



Sgt. Jeanine Madden scans the battlefield with steely determination, knowing the platoon's survival depends on her next move. Amid the chaos, she prepares to take charge and lead her Soldiers to victory. (AI image generated by *NCO Journal* staff)

The Drone Patrol, Part 2

The Right Thing

By Chago Zapata

Managing Editor, *NCO Journal*

His words echoed in Sgt. Jeanine Madden's mind. "Look, man, you been a sergeant, what, a week? You never led an infantry platoon in combat. Hell, you never even seen real combat," Spc. Mario Antonelli said, looking around warily and nodding once again. "We need to go back to the FOB. This chick can't lead. She don't know jack. We don't need to listen to her."

Angry and frustrated, Madden stared at Antonelli. His swarthy, obstinate face was pockmarked with acne scars.

The platoon's leadership was gone, and this man was urging the rest toward mutiny.

She opened her mouth to speak, but others stepped forward, and an animated argument broke out between the two opposing groups.

She stood staring at the ground. Thinking. There

were 23 of them left. The rest of the platoon lay scattered around the explosion zone, their bodies steaming faintly in the cool morning air. The temperature would rise to the upper 90s or higher later that day.

Madden desperately needed allies. The platoon had a common goal, but they needed someone to guide them to see it. She needed someone on her side whom the men trusted and respected. Her head snapped up. She needed Martinez.

She caught Spc. Johnny Martinez's eye. It wasn't hard; he stood staring at her from beside the arguing Soldiers.

Dipping her chin in a sign for him to follow her, Madden walked away to stare at the horror that was left of the platoon leadership. Bile pooled in her mouth at the sight and smell of blood, roasted flesh, and spilled insides.

She looked beyond at the dark plumes of smoke

snaking up from the faraway FOB and clenched her teeth in anger. All the needless death, and instead of planning ways to take the fight to the enemy — of finding them and killing them so they couldn't kill any more of their brothers and sisters — the platoon was arguing uselessly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Martinez step beside her and stare sadly at the carnage.

They stood together a moment, the voices behind them rising and ebbing like waves crashing on a rocky shore.

"It'll be hot in a few hours," she said, anger turning to sadness. "We gotta bury them. We can't take them with us, and we can't leave them out here like this."

She turned to catch his eye.

"Whoever did that to our FOB is still out there," she said, pointing at the distant curling smoke.

After a moment, her arm dropped to her side.

"I can't do this alone."

She stared down into his eyes. Martinez was a few inches shorter than her 5 feet, 9 inches, but he was stout and solid where she was tall and slim. If they were to succeed from this point on, she needed his influence with the men. They respected him and his quiet, no-nonsense attitude.

"I know I don't have the authority, but we're out in the middle of nowhere, and we have a job to do, so I'm gonna do it anyway," she said after a long, tense pause.

She was inexperienced and unsure of what to do. Ultimately, she decided the best thing was to take the lieutenant's place as platoon leader and for Martinez to take Sgt. Johnson's place as platoon sergeant. It seemed reasonable, so she decided to go with it — though the rest of the Army probably wouldn't agree.

"I want you to be acting platoon sergeant," she said, then blushed. To her ear, she sounded pretentious.

"How about it ... Cpl. Martinez?"

She glanced back at the arguing Soldiers.

"Can you get that, that ... rabble ... under control?"

She turned and pointed once again at the far-off plumes of roiling smoke.

"Will you help me get the bastards who did that to our friends? To our home?"

Martinez stared at her. His dark, inscrutable eyes bored into hers. She returned his gaze just as intensely, wanting to convey a confidence and decisiveness she didn't feel. She did her best to hide the fear, anxiety, and doubt that consumed her.

Was she up to the task?

His piercing eyes penetrated hers for a few eternal seconds. She felt as if she were being dissected, pulled apart, probed, and inspected from the inside out.

"Yes, sergeant," he said simply. His Spanish-accented voice was deep and resonant.

He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, people listened. Relieved, Madden let out an explosive breath she didn't know she had been holding, nodded to him, and turned to look back at the scattered bodies.

