



TRIAL BY FIRE

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There are always bodies lying in the street come morning. Some of them we kill; some of them get killed by their own side. The Yanks have a name for that. Collateral damage. Some of them are the bad guys; some of them were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's hard to tell the difference when they're dead. Sometimes their guns are still where they dropped them; sometimes their mates have picked their guns up and taken them away. We've got a detail whose job it is to clear the bodies every morning. They trail around town, pick up the bodies and take them to the hospitals. At least, I guess they take them to the hospitals.

The morning after the fight over that card game, we're red. Nothing makes sense after a while. After a while, you stop asking why we get handed the bollocks we get handed. You just lock and load and head

out wherever they tell you. That makes life easier for everyone. It's only after you get back that you ask the questions and wonder why, and that's only if you're that way inclined. This is one of those times that maybe we won't get back. We're red for the second time in a month, heading down toward the Old State Building, when they hit us. Nothing fancy. I get knocked right out of our Warrior when a katie blows the front cabin to shit, and suddenly I'm sprawling in the dirt like a beetle on his back.

I feel like an insect under a magnifying glass, rolling around in a metal bowl on the kitchen table. I feel exactly like that insect felt for the 6 long minutes it took to burn to death, except my 6 long minutes have lasted for 6 long months. The only time it got any cooler was when they announced that nobody – NOBODY – was getting out early. You could feel the temperature drop all around the building. After he told us, the lieutenant cleared his throat and couldn't think of anything else to say. It weren't his fault; he was in exactly the same situation as us all. He had a family, too; but we hated him anyway.

By the time I get myself up again, all hell has broken loose. It's hot and bright and the noise never stops. I still have my gun. That means something here. I get my back against something solid, and try to work out if I've taken a hit. Good news is, I'm clean and clear and I still have my gun. I need to find out what our likely course of action is; maybe the lieutenant can tell me. First thing I can see is Baldwin, gone full-on nutter, firing rounds off in every direction; second thing is the lieutenant, on the ground at the other side of the vehicle.

The lieutenant's family will get a message, just like everybody's family gets a message eventually. They can expect his body shipped back to Brize Norton within the week. They should call this number to find out about the arrangements. They could keep the flag once the ceremony was over. It would be appreciated if they didn't talk to the press. If they need to talk to anybody, they should call this number. That's a different number to the first one.

I pick up and get moving, but when I get to the lieutenant, he's shuffled. I count two exit wounds high on his side, these open wide mouths spilling organs and air onto the street. At this stage, I'm not even sure if we're under fire; Baldwin's rattling off rounds all over the shop, but that's the only sound of gunfire I can hear. I look down at the lieutenant, but I still count two bullet holes and he's still dead. I look back toward Baldwin and I know which direction those bullets that killed the lieutenant came from. How do I know that? I don't know. These are some hard questions you're asking me, considering the circumstances.

Week three, I was sitting down at the computer, which we only get once a week. I e-mail my mum and dad, to let them know how I'm doing. I promised a couple of friends that I'd keep them updated on what was really going on over here, and they told me this would be the best way. I'd just sat down at the desk when Baldwin came up behind me and started mouthing off. It ended badly. We were both locked down for 2 days, and I never did get to e-mail my mum and dad. Baldwin blamed the heat, said he was going crazy with all the heat. The lieutenant didn't think that would wash.

Suddenly bullets start picking up dirt about three foot in front of me, and now we're under fire. So what do I do? I start running towards the incoming. Little dust devils jump up on the ground right in front of me, and I fall clumsily to one side, close enough to an old market stall to get cover. This is one of those moments where, when I get back, I'll ask myself what the hell I thought I was doing. Let's see how it goes.

I never had much to do with Baldwin before we got here. I don't know why he never liked me. I never had a thing against him. One thing I do know is that he had a lot of time for the lieutenant, a lot of time. Baldwin used to say (not to me, but times I overheard) that the lieutenant was probably the best officer we could have out here. He looked after us, sure, but Baldwin seemed to really take to that. When Baldwin was acting up in the heat, it was the lieutenant could calm him down, with just a quiet word; Baldwin would listen to that man like he wouldn't listen to anyone else. I wondered what bond they had that I didn't have, but mainly I wondered how to keep out of Baldwin's way.

Everybody's face down except me and Baldwin. He's in clear ground, spinning about himself, shooting at anything that moves. Sometimes he'll take a step forward, sometimes he'll stagger to one side, firing all the time. Pieces of the surrounding buildings chip and buzz at odd angles like angry insects knocking against a white-hot light bulb. It seems like a couple of hours, but it's probably just seconds. Somebody's returning fire on Baldwin, forcing him to step back. He takes one in the shoulder and goes down like an old oak (he goes down

holding his gun, he's a good soldier). Now I can hear our attackers all around us, the sounds bouncing off the buildings so it's impossible to tell where anything's coming from. Sure; it was impossible for the lieutenant to know where those bullets were coming from. That's not important right now, though, because I'm the only one of our unit that isn't pinned down in the middle of the street.

