

# WORDS ON A WALL

By Rod Merkley

**D**ust, sweat, and blood are the three things I remember from that day. I squint through the grimy burn of sweat and dust in my eyes. I taste the saltiness of my sweat on my lips. I feel the stickiness of my soldiers' blood as it soaks through my fire-resistant gloves while I tried to save their lives. I can taste their blood on my lips. I can smell their blood. Every time I see, taste, smell, or feel any of those three things, I return to the day I became a hero, the day I lost myself, the day I died.

When I return it's like a crazy dream. I am in the back of my truck. I feel my body running to the side of my patient, Private First Class Sarah Behunnin. An explosion is coming, but I just keep working. Then everything goes black. I either awaken in the night or come out of my trance while teaching high school students. The last thing I told Behunnin was that she would be all right. I lied. Behunnin was beautiful in a pained way, tall and muscular like a college swimmer. I remember how she walked and talked as if she was going to break free someday. Then she was on the ground in front of me, screaming that she couldn't feel her legs. Her body was destroyed by shrapnel and violence. That's when I told her it would be okay. In an hour she was dead.

I've been told what happened next. My family talks about it. The Army recoded it and asked me to read their record to verify that it was true.

Everyone tells me how I became a hero, but I don't remember it. They tell me that I covered Behunnin's broken body after the second blast, that I returned fire when the enemy came at us, that I killed a 13-year-old "terrorist." I've been this account many times, but I don't remember it. Sometimes I dream of the boy I killed, but in my dreams his face seems too perfect. He looks like some innocent kid off of a *National Geographic* documentary, young and innocent and pure. In my dreams and my memories the boy I killed looked like one of students I taught back at the high school, not like an insurgent firing an AK-47 at me. Terrorists are supposed to be scary, violent men. They aren't supposed to be like the kids I teach. I don't think my memory of his face is real; I hope it's not. But the memories are always with me. Sarah Behunnin. The boy I killed. Everything else about that day is a blur of blood, sweat, and dust.

I remember shielding Behunnin from the falling rubble after the second blast in Iraq. Then I woke up in Germany. I vaguely remember some officer in a pressed uniform smiling and pinning a Purple Heart and a Silver Star on my chest. My wife was there too, but I don't remember seeing her, but I remember feeling her presence. They were reading the award citation that told my heroic story. To me it was a series of disjointed sentences that mirrored my fragmented memories that make up how my war will always be remembered. "Risked his

life to protect his patients.” “Returned fire while providing crucial care.” “Worked tirelessly for an hour until he collapsed from blood loss.” “Saved the lives of five soldiers.” That citation is full of hollow praise. They talk about the five lives I supposedly saved but don’t mention the three that I didn’t. What I honestly know is that I’m not a hero. I’m a schoolteacher who was stupid enough to join the National Guard. I will pay for that mistake for the rest of my life. I live in small town Kansas and I’m the town hero. They never let me forget it, either. My father is the worst.

I recognized the number on my vibrating phone. I hit the screen to answer and said, “Hey Doug. What’s going on?”

“What’s up with you and dad?” he asked.

“He was yelling at mom about how she needs to call her son and tell him to get his ass to the courthouse this Saturday.”

“Yeah, I told him that I’m not going to the dedication. I guess he wasn’t happy.”

“You’re not going?”

“Yeah, all it is is a stupid rock with some words on it,” I replied.

“It may be a stupid rock but it has your name on it and it’s dedicated to you. Plus we got the contract to install it so Dad’s going all out with his military family routine for the dedication. And I’m still your platoon sergeant. If you’re not going to be at drill, you should at least tell me. Who’s going to stand out in the front of third squad and count to seven if you’re not there?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out. You’re a smart guy.”

“Can’t you just go to keep the peace?”

“I didn’t break the peace and I’m not making peace.”

“Okay, well, Dad’s going to summon you to his throne room and give it to you,” my older brother warned me.

