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## THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE ON EARTH

Our battered Toyota sped across the dusty road, keeping pace with the convoy vehicles in front that we were charged with protecting. That stifling noon of Monday, 7 June 2005 was already proving to be a nightmare. Our Iraqi drivers had been appalled that we were delivering a load through the 'Sunni Triangle' north of Baghdad, one of the most dangerous places on earth. Their fears and the condition of our ageing trucks had already slowed down the convoy as it went from our compound near the Abu Ghraib complex in Baghdad towards Fallujah, the heartland of the insurgency that was tearing Iraq apart.

Worse still, our route would, by necessity, take us north of Fallujah as we headed towards our final destination of al-Habaniyah, along a narrow, elevated road that had already proved itself one of the favourite hunting grounds for local insurgents.

As usual, our team leader, Yves M., had cried out '*Allah*

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*Ackbar'* (God is Great) over the radio as we left the security compound that morning to try and encourage everyone, but the cry didn't get the usual hearty response and, when our Iraqi drivers answered half-heartedly, I knew that I wasn't alone in being desperately worried about this mission. But at least I had my ex-French Foreign Legion mate, Denis B., on the convoy security detail, along with Yves, an ex-French Army veteran, and Sean L., a former member of South Africa's private security Ronin outfit. Yves had also served in the Croation Army during the Balkans conflict, so he had combat experience and knew what he was about.

But no trip near Fallujah was ever without its risks, even for the American troops in their heavily armoured M1 Abrams battle tanks. The craters that littered the dusty roadside were a mute testament to the attacks that had already earned Fallujah its fearsome reputation. But today all we were escorting were trucks loaded with beds and billet equipment for soldiers of the new Iraqi Army, hardly the stuff that insurgents would target – if, that is, they knew what was inside the trucks. To them it could as well be ammunition or medical supplies. Or they might simply relish the chance to kill a few more infidels.

I sat in the rear of the speeding saloon and tried to maintain my focus. As my years of French Foreign Legion training had taught me, often it was the little things that kept you alive. I had two bags for my gear stowed carefully by my side, one for fighting from inside the car and one in case I had to get out of the vehicle in a hurry. Each rear door was

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draped with my body armour, ready to be grabbed at a moment's notice.

The heat was stifling and, as I gazed out the window, the whole countryside seemed to be burned brown. The only bit of colour came in flashes of green from a few stunted palm trees, and even they were hard to spot through the dust clouds. Fuck it, but there was dust everywhere. If you expected violence on arrival in Iraq, you certainly weren't disappointed, but no-one warned you about the dust, the flies and the heat.

On my lap was my AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifle, with extra clips of ammunition stuffed into virtually every pocket and cubby-hole I could find. I was firm believer in the old infantryman's motto that you can never have too much ammunition. Directly in front of me was my Iraqi driver, Arkan H., and alongside him an Iraqi security contractor, Wisam D. They were both married men with families, and I knew they wouldn't be doing this job unless they really needed the money. But there wasn't much talking, we were all too busy staying focused on what was going on along the roadside.

Today, we had to protect ten old articulated trucks heading from our secure compound in Baghdad to an Iraqi police depot just outside al-Habaniyah. To deliver the trucks and their cargo we would have to cross the insurgents' own backyard. The key was getting there and back out again as fast and as discreetly as possible. The security detail involved five vehicles, mostly old, battered Opels, BMWs and Toyotas, like my saloon. These kinds of cars were far

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better for maintaining a low and discreet profile – if you drove a powerful new jeep you might as well have a neon sign over your head flashing ‘foreign security contractor’. These civilian convoys were as hazardous as our job could get. And in a country gradually tearing itself apart with violence, this area between Abu Ghraib and Fallujah was the epicentre of Iraq’s carnage.

I was assigned to the convoy’s centre as the Counter Attack Vehicle (CAV). I had to ensure that the long line of trucks stayed together and, in the event of an attack, I also had to try and prevent any segment of the convoy being isolated and overrun. In an ambush, I was expected to respond to threats in any situation, and, if necessary, to give the insurgents something to think about while the rest of the convoy got out.

