

# Woman in Black

By Glenn Sierra

Gazing through the four-inch thick bulletproof windshield, all my driver and I can see through the swirling sand on this cold black night is the red glow of taillights and floodlights from the vehicles up in front of us. I look down at my watch, another hour had past. Everything seems to moving in slow motion. Even our vehicle's icon on the Blue Force Tracker computer screen seems stationary. I go back to scanning my sector through the armored glass when a screeching voice in my headset startled me out of my trance.

The audio distortion is a voice yelling, "Reaper One-Seven! Bloodhound One! There's something black moving towards me from my nine!" It was, our Husky vehicle operator, Specialist Ralph Arismendez. I hear fear along with his excitement in his voice. Then Specialist Mathew Sparks, the fifty-caliber machine gunner in the RG-31 Mk 5 gun truck traveling behind Arismendez's unarmed Husky eagerly transmits, "Reaper-Seven, One-Gulf. I got positive ID on the target in my sights. Permission to fire!"

My mind races, I've got to think fast! What do I do? Is there a threat to my men? Shoot now, ask questions later?

It feels like an eternity before I answer. "One-Gulf. Do you see a weapon? Do not fire unless you see a threat." I reply trying to sound calm and smart. Seconds tick by. "Reaper-Seven. I see arms waving in the air. I don't see a weapon." Sparks reports back. He sounds disappointed.

As platoon sergeant I'm positioned in the rear of our route clearance patrol, in my MaxxPro Plus gun truck, it's the dually with blast shields on the sides, so I have eyes on all seven vehicles up front, which spread out to about a quarter mile. My MaxxPro is also the designated ambulance with stretcher and medic aboard. But tonight, I'm running the patrol, so I'm in another vehicle, sitting in Lieutenant Miller's seat inside his RG-31 gun truck covering the unarmed vehicle in front of us, called the Buffalo. The Buffalo is a vehicle that is as tall as a two-story building; it has a V-shaped hull, and with its robotic-clawed arm slung back it looks like a twenty-five ton rolling sci-fi steel monster.

The KC floodlights mounted on our mine resistant armor protected vehicles, or MRAPs, struggle to penetrate tonight's whirling sand. The lights outline the sharp jagged edges that shape our massive vehicles that can be seen for miles on a clear night.

Our strategy is totally opposite of being stealthy and sneaky, which is what Soldiers are supposed to be on a combat patrol. We can't find improvised explosive devices or IEDs in the dark. We want the bad guys to know we're looking for their IEDs so we light up the night. If, by chance they detonate one on us we'll take the blast, but I doubt if they'll be able to, since all our vehicles are equipped with electronic counter measures, or ECMs, which jam all their cell phone, garage door openers, and other electronic frequencies preventing them from detonating their IEDs remotely. They're not dumb, they know what we have and sometimes they will run wires up to side of the road to a buried 155 millimeter artillery round or to a hidden deadly cone shaped cylinder known as an explosive form projectile, or EFP

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to detonate, but that brings them closer to our trucks and that's when we take the fight to them with our weapon systems and air assets.

My patrol of MRAPs is traveling in a staggered traveling over watch formation. At night, our vehicles looked like a rolling oil refinery. Lights burning bright, shining three hundred and sixty degrees searching for hidden IEDs planted along the highway. We're in Iraq, its 2008, it's a freezing January night and we're traveling west toward Fallujah.

Hunting for IEDs is more of an art form. There's nothing tactical about it. Our vehicle speed is slow, between five to ten miles per hour. We move even slower in the city, Baghdad, where there are piles of trash everywhere. Perfect to hide something deadly. We rely on our senses, not our technology. Everyone in the vehicles, except our gunners, use our eyes and gut feeling to scan the ground and all around searching for indicators: a pile of rocks that look out of place, a wire, or shapes in garbage, odd shaped cement blocks, or even the way people act as we slowly roll by.

"Reaper-Seven. My God! It's an ugly old woman covered in a black burka! She's crying and yelling something!" Arismendez reported. He sounded disgusted.

I couldn't see her yet, because Arismendez's vehicle is the lead Husky. A Husky has no weapon system for self-protection and looks like a Caterpillar grader without the blade. It's long and thin with only a single driver-operator and ours has a mechanical interrogating arm welded to its front bumper. Its only protection is its armor, electronic jammer, and the RG-31 gun truck shadowing behind. I've driven the Husky around the motor pool but never out on patrol. Everyone joked about only a crazy man would go outside the wire in one. It took Lieutenant Miller and me a while to pick our Husky drivers. They had to be introverts because they'd be all alone in the Husky's claustrophobic compartment for up to ten or more hours on route clearing missions.

