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Saving The Soldier

By Clint Hall

My camouflaged jacket drags the hot sands forward with me; emotion has long since drained from my eyes. I move only on adrenalin. My hands squeeze at the sands so hard, it threatens to turn to glass. My sand-covered fleece blanket shrouds me and makes me look just like another dune; a moving dune, however, but the enemy is too stupid to notice. It's almost hard to believe that a hundred metres behind me is a lush gathering of trees.

I crawl nearer to the site where my team had been ambushed, there must still be enemy on the premises, so I need to be cautious. It's hot out, but my shroud keeps me shielded from the sun's burning rays. The ambush of my team weighed heavy on my shoulders.

I was setting up in a tree in the jungle, sniper rifle poised, hands shaking, camo paint melting down my forehead. The enemy's commander danced inside my scope, I was ready to fire, but just then the branch beneath my feet cracked and snapped off. I fell – must have been twenty feet, hitting my head on every branch on the way down. I must have knocked myself out because I don't remember hitting the river, but I did. The last thing I remember was my commander yelling my name before I awoke, wet on the shore. The river that ran through the trees swept me almost a hundred feet away from my team. Where were they? Did my slip give them up?

I ran back to the tree that I fell from and looked up at the branch that had given way. I was sure that it was strong enough to hold me. I rubbed at the stinging in the back of my head from the fall, blood still matted my hair. What next? I wondered.

I see one of my comrades forty feet away, sprawled in the sand; he is as still as a lake on

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a calm day. It's Max! Maybe he is alive. I crawl closer then stop, frozen. Footsteps. Sand is being kicked up into the wind. The grains bounce off my shroud; I hear it so clearly, it's so loud!

A man's boots startle me as they enter my field of vision only two feet away; he almost stepped on me! My eyes focus on his soul as he looks at my fallen friend. The man aims his gun at Max's head and uses the point of his boot to nudge his body a couple times. When he is satisfied that Max is indeed lifeless, he reaches down and takes a fistful of Max's dog tags. He yanks on the chain, and when it doesn't come off, he swings his rifle over his shoulder and uses both hands to tug on it. When that doesn't work he puts the heel of his boot on Max's pale face and gives a forceful pull. The chain snaps and the man stumbles back a few steps. He retreats from my immediate sight. I almost reach for another handful of sand, but I realize that I don't hear those same footsteps leaving, that same blast of sand against my shroud, so he must still be here. My heart raced . . . what if he noticed my movement?

It isn't that. He stoops over the body and lets a large, foamy glob of spit drip from his lips onto the sewn emblem of our flag on Max's shoulder.

I stare at the flag after he leaves. I just lie there . . . staring. I don't even know what I'm thinking. I just stared at it and maybe I was thinking about the man stepping on Max's face, removing his tags like he was removing a crooked nail from a piece of wood, maybe I thought about that tarnished flag; my home – spat upon. I know now more than ever that I have to find any survivors and bring them to the retrieval point.

There's another jarhead forty feet from Max, on his back, gun-in-hand and staring into the sky. Well, maybe staring is the wrong word as he had been shot in the face; red and pink and white matter was scattered around his head like confetti. I wish I knew who he was, I feel so bad for not knowing, but he's dead so he can't have my attention right now.

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Another is beside the confetti man, this one had stepped on a mine; the lower half of his body is nowhere to be seen. There are two more men twenty feet from them, and another man ten feet from the two; his finger twitched. Maybe it was one of those after death reaction things, but there's the possibility that he's alive, and I have to go for him even if the chances are slim.

He is lying face first in the dirt; he is still breathing because I can see his breath uplifting dust. I feel his wrist and find a pulse; it's weak, but it's there. I crawl on top of him and drag him along with me underneath the blanket. Probably looking like a dune consuming the dead.

Before I was about to leave the forested area, I fished around in my bag looking for the radio. Everything inside was wet; my handgun was waterlogged – not to mention I still didn't know where my rifle was. The radio was wet, but I was still hopeful, still wishing that it survived. I placed the earpiece in my ear and turned it on. Nothing. Not a crackle, not a fizz, no static, no voices. Just nothing.

I heard gunfire. My ears stood at attention; I pulled the bud from my ear, looked toward the noise with scared eyes. I heard cries from my friends, pain-filled yelps and screams. They were dying out there, dying without me as I stayed in the trees, hiding. I couldn't move, though; I wanted to, but I just couldn't. They needed my help but my legs were frozen. My adrenalin was pumping hard, but I didn't take a breath of air. They would need to be rescued, and a radio was the only way. I had to get one of their radios. It would be lying on the ground in the middle of weapons exchange. I needed to enter the battlefield. I needed to go into the desert.

