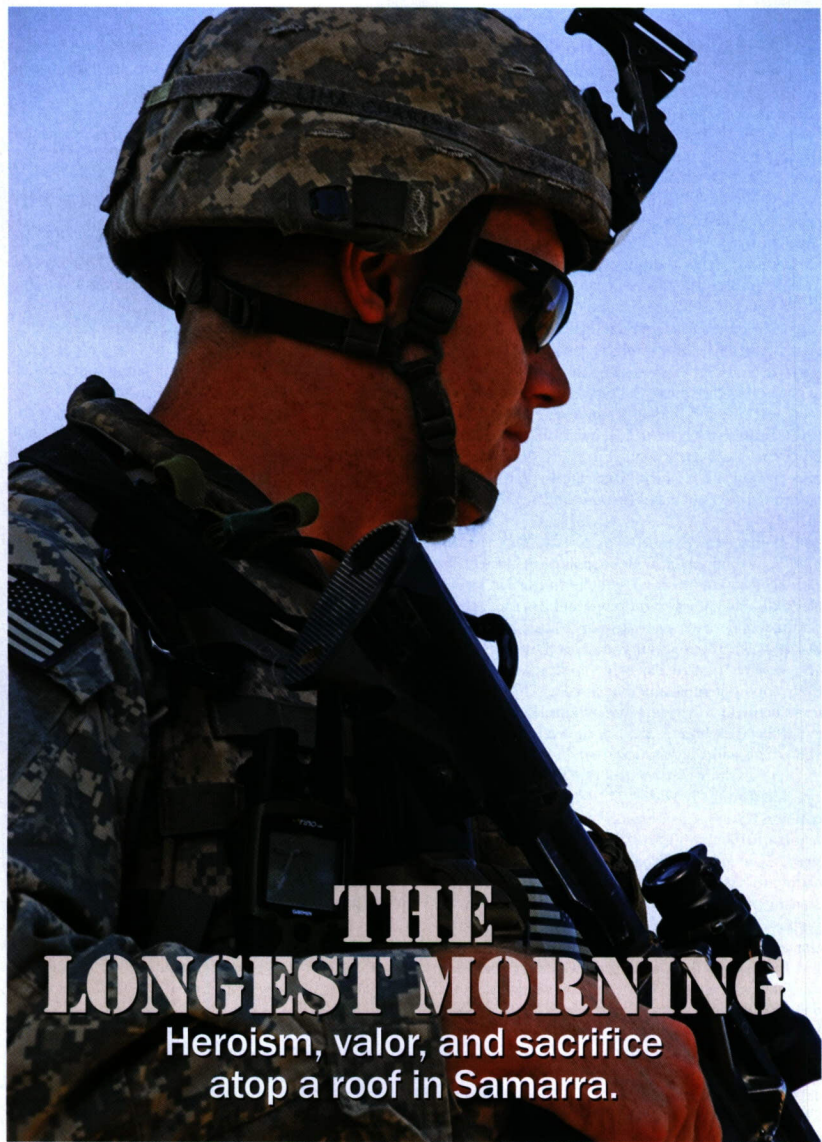


THE LONGEST MORNING

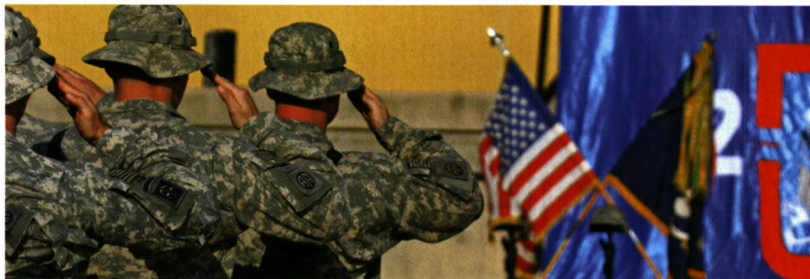
Jeff Emanuel

The American Spectator; Nov 2007; 40, 9; Discovery

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Samarra, Iraq

THE DAY OF August 26, 2007, began like any other for the soldiers of Charlie Company, 2-505 Parachute Infantry Regiment (from the 82nd Airborne Division)—with a mission in the city. Over a year into its deployment to Samarra, Iraq, and now working on the three-month extension announced by Secretary of Defense Gates in the spring, the company knew the city like the back of its collective hands and had its operational routine down to a science, whatever the mission it might be tasked with.

On this morning, that mission was to establish a defensive perimeter around a block in central Samarra, so that Charlie Company's 3rd ("Blue") Platoon, led by Lieutenant Scott Young, could search a shop where it had information that Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were being manufactured.

