

Hesco

On our second deployment, Corporal Ryan's squad caught a puppy out in the city. They carried it back through the front gate of Camp Baharia in the machine-gun turret of the lead Humvee. Lieutenant Fischer didn't notice for the first week. We named the puppy after the dirt-filled HESCO barriers we built to fortify the abandoned Iraqi guard compound we lived in. On Wednesdays, a truck brought hot breakfast over from the main camp. Hesco ate at least one piece of bacon from everybody. The rest of the week he ate MREs. His farts started smelling like ours. At night he slept in the boots' bunker and nipped their heels when they went outside to pee.

A boot from my squad—everyone called him Princess—got his girlfriend to send us one of those collapsible kiddie pools from Walmart. We carried it up to the flat mud roof of the guard compound and convinced the utilities guys to fill it when they came to resupply our drinking water. Somewhere I have a picture of half my squad stripped down to our skivvies, lying in that little pool, with Hesco doggy-paddling on top of us.

First squad lived at a combat outpost in a suburb of Fallujah called Saqlawiyah. Whenever Ryan's or my squad convoyed up there, we rubbed it in that we had a puppy down at Baharia. Then one of their boots got his pinky finger blown off. Everyone started pressing their handprints into the dust on the side of the Humvee and wiping away the little finger. The first night he came back from Charlie Surgical, we made Hesco sleep in the rack with him. By that time, Hesco had gotten way too fat to share a cot with. Doc worried about his cholesterol.

We had to hide Hesco whenever the battalion sergeant major came by. He probably would have shot him. The battalion did not allow pets of any kind. One time the sergeant major came to talk to Lt. Fischer, so we carried Hesco up to the roof. After he left we forgot about Hesco. He had gotten into the pool and couldn't get out. By the time we got him out, he had peed enough to tint the water yellow. Ryan made one of his boots start a siphon hose by mouth to drain the pool. None of us could talk the water-truck driver down to anything less than two full canteen cups of Jack Daniel's to refill it. That night, Ryan and I sat up on the roof and drank the rest of the whiskey, which one of the boots' mothers had sent him disguised in an apple-juice bottle. We both passed out on top of a

HESCO bunker built next to the pool. The boots found us the next day in just our skivvy shorts, our burned faces covered in dried puppy saliva.

Our sister platoon lived on a larger base called the MEK. The MEK had air force and civilians stationed on it. The marines quartered there ate at the good contractor-run chow halls. Sometimes we would convoy there just to eat. After our sister platoon got caught in that mortar attack on OP Delta, we snuck a whole watermelon out of a Kellogg Brown & Root chow hall and brought it to their wounded guys at Charlie Surgical. Hesco could always smell the MEK on us.

We'd had Hesco about a month when Lt. Fischer said to get rid of him. The battalion maintained that all stray animals in the Al Anbar Area of Operations carried diseases. Fischer said the sergeant major had stepped in dog shit at our compound. We told him we'd get rid of Hesco, but we didn't. A week or so went by. Fischer seemed to forget. Then Hesco chewed up the bases on the two wooden crosses the boots built in front of their bunker in memory of Carl and Ricky. He might have gotten shot that day if he hadn't have dug his way into a HESCO basket. He didn't come out until the following Wednesday, when we had bacon to lure him. That same day, Lt. Fischer burst into the squad leaders' bunker yelling at us to stop fucking around and to stay focused. Ryan told him we would go shoot the dog right away.

Of course, the boots had no intention of letting us touch Hesco. They wouldn't even tell us where he was. I mentioned the chewed crosses, but bringing up the dead just infuriated them. Taylor, the biggest guy in our platoon, crossed his thick arms and said, "You hurt that fucking dog, I'll beat your fucking ass. I don't care what rank you are." None of us really wanted to take Hesco behind the bunker and Old-Yeller him in the head, anyway. The boots hid him on the roof. That night he ate every meat loaf and gravy MRE the platoon could find. After everyone else went to sleep, I brought Hesco down so he could sit with the radio watchman until daylight.

Early the next morning, the boots tried hurrying out to the Humvees with Hesco wrapped in a camouflage poncho, but one of the poncho's corners got caught. The whole thing came off. They could hear the lieutenant in his bunker. One of them stood by Fisher's doorway to make sure he didn't walk out. Princess dashed toward the trucks with the puppy wrapped in his arms. The other boots hurried behind him. He tossed the puppy into the back of the truck and slammed the armored tailgate. They all walked back laughing. The lieutenant stepped around the corner of the bunkers with his shaving gear. He said, "What the fuck are y'all doing up so early?"

They all stood there speechless. Ryan and I, just waking up, stepped out of our bunker. Fischer saw us. He yelled at us as we walked over, “Did you get rid of that fucking dog?”

I hesitated. Ryan said, “Yes, sir. Yesterday.” Fischer squinted and looked at both of us.

“Gents, you two better get your fucking shit together. You’re taking half my platoon outside those gates in a couple of hours. Now’s not the time for that bullshit.”

“Oorah, Sir,” we both said.

“Show some professionalism, Corporals,” he continued.

“Oorah, Sir.” After he went back around the bunkers, the boots made fun of Ryan and me, laughing and saying “oorah, sir, oorah, sir” in whiny voices behind our backs.

