

# So they allowed it to begin

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*“So they allowed it to begin, having obtained for it formal assurances of help from the British Government. Yet none the less the rebellion of the Sherif of Mecca came to most as a surprise, and found the Allies unready. It aroused mixed feelings and made strong friends and strong enemies, amid whose clashing jealousies its affairs began to miscarry.”*  
T.E. Lawrence from his book *“Seven Pillars of Wisdom”*

Lawrence’s words, first published almost eighty years ago appear now prophetic, as the initial zeal of the “shock and awe”, the “lighter, faster and deadlier” pentagon doctrine has given rise to a mounting insurgency that has our military commanders asking for more troops. As the mother of a Marine now serving his second tour in Iraq I dread the thought of putting more troops in harm’s way; as George Bush Sr. reasoned in his book, our troops have become occupiers, not liberators, in a bitterly hostile land. Still, from the bits and pieces of information I glean from the all too few, emails and calls from my son, more troops are sorely needed.

Some of you have read my stories about my son, Lance Corporal John Fett, attached to Fox Company, 2nd Battalion 5th Marines. For those who haven’t he is currently stationed at one of four forward operating bases in Ar Ramadi, the “Wild West” they call it, just a few miles from Fallujah. John knows I write about him occasionally and admonishes me not to make him out as a hero so I will begin by affirming that he is a “grunt” as they call themselves, just another pair of “boots on the ground”, an ordinary Marine fighting in an extraordinary war.

Since John’s redeployment in September he has labored under

seemingly intolerable conditions patrolling the streets of Ramadi. Both on foot and in patchwork armored humvees, they patrol sometimes for 24 hours at a stretch. After a break of only three to six hours they sit on OPs (observation post) hidden on a rooftop somewhere in the city for another 24 hours. They take caffeine pills to stay awake and because they've lost any circadian rhythm they take sleep aids to fall asleep. Weeks can pass before anyone gets a full day of rest and it is not unusual to see someone catching a few winks slumped over a mess hall table or sprawled in the back of a humvee. Recent news reports depict overused military equipment breaking down; it is not only the equipment that is being overused.

John, 25 and a squad leader, seems to have aged dramatically since his redeployment in September, war does that I am told and he and his fellow Marines have seen their share of action.

✘ John rarely goes out on patrol without being shot at and a picture he sent back proves that his armored humvee has saved his life more than once. The half paved, potholed streets and highways are littered with debris, garbage, weeds, shrubs and the insurgents have no difficulty hiding IEDs (improvised explosive devices). John has driven over five IEDs so far, each time they exploded in front of or behind or to the side of his humvee, or in one instance, weren't powerful enough to penetrate the vehicle armor. Neither he nor his squad has been hurt and because he has never lost control of the vehicle John has earned a reputation for sheer nerve and good luck. Not all of his comrades have been as fortunate.

It was Halloween here in the US and John and his squad and another humvee were out on patrol. The other humvee was at John's five o'clock and only six meters away when it hit an IED. John didn't see the explosion but his own vehicle was hit by secondary shrapnel, rocks, dirt and blood. Marines, of course, don't leave Marines behind and John wheeled his humvee around to provide cover, support and aid as they

radioed for assistance.

By this time, John is a veteran of multiple firefights, he has seen fellow Marines die and he has stopped to reload his weapon after returning fire more times than he can remember but he is still unprepared for what he sees. The driver, a lieutenant is dead, his throat blown out and another man, bleeding profusely his chest and face a ghostly blue and yellow, is unconscious, his punctured lungs have collapsed. The smell of burnt flesh fills his nostrils. A third Marine is also unconscious the raw jagged edge of exposed bones protrudes from his pants. The two Marines still alert are behaving as you might expect from men having just suffered severe injuries, one demands morphine before they move him.