Due to the insurgents' penchant for placing IEDs along the routes used by Charlie Company's vehicles in order to ambush them on their way back, two separate rooftop observation points (OPs) would be established, one to the north and one to the south of the shop, to watch for enemy activity on the roads that were serving as Blue Platoon's infiltration and exfiltration routes. The southern OP, led by Staff Sergeant Jason Wheeler, was manned with paratroopers from Charlie Company's 1st ("Red") Platoon. "Reaper Two," one of the sniper teams from 2nd Battalion's scout platoon, would man the second OP, almost a kilometer to the north. Reaper would be overwatching the area from the roof of a large four-story apartment building, which was laid out with the long axis facing north-south, and which was bordered—across the surrounding streets and alleys—by several other buildings.

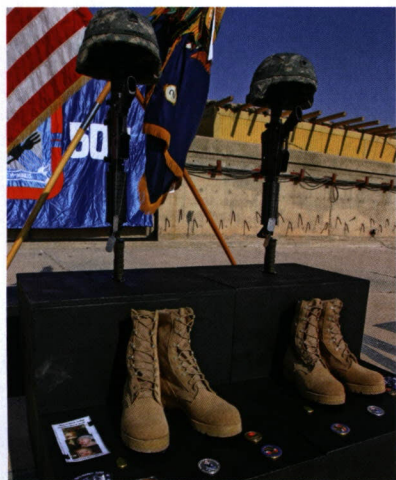
The three-man Reaper team, known as the best in the unit, was led by Sergeant Josh Morley, a 22-year-old



SPECIALIST ERIC MOSER, THE COMPANY ARMORER, WAS A COMPETITION-CALIBER SHOOTER, AND HAD GONE ALONG ON SEVERAL OPS WITH REAPER IN THE PAST, SERVING AS A "DESIGNATED MARKSMAN."

BY JEFF EMANUEL

Photos courtesy of U.S. Army Specialists' Alex Scalco and Paul French.



THE THREE-MAN REAPER TEAM, KNOWN AS THE BEST IN THE UNIT, WAS LED BY SERGEANT JOSH MORLEY, A 22-YEAR-OLD PARATROOPER FROM NORTH CAROLINA.

paratrooper from North Carolina. Morley was regarded within Charlie Company as a consummate professional, and the men in the unit knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they could always count on him and his team to come through whenever they were needed. Morley was affected even more than most of his fellow soldiers by the additional three months that had been added on to his unit's combat tour, for he was a new father and was counting the days until the end of the deployment, when he would finally get to see his infant daughter for the first time—something he had already been waiting months to do.

The rest of Morley's team was made up of Specialist Tracy Willis, a 21-year-old from Texas, and Specialist Chris Corriveau, a 23-year-old from Maine. Willis was well known within Charlie Company as a friendly, laid back, permanently smiling young man who was always good for a laugh and for conversation, regardless of the person and the situation. Corriveau was quieter, but had earned the immense respect of his peers at Patrol Base Olson not only for his talent as a sniper but also for his abilities as a natural leader.

The team had been together in Iraq for well over a year, and the three young men were as close as soldiers could be. They knew everything about each other, from their backgrounds, to information about their families, to the punchlines of Willis's tiredest jokes. Further, they had worked together so closely, and for so long, that they could read each other's body language and tone of voice, and were able to function as an extraordinarily effective unit.

For this mission, the three-man Reaper Two sniper team was rounded out by a fourth man (and a second Texan), 23-year-old Specialist Eric Moser. The company armorer, Moser was not a member of the Battalion Scout Platoon like Morley, Willis, and Corriveau, but was a competition-caliber shooter, and had gone along on several OPs with Reaper in the past, serving as a "designated marksman." His skill with firearms would end up being critical that day.

EARLY IN THE MORNING, after dropping off SSF Wheeler's team, Red Platoon's four Humvees rolled up to the predetermined dismount point for the second OP and came to a stop, allowing Morley, Willis, Corriveau, and Moser to get out. Upon departing the area, the trucks would make their way to Patrol Base Uvanni, an Iraqi National Police outpost in the center of the city (about 1.5 kilometers southwest of Reaper's OP), where they would wait until it was time to pick up the overwatch teams, while also serving as a Quick Reaction Force in the unlikely event that anything should go wrong at either of the overwatch sites.

The four-man sniper team hustled to the northern gate of the apartment building, cut the lock, and quietly moved into the courtyard. Morley instructed Moser and Corriveau to remain behind to close the gate and remove other signs of the team's presence, while he and Willis made their way into the building and up the stairs. Moser pulled security while Corriveau quietly closed the gate and replaced the lock, and then the two followed the others inside, clearing the stairwell as they ascended, but not going into the hallways of the apartment building, as they didn't want to alert the inhabitants of their presence.

