

Pistol Whip

The temperatures have been topping 120 for days now, and each time the heat rises to about 115 degrees, the generator turns off, cutting power to our entire compound. Our only recourse is to sit under the patio shaded with camouflage netting and wait for the generator to cool off enough to be restarted—a process that takes four or five hours, depending on how much water we want to waste by emptying one-liter bottles over the generator and watching them instantly evaporate. I stay in the office as long as I can, telling Hameed, my interpreter, that we will go meet the Iraqis we work with once we lose power here. The Iraqis likely won't have power either. They're tapped into the Baghdad power supply, but when it's hot like this, their power rolls, too—two or three hours on, two or three hours off, mitigated only by their sporadic willingness to turn on the backup generators.

Schwab, my lieutenant, sits in the chair on the opposite side of my desk, throwing magnetic darts at a Philadelphia Eagles dartboard left here by someone who affixed a Velcro patch with the word "Phillips" to the top. The magnets hardly ever hold, so Schwab throws the darts, watches them bounce off and land on top of the fridge or on a computer, gathers them, and repeats the process. Schwab doesn't usually come to my office in the morning because he works for a different Green Beret team than I do. But last night, our Air Force team in Basrah took heavy indirect fire overnight, and we haven't been able to get in contact with our guys down there. Schwab spoke briefly with the Navy Special Warfare team in charge of the regional battalion, but they didn't know anything about our team. After Schwab told me about the attack around three o'clock in the morning, I called down to Kuwait to let our Air Force leadership know. No one answered, so I left a message.

While Schwab throws darts, I sit at the classified computer working on information cards for all the Iraqis I work with. Perry, the Special Forces guy I work for, told me yesterday that it is suddenly vital to know the Iraqis' tribal affiliations, the strength of their allegiance to Saddam's regime, their religious sect, what we speculate they do on their leave periods, their other sources of income, our assessment of their marksmanship, and, for some reason, the length and pattern of their facial hair. Most of the Iraqis my team works with regularly are mechanics, bakers, and logisticians. As I speculate what Hazbar does on his leave

period—tends his date palm farm in Diyala, harvests watermelons and peaches he brings back for me, plays with his five-year-old son, Ali, kisses his wife—the phone rings.

“Schifani,” I say when I pick up. Perry instructed me never to answer the phone with my rank or my unit. We assume everyone in Iraq can hear us.

“Is this Captain Katherine Schifani from SOITT?” says the voice. My Air Force chain of command, headquartered some 400 miles south of here in Kuwait, insists on using rank and unit over the phone. Fortunately, they never actually know what unit we’re part of. For the last three rotations, we were SOITT, though people forget what all the letters mean. In March, when the Army reorganized us, we were parceled out to six different units whose acronyms we can’t remember, either. After three months of trying to explain our new, fractured organization to my Air Force leadership, I stopped trying to accurately express our status. Part of the issue is that we haven’t had reliable e-mail communication with Kuwait since the reorg, as I’d noted every Tuesday by conference call when I delivered our personnel status. I recently stopped joining the conference call, just to see if anyone would notice. It has been two months, and so far no one has commented on it, meaning that no one has received our personnel status for two months, except through phone messages announcing the unknown status of two of our team members in Basrah.

“Yes,” I say.

“Good,” says the voice. “This is Major Jones, your new operations officer down here with the 467th.”

“OK,” I say.

“Did you get the e-mail I sent you? You haven’t responded,” he says.

“No, sir,” I say.

“Right,” Maj. Jones says. On the phone, he sounds like the kind of man who wears Brut cologne, even on the border of a war zone; keeps his hair extremely and evenly short; tries to grow a mustache on leave, knowing that it grows only in patches; and took two tries to qualify on his pistol.

He forgets he has met me. He was responsible for greeting us when we landed in Kuwait in February after forty-four hours of continuous travel that started in New Jersey on a bus. After we were in-processed; issued body armor, helmets, and first-aid kits; and ushered to temporary lodging tents and trailers, he walked Schwab to the coffee shop on base to discuss our important information over vanilla frappés. After he paid for Schwab’s coffee, Schwab told him I was the one in charge. Maj.