She heard him turn on his heel on scrabbling pebbles and walk back to the arguing Soldiers.

The loud ripping sound of releasing Velcro as she tore open her body armor didn't drown out his angry bellow.

The babble of arguing voices stopped mid-word.

She didn't hear what Martinez said. Her whirling mind was busy with tasks and plans. She picked the spot where they had put the bodies before burying them and chose



A fleet of Mogdees hovers over the battlefield, scanning the horizon as Sgt. Jeanine Madden directs their movements. Below, Soldiers swiftly take their positions, secure their gear, and prepare to engage under her command. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)



Madden desperately needed allies to guide the platoon toward their common goal. She needed someone on her side whom the men trusted and respected. Her head snapped up. She needed Martinez. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

a plot of ground for the mass grave. She would need to send out a couple of four-man teams to search the houses around them for shovels and maybe a cart or other tools.

She took a few minutes to launch the whole company of Mogdees in her pouch and spread them in a grid formation far above. They stood guard, ready to warn her. The Scratchass on her arm would alert her with a haptic thrum if anything came within 10 clicks of their position.

She removed her helmet and placed it atop her body armor, where it leaned against a thick tire. She propped her rifle against the pile.

That done, she rummaged in the vehicle, found a box of black plastic gloves, pulled a pair out, and slipped them on. They were a little loose but good enough.

Lead from the front, grumbled Sgt. Johnson's ill-tempered voice in her head. *Get your hands dirty. Set an example.*

Martinez's deep voice droned in the background as she paced hesitantly to one of the blasted bodies, gripped it by what remained of its body armor, and dragged it to a clear spot near where they would be buried. She forced herself to look at the man's face.

It was Sgt. Johnson.

His face was relatively unmarked except for a small splatter of blood on his leathery cheek and a dark smudge on his forehead. His unseeing eyes were open. The man hadn't even had time to be surprised.

Throat constricted and eyes stinging, Madden closed

his eyes with two gentle fingers and wiped the blood and soot off his face with the edge of her uniform. She struggled to control her emotions and nausea.

Under his harsh, seemingly angry and impatient exterior, Sgt. Johnson had been a kind and compassionate leader. He cursed more than anyone she'd ever met, but it was all an act. In private, he was quiet-spoken, easy to talk to, a good listener. He was strict but fair, quick to reward good work, and just as quick to punish when necessary. He never played favorites, and — like the men — she both feared and loved him. But mostly, she hated to let him down.

She straightened and stood looking down at his face, peaceful in repose and no longer angry. She gulped several times, tamped down the tears that threatened, took a deep breath, and strode to another body.

Martinez's droning voice finally stopped, and she heard the trample of boots on the hard-packed earth as the platoon's surviving members joined her.

No one spoke. They stood watching her for a moment, then stepped in to help. Martinez picked up the Soldier's shredded legs and helped Madden carry him to the spot next to Sgt. Johnson.

She helped carry another Soldier's blasted remains and then looked around for Martinez.

"Cpl. Martinez! A quick word, please," she called out loudly, motioning to the side.

He followed her out of earshot.

She explained her plans for the Soldiers' remains.

They would remove their dog tags, personal belongings, weapons, and ammo and then bury the remains in one mass grave. They would need to cover it with stones to keep animals and human scavengers from digging them up. She would mark the coordinates so they could come back for them later.

He nodded in approval when she recommended three men as squad leaders, but after a moment, he suggested she replace one with Antonelli. He had always been a troublemaker. Giving him the responsibility might curb some of his more troublesome impulses.

He started off, parting to pass the word and detail the two four-man teams to look for shovels and other gear.

"Tell them not to piss off the locals," she said to his retreating back. "We don't want them mad at us. We may need 'em."

He nodded and gave her a thumbs up but didn't turn around. She went back to help with the remains.

Two Soldiers had found 5-foot lengths of twisted half-inch rebar and were using it to loosen the earth. Two others were scooping away the freed soil using pieces of wood from the destroyed house.

