

## Prologue

June 2017. Gardez, Paktia.

His eyes snapped wide open in the dark while block walls, eight inches thick, shook from the explosion.

*BOOM*

The wooden door rocked in its frame and he felt a wave of pressure passing across his chest and eardrums. He felt and heard the blast, but feeling was the more powerful sense. "What was that?" he thought, instantly awake and remaining on his side.

Light filtered in as his mind caught up with his vision, the sun's early rays breaking through gaps in a doorframe - just enough to see dust suspended in the warm morning air.

"What the *fuck* was that?" his thinking expanded in scope and intensity.

It couldn't be the Entry Control Point (ECP) because the noise would've been louder, the blast wave from the east. Could it be the wall? Did they just hit it? Is a breach coming?

He sat up and looked at his boots and rifle while thoughts drifted to enemy fighters rushing onto the base to start killing. It would take a pretty big bomb to knock out the Hescos, thick as they were, and no way something that big could have gotten through the outer ECP - unless it did. Here, the most dangerous scenario was often the most common.

So in case it was a complex attack, he planned the next steps. "Kit up, get to the SCIF, and start a counterattack by clearing south toward the mortar pit," he thought. The SCIF, short for Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facility, was more than a clunky acronym - it was the regional hub for top secret intelligence and his responsibility to defend at all costs.

Through another three seconds of waiting and sensing, angry at being awoken by another explosion and hoping it was off the base, he started reasoning: "If they hit us, there would've been noise by now. Small arms fire, people running, something." There was no crunching gravel from footsteps outside. No shouts of any kind. After all, it was early on a Sunday - around 0600 - and both Father's Day and their anniversary. The previous night was another late one, working well past 0200.

As his heart slowed once again, he eased back onto the bed and planned to fall asleep. "This is why we have a Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and pay people to work in it. They got this. Shit, Carlos makes

like twice what I do for a tenth of the work,” he thought, besmirching his intelligence contractor on the night shift.

“If the TOC really needs me, they’ll come get me.” He turned over, finessed his phone off the charger, plugged in earbuds - the type that came packaged with every iPhone - laid back, and opened his standard mindless fare of Spotify’s Top 40 playlist. Music started but he was still angry at waking up less than four hours after finishing the previous day. As his mind calmed a bit, he caught up with the chorus of a newly-released hit back home.

*...Uh huh! I think you’re moving in too close*

*But I think that it’s my body wanting it the most, like*

*Uh-huh! I don’t know what it is I feel*

*But I know it’s my emotions going in for the kill...*

“Damn, that’s a great voice. But what the fuck does Julia Michaels know about going in for the kill? She ever kill anyone? Seen someone die?” he wondered while his mind drifted off, needing sleep. While he didn’t know what to feel about the blast, this was a time to look realistically at the world - cold, hostile, and dangerous.

Caring about lives, innocent or otherwise, would just cause burnout in short order when death was everywhere and always in the air. Death lurked in the mountains, snow, rocks, valleys, forests, farms, fields, orchards, roads, vehicles, houses, villages, towns, and cities. Anything and anyone could kill. Anytime. Everyone here knew death and saw it too often for this evil land to be a truly human place. But somehow the country was home to over 35 million people.

So he calmed his nerves while 30 Afghan policemen and civilians died a few short miles away, across this broad alpine valley. A massive suicide bombing and gun battle broke the calm of the Holy Month, Ramadan. It was clearly a new phase of the annual fighting season in this corner of the “Graveyard of Empires.”

Like the song playing through his earbuds would drop off the charts and be forgotten in months, this attack wouldn’t even make news back home. It would maim, horrify, and traumatize dozens here for the rest of their lives. But then again, most locals would ignore it too because Afghanistan was surely the most forsaken place in the history of the world. Their sorrows stretched back millennia at a depth no modern American could possibly understand. With that, he zonked out before needing to start another day at the office.

## **Chapter 1: In a World of Penises, Be a Dick**

**January 2008. Fort Sill, Oklahoma.**

“TOE THE LINE!”

