

Hardships in Afghanistan

By Sgt Chase B. Gindin, USMC

Editor's note: The following article is the second-place winner of the 2020 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the third-place winner and honorable mention entrants.

Everything is dark. A faint ringing grows louder. Voices echo far away, yet they feel close. Sergeant Baker exhales. The air around him is heavy and humid, like an open oven. The coppery stench of fresh blood, cordite, and burning flesh fill the summer air.

Private First Class Holiday screams over the sound of incoming and outgoing

gunfire. "Sgt Baker, you all right? Wake up! We're taking contact."

Corporal Torres shouts over the intense firefight that seems to have broken out of nowhere. "Where the hell's the radio? Someone find me the damn radio." ... Silence.

Sgt Baker thinks of the front yard of his house. He sits with his parents on a cold winter night, gathered around a fire pit. The heat from the fire pushes against the cool winter air. They talk about life, his future, what he wanted to do with his career.

He debates whether he'd stay in the Marine Corps or get out after four years and apply to Florida State University.

"You nervous, Son?" asks his father.

Sgt Baker replies as he takes a long drag from his cigarette, "A little, Dad ... just a little."

"That's good," his father affirmed. "If you weren't nervous then you're either an idiot or something's wrong."

Cpl Torres screams on the radio, "Archangel-41, this is Gravedigger, I've got multiple enemies inside compounds Tango, Charlie, and Echo. Enemies southwest of Tango about 300 meters in a wadi, two technical vehicles southeast 250 m of Charlie compound. This will be a Type 1 control, advise when ready to copy 9-line."

Sgt Baker is in his shithole barracks room with his best friend Cpl Foy. They're drinking whiskey straight from the bottle and talking about their upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. Sgt Baker's phone rings. It's his girlfriend, Sarah.

"We need to talk about this ... I think we need to take a break."



A squad from 1/9 conducts a patrol in Helmand Province in 2014.

From left to right: LCpl Chase Gindin, LCpl Kyle Seykot, LCpl John Konsavage, and Cpl Scamp, an IED detection dog, sweep for IEDs in 2014.

Shocked, Sgt Baker looks up to the wall. A single photograph remained unpacked. It was the one with his arms wrapped around her, as she kisses him on the cheek. He had wanted to make sure it would be with him. That way if anything happened to him, she would have known how much he had loved her. Sgt Baker replies angrily “Are you serious? You’re doing this now? You know I leave tomorrow, right?” He rips the photograph down and throws it into the trash.

Sarah answers, “Yeah, I know but I don’t want to do this anymore, I’m still young and I want to go out and explore the world. I don’t want to be forced to wait nine months for you. I’m sorry, Jonathan.”

Cpl Torres bellows into the radio, “Ford, zero-seven-zero, left, ten-point-one. Forty-six feet MSL, two technical vehicles in the open, grid 18S TD 9183 3574.”

Cpl Foy shouts to the rest of 1st Squad. “Pick up suppressive fire on the right.”

Cpl Torres yells into the radio as he triple checks all the work on his map, while rounds continue to impact all around him “Illum on deck, southwest 250 m, left pull back to HA Vegas. Advise when ready to copy remarks, final attack heading one-two-zero through one-five-zero. I’d like a single Mk-82 from each jet. Lead hit the northernmost vehicle, Dash-2, hit the southernmost vehicle. Dash-2, follow 30 seconds in trail. Immediate push.”

Sgt Baker slowly opens his eyes. The world is spinning but slowly stabilizes. He lays there a couple seconds before realizing that an IED just went off and the squad is being ambushed by enemy insurgents.

Sgt Baker says to Cpl Torres as he’s stumbling toward him, “It’s kind of late to be triple checking, you fucking boot.”

Cpl Torres replies sarcastically, “Screw you. I was hoping you’d stay knocked out for longer so I don’t have to hear your dumb ass talk about my control.”

Sgt Baker looks around and shouts, “This is a decent ambush, I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Half shocked and half impressed he states, “I thought these guys were just stupid farmers.”

Cpl Torres opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted by Archangel-41 on the radio. “Gravedigger, Archangel-41 is pushing.”

Cpl Torres calmly replies, “Archangel-41, continue.”

Archangel-41 comes back on the radio. “Roger, Archangel-41 is IP inbound.”



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Cpl Torres calmly says into the radio as he makes visual eye contact with the aircraft, “Archangel-41 continue.”

