

Responding to an IED Blast

By Miles Vining
and Kevin Schranz

Editor's note: This excerpt was taken from the book "Into Helmand With the Walking Dead" by Miles Vining and Kevin Schranz and is told from the perspective of Vining.

One afternoon on Quick Reaction Force (QRF) rotation, we hear a faint explosion, not loud at all, but it comes from the southern portion of Camp Leatherneck. Explosions are such a common occurrence at Leatherneck because of all the explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) controlled detonations of bad ammunition that they are rarely worth a second thought. But this one is different; it came from the south whereas the controlled dets are announced beforehand and come from the north. We kind of look at each other and say, "Well, that don't sound good."

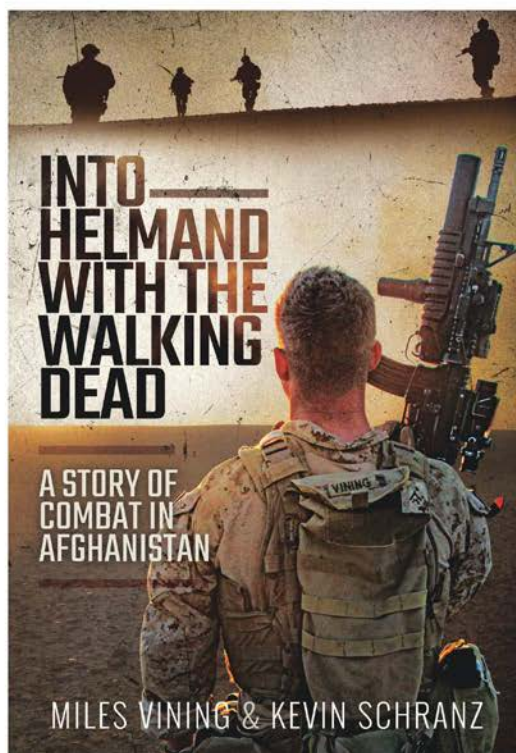
A second later Sergeant Leonard runs in yelling, "QRF mount up!" Obviously, somebody needs us and in a bad way.

Scrambling as fast as we can, we mount up. Frog top on, lacing boots up, throwing a flak over my head and Velcroing it together, night vision goggles, extra batteries—got them—rack a round in my M4, check my 203 HE (high explosive) grenades and throw my extra gear pack in the truck along with my helmet. Rev the trucks up and do all the system checks, lights, CTIS (Central Tire Inflatable System), ECMs (Electronic Countermeasures) turned on, Blue Force trackers signed into. Stuff some MREs (meals, ready to eat) under the seats because you never know how long you're going to be out there. Place the ammo cans in the turret mounts, lock the guns in and wipe them down real quick with CLP (Cleaner, Lubricant, Preservative), clip that gunner's harness in. Switch the truck Prick-one-fifty-two radios on and get solid comm checks with the other trucks and then turn the dismount radios on and get checks with them back to



COURTESY OF MILES VINING

Cpl Miles Vining (above) takes a break during a foot patrol while carrying a Thor device used to jam remote IED frequencies. He and fellow 1/9 rifleman, Cpl Kevin Schranz, wrote a book (below) about their experiences as Marine riflemen during two deployments to Afghanistan.



the combat operations center. Op-check the Thor and CMD metal detectors, extra batteries for them too ... we don't know if we're dismounting or not either. Stash those sickle sticks and unbutton shoulder pockets to leave the tourniquets hanging out in case you need them real quick in a massive trauma hurry. The

whole time this is going on, you want to know the details—what's happening—to form a mental picture of what we're getting into.

Could just be some idiot patrol broke a mine roller and needs a wrecker—easy day. Or someone's in contact and needs another vehicle element to bail them out on the eastern wadi. Either way they need you there. Running to the pisser for a last-minute piss, I catch up to the LEP, Mr. Gibbs. "Hey sir, what's going on? You know anything?"

He pauses for a second and replies "Yeah, Motor T got hit with an SBVIED [suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device], three guys med-evacked, two urgent."

