

Fiction from Peter Molin: “The Brigade Storyboard Artist”

Captain Alex Athens had been the undisputed master of PowerPoint storyboards within the brigade headquarters since the unit's arrival in Afghanistan. No order was disseminated until he had compressed it into a carefully orchestrated one-slide tapestry of photos, maps, graphic symbols, and textual data that prescribed every detail of an upcoming mission from intelligence to logistics to actions-on-the-objective. No mission was complete until he had compiled a perfectly manicured one-page/one-screen garden of text and images representing information, data, assessment, and analysis that thereafter would comprise the enduring record of whatever had happened, no matter what anyone said later on, and each storyboard he created was eminently ready to be submitted up the chain-of-command, if the event or mission recorded was important enough, to “the highest levels” and consequently shape understanding of what was happening on the battlefields and drive policy and strategy decisions.

Nominally objective, his storyboards were in reality a representation meticulously constructed by Captain Athens' highly organized, supremely artistic processing of what really realer-than-real soldiers had encountered outside the wire, reported in terse radio reports, scribbled about on notepads, photographed on pocket cameras, and committed to memory as best they possibly could under confusing, stressful circumstances. Though far from the senior officer on the brigade staff, Captain Athens had made himself its most valuable member in the brigade commander's eyes. No one could tell the story of what was supposed to happen as well as Captain Athens, and no one could better tell the story of what supposedly had happened.



Declassified US Army storyboard published in "The Most Lethal Weapons Americans Found in Iraq," by John Ismay, October 18, 2013, New York Times.

Captain Athens' success had imbued him with an autocratic, aloof air that made him respected, though more feared than well-liked, among his peers on the brigade staff. In that claustrophobic and deeply unhappy cauldron of furious military endeavor, lots of people grumbled, could be prickly to deal with, and periodically descend into funks, but a spirit of shared servitude, black humor, and forced good cheer generally prevailed, so it was notable that Captain Athens had few friends among the many other staff officers, nor did he seem to bond with the other officers scattered throughout the base. But whether he was liked or not was really beside the point. Since no one worked for him directly, he couldn't really make anyone miserable personally, so as long as he kept creating storyboards that were better than anyone else's and were loved by the brigade commander, then that was enough, more than enough, really.

But when Captain Athens went on mid-tour leave, the problem arose of who would replace him as the brigade's designated storyboard creator. Captain Jones tried, but his storyboards were full of errors and oddly un-synchronized typefaces and needed dozens of revisions before they were ready to be disseminated. Captain Smith's were okay, but just okay, and he couldn't complete them in a timely manner, let alone work on two or three simultaneously as could Captain Athens. With Captain Athens gone, both morale and effectiveness within the brigade headquarters plummeted. Without his storyboards suturing gaps between concept and plan and plan and action, uniting the headquarters across all staff sections and up-and-down the chain-of-command, it felt like the brigade was fighting the enemy one-handed. Orders were understood

incoherently and execution turned to mush. Storyboards sent higher generated questions and skepticism, or even derision. The brigade commander's mood turned more horrible than usual and he pilloried his deputy and senior staff members, accusing them of sabotaging the success of his command.

Desperate for help, the brigade ransacked their subordinate units for an officer or staff NCO who might replace Captain Athens. Of course none of the subordinate units wanted to give up their own best storyboard artist, so now they engaged in subterfuges to avoid complying with brigade's tasking. That's how Technical Sergeant Arrack's name got sent up to brigade. In his battalion, he'd been a night shift Tactical Operations Center NCO whose potential as a storyboard artist was unrecognized. An Air Force augmentee to an infantry unit, he had never been outside the wire, much less in combat. Nothing much was expected of him by the infantry bubbas with whom he worked, thus the night shift TOC duty answering routine radio transmissions and compiling the morning weather report. The battalion submitted his name to brigade confident that it would be summarily rejected and they wouldn't have to replace Sergeant Arrack on the night shift. But Sergeant Arrack's trial storyboard for brigade had been magnificent. Created to support the brigade's new plan to engage the local populace on every level of the political-economic-cultural-military spectrum over the next six months, it was a masterful blend of bullet points, text boxes, maps, charts, images, graphics, borders, highlights, and different type faces and fonts, totally first-class in every way and obviously presentable without correction even at "the highest levels." The brigade operations officer's heart leaped when he saw it, because he recognized how good it was and was confident that it, and Sergeant Arrack, too, would make the brigade commander very happy.

And so he was, and so for the remaining three weeks of Captain Athens' leave Sergeant Arrack was the brigade go-to storyboard

creator. In twenty-five days he generated thirty-seven unique storyboards in addition to the routine ones that accompanied daily briefings and needed only to be adjusted for recent developments. The entire life of the brigade during that period passed through Sergeant Arrack's fingertips and into his computer's keyboard and then to reappear in magically animated form on his workstation screen: raids, key leader meetings, unit rotation plans, IED and suicide bomber attacks, VIP visits, regional assessments, intelligence analyses, and every other operation and event that took place in the brigade's area of operations was nothing until it was transformed by Sergeant Arrack's storyboard artistry.

