

# Surviving the International War Zone

Security Lessons Learned and Stories from  
Police and Military Peacekeeping Forces

Robert R. Rail



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## *My Life's Lessons*

### **GO FETCH, BOY**

The story of the fox and the rabbit was told to me long ago in the hard to remember past, at a time in my life when I just didn't fully appreciate its lesson.

I was just a little kid, wearing hand-me-down clothes from my big brother, who gravitated to and greatly treasured the hard and painful lessons of life that an old black man was willing to share with me. He told me about his existence on the sometimes ugly streets of Chicago. He relished telling one and all that paid him the honor of listening, where his wisdom (and the scars he bought it with) came from. I felt lucky to be in the numbers of those who were allowed the gift of hearing what this old man had to say about everything and anything that crossed his knowledgeable mind. For the price of "go fetch," I earned the admission price to hear another great story from someone in this world who had the time to talk to me. He only had to say "go fetch boy" and I was off like the wind. I would get a bag from somewhere and scrounge up 12 clean, empty, glass soda bottles, and return them to the little corner store down the block for the two pennies each deposit. It was a great little neighborhood store and I loved going there for any reason.

At that time in my life the store was a haven because it was so different from the other places in my life where there was little to attract me or catch my interest. I thought it was a huge and wonderful place. After all, to a little kid like me any store that had soda, candy, bakery, and little toys in small plastic containers was the best place on Earth. From the big happy lady behind the counter, to the squeaking old wooden floors, to

the dog that was always sleeping in the doorway sunlight, it was a great place to wander up and down its one aisle with my hard-found deposit money tightly held in my hand. I would walk up and down that one aisle, over and over, consuming everything with my eyes until my interest was totally satisfied. With the returned deposit money I got one soda pop from the case on the floor and one soda from the big noisy cooler with the glass door. Sometimes the lady would charge me two cents more for the bottle that came from the cooler but sometimes she didn't. When you're a little kid these big money transactions mean a lot to you. When I brought back our sodas, the old man would always give me a great big smile with his big old yellow teeth, and then give me one approving nod of his old gray head, as he held the cold glass bottle tightly against his forehead. He would always take a moment to rub the refreshingly cold glass bottle from side to side across his forehead while saying to me, "you did good boy, damn good."

Now, he would say that it was time for another "black pearl of wisdom." That was his slant on his stories and on his life. After what he had endured in all his years of life he had earned the right to say it any way he wanted. "Listen up boy!" he would tell me as I sat on the old, cool, cracked concrete floor with a wide smile on my face. "A fox can run faster than a little fuzzy rabbit. A fox can turn a corner in the blink of your eye, faster than any rabbit made by God could. A fox can run all day and all night without so much as takin' a deep breath. So why does that rabbit usually get away? Are you listening to me boy? Well ... why? I'll just have to tell you why because you're still young and dumb to the world and haven't learned much of anything useful in your life yet. The fox is just runnin' for its dinner, but the rabbit is runnin' for its life. That's motivation boy. Remember what I'm saying here! The rabbit is motivated to run or it's gonna be eaten. There's going to be times in your life, boy, when you just have to make yourself motivated or you will lose, or get hurt awful bad."

The older I get the more weight his words carry in both my mind and my heart. After the stories, sometimes, if he wasn't too tired he would show me some of his "super punch" boxing tricks. The talk in the neighborhood was that many years ago he used to be such a good boxer that he actually made money and traveled all over the country fighting other men in warehouses and empty buildings in front of big crowds of people who paid to see him fight. When he would walk the streets where we lived I noticed how all the other men on the street would smile timidly at him and give him a lot of room when passing him on the sidewalk. They made sure he had room as he sat in his chair in the shade in front

of his building. I was always a little bit confused and even surprised that young men who were bigger and stronger than he was would still give him such respect. He would show me how to punch with my left hand as hard as I could into the face of my opponent and then quickly punch with my right hand, and if I could, to punch again and again with the better power of the right hand. He called this his special one-two punching.

Many of my afternoons passed by quickly between “go fetch,” great stories, and the super punch one-two training. One day I came by the building to surprise the old man because I already did the “go fetch,” but this time both bottles of soda pop were cold from the cooler at the corner store, and I was going to trick him into asking to choose which hand had the cold soda in it. This was going to be the day I tricked him and tricked him good. He thinks he’s going to be ready for me today, but I was going to be ready as a rabbit for him instead. When I got to his room down the hallway there were two men moving out what little furniture he had. As I stood in the doorway I became as cold as the sodas in my hands. One of the men said, “If you’re looking for the guy who lived here, kid ... I’m sorry, he’s dead.”

