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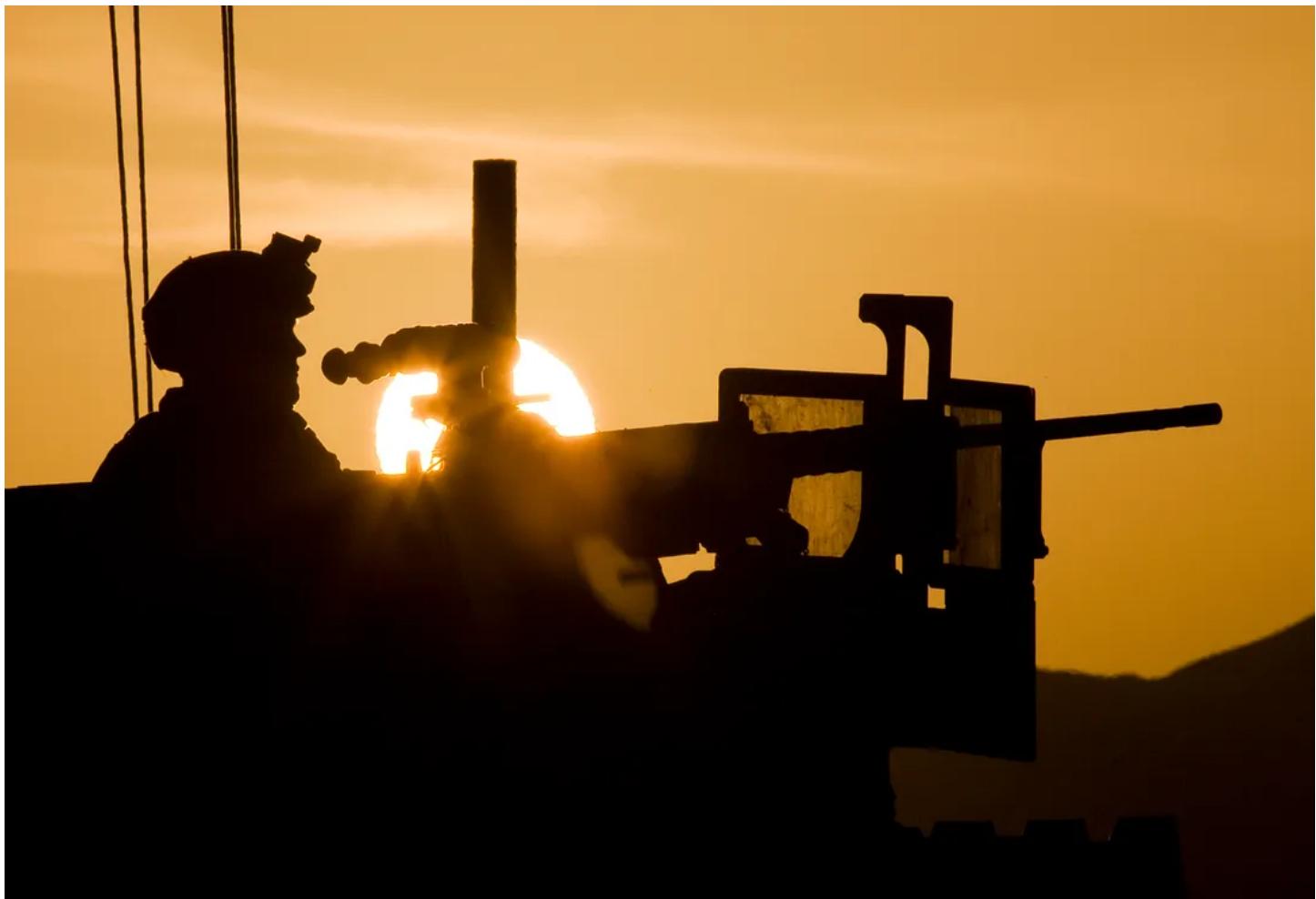
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# 200 Trucks, 500 Passengers—And a Convoy's Fight to the Death in Afghanistan

New book details deadly battles for logistics

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Wars are fought by people, and people need things. *Especially* when they're fighting a war. So how do you get food, water, ammunition, fuel, repair parts, weapons and building supplies from point A to point B? Oh, by the way—you only have enough helicopters to move four percent of the required supplies, there are no roads and the enemy is trying to kill you.

Enter combat logisticians. In our case, *U.S. Marine Corps* combat logisticians.

Equipped with gun-armed escort vehicles and heavily-armored cargo trucks, combat logistics units fight to keep friendly units fed, fueled and armed.

Convoys can be huge, ranging from just a dozen trucks to more than 200. Combat logisticians face the same challenges that any civilian supply-chain manager like UPS does, tracking thousands of pieces of cargo by priority, delivery location and recipient.

Rehearsal is essential. What do you do in an ambush, a roadside bomb strike, a medical emergency or a mechanical breakdown? You have to inspect every vehicle and meticulously clean and test-fire every weapon.

Everyone has to know his job and the job of everyone to his right and left. Gunners must know how to drive the trucks, and drivers must know how to man the guns.

Then there's the enemy. Afghanistan's Helmand province, where I deployed, doesn't have many roads, so everything goes cross-country. Even local goat trails can be magnets for insurgent bombs, so most missions need a totally off-road route.

Off-road is rough, though. Trucks carrying 50 tons or more have to go really slow—and still often get stuck.

A giant convoy going just five miles per hour makes a really nice target. The enemy is happy to oblige with combined-arms ambushes, immobilizing the first truck with an Improvised Explosive Device then hitting the rest of the convoy with rockets, small arms and mortars.

The logisticians must first repel the enemy attack with fire—a typical combat logistics convoy has more crew-served weapons on its trucks than a whole infantry company possesses.

The platoon commander or platoon sergeant coordinates medical evacuation and close air support while a recovery team removes bomb-damaged trucks with a wrecker—essentially a heavy, armored tow truck.

Day in and day out, they're on the road. The demand for supplies seems endless. Every day, units are burning fuel, firing ammunition, drinking water and eating food—and the logisticians have to replace it. And *after* a mission, there is only one thing to do.

Load the trucks up and get back on the road.

My name is Jeff Clement. I'm a Marine veteran of the war in Afghanistan, and author of the new book *The Lieutenant Don't Know*, the story of my combat logistics platoon in Afghanistan.

What follows is an excerpt.

## **APRIL 2010: NORTH OF THE WESTERN CLUSTER, SOUTH OF MUSA QAL'EH, NOW ZAD, AFGHANISTAN**

There is a common joke among Marines that you will never look as cool as you did while you were deployed—and it's true. For me, I know that I will never be as cool as I was on one particular day in April 2010.

