

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

Aaron Dutsch

Course: English 447

Instructor: Dr. Mary Sue Ply

Assignment: Memoir

From February to August 2004, I served my second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom as a member of the USAF 506th Security Forces Squadron at Kirkuk Air Base, Iraq. In June 2004, midway through my deployment, I was transferred to TacFor (Tactical Forces). Tactical Forces, nicknamed "Tiger" teams, served as the base's quick reaction force and conducted mounted patrols of the city of Kirkuk and nearby rural areas. Each team consisted of a commander, driver, and gunner. I served as a driver for Tiger 6, and my call sign was Tiger Six Alpha. SSGT Edgerton, who happened to be my supervisor in the U.S., was the team commander, and Adam Eurychko, whose nickname was "Gecko," rode in the turret with an M2 .50cal machine gun. Our primary objective was the interdiction of terrorist militia who were using rural areas and parts of the city to launch deadly attacks on our base with rockets and mortars.

The streets of Kirkuk were impossibly congested, as I weaved in and out of traffic, frantically trying to create a safe path for the six humvees behind me to follow. I wiped sweat from my eyes with my grimy sleeves and plowed ahead, ignoring stop signs and other traffic. Occasionally, I even ran other people off the road as I desperately tried to keep our convoy moving. In a dangerous environment such as this, where Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and ambushes could be hidden anywhere, movement was the key to survival. If we stopped, we would become incredibly vulnerable. To make matters worse, the Iraqis, who were driving down the same streets, seemed entirely indifferent to our presence. Iraqi drivers continuously pulled out in front of us and darted between our vehicles, jockeying for position in an imagined race.

“God Dammit, Hurry Up Dutsch!” Sgt. Edgerton screamed, as he pointed his pistol out the passenger window towards an orange and white taxi driving alongside our humvee. Realizing the taxi driver was ignoring the pistol pointed directly at his head from only two feet away, Sgt. Edgerton put down his pistol and began bashing in the taxi’s windshield with a wooden ax handle. Oddly, many Iraqis had grown indifferent to having guns pointed at them, as if they knew we weren’t going to arbitrarily execute them. Seeing us walking around with bats and ax handles, however, was a different story. Most were unwilling to see how far they could push their luck before receiving a beating.

Unable to see through his smashed windshield, the taxi driver found a place to pull over and waited for the convoy to pass. I continued driving as fast as I could directly down the center of the road, sending an ancient pickup truck skidding into a garbage-filled ditch. Behind me, Gecko was standing in the turret, the massive .50 cal barrel swinging back and forth over my head. Gecko was constantly searching for any signs of threat, IEDs, or possible ambushes. Every time oncoming traffic approached, he would aim directly at the center base of the vehicle, ready to respond to any signs of hostility.

Through the clutter of rusted, smoking vehicles, I could see the massive traffic circle with four bronze colored swords, nearly twenty feet tall, crossed in the center. My turn was located on the road just before the circle. Without slowing or yielding to oncoming traffic, I turned left onto the road, hoping that the Iraqis’ brakes were working well enough to keep them from crashing into us. Behind me, I could hear the screeching of the Iraqis’ brakes and the collisions of cars being rammed from behind. In my rearview mirror, I saw the trail humvee clear the intersection full of wrecked cars, and I once again laid on the gas, barreling through an Iraqi suburb. Ahead of us, children ran out of their homes, jumped over mounds of trash and garbage, and began

gathering along both sides of the street, waving and smiling, hoping that we would throw them some treats. Without slowing or taking my eyes off the road, I continued driving as Sgt. Edgerton reached into a bag of Jolly Ranchers and sent a multi-colored shower of candy raining down upon the children. A small chorus of cheers went up as the humvees behind us followed suit with more candy. Even Iraqis like Mardi Gras, I thought, as we left the suburbs behind and entered an area known as the “Drag Strip.”

The “Drag Strip” was the name we had given to a poverty stricken neighborhood, parts of which bordered our base. Running down the center of this neighborhood was a straight stretch of road approximately three miles long. Today’s mission had us traveling to the center of the “Drag Strip,” where we would present some local teachers with several boxes of school supplies. In addition to the school supplies, we planned to distribute shoes and toys to the neighborhood children. This was all part of our commander’s plan to win over the hearts and minds of the local populace. Morale had been high when we gathered for the mission briefing. Everyone appeared happy to do something positive for a change, and we all expected this to be an easy mission. After all, no one but the teachers knew we were coming, so the possibility of an ambush was rather small.

