

# The Journal of Military Experience



# **The Journal of Military Experience**

**2011**

Edited with an Introduction by  
Travis L. Martin



## **Eastern Kentucky University**

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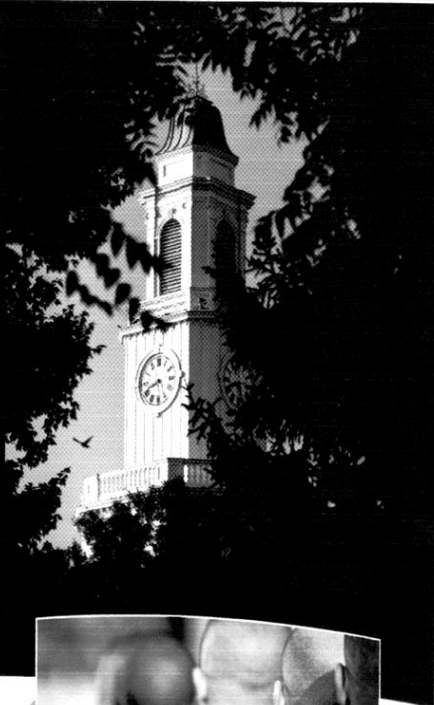
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## Introduction: *The Journal of Military Experience*

The following stories, poems, and artwork belong to men and women trying to translate entirely foreign experiences into a language that others—and the writers themselves—can understand. The following pages detail the efforts of veterans to look back and decide *who they were* in uniform, what they have become, and what their experiences mean to their respective futures.

Most of the authors here are student veterans making the transition from military to civilian life. In that way, they are re-shaping their skills and knowledge into something palpable for existence in a strange new reality. If what you read seems surreal, horrific, or confusing, know that this way of life became completely ordinary for the authors in this journal. It is the world that they have been asked to reintegrate themselves into—the world that you consider to be normal—that has grown, to them, estranged and unfamiliar.

It seems like every generation has its wars and men and women in uniform who write about them. Before you read any further, ask yourself, “Why is this the case?” What possible reason could there be for airmen, marines, sailors, and soldiers to write about the most unspeakable crime that mankind is capable of committing? The answer lies in the question: War is as horrible and awe-inspiring as they say; it is something that we—the citizens of a country lucky enough to fight wars in faraway locations—have the option of pushing to the back of our minds and quietly dismissing as a necessary evil. War is something that we do not have to think about, but it is something that those who fight in our stead must think about every day after they return home.

Not all of the stories and poems that follow are about combat or service overseas. Yes, some of the authors write about the unspeakable things that they have been asked to do, or more accurately, that have been done to them. But some focus solely on that work of translation, making sense of a warrior culture and the mentality of an individual who has been bred, trained, and conditioned by a society in desperate need of a few willing to sacrifice for the many. In this way,

all of the following works are interrelated—bound by a common bond of service—and speak with a unified voice to a fragmented audience of believers and skeptics alike.

I have had the help of some kindhearted, altruistic individuals at Eastern Kentucky University in making *The Journal of Military Experience* become a reality. I particularly want to thank Brett Morris for allocating the time and resources (job) needed for me to work countless hours soliciting, compiling, and editing the submissions. I also want to thank Dr. Deborah Core and Dr. Lisa Day-Lindsey for their mentorship and guidance in the fields of life-writing, trauma, and English composition. Russell Helms, from EKU's creative writing program, met with me in the early stages of the journal's formation, setting me on the right track about how to go about the work of creating a journal. On the same note, and if this journal later appears in online form, know that Linda Sizemore from the EKU Libraries approached me and is currently guiding me about how to include these works in their online repository. Ryan Donahue, a veteran and leader in the EKU VETS student organization, helped me figure out how to convert this journal into printable form. Veteran artist Matthew Foley put countless hours into interpreting the emotions and symbols contained herein for the production of an original cover. The same credit for artistic interpretation should go to Luke Manuel and Micah Owen for the artwork accompanying the stories. Thanks must also go to Dr. Susan Kroeg and the members of Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society for volunteering their services as editorial consultants. Most importantly, none of this would have been possible without the financial contributions of the EKU Student Government Association and the College of Justice and Safety.

Finally, I want to thank the authors for being brave and willing enough to share their memories, dreams, and emotions. We corresponded regularly through emails, expanding and revising the works as many times as we could possibly fit into two semesters. I have read these works so many times that I have internalized their lessons. Pride, sadness, honor, and pure, unadulterated terror

have been regular parts of my daily routine for some time now. As you read, you will find yourself asking how these men and women were able to endure so much for so long. Speaking from the personal standpoint of teacher and friend to many of the authors, I can say that it is an inspiration to witness their resiliency, not only in sharing their experiences, but in waking up each day with the courage to create a new life after witnessing so much pain and suffering. Facilitating a means for these authors to narrate their experiences in a cathartic, healing way that educates non-veteran readers about the nature of military service is what this is all about.

—Travis L. Martin

Editor, *The Journal of Military Experience*

# My Military Life

—Guy Robert Lubin

I remember growing up as a child in Haiti, always wanting to be a part of the military. I especially wanted to be a part of the United States military. So, when I went to Brien McMahon High in Norwalk, Connecticut, I took one year of Navy JROTC. That is where my journey started. We had a Marine instructor and a Navy instructor. Every year, students from the graduating class enlisted in the military. I didn't know what to do otherwise. I hadn't taken the SAT, so I couldn't enroll in college or at a university. I just knew I wanted to get far away from my father. He talked too much, always asking me what I was going to do with my life. Some of my friends were not doing anything with their lives, so my father thought I was going to end up like them. I decided that the military would help me to get away from my dad. But I did not really know what I was getting myself into.

On July 13th, 2001, I was in Springfield, MA enlisting in the Marine Corps. My recruiter and I talked about a whole lot things. I asked him questions about the Marine Corps—about what I should expect to see when I got to Parris Island—and other basic inquiries. He would tell me what I wanted to hear, keeping me interested. After the physical and blood work, he showed up with a packet and a pen. He wouldn't give me the time to read anything and my dumb ass didn't bother to read the paper before signing it. Later, I found out that this packet gave my life to the government. My date to ship out for boot camp was February 11th, 2002.

I signed up for the Marines well before the events of 9/11. On the morning of September 11th, I was sleeping when my dad called me and told me to turn the TV to the news channel. I really couldn't believe what I saw. For a minute, I thought I was in a dream. But I quickly realized it was reality when I heard

President Bush was about to declare war. To be honest, I was scared everyday leading up to when I got on the bus in South Carolina.

Eventually, I arrived in Parris Island. The way the drill instructors treated us over there, well, it was unbelievable. They did everything possible to make us nervous. Every morning by 0430 we had to be awake and ready to go PT. Then, they would “smoke” us by taking us to the sand box and making us exercise. At the chow hall, we would only have two minutes to eat. Once the “guide” (the guide is the marine who carries the Marine Corp flag when a group is marching. He is the first in line and the last to enter the chow hall as a result) is done, so is everyone else. They made us march everywhere. The drill instructors would mess us up on purpose, just so they could smoke us with pushups, sit-ups, or running in place. Another thing they would do—when we’re on the quarter-deck spit-shining our boots or cleaning our weapons—was get boxes of flour and spread it over the deck with water. They would start counting down as we cleaned: “1:59, 1:58, 1:57,” skipping some numbers until they reached ten seconds. By the time we blinked our eyes they would be at zero. And at zero everyone better stop cleaning, or suffer the consequences. If we were not done they would take us out to the sand box and start smoking us at temperatures of 100 degrees and more.

Despite everything, I was really confident. I told myself, “If you came here, you won’t leave until you do what you came here to do.” But before graduation there’s one last challenge everyone must complete. It’s called the “Crucible.” And it’s pretty much like being crucified. It consists of two days in the jungle. The funny thing is that they only give you two MRE meals. I thought to myself, “How the hell am I supposed to survive for two days with just two meals that only last about six hours?” I thought, “Damn. These people are really trying to kill us.” Did I mention that we only had one canteen of water? I remember thinking, “Wow! Somebody shoot me, please.”

We had to do navigating courses and casualty courses (that’s when one of your team members fake being shot or dead), carrying away the wounded from

the imaginary “hot zone.” I only weighed about 115 pounds at the time, so carrying someone who weighed 180 pounds was quite the task. At the end of the first day, we all swore out loud because of the lack of sleep. The lack of sleep was mostly because we had to do night watch. Like I said, there was always something.

Finally, we humped back to base while singing cadence at 3am the second day. We were tired, hungry, thirsty and we stunk. Once we arrived at our quarter-deck, they gave us some extra minutes to get showered and put on our C-uniforms for the drilling qualification. After the qualification was family time; all of our families showed up to visit. They gave us liberty from 1200 to 1800 hours to be with our loved ones. The day after that was graduation day. We walked across the parade deck and received our “Eagle, Globe and Anchor,” the Marine Corps’ emblem. I became a Marine.

After boot camp, I went home on leave for ten days. After that, they sent us to camp Geiger in Jacksonville, NC for Marine Corps Combat Training (MCT). They taught us how to handle our weapons, clean them, break them apart, and how to use explosive devices. The training lasted twenty-four days. MCT is like boot camp all over again, but it lasts only twenty-four days. This time, we got treated like humans instead of animals. It was a bit relaxed, meaning that the instructors didn’t scream at us too much if we were not acting like dumb asses.

I wanted to be an administrative Marine, so they sent me to a Navy officer’s administrative school in Newport, RI. I wasn’t focused and things didn’t go well. Eventually, they decided to send me to another school. This time, they got to pick. When I arrived at the new school I went to the front desk and asked what the place was. The lady responded, “Food Service Specialist.” I was extremely mad. But there was nothing I could do about it. Plus, I was already there. I attended the school for the four months it lasted.

After that, I went to my first duty station Camp Lejeune, NC. It was early in December of 2002. On the 17th of December, our Gunnery Sergeant told us that

we were going to Iraq and that our orders were already printed. I said to myself, “This is crazy because I just got here and I don’t even know anything about the base.” I also had a girlfriend at the time and we had just gotten serious. Nevertheless, on January 3rd, 2003 they shipped us out.

We boarded an assault ship called the USS Bataan. This was my first time being on a ship. And this one was huge. It had everything. From where we entered (a place called the hanger bay) I saw other boats inside the ship and military trucks and humvees. I also saw big steel trailers used to carry supplies and ammunitions. On the next level up, I saw helicopters and people fixing them. There were a few airplanes, too. At the very top was the flight deck where there were so many planes and helicopters that I couldn’t believe it. The ship held nearly 6,000 people. It took us two hours to get to the part of the ship designated for Marines. And by the time I reached the flight deck to check out the view, we had already pulled off shore. It was an exciting trip. But Kuwait was a different story.

We were at the border between Kuwait and Iraq for a while, getting ourselves ready to invade Iraq. While we were at the border, it took us three days to get all our supplies off of the ship. We stayed on the beach for a few days before heading north. We got everything ready to be transported to the border, vehicles and supplies. I remember being on the main road driving when a white minivan closed up the distance to our truck. We instantly got all our weapons ready to start blasting bullets at that van (because it looked suspicious). We were told to keep locals one-hundred feet away at all times. And we did not see the difference between Kuwait and Iraq. When we arrived at the border, we practiced taking enemies down, vehicle checks, and POW simulations. Once President Bush declared war, we crossed the border. My heart was beating at least one-hundred miles per hour. I felt like it was going to get ugly. I was right.

The first marine who got shot in front of my eyes lay on the ground before bleeding to death. I froze in place, thinking things like, “Is this really

happening?” or “Is this real?” I had to put my fear behind me and accept that I was in the middle of a war where people will do everything in their power to kill me and my fellow Marines. I had to learn how to survive and protect myself and my fellow Marines at all cost.

On April 28th, 2003 we headed to Fallujah. Our commander said it would get bloody because Saddam Hussein’s people were there. We were told to prepare for anything. I thought about three things: my parents, my sisters, and the woman I was with when I left. Everyone made a last phone call to their loved ones and families before leaving for Fallujah. I called my girlfriend before anyone else. She broke up with me and hung up the phone. I was devastated. I felt exiled from the world—like no one cared about me—and walked around carelessly with my head down, waiting for an Iraqi to shoot me. I didn’t care about existing anymore.

When we arrived in Fallujah, the United Kingdom soldiers worked side-by-side with our unit, fighting house-to-house combat, defeating the Iraqis. I almost died so many times. My attitude did not help matters. And things went on like that until one of our men shook the hell out of me and told me to “get my head in the game” because the situation “wasn’t a joke.” If I wanted to get back home, I had to start thinking about staying alive in the meantime. After a while, I had a vision of one of my little sisters, Jessica Lubin, standing in front of me, crying. For some reason, strength came upon me and I stayed focused the rest of the time that we were defeating the Iraqis in Fallujah.

We were out for about a month before rotating with another unit and heading back to our camp. For that whole month of combat we couldn’t contact family members. My dad was extremely worried because he hadn’t heard from me. He would spend days without eating and watched the American death tolls on the news. This only made him more worried. When we finally had the opportunity to call home it was a relief for most of our families. But it was also sad because some of us didn’t make it back.



Combat came when an Army supply truck was captured. The Iraqis killed three soldiers and held the last one in captivity. They sent us out as a rescue team to find that captured soldier. The Iraqis would move her to one location and then to another every time we got close. Eventually, we found her tortured, beaten, and raped at an old hospital outside of the city.

After that, we stayed on base until we went back home in July of 2003. Before Thanksgiving, we were already on our way to Afghanistan. There wasn't too much hostile activity going on over there at the time; but *we* would get attacked by RPG's almost every day. The weather over there was extremely cold and we were outside the wire for weeks at a time. I got frostbite in my feet, and one of our humvees hit on a roadside bomb. But no one got hurt. We got shot at a few times while looking for the bad guys. And when we found out we were going home in May of 2004 we were very happy. We needed a break from the desert.

We stayed home for about nine months before our second trip to Iraq. For some reason, I felt like something was going to happen this time around. I would get scared every time I thought about it. I will never forget our second tour to Iraq. I lost way too many of my friends over there. Friends died in front of my eyes; I came only two or three feet from getting shot; and one of my friends was killed by an Iraqi sniper on a Sunday morning while patrolling a village for security.

That morning we were talking about girls back home—just having guy's talk—when suddenly we heard shots fired at 9 o'clock to our left. Someone yelled, "Contact Left! Shots fired!" And I looked over my right shoulder to see one of our men on the ground, shaking and holding his neck. We rushed to him to see how bad he was hurt and called for a medic. But they didn't arrive on time and he died, eyes-open looking at all of us. I cried like a little kid. That Marine was a good friend of ours, and after his death none of us wanted to be in Iraq anymore. Every day, someone else would die or get seriously injured. One of my

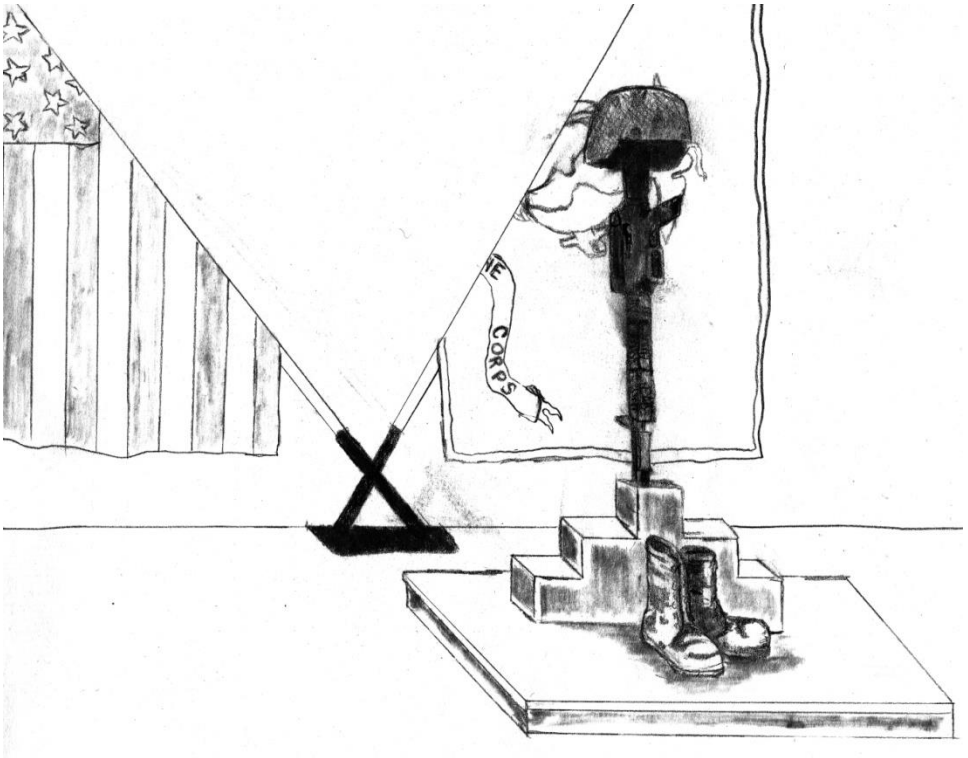
friends lost his legs from a roadside bomb right outside our front gate at 0200 in the morning.

My experience in the United States Marine Corps is one of experience I will never forget because it changed my life forever. The person I was before that is long gone now. I miss all of my fallen brothers to this day. But the fact that I'm still here—that they didn't die in vain—will be a fact I repeat again and again until the day I die. I will never forget the sacrifices they made for our dear country, the United States of America.

2nd Battalion, 8th Marine division

AMERICA'S BATTALION

HOOO-RAAHHHH



## Miserable Grunts

—Wayne Heath

*It is November of 2007 and we are in southeastern Baghdad, near the city of Lutifiyah. Bravo company, 2nd battalion, 502nd infantry regiment has a Patrol Base (PB) named “Copper” approximately fifteen miles from resupply at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kalsu. I am a Private on my first deployment to Iraq, and I am still becoming accustomed to the daily life of patrols and the dangers Iraqi roads have to offer. It is exciting, and we are only a few days away from a mission dubbed the “Death March,” which will consist mostly of first and second squads.*

The first squad leader is Staff Sergeant (SSG) Robert Ruiz, who is arguably the best squad leader in our platoon. I am in first squad, along with Sergeant (SGT) Matt Scruton, who happens to be the best team leader in the platoon. Both Ruiz and Scruton are seasoned vets who saw lots of combat in previous deployments. As a result, first squad is always called upon for serious missions. The “Death March” is a serious mission.

We head northwest of PB Copper down a road called “North Aces.” When we arrive, we kick out the usual group of soldiers to inspect some abandoned houses. The houses are suspected “hot spots,” or cover insurgents use to shoot across the presidential canal at the corrupt Sheik Mohammed. The presidential canal separates our PB from Route Aces, and Sheik Mohammed’s house is located directly south of the houses we are searching. We patrol the houses but find nothing except for hundreds of expended 7.62mm rounds. But we decide to stick around for about two to three more hours, trying to incite the insurgents to attack us. Nothing happens.

When we return to PB Copper, we are told that at around 2400 hours we will be getting up and doing our checks in preparation for an upcoming ambush mission. The same personnel used in our previous patrol will set up the ambush

in one of the abandoned houses. So most of us go to bed and try to get three-to-four hours of sleep in preparation for the next mission. Before racking out, I am told that instead of bringing the usual 800 rounds, I will be humping 1000 rounds as well as a pack full of water and MRE's. For a small guy of 5'7" and 160-pounds, carrying a 16-pound machine gun with the additional weight is not very appealing.

We are woken by other members not going out on the mission. These individuals will be used for 12-hour rotations of force protection (four patrol base tower guards, to be exact). They show the same lack of excitement in pulling guard as we do waking up for the mission. The temperature is extremely cold and visibility is only about five feet with NVGs (Night Vision Goggles). But we try to appear motivated for the task at hand.

All of our false motivation dwindles before we even set off on the so called "Death March." The sixteen bodies used for the mission will walk around ten clicks on our pre-planned route to the house. We head out of the North side of the patrol base to cut across a farmer's land and decrease the distance to our ambush site. The weather adds a nice touch of rain to the lack of visibility and freezing weather.

After walking for one hour, we barely make it five-hundred meters from the patrol base. It is not because we are not in shape; rather, it's the obstacles and canals not shown on our maps making the journey difficult. After "hand-railing," or following the canal, we intersect another canal with a makeshift bridge built by the locals. As we cross the canal, no one notices the fifteen-foot drop under the three-foot-wide bridge. When carrying 60-pounds of gear on your back and a weapon—with five feet of visibility and slick footing—walking across a three-foot-wide bridge is a little harder than usual. What should have taken five minutes turns into fifteen minutes, and, as we cross, we see a local's house just beyond a group of berms (manmade barriers of dirt and stone).

Before getting within fifty meters of the house, someone takes a pop-shot. It “snaps” right by us. Instead of us taking cover and wreaking havoc upon the general direction of the shot, we do nothing. We actually have no idea where the round came from, and, because of the cold, miserable conditions, we just sit down on our asses and lay on the berm to rest our shoulders. After fifteen minutes of resting and seeing if we were approaching an ambush, our LT (Lieutenant Arias) determines that the very real shot is actually nothing at all and that we should not be worried about it. He orders us to “Charlie Mike” (continue mission). Pushing past the berms, we continue on the planned route given to SGT Scruton, hoping to somehow intersect with the abandoned houses.

Walking through the mud and snow flurries with limited visibility causes us to slip and fall so many times that many of our weapons become ineffective. By now, my weapon is caked with mud and no one is exercising light and noise discipline. I see tactical lights from our weapons light up one by one and start hearing the words, "fuck this shit." At this point, the LT makes a decision to cut our losses and head straight to North Aces on the same route we used on our previous mission. It seems like a win-win scenario—like all our bitching got us out of the planned route—but going this way only adds two more miles of walking. However, walking on Aces we have SOIs (Sons of Iraq), previous insurgents turned good, that we pay to watch our routes. This is comforting because it seems like every time SOIs are around we don't find or hit IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices).