Immediately dropping everything, all 64 recruits in the platoon moved to the ends of their bunks in the position of attention - standing straight, heads and eyes forward, silent, unmoving, heels together, feet forming 90 degree angles, arms at their sides, fists clenched, thumbs pointed straight down.

“We’re doing mail, privates. Schoolhouse formation. MOVE!” Drill Sergeant Diaz barked with a hint of Texas twang.

At that command, the privates strode quickly to the space in front of the drill sergeants’ office. The “kill zone.” This was only their second mail call but clearly bigger than last time looking at the box on the ground. They gathered in a tight group, shoulder to shoulder, and the first two ranks took a knee.

“Alriiight,” said Drill Sergeant Diaz, dragging out the “i” for 2 full seconds. He stood before the men in a confident, tense posture befitting his position. “Before we do this mail, y’all gonna learn something. Check it out: in red phase, you privates are all penises. Like everything else in the Army, it’s an acronym. Stands for People Entering Nationally-Important Service.” Some guys could barely conceal laughs but the Senior Drill Sergeant didn’t shut them down, so this was a refreshing sign of his humanity.

“But PENISEs are soft and ugly and not all of them make it. So by graduation, we are turning y’all into hardened DICKs: Dedicated. Individuals. Committed. To. Killing,” his staccato enunciation and dramatic pauses between each word adding profound emphasis.

Nathan Blount lost it and started laughing out loud.

“PRIVATE BLOUNT, IS SOMETHING FUNNY TO YOU?”

“No, Drill Sergeant!” He moved to attention, almost casually, still smiling.

“Oh so I’m not funny. You think I’m boring?”

“No, Drill Sergeant!” The smile was gone, replaced by a rush of blood to his face.

“Then why the FUCK are you laughing, Private Blount? You piece of shit!”

“No excuses, Drill Sergeant!”

“Oh we got something for that. FRONT-LEANING REST POSITION!”

All privates snapped to attention in a whoosh and Blount nearly hit the ground - ready for push ups.

“WHO TOLD YOU TO MOVE?!”

Private Blount popped back up to his feet.

“You must want to push, huh, Blount? That’s a good idea! FRONT LEANING REST POSITION. MOVE!”

Each member of the platoon dropped to a plank as quickly as they could and as tightly packed as possible for the exercise they all knew was coming next.

“THE PUSH UP!”

“THE PUSH UP, DRILL SERGEANT!” the platoon’s shout reverberated.

“THE PUSH UP!”

“THE PUSH UP, DRILL SERGEANT!”

Satisfied they were paying attention after two fakeouts, Drill Sergeant Diaz lowered his voice and ordered: “In cadence. Exercise! 1, 2, 3.”

“1!” The platoon shouted repetitions like in some of the great war movies - Full Metal Jacket, etc. Of course, a concrete room full of smelly men pushing on a moonless January night in Oklahoma wasn’t very glamorous.

“1, 2, 3.”

“2!”

“1, 2, 3.”

“3!”

And so it continued for 30 minutes: push ups, flutter kicks, push ups, sit ups, and the 1st Platoon favorite - front, back, go. Now they were past the prescribed lights out time and Drill Sergeant Diaz was ready to finish the day. He had other things to do.

Mail call went better from there. It had been about a week since the last one and Soldiers’ families had enough time to send their first or second letters of the basic training cycle. Even some mail from friends began to trickle in. But it was almost 2230 and everyone had just enough time to skim the basic contents of their mail, piss, and brush their teeth in the five minutes allotted for hygiene.

Sean didn’t have any mail this time so took the extra minutes to organize his wall locker for tomorrow and lay down before the first guard shift killed the lights. Of course, he laid down on top of his

neatly-made green wool Army blanket, corners tucked into tight angled hospital corners - dressed in light gray “marshmallow” sweats. Nobody ever had a reason to take so much risk as sleeping among the sheets and blanket - no matter how cold the bay got at night. Not when 0430 inspections carried heavy penalties.