The two teams returned in 15 minutes with half a dozen shovels, three picks, a wheelbarrow, and a small donkey pulling a rickety wooden cart.

It was barely an hour and a half since the volley of rockets zipped in to destroy the far-off FOB and an hour since a pair of suicide bombs devastated their platoon.

So much had happened in so little time.

Madden gripped the third squad leader's blood-drenched trousers, helping to carry his remains to a spot next to the lieutenant. She was surprised when she looked across the man's shattered body to see Antonelli looking back at her. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but a towering anger was in his eyes.

He nodded as if in acceptance. It looked like there would be no more trouble from that front. He was ready for some payback.

She jumped in surprise when a persistent pulse from the Scratchchass thumped her forearm. After helping Antonelli deposit the Soldier's body next to the others, she shouted for Martinez.

He was waist-deep in the grave, shoveling dirt with

two other men. His head snapped up, and he nodded acknowledgment. He handed his shovel to another Soldier and trotted to meet her at her gear.

"Get everyone geared up and man the guns," she said urgently, settling the bulky body armor comfortably on her shoulders. "Something's coming our way."

Martinez bellowed to get the platoon's attention and shouted rapid-fire commands. Soldiers trotted to their gear, donned their body armor, snapped the helmet chinstraps, checked their weapons, and rattled off to their vehicles.

Madden slapped her helmet on her head, snapped down the visor, and sent a series of commands to the Mogdees, her eyes in the sky.

After a moment of manipulating the remote control she had snatched out of its pouch, she pointed down the road northwest, in the direction they had been moving when they stopped to deploy the Mogdees.

"They're coming from that direction," she shouted. "Hold your fire until you hear my signal."

She sent a series of commands to her Mogdees.

Twenty-two broke off from their overwatch position high above and streaked down to the Soldiers readying for battle. With a muffled hum and a faint wash of downward air, a Mogdee hovered half a foot above each Soldier. The remaining drones adjusted their positions in the grid.

Madden spoke quietly. The sophisticated earpieces deep in her ear canals picked

up her voice and broadcast it through a tiny speaker in each hovering Mogdee. She called it intercom mode.

"First squad, sound off," she demanded, an unmistakable edge of command in her voice. "Don't shout. Just call out your number."

The Soldiers sounded off. They heard each voice as if they were standing next to each other. The last number in each squad was drawn-out silence. The missing leaders were a hollow void.

Madden touched the Scratchchass with well-practiced fingers, zooming the high-resolution cameras in on five white pickup trucks careening down the narrow road, chasing a battered, rust-spotted dark-green sedan.

Men leaned out of the two front trucks' passenger side windows, firing AK-47s at the wildly swerving car.

She heard the metallic thump of bullets hitting the car's thin metal shell.

With a series of voice commands, she detached a



Sgt. Jeanine Madden stands amid the devastation, her mind whirling with tasks and plans. She didn't hear what Martinez said. Her focus was on choosing the spot for the mass grave, a place where the fallen Soldiers would rest, as she prepared to send teams out for tools. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)



The green sedan swerved before exploding from a 7.62 mm round, flipping over. As the white trucks tried to escape, drones and the platoon unleashed a deadly barrage, tearing through them. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

squad of Mogdees and used her remote to control them. She flew five of them alongside the sedan and focused their cameras on the cabin.

The driver was a thin, short-bearded young man, probably in his late 20s, wearing a white dishdasha, or robe. Blood drenched the sleeve of his left arm. A child crouched in the seat behind him, peeking at the trucks and screaming in terror. The back window was shot out and the windshield a spiderweb of cracked glass and bullet holes. It was a wonder the man could see through it at all.

Madden choked back a laugh when she saw the thin man lean out the window like Jim Carrey in the ridiculous *Ace Ventura* movie and drive one-handed, looking back fearfully at the cars chasing them.

She shifted her point of view to the five drones flying alongside the pursuing vehicles.

Each truck carried three men, two in the cab and one in the bed. The bouncing, swaying ride down the rough road kept the men in the beds from aiming at the fleeing vehicle. All they could do was hold on for dear life.

