

“That’s good, Conn, come on back”

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Patched up concrete, bags of trash, bridges, large crowds. All now teem with imminent destruction. I often sink into nostalgic stupors, thinking about times when I would loiter for hours in my favorite bookstore, perfectly content in that familiar and welcoming environment. Hours passed without concern as I ventured through the weaves of literary tapestry. To stretch my legs I'd stroll between the loaded shelves, adding books to my ever-expanding mental reading list. I'd sip coffee at the café and eat a snack while watching my fellow patrons, trying to read moods and body language, and guessing the kinds of people they might be.

But in the months after my homecoming from Afghanistan, what were once relaxing visits to my favorite bookstore became marred by constant pauses in reading. I would scrutinize everyone who passed too close. I sat in a state of hyper-vigilance when really all I wished to do was read, do homework, or simply enjoy the bookstore as I used to.

I would never have thought I would not be able to sit still and focus for more than five minutes at a time reading a book. I loved reading for hours at a time. I sought solace in books. I sought

adventure and thrill. But all that, for the most part, now seems lost to me.

My ability to maintain any sense of normalcy, according to my wife, appears to be non-existent. Now I'm obsessed with situational awareness and maintaining my 5's and 25's—a method we used to check the ground around us by starting at 5 meters and working out to 25 meters. I am stuck in “Battle Mind”—that once coveted mindset of heightened awareness my commanding officer said we needed to maintain.

But this Battle Mind is simply no good in my life today. I am jumpy and moody, and I've been told I seem unapproachable, as though I'm about to have some kind of violent outburst. These are just a few of the facets that make my present persona dysfunctional. I am a healthcare worker, and these problems are no good to someone in this profession. I need to be able to deal with a myriad of situations and while hyper-vigilance can work in some cases—like paying attention to details and catching an otherwise unnoticed symptom in a patient—it is ultimately detrimental. My inability to swallow criticisms from patients and family members is not good for them, my employer, or me. All in all, I am ultimately a “no-go” in my present state, but I am coping and am leading a fairly normal life despite my past.

These changes, both psychological and physiological, were an absolute necessity at the time of my traumatic experiences. They enabled me to survive in a world in which, if I were not in the right state of mind, I would be taking a very rough ride atop pounds and pounds of high explosives.

In 2008, my unit, the 206th Engineer Battalion, deployed to Afghanistan to conduct Route Clearance Patrols (RCPs). RCPs are pretty much what the words suggest: patrols to clear routes of travel used by NATO forces of any obstruction. This is not to be confused with things like stacked tires, debris, or an object laid across the road to impede progress; the obstacles I refer to are much more effective. They will blow a massive crater in an asphalt road and take the persons who were on the spot during detonation on a fatal ride. RCPs are tasked with clearing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). These could be anything from old rockets and anti-tank mines to .50-caliber ammo cans packed with a homemade explosive (HME). And one other catch: in Afghanistan 95 percent of IEDs are buried in the ground with two activation methods—pressure plate and wire. *Bummer.*

These obstructions are meant to impede us, destroy our vehicles, and—for the full bounty the Taliban pays locals if this should happen—kill us.

We were fortunate enough to have the proper Counter-IED assets. MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) are heavily armored troop carriers and gun trucks. The Buffalo, which we called the “Cadillac” because of its awesome seats and massive frame, used an extending arm to sweep possible IED spots with a pronged fork and a claw to dig up the bombs.

And last—but by no means least—we had the Husky, an armored vehicle that resembles a road grater, but instead of the blade fitted just under the cab of the grater, we had two retractable

panels. When extended down, they sit under the cab and scan the ground with a kind of radar. All of these vehicles have V-shaped, mono-hull chasses that deflect blasts outward and greatly increase survival for the occupants.

One of the first lessons I learned was that it is simply the nature of the beast that, as a husky operator, you are most certainly going to hit an IED. Once you are at peace with that, you will be prepared to perform your duties effectively and not feel constant fear looming just above conscious thought. I found that peace long before my number was drawn, so as I stepped into the “Purple Heart Box” that morning, I was ready.

