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British Battle Group Under Siege

SGT DAN MILLS

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SNIPER ONE

On Scope and Under Siege with a Sniper Team in Iraq

Sgt. Dan Mills

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For Chris Rayment and Lee O'Callaghan, who didn't make it home

Illustrations

1. View of Al Amarah city centre from above its southern edge, over a Lynx helicopter gunner's shoulder
2. The Cimic House compound beside the River Tigris
3. Sniper Platoon, 1PWRR. *Back row, left to right:* H, Smudge, Des, DV, Dan, Daz, Rob, Chris, Fit Ben and Ads. *Front row:* Pikey, Longy, Oost, Sam, Harry, Redders and Louey
4. Yours truly on the look-out for enemy activity on Cimic House's roof
5. Article picturing rogue cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, pinned on the wall of Sniper Platoon's living quarters
6. A typical roof-top scene post-battle
7. Cimic House's swimming-pool
8. Louey and Daz in the rear sangar
9. An L96 sniper rifle with a SIMRAD night sight
10. The view of the OMS building from behind the wall where Dan's men first returned fire at the enemy, on 18 April
11. RPG Alley
12. View of the OMS building from the neighbouring park, a favoured launch location for enemy mortar teams
13. Major Ken Tait on his return from a fighting patrol before he was banned from going out
14. The remains of Daz's burned-out Snatch after the 18 April contact
15. The awesome AC-130 Spectre Gunship
16. Chris, me and Sgt Ian Caldwell in the driveway of Cimic House, preparing to leave on an arrest raid
17. Chris snipes and Des spots while concealed on a roof-top in downtown Al Amarah
18. Ads snipes and Oost spots early in the morning from the roof-top of Cimic House – after a hard night's work
19. An F-16 drops a laser-guided bomb
20. Dale fires illume mortar rounds from Cimic House's roof – his birthday treat!
21. Best buddies: Chris Mulrine and US bodyguard 'Red Rob'
22. Chris supports his L96 in a tripod on the roof of the Pink Palace
23. The platoon's accommodation block after a mortar direct hit
24. The painful bruise left on my shoulder by an AK47 round during the OPTAG patrol
25. The hole left by the bullet in my body armour
26. Pte Daniel Crucefix, who got stuck at Cimic House for three days with a piece of shrapnel the size of a credit card in his nose
27. Pte Johnson Beharry VC poses with a belt of 7.62mm, a few days before he was critically injured
28. Pte Johnson Beharry's badly shot-up Warrior the day after his first Victoria Cross action
29. Chris with an L96 and Oost with an SA80 and underslung grenade launcher outside the Pink Palace
30. Concealed sniping. Chris is Number 1 and Des is Number 2, during a raid on an enemy house
31. Heavy metal. A Challenger II Main Battle Tank from the Queen's Royal Lancers
32. Mortar-damaged roof sangar. I left with Oost just ten seconds before a round came through the roof and exploded inside it
33. A US engineers' convoy burns after its huge ambush on 1 May

34. Bored snipers watch a DVD during the July ceasefire. *Left to right: Smudge, Harry, Ads, Longy and Pikey*
35. Snipers in the roof-top sangar, with the 'Royal Marine' team hard at work on the right
36. The 'Royal Marine' sniper team. Buzz, *left*, and John, *right*, at work in the roof-top sangar
37. Dan receives his Mention in Despatches silver oak leaf from Brigadier Iain Cholerton, the Army most senior officer in Wales
38. Dan's Mention in Despatches certificate

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The men of fighting Y Company; in particular Captain Simon, Ian and Dalebert. Finally, all the chosen men of Sniper Platoon who I had the extraordinary privilege of leading and fighting alongside. Keep your heads down.

Dan Mills, January 2008

When you go home tomorrow, don't expect anyone to know what you have been through. Even if they did know, most people probably wouldn't care anyway. Some of you may get the medals you deserve, many more of you will not. But remember this. All of you are now members of the front-line club, and that is the most exclusive club in the world.

Lt Col Matthew Maer
Commanding Officer,
1st Battalion, the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment
Camp Abu Naji, October 2004

Prologue

18 April 2004

'Gunman top window,' screamed H.

H was the first to spot him, from his position of height as top cover on the back of Daz's Snatch Land Rover.

As soon as I heard the call, my eyes darted to the gunman. The moment you hear a gun is trained on you, you scan for targets. And there he was, in the top window of the sinister three-storey building inside a well-fortified compound. Unusually for buildings in Al Amarah, it had a fresh coat of white paint and bars across every window.

As my eyes found him, he began to slide an AK47 through the iron grille. The metal barrel glinted in the bright sunlight as the gunman moved slowly from side to side. He couldn't seem to decide which of the nine of us he wanted to aim at first.