By now, everyone in the area knows what we are up to. Little by little, the sun starts to rise and we pass another bridge crossing the presidential canal. Again, it is a long drop into deep water. But we cross without incident and begin our approach towards the abandoned houses. The mud is very slippery. At one point, SGT Scruton slips and falls. After ten to fifteen falls, he grabs his weapon, slams it on the ground, and says, "Fuck this stupid shit." Most of us walking behind him feel the same way. Still, SGT Scruton picks up the weapon and we Charlie Mike

towards the houses. By the time we arrive, we are all so cold that our first thought is to start a fire with whatever we can find. So, our high-speed ambush mission turns into a search for fire wood. Of course we pull security; but in all reality the security is relaxed, and if we get hit by a group of sophisticated insurgents, we will take many casualties.

We all know this is supposed to be an offensive against the insurgents in our AO (Area of Operations). But, after the plan of sneaking up on the houses covertly fails, our mission seems like a regular patrol. The “security” we pull is just one guy watching the backside and another in the front. Some of us share a sleeping bag. We do not think twice about the need to share. Devin George and I pull guard at the same time and work it out so that we can combine his sleeping bag and my blanket to stay warm.

To kill time, we all play a game SSG Ruiz played during his first deployment to Afghanistan in 2002. It is called “the movie game,” and it starts with one person picking a movie. The next person must name an actress or actor in that movie. We play the movie game most of the time we are not pulling guard. Many of us go to sleep because of the three to four hours of sleep we got the night before. We never encounter anything or anyone hostile.

Sometime later, we all assume the mission is a bust and the LT decides to cut our losses. After LT radios back to PB Copper, it is decided that we will only stay until two in the morning. At first, we are all relieved. Otherwise, we would have been miserable for the next couple days. Before we begin the walk back home, we all take turns pulling security on the roof. Being from Florida, the cold, Iraqi air is miserable. The only thought running through my head is a question: “Why the fuck did I join?” During our deployment, I would estimate that over seventy-five percent of us thought this same thought daily.

Our walk back to Route Aces is nowhere near as bad as before. I secretly hoped some kind of vehicle would be there to meet us. But our LT decides that we are “Hooah,” or good to go. He wants us to walk back, and at this point, the

bickering is not just amongst lower enlisted. Everyone is pissed off. As we manage our way back to one of the bridges crossing the presidential canal, we take it very slow because it is dark. After a couple of soldiers make it across, we take a pop-shot from one of the SOIs who are only 100 meters away. I go to my stomach in the middle of the bridge. SSG Ruiz and SGT Scruton are both behind a berm getting ready to prep a couple grenades and assault the bunkers a couple of meters ahead.

It takes us all a few seconds to realize that the shot is a mistake and that the SOIs are not the enemy. I think the SOIs are the ones responsible for shooting at Sheik Mohammed in the first place. Maybe, they made a mistake like they made when they shot at us. The SOIs had to have known we were US soldiers. Even in the dark, a regular person and a soldier with 60-pounds of crap on his back look completely different.

## When Identities Collide: A Marine Musician in the Field

—John Jay McNeal

“Column of files, right platoon, forward, march!” The sound of the trumpets and drums playing “Semper Fidelis,” the Marine Corps’ song, is as fresh in my mind as what I ate for breakfast. The song echoes as the band marches past the review stand, blowing everyone away. After we play the Marine Corps’ Hymn, we march off, load our beautifully wrapped motivational bus, and depart the Officer Candidate School parade deck in Quantico, Virginia. The time is 10:00 am and after returning from the graduation ceremony, the lucky brass quintet (BQ) quickly changes from their desert (or woodland) cammies into the “Service A” (all green and khaki) uniforms and rushes to the National Museum of the Marine Corps to play the commissioning of 200 butter bars. It is the start of a typical summer.

After the BQ leaves, those of us left in the band hall get to do almost whatever they want. Almost. Most of the time, we break into smaller groups (more BQ’s, our rock band, or our party band, which is probably the best ensemble of them all) and rehearse if we haven’t done a graduation. If we *have* done a graduation we just go home and go back to sleep. Following the commissioning ceremony in 2007, sleep wasn’t an option for me and the Quantico band. No, we were set to go to the field on the following Monday. That’s right: even Marine Bandsmen go to the field to keep up with the traditions and standards set by the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Most of us didn’t have a clue what we were doing. We had never been overseas, but we still had to make sure that we were in shape and trained in the event that we got deployed (highly probable). That week in the field turned out to be a week that I will never forget. It started off as a way to get out of the barracks and shoot as many weapons as possible. But it quickly turned into a major



training exercise because sixteen members from our band had just returned from a tour over in Iraq. I'm not gonna lie: this would turn out to be my favorite week in the Marine Corps.

All Marine Musicians are required by USMC standards to attend three months of boot camp and one month of MCT (Marine Combat Training). Every active duty Marine that is in a fleet, field, band, or the Commandant's Own (his personal band) has the same amount of training as every other Marine. Bandsmen go through all this training, and after four months of not being able to play your instrument because of all the field training, there is nothing better than going straight to the Armed Forces School of Music (SOM) in Norfolk, VA. This tri-service school is attended by every Sailor, Soldier, and Marine for a minimum of six months for Active troops (a minimum of one month for Army Reserves and National Guard). The school can last up to ten months for those who require extra training. For band members, ten months of your entire Marine Corps career is spent in a training environment and not in the fleet. Once you have acquired all of the basic skills to become a Marine Musician, you are shipped out to your first band as a young Lance Corporal. That is, if you haven't done anything stupid to screw up your promotion.

I showed up in Quantico as a Lance Corporal because I was smart enough not to do anything stupid during training. Being a Lance Corporal (Lcpl) has a good side and a bad side. For example, when you're in the field, being a Lcpl is not fun: You are the one expected to clean the firing ranges and the Military Operations on Urban Terrain (MOUT) training area. This means picking up all the brass shell-casings and whatever dummy ammunition are used. I didn't like being a highly trained member of the modified janitorial service, but being able to train with Marines from both my unit and units that had just come back from downrange helped me become a more qualified and useful Marine.

Once you arrive at one of the twelve fleet bands, you are expected to start learning and memorizing all of the music that everyone else already knows. At

this point, you are either going to prove your worth, or you are going to suck and die. And by die, I mean you are going to be ripped a new one by everyone in your section who outranks you. So, it is best to learn your stuff and learn it quick. Each band has its own list of memorized tunes, consisting usually of more than thirty marches and all the standard ceremony material. These marches include: the National Anthem, the Marines' Hymn, Anchors' Aweigh, Semper Fidelis, Officer of the Day, Adjutant's Call, CMTC, and the entire set of bugle calls for trumpet players. You are only allotted thirty days to memorize it all. Keep in mind, that during these thirty days you have to do unit PT, maybe a rifle range, and a base/unit in-processing. All of these things detract from the time you have to practice music. And, if the band is on temporary assignment of duty (TAD) when you check in, or, you are the one Marine needed to complete a ceremony the next weekend, you have even less time. Either way, you better know the music when the thirty days are up. Otherwise, you will be known as the unit dirt-bag.

In MOUT town, what you know about music means squat. You are not in the field to learn how to get dirt off your instrument; you are there to learn how to be a combatant. I was able to do just that during the field week. We did many exercises that incorporated teamwork, training, and living in the field with no running water for a week. That may sound disgusting, but you don't ever feel closer to your fellow Marines than when you have to live with their stench for a week. I can only imagine what Marines who don't have running water for months feel like.

I remember a specific exercise that entailed paintballs and tear gas during my MOUT training. It made for an interesting three hours. We were told that we needed to clear four buildings and set up a command center. The five people in our fire team reached the first building and cleared it with no problem. The danger came when we walked back downstairs and one of the instructors threw a tear gas grenade (CS) through the window. If you have never experienced the

wonderful effects of CS gas, let me tell you that it is the most unpleasant feeling you will ever have to endure during training. The gas makes you cough nonstop, tear up, and snot runs down your face until you either feel sick or end up puking. Needless to say, when the instructor threw CS into the first building we had to clear, we all just took a seat in a corner of the room and coughed until the gas cleared enough for us to continue our mission.

Most Marine Musicians get mistaken for civilians. They look like Marines, but the typical civilian thinks of the Marine Band as the President's Own. In reality, there are thirteen fleet bands across the United States, consisting of enlisted Marines and Marine Chief Warrant Officers. The bands are spread across the Eastern and Western seaboard; they are at each of the twelve major Marine bases. One band (other than the President's Own) is located in Washington, DC and it is the premier band—the Commandant's Own—comprised of active duty Marines. I was an active duty Marine in the Quantico band when the instructors threw that CS gas through the window. Despite the ill-effects, the training was making me feel like a real warrior.

After we cleared the first building—when there was no longer gas in the air—we moved on to the second building. I didn't quite make it. While crossing the alleyway between buildings, I was hit by a sim-round (live action paintballs) in my lower back. Naturally, my first instinct was “Ow, what the hell was that!” But I soon realized that it was not friendly fire as I laid down, face-first in the dirt between the buildings. My team leader decided to continue on and forgot there were five people in his team instead of the normal four. He later realized the big mistake he made, but it was too late. I was down for the count.

A typical Marine band consists of fifty members: five percussionists, three tubas, two euphoniums, five trombones, seven trumpets, five saxophones, four French horns, four clarinets, three flutes, one oboe, one electric guitar, one electric bass, and one piano player. These are the members that actually play in each band. The leadership element of each band consists of the Band Officer

(BO) who takes care of most of the contacts for each performance, the Band Master (BM), or second in command who takes care of all orders from the BO, the Drum Major (DM), who leads the band in parades and ceremonies, and the Enlisted Conductor (EC), who manages the band during ceremonies and concerts. The Instrument Repair Technician (IRT) fixes anything the band breaks and the Small Ensemble Leader (SEL) coordinates all of the gigs for our small ensembles (i.e. brass quintets, Dixieland band, rock band). The Marine who shot me in the lower back was not in the band. And no one in my elaborate chain of command could help me when I was in the field, lying on the ground, and holding my back.

When the opposition realized that they had finally got one, they decided to make sure my teammates couldn't find me. So they threw a grenade that was supposed to spew smoke and cover my position on the ground. Unfortunately, the grenade they threw was not a regular smoke grenade. No, my luck made them throw a CS grenade to cover my position. It landed directly between my legs, which were spread in a "V" position. Because I had been "shot," I was not allowed to move from my position (even though I was in a potentially dangerous situation because of the CS). I had to lay there, hold my breath, and hope that my team would come back and drag me to the command center before I started coughing like a mad man. This gave the rest of my team's position away.

People think that a typical band performance is all about looking good and performing well. They think there is no stress involved with all of the details leading up to a concert or ceremony. Little do they know, a fleet band performs its own logistics, set-up, break-down, and transportation of everything and everyone involved with the band. Logistics alone created the most stress I have ever had to deal with. Every Marine in the band has a specific job other than playing an instrument. For example, I was a sound technician for most of my four years. I was also the load master near the end of my tour. Even though it gave me a major headache during longer trips, being the load master was my favorite part

about being in the band. It gave me a sense of pride to get everyone to load, unload, and reload in the most efficient, time-sensitive way imaginable. There are other positions as well, such as administration, instrument repair assistant, public affairs, Sergeant of the Guard (security details), Police Sergeant (the one in charge of the cleanliness of the building), and the network gurus. And, of course, there is the senior chain of command. Being in a Marine Band entails way more than you expect when you sign that dotted line. But I never expected to be clutching at my lower back, spread-eagle, while choking and gagging from a CS grenade.

I lay on the ground, holding my breath, shutting my eyes as tight as I could, hoping that anyone would come get me. At that point, I didn't care who pulled me out of the CS gas cloud; I just wanted to be able to breathe again. Eventually, a very dear friend of mine, Corporal Heidi Beck (now Sergeant Beck) screamed for someone to get me out of the situation. Then, another good friend of mine, Lcpl Craig Witt (now Sergeant Witt) dragged me to the command post to regain whatever consciousness I had left. This was certainly not the kind of thing I had imagined when I signed that dotted line.

There are definite perks to being a Marine Musician: Staying in shape, traveling, meeting new people, and growing your musical abilities are just a few. There were so many things that I enjoyed about staying in shape, but the rigorous training for the annual physical fitness test (PFT) and combat fitness test (CFT) was not among them. Those pictures that people see of Marines running in their green-on-green PT gear where everyone looks like they are enjoying it, well, it wasn't fun to me. I enjoyed going to the gym, working out, and being able to sit in the sauna for a little bit. The problem, however, is that if you don't stay in shape you start to become a "fat body." And this means that you become the worst thing ever in the bandmaster's eyes. Some people can be three pounds under their maximum weight and still be considered disgusting if they look bad in uniform. That just doesn't sit right with me. I think if you can look like a

Marine in uniform and you can pass all your fitness tests, you shouldn't be judged for being two or three pounds under or over your maximum weight. The demand to constantly watch my weight had me thinking about these things as my friends dragged me out of that cloud of CS gas.

After recuperating in the command center, I finally realized what had happened and was able to examine my surroundings. I had been placed in the “immediate trauma” area by the doctor. They treated my “bullet wound” and declared me a “casualty of war.” In the process of the rescue, Craig had also been wounded, but not “mortally” like myself. Because this was only a training exercise, I decided to unload my weapon, give the rest of the ammo to the command center guard (Staff Sergeant Chris James) and just chill with the other “fatalities.”

Traveling is the best part about being a Marine Musician. I have been all over the Eastern seaboard. I have been to New York City, Cleveland, Staunton, Lynchburg, Norfolk, Harpers Ferry, Ligonier, and as far West as Cedar Rapids. My favorite trip was up to New York during the September 11th memorial services. Our rock band (one of the many small ensembles that a Marine band has to offer) played in Times Square for a huge crowd. That was the best hour-and-a-half I ever had playing with the Marine band. I was also humbled during this trip as we performed a memorial concert in one of the buildings that had been destroyed during the attacks. It was my favorite experience as a *musician*. But my favorite experience as a *Marine* occurred, as I mentioned, during the same trip where I was shot in the lower back with a paintball gun, surrounded by a cloud of CS gas, and was dragged to an imaginary command center by my friends.

After the training exercise came to an end, we learned that the person who threw the CS gas grenade between my legs did it on purpose. That individual got in trouble. I was glad, because I didn't find anything funny about the “prank.” That night, we did night vision goggle (NVG) training. We didn't use any sim-

rounds for this exercise because it was too dangerous. Instead, we used blanks and went completely lights out. That was by far the most interesting night of field week. At the end of the week, the band Marines were told that they were the most organized group of Marines the instructors had trained for a long time. We knew that we were organized because we had always worked together as a team. Don't ever mess with a Marine, but sure as hell don't mess with a Marine musician. We may look like a bunch of pansies, but in field week we held our own with the Marines who had just come back from Iraq. It is my opinion that we are the strongest unit in the Marine Corps.

The biggest performance that the Quantico Marine Corps Band does is the Virginia International Tattoo (VIT) Festival in Norfolk, VA. Our performance is part of the Virginia Arts Festival, which lasts for an entire week in April. The VIT is the home of a massive international music and gymnastics performance. Over six-hundred artists and performers attend every year from countries such as Norway, Russia, South Africa, Canada, Sweden, and Finland. If you have ever seen a marching band competition, it is similar to that. Everything is an exhibition and it brings more countries together than any other type of organized routine.

VIT was one of my favorite performances because we worked for two months straight preparing the show, starting in February and ending in April. There are downsides: It sucks preparing in the middle of winter because Quantico gets cold; and sometimes we practiced outside in our PT gear (this gear doesn't keep you very warm). And when we went to Norfolk for the VIT, we usually ended up in a crappy hotel. Luckily, we never had to stay in the rooms very long. The VIT is very different than the experiences gained in the field. Both have bad aspects, but both give you a sense of pride and accomplishment that you never forget.

Being a Marine musician is about more than just being a Marine, or even being a musician. It is about being able to understand that you are both of these things and that you represent the United States Marine Corps wherever you go.

As a Marine Musician, you have earned the title of Marine and the respect that goes along with it. We are not only the nation's first and foremost fighting force. We are on the battlefield at home, fighting to prove that we are still needed. In doing such, we are proud to be known as the few, the proud, your United States Marines.





# My Medication Problem

—Franklin Means



It is no secret that I have Bi-Polar Disorder and PTSD. It's not easy to live with these two conditions. Without medication I have severe mood swings, go days without sleep, suffer from paranoia and battle depression. The last batch of drugs caused me to break out with a skin rash and turned me into a zombie. That feeling is no fun. It makes your day drag on and you have no motivation, impairing your reaction time while putting you in a lethargic state. My medications cause bad bouts of depression and insomnia, making it hard to get up in the mornings. I have missed many of my classes this semester. It is very hard to wake up when there is no motivation or desire to get out of bed. And this is not a feeling that can be pushed aside or thought away.

I only recently found out that I have Bi-Polar Disorder and my PTSD is not combat related. I used to be an emergency 911 dispatcher. The job was great for about the first month. Then, I received a call from a woman who was murdered

while I was on the phone with her. I can trace back all of my problems to this single instance in my life. I thought it was normal to be paranoid, stressed out, and not sleep for a few days at a time. I joined the US Army to get away from these problems, to make a drastic change in my life and how I felt. However, and in retrospect, joining the military only delayed the inevitable.

Things were going good until I received a subpoena to appear in the murder trial. The feelings started all over again: problems sleeping, depression and anxiety resurfaced. This, of course, disrupted my military career and I was deemed unfit for service after a year of treatment and no results. It was hard to concentrate on the military because I heard that woman beg me for help every day. Complicating matters, I even got entangled in a wrongful death suit for the whole thing. The man who killed her had held her hostage all morning. When she got away he chased her with his truck and ran her car off of the road. I had her on the phone during the chase. After her car stopped rolling over he ran to it and shot her five times, killing her. I am still unable to figure out why they are suing *me*. I received a medical discharge in October 2008 with no deployments. I felt pretty worthless since the doctors didn't trust me to be a medic and do my job. So I went home.

I had a job lined up, but I was still having problems with sleep. Then, about two months later, the VA called me in for an appointment with a psychiatrist. They determined that the reason I was having so many problems with the PTSD was because of Bi-Polar Disorder. Things started to make sense: My constant battle with depression and insomnia wasn't normal. I now know why. Bi-polar disorder causes severe mood swings. The highs and lows which make depression and anxiety worse are not easy to deal with. During the high phase, you need little or no sleep and this can last for days. The low phase is an extreme depression that seems to never end. In my case, it seemed that there was no middle-ground without treatment.

I'm still in a constant battle to get the right combination of medications. I have tried a list of meds a mile long and counting. Sometimes, it's a little overwhelming. I can't get "leveled off" or be a "normal" person. I would at least like to *feel* normal. Every time I change meds I have severe mood swings that are jeopardizing my marriage and college career. Sometimes, I don't know which way to turn and don't care if I fail or not. If you have ever had the "hell with it feeling," you know how I feel most of the time. I know the VA is doing their best to help me, and if not for the VA I would be in serious trouble. I am both hopeful and frustrated, but I know, eventually, I will get this under control.

## Route Georgia, “Tangi Valley,” Wardak Province, Afghanistan

—Michael Conn

*Summer 2008*

Afghanistan: I hated you so much. All the hate in the world can't measure up to the hate I felt towards you. However, there were some positive things about your country—only a few, though. Yes, the times with my brothers of Route Clearance Package (RCP), Counter IED (C-IED) Task Force 2, 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, 206th Combat Engineers are connected to enjoyable, permanent, and vivid memories. These are very, very vivid memories, mind you. Some of these memories occur without the conscious commands to recall them. Those are the bastards. We all have memories that we “remember like it was yesterday,” and they usually bring us smiles and momentary lapses into nostalgic stupors. But what about the memories that are so vivid they trigger all five senses? *Those* are the bastards. Joe Galloway once said, “We who have seen war, will never stop seeing it” (from *We Were Soldier's Once...And Young*, co-written by Lieutenant General Hal Moore and Joe Galloway, Combat Correspondent). I will never stop seeing war and I hope to show you—my readers unaware of the darker side of conflict—my memories of fallen soldiers. You know, the blunt truth of it all.

“What the hell happened here?” I ask as I navigate my MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle) through the carnage that was once a convoy of vehicles. Some of the vehicles burn while others resemble nothing in particular except twisted heaps of metal charred black by the burning fuel.

“Fuckin' Jingle Truck massacre,” says my platoon sergeant, James Hart (A jingle truck is a colorfully decorated vehicle with bells and chains hanging from bumpers and mirrors).

“No shit, so why did they call us out here again? To oversee their recovery?”

Hart shrugs: “Something about escorting the infantry out here so they can pull over-watch for the ANA” (Afghan National Army).

“What a bunch of bullshit,” I think to myself. We have been away from the FOB (Forward Operating Base) for over a week, doing missions down these shitty-ass roads, looking for IEDs on friggin’ blacktop. I can’t see the logic in it. If the Taliban manages to get a couple hundred pounds of explosives under the asphalt without disturbing the surface, well, by God, more power to them! I shake that thought from my head, though. I know I am just getting annoyed. As a result, I am ignoring the perfectly good logic behind these asphalt missions. The Taliban often takes advantage of failing asphalt over the tops of culverts and in openings to the bare ground, burying hundreds of pounds of HME (Home-Made Explosives) and nifty, home-made ignition systems (nothing more than detonation-cord and some wire that can be triggered by an insurgent) for our convoys to run over. They are clever bastards.

