

War Within

by Glenn Sierra

The Army Combat Uniform, or ACUs, she was wearing which is notorious for its sticky Velcro and baggy fit, concealed her slender body. I could tell she was excited and alert as she looked at me. Her alluring brown eyes, which were the same light auburn as her soft skin followed me across the room. She was attractive with high cheekbones, average height, in her late-twenties, and was positioned behind a long folding table centered inside the conference room of the Headquarters Support Company, or HSC, building. She kept gently tugging the bottom edge of her blouse to keep the front of her ACU's along with her Captain bars neat and straight. Her face was serious but I could sense some nervousness by the way she fumbled my paperwork on the table in front of her. I also noticed there was no combat patch on her right shoulder as I walked toward her.

Before I had entered, I made three solid knocks on the timeworn wood door to the room. The Vietnam War era HSC building was old, its paint had turned into peeling flakes, and its aged lumber frame creaked but still held everything together and so it remained functional. When I heard her command to enter I turned the knob, pushed open the door, and the squeaky hinges announced my entrance.

Each of my steps made a muffled thud on the wood floor as I walked across the room to the table facing her. I put myself at attention, saluted, and reported to her, in which she returned the salute and stared at me for a couple of seconds.

"Staff Sergeant Sierra, do you have anything to say in your defense about these charges against you?" she questioned piously but in her gestures I could sense her contempt.

"She's just doing her job as a prosecutor." I commented to myself. I submitted my statement to a Criminal Investigation Division agent on Bagram Air Force Base, or BAF, back in Afghanistan two months ago. She's just wrapping up and is representing the United States Army, which is no different from any other giant bureaucracy that is impersonal, cold, and tangled with regulations. The Army looks at everything in either black or white. But, sometimes the bullshit gets political and shit will roll down hill. They're either going to bust me down a rank or two or bust me down to E-nothing and lock me up in Leavenworth.

This was my final disposition hearing here on Fort Hood after weeks of waiting. "Men and women are fighting and dying over there." I kept thinking to myself. "She has no idea, what I had to do over there to keep my soldiers alive and to accomplish our mission."

"Now I'm the bad guy and I don't give a shit anymore," I started to feel weak. I felt a knot in my gut and felt tears start to form but hell if I was going to cry. I could not admit I was mentally wasted. I opened my mouth to say something but nothing came out. Our eyes met as my mind raced back to where I'd had come from. I must've looked pathetic.

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BAF rested in a valley in north central Afghanistan surrounded by a wall of white and a roof of blue. Every time you looked up, there was a ring of ominous snow white covered mountains and a boundless crisp blue sky above. It is not far from the capital city, Kabul. The airbase was an active international beehive jam-packed with troops and civilian contractors of all nationalities flying in and out. We arrived there a little over a year ago from Texas.

In Texas, our mobilization preparation, or mob-site, took place at North Fort Hood. After a few weeks upon our arrival, the infantry battalion I belonged to was divided into companies and assigned to a new strategic concept called Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRT's which were scattered across Afghanistan. The companies were going to serve as a protection force for the U.S. Army Civil Affairs soldiers who were running the PRT's. In other words we were going to be their bodyguards.

In 2005 a typical American PRT had over one hundred personnel working together with a mission to provide monetary funding for humanitarian projects for the local Afghan villages. This was a way to win the hearts and minds of the villagers who were caught in the middle of the epic struggle between the Taliban and coalition forces.

One of the operating procedures of a PRT was to convoy out to local villages and establish working relationships with the village leaders, which were usually the village elders. The Civil Affairs soldiers, or CA, would then sit down with them and, using their interpreters, try to find out what their wants and needs were in an attempt to improve their quality of life or provide economic development opportunities.

While the meeting was taking place inside; the force-protection soldiers, or force-pro, would be outside providing a security perimeter against any possible attacks from Taliban or Al-Qaeda forces utilizing their gun trucks and dismounted troops.

The force-pro soldiers were also responsible for security of the PRT's base which was constructed of a twenty-foot high Hesco wall surrounding a couple of acres crowned with triple strand concertina wire and watch towers. Inside the walls were the command center, chow hall, and living quarters. The Force-pro soldiers would perform routine forward operating base, or FOB, duties such as operating the front gate, thoroughly search and inspect every civilian person or vehicle entering the FOB for any potential threats, and also man the machine guns in the security towers twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. To do all those tasks for twelve long months would require a lot of soldiers and a lot of discipline.

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Back on Fort Hood, as the platoon sergeant of a scout platoon in the Texas National Guard our upcoming Force-Pro mission was starting to make sense but little did I know I was in for many surprises. Like the one where our male-only infantry companies were assigned female soldiers to be part of the force-pro mission and sure enough my platoon got four females which was the beginning of steady disharmony between my men that would fester in the upcoming months.

