

My Reason



Robert Loughhead

He kissed me. I was waiting to get the mail, but I realized that she would be a while. I went over, picked him up, and gave him a big hug, telling him how proud I was of him. Somehow, I think he will never know.

It was a lovely Somali day and I had just finished playing some volleyball in the sandy courts we had outside of our accommodations in Mogadishu. I was standing in line waiting for a hot meal of pork chops that had been commandeered somehow on a convoy run. Just as they were putting the pork on my paper plate, the call came through, “Shut the line down, and link up at headquarters.”

Within five minutes we were lined up, watching the horizon, as the sky out over the most direct route to the crash site was lit up with green tracers. Our guys were being pierced by cross fire from the Somalis and their progress was halted. They turned around to come back while another plan was formulated.

I walked into the kitchen, shaking off the sleep meds I had taken the night before. She was putting away some dishes as I moved to the refrigerator to get the eggs and crabmeat for her

breakfast omelet. I moved back around the island and waited. After two seconds, I'd say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get in your way." The way the words hung in the air, the look of fear and concern on her face. They stung me. *Is this what I had become?*

This was our routine. She would get up and shower; I'd get up and make her breakfast and feed our son, to help get her out the door. It was about all I was functional for in the house. A warrior reduced to playing Mr. Mom. Once she left, what used to be a strong man would find himself on the internet, doing a little reading, or, if I felt really down that day, I'd just go lie back in bed or go to the basement where it was very dark. I could grab my poncho liner, curl up on the couch, and act like the day didn't exist, like I was normal and could just sleep it all away.

Some days though, our routines would collide. Those were never good days. It was never good to mess with my schedule, even if I didn't know what in the hell my schedule included on a daily basis. The only thing I knew was that in the morning I had a purpose; once they walked out the door into the real world, it was anybody's guess as to *what he is going to do today*.

"Are you going to your doctor's appointment?"

"Yes," but even that would be a lie sometimes; I would get to the VA hospital and not be able to walk in. I quit going to group therapy at the Veteran Center downtown.

"Will you go to town and pay this bill? It's due today."

"Sure thing."

Only hours of solitude would be followed with drinking to numb the pain, and I would finally say, "The hell with them, I've

got too much going on, I'm not going to town today, parking is a pain, and I don't feel well."

There was always something wrong: bills, dinner, and school events; if they didn't center on my pain, I could not care less about what the rest of the world thought about me. What these people once knew to be me left a long time ago; they just never saw the train while it was leaving the station. Then again, maybe that was just who I had become. I was too busy with the tree rooted in my life, much less a forest.

"Cpl. Loughhead, you are going fifth in the lineup." I started looking at the moon that was rising over the Black Sea. *How in the world did I get to this point?* The calm of the moonlight on the water centered me; water always had a peaceful effect on me.

All seemed to be eerily quiet at 11 PM as the convoy started moving. Then, as we rounded a corner, I heard the tank up front open up with a couple blasts. The Somalis knew which way we were coming, and they had used the hours of our planning to construct more roadblocks. I heard the cacophony of fire come roaring to life. It felt like anybody that could breathe in that city with access to a weapon was out on both sides of the route, doing their best to take us out.

I drove a hardback Humvee that we had equipped with an automatic grenade launcher with my team. Nothing about the night seemed normal as I looked through my night vision goggles driving through the narrow streets. I saw muzzle flashes to my left as PFC Topmiller shot targets appearing in doors and the windows

of buildings that were no farther than 15 feet to our left or right. With every launch of a grenade from PFC Smith up top, I saw the clouds of debris and destruction left in front of us.

We followed the convoy onward as number two in the lineup. The first two APCs had gotten into another ambush and were lost for the rest of the night. I felt my skin prickle with more anticipation of how the night seemed to be getting worse in a hurry. The stench of sweat mixed in with the carbon of our fire, and the dust from the debris and filth of the city formed a smell I knew I would never forget. My other platoon mates from 1-87 infantry sat at the intersection, a link up point to lead a convoy back out of the city.