But just keeping the convoy together was proving difficult enough. The articulated trucks were all old, had been in constant use since the Coalition invasion and, most worrying of all, were prone to breaking down at precisely the wrong time. Not one of the trucks or security vehicles would have been allowed on a European or US road. And yet our very lives depended on these clapped-out artics.

Some 12km from al-Habaniyah, one of the trucks got stuck as we swung off the main supply road and on to an old dirt track. This was our worst nightmare. We were in bandit country, we had to deploy our Iraqi security detail – plus, we also had to cope with the possibility of the US military mistaking us for insurgents. Sure enough, as we desperately worked to get the truck moving, a US patrol

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swung on to the same dirt track and, spotting our armed Iraqi guards, instantly deployed in a defensive formation as if we were insurgents.

None of us underestimated the danger we now faced. US patrols had lost so many troops that some had naturally adopted a 'shoot first and ask questions later' policy when faced with possible threats. Before the American patrol could fully deploy, we had to order our Iraqi contractors back into the vehicles and Sean walked, hands held over his head, towards the lead US vehicle, an armoured Humvee, to try and explain our predicament. He walked slowly, his hands in clear view and repeatedly shouting, 'Friendly force, friendly force', not an easy task when you know a .50 calibre heavy machine-gun is trained directly on you. One blast from that weapon is enough to cut a man in half. But, after a few nervous minutes, the US patrol lowered their M16 assault rifles and, at last, acknowledged who we were.

I sat in the car and nervously fingered the trigger guard on my AK-47. The thought flashed across my mind that this was a strange place to find a chef from Cobh, Co Cork. Whatever about joining the Foreign Legion for a military life, Pádraig O'Keeffe certainly never thought he'd end up at thirty-five years of age sitting in a battered old Toyota with only a Russian assault rifle for protection in probably the most dangerous place in the world. I took a final nervous drag on my cigarette and waited for what was to come next.

It took us almost an hour to get the truck free of the soft sand and moving again, more than enough time to advertise

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our presence to any insurgents in the area. By the time we had all the trucks moving again, the traffic coming against us had become quite heavy. Within twenty minutes of our truck breaking down, I had noticed a steady increase in traffic on the road. We had never seen this level of traffic coming out of al-Habaniyah before – and, interestingly, the traffic was all moving against us, as if people were leaving the area for a specific reason.

With their previous ambushes and use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the insurgents had proved that they were evolving a very special skill in killing Coalition troops, as well as Iraqis working for the Interim Government and, most of all, the private security contractors, like myself, who undertook the security jobs no-one else wanted.

I smiled grimly as I realised that, far from being in the safest part of the convoy, the killing fields of Iraq had shown that the convoy centre was where the initial attack almost always came. The insurgents had previously favoured attacking a convoy at the front and rear, in the normal manner, thereby trapping it. But, because of how convoys in Iraq were being protected, the insurgents were now often attacking in the centre, hoping to cut the convoy in half.

Attacks were also mounted at the start and end of our missions as we left or returned to our Abu Ghraib compound: this danger was reflected in the fact the Iraqi police and foreign security contractors had erected a special security zone around the area, which required vehicles to pass through almost two hundred metres of three-metre-high blast walls

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which lined either side of the approach roadway, forming a kind of tunnel. This was supplemented by machine-gun posts and pill-boxes. And yet the attacks still came on a weekly basis and you had to maintain high alert even at the very end of a job.

Now, as we finally approached a hamlet just a few kilometres from al-Habaniyah, we drove along an elevated road with mud-brick houses on either side. Not much farther to travel, I thought, and we'd be okay. I kept a light grip on my rifle and fought the urge to re-check the magazine – I'd already checked it at least six times. Just one kilometre ahead we would have to make a tight left turn, enough to force us to slow our pace dangerously and spread out the convoy. As the turn loomed ahead, I repeatedly scanned the buildings for any sign of movement, because I realised that if I were going to hit this convoy, that is where I'd mount my attack.