Archangel-41 comes back on the radio. “Archangel-41 is visual friendlies, contact mark, tally target. Archangel-41 is in, heading one-three-zero.”

Cpl Torres, giddy with excitement, announces “Cleared hot.”

First squad’s screams of joy ring out over the exploding bomb and mask the sound of the intense firefight. Sgt Baker continues to command his Marines, loudly, over the chaos, “Gain fire superiority NOW! Once that SMAW hits the compound, first and second fire teams are bounding with me while third fire team provides overwatch.”

Sgt Baker locks eyes with his team leaders, Cpl Torres, Foy, and Jones to ensure they’re all tracking and ready to go. Private Corza moves into the hot position with his SMAW. He lines up his shot, checks his back blast, and squeezes the trigger. The compound wall explodes in a hail of dirt and debris. First and second teams begin bounding. Under the suppression from third fire team they quickly close on the first compound. As soon as they hit the compound wall, the first fire team forms a rolling stack and gains entry while the second fire team holds outside security.

Lance Corporal Dean enters immediately clearing the fatal front. Two shots



A squad leader in 1/9 leads his squad to the next compound while patrolling Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 19, 2013. (Photo by Cpl Austin Long, USMC)



CPL PAUL PETERSON, USMC

Cpl Dennis Cox, a scout sniper with 1/9, Regional Command Southwest, uses his rifle scope to scan distant buildings during an interdiction operation in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 19, 2013.

sing past his head and slap the wall behind him. Instinctively, Dean brings his rifle up and snaps off a hammer pair to his front. The bullets knock back the head of the insurgent crouched behind a couch. Blood and brain matter splatter the wall behind the lifeless body. Dean button hooks and clears out the rest of his sector while the rest of the fire team enters behind him.

With the first room clear, Dean alerts the team to a doorway left. They stack up to enter the doorway when the sound of a PKM fills the compound. As machine-gun fire rakes the room, Dean drops his weapon and falls to the dirty, brass-filled floor, crying, "I've been hit." He crawls back into the first room, pulls out a tourniquet from his left shoulder pocket, and applies it high on his right thigh.

Cpl Torres screams over the sound of gunshots while trying to engage the enemy in the second room. "Dean! You good bro?"

LCpl Dean winces in pain, "Yeah, by the grace of God it only grazed me."

Cpl Torres shouts, "Barns, bring the SAW in here! I want you to go cyclic into that room. Offset yourself so you don't get killed."

LCpl Barnes replies, "Sounds good, Corporal." He angles himself from the door and starts unloading, holding down the trigger while he props the SAW against the threshold of the door, engaging the enemy through the doorway. At the same time, Cpl Torres begins prepping a grenade.

Cpl Torres screams over the chatter of the SAW, "Barnes! Sustained rate! Get ready to take cover, I'm about to toss this frag!"

Barnes nods, pulling back slightly allowing Cpl Torres to swing around and fling the grenade into the room, "Frag out!"

The explosion leaves the Marines with ringing ears and the concussion shakes them to their boots. The enemy fire has stopped.

Cpl Torres gasps as he clears his head, "Screw that, I'm never doing that again!"



COURTESY OF SGT CHASE B. GINDIN, USMC

LCpl Hentges sits with Gindin in the back of a 7-ton truck during an ITX at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twenty-nine Palms, Calif.

All right, let's finish clearing out the rest of the compound and link back up with second fire team."

After linking up with the second fire team, Sgt Baker tells the third fire team to move up to their position while first and second fire teams cover them. Sgt Baker orders the first fire team to hold security on the roof and inside of the compound while the second and third fire teams move to the second compound and clear it.

While en route to the second compound, second and third fire teams start receiving accurate small arms and machine-gun fire from the third compound. They quickly return fire, take cover, and return accurate fire until they gain fire superiority. They then run to the second compound under first fire team's support by fire. Without warning, the world explodes in a deafening boom and blast of dirt and debris, knocking the Marines back.

Sgt Baker coughs, "Is everyone OK?"

He hears a gut-dropping thud to his left and looks down to see the upper torso of LCpl Freeman's body. Sgt Baker knows he will never be able to get the image of the mangled and legless body out of his memory.

Sgt Baker screams as tears streak down his dirt-covered face. "Freeman! No! Corza, grab Freeman! We need to push inside this compound for cover. I'll go first since the CMD is broken." They braced for heavy enemy resistance. As soon as they break through, the smell of human feces overwhelms them. No enemy. On the ground lay abandoned binoculars and footprints. Evidence the enemy had been observing the Marines to prepare for an attack on their FOB.

