A Knock on the Door

Chapter 3

I had been asleep. There was an insistent knock on the door of my hootch. It was almost 2200hrs and I have been up all day. I needed my rest for the morning. I had Army Combatives to teach, Sick Call to handle and then Chow, all by 0800hrs. Not to mention a shower somewhere in that time period. I was not happy to be woken up. As the senior enlisted Medical Platoon Sergeant, I was afforded certain concessions. One, of which, was to sleep as much as I wanted. No one ever complained. My troops wanted me to remain well rested. They needed me to remain well rested. They understood that when the time was needed and lives were on the line, I was the one who would answer that call without hesitation. Here on COB Speicher, in the shithole of this dusty, dirty little desert country of Iraq, that call came all too often.

I found myself, getting out of bed in my P.T. shorts and shirt, my dog tags were making that familiar clinking sound as they were dangling from my neck. As I put on my slippers, yes, I had slippers, and not just the flip flops, but actual slippers. I was instantly alert, ready to respond to any medical emergency I was confronted with.

“Yes, who is it”? I asked, making my way to the door.

“SFC Tackett, It’s PFC Dubois. I need some help, SGT”. It was the Chaplain’s Assistant. Bodyguard really. “SFC Tackett”?

I opened the door, there stood the tallest cajun I have ever met. At six foot six inches, this tall, skinny kid didn’t fit into his uniform properly. It was way too big. He looked like he was wearing his father’s hand me downs. It must be tough on supply to get him a big enough uniform for how tall he was, but being so thin made the uniforms hang off of his frame in an unkempt manner. But this troop was actually pretty squared away from what I had seen. He had only been here 2 days and he seemed to know his trade. Looking past him, I could see the mile-long convoy of vehicles. Some were gun trucks, some were transportation trailers. So many different vehicles, big rig diesels, MRAPS and HMMVs made up this rag-tag looking convoy.

“Yes, Dubois, what’s up”? I asked, rubbing the sleep off of my face.

“Sarnt Tackett”. He drawled. “Me and the Chaplain are going out the wire tonight. We are on the convoy mission”. I’m nodding, twirling my fingers in the air, attempting to get him to speed up his speech pattern. No luck. He speaks as fast as molasses runs. “Sarnt, Supply is closed and I need ammo, Sarnt”. He pleads. I know he’s right. Supply has been trying to act like they are a normal office back in the states. Open from 9 to 5 and closed on weekends. This was Sunday, technically. Supply would be closed. I was the Medical Platoon Sergeant, not the Supply Sergeant. But everyone knew that if you needed something done quickly, I am the guy to go to. The PFC slowly pulled out a Coca-Cola bottle. And apparently, he knew the cost of dealing with me! It was ice cold! Even better.

“Okay, okay, okay”. I opened my door. “I will hook you up tonight. But find me as soon as you get back and we will go get your initial ammo issue from Supply. I don’t care what time it is”. I admonished. I placed the coke bottle on my night stand, next to my rack.

I walked over to a large white sheet hanging up on the wall. It almost covered the whole wall, it was a king size sheet. Hung up for movie day. It also covered a secret room. Saddam Hussein’s secret room! This little closet was a small, double secret torture room. It was two little closets side by side. Each closet was insulated with a think covering of foam. Claw marks and scratches raked up and across the walls of both torture cells. Dried and caked blood was easily visible on the cement floor. There was actually a drain in the middle of each cell, for the blood, I imagined.

When they were issuing out hootches, the other senior enlisted got the bigger, better, newer rooms. I had been at the CASH getting oriented and this was the last room no one else had wanted. My room. The Torture Room, where Saddam had tortured the Iraqi Soccer Team after their defeat to the US. From our own gossip, some had been murdered in here. I loved this room! It now kept one of my wall lockers with the contraband, I mean my stuff! I kept my ammo in here. Yea, just my ammo and my snacks. Just my ammo, my snacks and some other stuff. Not really worth mentioning here in this book. Ducking behind the sheet and going to my wall locker, I opened it up. I grabbed my 10, fully loaded mags and gave them all to the green PFC. You never know when shit will hit the fan. I can get more in the morning, so it was no big deal. No big deal indeed.

