

1. Fire Support

“Reaper 2-1 this is Jester 2-3, confirming firing at JT-901453, over.”

“Reaper 2-1 confirms firing at JT-901453, out.”

“Roger 2-1, firing now, over.”

“Solid copy, out.”

“Shot, over.”

“Shot, out”

Boom.

“Splash, over”

“Splash, out.”

“I can confirm, the target is destroyed, repeat, target destroyed, much appreciated Jester.”

“Jester copies all, out.”

Working in “Danger close” isn’t always preferred, but when push comes to shove, you want someone high in the sky to be able to rain hell onto the bad guys below.

It must be nice and cozy 1000 feet up in the sky.

Once Jester had cleared the way for our tanks, we started to push forward a bit more. We didn’t really need to

worry about any resistance since they either were already dead or got scared off when they heard the JDAM scorch the earth around them. Our squad, Reaper, was tasked alongside Wolverine, Mongoose, and Cyclops to secure a High-Value target from behind enemy lines here in the desert.

After being in the Middle East for a few weeks, the heat starts to become more and more of a problem as more people start to get packed together into little groups. The guys in the tanks are lucky- they get A/C. Being A/C deprived may seem like a minor problem, but once you have hot sand in pretty much every orifice of your body and skin peeling in places you wouldn’t think possible, you start to wonder if it was even worth it to cross an ocean and sea to get to this sweaty armpit of a country.

Of course, there’s a few good things about it, too. My squad, Reaper, is considered an “escort” squad which essentially means that we get to have some sort of armour around us at all times, whether it be tanks, LAVs, or even jeeps, we always have that cushion that if anything were to go wrong, we’d have those guys to back us up.

Our tanks were able to cross the dingy “bridge” pretty easily, even though everyone was gritting their teeth in case one of the treads didn’t go where it was supposed to and caused to tank to fall into the river below.

They aren’t amphibious, you know.

The LAVs are, though.

Once inside the city-scape, the type of combat changes entirely. You find yourself constantly checking corners and

balconies in the event that someone with an RPG or .50 cal is lying in wait.

“Hey, J,” I hear a voice ask.

“Hm?”

I turn around to see the pointman, Edwards, holding up a small child.

“Ed, what are you doing with that kid?” I ask, hoping that Ed wasn’t thinking anything extreme

“Saw him snoopin’ around in the shadows, he could be feedin’ info to the bad guys.” he scoffs, holding up the kid by the scruff of his faded polo.

“Look, Ed, we don’t need to worry about some kid tattling on us, just let him go.”

“Hmph.”

Ed gave shot one last glare directly into the eyes of the child before throwing him on the ground. The kid quickly picked themselves up and scurried back into the shadows.

“You’re either way too cautious or way too paranoid sometimes, Edwards, I can never tell.”

The medic, Williams.

“Listen, Will, my ‘paranoia’ has saved your behind at least, hm, three times!” retorted Ed.

Why did you sound so unsure about that “three”?

“My behind is none of your business, Ed. Besides, J here is obviously getting sick of your ‘I’m the hero’ shenanigans, so why don’t you just drop it.” snarled Williams.

“You guys done with your routine? The tanks are getting ahead of us.”

I honestly just want to get done with this mission and go home. I’m sure everyone does, so there’s really no point in saying that out loud.

“Hey, uh, Reaper 2-1, looks like Reaper 2-4 got left behind in the riverbed, might want to go check up on him. We’ll wait for you guys here, over.”

Just as I was almost forced to physically pull my two comrades apart, I hear the voice of Wolverine 2-3 crackle in my headset.

“Oh, he might’ve gotten lost in the smoke. We’ll go get him, over.”

“Copy that, out.”

Reaper 2-4, or Jose, never really seemed to be able to keep up with the rest of the convoy since he insists to be able to take all of his gear with him wherever he goes.

I get that you’re the “support” but I mean c’mon man, the mortar can stay at the F.O.B.