"All vics. This is Reaper-Seven. Charlie Mike!" I replied, which means for all vehicles to continue the mission. "All vics. Scan your sectors! All gunners be ready!" I ordered into my headset mic just an inch from my lips. The heater is on full blast baking my driver and me. I can feel dampness build up around the plastic ear cups of my headset. I can smell my own stink from the sweaty pads up inside my ACH helmet. My chinstrap is soaked and smells. Our Iraq interpreter or terp, Taji, is strapped in the rear passenger seat, probably asleep. We usually don't give the terps headsets. He's fine. It's our gunner who we sacrifice our comfort for. All the hot air is keeping the lower half of his body warm. His upper half is out in the open turret manning his Mark 4 grenade launcher. He's exposed to the freezing elements regardless of his fleece cap under his ACH, neck gaiter, goggle, and, winter gloves.

Our mission is to clear the main supply routes (MSRs) of any threats and ensure freedom of movement. That means we don't stop for anything. We stop only to interrogate a suspected IED. We're definitely not stopping for some old screaming woman in the middle of no where, on a winter night, all alone on MSR Mobile, heading west, just past the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

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“This is an ambush” I said to myself. Images of a naked Arab woman on videotape flashed through my mind. She was recorded during Operation Iraqi Freedom: 2005-2006 by a Puerto Rican route clearance patrol in Baghdad. The tape shows her dancing on the side of the road fully dressed in her blue burka, but as the Humvees approached her, she pulls off her burka and then slowly lifts her ruby, red dress over her head, as she sways her hips provocatively from side to side. Stripped down to her lace bra and panties, she twirls her body around in circles, her milky, white shoulders enshrouded by a mass of raven, wavy hair. She purses her lips and with one hand blow kisses at the men while with her other hand, she pulls down one bra strap and then the other, exposing her large, firm breasts until she faces them completely naked, dancing and smiling the entire time. Those Puerto Ricans rode underneath a highway overpass, perfect for an ambush setup with rocket propelled grenades or RPGs, anti-tank grenades called RKG-3s, and IEDs because the woman succeeded in captivating all the Soldiers’ attention with her mesmerizing show. Lessons learned.

I could see out in the misty distance the lights of our two lead Huskies were about to pass under a bridge. That’s where the woman must have come out of hiding.

“Reaper-Seven, Bloodhound one, we’re approaching an overpass.” Arismendez stated.

I reply, “Roger, All vics black out and halt. Scan your sectors.”

With all the lights out and vehicles stopped we’d be able to use our night vision devices and thermal sights for any sign of an ambush up ahead. Lieutenant Miller’s RG-31 has a telescopic Gyrocam mounted on the rear of the truck. Through our internal intercom I tell the Gyrocam operator, Specialist Canales to raise the mast all the way up and see if anyone or anything is on top of that overpass waiting for us.

The camera system is inside a steel ball at top of the telescopic mast. The camera can see great distances day, night, including white hot or black hot thermals. The mast can go up a hundred feet and with it we can see everything. I have a small video monitor up on the front dash and it’s wired to the camera so I can see everything Canales is seeing.

“Only movement is the old woman, running up to Reaper-One’s RG. Now, she’s dropped to her knees. She’s yelling and waving her arms” Canales remarked.

“Roger, All vics, Everybody, five and twenty fives. And report in sequence.” I transmit to the rest of the patrol.

The “five” means scan the area five meters from where you’re looking out from the vehicle. That’s where they plant tank mines, unexploded ordinances like 155 millimeter artillery shells, or hard to see pressure plates. You might be lucky and spot a wire. You’re definitely unlucky if the IED is remote detonated by cell phone or garage door opener.

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Our greatest threat lies out at twenty-five meters. That's where they hid the EFPs that look like one-gallon paint cans with a cooper concave lid lying on its side. They're hidden underneath trash piles or encased in foam to look like cement blocks. Once detonated the cooper forms into a molten slug traveling twice the speed of sound and will penetrate any armor the U.S. military has here on the ground.

