

New Nonfiction from Andrew Davis: Korta Za: Go Home

Andrew Elliot Davis was born July 1, 1990 in Worcester, MA; his family moved to Milford, NH, where he graduated high school in 2008. Although Andrew had a lot of different interests as a young man, his dream was to be in the military, and he joined the Marines right out of high school—not knowing exactly what to expect but willing to take on whatever his country needed from him. Andrew faithfully served in the Marines as a Sergeant in the Infantry through three tours overseas, including a tour in Afghanistan. That is where he got his idea to write Korta Za.

After he was honorably discharged from the Marines, he went on to get his bachelor's degree in environmental economics from the University of New Hampshire. While attending UNH, he became an avid fan of their college football program, where Andrew was a season ticket holder. He would later donate a New Hampshire state flag that he had taken on his tours overseas to the UNH football program, and they still bring it out at every game to this day.

Like many other military members, Andrew had a hard time in life after his service, and throughout his successes he also suffered from PTSD. Unfortunately, Andrew passed away before he could publish his story. His family is very proud to share this story with others and our hope is that he would be proud as well. Andrew is buried at the Boscawen Veterans Cemetery in Boscawen, NH and is finally at peace, at last.

Korta Za: Go Home

When you experience something so life-changing, it is sometimes with you everywhere you go. Such is the case of my

experience. When I turn away, I see it; when I go to bed, I feel it. When I close my eyes, it haunts me like a horrible movie on rerun over and over in my head. I will drift to sleep in order to get some liberation, but the dreams always turn into nightmares. It's like a rat caught in a maze with no sensible exit in sight—just a loop of walls and empty corridors. This is my experience that changed me from who I once was to the man I am today. Whether I like to admit it or not, it affected me with such magnitude that I cannot possibly ever hope to comprehend it. The only thing I know for sure is the change will forever be with me.

This is about my time in Afghanistan, when 45 men from Third Platoon, Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines left the United States for seven months. We were going to a place we had never been but had read, talked, and heard so much about. For many of us, this was the first time out of the country, or even away from home for that matter. There is nothing in this world that could have totally prepared us for what we would go through in the next seven months. Not all the training, not all the class time, not a thing could. We left as boys. For those of us who did return, we were men, but not ordinary men. We were tired, broken, and defeated. This is my story.

The hum of the rotors pierced my ears like the sound of a million wasps swarming around my head. The heat of the helicopter engulfed me as I struggled to breathe through the exhaust filling my lungs. This was a United States Marine Corps CH-53 helicopter, and it was my golden chariot to battle. Inside it were twenty tightly packed Marines, not knowing what awaited us. I sat with my heart pounding out of my chest, clutching my rifle for dear life as we were tossed and turned in our seats. Outside, I could hear the gunfire from below and I could feel the pilot swerving to avoid it. *So, this is it*, I thought to myself. *This is what I have been*

waiting for my entire life. Ever since I watched the World Trade Center Towers collapse on the screen over and over, I knew what I was destined for. Here I was, sitting in a metal coffin headed to the middle of nowhere in a country that might as well have been Mars.

We were given the signal for five minutes out and in one fluid motion I placed my rifle into condition one. This meant that I now had a bullet in the chamber and my rifle was ready to fire. We hit the ground, hard, and the ramp immediately dropped. Half dazed, we all threw ourselves up and ran out the back as we had practiced hundreds of times in the States. I struggled to see as the brown-out conditions of the sand overtook my eyes and throat. Still, I knew what I had to do and followed the outline of the Marine in front of me. Almost on cue, I threw myself to the ground in a defensive posture. I heard the helicopter take off behind me and then there was nothing but silence as I heard her rotors slowly fade into blackness. I pulled the butt of my rifle hard into my shoulder and immediately started scanning my surroundings, looking thoroughly for any possible sign of a threat. In the distance I could hear the sounds of war, but of them I could see nothing. The scene before me was like something out of a movie about other planets. All around me, we were surrounded by large mountains that would have looked more appropriate on Mars. They were nothing but rocks and dry dirt, not a tree on them. The ground itself was made up of hard-packed dusty sand that got into my eyes and throat with every breath. The sun beat down so hard it was like walking into an oven, the wind like holding a hairdryer on high to my face. We lay like this for what felt like an eternity, until the order came from around the group. *Pickup and move!* With my heart nearly pounding out of my chest and my body numb from adrenaline, I slowly rose to my feet and proceeded to fall into place with my comrades.