I was already walking backwards to my Land Rover, the other vehicle in the small patrol, which was parked up 50 metres further down the road. But Daz's vehicle was just 15 metres across a road from the compound's front gate. If the gunman was anything like a decent shot, we were all sitting ducks.

He was in animated conversation with a couple of his other stooges; one older, one younger. All of them were bearded, dressed in black dish dashes and wore green canvas chest rigs. They seemed to be jabbering away, I could almost hear them weighing up the situation: 'Shall we, or shan't we?'

Then the compound's heavy gates slammed shut with a loud metallic clunk. The four angry blokes with the same heavy Islamic beards who had been shouting at Daz and I had abruptly scrambled back inside.

They're thinking what I'm thinking. This is going to kick off. I know it.

It was only the first time we'd been this far away from base. But I'd done enough tours of Northern Ireland to realize what was going on here.

The mood was changing very rapidly from bad to terrible. My brain scrambled to keep up with the pace of events. I had already decided to get the fuck out of there and told the boys to mount up. Now it looked like we'd run out of time already.

Immediately and involuntarily, my pace quickened as I continued to walk backwards. I wanted to turn round to look where I was going, but I didn't want to take my eyes off that clown in the top window.

Fuck it. How did we get into this mess so quickly?

I couldn't turn and run to the Snatch, because that would mean we'd lose face in front of the nutters, whoever the hell they were. And the British Army doesn't do that. But I also knew it was no time to hang around.

Don't get excited, Danny Boy. Keep the heart rate slow and concentrate, you're no good to anyone panicking like a big girl.

'I've got eyes on,' shouted Smudge.

'Seen,' said Ads, along with a couple of other blokes a second later.

It had taken no more than four seconds for the three other top cover boys in the two Snatches to focus their Minimis on the top window.

Good. At least the boys are all wide awake. Then again, it wouldn't have said much for my training if they weren't during a drama like this.

The boys' reactions calmed me down a bit. Anyway, weapons aren't exactly uncommon in this desolate and forgotten corner of Iraq. Even grannies are known to walk the city's streets with AKs slung over their backs. None of this means it's going to go tits up.

I had got to within ten metres of my Snatch, and all we needed was a few more seconds to get in the Land Rovers and shove off home sharpish. No problem.

That's when the grenade came hurtling over the compound wall. We all saw it at once. Half a dozen voices screamed 'Grenade!' simultaneously.

Then everything went into slow motion. The grenade took an age to travel through its 20 metres flight through the air. A dark, small oval-shaped package of misery the size of a peach.

On its upward trajectory, the handle sprang off, landing separately on the pavement with a light tinkle.

Then, a small cracking sound. The handle's release allowed the hammer inside the grenade to spring down hard onto its percussion cap. That ignited the gunpowder fuse, which began to burn furiously, creating enough heat to ignite the high explosive charge.

My second-in-command Daz was the last to see it. He had been standing behind his Snatch with his back to the compound. As he turned round, the still ticking grenade just cleared the Land Rover's roof and hit him square in the chest with a dull thud.

Daz was left momentarily frozen to the spot, open-mouthed with shock. It bounced off his body armour's breast plate, and down onto the pavement before slowly rolling into the road and right under the Snatch itself.

In a desperate scramble, everyone else instinctively threw themselves down and covered their faces.

Another whole second of total silence.

Then *BOOM*.

A blinding flash of light, a pulsation of shock wave and deafening bang; all at once. Shrapnel flew in all directions; hundreds of red hot tiny pieces of metal whizzed through the air, pinging off the metal gate, the stone walls and my Snatch. Simultaneously, an instantaneous whirlwind of dust and detritus whipped across the filthy street, coating anyone within 10 metres with a thin layer of grime and spots of engine oil.

All I could hear was a ringing in my ears, worsened by an immediate secondary echo as the furious tirade of noise bounced off the surrounding walls and back down our battered ear canals.

At last, silence again. So I dared to look up. It had gone off right under the Snatch's bonnet, blowing the engine compartment to pieces.

Fuck, that was close.

For a few seconds, it looked like we'd got away with it. I looked up again to see the Snatch on fire. But nobody was screaming, and everyone was still on their feet.

The next thing I heard was Daz.

'Fuck. I'm hit, I'm hit. Fuck it,' he shouted again and again.

He half ran half hobbled down the pavement towards me and my Snatch. With a massive release of adrenaline squirting into his nervous system, it had taken him a few seconds to realize what had happened.

Both trouser legs were heavily ripped, and a dozen claret-coloured blood spots had started to grow on the Combat 95 desert camouflage material from his belt to his boot soles. As he hobbled, blood also began to leak out of his right boot and leave a small trail of red on the road behind him.