The lights went out and he drifted off quickly, fast enough to miss any sensations of falling asleep.

“Edgar, hey, it’s your shift, man,” a figure standing over him in the dark shook his shoulder. Time for fire guard - the name an Army tradition from the days of stoking camp fires. It was also great conditioning to the realities of military night operations, accountability, and keeping security as the first priority of work.

In basic training, everyone took turns as a sentry for 30 minutes to an hour or more during the night. Teams of at least two exhausted Soldiers paced through rows of bunks to count heads, count rifles, keep everyone in the bay, keep intruders out, and report to any drill sergeants or cadre who checked in.

Sometimes, when drill sergeants need to reinforce a lesson or just break everyone down, they would assign 100% security. All 64 privates would wake up (256 among the four platoons), kit up in body armor, helmets, rifles, knee and elbow pads, ballistic glasses, and gloves to walk the room and protect each other for an hour or two. Those were the worst nights to have a second shift - both from the sleep deprivation and because the drill sergeants were angrier than usual.

Sean rolled over, sat up on the bunk, and leaned forward to put running shoes on. His battle buddy, Specialist Dewayne Edwards, had woken him up and - seeing Sean was sufficiently awake - sat down on his bunk in the reverse order to go back to bed. Sean checked his watch.

0330 - shit. This was the worst shift because he would walk for 30 minutes, lay down at 0400, and spring back into action for the day at 0430. Not enough time to enjoy another REM cycle.

Finished tying his shoes, Sean grabbed a green elbow flashlight with a red lens, slung his M16A2 rifle over his shoulder, and linked up with Private Dennis Alonzo by the drill sergeants’ office. Alonzo had the platoon’s notebook for rosters and schedules.

“Quiet night, man. Cox said Abner checked the bay around zero one,” referring to the battery training room’s runner on battalion staff duty tonight. Specialist Abner was one of the unlucky few junior enlisted Soldiers assigned to this basic training battalion instead of a real unit out in the big Army. Those guys hated life and projected it on recruits at every opportunity. “Count’s all good. Otherwise, nothing.”

“Sweet,” Sean whispered.

“Yeah, I’ll walk this side first. Cool?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

So the two young men began their shift. Alonzo counted all the heads and rifles on his side of the bay, keeping mental note, and grabbed Sean’s attention after a few minutes.

“Here you go,” Alonzo whispered, handing Sean the guard roster. “1st and 2nd are up,” implying all 32 men and their rifles of the two squads were in place.

“Cool, thanks,” Sean took the three-by-five inch green “Rite in the Rain” top-spiral notebook and strode to the north end of 3rd Squad’s bunks. Pacing down the row, he started counting sleeping men and stationary weapons on his side of the bay. 32, all present. He jotted down the combined numbers next to the row for their shift. 64 and 64. Tucking the notepad in his pocket, Sean resumed pacing - this time more leisurely. Only 22 minutes left. Duty mostly fulfilled, it was easier to let his mind drift in preparation for a little taste of shuteye with the remaining night.

There was usually nothing terrible about pulling fire guard. It was easy to go sort of braindead, he just had to stay awake. But the lost sleep got annoying quickly. What the hell had he gotten into with this Army stuff? And a six-year enlistment? Sean shook his head and continued pacing.

It felt like an eternity, especially from checking his watch every couple laps through the room. But eventually, the time was nearly up and the next shift needed to be awoken. Sean made his way to Private Cory Eller’s bunk and woke him up. The same process repeated - one man waking another, giving him a minute to gain his senses, and handing off responsibility in a quick briefing. This was to be a constant in the Army - communication, accountability, and a handoff between individuals and groups to continue the mission under any conditions.

Sean had just enough time to fall asleep when Eller’s shift turned on the lights at 0425. Men began stirring and Sean was always quick to get moving. When nothing else was under his control in a given day, getting after it early was a way to have some choice.

