

New Essay by Joshua P.F.: Bombs in the Trash



It was a relatively clear and cool night in the spring of 2008 on our fortified U.S. compound, Camp David, which was co-located on the property of the Najaf Technical University at the southern end of Najaf, Iraq. I was smoking hookah and watching Arabic TV with our local Iraqi guards, something I did nightly, when my Captain, a West Point grad, sheepishly poked his head in the door and asked if we could talk. Of course, I said, then passed the hookah's hose to the Iraqi next to me, ensuring the tip was pointed back toward me so not to give offense (passing the phallic hose's tip facing outward is considered vulgar). I rose, then walked to the door.

My Captain, a tall, thin, dirty blond in his late 20s, was in uniform: combat boots, ACU bottoms, and a military-issue fleece top; I, on the other hand, was wearing my usual ensemble: Vibram-soled Merrell hiking boots, Dickies work pants (a California staple of '90s skate culture), plaid snap-button shirt, and a navy-blue nylon windbreaker.

"What's up, Sir?" I asked.

He scanned the room pensively. There were no other Americans around, just the two of us, and our non-English-speaking guards inquisitively throwing casual glances away from the TV toward our conversation.

"Soooo..." he began to say. "I've heard you take little trips outside the wire in civilian clothes..."

I looked at him, trying to keep my expression neutral. The accusation, though true, was quite salacious. U.S. Military personnel in Iraq, even Special Forces like he and I, were

strictly confined to the guarded installations, Military Camps and FOBs, and only left under direct orders to conduct a mission or move to another installation. When leaving “the wire,” soldiers travelled in convoys of heavily armored military vehicles with guns big and small, medical supplies, comms gear, and anything else needed for a prolonged fight. No soldier would want to venture out alone as a vulnerable civilian—logically it didn’t make sense.

“...if you happen to be out tonight, do you mind checking to make sure the MSR is clear?”

Clear, I thought to myself. What does he mean by clear? I asked. The Captain explained his concern that there might be something hidden in the roadside trash (sporadic piles of trash line every major road in Iraq) on the MSR (Main Supply Route) in front of our compound. Apparently, he’d read some intelligence cable claiming terrorists were threatening to disrupt U.S. Army convoys in the region with IEDs, and he was apprehensive about his resupply run the following day. This didn’t surprise me. I’d seen Special Forces officers refuse to get out of armor-plated trucks during a mission, fearing stray bullets. I’d known Special Forces commanders who reject orders of battle that position them at the head of a convoy, fearing roadside bombs that often target the first truck.

I reiterated his request in more direct language: “So you want me to go outside the wire in civilian clothes and dig through trash piles looking for bombs?”

His response: “Basically, yes, if you’re out already.”

I asked again. Maybe he was tired and didn’t understand the ramifications of his request. He wasn’t suggesting an official military mission with bomb detection technology and protection gear; he was proposing that I go out, unsanctioned and unprotected, into what was technically a war zone, risking my personal safety to ensure his. What if something happened,

like if I was kidnapped or blown up? Surely this would get him in trouble, maybe even court martialed. He was such a straight arrow, a by-the-book kind of guy. Why would he risk this?

Was he really that scared?

Was he a coward endangering someone else for his own protection?

But in my Captain's defense this wasn't an order, like how they say in movies "that's an order!" It was more like a suggestion, and I felt free to decline his request (although consent becomes fuzzy when there's an asymmetry of power: he a captain and I a sergeant). Actually, I think he was asking me for a favor, that's probably the best way to describe it. And that surprised me more than anything.

He and I'd had a rocky relationship up to that point. To be honest, I've had a rocky relationship with authority my entire life. This came up in my psychological evaluation during Special Forces selection, and I was almost kicked out over it. Fortunately, they let me pass with the excuse that I was young and would therefore age out of my rebellion, which I don't think ever happened. So I don't think my Captain knew what to do with me. I, and a few others on the team, often did things without asking his official permission and ended up begging for his forgiveness after. I never hesitated to do what I thought was right. He hated that, but he needed me. I was one of the more senior members of the team, and I ran all of the HUMINT (human intelligence) operations.

So maybe this favor was a proverbial olive branch, a way for me to get back into his good graces. Or maybe it was the other way around, maybe he felt like a disrespected outsider and wanted to be included in our *extracurricular* activities. Maybe he wanted my respect? It was no secret that I thought of him as weak and ineffectual. That's how we were taught to think of officers; and most I'd encountered (but not all) lived up to

those expectations.

