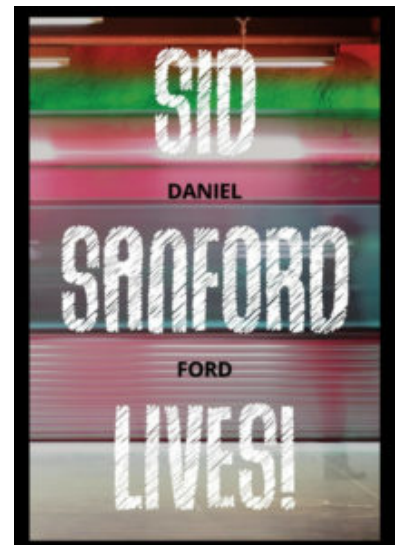


FOB by Daniel Ford

An excerpt of the debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!*

by Daniel Ford

Sid stepped into the desert surrounding the cramped forward operating base just as the sun surged over the distant mountaintop. He scratched his patchy, three-day-old beard. He inhaled deeply, the already warming air singeing his raw nostrils. The sand didn't crunch so much as slither away from the hot breath of desert wind.



Daniel Ford's debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!* is now available from 50/50 press.

He eyed the line of beige Humvees parked by sandbags piled waist-high. He strode over and climbed into the makeshift garage. Sid propped himself against the tall front tire of the closest vehicle. He stretched out his legs and crossed them,

feeling the full weight of his still stiff boots on his ankle. He shifted his position just enough so he could awkwardly pull his notebook out of his back pocket. He stuck his pen behind his ear, sure the words that had been eluding him since the troubled descent through the mountain range would come before the afternoon sun boiled his internal organs. For now, Sid propped his head up against the hard, black rubber and tried to remember how he'd landed in this dusty valley.

Roger Ray's slamming door muffled the newsroom's buzz. So many conversations from which Sid had long ago felt disengaged continued in shouted whispers once Ray started howling in earnest.

"I'd be weakening my damn city desk in the middle of a mayoral election," the aging editor said. "On top of everything else, I'd be giving you, a little pissant, a promotion ahead of, frankly, a long line of more goddamn qualified reporters."

"Someone else can cover the Bronx borough president's philandering and embezzling," Sid said over Ray's incoherent grunting and molar grinding.

"Plus, I'd catch all kinds of holy fucking hell from the board..." Ray said. "Wait, what did you say?"

Sid patiently reached into his messenger bag and retrieved a blue folder that looked like an overstuffed jelly donut. He tossed it on Ray's desk and watched as he casually flipped it open. Ray rolled his eyes as he read the top sheet, but that hadn't stopped him from skimming the tax forms, illicit photos, and tawdry phone records bulging underneath.

"Sources?" Ray grunted.

"Waiting for a phone call from whomever you decide to assign the story."

Ray held Sid's gaze, hoping his young reporter would wear his

self-satisfied grin just long enough for him to slap it off his face with a hefty Sunday newspaper.

"This doesn't change anything," Ray said, slamming his hand on the pile of front-page fodder. "I could just as easily order you to write this."

"I have a draft someone can polish if that helps," Sid said. "You don't even have to use my name. Actually, I'd prefer you didn't, I don't want to get banned from Harlem and its chicken and waffles."

"Listen, son..."

"I believe you owe me one," Sid said, his jaw stiffening.

Ray waited a beat before nodding weakly. He got up, sat down on the edge of his desk, and put a hand on Sid's shoulder.

"A desert warzone isn't an appropriate place to overcome personal demons," Ray said.

"That's not what this is about," Sid said. "I've just moved beyond writing about tainted politicians and transit complaints."

"You better hope so. You survive our security training and I'll think about it. That's the best I can do."

Sid took the deal and flew out to the Middle East three weeks later.

A sharp pain in his shin brought Sid back into the present. He cursed his luck, certain he'd been stung by a scorpion. However, the pain dulled quickly, but not before another kick to his boots forced him into a crouch. His eyes burned red as he opened them fully. He put his hand against the sun and made out a camouflaged hulk wielding a wrench standing in front of him.