The US patrol had already informed us that the track we were following towards al-Habaniyah was effectively no-man's land. One US Army Sergeant, in a quiet aside to our security team as we worked to free the stranded truck, advised us not to use the route and to head back to Abu Ghraib. He warned us that there were no Coalition forces in the area and that the hamlets around al-Habaniyah were believed to be rife with insurgents. While we were told that we would receive Coalition assistance in any emergency, none of our security team held out much hope of it in reality. We knew we were on our own. But what could we do? If we abandoned the trip and headed back to Baghdad, we'd only

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have to bring the convoy back out here again tomorrow. Better to take our chances and run with the convoy now.

As we approached the turn, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a figure huddled by the side of a mud-brick building to my left. I mentally registered his position and continued to scan the road ahead. I looked back to scan the house a second time and, sure enough, I could now clearly see the man crouching with an AK-47 in his hands. Instinctively, I knew that this was the moment we'd all dreaded. Time seemed to freeze as my Legion training began to take over.

The crouching figure slowly began to raise his arms and I could see the distinctive shape of the AK-47. I knew I had to signal the ambush to the rest of the convoy. We'd be cut to pieces if we ended up trapped amongst these buildings sitting on an elevated roadway some six feet above ground level.

Without thinking, I levelled my rifle and emptied a full magazine at the figure, seeing several rounds hit him. Almost instantly, I could hear a hail of fire erupt in reply from all around us. I shouted to Arkan to accelerate and get us away from the turn, and he was screaming back at me, 'Mujahedin, Mujahedin.' Seconds later, the windows of the Toyota exploded in a shower of fragments and I realised that Wisam was already dead, his bloodied head resting on the dashboard beside Arkan.

Suddenly I saw that the trucks ahead of me had stopped moving, and I instantly knew that something was seriously wrong. Our Toyota had barely rolled to a stop behind a truck when I ordered Arkan to sweep around it and move to the front of the convoy to find out what was wrong and why we

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were stopping in such an exposed position. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a civilian truck coming against us and, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, it erupted in a hail of Kalashnikov fire from the insurgents. The truck ground to a halt and its cab partly shielded our saloon as we finally pulled up beside our own convoy artics. The poor civilian truck driver was dead within seconds. I didn't know it at the time but that civvy truck would probably save my life.

I hardly registered the sound of multiple 7.62mm rifle rounds crashing into the Toyota as I realised that, instead of coming from the left where I had shot one insurgent, the bulk of the ambush fire was now coming from my right. Within seconds of stopping, the Toyota was being carved apart by rifle fire and I knew that if I was to live through the next few minutes I had to get out of that car fast. Arkan was already out and taking shelter. As I kicked open the rear right door I felt a blinding pain in my elbow and realised I'd been shot. But with my injured arm I was still able to hold and fire the AK-47, and with my other arm I held my body armour in front of me as a shield. I could see the body armour flapping from the 'thud' of incoming rounds. I fell on to the roadway, still firing my rifle one-handed, and was instantly shredded by glass fragments that now littered the roadway.

I knew I had to find cover fast, so I combat-crawled on my elbows across the roadway, around the Toyota and into the shelter provided by my car and the stranded artics. I ignored the pain in my arms, only afterwards discovering that I'd torn lumps of flesh from my hands and arms as I crawled

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over the broken glass. But the incoming fire was incredible. I could hear 7.62mm rounds crashing through the car, the artics and even striking the roadway, tearing chunks of stone and clay up into our faces.

I shouted to Arkan to push the car underneath the first artic in the convoy for extra protection from the incoming fire. Incredibly, the young Iraqi managed to do it, pulling against the frame of the car door at the front and sliding the big Japanese saloon underneath the front bumper of the artic. The instant I heard the 'thud' of the Toyota wedging itself underneath the old truck, I opened fire again, emptying a full magazine at the distant buildings where the fire against us was most concentrated.

And then, from directly behind us, all hell broke loose ...