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# **Anatomy of a Soldier**

Written by Harry Parker

Published by Faber & Faber

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# Anatomy of a Soldier

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HARRY PARKER



FABER & FABER

First published in the UK in 2016  
by Faber & Faber Limited,  
Bloomsbury House,  
74–77 Great Russell Street,  
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Reality Premedia Services Pvt. Ltd.  
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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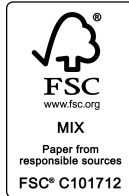
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All events, places, characters and names have been fictionalised.  
Any military, medical or cultural inaccuracies are the fault of the author.

A CIP record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–32581–8



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For my mother, father and brother

## I

My serial number is 6545-01-522. I was unpacked from a plastic case, pulled open, checked and reassembled. A black marker wrote *BA5799 O POS* on me and I was placed in the left thigh pocket of BA5799's combat trousers. I stayed there; the pocket was rarely unfastened.

I spent eight weeks, two days and four hours in the pocket. I wasn't needed yet. I slid against BA5799's thigh, back and forth, back and forth, mostly slowly but sometimes quickly, bouncing around. And there was noise: bangs and cracks, high-pitched whines, shouts of excitement and anger.

One day I was submerged in stagnant water for an hour.

I went in vehicles, tracked and wheeled, winged and rotored. I was soaked in soapy water then hung out to dry on a clothesline and did nothing for a day.

At 0618 on 15 August, when I was sliding alongside BA5799's thigh, I was lifted into the sky and turned over. And suddenly I was in the light. There was dust and confusion and shouting. I was on the ground beside him. He was face down; he was incomplete. I was beside him as rocks and mud fell around us.

I was in the dust as a dark red liquid zigzagged towards me over the cracked mud. I was there when no one came and he was alone and couldn't move. I was still there as fear and pathetic hopelessness gripped BA5799, as he was turned over and two

fingers reached into his mouth, as his chest was pumped up and down and they forced air into his lungs.

I was picked up by a slippery hand, fumbled back to the ground, then picked up again. I was pulled open by panicked fingers and covered in the thick liquid. I was placed on BA5799. I was turned. I tightened. I closed around his leg until his pulse pushed up against me. And he grimaced and whimpered through gritted teeth. I was wound tighter, gripping his thigh; stopping him bleed out into the dust.

I clung to him while he was lifted onto a stretcher and he bit deeply into the arm of a man who carried him, when he no longer made any noise. I clung to him as we boarded the helicopter. I was wound again then, and gripped him harder.

I clung to him as we flew low across the fields and glinting irrigation ditches and the wind rushed around the helicopter, when he pleaded with God to save him and metal pads were placed on his chest and his body jolted. And I clung to him when the machine read no output, when there was no pulse against me.

I was there when they ran across to the helicopter and took us into the cool of the hospital.

I was there when the doctors looked worried. I clung to him when he came back, when he had output and his faltering heart pulsed again. I was still there when they hung the bag of blood above BA5799 and they cut the remains of his leg away.

And then I was unwound and loosened and I was no longer there; BA5799 no longer needed me.

My serial number is 6545-01-522. I was at the bottom of a surgical bin and then I was burnt.

I was placed on a broken pallet with three other identical bags of fertiliser outside a shop in the village of Howshal Nalay.

I had been on the pallet for two weeks when Faridun came on his green bicycle. He greeted the shopkeeper and they started to haggle. Then Faridun handed him money and the shopkeeper lifted me onto the bike's pannier. I sagged over its metal bars that pushed into my plastic skin and he fastened me down with orange twine from the shop. Faridun shared a joke with the man, then swung his leg over the crossbar and we rode away.

Faridun cycled us out of the village on the exposed road; a raised, sand-coloured backbone running through dusty green fields. The bike's buckled rear wheel squeaked below me as we weaved past potholes left by the winter rains.

