

Ride the Cyclone

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Clack. Clack. Clack. The sound was a faint echo as I, hot and sweaty, moved slowly in a small group toward the closing stages. Clack. Clack. Clack. A turn came and I headed through the maze of metal rails and people. The screams were getting louder. An odd trepidation filled the damp, dark meandering area. I could hear some sort of hydraulic hissing now. The metal bar swung out of the way and I nervously stepped forward.

The tall Georgia pine trees were blowing in the hot breeze. Dust swirled behind my vehicle as my driver navigated down the dirt trail back to my tank company's assembly area. I could smell it before I could see it. The grill was fired up and one man in my company was busy with burger and brat requests. This was a tradition with Alan Gifford, the highest ranking enlisted man in Charlie Company, 4th Battalion, 64th Armor. I was returning from an operations order meeting at the battalion command post. I was still fuming at the fact that my company had once again been given what I view as the "crap" mission. I hopped out of my vehicle and strode over to tell Alan about the plan. I had a plan. We were not going to get the same "scrub" missions for the entire field exercise. I did not understand why we were getting them in the first place because usually they are given to a weak unit. My company, known as the Cyclones, was not weak and we certainly could handle more on our plate than the battalion was currently giving us. The battalion commander seemed to have some apprehension about the abilities of my company.

The crowd swelled forward behind me to fill the now empty spaces. The seat was hot as sat down. All I could think about the incredible number of people who had done this before me. It was too late to back out now. I never quit anyway. A harness was secured over my head with the repetition and enthusiasm of a prison guard conducting his daily duties.

True leaders create meaning out of difficult events or relationships, while others may be devastated or even defeated by them. Leaders come out of these experiences with something useful. Through a crucible type experience, leaders acquire new insights, new skills and new qualities of mind or character that make it possible to leap to a new, higher level. I commanded Charlie Company, 4-64 AR, 3rd Infantry Division. The Cyclones had fought their way into the heart of Baghdad, taking what is now known as the Green Zone during hard fought street battles. They were combat tested and proven. 1SG Gifford and I took over our positions after the company returned from Iraq. We shared a unique relationship not universal in the other companies where disputes between leadership were a common episode. While Alan and I played in softball tournaments together and with our soldiers, the rest of the battalion leadership went home to get away from each other. Our command team was the envy of the battalion. He was a true professional and an important close friend.

We were determined to not let the field training exercises set a bad tone for a year deployment in Iraq. The soldiers in the company deserved better. They were good and I would not let them down. Alan and I discussed our ways of improving daily. He always told me if I thought something was stupid but it worked then it was not stupid. We sat in each other's offices laughing and working. Somehow the conversation always turned to his son. It seemed that his life revolved around his son. When he talked about his son, Alan's face would beam with excitement. He hated leaving his family for such a long time. Talk of retiring and going back to Florida to buy a boat for fishing seemed to end most of our long discussions.

We worked hard together. A relaxed atmosphere mixed with the seriousness of the task at hand made the training challenging and interesting for the soldiers. At our final training event we proved ourselves. The battalion went to Fort Polk for our mission readiness exercise. It was

the stamp of approval for units to deploy. Alan and I had prepared meticulously for our rotation there. We were successful at every mission as a direct result of the time and effort my soldiers put in to do the right thing. During a final briefing, the evaluators asked the battalion commander (BC) which company he thought was his best company. He replied that he thought it was Bravo Company led by Captain Michael MacKinnon. The lead evaluator shook his head and stated that in their opinion Bravo Company was a close second or maybe a tie in some categories. In their opinion, Charlie Company was the best company in the battalion. We had done it quietly. We did not gloat at our success because that was only a small step for us. LTC Roth had a new confidence in us that was readily apparent to everyone. He thanked us for a job well done as he gave a final pre-deployment speech at the Warrior's Walk. The Warrior's Walk was lined with freshly planted trees. Each tree represented one soldier from the division who had given the ultimate sacrifice in the war so far. There was an engraved stone at the base of each tree. His speech was motivating and grounded everyone with the reality of war. One of my soldiers told me as we boarded the bus to the airport that he had confidence with my leadership and that I could bring them all back home safely. We were ready for Iraq.

Clack. Clack. Clack. I was strapped in the seat, legs dangling and a big nervous smile on my face. Up we went, slowly. Clack. Clack. Clack. I was looking at the changing view and not really paying attention to the concrete far below my feet. My adrenaline was building. I could hear shrieks of excitement mixed with fear and apprehension. Clack. Clack. Clack.

We arrived in Iraq late December/early January of 2004. My battalion was selected to be the International Zone keepers. My 1SG and I thought it was not quite a challenging enough mission but dove into the work. LTC Roth said we would not be doing the same mission long because he wanted to give us the challenge we deserved. Until then, my company was given one

entry control point (ECP) into the international zone, and responsibility for the Janin Peninsula, part of Route Irish, and the Yarmouk hospital. This was central Baghdad. Route Irish was well known for the number of improvised explosive devices (IED) detonated against Army patrols. The Yarmouk hospital seemed to be a dumping ground for horribly disfigured wounded and dead bodies found in Baghdad. We responded to many car bombs, suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices sites, and most importantly – controlled entry into area for the Iraqi government known as the Green Zone. We knew change was on the horizon and could not wait for a new mission. Our company soon was selected to assist a special Task Force consisting of Special Forces teams. That meant moving to a different Forward Operating Base (FOB) and doing more of the missions for which we had trained so hard. It also meant getting out of the Green Zone area and out of Baghdad completely for that matter. My battalion commander, true to his word, had found a way to get my company a new mission. My company was excited about the prospect of getting a mission that required our combat skills. The excitement spread even more with the news of a pool on our new FOB. That was a small perk to go along with the new combat mission. The summer heat was reaching 110 degrees daily.

