A Permanent Soldier: Notes from the Forever War

by

Dennis Lowell White
Class of 2019

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut        April, 2019
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... 3

Foreword: Introduction to my Military career ................................................................. 4

Prolouge: Squirrels, Insurgents, and Poverty ................................................................. 18

Part I: Escape from Appalachia and Iraq ........................................................................ 40

Part II: Coming Home .................................................................................................... 60
Acknowledgments

To my Wife, Maria Karla Mondragon-Perea, thank you so much for putting up with my grueling schedule these past four years. Thank for you standing by me no matter what. I love you with all my heart, and credit your support with getting me through this ordeal at Wesleyan.

To the Iraqi and Afghani people, thank you for your kindness and spirit. I learned so much about humanity from both nationalities and I am eternally grateful for what I learned in your countries. I hope to take those lessons and teach them to others before the war drums beat again.

Professor Cecilia Miller and Giulio Gallarotti, thank you for allowing me to do this project. I am very proud of this work and appreciate both the training and permission to pursue this work.

Professor Charles Barber, thank you so much for your patience, attention, critique and help. Despite working on your own books and projects, you’ve guided me through the chaos of writing.

Professor Richard Adelstein, thank you so much for always answering my questions and inspiring me to work as hard as I did. Your comments during the initial feedback were critical to getting the project to where it needed to go.

Professor Robert Cassidy, thank you for the reading list you helped me put together last summer. The works on the list are tough to follow, but an important tradition for our generation of veterans to continue.
Foreword: Introduction to my Military career

My military career isn’t a mirror image of most others. I spent seven years on active duty and three years in the Texas Army National Guard. I enlisted in March of 2006 and left active duty in the summer of 2013. Between those years, I deployed three times to combat zones for a year apiece. My first deployment was from January 2007 to February of the following the year. My second deployment, after a year of training at Fort Hood, Texas, lasted from April 2008 to April of the following year. After seven months at a U.S. Army garrison in Germany, I deployed once more to Afghanistan as a member of the brigade personal security detachment. But it is odd to see my career delineated in neatly arranged time periods. Time in the army does not play out the way it does in the civilian world. A month might be so jammed packed with training that it rolls into one giant sleepless blur, making six weeks of training seem like a year.

Many people who served in the Army do not go to a combat zone nor will they spend time working directly for a brigade commander or on some officer’s trip down memory lane to Vietnam-era tactics, as I was. A typical Army career would be as follows: a soldier graduates basic training, the Army sends them to their regular units. They spend a year training with that unit and then deploy to a particular location or start the training cycle all over again. My career differed right away with an instant deployment to Iraq after basic training. I was as cherry as cherry could be when I first arrived. However, I received plenty of on-the-job training from experienced soldiers and am eternally grateful to them for keeping me alive. However, real bullets have a way of forcing cognitive abilities to grasp subjects rather quickly, in particular, infantry tactics.

Furthermore, most people don’t beg the Army to let them serve. I earned my GED in 2005 and spent a year trying to convince the Army to allow me to enlist. The Army has always
been wary of GED recipients and only allows a certain number to enlist. It took a full year before my number came up and I was able to go to basic training. In Basic, I had a heat stroke and spent a little over six months in a training program that normally takes fourteen weeks. I then went to Airborne school, learned to jump out of planes, and was assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division, which has no airborne troops, but they give a badge to wear.

Most soldiers don’t re-enlist either. After a few months in Iraq, I realized I had less than a year in the Army once we returned from deployment. I had no idea what I was going to do and was beginning to enjoy army work and generally excelled as an ideal soldier, at least while on duty. Once I found out you could re-enlist with European assignment as an incentive, I went straight to the Sergeant in charge of re-enlisting and signed the papers extending my contract from three years to six years. I received a $12,000 cash bonus—tax free while in a combat zone—and a European assignment. Here’s a photo of me immediately after my re-enlistment after crawling along the banks of the Tigris River searching for a weapons caches.

At COP X-Ray after our squad discovered a weapons cache— the smile is sarcastic.
But, little did I know at the time that the Army can order you to do whatever they want, even if it is against the contract you signed. After much excitement for an assignment in Italy, the Army ordered me to deploy a second time with the 1st Cavalry Division. As something of a consolation prize, I was assigned to a new, special unit, called the Blues Platoons with the Air Cavalry Brigade on the opposite side of Fort Hood, Texas. In this unit, we were supposed to be the multi-national division Iraq commander’s reserve for special missions. It was a throwback to the Air Cavalry of Vietnam, However, after a “status of forces agreement” with the Iraqi government, we were mostly tied to the base. The Iraqis grew impatient with our continued presence and wanted to take a leading role in the war now. The status of forces agreement signed by President George W. Bush before leaving office did just that and we were painfully bored for a year. We did train some Iraqi soldiers and recover broken aircraft, neither of which is particularly exciting or glamorous. But we did our jobs as best we could through intense boredom.

After I returned from a second deployment to Iraq, I received my European assignment to Germany rather than Italy, as my orders initially stated. However, I could not go to Germany without re-enlisting yet again for a year to satisfy an Army policy of stabilization. The Army figured they’d better get three full years out of me if they were going to pay for me to move somewhere else within the Army’s system of bases. So, I signed the papers and my end time of service date changed yet again to August 2013—putting me up to seven on active duty. I wasn’t excited about spending more time in the Army, but I wanted to see Europe before I left the service.
In those short seven years, I deployed three times to combat zones. That pace of deployment is overwhelming for anyone. Officers are generally assigned to higher levels or staff positions, making burnout more avoidable, not that officers cannot get burned out. But, for enlisted soldiers, it is not unusual to see a senior non-commissioned officer who has deployed more than six years of their life to a combat zone. I was on this course; however, my career and rank were not catching up with the extraordinary time I’d spent in the service. The combat time got to me; I was wearing my anger on my sleeve at work and everyone could tell. Subordinates, seniors, and peers alike were constantly asking me to tone it down a little because I was “scaring the new guys”. Lots of my time in the Army seemed like a blur, moving from one set of problems to another, never really solving any of them. I rarely felt like I’d accomplished anything when I moved to another part of the Army and learned how awful it can be to spend time earning the trust of one unit, only to have to restart the entire process a few days later.

Later in my career I became a Non-Commissioned Officer. It was a proud moment for me to pin the Sergeant’s stripes on my chest. The rise in responsibility from soldier to Sergeant is difficult to understand for civilians, but essentially they pulled me away from my friends, and had me manage their careers. Then imagine an all-powerful authority just above you that can control every aspect of your life should you happen to screw anything up. That is the life of a sergeant: the constant threat of career ending evaluations, and attempting to balance kind leadership with the exacting standards needed to survive in combat. I attempted to do that as ethically as possible and made a lot of enemies out of former friends. The Non-Commissioned Officer’s life is ruthlessly competitive and the longer you stay in the more cut-throat you have to be about preserving your career. NCOs are indeed true to the cliché; they are the backbone of the Army, and they ruled my life from Reveille to Retreat.
After I was promoted to Sergeant I was ordered to attend the Non-Commissioned Officers Academy in Germany. It is the first school an enlisted soldier attends in their professional education. While at the NCO Academy in Germany, the cadre, or the permanent instructors that live and work there, said that “if you don’t like the direction the Army is going, put it in your rearview mirror.” If I could have done that right then, I would have, but I had two-and-a-half more years to go. The pace of year-on year-off deployment had gone on for so long; I knew there was no way I could continue my chosen profession as a NCO without some sort of reset or rest. I would see the old timers, full of spite, faces lined with anger and disappointment. I saw the contorted faces and perpetual bad mood of senior NCOs that ruled over my life with an iron fist. I did not want to become like them, and for the most part I have not. To be clear, I have no love for the Army or those old angry NCOs, but I sympathize with the bitterness of being stuck in a violent profession for decades.

Ultimately I wanted to learn more about the world and go to college rather than being stuck in a rank for too long at a military post I hated. Luckily, I had the gumption to leave that type of environment to go to college. Thankfully, the Army does indeed take care of your education needs and has paid a handsome sum for my Wesleyan education. After they crammed twenty years of life into seven-and-a-half years, I have no qualms about taking the money for my schooling. Nor do I have any second thoughts receiving a small monthly stipend for Tinnitus or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Every time I feel a tinge of survivor’s guilt, I try to remember anyone would do what I am doing given the same circumstances.

It should be said that while I was in the Army, I did the best I could. I went to Airborne school, graduated top of my class from the NCO academy and won several contests and awards related to my abilities as an Infantryman. Now, I have almost nothing but regret when I think
about what I really did. But I don’t beat myself up too much about it because of the way I lived at the time. It is hard to explain with words but growing up poor in West Virginia with no way out, the Army is a great option. Considering where I am today, I made the right choice. But the destroyed lives the US Army leaves in its wake in Iraq and Afghanistan permeate my thoughts and dreams on most days. What I did there had nothing to do with freedom, democracy, weapons of mass destruction, or chasing down Osama Bin Laden. We were there on an imperialist mission, to remake these countries in our image despite our cultures being light years apart.

*Training mission on West Fort Hood Airfield in 2008 before my second deployment*

Despite my anger at U.S. foreign policy, I strove to be the absolute best soldier I could be. I was not the best soldier in the world, but I was very good at my job. The better a Sergeant or soldier is at their job, the more likely they are to bring home their troops and avoid needless firefights “downrange” where it counts. I took that job seriously and wanted my soldiers to come home. Despite my philosophical misgivings about what we were doing, it’s tough to call a truce on the battlefield for discussions about the means of production with an al-Qaeda fighter or
Taliban member. Furthermore, in the event of a real global threat, I would want plenty of well-trained infantrymen to defend us, however unlikely that might be.

The story that I’m about to tell will do everything it can to explain this, but words do fail me sometimes in trying to explain the boredom, excitement, complexity, simplicity, humor, and misery of combat. This is neither a comprehensive nor a complete history of my career, but a reflection on my experiences as best I can remember. Reader be forewarned: The memories I attempt to transcribe are chaotic and will not always make sense, as they do not make sense to me sometimes either. Things will seem to contradict one another, as in combat, things often do.

**Prologue: Machine Guns and Tee-Ball**

When I was ten years old in the lazy summer humidity of West Virginia, I joined the local tee-ball team. There wasn’t much to do in West Virginia for a little kid, especially where our house was located. I was cut off from every other kid in the area by ten miles, railroad tracks and a river. In Appalachian slang, the area we lived in was called “a bottom.” In our bottom, there was nothing but seven elderly people and my sister. So, the chance to play with a kid from ten miles away every day was the best possible thing I could have done at the time, or at least I thought.

In my hometown of Bim, West Virginia, there was nothing for several miles other than collections of ramshackle houses and trailers. The entire road, Route 85, was pretty much the same. In fact, town is a rather generous term; these were all unincorporated areas governed by the coal companies back in the day when coal was king. Now that coal was on the decline, it was a dying community. On one end of the holler, as we called it, was Clinton camp. A former coal camp with perfectly symmetrical rows of houses, typically two to three-bedroom houses, with
the large boss houses at either end of the camps. The days of the company store and fake money were long gone, but what folks were left had kids in the small local sports teams.

*Old Coal Camp of Clinton, West Virginia.*

My grandfather had played baseball and talent scouts had already identified him as potential talent before the Korean War. After getting a teenage girl pregnant - - my grandmother - - he was ordered by the court to either join the military or go to jail. Grandpa took the former and went on to work in the coal mines rather than the baseball fields. He was, however, proud of me for joining a tee-ball team. So, all my practices were quite fun, and I seemed to be pretty good at the game. The coach of the team was a kind man who worked underground at night and coached us during the day. He’d often show up with coal dust all over his face, while all the coal dusted fathers watched from the stands.

The baseball diamond where we played had a working scoreboard and a well-kept field. But over the fences, the wild vegetation of the West Virginian hills began immediately. Briar bushes awaited those not paying attention, like concertina wire does in a warzone. Stinging nettles that burn like a bee sting were everywhere. I would often hear the call of a rattlesnake letting everyone nearby know: Do not enter. The woods were a scary place in West Virginia if you weren’t paying attention. I would always have some briars hanging onto the edges of my pants, stings from plants and insects, and usually I’d get out of there without a rattlesnake bite to the ankle.
I was excited to finally be part of a group of kids. Despite them not really liking me or knowing me that well, I was happy. The group of kids on my team were like the *Bad News Bears*; kids would sneak off to chew tobacco at the age of seven-years-old sometimes. Obviously, they were just mimicking their fathers who worked too much to supervise them. I was just desperate to be a part of a group of kids and to have friends to play with.

One day at practice during a scrimmage, I walked into the dugout. Inside to the left, the bench stretched along the black and white paint of our team’s colors. I walked to the end of the dugout where I usually sat and discovered a bird’s nest with colorful eggs underneath the bench. I thought I’d discovered a cache of candy.

“Hey guys, check this out!”

“That’s a bird egg, stupid!”

“No, it isn’t. Watch this,” I said as I slung the egg against the wall. The yolk dripped slowly down the blue painted wall next to our poorly drawn mascot, a tiger. I immediately felt strange, like I might have killed something inadvertently.

“You just killed a baby bird! I’m telling!”

The kid screamed and ran off to get the rest of the team. Pretty soon I was surrounded by kids from Clinton camp. They were all pointing at me and openly discussing apparent rumors about me.

“He’s weird, I’ve never met him for practice, and he kills birds for no reason!” One child said.

“Dumbass!,” another boy said.

I was now looking at the ground as my vision began to blur from the tears filling my eyes. I didn’t want to kill a bird — I thought I’d found a candy egg stash for my buddies. I
thought of all the cute birds I’d found in my yard and how I’d killed one on accident. I believed what the little boys were saying to me. Something was wrong with me, I didn’t have friends at my age, and all these kids grew up together and played with each other. I was an outcast and rightly so in my mind.

“Hey, what happened?”

Erman, our coach bellowed from the door of the dugout. Erman knew my dad from the coal mines and they worked the same shift. He’d been a college baseball player and I’d heard my grandpa brag about him often. Erman shut the kids up and sat down next to me.

“What happened, White?”

Through my sniffling, I choked out that I’d killed a baby bird on accident. I thought it was a candy egg. I didn’t mean it.

“That’s alright, it can happen to anyone.”

He turned to the team.

“Hey! White is your teammate. You don’t treat teammates like that. You understand? He didn’t mean it and y’all are just being cruel.”

I felt stupid that an adult had to stick up for me, but my tears began to dry up. None of the kids really listened to him, but I was grateful they’d stopped their mob attack on me. My dad would have never done that and would have blamed me.

I never told anyone about this incident, but every once in a while I think about it. Tears well up on the bottom of my eyes when I see the vivid dugout in my mind’s eye and the dripping, yellow egg yolk of the unborn bird. Many of those children now are dead from overdoses, in jail for committing robbery for drugs, or simply working dead end jobs, engrossed with extreme depression. I did go on to find a small group of friends, but those feelings of people
surrounding me and laughing never left me. Living in a rural area is tough, and the days pass like molasses; nothing important happens, no one cares what happens in rural West Virginia, and they never will.

Years later, in the burning humidity next to the Tigris River, at our COP X-Ray, I sat in another concrete structure. This time, it was a fifty-foot concrete cylinder with two machine guns hanging out of each side, carefully aligned so that their fields of fire would interlock, leaving no space in front of it uncovered by burning metal. The cylinder was made of one foot thick concrete and was our platoon’s assigned guard position for the duration of the deployment. It had enough space for a large trap door under us, two small wooden stools, and a table to put a radio on to communicate with headquarters. The tower was sparse, mostly gray with a smattering of bad drawings on the ledge of the windows, but the Army doesn’t want their soldiers screwing around in a guard tower, so bare conditions are expected.

A guard tower is a boring place to spend four hours of your day. The boredom endured by regular soldiers in guard towers is difficult to describe. I have engaged in all sorts of silly games to make the time pass, whether making up word games or taking dumb pictures, anything I could do to take my mind off the time. At night, before the sun went down, the guard tower would get even hotter. Simply by standing in your gear, sweat would accumulate so heavily that a steady drip would pour off my nose onto the platform below me. Sometimes a puddle of sweat would form; other times it would quickly evaporate. Time dragged on in the guard tower, and since I was the lowest ranking soldier, I tended to get stuck with people that no one else wanted to be around.

In front of the tower were a collection of small houses. Much like the holler I used to live in, there wasn’t much to do for the local kids, so they’d play soccer in the street near our guard
tower. I liked watching them play because you could see the same dynamics play out as anywhere in the world. The primary difference was their religion was Islam, and ours was Christianity, both of the fundamentalist strain.

While the kids laughed and played, a sniper’s bullet slammed into the side of the tower. The kids barely even noticed, but the sound reverberated around the tower, and the abject fear of combat crept up into the pit of my stomach like a stone.

I was shaken, but not upset. I’d been fired at by snipers so many times by now, after six months in Iraq, it was hard to count them. All I felt was a burning anger at being shot at. I wasn’t even bothering anyone right now, just sitting in my tower, occasionally tossing out cold water to the kids below. Now this asshole was trying to kill me. In my view at the time, it was for no reason. However, if the roles had been reversed, I wouldn’t hesitate to fire at a foreign invader in my holler either.

I called into the command post to let them know we were taking sniper fire.

“Comanche mike, this is Tower 7. we’re taking sniper fire, over”

“Tower 7, you are authorized to engage, and by that I mean light that motherfucker up.”

I hung out the window of the tower and screamed at the children between me and the Tigris River to get inside. The children ran into a courtyard nearby. I began scanning the area trying to figure out where it could have come from. It came from only one of three places: the island in the river, the river bank, or the alley that led to the houses on the river bank. Just as I was looking straight out the window, another bullet slammed into the side of the window; I felt the concrete stinging my face and was grateful I was wearing my eye protection. Instantly, without really thinking about what to do next, I began firing at the island in the middle of the Tigris river, the place I was sure was the location of the sniper.
COP X-Ray was an old wool factory, We lived inside the two buildings furthest from the river.

Just as I was trained in basic and on the machine gun range, I squeezed the trigger, muttering to myself “die terrorist, die.” The time it takes you to say that phrase, is the length of time an effective machine gun burst should last, around nine seconds. Behind me, my guard tower partner was shouting, “Get that motherfucker White!”

I fired my entire 200 round belt into the island, and every possible location the bullet could have come from. A transformer on the powerlines exploded in front of me. A car in my line of sight was filled with holes. The houses were pock marked with my bullets. A distraught woman in the courtyard raised her hands to me screaming something in Arabic. She was likely angry that I’d just destroyed the town’s electricity supply for the next few weeks. Or perhaps, she knew the young man who’d fired at me. I had no way of knowing, I’d just unleashed a barrage of deadly steel into every potential hiding location the sniper might lay. The post firing silence filled the guard tower, while the screams of frightened civilians wafted over the compound walls.

The sniper never fired again. I have no idea if I killed him. Frankly, I don’t feel guilty if I did, as he did fire at me first. When you initiate an ambush or attack, you do it knowing you will
probably die. That brave sniper, likely untrained, hopefully either slipped away or had a quick death. Despite being happy that I’d eliminated the threat, seeing the destruction I caused to the local population made my stomach turn. I’d terrified the children so bad, they’d likely never forget it. They’d seen my tracer rounds from their courtyard, blazing overhead; children that could easily be my classmates now; all of us severely traumatized by war.

When I returned to the command post that day, the commander slapped me on the back.

“Way to light that turd up, White.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I felt very strange. After fighting for acceptance in the platoon for so long, now that it was known that I wasn’t afraid to shoot at people, everyone cheered for me. Sometimes people would joke, “Don’t step in front of White’s guard tower, he’ll fire every round he’s got at you.” I began to second guess myself. Should I have fired that much? Should I have fired at all? Was I sure it was a sniper? Even though I knew I’d been fired at, my mind played tricks on me. At night I would see that woman’s distraught face in the twilight before I fell to sleep, the horror of the children’s faces as they realized why I wanted them to go inside. Did they know the man I might have killed? I don’t know; I never will. It was strange to have been only fifteen years earlier when I was ostracized for accidently killing a bird that may not have even lived anyway, to being praised for killing something in my professional life. I wasn’t awarded a medal for the task, but the praise alone was enough.

As I write now, I can see that transformer exploding in my imagination. I see the children peacefully playing and being silly. I see the run-down Opal sedan taking round after round from my machine gun. I feel the adulation after returning to the platoon area after my guard shift. I hear my lieutenant’s praises, the commander slapping me on the back. I remember desperately
trying to win the acceptance of my platoon sergeant and hearing him say, “You might be worth a fuck after all.” I was accepted now, even if I didn’t kill anyone that day. I felt upset at the man who shot at me. We could have been friends now; we might share a beer or coffee. We might discuss the political systems that put us in that strange position in the first place. He was likely trying to prove himself to someone as well. The sniper and I both proved ourselves that day. It was not a noble fight, but we both proved our willingness to fight and die for our cause. I just hope he lived to tell his story as well.

But, I strangely feel more guilt about that bird egg to this day. That bird egg did not shoot at me, but some weird instinct made me destroy it. The way the children reacted sticks in my mind. Though I’m not proud of shooting a machine gun at a living human being, whoever I shot at did just try to kill me. I’ve worked long and hard on that guilt and the reason I tried to kill someone else. It’s not something neither the shooter nor I should feel guilty about. We were in a war doing what warriors do: attempting to kill one another.

**Part I: Squirrels, Insurgents, and Poverty**

West Virginia’s motto, “Wild and Wonderful,” is difficult to explain with words alone. From my boyhood house, I could look up and see nothing but green mountains shooting out in every direction. The vegetation has an unruly look as it slithers across the power lines and attempts to encroach on the highways that pass through the hollers. The katydids make an eerie call from the woods, like a dissonant orchestra from a 1950s outer space film. The forest permeates everything in life in West Virginia — even the golden domed Statehouse has lush forests within view. From an early age, I was taught that the land can keep you alive if you need it to and as early as I could walk, I was practicing firing a gun for the big hunt.
In the humid summer, my Dad took me to a spot in the woods where he could teach me to shoot a shotgun. Up until that point, I’d only shot a small rifle at paper targets near the house. Dad was worried I couldn’t withstand the recoil of a shotgun. My grandfather, Paw teased me harshly when he found out I’d been knocked to the ground by a twelve-gauge shotgun. I loved Paw and desperately wanted him to respect me. This time at the spot in the woods, over the din of a katydid call, I was able to stand up straight while shooting the large bore shotgun. Ecstatic, I couldn’t wait to tell Paw that I could shoot a shotgun now.