Grabbing his toiletry bag, he moved first to the latrine for shaving. An advantage of beating the rush to this was a better chance at hot water. Face halfway lathered, he heard commotion in the bay as Drill Sergeant Titus entered.

“GET THE FUCK UP!” the shout broke through the murmur of moving men, carrying all the way to the latrine in the back of the bay. Sean picked up his pace and finished lathering. As he put the razor to his neck first, Drill Sergeant Titus flipped over a bunk - the steel frame crashing loudly against linoleum-covered concrete.

“INCOMING! You’re under attack, privates! MOVE!”

This was going to be a rushed shave as Sean continued quickly. All 10 sinks were now occupied with the same scene. Finished, Sean reached for his toothbrush and continued the ritual. More men were moving in, doubling up on sinks.

As he strode back to his bunk, several squad members were already changing into ACUs and putting on boots.

“What’s going on, man?” he asked Edwards.

“Drill Sergeant said we got 5 minutes to be downstairs. Full battle rattle and rucks.”

“Shit,” Sean knew this was an impossible timeline and an unusual start to their daily physical training (PT).

“Yeah, one of those days, bro,” Edwards knew it too.

The platoon scrambled - all donning gear as quickly as they could. Their rucksacks were already packed from the prior day’s gear inspection. Body armor and helmets on, the first couple guys rucked up and started running down the back stairs. They clearly skipped shaving. Must be nice to have peach fuzz, Sean thought.

A few minutes later, he and Edwards joined the rush downstairs and fell into place with 4th Squad at the back of formation as others followed. Drill Sergeant Titus was nowhere to be seen and they were now at the 0435 time hack - a bad omen.

“DROP!” Drill Sergeant De la Garza appeared from the dark parking lot and platoon members already downstairs moved to a plank, grounding rucksacks and laying their rifles across the backs of their knuckles. It was a bitch to exercise in battle rattle.

“Y’all just doing what you want to do!” Drill Sergeant De la Garza bellowed in his baritone Mexican accent. “Enemy got the drop and now your buddies are dead.” The Soldiers felt the collective punishment coming as more filtered down.

“Hurry up! Waiting on you!” he growled.

The last men sprinted up and dropped into a plank at 0440. With the whole platoon in a messy formation, Drill Sergeant Titus descended from the bay after confirming it was empty. He and De la Garza worked them through five minutes of exercise. With that over, they were ready to begin PT and exercise in earnest.

“Get up! Get your shit on!” Drill Sergeant Diaz arrived during the warmup and now had the platoon on their feet, putting on rucks.

“Alright, privates, we’re going on a little walk for PT. I heard y’all were slow reacting to contact this morning so we’re gonna stretch real quick and step out.” Drill Sergeant Diaz grabbed his own ruck and demonstrated a couple back and leg stretches while the platoon followed. “Let’s go,” he said in the first calm voice they had heard yet that day.

1st Platoon filed out, walking through the parking lot and into two staggered columns on the road, spacing out with 5 meters between each man to reduce the damage a single grenade could cause. After 100 meters, the platoon shaped itself into a proper road march formation as they approached the woods.

The morning felt cold, mid-30s and humid, as men began to notice with earlier adrenaline wearing off. Overcast skies two hours before sunrise made everything extra gloomy, although it would get even colder when the wind picked up after dawn. Rifles at low ready, the platoon marched into the dark and hoped exertion would warm them soon. Minutes dragged into miles.

“You’re just walking along.” Drill Sergeant Titus shouted, approaching 4th Squad from behind at a brisk stride. Getting their attention, he continued, with pauses emphasizing each statement.

“Y’all are just going to school for the day. Walking down the block.” The privates weren’t being asked questions so his soliloquy proceeded as they marched in silence.

“Got your school uniform on, your backpack on. You got lunch in the goddamn backpack!” Drill Sergeant Titus’s shout pierced the cold, dense morning air - stirring the men a bit.

Okay, many thought, those are things we would have been hauling into school - some of them merely weeks ago. Sounds like a normal day.

