

September 6 2012

Greetings from Afghanistan,

My name is Sergeant First Class Allan Russell. Currently I am deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in the Panjwa'i District of Afghanistan, basically the middle of nowhere. However, it remains one of the few Taliban strongholds left in the country. It is the birth place of the Taliban. The people here are not supporters of the Taliban, they are the Taliban. Jon-Ray Falgout and I served together from 2006-2008 back in Ft. Riley, KS, and he asked me to write a little something about Operation Tommies Come Home.

When we deployed to Afghanistan in March of this year, we all knew that we were in for a different fight than most of us had ever seen. Having done 3 tours in Iraq, I truly felt that I knew what combat was all about and had few doubts that we could steam roll through this tour like we had others. As the deployment crept forward, we began getting news from the unit we were replacing and none of them sounded good. Staggering numbers that I honestly didn't believe. Twenty-four KIA and 140 amputees in 12 months sounded absolutely impossible. I had never heard of anything close to that by a unit in 10 years in the army. I decided that I would make my own opinions when I got here, and not listen to the rumor mill.

Arriving in Manas, Kyrgyzstan (I am sure that's misspelled), the pre-game jitters started to set in. I was walking past our tents we were staying in and began seeing unit patches of the guys we were replacing. We started asking questions about Mushan. Every time we asked, we were met with the same response, "good luck." I met a young Sergeant in the smoking area. The kid had the thousand yards stare that I had known from previous tours. Sure enough, he was from Mushan. The rumors were true, he told us. Twenty-four KIA, 140 amputees and 200+ purple hearts. I would be lying if I said that these numbers didn't terrify me. As a leader I couldn't tell the soldiers, but in my peer groups we would joke about our own life expectancy. Dark humor is always best shared with friends in the infantry. As we moved to Kandahar for reception training our first day, we were told if we wanted a firsthand account of how things were in Mushan that day, we should head to the ER, a soldier was there with a gunshot wound to the buttocks. The million-dollar wound on his last day on patrol, that really is miserable. We visited the soldier and again were met with the thousand-yard stare. Now it was real we were going into a fight.

Fast forward a little bit, March passed with little of note, our first week here we took 5 rounds of indirect fire. One of the rounds went through one of the tents and injured our combat camera guy. It was his first and last day at Mushan. April was on a roll. However, you could feel it in the air, things were changing. SSG Bill Kearney, a squad leader in our second platoon arrived to the company shortly before we deployed. Having worked with Bill before, I knew he was a professional and an outstanding leader of soldiers. Our second platoon, known as the Earth Pig, has held a reputation in our battalion for many years. You could always count on the Pigs to be there if you needed anything from guns in the fight, shirts off their backs, or someone to just talk to. While conducting a routine mounted patrol, Bill's crew hit the first IED of the tour. It was 100 pounds of explosives. In perspective, three pounds is more than enough to seriously injure or kill someone. "I'd rather be lucky than good" is a term often used in our profession. Bill's crew was certainly lucky that day. PFC Dortch took the worst of it with a severe concussion; everyone else had fairly minor symptoms. Bill is working on his fourth purple heart of the tour. By regulation, if he gets one more, he can't deploy any more. To be honest my heart is torn between if I want him to get one and if I don't.

On a mounted patrol going to one of our Afghan bases in our area, our second platoon had a Stryker struck by an IED. The blast was enormous. I felt the boom and I was over 4 kilometers away. It was assessed that it was more than 100 pounds of explosives. The blast rattled everyone inside the truck. SGT Derick Gamez was severely dazed but had the poise to make sure all his guys got out of the truck as it started burning. As they got out, Derick realized one person was missing, the driver, PFC Patrick Kelly. Patrick couldn't move on his own and was trapped inside a burning truck. Derick and another soldier, PFC James Muma, both jumped on the burning truck and got Kelly out of the truck. Kelly sustained a broken femur, broken arm, broken fingers, burns all over, but is alive because of his friends. Derick and James both were burned pulling Kelly out. It was our first casualty. It was the first time we had really been rocked. It was the first time this tour I have seen soldiers willingly risk their safety for each other. It wouldn't be close to being the last. PFC Kelly is doing well, so well in fact he is in outpatient, and walking. His wife has been by his side the whole time.

