SITREP: Veteran Perspectives on Combat and Peace

Western Illinois University
2016
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2016

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Resources for Veterans and Service Members

Beu Health Center
(309) 298-1888
BeuHealthCenter@wiu.edu

Psychology Clinic
116 Waggoner Hall
(309) 298-1919

Center for
Military/Academic
Transition and Health
Seal Hall 214
(309) 298-3697

School of Graduate
Studies
Sherman Hall 116
(309) 298-1806
Grad-Office@wiu.edu

Disability Resource
Center
Memorial Hall, 1st Floor
(309) 298-2512
Disability@wiu.edu

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Admissions Office
Sherman Hall 115
(309) 298-3157
Admissions@wiu.edu

Financial Aid Office
Sherman Hall 127
(309) 298-2446
Financial-Aid@wiu.edu

University Counseling
Center
Memorial Hall, 1st Floor
(309) 298-2453
UCC@wiu.edu

Office of the Registrar
Sherman Hall 110
(309) 298-1891
R-Office@wiu.edu

Veterans Resource
Center
(309) 298-3505
VeteransResources@wiu.edu
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The Kaserne

Excerpt from unpublished fiction manuscript “One Weekend”

The barracks were a part of the edifice of this archaic kaserne, built about 1900, to house the German Army. It sagged now, unfit for soldiers to work, let alone live. The plumbing needed to be replaced. A coat of paint lasted barely a year before the walls shed like the skin off of a snake. The civilian chemical factory nearby produced a foul odor, and then there were the rats.

Rodents as large as a puppy or kitten often surfaced up to ground level from the deep basements. Not much could be done about the source of this pestilence due to tunnels connecting the basements of this kaserne to other kasernes in the city. The tunnels had been used by the German military during the previous world wars and were purposely flooded after World War II – so the story went.

One couldn’t help but wonder what might be found in the tunnels if they were drained. Perhaps old firearms and ammunition, or motorized equipment, maybe great works of art or monetary treasure thought to be lost forever. Observing the mold growing in the cracks and crevasses of the basement floors and the musty overwhelming stench of stagnant water, anything a scavenger found would most likely be worthless.
The tunnels would never be drained, though. Leaving the reality of contending with a decaying structure for the soldier to work and live.

Susan Gorman Winstead
I had never wanted to go to war in my life. I had not even wanted to join the military. Yet here—at twenty-seven, with a degree in business from Kansas State, and five years’ experience bouncing from one job to the next—I sit with a manila envelope resting in my lap as I take my seat on a Frontier Airlines flight from Kansas City to San Diego. Inside are my orders, along with the orders of three other soon-to-be recruits randomly seated around me (damn, they look young!), to report to Marine Recruit Training Depot, San Diego. I wonder if, like me, they did not count on their subconscious to be so insolent to their true dreams and desires as to somehow also trick them into our current predicament. Each one of us, having already selected the Infantry Rifleman MOS (0311) following basic, are without a doubt off to fight in a war now four years from its genesis—give or take all or parts of a few millennia. Anyway, it’s the Marine Corps for me. Even if it is The Suck, from what I’ve been told they don’t ask their riflemen to jump from perfectly good aircraft.

From our cruising altitude the world changes, the surface loses depth, but the Earth seems to gain magnitude. The horizon is not as smooth, or even as definitive as it is from the ground. There is earth, there is sky, and there is dark above it all. It is vague and dull like the x-rays of the “tib-fib” fracture I accomplished running from the police after egging our principal’s house so many years ago, the one the doctor could read like
the front page headline of the *Kansas City Star* while I just stared in bafflement as though I were trying to understand the plot or purpose of a David Lynch film. That was the spring of ’92, the spring my brother, Ray, came home from the Army to convalesce alongside me.

Midwest winters are as charming as a five-month stay in the dentist’s chair, and for the young teenager caught between the enchantment of youth and the freedom of adulthood, the early months of the New Year are a sinister and confusing practice in frustration, because they are also those last few weeks of the seemingly endless Midwestern winters. The magic of the holidays gone, a kid has little to do on the farm but his chores in the icy morning temps and dream of warmer days while flipping through his father’s nudy-mags in the chilly atmosphere of the side attic off his upstairs room. So, right as I and every other dumb and numbed-faced kid in the 9th grade started to speak of a coming ice age and the terminal end of anything resembling spring and summer as we knew it, there came a magnificent break in the cold. It began with a week when the temperatures suddenly soared from below freezing into the mid-seventies.

As I stood at the edge of the road by our farm waiting on the bus, my boot, cast, and crutches sinking in the bleached mud of the sodden gravel road, dampened by the abrupt change in temperature melting the last pockets of snow and ice, I saw my brother pass by and pull into our lane. Following his deployment to Kuwait for the first Gulf War he was diagnosed with an inguinal hernia
and the Army operated to repair it, allowing him a full thirty days of leave to heal—a half-shaven pubis, pocket full of cash saved up from his time overseas, and a primer-colored ’82 six-cylinder Camaro with temporary plates as war trophies. Too excited to concentrate on anything related to North Eden High School, I decided right there to play hooky and excitedly but clumsily hobbled up the lane like a giant insect on my crutches, only to watch him leave me standing by his car alone as he limped his way across the yard and into the house without a word.

That night my family celebrated Ray’s return in their own way: a Pizza Hut dinner on flimsy paper plates, restricted conversation, and an early call for bed. Ray, however, ate his pizza straight from the box, never bothering with paper plates, and chose a six-pack of bottled beer over a tall glass of milk. When Dad called for lights out, he grabbed his mess kit and invited me into the bathroom to keep him company as he showered, something I had always wanted to do (for reasons a younger brother can’t even explain to himself), and as I listened to him talking from behind the curtain, I related the sound of the shower with that of catfish frying in the church basement on Sunday afternoons.

I was only fifteen, but he threw me the keys and told me to drive because he wanted to drink. He said we would keep to the back roads, and then—as if he forgot why he had wanted me to drive in the first place—he opened a beer and handed it to me. I was already struggling to operate the Camaro with
the cast on my right leg but took the added challenge of having an open container between my legs without poise, and instead with an animated spirit. There was spring overcast, but the temperatures were incredible; what would now be coined unseasonable, we then called unspoiled. You couldn’t see the moon but you could the moon’s light against the grey and creamy gravel. It was a perfect night for back road, petty-criminal mischief among siblings.

“And so you can see, we kill off the Wolf and breed the Pitbull. When you really get down to the brass tacks of it all, that’s how simple it is. You track’n, brother?” Ray said, wrapping up a polemical response that lasted the worse part of a half-hour; though, by that time, I had forgotten what I had asked and was lost in all the metaphors. Still, he had somehow won favor with my inner jury. Even as confusing as he could be at times, he was by far the coolest person I knew.

“Track’n?” I gave a little time in an attempt to comprehend just what in the world his long diatribe could have meant and then took my eyes off the road to try and read his expression. Instead, he read mine.

“Look, Topher, you worthless shit, I can’t explain it to you if you’re going to play the dumb-fuck all the time.”

“Dude, sorry I’m such a reprobate in your eyes…I can fucking assure you I’m not try’n to be. Maybe, it’s just…I don’t know…I haven’t killed enough brain cells, or been to boot camp; you know—like you?”
And then, as the sun was coming up and about the time my brother was used to lining up for morning chow, his attention veered toward a small neglected track through prairie grass heading down a hill toward a deceivingly steep bluff with a pocket of trees in its belly.

“Hey, turn right here, man! Right here—turn right, Topher!”

“That’s not a road; it’s a cattle trail, Ray. Your piece of shit Camaro won’t make it down the bluff, dude.”

“Shut the fuck up and follow those tracks,” he replied with a stiff smile that couldn’t hide his enthusiasm.

Whenever my brother gave me commands, or even advice, my policy was pretty much to always do the opposite—especially when he showed excitement. This was certainly the case when he demanded we abandon a sketchy, un-kept, and unnamed gravel road for an even less developed and loved lane leading out onto the prairie. Nonetheless, I cut the wheel and followed the tracks down the hill and through a patch of trees too thick to see to the other side.

Ray arched and stretched his neck and body in every conceivable way in an attempt to catch a glimpse of what lay waiting on the other side of the foliage, and around a small bend in the path just beyond. As we cleared the narrow thick of trees, we came under an immense metal sign dangling from rusty chains sprouting straight from the bark of a low overhanging branch that draped the path we, at this point, had no choice but to remain on. It was a
worn and rusted marquee the color of a metal forest in late fall, and its white background was cracked and no longer truly white. As we passed under it, I gave the sign a suspicious and cautionary glance, afraid it would break free of its corroded chains and lay one of its jagged edges teeming with the tetanus down the center of my face. Up to that point I had been enjoying the open T-top roof of the Camaro. The eight black letters fitted to its center shelf read: MUSTANGS.

Nestled on the back edge of a black dirt cul-de-sac sat a tarnished, unsightly structure, which, if cleaned and fixed up a little, could have served as a location for some B-Grade post-apocalyptic horror film. Arguably, on that day it laid witness to the murder of the last of my innocence. The building was nothing more than a single-wide prefabricated trailer nestled halfheartedly on stacks of old cinder blocks, now half buried in mud. I parked the car on the opposite side of the dead end lane from the trailer. Ray got out and, lighting a cigarette, stood waiting for me to maneuver my bulky cast out of the car so I could then wrestle my crutches from out of the back seat. I could see he found humor in my suffering as he finished the last of a beer, then tossed the empty bottle into a patch of tall prairie grass. His face was flushed red and he wore the permanent grin of a fat kid with sweets.

“Come on, hurry it a little, dumbass,” he said as he started for the door—me, hobbling guardedly behind. When we reached the front steps he banged on the sheet metal door with a loose fist, stirring any peace left in the air and causing the
A wood panel door behind the outer metal one opened and through the rusty screen stood an older lady with a blazing orange afro and cigarette dangling from Imperial red lips. Her secondhand dress and makeup, including the greasy lipstick, gave her the look of a kid playing dress up, and the rest of her suggested she may have been the recent victim of a lightning strike. Something in her eyes told me she wasn’t up all night drinking chamomile tea.

She looked down at my brother and me and asked in a nervous and accusatory tone, “How old are you two?”

I stood in shock but Ray, tossing a thumb back and forth between the two of us, quickly replied, “I’m twenty three and he’s nineteen, ma’am.” Facts were, I was fifteen and he was nineteen at the time, and you would have thought he was getting to ride a rollercoaster for the first time.

“Well, come on then, and don’t let in any more flies.”

With a great deal of effort I managed to get up the three wooden stairs, which had aged as badly as the eyesore they led into. I looked around cautiously as I entered. There were three couches spread against the outer walls of the main room—none matched another except for being upholstered in gaudy patterned tweed. The carpet was a putrid blue, or green, and had better than a thousand cigarette burns sprinkled across it like stars in the night sky. The air was smoke-filled and stagnant, and the ceiling stained a sort of brownish yellow.
The windows were covered with green plastic curtains which, from the early morning sunlight passing through, gave everyone’s skin a sickly glow.