I don’t know how long I stood there. Perhaps if I just closed my eyes and pretended that I never heard those words it would all change back to the way it should be with just him and me. But no, I was alone again in a terrible way. I just left the sodas on the old wooden table that was left in the corner of his room. I was hot and sweating, but I didn’t feel thirsty anymore. I walked away and kept walking aimlessly for most of that day. My heart was torn, it hurt, and I cried for him and I cried for myself and what I had lost; but that’s alright because that’s the way little kids think, and I was just a little kid who hadn’t grown up yet. I was always just called “boy” and will always deeply regret never knowing his name, but I will always remember his wide smile and the time that we had together, just him and me.

For a brief time I had some success climbing through the ropes by myself and getting into the ring to fight in the amateur boxing world. I can remember how I felt using my skill and aggressive power to “deck” someone who was foolish enough to get into the ring and go against me. I was only a welterweight but I had the huge power advantage against most of my opponents because my upper arms were bigger around than my neck. I could hit really hard so I focused most of my efforts on hitting my opponents and not enough time developing my abilities to not get hit.

Before long I found myself winning fights and moving up in the skill and caliber of who I was fighting. Now my fights were getting much harder to win because my opponents were getting better and the mistakes I was making were resulting in my being “paid back” by getting hit back. I found out that I was actually doing the “one-three super punch” but now I was getting hit with the “two.” I was having the unfortunate experience of sitting on my ass in the middle of the ring and looking up at the referee. The worst part of all of this was that getting hit didn’t hurt at all. You know that when it doesn’t hurt anymore you are really hurt bad. Pain is the warning sensation your body sends to your brain to make you stop doing something. When you stop getting that signal you’ve gone way too far over the edge. I realized then that what I had been doing to my past opponents was now being done to me. This turnabout was a very sobering and undeniable shot of reality in my young life. This was neither a good nor desirable circumstance. After a couple times of experiencing this novel situation I decided that it was time for me to get motivated “like a little rabbit” and seek out a new future career path.

My life would now go on with the wisdom of the “scars of experience” from a friend that will never be forgotten, lighting my way through many dark moments in a very uncertain future. As the years passed and I served in one war zone after another, I realized that the lesson to be learned is that if you are not motivated to survive you better play rabbit and get motivated!

Every war zone has a name for it. Some call it the red zone. Some call it by code names or sectors, or even by grid reference numbers on a map. No matter how they refer to it, you’re walking in harm’s way. Once you have gotten into it, you will always remember that the way you look at the world will never be the same again. I remember saying to my old police partners back in the states after happily returning from my first war zone that it’s not where you are, but what happens while you’re there. You can never fully understand or be able to anticipate your surroundings but you can understand yourself and anticipate your reactions. Be honest with yourself and know your limitations. Plan on how you can work to strengthen them. There are times when you will be in a quiet area, where things are peaceful and calm, and all of a sudden all hell breaks loose around you. The strange thing is that there are times when most of the world will never hear about where you’ve been or what you’ve been doing because nobody cares about that small piece of land on the map except you and your partners. There are other times when you cruise through your tour of duty mostly unscathed and when you get back to your own

country everyone wants to know what was going on because of all the media reports. News was being made about where you were, pumping up the conflict and putting their own usual twisted spin on what they wanted the rest of the world to think really happened. There were times when you could attribute more of the stories we heard back here at home to it being a slow news day, than it being about the actual truth of what had happened or what action you knew had been taken.

I remember tiredly trudging through the moonless predawn streets of one war zone and suddenly hearing a whizzing sound going past my head—then a pinging sound and something bouncing off the vehicles and the stones under my boots. Getting shot at is not like on the television or in the movies. There it's all drama, special effects, flashing lights, and other strange sounds. Getting motivated and reacting to the attack was an immediate and unconscious response. Returning fire was a training-instilled reaction that fortunately required little to no thought on my part. It was not a conscious choice for me and the other officers to engage the ones who were shooting at us. It was the natural reaction we had to survive and defend the lives of our partners, like we all had been trained to do. You react because there is no time to think about your response to what the hell is going on around you—or at you! And there is no time for you to pause to think about what you have to do.

Between fate and circumstance, and a dimly lit doorway with armed combatants, there was no time or alternatives left. Before I could back off the trigger I had fired off almost an entire magazine of my weapon's ammunition. You can never acquire "enough" conflict experience in your life so these experiences are all crucial trainers. The challenge was surviving long enough to learn the lessons that went with this combative situation. Good training and just plain luck prevailed, and we just mindlessly and automatically fell into the "cover and reload" mode. I had to reload and maintain my ammo magazines as soon as I could because I didn't know if the next street I would walk on would be worse than the last one. Your ammo magazines are a treasured burden; they are your best insurance and lifeline in uncertain surroundings. I fired off too many rounds from my weapon's magazine because I was just so damn charged up—my heart was pounding louder in my head than the sound of the rounds discharging from my weapon.

