



## The Lucky Ones – Paul Blake

Private “Lucky” Fletcher stood against the cold, hard, wet concrete of the wall looking through the thermal scope of his rifle. He swept his sector across a slow three minutes, as per regulations. He took his eye from the scope and traced the path back at the same speed. The eye could pick up sudden flashes of motion that the scope could miss. Left to right and right to left. One sweep, six minutes. Ten sweeps, an hour. One hundred sweeps, a shift. Lucky’s shift had, so far, lasted one hundred and twenty sweeps but he was in no hurry to return to the warmth of the bunkhouse. No hurry to leave the muck that enveloped his booted feet, that was part mud, part water, part blood, part rat, all shit. No hurry to leave the driving rain, that swept up from the lowlands he looked out across like a wave. No hurry at all. The bunkhouse was where Lucky’s friends were and he’d tried his hardest over the past few weeks to avoid them.

“Lucky? What are you still doing out here? Your shift ended two hours ago. Where’s Jenkins?”

“Jenkins is at the infirmary, Sarge. I offered to cover him. He shouldn’t be long,” Lucky said with his eye still to the scope.

“What’s up with him this time? Trenchfoot? Sniper’s eye? Stubbed toe?” Sergeant Lang asked, his voice quiet and rasping. The crew called him Sergeant Lung or the Marlboro Man, but Lucky liked him and was always respectful.

“A bad case of knob rot, Sarge. Said he caught it from his missus during the last R&R, but we all know it was from the fellas in Boytown on his last overnight pass.”

“Poor fucker, would rather let it be thought that his missus was a cum-dumpster for all and sundry while he was away than admit that he likes boys. Doesn’t he know that the army doesn’t care about that anymore? It only judges you on your actions on the wall and how you look after your crew.”

“I couldn’t say, Sarge. He won’t be long though. They’ll just give him a shot and he’ll be back.”

“Alright, Lucky. Down you come, I’ll take your place until he gets here. I wanted to have a chat with him about his work ethic, it won’t hurt to discuss his personal ethics at the same time. How’s it been tonight?”

“Quieter than a mime’s surprise party, Sarge. Maybe the rain is keeping them away.”

“It does normally. Come on then, back to your bunk and get some shuteye. God knows you deserve it after what you’ve been through the past couple of weeks. It’s good to have you back, by the way.”

Lucky took one final quick sweep hoping for an excuse to stay. Nothing.

“Yes, Sarge.” His voice was as despondent as his face. He stepped away from the wall. Two, three feet. Turned on his heel and saluted the Sergeant. “Private Fletcher stepping down, Sir.” Regulations are regulations.

“Dismissed, Private,” Sergeant Lang said with a smile and a cough as Lucky squelched away. He stepped into Lucky’s place, rifle in place. “Oh Lucky?” Sarge called out. Lucky turned around. “Keep away from the infirmary, I wouldn’t want Jenkins to know I want a ch—”

Lucky watched as Sarge’s forehead shone a bright white-red-white and exploded outwards spraying Lucky with a shower of blood and brain. Sarge slumped to his knees in the mud and shit and fell forward.

“Sarge!” Lucky called, then regulations kicked in. His slammed the palm of his hand against the red button beside him, regulations called for them to be every two metres along the wall. A siren began to wail in the night as though mourning the loss of Sergeant Lang. Lucky stepped around Sarge and retook his place, rifle to shoulder, this time tracking multiple contacts in his scope and his finger holding the trigger down for the regulation one-two count to conserve energy charge as the green laser bolts flew towards their targets. Lucky licked his lips in concentration and grimaced at the coppery taste of Sarge. The sky became thick with the smell of ozone as more and more green bolts were shot as soldiers rushed to the wall. Almost as thick as the lump in Lucky’s throat. Sorry, Sarge, he thought. It should have been me. It’s never me. He blinked away a tear and shot again and again.

