

## Inside Checkpoint Two

It's hard to pinpoint when this story begins. A sense of service to our country was instilled within me at a very early age. It wasn't until I understood what war was, and what it meant to be a soldier, that I realized the path that was being carved out for me. I was a young man who looked at the world as if it needed a protector, along with the people that resided on this third rock from the sun. That young man was me, Matt Goss. I grew up in a military family, always finding myself sitting in the middle of my family members, listening to them talk about being dropped behind enemy lines on D-Day, or the smell of gunpowder lingering in the air of the jungles, in Vietnam. Those within earshot that had not experienced these trials and tribulations, would shift in their seats uneasily, trying not to draw attention. I always knew that someday I would have stories of my own to tell, when someday, I would take my place among these men whom I sat amongst, being the next generation to pass the torch. I had no idea at this time that the life I would lead in service to our country, would lead to more combat, more death, more bloodshed, and more tears, than any of the stories that wide eyed young man so vigilantly listened to so long ago. This is my story.

It was 12 February 1998. I was 17 years old, and the day had finally come. My father, Samuel, was driving me to the recruiting station to join the Army. With a quick swipe of a pen, I found myself the property of Uncle Sam. It's funny how a person doesn't realize that they are making ripples, and waves in the ocean of life. Some would call this the Butterfly Effect. This very day would be a pivotal point in my life, and would also have a great influence on hundreds of other lives in the coming years. At the time, I was only thinking about the trials that I would face becoming a soldier. I would not have the ability to look ahead, and see the men I would be

fighting next to on lands far, far away, or the men that would breathe their last breaths next to me in battle, that I would call brothers.

It was now June, same year. I had never stepped foot on a plane before, and here I was, dropped off via taxi, at the curb of Philadelphia International Airport. It would be my ride to Ft. McClellan, Alabama to enter basic training. I had to laugh at myself as the plane taxied. I had never flown before, and I was scared. This is when I realized the weight of my endeavor. Here I was, scared to fly, but I was flying to basic training to learn how to be a soldier, and jump out of planes onto a battlefield, and fight to the death if required. This took my mind off of the butterflies in my stomach. As the plane rapidly increased speed down the runway, I felt the air begin to lift the nose of the plane. Before I knew it, for the first time in my life I could see the entire area where I grew, up all at once from 10,000 feet, then 15,000 feet, and then clouds.

After many hours of travel, and a sleepless, and nervous night before, we arrived at Ft. McClellan. There was approximately 75, soon-to-be soldiers, on a 60 person bus. You could hear a pin drop, as the old diesel engine of the bus sputtered to a halt. We began to stand up, not saying a word, and recanting all of those movies about boot camp. "*Full Metal Jacket*" comes to mind. I will never forget seeing a Drill Sergeant for the first time. He had to turn sideways to fit through the door of the bus. In my innocent eyes that man blocked every shred of light from the first row of seats and beyond. His Brown Round Drill Sergeant hat was cocked down to his eye brows, shadowing all but the whites of his eyes. A bead of sweat slowly trickled down the side of his stone cold face in the hot Alabama heat. Here we were, 75 against one, locked in a standoff. "Get the fuck off my bus! Move! Move! Move! Maggots!" The first row tried to move past him as he started to walk down the aisle of the bus. "Don't you Fucking Touch Me!" "Get off my bus now!" We opened emergency exits in a frenzy. Recruits were jumping out of

windows, the back door, and any other way we saw fit to get away from this man eating, blood thirsty, shark. Little did we know, but that was the first lesson we learned as we were programmed like robots. Robots with a primary purpose; Adapt and overcome, and always find a way. This lesson would be crucial later in my life, more times than I can count.

What we didn't realize is that the school of Drill Sergeants circling the bus were just waiting to attack. "Fall In! I said fall in!" What the hell do they want me to do? I know that means everyone get into a formation, but I had no idea what a formation was. I would learn these terms, and more, very quickly over the coming weeks, and months, as I was transformed into a robot, programmed to kill, with nothing more than a spoken order. My wide eyes became sharp, always scanning for a threat. My innocence was gone. I used to think a bad meal was a cold burger, being brought to the table. Now I found myself happy with an uncooked hotdog, in a fox hole, while the rain pounded all around me. I was reborn into a new world, ready to fight the good fight, and to defend our Country, and our Flag, from enemies both foreign and domestic, with any means necessary.

