

LIVE AND LEARN

by

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It was house to house fighting, the most dangerous of combat situations. This wasn't your average mission—*but then Marines don't do average*, thought Corporal Dominic Elkins, second in the stack—*that's why we're Marines*.

'Bam', standing just outside the stack with the metal battering ram, delivered a single strike, punching through the flimsy wood, housing the lock, and nearly knocking the door off its hinges. Bam was huge, with meaty shoulders and slabs of muscle strapping his chest, arms and legs. He'd opened over seventy portals with the heavy ram; always with one hit, hence the nickname 'Bam' rather than 'Bam-Bam' or worse, 'Bam-Bam-Bam'. It was a sense of pride for him and a big safety factor to the five men in the stack since they had no way of knowing what waited on the other side of the door. It could be a woman with children sitting down to eat, or an IED that would blow the Marines out of their boots.

This time it turned out to be three committed terrorists with AK-74's. The first man in the stack, Sgt. Matt Simmons caught a spray of bullets that ripped up his right thigh and across his torso just as he was tossing a flash-bang into the room. His SAPPI plates and other armor absorbed the body shots, but the combination of concussion and shattered femur bone dropped him to the dirt floor. The bang rolled under a table and went off, the heavy wood blunting its effect.

Corporal Elkins, seeing his sergeant fall, ignored both protocol and the bang and followed into the room, firing before Simmons completely hit the ground. His M4A4 spit a three round burst of 5.56 NATO rounds at the heart of the closest man. One of the copper jacketed bullets hit the barrel of the man's rifle sending shards of metal and wood back into his face—the other two destroyed his heart and lungs. Elkins shifted and pulled the trigger twice more sending six rounds toward the next target, the red dot of the EOTECH site jerked up and to the right ever so slightly. Puffs of red misted the stale air as hollow sounding thuds indicated a series of hits.

The second man went down, screaming.

Elkins felt an impact to his chest—ignored it and re-sighted—just as the man behind him, Lance Corporal Barry Market, put two bullets into the belly of the man that had shot Elkins. The terrorist bent over—straightened—started to aim and was instantly obliterated by a barrage of bullets from both Elkins and Market.

"You hit, Corporal?" asked Market from the radio mic.

"Just armor. I'm fine," said Elkins as he swept further into the divided room, clearing each section with the muzzle of his rifle. Market followed close as did the third

man in the stack. The fifth member dragged the bleeding Simmons out of the shack to the medic waiting beside Bam.

Elkins could hear his own breathing amplified inside the helmet. His chest hurt where the bullet made contact and he could feel blood wetting his undershirt. He would have a welt and some swelling and a colorful bruise later, but he knew from experience that the slug itself had not penetrated his plates. He was senior now, the leader. It was his first time taking charge of a mission and he felt a new weight—a sense of responsibility he'd never felt before—for the men with him—*his* men now. He also thought about the three targets they'd taken out—*three*—he had to keep count. Command demanded exact numbers.

They cleared three rooms without further resistance, but the place still felt—inhabited—dangerous. It wasn't that he heard anything—his hearing was shot from all the gunfire—no—it was more of a hunch—and intuition. In peacetime he might have ignored that feeling—but here—in the sand pit—no way. He'd been on too many missions not to trust his battle instincts.

Motioning with a short series of hand and finger gestures he directed the fourth man in the stack, Ozzy Flukes, to watch the last room while he swept the closest two with Market for cover. When they'd been cleared they regrouped with Flukes and the fifth member of the stack, Lance Corporal Cristian Velasquez, who had rejoined after depositing Simmons with the medics.

Their intel was that this house was being used to make IED's and Elkins figured if it was accurate, this last room would be the place.

Dominic didn't like the idea of popping the door on a possible explosive device and if bombers were in there they might have had time to rig one up. The safest course of action would be to lob a couple of grenades at the door and wait for the dying to stop. The problem was it might be a roomful of kids or women instead of bad guys making explosives and neither his conscience nor the rules of engagement would allow taking the chance with grenades.

“What do you think?” whispered Market through the mic. “I myself am not liking it. They had plenty of time to rig a few Claymores or a few sticks of string pulled TNT to the door while we were playing pin the bullets to the rag-heads out there. We punch it and we might end up with a mouthful of nails and ball-bearings and high grade exploding gases. Not the way I want to finish the day, Corporal.”

“We can't just blow it,” said Elkins. “There might be innocents.”

“If they're here, in the same place as the guys with the guns, they ain't innocent,” said Market. “Collateral damage sucks, but there's a reason it happens in wartime and it's called being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people.”

Dominic shook his head. “The rules of engagement don't afford us that luxury.”

“Rules are rules and all that, Corporal, but sometimes reality speaks louder than rules and the reality is that if we open that door and they have it rigged we’re all going to go bye-bye real fast like.”

Dominic looked at the wall that stood between them and the door.

Market wiped a stream of sweat from his cheek. “Look, Corporal, there ain’t nobody here but us to say what was what. So how about we all agree there’s a bunch of IED making bad boys in there and send them to their virgins like good Marines?”

“Without first verifying that they *are* bad guys?”

“That’s right,” said Market. “Some days it just sucks to be on the wrong side of a war.”

“No,” said Dominic. “Orders are orders and sometimes it sucks to have to follow them—but that’s what we do.” He looked at the wall again. “Bam,” he said over the radio, “I need you in here with your toy.”

“You got an idea?” asked Market.

“I got an idea,” said Dominic.