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An hour later, Lucky trudged into the bunkhouse. The attack was over, repulsed. His crew was already there and in good spirits. Lucky could hear them as he parted the rough woollen sheet

that functioned as a door to the shelter. The bunkhouse was a large single storey warehouse-like structure made up of prefabricated concrete slabs. Inside it was split into sections by temporary wooden walls that didn't quite reach the ceiling. There was a main foyer, that doubled as a cloakroom for the heavy, muddy boots and wet weather outer layers for the soldiers. Wooden benches lined either side. Which was where Lucky was sat. Struggling to undo a tough bootlace knot with his cold, shaking hands. There were two internal doors in the foyer. One for Lucky's crew, and the other for the other crew that shared the bunkhouse. Two crews, forty men in total. Beyond each door was a separate dayroom, the dorm that contained the bunks, shower room and toilets, as per regulations. The crews were kept separate, save for the bootroom foyer, to foster a them and us rivalry. Kill scores were posted on electronic noticeboards daily in the dayroom, as was an intra-company leader board, both of which were updated in real-time. One company, twenty crews, four hundred men, or sometimes less. Lucky had stopped looking at the scores or the screens a few weeks ago.

Finally, free of the knot and the boots Lucky placed them together, neatly, under the bench alongside the others already there. He hung his still dripping poncho on a hook and placed his helmet over that. He looked at his crew's door and took a deep breath. He walked over to it with the accompanying sound of his damp sock covered feet slapping on the hard floor. The thin wood wall barely muffling the merriment within. He placed his hand on the round door knob, paused, took another breath and twisted.

"Lucky! Hey everyone, Lucky's here!" Joe screamed out. Joe wasn't his name, but no one could pronounce his given one. His family was from Sri Lanka, well, the generations before were. Joe had been born in one, and raised in many, refugee camps dotted around Southern and Eastern Europe as China expanded its borders over the Himalayas and through India and all the 'Stan countries. Joe had been in the crew for the past six months. Three more than Lucky. He

was Lucky's bunk buddy so they had grown, relatively, close in their time at the wall. Lucky's face, off shift, a mere foot underneath the back or side of Joe's in their stacked bunk beds.

Lucky raised his hand wearily in greeting as the rest of the crew called his name. Eighteen men, one name. Lucky's. They crowded around him, patting his back, offering a smoke or a drink.

"Have you seen the boards?" one asked. It may have been Pierre.

"Come look at the boards," another said, pulling Lucky's arm. Lucky recognised the tattoos on the hand of Pierre Two, having seen them very close up after a card game early on in his time with the crew.

The crowd parted and they walked as a huddle around Lucky with Pierre Two leading him. Silent in anticipation, with massive grins, they waited for Lucky to see. The screen hanging on the wall of the dayroom was showing a news broadcast, images of beaches on fire and flashes at night gave way to an attractive newsreader mouthing something or other. The screens didn't have sound. The walls they hung on were so thin that they would be forever competing with the other crews' screen. In the early days, fights had been caused by screen wars between crews. Regulations put a stop to that by stripping all screens of their internal speaker. In the corner of the screen overlaid over the broadcasted program was a series of numbers and symbols.

A trained eye could read them at a glance, it had taken Lucky a week to get to that stage. But now Lucky just wasn't interested. He looked away from the numbers to the newsreader. Her brown eyes looked into his as she read from the teleprompter embedded in the camera in the studio in whatever city or bunker, she was in.

"XIV Crew number one, baby!" American Pierre called out from beside Lucky. He leaned over and kissed the top of Lucky's head. "Thanks to you."

“Another hundred and sixty-five kills today. You’re miles ahead of everyone.” Not Pierre called out. He’d joined the crew the same time as Lucky. Lucky always pictured him as the nervous kid he’d met on the bus to the wall, leg shaking, mouth flapping.

“Leave some for us next time,” joked Joker with a huge laugh as he punched Lucky in the shoulder.

“Yeah, you’re making us look bad,” Someone said. Lucky wasn’t sure who.

“Shit no, keep going, you’re making us look good,” Pierre Two said from the front.

“Another day like today and we’ll get away from here for a while.”

“Yeah Jenkins can get to Boytown again.”

“Where is he, anyway?”

“On the wall, Sergeant Lung was looking to give him an ass-chewing.”

Lucky remained silent. They’d find out soon enough. He extracted himself from the crew and mumbled, “Shower.” The crew sang his name as he stumbled his way out of the day room to the dorm. He shrugged off his gear, dumped it on the floor, and grabbed a towel and headed to the showers.