I looked cool, but I was terrified. What the hell was I doing there? I gave myself 50/50 odds of making it through without getting shot. I was dismounted, directing recovery operations and trying to avoid getting hit by the hail of gunfire pinging around me, while having this radio conversation with my company commander, Capt. John Gallagher, call sign "Arawak 6."

Arawak 6: "Arawak 2, this is Arawak 6. Say again your situation, over."

Arawak 2: "Arawak 6, Arawak 2. Platoon sergeant's truck hit large IED, probably command wire det. No immediately life threatening injuries. I have pushed back to the blast site. Security cordon established, we are taking accurate small arms and medium machine gun fire from three positions to our north. We are also receiving mortar fire, five rounds impacting within 200 meters."

Arawak 6: "Roger, copy all. You said accurate fire?"

Arawak 2: "Affirmative."

Arawak 6: "How accurate is the fire?"

Arawak 2: "Well ... they haven't hit me yet."

I can be pretty sarcastic when I want to be, and asking me "exactly how accurate enemy fire is," as it's pinging next to my head, is a good way to elicit that response. Any more accurate and I wouldn't be talking to you ... I was terrified.

My Marines, I later found out, just thought I was trying to be funny.

## **MISSION PREPARATIONS**

Operation Lava 31 was a joint U.S.-U.K. logistics mission from Camp Leatherneck to Forward Operating Base Edinburgh and the Musa Qal'eh District Center. The third in a series of three joint logistics operations aimed at moving the U.S. 1st Battalion, 2d Marines into the Musa Qal'eh District, and bringing the British Army's Brigade Northwest back to Camp Leatherneck.

This convoy would be the biggest one yet. Operation Lava 29 and Operation Lava 30 had clocked in with about 150 trucks each. Operation Lava 31 was a third again as large with 205 trucks and over 550 passengers, including U.S. Marines, soldiers, sailors, airmen, Drug Enforcement Agency civilians, Afghan National Army soldiers, British Army soldiers including Gurkhas from Nepal, British Royal Marines and one U.S. Marine dog named Ringo with his handler, Lance Cpl. Green.

The scale and scope of this operation cannot be overstated.

The turnaround from Operation Lava 30 to 31 was only about 10 days, which is phenomenally fast for a multinational operation of this size. Capt. Gallagher, the Alpha Company commander, was the mission commander. I commanded the U.S. main body with about 140 vehicles, while a British counterpart commanded the British contingent.

The planning began while Operation Lava 30 was still outside the wire. Capt. Gallagher and I had talked about the mission before he left on Operation Lava 30. My first task was to plan the route for the convoy. I looked at all the intelligence reports in both the American databases and the British J2 intelligence section, and overlaid the attacks and intel reports on a map with all the previous Operation Lava route honesty traces.

Combined with the Ground Movement Target Indicator radar traces from E-8 surveillance aircraft to show civilian patterns of life, I began to build the route. I pretty quickly came to the conclusion that there was no good route. That is, there were bad routes and worse routes. Beyond worse, there were routes that were simply impassable. And there was *not* a route that would take us from Camp Leatherneck to FOB Edinburgh without exposing the convoy to high enemy threat or

treacherous terrain ... or both.

Balancing these risks was the principal consideration in building a route. After about 12 hours, I think I had the best of a very few less-than-ideal options. The route was approved by the respective mission commanders for the U.S. and British forces, and the planning continued.

Planning meetings with the British continued daily, and we moved closer to execution every day. After the near continuous enemy contact on Operation Lava 29 and 30, we were going to have unprecedented air support for Operation Lava 31. Between the American ScanEagle drones, FA-18s and mixed “skids”—AH-1 and UH-1 helicopters—and the British Apache Longbow and Lynx helicopters, we would have a *lot* of air support.

Each request for an hour of air support required several hours of planning, laying out the specific tasks requested and the intelligence targets for the pilot, as well as syncing the movement with the convoy’s timeline.

Once the planning was completed, we had a large confirmation brief, with each element leader briefing the composition of his element and any key considerations for the mission. I had briefed my battalion commander before and conducted dozens of briefings in training, but had never briefed senior ranking officers of a multinational coalition before.

I was more nervous for the brief than for the mission itself. The training worked, and my portion of the brief went well.

A few trucks from the U.S. Maintenance Support Battalion truck platoon, call sign Warpig, embedded in the convoy. To protect the guilty, I’ll just call their lieutenant “Lt. Warpig,” although the Marines of my truck team would tell you that he was often just referred to as “dumbass.”

Working with him would prove trying. As we were about to head over from our motor pool to the British compound for the confirmation brief, Lt. Warpig pulled up in his M-ATV armored truck—with a mine-roller attached for an unknown reason—and asked if he could follow us over. Of course we obliged.

We were less than a hundred yards down the road when the MATV suddenly veered off the graded road and was sideways in one of the drainage ditches along the side of the road. A set of wheels flew off the mine-roller, while the mine-roller itself came to rest at an awkward angle.

Capt. Gallagher and I pulled a u-turn in our truck, one of the ubiquitous Toyota Hilux SUVs used on Camp Leatherneck, and drove back to make sure everything was alright.

“What do I do?” Lt. Warpig asked.

“Is everyone alright?” I countered.

“I think so,” he stammered.

“Well, make sure so.”

He did, and came back to his original question. The mine-roller was badly damaged, while the M-ATV was stuck and would need a wrecker. “You’re gonna need a wrecker for that. Call your [Combat Operations Center] and request one.”

“Can you guys get one of yours? I don’t want to tell my COC about this one.”

Besides the fact that we were almost late to meet with the Brits and that his unit should support him before we task our Marines, there was no hiding the damage to his truck. He later told us that the mine-roller was severely damaged and had to be rebuilt, while the truck had broken a tie rod—and that the driver just didn’t know how to drive.

If only I had seen this as the warning it was.



Mission planning. Photo via Jeff Clement

With a large group of Marines from 1/2 embedding in the main body to move from Camp Leatherneck to their new area of operations in Musa Qa'leh, which would include a different group of British soldiers from those in the previous missions, additional rehearsals were required. We once again planned for a round robin of rehearsals, with Marines and soldiers rotating from station to station, receiving a briefing or practicing a particular skill or maneuver for the mission.

My station was the mission briefing station, so I briefed the scheme of maneuver to each individual who would be on the mission. After my brief, a junior Marine from 1st Battalion, 2d Marines came up to me and said, "Sir, I think you know my brother."

The Marine was Lance Cpl. Christopher Drake, a machine-gunner from Burke, Virginia. I had indeed known his brother, Lance Cpl. Daniel Drake, who was a good friend of mine from elementary school. It's amazing what a small world the Marine Corps is.

The mission preparation was more hectic than ever. Because of the massive size of the convoy, we needed to mount an unprecedented number of machine guns in our trucks to maintain even a semblance of security. Even though every Marine carried a rifle, most Marines were occupied as drivers or assistant drivers and couldn't focus on gunning—we relied on putting dedicated Marines in truck turrets with machine guns.