Jones left Schwab at the coffee shop, put all the papers in a blue folder, handed it to me, and walked back to his office to finish his frappé and prepare for the official squadron briefing, which he delivered more or less accurately.

Slide 1: A map showing Iraq and Kuwait. He told us the squadron fought hard to maintain a command presence in Iraq, but that they were now based in Kuwait to support the drawdown.

Slide 2: A map of Iraq and lots of dark blue squiggly lines. He told us they fly some 60,000 miles by helicopter to come see all of us. He looked at Schwab and nodded.

Slide 3: An Air Force guy with a badly formed mustache wearing dark sunglasses and holding a long rifle with no magazine loaded. He told us we were the heartbeat of the Army's operations in Iraq; he told us that our squadron motto is "Pound for pound, we do more" because we so vastly outperform our Army counterparts in the same job.

Slides 4 and 5: Self-portraits of Maj. Jones in body armor, smiling, at a base even farther from Iraq than this one. He told us about his last deployment.

Slides 6–10: Pictures of his wife featuring all three different colors of her hair. He smiled around the room, skipping me and the rest of the women on my team.

Slides 11–13: Pictures of Maj. Jones and his wife on a beach somewhere tropical, holding drinks with miniature umbrellas; one photo of them near a waterslide. He reminded us he was away from his family as well, and looked at Schwab and nodded.

Slide 14: Our chain of command, featuring official pictures of our squadron commander—who could not give the briefing herself because she worked day shift, which didn't start for an hour—of Maj. Jones, and of someone else he didn't introduce. He told us that if we suddenly were not being used within our job specialty, we should tell them right away and they would talk to the Army, move us to jobs within our specialty, or send us home.

And here we are, filling out Special Forces profile cards and waiting to hear if a supply troop and a vehicle mechanic who are in Basrah augmenting Navy Seals are still alive.

"We need your whole team to complete the Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell repeal training online ASAP. We need the whole squadron done by tonight," Maj. Jones says.

"OK," I say. "We will not likely have it done tonight."

"What's the problem?" he asks.

"I probably won't be able to get ahold of everyone on my team by tonight, and our guys at the outstations don't have Internet that can access the training website. Actually, neither do we," I tell him.

"So you can have it done by Friday?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," I say. At least by Friday we can figure out how to fabricate the certificate you print off after completing computer-based training modules like this.

"Good," he says. "Send me an e-mail when you're 100 percent compliant."

"We don't have e-mail that can send to your accounts," I say.

"Look forward to hearing from you by Friday, Captain. Pound for pound," he says and pauses. "I said pound for pound, Captain," the major repeats.

"Schifani copies. Out," I say. When I talk to the men I work with, which rarely happens over the phone, we speak like we're on radios. We also assume that the only reason for phone calls is to pass along important information. I hang up the phone. Schwab collects the darts and begins to throw them again.

"What was that about?" he asks.

"Some computer-based training that Kuwait wants us to do," I say.

He throws a dart at the Phillips Velcro patch. The phone rings again.

"Schifani," I say.

"Captain Schifani of SOITT?" says the same voice, emitting Brut through the receiver.

"Yes," I say, and put the phone on speaker for Schwab.

"Major Jones again, from the 467th down here in Kuwait."

"Yes, sir."

"You're actually overdue on that CBT. We need it done before lunch today so we can report it up to Ninth Air Expeditionary Task Force. Can you do that?"

"No, sir."

"Look, I know you have other things you need to work on, but this is the general's hottest item right now. We're the only unit in the command who's still non-compliant. I recommend getting your team together in a room and just going through the slides together. Then you can knock the whole thing out in less than an hour."

"OK, sir. I won't be able to talk to my whole team. I can meet with six of them in an hour or so, but our Internet doesn't get the CBT here."