I had just returned from the scene of a suicide bomber when I got a message to go see LTC Roth. The scene of suicide vest bombers is very somber. This particular bomber was at an Iraqi Army recruiting area. The bomber had walked into an area surrounded on four sides by huge concrete walls to detonate his explosives. Still with the vision of the suicide bomber's head in the middle of the road, many dead and dismembered Iraqi Army recruits, and the smell of charred flesh...I was informed that we would be immediately be moving south to FOB Falcon. We were immediately being attached to a National Guard battalion. I thought – Great, what did I

screw up? They had a tough sector. This was a new surprise that would definitely challenge my company.

My commander went on to explain that LTC Wood, a friend of his, would be taking over as the new BC for the National Guard Infantry Battalion. He was currently the deputy commander for the 2nd Brigade, 3ID. I felt somewhat relieved because he was a friend of LTC Roth but more importantly, he was active duty. LTC Roth told me that COL Cardon, the Brigade commander, had personally selected my company to do this mission. CPT Mike MacKinnon would be going as well...to take over the battalion's Alpha Company. I chuckled because Mike, a friend, was currently on his two week leave from Iraq. He was expecting to come back to Iraq and become the Headquarters Company Commander for our battalion. What a pleasant welcome back to Iraq he was going to get. The more I thought about it the funnier it became...until LTC Roth told me the problems the National Guard was having and the reasons we were going there. I was told that I would be taking over the worst sector of Dora, which was currently the worst in all of Baghdad, and to expect more. More? More what? I remembered thinking it couldn't get much worse.

The clacking had stopped, but screams still filled the air. I could only grip the harness handles tighter. I was looking straight down. The tiny seat felt like it would not hold my weight. Time froze.

August 26, 2005, at 0745, PFC Jason Little was driving his M2 Bradley fighting vehicle in our new area of operations. As they rounded a turn, a roadside bomb detonated underneath the vehicle. The force of the blast disabled the vehicle. The vehicle commander was unable to

Speak with PFC Little over the vehicle communication system.



August 26, 2005. PFC Little's Bradley as it sat after the IED strike. When this picture was taking the water valve had been shut off for about 2 hours.

The front left side of the Bradley had sustained most of the blast. In the driver's station, Little was hit by shrapnel that came through the bottom of the vehicle. He was hurt but managed to still maintain his senses. On the right side of the road was a canal half full of water. He managed to stop the vehicle despite engine oil and dust filling his compartment. Little also opened the back of the vehicle so his fellow soldiers could get out of the vehicle. He did not know the extent of damage to the vehicle or if it was on fire. He did know there was a canal and that his peers needed his quick actions. The vehicle stopped with the right side of track hanging off the road over the canal. The soldiers riding in the rear of the vehicle escaped with no injuries. Jason's quick thinking and actions also allowed the squad to catch the two trigger men that detonated the bomb.

This event happened less than 3 days after we took over the new sector. This was my first soldier injured from an IED strike. We would soon be striking IEDs almost every day. My tank was hit by an IED that sprayed shrapnel all over the turret. The equipment in the storage

areas on the outside of the turret were shredded by large pieces of flying metal. A large chunk of metal was stuck just below my arm in the tempered glass of the periscopes on my hatch. Not long after that we were hit again. We rode on each time. Several of my tanks would be hit with minimal damage. Our egos were starting to swell. A wheeled vehicle in my company struck an IED. The entire front end was gone. The crew all had minor lacerations. The driver sustained a broken femur and was evacuated. The gunner developed a blood clot in his leg and was also evacuated. That was the worst IED so far along with PFC Little.

Delta Company from the National Guard had the adjoining sector. We used the same routes to get to our sectors and usually had patrols out at the same time. They did not have tanks and soon it became apparent that our tanks were not making things easy for them. I moved quickly down a route and saw a car stopped at the intersection going into Delta Company's sector. The car had young men in the back seat who watched us intently. As we approached, the car started to move forward then stopped again. As we rounded a curve toward them, the car took off into Delta's sector. I thought it was odd. It seemed as if they were almost trying to get us to chase them. The thought quickly left my mind as we turned south into my sector. We had traveled no more than a mile when we heard a huge explosion. I turned and saw the tell tale plume of smoke rising above the palm trees. We raced back. About thirty meters down the road into Delta Company's sector was a huge hole. A wheeled vehicle was sitting at the intersection was the right front tire shredded and the wheel bent at an outward angle. The fiber glass hood was half gone and peppered with holes. The vehicle commander, a sergeant, was on the ground in a field beside the vehicle. He was missing a portion of his foot and writhing in agony. Suddenly Sonoda, the gunner of their vehicle, started screaming and whooping in what seemed like frightened joy. My loader, SPC Pride asked him if he was alright. He did not answer but

whooped even louder as he pointed to his body armor. A large piece of shrapnel had lodged itself into the thin protective pad that covers the groin area of its wearer. Suddenly we understood his delight. The next day, SGT Silva, from Delta Company, was killed when his patrol chased a car at the same intersection in my sector. The IED flipped their vehicle over killing him instantly. As for the Cyclones, we kept getting hit but no one was getting seriously hurt. We were capturing and killing insurgents. We barely noticed when they attacked us. We almost seemed invincible.

Suspended high above the concrete, my tension suddenly was gone and a weird calmness took over my body. My senses were peaked at every move of the screaming people around me. My adrenaline level had been here before and often. So often in fact, I found myself noting different distinguishing features and mannerisms of the people around me. We plummeted toward the earth.

