The blast was deafening! Dirt and debris showered down upon the quiet little town. It was one o’clock in the morning. Today was SGT Major Burgess’ birthday! He was a valuable friend to the medical section. We all came to town together and somehow our section had went off on our own after dinner and a few drinks. We were all out enjoying a quiet evening on the town and suddenly found ourselves amidst a chaotic battlefield. Kaboom! Another bomb exploded! This one was just a few blocks away from our location atop the luxurious rooftop bar smartly named, The Camel Bar. Now covered in dirt and debris, dust everywhere. Smoke billowing thickly in the air. Sudden quiet. Silence for about half a breath. Then it began. The screaming. People were screaming, men, women and children. Some running, some crawling, some dazed and confused, some not moving at all. Smoke, dust and fear hung in the air. Thick. The smell of burnt flesh, hair, clothing, rubber and wood all mingled together. The smell of fresh death. Car alarms wailing, sirens blaring, horns honking, people screaming. All at the same time. It was incessant!

 We picked ourselves up off the dust and litter strewn floor. Quickly accounting for our Battle Buddies, we conducted a quick self-assessment to check for injuries, finding that we were intact, we checked each other for less-obvious injuries. We looked at each other and quickly took stock of our situation. We were wearing tourist shirts and cargo shorts. Thank goodness we all wore tennis shoes and not the normal flip flop type sandals most people wear during the day. We all knew the dangers of being out here in the dark of night, even though this was classified as a peaceful area, we knew that violence was just around the corner. Our base was three long miles away.

 Our safety protocols stated that our outpost would be on lockdown in the event we are attacked. We understood immediately that no help would be coming. No immediate rescue would be undertaken. It was understood, as we looked at each other, dusting ourselves off, that we were on our own, in potentially hostile territory, unknown enemy strength, unknown enemy location and a long way to go in the middle of the night. Boom! Another blast ripped through the city. This one further away. Still close enough and powerful enough to shake the whole goddamn city!

“We need to get back to base. Now”! Stated Lt. Nelson, my PA and Team Leader. For those of you not familiar with medical terms, PA stands for physician’s assistant.

“I’ll take point”. I stated. “Follow me and keep it tight”. I nodded to “Doc” Nelson, “Doc, you stay in the middle. Navarette and Nguyen, you flank him”. We all knew that Doc was the guy we all needed to protect. We knew it, he knew it. Doc was as brave as any of my Medics. But the reality was that he was the most skilled. Any one of us would gladly jump on a grenade for him. He knew how we felt without having to put it out there in word format and he would do the same for any of us. We had an unspoken bond. The “Doc” and his Medics. We were all called “Doc”. He was a very humble man.

“I’ll bring up the rear with Johnson”. SGT Henry Young stated matter-of-factly. Johnson and Young were our best and fastest Medics. They knew it. As the Medical Platoon Sergeant and the “Old Guy” of the Team, I led the way back to South Camp at about a six-mile pace. A pace I knew my troops can keep up with since I was the slowest. Sgt Collins followed. He was my second in command. Never would I have thought that this moment would forever impact me and my outlook on life. Being well-trained and well equipped for emergencies was one thing. It is quite another to suddenly be plunged into a chaotic and unforgiveable battlefield, where even one mistake has the potential to cost innocent lives, the lives of your Battle Buddy or even your own.

We maintained two-meter intervals as we zig zagged through the war-torn city. Dodging debris strewn all over the roads and sidewalks. Burnt and crushed vehicles littered the streets as if someone had just rolled them out like dice. We avoided the civilians who were screaming, wounded, pleading for help. We stayed focused on getting back to camp. We did not know who the bad guys were, so we ran. Without supplies to help, without weapons to defend ourselves, without any way to communicate with our units, we ran. Through the night, through the dust, through the chaos, we ran. Until we finally cleared the dark city. Power had been knocked out in the first blast.

