

Often, sitting in the MRAP, out on patrol, or even sleeping in our cots, we'd hear a massive explosion. Sometimes they were close; other times far away. We never saw anything and weren't hit, but everyone would pause. We'd stand there, not saying anything, waiting for the radio to crackle to life, waiting to hear who was hit, waiting to hear if everyone was okay, waiting to hear those awful words: "Standby for casevac."

Sometimes it was okay; other times it was terrible. But now and again, nothing came over the radio. The silence hung heavier and heavier until someone would call in asking if anyone had eyes on the explosion. In those rare times, no one ever did. The only explanation was that some Taliban blew himself up.

In those seconds after a boom, when I took a deep breath and waited to hear the news, it was easy to find out who my friends were. In the middle of the night, I'd jerk awake to a distant blast, and think, *Shit, is Blackwood on patrol?* Or during the day, when we were waiting for Echo Mobile to swing through, I'd hear something and worry about Demmingware. Either way, I'd hear an explosion and I'd wait, with bated breath, hoping it wasn't one of my friends who lost a leg, an arm, a life. I'd hope it was someone I didn't care about, someone I never met that died. I put that on their family so I wouldn't have to think about it.

So those times when something blew up, and no one knew what it was, I smiled. I smiled and grinned, and I was happy one less Taliban was running around, one less person trying to kill me and my friends. I'd smile and grin, but the happiness would catch in my throat because I'd tell

myself it was a Taliban, but deep down, I knew it was some poor farmer. Someone who was paid to do it if they were lucky, or told to do it-or else-if they weren't. But I'd smile and pretend and tell myself it was a Taliban because that's how you deal with bombs going off. I'd hope it wasn't someone I knew or someone that came with me, and I'd hope that maybe it was someone who deserved it, because, in that moment, when I was holding my breath and waiting for the radio to crackle to life, it was all I had.