

Robert G. Fuller, Jr.  
79 Maple Ridge Drive  
Winthrop, ME 04364-3427  
(207) 377-6973  
rgfuller61@aol.com

## **FLASHBACK MORNING**

by  
Robert G. Fuller, Jr.

The concussion blows out the windshield and hits me like a rock made out of air and noise. The M916 truck I'm driving bucks up and the thirty-foot trailer behind it jackknifes sideways. The left wheels lift off the road, then slam down. I'm stunned and confused for a couple of seconds.

Oh, shit ... a damn IED. I grab my locked and loaded M-4 and bail out. Am I all right? I guess so, except my face is full of glass bits and dust. It feels like it's been stung by wasps and then sandpapered. God, thank you for those Wiley-X ballistic sunglasses. My ears are ringing. I'm one hurting puppy.

I can see flames all over the place. The air's full of dust and smoke. I'm about to barf from the stink of oil and diesel fumes. Hey, is that a meat smell? Holy Jeez, some guy must have been burnt.

What's happened to my driver, Tib Tibbetts? There's a lot of hollering and screaming. Then I see Tib. He's down on his hands and knees, shaking his head.

"Tib! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just banged up a bit."

Ed Spiller, the driver of the 916 in front of me and just behind the lead gun truck, comes up.

"Les got his arm cut up some and he's bleeding." Les Carver's his assistant driver.

"How bad?"

“Bad enough. Do you have your CLS bag? I can’t find mine.”

I check the truck, dig out my Combat Lifesaving Bag and go find Les. He has a deep cut on his left forearm but his OTV body armor keeps him from getting hurt worse. Our LT is real squared away and had us mark up our CLS bags so when we opened them every item was labeled - “scissors,” “bandages,” whatever. Sometimes there’s medics with the convoy, sometimes not. Like this trip.

I can tell Les is just beginning to feel pain. But he’s one tough critter and tries his damndest not to show it. I get a field dressing on the cut. No arteries cut, looks like, but I slap a tourniquet on it anyway. Then me and Tib haul him down to the wrecker which is the primary CASEVAC vehicle. There are a few more guys there. Erlon Chubbuck has bad burns on his face and his left leg mangled up some. Him, Billy Orff and Rene Ducharme were in the point vehicle. Erlon was driving. Rene was the gunner. I see Billy. He was the assistant driver. Looks like his right arm’s broke. They’re taping it up his chest and he’s moaning something awful. They were in the kill zone when the IED went off.

We all have our blood type written on our helmets and the tops of our boots so if we get hurt real bad the combat medics back at the FOB will know what to do. Billy, who’s sort of a wild man anyway, has his tattooed on the side of his neck.

Everyone else besides him and Les is about like me, not too bad off. I see Buddy Dunn, the wrecker driver.

“See the son of a bitch who set it off?” I ask him.

“Nope,” he says. “Usual - they set it off with a cell phone. We didn’t see anyone running away with one. If we had, we’d sure have taken him down in a hurry.”

I can hear the LT calling in on the SINGAR.

“Chamberlain two-six, this is White Knight four-one. We’re on MSR Lexus about a click from the Tigris bridge on the far side heading toward Patriot. We’ve been hit by an IED. We have casualties. Repeat, we have casualties. Request QRF support for possible follow-on attack. Upon confirmation from you we will switch freqs to request MEDEVAC assistance, over.”

The SINGAR crackles.

“White Knight four-one, this is Chamberlain two-six. Roger that. We will get QRF en route and monitor your transmission with MEDEVACs, over.”

“Roger that,” the LT says. “So far eight casualties counted. We’ve got them fixed up as best we can and ready to CASEVAC, over.”

Then I see two fellows coming down hauling someone. You could tell right off that he was dead. His helmet was all squashed in and his legs was just dragging in the dirt.

“Oh, geez,” says Erlon. “That’s Rene. The gun truck must have landed on him when it flipped.”

We hear the LT again.

“Chamberlain two-six, we have one KIA, over.”

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It all gets back in my head when I’m tweaked up and stressed out, which I was. Not every day when you find a burglar in your kitchen and shoot him.

There’re headlights coming up the driveway. My mind changes channels and I’m back in the world. It’s four-thirty on a late November morning and I’m standing in the garage in just my T-shirt, my shorts, my parka and my low-cut Bean boots, freezing my butt off waiting for the police to show up. I’d called 911 about twenty minutes ago. I was already working on my third Marlboro when Chief Casavant showed up in the town’s cruiser with a State Police cruiser right behind.

