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Exerpt

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Foreword by David J. Bercuson

A gritty, compelling, boots-on-the-ground memoir of one Canadian soldier's experience in Afghanistan

Nothing can prepare a person for the reality of bloody, concussive warfare. . . . Those who like war are aptly named warriors. Some, like me, are fated never to be warriors, as we are more afraid of war than fascinated by it. But I have the consolation that I have walked with warriors, and know what kind of men they are. I will never be a warrior, but I have known war.

Ryan Flavelle, *The Patrol*

Chapter 5

Mushan

17 July 2008

They say that there are no atheists in foxholes. I am certainly not a spiritual person, more of an armchair agnostic. Although I doubt that there is a God, I would rather stay out of the argument altogether. However, when I find myself inside the modern equivalent of a foxhole, my lofty intellectualism quickly erodes. Despite my convictions, I find myself becoming steadily less agnostic as the tour progresses. Now, when sitting inside the razor wire of the last friendly outpost east of Helmand, I hope passionately that there is a God. I don't claim to know the answers to the big questions, but I lift up my eyes and beg anything that wants to listen to spare my family suffering. I am so afraid of what tomorrow might hold that I need the comfort of something more powerful than I am.

I look up at the stars and pray that I will be protected from this place of bullets, razor wire, and death. Finally, I ask that I will be okay, and that if not my family will understand and will know that I love them. It is 0200, and I only have three and a half hours before the patrol is set to begin.

I take a deep breath of the cool, refreshing Afghan air, sigh, and totter off to my beloved ranger blanket.

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Waking up in an army camp conjures images of bugles, horses, and trumpets. In my experience, reveille, despite its pretentious name, is simply a series of people softly shoving and poking their neighbours awake. This noise is followed by the distinct and fearful sound of people waking up around you, shaking off their sleeping bags, and putting on their kit. For a few seconds I try to hide in my ranger blanket, but there is nothing I can do. The morning has arrived. By the time I finish picking my helmet out of the sand, pulling out my smokes, and sitting down to await the patrol, orange light is

beginning to show on the horizon. I sit and watch it grow, and smoke my second cigarette of the day.

The frantic activity around me has subsided into groups of people sitting around, looking large in their body armour, smoking, talking, or dozing. As the sound of an ANA soldier greeting the sun with his morning prayers echoes through the camp, the word is passed: Kit up, get on your feet. So we stand up and shuffle into position, feeling once again the weight of our packs. I look at Chris's goggles and wonder how he gets them to stay in place so well. I smoke another half of a cigarette and after an interminable time the man in front of me starts to walk.

We are taking our first steps into the bright Afghan sun. My stomach is twisting itself up into knots. Frankly, I'm nervous. For the last three days the Taliban haven't made their presence known, but we can feel them watching us from every grape hut and compound we pass. I know deep down that today is going to be the day. We plan to search most of the compounds in the village; we plan to hit the enemy where it hurts and seize his weapons before he can escape. We know that we won't be allowed to do this without a fight.

We cross about a kilometre and a half of flat mudfields before reaching the outskirts of the village. They are completely level, and broken into a grid by tiny mud walls that allow them to be flooded. The last time we walked through these fields, they were filled with poppies drooping low with the weight of seed pods containing unrefined opium. As the harvest began, the fields had been filled with young Fighting Age Males (FAMs). The military makes an important distinction between fighting age and not. (Soldiers refer to them as Fighting Age Guys.) Their eyes had burned holes into our skulls as we patrolled past them. It would be these men who would take up arms against us after the harvest was complete. About a month later we are walking through the same fields, now devoid of any sign of life, and only an ominous silence greets us.

This silence does not last long; the ANA, cheerfully running, marching, and chattering their way into position, infect the landscape with life. They leave a trail of ration garbage almost everywhere they go, and when you follow them you merely need to look for the empty packages of Power Banana Chips and Honey Nut Cheerios.

We stop along a mud wall that comes up to chest level, and I look out onto the landscape. Nothing really seems different. I can see children and goats wandering around, and the village appears to have the same listlessness we encounter almost everywhere we go. Seeing women and children is usually a good sign, as they tend to flee before the Taliban fire on us. Nothing seems out of the ordinary, so I sit down to get the weight off of my shoulders and drink a bit of water. I ask Chris if he would like to get a picture together. He agrees, and I ask Peter, our terp, to take it. I still have the picture to this day. You can see Chris telling Peter to turn the camera on its side. In the background stand Major Lane and CWO Cavanagh. Whenever I see it I think of Chris, Peter, and that cool morning.