There is blood everywhere and John and his squad are soon covered with it. They help move the wounded to a support transport, provide escort to safe territory and carry them into the med office. A helicopter evacuates the Marines to a hospital. There is no time to properly clean up and they go back out on patrol, blood still stains their clothes and their humvee. John still doesn't know if the four Marines lived or died. His voice is somber, controlled and I detect the rage he hoped to hide from me as he related this event. That John barely avoided driving over the bomb himself is never brought up.

Two weeks later, John and I are speaking, it is 5 AM in Ramadi and cold, I could hear him stamping his feet to stay warm and am relieved not to hear the strained, managed rage he last had in his voice. Suddenly he takes the phone away from his face and I hear him exclaiming again and again, "oh, my god, oh my god!" Someone is speaking but I cannot make out what is being said. John finally comes back on the line and explains that one of his buddies was walking to the medic and had stopped to show John the bullet wound he had just received in his back. John then continued the conversation where we had left off as if nothing at all unusual had happened; just

another commonplace act of bravery in this camp full of ordinary Marines.

If John is beginning to see the daily fighting, sniping and roadside bombs as commonplace, so to are the locals. John tells how he and his squad chased a couple of insurgents that ducked into a home with hopes of escaping out the back. John and his squad followed the two men through the house, their weapons bristling, side stepping a family meal. The family's only reaction to this thundering intrusion was to hold tightly onto their supper so that it wouldn't be knocked over. Two months earlier, John felt awful charging through people's homes but he claims that he no longer cares and I worry that he is losing his sense of humanity.

One news report showed a Marine sergeant stationed at one of the camps in Ramadi claiming that if any of the men were offered the chance to go home without any consequence, they would all refuse and stay. I asked John if that were true and he told me that he would stay for his buddies. After some reflection he says that perhaps his efforts and those of his fellow warriors really are keeping the battle off US soil. If that is true then he thinks that his being there is a good thing, but he sounds more like he hopes rather than believes it to be true.

When I ask him about the civilian bus that was fired on in Ramadi, John mistakes my curiosity for criticism and defends the action taken. "Everyday in Iraq a vehicle loaded with explosives ignores the warning shots and then explodes killing troops and civilians. I have fired on plenty of vehicles for the same reason", he explains. "If I let a car bomb go by and one of my buddies was killed, I'd never forgive myself".

As in other wars, the troops in Iraq have names for the enemy, names to dehumanize the enemy, to make it easier to kill the enemy. Pictures of John's humvee, riddled with bullet holes

and damaged by IEDs fills me with fear and I understand his anger at this "enemy". Yet, I am afraid that in his weary, wariness he may forget the "rules of engagement" that separate our warriors from being mere murderers and occupiers; that separate our troops from US foreign policy, and I tell him so. He snorts at me with derision as the Marines in Ramadi have been using themselves as bait in order to draw fire to identify an enemy that takes refuge by melting into the local populace. Still, I plead with him, behaving honorably now will make it easier for him to make peace with himself later.

A recent acquaintance sent me an email about the Pelopponesian War and it reminded me of a legend whereby a Spartan mother sent her son to war and said, "Come back with your shield or on it." She meant that her son should fight or die fighting honorably. An honorable death would see her son brought home on his shield and if he returned carrying it then he had done right by his fellow warriors AND his enemies. I want very much that my son come home with his shield.

*"The mentality of ordinary human slaves is terrible" they have lost the world " and we had surrendered, not body alone, but soul to the overmastering greed of victory. By our own act we were drained of morality, of volition, of responsibility, like dead leaves in the wind".* Lawrence's words, written so long ago are prescient, still resonate true today, defining both ally and enemy. Ultimately, he declared the ally efforts in that almost forgotten siege a triumph. I hope history later views the current war in Iraq the same way.