“Paw! I can shoot a shotgun now!”

“Good, let me know when you actually get something when hunting,” Paw replied wryly. I was slightly hurt that he wasn’t excited at my newfound skills but figured he’d really appreciate me once I killed an animal while hunting. Dad had stopped taking me hunting when I was eight because I had complained about getting up so early and scared off a deer. Now that I was ten, I was determined to show that I too could hunt like the adults.

Dad took me on the same path he’d taken me before and glanced back at me every so often to make sure I was paying attention. This time, I was determined not to let Dad take me back home and crept along like him as quietly and attentively as possible. The orange vest I was wearing chaffed my neck, but I didn’t utter a word. It took nearly three hours to arrive at the spot we took up. I was completely exhausted but made a point not to look like it bothered me. We sat in the same spot for five hours before squirrels began to gather in a tree in front of us. Dad had been making a squirrel call with his teeth every 30 minutes or so, and they had begun to squawk back at us now.

I was trembling with excitement. Finally, I’d get a chance to show that I could hunt. The squirrels were darting back and forth on the tree. It was tough to see where they were going and
they would disappear from sight as quickly as they appeared. Dad silently nodded his head to give me the sign to go ahead and take a shot. I raised the shot gun to my shoulder, placed the bead on a split in the tree where the squirrels were sprinting in and out of. The second I saw a squirrel pop his body over the bead on my shot gun, I squeezed the trigger and felt the recoil kick me in the shoulder like a baseball bat. I held onto the gun tightly and did my best to appear as though it didn’t affect me.

Two squirrels tumbled out of the tree to the ground. I was so excited I looked at Dad and shouted, “I got two!”

“Shut up!”

Dad’s eyes had gone from watchful to fiery anger. Hunting was a silent, somber affair, not a drunken barn dance, as Dad liked to say. I stayed quiet and followed Dad to the base of the tree to retrieve my squirrels. Dad found the first, a bright red squirrel with big fat hind legs. Maw Maw would be proud of this one. The other was a skinny gray squirrel, not much for cooking, but bragging rights for eternity. Dad demonstrated how to pin the squirrel on my squirrel pin, or what looks like a giant safety pin attached to my belt. We walked down the mountain, with the two squirrels dangling from my hip. I felt like the coolest woodsman in West Virginia.

I couldn’t wait to tell Paw I’d killed not one but two squirrels! There was no way he could not be excited for me, or at least praise me.

“Paw! I killed two squirrels with one shot!”

“Oh, bullshit.”

“I swear! didn’t I Dad?”

“He sure did, Dad. Quite the ole crack shot we got here.”

“Well I’ll be damned!” A grin stretched across Paw’s wrinkled face. Paw reached out to
hug me, but it wasn’t until Paw began to brag about me to his friends that I was happy. One day later, Paw took me to meet a fellow war veteran friend of his. On the way to meeting him, he told me all sorts of stories about him

“In the war, this crazy son of a bitch flew a plane with no engine straight into the krauts.”
“He probably killed a stack of Nazis as high as you stand!”

It was as if we were going to meet some sort of mafia boss, Paw told me not talk until he told me to and not to mention the war to him. I dutifully obeyed.

“Jim, I want you to meet my grandson, He killed two squirrels with one shot the other day.”

“What? Are you serious? That’s a feat right there!”

I was finally a part of the old man’s club, if only they could see me now.

***

But, even with all the boredom and weirdness of West Virginia, it still doesn’t really explain why someone would put themselves through the torture of the Army. But I recall almost the exact moment the idea popped into my head. In my Maw Maw’s living room at thirteen years old; Dad had rented a VHS tape of *Saving Private Ryan*. Before he popped in the movie, we talked about Paw. Dad talked about how Paw was a soldier and did all sorts of heroic things. Dad’s admiration of Paw and the stories he told about him concocted a mystique around what he’d done. None of it meant anything material to me, but simply that he was a respected hero because of the war.

Paw was a gruff World War II veteran who’d served as an artillery forward observer. He’d received a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star for dropping artillery on a battalion of Nazis having a volleyball party. Even now, nothing makes me smile more than my Paw ruining a big Nazi party with exploding steel from the sky. However, Paw was not a very nice man. He was
often sarcastic and cruel to nearly anyone around him, but he did work harder than anyone I’d ever met. He worked long hours in the coal mines ever since World War II as a foreman and earned enough to purchase a nice house in Madison, West Virginia. As mean as Paw could be, I respected him and loved him because he was my Paw. Anyone who knew I was his grandson would say “Your grandpa is a hero, and he’s a damn good worker.” But anytime I asked Paw about the war, he’d just say, “Don’t you worry about the war. It ain’t no damn good anyhow.”

My few memories of Paw are traumatic to say the least. He once visited Dad to help with the large garden my dad kept throughout my youth. I’d visited my Maw Maw during one of the hottest parts of the summer as she’d made red Jell-O for the kids in the holler. After hours of playing with crawdads and tadpoles, most of the kids—my sister, cousins and others—would disperse near sundown for their homes. Maw Maw had me go get some Jell-O and it was a delicious treat at the end of the day. Paw was sitting by himself near the shed with a lone bare lightbulb, a pack of cigarettes, and a bottle of Liquor next to him. I approached Paw the way I would any other time, and he asked me very directly, “Are you some kind of faggot?”

“Paw, what’s a faggot?”

“You think you’re a fucking girl?” All I remember is the pain and tears as he told me to go wipe the lipstick off my face and act like a man. I suppose the red Jell-O left on my lips made Paw angry. Or perhaps, in his drunken Post Traumatic Stress Disorder stupor, he’d thought I was one of his crass war buddies. Nonetheless, it hurts to this day thinking about my drunken Paw calling me a faggot, particularly when I learned the meaning of the word. Though I’ve learned to accept it more as I have dealt with my own, likely less intense PTSD that I suffer from after, by comparison, a much calmer war in Iraq, than what he experienced.
When Dad popped the movie into the VCR on top of Maw Maw’s big wooden TV set, I didn’t really know what to expect. But instantly, when one of the transport boats ramps fell onto Omaha beach, every soldier got a bullet in their head and falls dead. The death and carnage seem to never stop; for twenty straight minutes, blood and guts and war spilled across the screen. At ten minutes into this movie, I asked, “Is this all it is, just killing?” Dad just waved his hand at me to be quiet and to continue watching. It was in this very moment it dawned on me, what Paw had really taken part in during World War II.

After the movie was over I reflected on the journey my Paw made from Normandy beaches to Berlin, Germany. He joined the Army to get away from depression era West Virginia in the thirties. He survived the Battle of the Bulge and I began to understand why everyone revered Paw so much, despite me determining that he was just a grouch before the movie. The bloodshed of the movie finally clicked for me and I thought I knew what the Army was for then. People join the Army to get away from boredom, have adventures, and become heroes by killing Nazis. Even if you didn’t make it home, someone would make movies about you and you’d be admired for all time. Of course that’s not how it goes in reality, but at thirteen, I thought I figured out the world. I hadn’t made the connections of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder nor any of his other behavior related to the war. I just thought he was an impossibly tough old man.

*Saving Private Ryan* ends with an elderly gentlemen visiting the grave of his buddy, with a singular tear on his cheek; happy and jovial family members jumping all around him while the veteran quietly reflects on saving the world. We never see the endless nightmares, nor the pain someone feels in their hearts from having murdered or participated in fight to the death with other human beings. There is no movie as popular as *Saving Private Ryan* that has a conclusion
scene with a veteran crying, grasping a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a .45 in the other or
telling his Grandson he is a faggot. That movie simply is not entertaining.

Paw, my grandfather, was aging well for the most part, but he liked to have a little bit too
much whisky or beer sometimes. Sometimes he’d say something weird in front of young
children who had never been to war, but all in all, he was a kind man. He had a stroke and his
mood blackened for the rest of his life. Though the stroke took it out of him, he’d been so
independent for so long, that he’d forgotten what it was like to be dependent on anything. Paw
lost the use of his body and he became so angry at his dependency on younger people that he
would both let us know how angry he was and would take it out on grandchildren.

Paw sat in his chair, with half of his body useless, and seethed with anger. He’d stormed
the beaches of Normandy, travelled the world. He’d conquered whatever he set out to conquer
and returned home to West Virginia. But, now, half his body no longer worked. He couldn’t pour
himself a glass of whiskey, couldn’t venture to the nearby stores for a pack of cigarettes when
having drinks with pals on his porch. He was entirely useless in his view. He would often try to
manipulate nurses into giving him a Cyanide pill, which he’d likely heard about while he was in
World War II, when the leaders of the Third Reich killed themselves \_en masse\_ with the drug.

Paw was also an avid hunter at one time. He was a traveler, so he kept a small caliber
pistol in his pocket and would sit on the commode at rest stops with his pistol at the ready if
someone were to barge in on him. As an older man and fellow combat veteran, I now know that
this was a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Either way, it was part of his character –
a tough old man who wanted to see the world that he’d fought for, and who had watched his
friends die on European battlefields.
Paw sat in his recliner, shortly before dawn, like he’d done many times during the war while waiting on his men, or for formation. He knew it was time. Paw hadn’t put much thought towards killing himself, but he found his old Saturday night special after his children had searched the house for guns and drugs that might be used to for suicide. He loaded his pistol that he used for protection after long nights on the road. He struggled on a cane towards the kitchen to pour himself a glass of whiskey. Like he’d done so many times before. The smoky taste of whisky that had such joyous connotation prior to this moment tasted like a flavorless burn. He ate his meal, a biscuit filled with eggs, cheese, and ham, put the barrel on his temple and took a step off the ledge, into oblivion, into eternity.

Yet, I know exactly the moment I fell in love with joining the army, it was right after Thanksgiving in 2005. It was in the popcorn fumes wafting through the aisles of Target. The same Target you might go to in San Francisco is the same one we have in West Virginia. I had a manager, named Kevin, whose distinctive, slightly effeminate Southern accent, would send cringes down every worker’s spine when he spoke through our Walkie Talkies. Kevin never spoke to you about something important, simply where things needed to be stocked.

“Dennis, I know I told you to take your break an hour after you got here, why are you not on break?” He whined at me.

He’d talk to everyone on the store wide Walkie Talkies. Fellow workers would look across the aisle with knowing contempt for Kevin’s management style. Most of the workers would try hard to not go on break the first hour after clocking in, as it was misery working seven straight hours without a break. But someone on the shift had to take break first, and it was hell
when you had to be the first one or the last one to do so. I suppose Kevin wasn’t an inherently bad person, but Target brought out the worst in him.

A year before I joined the Army, Kevin brought me into the stockroom by myself to tell me about something that I was going to absolutely love. Since Kevin never took more than a second to know anything about me, I knew it would not be as awesome as Kevin was describing. That didn’t stop his jabbering on the way to the surprise that awaited my seven-hour shift. After passing through the plastic curtains, walking through aisles of brown stock boxes and red scaffolding, we arrived at four pallets filled with small 4x6 inch cubes covered in plastic wrap, brown paper, and a plastic box with a red Christmas candle inside. It was Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, and Kevin said at me with pure arrogance in his tone and said “You see, I knew you’d love it. I need you to unwrap every single one of these boxes before the end of your shift. Don’t have too much fun! And make sure they go on the shelves just like I asked.”

Without waiting for me to even say okay, he turned and walked out of the stock room as quickly as he could. I began the impossible task by myself, under buzzing neon lights and the occasional stock crew member returning for another load of plastic garbage to put on shelves for the eager black Friday shoppers. At the time, West Virginia labor laws only forced companies to pay overtime when an employee exceeded eighty hours in a two week pay period. So Target would often have me working fifty hours the first week in the pay period and twenty-five hours the next to avoid paying us overtime and benefits.

After working my way through a quarter of one pallet, my only friend on the crew walked in, Josh, a big, tattooed bearded guy.

“Kevin got you doing this bullshit today?”

“Yep.”
“Yea, he got me with it yesterday, walked all the way back talking about how much I would love this job.”

“What an asshole.” I said, unwrapping yet another Christmas candle.

Josh pulled up a crate next to me, dutifully grabbing his share and began shucking his candles like ears of corn. We started cracking jokes, attempting to enjoy ourselves despite the mind numbing labor of retail. We’d repeat old bits we heard comedians say on TV, talk about the war, politics, and anything to keep our minds off the task at hand when suddenly, a piercing yell came from down the hall way

“Joshua Cobb!” Kevin shrieked as if he were Josh’s mother

“Did I tell you to come back here and help Dennis? I know daggone well there are some end pieces that need fixed, are you telling me all that work is done.”

“No, Kevin, I’ll get right on it.”

Josh rolled his eyes at me as he stood up to attend to whatever meaningless task Kevin assigned him. I was grateful for the company while it lasted.

After working endlessly at this pile of Chinese plastic junk, my minute lunch break began. I opted for a cigarette and an energy drink on the bench outside the store, since meals were tough to come by at work. Kevin was also on his break outside, having a cigarette as well.

“So what are you going to do Dennis?” he said.

“About what Kevin?” I said in between drags

“Don’t you have any ambition or dreams?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking about joining the Army.”

Kevin looked at me for a few seconds and burst out with laughter. Not a simply chuckle, but laughter intended to hurt someone’s feelings.
“You ain’t joining no Army, you’ll fail out of basic training and be beggin’ for your mommy within a week”

“Ok Kevin, you’ll see.” I said.

“I know we’ll see, when you come crawling back for a job at Target again,” He said.

I didn’t show the murderous anger welling up in my veins after his disrespect, because it would have resulted in a jail sentence. Yet, Kevin walked away in his arrogance, while flipping his cigarette into the gutter.

“Don’t worry Target will always have a place for you. Even if it’s the cleaning crew.”

Three months later, it was time for me to quit Target’s stock team and ship off to infantry basic training. Kevin, had yet to give me a yearly performance review, not that I was particularly concerned about it. As I clocked out for the final time, he told me I had to do a final evaluation. Sure Kevin I thought, though I was shipping off to basic training in a few days, a final evaluation wouldn’t hurt.

“So, you see, I know you only make 5.50 an hour, but, I don’t see you out there on the floor hustling. At Target, we need more bang for our buck.”

“Kevin, I’m leaving today, you aren’t getting anything more for your buck. Furthermore, you don’t pay me, Target does.”

“Well, you need to hear this, you need to work harder, $5.50 an hour is nothing to sneeze at. Everywhere else in this town pays $5.15”

I let this moment stew for just long enough to fuel my motivation through infantry basic training three months later. Every time I felt like falling out of a ruck march or run, or giving up in any way, I remembered Kevin, telling me I couldn’t do it. Every time there was something painful to go through, I distinctly heard Kevin’s voice asking for more “bang for his buck” on
less than six dollars an hour. I have no idea what dead end job Kevin is working at today, but I guarantee it’s not writing a memoir at a New England college.

When I signed on the Army’s dotted line, the mystique Spielberg portrayed in that movie permeated every single part of the image I had of my future life. There are heroic medal citations on the walls of the barracks, Drill Sergeants tell stories of heroes from the past, some of their own friends, or more famous ones like Sergeant Audie Murphy or Sergeant York. We sang cadences like “Remember World War II, where our grandpas died They gave their lives for you and I.” My chest always swelled with pride at the time when hearing those words and singing them on the way from training. People unquestionably respect these ghosts and call them heroes. But you never hear one of those actual heroes say they are, nor do you hear what is going on inside of their heads.

When I arrived at Basic Training, I was given a quick overview of the training that I was to attend during the following fourteen weeks of Infantry Basic Training. One part of the training schedule near the end called the “Battle March and Shoot.” It’s an exercise without any standardization or specific guidelines, so the Drill Sergeants make it up on their own. That is not an inherently bad thing, however, our Drill Sergeants were a hell of a lot crazier than many of the others. Our battle march and shoot standards to meet were a four mile run, in full gear including plates and helmet, followed by a live fire shoot at a target discrimination range. A target discrimination range is designed to mimic combat situations and force you to shoot at a variety of targets. The idea is that you learn to fight like you would fight in war, after running long distances in “full battle rattle,” as they say, with a pounding heart and sweat pouring into your eyes. The problem was, that my body did not match my motivation and my mind beat my body
that day. Furthermore, after living on a steady diet of garbage food and little exercise as a stock boy in Appalachia, I was not exactly cut out to be a GI Joe at that point of my career.

As the “Battle March and Shoot” date approached, it seemed as though it would suck like any other thing, but that it only would be another hurdle on my way to graduation from Basic Training. However, the Drill Sergeants called us around the night prior to the event to force hydrate us. It began with an order to my entire platoon to fill our two quart foldable canteens that were never used up until this point. We were ordered to chug, and it became almost like a silly game. I swilled the strange tasting barracks water as fast as I could and was proud of myself that I didn’t throw it up like the others. The drill sergeants woke us up in the middle of the night for round two of the same drill. Again before loading up into transportation we force hydrated once more before bussing to the training location.

That morning, we loaded into what recruits called the dreaded cattle cars, a towed trailer normally used for cows now, soldiers stuffed themselves into to get to the training areas. They were miserably hot and uncomfortable and we weren’t quite sure what was in store for us. We often would seem to drive around in circles while the soldiers in the cattle car attempted to stand up straight. We’d usually see some diabolical looking tower or obstacle course from the windows before we got to the training area. This time, it was just a normal range with the innocuous title for the event, Battle March and Shoot.

The Drill Sergeants barked in their typical tone

“You will put your ruck sacks down. You will fill your two quart canteens once again and chug them.”
I groaned as I was already terrified of being dehydrated and had been sipping on my canteen between forced chuggings all morning. We chugged yet another two-quart canteen and were briefed on the training event for the day.

“You will secure your rifle, your vest, and your ruck sack and form up on the side of the road. Upon the call to go, you and your entire platoon will begin a brisk jog to the turnaround point with your senior Drill Sergeant. Do you understand?”

“Yes Drill Sergeant!”

None of us ever really understood, but knew how to pretend that we did.

As we began to jog, in full battle rattle, the red Georgia dust kicked up all around us. The hot Fort Benning air was so thick you could cut it with a knife and fork. Immediately my chest started burning and some soldiers fell behind almost instantly. This motivated me to work even harder, because the humiliation of failing was worse than harming yourself. Our Senior Drill Sergeant was easily the meanest one in the company, and during the run at the turn around point, he simply stated “good job Privates, keep it up.” Which made me think we were finally doing something right after his near constant berating. In the distance, I could see the turnaround marker to get back. It didn’t feel like it took long at all to go two mile and it felt like we’d be done soon enough.

But as I ran on, I started to think the trees were moving onto the road. Half way through the final leg of the run, a fellow recruit ran over to prop me up and keep me going. I thought felt fine and told him “Get the fuck off me, I’m fine.” That early in my career I had not learned how to be that bitter about everything and was out of character for me to curse out a fellow recruit. I was starting to feel my friend actually picking me up and pushing me along. My lungs began to burn like fire and my legs felt like they were slicing through half dried cement. The lights began
to flicker slowly away. My pace slowed and I could no longer hear anyone as the I felt the ground getting closer. Then suddenly, I could see everything again, but in a totally different setting.

My eyes were slowly getting accustomed to what I saw, an IV, a bright light, two people in blue asking me questions. I could hear a siren overhead and realized I was in an ambulance. I managed to eke out the words.

“What did I do?”

“Heat stroke, soldier, Are you with me again?”

“I don’t know about that, what is this damn thing?”

The civilian paramedic’s had a blanket with ice gel flowing through it laying on top of me. Despite it filled with frozen gel, I felt like it was still blazing hot. I was also stark naked underneath the blanket as my uniform had been cut off. I was covered in icy sheets the Drill Sergeants threw on me underneath my ice blanket. It all felt so hot and uncomfortable, I just wanted to get it off me. My lungs felt like they were on fire and the blanket was driving me crazy.

“Can I take this thing off, it’s too hot?”

“Soldier, that thing is ice cold, you had an internal body temp of 107.8, just bear with me ok?”

I was blown away at that statement, as I’d heard it was impossible to above a temperature of 106 without dying.

Inside the emergency a room, a nurse’s face appeared before mine and saying, “You’re a big tough guy right? An infantryman no?” “Yes ma’am” I said proudly. “Good, you’re going to feel a pinch okay?” And without a second more she jammed a catheter into my urethra. I howled
in pain while the nurses tried to calm me down. I had no intention of hurting anyone, but good
god, at least let someone know when you are going to jam a sharp tube into your genitals. It
wasn’t long before I was asleep again, the doctors sedated me and I was able to get some rest.

Back at my Basic Training company, my Drill Sergeants had already started the paper
work to send me home for thirty days for medical recovery. I begged them not to send me home
and just let me graduate, but the doctors determined that I was now more susceptible to further
heat injuries until I could be observed by doctors more closely. So the Army ordered me home
for thirty straight days and I returned right back where I came from, Charleston, West Virginia.

I was terrified that something would happen and the Army would not let me return. So
many folks had said that I’d get kicked out of basic training, so when I came home for those
thirty days I only told my Mom and Dad. I had already seen other soldiers get sent away on leave
like this only to be booted out of the Army a few days after they returned. I trained every day
while I was home to make sure I’d be ready once I returned.

Thirty days later after many videogames and home cooked meals by Maw Maw, I was
back at Fort Hood Texas in Army uniform. I stood at Parade Rest in front of the Commander’s
office awaiting to hear my fate.

“Private White! You will be reassigned to the Physical Training and Rehabilitation
Program! Do you understand?

