

Luke Pitzrick

Author's Note: I enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1999 and served as a scout sniper in a Surveillance and Target Acquisition platoon during the war with Iraq. The assignment given to my writing class was to write about an experience that had a significant impact on our lives. My experience in war had a very strong impact on my life and was still fresh in my memory, so it seemed like the best topic. By using some of the thoughts that were running through my head before, during, and after the war, along with graphic imagery, I hope to convey to the reader how and why I changed. I also want to show a glimpse into the reality of war.

Another War Story

It was January when I arrived at Camp Pendleton, California, after a short stay at home. I always hated getting on the bus that went back to base. The bus drivers all had a very bad habit of driving way too fast. I think they disliked their job, with its never-ending task of taking Marines and Sailors to town, smelling of hair gel and too much cologne and ambitiously talking of women and beer, and bringing them back again hung over and depressed, smelling of liquor and cigarettes.

Coming back to base after leave always felt odd and left me in a pensive mood. I hated leaving home and my family, but at the same time I looked forward to getting back. Every time I went home, my parents' house felt so small; it had seemed so much bigger growing up. I guess after living on base for four years it felt more like home and the guys in the platoon were like brothers to me. We'd been through so much together. Of course I'd never admit to the guys in the platoon that I looked forward to getting back and neither would they. That would be the ultimate sin. From the day a fellow enlists to the day he gets out, he gripes about how much he hates the military. He does this because everybody else does. If he didn't, everybody would think he is a lifer, and everybody hates lifers.

Coming back to base this time was different than all the previous times. On top of the usual array of mixed emotions, I felt anxious and curious because of a call that I'd received the last day I was home. I was sitting at the dining room table when the phone rang. "Luke? Hey, this is Carter. Listen, as soon as you get back, go through all of your gear and make sure it's serviceable. If your rifle needs to be sighted in, tell your team leader as soon as you get back so we can try to get you on the range."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I think you know, but don't worry about it. You'll find out when you get back."

As I sat on the bus with my green duffel bag, looking out the window at the passing scenery, that telephone conversation kept running through my head. He was right; I did know what was going on. For months now the situation in Iraq had been escalating. Everybody knew it was a matter of time before we got sent over there, and we had been getting a lot of intel briefs over the past few weeks about Iraq, something they wouldn't waste time doing unless they had a good reason. I still couldn't believe it, though. Leaning back in my seat gazing out at the blur of greens and browns of passing vegetation, I became lost in my thoughts. "Four years of training and I finally get to use it. Finally get to see some action. I hope I do good. I wonder what it feels like to get shot ... No, I can't think like that – to hell with that kind of thinking. I'm gonna be strong. Hell, I'm gonna get more kills than anybody in the platoon! I gotta be hard. No warning, no remorse...."

Two months later, the war in Iraq had already begun, with U.S. and Allied forces pushing for Baghdad from the Kuwaiti border. The 1st Marine Expeditionary Force rolled north through open desert and began sweeping northeast toward the city of An Nasiriyah. The convoy stretched for miles, as far as I could see in front of me and as far as I could see behind. Humvees, armored personnel carriers, trucks, artillery pieces and tanks stretched across the desert like a giant green snake. The sounds of thousands of diesel engines and that humbling and menacing sound of tanks filled the desert as their tires and tracks kicked up sand that sent billowing clouds of dust into the sky. Sitting crooked and bent in our war machines, we crept along hour after hour for days. All we had were each other, and all we knew was the choking sand and the burning sun. The sand was impossible to overcome. It was like being on a ship in the middle of the ocean and trying to avoid the water. We just learned to live with it. We all hated the sun, but it was our God and it showed no mercy on us. It ruled over us with relentless authority, pressing its heat down upon our bodies, driving us mad and filling us with hate.

