

5-1-2006

Death of One's Former Self

Joel Hall

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Joel (2006) "Death of One's Former Self," *Forces*: Vol. 2006 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2006/iss1/3>

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Death of One's Former Self

Joel Hall

“God I hate this place.
It isn't the **blazing** heat
or **CRAP** that they call food, but rather
the dehumanization of the **entire** situation.
I am a **tool**. When did I become a tool?”

“Cummings!” yelled the lieutenant. The ramblings in Cory's head quickly ceased as he snapped back to reality.

“Yes sir,” replied Cory as the lieutenant waved him over from his guard point on the roof. Cory waddled over awkwardly, being careful not to become a target by exposing his head above the four-foot wall that surrounded the rooftop.

The lieutenant spoke in hush tones to mitigate the knowledge of their presence from the local population.

“Cummings, you are being temporarily attached to the 5th Special Forces Group. Their medic was wounded last week and we have been asked to provide them with support when they need it. Looks like it's your lucky day.” Cory had a rush of adrenalin. It was a mission that he had dreamed of. A smile came to his face as the words sunk in. The lieutenant continued, “Don't you look too excited now. You're not leaving this party for too long. It's just a re-supply mission to an A-Team down in Samaria. You'll be back before nightfall, and I still expect you to pull your shift tonight when you get back.”

"Yes sir," Cory answered wondering if the supply mission was just a cover for a more sensitive mission such as a raid or recon. He knew several fellow soldiers who had gone out with the Special Forces under a cover mission.

"Now go get some rations and pack up your rucksack just in case. Be ready in fifteen minutes," the lieutenant ordered.

Cory again returned to the refuge of his mind as he made his way down the stairs leading from the roof to his living quarters. *Wahoo! A four-hour vacation.* Cory, a Medic assigned to the 4th Platoon, 4th Military Police Company, was a part of a mission to protect a safe house on the west side of Tikrit. So far it had been a mundane mission like most. The highlight of the mission thus far had been the arrival of his Maxim magazine. Even though it was three months late, he still treasured it. It was the proof he needed to reassure his mind that his existence before being deployed to Iraq had really occurred. Cory made his way to his cot and rustled through the few items under it to determine what he would take with him. He pushed away his poncho and revealed his most precious possession: the three-month old magazine. Cory folded it in half and shoved it into the front pocket of his rucksack, which left Sarah Wynter's eyes staring out at this foreign world around her. The magazine had gotten there only three days earlier and he was anxious to read it. Cory quickly gathered up the remaining items he thought he would need and headed to the front room of the building grabbing his rations on the way.

Cory sat on the broken couch that the platoon inherited with the house. One side of it was propped up by an MRE box, which caused it not to be level. Cory ran through a list in his mind to make sure he had packed everything he needed: 'M-16, ammo, rucksack, rations, med-pack, smokes, night vision, pro-mask, ...' He was interrupted by the sound of three vehicles pulling up to the building. Cory stood up and peered through the dirty glass of the only window in the room. What he saw was not what he expected. Three mid-nineties, white unmarked Land Rovers were pulling up with what seemed to be half of the US Army's arsenal hanging off of the vehicles.

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"That must be my ride," Cory said half laughing to the MP guarding the door. The guard's eyes opened wide and a smile shot across his face.

The guard said enthusiastically, "Looks like you are in for some fun." The guard removed the board that was barricading the door and let Cory out.

Out of the passenger side of the first Land Rover emerged a scruffy looking fellow with a full beard and a deep tan. He was wearing the new Army battle dress uniform, and in typical SF style, had no visible sign of rank or nametags. The only insignia he had was the lone American flag on his sleeve. Cory made his way around the two large barriers blocking the front of the house from the street to meet with him. The man extended his hand and introduced himself as Jim. He had a firm handshake and spoke in a clear strong manor. He told Cory he would be riding in the second vehicle and would be briefed once inside. Cory picked up his gear and moved to the second Land Rover scanning the vehicles and their contents on the way. The trucks appeared to be normal Land Rovers but had been modified with armor plating and machine gun mounts. Whip antennas were mounted to the rear of the vehicles along with fuel and water jugs. The front and rear vehicle had turrets in which fifty caliber machine guns were mounted and manned. Inside the second truck sat two unshaven rough looking men that emitted the proverbial 'I live by my own rules' vibe.

"These guys are bad asses," Cory remarked under his breath as he opened up the rear passenger door and hopped in. He began situating his gear as the Truck Commander in the passenger seat turned and introduced himself as Tommy. He spoke in a southern drawl and had a wad of chew in his mouth, but he had an aura of intelligence and charisma. He gave Cory a brief rundown of the mission and confirmed what Cory's lieutenant has said earlier; it was a simple re-supply mission. Tommy also mentioned that they were going to stop at the Balad Airfield on the way back to "hit up" the Post Exchange, and grab some chow at the new Brown and Root dining hall.

Cory had not been able to go to the Post Exchange in two months and had resorted to smoking Iraqi cigarettes that reportedly contained hash. He thought there was a better chance they had hash in them than tobacco. They were packaged as

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Marlboros, but were far from the class-A tobacco he was use to. The box was printed crudely and off color, and the tobacco was packed so loose he had to be careful not to drop the cherry off the end while smoking. But desperate times call for desperate measures, and he had one of two choices. He could either smoke what he could get or quit, and that wasn't going to happen. Enticing as the PX was, the real food was what he wanted most. The best meal he had in the past three months was a concoction he made by mixing a box of Mac and Cheese with canned tuna seasoned with Tabasco sauce in his canteen cup.