“Thanks, Sarnt! Thanks, so much. I owe you big time”! He was ecstatic. Beaming from ear to ear. I am sure he felt safe now that he had ammo. Confidant. Protector of Chaplains. I could tell that a great weight had just been lifted from his shoulders. I sincerely hoped that he would never find out the very real and very deadly truth-10 full mags of 5.56 are never enough in a real firefight. This is why our seasoned Warriors always took cases of ammo out with them. Cases. In a convoy, you have limited visibility, meaning your fields of fire suck, the vehicle bounces too much to aim well with an individually assigned weapon. But who was I to rain on his parade?

Smiling as I closed my door, I wondered where in the hell did a green E-3, PFC, new in country, find an ice-cold Coca Cola this time of night? I will save it for breakfast, I mused, placing it in my small fridge. I quickly went back to bed and fell sound asleep.

Another incessant knocking at my door! Who the hell could it be now? I checked by cell phone, no missed called or messages. Couldn’t really trust these haji Nokia cell phones. I never know how many minutes the locals added to my phone when I paid them Amrican dollars to load minutes for me. I also checked my radio. It was on. No chatter. I went to the door in my Hugh Hefner playboy silk pajamas. I don’t even remember changing into them.

“Yea, what’s up”? I asked as I stood off to the side of my door, hand on the handle.

“Doc! You gotta get up. Doc”! Sounded like one of our young LT’s. LT Rossignoli?

Opening the door, I smiled weakly. “Everything ok, Sir? What’s up”?

“Hey, I am sorry to bother you, SGT Tackett, but we need a Medic for our convoy”. Now I noticed he was in full battle rattle. Oh great. He continued, “Your Medic, SPC Tamayo, just broke his arm. He’s at the CASH now getting an x-ray”. He was speaking fast. He was in a hurry to meet the SP time. “We need someone right now. We are all lined up and ready to exfil the wire”.

I looked out past him, over his shoulder. I could make out an easy hundred vehicles. Every 5th one a HMMV or an MRAP. The rest were big rigs. Driven by contractors, some Greek, some Portuguese, some Russian, all types, everyone trying to make some big money. And now I had over a million dollars worth of supplies and equipment waiting on me to make a decision. Great. Just great. I took a deep breath, already knowing I would go. “Give me 5 mikes, Sir. I got you”.

He smiled from ear to ear. Pulling out a can of Coca Cola, “Thanks so much, Sarg. I really do owe you one”! He exclaimed as he handed me my price. My man! He quickly left and ran back to the convoy. “You’re in the middle”! he yelled over his shoulder as he disappeared into the night.

I grabbed my gear, threw on my boots without lacing them, my STOMP 2 Med Bag, and a uniform. I threw my battle rattle on over my jammies and then went into my Torture Room to get my weapon and ammo…I suddenly felt sick to my stomach…Everything was moving in slow motion as I knew…But I was in denial…I grabbed my M4 and hoped beyond hope for a miracle. I slowly glanced into my contra-I mean my wall locker looking for ammo. None, nada, zero, zilch. Summbitch!!! I had hoped that it had been a dream. A horrible joking nightmare. But it wasn’t. I really had no ammo. Fuck! Fuck. Fuck, fuck!

It was just a quick turn around. Nothing to worry about. You won’t even need any ammo. Back before you know it. Murphy’s Laws of Combat came quickly to mind. Fuck my life.

Med kit on my back, everything else in my arms, I walked out into the night. My ride, an MRAP was waiting. Perfect. At least I would be able to sleep! The rear hatch began to slowly slower. Like a gate to a castle. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. The sound of the hydraulic motor lowering the 500 pound ramp. It takes about 20 seconds to raise or lower, always seems like forever. Finally, it stops, the ramp resting on the hard packed desert floor. I walk up and hit the button to raise the ramp. The 50 gunner had already gone back up to his nest. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. I slowly raise the ramp. An eternity later it finally latches. Secured.