Once first squad establishes 360-degree security, Sgt Baker grabs the radio handset and says into the radio, "Dust-off! Dust-off, this is Gravedigger. Standby for casevac 9-line."

LCpl Jones, Freeman's best friend, hangs his head in the corner with his hands on his Kevlar mumbling "Damn, I can't believe they got Freeman ... we haven't even been here two weeks."

Wiping tears from his eyes, Sgt Baker speaks into the handset of the radio, "3 Delta, 4 Alpha, 5 Litter, 6 X-ray, 7 Charlie, 8 Alpha, 9 Delta advise when ready for Z-Mist."

Sgt Baker looks across the room and sees LCpl Jones crying uncontrollably. "Listen, Jones, we'll get through this together, I promise you that we'll make these guys pay for what they did to Freeman."

Dust-off squawks over the radio, "Gravedigger go with Z-Mist."

Sgt Baker tries to stop his hands from shaking as he slowly reads off the Z-Mist

Right: LCpl Hentges “drops rounds” during an ITX at Twentynine Palms, Calif.

into the handset. “WF6594, IED, lower torso blown off, None, None.” Sgt Baker starts walking across the small one room compound getting an ammo, casualties, and equipment report, setting sectors of fire, and assessing his Marines emotional and mental state.

The Dust-off pilot cuts through on the radio. “Gravedigger, this is Dust-off, en route 10 mikes.”

Sgt Baker responds, “Roger 10 mikes. Advise when ready for landing zone brief.” Instantly the pilot replies, “Ready to copy.”

Sgt Baker wipes the tears from his eyes and says, “Grid 18S TD 9179 3572, marked by smoke, northeast about 6 knots, dust, debris, possible IEDs in vicinity of grid passed. Enemy currently located NE 150 meters. Will provide suppressive fires for you.”

The Dust-off pilot replies, “Roger, solid copy on all, will advise when two mikes away, Dust-off out.”

Sgt Baker goes to the center of the compound to give commands to second and third fire team. “As soon as I give the order we’re going to pick up suppressive fire on the enemy in the last compound to cover Dust-off while they evacuate Freeman. Then we’re going to go over there and show those guys how real men fight.”



COURTESY OF SGT CHASE B. GINDIN, USMC

Cpl Charles Kristel, team leader with 1st Bn, 9th Marine Regiment, stands between desert compounds cleared by his Marines during an interdiction operation in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 19, 2013.



CPL PAUL PETERSON, USMC

Sgt Baker now switches his radio to the squad internal net, “Torres, it’s Baker, Over.”

Cpl Torres replies, “What’s up?”

Sgt Baker says into the dust covered radio, “We got a casevac coming. Once you see me pop smoke I need you to pick up suppressive fire into the third compound, all right?”

Without hesitation, Cpl Torres replies, “OK, I got you, bro.”

Sgt Baker switches back over to the Dust-off net just in time to hear the pilot say, “Gravedigger, this is Dust-off, touch-down in two mikes.”

Sgt Baker throws a smoke grenade into the open field behind the compound. “Roger, popping red smoke, tally smoke.”

The pilot replies, “Tally smoke.”

Sgt Baker clips the handset to his flak, turns to his Marines and shouts over the sound of the incoming helicopters, “OK, start suppressing the hell out of that compound now.” In unison, everyone starts shooting. Rounds tear into the hard mud wall of the compound that’s baked in the sun for hundreds of years.

Sgt Baker screams to Pvt Corza over the sound of the gunshots, “Corza, you’re with me! Grab Freeman and let’s get ready to move!”

Barely loud enough for Sgt Baker to hear, the radio squawks to life and the pilot says, “30 seconds.”

Sgt Baker turns to Pvt Corza. “Let’s go, I’ll cover you, Corza.”

As they make movement to the CASEVAC helicopter, smoke grips their lungs, the helicopter blades kick up soft dirt into the air, and bullets snap all around them. They load Freeman onto the bird when a rocket propelled grenade flies by the helicopter, dancing between the blades.

Nervous, Sgt Baker yells to Corza, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

They quickly run back to link up with the rest of the Marines under the cover of friendly suppression.

