

Gaming

Rebecca Evans

During my time stationed at Upper Heyford, we frequently played games, war games or “exercises,” officially known as Warfare training. We wore olive drab Chem Gear over our fatigues. These “suits,” made thick and thermal, with a charcoal lining, as if this would prevent chemical saturation. We owned helmets, gas masks, rubber gloves with white cotton liners, and rubber boots that draped our combat boots. We “masked up” during Alarm Red and, during the other alarm conditions, we maintained the simpler state of “war ready.”

This was 1986, five years before the Gulf War. Straight from stateside after a year of training, I had mastered most of my job skills. Now, overseas, I needed to re-learn navigation and procedures. International flightplanning involved crossing borders and some of them, like France, proved less than cooperative.

On this night, an EF111 crew from the 42nd ECS handed me a flightplan. This F111 model, incapable of dropping bombs, flew in front, “jamming” airwaves and radar frequencies, creating a stealth effect for the aircraft following behind, which made it difficult for the enemy to detect us.

It was a four-flight sortie. Four aircraft. Eight crew. Two men per jet.

I worked alongside my supervisor, Sgt. W. during a twelve-hour shift, seven p.m. to seven a.m. He possessed a southern twang and I loved his wife, fifteen years his senior, though I hadn't met her. He shared stories of their lives prior to his military career. His tales of young love and youthful days pulled us through long shifts.

"There was the time," he told me, "me and my wife tackled a patient trying to escape from the rooftop. Which was better than most of the others, who tried to jump and end their lives." His drawl rhythmic, soothing me as I moved through banal tasks. His wife had worked alongside him at a mental health facility somewhere in the south.

"...and your own family?" sometimes he'd asked.

"Most of them are still in Indiana."

I trusted him. I did. Despite our comradery, I worried what he'd think of my childhood. Or lack of. I treaded carefully, wearing long sleeves, even in summer, hiding scars along my wrists. The shortest ones, an early suicide attempt, and the rest marked a variety of "accidents," many at the hands of my step-father. By the time I entered the military, I gave little credence to my scars, believing myself all right, feeling I was in good emotional shape. I had passed the psych evals and, surely, if mental, military screening would've vetted me unfit. I had truthfully completed the entrance exams. To the best of my ability. I no longer worried about my stability. I told myself that my earlier suicide-tries didn't count as serious. I knew I didn't mean it. *I'm still here.*

Looking back, that war, the real one for me, in 1991, broke me in an unexpected way.

For now, this game, this war game, was just beginning. They called it Salty Nation, a Cold War exercise to practice nuclear attack response, which involved our base, RAF Upper Heyford. Other bases engaged as well, RAF Mildenhall housed a few deployed KC-10 tankers and RAF Lakenheath participated with their own squadrons of F-111's. Heyford stood only fifteen minutes outside of Oxford, England. Mildenhall and Lakenheath sat closer to Cambridge. The F111's primary mission throughout the Cold War was to provide medium range nuclear strike capability. Location mattered.

I began typing the route from the flightplan into the RAFAN, (RAF Aeronautical Network). Once "sent," it would transfer through airwaves, communicating with each tower and radar approach between here, Heyford, and the flight's destination. In course, the plane would be handed off, tower to tower, caught by the next voice on a radio.

"Their ETA is six hours," I said, a problem as F111's held only four hours of fuel.

"Are they air-refueling?" W. asked.

"No."

"HmMMM. Type it in for now."

Normally, we would've questioned this type of thing. "Playing war," we knew this wasn't real and the majority of our "work" was simulated. During "games," we'd create flightplans and not send them. Or would utilize an old truck in place of an aircraft at a dummy crash site, allowing emergency response teams to practice for rescue and recovery. As if...we were at war. As if...there existed a nuclear crisis. Training.

"They're also routed through France," I said. This was as much a problem as their limited fuel. France required a diplomatic clearance number (DIC), pre-approval, for our aircraft to cross their borders.

"Of course. Part of the fun," all he offered.