“Hey, lovebirds, we’re moving back to get Jose, let’s go.”

Both of them give me a half-hearted “Yes, sir.” as they (finally) stopped their argument.

Reaper 2-2, or Rick Williams, is a field medic from Washington. Because of this, Frank Edwards, Reaper 2-3, from Louisiana, are always getting into fights, mostly because Ed never graduated high school and Will was able to get out of college with a master’s. Jose Martinez, Reaper 2-4, went through ROTC in college, although he never really understood the “commanding” part of “squad commander,” so he just ended up just picking something he liked- fiddling with stuff.

Guy's a real geardo if you ask me.

"Hey Jose, what're you doing? Why'd you split?" I asked on an open comm.

I got a quick response.

"Well, I thought I saw some suspicious activity on our trail so I set up some sensors and decided to wait." he replied.

I heaved a deep sigh, and made sure Jose could hear it.

"Jose, I was under the impression that we all wanted to get this done ASAP, right?"

Reaper 2-4 didn't answer.

I let out another sigh.

"C'mon let's go get 'em."

We went down into the concrete riverbed and saw Jose setting up a rudimentary field reconnaissance outpost. Honestly, it kind of scared me how quickly Jose could get these things set up.

Maybe not so much "scary" and more "really questionable."

"It really pains me that I've gotta say this, but pack all this stuff up. The tanks are waiting for us."

Jose shot a quick glance at me as he retracted the antenna out of some kind of radio. He scoffed, then began to seemingly do everything again but in reverse.

He really was unsettling.

With a motion of my hand, I said "We're gonna head up, don't take too long."

He responded with an "O.K."

When I enlisted, I never really wanted to be in a leadership position. I feel that I'm better at carrying out orders than I am taking them. My drill sergeant seemed to think so too, making remarks like "Careful around pushy girls, Adams." and "Girls are gonna trample all over you if you keep taking orders like second nature, maggot!" I don't really think that a single forty-something year old was in any position to give me relationship advice, but it seems like her advice rubbed off since from then on, I never even talked to girls who asked "Could you hold my bag?" on the first date.

Curse you, Drill Sergeant Polonski.

The worst part about having to patrol, let alone lead a squad, through a city is that you have no idea what the layout is, save for a map you're given at the mission briefing. Sure, the brass gives us maps that outline the road systems and locations of key buildings, but that's where the list ends. There'll always be small side roads and dwellings that can go completely unnoticed.

And you never know what could be waiting for you in those blind spots.

It seems that when your deployed, seeing any type of friendly vehicle will automatically reduce the amount of stress you're feeling. Right now, it wasn't any different.

We had made it back to the armor division along with Reaper 2-4, so we could now actually continue with our mission- securing a high value target located deep in the city.

Bombs are always the insurgent's weapon of choice against armored units. I mean it makes sense, there's always so

much material left over after a large conflict that some explosives are bound to get into the hands of the less-than-fortunate people in the world. These can vary from simple hand grenades to full on bombs meant to be dropped thousands of feet off the ground. And usually, you can hide these things right in the middle of a road.

Reaper squad was told to be the “pointman” in this operation, but naturally it’s kind of hard to always be in front of a Main Battle Tank, so we ended up lagging a few feet behind the lead tank. This, however, proved to be a fatal mistake

I was looking a little bit ahead of the lead tank, just a slight movement of my head, when I noticed something amiss. A small mound of sand in the center of the cracked, paved road, just a few feet away.

I knew I had to say something.

“Stop! Stop everyone! Possible I.E.D. up ahead! Stop!”

I yelled loud enough to make sure all the ground squads could hear me and waved my hands over my head.

Although, it seems it wasn’t loud enough for the tank in front to hear.

I’d forgotten to say so on open comms.

A split second before I could start reprimanding myself, my thoughts were cut off by the familiar sound of a nearby explosion.

“Nearby” is a bit of an understatement.