The ensuing stench from the smoke of burning cars, bodies, warm flesh, and feces that are the aftermath of conflict will be etched in my thoughts forever. I vaguely remember briefly lying down, scrunched under a vehicle for cover and reloading. It wasn't the best spot to pick,

but it was cover and safe for the instant it took to load magazines and gather back my train of thought. I often wonder why some memories are so strong while others only come to mind when other thoughts, smells, and sights trigger their remembrance. I just lay there, tucked up with a partner, under the vehicle for a “cover and reload” moment, with a slippery wet ammo magazine. My eyes were wide open as I strained to hear the distant crack of weapons’ fire. It didn’t sound as close to us so that was a relief.

No paperwork, no report number, no forms to be filled out making sure that all the little boxes were filled in and all the spelling was correct with copies going through all the proper chain of command. Out here it’s just magazines in and magazines out, and move on. That’s all there was to the incident for now—and later, just random thoughts about little things that remind you from time to time about what took just seconds to occur but will stay with you forever. I couldn’t shake the thought that there had to be more to it all, some sort of aftermath to what just happened. But why should there be anything? It was done and it was over. Sometimes you reflect back in your thoughts and think, why me? Why here? Why now? And then you remember, “It is not where you are, but what happens to you while you are there.”

As the light of day grew brighter I saw why my ammo magazines were wet and slippery to my touch. They were covered with my blood because my hands were so desensitized by the endorphin rush caused by the conflict that I didn’t even feel my broken fingernails or any of the cuts on my hands. The fingertips on my right hand were all cut up from reloading my ammo magazines. We were all quiet as we gathered our thoughts and realized we came through it alright. Needless to say I felt the elbow and knee scrapes later. The side of my head started to hurt and I remembered hitting the bottom of the vehicle when I cleverly tried to stand up under it; but at the time your mind and body switch gears and you just aren’t in a mental state to try to think. We were remarkably “motivated” and weren’t thinking about the little details that didn’t matter at the time.

I think about the lesson of the candle and the flame. When you tell some people that the flame will burn them they still fall victim to their own compulsion and put their hand in the flame. They need to learn by their own experience just what it feels like. Others can learn from the experiences of others and avoid the pain of the candle’s flame. I know in my heart that I was spared the pain of many candle flames in my life, and for that I am grateful—for each and every “pearl of wisdom” I was given even when it was a time in my life when I couldn’t appreciate what I was given and how well it would serve me my entire life.

Whenever I am back in my country and I'm being thanked for serving in some war zone, I reflect on the sacrifices of the men and women of our nation, now serving, and those who served in our fading memories. I recall Vietnam and the lack of respect and outright animosity toward the soldiers from much of the public and the media as they returned, despite the fact that it was our government and the political elite that chose to send them. I can't imagine the mental anguish and emotional pain they endured being subjected to such scathing and unjust scrutiny.

The fact is that they, as well as our current rank and file deployed throughout the world, responded to a call of duty to serve and protect our country and country's interests in adverse and sometimes unimaginable circumstances. We, as a nation of people, in turn have the responsibility to respectfully listen to them. It is the least we can do for the time and service they have rendered to us. Personally, it is always an honor for me to meet them and learn from some of their experiences and pearls of wisdom they have kindly offered me.

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## *Returning Back Home*

My “brother” is someone you may or may not have ever met in your life. My brother is not a man or a woman who is blood-related to me. He is related to me by his willingness to shed his blood unhesitatingly for me, as I would do for him. I can’t explain this bond between all of us that transcends the customary and typical feelings that most casually consider valid in a friend, because I don’t understand it all myself. It’s not something that you comprehend but more of what you feel and know that the same feeling, without words that are expressed, is within the other person as well. It’s like being as one with all of the good and the bad in concert, and words are not even needed to be spoken between us much of the time. It means never having to look behind you to see if you are covered, and covering the back of your partner without being asked or thinking about the consequences to yourself. It’s not based on the time we spend together but where that time has been spent, and the desperate conditions or insane circumstances that cemented the bond between all of us. There was no race or gender or religion or politics or other chosen veneer between us. These meaningless layers were burned off very quickly and when there was nothing left to separate us from one another, we became as one with our blood, our laughter, and our pain now being the same because of all we shared. We are like a protective shadow to each other, like a safe harbor of darkness where we can hide from the world and even our own thoughts. We didn’t have to look down to know that our shadow was there. At night we knew all the world was our shadow. The shadow is my brother and I am his shadow.