“I’ll survive,” I said. “But thanks for looking out for me.”

“Hell, someone has to. You’re the family hero. What kind of brother would I be if I didn’t watch your back?”

“Yeah. If he asks, tell Dad I’ll stop by the trailer before work tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll talk at you later.”

“Bye Doug.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I put my phone in my pocket. Doug is the son I was supposed to be. I was always Dad’s favorite growing up and Doug was the screw up. He probably got arrested ten times before he was eighteen. Dad had to pull some strings to even get him in the Guard. But now he is the golden boy. He joined the infantry and I became a medic. He took over as foreman for the family construction business and I went off to school. Doug is Dad’s favorite now because he did the things I was supposed to do. But somehow I ended up as the hero, which pissed our dad off.

Driving through my hometown used to piss me off. I remember the day I got back from the hospital and saw a morbidly obese man chain smoking while eating a footlong sub and chugging on a super Big Gulp. I got so mad I had to look away. What right did that fat slob have to be alive, abusing his body, when my healthy, fit, attractive soldiers were dead? The randomness and lack of fairness was ridiculous. I’ve gotten to the point that I don’t get angry about the local slobs.

My dad has a portable office that he has delivered to his construction sites. My brother and all his workers call it the throne room behind his back because that’s where he goes to lord over his kingdom. It’s equipped with a sign that says “Private Property: Salesmen and Liberals will be Shot.” He also has “Smoking is Encouraged” and “Real Men Smoke Cigars” signs. When you get inside, you instantly see what’s important to my dad. He has pictures of himself and all three of his sons in uniform. He has clippings about his retirement after eight

years as a First Sergeant, our deployment, and my awards. If you walked into his office you'd think that his sons were all active duty military, not a bunch of National Guardsmen. He doesn't have pictures of my mom, any of our wives, or graduation pictures. His office is all about the Army.

I drove up on the way to work. I knew Dad would be there because he always gets there early to make sure his crew doesn't show up late. I opened the door and a cloud of cigar smoke greeted me.

"Come in or get out. Don't just stand there scratching your balls" was my dad's greeting. Dad had watched *Full Metal Jacket* one too many times and thought he needed to show everyone he was tough by talking like R. Lee Emory.

"And close the fucking door," he continued. "I don't want you bringing the flies in with that pansy ass deodorant you wear."

"Doug said you wanted to talk, Dad, so I'm here," I answered.

"Yeah. I wanted to know if you pulled your head out of your ass and decided to support your family yet?"

"It's not about that, Dad," I said. "I'm just getting back into the swing of things. I really don't need this right now."

"For fuck's sake. What is there to deal with? It's a dedication, you show up and walk around with your pretty blue uniform and show off your fucking medals. That's all you have to do. I've read the story. You wasted a bunch of fucking Hajis. You can handle one ceremony."

"I just don't want to go. It's my choice."

"What is your major malfunction, son? I don't know what the fuck they teach you in college. I don't even know how your pussy ass has lasted this long in the Army. Sometimes you got to suck it up and do things you don't want to do. You think I want to squeeze into my old fucking uniform? You think I want to let everyone see how fat their old First Sergeant has gotten? It's a

fucking embarrassment, but I'm going to suck it up and do my duty."

"Thanks for asking Dad and no I'm not going," I replied. I admit I was being a bit sarcastic but that was my defense against getting angry. Dad didn't want to talk; he wanted to tell me what to do.

"You're supposed to be the big fucking hero, but you can't even face a rock with some names carved in it. Look at it this way, son, you have a duty. Your duty is to support your unit and your goddamn family by going to the dedication. You can go home and act like a pussy every other day for the rest of your life," he yelled. "All I need is an hour and you will be there."

"I'm sorry but I'm not going," I said, pausing between each word to let them sink in. "Why does everything in this family have to revolve around you? If I went, it would be for my men and for their families. I wouldn't go so you can parade me around like a calf at the fair. This is about real heroes, Dad, not about you."