Over the next few years, I did numerous deployments, working my way from Private to Corporal. I was now instructing young recruits myself, in Urban Warfare and Combat as well as Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT).

On 11 September 2001, I was asleep, when my bedroom door flew open. It was my roommate, clad in nothing except boxer shorts revealing a lifetime of warfare told in hundreds of tattoos. He said "Get your ass out of bed! We have to get to the unit!" I had no idea what was going on, but I rolled onto the floor and jumped up looking for my BDU's. I could overhear the living room T.V. as the second tower was hit. Before the towers collapsed, we were on the road, ready to give the ultimate sacrifice. We had heard about small attacks here and there, but this

one was different. We knew we were going to war. The ride was quiet except for the roar of his 5.0 Liter High Output Mustang, with straight pipes coming off the headers. It bellowed a thunder that would impress Odin, and carried two passengers that carried the Hammer of Thor. From that day forward, I knew nothing but war. I would grow into the man I am today; influenced by the men whom I would fight next to, the men who would train me, and towards the end, the men whom I would train. This knowledge would be gained from the countless battles I would fight, and the brothers, and warriors that would fight, and die next to me on foreign lands.

After the war in Afghanistan started we were shuttled around here and there, in support of the ongoing battle in the Middle East. I found myself in Saudi Arabia, providing Force Protection for a small military base in the middle of the desert, not far from southern Iraq. Mid-way through our deployment, our camp was rocked by a massive explosion outside the walls. A car bomb had detonated at the Embassy, killing and wounding what seemed like countless people. The wounded began flooding into our gates. People with flesh ripped off of their bones, and charred faces were begging for help. We did all we could to accommodate these innocent people. But really there is only so much a person can do.

Fast forward a few months. We are done with our deployment, and ready to head back to the air strip, and begin our journey home. That evening we were all called into an airplane hangar on the tarmac. We were told at this time, that war had been declared in Iraq. There would be no outgoing flights. Back to our Perimeter Defense Positions we went. One man defenses now turned into two. Patrols doubled, then tripled. Minute by minute, updates on the war that that would find itself just a couple hours away, were given. Any time off was a thing of the past. We worked endless hours, sleeping only when we could, and often not changing out of our uniforms for days. Chow was delivered by roving patrols if we were lucky. Usually it was two

MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) daily. These were picked up on the way out of our morning, or night briefings. Spaghetti was my favorite. If you were lucky, you had the jalapeno cheese sauce instead of the plain cheese. It was the little things that you counted on to keep your spirits up while you sat waiting, just waiting. You may ask, what were we waiting on? The answer is always "anything, and everything." We would train for the worst, and hope for the best. You never knew if the next vehicle coming into the checkpoint, would be the one to make the lights go out, or if a sniper would take you out while you are on patrol. Soon enough this chapter of my life was over. I thought I had accomplished a lot up to this point. How naïve I was. I had no idea that this would not be the end of a book, but merely the introduction, to a lifetime of war.

I found myself back home in late 2003. It had been over two years since the beginning of the War on Terror. My military dress uniform now clad with medals that tell a story to only those who know the language. I had been trained and tried over the years, but my war was not over. It had not yet begun. I was good at what I did. I enjoyed the comradery that only brothers in arms know. I missed it. My time in the Army was coming to an end, and I decided to look at doing other government work. After networking, I found myself lurking in what many people would describe as "secret squirrel" type of work. I sent in my resume, and received a call the next day. "I'm emailing you plane tickets. Can you be at the airport in two hours?" I was alive again! I packed a small backpack, grabbed a ride from a friend, and I was on a plane to begin what would be the next 12 years of my life.