I walked into my office at 1630 on September 16, 2005. I was feeling confident because my patrol had just captured two black list insurgents. One of the guys had been evading us for a few months and we had nabbed him on a routine patrol. I was ready to write my report and go eat with Alan. I had forgotten that my patrol was late by three hours and that Alan was going on patrol with my 1st platoon that evening. My master gunner, SFC Marrero, stuck his head in and asked when I was going to chow. I told him to give me 30 minutes and we could go grab a bite. He returned 25 minutes later, ready to eat. Suddenly, my command post NCOIC poked his head around the corner of my office door. He looked sick. He stammered out, "Sir, Red 3 has been hit ... they said that tank is f\$%# destroyed." I was on my feet already, grabbing my vest and M4 rifle. I told the NCOIC to get my tank crew to bring my tank back to the command post immediately. Destroyed? What exactly did he mean by that? I ran to the command post radios. I called the patrol leader but instead heard SSG Noto, a patrol member, on the radio. He

explained that we had four severely wounded. The evacuation helicopter had been called. I sprinted out to my tank with SFC Marrero close to my heels. I'd never seen him run that fast. He had been the platoon sergeant for first platoon and had just switched out with SFC Arthur several weeks before. I knew there was no way he was not going out there. He had been like a father to most of those soldiers in the platoon. He was well respected, intelligent and turned out to be a huge comfort to have with me that day. As I jumped into my tank hatch, I gave the order for the entire company to get ready to move immediately. My second order met deaf ears. I instructed the command post to send someone to find 1SG Gifford and tell him we had real world casualties. I was way off on the current time. I assumed that my top NCO was still at the mass casualty exercise the Forward Operating Base was practicing that day. I had somehow forgotten that I returned from my earlier patrol some 3 hours late. The mass casualty exercise was long finished and Gifford was out with first platoon. The silence on the other end of the radio exasperated me. I changed my tone of voice as I inquired if they had heard my last transmission. I understood the impact of what was happening and yelling over the radio would not help things. Another pause of eerie silence was my answer on the other end of the radio. Before I could say anything else, Schultz's voice broke the silence with a statement that I will never forget. "Sir, Cyclone 7 was on Red 3." I threw my hand microphone which twirled out as far as the spaghetti cord would allow it and came flying back, passing inches from my face. I had heard the radio traffic from SSG Noto to my command post updating the four wounded to two killed and two wounded. Alan Gifford was one of the two killed in action. My tank was flying toward the vehicle blocking the exit to the FOB. I waved at them to move out of the way because I didn't have a patrol pass or for that matter, anything required for leaving the FOB. I was a lone tank heading out the gate into deadly southern Baghdad.

The air rushed out of my lungs as the ground speed up to meet me. Everything else was a blur. Suddenly I was heading toward the sky again twisting and turning. Stomach churning and being jerked from side to side, I somehow remained calm. Everyone around me was yelling. I released my grip on the harness handle to casually watch as the earth speed past.

I heard SFC Davis over my radio. He was one of my tank platoon sergeants but I had sent his platoon to be attached to CPT MacKinnon's Alpha Company. He informed me that he had heard everything, was out in sector and could meet me at the FOB. I quickly told him that I was heading out the gate and gave him a link up grid. I would still have several kilometers to travel as a lone tank. I shouted to the soldiers manning the gate that I was linking up with a patrol already out. The soldiers manning the gate could see my urgency and quickly backed the truck out of the way. We flew out the gate toward route Irish at break neck speed. SFC Marrero and I quickly loaded our rifles and the machine guns on the tank while exiting the base down a short road, off limits to anyone other than military. I did not try to wave at cars as we sped off the entrance road into civilian traffic. We simply went over the small center median while cars screeched to a halt as they saw the mammoth tank bellowing across the highway. We headed the wrong direction into oncoming traffic for a few hundred yards before turning west onto our route. We hit what was called the Spider, a small traffic circle that looked like a spider on our maps. I called SFC Davis to get his current position. His platoon was moving very fast too. He was at checkpoint 19, just a few miles to our north. I adjusted our link up location to a different point thinking that we would hit it about the same time. My tank got there a split second before his platoon and rolled out onto the road in front of them without slowing. Now I had a nice sized force heading to help my first platoon. SSG Noto was on the radio again. I could hear the machine gun fire in the background. He was giving a contact report and firing the .50 caliber

machine mounted on his tank. I requested air support as we turned on route Mercedes. Route Mercedes was another hot IED route with numerous holes and small craters caused by past explosions. This was where PFC Little was wounded a week after we had taken over the sector. We made the turn from hard pavement to dirt road with my tank leading. I could see the holes at the upcoming second turn. I instinctively leaned to the middle of the tank. There was a man probably in his 70's walking with a woman clad in the *abayah*, a long black cloak worn over a dress and covering the wearer from head to foot; Iraqi woman's traditional costume. SFC Marrero was in my loader's hatch gripping the 240 machine gun. The road split here and we had to take a ninety degree turn to head south along a canal. I saw several men with a herd of goats on the other side of the canal. My voice sounded distant in the boom microphone of my crewman helmet as I stated that the old man and woman would be hosed if an IED went off now. We made the turn.