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# Back to Iraq

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August, 2004

©Mary Geddry Less than a year after returning from Iraq, my oldest son, Lance Cpl John Fett, 24 received orders that he is being redeployed. John is attached to the 2 nd Battalion 5 th Marines and they are being sent over to relieve another battalion in their regiment that has been in Iraq for an extended period. He will be stationed in Ramadi a suburb of the dissident hotbed, Fallujah. Thankfully he received some time off and was able to make the long trip from Camp Pendleton, near San Diego to Coquille for a short visit and also to give me the use of his Jeep. As is usual when he gets leave, he made the rounds visiting his father and four brothers and both he and one of my twin sons, Alex, 19 came up to see me. Alex brought up a welder and the two of them, (Alex was the welder, John was the grinder), built me a beautiful metal gate for my garden.

While in Iraq, John was given a meritorious combat promotion and made a squad leader, he received squad leader training on his return. Since then, John and his squad have spent months and months training. While John is officially an anti-tank assaultman he has been undergoing primarily SWAT training. He tells me they spend up to three weeks at a time, training in urban warfare using a sophisticated version of laser tag called Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System 2000 or MILES Gear. The lasers and sensors allow force-on-force training using their typical weapons. John tells me that in all these mock urban scenarios, and by now, all participants are very highly trained, that at the end of each day, rarely is anyone left alive on either side in close quarter combat. "Pretty much, everyone is dead", he says.

John's training has also made him an expert with timed explosives like C-4 and they use Computer Aided Exercises or

CAX to simulate tactical breaches on the enemy compounds. They often use a variation on paintball or chalk bullets while training. Once while making a charge and leaping over his "fallen" comrades he took three rounds in his arm and bore the bruises for several days, flak-jackets don't typically cover arms. They don't train much in hand to hand combat, the premise being that if you are a Marine in Iraq and you are down to using your fists, the situation is probably hopeless.

As a mother it is difficult having a child in harm's way and the thought of him returning to Iraq causes me to ask him if he thinks being a Marine has been good for him. "Probably", he says, with some reflection, "yeah, it has probably been good for me." Still, when I ask him if he thinks any of his skills will be transferable to civilian life, he chuckles and answers, "No, probably not."

John went to Butte College for awhile and had considered a career in computer science but he now thinks he would like to be a firefighter, forest fires preferably but even a city fireman seems to appeal to him. "Sitting at a desk all day just isn't for me," he says, "I need to be out and moving." These are funny words from a young man who can finish a Tom Clancy novel in one day.

During his visit he explained that while in Iraq, as before, he will receive an extra \$150 per month combat pay and that no taxes are withheld allowing him to save up a bit of money during his seven month deployment. Even so, our young warriors have to spend a lot of their own money to defend our country. John and his buddies will have a gear list waiting for them at base, personal items mostly, so many pairs of socks, razors, underwear, etc., but totaling about \$300, which when deducted from a \$500 net paycheck doesn't leave much to buy gas, pay car payments or insurance, buy phone cards or plane tickets to see loved ones before they go.

Our visit was too short and we had to head back to Mendocino

where Alex is general administrator of the Stanford Inn just south of the village. We stopped to visit my parents on the way (more relatives to see before he goes), and despite John's liberal observance of the speed laws didn't arrive in Mendocino until almost 2:00 AM. I knew it had been a long time since I had seen all four of my sons together at the same time but I didn't realize that they had not all been together either in some time. They were all four of them up all night, John, Gabe, who is 20, and the twins Alex and Chris, talking, playing chess, swimming and taking photographs, documenting the event while I slept.

I had booked John a flight from Oakland at 11:30 AM and at 7:00 AM after being up all night Gabe, who goes to school in San Rafael, and John were ready to go and after many tearful goodbyes from everyone they left. Gabe got John to the airport only a few minutes before his plane was due to leave and the line in front of the baggage check was horribly long. John raced up to the head of the line and apologized for cutting in but told the checker he had to catch that plane. The checker looked from John down to his seabee bag and asked "You got orders?"

"Yeah, man," John answered, "I've got orders."

With a knowing smile and a "good luck, son", he sent John, my first born son, on his way back to Iraq.

