



Smoke

by R. Morgan Crihfield

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It was like the world turned down the volume in respect; the Dustoff chopper rotors faded in the distance. Baker stood with his men, filthy and soaked. He stared at the absurd wet trail of blood running a grotesque path from the stairs of the vehicle to where it seeped into the greedy sand at the staging point. The sound of a zippo lighter finally broke the silence, and the world came flooding back. Smoke wafted past as the rituals and procedures of the military vied for attention.



Earlier.

Outside Al Bab, Syria. 20 June 2019. 0536 hours.

“I need my damn commo back up, Nguyen,” 1st Lieutenant McGann barked over his shoulder at the back of the LMTV where Specialist Nguyen was syncing up satellite and encrypting the squad communications with the new Quick Response Force frequencies.

“I’m on it sir. Had to download a new key from the TOC. Five Mikes,” Nguyen replied.

“If you can’t get my commo up, then what the hell good are ya?” McGann asked.

“Mostly presenting PowerPoints, sir. I was cross-classed into commo,” Nguyen joked.

Lieutenant McGann scrolled on his BlueForce Compact to view the details on the city as well as intel from higher in the early dark of morning. Only 2 hours left until the mission kicked off, and they were still not up on equipment. He damn sure didn’t want to miss his SP time. Sergeant First Class Baker appeared and placed his ECH (Enhanced Combat Helmet) on the back steps of the MRAP. Producing a Gerber multi-tool, he tightened his light and Heads Up Display (HUD) eyepiece and ensured 550 cord held them tightly in place.

“Commo still down, Sir?” Sergeant First Class Baker managed around a lip of chew.

“Roger. Nguyen says we should be up soon,” McGann said. “How are we with supply?”

“Good. Got a couple of M-414 Smoke Projectors and we will have Satellite and tech support, just need to send the go-code. They are standing by,” Baker replied while sheathing his Gerber and spitting tobacco.

The M-414s were olive-drab, lightweight cylinders about 3 1/2 feet long with both an iron and a red-dot sight. These were held in place with 550 cord lashed to the rail that ran along the top. A pistol grip protruded from the bottom and fired like a shotgun. The rounds were designed to impact and stick to the surface of the target with a thick, dense adhesive and pour colored or white smoke to mark targets or provide concealment. Rather than the old methods, this was a direct fire weapon with plenty of range and did not have to rely on an arc to hit a target. This allowed smoke or HEDP rounds to arrive on target with greater accuracy and with greater ammo capacity.

“Did we manage to borrow a Droner from Alpha Company?” Lieutenant McGann asked, looking up from his briefing.

“Yes sir, Corporal Mercer will be our Combat Drone Operator today,” Sergeant First Class Baker replied while looking at the city in the distance. “Their Platoon Sergeant said she was pretty squared away. She is at supply pulling and loading up her drones now.”

Lieutenant McGann felt the BlueForce Compact vibrate. It was an olive-drab, rubber/carbon, “Soldier-proof” case holding BlueForce-linked and encrypted data. In the age of the smart phones, the BlueForce Compact was something that didn’t need much instruction. The messages blinked along the top with terrain, GPS, weather, and a dozen other features a touch away. He opened the messages and saw the CO gave the go-ahead. It was all in place. That familiar feeling of the last six months of this deployment fell over the older Lieutenant. It was electricity in his nervous system and anxiety in his stomach. He looked up at Baker and nodded. It was time.

“Round em up, Sergeant Baker. Briefing in 5 Mikes,” McGann ordered. “I want all NCOs to check equipment and load-out before the briefing.”

“Roger, Sir. Let’s get this show on the road.”

* * *

The platoon gathered in front of the gun trucks in full battle rattle, casually standing with their squads as Soldiers tend to do. The interpreters stood nearby, also wearing body armor, and smoked while waiting to be assigned to their squads. Lieutenant McGann stood in the center of the lazy crescent of troops with Sergeant First Class Baker standing to his right.