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To add to the confusion that night, I think I'd been drinking with our Iraqi guards. Technically, U.S. soldiers in Iraq weren't allowed to drink alcohol, but I and a few others on my team were released from General Order No. 1 so we could drink during meetings with intelligence sources. Of course we abused the privilege. I'll confess that once or twice my team (minus the Captain) got drunk and then went out looking for a fight.

Anyway, I gave my Captain one last chance to retract his request.

But like a good officer, he stayed the course: "Let me know if you find anything!"

Dumbfounded, I went to get Jim, our Senior Weapons Sergeant and my partner in crime. Jim is an interesting guy, physically imposing, sort of a redneck, and up for anything; he definitely fit the stereotype of an SF dude. And he's one of the most kind and loyal people I've ever known, though we did have some heated arguments.

"What the fuck?" Jim asked. "Is he serious?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"This is fucking ridiculous."

"What isn't?"

"He's such a fucking pussy..."

Jim and I continued to discuss the bizarre tasking. We couldn't deny his accusation: in the past few months, Jim and I, along with an interpreter, had on several occasions dressed up like locals and quietly snuck off our compound. Sometimes it was to meet an intelligence source, or attempt to recruit a

new source, and sometimes it was just for fun, like to go to a restaurant or sightsee. There weren't many places in Iraq where U.S. soldiers could get away with this sort of thing in 2008, especially in southern Iraq, but Najaf was a relatively peaceful city because of all the Shia holy sites that brought over a million tourists every year, mostly from Iran. As long as we kept our mouths shut and dressed like locals, people would hopefully assume we were light-skinned Iranians on holiday.

So it was far from unreasonable for Jim and I to accept our Captain's secret mission. We were frankly bored in Iraq, and we'd do almost anything, no matter how dangerous, to get the wartime experiences our egos craved—that's why we joined Special Forces. Despite the military's emphases on rules, structure, and hierarchy, many soldiers (especially in Special Forces) flagrantly break those rules with the excuse of "making mission," as we called it, with little to no thought of the repercussions. This, at least in our minds, seemed heroic. So how could we refuse our commanding officer's tacit permission to break the rules, knowing there was a chance we'd uncover IEDs and potentially save American lives?

"At the very least," I told Jim, "this will make for a funny story later."

"Yeah, if nothing fucking happens."

"Right..." I said looking at Jim. I could tell he didn't particularly want to go, but we'd spent so much time talking shit about others on our team, like the Captain, how they were weak, how they were pussies, that I think we both felt saying "no" would have made us hypocrites, and potentially cowards. My pride couldn't handle that.

Jim looked at me. He wasn't going to back down if I was in.

"Let's just do it," I said.

“Fine.”



Jim and I decided not to bring an interpreter on our trash-digging escapade since we weren't expecting to meet anyone that night. But we did bring one of our local Iraqi dogs, Willy. Willy had an athletic, medium build, droopy sad eyes, and a burnt orange and white coat. We thought he'd happily dig through trash piles looking for uneaten food and expose any explosive devices. We loved that dog and we'd hate to see anything happen to him, but if someone was going to get blown up that night, better him than us.

Jim and I chose to drive our newly acquired covert POV (Privately Owned Vehicle), a white Toyota 4-Runner with ballistic glass, steel-reinforced doors, and armored seats. Wearing civilian clothes, we grabbed our body armor, Glocks, M4s, bugout bags, and the dog, then jumped into the SUV. We exited our compound through the main gate onto a side road. It was after midnight and the Iraqi gate guards gave us funny looks; I can't imagine what they thought (there were all sorts of rumors swirling around about our activities in Iraq, like that we were putting sharks in the aqueducts to eat children). We drove a few hundred meters down the main road, and then we stopped at our first large pile of trash. The houses on that MSR were set back pretty far back from the road, so there was plenty of room for us to park in the dirt. And lots of trash.

At the first pile, we opened the car door and shooed Willy out. Of course, the scaredy-cat looked at us, then looked at the open door, then whimpered. We tried to pull him out, then we tried to push him out, but Willy absolutely refused to exit the vehicle. I think he was afraid we'd leave him out there, outside of our cozy compound. Iraqi dogs have a harsh life in the unforgiving desert, but live in near luxury on U.S. military camps (I bet the Iraqi dogs think we invaded the country just for them. And who knows, maybe we did).

So, Jim and I had to search the trash ourselves. Our first instinct was to take turns; one would stay inside the protective vehicle while the other checked a trash pile, and then we'd switch. But neither of us could stomach the thought of watching the other get blown up while cowering in the truck, survivor's guilt and all. So we got out together. Willy still stayed in the truck though. I think he was the only one that night thinking clearly.