“Got your rifle in your hands. Ready to kill. Kill em all!” Another pause. Some guys chuckled.

“You’re gonna waste those motherfuckers before they can get you!” Drill Sergeant shouted. Another, longer pause.

“Sometimes you just gotta think about shit all fucked up like that. Then the Army gets fun.”

Continuing to march, a small switch flipped in Sean’s head. Recognizable to some as dissociation years after the fact: Always be ready to kill, including through hard or fucked up situations. It’s what we do. You will be better at killing than the next guy. Because if you aren’t, you’re dead. This was a headspace with enough octane to fuel a young man for years. Everything he had wondered before joining the National Guard clicked a little better. It’s becoming real now and this is how it’s done professionally.



## Chapter 7: Cultural Awareness

### September 2014. Gardez, Paktia.

“And sir, and also so like this means... Like he is asking about to hold your hand,” Dave (actually Daoud) translated.

So, in the Afghan custom, Sean gave his hand to the strange older man smelling of rose water, poop, and sweat evaporating in the hot sun. He must be about 45 years old since he looks 70, Sean thought as he began to size up this distinguished guest to the American base.

At 5’6”, the now-smiling Major Suleimankhel was five inches shorter than Sean but a tall navy blue Afghan National Police (ANP) hat brought them nearly even. That height difference contributed to a perceived reek emanating off the Major - stench rising with afternoon heat to assault the nostrils of any bystander. His stature included legs that looked strong (at least earlier in life), a soft and diabetic paunch, and shoulders narrower than expected for someone in this pear-shaped body type.

The Major had a darker complexion than many of the area’s tribesmen, despite hailing from a well-known local tribe, yet showed something of an olive tinge as well. There was a trace of reddish henna in his thick mustache, bushy eyebrows, and curly hair hanging down just over the ears. Dark eyes were set between baggy eyelids, and they possessed a noticeable glint – much more so than the dead, empty look dominating most faces here.

They had about 400 meters to move on a winding route across the base, the longest Sean had yet walked holding an Afghan’s hand. They previously met a few times to talk about election security, checkpoint manning, and vehicle maintenance. Maintenance wasn’t in the Major’s job description, which was normally a concern in such bureaucracy, but familial connections won him access to that huge cash cow of corruption.

After the normal dog and pony show of a weekly security *shura* with American and Afghan brass, today’s brief meeting was intended to cover future police training plans. Some logistics staff Captain from the Army Reserve inserted himself into their conversation so he could feel excitement on his otherwise pointless deployment. Since the Major didn’t know this Captain, he steered Sean’s scheduled meeting to focus on pleasantries instead. Sean dreaded where conversation would go on their walk and couldn’t wait to get the Major back to his men. Unfortunately, the Afghan sense of time coupled with the Major’s obesity,

short legs, and age meant this would drag out longer than necessary - and of course the Captain opted out of walking across the FOB so he could get to the gym. Rock, paper, rank struck again.

At least Sean lucked out today and his right hand had quick access to his Beretta M9 pistol if it came to that. With the insane number of insider attacks in this region, every advisor had to be ready for a fight at any moment. Every member of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) could be a threat at any time.

Sean sized up the situation in case it came to that. Gain space by pushing the Major, draw, dump rounds until he dropped, reload, and reassess. It would be too easy to kill this guy unless his fat belly deflected or slowed bullets enough. Okay, then it's decided: two rounds to the chest and one in the head - quick Mozambique Drill - given this geometry. Holding center mass should make shot placement in the vitals easy with their height difference and the Major's saggy abdomen. With that decided, Sean was ready for where the conversation with his "friend" might go.

"*Salaam, salaam, chor-e?*" the Major bid Sean greetings of peace and asked how he was even though they had gone over this several times already today.

"*Kha im, manana. Tatsengay ye, mudir sahib?*" I'm well, thank you. How are you, chief? Sean replied with a smile and the harsh eastern style of Pashto befitting the situation.