“Ok, bring up your HUD and pay attention. 1st Platoon will lead the way as usual. 2nd Platoon will provide QRF and 3rd will be shutting down the roads,” Lieutenant McGann said, spinning up his BlueForce briefing. The images of the city and the faces of several Syrian men played across the eyepieces of the ECH helmets. “Higher is calling this Operation Eviction. The men you see on your HUD are the targets. These guys fled Iraq and were closely tied with what is left of ISIS. They set up shop here and have been giving the friendlies all kinds of hell while holding an important town in our supply lines. The locals have been asked to leave a few days back, but you know how that goes. Our primary objective is to find and detain these men if possible for intelligence and our secondary objective is to find and engage resistance in this town to later help establish a COP for a joint American/Syrian training unit.”

Sergeant First Class Baker jumped in. “Rules of Engagement will be any military aged armed combatant or individual with hostile intent. Keep an eye out for IEDs, new holes in the ground or concrete, or vehicles that try to roll up on you. The EOD bomb teams have been very busy in this region and there is no reason to think there won’t be surprises in the town.”

Lieutenant McGann nodded in agreement. “Right. We have a Controller for this operation so they will be on the comms if you need data like maps and they should be able to feed us information as it becomes available. Corporal Mercer is on loan with us from Alpha Company and she will be hooking us up with drone coverage. First Squad will be with me, 2nd Squad will be with Sergeant Baker rolling in on Al Raei Road,” he said indicating on the virtual map via his tablet. “Staff Sergeants Kasmai and Jones will take 3rd and 4th squad to enter the city from the

Northeast roads and establish a perimeter around our target buildings so we can sweep and clear. Your squad and team leaders will review again with you your individual assignments.”

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The armored, explosion-resistant MRAPs and Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs) rolled down their routes to their assigned entry points. Even though the Platoon leadership was spread out among the vehicles, they worked together on a conference feed with the Company and Battalion Commanders. They studied their HUDs and BlueForce Tabs to observe the current drone footage and Intel being feed by the Battle Controller. The word came down that the roads to the north of the city had been shut down far enough out to allow the platoon’s insertion. McGann looked around at the Soldiers in the Caimen MRAP seated around him bathed in red interior light of the vehicle. The first shades of a blue dawn filtered through the windows.

Wars and occupations had given way to endless pivoting and redeployments of a military giant to swat at hotspots. The whole region had fallen to sectarian conflicts following the Syrian civil war and long campaign to destroy ISIL. The enemies had grown more diffuse as the allies fought amongst themselves. While this was Lieutenant McGann’s first real deployment in Operation Steadfast, Sergeant First Class McGann had spent his previous career deploying throughout the region: Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. War had become rapid, short deployments of mixed infantry and combat arms elements with a heavy cyber and tech presence. Drones had become the de facto air support and combat control.

Everyone handled this pre-operation tension differently. Sergeant Finn, the medic, chewed gum, listened to his ear buds playing his “war mix,” and rested his ECH on the wall behind him. Specialists Chow and Garcia argued loudly about a recent fantasy football draft while adjusting the ammunition on their SAWs and 240 Bravos. Private First Class “Chili” Chilton faded in and out of sleep to the lull of the lumbering gun truck only to be kicked awake by Nguyen. Lieutenant McGann took a deep breath and put away his fears to clear his head for work. He joined to be a leader, and here it was: warts and all. No theme music, tone deaf orders from his superiors, and endless problems vying for his attention.

Corporal Mercer had two “knocker” drones on her lap, preparing to load 357 SIG rounds and perform a functions check. The core was a dark olive-drab, lightweight, carbon-fiber weave with a noticeable honeycomb covering high-definition camera lens with 4 projecting rotors within a protective sheath. The core itself also held a high powered glass breaking piston and striker-fired pistol barrel slightly extended and parallel to the camera. They were controlled via an extended hand controller and screen hooked into the main CPU and antenna assembly hooked just above the ammo pouches on her body armor. The rotors spun and the striker-powered pistol dry fired to signal function. She loaded the rounds and set the drones on “standby” like she had done hundreds of times before.