Sitting on a stool near a tiny kitchen area was a plump woman, who, to me, appeared to be in her mid- to late forties. She wore a large Muumuu with a paisley design and she, too, was smoking a cigarette while listening to voice traffic coming from a two-way radio taking up most of a little round kitchen table. Her head was large and round and her eyes were tucked back in the fleshy fat folds of a jaundiced face like two pee-holes in the snow. I wondered for a moment if she might be suffering from an allergic reaction to something, or someone, she ate. She took one look at my brother and me and broke into a sinister giggle that shook her jowls with every toss of her big head.

The older lady who greeted us at the door wasted no time with the formalities of Midwestern manners, but instead got straight to business.

“It’s thirty dollars for thirty minutes in a room with a girl.” I looked around for the girls but saw only her and the creature on the stool. “Fifty for an hour and five dollars for anything extra,” she offered, then paused for a response.

“Anything extra?” I asked, sickened and confused.

“Anything weird, hun,” she replied, then added—to clarify there were limits to the level of debauchery they were willing to practice, “and it’s up to the girl if she accepts your offer anyway.” Again, I looked around for any girl/s.
“Ma’am, what girls are you talking about?” I asked, my face tangled in an equal look of fear and intrigue.

Ray threw an elbow into my side that knocked me back against the wall behind me. “Shut up, Topher!” he whispered in a half scream.

“Well, son, you have the choice between me, or Sally there.”

Apparently, Sally was the toad on the barstool, and at the mere thought of her solicitation my penis let out a quiet cough in my undershorts. In a begging tone I leaned into my brother and said, “Let’s get the hell out of here, man.”

Ray’s reply was immediate, almost as if practiced, “No! I’ve been stuck in a shithole sandbox surrounded by three hundred other dudes dressed just like me, with the same stupid haircut, same stupid look of boredom and fear, and not a woman in sight for nine months. I didn’t get a single sip of beer, or letter from a girl the entire time, and even went thirty-six days without a shower at one point. Ray’s here now and he’s about to have some release. And Ray’s not going to let the fear of disease or regret stop him.”

“Okay, well that’s insane. You realize that, right? You’re even referring to yourself in the third person now, so let’s go!” And then summed up my plea with, “Dude, these are not girls; not even sure they are women.”

“Honey you don’t hafta do a thing you don’t want, but if you ain’t pay’n customers ya’ll needa get the hell outta my establishment,” the older one commanded. I let a short chuckle go at some of her
choice of words that brought about a fearsome look of loathing from both her and Sally.

“No, ma’am, I’m a paying customer for sure. I’ll just go with you if that’s okay?” Ray replied.

“Well aw-right, get your scrawny butt in the other room then!” she amused, and then shot a crocodile smile at me as she turned to walk away.

“Umm…Ray, what should I do?”

“You can set yer narrah ass right there, ‘less you change your mind,” she said as she pointed a thumb over the side of a shoulder at the longest of the three couches.

I took a seat on the couch and spent the next several minutes listening for any sounds of struggle or my brother’s pleas for escape, but heard none. Instead I heard a series of banging, quiet cursing, and muffled laughter. Then there was a knocking and a thud, like a stiff body had dropped to the floor. I panicked for a moment, and then heard the sound of more stifled merriment.

As I tried to settle back into the harrowing depths of the couch, the portly woman spoke, “Fer five dollahs you can go ‘n the uthuh room ‘n watch?”

“I didn’t bring any cash on me. Sorry,” I remarked with false regret.

“Well just go have a look anyway why don’tcha,” she replied.

“Nah…my brother will kill me if I go in there.”
“Oh no he won’t, just be real quiet like, and keep your little prick in your pants or it will cost ya twenty five.”

I sat shocked at the notion I would allow any part of me to leave the security of my clothing or want anything to do with what was going on around me, but as I sat there on the couch a moment something happened. I grew curious—and incredibly so. Suddenly I was no longer on the couch, but instead making my way down a short dark hallway with walls made of thin compression board patterned to look like real wood. I imagined the scene from 2001: A Space Odyssey, when Dr. Bowman (Dave) travels into the monolith. At the end of the hall was a door, half-cracked so I could begin to see into the bedroom as I made my way closer.

Once at the door I peeked inside. My brother lay on his back on a sheetless blue mattress, his hands on the hips of the woman as she sat atop him rocking back and forth, her orange afro accentuating her actions by waving with a slight delay of her every move. I could see one thin, saggy breast with a dark misshapen nipple that I stared at for several moments, hypnotized; then, watched with some form of horror as my brother leaned up to suckle it. Suddenly, I was overcome by some kind of elation.

I tried to curb my amusement but couldn’t, and I burst into a fit of laughter. Drunk on a powerful cocktail of fear and excitement, I hobbled my way back down the hall, past Sally sitting with a plump expression of shock, and burst through the front doors. I tried to get my crutches under me as I
hit the ground but was moving too fast and toppled over, falling face first on to a soft bed of grass and dirt. I managed to pick myself up and hopped, holding both crutches in my left hand, all the way to the car. I climbed in and found the keys still in the ignition. I fired up Ray’s Camaro before looking back toward the trailer.

When I did I saw my brother, naked with his clothes and boots in his arms, come tumbling out the front door. He skipped the steps in a single leap. His hernia incision still somewhat fresh, he flinched in pain as he hit the ground in a limping sort of skip. He looked back over his shoulder only once, and only for a quick moment, as he painfully made his way to the car. Once in, he hollered for me to take off. Although I never saw anyone other than the two ladies, I feared having my head shot off by an angry meth-fueled pimp with a shotgun. I threw the car in reverse and spun it around, narrowly missing the front steps of Mustangs before tossing it in drive and hammering the accelerator, aiming it as best I could toward the lane leading back through the trees and up the bluff.

This is the last real memory I have with my brother, him in the seat next to me seizing in a fit of amusement and shooting sibling glances at me through tears of laughter. I know we spent more time together that spring and even spoke on the phone a few times after he headed back to his post in Missouri; however, we never really spoke much of that day again.

The following fall Ray was killed during a training exercise. The letter to my parents said he
was blown off course by unexpected wind gusts while performing a night jump. He landed in a river and his parachute acted like a fisherman’s net as he became tangled in it and drowned. I was pulled from Mrs. Henson’s Calculus class and sent to the principal’s office on a Monday morning, where both my parents stood in the hall outside his door sobbing uncontrollably. My father made a few attempts to tell me about Ray but couldn’t keep it together long enough to get the words out. Eventually it was Principal Evans who delivered the news. Outside, the rain began to come down in sheets, and I watched as the small gutters along a large window filled and overflowed.

Ray’s buried in a cemetery on the north edge of town; a flat granite stone engraved with an ornate sketch of the U.S. ensign blowing in a breeze marks his grave. Though you would have to travel more than three miles down winding country roads to get there, as the crow flies he rests just over a mile from that small patch of trees in the gully where Mustangs once ran its operations.

Ryan Bronaugh
**Illusion in the Mist**

Revised fragments of Ben’s life coalesced in the flames around him as his slender fingers clutched grimly at the sand saturated with his blood. His ears rang; his eyes blurred. His pulse was weak, fluttering, erratic—*at least it’s still there*, he thought as he turned his head toward the small row of houses where the grim-faced children had appeared moments before the air filled with steel-jacketed damnation. They pantomimed smoking by patting their lips with their small dusty fingers. The older of the two was a girl, who Ben guessed had to be ten or eleven, the same age as his niece back home. She sidled up to Ben, imploring him for a cigarette. “Smoke, smoke.” She became more insistent the further along Ben and his platoon marched. The smallest boy grunted in Pashtun as he jogged past Ben and the girl, stopping to ask the other soldiers for cigarettes.

The nylon straps of Ben’s rucksack dug into his abraded shoulders; the gritty crunch of sand and pebbles underfoot underscored the somnolent creak of the tracks of the personnel carrier as it ebbed along the pockmarked road. Ben maintained his silent vigil, scanning his field of fire while the young girl, brazen and fearless, tugged on the cargo pocket of his BDU trousers. He tried to bat her away without making eye contact. Her incessant chatter seemed to be asking for more than just a cigarette. Her voice became shrill and loud; the young boy looked back at her quickly and sprinted back toward her, holding up an entire pack of
cigarettes. Ben stole a glance downward and his watery blue eyes met her dark, dusky ones. Eyes that belonged on the face of a grown woman twice her age. She held her hands up and smiled shyly at Ben as he heard an ominous, sphincter-clenching click before everything dissolved into chaos.

His hands tightened into fists; he coughed and choked on the bloody sputum filling his throat. *This is my fault...* he wanted to laugh at the absurdity, but his morbid guffaw turned into a gurgle. Despair, rank and green, washed over him as he spat out several fractured molars. The bright antiseptic sting of an IV; the muffled words of encouragement to hang in there. Time compressed, froze—minutes seemed like hours.

Pressure on his chest.

The weight of his Kevlar no longer noticeable.

Warmth suffused his body as he groaned Courtney’s name.

A cool breeze kicked up in intensity, prickling him with goosebumps.

His mind reeled at this moment in his life that had become too great to overcome.

*Her almond bronze skin with specks of glitter stuck to her moist cheeks like tiny iron filings on a magnet. Ben caressed the faded circles of blush on her cheek with his thumb and gently ran his index finger over the bruised purple of her*
eyeliner. She never wore lipstick, maybe lip gloss on occasion but never lipstick. In his opinion Courtney didn’t need any make-up, but there was no arguing with a woman about her appearance. The early morning Mt. Auburn air, redolent of grass—mown and smoked—with just a hint of cinnamon, wafted among the trees at the edge of the park on the outskirts of town.

My Courtney, Ben thought. Yet not exactly mine, either.

She caught him smiling at her while she put her hair up in a hasty ponytail. She stretched her legs out, putting her feet in Ben’s lap. Her adrenaline rush had waned, her calves and quads bunched and jittery from dancing most of the night. Ben kneaded her calves until he felt the muscles loosen under the gentle pressure of his fingers. Courtney lay back against an elm tree and closed her eyes. Ben rubbed her feet tenderly. Courtney’s soft breath rushed from her lungs as she groaned with pleasure. A tired smile pursed her lips. “If you only knew how good that felt,” she whispered, lighting up another joint, inhaling the smoke deeply, holding the smoke captive. Ben held his breath with her and watched her as she peered at him from half-lidded eyes. Ben winked and smiled as he exhaled, telling her he knew how good she felt. He knelt down and kissed her dimpled knee. He tasted body lotion and the faint salt aftertaste of sweat...of her. She wriggled her toes and giggled.
“That tickles, Ben.” She exhaled, coughing lightly. “Did Joey tell you that was my ticklish spot?” Ben’s hands wavered as they worked their way back up toward Courtney’s knee. He looked past her toward an anonymous stone marker.

“He didn’t have to tell me anything.” Ben reached for the smoking joint and inhaled deeply.

