

It Was Monday By Larry Farmer

Every day was Monday. Nothing ever changed. The relentless pace of combat operations in Iraq demanded that missions were conducted without regard to calendar or clock. So I quickly decided that every day was Monday.

My team was stationed in Ba'qubah. That day I had to run a convoy 50 miles north to Sammara to check in on another team stationed there and then 30 more miles north to Tikrit. We always made good time driving the large SUV's in convoys. We learned early on in the war that the faster and more aggressive we drove, the harder it was for the enemy to accurately gauge when to detonate a roadside bomb, or fire a rocket at the vehicle. So we swerved through traffic, cutting the local drivers off, forcing them off the road. If traffic moved too slowly, we rammed the vehicle in front of us until the driver pulled off the road or accelerated. So at 90 mph, and ripping through traffic, we made it to Sammara in short order. The team in Sammara warned us that the locals were acting distant lately to the soldiers; the same soldiers they dealt with daily. That warning made us nervous.

On our way out of Sammara, we had to travel through the market district—the most dangerous area for ambush. It is so dangerous because the enemy knows that if they open fire on American troops from a large crowd that those troops will not return fire into the crowd, endangering innocents.

The market was less than a mile away. My teammates opened the bolts of their weapons to insure a bullet was loaded though they knew it was. I did a radio check with the other vehicles in the convoy even though I heard traffic over the net. Fingers tapped nervously

on trigger-guards. Heads roved back and forth, scanning, and the driver drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

As we entered the market area, we were forced to slow the convoy speed down to 10-15 mph because of traffic and pedestrians. The aroma of rotisserie chicken and baked flat bread filled the air along with the smell of car exhaust and the sound of honking horns. Each of us scanned the crowds intently. We looked at people's hands, trying to determine what was in them. We watched for cellular phones, they were as dangerous as firearms since they could be used set off a roadside bomb, or to signal others when to spring an ambush. We looked to see if the streets emptied out as we arrived, which would mean that an attack was imminent, or if the people were simply annoyed by our presence. This time driving through the market area was uneventful. We felt relieved, since there would be no fight, this time.

After making it though the inner-city shopping choke point, we aggressively accelerated and the noise from the huge engines in the SUV's muffled radio traffic and men chattering about the other team's bad intel.

Within a moment, the Great Mosque of Sammara came into view. Driving past it always commanded my attention. It is a tall spiraling tower. It was so tall that even at about a half-mile away, I had to lean down and twist my head almost into my lap to see the top of the thing. The tower was built close to the Tigris River thousands of years ago as a tribute to the Tower of Babel. I could not help but recognize a breathtaking piece of ancient history as well as human folly. I was captivated and awestruck. Unfortunately, being awestruck in Iraq can get a soldier killed.

An instant later, an automatic rifle volley splintered holes in the SUV. For a short moment, no other sound existed. A gunshot produces a sound like nothing else. It seemed even the engine and road noise was silent. The cracking and piercing noises followed by the waffling echo of the bullet's wake caused my heart to skip a beat. The shots broke through the door glass and ripped thorough the roof of the SUV; the rounds passed within inches of my head. I was stunned for a split second, and afraid one of my troops had been hit. Everyone reacts individually to gunfire; anger was my reaction.

"Stop the fucking truck now goddamn it!"

The tires screeched from the brakes until the truck stopped. I jerked hard on the door handle. It broke it as I exited. I drew my pistol and gripped it with both hands. With the pistol leveled with my eyes and elbows drawn close to my body, I ran toward the enemy bullet's origin.

"Cover me!"

The nearby road noise and screaming voices of frightened passersby faded to a whisper. I could only hear my boots thumping against the sun-baked ground and my heart pounding as I scanned the vicinity. My anger and adrenaline began to control my senses as I hunted the gunmen with tunnel vision. Without peripheral vision I would lead my team into another ambush. I slowed down and started to watch everything, as I continued.

I wanted a target more than my next breath of air. Whoever shot at us wanted to kill me and my soldiers. My anger was insatiable; and growing into rage. When I saw two people running from the tall river-grass with weapons my rage and bloodlust consumed me. I wanted them dead.