“We are entering the city now, Sir. On location in five. Over,” the driver reported via the intercom.

“Sheepdog Actual, this is Sheepdog 2. We are just about there,” Sergeant First Class Baker reported.

“Roger Sheepdog 2, this is Sheepdog 3. We are on site, and perimeter is set both mounted and dismounted. All quiet so far. Over,” SSG Kasmai reported.

Lieutenant McGann’s stomach was a mess. The adrenaline always went a bit sour on him so close to game time. He flipped down his HUD and was the first out the rear door.

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Sergeant First Class Baker had locked down the block which held the target compound. There were JLTVs and MRAPs posted up with turrets scanning in the very early morning smoky light. Somewhere, a dog was barking and the smell of food somewhere in the nearby apartments wafted out into the streets. The streets were way too empty, even for this hour of the morning, which gave Baker a bad feeling.

“Not good when no one is around; if I learned anything in Iraq, Sir,” Baker offered.

McGann and his squad posted up on the exterior wall of a three-story compound surrounded by a one-story wall with razor wire along the top.

“Controller, this is Sheepdog Actual. How are we looking?” McGann asked into his helmet microphone.

“Sheepdog Actual, this is Controller. You are clear for now. A lot of movement in the nearby market and some housing areas but that could be normal. Nothing in the nearest three blocks. Over.”

“Roger. Standing By,” McGann replied.

“Ok, Mercer. Let’s send in a drone and see what we are dealing with here.” the Lieutenant ordered.

“Yes sir, on the way,” Mercer replied and produced a compact polymer and aluminum, olive-drab drone covered in scuff marks. The drone took flight and zipped over the compound wall.

Corporal Mercer grimaced. “Looks like 2 men visible via a second floor window. They seem to be arguing and one is on a phone and pacing.”

“Either our target?” McGann asked while scanning rooftops with his with the scope of his rifle. .

“Hard to tell, but I don’t think so. Headed to the ground floor and breaching the kitchen window,” Mercer said.

Just then, a snap-hiss of rifle rounds impacted the MRAPs and JLTVs leading to a flurry of motion by the CROW automated turret and the live gunners on the MRAPs. The Soldiers dropped further into cover looking for targets while Mercer began to curse. The next moments descended into confusion and chaos.

“All Sheepdog units, this is Controller. You have approximately 15-20 dismounts pouring out of a compound a few blocks over and dismounts on the roof of nearby buildings,” the controller informed through the headsets. “You are about to get hit.”

The 240 Bravo machine gun roared to life firing on a nearby rooftop while a rocket propelled grenade exploded well wide of the position, covering the area in dust and peppering the men with debris. Direct fire erupted in all directions. Corporal Mercer gritted her teeth and squeezed the trigger on her drone controls firing the pistol rounds from the drone inside the compound.

“Are we clear to breach, Mercer? We need to move!” McGann yelled into the squad comms channel.

“Roger, Sir. Hit it!” Mercer replied.

“Get into the back of the MRAP and engage those targets on the roof!” McGann ordered while making a hand motion to breach the compound gates to the squad stacked up along the outer wall.

The Sapper detonated the hinges and locks on the gate simultaneously, throwing it clear. The squad stacked on the door to the main compound moments later; the rest of the platoon held the position and took fire a mere 100 yards behind. McGann heard Staff Sergeants Kasmai and Jones barking orders and returning fire as the militia rushed the area. The mounted MK19 40mm grenades and M-2 50-caliber machine guns tore into the enemy beyond the compound’s southern wall. McGann’s breaching squad took the main door to the compound down as quickly as the gate. McGann was the fourth man in – stepping over a corpse from the drone and clearing a small storage room back and right of the door. Private First Class Chilton held position behind cover, his SAW aimed up the stairs. The lead soldiers searched violently and zip tied the remaining men in the kitchen, including the mission target.