 Our base was still two miles away into the desert. Towards the beach, towards our Brothers, we ran. My crack troop of Medics followed closely. Running quick, running quiet, we knew that we would be silhouetted against the bright lights of the compound when we got close enough to make that last mile dash.

As we approached the first security barrier, I yelled in the loudest deepest voice I could muster. “Americans coming in! Seven Americans coming in”! As I ran up to and through the gate. “One”! I yelled, as I noticed Sgt. Tyner on the M60 up behind the K rail watching us closely. He quickly recognized our Medical Platoon and looked out past us for anyone who might be following behind us.

SPC Hernandez was all geared up at the funnel point waving us through, his weapon at the low ready.

SGT Collins was right behind me. “Two”! He yelled.

SPC Navarette came through next, “Three”!

“Four”! Doc Nelson yells to Hernandez.

“Five”! Yells Ngyuen as he passes through the choke point.

Sgt. Johnson comes in next, “Six”!

“Seven”! Yells Sgt Young and he makes it all the way through. Once on the other side of the check point, we quickly circle up. SGT Tyner drops down from the crow’s nest to debrief us. It has now been about thirty minutes since the blasts have rocked our quiet little outpost.

“You guys are about the last to get back”. Tyner is grim. “We still have two LT’s out. No word from them yet”.

Doc Nelson asks, “Does anyone know what happened”? Before SGT Tyner can reply.

“Do we have any casualties”? asked SGT Collins, all business.

SGT Tyner says, “Just that three bombs went off all over town. We are expecting an attack, but so far, nothing”. In response to SGT Collins’ question. “Doc Tackett”. Tyner looks at me and continues, “Top said to order you to his office as soon as you made it in”. Shrugging his shoulders, he went to radio the TOC that we were back in The Wire.

We made it! We were safe. Relatively speaking. We had made it back to South Camp, the Multi-Force Operations outside of a small tourist town called Sharm El-Sheikh, at the beach on the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. It was a hot night in July 2005.

Doc Nelson looked us over, we were all covered in dust, debris, small scratches and lots of sweat. “Get geared up guys. Lots of people are going to be needing our help”. He said solemnly. “Collins, check the Medical Clinic real quick before heading to your Company. Make sure they are ready for anything”. SGT Collins nodded, as he disappeared into the darkness.

After the enlisted all left, I spoke to Doc alone. “Doc, those civilians need us right now. You know it will take hours to cut through the red tape and let us go outside The Wire to help”. Desperation was in my voice. “It’s been twenty minutes since the last bomb”. I looked him in the eye. He knew without speaking that I intended to “cross the wire” one more time, with or without permission. People were dying as we spoke.

“Meet me back here in ten minutes, trauma gear only”. He nodded to me in the darkness. “I’m going with you. I’ll talk to the “Ol’ Man”. He turned and jogged away into the night.

I made my way straight to Top’s office. “What the hell did I do now”? I wondered. Or better yet, what the hell did they find out I did? I was always up to something.

 “What the hell were you thinking”? Screamed a very frustrated First Sergeant. I was standing at “parade rest” in front of his desk, doing my absolute best not to make eye contact. Making eye contact would ensure I went straight to the brig. Do not pass “Go”, do not collect $200. First Sergeant Honeycutt was livid. I could tell he was extremely upset and on the verge of physically settling this whole matter, right here, right now. He was a tall man, so even with him sitting at his Army issue standard desk, grey, 3 drawer, one each, he was tall. I knew better than to answer him just yet. Let him get a few more thoughts out and the steam will subside, I prayed. It was 0130 in the early morning hours. Our outpost had just been placed on high alert. Attack imminent. He was understandably cranky, moody and full of anxiety.

 “I don’t know what your problem is with having a death wish, Sergeant First Class Tackett”. It’s always bad when they use your full rank and name. “But I am this close (holding up his two fingers, spaced ab out an inch apart) to recommending another Article 15”! He was of course talking about my last Article 15, in which I smuggled a very cute, young lady into our Peace Keeping Camp on the Sinai Peninsula last month using our military ambulance and I had kept her in my hootch for almost a week before she was discovered. But that is another story. “Do you have a death wish, Sergeant First Class Tackett”? His voice was almost back to normal.