They sat side by side and watched the sun rise higher. Courtney murmured gently in Ben’s ear as her head tilted and came to rest on his shoulder. Her hands slack in her lap. He didn’t have the heart to wake her even though he still had to get home and pack. He traced the small blue veins in her wrist. Her foot twitched, she whispered Joey’s name. Ben pulled up a clump of grass with his free hand and squeezed it into a fist. Courtney yawned, stretched her arms and rubbed her eyes, smearing eyeliner onto her hands. Another smile played across her lips as she suggested that Ben take her home.

The cold winter of his soul emanated to the marrow of his bones under the high sun of a nameless, forsaken desert. Tears of pain and regret ran down the sides of his head and pooled with the sweat and dead gnats in the tiny bowls of his ears. Each breath ripped through his core as he struggled to sit up, to roll over, to do anything but play dead. It wasn’t his time for the long sleep in the ebon pitch of eternity.

His legs kicked spasmodically.
His vision clouded as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

His throat constricted as he tried to call her name one last time.

He was almost home.

Chris Bell
A Reflection of Regret

The face that returns my stare from the other side of the mirror is not one I’m used to seeing; it is pale and ceramic, accentuated by the fluorescent light above. The skin sags slightly down from the eye sockets, the depth of which is farther than I remember.

I know the last few months have been tough, but I never realized how tough until now, now that I behold the haggard reflection that is mine. I can’t seem to shake the dreams. They’ve plagued me since I came home from my second pump to Afghanistan.

My therapist is always telling me to talk about it, hash it out verbally to another human being. She says that’s the best way to cope. That, and take medication.

Oh, that’s right. Medication. I haven’t refilled my prescription in over a month. Maybe that’s why I haven’t been sleeping and my brain hasn’t been functioning properly. Not to mention I have a headache that feels like the back of my skull was smashed in with a brick.

I blink once, twice. My eyes are cloudy and unresponsive. They don’t twitch around robotically to capture all the details like they should. Irises of
milky green form a narrow ring around dilated pupils, pupils that are blacker than any night I’ve ever seen. I look into their hollow abyss and the rest of my surroundings begin to fade.

Then the fluorescents flicker, and the startlingly loud flush of a toilet diverts my attention to the row of gray stalls behind me. I am suddenly aware of the bathroom in which I stand: the white tile floors, the walls that match the stalls, the double black and white marble sink that my hands rest on while I lean toward the mirror in a hunch. A bouquet of fresh flowers sits between the sinks, and a painted depiction of Jesus hangs on the wall to my right, his pierced hands held out to either side as if to welcome me into an embrace.

With a spine-tingling creak a stall door opens and an impeccably dressed man approaches the second sink next to me. He sets his black, pin-striped fedora on the counter and begins to wash his hands slowly and carefully, attempting to avoid wetting the cuffs of the black shirt sticking out from underneath the sleeves of the pressed suit that matches his hat.

I ponder the strange combination of a black-on-black suit with a black tie, black pocket square, and a black fedora. And then he addresses me. “Did you know him well?” he asks in a voice that is low
and rich. He sounds like a late-night radio host, the kind to which people fall asleep.

I finally look at his face through the mirror. His complexion is eerily similar to mine, and he has a thin, black mustache that stops right at the ends of his mouth. He pulls a paper towel from the white dispenser on the wall next to him, and dries his hands as he returns my gaze and waits for an answer.

“Know who?” I ask with a furrow in my brow.

“The fellow whose funeral we both risked being cursed to darken the threshold of this church for, of course,” he said, as if it should be obvious.

“Oh, right . . . no, I didn’t know him that well,” I say, and look down into the sink below me. I forgot that I’m here for a funeral.

Or did I?

I make a mental note to go get my prescription filled as soon as the service is over; lack of sleep is really taking its toll.

“Did they tell you how he died?” he asks me. I shake my head. A smile creeps across his face, stretching his moustache and lighting up his dark brown eyes.
Then the man in black places the fedora onto his head with surprisingly little effort. He spins on his heel and walks to the door, his reflective black shoes clacking loudly.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” he says without looking as he pulls the door open. I look back into the mirror and contemplate the validity of his bizarre statement. He’ll show me? How exactly will he show me? I want to continue this inner deliberation, but he has already left me.

“Alright,” I say slowly, to no one but myself, and turn to follow him.

I step out into a large foyer. A gray carpet speckled with white stretches across the entire space, and gray walls give a déjà vu from the bathroom. As I walk toward the auditorium into which myriads of other people are flowing, I look to my right through the three large double doors that lead out of the building. It is rainy and dismal, a cliché for funerals that I don’t much mind; it puts one in the mood.

I reach the tail end of the crowd funneling into the auditorium, and I wait patiently, moving when I can. Not the man in black; I see him push his way seamlessly through the crowd, yet no one notices or seems to care. Soon I lose sight of him,
and again wonder what it was that he wanted to show me.

I listen to the quiet murmurs of the people around me, and glance down to their swaying hands; they all carry some sort of handout, a program for the memorial service about to commence. There is a picture on the front of the program, but my eyes limit the clarity of it; it’s a blur of colors. I’m sure that I know this man, otherwise I wouldn’t be here, but exactly who he is... of that, and many other things of late, my mind is hazier than the smoke-filled air of a midnight barroom.

Once I’m through the bottleneck of the doorway, I ignore the steer of the cattle train filling the seats from the front of the auditorium to the back, and find a nice, secluded spot in the far left corner. The gray chairs are comfortable and match the carpet, but all of these neutrals are starting to bore me.

I begin to take in this massive room. It must seat at least five hundred, if not more. The walls are plain white, but banners and posters of motivational catchphrases and overused Bible verses hang in various locations. The extremely high ceiling proudly displays the industrial look of exposed air ducts and steel framework, all of it painted black.
Scattered throughout the framework are high-tech spot lights, hanging can lights, large black speakers, and what looks to be a projector. My eyes follow the path of this projector to a jumbo screen against the wall high above the stage.

And that’s when I first notice the focus of this gathering: a long stand clothed in white linen bears a closed, mahogany casket, draped with the Red, White, and Blue. Resting next to the casket on an easel is a large framed picture, presumably of the man lying in the casket. I squint, trying to catch a glimpse of this unfortunate soul, but it’s too blurry for me to make out from this distance.

“He must have gone in a terrible way, closed casket and all,” the man in black says near my right ear. I glare in his direction for a moment, less upset at him for surprising me as I am at myself for lacking awareness.

“You know, that’s the second time you’ve startled me. Do you usually show up unannounced?” I ask, returning my line of sight to the stage.

“Spontaneity is the spice of life, my friend,” he replies, withdrawing a silver pocket watch from the inside of his suit coat and springing it open to check the time. “Which reminds me, I have to scat soon. I hope this doesn’t take all day.”
I shake my head with a smile, scoffing at the overall uncaring nature of this man.

“Didn’t you want to know how he died?” He leans closer to me when he asks, as if he is trying to be discreet, and I wait for him to come out with it. After a moment of silence, I finally look over at him. He puts his forefinger into his mouth as if it were the barrel of a gun, then drops his thumb as if it were the hammer.

He dons a sick sort of smile, and his eyes grow darker than they were before, seemingly changing color right in front of me. I stare back for a few seconds, not sure how to respond, then look away and shrug my shoulders.

“And how do you know that?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“Oh, I know a lot of things,” he replies softly. I’m starting to think this man is crazier than I originally perceived.

The high attendance for this service is astounding to me; the entire center section is full, and at least three-quarters of the outer two sections are packed as well.

Once the whole of this crowd is tucked neatly away into their respective rows, and it
appears that all that care to attend are present, the silence in the room becomes eerie. No one wants to break this silence either, and I glance around to people doing their best impressions of statues, with the occasional scratch of the face or adjustment of the body.

“Quite the turn out, isn’t it?” the man in black asks, as if reading my mind. It becomes obvious that ignoring this stranger will not keep him from speaking to me, and that, unlike everyone else in the room; he cares little about respecting the quiet. I only nod in reply.

“He must have been an upstanding fellow, to be so popular, wouldn’t you say?” He continues his questioning observations, again paralleling what I am pondering.

I wrack my brain trying to think of a funeral I’ve been to with as many patrons, and not one comes to mind. This man is missed by many, throngs of people whose spirits have been crushed by his decision to end his life before it was over. They will have to live every day wondering what they could have done to prevent this tragedy.

Finally, the vacuum of soundlessness is filled with some sweet melody, clearly marking the beginning of the proceedings.
“Look at the family; they must be in a horrible place right now,” he says nonchalantly, followed by the repetitive click of his tongue and a small shake of his head. I hadn’t noticed the family yet, and now my eyes wander to the front row of chairs in the center section.

Perhaps if I recognize any of them, it will restore my memory of the dead man, but from where I sit I can only see the backs of heads. There are two young children flanking a woman, whom I guess is the wife of the deceased. Beside her is an older man and woman with graying hair, and a similar couple next to them; parents of both the wife and her dead husband, I assume.

The entire row behind them is full of men wearing uniforms and close-shaven haircuts. All of their outfits that I can see are the black jackets with high collars, red trim, and golden rank insignia on the shoulder sides: Marine Corps dress blues. One in the group wears the Navy’s enlisted dress uniform, the “crackerjack,” given its nickname for its appearance on the box of that well-known popcorn snack.

Suddenly, a man in a gray suit makes his way onto the stage and takes his place behind a small podium on the opposite side of the casket from the framed picture. He begins his speech,
undoubtedly saying something about death and how it’s sad, but how it comes to everyone and we have to celebrate life while it lasts, then take comfort in knowing we will see the deceased again someday, in heaven. I don’t really listen; every funeral I’ve been to is the same as the next.

The flick of a lighter next to me is louder than the slamming of a hammer against metal. I look over at the man in black, eyes wide. I can’t believe what I’m seeing: he has lit up a cigarette and is exhaling his first drag. He notices me staring and turns to me:

“I can only take so much of this bullshit before I need a smoke,” he says, holding the pack out to me in offering. I shake my head vehemently and look around the room, astonished that no one even notices.

“What are you doing?” I whisper. “Put that out!”

He takes another long pull and pauses before letting the smoke out of his lungs. The cloud is all around us now, and the smell is even tickling my throat the wrong way. And still, no one seems to have a clue, or they just don’t care, but it can’t be the latter. Can they be that focused on the service?
“Oh, they don’t care,” he says, picking up on my anxiety. “Why do you suppose he did it, anyway?”

The speaker up front continues, as if there isn’t a man in the back smoking and attempting to have a conversation with the man next to him. The whole situation feels surreal, and I start to wonder if it’s a dream. I take a roll of forearm skin between my fingers and squeeze as hard as I can.

I feel nothing.

I pinch harder. Still nothing.

“My money’s on post-traumatic stress disorder,” he answers his own question. “Some people simply can’t handle it.”

“What the hell do you know about that?” I scowl and ask defiantly, well above a whisper, emblazoned with a sudden anger.

“Oh, actually I know quite a bit about it,” he replies, blowing smoke in my direction. He turns the question back onto me. “What the hell do you know about it?”

