

Anecdotes of War - Accounts of a Soldier

by Sameer Kermalli

There are many faces of conflict. Everyone in a conflict or a conflict zone will experience whatever is happening in a very different way. From insurgents to peacekeepers, civilians to journalists, to each a conflict zone could either be a grim reminder of misery and hopelessness, or a story of triumph and joy.

Joseph Mnyune is a Tanzanian by birth, and yet has served in the British Army, around about 2003, just when the Iraqi war and insurgency had erupted and allied forces were placed in Iraq; each with their own task routine and duty rosters. Joe was only 21 years old when he managed to get enlisted and recruited by the army, after getting cleared by the Tanzanian army of any liabilities. Tanzania being a Commonwealth country was the main reason Joe would be able to serve in the British Army.



Airstrip. Portrait

After training and getting his badges as a private 2nd class, he got crash trained in several cadres before being whisked away in berets to Basra for the Princess of Wales Royal Regiment as peace support. This role changed to helmet donning peace enforcement as soon as the Murtadha Al Sadr uprising began, and Joe's 6 month long tour would begin with him being a gunner for force protection, strategically placed to watch landing strips or being in a sweeper car ahead of a convoy and sometimes providing cover for a bomb disposal unit or then high valued persons. All these tasks were performed while strictly adhering to the British Army Card Alpha code of conduct guidelines, which was very clear in terms of what to do in which situation. The following accounts are first person anecdotes of a few instances of what happened to Joe during his tour, in a very subtle manner, and keeping names to himself.

The forward operating base. "Meetings were common," says Joe. "We would escort high valued persons to operating bases that were sometimes in the centre of towns, with the locals homesteads around." On this particular day, he was taking a break watching SkyNews on the television, which was reporting that a forward base in Basra was under attack by insurgents when suddenly the wall adjacent to the place where he was sitting collapsed. "I had my rifle in one hand and a burger in another, and I remember I took a rather large bite out of the burger because my thoughts were, I am still very hungry and this also could be my last meal," he says,



Peace Support Unit

almost laughing as he recalls. He took cover and the unit working as they would, had already in the meantime requested for the necessary assistance which arrived in a short time, and they were able to get into their armoured vehicles and a tank that would now clear the path for them, so as to get out of the volatile zone they were in. "It was funny that though the situation could have escalated, we got out of there unscathed." However, this was not always the case. In a similar case of escorting another person from the base, the convoy would leave a decent space between cars, to reduce the effect of an

attack if they were bunched up together. "I was in the first car, the sweeper or cut-off car in the front, and we did the 'stupid jobs' of looking into garbage bins, and scanned the roofs," explains Joe. "This time, we had just passed a point and were ahead when the car behind us got hit and there was shrapnel everywhere because two of our guys were badly hurt." One of them losing his eye and another with a large gash over his back and pelvis. An alternate team that was not far away offered support, with the sweeper car returning to base using the same route they had come as they were now assured that it would be clean. "We used chubs, to block GPS signals when we were in these situations, however it seems one of us had left their phone on by mistake, or forgot to switch it off in the hurry to leave, and this cost us soldiers who would return home, sometimes not completely, as in another very gruesome incident." says Joe solemnly. "I have heard skulls explode," says Joe.



Heading back to base after a long day

"Though we tried to flag down the jeep, slow them down so that they would manoeuvre around the fuel truck accident, he went straight into the truck which exploded and the situation was only worsened due to the impending sandstorm that followed." Conflicts and wars have consequences, soldiers return with post-traumatic stress disorder, with nightmares and feelings of never having left the conflict zone.

"I was born in Tanzania, and every day is a form of PTSD," says Joe jokingly. Clearly Joe was amongst the lucky ones who returned to lead a normal life after serving in the army,

unlike some who wither away. He remembers a funny story about a time where he was on his break, before he would relieve his gunner sentry from the post that was to guard the landing strip. Sirens would go off if there was an attack at the base. This had become so common and many times it was nothing serious explained Joe, except for this one time. "Usually the siren goes off, and you grab your helmet and your gun, and move to the duty station," says Joe. "this time, the siren went off and I ignored it, and went back to sleep." Heading back to the post to relieve his lookout, he realised that the post did not have its covering and that there was clear shelling had taken place when the sirens had sounded. "We did laugh the incident off." smiles Joe.

All conflicts have conflicting reporting and documentation. Stories told and anecdotes that are remembered tend to be skewed or remembered with gaps due to stressful situation recollection. Memoirs are written by those who return and can remember; a reminder of difficult times.



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