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A Moment of Panic on Post One

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A Moment of Panic on Post One

Jason Ryan Arment

Ulrich and I had been standing post one together for the last week or so. It was a pretty nice post, as far as posts go, so there really wasn't much complaining about the duty assignment between us. The post was elevated, which meant that there were few rats, and the door of the post was locked, which meant you could sleep without worrying about being walked in on. Sleeping was frowned upon, but anyone who tells you've they haven't racked out on post in a combat zone is a liar.

Our shift was about to end for the day. The eight hours of staring at the same neighborhood in Iraq we had been holding down for the last three months was not exciting, and the one hundred and twenty degree heat was not helping the matter in the least. I had decided to sleep most of the post, as Ulrich had said that he wouldn't be able to. Whether he stayed up for the whole eight hours or not, I have no clue. Having both Marines sleep on post was a really bad idea for obvious reasons, but we always would say jokingly that the "shots would wake us up." I had just risen out of my seat, and made my weapon--an M 16-A4 service rifle--condition four. Condition four being no round in the chamber, no round magazine inserted. Ulrich had just sent out radio traffic from our post saying that we were ready to dismount and receive our relief, those who would replace us on post. As we stood there, hating life, and wondering what tedious chores the rest of the day would have in store for us, a shot rang out less than fifty meters from our position. This, we both knew, was about to be a "bad day," as the saying in the Corps goes.

I hit the deck the quickest way possible. It wasn't the bullshit Hollywood way of hitting the deck, where someone dramatically throws themselves to the ground in a flourish, finding time to grab their buddy, and be a hero. It was the most effective way, letting your knees buckle and simply dropping, like God had just hit the light switch in your head. On the way down I went from being groggy to fully awake. The endorphins dumped into my blood stream. I was vaguely aware that Ulrich had also decided to see if he had magically become weightless, and found that instead of floating he dropped like a rock.

I would like to say that I hit the ground with a thud and a sharp pain, but that is not the case. To be honest I have no idea how I hit the ground, because it didn't matter. My brain was absolutely out of "give a fuck"

when it came to registering the details of everything, with the exception of: find a magazine in a magazine pouch, slam it into my weapon, and rack a round into the chamber. Somewhere in the middle of going condition one (as such actions are referred to by gunslinging professionals) I heard Ulrich ask “Where’d it come from?” Out of my peripherals I barely registered his baby face, completely blank, as his body’s chemical composition did that age-old waltz from being complacent to fight or flight.

I came up without realizing I had come up. I was one second on my side, reloading like it my life depended on it, and the next I was behind the sand bags. The instant I noticed I was standing I realized I had my newly loaded rifle in my hands, and it was being aimed at the intersection where, to my best estimation, the shots had come from, and I was hunting for heads. Suddenly a voice sounded from somewhere in the post, it half yelled something as follows: “WHERE THE FUCK? WHERE THE FUCK? FUCK, FUCK . . .”

I was about to tell whoever it was to shut up and stop panicking, when I realized it was my voice I was hearing. I stopped yelling and started regulating my breathing, immediately wishing I hadn’t. In the scuffle-filled silence the small dimensions of the post were made crystal clear by adrenaline. Every bit of the fighting position was so sharp and clear it took on a surreal grainy texture. I felt like I couldn’t breathe, the claustrophobic post cinching in on me like an anaconda.

I heard Ulrich slam his back into the heavy metal door of the post. He had come up with his rifle aimed out the window in the general direction of the street. He was running completely on instinct now, something I would have stopped and admired instead of just seeing out of the corner of my eye if the circumstances had been different. With his shoulder and the back of his body armor wedged as far as it could go into the small corner that the meeting of the door frame and wall made, he froze--like a deer who has heard the gun shot of a hunter, jumps, and then turns into statue--he wasn’t even breathing. We stood stalk still for what seemed like a minute, but was really a fraction of a second.