Maintaining dispersion between the trucks was of paramount importance. If vehicles were closer than a few truck lengths, one IED might damage or disable multiple vehicles. On average, we tried to maintain between 25 to 50 yards' distance between trucks. The trucks in this convoy ranged from eight to 20 yards in length, depending on the type of truck and whether it was towing a trailer.

With the huge number of vehicles we had to bring, each requiring a driver and an assistant driver, we only had enough Marines to put a gunner in one out of five trucks. Ideally, we would normally put a gunner in one out of every two or three trucks.

With a gunner in every fifth truck, considering the distance between trucks and the length of the trucks themselves, there was over 250 yards between gunners. On top of that, the gunners alternated which direction they were facing. The first gunner faced forward, covering our front, and the last gunner faced to the rear, covering our six.

The second gunner always faced to the right, covering our right flank. The third gunner faced left, covering the left flank, and so on down the line. There were over five football fields between a gunner and the "adjacent gunner" covering the same side of the convoy. It was less than ideal to say the least.

The hardware to mount the weapons in the trucks was in short supply, so we had to

beg, borrow and steal to get enough of the critical universal mounts and universal pintle adapters to put the weapons in the turrets. We were short on traversing and elevation mechanisms that lock the weapon in place and allow for small, precise adjustments in aiming; without these, accurate engagement of targets at long distances was nearly impossible. We would have to make do.

There was never enough time. For the leadership, this inevitably meant there was very little sleeping in the days before a mission. Generally, we were able to get the majority of the junior Marines some sleep, but things were always popping up for unit leaders and NCOs. Before Operation Lava 31, which was set to depart around midnight, I was awake by 0500 the morning prior after only a few hours of sleep.

This schedule was the same one that circumstances forced upon the platoon sergeant, Staff Sgt. Caravalho, the trail maintenance officer Sgt. Williams and countless other Marines. For us, it meant that we had been awake for 19 hours before the mission even started.

The battalion leadership would always get on us about executing better rest plans, but did little to facilitate it. They demanded elaborate multi-hour, graphics-intensive PowerPoint briefs with 3D flyovers of the terrain, made last minute changes to the load plan and only fulfilled equipment shortfalls at the last minute. These all had cascading effects that required attention from the platoon at the 11th hour.

There was a definite feeling in Alpha Company that the rest of the battalion really didn't understand what it was that we did or how to best support us—or support us at all, as the case was. Marines joked that the real enemy was not outside the wire, but in the battalion HQ.

As I was walking to the COC for what seemed to be the 15th time the evening before Operation Lava 31, I was stopped by Capt. Driscoll, the Headquarters & Service Company commander. "So, you excited?" she asked. "I really wish I was going with you."

"It is what it is, ma'am."

"What does that mean? Most of the Marines in H&S would be glad to be in Alpha and

go on this mission. You don't know how lucky you are."

"I guess I'm a little more stoic about it or whatever. We just need to stay focused."

"But it's exciting!"

"You keep saying exciting, ma'am. But we know that we are going to get shot at."

"You don't know that ..." She was as bubbly as ever, and it was annoying as Hell.

"I *do* know that. This is Operation Lava 31. Lava 30 got in a fight. Lava 29 got in a fight. Every Lava between 1 and 28 got in a fight. We are going to get in a fight. So excited isn't the right word. Operation Lava 31 is going to get in a Hell of a fight and people are going to get hurt."

"Well, cheer up."

I walked away. What I wanted to say was, "Go fuck yourself. Ma'am. You don't know who I am or what I have to do. So take your cheer up and go fuck yourself."

I wasn't grumpy, I was busy. I wasn't depressed about the situation, I was realistic. I was steeling myself for the fight ahead. In the same way a runner prepares for the gun to go off or a boxer prepares to take a hit and hit back harder, I was mentally preparing myself. We felt that the concept of this was totally lost on most of the battalion outside of Alpha Company. We felt like it was Alpha Company versus the world.

The most stressful part of mission preparation was the convoy manifest. This document was an Excel spreadsheet that listed every vehicle, in order, by vehicle type and serial number plus its cargo by serial number, along with each Marine or passenger. For each passenger, the manifest had to include their full name, rank, branch of service, social security number, blood type, rifle serial number, rifle optic serial number and binocular or other optic serial number.

While accountability was essential, there had to be a better way. Did UPS track packages and trucks with numbers manually punched into Excel? For the Operation

Lava 31 convoy, with hundreds of passengers from dozens of different units, manifest preparation was a nightmare.

My manifest NCO was Sgt. Thomas Belcher, and he was a workhorse, but he was *also* the platoon loadmaster and had to supervise cargo loading. Every change came down to the last minute, and the operations officer required that manifest changes be made to the source document in Microsoft Excel and resubmitted by us because his COC personnel refused to make the changes themselves.

At the time, our motor pool on Camp Leatherneck was over a mile from the COC and company office, and I was stuck walking everywhere. Any manifest change required two miles of walking in 120-degree heat. It might seem trivial and like an idle complaint, but on the day before Operation Lava 31, I spent hours walking to the company office to use a computer to make minor manifest changes, and hours walking back to the motor pool to supervise final preparations.

“Lt. Clement, why isn’t everything ready? We still need updated mission brief PowerPoint slides and Excel spreadsheets,” the operations officer demanded.

*Oh, yes, clearly, it is my inability to manage my time that resulted in mission prep coming down to the last minute, and not ridiculous amounts of bureaucratic nonsense,* I thought as I rolled my eyes and trudged off to try to finish things in time. Mission plans and Ground Transportation Requests, for example, had to be submitted in both the SIPR and CENTRIXS computer systems, and because of classification requirements, the requests had to be typed into each computer separately.

I swore that if I was ever in the S3 shop, my Marines would bend over backwards to remove administrative restraints on the maneuver elements, the Marines who made CLB-6 a combat logistics battalion.

I was more stressed by and spent more time dealing with administrative bureaucratic requirements than with actual mission planning and preparation, and I know the other platoon commanders were, too. Why, exactly, did the commanding officer need a 3D flyover of the mission route in Google Earth? Wouldn’t my time have been better spent supervising my Marines or getting sleep before a mission?

The lieutenant don't know.

The battle with the chain of command finally ended and we suited up to go. The convoy would leave in the middle of the night, hoping to push east on Route 1 and well north into the desert before the sun came up and the enemy was aware of our presence. The idea was to get through the Mis Mas Wadi right after sunrise and race north, delaying the inevitable fight and keeping the momentum on our side.

With over 200 vehicles, the convoy stretched over 13 kilometers, or eight miles. We were lined up in columns of 10 in the British and American motor pools, with the smaller units who were embedding parked alongside the roads of Camp Leatherneck. Once the first vehicle pushed out the gate, it was over three hours until the last vehicle was outside the wire. As each vehicle left, we checked them off the list.