We carefully approached our first pile of trash. Jim extended the muzzle-end of his rifle into the pile and carefully turned over several pieces of trash. I followed suit. Willy watched suspiciously. Nothing, thank *Allah*.

We searched through a few more piles, fortunately still nothing. Then we moved farther down the road, still nothing. Just as we were about to give up for the night, Jim and I looked up to see lights flashing in the distance. We were on a main road next to a suburban area a couple miles south of downtown Najaf, and not surprisingly, we attracted the attention of local residents who probably assumed we were actually planting IEDs, not looking for them, and called the police. So just when we thought this night couldn't get any weirder, Jim and I looked at each other.

"We're about to get arrested, in Iraq."

As we watched the lights approach, I tried to imagine what the police would think, rolling up on two bearded, heavily armed white guys in western garb rummaging through piles of trash after midnight.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" Jim asked.

"Uh, I don't know... but we may know these guys."

The cops arrived, a pickup truck loaded with Iraqi police officers brandishing AK-47s. We lifted our hands to present a non-threatening posture, and I offered the traditional

greeting, "*salaam a'layk.*" Then I quickly told them we were American soldiers stationed in Najaf: "*Ihna Amreekan, saakin gareeb minna.*" Then I asked, in more broken Arabic, what police station they were from. Their response: the station about a mile southeast of the city limit. This confirmed my suspicions. We did know these guys, unfortunately.

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A few weeks prior, our SF team in armor-plated, turret-mounted-.50-Cal Humvees descended upon the Iraqi police station at the southern end of Najaf, about a mile east of Camp David, in a "show of force" unsanctioned by our Captain.

We were pissed.

It was common practice for police in Iraq to arrest someone on fictitious charges and extort money from his family for release; the Iraqi police were considered quite corrupt by the general population. But unfortunately for this particular cohort of extorting police officers, their hostage was one of our coalition partners, a soldier from the Iraq Army unit located on the northern end of Najaf. This unit came to Camp David several days a week for training, and we conducted joint combat operations together. So we were pretty close with these guys.

The kidnapped soldier lived in the neighborhood next to Camp David, and after he was arrested, his wife and a few fellow Iraqi soldiers quickly rushed to our compound to inform us. At this point in the deployment, we were sick and tired of watching our collaborators get exploited and sometimes slaughtered while we stood idly by, usually waiting for bureaucrats to sanction intervention. So this time, before any military officers could debate the appropriate course of action, or more likely just schedule a meeting to discuss who'd be in charge (who'd get to take credit), we decided to grab our guns, pile into our military vehicles, and rush to

the Iraqi police station to conduct an impromptu rescue operation.

Our Captain wasn't consulted.

We pulled up to the police station aggressively, jumping the curb and nearly ramming one of the buildings. We trained our .50 Cals on blind corners and quickly exited the vehicles. We swiftly disarmed each cop we encountered as we made our way to the headquarters building. We kicked in the door, pushed everyone up against walls, and demanded to speak with the person in charge. He timidly revealed himself, a short pudgy dark-skinned man.

We yelled. We bullied. We demanded. And out-gunned, the police chief relented (thank *Allah* this went as well as it did).

We got our guy back and tucked him into one of our gun trucks. Then we thought it'd be funny to disarm the Iraqi cops, so we grabbed all their heavy weapons, about 4 "BKC's" (Russian PKM machine guns) and a few AKs, and brought everything back to our compound. We laughed all the way home.

But our Captain didn't find it funny when several Iraqi police officials showed up at Camp David an hour later complaining about what we'd done and demanding their weapons back. Our Captain came undone, red-faced and nearly hyperventilating, yelling at us:

"What the fuck were you thinking!" He kept repeating, almost to himself.

Jim and I looked at him but didn't respond. The Captain was in no mood to hear our excuses, or argue. He was angry, yes, maybe uncontrollably angry, but I think he was also deeply embarrassed. And afraid. Our Captain was afraid of injury and death, much more so than Jim and I were, we already knew that, but I think he was also afraid of something else, maybe his biggest fear: ruining his military career. This was the first

time he'd personally had to face our action's consequence, and I suspect he feared word might get back to his (and our) superiors. We'd get a slap on the wrist and probably a chuckle, but since he was technically in charge, he'd surely be scapegoated for our actions.

"You better give the fucking guns back!" he continued.

Jim and I still didn't respond. Then we quickly walked away before our discomfited Captain realized we weren't taking him, or this threat to his career, seriously—in our minds, the only thing to fear was cowardice. We knew we'd pushed him over the edge, but that just made the situation even funnier for us. We laughed awkwardly as we weighed our options. But we didn't have much of a choice. So begrudgingly, we gave the guns back.

