

GAS! GAS! GAS!

Mike Kubista

"VX gas is a nerve agent," the Intelligence officer begins, my platoon sitting in a half circle in the sand at his feet. "It's odorless, tasteless, and heavier than air. If you breathe it in, it'll settle in your lungs and attack your nerve centers. Your muscles will seize, and you'll fall to the ground, spasming until you snap your own spine. If your unit gets hit, go to MOPP level 4, and move to higher ground. Do not remove your mask or protective gear for any reason."

This is a common briefing on the Iraq-Kuwait border in early 2003

"Sarin gas is a lot like VX. It's odorless and tasteless and attacks your nerves causing paralysis of the muscles. Saddam used this shit in the 80's on the Kurds, so don't be surprised if he uses it on us."

The last few weeks have been a blur. In mid-January, my MP unit got activated in Minnesota. After a flurry of dropping classes, cancelling leases, packing gear, and saying goodbyes, I'm on a plane to North Carolina, a plane to Germany, a plane to Kuwait. By early February, I'm in a desert camp preparing for the invasion of Iraq. Three weeks ago, I sat in a Midwestern college classroom while a Sociology professor gave a passionate speech about men being pigs who do nothing but try to hold women back. Now I'm in a desert, with an Intelligence officer telling me that in a few days, my face might melt off while I puke up my lungs.

"Mustard gas is a blister agent," he continues, "It smells like garlic and onions. If it comes in contact with your skin, it will burn you. Your skin will bubble with blisters, and if you don't die,

you will be severely scarred. If mustard gas gets in your eyes, your eyes will swell in your head, and you will go blind. If you breathe it in, your lungs will blister and you will vomit and cough up blood. Saddam used mustard gas on the Iranians in the Iran/Iraq war, and he used it on the Kurds in the 1980's. Don't be surprised if he uses it on us."

"Fuck man," Ramirez says, "I hope my dumb ass gets shot. This gas shit ain't no way to die."

"Nice clean shot to the head," Baker says, "That's the way to go. Not flopping around on the goddamn ground with my skin melting."

"Phosgene gas and Chlorine gas are both choking agents. Phosgene smells like fresh cut grass. Chlorine smells like bleach. Both attack your lung tissue. If you breathe them in, your chest will tighten, and you will hack and choke until you run out of air. Chlorine gas is cheap and easy to produce. Don't be surprised if Saddam uses it on us."

"At least we've got chemical detecting chickens," I say. Ramirez and Baker snicker. A truck load of farm chickens arrived in camp the other day. They were supposed to be another line of defense, a gas detection system like canaries in coal mines. If gas was present, especially nerve agents that we couldn't see or smell, the chickens would die, letting us know to mask up and get the fuck out of there. Two days after the chickens arrived at camp, they were all dead. Apparently farm chickens don't just die from chemical weapons. They also die from heat exposure and sandstorms.

Most of the time during the buildup in Kuwait we are at MOPP level 1, a designation that tells us how much protective gear we should be wearing based on perceived imminence of chemical attacks. At MOPP level 1, we wear charcoal lined chemical suits instead of desert utilities. The

charcoal suits are heavy and don't breath like the light fabric of our normal desert uniforms. They also aren't the right colors. Instead of the light tans of our desert cammies, they are forest greens and browns. We look ridiculous dressed in woodland camouflage in a desert where nothing green grows, but it probably doesn't matter. The slogan for the campaign is "Bringing Peace through Superior Fire Power." I don't think stealth is our intention.

At MOPP level 1, you also have a gas mask strapped to your hip. It's in an awkward pouch constantly bulging out at your side, but the rule is nine seconds. You have nine seconds after hearing the dull thud of an impacting chemical weapon to get your mask on, clear it of contaminated air, and cinch it tight. If you fail to do this in nine seconds, your buddies watch you do the funky chicken on the ground until you die. This is why you keep the mask on your hip. Every marine walking around camp has two things always with them, gas mask and rifle. It doesn't matter if they're going to the shitter or walking to the shower in PT shorts and flip-flops. They always have a gas mask and rifle.

