

My War

by

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A gun muzzle prods me sharply in the kidneys. I stumble forward into the stream and I get a bootie of water through the rip in my left sole. I half-turn and Arse-face emits something in his language, which of course I don't understand. But I guess what he means. The other muj loiter and pick their rotting teeth.

I look down at the AK. "My taxes paid for that, so be more careful with it, you stupid peasant," I murmur, smiling hard, like a contestant in the Young Pioneer of the Year competition. Oleg, hands tied, snorts with laughter, but converts it into a coughing fit. You don't mess with these maniacs.

Arse-face points and shoves me forward. "Be lucky, Lucky", says the Tartar we call Boris the Steppe Stallion because his real name is unpronounceable, "Take time, huh?" I know what he means. I move another step forward into the stream, my soaking toe-rag really beginning to niggle me. I hold out my hand rather imperiously. Spittle, the least-worst of the muj - almost a regular human being - hands me the tool-bag, a dirty scrap of Army-issue canvas with mallet, spanners, a couple of screwdrivers, a few bits of wire and the all-important torch.

I take another step forward and everybody else clears off back over the ridge like scalded cats. I glance over my shoulder and I can see a couple of turbans and foresights. Not that there's any point in running.

A sharp object seems to have ripped up from my sphincter and lodged in my gut. For a moment I can't do anything, buttocks quivering. I gasp for breath,

then the pain recedes. Conscious I'd better do something before I get a hot one in the back I stumble round the iron-grey object in the middle of the stream, keeping clear. It's one of ours. What else would it be?

The churning in my guts is bugging-up my concentration: yet I can't drop my pants here: that'd be inviting one of those lunks to shoot me up the bum: their idea of a joke. I stagger round to the other side of the bomb and crouch down, pretending to be deep in examining it. I slowly slide down my fatigues and a watery slurry, a mixture of dysentery and fear shoots out. I hope it poisons someone's drinking water downstream. Then I experience a delightful moment of relief. And I notice small silvery fishes darting in and out of the reeds, arrowing around like a single individual: how do they know to turn the same way at the same instant? I watch fascinated as I ease up my trousers and buckle them again.

I'm now the expert of our little group, because I've defused five items of "Unexploded Ordnance". I *am* lucky, but my engineering training helps. Not that it'll matter, one of these lovelies will have my name on it and it'll be goodbye Joseph Illich Pachenko. My Mum and Dad think I'm dead anyway, I suppose: Missing believed Killed. I'm certainly missing: I haven't a fucking clue where in the Hindu Kush I am, as the Muj marched us blindfolded for nights, and it all looks the same to me: barren hills, parched fields and grubby little villages, or burnt out ex-grubby little villages, which was our doing I guess.

I look at the bomb again.

Somewhere in Kabul is a cool office. And in that office is a filing-cabinet. And in that filing cabinet is a set of plans, of each type of bomb and how to identify it and where the fuses and detonators are. And I'm an engineer: I can read plans. So if I had a plan, I could - probably - work out how to defuse the bomb. But I don't, so I classify them as Big Motherfuckers, Medium Motherfuckers, Bomblets, Rockets, and Other Aerial Junk. This is a Medium Motherfucker: it weighs maybe 250 kilos, it's casing is cracked, it's fins have broken off: I can see one sticking out of the stream about 30 metres back, and it has a yellow band round the nose. What does a yellow band mean? Napalm? Delayed action? Only drop when there's a full moon?

I move round to the rear. Bingo! There's a large wing-nut attached to something that goes inside, and a nice cyrillic panel, for stupid Russian artificers: "Insert Fuse AF91 here and turn clockwise". AF = Auxilliary Fuse?

There are cracks where the water has run in. Don't know if this is a good or a bad thing. The black shadow of a vulture falls over my head and along the bomb and I reach out and turn the wing-nut anti-clockwise. It grates a bit and I sweat but it comes free bringing a tubular fuse with it. I hold the thing up triumphantly, then put it in my pocket. At once I feel woozy and lurch around, my head spinning. I need to take a few breaths. I slosh over to the front where the main fuse would be but I can't face it yet. So I fumble in my pocket for the fag I bartered off Spittle for my wristwatch. I pull it out and light up. I know it's stupid, smoking around an unexploded bomb, but I don't care. The harsh smoke grates on my throat but my head clears.

The unrelenting sun is beating down and I'm feeling drained. I pause for a while. This is our plan: we try and take as long as possible, so that we never do more than one bomb a day, squeezing that last juice out of the fruit of life.

A guttural yell comes down from the ridge. The muj are getting impatient, so I stand in front of the bomb. I doubt even they are dense enough to risk blowing up their prize by shooting me for dawdling.

The nose-tip is partially separated, so I get out the torch and peer inside. I can see some wires coming out of the main fuse, but I don't know what they are. One of them seems loose and maybe that's why it didn't explode, although I'm always wary, as some of these things are booby-trapped to blow up the muj, which is why they use us prisoners instead. A couple of days ago they captured an officer - dunno what unit he was from - and he told them it was against the rules of war (ha ha); and waved a piece of cloth which had writing in various different languages telling them they'd get a reward if they sent him back with all his bits intact. Of course none of them can read, so this was useless. They took the cloth to a mullah, who laughed, then blew his nose on it, after that they made the officer dig a hole and threw heavy rocks on to him, a sort-of execution and burial all in one.

Using the bits of wire from the toolkit I manage to gently extract some of the fusewires from inside to near the surface. I can't get the wirecutters in. "I need a knife. I need a bloody knife!" I shout. A commotion breaks out on the ridge, my companions, trying to explain what I need, and I suppose, the muj arguing amongst themselves whether they can give a prisoner a knife. As I sweat

my guts out, holding the wires as firmly and gently as I can, Arse-Face comes down the slope, and throws a knife to me: it splats into the stream a few metres short. I shrug, indicating I can't move. Suspiciously, slowly, covering me with his Kalashnikov, he comes up to pick up the blade.

His countenance is black with rage - and fear too, I note. Slowly he hands me an ornate, heirloom dagger. I smile at him. And start to saw away at the wires. He's paralysed by something more than fear: if he legs it back to safety like a rat up a drainpipe: he'll be a laughing stock, but that means he's got to stand here, and feel the same fear as me: maybe worse, 'cos he's powerless, while at least I'm doing something. For a moment I sense something in common, a fellow-feeling, then it is replaced by his blackeyed muj stare as he glowers at me. He's going to have the last word by killing me the moment I defuse the bomb.

As I eyeball him, something gives, and a handful of wires rip out of the casing. I'm so tense that I topple back in the stream and flounder around like a kid in a swimming pool. Water fills my mouth and I try to get to my feet, gagging like a blowfish. Arse-face is laughing his head off, and waving the gun around. I step daintily away from its muzzle and plod up to the ridge, spluttering, to meet the figures coming down. By unspoken consent, the one who defuses the bomb doesn't have to do any of the boring scraping-out duty. The rest of the prisoners and the muj move up to the bomb, plastic bags and spoons in hand. Our explosives are fuelling their war-effort, ha ha. I flop down on the warm grass and something with legs scuttles over my face. I don't swat it: it's earned the right to

live. After a while I recover a bit and look round. The muj haven't bothered even to put a guard on me: where would I go?

I lie back and watch the sky. The vulture comes again and hovers overhead. I get a bad feeling about tomorrow.

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