He made it ten metres before he stumbled off the pavement and sank to the ground right in the middle of the road. His body had obviously told him it wasn't going any further.

Remembering his first aid drills, Daz rolled onto his back and started to wave his legs around in the air to restrict the flow of blood out of his wounds.

'Fuck, fuck, fucking bastard,' he carried on, as he shook them about violently.

Unfortunately, Daz had decided to collapse in full view of every available firing position inside the compound.

I looked over to it. Most of the building's window grilles were now filling up with gunmen and at least a dozen AK barrels were pointing at us. And just as he started the upturned beetle impression, the rounds started to come in. The gunmen had taken the grenade's explosion as their cue to open fire.

Jesus fucking Christ, we've just entered another world here.

The seriousness of our predicament hit me like a smack in the face. This was for real, and it could only get worse.

Bullets smacked into the road all around Daz, kicking up small puffs of dust. They also pinged off both Snatches' armoured sides. They were spraying off whole mags on fully automatic straight at us. One whizzed just over my head with a crack as it split the air. Totally undisciplined fire, but there was enough of it to cut us to pieces.

Daz lying in the open air like that painted the perfect target for the gunmen. We had to get him out of there, but that meant running right into the bullet storm.

Shit and bollocks. No time for any more thought. I sprinted from the Snatch and, with Ads beside me, made the 30-odd-metre dash to Daz in record time.

Taking an arm each, we dragged him just as quickly face downwards back behind my vehicle and out of the direct line of fire. He screamed out in total agony as his wounds rubbed against the tarmac but there was no other way to do it.

Somehow we reached the Snatch without taking any more hits. But still my two top covers, Lou and Smudge, weren't returning any fire. They'd trained for this moment all their military lives and they had two bloody great Minimis in their hands. But they were still in shock at what they had just seen.

Seeing anyone blown up in front of your eyes isn't pretty, let alone a good mate. The two twenty-year-old privates were scared out of their wits, and they weren't going to hang around up there in the full face of that bullet storm for any longer.

All nine of us were now sheltering in or behind the Land Rover, which had become a dirty great bullet magnet for the gunmen. We hauled Daz into the back of it, as its armoured sides gave him just a tiny bit more cover from ricochets behind us.

Inside, I got the chance to give him a quick once-over examination.

He was in a proper mess. The shrapnel had pepper-potted both his legs with puncture holes from the top of his thighs right down to his desert boots. There were around a dozen serious wounds in his flesh. His right foot in particular had been torn up very badly, and was just a mess of ripped boot and blood, bubbling and congealing through his matted and shredded white sock.

Inside the puncture holes a host of different-sized grenade fragments that had torn through his skin were still embedded, along with any other debris from the gutter that the blast had picked up on its way into him. The pain must have been excruciating.

He gave off a strong smell of gunpowder and burnt meat. His face had also lost a lot of colour. His eyes were all over the shop, and he was going in and out of coherence.

'You stupid jack bastard, Daz,' I said, in an attempt to keep his spirits up. 'You could have collapsed in cover rather than in the middle of the fucking road, mate.'

He managed to pull a smile. For a man in that shit state, he took the criticism well. But his time was swiftly running out and we were pinned down.

Bullets were still pinging off the Snatch's sides with sharp high-pitched twangs thanks to the regular bursts of automatic fire from the compound in the background.

Welcome to Al Amarah.

I had some decisions to make – and fast. It had well and truly kicked off, and we were slap bang in the middle of it with our dicks hanging out.

We first heard we were going on a rainy November morning in Tidworth.

The battalion's brand new CO got up in front of the lot of us to announce it. His very first words to us were: 'Good morning. My name is Lieutenant Colonel Matt Maer. I'm your new Commanding Officer, and in twenty weeks' time we'll be deploying to southern Iraq.'

It was the normal overly dramatic crap new officers come out with, because they hope we're impressed by it. It worked though – we were. We were going to Iraq.

By the time we'd get out there, it would be a year since Saddam Hussein had been deposed. The Marines and Paras were long gone, and by then southern Iraq was rarely even on the TV. But we didn't give a toss. It was gleaming news. For once, we were going somewhere interesting.

In his speech, Colonel Maer also added, 'It will be a tour like no other.' And not one of the 600 soldiers in that room had any idea at the time how true those words would prove to be.

For the next few days, our camp on the Hampshire/Wiltshire border was total madness. The phones didn't stop ringing. Soldiers serving away from the battalion were trying every trick in the book to get back off postings from all over the place. Others who had recently applied to sign off were desperately trying to steal the paperwork back again and tear it up. Nobody wanted to miss this one.

