

A Table in the Presence: Street Patrol by Georganne Schultz Hassell

Shortly after I arrived in the dusted desert province of Zabul, Afghanistan, I agreed to walk the streets with our security forces in what the military calls a presence patrol. I'm not sure why I said yes when the sergeant asked if I wanted to go with them that Friday night, but I shot out my agreement faster than I can decide which movie to rent, as if it were an easy decision in a normal life. Our unit had been told the locals liked it when we performed night patrols, hunting the enemy. That night we would oblige them.

The guys geared up with much less effort than me, swinging heavy armored vests over their heads with ease. With obvious experience they arranged various weapons on their bodies. Rifles, knives, shotguns, and sidearms each had a specific place of convenience among the camouflage. Greens lines of fabric held purple glow sticks in place while cargo pockets protected night vision goggles. Our gear-up complete, we rolled into two even columns, just like in training. Looking up and down the lines and realized I was the only girl, the runt of the group, again. I pulled my focus away from how silly my small frame must have looked with six magazines of M4 rounds strapped to my chest and concentrated on keeping up with this group of hardened men. Full combat gear is not my favorite wardrobe ensemble; after an hour or so I start to get uncomfortable. My belt holding up my Beretta M9 begins to sag down to my right leg, causing it to dig into my left hip. The weighted Kevlar vest forces me to appreciate my normal body weight, when gravity feels kinder. The men surrounding me carried this gear and so much more every day, and for that I admired them.

Time to move. The recently poured concrete at the gate meant we had to balance on a few wobbly boards just to exit the base. I did not want the patrol to start out with concrete feet, so I moved slowly. Feeling as wide as a car I put boot in front of boot until I was safely across. We shuffled back into our two neat lines and then into the dusty streets.

We began with the back streets where the familiar smell of rancid body odor and trash drifted past my nose so frequently I hardly noticed it after 15 minutes of patrol time. Zabul province didn't have any sanitary waste management, but the population made no effort to alleviate or mitigate the garbage problem. Empty water bottles, plastic wrappers, decaying food--it was all strewn about in and around the streets.

The poverty hit me the hardest that night, perhaps because we weren't just blasting through their town square in armored carriages. I couldn't avoid the children's pleading stares. Mud walls with straw packed throughout made up their homes, with a grimy rag of a cloth for a door. When the wind blew the rag doors aside I saw little more than dirt-packed ground and no furniture. This was inner-city poor, but in actuality, almost everyone in and around Qalat City was reduced to living in plywood houses, mud huts, or worse.

We stopped a few people and searched them unceremoniously. Soldiers used the pat-crush method, which patted down the individual and then pulled the fabric up, crushing it in their hands, so even a small object would be easier to find. I learned this technique in training but I was grateful to be a bystander now. It would be inappropriate for me to search anyone but

women and we encountered none in this highly conservative province, where women mainly stayed in the home. If they did go outside, they wore the full ghost-like covering called a burka. I didn't see any women draped in the traditional bright blue cloth out roaming the streets this time of night.

With heavy footsteps we trekked on, but when the buzz of a motorbike came too close we shouted in rough voices, "Wadareiga!" meaning, "Stay back!" It was one of the few words of Zabul's native Pashto language I had learned in my short time here. I couldn't say "welcome" or even tell them my name, but I could assert authority in their homeland. It was an odd twist on international relations.

A sergeant with more seasons in service than any green lieutenant like me lead us through the winding, dirt paths of the city and into the rural edges of this civilization. The city conditions were depressing with their but life on the outskirts was much worse. Homes were built from tattered fabric, sewn crudely together in patchwork fashion. It was a gypsy-like setting with women draped in colorful, soiled garments, and their tent homes sprouted from the rocky hills like mushrooms. Donkeys, goats and dogs roamed freely as if broken free from a deranged petting zoo. But there was no gypsy allure, no mystery to these people or their lives. There was only misery. I felt awkward stomping through their permanent, makeshift homes, and I couldn't tell if our presence was wanted. I tried to consider a foreign military stalking through my backyard and how upset I would be about it. My native New Jersey gut says I would be pretty pissed off.

