



**The reaccountment of the events on the night of February 20th
2010 that claimed one Marines life.**

As told by Tom O' Neal in the book Video Games & Machine Guns

The Golf Company Marines of Patrol Base Barcha had made great stride in securing their primary area of operation, as a result of countless foot patrols pushing farther south. They spent days on end relentlessly pursuing the Taliban and keeping them off balance. The pursuit often involved spending several nights sleeping on the dirt, in the rain, and battling the rest of the elements in addition to the enemy. This was part and parcel of what their job required and the Marines had no problem with it. They were young and tough as nails. The severe nature in which they functioned became bragging rights among the men. Their aggressive, fast-paced operations tempo divided the enemy's leadership and constantly disrupted movements. Several high-value Taliban leaders had been captured and attested to this very fact. Word had gotten out about the 2/2 and had been passed down to the people on the ground. They advised fighters not to engage the Marines in a firefight. The violent exchanges would bring too much attention to a particular area and result in the endless pursuit that the 2/2 was willing to give. Nowhere was completely safe, but it was certainly better than when they had arrived four months earlier.

On a dark night in February, Steve and his fellow members of 4th squad were briefed on a mission they would be taking on to clear several known IEDs. They would accompany Eckard and Knaul, as they had many times before, providing security while the homemade devices were detonated in place. Fourth squad worked well with the two veteran EOD techs and felt comfortable with the role that they played in getting rid of the IEDs.

On this night, things seemed subtly different. To start with it was dark, and that did not encourage a warm fuzzy feeling one bit. Working in the dark, cold night air only added to the degree of difficulty. One positive note was that the area they were going into was not far away and wouldn't require a long, tiring patrol. In fact, it was directly in front of Barcha, not more than three quarters of a mile away. Steve grumbled as he laced up his boots and geared up, re-checking his equipment to make sure everything was exactly right. The mission he was going on was dangerous, and even though it was close by there was no room for mistakes. This was supposed to be his night to sleep, at least while he wasn't on guard duty, so he was not overly thrilled at the thought of being out until the early a.m. hours. Sleep was a precious when the Marines could come by it, so when they got the chance to snooze they took every possible advantage. Steve continued to groan, joints creaking as he stood and silently cursed as he threw on his flak jacket, helmet, eye protection, and gloves. One last check of his weapon, ammo, grenades, and light reassured him that he was ready to go. He was not the only one expressing their displeasure over not sleeping and having to gear up and go out in the cold. Shavers finished getting his gear on as well and stopped to talk to Eckard, who was standing near the entrance of their tent. Since he would be the squad leader on this night, the concern was conducting such an operation in the dark. Shavers said, "Staff Sergeant, I don't have a good feeling about this, ya know." Eckard quickly gave Shavers a pat on the shoulder and calmly reassured him that, "everything is going to be all right. Don't worry about it, okay? It'll be fine." Eckard had a way with people, especially the junior Marines, who all looked up to him; he always put them at ease in tense situations. The confidence and knowledge he possessed gave those around him a calm, settling feeling when they watched him work. He was not cocky, just calm and focused when it came time to get down to business. Even though Shavers talked to Eckard, he still wasn't feeling the love. Steve and his fellow Marines in 4th squad had been to

this same show before; it wasn't their first time. Nevertheless, nobody wanted to go IED hunting at night. The squad gathered in a tight group just outside of one of their tents in the cool night air for their briefing to go over operational details one last time. There was no room for error; and no matter how well things went, even the best laid plans were regularly tested in such a violent area. The group stood by waiting for the final clearance, via radio. The serious young men were tough, and it took a lot to spook them. They liked to crack jokes, but this night, there was not a lot of humor to go around. Steve turned to Eckard and gave him a nod. He stepped up towards him and bumped him on the shoulder with his forearm the way you would see a football player do on the shoulder pads of his teammates. Eckard gave him a confident nod back in return and turned to Shavers, asking if he was ready to go. Eckard had been on five deployments during his Marine Corps career. He had been in combat and violent firefights before, clearing buildings and houses, one by one, room by room in the city of Fallujah, Iraq. During another deployment to Ramadi, Iraq, he was credited with disarming some 300 IEDs and destroying over 10,000 pounds of enemy ordnance. Eckard was a highly decorated Marine and was all too familiar with the dangers of his job. Steve had a lot of admiration and respect for both of the EOD guys, especially since they had saved his and fellow Golf Company Marines' lives more than once.