It was the firemen that had done us out of the invasion. We missed out on being part of one of the largest deployments of British forces since World War Two because of their poxy strike. The government used troops in 1950s Green Goddesses as the emergency response while the pay dispute was going on. So while 43,000 of our colleagues were storming southern Iraqi beaches, we were saving cats from trees in Hampshire. It was pathetic.

There were some proper obscenities exchanged too when we drove past the firemen's picket line. None of this car horn honking from us.

'Toot if you support the fire fighters,' they'd shout.

'Fuck off and get back to work, you lazy bastards,' we would reply. 'You wankers stopped us going to Iraq.'

If that wasn't bad enough, we'd narrowly missed getting Gulf War One too. Back in 1991, the battalion was so convinced we'd get the call up for it, it had started to pack up equipment in shipping containers. We'd even started painting all our vehicles sandy coloured. But then the war finished too quickly and they didn't need us.

The Paras robbed us of a chance to go to the Falklands too. We were all ready when the MoD flew them all the way back from a training exercise in Belize so they could go instead.

The truth is, the 1st Battalion, the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (PWRR) never went anywhere.

We're the county regiment for London and the southern Home Counties. And although only officially formed in 1992 in an amalgamation during army cuts at the end of the Cold War, we're still the senior English regiment of the line. That's thanks to our forebears, who trace back to as early as 1661 and the defence of Tangier. Our nickname is The Tigers, and that too comes from another famous forebear, the 67th Foot, because they did twenty-one years of unbroken service in India. Or one unit or another that we are related to has fought in virtually all the major campaigns in which the British Army has ever taken part. Then, for some reason, about fifty years ago it all stopped.

We're not flash, and we'd hardly been in the news in the last thirty years before that – except of course when we took on Princess Diana's name during the amalgamation. But that all ended soon enough too when she died five years later. None of that is to say that we weren't a bloody good fighting force of men, and one of which I was proud to be a member. A lot of the line regiments were

just like us. None of us had been given the chance to prove our worth for so long, the MoD had begun to think we didn't have any worth.

I was thirty-six years old. I'd been a soldier for eighteen years and a sniper for ten. I'd done six tours of Northern Ireland, one of Kosovo, and one of Bosnia – and I still hadn't fired my rifle in anger once. Anyone who had been to Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s had their hair singed by a few IRA bombs. But not actually being shot at by an enemy standing right in front of you, and not getting the chance to shoot back, used to make me question whether I could ever call myself a real soldier.

I grew up in a village near Slough in Berkshire, the second child of four. I joined the army as a boy soldier aged sixteen in 1984 after some recruiter popped a leaflet through my letterbox, and I joined the Queen's Regiment – my local county regiment – because that's what the sergeant at the recruiting office told me to do. Service is a bit of a family tradition with us. My younger brother is an engineer in the army too. And my sister was a signaller until she got out to join the police. Our dad was a fireman, and served alongside two of his brothers in the same fire station. My mum was a ECU operator, and my grandfather was in the Royal Engineers.

I've been married and divorced twice and I've had three children – two daughters from the first and a son from the second. The army and marriage don't go particularly well together because you're never really there. I got out in 1998 for eighteen months because I hated being away so much. But when I realized I hated civvy street even more, I signed up again.

I've never been much of a barrack room soldier who enjoyed all the dressing up and all the formalities that go with that. In fact, my idea of hell would be to be a guardsman outside Buckingham Palace. But I've always loved being out in the field, doing the job I'm paid to do. That's why I became a sniper. It's about taking professional soldiering to another level.

As the commander of the battalion's Sniper Platoon, I'd be the first to admit that I've got pretty high standards. I certainly don't suffer fools gladly. But if they're good soldiers, I'm fairly relaxed and give them a lot of rope.

We were all well aware that Iraq was all about nation building now, not war fighting. But we were still over the moon. We were just chuffed to bits that, for once, we were going to get our turn. It wasn't the Balkans and it wasn't Northern Ireland. Who knows, we may even finally get the chance to use the blinking weapons we'd trained so hard with for all those years.

The patch the battalion had been allotted was Maysan, the northernmost extremity of the poor Shana'a south under British control. Its capital, which would be my company's responsibility, was the town of Al Amarah. I'd never heard of the place, but it sounded properly Iraqi and that was good enough for me.

The battalion consisted of four companies. Three of them, A, B and C, cut about in tracked Warrior armoured personnel carriers, because we are an armoured unit. And then there was us, Y Company, the battalion's 106 support weapons experts. Y Company itself was organized into four platoons: mortars, anti-tanks, reconnaissance and snipers.

I had only recently returned to the battalion from doing an instructor's job at the Infantry Training Centre in Catterick. And as soon as we got the news about Iraq, it was my responsibility to get the platoon battle ready for a serious operational deployment. I'd been a qualified sniper for twelve years and had served in the platoon on two tours previously. Now I was in charge of it – my dream job.