Damn, an SBVIED? Those things are no joke, especially if it blew right next to one of our trucks. But two urgent?

At least there're no dead so far; get them back to the Bastion Role Three as soon as possible. Those docs are amazing and they'll be able to fix them up and get them out to Ramstein or Bethesda within days. I think as far back as World War II guys have always held out that if casualties can at least make it back to a larger, rearward aid station, they'll make it. And why wouldn't they? The aid stations in the rear have all the amenities and surgical expertise of a hospital, and they are amazing at what they do. Get them there in that golden hour and they'll be fine. They might be missing limbs or an eye, but they'll live and that is the most important part.

This isn't Hawthorne where the nearest hospital is 40 minutes away by helo but Bastion, a brisk five-minute ride on an emergency American dust-off or British Chinook Tricky (medevac) flight. We link up with EOD at the back gate of Camp Leatherneck, make sure our comms are good with them, and then we depart friendly lines out to the site of the convoy. Going out the back gate always is a burden because of the terrain: it's popping you out right into the desert. Whereas going out the north gate brings you to Highway One,

which is a hardball so at least you get to have an easy journey before heading south and into the area of operations. After a bumpy ride of about 20 minutes, we arrive at the blast site. EOD guys head up to the site while my truck pulls security. I get out with my corpsman buddy Zhao, and we set up a roadblock consisting of traffic cones and sea wire. In the distance, I see some sort of a block or building and a number of Marines wandering around it. I look through my RCO but I still can't really make it out, even through four-power magnification.

Leonard gets on the net and says, "Hey One Alpha, send Vining over here so we can talk to the people here."

So, I trek over to where all the Marines are. At this point, we don't know if it was an IED or a suicide vehicle that hit the MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle); we just know that

The massive tires are a hundred meters away and turned inside out from the explosion. The engine block is completely blown away and almost every single item inside the truck has been blown out the back and is laying in pieces all around it.

Motor T got hit while on a supply run from Patrol Base Boldak. In fact, from where we are, we can actually see the easternmost portions of Camp Leatherneck, and the G-boss tower of Boldak. That's how close the convoy

was to both the bases. But we still assume it was an IED, so I make my way over very cautiously staying in the tracks of previous vehicles as the road hasn't been cleared as yet.

The building that I couldn't make out turns out to be a 6x6 MRAP, laying on its left side, and the huge circular gap in the middle of it turns out to be the hole where the turret used to be. I get up to the vehicle and things are just a complete mess. The hull is mostly intact, but all the windows on the right side are completely blown out. The massive tires are a hundred meters away and turned inside out from the explosion. The engine block is completely blown away and almost every single item inside the truck has been blown out the back and is laying in pieces all around it. The turret itself is laying on its side, 20 meters from the truck. I peer inside the turret hole and everything inside is



While on patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in late December 2013, LCpl Patrick Tomassi, a grenadier with 1/9, talks with some local children.

CPLAUSTIN LONG-USMC

strewn all over. Outside the vehicle are trails of the gunner's blood and mucus.

One of my Motor T buddies comes over, really calm with himself. He is a sergeant, and a POG (person other than a grunt), usually the worst possible combination, but he's cool, a good guy. Completely casual he relates how he found Erickson propped up against the mud, how the Navy medical senior chief in the back had his legs all f----- up, how Erickson's face was completely mashed in, but still breathing somehow. The explosion was so big that he felt his own truck had been hit even though he was two trucks ahead of Erickson's. Just like us, they swept their way over to the truck, thinking it was an IED of some sort, so we're on the lookout for secondaries. He walks off and we go on about our business.

A few minutes later, I hear sobbing, uncontrollable sobbing. I look over and it's the Motor T gunny with his hand on the sergeant's shoulders, trying to

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comfort him, trying to tell him there's nothing they can do for Erickson, that he was pronounced dead at the Bastion Role Three. The well that the MRAP crushed is connected to a compound right next to it. The family, minus the women, are outside, squatting on the edge of it, looking at us. I start talking

to them in Pashtu about what happened. They tell me a little but then start asking for compensation for their damaged well. I give them this long stare, thinking, “One of our guys is ... dead and all you want is compensation for your damned well?” I almost tell them as much but catch myself.