Peter is a gangly teenager who looks as if he has outgrown his combats. He has an adolescent's downy moustache, but acts like an adult in everything he does. I have learned that he is from a good family in Kandahar Province, and that he is a proud Pashtun – he holds a haughty expression whenever he talks. He's told me that his parents have a two-car garage, hard to imagine in the mud-walled hicksville of southern KP. Once some Taliban had gotten onto a bus he was travelling on and tried to kill everyone working for the International Security Assistance Force. He had his ISAF papers on him, but they didn't search him. In Afghanistan kids grow up more quickly than they do in the West, and Peter is looking forward to getting married on his next leave.

Peter has a remarkably effeminate way of smoking a cigarette, and he is one of the few terps who doesn't rely on sycophancy. He never covers his face to hide his identity when we are on patrol, and I think he really believes in what we are doing. He interpreted for the last rotation of Canadians, the Van Doos, and he had picked up some uniquely Canadian slang. His speech is liberally sprinkled with Québécois curse words, and we finally have to forbid the blasphemy *tabarnak* in our LAV. The sergeant-major once chewed him out for not wearing a helmet, and when we walk into the village proper he sullenly wears a large green Kevlar helmet over his cheap imported baseball cap. I think he always resented the sergeant-major for speaking down to a Pashtun of his imagined stature, and he was transferred a few weeks after this patrol. He once asked for my e-mail address, but I did not give it to him. He may very well have been selling information to the Taliban, and I couldn't take the chance.

I am a generally friendly person, and I like to meet new people and develop new relationships. But in Peter's case, I can't bring myself to fully trust him. It's not that he wasn't a nice person; I enjoy talking to him about Afghan culture, his family, and his childhood. But he is Pashtun, and I've heard too many horror stories of anonymous e-mails sent to family members at home, or to Pakistani hackers. Maybe some of these are apocryphal, but it doesn't matter. I don't trust any Afghan I meet, and to be fair none of them have earned that trust. I felt bad saying no to Peter, and I could see in his eyes that he was insulted, but it was too great a risk.

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As we walk into the village of Mushan, I think again about the neatly laid out dirt roads, and the engineering feat that was required to build mansions out of nothing but mud and garbage. We walk slowly as the heat begins to increase and stop often for water breaks or to allow searches to be conducted or to wait for people to get into the proper position. A line of Canadian soldiers forms itself to cover as much of Mushan as possible. We search for weapons, IEDs and bomb makers. My early-morning jitters begin to leach out of me as the Afghan sun pours in. The patrol stops being exciting or dangerous, and becomes for the most part monotonous.

I concentrate on my water consumption and the person in front of me. I talk briefly to the artillery observer behind me, and smoke cigarettes slowly despite the fact that they've already lost their appeal. We move a few slow kilometres and jump wadis and ditches. I focus on every footstep I take and try to ensure that I'm walking where someone else has. We continue with our almost lackadaisical pace until we reach a narrow road with a chest-level mud wall on our left and a wadi on our right. In the distance, I hear what I'd expected to hear since the patrol started.

Incoming gunfire sounds a lot more high-pitched than you would expect and a lot louder. Often, you don't hear it as much as you feel its concussion in your ears. It has become pretty commonplace to hear weapons in the distance; we hear them at night at our patrol base, and I'd heard a few distant firefights on earlier patrols. But this is different. It is closer and more immediate. The sound is coming from about 300 metres away, a mid-range that I am not used to. We hear only a few machine gun bursts, but

they stop us in our tracks. A pause follows – just long enough for me to think that I’d imagined the whole thing. Then the torrent breaks, and we hear one of the Canadian or ANA platoons start to return fire. They are much closer to us; in fact, I can see a friend in 4 Platoon sprint up into position. Immediately my radio squawks to life and the contact report begins coming over the air: “29er, this 21, contact, wait out.”

As we wait for 4 Platoon to get more information on exactly what’s going on I sit down. I don’t really know what to do. The reality of the situation is just beginning to dawn on me. This is not another exercise to wait out, in the certain knowledge that there isn’t any danger; this is a real live firefight, my first sustained close contact with the enemy. After training for seven years, this is the first time that it all really matters. The first time I have an opportunity to strike back at an invisible enemy that has taken its toll on our company with IEDs buried in the road. The first time I am in a situation where my decisions could become a matter of life and death.