I'd turned the light on in the garage so the cops'd see me real good, and both the chief and the trooper killed their headlights. The chief got out of his car. Well, "got out" isn't really the right way to describe it. Roland Casavant is a big man, maybe six-five, maybe 230 pounds. First off, you could see him moving his head around to check out the area before he even opened the door. Then he swung one big leg out at a time, bent over carefully so's not to hit his head on the door frame and just sort of pushed himself out and up real quick, like he was doing a squat lift. The trooper was a smaller fellow, kind of wiry-like. You could see his eyes moving around, too, just covering the chief's back and making sure nobody missed anything.

The chief spoke first.

"Hey, Dale. Even with that parka, you must be pretty damn cold."

"The rest of my clothes are up in the bedroom, Roland," I said. "I didn't want to go back up there and then out again through the kitchen. Didn't want to mess up the crime scene. If shooting a fellow that's in your house in the middle of the night and has a machete in his hand's a crime, that is. I was lucky that I had the parka and my boots in the closet next to the garage door and this door mat, some kind of fiber or something, to keep my feet off the concrete. Otherwise, I'd be hurting more than I am." I took another drag on the Marlboro. The smoke tasted good and warmed me up some.

"This is Trooper Fernald," said the chief. "He'll be handling the investigation. The fellows from CID are on their way."

"Hello, Mr. Peaslee," said the trooper. He didn't offer to shake hands. That was okay by me. I figured he might do that. Probably didn't want to get any evidence on him if I had any on my hand.

"Hello, sir," I said, figuring it was best to be real polite under the circumstances. "You want to go in and have a peek at the guy?"

“No, we’ll wait till CID shows up. Know who he is?” asked the trooper.

“Never saw him before,” I said. “Could be a local. I don’t know most of the youngsters around here these days. He’s maybe late twenties, early thirties. I didn’t spend a lot of time looking at him after he was down. Figured I’d call 911 and let you sort it all out. Geez, it’s cold out here, Roland. Can you move the cruiser up and we can talk there?”

“No problem,” said the chief. He went over to his Crown Vic, fired it up and parked in front of the garage. I stubbed out my cigarette. We all got in, the trooper and Roland in the front seat and me in the back.

“Let’s talk about what happened first,” said the trooper. He was all business.

The chief held up his hand. “Wait just a minute. Dale, where’re Barb and the kids?”

“Barb’s still in the bedroom upstairs,” I said. “I hollered at her not to come down until you got here and said it was okay. She didn’t give me any argument.”

The chief gave me a knowing look and I sort of grinned back a little. Barb’s the kind of woman who isn’t shy about speaking up and the chief knew it.

“Tyler and Britney are up at Sunday River with some of their friends, skiing. Guess we got pretty lucky on that score,” I said.

“Sorry,” said Fernald. “Okay to take up what happened?”

“Sure,” I said. “Barb and I were asleep in the upstairs bedroom. She’s a light sleeper and poked me awake. She whispered something like ‘Dale, I think there’s someone downstairs.’ So I listened and, sure enough, it sounded like there was someone moving around down there. That got my attention right off. I sat up, reached in the bedside table next to me, got out my .38 and took off the trigger lock. Told Barb to stay in bed and keep quiet. Then I got out of bed and padded over to the stairs and listened some more. Damn right there was some

bandit down there, roaming around. So I went down the stairs real slow, stepping on the far side so the stairs wouldn't creak. You can bet that I was some careful. I could tell whoever it was, was in the kitchen. The kitchen's on the right at the bottom of the stairs."

Fernald said, "Mr. Peaslee, when homeowners decide to take on prowlers, the result usually isn't good for the homeowner. Why didn't you call 911 when you heard the noises?"

"I thought about it," I said. "But I figured by the time you got here, the fellow would have either come after Barb and me or heard you coming and skedaddled without me getting a good look at him. Besides, I was riled up that someone was in my house. Dang it, I knew we should have gotten another dog to replace old Samson. He's been gone about three months and we just haven't gotten over it enough to go get a puppy, I guess."

"Then what happened?" asked the trooper.

"I edged over to the left of the doorway. I could see the guy and that he was holding something big, maybe a baseball bat. So I stepped in and flicked the light switch on the inside wall. I had my .38 pointed right at him, and I yelled, 'Drop it and hit the floor, you son of a bitch!' He lifted up his arm and I saw that he had a goddamn machete. He yelled back, 'Give it up!' and started toward me. Well, that was it as far as I was concerned. I have a laser sight on my .38. It's a Smith and Wesson Bodyguard. You'll see it. I left it on the kitchen counter. I put the red laser light right on his chest and drilled him - twice."

"Why twice?" asked the chief.

"Geez, Roland, you was in the Marines, I'm in the National Guard. Didn't your DI tell you anything worth shooting once was worth shooting twice?"

"Come to think of it, he sure did," admitted the chief.