I felt the rear of the tank lift off the ground as my prophetic statement became fact. The blast sent SFC Marrero tumbling down to the floor of the turret. I was shaken. That was the third time my tank had been hit by an IED. I called to SFC Davis to see if his tank and crew were alright. He screamed that they were fine and to look in the palm grove to our left side. I never heard the bullets whizzing over head but saw the muzzle flashes of the fighters shooting at us. SFC Marrero had popped up, was aiming and firing as I swung into action. For a split second, with my finger hovering on the trigger, I aimed at the guys with the goat herd to our right side. I could see rounds impacting the ground all around them. One man, at the center of my aiming point, just stood there while the others scrambled to get out of the line fire from the insurgents. I swung to the left and saw one insurgent tumble over as SFC Marrero's bullets found their mark. A second insurgent was shooting as he moved. My aim was steady and I felt

my rifle kick slightly as I fired a quick burst. In my sights, the man's head seemed to explode as my bullets hit him. The firing stopped and I quickly sent a report to my command post to be relayed to our battalion. SFC Marrero was mad as hell. This was his first time being hit by an IED. He was physically sore, having been knocked around by the explosion. I glanced back at the spot we made the turn. The *abayah* lay in a crimson mass on the ground. The old man was nowhere to be seen. The driver of the third tank told me later he had watched the man, as if in slow motion get blown into the canal and the woman had just fallen in a heap, like being hit by a light saber from a Star Wars movie. We pressed on to my first platoon.

A jolt and we suddenly slowed. It was another short climb, but no clacking this time. The rise made your stomach drop and suddenly the ground came rushing up at me again. My vision was focused now of the fleeting glimpses of people staring wide eyed as we shrieked by with arms and legs flailing like rag dolls.

The Apache helicopter pilot was trying to contact me on the radio. I was busy scanning and guiding my driver. The scenario so far was classic insurgent tactics - one tank heavily damaged by an IED and the responders patrol struck by a second IED. Nice tactic but I was not going to let that stop us from getting to my injured soldiers. I had to think with a clear head. The Apache was coming in from the West. I called SSG Noto and heard the weapons still firing in the background. This confirmed they were still in contact with enemy. I told the Apache pilot to continue in from the West. I knew the location where 1st Platoon had been hit on Route Corvette all too well. I decided to pass a turn to go south which would have led us onto Route Corvette. The Apaches would come in from the West which meant whoever was shooting at my soldiers would probably try to escape to the east along the Tigris. I would continue to move east to the Tigris and then go south. We could possibly catch, or even better, kill some of the

insurgents. No one underestimated these insurgents. We viewed them as subhuman monsters that cut the heads off innocent people, exploded themselves in massive steel ball curtains in crowded market places, and drove suicidal missions in cars filled to capacity with explosives into more civilian areas. It was a cowardly way to fight in our eyes but achieved their effect. My tank hit the route along the Tigris and turned south. SSG Noto reported that they were no longer in contact. We sped south until we reached Route Corvette and turned back to the West. We crept along the elevated canal road scanning the palm groves intently for any movement or sign of hostility. As we approached the location where my platoon's tank had hit the improvised explosive device, I could see the tank silhouette in the evening sun. This was no normal tank silhouette. My tank moved closer and closer and expletives filled the air from my crew. The turret is off sir. This matter of fact statement came from my gunner. SGT Martin had picked up the destroyed tank in his sights. I quickly dropped down to look through the commander sight. I quickly stood back up as a Blackhawk helicopter lifted off and quickly sped away. I could now make out the tank with my naked eye. Where the exhaust grill normally is on the rear of a tank was covered by the turret. I was looking into the open hatches on the top of the turret. The turret was resting on the back of tank with the gun barrel buried deep into the ground. Pieces of the tank were all over the ground. Road wheels from the tracks had been pushed out of their housing compartments. There were 120 mm tank rounds littering the ground. The panels on top of the turret had been punched out. Strands of linked 7.62 and 50 caliber ammunition were strewn all over the ground and on the turret. I stumbled off my tank in awe of the destruction in front of me. The platoon leader met me at the rear of the destroyed tank. He quickly explained what happened and the direction of the attackers. Their three tanks were heading west on Route Corvette. 1LT Kroells had quickly dismounted his tank which was in front of the destroyed tank.

He quickly realized how important it would be to get anyone left alive out of the destroyed tank. 1LT Kroells quick thinking and aggressive actions saved the lives of two soldiers that day. His actions also earned him a Bronze Star with Valor. He ran to the tank as the dust and debris settled. He saw the turret had been blown off the tank and was behind the vehicle with the gun tube sticking straight down into the ground. He pulled the company 1SG from the loaders hatch but could not find a pulse. He realized the destroyed tanks engine was amazingly still running. He instructed a soldier to shut off the engine while simultaneously realizing it was burning SGT Marek, the tank commander.



September 17, 2005. An explosives team examines the gutted wreckage of Red 3. The engine was still running after the massive blast.

1LT Kroells, despite the heat and possibility of tank ammunition exploding, pulled SGT Marek to safety. Other soldiers were now arriving at the scene and treating the injured. 1LT Kroells again went back to the tank and pulled SPC Ford, the driver, from the wreckage of the hull. He carried SPC Ford to a safe place. He continued to provide first aid to the injured and had determined that one was KIA. While 1LT Kroells was pulling the injured and dead from the wreckage, insurgents had moved to a palm grove near the destroyed tank. They began to fire at the soldiers as they prepared for the medical evacuation helicopter. 1LT Kroells dove for cover

and began to orchestrate the defense of their position. He directed his two remaining tanks to provide suppressive fire to protect the soldiers pinned down by the insurgents' machine gun fire.