“I have it!” I say loudly. “You don’t know the first thing about handling it!” Then I remember where I am and the press of my lips into a tight seal is pure reflex. Surely someone heard that outburst;
but another look around proves otherwise. I start to
rub my cheeks with both hands, and firmly slap my
face back and forth.

“Well,” he laughs with another exhale of
smoke. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

I shake my head and breathe forcibly in and
out to calm myself down. The room is as still as it
has been the whole time; no one hears us. The man
on the stage is still talking in that same, steady,
depressing drone. The back of my head swells with
pain again, and I suck through my teeth in response.
I need my pills.

“Most people find that therapy is a waste of
energy, and so some think the best way to fight the
demons is to live from one handful of pills to the
next.”

Our eyes meet. He can hear what I’m
thinking.

“What most people don’t realize, though,”
he pauses for another drag on his cigarette, which I
suddenly realize is no shorter than when he lit it, “is
that all those pills bring on another kind of
sickness.”
He laughs loudly now. It starts at a guttural rumble and rises steadily to a higher pitch, bouncing off the walls and filling the room. Nobody looks.

“Pick your poison,” he says after catching his breath. “Mental illness, or masked mental illness.”

The light clicking on in my brain is overwhelmingly bright. This couldn’t be any closer to the truth, and I didn’t see it before. I have been slowly killing myself. I am careening toward a cliff in a brakeless vehicle of suffering, and no matter how hard I will it, the edge of that cliff draws no closer; there’s only one way to end the ride. I feel an abrupt connection to that body in the casket, and it dawns on me now.

“You’re going to end up like him?” he asks, beating me to the punch line this time. At that I shoot up from my seat and back away from this devilish person. He starts to chuckle again.

I turn and walk hurriedly from the auditorium, straight to the glass doors at the other end of the foyer, and out into the bleak. I feel the tirades of falling water slam against my body with each forceful gust of wind, and I stumble aimlessly through the parking lot, willing myself to be rid of this experience.
“Wake up!” I yell aloud to myself. Water runs down my face and into my eyes and nose and mouth. “You have to wake up!”

I close my eyes and fall to my knees, face to the sky. I need to wake up.

“Their tears are like the pouring rain, are they not?” his voice surprises me yet again, and I open my eyes to a sight that nearly knocks me unconscious: I’m not in the parking lot anymore. There is no longer rain falling, only the scent of it. I stand behind a row of chairs lined up in front of a casket, the same casket from the church, in fact. Only this time, it’s suspended over a hole in the ground of the same shape and size, and covered by a foldout awning. White grave stones with rounded tops surround us, as far as my eyes can see; rolling, grassy hills of them; white rectangles that turn into dots that turn into specks, sprawled out under a gray-clouded canvas.

I soon am aware of the immense crowd around the casket. Every person that was at the church must be present here.

As before, I see the backs of the family members. The wife is hunched over, shaking. Her mother’s hand glides across her back, doing what she can to comfort and console.
The deafening crack of seven rifles causes the two children to jump. I look through the crowd of faces across from me and beyond them I see a row of Marines with flat, white hats, brass buttons against black jackets strapped with white belts, and white-gloved hands around brown, ceremonial rifles. With the second round of shots, the wife begins to weep audibly, as if there are real bullets coming out of those barrels, and she feels the fierce burn of every one of them in the deepest part of her being.

The final shots reverberate all around us. I feel as if my eyes should be welling up with tears, but there is no moisture.

“It almost makes me shed a tear myself,” the man in black states. “Almost. But then again, I don’t really feel emotion.”

I do my best to ignore him as the cemetery falls under silence again, save for the occasional swish of distant tires roaring along wet pavement.

A trumpet takes command of the airwaves next, wailing that familiar military tune of sleep. Each sorrowful note tugs at the fibers of me. I reach up to place my hand against my heart, only to be surprised by the feeling of something cold and metallic. Looking down I see two rows of golden medals hanging by striped, multi-colored strips of
cloth. They lay against a black jacket with brass buttons and a gold-buckled, white belt. My legs are enclosed in royal blue pants that flow down to a pair of black shoes so reflective that I can see my face in them.

“Forget you were wearing your uniform?” the man in black asks me with a snort. I hold my white-gloved hands up in front of my face, the shock of my discovery squeezing my retinas and distorting my vision. I stumble forward with a sudden onslaught of vertigo, my hands stretched out in front of me to catch myself against the chairs.

Without any amount of effort, somehow I am upright again, on my feet, now standing under the awning. Two Marines have just finished folding a flag, and one of them turns to face me. He spins the star-studded, blue triangle so that the point is into his chest, and he steps right past me and onto one knee. I try to turn around to watch, but I can’t move. My muscles, they don’t respond to my brain’s commands.

“Ma’am, on behalf of the President, the United States Marine Corps, and a grateful nation . . .” The woman’s sobs drown out his words. All I can hear is her hopelessness and fear; her looping realization that she now has to go on living and parenting alone. She says something in response to
the Marine, and her voice knocks against some memory in the farthest reaches of my mind. Who is this woman?

“It’s a damn shame, isn’t it?” the man in black asks again, so close to me now that his breath tickles my ear with every syllable. “Wasting his life like that, leaving behind such an amazing woman and his children. All he had to do was . . .”

His voice fades away. I turn and look right into his dark, penetrating eyes.

“What?” I ask. “All he had to do was what?” I beg for the answer, feeling in my soul that it is for me and me alone. The man in black studies my face for a long, chilling moment, then looks away and smiles.

“All he had to do was talk to someone. You humans aren’t meant to be alone, in troubling times, or in happy ones.”

I scowl. It can’t be that simple. If it were that simple then the epidemics of depression and suicide couldn’t last; they wouldn’t stand a chance. I open my mouth to protest, but something else he says jumps out instead.

“We humans?” I ask softly. He turns to me now, a darkness rising around us.
His eyes become a void, retreating into his head and leaving black, cavernous holes. The skin on his face separates and sluices away in long drips, exposing the white curvature of his skull. The corners of his mouth curl up into an unearthly smile, revealing a toothless interior.

I step backward, bracing myself under the weight of the horror that assaults me now. This is no man in black. It is Death himself.

“Mommy!” a child’s voice cries out in sadness, somewhere behind me; it’s my child, sitting there in the cemetery with her brother and mother. My eyes fall to the casket in front of me.

“Oh, who is in that casket, sir?” I manage to exhale.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” His voice is much deeper than before, and it terrifies me. With three steps he is beside it, flipping up the heavy lid as if it’s the flap of a cardboard box.

I close my eyes and take a step forward. The weeping and wailing and sniffling of every person in the cemetery are a crescendo of thunder.

I take another step forward. I hear the voices of my children, begging me to come back, pleading with me to hold them again.
I hear my mother and father, asking me what they did wrong, how it came to this.

I hear my wife crying so hard that her breaths are sudden, screeching inhales. Every tear that hits the ground pounds in my ears like the simultaneous firing of a thousand cannons.

It is deafening.

I can hardly breathe, but I take a third step, and I feel the casket against me.

My eyes crack open, and I see a body in a uniform. I follow it up from the black, reflective shoes, past the blue pants, the black jacket, the white-gloved hands clasped above the white belt, the golden medals and rainbow of ribbons, and the tight collar flanked with eagle, globe, and anchor emblems of gold.

And then I see the face.

The face is my own.

My reflection in the casket.

Luke Cummings
Redemption Tea

The man drinking Redemption Rye whiskey seemed drunk. Not because he was acting in a singularly obnoxious way, but because his actions did not seem to fit his physical profile, nor a man of his age. The man had thinning short salt and pepper hair on top, and thicker more contrasting hair on the sides of his head, being both very black and very grey. He was perhaps forty-five, with a multitude of crows’ feet at the corners of his eyes and smallish bags beginning underneath. He was one of those men you would see without seeing, being of a smallish height, 5’7 or so, and slight of build, as well as being neither handsome nor ugly. Yet Pusillanimous, watching him from the bar, felt that the man had a subtle power because of it.

The man seemed happy at the moment, truly happy, that kind of happy only fateful sorry fuckers knew of, like that poor Nigerian who survived at the bottom of the Atlantic, in the cold wet pitch blackness, for three days in an ever-shrinking air bubble amidst the overturned wreckage of his sunken ship. A Goddamn salvage diver had found that poor bastard; he wasn’t even supposed to be alive. And like that kind of happiness, thought Pusillanimous, this Rye drinking man’s happiness was probably just as fleeting, like the Nigerian
waking up in the dark night, thinking the dark cold sea had found him yet again.

The Rye drinker had lost the very first hand of the poker tournament, losing all but three of the smallest denomination chips when his two pair were beat by a larger two pair. At that point, the man hadn’t been drinking anything, and the loss of 2,425 chips seemed all but a death sentence. Which wouldn’t have really mattered because the man was all but invisible. Even he, Pusillanimous, would not have paid him much mind, as faces come and go at the poker hall, and his seemed more common than most. But the man had gotten up and gone to the bar, coming back with a small clay cup with undecipherable scribble upon it, which, minus the writing, kind of looked like a Saki cup. It was this small detail which had caught Pusillanimous’s attention.

Someone at the table, be it out of sympathy or true curiosity, had asked him, “Are you drinking Saki?” and another had asked him, “Where did you get that cup?” and still another had asked, “What’s that writing?” The Man had answered in kind, “I don’t drink Saki, this here is Redemption Rye Whiskey. The cup is a Fallujahian whiskey glass, the writing Assyrian Neo-Aramaic, and the design is inspired by hate; as drinking spirits is apt to get one killed where I got this glass, so it’s better to be
thought drinking tea. And now I will start to win.” This last part was greeted with much laughter.

Yet it was truth the Redemption drinker had spoken three hours past. It was hard to grasp why or what kind of truth had been cast upon the world by the plain man with his vizard whiskey glass, but cast it he had. Even he, Pusillanimous, a man well known for his skill at poker, had been eliminated by the man drinking Rye. On the surface of things it seemed but a case of crazy luck, did it not? How could only three chips be turned into a mountain otherwise? But Pusillanimous had been smoothly trapped, or was it just some strange form of amateurishness? The Rye drinker had played his hand as if he had been chasing the straight, had played it so convincingly that when the straight hadn’t come, he had been sure of his two pair. No, Pusillanimous thought, it had not been luck or amateurishness; the man drinking Redemption had cast truth.

Pusillanimous smiled slyly. The crowds watched the happenings because they were entertaining. They watched it because they all loved the idea of luck, of something that came to an individual without reason or basis. They liked the idea that they could be that person. And the man drinking Redemption knew it, loved it and indeed depended upon it. His joy was true, but everything
else was as false as a summer day in a February winter. He hadn’t been drinking all that much, had he? And his wild betting wasn’t all that wild, was it? As for his hands, they had outs, were open-ended or were simply the nuts. But no one seemed to see that, because they wanted to believe the opposite. What had the man said before he went on a tear? What had he said before he began his rise from the ashes? Yes, yes; *It’s better to be thought drinking tea.*

**Jelly Bean**
To Whom It May Concern

Whoever you are, I fear you are taking the long walk of unsatisfied nightmares;
I fear this apparent dream of dreams is melting within you like the pavement under your feet.
Even now your face and body stand before me in the night and your hopes, aspirations, and fears have become mine.