The four-man team emerged onto the northern half of the roof and surveyed their surroundings. The building was set up with two staircases, one on the north side and one on the south side, both of which opened up onto the top of the building facing west. Dividing the north and south halves of the roof was a four-foot high, east-west running wall. The entire perimeter of the building's top was lined with a wall of the same height.



Once the area had been secured and the OP established, there was little to do but watch the street around the building. The team took turns keeping watch and sleeping; they had done hundreds of these before, and, while things could get hairy at times, their job involved far more boredom than excitement—especially if they were careful, as they always were, to keep their heads down and not let anybody below know that they were there.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to the four men of Reaper Two, one of the building's occupants had seen them enter and had passed the information along.

JUST BEFORE 11 A.M., REAPER RECEIVED WORD that Blue Platoon had finished its search of the shop (which had yielded no evidence of illegal activity) and was heading back to Patrol Base Olson, three kilometers to the west. With this, the men dispersed across the top of the building, with two—Moser and Corriveau—watching the road from corners of the roof, and the other two—Morley and Willis—taking up a position by the northern stairwell, where the team's radio had been deposited. Assigned to the southeast corner, Corriveau picked up an M4 rifle to complement his sniper weapon and vaulted the dividing wall, moving onto the southern half of the building and taking up his position, watching the base of the buildings across the road but careful to remain below the roof's perimeter wall and out of sight from the street below. Taking a quick peek over the wall, he saw a white sedan nearing his corner of the building but due to the obstructed view that came along with his rooftop concealment, Corriveau never had a chance to see the situation developing on the street directly below.

FROM HIS POSITION BY THE STAIRS, THE SITUATION SEEMED UTTERLY HOPELESS. HE COULD SEE MORLEY AND WILLIS LYING ON THE ROOF, UNMOVING, KNOWING THAT THEY WOULD NEVER MOVE AGAIN.

On the northwest corner of the apartment complex, Moser was watching the road in front of the building through a cut in the roof wall. As he looked down, he saw a white car speed up to the corner of the building. Four men holding AK-47 assault rifles (at least two of whom had long beards—a distinctly *non-Iraqi* trait) emerged from the vehicle and sprinted toward the building's entrance. Seeing this, Moser immediately yelled to the others that enemy fighters were below. Morley, who along with Willis had been positioned next to the stairwell, raced to Moser's corner of the building to assess the situation and if possible to engage, but could not move quickly enough to prevent the men on the ground from making it into the building.

Suddenly, machine gun fire erupted from both of the stairwells behind them.

AT PATROL BASE UVANNI, a kilometer and a half away, the four armored Humvees that made up Charlie Company's internal Quick Reaction Force (QRF) were sitting just inside the gate, its soldiers in their vehicles and ready to move at a moment's notice, when the sound of gunfire echoed through the city streets. The sound of automatic weapons fire is as common in Samarra as traffic noise is in the United States. To

Lieutenant Steve Smith, however, Red's Platoon Leader, these shots seemed different for some reason—like they were coming from the north, instead of from the usual

THE SOUND OF AUTOMATIC WEAPONS FIRE IS AS COMMON IN SAMARRA AS TRAFFIC NOISE IS IN THE UNITED STATES.

east-west direction. He immediately ordered radio checks to be attempted with both OPs to make sure that they were okay.

The first call went to the southern observation point, where SSG Wheeler's team was positioned. "Do you hear gunfire?" he was asked. He replied, "It sounds like the gunfire is coming from north of me. It sounds like Reaper."

Sergeant First Class Rodolfo Cisneros, Red's Platoon Sergeant (ranking noncommissioned officer), ordered an immediate radio check with Reaper. He had a bad feeling about the gunfire and explosions that sounded like they were coming from the exact direction of the northern OP. The radio call received no answer—enough reason for Cisneros to call for the QRF to move immediately, as the unit's standard procedure regarding overwatch operations was that, in the event of a lack of communication with an OP, the QRF should assume it had been compromised and move to its location immediately.

Lieutenant Smith ordered another check—again, nothing. Upon the second failed radio call, he ordered the four-Humvee Quick Reaction Force to roll out of Uvanni and make for Reaper's location as fast as possible. As the Humvees sped out of the Iraqi Patrol Base, Smith continued trying to raise the sniper team on the radio. He did not know that their radio had been destroyed by a grenade, and could only hope that the sounds echoing down the alleyways from the north—which sounded like a full-blown battle at this point, complete with automatic and single-shot gunfire, as well as frequent explosions—were not coming from Reaper's location.