Once they enter the compound they catch their breath and calm their nerves. Sgt Baker takes out a can of dip, and packs a lip. “All right, listen up ... second and third fire team, I’m going to call in 81s to hit the third compound. Once I deem suppression is effective we’re going to push to the wadi that’s in between this compound and the third. Once we’re there, I’ll cease fire and we’re going to bound to the third compound and clear it.”

Sgt Baker now switches his radio to the 81s COF net and says, “Savage Bravo, Savage Bravo, this is Gravedigger. Stand-by for POS REP.”

Savage Bravo instantly replies, “Roger, standing by.”

Sgt Baker looks at the Garmin GPS on his wrist. “18S TD 9180 3576, how copy?”

Savage Bravo replies, “Roger, I copy 18S TD 9180 3576, out.”

Sgt Baker calls to LCpl Arnold, “Hey, Arnold, bring me the Vector DAGR.”

LCpl Arnold runs over and digs the Vector DAGR out of his assault pack and hands it to Sgt Baker, “Here you go, Sergeant.”

Sgt Baker looks through the Vector and begins to flip through the menu. He quickly does the 12-point field calibration, chicken dance. Once the display says he has a good field calibration he quickly connects the Vector and DAGR. Sgt Baker keeps a low silhouette, sets the Vector on the mud hole in the wall that he assumes is a window, and presses a button on the black cord that instantly gives him a grid location to the enemy compound.

Sgt Baker speaks into the radio while jotting final notes into his note taking gear, “Savage Bravo, Savage Bravo, this is Gravedigger. Fire for effect, over.”

The radio operator replies excitedly, “Fire for effect, out!”

Sgt Baker replies while spitting on the ground, “Grid TD 9200 3599, over.”

Savage Bravo is in the middle of replying when they lose communication, “Grid TD 9200 35-”

Sgt Baker looks worried, swears, and grabs his radio out of his radio pouch. He fiddles with it, attempting to establish communication with Savage Bravo again. “Savage Bravo, Savage Bravo, this is Gravedigger, radio check, over.”

Savage Bravo, with heavy static and barely readable, replies, “grid TD 9200 3599, out.”

Sgt Baker, visibly relieved that com-



Cpl Dennis Cox, right, scout sniper with 1st Bn, 9th Marine Regiment, peers around a dirt wall to search for insurgent activity during an interdiction operation in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 19, 2013.

CPL PAUL PETERSON, USMC



CPL AUSTIN LONG, USMC



CPL AUSTIN LONG, USMC

LCpl Patrick Tomassi, grenadier with 1st Bn, 9th Marine Regiment, looks for insurgents firing on Marines during a patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 22, 2013.

munication is back, says, “Enemy compound, requesting delay and converged sheaf, over.”

Savage Bravo replies, “Enemy compound, requesting delay and converged sheaf, out.”

As Sgt Baker calls in his fire mission, Cpl Foy calms his fire team to make sure they are ready to push into the wadi.

“Listen up, third team, when we push

to the wadi make sure you’re glancing over your sights and not through them, so you don’t get tunnel vision. If they start shooting at us, just do what we were trained to do and I promise everyone will be fine.”

The rounds from Savage Bravo start hitting the compound. Sgt Baker screams over the explosions, “All right, let’s do this.”

Sgt Brian Early, left, squad leader with 1st Bn, 9th Marine Regiment, points in the direction he wants LCpl Wandy Santos, team leader with 1/9, to cover while patrolling in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 22, 2013.

Second and third fire teams push to the wadi without any contact from the enemy insurgents. Once they hit the wadi, they wait for the fire mission to end and the go-ahead from Sgt Baker. As soon as the fire mission ends, they start to receive fire from the compound. However, they are still engaging the first compound where first fire team is. Sgt Baker realizes that they had crept into the wadi without being observed and whispers, “Maybe something will go right today.”

Sgt Baker screams, “Wolfe, use the M32 and start lobbing 203s into the compound. Make sure you’re aiming for the windows and doorway and not the compound itself.”

LCpl Wolfe replies, “Roger that, Sergeant.”

LCpl Wolfe low crawls to the berm of the wadi and starts lobbing 203 rounds into the windows where the enemy fire is coming from. Sgt Baker sees an enemy insurgent shooting from the window moments before a 203 round impacts his position and explodes.

Seeing the effects from LCpl Wolfe’s M32, Sgt Baker screams over the sound of incoming fire and explosions, “Prepare to rush! Rush!”

