

## PART ONE / TRY NOT TO THINK OF ME UNTIL I GET BACK

From Michelle's diary,

August 7, 2006

Woke up today wondering how you were. Went to the hospital with your dad. It's hard to know what to say to you. It's horrible that you aren't awake, but I know you can hear. I just spoke to you stupidly, as I always do. The only person I see laying there is my Martyn and no one else. It's hard to be strong, but I am for your sake as I know you can hear how I am feeling in my voice.

Kevin and Katie came down today to keep me and your dad company while you spent all day in theatre. That's the horrible thing, knowing that you are going through all that and we can't help. If I could spend every minute with you I would, but I can't.

This feels like a dream. Saw you after the operation and you were covered from head to toe in bandages. But you're mine and I still love you. Didn't want to leave you and I just wanted to be with you, but I know you will fight all the way.

## 1. MARTYN / I WAS EXPOSED AND I WAS TERRIFIED

Helmand Province, Afghanistan – August 1, 2006

THE Taliban fighter peered over the wall. I recognised the unmistakable warhead of his rocket-propelled grenade. He was close and he was going to fire it right at me. I couldn't go anywhere. Stuck inside the ruined hulk of my wagon with my mates dead, I was a sitting duck.

All I could do was hope for the best. I'd survived the initial attack, so maybe my luck was in. I wasn't normally a driver, but I'd been assigned for about a month now. The regular driver had gone down with heat exhaustion. If he'd been all right, I'd have been in my signalman post. If he'd been all right, I'd be dead.

But the heat gets to you. Nothing can prepare you for what it's like in Afghanistan. When I stepped off the plane in Kabul almost six weeks earlier, it was 6.30am. But even that early in the morning, a wave of heat swept over me. It was relentless. We couldn't get used to it, and it was getting hotter every day. Further south in Helmand, July temperatures reach 50°C.

Someone stuck a thermometer in a wagon and it went over 100°C. When you're driving you can add 15°C to that because you're sitting in a small cab next to a 4.2 litre Jaguar engine. Great weather for shirts, shades and lazing under a palm tree with a cold beer. Shit weather for desert combat gear, a helmet, body armour, and trying to negotiate the wasteland, the enemy and landmines in a cramped steel box.

Our operation had started the night before.

The Household Cavalry is a reconnaissance regiment.

We explore and get information. We're the barrier that delays attacking forces and we act as a screen, a diversion tactic to allow other troops to move and carry out operations.

We go in ahead of infantry, then support them. The Household Cavalry is the furthest forward you can get for non-Special Forces troops. We're the most deployed regiment in the Army and we're right in the enemy's face.

We were moving from Now Zad to Musa Qala to help extract the Pathfinder Platoon and re-supply Danish troops holed up there. They were being ambushed every time they went to collect their supplies. The Pathfinders are an elite forward reconnaissance element made up mainly of paras.

As the crow flies, from Now Zad to Musa Qala was only 40km. But we had to go round some mountains, which almost doubled the distance.

Before we headed off, I checked my wagon over. It was a Spartan, which is more of a support vehicle than the sort that would be the first into battle. A Spartan weighs 13.5 tonnes. It has an added layer of ballistic armoury on the body, and a cage to protect against RPGs as well as another reinforced layer of metal underneath to protect against mines. You feel pretty safe inside one.

I gave the Spartan the once over: gearbox oil, engine oil, coolant, air filter, hub oil and axle oil, the wheel rubbers, balancing horns and pins on the tracks. I checked every seventh one and they were at the right angle. I was relieved. If one was loose I would have had to check the whole track. They often got loose out here – the vehicles really took a battering in the terrain. The check took five minutes but it seemed like five hours in the heat.

I took a shower. But 15 minutes later, walking into the boiling hot cookhouse for some grub, I started sweating again. Maybe it wasn't worth me having a shower, but I knew I'd be off on operations in a few hours and had no idea when I'd get another one. The same went for a square meal. And despite the mess being the hottest place in camp, I couldn't avoid it. I

knew that I could be eating boil-in-the-bag food for a few weeks, so I wanted to fill up with a proper scram. I ate a massive fry-up.

We left Camp Bastion on Monday, July 31 at 5pm. There were four of us in the wagon – my mate LCpl Ross Nicholls was on signals. He'd been moved over from another troop and I was pleased to have him on board. He was a nice guy, hard working and a good influence on me. Behind me to my right was 2Lt Ralph Johnson. My commanding officer, Captain Alex Eida 7RHA, was back there, too. Alex was from the Royal Regiment of the Artillery and worked as our Forward Observation Officer, or FOO.

