

1Lt Mark Larson, Service Battery, TF 1-7

"Yeah I'd say its gonna hit 116° today" he says to his buddy as they head over to the gym for their zero six workout. After six months in country the body seems to be able to recognize nature's signals about a foreign country and land that comes from being in the environment for over half a year. "Yeah, It's cooled down these past three weeks," says 1LT Stephen Johnson of Service Battery, Task Force 1-7 as they enter the weight room only to see the usual twenty something soldiers. Soldiers that came here from all over the states and parts in between getting their daily exercise, some faces familiar some not but all here with the same mission to serve our country well and do the best we can. After the workout they change and head up to the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) to receive the latest Intel on enemy activity in sector. Larson likes to make the ten-minute walk as it gives him time to reflect on the day's mission and watch the sunrise in the east over this right shoulder. The walk also allows him to mentally rehearse scenarios that may arise throughout the day: Medevacs, Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's), Breakdowns, Unit Coordination and the like. He looks to the lieutenant on his left "Any suggestions on Checkpoint 212?" he has special trust in Johnson who has recently come off a five month rotation enduring mounted and dismounted street patrols, raids, and a lot of time

"outside of the wire". As they walk Larson confides in his peer that he woke up nervous realizing he would be the first team of patrols through the highly dangerous checkpoint and needed some peer advice or sympathy. "I sometimes take the exit before the bridge and head north in the southbound lane, but it might be hard with the larger trucks, I only had four hummers" Larson contemplates this for a minute and, like all patrol leaders, visualizes it all going down and decides its too dangerous with lack of maneuverability and opts for the traditional route. "Yeah, I'll stick the usual route but I don't like it."

Entering the TOC is not one of his favorite things to do for the TOC holds the truth about what is going on in sector and to stay calm he has learned that ignorance is often bliss. But this morning has been quiet so far but no one has really been out the gate yet so today he may be made the guinea pig and report any unusual activity. He says hello to some, grabs a cup of coffee and drops off his battle buddy to stay behind for the 0800 meeting with the planner, but Larson has to run. Although the walk to the TOC is long the trip back seems much shorter. Walking to his unit with the cup of coffee combined with the down hill slope, he realizes, makes it easy on him. Making his way to the unit waiting in the hangar he's excited to see that the troops are ready to go, check his watch 0827, he's just in time.

"Damn LT, I thought you forgot about us." Bellows SSG Buchanon the Service Battery Headquarters Platoon Sergeant, as he makes it down to the vehicles. "Nah, had to grab a cup of coffee, besides I like making a dramatic entry". Making his way to the unit's command post he drops off his mission information, asks once more about the route and he's off. Marching out of the hangar to the eagerly awaiting eighteen soldiers ready to go in their battle gear he feels much safer knowing the guys are ready and the nervousness seems to momentarily subside in the company of his own. His own soldiers that only a month ago he knew not one seem so familiar now. During the convoy brief, which the soldiers know better than him, Larson leaves out the repetitive stuff and focuses on his concerns about CP 212 and his plans for the hour long drive that morning. The mission for the unit is to support the Task Force and today they were heading north to drop off much needed supplies to FOB (Forward Operating Base) Tinderbox home of the Task

Force scout platoon. At the end of the brief he asks SSG Buchanan if he's forgotten anything and with that they mount up.

A week ago Larson had written home to his father on his feelings about running these patrols and missions on the main supply route with apprehension. "Dad, its like the feeling you get sitting in a roller coaster riding to the top, your nervous, yet focused, filled with anticipation with little control over the outcome". Exiting out the main gate and heading north all vehicles are in line and the radio is buzzing and then the familiar voice of SSG Buchanan comes over the net. "All vehicles are looking good" he relaxes for a minute. SSG B has been on over two hundred of these, Larson only ten and he's glad he has this NCO in his platoon. He thinks back if there is anything he may have left out, forgotten to tell the soldiers, something he didn't say that he should of but he trusts his men to do the right thing if the need should arise and he calls back "Dragon two this is Serpent five, lets roll". Taking the convoy up to 50 MPH, their moving, looking, scanning, and anticipating anything from the road but the explosive device would be the enemy's weapon of choice.