We set up our forward operating base in an abandoned police

compound on the outskirts of a town called Dehana. This area had many strategic advantages. It sat right on the Dehana Pass, which was situated between two mountains. It was a central chokepoint for any movement coming through the area, and it gave us enough high ground from which to keep observation posts on the valley below. This pass was famous for Alexander the Great's army moving through it during his invasion of Afghanistan. We felt as if we were following in his footsteps. At one time the town might have been flourishing, but all that I could see of it now were bullet-ridden walls and shops in appalling states. War had torn this town apart and its inhabitants were equally tattered. Our base consisted of one central building that had at one point held the town's police force, and then before us was owned by a drug lord. Now it was to be our home for seven months. There was no running water and the only electricity we had was from two generators we set up ourselves. The generators were used specifically for charging radios and running vital equipment. We slept on any ground that lay within the walls of the compound, but mostly sticking to our squads of thirteen Marines.

We took no time at all militarizing our new home. We placed barbed wire on entry and exit points and set up trip flares all throughout the perimeter. If anyone came near us in the night, they would be surprised with a large flash of light. We built posts and filled the sandbags. To us, we were just doing what we knew how to do, what we had always been trained for. To the people of the village, we were invaders from a far off land. Whatever we were, one thing was for certain: The Marines of third platoon had moved in, and we were here to stay.

On our forward operating base (F.O.B), life to us was good. We had bottles of water plentifully, and we ate prepackaged food called MRE's. But best of all, we had walls. Walls made out of mud so thick that the danger of what was right outside them seemed so far away. That for a moment we could feel safe was

all we needed sometimes. Knowing that just right outside our gates was an entire town that wanted us dead would become disconcerting, on occasion. If I said life on the F.O.B was amazing, I would be lying. But if I said I couldn't have asked for better, I would be telling the truth. We had water, food, and walls. I couldn't have imagined it could get any better. I was nineteen years old and there wasn't a telephone, toilet, or running water for that matter, in sight. We went to the bathroom in a bag and then burned it in a hole we dug out of the ground with our shovels. We would eat two meals a day consisting of food all out of a package, some twenty years old or more—but it was food. We would sleep maybe once every forty-eight hours or so—but it was sleep. I would huddle close to my brothers when the nights got freezing cold, and collapse into the shade of a wall when the temperature outside rose to 130 degrees during the day. On post, I would laugh with the children and throw them packages of freeze-dried muffins and anything else they would beg me for. This was my daily life within the base. Eat, stand post, eat again, laugh with friends, clean my gear, clean my rifle, and reload ammo. It was a good life, and it was a welcome opportunity from what lay just but a few hundred meters away.

Of all the men I was with, my best friend was Jake Fanno. He was from Oregon and had grown up similarly to me. He was in my squad, and we had gotten along from the beginning. We would always hang out and make jokes to each other to pass the time, and I always knew I could count on him for anything. I had no problem trusting him with my life. Of my best memories, I can recall this particular time when we found a bag of taco meat and then searched everywhere for packaged tortillas. Everything we found happened to be rotten and about thirty years old. We were so excited by the time we finally found tortillas that we forgot we had no way to cook the meat. So we just opened the bag and ate it cold. We were so happy we had found something good to eat that neither of us wanted to admit how horrible it really was.

"This is so good," Jake said.

"The best," I replied, "you could never get anything like this at home..."

"Dude, this is horrible."

We both laughed hysterically for about ten minutes and finally gave up on the entire situation. This was what made us happy—finding food that was thirty years old and pretending like it was edible. Just because of the idea that it might make us think of home. We could never get past how fake the food was, or how sick we always got from it.