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## Choices from Iraq

Choices From Iraq

July, 2003

©Mary Geddry A few days ago, I received some photographs from my son, now a Lance Corporal in the Marines, who has been



stationed in Iraq, of late along the Euphrates River in the southern region. He related a tale of one of his experiences that perhaps illustrates the huge, moral decisions forced upon these youngsters, decisions they will bear the burden of all their lives. 

It was late August 2001, two weeks before the 9/11 attacks, when my eldest son, John, enlisted in the Marines. He was twenty-one at the time, a touch late for an enlistee, but they took him nonetheless and while his primary motivation in enlisting was for college money, he seemed genuinely excited to belong to something. To know John, would be to know that he was not someone you could ever imagine as a warrior. Soft hearted with animals and the downtrodden, certainly but also, always rebellious since birth. I tried to envision him taking orders as he left for boot camp late the next spring and couldn't bring a picture into focus. Still, when I saw him at his graduation, that August day in San Diego, crisp in his uniform, a single stripe on his shoulder, the patent leather shoes, the expert rifleman pin on his collar, the pride on his face; there were still vestiges of the boy, he gulped down the homemade chocolate chip cookies like always, but he was changed, confident, even relaxed on that day.

We all knew the day would come when he would be deployed to Iraq, and on January 30, 2003, after several months of specialist training as an anti-tank assaultman, his battalion left for Kuwait. John is a part of Fox Company, 2 nd Battalion, 5 th Marines and it was the Marines of 2/5 that took the Tigris River a couple of weeks into the campaign and it was there, in battle, that John lost his sergeant. The story I have to tell happened not long after this event and not long after the news media was filled with the story of a Marine checkpoint many miles southwest of John's position, where a van full of women and children had been fired on and killed.

John's battalion had been taking fire all day and the war continued to rage in the distance as John manned a checkpoint that had been hastily erected out of two by fours, plywood and fence wire. Dawn was just starting to break and the chill was inescapable in spite of his gear, when a vehicle, (I forgot to ask what kind), absent any headlights was making its way toward him through the near darkness. He flashed the floodlights and the speakers blared in Arabic to stop but the vehicle continued, accelerating through the glare of the lamps. Still numbed by the death of his sergeant and more so from the catastrophe at another Marine checkpoint, he fired warning shots from his machine gun. The vehicle swerved but continued on toward him and so, praying that there were no children inside he focused on disabling the vehicle firing multiple rounds into the engine block and tires. Finally, the engine seized and the vehicle, immobilized came to a stop less than ten feet from where my son was firing. Almost sick at the thought of what might be in that car, he hoped with all his heart as he approached it, weapon ready, that he would not find a family of women and children. In the brief moments that all this was happening he couldn't stop asking again and again, how he would live with the knowledge of having hurt innocents. These are the types of decisions these young warriors, eighteen and nineteen year olds are being asked and some would argue, been trained to make. These are very heavy decisions.

My son captured the sole occupant of the vehicle, a captain in the elite Republican Guard that was trying to run ordnance to his men hidden in a location not far from and in a position to have fired on John's battalion. The captain, having been wounded by a few of John's rounds needed hospitalization and John escaped, for the moment, carrying a life long burden of guilt and doubt.

In Shannon French's book "The Code of the Warrior," Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003, she discusses why

warriors need a code to separate them from being merely killers, murderers or conquerors.

~ Marines don't do that is not merely shorthand for Marines don't shoot unarmed civilians; Marines don't rape women; Marines don't leave Marines behind: Marines don't despoil corpses, even though those firm injunctions and many others are part of what we might call the Marines' Code. What Marines internalize when they are indoctrinated into the culture of the Corps is an amalgam of specific regulations, general concepts (e.g., honor, courage, commitment, discipline, loyalty, teamwork), history and tradition that adds up to a coherent sense of what it is to be a Marine. To remain "Semper Fidelis," or forever faithful to the code of the Marine Corps is never to behave in a way that cannot be reconciled with that image of what it is to be a Marine.

My warrior returns home soon, mid August, a changed man, no doubt.