Sniping is one of the hardest jobs in any infantry unit. It's one of the toughest trades to qualify for and British Army snipers are the best in the world. That's the other reason why I wanted to be a sniper. I wanted to be the best.

The platoon was fifteen-strong in total, all of them qualified snipers: one sergeant (me), three fuffheads (corporals), three lance jacks (lance corporals) and eight toms (privates).

When I took over the platoon, I'd decided it needed some shaking up. So I ran a reselection course

which gave me a chance to bin all the blokes who weren't up to scratch. Literally dozens applied because it's the best job in the unit. I could afford to be pretty ruthless, and really get the very best. By the time I had finished with them, they were a gleaming bunch of lads too. I'd hand-picked the fourteen best killers in the battalion.

The difference with being a sniper is you can see the man's face when you kill him. You can see everything about him, because you've probably been studying him for minutes, or even hours. So when you pull the trigger you have to be able to separate yourself from the knowledge that you're taking a life. There's no point in putting someone through eight weeks of highly physically and mentally demanding training if when the moment comes, all he's going to do is think about the wife and kids the target might have at home. He may well be a father of eight, and have four grandparents to feed too. But he's the enemy and that's that. Tough shit.

You can't teach people how they're going to feel when it comes to that moment. Which is why selecting the right character for the job is so important. If they're half decent soldiers, they should be fairly good shots anyway. So you look for mental toughness and stamina above anything else.

A sniper has to be a bit of a hunter at heart. He has to enjoy the tracking down and the kill. You can't be thick either, because there's a lot of information to learn and a fair few calculations to carry out. Just judging distance well is a bloody hard thing to do.

Pulling the trigger and hitting the target is only one small element of it. You've also got to be good at getting in and out of the right place without being seen. Otherwise, you're going to get killed too. That means putting up with a lot of discomfort and pain. You're going to be lying in a hole full of water for days on end. Or in a cramped attic, or an exposed rooftop. You've got to be used to being wet, tired, miserable and dirty. And you're going to have to have a dumper truckload of patience.

We soon became a very close-knit bunch. Snipers always stick together because we think we're better than everyone else. We also encourage resentment. Sniping is a black art that few understand and even fewer are any good at, and that bothers them. But it just made us closer as a unit. A lot of the boys were so proud of who they now were, they went out and got a tattoo of the sniper's classic logo, a pair of crossed rifles with an S above them, on their biceps.

We never used anything other than first names for each other. None of that 'sir' bollocks for us. Everyone in the platoon had a nickname. Mine was 'Monk' on account of my thinning pate. The others were cheeky sods. The average age of the platoon was twenty-four, so the blokes were a few years older and more mature than the average squaddie in a rifle company.

We also look different to everyone else. Our precision weapons immediately stood us apart. The main tool of our trade wasn't the regular army's 5.56mm calibre SA80 assault rifle, but the 7.62mm L96 – a single-shot, bolt-action sniper rifle. It's known as the 'long'.

We also prided ourselves on dressing scruffily. Even in barracks, we'd walk around without rank slides and looked generally unkempt, because that's how we performed our special trade. We would patter around with our shirts hanging out, sleeves not rolled up and our hair and sideburns worn long. And we didn't wear twisters in our trousers, which meant they extended down to cover most of our boots.

But we were scruffy for a good military reason. We don't like washing our field clothes because we've got to smell like the ground we're operating in. If you try and hide out in the long grass stinking of Persil, you won't last for very long. And gaping big black leather boots aren't great camouflage unless you're trying to hide on top of a tarmac road.

That makes us loathed by the Regimental Sergeant Majors the world over. They don't like snipers because we tend not to give much of a shit about the things that really bother them. RSMs want everyone to be as smart as a pin, with shiny buttons and boots. But we're not interested in that, because it doesn't make you shoot any better.

Snipers have two textbook roles in modern warfare. The first is reconnaissance. Along with the Recce Platoon, snipers are the eyes and ears of the battle group. We obtain intelligence by either covert or long-distance observation, to build up a picture of the enemy's strength and movement. Sometimes hard information can be a lot more powerful than firing bullets. You can report back target or troop positions, and get them destroyed by artillery without even giving your position away.

The second is to take out priority targets. Our job is to cause disruption to the enemy's battle plan and the way that they're fighting in the best way we can. Top of the list is always the enemy command elements, their senior officers. That leaves them leaderless and sows confusion. The lower priority is the humble soldier, because losing one or two of them won't have any effect on the enemy's attack. But if they're the only targets that pop up, then you'll kill them all the same.