The enemy was changing and fighting season was about to start. I had heard of fighting season before and had never realized that these people take it so seriously. It's a legit season, like Spring. In early April, our B Company took the first hit. SPC Phillip Schiller was killed in action, in the most honorable fashion I know of. The young man was hit by enemy fire as he was firing his machine gun, allowing his squad to help SGT Cordoza, who had been shot in the leg by enemy fire. It was the first hit in the battalion, and it shook us all a bit. 6 days later on a clearance operation, it was my company's turn. Our lead interpreter was shot in the throat by a single shot. Honestly, few things are more chilling than a single shot. Bursts mean people are just shooting; single shots mean someone is shooting at you. Our interpreter, Nabi had passed away before

he hit the ground, 5 feet in front of our commander. We had 2 days left of clearing, the option to stop and take it all in was not there, and we had to press on.

We continued to do well through much of May. On Cinco De Mayo, my platoon was doing a normal route clearance before being relieved by another platoon on our over watch position. SGT Zach Anderson was clearing with PFC Josh Moon and PFC William Freas along with some Afghan soldiers. As they rounded a corner, they were struck with a directional IED that was filled with fragmentation. Everything from spark plugs to bolts were recovered from the site. All three were thrown to the ground. Zach ran to his mine clearing equipment in a known IED area, grabbed his mine detector, and cleared a path to the other two. He made a casualty collection point and treated the others until the medic arrived. It wasn't until he got back that he realized he had taken shrapnel in his leg. SGT Zach Anderson has been nominated for the Bronze Star Medal with Valor Device. An award I wish I could give all the soldiers.

As we made our final preparations for an upcoming mission our base took 2 rounds of 82mm indirect fire. The rounds again landed in a tent, this time it was the tent of our language assistant. They are local nationals who speak both English and Pashto, who bridge the language barrier. We lost two more of our interpreters and that was devastating to the company. One of the terps took shrapnel to the head and the other to the chest. They were the most severely injured. Another one of our terps was injured but was able to stay with the unit. Two soldiers were also injured. SGT Cody Outcalt took shrapnel in the arm and his back and SGT Joseph Glover sustained a concussion and shrapnel in his thigh. Cody recovered and was able to return to duty and lead his fire team. SGT Glover spent a while recovering in Kandahar, but eventually came back to us, though he suffers from Traumatic Brain Injury and can't go on patrol. We would take indirect fire a few more times over the next few weeks without injuring any one. A round fell about 15 feet short of my room. I really would have been sad if my snacks had been destroyed. Another round went directly through one of the tents and landed in our chow hall. No one would eat in there for a few weeks. Eventually, we all got over it and renamed the place the impact zone dining facility.

Despite the indirect fire, it really felt like what we were doing was working. It felt as though the enemy was on the ropes and it would take something significant to tip the scales and they would run. Our battalion started another clearance operation on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May. A clearance operation is a multiple day, door to door, compound to compound deliberate search. Often known to the infantryman as a giant waste of time. The enemy knows you're coming. It's a little hard to hide 400 soldiers moving across a field/desert. On May 30<sup>th</sup>, our company began our portion of the mission. We were to clear 5 Kilometers in 2 days. Not a large feat, seeing as to how most of us can move 5k in under a half hour. It turns out that the enemy wasn't on the ropes. He was regrouping, reinforcing, and waiting for a fight. May 30<sup>th</sup> would begin that fight.