"OK, then you need to find an MWR tent and do it in there," he says.

"We don't have an MWR tent," I say. We used to, but the unit Schwab now works for took over management of our compound after the reorg and turned the plywood MWR building into their operations center and locked the doors with keypads they won't give us the codes to. They

store a lot of gear in there, have taken all the Internet jacks, and hide boxes of desirable cereal in the back.

"Look, Captain, I don't know what kind of conditions you have out there, but you need to get this done and call me back as soon as you're finished."

"OK, sir, we're finished," Schwab says, leaning over the desk to join the conversation and holding a handful of featherless metal darts.

"How is that possible?" the major asks.

"We've done as much as we can," Schwab says. This is why Schwab has such a tenuous relationship with his unit here, why they help him only when not doing so would have a direct and devastating result on their own operations, why they won't give us the codes, why they take our Lucky Charms, and why, by extension, they hate all of us. This is also why Schwab is so useful.

"Captain," says the major, apparently unable to distinguish my voice from Schwab's, "this isn't a joking matter. The general is tracking how many of his troops haven't done the CBT. Your team is the only one that hasn't even started. We've been sending e-mails for two weeks now. We're getting chewed out in our staff meetings because we're still in the red. You need to do the training and call me back ASAP when it's done."

"Yes, sir," I say. Schwab throws the darts all at once; one actually stays affixed to the dartboard.

I hang up the phone and watch as Schwab gets up to collect the darts. "Any word from Basrah?" I ask him, as though he may have heard something while sitting in my office throwing metal spears at the wall. He looks at me with an open mouth and shakes his head. "Close the door," I tell him.

He sets the quiver down on my desk next to the stapler, gets up, closes the door, and secures it with a piece of bailing wire and a protruding screw.

Schwab and Shawn, a staff sergeant we sent to Diyala, are the only people on my team younger than I am, and Schwab only by a month. He's also the only other officer here, and by default the only person I can talk to. I had no plans of telling anyone here anything about my life, other than that I hate Shreveport and I like the snow. I imagine myself like Tom Hanks's character in *Saving Private Ryan*—distant, enigmatic, commanding. But Tom Hanks's character never got phone calls about a CBT from a man who spent more time showing us pictures of his wife in a bikini than he did explaining what to do if we needed help. As I break down in front of Schwab, he grabs the darts, moves his chair back from the desk a little, and smirks to himself because he knows this place

has finally cracked me, at least for a few minutes, and he's been waiting for this.

From the U.S. Air Force Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell Repeal Training, Tier 3

A narrated 24-slide presentation

Slide 3: What's new?

- *No discharge based on sexual orientation*
- *Not a factor in recruitment and retention*

What has NOT changed?

- *Evaluation based on merit, fitness, and capability*
- *Sexual misconduct = grounds for administrative or legal action*

Slide 8: What if...

I have moral or religious concerns?

- *Rights*
 - *Free exercise of religious expression, within law and policy, remains unchanged*
 - *Maintain beliefs*
 - *Discuss concerns with commander/chaplain*
- *Responsibilities*
 - *Continue to treat all with dignity and respect*
 - *Continue to follow all lawful orders*

Slide 10: What if...

I want an early discharge?

- *No policy for early discharge based on:*
 - *Opposition to repeal*
 - *Opposition to serving or living with gay, lesbian, or bisexual members*
- *Provision for voluntary discharge remains the same, and is granted only when in the best interest of the Air Force*

Slide 13: How does this policy affect...

Equal treatment?