We're trained to operate anywhere, from behind your own lines, no man's land or even well behind enemy lines to disrupt the rear. We're always the first out, and the last in. But gone are the days of the lone sniper out in the middle of nowhere doing his own thing. Nowadays it's all down a lot more specific tasks in patrol groups of two, four or eight men, and sometimes the whole platoon.

Our adage is one shot, one kill. Nowhere is it truer that a miss is as good as a mile than in our business. It's more than just a matter of personal pride. If you miss, it gives the target a chance to kill you another day.

Modern-day snipers work in pairs. A shooter and a spotter. The shooter is known as the Number One. He controls the weapon, from setting up to pulling the trigger. The Number Two finds targets for him, double checks his wind and distance calculations, and covers his arse.

The elite of the platoon were the seven qualified and badged Number Ones – me, Daz, Chris, Fitz, Ads, Longy and Oost. Everyone was trained to shoot. But if there was ever the option, the Number Ones would be the trigger men. The Number Twos were Smudge, Rob, Ben, H, Sam, DV, Des and Pikey. As mine would always be the first name on the top of the platoon admin lists, I was known in military shorthand as Sniper One.

In those first few weeks after Colonel Maer dropped the bombshell of Iraq, Tidworth was a feeding frenzy of speculation on what the tour might be like. We'd latch on to the smallest nugget of gossip like it was a revelatory message from the stars.

Dale, our Company Sergeant Major, came up with one of the best in the Sergeant's Mess one night. Conspiratorially, he glanced over his shoulder and then leaned in towards me at the bar.

"Ere, Danny, I hear the CO's done his sums. If the current tempo of events stays the same, he reckons about one in five members of the battalion is going to get into a decent contact at some stage during the tour."

A decent contact in our books meant a reasonably sized firefight.

'Really?'

'Yeah. And Abu Naji got mortared three days in a row last week too. But be careful with those little nuggets, mate, because we don't want to scare the hens, now do we?'

He'd meant to be all grave and serious about his prized information. But when I turned to look him straight in the eye, even Dale couldn't resist a big cheesy grin. He was just as excited as the rest of us despite his position, and we had a bit of a schoolboy giggle to ourselves.

WO₂ Dale Norman was the most senior NCO in Y Company, and by far its most respected member, officer or otherwise.

A father of three from Portsmouth, he was known as Mr Unflappable – the coolest cucumber in town. Dale was a big stocky lad, and was famed for his bone crunchingly hard hand shake. He also had a big deep voice just like Frank Bruno's and always spoke naturally slowly, which gave him an immediate air of authority. Whenever he said 'fucking' though, it always came out as 'faarkin'.

He was also a good mate of mine. We'd been in the same battalion for almost twenty years. We

gone through most of our careers together, grown up together. He never asked me to call him sir, which I should have by the book, and he was always up for a chat when I needed it.

After Christmas leave, we went straight into three hard months of operational training under the supervision of a unit called OPTAG (Operational Training and Advisory Group), the army's experts on life on operations. It was the routine package, a refresher course for all the military skills tailor-made to suit southern Iraq. That meant helicopter drills, patrolling, vehicle checkpoint drills, riots, casualty evacuation, some basic Arabic. And a lot of smiling.

'Iraqis are used to soldiers with guns kicking shit out of them,' one of the instructors used to say. 'The way we prove we're different from Saddam's mob is by smiling. That way they'll know we're not going to hurt them.'

'So smile, you fuckers.'

We'd smile on patrol. We'd smile at checkpoints. We'd even smile jumping out of the helicopter. We smiled so fucking much our mouths would be in agony by the end of every day.

I pushed the platoon hard on the series of work-up exercises in Canada and Salisbury Plain. Iraq was a dangerous place, British soldiers were still being killed there regularly. So I reckoned I had a duty of care to give my guys the best chance possible of surviving.

There was initially some debate about whether we would even be taking our longs. Someone in the head shed had thought most of the kit Y Company used would appear a little aggressive for a peacekeeping tour. The locals would get upset if they saw us with too many pointy things. In the end the CO agreed on a compromise – the mortars would stay in Tidworth, but the sniper rifles could come out. What we didn't know was that mortars were just what we needed.

The Hercules touched down with a heavy thump on the tarmac of Basra Air Station. The pilot threw the propellers into reverse, roaring and jolting everyone forward. We'd been swapped from the Tristar to the army's old workhorse in Qatar because the comfy passenger jet didn't have the defensive-aid suite to land safely against the surface-to-air missile threat in Basra.

It was just after half past nine in the morning on 7 April – a year to the day since the city had fallen to the British invasion force.