Both squads went out that day to fill a bunch of HESCO barriers for a new police station in the northern part of the city. A driver had brought the front-end loader over from the MEK the day before, but we needed to drop it off for our sister platoon on the way back. We had decided to leave Hesco at the MEK, too, outside one of the nice chow halls where someone would feed him. Princess rode with Hesco in the back of the Humvee in front of mine. A boot from Ryan’s squad rode back there, too. He held the puppy up over the armor siding to wave a fat paw at the guard on the way through the gate. Ryan and I wore Personal Role Radio headsets strapped inside our helmets so we could communicate with one another individually. I insisted we give a third PRR headset to Princess so if we got ambushed I could make sure he didn’t get hurt trying to look after that dog. A little ways outside the HESCO serpentine, Ryan’s boot leaned back over the side and vomited into the wind. Yellow, watery bile misted our windshield. Princess clicked on the PRR headset. I could hear him gagging. He said Hesco had the diarrhea shits. The boot hung his head over the armor until our convoy turned onto Route Michigan. Everyone knew to keep their heads down on Michigan in case we got hit by a roadside bomb.

Our route took us past the control point into the city before turning down a rubble-lined alley in the Jolan District. Kids started noticing us around the other side of the bombed-out amusement park. The front-end loader made our convoy a parade for children: sitting up tall on big balloon tires, carrying its enormous bucket through the garbage-filled intersections. It seemed every kid in Fallujah could see us coming through the holes shelled in their bedroom walls. They gathered around us at every street corner, climbing down off the collapsed balconies of two-story buildings and appearing from behind piles of garbage.

Marines posting security on the edge of Jolan Park waved at our procession from behind a brightly painted carousel with half of all its horses chewed away by machine-gun fire.

A mob of children followed us to the police station. Most of them knew a few lines of English. "Mister, mister," they could say, "give me." "Give me one dollar," some asked, "give me one pen," wagging their little index fingers. The older boys asked for "one fútbol." When our trucks stopped, Princess threw a couple bottles of water covered in Hesco's diarrhea into the flock. The first kid got it on his hands and started crying. An older girl used water from one bottle to clean the other. She ran off with both of them. I looked in the back of the Humvee while my squad unloaded pallets of folded HESCO. All the foul smelling, slushy crap that came out of that one puppy could have filled an ammunition can. It got all down the front of one boot's flak jacket and on his rifle. Soaked completely through to Princess's socks. Hesco slept curled up in the corner. Vomit dripped down off the tailgate. I started gagging, too.

I climbed up into the back of the truck and dragged that dog out onto the ground. I got that nasty crap on my hands and started dry heaving again. The kids stepped back from the stench coming off Hesco. He scooted around on his behind with his tail tucked between his legs, making sad puppy eyes. I kicked him away when he tried to hide behind me. Taylor walked right past me, opened up the back of the truck, and patted his leg for Hesco to jump back in. "Come on, Hesco. Hop up. Hop up, buddy. There you go. Oorah, big guy. Good boy. Yes. Good devil dog," he said, clicking his tongue. Hesco flopped back up into his own shit. Taylor slammed the tailgate.

"Taylor, we're going to get blown the fuck up fucking with this shit out here," I said.

"Let's just get him to the MEK, Corporal." Taylor turned and looked at me. "He's an inside dog." We didn't need to be out there in the middle of the city messing around with a dog right then, so I just shook my head and walked away.

The grid coordinates Lt. Fischer gave us to find the new police station brought us to a completely leveled city block covered in layers of matted garbage. Collapsed apartment complexes and the skeletons of shell-pocked buildings surrounded the lot. The front-end loader driver had to use his front bucket to scrap the trash and rubble into a pile across the street. Ryan's squad posted security around the area while my squad stretched out empty HESCO baskets. The children watched in amazement as the front-end loader dumped heaping bucketsful of their old houses into the new bunker walls.

Halfway through the job, Ryan told me to pick up the company radio. Battalion always seemed to think they had accurate information as to the whereabouts of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The grid coordinates getting communicated over the radio about the al-Qaeda leader's location that day put Bravo and Weapons Companies' search right on top of that pile of trash the front-end loader had pushed up. Helicopters started circling over the rubble tops. Lt. Fischer sent orders to abandon the construction site and escort the front-end loader to Bravo Company's firm base. Most of the kids left when the helicopters showed up.

We pushed the empty HESCO baskets off the back of the truck and left. Bravo Company occupied a square block of HESCO-fortified buildings a few miles northeast. We wound our way through the city streets. Orders came over the radio from the battalion to pick up the sergeant major from Bravo Company's firm base and transport him back to Camp Baharia. I could see the HESCO bunkers of the firm base through our windshield. A split-second before I did, Ryan clicked on and yelled, "Princess, get rid of that fucking dog."

We couldn't stop. I clicked on to tell Princess to hurry up just as several kids came sliding down off a stack of charred vehicle frames. They ran down the side of the highway. A concertina wire fence stretched out between them and us.

"Corporal, we're going too fast," Princess clicked on.

"Goddamn it, Princess. Be a marine," I yelled into my headset.

"Oorah, fucking Corporal," Princess clicked off. The oldest boy running down the road turned his head to watch us. Princess held Hesco up over the armor. I could read his lips shouting, "Want a fucking dog?"

The kid held up his finger as if to say, "just one." But the truck had already passed him. Princess leaned under the armor one more time. Then he threw that dog so hard. Hesco spread out flat in the air. He cleared the concertina wire fence, spinning head over body. The other little boy, stepping out from behind an upside-down tanker truck, had his eyes set on the front-end loader. Hesco's bulging belly wrapped around that kid's face like a hairy, shit-filled water balloon. The puppy and the boy both rolled a few times before I lost sight of them in the rearview mirror.

Inside Bravo's firm base, the sergeant major met us at the gate and climbed straight up into the back of the truck full of puppy shit. He made the whole platoon get rabies shots.