

Afghanistan— Lessons in Situational Awareness from a S.A.P. deployed in the Civilian Surge

PRELUDE

Dedicated to Master Sergeant Scott E. Pruitt
KIA 28 Apr 2012



MSgt. Scott Pruitt, Zaranj, Nimruz Province, Afghanistan, 27 April 2012

29 April 2012
0010 hrs.
Camp Leatherneck, Helmand Province, Afghanistan
LSA 11, Pod 1, Can 13

Mozart's Requiem seems to be the music to listen to as I write this...
Dark and intense and powerful; that about sums up today.

"LJ, you're out on Chalk 1. Move it!"

I hurry over the rocks, moving as quickly as I can against the weight of my helmet, body armor, assault bag, gravity, and the downwash from the rotary blades of the Osprey. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Why has Newton cross my mind at a time like this? OK, up and in.

I'm small and fit nicely into the compact spot where the crew tuck me, right at the front of the aircraft with MSgt Scott Pruitt.

The American flag wasn't long enough to cover him from head to toe, and the profile of his nose was outlined by the Marine-green make-shift shroud draped over him, lying between his body and the Stars and Stripes. As the Osprey made its way back to the base, the suspended stretcher on which he lay bounced gently, as if rocking Scott to a peaceful sleep.

Just one month earlier, when he and I were in Zaranj at a day care center, we noticed a suspended crib. He commented on how he would enjoy a bed like that... I'm having déjà vu.

I sit here, looking at Scott with the stars up under his chin, thinking about talks we had, thinking about his laugh and his smile and his dedication to his Marines and his family.

It is my honor to fly with the Master Sergeant on the trip from Zaranj back to Camp Leatherneck.

At some point, halfway through the flight, I find myself thinking about a passage from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others.

I need to tell a bit of this story now to separate myself from the guilt I feel. I need to pin down the truths I can find in the midst of this surreal day.

It was Saturday, 28 April, about 1700 hrs. I was in the Guest House of the Governor of Nimruz Province and had just conducted a water resource workshop for the staff of the provincial Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. As I was reviewing the outcome of this meeting with a colleague, I heard a blast and felt the building shake.

Being based at Camp Leatherneck, I've become rather indifferent to big booms and shaking buildings, so when I heard the sound of an explosion it took a minute for me to process where I was and what that sound might mean--

Internal dialogue: *"Well, shit. I'm in Zaranj, ~ 2 clicks from the Iranian border."*

Adrenaline rush set in.

Internal dialogue: *"Time to Focus. No time to panic or to act like a girl. See what you can do to help."*

At the time of the blast, most of our group's Marine and Afghan National Police security detail was out as part of a convoy. Those Marines responsible for me and the handful of other civilians were walking the perimeter of the buildings in the government compound, or they were out on the second-floor balcony doing radio checks and watching the weather and looking for evidence of the dust storm that had been forecast.

Then the blast... *Was that a blast?*

I walked out onto the balcony to see if the Marines on guard appeared to be concerned when I saw a plume of smoke rising to the west, a couple of blocks away. I've seen plumes of smoke rising like that during weapons testing at Leatherneck. I'm having déjà vu...



For some reason, I decide to take a picture. The time stamp shows 1704 hrs.

The radio crackled... *"We've got men down. Repeat. Men down."*

"Ma'am, put on your gear."

Until that moment, my back hurt so badly I could not imagine ever getting into my body armor again, but I had it Velcroed to me in less than a minute. And I'd never been so happy to put my heavy, clunky Kevlar helmet on my head.

For the past day and a half, we'd been moving all over town in convoys— 5-6 Toyota 4-door pick-up trucks. We had a pattern: Marines, in their kit with weapons ready and radio jammers and such stuff, would ride in rear of the trucks, while civilians as well as military “dignitaries” would ride in the cabs. With each movement, the Marines in charge of security carefully orchestrated where, when, and how we would transit from Point A to Point B. We were briefed about what to do in the event of attack or trouble. I felt safe.

This particular afternoon, part of our group had gone in a convoy to have “eyes on” a couple of work projects funded by US \$\$--the customs house and the border crossing buildings. Those of us running classes and meeting with government officials had stayed behind, safely inside of the Governor's compound.

The convoy was returning from the afternoon inspection when all hell broke loose. At first the radio chat wasn't clear about what had happened—an IED? A suicide bomber? Reports varied as to how many were injured or possibly killed, and whether or not they were Marines or Afghan police.

The Marines stationed at the Governor's compound were in immediate radio contact with the convoy leader. The officer in charge of the Marines at the compound ordered the men to round up everyone and to get ready for extraction.