When it was our squad's turn for patrol we would suit up and head out. Patrols were always conducted on foot and were the most dangerous parts of our days. We would wear our helmets, bullet proof flak vests, boots, camouflage utility uniforms, and of course our rifles, ammo, and whatever grenades or rockets we could carry. It was particularly dangerous because this was when we were most likely to be attacked. The enemy would watch and wait for us to get away from our base to open fire. Every step could have been our last. A favorite tactic of the enemy was to plant bombs in the ground, called IED's, that could blow up right under any of us if we didn't find them in time.

Walking through the village was always the most stressful time for me. The people did not like us at all and made us very aware of it. As we walked by them, they would clamp their mouths shut and berate us with their eyes. Any sign of weakness and they would be quick to take advantage. We were outnumbered by them, so it was important to always be on watch and not allow for any mistakes on our part. Whenever I was dealing with the villagers, I always had both hands on my rifle and kept such an aggressive posture that no one would dare to attempt to get the better of me. No matter what it took, I was coming home alive. I would let nothing get in my

way.

IED's were always my biggest fear while on patrol. Of all the times I was shot at it was easy to take cover and shoot back. IED's were another thing. While patrolling, my heart would fall into my stomach with every step. My mind was always so convinced that this would be my last step on earth. I had seen it happen to so many friends, to so many villagers that I was convinced that I was next. One second, everyone would be walking around like everything was fine. The next second, the ground was opening up, and hell for a split moment was swallowing the world as I watched my friends launched into the air with agony and horror in my heart. This was the fate that scared me the most. I was a grown man, and I went through horrible things on a daily basis. But of everything that happened to me this was the fate that was always so continuous in my mind.

One day while I was eating lunch, it began to thunder. I found this odd because never in all my time being in Afghanistan had I seen it rain. That was when I heard the familiar snap of rounds overhead. I instantly sprang to my feet and threw on my gear as fast as I could. My adrenaline was pumping so hard that I couldn't even remember placing a magazine of bullets into my rifle and making it condition one. It was just all a fluid motion, as if my rifle was an extension of my body. I flew to the gate where everyone was already waiting anxiously. They had never dared to attack us in our own backyard, and we were all nervous of what we would find right outside the door. Without hesitation I opened it and led the way out. They had come looking for a fight from us and they were going to get one. Had my body been listening to my mind before I opened the door and went outside, then maybe I would have acted more slowly or rationally. My mentality of "act immediately without hesitation" is exactly what had kept me alive up till that moment, but I feared this mentality would now get me killed. Instantly, upon stepping out of the gate I heard and felt the

symphony of death play its encore all around me. The dust at my feet and the air around my body was being sprayed with what felt and sounded like millions of little firecrackers. I pushed on and flung myself behind a grave and began to return fire. Rockets exploded right in front of me, but my body was so full of adrenaline that I ignored them. As my mind screamed for it all to stop, as my gut gave out, as I instantly wanted to vomit, my legs carried me, and my hands reacted. It was as if I was acting on autopilot and was up above watching the entire situation. When I made my way up to the wall, I knew that my fire team was behind me. I knew that if I pushed on, they would be there. They always were. I had two choices, go left or go right. If I chose right and everyone followed me, we could all be killed. If I chose left and everyone followed me, we could also be killed. It was the most important decision of my life, and I knew exactly what to do. I followed wherever my legs would take me. These are the moments that defined my time there, the times that I can gaze back on and know that I am lucky to be alive.

So many years later I can look back on my experience and I can talk about it. There are many things I did not mention in this story. Some things are so horrible that they need never to be talked about to a single soul, things that nobody could possibly comprehend. Those horrible things were part of my everyday experience. But it has shaped who I am today. Not a day or a minute goes by that I do not think of these things. That how at nineteen years old I was a grown man, knowing that each day, each moment, each step could have been my last. I have many friends that do not have the opportunities that I have today: to go to school, to enjoy a football game, to kiss a girl. They are no longer here, and they are some of the best men I have ever had the honor of knowing.

In Pashto "Korta Za" is a phrase that means "go home". The locals would always tell us that, meaning that this was their home and we needed to leave. To me, it always had more

meaning. To me, it meant that we would be going home. But not going home as who we once were; we would be going home as shells of those young men. Forever changed by our experiences, our innocence forever left on a mountain top in the Dehana Pass of Helmand Province, Afghanistan.