

Out From Under the Rug

By SSgt Kenneth R. Rick, USMC

Editor's note: The following article is the third-place winner of the 2019 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 honorable mention entrants.

I was the first squad leader, 1st Platoon, "Dog" Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment and my platoon was headed across the Helmand River, west, to a little town called Qal-eh-ye Gaz. We were tasked to conduct reconnaissance for the SEALs. We would soon find out why it was said that the village had never been taken. Of course, we got that intelligence months after the ensuing battle.

Just before six in the morning on an already hot June day, we were in our landing zone. This was my fourth combat deployment and second time to Afghanistan so I liked to think I could recognize the signs that told us it was about to happen—we were about to get in a fight. As the telltale signs of eerie silence and barely a couple of birds chirping gave us the gut feeling, we pushed out our leader's recon patrol. The Marines of 1st Plt had

planned to stay in the area for about a week and we needed to find a house from which to operate. That meant taking a house from a family. While en route to the one chosen via map reconnaissance, all hell broke loose. This was the most well-coordinated attack from an invisible enemy I had experienced to date.

As the leader's recon element was ambushed by small arms and a medium machine gun, the rest of us in the landing zone started taking 82-millimeter mortar and small arms fire. We had no idea where it was coming from. There were buildings to our west and tree lines to our east. The sun was barely up and we were now scrambling to get out of the landing zone. Those mortars were accurate.

I specifically remember calling both Gabe and Jeremy, who were my team leaders, to get the men pushed west to

cover and get accountability. Silence on the radio. No response. My heart was racing and my mind was going crazy. Where are my Marines? I had only pushed 50 meters west so we couldn't be lost; had they been injured—or worse? As I attempted to get around one house, our leader's recon element ended up taking a new patrol base. I remember looking south to make sure no friendlies passed me while at the same time I watched a mortar hit 3 feet from me. We were in very soft tilled farm fields common in the Sangin Valley. It was so soft that the mortar just stuck in the dirt, fins exposed. I didn't have time to think about it being a dud or not so I just called on the radio to anyone listening in the chaos that I was the farthest south element and I was pushing to our patrol base. Those guys were good: From complete defilade and cover they were able to force us into a position that we would end up staying in for the next six days.

We were hearing bad news over the radio—the call for a medical evacuation bird to take away a wounded Marine shot in the throat. It was with our sister platoon farthest south. The other squad leaders and I talked about what would be our plan of attack. There was no hiding in the patrol base. We had to hunt these guys to take the pressure off of us. Our unit finally had accountability and only a couple of our Afghan soldiers had taken shrapnel from the mortars. Those guys were tough. They wanted to stay and fight even with their squad leader getting a piece to the face. The radio was now telling us the Marine shot in the throat was an angel—he was gone. Our blood was boiling and we were itching for payback. It was only three hours into the mission.

Our priorities of work were going flawlessly. Security was set, communication with higher was solid and we had full accountability. The leadership of the platoon was discussing who would push out first, explaining the route and trying to figure out when we were getting our big guns. Alpha Co, 1st Tanks was coming in direct support of us.

It was 10 a.m. and it had been silent for too long. We knew it was coming, and if the mortars were accurate again, then we were in real big trouble. As we were still



COURTESY OF SSGT KENNETH R. RICK, USMC

Marines of 1st Squad, 1st Plt, "Dog" Co, 1/7. Top row, left to right, Cpl Gabe Hernandez, Sgt Ken Rick, the squad's interpreter and LCpl Jeremy Horton. Bottom row, left to right, LCpl Javier Fuentes-Mattson, LCpl Abraham Jung, LCpl Jeffery Boldt, and LCpl Albert Alba. Jung, Horton, and Ken Rick were wounded in operation JAWS D-5.

The landing zone team was exposed to everything with no cover at all. Just five minutes after departing our patrol base, it seemed every enemy gun in the province opened up.



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Sgt Ken Rick was the squad leader for the first squad of Dog Co's 1st platoon.

discussing the rotation of patrol and security squad, there was a loud explosion inside the patrol base. We looked over toward the explosion and we saw Andrew swinging at something as another something bounced off his Kevlar. Six grenades were being tossed into our patrol base from an adjacent compound and Andrew was trying to play handball with them. I pushed one Marine out of the way and toward cover. It was Marc, our acting radio operator, who took a piece of shrapnel and was yelling that he was hit. I pushed him to cover as well and as I turned back toward the explosions, my squad automatic weapon (SAW) gunner, Jeffrey, was still too close. I grabbed him and swung him to put myself between him and the final blast. I realized a minute later after directing him to help with Marc's wounds that I had taken a piece in the butt cheek. I for sure wasn't getting out of there for something so small. Instead, Nick, the second squad leader, and I hopped on the roof and began lobbing grenades and suppressing the compound the grenades came from—who knows to what effect.