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The shower was a long one as Lucky tried to get the stench of war, and the splatters of Sergeant Lang, off him. The water went cold partway through but Lucky kept on scrubbing. After the shower Lucky bundled up his gear and dumped it in the two-metre-long lidded wash basket against the partition wall. It would be collected in the morning and taken by the laundry grunts to be steamed clean. Regulations stated that a clean army was a healthy army. Lucky lay on his

bunk, which sagged a little in the middle as the elastic strapping that held the mattress in place aged. He pulled the thin blanket over him and closed his eyes, praying for sleep that rarely came. After a while his mind entered the state between wake and sleep, where lucid thought became reality amongst dreams. Lucky was taken back to the killing fields, charging over the cratered and boned ground, charging through clouds of man-made smoke and fog. His crew around him. Screaming unintelligibly as they ran. Rifles to their shoulders, thermal scanners looking ahead. Earpieces connected to headquarters telling them what direction to head in, what to expect in front of them. A cacophony of noise and riotous experience.

It was Lucky's first time over the top. He followed in Joe's wake. Stepping where Joe had stepped, leaping over the barbed wire and broken bodies when Joe leapt over them. A voice over the earpiece screamed "Incoming!" as the crew around him screamed "Drop!" as they slid to the mud like a nu-footballer attempting a tackle in the rain. Lucky followed a second or two behind them, not yet on their wavelength. Green laser fire arched through the air he had been occupying.

"Always lucky, eh Lucky?" said Joe with a grin as he pulled Lucky down into the crew.

"Something like that, thanks," Lucky said, his eyes wide. Regulations didn't cover getting shot at.

Not Pierre called over, "It's not like training, is it Lucky?" Lucky looked at him, leg shaking like fish on a hook but a wide grin on his face.

"They're not supposed to fire back."

"They'll do worse if you two don't shut up," Pierre Two said. He was leading the crew today, "HQ say there's a building up ahead where the fuckers are holed up. They have tried to target it with artillery but the sneaky fucks have got a scrambler going. They want us to flank it along the floor and then take it out with grenades."

“Ah shit,” said American Pierre. “Jenkins isn’t here. He’s the best with the grenades. He could hit a fly off your nose with one of those.” Jenkins was in the infirmary with a suspected rat bite.

“Never mind him, I’m pretty sure even we can hit the side of a building in the middle of a battlefield,” said Pierre Two. “Okay everyone follow me, on your bellies, we’re going that direction,” he indicated with a chop of his hand, “three hundred metres, then we’ll turn ninety until our faces hit concrete or whatever the hell the thing is made of.”

The crew crawled through the mud, the puddles, the flies, and the shit. Lucky didn’t think it was actual shit, but that what’s the sergeant had called it when Lucky first got to wall.

“Over the wall,” Sergeant Lang rasped. “Is the shit. Once you are in the shit you follow your crew, and do what your crew does. That’s the only way,” cough, “of getting through the shit, and getting the shit out of the shit.” Double cough.

The crew turned on Pierre Two’s command and soon reached a wooden fence. Beyond the fence among swirling tendrils of smoke was an old farmhouse with a barn beside it. The barn’s thatched roof was holed and sunken. They could see green lasers firing from there heading back over the shit.

“Ok, we’re here,” said Pierre Two in a quiet voice that came through their earpieces. “Joe, Pierre, Joker, Lucky, take the barn. The rest of us will take the house.”

The crew shuffled on their bellies twenty metres away leaving the four for the barn in place.

“Ok fellas,” Pierre Two said over the earpiece. “We’ll do this together. Hit them in one hit. Get your grenades ready.”

Lucky took three grenades from the pouch strapped to his side. Set the timer to five seconds, as written in the regulations. He pulled the pin from the first, being sure to hold the safety clip in place. He got up to one knee. No one shot at him, or the rest of the crew. The enemy's attention elsewhere.

“On three, we throw,” Pierre said. “1.. 2.. 3!”

Lucky threw his grenade high into the hole in the barn's roof. He removed the pin from the second and threw it to follow the first. As he removed the pin from the third, he didn't see his second hit the thatched roof and bounce back towards him. He readied his arm to throw and was flattened by the impact wave from the errant grenade, and Joe, pushed backwards by the force into Lucky. The third grenade left Lucky's hand and fell in the midst of the crew attacking the house. He called out a warning but couldn't hear his own voice.