Taking that as a form of permission, the Major burst into a long run on sentence ending with a question - moving too fast for Sean to understand any of it. Dave also didn't interpret anything, instead responding curtly in Pashto and saying, "sir, I won't translate this what he says. It is not good, not good to say."

"Why, what is he talking about?"

"Sir, he says he sees your ring and ask if you are married. I say to him you are and he ask if you have any girlfriends here on the FOB Lightning," Sean could see the Major looking at some female Soldiers nearby. Goddamnit, of course the counterintelligence female is walking to the dining facility (DFAC) wearing *that*, Sean thought looking over an area the Major scanned. That's probably who he focused on, the Specialist in the tight pink blouse and tactical slacks. When 10% of your people are female, this type of civilian dress stands out even more.

The Major was smiling and turned to smile at him too. "Or if you have any boyfriends. He says that he could help you find girlfriend or boy."

Sean found a new willingness to offend the Major, so withdrew his hand. “Dave, please tell him that we Americans work together as professionals and are here to do a job.” His thoughts continued through gratitude for an excuse to not hold this asshole’s hand any longer.

The Major’s grin grew wider, knowing he struck a nerve. Sean wondered if he was stupid, high, or both. He probably wasn’t baked because his eyes were fairly normal, but you could never tell with all the weird substances people ingested in Afghanistan. Why would the Major go there first when he knows we’re abandoning his sorry ass and all of his cops? Also, how are these devout people always banging anything that moves without running water, soap, or lubrication? These are some dirty thirsty fuckers here.

The Major’s next remarks in Pashto were shorter and ended with a chuckle. Dave translated, “He says if you change your mind, he could find a boy or girl for next time you visit, and also this means maybe you could still bring some for him. And sir, the way he said this I think he means like really dancing boys.”

Sean stayed silent, flashing a glance of disgust, and filed this away as another data point to report later – corroborating intel that Major Suleimankhel was a pedophile. Of course, even if they had smoking gun proof he was a molester like every other powerful Afghan man, there was nothing they could do. Withdrawal was the focus, always and everywhere for the conventional Army. Even SEALs and Special Forces guys didn’t seem to care anymore about building lasting capabilities. They were just trying to kill the highest value targets they could before pulling out of Camp Nevins.

Beside, any reports of child sexual abuse would just go onto a PowerPoint slide to die somewhere between Bagram and Kabul. No data like that would make it out of south Asia, and why should it? That’s just the way it is here. If we stop working with every sex offender like US law required, the Taliban wouldn’t have any Afghan forces left to fight against. Who wants the terrorists to win? So we’re building rapport with a monster today, Sean thought. Great.

Rather, it was perhaps most disturbing to think that Dave - the most westernized and seemingly innocent of the young local national linguists - grew up navigating this culture with its *bacha bazi* or “dancing boys.” He was fluent in hip-hop, Hollywood, and wholesale evil just like any good partner for America abroad.

Feeling he had won the first round of conversation, the Major launched another topic – this time far more serious.

“Sir, he is now talking a lot about America and the NATO forces, like, why you guys are leaving? He is asking and the...” Dave trailed off while the Major continued. “And also this means, sir, and he says that, it

would be very hard for him, for his family, for the people, very hard he says if America leaves Paktia now he says,” Dave interpreted quickly, always using a long “a” in “says.”

“Well, sir, as you know, US forces are leaving because your men are stronger every day. While the brave Afghans step up, the US will step back. So we have to do what we can together in the time we have,” Sean turned to the Major, offering this standard canned reply. And what a crock of shit it was to pitch that line when the ANSF were losing ground to the Taliban, Haqqani Network, Pakistani Taliban (TTP), and Al Qaeda every day.

He remembered hearing something like it in an Obama speech while driving home on leave a few weeks before this deployment. That speech and individual officers’ interpretations of it were the closest they would get to strategic guidance for the Afghan war under this administration. Lord knows no one had read Sean’s most recent executive report on massive ANP losses.