It was all on my shoulders now; if I made the call I'd be a hero . . . if I didn't I'd be another name on the plaque, one below whomever's name was before mine in the alphabet.

I didn't like that second option. I wish I had my gun.

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I dragged the injured soldier over fifty metres already; I am almost in the cover of the trees. I haven't been spotted. I will make it. *We* will make it. Oh God, he is so bloody. I can't see where he is bleeding from, but I know it must be a big hole for this much blood to be leaking out.

I keep us moving and we finally reach the trees. I know there isn't anyone near our position because the blood trail that this guy leaves would've been about seventy-five metres long giving the enemy some bright breadcrumbs. I pulled him to his feet and shed the blanket.

"Come on, you have to walk."

I wrap his arm around my shoulders and we stumble through the jungle.

Don't get me confused with someone brave; I'm not looking to be a hero. Not in the slightest. In all honesty, if I had the option of saving my friends or going home . . . I would've left . . . saw my girlfriend again, and my dog, Dirk. I used to always wrestle with the rotwiler: that big, black, beautiful animal. Jamey, my girlfriend, despised the dog, but agreed to look after him while I was gone. I love her. She was what kept me alive through all this. Long, thick golden hair, brighter than the sun - curves like a Barbie doll.

I see my friends going out to fight in this war about politics, and they come back as half the men they were, or sometimes they don't even come back at all, so the only thing that holds my mind and soul together is Jamey and the hope that I can see her again. And my mind and soul are all that I have out here.

That's all I wanted, was to go home, but these were my friends, my colleagues; I had to save them. Even if it was only one of them.

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The feeling came back to my legs, it was time to enter the battlefield; I started breathing again and raced through the jungle to the ear piercing sounds of hammers detonating gunpowder. The screams still sounded. It was a nightmare. My brain was numb; I couldn't comprehend the severity of what was happening. If you were in this war, you had seen dead people on more than one occasion already, but somehow this was different. I couldn't actually see the carnage, my mind just developed pictures as I approached, and I was approaching quite quickly. The discharges were louder, as were the screams. I got to the edge of the jungle in time to see my last comrade slaughtered from afar. I jumped behind a tree and waited. The gunfire stopped. No, actually there was still the occasional blast from soldiers that were shooting at mirages or thought they saw one of the bodies move.

Atkins was twenty feet away from me; blood was seeping into the sand and staining it all around his legs. His eyes were wide open; no life left in them. He just stared at me. Stared. I looked deep into his eyes, but didn't see the man I had come to call 'friend.' All I saw was an empty skin, like a banana peel without the banana. I saw in his eyes the family he was leaving behind, and his dreams of becoming a psychologist. He helped people, he told me how my mind could be saved through all this. How I had to step out of my mind to save my soul. He wanted to help everyone, he wanted to become world renowned like Freud, but that was gone. All gone. Lost in his eyes.

I saw his bag laying three feet away from the four-inch hole in his side.

An antenna from inside the bag waved at me in the wind. His radio.

I try to get the injured soldier to move faster, but he just can't. He doesn't have the ability or the blood or both. I hear something, something distant that makes me stop. I look behind us to

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try and place the sound, but I don't see anything so it must be farther back than I have the ability to see. We haven't moved too far into the trees, his hobbling keeps us from moving fast, so the noise could've come from the sands.

I hear it again! It's a voice . . . a different language. I can't speak those words, but I don't have to, all I have to know is that that is the enemy's tongue and they are speaking it near me! We start to run or jog, or hobble faster, whatever you want to call it, there was forward motion, and that's all that matters.

They must have found the blood trail! That's how they know that someone's still alive. Gunfire starts ringing out from behind us; we've been spotted! Bullets howl past our ears, I can almost see them pass by me. So many of them, too . . . like angry fireflies that can move faster than sound.

I can get us out of this! I know I can! The retrieval point isn't too far from here!

I peeked around the corner of the tree to look into the desert and scan the sand. There were three of them standing around surveying the damage and yanking dog tags off the necks of their victims in the golden sea. I waited until they either lit up a cigar or tugged on other dog tags to lunge for the bag. I had no problem getting it; I wasn't noticed. The radio worked, thank God. I feared that something would be wrong with it, a bullet through its circuits, maybe.

But it was my lucky day. Lucky day. . . .