I typed. Halfway through, the base sirened Alarm Red, a one minute warbling tone, signaling an attack imminent or in progress and we assumed MOPP4 (Military Oriented Protective Posture, level 4), which meant full gear. I took cover, diving beneath the console and donned my mask, unable to establish a seal, my mask ill-fitted and too large for my face. My lenses steamed, clouding my vision. I pressed my helmet over top my mask, stretched rubber booties to cover combat boots, zipped my chem jacket, yanked my liners and gloves (cut from

the same thick rubber as the booties). I tucked my sleeves into the gloves, protecting my skin in case of nukes. As if I'd worry about skincare.

Around my outer garment, strips of masking tape simulated M9 tape, detector paper used to identify chemical agents we'd most likely contact. At the time, our greatest concern covered the five most deadly chemical weapons for war:

- Nerve agents. Sarin, soman, tabun, all G-Series, named, thanks to German scientists who synthesized them. There were also V-series, like VX, more persistent than G-series.
- Blistering agents. Mustard and lewisite. It's interesting that Fritz Haber, a German-Jew and a chemist, was known as the "father of chemical warfare." He developed poison gas as a weapon and oversaw the distribution of it in Belgium in 1915. He went on to receive the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1918.
- Ironically, Haber's wife, Clara, the first woman to earn a PhD in Chemistry at the University of Breslau, opposed his chemical warfare work and shot herself in the heart with his service revolver. It took her time to die.
- Choking agents. Chlorine, phosgene, diphosgene. Choking agents came to life on April 22, 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres in Belgium when the Germans created a wind-borne cloud with 168 tons of chlorine overtop the French, Canadian, and British troops (thank you Fritz). Phosgene, also a German-invention, was introduced in 1917.
- Cyanides. France used hydrogen cyanide as early as WWI. It's a chemical that is considered "military useless" as it is highly volatile. Despite this, its use was reported during the Iran-Iraq war in the eighties.

- Incapacitating agents. Anticholinergic compounds. These are not intended to be lethal. Instead, they yield temporary physiological or mental impact, and are considered the more humane method of warfare. Right.

I typed with two pencils, one in each hand, pecking a key at a time with the eraser end. I'd learned to de-fog my lenses, "cheating" in time of war, slipping my index beneath the seal along my jawline, producing a vent, breathing in spurts of sweet air from the real world.

I lost myself in the typing, gloves or no gloves. The strokes consisted of geographic coordinates, the work trite, mindless. I drifted, into dreams, into pasts, into my forgotten-moments.

On a steaming August morning, the summer before I had entered kindergarten, I played in the dingy basement with my brother, David. Our house, in Cedar Lake, Indiana, had contained an unfinished basement, divided into many rooms, floored in stark concrete. Square carpet samples scattered throughout and, in the center of the room stood two wobbly card tables with half-finished puzzles. A sun-faded brick-red loveseat leaned beneath a high, small window, too dusty to offer much light.

Both our parents worked, gone for the day. We could do whatever we wanted. On this day, he and I played restaurant. My brother, two years older, acted as the customer, and I pretended to serve him food. Like my mother, I loved being a waitress. I felt glamorous in the role. I stuck a pencil behind my ear and tied a long-sleeved shirt around my waist backwards, creating an apron. He sat in a white plastic chair, his knees pushing into the small table. I took his order: five donuts. I carefully stacked the "donuts" on a tray created from the box top off a game. The "donuts," made of plastic in varying colors, were actually the stacking circles that

fitted on a cone. A toy from my toddler years. The top piece, a red ball, reminded me of a clown's nose. I presented my brother his "breakfast."

"Did you want a cup of coffee or something?" I asked.

"Sure. Coffee. Black." Without glancing up, he feigned eating, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"I'll get you a napkin too." I walked away and returned with an empty pencil holder.

"Here's your coffee, sir," I said.

He nodded.

"You need to say thank you." I placed my hands on my hips.

"Okay. Thanks."

