
Mike T. and the Buffalo Nickel

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I^N JUNE OF 1993, I was a Marine Sergeant in Somalia. I had been in many countries. I had seen battle before, and I had encountered death and destruction in such places as Panama in 1989 during Operation Just Cause, in Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991, in Liberia in 1992 during the evacuation of the American Embassy, and Bosnia in 1992. I had been to forty-eight countries, and probably half were hostile towards American servicemen. However, nothing could have prepared me for the experiences that I would endure in this small east African nation. Acrid smoke and the rancid stench of rotting corpses were constantly in the air. The heat, the swarms of relentless flies, and the Somalis that wanted us dead made this an almost unbearable place to be.

One day I received a letter from my father. He did not write to me often, so I thought that he was delivering bad news. I took my letter to the bunker that I slept in and, sitting there alone, I read my mail. My father explained to me that he knew what I was going through. He was a veteran of the Korean War and had experienced many horrible things. He then told me that when he was in Korea his mother sent him a letter containing a buffalo nickel. She explained to him that it would bring him good luck and get him home safely. My father kept the coin with him at all times. He swore that the coin actually did bring him luck, keeping him alive when in all probability he should have been killed. In closing, my father said that it was time for me to have the nickel. He asked me to keep it close. I sat there staring at my present, and I remember thinking that I could use all the help that I could get in order to leave this place

in one piece. So, I took the nickel, drilled a hole in it, and put it on my dog tags chain.

The next day I went out on a combat patrol with about twenty other Marines. Not long after entering a hostile neighborhood, we were ambushed. There were bullets and explosions all around us. I was behind a small wall with my back against a building, returning fire. Suddenly a rocket-propelled grenade slammed into the building only feet above my head. It did not detonate, though. Then, as quickly as the firefight started, it ended. We received no casualties that day. I remember looking at the hole in the building from the grenade. An RPG is usually very dependable. It is a rugged, durable weapon that rarely has malfunctions. Was it by chance that the round did not detonate, or was it the luck of the buffalo nickel? I wasn't convinced.

A few days later, my platoon was engaged in another firefight. A round from an AK-47 assault rifle went straight through the bush cover that was on my head, coming so close that it sizzled the hair on my head. Was it luck? I still wasn't sure.

Though I had a few other close calls the six months I was in Somalia, the most vivid was the day that I got shot. I was a sniper. My partner and best friend, Corporal Mike T. Spencer, and I were to travel outside of our safe zone and find "targets of opportunity." We were in the second floor of a building. I was scanning the surrounding area with the scope of my .50 caliber rifle. Suddenly bullets came tearing through the walls. We were being shot at from down below and from the other buildings across the street. We returned fire but quickly realized that we were heavily outnumbered. I was carrying a secondary weapon. It was a small 9mm. submachine gun called a MP-5. In a matter of seconds I had fired sixty rounds from it. Mike had been hard at work also, firing nearly ninety rounds from his M-4 assault rifle. I was changing the magazine in my weapon when a bullet ripped into my right shoulder and exited my back. At the time I wasn't sure if I were shot. I thought it was some debris hitting me from grenade explosions. When I felt the warmth of the sticky blood, I knew that I was in trouble. Everything was in slow motion. Mike helped me up from the floor and told me that we needed to go. As we were leaving the room, I remember looking back. The walls were riddled with holes and sunlight was streaming in giving the structure the appearance

of Swiss cheese. We fought our way out of the ambush and made a radio call for help, and I was medically evacuated by helicopter to a hospital ship. When I was stabilized, I was flown to a U. S. Air Force base in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia. After surgery I spoke with the doctor. He told me that the bullet had barely missed an artery and had come very close to hitting my spine. The surgeon said, "You are very lucky to be alive." He was right.

After four months of convalescence, I returned to full duty. Mike T. and I continued to find ourselves in sticky situations in various places around the world. I kept the buffalo nickel close to me, though. I do believe that something other than my knowledge and experience kept me alive in tight spots where death was certain. This coin, this measly item that was worth only five pennies to anyone else, was priceless to me. Not only did my nickel bring me luck, but also it became a symbol of hope and of home.

I was never one to believe in superstitions. A black cat walking across my path, walking under a ladder, stepping on a crack, all of these stories and urban legends we heard while growing up, were silly to me. I believed that men forged their own destinies. There was no such animal as luck, good or bad. That is what I believed until the summer of 1993.

In the spring of 1996, I decided to leave active duty. On the day that I got out of the service, I went to my friend Mike Spencer's house. We sat outside on his porch and talked about our times together. I had known him for nine years. We had saved each other's lives on more than one occasion. Before I left, I handed him the nickel and asked him to keep it safe. He was fully aware of its origin and gratefully accepted it. I remember his voice cracking, becoming shaky, the tear that ran down his cheek, and I remember the smile on his face that spread from ear to ear.

Last week I received an email from Gunnery Sergeant Mike T. Spencer. In the letter was a picture of him in Iraq. He had written only one sentence. It was, "Guess what's in my pocket?"