I managed to give some directions to the platoon that had arrived with me. I also was thinking that I was glad I had requested the entire company to be alerted and ready to move. We would need them. Alan was dead along with David Ford, a smart baby faced 20 year old. Ford was driving the tank and Alan was in the loaders position. SGT Russ Marek was the tank commander and SPC Bowen was in the gunner's seat. I wanted a report on them immediately but knew that this situation was still very much a danger zone. The lieutenant had told me that Bowen and Marek were lying on the ground under the turret behind the tank when other platoon members arrived to help. He informed me that Marek, missing limbs, was in dire shape and probably would not survive. Bowen was the soldier who had told me about his confidence in my leadership as we left for the airport. Bowen had somehow walked out of the wreckage only to be dropped by an AK-47 round to the leg. I bent down and picked up a mutilated rifle that was bent at odd angles. I knew I had to get Kroell's platoon back to our FOB as soon as possible so they could decompress. I informed the lieutenant of my decision and he argued that they were alright. I could read the faces of the platoon. They were not alright. A huge blast from a 500 pound aircraft bomb coupled with an additional 400 to 500 pounds of explosive had blown the turret completely off the last tank in the platoon column. The explosion completely destroyed the M1A1 tank. Their soldiers' eyes were empty and their heads were hanging. They were going back to the base whether the young lieutenant wanted to or not. This would be another haunting decision I would live with the rest of my life. They quickly got back on their remaining two tanks to return to the FOB. I was sending another tank and a wheeled vehicle back with them. I

climbed on top of the turret of the closest tank to send a quick report to battalion. My thoughts were only of how I had let Bowen down.

I was suddenly upside down and my feet were pointing at the sky. The beautiful blue filled my eyes. I thought how clear it looked. As quickly as my feet were pointed toward the sky, the ground was once again beneath them. They were still dangling loosely and somehow I managed to notice one shoe lace was not tied.

The blast was tremendous. A thick black plume of smoke rolled instantly toward the sky. I looked down at SFC Marrero and SSG Spangaro as they moved for cover. First platoon, as they were moving to return to the FOB, was hit yet again by an IED about 400 yards from us. The sudden snap and whine of bullets in the air caused me to flatten on the turret. I shouted at the loader to inquire if anyone was in the gunner's seat of his tank. It was empty. A second IED, the third of the day to strike the company, had blown up directly underneath 1LT Kroell's tank. Shaken by the blast but acting out of instinct, 1LT Kroells checked his crew. He got no response from his driver. Under a barrage of small arms again, 1LT Kroells tried to free his driver. With complete disregard for his own safety, he dismounted the tank to signal to me that they needed help. I pointed to the place I thought the incoming bullets originated and gave the tank loader instructions to cover our move to the second disabled tank. I added a quick afterthought that if he saw us shoot a flare to call for a medical evacuation flight. I jumped off the front slope of the tank and handed SFC Marrero my hand held radio and a flare. SSG Spangaro and I took off in a dead sprint toward the tank. I was oblivious to any bullets splitting the air by our heads. As we sprinted down the dirt canal road, the sound of the loader's machine gun opening up with deadly fire was comforting to us. Maybe it was too comforting because we both slowed to almost a walk. Simultaneously we looked at each other and broke into a sprint again. I heard an unusual

whoosh noise behind me and turned my head in time to see SFC Marrero firing a second grenade from the launcher under his rifle barrel. I continued to run as the sound of gun fire slowly subsided. I had no idea when it stopped.

I could see the tank sitting in a precarious position, almost hanging off the road. A huge furrow had been dug as the tank had veered off the canal road. I could see the left side of track splayed completely out behind the tank. Their interpreter, head in hands, was sitting on the bottom right side of track. He lifted his head to look at us as we ran up. I could see pain and tears rolling down his face. SPC Hutch, the usual driver of the tank, was frantically trying to pull tools out of the compartment on the outside of the tank. I ask Hutch if he was alright but he only muttered Deckard. The lieutenant popped his head out of the hatch. He was sweating profusely and dropped out of sight again. Spangaro, grabbing Hutch by the shoulders, asked again if he was OK. He said he was fine but SGT Deckard was still in the driver's compartment. Clearly Hutch was not fine and I could only guess about Deckard. I made a hand motion to SFC Marrero to fire the flare. He understood and stopped to fire the flare. The lieutenant surfaced again from the hatch and shouted down that he could not get to the driver's compartment. The gun barrel of the tank had been over the front of the tank which meant the door in the turret shields for the driver to exit into the turret was not a position for anyone to either enter or exit. SGT Deckard had switched with Hutch for the ride back to the FOB. Hutch had been in the gunner's seat. He was in a lot of pain from the blast. He was not bleeding but had a concussion and injured back. The interpreter was not bleeding either but his knee was twice the normal size. I could practically walk from the ground onto the front slope of their tank on the left side. The tank was at a bad angle and I was worried it may roll over. The furrow it had dug after the explosion actually was preventing that from happening. The driver's compartment is in the hull of the tank

and sits directly below the gun barrel on the front of the turret. SFC Davis had arrived by now. The driver's hatch was combat locked meaning SGT Deckard had moved a metal clip onto a hook so the hatch could not be opened from the outside. We needed tools. I understood what Hutch was trying to do now. SFC Davis, SSG Spangaro and I were all on the front slope of the tank. We inserted a long steel rod into the hatch lip. Despite the combat lock the hatch still could be moved up about two inches. This was not enough to get a hand inside and increased the chance of losing a few fingers if the hatch snapped back down. I lay flat on the front of the tank peering into the tiny opening. SGT Deckard sat in an upright position with eyes wide open. I shouted his name several times. There was no answer. Sweat ran into my eye as I tried to get a better view. I thought he moved. My focus returned and I saw his left eye. There was no white showing. It was as if someone had replaced his eye with a reddish black marble. I scrambled back from the hatch. That was not real. Sweat in my eye and the adrenaline must be playing tricks on my mind. That looked like something from a movie. I shook my head and looked again. It was real and I could see some blood on his face. We had to get him out or he was going to die. . SPC Hutch was on a stretcher now and needed to go on the medical flight that was in route. The helicopter arrived quickly and took him away. SFC Davis and I moved onto the turret to see if we could get to Deckard that way. My lieutenant was slowly dismantling the inside of the turret with his hands. He had bent shields and was pulling cables out of the way. SFC Davis, a tank master gunner who knew tanks inside and out, jumped in to see if he could power the turret around. Kroells mumbled he had tried that but the turret was jammed from the explosion. It would not budge at all.