The squad made their way off base, boots crunching over the rocks, and steadily moved farther into the neighboring field. They slowly dispersed a few meters apart from each other in a long, winding line. Leaving the safety and security of the familiar Rock were they had spent what seemed like a lifetime, trudging cautiously, farther into the night. There was just enough moonlight out that they could use hand signals to one another indicating direction, to stop, or to signal danger close by. Weapons were at the ready as they scanned for any possible threats. They were now acutely aware of any noises or movements around them that didn't belong.

The plan was to push to the area of the known IEDs, identify the exact locations of the explosives, and then provide security for Eckard and Knaul to blow them in place. Once an IED was discovered, Eckard would notify the squad leader and the Marines would branch out from the release point as designated by Eckard himself. This put a somewhat safe distance between the IED and the squad of Marines. It also allowed for a perimeter around the immediate area where EOD would work, while someone else had their back. Once the area was secured, Eckard and Knaul would move up into place and literally go hands on with the deadly device, either disarming it or setting an explosive charge to be detonated safely. It took nerves of steel and acute mental focus to quickly and efficiently accomplish such a task. The pair worked seamlessly together, communicating and almost sensing what the other was thinking and what the next move would be.

The squad reached the area in a good time. Shavers quickly held his fist up into the air for the squad to see, giving the signal for the others to halt. He moved up to Eckard and Knaul's position to confirm the information about the suspected IED. Eckard advised him that this would be their release point for a safe distance and told him to have the squad do a security sweep from their positions and stand by until he and Knaul notified Shavers that the device had been rendered safe. The squad branched out in several directions, intently checking for anything or anyone that didn't belong in the area. Both Eckard and Knaul moved in close to the IED and methodically began working to identify what it was made out of, if it had a pressure plate, or if it had a command wire attached to it. They began with these checks every time, systematically

breaking down each component. Steve and Terzano moved to the side of a small, dilapidated mud building, easing around the first corner, weapons up, in order to make sure nobody was at the other end of a command wire. Both breathed a silent sigh of relief and took a momentary knee while they took in all the surroundings as far as the dim partial moonlight would allow. They couldn't see what was going on with Eckard and Knaul, but it wasn't a good time to leave the backside of a building unattended, so the two fretfully stayed put. This would be a prime spot for the Taliban to sneak up while an IED was being disarmed. From seeing both of the EOD guys work countless other times, they were confident that this wouldn't take long and with any luck the squad would be on their way soon.

About fifty to sixty meters away, on the other side of the building from Steve and Terzano's position, Eckard and Knaul quickly went to work on the IED. They identified it as two old mortar shells that appeared to have more than one wire leading in different directions from the explosive itself. Knaul started tracing the wires for other possible charges that could be connected and moved several meters away from Eckard as he did so.

Shavers was positioned in the opposite direction from the building and was around fifty meters away from the IED. He tried to keep an eye on the different positions where the Marines in his squad were, watch Eckard and Knaul, and at the same time watch his back for anyone trying to sneak into their current area. There was no discounting it, what they were engaged in was dangerous as hell and every Marine out there that night knew it. Time was moving at a snail's pace. It felt as though they had been in one place for hours, when in truth it was probably about twenty-five minutes. Tensions were high, but everyone in the squad was doing their best to be patient, knowing that the EOD guys were working quickly and as safely as possible. The night air didn't seem as cold as when they had first set out. Even though the Marines were stationary for the moment, their blood was pumping, and they were filled with adrenaline. The tension in the darkness that surrounded them was palpable.