Our VHF radios were only reliable out to about three miles with the radio-controlled IED jammers on, so for this mission I would have three radio nets going—a satellite radio net back to the COC, a short-range VHF internal net because most trucks only had VHF and a long-range HF net for the convoy leadership, who would relay all calls on the VFH net to and from the trucks near them.

To further complicate matters, the encryption on the British radios was incompatible with the American radios. A British liaison officer rode with Capt. Gallagher with a portable radio and magnetic antenna stuck to the top of the truck. All traffic to and from the Brits would be relayed through her, to Capt. Gallagher and on to us.

Improvise, adapt and overcome ... or something.

The movement was steady, but I knew that the real challenge would not begin until the convoy was off the highway.

The convoy turned north. The Route Clearance Platoon, Thor 3-1, was up front, followed by our security element from Alpha Company, First Platoon, Arawak 1. The American contingent of the main body was next, and was under my command. The

British main body cargo element was behind us. Last was a security contingent of three trucks led by our company operations chief, Gunnery Sgt. Mario “Bad Boy” Locklear.

CLB-6’s heavy cargo trucks and armored security trucks on the Operation Lava 31 convoy stretched across the desert. About half of the convoy was off Route 1 when the first Heavy Equipment Transporter got stuck.

The HET is a massive tractor trailer capable of carrying loads exceeding 100,000 pounds. We had put them near the front of the convoy because they would set the pace—by putting the slowest trucks near the front, it helped ensure the front of the convoy didn’t run off without them. They were simply not designed for use off road, and just as on previous missions, one of them had blown the hydraulics on the trailer.

By then, it was about 0200 in the morning. The front of the convoy was already within sight of the Lone Hill. As day began to break, Capt. Gallagher pushed one of the security trucks to the top of the Lone Hill to keep watch and to provide a visible deterrent to any enemy fighters. The enemy knew we were there, surely. We might as well take the dominant terrain and deny it to them.

We sat. We waited. Daylight was burning, and we weren’t moving yet. Six or seven hours passed while we waited, once again, for a Quick Reaction Force from Camp Leatherneck to return the damaged HET and allow the convoy to continue to FOB Edinburgh. By mid-morning we were ready to get going again, but there was a new problem. The seven hours of idling had burned a lot of fuel.

Most of our trucks were good for about 30 hours at our crawling pace between refueling—and we had killed seven of them. The trucks had enough fuel at the time, but I did the math in my head and wasn’t happy about where we would run out of fuel, somewhere near the Salaam Bazaar, which was not where I wanted to conduct refueling operations.

More precisely, it was exactly where I didn’t want to stop to refuel.

We began refueling each truck from one of several of the convoy’s M970 fuel

tankers. When I could, I would help with the refueling because it gave me a chance to get out of my truck and talk to the Marines. The attitude that morning was a frustrated one; even the most junior lance corporals knew how long we still had to go, and that the enemy was waiting for us.

We had already seen a good number of dickers, Afghan fighters monitoring our actions, on motorcycles checking out the convoy and heading north. They would be waiting for us. We would see them again, we knew.

Progress. Slow movement forward. Through the heat, we pushed up to the Mis Mas Wadi. Of course, once again this meant dismounted clearance of the wadi by the engineers. As I recall, we didn't find or hit any IEDs in it that time, and there were no major delays at the Mis Mas or the Rue De Now Zad that I can remember.

But then we got up to the Western Cluster, a region thick with poppy fields, mud compounds and insurgent activity. Besides the enemy, the poppy fields and mud compounds made the area very dangerous due to the limited trafficability. Poppy flowers are grown in thick mud. The fields are, in fact, flooded with several inches of water during the growing season and trap even the most aggressive off-road vehicles.

Our restricted mobility meant we were very easy to target with IEDs. We stayed in the open desert as long as possible, where the freedom to maneuver limited the risk of IEDs, but we had to cut through the compounds at some point. The Route Clearance Platoon entered the compounds around 1600.

The route was narrow, with barely enough space between the mud walls to fit our trucks through. Almost immediately, the RCP determined they would have to clear the route dismounted. The three kilometers to get through would take something like 15 hours to clear. And we knew it going in. Fifteen hours of painful, step-by-step mine-sweeping.

IEDs were found almost immediately. The first one was big, with a high metallic signature. It seemed almost too easy that the IED was found that quickly, and the ease of that find just added to the stress. Were we supposed to find that piece of metal, so that while dealing with it, a hidden, more deadly IED would explode or an

ambush would erupt?

The engineers began interrogating the suspected IED, and unearthed three 120-millimeter Russian mortars strung together with det cord and a pressure plate. This was the most sophisticated IED that had been seen in the area in a long time—and also one of the most deadly. We were up against the insurgent varsity squad. They weren't messing around.

I had been awake for 38 hours by that time. The sun had begun to set, but there was nowhere to go. The convoy inched forward, moving only as fast as the soldiers up front could clear. Clearing with a metal detector is exhausting, especially while wearing body armor and under the intense stress of possibly being in a sniper's crosshairs.

The Route Clearance Platoon soon asked for our Marines to rotate in and take turns on the metal detectors. Though our Marines were not engineers, everyone was trained on how to use the metal detectors to search for IEDs, and the truck drivers of CLB-6 did what they had to do.

IEDs were found every few dozen meters. The convoy would inch forward, and then halt while the IEDs were deliberately exploded with C4 explosives. The sun was near the horizon. The "evening transition period," the most dangerous time for us, was approaching.

There was too much light for our infrared Night Vision Goggles to provide good contrast and a distinct advantage, but too little light for ideal vision with human eyes alone. The relatively short range and limited visibility through our truck windows limited the effectiveness of our PVS-14 NVGs anyway. In other words, all our technology was nullified, and during the evening transition period, we were reduced to an even playing field with the insurgents.

On that day, as on so many others, we watched the sun dip below the horizon, and like the opening bars of a symphony, the enemy began pouring forth heavy, sustained, accurate small arms fire.

The AK-47 family of weapons is the most pervasive weapon in that region. Made of

stamped metal parts, they were cheap, reliable and deadly accurate at ranges under 300 to 400 meters. The AK-47 makes a distinctive *clatta-clack* sound that is louder, rounder and somewhat more mechanical, and less surgical, less precise than the American M-16s.

We were in a cross-fire, being shot at from both sides. There was nowhere to go forward except at the pace that the route could be cleared, and nowhere to go back. Racing forward was a sure way to strike an IED, destroying a truck, injuring our people and creating a blocked ambush for ourselves.

The bulk of the fire seemed to be concentrated on the middle of the convoy, the main body. This was a relief, since the Route Clearance Platoon and our dismounted sweepers were outside the protective enclave of vehicle armor.