I feel bad for those poor guys hunting IEDs in Humvees before enough American people pressured Congress to open up the budget's purse-strings, allowing for the development of route clearance vehicles with V-shape hulls, inches-thick armored glass, RPG cages, and huge protective shields, welded onto huge steel vehicles to optimize U.S. soldiers' safety. During our tour duty in 2008 we would not even consider using the first generation RG-31 Mk 3 MRAP outside the wire. However, even with America's strongest, durable steel and advanced technology, the U.S. military could not prevent EFPs from slashing through their trucks and killing anyone in its deadly path, like Specialist Turner and many other honorable soldiers'

A month ago, our Brigade Commander pulled Staff Sergeant Thomas and myself from our units at Camp Liberty and sent us to Camp Loyalty to find out why so many of his newly-arrived 82nd Airborne Division's combat engineers were getting killed during route-clearing missions. To break down any barriers, I had pinned on my airborne wings to my ACU jacket when we reported to their CO on the first day. It helped and he welcomed us to help his Soldiers become more effective IED hunters. It took a day or two to put everyone at ease with our mission to assist and assess them and we soon went out on patrols with them.

In hindsight, I realized the first disadvantage of this endeavor occurred when they operated in the meanest area of operation, or AO, in Baghdad which is in and around Sadr City. A year before the we arrived in the country, the U.S. Army assaulted Sadr City to demonstrate to Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the most influential religious and political figures in the country, that he no longer took charge. The U.S. Army now took over the reins; consequently, every Iraqi man, woman, and child, in and around Sadr City, despised American troops.

Secondly, the insurgents proved to be sly and calculating. They knew the 82nd Airborne Division belonged to a prestigious American unit, so killing them earned them major points on the battlefield.

Thirdly, these paratroopers had the heart to fight but not the experience to defeat the IED threat. Their predecessors screwed them over. The departing unit did not impart their knowledge or lessons learned. They merely said, "Hi guys, glad you're here! See ya. Don't want to be ya!" and out they went, leaving the 82nd Airborne Sappers to figure problems out on their own in their new hostile AO.

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I recollect my first assignment with them. Their mission briefing was outside in the motor pool with roaring engines and noisy, whirling generators that prevented me from hearing any of the objectives, intelligence warnings, or medical evacuation procedures which were extremely vital information in case we got hit. In exasperation, I thought, "If I didn't hear anything, then I'm damned sure the young troops around me didn't either!" I remembered how two privates attempted to hold up a map that kept flapping in the wind while the platoon leader tried to explain the route, using a stick. I recalled, "I couldn't see shit. If I couldn't see, then no one else could either."

During the mission, many attempts proved futile as they used flashlights and paper maps to figure out their locations along their routes in order to call in their checkpoints. No one even bothered to turn on a Blue Force Tracker, which is a computer linked to U.S. satellites that would've displayed their vehicles and friendly vehicle icons, along with enemy threat icons coordinates and their routes.

Once out on their mission, they trekked forward in the MaxxPro gun trucks, leading the route clearance patrol. The MaxxPro is rated as a competent gun truck but scored well below par as an observation-interrogation vehicle because a soldier can hardly observe through its four, tiny rear-side, bulletproof windows.

But finally, the cardinal sin to trump all sins during wartime occurred when the departing troops, in their pursuit to find IEDs, failed in handing over their acquired knowledge to incoming troops, and as a result, the 82nd lost Soldiers.

It took about twenty to thirty meters for the twelve inch copper disc to form into a white-hot deadly molten slug. It took less than a second to reach that distance. At that speed, the molten copper slug sliced through the Maxxpro outer armor, on the three o'clock side, just below the first tiny bulletproof window, behind the gunner's legs. That's where Specialist Turner was, trying to look out, trying to figure what the fuck was going on. In an instant, the slug seared off his left arm, armored vest, and half his face. The copper was so hot his flesh wounds were cauterized. The slug continued through the opposite hull, through a twelve inch thick concrete Jersey barrier, and dispersed into an apartment complex. Not a scratch on the driver, the gunner, or the truck commander. The vehicle was still running.

When the dust settled, his buddies were out in the street, running around, screaming, and pointing their M4s looking for targets trying to help. It didn't matter. The triggerman was long gone and so was Specialist Turner.

"Reaper-Seven. Bloodhound-One. All clear, over."

"Roger. Bloodhound-One."

"Reaper-Seven. Bloodhound-Two. All clear, over."

"Roger Bloodhound-Two."

"Reaper-Seven. This is Reaper-One. All clear except the old woman is still outside my door, over."

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Shit. What's she doing? What's she want? Taji, is still asleep in the back of our truck. It's noisy back there without a headset. If he's not looking over Canales' shoulder at the Gyrocam screen or looking out the windows, he's not going to know what's going on. I'm not sending him out to her. He's usually in the Buffalo or in one of the forward RGs in the city but out here in the open desert we usually don't need him, especially at night.

As the last truck reported in I asked, "One-One, is she still there?"