I dump my gear in the middle of the MRAP floor and get the headset on. I can hear faint music coming through the ear muffs. Pushing the transmit button forward I spoke into the mike. “I’m onboard. Ramp secured. Wake me if you need anything”. Everyone knew I always sleep until I get called up to earn my money. No one ever complained. I stripped down and got into uniform as the driver made our way back into position in the middle of the convoy. Hell! I didn’t even know who my crew was! Didn’t matter. Yet. I laid on the hard metal floor, used my Pro Mask for a pillow, laid my weapon across my body and covered up with my woobie. Oh, how that woobie has saved my life a time or two. I was asleep as we crossed the wire, with my headset still in place. I subconsciously tuned out the chatter, focusing on one word to revive me. “Doc”. When I hear that particular word, it’s like magic. I am instantly awake, alert and quiet waiting for the next word to point me into action. Instantly. It’s a gift. Oblivious to the bumps and noise of the behemoth MRAP, I slept, hoping to not hear that magic word.

I don’t dream. Not anymore. Not since I was a young Combat Medic, 91 Alpha, way back when. First call I had of a drunk driver. MVA with two vehicles involved. Mother and two year-old were hit head-on by a young, drunk PV2 on post. As well as I can remember, I never dreamt again, ever. It’s probably better this way. “Doc”. Someone had spoken my magic word.

“Yea, go ahead”, I replied instantly awake, pushing the transmit button forward. Internal comms only. Eminem’s song “Just Lose it” can be heard faintly over the headset, rapping away.

“Hey, Doc, we got a vehicle down with a flat tire. I easily recognized SSG Van Pelt’s calm voice. Professional. He was our TC, Tank Commander. Even though this was an MRAP, the old lingo was still around. “Mustang One-One wants us and Rover two-one to go pull security while they change the tire”. “We are pulling out and turning around”.

“Roger, roger”. I replied. Time to pop up and get my game face on. I stow my woobie and get my gear up off the floor. I look out the port-side periscope as we begin our exit from the convoy and turn around. We are in front, Rover two-one smoothly pulled out of the convoy, fell in line and followed us back past the rest of the convoy. Over forty vehicles! Stretching out over a mile. They don’t stop. They won’t stop. We will have to get the tire changed and catch up to them. I notice that Rover two-one is a .50 cal gun ship just like our MRAP. Two .50 cal MRAP gunships for an escort? Seemed excessive. I hadn’t gotten the Safety Brief, so I had no idea of the present ThreatCon Level. Great. Just fucking great.

About ten minutes past the last vehicle we came upon the downed vehicle. A big Peterbilt semi-tractor with trailer. We passed the vehicle then did a u-turn. My vehicle took point and set up about ten meters in front of the big rig. Rover two-one stopped short and set up about ten meters behind the end of the trailer.

“Thunderbolt Five-one in position”. SSG Van Pelt calls out.

“Rover two-one in position”. I hear SSG Griffin’s voice. Cool. We have a solid team. These guys know their business. They leave the vehicles running.

“Doc”, Van Pelt kinda asks , kinda tells me, “Go check on the driver and get him to hurry his ass up. Will ya’”?

I don’t argue. While I technically outrank him, this is no time to quibble. We are in enemy territory, in the dead of night, without much ancillary support. Help would be ten, maybe twenty minutes away by chopper or fixed-wing aircraft. This is his vehicle, he is in charge. Make no mistake. I guiltily look at my weapon, knowing I have no fucking ammo. Fuck my life. I get to the rear of the vehicle, unlatch the safety lever and push the button. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. I let the half-ton door lower halfway to the floor. It took forever!

I walk out onto the ramp, crouch down and wait. I need time to allow my eyes to adjust to the complete darkness. The big rig’s lights are off and the driver is working by flashlight only. Awesome. Smart dude. I notice the silhouette of Rover two-one back in the shadows. Alright, alright. I can make out shadows now. “Exiting vehicle, no comms”, I take off my headset and replace it with my Kevlar. I notice lights from a far-away village off to the West. Maybe two miles away. Maybe. I jump down the two feet from the ramp to the road and walk out into the inky blackness. My eyes have adjusted.