Rifle rounds sprayed randomly from the upper stairwell into Chilton’s cover. The SAW opened up on the gunman and the wall he was using for cover killing him instantly. The Squad stacked up and stormed up the stairs clearing the 2nd story before finally calling all clear. The battle outside escalated and voices flooded the net, calling out targets and orders.

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Outside, Sergeant First Class Baker held a bad position. There were too many blind spots and high ground vantage points, and the most accurate fire on his position was likely coming from several blocks down the road

where his mounted firepower was useless. His squad was set up well, weapons protruding from cover using their HUD connected to a camera on the scope of the weapon to allow observation without risking skin. More hostiles joined the fight and it was taking too long for the lieutenant's squad to clear the compound. The drone zipped along rooftops like a hummingbird and engaging the enemy with pistol rounds, too fast and small to be engaged properly by the insurgents. The Controller called out positions and targets while relaying vital information to the squad and team leaders. Jones and Kasmai were getting their asses handed to them as well. "Don't like the situation? Change it!" – a lesson hammered home from the endless patrols from Ranger School.

"Norris! Give me smoke low at that intersection and high on the corner of that building to give us a break from the snipers down the block," Baker screamed while gesturing with a flat hand.

Specialist Norris pulled down a pistol grip from the M-414 and aimed down the fixed red dot scope on the top and fired two rounds. They struck the intersection and stuck in place with the smoke grenade's adhesive goo. Two more were fired onto the side of the buildings and held in place on the vertical surface; billowing their contents and pluming onto the rooftops. The distant snipers were now blind. Norris then inserted high-explosive, dual-purpose, fragmentary round into the M-414 and fired into a window. A flash and pop later, the gunman didn't reappear. The MRAPs and JLTVs shifted to provide better cover for the compound entrance and kept effective fire on avenues of approach halting the enemies' progress forward. The insurgents fell lifeless in the road when the rounds struck and spun them.

Specialist Chow's leg buckled and sprayed red in the dirt of his position when the round struck. His 240 Bravo fell silent as he struck the ground screaming. Sergeant Finn sprinted from the MRAP, throwing his bag to the ground next to Chow. Finn held the compression bandage open and in place as Garcia wrapped the tourniquet around Chow's upper thigh. The leg poured seemingly endless blood that soaked the dust and all the troops involved in the care; Chow screamed.

"Controller, this is Sheepdog Medic. We have a casualty: left leg. Profuse bleeding and likely broken femur. We need surgical spun up when we get back. No way for air medivac at this time," Sergeant Finn reported while pressing his body weight onto Chow's leg: Chow fell unconscious.

Lieutenant McGann's squad rushed back out into the fight with a detail dragging a zip-tied primary target into the MRAP behind them. McGann's order to mount up and withdraw carried over the comms net. The drone returned, far lighter without ammo; and was scooped up by Corporal Mercer. Kasmai and Johnson's own casualties were loaded up while the mounted gunners, both live and automated, continued to aggressively spend ammunition on the insurgents who had started to withdraw given their own substantial losses.

Time moved like molasses: a thing that happens in combat. Everyone seemed to move agonizingly slowly, but in reality the whole platoon was mounted and rolling inside a couple of minutes. The comms net was a tangled mess of voices, the controller acknowledged and relayed all at once. The ride back seemed over almost immediately as the gun trucks passed the Coalition checkpoint of vehicles and T-walls. The wounded were evacuated by chopper immediately.

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Baker, McGann, Johnson, and Kasmai stood, heads ringing and adrenaline souring in their bodies as their armor and helmets were stripped off. Messages were endless on the Blue Force Compact pad from higher command. Sergeant First Class Baker stared at the ground of the staging point, lost in his own head. Cigarettes were lit and chew scooped as the decompression began. They watched as the captured target was carried away by MPs and enigmatic civilians with khakis and dress shirts draped in bizarre laminate badges. There was no theme music or greater lessons learned: just sheer nerves and minds that endlessly churned to process the day. The only calm breath found in smoke.