

Chapter One

COURAGE

Courage is fear holding on a minute longer.

General George S. Patton, Jr.

On December 27, 2003, while en route to the Iraqi Police Academy Range, Staff Sergeant Sullivan's Squad was hit by an IED. Staff Sergeant Sullivan's Squad was part of several squads from different Military Police Companies assigned to the range. The first blast damaged one of his two vehicles, injuring all three soldiers, one severely. The vehicle was so heavily damaged that it could not exit the kill zone to safety.

The driver, Private First Class Wabrek, received numerous wounds, despite the bullet-resistant glass and the flak jacket secured to the door to block incoming shrapnel. While Wabrek sustained injuries to the face and left eye, his Kevlar helmet stopped what would have been a fatal blow. The blast also shattered the magazine of his M-16, which was in a bracket next to his left leg, riddling his leg with fragments of bullets and the magazine itself. Private First Class Wabrek is one of the toughest individuals I have ever met; he never once complained.

Other pieces of shrapnel flew inside the vehicle and struck Team Leader Sergeant Jessica Walsh in the face. Days later, when Private First Class Wichowski was adjusting Sergeant Walsh's helmet for the

night vision attachment, he accidentally dropped the helmet and realized that something had cut into his hand, which was now bleeding. After examining the helmet, Wichowski found a jagged piece of shrapnel lodged in the helmet right at the location that protects the left temple. If Sergeant Walsh had not been wearing the helmet properly, she would have been instantly killed by that small piece of shrapnel.

Specialist Wichowski, the vehicle gunner, received a back injury when a piece of the explosive device blasted through the floor of the vehicle and up through the roof, striking him in the back ceramic plate of his body armor. Had it not been for the ceramic plate, chances are good that the shrapnel would have cut him in half. All three soldiers suffered hearing loss, and were extremely disoriented by the blast and concussion.

Shortly after, small arms fire began raking both the disabled vehicle and Staff Sergeant Sullivan's vehicle, which had stopped to assist his stricken team. At first, only three soldiers were capable of returning fire, and the heaviest weapon available was a Squad Automatic (SAW) M-249 with limited ammunition.

In an ambush like this, with a vehicle that cannot move, soldiers are drilled to deliver a heavy volume of fire on the attackers to achieve fire superiority and break up the ambush. However, neither the SAW nor the soldiers' M-16s had heavy enough rounds to punch through the walls that the attackers hid behind. Considering that ammunition was already limited, no one wanted to waste bullets making pockmarks in the walls. Fortunately, the limited number of U.S. soldiers with limited ammunition were able to drive the insurgents away with suppressive fire.

About this time, another U.S. unit came into the kill zone to assist, only to be hit by an IED—several soldiers were severely injured when they dismounted and attempted to make their way to the damaged vehicle. A radio call was made requesting an Air MedEvac helicopter to pick up the injured soldiers, but I don't know if that call ever went through. Most of the time, our radios did not have enough range for anything beyond a couple of miles; it is uncertain whether or not the

aviation unit ever heard our call for help.

Staff Sergeant Sullivan managed to get his wounded soldiers, and the rest of his team, along with the injured soldiers from the other unit, to the combat surgical hospital.

Private First Class Wabrek, despite being seriously injured, was concerned about what his family would be told about his injuries. He wanted to let his mother know that he was okay. The last thing that he wanted was for his mother to find out that her son had been wounded in Iraq, from a chaplain and a team of officers standing at her front door. Unfortunately (or not), he was in no condition to talk; the pain and medication were just too much. If he had gotten on the phone, he would have caused his mother unnecessary concern.

Staff Sergeant Sullivan took care of his Squad like they were his family, because to him, they were. In direct violation of several orders, Staff Sergeant Sullivan borrowed a cell phone and called Wabrek's mother. He explained what had happened and that Steve was getting the best of care in a real hospital. Staff Sergeant Sullivan continued to explain that Steve would be flown out of Iraq and up to Germany shortly for further treatment, and then be evacuated to the States where he would most likely be admitted to the Walter Reed Army Hospital.

While Staff Sergeant Sullivan's actions violated several regulations, he had details about Wabrek that the Casualty Assistance Team did not. While they were a huge improvement over the telegrams that notified families in previous wars, the Casualty Assistance Team would not have firsthand knowledge of what happened to Wabrek. Sullivan knew that Wabrek's mother would rather hear from someone who actually knew her son, as opposed to hearing from an officer who had never met her son, and could offer only overly-rehearsed lines.

