

Outside the Wire

Prologue

Captain Erin O'Connor, C Company, 722nd Military Intelligence Battalion, reviewed the intelligence report one final time. It was the end of another 14-hour day, and she was fried. Sending this document would be her last official act as the boss of C Company. In less than 24 hours, she'd be on an Air Force C-17 flying back to the States to join her new husband at the US Army's Intelligence Center for Excellence. Known as the "School House," it was located at Fort Huachuca, in the arid desert of southern Arizona. Erin was truly sick of the desert, but at least she'd be with her new husband Wayne, a retired Army Special Forces Chief Warrant Officer-4. They never got a real honeymoon before she deployed, so they'd be spending a blissful week on the beach in Cancun before she reported for duty. This put a little smile on her weary face.

Her new posting at Huachuca was Officer in Charge of the HUMINT (Human Intelligence) training unit. It was a good fit for her. Her instincts and skills had been finely honed during her last two deployments to Iraq. Now it was time to share her hard-won knowledge with the students of the School House.

Erin knew her decision to send this very preliminary intelligence report up her chain of command was going to be second-guessed by scores of critical eyes. Her unit's latest walk-in source from the Baghdad district of Sadr City hadn't been fully vetted or even polygraphed yet. For some reason known only to the stifling Army bureaucracy, polygraphers at Victory Base were now in short supply. Despite all this, her gut told her this guy was telling the truth. She'd

watched nearly all the interviews on a video monitor and hadn't seen any red flags that made her feel otherwise. In fact, his story made sense given the current political climate back home. More importantly, it dovetailed with other little whispers they'd picked up from local street sources that something big was brewing. Her people had been able to verify his claim that he had close family ties to top leaders of the Iranian backed terrorist group, the Mahdi Army. This critical bit of corroboration verified he probably did have access to the information. The rest of his story, the scary part, they were still trying to validate.

During his debrief, the source said the Mahdi Army was planning a new terror campaign targeting Baghdad area Coalition Forces at the massive Victory Base, as well as Iraqi government forces and infrastructure. He said the campaign was in the final planning stage and was receiving logistical and operational support from an unknown foreign source. Erin knew this "foreign source" had to be Iran. US intelligence had long ago established that Iran was supplying weapons, training and funding to the Mahdi Army.

According to the source, the terror campaign was to begin with rocket and mortar attacks targeting Victory Base housing and US air assets scattered throughout the greater Baghdad area. The alarming part was that a key planner was overheard saying the operation would be a multi-pronged attack like the 1968 TET Offensive in Vietnam. The insurgents were hoping these attacks would cause high American, Coalition Force and Iraqi casualties, leading to a dissolution of the Coalition and ultimate American withdrawal. This strategy had worked in Vietnam, and more recently in Spain after the devastating Madrid train bombings of 2004. It could work again. Unfortunately, the source did not know when the campaign was to commence.

Erin knew this largely unverified intelligence report would be just one of thousands of reports inundating the intelligence community on a daily basis. It would likely wind up on some

analyst's desk for a month or two before anyone took a hard look at it. By then, it could be too late. All that said, it still needed to be sent.

She reviewed the report formatting, classification header, footer and portion markings. It all looked good. Since her unit was the original source of the information, they had control over its distribution and classification level. This report had been classified as Top Secret/HCS and would be maintained within a Special Access Program code named "Argon-Lancer." Captain O'Connor pressed the send button on her secure terminal and logged off. It was late and she still needed to pack. She was going home.

Chapter 1

Bubble Guts

The medical specialist, whose name was Jason, pulled the IV needle from my arm and handed me a cotton ball.

“Mr. Sutherland. Please hold this on your arm.”

“You can call me Rick,” I offered.

Jason bandaged the hole in my arm, and I rose from the examining table and put my shirt back on. This trip to the Troop Medical Clinic (the TMC) was only meant to be a one-week follow-up visit to verify the meds I’d been taking were working for a nasty case of “Saddam’s Revenge”. I was fine, but dehydrated, and the army physician—a very thorough and dare I say attractive major named Weaver, instructed young Jason to plug an IV into me. I’d have preferred an ice-cold Stella, but in Iraq you take what you can get.

“How do you feel, sir?”

“Hydrated.”

Jason smiled. “We aim to please, sir.”