This part of my life is what many people would probably consider another chapter of my life. I would also consider this another chapter, but in a different book. I say this because the man that stared back at me in the mirror, up to this point, still had warmth in his heart. He still saw the good in mankind. The man that would stare back later in my life, would not be looking

at his reflection, but rather watching behind him, waiting for an attack. The innocence would be gone from his eyes. The light replaced by darkness, and covered by sun beaten eyelids that would remain open while he slept. The reflection would also reveal battle wounds from shoulders to ankles, each with their own story. All of this began 14 years ago, in Fredericksburg, VA.

Not having a clue as to what lay ahead, I was so full of energy, and hope for the future. I would find myself once again at the mercy of instructors. The difference this time being, I was surrounded by almost 100 men, all from different branches of the service, and almost all of them from the elite of the elite in their respective fields. We had retired Navy S.E.A.L.'s, Special Forces, Pararescue Jumpers, and Force Recon as far as the eye could see. All of these men with a story of their own. We fell in like the robots we were, waiting for our next instruction, without even being told to do so. I would make a few friends very quickly. In a military environment this is usually how it goes. None of us in the civilian world are ever eager to talk to strangers, but in an environment full of soldiers, we all had a common bond, and if need be, we would die for one another right there, even without knowing each other's names. This was engrained in every single one of us; to fight, and to die, but never leave anyone behind.

Training began the very next day. We were being judged not on our individual abilities, but on how we would operate as small units of five men or less. The instructors knew that we all had the knowledge of how to operate in combat zones. What this mission required was very different from any operations that any of us had ever done up to this point. It would require us to operate as a team, with different ROE's (Rules of Engagement) than we were used to, and the ability to adapt and overcome in order to mold into a single operating unit. One individual I would meet became an instant close friend of mine, Kyle. The two of us came from similar

backgrounds, and operated as a left and right arm do on the same torso. He would share stories of his family, and I would do the same. We would discuss the protective formations we were being taught, and the different weapons systems we were operating. We would share stories of our past. Some would end in laughter, and some with tears.

There was no room for individualism during this time. Many of the initial group who stood tall at day one, were now at home. All of them cut for one reason or another. After a couple of months in training, there were approximately 17 of us left from the initial 100. We would all be granted passage onto the next stage, deployment to an unknown land. We were told initially in the beginning of our training that we would be deploying immediately upon graduation for those of us who made it through training. This did not happen due to reasons beyond our paygrades, and we were told to pack our belongings, and head home to await orders. I was very disturbed because of this. I was already back in the mindset! Why are they doing this to me? Either send me to war, or send me home! It is not easy going back and forth mentally between the two. While Kyle and I were saying our goodbyes as soldiers do, we were approached by one of the instructors. He let us both know that we had stuck out during training, and he wanted us to stay with their group to deploy to Afghanistan. Before he finished saying Afghanistan, I think I was already signing the paperwork. Weirdly, I slept very well that night. I knew what dangers lie ahead, or at least I thought I did. Just having a solid plan was enough for me. I knew I was moving forward to do what I was born to do, provide service to my Country.

Kyle and I arrived in Afghanistan in the early days of 2005. We were what the guys who had been there for a while would call “Green as Grass”. You have to always go through the song and dance of figuring out where things are, where the chow hall is, where to pick up your weapons and so on. I had only been placed in my room for a couple of minutes when there was a

knock at my door. It was my new Team Leader. He introduced himself quickly, and gave me a map of the area without even giving me the time to introduce myself. He proceeded to then tell me “Learn this map, we are heading out at 0600, and you are driving the lead vehicle,” and out the door he went. I spent the rest of the night studying the map, picking out landmarks to help guide me from one place to another. In the morning I was standing tall and ready to go. As promised I was driving the lead vehicle. As soon as we pulled out of the gate, it became obvious that I had been looking at routes that no longer existed. There were still Russian tanks from a war long ago, blocking intersections that were rusted to pieces, holes in bridges, from car bombs not more than a few days old, and routes being blocked due to fire fights happening just down the road. I looked in my mirror and saw a mountain behind our camp with an odd shape. All I kept saying to myself is, “If I have to get back to camp, follow that mountain.” I had proven myself over the coming weeks as an asset to the team, and we were all as close as brothers. How I had longed for this. It wasn’t long before I was asked to move to another part of Afghanistan, to assist in the training of the Afghan Army, and Police. Not any sooner was I asked to do this, and their camp was shut down due to an attack. I was then re-routed to Iraq where I would spend almost the next decade of my life.