Zaranj is just outside of the “golden hour” bubble, and it would take the air assets, once called, at least an hour to get to the local airport from the Bastion tarmac. What might happen in that hour? Internal dialogue: *“Remember to breathe.”*

It took about ½ hr for most of those who'd been in the convoy to return to the government compound. I couldn't find Captain Julie, the one Female Engagement Team member who'd come with us. And one of my civilian colleagues hadn't shown up yet.

Time is very strange...it seemed to slow down at this point. It was like I was swimming through some type of clear viscous matter--moving but in slow motion.

I became aware that the female Capt. and my civilian colleague returned, as did Capt. Jason. Their clothes and hands were covered with blood. I went with Julie to see if she needed any help to collect her things. She was shedding no tears and looked in shock. But her body language said that she needed no help; she's a Marine and well trained in how to mobilize quickly and effectively.

Once in her room, she looked at me and quietly, calmly said, *“We lost Top.”* (“Top” is the Marine nickname for a Master Sergeant.) Three more Marines plus two Afghan National Police were injured either by shrapnel or small arms fire that occurred after the blast.

The Capt and I walked outside to wait for Nimruz government's up-armored Humvees and armored troop carriers to transport us to the airfield.

While we waited, quietly and without fanfare, a white van with a green cross painted on its door pulled up by a side gate. I was standing by myself staring out through the wrought iron bars watching as the driver parked next to the curve. Quietly, two Marines were pulled aside and taken to the van. The rear door was opened and they went inside. Sticking out from the back of the van, I could see socked feet on a stretcher, and their faded tan and olive-drab color left no question about what was happening—the Marines were identifying the body of their brother.

Scott was from Florida and had lived in Mississippi. When he spoke, he had hints of a Southern accent. He was planning a trip with his 4 and 9 yr. old daughters when he returned from deployment. Pictures of his girls and a lovely orange and red heart with the words "We love you, Daddy" were proudly displayed on the wall next to Scott's desk. Scott was getting remarried, and he and his fiancée were making wedding plans for a small ceremony in June 2013 at Coco Beach.

Scott and I worked in the same office at Camp Leatherneck. He arrived with the I-MEF Marines who took command in March 2012 and had been in Afghanistan for just over two months. Regardless of the mood I might be in, Scott was always patient and had a smile and a kind way of putting it whenever he needed anything from me. A question like, "*How many people in Zaranj will benefit from the water we're trying to help them harvest?*" began with a smile and a " 'cuse me, Ma'am," in a Southern honorific sort of way (which is very different from a military required "Ma'am").

One of the last things Scott asked me before we left Leatherneck was how old I thought the children were in the day care center of the Zaranj Midwifery School. He had friends at home who wanted to send them some toys. Scott was also planning to get enough soccer balls to "outfit the girls' school."

The time he went with a group of us to see the Girls' School, he was very moved. As the dad of 2 girls, he talked with me about women's rights and the differences between the aspirations and hopes of his daughters compared to the daughters of those who live in this city next to the Iranian border.

The day before he died, Scott gave a jolly rancher candy cane to a 4-year-old Afghan boy and then spent the next 20 minutes with him coloring in a coloring book that he (Scott) had brought along. As fate would have it, we were traveling with a reporter/photographer named Mike who was working on a story for a newspaper in the states. Mike took a dozen pictures of Scott coloring with the boy...I hope a few of those pictures get to Scott's family and friends.



MSgt. Pruitt, Zaranj, Nimruz Province, Afghanistan, 27 April 2016
Photo by Michael M. Phillips

I attended my first Dignified Transfer ramp ceremony in August 2011. Every one of them—and between the US and Brit and other coalition force casualties, I've been to a couple of dozen--has been heart wrenching.

...and every time I wonder WHY the young man, who is being sent home in a box, had to die in Afghanistan.

For the past 10 months I've pondered what I would say to the spouse or parents of a Marine or soldier or sailor killed because of work he was doing on a development project in which I'd played a roll.

And here I sit with Scott, who is dead.

"Doc, do you think I need to come along?"

"Sure, Scott! I need your eyes and ears to help me know if all is working well. I'm leaving theater soon."

Scott was a Marine who, like all the others with whom I serve, volunteered to be in the military. He understood the risks. And he would have rather been out in the field, outside the wire playing an active role than sitting behind Hesco barriers and concertina wire in our plywood office at his desk producing PowerPoint slides for the CUA.

It looks like Scott will beat me home.
This will be my last ramp ceremony...

LjPM