But my focus at hand was to get my scout platoon to successfully complete several key tasks, which were intensive training scenarios developing individual skills and collective, or team-work, tasks which would certify us to be able to deploy to Afghanistan. These ranged from operating procedures for base security, techniques to use while searching indigenous people, weapon familiarization, combat life saver techniques, culture awareness, and more. We still had another three weeks of certification before we departed overseas. It was about this time when our headquarters posted the list of PRT assignments.

There on the list was my platoon assigned to PRT Khowst. Going down the list was Alfa Company assigned to PRT Gardez, Bravo Company would go to PRT Ghazni, Charlie Company went to PRT Farah, and the list went on and on. Then it dawned on me that my scout platoon was the only platoon assigned to a PRT.

“We’re going to PRT Khowst!” I announced to the platoon after a little research on a paper map. ‘It’s in Regional Command East, or RC-East, near the Pakistani border.”

The remaining days became a blur as we got closer to the mobilization platform, or mob-platform, which was military jargon for an airfield where the troops conducted their final manifest, boarded the contracted civilian jetliner, and flew out to their oversea tour of duty. We were all ready to go.

But, no one was more ready than our Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Salinas and our Command Sergeant Major Villarreal. For over a year, Salinas and Villarreal pushed the battalion hard in combat tactics and skills for this upcoming deployment.

I transferred to Salinas’ infantry battalion a little over two years ago. I felt welcomed by everyone I met but I felt discontent among the sergeants within the scout platoon. I figured it was the typical deal in which the fucking new guy, or FNG, had to go through. Other than the animosity towards me from the NCO’s, the scouts were all young, receptive, highly motivated and eager to train.

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Every month we'd meet at our home station drill hall in south Texas or convoy out to training sites to train on Warrior Tasks that were required for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the colonel and his sergeant major constantly spot checking our progress.

Reflecting back, I think I caught Salinas' eye when I was the only soldier representing his battalion to be awarded the Expert Infantry Badge during a grueling three month long EIB competition at Camp Bullis, which is outside San Antonio, Texas. Earning the EIB badge is coveted by all Infantrymen who are Eleven-Bravo, which is an U.S. Army skill code, but I was a Nineteen-Delta, a Cavalry Scout.

Regardless, the EIB course was extreme; starting off with a twelve mile forced ruck march, weapon qualification, day and night land navigation, then call for fire, and many other intensive timed events which tested a soldier's skill in infantry tactics and knowledge. The attrition rate was high in those first three events and at the stations or lanes we only had one chance to retest a "no-go" and if we got a second one, we were out. I got my first "no-go" on the call-for-fire station, which pissed me off because I'm good at it. But my cockiness got the best of me because I transmitted "ten meters down" instead of "one-zero meters down" while adjusting for fire. And on the last day of the competition, I was skating, which means if I "bolo" which means fail one more event they would kick off the course.

The hand grenade lane, where we had to destroy an enemy fighting position, was my last event. Hiding behind a log in the prone position, I poked my head up and pulled it down for a quick peek to find the target. I removed the grenade's safety and pulled the pin. Next, I hastily got up on one knee exposing myself for three to four seconds, lobed the grenade, and then swiftly ducked back down. I cursed, because it looked like it may have fallen too short.

When I heard it explode, I remained in the prone waiting on the cadre to say something like, "you're a no-go, at this station" which would mean I wasn't good enough for the EIB and return a failure because I was the last guy left representing our battalion.

With the front rim of my Kevlar helmet resting on the ground and the helmet's headband and chinstrap holding my head in place my nose was barely an inch or two above the leafy ground. The aroma of the leaves and soil was comforting; I lost the track of time. It felt like an eternity until I heard the instructor shout out, "You are a go at my station! Congratulations!"

He later told me that my grenade did fall short but it had a lucky bounce and bounced right into the enemy fighting position.

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Words can't describe how elated I felt that moment and how proud I was later when they pinned the EIB badge on my chest at the award ceremony. There were five of us who earned the EIB badge that day; the other four were from other infantry battalions. And in the applauding crowd were Salinas and Villarreal nodding their heads in approval and beaming at me with satisfaction.

Back on BAF we had a day or two to settle down, to collect our gear, and link up with the soldiers who we were going to replace. We stayed in transient tents set up along BAF's busy main avenue called Disney Drive.