This secret of this short phone call was kept for years. The story we heard that day was that Private First Class Wabrek called his mother from a borrowed cell phone (no one would question a son calling his mother from a hospital bed).

Until Wabrek was sent to Germany, Sullivan and his Squad visited Steve at the hospital every chance they could get. They even escorted him to the airport to ensure his safety and see him off. Several others from the unit checked on Wabrek when he was in the recovery room, and waited with him for the transport that would take him to Germany, and back to the States. Wabrek insisted that Wichowski, his gunner, get a video camera to get footage of him in the CSH being treated.

Several days later the Squad packed up Private First Class Wabrek's gear and shipped it home; they knew he wasn't coming back.

Air Land Battle Manual

The military has detailed instructions for everything, from how to launch a nuclear weapon to how to dig a latrine. The overall direction comes from the *Air Land Battle Manual*, which gives general guidance for coordinating all Army units, and instructions on how the next war will be fought. The Military Police Corps has its own field manual that outlines what every soldier in a company should be doing, what they should be doing it with, and how they should be doing it. Some of these instructions come under the Table of Organization and Equipment that details each soldier's job, as well as the exact equipment that each soldier, from Private to Captain, should have. These details are followed by tactical operating procedures, and are handed down through orders issued by ranking officers.

When you're the low man on the totem pole, people above you can short circuit all these orders and directives, leaving you with no option but to suck it up and drive on. Some situations are more understandable than others—if you have a finite number of armored vehicles, and you are putting out more soldiers than the armored vehicles can accommodate, you make do with whatever vehicles are available. What you do not do is place soldiers who are in unarmored vehicles into more hazardous situations than the soldiers in armored ones. This common-sense concept, along with many others, was not followed.

It had taken twelve years to get to this point, where bureaucratic apathy, professional indifference, underestimating the situation, and

just plain stupidity almost got three soldiers killed. Old, unarmored vehicles, radios that did not work, low ammunition supplies, decreasing squads from three teams of ten soldiers to two teams of six soldiers, light machine guns with limited penetration power, and lack of hand grenades all combined to bring us to a point where we came so close to losing three soldiers in one day. All of this could have been corrected if the Department of Defense, the active-duty Army, and the State of Connecticut had cared just a little bit. Unfortunately, this was not the first incident, and it would not be the last.



Photo by Staff Sgt FMartin Sullivan

Figure 1.1 Private First Class Steven Wabrek



Photo by Staff Sgt FMartin Sullivan and PFC Bartosz Wichowski

Figure 1.2 Private First Class Wabrek waiting for transport

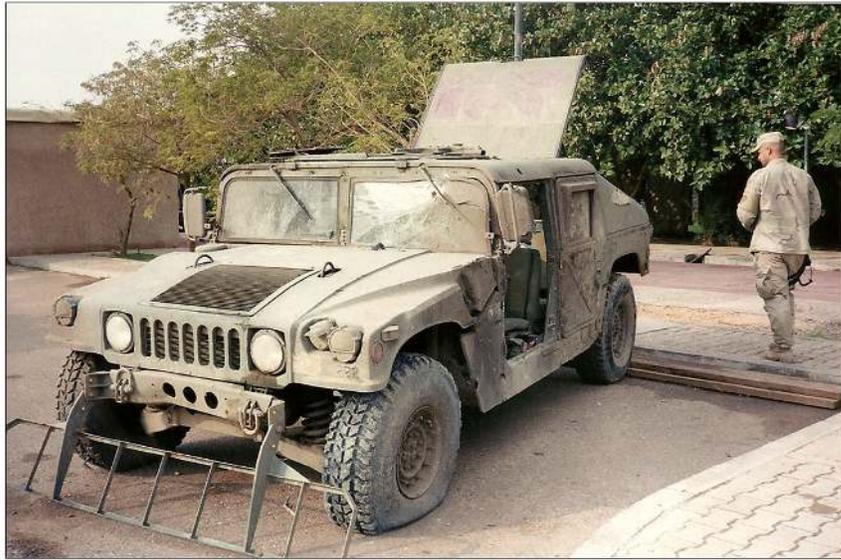


Photo by Master Sgt Marc Youngquist

Figure 1.3 2nd Platoon's damaged vehicle being inspected by Sergeant Karl Rynhart



Photo by Master Sgt Marc Youngquist

Figure 1.4 Private First Class Wabrek was sitting behind the door



Figure 1.5 Sergeant Walsh was sitting in the Squad Leader's seat when she was struck in the face



Figure 1.6 Wichowski was in the turret and struck in the back