Our convoy was well armored. Every truck could stop AK-47 bullets easily, and even if our tires were targeted, most vehicles had a Central Tire Inflation System that could flood the tires with high-pressure air as fast as it would flow out through a small number of bullet holes.

The key for us was to keep our gunners low in their turrets, returning fire and suppressing the enemy. With gunners in only one of every five trucks, most Marines were in trucks without an option. They had no choice but to sit there and listen to the rounds ping off their armor. The windows were bulletproof to a point—after a sustained hail of bullets, the windows could shatter and many did.

No bullets got through the armor, but a few tires were hit and quite a bit of cargo was damaged. I was especially concerned about the potential for rocket-propelled grenade fire. With mud buildings just a few meters from many of our trucks, an enemy fighter could pop out from around a corner and blast a truck broadside in one of the passenger doors.

We saw a few of the distinct smoke trails that an RPG-7 leaves behind as it is fired. The sound is unlike anything else. When fired, there is an initial explosion propelling the round forward sounding like a *KGH!*, immediately followed by the more directed rocket jet—*schew!*

*KGHschew!*

I have thought a lot about this sound, and the sounds of all the weapons that were fired at us, as well as the ones that we fired back at the Afghans who were attacking. The word “onomatopoeia” is a noun that means, according to Webster, “the creation of words that imitate sounds.”

The onomatopoeia of the sound of each incoming weapon is important. The Marines who were being fired at will never forget it. When an RPG round hit its target, it would explode with the sharp punch and black smoke of high explosives. *Boom.*

The RPG is a deadly Russian weapon designed to punch through armor, and would go cleanly through any of our trucks. There was just enough light from the moon to see the smoke trails of the RPGs’ rocket motors. Except for the firefight, the night was quiet. *KGHschewBoom!*

Thankfully, the insurgents firing the RPGs at us were either unable or unaware of how to properly employ the RPG-7—and never set up a great shot. Only one vehicle was hit, an M-ATV, and the RPG struck the weight plate of its mine-roller.

The mine-roller was loaded with about 5,000 pounds of eight-inch steel plates to press down on the ground in front of the truck, so when the RPG round struck the plates, it exploded, doing no real damage to anything or anyone. The explosion from the relatively small warhead still created a tremendous, percussive blast wave.

The back and middle of the convoy repelled the enemy for about an hour. It was tactical whack-a-mole. Somebody would pop up and start shooting, we would shoot back. *Clatter-clack!* Tracers were going in every direction.

RPGs. *KGHschewBoom!* I was trying to keep everything together and keep the Marines calm. It was dangerous for me to bring my truck up on either of our flanks, because as our gunners fired, we could cross into the stream of their bullets. I was stuck in my truck, and my truck had to stay in its position in the convoy. I noted positions of enemy fighters and talked through the scenario on the radio as slowly

and calmly as I could.

“Alright guys, this is Buzz. Stay cool as a cucumber. Identify targets as you see them, but don’t shoot at nothing.”

Ammunition was always in short supply for the insurgents. After a while, having expended thousands of rounds, they would realize they were not going to have much impact on us—and they would retreat. The enemy “shoot-and-scoot” tactics of not lingering in any one position made it difficult to tell how many of the enemy we had injured or killed.

We needed to recover and reset from the firefight, even though we didn’t have any casualties. Primarily, we had to redistribute ammo between trucks, resupplying those that had been heavily engaged for most of the firefight.

It was completely dark now. The Marines at the front continued sweeping slowly, creeping onward throughout the night. More IEDs. More controlled detonations.

“Stand by for blow-in-place. Five minutes.” I could hear the fatigue in Lt. Selander’s voice.

Through the night, we cleared the route. Inch forward. We dropped the convoy down to 50 percent meaning that half of the Marines could go to sleep. One Marine in every truck needed to be awake, plus all the gunners.

There was only one platoon commander, though, and I was not comfortable going to sleep. I could not have slept if I tried. Capt. Gallagher felt the same way. We checked in with each other on the radio every few minutes. “Arawak 6, this is Buzz, radio check, over.”

“Buzz, Arawak 6. Got you lima charlie,” he responded, using the phonetic alphabet for the letters L and C, slang for loud and clear.

“Interrogative, uh, how is it back there?”

“Quiet, nothing going on, over.”

“Roger, nothing up here. Slow progress. We really need the sun to start coming up. Stand by for something during the transition time.”

“Solid copy, over.”

The sun started to come up. I could see the Blue Force Tracker icons for the front trucks nearing the far end of the compounds. Something like a dozen IEDs had been found. It had been a long night.



Tanker truck stuck south of Now Zad. Photo via Jeff Clement

## DAY TWO

0500. I had been awake for 48 hours now. More RipIts. My truck team took care of me. In addition to bottled water and MREs, we could get Gatorade and RipIts

through the supply system at Camp Leatherneck. RipIts are an off-brand energy drink, like a cheap Red Bull. Packed in squat little eight-ounce cans, they came in a few different flavors. Cpl. Sena, my gunner, knew that my favorites were the red Power Punch and the yellow CitrusX flavors.

I never asked him to, but he always got me a case of one or the other. I don't know how he did it, but I didn't ask. Forty-eight hours without sleep. More RipIts. I was watching the little blue icon of the front truck on my BFT screen, overlaid on a satellite image of where we were. We finally got out of the compounds on the other side.

We should start moving. There was a little wadi, an offshoot of the Lande Nawah, on the other side to clear through, and then it was back to three to five mph, which would feel like flying. The threat would go down, at least for a while, until we got to the Lande Nawah Wadi.

"Oscar mike." We started inching forward, first one truck, then the one behind it, and the one behind it, and the one behind it. A slow rhythm, like a slinky.

*BOOM!* An LVSR was engulfed in a cloud of dust. It had only just shifted forward; I hadn't even seen it move forward. They hadn't left the tracks, but it was the heaviest truck that far forward. Some IEDs were set only to detonate under the heaviest trucks, an effort to make recoveries harder for us.

"IED IED IED!" I called on the radio.

"I'm rolling!" Lance Cpl. Sedam, my driver, didn't wait to be told what to do. He *knew* what to do.

I clicked the radio. "Buzz is pushing up."

"Buzz, Arawak 6, come in," called Capt. Gallagher, who was up toward the front.  
"What's the situation?"

"A6, Buzz. IED hit an LVSR. I'll be at the strike site in a sec, over."

"Alright, roger. Standing by."

“Roger. I think we should keep the front moving, and open up the dispersion in the security platoon to take up the space, keep it secure.”

“Concur.”

My truck pushed up to the damaged LVSR, and drove around it with the mine-roller on our MATV. If there were any secondary IEDs designed to hit rescuers or medical personnel, the truck would hit them instead—a far preferable option.