We all just kind of stand around it for a bit, in total shock at the utter devastation. When you spend so much time inside an MRAP or M-ATV (MRAP-All-Terrain Vehicle), you get accustomed to believing that it'll protect you from just about anything. Well, at least an MRAP will. M-ATVs have a nasty habit of splitting right down the middle and turning into a catastrophic kill, meaning five dead Marines going home in steel containers, later flag-draped pine boxes lowered into the ground with weeping mothers staining the ground with their tears. We know our vehicles aren't completely invincible, but to see one like Erickson's so torn up



Sgt Bryan Early, a squad leader with 1/9, directs a Marine where to provide security during a patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 19, 2013.

CPL AUSTIN LONG, USMC



During a 2014 deployment to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Cpl Miles Vining covers his sector with the M4/M203 rifle/grenade launcher. Poppy fields are visible in the background; much of the Taliban's maneuvering revolved around protecting poppy cultivation and the illicit opium trade. (Photo courtesy of Miles Vining)

Book Tells the Rifleman's Story About Helmand Province Deployment

"There's nothing I did that was special," said Miles Vining, in his straightforward way, which is why he wanted to write a book about his experiences as a typical infantry Marine on the front lines in Operation Enduring Freedom. His new book, "Into Helmand With the Walking Dead," does just that.

Vining, a rifleman who deployed to Afghanistan with 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, had read many of the books about combat in Iraq and Afghanistan; however, they all seemed to be written about extraordinary circumstances and experiences. Vining and his coauthor Kevin Schranz, a fellow 1/9 rifleman, wanted to write about the ordinary. They wanted a written record of the day-to-day experience of the rifleman—the lance corporal—so that the American public could understand it. "This is a simple tale. This is about the grunts," writes Schranz in the book's preface.

"This is a testimony of what it was like to serve, to grow up as a young man and to serve as an infantryman ... all its gory and glory at the same time," said Vining. "This is my testament to 'the suck,' to being on deployment."

Vining, whose father worked for the State Department, spent most of his formative years in Thailand, Burma and Malaysia but all the while, he had the idea that he wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps. "I can't really offer any grandiose story," said Vining. "It was a very intrinsic thing that I felt ever since childhood. For me there was never a why, there was always just a question ... of how I was going to serve ... I wanted to be in combat. I wanted to go to war. I wanted to fight," he said. "I just felt it in myself. I could have said I was motivated by 9/11, I was probably 10 years old when the towers fell ... and I was really interested in military history. I could say all that, but really, at the end of the day, it was just really something that was in my bones."

He enlisted in 2010 and after recruit training at Marine

Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., and infantry training, he was assigned to 1/9, known since the Vietnam War as "The Walking Dead." After his enlistment was complete in 2014, Vining went to college and earned a degree in central Eurasian studies.

He and Schranz started writing about their deployment in 2014. Tragically, Schranz took his own life before the book was finished, which Vining said strengthened his resolve to follow through with its publication.

The book was published in October 2020 and it wasn't long before Vining started receiving feedback. One of the most memorable comments was from the wife of one of the Marines he served with. She told Vining that she was speaking on her husband's behalf because he was still too emotional to discuss the deployment. She thanked Vining for giving a voice to that community—the typical rifleman—and that generation of young men who volunteered to go to war.

For Vining, writing was beneficial as he transitioned back into civilian life. "The actual process of writing it was an extremely cathartic experience in terms of going over things," he said. "It's still very visceral and real in terms of death, in terms of relationships, in terms of the community and it's been very cathartic in reading and writing it in terms of dealing with that stuff and working through it. It's made a huge difference in where I'm at today," he added.

"I've actually run into a lot of guys from my own battalion ... [and] other guys who have said 'I'm really proud of you for writing it, it's really awesome that you got it out, but I'm not ready to read that just yet. I'm not ready to open that door.' My answer to that is ... you need to bust down that door and you need to have that cathartic experience. If you don't, that door to that dungeon will stay closed forever."