When you have earned every grain of sand in the hourglass of your deployment time and your time is up, and you have filled out enough end-of-mission deployment report forms to wallpaper an entire room, you leave the war zone and finally come home to where you think you belong. With that rush of long-awaited emotions, this is one of the most indescribable and wonderful moments you will ever experience. But now you feel that you are alone because of how you have changed from what you used to be. Alone, because you have left your partners so very far behind and away from where you are now. It's so very great to see and hold all of your loved ones—those you have missed so much and worried about every day you were so far apart from them in the war zone ... but they don't understand your constant fear for their safety, and you still feel that you are alone and apart from those you were once with. You want to tell your family so much of all the things that are on your mind but you know they won't understand the world you have just come from or maybe they don't want to understand, so you remain silent about all the coming home conflicts and confusion that are inside of you, and you still feel alone. With shuddering hands you once again taste the incredible food, like steak and ice cream and anything cold to drink, but you still feel like you are alone. You sleep in a bed so comfortable you can't believe it, but you still wake up and find yourself alone. You sit at a table and don't have to eat out of a plastic, military ration bag with food that will taste and look the same today and next year, and are served dinner on a plate and eat with real spoons and forks. But your mind dwells on what your partners back in the war zone are eating or not being able to eat, and you're alone. You can go anywhere and do anything you want to do without paperwork, restrictions, written orders, and passes, but you restlessly walk anywhere and everywhere alone, not even remembering where you have been walking or where you are going. You pace around in total awe when you're at the local supermarket and can't believe all there is on the shelves for you to buy. One aisle of the store you are now in would dwarf the entire PX back in the war zone. There you had to use ration cards, or trade-offs, and wait in lines, and still considered yourself lucky to have even made it into the gate to be there, but you feel alone in this big store that has more than you need, more than you or your former partners could even remember. You go from channel to channel on the television, hearing the stories from the all-knowing "insightful" experts about what it's like to be where you have just come from, but you remember the hard truth and feel like you are the only one at home who knows what's actually going on over there in the war zone and

feel so alone because there is no one here you can share your thoughts with that will understand. The politicians and news commentators fly in and out of highly protected “safe areas” that have every comfort and luxury known to man let alone a war zone, and yet they still complain about how tough it was for them to be in an area where you would have considered it a holiday to be there. You hear the manipulated, in-depth, twisted reports, from those who were only there just long enough to get dust on their feet. With their special culled insights obtained, they leave to go back to our country and promote their version of what is going on at the expense of the blood, sweat, and pain of those remaining back where you have just come home from. However, even the bitterly hard fought accomplishments of so many dedicated individuals are relegated to a worldwide interruption on all news programs to report the death of any notable drugged out rock star or other significant socialite or political event. During those days when society news holds higher priorities, all reporting of the war and sacrifice ends for that media moment. You listen to all of the remarks and opinions and complaining from all of the people who know everything about where you have been and what they think you have done, or should have done. You just take a deep, controlled breath and let the anger and depressions build within you, because there is no place for it all to go, and no partners here—back home—to talk to about everything that is so upsetting for you to think about. You care about some of these people more than the words they say offend and hurt you, so you just let their remarks and conversation flow through the burning embers of your heart and mind. They ask, “Is everything all right?” “Something wrong?” “Thank you for your service.” “Great being back?” But you feel like their words are being asked to some other person who’s hiding inside of you. You think now and then about those who will not be coming home or those who have been so badly hurt, and after a deep sigh of relief that you returned home in one piece, there is the thought forever in your mind about the loss that others have suffered.

You feel alone because your war zone partners are back in that place where you have just come from and that’s still in your mind every moment. Time does help, and having someone to just talk to during the bad moods and moments means everything in the world. All of the things that happened in the war zone were things and conditions that were dealt with or worked out, no matter how bad it was. It was just handled in some way, and it got done, because we were there together. But here, I am alone in a crowd. Here, I have trouble hearing the music others take pleasure in.

The humor that I see and hear is no longer funny to me. Here, what others touch I can't feel. I know that something is missing or gone that was once within me, but I only feel the emptiness I know is in me here at home. All I know is that something is gone, and I know it was left back there where I have just come from. Back in the war zone I was whole and complete, but here, back with all the people and things I longed to be with for so very long, I realize that not all of me has returned home.