I arrived in Iraq, again, the new guy, but no longer “Green as Grass”. I had proven myself in Afghanistan, and instead of a cold welcome, it was “I’m glad you made it out of there bro.” I was quickly whisked away via a convoy, and driven to a hotel in the middle of Baghdad. This was during a time that would be deemed “The Wild West” by future generations. My first night in my room, I fell asleep to the sounds of the mosque singing the nightly prayer, with the dull sounds of gun fire, and explosions in the distance. This was like a lullaby. For me it was home. I found myself working as an evaluator, and instructor for teams moving around the city.



Evaluating their convoy maneuvers, and weapons manipulation skills. I would then take this information back, and make training scenario's based off of this information. Only a couple of weeks in, I received a call from a familiar voice. It was my friend, Kyle! He told me about the many adventures he had since my departure from Afghanistan. He also informed me that he was asked if he would like to join me in Iraq, as another instructor. He wasn't sure if he wanted to make that move, but I talked him into it. On the plane he went, and a few days later I was reunited with a dear friend. We spent the first day learning Operating Procedures, and getting him up to speed on this new environment. We would teach different weapons systems to what came to be known as the League of Nations. This consisted of translators, and power points in many different languages. We taught everything one needed to know in order to survive in this harsh landscape. One morning I was approached by one of the Team Leaders, from one of the teams that operated daily in and around the Baghdad City area. He was down two men due to an attack, and asked if Kyle and I would be willing to sit in as Operators, for a long distance mission. I told him I would be there, and that I would speak with Kyle about it. After speaking to Kyle about this run, he was unsure since that was not our objective, but I was always able to talk him into an adventure. The next morning we arrived early in the basement of the hotel, for our pre-mission briefing. This is where they discuss what we will be doing, the routes we will be taking, and what sectors we will be covering. The Team Leader approached me and asked to speak to me outside quickly. This conversation took a lot longer than anticipated, and before we knew it, the team was coming out of the basement to load into the vehicles. The Tactical Commander of the team saw me and said "Matt! I thought you weren't coming. I didn't see you in the brief." I apologized and he said, "No big deal, I had you riding right rear in the follow vehicle, and Kyle riding Left rear in the Lead. No problem. I put Kyle in your seat, and you can

just take his.” This would be a time I would later reflect back on, as one of those ripples in the ocean of life. During the early days in Iraq, we didn’t exactly have the best equipment. We were rolling down the most dangerous roads in the world with windows down, and barrels out, scanning for threats at 60 MPH. As we watched the skyline of Baghdad retreat into the horizon, it was almost peaceful. We were approaching a choke point in the road ahead. This is where an object of forces you to enter through a tight path, and limits your abilities. It was an abandoned Iraqi Army checkpoint next to what appeared to be a small city of mud huts. It almost reminded me of when I was a child, watching the Flintstones. Our convoy then tightened up, and the speed dropped sharply as we navigated the tight squeeze. No sooner did we pass through, and everything began to ring, and I didn’t know which end was up. I could hear yelling over the radio, and I could see the vehicles behind me skidded off the road. I still had no idea what the hell happened. As I gathered my strength, and the initial shock wore off in what was actually only a few seconds, I realized we had been hit by an enormous IED. I robotically exited my vehicle, and took my place among the rest of the team in order to bound to the injured. We were under a massive amount of enemy fire from the rooftops, and we had no communication with our base to call for backup. Our guys were going down one after the other. My mission was to find Kyle. We always told each other that in the event we come under attack, you find me and I’ll find you, and we will fight together. As I approached Kyle’s vehicle, I breached the door in order to fight next to my brother, only to find a body without a head. “Kyle, get up!” I yelled. I was still in shock at what I was seeing. The guy next to him was unconscious, and missing an arm. The driver still had his hands on the steering wheel but was killed in the blast. This was obvious due to the back of his head missing. The rear gunner was trying to pick up his weapon, but missing his hands. We fought for what seemed like hours, but who knows exactly how long