I was wedged on this seat. The pressure from the harness kept me securely in place. I still feel like I was floating with nothing holding me down. Another jerk on my neck and my feet

once again pointed to the sky. Groans filled my ears and I realized they were coming from my mouth and the ground once again was passing rapidly under my feet.

I heard the rumbling sound of Bradley fighting vehicles and tanks. I looked up to see my infantry platoon, nicknamed Gambler, approaching us from the west. I squinted at the approaching vehicles and quickly saw that they were on the north side of the canal. The lead Bradley stopped alongside me as I waved at the vehicle commander. He shouted down for instructions. I shouted back that I needed help on my side of the canal. The Bradley's engine shut off as he lifted his arms in a questioning gesture. I bellowed again that we needed help on our side of the canal. To my utter surprise, the Bradley ramp dropped to the ground immediately. A sergeant and his squad came out and quickly slide down the concrete slope of the canal into chest deep water. I saw the current quickly push them downstream from my position. The squad reached the near side but none of them could climb the slick concrete embankment while they were wet. I grabbed the nearest soldier and told him to hold my feet tightly. I slide down the bank head first. The sergeant looked quickly realized what I was doing and moved his squad to my precarious position. He helped push a soldier up the side until he could grab my outstretched hands. The soldier holding my feet started to pull us up but I shouted for him to stop. I told the soldier from the squad to just climb my back like a ladder. It hurt but it was much faster. SFC Davis rushed over to help haul the squad off my legs as they pulled themselves up. SFC Davis and the other soldier then lowered me even further into the water so I could grab the sergeant. Both of us were pulled up the slippery side of the canal. The sergeant immediately sought his instructions. After a brief explanation, his squad was moving to different points. I moved immediately to assist in getting SGT Deckard out of the tank. I peered in the

crack again and knew immediately SGT Deckard was dead. He was dead because I told them to return to the base. My heart sank.

The sun was setting as the rest of my company arrived at our location. A tank was leading and was on the south side of the canal. I grabbed SFC Davis, telling him to move that tank forward and elevate the gun tube. We were going to force the turret to move by pushing another gun tube against the disabled tank's gun tube. The thought hit me that maybe if I had this idea sooner, SGT Deckard would be on the flight to the hospital with SPC Hutch. The anger and frustration mounted inside me. I heard a tremendous pop as the disabled turret suddenly broke free of whatever had wedged it in place. The turret was quickly turning now as a soldier manually cranked the handle to turn it. A second soldier reached into the driver's compartment to unlock the hatch. It swung free with ease. I reached down to pull Deckard out and was suddenly staring at a severe wound in the top of his head. The group of soldiers helping to pull him out of the hatch lumbered backward as we heaved him up and away from the tank hatch. I held him under the arms as his head lolled against me. I was on my butt looking at the approaching helicopter. Cradling my dead soldier, I abruptly focused on an Iraqi power line. Someone had thrown the smoke for the helicopter and it was obscuring this wire. I pointed this out to SFC Davis as we scooted off the tank backwards. He glanced up quickly and sprang into action. He grabbed a flashlight and began to wave the helicopter into a new landing area. I did not realize the amount of blood pouring on me as I held SGT Deckard during this quickly averted disaster. The medics from the helicopter quickly ran up my location. One saw SGT Deckard and the other began checking me. The medic who saw Deckard quickly produced a body bag. I asked the other medic what he was doing when he asked me to sit down. Then I saw my right side glistening. I quickly realized that the medic thought it was my blood. I told him it

was not mine and that they better check Deckard before they put him in that bag. They did and I watched as a flap slowly covered his face as the zipper was pulled up on the bag.

The sudden jerking motion made my head bounce against the harness like a pinball. We shot to the left and then back to the right. The shoe lace flew in the air and I began to wonder what would happen if it caught on something as we blasted by at blinding speed.

I do not know how long we remained on Route Corvette calling for illumination rounds. We traced a wire from the tank the first 1SG was on to a long farm structure. This was also the location of the small arms fire that following the IED explosion. In the early morning hours of 17 September, another company arrived to take over the recovery mission. The battalion wanted all of Charlie Company back at the FOB. I gathered the remaining tank from first platoon's patrol and started the return trip. I put the interpreter in my tank and made sure each patrol knew their routes back. I did not want us all going the same way. Once again I took the lead in my tank. As we turned off Route Corvette, the extent of the damage from the IED on the trip out made itself apparent. Two of my road wheels had sheered completely of the arm that holds them. This was probably from the rear of my tank lifting off the ground when the IED hit us. We stopped to repair what we could in order to make the trip back to the FOB. I just received a radio call that we needed to stop anyway because an explosive ordnance team was detonating an explosively formed projectile (EFP) that was found about 500 meters north of us. Those were the ugly new IED that had been being used more frequently in our sector. They could penetrate a tank and absolutely demolish a wheeled vehicle. We could not fix the road wheels so we had to do a make shift fix by using a chain to tie up the arm that holds the wheels. This seemed to work enough to allow us to creep along at five to ten miles per hour. The boom from the EFP detonation got us moving again. We passed the EOD team as they were packing up their gear to

