

New Nonfiction by Ivory Schanfelter: “Condition Black”



Time in a combat zone passes strangely. When you are surrounded by the incredible, the human mind has a tendency to dull your senses so that the days aren't memorable, but there are a few days that stand out as brightly to me as a muzzle flash spitting in the dark.

One morning we were cruising along. Afghanistan in its simple beauty whipped by me. Women tightened their shawls as we passed. Children laughed and shouted, waved, or threw rocks.

“Chocolate mataraka!!!” they'd shout. In English this means literally 'give me chocolate.'

A hand taps my leg. I chance a glance downward. Sgt Northmoney is looking up at me.

“Do you smell something funny?” he asks.

“I’m smoking a cigar,” I answer without hesitation. I’m too high to care that I might be found out, and frankly, I was a little annoyed at what he was insinuating. Yes, I was smoking drugs on our patrol. Yes, I was getting high as the lead gunner in a convoy. Yes, I was endangering the lives of everyone on board with my negligence. Guess what? Prove it! Not that I really wanted my Sgt to look closer, I just was in a constant state of defiance.

“Okay,” he says unconvincingly, but then he shrugs and I know I’m in the clear. The rest of that patrol was uneventful.

I had been in Afghanistan for months. I was ready to go home. I was sick of all the hot sun and long mission briefs. Sick of all the crude jokes and mindless drivel. The mocking we as men give one another makes me think of the schoolyard and crushes we had; we may as well have been pulling each other’s pigtails.

I had started smoking hashish in the turret of my vehicle around the middle of our battalion’s deployment. A few of us would purchase it off an interpreter back in our FOB whenever we had some down time.

Up to this point the idea had never occurred to me that the things I was seeing and doing would have any affect at all on my mental health. I was the same Avory in my mind who had joyfully flunked out of high school a few years before. The same Avory who played video games all hours of the night, and screamed obscenities at random passerby while driving in America. The same Avory who missed his brother and his mother.

There's an idea we've all had that remains just out of focus. Slightly out of reach to our mind. Of our understanding. You think to yourself, "I'll just forcibly extend to this idea, and then I'll be one with the idea, and the idea won't be out of focus anymore." Instead, you notice no matter how hard you think on it, or maneuver it or your thoughts to achieve or attain this idea, it remains foggy. So it was for me from this point on, and for a long time afterwards. The idea I was seeking to achieve was soundness of mind, and it continued to elude me.

I was fooling myself that I hadn't changed. I was meaner. Less trusting. Snapped at any moment. I started volunteering when I didn't have to, and stopped taking care of myself altogether. I had a nickname through the rest of my time in the marine corps because of this. Dirty, they called me. And I was dirty. Crusty. I didn't care.

On the last day of Ramadan, I volunteered to be the lead gunner again. We needed so many bodies to make up a full squad, they were short one. I volunteered. We left the wire like normal and set a cordon for a ground patrol that was sweeping through a couple compounds. I had my 240 machine gun in condition 3, like how it always was. That meant ammo was in the receiver on the tray ready to be fired. The only thing missing in this condition is I would have to pull the bolt back to the rear. After that, all I'd have to do is pull the trigger, and I'd be slinging 7.62 rounds down range at the rate of 950 rounds per minute. Condition 1. It makes sense that we would ride around in condition 3 when you think about how deadly it was at the touch of the trigger. You wouldn't want to accidentally put a burst into someone's house. Or family member.

The cordon was uneventful, though. I even decided against smoking this day. So I believed my mind was clear. I had a mud wall I could just see over in front of me, that led to a medium sized courtyard.

I was busy thinking about something, when gunshots rang out in the compound in front of me. The familiar rush of adrenaline pounded through my veins, along with the familiar fear.

I risked poking my head down really quick to ask my Sgt. "Is that right over there?", I burst out to him incredulously, but I didn't shout.

My Sgt said, "yeah I think so", perfectly calm.

Back on my 240, I slammed the bolt to the rear, now ready to put so many rounds through it that it melted the barrel if I needed it to.

Adrenaline urges me on as I press my cheek on the buttstock, and I firmly plant my shoulder behind the gun.

I can't believe it, contact right in front of me, not even 30 feet away. With a chilling thought, I realize we are in grenade throwing distance. A helicopter screams by overhead, its rotors beat a drum against my back.

The rims of my vision take on a reddish hue, before darkening to black. All I can see is the top of that mud wall, and the sight of my barrel. My hearing starts to dim too. All of a sudden there is no sound, just an increasing whining noise that starts somewhere deep in my psyche. A place I didn't even know exists. All the while gunfire rings out staccato like, one pop followed quickly by another.

"Schanfelter!" A voice from the bottom of a well.

I rotate my machine gun methodically back and forth along the top of the mud wall, daring a taliban to pop his stupid head up. Wishing he would. 'Do it', my voice screams in my head.

'Pop your head up. My finger is on the trigger, ready to split your skulls ,and shred your bodies, and spill your brains, and spill your guts, and—'

"SCHANFELTER!" A voice I hear but don't hear echoing again from that well.

'Do it, you stupid, stupid taliban pieces of crap. I dare you. I want you to come at me, stick your stupid head up, taste my fury! Taste my vengeance, feel my wrath, pay in blood, pay in blood, pay in—'

"SCHANFELTERRRR!!!!!"

That voice finally reaches me and I scream, "WHAT," while tearing my tunneled vision briefly off my sights to see something very confusing. It's my vehicle commander Cpl Junger.

Standing in the open.

Looking relaxed.

I notice no one else has moved either, except they all look at Cpl. Ewing and me.

"Schanfelter." Cpl Junger says soothingly.

"What?" I say, matching his low voice.

"They're fireworks." He smiles at me.

I look around at everyone looking at me, and the continued gunfire popping repeatedly in the compound along with the sound of children laughing wildly.

Wait, children laughing?

Then reality comes flooding back to me, and what Cpl Junger says sounds home. It's not gunfire, there are kids in the compound shooting fireworks. My vision starts to return. It's

just fireworks. People start to look away and go back to what they were doing.

Another bout of popping sounds, followed by the screeching joy of carefree children.

Just fireworks.

I look back at Cpl Junger as he smiles at me reassuringly.

“Oh,” I say.

We look at each other a moment.

“I was gonna do a whole other thing.” I say jokingly.

Cpl Junger laughs, turns and walks away.

I smile at the few remaining faces turned towards me. They take the bait and go about their business.

I turn and open the tray, take the bullets off, and pull the trigger, holding the bolt so it doesn't fly forward, and ride the bolt home. I return the bullets to the tray.

It was the last day of Ramadan, and the whole city of Sangin was celebrating. Fireworks and dancing were happening everywhere.

And here I was about to shoot a couple of kids.