it was. Time has no place in combat. As our ammunition count was running low, along with the adrenalin level, they rode in. It was an Army Quick Response Team, riding in on those desert tan, steel horses, with a message for our enemies; “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.” This was an unspoken bond. I was all but wrestled down by some young soldiers who told me “you’re ok now brother, we got this.” I was loaded into a vehicle. I was covered in blood, bone, and brain matter from the fight. My ears were still ringing, and my body was tired. As we did a U-Turn, and passed by the other vehicles, I saw them carry my friends limp body to another vehicle. This would be the first of one of his last rides, taking him home. It wasn’t until this point I remembered that I was supposed to be in Kyle’s seat. In a way, my friend had protected me, one final time.

A couple of months later, and a few more battles, I had found myself with a skin so thick, it ran to my core. I would stare right through those “new guys” who still had their sense of humor, and had never seen what I had seen. They would talk about what they were going to do on their upcoming leave. I had given up my leave. I did not want to leave this place. This place was now me, and I it. My blood stained numerous locations, as I had been baptized in the trials of combat. At this point in my life, I believe I was comfortable with the idea of this being the last land I would ever step foot on. The groups of men I socialized with became very select. We were often the ones that wore the same uniforms day in and day out, smelling of gunpowder, and booze. We were the guys who would sit next to a rowdy group in the chow hall, and quiet them down without saying a word. Hell, we barely spoke to each other. We didn’t have to. We were proven to each other, and the only thing we needed to know, is that we had each other’s backs.

It was now 2006, and my story took yet another turn. I had been selected to move onto the Embassy Compound to provide Tactical Support, and Counter Assault for teams operating in

and around the City of Baghdad. I found myself in very comfortable surroundings. These men had all seen as much, or more than I had. They all stood almost stoic during briefings. Every one of them listening intently, running scenarios through their heads. Over the next few months I would work my way from a Fire Team Leader, to Tactical Commander. We would train and fight as a single unit. We would clear buildings without the need to verbally communicate. Every one of us knew the capabilities of the man next to him. When a team would call for help over the radio, usually we just had to scan the horizon for smoke, and tracer rounds. That's one simple way of navigating quickly to provide Counter Assault, and save lives. If you were able to get to them in under five minutes, it usually meant you would find survivors. If it was more than five minutes, you were usually filling body bags. There was not any time to think, but only to react. Any decision was a good decision, since no decision would always result in death.

It was early in 2007, just after my birthday. I was training with a brand new team, and taking over as Tactical Commander. We had just finished doing drills, when we heard our Air Assets call in that one of their door gunners had been shot in the head by a sniper. He was dangling below the chopper by his man down strap, and they would be setting down on a rooftop in a very dangerous place, only a few kilometers from where we were. I immediately gave the order to get to the trucks and roll out. The sound of magazines being slammed into 38 M-4 rifles, and the charging handles being yanked back on eight machine guns, all within about five seconds, would send a chill down Satan's spine. We were bound and determined to get to their location, in the event they came under further attack. As we approached the checkpoint to exit our base, we heard yelling over the radio from another support aircraft saying that they were going down into the very guts of the city. A close friend of mine, Terry looked over at me from the driver's seat, and said, "I wouldn't want to be you right now dude."