“Your aim is pretty good, specialist,” I said as I rubbed my arm. “Can I go?”

“Yes, sir, we’re done, but don’t forget to stop at the desk for your meds and weapon.”

Reminding a patient to pick up his weapon at the front desk is not something you usually hear at a stateside medical clinic. Over here, it’s the way we roll.

On my way out I spied Major Weaver in her tiny office and stuck my head in to say thanks. She was on the phone, but waived me in. A quick look around revealed a framed photo of a handsome army captain in dress blues, wearing the beige beret of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and alongside was a folded American flag in a triangular glass case. A small, engraved brass plate on the frame read: *CPT Justin Findley KIA 23/09/03*, which explained the memorial bracelet I'd seen on her wrist. I have a similar one on mine. Then my eyes fell upon something I guarantee you'd never see in Doc Bailey's office. Standing in a corner behind her desk was a T-shaped wooden rack bearing an army issue Kevlar helmet, body armor with rifle magazines stuffed in its pouches, and a shoulder holster complete with pistol. Propped up in the corner was the M-4 carbine that no doubt went with the magazines. I had thought that docs were unable to carry long guns, but this one evidently did. I bet she could shoot it too.

Major Weaver ended her conversation, looked up and smiled warmly.

"Thank you very much, Major. You've got a great staff here."

"Thanks, Mr. Sutherland, I agree. How are you feeling?"

"All good and ready for adventure."

"Hold up there. You were dehydrated. You need to take it easy for a day or two and drink lots of water. Take the Lomotil for a couple more days just to be sure. The other meds I prescribed are for when you get this bug again."

"Bubble guts?"

"Yep. Everyone here comes down with it at least once."

"Will do, Major. Thanks again and see ya around."

"Probably." Major Weaver smiled.

I stopped by the clerk's desk and grabbed my meds and pistol, then stepped from air-

conditioned comfort into an absolute blast furnace. A large temperature gauge mounted on the wall of the clinic showed a sizzling 120 degrees. I strapped on my pistol belt and started walking back. I didn't have wheels, so I had to hoof it and it didn't take long before sweat was stinging my eyes and streaming down my back. Did I mention I hate this place yet?

The TMC was a good quarter mile from the center of our small oasis, and my abode was farther still. I planned to get back, grab a Coke at the local Subway, and take a well-deserved break.

The trek back to my pad here at Camp Victory Baghdad, Iraq was a badly fractured and battle-scarred path. One errant step and you'd be flat on your face. Truth is, this whole place was a slip-and-fall lawyer's wet dream.

As I stumbled along, I spotted a dust-covered white Chevy SUV pull over to the curb about seventy meters ahead. The Chevy, nothing special, had a black plastic G.I. storage box sitting atop the roof rack. White SUVs were as common here as silver Volvo wagons in West Los Angeles. As the driver sat there, I spotted another person in the back seat and inched closer. The uniformed driver had a cell phone to his ear and was checking me out through his sideview mirror. The passenger was just a shadow.

What stuck in my head was the SUV's plate number, CZ 8008, because my kid Troy got sent to the principal's office when he was ten for punching 8008 into his calculator while sitting in class. Then the little jokester turned it upside down, proudly showing everyone that he'd spelled "boob". Smart kid, but Mrs. Tipton was not amused.

It was probably just a couple of lost soldiers, I reasoned, as I walked past. Victory Base was enormous, and there were no street signs. I'd been lost a time or two myself.

Just as I dismissed 8008 from my mind, I was startled by a very loud and shrill siren. While I'm no stranger to sirens, this one could have had every mutt in LA howling. Stopping dead in my tracks, I tried to remember what this sound meant. Recognizing my confusion, a young soldier in Army PT gear gently lent a hand.

"It's INCOMING! Get your dumb ass in a shelter!" she said, as she turned and dashed for a nearby berm.

BOOM! Fifty or sixty meters in front of me, everything exploded in a deadly cloud of flying debris, flame, and choking dust. The shockwave knocked me on my butt. Slowly, I opened my eyes and inhaled a lung full of dirt, smoke, and God knows what. My right ear was ringing, not good. I looked up to see the tell-tale gray smoke of a high explosive detonation, rising from what used to be a housing module.