ON THE ROOF of the apartment building, Morley and Moser were taking AK-47 and PKC (a 7.62mm Russian-made machine gun) fire from both stairwells. As they spun around to return fire, they saw several small, dark objects flying onto the roof from the stairwell—hand grenades. Morley recognized that the situation was rapidly deteriorating and knew that, though his team currently occupied the high ground in the emerging battle, they could not hold out for very long due to their vast disadvantage in numbers. Seeing that Willis, who was next to the team's radio, was busy firing into the stairwell through a window on the enclave's

north side, and not knowing that one of the first hand grenades tossed onto the roof had disabled it, Morley made a dash across the roof to call for the QRF.

He never made it there.

As Moser fired into the door from his corner in an attempt to suppress the enemy assault, he saw Morley appear to stumble and go down, his weapon skidding across the rooftop toward the stairwell door. His first thought was that the team leader had tripped and fallen; a moment later, his brain registered the truth: Morley had been shot. A burst of gunfire from the southern stairwell across the dividing wall had scored a direct hit, with one round striking Morley directly in the forehead. He was dead before hitting the ground.

Moser didn't have time to dwell on Morley's death. Knowing that what had just become a three-man team could not long withstand the concerted effort by what was clearly a large enemy force to move up the stairs to his location, he took the same chance that Morley had, and crossed the roof to the radio while Willis continued to fire his .240 machine gun into the stairwell, killing at least two enemy fighters with well-placed bursts as grenades continued to be tossed up the stairs and out onto the roof. As he moved to the radio (which he found to have been disabled by a grenade), Moser was able to get a look down into the northern stairwell. Inside, he saw a number of armed men, both black and Arab rushing up the steps toward the roof—none of whom were the individuals he had seen get out of the car moments before on the street. Apparently there had been fighters stationed in the building before the white car's arrival.

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the roof's dividing wall, Corriveau had been watching the area to the southwest when the gunfire began at his back. Spinning around at the edge of the roof, he saw a man with a PKC machine gun emerging from the southern stairwell, and immediately moved toward him, raising his M24 sniper rifle, only to find that it wasn't loaded. Continuing to advance on the man at the top of the stairs, who was firing across the roof, Corriveau quickly loaded a five-round magazine into his rifle and fired a perfectly aimed shot into the assailant's head. Continuing to close on the man, who was now on the ground, Corriveau fired again and again, recharging the firing handle each time, until he had emptied his remaining rounds into the body. Following up with a swift kick to the fighter's head to

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make sure that he was dead, he then tossed his empty sniper rifle aside, picked up the man's PKC, and stepped into the stairwell, looking down over the railing. Seeing at least one more armed man charging up from the landing below, Corriveau held the PKC over

HE WAS STILL IN SHOCK AT MORLEY'S SUDDEN DEATH, AND THERE WAS NO WAY THAT HE WAS GOING TO ALLOW THESE ANIMALS TO TAKE HIS TEAM LEADER'S—AND FRIEND'S—BODY.

the ledge and, firing blind, let go with a burst. A scream from below let him know that at least one of his rounds had hit home. He repeated this action three or four more times until he was unable to see any more movement in the stairwell.

Having neutralized the threat at his back (at least temporarily), Corriveau took his newly acquired PKC and sprinted back to the western edge of the roof to check the road again. As he peered over the edge, he saw several men running toward the entrance to the building from the south. Just to Corriveau's right, over the dividing wall, Willis, who had left the northern stairwell to Moser, was looking at the same scene. Looking to his left and catching Corriveau's eye, Willis, who had stepped up and taken charge after Morley had gone down, pointed at the men, pulled a grenade from his vest, and yelled, "We're going to frag them!" Corriveau retrieved a grenade of his own, pulled the firing pin, and let it fly, hitting the last man in the group running toward the building. Seconds behind him Willis pulled the pin from his own grenade, and prepared to throw it down into the street as well.

Suddenly, the morning exploded into gunfire, and bullets began flying at the rooftop from seemingly every direction. Enemy fighters had established supporting machine gun positions in the buildings on three sides (north, east, and west) of the apartment complex, and had begun firing relentlessly at the building top that had become a battleground, sending debris flying up all over the place from the walls and roof. Over the loud chatter of the supporting fire, Corriveau, who was still facing the street, heard a loud burst from his five o'clock. Looking to his right, he saw Willis disappear behind the dividing wall, the prepped grenade still in his hand.