"He went down flat on his back," I said. "I use a jacketed hollow point

round for personal protection. 'Course, you can't shoot those at the indoor range at the Fish and Game Club, I use plain old lead for that. Plus they don't give those hollow points away - twenty-two dollars for a box of twenty-five. You can get fifty lead target rounds for about fifteen dollars. Anyway, that's when I called 911. Barb shrieked a bit after I plugged the scumbag and called down to make sure it wasn't me that got shot and I told her I was okay, the guy was on the floor and she should hunker down and stay in the bedroom like I said earlier. Then I went upstairs and used the bedroom phone. Didn't want to mess with the kitchen phone. That's about it."

"Any idea why he picked on you?" asked the trooper.

"I figured you'd get around to that," I said. "My dad had a big coin collection. He was a twenty-year Navy man, retired as a senior chief bosun's mate. My brother, my sister and I were Navy brats. We lived in Norfolk, Virginia, Mayport, Florida, San Diego, Pearl Harbor - that was a real good three years. He did sea time all over the world and, every port call his ship made, he'd pick up a couple handfuls of the local coins and try to find ones from other places. He got hold of a lot of older coins and bills, too - don't ask me how. Had almost a footlocker full by the time he was done. I had 'em appraised by this outfit down in Portland. Some of 'em are worth quite a bit of money as collectors' items and he had some ones made out of real gold. When he died he left 'em to me, seeing as I was the only one who was in the military like him and had done a tour in Iraq with the 133rd. Folks around here knew that I had this collection, see, and I figure he found out about it. Plus I live here out in the country. Roland'll tell you my nearest neighbors are Paul and Tammy Frenette, half a mile down the road in that double wide."

"I thought you kept that collection in a safe deposit box at Wabanaki Savings," said the chief.

“I do, most of it,” I said. “But Barb asked me to keep a few around to show to the kids in her class at Coburn Elementary every so often. Also, this scumbag might’ve thought I’d have some cash in the office out in the barn he’d get me to hand over. I don’t usually have much more’n a hundred dollars or so in small bills and loose change, though. Lots of the folks I work for pay in cash. The local contractors and summer people, those are the ones who write me checks.”

I run an excavating business with a big old Kubota backhoe and a Jimmy Top Kick eight-yard dump truck. Got both of them used, not too hard, for a real good price. Foundations, septic tanks, you name it, I can dig it. Before the housing market went bad, I subbed for a lot of home builders around here and as far away as South Paris. That’s pretty much dried up. The summer folks on the lakes, though, they’ve always got some small job or other they want done, and they don’t for the most part care about the price so long as you show up when you say you will. I put in their docks in the spring, take ‘em out after Labor Day. I can fix most anything, too. During the winters I plow snow with my Chevy four-wheel Silverado 1500 and shovel snow off of the summer folks’ camp roofs. It’s hard work but I’m used to that and between Barb’s teacher paycheck and what I net we get by. I have a pole barn I built to keep the equipment in and I got a small office in there with a desk, some file cabinets and a counter with a cash register on it. My sister-in-law comes in three days a week to take care of the paperwork. I get most of my calls on my cell phone and there’s voice mail and my cell phone number on the office line. But she answers the office line when she’s in. So far it’s all worked out pretty good. When things perk up a bit I’m thinking of asking Matt Littlefield, the loan officer down at Wabanaki Savings, for a loan to build some of those storage units where people can keep their gear and the summer folks can put up their boats and such over the winter.

About this time the CID crew from the State Police showed up with the



evidence truck. They talked with me and the officers first, then went in through the garage and into the kitchen. They strung some of that yellow crime scene tape in the doorway and outside the back door.

Chief Casavant came back to the cruiser and called Coburn Ambulance Service to come out with a body bag.

“Whyn’t you go back in through the front door and warm up in the living room?” said the chief. “ You won’t get in the way of the CID boys.”

I came in, took off my boots and settled down in the recliner in the living room. Then the adrenalin started to wear off. My mind changed channels again and I was back. Back in the shitstorm that was OIF - Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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We were running a six-truck convoy out of FOB Marez, hauling two shower T-huts over to FOB Patriot. FOB Marez is a lot larger, and we’re in the old Iraqi Republican Guard base. We got all the grunts and engineers. We pick up the supplies from a nearby airfield and convoy ‘em down. Patriot used to be one of Saddam Hussein’s palaces. It’s HQ and has more officers than Marez so they’re always needing gear and what not.

The point vehicle was a gun truck with a big ol’ M2 .50 cal “Ma Deuce” in the turret. A round from one of those babies can ruin your whole day. Take an arm or a leg right off. Next was me and Buddy Dunn in our 916s with trailers, hauling the shower huts. Then the wrecker in case one of the vehicles broke down or got hit. That has a gun turret too, mounting an M240 Bravo machine gun firing the standard NATO 7.62 mike-mike round. Then a bobtail 916 as backup for any other 916 out of action. Bringing up the rear was another gun truck with an M249 SAW machine gun in the turret. Fires a different round - a 5.56 mike-mike. Nothing like automatic weapons to raise your happy level.