We began crossing a large open area known as the Salt Flats. Moving through the dark to get out of the open, we began pressing through the area of Mushan. Most of the village clusters in the area are protected by IED belts, basically mine fields that establish a perimeter around the village clusters. Explosions could be heard all day, as our engineers found and blew up IED's in the area. By noon I had heard no less than 20 explosions, each time gripping the radio to make sure that we had found it, and no one was hurt. Late that afternoon, as we were approaching our bed down spot for the night, I heard an explosion about 100 meters away. I knew it was my platoon, and I knew we didn't find it. As I ran forward with my medic, I came to my weapons squad leader as he was putting out a fire in a field. I could see a soldier behind him being treated. It was PFC Michael Payne. Payne had come to us 3 weeks before we deployed. Payne was a big boy. Years of working on a farm in Oregon had made one of the most gigantic and brute strong guys I had ever met. I asked my squad leader what happened, and he said he didn't know, he just saw Payne blow up in front of him. I called in for a helicopter as soon as I had a report on what happened and the injuries he'd sustained. I moved to him and held his hand waiting on the bird. He only asked me for two things, he didn't want them to take his leg, and he wanted his Bible. I knew I could at least try and get his Bible. His heel had been torn off and he had burns up his calf. His leg would be gone before he woke up in Germany. Less than 4 months with our unit, and he was easily one of the hardest working guys I have ever met. I called him when he got back to San Antonio, he was happy to be home with his new wife. But he said he only wanted to come back to us and finish the tour.

As we moved to a grape field, I heard an explosion to the south. Didn't really think anything of it until I heard the call on the radio. Our engineers had struck an IED just south of us. Our second platoon was working to get a helicopter there. In fact, they were trying to get two to come in. SSG Michael Gibson and SGT James Moore had been attached to our second platoon for the mission as their engineers. As they were clearing a route through an IED belt, SSG Gibson stepped on an IED. Immediately it took his leg almost all the way up to the hip. SGT Moore had severe soft tissue damage to both legs. Both were life threatening, but I still didn't understand why they needed two birds. Turns out 7 people were severely concussed from the overpressure of the explosion. 3 of those people worked to save the lives of Gibson and Moore. Without enough bearing to stand up without throwing up, they were able to apply tourniquets to the legs of both soldiers, saving their lives. One of the soldiers who suffered a concussion was PFC Clark. Clark scored the lowest I have seen on the concussion exam. When he made it to Germany it was discovered that he had a tumor in his brain. In a strange twist of luck, an IED saved Clark's life.

Sleep didn't come easy in that grape field that night. I wondered if we had done enough to train the soldiers, and I hoped the next day would be a little easier than this one had. As I sat with my radio next to me, I heard another company to our south that was on the same mission. They were calling for another helicopter; a soldier hadn't drank enough water and suffered from dehydration. I let out a little chuckle, guys were losing their legs and this kid was leaving because of not enough water. Seemed like that kid would be teased for a long time by his platoon. As the helicopter touched down, a dog handler from the Navy was helping load the patient in the helicopter. The helicopter started taking small arms fire from the west. As Sean Brazas was loading his buddy in, he was shot in the chest, a perfect shot in between his plate carrier. Brazas fell to the ground, the round pierced his heart. He had died before his buddy had got to the hospital. I didn't know Sean, never saw him in my life. But I can't help but be proud of him that day. We all hope that we would have the courage to help our friend when we are getting shot at, but you'd be surprised how many people don't. It takes a certain character to be that brave. Sean had that.

May 31<sup>st</sup> we woke up, bright and early, to start clearing again. The day before had left a sour taste in all of our mouths. As Soldiers, though, we pressed on. The morning passed quickly and, by lunch, my platoon was done with our portion of the clearing. Sitting in a mud hut used to dry grapes, we took our kits off and cooled down. Our second platoon was way behind, and we were starting to plan how we would clear the remaining portion of the area. Another explosion and this time it was big. SPC Josh Wetzel had been clearing since the engineers had gone down. As he came up to a wall, he stepped on an IED. Immediately he did a back flip and landed in a field. Both his legs had been blown off. SGT David Brooks was behind him and had caught shrapnel to the face and eyes. Having known both of them for years, I was terrified. Then another explosion, one of the Afghan soldiers with us had stepped on one a few feet from where Josh had stepped on one. It tore both his legs and one arm off. They were all loaded on a helicopter. Josh was taken to ICU and sent to Germany, then on to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He has had an amazing recovery. Last week we saw a picture of him on Facebook as he took his first steps with his prosthetics. A southern boy from Alabama, his devotion to his Auburn Tigers is quite impressive. His wife, Paige, has been with him the whole way. The pictures of the two of them sleeping in the same hospital bed or sneaking out to have a date night are truly moving. David Brooks sustained shrapnel to the face and eyes. I have known David for 4 years now, and he's never been a stickler for army rules. He obeyed one that day and was wearing his eye protection, and it saved his vision. David recovered in Kandahar, refused to go to America and is here with us still. I never heard what happened to the Afghan soldier, and I am not so sure I want to.