I sent out a distress call and told them to send a chopper to the retrieval coordinates. I got a twenty to twenty-five minutes ETA and closed the channel. I dropped the radio and looked out toward my fallen friends. I wondered if there was anyone still alive in the midst of the massacre.

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I'm not sure if throwing him over my shoulder will slow us down or speed us up, but I know if I did I would have to stop to get him up there and that would waste precious time and allow the enemy to gain on us. So I decide against it.

I look back, but can't see anybody, just brush and trees; however, the gunfire proves that there *is* someone back there. We're nearing the retrieval point; I recognize some of the trees that I had passed earlier in the day, but five minutes must still be killed until we hear the comforting cut of chopper blades. We have to hide and take out these monsters that are following us while we wait.

I look into the sky again and can't see or hear anything parting the wind. Disappointment accompanied the intense fear within me. I place him in the dry grass and take hold of his rifle; I set up for a sniper attempt in the grass beside a tree. I look through the scope and see three men; they had stopped firing and presently searched the brush for us.

I aim at the one closest to the tree we are hiding behind and snap off a shot; he doesn't have time to cry out in pain . . . I shot him in the neck. He grabs at the broken artery as it gushes like a geyser, and his comrades look at him, shocked. I shoot the second in the nose and the third in the shoulder before he could get out of the way. I stay silent behind the tree waiting for an indication of where he lay. I inch away from the safety of the tree and look around. I see some blades of grass rustle and I point my gun at them. I detonate two shells and hear no more rustling. I must have hit him.

I sit down in front of the soldier I saved and checked myself for injuries. I had none; I was quite surprised. There was a lot of gunfire.

I hear more rustling and look up behind my friend's drooped head to see a man jump

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from the brush and fire down into the soldier's thigh. My own thigh tenses up with enormous pain for some reason. Empathy? I yelp and grab it as tight as I can, almost as if I can stop his bleeding from over here. The soldier pulls his sidearm with surprising haste for a man in his condition and fires three shots into the enemy's chin before he can pull the trigger again. The enemy drops and the soldier turns, shoots his assailant's carcass four more times in spite.

What the hell was going on? Why did *I* feel pain for the injury *he* got? He turns back to face me and I stare into his eyes for the first time. Confusion hit my face like a freight train. His eyes were eerily familiar, his face and expressions are the same as the man I know best.

Those eyes are *mine*, the face belongs to *me* . . . this man sitting across from me is me! I see him in the mirror everyday as I shave!

My memory is Swiss-cheesed. Things are out of place, unorganized, but they start to return. Images of what really happened danced around in my mind . . .

After I radioed HQ for chopper retrieval, I poised Atkins' automatic, crouched down low and ran over to the next man on the field. His injuries were lesser than Atkins, so I figured he might be alive.

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The enemy saw me. They started to fire, I dodged and ducked and rolled as much as I could and tried not to get hit, but it was useless. Bullets hit me from all angles, I was a bloody mess, but I was alive; I was the only one that could claim that. I fell to the ground and prayed that someone would come save me. What did Atkins say? Let your mind save your soul?

Maybe the me that was under the camouflaged blanket was my instinct for self-preservation. Maybe he was what I needed to see, maybe he was my mind helping myself, or maybe he was my guardian angel, but I remember what he - or I - did so vividly, though! He didn't forcefully drag me like I imagined he did; I crawled myself. I got here myself; I killed those three men myself, but it felt like I wasn't a part of him as I did those things. Maybe it was the hot weather that made me believe that I was saving myself, or maybe the loss of blood made me hallucinate or both, but whatever it was *I saved myself*. It was me . . . it was always me.

And now I'm alone. Whatever I thought it-him-me was, was gone now. The charade was over, my guardian has left, and I have come to my senses. The chopper is coming, I hear no more enemies, but I can't hold on. I brought myself this far, I want to bring myself the rest of the way, but it is too hard. I have to finish saving the soldier.

My head starts to droop and I begin to lose consciousness.

"Wake up soldier." My eyes flutter open and I look into Jamey's beautiful blues. "Dirk won't eat, I think he misses you." I can see her figure hiding in the brightness of the sun directly above her. Her hair waves at me, teasingly, and the corners of her mouth turn up when she sees she has my attention.

I try to smile back, but it hurts too much to move any muscle, "I can't come back, baby. I

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didn't survive."

The sky around her slender silhouette strobed as helicopter blades sliced through the afternoon sky. It won't be long before I'm back with Jamey and Dirk and leave this war behind.

I saved the soldier.