I soon found myself on my back, knocked back from the force of the explosion, the heat licked all over my body.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the tank in front of me on fire, a huge plume of smoke coming towards me, blown over by the wind. When the ringing in my ears stopped, I heard the screaming of the crewmen, along with the searing of their bodies.

Before anyone could rush over to help me or the crewmen, gunfire began to erupt around us.

An ambush.

They knew something like this would jarr our formation, let alone leave us dumbfounded, so they took advantage of it.

I felt the sensation of someone picking me up and dragging me into an alleyway. I looked up to see a face wearing a beard that I recognised. It was Williams.

“You alright, Adams?”

It took me a second to process his question.

“Yeah,” I groaned, propping myself upward with the help of my rifle.

Soon enough, the last two members of the squad met up with us in the alley. Ed gave us a “field report.”

“There’s guys with guns shooting at us all over the place, we gotta get outta here!” Ed said frantically.

“That’s obvious, Edwards…” I heard Williams mutter.

Jose seemed to agree with Ed.

“Yeah, running sounds like a good plan, at least figure out where they’re at,” he said.

“Alright, but first we have to link up with-”

My order was cut off by the sound of four other explosions, followed by one louder one. Sounds like they took out another one of the tanks. Another four servicemen dead.

I glanced out onto the street and was greeted with a sight that I won't ever forget. Men pinned down around the flaming wrecks of tanks, showered with sparks from 7.62mm bullets. The unidentifiable corpses of tank crews, burnt into a crisp. The faces of the men varied. Some showed fear, others stubborn courage. The insurgents were taking losses too as we had started to return fire from alleyways and from behind cover. We all knew that this could happen, but we all just tried to wish it wouldn't.

Nothing good ever comes from assumptions.

2.

Alleyways and Allegations

To say that we were terrified would be a bit of an overstatement. However, one can't help but feel a bit anxious in the situation we were in.

We had started to run down the tight alleyways leading outwards from the firefight, but only seemed to run into more tunnels. Jose had the idea that we should start heading into houses to get a better vantage point as the town was almost empty, save for the insurgents. With this, we started to move into a, rather large, three-story house which was adorned with middle-eastern style arches and architecture.

"Looks like these guys didn't take much with them, huh." Jose noted as we walked passed bits of furniture and some personal belongings.

We weren't briefed too much on what this town really was, so we had pretty much no idea why most of the place was empty.

Eventually, we made it up to the roof. The cracking sound of gunfire could still be heard from where we left, along with a large plume of smoke. We all took a second to stare off in thought, for our comrades that we left behind.

“Wait a minute.” I said.

Everyone turned to me.

“What did we just do...?”

No one answered me.

“We just left all of our guys back there to save our own skin, don’t you guys think that’s more than a bit selfish!?”

I was getting mad.

At my own men.

My comrades.

Edwards began to respond.

“Look, J, we just, uhm, had to complete the mission, ya know? I mean come on, if we stayed there we would’ve been shot to-”

“Give me good one reason why I shouldn’t drag you three back there and have you fight for your lives alongside the proud men you left behind.”

Then it was Williams who answered.

“We need to come clean, guys. No reason to hide now.”

Clean?

Are they spies?

Insurgents?

Do insurgents even have spies?

As I was processing this information, Williams started to speak again.

“We had, sort of, thought this might happen. So, we had a plan that we’d just run out before things got too out of hand”

What?

I looked at them with an expression of bewilderment.

“Y-you’re joking, right?”

“Th-then, when Jose went off earlier, did he think there was an attack? Was it just a false alarm or something?”

They all gave me solemn stares.

Then, Jose approached me.

“J, we all know that if we stayed there, we wouldn’t be long for this world. It’s common sense.”

I didn’t want to believe it.

I didn’t want to believe that I was going to wait until the last rifle from that distant gunfire would be snuffed out.

But,

I am a man of reason, above all else.

