my flak by its shoulder strap through the entrance of our hooch and sighed with comfort as I saw the familiar olive drab cots in a neat row. I began to strip off my tokens of war and search underneath them for a real identity. Behind me, Garcia entered the hooch and did the same thing. His passage left a lazy cloud of dust hanging over us in the dim dwelling. I unzipped my assault pack and unrolled the thick red rug. My eyes crawled over the flowers, the pure white arches, the heavenly spire, the raw gray hole left behind by Taliban prayers. I knew the deployment was eating the same kind of hole in my spirit.

"What you looking at, Capps?" Garcia asked with machismo dripping from his voice.

"Just some shit I stole." I snapped out of my trance. "Hey dude, what about that fuckin' fire? What do you think that could have been? Molotov cocktail maybe?"

"Nah Capps, I did that shit." He mimed striking a book of matches and throwing it into a bale of straw, "But don't tell nobody!"

I turned back to my trophy. Before I stashed it under my cot, I ran my fingers over the threadbare patch that consumed the palace like smoke bleeding into paradise.

Nolan Capps's "Smoke Signals" is part of a larger work about his time in the Marine Corps and the experience of deploying and returning from deployment. Life as a Marine is full of physical and emotional pain. It's a grind. But the bitterest part of military service, for Capps, he reports, was the gap between expectation and experience. His writing addresses that expectation gap—and the frustration, anger, and fear it breeds.