Your sacrifice will not die with you.
It stands out amongst everything I do;
the constant reminder of a life cut short in order for my life to mean something.

Whoever you are, now I place my head upon you, that you will be my inspiration.
I give to you with every ounce of my being close to my heart;
But I have loved many, yet I love none better than you.

Jared Worley
The 22

“…What singest thou? it said,
Know’st thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards?
And that theme is of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers…” --Walt Whitman

Battle-hardened soldier, I watch you,
Pull the trigger so fast it scares me
Mind games don’t leave me
Move so fast don’t lose me
It matters where you are.

As reality hits, I’ll be waiting
With the coffins under the flag.
Hey, survivor, you’re still returning
From a war you cannot escape.

Battle-hardened soldier, I watch you,
Placing the opening into the back of your throat.
Memories don’t leave me,
Twenty-two per day don’t lose me
It matters where they are.

As the sun hits, I’ll be waiting
With the tears of your loved ones and friends.
Hey, soldier, you’ve come a long way,
From a war you cannot escape.

Jared Worley
364 and a Wake-Up

I saw it coming from a distance;  
A slow, inevitable change constantly lumbering closer.  
Much like the Titanic watched its iceberg,  
Both masses contained the same morbid possibilities.

I received my tickets  
A round-trip Southwest Asian trip.  
We were all involuntarily entered into a lottery.  
The prize?

A non-refundable revocation of your return ticket.

The love of country --  
The idea that led me here.  
The love of brother --  
The mortar that solidly kept me in my place.

Many boys accompanied me.  
But only men returned.  
Afghanistan guaranteed the change,  
The question was not if, but when?

The dust, wind and heat chewed at bodies,  
Leaving our actions and memories to gnaw on our souls.

When this country is done with you  
All that's left is a hollow shell.  
Once this hell has emptied you  
You're on your own to rebuild.  
For most the road is long, rough, and potholed,  
Like a forgotten cobblestone path.  
They're the lucky ones.  
Some never will.
Automatic rifles
Chatter like teeth
In mouths of mountains and cities
Of a hypothermic country.

A devil's playground,
Man's darkness is allowed to roam.

The dark side of man closely resembles
The unlit side of the moon.
Both are witheringly cold,
So brutal that man cannot survive.
This realm of darkness only allows
The most evil and sadistic.
Everything else dies.

Every day I was lucky enough to open my eyes
I counted my blessings
But mostly my magazines.
Each slender metallic box contains
Thirty second chances
Thirty messages urging the Reaper
"Take him, not me,"
Send all the messages,
As quickly and accurately as you can
And hope they are delivered and not stamped
"Message undeliverable: return to sender."

The letters destined to be returned
Transcend their former package.
An envelope, plain and unassuming
Fails to deliver justice
Or honor, hard-earned and deserved,
Of the forlorn treasure contained within.
Heroes return silently
To the land from whence they came
In flag-draped metal caskets;
A final declaration to the world.
An eternal defense to the Soldier contained within.

On behalf of a grateful nation,
We, the willing, fight.
In the confines of a hostile nation,
Our heroes die.

Explosions and gunshots ring out,
Unexpected and jarring,
Like swear words
Violently uttered
By a Tourette's afflicted person.

KaWumpWumpWumpWumpWump.
.50 caliber machine guns
Beat on the war drums.
KaWumpWumpWump
Pounding out the rhythm,
Guiding us in our dance.
A dance of violence partnered with our enemies.
A song echoed throughout human history;
This endless waltz.

Ceramic plates and woven Kevlar,
Encompass our bodies
Keeping us safe from bullets, shrapnel, and blades.
These heavy vests
Are little more than a mother's embrace
For war.

Vests do fail.
This I know--I've seen it with my own two eyes.
We pride ourselves on marksmanship.
Targets out to 300 meters
Don't even stand a chance
But in the back of a moving, bouncing vehicle
I hit the hardest target of all my years:
The administering of an IV
Into one of my Soldier's vessels.

Days passed by
Primarily crawling and halting,
Rarely did they pass as quickly as I would have liked.
Daily, the sunrise brought
A cosmic spotlight,
Vainly attempting to bring attention and assistance with its rays
To this country,
And our struggle.
Both were wrought in plight.

Things we have seen,
And actions we have taken
Are in direct violation of society's ideals.
We are released of punishment,
Our actions were not our own.
In accomplishment of our mission,
And defense of our lives,
We should find solace
From our numerous, nay--countless, societal violations.

We, or is it just I,
Have yet to find this solace.
As of yet, the search continues.

Our time in country drew short,
Anticipation grew.
Like children waiting for a roller coaster,
We could not wait our turn.

Our replacements came.  
They barely listened to what we had to say.  
A new commander thought he knew best.  
His plan was horrid.  
It sounded as if he were going to lead his men,  
Like sheep, to slaughter.

I never did check to see how they fared.  
I brought my men home.  
My responsibility in that country was over.

Our bags were packed when our plane arrived.  
We boarded the big gray craft  
Like animals boarded the Ark;  
Two single-file lines, one up either side.

The engines roared constantly  
On our trip to Kyrgyzstan.  
Drowning out all other noise,  
Conversations were impossible.  
No one complained;  
We didn't have much to say anyways.  
The aircraft was more than a plane;  
It became a decompression chamber  
30,000 feet in the air.

For several days we waited  
To catch our connecting flight,  
A plane that would take us back to America  
By way of the Atlantic.  
A flight to take us back to society, normalcy;  
Our lives.  
That was all fine and dandy
And we were glad to be heading back,
But for more than a year
We were separated by more than just a pond.
A flight we could take a thousand times,
And still we would not have returned.

The public welcomed us home,
Beckoning with open arms,
They treat us as heroes.
Unbeknownst to them
The abhorrent things we've done.
There is blood on our hands,
Coursing down our fingers,
Dripping from our nails.

Indefinite terms in prison
Await citizens who act
As we have acted.
What makes us different?
Is it the camouflage?
Or because we did it for the Red, White, and Blue,
For the general public,
People like you?

Months went by.
I survived.
The battles from overseas
Still rage within.

The world I returned to
Remained unchanged.
But deep inside me,
Nothing would ever be the same.

People in my life,
Family, friends, and passersby,
They mean well.
Full of curiosity,
I can see it burning in their eyes.
They want to know, to understand,
Just what happened,
What changed,
In the hellish hold of that foreign land.
They've compiled their most poignant questions
And all they think to ask:

"So, was it hot over there?"

Anonymous
Bloodshed Bridged Generation

It caught us by surprise.  
We were wholly unprepared.  
The warning signs were there,  
But haphazardly disregarded.

Astonished our nation. A Day we would never forget.

A daring plan,  
Painstakingly plotted and executed;  
A deep sorrow was about to be forced upon our country  
Shortly after 8:00 A.M.

Terrorized our nation. A Day we would never forget.

From over the bay and ocean  
The planes flew in.  
Everything appeared routine and aroused no suspicion.  
Like mosquitoes, these unsuspected planes came to draw blood.

Mortified our nation. A Day we would never forget.

Something was wrong.  
Eyes cast skyward  
To view the final moments of flight.  
Too low, too fast, not following their flight path.

Traumatized our nation. A Day we would never forget.

A unified gasp resounded from coast-to-coast.  
Words failed to convey our thoughts.  
Like a ship without a compass,  
We found ourselves utterly lost.
Aggrieved our nation. A Day we would never forget.

Fires raged, illuminating the wreckage. The aircraft were destroyed and the buildings fared no better. Confusion and chaos ruled the scenes. People sought refuge, leaders, and friends.

Resolved our nation. A Day we would never forget.

Our nation was physically scarred But emotionally this unforeseen attack Merely hardened our resolve Like the flames of a metal forge.

Unified our nation. A Day we would never forget.

Through hardship and heartache Unity was found. A dark veil was lifted, allowing us to see a foreign enemy By this cowardly attack.

Mobilized our nation. A Day we would never forget.

Thousands of boys received the call: Defend what is closest to you Hurry up! Enlist.

Motivated our nation. A Day we would never forget.

Like early explorers we would relentlessly seek Treasures of vengeance and justice With military force and prowess We entered into another costly war.
Two days that connected generations. Two days we must never forget.

Your great grandparents will always remember The Japanese attack. 
More recently our country unfalteringly recalls The day the Towers fell.

Anonymous
These Boots

These boots despise,
Their own lives,
Because through suicide,
Friends have died,
They have seen lies,
But if you look in others’ eyes,
You will see cries,
From GIs,
It’s no surprise.

Many don’t care,
Because problems aren’t theirs,
The issues are clear,
But many fear,
To help,
When danger is near,
They try to see clear,
Of these boots.

Pamela Peigler
Truth to an Honest T

Where is the Truth to an Honest T?
Not the one, two, three truth
Of his, her, and me truth
But the single truth of all truth
Like an Ecclesiastical Solomon truth
Minus the whole duty to God truth
A Dragnet truth, just the truth.

We are man: male and female
We lie and make fanciful tale
We know it not
We each to our own, what makes us happy
We settle our souls and heal our hearts
We despise any further lesson yet

Lay the cards on the table, faces of true evil,
And name them not.
Yet among their conflicts, carnage, corruption
Evil was not in their heart
They believed in power, purpose, and passion
We strive for the same, seeking their salvation.

Look to God at his great traits
Omniscient.
Omnipresent.
Omnipotent.
We will though…no. We cannot wait.

Anything God has done must be good
We know for he was razed on wood
Yet he stood, so we must also stand
We believe we are God; we follow man.

Yet we lack all that God was, is, could be or what
Create our own righteousness
Delved in the pit of our own indignation
We act with hatred of all that is not us
And judge the future by the past
Like all the cards above
Created in the Tempest of our thoughts
Righteousness
Yet with no Plan to Forbid
Wondering why, we live and die
From the Monsters in our Id.

Dan W. Holst
What Else Can We Do?

Death is the imminent visitor;
the unwanted guest
that drags with it the destruction
of not only the life taken,
but also the lives left.
When Death comes to call,
and we are but friends looking on,
the suffering and sorrow
is overwhelming.
It renders us powerless.
To take away their pain is all we desire,
but it can never be done.

So what else can we do then,
but lend our ears and hearts and hugs;
to offer our own brick, our own mortar,
and bolster the façade of normalcy?

What else can we do then,
but attempt, even in futility,
to fabricate some sort of respite
from that pain that will never die,
from that gash that will never heal?

The burden of loss, you see,
is a greater burden than that of any other kind;
greater even than the burden of guilt
or of shame
or of regret;
for the burden of loss houses all of these
in one dark, hellish room.
But it is their burden to bear;
not ours.
It is theirs to heave upon their shoulders;
of which to feel the crushing weight
during every empty moment,
in slumber or sleeplessness,
each day for the rest of their lives.

What else can we do, you and I,
but brace our shoulder against theirs
and share the weight with them?
For even an ounce of aid
against the mountain of grief
can split the clouds
and give the sun and its warmth
a chance to brighten the shadows;
to mute the cruelest of realities.

