

New Nonfiction from Teresa Fazio: “Light My Fire”

The following excerpt is from Teresa Fazio’s [Fidelis: A Memoir](#), reprinted with permission from Potomac Books.

A week before leaving Iraq, I shuffled through my post-deployment health assessment, a quiz to divine if we were crazy or sick or prone to shooting our loved ones. I gave the pasty Navy doc the answers he wanted: *Yeah, I’m fine. No, I haven’t seen anyone killed—lifting that transport case doesn’t count. Yes, of course I was exposed to sand. No, no nightmares, not lately. Shit blows up, whatever. No anxiety, just stress. I’m an officer; I can handle it. Let me go.*

I was impatient with anyone who hadn’t also been in Iraq for seven months, laying cable like my wire platoon. Our replacements’ questions—where did this cable lead, when was chow, was there really a shot-up mural of Saddam Hussein—disrupted my precious workaholic routine, the one for which Marla, another female lieutenant, had nicknamed me Rain Man. With the new troops swelling our numbers, we spent the next several weeks laying as much cable as possible. The Marines bore down, digging what trenches they could with a motorized Ditch Witch, then pickaxing the more sensitive areas bordered by concertina wire. They laid cables straight into sandy trenches, zip-tying them every few feet and burying them under fine grains. Their knees shone white, and they washed grit from their hands and necks before meals. It sucked, but it was celebratory for the Marines leaving country: a last hurrah, the old guys willing to do anything to get out of there, the new guys excited to do anything at all. Even if it meant pulling cable hand over hand, fingers pruning with sweat in canvas gloves. As they tipped blue strands of Ethernet, bits of plastic tumbled to the ground, until everything was wired in. I watched Marla help dig, her slim figure bent at

the waist, forearms dirty, red bun over delicate features. Though half the company comprised new troops, I didn't overhear anyone hit on her.

Fortunately, a squared-away comm-school classmate named Torres took over my wire platoon. Major Davis tossed me the keys to our battalion's SUV, so Torres and I could inspect the cable line. Airfield to the left, headquarters to the right, the rest of Camp Taqaddum a desert plateau. The Euphrates winked below us if we craned our necks just right. Though I hadn't driven in seven months, the potholed roads felt familiar. Torres' clean uniform stood out against dusty upholstery.

I pulled over within sight of some junked Soviet planes, where I'd once gone on a long run with Jack and one of his sergeants.

Torres asked if mortars hit around TQ a lot. I told him that in the past month, most of the danger had stayed outside the wire. Except down that road—I pointed toward the gate where insurgents had crashed a vehicle full of explosives. And, I continued, when the mortars got close to regiment, peppered that empty tent—that was bad. Cut our fiber optics. Fucked up like a football bat. I climbed out of the car and kicked a toe in the sand, unearthing zombie cable. Torres didn't ask any more questions.

A few afternoons later, hopped up on caffeine with nothing to do, I called Jack from the Systems Control hut. He couldn't hang out; he had an angel coming in, he said, a mortar victim from Fallujah. All of the other times I'd been in his room, he'd shooed me away when the calls had come. This time, I asked to watch him work. I wanted to finally witness the cause of his sleepless nights.

"Major Davis would crucify me if I let you see this without him knowing," Jack said. But when I asked the major if I could watch Jack work, he just braced a hand on the two-by-four door

frame and said, "Yup."

In his bunker, Jack pressed play on James Taylor's Greatest Hits. It calmed him, he said. Two Marines lay a stretcher on sawhorses and unzipped a body bag: an ashen Navy Seabee with a fresh haircut. Blood sluiced to the sawdusted floor. One Marine held the clipboard; several more circled the body. They marked the locations of wounds and tattoos, crossing the Seabee's stiff arms over his chest for balance. Jack donned nitrile gloves and pulled a brand-new pack of Camels from the Seabee's pocket. A fist-sized hole bled where a heart had once beaten. *Fire and Rain* kept time.

I shifted from foot to foot as Jack counted dog tags, ID card, wallet, and photographs into a manila envelope. He motioned me back with an outstretched arm and a frown.

The whole process took only fifteen minutes. Soon the chaplain thumbed a cross on the Seabee's brow. The Marines put him in a fresh body bag, strapped it into a flag-draped transport case, and tied it tight with twine.

After, Jack wadded his nitrile gloves into the trash and led me to his room. We shut the door, no matter his Marines cleaning up in the outer bay. He pulled me in, kneading my back; I pressed my nose into his T-shirt and inhaled. Together, we breathed.