You spend all day out in this heat, the heat that sits at the base of the valley, guarding a position that pretty much guarantees that you're a target. Forget about a bullet to the head: it's more likely to be a car running into the wall outside, a rocket fired from a donkey cart, a mortar coming down at exactly the wrong moment. Or maybe it'll be the heat that kills you, seeping under your body armour and into your pores, forcing the sweat back in on itself and choking you from the inside. Maybe one day you'll just forget to drink enough of the water that they pay to ship from back home, and you'll feel yourself slipping down the front of the tank into the street. You'll hear voices speaking a language that you don't understand as the kids, those hangers-on that soldiers everywhere suffer and depend on, crowd around you, their hands inside your jacket, stealing your watch, and then you'll be gone.

With Baldwin and the lieutenant laid out, we're losing the initiative in this particular scrap, and it looks like I'm the only one with the wherewithal to do anything for the next couple seconds. I count quick three, stand and jump the market stall, coming down hard on the pavement side. As I come down, I feel my ankle buckle on one of the fucking cracks in the concrete, but I keep my balance and use the momentum to fall forward into the building in front of me. The air's

hot and dead in here; which is what I'll be if I don't keep moving, even if my eyes don't have time to adjust to the darkness all around.

Baldwin never got any less crazy with that heat. He used to wake up in the middle of the night when he hadn't even managed to sleep, and keep everybody awake with his moaning. It was a weird kind of sound he made, not loud but it were always there, like the sound a dog makes when it's part hungry and part pissed off. He started more fights than he finished, and didn't try to hide it. They cut him some slack because everybody was feeling the heat. He even got hauled out for a couple of negligent discharges, but they dropped it. Looking back, that was probably a mistake.

One storey, up the stairs, onto the roof. There's one Iraqi bloke up here, on his belly, looking out over an old tarpaulin and some boxes. Up here there's no echo; you can here the individual discharges, and they're clearly not negligent. I must sound like a bull in a china shop coming up those stairs; the bloke rolls onto his back and sees me coming. Just for a moment you look right into his eyes, and he looks right back at you. You see the heat in his eyes, and he sees the heat in yours. The blood's running down your face from a cut somewhere over your eyes, and you're staggering like a boxer after he's taken his second punch. It's difficult to lift the barrel of your gun; it feels heavier than it usually does. The heat drags it down.

We play a lot of cards in the evening. It feels like every night we get something come in over the walls. You hear some low whistling, sometimes it sounds like the biggest bloody wasp you've ever heard,

and then you hear a sound like paper crumpling. Most times, nobody gets hurt. They're like warning shots. If they're close enough, we put the cards down and go combat ready. If nobody else jumps up, we just keep playing cards. What are you going to do, throw the whole game just because some idiot thinks it's a good time to throw a grenade over the wall? We all keep our guns by our sides anyway.

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His gun is sticking out between two boxes and he can't raise it quickly enough. This doesn't feel much like combat any more; it feels like target practice. I'm out of his line of fire, and I can take my time. I can take stock of everything going on around me, put it in a catalogue so that I can replay it time and again. One thing I'll remember later: he's dressed just normally, shirt and trousers. I expected a bloke like this, a bloke trying to kill me, he'd be dressed in full-on jihadi rags, that whole dress-and-headscarf deal. But no, here he is in grey trousers and a dirty white shirt with one button missing; beside him on a crate is a grey jacket, neatly folded. He looks like he had a hard day at the office.

So, me and Baldwin ended up at the same card game. I thought I'd play just one more hand and then get out but – wouldn't you know it? – that last game ended with just me and him staring across the table at each other. Me with my full house and him with nothing. Baldwin decides it'd be a good time to accuse me of cheating, throwing his chair backwards as he stands, letting the other guys grab him before he kills me. Quick as a flash, the lieutenant is between us; talking

Baldwin down in the same quiet voice you'd use to calm a wild dog. Warning him that this is his yellow card, one more time and he'll be out, then the lieutenant won't be able to protect him any more. Blow me if Baldwin doesn't start breathing slow and steady, then walks off without a single look back. The lieutenant turns to me and says he doesn't want trouble on his watch. I want to laugh and I want to cry too; we're living in a whole city of trouble.

And we're the trigger pullers in this city of trouble, that's all we are, so I pull my trigger.

What do I miss? I miss being able to run a bath. I miss being able to fill up a paddling pool on the back patio and fill it with ice and beer. I miss going down to the coast and rolling out a rug to lie on. I miss watching girls walk down the street in short skirts. I miss clouds on the horizon, and piles of wet leaves at the edge of the road. I miss absolutely everything about home.

I get off two shots – so quick they're like one shot – and put a nice big hole right in the middle of his torso. He doesn't even have time to blink before he dies, his body shoved back towards the edge of the roof. I wonder faintly what happens next. I suppose that in the morning somebody will come around and take his body to the hospital. They'll pick up his neatly folded jacket and take him away, because to them he's just another dead body. But this is the first man I ever killed, lying right here in front of me. And lying in the street below, with a couple of bullet holes in him, is the first man Baldwin killed.

Maybe every day will be like it was today. Maybe every day for the rest of your life will be nothing but heat and dust and light, with nothing to protect you, and nothing to stop you from feeling like even the air in your lungs is against you. If you stop to think about it too much, it'll slow you down, and then you'll be next in line for that flight back to Brize Norton. One by one we pull our triggers, and hope that we're not next in that particular line.

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/21/trial-by-fire.html>

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