go on to their next call. The slow move was torture especially on most dangerous routes in Baghdad. SFC Marrero and I both were exhausted as we sat in the turret with the hatches closed for security. The EOD team flew by us as we approached a road intersection. I knew I was going to have to go exposed from that point on to help guide my driver and avoid civilian traffic. I told SFC Marrero that nothing happened that far north anyway. Opening my hatch and reaching up to pull myself out of the hatch, I glanced at SFC Marrero as he was pulling himself up. The interpreter was sitting on the ammunition box beside my seat. No telling if he would continue to work for us after his harrowing day. My right arm was now extended well above the hatch as my head popped up just in time to be slammed into the back of my 50 caliber machine gun mount. Smoke and dust swirled in the turret as SFC Marrero voices came through the headset. I could hear the tank commander behind me shouting into his radio that Cyclone 6 had just been hit hard. That was me. Hit hard? Is that how you describe this headache? I looked down at my hands and saw what was left of my goggles – one lens. I had no idea where the rest of the goggles were but I could feel the strap that had kept them on my face in normal situations dangling by my ear. The blast had not knocked them off my face because my crew helmet was still on my head. The impact with the back of the machine gun mount must have done the harm. I felt a hot stinging in my right elbow and reached down to brush away pieces of shrapnel. My sleeve was ripped in several spots. I had two cuts and several tiny holes in the back of my elbow. It hurt like hell but my head hurt worse. I could feel a knot on my forehead. SFC Marrero asked me again for the grid. Things were starting to focus now. He stated in between expletives he claims never came of his mouth that he needed a grid for higher. I mumbled that we were north of checkpoint 17, where nothing ever happened.

The speed was nauseating. Lurching from side to side was not enough. We were now twisting from side to side and spinning in downward spiral. My body was not supposed to endure this type of abuse. I groaned again as we shot straight toward the sky once more.

LTC Wood had taken over the battalion but was on leave during the dark days in September. He was a man who cared about his soldiers. When he returned to Iraq, he put a hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eye and simply gave me a look that said he cared. The manner he approached things seemed different to me now. Maybe I had earned the trust of this man. LTC Wood would request my input on missions and slowly began to be more than just another commander. He became a mentor and a man I greatly respected. His tough but caring way of leading this battalion made everyone feel part of a big team. The National Guard soldiers were no longer feeling sorry for themselves but acting with a new sense of pride. The battalion had several huge missions planned. We also completed many successful missions. LTC Wood was everywhere. He would show up on missions and lend a hand where needed or just simply observe. He had just left my location on a particular mission. We suddenly started receiving insurgent mortar fire. As I ran with the rest of my soldiers to a new location, I felt my Iraqna cell phone vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out as I ran and saw it was LTC Wood calling me. He asked where we were going and if everyone was alright. I gave him a grid to which he joked that we better run faster because the helicopters were inbound and we seemed to be running the opposite direction. He said he knew we could do it and hung up. He was always out with the soldiers. He did not expect them to do anything he would not do himself.

I heard the panicked call on the radio. My tank rode over the dirt mound and slammed back down with a thud. Martinez knew the urgency in my voice as I told him to turn it around. His only question was the route name again. I stated "Buick" as I listened to the battalion

chatter. Damn, I had just told him to go in a tank. I had just discussed riding in the loader's hatch of one of my tanks with Captain Michael MacKinnon. He assured me he would use the tanks from my platoon that were attached to his company when going on patrol into this area. Now, riding in a hummer, he had been hit by an IED and it was serious. By this time we were heading east on the road we called Chicken Run. The roof tops of Market Street on the southern side of Dora rose up quickly. The tight right turn to head west was another favorite spot for insurgent IEDs. I instinctually leaned toward the center of the tank and bumped heads with my loader who was doing the same lean. We grinned at each other for a split second and went immediately back to scanning the road, rooftops, and traffic. Checkpoint 19 was busy as usual. The Iraqis manning the point seemed to have no interest in my tank barreling toward their position with no intention of stopping. I could hear my gunner chuckling as he murmured that this may hurt. Martinez almost did a power slide as he turned the tank onto the bypass trail that we used to skirt the checkpoint routinely. His ability to maneuver our 70 ton vehicle always amazed me. We quickly passed the site of the IED that first hit us, now just a faint distant memory. Cars now were pulling over quickly as if they knew we would not have time for the slow game of waving them out of the way. We rounded a last curve just as I saw the dark brown and black dirt from an explosion rip the air a few hundred meters in front of us. The tank almost stood on end as Martinez stopped. I told Pride to get his M4 and follow me. I issued instructions on my hand held radio to my patrol as we ran toward the blast. I could see people searching around. One soldier saw me sprinting toward them and frantically started to wave for me to stop. The thought hit me like a ton of bricks. I was doing the exact same thing they had done. I froze but managed to grab Pride as he raced beside me. A quick explanation had him following me off the road. I worked my way off the road and into yards of the homes lining the street. How could

I be so stupid? The thought chilled me. As we worked the maze of stone walls and houses, Pride shouted to me that Stalker 6, LTC Wood, was missing. I had somewhere along the way handed him the radio. We ran faster.

The rolling hills pull at my stomach. It was all I could to keep from revisiting my lunch. The weird calm was still with me and I soon was putting two and two together. This was how I had felt an entire year. My body was simply responding to the adrenaline with the calm demeanor I had done for a year.

A sergeant, who I recognized as the same one waving at us as we ran toward them, quickly explained that they could not find LTC Wood. There was a sudden shout and that statement was no longer true. I rushed to the canal where the two shouting soldiers were already waist deep in the water. I saw LTC Wood and heaved a sigh of relief which soon was replaced with a deepening sick feeling. He was face down in the water. The rusty looking water felt cool as I slide down the ten or so feet into the water. Several more soldiers were getting in the water.