As David recovered in Kandahar, our C Company had a soldier struck with an IED. SPC Stokes, was on a dismounted patrol and lost both of his legs. He was the medic for his platoon. I didn't know Stokes, enough so that I don't even know his

first name. I know this though, when our Brigade Sergeant Major went to San Antonio to visit, Stokes asked him if he got his prosthetics, when he could come back to the unit.

On June 6, again our second platoon was on one of our routine patrols out west of our base. They got a Stryker stuck in the sand in the banks of the Arghandab River. The Stryker's tires spun until it dug in. Our 2-1 truck took the lead out of the area. The truck was struck by an 80-100 pound IED that blew the axles off the truck. The truck caught fire, as the boys started to get out again a soldier realized that not everyone was there. PFC Janckila, a kid not even old enough to buy a beer, called out that his friend Ryan Durham wasn't out of the truck and it was on fire. Janckila ran back in the truck through the smoke and crawled through the driver's compartment. PFC Durham couldn't get out because the engine pressed so hard against the hatch it wouldn't open. Janckila pulled Durham out, through the flames. Not 21, but old enough to be a hero. PFC Janckila is currently being submitted for the Army Commendation Medal with Valor device for his actions on June 6<sup>th</sup>.

June passed slowly. As we left our COP for a normal patrol with our Afghan partners, we passed our third platoon who was already on another patrol. They were moving through a series of grape rows and came to an open point in a wall. SGT Michael Lassey spotted what he thought might be an IED. By now, as a unit, we had all become pretty darned proficient at spotting them. Our young Sergeants across the board had become the experts on spotting them. Michael was right seeing the signs. As he called forward the bomb disposal team, he stepped on the IED. It was hidden and he saw a hoax IED. The blast tore through his legs, leaving him with severe soft tissue damage. The medic, Doc Perez, did an outstanding job of stopping the bleeding, but they still had to move Michael to a spot a helicopter could land. The grape rows in Afghanistan are like rolling hills separated by a foot and a half. It took almost 10 minutes to move Michael the 300 meters to an open field. When I said that Doc Perez did a great job stopping the bleeding, I wasn't lying. He did so well he forgot to give Michael morphine. As he waited for the bird, Doc finally hit him with it and up and away he went. Michael is doing good. He is recovering in San Antonio with his wife. It wasn't certain he would keep his legs, but, luckily, the doctors did an exceptional job and were able to save them. Many surgeries later, he is recovering with many to go. He will be in San Antonio for the next 2 years at least.

By July, the fighting had become intense. Every patrol we went on we were getting in firefights. New fighters were in town and they didn't care about locals, or women and children, they just wanted to get their Jihad on and try and get an American. We had done well, but war is a game of inches. 2 inches left, 2 inches right and some of us may not be here.