“Yes sir!”

I shouted not knowing really what any of it meant, but the Drill Sergeant assigned to take
care of me that day had me pack all my stuff into a truck. He then drove me to a barracks that
looked more like a warehouse. He walked me to the most senior Drill Sergeant he could find and
handed him a packet of orders. Without saying a word to each other or to me, I was then led to
another door and handed off to another Drill Sergeant. That drill sergeant led me to a bunk and said abruptly

“There’s your rack, keep it clean.”

He then walked away. I was not even sure what to do, but it felt like prison rather than Basic Training. People milled about near the windows and were sitting in the floor reading magazines. Some other groups of soldiers scrubbed the floor with tooth brushes. A fellow broken soldier approached me and handed me a rag.

“You’re gonna clean the hall way”

“With this rag?”

Without hesitation a Drill Sergeant appeared out of nowhere and screamed so loud into my ear that I thought he was going to pop my ear drum.

“You do what your leader tells you to, roger?” he shouted as spittle hit the side of my head.

I took the rag and just ran to the bathroom without saying anything. I’d been shuffled around the Army and tossed in among people I’d never met and was now expected to perform. I suppose in retrospect, that was excellent training for what my career was to become. In the bathroom, I grabbed a spray bottle and began pointlessly wiping at an already clean corner. At this point in my career, I knew it was most important to appear to be doing something, rather than actually doing anything at all. Tears started to well up in my eyes as I scrubbed, I had no idea what was going to happen to me. No one would tell me what was going to happen or what to expect, but I was in limbo.

Six weeks later, after spending some of the most boring time locked away in a warehouse for broken soldiers, my Drill Sergeant poked his head out of his office.
“White? You wanna go back to training? Come in here real quick.”

I ran as fast as I could to the Drill Sergeant and he let me know that I could return to training but that I’d have to go back to the third week of training. If I did not take that slot, I might get stuck in physical training unit for even longer. So I took him up on the offer, signed the paperwork, and was back to regular basic training the next week. I can’t say I fought hard while I was in physical rehabilitation, but I fought hard to maintain my mental health throughout the monotony. The Army has a strange way of solving problems, and I was learning that issues often are not effectively supervised unless the task at hand has some sort of glory for the officer in charge.

But, eleven weeks later, I was marching in dress green uniform, with a big blue cord, representing the infantry on my shoulder. My Mom and Dad pinned my crossed rifles onto my uniform. My parents left shortly after graduation and I was sent to Airborne school on the other side of Fort Benning. Three weeks later I passed airborne training, expected to be assigned to the storied 82nd Infantry Division. That’s the unit with the paratroopers that everyone hears about, however, I was inexplicably assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division. The Army does not look at what you are qualified to do, they look at what they call the “needs of the Army” to determine where you will be assigned.

Once I graduated from Airborne school I was elated. I’d suffered through the worst Basic Training could offer and I’d jumped out of planes to the Army’s standard. Now all I had to do was get orders to my new unit. All the other soldiers in Airborne school had been assigned units and I was still waiting. After a few hours, the instructor finally popped his head out of his office and hollered.

“White! Fort Hood, Texas. Pack your bags you’re going to Iraq!”
“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

I was secretly excited for this to happen to me. I thought that I’d get to war and get it over with early in my career and then I would go onto be the Sergeant Major of the Army or whatever nonsense I was thinking about my career at that point. Most soldiers think it will be a twenty-year career when they get out of Basic Training. Usually, it does not take long to correct that way of thinking, for me, it took a little longer than most. But I eventually came to despise every aspect of the Army in every way.

My father had given me his old ‘94 Jeep Cherokee. It was barely running and had no air conditioning. But it held my guitar amp and clothes, so I hopped into my Jeep and drove to Fort Hood Texas. Hood has a special cachet in the Army among soldiers. The gate guards announce to you as you enter “Welcome to the Great Place!” 1st Cavalry patches are pasted on anything and everything across the base. The heat is unbearable and there is nothing around for eighty miles in any direction. It was the bane of my existence for at least a decade. Even after leaving active duty, I found myself back on Fort Hood for annual training exercises yet again. I should say that assignment to Fort Hood changed my life. It may have seemed boring when I was a young broke private, but as I matured, I realized the potential of living somewhere like Texas. Jobs were everywhere and training for jobs that were offered was available everywhere. I would even see on the highway billboards that would call for veterans to work in oil fields, the rail roads, and other heavy industry. I knew that if I lived in Texas, I’d never go hungry or be as desperate as I was in West Virginia. In Texas, I gained the required skills to attend a place like Wesleyan, So for that, I am eternally grateful to the State of Texas.
Since I arrived at Fort Hood, in late 2006 after leaving Target and Basic Training after, my unit at Hood already left, I was in the rear detachment—the unit either replacements go to for processing into Iraq or ne’er-do-wells go to for being processed out of the Army. No one tells you that in brochure for the Army, but there is usually a reason for being left behind, and it’s usually not good. Nevertheless, I was motivated and high on Hollywood propaganda.

I walked into the main unit the first day I was to report and handed my paperwork to Staff Sergeant Stafford. He had a hearing aid and walked with a limp. Stafford looked at my paperwork and said, “Infantry, good. Infantry made me who I am.” He handed me my papers back with his scarred hands and hearing aid for far too young an ear. He looked me in the eye for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“Why the hell is your uniform wrinkled? Aren’t your proud of being infantry?”

“Uh, Sergeant, the Drill Sergeants said we didn’t need to iron our uniforms since they are the new kind.”

“Well I’m not a fucking Drill Sergeant, am I?”

I stayed silent because I knew what was about to happen.

“Pick your duffel bag up and hold it over your head.”

Son of a bitch, here we go again – *I thought*. I picked it up the heavy bag of gear over my head while he paced around me looking me up and down.

“You are real piece of shit, White,” he said to me like a psychopath about to murder someone.

“Why the hell are you in my Army in this piece of shit uniform? Do you know how many grenades have went off near me for you to walk in here disgracing the entire US Army with this God-awful uniform?” We spent the next seven hours playing some variation on this game,
Stafford pacing around me with sweat pouring off my nose. Hazing, that’s what the Army calls it. Sadistic pleasure of people on a power trip is its real name, something I’d deal with nearly the entire ten years I was in the army. I did my best to prevent hazing when I became an NCO myself, but it’s a culture that permeates the entire Army.

Five weeks later, after suffering through the administrative process of going to Iraq, I was sitting in the base gym on the bleachers, waiting to board our flight to Kuwait. I was already shaking and nervous. I thought, *Well this is it, last time I’ll see the US*, when SSG Stafford sat down next to me.

“What’s the problem? You act scared.”

“I am.”

I could see his hearing aids that had to be implanted in his head after withstanding three IED attacks and an insurgent grenade that exploded near his head in 2004.

“Combat is boring, but it made me who I am today,” he said to me.

Feeling not particularly reassured, I thanked him for his advice and joined some friends for a cigarette outside. I was going to Iraq, and luckily, I’d never see Stafford again. That is until he was picked up by my friend for going AWOL for three years. Things had strange ways of working out in the army.

Landing in Kuwait, in a civilian passenger plane, with your rifle sitting between your legs, is a bizarre experience. Flying over Kuwait City, you see the pulsing heart of the country, but outside of the city limits is pitch black except for the oil refineries’ glow over the horizon. When the door of the plane opens, the intense heat of the desert fills the plane like an accidently opened oven. A large former military—now civilian—contractor stepped onto the plan and began the percussive military style welcome.
“Welcome to Ali al-Salem airbase! You will exit the plan in an orderly fashion to my right—your left! You will not wear headgear on the flight line!” The contractor continued barking his welcome speech while we disembarked the plane.

He was shouting at no one in particular. We filed into a large building and sat down while another military contractor let us know what the tasks for the next two weeks.

Walking outside, the desert is so vast and desolate it feels like you are on another planet. I didn’t mind staying in Kuwait, but I did want to be part of a unit. The Army had put me in limbo for nearly eight months getting to Kuwait, I was ready to no longer be an excess soldier floating around the Army from squad to squad. Jetlagged, I walked to the far side of the base where a 24-hour café called Green Bean was located. Green Bean is probably the official symbol of being soft in the army, but it’s the only thing to do at 0330 in Kuwait on a Tuesday.

Green Bean was inside of a shipping container and staffed by what the Army calls “third country nationals.” They are actually Bangladeshi workers that would otherwise survive on a dollar a day. Halliburton figured out how to use them as contractors, pay them four dollars an hour and serve coffee to soldiers on base. They barely spoke English and usually get your order wrong, so ordering tea or black coffee was wise if you were in a hurry.

After my late-night tea and cookies by myself, I began walking back towards my tent. The sand slowly began kicking up everywhere, then it picks up quickly and suddenly I’m being sandblasted by God in Kuwait. There is nothing you can do to see: goggles, eye protection, nothing can help you see. The sandstorm, the most disorienting thing imaginable, and I struggled to continue walking back to the tent. The sandstorm was the first taste I had of the Middle East, and the wild; disorienting, stinging sand is essentially the same thing the US government is doing
in Iraq. Grasping at nothing, in the dark, entering accommodations that aren’t yours on the way to a pointless finish line.

My first impressions landing in Iraq at Camp Taji was that it was drab, gray and brown.

Taxi cab drivers mill about near a dusty plot of a road, waiting on customers to exit the gate. A disheveled white sign read "Camp Taji, Gunners Gate." A convoy of brown Humvees with machine guns roar into the gate, stopping by African private security guards, dressed totally in brown. The dust roils around as if in a constant tornado of sand. The guards exchange information with the Humvees and the soldiers exit the vehicles. One by one, the filthy soldiers, with gray uniforms that have turned brown, clear their weapons into a red, but coated in brown moon dust, barrels. Sergeants bark at various soldiers "Let's go " as the tired, gray and brown soldier hobbles to the clearing barrels. Along the road is gray gravel, but it was coated in brown dust. Everything has a thin coating of brown dust, even the concrete walls have brown dust on them. On both sides of the road, cages lined with brown canvas, filled with brown dirt surround the soldiers in its halfhearted attempt to protect them from incoming rounds. A soldier, drenched in sweat, removes his gray brownish helmet and it drops to the ground, a cloud of brown smoky dust envelop the helmet.

After the gate, the cramped serpentine entrance opens up into a gray and brown sea of military equipment, brown trailers, and gray concrete walls. Along the wall, every few hundred meters, a gray tower stands over us like stalactites in a cave tour. Roads appear to have formed out of necessity rather than any sort of planning. Near a fork in the road, there is a medium size fig tree, with twisted, painful branches. It seems to have some green on it, but once approached, it's obvious the brown dust has taken it over as well. As trucks and tanks rumble near, the tree trembles, shaking the brown dust from its leaves and unripe figs hit the ground, like dropping a
bag of marbles onto the ground. The tanks and trucks rumble by mindlessly crushing the figs that roll into the road. For a brief moment, the juice of the figs runs in a colorful mess, until the brown swiftly returns the natural, Camp Taji color of Brown.

Along the road to the towards the fuel point, there are signs, coated in fine brown powder, with the slogans of our unit’s senior military leaders. One sign has a smiling soldier with a thumbs up, with the quote next to it “We need leadership, not likership.” Along the road, more of these signs pop up with nonsensical phrases like “Less hooah, more dooah” or ironically “Safety First!” Near the path by these signs is a 4-foot ditch filled with brown water. Tanks with giant holes in them, or self-propelled artillery with no tracks from Saddam’s Army line the road. The equipment is splayed about in a ramshackle manner, like a dead body that collapses in no apparent way. Written in bad spray paint on the tanks are messages, some were silly such as "coming soon, amp Taji Walmart." Some were romantic like “I love you Tanya ray.”

Near the fuel point, where we always went to fuel our vehicles after mission, brown hedgerows of dirt surround the fuel bladders. From above, the fuel bladders lay out in carefully planned rows. Behind them, Howitzer cannons protrude like excited elephant trunks towards the sky. Men in orange suits and orange space masks approach vehicles with clip boards and fuel hoses. The men sign things and exchange other things while they fuel up the trucks. The thick smell of JP8 or military diesel fuel fills the air. The fumes disperse the light like steam after hot water splashes into an oily pan. The men in orange suits mill about, shouting in a language few understand. A loud, concussive burst sucks all the air out of everyone's ears like a vacuum. Brown dust roils several inches away from everything, before settling in again like a dog startled from its sleep. Just a few hundred feet away, the elephant trunks of the artillery are belching fire
one by one. Each time the cannons roar to life, the air is sucked out, and replaced with pain in the ear.

Further inward into the camp, is a row of dusty white trailers, laid out in perfectly symmetrical patterns. Pallets line the walkways between them, beside the pallets lay cages filled with dirt, acting as barriers to protect those inside. Inside the trailer, is a bed, with a red blanket. Slumped next to the bed is a bullet proof vest, covered in brown dust and white salt from sweat. It hugs a rifle, also covered in brown dust. The room is split by lockers with a bed on each side. There is a small window with Venetian blinds that allow in stripes of white light. The room isn't silent, it's filled with the sounds of snoring. Exhausted, sweaty, soldiers lay in a state of unfinished undress. A boot still on, a top half off, like the aftermath of a boozy frat party. Yet, there is no booze, and there is no party, just sweat, exhaustion, and the brown haze of an army at war.

***

I didn’t always pee in empty water bottles, but I didn’t always spend half my week in a grey concrete tubes. The exact week I arrived in Iraq I was placed on guard duty. Guard duty, the ubiquitous duty every service member everywhere has done once or twice. Even the Coast Guard has to do it, even if they get air conditioning and catered meals. For us, we were surrounded by a hostile population with armed radicals intent on killing us. So, guard duty was not only necessary, but a matter of life and death. Each time I lay my head down, I was entrusting whoever was in those towers to prevent young Iraqi patriots from sawing my head off on Al-Jazeera, the news network that would broadcast insurgent propaganda in those days. I took the duty quite seriously, but considering the sheer amount of time I spent in the towers, they weren’t always the squeaky clean image of patriotism.
The first time I pulled guard duty in combat zone, it was the middle of the night on a small compound about one hundred fifty meters from corner to corner, near a town called Sa’ab Al-Abor, near the Saddam Canal. In the center of the compound was a small mud brick house with a leader’s room and a soldier’s room. The mud brick building was surrounded with thick Iraqi mud that caked onto your boots like concrete. The perimeter was lined with Hesco barriers—a system of attached metal baskets lined with canvas and filled with dirt—and a battle position at each corner with a Bradley Fighting Vehicle carefully scanning the horizon. One corner that could see the road had a Bradley with its 25mm cannon and hi-tech night vision to watch as far as the horizon on the road. The other points were manned by gun trucks with either MK19 grenade launchers or M2 .50 caliber machine guns. Each shift was supervised by a Sergeant, known as the Sergeant of the Guard, to ensure troops were awake and command was informed.

Walking through thick mud on the way to my guard post for the first time was exciting. Here was I was, in Iraq, doing real soldier work that most soldiers at the time wished they were doing. I pulled down my night vision goggles and began scanning my sector of fire in irregular patterns the way I had been trained. In the distance, I could see sporadic tracers shooting into the air far into the distance beyond my weapons reach. I reported this to platoon HQ only to be told it was common and not to worry. Near my position, there was nothing but dirt and shrubs. One person would have to sprint 750 meters to get from the next covered position to the wall of the compound making it a nearly impossible military target for insurgents.

In the distance, I could make out tracer fire going from the round to something in the sky. I do not know if it was celebratory fire from Iraqi civilians or Iraqi militia men taking aim at an American helicopter. All through the night I could watch through night vision devices and see
random fire, drones, helicopters, and airplanes. The night sky in Iraq was always crowded, while the US military attempted to dominate and track insurgents in the blackness of the Iraqi night. It was a strange sight, watching distant bullets and rocket fire bursting from the ground, while not making so much as a crack at my distant position.

During this period of time in Iraq, 2007, the IED was the deadliest weapon on the battlefield used by the enemy. It was nearly impossible to spot them and had most of us worried every time we left Camp Taji or COP X-ray. Guard duty, despite all its tedium and aggravation, would soon prove to be far better than patrolling the roads waiting on an improvised explosive device to send you to oblivion.

The improvised explosive device was the most feared enemy weapon in Iraq during most of the war. The Iraqi insurgents adapted well to our tactics with rudimentary weapons. When I arrived in Iraq in early 2007, we were losing north of ten soldiers per day to IED blasts. Before getting to Iraq, I was serving in the rear detachment of the 1st Cavalry Division; some of the soldiers that were on their way out of the service in the company formation were wounded by IEDs. In basic training, during the ceremony after the final exercise before graduation, we were given our crossed rifles and welcomed into the infantry. The drill sergeants implored us to look at one another and remember the faces, because many of us might not be coming home once we went to Iraq or Afghanistan. IEDs proved this to be true and killed many of us indiscriminately.

Wars of the past had their own hellish weapons with which they must face the abyss. For Vietnam, many veterans claim the booby traps, the land mines, or infantry ambushes were the most terrifying things to face on the battlefield. But for us, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the insurgents could not face us tactically on the battlefield. We had 25mm cannons, brand new rifles, machine guns, grenades, grenade launchers, sniper rifles, MK19 grenade launcher machine
guns, 50. caliber machine guns, and radios that could call in helicopters or jets. Simply by depressing a button on the hand receiver, repeating a few well-rehearsed lines, 155mm artillery shells will rain upon the enemy with lethal ferocity unmatched in the modern world. The sheer precision of the carnage that the U.S. military can unleash on its enemies at a moment’s notice is something to fear. However, all of these weapons can be overcome with ingenuity, and that is indeed what the Sunni and Shia insurgents did in our battlespace.

In our area of operations, the IED caused every man in the patrol to be on constant watch. Nothing was too small to be unchecked. A goat carcass on the side of the road, a cardboard box on a highway medium, or simply an elderly man on the way to the market were subjects of interest for U.S. soldiers. The insurgents created such fear of the IED that we had to meticulously comb every single inch of battlefield to make progress into population centers each day. Not only were IEDs effective in stirring fear, but there were two different types of IEDs that bore two different types of death.

In 2007, I learned that Iraq’s religious sectarian fault lines stretched from one end of the country to the other; Kurdish on one side, Sunnis on another, Shiite on yet another side of the battlefield. Sunni militias, often, but not always, were the friends of Saddam Hussein and livid that foreigners had invaded their country and given power to the Shi’a. The Shi’a militiamen that hung Saddam Hussein shouted religious insults at the former dictator as they released the trapdoor beneath his feet on his way to oblivion. The area that I patrolled with my fellow Americans was former Sunni Iraqi intelligence officers. They were sectarian, enjoyed alcohol in private, and abhorred the American presence in the neighborhood, but detested the Al-Qaeda presence even more.
I learned also the Shi’a, on the other hand, tended to live in the poorer districts of Iraq. Not that any particular district was wealthy, but Shi’a were clearly a marginalized population before the invasion. The Shi’a, as a majority of the population, were eager to exert their influence after the collapse of the Saddam regime. Regular folks that were simply on their way to work, mosque or the grocery store couldn’t have cared less about the ancient split between the religions, but the militias, the Americans, and the elites had other ideas.

Sunnis, after the collapse of the Saddam regime, consolidated in their tribal areas. Their leaders, often officers in Saddam’s army, stashed huge weapons caches all around the countryside. At first, the Sunnis simply wanted the foreign invasion out of their country. They created weapon smuggling networks throughout the country and in 2005, the country exploded with civil violence unseen in the country since WWI. Al-Qaeda fighters like al-Zarqawi seized the opportunity and developed effective guerilla tactics against US forces. They did not have the weapons we had, so they buried improvised explosive devices at night, sometimes lying dormant for months before igniting their deadly wrath on the foreign occupation troops. Further, al-Qaeda blew up one of the most important Sunni mosques, laying blame at the feet of Shi’a. The desperation of young men made for easy recruiting grounds to attack coalition troops.

The Sunni version of the IED was simple: bury up to 500 pounds or more of homemade explosives just beneath the surface of the road to blow up one American vehicle at a time. These devices were initiated by washing machine timers, copper wire, infrared garage door openers, or cell phone signals sent at a specific time to blow American soldiers to smithereens. To combat this, Americans created electronic system to jam cell phone signals. Rhino mounts, named for the way they looked like a rhino’s horn, held sparkplugs that set off the infrared sensors, or the inverted V formation. The inverted V formation was the reverse of the traditional infantry patrol
formation that was led by a sergeant to a formation that sent soldiers off the road of convoys to inspect for copper wiring and other telltale signs of imminent IED threats before the vehicle convoys could reach them.

The IED of both sides could be disguised as fresh concrete, a dead animal, or simply a misplaced piece of trash in the road. Once exploded, these gigantic bombs could flip an Abrams tank on its side, killing everyone inside. An unarmored Humvee stood no chance on a direct hit. Often times, a Humvee would kill five soldiers at once. No matter how thick the armor, an Iranian Explosive Formed Projectile (or EFP) would slice through the troop compartment like an X-Acto knife.

The way these weapons were used against us was simple. The triggerman would sit behind a mud wall, watching our antennas float in the wind like cat tails in a swamp until it hit his trigger line. He’d complete the electrical circuit with a car battery or two wires of the IED unleashing the destruction upon the occupying army. Then, our army would move heaven and earth to save the soldiers mangled in the massive explosions. It was nearly impossible to detect when an IED was in the road; often, we’d spend hours inspecting anything suspicious, only to have an unarmored Humvee blown 30 feet in the air with all the soldiers inside shredded like West Virginia coal in a strip-mine.

The Shi’a had an even more insidious weapon called the EFP or Explosive Formed Projectile IED. These IEDs were developed in the 19th Century to dig wells deep into the ground. For Sadr’s Shi’a militia, Jaish Al Mehdi (or JAM) were turned on their side and blown through all American vehicles in our arsenal. The explosive, shaped like a cone, would form into a molten ball of steel that would punch through American armor and spray molten steel throughout the troop compartment. If you were hit by one of these small explosives, you were
sure to have everyone in the truck’s name on a tombstone the next morning. The Iranians laughed with glee as our troops were mangled by these cheap yet effective weapons.