Continuing through the carnage, which seems to go on forever, Hart gets his camera out and films the burning vehicles. The radio is silent as we pass the decimated trucks. We have been in country just a little over a month. While we have found and struck numerous IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), we have not actually engaged or been in direct combat with the enemy. Our wheels crush random parts of the destroyed trucks, and our entire platoon wishes the enemy would come back out for more. We want to face an armed adversary—one that will fight us in the open—not one that attacks civilian convoys and plants IEDs in the ground for us to hit so that they can claim victory over a damaged US truck. After a couple of kilometers of burning wreckage, we are instructed to pull off the road and form a perimeter around a school house. I lose track of how long we’ve waited when I finally decide to pull out my iPod. Of course, as soon as I start up my music, I hear a boom.

The sound of the explosion is dulled by our vehicle’s armor and the music from my iPod. I rip the device from my ears fast enough to catch the ass-end-

sound of the explosion. Radio chatter commences. LT (the Lieutenant) asks if anyone has a visual on the point of origin. My heart races. Have we actually been engaged by the enemy? Currently, it is impossible to tell, at least for me. One of the infantry guys finally speaks up, confirming that it was a poorly aimed RPG (rocket propelled grenade) that detonated across the road from us.

“Good God! They could not possibly suck any worse! We’re a damned stationary target. Come on,” an annoyed someone says over the radio. I look at Hart, and while I see open disapproval on his face over the comment, I can also see a measure of agreement in his eyes.

“Move us up beside LT. He’s got that MK19 raining hell on ‘em” (A MK19 is an automatic grenade launcher, pronounced “Mark 19”).

“Sure thing, Habeeb” (This call sign is a nickname I made up for Hart). I maneuver the truck through the maze of our non-combatant vehicles and come up beside LT’s truck. John Melvin is LT’s MK19 gunner. He shoots the weapon in directions pointed out to him by one of the infantry officers who also has a MK19 raining death on ‘em. Apart from the IED explosions, this is by far the highlight of our combat relations with the Taliban.

We soon realize, however, that the single RPG is all we are gonna see. The Taliban’s chief means of combat relies on employing the age old tactic of guerilla warfare. They are masters of the hit-and-run. After some time, my iPod switches back to music. I use the down time to take off my ACH (Army Combat Helmet) and rub my hair (what little is there). Some of the simplest things go unappreciated in war, such as being able to go out and about without a several-pound-hat on your head. I look over and see that the BFT (Blue-Force Tracker) has received a text message from the TOC (Tactical Operations Center).

“Sergeant Hart, there’s a text on the BFT.” He had been writing in his green book and hadn’t noticed the message.

“What the hell?” he says after reading the message. I continue to look at him, waiting for an answer. “We are to escort the infantry further down this road to assist in the recovery of a disabled American vehicle.”

As he explains, LT comes on the radio, “3-7, this is 3-6.”

“Go, 3-6... You get that message from the TOC?”

I can hear the disdain in LT’s voice (him and the commander in no way, shape, or form get a long). “Ah, roger 3-6, call it.” There is a moment of silence.

I shake my head in disbelief. Once more, I’m pissed. “Here we go,” I think. Another night without a shower and eating MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). Perfect.

“Roger 3-7, let’s form up,” says LT. Within a few minutes we form up behind the infantry element. Since we are no longer on an escort mission, we elect to roll behind.

The infantry commander comes over our radios: “RCP 2, you ready to Charlie-Mike?” (Continue mission).

“Roger, Viper, Charlie-Mike.” We start to move, pulling back onto the asphalt. We travel another kilometer and the decimated Jingle-Trucks disappear behind the haze of heat coming off the road. I try to read the text on the back of the MRAP in front of me as I always do out of boredom. Suddenly the text and the MRAP disappear into a plume of black smoke. This is followed quickly by another deep boom and hail raining asphalt.

“Holy shit!” I yell as I slam on the brakes. This would normally be an opportune time for the gunner to cuss me all to pieces for the sudden breaking. No words come my way. The MRAP in front of us has been struck by an IED—a massive one—and LT breaks up the radio chatter:

“All Sapper elements hold!” The rest of our convoy comes to a stop. We all know what has happened. The dust clears, but what I expect to see does not appear. Instead, the MRAP makes it through the explosion intact. The trigger-man was a split second too late. LT makes several attempts to raise the MRAP on

the radio, but to no avail. They give us the thumbs up and Hart relays the status of his MRAP to LT.

The infantry commander comes on the radios once more, angry and demanding to know why we have stopped. LT tells the commander the situation. If the infantry commander has any genuine concern, he doesn't show it. He has good reasons, explaining that there are reports of American KIAs, and possible MIAs coming to him over the radio. A sudden chill goes through my body. The feeling is beyond my ability to describe. It still is to this day. The only response that comes from LT is "Roger."

We start moving again. Dreading the worst—the grim possibility that some of our own could be dead or missing—a new sense of urgency reveals itself in our every movement, every thought. The dread we all feel cannot be shaken. The convoy turns left, off the main road. There is a hand-drawn sign at the entrance. In English, it reads, 'Tangi Valley.' More information comes from the radio: "Sapper, this is Viper. Be advised: the roads are narrow."

"What a fucking understatement," I think to myself. As of yet, I have never been on a road this small, this dangerous. With mountains on both sides of us, our route is smack dab in the middle, bordered by small villages and wary occupants. We travel along the road for about fifteen minutes or so, working our way deeper into the valley.

Finally, after coming around a sharp turn, I see smoke—black smoke. As we get closer, and as we make our way through the soldiers running back and forth to over-watch positions, I see another burning, twisted heap of metal. This time, I immediately recognize it as an American humvee. Once more, a chill goes down my spine. The idle talk in our vehicle ceases. In front of us, the frame of a vehicle lays awkwardly side-ways in a massive crater.

We are Counter-IED, RCP. We have seen many vehicles disabled by IEDs, even some of our own. It is our job—our everyday activity—to search for and destroy IEDs, even if that means triggering the bombs ourselves, taking the hit.



As we gaze at the former humvee in front of us, the true capabilities of our enemy are revealed in cruel, genuine form. We are suddenly thankful to have our jobs: as an RCP platoon, we have the privilege of using the military's toughest, IED-resistant vehicles and equipment.

I pull my vehicle into position as directed by Hart, putting it in park. Our attached EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) element is summoned by the commander on the ground. We soon find out that the destroyed vehicle has MK19 rounds cooking off from the intense heat. This means that we have to place charges around and as close to the vehicle as possible to ensure proper destruction of the munitions. We have to act before recovery operations can begin. Hart gets out of the truck and I ask my gunner and passenger to switch places. I do this so that the gunner can take the wheel. I want to help outside. I walk with Sergeant Hart to EOD's Jerrv (a vehicle most often used by EOD teams due to its storage space and extra explosive resistant armor). They have the det-cord out, preparing the charges. I take a couple of blocks of C4 and make an incision down the C4's center. I insert the cord. Once all the preparations are made, EOD proceeds toward the humvee.

Only then do I notice that there are bodies still in the vehicle. I can see the gunner still attached to his harness, head resting on his IBA. His Kevlar had slid down his forehead, covering his eyes. I cannot see any legs—there are no legs. Behind the gunner I see a passenger who has been charred completely black. One of the EOD guys blocks my sight as he moves the charges into position. A look of anguish takes charge of his face as he turns around to face us.

All is made ready. The EOD team leader makes the call over the radio: "Fire in the hole." The phrase is normally spoken with audible, excited anticipation, but not today. There is no excitement here, simply a cruel requirement. We cannot recover the bodies with munitions cooking off, but how does one justify this task? Despite what I think—how necessary it is—I am disgusted with all of it, myself, and at all of us. We honor the dead and this seems barbaric.

The explosion simply happens. So, we subject the occupants of the vehicle to yet another desecration. After a few minutes of waiting, EOD conducts a quick inspection, declaring the scene to be safe and clear.

We move in. I approach the vehicle, expecting to be further horrified by what we have done. Instead, I see that the bodies are in the same condition as before the blast. The feeling of disgust and horror slightly abates. No one says anything. We knew what had to be done. We find out that there were five passengers, three of them still in the burning vehicle. One has been evacuated and another, reportedly, has been dragged off by insurgents. The final occupant has no form left to his or her body. The blast of the IED completely reduced this passenger to nothing more than small fragments that have since been scattered throughout the area. As we fan out to pick up debris, a grim truth is soon revealed: There are pieces of human flesh scattered throughout the area, intermingled with the exploded parts of the vehicle. We pick up every bit. This was a brother and we will not leave him behind to decay in the damned Afghani sun.

After some time, more people arrive via Blackhawk. The occupants are CID (Criminal Investigations Command) and others we cannot identify. At this point, we don't care. We continue to pick up bits of brain, skull, and whatever else we can find. The CID guys bring body bags and we place all we have recovered in a single bag. Next, we turn to the task of removing the bodies from inside the vehicle. The gunner's head did not change position in the second blast. His chin is still resting on his IBA—eyes closed—as if sleeping. In the hell that surrounds him, he looks peaceful. I will never forget his face. We untangle him from the harness, gently pulling him from the ruin. He is carried with the most profound feeling of honor any of us have experienced in our military careers. Although we further added to their hell by setting off the second explosive charge, our shoulders carry less of a burden knowing that we are able to aid these men in their return home.

After we lay a shroud over the passenger, we place him into the body bag. We then move to the charred remains of the rear passenger. He looks unreal—like something straight out of Hollywood—because I have never actually seen a dead body before. As I gaze at this man, I notice something I will never forget: The smell of burning flesh fills the air. To this day, I smell that smell on a random, daily basis. No other smell can compare. No other smell exacts such permanence in your memory as the smell of burnt flesh. The man was a terp (interpreter) for the now obliterated vehicle, and he wears the uniform of an ANA soldier. Somehow, his uniform had escaped the heat of the blast. We treat him with the same respect as the American soldier, placing him into a body bag to be turned over to the ANA.

Next, our recovery vehicles move into position and hoist the wreckage onto our tractor-trailer. After this is done, me and our medic, Doc Jekyll, approach the crater. I have never seen one this big; it is nearly deep enough to accommodate my whole height. I can see melted glass. The heat had been so intense that the ballistic material was reduced to liquid form. We begin sifting through the rubble, grabbing whatever pieces of the humvee we can find. I am shocked to find a piece of skull, another, then another, and so on. We dig up one of their weapons, an M4, twisted and melted. Somehow, I am still able to make out the serial number.

After we are certain that all the pieces have been recovered, it comes time to load the fallen. Those damned Taliban bastards will find no war trophies here. We lift the bodies into our Buffalo (the toughest vehicle next to the single passenger husky). Once again, we feel a sense of honor in recovering these fallen warriors, who, like me, woke up this morning to continue their job and fight the war that they had been asked to fight. Like all men and women serving in this occupation, they were aware of the inherent risks and the fact that death's ever-looming shadow eagerly awaits to claim the next soul in this war. Despite our risks and fears, they served bravely and honorably countless hours before us.

I am home now, whatever that means. But the experience of war continues to reside in my very being. It is a part of who I am now, and it always will be. During my time in Afghanistan, the powers-that-be gave us the means of coping with our grim reality. We developed nearly emotionless personalities to prevent our normal, cognitive functions from getting in the way. These ways of being were a standard-issue, warrior survival kit. Normal, expected, and accepted emotional responses to chaos, carnage, and death is not a part of who I was forced to become. The suppression of our emotions enabled us to stoically perform and carry out our detestable duties. There is no dwelling on what was, or could be; we simply live in the moment—other thoughts to be damned.

A fellow veteran mentioned to me a theorist named Cathy Caruth. Caruth believes in what she calls a “Paradox of Trauma.” I will paraphrase her theory as it was explained to me: “The sufferer must experience traumatic emotions (anxiety, fear, flashbacks, etc.) later in life because the body is unable or unwilling to feel the pain of the event when it occurs.” Cathy Caruth has the right idea, in my opinion. It has been nearly two years since my return to the “real” world, and I have only recently been able to reflect on my other life and dissect the vivid, chaotic memories constantly intruding upon my consciousness. When I recovered those fallen soldiers I felt little emotion. I remember only rage. I also remember a fleeting instance when I was terrified and appalled, but only for a moment. My emotional survival kit kept me on track and where I needed to be. It just so happens that I needed to be emotionally sedated at the time.

I remember those burning soldiers more clearly now than when I experienced them in Afghanistan. I didn’t know them. I have no memories of these men. I only knew them in death. Still, I feel like we developed the strongest of bonds as we lifted them into their carriage. In retrospect, it felt as if I were a pallbearer, walking a dear friend on his last journey through the corporeal world. Perhaps the ability to write and reflect on this memory has had an unconscious healing effect on my former (pre-war) self. While that self has come full circle, the self that

exists today—who writes this story—is still trying to make sense of it all. I will never be the same. I think I will remain a man with terrible, haunting memories. In time, I will learn to accept what was. I may heal, but I will be forever scarred.



## Baghdad Babble

—Deb Hamilton

*While deployed to Baghdad during the summer of 2006, I found solace at “The Oasis,” a serve-it-yourself, plywood coffee bar located on a concrete patio outside the base chapel. I stopped at the java sanctuary each morning before 0600, sat at a table with a cup of joe, and wrote in my journal before trudging on to a twelve-hour shift in Supply. What follows are a few choice excerpts from my journal.*

*24 JUN 06, Saturday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq*

Since arriving in Iraq, this is the first moment I’ve had when time, energy and mental focus have intersected, allowing me to write. Before I begin discussing life at this installation, let me first talk about my first morning encounter at Al Udeid. I wrote a note to myself not to forget mentioning it, so I’d best do it now—before I forget...

Okay, so when we arrived at “The Deid” it was pitch dark, sometime in the early morning hours. I recall hitting my bunk around 0300 or so. At close to 0500, I awoke with the need to pee. When I stepped outside the tent—which, by the way, is pitch dark inside 24/7—the sun was just starting to illuminate the atmosphere. The dome-topped tents appeared as perfectly baked loaves of some lightly colored bread, evenly spaced down long rows atop white powder-coated rocks. The temperature was modest; it was not too warm, but certainly not cool in any sense. I crunched my tennis-shoed feet across the gravel to the white trailer labeled “women,” did my business, and returned to my own “loaf,” to my bunk, and then back to sleep.

A few hours later—sometime between 0900 and 1000 hours—I woke up startled. Even with the air conditioner blowing, the once cool tent felt like the

oven instead of the bread. I kicked off my sheet and blanket and tried to determine if it was truly *that* hot or if I was having some sort of hormonal malfunction. For several minutes, I laid there looking up at the mattress, trying to relax and acclimate to the new and sudden change in temperature.

The barracks at Al Udeid are unlike any I've ever stayed in. For one thing, we are in a tent. It is a very long, half-rounded structure containing nothing but two rows of bunk beds with an aisle down the middle. I am on the bottom bunk, a bed numbered "thirty." It sucks because I can't really sit up on my bed to go through my stuff. Plus, it is always "twenty-four hour quiet time" to accommodate the sleeping needs of the various, traveling personnel. Eventually, I decide to take another jaunt to the latrine, this time to brush my teeth and wash up a bit before starting my day. Little do I know, a new and painful environment waits just outside my tent door.

I make my way down the dark aisle of the tent using my miniature flashlight. It does not cross my mind to grab my sunglasses while gathering my towel and toothbrush. When I push open the tent door, it is like witnessing a nuclear flash. My senses are so overly stimulated that I don't know whether to step out or rush back in. I hesitate but decide to go for it. "My eyes will adjust. It's just the stark contrast of going from dark to light that's hurting my eyes," I tell myself. But after about six or seven steps, I realize a need for retreat.

It is freakishly bright outside! In full sun, the previously innocent, powdered rocks become intense reflectors of sunlight. The light which colors all the structures and concrete barriers only adds to the brightness. The sight is like a scene from a sci-fi movie. Imagine an astronaut emerging from her spacecraft on some uncharted sun-planet and you will have a pretty accurate picture.

Needless to say, when I go back to retrieve my sunglasses from my darkened bunk area I can't see a thing. Not even my little flashlight giving all it has helps. It is like a million flash bulbs going off simultaneously, leaving millions of undistinguishable blobs in my path. Several minutes later, with dark lenses firmly

across my eyes, I again cross planet “Gleamula” with my fluoride equipment and complete my morning mission.

*25 JUN 06, Sunday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq*

Today makes my fifth day here at Camp Sather, but it feels as though I’ve already been here a month. Working twelve-hour shifts seems to stretch one day into two. The drudgery of carrying body armor and a skull bucket everywhere not only adds to the blurring of time, it tires your body to the point where you feel as if you never get any rest. Maybe it’s the endless stream of helicopter flights and the “pop-pop-pop-pop” of weapon fire outside my tent all night that keeps me from feeling rested after I sleep. Either way, I feel old and tired this morning at “The Oasis” with coffee in hand, jotting down these few lines of thoughts and experiences.

Chances are that a few more days of this life will cure my feelings. Most of the folks here arrived over a month ago and appear to have adjusted to the gritty lifestyle. With less than five days under my belt, I am reluctant to complain. And, when I do complain, it is only on paper. Complaining verbally is something I’ve vowed not to do out of respect for my fellow soldiers. Most will spend no less than four months in Iraq and some will spend far longer, especially the Army troops. The Air Force currently limits troops to four-month rotations, replacing entire squadrons every four months. Thank God the Air National Guard divides its four-month slots even further, allowing us guardsmen (and women) to deploy for much shorter durations. My time in country should end after forty-one days. Mind you, that does not count the time it takes to get there and the time it takes to get home. Almost everyone gets held up a few days in Al Udeid. I was stuck there for two days coming over, and I can pretty much bank on an equal or longer stay on the way home. The return visit will probably serve to depressurize me from the harsh routine of Baghdad.



*26 JUN 06, Monday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq (Laundry Tents)*

Yesterday (Sunday) was supposed to have been my day off. I planned on using the time to catch up on my laundry. All of my uniforms were dirty. Plus, I had added items to clean from my journey over here: civvies (civilian clothes), towels, etc. However, I was notified that no one gets a day off until they've been here at least a week. That meant no free time for Deb to clean out her laundry bag. So, I made a game plan. I decided to put my clothes in the wash and then go back to my dust-cubicle inside the tent and exercise.

After about thirty-five or forty minutes, I went and placed the wet clothes into dryers before going to take a shower. After the shower, I returned to the laundry tent, folded things up, loaded my bags with clean laundry, and headed back to the tent. The entire process of doing laundry and showering took from 1930 to 2130 hours. Two hours is a lot of time when you're working twelve-hour days. Needless to say, I am sitting at my morning patio table in a slightly crumpled—but clean—uniform.

Some might ask why laundry arrangements are such a big deal. Well, besides the time factor, there's the sweat factor. Taking a shower between the washing-phase and drying-phase is less than desirable, considering that any amount of time spent exerting yourself generates more sweat. The laundry tent, of all places, is almost hot enough to make flesh melt.

Last night was my first laundry experience. I wasn't sure how difficult it would be to find open washers and dryers. I found out fast that Sunday evening is a bad time. There are three laundry tents here in Tent City and each houses around ten washers and dryers, including the broken ones. I had to go to all three tents before finding an empty drum and, as Murphy's Law would have it, it was the furthest facility from my dwelling.

Open at each end, the laundry tents are lined down the left side with washers. Dryers occupy the right side. Down the center are three or four tables that laundry gets folded on. There are a few seats, as well. The underside of the

canvas is coated with desert grit and the floor is dirty concrete. You certainly don't want to drop a wet article on that floor during the washer-to-dryer transfer. It would mean instant mud contamination!

When I first walked into the tent, there were piles of clean laundry atop the folding tables. The clothes were placed there by launderers in need of the dryers' (previously launderers') loads. Rather quickly, I located two empty washers separated by one broken one. I started the water and found out that temperature selection was of no use. The water was hot from the sun-baked storage bladders that held it all day. "Oh well, my t-shirts needed a little shrinking anyway," I think. Once my laundering experience was over, I vowed never to wash in the evenings again. I will forever more wash my clothes in the morning.

There is something I almost forgot to mention: the water used on base is non-potable, meaning it is not suitable for drinking or preparing food (they ship in bottled water for that). As I was folding my laundry and putting it away, I noticed that all my whites were now a nice shade of beige. I'm not sure if bleach will help; but I might pick some up at the BX (Base Exchange) and try it. At least, I'm glad we're not drinking from those storage bladders!

*27 JUN 06, Tuesday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq*

A funny thing happens here at Camp Sather concerning the days: I have almost a week's worth of mornings under my belt, but I've already stopped trying to count the exact number of days I've been here. It is rather easy to keep track of the date, but difficult to know which day of the week it is. Others claim that they share in this same phenomenon. We attribute it to the long work shifts blanketing the six work days. I've not much time to write this morning.

I arrived at "The Oasis" about a half-hour later than normal. The reason is because I was cleaning my dusty, blanket-draped quarters. Today is inspection day. Last week, we received emails that tent inspections were the first Tuesday of each month. Since it is still June, I'm not sure of their logic, but I guess it's the

first Tuesday of a week that starts a new month. Who cares? It's just one of those necessary nuisances.

I'll be curious to see the outcome of today's inspection. Several days ago, the Services Squadron received over three hundred sets of flame retardant privacy curtains. They are the type designed for our rounded dwellings. A lot of folks already have the proper curtains in their tents and we are probably one of only a few who don't. My guess is that after the inspectors come through and we take a fire hazard write-up, we'll be issued the correct curtains.

I can hardly wait for that to happen because I am tired of looking at sloppy layers of mismatched blankets, sheets, and sleeping bags surrounding me on three sides (the fourth side is the tent wall). My little section of tent should do well. If I take any personal hits, it will probably be for the large door mat on my floor. It's the kind you'd expect at the entrance of an industrial plant or other commercial location. It has a heavy black rubber backing with a green outdoor carpeting type of surface.

I took the mat outside and tried to shake some of the dirt and lint free to no avail. I have already tried sweeping it with the over-sized broom in our tent. That only succeeded at injecting broom straws into the mat's fibrous top. My last resort was to stoop down and hand-pluck the most contrasting debris. It was sort of like picking tiny cotton balls from a sheet of Velcro, if you can imagine that. When I was finished with the mat, I scanned my area one last time. Yep! Everything is straight and as dusted as it can get!