I make my way straight to the guy with the flashlight. He is a civilian sitting on the ground, tools around him. He is alone. Driving alone he doesn’t have to split his pay with anyone else. He has an air drill hooked up to his brake line and he is undoing the lug nuts. He has half of them off. He is not a happy camper. The sound of his impact wrench going to town was deafening in the still desert night. “Another five or ten minutes. I’m almost done”. The driver comments, without looking up. He wouldn’t be able to see me anyway. The flashlight’s weak beam was lighting up his face. He could only see what was in the cone of light. He was a pogue. Obviously. Careful not to look at the light, I glanced around in the darkness. The whir of the air gun continued. It really was dark on this side of the road. Very different from the “real world” where you had city streets and buildings lighting up most of our civilization.

I made my way up to the front of the cab. I made sure to stand directly behind the large front wheel as I tried to lean forward and peer around the front of the truck. I was trying to get a glimpse of the town lights out in the distance. I had to take another step forward, meaning that my feet were now exposed. I could hear the sounds of the tire being put on. Whir, whir, whir. I could make out the small town’s outline. Maybe two miles. Maybe. I walked to the rear of the truck, closer to Rover Two-One. Everything looked fine. I peered around the back of the truck and could only see darkness. I couldn’t see anyone in Rover Two-One, but I knew they were there. Overwatch. My guardian angels, if it came to it.

I checked my ACOG to make sure it wasn’t loose. I hadn’t brought my NVGs. I quickly did a self-check as I made my way back to the front of the truck. I needed to keep my mind busy. Boots-Laced tight. Check. OTV body armor with neck protector, shoulder and cod pieces-check. Fifteen pounds. SAPI plates-Front, back and sides. Twelve pounds total. Check. Canteens-full, Camelbak-full (You can never have too much water out here in this hellish desert landscape). Eight pounds total. Check. IFAK, Flashlight, Gerber folding knife, trauma shears, chem lights, ROE cards, jerky sticks. Check. Pocket bible-Side pocket. Check. Knuckle gloves. Check. NVGs-negative. Stomp II aid bag-Back in the vehicle. Forty pounds. Check. Kevlar-with goggles. Three pounds. Check. M4 rifle with ACOG-check. Eight pounds. Check. Ammo-ten mags full. Fuck!

Peering around the front of the vehicle I looked for the town’s lights. Darkness. What the fuck?

“Heads up”! I heard someone from SSG Griffin’s MRAP yell. “Lights went out! Heads up”!

My throat constricted. My stomach tightened. I felt nauseous. I glanced forward to my own vehicle. The ramp was still halfway down. But it was too dark to make out what was going on. I heard the gunner yell.

“Hurry up, Doc”! In a high female voice. Tennison? “We got to go”! It was Tennison! SPC Tennison, armored vehicle mechanic. I hadn’t even known she was on Van Pelt’s crew. Cool. She was a shooter. Even if she did accidentally pee on me once when we were on another convoy together. Gatorade bottle, my ass. But that is another story.

I glanced over my shoulder towards the driver finishing up with the tire. I stepped backwards to keep myself behind the giant front tire. “Hey, we need to go”. My voice straining to show the urgency of the situation.

“Just a sec”…He began. And then the light show began. Have you ever seen Star Wars when they are blasting their lasers out in the blackness of space? Yea. Like that. It is a general practice to make every fifth round a tracer round. I knew instinctively that for every red streak I saw, there were four more invisible deadly lasers streaking out also. The red lasers streaked across the darkness. Mesmerizing. Whizzing, zinging, zipping. Then the sound caught up to me. Crack, crack, crack, crack. The easily identifiable sound of a distant AK 47. Many, many AKs. Fuck! The staccato bursts continued without a break for an eternity. Red lasers zipping all around and between our vehicles, over our heads, some lasers bouncing off the road.

Then my guardian angels roared in defiance! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! The Ma Deuces opened up at the same time. Sending green fiery tracers of death back towards the origins of the red tracers. Full auto. Beautiful! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! I screamed to the driver as I grabbed him and shoved him towards the open door. “We’re leaving”!

“My tools!” He looked bewildered. Shock. Disbelief. First Time being shot at? I Wondered silently in my mind. Rookie. He’s gonna get me killed. Red streaks began again in earnest. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack!