Without returning their stares, I gave them a quick response.

“Next time you plot something behind my back, well, there won’t be a next time, right?”

I did a short survey of the area.

“If we take those next two alleys, we’ll be back out in the outskirts of the city.”

I signed “let’s move” with my hand.

It wasn’t long before we made it out of the “maze of alleys” as Edwards had dubbed it. We had now found ourselves in, relatively, open terrain. However, if we were planning on getting all the way back to F.O.B., we’d need a car.

3.

Warnings for the Future

Ask anyone what their phobia is and you're bound to get a lot of varied responses. These could range from "What's a phobia?" to "Dear Lord, keep me away from any and all dairy products!" As for me, I have a particular fear of being alone, especially if it's when I'm in a place I don't recognise. I first realised this when I was transferred to a new campus in middle school. My first thoughts were: "Well, since I made friends so easily before, how could it be hard now?" However, that ideal slowly devolved into me finding myself alone all day until I got home. Needless to say, those were probably the least favourable times in my life, but that's not to say I didn't learn something. From that point onwards, I made it a personal goal to be an easy to talk to person, the kind of guy that would come talk to you if you were awkward and alone at a party. And I haven't given up on that.

It took at least half an hour to scrounge around for a car with it's keys still inside, not to mention it had to have some gas, too. The prize we got was your standard, run-of-the-mill white pickup.

Not exactly luxurious, but it's not like that even mattered.

"Geez, I wonder when was the last time someone even sat in here..." remarked Edwards.

Williams gave Edwards an annoyed look as he answered, "Probably recently, considering the keys are still here."

Jose slid his fingers around the key and turned it sharply to the right, causing the car to sputter awake.

"Eureka!" shouted Jose.

"Pipe down, we don't want everyone in this cursed town to hear us, you know." I scolded.

Jose pouted and reclined into the driver's seat, setting his Light Machine Gun on the floor of the truck. The rest of us kept our rifles in hand, ready to respond to any unwanted company.

I began to give a run-down of our plan.

"So from what I can tell from this map that I found in the glove box, it looks like the nearest town is around 15 clicks from here. Shouldn't take us too long. From there, we are going to continue east towards the closest F.O.B. Understood?"

The rest of the squad responded with a firm "Yes, sir!"

From there, I slumped into the faded upholstery chair and went deep into thought.

Who are these men I am with?

Why would they so easily brush off leaving friendlies behind to die?

What are their motives?

As I was pondering this, Jose gave me a slight poke in the arm.

“J, look, on the road, about a klick away.”

I followed Jose’s instructions and looked ahead of me to the road.

A large mass of wrecked vehicles were blocking the way ahead of us.

“Well, there’s just open desert all around us, so why don’t we just go around?” asked Edwards?

“No, that wouldn’t work.” I started. “There’s no way this is just by chance, I’m sure the bad guys are luring us into a trap. Stop the car.”

Jose obeyed, and the truck screeched to a halt.

“Alright, we’ll get out and keep going on foot. We have no idea what kind of ordinance is lying around on the road ahead of us.”

Jose grabbed his LMG and exited through his driver’s door. I did the same through the passenger door. The rest of the squad followed us through the back doors. Edwards rapped his hand against the hull of the truck as he got out.

After giving a brief look around, I gave a hand signal pointing towards the overpass in front of us.

“Let’s go!”

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It soon became apparent that the choice I made was the right one. Not even 50 meters ahead of our vehicle was a

covered mound of old munitions, mostly grenades, linked together by crude wiring.

After disabling the trap, we continued onward and went under the overpass that lay ahead of us. A thick layer of dust seemed to blanket the floor. The road had collapse inward and we had to be careful not to slip on any of the uneven rubble. Luckily, it seemed that no one had been driving on the road as it collapsed, so we weren’t greeted with the unsightly remains of an unlucky individual.

Not much time had passed until we were beyond the overpass and were left to behold the sight ahead of us. A town, not much larger than the last one we were in, that was bustling with activity. We could even hear all of the cars honking.