Hope is but a seed,
and love is the water.
We must do the watering.
What else can we do?

Luke Cummings
American Dignity

Do you believe in freedom and what does that mean?
For I Believe in Myself,
(With my thoughts so free)
Not controlled by any group nor under their shroud
All that I am (both now and when), I’ll desire to be.
Not the crowd, not the shroud, not for me.

Proud of my heritage and my past
But dictating to me, to them I decree
No more—For I am and my life is free.

Living in peace and not by circumstance,
Created by God with a mind of my own.
With choices free and freely sown
Lawfully living while crafting my course
Living together with responsibility
To myself, to others, to friends and family
I sometimes fail, but sometimes not
I’m always learning, choosing to be
In acceptance of myself, but ever striving to see
That better person I know that I can truly be.
To Myself, To Others, To this American Dignity.

Dan W. Holst
Today, I Was an American

Today, I was an American.
I have left my home
To protect someone else,
I have left my family
To defend strangers,
I have crossed waters and lands
To liberate the oppressed
Free the enslaved
And allow for the self determination of all.
I believed in something greater than myself
And have become a part of something stronger.
My God points the way,
With the compass of my Conscience.

Today, I was an American.
I have fed children,
With no provider,
I have built bridges,
Where no one could cross,
I have stopped disease,
Where no doctors are there to mend,
I have brought water,
Where there was only sand.
I have installed power and light
Where there was darkness and shivering
I have brought smiles and handshakes,
Where there was only fear and suffering.

Today, I was an American.
I have fought Nazis, Fascists and Communists,
I have fought Terrorists, Extremists, and those who hate.
I fought those who would take my life and my freedom
And I showed that no one will inflict their will on me or mine
I have confronted wrongs
And found solutions,
I have faced enemies
And made friends.
I have defeated tyranny and evil
And brought hope and dignity.

Today, I was an American
I have infinite hope for the future
And I always look to the sunrise
I have dreams and ideas,
That are only limited by my creativity
I am Fifty Indivisible United States, many races, and countless religions
I am a Red, White and Blue Flag, with thirteen stripes and fifty stars
My flag is the bane of those that oppress, preach hate and inflict evil
Because my flag is the Symbol of Freedom and the Banner of Liberty
I am the Constitution and The People, are We.
I am a citizen of the Shining City on the Hill.
My faith is imperturbable
My rights are inalienable
I am boundless in my hope
And my cause is always Right.
I am one of the Free and We will always be Brave

Today, I was an American
And I will be an American, Tomorrow.

Chadwick S. Swenson
Not a Care in the World

Uninhibited play
Not a care in the world
From the park to the neighborhood bar,
Twelve yards in total,
We received permission to use them all.

We were kings,
This was our courtyard.
But some days we were cowboys,
Then it was our ranch.

The scenery changed,
Dependent upon what we were playing.
But it was ours!
And with it we would do as we wished.

Sometimes us kids' play would get a little rough,
But we didn't mind cause when we went home
Our dads told us
That's the kinda stuff that made us tough.

Hide-and-seek,
Kick-the-can,
Ghost in the graveyard,
Are infinitely more fun at night.
Poor vision added eeriness,
Glee, giddy happiness, and delight!

The neighborhood fun was fueled by imagination
And supervised
By the warm yellow glow  
Of West Seminary's lone street light.  
One light was plenty,  
Allowing us to escape our seekers in the night.

Boxes, sheets, and pillows  
Were our building blocks of sorts;  
The medium with which we created  
Fantastic castles, pirate ships, towns, and forts.

A car was something our parents had  
Serving only one real purpose;  
It was the mode of transportation  
That ferried us to crosstown play dates.

A simpler time in life,  
 Compared to now,  
Every day was happy  
 We hadn’t any bills, jobs, or responsibility.  
We just looked forward to hanging out from sun up  
to sun down,

Saturday to Sunday.

Anonymous
How to Lace a Dream

I have felt the solid rock under all waters and seas,  
Where pressure prohibits all air, yet bubbles ooze  
from places beyond.

I have tasted the passions and glory of life,  
But the life is always bested by our Space  
coming from beyond.

I have inhaled the aroma of the undying rose,  
the lotus and the lily,  
Reviving those memories, taking me back to the days  
from beyond.

I have heard heaven’s great choirs singing glorious  
Hallelujahs from beyond the twelve pearls of heaven.

I have seen the edge of expanding space,  
Often wondering, what lies beyond to expand into?

Beyond rationality we find our dreams.  
It is from there they arise. Companions and riddles  
from the muse,  
Fleeting moments to grasp and live.  
Sea turtles arise by the throng from underneath the sand.  
Sea horse birthed from the male unlike most other life.  
Of their masses only a few survive to reach  
the blessed waters;  
It is the same with dreams.

The shout of their birth washes over us like a whisper.  
Quickly, but gently now, grab one. A single germ  
of inspiration that is a dream;  
A tiny and tender tendril to take us to the unknown.
Not all dreams can survive so choose
Carefully, and lace it delicately to your life’s tapestry.
Patience my friend for a long cultivation.
But be wary for the dangers of the unravelling,
Take now the aglet.
And guide it around the obstacles of impatience,
disbelief, and ridicule.
But sometimes the unravelling becomes its own tendril
leading dreams to some
Other Space.
So be careful! Don’t let the aglet become a prison.
The tapestry must flow ever ebb and grow.
Once it is pulled taut the dream will stop.

Be patient . . .

Not all dreams come true, but of the ones that do,
Ever the sun will shine on your own Gold of Kinabalu.

Dan W. Holst
The Deployment

Month One: 0800 hours

My camouflage utilities are drenched in sweat, and my flak jacket is only becoming heavier with every hour that fades away. It’s extremely hot in this hostile desert, and it’s only going to get hotter even though it’s still early morning. The sand is so fine that it almost appears as a moon dust on the earth. Here we are, in the middle of nowhere near a small village, building our first forward operating base or what we like to call FOB for short.

“Corporal, we need to take a break for a second,” Private First Class Engelhardt says.

“You best put that shovel to use, because the only break we’ll have is when we’re done building this piece of shit,” I order.

“Aye, Corporal,” he moans as we get back to work.

I am feeling the sensation of giving up as well, but I cannot let them see that in me. I am a non-commissioned officer, superior to my men, and I have a responsibility that one might look at as overwhelming. If I give up now, we’ll never make it through these seven months of hell.

Month Two: 1700 hours
The food is phenomenal since it is the first time we have eaten anything in a week. I look around and realize how nice it must be to work on the main base of Camp Ramadi. Shower, food, and adequate sleep are something my squad and I have been begging for since we first got here.

We head back to the humvees staged near the gate and proceed down what the military has labeled on their maps as “Highway to Hell.” All is unusually quiet for now, which makes it worse. If it’s quiet, there is something wrong. If it’s noisy, it’s just another day.

**Month Three: 0200 hours**

It is time for another rush of anxiety, fear, and adrenaline as we are sitting quiet along the wall of house waiting for that special word to go in.

“Pshht….Gibbs, over…pshht,” the radio whispers.

“Send your traffic, over…pssht,” I answer back.

“You keep your team out here while my team goes in, over,” another corporal orders.

“Hell no, my team is going in. I’m the corporal with the longest time in rank, so I call the shots around here. I am ordering you and your team to back down,” I say assertively.

As I relay back to McQueen to confirm that it is my decision to make the call of when and who
is to go in, gun fire erupts inside of the house. It is too late for any of us to make a call, and the first door is being kicked in by my team….

The raid was considered a success because the terrorists surrendered, but was considered a disappointment by the men because of the lack of action. Will we ever get to engage in real gun-to-gun battles?

Month Four: 1117 hours

It’s another typical day of humanitarian effort--handing out stale rice and rotten cans of beans to the village. It’s now two days from Christmas and stress is vamped to its max. Everyone is thinking about their family and the holidays near this time of the deployment. Here I am, ground-guiding the Humvee, realizing how complacent we have become now that we are in the middle of our deployment. My staff sergeant and I are trotting along with no care, talking about things we will do when we arrive back in the states, when suddenly the village people run away and everything becomes quiet.

“Gibbs, get that jackass over here and give me a progress report, now!” my staff sergeant commands, loudly.

“Shurta, ta’al hina,” I shout to one of the police officers, gesturing him to come to my presence.
As he is approaching me to inform me of what is going on, he starts yelling so that I am not able to comprehend what he is saying.

“BOOM!”

“Corporal, corporal, can you hear me? Are you alright?” my corpsman asks as he crouches down by me.

When I look up at the sky, I suddenly realize that my ears are ringing, and I am hearing gun fire in the background; I am now considered a victim of a terrorist attack. Action is not always as fun as it seems, if you’re the victim first.

**Month Five: 1900 hours**

Gunfire is everywhere. We have come up on a group of HVD’s that are planning an attack, but after being tipped off by one of the village members, we are able to intercept them before it is too late. There are twelve of them running at us, firing as fast as they can. I feel like I am replaying a movie about a war, only it is reality! We are amped up but scared because we have witnessed our first comrade die from numerous gun wounds to the head and legs.

We proceed to push towards the water pump house that is near the edge of the Euphrates River. One man has already blown himself up, and another guy is waiting for us to move in before pressing the trigger.
“Pssht…Lieutenant O’Melila is down; he’s been bit by a suicide vest, over!” the radio shouts.

“Roger, what’s the condition over?” headquarters answers back.

As my team and I make our way to the other side of the house, we witness my lieutenant unconscious and not moving. My eyes glance down his body, realizing that his legs are missing.

“HQ, this is Echo Four Golf..over!” I shout in panic.

“Send it, Echo Four Golf,” they answer.

“The condition?! You want to know his condition? He has no fucking legs, so get a Goddamn bird in the air now! Our grid is 926234, over!”

Within 10 minutes, we hear two helicopters in the air from the far off distance as we continue to suppress the last two enemies rapped in the pump house. Seconds later, we are ordered to run away from the pump house as the first bird rears back like a bee and shoots hellfire missiles, blowing the house to pieces. Once the ground is deemed White House, the second helicopter makes an immediate landing in the grass nearby.

**Month Six: 1600 hours**

It feels good to pack up our belongings, knowing that we’ll be heading home soon. The thrill of getting on that plane back is just
overwhelming in our eyes. The aggravation of everyone living together, seeing each other every day, diminishes as the R.I.P. is beginning. This means that another unit will arrive to take the course of seven months of pain, agony, laughter, and memories as we have done with the unit before us.

“Good job on the deployment squad, but you’re all still considered boots,” I throw out there as we continue to clean out our hooches.

“Corporal, we can’t be considered boots if we’ve accomplished our first deployment,” one says.

“Oh trust me, you’ll always be a boot in my book,” I express, laughingly.

I feel like I have done it all. It’s been a long journey within my four years in “the stint,” and it’s finally coming to an end. The light is at the end of the tunnel for sure.