Dave diligently interpreted while Sean second-guessed himself on giving a three-sentence response, wondering what would get lost in translation. It was funny how his unit had received pointed enjoiners in training at Fort Polk on how to work with linguists. If we speak too much, they won’t be able to keep up and will misrepresent what we’re saying. If only the Afghans had some experience with that concept, he thought while the Major spouted a much longer response.

“Oh, sir, he says like he knows this what you say. But he says he needs help now or his guys could be hurt. And the people of the area, like the civilians, they could be hurt too. He says like if you could have more airstrikes on the enemy forces...”

Sean’s mind began drifting at this sad line. Always the same. More airstrikes. More free shit we won’t deliver due to the withdrawal. It was a lose-lose anyway because too many of our “intelligence-driven operations” were simply the result of Afghans deceiving us to settle old scores among the tribes. If only someone cared about stopping Al Qaeda and their Takfiri ilk.

“... and maybe also if you could give his guys some new bomb-clearing equipment...” Dave continued.

I bet he’ll ask for training next, then go into how the Afghan Army isn’t helping the cops. And they don’t want to speak ill of their Afghan brothers, but maybe I could go to talk to the Army advisors for him.

“... and also this means and he says that if you could, please share this information to the Army advisors before next training at the Regional Training Center...”

What's worse: this child-molesting Major or how badly I need to shit right now? Sean was getting tired of the trots. Always the same feeling. A slow gut rumble, sudden butt pucker, dreading the smell and its dehydrating effect. What had it been, like two straight months with diarrhea? When would this end? He'd heard of Montezuma's revenge but this can't be normal. Gotta love the infantry, where officers have to "stay hard" and avoid any medical attention unless they're shot and pass out from blood loss.

"... and when the British guys were here with the PRT guys and from the with the how is it say one hundredth, one hundred first..."

Of course, back to how another unit two years ago over-promised and under-delivered. Do Afghan cops all go to acting school, always saying the same thing in the same sequence? They must have known the 101st Airborne Division's 4th Brigade Rakkasans were all windbags at advising. That unit exists to shoot people in the face, not end this war like brilliant management consultants we're now expected to be.

Sure, the G3 running operations - Colonel Sayid - seems like a decent and credible guy. But he doesn't have the right tribal *wasta* or enough *bakshish* to buy loyalty from all his men. So no wonder the police had trouble getting things done.

Sean's mind continued to wander while following the general thrust of the Major's rambling. I guess it's true, though, when they said at Fort Polk you should never promise something you can't deliver to Afghans because they'll remember and call you out. To the point of killing you over something someone else said years ago.

The Afghan view of time was almost exclusively backward-looking. What happened two years ago is more important than what's happening now. Indeed, Sean had recently spoken with a flustered State Department Foreign Service Officer about two families in Paktia shooting it out. The dispute originated from an argument over timber rights in the early 1700s. Maybe the Afghans' lack of regard for the future is why they invested so much in violating kids.

"So that is what he says, sir," Dave's closing statement brought Sean back to reality. The Major had talked for several minutes, far more than Dave could have interpreted accurately. Plenty of room for error in this type of conversation. Sean's mind had drifted anyway since this Major meant nothing for the future of the mission.

Thank God, Sean thought, the ECP is close. "I can entertain him another 40 meters, stay noncommittal, and get to the bathroom before my sphincter breaks." He flashed a glance over his right

shoulder at the latrine about 10 meters west, along the path they were walking down. Yes, one of those toilets has no idea what is coming its way. Even if it isn't the best shitter on the FOB, that one will do nicely.

"Yes, sir, thank you for bringing up those needs. I understand and want to help too. Let's plan on more airstrikes, just have Colonel Sayid call me anytime when forces need help."

Sean raised his left hand - but not too much to offend Afghan sensitivities about the "unclean" hand they used as toilet paper - gesturing that he wanted to say more when Dave finished. While Dave translated, they continued to walk, starting into the ECP. Sean mentally rehearsed his response to the Major's verbal diarrhea. Damn. Diarrhea. Speaking of that, it was past time to end this conversation and hit the shitter TIME NOW.

