

Cover Page

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A HERO'S DEATH

Sergeant's Majors Strickland and Strickland were two of a kind. I didn't have the chance to meet Strickland the husband, but I knew his wife because I was her driver. She was the post Sergeant's Major at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, on 11 September 2001. Her position was the highest enlisted job on any military installation. She was no meaner than the ordinary soldier, but looked different than most. Her hair was grayer, she seemed to have more wrinkles, and her eyes were usually creased, only showing tiny slits of white and blue pupil to any soldier who had enough courage to look into them. Because she had to lead by example and survive in a male dominated culture, her uniforms were always more pressed and squared away than others, her boots more highly polished – I could always see my face in their shine – and her posture, walk, and gestures were always dedicated to soldiering. She moved with sharp, crisp snaps I had only seen in Special Forces troops.

I never met her husband. But I knew there was a lot of love between them. Something soldierly about her would slip away from her voice while she spoke to him on the phone. It was as if, in some subtle way, all the Army in her left as she became intimate toward the man she loved with her voice. She said, 'I love you.' And I knew there was something special between them both that I could only hope to one day experience.

But a tragic day came for both Sergeant's Majors as well as for their only child, a young woman, and for the first time in my career, I wished that I was not in the Army. For a soldier who is supposed to be chiseled in stone, the crying eyes of suffering women and children are too painful to look at. But, today, I'm out of the Army and not a block of forged steel. I am nothing more than a person with a memory of two women – one clad in a battle dress uniform, one young woman with tears in her eyes – both suffering from an earth-shattering loss – one from the loss of her husband, and one from the loss of her father. So, this is how I remember them....

While checking identification to allow people passage onto base, I heard someone screaming, "Oh, my God!" I looked around but couldn't see much because of sun glaring off windshields. "I can't wait any fucking longer! Let me on base!" she yelled.

My heart jumped and everything around me slowed. Her blood curdling cries gave me a chill that stung the back of my neck.

"Where is he? Where's my father?"

"Your father? Ma'am, please calm down. Let me help you. Come to the guard shack." I escorted her inside. Her body shook uncontrollably. I wasn't sure what to do, so I helped her sit down on a wooden bench inside our tiny guard shack.

"Smitty, you got these?" I yelled to a friend who was also checking I-Ds.

"Yeah, is she all right?"

"I don't know." Although the day was filled with many women, men, and children entering base enraged and saddened by what had happened, her hysterics were worse, and her yelling confused me.

It seemed like everyone who drove through our gate wanted to know if their husband or wife was in the Pentagon. I had no idea, and after what seemed to be the

thousandth driver to ask me, I gave up. I was telling people I had no idea and eventually realized they calmed down more quickly when I told them ‘No sir or ma’am, nothing is wrong with your spouse. I’m sure they’re fine.’ After a period of using that technique, I felt dishonest and figured maybe that was not the best thing to tell the worried travelers.

“My mother’s the Post Sergeant Major. Someone said my father was killed today.”

My heart sank. I knew her father was probably dead. I knew he worked at the Pentagon and he was probably already there when the plane flew into the building.

“Ma’am, I’ll call your mom and have her come and get you.”

“Is he dead?” she screamed.

“Ma’am, I don’t know!” My anxiety got the best of me, and I raised my voice, “I’ll call your mom’s office.”

There was a small telephone in the guard shack. I picked up the receiver and dialed. While I listened to it ringing, I looked at this young woman in front of me. Her eyes were blue; blonde strands of hair hung down in front of her face. She hugged herself so tightly that her fingers changed colors, first pink and then white. With two mascara lines running down her face under her eyes, she stared at the long line of cars about to enter base. The noises vibrated as she rocked back and forth in a seated fetal position, moaning slightly. It was one of those misplaced modifiers; you had it modifying the noises.

A secretary picked up the phone after several rings. I asked her about the Sergeant’s Major, and she said nothing had been confirmed through proper channels, not to say anything more upsetting to the daughter, and then told me that the male Sergeant’s Major had died in the Pentagon. My heart sank, and I thought I was going to throw up.

“Are you there?” The secretary heard my silence. “Are you there?”