Army experience had already taught me that “anything that can go wrong will go wrong,” and about ten minutes later the first sergeant was calling for a Humvee with a grenade launcher to take out a sniper who had halted their advancement. I followed the sound of the nearest gunfire until I found the grunts after a couple blocks. The first sergeant walked up to my window and told me to follow him. Before pulling into the street and into the line of fire, he told my gunner, “I’m going to put tracer rounds on the target, and you follow my rounds and take that son of a bitch out.” I felt the turmoil in my stomach grow; I could feel the tension in my vehicle, as we knew this was a death mission, as the sniper had already killed one and injured some others.

I watched in amazement as the first sergeant marched right out into the open of the street, seemingly without any fear for his own well-being. At this point, I thought to myself, *fuck it; if he’s got the*

balls to do that, then I'm following that man anywhere. I drove out to his position and watched through my night vision goggles as the last of his tracers hit the top of the wall of the roof. My gunner launched his third round, hitting the sniper as he stood up at a timely moment. I watched him take it; he fell over the roof's edge. A cheer rose up from the grunts that had been pinned down. They were then able to move on up to their objective.

Sure, I heard the whispers. I saw the people talking as if I weren't even in the room, "Well, if he can go do this or that, then he surely doesn't have a problem."

I was even asked by a friend one night when I was out picking up some take out, "So how much do you get a month from the VA?" I was shocked. The cat was out of the bag, and I had officially lost friends that would never understand.

I dealt with the "I don't know why you just can't get over it" and other mundane comments from friends or family that thought they were being helpful. The more I was prodded, the harder it fell back on my wife and son. Push his buttons and look out. My roaring would be at family. It allowed me not to look at the real issues.

I went into sabotage mode and tried to push those closest to me away. I would talk to people online to make myself feel normal again. It is easy to paint yourself as normal or joke that your craziness is what makes you normal when you are online. It is the people that think they are normal that don't have a clue.

Self-deprecating humor is a tool for avoidance for a person with PTSD, as is intoxication. Many turn to alcohol. I knew what I was doing and knew it would be the end of my family, yet I couldn't stop the train that was rolling. The train had run for so long that I truly didn't feel that I could undo all the damage that had been done. I saw the cuts; I saw the way PTSD had controlled me. I saw how it was affecting my son, my wife, and the people closest to me. There were eggshells and shattered glass littered all through the path my life would take.

The chaos of battle overtook me as we sat there in the middle of that street; it seemed the whole world went silent around us. With the grunts moving forward on foot, they continued to fight their way in, but my company radio net was quiet. I knew people were locking up. Still, no matter the training, when bullets start snapping around you, all bets are off.

We were alone in a Humvee in the middle of a bad part of town. Our only saving grace: the Somalis didn't realize we were there. I started to take notice of the sights around me: a dead donkey that had been shot was lying not far in front of me, his cart overturned but still attached to the harness. Bodies scattered here or there very dark in color.

The crackle of my radio finally broke my silence and reflection and told me that something was about to change my situation again. "Three, this is six, you need to take your Humvee up to the evacuation point. They have a casualty you need to bring out."

I was left to my own fruition to find the link up point. I had no map. I could only go on the sense of direction that I had acquired after a couple years of doing land navigation and finding out where I was on the earth for some second lieutenant that hadn't quite mastered the skill yet.

The Somalis didn't know we were coming since the 2-14th, 10th Mountain guys had already cleared the way to the link up, so I didn't encounter a lot of fire for the next couple of blocks. I rounded a turn to see silhouettes through my goggles—troops moving around, setting up perimeters. I linked up at the casualty collection point. They tried to immobilize him in the back of my Humvee. Every little jolt in the street made him scream out in pain. I made it only about fifty yards before I was called to a halt. It seemed they were sending in a front line ambulance to extract my guy. We were needed at the crash site. After the soldier was transferred, I was led back to a small alley where the Black Hawk Super 61 had been shot down in the midafternoon.

PFC Topmiller was outside of the vehicle helping to liaise between me and the Delta operators working on the fuselage. They hooked the Black Hawk up to a tow strap and my Humvee, and we started working to try and pull the wreckage from the tiny alleyway. Tight quarters didn't bode well for us as sitting targets, so they dispatched four rangers to our front to provide security. Others were at the rear of the helicopter, but the Somalis knew exactly where we were. They knew that we would try to get the pilot out of the bird.