 “No, First Sergeant”! I replied loud and proud. “I do not have a death wish, First Sergeant”! “I-“

 He cut me off abruptly. “Then why must you constantly be *On the Razor’s Edge*”? He questioned, exhausted. “You and your platoon had no business being out there tonight! And who the hell authorized you to take the whole goddamn platoon?! Why do you always push the envelope”? He opened up his hands, palm upwards. “Why”? First Sergeant was a good Soldier. A good Leader. He genuinely cared about his troops. I was one of those troops, albeit a troubled troop. I knew that he wasn’t really mad “at me” he was worried for me and my platoon and now that he knew we were safe, he could play the tough guy.

 “I’m not trying to always be *On the Razor’s Edge*, Top”. I explained, using a more familiar term for his rank. I hoped it would calm him down a bit. Still not making eye contact, I stood very still and very straight.

 “Bullshit”! He spat. I could see he was weary with the burden of leadership. I knew I had a lot to blame for his current state of mind. “That fucking razor is going to cut your ass in half one of these days, Sergeant”! His voice was still at an elevated pitch, but he wasn’t quite screaming at me anymore. He stood up and made his way around the desk to sit on the corner.

“Oh, hell! What was he going to do? Soldiers need me. My Medics need me. And they need me right now”! I thought.

There was an urgent knock at the door. Without waiting for an answer, the door opened. “Who the hell opens the door of the Company First Sergeant without identifying themselves”? I quickly wondered to myself. It was my boss! Our most respected Battalion Physician! My savior, I hoped. If anyone can get me out of this predicament it would be this guy, Captain John Nelson, our “Doc”.

“Top. I just came from talking to the “Ol’ Man”. Referring to our Battalion Commander, Doc Nelson was all business. This wasn’t like him. Something was up. “I convinced him to send Tackett and myself out, equipped and fully loaded to assist the locals”. Doc Nelson was our golden boy. Young, super smart, surfer dude and he was the epitome of a California Dude, blonde and handsome. He was as tall as me at 5 foot 10 inches, unlike me, he was solid muscle. He came right out of a movie. Now he was serious. He meant business. Even Top knew better than to argue with him. But Top being Top, had to get in the last good word.

“You two had better not fuck this up. I can’t believe we are sending our two top Docs out into this shit show”! He looked both of us in the eye, in turn and paused for dramatic effect. “God speed, gentlemen. Now get the hell out of my office before I throw you in the brig.” We both made a hasty exit, we quickly matched step as we walked. Down the long, white hallway heading to the main front doors. No words until we made it outside.

“What the hell was that all about”? Asked Doc. Looking at me. We were making our way towards Doc’s hootch.

Not returning his gaze I kept my eyes on the ground. We could hear the sirens going off all over the compound. I hear the movement of Soldiers, fully loaded and vehicles rushing to their defensive positions. “Top said I’m always on the razor’s edge and I’m going to get someone killed one day”. Probably myself. I thought quietly. I was waiting for Doc to disagree…waiting…waiting…

“Yea, well maybe he has a point”. Doc Nelson replied calmly. We paused our walk and I looked him in the eye. Then I saw a sparkle in his bright, blue eyes. A hint of a smile began. “But not today”! He exclaimed proudly. “Today, Fortune favors the bold”! He clasped a hand to my shoulder in a fatherly manner, and yet he was ten years younger. “Today, lives depend on us, Tack. Us. Just you and me. I got the OK to go outside the wire and assist at Pyramid Hospital with the wounded”. The small smile just became a big smirk. “Get your shit together. Let’s all meet at the gate in 10 mikes”. Doc Nelson knew that nothing would keep me from venturing out to help the wounded. Better to work with me than to work against me. And we both knew that it would take more than ten minutes to get ready. We better not screw this up, we knew Top was going to go ballistic if we got hurt.