The person who goes off to the war zone is gone forever, and the person who returns is a different person. That person does not even know or fully understand what has happened to him. Time is the great healer and, hopefully, slowly the two become one again, stronger and more secure than either identity ever was by itself.

## SWEET DREAMS

*Janet Rail, United States*

When I was a little girl, I remember watching my father take a nap and in the middle of it he started twitching and moving around in his sleep. I was going to wake him up because I thought something was wrong but my mother stopped me. She said, "Let him sleep. Sometimes it's better not to remember a dream." This happened more than once and the answer was always the same. Mom would always calmly lead me away so my dad could finish his nap undisturbed. When I was older I finally asked my mom what she meant and what my father was dreaming about that was so bad. The simple answer—"The War." Dad served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was part of the 1st Division (the Big Red 1), and even though he is very proud of his service and what he did he never spoke to me about any of it. I was a child—and a girl—and back then, you just didn't talk about things like that. I knew he drove an ammo truck and spent a lot of time in Germany but while we were children the details were very sketchy. I'm sure my dad was involved in a lot of things that would give anyone nightmares but he never said anything to us. It wasn't until my older brother entered the military that my father talked to us about his time overseas, and even then, most of what I learned was good memories and things that would not be upsetting to anyone. The "nightmares" of the war remained unspoken.

When Bob came home from his first mission in Bosnia there was more than one time he started twitching and moving around in his sleep.

Laying there next to him I started to instinctively reach out to him to wake him up ... but then I heard my mother's voice calmly say, "Let him sleep. Sometimes it's better not to remember a dream." I would lie there, not moving because I didn't want anything to wake him up and I would wait until he would stop moving around. I would gently reassure him that he was home and everything was okay. Sometimes he would wake up and sometimes he would sleep through the whispers but I always noticed his body starting to relax. Most of the time, he would be able to go back to sleeping peacefully. Even after you are thousands of miles away from the fighting, the war can sneak up on you.

After Bob had been home awhile, the nights of rough dreams became fewer and farther apart, but when he returned home from Kosovo and Iraq once again the nightmare of the war came home with him. Talking about things during the day helped make the nights much better. The military calls it debriefing but just "listening" can be very helpful for both the returning soldier and the family that is waiting for them. Most of the time, the thoughts being recalled were random—good things and bad things all mixed together. Stress can do that to your memories and there aren't many more stressful situations than being in a war zone. Sometimes it would be the same story he told me the week before and sometimes it would be all new information. What was important for me to remember was that Bob wasn't trying to hide information from me. He honestly had forgotten about some incident until that moment. There were things that happened in Bosnia that he remembered after he came home from Iraq. Watching the news reports just before going to bed definitely did not help! And it didn't have to be news about the war. It could be something that seemed totally innocent about an event that happened in a small town near home but there could be "something" that reminded him of something that happened "over there" and the floodgates of his memories were opened.

Time is truly the great healer. As the days turn into years the number of nights the war sneaks back into Bob's dreams are less and less and this is good. Sometimes I wonder after all these years if my dad still has nights when the war sneaks back into his bedroom.

Moving first-hand accounts of war-zone life from officers who have been there

# Surviving the International War Zone

## Security Lessons Learned and Stories from Police and Military Peacekeeping Forces

Robert R. Rail • Eddyville, Kentucky, USA

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### Experience the actual day-to-day struggles of those living in the world's most unstable regions

Few people are better able to describe how to survive in a war zone than those who have seen, experienced, and lived it first-hand. Comprised of a collection of original stories from international contributors, **Surviving the International War Zone: Security Lessons Learned and Stories from Police and Military Peacekeeping Forces** contains true accounts of unimaginable scenarios that could only occur in war-torn and conflict-ridden areas.

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- Surviving extreme temperatures and staying healthy
- Interacting with the indigenous population and cultural awareness
- Adjusting to the challenges of limited technology and resources
- Protecting oneself from the imminent threat of violence that is present in all war-torn regions

Enhanced with photographs from the war zone, the stories in this volume range from accounts of unspeakable torture, to descriptions of deplorable living conditions, to moments of humor. Some of the stories will make you laugh; others may make you cry. Ultimately, the book provides an unparalleled insight into the full range of deep-seated and sometimes conflicting emotions of the people who have lived and served in war zones and have come home to tell about it.

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- Explores the impact of cultural differences on the work of overseas military and security detail

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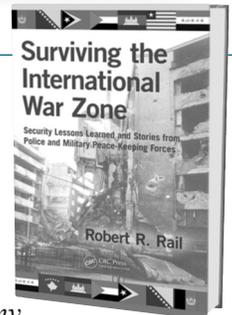
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