- *All Airmen shall be evaluated only on individual merit, fitness, and capability*
- *Use of existing mechanisms such as chain of command, IG, etc., for redress of issues based on sexual orientation*

Slide 24: Summary

Brief Provided:

- *Information regarding DADT and its effects*
- *Reminders of:*
 - *Air Force Core Values*
 - *Air Force diversity and unit cohesion*
 - *Standards of conduct*
- *Until the date of repeal, current policy remains in effect*

The day Schwab sat smirking in my office with a handful of magnetic darts and found out that I have a girlfriend, our relationship dramatically improved. He now takes notes at meetings I run, he asks my opinion on tasks that I'm ultimately responsible for anyway, and he walks into my office in the morning and shows me naughty messages he sends to his wife, who is currently in Afghanistan. On particularly hot mornings, he comes in and shows me lewd Internet memes. The one he shows me this morning is of a man performing oral sex on his female partner with the caption "Breakfast is the most important meal." Schwab pulls up the picture on my unclassified computer (which can't access official Air Force sites, but can access this), steps back from my desk, adjusts the belt holding his pistol, and laughs.

He sits down in the chair and grabs the darts. "Are you into strap-ons?" he asks.

"What?"

"Probably not," he says and squints at me. "You look like more of a purist." He taps the computer monitor with one of the darts and winks. He's leaving this evening for Diyala to check on our guys out there. One of them has had a stun grenade thrown into his room twice in the last three weeks. The SF team leader there told me they did it so he would learn to lock his door. Now that he locks his door, they've taken the steps away from his doorway so he makes an unexpected three-foot drop in the morning. I ask the team leader to stop harassing my supply troop, but the supply troop rarely works and is rarely effective when he does. Unlike the other member of our team in Diyala, who is generally proactive and communicates frequently with us, our supply troop forgot to call in for accountability on Monday and lost another supply request for the team, so Schwab is going out to serve him paperwork.

Schwab walks around my desk and grabs the darts. I would be going with him to Diyala, except that Perry has assigned me an urgent task here. I am to obtain an accurate count of the ammunition held by the Iraqi brigade—including all three battalions and the support unit—by

type and quantity. I need this by seven o'clock tomorrow evening. I know that Ahmed, the Brigade director of logistics, has this information somewhere. But in all my months here, he has yet to disclose Brigade totals. I know the First Battalion's totals, but the commander of the Second Battalion won't talk to me. Hisham, the support unit commander, has no ammunition. Adel, the Third Battalion commander, photocopied his totals and gave them to me in a neatly organized folder when I asked. The Brigade, he told me, has an additional store that Ahmed alone has the keys to.

"I have to go see Ahmed," I tell Schwab as I close the computer and collect my notebook.

"You should show him that picture," Schwab says.

Schwab has never worked with Ahmed. He doesn't understand why I refused a smaller-sized uniform that fit better when it was offered. He doesn't understand why I haven't bothered to fix the unfortunate haircut a former Iraqi commando gave me last month. He doesn't understand why I choose to brandish my pistol instead of conceal it like the rest of the men here. He doesn't understand why I got rid of the shackles left for me in the bottom desk drawer in this office.

Like many Iraqis I work with, Ahmed has a dark, full mustache that bends slightly down at the sides of his mouth—something I note on my info card. He offers me cigarettes every time I go to see him, and when I decline, he requests that I draw one out of the pack for him. I have managed to refuse this task for months by pretending that I don't understand what he is asking me to do, keeping my hand over my heart and shaking my head. Ahmed employs a woman in the office whose name I will never learn. Her job here is not well defined, but from what I can tell, she's principally responsible for adjusting her electric-blue eye makeup, slowly removing cigarettes from Ahmed's pack, and placing them in his mouth. He does not let her light them.

When Ahmed is on leave, she is not here. The sergeant major who works here tells me stories about the two of them. Ahmed is married and has a few kids in north Baghdad. But when he's at work and on post, he lives with the woman in the office. Her entire family, the SGM tells me, was killed by Saddam's men right before the U.S. invasion over a misunderstanding about what they intended to do with a field they purchased outside of Ramadi. The woman found bodies in pieces strewn across the field one afternoon, and, in the near-darkness that night, she fled Ramadi to Baghdad. Somehow in the course of the next four years, she ended up here, where she's been for half a decade, living with Ahmed, slowly drawing his cigarettes.