Twenty minutes later, Doc Nelson and I were fully equipped in our battle rattle, we had our Army issued STOMP 2 med bags and we each had a combat lifesaver bag. We had our issued 9mils on our hip. All my medics were standing ready when we got there. Quickly taking charge, I called out Sgt. Collins.

“SGT Collins”! SGT Collins is one of our best medics. Smart, experienced, a natural leader. He stepped up to the front of the gaggle. “Looking around at everyone, I could not have been more proud of my medics. Everyone was ready to do whatever was asked. Speaking to the group. I began, “SGT Collins will be in charge until Doc and I return. Each of you get to your assigned units and assist them and be ready for anything”. I could tell they guys wanted to go with us. I continued, “Your men need you on the line. I need you to be there for them. They are counting on you. We know you won’t let them down”. I tried to make eye contact with everyone, even if just for a moment. Looking over my medics I knew they would be able to handle anything. Hell! I trained them to be as good as myself. Some were even better, but I would never tell them that. “Get going”. They all said their good byes and went trotting off into the darkness, going their own ways, anxious to meet up with their line units. Their Brothers in Arms.

Doc Nelson looked at me as we headed for the front security gate. “How far is Pyramid Hospital, you think”? He asked noncommittedly.

“It’s about four miles”. I replied casually. You could tell the adrenaline was beginning to build inside. My heart was racing! We began a slow jog to the main gate. It would have been nice if Top had given us a vehicle to take outside the wire. But we knew that was out of the question. Vehicles were always in high demand, we might need them for our own troops. We couldn’t take the chance of losing even one vehicle. Maybe we could break a rule or two and jump on a civilian bongo truck. Wouldn’t that be nice. Two hard charging Medics riding into battle, into chaos, into the unknown on the back of some dilapidated, dust covered, duct tape and bailing wire holding it together truck, weaving erratically in and out of traffic. Yea, I can just see us now. Laughing out loud, I picked up the pace.

“Two going out”! I screamed to the backs of our security team. Sirens were still wailing in the distance. I counted at least six Soldiers behind barricades and K rails, anxiously anticipating the unexpected to occur. They were strategically placed behind barriers and the familiar muzzles of the SAW and M60 (yes, we still had M60’s!) were easy to see from their elevated platforms. As we passed the inner and out barriers I yelled, “One out”!

Doc Nelson yells, “Two out”! As he passed through.

We could hear SGT Witcher, the Sergeant of the Guard, reply, “Copy, two out”. As he waved us through. He knew us. He knew we were on a life and death mission to help the locals.

With that, we began the four-mile jog to Pyramid Hospital in the middle of this desert city of Sharm El Sheikh in the middle of bum fuck Egypt. Smoke and dust was heavy in the air. The date was 23 July 2005 and it was almost 0200 hours by now. We had no idea what we were going to find. All we knew was that our friends, our allies were under attack. I knew some of these locals personally, they had saved my life a time or two, and I was determined to help them if I could. The four-mile jog would have taken almost an hour, as we were loaded down with medical supplies, about seventy pounds worth! We were wearing our battle-rattle, another thirty pounds! We trained for this grueling run regularly. Many, many times we ran in full gear and fully loaded with our medical supplies. Train as you fight! It paid off in spades tonight. We didn’t talk in order to conserve our strength, we knew this was going to take a while, there were probably dozens hurt, dead and dying. We were wrong, so very wrong. Dozens would have been a walk in the park. We had no idea that this bad dream would turn into an absolute nightmare.