During the bound, Sgt Baker sees rounds impacting all around his Marines, kicking up puffs of dirt. He’s scared, but not of getting shot. He’s scared one of his Marines will get hurt. The only cover in sight is micro terrain, not protective against enemy fire at all.

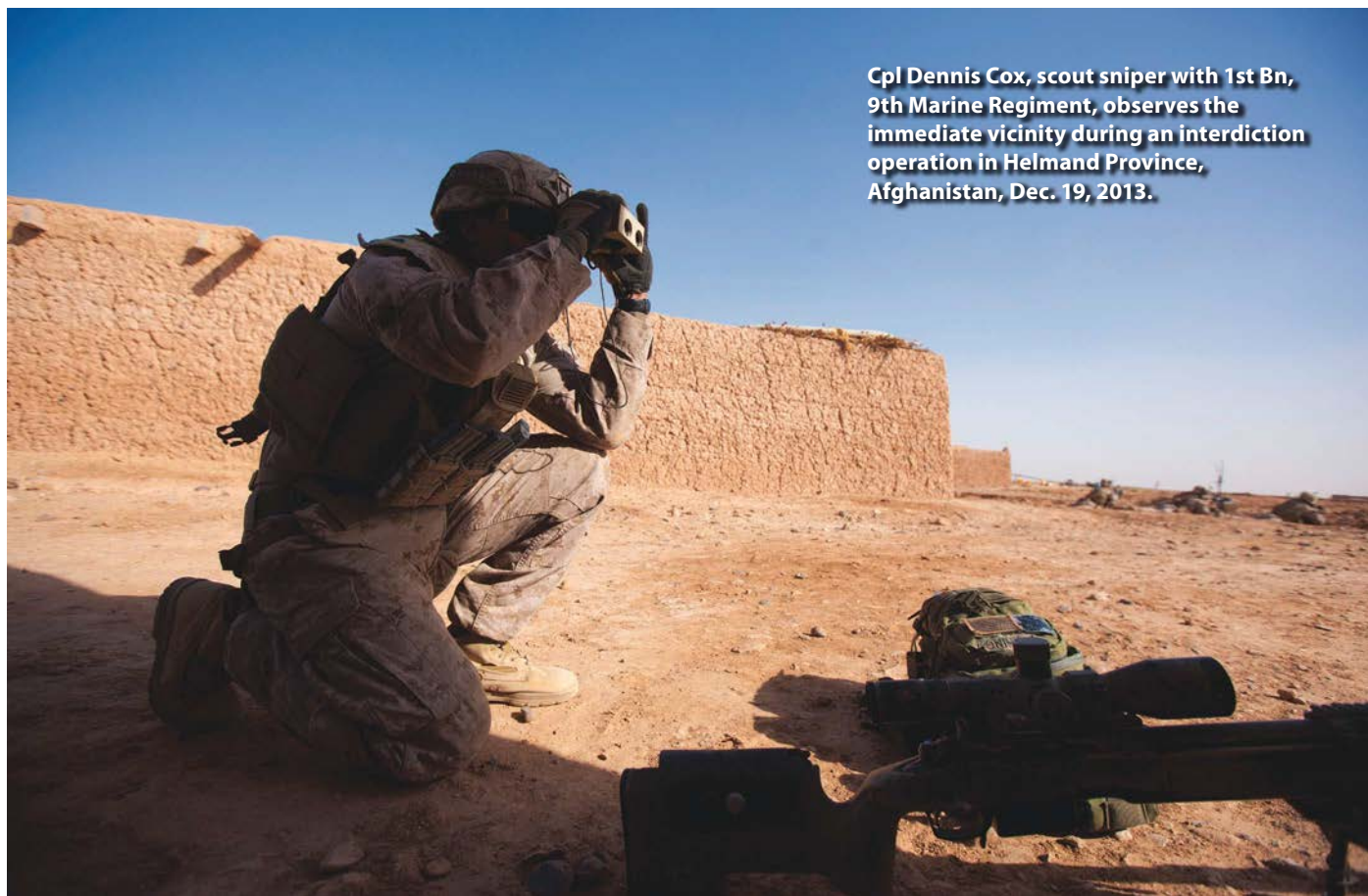
Once they get to the compound, they stack up against the compound wall and are about to make entry into the compound when Private First Class Jackson stops everyone from moving.