"You need to eat everything and tell me it's really good. I'm a good cook."

"Okay. It's real good. Thanks."

"And you have to pay me. Tip and everything, because I'm good at serving you." I swept my hair out of my eyes, quite dramatically, and jutted out my hip.

"I have to pay you?"

"Of course." I removed my pencil from behind my ear and tapped it against my bottom lip. I continued, "Let's see..." I began counting on my fingers.

"Stop acting like Mom," he said.

"I'm not being Mom. I'm waitressing." I poked the pencil back behind my ear, then crossed my arms.

"I don't want to play anymore. It's not fun." He shoved himself from the table, tipping his chair. He jumped over it and ran towards the stairs.

"Hey!" I shouted. "You have to pay!"

"I'm not playing," he yelled over his shoulder.

"You can't do that!" I dropped my tray, yanked off my apron, throwing it at the floor.

"You can't not pay me!" I chased after him.

"I'm going outside," he said, running up the four concrete stairs from our basement, across the landing and out the door.

"We're not supposed to go out!" I shouted to him. It was still early. If we were caught playing outside, we would be in for it. It probably didn't matter. We were always in for it.

The top half of the door, made from glass. The bottom was constructed of metal. At three strides behind him, I reached out, an effort to push the handle of the door. My hand missed the door-knob, hitting the glass. The door shattered, and my body followed my hand through it. The metal edge dug into my stomach, stopping me. I fell back, catching myself, hands and bottom splatting on the landing, surrounded by large daggered pieces and crushed crystals. My stomach burned, knowing the trouble I caused by breaking the door.

I looked to W. I wanted to ask him about the flightplan. I feared appearing stupid. As if sensing my question, he gestured with his gloved hands, air-typing, and said, through his mask, "Type."

Often navigational points are depicted with abbreviations, like UPH for Upper Heyford or DTY for Daventry. This plan was contrived solely of longitude and latitude coordinates, unfamiliar and not part of our typical European training routes. Then, in the remarks, the crew had listed another call sign, indicating a fifth EF111.

"They have a fifth aircraft," I told W., my voice muffled. My mask, slimy, slid, and I breathed air that tasted like a dirty tire if you licked it. My tee shirt, beneath my layers, saturating with sweat from simply sitting.

He shrugged, "It's a game."

The plan indicated 32N 13E and I had no clue where this fit on a globe.

I stopped typing.

"I'm going to look this up," I said.

"Seriously? Have at it."

Our unit, housed in building 172, a World War II hangar, contained numerous divided rooms. One held the safe, another served as administration offices, a third and larger area, maintained space to plot routes. It was here, in the flightplanning room, I pulled a European chart and sat on the floor, plucked off my gloves so I could easily unfold it. *This is an unusually lengthy Alarm Red.* Normally, we'd be masked maybe fifteen minutes. The Command Post probably forgot about us since it was evening with little base activity.

The coordinates weren't on this chart.

I picked a different chart.

Then another.

I tossed them to the floor.

Something's wrong.

Where were we sending our crews?

Wait, this isn't real.

I reminded myself, Salty Nation denoted an exercise, a game, only training. Still, I couldn't pinpoint the location. Not on any chart.

I moved to the wall map, ran my right finger to the IP, the Initial Point.

Tripoli.

I sat.

Hard.

Why are we training for sorties to Libya?

In the moment, I thought that we could've been practicing for a bigger mission, something soon, maybe a week out? Perhaps two?

Am I supposed to know this?

Do I have the security clearance?

Should I tell my supervisor?

He must already know.

Was I being tested?

Maybe this was an evaluation to determine if I could indeed keep a secret. Or maybe I should report this. Unsure what to do, I did nothing. It was night, the flight's scheduled take-off an hour or more away, as I remember. We had a little time. For now.

My right arm had hung limp, a slice of glass, the full length of my forearm, protruding. I hadn't seen blood. I thought I was fine.

I tried to lift my arm to touch my face. I couldn't. Another chunk jutted from my armpit. Still, no blood.