The men in the passenger side of each vehicle had no such problem. They leaned out their windows and fired their weapons at full auto. It was a waste of effort; most of their rounds flew wide of the mark. A swerving, bouncing, speeding truck wasn't the perfect shooting platform.

The men chasing the green car ranged in age from their early 30s to late 50s. They wore white robes and heavy beards, and square, red-and-white-checked headscarves wrapped their heads.

They looked angry. Murder was in their eyes.

And they were heading straight for the platoon.

Houses dotted either side of the street, and a slight curve in the road shielded the up-armored Humvees — parked diagonally on either side of the road a kilometer away — from the drivers' sight.

The men in the trucks had what Madden could only describe as fanatical expressions on their faces. A gut feeling told her they weren't the good guys.

She made an instant decision.

Sgt. Johnson once told her that it was better to make any decision in difficult situations — even if it was the wrong one — rather than none at all.

"Listen to your gut," he said. "Sometimes that's all you got to go on."

He had looked hard at her, his leathery face set in a frown.

"Once you make that decision, commit to it, and don't second guess yourself," he growled. "Those who can't make up their minds really piss me off!"

Madden switched to intercom mode.

"This is Alpha One Six. Don't shoot at the dark green car. I say again. Don't shoot at the dark green car," she said, trying to sound calm. Alpha One Six stood for Alpha company, first platoon, platoon leader.

"Fire on the white trucks chasing it," she continued. "Take them down as soon as they're in your sights."

She quickly selected the drone hovering over Martinez.

"I can open comms, so you can speak to the platoon if you want to," she said, stress and excitement raising her voice an octave higher.

He nodded, but when he realized she couldn't see him — her eyes were elsewhere — he said, "Yeah."

There was a pause, and then she said, "Go ahead."

Martinez leaned over the hood of his Humvee, bracing his weapon against the cool metal, and aimed down the narrow road. The clatter of Russian assault rifle fire echoed through the air like distant firecrackers.

"This is Alpha One Seven. Listen up, everyone. We have no idea how long we're gonna be out here, so conserve ammunition. Make every shot count. Over," he said. Alpha One Seven stood for Alpha company, first platoon, platoon sergeant.

Madden switched off comms once she realized he was done and shifted her view to the Mogdees high above, recalling to the grid formation the drones flying close to the chase.

"Everyone stand by," she said. "The enemy will be in view in five seconds. ... Four ... three ... two ... one."

The green sedan shot down the road from behind a small shack. It swerved right, then left, then right again. When the white trucks appeared, a lucky 7.62 mm round hit the green car's left rear tire. It exploded in a shower of black rubber and sparks as the rim smashed into the blacktop.

The car was in the middle of a swerve, and instead of correcting, it skidded sideways. The wheels caught on the road, and the vehicle flipped over sideways several times. Glass, bits of metal, and chunks of road flew in all directions.

The men in the trucks shouted triumphantly, and the ones in the passenger seats emptied their magazines on the still-rolling sedan.

That's when the drivers saw the up-armored Humvees and slammed on their brakes, intent on making a quick U-turn and hightailing it out of there.

But it was too late.

With plenty of time to prepare, the drone patrol was in position. They fired well-placed, accurate shots into the unsuspecting trucks. The .50-caliber and M240 machine guns, firing in three-second bursts, shredded the front two vehicles, turning the men inside into a bloody horror of ragged meat and shattered bone.

The whole platoon fired into the first pair of trucks, then shifted their aim to the others, shooting into the cabs. The men in the passenger seats and truck beds only got a chance to fire a few rounds in the platoon's direction before a hail of bullets lanced through them, filling the cabs with a mist of blood.

Momentum kept three vehicles rolling forward to crash into the first two, which were a mangled, shredded mess of metal, licking flames, and dirty, churning smoke.

One of the men in a truck bed managed to jump off its side. It was still moving fast, and he hit the ground hard, twisting his ankle. He managed to hobble behind one of the houses.