MOPP 2 is the same as MOPP 1, except you also strap rubber coverings on your boots. When we cross the border, we cross at MOPP 2, because the boot coverings take too long to put on in an emergency. My feet always sweat in my boots anyway, but with the rubber coverings, I feel like I'm standing with sneakers on in a swimming pool. My feet slosh every time I plant my feet on the metal grated floor of the Humvee to rotate the turret a different direction. I can feel the stink trapped inside my boots, something like processed cheese dust and a dirty jock strap. The deployment has barely begun. It's only going to get worse.

At MOPP 3, you've got the chemical suit, the boot coverings, and the mask holster on your hip, but now your mask is out of the holster and cinched tight on your face, and your chem suit hood is drawn over the top of your head. MOPP 3 is the level that's going to save your life,

so we practice going to MOPP 3 over and over again. In time the gas drills become a game with guys yelling out "GAS! GAS! GAS!" at any inopportune moment just to watch everyone scramble to mask up in the allotted time. The call usually comes after someone puts a fresh wad of chew in their lip. Tobacco in any form is a precious commodity, and guys won't waste a fresh dip on a mask drill, so they'll mask up with the wad still in their lip and then gut the spit, even if it makes them want to puke in their masks.

MOPP 4 is the same as MOPP 3 but you add rubber gloves. MOPP 4 is the highest level of protection, and at that point every inch of your body is covered with protective equipment. We only go to MOPP 4 one time, and it's before we cross the border. It's a ball-scorching sunny day when we get the call for an incoming SCUDs. SCUD missiles are potential delivery systems for chemical agents, so even though we are several kilometers away from the impact, we go to MOPP 4 and take cover behind a dirt berm in case of more incoming missiles.

It's still early spring in the Kuwaiti Desert, but the temperature is around ninety degrees, and you can't pray for a cloud. With our hands, feet, and faces covered in rubber, and our bodies draped in thick suits and fifty pounds of combat gear, I'm pouring sweat. No matter how tight I cinch my mask, it slips and slides on my face, and I can't get a good seal. The eye holes fog up from the heat my head is generating, and my hands involuntarily move toward my face to pull my mask off so I can wipe them clean. I stop myself as my hands touch the tightening tabs at the back of my head. You can't unmask during a gas attack dumbass.

"This is pretty fucked," I say to Ramirez or Baker, whomever is next to me on the ground. "How the hell can anyone fight in this shit? I couldn't see a target twenty feet away, let alone shoot at one."

A passing field reporter sees us lined up on the ground in MOPP 4 and jumps out of her truck, thinking she stumbled on a story. She crouches next to me, and her camera man shoves his camera in my face.

"What's the situation?" the reporter asks me, clearly excited. I really have no idea what the situation is. At this point, I don't even know there was a SCUD attack. I figure we're just rolling around in the dirt getting sweaty because our commanders are kind of dicks. I mumble something unintelligible to the reporter about identifying targets, and she promptly stands up to look for someone who's not a moron.

A couple weeks later, my unit is camped outside of An Nasiriyah, Iraq, during the first big gunfight of the war. I'm on night security, and there are so many flashes from discharging weapons and explosives in the city, it looks like a lighting storm is coming from the streets. As I watch the city, a lone highback Humvee rolls up the dark road behind me. When it turns toward where my platoon is camped, I walk out to meet it. There is one Marine inside, and he looks equal parts embarrassed and anxious. "Hi, um, I got separated from my unit, and my radio's not working. You haven't seen them come through here have you?"

"You lost your fucking unit?" I say, "Shit bro, no one has come past here in a couple hours."

The Marine, probably nineteen or twenty like me, looks down at his steering wheel unsure of what to do.

"Whatever you do," I say, "You should quit going the direction you're going. There's a huge fucking fight in the city right now, and you're heading right for it."

"Oh," the Marine says, "You think I could stay here with you guys tonight?"

"Sure man. Park next to my truck, and I'll let the next watch know why you're here."

My shift is up, so I walk over and shake awake my replacement in his sleeping bag. When he gets his boots on and takes my place, I tell him why the extra Humvee with the marine sleeping in it is parked next to our platoon and then walk to my sleeping bag. Wow. Driving toward Nasiriyah alone in the dark. What the fuck?