Sweat dripped into my eyes, blurring my vision. I ran my left hand across my face. Blood. I touched my forehead, followed the edge of another piece with my fingertips as it spanned from the right side of my hairline to the top of my skull. I knew I should be hurting because

blood now trickled down my neck. Unsure how many more places I'd been pierced, I stayed still, my body numb until a scream startled me, much like a slap and it took a moment before I realized, *not my voice*. David.

"No!" He ran towards me, crunching as he stepped. He stood for a moment, looked around, as if someone might appear to help.

"I'll go get Mrs. Hites," he said and disappeared through the broken door.

"Don't leave me."

Now my shorts soaked in blood, my legs, splayed in front of me and bare except for one smaller, protruding shard. Blood puddled, dotted with floating shiny bits. I didn't know my body could hold that much blood. Dizzy, I tenderly lowered myself onto the mess, lying on my back as if used to a bed such as this. I waited for Mrs. Hites to come help. The ceiling, lower than I recalled, was covered with the same gray cement color as the floor. Thick cobwebs strung in the corners and I watched as a spider dropped, then trembled on his thread. I tasted bile. My body shook. The room dimmed. I did not want to be alone in a darkening room with a spider. I wished I could cry. I knew I'd be in trouble for that too. I wanted to call out for someone, anyone. No one was near me to hear me. I shivered. It took forever before Mrs. Hites arrived.

"Holy shit." I said as I returned to the console. "We're going to Tripoli." I squeezed my hands into balls to help maintain voice-control. I waited for W.'s response.

"It's part of the game," he said, his voice calm. *He knows*. Then I remembered, two weeks earlier, a shootout between Libyan missileers and the US Navy. And after, high media-attention-gain of the Libyan-backed Le Belle Disco bombing in West Berlin, killing two people, one, an

American serviceman. The stage set for a strike. I felt small. I also felt part of something big.

Something that mattered. Something secret.

I tugged my gloves back on, pencils in hand, typed with the eraser-end, and tried to not think about typing. Tried to not think about anything, though impossible to not think. I returned to my childhood, fractured images of my body bleeding and not-bleeding, this memory-cocoon, my private mental place as I pecked at the keyboard. I wouldn't need to do anything with this memory. Nothing required resolution. I knew how things ended and reminded myself, *I'm still here.*

As the door shut, more glass had fallen, tinkling to the ground, and I opened my eyes to Mrs. Hites standing over me.

"Oh dear child," she had said, squatting, scanning my surroundings.

"Get a blanket," she told my brother. As a heavy woman, she typically draped her body with country dresses dotted with small blue or yellow flowers. It appeared she was always home, always available for her six children. The fragments stuck in me most likely created a plug. Mrs. Hites left them intact. She tiptoed, barefoot, through the debris, and I worried she'd cut her feet and then wouldn't be able to help me. I wondered why she forgot her shoes. Maybe she left her house in a hurry.

She instructed my brother, towels, blankets, shoes, stay calm. David fetched items, returning with an armful of rags, a blanket, and Daddy's dingy corduroy slippers, worn thin through the soles. She folded the blanket twice over and laid it beside me.

She lifted me beneath my shoulders and scooted me onto the soft folds. She gently raised my feet, aligning my legs with my body.

"You lift these two corners at her feet," she instructed David.

Mrs. Hites's powdery perfume wafted over me, contrasting the metal-blood smell. She bent, raising the corners near my head.

"Ready?" she asked.

They hoisted me, my body sagging in the center of the make-shift gurney, my brother's end near the ground. By the time we approached the station wagon, my feet dragged, and David's forehead beaded with sweat. At least he didn't drop me.

"Set her legs down and come to this side," she told him. Half-propped against the passenger seat, my brother held me in place as Mrs. Hites climbed through the driver's side.

"OK. Go back to her feet now. I'm going to pull her in with the blanket. You need to hold her feet up as high as the seat."

"OK. I can do it." he said.