As luck would have it, there were many vehicles, cars, trucks and bicycles, all going our way, towards the center of town, towards Pyramid Hospital. Everyone was in a panic. Talking fast, hands gesturing wildly, we didn’t understand the local language very well, but we could easily understand their panic. It was easy to wave down a Toyota pick-up going our way and jump on the back. The driver, like most of the locals knew that we Americans were here to help. We stood in the bed looking over the cab trying to catch our breath, taking in the damage the city had suffered. It looks like there were three areas of the city hit by the explosions. We wouldn’t find out the actual number of wounded and dead until later. The truck weaved through traffic and made it’s way to the hospital. We didn’t know how bad it was until we walked through the double glass doors of the ER at Pyramid Hospital just after 0230 hours.

This was it. Size up the scene. This is what I have been preparing my whole life for. Check the scene for safety. The countless hours reading emergency medical books, first responder manuals, the endless hands on testing, over and over and over, until I could perform the techniques in the dark. Triage quickly. Starting I.V.s, performing emergency tracheotomies, needle chest decompressions, suturing minor wounds, this was my place, this was my time, this was my home, where lives hung in the balance of split-second decisions. If I messed it up, the patient might die, there were no second chances here. We could see so many injured people, some crying for help, others pleading with their hand and arm gestures. The entire floor was thick with fresh blood. We could actually smell the blood, the burnt flesh and clothing. Dust hung in the air. Hell, dust hung in the air everywhere, the whole city had dust hanging in the air!

You could feel the fear, the anxiety. The scene looked like some horror movie scene. Men, women and children were in various stages of shock. People were running around with supplies trying to help as best they could. Others were the family who brought in their injured family member, hoping for a miracle. The look of these dust covered faces was almost too much to bear. Tear streaked faces everywhere. Screams of the wounded. Yells of those trying to help in order to get more supplies into play. Those yelling were just trying to cover up for their shock. It was utter chaos, no organization, panic was setting in. All this took less than a second to size up from when we entered the understaffed and ill-equipped ER of this third world country. This was why the good Lord put me here. When lives hung in the balance, I wanted it to be me called in to help. I know I am the best. You want it to be me who gets this call. They need it to be me who shows up to help. I relish this feeling. I thrive on this adrenaline rush. Challenge me! Few will understand, I need to be On the Razor’s Edge.

Walking in, I notice an elderly lady wearing her hijab, sitting on the floor, her back against the wall. Her ankle in protruding from the bottom of her dress. The ankle is at an impossible angle. Bone fragment protruding, blood actively pouring out of the jagged hole. Blood is pooling around her, soaking into her dress. She is wailing! Her airway is intact. I drop my aid bag next to her. Her younger female companion, probably her daughter, is frantically talking to her. Desperately trying to calm her down. I can only see her eyes. I quickly put on my nitrile gloves and grab a CAT tourniquet.

“No tourniquet”. Doc Nelson says calmly. “Save it. Use the Israeli dressing and elevate it. I will get her to surgery as soon as I can. Keep an eye to make sure the bleeding stops”. He is gone. Onto the next injured person.

“I’m going to stop the bleeding”. I say in English as I start opening up the dressing I will be using. I am sure she doesn’t understand my words, but my actions are obvious. I am here to help.