Realizing they’re exposed, Sergeant Baker yells angrily, “What the hell is going on, Jackson?”

PFC Jackson screams back, “I see trip wire, Sergeant.”

Quickly losing his initial frustration, Sgt Baker responds, “Good call.”

Sgt Baker takes his squad around the back of the compound making sure they crawl under the compound windows, while the person behind them holds security on the window in case an enemy pops up. Once they reach the back of the compound Sgt Baker sees a window to climb through. He knows it would be risky to enter in case the enemy was waiting for him or if they had another IED planted. The thought



Cpl Dennis Cox, scout sniper with 1st Bn, 9th Marine Regiment, observes the immediate vicinity during an interdiction operation in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 19, 2013.

CPL PAUL PETERSON, USMC

Below: A squad leader with 1st Bn, 9th Marine Regiment, provides security for Marines moving to the next compound during a patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 22, 2013.



CPL AUSTIN LONG, USMC

weighs heavily on him. He knows he couldn't let his Marines go in first. He knows that he would have to be first to enter to set an example as a leader and show his Marines that he cared about their welfare. Sgt Baker feels around the window, methodically making sure it's clear. He takes a deep breath, says a prayer in his head, and climbs through the window.

Upon entering, he sees a civilian mother

holding her child, hiding in a corner visibly frightened. He raises a finger to his mouth, signaling for them to be quiet while he fixes his weapon on the doorway to the room. He motions for them with his free hand to come to him. They slowly walk to him. The mother and child are about halfway when she trips and knocks over a table.

Sgt Baker knows that the insurgents are going to come for them. He quickly

hands the child out the window. The insurgents' voices start echoing down the hall getting louder and louder. He knows that he couldn't help the woman out the window without getting shot in the back. He signals for her to get down on the ground behind the table. As she gets down, a grenade tumbles into the room and stops in front of the table. Sgt Baker instantly jumps on top of the woman. As soon as he lands on her, the grenade explodes. Instantly, Sgt Baker screams out in pain from the shrapnel that peppers his legs. Two insurgents storm the room. Everything is in slow motion for Sgt Baker, and he sees them raise their weapons.

He thinks about his squad and how they would take his death.

He thinks about all the good times he had with his squad during their workup and at ITX.

He thinks about the song "Worst Behavior" by Drake.

Lastly, he thinks about his parents.

Sgt Baker sees the insurgent put his finger on the trigger of the AK, he closes his eyes, waiting for death.

Two shots ring out.

"Sgt Baker, are you all right?" screams Cpl Foy as the two insurgent bodies hit the ground. Sgt Baker opens his eyes in disbelief.

"I just took shrapnel to the legs," says

Sgt Baker as he rolls off the woman, who is trying to thank him in broken English. The rest of second fire team enters the window and help the woman out of the window to talk to the interpreter. The fire team clears out the rest of the compound. Sgt Baker calls up to EOD and lets them know about the IED at the front of their compound that they were going to mark and bypass. As he communicates with EOD, the corpsman bandages his legs.

Sgt Baker winces at the pain. "Team leaders on me. We're going to push back to the second compound, link up with first, and then RTB."

Upon link up with first, they consolidate their ammo and start the patrol back to the forward operating base. Sgt Baker thinks about how everything went wrong. He lost one Marine with two wounded. They'd only been in country two weeks. He knew that Afghanistan would be challenging and stressful, but he didn't understand to what degree until now.

Once the squad enters the forward operating base, Sgt Baker and the other fire team leaders go to the command post and give the platoon commander, company officer, and watch officer a debrief on their patrol. After the debrief they walk to their tents to take off their flaks, Kevlars, and blast diapers. They



Marines with 1st Squad, 81 mm Mortar Platoon, Weapons Co, 1st Bn, 9th Marines, "The Walking Dead," pose for a photo.

sit down on their cots and begin to cry about LCpl Freeman. All the emotions of the day's events, which they had so carefully guarded till now, come out full force. Afterwards, they walk over to the rest of the squad and give a Frag-O for the next day's patrol.

Author's bio: Sgt Gindin enlisted in October 2012 and was assigned the

MOS of 0341. His first duty station was with 1st Battalion, 9th Marines where he deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in 2014. He then went to 3/2 and he deployed twice to Okinawa, Japan, in 2015 and again in 2016. Sgt Gindin is currently assigned to Headquarters and Service Company, Officer Candidates School, Quantico Va. 🇺🇸

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