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Forged in Fire: Ashlyn Howard's Deployment to Iraq

The first attack happened on December 3rd, 2019. Ashlyn Howard and her coworker were walking along the Al Asad Army base when she saw, reflected in a puddle on the ground, a streak pass through the sky. "I thought it was fireworks," Ashlyn recalls as we sit and talk about her time in the Army. It wasn't until one of her battle buddies, as she calls them, came running past shouting "Howard, get down," that the realization clicked for her. The streak, she later found out, was made by rockets that were being fired at her base, "IDF," or indirect fire, as she calls it. But this was only a harbinger of what was to come.

One month later, on January 8th, 2020, Iraq fired ballistic missiles (supplied by Iran) at the Al Asad Air Base in an unprecedented attack. Ashlyn, after having spent a full day working as an HR specialist responsible for keeping track of more than 4,000 personnel on a daily basis, was walking back from the mess hall when she and her co-workers received the call at around 20:00 hours to report to HQ with an overnight bag. Not thinking too much of it at the time, they reported for duty ready to pass the time watching movies and hanging out. While she and the rest of the base operations unit settled in, the active duty unit, whose role is to ensure the safety of the base, were preparing to go out.

Thinking they were being called on a training mission, Howard was still unaware that anything was wrong. It wasn't until around 23:00 hours that there were anxious rumblings that

something was amiss. As it turns out, someone at the base had received a tip off that something was about to happen. It was then, with tensions running high, that Ashlyn, who was 19 years old at the time of the attack, called her parents: “Something is going to happen, if you watch the news. I will call you when I can, but I just want to make you aware.”

Ashlyn joined the Army when she was 17, with her parents co-signing her paperwork. Coming from a military background – her father is a former Marine – she decided to join the military only after having gone through

the entire enrollment process for the University of South Carolina. “I got the idea out of nowhere,” she says. After briefly considering the Air Force, Ashlyn settled on the Army, letting them know exactly what she wanted. “I told them I wanted to be in human resources ... and I wanted to be in Fort



Ashlyn with her family.

Jackson in the reserves,” she said. She ended up getting her desired post– the recruiter called her in the middle of her senior year history class telling her they would hold the position for her if she committed right away.

Her plan was to join the reserves and still attend college at the University of South Carolina so that she could become an officer. There were rumors of deployment floating around, but Ashlyn, who planned on joining officer training which would make her exempt from deployment, didn’t think she would be going overseas anytime soon. As she continued on with

her ROTC training while in school, however, she faced an often-overlooked truth. The adjustment of moving from basic training and reserve life to civilian life “was a big struggle,” according to Ashlyn. This difficult transition ultimately caused her to drop out of college that semester. Because she dropped out before signing her contract to become an officer with ROTC, she had to deploy with the rest of her unit who were called to Iraq.

Her time at Al Asad started out well enough— “morale was high,” she recalls of her time before the attack. “A lot of things changed after that,” she says. Many of the non-military workers who were on base left after the attack happened. “There was this man . . . and he made the best bread,” Ashlyn recalls. She befriended him and would look forward to getting fresh pizza bread and monkey bread from him while on base. But after the attack, many of these contractors left and getting food became much more difficult.



Ashlyn in uniform.

After that call to her parents, Ashlyn and the others were ordered to go to the bunkers at around 0:00 hours. She and her team were fully battle ready, wearing kevlar and carrying their weapons. As they waited, they received another call, this time ordering all essential personnel back to HQ. “I should have went [with them], but I didn’t think that [I was considered essential] because I was only a specialist E4 at the time,” she says. So Ashlyn stayed in the bunker. “All the way up until the attack started I was anxious . . . but then once the attack started, I got eerily calm,” she recounts.

This poise under pressure is, in many ways, unsurprising. After spending just a few moments with Ashlyn, it becomes immediately clear that this a person who knows her own mind. From her strong conviction to join the Army, to the incredible way in which she commands her own person, her steadfastness is palpable. This, perhaps, is something she gained during her time spent in basic leadership training. She made E5 –the rank of sergeant– by the age of 20, only a year and a half after joining as a private E1.

She also learned a great deal from watching others, seeing both positive and negative examples of leadership and learning from both in turn. “I want to be somebody who uplifts people,” she says, speaking about her views on leadership. Ashlyn carries these lessons of leadership and resolve with her today where she is currently enrolled at the Citadel studying marketing and business development while working as a paralegal for the Army. She is also a member of the Citadel’s Distinguished Scholars Program and is also the President of the The Citadels Student Veterans' Association Chapter.

It was perhaps these qualities of determination and leadership that allowed her to keep her composure while huddled in a thickly-walled concrete bunker. She could hear the “incoming, incoming, incoming” and sat, waiting. The difference between rockets



Bunker at Al Asad (Qiblawi)

and ballistics, Ashlyn explains to me, is that “when rockets hit, you hear the sounds ... they whiz



Ruined living quarters at Al Asad (Qiblawi)

past and they boom. With missiles, when they release, they have an arc.” She recounts what it was like in these suspended moments of anticipation waiting for the missile to hit: “You’re sitting there, crouched ... and you’re waiting and minutes pass by and you’re, like, ‘Okay, did it hit?’ And the minute that you sit up it hits.” Despite the terrorizing effects of the attack, there were no casualties, though the base suffered heavy damage.

Weeks after the attack, journalists and historians came to interview those stationed at Al Asad. One journalist asked Ashlyn if there was anything she’d like to say to those back home who were her own age. “I remember getting really emotional about it because a lot of my friends then were in college and they obviously had very outspoken views about the military... And I was like, ‘I want to let people my age know that yes, while they may have their strong opinions about the military, there is a reason why we do the things that we do and come overseas and have to be in these combat zones. That way you can have the freedom to be whoever you

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Ashlyn standing at parade rest

want, to love whoever you want, to be able to be a woman in America and have the rights that you do...they just need to understand that.” Ashlyn’s conviction in these words is evident and her great accomplishments serve as testimony to the incredible resolve and determination that, in part, form an unshakable character.

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