"Also, sir, since our contractors are leaving, your field-level vehicle maintenance will be with contractors on the Afghan Army base in Logar. So it's very important to keep your shop in Gardez running well on its own." This meant that the Major's guys would have to drive through a Taliban-controlled mountain pass when they needed, say, new brake pads because their foreman sold American-provided pads in the bazaar for walking around money. Between that, IEDs, and the Major's lack of kickbacks from Logar, it was clear that these Afghan police would be without any vehicles in maybe a year.

"And thank you so much for visiting today, sir, it's always good to see you. Thank you for your insight on how we can help in this time together." Sean could have mentioned the date his unit was leaving Paktia but his esteemed police colleague would probably funnel that information straight to the Taliban.

While Dave did his thing, the Major's face lit into a smile. Maybe he was too high to realize this would be their last meeting. Maybe he was too dumb to understand that the Americans really were leaving this time. More likely, he just smiled out of the hopelessness of a typical fatalistic Afghan worldview, dreaming of rape and pillage in the afterlife. Of course, Afghans were fully entitled to that worldview after millennia of fighting each other and robbing passers-by on the Silk Road. The dumb ones always die first, so be wary of old men at war.

"*Deyr sha, manana, Bridman. Kha woraz walaray wa da khoday pa amaan.* Thank you, thank you, Lieutenant, goodbye. Salaam, salaam, salaam. Goodbye." The Major's use of English made it clear this wasn't his first rodeo dealing with Americans.

"*Manana, mudir sahib, manana. Da khoday pa amaan wa salaam.*" They shook hands and smiled at each other - never to meet again. Sean put his right hand over his heart in the obligatory gesture of heartfelt kindness and offered a smile with another "Salaam." No amount of Army training had prepared

him for the heaps of bullshit packed into this conversation. Indeed, none of this matched his expectations or hopes for a career of service, and working with men like Major Suleimankhel was beginning to make him consider civilian life.

Seeing that the Major's bodyguards were on their truck about ten meters past the gate - only one flagging them with an AK-47 muzzle - Sean turned to walk back through the ECP. After they made it far enough in the concrete serpentine to gain cover from their Afghan friends, Sean backed his mind off of survival mode. No more need to look over his shoulder or listen for every possible hint that direct fire was imminent. With survival assured for at least a while longer, Sean turned and thanked his interpreter. "Great job today, Dave! Thanks for letting me know about this guy and talking through all that stuff."

"Oh no problem, sir, this was good. And maybe we don't have to meet him again. He is not a very nice guy."

Dave got it. Thank God at least some Afghans were sober at any given point. This must be what winning looks like - working with people who aren't stoned 24/7.

"Well, Dave, good work. Why don't you go hang out in your room and I can come pick you up for dinner at 6? You must need some rest after this, uh, crazy afternoon."

"Oh thank you, sir! Yes, that would be good for me to rest. I think some guys are still out so maybe can lay down. I'll be here at 6."

And with that, they shook hands, smiled, and Dave turned to sign out at the ECP. Sean didn't bother to look back. He knew Bandit Troop's guys were good. They loved Dave and Dave was happy to go chill in Terp Village. Their parting was one of a sincere friendship. This interpreter really was a good guy, even if he loved Akon and hated Shias and Hazaras with a genocidal zeal for some unimaginable reason.

But Sean was on a mission. As he moved toward the shitter with a sense of purpose, some lines from a recent pop hit flashed in his mind. Without knowing it, The Chainsmokers served up vanity and narcissism almost as thick as the US and Afghan governments'. They had a lot to be proud of with guys like Major Suleimankhel upholding the law - truly the best and brightest all around. But this song's lyrics were so delightfully dumb they spun Sean's mood positive before relieving his afflicted gut.

*It's not even summer, why does the DJ keep on playing Summertime Sadness?*

*After we go to the bathroom, can we go smoke a cigarette?*

*I really need one.*

*But first, let me take a selfie...*