

# Unspoken

by

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I'm walking on the gravel road toward my office when the loudspeaker static crackles through the air. I've grown accustomed to the sound since arriving in Afghanistan. It usually announces severe weather, road closures due to mine-clearing activities, or gunships getting target practice in a nearby field—the kind of information thousands of service members might need to know right away.

This time, however, the voice delivers a different kind of announcement: “A mass casualty incident has occurred.”

I quicken my pace to a trot, and my tan boots kick up dust as I make my way along the path. As I near the office door, the speaker comes to life again, this time announcing a red alert.

“The base is under a direct attack,” the voice tells us. “Don your Kevlar and body armor and take cover in the nearest bunker.”

I break into a sprint, shoving open the tent door and rushing to my desk. Staff Sergeant Kevin Tomlinson stands behind his desk, mouth agape, his mind clearly somewhere else.

“Get your stuff on and let's go!” I bark at him, bringing him back to the present, as I holster my sidearm and grab my body armor off the stand next to my desk. I swing my arms

through the vest and bend under its weight. Adrenaline takes over, and I straighten up and grab my Kevlar helmet.

“Let’s go!” I say again, grabbing Kevin’s helmet and shoving it into his hands. I direct him to the rear exit of the tent and follow him out the door, struggling with my helmet’s chin strap, which never buckles just right.

The bunker is not quite tall enough to stand up straight inside, so we stoop and duck-walk through the entrance. Benches line either side of the concrete tunnel. The snowmelt of early spring has left the inside of the bunker clammy, and I wish I had a jacket. Unlike the dry ground outside, the dirt inside remains saturated. Mud sucks at my feet. When I sit down, my knees almost brush against the person in the space across from me. With my helmet grazing the bunker ceiling and my boots sinking into the muck, I brace myself for an uncomfortable morning.

My concern about discomfort quickly passes. The loudspeaker announces again that the base is under attack. Questions flood my mind: Are they re-announcing the first attack or announcing a new one? How many injuries does it take to cause a mass casualty announcement? Where are our attackers? Will I pull the trigger on my gun if it comes to that?

I look across the bunker and see Master Sergeant Shawn Larson, wedged between two airmen I don’t know. Shawn has been in Afghanistan for only a few days—the first combat assignment of his twenty-year career. His eyes scan the bunker, taking it all in. He sees me looking at him and shakes his head. “I don’t know, Captain,” he says. “This is gonna be a long six months.”

I offer him a slight smile and nod. “Looks that way,” I say.

The loudspeaker announces a “Red Alert” once more.

“How many of them are there?” asks an airman, maybe two years out of high school, with fear in her voice. “Why can’t we stop them?”

A male airman farther down the bench gives a sarcastic reply that I don’t hear because the “Mass Casualty” announcement sounds again. A few people laugh at what he said.

Master Sergeant Lee Spears, a hard-nosed Philadelphia native, hisses, “Did you hear that? Every time they make that announcement, it means at least eight people died. Eight of your brethren died, and you’re making jokes?”

I’m not sure whether Sergeant Spears’ information is correct, but I decide not to pursue the argument. Seriousness settles over the bunker. We sit in the quiet, listening for sounds of war.

Tension builds in the silence. I lean back against the concrete, not caring if my just-pressed uniform gets filthy. Closing my eyes, I think about my wife and infant son thousands of miles away. I pray we'll all make it out of this attack okay.

Half an hour later, the sky erupts in my ears as an F-15 flies low overhead. A second one roars behind it, the deafening noise designed to scare the fight out of our enemies.

"Were those ours?" someone asks.

"They'd better be," the smart aleck airman retorts. "If the Taliban have started flying airplanes, we're in big trouble." Everyone laughs, and together we savor the lighthearted moment.

We've been in the bunker for more than two hours when the loudspeaker informs us we can return to our work centers. I go back to my desk and phone my commander's office to report that Sergeant Tomlinson and I are both back on duty.

"You okay?" I ask Kevin.

"I'm fine," he says in a thin voice. He sits down at his computer, still wearing all his gear.

"You can take off your helmet and vest," I tell him.

He nods but doesn't make a move.

Kevin is a reservist who usually works on a Ford assembly line in Detroit. He volunteered to come to Afghanistan because he thought he'd spend a few months handing out food and clothes to Afghans and playing with their children. Since arriving, we haven't been allowed to leave the base. Suicide bombings aren't part of his imagined deployment. He needs space. I leave the tent and stand for a moment in the sunlight, letting the brightness recharge me.

I seek out a friend who works in the command center. He confirms that the attack was a suicide bombing at the base's gate. "Probably twenty people were killed," he tells me. "Mostly Afghan civilians."

I return to my desk to see what, if anything, I need to do as a result of the morning's events. I'm saddened by the senselessness of it all. Across the hall, another officer flips on the television.

"Hey," she says, "the bombing's on the news already."

My heart sinks. I pound out an email to my wife to let her know I'm okay. I hope she'll see the message as soon as she wakes up. I tell her I'll call her the first chance I get.

That evening we talk, and I give her the basics of what happened. For the first time in our marriage, I feel like I can't tell her everything. I can't tell her I was scared when the red alert sounded or that I felt sick every time they called out a mass casualty. I can't tell her that I didn't feel safe or that I prayed that she and my son would be okay if anything happened to me. All I can tell her is not to worry about me and that I'll be home soon.

She knows I'm holding back, but she doesn't probe any further. I love her even more for it. We hang up, and I recognize that we both had our needs met—my need to protect her and her need to believe I'm safe. Still, I feel as though I've betrayed her, and I count it among the costs of war. This is the untold sacrifice of the military family: unspoken words, unexpressed feelings, unshared secrets.

Three months later, my wife and I embrace in the airport, our year-old son asleep on her shoulder. She is beautiful; he is pure joy. Later, over lunch, I begin to recount my war stories, not holding back the details this time. I know she wishes I had shared all with her before, but she also understands why I could not.

She takes my hand and looks me in the eye, and I don't have to say anymore. I think about the people who stopped to thank me for my service as I walked through the airport in my desert camouflage. I know they meant well, but they misplaced their thanks. The real heroes are back home, giving us reason to fight and hope for a brighter tomorrow.

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*Foxholes*, a military thriller, is available for pre-order on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Black Rose Writing.

Author's Note: A version of this essay was previously published in *A Cup of Comfort for Military Families*. While the events depicted are true, I've changed names and some of the details to protect individuals' privacy.

Also, the Department of Defense has asked me to say, "The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government." That's true; the views here are mine alone.