There were no sounds in the field, except the occasional clank or rattle of equipment from Eckard and Knaul as they moved about, trying to finish getting the IED disarmed. Everyone else was motionless and silent, waiting with bated breath to hear the all clear so they could move on.

Shavers tuned to look over his shoulder, checking to make sure that the area in his blind spot was still safe. As he started to scan through the dimly lit area to his rear, there was an explosion just in front of him. The pressure made a ripping sound as it passed through the air, knocking him over and onto his knees. Steve and Terzano could hear the dirt and debris pelting the wall on the other side of them, followed by the cloud of dust and smoke billowing through the air. Everyone immediately knew what just happened but didn't want to believe it. They knew where Eckard and Knaul were in relation to the IED, which meant that they had probably not survived the blast. Shavers tried desperately to get to his feet and regain his bearings, his head pounding and ears ringing. His uniform and equipment were covered with an assortment of terrain from the field they were in. He instinctively keyed the radio mike and yelled "Corpsman up! We need help!" All the while, Kyle "Doc" Treptow, a Navy corpsman who was with them on patrol, had been near Shavers when the explosion went off. Treptow felt the blast as well but

knew that he needed to get to the Marines as fast as possible in order to try to save them. This wasn't his first time on patrol when someone had been seriously injured or killed by an IED, and he feared the worst for Eckard and Knaul. He squinted, trying to look through the dusty darkness calling out to Eckard and Knaul, but nobody answered. Shavers didn't want to believe it, but he was positive that Chris was gone. He wasn't sure about Knaul. The entire squad of Marines frantically yelled out from various locations over and over, "Eckard! Knaul! Are you guys up? Are you all right? Come on, talk to us!" Terzano yelled out to Shavers, "Where are they? Are they okay?" Steve lunged forward to get around the corner of the building, and Terzano grabbed him by his flak jacket, pushing him toward the ground. Steve said, "I don't care. I'm going out there." Terzano said, "No you're not. Stay the fuck down, O'Neal." All of the Marines desperately wanted to respond and help.

Shavers was still trying to get a glimpse of Eckard and Knaul as he continued to communicate over the radio to their patrol base. Before he and the others could make their way to the blast site, the area still had to be cleared. It seemed like an eternity until help arrived to sweep the area for any more possible IEDs. If additional Marines were killed in the process of trying to render aid, they would be no help to anyone. Fortunately, the patrol base was not far off and a QRF arrived as fast as possible helping to maintain security and clear the area. Once it was confirmed that the 9 Line had been established and CASEVAC would be on its way, Shavers and Treptow moved towards the area where the IED had once been. As the other squad members saw them move forward, they darted out as well. Treptow started making his way to Knaul to start assessing his condition. Steve and Terzano sprinted to their squad leader. The Marines soon discovered the location of Eckard's body. As they looked about the horrifying scene, it was apparent that Eckard was gone and there was nothing they could do. He had been thrown nearly forty feet away from the original location of the IED due to the high explosive detonation. His injuries were catastrophic, and life that day for him ended in the blink of an eye. The sight of their beloved fellow Marine, friend and highly respected EOD tech hit them as hard as the shockwave from the blast had. The focus now had to be placed on Knaul, who was lying several meters to the south of where Eckard was hit. Knaul was covered in dirt and black soot almost blending in with the terrain, his uniform and equipment torn and broken. Knaul was initially unresponsive, being knocked completely unconscious from the enormous blast wave. When Treptow reached his location, he had just started to regain consciousness. Knaul immediately began throwing up uncontrollably, indicating he had suffered a severe concussion. He had lost his hearing and most of his vision temporarily. Despite his serious injuries, Knaul was instinctively trying to make his way to Eckard, attempting to crawl on his hands and knees. He had no idea where his fellow Marine was, but something inside of him was telling him he needed to find Chris. The scene was heartbreaking yet demonstrated the deep respect and bond the Marines had for one another. Time after time they would put their own lives before other Marines if it meant saving a life. This tragic incident was no exception. He was simply doing what he and Chris had done throughout their deployment. Shavers paused and took a deep breath before he made the next call on the radio to his platoon leader, Lieutenant Bruins. "2-4 Actual, this is 2-4. We have a Fallen Angel, I say again we have a Fallen Angel!" The transmission meant that a Marine had been killed. The words didn't seem real as they came out of his mouth, and they would replay for the rest of eternity in the minds of those who were there.