AT THE NORTHERN STAIRWELL, Moser was holding the high ground, doing his best to lock down the access route to his half of the rooftop—and to stay alive—by alternately firing his M4 rifle around the northwest corner of the stairwell and taking cover behind the structure's northern wall. AK-47 and PKC fire, as well, now, as 9-millimeter pistol fire, was being

steadily spewed from the doorway, and grenades were still bouncing out onto the roof and exploding around Moser at an alarming rate. Pivoting around the corner to fire another burst with his M4, he was able to see at least eight people in the stairwell, all attempting to make it up to the roof. He did his best to suppress the charge.

As he took cover behind the wall yet again, Moser saw a single enemy fighter reach out of the stairwell and grab the M4 that Morley had dropped when he had been hit. Though he immediately leaped up and began firing into the building again, Moser was too late to prevent the weapon from being taken. He had larger problems to worry about than the rifle, though. The charge up the stairs by close to a dozen men (both black and Arab) was continuing, and grenades were rolling out of the doorway one and two at a time and exploding with thunderous bangs. Shortly after the weapon had been taken, the person at the top of the staircase made a lunge for another prize on the roof—Morley's body.

Spurred into renewed action, Moser flew around the corner of the stairwell and let loose with a relentless series of bursts at the advancing enemy. He was still in shock at Morley's sudden death, and there was *no* way that he was going to allow these animals to take his team leader's—and friend's—body. Risking his own life to remain within reach of the stairwell—and thus to be able to impose himself and his M4 as a barrier between the attackers and Morley's body—Moser fired again and again into the doorway, hitting insurgents inside while miraculously avoiding injury himself. The number of targets never seemed to diminish. As soon as he shot one person attempting to fight his way out of the stairwell to seize Morley's body, another would appear.

As Moser was exchanging fire with the topmost fighters in the northern stairwell, and attempting to remain behind sufficient cover to avoid the repeated grenade detonations on the roof, he heard from across the building top Willis's call to Corriveau to prepare their grenades. Just then, the enemy support-by-fire positions surrounding the building opened fire on the rooftop, sending Moser scrambling for cover again. As he retreated behind the northern wall of the stairwell (crouched down to avoid the withering fire coming from the north, east, and west), he looked out toward Willis just in time to see a PKC burst from the northern stairwell catch him in the back.

Almost in slow motion, Moser saw Willis's body contort, saw him collapse onto the roof, and saw him land on his own grenade, which he had prepped for

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use but hadn't yet been able to throw.

A split second later Willis's body was rocked by the explosion, and Moser knew instantly that he was dead. The battle had only been raging for five minutes, but it already seemed like a lifetime to Moser—and it had cost

ALMOST IN SLOW MOTION, MOSER SAW WILLIS'S BODY CONTORT, SAW HIM COLLAPSE ONTO THE ROOF, AND SAW HIM LAND ON HIS OWN GRENADE.

the lives of at least two of his fellow paratroopers. With the machine gun fire pouring in from three sides, the concerted efforts on the part of the fighters in the stairwell to reach the rooftop and Morley's body (and do who knew what from there), and the grenades exploding around him, Moser could do nothing but hold what little ground he had, and keep trying to suppress the fighters in the stairwell. From his position by the stairs, the situation seemed utterly hopeless. He could see Morley and Willis lying on the roof, unmoving, knowing that they would never move again. Further, as he couldn't see or hear a thing from the south side of the building top, due to the dividing wall and the withering gunfire coming from all sides, he had no choice but to assume that Corriveau was gone as well.

He had never felt more alone.

IN THE SOUTHERN HALF of the rooftop, across the dividing wall, Corriveau was still very much alive. He absolutely knew this to be the case because, as he sprinted back to the southern stairwell to prevent any more enemy fighters from making it to the rooftop, he was beside himself with emotions the likes of which he had never felt before. If he were dead, there was no way that he would feel the hurt, the loss, the sheer *rage* that was bottled up within him now, that drove him as he fired his PKC over and over into the stairwell, cutting down armed insurgent after armed insurgent as they ran up the stairs toward him. He had seen Willis go down from the gunfire, had heard the explosion of his friend's own grenade, and knew there was no way that he could have survived such a blast. Further, he had not seen Morley or Moser since the initial shooting had begun over five minutes (that seemed like hours) before and knew—though his mind could not accept it—that they, the last of his team, the last of his support, the last of those who were closer to them than his own family, must be dead as well.