Everyone had been wearing full body armour and helmets since we had crossed over the Iraqi border. As soon as the loadies opened up the doors, the warm air permeated the plane drowning out the air conditioning in a few seconds. Even without the extra weight on us, stepping out into it felt like walking into a furnace. It was still only mid-spring, but the ground temperature had already reached 40°C. From the dark interior of the Herc, Basra's bright sunlight was blinding. And within five minutes, I was covered from head to toe in a proper sweat.

The first sight I saw was the happy smiles of some soldiers from the 1st Battalion, the Light Infantry, lined up to get on the plane we had just got off. They were the unit in Al Amarah we were going to replace. They were going home, and our arrival was the final confirmation of that. And their joy was plastered all over their faces.

As we filed by into the terminal building, one called out: 'Hello, lads, nice to see you.' Another asked: 'How long you boys got here then? Six months is it? Oh dear, that is a shit sandwich, isn't it? Did you know I'm flying out today?'

He got a huge laugh from his mates. It was the normal good-natured ribbing between rotating troops that happens anywhere. But the Light Infantry boys really seemed to mean it.

Before all troops arriving in theatre got to their final destinations, you had to do two weeks of acclimatization at Shaibah Logistics Base first. So we were packed on board coaches and driven to it through the desert.

I peeked out from behind the coach's blastproof curtains on the way. Iraq was pretty much exactly the shit hole I had expected it to be from what I had seen on the news. All along the route lay destroyed Iraqi tanks and armour. The desert plain looked just like a widely spaced junk yard. Endless remnants of the invasion, the first Gulf War before that, and the Iran–Iraq war even before that. Nothing had been cleared up. There was war detritus everywhere, and it's what we had all been yearning to see.

Fucking brilliant, we're here at last.

It was also still the nearest most of us had ever been to an official war.

After an open-mouthed hour with all noses pressed to the windows, our first holiday in Shaibah began. The point of it is to get used to the heat and desert conditions of southern Iraq inside the safety of a great big base in the middle of nowhere, where nobody is going to shoot at you or try to blow you up. It's also used as a place to give soldiers in Iraq a few days off from the front line – hence the Ibi nickname.

Shaibah is the main supply hub for the 9,000 British troops in the country. It's based on an old British barracks built in the 1920s when we first ruled Iraq. But these days, it's the nearest the British Army has ever come to going to war the American way. It was a small slice of home shoved right in the middle of miles of sand. Amid row upon row of big air-conditioned accommodation tents was everything a squaddie could ever want. Apart from beer and shagging, that is. There are fast food trailers like Pizza Hut and Burger King, a massive gym, coffee shops, hairdressers, souvenirs, a cinema and even a traditional British pub – alcohol-free of course.

After we'd found our lodgings, the three other platoon commanders and I got an update on the general picture in Iraq from the company OC (Officer Commanding), Major Justin Featherstone. He'd been out for a bit as part of the advanced party. His news was dramatic.

In the last forty-eight hours while we'd been travelling, it had all well and truly kicked off out there. Across large parts of the country, the firebrand Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr had stirred up a shit storm. His fighters had seized police stations and government buildings, and attempted to storm a series of coalition forces' headquarters. The fighting was at its worst in the major southern cities of the Shia heartlands. In the city of Kut just 100 miles north of Al Amarah, a Ukrainian soldier was killed and Polish troops even had to temporarily abandon their base and pull out of the city altogether.

The trouble had been brewing for months. In September 2003, Moqtada declared his own shadow government for Iraq. He promised to rule it as a strict Islamic state and started rubbing out his rival Shia leaders. Eventually, the Americans' patience ran out. In March 2004, they closed down his newspaper and issued a warrant for his arrest for murder. In retaliation, he mobilized the Mehdi Army. On 5 April, fighting broke out. The al-Sadr uprising had begun.

Elsewhere across the south, 500 Italian troops in Nasiriyah had fought a fierce battle with militants, suffering twelve casualties of their own, but killing fifteen and wounding thirty-five enemy. Spanish soldiers were fighting on the street with Mehdi Army gunmen in Najaf, and the Bulgarian base at Kerbala came under heavy grenade and machine-gun fire. An American soldier was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) in the poor Shia stronghold Baghdad suburb Sadr City, recently renamed after Moqtada's father. And three Japanese civilians and seven South Koreans had been taken hostage and the Mehdi Army were threatening to burn them alive. From what Featherstone could pick up there had even been a bit of scrapping in Al Amarah too.

The 'good' news, Featherstone said, was that it wasn't expected to last much longer. Intelligence had predicted the uprising would peter out pretty quickly after the initial outburst.

Shit. We were sitting on our hoops in Shaibitha watching everyone else have all the fun on CNN. It was the same old bloody story for the PWRR all over again. Yet again, we were going to miss the action. By the time we got up there, there would have been a settlement, or al-Sadr would be dead. The whole storm in a tea cup would be all over. Un-fucking-believable.