After three months in Iraq, on my way to do maintenance on my Humvee, I stopped by the cynically named “boneyard” to look at an EFP attack. There was a small hole on one side that looked like a large caliber round had entered the vehicle. On the other side, it looked like a giant shotgun had ripped through the entire vehicle. Inside the vehicle, nothing but charred plastic, burnt skin, and black soot remained.

In the same boneyard, the Sunni deep-buried IED spoke its terror—a Humvee, mangled by powerful explosives, remained. Often, the truck would leave only the chassis of the former vehicle with steel that appeared to be chewed up by a bear. The explosives would be so powerful that any human remains were blown out of the vehicle. For some reason, these explosives scared me less than the more cheaply made Iranian EFPs.

These two IED types may have terrified soldiers in during Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, it wasn’t the blast that scarred us most, but the constant vigilance that they required. Anything could be an IED: a box, a toy truck, a discarded cooking oil canister. We would search endlessly for these explosives yet still receive reports of soldiers all over Iraq being mangled by them. The Army’s typical response would be that the soldiers weren’t looking hard enough for the nearly transparent copper wiring. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously chastised a soldier for wanting the army he wished for but not the army he had. Yet, I never saw Secretary Rumsfeld’s wine and coffee stained teeth mount up into 1st Cavalry Division vehicles and patrol the dangerous roads of Iraq.
Three months after arriving at Camp Taji, Petraeus ordered all troops to occupy buildings closer to population centers and to move off the major camps, into what were called COPs, or combat outposts. We were tasked with finding a new dwelling for our hundred and forty soldiers to carry out Petraeus’ new operational concept. After inspecting a three potential sites for our first patrol base to occupy spaces out into the population centers, we encountered a massive IED. It was determined that this patrol was rather routine and didn’t need the heavy weaponry of the infantry fighting vehicle. Instead, we rolled outside the wire with three unarmored Humvees; some with 50. Cals and the smaller yet effective 240B machine guns. All the vehicles had the rhino mount, a black box that looked like a mailbox signal demonstrating mail was in the box. The boxes held sparkplugs that would run and set off heat sensors with the idea it would blow up in front of the troops rather than underneath.

Sergeant Lincoln, my team leader while I was in Iraq was an impossibly calm Texan from Sweetwater. He was the type of guy to play country songs, wear Wranglers, and goes hunting and fishing on the weekends. Sergeant Lincoln was the first leader I had in the Army and he treated me pretty well. It always blew my mind, that no matter what, Sergeant Lincoln would have the calmest attitude in the Army. Once in the middle of a fire fight, when you could hear soldiers screaming all manner of obscenities, Sergeant Lincoln calmly ask someone for a chew of snuff. He was that kind of guy, even though he too was worn thin by the war by the end of the deployment.

After snooping around the local wool factory and finding a handful of squatters inside, we left to return to Camp Taji. Immediately upon exiting the factory gates, a cacophony of twisted metal and flying rocks echoed over the banks of the Tigris. The sounds of twisted, crunching steel ripped through the air. All the soldiers in the convoy sat silent awaiting orders.
after the paralyzing sensation of contact with the enemy. I looked into my rearview mirror and watched the small pebbles rain down on the hood of the truck behind me. While gawking to the rear, pebbles began landing on the hood of my truck in front of me. My muscles tensed up so hard it felt like I might break my own bone.

I heard Sergeant Lincoln, asking over the radio if everyone is alright before hearing the word “dismount!” when I instinctively opened my door and pointed my rifle towards the Tigris. I looked behind me and saw the platoon sergeant’s truck empty out. One medic walked up to me and began slapping me on the helmet screaming “IE—Motherfucking—D’s, White!” I knew this was my first, but not last experience with these deadly battlefield surprises.

The rhino had worked or the triggerman had not estimated his windage properly and let the bomb off slightly before the troop compartment. Everyone in the truck survived without a physical scratch. “Help us hook the truck up, White” my sergeant ordered and we began hooking the two vehicles up. Humvees are designed for this type of attack and within a few minutes we were towing our twisted vehicle back to camp Taji. the medic and I shared a seat in our Humvee while we made fun of his crew’s stupid responses to the IED blast.

It was a terrifying ordeal but we were giddy with laughter that no one was hurt. The laughter of the troops is inexplicable. In particular, one young medic who still serves to this day, who’d already had several of his friends die in his own arms, took it all in stride, as if none of it really mattered, especially if you lived or died. I envied that attitude from fellow soldiers and did my best to emulate it. At least if I were to be stuck in situations like this, I may as well not be a quivering mess of emotion, and attempt to laugh off the macabre jaws of the death that just missed us by a foot or two.
Luckily, no one was hurt, but that didn’t stop us from returning the next day. Sergeant Rogers ordered me to dig in the same spot that the IED blast occurred at the scene of the explosion. Not one to accept defeat, I immediately grabbed a shovel from the Bradley and began digging directly where the blast went off. After about two minutes of furious digging, I raised my head and said to Sergeant Rogers, “Hey Sergeant, this seems kind of stupid.”

“It sure does, White. Stop what you’re doing,” he replied while he walked off toward the river bank with only a pistol on his side. Everyone on the patrol was flabbergasted that he would just walk away from his platoon in search of an insurgent a day after the blast. We followed him diligently to ensure his safety. We reached the banks of the Tigris when he stated, “Looks like there ain’t much here fellas.” No kidding Sergeant Rogers, no kidding.

A month earlier in Iraq, we had done nothing but patrol the local area. Despite the news saying we were losing more than ten soldiers a day, I’d personally lucked out and found the quiet area of Iraq. We’d gone out to search a huge field of palm trees near the Tigris river one day when we set up a small perimeter. We radioed back to amp Taji, our XO ordered our patrol leader, Sergeant Guab, to do something he clearly didn’t want to do.

Staff Sergeant Guab was one of the most amazing people I ever met in the U.S. Army. He was born in the Philippines and came to the United States as a teenager and joined the Army. He’d been serving for nearly two decades by the time I met him and had deployed to Iraq twice before the tour we were currently on. He was greatly respected by all in the platoon, despite some saying he had a few screws loose. Indeed, he did have a few screws loose, but he took care of us and always stuck up for us when officers tried to make us do stupid things. Sometimes, to
the detriment to his own career. Despite all that, he was the bravest soldier I ever met in the Army.

During this rare occasion in Iraq, the formal commander was on leave. In his absence, a First Lieutenant that occupied the position of Executive Officer of the company. In Army slang, the Executive Officer is simply known as XO. The XO is a critical member of the command team for any company or battalion. The XO is often angry at the amount of work they have to accomplish, and too inexperienced to handle senior NCOs like Guab, who often challenge their authority.

“XO wants us to do something else. We’re not fucking doing that. We’re resting here for two hours and returning.” Guab bellowed from the center of our perimeter. That sounded good to me, so I found a nice place to pull guard duty and sat down. Soldiers were bored and goofing off on the outskirts of the perimeter, SSG Guab snored loudly in center. Some soldiers were sticking grass into their helmets to mimic something from out of a movie. When Guab rose his nap, he said, “Ok, motherfuckers. Let’s go.” As we walked, we lost most of our discipline. This wasn’t like a movie, with cold blooded killers stalking the Viet Cong in the jungle. We returned to our vehicles on the main road, my boss, Sgt. Lincoln, looked at me and said, “Combat is boring, huh?”

**Crack. Zing;** The telltale sound of a bullet whizzing right by my head. I wasn’t sure exactly what had happened but for a split second, no one else did either.

“Was that a negligent discharge?” Lincoln asked me when a barrage of machine gun fire began ripping up the pavement all around us.

I’d managed to find some cover in a sewage canal next to me and grabbed the interpreter, who was frozen in fear, hauled him into the canal with me. The bullets were ripping into the
ground all around us. When I lifted my head up to see if I could find where it was coming from, a blazing red flash went by my head ten feet away. An RPG, or rocket propelled grenade, in moves a hell of a lot faster than they do in the movies. The trucks were slowly rolling away with me still in the ditch. I was separated from everyone else in my unit, and I screamed at the interpreter to get into the truck. I mustered the courage to run and catch up to the truck during the second the lull in the fire went down. The amount of courage it takes to run into suppression fire is something only someone about to die can do. It is by far the dumbest risk I’ve ever taken, but the possibility of being left behind was a fate even worse than death.\(^1\) Somehow, I clambered into the truck.

SSG Guab ran off on his own to where he felt the shooter was, in the courtyard of a random civilian. Once he gained entry to the courtyard, the rest of the squad had mistakenly thought he was in another courtyard. The next senior ranking NCO, then pulled the pin on his grenade, and chucked it over the mud wall of the courtyard he also believed some of the insurgents were hiding. However, it was no insurgent inside, but SSG Guab. Guab dove inside the house and was nicked on his leg by shrapnel from our own grenades. None of the insurgents that shot at us that day were ever found, and we returned to base unharmed, other than Guab’s friendly fire incident. Our medic hopped out of our truck and joined Guab in the Bradley where he patched Guab up nicely. Guab did not miss a patrol and was out with us the next week, thick bandages around his knees.

On the way back to the base, my hands were shaking like leaves. I felt sick. From my dismount seat in the back of the Humvee, I read the names of people killed in our unit that someone had written into the back of the head rest. One mile from the fire fight, kids were

\(^1\) https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/world/20cnd-iraq.html?_r=0
waving at us, playing soccer, asking for food. At the base, when everyone went to rest and eat, I never left the Humvee. My life hung in the balance that day and I lit a cigarette to try and get some peace for the day. Our Squadron commander popped up out of nowhere and comically jammed his mustache into the window of my Humvee. His Command Sergeant Major was on leave so he’d taken to inspecting the trucks himself.

“How do we smoke in military vehicles, soldier?”

New to the Army, I wasn’t even sure, but assumed the answer was no.

“Negative, Sir!”

“Have your entire chain of command come see me right now.”

In less than two hours in the combat part of the Army, I’d almost died in a sewage canal and returned safely to the company area on camp Taji, and then sunk my entire company of 140 men in trouble with the Squadron Commander. Not exactly Saving Private Ryan, and there damn sure wasn’t any mystique left about the life of a soldier in combat.

Just a few months into my Tour in Iraq, I learned that a small kill team is far less cool than it sounds. Essentially, at least for my deployment, it was a bunch of excellent marksmen that read too many sniper novels in their teens. What it really involves is a bunch of infantry sitting in a bush watching a desolate landscape for eighteen hours at a time. However, the Army simply envisioned it as a small group of soldiers, armed with scoped rifles to either provide fire support for missions, or surveil intersections to prevent IED emplacements. The words spoken in the platoon brief room, SKT (Small Kill Team) sound extremely cool to 22-year-old ears that just received their crossed rifles and were sworn into the infantry. My experiences with the SKT of 2007 were both embarrassing and annoying.
Comanche troop had a local SKT enthusiast, Super Scout. We called him Super Scout because of his constant bragging in dramatic tone of voice. Super Scout would meet up with lower ranking troops at the smoke pit at night to expound the value of the small kill team. He would regale us with fake stories about how many “kills” he’d gotten at 700 meters and farther during the invasion. Super Scout made his rank in less than four years and was younger than many of us. For all his bravado, he was prone to falling asleep on guard duty, missing guard duty, and being late for patrol briefs. It seems that those that talk the most always end up being the least willing to do what needs to be done.

Despite Super Scout’s overblown Tom Clancy nonsense, I was identified early on as a potential SKT member. At first, this seemed like some sort of elite selection. Yet, when I told my other soldiers, they simply laughed at me. I knew Super Scout was dumb when he called me into his room to time my ability to disassemble a machine gun after six months of patrols as a machine gunner. But, given his proximity to the platoon leadership, I’d erroneously assumed this was a duty everyone wanted.

One of the best friends I made while earning my keep in the Platoon was Van. Van was a guy the same age as myself, African American, and from Arizona. Van gave me a hard time when I first arrived to the platoon because I was the replacement for his best friend that was killed. But he warmed up to me, and we became roommates at COP X-ray when we moved off Camp Taji. I’d seen Van do awesome things, despite his sarcastic attitude towards leadership in our platoon. He always had something smart to say about something dumb I was about to do, so I was excited to come brag to him about getting on the SKT, only to be mocked for hours.

“Super Scout is gonna make you sit in a bush for two days!” Van hollered with laughter.
“Hey, you gonna be Delta Force too, man?” another soldier howled with laughter. I’d been suckered, yet again.

Despite the ridicule on the way to pre-mission brief, I dutifully went to the commander’s office to receive our mission. It was fairly basic: go to this location and look for a mortar team that had been launching mortars into Camp Taji. I was assigned a machine gun for local security and sent on my way. As the lowest-ranking soldier on the team, I was assigned the most equipment to carry. I was still in the prove myself mode of my career, so I accepted anything I was given, though it does not take long to regret being gung-ho after walking a few miles with a thousand rounds of machine gun ammo and two extra radio batteries.

I had a pretty bad cold at the time and couldn’t control my coughing. We set up shop in a pasture, waiting on a mortar team to arrive. It was literally in a bush, just as Van had said when he mocked my enthusiasm for being selected for the SKT mission. As the sun rose, and the baking Iraqi heat began to set in, I realized why so many of my fellow soldiers made fun of me and avoided SKT duty like the plague. While we didn’t see a mortar tube, a sheep herder certainly found us.

“White, you see that goat herder over there?”

“Roger, I see Him.”

“Keep a close watch on them.”

The location we’d been assigned by the commander was a small outcrop of bushes surrounded by grass ready for cattle and sheep grazing. The local economy was mostly sheep wool, sheep meat, date palms, and cattle. There wasn’t much else for the economy there and that’s what everyone in the area did. There was nothing for miles except for an outcrop of mud
huts. The families that lived in them began milling about at sun up. No one noticed us and wouldn’t have cared if they would have spotted us, either.

It wasn’t long before the goat herder began walking in our direction. Naturally so, because the bush we were hiding in had a plethora of vegetation for the goats to eat. I lost track of the goat herder and attempted to watch for more pressing tactical matters, like a mortar team. After six hours of staring at the same spot in the desert, I tapped my partner, to indicate I was going to take a nap. While lying on my back and blinking my eyes open, I heard the bells on the goats and saw two big goat beards shaking overhead. It was surreal until I heard one of the NCOs jump up and scream at the herder. It was Super Scout, thinking he was in another Vietnam movie. “Who the fuck do you work for?” He screamed at the herder, as if the herder were going to respond in English “I work directly for Osama Bin Laden, you’ve won the war, Super Scout!”

The herder attempted to explain himself in Arabic to a clearly inept American soldier. However, the call from HQ got us home for the day. We walked back to the COP X-ray about a mile away. On the way back, I suddenly realized, after only seven months in a combat zone, that the war was bullshit, even though I’d just signed up for another five years of this nonsense. The anger at myself for being suckered in slowly began to seep into my thoughts.

We just sat in a bush, in a craggy desert with no one around for miles except goat herders. We planned the mission two days in advance. Every possible situation was discussed and mitigated with possible solutions. We then gathered ourselves at 0200 in the morning, carried a bunch of lethal gear to a bush just out of sight of our guard towers, to catch a mortar team that did not exist. The commander knew well that there was little to no chance of us seeing a mortar team set up, but he was allowing the senior NCO that was sniper-qualified to lead these missions, despite them having no results. That’s essentially how the entire war works. Everyone knows
these wars can’t be won, but since we have an Army that fancies itself an expert at war, our society allows them to do it. Not a single person in that area has ever threatened mine or my family’s safety. Yet, here I was, staring into their lives, aiming weapons at them while they carried out their goat herder duties for the day.

A few weeks later, on the way to drop another SKT in a field near an insurgent stronghold, our commander got a special message from the division commander, a two-star general in charge of 20,000 soldiers or more. Was it a super-secret mission to extract a diplomat? No, but the British Special Forces, or the SAS had sadly landed a bird (helicopter) in a nearby farm. The bird tipped over and the blades on top of the aircraft flew apart while two unfortunate British soldiers fell under the chopper. It was the first two dead bodies I saw in a combat zone, Despite the fact that they were not being downed by enemy fire, it was still a traumatic scene.

I’d seen the distinctive British desert camouflage in Kuwait in the chow hall. We’d made great friends with many Brits during late night smoking and joking sessions. They were an affable bunch, usually wore their hair longer than us, bloused their boots much looser and loved to trade uniform patches. It was great fun meeting an allied army right before moving onto Iraq and now I’d see their lifelessly brown striped uniforms and low quarter boots dangling lifelessly from underneath a helicopter.

It was the absolute dead of night, 0230 at the latest, and when we received a fragmentary order, or FRAGO in military terms. Our convoy instantly shifted course and began barreling towards the sudden new objective. Sgt. Lincoln sighed loudly into our intercom system and began briefing us on what we were about to do.

“Allright, we gotta go help these British special forces dudes who had a bird go down. They’ve got two dead on the ground right now, and we’ve gotta go help ‘em get out.”
“Does this mean no SKT now?”

“Yes, White.” Sergeant Lincoln said sarcastically “No playing in the mud with Super Scout today.”

I was relieved to have had my staring contest missions amended but wasn’t sure what we were getting into now. We’d been notified that a British special forces team had attempted an air assault in the middle of the night when their aircraft flipped over killing two members of their team. This was General McCrystal’s task force 6-26. Every night, elements all over Iraq were conducting quick raids to kill or capture leaders of the insurgency. It was organized with ruthless precision, but sometimes humans make mistakes and helicopters crash. McCrystal may have been unceremoniously fired from his role as overall commander in Afghanistan, but his real contribution to the war was the efficient killing machine of task force 6-26. The insurgent leaders’ capture was merely a matter of time.

At the objective, I could see the British soldiers standing around, characteristically sloppily bloused boots sticking out and imagined their cockney accents chatting at me in Kuwait. Yet, I heard our own sergeants hollering and barking in the background.

“Get that fucking truck over here now!”

“Hey, dipshit. Get that Bradley over there to that position yesterday!”

We all moved like clockwork, yet, we’ve developed a brand of yelling nearly constantly. Sgt. Duncan called me over to him to let me know to go work with the Brits. I sprinted over to their side of the perimeter and asked if they needed any support.

“Well, first let’s do some introductions.”

“This is Tom. This is Jim. We’re just looking over in this area,” while pointing in the general direction he wanted me to pull security.
“Please let us know if you need anything a ‘tall!”’

“Roger that.”

I walked over uneven Iraqi farmland to fill a gap in their line. I was amazed at the politeness of the British troops considering they’d just lost one of their own.

After several hours of staring into the dark of the night, the British patrol commander on the ground called a quick huddle with the American leadership near the helicopter. The British soldiers were impossibly cool headed and polite. Even when being utterly disrespected by the American leadership. I never learned any of their names, but they were spot-on examples of the British national character.

“Alright, Captain. We’re gonna line this Merlin with C4 and blow it in place.”

“You will not do that in my battlespace,” our commander replied.

“Well, it’s our bird. We choose to blow it in place if that’s alright with you.”

“I don’t know who you think you are, but you ain’t blowing that bird in place.” Our American commander was now taking on an authoritative tone reserved for his own troops rather an allied nation. “This is my goddamn battle space and you will not allow sensitive items to be used by the enemy.”

“Captain, we’ve already recovered the sensitive items—you can inspect it for yourself. Furthermore, I don’t think Muqtada Al-Sadr has a helicopter pilot academy in Basra. However, if you think blowing up a heli into a million pieces can be used by the insurgents, you can take care of this helicopter yourself.”

Our commander, now smug that he had won an argument with a Brit, gave his radio operator his customary grin. “Call the maintenance company to recover the bird, Sgt. Bernard.”

“Right, well, we’ll off then.”
The Brits were being quite terse with our commander and were visibly offended at his behavior. However, the subtly of their insults and anger went right over our commander’s head. The mood with the Brits had soured after the argument and they didn’t even say goodbye.

“Alright then, Captain. This Merlin is now yours.” The British element on the ground disappeared shortly afterwards. It was if they were never there except for the chopper laying lifeless in the center of the perimeter.

“White, PJ, Shank—we’re gonna be here for long while, ok?”

“Well motherfuck. At least I got a pack of cigarettes.”

“Amen brother.”

With that, we instinctively took on a “one on two off” security stance inside our Humvee. PJ was already in the turret so he took first shift. After two hours, he nudged me awake and I popped into the turret. The Iraqi sun was just barely rising over the vast Tigris River while it burned the water that accumulates on the ground overnight, including your uniform. Iraqi weather spares no one. The Brits had recovered their bodies and we were now guarding the downed helicopter until an American recovery vehicle could be spared to recover this bird.

“White, let me get up there for a while, ok?”

“Please do, Sergeant. I’m exhausted.”

We’d been there for over forty-eight hours when my back had started to hurt. Sitting on a seatbelt wrapped in pillows is not the ideal way to spend a Saturday afternoon. Once I sat down back down in my seat, I fell fast asleep. There is no sleep on earth that is as restful as the two hours after a long guard shift, but there is no sleep on earth less restful that sitting cramped inside
a military vehicle, with body armor under a blazing sun near the Tigris River. The stress of this type of mission causes many soldiers backs to compress and crush their discs. I am one of those soldiers.

We spent two boring days in the same spot waiting for relief. The Merlin helicopter was taken out five pieces at a time by American logistics companies. After hours of sitting in the same spot, SSG Duncan proclaimed he was bored and made an excuse to go patrolling the nearby area. He took two trucks to a blown-up bridge and made up some excuse to detain three Iraqis. An old man in a dishdasha, a young man, and a middle-aged man. None of them looked particularly threatening and all three spoke English. SSG Duncan had me guard the detainees in the back of the Bradley because of my lack of seniority.

“These fuckin Hajis stink to hell, White.”

“Roger that, sergeant.”

