

A NIGHT ALONG THE RIVER

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

By SSgt Steven Rossa, USMC

Author's note: This is the story of the Marines with whom I served in 2010 in "Delta" Company, 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, in the southernmost areas of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. More importantly, this is the story of every Marine and Sailor who has deployed to a combat zone over the last two decades of war. Our books, movies and TV shows are full of heroic battles and intense firefights, but that isn't everyday life in combat. This is the rest of the story.



Sgt Steven Rossa stands in front of The Castle, his unit's outpost in Khan-Neshin, Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

The evening sun had set, and everyone was meeting in the Combat Operations Center. Darkness was falling fast over the small plot of land now occupied by White Platoon. My convoy had just arrived after a long and dusty drive from our outpost through the sand and rocks that formed the barren wastelands north of the river. This was a strange place. You could see nearly every type of landscape all within a single patrol. We would start up in the rocky hills, moving south toward the farmlands. Along the way, we would pass a marsh created by the runoff water coming from the hills. Just beyond this small, waterlogged area were sand dunes that looked like a *National Geographic* picture of the Sahara Desert. Eventually, we would reach the flowering poppy fields beyond the sand, almost like an oasis. After making our way through the thick encasing mud around all of the crops, we would reach a tree line separating the contrastingly bright and colorful fields from the outskirts of the dark brown shadows of the villages. One such place had an area that the locals referred to as "the jungle." By American standards, it was more like a small patch of woods, but here with so much open desert, any bit of trees seemed like a rainforest.

Once we were inside the village, it felt like we were on another planet. We would joke that it felt like a scene from "Star Wars" on the desert planet Tatooine. The roads were shades of earth and stone as were the homes and mosques and nearly every other sort of structure. Short walls created courtyards and black-clad women who were covered head to toe were rushed into them as we walked by. Goats and other animals roamed free while little children watched curiously from their half-hidden positions. Not all of them were hidden, though. In fact, some of the older kids were so used to seeing our patrols they would come running for a treat, and sometimes we obliged with pieces of candy or bottles of clean water. One inhospitable greeter was the ever-present

wild dog. These beasts appeared to be something out of a werewolf movie. They didn't exactly make us feel welcome and often came too close for comfort.

Farther south, the Helmand River marked the end of our area of operations. It was a vast and deep river often occupied by fishermen on small boats and stretched the length of our assigned region. Back atop the hills, we gathered for our evening meeting within our dusty wooden office overlooking the southernmost occupied part of the country on one of our first nights in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

The meeting was short. No one wanted to be standing around taking notes on tomorrow's operations when everything was starting so early. Better to hit the rack so we could meet the timeline. I always had the best of luck and was permitted to stay with some of the officers afterward. You can imagine my excitement. My commanding officer was a young but very experienced captain. He was extremely smart and cared deeply for his men. No one ever wanted to disappoint him. Too often, enlisted Marines are burdened with lesser officers. I imagine the opposite is true as well, but I'll never admit that.

The captain wanted to see how the new camera systems worked and asked the Marine monitoring them to show us their capabilities. We started to play around with the settings, going from infrared to night vision and back to whatever settings he had customized. The captain asked how far out we could see, and we began searching for our other platoons, zooming in toward their last known positions and looking for the outlines of their armored vehicles. Then, as the cameras scanned slowly from right to left, we saw movement.

We had spotted Blue Platoon and were able to clearly track their vehicles several kilometers away driving through the night as if it were the middle of the afternoon and clear as day. It was actually quite impressive—not all of our gear worked so well. Anyone who has spent time around



While on patrol (above), Sgt Rossa's squad would pass picturesque sand dunes. Patrols also afforded Sgt Rossa and his Marines (left) the opportunity to question locals at a popular Helmand River crossing point.

the Marines knows that we don't always get the highest quality gear. I always think of that whenever I hear the phrase "military-grade" on TV.

As soon as we spotted the convoy, a bright light flashed across the monitor. The camera shook as we watched the enormous armored trucks come to a swift halt. There was smoke masking one of the trucks. It was expanding outward and upward into the black sky. On our screen, miles away and in the safety of our old shack of a command center, we could see what had just happened. The captain called out on the radio to the convoy. There was no need to wait for them to call us first. I directed my corporal to have the men prepare to respond as did several other Marines in the room. An improvised explosive device (IED) had just struck Blue Platoon.



Left: One of the swampy areas Sgt Rossa and his squad patrolled through in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

BLUE PLATOON TEAM LEADER'S STORY

Everything inside the truck went dark, and smoke filled the cabin. My ears were ringing, and I couldn't see much of anything.

It felt like we had only just arrived back at our outpost after being in the field for what seemed like an eternity. This outpost was named "The Castle," and it was quite literally a castle. Alexander the Great had built this small fortress during his journey across this part of the ancient world.