Caleb, one of our platoon corporals, along with Jeffery, was treating Marc. It turned out that Marc took the piece of

shrapnel through the back and it collapsed one of his lungs. He needed to get out of there. Marc was on a stretcher, Caleb was pulling a piece of shrapnel out of his own arm that he decided not to say anything about, and my two team leaders were getting ready to secure the landing zone to evacuate Marc. Steven, my engineer, was a young private first class with a wife and kid at home. This guy had found everything we threw at him in training during our work up and I was not worried about him at all. My team leaders said they had it, so I stayed on the roof ready to suppress the enemy.

The landing zone team was exposed to everything with no cover at all. Just five minutes after departing our patrol base, it seemed every enemy gun in the province opened up. Small arms, medium machine guns and what we guessed to be RPGs erupted. My first team leader, Jeremy, ran inside the patrol base and said, "Steven is dead." Without hesitation, both Nick and I jumped off the roof. Nick grabbed a stretcher with Jeremy and I grabbed the SAW from Jeffrey. All we knew was a man was down and the rest of my squad was pinned.

The three of us ran outside of the patrol base, rounds still impacting mere feet



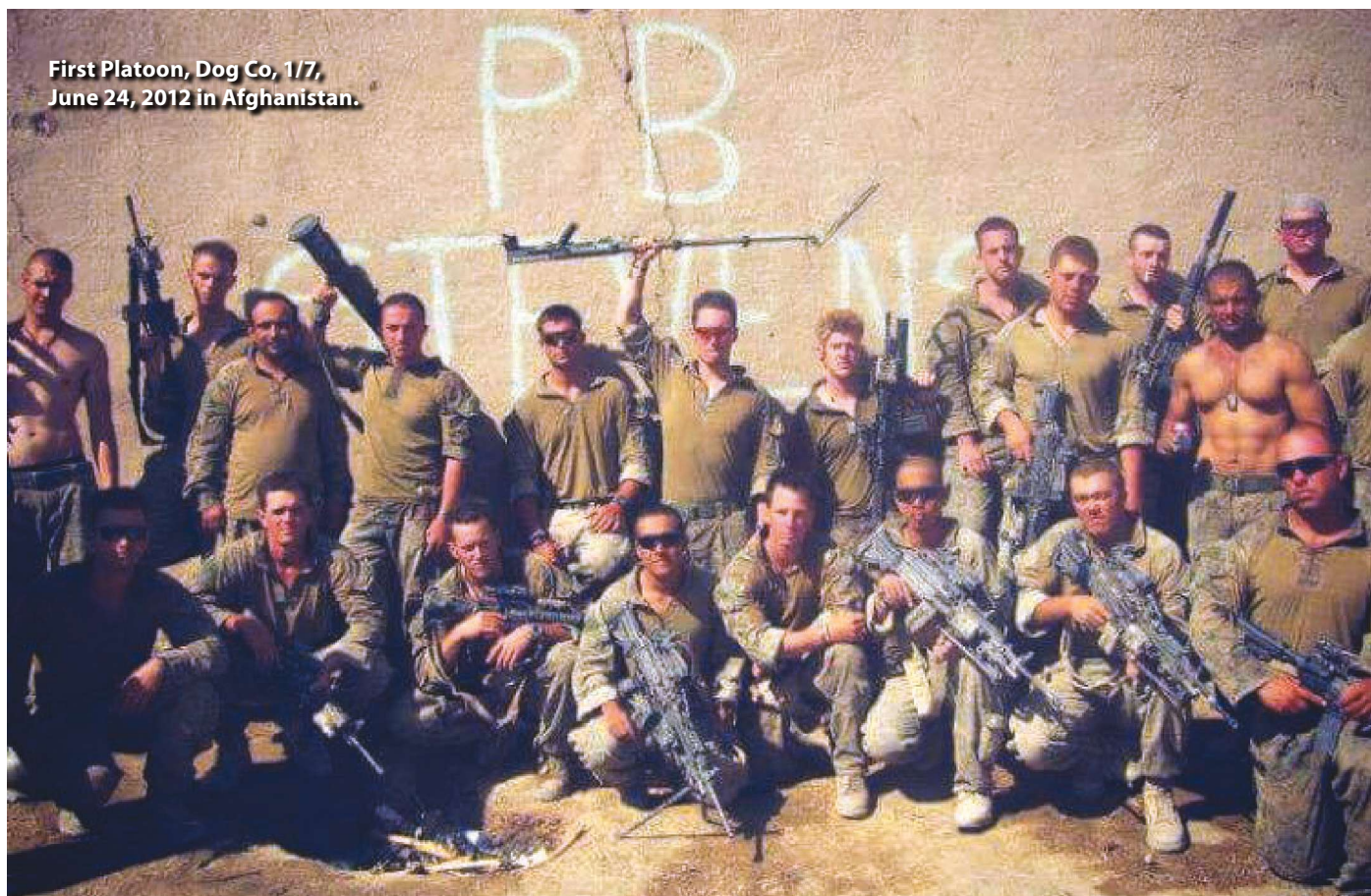
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PFC Steven P. Stevens, pictured here less than a month before he was killed on June 22, 2012. He was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and promoted to lance corporal.