“Well gee, ain’t this a surprise,” remarked Ed, to no response.

“We keep moving.” I ordered.

Once we made it into the outskirts of the city, people start to glance over at us, and look away. Not really surprising considering they probably know someone that was on the “unexpected casualty” list from the last bombing. I took another quick look at the map before heading deeper inside of the town.

4.

The Sounds of Life

All men are created equal, it's a fact. However, when an individual is surrounded by others whom they can't sympathise with, it's harder to view them as equals. You can say that you harbour no bad blood towards them, but at the end of the day, you feel uneasy when you're forced to share even one conversation with them.

My men were mostly silent, as I'd come to realise, however I soon yearned to hear a familiar language when everyone around my was giving me the stink eye and speaking in tongues.

Not at one moment did I feel safe in this place, it felt like my gut was going to jump out of it's socket just to tell me to turn around.

But I had to continue.

I had to get these men back home.

As I was pondering this in my head, Williams gave a little jab to the side, bringing me back to the situation at hand.

"Look over there," he whispered as he pointed off to the left..

I followed the direction of his finger and saw two men, roughly in their twenties, examining us from afar and conversing between each other.

"I'd bet they aren't friendly, lets move," I said as I turned to the rest of the squad.

We continued to walk through the bazaar, which led into a large plaza. There were civilians here, walking around with their families, enjoying the early evening's cooler air. A couple with their two children. A man with his daughter. People, just living their lives. The sight reminded me of a central park in my hometown. Guess I really want to get home. But, no matter how much nostalgia this view filled me with, I have to remember where I am. Eventually, the plaza-goers noticed us and led their families out of the plaza.

Makes sense, considering who we are.

As I thought this, I saw movement on the rooftops.

"Movement! Up top!"

We all quickly rushed to any cover we could find.

Crouching behind a mound of rugs, I yelled out,

"Anyone have eyes-on?"

I saw Williams, who was behind a pillar, peek out to check above us.

A bullet flew past him, and he lurched back around his pillar.

"Right ahead of us, your twelve o'clock!"

I popped up, shouldered my rifle, trained my sights onto the bogey, and pulled the trigger.

He fell backwards with a sharp lurch of his head.

“He’s down!”

I looked to my left right as Jose began to spray down a section of rooftop with his machine gun.

I briefly scanned the rooftops, seeing several additional bogeys start to come out from hiding.

“We’ve gotta get out of here, we’re too exposed!” I yelled.

Jose turned me and replied, “You guys head to the overpass to our right, I cover our rear!”

“Good plan, on three!”

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One! Go, go, go!”

We all broke out from behind our cover and raced to the overpass. Jose ran with us initially, but found a corner to provide covering fire from. Jose was considerably slower, after all, due to all of the things he was carrying. Like that mortar.

Attempting to dodge bullets as we went, we made it to the overpass. Jose caught up to us as we laid down supporting fire.

After catching his breath, Edwards looked at me and asked, “Well, what now?”

The gunfire had seemed to calm down, so I took the opportunity to bring out the map and check our location. It seems that we were nearing the road that we had to follow, but there was practically no cover on the way there, it was a straight highway. However, there were several smaller side streets that would eventually lead to the same place.

“Looks like we’re gonna try to take these,” I replied, pointing to the different streets on the map.

“Alleys, again?” groaned Edwards.

“You don’t like it? Well then I guess we could always just go right on top of this highway and pray that some stray bullet doesn’t hit us, right?”

Edwards fell silent.

Williams let out a small sigh and said, “We better get a move on,” as he began to head towards one of the alleyways. We followed suit.

As we were making our way towards the alleyway, we heard someone yelling at us. We quickly turned around and saw five tangos aiming their rifles at us from behind. We all broke into a sprint as they began to open fire.