## CMOC

—Deb Hamilton

*Yesterday was my first day off since arriving at BIAP (Baghdad International Airport) last Wednesday. Today is Friday and I have decided to spend several hours of my off-day on a volunteer mission to a place called the CMOC (Civilian Military Operation Center). The CMOC is located on one of the Army camps here, just inside the wire. It's a clinic where Iraqi citizens can bring their children for free medical care. I learned about the CMOC from Senior Master Sergeant Taglieri or "Sergeant Tag" (as she's known by most military folks). The Iraqi people call her "Jennifer." I met SMSgt Taglieri at "The Oasis" where I have coffee every morning and write in my journal. I told her I was a writer of sorts, and she thought I'd be interested in the people at the CMOC. She was right.*

*30 JUN 2006*

It takes close to thirty minutes to get there by bus. Tag drives while I, two military doctors, and another volunteer ride in the bouncy seats. A few other people follow behind in government vehicles. When we arrive, a young boy comes running up to Tag's driver-side window, smiling from ear to ear. It is obvious that Tag is a familiar and most-welcomed face. As we stand outside in the dusty lot, waiting to go inside the aged, tan, concrete structure, the young boy greets each of us, smiling and shaking our hands. The kid looks to be about twelve or thirteen. I find out later from an interpreter that he is not a kid at all; rather, he is a young man of nineteen. Learning of our greeter's true age immediately causes me to recall my child development course in psychology. I conclude that the man's appearance is likely due to a lack of prenatal care and malnourishment, causing growth retardation.

The open room we enter into looks orderly, but also old and grungy. The floor is bare concrete and the walls are very plain. An area to the right is sectioned off with several dusty, black, cushioned chairs. Some children sit quietly watching a television set. “Scooby Doo” is playing in English. Straight ahead is a raised, concrete platform with folding tables set up on it. This station is used to place boxes of donated items for the kids and their parents. Of particular interest to the children are “Pez” candy dispensers that have been shipped over by a volunteer’s family.

At the center of the large room—just a bit forward—are several rows of the same black, padded chairs as those in the children’s TV area. The rows are half-filled with Iraqi adults, mostly women clad in the traditionally thick, black, Muslim attire (I keep forgetting what the heavy, draping garments are called). A few men are also seated there, wearing light-colored robes while the rest are dressed in outdated jogging pants or jeans and t-shirts. Cradled by some of the parents are infants and toddlers too small for the TV area. I can’t help but notice how tiny they all are: tiny, helpless babies at the mercy of all this conflict and poverty.

I watch as one man walks over to the children’s area with an infant son. He briefly positions the little one on the back of one of the padded chairs while supporting him securely with his hands. He lifts the baby in his arms and caresses a tiny cheek with the side of his masculine thumb. This is a father who loves his baby boy. His affectionate ways say more than the words of any language could about Love’s universal nature.

I go over to the man and ask if I can take a picture of the two of them. He smiles and grants me permission. Then he repositions the baby against him, facing him toward me in a sort of seated position. I realize then that the father thinks I only wanted a picture of his child. He seems surprised—pleased—that I choose to photograph them together. He smiles as I show him the tiny screen on

my digital camera. Later, I begin to speculate on a means of giving a copy of the picture to the man.

*02 JUL 2006, "Operation Photograph"*

I have a revelation and decide to drag Lindseye (my significant other back home) into it as an accomplice. I start thinking really hard about a way to give the photographs to the Iraqis who came to the CMOC clinic. My mind finally lands on the idea of a Polaroid camera, specifically, the kind that develops the picture while you wait. After speaking to Lindseye about my revelation during one of our allotted, fifteen-minute phone calls, she agrees to get involved and to see what she can come up with from her end. My original thinking is for Lindseye to check the pricing for cameras and film. If we can afford it, she will buy the stuff and ship it over.

"God Bless" my sweet Lindseye! She decides to turn "Operation Photograph" into a charity campaign back home. And she is already taking steps to see about getting camera supplies donated to the effort. Plus, she will rally our families and friends to participate. Not only will she ask for donations, she will request children's multi-vitamins and shoes. These are items they are in dire need of at the clinic. I'm hoping to have updated news on our project when I go in to work and check my email. I am beyond pleased with Lindseye's enthusiasm and I'm excited about the prospect of starting a small project for the Iraqis that will continue to live here after I'm gone.

*Note: Operation Photograph turns out to be a real success. Thanks to many good folks back home in Eastern Kentucky, a package arrives just before I leave Iraq. It contains a digital camera, a photo printer and lots of paper and ink supplies. My correspondence with Tag and others after I leave Baghdad reveals that the Iraqi families enjoyed receiving pictures of their children immensely.*

*03 JUL 2006*

I meet the most remarkable young man at the CMOC. He is dressed in a U.S. Army uniform and stands at a solid six feet or more. I notice that in place of where Army rank is normally displayed—just below the “v” of the collar—there are the initials “I.T.” I learn that this stands for “Iraqi Translator.” His nametag reads, “Zeeman.”

I would have never guessed that this young man is an interpreter. He looks more like an average soldier. Even more surprising, I would have never guessed him to be from Iraq! His hair is lighter than the dark black I have grown accustomed to in Iraq; it even has touches of red in it. Zeeman speaks English incredibly well. Sometimes, he speaks so fast that I can’t quite keep up. Another odd thing is that I have noticed his English seems to have a French accent. Sure enough...he speaks fluent French, too!

During the course of our conversation, I (and others standing close by) learn that Zee was raised in an elite environment. Zeeman tells us that his family members are all either physicians or lawyers (including an aunt who is a psychiatrist in the United States). Zee explains that he is the “dark sheep” of his family and that no one supported his decision to translate for the American military. It is unclear from our conversation why Zee’s family members are against his chosen profession. I figure it either went against his elite background or it has something to do with their personal feelings about America’s involvement in Iraq. I determine to learn more about his family and their views during our conversation.

Sure enough, the more Zeeman speaks with our small group, the more I become enamored with him. Unlike the stoic pose he maintains in the photographs taken with me, he is, in actuality, full of smiles and very animated. He appears to almost burst with energy and enthusiasm. I admire his personability with the civilians at the clinic for treatment.

Zee's disposition absorbs much of my attention as he shares his personal experiences and concerns with us. He tells us that when he first began his job as an interpreter—three years ago—he was positioned with frontline Marines. He speaks of the battles he witnessed and participated in. One time, he turned to check on a wounded buddy and was shot while exposing his back. Zee does not elaborate on the extent of his wounds. But he goes on to tell us in his matter-of-fact way that he'd seen many people killed: "One minute your friend is right there with you and the next minute he is gone."

We do not press Zee with questions. We are all too humbled to pry deeper into his tales. We assume that the friends he refers to are Americans—friends that he had come to know—and that they had accepted him as a fellow warrior. As he speaks, I find myself wanting to learn more about the Iraqi up-close as well as hear more of his personal accounts of the war.

Mr. Z shares that his fiancé had also served as an interpreter. Zee said she was killed in Fallujah. He says her death made him decide to come off of the front lines. His mention of her brings with it a momentary change in his demeanor. His face becomes relaxed and his eyes stare at the floor. It is obvious that Zee loved this girl and that he was shaken by her loss.

Zee's demeanor quickly recovers as he goes on to tell us that he hopes to go live with his aunt in the states. Zee explains that if he stays in Iraq, he will be killed as soon as the US troops leave. It is unclear to me exactly who he is referring to (the threats he describes are acronyms that I am unfamiliar with). I'm quite positive at one point, though, that Zee says the very people we are currently training will be the ones to kill him. Zee claims that they will kill him and "anyone else who helped the Americans."

During our discussion, Zeeman motions for another translator to join us. She is an attractive young woman wearing a low, v-neck top, tight-fitting, Capri style jeans, and very tall platform sandals. The girl wears makeup and has very large,



brown eyes. Her hair is shoulder length and her English sounds more American than Zee's, perhaps even more than mine! Her name is Rafen.

Rafen corroborates Zee's concerns about being murdered. She says that she has to get out of Iraq and that she can't wait to leave. I find Rafen a quite interesting complement to Zee. Her demeanor and commentary remind me much of young, urban-American women. For instance, when one of the airmen asks her the name and significance of the long black garments worn by many of the Iraqi women, she rolls her eyes sarcastically, saying simply that the burka is worn for religious reasons. As the discussion continues, Rafen explains that the women believe it is pleasing to God for them to cover themselves. Rafen also points out that she is not religious and that she doesn't believe that God cares much about what people wear. Internally, I smile because I can see the dawning of change in this young woman's posture. She is somewhat of a rebel; but her spirit is guided by logic and intelligence. As with Zee, I want to learn more about Rafen and her thoughts about our world.

Before breaking from our group, I take the opportunity to ask Zeeman his age. He says he is twenty-years old, which means he started his military job when he was only seventeen or eighteen years old. My knee-jerk response is to say, "You're just a pup!" Then I quickly acknowledge to Zee that he has already seen and dealt with more turmoil than most men three times his age. Rafen, as it turns out, is also a well-seasoned twenty-year old.

As I bid my new acquaintances farewell, I thank them for all for what they have done and are doing. Never before had I considered the troops in need of such support. Zeeman and Rafen have crossed so boldly over to our side of the line. May Allah cover them with protection and teach the world through their voices.

*14 JUL 2006, CMOC, Visit #2*

I have returned to CMOC with SMSgt Taglieri and several other Air Force members, including a doctor ranked as a Lieutenant Colonel. There are quite a few children at the clinic along with their parents, mostly mothers shrouded in burkas. I snap only a few pictures of the kids. I'd rather wait until the photo printer arrives from Lindseye so I can offer photographs to keep. I start looking for Zeeman. But I don't see him anywhere. I ask if he will be here later and am told that he might. He never shows.

Rafen isn't there either. But there is a young woman named Huda. I met Huda on my previous visit. We talked for a while and I could tell she was in much different spirits. She and the other Iraqis who associate with Americans are in more danger of being attacked than normal. This is because a contracted security company, KBR, is leaving Iraq. I've received word from two different sources that the US government has failed to pay KBR millions of dollars. One of my sources—a Technical Sergeant with the Security Forces—claims that a large group of troops are being sent to Sather to take over airport security. Also, a military group known as “Red Horse” is coming here to make repairs to the runways. I'm not sure if they will only fix our runways, or, if they'll fix the Iraqi commercial runways as well. KBR has been keeping the perimeter surrounding the local airport safe. Huda, her family, and lots of other Iraqi people live in an area known as, “The Village.” The Village is kept safe by KBR. And now that they pulling out, The Village is vulnerable to attack.

Everything I am told about the situation seems to be true; we now have an over abundance of Security Forces personnel swarming our compound. I don't know if Red Horse has arrived yet, or not. Tag told me yesterday—after we returned from CMOC—that one of the young Iraqi men who worked at CMOC was almost abducted since her last visit on Saturday. The young man is David, the one I thought was merely a child on my first CMOC visit. Tag said that David did not live in The Village; rather, he lives with his parents somewhere in

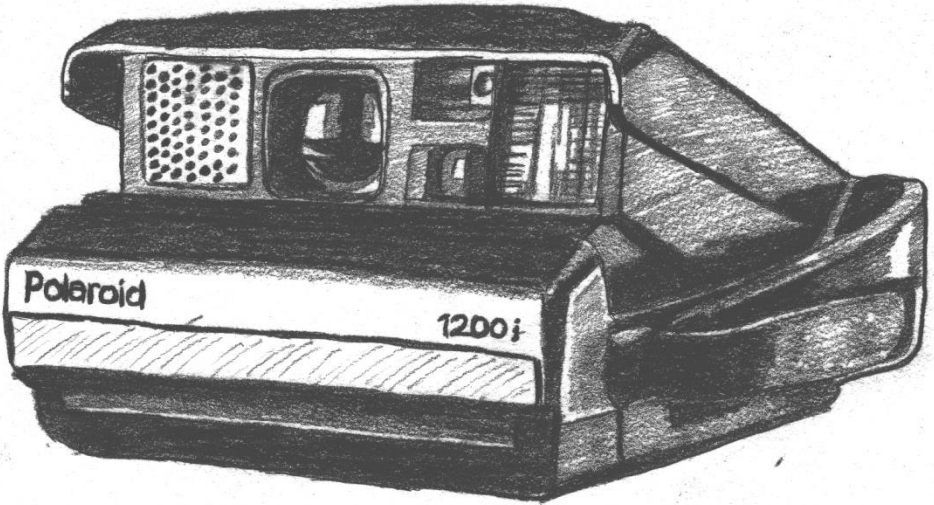
Baghdad. I recall David telling me that he lived “far” when I spoke with him earlier that day, before knowing of his precarious situation. Tag went on to say that the Army makes David stay on the base in order to protect him. Also, they are supposedly protecting his parents in their home. It is still very unclear to me who the bad guys are. I don’t know if they are Saddam loyalists, insurgents, or rebel groups of some other origin. My goal is to have clearer understanding of all this before I depart.

One person I am sure can help explain things to me is an Army man I met at CMOC yesterday. His name is Perez. He is filling in as NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge) while sergeant Noah of CMOC is on leave. I spoke with Perez close to the time we had to leave CMOC, and he had time to tell me how much he relates to what the Iraqi people are going through. He said his own country, the Dominican Republic, went through very similar circumstances twenty to twenty-five years ago. Perez said, “I am no different from these people. I even look like them.” Afterwards, he went on to say, “These people did not ask us to be here.”

Working for Civil Affairs, Perez’s duty takes him outside the wire on many occasions. Civil Affairs is tasked with smoothing relationships between the local people and our military. When US troops go into a town or certain areas of the city, they are sometimes met with hostility. Perez’s job is to communicate with the local people in such a way that they become cooperative with the Americans. He also goes into areas following violent engagements. This places Perez at much risk because he deals with Iraqi citizens whose homes and lives have just been destroyed.

I asked Perez if he was ever scared and he said, “No. I believe if it’s your time to go, then it’s your time to go.” All of his words were spoken in a heavy Latino accent. Just before leaving, I asked Perez a question. His answer struck me as most intriguing. I asked him if he felt that the job of Civil Affairs was a sincere

one. He cocked his head to the side and tilted his shoulder, saying, “I have my own opinion about these things.”



# My Life as a Soldier in the “War on Terror”

—Bradley Johnson

I sat helplessly in my living room on that day, watching as the events unfolded in front of me. I remember feeling like I should jump on a plane and go help. Logically, of course, I’d have done more harm than good. I wasn’t trained: I was a civilian. I vividly remember the anger and rage as I saw the World Trade Center fall. On that day—in that moment—I decided to become a soldier.

The day I went to the recruiter’s office is one of the more memorable days of my life. The memories are as vivid as my son’s birth. The sign out front read, “Freedom Loving Patriots Apply Here.” I walked straight in and asked for the “Freedom Loving Patriot” position. I was shaking, my palms were sweaty, and my heart was pounding out of my chest. The recruiter sat me down, gave me a list of options, told me exactly what needed to be done and sent me on my way to complete a series of tasks. I needed to lose nearly thirty pounds, gather documentation, take tests, and get myself into shape

It took me nearly four months to get into shape and lose enough weight to qualify for enlistment. That, in itself, was quite the feat (I had recently turned twenty-one and drank enough beer to kill an elephant). I left for Basic Combat Training (BCT) the day after my 22nd birthday full of piss and vinegar; well, piss and leftover bourbon, maybe. Arriving at Basic Training was interesting. I’ve seen dozens of military movies and was expecting a giant guy in a round hat to scream at me as soon as I rounded the corner; but that did not happen. In fact, things were astoundingly quiet for a week. Then, I found myself center stage in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

I arrived in South Carolina and began my adventure from citizen to soldier. Fourteen weeks later, I returned home ready to take on the world (or at least a part of it in the Middle East). And later that year, I knew I would get my chance. But in the meantime, I re-enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University to educate

myself and become a productive member of society. Some would say that it was my ignorance (or my arrogance) that led me to school with a deployment looming over my head. I would say that I needed to plan for the best and expect the worst. When you are a “Citizen-Soldier” the citizen part is as important as the soldier part. This is the reason I decided on the National Guard instead of the active Army. I wanted the chance to help my community directly as well as to be able to fight for my country.

Classes were going well, everything was in order, and I was well on my way to graduation. Afterwards, my plan was to attend Law School. I worked part time at the local insurance office and was going through a normal day—answering calls, selling insurance, and helping customers—when my office manager pages my phone to tell me that I have a call. I answer, “Can I help you.”

The voice on the other end says, “Raging Bull.” The line went silent and I knew what it meant. My heart dropped and my breathing became labored. I felt my world spinning as the gravity of what had just happened crushed me. I was ready and I had to accept the reality of the situation. This was real. This was not a drill. I was going to war.

I quietly walked into my boss’s office and said, “I just got deployed.” Without a word he nodded and I left with little ceremony. The three-mile drive home was the longest drive of my life. I had been married for only three months and now I would have to tell my new wife that I was leaving. It was October, and by November I would be gone to train and deploy somewhere in the Middle East.

With the ground war underway in Iraq, it was fair to assume I was headed there. In a grand exit, my company left our little town and headed south to our training site to prepare for waging war. It was both a long and a short three months. Long, because I saw my family three times; short, because I knew what tasks were ahead.

After witnessing the horrors of 9/11 and deciding to become a soldier, waiting in this place made me remember that I had always watched military shows and

documentaries, wondering if I would have what it takes when the time came. I was about to find out. That's not to say that my reasons for joining the military were all blood and guts; I found honor and pride in serving. It was a privilege to stand in a long line of men and women who had fought for this great nation. In a way, being a soldier held a certain romance for me. I wasn't out to be a hero; I wasn't out for glory on the battlefield; I was simply a soldier with a job to do.

After a miserable Christmas and worse New Year, the long and miserable flight to the Area of Operations (AO) was complete. We were there. Twelve hours later, I called home to let my wife know I was in country. She replied with two words that would change my life forever: "I'm Pregnant." Knowing pregnancies last nine months and deployments last at least twelve, I knew it was going to be a long one. I would sweat and bleed, and fight for an entire country that would need me. But I was also a long ways away when my wife would need me most.

This isn't the part of my story where I give a play-by-play of my time in Iraq. This is the part where I say that Iraq sucked, people died, people shot at me, and I shot back. I also made some of the best friends one could ask for. We are still brothers in the truest sense, despite being separated by distance and time. The bonds that we forged on the battlefield are bonds that cannot be weakened by time or distance. The people I served with are the only people in the world I would trust with my kids, my woman, or my booze.

My time in Iraq produced an interesting combination of "I'm a bad motherfucker" and "Please let me get home to see my son." It's an odd combination of "Fuck you. Bring it on motherfucker" and "I just want to go home." On the one side of the coin, you are trained, ready and willing. Above all else, you are fucking pissed off. At points, you go from feeling like you are wanted and needed by the locals to feeling like they don't want you there at all. So, you think, "Fuck it." You feel like equal parts Arnold in the end of *Predator* and Mel Gibson in the beginning of *Braveheart*. You'd rather not fight, but as

long as you have to, you are going to rain down hell upon the enemy. I realize this all sounds cruel and illogical, but so is war. You truly stop caring. You don't want to shoot, but you will. And you won't think about it, until you get home that is.

My tour ended and we came home. It was on that day the real struggle began. You don't realize it while it's happening. You don't even know that it is happening, but it is. While you fight and suffer and struggle, you are also changing, becoming someone totally different. The harsh and violent realities of war force you to change. Emotions are an inconvenience—they distract you—making you feel and think instead of react. A distracted soldier is a dead soldier. My evolution was a great thing on the battlefield, but it is just as much a bad thing when you get home. The inability to share or even *have* emotions is not something to be sought after. Five—almost six—years later that fight is still going on. I know you have seen the commercials with smiling people saying, “Veterans are a priority” and “helping them” is our job. Well, all that glimmers isn't gold. I have a chest full of medals, some that you can only get from being in combat. But to get the care I needed I still had to prove to the VA through letters from my peers that I was in combat.

The enormous bureaucracy involved with the Department of Veterans Affairs is oftentimes insurmountable. A trip to the VA hospital is like a trip to the DMV; and the level of care is sketchy at best. However, the VA has done great things for me: They pay for my schooling and they pay me a living allowance to go. They compensate me for injuries incurred while I was deployed and provide me with free medical care. It does make me wonder, though: Are they paying me so that I can walk away or so that they can? For all intents and purposes, the fighting I have done cost me my sanity and sense of normalcy. Even now, years later, my best friends in the world tell me that I'm different...that I am any number of things that are...*different*. Supposedly, I am violent, aggressive, loud, agitated, and not very nice. These are the descriptions that tend to top the list. It



hurts because I know that it is most likely true. I am different. I am scarred. I am flawed. I don't intend to sound like a victim here. I vowed to give my life for my country, and I still would. The part that they don't talk about is that your life *as you knew it* will be over after experiencing combat. You will be forced to deal with and accept a new reality. And this is a reality that trades my well being for taxpayer money.

I returned to my local insurance office to find that I no longer had a job. I know that USSERA, the relief act requiring employers to give back jobs to deployed guardsmen, guaranteed my job. But my job was half above the table and half below the table. It just wasn't going to work, financially. I re-enrolled at ECU in hopes of finishing a degree. But midway through my first semester back, I was called into action again.

This time, I went to Mississippi to help in the Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. While there, my pregnant wife had a miscarriage. It took me four days to get home, longer than it took to get home from Iraq. By the time I got home, it was over. But being the good soldier that I was, I took it in stride. However, my wife did not. She began to question whether or not I had cheated on her while deployed and, more and more frequently, arguments were the result. If I had cheated, or given her a reason to think so, I would understand. I did neither. I was too busy trying to stay alive. Sure, the Army "offers" programs to help with this type of thing if you are "on base." But we were not on base. It was at this point that my son had his first birthday. I opted for a divorce, moved out of our house, and headed back to work and school. But this time, it was culinary school.