I wondered if the Captain would ever speak directly to me again. He did of course: a few weeks later he tasked me with a secret mission to dig through trash looking for bombs.

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So needless to say, Jim and I were a little apprehensive when a truck full of these same Iraqi police, with their weapons, emerged out of the darkness. This time we were the ones outgunned.

Gesturing to us and the surrounding area, one of the cops asked what we were doing: "*Shitsawi hun?*"

Willy could be seen through the windshield peeking over the passenger seat.

"*Walla inshoof a'la mutafegiraat* [we're looking for bombs]," I said. I expected a laugh, I thought the situation was pretty funny; but they just stared. I continued to explain, or at least attempted to explain, that our commander heard there might be an IED on this road and we were searching for it. I asked if they'd seen anything: "*itshoof walla ishi?*"

"Lah," was the curt response; they showed no interest in continuing our conversation. I could tell they were confused, maybe by my shoddy Arabic, and they must have thought we were complete idiots (which we were of course). Then without offering to help, they abruptly left us there on the road. "*Bishoofak ba'adayn*," see you later fellas.

Jim and I left too.

On the ride back, Willy was finally at ease.



Back at Camp David, Willy happily bounced out of the truck. I think he was ready to call it a night and snuggle into his warm bed (he slept with one of the interpreters).

"Now he finally gets out of the truck," I said to Jim.

"Fucking pussy," Jim said with his usual levity, and a dip in his lip. Then he spat on the ground.

Willy scampered into the interpreters' building. He'd survived another day of our crazy war. And he'd have to survive many more days to come. We'd all soon go home, back to the U.S. to get on with our lives and military careers, but Willy would stay. Deployment after deployment, SF team after SF team, Willy would have to find a way to survive. We didn't understand that. We never thought about the long-term consequences of our actions.

"Let's go tell the Captain," I said.

We found him waiting outside our team room in a small courtyard, looking up at the stars. "What did you find?" he asked.

"Nothing, Sir."

"Good," he responded casually, and went back inside.

And that was that.

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About a decade after I left the military, I saw my Captain in the dining facility of a compound belonging to one of the most elite units in the Special Operations arsenal. I had since gone back to school to study physics, graduated with an engineering degree, and was now hawking high-tech solutions and methodologies to problems the U.S. government wasn't yet facing. Jim had retired after a long and successful career in the Army, and was now building his redneck dream home in the hills of rural Tennessee. And there was my former Captain, who was probably a Lieutenant Colonel or even Colonel by now, standing near the salad bar.

I hadn't seen him since leaving Iraq in 2008, but he looked about the same, maybe a little older and a little stockier. I was the opposite, about 30 pounds lighter from sporadic bouts of fad dieting. We were both in civilian clothes, but I could tell he was still "in the fight": probably hunting the next Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Well, not hunting himself. I'm sure he still sent enlisted soldiers to do the fighting. But even then, I envied these soldiers, the simplicity of their mission. I still imagined their experiences capturing and/or killing HVTs (High Value Targets) most closely aligned with my idealization of the heroic military life. In contrast, my experiences digging in trash looking for bombs felt meaninglessly reckless.

When I first saw the Captain, I reflexively smirked. Look who it is, I said to myself conceitedly as chills ran up and down my spine. But how could he be here, amongst the bravest of the brave? The best of the best? How could they not see him like I did, as a coward who sent others into harm's way for his own protection and professional advancement? I knew in that moment, even after ten years, I still wanted to feel superior to my Captain. I still wanted to see him as the career-

obsessed coward, and me, in opposition to him, the self-sacrificing soldier willing to risk everything, break any rule, to do what was right, what I thought was right.

But I also knew I was wrong. There's nothing right in war. My smirk had always been a defense mechanism hiding something deeper. I felt it almost immediately. It welled up in my stomach, my mouth relaxed, my countenance dropped. In Iraq, I just wanted the experiences of war—to feel what it felt like to be a hero—with wanton disregard for any of the long-term consequences suffered by the Iraqi people. But now, seeing my Captain, who after ten years had reached the pinnacle of the “heroic” military system I'd envied, I could no longer pretend. My actions overseas, disrupting a country in which I didn't belong, weren't brave. They were an attempt to live out a juvenile fantasy. Thinking my Captain a coward was just an excuse to justify this selfish pursuit.

I took a step in my Captain's direction. There was one thing left to do, the right thing. I needed to say, “I'm sorry.” I was sorry for how I treated him. I was sorry for who I pretended to be. I was sorry for almost everything I did in Iraq. But for some reason, I hesitated, and he walked out of the room.

I guess that makes me a coward too.