She never speaks to me. Sometimes she nods when Ahmed speaks, but she cannot maintain eye contact with me for more than a moment. Today, when Hameed and I arrive at the office, she is the first one I see.

"*Assalam alaykum*," I say to her and extend my hand like I do with the men.

"*Wa alaykumas salam*," she says, puts her limp hand in mine, looks at my boots, lets go, and leaves the office.

Ahmed and the sergeant major are the only ones here. I greet both of them, and Ahmed offers me a cigarette.

"*La, la, saydie, shukran*," I say and hold my hand over my heart.

He holds the box and waves it around in front of me. I shake my head. He looks for the woman, who has not returned, before he puts the pack on his desk and leans back in his chair.

"*Chaku maku, Naqueeb Jameela?*" he asks, using the name the Iraqis call me. What's new, Captain Beautiful?

"*Maku chi, maku chi*," I say. Not much.

He calls for chai, explains something about the computer not working, and rearranges blank folders on his desk. The chai arrives, and as we sip, the power cuts off. Ahmed gets up, opens the window behind him, and lets in the Iraqi summer and light. The window is the only one in this room and is covered with an elaborate pattern of woven iron and translucent yellow contact paper. When closed, it is almost entirely opaque. With the window open behind him, Ahmed sits back down in his leather chair and glows. The heat feels like it is radiating off his uniform. The sergeant major hits the computer and gets up. He shakes my hand on the way out and smiles. Ahmed locks his hands behind his head and looks at me. He can sense that I need something from him and relishes the power.

"*Saydie*," I say, "I need to know the total number of rounds by type in the Brigade. I don't know Second Battalion's totals, and I don't know how much is in the Brigade reserve."

Hameed interprets. Ahmed frowns at the part I imagine to be the Brigade reserve. He wonders how I know and which of his countrymen betrayed his trust by telling me.

"One million rounds of each," he says and Hameed interprets.

"How do you know?" I ask.

He sits up in his chair and opens a blank folder. "One million of each, except smoke grenades. Only thirty-two of those," he says. Hameed interprets.

I open my notebook and angle it toward the light. In a table I made with a ruler and a semi-functional, government-issued pen, I have a col-

umn for each type of ammunition and the totals so far from First and Third Battalions. I make sure Ahmed can see the table as I read off the amounts I have.

"Five hundred thousand rounds loose 7.62; 247,000 rounds 7.62 link; 123,200 rounds .50 cal."

He nods as I read. I look up.

"Why do you need to know?" he asks, and Hameed interprets.

"We are trying to establish a process that will resupply you long-term. In order to do that, we need to know how much you have so we can order more."

"Who will pay?"

"For now," I say, "we will." He doesn't know that this is only sort of true. Mostly, Perry wants to know how many rounds the Iraqis have in case things turn against us here after the withdrawal and we have to hold them off at the walls to our compound. He and his guys are trying to figure out how long we could last.

Ahmed smiles. He will do anything if it means he'll get more American goods. As the Brigade director of logistics, he and the Iraqi general he works for equate his value to the number of things he counts and controls.

"We are particularly interested in the amount of 9mm pistol rounds you have," I say. Ahmed is the only non-commando here who wears a pistol. The grip of his pistol is gold-plated, but to assure me it still fires, and that he can fire it, he once took me out to the trash pile and shot birds until he was satisfied—also information I note in my card on him.

He smiles again. "Come back at 2300," he says, and Hameed interprets. "Don't be late."

Hameed and I drive back to our compound, where I pick up Schwab and his battle buddy and drive them to the landing zone to wait for their ride.

At a quarter to eleven, I meet Hameed by the camouflage net canopy and we leave to go see Ahmed. We park outside the Brigade headquarters building that houses his office and walk into the blue-tinted light of the entryway. The groundskeeper is a silhouette in the darkness watering the plants and cleaning dust off the sidewalk. Music plays through speakers hidden in shrubs. We wave and go inside. Ahmed is in his office with the woman, who slowly draws a cigarette for him, places it in his mouth, and leaves the room looking at the floor without saying hello. Ahmed lights his cigarette and motions us to sit down. He swivels

around in his chair to open the window for ventilation. He looks at his watch and says something to Hameed, which Hameed doesn't interpret. Then he looks at me. "*Chaku maku?*" he says.

