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Tears for a Son

DAVID K. SIEG



SIEGE 1

EARLY ON A FRIDAY MORNING in August 2008, we were on our way back from a two-day mission in the desert in Iraq. Forward Operating Base (FOB) Sykes was a shit hole, but it looked like paradise right about then. The radio squawked and a voice came over the air telling us to turn around and go to the Village of Um Al-Debar just outside of the city of Mahallabia. I was part of the Special Operations Forces and was supporting a Cavalry unit, so long missions and last minute orders were nothing new to me.

Just two days before Sergeant First Class (SFC) Naylor came to me and said, "You want to go have some fun in the sun?" He knew I would never say, "No." A chance to play in the sand, I was always game. Little did I know that two days later I would see something that would change my outlook on this war, and my life would never be the same.

SFC Naylor used the inner vehicle communications and told the three of us in the High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) that we were being diverted on a short mission. The convoy commander First Lieutenant (Lt.) Resole, who was in another vehicle, broke in on the convoy communications and said, "And I was so looking forward to a hot meal." We all laughed. As we turned the convoy of three HMMWV's around and headed back out, just 100 feet from the gate, I saw Staff Sergeant (SSG) West waving and laughing at us from the Entry Control Point.

THIS WAS ALL THE INFORMATION WE HAD: TWO INSURGENTS HAD ATTACKED THE SMALL VILLAGE, AND THAT WAS IT.

SIEGE 2

We had an hour drive to get there and didn't know why we were going. Always mindful of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), we had to be on our guard watching the road and roadside ahead of us. SFC Naylor finally received a message from command about our mission. This was all the information we had: two insurgents had attacked the small village, and that was it.

Unaware of what we would be driving into and with no time for a proper mission briefing, Lt. Resole gave the order to have a team of three men to assess the situation. Lt. Resole, SFC Naylor and myself were to be the three man team. The other seven soldiers were to stay with the vehicles and guide the Iraqi Army when they arrived.

When we arrived the three HUMMWV's were set for security and the assessment team exited their vehicles. As we approached the courtyard area, we saw a crowd of people gathered around what was believed to be an Iraqi Police vehicle. The vehicle had over fifty holes in it from gun fire. A small group of civilians were gathered around a body lying on the ground covered in a bloody Iraqi Police uniform. He was dead from multiple gunshot wounds.

About twenty yards away, there was another gathering of about 30 civilians. As we approached them, I could see three more bloody bodies lying on the ground. Two older women and one younger woman, all three dead from multiple gunshot wounds. I felt so sad for the bereaving relatives and friends that were all in tears. I couldn't swallow. The lump in my throat blocked my airway. It was hard not to burst out in tears. The three of us stood speechless. We had no idea the worst was yet to come. I yelled for my interpreter Josh and he came running to me. The

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four of us were directed to go inside the village's small infirmary, so I walked up and opened the door. We walked to the back and saw a covered body and the body of a uniformed Iraqi Police officer both on tables.

SIEGE 3

Under the cover was an eleven year old female child dead from gunshot wounds. My heart sank. The Iraqi doctor covered her back up. The Iraqi Police Officer had two non-life threatening gunshot wounds and a fatal gunshot wound to the head. As it turned out, the men in uniform

were not Iraqi Police, but insurgents. The wounded driver ran into the infirmary to get help, but when the Doctor found out the uniformed man had done all of this senseless killing, the Doctor shot him in the head right on the table.

It seemed this nightmare had come to a close. I was wrong. A father busted the door open carrying a young boy's limp body. He laid the boy on the counter in front of me. The boy's eyes still open, but plainly lifeless. He was nine years old and died from two gunshot wounds to the chest. Saddened by this, I reached over with my right hand and closed his eyes. Josh looked at me and just said, "Why"? I was asking myself the same thing, but couldn't come up with a response. The insurgents claimed it a victory. Inside me, a whole new level of hatred emerged. My heart still wept for those who needlessly lost their loved ones. My hatred for those who take the lives of innocent people burned even stronger.

About five minutes later, the Iraqi Army Patrol arrived. Lt. Resole filled in the Iraqi Commander on our knowledge of the situation. We didn't know a lot, so there wasn't much to tell. I could see by the expression on the Iraqi Commander's face that he couldn't believe that the insurgents targeted unarmed civilians.

Lt. Resole, SFC Naylor, Josh and I returned to our vehicles. We decided to take a ten minute smoke break before heading back to FOB Sykes. The four of us stood there smoking and not one of us said a word. There was nothing to say.

SIEGE 4

We finished our cigarettes and climbed in our vehicles. This was to be the longest and quietest ride I have ever been on. It seemed like the trip back to the FOB would never end, as if the road just went on forever. It seemed like hours had gone by, but it had only been forty minutes.

We pulled up to the Entry Control Point. We accounted for all personnel and equipment and proceeded to the weapons cleaning area. I heard SFC Naylor mumble something. I wasn't sure what he said, but I wasn't about to ask and break the silence.

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I JUST COULD NOT FIGURE OUT WHY
THOSE KILLINGS HAD TO HAPPEN.**

The driver of the first vehicle dropped me off at my living quarters. I changed clothes and went to take a shower. I wished I could have just washed this day away. After I was finished with my shower, I got dressed for dinner. I ordered my food and sat down to eat. I couldn't take a bite. Lt. Resole and SFC Naylor came over and sat at the table with me. SFC Naylor asked if I was okay. I told him, "No, but I will survive."

I excused myself from the table and went to call my children back in Texas. I needed to hear their voices. I needed to know they were safe. After my thirty minute call I went back to my living quarters, laid on my bed and began to cry. It didn't take long for me to fall asleep. I was exhausted from the heat, and most of all from the experiences of the day.

I woke up the next morning and hoped this whole incident was just a bad dream.

Unfortunately, it was real and I just kept seeing the image of that little Iraqi boy's face. That image will be forever burned into my mind. I just could not figure out why those killings had to happen.

SIEGE 5

What did those children ever do to deserve dying this way? Why did they have to be there

at that moment, on that day? These are questions that I will never have answered, and they haunt me to this day.

That afternoon I found out the reason the attack took place. The reason those two insurgents attacked that quiet little village was to show the Iraqi's that the Americans can't always be there to protect them. Both of the insurgents were Iraqi Citizens. It is hard to believe they could target women and children. It is still hard to believe they could do this to their own people.

My father fought in World War II, Korea and Vietnam and would tell me stories about what he witnessed during those conflicts. He told me that I would see things that people should never see. He also told me that I may have to do things that at the time will not seem right, but in the end it will all make sense. As long as you can justify your actions, you won't lose as much sleep at night, even though, sometimes, sleep will be hard to find. I see now what he meant by the evil people can hold in their heart. Academy Award actor John Wayne made a statement in the movie, *The Green Beret*, he said, "A man carries a rifle into battle, by the grace of God he comes out in one piece and he carries a strange sense of guilt with him the rest of his life."

The men of that village stood up to the insurgents on that day. That was something that the insurgents may not have been prepared for. It was a good thing to know the Iraqi citizens were fighting back. I wished I could have done more to help them. Even today, I would go back and help out the people of Iraq if I could. Maybe some day in the future, when the country of Iraq opens up its borders, I can return as a civilian and visit "The Land Between Two Rivers."