Once we were able to drop all of our gear, we thought we could finally get a lukewarm shower and a prepackaged hot meal, but that's when the call came in. No sooner had we sat down and loosened our boots, then we were tasked to investigate an area near one of the villages, back out again into the cold night. Apparently, a rocket had been fired from around there, and the top brass wanted to conduct a search for more weapons. An explosives technician was going out with us this time, so the information must have been half-decent. Feeling annoyed, I grabbed some comfort items to take along for the ride. I thought that if I had to go back out during my rest time, I would at least bring some entertainment. We had a small stack of books and magazines piled high by the door, so I took my share of the latest

assorted magazines and shoved them into my backpack.

I climbed back into my truck, grumpy and tired, and sat closest to the back by the rear doors. I was the team leader for this truck, accompanied by two junior Marines and our Navy corpsman. Up in the front were two more Marines who drove and navigated the armored vehicle. "Doc," our Navy brother, was sitting to my right, struggling with his loose and

The explosion sent our fully armored, multi-ton, mine-resistant vehicle into the air like a toy matchbox car, and then crashed it back down to Earth with a thud.

broken seat harness, and I could see the discontent in his eyes. I smiled and said, "You'll be all right," and told him to do his best with the straps. We drove through sand dunes piled high on both sides of us as we made our way to the village. "This doesn't look like a perfect place for an ambush," I said sarcastically. I ignored

the ridiculousness going on with our convoy and went back to finishing my magazine. The young Marine across from me looked nervous, so I tossed one over to him to take his mind off of things. This was his first deployment, and he seemed a little on edge. As soon as that magazine touched his hands, it all went black.

The explosion sent our fully armored, multi-ton, mine-resistant vehicle into the air like a toy matchbox car, and then crashed it back down to Earth with a thud. After some of the smoke cleared and we confirmed there was no follow-on attack, I began checking my men. I looked toward the turret where our gunner was supposed to be, but he wasn't there. For a moment, I thought he was missing—maybe thrown off the top of our truck—and was now lying in the sand somewhere by himself. He wasn't, though, and I saw him lying unconscious across the lap of the other Marine that I had just given a magazine. They were both unconscious and looked almost like a couple who had fallen asleep on a long, red-eye flight. For a brief moment, I nearly laughed at the sight. Doc was awake and fine, other than the fact that he had smacked his face on his rifle. He was spitting a little blood out and had a fat lip, but he'd live. I threw my harness off and jumped into the turret in case anyone began to approach, while Doc began looking over the guys. There were no onlookers, no locals converging and no ambush waiting for us. A lost opportunity for the enemy, I suppose. The guys began to come to, groggy and confused. I signaled over to the next vehicle that we were okay, but our radios had been damaged, and the truck itself wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Other than the migraines that would last the next few weeks, we were all relatively fine. We licked our wounds and limped back to The Castle, too tired for a shower and no longer hungry for a shrink-wrapped dinner.

Back at the Operations Center, a team had been sent out to assist with the recovery of the downed vehicle and get all of Blue Platoon's men back inside The Castle without further incident. I asked if we could get a digital copy of the attack so I could send it to our higher headquarters in a report. In the video, after the explosion, you can make out a person standing up and walking away calmly behind some trees off-screen. This was most likely a spotter for the attack.

Over the course of our deployment to the Helmand Province, over half of our company had been hit by IEDs. During the month of December alone,



Returning from a night patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, are from the left: Lt Clayman, Cpl Creel and Sgt Rossa.

A side view of the outpost, The Castle, and the bazaar outside the walls.



the pattern was every other day. I don't share this information with my family, and I suspect many of the guys from our unit don't either. It's not that I think any of us have regrets, I just assume it's something that's better left unsaid to our mothers who spent their nights awake, worrying about their sons. As far as they are concerned, their baby boys are home safe, and it's all over now.

As I put this story together, I spoke with the Marine who was inside the vehicle. He left me with this final thought, "We did the right thing, what we were supposed to do, and despite our wounds, it's through our stories we will live on forever."

Editor's note: All photos are courtesy of SSgt Steven Rossa, USMC.

Author's bio: SSgt Rossa enlisted in 2003 as an 0311 at the age of 17. He served with 3rd LAR Bn in a variety of billets from 2006-2012 as a rifleman to platoon sergeant. After transitioning to the Selected Marine Corps Reserve, he became a civil affairs specialist in 2015 and is currently serving with the Marine Corps Civil-Military Operations School at Quantico, Va. with the reserve instructor cadre. 🇺🇸



The flags of the United States, Afghanistan, and the Marine Corps are flown at The Castle.