July 7, 2012 is the worst day I have ever had in my life. Short of losing one of my children, I can't imagine it could be much worse. Another clearing operation was slated for that day. We all had a bad feeling going into it. It was my platoon's turn to stay back in. I stayed in the operations center for the mission to be the connection for the guys on the ground to higher headquarters. Our second and third platoons began clearing the area. At about 7 in the morning, it all started. In the Ops Center, you don't see it, so you have to rely on the reporting from the guys on the ground. As I heard the call for a helicopter come in, I didn't have to rely on reporting, I knew it was bad. SSG Bill Kearney was coming in very hard to understand. We had heard an explosion and with Bill on the radio, there was a sense of panic. Sergeant First Class Edgar Barrera was the platoon sergeant for second. 12 years in the army, this was his third combat tour. He had taken a break and served as a drill sergeant between his second and third tour. It gave him some time to spend with his wife, Lucia, and their two kids. As Edgar was coming out of a building, our Bomb Disposal Team spotted a wire and told everyone to stop. It was too late. Edgar had been struck with an IED. Both legs and his arm were ripped off. The bomb disposal team behind him all took parts of the blast, as well. SSG Razon, the team lead, lost a testicle, 1LT Wright had shrapnel wounds all over her body. Bill Kearney, the squad leader calling up the report came across as unreadable for a reason. He had shrapnel lodged in his gums and blood was filling his mouth as he was trying to call for help. Edgar, SSG Razon, and 1LT Wright are all recovering right now in Ft. Sam Houston, Texas. Edgar's wife, Lucy, is an amazing person. Edgar is one of the toughest human beings I have ever met. He doesn't complain about his situation. He isn't a victim, he is a survivor, he is a soldier, and he is someone I am proud to say is my friend. The doctors say he is way ahead in his recovery and he hopes to be walking in the next month or so. His arm is a prosthetic and he is getting used to it. He still suffers a lot of pain, but he toughs through it. SSG Razon and 1LT Wright are both ok and still recovering at Ft Sam. 2 other soldiers were wounded by overpressure from the blast. PFC Buffington was moved back to our base, but SGT Juan Navarro refused to leave his soldiers.

By 7 A.M we'd sustained 7 injured soldiers. The day had only begun. As I waited in the Ops Center, reports of firefights and IED's found came through all day. At about 2 o'clock, another unexpected explosion. Our unit had another company attached to us. When they came in, I saw a face I hadn't seen in 8 years. SSG Chris Beyers looked exactly as I remembered him. He was now a weapons squad leader in a unit from Ft. Lewis. We reminisced before the patrol, both of us had another child since the last time we'd spoke. His wife, Annie, was doing well and he was just ready to get the tour done to get back to her. His squad was getting some water from their trucks and moving back to their dismounted position when Chris stepped on an IED. It immediately took both of his feet off. When I heard the name, I teared up. I hadn't seen the guy in 8 years, and the last thing I'd told him was to watch his step. Chris was cheery as he got on the bird they say, and it doesn't surprise me; that's how Chris is. Annie and the kids are with him now in Ft. Sam Houston, San Antonio. He lost both legs below the knee, but as I wrote this today, I saw his Facebook page. He took his first steps yesterday. I couldn't be prouder.

As July 7<sup>th</sup> wore on, my nerves started wearing thin. Explosions and gun fights all day, then I heard one real close, too close. I opened the door to the Ops Center and made a joke about if the enemy had IED'd the base. I heard someone say the generator was on fire. Then I heard the scream. PFC Cody Coopenberg was refueling the generator that powers our showers, when somehow it arced and caught fire. Coopenberg was covered in diesel fuel and immediately engulfed in the flames. Sergeant First Class Bernier, on his second day in the company, ran and tackled Coop while he was on fire. Smothered him in the dirt and took him over to our aid station. When I got to the aid station it was a scene unlike anything that I have ever witnessed. Never have I seen a man in so much pain and there was nothing we could do. Coop had over 65 percent of his body covered in third degree burns. The smell of flesh and fuel will never leave my nose. I held his hand as our medics attempted to start an IV line on him. It took many attempts, but, somehow, he ended up getting one stuck in him and they started fluids and pain meds. I will do my best to recant the conversation.

Coop: "Sergeant Russell, I love you guys. Tell everyone I love them."

Me: "Coop, I love you too, we all do buddy. You're going to be ok."

Coop: "Sergeant, I can't see myself, how do I look?"

Me: "Well, Coop, I can see your penis. It's ok, a little small, but ok."

Coop: "It's always been small, Sergeant."

Me: "Then I suppose you're going to be just fine, Coop."