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The next night, there were no casualties. I stayed long enough after midnight to hear Jack say my name and "I love it when you touch me" and his son's name and "I love you." He saw the dead when he slept. He thought of them constantly, he said, except when he was with me. We dozed an hour. Then I pressed my lips to his forehead, found my glasses, and slipped away. Six more days left in Iraq.

The next morning, on my walk to stand watch, I ran into

Sanchez exiting the chow hall. I teased him about the samurai pads snapped to his flak vest: floppy hip guards, shoulder pads, a flat, triangular groin protector. Each piece sported a different pattern: digital desert, analog woodlands, Desert Storm chocolate chips. He was a Marine Corps fashion nightmare.

When I got to work, I found out the reason for all that gear. A vehicle-borne IED had hit a convoy northwest of Fallujah, killing seven Marines and wounding six. A “mass casualty” event. Jack, Sanchez, and others rode out on a convoy to recover the bodies.

I couldn’t sit still, so I walked into the TechCon van. Maybe the sergeants could offer distraction, whether with work, or with *Nip/Tuck*, their latest binge-watching addiction featuring plastic surgeons in compromising relationships. We watched for three hours, until we hit an episode where the plot revolved around infidelity.

I remembered that Jack was on the convoy.



This “other woman” had terminal cancer. Her adulterous lover helped her commit suicide before the cancer took her. The woman penned letters and sipped milk to coat her stomach while swallowing handfuls of pills. As she watched a lakeside sunset and the soundtrack played Elton John’s *Rocketman*, I felt a wash of fear.

Jack was still on a convoy.

While watching the show, I wondered, Will that be my punishment, too? I’d become increasingly anxious about our imminent return to the States. Even more than getting caught, I feared losing what I thought was my only chance at love. Jack’s wife in California loomed far larger than any bomb threat. A thick sludge of guilt coated my powdered-egg

breakfast. I controlled my breathing.

He was still on a convoy.

After the episode ended, I stumbled out of TechCon into sunlight, blinking back lethargy from hours of TV. I had to do something good, something officer-like: inspect the cable. Check on my troops. I controlled my breathing and swallowed the lump in my throat.

At the far end of the flight line, my Marines were deepening a trench in a spot plagued by heavy truck traffic. I walked the fiber optic lines along the airfield's edge, checking them for bald spots, kinks, and cuts. The air reeked of diesel. Helicopter rotor blades blended into a buttery hum. Sparrows flitted along eight-foot-tall Hesco barriers. After fifty yards or so, I stopped and peered down the flight line. Maybe a hundred yards left. Hot, boring work. I figured I could get to my Marines more quickly on the other side of the barriers, where there was a concrete path. I ducked behind them at the next opportunity.

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WHUMP. Seconds later, a mortar landed on the airfield. I felt the blast wave in my chest and teeth. I took a few steps forward, thinking of my troops digging near the flight line entrance.

WHUMP. Another mortar round, a little farther away. A small rock kicked up by the blast flew over my head, or was it shrapnel? I had the urge to reach for it, to catch it, but I did not. Instead I turned around to head back to our company's headquarters. As my Marines fast-walked past me, carrying ammo cans full of tools, I thought only of counting their heads.

In the following months and years, I would wish I had been on the exposed airfield side of the Hesco barriers when the mortars hit, that I had sprinted full-tilt toward my Marines

digging that trench, instead of taking a few steps forward before retreating. I would even wish I'd been hit by shrapnel, like a vigilant lieutenant. Was that the most fitting consequence of what I'd been doing with Jack? If he returned from his convoy to find me lifeless, would caring for my body have made him love me, made him stay?

In any case, he returned. Late that night, I lingered outside Comm Company's compound under a hard pearl moon. A hundred yards away, Jack's Marines unloaded one, two, three, four, five, six, seven body bags from their refrigerated truck. Then they hefted still more.

Under the floodlights, I made out Hoss's lanky silhouette, spotted Mullins's round shoulders and rolling gait, almost heard his Southern drawl. Two more darted around the truck, its tailgate the height of their heads, shepherding paperwork. Sanchez stood straight and musclebound, lifting tirelessly. Sergeant Jonas barked orders.

Soon they all moved inside; they must have been grabbing clipboards and unzipping body bags. I stared at the bunker doors, wishing I could enter. If I had tried, Jack would have shouted me away, and Mullins and Jonas would have shaken their heads. I would like to say decorum held me back from going over there. Really, it was shame. The most honorable thing I could do was stay away. Wait to go home.

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