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The First Round

The first round landed about a hundred yards behind us, and the explosion made us laugh. You see, in times of extreme stress, the mind disassociates itself from reality.

We de-trucked from a six-hour ride in the back of a duce and a half, a primitive military vehicle comparable to a flatbed semi. The trip was made overnight using the cover of the low illumination of the moon. What lay before us was nothing more than a garbage dump at the border of a medium-sized city. Dawn was beginning to break and Muslim prayer was being pumped out through dozens of loud speakers around the city. With the first sights of the sun, the spring heat was a foreshadowing of the blazing temperatures to come. This would be the day that the 82nd Airborne Division made their first mark in the Sunni stronghold of Al Samawah, Iraq.

At about 0900, or nine a.m., we finally received orders to move out across the dump to an oddly located berm of dirt about 1200 meters away. There we would sit in a blocking position while the armored units pushed the enemy to us. We made it about halfway, when a familiar sound began to resonate in our ears. It was gunfire. Charlie Company had moved in the exact opposite direction as us and was currently engaged. The battle was out of our view, but the sounds alone began to strike an off-tune chord in all of our bellies. It was a feeling of realness, unfamiliar because it could never be

duplicated in any training scenario. We continued to move, this time with a little more caution, towards our berm.

Once we arrived, we set into our defensive configuration, with the machine guns on the ends and the riflemen in the middle. The mood began to settle and the usual carefree attitude of the infantryman began to replace unease. We were ignorant to any realistic dangers, even when the first small arms began to fly over us; we made jokes about how they sounded like bumble bees. Then mortar rounds began to explode first behind us, and then in front of us. At first we made jokes about the Iraqi's inability to aim his mortar tubes, but each sequential round got closer. It didn't take long until the explosions were close enough to make our ears ring and splatter us with the third world rubbish of the dump that surrounded us.

Everyone began to feel a little nervous in his own way. Some made more obnoxious jokes, and some just went completely mute, but no one acted like his life was in immediate danger. There is little you can do when you are receiving indirect mortar rounds, other than take cover and pray. The lack of protection in the middle of a dump left us with one option. All were on high alert looking for an opportunity to spot the person that was bracketing these mortars on us, before he found his target. It began to feel like a race against time. The longer we did nothing, the closer the rounds got, until finally I saw him six hundred yards away, popping his head out from behind a hill long enough to watch the explosion and then duck back under to safety.

The forward observer, a person trained to call in indirect fires, quickly did his calculations and was on the radio, making transmissions that to the layperson may sound like gibberish: "Alpha four six, this is Alpha two seven. Grid mission. Prepare to copy."

He followed with our coordinates and then the coordinates of where he wanted our fires to land. Within two minutes our rounds began to drop around that man's position on the hill. He instantly began to run; it was then that both my gun team and the other gun team knew what had to happen.

Puffs of dirt known as *round signatures*, where the bullets are hitting the ground, began to race towards the man on the run. Then he fell, dead. Simultaneously, our disassociation with the situation was replaced by a cold, hard brick of reality. It was only then that the reality of the situation began to set in. I was in Iraq. I was at war. At the young age of twenty, here I was in a third world country halfway around the world, armed to the teeth, surrounded by like people, and knowing I would have to repeat this action and feel these feelings again.