

## A Killing in Iraq

The sun was beating on us like an angry monster. Bill and I were on the roof of a three story house that looked like a thousand other rooftops we had been on. There was a waist height concrete wall enclosing us, providing a false sense of security. A ridiculously oversized satellite dish was looming behind, granting cover from positions higher than us. Sweat had soaked through my body armor. The boots I was wearing were becoming spotted with what my socks could no longer hold in. We were not only tired from the heat, but had just finished an intense battle with what most likely was an al-Qaeda insurgency, that had raged on for two hours. This is not too unusual of a situation. We had been fighting an element for many months that was well organized and heavily armed, but that day has been burned in my memory, and often surfaces whether called upon or not.

I was deployed to Iraq for the second time in May of 2006. By then, I was a team leader and enjoyed having a little more control of situations than on the previous tour. Bill and I had been new soldiers together and became close on a working basis. In March of 2007, after ten months of trying to calm northern Iraq, participating in the troop surge, and fighting in Baghdad, we got orders to drive south to a town called Baqubah, located in the Anbar Province. Military Intel reported that al-Qaeda had created a stronghold, due to the lack of American soldiers available to patrol the area. Our first day in town would set the stage for what would become a costly battle. Two men from my platoon were killed after an IED demolished their Stryker. Months would follow with the loss of many friends and many enemies. It was some of the most intense fighting the war had seen.

There was an eerie silence after the firefight, and my ears were still ringing from expending most of my ammo. The air was pungent with the smell of sewage, diesel fuel, and gunpowder. Bill and I were watching down the main street in town, spotting for any lingering al-Qaeda fighters that felt the need to engage us again. A man began to cross the abandoned street, which managed to get our attention very quickly. The both of us lined him up in our sights to assess his intentions. Bill says to me "I am going to take him out." Sometimes these decisions are fast and easy to make, but this was different. I did not think Bill's judgment was correct. I informed my colleague of my assessment, stating that the man did not look suspicious, nor was he armed. "I am going to kill this guy," Bill excitedly states. I advise him again, it is pretty clear this man means no harm and does not need to be engaged. As I am looking at him in great detail through my scope, a loud pop pierces the air, and an excited groan slips out of Bills mouth.

I wish I could say why Bill felt the desperate need to end that man's life. Maybe it would be easier to process, but I never got an explanation. I never asked. We had been out for quite a few days, and by that point, had lost three good friends to an increasingly violent war. All we wanted to do was go home, and that possibility was not looking so good. Maybe he was dealing with problems at home or just wanted revenge. I don't know. I was looking at this dead man in great detail, wondering why he had to die. We had seen so

much death, violence, and destruction that war can naturally bring, but felt this death was unjustified, unnecessary, and avoidable. We sat there in an eerie calm for another thirty minutes on that rooftop. I could not tell Bill how I felt about his actions. What do you say to someone when emotions are so high, and they have watched your back for so long? Orders came over the radio to move to the body and find out if he had any link to the fighting. We only had to move a block to arrive at the man's body. Bill pulled security while I searched him. He knew we were not going to find anything linking him to the battle. I had found an ID with a name and address on it. Turns out, he only lived 4 houses away and nothing turned up indicating he was involved in the hostilities.

Seven of us, including Bill, moved down the street to where the man apparently resided. An old and wise looking woman answered the door with a look of fear on her face. Neighborhoods knew when you were going door to door, and she was aware her house was singled out the instant we arrived. She filled the street with an indescribable wail that infected the family of seven behind her. It became defining in the house where a father, brother, son, uncle, and sole provider would no longer be returning. We told the family that their loved one was caught in a cross fire and was lying in the street not too far away. I began to think of my family and the inconceivable reaction they would have in a similar situation. I was mad at Bill. I was really mad at Bill. The sorrow was gushing out of that house like a tsunami. Bill could not feel the wave of grief because he opted to pull outside security while the rest of us informed the family. He did not want to be hit by the cost of that decision, that single shot taken without regard for human life and its value. He does not share the same memory of that evening as I do. Bill needed to make sure we were safe while cleaning up his mess.

Many things can alter the way a person will deal with a situation. Fatigue, hunger, anger and being surrounded by violence for long periods of time are very powerful elements that can change the way you think. I never said a thing about the incident to Bill after that day. I only spoke to him before the shot was taken, and kept the rest of my feelings to myself. Maybe I am responsible for not doing enough but I found some closure seeing that family suffer as they did. That was my punishment. What was his?