As I rolled onto my belly and crawled toward a nearby canal ditch, I felt a sharp sting in my left thigh which must have been from the fall. My savior in PT gear now got up and ran full tilt for a row of buildings.

I knew I had to find shelter, too, but where the hell were they? I looked around, moved forward a few meters, and spotted one thirty meters away. Jumping up, I ran towards it for all I was worth which wasn't much after the divorce and paying my share of both boy's college tuitions.

I did a long jump over a small canal as I raced for safety, but for the life of me don't know why I didn't use the bridge. When you're scared shitless, you do goofy stuff. I cleared the canal and dove headlong into the shelter, landing face-first into the lap of a squatting Navy Judge Advocate Corps lieutenant junior grade.

The shelters were rectangular concrete cubes open at both ends and, on the bottom, and

four or five feet high and about the same wide. With little space to move around in, I quickly made friends with the good lieutenant as I gathered my composure. She had a welcoming smile and smelled good, which is always a huge plus in Iraq.

BANG! Another incoming round made a direct hit on the adjoining housing module. They're called CHUs (Containerized Housing Units). The explosion blew the roof off, and very quickly the fire spread to the adjacent units. This was crazy. The base hadn't been hit in at least six months. What the hell was going on?

A loud buzz saw-type noise kicked in, like a huge high-speed machine gun. "Base Phalanx gun" said Campbell, the lieutenant junior grade. The Phalanx was an air defense Gatling weapon developed for the Navy, and the Army had apparently grabbed some for base defense. The Army calls them C-RAM (Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar).

Flying skyward was a line of tracers that suddenly were exploding in a plume of gray smoke, and an incoming insurgent mortar round was blown to bits.

When I turned to look back to where the white SUV had been, half expecting to see a burning heap of junk, it was gone. Lucky dudes, or something else? It was strange. The driver checking me out. The passenger in the back seat? Probably nothing, but what mischief could they have been up to? I dismissed it from my mind, needing to concentrate on the issue at hand. Staying alive.

It's moments like this that cause you to take pause and ponder life's little choices. Okay, what the hell was I thinking? I had retired a year early from LAPD to accept this civilian contractor gig. Though Uncle Sugar was paying me big bucks to be here and share my law enforcement and counter terrorism expertise with our war fighters, for me it wasn't about the money. It was about finding bad guys and keeping our kids safe. My job over here was to

identify bomb makers and terrorist cells and sic the Special Operations guys on them before they could plant their deadly IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). The Army calls this “getting left of the boom.” Back home we called it “proactive policing.” Same idea, different crooks.

Catching bad guys is what I do. It’s fun and I’m pretty good at it. I’d worked in LAPD’s Counter-Terrorism Section for years, so I knew a little bit about the local crooks and their playthings. But that was stateside, and this was Iraq.

I glanced at the M9 Beretta, 9mm pistol, strapped to my right thigh. It was unloaded. Nobody on base, except for the MPs could have a loaded weapon. Perhaps some Pentagon genius decided military members couldn’t be trusted with loaded firearms. Call me old-fashioned, but in a place where you can get shot, you need to carry a loaded gun.

That empty pistol symbolized how truly screwed up things were in Iraq, and the war had turned into another American police action. No big set-piece armored division vs. armored division battles now. No massed infantry assaults. Just nasty little pinprick engagements that killed and maimed one or two of our young soldiers at a time. The empty guns, scary Rules of Engagement and other nonsense, were all part of the same nasty little package.

Suddenly, the roar of approaching Victory Base fire engines brought me back to reality. I watched as a pair of determined GIs tried to penetrate the wreckage of the CHU, but the flames were too intense. When the all-clear announcement sounded, we crawled out of our shelter. Within minutes the hose jockeys had the flames under control and MPs were on-scene doing their bit.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Campbell and I ran over to offer help as firemen removed a body from the CHU wreckage. He looked middle-aged, but too blackened from the fire to tell

much more. He was laid on a rescue blanket so medics could go to work, but it was pointless.

I've seen too many bodies.

As I stood watching, I began to feel light-headed. Then I felt something dripping down my left thigh. It had to be sweat. My T-shirt was soaked through, and my mouth was dry. Then I noticed blood spreading along my left leg. The MP alongside me glanced over and seeing the blood he grabbed my arm just before I hit the dirt.