"Roger, Seven, she's still on her knees. Over"

"One-One, Can you tell what she wants? Can you make out her words?"

"Seven, I can't hear her through the door. I'll get my gunner, over." Sparks is up in an open turret. He'll be able to hear her more clearly. Good thing she's at One-One's truck and not One-Two. One-Two has a remote control weapon system on its rooftop called a CROW. Tonight we have a M240B machine gun mounted on it.

Human contact with people outside the truck is pretty difficult. With our headsets on, protective blast plates welded to the hull, armored glass, RPG cages, glaring lights, weapons ready and the fear that everybody outside wants to kill us, it's hard to conduct face to face interactions with the indigenous people.

Hell, men are forbidden to speak with Muslim women if they're outside the woman's family circle. That's Muslim men! American Infidels, like us, would be breaking serious Koran law if we wave to a Muslim woman and say "Hi".

My scowling face turns into a smiling one, when I think about how many times we broke that law back in Baghdad as we cleared Alternate Supply Route Senators, or ASR Senators, that ran next of Baghdad University. There, in full view on the sidewalks, walked the most beautiful, young women I have ever seen. A mixture of Christian and Muslim students occupied those neighborhoods. Almost all of the women wore head shawls; a few wore full burkas.

I savored the memory of one beautiful woman in particular. She wore a silky, black burka with slits riding up her sides. A burka can barely hide a woman's shoes or feet. I recalled how the rhythm of her walk held me spellbound. I could almost hear the tapping of her high-heeled, black leather sandals as she strolled down the cobblestone sidewalk. The heels complimented her petite, tan feet with glossy red-painted toenails. A delicate, silver anklet, with tiny sparkling charms, dangled at each step. She wore skintight blue jeans, but I could not see above her ankles and calves. Holding the burka securely around her slim waist, she had strapped a slender, leather sash, attached with small round silver cups, swirling its tiny, glittering chains round and round to the beat of her swaying hips. Her golden-brown bangs, peeking from the outer edges of her burka, fringed her high, round forehead. Her face radiated youth and vitality in contrast to the dark, somber shroud that engulfed her. She applied her makeup with the skill of an expert makeup artist, or maybe her natural beauty caused me to marvel at how her tan, chiseled chin and smooth, sleek jawline curved upward to form her full blushing cheeks.

Right then, I saw her emerald, almond-shaped eyes, glancing up to meet mine. She bashfully smiled and immediately looked back down at the sidewalk. At that

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moment, shocks of electricity fired up through my veins more powerfully than any bullet could ever reach my heart.

Only with enormous effort, did I manage to pry my gaze away from her back into the truck and observed with amusement how every single member of my crew held their gazes transfixed, lost to the loveliness and splendor of the women outside.

After those incidents, we would always joke among ourselves about how the insurgents' secret weapon against them, would be the lovely ladies at Bagdad University. If the insurgents wanted to get us Baghdad University was the place.

"Reaper-Seven, this is One-Gulf. The woman is running back toward the Buffalo. Over." Sparks stated without emotion.

"Roger, One-Gulf." I replied. Time to wake up Taji. This woman is too persistent.

"All Reaper elements, all's clear. Lights on and Charlie Mike." I ordered, at the same time I typed a text on the BFT's keyboard informing my higher why we had stopped. I turned toward the back of the truck to see Taji but I can't see him so I click on the intercom switch and say, "Canales, wake up Taji and tell him we need to get rid of this woman."

Get rid of this woman. Those words bounced around in my head taking me back to my first deployment in Afghanistan. Up in the mountains, my platoon was task to check out a suspected rocket launch site on a ridge a few clicks east of our forward operating base, or FOB. Not too far from a small village, up in a cave, we found a woman in black. Our medic, or "Doc", said she was shot in the back of her head, that she was executed. She was in her late thirties or early forties. Our terp, said the men in the village probably killed her because she probably talked too much. They had to get rid of her.

Out in rural Afghanistan, women kept out of sight. No large cities existed in the Khost Province. We saw them dressed in black or blue burkas, scurrying quickly through the back alleys of small villages or haggling cautiously to vendors behind the market tents but never boldly out in the open public. It's interesting how we would see both little boys and girls waved freely at us as we convoyed throughout the countryside, but by the time little girls reached nine or ten years old, they suddenly disappeared, mysteriously whisked away in preparation for an arranged marriage.

