

## Too Young to Take

Riley Macke

Everyone dies, but some die before their time. Four years ago, I learned this hard lesson myself, and it shaped me into becoming a better man than I ever was or thought I would be. Allow me to share my story, which starts in a simpler time; simpler in my eyes, anyway.

It's the summer of 2017. I was a young 16-year-old boy in the Army ROTC. My dream is to become an Army Ranger. My main motivation—my grandfather, a decorated Vietnam Veteran. During this summer break from school, I was offered the opportunity of a lifetime: to go overseas and live on a real army base for two months. The base is in a safer, almost non-combat environment. After lengthy talks with my parents, they finally agreed to let me go.

That next week, after many tests and interviews, I was on a plane to Camp Arifjan, a multi-branch base on the coast of Arifjan, Kuwait. When I stepped foot out of the airplane on to the base, I was hit with a blast of salty sea air. The desert wind washed over my face as clouds of orange and yellow dust swirled on the landing strip. It was bright. So, so bright I had to squint my eyes just to see the hangers in front of me. The sound of heavy military boots clapping against the pavement arose behind me. I turned and stood up straight and saluted my new platoon Sergeant. He was a tall Black man in his late thirties, built like a freight train. He had the aura of a giant, an iron wall of a man. He looked down at me and gave me a warm smile.

"At ease, Private Macke, and Private Strands. I am Sergeant Johansson, Staff Sergeant of this base and your new CO. It's nice to have you boys with us to see what it's all about!" he boomed in a kind, cheerful voice. I was taken aback by his kindness and sincerity. For the

last year I was used to the screaming downright scary voice of my drill sergeants and commanding officer, but this sergeant wasn't treating me like a newbie recruit or a waste of space. He was treating me like a fellow brother in arms.

Sergeant Johansson then brought us to the barracks, a small stretch of worn metal clad oval buildings. Inside were rows of black metal-framed bunks and a small, shared bathroom and kitchenette at the end of each building. "You boys settle in and wait till evening Roll Call." He smiled and walked out. That started and ended my first day overseas, away from home in a foreign land.

Over the next few months, every day was something new. Either helping with munitions and patrols on base or driving in escorts to nearby villages and learning the culture and people of Kuwait, we were always on high alert. Even though this part of the country was under superior safety due to the proximity of the base, there was still a risk of roaming Taliban fighters. Every move our sergeant made was with extreme caution to make sure the young men in the platoon like myself did not experience combat. We volunteered to be here, yet it was common practice to make sure our visit was safe and surveyed. The experience was amazing, and I was one step closer to my goal of being an Army Ranger. Until one day, only three weeks before our scheduled departure home.

It was another scorching day. The desert was bright, with the glaring sun shining in the sand like a plane of glass. We loaded our Humvees for a four-hour trip to a small village of Anjhashi. We loaded into the second Humvee in the line and departed. All around me was the roar of the engines and the laughter of my squad mates as they played cards in the back seats. About two hours into our trip, we passed the small ruins of old decrepit buildings. All of a sudden there was a flash of bright orange and loud bangs that rattled my ears. The Humvee in front of us rolled onto its side, its undercarriage blazing from an IED that was planted in the road. Suddenly a rusted white pickup truck come roaring from the ruins towards us. Tunicked men shout in Arabic and start firing AK-47s at our convoy. My sergeant looked at us and called,

“All units other than Macke and Nelson come with me!” My young self, having false confidence, begged my CO to let me fight, too.

Reluctantly, knowing the risks, he agreed. It was my own free will to fight. This was my dream, to be a good guy fighting the bad guys and protecting my country and being a savior, a warrior. I hopped out into the Humvee and crouched behind a dust ruin wall. I chambered my rifle and started firing like I was trained to. A rush of adrenaline and excitement came over me. I had no fear for my life. It felt like I could have taken on the world. The firefight lasted approximately forty-five minutes, but for me it felt like ten minutes. As I reloaded and aimed again, I saw a man with turban on his head and long beard peering across the way about 150 yards out. I aimed my rifle like I was in a video game and fired. Four bullets hit him—three in the chest and one in the head. As if in slow motion, I saw the blood fly from the back of his head and his hands drop his gun. His lifeless body fell harshly onto the scorching gravel, eyes devoid of life. A sudden realization hit me like an entire freight train. I just killed a man. I took another human being’s life on purpose. I fired my gun with the intent to kill and killed someone. My head went blank, and a sudden pain was felt in my chest, an overwhelming sense of guilt and distress. Unimaginable amounts of sadness and guilt washed over me. I ducked behind the wall and started profusely vomiting. My vision blurred, my heart felt like it was going to rip out of my chest. Everything faded to black, and I awoke screaming back at the barracks. Sergeant Johansson walked in and looked at me with somber eyes. I started to uncontrollably cry as he held me in his arms and gave me a firm hug without saying a word.

I went home two weeks early on medical leave for my mental health. When I arrived at the airport my mother was there to greet me. She later told me she was horrified when she looked at me and saw my hollow eyes with emptiness and sorrow. She thought she had lost the little boy she loved so much. My father, enraged, immediately got me discharged from the Army and took me to therapy. After many years of night terrors and talks I finally came to terms with everything that happened. After so much time I can finally put my words into paper

and relive my experiment so others can learn the same thing: Cherish life. Whether it be the people you love or your greatest enemy. At one point you may have even wished death upon someone you dislike or even hate, let go of those feelings. Death is inviting and will take anyone sooner than expected. One should never have to take another's life by any means. I came to learn this the hardest way imaginable, even if it was an enemy, a terrorist, a bad guy. It does not matter, cherish life even if you do not cherish your own.

**Riley Macke** is a nineteen-year-old Aviation student from Duluth, Minnesota. Riley loves the outdoors and spend most of his time hunting, fishing, or hiking. He also loves to write and has helped develop a plot for a published fantasy series.