He sighed when he saw the checkpoint through the vibrating air. He dismounted as we approached and pushed the bike along beside him. An iron bar was propped on two oil drums across the road, and a red-tanked motorbike leant next to it on its stand. A group of men sat in the dark shade of a compound. One of them stood and walked towards us. He beckoned Faridun over with the hand that wasn't holding the weapon.

'Peace be upon you, young man. How are you?' he said.

Faridun shielded his eyes and looked up at him. 'Peace be upon you. I am fine, praise to God.'

The man was a black silhouette against the sun.

'I am on my way home from Howshal Nalay, I have been to the market,' Faridun said quietly. 'I need to get back before dark.'

The others emerged from the shade and gathered behind the man. Faridun glanced up at them and recognised his friend Latif. Latif had also recognised Faridun; he looked uncertain and then walked forward and whispered into the man's ear.

The man's face tightened. He stepped out and kicked hard against the bicycle's crossbar. Faridun caught his ankle under the sprocket and fell into the dust. I slumped onto the road with him, twisting under the orange twine. The man held the gun with both hands now and stepped onto the bike, crushing Faridun's leg.

Faridun didn't make a sound.

The man was over him and forced the barrel down against his mouth. Faridun pursed his lips closed, shaking his head from side to side. But the man wormed the weapon back and forth until Faridun's lips were pushed apart and the barrel slid against his teeth, slipping up to peel away the gum from his incisor. Faridun opened his mouth in pain and the weapon banged through his teeth until it knocked into the back of his throat.

'Is your father Kushan Hhan?'

Faridun gagged and his tongue curled up against the metal. He nodded in shock. The man pushed down harder and Faridun convulsed and choked around the barrel again.

'Your father is working for the infidel,' the man said. 'If he continues to do this against the will of God, I will cut off your sister's head. Do you understand?' He pushed again a final time. And then the weapon was pulled clear and he stepped away.

Faridun's eyes were wet but he held the man's gaze as he got up out of his shadow and lifted the bike off the ground. The twine



lost its grip and I fell off the pannier. Faridun's lip was already thickening and he looked over at Latif.

'May God be with you, Latif,' he said, before slowly wheeling the bicycle down the road, away from where I remained in the dust.

The men laughed and patted Latif on the back. One of them walked into the middle of the road, picked me up and threw me down against the compound wall.

That afternoon the men reclined in the shade and waved a group of nomads and their camels through. They took fifteen dollars in tax from a lorry driver and chatted with a group of men on their way home from the fields. Finally, as dusk sharpened the horizon, two of them left on the motorbike. The others moved the pole and oil drums into the compound, said they would meet again after prayers and drifted away.

The last man lifted me onto his shoulder. He walked down a path beside a silver strip of water until we reached a dark area of undergrowth in a maze of crumbling walls. He opened a wooden door, put me on the floor and pulled it shut behind him.

I am a bag of fertiliser. I contain  $\text{NH}_4\text{NO}_3$  and I waited in that dark room until I was opened and used.

I was taken from a box and laces were threaded through my eyes. My tongue was pulled out and a man wrote *BA5799* in black permanent marker that bled into my fabric.

I was in a room with things laid out on the floor, stacks of clothes in rows: T-shirts, combat shirts, trousers, hot-weather underwear and socks rolled in balls. There was a pile of notes and maps, a book about a distant country where conflict persisted; another pile with tubes of toothpaste, toothbrushes, insect repellent and malaria tablets; a third with a GPS, a torch and a med-kit. There was also a leather diary, a helmet and a stack of magazines, oiled and shining, with a rifle-cleaning kit rolled up next to it.

A large black grip-bag and a Bergen lay open, ready to be packed. Everything was named in black, like me.

The man sat on the single bed. He put his foot into me and I was pulled tight to his ankle by the laces he wrapped around my neck three times before carefully tying a knot. I could feel his toes wiggle and then he pulled the mirror of me onto his other foot.

He walked around the room and flexed his toes again. We left the room, went downstairs and outside.