I’m not proud of the language we used to describe the local population in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it should be explicated here for civilians. Haji is a term of endearment for Muslims that have made the hajj, or pilgrimage. For American troops, we used the term pejoratively to describe any and all Iraqis or Afghans. Much like troops in Vietnam used horrid terms to dehumanize their enemy, we did the same. It’s not a point of pride, but it is critical to understanding our history and interaction with the world around us.

He wasn’t wrong; the back of the Bradley smelled like months of body odor punctuated with the spices the Iraqis tend to eat in their national cuisine. I’m not proud that I didn’t like the Iraqi’s body odor, but they were working class men. On their way to work, of course they weren’t going to smell like roses. I doubt a truckload of coal miners smells like roses, either. I smoked cigarettes like a freight train to keep the smell down. I’m not making value judgments on
these men; it’s a different place with different hygiene standards. These men were dirt poor, working class folks looking for a place to earn their next meal, but Duncan made up some nonsense to keep his combat-addled mind calm. Everyone in Iraq during the surge was a suspect; it was an exhausting exercise pretending everyone was out to get you.

SSG Duncan popped his head into the troop compartment

“I’d offer you an MRE, but you might throw up.” He said sarcastically.

“Mista, piss shit, please?” The elderly prisoner said in broken English.

SSG Duncan looked at me with a gigantic grin.

“You know what comes next, right?”

I simply nodded my head, lifted the man’s blind fold while Duncan dropped the ramp of the Bradley. I escorted the man to the side of the road and handed him a bottle of fresh water. I mimed some hand movements and he pulled up dishdasha—or man dress as we called them—and relieved himself. I felt humiliated for both of us. I gave him as much privacy as I could; there was no way the man would run from me. He finished relieving himself and I helped the old man back into the Bradley. We kept them for another 18 hours before depositing them at the prisoner holding area at camp Taji. I do not know what became of these men, but I am certain they were not members of the insurgency that day. However, the way we harassed them might have made them insurgents the next.

“Terps” is an endearing shorthand term for interpreters. Terps played a critical role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Terps were often the difference between success and failure. The terps generally had great senses of humor and loved to work with US troops. The pay was significantly higher than anything they would get on the local economy and most were grateful for the pay. However they were also terrified of being exposed to their local communities. Often,
Shia terps would work with troops in Sunni areas and vice versa. Our terps would often wear masks to conceal their identities to the local areas.

Terps often lived and worked with soldiers. They effectively became part of our units and were treated like equals. They often had silly names named after explicit sex acts. Our platoon’s terp was named first name Jack, last name Meoff. Jack would wear his MEOFF name tape as an inside joke to both the soldiers in the platoon to trick field grade officers into saying Jack Meoff. Generally, the officers wouldn’t know a thing until after we’d already left and someone would radio to our leaders, “Stop giving your terps sexually explicit nicknames.”

Terps, while they could speak English and generally with American accents and colloquialisms, were still culturally Iraqi citizens. Serving within a military company without military experience made it difficult sometimes when they did not understand what we were doing or were not informed of what was going on within the compound. Often times, we attempted to ensure terps had all the amenities they would need inside our compounds to make them feel at home.

I became good friends with the terps on my first tour and they became Arab language instructors for me. We would talk about family and life at home. Often the Terps would grow so fond of us that we’d hang out together just as much as the soldiers. Sometimes, commanders and senior NCOs would break up get togethers between terps and soldiers. This was confusing for the terps because they were putting their lives on the line with us, but there remained a paranoid distrust of terps, even if they had fought with us side by side, by senior leadership. Personally, if I ran into the terps we had then, I would invite them into my home for a meal. They were truly some of the bravest and most intelligent people I met while I was in Iraq. However, there were a couple that did not shine as bright as others.
Iraqis that spoke English would often try to work for the Americans if they could. The pay was far better than anything an educated Iraqi could attain otherwise. Many of them were brave men intent on feeding their families. They were often threatened by the militias for working with us and had to take Byzantine methods to prevent being tracked by all the militia spies. Hadi, one particularly interesting terp, would often regale us young soldiers with tales from a wild Iraqi man.


“I’m good Hadi, pretty sure SFC Ortega would have me executed for that.” I said.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me. I can get you anything.” Strange, but entertaining conversations like that were always welcome during the boring hours of combat life.

We were playing cards with Hadi one night when the subject of marriage and women came up. Hadi, older than most of us, shushed us all up so that he could give us the best wisdom in his repertoire.

“Listen, listen, listen. This is what you do to your wife. First, go home, wipe your finger on a window seal. If it is dirty, slap her. If it is clean, slap her. Tell her you will leave the house and expect to be completely clean when you return. Go to have tea with your friends, smoke a cigarette, return a few hours later. When you return, don’t even say a word to her, just slap her, and tell her how disappointed you are with her. Finally, return a third time, and tell her you love her and respect her hard work in cleaning the house.” Hadi’s giant teeth appeared beneath his bushy mustache and round face. He was laughing between puffs of smoke on his cheap pine brand cigarette. I had let my cigarette go out, staring at Hadi, mouth agape. Other soldiers were
howling with laughter. “Yoooooo, Hadi you wildin’ out my dude.” “We need to start training women like at back home, don’t we?” The sentiment filled the air, with two different nations of toxicity toward women. It’s certainly not the part of the movie they show you in *We Were Soldiers*.

Where the hell did I go wrong to end up in this dirty brown box living quarters, learning how to both physically and emotionally abuse women to clean your house, I wondered. Furthermore, the surreal way some of my fellow soldiers cheered him on either in jest or in seriousness made me want to tear up my recent re-enlistment contract for seven more years of this. I fought back the anger at my re-enlistment. It was far too early in the game to regret such a long decision I made in my entire twenties. I’d essentially traded my twenties for adventure and a job, something I’d come to regret.

The Iraqi sun cooks everything that lays in it. Buildings get bleached white, skin turns deep brown, and the ground cracks from the blazing sun. The soles of my feet felt like they were on fire under the weight of a machine gun, and a back pack full of batteries and ammo belts. The weight of the equipment is so much that it feels like you can’t concentrate on the lethal threats all around you. Any machine gunner with a brain knows you can’t really keep your weapon racked, and typically jump into the fight once it’s already started. You just hope the first bullet doesn’t hit you in the face.

Despite the intense heat, I’d grown accustomed to carrying the burdensome load all over a small road that we would call a holler back home in West Virginia. The best part of any mission was hearing the Lieutenant’s radio crackle to him “Red 1, go ahead and return back to Camp Taji.” Air conditioning, a plate of food, and cold water awaited back on Camp Taji. My mind would be instantly transported back to the camp, imagining the ice cold water hitting my
tongue and the feel of a shower. Post mission ice-cold water is a pleasure I can hardly describe with words, but it is an extraordinary thing after twelve hours walking around in circles, in 125 degree heat and with 125 pounds of gear on your back.

After dismounting our vehicles and walking miles into palm groves, seeing our vehicles appear in the desert, made me want to run to them, when approaching after a patrol. I could usually see our driver placing cold water bottles from the cooler on all of our seats. The machine gun gets ten pounds lighter and the soles of my feet cooled off through sheer mental hallucination. Feeling the metal latch on the door of the Humvee unlatch and the weight of my vest loosen is such a relaxing feeling. I still knew we had to travel the distance between our patrol area and Camp Taji, but I was close enough to be excited about getting back to Camp Taji.

“Red 4, go ahead and lead us home.”

“Roger, Red 1.”

With that, we were on our way home. Banter filled the truck, soldiers that were not on the dismounted mission, wanted to know all the gossip of the patrol which was typically meaningless. We’d bought a banana from a kid or learned a new Arabic word. I could not concentrate on the conversation in the Truck and drifted off watching the Tigris River flow by from my window. I was staring into the distance when a blazing red flash ripped between our trucks in the convoy.

“RPG!” Our gunner yelled into our intercom system. Rocket Propelled Grenades are one of the primary weapons of insurgencies everywhere. Cheap and easy to use, however, if an insurgent failed to take the pin out of the rocket or modify the fins, it would often fail in flight. That ice water awaiting for me back on Camp Taji was getting farther and farther away. When I glanced over to the point of origin, I could see the white cloth of the insurgents dishdasha.
Luckily, the fins on the rocket didn’t deploy properly and the rocket aimed directly at our truck randomly veered up at a 90-degree angle and landed somewhere harmlessly. The insurgent was already gone, most likely having changed his clothes and threw his RPG launcher into a ditch.

“What in the fuck was that all about?” SSG Lincoln said in his thick Texas drawl, cool as ice, as if a cow had just run off.

“Looks like an RPG to me.” The gunner reported from the turret. I was so exhausted, it didn’t register how close I’d come to death that day.

The day of the awakening, or the Sawha as the Sunni militiamen called it, my squad was assigned security duty for the days parade. The Awakening was a movement of Sunni Sheik’s that had grown tired of Al-Qaeda’s brutality. As the Sunni’s began to arm their own militia’s in Anbar province, the word began to spread to our area as well. Soon we had hundreds of militiamen filing through our COP to be identified and given a rifle. The day they were to take over as the local security not friendly to Al-Qaeda, they had a parade with American Humvees as support. American trucks lead the way through the village, while one of their leaders sat in a speaker truck and gave speeches. It was sort of a revolution from our eyes, and proof that Petraeus operational concept of counter insurgency was paying off. In reality, we were able to pay more than Al-Qaeda and paid people to not shoot at us. Then we called them a militia and handed it to the Iraqi government to figure out once we were gone.

On the big day of the Awakening, we marched two miles to the area where we were to guard the flanks of the parade. I took up a position laying between two rows near the edge of a hedgerow. Lying near the ground with my squad was one of the most common things I would do in Iraq. I would get intimate with the ground after laying on it for three hours at a time. The silence becomes something rather quickly, though. I heard the birds chirping, the call to prayer,
the date palm farmers climbing the trees nearby, the bells on the cows, and goats jingle. Stinging sweat pours into my eyes while I’m trying to hear if anything is out of the ordinary. None of this world cares that I exist; it’s just Iraqi farm life playing out all around. They all had no idea where we lay nor cared; they were just getting their dates down to bring to market. Until the speaker truck began rolling down the street

The current Squad I was in was with another person who became a close friend of mine named Casey. Casey was from South Carolina and spoke with a thick southern drawl. He smoked like a chimney and still managed to always max his PT tests. He had a habit of calling everyone brother, and his accent and attitude reminded me of my own. We became good friends and I learned a lot simply by watching how he behaved under fire, and when doing normal work as a soldier.

In the distance, we could hear “Allahu Akbar” from the speaker truck as the new militia friendly to U.S. forces began marching through the village. My weak Arabic and hearing the words al-Qaeda and Allahu Akbar was nightmarish, but I knew it was part of the new awakening movement supported by General Petraeus. He’d recently determined that it was better for Iraqis to care about their security than relying on Americans to do it for them. As the Awakening militia approached, all the men in the squad perked their heads up to look at each other. We were all somewhat nervous, our enemies yesterday were all given weapons, and were now supposedly our allies. As the vehicle approached, the Iraqis continued their daily lives.

_Thhhhwip._ The rounds sound like they are violently unzipping the air around you. I felt tree bark slowly float onto my face

“*What the fuck!*” Casey said as he tried to force his body onto the ground away from the bullet that just whipped through our position. I could feel the tree bark slowly falling onto me as
I felt the abject fear of combat. Bullets were now whizzing all around us over the sound of a speaker truck announcing *allahu Akbar*.

Our squad leader’s radio crackled to life.

“Hey, can you have those fucktards stop shooting up the goddamn palm grove, they are shooting at us.” The fire died down and the militia commander apologized for mistaking us for al-Qaeda fighters. During their parade, some of the militiamen decided they would show off their new found American-backed power by firing indiscriminately into the palm groves, at Americans there, to prevent bad guys from attacking their parade.

*Welcome to the awakening,* I thought; untrained teenagers with guns tasked with local security in Iraq.

Later, seven months into my tour, In one of the most combat-laden days of my first tour in Iraq, we set off two IEDs, were shot at multiple times by small arms, and witnessed an RPG stuck inside the body of an Iraqi soldier.

We were in the middle of a raid chasing a mortar team when we heard intense machine gun fire a mile to our south. I heard the platoon sergeant’s radio crackle to him that we had to reinforce the American team embedded with the Iraqis as they were in danger of getting overrun. As I jumped into my dismount seat, my stomach knotted into a million pieces. I could hear what sounded like a heavy machine gun, in the short distance where they were asking us to go. Bullets crackled everywhere. This was it: I was certainly going to die this time, no doubt about it.

When we arrived, the fighting was over and we could see a small team of Iraqis attempting to work on their wounded. Our platoon sergeant asked our medic if he wanted to help him.
“And get blown up? You better call EOD first, sergeant.” Doc was adamant that we call explosive ordinance disposal first, before poking around at a rocket lodged in a human body. To be clear, there is little anyone can do for someone with an RPG stuck inside their abdomen. The American team on the ground said that we shouldn’t stick around, as the untrained and nervous Iraqi soldiers might shoot at us. The clearest memory I have of the situation is not the wounded soldier himself, but his friend, on his knees blankly staring at me through the window of our truck as we drove by. The blood from the soldier’s wound trickled next to the unharmed, permanently traumatized soldier. I didn’t speak to that man, but his eyes burned into my mind exactly what he felt. We rolled right on by without stopping, just observed the gruesome aftermath of an insurgent attack on the new Iraqi Army.

Before the awakening, militias owned the streets of Western Iraq and Baghdad, American policy makers wanted us to work more closely with Iraqi soldiers. It wasn’t easy working with them, as they had their schedules and timelines, entirely unaware of the urgent needs of the Americans who had so kindly liberated them. Often, we’d arrive to their command posts with all of their soldiers asleep and their commanders still wearing pajamas and sleep in his eyes. This always pissed off our platoon leader because we still had to go on mission with or without them. Today was different; they rolled with us.

“We’re staying in the trucks today, White,” SSG Lincoln relayed to me after returning to the truck after a mission brief with the Iraqis. This sounded awesome to me, hopefully the IED gods wouldn’t decide today was my day. The Iraqi soldiers were going to do most of the searching. In my naïve mind, I thought that the Iraqis would be hard chargers. But what I saw on the road next to our vehicles was anything but; mismatched uniforms, the LT wore highly polished shoes, no rifle and his pistol was displayed for maximum status. The soldiers seemed to
amble more than deliberately searching the ground for bombs in front of them. Certainly, it was no value judgement against the men in uniform, but the horrendous and broken system of training we’d demanded they implement, despite not having any institutional back up.

At a stop, one of the Iraqi soldiers walked up to my window. Clearly curious and attempting to communicate with me from the outside “Don’t fuck with em’, White,” Lincoln ordered. I didn’t intend to, but the Iraqi clearly wanted to fuck with me. He held up an empty can of Skoal snuff to the window. “Amerikki! Good!” with a big grin and a thumbs up. He seemed like any other goofy kid, so I gave him a thumbs up back. I remember thinking, I bet both of us knew how to skip levels on our videogame consoles like Mario.

Today’s mission was to be a soft knock raid at possible high value targets house. A soft knock raid meant that we would literally knock on the door and ask to enter the house. Typically, Iraqis will invite you in, and that way you wouldn’t have to kick in the doors and destroy their home. At the house we were ordered to enter with Iraqis, we quickly found that Iraqi soldiers didn’t comport with the soft knock intent of the raid. We were supposed to knock and talk to the residents, but the Iraqis smashed into the house roughshod and undisciplined, without waiting for an invitation into the house. They began dragging residents out by the hair of the head. I saw one Iraqi soldier slap a man in the face while another hit him in the back with a long stick, like a switch your grandmother hits you with, but longer to deliver twice the damage.

“What the fuck?” I asked SGT Lincoln,

“Hey, these people know how to get information out of their own people, not our country man” he responded.

It just looked like they were a group of thugs to me. Later we found out every house they entered was stripped of all valuables, phone cards, money—men were slapped in front of their
families and insults were shouted. It turned out that the Iraqi unit had been made up of Shiite militiamen, inundated with sectarian propaganda fed to them by Muqtada al-Sadr and other firebrand radicals. The area we patrolled was almost entirely a Sunni district. Our presence simply legitimated their unregulated and relentless violence on their own people. Men in uniforms intended for the safety of their own people, visiting them in the daylight with American troops as back up to steal and punish. I suppose this is what winning looks like to Dick Cheney, but it’s a memory burned far deeper into my mind than the fighting between the patriotic insurgents and my friends and I.

“Put the cigarettes out and get it on. Is that a Rip-It, seriously?” We’d just received a brief that energy drinks were deadly, but none of us heeded the advice. I put down the mini-can of the neon colored energy drink, Rip-It, on the side of a t-shaped wall and put on his vest. Rip-Its were in every chow hall in Iraq some might even argue they fueled the American war effort. The sergeant barked out orders about who goes where and for what. While some soldiers hefted equipment onto their backs, others were complaining about being awake at 0300. The dust clouds kicked up as we walked towards the gate. It was still three hours to sunrise, but our bodies and uniforms are already drenched with sweat. We’d done this same thing, but in different locations so many times now without result.

Our mission was to walk one kilometer out of a side wall of Camp Taji Iraq and search a cluster of houses near the Saddam canal. My particular slice of the pie was to be on the cordon team to prevent anyone from leaving or entering once the searches began. Often times on cordon, it feels as if you are alone because you can only see your two nearest buddies who are often 25-50 meters away from you. It also often feels as though you’re sitting on the sidelines, while your
buddies are doing the important work. Both are critical jobs, but I always wanted to be near the action.

As the leading team of the patrol, we slipped into our cordon positions on the perimeter as the Iraqis began to mill about in the buildings. I looked at my Sergeant and gave a thumbs up and awaited confirmation. My sergeant sent me a thumbs up back and I settled into a comfortable kneeling position. My eyes would dart around in irregular patterns attempting to see any possible intruders coming from far away.

*Kah kah kah kah.* The report of a weapon going off reverberated off the mud walls of the house we stood by. The fire was coming from somewhere less than 200 meters from us. Then, an eruption of fire popped off and I looked over to Sergeant Staten to see if we were supposed to do something. We both sort of waited for a second before realizing shooting was going on and we could yell again. “What the fuck is that?” SGT Lincoln asked me.

“Hell, if I know, should we go over there?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” and we began sprinting to the action as fast as humanly possible. The shooting was long over by the time we made it to the scene.

We ran into a Sergeant from another platoon and found out what happened; during the entry, the father of the house sent his two sons out to run away. The two sons attempted to fire at us and were instantly killed by a United States squad. We returned to our original location to retrieve the rest of the troops and move into another location. As we filed passed the overturned car, I could see one leg sticking out of the car. On the other side, I saw a body lying face down in the road. As I passed by it, a Sergeant from Headquarters platoon was searching the body and pulled the head of the man’s body off the road. His eyes were completely white and his face contorted. He wore a disheveled suit coat, a Russian model grenade lay just a few inches from
where he held it. His rifle still lay in the car where he dropped it. A small bullet wound with only a trickle of blood, as if only a shaving accident, dripped down his neck. A tiny collection of blood pooled the ground under his neck; it was shocking how little blood leaked onto the ground.

“You see that, White?” Sergeant Bernard said loudly, with a sarcastic smirk on his face. “That’s fuckin PTSD. Welcome to the club.”

I feel it necessary to explain what drop weapons are, especially during this time period of the war and U.S. Army history. Drop weapons were old AK-47s found on the battlefield somewhere either after fight. They are kept in the back of truck within easy reach of any soldier in the truck. Typically, wrapped in garbage bags and placed under mountains of equipment, however every soldier knows precisely where they are, and if not, their sergeant will know. They were always nearby, whether you thought about them or not, but they were seen as an object of trust from everyone in the platoon. If you accidentally shot someone you weren’t supposed to shoot, the silent agreement was that they would place an AK-47 in their hand and attempt to absolve yourself of your crime.

We never used a drop weapon, I’m proud to say, but I’m sure we would have if the need arose. It’s not something I’m proud to tell about the U.S. military, but the reality of war isn’t pretty either. Drop weapons are a form of trust with everyone in the platoon. You know even if you make a mistake, people will try to get you home. You know that everyone in your truck will construct a story and make sure you don’t go to jail. But there is no group that forms to protect Iraqis from the bullets of a trigger-happy soldier. There is no jury for them to worry about, either—only the finality of death.
Burn Shitter

“Hey Bernard, go get Beckham!” the commander shouted over the din of Humvee engines running to his gunner. We’d just returned from a patrol with the troop commander and were lining up our vehicles to park them inside the dust-covered warehouse in our compound. Bernard ran off to the command post to retrieve the Terp while the rest of us broke down our vehicles to park them. Whatever the commander was yelling about, it didn’t involve me, so I continued to perfectly align our vehicles and take down all our equipment from the vehicle.

“White! C’mere!” my team leader, SSG Lincoln, shouted from the entrance to the warehouse. I stood there dumbstruck for a second until the gunner yelled, “Hurry the fuck up, White! Your sergeant is calling for your lazy ass.” Now, I’d guessed whatever the hell the commander was yelling about had my name all over it.

“White,” Lincoln said in a thick Texas drawl.

“Go get all those fuckin terps. Take ‘em to the burn shitters and make them burn their shit themselves.”

“What in the hell happened? Those are off limits.”

“Yeah, the terps didn’t know that and we have about three 55-gallon drums full of piss and shit that has to be burnt off. Our soldiers didn’t do it so they ain’t doing it. But, you’re my best guy so I’m putting you in charge.”

Usually in the Army, whenever a NCO tells you that you are their best soldier so they need you to do something particularly horrible, that NCO is filling you full of baloney. But, I also knew I was the newest soldier in the platoon and had not earned the right to talk back to anyone just yet. So, I dutifully replied with “Roger, S’rnt,” and retrieved a jerry can full of JP8 diesel fuel and set it down by the burn shitters.
I walked straight to the terp room and asked politely to the dumbest terp in the room, Beckham.

“Hey, which shitter do y’all use?”

“Hey, White. The wooden ones, someone told us they were they were the terp shitters.”

