

## SPARRING WITH DEATH

*Paramedic units of the US Army fly the dead and wounded from the front to the field hospital. Their job is a daily struggle against boredom and the madness of war.*

It's strange, waiting for death when it's not your own death you're waiting for. Waiting for a vehicle or a mine to explode, for a sniper lying on a farmhouse roof to take aim, hold his breath and shoot. Waiting for a rocket fired from a makeshift launch pad to crash down. Waiting for war.

Seconds give way to minutes, minutes to hours, hours to whole days, and it's no different this evening in November 2011. Katie Dirkontis, 21, and Sean Hagens, 23, sit in a cramped room with walls made of chipboard watching Dexter, the serial killer from Miami. There is death everywhere, even on TV. It is a cold, misty winter day and even their mood is gloomy. A clock on the wall ticks away the time.

Katie Dirkontis and Sean Hagens are paramedics of the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, Charlie Company, which comprises 29 pilots and paramedics. Since the beginning of August they have been stationed here in Camp Shank in Logar Province, a fortress of barbed wire and concrete. From here they make sorties to pick up the wounded and dead from the front and bring them back to the field hospital. They are a rescue team on constant alert, body gatherers in a war that was long since given up for hopeless by politicians, a war making no headway and having no solution.

Nowhere is its pointlessness clearer than here, the final link in the self-perpetuating chain of events. It's a perpetuum mobile of a war, which day by day produces nothing but victims and casualties. For the paramedics of Charlie Company that means wait .. more victims .. wait again - the theatre of the absurd. Yet it's real. And it scars the paramedics for life, more and more every day.

The paramedics and pilots of Charlie Company fly into madness every day. It's a kind of sparring match with death. Round after round, with no end, no way out, no goal. Over the past 15 days the war has fed 93 patients into the bowels of Dirkontis and Hagens' helicopters. And this is a quiet month.

That's partly because of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim feast of animal sacrifice. During it the war has been on the back burner. For three days there hasn't been a single incident, barring the fellow who cut off his own finger tip by mistake. The lull is broken by a whistling noise followed by an explosion; it was quite near by. "Incoming," shouts a soldier. The paramedics run to the bunker and squeeze into a few square metres of safety, surrounded by concrete walls and sandbags. In there they speak their own language, obscene army slang. Someone tells dirty jokes, another farts, and for a moment danger is not the only thing they smell. Then another rocket comes in, followed by mortars. Over the radio comes a message that armed men are attacking the camp. Machine gun fire goes on for a minute or so. "Hmmm," murmurs Sean Hagens, drawing on his cigarette.

"The first months here were hell," says Sean, lighting another cigarette in the bunker. There is something about him which suggests the mischievous teenager, naughty but amiable. He is a muscular young man with close shaven head. "One operation after another. Dead bodies, wounded men, severed limbs, the lot. Without any let-up. And now suddenly there's nothing doing!" His company has been stationed in the disputed province of Logar since August; it is a two-hour car journey south eastwards from the capital Kabul.

"I don't want to sit around doing nothing, but nor do I want anyone to get hurt or killed." He hates this waiting, yet any interruption of it is likely to mean someone has lost their life. So in fact it's all right as it is, just that it's bleak and rather boring.

The Afghan festival of sacrifice is coming to an end, the mist has cleared, and war comes back for Sean Hagens just as he is biting into a sandwich. "Medevac! Medevac! Medevac! Urgent!" comes the raucous message from his walkie talkie. "Urgent" means that the helicopter must be in the air within eight minutes; someone has been seriously injured, there are bodies which have been shot, badly burned or mutilated. "Priority" means there is nothing life-threatening; flesh wounds, burns, grazing by bullets. "Routine" means the tasks nobody enjoys dealing with: patients with dysentery, soldiers who have cut themselves, appendicitis cases, which still have to be taken away by helicopter. Easy stuff, routine indeed. In Afghanistan urgent is the norm. Hagens the paramedic, two pilots and a chief crewman who is responsible for safety in the air, all sprint towards the helicopter.

What has happened? Hagens shrugs, he has no idea. A few minutes later he is flying over precipitous, desolate mountains which offer nothing to catch the eye. A brown ocean of dust and rocky scree. Simultaneously a second team is getting ready in case the first helicopter is shot down or a member of its crew is wounded or killed. In September a paramedic was killed during a night operation when his head was struck by the rotor blades of his helicopter. In August 38 US soldiers died when their helicopter was hit by a grenade.