I flashed past my pair and then was stationary on the ground. It flashed past me. We were running. We went quicker as we pounded up a chalk and flint track through gates topped with razor wire. The track was lined with hedgerows and we skipped

around puddles and plunged out of a tree line and up a green hill.

We settled into a rhythm and the man breathed with practised control. My tread folded and bent around rocks and grasped the mud with each stride. The puddles reflected the blue and white sky above and my cloth surface formed creases as I flexed to the movement of his foot. He increased the tempo because he knew he could and indulged being able to. He was strong and his breathing was still measured as we pounded on. The fitter he was, the harder he could fight and the longer he could survive.

He pushed himself faster, motivated by nothing but oblivion and he drove on up a steep slope. He stopped at the top and looked over the wide plains below, crossed by lanes and squared with wood blocks.

He tried to empty his head but thoughts washed over him. He was already there, focused on what it would be like and its inevitability. When he thought of the final week before he deployed it seemed unreal. He thought of saying goodbye.

We left the track and ran through grass. Blades stropped over my toe, leaving green scars. We went down a steep slope and he jarred through me as we descended. I started rubbing on his left heel and a blister formed. The creases in me deepened and the shape of each of his toes moulded my inner sole.

We dropped off a kerb and ran on along a metal road that was hard on my tread. We turned a corner to a gate where he showed his ID card to a soldier and stopped.

‘I didn’t know you were on guard, Rifleman Macintosh.’

‘Deep joy, sir,’ the soldier said.

‘Not losing any leave, I hope.’

‘No, I finish tomorrow morning, then I’ll go straight home. You been for a run?’

‘Just breaking in my new boots,’ he said and looked down at me.

‘Keen, boss. Carry on like that and you’ll be colonel one day.’

‘I’m sure it won’t come to that, Mac,’ he said and turned. ‘See you later.’

It started to rain and the tarmac speckled dark in front of me. He sprinted hard for the final half-mile back to the building we had left.

He walked, his hands on his head, his chest heaving. He recovered quickly and we went back to the room. I was taken off and the heat of his foot dissipated. I was placed carefully among all the kit laid out on the floor.

He slept in the bed and in the morning shaved at a sink. He dressed in a green camouflaged uniform and pulled on boots, like me but black and leather. He smoothed a green beret over his head, positioning the silver bugle above his eye, and went out. When he came back he rearranged the piles and counted the socks again before adding another tick to a list.

The next day he put jeans and a T-shirt on and old trainers that had remained unused in the corner of the room since I had been there. He stuffed a few things in a bag and left, locking the door behind him.

I was alone in my spot, next to my pair among the piles ready to be packed.

He came back a week later, unshaven. He sighed and sat on the floor and began to pack the kit. Everything had a place and each item on his list was finally crossed through. Once finished he stacked the Bergen on the grip and I was placed next to a chair with a desert combat uniform draped over it and the green beret on top.

Another man peered around the door.

‘You coming for some food?’ he said.

‘Sure, give me a sec, I’ve just got to call home.’

‘Okay, mate, see you down there,’ the man said and left.

He picked up his phone.

‘Hi, Mum, it’s Tom,’ he said. ‘Yup, fine, just finished packing – all ready to go . . .’ He walked around the room and then sat on the bed. ‘Just pizza and a film, probably, with the others . . . I think it’s about ten tomorrow but we have to be ready for the buses at five . . . Thanks for the weekend. It was great to see you all.’ He listened to the phone, twisting his fingers through the duvet cover. He stood and went over to the window. He talked and laughed and walked over to the chair to pluck at a loose thread on his combat shirt. ‘I’ll call in a few days,’ he said, ‘when I get there . . . Okay, will do . . . And you, take care . . . Bye . . . Bye.’