Captain Athens heard-tell of some of this while on leave and didn't like it. Though overworked as the primary brigade storyboard artist, he liked the status and the attention it brought to him. Truth to tell, he was glad when his leave ended and he made his way back to the brigade headquarters. But his first meeting with Sergeant Arrack did not go well. Sergeant Arrack was seated at his workstation, busy on an important project. Engrossed in what he was doing, he had barely looked up. "Hm, good to meet you, sir, I've heard a lot about you," he murmured, and turned his eyes back to his computer screen and began tapping away again at the keyboard. Captain Athens hated him immediately, and he could tell his place within the brigade HQ had now changed. Among other things, people just seemed to like Sergeant Arrack more than they liked Captain Athens, and were eager to work with him, eat with him, and hang out with him, while they approached Captain Athens gingerly. And when the brigade operations officer assigned Captain Athens a new storyboard project, it was obvious that it wasn't a priority mission, what with the operations officer making a lame excuse about easing Captain Athens back in slowly.

Over the next five weeks, the tension between Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack bubbled. Captain Athens was now Sergeant

Arrack's superior, and though Captain Athens didn't do anything totally unprofessional, he didn't make things easy for his subordinate, either. He assigned him menial tasks such as inspecting guard posts around the FOB walls in the middle of the night and inventorying the headquarters supply vans, all ploys designed to get Sergeant Arrack out of the brigade headquarters while reminding him of his place in things. Rarely did Captain Athens let Sergeant Arrack near a computer and he never complimented him or made small talk of any kind with him. Everyone on the staff saw what was going on, and gossiped about it endlessly, but no one said anything officially, and the atmosphere within the brigade headquarters roiled as a result of the unconflicted animosity. For his part, Sergeant Arrack spoke about the matter only in guarded terms with some of the other staff NCOs. He didn't want to make trouble, but it wasn't long before he hated Captain Athens just as much Captain Athens hated him. The brigade commander pretended not to notice anything was wrong, but neither did he tell anyone that he had come to like Sergeant Arrack's storyboards more than Captain Athens'. The captain's were good, but Sergeant Arrack's were better.

The tension between Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack boiled over when Captain Athens told Sergeant Arrack he was detailing him to the dining facility to conduct headcounts. Sergeant Arrack determined not to take the sleights any longer and complained to the senior Air Force NCO on post who spoke to the brigade command sergeant major who then spoke to the brigade commander. The conversation between the commander and the command sergeant major took place at an auspicious moment, however. The night previously a raid to capture a high value target had gone very wrong. The intended target had not been at the objective and the military age male who had responded to the noise outside the family kalat walls with an AK-47 in his hand and subsequently shot by the Americans had been a nephew of the provincial governor. That's not to say he couldn't have been Taliban, too, but there was no proof that

he was, and his death would certainly demand explanation. Next, a woman in the kalat, distraught and angry, had charged the American soldiers, and she too had been shot. As the unit had waited for extraction from the already botched mission, the helicopters coming to get them had identified a group of gunmen a klick away from the landing zone. Not taking any chances, the helicopter pilots had opened fire on the shadowy shapes in their night vision goggles, but the gunmen turned out to be a platoon of Afghan army infantrymen on patrol with their American advisor team. Even worse than worse, the advisors had done most things right—they had had their mission plan approved, called in all their checkpoints, and marked themselves and the Afghans appropriately with glint tape and infrared chem lights that should have made them recognizable to the helicopter pilots—but once buried deep in the mountain valleys their comms had gone tits-up and they couldn't talk to anyone quickly enough to forestall the attack from above. So now the airstrike was a cock-up of the highest order and six Afghan soldiers, along with the two civilians, plus one American soldier, were dead, and higher headquarters was screaming for information and the Afghan provincial governor was outside the door demanding to know what the brigade commander was going to do about it.

If any event was going to be briefed at "the highest levels," it was this one for sure, and the brigade would need the best damn storyboard anyone had ever created to make sure the right narrative and message were conveyed or the mess would even grow bigger. It wasn't just that the facts had to be right, the tone had to be perfect, or even more than perfect, if that was possible. The storyboard had to signify that the mishap in the dark night was just an unfortunate blip in a continuum of fantastically positive things that were happening and that everything was under control, that the brigade had this, would get to the bottom of things, learn the appropriate lessons, take the right actions, punish appropriately who needed to be punished, and just generally get on with it without any help

from higher and especially without the basic competence of the unit, which meant the reputation of the brigade commander, being put up for discussion.