I had just hit an IED the day before, which had disabled the vehicle. The backup Husky had also been disabled by a blast. It had rolled over a pressure plate, and the explosion blew off its ground-penetrating radar system. We stayed overnight in an impromptu camp so that the vehicles could be repaired.

Because I had hit an IED, I was supposed to have an easy day in the second Husky position. But the IED had been nothing more than what I dubbed a “toe popper” that blew off a tire, filled my cockpit with dust, and lifted the front end of the vehicle off the ground a few feet. By the standards of what we had encountered to that point, the 12 pounds of homemade explosive in an American .50-caliber ammo can was nothing. This was my first direct IED strike, but compared to the other guys’ first bombs, it was kind of lame. Many of them had taken much bigger blasts. So at our pre-mission briefing when the platoon sergeant asked who wanted to take over the Husky, I readily volunteered.

With my iPod bud inserted into my left ear playing the second Harry Potter audio book and with my mine detection speaker turned on high near my right ear, we rolled out around 6:30 a.m. Hours passed, and with a chill that spread all over my body, I noticed we were approaching the hottest spot on the route to Kooshmond.

The infamous wadi, or dried creek bed, had an IED buried beneath its sand-filled bottom every time we passed through. I realigned my wheels and pressed the brake to get myself into a more comfortable position. I ratcheted down my harness on my right side, allowing me to look down at the right panel to see my back wheel placement. After a swift bout of expletives, I took a cleansing breath, let off the brake, and inched forward.

Sweat poured down my face. My toes were white knuckled in my boots as I worked the brake pedal. I delicately handled the stirring wheel as I slowly went down into the wadi. I knew that a forceful correction or adjustment in the wheels position could trigger a detonation due to the sudden shifting in dirt around a pressure plate, or through the wheel itself depressing it.

My front wheels reached the bed of the wadi without incident, but I did not breathe easier. As I gazed out in front of me, I could tell that the dirt all along the trail had been disturbed, but I dared to hope that the disturbance was from a recent rainfall, or something natural like that. My vehicle continued to level out as I inched forward. As I crossed the center of the wadi, my detector let out a high frequency tone. I crept a bit further up, listening for changes in the sound. Once it started to lessen, I stopped,

reversed, and awaited again the tone's pinnacle. When I hit it once more, I stopped and engaged the Husky's marking system, a hose that descends from a reservoir of highly resilient and bright red ink to the panels below. The hit was on my left panel so I marked it accordingly and called to the Buffalo to alert them.

"Hey, Bonecrusher," I said. "Got a solid-toned hit here on my left panel. I've marked it and will continue."

"Roger, Conn, sweep on up to the other side there and stop."

"Roger, Bonecrusher."

I was confident that I had just found our IED, which bolstered my resolve. I continued forward ever so slowly. In the next three minutes that it took me to reach the other side of the wadi, I marked another six spots with low tones. I knew these were of little concern. As a sapper, you learn the language of the detectors. But I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. I was once more clinching my toes. This must have been the longest two minutes of my life as I ascended the hill of moon dust, but my vehicle soon leveled out on the other side, unscathed.

"Ok, that's good, Conn, come on back," Bonecrusher said.

For a brief moment, as I engaged the reverse, I felt at peace with everything, anything, and anyone; I had no idea why. As I shook out of my stupor, I did find the order to "come on back" to be a bit odd. But, then again, this whole situation was fucked up so I paid no heed to the oddity of the order.

As my Husky inched backwards, I felt the rear end slipping out of the tracks I had made coming up, so I corrected ever so carefully, continuing my journey backward. The rear of the vehicle

evened out as I moved onto the flat riverbed and I slowed even more. After another moment of *minute* adjustments to my steering wheel, my attention was drawn away from my mirrors; because of the thick moon dust, my front wheels were now sliding out of the tracks.

“Damn it,” I said, and stopped my vehicle. I made what I hoped would be the right adjustment to land the wheels back into the track and slowly let off my brake pedal. The vehicle inched back, but the wheels continued to dig out a new track. I cursed again. My best course of action at that point was to simply angle my wheels shallow and to allow them to slowly come back on track as I reversed. Another gut-wrenching moment passed, but my wheels finally made it back into the tracks. I stopped to take a breath and to wipe the sweat from my face and eyes. I let my head drop against my right window and closed my eyes, gathering myself and said, “Almost done here.” I snapped my head back up, patted my face and shook my head.

