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Drone Patrol Part II

By Mad Martigan

Twenty-four left. Beans and bullets.

One day, during break at the Miniature Optically Guided Drones (MOGD) school, Jeanine Madden expressed concern about her upcoming promotion to sergeant. The civilian instructor there – an old, retired Soldier himself – told her, “Beans and bullets.”

“Feed your Soldiers,” he explained. “Make sure they can fight back. And when all else fails, beans and bullets.”

Now, with 24 soldiers left, the only thing that ran through her mind was accountability, beans, and bullets.

“Sound off!” she yelled over the chaos of stressed Soldiers. “I said, *sound off!*”

“What are you talking about?” Spc. Antonelli

hollered back.

Realizing she was shouting for something that didn’t make sense, Madden said simply, “I just need your attention.”

“Look, only 24 of us are left, and I need your help,” she continued. “There isn’t much at the base to get back to, not to mention the danger we would have to go through to get back. Right now, I want to worry about here and now! I am not Sgt. Johnson. None of us are! But maybe we can work together to make it out of here.”

After all that, Madden saw the Soldiers’ expressions lighten and understanding spread across their faces.

“What do you need us to do?” Spc. Still asked.

“We need you on comms. Keep working on it,”

Madden said, knowing full well she would need his expertise to figure out how to communicate with the higher-ups.

“Roger, sergeant,” Still replied. He began working through the comms issues without batting an eye, just because he wanted to help.

Madden looked at everyone else and remembered the casualties, beans, and bullets. She divided the tasks as evenly as she could.

She had some Soldiers count the ammo by weapon type, and some tally up the amount of water and MREs on hand. Spc. Voss, a 92F Petroleum Supply Specialist reclass, asked her about fuel. She felt relieved.

“Thanks, Voss. I forgot. Let me know how much fuel is in each truck and how many fuel cans we have on hand.”

Voss looked happy to have contributed and set off on his task.

The remaining few Soldiers without tasks she split between security and helping her recover the bodies of the slain. There was no way in hell she would leave them behind. The Soldier’s Creed and Warrior Ethos were sacrosanct to her, even if technology ruled the battle space.

“I will never leave a fallen comrade,” she thought.

When it came to inventories and accountability, she’d always been meticulous. She had to be as a MOGD operator with two companies of drones in her ruck. She had to track and maintain 500 tiny, advanced, easy-to-break “little Soldiers.”

And she was their commander. Madden pondered this as members of the platoon finished and reported in on each task.

“We have two fuel cans per truck,” Voss said.

Happy to return to reality, Madden asked, “What does that add up to?”

Voss squinted as if struggling with the basic math and, after a moment, said, “Seven trucks, so about 70 gallons, sergeant.”

Madden thanked him and asked him to help her keep track of everyone’s fuel status.

Other Soldiers reported ammo, food and water status. They were still at 100 percent ammo (they hadn’t fired a shot after leaving the FOB), but food would be an issue in time. Among the seven trucks, there were only two cases of MREs. They hadn’t expected to be out for long, nor that the FOB they needed to return to for supplies would be destroyed. Madden had to figure out the food situation before it became a real problem. The five-gallon jerry cans of water in each truck were untouched. That was a relief.

Thinking back on the last few

hours, Madden wondered what challenges Antonelli had prepared for her. She mustered up the courage to ask him, preferring to get ahead of any troubles. She found him muttering to other Soldiers while they situated their vehicles for movement.

“Antonelli, come over here,” she demanded.

Antonelli heard her plainly, and as the disgruntled specialist swaggered toward her, somewhat begrudgingly, she asked, “Can we count on you?”

“What do you mean?” he retorted.

“If something happens to me, can I count on you to take care of the platoon? You’re next in line.”

Antonelli looked Madden dead in the eye and replied, “Ironic, isn’t it? An hour ago, I was preaching for all of us to ignore you and run back to the FOB. Now, for some reason, you’re asking me to have confidence in you.”

Madden listened intently, waiting for Antonelli’s attitude to sour.

“Look, women have it hard enough in the infantry, but no one ever expected you to be in charge,” he continued. “None of us wanted you here. We *all* volunteered for MOGD, but the commander chose you. Not because you were the best, but because he didn’t want you around, and none of us thought you’d make it back from school.”

“Yet here you are, and you’re good at it, too. What are we supposed to do, Maddy?”

Madden let him vent, eager to see where this was going. She bristled at “Maddy,” but now was not the time to correct him.

“If we manage to get out of here, the drones will tell the truth if we mess you up and leave you out here. None of us can control them. We need you for that, at least. Yet, you need us, too. When you pull that visor down, you’re completely vulnerable. You need us to protect you, and we need you to protect us. No matter what, we’re tied to each other, and neither of us wants to be here. That’s the ironic part.”



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He paused a beat, then added, “So, you’re damn right you can count on me! Can we count on you and those drones?”

By listening and not interrupting, by allowing him to get it all out, Madden had somehow won him over. She didn’t hesitate a second when he asked the pointed question.

“You’re damn right you can count on me, Antonelli. All of you can.”

At least they had that. What would come next would

be hard. They needed to establish communications somehow, to reach battalion, bridge, anything. The stakes couldn’t be any higher. Their cohesiveness as a team would be critical to their success, to their survival.

Madden felt a weight lift from her shoulders after the success of her conversation with Antonelli. But would their peace endure? It would surely be put to the test. For now, though, she focused on the next steps to take. They had to find and destroy a powerful and mysterious enemy. ■



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