



Triple Check

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O230. Over the assault net I hear the call -- 3,2,1, execute, execute, execute. The last time I heard that I was in Michigan. It was just training then. Tonight it was real. I still can't get over the way the air smells: like a combination of burning trash and rotten farm hay. I am familiar with the smell of rotten farm hay; we live in one of Saddam's old stables.

I think we are all a bit nervous, even though no one will admit it. As I look around, I notice that everyone has his own ritual. Some smoke, others dip Copenhagen, some listen to their iPods; some do all three. Regardless of what pre-mission ritual we engage in, everyone has the same look on his face. It's the look everyone has in the plane before a free fall jump. It's not anxiety or fear—it's something else: it's focus. It's the same look professional athletes have before a game.

We are briefing at 2200. In training, the briefs could last up to three hours. This one only lasts 35 minutes. After the brief, I get a fresh set of batteries for my optics and lasers. There are always plenty of triple and double A batteries to go around. The batteries that have been in my gun are probably still good, but I change them anyway. I grab some spares just in case. I triple check that everything works and that the new batteries are fresh.

2300. I check my gear again. My gear is still in order.

We have been in country for just over a week: long enough to get acclimated to vampire hours. We rise in the evenings and get to sleep before dawn. At first glance, there was nothing different about tonight. If you take a step back and put it in perspective, the night was the culmination of three years of training. That's 26,297 hours that were all going to lead up to a mission that shouldn't take longer than 30 minutes. I do another quick function check on my gun. It works.

2330. It's time for my second red bull; the chow hall was out of wild tiger. Wild Tiger, the local energy drink, has nicotine in it. It was always the first to disappear out of the refrigerators; unfortunately we won't receive any more until Tuesday.

Even though I know the time, I keep checking my watch. We are rolling out at 0200, which means I need to have my kit on by 0145. The trucks were staged at midnight. I put on my first layer of gear and take my armor to the truck. I always wait until the last minute to put on my armor.

Midnight. Some guys go to the main chow hall to get a quick bite. I decide to stay at the camp. I bum a p-funk from one of the guys—that's what we call parliament cigarettes. I check the dry erase board for the tenth time to make sure the timelines haven't changed. Changes are always in red.

The next hard time was 0100 for communications checks. Most people only use one radio; I use two so that I can listen to multiple communication nets. I grab my radios off the charging table. The batteries are rechargeable and have been known to burn out fast, so I grab a few spares. I keep a spare battery on the back of my helmet to help balance out the weight of my night vision. Next, I get two infrared chem-lights and put one in each side shoulder pouch. We use them if we suspect any serious chance of friendly fire. It's definitely for a worst-case scenario, but it's early in the war and forces weren't exactly de-conflicting with each other.

0130. I get a quick check from one of my buddies on both our communication nets. Everything is good. Guys are starting to gather around the trucks and the individual rituals continue. I check my laser again, and it still works. I do the same with the light on my gun.

0145. I put my armor on and sling my gun. I wasn't going into the target house tonight because that was saved for the guys who had been in country for a while. I watch them get ready. They make all of this look pretty routine, and I wonder how many missions it took before they became like that.

I turn my radios on and hear everyone getting their checks ... again. It reminds me of when the airlines let you listen to the pilot chatter as an entertainment option. I think it was usually channel 0 depending on the airline. I'm sitting in the back of the truck tonight. With all my kit on, it's hard to get in and out of the cramped trucks. It always baffles me that a truck this large could have such small seats. The navigator checks us in, and we are ready to go.

0200. We roll out of our compound. We are the last truck in the convoy. There isn't really an IED threat. The main threat comes from small arms fire. In addition to the turret gunner, there are four other mounted heavy weapons—the truck looks like The Death Blossom from The Last Star Fighter. As soon as we pass the final checkpoint, our convoy goes black. Everyone is on night vision and all truck lights are off. As we pass the last barrier, the expansive city opens up. It amazes me how empty the streets are; a curfew is in place. The house we are hitting is only a

few miles away. We park down the street from it, so the trucks don't wake the house's occupants. The assaulters going inside the target, quickly and quietly get out of the trucks. They methodically make their way towards the house.

0230. The door is explosively breached. That's our cue to drive to the house and provide external security. I ride on the side of the truck like a fireman so that I can quickly get to my designated position. Everything looks different from the rehearsals; I double-check my wrist map to make sure I'm in the right spot. Just as practiced, I pick up security on my corner of the target. I take a knee beside a small wall. I look at the guys that have been in country for a while—it all seems like second nature to them. I wonder how long it will take for me to be like that. I wonder if this will ever become routine.