The young woman sat in front of me. I wanted to cry for her. I felt like time had stopped. I felt like a bullet had hit my chest.

“Specialist Fox, don’t say anything about any of this to the daughter...are you there?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I forced myself to speak, “everything will be all right. Do you have a driver coming to the gate?”

“That’s better, Specialist Fox. The Sergeant’s Major is on her way.”

I said all right and hung up the phone. The secretary might have been in mid-sentence, but I didn’t care anymore. “Your mom will be here soon.”

“Is my father dead?”

“Ma’am, I don’t know.” My heart swelled inside my chest. I wanted to cry for her, but I couldn’t. “Your mom will be here in a couple of minutes. I’m sure she’ll be able to tell you more.” After I said that, we waited in silence. Occasionally, a little murmur would come from her mouth but nothing more. I stood by her and watched out the window. After several of the longest minutes of my life, I saw her mom drive up. The daughter saw my eyes raise then turned around and saw the van. Before I could help her off the bench, she ran out the door and climbed in the van. I couldn’t see anything after that.

Later in the evening, I reported to my section supervisor, Sergeant La Pan. He gave me a mission. I had to drive the battalion executive officer to the Pentagon. It was

a simple mission, much less physically demanding than working at the gates. I was told to drive him to Pentagon in a Military Police car, and check in with the First Sergeant of the MDW engineers, one of the lead search and rescue units at the Pentagon. Fatigued and sunburned, I was ill-prepared for the images I was about to witness and my final contact with the post Sergeant's Major.

Our drive to the Pentagon began on Interstate-395. Just past eleven at night, the roads were clear of traffic so driving was simple. The car window was down; a gentle breeze cooled my face, and a cup of coffee helped me wake up. Sugar and cream provided me with freedom from the day's insanity. It felt nice.

Caught in my momentary freedom, I almost missed my exit. The X-O pointed, and I followed the signs that marked a path toward the Pentagon. The narrow off ramp was wound snugly against an embankment. As we crossed its apex, suspense slowly swelled inside my stomach. I felt my heart roll toward my throat. I forgot about the cup of coffee, feeling my pulse throb under clenching fingers that grasped the steering wheel tightly. I could tell the X-O was anxious because he leaned toward the windshield until his nose had almost touched the glass. He looked over at me, but neither of us said anything. We finished our turn.

Almost an entire wall of the monumental American icon had been knocked down. The 300 foot gash in the pentagonal carcass was still smoking. The crash had happened over 15 hours earlier. Perhaps because of fatigue, dehydration and sadness, Strange modifier—it should go with smoke, but it doesn't. the smoke rising to space looked more like spirits finding their afterworld.

After we parked the car, the X-O went to talk to officials about operations procedures, and I went to find the First Sergeant.

He wasn't far from the parking lot.

"How bad is everything, First Sergeant?" I asked.

Instead of telling me, he showed me. He had taken photographs of damage inside the Pentagon; the building looked like it had expanded all at once. Several feet of concrete had split instantly. Black smoke had filled the halls and left the walls dark and murky. Officers, civilians, and regular soldiers were dead. Their bodies were strewn across the hallways. People were melted to the floor.

"You all right, Fox? You ever seen dead people?"

"Yes, First Sergeant. Kosovo."

"You gonna be all right?"

"I guess," I said.

"I think that's how most of us feel," he said, as I began to walk away. "Hang in there, Fox."

I moved toward the disaster to take a closer look, but was interrupted when I saw her. I stopped because she was spending her final moments with her husband.

A little before midnight on September 11th, 2001, Sergeant's Major Strickland stood before the Pentagon. Her uniform was ruffled and her boots were scuffed; her shoulders were limp, and she had dark circles under her eyes. Sergeant's Major Strickland stared at the Pentagon. Smoke, fire, dust and wind crept through the debris. And the moment vanished when someone needing assistance, an officer, yelled for her.

“Sergeant’s Major Strickland, we need your help. Are you alright?”

“Yes, sir! what do we need?”

Sergeant’s Major Strickland received another mission and walked away from the remains of the Pentagon.