Nancy S. Lichtman



Marines with Bravo Co and Charlie Co, 1/9 conduct standard pre-combat checks on a range outside Camp Leatherneck, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Jan. 31, 2014.

and mangled, plants a little thought in the back of your brain housing group: this could easily happen to you next time you're out on a mounted op.

The recovery operation took more than six hours. EOD guys combed the area and did their post-blast analysis from which they deduced that the vehicle used had to have had over 500 pounds of explosives. We searched the area, looking for pieces of the MRAP to bring back and throw in the vehicle. The heavy parts such as the tires we just left them. EOD got all the ammunition that was in the truck, put it in a pile far away from the vehicle and blew it in place for fear the ammunition had become unstable from the IED blast. We heard over the radio that the ramp ceremony was going on back at Bastion.

Kristel, in his twisted humor, said, "Thank God we don't have to be at that. It was so cold that last time we were there for V's." Some of us laughed, me included, because although it was true, it didn't make the joke any sicker.

Then the wreckers came out and started the dirty work of lifting the entire vehicle onto the flatbed of an LVSR (Logistic Vehicle System Replacement). Hoisting a 40-ton tactical vehicle is not joke and requires a considerable amount of skill on the part of Motor T. We went searching for remnants of the suicide vehicle in the field next to the MRAP. Hefner actually found the driver's jawbone, so we plastic-bagged it for evidence collection. His Tennessee accent was unmistakable, "Hey guys! I fauund the ... jaaaw! I gawt his jaaw!"

With everything cleaned up and completed, we mounted back up in the vehicles and headed back to base. Doc, the Sir, Hanney, and Watson were where I left them earlier to talk to the local villagers.

Doc asked, "What happened, man?" Their only frame of reference was the turned-over MRAP as seen from their vantage point 300 meters away on security.

I told him, "F--- man, that whole truck was f----. The turret was completely blown off, the tires were 100 meters away, and I saw the gunner's blood and mucus in front of where the truck

CPL ERIC S. WILTERDINK, USMC

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Marines with Scout Sniper Platoon, Headquarters and Support Company, 1/9 participate in a range aboard Camp Leatherneck, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, April 19, 2014, in order to BZO weapons and test fire weapons before a mission.



COURTESY OF MILES VINING

The Marines of 1/9 gathered for a memorial service at Camp Leatherneck after Sgt Daniel Vasselian was killed while leading his men to support another unit that was pinned down by heavy machine-gun fire.

stopped, apparently his whole ... face was mashed in. Chief broke both his knees, and the A driver broke his arm.”

The rest of the trip back to Camp Leatherneck was in silence as we rolled through the south gate and back to our spot on QRF at the company lot.

What happened was when the log run left Boldak, a white Toyota Corolla started trailing it. As the convoy got about a kilometer away from Boldak, it sped up to the rear truck and the driver detonated his 500 pounds of explosive right alongside it. The force of the explosion completely disintegrated the car but flipped the 40,000-pound MRAP onto its side and perpendicular to the road, flattening a local Afghan well. The vehicle commander had his left shoulder broken, the Navy chief who was in the back broke both his legs, and the turret

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gunner had his face mashed in because the entire turret assembly flew off and took him with it.

It was the turret gunner’s first deployment: Lance Corporal Caleb Erickson from Michigan was killed on Feb. 28,

2014. Some of us blamed our restrictive rules of engagement for allowing this to happen. If this had been 2011, that car would have been shot up when it passed the 100-meter mark. But even then, there is no guarantee that would have made a difference.

*Author’s bio: Miles Vining enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2010. He was a rifleman assigned to 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., and deployed with the battalion to Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Upon being discharged, he studied at Indiana University Bloomington. Currently, he volunteers with a humanitarian group in Southeast Asia in addition to researching historical and contemporary small arms from the Middle East and Central Asia for *Silah Report*.* 🇺🇸