The Marines who weren't helping provide first aid took up positions surrounding the area for security and popped colored smoke to mark where the CASEVAC helicopter was to land. The chopper roared in, and the medical personnel moved quickly to stabilize Knaul and get him aboard. In minutes the chopper was gone, speeding off in the the darkness to get to the Battalion Aid Station as quickly as possible.

The remaining members of 4th squad stood staring blankly at one another, their emotions running wild, trying to comprehend what had happened. There was the matter of getting Eckard's body out of the area and respectfully secured for transport, which was more than any of them could bear.

Treptow had been down this road before in dealing with other fallen Marines who had been killed by IEDs. Before leaving the area, all of Eckard's equipment that could be located had to be accounted for as best as possible. Once Staff Sergeant Eckard's body was secured he was carried in a body bag by the Marines in a pallbearer fashion similar to that done in a funeral. As they moved carefully along, Treptow could feel the fallen Marine's body bump up against him while he walked. It was surreal, like nothing else; just hours earlier they had been talking and preparing for patrol. The eight hundred meter walk back to Barcha seemed like eighty miles for the mentally and physically exhausted Marines. They were met at the front gate by Staff Sergeant McConnell and several other Marines, who received Eckard's body from them. The transfer was done with honor and respect. Marines lined the area, some rendering salutes or a quiet Semper Fi as he passed by for the last time.

Steve and the rest of his squad eventually returned to their patrol base. The trip back seemed to take forever for them as well. Steve's pack felt like it weighed several hundred pounds. His chest seemed heavy; and he was out of breath, as if he had just run a marathon. The entire squad's minds and bodies felt twenty years older as they silently walked back to the Rock in the quiet darkness. When they returned, each went straight to their hooch (area where they slept). Steve and Shavers walked in, unhooked their packs and equipment, dropping everything in a pile, weapons and all. They collapsed on their racks, laying there silently, burning cigarette after cigarette, not saying a word, long into the night. Steve felt like someone had reached in and ripped out his insides. The only thing left was a mixture of nausea, anger, and shock. He wondered, "Why in the fuck did this have to happen, this night wasn't supposed to end this way?" He had just talked to Eckard minutes before leaving for patrol and jokingly given him a punch on the shoulder as he walked by him. That was the last time he would ever see him. Steve felt like he was going to be sick. The Marines remained with the body of their fallen brother, vowing not to leave him until transportation arrangements out of Afghanistan could be made. They spent the remainder of the sleepless night in a painful haze, reflecting on what had occurred, only interacting with one another. No one slept that night, even though they were running on empty. Each time they tried to close their eyes even for a few seconds, they were haunted by what had taken place. The horrific scene would replay over and over, always starting with the deafening explosion that changed their lives forever. The following day, Steve and the rest of the Marines who had been on patrol the previous night were taken to nearby Hassanabad for some much-needed down time. They were eventually going to have to get some sleep and reset themselves in order to keep going on. It wasn't going to be easy getting over this horrible event. For the time being they had to put it away and eventually deal with the

loss of Eckard later. It seemed cold and uncaring, but it was the only way to deal with the raw emotion in real time. There was no play book for them to read on how to cope with a violent traumatic death of a friend in war. Every person was different and each of them would have to shoulder the grief and pain in their own way. The one fact that the Marines knew for sure was that they could rely on each other. Eckard had proven firsthand to them that the term “Always Faithful” (Semper Fi) wasn’t just a saying, it was how they lived.