Lance Cpl. Quinn Gordon and Cpl. Jeremy Salsberry, the passengers of the LVSR, were conscious but shaken. Cpl. Salsberry’s leg was injured and he couldn’t walk unassisted. Lance Cpl. Gordon was rattled and only barely lucid, like a boxer who’d been hit one too many times this round.

Staff Sgt. Caravalho had pushed up to the downed truck as well, and we began debating the best way to recover the LVSR. An LVSR is a massive 10-wheeled heavy cargo vehicle, and since the front wheel had been damaged, knocking out steering, it would have to be lift-towed.

We had two wrecker variants. The MK36 MTVR wrecker was rated to lift-tow 48,000 pounds. The MK48/15 LVS wrecker could only lift-tow 32,000 pounds and it had a complicated towing mechanism and a crane capacity of only 9,000 pounds. I didn’t really like taking the LVS wreckers out, but sometimes it was the only option available. Since the LVSR weighed over 60,000 pounds, the LVS wrecker was just about useless in this situation.

I did have two more options that would present a better long-term option, but they would take longer to implement. The RCP had a M984 HEMMT wrecker, but it was three miles away on the other side of the danger zone that had just been cleared. To get it back to the downed LVSR, I would have to stop all traffic through the compounds to bring the wrecker back the other way. This would completely stop the convoy for close to an hour.

The other option was to use a British Man SV(R), a massive eight-by-eight wrecker, far stronger than anything we had. The Marine Corps had given us the MKR18 LVSR

cargo truck without an accompanying vehicle capable of recovering it—we finally got MKR15 LVSR wreckers a year later, so the Brits offered us the best choice.

The closest SV(R) was near the back of the convoy with the rest of the British element, and would take over an hour to bring up to the front. We couldn't take the risk of bringing the wrecker, one of our most valuable assets, outside the cleared tracks, so I decided to drag the LVSR out of the way to allow the convoy to pass by. The SV(R) would stay in the tracks until it got up to the LVSR, and then pick it up.

My primary concern was to get the convoy moving again. We tried to use an MK48/15 LVS wrecker but it wasn't strong enough, so we had to get the LVSR out of the way with an MK36. After that, I could worry about setting up a sustainable option like the British SV(R) to recover the LVSR back to Camp Leatherneck.

Had anyone ever done a front lift-tow of an LVSR with an MK36? We didn't have much choice in the short term. Inch by inch, the LVSR was pulled up. It wasn't the metal components of the hitch on the wrecker that I worried would fail, it was a catastrophic blowout of the main lifting cylinder, rendering the wrecker useless for the rest of the mission.

The MK36 did it, though. Ask nicely, and your truck will do almost anything for you. As it started to pull forward, the front wheels of the MK36 were bouncing off the ground because of the heavy load on the back. The driver could only pull straight forward with the front wheels in the air, but it was enough. In less than 30 minutes, a quick turnaround that still felt like an eternity, the convoy was moving forward again—a new record for CLB-6.

The Brits helped us out when they got their SV(R) up to the LVSR, snatching it up and towing it the rest of the way to FOB Edinburgh. It was mid-morning when my truck passed through the compounds and mud buildings began to emerge on the other side. The front of the convoy was racing forward at about eight miles per hour.

My BFT screen updated, and suddenly a gap appeared in the convoy. About 1,000 meters long, there was a distinct lack of icons on a section of the convoy somewhere in the middle.

I called Staff Sgt. Caravalho. “Smokecheck, this is Buzz. Do you see that gap? Can you check it out?”

“Roger, Buzz, I’m on my way.”

He got there, and found that an MTVR had stalled, and by the time the driver got the truck started, he had lost track of the convoy in front of him.

“Buzz, I’m bringing the convoy up.” Staff Sgt. Caravalho, in his M-ATV, was now at the front of that line and was racing forward to close the gap. The gap was down to about 500 meters.

An explosion. The biggest we’d ever heard.

“IED IED IED!” We heard Lt. Warpig, our ride-along, on the radio. He was about 30 or 40 trucks behind my position—almost two miles back.

My gunner leaned down and shouted into the truck, “Sir, we got red smoke.” The Marine Corps teaches lieutenants to always maintain an external focus; one of the harshest criticisms a lieutenant could receive was to be “internal.” The point is to create a mindset where officers immediately focus on taking care of their Marines and defeating the enemy, instead of focusing “internally,” on fear and self-preservation. The training worked.

Red smoke grenades signaled that somebody had been seriously injured in an IED strike.

“Go!” I shouted. I wasn’t afraid, not at that moment anyway.

“I’m flipping this bitch around.” Lance Cpl. Sedam, the driver, pulled a U-turn and we raced toward the IED strike at high speed. “Hold on! This is gonna bounce.” We flew over a small ditch, the M-ATV airborne.

Smoke grenades were used as a signal in an IED strike. Green smoke meant that everyone in the truck was okay, or at least not in need of immediate lifesaving medical attention. Red smoke meant the opposite. One of my Marines was dying.

Massive hemorrhage can kill in just a few minutes, and I didn't have a corpsman anywhere near there.

"Smokecheck, this is Buzz, come in."

Silence.

"Smokecheck, Buzz, come in."

Silence. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, "Buzz, Smokecheck, yeah, it was my truck." He was pretty shaken.

"Roger, I'm almost there." All traffic had stopped behind him.

I arrived at the spot where his truck had been hit and assessed the damage. The mine-roller was destroyed, and the whole front end of the M-ATV had been gutted. The right front wheel was gone. He had kept all his Marines inside the truck until the area could be cleared. We pulled up alongside, running our mine-roller beside the truck to clear the ground for secondary IEDs aimed at dismounted first responders. There were none.

I jumped out, grabbed my medical bag and ran to the truck. I ripped open his door. "Who's hurt?" The red smoke had everyone amped up.

"Nobody, that bad, anyway."

"Oh, you guys didn't throw the red smoke?"

"No, Buzz, dunno."

"Huh. Okay." I later found out that it was Lt. Warpig, goon that he was, who had jumped the gun and thrown the red smoke unnecessarily. I made a point to tell him to sit back and shut up for the rest of the trip. We exposed ourselves to a lot of needless risk because of his foolishness, but it wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last. "Let's set up some security and get this convoy moving again."

Until we got more gun-trucks in position, Marines would have to defend the position

using their M-4 rifles. The first priority was to get the whole convoy moving again, which we couldn't do until the damaged truck and mine-roller were recovered. We would need some wreckers, but the closest one was at the back of the convoy.



There was an LVS MK48/15 wrecker at the front, and the trail maintenance officer, Sgt. Williams, was just a few trucks back. I pushed my M-ATV back to his position and told him to follow me with his truck, but we couldn't get through on the left side of the convoy because of the poppy fields. There was already one MRAP stuck in the mud of the poppy fields—I didn't know whose it was but that wasn't my immediate problem. There was a mud compound wall on the other side of the convoy.