She slid my body across the seat, then placed my head into her lap as she settled in the driver's seat.

"Make sure the blanket is tucked in. Shut the door. Then hop in the back." He did as he was told.

I looked at my daddy's slippers and the three pedals on the floorboard as blood dripped from my head onto the vinyl, pooling on the floor.

"You need to keep your eyes open, Dear," she said, smoothing my bloodied hair away from my forehead. At the time, the 1970's, we lacked ambulances, at least in Cedar Lake. The ride to the doctors, three blocks away, was brief. I tried to lift my eyebrows, scrunching my forehead as if my face could pull open my eyes. My face throbbed and my eyes shut against my own will.

I sent the flightplan. Within minutes, maybe more, France replied. REFUSE. We knew they would. Later, we would discover that the French had already denied, through diplomatic channels, long before we ever filed a flightplan. Tactical deception and wishful thinking pressured our aircrews to try anyway.

By now, we had returned to Alarm Yellow, which indicated the base maintains "on alert" as we were no longer under "attack." Our masks, gloves and booties scattered the floor. W. and I poured over maps, replotting a new route, coursing our fighter jets through Spain and Italy. Friendly countries. Countries where we didn't need pre-approval. I re-typed and re-sent an amended flightplan. We waited. Again. After some time, W. disappeared into the flightplanning room. I followed. He sprawled a new chart on the table.

"What are you? Practicing now?" I said with a laugh.

He didn't respond. Nor laugh. He didn't even look at me.

"What are you doing, boss?" I asked, quieter.

"Both countries denied access," he said.

Why?

Why would our NATO allies have denied us access?

It's a game.

He busied himself, coursing another navigational detour and, by this time, a damp coldness crept along the back of my neck. My hands shook and I struggled to highlight straight lines on the map, point to point, through Germany. New friends, old enemies.

"Is this more air time? More time without fuel?" I asked. The crews would need altitude reservations (ALTREVS) for in-flight refueling as well. Long over-water flights relied on tankers

equipped with LORAN and cel-nav. F111's carried neither, increasing navigational difficulty. Now I worried. In this tenseness, I wondered if we were still "playing."

Surely this is only a game.

"They'll be refueling. We aren't coordinating that leg of the mission."

"Who is?"

"I need a smoke," he said. I hadn't realized he smoked, never saw him light one. I wanted one too. I didn't smoke. I had once tried at the start of my Air Force career to qualify for the extra cigarette breaks. It didn't work out. Though I was great at keeping a game-face, I was a less-than-good faker.

We submitted the new plan. After twelve minutes, which seemed like twelve hours, we received a response from Germany. ACP. This route had coursed our jets over the Atlantic, into the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar, increasing the distance by 1300 miles each way, far surpassing their four-hours of fuel on board. We had no idea where our men would link-up with a refueler. Or if they could. Take-off time, estimated-time-of-departure, ETD, now approaching.

We paused.

We waited.

We waited in silence.

I had only cried when the doctor cut off my orange and yellow daisy tank top, my favorite summer shirt. The doctor had pinched my skin together and then I goose-bumped from the brief sting of a needle. I closed my eyes and imagined the threads criss-crossing tightly over

my skin. I looked at the finished stitches in my forearm, black thread against pale skin, the jagged wound neatly pulled together, skin overlaying itself.

"I know it looks bad," the doctor said. "You'll heal just great."

The thread almost tickled as the doctor weaved it through. And then the process started over, pinch, sting, tickle, the doctor sewing me back together, over a hundred stitches. I hoped it would take him a long time to finish. The nice doctor talked to me, his words softly spoken.

Mrs. Hites held my hand, gently squeezing it.

"How many more stitches?" I asked him. Worried I would be in trouble for how much money this would cost.

"We're almost done. You had quite a fall young lady." I couldn't see his face, hidden behind the bright light strapped around his forehead. I thought the headlamp funny, something I had only seen in cartoons. I could see only white light and the doctor's hands pulling the black thread with a hooked needle. His voice seemed to come from around the light, low and gentle, as he began to help me heal.