“Okay, cool. I need all y’all to come with me for a minute.”

“What the fuck!” some of the terps complained as they got their gear together.

I led the terps out to the burn shitters. The CO was standing there with his giant arms crossed across his chest, black sunglasses on his stern face, his rifle hung by his side as we approached.

“I wanna know who the fuck said you could use these burn shitters right now.”

“They said it was for terps, Captain.”

“Who is they?”

The anxious terps were hesitant to tattle on the person who told them and simply replied

“I don’t remember, Captain.”

“That’s what I thought. Specialist White here has been tasked to supervise y’all burning your waste. He knows what to do, listen to him. I want this done now.”

The commander stormed off, demonstrating both the urgency to me and his anger to the terps.

“Alright y’all, pull out the rest of those barrels and pour this JP8 on top of it.”

The terps tied their shirts around their face to disguise the disgusting smell from their noses as they dragged the burn barrels out from underneath the wooden outhouses. Now that the barrels were arranged neatly in a row, I understood why the commander was so angry: they were filled to the brim with urine and feces. Soldiers know to never use these latrines for urination because you know how horrible the detail is, and a barrel full of urine burns very, very slowly.
Someone told them they could use these latrines or someone didn’t stop them from using them. Either way, this was a massive failure of his troops.

I walked over to the terps.

“Jesus Christ! Beckam, have y’all been using these?”

“Yes! We didn’t know and they are closer than the porta shitters.”

“Fuck man!”

“I’m sorry!”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now. Let’s get this done man.”

I lit the first barrel to show the terps how to do it, and to ensure none of them caught themselves on fire. The only one terp that had military experience was Jack. He’d been an infantry squad leader for years under Saddam and the new army under the Americans. As any experienced soldier would do, he made himself invisible from the commander’s wrath. I wasn’t the type to go find a soldier that had avoided punishment, and it’s bad form as a soldier to do so if someone has avoided the shit fit of a commander.

Beckham, as usual, whined the most, so I handed him a 20-foot long 2x4 and told him, “You gotta stir it. It’s got so much piss in it that it’s going to take us all day long to burn this off.”

“I didn’t know that’s how you use these, White! This isn’t fair.”

“I know it ain’t fair, man, but you gotta fuckin do it because it’s y’all's fault.” It wasn’t Beckham’s fault. It was our fault, but there was a lesson to be learned here by the terps. If you intend to work with the military, you will clean up after yourself and you will take responsibility for your actions; whether the military does or not is a different story. As a soldier who’d done
countless work details as punishment that had nothing to do with me, I felt little sympathy for the terps.

Two hours into the moaning and groaning, Beckham and the other terps were taking turns stirring all the barrels and sneaking a cigarette in one of the vehicle bays. The sun was brutally hot today. In the distance you could see the green palm trees behind the concertina wire walls. The guards were covered in camo netting that billowed in the hot wind like flags of war. The blazing heat from the burning human waste was literally cooking us all. However, I’d been through the worst of the war, and I could have honestly stayed there all day watching the terps and directing their actions. It was easy compared to what we did outside the wire.

“White, c’mere!” SSG Lincoln hollered from the vehicle bay. I ran over to him as quickly as possible

“You see that sewer drain over there?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Let the JP8 burn off and pour that BS into that drain as soon as you can. This is dumb as hell.”

“Roger, S’rnt, You want me to let the commander know what’s going on?”

“Fuck no, are you crazy? Goddamn pour that shit into the sewer and tell Sgt. Bernard you are done. Don’t fuckin say a word to anyone I told you to do it, understand?”

“Roger, S’rnt.” Relieved, I ran back to the terps and explained to them the situation. All the terps shouted “allahu akbar”

“I said hold on, y’all. Let’s get this done first. If the CO figures it out, we’re all screwed.”
The CO had far better things to do than worry about this incident, so we popped the sewer drain and waited for the fire to die down. We’d been burning for over four hours now and figured it’d made the point that the CO wanted and we all needed rest. The gunner appeared out of nowhere with a sissy bar. A sissy bar is a 12-foot-long steel crowbar designed for use on a tank. We popped the sewer lid and one by one dumped all the feces and urine into the sewer drain.

“These goddamn terps drive me crazy sometimes, dude.” The gunner said as he propped the barrel up on his to pour into the sewer.

“Hey! Y’all learn y’all’s fuckin lesson? Don’t fucking shit in this goddamn porta shitters unless the commander explicitly authorizes you do so.”

“Yes. For God’s sake, the gunner, let us go!”

“Alright, get the fuck out of here, then.” The terps ran to their room as quickly as possible, The gunner looked at me said, “you weren’t really gonna make them burn that to the end, were you?”

“Yeah, the CO said to do it.”

“Sometimes, you gotta get the job done whether it’s by the book or not, otherwise y’all would have been out for two days doing that.”

It was sometime after deployment that I begin to wonder if I’d made a mistake in re-enlisting, I had after all not spent much time at home station before going to combat. Immediately upon arrival in the states, parties were everywhere returning troops were. Alcohol flowed like it was a frat house, officer and enlisted alike were red-eyed at morning formation for months following the deployment. One common quip was that if you could smell the alcohol on a passing running formation, they’d likely just returned from combat.
Most disturbing about this alcohol abuse was the punitive measures exacted upon soldiers who over indulged, myself included. Military justice is swift and archaic, and does not take into account recent combat experience and the symptoms of PTSD. We’d just spent a year dodging bombs and bullets, we took wild risks with drinking and other recreational activities with sad results. I was immediately transferred upon return to Fort Hood to a unit where no one knew me and would not tolerate any slip ups. One night, after too much drinking with my old unit friends and not enough time to sober up, I returned to duty at the appropriate time. My new company had little patience for soldiers returning for combat, especially ones they didn’t know.

I’d come to my new unit highly recommended by the old and was slotted for early promotion. I was in peak physical condition, tactically and technically proficient and also a charismatic leader that troops gravitated towards. The new sergeant that I was assigned to who had never deployed to combat was looking to make a name for himself as a disciplinarian and recommended me for full punishment for drunk on duty. The initial response after I was sent up for a field grade article 15 was immediate separation from the army. I was crushed.

It felt like the immediate aftermath of a punch in the face, I heard a ringing in my ears, I immediately imagined going home, admitting to my former manager that he was right. I wasn’t cut out for the army. The future seemed so dissonant and hopeless. Discharges for misconduct are typically done without benefits. I was only twenty-three years old at the time and was set up for a great career in the army, now I was facing a general discharge. I assumed I would simply just walk out the gate and kill myself rather than face the humiliation of returning to West Virginia without a way to support myself. There was nowhere for me to go nor a job for me.

My platoon sergeant, a large Native American man from Oklahoma took me aside to tell me the bad news. He also informed me that he was not supporting separation and that my new
squad leader had sent the report up without his knowledge. I phoned my former squad leader to speak on my behalf at my article 15 hearing, he agreed to be a character witness, and chewed me out for being stupid. I agreed with him and thanked him for his time.

I thought never endingly how embarrassing the whole ordeal was, my hearing was scheduled for each Friday of the week and would get postponed 5 minutes before I was to report. This went on for 3 months until I began to think it would be brushed under the rug, when I was called to report right now on a Thursday afternoon. I walked into battalion headquarters, and the halls were lined with troops awaiting a field grade article 15. One at a time they’d walk in and walk out without their rank. I called my former squad leader to see if he was available for the hearing and he ran over right away to testify on my behalf.

As I neared the doors to the commander’s office my platoon sergeant stuck his head out of the door and said “When they ask you if you have anything to say, just go say you accept full responsibility for your action and will strive to improve.” I nodded my head and awaited my final fate.

“SPECIALIST WHITE REPORT!” a sergeant barked from the room, I walked into the room, saluted the commander and reported. The ringing in my ears returned, it felt as if I were about to be executed. My entire chain of command stood to one side and one by one recommended I not be separated from the army as I had proven myself to be a good soldier in combat and in garrison. Two separate unit’s leadership appeared on behalf, more than any other troop on the docket.

The battalion commander, who’s arm was destroyed by a grenade, looked up at me from his desk in stern tone. “Looks like you’ve made quite an impression on your leader Specialist White. I’m sentencing you to 45 days extra duty and 45 days restriction to post, and reduction in
rank to private. I want to get your attention on this, this type of behavior is not tolerated in the army. You’re dismissed, extra duty to begin immediately upon the conclusion of this hearing. I made a left face and began to walk out of the room before the Sergeant Major stopped me, “C’mere White” ripped my rank off my chest and threw it on the ground in front of the door. Each of my leadership were ordered out of the room and stepped on the rank before leaving. It is an informal punishment, but devastating nonetheless, one night of indulgence ripped everything I’d done well away.

Walking out into the hallway, my Platoon Sergeant pulled me over to the side and explained “White, same thing happened to me, don’t worry, damn near every Sergeant Major in the army has had this punishment. Hang in there, and get ready cause you aren’t getting sleep for a while.” I nodded to him and reported for extra duty.

Standing in line to report for extra duty I began to talk with the other troops on their way to punishment. I was the only soldier out of 23 that was not about to be separated from the army. The crimes the soldiers committed ranged from cocaine or meth use to domestic abuse, all of them related to PTSD symptoms of the previous deployment, now on their way out for misbehavior and stripped of benefits earned in combat. I felt lucky and kept it to myself that I was retained in the army.

I was given a brush and some soap and ordered to scrub the curbs out doors in the Texas heat until 1139 and night when extra duty was released. You have to report for regular duty at 0600 the following morning giving you approximately 4 hours or so a night to get some rest. Whether the sergeant on duty was feeling particularly malicious depended on how useful your work was. In my unit, we were allowed to do meaningful work, in other units, soldiers on extra
duty were ordered to do no goal oriented work, just work for retribution. Several soldiers died in Washington state in the 2nd Infantry Division, who’d also gotten press for particularly brutal practices in Iraq as well.

After I finished extra duty I spent another year training with the 1st Cavalry Division. I was supposed to go to Italy, but was ordered to deploy again with my original unit. Shortly after denial of my permanent change of station, an opportunity arose for one platoon to be moved to another part of Fort Hood to be in a special unit. Our platoon was selected, and we moved from one side of Fort Hood to the other to train with an air assault unit, the Army called the Blues Platoon.

In Blues Platoon we were supposed to be the first ones to assist when something bad happened in Iraq. We trained extensively on the insertion and extraction of troops with helicopters. We trained how to call them in, how best use helicopters to your advantage, and the pilots were able to train as well. We spent six months training like this before returning to Iraq, with the air cavalry brigade of 1st Cavalry Division.

My second deployment was one of the most boring times in my Army career. A typical day on the second tour was to wake up at 0630, do two hours of physical training, and the wait until it was time for Lunch. After lunch, we would have to some sort of monotonous training and then we would wait on dinner. Life went on like this for months at a time, with little in the way of recreation. We did our best to manage our time, and I personally managed to read at least fifty books while deployed that year. The deployment had so little going on that our commander organized a competition to improve morale.

The competition was a twelve-hour event beginning at 0600 in the morning, beginning with a physical fitness test. Then for the rest of the day, we would be marching miles between
different training locations on Camp Taji, disassembling and reassembling weapons. Calling for artillery or helicopters in fake missions, and quickly evacuating casualties. Sometimes by the next morning, we had marched nearly 20 miles. At the last event before the finish line, I had a medic cut off a large portion of skin on the soles of my feet, and glue back on. I had a large blister that covered the ball of my feet, but after the makeshift repair, I was able to hobble the last two miles to the finish line. Luckily, we were so far ahead in the points, that our speed on the last two miles did not matter.

![Image: Foot with blister under bandage]

_Just before having a medic cut off the skin and re-glue it in place._

Little did the commander know, that myself and my friends in my squad had been nursing an intense anger at officers in our company. So, we trained our butts off for the competition and blew everyone else out of the water. We ended up winning the competition, through pure grit and determination. However, it just illustrates how little there was to do in Iraq, that we had time to create such an elaborate exercise for us to compete.

One of the worst parts of the Army is the problem drinking. Most everyone works very hard for long hours and low pay. A typical day in the Army might involve picking up cigarette
butts for four hours, an hour long lunch, then get chewed out by every Sergeant in the company while also picking up cigarette butts. So it’s not unusual for folks that do that sort of work to tie one on in the barracks after work. But for us, an unusual mix of combat veterans and new soldiers spelled disaster, at least for me.

We had been training with helicopters for the past week. As a seasoned soldier, many of the leaders looked to me to teach tactics to the new soldiers. I was identified as someone to make sergeant soon. Weapons fascinated me since childhood, so now I was simply doing it for living. Despite hating the war now, I felt that I could make an impact on the new soldiers by teaching them both how to stay alive, and how not to provoke needless fights when they did make it to Iraq. After a week of tough training, and high praise by commanders and leaders, I was given a challenge coin by the battalion commander for demonstrating tactical proficiency during a live fire exercise.

After a tough training week, we gathered in the barracks to pre-game before going to the club. I was in a mode to demonstrate I was harder than anyone. I wanted to go harder than anyone else in any setting, so I brought a handle of Wild Turkey. I challenged the new soldiers to a chugging contest and won handily. All I remember after winning the chugging contest was laying on a friend’s floor. When I awoke next, it was on the floor of a jail cell on post. I was completely unnerved by the abrupt coldness of the floor when of the cell when I awoke.

“What is your unit soldier?”

The MP sergeant barked at me in the cell. I told him some random numbers hoping that I could get out of this without my chain of command finding out. Obviously, this was not a winning strategy. The MP came back and told me I could rot in the jail cell if I wanted, or I could give him my real unit so they could come and get me out. I did as asked and was picked up
by whoever was on duty that Saturday. After having one drinking related incident, I was certain this one would get me kicked out.

I felt farther from my goal of getting out and going to college than ever before. I’d allowed the stress of work to drive me to more bad behavior, and now there was no way I’d make sergeant. I was already a little late on making sergeant and this only made it longer. Once we made to Iraq again, much was forgotten about my DUI. In fact, many of the NCOs would tell me “don’t worry man, it happens to a lot of folks.” I felt as though maybe I was making it worse than it was until it came time to promote me.

“White! You didn’t tell me you had another drinking related incident?”

The First Sergeant fumed with anger at me. I had indeed not told him about my previous drinking related incident a year earlier. I knew this meant they would probably process me out and figured he would make me sign a form to relinquish my GI bill benefits and VA healthcare. Applying to jobs on the outside without an honorable discharge, my entire military career, up in smoke.

“I was going to promote you! Now I gotta promote one of those other idiots!”

The first sergeant was on his feet now, angry not at my transgression, but that he couldn’t promote me and desperately needed sergeants. Though he did not want to kick me out, the fact that civilians had not punished me made it so that I’d have to wait until I returned to promote me.

I suffered through the rest of the long deployment, which was basically us sitting in a room waiting on the Iraqi army to ask us for help. When we returned, I was sentenced to 10 days in Waco Federal prison. At first, I was relieved I wouldn’t have to pay more money for a fine. Before I left for court, I filled out a leave form and the commander granted me 10 day leave for prison time, so that I would not be charged with AWOL. Instead of post tour leave, I took a few
weeks off to go to federal prison for my transgression with alcohol. It wasn’t ideal, but it’s made for a great story.

In the courtroom, the prosecutor asked for the most absurd sentence of six months in prison and a 10,000 dollar fine. Luckily, I received ten days in jail and a one hundred dollar fine. Though, I broke down into silent tears when I was escorted out of the courtroom. I was wearing my class A’s with a chest full of medals. The Marshal whispered politely to me “Hey son, let’s take that jacket off, those idiots at the jail will destroy that just for spite.” I nodded, grateful for the slight humanity while in custody. In jail, I was given an orange jump suit and was marched around in a labyrinthine maze of white concrete walls, which were filled with prisoner’s artwork about taking responsibility for your actions. While walking to my cell, a massive African American man started screaming “Look at the chomo! Look at the chomo!” pointing at me as I walked by. Great, now one of these fruitcakes with SS tattoos would kill me in my sleep, because they would think I was a child molester.

When I finally made it to my cell, a man with SS tattoos all over his body welcomed me in with a loud, hokey southern accent. He asked me every question you could imagine, but in a friendly way. I learned later, that this is how the Nazi gangs find out if you are indeed a child molester. While looking at this man’s incredibly intricate Nazi tattoos, I realized quickly that I could have prevented this simply by behaving responsibly. I wouldn’t let the Army, nor PTSD push me to the brink again.

Part II: Germany to New England

I arrived in Germany the same way I arrived at Fort Hood: exhausted and in a wrinkly uniform. This time however, I knew enough to hide from the sergeant until I could find a better looking one. Germany was a place of extraordinary beauty. Green mountains like West Virginia,
but without the strip mines that dot the landscape. Rather than black-smoke-belching coal trucks, heavy industry was mostly construction and high-tech manufacturing. Even impoverished areas of Germany seemed ok. At least in Germany, higher education or a trade was a reasonable option for anyone.

Some things are different about soldiering in Europe. Headquarters buildings don’t have air conditioning. The temperature during the day was barely 80 degrees on the hottest day in August. Coming from the sweltering Fort Hood, this was a relief, until the winter time came about. In the winter, the sun sets long before 3:00 PM and it feels like you are in a constant darkness for most of the year. The snow cakes the landscape and tenaciously sticks to the ground for the entirety of the winter. The base I was assigned to, Baumholder, Germany, was supposedly built during World War I in a location where French airplanes could not see the Germans due to constant overcast. I do not know how true that is, but I do know that the base was nearly constantly overcast, even in the summer. Further still, it was constantly drizzling with rarely a day without rain. Before those wonderful seasons and weather could hit me, though, I was assigned to 3-4 infantry under the newly indecent 170th Infantry Brigade combat team; a unit whose only recent history was a deployment to Russia during their revolution in support of the White Guard.

When I spoke to the personnel NCO, he asked me if I could run well. I said, “Ok,” when he said well you better get really damned good at it. As I continued the process of entering the new unit, something seemed off. At first, I had a barracks room with no key because the sergeant was too lazy to go find it. Then, there were brand new privates that were empowered to scream at specialists like myself for no reason. I recognized another soldier wearing a combat patch, when he simply told me, “That’s how it is in this piece of shit unit.” The mood among folks who’d
already deployed and were on their second was swiftly blackening. It seemed as if the only troops who were treated as professionals were troops that had been assigned to the unit before they renamed. Privates that were barely out of basic training would order me to do menial tasks, and when I looked at sergeants in disbelief, they simply re-enforced them—a strange way to behave, considering my knowledge, experience, and competence in the field.

Inside the unit’s buildings were immaculately clean floors and polished hallways. They were the last building in Germany to have floor polish, as the German government had outlawed its use for environmental reasons. Charlie company ¾ didn’t care about the German government—or the American government for that matter. They did whatever they damn well pleased and dared anyone to do something about it. The first thing we did in the unit was not a Friday gut check physical training session, but a Monday morning 10-mile run, followed by a month of daily 10-mile runs. It was a grueling pace to begin with, however, far more grueling was the punishment that went to soldiers that fell out of runs, even if they caught back up.

At the beginning of the run, our first sergeant took a step back to give us a lecture on running.

“Men, we are designed to run. We are hunters. We are infantrymen, we kill for a living. We run for a living. So, we are gonna run faster and longer than any other company in the United States Army!”

A few shouts from sycophantic junior NCOs bounced around the formation. I’d ran 10 miles multiple times, but not at a very fast pace. The commander then took over the formation and began his part of the speech.

“Ok men, running is what first sergeant and I do. If you can’t run well, you will either learn to run in my company or we will break you. The Army needs people that are physically fit,
if you can’t do it, go home.” Which makes a lot of sense, until you realize it’s not easy to just jump on a plane and tell the Army goodbye.

The commander then announced the run formally after calling the company to attention.

“Charlie company will run 10 miles at a nine-minute mile pace. We will take the route via Battalion Avenue to Ball Buster Hill. We will run off post down the mountain to the turn designated by Staff Sergeant Cooley yesterday. If you fall out of today’s run, you will re-do the run tonight at the track at 1700 hours! Riitiiight face, double time, march!”

Just like that, we were off on our first ten-mile run of the week. For the first few miles I thought it was not terrible, and the scenery around Germany was indeed breathtaking in the morning dew. However, every time a company begins, it feels like you’re on a train that you wish had brakes. Since I knew it was going to be a long run, I didn’t even attempt to sing cadence with the company to save my breath. When we got to the base of the notorious Ball Buster Hill, it was a very long hill leading to the top of a mountain. There were two sections to it, it leveled off after a half mile. Then another mile to the top of the mountain. As soon as we took off up the mountain, I slowed down. Coming from Fort Hood and Iraq, I wasn’t used to running inclines. I thought surely they’ll give me an alibi for my first week. I caught up with the rest of the company at the top of the hill and kept on trucking. It was a tough slog, but it wasn’t anything I could not handle with a little practice. But the Army never has time for you to practice anything, you either kill yourself to exceed the standard, or you did not try at all.

As we returned to the company after one hour and 45 minutes of running, I was exhausted but not totally spent. I figured in a few weeks I’d have the hills down pat.

“If you fell out of this run, fall out to my right, your left!"
A big burley platoon sergeant from Africa shouted at the formation. I still figured that as long as I caught up, I wasn’t a fallout.

“White, you didn’t make the run. Come over here!”

The sergeant took my name down and said with a smirk, “See you at 1700 down there at the football field.” I was thinking there was no way this could go on every day, because it wouldn’t allow me time to heal long enough to get strong enough to run the hills like a deer. Instead, this process went on for weeks. At three weeks, my knees were beginning to swell up like basketballs when I asked the medic for a pass to the aid station. I asked the medic to send me to the aid station, as I’d learned you cannot be refused medical treatment in the Army.

“First sergeant says life, limb, or eyesight”

“First sergeant doesn’t control the entire Army, man. I need a heal day.”

“Sorry, man. No can do.”