“Fuck your tools”! I kicked his air gun under his truck so he wouldn’t focus on it. No time to fuck around and find out if time is on our side. “Get in, Let’s go”! I slammed his door closed and jumped behind his front driver’s tire for cover. Red lasers kept zinging by. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! The truck came to life. Lights on bright! The truck lurched forward! Illuminating SSG Van Pelt’s MRAP for everyone to see. Maybe even ruining Tennison’s night vision. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack!

“Stop”! I screamed to the driver. “Stop! You fuckin’ idiot”! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Green lasers streaking away towards the enemy.

His window was down. “We’re being shot at”! He screamed back, braking hard. Panic in his voice. “We got to go”! His eyes were wide in fear.

“Turn off your fucking lights! They can see us”! I screamed right back. Fucking idiot! The lights of his truck went out. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! “Don’t drive off, I’ll be exposed”! I screamed. Just like a Looney Tunes cartoon. I quickly pictured Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck trying to hide from Elmer Fudd! “Wait ‘til I get in my MRAP. Stay down”! Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! More red lasers.

Just let me size up the situation, my mind screamed silently. Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Green tracers were good. I looked forward into the darkness. I knew the MRAP was about twenty, maybe twenty-five feet away. The ramp was halfway down. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! Red lasers taunting me. Teasing me. I dare you, they screamed. Fuck around and find out, they screamed! Just give me a fucking minute to think!!! I silently screamed to the darkness. I took a couple deep breaths, I knew what I was gonna do. Foolish mortal. I faced the MRAP, off in the darkness. My vision tunneled. I gripped my assigned weapon with both hands ready for my sprint of a lifetime. My heart slowed. Time slowed. The lasers seemed to freeze in mid-air. I noticed a momentary pause in the red streaks. For just a moment, green overwhelmed red. The red streaks paused. To change mags, dead or dying. Don’t waste this moment. He who hesitates is lost. Look before you leap!

And I ran. I ran as fast as I could possibly run with forty pounds of awkward gear on my body. First step and I was away from the protection of the big truck, five feet. Second step and I was out in the open, ten feet! Then the red lasers streaked across my vision. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! Too late to stop now. My guardian angels were working their magic. Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Third step in the dark, my tunnel vision oblivious to the red streaks, fifteen feet. Over halfway. My mind screamed in defiance. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! More red lasers, right in my face! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Was our reply. Fourth step, twenty feet away. I could barely see the inside of the MRAP, faintly illuminated by the interior black out lights. And I leaped.

I leaped through the air like superman. My weapon still in my grip. I tucked and rolled as I cleared the ramp. I came up on the dark floor of the MRAP and dove for the ramp’s toggle switch! Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. Are you fucking kidding me? Hurry up! I was screaming at the ramp. Hurry! I glanced up and out of the open ramp. Crack, Crack! Crack! Crack! The red tracers continued, but at a slower rate. Much slower rate. Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Koosh! Fire superiority in action, Baby! That’s right, bitches! Fuck you! The ramp clanged shut and latched secure.

I was taking off my Kevlar and getting the headset into place. “Secure”. I calmly spoke into the headset’s mike. My racing heart began to slow to normal. My hands shaky.

“Roger. Secure”. I heard SSG Van Pelt’s reassuring voice. The MRAP jolted forward and away we went into the darkness. Black out lights engaged. I got up and peered through the periscope windows facing rearward. The truck was following us. I was sure SGT Griffin’s MRAP was bringing up the rear. The Ma Dueces fell silent. Spent brass literally littered the whole floor of the MRAP. Dang, I thought. The beautiful smell of spent ammo in the air! Where was I supposed to sleep?

Once the dawn began to break and we were long gone from the heated fire fight, we pulled over to check our vehicles and do a damage assessment. I methodically hit the ramp’s toggle switch. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. I fucking hate you, I sent that mental note to the switch. Tennison came down from the gunner’s turret and together we went down the ramp to meet up with Van Pelt. The driver, SPC Williams, joined us. We walked along the vehicle inspecting it for damage. A few dings and small dents. Tires were good. No bullet holes there. Mirrors intact. We looked good. SGT Griffith and his crew were doing the same to their vehicle. Both our gun crews made our way to the civilian trucker and checked his vehicle. The impact tool was lost. The air line had severed. The driver was disconnecting it now and securing the line.