"Will I get a lollipop?"

"Maybe even two. That slice under your arm was a close call. Too close to a major artery. You're lucky. Your wrists too, near a critical point." Years later, I would carefully slice into that same scar, a poor attempt to try to die. On this day, too young to understand how my body worked, too naïve to contemplate how many ways there were to die, I instead embraced medical-attention.

"Major artery?" I asked.

"Your heart pumps blood through arteries and veins. It's the way your blood travels in your body, like cars on the road or planes in the sky. Don't worry about that now. Try to relax as I finish. You're a good girl."

"Will you tell my mom I'm good?"

"Sure. I think she knows. I'll tell her if it helps."

I received a shot before I left the doctor. That smarted more than the stitches. Still, I did not cry. When we returned home, Mother, perched on the front steps, held a Raggedy Ann doll, still in the box.

"We were just playing," David said, getting out of the car.

"Here." Mother handed me the doll. "I was saving this for Christmas." I sat in the passenger seat, holding the box, long and thin, covered with plastic.

"Thank you, Nora," Mother said to Mrs. Hites.

"That was scary. She's lucky she didn't lose an eye. Or her life. You should say a prayer of thanks."

"I'll do that."

"You should consider staying home. Your kids need you here."

"I don't need your words of wisdom. As you can see, I have quite enough to deal with now," Mother said through her clenched jaw. "You have a much easier life than I do. I have to work."

Mrs. Hites cradled me in her arms, settling me in the bottom bunk of David's room. Mother followed. Mrs. Hites sat on the edge of the bed, removed the slippers, now splattered with blood, and handed them to Mother.

"I forgot my shoes," she told Mother. Mother took them, and both women left the room.

My brother sat on the floor, beside his bed. He opened the box and handed me the doll. I held it, feeling like I had a twin, ragged and randomly stitched. I tried to smile. Everything tightened, a swelling around the stitches, and my face stung if I moved my eyebrows. I hoped it would take a month to heal, then I could stay in my brother's room.

David left me money near my pillow the next morning. A single dollar bill, crinkled, and two dimes. Payment for the donuts.

I lay alone most of the next day, listening to voices outside the bedroom door. They thought me asleep. I could hear them. Talking. Mostly about me.

"Do you think she did it on purpose? Some sick way to get attention?" I heard Mother ask and then continue, "maybe she should be punished?"

When I heard the muffled response, the ache inside of me started. The stitches stretched tight, digging into my skin, and everything began to hurt at once.

When our jets taxied for take-off, W. said we should sit outside, watch them launch. We failed to admit those planes might not return. We didn't speak these worries aloud. We waited for a lifetime, and I'd learned later in my career about the tediousness of military conflict, the mundaneness of waiting in those hours of nothingness. I'd learned to spend those moments in my mind, in my own games, in my own wars, fighting me against me.

We would later understand that Lakenheath sent twenty-four Pave Tack equipped F111's, whose system offered guidance for laser-guided bombing to avoid unintentional non-target hits. Those aircraft joined our five EF111's. Those aircraft lost a crew, call sign Karma 52, Capt. Fernando Ribas-Dominicci and Capt. Paul F. Lorence, who were shot down over the Gulf of Sidra. Two men I did not know. Two men I would never know. Two good men, gone.

As our own crews took off, our EF111's, our men, breaking through my dream-mind, breaking through barriers, I thought they looked burdened, as though it was hard for them to lift off that asphalt. I thought about my battles, mostly in my childhood, scars imprinted as if to remind me of my stories, of how certain moments felt as if I'd played a game, a game I was losing, as though I'd not read the rules. As if completely off-course. The moment our aircraft busted through clouds and zones, I realized Salty Nation was well-timed, perhaps a cover to keep us in the dark as we helped bomb Libya. It seemed everyone else knew the rules to this game, as if the entire world involved itself. And I, I had felt small, purposefully uninformed and heavy in my own gear.

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