Occasionally, poorly-clad Iraqi fighters toting assault rifles and driving old, beat-up trucks would ambush the convoy. They were never successful, though. It always happened up ahead of us and it would happen so fast. A few short, sharp bursts of gunfire, someone would yell, a couple explosions and that was it. Then we would drive by the aftermath. Burning vehicles upside down and shredded to pieces with the mutilated, smoking bodies of their passengers scattered about like bloody rags. Sometimes an Iraqi would die in the road and no one would bother to move the body. Every vehicle in the convoy would run over it until there was nothing left but a red smear and shredded clothes. It was strange looking at the aftermath of such chaotic violence. It didn't make sense or seem real. I was confused; I didn't know whether to feel sorry for them or to hate them. All of the training that I had gone

through and I still couldn't make myself shrug it off. But I had to. I had to carry on. I couldn't let my brothers down.

Killing had always been nothing more than words and ideas during training, but now it was real. I could see it, I could feel it, and I could taste it. The songs and the old war stories from back home no longer concealed it in the obscurity of my imagination. Its reality was staring me in the eyes and spitting in my face, and it was ugly. But I had to overcome my doubts and my fears. I didn't want to die, and more importantly I didn't want my brothers to die. In war, an infantryman must kill if he wants to live. If he values his life and the lives of his comrades, he must deliver death as best he can. And so I did, and it was my training that I fell back on. It was a certain mindset that I needed, and it was training that showed me how to find it. "Don't let it get to you; stay hard. To hell with these bastards, they all deserve to die. No warning, no remorse...."

The hours rolled by and we kept pushing north until late at night when we finally stopped just south of An Nasiriyah on the outskirts of the city. There were eight of us crammed in the back of the humvee with all our gear, weapons and ammunition. It was hard to move unless someone came around back and opened the tailgate for us. Our limbs had gone numb long ago and there was a layer of dust an inch thick covering everything like a blanket. So there we sat like little wooden statues until word came down that a Marine unit was ambushed on the southern bridge leading into the city. They had let their guard down when trying to talk with some Iraqis in civilian clothes who were on the bridge, but it was a trick and 50 Marines were wounded or killed after they got hit hard with small arms and RPGs. Shortly after this message, a lot of things started happening very fast. Troops were assembled, more ammunition was passed out and vehicles were moved while radios squelched out broken words to officers who quickly drew lines on their maps. Before I really had time to think, I was sitting in an armored personnel carrier with my rifle in my lap and about twenty other Marines. Up ahead a lightning storm had descended onto the city with artillery, helicopters and mortars raining down fire upon it. I started to get nervous. I felt cold but my whole body was sweating. It's hard to explain, but I can liken it to the feeling of riding a roller coaster for the very first time as a child – the moment when the cart reaches the very top of the first plunge and you're not going up any more but haven't started to drop yet. I had to do something to calm my nerves, so I began checking over my gear and weapons. My weapons were most important because they were my life. Without them I was dead, I was nothing. I had five of them. First I checked my sniper rifle, then my assault rifle, and attached was my 40mm grenade launcher; after that was my pistol, and last I checked my bayonet. My bayonet was sharp and my guns were clean and loaded. I moved on to my gear: Boots, flack jacket, helmet, gas mask, first aid kit, radios, batteries, water canteens, chow, chewing tobacco, compass, maps, ammunition, and ruck. Eighty pounds of gear and it was all tied down and in its place. Checking my gear and weapons didn't do much to help calm my nerves. So I bowed my head down and looking at my hands resting in my lap, I began talking quietly to myself as if saying a prayer. "How in the hell are we going to fight off a whole city? There are over a hundred thousand people in there. I have to find the courage. No warning, no remorse. No warning, no remorse...."

In the front of our vehicle intently listening to a radio handset stuck under his helmet was a lieutenant whom I had never seen before. He was covered head to foot in dust and held a little red-lens flashlight in his mouth that illuminated a map stretched across his lap. One hand was holding the map in place as the other quickly took notes and drew lines. After he finished, he pulled the handset out of his helmet and stood up to give us our brief, yelling to be heard over the roar of the engine and gunfire. "Everybody listen up! Everybody in the city has been declared hostile! If it moves, it dies!" He held up his map and pointed to two red bridges on the north and south side of the city that he had circled in thick red ink. "Everything between here and here! The whole battalion has to get through the city and we have to secure the main road going through it so they can!" As he continued to yell orders at us, our vehicle began to rumble forward, quickly gaining speed until it was going full throttle. Artillery boomed from behind and machine guns started bursting out all around us as we rolled across the bridge over the Euphrates River and into the city.