"Scared the fucking piss out of me," the soldier spat.

A tobacco-infused glob of spit now sparkled in the sand between the two men like a brushstroke of oil puddled in a Queens parking garage.

"Sorry," Sid muttered.

"You're not supposed to be here. I could have put a bullet in your fucking head. Probably give me a damn medal considering you're a reporter."

"I get it," Sid said. He brushed the sand off his pants as he stood. "I'm leaving."

"Don't be a pussy," the soldier said, extending his hand. "I'm Mason."

"Sid."

"Oh, I know your name. We get daily briefings on how to talk to you."

"Is that why no one has done it yet?"

"Fuck, easy killer," Mason said. "PR is not our strong suit."

"Funny considering that's part of your mission."

"Enjoying the heat while you're preaching at me?" Mason asked, slapping a wrench into his palm.

"Had to get out of the AC," Sid said. "Too small a space and too many closed windows."

"You want to open those bulletproof windows for the enemy, be my guest, but make damn sure me and my friends are all in the latrine when you do. And try not to make too much of a mess for us to sop up later."

"Yeah, well, never been a fan of central air. Messes with my

sinuses.”

“You been in a sandstorm yet?”

“No.”

“Might change a few of your preconceived notions about our little air conditioned shit box.”

“I didn’t mean to offend anyone.”

“Well, could you not offend anyone a few paces to your right. I’ve got to park my ass under the vehicle you’ve been using as a hammock.”

“Right,” Sid said. “Yeah.”

He moved out of the way and heard Mason slide under the front bumper. Sid rubbed the back of his head.

“Something wrong?” Mason asked from beneath the vehicle.

“Can I help you with anything?” Sid asked.

“You know much about auto repair?”

“Not really, no.”

“Then I’m good.”

“Well, how about I just keep you company then?”

“Like to work alone.”

“This is the longest conversation I’ve had in days,” Sid said.
“Give me something.”

“I didn’t shoot you, what more do you want?”

“Son of a bitch,” Sid mumbled.

The clangs and grunts stopped. Mason wagged his boots back and forth.

"Coffee," he said.

"Do you want anything—?"

"Black."

"You got it."

Sid headed back to the FOB. He found another hulking figure in fatigues leaning up against the counter, waiting for the coffee pot to finish gurgling.

"Lieutenant Núñez," Sid said, keeping a respectful distance.

The officer growled something through his dark mustache that sounded like, "motherfucker." Sid contemplated reaching for his notebook and peppering Núñez with questions before the man had even poured his morning coffee, but thought better of it.

"Given any thought to my, um, repeated requests?" Sid asked instead.

The officer's severe, but sleepy, brown eyes motioned toward the coffee pot.

"Got it," Sid said, grabbing two Styrofoam cups from the stack.

"Thirsty?" Núñez asked.

"Getting one for your mechanic."

"Are you referring to Sergeant Ward?"

"This would be a lot easier if you didn't break my balls every time we had a conversation."

"But it wouldn't be as fun," Núñez said. He filled his mug and turned to walk out the door. "Don't bother my men without my permission or I won't talk to you at all."

The officer knocked into Sid's shoulder as he left.

"Sir?" Sid called out.

"You're not ready to leave the wire," Núñez said, pausing in the hallway. "Some of my men aren't ready. Request denied."

"Thanks for your time, Lieutenant..." Sid muttered.

He knew picking fights with commanding officers wouldn't get him anywhere, but he hadn't been raised to keep his mouth shut (or respect authority for that matter). However, Núñez had just confirmed Sid's suspicions about the base's preparedness. What Sid couldn't piece together is whether that mattered in this country or not.

Sid returned to the Humvee and found Mason's boots pointing out the opposite end. Sid pounded his fist up against the bumper.

"Jesus H. Fuck!" Mason yelled out.

Sid heard tools thump against the sand.

"Delivery," he said. "I'm allowed to give you coffee, right?"

"Hell yes," Mason said.