Fighting like a man who had nothing to lose, Corriveau moved to the southern end of the roof, staying low to avoid the continuous fire from the surrounding

buildings, and, keeping an eye on his own stairwell, began to fire bursts from his PKC across the dividing wall into the northern doorway as he bounded back and forth across the end of the roof, ducking for cover between bursts. As he popped out to fire again and again, he saw one insurgent after another in the northern stairwell, trying to make it out onto the roof, many of whom, it appeared from their long beards and the color of their skin, had come all this way from some foreign land just to kill *him*, and to kill his friends.

His insides contorted with emotion, Corriveau did the only thing that he could do in that situation: keep moving, keep taking cover, and keep fighting off his assailants as long as he had the strength and the ammunition to do so. As the last man standing, there was nobody else to turn to for help—either he would fight, or he would die, with the two not being mutually exclusive.

But, if he was going to die, he was going to go down fighting—and he was going to take as many of these animals with him as he could.

AROUND THE FAR SIDE of the northern stairwell, Moser was engaged in a battle with a hand holding a 9mm pistol. Grenades were still being tossed up the stairs onto the roof, and every few seconds a black hand would reach around the wall of the structure and squeeze off a few rounds in his direction. Ducking behind cover when it appeared, then swinging his weapon around the wall and firing a burst when it went back inside, Moser could see no progress being made in his battle to keep his assailants from taking the rooftop—and no escape in the event that they finally did. Due to the dividing wall and the fact that, entirely by chance, he and Corriveau were both suppressing the same stairwell, from opposite sides of the roof, in an exactly alternating pattern, Moser never saw that he was not alone, that there was another member of his team alive on the rooftop (and neither, on the other side, did Corriveau). However, despite his creeping sense of hopelessness, Moser continued to do all that he was able—which, at this point, was to protect Morley's body the best that he could, and to keep exchanging rounds with the insurgents behind the door.

And then his weapon jammed.

As if more adversity were needed in a situation that was already an against-all-odds struggle to protect the body of a fallen comrade while also trying to stay alive, against the combined opposition of an assault from foreign fighters in the stairwell and a constant stream of grenades being tossed onto the roof near him—which prevented his crossing the

mere feet separating him from Morley's load carrying vest, which was in the northwestern corner and held a walkie-talkie ("ICOM"), the last undamaged piece of communications equipment on the roof—as well as nonstop machine gun fire from the buildings on every side, now Moser's M4 was threatening to fail him. In this time of greatest need, Moser's training and experience kicked in. He remained calm, cleared his weapon, and, undeterred by the fact that now, due to a malfunction in his most precious piece of equipment, he had to charge the rifle's firing handle after every single shot, resumed the battle.

For nearly five minutes, he traded shots with the faceless pistolier on the other side of the stairwell door, all the while knowing that, in the end, he would not have enough time or ammunition to hold the rooftop himself. As the minutes crept by like hours, a renewed sense of hopelessness began to take hold. "Please God, help me," he pled time and again, as he alternated firing into the stairwell, ducking for cover from the returning fire, and searching frantically for some way out of what appeared to be a certain-death situation. Looking to the west, he saw the unmistakable form of the 52-meter tall Spiral Minaret, which stood in the northwestern corner of the city, a scant thousand meters from Patrol Base Olson—and safety. Measuring its distance from the rooftop, Moser wondered for the briefest of moments if he could survive a jump off the building intact enough to be able to run the three kilometers back to Olson.

The situation was desperate, and Moser needed a miracle.

THOUGH HE WAS in a similarly desperate situation on the south side of the roof, the idea of leaping off a four-story building never occurred to Corriveau. Instead, as he bounded back and forth across the building's edge, alternately firing into the northern stairwell door and taking cover from whatever return fire came his way, his mass of conflicting emotions was overridden by only one thought: Get to the radio on the other side of the roof.

Finally, running low on ammunition and facing only sporadic harassing fire from the southern stairwell, Corriveau decided it was time to make a break for it. He fired a final suppressive burst into his own doorway, as well as into the one to the north, and made a run for it, dashing across the open rooftop, vaulting the dividing wall, and racing for the semi-protected far side of the northern stairwell.

IN THE NORTH SIDE OF THE ROOF, Moser's situation was looking bleaker by the second. He had gone through five 30-round magazines with his M4 and was still defending the roof from an attempted assault up his own stairwell, while frantically search-

FOR NEARLY FIVE MINUTES, HE TRADED SHOTS WITH THE FACELESS PISTOLIER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STAIRWELL DOOR, ALL THE WHILE KNOWING THAT, IN THE END, HE WOULD NOT HAVE ENOUGH TIME OR AMMUNITION TO HOLD THE ROOFTOP HIMSELF.

ing—and hoping—for a miraculous escape from his present situation.