That night, we found ourselves in a minefield. One of the other Spartans hit an old Russian anti-tank mine. The vehicle shot up into the air and wheeled 180 degrees. It scared the shit out of me – until I saw the tank's commander jump out and on top of his wagon and do a comical war dance.

The vehicle was trashed. The tracks, decks, gearbox and chassis were all destroyed. But because of the mine shield, the crew escaped unharmed – apart from being a bit bruised and battered. After the explosion, the driver stood up, touched his body up and down to check everything was in place, put his body armour on and took a couple of painkillers.

News of explosions always gets home. So the men involved were given the opportunity to use the satellite phone to let their families know they were okay. One guy said he wasn't fussed with calling, so his troop leader did it.

He was hoping to allay any fears the guy's wife might have. But instead she screamed down the phone: "The liar. He told me he was in Knightsbridge on ceremonial duties for three months."

We laughed. It broke the tension we were all feeling.

Our job that night was to create a screen for the Canadians, so we spent some time destroying the vehicle, denying it to the enemy. We knew the Taliban would wonder what the

racket was and would be watching us. It was the perfect diversionary tactic and gave the Canadians the freedom to complete their task.

Of course, destroying our own vehicles, which cost thousands of pounds, isn't how we usually create a distraction, but we made the best of the situation. And we weren't going to let the Taliban strip it for parts.

We weren't moving any further because of fog, so we tucked down for the night. The ground was my bed.

Kipping out with the Army isn't as relaxed as camping with your mates. You can't light a fire for obvious reasons. But there are moments when it comes close to feeling quite nice. There's a rota for people to be on watch, or on stag, and you feel pretty safe.

Because of the structure of the Household Cavalry, we're an especially close-knit regiment. We have small squadrons and small troops of men. You can do your training with someone then work for 22 years with that same bloke. Everyone knows everyone's stories.

I listened as soldiers shared their thoughts. There's something about the atmosphere created when you're sleeping out at night that makes the lads share more personal information than they normally would. Maybe being faced with your own mortality makes you want to talk. Or maybe it's because there's no TV, no pub, car, wife or kids, to act as distractions.

Whatever it is, really personal stuff gets shared. It's a different kind of relationship to the one you have with your mates at home and it's good. Until, of course, the following morning, when in the light of day emotional intimacy seems slightly ridiculous and that personal information is used against whoever was stupid enough to share it.

And there are no secrets in the Army. Gossip moves faster than bullets.

I stayed quiet that night, and covered myself in a mosquito net while listening to the chat. I thought about Michelle, back at home in England. I loved her so much and couldn't

wait for her to be my wife. We'd be getting married the following summer. My mind drifted back to how we met seven months ago. Michelle had been doing shifts in a pub near her home in Frittenden, Kent. It was my dad's local and they got chatting. He told her about his soldier son and she asked to meet me.

I was attracted to her the first night I saw her. She was a few years older and had so much energy and confidence. I felt shy and quiet in comparison. I hoped it wouldn't put her off. It didn't. We got on so well.

And I was gutted when I had to leave the pub. I'd promised to meet dad and his mate at another pub. As I sat drinking with them, Michelle was all I could think about. I wanted to go back and see her. So I made an excuse and left.

It was the right decision. As I walked into the pub, she smiled at me. Everything felt right when she looked at me. She asked me why I'd come back. With a bit of Dutch courage inside me I joked that the beer had been off in the other pub. She didn't believe me and I didn't care. We were inseparable from that moment – until I went to Afghanistan.

The chat in the camp soon moved on to how lucky the Spartan crew had been. I filed thoughts of Michelle safely away, and turned to my responsibilities. I'd be driving a Spartan the next day, so I hoped it was a good omen for us that the crew had survived.

We were back on the road at 5am and the heat was already building. I focused on the track ahead, negotiating the potholes and ditches. The heat can dull your concentration, so you have to focus harder when it's that hot.

With my left foot, I pushed up and down continually through each of the seven gears, lifting us out of every hole, pushing us forward. Ralph, standing and looking through the capola where the machine gun was mounted, could see more than I could. "Left stick, left stick, right stick," he called. I tried not to over-steer. We were averaging about 10-to-15kph.

I was wearing my crewguard helmet, which was plugged in to the tank's Intercom system.

Instructions and banter were constant. I chucked in a few sarcastic comments of my own. But I couldn't distract myself from the heat. I was sitting in a puddle of sweat. Rivers of it poured down my back, my arse, my legs and my arms. A pool gathered in the shell of my headset cupping my right ear. It poured down my face, into my mouth, and I could taste it – mixed with sand and dust kicked up by the vehicle in front.