That night he slept fitfully and at four his alarm rang. He immediately clicked the light on. He sat up, gripped the side of the bed and yawned. It was still dark outside and he leant on the sink and shaved off his stubble. He stared at the reflection and its bloodshot eyes. It looked different from how he felt. He smiled, but his eyes were empty as he pulled the razor across his chin. It didn’t matter what he looked like.

He packed the last of his kit into his Bergen, dressed in the combat uniform and then pulled me on.

At breakfast other boots like me fidgeted under the table. None of the men had slept well and they talked of little other than timings and the co-ordination of the next few hours.

Back in the room, he shouldered the Bergen and grunted as he lifted the grip up until it was stacked on top. He held a green day-sack in his right hand. Now almost twice his weight pushed

down through me. He looked around the empty room, flicked the light off and left without locking the door.

We walked through the camp lit by pools of yellow streetlight. Other dark figures, hunched beneath heaped bags, moved from buildings and converged on a long row of buses. Voices became clearer and then we were among the bustle of people and activity in the darkness beside the road.

A voice called from farther along the line, 'B Company down the end. Grips on the four tonners, Bergens underneath. Stop mincing, you lot.'

We pushed past a flustered man unpacking his bag on the grass.

'Come on, Rifleman Milne, you've had your entire life to pack – what have you forgotten now?' a man said as the soldier ran off.

'Morning, sir, B Company's at the other end.' Someone pointed down the line.

'Thanks,' he said and he stepped me over a bag and walked along the pavement.

'Any more for weapons and serial number kit? CQ wants you now,' a storeman shouted from a container.

We walked to a truck. The grip was lifted from his back and stacked with the others and then he pushed the Bergen into a space below the coach. He stood in a queue of yawning men and signed for a rifle. Finally we stepped up into the bus and sat in the first row. The green butt of the rifle rested on the floor next to me.

A man slowly moved down the central aisle counting the soldiers relaxing against the windows.

'That's everyone, sir,' he said and sat down next to us. 'Just waiting for Rifleman Smith – he's helping the CQ's party with the grips.'

'Thanks, Sergeant Dee.'

The bus left the camp, an oval of light on the road in front. The trees were dark through the windows as the sky began to lighten. His foot relaxed and he slept.

When he woke he looked at the countryside flashing past until he nudged the man next to him.

‘We’re nearly there, Sarnt Dee,’ he said.

‘Cheers, boss,’ the man said. He stood up and looked over the back of his seat. ‘Listen in,’ he said. ‘Stop window-licking, Rifleman Macintosh, that’s it. When we get off, the bags will go separately to the plane. No one is to get creative. Check in as a platoon.’

After queuing and showing his documents he sat in a lounge and crossed me on his other ankle. Men slept bent over rucksacks and with earphones in. Few of them spoke. Some lay on the floor with their combat jackets wrapped around their heads against the strip lights. Eventually men in blue uniforms came into the room. A man wearing a lumi-vest walked out among the rows of seats.

‘Sorry for the slight delay,’ he said, ‘there was a problem with the airframe. We will begin boarding now.’

‘Halle-fucking-lujah,’ someone said as they stood up.

He walked out of the terminal in the single row that crept forward. All the men around were quiet, their uniforms new and undusted as they fed up the stairs ahead into the aircraft. He sighed and scrunched his toes up in me. There was no possible alternative, he thought, no going back.

Green trees tossed in the damp wind beside the runway. He bent down and touched the ground beside me and then I stepped up onto the metal stairs.

On the plane, the boots of other men lined up under the seats in front of me. He couldn’t sleep and leant his head against the

window and watched the tops of the clouds. An unwanted stream of thoughts and recollections drifted over him, only connecting as reminders of what he was being propelled away from.

After the flight, we descended aluminium steps out onto the runway. I felt the heat of it on my sole and the air vibrated and merged the black tarmac into the sky.

I am a desert combat boot. I have *BA5799* written on my tongue and he walked me across the tarmac towards a city of white tents and cream hangars, floating on that shimmering desert mirror.