After climbing out from the car's underbelly, Mason grabbed the cup and downed the coffee in one swallow. He tossed the cup back at Sid who caught it while preventing his own coffee from sloshing out.

"That must have felt good," Sid said.

"Nothing feels good here. Needed a jolt."

"Happy to help. Does this mean I can ask you a few questions?"

"Hope you're not looking to fill column inches with me," Mason said. "I'm a pretty boring story."

"Yeah, I figured that out pretty quick," Sid said. "But I'll

take what I can get right now.”

“What are you writing about?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“See, you want us to engage, yet you have no fucking clue what your plan is.”

“I’m here, that is the plan. A lot of people have questions about what’s going on over here.”

“Tell you what, a lot of guys over here have a question or two on what’s happening.”

“Maybe we can learn from each other.”

“When can I say I’m off the record?”

“Whenever you want.”

“And you can’t use what I say?”

“That’s how it works.”

“Then I’m off the record.”

“Fine by me.”

Sid leaned up against the door, burning his elbow on the hot metal handle. He pulled it away, more pissed about the squad’s antipathy than by the glowing red blotch on his arm. Mason wiped his forehead with an oily rag and then got back to work.

Mason clamped his thick hand down on Sid’s shaking leg.

“Really? Still with the fucking nerves?” Mason asked. “The mission is over, fucking relax.”

Sid adjusted his helmet and nodded.

“Lieutenant, Bob Woodward here is still pissing himself,”

Mason yelled above the roar of the Humvee. "Any suggestions on how he can calm his delicate senses?"

In the passenger seat, Núñez turned his head slightly and growled something that sounded like "fucker."

"Well, I wouldn't do that to your mother," Mason said. "Just sit tight, we're almost home."

Sid had hounded Núñez for nearly a month to authorize his first patrol. The squad now fancied itself a crack staff, impervious to the anxiety and turmoil endemic to other platoons across the desert. Outside of the occasional pop-pop-pop in the distance, however, none of the men crowded in the FOB had been in a firefight or had to halt a long caravan in order to investigate and detonate an IED. How would they react in the face of something more treacherous than cleaning out latrines or standing at attention for Reveille?

It turned out that Sid's hands refused to stop shaking the moment he parked his ass in the Humvee. They shook all through the meeting with the hard-eyed, sun-scorched elders of the nearby village. Núñez listened patiently to the staccato Arabic flying off the leader's rotten teeth like acid. He absorbed the overwhelmed translator's stuttering and backtracking while nodding and trying to maintain eye contact with his counterpart. Sid watched as younger, more anxious men prowled along the back of the tent, shouting and pointing every so often. They had been stripped of their arms before entering, but their danger still permeated the cramped space.

"What are they pissed about?" Sid had asked Mason.

"No water. Limited food. Enemy offering it all at discount prices," Mason had said. "It means we're fucked. Now shut up and keep close to me or anyone else with a gun."

Sid's concentration was broken by Mason leaping out of his seat and climbing on top of a snoozing soldier in the rear of

the Humvee.

"I said move your hand, Bee," Mason shouted, slapping his subordinate on the cheeks.

"Wake the fuck up, this ain't fucking nap time."

"Sorry, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Up all night playing 'Call of Duty' again?" Mason asked.

"Nuh-uh, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Christ, just what Uncle Fucking Sam had in mind when he signed your sorry ass up," Mason said, retaking his seat. "Has more goddamn kills online than he does in real life. Put that in your article, Sanford."

"Why do they call you Bee?" Sid said, ignoring Mason's jabs to his bicep. "Hard to figure considering your nameplate reads Zdunczyk."

Bee glanced at Mason, who nodded his approval.

"Real name's Frank," Bee said.

"I'm aware," Sid said. "Why Bee?"

"Aw, tell him," Mason said, throwing in another scoop of tobacco below his bottom lip.

"My first day in the mess I wanted to make conversation," Bee said. "So I started talking about this article I read about bee hives being like a communist society. Then I started in on the similarities and differences between hives and military bases. Kind of explains it all."