Bam came up behind and touched Dominic’s shoulder. “I’m here, Corporal.” Bam was always formal.

Dominic touched the wall. “Think you can punch me a hole through this with one hit?”

“Where exactly, Corporal?” he was also brief in his speech.

Dominic pointed to a spot about eye level.

Bam felt the wall with his sausage sized fingers. His hand looked like a catcher’s mitt. He looked at Dominic, his lips tilting at the corners. A nod.

Elkins looked at the other members of the stack. “Market, you and Ozzy pull a pin each on a frag and stand ready. Don’t lose the pins. If there’s innocents in there you’re going to have to secure them. As soon as Bam knocks through I’ll take a quick peek. If it’s hostiles I’ll drop to the ground and you two toss in the frags.”

“What if you get a bullet in the face?” asked Market.

“Then I’ll drop for sure and you proceed with the plan.” Dominic grinned.

Market shook his head. “I myself do not like this plan, but since Sgt. Simmons is down, you are the boss.”

Elkins gripped his shoulder. “Pull the pins and stand ready.” He looked at Bam—touched the wall and said, “On three.” He held up one finger—two—three...

Bam hit the wall with roughly the force of an incoming ICBM. The mulch, wood and thatch composite of the wall breached as though it hadn’t been there. Only Bam’s considerable experience and expertise with battering kept him from over-swing.

Dominic was up and looking before Bam dropped the ram. He saw a tight knot of perhaps seven men ducked down behind several tables stacked in front and on top of each other, facing the door. One of the men saw him and struggled to point a rifle, but it

caught in the clothing of the man next to him. Dominic dropped to the ground, praying that neither of his men would accidentally fumble their grenades on top of him.

There was a clatter and then Elkins was lifted off the dirt floor by a hot hand of dirt and wood and pressure that threw him across the room and into a wall and back to the floor. A patter of rocks and debris cascaded like rain sprinkling his helmet and face and neck. Dust and smoke choked the air from the room and a high pitched whine burned through the muteness of his world like an ice pick heated to white and sliced through the fragile membrane of his eardrums.

Forcing his eyes open he saw only red. He swiped at his goggles and realized they were covered in blood. *Where were his men?* His body hurt—everywhere. The gentle sweep of the short flight had been made a lie by the brutal impact at the end. Dominic coughed out dust and pushed himself to his knees. Blood dribbled to the thirsty dirt from some wound to his scalp. He surveyed the room, or what was left of it, and saw his men scattered about like spent casings. *Were they dead?*

Two grenades, he thought, and frags at that. How could they have done all this?

His rifle was still attached by its combat strap as he crawled to the closest man. It was Ozzy. Dominic couldn't check for a pulse with his gloves on so he gave him a hard shake. In the real world he would never have moved a man with possible neck or back injuries like that, but this was war and in war there was no time or place for the niceties of preventing paralysis or further injury, there was time only for raw survival.

Ozzy's eyes popped open. He stared at Dom. "What happened?"

"No idea. Can you move?"

Ozzy wiggled his toes and fingers. "Ow!" he looked down and saw that two of the fingers on his right hand were bent back along the knuckles. "That don't look right."

Dominic saw Bam, Market and Velasquez struggling to their feet.

"Can you shoot with your left?"

"Suppose I'll have to."

Dominic saw a severed foot lying beside his knee. Not far away was an arm and on the wall he saw a rectangle of nose and cheek. It was like waking up to Frankenstein's laboratory. He looked at Market. "I said one frag each."

"We did," he said, holding a gloved hand over a tear in his sleeve that pooled blood. "I don't know what happened." He helped Dominic to his feet.

Dominic indicated the room with a head-bob. "Let's go check it out."

Tactfully they approached the destroyed section of wall. Inside was horrific. Blood and body parts scattered everywhere.

"How many were in there, Corporal?" asked Bam.

"Not sure," said Dominic. "Six—seven—maybe eight—it was a quick peek. We need an exact count."

Velasquez looked around. “How are we supposed to do that? I mean there’s no way to sort out all these parts. It would take hours. And the haji’s are gonna come runnin’ after all this racket.”

“Counting heads would be the fastest,” said Dominic, “but with all this rubble it would still take too long.” He looked toward the door they’d feared might be wired for explosives. It was gone. “What do you make of that, Bam?”

Bam checked out the sides of the hole. He nodded. “Wires. It was rigged all right. My guess is that when our frags went off it detonated the Claymores here as well as whatever other bombs they already had assembled and the powder and plastic and anything remotely combustible. We’re lucky to be alive, Corporal.”

“But not for long if we don’t beat feet out of here,” said Market.

“We still have to have a count for the brass,” said Dominic.

“We could average it out,” said Ozzy, “say seven in the room and the three up front for a total of ten?”

They all looked to their new leader, knowing his tendency to follow the letter of the law and his exactness for protocol.

Dominic shook his head and they all groaned inwardly; the knowledge that they could be swarmed and trapped at any minute weighing heavily.

He looked them each in the eye, his lips thin, jaw flexing. “We’re Marines. We don’t do average.” He spit blood from his mouth. “Make it eleven and let’s get out of here.” They all nodded, grinning, and started for the door.

Dominic was last out. He gave the room a last appraisal, seeing the carnage that had been inflicted and realized he’d learned something just now. This was literally the first time in his military career that he hadn’t followed his orders to the letter and then some. But it was also the first time the lives of the other men following those orders were his responsibility. And sometimes—not always—but sometimes—that was more important.

Eleven? Maybe it was twelve.

The End