We boogied out of Marez at zero-five-dark-thirty. Just enough light to see where we was at, and you hope most of the hajis are still in the sack. Our intel briefing said we'd be moving through a hot zone. Like there's no other kind, for Chrissakes. Our LT tried to anticipate everything that might go wrong and looked after us real good. He has us double check the frequencies in the SINGARs to make sure they could reach Chamberlain or MEDEVAC if we got hit, and check the batteries in the hand-held Motorolas we carried so we could talk to each other. The SINGARs use secure wireless transmissions and our orders are to shoot 'em up if there's ever any danger of them falling into the hands of the hajis.

Our trucks were crap. When you come in theater, you don't bring your own but take what's there from the previous unit you replace and go with it. We got mostly beat-up old Viet Nam-era vehicles left behind by the Mississippi National Guard. Lots of them had manual shifts which the younger kids had no idea how to drive. Would you believe it, we took whatever extra flak vests we could find and duct-taped them to the sides of the doors to give us extra protection.

We always change our routes so the hajis will never know for sure where we're coming from or where we're going. Today our orders were to head out on Main Supply Route Toyota, ram through Mosul on Alternate Supply Route Saab and then after we cross the Tigris get on MSR Lexus into Patriot. We named our routes after cars because we couldn't pronounce the names the hajis called 'em.

The first problem is getting through Mosul. It's a big city with about one point two million people. We drive through there like Mad Max, just as fast as we can go. That way some haji up on a roof can't draw a bead on us. The horns on our trucks were pretty much worthless so our LT, whose folks run a boat yard on the coast, had his dad ship over a box of those big air horns. Those get the locals' attention right off quick. If a car don't move out of our way we can shoot it

up and push it off to the side. And a car could be packed full of C-4 explosive with some haji sitting on a roof with a cell phone ready to trigger it, you never know.

Intersections, rotaries, ninety degree turns – they're all choke points and potential kill zones so we blast through them and keep the horns going. The worst are overpasses. There might be some one up there with a grenade waiting to drop it on you. Or somebody'll pop up with a rocket launcher. Only thing to do is weave and don't keep the same interval between vehicles.

If you make it through Mosul, there's only three bridges over the Tigris to get to Patriot and they can be death traps. We just blast across them too and hope like hell that Ahmed in Mosul hasn't figured out our route and called ahead to his brother Talib to tell him which bridge we're using today and for him and a couple of his buddies to strap on their explosive vests and prepare to meet Allah. The locals scatter like chickens and I've even seen a few jump into the Tigris just to get out of our way. We don't win any hearts and minds doing that but I could care less. We have a mission to perform.

I've given up on understanding how Iraqis think. Maybe we should just have let Saddam keep on running the show.

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"Dale? Dale?"

It's Roland. The remote control in my head switches channels again and I'm back in the world.

"We're heading out. CID's got everything it needs. You and Barb can go back into the kitchen if you want to. The kid's name was Lucas Boynton. We found his ID. Barb was a bit broke up. Says she had him in grade school and he was a sweet kid. Don't get spun up about charges. I never saw a clearer case of self-defense. Roy Colfer won't even take this to the grand jury. We'll wait until

the autopsy and the tox screen, but from what you said about how he acted he was probably on some kind of drugs and broke in to steal your coin collection and sell it to feed whatever habit he had.”

I swivel my recliner and see the two EMTs carrying the kid out on the gurney in a body bag.

Channels change again. I see Rene Ducharme, his neck broke, what’s left of his head oozing blood and brains, being zipped up in his body bag.

I hear one of the EMT’s. His voice sounds far away.

“Nice group, sir,” he says.

“Always best to get ‘em in the kitchen,” says the other one. “Lot easier to clean up and you don’t have to throw out a rug.”

I give them a stare that’s as cold as outside. They’ve never been in combat and if they’re lucky they never will.

“Get out of here, dickheads.”

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I got nothing much to do tomorrow. I think I’ll call the VA and see if I can get another appointment with that doc who handles PTSD cases. I’ve been talking to him and he’s been real helpful. Only once in a while do I get these flashbacks now. Takes something like this to set one off.

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Robert G. Fuller, Jr., who describes himself as a “recovering lawyer,” is a Navy veteran. CPT Adam Cote of the Maine Army National Guard, and an OIF veteran, contributed his recollections during an interview with the author. Fuller has also written *Unnatural Deaths*, a mystery/police procedure novel set in Maine.