"You're so fucking lucky 'Queen Bee' didn't stick," Mason said. "Whole squad was fucking howling so bad Núñez smoked the shit out of us. So worth it."

Sid reached the pocket of his flak jacket and pulled out his recorder. He waited for Mason's affirmative before turning it on.

"Why'd you sign up?" Sid asked.

"No one needs to hear that fucking story," Bee said, wearily looking at the slim device. "No offense, sir."

"This is your penance for conking out," Mason said. "Be thankful it's not fucking licking my boot whenever the fuck I tell you to."

"Yes, Sergeant," Bee said. "It all started when my father was murdered..."

"Murdered?" Sid asked, the quake in his hands now having less to do with nerves or the Humvee's shimmy.

"Yeah, couple of townies broke into our house looking for shit to pawn to buy meth or some shit," Bee said. "My dad went to investigate and they dropped him with one to the head before he could raise his pistol."

"Holy shit," Mason muttered, spitting tobacco juice into a cup. "Where were you?"

"Getting high in the woods with a bunch of fucks from school," Bee said. "We all passed out there. Cops ended up coming out to find me. We all scattered thinking they were going to bust us for weed. Ran home and right into the yellow caution tape like a goddamn marathon runner."

"They catch the bastards?" Sid asked. "I mean...did they apprehend the suspects?"

"Nah, this is the best part," Bee said. "They stepped over my dad and started ransacking the rest of the house. Probably looking for money or trying to cover their tracks. Make it look like there were more than two shit kickers. My mother had

holed up in her closet and waited for them with a Remington 870 shotgun she bought on layaway from Walmart. Blew both motherfuckers away when they opened the door."

"My kind of woman," Mason said. "Shit, sorry about your Pops, but this is making my shit hard."

"So how'd that lead to you enlisting?" Sid asked, once again ignoring Mason.

"Despite being relieved, my mother was pissed as hell I wasn't home when it all went down," Bee said. "She told me that since she took care of my father's killers, the least I could do was go shoot some towelheads in the desert. Sorry, is that too crass for a newspaper?"

"I'll clean it up, don't worry," Sid said. "You regret it?"

"Only regret I have is not killing those pricks myself. And not having a chance to kill anyone here. Fucking glad-handing political bullshit isn't my thing."

Sid nodded and pressed the pause button.

"Thank you for trusting me with your story," he said, extending his hand. "I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Oh, I don't trust you for shit," Bee said, shaking Sid's hand. "But Mason does and I report to him. I'm just as liable to shoot you next time you come near me."

"Understood," Sid said. "Just make sure Mason's behind me when you do it. Takes care of both our problems."

"You fucks know I'm still fucking here, right?" Mason asked.

The Humvee's breaks squealed like a downtown bus as the hulking transport swerved abruptly. Sid tumbled into Mason's lap just as the cup of dip flew out of the Sergeant's hands and onto Sid's chest.

Núñez shouted something unintelligible from the front of the vehicle.

“Shit,” Mason said. “Look alive, fellas.”

Sid’s nerves actually calmed as the camouflaged men around him checked their weapons and reached for additional ammo. He heard a distant whistling that aggressively faded into dense thuds nearby.

“Fuck, we’re in the shit now, boys,” Mason said.

The Humvee shook after a mortar landed a few yards away, spraying sand and debris across the small windows. The whistle intensified as the enemy’s aim improved. Núñez’s orders came out in a stream of profanity and pseudo-Spanish as he exited the front seat. Sid could feel the ripple of steel and sand as the Humvee continued to race across the desert. Mason shoved a finger into Sid’s chest.

“What did I fucking tell you before?” He asked.

“Stay close,” Sid said. “Preferably next to someone with a weapon.”

“Good,” Mason said. “Don’t fucking forget it.”

And then the world went white.

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Daniel Ford

Daniel Ford is the author of *Sid Sanford Lives!* He's the co-founder of *Writer's Bone*, a literary podcast and website that champions aspiring and established authors. A Bristol, Conn., native (and longtime Queens, N.Y., transplant), Ford now lives in Boston with his fiancée Stephanie. He's currently working on a short story collection.