The world seems to close in around me, and I have trouble thinking clearly. I’m not terrified, like I thought I would be; I’m more confused. My training has taught me to take cover and try to get to a good firing position. I kneel below the wall, listening to the fire erupt around me. It sounds like the percussion section of an orchestra; I can hear the staccato drum roll of Taliban machine guns and the response of individual pings of lone rifles, and the bass booms of M203 grenades. I hear on the radio that 4 Platoon and the ANA are both in contact along an approximately one-kilometre line. The fighting elements begin feeding back information: grids of enemy contact, locations of friendly call signs, estimated strength of enemy positions, and so on. The snipers climb onto a roof in an attempt to find a good firing position. It all happens the way it would in Wainwright or Shilo, *but this time it’s for real.*

I crouch behind a wall for only a few seconds before I see the OC get up and start walking quickly forward. He wants to further “define the battle space,” and it’s my job to follow him. As I stand up, two or three RPGs sail over the wall to our left in quick succession. They were aimed too high and explode in the abandoned field behind us. I’m not sure exactly how close they are, but I hear the scream as they pass, and see leaves on the tree behind me blow back and forth. I get the idea fixed in my brain that the Taliban are using my antenna, which sticks up almost half a metre above my head, as an aiming marker. They may very well be, as my antenna is probably the only thing

visible to the enemy some 200 metres away. The OC needs my radio, and I can see the sergeant-major running up and down the wall, trying to figure out who fired at us, and whether they were still firing. I harbour a strong desire not to stand up and show my antenna again, so I crawl over to where the OC is sitting, cursing his smaller radio and my inability to fix it (it is working properly; we are simply out of range). I sit down beside the OC and, like a pop up window in my brain, the words, "I've made a series of poor life decisions to get to this point. If I had made better decisions I wouldn't be here getting shot at" flash in front of my mind's eye.

I try to decide if what I'm doing is prudent or cowardly. The firefight continues to rage around me. My responsibility shrinks to a small portion of field across the wadi that I cover in case the Taliban try to flank us, and my radio, which provides the OC with the ability to talk to command. Through the fog in my mind I see Chris brush some thorns off a dip in the wall we are hiding behind, and thrust out his C8 while bullets continue to fly over the wall. I'm struck by how cautiously and professionally he pushes his weapon toward the sound of gunfire, and it dawns on me that I should probably do the same. Before this moment, I had expected combat to be reactive, to merely do what I had been trained to do. Although this is, to a certain extent, the way I am responding, I've never had to focus my will onto an action like I did at this moment. The rational part of my brain screams out to stay down and wait for it all to go away, but my training demands that I take up a firing position. I remain lost in a decision loop until I see Chris carefully but confidently push his head over the wall. I rally my will and stand up awkwardly.

The first thing I see is two soldiers from our weapons detachment (the guys who carried the C6 machine guns) trying to climb onto the roof of a small grape hut to our left. It's a simple enough task in most situations, but the combination of a machine gun weighing 18 kilos, 15 kilos of ammunition, and about 45 kilos worth of personal kit (body armour, pistol, helmet, water, etc.) make the process considerably more difficult. I look out into the field from which we received the RPG fire. By this point, a line of Canadian soldiers has spread out into firing positions. Section commanders are running around ensuring that everything is covered. The OC frantically takes notes on his map and passes information back to our higher call signs. In the field in front of me I see flashes of brown combat uniforms, 4 Platoon advancing toward the enemy. For the

briefest moment I also think I see a turbaned head skulk out of sight from one of the mud compounds on the other end of the field. To this day I'm not sure if that head belonged to the Taliban, a civilian, or my imagination.

Looking back today, the firefight takes on a moviesque quality. It doesn't seem like I was actually there. I had a feeling of utter detachment that I couldn't and can't quite define. For the most part I was numb, responding more than deciding how to act. It was as if I was an intensely interested observer going through the motions of being a soldier without actually being there. There was so much adrenalin going through my body it's not surprising I felt strange.

The weapons fire begins to die down, as the Taliban flee before the advancing Canadians. It looks like a simple "shoot and scoot," the normal Taliban response when we probe close to something they want to protect. Their usual plan is to fire long enough to pin down the Canadians while they rush whatever they don't want us to find out of the area. Most of the time, we usually have a pretty good idea of what the Taliban are hiding, but as they are unfettered by body armour and by the fear of IEDs, they usually escape on some winding path that we can't easily follow.

The threat now becomes booby traps in the compounds that the enemy have abandoned, and we call up the engineers to assist us in clearing them. After watching for a few minutes I decide that it would be prudent to hydrate while I have the opportunity, so I sit back down and drink half a bottle of water.