Two males were running from the scene; one with an AK-47, the other with a pistol. My index finger moved off of the slide and on to the trigger. I started squeezing the trigger when I noticed that neither of my targets were adults; they were two boys. I released the trigger and lowered my pistol two or three inches. After I looked intently at the targets there was no doubt. They were boys. My stomach knotted up. My team saw the two boys running away as well and had opened fire. I ordered my soldiers to cease fire and to halt their pursuit and to take up security positions to the left and right flank. Then I ordered them to point their rifles away from the boys. I did not want any of my soldiers to kill a child. But they had to be stopped. They could not be allowed to shoot at and likely kill other soldiers. Firing at us made them our enemies, but they were boys, children who should be watching cartoons, not fighting in a war.

Iraq is not a lecture hall where moral decisions are made after lengthy deliberation. Decisions are made instantly, with a final result too profound and heinously real to appreciate in a safe and comfortable classroom.

My armed target, the oldest one with the AK-47, was about 50 feet from me and running away fast. I raised my pistol again, took aim, and fired six or seven shots. The first two shots found their mark. I saw two flashes of blood spray from his back. The target started a forward tumble as a third round hit him. That last bullet struck the back of his head and caused it to twist. It turned just enough that I could see his face and eyes. His eyes glazed over the moment he died.

I charged forward at a full sprint toward the fallen shooter. I ran down a deep gully and into irrigation ditch where the boy's body lay jerking. I instinctively kicked the AK-47 away from his hand. He was dead. I was running to disarm a dead boy and get a better shot at the

other boy. As I ran closer to the second boy I became nauseated, but I could not let that impede me. I took aim, but both of my hands were trembling. I stopped and fired another six or seven rounds; all of them missed. I released the near-empty magazine from my pistol and took off at a sprint again toward the boy, reloading as I ran. After I slammed the fresh magazine into the well, I stopped again. I aimed my pistol again and squeezed one shot at the boy. I shot him in the right thigh.

The bullet tore a mass of flesh from the child's leg and left a cavity that could easily accommodate an adult fist. I kicked the pistol he had dropped away from his reach as he lay prostrate in the irrigation ditch. It skipped several feet from him. I snatched the boy up by the sleeve and flipped him over, bouncing him off the ground.

My cocked pistol was about two inches from his face. My rage still boiled and the adrenaline running through me caused my hand to tremble. I looked into the crying eyes of a child, not an enemy soldier. The boy begged in broken English, "Mister, Mister, Please! Please not kill me! Not kill me mister!" more tears rolled down his face; a face that could not have aged more than 10 years. I had killed one child and now I contemplated killing this boy. Because of the wound I inflicted I knew this kid would never run and play, or climb the monkey-bars at school again. I was no longer morally numb. I could not kill another child. My rage calmed and I holstered my pistol so I could fill the bleeding flesh cavity with a curlex bandage. I took out my field dressing to secure the curlex in place. As I tightened the bandage in place, the boy's pleas for mercy became cries for his mother. "Mommy, Mommy! Please Mister, Mommy, Mommy!" I tried to reassure him that he would be okay.

The reality and finality of this situation filled me and my humanity would be suppressed no longer. I turned away from the boy and buckled to my knees. I vomited. As the other soldiers approached I wiped my mouth and tried to compose myself. But the vomit dripped down the front of my body armor and onto my trousers.

“You okay, Sergeant?”

“Yeah, I’m all right. Let’s get the kid to a field hospital... Was anyone hit?”

“No.”

“All right, establish a security perimeter around the area until we are ready to move out.”

“Roger that.”

Another soldier and I carried the younger boy up the hill to a field ambulance. A couple other soldiers brought the dead child, now zipped in a body-bag, up the hill and tossed him next to his friend in the ambulance. I ordered the security perimeter to collapse and for the convoy to proceed so we could make it to Tikrit before sunset.

During the next 25 miles of the convoy to Tikrit, I stopped functioning as a combat leader. I was not monitoring the net or pulling security. I could not focus on anything other than what I had done. The enemy lifeblood I coveted so much covered my uniform, saturated my skin, and stained my soul.

When I arrived in Tikrit I began writing a report of the day’s events. I asked another soldier what day it was. He said, “It’s Monday, Sergeant.”