After a twelve minute flight the pilot lands the helicopter in Camp Kharwar, a tiny US Army outpost in a valley, and soldiers bring the patient on a stretcher. "Urgent" today is an Afghan soldier who has bullet wounds in his arms, legs and head. He is given morphine for the pain. His skin is the colour of melted wax. Hagens cushions his head on a blanket, wipes the blood from his face, takes his pulse and heartbeat, checks his dressings.

Good, bad, hero, villain - in the belly of a rescue helicopter such concepts have no significance, they are abstract, immaterial. They are dissolved in the whirring of the rotor blades. Whoever is in danger of dying, whether their wounds were caused by a land mine, a car bomb, a mortar, a rifle bullet or a grenade, gets the same treatment, the same care, the same grim determination to keep their human frame alive; American soldiers, Afghan soldiers, wounded Taliban, children with bomb fragments embedded in their bodies.

This is Hagens' second spell of service in Afghanistan. The first time he was in the infantry and did more shooting than healing. He got the second call on a Wednesday - he was to be sent to Afghanistan for the second time. He wasn't bothered, he was mentally prepared for it. However, he had doubts from the start.

"I'm a paramedic, after all," thought Sean Hagens to himself. But he was serving in the infantry. "But how would I treat the wounded in the confines of a helicopter? I was never trained for that." At a barracks in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, he and others pretended they were in Afghanistan, learned how to jump out of a Black Hawk quickly and nimbly, raised and lowered dummies on rope harnesses, got used to cramped working conditions, gave transfusions, performed operations on a plastic thorax, made holes in artificial limbs. They would pick up the rest as they went along, said the trainers. War is the best instructor, they said, giving Sean a slap on the back.

So, Afghanistan it was.

Hagens volunteered because the army will pay for a veteran's studies after he has completed his service. Four years of drill and warfare are a reasonable price, thought Hagens. But he hates war and he hates what he has to do to people.

Shortly after eight in the evening an Afghan soldier in Camp Chark falls off his watchtower. It's a ten minute flight away. Priority. As the pilots are preparing to fly in and land at the outpost, armed combatants attack the camp with mortars and machine guns. Explosions light up the sky, tracer bullets make red streaks in the night. The pilot turns aside and circles in the air for 25 minutes while down in the valley Apache attack helicopters shoot to clear the way for the paramedics to land. More of that accursed waiting. Once again there is time to wonder what is actually going on down there. Uncertainty steals into the subconscious, turns into something which makes the throat tighten. The rescue mission takes only a few seconds. The important thing is not to waste time on the ground, not to offer a target. The helicopter settles with a bump on the landing strip, the patient is winched up into the belly of the Black Hawk, the machine takes off again at once and is quickly swallowed in the night. Back in safety, relief brightens Hagens' face.

9:16 pm. The third operation. Lying in Hagens' helicopter is an Afghan soldier who has had both legs ripped off by a mine. Parts of his body are lying in a plastic bag beside him. Hagens applies tourniquets, injects Pentanyl for the pain. He cautiously feels the legs, which are a mass of blood, flesh and splintered bone. The patient screams and lashes out at Hagens with his fists. Automatic reflexes which have been witnessed a hundred times in this cramped space where horror has become routine. Hagens' hands are shaking as he climbs down from the helicopter and lights a cigarette. Later on that night there is an American soldier with vomiting and diarrhoea, another who has got sawdust in his eye and two more who are at risk of suicide. Routine, good for filling in time and preventing boredom.

This accursed waiting is a slow descent into the depths of the soul. It's a daily battle against lethargy and the temptation to switch off in the face of so much suffering. Nobody likes talking about the exploded heads, the entrails pouring from torso wounds, the severed arms and legs, the screams of agony, the stench of blood, the fear in the eyes of wounded men, the disbelief on fellow soldiers' faces. Or the feeling when a wounded person bleeds to death within the five minutes or so they are in the air. Such memories are stored just under the surface. They can't be shrugged off, but are buried under a thin layer of normality.

Events are buried in the head as in a time capsule. "I pretend I'm working on a dummy and blank out the fact that it's a real person bleeding and possibly about to die," says Katie Dirkintis, lighting a cigarette. "I shove it all to the back of my mind and don't think about it. I have to keep functioning, that's what matters." Each person has his own way of handling the game with death. It's only occasionally, as when a patient dies during a flight, that feelings of guilt come to the surface. "Then I ask myself, did I do anything wrong? Why wasn't I able to save that life?"