Tommy finished up the brief by explaining the rules of engagement. "The ROE is real simple; if you see me shootin', unload." On that note, Tommy radioed to the lead vehicle that they were ready, and the convoy pulled away from the safe house.

Cory stared out the window of the Land Rover and scanned for enemy activity such as improvised explosive devices, infamously known as IEDs. The summer heat was blistering. Riding in a vehicle seemed to only make it worse. Cory attempted to explain it to his family in a letter home as, "the feeling of opening a three hundred and fifty degree oven that happened to have a sand blaster inside." As they gained speed on the highway, he felt the intensity of the heat amplify. The sand and dust kicked up from the vehicles stung his face and hands. He wore goggles to protect his eyes, but the remaining exposed skin began to blacken as the pollution and dirt stuck to his sweat soaked skin.

He had brought two bottles of water: one cool and one frozen. The heat had taken its toll on both. The cool bottle was now hot and the frozen one was a quarter thawed. He drank the ice-cold water from the frozen bottle and replaced it with water from the hot bottle.

In the process of the delicate water transfer, Tommy spoke up and broke the steady hum of the engine. "So where ya from, Cummings?"

"Murray, Kentucky," Cory shouted, in an effort to be heard over the noise of the wound up engine and wind blowing through the open windows.

"Never heard of it," Tommy responded. He continued jokingly, "Must be one of those small hick towns that are all around there. I was at Campbell a few years back for Air Assault training and had the unfortunate pleasure of getting lost in one of those towns in Kentucky. If not for my training, I wouldn't have made it out alive."

"Yeah, but it's home," Cory replied as he always had in subtle defense. Although the reason he joined the Army was to escape the inevitable life of poverty that was so prevalent in the area, he still felt attached, but he never wished to return there to live.

Cory set the water bottle back down next to his rucksack and caught a glimpse of the eyes of Sarah Wynter staring back at him seductively. A few memories from home entered his mind for a moment, but he pushed them out. He felt this was neither the time nor place to recollect about better times.

Tommy began telling a story about the time he spent in Bosnia. Cory was engrossed in the story and felt as if he had become almost a member of the team. He sensed a comradery among these men that was lacking in his platoon. He felt as if he was an equal and not a tool of a totalitarian ruler.

Suddenly Tommy quit talking mid-sentence and fixated his attention on a vehicle that was stopped on the side of the road a few hundred yards ahead. He motioned for the driver to slow down and strained through the glare to identify if it was friend or foe. The truck was about one hundred feet off the road and had several silhouetted figures around it. The sun was beginning to set, and it was difficult to determine who they were and what they were doing. Reports of IED activity on this main supply route were growing by the day, and an order was given for soldiers to maintain extreme vigilance while conversing this route. The lead vehicle slowed as the convoy approached the parked vehicle, and as Cory processed what he was seeing, the lead vehicle erupted with a splendor of gunfire. The ten plain-clothed men standing beside the old white truck holding AK-47s didn't have a chance. Cory thought the lead vehicle looked like a battle ship from the sixteen hundreds, as he witnessed it engage the targets. The truck

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rocked to one side as the fifty-caliber main gun mounted to the roof of the Land Rover roared to life with fire and smoke. The passenger side of the vehicle breathed fire as tracers streamed out of the side windows as if they were the portholes of the old battle ship.

A fraction of a second later Tommy started to squeeze off rounds from the M-60 machine gun mounted to the side of the Land Rover. Cory knew what he had to do and switched the selector switch on his M-16 from safe to three-round-burst and began unloading on the truck and men around it. The sound was deafening as the two guns fired and pain rung in Cory's ears. The smoke from the rounds was pungent and overwhelming. It burned his eyes and nose and made it difficult to see. The hot brass from Tommy's M-60 flew all around the truck and stung as it occasionally pelted Cory in the face.

Cory's heart was pounding and his whole body began to shake from the adrenaline. This is what he had envisioned when the lieutenant had first told him that he was going out with the Special Forces. This was the moment that Cory had dreamed of, the moment when he would defend his country by taking the lives of its enemies. He was living it, the greatest moment of his life.

Suddenly the lead vehicle screeched to a halt and Jim jumped out of it. Tommy and Cory immediately stopped firing and a rush of confusion was expressed across their faces. The driver of Cory's truck sped to the lead vehicle. As he approached it, a sinking feeling filled Cory's gut. Stenciled in large black letters across the opened driver's door of the destroyed truck said, POLICE, in plain English.

Jim yelled the only word that Cory did not want to hear, "Medic!"

It seemed an eternity between the time it took Cory to make his way from the Land Rover to the Police truck. The dread that he felt made his feet feel like lead and his stomach knotted so bad he vomited as he approached the scene. The moment that was supposed to define his life had become the nightmare he most dreaded. One thought resonated inside of him, "What have I done?"

The essays

Death of One's Former Self

by Joel Self

and Little Afghan Girl

by Stephanie Hall

were written by a

husband and wife.

Joel Self was stationed

in Iraq while Stephanie Hall

was stationed in Afghanistan.