"*Maku chi, saydie. Maku chi.*"

He offers me a cigarette and smiles when I decline. He opens the top drawer of his dark cherry desk and takes out a folder. Inside the folder is a stack of stapled yellow paper stamped at the bottom with the Brigade seal. He puts out his cigarette, closes the window, and hands me a yellow piece of paper with English numbers and Arabic explanations of the types of ammunition. Hameed and I stand up, and I watch as he begins to translate them: 5.56 ball, 5.56 trace, 7.62 loose, 7.62 link, .50 cal., det. cord, grenades, incendiary grenades, smoke grenades (green, yellow, purple), C4. There's a separate page for 9mm. Ahmed walks around the table, stands directly in front of me, takes off his pistol, drops the magazine, picks up a pen, and adds fifteen more rounds of 9mm to the list.

"*Khamsa'tash,*" he says. The power cuts out.

I can hear Hameed sit down in the complete darkness behind me and begin to fish for his cell phone to use as a flashlight. I smell Ahmed's cigarette-flavored breath suddenly inches from my face. I hear him reload the magazine.

"*Ah, Jameela,*" he says in a low, drawn-out whisper.

I feel him put the grip of his pistol sideways against my chest; the back of his hand rubs a figure eight over my breasts. He inhales. As he exhales, he presses his hand across my chest and moves the pistol so it points directly through me. He drags it down to my left hip, opposite my own weapon and pointed behind me at Hameed, who is discovering he does not have his cell phone with him tonight. I know the hammer is forward. I can feel his thumb on the inside of my right thigh as he moves the pistol down between my legs, pointed at the ground, and I wonder if there is a round in the chamber, if the count really should be sixteen more. He pushes the top of the receiver hard against me and drags it the length of the pistol, from the front sight to the rear sight until the rear sight snags on the bottom of my zipper. He breathes Marlboro on me and moves the pistol back toward him until the front sight catches my pant seam. I hear him audibly inhale, and he moves the pistol forward again. Each time he covers me with stale tobacco breaths, he works the pistol between my legs. He breathes in as he pulls it toward him and exhales when he pushes it away. His hand starts to tremble around the gold-plated grip. He pushes harder.

I think I should shoot him. But my arms stay where they are, frozen in place by the stale, blank ninety-degree air of this concrete Iraqi building,

my left hand holding the paper on his desk with a total that increased by fifteen rounds moments ago, my right hand resting on my own pistol, still secured in its holster, aimed at the floor. Outside, I hear the backup generator kick on. The smell of Ahmed's cigarette breath gets weaker, and he steps back from me as the lights come back on. He re-holsters his pistol and smiles at me. While the lights were out, the woman with the blue eye makeup returned in total darkness and sat down at a desk behind Ahmed. "*Naqeeb Jameela*," Ahmed says as he walks around his desk and sits down. The woman stares at me deeply, her blue-framed eyes holding mine. We can't look away. I hear Hameed say something to Ahmed behind me.

"He wants to know if you need anything else," Hameed says to me.

"No," I say, take the papers, and walk out without shaking hands with Ahmed. The woman stands up and says "*ma'asalaama*."

Hameed and I get in the car. He finds his cell phone sitting on the seat. "He was in a weird mood," he says.

"We got the numbers," I say and start the car. We drive back to our compound, where I let Hameed out and go with the list to Perry.

"Here you go," I say to him and hand it over.

"What is this?" he asks me.

"The Brigade ammunition totals you asked for."

"Oh. Well, we ended up just making something up. We probably can't trust their count anyhow."

"So you don't need this?"

"Not really. But I'm impressed you could get it. Brandon has been trying for months and hasn't gotten anywhere. What did you have to do?"