More than a few Soldiers had the man in their sights, but pity or something else kept them from squeezing their triggers. Who knows, maybe in the heat of the moment, they were rooting for the man to get away. Besides, his obvious terror and exaggerated limp made him look hilarious. Instead of shooting him, they



With plenty of time to prepare, the drone patrol was in position. They fired well-placed, accurate shots into the unsuspecting trucks. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

laughed and nudged each other playfully.

Madden watched from above. She let the platoon do the work. They didn't need her to get the job done. Instead, she kept her visor down and sent a squad of her Mogdees to follow the white-robed man. She was glad the platoon didn't shoot him. She needed to find out who he and the others were and why they were trying to kill the man in the green car.

He didn't take refuge in one of the small houses.

Instead, he limped to a boulder 50 meters or so from the shack and shimmied into a hollow between the stone and the hard-packed ground. The spot was probably crawling with scorpions and camel spiders, but the man didn't seem to care.

Madden watched him put his arms out and pull as much dirt and dry brush as possible to cover his hiding spot. He did a decent job of it, too.

She smiled. It wouldn't do him any good.

She shifted her POV to the green car. It lay upside down, spinning slowly on its crushed roof. She watched the young

man crawl out, trailing bits of broken glass. He reached back in and pulled out the boy in the back. They were both bruised and cut up by the sharp shards and twisted metal.

Martinez sent first squad to check on the men in the mangled trucks. None survived. They collected the young man and child on the way back.

Once the area was secure, Madden put second squad on the trail of the limping man. Third squad stayed on overwatch, manning the turrets and aiming their weapons at any possible enemy cover.

There were no more enemies. The only one still alive cowered under a rock.

Madden sent a Mogdee, flashing a bright red LED light, to guide second platoon to him.

The squad returned 10 minutes later, Antonelli prodding the man with the tip of his rifle, urging him to limp faster, and guiding him around the burning wreckage. The man's hands were zip-tied behind his back. His white robe was ripped, stained with dirt and blood, and his red-and-white-checkered headscarf was askew, partly covering his left eye.

The prisoner was dark-haired, and his heavily wrinkled face tanned a deep brown from a lifetime's exposure to the sun. His wide, dark eyes flicked from side to side in terror, as if looking for an escape route.

Antonelli dragged the man to Madden and kicked

his feet out from under him, sending him tumbling onto his rump. With a sardonic smile, Antonelli stepped back, waving elaborately at the prisoner like a ringmaster introducing an act.

Madden gave Antonelli a warning look but didn't say a word. She stared down at the man, her face emotionless, though her mind was in turmoil. How was she going to get this dude to talk?

Who were these people? Why were they chasing the

other guy? Did she do the right thing by ordering her platoon to open fire and kill the men in the trucks?

She motioned Martinez to her side and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

"Just you and the squad leaders," she said. "Get everyone else to finish digging the grave and keep someone on the .50-caliber. Just in case."

He turned, calling the squad leaders to him. As efficiently as Sgt. Johnson, he got the men organized and working.

Madden turned to Antonelli and pointed to a

spot next to one of the Humvees, about 10 paces away and out of earshot.

"Take the prisoner over there," she said, "and if you want to stay a squad leader, I better not see you kick him or mistreat him again."

Grumbling about never being allowed to have fun, Antonelli led the man away.

Madden studied the pair as first squad escorted the young man and child to her.

The boy, who looked to be about 10 years old, was sobbing, head buried in the man's middle, clinging desperately to him with white-knuckled fists clenched in his robe.

The man gently disentangled himself from the boy and knelt gracefully before her, pressing his forehead against the ground.

"Thank for saving us, sergeant," he said in clear but heavily accented English. "We owe you our lives. Thanks be to Allah!"

Madden stared down at the man in astonishment.

She glanced up at Martinez and the three squad leaders. They looked as shocked as she felt.

"You speak English?" she asked, leaning down to help him to his feet — but she pulled her hand back before gripping his elbow. She knew their customs didn't allow women to touch them.