Suddenly, that miracle arrived.

Through a hail of bullets from the surrounding buildings, Corriveau bounded over the dividing wall and came sprinting across the north side of the roof and around the stairwell, almost knocking Moser over as he flew around the corner. Upon seeing each other alive, an unspeakable joy flooded the manic Corriveau, and an equal amount of relief flowed through Moser at the suddenly gained knowledge that each was not the only man left alive on this godforsaken rooftop in Samarra.

After the joyous yet indescribably brief reunion, the two Americans resumed the fight together. As Moser suppressed the enemy activity in the stairwell, Corriveau reached down and picked up the team's radio to call for the QRF. But like Moser before him, he found that it had been destroyed by one of the first grenades thrown onto the rooftop. Flinging the useless object across the roof out of frustration, Corriveau next set his sights on the survivors' last hope of a means to call for help: the ICOM on Morley's vest.

As Moser locked down the stairwell with his M4, Corriveau crossed the open rooftop to the northwest corner, where Morley's vest lay, and retrieved the small hand-held radio. Picking it up, he made calls on channel after channel, desperate to get hold of anybody that he could. Finally, as he turned the knob to Channel 13, he made contact with SSG Wheeler on the southern OP.

"Reaper Two is in contact!" Corriveau yelled into the radio. "We have two casualties, need immediate QRF and air support!"

Having made his transmission, Corriveau threw the ICOM aside and moved back to the northeastern corner of the roof, where he and Moser took turns firing at the enemy machine gun position to the east and suppressing the northern stairwell, continuing to protect Morley's body. Sporadic harassing fire was

still coming from the southern doorway, but it was not enough to be a concern.

As they held down their quadrant of the apartment building's rooftop, one final grenade came rolling out of the stairwell, exploding harmlessly several feet away from them. Then, the fire from the doorway began to die

"REAPER TWO IS IN CONTACT!" CORRIVEAU YELLED INTO THE RADIO. "WE HAVE TWO CASUALTIES, NEED IMMEDIATE QRF AND AIR SUPPORT!"

down. For some unknown reason, the terrorists inside the building, who had been pushing so determinedly up the stairs during the ten-minute gun battle, had abandoned their pursuit, and were quickly evacuating their dead as they left the building. The rooftop battle zone had become much calmer.

RACING NORTH UP the street toward the apartment building, Red Platoon's four Humvees were heading into the unknown, but were preparing for the worst-case scenario. Wheeler had relayed Corriveau's ICOM message to them, stating that there were friendly casualties and that the OP was in contact. As the column neared the building, Lieutenant Smith could see thick, black smoke rising from the rooftop, while SFC Cisneros saw fire being directed at the OP from several buildings around them.

The streets were completely deserted as the QRF pulled up to the apartment complex, passing on the southwest corner the body of a black fighter holding an AK-47. The four Humvees pulled up to the east, north, west, and southwest sides of the building to establish a security cordon; as his vehicle reached the front, Lieutenant Smith jumped out of his Humvee and sprinted into the building alone, leaving his remaining dismounted soldiers racing to catch up. All he knew was that the young men he had dropped off here only hours ago were in danger, and had already taken casualties. SFC Cisneros, who leaped from his truck the moment he saw Smith take off, caught up to his Platoon Leader at the base of the stairwell, pulling him back so that he could assume the risk of mounting the staircase into the unknown first.

As the dismounted paratroopers—Smith and Cisneros, as well as Sergeant Tim Curry, Private First Class Tim Durfee, and Specialist Brady Thayer, the platoon's medic—raced up the stairs, weapons at the ready and hollering "Friendlies coming up!" at the top of their lungs, the sound of gunfire from below came echoing up the stairs. One of Red Platoon's turret gunners had positively identified a gunman in an

alley to the southeast, and was engaging him.

The stairwell itself was covered in blood, from top to bottom. Looking around as he climbed toward the roof, Cisneros saw marks in the slick coating that indicated that several bodies had been dragged down from above. Finally, as he reached the last flight of stairs, he encountered a dead body, oriented as though it had been moving up the stairs when it had been killed.

Finally reaching daylight at the top of the staircase, Cisneros made an immediate turn to the right, around the northern wall, and almost ran into Corriveau. Wanting to avoid being shot by the shell-shocked paratrooper, Cisneros grabbed Corriveau by the upper arms and yelled to him, "Hey! It's us! It's us!" Punch-drunk and mentally exhausted, Corriveau went limp for the briefest of moments in Cisneros's arms; behind him, Moser simply stared, wide-eyed.