I swigged from my water bottle. It was encased in a damp sock. It was never going to be cold refreshment and the sock made it lukewarm – but that was better than drinking hot water. Anyway, it didn't make it to my bladder. It seeped right out of my pores as my body desperately attempted to keep me cool.

We stopped once. I took off my shirt and wrung it out. Sweat oozed from the material – you'd have thought I'd been swimming in my clothes.

Back on the road, the landscape was strange. Sand, rocks and not much else, except for few trees here and there. Afghan tribes settled near vegetation because it marked the site of water. Unfortunately, I couldn't indulge my childhood hobby of climbing trees because groups of villagers could be sheltering Taliban.

I kept my eyes peeled, driving through this pale and barren land, burned by sun, damaged by conflict.

Something flapped in the distance. As we drew closer I noticed that it was a piece of material fluttering in the breeze. It was attached to two sticks poking out of the parched earth. A man sat under the canopy with a bottle of water. He watched us as we drove by. I don't know who was the more surprised, him or us.

Was this flap of material and these two poles his home? If not, what was he doing here and where did he get his water? For a moment, I thought I was hallucinating.

Eventually we arrived at a high point – a hill overlooking a village; about 12 buildings with sandy-coloured high walls and no windows. It looked pretty derelict.

We got into a defensive formation while the officers and troop leaders decided what to do.

We were under pressure to get eyes-on to Musa Qaleh. Getting eyes-on means being able to see what's happening. We needed to see where the Danes were being ambushed from, so the decision was taken to drive through the village. The only way down was along a wadi, a ditch that had once been a stream.

I closed the hatch above me and we set off. I had a tiny window to look through and could only see ahead, not to the sides.

I was the second vehicle down the wadi. Mick Flynn, who was a corporal of the horse at the time, was in front in a Scimitar. I kept close enough to assist him if he got into trouble but far enough back so I wouldn't be caught up unnecessarily.

Rolling down the hill and into the village, we found ourselves corralled by high walls on either side. We pushed through, keeping an eye out for enemy fighters. But everything seemed quiet – only the rumble of the wagons rolling through the dust. It was 7am.

Someone shouted over the radio. My heart leapt. It was Mick Flynn coming under attack from small arms. We were being ambushed. I heard fire pinging off our vehicle and Alex returned fire.

Then Alex shouted: "Compo. Reverse, reverse. Get us the fuck out of here."

I pushed the reverse lever forwards as hard as I could and felt it click. We shot backwards. A massive explosion rocked the wagon and it stopped dead in its tracks. Instinctively I ducked, then looked behind me.

The back of the tank had split open like a can. Fire and smoke poured everywhere. The machine gun turret had dropped into the tank. The roof was gone. The back door was gone. The floor was gone. And the crew was gone.

They were dead. I was alone. I was exposed and I was terrified. I was pressed into the wreckage of my vehicle. I didn't know what to do. I had to get out of there.

And then I caught a movement in the corner of my eye.

The Taliban tucked that RPG into the crook of his shoulder. He tilted his head and aimed it right at me. He fired. The grenade hurtled towards me, trailing a plume of smoke. It shot past my shoulder and hit the Spartan's engine. The engine exploded. The fireball swallowed me.

## 2. MICHELLE / PEOPLE TOLD ME, "IT'S ONLY SIXTEEN WEEKS"

Frittenden, Kent – June 2006

I WATCHED Martyn playing in the garden with my parent's golden labrador, Harvey.

A few weeks before, the lawn that they were now fooling around on had been transformed into "The Wedding Patch" for my brother Kevin's wedding reception. It had been a great day and towards the end of the night, Martyn and I sneaked away and sat by the cornfield. We listened to the distant music and talked about our own future, the life we hoped to lead.

We sat there for ages. The moon shone, and a warm breeze wafted through fields.

I heard a cheer from the marquee.

"Kevin and Katie must be leaving," I said. "Come on."

We raced to the drive, just in time to see the limousine pull away. We stood with the crowd, waving and clapping.

People began thanking my parents and moving towards their cars, but the slow songs were still playing, so I pulled Martyn into the marquee and towards the dance floor.

The Time Of My Life from Dirty Dancing started up and I snuggled closer to Martyn. He buried his face in my hair and I felt his strong arms hold me tighter.

We were the only people dancing and as far as I was concerned we could have been the only people in the world.

We were in our own little bubble.

I couldn't believe I was so happy.