While attempting to cross Disney the next morning, I got bumped and almost knocked over, by a jogger. Every morning, the U.S. Army Military Police closes off Disney Drive to motor vehicle traffic to allow personnel living on BAF to jog. There really was no other road to safely run on. They were still finding anti-tank and anti-personnel mines around the airstrip left behind by Soviet Army when they made their last stand and retreated back to the U.S.S.R. So there were hundreds of joggers; U.S. soldiers in their PT uniforms wearing reflective belts jogging with their battle-buddies or running in formation, coalition troops, and civilian personnel running up and down the long boulevard. It almost seemed festive, they jogged like there wasn't a war going on, it was crazy.

After several hours of transition briefings: we waited for an aircraft to arrive with our equipment, for the pallets to get off loaded, and our battalion supply section to disseminate the gear. The companies and my platoon were going our separate ways soon and we wouldn't consolidate again until it was our turn to leave Afghanistan, which would be in twelve more months.

As our stay on BAF grew short, I met the company's First Sergeant we were replacing that had just finished their one-year long tour of duty at PRT Khowst.

"You're just a platoon! Are you fucking nuts?" He shouted, his face turning red after I introduced myself. "We barely made it out of there as a company. You guys will never make it past six months." I must've looked like a deer standing in the headlights. "There's no way you guys can go out on missions and secure that FOB with just thirty guys," He continued. "You guys will be doing twenty-four hour shifts for a year and once you start sending guys home for leave, you'll be short of personnel. You're gonna burn your guys out." I didn't know how to respond.

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The number one killer of U.S. Soldiers in a combat zone is complacency. A Soldier can be pushed hard but he or she has a limit before he starts to break down. When he is mentally and physically worn-out all precautions gets thrown out to the wind. No longer focused on his tasks he'll become a danger to himself and to others around him by giving the enemy an easy target to kill.

Later that day I sought out Colonel Salinas after a briefing. I knew better than to just approach him about an issue without going through my chain of command but I felt a panic inside. As I approached him, he stuck out his hand to greet me and I felt his strength, the sound of his voice consoled me, and his priest-like smile put me at ease.

I told him what the First Sergeant had told me about how a platoon size element wouldn't be able to support our mission and we were going to run into manpower issues. He nodded his head in affirmation as he listened to me intently.

"Staff Sergeant Sierra, I'm well aware of the your situation and the truth of the matter is, you're fucked!" He responded, looking at me square in the eyes. "You're going to have to suck it up and take your platoon out there and do your mission. I know you can do it, that's why you've got the job."

We had little time left on BAF before we loaded onto Chinook helicopters and flew out to Khowst. Our individual gear and crew served weapons were all palletized and ready to go. I allowed a last minute PX run for those who wanted go. All I needed to get was a basic combat load of ammunition for each soldier in my platoon. Our supply guys were having problems getting us our ammo so I linked up with one of the departing unit's platoon sergeants and, using whatever wit and charm I had, he got each of his troops to hand over their fighting load of ammo to each of my thirty scouts, which they had to get rid of anyway. They gladly emptied out their M16 magazines and passed out one hundred and eighty rounds of 5.56 caliber bullets to each of us as they headed for BAF's main air terminal to get on that big freedom bird and fly out of Afghanistan back to the world.

There's something distinctive about the wasteland of Afghanistan that makes it so unique. On a map it looks like a small place with its borderlines boxed in tight. But flying out of BAF and having the Hindu Kush mountain range rushing below in a rattling shaking aircraft as it struggles up to climb over its snowy peaks is a humbling experience. Our machines and bodies are insignificant compared to the raw terrain below.

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It's as if God pulled out the insides of the earth and laid it out on the surface. The geology is magnificent created by forces deep within the earth. I saw solid rock gorges cut thousands of feet deep by centuries of rushing white water from the melted snows, mountainsides covered in lush green pine forests, beautiful colored rock formations layered in purples and golden-brown, tan sandstone domes turning into fat rolling brown hills smoothing out to immense sandy deserts ending at the enormous golden sun-sphere slowly sliding down into the hazy horizon.

The Apache gunship, I see through the Chinook's door gunner's hatch, is providing over watch protection as we fly through the mountains. A Chinook transport helicopter is an easy target and a better one if it's filled with men and equipment to insurgents armed with RPGs or DShK heavy machine guns ready to ambush one from the rocky mountainsides.

The U.S. Army learned a valuable lesson from the Soviet Army; deep in the rocky mountain passes or along twisty wadi roads the agile Afghan fighters were masters at ambushing ground vehicle convoys. If the survivors of the burning convoy were able to return fire it would've been too late, because like ghosts, the mujahedeen would've had vanished back into their rocky dark crevices. The death and destruction toll for ground convoys was too high a price to pay, so that's why we fly.

