

OPINION  
DAVID FRENCH

# ‘Contact. I.E.D.’

May 26, 2024



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**By David French**  
Opinion Columnist

“Contact. I.E.D.”

When I served in Iraq, I’d hear those words on the radio, and my heart would freeze. It meant that one of our vehicles had encountered an improvised explosive device — a roadside bomb. It meant damage. It meant injuries. It meant death. And when death comes for your brothers, it leaves a wound on your soul that never fully heals.

The unique demands of military service mean that soldiers experience loss differently from the vast majority of civilians. In the civilian world, death interrupts our lives — we drop everything to rush to the side of a dying relative or friend. Time can seem to stop. We put work on hold. We cancel family trips. The rituals of mourning and comfort take priority as we pause, sit with our families and grieve.

In war, death interrupts nothing. Time doesn’t stop; it seems to accelerate. And that’s deeply unnatural. The moment that contact call — which indicates a violent encounter with the enemy — comes to headquarters, you’re split in two. The human side of you desperately wants to know if anyone was hurt. And when you hear the radio crackle with the sound of “V.S.I.” (very seriously injured) or “K.I.A.” (killed in action), part of you is overcome with fear and concern.

But only part. In that moment and in that place, grief is the enemy. It can cloud your mind and color your judgment. Lives are at stake, so you shove it to the side and focus on your job. At the scene, the job is often simply staying alive. You fight, you treat the wounded and you call for help.

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Back at the base, a different kind of frenzy sets in. There is the urgent necessity of both directing the fight and responding to the loss. One set of soldiers directs the fight, routing air assets to the scene of the attack, dispatching a quick reaction force, or Q.R.F., to support the soldiers under fire and ordering artillery to respond to immediate threats.

Other soldiers gather the personal effects of the fallen and still others pull the plug on the internet, cutting off the base from friends and relatives back home. We did not want families to learn of their loss by text message or social media post. Even worse, the online rumor mill could misidentify casualties, causing horrible and unnecessary pain.

Military families know that casualty notification should happen in person, and when communications go dark with units abroad, families at home know that someone has fallen. We know that our families are consumed with fear, but we can’t reach out. We can’t tell them we’re OK. In fact, when the internet goes dark, that’s sometimes the first indication even for the soldiers on the base that someone has died.

We were constantly whipsawed between our humanity and our roles. A torrent of personal and operational information flows in at once.

“Contact. The Q.R.F. is taking small-arms fire.”

“It’s confirmed. We lost Fox Six. We lost Torre.”

“F-16s are on station. The I.E.D. might be command-detonated.”

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In one instant, we were completely focused on responding to the threat. In the very next instant, I would feel a punch in the gut. I wanted to vomit. My eyes clouded with tears. Torre Mallard, the commander of Fox Troop, Second Squadron, Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, was my friend. He was a husband and a father. We had just talked the day before his death about his plans after he got out of the Army. He had unlimited potential, but Torre was gone.

Torre died on March 10, 2008, the worst day of our deployment. The same I.E.D. that claimed Torre’s life also took the lives of a civilian interpreter named Albert Haroutounian and two other soldiers — Specialist Donald Burkett and Sgt. Phillip Anderson.

But we had to focus. A command-detonated I.E.D. meant that the explosion was manually triggered. The insurgents had to be in the line of sight of the convoy to detonate the explosive. If the I.E.D. was command-detonated, that meant they might still be close. Perhaps we could find them. Or perhaps other insurgents were close by as well, and this was the start of a larger attack.

That’s the rhythm of life and death during war. There is never time to mourn. You experience more death, injury and loss in a compressed period of time than many people do in their entire lifetimes, yet there are no wakes. There are short memorials, but no true funerals. The rituals of grief don’t exist.

So you push the grief away. But you can’t escape it, not entirely. And the friends you lose haunt your heart. My mind played tricks on me for days after Torre’s death. I kept thinking I saw him out of the corner of my eye. I kept thinking I heard his laugh.

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And just when you think that there’s a lull in our operations, when you can pause — when you can sit, remember and grieve — another call comes. “Contact. I.E.D.” Your heart freezes again, your mind focuses again and you do this over and over — until you come home.

When I talk to vets who struggle with civilian life after their service, two themes tend to emerge. One is that we struggle with a loss of purpose. As a friend of mine put it to me, “I hated my deployment, but I also knew every minute of every day why I was there and what I was supposed to do.” The other is that we finally confront the grief that we once shoved aside.

The names of the men who fell during my deployment are still fresh in my mind. Torre, Albert, Donald and Phillip lost their lives on the same terrible day in March 2008. Andrew Olmsted and Thomas Casey died in an ambush by Al Qaeda in January. Corey Spates was killed by an I.E.D. in February. Gregory Unruh died in a vehicle accident in March. Matthew Morris and Ulises Burgos-Cruz were killed by an I.E.D. in April. Andre Mitchell died in an accident in July. And my friend Michael Medders was killed by a suicide bomber in September.

When I came home, all the grief that I had pushed away came flooding back. As a reservist, I didn’t return to an Army base, but to my home and family, far from the people with whom I served. I talked to friends and family about men they’d never known. To fully grieve — and to even begin to heal — I had to be with my brothers. Even though we were scattered across the country, we still needed one another.

So, in the summer of 2011, we traveled together to Avon Lake, Ohio, to remember [Mike Medders](#). He was the last of us to fall, and his death shattered us. We met his high school friends. We met his college friends. We sat with his mom and dad.

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The last night of our visit, his sister hosted a party in Mike’s honor.

It was a beautiful summer night. We were gathered at his sister’s house, swapping stories and toasting Mike, when we heard the sound of bagpipes. One of Mike’s neighbors was standing by himself, shrouded in darkness at the end of the driveway. He played “Amazing Grace” and everyone fell silent. We raised our glasses in quiet tribute.

Then, just as suddenly, the bagpipes stopped. The song was over, and the neighbor walked back home saying a word.

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David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is [“Divided We Fall: America’s Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation.”](#) You can follow him on Threads ([@davidfrenchjag](#)).

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