"Sedam, can you put this truck through that wall?" I asked my driver.

"Hell yeah, sir! For real?"

"Do it."

Lance Cpl. Sedam backed the truck up and lined up his approach. He hit the gas and we were pressed against our seats as the truck accelerated. The mine-roller plowed through the compound wall in a cloud of dust and rubble, leaving clumps of mud covering the mine-roller and the hood of the truck.

It was like something out of a movie. He had cleared enough space to bring Sgt. Williams' maintenance truck up to the site. Sgt. Williams then set to work disconnecting the mine-roller and dragging it out of the way.

Staff Sgt. Caravalho had set up dismounted security with a few Marines, but we needed more firepower. I called Sergeant Galante, the security team leader, on the radio. "Godfather, this is Buzz. I need you to push back here to help with security."

Staff Sgt. Caravalho was already running around, moving some of the trucks with guns. The children and women who had previously been watching us had scattered. This was not a good sign.

"Roger, Buzz. On my way."

Sgt. Williams had, by now, dragged Staff Sgt. Caravalho's damaged M-ATV out of the way with his truck and some chains, which allowed the convoy to get moving again. I started waving the trucks forward. We had to get the cargo trucks moving so that I could bring up the MK36 wrecker that was at the back of the American main body. I then turned my attention to the MRAP stuck in the poppy field. I raised them on the radio.

"Uh, yeah, Buzz, this is Warpig. We're stuck out here."

I had no idea what the Hell he had been doing out there to begin with. I sent Sgt. Williams and his driver, Lance Cpl. Renno, to drag them out with their MTVR. Less talented drivers would have gotten stuck themselves, but Lance Cpl. Renno was a champ.

*Snap!* It sounded like someone had popped a bag of chips next to my foot. "What was that?" I asked.

"Uh, I wouldn't worry about it, sir. Just don't stand still too long," Staff Sgt. Caravalho said with a grin.

Small arms fire. We had security trucks all around, ready to return fire, and one of 1/2's machine gun teams had dismounted as well to provide more support. Every Marine on the ground began looking for targets, scanning the mud rooftops with the Rifle Combat Optic gunsight on their rifle.

We were now taking heavy, accurate and sustained fire from the compounds to the north, about 100 meters away. The Marines started returning fire. The M-240 snapped into action, and so did an Mk19.

The Mk19 automatic grenade launcher is terrifying to be on the wrong end of. It emits a sharp explosion as it fires the grenades, followed by a short delay as they fly through the air, followed by the explosion of the 40-millimeter grenades. *Bam bam bam bam ... whump whump whump whump. Bam bam bam bam ... whump whump whump whump!*

The desert sand frequently jammed the weapon and it required a special lubricant called LSA that was practically impossible to get hold of, but this Marine seemed to be on top of his game. He kept his gun in the fight.

*Bam bam bam bam ... whump whump whump whump!*

I took cover behind the damaged M-ATV, waiting for the MK36 from the back to pass by. I ran out and waved for an empty flatbed truck to pull in next to the damaged mine-roller.

Enemy rounds were flying everywhere, pinging off the trucks, targeting Staff Sgt. Caravalho and me. I was terrified, just like everyone else. But I realized that the Marines were looking to see how I reacted and looking for direction; I couldn't afford to be paralyzed by fear.

Finally, enough trucks had passed and the wrecker was there. I had started to doubt it would ever arrive, but waved it in next to the M-ATV. Cpl. James Prickett, call sign "Reaper," hopped out.

"Damn, sir, it had to be this one? Why you got this whack-ass adapter on your truck, staff sergeant?" The mine-roller bracket on the front of the M-ATVs was a first-generation adapter and did not have tow points on it. This was later identified as a critical flaw and fixed for future models, but for us there was no way to easily hitch it to the wrecker to recover the truck.

"It's gonna take me a minute, but I can probably snatch it with some chains," Cpl. Prickett drawled. He set to work, wrapping chains through the hitch point on his wrecker and around the mine-roller bracket. "It should lift, but steering's gonna be a bitch."

I stopped traffic once again because we needed another wrecker to recover the destroyed mine-roller onto the flatbed we'd pulled over earlier. I sent Sgt. Galante to bring it back from the front of the convoy.

Again, another eternity. I crawled under the M-ATV to cage the brakes, really hoping

that no bullets hit my feet that were sticking out from under the truck.

*KGH-schew!* An RPG. The enemy attack was intensifying. I was back behind the damaged M-ATV, peering through the RCO on my rifle trying to get positive identification on an enemy position. They kept bouncing around, popping up and firing once from one spot, and then moving to another spot within the mud compounds.

*Whump-BOOM!* Black smoke. Mortars.

The first one fell about 200 meters north of the recovery site. A minute passed. Everything was waiting on that MK48/15 to get the mine-roller. Cpl. Prickett was still working on the M-ATV, struggling with the chains.

*Whump-BOOM!* Another mortar. This one closer, but from the compounds south of the convoy. This was bad. We were being bracketed. A reliable technique to adjust indirect fires like mortars or artillery, bracketing relies on dropping the first round on one side of the target and the second on the other side, reducing the adjustment each time, walking the rounds onto the target.

That the first mortar was short of us from where I guessed the point of origin was, and the second was long, meant that the enemy mortar team knew what they were doing and had a spotter with a radio adjusting the rounds.

While this was going on, I was on the radio with Capt. Gallagher, relayed through one of the Army trucks since I was on a handheld PRC-152 with limited range.

Arawak 6: "Arawak 2, this is Arawak 6. Say again your situation, over."

Arawak 2: "Arawak 6, Arawak 2. Platoon sergeant's truck hit large IED, probably command wire det. No immediately life threatening injuries. I have pushed back to the blast site. Security cordon established, we are taking accurate small arms and medium machine-gun fire from three positions to our north. We are also receiving mortar fire, five rounds impacting within 200 meters."

Arawak 6: "Roger, copy all. You said accurate fire?"

Arawak 2: "Affirmative."

Arawak 6: "How accurate is the fire?"

Arawak 2: "Well ... they haven't hit me yet."

Sgt. Galante rolled back in with the MK48/15 wrecker. Sgt. Williams took charge, rounds impacting all around him. He paused just long enough to flip the bird to the attackers as he climbed over the damaged mine-roller, strapping it to a flatbed truck for recovery.

The rear of the convoy had been halted for almost 10 minutes so that we could pull the wrecker from the front. The front of the convoy had kept moving, and once again there was a gap, probably about two kilometers long now. Not good, but the front of the convoy had to keep moving to pull the rear up. Stopping now was the worst thing we could do.

I clapped Sgt. Galante on the back. "I need you to reconnect this convoy. Get them moving."

"Got it, Buzz."