More than a few Soldiers had the man in their sights, but pity or something else kept them from squeezing their triggers. Who knows, maybe in the heat of the moment, they were rooting for the man to get away. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

The man rose quickly to his feet and thrust out a hand. "I'm Kassim," he said with a grunt, rocking back on his heels as the boy crashed into him, wrapping thin arms tight around his middle again.

"And this is my son, Baravan," he said, tousling the kid's black hair.

The boy had stopped crying and tilted his head back to gaze fearfully at the Americans, who stood like giants around them — monsterlike in their bulky body armor, black weapons, and Kevlar helmets. His frail body shuddered as he struggled to catch his breath.

Madden shook Kassim's hand.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Why were those men trying to kill you?"

Doubt and anxiety had assailed her from the moment she made the call to take out the men in the trucks. She feared she may have made the wrong decision.

But it turned out to be the right call.

The platoon's medic appeared out of nowhere and knelt to examine the child. He gently wiped away his tears, cleaned a few cuts, and covered them with Band-Aids.

The prisoner tried to stand as Kassim's story unfolded. He yelled a single word repeatedly at the top of his voice, spittle spraying from his lips and speckling his tangled salt-and-pepper beard.

"Khayin! Khayin! Khayin!"

Antonelli pushed the enraged man down again and again. Finally, he rolled him onto his belly and kept him pinned down with a foot planted firmly on his upper

back. He shrugged at Madden as if to say, "I ain't hurting him." He had a wide grin on his pockmarked face.

The man kept hollering the word, but now it was muffled against the ground.

"What does that mean?" Martinez asked.

"Traitor," Kassim replied after a moment's hesitation.

The white-robed man launched into his tale.

He grew up in Baghdad, the son of a wealthy merchant. He learned English by watching reruns of *The Brady Bunch*, an old '70s television show. He had to make his own way in life when his father was found guilty of corruption and moved to a faraway village, where he had lived until earlier this day.

He applied and was hired as an interpreter when Madden's unit took over the area of operations. He lived in a nearby village and commuted to the FOB nearly every day.

The man talked, flinching in pain as the medic tsked while cutting away the blood-soaked sleeve to reveal a shallow bullet wound. The medic cleaned it with sterile gauze soaked in hydrogen peroxide.

A few days before, a group of strangers arrived in two large trucks and seized a group of houses. They scared the villagers from their homes and even killed several men who tried to defend their property and their families.

Rumors spread they were there to rain death down on the infidels. The villagers should be glad their paltry homes would contribute to the glory of Allah.

Kassim was getting ready to leave for the FOB, but word got around that the men were looking for him. He



"I'm Kassim," he said with a grunt, rocking back on his heels as the boy crashed into him. "And this is my son, Baravan." (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)



In less than two hours, Madden had somehow managed to win over an ally, unite the platoon in a common cause, lead an ambush without platoon casualties, and collect enough intelligence to launch an attack on the people responsible for the FOB's destruction. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

hid with the elderly widow who watched his son when he was at work. That night, he went out to recon the men and their trucks.

He couldn't get close enough to get a good look at the trucks, but he heard a large generator like the ones used at the FOB. There were at least 30 men, and their leader was a man they called "Boss." He found it strange, because they said the word in English, not Arabic.

Kassim paused, looking around at the attentive faces.

The sound of digging and animated conversations merged into a garble in the background. The platoon was in high spirits. There was nothing like winning a battle without so much as a scratch to put everyone in a good mood.

"I can tell you more, and I will help you translate with that guy." He nodded at the zip-tied man struggling on his belly. "But you have to promise you will take care of me and my son. That you will protect us."

They all turned to look at Madden, who flushed bright red at their sudden intense scrutiny.

"I'll do everything I can," she said with a nod. "We'll make room for you and your boy in one of our Humvees, and I'll talk to the battalion commander when we get back to the FOB."

She looked directly at Kassim to make her next point.

"You've worked with the Army long enough to know the final decision ain't mine to make, right?" she asked him. He nodded.

"Like I said, I'll do everything I can," she continued. "But while we're out here, I'm in charge, and you have my word we'll take care of you and your son."

The man stared at her, gauging her words,

tone, and body language.