SGT Griffin was giving me the eyeball. “You ok, Doc”? He asked seeming very concerned.

“Yea, I’m good to go”. I replied, nodding my head.

“Your covered in blood”. He added.

I quickly did a self-check. Patting down my chest, my arms, my abdomen and scanning my legs. “I think I’m good”. I shrugged my shoulders.

SSG Van Pelt stepped closer. “Your face, Doc”. He added, “You’re covered in blood”.

Taking off my knuckle gloves, I gently patted down my face and my hands came away covered in warm, fresh, bright red blood.

“What the heazy”? I asked out loud.

Tennison gave me a kinda clean, dusty old piece of brown t-shirt. I wiped off my face and added some water from my canteen to the rag. I quickly cleaned my face as best as I could. Stepping up on the truck driver’s step, I looked into his driver’s side mirror. I noticed a jagged looking laceration half circling my right eye. Not actively bleeding. I’m good. Gonna be a nice scar though.

We caught back up to the convoy and finished the route with them. We dropped off the supply vehicles and just my unit’s tactical vehicles remained. The trip back to camp was uneventful and a lot faster without the civilian trucks slowing us down. When we made it back to camp, I went straight to find Doc Nelson. I explained what had happened.

“You’re pretty lucky, Tack”. Doc was smiling from ear to ear. He was applying some surgical super glue to approximate my wound’s edges and hopefully keep the scarring down to a minimum. He continued, “You probably got smashed in the face when you jumped into the MRAP”.

“Hush your mouth”! I admonished with a smile. “I’m saying I got hit by a ricochet”! That’s my story and I’m sticking to it!

Later that night, there was a knock on my door. Knock, knock, knock. I checked my watch. 2210 hours. Kinda late.

“Yea, who’s there”? I answered. Getting up I went to answer the knocking in my jammies. Hugh Hefner would have been proud.

“It’s PFC Dubois, Sarge”. The Chaplain’s bodyguard! Awesome. I quickly opened the door.

“I brought back your ammo, Sarnt”. He drawled. His arms full of mags. My mags! My beautiful, beautiful mags! I quickly stowed them back in my contraband closet.

“Let’s go, Dubois”. I said as I motioned for him to follow me out. He followed.

“Where we going, Sarge? It’s late and I gotta get some sleep for church services tomorrow”. Bemoaned the tired PFC.

“You just hush and follow me”. I admonished, “This won’t take but a minute”. As I motioned him to follow me down the hallway.

We quickly walked to SSG Arnesto’s hootch. Knock, knock, knock. I knocked and patiently waited. A sleepy eyed SSG Arnesto answered. He was wearing his PT uniform. Most pogues did. This way they didn’t have to change in the morning for PT. Lazy rat bastards.

“Yea, Doc. What’s up? It’s late”. SSG Arnesto spoke, not quite awake yet. I looked over his shoulder into his room. It was a mess. It smelled. Crap everywhere.

“I need you to get PFC Dubois some ammo, please”. I replied very nicely. “It can’t wait. He needs his initial issue of ammo”. I finished.

“Sorry, Doc. Supply is closed”. He answered matter-of-factly. He was waking up. “He’ll have to come back at 0800 hours when the office opens up”.

Remembering my latest Tackett Adventure-Red tracers zinging all around…My mind trailed off. Just for a sec.

I spoke slow and deliberate, accentuating each syllable of his rank. “Look, Staff Sergeant, Arnesto”. He stood up straighter. “PFC Dubois should have received his initial issue of ammo five days ago. He will not wait another day, he will not wait another hour”. I was looking him in the eye. Fuck around and find out. My voice had a slight edge to it. Stern. Unswayable. I continued, “Get your shit together, Staff Sergeant and get PFC Dubois his ammo. Do you understand”?

“Yes, Sergeant”. He snapped to. “I got my keys right here somewhere”. So, in his PT uniform and flip flops he led the way to supply. “What happened to your eye”? Arnesto asked over his shoulder.