He jumped up in his MRAP, hanging out the door, and waved for the rest of the trucks to follow him. He made it about 400 meters before there was a small explosion under his left front tire.

"This is Godfather, IED IED IED!"

A pause. The truck started rolling again.

"Buzz and Smokecheck, Godfather. We're a little shaken, but we're not hurt. I think we can limp the truck up to the convoy. We'll fix it later." The front tire was missing a big chunk, but he managed to reconnect the convoy and then pulled over, waiting for a wrecker to help him change the tire.

We finished recovering the M-ATV and the mine-roller, taking fire the whole time. Staff Sergeant Caravalho and I double-checked that all of our Marines were back in the trucks, fist-bumped and we jumped in trucks.

Terrifying. Exhilarating. I knew I would never look so cool or bad-ass again. We pushed up to the convoy, and I finally took a breath. I was exhausted. “Hey guys, do we have any water in here?”

Lance Cpl. Williams, the radio operator, handed me one. “Sure thing, sir.”

“Uh, can I have like … three more?” He laughed and handed them to me. From the time the IED had hit Staff Sgt. Caravalho’s truck, it was only 57 minutes to when the recovery was complete, which was actually a pretty good performance, given that we had to recover a M-ATV, a mine-roller, free a vehicle from the mud of the poppy fields, get two wreckers to the site, take fire and hit a secondary IED when Godfather was relinking the convoy.

When I got back in my truck and realized how little time had passed, I couldn’t believe it. The American half of the convoy was out of the compounds, but the British contingent at the rear was still back there. The enemy never broke contact, and continued firing and dropping mortar rounds on them. The convoy did not hit any more IEDs, though, and was able to push through.

Things were working exactly the way they were supposed to, given the circumstances. Capt. Gallagher, as the overall mission commander, remained focused on the end objective, getting to FOB Edinburgh. I could focus on the details of the recovery and the firefight, the proverbial point of friction.

When the main body—and my platoon, specifically—was heavily engaged with the blocked ambush, he continued driving the front of the convoy and the RCP, increasing dispersion in the security element to absorb any gaps. The end result was that the IED strike and ambush had not even slowed the convoy down in the slightest, because the Route Clearance Platoon, the slowest and most deliberate movers at the front of the convoy, had not slowed down.

By the time I got up to the Lande Nawah Wadi, the front of the convoy had been there for nearly three hours. The RCP had cleared down into the wadi and was working their way up the other side.

It was nearly dark. The last time most vehicles had refueled was at the Lone Hill, 30-some-odd hours ago. Shutting down overnight had saved a lot of fuel, but almost everyone was on fumes. I organized a refueling operation to get everyone topped off before night fell and before they navigated the wadi. It was only a short drive from the Lande Nawah to FOB Edinburgh, six miles or so, but that could take hours or days. Nobody knew.

For every previous Operation Lava mission, the British had sent a security platoon south from FOB Edinburgh. But because of a heavy firefight up north of Musa Qal'eh, near Panda Ridge, there were no forces available to meet us down south. We would be on our own all the way in.

Staff Sgt. Caravalho was really not feeling well—the IED had hit him hard and his truck had been destroyed. He was riding in one of the security gun-trucks, so I dropped back to the end of the American main body to make sure that every truck and Marine got through.

The descent into the wadi was steep and winding. The last 30 meters dropped down suddenly and curved sharply to the left. Most of the trucks were through the wadi. The second to last truck, one of the MK36 wreckers, started down the trail into the Lande Nawah, so I jumped in my truck and waved to the lead British vehicle, who would follow me.

We stopped moving. *What was going on?* It had just gotten dark, but visibility wasn't too bad. I stood on top of my truck to see what I could see. I couldn't see anything. A couple of my Marines came running up the hill. "Hey sir, one of those guys from 1/2 flipped his MRAP."

"At the bottom?" Probably right on the left-hand curve.

"Yup. Right at the turn."

I jumped out and ran down the hill, trying to stay in the tire tracks so as to not step on an IED. Sure enough, the driver had not seen the turn until too late, and overshot the turn, rolling the MRAP onto its passenger side. The exhaust system and air intakes were torn up and cracked but the driver was okay.

2100. I had been awake for 64 hours. The convoy was stopped. Another problem, just when we were almost there. I brought up a wrecker and we debated the best way to recover the truck.

“What if we use the crane to pull the truck up?” somebody said.

“No way. That truck weighs over 35,000 pounds. The crane on the 36 is only rated for 22,000.”

“We’re gonna have to roll it back up,” I insisted.

“Alright, sir, I guess I could use the dual winches on the back.”

It took about an hour, but we got the MRAP out and the platoon’s mechanic, Sgt. Williams, gave the truck a once over. “It’s fine to drive, sir. The air intake is smashed, but the second filter will catch any dust for the short trip. It’s safe.” He turned to the Marine driving it. “Alright, killer, get moving.”

“I’m not driving that truck. It could have been damaged,” the lance corporal insisted.

Sgt. Galante, my security team leader, countered, “If anyone damaged it, it was you when you missed the turn.”

“How could I have seen that turn?”

“The 150 drivers in front of you managed to make it. Get moving.”

“No. You’ll have to tow the truck.” Who was this Marine and who did he think he was? His recklessness had already damaged equipment and endangered Marines, and now he was being insubordinate outside the wire in an area known to be full of IEDs.

I'd had enough. I interjected. Less than six inches from the Marine's face, I let him have it, waving "knife hands" and aggressively gesturing at him. "That's enough. I'm not endangering anybody else by making them tow the truck that you rolled by your carelessness. We have waited here long enough. My TMO says the truck is safe to drive. You are ordered to drive that truck the last 10 kilometers to FOB Edinburgh. If you refuse, I will charge you under Article 92? Any questions?"

"No." He looked sullen.

"No whaaaat?" Sgt. Galante smiled.

"No, sir."

"Sgt. Galante, you got this?" I turned back toward my truck.

"Got it, sir." He turned to the lance corporal. "Get in your truck. Not another word."

We were finally moving again. It was completely dark, and took several hours to get over the rolling hills north of the Lande Nawah and up to the plateau that FOB Edinburgh sat on. 0200 in the morning. I was losing track of what day it was after 69 hours awake. My truck team was finally inside the wire. I found Capt. Gallagher and briefed him on what had happened, and by the time I returned I found my Marines asleep around the truck.

They had set up a cot for me and put my pack on it. They really went out of their way to take great care of me. I pulled out my iPod to put on some music as I fell asleep. I didn't make it through the first line of the first song before I was out.

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We go to war so you don't have to

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## Responses (1)



Jason Adsit

What are your thoughts?



Jason Adsit

You

Mar 25, 2021

...

Jeff, great write-up. I bought a copy of your book. I was one of those Thor 3-4 sweepers in the RCP at the front. I'd love to chat sometime. Thanks for writing this.



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