I worked, learned, cooked, and drank...a lot. Then, I met *her* and *she* saved my life. *She* dragged me out from under the pile of pain, anger, and depression that was stacked on top of me. And *she* is now my wife. My wife has not given me a hand out; rather, she has given me a hand up. She has loved and supported me, unconditionally.

Looking back, I realize that it's not my fault. It's not anybody's fault. Things just happen. I am on my way to a 2012 graduation. My life as a soldier in the War on Terror was and still is an interesting one. I have lived and seen and smelled and done many things that I can't take back. But many of these things...I don't want to take back. The Army National Guard and the United States have given and taken away many things. But these are all small prices to pay. In the end, I hold to the belief that my son will not have to pay the same price that I have. And that assurance justifies my hardships and my struggles. Freedom is not free.



# My Bosnian Deployment

—Michael Reichert

I was in the Army for almost two years before being deployed to Bosnia. I had been to Korea; but, as I was soon to find out, Korea was nothing compared to wartime Bosnia. It was January of 2000 when I joined the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment on a military flight straight to this warzone. As prepared as we thought we were for the “police action,” we could not have expected what awaited us. Everyone told us that the war was over and that we were there just to keep order. But we soon found out that the war was still going on and we were right in the middle of it. As I stepped off of the plane, my unit and I were put on a bus and driven to a camp built not too long before we arrived. The camp used to be a pig farm, so you can imagine the smell.

There were many times that were hard, as if we were in a living hell. And there were times when we were called for stupid and crazy missions. There were also times when we were off for a day and would get together and come up with fun things to do. I will start with the crazy and funny things we did to occupy our time. Then, I will move on to the absurd missions before discussing the more hellish times.

Everyone needed to get their minds off of missing their families, the chaos, and the fatigue from time to time. So, we would do crazy things. For example, we would head to a water hole and jump in and just act crazy. We would wrestle for therapeutic reasons and to get our minds off all the crap going on all around us. Some of the guys even made sumo wrestler outfits to wrestle in.

There were times when we had the weirdest and most absurd missions you can think of. Once, we got called on a mission because a man moved his prized pig into someone else’s home. The culprit tried to tell us that he thought the people had moved out; and, since he was living next door, it was necessary for his pig to have the house all to himself. It was our job to try to get the man to

have the pig move out of the house so the homeowners could move back in. But the pig did not leave easily (thanks to the efforts of his owner). As a result, one of our men ended up saying “screw this” and shot the pig. The man went nuts and the Army had to pay him for this pig and three generations of the pigs that would never be born.

Another funny thing happened when we got picked for a security run-through in a very small town. We stopped the humvees and got out to talk with some of the town’s people. After about forty-five minutes, a hoard came charging at us with pitchforks, shovels, and brooms. We looked at our Captain and asked, “Sir, what do we do?” Since they weren’t armed with weapons, he told us not to shoot and to get in the humvees. My roommate, Sherwood, was surrounded by the time the rest of us were in the humvees. He had no other choice than to start hitting the people with the butt of his weapon as he was pummeled by brooms, shovels, rakes, etc. Then, our Brazilian counterparts in the peacekeeping mission pulled up with riot gear and started taking these people out left and right with batons. It was just so funny, I still laugh about it today.

Now comes the hardest part of any war zone, the being shot at. In war, death is all around you and, afterward, the memories don’t go away. Bosnia was still a warzone even though they wanted to call it a “police action.” I was shot at—at least four times—and somehow I am still here today. I never got hit. Either someone was watching over me, or, everyone that shot at me was a very bad shot. I have seen death and I have smelled death. Sometimes, I remember death as a person and remind him, “Nice try asshole, but I’m not going quite yet.”

The smell and spectacle of death is something you never forget. Every once in a while, I can still smell it and I see the men’s faces that I had to kill. The thing that haunts me the most are reminders of a mission where we had to secure a mass grave site. Apparently, some guy had killed innocent people and decided to hide the bodies all in one place. We were called there to secure the area while

locals dug up the people for proper burial as well as to find the evidence needed to convict the murderer.

When we arrived, the smell of rotting flesh filled the air. I was told to pull the first guard shift around the mass-grave site. During one of my patrols, I made the huge mistake of looking down: The body of a little girl was still there, holding onto a little stuffed rabbit. The little girl was wearing a purple dress; she still had a blindfold on her eyes. And she was just thrown on top of all the other bodies. I can't get that image out of my head.

It hits me especially hard in my dreams. I wake up in cold sweats and sometimes I wake up screaming, I have even hit my girlfriend in my sleep and not realized I had done it until the next morning. In waking life, the smell hits me when I least expect it. To this day, anything that reminds me of what I smelled the day I saw that little girl will cause flashbacks. I go back to that day and it seems real even though I'm no longer there. I still have anxiety attacks.



My military service is something I will never forget. Whether they are of good times or bad times, the memories will always be with me as they are with any other soldier. But I am out of the Army now and my prayers and best wishes are with the soldiers of today.

# One Night in Iraq

—Travis L. Martin

*9:00PM—30 Miles North of Najaf, Iraq.*

Having already fired a flare directly towards the vehicle without success, I decide to flash my spotlight three more times. My efforts to communicate with the driver fail, and the car continues straight towards our convoy. I break two glow sticks and wave them in an “X” pattern, trying to get the driver’s attention. He slows a little, acknowledging that he sees me; but the driver chooses not to stop. The sun has just set. All of Iraq turns a grayish brown as the uncertainty of dark begins its slow creep over the once illuminated landscape. I pull out my night vision goggles, tie them to a strap on my flak vest, and set them next to the green ammo can directly to my front. Meanwhile, the car I fired a flare at transforms from a white speck into a clearly distinguishable orange and white sedan. For now, the car is not a threat. But it will have to come to a stop before our convoy can pass.

I am the gunner in a Humvee leading a convoy of military gun trucks and civilian supply vehicles. I stand looking forward with my knees locked, swiveling back and forth, bouncing off of the sides of the hatch with every little bump. My body flails against the cold steel like a small, helpless ball bouncing around in a pinball machine as the Humvee rolls along. I often let myself bounce around like this to stay awake; but I am not tired. Rather, I am bored and trying to stay alert while deciding if this seemingly innocent car in the distance poses an actual threat. My left hand rests on a crank that can swivel the gunner’s hatch left or right depending on which way I turn it. My right hand tightly grips the butt stock of an M240 Bravo machine gun and periodically I ensure that the ammo belt leading into the weapon’s feed tray is not tangled or caught in debris.

Meanwhile, below me, and in the cab of the Humvee, Sergeant Calhoun and Captain Dallas have reached a conclusion concerning the meaning of life.

My platoon-mates' bantering is a welcome relief from the nervous silence accompanying night missions. When you are the gunner in the lead truck you are cut off from everyone. The driver and convoy commander are only two feet away, but they are nestled in the somewhat secure confines of an uparmored humvee. I am exposed, both physically and psychologically. Physically, my upper torso is fair game for IED blasts, sniper rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, and that piano wire the enemy has taken to stringing up under bridges. The piano wire rests at the perfect height to decapitate gunners who think too much, like me. Psychologically, the lead gunner is under a lot of stress: It is my job to spot things in the road that go "boom". And if I fail, it can mean the death of not only me, but my friends in the cab of the vehicle below me and the vehicles behind me, people that I have come to know and love.

One thing that I both love and hate about being the gunner in the lead truck is that there are no military trucks in front of me. It can be scary when you think about the fact that you are the only one able to prevent an assault coming from the front of the convoy. And you have to take the fact that you are secure to your six o'clock (directly behind you) by faith. But there is also something about being in the front that allows you to relax from time to time. Having no military vehicles in front means that I can momentarily slip out of the war and imagine what it would be like to drive down these roads in my own car. I often find myself pretending that Iraq is just a normal place, like anywhere else. When the sun recedes and the ground takes on that grayish brown color, I pretend that the desert sand is brown grass, decaying and withering in anticipation of the winter. Sometimes, the street lights in urban areas are so like home that I imagine myself driving the night away like I used to do before I enlisted, throwing the angst and uncertainty of youth into the curves of random roads. And when Calhoun and

Dallas chatter over the headset, it almost feels as if I am out for a drive with a couple of my best friends.

I am silent most of the time, eavesdropping on their conversations. Their banter is hilarious and I only chime in when I have given particular thought to what I am going to say. They are both from the north and a little wittier than I am. Where I am from, in Kentucky, we have a different sense of humor and our approach to life is much slower and relaxed. Specifically, I am not accustomed or experienced enough to add my two cents about sexual conquests and I am not brutal enough to win a battle of insults. Soldiers don't insult one another out of malice; it is more a sign of camaraderie than anything else. I have been called every name in the book in the most loving of ways. Still, we judge each other based on the promptness and quality of our rebuttals to said insults. I usually approach insults from a self-deprecating angle; and I have my moments during our 36-hour, three-way conversations on the headsets. One of these moments led to the creation of Sergeant Travis "Cat Balls" Martin. In a flash of inspiration—deprived of sleep and in search of a cure for the tedium of driving down a route with nothing but desert for as far as the eye can see—I constructed my character over the radio. The story was simple: Calhoun and Dallas were talking about sex and various predicaments of the phallus when I chimed in with an entirely made-up fact:

"In high school the guys in the showers gave me the name, 'Cat Balls' because my testicles are abnormally small and furry."

"That's it!" Dallas exclaimed.

"Yes, from now on you will be known as 'Cat Balls', the sickest, deadliest and craziest gunner in all of Iraq," Calhoun added.

"And when the enemy hears of Cat Balls driving through their village they will run in fear and lock their doors because they know that my balls are small and furry. They will never understand that the slaughtering I do is not hatred for



their people, but rather, a natural reaction to having been born with the balls of a cat,” I concluded.

And so, the legend began: From then on my moniker was Cat Balls. Naturally, Calhoun became known as “Smurf Dick” for reasons that are easy to guess. Dallas simply took on the call sign “C-P-T” as an alliteration of the abbreviation for his Captain’s rank. Dallas’ nickname was partly a joke about the practice of calling a lieutenant “L-T” and it was less severe than Cat Balls or Smurf Dick because, outside the humvee, he was an officer who commanded respect. Our motley crew traversed every corner of Iraq with some sick desire to be the occupants of the lead truck at all times. Missions would last anywhere from six to forty-eight hours depending on whether or not we had a breakdown or an accident. We performed escort missions almost exclusively, getting the Iraqi and Jordanian truck drivers where they needed to be with supplies and ammunitions. Our convoys had only five or six American gun trucks interspersed throughout; the remaining twenty-to-thirty trucks were driven solely by local nationals. To kill the time, Smurf Dick and I often made calls back to the rest of the convoy:

“Never Scared 2 this is Smurf Dick 1, over.”

(Confused mumble and static)

“This is Never Scared 2, go ahead.”

“Roger, this is Smurf Dick 1. Cat Balls 1 says that there is a box on the right-hand side of the road; keep an eye out, over.”

“Smurf Dick, can you have Cat Balls describe the box? Over.”

(Chuckles overtake the static)

“Roger, this is Cat Balls 1 Actual; prepare to copy ... On the right hand side of the road, about five meters from the edge, there is a brown box that looks suspicious, over.”

“Roger, we will keep an eye out, over.”

“Roger that. Cat Balls 1 out.”

So, it is Cat Balls—the furry-testicled warrior—trying to size up the orange and white sedan heading towards our convoy. Is this the crazed suicide bomber that I dream about every night and forcefully forget before each mission? Is this the guy that people are literally dying every day to meet? I play out the scene of my own death in my mind: The car speeds up and I am caught off guard. At 50 feet away I start firing at the vehicle. I hit the driver; and with his lifeless foot on the accelerator, he speeds directly towards my humvee. At 25 feet the driver and my platoon leader start yelling at me. At 15 feet the driver of the car begins to swerve. With no way to keep firing, I throw myself down inside the gunner's hatch and the car impacts on the right side of our humvee. The impact triggers enough explosives in the trunk to level a building. Everyone (including myself) in the humvee dies; we are liquefied by the magnitude of the blast. Any remaining pieces are bagged up and mailed home. At the memorial service someone mutters to someone else that the three deaths are my fault: I failed to act. I play out this scene in my head before every mission, when I am eating chow, when I am sitting in my room, when I am brushing my teeth or staring at the stars, and especially when an orange and white sedan does not come to a stop. It only takes two or three seconds for my brain to let the whole tragic ordeal unfold. And despite the fact that I have never witnessed or been a part of something nearly so terrible, it is horrifying and real enough that I must constantly reaffirm my own place in reality.

I swivel my gunner's hatch at an angle, making it so that the shield can block me from the shrapnel of a blast while allowing my M240 Bravo to point directly at the driver's face. I pull back the charging handle on my weapon—loading a round in the chamber—keeping it trained on the car. The bolt slides back so smoothly that my right hand—the one holding the charging handle—feels a little giddy, excited from the successful execution of its simple task. Once again, I have to decide whether or not my fantasy-suicide-bomber friend is an actual-suicide-bomber friend. I have to rework the equation that turns over and over and

over in my mind every time I leave the base-perimeter wire. I have to decide if a simple orange and white sedan creeping towards me is a threat, not so much to my life, but to the lives of the people I share a humvee with. Most importantly, I have to decide whether or not this risk is worth taking a man's life and living with the consequences.

I figure that since the man is slowing down, he must not be bent on killing anyone. But then again, I am going to get yelled at if he does not stop and I let him go by. I am the lead gunner and it is my job to make sure that all traffic comes to a stop and that no one sneaks a VBIED (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) into the heart of the convoy. I basically demanded this job. I figure if someone is going to be up front it should be me. Other guys get trigger happy; other guys fall asleep in the hatch; other guys are complacent. But not me. I read the words "Complacency Kills" on the wall every time I leave the base, and like a good little soldier, I take the words to heart. Perhaps I am egotistical to feel responsible for the lives of everyone in my vehicle, every civilian I pass, and every truck behind my own; but I know I will probably pay for it before the end of the deployment. After all, if someone is going to run over a bomb, get shot by a sniper, get his head cut off by piano wire, get crushed in vehicle a roll-over, or run into a VBIED, it is more than likely going to be the lead gunner.

My hands shake from Red-Bull and caffeine tablets; but I am not nervous. The ill-effects of caffeine, taurine, B-vitamins, and sugar are a welcome relief from deadly fatigue. Pointing my machine gun at the Iraqi's face, I accept the fact that circumstances are beyond my control. I have to come to terms with this fact each time we go on mission. I tuck the fact that my control is illusory—that little metal bullets will do little to stop a vehicle bent on running itself into my vehicle—neatly away in the back of my mind. Ultimately, the driver of the sedan is going to choose his own fate. I am simply another cog in the machine. Depending on my degree of resistance to military indoctrination, I am mindless; I am not supposed to think. And every time I hesitate—choose not to immediately

fire at my perceived enemy—is a moment in which I am disobeying orders and putting my friends' lives in jeopardy. This resistance has become a horrible habit that I am finding hard to break.

The driver of the sedan can't see me. All he can see, possibly, are the streaks of light from my glow sticks in the distance. He has no idea about the thoughts rushing through my head. He is absolutely and unequivocally foreign. He did not grow up in a small Kentucky town in the Bible belt. He does not understand how hard he is making my life just by driving down an Iraqi road. And he is probably confused about why I just shot a flare at him and why I am waving glow sticks around in the air like a madman. He is blind. But I can see him clearly: He is a man on his way home from work, rushing to his wife's embrace and the warmth of children hugging at his legs. At the same time, he has waited for this moment his entire life: It took him months to put together the explosive materials weighing down the rear end of his orange and white sedan. He lost three fingers toying with old mortar shells and land mines and electrical wire; he hates me with every bone in his body and he suffers from a mental disorder that is shameful in his culture. Death is the man's only respite; and, to him, I am simply an easy ticket to martyrdom.

The man with two distinct identities is stopping, but not fast enough. Normally, one of two things would happen at this point: (1) The Iraqi stops or (2) the soldier begins mercilessly pumping rounds into the car. But I expected this sort of thing and prepared a third option before the mission. Picking up a rock from next to my ammo can, I take aim and launch it at the driver's windshield. The sound of glass breaking is loud enough that the rest of the people in my truck hear it. They laugh and the Iraqi comes to halt. It was really the only choice I had; it was either the rock or I would have to shoot the man. I have every right under the rules of engagement to fire on any vehicle that gets this close to my convoy; at least, this is what I am told.

Essentially, I am an ordained minister for the would-be-god otherwise known as the United States Army. I interpret this false god's laws, dictating life and death and separating the innocent from the wicked. But I am a generous dictator: It is my job to determine who lives and who dies, but I believe that if at all possible no one should have to die. I use jokes to keep people from realizing I've never fired on anyone with the intent to kill. I mockingly call myself "God's gift to war" or repeat a saying that I read inside a port-o-john in Kuwait: "Truck drivers pay no toll at the gates of Hell." That is what we are, in case you are wondering, just truck drivers. I am not in a combat arms unit or a trained killer. I am just a lowly truck driver. However, I am in a position where I pretend to be an infantryman every night. In the lead truck I am a gunner, I decide the fate of every Iraqi man, woman, and child passing in front of my vehicle.

I have never had to shoot up one car, never had to point the gun at a man and take his life. And I thank God (the real God, not the Army) every day for this. Sure, I have returned fire after explosions; and we have been shot at, blown up and generally harassed. But I've never faced the enemy and been in that situation I expect to happen any day now. In place of adrenaline and a fight for survival, my war is an algorithm. My response to any given situation is little more than a cold, calculated solution derived minutes, days, weeks or even years prior to the time of an actual event. My reactions are a struggle between personal morality and years of combat training and experience. The whole war thing is an equation for me: Every rock I carry—each broken windshield and fit of ensuing laughter—is equal to a life saved.

It is not that Captain Dallas, Calhoun, and the others are evil. They are in the same predicament as I am. As the convoy commander, Captain Dallas has about as much knowledge of each passing car as I do. His only course of action is to have his gunner follow the Army's rules and keep his men safe. No matter which way you look at it, the burden falls on me. I am to shoot every car that gets within 25 meters of the convoy. But, and to be fair, there are a lot of little rules

that lead up to this event: First, I have to flash the car with the spotlight; then I have to shoot a flare in the general direction of the approaching vehicle; then I wave the glow sticks, and if that does not work, I am supposed to bring the car to a halt using any means necessary. But traveling at full speed through busy streets makes all of these rules—these standard operating procedures—null and void. So, I throw rocks. Sadly, if the higher brass finds out that I am throwing rocks through windshields I will likely get in more trouble than I would for decimating a vehicle full of people.

The “Standard Operating Procedures” or “Rules of Engagement” (as they call them) are not practical. For instance, often a car will pop up on the other side of a curve and I will have to think fast. I figure 99.9% of these guys are just on their way home from work; so I throw a rock through their windshield instead of killing them. There are those that would argue—in light of the imposed curfew—that anyone caught out in the middle of the night is up to no good. But no one has ever blown up when I am in the front. I figure that I am doing everyone a favor through restraint. If I kill one innocent Iraqi, his three children will just grow up to be terrorists who will, in turn, be killed and produce three more terrorists apiece. In all actuality, each windshield I break gets rid of at least nine terrorists. This is what I tell myself when I think about the violent smash of my rock penetrating a windshield and hitting an infant—little baby brains meshing with the broken glass. I see imaginary-infant quite often when I am doing my calculations. Sometimes, the infant is replaced by a woman or a pre-adolescent boy or an Iraqi man who supported U.S. troops before being violently accosted. But these are all just variables. I know that bullets kill for certain.

Such is the irony of my war. Innocent people get killed every day, legally, under the pretense that the killer could not determine whether or not there was an actual threat. So long as the spotlight is used, the glow sticks are waved, and the flare is shot, a gunner can shoot anyone he or she wants. Of course, this is not how they teach it to you in the meetings. But enough “what if” scenarios are

brought up so that those in charge basically say what I have said happens through a wink and a nod. Think about it: Lives are just winked and nodded away.

My schematics are little more than an attempt to justify my actions. But I suppose everyone looks for a sense of self-justification when they are forced to make life and death decisions. I simply try to ignore everything the Army taught me about the morality of killing for one's country and do what I think is right (there's that ego coming back into play). I don't follow the same logic as some of my fellow soldiers. A couple of weeks ago, a Reserve unit arrived on the base that I am stationed on and started performing escort missions similar to our own. However, these guys were ill-equipped. They did not have spotlights or glow sticks and likely, they did not know how to shoot a flare. So what did they do when a car came up to their convoy? They followed the rules of engagement to the letter and shot it. I know this because I witnessed it. I was in the lead truck in our convoy and we left the gate soon enough after them. We were so close that I could see their last truck. At every intersection—every turn—I would hear gunfire and see a disabled civilian car on the side of the road a few minutes later.

Now, I am not saying that everyone they shot at died; but, in all likelihood, some of them did. I elevate myself to something better than these confused or scared or possibly trigger-happy “new guys” by believing that, if I had been the lead gunner on their convoy, those cars would have only gotten a rock through the windshield as a worst-case scenario. I also try to tell myself that these Reservists don't know any better—that I can't really know what is going on up the road—despite having travelled the exact same route hundreds of times. The scary thing is that I have heard people talk about how this kind of thing is funny and actually brag about how many times they have shot cars. These same people will go home and tell their friends that they “engaged the enemy” countless times. But I know, and they know, that they just killed some guy on his way home from work.

Back to tonight's mission, the one where I just threw a rock through a guy's windshield and everyone thinks it was the funniest thing in the world. I select about 10 rocks for each mission. They are big rocks; and they do a considerable amount of damage when they hit a car going at full speed. But I'm not killing anyone. I am better than those guys in that Reserve unit. Right?