The memory glittered in my mind as I watched my gorgeous man frolic with Harvey. The future looked bright for the two of us. I should have been the happiest woman in the world.

But in a few hours I would leave Martyn at Combermere Barracks in Windsor as he got ready for his four-month tour of Afghanistan.

The knot in my stomach that had momentarily tightened when Martyn told me he was going was permanent. I did think about the danger he faced, but it wasn't a danger I could relate to. All I could really think about was the separation.

People told me, "It's only sixteen weeks," or "It's just over a hundred days," but nothing made it better.

We'd only met in January and now we were going to be forced apart for almost as long as we'd been a couple.

We didn't even know how often we'd be able to speak to each other.

But we pushed our sadness aside and enjoyed the three weeks' leave Martyn had been given prior to deployment.

I looked down at my engagement ring. Martyn had proposed to me the night before. He'd taken my parents and I out for a meal then asked me to marry him when we got home. I was so happy. I called everyone I knew. Mum, dad, Martyn and I opened a bottle of champagne. It was the happiest night of my life.

Eventually, tired with all the excitement, we went to bed. As usual I lay my head on Martyn's chest and rested my arm across his stomach. How would I sleep without my hunky soldier to cuddle?

"Night, darling," I said.

"Night, Mrs Compton-to-be. Love you."

"Love you too, husband-to-be. Sweet dreams."

I'm sure I fell asleep first. I always do. I didn't know what thoughts I left Martyn with as I drifted away.

Morning came too quickly, and we were ready to leave.

"Martyn," I said, "come on, babe, we better get ready to go."

Harvey bounded into the house and Martyn ran after him. I thought how strong my man looked, how fit and handsome he was. He grinned at me and gave me a peck on the cheek as he scooted upstairs into the shower. I felt very lucky.

Dad, mum, Martyn, Harvey and I began the journey from Kent to Windsor. Stick us all in a car together and what you got was chat – heaps of banter, usually about football because dad supported Southampton and Martyn and I followed Spurs.

But that Sunday, silence filled the vehicle.

Harvey, in his compartment in the back, knew something was wrong. He'd usually be bouncing about looking for someone to stroke him. But that day he rested his chin on the back of the seat. Can dogs sense sadness? I don't know. But that day, Harvey definitely picked up on something.

We stopped at Martyn's dad's house in Staplehurst. I waited in the car, watching Rob and Martyn. Martyn wasn't one for long goodbyes, and when his dad reached to hug him Martyn said, "What are you doing, Dad? I'll be all right."

Typical of him. But I did notice him squeeze his dad's hand. They are so close. I knew that simple gesture meant a lot to Rob.

And they'd already had a very emotional goodbye two days previously when Martyn had reappeared in our local, The Bull in Sissinghurst, a week after everyone thought he had already left. His deployment had been postponed and he asked me not to tell anyone so that he could surprise his mates and his dad.

Everyone gawped when Martyn and I walked into the pub. Our friends and Rob were there. The two of them hugged for five minutes. There were quite a few tears that night, and Rob made Martyn promise that he would never do that again.

After leaving Rob's house, we headed for Windsor. The journey took about two hours.

When we got there, the four of us and Harvey walked along the river. The sun fell, reddening the sky with the promise of a fine day tomorrow. Martyn and I drifted behind my parents. We held hands, but didn't say much. There was so much I wanted to say, but I couldn't find the words. We made small talk about the houseboats, and the ducks and swans.

Other couples and families with dogs strolled past us. They looked so carefree, and I envied them.

When the time came, Martyn said goodbye quickly to my mum, dad and Harvey. They went to the car and Martyn and I stood beside the barracks wall, away from the entrance.

He put his arms around my shoulders and I reached around his waist. I looked up at him. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

"I love you lots," I managed to say. "Keep safe."

"You keep safe, too," said Martyn. He went to say something else but his voice broke and tears began to run down his face. We hugged. It was bittersweet to be so close to him when soon we'd be so far apart.

We looked at each other. "You can't walk in like that," I said, indicating his tear-streaked face. I rummaged in my pocket for a packet of tissues. The only ones I had were imprinted with cartoon monkeys. "Have these."

He managed a giggle as he took them. We hugged again. "I love you, babe," he said quietly in my ear.

It was time to go and I strode towards the car. Dad was under strict instructions to drive away slowly so I could wave. I got in the car and slid my hand under Harvey's collar for comfort.

Martyn composed himself, blew his nose and tucked the tissues in his pocket. He picked up his bag and turned towards me. He waved and blew kisses. I did the same.

Then he trudged towards the barracks gate.

And he was gone.