The fighting spirit of Afghanistan is evident in the victories they had in the wars with the Soviet Army, the British Empire, and Alexander the Great. But the war with us is an ambiguous one because the bad guys are not the Afghan people but Al-Qaeda and the Taliban forces that are a mixture of mostly radical Afghan and Pakistani men bonded together by an extreme Islamic belief that it's right for them to exterminate the Infidels around the world.

The Afghans in the Province of Khowst, some spell it Khost, spoke either Pashto or Dari depending on what tribes they're from. Some tribes have had deep blood feuds and have been fighting and killing each other for centuries.

"You Americans don't understand our words, Sergeant Sierra," Sahar explained to me. "The word 'Taliban' means 'one who studies Islam' it doesn't mean terrorist." His brown eyes above his long Roman-looking nose searched my face and then he produce a simple smile showing his perfect white teeth.

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I was introduced to Sahar, my interpreter and my Afghan labor supervisor, a few months ago when we arrived here. As it turns out PRT Khowst is actually a FOB within a FOB called Chapman Airfield which is an old Soviet airstrip two thousand meters long complete with a grave yard full of shot up Soviet transport planes, a wrecked MiG fighter jet, and two T-72 tanks.

Chapman Airfield was surrounded by Hesco walls, concertina wire, and gun towers manned by Blackwater contractors. There were two external gates, the main gate was on the north end of the runway and controlled by Blackwater. Once inside the outer walls, half way down the runway, past the make shift firing range, the burn pit, and some small Afghan guard living huts, was a another Hesco wall and an inner gate controlled by my force-pro guards. Through that gate the FOB split into two sides, on the right, the PRT side and on the left, the secret squirrel side.

We called them secret squirrels, spooks, special-ops, or the dark side because they're either Other Government Agencies, or OGA, like the CIA, and the Other Defense Agencies, or ODA, such as Special Forces, SEAL teams, or Rangers. In reality they owned the FOB, and the PRT was there only as a guest; the spooks set up the site to launch attacks as soon as the Taliban retreated into Pakistan. My impression of those guys, there were no females on their side, was they were very professional and highly disciplined for what they did every day which was to go out far and wide to search and kill the enemy.

As soon as they established a battle rhythm, they hired the private security firm called Blackwater to provide FOB security so they could focus on that mission. There were about ten Blackwater guys who in turn hired and trained about fifty local Afghan guards to secure Chapman Airfield's outer perimeter and two external gates.

"I pray five times a day and study the Quran, I am also Taliban." Sahar continued "but I am not a terrorist. About one year ago, before you came here, they put a bomb in the wadi I use to travel here and a timer set it off. But Allah was with me, I had to leave early that morning and so it missed me. My family has gotten death letters from them. They killed an uncle and a good friend of mine. They are bad Taliban, they are the terrorist."

Sahar and I would walk and talk about things while we checked on the progress of on the various improvement projects on the PRT side I got the Afghan labors to work on. As the platoon sergeant and because of the manpower shortage many responsibilities just fell on my shoulders. A major one was my assignment as the PRT's pay agent, or the guy who gets the cash and pays for authorized products or and services after approval of a Field Ordering Officer, or FOO.

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Overnight my stature as the “money-man” rose to the top of the Afghan guards, interpreters, and laborers food chain because I would physically pay their salaries. As I walked through an area the Afghans would stop what they were doing, stand up, place their right hand over their hearts, slightly bow toward me and say “Asalaamu Alykum, Sagent Sara,” I would smile, responded with my hand on my heart, give a slight bow and responded, “aleykum asalaam.”

My new status didn’t get to my head; I just appreciated what appeared to be loyalty and a solution to fixing and beefing up our weak defensive positions.

My platoon was responsible for a small section of Chapman Airfield’s perimeter, which had three towers, and two internal gates that entered into the PRT’s side. The towers were nothing more but sandbags on top of empty rusty Connex containers and the gate guards had no cover to get under if it rained or from shrapnel from an RPG or mortar attack. Our section was hastily put together, disregarded, and would easily be exploitable by the enemy.

Blackwater had their shit together and most of them were ex-military. As soon as our hand over from the last remaining force-pro soldiers was complete and they departed, the Blackwater supervisor, code name “Bear” they never use their real names, came up to me to let me know how concerned he was about the weakness of the PRT’s perimeter section and how few in number we were. There must have been bad history between the last force-pro guys and Blackwater. I didn’t care, we were stuck here awhile, we had to survive another eleven months, and I was going to make sure we did everything to secured our section.