Allow me to clarify: Tonight's mission came with a warning in the intelligence briefing. Apparently, the locals are mad because they believe American soldiers are shooting unarmed civilians (big surprise). We are to expect an ambush of some sort as retaliation. But other than the windshield I just destroyed, there has been no action. There is a man outside of his vehicle cussing at our convoy in Arabic and I hear people chuckling over the radio. But other than that, it is the same monotonous trip that we always make.

Three hours and six rocks later we have escorted the supplies to where they need to go and are on our way home. But somewhere along the way the map shows that we have taken a wrong turn. We stop the convoy and everybody is on guard, scanning their sectors and making sure that no one approaches. I am in an awkward position. The road is going straight and our convoy is parked along the side. But our truck, the lead truck, has turned right and gone about fifteen feet onto an adjacent road. The main road is running parallel with the rest of the convoy, and I am out of position to stop traffic from the front. There are no buildings and the dark envelops the living and everything else more than twenty or thirty feet away. At first, there is no traffic and I silently pray that I am not called on to act from my current position.

Then it happens: a car just like the one I threw a rock at earlier comes towards the convoy. I spotlight and wave and do everything I can to get its attention; but the driver does not see me until he gets within about twenty feet of our trucks. At this point, I should have already opened fire. He must know that he has happened upon an American convoy and that he has no business coming any further. At the same time, he must be confused and unsure about why an American convoy is on



this particular road. He stops about twenty meters away from my truck and just sits there. I have gotten complacent—too used to not killing people—and I am hoping that this guy does not come any further as I put on my night vision goggles. The lights from his car screw up my vision; but I can distinctly see the driver, someone in the passenger seat and what looks like three little heads bobbing around nervously in the back. Every car is a complex equation to be solved: It will haunt you for the rest of your life if you get the wrong answer.

I think to myself, “If this guy is going to become a martyr, and get however many virgins when he gets to heaven, he would most likely not bring his wife and kids.” I think this, but I also see Dallas returning on foot from behind. He has been sorting out the directions and gives me a disgusted look while asking, “Are you just going to sit there and let this guy blow us up or what?” This is ridiculous, I think. But without hesitation I fire a couple of warning shots right in front of the vehicle and yell at the guy to move out of the way. Well, I yell the Arabic word for stop, which is one of the only Arabic words that I know. In actuality, our would-be-suicide-bomber friend follows my directions perfectly.

The guy does not move an inch. In fact, he lights a cigarette and just stares at me. I hear from inside the convoy, “What the fuck, Martin? Seriously, if you don’t have what it takes then I’m going to find someone else.” I don’t want to kill this guy and his kids. I think this is a worthwhile notion; but I don’t say it out loud. Dallas is not angry that I haven’t shot the car. He is angry that I have let it get this close to our convoy. I have failed in my job as lead gunner. I explain that there are kids in the back and he starts to question how I know they are kids, attempting to diffuse my argument. Luckily the Iraqi slowly backs away before I get the order to fire. Dallas gets back into the Humvee and we turn the convoy around, exiting the area from the way we came.

The whole ride home I get made fun of: “Yeah, Martin, that guy punked you out back there.” I try, as usual, to turn the whole thing into a joke at my own expense. They call me a pussy, a bad gunner, and every other name in the book,

and I just take it. This is my cross to bear. I deprive trigger-happy kids from getting their bragging rights. People see through to my massive ego; they believe that I think I am better than everyone else (although, I don't see it exactly that way) and they resent me. Whatever the case, I have been doing this for four months now and no one dies while I am in the front.

We get back to the base and I dismount my gun and carry it into the tent. Everyone else has their own air-conditioned connex, but we sleep in a big tent. Tents are stifling hot, regardless of whether or not you have an air conditioner. But we sleep all day and pull missions all night; so it really does not matter. I slide my machine gun under my cot and roll my sleeping bag out to lie down on. I take off my boots but leave the rest of my clothes on. A night full of deciding who lives and who dies, of doing the work of the would-be-Army-god has made me very tired. I close my eyes and fall asleep instantly.



## Put the Truck in Gear and Drive

—Micah Owen

*November 19th, 2003, Iraq.*

It is my week on QRF (Quick Reaction Force) and an announcement goes through the tent for us to gear up and be ready for a briefing in ten minutes. I jump off of my cot and hurry to suit up and grab my weapon, the M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon, aka, the SAW. The fully automatic M249 shoots the standard 5.56 NATO ammo at a rate of 850 rounds per minute. The SAW shoots so fast that it can melt the barrel if one's trigger finger is heavy. In "full-battle-rattle," our group gathers in a formation, awaiting further instruction. All we are told is that a truck got hit by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device). They don't tell us who got hit, but it doesn't matter. Our boys are out there and they're down...let's go get them. Our directions are clear: We need to get in our PLSs (Palletized Loading Systems) and get out there to recover any injured parties. The PLS is a ten-wheel-drive truck designed to carry materials loaded onto pallets across any terrain. My truck, number 303, is decorated with woodland green cammo paint and its top roof panel is unbolted, serving as a makeshift hatch for engaging the enemy.

On the "dog house" between the two seats I place five, two-hundred-round ammo drums along with a beef stew MRE (Meal Ready to Eat) and two bottles of water. I position everything in a way that will make it easily accessible from the gunner's hatch. My MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear and sleeping bag rests on top of two sandbags that have been placed on the floor boards underneath my seat. During the invasion of Iraq, our trucks lacked the proper armor. In desperate need for added protection, we placed sandbags on the floors and lined gunner's platforms with extra flack vests. These meager upgrades hardly do a proper job of stopping a blast from an IED or gunfire. But the "better than nothing" rule applies.

I have gotten used to the fact that we are under-protected. We have gone on enough missions now that the natural fear of being harmed no longer overwhelms my thoughts. I know that there is always a chance that I could get hurt or possibly killed, but I no longer fear death like I used to. Still, every time we leave the gate I say a quick prayer to my granddad, Keith Owen. I sincerely believe that he is up in heaven, watching over me. And there have been multiple times throughout this deployment that have proven my belief to be true.

With the trucks fired up and put in gear, we head out the gate. I pray to my granddad for protection of the convoy while locking and loading my weapon. The sun is standing straight up in the sky and the searing wind begins to pound my face harder and more steadily as we gain speed. Heavy traffic on the MSR (Main Supply Route) makes it difficult to relax. Civilian cars bolt in and out, trying to pass our slow moving convoy. The possible threat of a VBIED (Vehicle Borne IED) is always greater in heavy traffic. I view every Iraqi vehicle as a potential bomb and never let my guard down. My upper body is exposed from standing in the hatch and the only thing protecting my legs is the glass from the door and windshield. If my truck gets hit with an IED, there will be little chance of me coming out of it unscathed.

Aside from heavy traffic, the drive feels like every other mission I've been on. I eagerly anticipate getting to the site and the miles go by like running bare foot up a steep sand dune. The sun is hot and it unlocks the uninviting aroma of melted plastic and hot carcasses that we have all gotten used to. Making matters worse, every time I smell these smells I am reminded of one smell in particular.

We were rolling at night when ahead of the convoy I noticed a glowing fire in the distance. As we got closer, I could make out that it was a passenger bus set ablaze. Smoke spewed from the bus in thick, dark plumes like one might see outside of a lumber mill. Attached to the smoke was the heavy, pungent smell of melted rubber and something else that, at the moment, I couldn't distinguish. We slowly passed the burning bus one vehicle at a time. As the truck in front of me

made its pass, I saw the passenger point out their window towards the bus. I couldn't make out what they were pointing at, and made a note to myself to pay attention as we went by ourselves. We crept up and drove parallel to the burning vehicle. The smoke and smell got thicker and entered into the cab of our truck. I almost gagged from the taste, but was able to hold it in. Then, I looked into the yellow and orange glowing windows and saw human figures. People were still on the bus. I could distinctly see the charred, black remains of people. Some looked as if they had tried to make it out through the windows. They had become overwhelmed by the fire. I came to this conclusion because it looked like they only made it partially out. Some looked as if they were still sitting in their seats—as if the ride was not yet over. It was like a scene from a horror movie. When our truck passed the blaze, the mission continued in almost complete silence. And that smell is what consumes my thoughts the entire way to meeting up with our wounded convoy.

We arrive in the area to find the convoy halted. I can tell that they are close to where the explosion occurred because, just feet away, the crater from the blast is clearly visible in the center of the road. Massive amounts of hydraulic fluid lies splattered across the pavement, looking like spilled ink on a paper canvas. They are sitting only a hundred yards beyond the site of the blast. We position our truck in a box security formation around the convoy. I can see that it was the wrecker that got hit. Specialist Brown and Private Winters were the operators of the truck. I know them well. The wrecker took the brunt of the explosion. Nevertheless, the occupants of the wrecker received peppering to their arms and faces from the shards of glass that flew from the windshield. They are dazed, but intact. "Thank god," I think to myself.

Specialist Rodgers quickly attaches the downed vehicle to the backup wrecker QRF bought for recovery purposes. After the damaged truck is secured, we move a ways down the road to wait on Scouts. They will escort us to the nearest post. We need to get off of the MSR. We are sitting ducks waiting here. The longer we

wait, the longer the enemy has to plan another attack.

Each passing car is a potential threat, a target to size up and evaluate. We are on high-alert and our assholes are still puckered tight as we think about the IED that struck the vehicle. We are not scared, but we know that the enemy is likely still in the area. We are in a state of constant hyper vigilance. The Scouts reach our position around 1500 and brief our leadership on the route we will take. Finally, it is time for us to get off this damn MSR.

Our new convoy consists of the original units sent by our unit, the local national truck drivers they were escorting, the QRF, and the Scouts. The length is massive, and a large convoy means a slow convoy. Even with the added protection of the Scouts, I do not feel any safer. Though our numbers are high, our gun trucks are spread out amongst the local national truck drivers that we are escorting. We are vulnerable. Our convoy moves from the open desert into Fallujah. Now that we are in a tight area, it will become difficult to maneuver and get support to those who need it. My job as a gunner becomes much more difficult.

We turn off the MSR and into Fallujah. This simple left-turn takes what seems like a century because of the size of our convoy. What's more, we essentially advertise to all of Fallujah that we are on our way. As the long convoy makes its way into the city, I am towards the rear of the line. There is another PLS, a five-ton with a mounted, .50-caliber machine gun, and two Scout Humvees behind my truck. At first, I am not sure why we needed the Scouts. But entering Fallujah and knowing what a dangerous place it is, I welcome the grunts.

Ahead of me is over a mile of military and civilian vehicles trying to make their way through the heavily populated city. On both sides of the road there are three-to-four-story buildings lining about five or six blocks. A small parking lot takes up the area directly to my left. Tight quarters and urban areas are something that I am not used to. Mostly, our missions have been strictly on the MSR or

across open desert. Nevertheless, training and natural reactions kick in: I know that I have to scan the roof tops, windows and balconies for snipers and RPG's. I begin sizing up potential VBIED's and walkers among the populace.

There are hundreds of Iraqis lining the streets. I scan my sectors as they pop in and out of markets, jump out from beside parked cars, and generally create confusion. They are all potential threats and if something bad happens, potential targets. For now, my job is to simply sit in the hatch of the PLS, wielding my M-249 SAW and make my presence felt. I am nervous as hell. But who wouldn't be at this point? Then, the convoy stops. Why the hell did we just stop?

The reason we are stopped is too far up ahead for me to see. The wait seems to last forever. I smoke two, maybe three cigarettes one after another, trying and calm my nerves. As my last cigarette goes out, I bend down into the cab of the truck to grab another. I rustle through the clutter of ammo drums, MRE garbage, and duty gear, finding the pack of smokes resting on the floorboard. I position my body where I can reach down to recover my cigarettes when I hear a loud, metallic bang.

I scramble—weapon in hand—to the top of the hatch. I expect the worse. Small arms fire explodes from the rear of the convoy and I look to see where the return fire is directed. I don't see any burning or exploded military vehicles, only confusion. The Iraqis lining the streets—men, women and children—are all running for their lives. Shit has just hit the fan and I'm in the middle of it. I raise my weapon and start to scan.

Amongst the chaos, I look for any one brandishing a weapon. I scan left, right, up and down. In the parking lot to my left, a man in a light brown gown runs toward the convoy. He is approximately forty yards out, tall and slender, with a thick black beard and white turban stained from exposure to the desert. He clutches something wrapped in cloth around his mid-section.

I fix my sights on the man because he is running toward the convoy while concealing something in his clothes—he looks suspicious. The man shambles

forward awkwardly and the hidden object drops. He frantically tries to catch whatever it is, but it slips through his fingers. It is round in shape and dark in color; it doesn't bounce, meaning it is likely made of metal. Finally, I put two and two together:

“Grennnnnnaaaaade!” I yell. With gunfire all around me, I realize that I am the only one who can hear me. Training kicks in. I can't let him get away. I can't let him get close enough to the convoy to use his grenade effectively. In my mind, the Iraqi has made the transition from “potential threat” to “enemy.” Three red flags help me come to this conclusion: One, He is running towards the convoy when all other civilians are either running away or hiding. Two, the man is holding an object that appears to be a grenade. And three, he is so concerned with what he is holding that he is willing to risk life and limb to recover it.

I begin firing three-to-six-round bursts. Hit. The man falls but is not dead. I must have hit him in the shoulder because he gets back up, grabs the round object, and tries to find cover. I fire again; but he won't fall. He is getting close to a generator which I recognize to be his closest form of cover. He is only five feet away from escaping my sights. I aim again for his bottom right foot, leading my bullets about two feet in front of him for effect. I fire one more time, spraying a wall of lead and ripping across his upper right thigh and back before decimating his left shoulder. He falls and does not move again.

I don't have time to think about what just happened. I don't have time to comprehend that I just took a man's life with the fight still going on around me. The only thing that I think about (as I hear the crackling of small arms fire all around) is ammo. I bend down into the cab of my truck to grab another ammo drum. I reach for the one closest to me and notice my driver, SPC. Morgan, panicking and crying out in terror. “She's froze-up,” I think to myself. Protocol for this type of situation would be for the driver to have their weapon out the window, scanning for threats and being conscious of the convoy ahead of them. She's not doing anything but screaming out in terror. I take a second to look at



her closely. I don't see signs of injury or damage to the cab around her. I switch back to fight mode.

I get back up in the hatch and see that fire is being directed at the gray, concrete building to my 0730. I see other elements firing at a second floor balcony. The building turns to dust as the small arms strikes tear into it. I focus my sights at the windows and fire four to five more bursts. I'm not sure if I'm hitting the enemy; but at the very least, I am providing covering fire for whoever needs to reload or reposition. The firing stops and I glance back at my first target as I reload my weapon. The body is gone and I see a large blood trail from where someone dragged him off or from where he crawled away. The pool of blood is large, thick and very dark. I stare at it for a few moments, locked in a type of trance.

Amidst the screams and cries of the civilians, I hear the panicky cries of SPC Morgan louder than anything else. I kneel down to see if she is in pain. "Maybe she did get hit," I think to myself.

I look at her and scream above the noise and confusion, "Morgan, are you okay?" I have to scream because of the intense ringing in my ears.

"Why are you shooting at them? Why is this happening? Why? Why?" Morgan is angry at me and has a stream of tears flowing down her face. Her reaction makes me furious. How could she be so blind to what is happening?

"These are loving people, why are you shooting at them?" Morgan asks. Her hands cover her face as she bawls at the top of her lungs. This is the wrong damn time and I am the wrong damn person to be arguing with about the morality of war. I get angry as I think of her closing her eyes the moment lead started to fly. I see a naïve little girl imagining her own little fairy tale of us being the bad guys. I can't believe what I am hearing.

"God damn it, Morgan! These people fired at us...so fuck yeah we're shooting at them." I can't understand why she is mad at *me*. How could she worry more about these people—people who are trying to harm us, I might add

—than those of us trying to keep her alive? I see the convoy starting to move and Morgan’s face still buried in her hands.

“Morgan,” I say in a calmer voice. “Put the fucking truck in gear and drive.” She doesn’t respond and then rage and desperation kick back in.

“Morgan, put the fucking truck in gear God damn it!” She lifts her head, sniffing and whimpering. She looks forward with a blank stare coming from her ghostly white face, watching the truck in front of us pulling away fast.

“Drive!” I yell. The ringing sensation moves from my ears to bouncing around in my brain. She slowly comes back to earth, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and puts the truck in gear and drives. The sun is starting to go down and we are moving at a snail’s pace.

“For the love of God get us out of this fucking town,” I say to myself. I think I am special, but I know that this is what everyone on our convoy is thinking as well. I quickly reload my weapon and keep scanning my sectors. Still standing in the hatch, I glance down at my feet and see all the empty brass that collected in the cab during the ambush. I start to think more about the Morgan situation. Although I am still angry with her, I understand that she was just scared. But I can’t understand why she blamed *me*. She was in the truck, but she did not experience what I had just experienced, nor did she have to make the same decisions that I had to make. She is lucky that she wasn’t forced to pull the trigger and take a man’s life. I guess, in a way, I am jealous: I envy her.

We finally get out of Fallujah and to our destination. After a debriefing and quick ammo count, the commander allows us to bed down. I roll out my sleeping bag on the back of the flat rack on our truck. I take my boots off, place them next to my vest and helmet, then lay on top of the bag. The weather is still too warm to crawl inside. My M-249 and a fresh drum of ammo rest on bi-pods parallel to my bag. I replay the actions of the day over and over in my head like a coach reviewing game film. Just when I think I have justified every little action—accounted for every little detail—a switch goes off like the pushing of a rewind

button on the VCR. I can't get it out of my head and get a sick feeling in my gut every time I see the image of that man falling to his death. I still get that same sick feeling today. My heart pounds when I think about it. I can see that day in Fallujah as clearly in my mind now as if it happened yesterday.

I lay there with my feet crossed and my hands resting interlaced over my stomach, staring at the millions of stars flickering above. I'm alone and enjoy the solitude. In the background I hear soldiers telling each other of their actions that day. Some are laughing and cracking jokes and others are just there to listen. The best thing is that we are all here to talk about it. We all made it out of Fallujah. I focus my attention back to the stars and pick one in particular: "Thank you Granddad."



# And Justice for All

—Jedediah Bowels

Five decades and five major military operations after becoming the "pre-imminent" power among the world's nations, the United States has experienced great loss and gained little from conflict. With the world's largest military and defense budget, you would more than likely come to the rational and intelligible conclusion that we should have easily swept away our enemies and lost few casualties, if any. But that's not really how things turned out. We have lost an estimated 105,000 brave and loyal sons because of cowardice and weakness on part of the political leaders who are unable to do all that is necessary to achieve a permanent victory, maintain full-spectrum dominance, and keep the villains of this world at bay.

On December 7th, 1940, my Grandfather's enlistment in the navy expired. He decided to leave the service and try the civilian world again. Oddly enough, and exactly one year later, he was called back into the United States Navy following the attack by Imperial Japan on the US Navy base, Pearl Harbor. With great pride and honor, he, and thousands of other service members, went bravely head-on into the most devastating conflict in world history. The sole reason I joined the service was to make him proud. I believe I accomplished that goal.

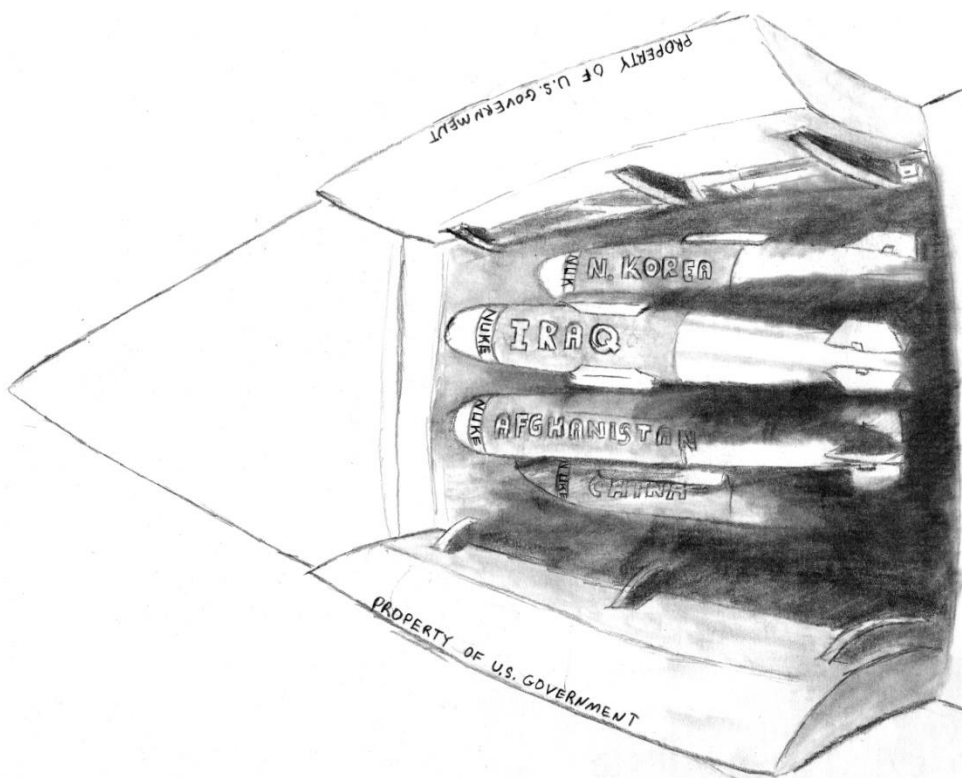
After he passed away, nothing was the same. As a result, I separated from the service three years later. Looking back, I can say I spent my time in the Navy without regret. I spent many days, months, and years supporting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many times, however, I would think to myself and wonder, "Why are we fighting this war with such a love for humanity?" or "Why do these brave men and women have to put their lives at risk, when, in actuality, they don't have too?" This is war. It's not fair. And it's not supposed to be. The means of the conflict—the brutality therein—is justified by the victors when goals are

achieved for the betterment of the winner. Another frequent question that I seemed to continually ask myself was this: “Is one American life is more important than one hundred of our enemies?” Of course it is. War is a horrible thing; but in *this* world it is a necessary thing.