What seemed like forever in time had only been a few hours. It was 2 AM on October 4th, 1993. Whenever the Somalis fired RPGs or small arms at us too heavily, the operators called for a gun run from the AH-6 little bird pilots circling above. You could hear them coming, the sound reverberating off the tin shacks on either side, the infrared laser of the targets through the night vision goggles, as you went momentarily deaf from the loud burp of their Gatling guns roaring overhead, raining down hot brass that would burn you to the soul. I watched the destruction in front of me while wiping the hot discharge from my neck.

I did therapy. I was an inpatient and I put in the time while I was in the hospital. It hurt and I was as raw as I think a human can be. I shared my fear and guilt with my brothers in arms, even ones from Korea, Vietnam, and the War on Terror. Yet, I let my patterns of comfort continue. I have come to see the light now, in more ways than one. I understand that it was my fear of telling my loved ones what was bothering me and what was going on in my head that was driving the very people I needed away. I lost my wife and essentially my son. Honestly though, his dad is in a better place, and if I were with him daily, I'd be tempted to fall back into the same routines. I have a chance at life now with my son. I don't want to see the markings of PTSD on his life any more than they already are.

They instructed me to start pulling forward. Dropping the vehicle into low, we tried for several minutes, but there was no

pulling the big bird, and my wheels were just spinning up sand at that point.

Every so often I got calls over the net from my higher ups and even some of the leaders back in the Battalion Headquarters, asking about our progress. *When will you be done?* Daylight was coming soon, and we would lose our advantage of the Somalis' not being able to see us at night. I was a little consumed with working the Humvee and not entirely worried about the chatter, but it was becoming a distraction. In my mind's eye I had seen enough of "leadership" in this evening, to make me a little on edge.

Time seemed like it was going fast as we were coming up on five o'clock; I felt like I had been in warp speed and had only been at the crash site for about forty five minutes instead of the three hours that had actually elapsed. I felt very safe in this hell hole of a place I had found for the early morning hours, surrounded by Rangers and the strafing runs of the little birds; I could never recall such a feeling of peace and resolution in my life.

As I watched the dawn of day coming, I noticed as the birds started chirping in the bushes along the shacks that we were lined up beside. One final call over the net finally got one of the Delta guys on my Battalion net; he calmly grabbed the mic from me and told the officer on the other end, "We will be done when we are fucking done, not any time before, so clear the fucking net so we can do this."

We were well aware of the situation at hand, but leaving was not an option. I smiled to myself at what I knew was a seething

and humiliated officer whose radio operators back in the tactical operations center were smiling just the same.

I was told to start pulling again—slowly this time. There was a little more give. Suddenly, I felt the Humvee lurch forward as I hit one of the ruts I had dug out earlier with my tires. I felt the line go slack. I looked in my side view mirror and saw a head and arm come rolling towards me in the dirt. I had never been sicker to my stomach in my life. Topmiller came up and asked if I saw it. I told him yes. I saw the same look in his face that I knew he was seeing in mine.

I still see it plainly. I have opened up my mind to the possibilities, of the insanity I saw. How is it that more people are not affected by seeing or being a part of this sort of chaos? When I struggle with the nightmares, they are grand. I can lock down on anyone and anything, just go in my shell and watch them—*feel them*—prodding me as if they are a young boy with a stick trying to prod the turtle to stick his head out from under the shell.

APCs were called forward to get the wounded and dead, but there was not enough room for some of the Rangers to ride out. They were instructed, along with some of my 2-14th brothers, to walk and use the APCs for cover. Finally, with the lob of a couple grenades into a gathering crowd behind us, we dispersed the group and started on our way out.