A lot of what happened in that city I don't remember. It was only six months ago but looking back on it feels like trying to remember a dream or something that happened when I was a child. Only fleeting glimpses of events, emotions, and sounds come through. There are memories that I do have, though, and they cut like razor-sharp mirrors through my mind and reflect into my soul. The nine hours that it took us to fight through that city revealed to me the true reality of war and forever destroyed the mythical view of war I once had. I found out how killing is really done in war. It is brutal and often random and meaningless. Women and children, whole families, people who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, killed. There was nothing noble in killing other human beings and there was no honor in their deaths. Arms, legs, and heads blown off; people burned up, crushed, blown to pieces, ripped in half, run over by tanks and chopped down by machine guns. Infants wailed next to their slain mothers, and fathers wept over the bodies of their dead sons and daughters. This is the reality of war, this is its true nature. All of my beliefs and ideas of war and killing were crushed and my mentality of no warning, no remorse was laid bare, turned around, and thrown back in my face.

The fighting in An Nasiriyah left me feeling cold and bitter, and an overwhelming feeling of sadness and emptiness came over me. Life had lost its value and meaning. I had seen how easily and meaninglessly it could be snuffed out, and I was not just a spectator. I dove in head first, and my youthful innocence died with the people that I killed. My heart had become hardened by war. I saw it in the children, too. It was hard to look at them; their eyes were empty and distant and it seemed as if they looked right through me. A child should be carefree and full of hopes and dreams, but war takes this away from them. They lose their childhood.

After the fight in An Nasiriyah, my unit started to make its way to Baghdad and what was expected to be a much worse fight. But as luck would have it, Baghdad turned out to be relatively calm. We had been in the city for a couple of weeks when it came down from higher that combat operations in Iraq were declared over by the United States. About a month later, I was sitting in a commercial airliner taking off out of Kuwait and heading back to California. It was late April or early May when my unit was pulling out of Baghdad and by September I was sitting in a classroom at Mt. Hood staring at my paper and trying desperately to remember the difference between an adjective and an adverb. It was quite a change to say the least. My life had completely changed in a matter of months and I came to find out that the hardest part of going to war was coming home. I was no longer enveloped in the killing and war environment of the infantryman. I spent a lot of time thinking about war and life and my country. I started to think about the people that I had killed and their families. I felt sorry for them and wished I hadn't done what I did. The people who were nothing but notches on the stock of my rifle became real and I grieved over them and what I had done.

It took a while to overcome the negative outlook I had on life and come to terms with what I had seen and done. I realize now that my anguish and sorrow came not only from what I had done, but perhaps more importantly, from what I had become. I was not born a killer but to kill I had become one. And my weakness was not measured by my ability to kill, but by the fact that I had built my capacity to kill on a foundation of hate and apathy. I have only myself to blame for this. The military did not teach me to hate; it only taught me that to live through combat and to be victorious in war I must kill. It saddens me that war puts people in a situation where they have to kill in order to live. And when all of the patriotic sentimentality and romantic visions of heroes and glorious deeds are taken away, all that remains is the horrific reality of war. I realize that there will always be wars and sometimes they are unavoidable and necessary, but I think it is important for people to understand the reality of war. I wish it didn't have to be this way. I wish people could learn to love each other. But these are just wishes. My comfort is in knowing that I have changed and through this I have hope.

*Instructor's Note: I was stunned when I read Luke's narrative essay, not only because of its raw power and intense descriptions, but also because he was willing to lay bare the regret he still carries because of his experience as a soldier. What is most admirable about his essay is the poignant contrast he draws between our cultural glorification of war and its true horror, often imposed upon innocent children and civilians. Chris Hedges, in *What Every Person Should Know about War*, writes, "In a democracy, the voting public must grasp the exacting toll of war." I hope students are able to read Luke's essay and comprehend the toll it takes on both soldiers and civilians so that they, too, will understand that war must only be a last resort.*

--Holly DeGrow