

Essay 1: How Did I Get Here?

“SIR CAN YOU GET SOME CURLEX? Slowly I realized that I was “sir” and the female medic was talking to me. “SIR, SOME CURLEX!” I’m looking, except I don’t know what the hell curlex is. “ON THE LEFT, NO, FARTHER DOWN SIR!” Why can’t I know the important things? Curlex is a bandage, I reasoned, in time that moved as slow as cold motor oil with lumps of filth. Now I’ve got it, I throw it to her. I have never been asked to assist directly at a trauma table. This patient is in desperate need.

The curlex is frantically passed to my NCOIC and best friend. Veteran of heavy combat, and trauma medic, Sergeant Brock Allen McNabb. I stand at the patient’s head. Brock is placing the curlex in the patient’s lower abdomen, as fast as he can, and without unrolling the long bandages. Two days later I realized that he was building a dam against a sea of blood.

The patient is special. All patients are. Mothers and fathers believe it, please. The several doctors and physician assistants, and dozens of medics who surrounded your children felt that acutely. They tried their best, hearts pinned to their sleeves, to save them all. Most of them, they did. This patient had been brought into the Riva Ridge aid station head first, borne on a litter by four, as all patients are carried. I was walking out of the trauma room and held the door. The first thing I saw was naked breasts. I stopped dead in my tracks. I didn’t know what to do next. In my darker moments I think that was my job. To stand by, helpless and horrified, holding the door. The patient was a woman, God bless her, and God save us all. The combat medic had done his job. The patient’s clothes

were cut with bandage shears, from foot to head. Her wounds were visible, ventral and dorsal. But so was her femininity. This would later haunt the medics.

SGT McNabb moved to turn the patient. I stood at the patient's head. Someone had given me one of her IV bags to squeeze, so that the blood pressure enhancing fluids could more quickly enter her veins. It was one of two bags. I have no earthly idea who held the other. All I did was squeeze. And worry. Too little? Too much? McNabb is turning her now. He has emplaced as much curlex as he can. He is searching her back for an additional wound, unsure if he has stanching all sources of bloodflow. He does so with a look on his face that is foreign to me. And by this point, I was pretty goddamn fucking sure I had seen them all.

As Brock moved to turn her, I slowly, and finally, realized why. SGT McNabb is 6' 3". His long arms were extended to grasp the patient like gentle tongs. His fingertips were at her sternum, his elbows at her vulva. God almighty, he is holding her closed. She has been split open, from genitalia to navel. I am angry with myself. For my foolish hope, early in this case (one minute ago). When I first saw her, I glimpsed breasts, and panicked. Then I saw that her right foot was shorn off, and rejoiced silently. Why? Because most EFPs take the soldier off at the knees or higher. Surely, this young woman, then, missing only a foot, will go on? To struggle, sure, but eventually to triumph? In this case not so. An EFP is, to my understanding, a cylinder (a semi-liquid jet, really) of molten copper, moving at 1 kilometer/second.

The EFP didn't stop there. It entered through the thick, soft* armor of her driver's door, transected her ankle and finally exhausted its energy directly between her legs. I

keep returning my gaze to her ankle. About the size of my wrist (and I have rather girlish wrists).

One of our MDs called out a blood pressure. Thirty-eight over something. Almost nothing. Nothing is what she came to our MDs with, probably clinically deceased. But definitions mean nothing to mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters and lovers of the sacred dead. They raised her, as they raised others. That was the expression of their love, deep and white-hot.

Me? I stood at her head and considered her hair, for Christsakes! The blast had mussed her hair. Removed her foot, cleaved her abdomen, but mussed her hair. For whatever reason I looked at it and longed to smooth it back from her forehead. Like I do for my children. It was reddish-blond, curly, almost kinky, and in disarray. I looked around me to see if anyone would notice this gesture, if anyone would mind. Hell, I don't know what to do in an abattoir of human suffering, it's not my job. I deal with easy things, like the paranoid, the personality disordered, and those without hope. All I wanted to do was smooth her hair, perhaps compose her for the next stage of her journey. But I never did it, and regret it to this day. It was too intimate a gesture for that frenetic, clinical, life-preserving context. In the end, I squeezed the piss out of that IV bag. I gave it all I had, and it was all I could give in that moment. Mothers and fathers, I can tell you this. She was at peace. She never regained consciousness after the blast, said the medic who brought her in. And I can tell you that she remained, beautiful in repose, throughout. Mercifully, she died, en route, via helicopter, to Baghdad ER. I will love her and remember her always. Why? Moms and Dads will understand. Because we took care of her. Because she rolled out, driver of the doomed lead vehicle in a patrol sent to rescue

another group we took care of, too. Because she was a female combatant in an Army that has none. And because she was, as Dr. Pat Friman taught me, a hero of everyday life.

Moms and dads, and especially HER mother and father, wherever you may be: together, apart, in peril, plenty, sickness or health. Please know that we loved your kids. And Jesus, please tell that stinker that she owes me a full box of Kleenex, just for this chapter alone. I owe her my everything. She died, ladies and gentlemen, racing to the scene of a horrific miscal, a vehicle blown into the air, inverted. Filled with our sacred dead. Once a Bradley is inverted, few or none escape. Instead, they burn alive or asphyxiate, sometimes, according to their comrades, banging on the hull with rifles or tools. Hoping, and in the end, begging for release? We were never sure. Our female patient joined them, those now dead to whom she sought to provide aid, an honored hero. Because she gave enough of a shit, mom and dad, to stomp on that accelerator and head deep into harm's way. Don't you forget it, proud and grieving parents. I have kids, and I never will. Nor should you forget, sirs: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Karl Rove, Donald Rumsfeld, and all the others who are, or were in 2006-2007, as Prince said, "bored and believe in war." You have no idea of what you've wrought, or what's to come. But we do, I perhaps least amongst them. Be that as it may, I will, for the sake of that brave young woman, the handsome young man with no head, and the several dead who turned green in the extremity of exsanguination, try to show you.

*Supposedly, an "up-armored" Humvee of 2006-2007 Baghdad had thick, soft armor designed to better absorb the impact of an EFP. As opposed to the hardened steel that protected against typical IEDs, such as "daisy-chained" howitzer shells, as were

prevalent in late 2003-through mid 2006. I'd be willing to be proved wrong, but I never saw that shit work.