The Patch

We make our way down an urban street in the middle of Syria. There are two story buildings on each side of the street, war torn and deteriorating from the ongoing civil war throughout Syria. It is about three in the afternoon, and oddly quiet. Usually there are a lot of people in the area. Various things usually take place in the mid afternoon in this town, from people selling their homemade goods, to people going and buying produce. Today, there's no one to be seen.

"Sergeant Neubauer, something doesn't feel right. Where is everybody?" says Lance Corporal Mcnulty, one of the 13 Marines in my squad.

"Keep your eyes open, and stay alert. We are taking this slowly."

Mcnulty wasn't wrong. There was something wrong. I could feel it in my chest. Fear ripped through our bodies, not knowing what to expect. You could cut the tension in the air with a knife. Each and every one of the buildings lining the street could be a potential hiding place, filled with enemy combatants waiting on an ambush. An IED could be emplaced anywhere near our route through the town, waiting to explode on one wrong step. My heart is beating heavy, I can hear it in my ears. I carefully walk, leading the patrol with a Compact Metal Detector (CMD) down the empty street. The quietness of the town makes my heart thumping more apparent. My CMD starts beeping. What could it be? A Mine? An IED? I look down to investigate what is setting off the tone. It's just a piece of metal rebar from one of the buildings. As I look up, a door to my right flies open, and in the flash of an eye a man with an AK47 appears in the doorway, pointing his rifle directly at me.

Let's take a step back so I can explain to you how I ended up in this situation. In October of 2017 I was deployed to Korea. While on deployment the Syrian civil war was waging on. The Syrian government was using chemical weapons against the rebellion and Syria's citizens. After an attack on the Syrian people, President Trump called for ground troops to enter Syria. The effort would consist of an Artillery unit and a Combat Engineer unit. Our unit, the Combat Engineers, was the closest unit to Syria at the time. Due to this we were pulled from our deployment in Korea and immediately reassigned to the effort in Syria. We flew out to Okinawa Japan and on December 18th, we loaded up onto a C130 military aircraft, and departed for Syria.

"You will take this patch with you wherever you go. Always on the front of you flak jacket. It is absolutely essential in your day to day operations. If you ever go down or your brother next to you goes down, this will be ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL to yours and their survival." said Staff Sergeant Magobet, our platoon sergeant for Charlie Company 1st Platoon. We received our patches right before we took off for Syria. These patches included critical information about each individual Marine, and if someone went down, would be critical in getting them the medical attention they needed as fast as possible. If you ever had to take a patch from another Marine, you were essentially holding their life in your hands.

We landed in Syria, and as the first unit on the ground, had no idea what to expect. We rushed out of the crowded C130, weapons drawn, and ready for whatever would face us ahead.

After setting up a perimeter, we started to dig foxholes. These were small holes in the ground about 5 feet deep and only wide enough for 2 people. After 2 days of holding our position and securing the area, the Artillery detachment arrived. Once they were settled into their foxholes, we were briefed on what our mission was. We, the Combat Engineers, were tasked with clearing out cities and routes for the Artillery unit to drive down. They were to set up in designated locations and fire onto designated targets, then pick up and relocate to a new position.

Each patrol we went out on we were outfitted with our body armor, our weapons, 180 rounds of ammo, a CMD and a patrol pack loaded with food and water. Our patrols lasted up to two days each. Each patrol was met with new challenges, everything from mines and IED's to enemy combatants emplaced throughout the routes. We went out countless times, ready for whatever would come ahead, and completing our missions without error.

February 20th, 2019. My squad of 13 Marines went out on yet another patrol. Our packs were heavy, our bodies were exhausted, and we just wanted to be back home, but it wasn't time to leave yet. So we loaded up and checked our gear and departed. I didn't have a good feeling about this patrol. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach and didn't know why. As we left the base, I reached down and felt my patch. Sweat, blood and dirt had made it rough and worn, but it gave me comfort knowing that no matter what, my Marines had my back, and if the time came where my patch was in one of their hands, they wouldn't let me down.

Now, here we are, in the middle of what seems like an abandoned city and in an instant, it wasn't empty or quiet. As I look up from my CMD and see the man pointing his weapon at me, I yell out to my Marines, "Contact right!" as I threw my CMD to the ground and reached for my weapon. No sooner than the words came out of my mouth I heard the gunshots. Pain ripped through my right thigh and what felt like a freight train hit me in the chest then head. I was knocked to the ground and found myself looking up into the sun. Gunfire erupted from all around. The sound of bullets ripping around us and smacking into the walls of the houses around us was all we could hear.

Out of nowhere I find myself being drug into the first floor of a building. I look up and see one of my Marines Corporal Forbey dragging me by my flak jacket. As my squad set up and returned fire from the building I could feel a tourniquet tightening around my leg. The pain resonated through my entire body, and my breathing was labored. Forbey ripped my radio from my flak and pulled off my patch. I knew it wasn't good. As voices start to fade and the gunfire seems to get quieter, I hear the unmistakable sound of another patch being ripped off. As my vision closes in, I frantically look around and see another one of my Marines on the ground, Corporal Kovak. My heart drops, my breathing is all I can hear now. I'm not scared anymore, I'm worried for my Marines. I can't stop thinking about them and how I'm not going to be there with them. It's my duty to keep them safe, and I've let them down. My vision goes black, and everything gets quiet.

I wake up in a hospital bed. I have no idea where I am, but as I come to I can see my Marines waiting by the bed. They made it. After I passed out it wasn't long before an armored vehicle patrol came to their aid and extracted myself and Kovak. They pushed on with the

mission and finished with no further incidents. After talking with them for a little I notice

something. Kovak isn't anywhere to be found. I ask about him, if he's okay, where he is at. They

all get quiet, and Forbey hands me a patch.

"Kovak didn't make it, but out of everyone here we all agree we think you deserve to keep his

patch."

Every day I wake up and look at that blood stained patch. I'm reminded of my Marines

and the struggles we faced together, and of course of my friend. Every day I carry his name on a

band on me. It took me almost a year, but looking back, I've realized that nothing in life is

guaranteed. We can't take anything for granted, and not only that, but we will all be faced with

various hardships. But as long as you are surrounded by good people, ones who have your back,

you're going to be okay. Find people you trust with your patch, and who trust you with theirs,

and you'll never be alone, you'll never be forgotten.