I carried Coop with our medics to the helicopter. I honestly thought that I would never see Coop again. When he landed at Kandahar, I was surprised he was still alive. When he left for Germany, he flew with a breathing specialist because his trachea was severely burned. Coop made it all the way home. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August I was at the ER in Kandahar, smoking a cigarette. A nurse came out and was talking to one of her co-workers. I did a little ear hustling and overheard her as she talked about a burn patient who came in on July 7<sup>th</sup>, the kid had over 60% burns to his body. She had been emailed from a nurse in the states, who said he walked again for the first time. I cried, the nurse asked if I was ok. I asked her if she was talking about Cody Coopenberg. Sure enough, we were talking about the same person. Coop was given a 10% chance to live to the next day. He is at the burn clinic in Ft. Sam Houston. It's the best in the nation. He has a long way to go in his recovery, but, with his wife by his side, he takes it a day at a time. He is a survivor and a warrior in every sense of the word. Coop shouldn't be with us by normal standards, but, by God, he found a way.

It had been an overwhelming day by any standard. I felt helpless in the Ops Center, but the sun was starting to go down, and that meant that the platoons would stop clearing soon and bed down for the night. I was outside smoking, trying to diffuse the day, when another unexpected explosion happened. SGT Juan Navarro was hit. A couple of paragraphs ago I mentioned

Juan. When SFC Barrera was injured, Juan suffered a concussion. He refused to leave his soldiers. He knew what it meant to be a leader and refused to let his guys go forward without him on a day like this one. Maybe any other day Juan would have come back to the base to get medical treatment. Who knows? SGT Juan Navarro took a knee, his assault pack weighed no less than 80 pounds. He had time to take it off and take a break. Before he did, he was talking with our Battalion Commander, LTC Rutherford. The Commander told him to keep his head in the fight and his soldiers safe. Juan replied with "Don't worry sir, I got this." As Juan leaned back and rested his assault pack on the ground it set off an IED. No matter if he would have been in the best medical facility on earth, the outcome would have been the same. Juan Navarro was pronounced DOA at the emergency room in Kandahar. He was a warrior, a leader, and a friend. He is deeply missed, but his actions that day will forever be a part of my life. He had a chance to leave, go back and just take the day off. He refused, for his platoon, for the company, and for his friends.

As the news came, it sucked the life right out of all of us in the Ops Center. SGT Navarro was the first person killed in action in our company. The rest of that night and the following day are kind of a blur to me. We had three more IED strikes but no one was seriously injured. Wrapping up July 7<sup>th</sup> and finally going to sleep was a small step. The soldiers and I have put it behind us, for now. When we get home, we will have to process it all. Take it all in, and I hope that everyone is capable of handling their feelings. In total we had 1KIA and 21 WIA. July 7<sup>th</sup> was a hell of a day.

For the most part, the rest of July passed without incident. I honestly can't recount the rest of the battalion for you, and I apologize but I just don't know the circumstances behind all that has happened. I have joked with people before about a piece of equipment that I have. Jonray may remember my camelback bladder. It holds my water and has steadily done so for the last ten years. Never cleaned it, never been on a mission without it. Its lucky. I told people the day it goes down, I go down. I wish I'd never said it. On 1 August, I noticed a small hole in it, we all joked and said that was it. It all goes downhill from there, right? That afternoon, as I was getting ready to go on a mission, I was in the squad leader hatch of a Stryker. The driver slowed down and then pumped the breaks. The hatch behind me was not locked in place and came forward and hit my head. I don't remember a lot of it, but I remember being on the ground on my knees outside the truck with pain shooting down my right arm. I knew it wasn't good. The curse of the camel back got me. I haven't been able to go on patrol since, I have a pinched nerve and when I put a helmet on my hands go numb.

I handed over the reins of the platoon to SSG David Hill. If one guy could absolutely handle it, Dave could. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, my platoon was on a mission in a normally contentious area. Oddly enough, not a shot was fired on the entire mission. On the way back, one of our Strykers was struck by an IED. This time it was the commander's Stryker. CPT Andy Smith, our company commander and 10 other soldiers were inside. According to Dave Hill the Strykers front four tires

came off the ground, low rider style, then came crashing down blowing out the tires and axles. Dave didn't think anyone had survived. As he made his way to the truck, he saw movement, so he and the medic took off to see if anyone was seriously hurt. One by one, everyone in the truck began coming out. No one was killed, and to this day I still don't know how. They brought everyone in the truck back to our base. CPT Andy Smith broke his arm and ankle. A whole lot of pins, screws, and plates later he is recovering back at Ft. Lewis. PFC Julio Aguilar has three broken vertebrae and is also back at Ft. Lewis getting treatment. PFC Jonathan McCann has damage to his shoulder and is on his way home, as well. CPT Smith was a great commander, probably one of the best I have ever had; completely dedicated to the mission, willing to listen to his soldiers, and made no excuses and would never except any. He has been replaced by CPT Paul Brown who by all accounts is an outstanding commander to this point. We have been blessed by a solid officer corps and that really helps a mission.