“la-a. La-a”! A young man in a nice dressed suit is motioning me to get away from the lady. He is trying to push me towards a different injured man who is holding his arm at an awkward angle. No obvious bleeding. He is crying. His airway is intact. The young lady is pleading with him in Arabic, motioning towards her mother with the actively bleeding ankle. The man points at the man with the broken arm, obviously telling me to treat him first. I go around him and make my way back towards the bleeding ankle lady. Emotions are high. Male dominated society demands that males be treated first. My medical training tells me to do the most good for the most people. My medical training tells me to stabilize the serious injuries now. Open fracture actively bleeding out is more serious than a broken arm. I am spun around at the shoulder by the nicely dressed man. He is animatedly yelling at me, motioning to the broken arm guy, his eyes open wide in disbelief as he sees the barrel of my Army issue M9 Barretta pointed between his eyes. He immediately stops speaking as he notices the stern look to my eyes. The hammer is cocked back. A round is in the chamber. Finger is on the trigger. Breathing has stopped. The entire hallway of Pyramid Hospital’s emergency room holds it’s collective breath. All eyes are on me. Doc Nelson is hunched over a gurney, he has his stethoscope on, one hand has placed the bell into position on the chest of an injured child, checking for a pneumothorax no doubt. He freezes and watches the scene play out, watching my every movement.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the well-dressed man backs up. As he does, he lifts his hands, palms outward. “Mafeesh muskila. Mafeesh muskila”. He quietly speaks. The confrontation is over, everyone breathes again. I lower the pistol, uncock the hammer, place the weapon on safe and place it back in my holster. I’m not fucking around. Everyone knows now. Doc goes back to assessing the injured child. People start moving again, helping each other. I go back to the lady. Relief on the daughter’s face, crying, but smiling. I gently dress the wound with a lot of extra padding, pull a little traction and with the daughter’s help I put on a SAM splint. Elevate the whole leg on my aid bag and check to ensure a pulse is still distally present. I wave over an orderly and ask for a gurney in English. As he runs off, I scan for the next serious injury.

An old man, covered in dust and blood is standing against the wall. He has some dried blood from his ears. His eyes look bewildered. He must have been close to one of the explosions. Old guys are tough. A quick assessment shows me he is breathing ok. No abnormal breath sounds. Breathing is steady. Definitely a concussion, blown out ear drums, maybe an TBI, maybe… Need a scan first. A few scrapes and scratches all over, but he should be fine. I wave over an orderly to find him a chair. I move on. There are hundreds more waiting. Hundreds!

Before this evening I was just your everyday happy-go-lucky Combat Medic. Just trying to get by, doing the minimal amount of work for the most amount of fun. I look back now and am grateful for the opportunity to serve my country. I have gone on to prepare my Medics for Combat. Anyone can teach from the books Basic First Aid, Prehospital Trauma Life Support, Tactical Care Under Combat, etc. I like to think that I taught from the heart, my heart. To instill that drive, that need to succeed, to help save lives. I believe that attitude can change the outcome. Sometimes. I preach to those who bitch, moan, whine and complain, “If people aren’t dying, and the enemy isn’t trying to kill you, it’s too easy”! I got that cool saying from SSG Griffin while I was in BNCOC.

While most people will never understand, they may scoff or feign understanding, but until you experience life *on the razor’s edge*, you will never know. After going back into that town-triaging the wounded, bandaging deep cuts, suturing the minor injuries so that Doc Nelson could deal with the serious shit and splinting all kinds of traumatic injuries, penetrating chest injuries, amputations, treating second- and third-degree burns, cleaning deep avulsions, prepping the injured for surgery, I realize how easy my life is now. It was a lot to fathom, that night in Egypt. The hurt, the anguish, the grieving, the anger, almost overwhelming, almost.

We found the energy and strength to provide comfort to the dying. Acting as a rock for the civilians to cling to. Demonstrating courage and resolve in the face of so many injured. Helping get the dead to the quick make-shift and overflowing morgue. We sometimes held the dying in my arms as they passed on to the next world. Compassion, you can’t teach this in a classroom. Looking at the loved ones who were in turn looking to me and Doc to provide a miracle, broke my heart. I knew I could not help save everyone. I helped as best as I could. I knew where I was meant to be. Help the wounded. Provide comfort to the dying, my whole life I have been preparing for this moment. I did not fail my fellow man. After most of the serious wounded had been cleared and the seriously injured were lined up and prepped for surgery, I sought out Doc Nelson. I found him suturing up an abdomen in the surgery room. He had plenty of help. I waited patiently outside for him to finish. I had a cup of coffee in my hands for him when he came out to catch his breath. We took stock of our situation.