-I understood the rust color of the water immediately and shifted my focus to the soldiers around me. LTC Wood was mortally wounded. This was a recovery mission now and I was the senior guy on the scene. I scrambled back up the bank to retrieve a body bag. I shouted to one of my soldiers that we needed a bag, straps and a vehicle. I was like a robot now.

I instructed soldiers into security positions and to clear or check things in the immediate area. The soldiers in the water were struggling to put LTC Wood's body in the body bag and lift it out of the canal. The bag was filling up with water and making it extremely heavy to lift. Staff Sergeant Santiago, a soldier in my company, volunteered to go in the water because he had an idea. I welcomed this quickly and down he went into the water. We brought a vehicle over

and connected straps to a litter that we had tossed down to SSG Santiago. Santiago worked quickly wrapping the bag around LTC Wood and strapping it to the litter. I watched helplessly as the body came up the bank on the litter. LTC Wood was out of the water now. The body bag had been wrapped around him in a makeshift fashion in order for it not to fill with water. Soldiers were clambering up the bank to get out of the water. One soldier knelt beside the body and hung his head. I softly smacked him on the back of his body armor and told him to keep his head up. I thought he was a lieutenant, the platoon leader of the 184th guys that were there. I found out much later that he was the new battalion surgeon and a major. This major was one the first guys into the water and the expression on his face could not hide his emotion or ill feelings. I tapped him several times more to give words of encouragement and try to get him to focus on the soldiers still around us. He would not lift his head. He kept staring at the boots sticking out of the body bag, one with the toe pointed to the ground and the other pointed to the sky. The helicopter was arriving soon and I was extremely exhausted. I dropped to a knee beside the surgeon. He lifted his head long enough to give me a grimace. I was angry at him and concerned all at the same time. The man had seen our boss destroyed by an IED and was having trouble dealing with it. I started to adjust the body bag so that the exposed portions of LTC Wood were all inside the bag. I glanced up at Pride, who had stuck by my side relaying information and covering my back the entire time. My stomach dropped again. The sun glistened off a reddish chunk of flesh that was right in my face, hanging from a bush. I told Pride to grab a medic. I quietly pointed the human part out to the medic and the two of us quickly moved along the edge of the canal placing various sizes of flesh into a plastic bag the medic produced from his aid pouch. Pride assisted us though I did not ask him or anyone else to help with this gruesome task. I could feel a rage boiling inside me. This leader had turned a desperate battalion into a

functioning organization. This could not happen. He had a wife and daughter that needed him. He had a battalion that needed his leadership. My mind slowly turned to CPT MacKinnon as the evacuation helicopter started to land for LTC Wood. I just knew Mike would be fine. The wind was swirling as I grabbed the end of the litter and moved toward the Blackhawk that had managed to land in our small clearing beside the canal. The two soldiers carrying the other end of the litter placed its edge inside the helicopter; moved to the side and watched me give a heave to get my end into the open door of the helicopter. The boot was still pointed down as the evacuation medics pulled the litter onboard. I turned and walked away.

I reached for my Iraqna cell phone as soon as I returned to my office. CSM Stanley would know what was going with Mike. He answered but not in his usual cheerful manner. I spit out my question and his reply floored me. Mike was gone. He didn't make it. Another leader was dead. I felt I had an obligation to the rest of my company. The entire active duty leadership attached to this battalion, with the exception of myself, was dead. The guilt that I carry because I am still here comes and goes.

The darkness made me want to shrink down in the seat but we shot out of the tunnel so quickly it passed before I could act on it. The feeling of being upside down quickly took over. I was tumbling through space. My view quickly changed from sky to ground, sky to ground. This cannot go on forever. Suddenly a hissing sound and we slowed. I heard a familiar clack. Clack.

I sat on the bus listening to the whoops and "hell yeas" of my soldiers. It was January but a clear beautiful day in Savannah, Georgia. The sun was bright as the bus lurched forward behind several other buses full of soldiers. This was it. This was the trip I so looked forward to taking. I felt empty. I hid it, my sadness. I had led my company through this. I knew I had to enforce the standards or we would have imploded. The difficult task was balancing the care of

my soldiers with mission requirements so we were still productive. I knew that the families must hear from me also. I had to extend my influence beyond the chain of command. That was the hardest thing to do. It was one of the things that changed me. I phoned the wife of my 1SG. It was difficult. She has never forgiven me.

I was told by a superior that if leadership was an art and a science, he thought I had mastered the art portion. I learned from my experience that by leading by example trust is built. It is easier to maintain focus and consistency of purpose if trust is built. You build trust by treating everyone with respect. The bottom of the food chain in organizations needs to know that they are equally as important as the people in the head office. The responsibilities are different but the human factor is not. In my profession, lives are at risk from decisions I make. The deaths taught me many things but ultimately that a leader is obligated to help his organization through difficulties.

The houses and countryside flashed by as the bus picked up speed. My soldiers had done many wondrous things during our year in Iraq. I was starting to feel relaxed, finally. I knew where I was going to go immediately after the welcome home formation. There would be plenty of time for everything else. I headed for the freshly planted trees.

Fffssshhhhhhhhhhhhh. Pop. Shhhhhhhhhhhh. Pop. Pop. My neck jolted as we came to a complete and sudden halt. The Cyclone was one extreme roller coaster. I watched a metal floor move into position under my feet. The hydraulics hissed again as the harness was released from over my head. I stood, wobbly knees, collecting my breath. I walked away from the machine with my head spinning, but I knew it would stop. I walked around to the line of smiling and laughing people, I was going to ride it again.