**Month Seven: UTH (Undetermined time of hours)**

The stress only increases as we watch on Fox News a report about why our flights are delayed; the airlines are going bankrupt. It seems as though looking at your watch will never make time go by. At least the air-conditioning in the terminal is nice and there is an end to hostility.
Finally, our plane arrives and we begin to board with relief. I check my guys and make sure the accountability is up in my squad, look towards my chair, and say, “Chair, this is just you and me, the whole ride buddy. I’m going to take advantage of you like no other person has before, so I hope you enjoy, because I know I will.” I lean back and feel my eyelids start to get heavy. I have made it; I have survived everything that everybody has been gossiping about all these years. I have survived, “The Deployment.”

Christopher Gibbs
The glory of soaring with Eagles amongst the clouds also gave forth to diving to the depths of the sea to swim with the fish, sea turtles, and sharks--oh my! Adventure has always been an integral part of my life. During my eighteen months at U-Tapao AFB Thailand during Nam repairing B52D bomb navigation systems and flying combat missions on B52Ds to repair and optimize the bombing systems, the need for peace and tranquility reached its pinnacle. U-Tapao sits on the coast of the Gulf of Siam near Sattahip, Thailand about 90 miles south of Bangkok. During the Vietnam War an R & R (rest and recuperation) center for troops fighting in Nam was established at Pattaya Beach, about twenty miles north of U-Tapao along the east coast of the Gulf of Siam. Our unit had a bungalow there to provide us local R and R.

Although we were in the middle of a war, the seas of the Gulf of Siam promised and fulfilled some extraordinary opportunities for SCUBA diving and snorkeling. As fate allowed, the USAF, in cooperation with the US Navy, decided to teach SCUBA to anyone with adequate swimming and first aid skills who was stationed at U-Tapao. I enrolled in the first class under USAF MSG Petrin and additional US Navy instructors. I then learned and mastered the techniques and skills required to enjoy the treasures in the depths of the sea.

While at U-Tapao I was able to buy two scuba tanks, a regulator, and all the gear I needed for a mere pittance in comparison to costs back
home. Thankfully, when I left U-Tapao, the USAF shipped all of my SCUBA equipment, my Sansui stereo system, and my military uniforms and gear back home to Libertyville, Illinois. As I write this I am listening to music on that same system that I bought in January 1970.

After I returned to the “World” in June 1971, a PADI basic open water certification came in the mail. That plastic card opened up an entirely new world for me as I dove in the lakes and borrow pits of Illinois. Little did I know that enrolling at WIU would allow me to become a member of WIU’s Prairie Divers and consequently enable me to continue that adventure for the rest of my life. While at U-Tapao, I had applied for and was accepted for admission to WIU beginning in September 1971 to major in Physics and Math then eventually Law Enforcement Administration.

Upon my arrival on campus, just like each new student since WIU opened has done and as each future student will do, I searched out opportunities on campus. Although I had a full scholarship along with my GI bill, extra money was always nice to have available. Once more fate intervened. I walked into Western Hall, found the indoor swimming pool and met three professors, Coach Bob Clow, Coach Earl Detrick, and Coach Verne Wilhelm, who were destined to have a unique impact on my life. These three adventurers were amongst the founders of PADI who taught swimming, diving, gymnastics, and scuba diving at WIU. Thankfully I was hired as a life guard and then I was given the unique opportunity to study
and train under these three to earn the different PADI scuba certifications culminating with my PADI instructor certification.

Although I was majoring in Physics and serving as a student laboratory teaching assistant, my spare time was spent in the pool as a life guard, assistant SCUBA instructor, then a fully-fledged SCUBA instructor at WIU. As more WIU students and local residents learned how to dive under Professor Clow’s guidance, the WIU Prairie Divers was formed. We not only had fun, but a small cadre of us who Coach Clow deemed exceptional divers and who had earned our PADI instructors’ certification under the three of them became the Regional Under Water Rescue Team for the state police whose district headquarters was located just a few hundred feet north of WIU’s campus.

The most unique emergency dive that we ever completed was to repair the sand filter membrane system in Macomb’s fresh water supply plant in the park just across US Route 67 at WIU’s northeast campus entrance. The water system had a sand filter unit located about 75 feet back up through a 24 inch pipe from an access well. The sand filter system consisted of a porous membrane that supported a large column of special sand used to filter the water. Somehow a small section of the membrane got torn, allowing sand to fall down and block the exit port. Our team got prepared with equipment and a back-up diver and Macomb’s finest standing by to provide any help as needed. Coach Clow and Coach Detrick greased my wet suit
down from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, and then they tied a rope to my ankles.

Pushing my air tank ahead of me, towing a signal line, and towing one more rope attached to a tool bag behind me, I squirmed through the pipe to get to the large tank beneath the sand filter. Once in the tank, I was able to sit up and then pull my tool bag into the tank. I then removed the fallen sand and repaired the torn membrane. Finally about 45 minutes later after several preplanned yanks on my message line, Coach Clow and Coach Detrick pulled me back out of the pipe and water system. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED! We then all went over to Student Prince to celebrate one more unique adventure.

We dove in Lake Argyle, Spring Lake, and the borrow pits up near Canton, Illinois, and for a major dive trip went to Table Rock Lake in Missouri. We used to take very short fishing poles down with us to fish in the Canton borrow pits while SCUBA diving – just put the worm on the hook right in front of the fish and hope for a bite. The visibility in Lake Argyle was usually only few inches, maybe a foot at best, so we learned what it meant to be blind and to perform some task.

Although divers always yearn for open water, the pool was where we really had fun. During the early 1970’s, WIU under these three world-class professors and under the sponsorship of the WIU Prairie Divers held the Midwest SCUBA Olympics. The WIU Midwest Scuba Olympics brought the best divers from all over the Midwest to
WIU and the Western Hall Pool to develop and test their skills as individuals and as teams.

As the years went by, I continued to dive, teach others, teach my sons, and to enjoy the treasures of the seas in Illinois, Idaho, Florida, Alabama, California, Washington State, Mississippi, Texas, Hawai‘i, Guam, Greece, and Australia. One time while we were diving in the Pacific Ocean just outside the mouth of Hawai‘i’s Hanuma Bay, as we came up and rotated around, the battleship Missouri steamed by just a few hundred yards away after leaving its birthing at Pearl Harbor. We felt like microbes in its wake. Another time while diving near Destin, Florida, a manta ray came by at arm’s length. While I was a visiting professor at Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama about sixteen years ago, the circle became complete as I watched the eagles soar in the clouds above my head as I was SCUBA diving in my own back yard swimming pool.

On Saturday, March 19, 2016, the new WIU Western News arrived in my mail box with a story on how SCUBA diving is now an undergraduate minor at WIU. The author emphasized how individuals who have graduated in this now-formal program have gone on to serve their communities and others. This story brought back wonderful memories and a smile to my face as I was there at the beginning. I suspect that Coach Clow and Coach Detrick who are now Angels are smiling down from heaven rejoicing in how the program they began so many years ago has evolved. It is obvious to me now as I learned years ago that WIU leads the way
in providing a unique and exceptional academic experience and in proving public service for all.

Doug Rokke
To Whom It Should Concern

I am a person who does not speak often, but when I do it is with conviction and purpose. I was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in May of 2011. Having been back in the United States since October of 2010, I am appalled at the passive indifference toward not only myself but the overall lack of compassion for fellow combat veterans diagnosed with PTSD in regards to treatment by the military. I know I am far from being the first to speak in regard to the military and its handling of soldiers with this debilitating illness. Commonly known as 'Shell Shock' since WWI to present day, its symptoms and lingering effect predate our current generations by a multitude of service members; men and women haunted from the trauma they endured in ages of battle.

There are many different types of PTSD as it is dependent upon the individual. No one person's condition is the same as another's. It is of combat-related PTSD I wish to speak as it is the illness I suffer from. I am debilitated to a point of extremes, having endured significant exposure to traumatic events beyond my control and forced into them by the obligation I held myself to with my specific military profession. I was deployed as a line medic with the 3rd Infantry Division in Iraq from October 2009 to October 2010. I was exposed to not only a volatile cultural environment, but a people in desperate need for quality medical care. I, in many cases, saw fit to go to the Post Exchange (PX) and buy en masse over-the-counter medications for the locals that lived near the security checkpoint where
I provided medical coverage. Even when discouraged from treating locals unless absolutely necessary, I still continued to treat them.

Does this make me responsible for my illness? Possibly. More importantly, though, is that life is precious and should be treated as such no matter what ethnicity or creed. Life is an uncontrollable variable, and no amount of resiliency training will completely prepare you for the horrors of a world at war. I've had nightmares for over five years now, every night, about my deployment. I see dead and dying children in my sleep, hands stretched out for help that are always just beyond reach, friends whose lives were taken or those who took their own. I've held the insides of a baby girl in my hands while she was still alive. I've witnessed death and horror of humanity in obscene forms that would break my mother's heart.

I still hold myself fortunate in that none of the men of my team died. I prayed every night that my soldiers, my boys, be kept safe from harm. I gladly suffer what I have become, as I cannot imagine what I might have become were one of my soldiers to die in the field; I cannot fathom how much more I could take, being where I am now.

Upon preparation to return stateside, avenues of masking the truth quickly reached the surface and took root. A Post-Deployment Health Assessment was held while we were still in-country; a month of our deployment remained, in honesty, yet we took this test anyway. I encouraged my men to answer the survey faithfully and honestly; some did, others chose the quicker route
of feigning 'perfect health'. It is a common misconception that if you claim that there is something wrong from a standpoint of behavioral health that you may be held in-country for up to six weeks. This is hearsay, a farce: it is also true that it may rain tomorrow, but that does not mean it will. The propagation of such statements causes people with credible and legitimate problems to deny them, and lie to themselves, and further irrationalize the stereotype of PTSD sufferers in the military. The expedience of the premature assessment became evident later on once we returned to the United States, where several soldiers were recommended to Behavioral Health at Fort Stewart.

The clinic at Fort Stewart was a mixed bag in regards to treatment. If you go solely because you were recommended it is a check-in-a-box. If you have serious issues and seek out treatment, you are discouraged from thinking you may have a long-term problem. While this may appear to be done out of optimism and hope on the surface, it also belies an unwillingness to acknowledge that soldiers may indeed have long-term problems that require long-term solutions.

There were instances at the clinic in Fort Stewart where I was told to "Suck it up" and "Deal with it." An officer I saw for counseling, a Captain whose name I do not recall but could identify if I were to see his face, only saw me twice. At the end of our second session he shook my hand, wished me luck, and closed the door so quickly behind me that I felt the door on the heels of my boots. There was
no mention of a treatment plan, or even continuance of seeing him.

The military is supposed to give a six-month time period once back in the United States from deployment to re-acclimate with the environment and adjust to being in western civilization once more. During this timeframe no finalized diagnoses is to be given. Treatment is given, but as PTSD is a long-term illness, people are not diagnosed until they meet a minimum amount of time and a specific criteria of symptoms. In this period of time, some have a tendency to act out based on their illness. This is where the violence, the apathy for life, is first manifested. Drug abuse, self-violence, violence unto others, and overall dangerous behaviors are easily prevalent concerns of a more serious ailment. Depending upon the severity of the cause and proceeding social and organization reaction, avenues are made available for catharsis: substance abuse programs, family counseling, and overall peer support are made readily accessible. A drawback is presented in this availability of such necessity, however.