The grenade exploded sending bits of Pierres, and crew all over the shit. The grenades they were holding fell and exploded all around, finishing the job. Lucky was shielded by Joe's heavy, still, dripping body.

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“Lucky, you awake?”

Lucky opened his eyes. The blurry form of Joe's upside-down head cleared and Lucky saw his friend. “Just about. I'm never really asleep, nowadays.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You need your sleep,” Joker said from the bunk beside them. “How are you supposed to beat the other crews with no shuteye.” Lucky watched as Joker’s face shredded into pieces, then return to normal.

“Yes, Lucky,” the hoarse voice of Sergeant Lang said. “Sleep is vital in combat.”

The rest of the crew surrounded Lucky’s bunk. Pierre sat at the end of the mattress.

“I’m sorry, Guys,” Lucky said. Tears in his eyes and down his cheeks. “It was an accident. I don’t know what happened.”

Pierre patted Lucky’s leg through the blanket. “Just an unlucky bounce. Could have happened to any of us.”

“Yeah,” said Joe. “At least we’re out of the shit now.”

The rest of the crew murmured their approval.

“We’re the lucky ones,” Sergeant Lang said with a cough.

END

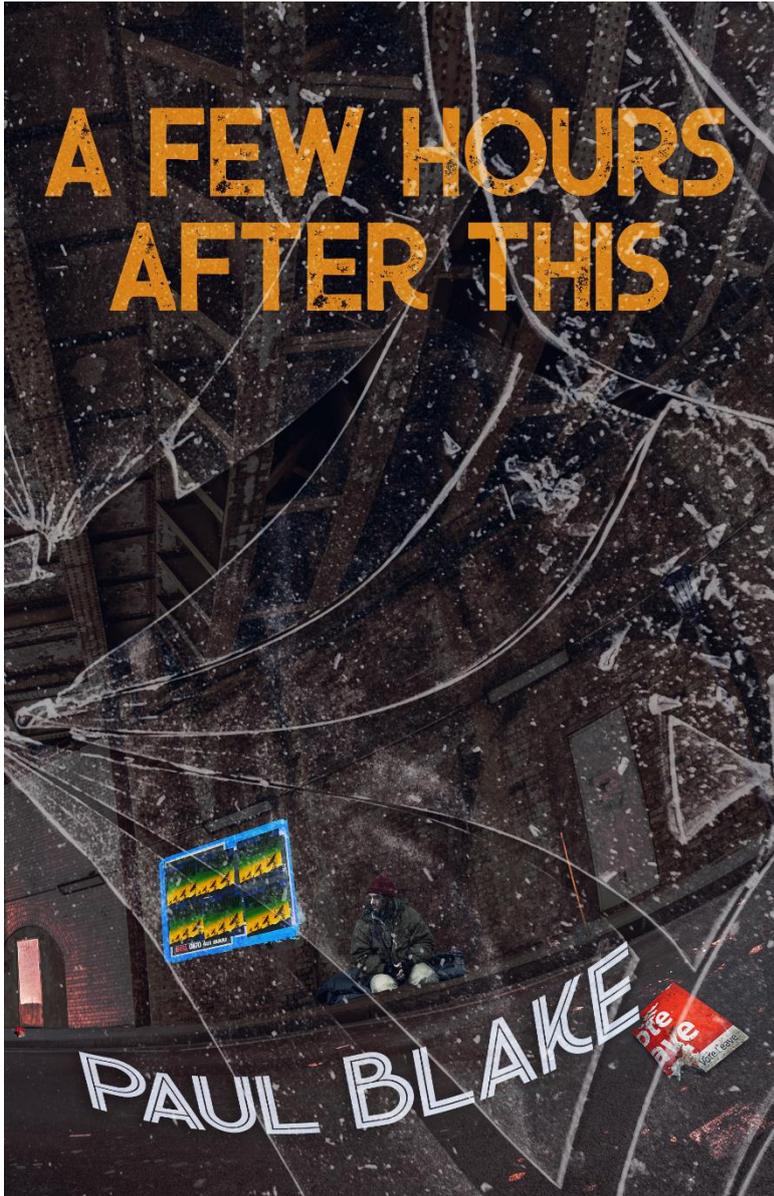
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# A FEW HOURS AFTER THIS



PAUL BLAKE

