

The Waiting

By Brian Mockenhaupt

I'm reading *Stars and Stripes* one day at lunch, my rifle on the floor between my feet, before we start the workday, driving our Humvees around western Baghdad. There's an article that says that sudden emotional stress can spike your adrenaline and stun your heart. So I add that to the already impressive list of ways you might die in this war, from bullets to beheadings. The main way, of course, is the bomb, the improvised explosive device.

Mostly we drive around Iraq, often we walk and always we wait. Waiting to blow up. But my luck runs strong. I've been hit with only one bomb, and it exploded too early, just in front of our truck. The detonator was elaborate, but the bomb was shoddy and did little more than pepper the truck with gravel and shrapnel. Dirt and rock cascaded through the turret hatch, and we yelled to one another, asking if anyone was hurt. Then we laughed and whooped. What else can you do?

With the explosion came relief, a release of anxiety. The anticipated had become the realized, at least for a moment, until the next moment, when the worry crept back. And that's inevitable. Everywhere you look, there's a possibility. The bombs are hidden in dead dogs and dead donkeys, trash piles and fruit stands, parked cars and moving cars. They're stuffed in sewer pipes, hung from overpasses and tucked behind street signs. Any place is a good place to slip, strap or bury a bomb.

Pondering this too often overwhelms the spirit, so I tuck the worry deep. But it comes back randomly, while walking down an alleyway or watching through the truck window as the fields and markets and side streets zip by. That's when I feel my heart trip, losing its cadence. Maybe in that pile of dirt, that overturned bucket, that bag of garbage. A sharp breath and my chest contracts. The truck might protect me. There's comfort in that. And when I'm on foot, I reason I'd most likely be killed by the blast. There's a kind of comfort in that too.

This cycle of observing, reasoning and rationalizing runs faster and faster, and after many dozens of these moments, my mind moves from panic to resignation in an instant, a beat. I may still have a young man's body, but now I have an old man's heart, and I know when I'm back home it will quiver from loud noises and strain in the night, while I sleep and I dream. There will be memories that linger from those things I experience, but plenty more from the things that I keep expecting to happen.

When Thanksgiving comes around, we stuff ourselves with turkey served by the Indian and Pakistani dining-hall workers, dressed for the day as Pilgrims and Native Americans. That night I'm sent up the road with my team to clear an intersection for the arrival of our company commander, who's being dropped off by another patrol. A bomb exploded nearby earlier in the day, during another platoon's foot patrol. The blast blew everyone to the ground and sent two soldiers to Germany with shrapnel wounds. I see the crater. I stand in it. Five feet wide and two feet deep. This is the problem with looking for bombs: They're hidden well, so you have to be close to find them. And if you do find one, you're probably too close.

With this in mind we walk, away from our trucks, past darkened houses and toward the intersection. We stop, crouch and whisper. There, on the far side of the road, is a small mound of dirt where there was none a few days ago. We shine spotlights on it but can't tell. We look at it through a

thermal scope but see no heat signature. Maybe it's just dirt. I creep up with Conlon, one of my soldiers. Closer, and closer still, and we see a piece of cardboard under a thin layer of dirt. He reaches for the cardboard. Resignation. He pulls it away. Two cylinders, bigger than coffee cans, are nestled in the dirt. Two baby blue wires, twisted together, run from each into the ground. That's a bomb. Three feet from our faces. Beat. Squeeze. Flutter. I'm backpedaling now, waving off the others.

Move. Move. Move.

But this must be the trigger man's night off.

The bomb-disposal guys come later, drive their little robot out to the dirt pile and sit an explosive charge next to the bomb. They blow it up, with a flash and a boom, and through our night-vision goggles we watch the white-hot rain of shrapnel shower down, tinkling on the pavement.

We watch this and we talk about what nearly was. And we talk about next Thanksgiving, how we'll have the best story at the dinner table about those things for which we're thankful. But the next year, when I am finally at home with my family and friends at the table, I don't tell the story.

Brian Mockenhaupt served two tours in Iraq as an infantryman with the 10th Mountain Division and is now working on a book about the military. New York Times, March 12, 2006