I let off the brake and felt the vehicle continue its reverse motion. And then an intense pressure engulfed me and the cab around me went black. I felt my body being forced upward with my vehicle through an unimaginably violent force. I thought my helmet would be ripped from my head and through the top hatch. My cabin filled with dust. Before passing out from the pressure, I yelled out one word to the world as blackness overcame me: “Damn!”

I came to a minute or so after the blast; some of the dust had dissipated in the air. Dirt mixed with the iron taste of blood in my

mouth, which had apparently been busted open by the upward pressure of my helmet and the chinstrap forcing my mouth shut. My head had come to rest on my right shoulder. I allowed myself a moment in that position to run something of a diagnostic on myself, but I stopped, realizing that I needed to alert the others that I was okay. I straightened my head and was nearly overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness—made worse by my swimming vision. I fought through the oncoming nausea and disorientation to find my hand mic, which I tried to key up. Nothing. The blast had taken out my radio. I looked up and groaned.

My head and neck really hurt when I changed position to put my sight in line with the hatches above me, but I fought through the pain and forced my arms upward. I placed my clenched fists against each hatch and pushed with all my might. In my weakened state, the already heavy hatches were nearly impossible for me to push. But push them I did. A gust of cool air rushed into my cabin and it felt amazing.

I spit out dust and blood and felt the back of my vehicle shift a bit, as one of our gun trucks softly came bumper to bumper with me, which was our SOP for this kind of situation. I could hear liquid somewhere in the engine compartment leaking heavily, like water from a jug. I began to fear fire, or another explosion. Panic crept up on me and threatened to take hold over me. But as quickly as it rose, I forced myself to dismiss it, because at that point, I didn't care, I just wanted to sleep. I occupied myself by cursing the Taliban while waiting for my extraction; their jihad

had come calling in my Husky, and it had called loudly.

I survived the remainder of my deployment relatively unscathed, even though I had remained at the forefront of our route clearance missions. We returned to our mobilization station for our out-processing. We were subjected to a multitude of both physical and psychological testing to ascertain whether we were ready to be released from active duty and the Army's responsibility.

We put our best feet forward. None of us wanted to be delayed on our return home. I regret my choice in playing the tough, stoic, and unaffected soldier fresh from an eventful combat deployment. The immediate help I could have received from the Army might have saved me a lot of grief and money. The problem with that thought, however, is that while I played it tough and denied having problems, I actually believed myself to be okay. But I was wrong. I was so excited to return to what I remembered as normalcy that my mind blocked out any introspection that might have triggered a conscious awareness of actually needing assistance.

And so I returned home to much excitement and fanfare, friends, and family. The first three months of being home I found myself struggling to re-acclimate to basic, adult living tasks. I had not paid for groceries in over a year. I had not paid for housing, gas, healthcare, clothing, or transportation, and these basic aspects of life now seemed completely foreign and nearly beyond my ability to negotiate. I was appalled at the prices of living commodities—appalled, but entirely willing to spend. And I spent

lavishly. I wonder now, as I think back, if that was a subconscious coping mechanism to keep my mind distracted from the latent problems trying to surface in my thoughts. Regardless, I bought myself many frivolous goodies.

After those initial months passed, my material distractions began to lose their appeal. I had never been much of a drinker, but as toys lost my interest and the local university's semester started back up, I picked up on it. I attended many parties, and as party etiquette demanded, I partook heavily. As the weeks passed, my drinking increased; I drank outside of social gatherings and soon dropped my attendance at them altogether. Drinking became more than just an expected social behavior to me. I found myself growing very fond of it, much like my discarded, expensive toys. I drank to escape from the mounting frustrations of the daily grind. I developed an extreme annoyance with people around me and their irrelevant and asinine interests and concerns, and soon it spread to my friends and family.

