



2021 Military Writers Society of America  
Anthology of Short Fiction by their Members

Theme: UNTOLD STORIES

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by Joel Graves

### A FIST FULL OF DEATH

In mid-November 1990 during Desert Shield, our unit was camped in Saudi Arabia about sixty miles south of the Kuwaiti border, waiting for the call to move up. I was a newly promoted Captain and the S-1 (Admin Officer) of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 67<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment—1<sup>st</sup> “Tiger” Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored “Hell on Wheels” Division, and I had business at 1<sup>st</sup> Cav Corps headquarters. If we followed the hardtop road that wound around the mountain range, the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps headquarters was over forty miles away. But as I studied my map, I noticed that if we drove cross-country, it was only ten miles. I got a compass bearing, and we took off.

My driver and I were traversing rocky, desolate country. We passed nomads, all dressed in black, and camels and sheep munching on thin patches of grass. About half way there, a large white snake shot across the front of our HUMVEE, and I told my driver to go after it.

I grew up on a cattle ranch. As a young boy, I managed to catch every kind of snake that roamed our part of Central California. I kept them in homemade terrariums in the barn and enjoyed feeding them insects, mice and frogs. To me, the creature racing along the ground at almost twenty miles per hour was just another snake.

The snake was very fast, but after a hundred yards, it finally tired and stopped. I eagerly jumped out to see what it was. To my utter amazement, it rose up *and flared its hood*. The snake was a beautiful, seven foot long, white cobra with a scattering of small black dots down it's back and a creamy yellow belly. The snake watched as I retrieved the mattock handle from the back of the HUMVEE and approached slowly. Although trembling with fear, I carefully pushed the snake's head down, until I could grab it behind the neck. Yeah, I know...

The snake wrapped its body around my right arm, but I did not think anything about it. Snakes do that. But this snake was big and powerful. Suddenly, it twisted its head to the right, working its jaws as it tried to bite my fingers. Too much of the head was sticking out. I adjusted my grip, so less head stuck out. But to my horror, the snake began to slowly pull its head out of my hand. In a few seconds, the head would come lose, and I would be dead.

No matter how hard I bore down, the head slowly retracted into my fist until I could not see it. I reached up with my left hand and desperately squeezed my right hand. At this point, I decided to kill the snake by crushing its head, if I could, to keep it from getting loose. I had seconds.

My driver stood by, eyes bugging out, paralyzed. He hated snakes, and never thought to ask if he could help.

I bent over and struggled with both hands, gripping as hard as I could. Then the snake stopped pulling and loosen the grip on my arm. I relaxed my death grip on its head. It relaxed a little more on my arm. I took my left hand off. It loosened up more, so I reached around with my left hand and pushed the snake's head back out of my right fist, but not too far, to where it was supposed to be. Everyone relaxed. The snake watched me closely but stopped trying to bite or escape.

My driver let out his breath and whispered, "Damn, sir, you almost died."

I looked at him, smiling sheepishly.

Now I had a pet snake. Once the magnificent beast gave up the fight, the struggling stopped and calmness settled in. I petted the snake's head, examined the body closely, and finally got my driver to touch it with a finger, briefly. I unwrapped its body from my arm and gently laid it on the ground. The snake remained there without moving, head raised a few inches, watching us intently. Finally, I shoed it away and it sped out of sight.

My only regret: neither of us had film in our little cameras.

The End



DRILL AND CEREMONIES—A COMMON LANGUAGE

I was a newly promoted Captain and the S-1 (Admin Officer) of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 67<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment—1<sup>st</sup> “Tiger” Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division. During the Desert Storm assault into Kuwait, I was responsible for left flank security, maintenance and medical assets. I rode in a HUMVEE immediately behind the last tank in the formation, followed by the maintenance and medical tracks.

Iraqi soldiers walked the battlefield, holding up white flags. Others were captured or surrendered as we overran their defenses. By evening, we had hundreds of prisoners. Word came down from headquarters to prepare the Iraqis for movement to the rear.

Early the next morning, before sending them out, we needed a headcount. I told Staff Sergeant Smith to count the prisoners, who were seated on the ground nearby. He came back thirty minutes later and said he tried but could not count them, because there were too many all jumbled together.

I was a Non-Commissioned Officer for ten years, so I had an idea of what needed to happen. I walked out to the mass of prisoners and stood in front of them. Many studied me with angry eyes. I shouted, “Stand up!” and raised my arms up. They began to stand. I was encouraged.

I shouted, “Dress right, dress!” and made a chopping motion with my right arm to indicate ranks and files. Then I stood with my left arm extended, repeating, “Dress right, dress!”

Suddenly, a short man leaped forward, speaking rapidly in Arabic. He nodded to me and shouted at the prisoners. He called them to attention, then had them form eight columns. The prisoners lined up, using their left arm to touch the shoulder of the person to their front and left, so they were lined up evenly. At the rear, they broke off to form even columns.

The little man, who I later learned was a First Sergeant, turned to me, stood at attention, and saluted. I saluted back and turned to Staff Sergeant Smith. “Count the prisoners!”

He walked across the front then down the side, and in a less than two minutes, returned with the count—267. I indicated to the First Sergeant to form two columns. As they finished forming up, the HHC commander arrived in his HUMVEE and escorted the prisoners to the rear.

The End

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