It was not soon enough, we were attacked on our third night with 107-millimeter rockets, automatic gunfire, and an attempt to breach our sector by them cutting through the concertina wire. It was about two in the morning and I was talking with one of my squad leaders when we heard what sounded like a freight train roaring above the old building we were in causing debris and dust to fall on us and then felt the concussion of the first explosion a few hundred meters away. Everyone scrambled, we grabbed our weapons, protective gear, and headed for our designated defensive positions. I had accountability for the force-pro troops and didn’t have communication set up yet so I had to sprint from position to position getting a head count and checking our status between the explosions.

As I ran, I could hear the counter battery returning fire out of FOB Salerno, which was a few clicks away. Because Chapman Airfield is mostly airstrip, it’s long and thin and hard to hit, especially with rockets propped up against rocks using Kentucky windage trajectory and fired off by an automatic timer. Salerno is easier to hit since its a big wide FOB with a short airstrip, several helipads, fuel and ammo storage sites, generators, hundreds of air-conditioned tents, motor pools and other structures.

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The Taliban fired twelve rockets at us, five landed inside our perimeter destroying a storage shed. The other seven destroyed and damaged mud-huts in the little hamlet behind Chapman killing two small Afghan children and an elderly woman. The special-ops medics tried to save one of the children but couldn't because of the severity of her wounds.

We didn't have any casualties or injuries but I learned some lessons on what to improve on. I needed to establish communications and build strong enclosed fighting positions for our towers and guard shacks. The special-ops guys had them on their side why wasn't any build on the PRT side? It didn't matter I had to get it done, so I put my laborers to work filling sand bags. Bear and I found the breach in the wire as we checked the perimeter but there were no signs of anyone. Bear thought they cut the wire last night in preparation for a future sneak attack.

I made calls to our S-4, supply section, expressing concern that we still hadn't received our combat load of ammunition from the battalion. We had no ammo for our heavy weapons, which were the Mark 19 grenade launchers, the M2 fifty caliber, and the M240B machine guns. We were using SAWs and M4's in our positions along the wire and that was not sufficient to stop a full-blown assault. There was only enough ammo in the gun trucks, left over from the last force-pro unit, to keep the CA missions operating.

Before we left BAF, I tried to prep my platoon for our upcoming hardship at PRT Khowst and told them of the promise from our battalion's S-1, or personnel section, that more soldiers would be sent to supplement us.

Our attrition started back on Fort Hood when we lost our supply sergeant due to an irregular heart beat and other medical issues he had, a young scout had dental problems and needed a root channel, another scout was put on medical hold for a severe sinus infection and a female soldier was placed on legal hold for violating General Order Number One which states no Soldier, while activated for deployment, can engage in sexual activities.

Now, several months into our tour, complacency started to raise its ugly head. It's not that the CA guys were arrogant; they just grew their hair a little longer, didn't shave every day, and wore their uniform out of regs. They were Special-Ops but to me it would've been better to represent the U.S. Army in a more conservative way when interacting with the indigenous people, but they did their thing and we had to do ours and that's where the problem laid. My guys started relaxing their uniform standards, not shaving, and making excuses like, "if CA can do it, why can't we?"

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About a month ago, Sergeant Major Villarreal flew out to visit his troops at each of the PRT sites. As soon as he landed here at PRT Khowst, he spent time with my young Force-Pro Soldiers and later sat with me to let me know his two pressing issues he had with all the PRTs, which were maintaining discipline and controlling complacency. He was right, we were not a “special forces” unit, we were a U.S. Army Infantry Battalion, we were a “conventional forces” and soldiers were getting killed and injured because standards and discipline were being unheeded.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. To a bored young soldier pulling gate duty or stuck up in a tower for hours, the fantasy of being a Rambo with long hair, a beard, belts of bullets draped across his naked chest, shooting a M60 machine gun with one hand killing dozens of bad guys infected his brain with “the grass is greener on the other side” which resulted in a negative attitude of his reality. My young frustrated soldiers did not realize the high price in blood, sweat and tears the ODA or OGA guys had to pay to be the hardest working operators that accomplished some of the most dangerous feats in our nation’s history. I considered my force-pro troops professional, but there was no comparison in the maturity level between my young troops and the battle-hardened veteran ODA or OGA guys.

Villarreal had one more pep talk with the troops before he left. Afterwards, I escorted him back to his Blackhawk helicopter waiting out on the airstrip. As we got closer the pilot increased throttle, spinning the rotor blades ever faster stirring up dust and stinging grit, then Villarreal turned to me and thrust his finger in my chest. “You, Staff Sergeant Sierra, have to enforce the standard,” he yelled through the rotor wash. “I’m depending on you to get the job done and bring every one back home alive.”

To Be Continued.....

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