Steve got on the Internet while he was at H-Bad and aimlessly looked at Facebook. He knew that he couldn’t post anything remotely connected with what had happened. He contemplated calling someone but had no idea what to say and didn’t feel like talking anyway. Steve whiled away several minutes staring at the computer screen. He accepted a friend request from his former classmate and fellow 2/2 Weapons Company Marine, Jake Ross, who was at the patrol base several miles away, and signed off.

Thousands of miles away from that barren field in Helmand Province, the family of Staff Sergeant Christopher Eckard received the tragic news. A son, a brother and husband were gone and would return this time from deployment in a flag-draped coffin. Two small boys, one wife, one mother and a brother would never get to talk to him, hear him laugh, or put their arms around him again. The town of Hickory, North Carolina, would forever be missing a piece of itself.

The news of Eckard’s death reverberated throughout our home as we read the article aloud. Immediately following his name were two other 2/2 Marines killed a day afterwards, Eric L. Ward and Adam Peak. No wonder Steve sounded tired and down when he called us the last time. This was why. There was a connection to all of these men. It had not become personal. I remember hearing Eckard’s voice in the background when I was talking to Steve, telling him to thank us for the jerky. Steve often spoke of Eckard and talked about how he wanted to be in EOD after getting to know Chris and being around a Marine like him. Steve and his entire patrol base lost not only a friend and fellow Marine but, even more, a crucial part of their team. Eckard and Knaul had kept them safe. They were credited with saving Marines’ lives many times. If a tough veteran like Eckard could be killed, then what did the future hold for the rest of them?

The Marines at Patrol Base Barcha were reeling from the pain of death and loss but their resolve had to stay strong as they carried on with the mission. Patrols had to go on, and combat operations had to be executed with the same dynamic energy and focus as they had started out with.

Just two days after the painful loss of Staff Sergeant Eckard, the Golf Company Marines proved their resilience once again. Another patrol base was established just several meters away from where the IED had claimed Eckard’s life. It was a dominant display of force and let everyone in the immediate are know that the 2/2 wouldn’t back down. For the Marines personally, it showed honor for their fallen friend. It also let the Taliban know that the Marines now owned one more piece of Afghan real estate.





GySgt. Christopher W. Eckard
11-13-1979 / 02-20-2010

GySgt Eckard was born on November 13, 1979 in Hickory, NC. His parents are Eunice and the late Steve V. Eckard. In 1998 he joined the Army National Guard for a short period prior to joining the Marine Corps in 2001. In May 2001 GySgt Eckard attended Marine Corps Boot Camp at Parris Island SC. Upon graduating boot camp he proceeded to Marine Combat Training in Jacksonville, North Carolina and then to Courthouse Bay Camp Lejeune for Combat Engineer School. After completing Combat Engineer School he transferred to 2D Combat Engineer Battalion 2D Marine Division. He completed two deployments, the first with 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) in 2002, and the second deployment in Fallujah, Iraq in the fall of 2004. After returning home from Fallujah he re-enlisted and volunteered to join the Explosive Ordnance Disposal community. GySgt Eckard attended and completed EOD School with honors and requested to be stationed at 2nd EOD Co, Camp Lejeune, NC. While serving at 2nd EOD Co he deployed to Ramadi, Iraq in the summer of 2007, Fallujah, Iraq in the summer of 2008 and the again to Afghanistan in the fall of 2009.

GySgt was killed on 20 February 2010 near Patrol Base Barcha in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan while conducting EOD operations in the support of a dismounted patrol.

GySgt Eckard was posthumously promoted to his present rank on 20 February 2010. His personal awards include the Purple Heart (Posthumously), Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with combat distinguishing device ("V"), Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with combat distinguishing device ("V") and gold star in lieu of 2nd Award, Marine corps Good Conduct Medal bronze star in lieu of 2nd Award, Combat Action Ribbon, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, Iraq Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, Kosovo Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, NATO Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, and the National Defense Service Medal.

His is survived by his wife of 8 years, Ashley Eckard, and their 2 sons, Steven and Avery, his mother Eunice Eckard and his brother Chad Eckard.