I remember Shahr, my interpreter in Afghanistan, telling me that whenever a Muslim marriage goes bad or the woman commits a crime, men often get rid of the women, either by killing them, dumping them, or banishing them. I saw hundreds of women in black burkas ostracized by society, the women sometimes fending for their children from the wilderness in isolation or clustering in small groups, begging for scraps and meager morsels of food in Baghdad. Often, they lurked around garbage dumps, rummaging desperately for anything edible to eat. Countless, faceless women in black burkas sat along the streets that lined around Mosques, markets, and the traffic circles. No longer able to shed genuine tears after days of incessant crying, the women with trembling hands feebly reached out to anyone who passed by. Their grievous woes often went unheeded.

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They appeared phantomlike, invisible to the throngs of people, occupied with their day-to-day activities and to the dense, vehicle traffic, swarming around them.

I see the woman in black running, leaving the Buffalo and heading straight toward this RG-31 gun truck. A look of panic stretched across her face. The misty vapor from her gasps lingered in the cold air, manifested from her panting and shrieking. Her eyes opened wide, searching for a wisp of hope.

“Sarge, she’s coming up on my side,” said Reaper-Six driver, Specialist Andrew Rosales, looking down at her through his door window.

A warning of danger flashes in my head, “Something’s wrong with this picture. All vehicles are rolling. The Buffalo is about to pass under the bridge. The overpass is approaching. I’ve got to focus.”

“This is Reaper-Seven. All vics scan your sectors. Gunners be ready,” I transmit to all vehicles, I then switch over to the internal intercom and say, “Canales lower the Gyrocam.”

I turn and shout through the noise of the vehicle back to Taji, who’s staring at me in the dim green light.

“Taji, open the back upper hatch.” I point to the upper corner of the rear compartment. “Find out what that woman wants!” I point out toward the nine o’clock side of the vehicle.

He looks through the side window. He looks back towards me and nods. I turn back to assess the situation. Seconds tick by. Then a panic shoots through me. What did I just do? I ordered him to open a top compartment hatch and we’re about to go under an overpass. Perfect for a grenade attack. I immediately turn towards the rear and see Taji closing the hatch. He moves up to me and shouts between the gunner’s legs.

“She wants a blanket!” Taji yells.

“What?” I yell back.

“She says she’s scared and cold and is asking for a blanket!” Taji continues.

“A fucking blanket?” I yell out.

I growl, “I don’t have a fucking blanket. I don’t have time for this shit.” Cold, hard logic dictates the facts, “I’ve got a mission to accomplish and men to keep safe. Who gives a fuck about an old Muslim woman?” But a feeling of guilt tugs inside me, “What if she’s legit and all she wants is a blanket?” My ambivalence releases the pendulum of emotions that swings back again in the opposite direction; “What if she’s bait in an ambush, and I get men killed in a trap? Better play it safe, Charlie-Mike, and just ignore the woman.”

“Sarge, I’ve got some snacks I can give her,” Reaper-Six gunner, Specialist Isiah Johnson, transmits down from his turret through the intercom.

My gunners usually stock up on goodies like plastic wrapped candies, cupcakes, or cookies from the mess hall to throw at the waving kids along our routes.

Reaper-Six driver, Rosales, turns to me and says, “Sarge, the Doc might have a blanket or something.”



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Our medic, our “Doc”, Specialist Fredrick Gonzalez, is in my truck, the last vehicle of the patrol. Standard operating procedure, or SOP, requires for the platoon sergeant’s truck to act also as the ambulance in case we need one. I know Doc has an olive wool blanket, stashed somewhere in his cubbyhole, an item always on our inventory when we conducted their vehicle load-out plans.

“This is Reaper-Seven. All Reaper elements halt. All vics five and twenty fives. Reaper Seven-Delta, move your vic up between this one and the Buffalo. Doc you’re going to have to dismount and give the old woman a blanket and any food and water that you guys got.”

“Roger, Reaper-Seven,” They both reply.

My Maxxpro Plus pulls up from the rear of the patrol, passes me and the old woman. The gunners re-orient their fields of fire. The Maxxpro’s rear door lowers and out sticks Doc’s head. He cautiously steps down the stairs, holding a folded blanket and a white plastic bag filled with food and snacks. The woman runs up to him and he hands everything to her. She bows as to thank him, raising her arms up in the air. Doc smiles at her, looks all around, turns and goes back inside the truck. The ramp rises up and he’s safe.

“All Reaper elements, Charlie Mike.” I say in a monotone voice. As we roll away, Canales has the Gyrocam pointed back in her direction. We are watching her on our monitor screens. She stands in the middle of the dark highway for a long while, just looking at us as we move away. Her black burka flaps in the cold wind. She slowly turns and disappears back into the black shadow of the overpass.