The Somalis came back in full force. I saw them everywhere shooting at us. My gunner ran out of ammo, so he called for my M-

16 to use. As I handed it up to him, I saw a guy on the roof directly above, getting ready to aim at us. I told Smith to take him out and watched as a guy was shot in the knee right in front of me. His buddies had to grab him to pull him forward. Another was shot in the hand and dropped his rifle. Everything was intense: the heat of the morning coming up off the cool streets, the smell of gunfire in the air, the loud explosions, the roar of it all. We picked up six Rangers at the rally point, and they were crammed into our Humvee on top of each other. Those without sightlines were handing any ammo they had left to those with opportunities to fire from the back of the Humvee. This sensation of euphoria and extreme fear was feeding the adrenaline in my body again. Finally, I pulled into the link up point, and we got back together with my platoon mates who had been there through the night.

We got confirmation that the last soldiers were out. As I was getting ready to leave, I noticed that I would be the third from the end of the convoy. Looking into my side mirror, I saw the next vehicle's gunner take a shot to the neck. I watched in horror as Doc Foley sprinted into action to save SPC Gutierrez's life. I couldn't believe we had made it back to this point only to see another guy get shot. I was told to go on.

We started to encounter burning roadblocks. By this point, I decided I wasn't staying in the city any longer and drove through three roadblocks to the amazement and chatter of my new passengers in the back. Time seemed to be slowing down as I got us out of the intense fire. But I was snapped back into reality when I realized I was losing the convoy. We were only doing about

fifteen miles per hour. I heard screams, “You missed the turn!” and “The stadium was on the left! You need to go back!”

“Hell, no, I am not turning around! We are going to the airport.” I took the roads I knew. Another Humvee followed as the chaos turned to serenity. People trying to kill us turned to people cheering us on. I passed by the War Memorial monument, then past a mosque; I could see the beauty of the Black Sea. It looked like a good day to be at the beach playing volleyball.

I slid in through the gates of the airport as the Turkish guards got the hell out of the way. They didn’t even think about trying to stop this haggard looking bunch of shot up vehicles. I pulled up to the makeshift hospital tent as the Rangers got out and instructed the medic that we had a body in the back. I watched as they removed the bag and felt the sickness in my stomach again as I visualized the head and arm. I knew at this point it would be this image that would haunt me for many years to come.

I still see the damage. When I wake at 2:20 AM, I’m ready for the dreams and the visions. I check the locks on the doors, look out the windows. It is not Somalia that haunts me anymore, though; it is the 20 years of my life I lost in between.

I see her now. I see the relief on her face because she doesn’t have to live with that person anymore. She doesn’t have to wonder what she is coming home to each night. “Will he be drunk? Will he be in one of his silent but pissed off moods?” That pains me, but it gives me great relief. I know now that I’m no longer a burden to her or my son. They no longer walk on eggshells. I wish it had

never been like that. I wish I had reached out and let her into my pain long ago.

I have a purpose now. With the help of my VA counselors, I am now able to write about Somalia and talk about it. I have reached out to a few of my brothers in arms that are struggling with the same stuff. Sometimes people back home want to hear the how and the why. But they don't want to know about the nightmares wreaking the havoc on your life.

During my first stint at the VA I was ready and willing to do the work. Little did I know, it would just be the start. Four years later, I felt more like a counselor. I knew what I had done with my life after trauma; I knew there was a way past it. I've been a voice of reason on more than one occasion for my brothers, even those on the verge of ending it all. For me, even on the days that seem like the future of those around me might not be enough, I will get a call or a message from someone needing help. I don't run from this responsibility. It is my passion. It is what I know best. The depths and despair of PTSD have wreaked havoc on some of the best men that I have seen or heard about in combat. There is hope for me, though. I do it for the brothers on my left and on my right.

I know now I should have let my family in, but I was too busy beating myself up for coming back. It makes no sense, but it was my mechanism. I tried my best to push them away, but she kept coming back for more. Until one day she didn't.

I am stronger now and I don't hold back my emotions. I'm trying to let them out for the world to see. I do it for my brothers and sisters, so that they can see; I do it for families that want to

understand. Maybe they can't, but letting them try sure as hell beats the alternative.

I'll always be there to support my son. I have a new mission now: I want him to know that his dad went through the depths of hell and found a way out. The human mind is truly capable of wonderful things. I've found in it qualities which have allowed me to do things I never perceived possible. Maybe one day he will understand. After all, shattered glass makes for the prettiest prisms in life.