Usually medics pride themselves on their independence, but not this one. Other soldiers were breaking down swiftly. Some had been at the twice a day ten mile runs for weeks longer than me. Others had recently completed a 34-mile ruck march. These were things even Green Berets and Rangers didn’t do. After two deployments to that hell zone Iraq, I was in Europe, hopefully to have fun alongside my Army career. But subject to overly sadistic NCOs and officers who thought they were in the lost Ranger battalion, I’d be under their thumb for at least 12 months. The intensity of it all scared me, I wasn’t sure if I could handle yet another grueling five years at this pace. I had it in me to survive this for a few years, but no one is that super human.

Because I’d just returned from deployment, the current Secretary of Defense had declared that soldiers had equal amounts of deployed time to equal amounts time at home station. The
time became known as dwell time. It was a great move by Robert Gates who’d taken over the Army and sent soldiers down range for twelve to fifteen months at a time, with far less time at home station. Thousands of soldiers had missed weddings, births, and all manner of important family issues. It should be noted here that officers often go for several years being in deployable status, only to rotate to a non-deployed status within five years after commission. It does not happen to all of them, but it is rare an officer is on the line for more than nine months. For enlisted men like me, it was not uncommon to spend as much as nine years training and deploying with front line infantry units. They wonder why we have a tough time reintegrating with people who’ve never even considered using violent force against their fellow human beings. In a perfect world, I would have been transitioning to a training phase after two deployments. However, in the global war on terror, I was but another number to deploy downrange yet again, until I either caught a bullet in my forehead, or spazzed out so bad I would have to be hospitalized.

As a result of this dwell time rule implemented by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, many senior leaders were pushing their soldiers to waive their dwell time between deployments. Ironically, the Army prides itself on taking care of soldiers, however, when they want soldiers to charge a machine gun nest, they tend not to care as much. Since I was assigned to a unit going to Afghanistan, according to their senior leaders, leaving any time after the rest of them was grounds for calling me a coward. After two deployments and more combat experience than most soldiers in the military, I was reduced to a coward for wanting to spend a few months outside of a combat zone rather than a few more months inside one. I would be called before the battalion sergeant major with a crew of five other soldiers in similar situations every Friday. Some soldiers signed the waiver, some did not. I refused to sign it. I feel and still feel that I had every right to
take advantage of the benefit created by Robert Gates, and I was not going to let a sergeant major who’d never experienced what I had to go on a sand bag filling tour in Afghanistan.

One morning after being called a coward by the sergeant major for fourth time in a row, he threw his glasses on his desk and stormed out of the room. The other soldier, a newly pinned Sergeant, and I looked at each other in distress. He’d recently been awarded a Purple Heart, and was given perhaps two inches more leeway than myself in not wanting to return so quickly. We smirked at each other and laughed, because ultimately, the only thing this sergeant major could do was yell; he had no authority to force us to sign the waiver documents. When the sergeant major returned, he asked us if we’d like to work directly for the brigade commander. They weren’t supposed to leave until my mandatory time at home station was up. After two deployments, I was not eager to go to Afghanistan with less than two months in between deployments. The sergeant in the room and myself said simultaneously, “Yes we do, Sergeant Major,” and walked straight to the office of the brigade sergeant major for an interview.

On the way to the brigade Sergeant Major’s office, the new sergeant and I discussed why we were not eager to go directly downrange after just having returned. There were rumors about the brigade Sergeant Major that he was even more strict than the one we just came from. But we’d both decided that we didn’t have any choice but to at least see how bad this Sergeant Major behaved. However, we were pleasantly surprised with his professional demeanor and to the point attitude about everything he said to us. He was not interested in games, but professional output. That was something I understood well, far better than the threats I received before.

“White, how many deployments you got?”

“Two, Sergeant Major.”
“Are you stupid?”

“Negative, Sergeant Major.”

“Ok, you’re on the team. Go see your new platoon sergeant.”

I was instantly relieved to be in a new unit. I did not even wait for the other soldier that came with me to ask what happened. I darted out of the room and went straight to my new platoon sergeant. The first question I asked was to someone with the same rank.

“Hey, do y’all do ten mile runs here?”

“What? No, four miles max. We’ve done one seven miles, once.”

Pure relief washed over me as I realized I was in a normal unit again. Despite working directly for the brigade commander, I was relieved of the lack of intensity I’d just gone through at the other battalion. Soldiers were committing suicide, NCOs were going completely off the wall on people, and I’d low crawled in the mud three times since reporting. Unless you’re in a live fire, there is no reason to ruin a uniform like that in garrison. While the Command Security Detachment would have plenty of its own stupid, it wouldn’t be nearly as stupid as what I’d experienced in the regular infantry units in Germany. The relief was palatable, the welcome reception we received from the rest of the platoon was in accordance with everything I had experienced so far in the Army. Folks were eager to learn more about us and train together for survival in our upcoming deployment.

Shortly after reassignment to Command Security, I met my soon-to-be wife on OkCupid. She would prove to be the Godsend I needed in my life. It was not a love at first site type of affair, but slowly earning each other’s trust until it was nearly impenetrable. She was not only beautiful, but my team mate. She’d been through the same working class struggles as I, if not worse. She loved punk rock and knew every Mexican dish under the sun. So, I was eager for mid
tour leave to go to Mexico and meet the punk rocker I found on OkCupid one lonely night in Germany. During my post deployment time in the Army and early college career, my wife was instrumental in helping me through the worst of days. While the army brought down everything it could on top of me, my wife was an excellent support to keep me going during those dark—even black—times.

Worse than the hazing itself, Germany was intensely lonely. The sun goes down at 3:00 PM in the winter. It’s a long walk to the desolate town, Baumholder, which mostly closed up after 4:00 PM, and only bars filled with lonely soldiers or elderly German men existed. All my old friends in Texas were at another duty station or out of the Army altogether. I felt like I was stuck in a dark place by myself. I was subject to all manner of torture until finally arriving at command security detachment. Of course, the Command Security Detachment had torture methods all its own, but nowhere near the insanity of ¾ infantry, the suicide company. Despite having new friends in CSD, I was eager to get the deployment over with, so I could go to college.

Since I had fought so hard to retain my dwell time that Secretary Robert Gates so kindly extended, I had come to a point where I could no longer waive the dwell time. Clearly, some angry soldier savvier than I had discussed this abuse of power with his congressional member and ended the practice altogether. It blew me away that had I have waived it just a few weeks earlier, I’d be in Afghanistan among 120 men that hated my guts. Since I had waited, now I had to wait two months to join a unit that appeared to love me. So, with the willingness to waive my dwell time and its denial by higher ranking soldiers than I, I stayed at home in Baumholder Germany, awaiting my order to Afghanistan while my friends headed down range without me.
Since this was my third and final deployment, my plan afterwards was to get back to Fort Hood, drive down to Austin, Texas, and go to University of Texas at Austin. I kept that in the back of my mind every time I’d get exhausted with the idiocy of Baumholder, Germany or camp span Afghanistan. I felt like I was always on the edge of a violent outburst. Sometimes a sergeant would correct me for a minor infraction like boots bloused wrong or hands in the pockets, and I would seethe with the white-hot intensity of 1000 suns. If only this idiot could see in my mind, that I’ve stabbed him with my pen and was enjoying watching him shuffle off the mortal coil. Then I’d flash back to reality.

“Roger that, sergeant! I’ll make sure I don’t put my hands in my pockets from now on! Thank you for correcting me.”

The sergeant in question always felt like he’d done a real good job because of my enthusiasm. Luckily, they couldn’t see the murderous anger underneath my enthusiastic veneer. That enthusiasm would end up getting me sergeant. Little did anyone know, besides my own first line supervisor, that I was carrying six years of burning, PTSD-laden rage. It’s hard to overstate how intense the PTSD rage can be—it’s all consuming. It takes over your actions and puts you in dangerous positions. It jumps to conclusions quickly like in the military and must withstand all the force of your anger. Some folks this comes out in violence, others, tears. Luckily, I’d learned to control its violence and keep it under wrap when required. Unfortunately, the Army rewards angry outbursts. Sergeants that give angry lectures to their troops are often rewarded as tough, but good leaders.

The time before I deployed was some of the darkest times I spent in the military. I was stuck in a building made for two hundred soldiers, by myself. It was nice to be in a building without a sergeant, but it got lonely and fast. The darkness of Germany’s winter only exacerbated the
loneliness. While on rear detachment, as they called it, we spent hours each day cleaning parking lots and areas on the base, of debris and garbage. After 1700 or 5pm, we were released, but it was already pitch-black outside. The cost of getting to a local train station was too much, and I was mostly restricted to a rural base in Germany, without a community or group of friends. It became more depressing as time wore on and I worried about my own safety sometimes. I was not sure whether I’d go crazy and jump out a barracks window, or worse, go crazy on a senior NCO or officer.

The night I left for Afghanistan, I had my last cheeseburger in the terminal at Ramstein Airfield. I sat there thinking how stupid it was that I was going to combat zone for a third time—all because I wanted to go to Europe. I was mentally kicking myself while a senior NCO hanger-on chomped on a burger next to me. I looked to my front—a dense, recently promoted kid four years younger than me, Sergeant Casas, pointed to the television to laugh at something he saw, Most likely a cartoon. Bits of food flew out of his mouth and landed to his front. Yet another idiot promoted over me due to my last year at Fort Hood. The Senior NCO that happened to tag along with us was rambling on about his success at investment before retirement.

“You know, if you do it right, you’ll never be broke?”

The NCO leaned over to me and my buddy eating cheeseburgers to show us his bank receipt.

“You see that?” His bank account read 70,000 dollars—an impressive sum to young soldiers, but kind of weak in reality. He ranted for 45 minutes while I sat in silent anger. The two NCOs, one junior one senior, talking about things they had no idea about, open mouths chomping on greasy cheeseburgers in a mall food court. It was a microcosm of the United States military, and not an unusual lunch scene anywhere in its world.
It was, however, a surreal setting. Ramstein airbase PX looks like a normal stateside mall: cheeseburgers, GameStop, and Levi jeans. The only indication that you were in Germany were the bratwurst sellers out front. The plane was a simple civilian plane that we were taking to Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan. We were to stay there in Manas for a week or so, until another plane could be filled up for a flight to Afghanistan. I was coming to Afghanistan late with Sergeant Casas to catch up with our brigade Command Security Detail.

We finally loaded the plane, when Sergeant Casas, four years younger than me ordered “White, stay where I can see you.” This was a man who’d deployed once in two years, while I had five years and two deployments under my belt, though this sergeant enjoyed kicking soldiers when they were down. He enjoyed the torture, because he knew I could not do anything about it. I took it in stride, knowing he’d be assigned to someone else once we arrived in Afghanistan. Any leader with half a brain could tell this relationship was coming to a needless confrontation, considering Casas’ constant semi-bullying style of leadership with someone twice his competence, it was only a matter of time before something bad happened.

All of this insanity was merely something I had to endure. Once we boarded the plane from Germany to Manas, I realized it would not be much longer before I was assigned to a regular squad. As the plane circled from above, I could see the snowcapped mountains and green trees stretching for miles. The cold base appeared to be by itself. Yurts dotted the interior of the camp. The telltale military green tents in perfect grid formation were to be our homes for the next week. It was freezing cold, and the safety of Kyrgyzstan shield us from the warzone that was Afghanistan just to our south.

Manas airbase wasn’t much to look at. It was a typical military deployment camp. There was a bar with a sign that said “only permanent party soldiers” meaning only the military
members that were stationed at Manas were allowed. Soldiers in transit to Afghanistan were to stay far away. There was a small PX and a dozen Yurts with trinkets inside from the old Soviet Union. I didn’t care about a single piece of it. I’d been to two other similar camps on the way to Iraq. The military set up bazaars for soldiers to buy gifts for their families. Each Yurt was filled with junk to send to my loved ones back home, as a macabre reminder that their son was on their way to war. This was my third deployment, I hated it before it even started.

That night, in the soldier’s theater, a theater that looked like three clamshell tents attached to one another, filled with both video games and movies for soldiers on their way to deployment, I sat chatting with my soon-to-be wife on my tiny laptop between movies. The movie up next was the new Tron movie. I was one of three soldiers in the theater, using the only plugs we could find. I was psyched to see the new Tron movie, when a young Lieutenant popped his head in the door.

“We’re gonna watch The Good, the Bad and The Ugly, not Tron.”

“Sir, we’ve been waiting to watch Tron” Another soldier spoke up to the young officer. The officer then went into a speech about the quality of The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, and how it was an American classic. If we wanted to watch Tron, we could watch it after this classic Clint Eastwood movie. I could not have been angrier at that point. Yet another senior ranking jerk stepping all over soldier he outranked so he could get his way. Typical Army nonsense; preach about taking care of soldiers, then openly fuck them over in any and all ways. It was a minor annoyance, but one of thousands that continued to stack itself onto my anger.

If I survived this deployment, the Army might kill me with death by a thousand cuts. A junior enlisted soldier endures all manner of indignity throughout the day. An officer might scoff at my hilarious upbringing in the West Virginian mountains, a Sergeant First Class might attempt
to impress you with his weak retirement account, another might ruin the thing you’ve waited on for five hours. All of this, on top of the seething anger, lay a pile of dead friends, and an incentive to behave stoically rather than realistically. I’d become a master of compartmentalizing my anger, or I’d have shot one those officers screwing up the movie that night.

The next leg of the flight was to Mazar I Sharif Airbase, a German-run base in the biggest city in Northern Afghanistan. Landing at what we came to call MEZ felt familiar. Despite it being primarily Germans, an army base is an army base. Tents stretching for miles, a church that converts to all other faiths on different days. Smaller European contingents had their own sections of the camp but it was open for all. Swedes, Finns, Danes and many others were everywhere. Europeans always have to look cool for some reason. The Germans had beards, the Danes had ear rings and even some men had pony tails.

Something about the Germans always seemed a little better than us. Their equipment looks nicer, the male soldiers all had beards and iron jaws like a GQ magazine. The female soldiers all had long blond pony tails. Their chow hall always had good cheese and bread. They were allowed two beers per day. Their weapons and technology were always better. Their navigation computer in their large vehicles were the size of an iPad to our oversized 1980s PC. Their machine gun turrets were all unmanned and remote controlled with an MG3 on top. Also, German soldiers were impossibly polite. An American soldier is liable to simply say “fuck you” to everyone that walks by, while s German might say “Hallo!” I suppose it’s the difference between the Bronx and Berlin.

Despite the nice European soldiers dotting the landscape, I was filled with anger. No matter what I did, I was surrounded by that decision to re-enlist. Once you sign the contract, its
iron clad. That contract must be upheld; the Army on the other hand can do whatever pleases them. The soldier has to accept it. Despite giving them over eight years of my life, they never felt obligated to do the right thing by me. And so that anger was constantly boiling under the surface. The mood I carried with me cannot be understated, it was the blackest of black. I’d contemplated the bullet as a way out on multiple occasions, but also realized I’d never act on that fantasy.

After a few days at MEZ, we found a helicopter to Camp Spann. My friend, Sergeant Dritchas, was waiting for me on the Afghan airfield. He brought a gator, a small golf cart looking car that seated two people with a small truck bed on the back. He talked about why I need to make sergeant and make it fast. I was not interested in becoming a sergeant at that point but figured it would not hurt considering I’d spent so long in the army as it were. If Dritchas wanted to make me a sergeant, I’d do my damnedest to get there. Furthermore, it was a relief to see a friend after living among thieves, lowlifes, and cheats back in Germany for so long.

“We’re gonna get you promoted to sergeant as fast as possible. Can you max your PT test?”

“Fuck no, are you crazy?”

“No, but you better get to work on it.” My team leader said.

I groaned, knowing that it was going to be an uphill, unfair battle to sergeant. We sped through the camp to our living quarters. Two squads were already on their way out the door.

“Heyyyyyy Whiiiite” many soldiers in the tents welcomed my arrival. It felt good to see the folks I’d trained with, but I was not eager to sit in Afghanistan for another year. There wasn’t a chance in hell that anything we did would matter. I arrived shortly before the Bin Laden operation and nothing changed for the soldiers in my platoon. The primary difference was that
once Petraeus took command from Chrystal, the Burger King and Tim Horton’s returned to Kandahar airfield, which we never visited.

A day in the life in Afghanistan was much different than the constantly shifting, extreme violence of the first deployment. In Afghanistan, you could almost plan your day around movements to the airport to pick up and return senior officers. In the months we did not roll out the wire that often, we would train our bodies as hard as possible. Some folks took to calling the deployment a fat camp, but it wasn’t that easy. We’d just been conditioned by previous deployments. To call this anything but a vacation seemed strange.

As an example of the moronic routine we began. I once got into a tremendous amount of trouble for not wearing sandals in the shower. I did not like to walk on rocks with sandals, so I would shower and put my shoes on afterwards. Army regulation dictates that you must wear socks while wearing shoes. In my view, this was if you were in a normal duty area, not taking a shower before a 12 hour patrol the next morning. Nonetheless, my platoon sergeant caught me not wearing shoes out of the corner of his eye one day. My squad leader had been desperately attempting to get me promoted and came to me right away.

“White, I know this is dumb, but Sergeant Jacobs saw you without shower shoes on the way to the shower.”

“I wear them so I won’t cut myself on rocks on the way.”

“Believe me, I get it, but he’s wanting to prove he meets the standard.”

“Ok, fine.”

I followed his rules absolutely to the letter and did it with such enthusiastic vigor the other troops and the platoon sergeant could hear my sarcasm. But, he’d brought it on himself with pursuing what we call chicken shit in the Army, that he couldn’t really yell at me for
following his rules. It didn’t stop him from preventing my promotion for as long as he possibly could, but it also didn’t prevent me from popping into the leaders tent to update my squad leader about my weekly haircuts, fresh uniforms, and daily workout routines. I’d passed the point of caring about the military, and I felt as though I was really pushing too hard. However, I’d essentially lost it by this point as well. I caught myself angrily confronting Afghanis after the deaths of comrades and telling Germans to fuck off when seeing them entering their recreation area with tall beers, saying “Hallo!” as I passed by.

A day in the life at Camp Spann varied by your position within the military. For myself, I was essentially locked down to a back corner of the camp with the rest of my infantry compadres, foreign and domestic. Next to our tent was a tent full of Canadians. We lower enlisted absolutely loved the Canucks. They were friendly and felt a lot like having a bunch of buddies down the street next door. I would often sit up at night chewing and smoking tobacco with Canadian NCOs, swapping shop talk and tactical procedures. We got along amazingly well, and luckily, we’re friends to this day. We often tried to work together, but the bureaucracy of working between two foreign militaries proved nearly impossible to overcome. However, having friends downrange is never bad thing.

Our tents were small and were shaped like small half dome structures. Supported by aluminum supports and wooden slats on the ground. The floor was covered in a washable, tough vinyl. We would clean the floor meticulously every week, if the mission allowed. When you opened the door to the tent, there short walk way into the main body of the tent, and bunk beds lined the hall of each. In each tent, we had enough space to allow soldiers to sleep on the bottom bunk and put their personal effects on top of their bed. Sometimes we would fight over space, but for the most part, it was a fairly comfortable living situation. The senior leaders of the
platoon lived several tents down, with the same size tent, only with three squad leaders, one
platoon sergeant living inside. For a time, we had an officer assigned to our platoon, but since it
did not appear that he did much more than play video games and act like frat boy, he was quickly
assigned to another sector with more officer work.

The drive from the airport to Camp Spann became an almost daily routine. Camp Spann
was located on the far west of Mazar-I-Sharif and airport. Our task typically was to bring senior
officers from Camp Spann, where we lived, to the airport at Camp MEZ. Inside our camp, you
had to drive through an Afghan army portion. Every time I passed through the Afghan side, I
would wince. You never knew when an Afghan soldier would turn on you. We’d already had
three green on blue incidents, or Afghan killing a US or NATO member. So, when I would step
from the American side to the Afghan side, I made a show to let anyone know that I was loading
my rifle, even though we weren’t technically supposed to load our rifles on their side.

Camp Spann, where I spent most of my time, had a small US/NATO side and the Afghan
side. At the entrance of the main camp, an old Soviet airplane with Afghan graffiti all over it lay
crushed and defeated on its display stand. Just a bit further from the entrance, was the location of
the beginning of the war, the Qala-Ijangi fortress. A CIA officer and Green Beret, named Mike
Spann, were killed by Taliban prisoners who revolted during their detention. Luckily, we never
went near that camp, but it could be seen from a ladder inside Camp Spann. Inside Camp,
Spann’s Afghan side was a massive parade field with concrete stands to the front. The US side of
Camp Spann was demarcated by hard barriers: twenty-foot tall sandbagged walls, heavy
mechanical gates that would stop a tank. We even had machine guns pointed into the Afghan
side of the camp, and for good reason. It wasn’t unusual for the Afghan government to threaten
us on the news. Furthermore, Afghan Army soldiers were liable to shoot at American troops that
were supposed to be helping them. I can’t say I blame the Afghans, American soldiers who’ve never had to think about where their water is coming from were telling Afghans how to soldier. I probably wouldn’t take too kindly to the kid from Harvard showing up in West Virginia to tell me how fish either.

Inside our camp was a long corridor called shooters ally. Shooters alley had a local legend about it that an Afghan had shot an American woman in the Navy for running in a tank top. Her bare skin had apparently offended his sensibilities. The camp itself, Camp Mike Spann, was named after several Americans were shot to death by Afghan soldiers in earlier stages of the war. The first US casualty of the war happened just outside the camp 15 years prior, when a Green Beret from West Virginia was killed by a prisoner. Despite the history of violence at the camp, it was to be a quiet space during my time in Afghanistan. Indeed, it wasn’t until we left the population centers that we had to worry about any kind of danger at all. There was a brief dangerous time when I first arrived, but it too turned out to be fairly easy.

The week before I arrived, some Christian fundamentalist in Florida decided it would be a solid idea to desecrate a Quran in a very public fashion. The local Afghan fundamentalists went haywire, taking people prisoner at the UN compound and decapitated a couple of Polish security guards about five miles from our compound. I was in no mood for the Taliban’s nonsense, nor was I in the mood for some fundamentalist back home causing someone to shoot me. Sadly, the UN compound in town probably did more for Afghanistan than any other foreign institution. Despite this initial worrisome period of the deployment, the primary danger we faced was getting caught out of uniform by a senior NCO.