Two days after CPT Smith was injured my platoon was again on a patrol west of our base. They began receiving small arms fire. If my platoon is nothing, they are violent. They returned fire with grenades, mortars, machine guns, snipers, if they would have had it, they would shoot a cannon. My first squad leader, SGT Josh Opolski, and his machine gunner PFC William Freas were hit by shrapnel. Being a squad leader, SGT Opolski had the squad's radio. Seeing that Opolski had been hit, our platoon commo guy, PFC Rollins, ran through machine gun fire to get to Josh so that he could call up his injuries and try and get him a helicopter out. When the medic arrived, he determined that both Freas and Opolski could make it to the vehicles some 800 meters away. They made it back to base and were treated at our aid station. I had been waiting for a helicopter to go to Kandahar to get my neck looked at and these two seemed like a good ticket up there. We all got on board. Josh had a piece of shrapnel in his neck, and William had a good chunk of skin missing from his forearm. We flew to Kandahar, middle fingers to Mushan as we took off. A small gesture, in case it was good bye. When we arrived at Kandahar, I escorted both the guys into the ER. They took Josh back to x-ray while they cleaned up Will. Josh came back and we were shooting the breeze when a nurse came by and told me he needed to sit down immediately. Something in her voice wasn't good so I asked what was up. Josh had shrapnel lodged in his throat, it was resting on his jugular and any sudden move could kill him. Josh had walked 800 meters, over grape fields, rode in a Stryker, then a helicopter. He is a tough, tough dude, and probably one of the luckiest people on earth. When they removed the shrapnel, doctors had to put it back in and repair the arteries. They gave him a lot of blood on the table. A week later, Josh was back at the base, and now is able to go on patrol. Will took some stitches and he's fine. I got told that I need lots of physical therapy and I probably won't get to go on patrol again this tour.

As Josh, Will, and I were hanging out in Kandahar, our supply sergeant, SSG Jamie Phillips, came and tracked us down. We had a CAT A casualty. Casualties are given an A, B, C status. "A" means life, limb, or eyesight, get to hospital within 1 hour. SGT Mark Worley was the lead man for patrol near the village of Mushan. Mark was struck by an IED and lost his leg. His friends got him loaded on the helicopter. As Mark was getting loaded, he had the presence of mind to tell the guys, "Screw you, I am going home," laughing and joking as he got on the bird. I ran with SGT Opolski to the truck and we got in and went to the ER. I had a chance to watch him go into x-ray and move to the OR. Josh and I waited for him to move to the ICU. By now Will had joined us. When we finally got a chance to be with him in ICU, we got to see the extent of it. Right leg gone, left leg and arm bandaged. Tubes coming out of everywhere, IV's with antibiotics and pain medicine. They kept Mark intubated all the way to Germany. We signed his body with sharpie markers. During the Purple Heart ceremony in the ICU, General Huggins made mention of the fact he'd never seen that. I stayed with him that night and slept for a little bit in a chair in ICU.

On August 16, our C Company sustained their first KIA. I don't know all of the details, but I know that PFC Demarsico was killed by an IED blast east of our base. A few days later, our C Company would be hit again, and again this was an IED. In total, 10 soldiers were injured, 6 of them very seriously. 2LT Church, who had just become a platoon leader, lost both of his legs. He is currently recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. On the same day, 1LT Eric Zastoupil was injured. He also lost a leg and is recovering with 2LT Church. Both were promising young lieutenants who had just received their first opportunity to lead soldiers in combat.