If our country had leaders committed to our wars—to the ultimate destruction of the enemy and the annihilation of all that is his, or, forcing complete surrender without a chance of resurgence due to a direct threat of finality upon he and his countrymen—would we be cowardly assailed during our occupation? We would still have brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. How many sons wait in vain for their father's return? I believe the blood of the soldiers lost in these wars should and will be on the hands of those that could have prevented this. I will add, to avoid any possible ambiguity, that my anger is not roused at those that have been called upon in these wars. My contempt is for those that would decry the use of deadly force to bring about justice and righteous action. Prussian General, Carl Von Clausewitz, compared the act of war to a duel between nations on a much larger scale. Granted, the scale is greater; but the purpose of both is to resolve a matter that, from a diplomatic and peaceful standpoint, is un-resolvable. So, looking at the situation following the events of 9/11, it must be understood, that, just as we would pursue, capture, and convict an individual who committed a heinous crime of tragic result, we must pursue these villains to the ends of the Earth. Sheer numbers should never detract from the price that must be paid for taking American lives.

Thinking back into history, I cannot think of one civilization that has defeated its enemy and then rebuilt their homes, protected their lands, and gave them money for damages. In fact, when in history did a great power of the world ever let its economy drain from a lack of resources when its weaker neighbor had plenty? Instead, we try to figure out where ELSE we can get the resources from. We, as a country, ask too much of ourselves. We cannot maintain such a magnificent society and culture without a unilateral understanding of the fact that

we must expand and increase our subsistence based off of the requirements of our own needs. I, for one, do not see a contradiction between this kind of justice and righteous action. I believe that to continue to do our duty to our country and protect the interests of the world as a whole, we must do first what is in the best interest of ourselves. Through blood and iron we can hammer the righteous laws of our will into the template of this world's future. We lack only the leaders who are willing to make examples of our enemies and prevent the deaths of our own—leaders that will help us take what we need and use it to strengthen and nurture our great nation—so that we will always deliver liberty, freedom, and justice for all.



# True life Experiences of Airman Over the Skies of the Middle East

—Steve Johnson

My past life in the Air Force was interesting, to say the least. Two years before the Gulf War—when the Iran-Iraq War was going strong—we were sent to refuel early warning and control (E-3) aircraft. The planes were part of an operation designed to keep an eye on the countries embroiled in the fierce conflict between the two nations. At the time, the Saudi government allowed us to live in a hotel in downtown Riyadh. We kept a very low profile, wearing dress pants and collared shirts when we walked the streets. We did not live on a military base, and for security reasons we had to dress like the locals to blend in.

Muslim culture adheres strictly to its religious beliefs, and if you break their laws you can be killed without malice. I saw what they do to people who break their religious laws first hand. We were down town one Friday afternoon near “the souk,” an open air market. A big, black Suburban truck pulled up and stopped in the middle of this concrete square. Crowds of people gathered around to watch. The back door of the Suburban swung open and a man in a dark robe got out with two others chained from head-to-toe. A big wooden block was removed from the back of the vehicle. I couldn’t see the faces of the people who were chained, but I could tell one was a male and the other female. I was with members of my crew and we turned to walk away from what we knew would be a public execution. But the crowd blocked us. I had heard stories of the same thing happening to other military members who were downtown at the souk...

When the Gulf War started two years later, I was twenty-nine years old. Our second daughter had just been born and our other daughter was two-years old. I left for Saudi Arabia about three months after my youngest daughter was born. I was stationed at an air base outside the capital city of Riyadh.

One night, we were flying a mission to refuel a flight of six, F-16 Fighting Falcons on a bombing run over Iraq. The mission was uneventful until we began

the return to our recovery base at King Khalid International Airport. On our first approach to the runway, we saw a bright flash coming from the direction of the city lights in the distance. The light got larger and larger as we got closer. Ten seconds later, I heard the sound of a Patriot missile battery launching two intercept missiles at what we had since realized was a Scud missile from Iraq. The Saudi air traffic controller stopped talking to us on the approach frequency and we flew blind in the ILS pattern for about five minutes.

Eventually, an American controller took over for the Saudi who had run away. The first Patriot missile missed the Scud and the second glanced off of it. As a result, the Scud was knocked off course and it changed direction. I found out after we landed that the missile hit a warehouse in Dhahran. The warehouse housed an Army National Guard unit from Pennsylvania. Fifteen guardsmen were killed and thirty-five were injured.

We were present when the air war first started on January 16th, 1991. Our mission was to take four F-117A stealth fighters into the heart of downtown Baghdad. From there, we were to hit and neutralize an Iraqi military communications center. I woke up four hours before our scheduled takeoff time and took a shower. As I got dressed for the mission, I thought about my family and whether I was ever going to see them again. I thought a lot: “Is this going to be my last night on earth?” and “Will I come back?” were among the thoughts I had.

I went to the dining hall and got something to eat. I hadn't slept much leading up to what would become the most dangerous mission of my Air Force career. Was I going to be on the first tanker shot down? I had seen pictures of people who were prisoners of war and I did not want to become one myself. We had parachutes and we had to wear them when we got in the aircraft. I knew we were no longer doing training missions. Rather, we were taking a real part in a real war. All those months of training were finally going to be put to the test. People were going to die tonight, and I was going to play a part in it. I went to the



armory to sign out a 9mm pistol with forty rounds of ammunition. I hoped I wouldn't have to use them.

I flew with a four-person crew. We had an aircraft commander, a co-pilot, a navigator and a boom operator. The boom operator was the only enlisted member of the crew. The rest of the crew were commissioned officers. This was going to be the first night of the air war against the forces of Iraq and I was going to be a small part of the grand plan.

# An Epiphany from Several Nights of Not Being Able to Sleep

—Christopher Gilbert



I will start by saying that I currently feel like I have found myself—my sense of balance, chi, or whatever it is you want to call it—and have reached a point where I feel comfortable again. I feel this way, partly, because of the new sense of accomplishment I got after starting school this semester. It has been like achieving a long sought after goals. For me, those goals just so happened to be attending an accredited institution of higher education like

Eastern Kentucky University. It's exciting to think about what I am doing and how it will affect my future. I am transitioning from being a service member to becoming a successful leader in the civilian world. I am accompanied by a new drive to do better in life.

Until recently, it felt like I had lost something in Iraq. It felt like I had lost *who I used to be* before entering the military. When I look back, I see myself as a young man who was kind, nice to others, mellow, reserved, carefree and someone who could always see the good in any given situation. Now, when I look in the mirror I see someone totally different; the old me is somehow *gone*. I feel like a central piece of that young man from my past is missing. For some time, this made me feel lost and confused. Things seemed hopeless. I had no sense of direction after leaving the military.

I felt this way until recently when I had an epiphany after not able to sleep. It just came to me. So I sat down and wrote it onto paper. Fear and stress caused by the constant little voices in my head saying, “look out” or “wake up” or “someone is standing by the bed” have made it very hard to sleep. I still find myself on “high-alert” all the time. And, most of the time, I don’t even realize it. Have you heard of the fight or flight syndrome? That’s me all the time. After long periods without sleep, I find myself tired and drained. I cannot concentrate on simple tasks like reading a magazine or writing a short story. I doze off at the most inopportune times, like when I am in the middle of class.

The feeling is even stronger now that I have become a husband and father. I have taken on the responsibility of role model and leader. Some of you might think that it is only natural to be a little worried. I mean, with the never ending stories on the news of violence and crime sprees, what kind of father would not be worried? You might find it unusual, though, when this pattern continues for weeks on end. The pattern becomes even more unusual when dealing with the new stress that accompanies performing simple tasks that I used to love.

Now things like working on my car, house, and home only make me mad. Here is an example: I used to love to work on automobiles; but now I no longer have the patience to even try. At least, I cannot undertake repair work calmly or without damaging something around me or on the vehicle. I have anger outbursts. These outbursts can start with something as simple as trying to put a nut on a bolt. After a few minutes of failing to get the bolt to go where it should, I feel the stress, tension, and anger build up inside of me. It is like a tea kettle about to blow its lid. My shoulder blades, neck, arms and head get increasingly tense until I finally transform into a miniature hulk, cursing, smashing, throwing, and hitting everything around me.

After it is over I always wish that I had not let myself lose myself control. My regret is also exacerbated by finding that I have something else to fix because of my outburst. I used to contain myself and never get mad at anything (except

someone trying to put their hands on me or my family). When the anger comes, I feel like a stick of dynamite with a short fuse: any little thing can set me off. This is the primary reason why I have so much trouble going to sleep. I constantly worry about what will set me off next. I always feel like someone is after me. It is like having a radio with tuning dials that pick up all kinds of static. The static represents my worries. Sometimes the static makes sense and other times you just do not know what you are hearing.

At times, I have felt lost and angry. When I try to sleep I hear stuff like strange noises and sounds in addition to the constant ringing in my ears. I hear footsteps, people talking, and movement in a room when I am the only one there. I hear the sounds from ghost stories but, at the same time, I can assure you there is nothing there. I am well aware that it is just my imagination and anxiety running wild.

I am not saying it is the boogieman or anything. I've never been one to believe in that stuff. Still, I just cannot keep my mind from racing. After listening to a sound in my head and clearly thinking about what the sound was, I will realize that the footsteps are my boys turning in their beds while sleeping or the dogs moving about. The other sounds are my cats playing or the plastic over the window catching the cold air from outside.

This anxiety makes it hard to keep a job. I am usually fine for the first couple of weeks. Then it seems as if my supervisors decide to forget that I am a human being and that I am a paid worker. It is about respect: If I don't talk to you like you are a child, don't talk to me like one. I can't handle people trying to yell at me or raising their voice. Not anymore. If you raise your voice or yell at me, be prepared to get the same. I can't let people think they can walk over me or that I will keep doing all their work. No, civilian employees bitch about so much more than veterans. We know things can get much, much worse and that tomorrow could be our last day.

Still, supervisors and other employees continuously fail to understand that the pissed off look on my face is more than just me making a face. In reality, this look is me fighting the urge to rip their heads off and shove them down their throats. I don't want to create any confusion about my previous work record: I have taken the high road and quit these jobs. I don't want to hurt anyone and get myself in trouble. I certainly don't want to work for minimum wage for the rest of my life. I learned to deal with some of my anxiety and anger by stepping outside and getting fresh air. I also try to look at whatever it is that is bothering me from other perspectives to get a better understanding of why I feel the way I do at a particular moment. Also, I have started working out to relieve the built up stress and tension I feel inside. Talking with my family members who are veterans helps tremendously.

Leaving the military was a drastic change for me. There are no entry level jobs in the civilian world that pay anything close to what the military pays. Most civilian employers have no clue about the kinds of training and experiences soldiers have. When I think about all the training I have no longer being useful, I just get more stressed and, again, find it hard to sleep. I cannot find jobs where my knowledge of MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) training and tactical combat training are useful.

I stay up all night to listen for sounds and fear someone or something might be trying to break into my house. It got worse for a while. Before, I only had to worry about me. Now I have to add my family to the equation. Then, I had an epiphany after not being able to sleep: the only thing I really need to fear is fear itself. I need to forget about the bullshit society throws at me every day and worry about what is important: life, family, and love.

Honestly, I am not sure I would call it an epiphany. It is really a realization of what life should truly be about. I realize now that I should only worry about what I can change, not the things I cannot change. I feel like I found the little

something from my youth I lost and that I now have the opportunity in school to make a better future for me and my family.

I know I still need help with the issues that I have been ignoring until now. Even at the request of my mom, dad, brother, sister, wife and friends I ignored what was plainly in front of me. It took me fifteen months to realize I had a problem. I have finally decided to get help for these things so that I may succeed in life and graduate college. Now it is time for me to start the next chapter in my life after being a soldier.

# Mama I'm Coming Home

—Matthew Holland

I'm looking at the crowd and it is like an out-of-body experience. I've never seen so many hot girls in one place. There is something about these girls: They are all perfect, everything you could dream of and more. It is only ten dollars for all-you-can-drink draft beer. There is something about this beer: It is the best beer I have ever had. Fuck this feels good. "Hey, bro, come check this shit out!" my buddy Bobby screams to me from the end of the bar. Then, suddenly, I am surrounded by what seems like the entire bar joined in the act of watching two girls. You can figure out for yourself what is going on. Then, out of nowhere, one of the girls grabs me by the collar. Something awesome is about to happen. I won't be pulled away this time. I can smell her perfume. She gets closer...

"Umm, this is your pilot speaking. We've got about three hour hours until we touch-down in Savanna, Georgia. The weather is looking very clear, so sit back and enjoy the ride." Damn, it was a dream. I always get so close. This happens every, single time. The smell of a hot girl's perfume, the sting of Bud Light, and my fun-loving, don't-give-a-damn attitude, are suddenly replaced by the smell of ass and ball sweat. Instead of the sounds of bar-music and seductive women, I hear my friend Bobby snoring his ass off next to me. Instead of feeling alive, visceral, and ready to *get down*, I feel groggy as shit because I had to pop four Tylenol PMs to sleep on this damn flight.

My name is Matt. I am a Navy Seabee. I'm in a pretty crummy mood right now because I'm in the middle of my fifteen-hour plane ride back to the states from Afghanistan. This isn't my first rodeo, but it's definitely a different feeling from the first time I returned from the desert. For one thing, I have a shit-ton more money than I did the first time; and, two, I'm twenty-one. Yes, I turned twenty-one in Afghanistan. It sucked ass—major ass. When I returned from my

first deployment I was groggy on this flight for the same reasons. But when I came back from that deployment it was weird: I didn't really want to come back because I was so used to the military lifestyle—the schedule, the straight-from-training-to-combat mentality, the being in the fight—and was comfortable with everything that it means to deploy. Now, I am older—I'm twenty-one—and I've spent twelve months have twelve months in Mississippi under my belt. I know people; I have a life to go back to.

On my birthday, I tried to get a buzz by drinking a case of rip-its, but it didn't work. Instead, I got hyper as shit and couldn't sleep. Now, I'm twenty-one and the closer I get to being back in the states, the more I have the same dream which I have already described. My dreams always include girls, alcohol, and waking up as soon as it starts to get good. The dreams are so real I can almost *taste* them. For the past three months, I've been looking forward to—literally dreaming about—going to the bar, buying drinks, and getting wasted. It's been a long time coming. Now, I am only three hours from Savanna. After that, I will have an hour layover before another forty-five minute stop in Gulfport, MS. I pop my last two Tylenol PMs, hoping I won't wake up until we land...

“Umm, this is your pilot speaking. We're about to land in Savanna, Georgia where the weather is a breezy, seventy degrees with sunshine.” I wake up at the end of the message, sure that I misunderstood him.

“Did he just say 70 degrees?” I ask Bobby, who is still half asleep.

“Yeah, pretty sweet, huh?” he replies.

Yes, it is pretty fucking sweet. Seventy degrees. We got to the desert in the middle of January. So, for the past—I don't know—six months, I've been used to at least ninety-degree weather and more. Don't even get me started on Kuwait. We spent two weeks in Kuwait on our way from Afghanistan back to the states. Every time you walk outside it's like putting your head in an oven while someone holds a blow-dryer in front of your face. It's miserable. Needless to say, I am pretty stoked about the breezy, seventy-degree, Savanna weather. We're



landing in Savanna before we actually get back home to Gulfport, MS. I never understood why we stop there because the plane ride from Savanna to Gulfport is only forty-five minutes. I think that the delay in Savanna is intentional so that we will see how beautiful the Georgian city is.

When the plane finally lands, I take the first steps off and immediately notice how much cleaner the air is. The surroundings are so much greener than what I have grown accustomed to. It is green in Hindu Kush mountain range in Afghanistan; there *are* trees and vegetation. But after eight months you forget what *real* trees and *real* grass look like. After eight months of living in the smell of burning trash, port-o-potties (I can't even describe the smell they were so bad), and constant man sweat, it is literally "a breath of fresh air" as soon as I step off of the plane.

In my last deployment to Afghanistan, I took constant trips to the burn pits in FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) Ghazni and Shrunna. The smell from the pit—the trash, feces, wood, and everything else that needed to be disposed of—would blow into my face and cover my body. We had to keep things like wires, nails and sensitive materials away from the locals who worked at the pit. The crafty little fuckers would go through the pits and make IEDs and booby traps from our trash. You couldn't trust the people they let on base. Sure, they do background checks. We even watched over them whenever they did work. Still, they would always pick up random objects and we would have to get them back. It is an awkward conversation asking someone for a nail and explaining to them why they cannot have it, especially in another language. You couldn't trust anyone. But all of that is over now.

I walk inside of the terminal and see all the volunteers welcome us back with cookies and cake. That's when it really hits me: "Damn. We're almost home." Only members of the military and their families can describe this feeling. I just feel good. To see people taking time out of their day to thank us is awe-inspiring. I didn't expect it to be like this—for the people to be so nice—and I am really

surprised. We are momentarily humbled. Then, out come the phones. The planning begins. It's a weird feeling, actually using my cell phone other than to just look up numbers to call from the phone-center. Me, Bobby, and a few others start "officially" planning what we're going to do that night. After all, when we land in Gulfport we will have forty-eight hours of liberty. I'm starting to get excited. My dreams of bar-hopping and woman-chasing are soon going to be a reality. What a feeling.

Before the partying can commence, we have to get back on the plane. I'm not the only one who is starting to get antsy. The plane takes off: "Next stop, Gulfport, Mississippi." The sounds of yells, screams, hoops, and hollers (you name it) roar over everything the pilot tries to say. I look around; everybody is smiling and talking to each other. Even those who had grudges against each other—who hated each other's guts—are friends for the forty-five minute flight. The majority of the people on this flight are happy and joined together by that common feeling.

I don't know if this is a tradition for every unit coming back home, but I made three deployments with the Seabees and every flight ended with a "blanket party." No, this is not the party where you hold someone down with a blanket and beat the shit out of them with pillow cases full of bars of soap. Our blanket party is where, on that short flight from Savanna to Gulfport, pillow cases stuffed with water bottles, trash, magazines, boots, and anything else around are thrown at everyone on the plane. It's funny to watch the flight attendants because you can always tell the experienced ones from the rookies. The experienced flight attendants know what's coming; they know they can't stop it. The rookies get all pissy and try to calm everyone down. That usually happens at about the same time they get decked in the head with a pillow case full of something or another. I have never come home without this happening; I wouldn't have it any other way. It's a feeling of freedom for me. The blanket party says, "I'm going to do

whatever the fuck I want to do these next three days. And I deserve it.” It’s a memory I will never forget.

Despite having to pick up everything we just destroyed, it doesn’t even come close to dampening everyone’s mood. People begin to yell random things:

“We’re going the fuck home!!!”

“I’m getting fucking drunk!!”

“My wife’s not gonna know what hit her!”

These are the anonymous screams. They get louder and more frequent the closer we get to home. The time is near. With the captain saying that we are about to descend, no one can sit still. Trust me, I was one of them. I can almost taste the beer. Finally, we land. Even those holding back their emotions instantly let loose as soon as the plane touches the ground in Gulfport, Mississippi. The crowd erupts. It is so loud that my ears hurt. Awesome.

We are lining up to get off of the plane. I’m ready to jump out of my boots I’m so excited. As we step off of the plane, we are welcomed home by a line of about twenty to thirty Captains and Master Chiefs who shake our hands and tell us that we did a good job. True to military form, we get our kudos in an assembly line type of fashion. Next, we get on the buses. It seems to take an eternity. As soon as everyone is on the bus, people from the other battalions load our luggage. It is pretty awesome because I don’t have to do it. I get a sense of pride, because, we are being treated with respect. We have earned our right to have these people load our luggage. It seems like a small gesture, but the people loading our luggage are indicators that we are home. When we left for Afghanistan, we loaded our own things. Now we are back. Things have come full circle. People are walking around, handing out flowers for whoever might want to give them to a significant other. I don’t have a girlfriend to give a flower to, or to welcome me home. Still, I think it was a pretty cool gesture for those who did. More than anything, I can taste the beer.

Everything is loaded up, ready to go. Why are we still sitting here? After about five minutes I turn to someone and ask, “Why the fuck we still sitting here?”

“Waiting on a police escort, I think.”

“No way, a police escort?” I think to myself. We didn’t have one last time. This ought to be pretty cool. Sure enough, the police show up and we roll out. On the whole ride from the airport to the base, I have a smile on my face, which is constantly stuck to the window. I feel kind of special and a little proud as we run through the red lights. People stare. A lot of people realize who we are and it is pretty cool when they honk their horns. I even see three old men on the side of the road, saluting as we drive by. That gives me chills.

Despite all of this, the one thing that really makes me feel at home is Rowdy Randy, or “RR,” as he is called. You can’t get the full RR experience unless you’re a relative of his, or unless you’re stationed in Gulfport, Mississippi. RR is a thirty-five year old, fat, Hispanic male who loves not wearing a shirt. He always has a shirt on him; but it is usually in his hand or around his waist. Oh, and he’s mentally handicapped. I’m not sure if I can prove that fact, so just trust me, he is. RR and his family live just outside the base; he has the tendency to hump the air and make sexual gestures to anyone he sees driving by. He actually had the cops called on him a few times for pulling his dick out of his pants and showing it to girls...

Anyway, back to where I’m going with this. As we pull up to the base, who do you think I see vigorously humping the air? It is none other than RR! Once I see him, I know we are back in Gulfport. RR’s knees are bent and his hips are thrusting forward and back with no rhythm at all. His gut hangs over his belt and sweat drips from his greasy black hair. It is beautiful. After watching the show, we get on base and start seeing all the signs made by the military families. They say things like “Welcome Home” or “We missed you,” stuff like that. At this point, it seems kind of surreal. I mean, I’ve been thinking about this day for the

past two months. Now that it's here, I really don't know what to do. Oh yeah, I'm twenty-one; I'm going to get smashed. We pass all of the signs, and as we start to turn the corner, I start hearing the screams. I see the families waiting for their husbands, wives, sons, daughters, moms, and dads to finally be back in their lives again. "Damn, this is really happening," I think to myself.