The days that weren’t filled with patrols were filled with physical training and tactical training. We rarely had downtime, so to fill my time, I made sure to work on my truck nearly
constantly. An MATV is not a jet, but it does require a good deal of work to keep in good working order. I never wanted to have my vehicle go down on account of something I did, so I worked on it constantly. If my turret didn’t work quite right, I’d go and oil it and replace some bolts, and make sure it took me at least two hours to accomplish the goal. I also made sure to install whatever crazy thing my squad leader, with an engineering degree, wanted me to install. By the end of the deployment, we had safari lights, a stereo, and a horn that would play whatever horn sound you could find on the internet. We also had a large speaker on the front of our truck from which the truck commander could shout things from the cabin. I was able to avoid needless busy work and modify my truck to my heart’s and squad leader’s content. My anger had a way of dissipating when turning wrenches and I made sure to turn them often.

Since I was the gunner on the lead truck, I would often have to assist the driver and truck commander on the best way forward. Roads in Afghanistan disappear in a split second under moon dust or shoddy craftsmanship. The road under us was barely jutting out from the mountain next to it. Wind swept dust across it as if it were to wither away before our eyes. Sand storms and whirl winds would pop up all around us. The heat above the truck was unbearable. Luckily, the new army trucks had strong air conditioners and my legs were quite cool, but up above the turret, my body, heavy with armor would sweat profusely. Somewhere out ahead, a Navy SEAL camp, that our sergeant major must visit was our mission. On the map, from the hardball road, we had about six miles of nothing. From my perspective, it was little more than a goat path and we were about to take giant up armored bread truck onto brittle sand swept roads, up a mountain to find Navy Seals.
One of the primary killers of soldiers this deployment was truck roll overs. Our new vehicles were twenty feet tall behemoths, with air brakes and a massive RPG cage on the outside. It looked like a giant armored bread truck with a basketball net on the outside. They were easy to drive despite their size but could easily rollover on the unstable Afghan roads, chopping the gunners in half. I was committed to living through my final deployment, so I always brushed up on rollover drills on my down time. I no longer cared about anything but surviving the final deployment. I wanted my soldiers under my charge to survive as well. My mood of the military had blackened to the point of no return. When I looked around at night, at the larger bases, I just thought about how insane the cost to keep 50,000 soldiers in a country like Afghanistan. What were we doing there? Particularly after Osama Bin Laden’s killing, there was little reason to be there. The strategy or tactical assessment changed constantly. It was impossible to tell anyone
why we wanted to be there, let alone why we would torture soldiers with extreme training before going into an occupation mission.

On one occasion, we were to go to a Navy Seal camp to check on it for the senior commander in our area. The road was not on the map, nor was it discernable to the naked eye. It was simply two bushes 15 feet apart at the base of a mountain. I tried to make out what it was for the convoy behind us, and just told the truck to keep going. Once we’d crept around the base of the mountain, road like shape appeared underneath us.

“You sure this is the right way, Sergeant Moore?”

“It is on the map.”

“Fuckin Navy Seals are up here?”

“I guess!” Sergeant Moore began laughing at the idiocy of it all. Here we were, risking our lives to simply visit a camp one might reach on a helicopter. Despite this and the thick swirling of dust surrounding our truck, we pressed on into the oblivion. As we crept forward, we would sometimes pause in attempt to allow the dust to die down enough to see in front of us. Inevitably that attempt would fail. I was standing in the turret when I heard over my headset, the thick Bostonian accent of my driver yelling:

“Oh, shit!”

The truck lurched to the left hard, a move that normally would have sent the gunner slamming into the side of their turret. Since I’d been practicing, I swiftly fell directly into the bottom of the truck, locking my feet under the driver’s seat to stay in place. I figured we’d already be rolling by the time I landed and was clenched my fists and face. Alas, the soldier in the back was screaming with laughter. It was just a bump, that was slightly exaggerated by our dramatic crawl through the storm. I’d overreacted and now we were all laughing at my caution. I
can’t say that I’m ashamed or felt cowardly over the reaction; I was not eager to be split in half by a bad move a driver made. Furthermore, if I was going to die in Afghanistan, it was going to be in combat, not because someone fell on me.

I was beginning to wonder if I would make it out of the Army at all; this was merely the first two months of a ten month tour in Afghaniland.

Eventually, I was I was promoted to sergeant on my third and final deployment. Since I was stuck at the rank below sergeant for so long, my pay raise per month was nearly 500 dollars. My squad leader and team leader had fought for me to be promoted for so long that I’d begun to think it was a pipedream. When I joined the army, I indeed wanted to be sergeant, and my goal before my disillusionment was to become a platoon sergeant and retire in a staff position in twenty years. That desire had long since passed, but I was eager to become a sergeant since I’d spent so much time in the military, it only made sense to get promoted. I was an expert at the Army’s current way of war. I lacked much formal training but knew precisely how to keep soldier and myself alive which, at that point in my career, was all I cared about. It made me sick thinking that I’d re-enlisted in Iraq on my first deployment while some never had the choice whether or not to re-enlist.

The process of promotion is not for the faint of heart. You go before a panel of first sergeants, the highest-ranking sergeants in the company, and a sergeant major. You are asked a battery of questions, chosen from a selection of topics on my military tasks. Some questions might be how long the hair on the side of your head can before being out of regulation. Further, it might be about the procedure for calling in a medical helicopter for injured troops. The most time-intensive portion of the entire board was the NCO creed, a three paragraph creed about what a sergeant’s job is in the military. It is difficult to memorize, more difficult to master, and
without a perfect rendition of it, you will not make sergeant. My friend and I spent hours reciting this to one another, sometimes one paragraph at a time, sometimes the entire thing. Eventually, we nailed it. However, it was not asked for in my final sergeant’s board. Here is the Creed of the Non-Commissioned Officer, which is recited often once you enter into its ranks.

“No one is more professional than I. I am a noncommissioned officer, a leader of Soldiers. As a noncommissioned officer, I realize that I am a member of a time honored corps, which is known as "The Backbone of the Army". I am proud of the Corps of noncommissioned officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the military service and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself. I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety.

Competence is my watchword. My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind—accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers. I will strive to remain technically and tactically proficient. I am aware of my role as a noncommissioned officer. I will fulfill my responsibilities inherent in that role. All Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership. I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own. I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed. I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment.

Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine. I will earn their respect and confidence as well as that of my Soldiers. I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike. I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders. I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage. I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget that we are professionals, noncommissioned officers, leaders!”
It took me a few months to finally make sergeant because of the point system. The Army, at the time, assigned points to various career progression milestones, such as deployment time, classes taken, schools attended, and even college coursework. Since I had quite a low point total at 400, it took a few months for it to lower and allow my promotion. Right before my mid tour leave, I was promoted to sergeant. I asked my squad leader if I could wear the rank, even without a ceremony. He quickly understood and allowed me to wear my rank home. After hiding my demotions, it was nice to show my recent success in the military. Despite knowing the sergeant’s life was not an easy one.

The first thing they do to you, especially in a combat arms unit, is let the senior ranking sergeants beat the shit out of you. Before my time in the army, when rank was pinned on your collar, the senior NCOs would simply hammer fist the pins of your new rank into your skin and collar bone. For the new uniforms, rank sat squarely in your chest, along the sternum. So, the new tradition was to punch the soldier in the sternum. Typically, infantry Army sergeants are not weak, though they may be dumb. These particular sergeants were both strong and dumb, and proceeded to sock me hard in my sternum. The recently promoted soldiers simply wound up, appeared to strike as hard as possible, only to miss at the last second with a hand outstretched in congratulations. Many recent sergeants had no desire to inflict that pain on someone else. However, it wasn’t long for me before I was indeed punching one of my own soldiers in the chest during a promotion ceremony. It was a tradition, after all.

By this point, I’d spent more than six years dedicated to wheeled infantry operations in combat and in training. In between my first and second deployments, I trained on how to respond to being separated from your platoon in terrain similar to Afghanistan. I’d already worked for fourteen months in Iraq in actual wheeled operations, in which we recovered vehicles and pulled
security in every possible environment. At one point, we even had a threat of chemical weapons because of chlorine bombs in our sector.\(^2\) I felt as though, even with the extreme terrain of Afghanistan, I was certain of my ability to do the navigational work required of such a unit. By the end of my deployment, I was leading over 100 truck convoys of supplies back to the airfield to be flown to Germany. The pressure was immense, but after so many years under life and death conditions, Mazr-I-Sharif seemed like a walk in the park.

Since I was the newest sergeant, I was given the worst soldiers to travel across the country. Since I was an expert at wheeled infantry operations at this point, it wasn’t too bad, but I couldn’t take my eyes off them even for a second. One of my soldiers would wear his dark eye protection so he could catch a few Z’s before I noticed he was sleeping on the job. I found myself wishing for just one major combat situation in order to snap them into constant vigilance like I’d done on my first deployment. Nothing wakes up the fear of death like a quick snapping bullet whizzing by your head.

While these patrols were mostly quiet, we would occasionally receive fire. In the new MATVs, it would have taken quite a round to burst through the armor. In some cases, the sergeant major’s own convoy was hit by rifle fire, and only the soldiers in that truck were aware of it. During one patrol from Northern Central Afghanistan through one of the more dangerous sectors, a truck took a few rounds in the side. Instead of winding up the entire patrol with a red alert radio message, they chose to quietly notify brigade and let them know that nothing was out of the ordinary. This approach was not appreciated by our sergeant major, in any shape form or fashion.

At some point in the patrol, we had taken fire. However, once all four trucks were on the road, there was as much as 1 kilometer between us all. The Taliban’s spotter would obviously watch our movements and sometimes take potshots at us as we passed. Our patrol leader, who was nearly a kilometer away, took a few shots and reported it higher via his computer. It was like a direct message on Twitter, only secure. He neglected to tell the rest of the convoy what happened and thought he would be writing up combat awards when he made it to homebased.

We’d almost settled completely into our squad tents when our patrol leader burst into the tent.

“All NCOs on that last patrol meet me at Sgt Major Grinston’s tent.”

A summoning to the brigade sergeant major was never good. He was in charge of more than 5,000 soldiers. If he were calling you into his office, it was not likely for a good reason. Unphased by this normal logic, Sgt. Torres, who’d just sent our death warrants to brigade, proudly hollered into the room. “Hey, NCOs on that last patrol, let’s go!” Torres blathered to me about getting his guys CIBs (the Combat Infantryman’s Badge). However, something seemed off about this meeting. Despite him being our main charge, I did not see anything good coming from the brigade sergeant major summoning us to his office post patrol. Something was wrong, and I was about to find out how wrong it was.

Walking into the room with other sergeants, I spotted our platoon sergeant, lips pursed in abject anger. All I could think was how bad this was going to look for him and how bad he was going to punish us afterwards. There was no doubt that Torres had screwed up—badly—but in the army they tend to punish anyone and everything that might have been in charge. The atmosphere in the room was dark, and when the brigade sergeant major arrived, it felt like Darth
Vader himself entered the room. All oxygen left, and I witnessed an unholy dressing down of one of the most powerful people I’d ever met—my platoon sergeant.

“At ease,” I called when the sergeant major entered the room. Typically, after calling at ease, the sergeant major would say “Carry on” quickly, to put everyone at ease. Today was not going to be an easy day, though.

The sergeant major’s eyes burned with an intensity I’ve not seen since. He slammed his fist down onto his desk so hard I was sure he’d broken it.

“Can anyone explain to me why I’m getting shot at and don’t know it?”

The giddy smirk on our patrol leader’s face had melted into desperation as he realized why we were in the office now. Despite this being someone else’s fault, I was just as much at fault. That’s how the Army works: everything is your fault, even when it isn’t. Even if you aren’t in charge, it is somehow your fault. If an officer fails, the question will be, “Why wasn’t there a sergeant to help?” If soldier fails, the same question is asked. There is no doing anything right, no matter how hard you try. A failure is a blemish on the United States government, so you’d best be right and perfect every single time.

The sergeant major screamed at the top of his lungs, and to his credit, actually made me fear for my life. He’d managed to call into question all our intelligence, even the intelligence of our ancestors. He looked directly at me, and screamed”

“Ain’t you some kind of combat veteran?!”

“Roger, Sergeant Major!”

“Then why in the fuck would you let this happen, you dumb son of a bitch?!”

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so I just stayed quiet. The brigade sergeant major screamed directly at me about my career, so I just kept my mouth shut. Sgt Major Grinston
was legit old school, he’d likely been beaten senseless by his drill sergeants. I had immense respect for this man.

By the time he was done with us, he told us we’d be doing gate guard until we died. Since he’d recently put someone else on gate guard, we believed him. Luckily, as the old Army adage goes, you can get an ass chewing, but it’ll grow back.

Another time I realized I was finally over the hill in the Army was when we were hit with a small improvised explosive device, something we macabrely describe as a toe popper. Our primary task was serving as the personal protection detail for the senior officers in our brigade. So, our senior officers would often like to ride along big logistics patrols to ensure their supplies were getting the right place at the right time. Our detachment filled in along a 100-truck convoy that was on its way to western regions of our operating area. The convoy stretched for so far you couldn’t see the lights at the front of the trail.

On long rides, my squad leader and I developed a habit of rambling at each other the funniest things we could think. It was the only way to stay awake on an eight-hour drive at 40 miles an hour. We were in an open stretch of the road when I heard two loud pops from my turret.

“What the fuck was that?”

“What was what?” The squad leader inside the truck couldn’t hear what I had. Then we all saw a bright white flash, followed by the concussion. I could feel the wind from the blast on the back of my neck. I couldn’t tell where it came from or what type of weapon it was, but I clinched my teeth and scanned my sector. I figured at any second, we’d be in a long gun fight with the Taliban, an enemy I’d heard a lot about, but never met. A 100 truck supply convoy would have been a perfect target for them. It had been a few years since I’d been in a fire fight,
but even so, I was far more highly trained than before. I was eager to get my revenge for the bomb detonated below our truck.

Our squad leader began rapidly reporting what had happened on both the radio and the computer. He’d sent messages to brigade to ensure his soldiers would get their combat infantryman’s badge; a minor award, but a point of pride of most infantrymen. By this time, I’d begun to settle back down into my turret seat. I figured if they were going to fight us, it would have been at the IED site, rather than four miles away from initiation.

One of the soldiers in the back seat opened up a coke. The tab made a loud poppin sound when the driver, still shaken by the attack, said:

“What the fuck was that?”

“It was a coke can, cherry. Settle down.”

Our squad leader cracked up with laughter. I hadn’t meant it as a joke, only that he should settle down because there was far worse than a toe popper out there. No matter, within days, it spread around the platoon that I was one of the hardest, most fearless people in the platoon. I can’t say I disagree with them at this point. But I wasn’t fearless at all; I’d simply become so disenchanted with life, and Army life in particular, that a mere toe popper wasn’t going to keep me up at night. In fact, I think I was the first person asleep that night once we settled down at the combat out post in camp Kuduz.

After about seven months in Afghanistan, my persistent back problems started acting up. My near constant anger boiled just under the surface like hellfire. I could barely contain my rage at the time and felt consumed with anger. I knew that even so, I’d only have four more months in Afghanistan. Luckily, I was also heading on midtour leave where I would meet my wife in Mexico City. That midtour leave allowed me to calm down just enough to make it through the
next four months of the deployment. Of course, immediately when I got back go Germany, I went on a month-long back packing tour around eastern Europe. I wasn’t in tremendous danger in Afghanistan, but the thought of dying there for no reason, even after Osama Bin Laden was killed, filled me with rage. Every close call was just luck in my view, and I would only survive so many of them.

After ten long months in Afghanistan, we returned in February to knee deep snow. I didn’t care, though. I was just happy to have a room to myself. Further, going out to a restaurant and having a delicious German beer was a real treat after the austerity of Afghanistan. It had gotten tough to even find a cold bottle of water in Afghanistan by the time we left. Additionally, after about nine months downrange, it got to a point where it did not matter if I came home or not. Not a macabre feeling of impending doom, just a normalization of deployed life sets in, and it feels normal. That’s the feeling that veterans often discuss that they miss; it isn’t the bloodshed, it’s the routine and close friends you make while serving.

By this point, I’d saved up so many leave days, I had enough to take 30 consecutive days. I strapped my civilian backpack on the day after we returned from Afghanistan and took a train to Berlin. I spent about a week wandering around the drizzly streets of Berlin, enjoying the sights. It was the perfect place to slowly rejoin civilization. I did not want to be anywhere near another soldier. I wanted to do normal things like have a roll with cheese in a café while reading the paper. Just having a beer in a public place without the fear of senior ranking person yelling at you was a delight after a deployment; the joys of civilization are magnified tenfold. Simply entering a grocery store in a Berlin neighborhood felt like an adventure. After about a week of wandering around Berlin’s museums and restaurants, I moved onto Warsaw, Poland.
Warsaw is typically not the type of place you visit on Easter Sunday because the entire country closes. You also don’t choose when you can have your leave days in the Army, so I was happy despite the lack of activity and cold weather. Warsaw still had some things going on: a winter market, beautiful museums, and a general amazing culture. Despite Poland having all sorts of problems, visiting a non-war torn country was a relief. While in Poland, I knew I had to go and see Auschwitz. It was a solemn tour of the death camp, impossible to describe. The camp was set up just like our base in Baumholder. The buildings even looked the same and the commander of the camp had an orderly just like our commanders have now. At that moment, I began to think of what Grandpa found to end during his war, and the guilt of what I fought for in my war.

My war was a mistake of proportions so epic, it will take generations to fully comprehend the disaster. Grandpa’s war prevented a fascist wolf from beating down the door to the shore of the United States. FDR even faced a fascist coup plot known as the Business Plot. Oddly enough, Prescott Bush had orchestrated the failed coup, but his grandson, George W. Bush, launched one of the most unnecessary losses of life in our lifetimes. True, it is only a fraction of lives lost in World War II, but the pointlessness of it all is what I will not forget. I view my war as a crime, as something I’ll have to make amends for the rest of my life. Grandpa’s war was something the whole world should thank the United States for, but it seems that we have become the world’s aggressors. It is not a jack-booted Nazi kicking in innocent peoples doors, but it is Billy Bob from South Carolina with a chew of snuff in his mouth, reciting South Park comedy routines.

I spent another few weeks touring old Soviet resorts before making the trek back to Germany, and shortly after the trek back to the United States, I’d called my branch manager and requested to return to Fort Hood. I’d recently begun to consider college and wanted to go to
University of Texas at Austin. It wasn’t a goal I achieved, but I’d say that going to Wesleyan, I found a far more interesting intellectual home. I spent a year of grueling training with a unit out of Fort Hood. The time was me just trying not to piss anyone off enough to get me kicked off my GI bill before getting out.

Before getting out, the Army has a tradition of punishment for those of us on way to 1st Civilian Division. That is day-on day-off charge of quarters duty. It’s when a sergeant and private are assigned to a commander as orderlies. You answer the commander’s phone, screen their calls, give people rides or anything that the commander or first sergeant deem necessary for you to do during the day. I spent six weeks on the boring, meticulous duty. However, I did not care; all I wanted was out of the military. I drove down to Austin Community College, enrolled in basic courses, and signed a lease on an apartment on Riverside drive in east Austin. It was the historically low income and Hispanic neighborhood, populated by recently released veterans like myself going to community college down the block.

The week before getting out, I gave myself a pretty bad ulcer. I could no longer keep anything down and my stomach hurt constantly. I was terrified to let the army check it out because I did not want to get stuck in the army for even a day. So, I toughed it out and took some omeprazole.

One strange thing about my life at this point was that I joined the Texas Army National Guard. My thinking was that when hurricanes and other natural disasters happen, I’d get to assist my home country instead of blowing up someone else’s. I sincerely liked this idea, but was quickly disappointed at what I learned in the Army National Guard was just a slower, more incompetent army, instead of an army dedicated to helping out the community. Still, I spent two years while doing community college. I’d sleep in my car between classes and worked security at
a local film director’s personal studio and house. I had very little free time and spent all my time waiting on my wife to join me in the States. The Guard provided a much softer landing outside the military than I give it credit for. Without the Guard, I may have tricked myself into thinking that I missed the Army. The National Guard still makes me remember how much I hated serving in the US Army.

I spent two years grinding hard in community college. I had no other option other than dead ends. I turned in every assignment on time, and up to standard. Most of my professors loved me and enjoyed having an engaged student in their class. It wasn’t terribly difficult getting letters of recommendation to go to Wesleyan. When I was accepted to Wesleyan, the first thing that hit me was tears. Standing in my apartment building mail room, I knew my life had changed forever. I wasn’t quite sure where the road would lead, but I knew this path would be the one I would take.

My wife and I packed everything we owned into my Honda accord and drove across the country to New England. An Appalachian, and a Chilanga (term for a person from Mexico City) living in painfully cold New England. Pursuing elite college degrees might not be what you’d expect from us having first met us. However, I know the power of a good education, and both of us will die trying to attain that little piece of paper that validates your existence in an office.

I’ve since gotten help for my traumas; I take medication and see a psychiatrist. I have been diagnosed with spinal injuries, PTSD, and hearing problems. My life in the service was tough, I have the scars and back injuries as proof. I often complain about the VA, but without it, I would not be able to write these words. The people in Iraq and Afghanistan are who I think
about most often. I have free glasses and nutrition classes at the VA. I can even sell little bits of my trauma for money to make ends meet. Just last year, I participated in a study at Yale and was paid 1,500 dollars. I’m not complaining about that, I’m talking about the unfairness of it all.

Where is the post-war hospital for the civilians houses I destroyed? Where does the mother who had no connection to a militia or military find solace that her son was blown to smithereens so small she can’t even bury his corpse? That’s who I think about, and that’s who everyone should think about.