"Shut your mouth before I shut it for you. Don't talk down to me like I'm one of your goddamn students," Dad growled. "You may be big man at that fucking school of yours but around here all that education don't mean shit. You're my son and you're going to the dedication. Hell, you're supposed to cut the ribbon. You're the hero and you're going to be there."

"Nobody asked me if I wanted to be a hero."

"You little shit. You think being a hero is a curse. If I would've been there, I would've done the same that you did and a whole lot more. You got your chance and you did the minimum. You need to be there for those of us that didn't get a chance."

"You didn't get a chance because you were an ass to everyone in the unit, Dad. You wonder why they wouldn't let you back in for the deployment? It's because you spent twenty-nine years in the Guard treating your superiors like they were stupid and treating your subordinates

like shit. If you had been there, you wouldn't be a hero. You'd have gotten us all killed."

That was when he punched me. He may be old and fat, but he still packs a wallop. I stormed out of the office before I killed him. Unlike my dad, I knew I was capable of killing a man.

In the end I decided to leave town that weekend. I called my commander and told him I couldn't deal with it, and he understood and let me work a few days during the week instead of going to the dedication on drill weekend. It was better that way.

For the next six months, I avoided the courthouse where the memorial was. It wasn't that hard because I wasn't invited to most of the family stuff anymore. When I did show up for Sunday dinner, my dad avoided me and I avoided him.

One day I decided to make peace so I called him. His cell rang four times then he picked up, said, "Fuck off, pussy," and hung up. After that I didn't try to make peace.

Eventually I had to face my fear though. The high school graduation was on the courthouse green, and I was asked to say a few words. I agreed because they didn't want to hear about how I was a hero, they wanted to hear about education and how important it was in my life.

So a week before graduation I decided to go to the rock.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought about the faces of the men and women I lost. When I walked across the grass of the courthouse square, I repeated a mantra in my mind: *All they are, are words on a wall.*

As I walked, I started to smell the blood from that day. My memory flashed to the face of the boy I killed. I tasted the salty, metallic taste of blood on my lips. I felt the grit of dust on my teeth and the burn of sweat in my eyes. Walking across the grass, I felt the blood, sweat, and dust swirl my body.

*All they are are words on a wall*, I told myself again.

I thought about my great-grandfather, a veteran whose name was on another monument by the courthouse. He was a German immigrant who arrived in France a week after the end of WWII. I remember how he joked, "The Germans surrendered once they heard that Grossman was coming back." He raised the money and dedicated the monument to the local veterans of World War I.

*All they are are words on a wall*, I said one last time.

I tasted salt on my lips again, but this time it wasn't sweat, it was tears. I saw the plaque and read their names. I thought of their faces as I touched their names.

I faced my fear and now I felt whole.

One week later, I stood on a stage to impart my words of wisdom to the graduating class.

"Hello, my name is David Grossman, and I am a veteran," I started.

"Some of you think that I'm a hero but I'm really not. I'm just a kid from Kansas that did his best in an impossible situation. I did my best and so should you. Some of you are going off to college. Some of you are going to work. Some of you are joining the military. It really doesn't matter where you are going; it matters what you do. I never wanted to be a hero, but I went to war and I did my best and people call me a hero. Now you go wherever you're going to and do your best. Then you will all become heroes."

With that I walked off the stage, hugged my wife, and sat down. My dad will never understand me. He thinks a hero is supposed to be John Wayne from *The Longest Day*. He'll never get that some of us don't want to be heroes.

My town will never understand me either, but that I can live with. They want me to be a hero so they can have something to idolize. They



read that a high school history teacher went off to war and came back a hero and they bought it. You know what? That's all right, people need someone to glorify. They want a combination of John Wayne and Rambo who is waiting for

another chance to save the world. They want the hero they know from the movies, but all they have is me.

If you ask me, I'm not a hero. But nobody does.