My team consisted of approximately 40 men. All of them Special Operations. They were retired Commanders and so on, from the S.E.A.L.'s, Special Forces, Force Recon and more. They took orders without hesitation, and put themselves in harm's way, as if it were their given purpose. And it was. Every one of us knew that at any moment it could all be over, but we would never go down running away from the fight. Whomever it was, that had balls big enough to attempt to send us to our maker, was going to have to work for it. We ate nails, and pissed vinegar. If our primary weapon malfunctioned, we transitioned to our pistols. If that failed us too, for God's sake, you better run, because we were coming after you, and we were going to rip you apart with our hands, and tear your flesh from your bones with our teeth. We were lions, and we knew it. That's what made us so effective, and so dangerous. When teams under attack saw us coming down the road, they knew they were safe. They knew that we would fight to the last man, just to defend them in battle.

Like I said, it was just after my birthday in 2007, and I am now leaving the checkpoint for the first time as Tactical Commander of this team. Without hesitation we drove in the last known direction of where we thought the helicopters had come under attack. We knew we were getting close because we started taking small arms fire from rooftops, and window's in certain areas. This was always a telltale sign that you were getting close. We drove all over the location looking for our brothers. Eventually we found the wreckage a few floors up in a building. Upon further examination it had appeared that they had all been executed after the crash by the enemy. Knowing that the enemy was obviously near, we grabbed our brothers, and loaded them into our vehicles. I made contact with our other teams on the ground to let them know we were rolling out, and heading back to base. As we lined up to roll out, all Hell erupted on those streets of Baghdad. Within seconds all you could see was smoke, and tracer rounds. Grenades were

blowing up all around us. Bullets were ricocheting off of our windows and doors. Up gunners were yelling for more ammo. I turned to my friend Terry and shook my head and said, "These Son's a Bitches." I came over the radio and said, "Team 22 has the lead, Move!" As we exited the smoke, I looked back and saw nobody else behind our convoy. We had just made it out, and could obviously get back to base, and nobody would have blamed us. There was no way on this planet or any other planet that me and my boys were going to let that happen, and we all knew it. I said "U –Turn! We're goin back in!" One of the up gunners yelled down and said "Did you just say we're going back in?" I said "Fuckin right!" With a smile, he charged his machine gun and said "Let's roll!" We entered back into the smoke against every normal instinct. I say normal because most people would not do this, but some people aren't born normal. That's what keeps this country free, and makes us who we are. We fought for over an hour. I was running through the streets; bullets, grenades and explosions were all around me. The amount of smoke that filled the air actually burned my throat. I was gathering up ammunition for redistribution, and getting accountability of all of our team members, and equipment. As I got full accountability of our men, we rolled out. This time all together. Our vehicles carried our dead and wounded down what was now quiet city streets. I had raccoon eyes from the smoke and gunpowder staining my face. I had eye protection on, so the only clean part of my face was where the glasses had laid. I found myself once again covered in blood, not knowing if it was mine or somebody else's. As I called the checkpoint on the radio to let them know we were one minute out with 12 vehicles, I began to let myself breath. This had been my first day in charge of this team. We lost five of our brothers, and the enemy did not count on a team of lions coming to get them. We fought a fight that some of the most battle hardened men would say was insane. As I saw the checkpoint approach, I switched my radio to our base in order to let them

know we were approaching. As our last vehicle came through the checkpoint they radioed to me, and said “follow vehicle inside the checkpoint.” With bloodshot eyes, and my hands shaking, I keyed my radio to base, and said “Base, this is 22. All personnel accounted for. Inside checkpoint 2”.

This would be the beginning of an era. We would fight many battles, and lose many brothers over the next few years. We would have times of celebration, and times of reflection. Physically I would begin to deteriorate. Scars from the war would be worn on me like badges, for all of the coming days. I would find myself as one of the more senior Team Leaders, and using my hard gained knowledge to write Operating Procedures, and to build more teams. I would look back on the good times, and the sad times. I would remember my friends by pouring a drink to the floor. Some would say that I would never be the same, but I believe this is who I was always supposed to be; A child shaped early on by tales of battle in WWII, to my first lessons as a wide eyed recruit in Alabama. I would go from easily hurt by the loss of a friend, to a warrior who toasts a fallen brother. I would also ride those waves in the ocean of life, and become the leader of a team, which brought all of their men back one fateful day, and finally realizing who he was, when he said “Inside Checkpoint Two.”