

He slid out of the Humvee and took the rifle off the back seat. Carried it across rough earth to the coconut mat. Placed it gently with its bipod feet a yard back from the edge. Bend down and loaded it. Stepped back behind it and lined himself up and crouched, knelt, lay full length. He snuggled the stock into his shoulder. Eased his neck left and right and looked around. It felt like he was alone in the middle of nowhere. He ducked his head. Closed his left eye and moved his right eye to the scope. Draped his left hand over the barrel and pressed down and back. Now he had a tripod mount. The bipod, and his shoulder. Solid. He spread his legs and turned his feet out so they were flat on the mat. Drew his left leg up a little and dug the sole of his shoe into the mat's fibers so the deadweight of the limb anchored his position. He relaxed and let himself sprawl. He knew he must look like a guy who had been shot, instead of a guy preparing to shoot.

He gazed through the scope. Saw the hypervivid image of great optics. He acquired the target. It looked close enough to touch. He laid the reticle where the two strokes of the X met. Squeezed the slack out of the trigger. Relaxed. Breathed out. He could feel his heart. It felt like it was loose in his chest. The caffeine was buzzing in his veins. The reticle was dancing over the X. It was hopping and jerking, left and right, up and down, in a tiny random circle.

He closed his right eye. Willed his heart to stop. Breathed out and kept his lungs empty, one second, two. Then again, in, out, hold. He pulled all his energy downward, into his gut. Let his shoulders slacken. Let his muscles relax. Let himself settle. He opened his eye again and saw that the reticle was still. He stared at the target. Feeling it. *Wanting* it. He pulled the trigger. The gun kicked and roared and the muzzle blast blew a cloud of dust out of the coconut mat and obscured his view. He lifted his head and coughed once and ducked back to the scope.

Bull's-eye.¹

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