We arrived at the predetermined location for the drop off and formed a circle with our humvees, guns pointing outwards. I pulled our humvee underneath the shade of a stunted oak tree and rolled to a stop about twenty feet from a battered, cinder-block house. Outside the house, a man and woman were sitting on a pair of brown, wooden crates. They were giving us combined looks of amusement and contempt. From the darkness of the house two young girls wearing bright floral dresses ran through the open door, shrieking in delight at our presence. Although the shade was a welcome relief from the sweltering midday sun, I was beginning to

regret my choice for a parking spot, as the horribly pungent smell of an open sewer wafted up from a ditch only ten feet away.

Almost instantly, a small crowd of people formed around us as everyone but the gunners, who were vigilantly searching rooftops for snipers, dismounted the humvees. I stayed near the humvee, providing Gecko with back-up, while Sgt. Edgerton and the other vehicle commanders began placing the boxes of supplies in a pile. Our translator began yelling at the crowd, trying to get them to form a line. Ultimately, she was unsuccessful. Her voice, vainly shouting for order, was quickly drowned out by the struggling and shouting of desperate children hoping for handouts. Sgt. Edgerton guarded the school supplies while we waited for the teachers to arrive. Everyone else began distributing toys, shoes, and candy to the crowd.

As soon as we began doling out the goods, all hell broke loose. Within two minutes, a crowd of nearly fifty grew to over seven hundred. I was swarmed by a mass of children, tugging on my clothes and digging through my pockets. None of them seemed to understand that I didn't have anything else to give. Undaunted, the children continued begging and grabbing my gear, despite my best efforts to push them away. I was becoming aggravated with the kids as their relentless pleas and groping began pushing my blood pressure higher, while sinking my patience lower. This was quickly becoming a tactical nightmare. As more people began to crowd around me, I became more isolated and vulnerable. I began pushing back the crowd with my rifle, but it was ultimately fruitless, as the children continuously frustrated my efforts at crowd control. Soon, frustration gave way to anger as I began shouting curses and harshly shoving the mob out of the way. Behind me, Gecko was having a terrible time keeping the kids off and out of the humvee. As soon as he would push someone off of the hood, another would try and climb up the back. Ultimately, he had to resort to using a bat to beat the kids away. Once the word spread

through the crowd that we no longer had anything to give away, dozens of fights began breaking out. Teenagers stole toys from children, only to be beaten and stripped of their loot by adults. In the distance, I saw the teachers running frantically through the crowd with the school supplies. Almost instantly, a mob of teenagers overtook the poor women, beat them, and ran off with the boxes held over their heads like trophies—chanting and laughing as they disappeared down dark alleys. I was livid over the scene that I had just witnessed and began itching for a fight. I turned to Sgt. Edgerton, hoping that he would give the order to pursue the gang with the stolen school supplies.

Around us the situation was quickly escalating into a riot. Sgt. Edgerton, sensing the increased danger in the tense mob, gave the order to vacate as soon as possible. I was struggling to get back to the humvees, pushing aside kids who continued to swarm around me, when a dark haired kid wearing a dirty white t-shirt emerged from the crowd, pushed a shiny pistol into my stomach, and began rapidly pulling the trigger.

Somehow, I instantly knew the gun was a toy. Maybe it's because, if the gun had been real, I would be dead. I grabbed the kid, who was, at this point, grinning wickedly and threw him to the ground. I was instantly on top of him, pummeling his face with both fists, until he lay unconscious and bleeding on the asphalt. I stood up looking for the gun, but it was nowhere to be seen. One of the kids, who was now helping his friend to his feet, had probably taken it while his face was being smashed in. The other boys carried their wounded comrade off, laughing and jeering at his misfortune. Over to my right, the man who had been sitting on a crate was now standing with both fists clenched, a suppressed fire burning in his eyes.

Eventually, I pushed my way through the agitated crowd and made it back to the humvee, and our convoy thundered off towards the base. Sporadic gunfire erupted as we left the “Drag

Strip.” The distinct report of AK-47s could be heard as the Iraqis resorted to killing each other over worthless toys, used shoes, and notebooks.

The unfortunate events of this mission continue to haunt me to this day. The fact that I beat the hell out of a ten-year old kid doesn't bother me. The way I see it, he is lucky to be alive. Had I been ready with my rifle, I probably would have blown him away. What bothers me, though, is how good it felt to beat him, how the stress and tension seemed to disappear as I gave in to hate and anger, and how easy it was to react as I did. My total lack of empathy or compassion is truly disturbing. Recalling the violence of that day is a bitter cancer that I still struggle to accept. Sometimes, late at night, I recall the images of teachers being beaten by students over school supplies and relive that day's events through my dreams. In the end, I suppose, it serves as an eerily poignant metaphor for the war. Often, it seems our good intentions only result in more violence and suffering.

Dr. Ply's Comments: *This piece is a chapter from the memoir that Aaron began in English 447. Aaron's strong narrative voice and use of sensory detail enable the reader to imaginatively participate in the events.*