from everyone. I took over suppression and command of the landing zone team while Jeremy and Nick loaded up Steven on the stretcher. Adrenaline will make your body do crazy things. We ran out 200 meters to where Steven had fallen, which meant Jeremy was at 400 meters. As rounds zipped around us, I remember telling everyone to go inside. I suppressed what I could as fast as I could and was down to only magazines while firing the SAW. Not one single jam happened while firing through a couple of magazines surprisingly. Good job, Jeffrey, on proper lubrication, I thought.

We now had another angel, Steven, and a deteriorating casualty, Marc. I learned that Jeremy couldn't reach us with his comm because as usual, it was down. Steven had taken a burst of machine PKM fire and shrapnel from an RPG all at the same time. He was killed instantly. I also learned that Abraham, the cover man and closest one to Steven, was knocked unconscious from the same RPG that hit Steven. Abraham was visibly in shock and still dizzy from his concussion, so I forced him to drink water and sit out the remainder of the patrols. It was a tough sight to see Steven wrapped in a poncho

First Platoon, Dog Co, 1/7,
June 24, 2012 in Afghanistan.



COURTESY OF SSGT KENNETH R. RICK, USMC

on a stretcher with Marc right next to him. This time, we had a full squad on security along with our suppression and smoke screen. The bird landed and took off without incident, thank goodness.

We began conducting our first movements, contact patrols, and would quickly be involved in a “troops in contact” (TIC). There was an enemy marksman with several small arms pinning us with abnormally accurate fire. Jeremy ran between trees to get the enemy to fire. After drawing fire enough to get a talk on, I could fire a smoke grenade, which allowed the pilots to drop the enemy building. Niall, my new sweeper, said, “That’s the sound of enduring freedom.”

Along our route to an enemy position, we expected to find an improvised explosive device (IED) and Niall found one. It had the typical signs—disturbed earth, on a walking path, out of sight of us and accompanied by a line of rocks. We marked and bypassed this one and set in security. We were only about 25 meters from the firing position facing my posts. I made the decision to hold everyone outside and away from me. I had a feeling that this house was booby-trapped.

Taking the sickle—a telescoping pole with hook we use to scrape across the ground to dig up wires and pressure plates common with the IEDs in our area—I kept my squad holding security and watching my back. I cleared the doorway of IEDs and saw three RPG fins left behind from the enemy firing position. I began clearing the rooms with my rifle, giving instructions to my Marines that if something happened, to come in slow and with the sickle again and to not rush in. The house was clear—no enemy and no IEDs. We were only 100 meters away from the patrol base. As I got back in with the squad, we started getting inaccurate small arms fire. It was just bait. After maybe a minute, the firing started coming toward us and as we sought cover, Niall would initiate the same IED. In the heat of the moment, you don’t think about these things. We were approaching from a different angle, the sun was going down and the enemy was firing.

Niall was blown into the irrigation canal paralleling the path we traversed that was filled with dirty septic water. I gave the instructions for everyone to stop moving. The area was covered with dirt

from the blast and we could no longer look for indicators—I had to decide my own path. I came up to Niall in the septic water and began going to work. Jeremy was the cover man for Niall. Closest to the blast, he was knocked into the water as well. He was visibly dazed from the concussion and was not responsive to my commands though in the kneeling position. Jeremy came to and helped with treatment. The injuries were devastating.

Just two days into the mission and my 1st Plt had sustained two angels, five casualties and four Afghan casualties. 2nd Plt sustained a casualty, our outside unit fighting with us farther south gained two angels, headquarters sustained at least two casualties, and tanks also sustained a casualty.

Everyone had enough. We decided that with the enemy trying to overrun our position, suppressing all supporting units and restricting our freedom of movement, there was no time to have different squads. We took the best of our platoon and formed the kill squad.

Author’s bio: SSgt Rick is an infantry unit leader and has served for more than 13 years. He is currently stationed at Camp Pendleton. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve.

He was visibly dazed from the concussion and was not responsive to my commands though in the kneeling position.

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