When I get to my sleeping bag, I take off my boots and pull off my chem suit. I usually sleep with it on, but I want one good night's sleep without the crusty thing stuck to my body. Once I'm in my skivvies, I slide into my sleeping bag with my rifle nestled against my right hip and gas mask carrying case cradled on my chest. When everything I need is where I need it, I slide easily to sleep.

"GAS! GAS! GAS!" I don't know who calls this out, but I jerk awake to a sitting position. In the moonlight, I see a Marine from a neighboring unit running toward our position. He's at MOPP level 4 and is frantically giving the arm signal for a chemical attack, hands over head, two thumbs extended but pointing downward, arms waiving up and down. I'm losing my mind with panic now. I've just been snapped out of sleep with the gas call, but I don't know when or where the chemical weapon impacted. I don't know if it's already too late, if my next breath will be a lung full of VX, and I'm going to spend the rest of my short life thrashing around on the ground in contorted agony. I grab at my chest where my mask should be. Nine seconds to get this thing cleared and secured on my face. But my mask case is gone.

Where the fuck is my mask? I get on my hands and knees and grope around in the dark. With every wasted second of searching, I expect a lung full of poison. I finally find my mask on the ground, several feet from where I was sleeping. I must have flung it off my chest when I

jerked awake. I've wasted too much time and expect my next breath to kill me, so after my next exhale, I don't breath in again.

I pull my mask out of the case, slip it on over my face and half tighten it. Before I can tighten it all the way, I need to clear it of contaminated air, and to clear it of contaminated air, I need to forcefully exhale and blow the unfiltered air inside of the mask out the bottom flap. I have no air left in my lungs, because I quit breathing, but I try to forcefully exhale anyway. The little sigh I'm able to muster isn't close to enough to clear a mask. I'm going to have to take a breath. This is it. This is how I die.

I breathe in quick but deep. When pain doesn't explode in my chest, I blow out hard, clear my mask, and cinch it tight. It was clean air, and after a couple shallow breaths inside my mask, I'm fine. My panic subsides.

Now that I'm masked up and breathing okay, I think about the exposed skin on most of my body. If this is a blister agent, it'll burn me badly. I don't have time to find my chem suit and put it on, so I slide into my sleeping bag and pull it over my head, hoping it'll offer some protection and that the nylon won't just fuse to my bubbling skin.

In my cocoon, I'm alone with the sounds of my breathing. I don't think about the other guys in my unit or what's going on outside. All I think about is the air going in and out of my lungs, and some sign, some pain or hitch in my chest to let me know that I didn't get my mask on in time or that my mask is malfunctioning. I don't feel any pain or discomfort in my breathing, but every breath is getting more difficult. Soon I'm laboring to pull in any air at all. Something must be wrong with my filter. I can't believe this is happening. In the middle of a gas attack, my gas mask is malfunctioning. When the air stops coming altogether, I have no choice.

I'm going to have to peel the sleeping bag off of my head, unmask, and breathe in whatever air is outside. I delay as long as I can, but if I don't get this mask off soon, I'm going to die anyway.

This is it. You have no choice. Do it now.

I rip the sleeping bag off of my head and cool air flows through the filter of my mask. I'm able to draw in full breaths. My mask is working perfectly. I was clogging my own filter with the sleeping bag. With my breathing back under control, I calm down again and look around to see if anyone is watching me fumble around in the dark like a panicked jackass. Everyone is masked up and hunkered down like me, just trying to stay alive.

Half an hour later we get the "all clear" sign, and I take off my mask. There wasn't any gas to begin with.

Mike Kubista is currently an MFA candidate at Minnesota State University, Mankato. In 2003 and 2004, he was a Marine Corps machine gunner and prison guard in Iraq. His experiences range from the initial invasion to brushes with Abu Ghraib prison to gunfights, IED explosions, and mortar attacks in Al Anbar province when the whole world seemed like it was on fire. "GAS! GAS! GAS!" is part of an upcoming collection of personal essays on Iraq.