

The War That Was Not

Tuesday, March 22nd, the call came in. It took all but seven hours, one tear-filled kiss, and an “I will be home soon” before I was out my door and on the way. A country 7,000 miles away was in need of help, and who else could be the savior besides us?

There was hardly time for goodbyes, as I rushed out the door, bags in hand. A quick talk to the wife, and I was back on my way to the base. This was not the first time, but for some reason, it felt a lot harder than usual. As I headed back to base, I felt a knot in my stomach the size of my fist.

The process of leaving was swift, everyone seemed focused and ready to move out as fast as possible. We had 18 hours to land and make the impossible happen. Who knew if such a plan could even be accomplished? Soon enough we would know. We landed for one last time in a small country in Europe, donned our equipment, and prepared for what we knew is coming: War.

Sitting there in my parachute, ruck between my legs, and rifle attached to my hip. I felt calm for the first time in 12 hours. Whether I liked it or not, I was going to be a part of a full-scale invasion to take back a country overrun by a group that was ruthless and sought to bring pain in every way possible. Maybe knowing that I could help innocent people was what put my mind at ease, but whatever it truly was I still do not know. As I looked to my left and right, I noticed PFC Burns who was shaking uncontrollably. His medium-sized body looked as if he had been set in the arctic and left to freeze to death. He tried to hide his shake, but it was as if his body would not allow it. On the far side of Burns was CPT Edwards, a true war hero, he looked quite the opposite of Burns. CPT Edwards looked posed, almost as if he had done this 1,000 times. His body language made me feel much better, and I told myself a real hero would carry themselves

the way he currently was. I tried to hold this confident pose for a long time; sitting in a cramped C-17 made it very hard to hold. As soon as the plane took off, I lost all hopes of carrying a confident pose, and found myself lying against a random Soldier to my right.

The plane ride had me feeling sick, the rough conditions were intense. We turned abruptly more than ten times, and dropped elevation multiple times, leading to everyone slamming into one another. The Aircrew seemed to remain calm throughout this chaos, which reassured me the pilot was doing this on purpose to avoid enemy radar. As I sat in the quietness of the plane, the reality of what was about to happen started to dawn on me. I was on one of several planes, that were transporting over 2,000 paratroopers into a small city outside of Atropia. Our mission is to secure the city of Atropia and drive out the presence of the enemy. Not a small task for only a group of 2,000, but I was confident in our abilities. With the time dwindling down, I tried to relax as much as I could. A task that began to seem impossible. The plane ride was the roughest I had ever been on, but for a brief moment, I was able to close my eyes. Whether I actually fell asleep, I was not sure of, but I was startled by the deep voice of a Jumpmaster. "20 minutes," he shouted. My body froze, rigid in fear, I knew what was coming.

Everything else in the plane happened in a blur. All of the sudden I was standing up, I was having a hard time keeping myself upright as the plane rocked back and forth. I finally began walking forward, following the other Paratroopers down the line. I held my static line in hand tightly, almost too hard. By the time I looked up, all I had to do was hand it off and take a slight turn out the door, as I jumped into the brisk of the night. "One-one thousand, two- one thousand, three-one thousand, fou... Holy shit...." Loud grunts came out of my body as my chute finally deployed. I tried my best to count to six, but it was never easy, as I was terrified of heights. This time it did not seem to matter. The drop was quick, too quick to feel real. My

landing was oddly soft, something that never seemed to happen. I gathered my gear as fast as possible, left my parachute on foreign soil, donned my night vision, and headed for the wood line where I would meet my squad and begin our attack.

I began a steady trot to what appeared to be a building sitting right outside of a wooded area. Here I met up with SPC Johnson, a 240 Machine Gunner, who had recently won best shot for the Brigade. We were about forty yards away from the building when we heard a loud bang ring out. The noise broke the silence of the night and was followed by several bursts of what sounded like machine gun fire. If the enemy had not known we were here, they sure did now.

From the moment that loud bang rang out, I do not recall another quiet moment for weeks. Johnson and I took cover in the abandoned building for twenty minutes, set up radio coms, and found out where the rest of our squad was.

As we began to move swiftly to our element, the sporadic gunfire began to become a constant eerie sound. In the distance, it seemed as if someone was lighting off firecrackers. Rounds ricocheted off of vehicles and either met trees or bodies. I could have never prepared myself for what I saw next. It began as a soft smell, and as we approached it became almost unbearable. I could not place it, and it was still too dark to see, so Johnson and I got into our position, where we fired on several targets for the next five hours. These five hours were a blur, we saw movement and shot until the movement ceased to move anymore. As dawn approached, I finally understood the stench in the air. That smell I will never forget, it just happens to be something that sticks with you for the rest of your life. Death...The smell was death, and it had emerged from the 25 paratroopers that found themselves in the wrong place when that first bang rang out. A well-placed mortar round had caused such damage, the damage I would never be

able to forget. The kind of damage that follows you all the way to the States. This damage follows me every day, even after the war was over.

The bed is soaked, and my wife is posed over me, telling me it will be okay. I have ground my teeth so hard that one has finally chipped. This recurring dream has come back, again and again, and again... since I have gotten back... The doctors tell me it will go away, but I fear... it is here to stay. They give me pills to take and tell me, "It will make it better," but I just must be broken as the dream has continued to stay. I know I am not the only one who is afraid to go to sleep at night, but I wish just for one night I could sleep peacefully. The war may be over, but, in my mind, I fight it every night. From the memory, to the smell, and at times I feel as if I can even taste it. The curse of war and death has followed me home, the war may be over, but for me, it is not. For me, this war occurs over and over again. This war, in my mind, may never be over.