Chapter 2:

FEAR IN THE DARK

Shock and Awe—the name given to the first wave of war in Iraq in March 2003, meant to crush the enemy in one overwhelming strike. One choice was given to Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army: Surrender or die.

Most people watched it at home from their living rooms. I watched it in person—twenty years old, boots in the sand at the border of Iraq and Kuwait. I was just a private and a member of a small team, but in the eerie darkness of this night, I learned a powerful lesson on operating in darkness that would become clear to me years later as a leader in crisis.

Here's how it played out: Our Humvee sat in a 360-degree security perimeter, guarding against threats we couldn't see. We rotated in shifts: one soldier in the gunner's turret, one on the radio, one trying to rest, but the rest never came.

As I lay on the cot in front of our Humvee, I slept with my boots still on and my rifle tucked against my chest like a security blanket. Every crackle of the radio made my body tense. Somewhere beyond the berm,

friends of mine were hunkered down, hoping to make it through the night without a firefight.

There's a photo from that night, taken through night vision goggles. It still feels unreal. The hazy green and gray from the night vision goggles changed shapes as bombs rumbled. The sky flickered in sync with the chaos, then went calm again. And all night, oil pipelines glowed in the distance as they burned.



Shock and Awe. Kuwait/Iraq Border 2003. 302nd MP Company, First Platoon. (My Humvee is center.)

What that photo doesn't capture are the sounds. Gunfire echoing in short bursts. The crackle of radio traffic. Explosions that were too far off to be threatening, but the eerie rumbling gave no doubt about the massive destruction taking place across the land.

We maintained strict noise-and-light discipline to avoid being targeted—sitting in pure darkness, barely speaking among ourselves. The far-off rumbles were met with strange periods of silence and a tension that I can still feel every time I think of that night. You could taste adrenaline and know there was great danger in the distance yet find a strange peace because it was just beyond your reach—for the time being.

As a twenty-year-old kid from the suburbs, witnessing Shock and Awe in real life, I was scared that first night of the war—but not for the reasons you'd think. All night long, amid the bombs and gunfire, wild dogs yowled as they hit our C-wire perimeter, which was a barbed wire meant to slow or deter anyone approaching. I never saw the dogs that night. I only heard them: running, growling, hitting the wire, then scurrying back into the dark.

This is not a heroic war story. Private Brittain was *terrified* of the dogs.

Not the war. Not the enemy. Not the threat. Not the bombs or the gunfire. I was afraid of *the wild dogs*. I would lie on my cot, hugging my rifle, eyes wide open, staring into the dark while hoping the dogs wouldn't get through the wire and reach me before I could see them and fight back.

When the sun rose the next morning, I had my own secret mission in addition to fighting Saddam's army—to find the monstrous dogs that had terrorized me all night. I needed to see what my enemy looked like in the light, but I couldn't find them. When daylight came, I realized the *monsters* I'd feared all night *didn't exist.*

The dogs were real, of course—but they were nothing like the creatures I had made them out to be. What I found instead were a few mangy strays that were thin, hungry, and scared. If they were anything like my dog, Sergeant Sweetcheeks, they were probably just terrified by the noise—running from fear and searching for peace of their own.

In the days that followed, we fed and named them. One became our border favorite: a white dog resembling Steve Martin's dog Shithead from the classic movie *The Jerk*. Some bored soldiers drew captain's bars on his fur, and he was forever known as "Captain Shithead." He slept beside us on the breach point, bringing joy where joy was uncommon.

After the darkness, when the light came, I found the opposite of what I feared. I found something to love.

THE MONSTERS WE INVENT

It's easy to laugh and see how absurd that is now—Private Brittain, scared of strays in the middle of combat—but fear in the dark does something to you. It exaggerates. It distorts. It makes puppies sound like wolves.

And when the sun rose? They weren't monsters. They were just survivors. They brought us joy, they lightened the mood, and they gave us something human to hold on to in an inhuman time.

What changed? *The light.*

Lesson: Fear doesn't need facts. It just needs darkness.

BEYOND SHOCK AND AWE: BLACKOUT OPERATIONS

You'd think one night like that would toughen me up—to prove I could handle the dark. It didn't. Shock and Awe may end, but fear doesn't always fade with it. The explosions stop. The cameras move on. But operating in the dark continues.

A few nights later, we were deeper in Iraq, escorting fuel north as the battle advanced toward Baghdad. The base we pulled into was on total blackout, where we had strict rules against using our headlights or any light at all. I'd practiced driving in the dark once before, in training, but this wasn't practice. This was real, with the enemy nearby and me with a convoy full of combustible fuel, depending on me. We slipped through the pitch-black maze wearing night vision goggles that warped everything in front of us. It was challenging to see anything clearly, especially depth or distance. The world looked like static green smoke, and my heart pounded. Every shadow felt like a cliff. Every turn felt like a trap, and yet, we kept moving—slowly, carefully, one cautious turn at a time.

Days later, we came back through that same camp in daylight. Without blackout rules or night vision goggles at play, what I saw made

me laugh out loud. The narrow, dangerous path I'd imagined? It was a wide, flat, open road. A child could've driven it.

Perspective changes everything.

Darkness lies—not always through fear, but sometimes through distortion. What feels deadly at night can be simple by daylight. And when you're leading others through darkness—whether emotional, tactical, or spiritual—you have to remember it's not always as bad as it feels. It is in those moments when we must ensure we operate with facts, not fear. If we can't see clearly enough to see what is real, communicate what you see and lean on your people to help. And, even when it's challenging, remain calm and trust that when the light returns, so will your clarity about the situation at hand.

FROM COMBAT TO CRISIS

Those nights taught me something I've carried through war zones, locker rooms, hospitals, grief, cancer, and coaching: What feels monstrous, terrifying, and overwhelming in the dark is often just misunderstood in the light—distorted, magnified, or stripped of its true form.

And when I say *dark,* I don't just mean the absence of light. I mean fear. Numbness. Shame. Guilt. Uncertainty. The space between who we were and who we're becoming. The weight of leadership when the map isn't clear.

In those spaces, the mind plays tricks. We catastrophize. We isolate. We turn our feelings into facts as we tell ourselves stories that *feel* real—but aren't always true. We hear the growl of something unknown and brace for the bite, only to find later it was never as close—or as dangerous—as we thought.

I've felt that darkness in hospital rooms, waiting for news about someone I love. I felt it when my doctor said, "The cancer has spread to your lymph nodes." And I've felt it most fiercely in the mirror—staring into my own hollow eyes, asking myself, *How on earth am I supposed to lead others if I can't even get myself through this?*

And every time, the path forward has started the same way—by finding enough light to see what's true and enough courage to keep moving toward it.

Leadership Lens

Fear in the Dark

Fear in the dark bends perception. It stretches shadows into threats and turns unfamiliar sounds into danger.

Most of what unsettles us in moments like these isn't the threat itself; it's the distortion created when we can't see clearly.

Leadership isn't about eliminating fear. It's about bringing enough light to restore perspective.

When clarity returns, courage looks different. It isn't the absence of fear—it's the decision to keep moving once you can see what's actually in front of you.

But not all darkness is imagined. Some nights reveal real wounds—loss, trauma, harm—that don't disappear with daylight. Those moments require a different kind of leadership, one rooted not in reassurance but in care and repair.

This chapter is about the darkness that distorts. Later, we'll face the darkness that truly injures.

Tactical Takeaway

When fear starts building stories louder than facts, pause. Ask yourself:

- What's *real* here? (Facts)
- What's *imagined*? (Feelings or thought spirals)

Write both down. Then act only on what's true.