

Gaza

I gaze out on the shimmering, blue Mediterranean.

Sitting on a strip of beach west of Khan Yunis, I was lucky I made it out alive. I haven't showered in more than a week. My khaki fatigues are filthy from the smoke, the dirt, and the blood. My azure blue, short sleeve shirt has a tear in the mid-section when it got caught on a splintered wall as I dove for cover in the early dawn two days ago.

I am alone on the beach because everyone I used to work with is either dead, in hospital, or has somehow escaped the unrelenting terror of round-the-clock bombing and the computer-guided howitzers aimed at us.

I arrived here last fall after completing my tour as a Marine Corps medic and earning my RN.

Finishing my cigarette, I knew why I was here. At 5'10" and 135 pounds I'm what some idiots call "a bad ass bitch." Being combat-ready like the day I shipped out from boot camp will do that for you.

My "jarhead" buddies at Pendleton scoffed at me when I told them I was checking out after my tour. Like a chorus of magpies, my barracks derided my decision.

"The UN's for pussies!" "Why you wanna go be with a buncha war victims and losers?!" My D.I. even pulled me aside earnestly asking, "Where the hell's the glory in doing all that shit?"

Having caught action in Helmand Province, I patched up nearly as many Afghan civilians as Marines. We drove through and into villages devastated by years of fighting. Four years being deployed there was like spending a decade in an apocalyptic purgatory.

For a girl, I don't take lip from anyone, but I sure don't go looking for fights. I know better. I'd just as soon hang with my gal pals, gossip, drink wine or something stronger.

I love wearing my black cocktail dress as much as I like getting muddy and hunting for ten-point bucks with my cousins just before Thanksgiving. I do have a few guy friends – men who somehow have managed to navigate all the crap forced on American males.

I chose the Corps, not because I believed any of the bullshit the recruiter was promising, but because I had a lot to prove to myself and, at 21, I was raw and still a bit mixed up.

Back to the present, I refocus.

The waves lap upon the shore. This is the only sound I hear. All the seabirds have scattered because of the deafening noise, smoke, rockets, and aircraft constantly filling the air.

The lull in the fighting will last just one more hour. This is the morning break agreed to by the IDF allowing civilians to snatch what belongings they can and flee south. It allows others to search for possible survivors or dig victims from the rubble of collapsed apartment buildings. Much needed medical supplies and food are rushed to street corners where the desperate will mob volunteers trying to ensure everyone gets something to sustain them for the next few days.

Those still in the northern section of Gaza know each day could bring death from above, a building collapsing because its foundation has given way, or any one of a hundred other reasons another family will be shattered.

It's less than 30 minutes until the end of the official lull and I'm hauling ass off the beach. I have to try to raise someone in my unit on my two-way radio. I lost contact with them 48 hours ago and have no idea whether the field hospital we set up on a neighborhood soccer field is still intact.

It's about a mile to the field. I'm within eight blocks of it when I hear the jets roaring in from the east. I jump into a stairwell leading down from the crumbling sidewalk.

Four jets thunder overhead as shock waves and ear-splitting explosions reduce a neighborhood a few blocks away to rubble. There is a slight wind this morning so I have just enough time to scurry away before a choking dust cloud envelopes the block where I was hiding.

Arriving at the field, I'm amazed to find the dozen pre-fab buildings and a cluster of heavy canvass tents still standing. The huge United Nations banners stretched over the roofs are matched with the same azure blue and white insignias on all four sides of the tents.

It is a ghost town. Waste cans overflow with used medical supplies. Here and there, surgical masks and used latex gloves are strewn on the ground. And there is blood. Lots of blood everywhere. There are trails of it and places where it has gathered in puddles. There is no smell of death, just a sense of urgency, panic, and sheer terror the air.

“Where the fuck are my people?!”

The Israelis must be jamming the airwaves again because I can't get through to anyone, yet the indicator on my radio is bright green.

I begin walking the road to Rafah, the only border crossing into Egypt. It's likely the UN Relief Works Agency has moved us “first responders” to the choke point for humanitarian aid. The means by which Israel is imposing its will on everyone in Gaza.

I want to be very clear here. No one in their right mind defends what happened on 7 October. And what has been inflicted on all of us now is the definition of insane war crimes. I'm not defending anyone's actions at this point because this is a chapter in the continuum of slaughter, conquest, and division from the beginning of time. Conservatively speaking, the start of the Crusades, but anyone who's peaked at the Old or New Testament can affirm it's been going on much longer.

After two months of fear and privation, I'm numb to it all. I want to report in and find out how soon I can get "leave" to fly back to Milwaukee.

I catch a ride on a flatbed truck driven by a 20 year old Palestinian guy who fled Gaza City. He's clearly driven this road before and is in a hurry to make it to the border with Egypt. I say nothing to any of the small group of young men and women exhausted and their eyes staring blankly ahead at nothing. I know they will have a maddening wait because only a few of them have passports and no official standing that will provide immediate transit.

Despite the men, women, and children streaming south and the burned out cars and other detritus of war, Sala, our young driver, gets us to Rafah in record time.

After hopping off the truck, I trot to Sala and press 40 Israeli shekels – 10 dollars – into his palm leaving me with about 20 bucks.

By now, my radio's functioning and I'm able to contact one of our unit commanders.

A make-shift staging area and small compound have been established for all of us NGO workers: Médecins Sans Frontières, Mercy Corps, the Red Crescent, we folks from the UN and a half dozen other groups just trying to help.

I learn that 102 of our comrades – all relief workers – have died in the fighting.

I am furious and also know I am helpless to reverse any of this.

I have energy enough to get myself over to the mess tent to savor my first real meal in a week. Then a shower. Then to the supply tent where everyone is trying to reassemble their uniforms or something close to what they were wearing a month ago.

I have orders to report to the admin. tent tomorrow at 0800 hours. I'll be debriefed and paperwork will be processed and given 30 days leave with round-trip tickets to Milwaukee.

A couple of wily supply corps types have "procured" a few cases of Bud, somehow have "found" ice and are now making a tidy profit selling cold brews. I've never wanted one so badly!

I head to one of several barracks-like tents to find my "rack" so I can lay my body down for indefinite shut-eye. An argument between two senior NCOs is loud

enough to wake me but far enough from the tent that I can't make out their words. They are part of a UN peacekeeping unit overseeing aid distribution and providing a thin presence of law enforcement among the refugees and everyone else.

A clamorous gathering of battered civilians, soldiers sporting the UN's sky blue beret, aid workers, and other foreigners has formed in a central area of this new camp. I learn it will be a routine status report.

There's about an hour before the next meal and the sun is hanging low over the water shimmering in the distance.

I've located a few of the nurses, doctors and others from the field hospital, but none of my crew are about or have been seen by the others. As I pull my pack of smokes from my pants pocket, I flick my Zippo with the raised Corps eagle and globe for folks in need of a light. I fire up one of my Marlboros and walk away from everyone in the direction of a small, sandy bluff from where I can see the water.

I don't have to justify my existence to anyone.

I'm thankful I haven't ended up in a body bag.