Katie Dirkintis joined the army because she wanted the life she hadn't yet had. She took her sixteen piercings out of her ears and nose and went to war. Two years ago she was in Iraq, now it's Afghanistan. "After the stuff I've seen and gone through here, back home I'll have to learn how to live all over again," says Katie as she opens a letter from her family. Two realities stare at each other in disagreement, the one she grew up in and the one in a war zone. In the course of a single year the two have been getting ever further apart. The memory of normal life has been getting frayed at the edges, till now it merely feels like the afterglow of a pleasant dream.

Between operations Dirkintis, Hagens and a few other paramedics and pilots sit on the verandah in front of their tents and smoke the time away, ready to dash to the helicopters whenever a call comes. They clasp their walkie-talkies as if they needed something to hold tightly onto. They crack jokes, pull each other's legs, chat about how long it is since they last had sex and what they'd like to do when they get leave. Soldiers are allowed to go anywhere they want for two weeks, floating between different worlds, at the army's expense. They talk about Australia, Asia, Europe, and most of their chat centres on sex, girls and beer. When the time comes they all in fact go home to their families to imbibe a bit of normality.

But home has become a strange place for Katie Dirkintis, a place of mind-boggling monotony. She can't think what she will be able to talk about with her friends. She is a pretty 21-year old with a blond ponytail and tattooed ankles, who is already in her second period of war service. "I've grown up. I have changed, but they haven't." At home life follows its usual course, Walmart, McDonalds, barbecues. They tell her who has broken off with whom, who is going out with whom, who has had a baby, which drugs are in vogue. Most of the time nothing has happened at all. The normal silliness which is such a contrast with the background of her Afghanistan experience, it's as if she had to find words to write in someone's poetry book straight after a nightmare journey.

The days are getting shorter and colder. Snow has settled on the peaks of the Hindu Kush like icing sugar on Christmas cookies. The Taliban, the Haqqani network, the followers of the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the remaining cells of al Qaida are now mounting a final offensive before the war closes down for the winter. The helicopters are now taking off hourly. The whirring of rotor blades hangs over the camp like the buzz from a swarm of hornets. Battles are taking place all over Logar province, vehicles are hitting booby traps, snipers are shooting from hidden vantage points.

Another Urgent, the fourth today. Sorties are cutting the hours of waiting into bearable strips. Dash to the helicopter with a look of well-trained indifference, squeeze into your bulletproof jacket, lift off. During the flight counter-infrared decoy flares are released from the helicopter. Soon the pilot brings the machine down to land at the hamlet of Ibrahim Khel, which consists of a few mud farmhouses and an American outpost. A seriously wounded man is carried on board; he has bullets in his shoulder, arm, thigh and calf. As it flies off the helicopter attracts bazooka fire. For a moment the crew look anxious, then anxiety gives way to smiles. The pilot veers sharply and hurries out of firing range. The second helicopter also comes under fire, and a bullet enters the cockpit and passes through a pilot's forearm.

Today Sean Hagens and Katie Dirkintis are off duty. They sleep late, then take time to have a shower, play cards, watch a DVD. No wearisome waiting, no wounded soldiers, no blood. Some moments which are not dictated by the rhythm of war. A chance to catch one's breath. Just to sit there on the verandah in front of their tents, stretch their bare feet in the winter sun, eat tinned pears and fill the time with talk about the last few weeks' operations. They spice the dramas which have unfolded before them with humour and sarcasm.

"Crass. The leg was mincemeat. Pure Hollywood."

"Mine was no better. He messed his pants, shit all over the chopper."

"A double amputation! Not something we get every day."

"Yeah, poor devil. He's not going to be dancing in the aisles."

"At least he's alive."

"Oh, yeah, ever so lucky!"

Hagens throws a tinned pear at Dirkintis' head and gives her a broad grin. That is the end of that conversation.

It's their way of handling what they have gone through. Gruesome events are briefly joked about and then cast aside, if such a thing is possible. With the next sortie, if not sooner, reality will return to haunt them with its questions and doubts. But until then, it's a matter of letting some fresh air into the head, turning off the brain and carrying on. Tomorrow the next round of the boxing match with death will take place.