Ten minutes on the road and nothing to report and CP 212 is in the distance, a car can be seen slowing down at the checkpoint and the imagination runs wild in the lead vehicle. Should I call it in, keep going, shoot, not shoot...what? He tells his gunner, PFC Rogers, to keep trained on the car and look carefully as we cross the bridge, let him know if he sees any dirt that may have been moved. The kid from the Buckeye State yells back down he sees nothing but then again he wears glasses. Keeping the convoy speed up they make it through the check point and head north on the main supply route Tampa hitting over 50 MPH again. Although all soldiers have been trained to recognize an IED, it's nearly impossible to stop for everything on the side of the road that could harbor an explosive. Tire treads, rocks and trash are the most prevalent and often make the passenger wince when passing by. Thirty minutes later the patrol arrives at the outpost and delivers the goods and the Alpha Battery First Sergeant, First Sergeant Jacobs, is happy to see us. "What ya' got for us LT?" he asks, as Larson who promptly goes to parade rest, a running joke between the two. "You call we haul, that's what I always say" in the back of the three trucks they have brought over 1800 bottles of water, fifteen cases of near beer, and a new freezer which is really what he desires, Meals Ready to Eat and an assortment of ammunition and barrier material. The soldiers get busy and SSG Garcia, the Battalion Ammo NCOIC, is already screaming after only five minutes on the ground. As Larson approaches the makeshift TOC at FOB Tinderbox he still cant believe these guys live out here but they manage. Looking for his second cup of coffee he remembers he skipped breakfast, grabs an ever available Otis Spunkmeyer Blueberry Muffin and heads out the door. By this time movement is in full swing, forklifts are moving and the soldiers are too. With an estimated time of departure of 1200hrs he sits back and relaxes for a moment ...they might even get out of here on time.

Two hours later the trucks have been downloaded and the patrol has attained a few more items for the trip home. Bravo 1-4 Cav is sending their mortar team to their FOB and they are the taxi. With seven more soldiers, mortar ammo, a trailer and mortar tube equipped with base plates strapped down they are ready to roll. 'Ah, halfway done' he thinks to himself and the activity seems to have taken the edge off the nervousness. "Remember to stay focused" he tells himself as they leave the Tinderbox gate heading south through the rolling hills to the main supply route. Back up to 50 mph the lead vehicle continues to scan the sector for anything out of the ordinary with doubt and apprehension returning like an old friend. Did I see that bag on the road on the way up?

Is that a dead animal? Did I forget to get latest Intel brief from the TOC? Back through the check point 212 a slight sense of relief settles in the leader's mind as he realizes his chances of getting back safely are much greater now that he is on the access road to his FOB only ten minutes away. "All vehicles on bypass" comes over the radio and they are heading home.

Whether a soldier likes to admit it or not his home while in Iraq will be his FOB and in this case FOB Summerall is home of Task Force 1-7. And while his home is the FOB, his family are his battle buddies, his father the platoon sergeant, big brother the squad leader, best friend his weapon system. To the Non-Commissioned Officers in Charge and the Platoon Leader they are his ultimate responsibility. Good leaders recognize that trust has been placed upon him and his leadership to make sure they do the best job they can to protect them while accomplishing the mission. The Platoon Leader now safely back in his room always says thank you to the man upstairs for the safe return of his men only to suit up again in two more days to repeat the process. Sitting in his room the leader often reflects on his own life and what he was doing when he was the age of most of his enlisted soldiers. The average age of his gunners is twenty-one, his drivers are younger and are asked each day to perform ordinary tasks under extraordinary conditions. Two years ago their high school teachers and counselors probably looked down on these men for not wanting to go to college, or perhaps unable to or unwilling to take some standardized test. However, to their Platoon Leader and in the minds of all who serve with them they have already passed the most significant test of all, a test of courage which one will never be able to quantify.