“Where’d it come from?” Ulrich’s whisper was all I could hear. The street traffic, the dogs barking, none of it was registering. My ears were ringing. After rotating back to the real world--that is to say, stateside--I sometimes have weird kinds of mini-flashbacks where something will trigger the part of my brain that is all business and my body goes from zero to hero at the drop of a hat: my ears always ring when this happens. People who study such things say it’s a learned predatory response, my ears bracing

themselves for dangerously loud noises and concussions.

“The intersection,” I whispered back. “Where’s the radio?” Was I talking normal and the ringing in my ears made it sound like I was whispering?

“It’s over there.” Ulrich was pumping his legs to stay wedged where he was; his feet were starting to slide in the thin layer of sand that coated the floor. It hit me like a splash of cold water. The radio had somehow fallen out of the post in the commotion. We were fucked.

“Leave it, don’t go out for it.” My thoughts were blurring through my mind, and I couldn’t seem to concentrate. What do we do? What do we do? Did the other posts hear the shot? Was there more than one? Will they call it in? It all flew through my head, but the blizzard of static in my brain was making it hard to focus on anything. I jammed the broom stick—a piece of gear used for patrolling that is attached to the long portion of the M-16—into the sand bags and put all of my weight against the butt stock.

I felt movement to the left of my legs. Ulrich was crouched down on the radio, squawking with a scratchy voice, “SHOTS FIRED, SHOTS FIRED, DO ADVISE. OVER.” After a couple of seconds of waiting, that seemed like an eternity, the Command Post came back with, “It’s just the Iraq Police dealing with traffic, nothing to worry about.”

And that was it.

We unloaded and walked down the stairs to the ground. I’m not sure what Ulrich did after this. I know we didn’t talk about it, except for a muttering from Ulrich that he had meant “over there” as in on the floor, not outside of the post, but that was it. I went and sat in one of the Porta-Johns and shook while I smoked a cigarette. You couldn’t talk about it, not right after anyway, and there was no way you could go have a break down in one of the designated smoking areas. All of that “emotional shit” was for behind closed doors, taken care of by the squad. Except my squad was broke, split down the middle by those who played along with our squad leaders bullshit, and those who were waiting for him to get someone killed. With no one to turn to, I just tried to chill out, to calm the fuck down. I got something to eat before I had to go one shift for eight more hours of work before my daily allotted eight hours of free time and sleep; by the end of the meal I had come to the age old nihilistic adage that many Marines turn to in times of crisis: “FUCK IT.” That was the best I could come up with, and I just left it at that. It was nothing to worry about.

Now we can talk about it. It’s ok to be scared now, to have feelings, to be absolutely freaked the fuck out. It doesn’t matter now though. We’re

all back in the states living the good life, sleeping on beds every night and eating food whenever we want to. None of us have to ask ourselves what we would do in extreme stress situations, we're "been there, done that Marines" now. Been there, done that, didn't talk about feelings afterward so we could all pretend we were hard as nails. No one wanted to think about anything but eating danger and shitting victory. No: feelings, second thoughts, regrets, and by God you had better not question our reasons for being here and occupying Iraq while we're doing it.

Iraq is a world away. Who I was in Iraq is a world away now. Our military has all but pulled out of that country, leaving the Sunnis and Shiites to sort out who will run it with AK's and RPG's. Who I was is still sitting on some lonely post there, chain smoking and starring out into the desert with steely eyes. That me will always be there. Sometimes I think I see him in dreams across a great expanse. I try to wave him over and talk to him. Talk to him about shaking, about breaking down, a girl that's cheating on him, and a grandmother who won't be there when he gets back. I shout at him; cupping my hands around my mouth, I try to grab his attention. He never listens though. He turns, gear thumping rhythmically against his body armor as he fades away. Trudging steadily back to Never Never Land. A place worlds away. A place deep inside of me.

Jason Ryan Arment is a literary studies major who wishes that Iowa State would stop stomping on the throat of the English department. He is an old junior at twenty-two, due to his role in the military industrial complex. He enjoys going to the range, supporting gay rights, and demonizing large corporations. Down with the Fed.