The brigade command sergeant major, oblivious to the events of the night before, walked into the brigade commander's office at 0730 to discuss the Sergeant Arrack situation. Normally the brigade commander would have cut him off, but the mention of Sergeant Arrack's name gave him an idea. He would have both Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack build storyboards describing the events of the previous night. It would be the ultimate test, he thought, to build the best storyboard possible under the most trying conditions imaginable, and whichever storyboard was best would go a long way to forestalling tidal waves of scrutiny from above. The brigade commander issued directions to the operations officer and the operations officer passed the word to Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack. Each commandeered a workstation with an array of secure and non-secure laptops spread out in front of them and multiple oversized screens on which to project their designs. They gathered records of radio message traffic and patrol debriefs, both hard-copy and digital, pertinent to the botched mission and opened up all the necessary applications on their computers. Each was told they had full access to anyone they needed to gather information and reconcile conflicting reports, but they had only two hours to complete their work and send their storyboards to the brigade commander, who of course would pick the one to be sent to higher. Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack fueled themselves with energy drinks, snacks, and dip, and got to work. After two hours of furious endeavor, each pushed save one last time and sent their storyboards forward.

Captain Athens' storyboard was good, real good. The brigade commander gazed at it on his computer screen and admired its very organized and aesthetically pleasing appearance. In the upper left corner was the required administrative

information—unit name, date-time group, security classification, etc. Down the left border was a timeline, in great detail, of all the events that had taken place on the mission. In the upper-half-center was a map that showed the locations of the night's major events. Each was marked with a succinct, well-turned description of what had occurred in each location. Below the map were four pictures, each dedicated to showing a different aspect of the night's events. On the right were a series of summarizing statements that prudently listed complicating factors, actions already completed in response to the disaster, and actions planned to be taken in the name of damage control. Everything was done extremely competently, perfectly positioned, not a thing out of place. Borders, background, font and font-size were all to standard. It exuded the professionalism of a unit that had its shit together in every way and as such would undoubtedly forestall questions and offers of unwanted help. The brigade commander was pleasantly surprised; Captain Athens had come through in spades.

Then the brigade commander opened the email attachment sent by Sergeant Arrack. The PowerPoint slide clicked into focus and the brigade commander gasped, for what appeared was not what he expected and could hardly even be said to be a storyboard. Unbeknownst to the brigade commander, Sergeant Arrack had been up all night trying to resolve a problem with his daughter's childcare plan back home in New Mexico. The situation still wasn't right when he had gone to chow in the morning. At the dining facility, he sat with a group of soldiers from his old infantry battalion who filled him with stories of how shitty things had gone down on last night's raid. When Sergeant Arrack arrived at brigade, a scorching email from his ex-wife greeted him accusing him of not fulfilling the requirements of their divorce decree. Then the operations officer gave him the mission to make a storyboard that would cover the brigade's ass about the fucked-up raid, and do it in so-called "friendly" competition with an officer whose guts he hated,

and vice-versa. "Fuckin' fuck this fuckin' horseshit," he had muttered as he settled into his workstation.

Sergeant Arrack's creation was immediately arresting, no doubt, but it had little obviously to do with the mission the night before. Instead, Sergeant Arrack had created a gruesome montage of horrific war-related images, snippets of military operations orders and Persian script, along with smears of colors, mostly red and black. The most striking image was that of an Afghan man with a knife sunk to the hilt in the side of his head. Somehow the man's countenance teetered between that of an extremely gaunt but handsome young Afghan and a skullish death-head whose vacant eye-holes bore into the viewer like the gaze of doom. It was as if Sergeant Arrack, an extremely talented artist, had perceived the assignment as a chance to portray the hellishness of war as effectively as possible, without a touch of romantic idealization of its dark side, and had done so in way that manifested both supreme imaginative power and technical skill. The whole thing, beautiful and terrifying at the same time, constituted a huge FU to the Army mission in Afghanistan generally and to a brigade he no longer cared about personally.

The brigade commander expressed mild concern about Sergeant Arrack's state-of-mind—"Holy shit, Sergeant Arrack has lost it!"—but he was too busy to either take offense or worry much about Sergeant Arrack now. He of course selected Captain Athens' storyboard as the competition winner and with no changes immediately forwarded it to his boss accompanied by a note explaining that he was in full control of the response to the calamities of the previous night. He then told Captain Athens to look out for Sergeant Arrack but under no circumstances did he want to see him in the brigade headquarters again. Captain Athens didn't have any problems with the order and even gloated a little that his competitor had cracked up under the pressure of the tough assignment. Sergeant Arrack's perverted storyboard might be museum quality

but that's not what mattered now. Working with the command sergeant major and the Air Force liaison NCO, Captain Athens placed Sergeant Arrack on 24/7 suicide watch for a week and then reassigned him to the FOB fuel point in the motor pool. Now, instead of building slides in the air-conditioned brigade operations center for review at "the highest levels," Sergeant Arrack pulls twelve-hour shifts in a plywood shack annotating fuel delivery and distribution on a crumpled, coffee-stained spreadsheet secured to a dusty clipboard. To kill time during the hours when absolutely nothing is happening, he sweeps spider webs from the corners of the office.

"The Brigade Storyboard Artist" originally appeared in [Time Now](#), October 7, 2016.