After pillaging the gypsy village with our eyes we moved farther up the hill, and spent the last moments of daylight in the shadow of an ancient castle. From our resting point the castle only looked like a long mud wall on top of a hill, but it was rumored to have been built by Alexander the Great. Now it's an Afghan National Army station, occupied by warriors once more. The stench of dung here was more potent than ever, with craters of the excrement surrounding us. I sat with the rest of the men on boulders, grateful to get the extra weight down, and surveyed the land. Desolate. That was the lasting impression of this journey. Even the trees were twisted and burdened, rising up from a drought-ravaged soil.

We gathered ourselves for the patrol back into town, and just before we reached the main road we stopped and searched a man who was clutching his son's hand. I thought of this Afghan man's deep pride and wondered if searching our fellow humans like this was trampling all over it. Did we wound his ego by bending him to our ways? Would his son would remember that dad was stopped by strange men with guns one day, for no other reason than he was in our path?

Twilight came quickly to rest on the valley and created illusions for my eyes, distorting my depth perception. Our first street to cross back in the city was the traffic circle outside the bazaar. Traffic buzzed around and we waited a few moments before plunging into it and stopping the motorbikes and cars coming through. As we crossed the wide street I heard the familiar buzz of a motorbike on my left. I turned to face it, threw up my non-firing hand and shouted "Wadareiga!" to stop its progress, but it continued to speed toward us. I shouted again and met the same response: a bike speeding in my direction. My voice strained with a third call

and greater urgency, but the motorbike kept moving. I started to raise my rifle in their direction, the darkness deepening around me, and the air exploded with more shouting. This time my own voice was drowned in it. The motorbike screeched to a stop about 30 meters away, and our team lead shouted for us to move out. I lowered my rifle, my personal standoff over. This brief encounter didn't really warrant fear in comparison to the true soldiers' experiences who marched beside me. I pulled my small, shaky self together and ran quickly to the next street, where the bazaar waited for us in shadow.

By now the cloak of night had all but taken over, and this stretch of road was almost worse than the traffic circle. People and vehicles lined the narrow street and the men turned to watch us. I avoided making eye contact most of the time. The scene was busy and I tried to scan for potential ambush points, thanks to in part to training and to paranoia. This would be a terrifying place to have a firefight. There were shops and vehicles and people to complicate the battle space. I rushed a prayer for safety through my heart and then saw men in a second-story mosque kneeling in rows, dutifully facing Mecca. Lights from the street only reached far enough to make out their forms while the rest of the congregation was hidden in darkness, their sanctuary silent amidst the frenzy of the bazaar.

We pressed on. Escaping the bustle through a side street, we moved back into the residential area, and passed up and over crevice-like paths between squalid homes. My footing was unsteady over the rocks so I reached for the night vision goggles tucked into my left cargo pocket. I tried to attach the lens to the metal mount on my helmet while balancing and bouncing down the terrain. Naturally, I fumbled and ended up just cupping the lens in my hand as we continued winding through the city. I didn't want to stop the team but when we got to flat area I reluctantly asked the rear element for help. The sergeant quickly obliged and fitted the lens to rest in front of my left eye, keeping my right eye free for firing. At once the night was clear, illuminated in a green glow, and I felt foolish for not asking for help earlier. Less than ten minutes later we rounded the corner to the rear entrance of our base and the patrol was over. As we dropped magazines and released a single brass round from our rifle chambers into the clearing bin, I realized we were only out on the streets for about an hour and a half. But I was more than ready to shed the extra pounds and the mental weight of the experience, which was so normal to the infantrymen with me. We had found no enemies on our patrol and every man we searched was clear. There were no IEDs, no drugs, no weapons, and no suicide vests that could have rocketed our ears and torn us apart, like the two men from our who fell last month to such an attack. There was none of that on my first presence patrol through a highly conservative Muslim city known to have Taliban operatives. The only explanation I found for this came from text more ancient than the city itself: a table had been prepared before me in the presence of my enemies.