"Good," he said, rotating his arm and flinching at the pain once the medic tied off the bandage.

"Is it OK if our medic takes your boy to one of the Humvees and keeps an eye on him? Maybe lets him pick out an MRE while you help us talk to that joker?" Madden asked, jabbing a thumb at the zip-tied prisoner.

Kassim nodded, and the medic took the boy away.

They walked to the prisoner and stood over him, looking down at the man in disgust. He lay wheezing and panting. His struggles had exhausted him.

"Tell him to tell us about the big trucks and the man they call Boss," Madden said tersely.

Kassim translated her question, and the man began to kick, holler, and spit out what sounded like a long series of foul words.

"No," Kassim said simply, scowling down at the man.

Madden, Martinez, and the three squad leaders looked at each other and laughed. This Kassim guy was all right.

They stood glaring down at the sweating, struggling man, wondering how they could get anything out of such a fanatic.

Madden looked from face to face, then motioned for them to follow. Antonelli pulled up the prisoner and sat him on his rump.

"Kassim, keep an eye on him for a second while I talk to my team," she said.

They walked out of earshot while Kassim stood behind the man with a hand pushing down on his shoulder to keep him on the ground.

Chest heaving, the man sat dejectedly, trying to twitch

his shoulder away from the man behind him.

Antonelli started immediately.

"Give me a few minutes alone with that son of a bitch, and I'll get him to talk," he said with a wicked grin. "I'll have the little bastard singing like a canary."

And so the conversation started. Everyone but her was convinced the only way to get the man to tell them anything worthwhile was to torture it out of him.

They thrust knife-hands repeatedly at the prisoner, chopping at the air to emphasize their points. They raised their voices. They glared at her.

She listened to the arguments and shook her head. No.

Sgt. Johnson would never do such a thing. She remembered his kind eyes and perpetually angry face, and she smiled sadly. He had been a walking contradiction.

She recalled his words as clear as day: "You gotta live the Army values, not because the Army says so, but because it's the right thing to do."

Madden tuned out the men's voices and recalled a conversation with Sgt. Johnson in his closet-sized office.

"Honor, respect, integrity, courage ... They're not just words," he had said. "They mean something, and you need to live by them. Do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason, and you can't go wrong. It won't always be easy or make life easy, but right is right."

Madden shook her head again.

No.

Sgt. Johnson would never do such a thing — and neither would she. They would have to find another way.

The three squad leaders and Martinez stared at her in frustration. They turned in unison when Kassim called to her.

"Sergeant!"

"I had a little talk with him while you five ..." he waved

a hand in the direction where they stood moments before.

"I may have exaggerated a little," Kassim said, noting the men's frowning faces and Madden's expressionless one.

"I told him you four men don't want to let the woman strip him naked, cut off his manhood, and feed it to him," he said, trying to keep a straight face. "But she insists. She is the *qayid*, the leader, and they must do as she says.

"I made up a few stories about you, sergeant," Kassim continued. "I hope you don't mind.

"He now half-believes you are an Ifrit, sent to earth to fight for the infidels, to enslave and emasculate all Iraqi men."

At the word "Ifrit," the man went wild with panic, glaring fearfully at Madden. He struggled to back away from her until Antonelli flipped him onto his belly again and pressed him to the ground with a size 11 boot on his back.

She stared at Kassim in astonished admiration.

"Jeezus eich bald-headed Christ on a half-shell," Madden exclaimed loudly, one of Sgt. Johnson's favorite sayings.

Instantly, the four members of her platoon laughed, and the tense atmosphere dissipated as if it never existed.

Looking around uncomprehendingly at the four men and Madden, Kassim shrugged and knelt beside the terrified prisoner. He spoke first, then asked a series of questions in their harsh language.

For all his previous bluster, the man proved a fountain of information, revealing everything they needed to know to take the fight to the enemy.

In less than two hours, Madden had somehow managed to win over an ally, unite the platoon in a common cause, lead an ambush without platoon casualties, and collect enough intelligence to launch an attack on the people responsible for the FOB's destruction.

Things were looking up. ■



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