Doing nearly the same exact thing we did a few hours prior, we began to run through the alleys, weapons drawn. Edwards was taking point. He saw a face peek out from around a corner. I fired a few shots in it’s direction. It dropped to the ground. We soon caught up to where it was and examined it.

Right before us lay the body of a man, and next to it, a sobbing child.

Edwards’ face changed from a look of seriousness to one of horror. The child looked up at him and screamed. Edwards’ head slowly lowered to look at the man’s body. A hole was in the middle of his forehead, and his face was fixed in a state of shock.

I walked up to Edwards and grabbed him by the shoulder and said, “Come on, let’s go.”

He offered no resistance. He seemed limp, if anything. His head was still craned on the crying child, but we could hear the yelling of the bogeys getting louder, so I had to nearly drag him to get him to move.

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As we ran, Edwards was silent, he didn't even raise his rifle. For a guy who seemed so indifferent about killing, it seems that even he has his limits.

A few yards away, we saw a grey service van. It'd make a perfect vehicle for going on the highway since we'd be able to blend in, and we wouldn't have to take anymore alleys.

The van seemed to be the perfect size to fit all of us and our gear.

Williams broke one of the windows and, luckily, didn't trigger the alarm. It was probably broken. He then proceeded to hotwire the controls.

I let out a small chuckle and said, "Didn't know you were such crook, Williams."

He turned to me for a second to reply, "You can learn a lot from reading books."

A bullet ricocheted off the van.

"They're here! C'mon Williams, we don't got all day!"

The shots seemed to be coming from not behind us, but from the road ahead, and this was assured by the fact that enemies could be seen lining up on the road, with an angle down on us. We opened the side doors of the van to use as makeshift cover and returned fire. The height advantage was quite apparent, however, as they were able to push us back

down behind cover just as we would pop out to try and take a shot. The only real goal here was to distract them from Williams, who they had a perfect angle on through the windshield. Williams realised this, though, and tried to use the interior of the cabin as cover. Just as he did this, he yelled, "Car's done, come on, get in!"

We rushed into the van and Williams immediately started backing it up, and turned around 180 degrees. It was obvious that we couldn't take the direct route out now, we needed to find a new way to escape. The tangoes seemed to have given up as their bullets were no longer hitting the van. Once things had calmed down, I pulled out the map once again to try and find a new route.

After looking at it extensively, I said to no one in particular, "Okay, it looks like we'd need to cut through this small industrial area over here." I pointed at a group of large square shapes on the map. "At its northernmost point, there's an exit to just open land, we'll take that."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

5. Oilworks

It wasn't long before we found ourselves surrounded by smokestacks and brick walls. Several factories were placed around the area, however most of them seemed to be abandoned. I turned over to Edwards who still had a deadpan expression on his face.

He must have been seriously shaken up by what happened.

It seemed like this would have been the perfect opportunity for the tangoes to jump an ambush onto us, but nothing happened as we traversed the grounds. What did surprise us was what awaited us at the end of the road. The familiar light tan of an MRAP.

"No way..." I uttered.

Well, it seems like our luck finally made a turn for the better, we'd been found.

We stopped the car and walked out into the street with our arms extended, and we were greeted by a soldier walking out of the vehicle.

"Corporal Adams?" he asked.

"That would be me, yes."

"Took a real long time to find you guys, but it looks like it worked out in the end, right?"

"Yeah, yeah it did."

Weirdly enough, it felt like nothing had changed. Here I was, surrounded by friends and on my way home, but it just seems like everything had went as planned. I guess it's the soldier in me that thinks this, but no matter what happened, it's still all part of the job.

Author's Note

The first thing that I want to say here is sorry. Sorry that this story is really not up to what I envisioned it to be. I had thought that I'd be able to come up with something really neat and cool to be a story, but it just ended up being an amalgamation of cliché story tropes and every military film ever. The main thing that I learned from this is that I should just stick to 1-5 page stories instead of trying to bite off a lot more than I can chew.