What was worse was there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. I had to wait for the rest of the platoon to arrive and take them through acclimatization. I was sick as a parrot.

I couldn't work out whether Major Featherstone was happy or sad about the al-Sadr uprising. Probably a bit of both. It was exciting for him like it was for all of us because he was a soldier. But it also meant an increased risk to his men, and that for him was a major worry.

Major Justin Featherstone was very much a soldier's soldier. He was a very approachable and friendly guy, who always made a big effort to be liked by all the blokes. That really mattered to him and so far he'd pretty much achieved it. Physically, he was balding prematurely for his thirty-five years, but well built and always carried a cheeky smile. And he was never afraid of getting his hands dirty and mucking in with any shitty task he'd given his men.

But if he had one flaw, it was that he was born a *Boy's Own* hero. He was the classic army officer/amateur adventurer sort. He was always organizing adventure training trips or exciting expeditions and the explorer's urge – which included a keen eye for the ladies – had given him a fairly lively army career.

Being given the command of Y Company, the most skilled soldiers in the unit, on an operational tour was a chance for Major Featherstone to really prove his worth to the army. He was very keen to take it. That meant keeping his nose clean doing a faultless job. Most importantly, that meant keeping all his blokes alive.

When the rest of Sniper Platoon finally did arrive over the next few days, I began the programme

immediately. That meant drinking endless bottles of water, platoon runs, lots of smiling, and practising our Iraq drills. The most important one I wanted to get us good at was top cover. That's the two blokes who stand up in the back of Snatch Land Rovers to give the vehicles all round protection while it's moving. If there was any action still left to be had up in Al Amarah, I wanted the boys to be ready for it.

There were also endless lectures on hygiene. Exactly how you should wash your hands before you ate, or you'd spend the rest of the tour in the shithouse with D and V. Shaibah also has a shooting range with 100 lanes in it for blokes to zero their weapons sights. It's the biggest the British Army has anywhere, and we thought it was awesome.

But the bottom line was Shaibah was well and truly the land of the REMF – Real Echelon Motherfucker. It was a Yank phrase from Vietnam, but it's been adopted by English-speaking military all over the world. And it was doing my head in. After four days of the place, I was chomping at the bit so Daz and I resolved to scheme a way of getting up to Al Amarah as soon as we could. He felt exactly the same as me.

Corporal Daz Williamson was my 2i/c and, at just a year younger than me, had the seniority to be in charge of the platoon himself. But a while back he'd been demoted from sergeant for punching some gobby PT instructor in the face. We agreed on pretty much everything – just what you need from your deputy.

I had another word with Major Featherstone.

'Sir, I've got to get up there. With the current crisis, it's really important Daz and I do a good and thorough handover with the Light Infantry sniper platoon commander before he goes.'

'Right.'

Lying, I went on: 'I've heard he'll be on his way down in a couple of days. Chris can stay behind and bring the boys up in two days' time.'

'Oh, I see. Well if you think you have to, you'd better go then, Dan.'

I gave Chris the good news.

Corporal Chris Mulrine, my No.3, was very popular for his sharp wit as much as his fine soldiering. He had no time for army bullshit and, as a massive *Blackadder* fan, did his legendary General Melchett impressions when only just out of earshot of some particularly bumbling officer.

In full Melchett impression, 'Yees, that's the spirit. They don't like it up 'em.' He shook his head.

'You bastard. I get it, I'll stay here and be a fucking REMF and you and Daz will have a right old caper. Off you go.'

That settled it. Daz had managed to find a couple of rides on a routine road convoy up to Al Amarah. They needed a couple more armed escorts. We jumped at the chance of a lift, they jumped at the chance of getting a couple of snipers to cover their arses.

We found the convoy of six eight-tonne lorries and a couple of Snatch Land Rovers by Shaibah's main gate at 8 a.m. the next day. They were loading up and almost ready to go. The driver of our lorry had done the trip once already in the last few days. He was none too pleased about having to do it again. But thanks to him, we got our first real indication of what the situation was like on the ground in Al Amarah, in a shouted conversation over the noise of the engine as the convoy pulled out.

The Light Infantry had had two weeks of misery.

The main base in the city centre had been repeatedly surrounded by more than 3,000 demonstrators. It started as just an angry protest, but the mob – which was constantly chanting the name of Moqtada al-Sadr – had got increasingly violent. Blast bombs were now regularly coming over the base's walls and armoured Warriors had to be deployed on the streets.

Over the last two nights, troops had also fought a series of clashes with Mehdi Army gunmen after coming under small arms fire.

Six British soldiers had been injured, and they had killed at least fifteen enemy in return. It was the worst violence British-controlled southern Iraq had seen since the end of the war.

And it showed no signs of abating at all.

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