The following day it was our turn again. As our third platoon moved in their Strykers to the Afghan compound to our west, their second vehicle was struck by an IED. We were able to survey the damage on our camera feeds in the Ops Center. Being together as long as we all have, when something happens, we are all immediately in the Ops Center making sure it's not any of our friends. SSG T.J. Moran was in one of the rear air sentry hatches of the truck as it barreled over the IED. T.J. was rocked pretty good and suffered concussion symptoms. His driver, PFC Martin Chiong, is one of the luckiest guys I know of. The blast penetrated the Stryker right under his feet. In perspective, about 4 inches of metal and Kevlar saved his life. Martin didn't walk away, he broke his ankle in a few spots. As his squad pulled security around the site, Doc Perez treated the injury and hit Martin with the morphine shot. In a semiconscious, drug induced haze he uttered a statement we all equate to "F you Afghanistan, I am going home." Martin is back at Ft. Lewis now recovering after multiple surgeries. T.J. has rejoined the unit and continues to lead his squad every day.

On August 18<sup>th</sup>, our second platoon was moving through the salt flats toward the southern portion of our battle space. SSG Tony Ayala's Stryker was hit by a hundred-pound IED. The hatch on the Stryker came unsecured and the hatch hit Tony in the neck. It fractured one of his vertebrae. The rest of the guys in the truck were all pretty much ok. A few concussions especially PFC Josh Moon who took the worst of it. Josh and Tony were both flown to Kandahar for treatment. I can't express to you what it is like to leave your soldiers. It is guilt, anger, fear, sorrow, and it is the last thing someone wants to do in combat. SSG Tony Ayala, SSG Thomas Moran, and I all begged to come back to Mushan. The doctors gave all of us the out from this country. None of us took it, in fact some of us made near deals with the devil just to stay. It is the character of the soldiers in Apache Company. The IED's continue to be emplaced, more than 150 in the last month. There have been more acts of true heroism than I can write now. Who knows, maybe I will turn this into a book, retire from the army and be a fishing boat captain. I don't know how to sum up the character of the soldiers here. There aren't words to describe the courage a man has when he has been awarded four purple hearts in a tour and he still volunteers to go on patrol.

As I wrote this, more of my soldiers were injured today. PFC Dustin Bendt and PFC Nicholas Jordan were in security positions when a single round of indirect grenade fire landed 5 feet behind them. Right now, they are both in surgery and a few of the other soldiers are back here with concussion like symptoms. Bendt sustained shrapnel to the abdomen and I will be surprised if he comes back to us. Nick Jordan took shrapnel to the shoulder, elbow, and ankle. My platoon returned fire violently and got the boys loaded on a helicopter.

I have left a lot of people out of this; some are less severe injuries like PFC Toure concussion, PFC Dortch with burns, and SSG Dave Hill with shrapnel. Some I have left out because I don't know the extent of their injuries or what happened. SGT McCart, a double amputee from B Company, SGT Gorbet and PFC Tyler Trudnowski with fractured ankles, also from our B Company. It was Tyler's first patrol and his truck was hit with an IED. PFC Andrew Lotts, who was injured with our C Company. 1SG Jeff Jackson, one of the best soldiers I have ever met, broke his femur in an IED strike. SGT Reynolds, single amputee two days ago from Battalion Mortar Platoon. I don't know the totals from across the whole battalion. My company alone has more than 150 purple hearts in processing. To all the people I have forgotten, I apologize.

I was talking one afternoon not too long ago with my best friend, Brian Piehler. We were talking about how we were planning a trip to San Antonio to go visit all of our friends. We wanted to get all of our guys down to see them and realized that just wasn't feasible. I talked to him and my 1SG about the idea and they both said why don't we bring them to the battalion ball. We started Operation Tommies Come Home with one thing in mind. So that is our goal, we want to get all of the wounded soldiers and their families to the ball. We want to present them with a token of our appreciation. Our deployment will continue, and we will keep fighting. It's what we do, like a frog and a scorpion. Thanks, Jonray, for asking

me to write this, it was kind of therapeutic. If you get a chance tell someone about us, pass our story along. Thanks for taking the time to read this, and I truly appreciate everyone's support.

Allan Russell