After they let all the new dads go home (there weren't many since we were only gone for eight months. If there were a lot of new dads, I'd be a little worried), the rest of us get off of the bus. It doesn't bother me too much not having anyone there to welcome me back. Plus, I always thought that kind of stuff was more for the people married with kids. I find my friend Bobby and am pleased to find the NEX (Naval Exchange) conveniently close to where they dropped us off.

I walk through the crowd of families to talk to my friend: "Hey, you want to run over with me and pick up a 12 pack before we grab our stuff?"

"Yeah, let's go," Bobby replies. I pick out a twelve pack of Bud Light. This is the same beer I always have in my dreams. It was the beer that was always around when I was drinking underage. Well, there was beer and cheap whiskey. I don't want

to get wasted at two in the afternoon, so I choose not to get any cheap whiskey. I want to last until the night time, when the partying will really begin. The twelve-



pack is cold; I set it on the counter; I am getting excited. Bobby is twenty-three and has bought his share of beer. I am twenty-one now. I just got back from deployment. And I immediately step up to pay.

“Can I see your I.D?” the cashier asks.

“My pleasure.” The moment I’ve truly been waiting for is finally here. I am legally buying my first beer, and (legally) taking that first drink. It is great. Me and Bobby step outside, pop the top, cheer to a good time, and then, well, that’s a whole other story.

# Johnny Got His Gun: Redux; or, A Near Life Experience

—Jeremy Cox

Youthful exuberance, unmatched and unfounded  
Sets a course for destruction and woe.  
Once plotted, irreversible  
My ship sails for folly, too late to turn back.  
I have only to go.

What port is this?  
The stars are all backward!  
Intrepid youth, spirited so far from home—  
Great wonder, great mystery  
Death lurking and waiting  
Can I keep watch, or will my wits slip away?

Days untold, wind blowing, sun baking  
I try to reason, to rhyme, and to know.  
Wisdom is folly when madmen take reign.  
Order and logic deceive, not direct.

Alone and forsaken  
I trust not my comrades  
(Nor my opponent)  
Who quests for my life  
The people I find  
All low and dejected.  
They hope for nothing  
If not to survive

In this I find a sense of belonging,  
Brothers of mind, of prayer, and desire.  
Longing and wishing  
I walk out my days.  
My only companions are strangers this way.  
Rending and ripping, my heart is removed  
—Only a void to carry me through

Out the other side, I stumble and stagger.  
White light so pure, so blinding and glorious  
Only to find the foul stench of the tomb:  
Corpses for kinsmen,  
Ghosts form the gentry,  
A land of lost souls,  
With no place to hide.  
Weary, I wonder.  
My life is like ash:  
Pale, gray, and formless,  
No beauty I find.

Home is a word that carries no weight.  
Rest is a lie and peace is its yolk.  
Love is a riddle,  
A game for the mind.  
Nothing is real.  
No satisfaction to find.

I long for the strangers,



The weak and the weary:  
The only true kinsmen I've known in my time.  
Oh brothers of loss  
With eyes so familiar  
How I do miss my comrades of pain.  
So strange to find solace in this land of unrest.

Realization—  
Rushing and running—  
Fighting and clawing—  
My eyes open wide.  
Brothers of arms do not make brothers of heart;  
Fear and oppression is where true blood-kin start.

Brothers, my brothers,  
For your love I pray—  
Do not desert me, deject me, denounce me—  
In my deep heart you will always stay.

Cycles and seasons,  
Time goes racing away;  
Memories fade, yet lessons remain:  
Love and loss, fear and discovery  
These are the things I carry today.

# Our Eyes

—Travis Absher

Through these eyes  
I have seen things  
That are too hard  
To talk about.  
When I try  
I don't know  
If my mind will let me;  
For the things that are there  
Bring tears to my eyes.  
If they start  
I don't know  
If can stop the tears  
From falling down my face;  
For they have witnessed  
The harsh real world.  
They have become  
Pieces of me,  
Making me colder inside.  
For I keep them inside  
To keep them from  
Those who don't know  
What WAR is.  
No matter how I try,  
You will never understand  
What it means to spill

Your blood  
For those who were strangers—  
Who now are brothers—  
Someone who  
You trust with your life  
And hold theirs as well;  
For we are no longer  
Members of society,  
But defenders of the Republic.  
We have become  
The protectors of freedom.  
We are SOLDIERS  
Who will lay down our lives  
To ensure  
Those back home  
Do not have to see  
What we have  
With our EYES

## Tree Darts

—Deb Hamilton

*Each morning I leave my tent and begin the long trod across the gravelly tent city. The temperature is bearable and the sky glows deep shades of indigo and violet because of the sun just below the horizon. There are a few clusters of tall eucalyptus trees along the way that emit sounds of ecstatic frenzy. Morning birds are preparing for the new day. It's as though the treetops are going burst! As the chaotic sounds peak, the birds suddenly begin shooting out from their leaved havens. This experience brings a joy to my heart which later flows through my pen.*

Zip they go  
‘cross the sky—  
winged silhouettes.

Dimly lit  
birth of dawn  
rids me of frets.

Chatter loud  
just ahead  
perched high—uptight.

Morning sport  
fast and fresh  
tree darts take flight.

## Echo of Wartime Drudgery

—Deb Hamilton

*While writing a portion of my journal, a thought occurred to me: Perhaps, I could best channel my thoughts and share my experiences if I selected one topic at a time to write about. I believe I will narrow the imagery I want to present with poetry. Yes, that's what I'll do! I shall close this morning's journal session and enjoy sitting on The Oasis' concrete slab with my white Styrofoam cup of hot brew. Then, if a few lines of rhyming verse trample across my brain, I will promptly have them march onto the page...*

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH . . .

Gravel being stomped,

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH . . .

Like granola being chomped,

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH . . .

Going to the job,

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH . . .

The military mob,

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH . . .

A sound that won't relent,

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH . . .

'Til you're back inside your tent.

## Steel-Toed Boots

—Deb Hamilton

Tan, like the camels  
of this ancient, arid land,  
are the boots on my feet  
as I tread upon the sand.

Their eyes keeping watch  
over every step and turn;  
laces hugging tight  
‘round my ankles hold me firm.

Soles bound underneath,  
clinging tightly like my soul,  
marching on together . . .  
in my boots I know I’m whole.

Rarely off my feet—  
then, still close ‘case evil shoots;  
like my vest and my gun,  
I must have my steel-toed boots.

# Addiction

—Don King

In the inky black of night  
All I can see is the soft glow of the cigarette drooping  
Lazily from my dry, cracked lips.  
The chill of the air steals  
Scant heat left in my body.  
I stand at the driver's side of my armored Suburban.  
But, all I can think of is this cigarette.  
So simple, yet elegant (and deadly)  
Are these neat little soldiers of death.  
Irony: I am slowly killing myself  
While death is such a common occurrence.  
Iraq, is, in a word,  
A name spoken to die—  
Life or innocence lost—  
Mine died years ago  
In this place.  
Yet, I find myself drawn back  
By my own free will.  
Entranced, just like this cigarette.  
It is so beautiful, the long tendrils of pearly smoke  
Rolling off its end (So white and pure).  
I see the unfettered, new snow falling  
Back home.  
Inhale: The cherry flares up.  
Exhale: Smoke pours from my mouth.  
It is no longer—

White and dancing and beautiful.  
Instead, it falls, grey and formless,  
Spoiled by my human lungs.  
Or is it the other way around?  
Funny how these things come to you in a simple cigarette.  
A cancer stick.  
A coffin nail.  
So many killed and dying because of it.  
Just like Iraq.



## Burrito

—Don King

Agony seeps to the bone  
Nothing feels like home  
I lay in my own misery  
Waiting for the night to take me  
Never knowing if I'll make it  
My mind, it's full of shit  
I'm spiraling out of control  
Trapped in this dark hole  
Thinking I'll make it to tomorrow  
Knowing that all this is hollow  
So, I bid thee all adieu  
This life is born again anew  
I lay here bathed in sin  
While the sun rises again.

## Distractions

—Don King

Right or wrong, there is no difference.

It all leads us to the same end.

Death is the only solace we know,

Except for the minute pleasures we always seek.

It seems absurd to look forward to tomorrow

When everything just ends in pain:

Either yours or someone else's.

The tears still stream down a face,

But all the hell we live through

Is a better alternative to nothing

For the brief reprieves of happiness

Give this life the only meaning we shall ever know.

# Sunshine

—Don King

Do you think you're alone?  
Left to live this hell apart?  
That you are the one  
To suffer in silence?  
Do you feel like Atlas?  
The whole world on your shoulders?  
Do you see only sorrow  
In your own reflection?  
Are you the dim, empty soul  
That never sees the light?  
Or, are you just like me?  
Lost amongst the gleam and glamour  
Of a world that only knows how  
To forsake souls such as we.  
Who are we to decide  
How much more we suffer  
When all we taste is a small piece  
Of that bitter fate?  
Maybe we are normal,  
Just like everyone else:  
Struggling to be seen  
Instead of obscured by the clouds  
That society deems we all shall don:  
We shall rise above this all  
And make our own sunshine

# America is Me

—Luke Manuel

“This is crazy,” they all said.  
But I knew why I wanted to enlist.  
On that September day my eyes saw red.  
America is me, and I was pissed

Three months later, the deed was done.  
I had survived this place called “hell.”  
One of the few: I was Uncle Sam’s son.  
America is me, I will calm her swell.

The days were long and the training tough.  
There were many like me, waiting on the word  
(Because we are ready, to call their bluff)  
America is me, and her voice will be heard.

The call had come, and we had landed.  
And so far from home the battles were waged.  
So many lost their lives and still remain stranded.  
But America is me, and she is still engaged.

So with the days, my time was finished.  
But when I die I’ll walk Montezuma’s Hall.  
And my memory will never diminish.  
But until that time, America is me she will stand tall.

# A Little Boy with Bananas

—Travis L. Martin

Brown hair hangs over brown eyes

Looking at brown feet

Standing on the brown earth.

A little boy with yellow bananas

Needs a green dollar to feed his family for a week.

A twinkle in his eye—

Reminds me of a freckly-faced, spoiled kid brother—

Then again, the boy could have been me

In another life.

My white hand reaches for my black wallet.

The little boy's hope is sparked.

But I come up empty handed.

His best broken English—

A futile attempt to earn that green dollar.

I could feed his family for a week.

A little boy with bananas, eyes full of a little brother's charm...

Contact—left. Explosion, to the rear—

Driver-side mirror vibrates, displaying images of dark black smoke.

White hand moves towards black gun—exposed—

Ducking down—pinging sound of metal striking metal—exposed.

Realization: brass hitting the roof from on top of the hatch,

Machine guns fire in all directions.

Get up you coward, you were trained to fight!  
Charge handle, find enemy in a crowd full of people.  
Boy with bananas: just one in a mass of running bodies.  
Someone finds a target—twinkling eyes fill with flames of hate—  
Another explosion to the rear.

Bodies fly while others lie motionless.  
What are they shooting at?  
Rounds hit—four stories up—200 meters away—take aim.  
One round hits, still no target—  
Weapon jams—charge handle, load bullet, fire, jams again—helpless.

Convoy moves, brass stops hitting roof.  
“Go, let’s go!”  
Truck engines roar, everything else silenced.  
Bodies lie motionless while—  
A little brown boy stands over a brown man clutching a black grenade—  
Brown eyes connect with brown eyes  
That stare straight up from the brown earth.

A brown hand drops a green dollar;  
It lands on a white shirt turned red.  
Yellow bananas lie scattered,  
I will never look at my kid brother the same.  
Brown eyes drop transparent tears and my white hands begin to shake.  
I drive full speed away from the city.  
How dare I look back?

# My Old Friend

—Travis L. Martin

You were just showing me that time...

After I asked you not to.

But you said it was important...

To remember!

Always remember, remember, and remember,

Whether I want to or not.

That's your game.

My memories can be so vivid—

Describable only in the moment I experience them—

Oscillate and define, interpret and try to feel.

What was I thinking of again?

I never can quite pin down where I was

—when things changed forever again—

Profundity's wake skews and slips away,

Feeling is the constant distraction.

I sorted through those familiar scraps for you.

Who was that boy in the picture?

I simply give up on remembering facts.

He looked so happy: A simple place to start.

If I could only remember how he felt in that picture.

(Everything else is a jumbled mess).

He looked so happy.

He must've been happy.

I think I remember happiness.

Yes, I am quite sure, now:

Happiness is sickly-sweet-pinpricks,  
Ringing after everything goes quiet,  
Exhausted heat and demeaning encourageables,  
Rats and cockroaches running for shelter  
—Breathless—running so fast  
As imitators reenact their fallacious landscape—  
Imprinted within.

Something precipitated my preconsciousness:

I was warned.

Yes, now I am sure of it.

We are not friends at all, are we?

I know your name.

*He was me.*

And you are better off dead and buried.



## *The Illumination*

—Matthew Foley

In the Fall 2010 Veterans Only Orientation Course at Eastern Kentucky University, Travis Martin and Brett Morris presented the opportunity to submit creative work to the first edition of *The Journal of Military Experience*. As an alternative to two exams, the students were allowed to produce short stories, poems, and artwork. The end product was a collection of creative works representing America's war culture. My contribution to *The Journal of Military Experience* was a process-art piece that I now call, *The Illumination*.

The nightmares of a warrior become the reality of a warrior through perception. Perception connotes that an option is available: Warriors who choose to perceive do so with the knowledge that the effects of this act influence the product—the nightmares, the values, and the place in society—that the warrior will carry with him or her after war. Perception—the ability to perceive—is inside of us all. Also, and in regards to what led to the construction of *The Illumination*, perception is a process. What follows is an example of warriors engaged in the act of perception, deciding who they are, who they have been, and who they will be after war.

On November 11th, 2010, veterans gathered to read the names of those who have perished in the Global War on Terrorism. I took the list from this reading and used the paper to produce powdered charcoal. As the veterans tore up the names of comrades who had fought and died alongside them, they talked, shared stories, and discussed the significance of destroying a physical embodiment of the pain that they all carry with them today. Next, we gathered around a fire to burn the destroyed list of names. The burning of the names released carbon in the same way that the veterans released their pain and suffering, replacing it with camaraderie and a community representative of their respective futures.

Using the charcoal, I composed three drawings representing pre, during, and post-war mindsets. The act of turning the list—the memorial—into artwork immortalized the fallen in a way that I had not previously thought possible. Through the process, I encountered the unanticipated effect of my own act of perception. I began with the simple desire to create art—to find an audience and help my career—while fulfilling my class requirements. My desire to help others was always present, but it increased exponentially as the project continued. I found myself engaged with the emotions and futures of those seeking the act of perception through my art.

My intent was to help other veterans gain a semblance of control over their world. At the same time, I hoped to help those without knowledge of America's war culture find a window into that disparate mode of existence. I completed my drawings, but the work was not complete. While the act of destroying names dredged up the emotions, pain, and sadness they felt (or should have felt) during war, the veterans also understood that these names were about to be put to work in the act of memorialization. As the veterans placed the names into a bucket meant to collect the ashes of future charcoal, they created something from their nightmares that just so happened to solidify their new place in society. The perspectives of these veterans changed: They gained control over their past and perceived a new future.

I completed three pieces of art using the charcoal. The first piece of art represents the soldier preparing for war, of innocence anticipating its own demise. Next, I depicted the experience of war, of chaos and the suppression of emotions for the sake of survival. Finally, I envisioned the warrior's view of the future, or the loneliness and uncertainty of being disconnected from the society they fought to protect. These three pieces embody the mindset of our Armed Forces—the individual soldier—in various stages of conscious and unconscious psychological development. But there was one more stage in the process before the act of perception could emerge in its full, empowering form.

Lining the three pieces of art along a wall outside of the university, I gave veterans a chance to physically express their emotions—to impress themselves—upon these aspects of the veteran psyche. The veterans explicitly destroyed the art. Implicitly, and however, they helped to create the image of destroyed and damaged identities represented in the three drawings. In essence, the act of perception took form through the art as the veterans found a way to make their emotions tangible, striking, and decimating what was taken away from them. As a result, the act of destruction became an act of construction; the veterans released psychological emotions physically; a light was shined directly upon the aspects of themselves they lost as a result of war. The veterans were better able to understand themselves while helping to create something that would teach the world about the sacrifices they made. This act of perception became *The Illumination*.

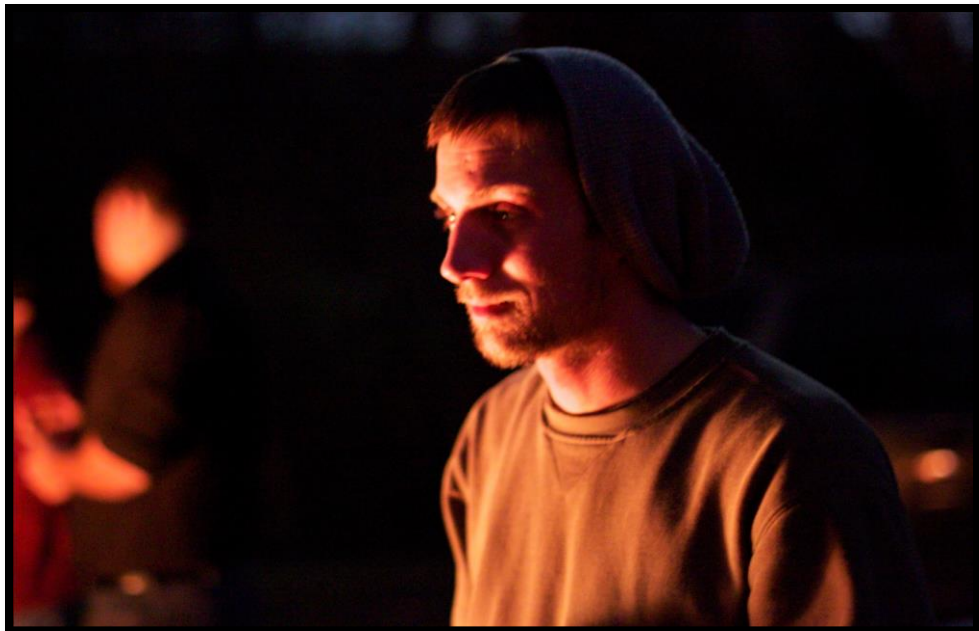
*—I would like to send a special thanks to the Lexington Visual Collective for allowing me to use their studio while working on The Illumination.*



Above: The initial gathering for the burning of names read during the Veterans Day Global War on Terrorism remembrance ceremony.

Below: The veterans unwind, relax, and share stories as they destroy the list.





Above: At this point, I am hoping that the project works out. I begin considering the psychological implications of my work.

Below: We burned the list in a steel can. Flames jumped and whistled from the top. This became the subject of conversation for the rest of the night.





Left and Below: I harvested the charcoal the next morning. Oddly, names survived the burning process along with newspaper articles describing political strife.

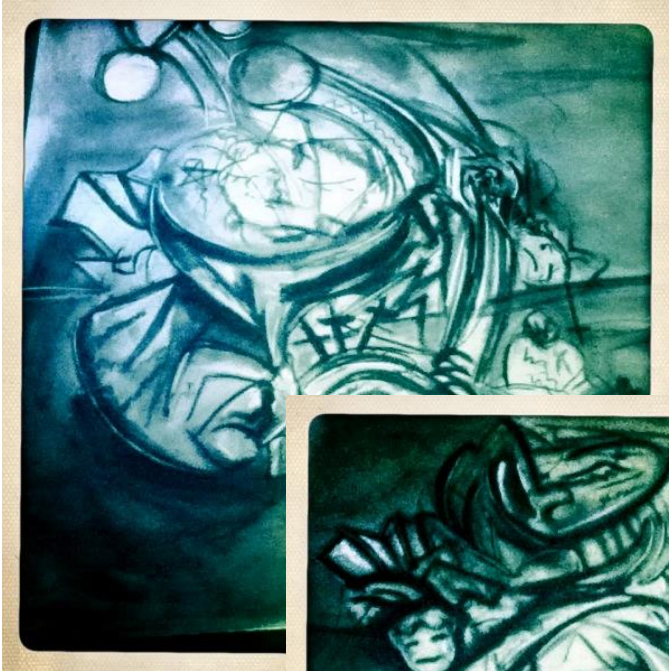




Above: The beginnings of the pre-war drawing.

Below: The pre-war drawing is in its final stages and I have started work on the during-war piece.





Left and Below: The three drawings are complete and ready for the next phase.







Above: I set the drawings up outside of the EKU Student Success Building.

Below: Passersby were confused about what we were doing.





Above: I gave the veterans the options of tools and even charcoal to add to the artwork. It took some time for the veterans to understand how to create through destruction.

Below: The destruction has begun.





Above: All of the drawings have been battered. The veterans are still a little hesitant to destroy.

Below: I assured them that they were not simply destroying the art I created. Rather, their acts *were* the creation.





Left and Below: At this point the veterans begin to let loose.



Right and Below:  
The destruction phase concludes with the veterans pouring out their emotions into the act of destruction.





Above: We pick up the pieces.

Below: As we wrapped the fragments in a tarp, we began discussing the implications of this artwork. We carried the pieces away like fallen soldiers, discussing what it means for a warrior to grieve. Instead of carrying away their fallen comrades, they realized they were carrying away pieces of themselves.





The Final Product:  
*Illumination of the Pre-War Mind*

The Journal of Military Experience



The Final Product:  
*Illumination of the Mind at War*





The Final Product:  
*Illumination of the Post-War Mind*

The Journal of Military Experience

## About the Cover

*The US Island, 2000-2010*

—Matthew Foley

In an attempt to express the last decade, I sought to depict the overwhelming giants in control of American society. They bicker and fight as our country strains under their malfeasance. Above all others, veterans suffer the consequences. After serving years in the service and multiple deployments overseas, *this* is what they come home to.