Ill equipped EMT’s were doing the best they could. Understaffed doctors and nurses were working as fast as they could to stabilize the wounded as they continued to pour in. Local policemen were doing what they could to regain some semblance of order and safety in this chaos. We had been here over three hours now. They were still clearing the wounded from the buildings and streets. We were out of supplies, tired as hell, exhausted, but we knew this night was far from over. We looked at each other, we knew we still had a lot of work ahead of us. Doc went to call our TOC for an update. I sat on an old chair, covered in blood and dust. I slowly drank my warm Coca-Cola. Doc had a serious look to his face as he returned.

“Those two LT’s are still missing”. He said. We both slowly looked towards the morgue. I closed my eyes for a moment. Took a deep, cleansing breath and prepared my mind for the horrors I had been putting on hold. I deliberately began to compartmentalize my fear, my anxiety. I will pull that shit out later down the road when I finally admit I have PTSD. As I opened my eyes, I found myself walking deliberately to the old supply room on the first floor. It was turned in a make shift morgue. Now full of broken bodies. Some clothed, some wrapped in sheets or blankets. Stacked up on each other, some piles were five or six people high! Dozens of dead! Dozens and dozens of dead! The room reeked of death. The room wasn’t even cold! It was a goddamn supply room! The stench of burnt flesh. Blood dried on the floor. Yet underneath the top layer of clotted blood, it still moved and slid when we stepped on it. I was dry heaving as we entered.

I prayed it was me who found the LT’s if they were here. As officers, Doc Nelson would be closer to them. I didn’t want Doc to be the one who found his friends. That would be very hard for a young guy to handle. We did a quick, cursory search, looking at the faces we could see first. Some of the faces had their eyes closed. Some faces had slight smiles, some no smiles at all and some faces looked like they…. Don’t think about it, push it down. Compartmentalize the horror and save it for another day! Focus on the faces I am looking for and forget the rest. Forget them! There will plenty of time to remember them later. Tears were freely flowing down my cheeks, my eyes hurt. My throat was swollen, difficult to breath. My heart hurt to it’s core. My soul was screaming out in painful silence. Nothing. “I don’t see them, Doc. Let’s hope they made it”. My voice unsteady.

 “Yea, they probably weren’t even in town”. Doc Nelson said in a reassuring manner, trying to be humorous. We both knew that the wounded and dead were still trickling in. Doc’s eyes were watery also. I wasn’t alone.

 Next, we began the methodical restacking of bodies, checking each face more closely. Some were women, some were men and some were even children. Some wounds were ghastly, open wounds, missing an arm or leg, part of a face. Dirt, tear streaks on some faces, burnt clothing, dried blood on faces, in hair, on hands and arms. The screaming and wailing of family members seeing their loved ones in such a state. Each body weighed about two hundred pounds or so, except the kids. The children weighed next to nothing. It took both of us to move each adult body. We didn’t dare take too long looking at the children. Their lifeless bodies, mangled, covered in dust and blood. These innocents should be home right now. Sleeping peacefully in their beds. Waiting for their mamas to wake them up for chores and breakfast. But here we were moving them carefully to see the face underneath. Hoping we didn’t see the faces we were looking for. We did not find those two LT’s that night. The sun was coming up. The serious work had been completed. Back-up was arriving. More doctors, more nurses, more supplies. We could leave now. It was time to check in on our guys back on post, get some chow, maybe eat a little breakfast, take a shower and figure out what the hell had just happened.

Turns out that the Taliban did not like the way peace was progressing and they tried to cause hate and despair, pain and anger, helplessness and grief. Instead, the town had stood up, licked their terrible wounds and fought back. But that is another story altogether. Those two missing LT’s came back later the next day. It seems they had snuck out and went to Eliat, Isreal without telling anyone. They thought they would have a grand old time and no one would notice. Boy were they going to get the hammer now!

As for me, well, let’s just say that I soon found a nice little flat off post, in the middle of an oasis. It was too easy to sneak off post, dressed as one of the local contractors, ride the pound bus into town, stay for a day or two and return in the morning wearing my p.t. uniform with my clothes neatly hidden in my camel back! On the razor’s edge, indeed.