I became an irritable and angry hermit, venturing out only to restock my daily depleted stores of Grey Goose. During each session of consumption, my mind grew more critical of everything and everyone; the one and only friend I would permit to share in my ventures was becoming wary of me. It seemed that each time we drank, my drunken mind would embark on rants, uncomfortable diatribes of criticisms and expletives. I remember in those times—and embarrassingly so as I write this and recall the memories of doing such—I would verbally destroy those who had not served in the armed forces, labeling them as drones, as

worthless and inconsequential.

I was stupid, of course. But as I would come to find out, I was also a tortured person. During my brief moments of lucidity, I had begun to realize it. As the months continued, my mind often strayed back to the battlefield and my experiences there, and soon my drunken ventures turned into a means of escaping from myself. I would get crazy and spend hours blasting music as a respite from my ever-looming and disturbing memories. Those escapes, great while they lasted, had time limits, and came with an undesired eventuality. Toward the end of each episode, my intoxication would fail me utterly and allow my demons to manifest in more violent and vivid forms, often resulting in fits of rage and despair. I would awake the next day to find my apartment in ruins.

While I was drinking, I denied myself female companionship. I was rational enough to know that I was unfit for intimacy; I continued to keep to myself. I denied the subtle suggestions of my subconscious self that I might need help, that my problems were spiraling out of control, and that I was beyond my own ability to regulate mounting self-destruction. I spent thousands of dollars on flashy electronics and other indulgences; similarly, I spent just as much on my expensive and self-debilitating addiction to alcohol. I stopped maintaining my friendships and personal health, and I gained a lot of weight.

I reached the point of deep depression. I grew tired of my drinking and myself, but I couldn't quit. I needed alcohol to sleep. I was trapped, and worse, I knew it.

It was not until one particularly bad night, in which I had again destroyed my apartment and nearly attacked a friend—as was told to me later—that my self-inflicted spell was broken. As my friends hurriedly made their exit from my apartment, they turned and looked at me—just before they slammed my door—and said three words: “You need help.”

Those words struck me. They hurt me. They embarrassed me. And they were the kick in the ass I needed to go and seek help. The next day I went to the local VA hospital, unsure of myself and nervous. The initial appointment was the first of many to come, and it was the beginning of a long and arduous journey, one that I am still trying to complete today.

It has been nearly four years since I returned home from Afghanistan, but my senses still seem to be aligned to that place. I can sometimes feel the heat or the bitter cold. Sometimes I feel the contour of the steering wheels I handled. Worse, I often smell melted glass and steel, burning flesh and bone. I can see the mountains of Afghanistan in all their majestic, rustic beauty. And I vividly recall the uncountable numbers of blast craters in the roads we traveled. Those memories always cause my blood to quicken, even now. The craters served as a constant reminder of where I was and what the devices that created them were emplaced to do.

My treatment has been extensive, long, and continuous; this is a good thing. Surely the work I have done and the measures the VA has taken to better my quality of life have been for the best. I have no doubt about it. I am better able to cope with the constant

assaults the Taliban continue to unleash on me today, thousands of miles away and years out, than I was when I had only vodka to help fight the good fight. It is a testament to the horrors of war that the battles continue to be fought by the combat veterans who have long since departed the battlefield.

Some days I am deeply saddened to learn that somewhere another veteran has lost the fight with their demons, that they have exploded in fits of rage, or drowned in a flood of depression, costing them their lives. But we are steadily beating out the stigma of PTSD. These days I hear about more and more veterans leading successful and fulfilling lives, proof that it *is* possible to come out from under the oppressive weight of traumatic experiences. I have done it myself. I acknowledge my condition; I know that it's there. In times when I feel weak and vulnerable, I use my rational acknowledgement of my condition as a re-affirming foundation through which I can steady myself and recover.

I liken my PTSD to a giant slab of rock being held up by pillars. The shadow of the slab is an ever-looming reminder of the slippery journey to this point in my life. The pillars are my solace and security. They represent those who have helped get me to this point, and the strongest of those is my wife, to whom I feel I owe nearly everything.

Be encouraged, my fellow combat veterans; there will always be people to lift you up when you need it. You can live, happily so, as one of those who has seen more than most people will in their lifetimes.