Staying low to avoid the machine gun fire from the surrounding buildings, and wary of the prospect of walking into another ambush, Cisneros turned and surveyed the scene on the rooftop. What he saw was sickening. The entire roof of the building was covered with well over a dozen blast marks from grenades, with some patches still burning, and shell casings from expended rounds seemed to cover every remaining inch of ground. From the northeastern corner, he could clearly see Willis's body diagonally across the roof, lying on its side directly over a large blast marking; he could also see Morley, lying face down near the stairwell door that he had just charged out of.

Lieutenant Smith, who had followed Cisneros out the door and onto the rooftop, moved to Morley's body to check for a pulse, though knowing it was a futile exercise. He called down to the medic, SPC Thayer, to take his time coming up, as the two casualties were clearly dead. As he knelt over the sniper team leader, he wondered over and over again how in the world this could have happened when he and his men had been *so close* to the OP the entire time. Lost in thought, he didn't realize that Thayer had come up behind him until Thayer placed a gentle but firm hand on his shoulder and said, "I've got it."

Machine gun fire picked up again from the building to the east, but this time Moser and Corriveau were not alone in facing it. SFC Cisneros and Sgt. Curry joined in returning fire, and the .50 caliber turret guns on the Humvees below engaged the shooters, as well.

Smith, Thayer, and Durfee carried Willis down the stairs to the waiting Humvees, where they gently placed him in a body bag and sat him in the back seat of one of the trucks. A second bag was carried back up to the roof,



where Morley was gently wrapped, his head cushioned by Cisneros, and was brought back down to the vehicles, where Moser and Corriveau, alive and physically unharmed but mentally exhausted and emotionally drained, climbed in and sat down. There was no room in the cabs of Red's trucks, so Morley was laid out in the trunk of the rear Humvee, with a gear bag arranged so that it propped up his head like a pillow. Morley and Willis's fellow paratroopers wanted their friends to be comfortable on their last ride back to Patrol Base Olson.

BY THIS TIME, Charlie Company's 2nd ("White") and 3rd Platoons had arrived from Patrol Base Olson, with Captain Buddy Ferris, the Company Commander, riding along. There was work still to be done at the site, from checking the roof for sensitive items to pursuing those involved in the assault, and Blue and White Platoons would spend the next several hours doing just those things. In the ensuing gun battles, several al Qaeda—both Iraqi and foreign—would be killed or captured, among them the informant who had initially alerted the foreign fighters to Reaper's presence on the roof of his apartment building. Following a large number of the fighters from the apartment building and the surrounding machine gun positions using surveillance aircraft, Captain Ferris was able to identify the house to which over 20 of the surviving terrorists went after leaving the building. Minutes later, a GPS-guided bomb was dropped on the house.

Within the next hours and days, more information would come to light, both through the interrogation of captured insurgents and through the development of more human intelligence on the situation. According to the available evidence, nearly 40 al Qaeda were directly involved in the assault on Reaper's position (they believed the team on the roof comprised nearly a dozen American soldiers). During the firefight, which lasted less than ten total minutes, Corriveau and Moser had killed at least ten enemy fighters—possibly as many as fifteen—and had not

MORLEY AND WILLIS'S FELLOW PARATROOPERS WANTED THEIR FRIENDS TO BE COMFORTABLE ON THEIR LAST RIDE BACK TO PATROL BASE OLSON.

only kept themselves alive, but, against all odds, had prevented al Qaeda from succeeding in their real goal: to kidnap the soldiers on the rooftop, and to make a public spectacle of their imprisonment and murder, just two weeks before General Petraeus's internationally viewed testimony on Iraq before the U.S. Congress. The suspicion that kidnapping was the fighters' intent was confirmed by a final piece of intelligence that Charlie Company received just after the incident: an announcement, crafted by the Islamic State of Iraq (al Qaeda's Iraqi front), stating that nine U.S. soldiers had been kidnapped in Samarra, and had been beheaded and had their bodies thrown into Thar-Thar lake (to the southwest of the city).

Thanks to the strength, courage, discipline, and unwillingness to give up in the face of seemingly impossible odds of Chris Corriveau and Eric Moser, the ISI had spoken too soon. There would be no trophy, no public relations victory to thrust in the face of those in America and around the world whose attention would in the next few weeks be focused again on Iraq. Instead, there would only be death or capture, as the ISI members responsible were hunted down, one by one, by Captain Ferris and his company of very motivated, and exceptionally lethal, paratroopers who, as Corriveau and Moser had demonstrated during the fight of their lives on the rooftop that fateful morning, would never, ever give up, whatever the odds. ❧

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