There is no regulation, annotation, memorandum, or directive regarding the discrimination of soldiers with PTSD. Such discrimination is an inherently social construct, made cohesive through the ostracizing, labeling, ambivalence, pressuring, and disregard of those who seek help. A person, a soldier, is free to seek treatment, but it comes with a price. The tight-knit social environment, previously a part of, now abandons the soldier to certain extents: treated as a
pariah, utter lack of acknowledgement, handling with such overt care as to avoid the situation completely. A complete list would be unending: the truth of it is that the soldier becomes a personification of their illness, their mental condition.

Reprimand for such blatant disrespect towards veterans with PTSD is hushed, kept within inner circles and is mostly unspoken of. On paper, it is chastisements that take the form of counseling statements that slip through the cracks or are destroyed upon transfer to a new duty station or due to termination of service/retirement. At the same time, such despicable behavior propagates nonetheless, and soldiers are more often than not abandoned to the judgement of their peers and superiors. For some, it is a simple paper reprimand. For those who act out in blatant disregard of law and regulation, it is discharge from service; even though the end result may be just, some treatment must still be offered, at least, in cases where behavior is different from before deployment. Too often are soldiers, sons and daughters of this nation, who served overseas allowed to slip through the cracks of treatment. What of "Truth, Justice and the American Way"? The sad truth of it is that justice is fickle and the American way towards veterans has become one engrossed on the almighty dollar.

There was an article from the Washington Post regarding an employee for the office of Veteran Affairs, one Norma Perez, who released an email to her office stating "I'd like to suggest that
you refrain from giving a diagnosis of PTSD" because they should "consider a diagnosis of Adjustment Disorder" due to not having "the time to do the extensive testing..." Norma Perez was summarily released from her office by Veteran Affairs Secretary James Peak who labeled her email as "inappropriate" and does not reflect VA policy. People are not their policies, rules, or ethical obligations, unfortunately. We all have compunctions that come from opinionated views on other people, and the world in general. The precarious question here is "if one person comes back from Iraq or Afghanistan and is perfectly fine, why aren't the other three, four, or however many like him or her?"

We in active duty, and those veterans who have served abroad, live with this every day. It is important for us to remember that through the admission of our condition that we gain strength in that someday we may overcome its hold on our everyday lives. This becomes quickly forgotten in a miasma of unending training seminars and practical exercises that ultimately prepare you for the bare minimum. There is nothing that can withstand the unpredictable situation that is war, and for those of us with PTSD it is something that never goes away.

When I transferred to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, I saw it as a fresh start. It was a new opportunity to me; I believed I was going to a low-stress department and would end my service with my head held high. I felt initial trepidation at the prospect of continuing my treatment at the Behavioral Health Clinic at Fort Sam Houston;
partly for the haphazard methodology of Fort Stewart's care and also because I did not wish to make a bad impression with my new unit by going to see Combat Stress. I was, in fact, assigned to the emergency room. I was never able to perform my duties as a medic the entire time stationed in Texas, as my flashbacks, panic attacks, and PTSD made me unfit for duty. I was placed in the Operations office in the ER and given tedious tasks and duties. My first line supervisors were very supportive of my condition and my seeking of treatment for it. I verbalized my deteriorating health, both mentally and physically, and was encouraged to continue attending my twice-weekly counseling therapy. It was assumed that since I was not doing any medical work in the ER that I would be fine; the level of immersion and daily exposure to trauma only made the situation worse. The flashbacks and nightmares intensified to a point of pure terror, of being afraid of sleeping while being deprived of a good night's rest for almost two years now. My memory began to show signs of impairment, my thoughts erratic and incoherent, momentary blackouts began to occur.

By my syntax and eloquence of speech in this letter you can surmise that I am educated. I consider myself a learned man, having earned a Bachelor's Degree in Literature and Writing from Western Illinois University before joining the military. Imagine then, with all your preconceptions of my intellect, daresay imagine you are me. How does it feel when your name is called and at times it is utterly alien to you, how you do not recognize it nor can recall the names of loved ones? Think how
crushing, how defeating, it is when you misplace your car keys or some other trinket and search for hours to find that they were in your hand the entire time. Your personal hygiene becomes a heavy labor, whereas it once was so automatic that no mental exertion was necessary. Even this letter you are reading requires such concentration that I must silence and alienate myself from the entire world happening around me.

I do not sleep well; horribly, in honesty, even though I am heavily sedated. All the noxious fumes I inhaled in Iraq point toward a diagnosis of Sleep Apnea and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder. When I get sinus infections now, my uvula swells to the size of my pinky and completely obstructs my airway. I eat only to meet the nutritional demands of my body, with no real regard for how something tastes or any true desire to treat myself. I cannot stand groups of people, big or small, indoors or outdoors. Children terrify me, and this is one of the most hurtful symptoms, the most grievous.

I cannot be around my teenage sister alone. It presents a high level of discomfort, almost anguish, to do so. Every time it does occur, my Fight/Flight instincts kick in and I run/walk/limp out of the room. It makes me cry to look at my sister alone: I see her as a young baby whom I made laugh for the first time, the teenager she is now, and I also see every trauma upon children that I treated, encountered, and saw. I see all of them, and I see my sister with their wounds, in various combinations.
These maladies, and others unmentioned, affect me to a point of debilitation and an inability to not only work but to live in but the barest of capacities of life. I am not alone in this; there are many of us, to varying extents of symptoms over many wars and conflicts. We are the estranged children of America, your sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. Treat us with the respect we deserve and the support we are rightfully obligated to have from you.

Brandon Mooney
They Cross

Then they crossed. It was the first time they had crossed, as far as we knew. Everyone had seen them many times. They had become part of the scenery. An inexorably flowing tidal river, the Mekong, brown in color; tropical vegetation close to or on the shore; palm trees, banana trees, elephant grass, shrubs, reeds, and in the distance rice paddies. Humidity like a soaked curtain. A pungent smell of wet richness, kind of like a recently plowed field heavily rained upon. Now and again there was an odorous waft of decay. But not quite enough to drive you away. Which is what ‘they’ were doing. Going away after they crossed.

‘They’ were the VC (Viet Cong), local guerillas who favored communism. Not the NVA, or North Vietnamese Army. As usual, ‘they’ were dressed in civilian attire, black pajama-like outfits, conal triangular hats, sandals, hand-me-down ill-shaped shirts made of burlap, bits and pieces of jungle fatigues. The telling factor they were VC: Weapons. Across their chest, slung over their shoulder, on their hips or carried at port arms. American military issue, Chinese-Communist, or even homemade. Where did they get the M-16s and AK-47s they carried? Did they make their own weapons? Not important now, but the fact they had them was.

‘Charlie’ was the generic name given to the enemy. In training at Ft. Polk LA, there were numerous pictured signs of peasant-dressed individuals with straw hats and rifles across their
chests. “This is the enemy Charlie,” the signs stated. After you were in-country for awhile, they became ‘gooks.’ ‘Gook’ could be an unflattering term for any Asian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai, or Cambodian. I don’t know what they called us, but a gook with a gun was Charlie and needed to be dealt with.

My mortar platoon, out of a small base camp near the village of Rach Kien, had bridge duty. We were providing security at the bridge near Tan An City. A paved highway crossed the Mekong River there and was strategically important. We usually went there by truck. The work horse Deuce & a Half, a 2 1/2 ton transport, took us. The trucks came out of Dong Tam, 9th Infantry Division headquarters. We usually had to walk or fly on choppers and walk when we got to our area of operation. So this was kind of a break and not bad duty. We didn’t have to walk at all. Our rotation for guarding the Tan An bridge came around about once a month. Nothing of note had ever happened at the bridge, until today.

We normally had three to four men on guard duty at the same time. There were ten to twelve grunts, or infantrymen, in our outfit. That’s not enough to stop a large attack but enough to slow Charlie down while we call for support. Our guard position was situated so we could see the underside of the bridge and a large rambling building that looked like it had once been a meeting place or maybe a communal farm house. It was on the other side of the river about a quarter click, or kilometer, from the bridge site. Everyone had seen gooks in
and around the building, but never any trouble or suspicious activity until we burned it extensively when an illumination round got too close. It was night and we wanted to see what was going on after hearing some strange sounds. Charlie ran away and didn’t fight the fire. They seemed more concerned with what they could carry off.

On the day of the crossing, I was in the lower forward guard position with three other guys. Walter Reed, a little chubby guy whose nickname was ‘Hospital.’ Tony Franeco, a serious but good-natured Italian from Milwaukee known as the ‘Dago.’ Sam Jackson, a large southern black man and devoted pot smoker, known as Toker. Sergeant George, a stocky potential lifer (career man) from Washington State called Asshole, and me. So in order from left to right: Hospital, the Dago, Toker, Asshole and me, an Irish guy from the south side of Chicago called ‘Mick.’ Personalities aside, we had seen action together before. So no worries there. Everyone was a Specialist 4th class, like a corporal, except for the future lifer Sgt. E-5 George.

Throughout the previous night, everyone in the platoon had pulled a two-hour watch. Nothing happened. After morning chow we trudged down to our position. We all had M-16s and there was an M-79 grenade launcher and M-60 machine gun at the guard post. Everybody smoked cigarettes, except Toker, who rolled his own joint. We waited and watched. The day was gradually warming up until about 3:00-4:00 p.m. when the daily monsoon would start. It would be a torrential downpour for thirty-ninety minutes and then a curtain of
mugginess would descend. On this day we sat, smoked, bullshitted and listened to the birds and monkeys.

Then I thought I saw something. There was no general alarm or clamor. “It’s just a papa san coming out to piss,” said Hospital. The motion was by the old burned-out farm house, not farther up by the bridge. In a few minutes another person came out and looked around. “No big deal,” I thought. Then four, then six gooks came out and milled around.

“What do we do?” I said.
“Shoot em,” Toker said.
“We can’t,” said Asshole, “They haven’t showed aggression.”
“We all know who they are,” I barked.
“Let’s lob a grenade and see what happens,” said Hospital. Before we could do anything, they advanced to the river’s edge and started to drag something out of the reeds. It looked like a boat of some kind. They were getting inside and preparing to launch.

“If that ain’t aggressive, it’s suspicious,” yelled the Dago. Sgt. George got on the radio. It was clear they weren’t going fishing, not armed to the teeth.

“The lieutenant says to stop them,” Sgt. George said.
“No shit, Asshole,” I thought. Why call, just shoot! We opened fire. 16’s by Hospital, Dago and me with Toker on the M-60 assisted by Sgt. George. The M-16s on automatic sounded like a string of firecrackers going off. The M-60 had a deeper,
throatier rhythmic sound. They got to the middle of the river before we hit anybody or anything. We weren’t sure whether to go for them or the boat.

Of course, they were shooting back, so it was hard to get a clean shot. Their AK-47s threw down a heavy and cordate-laced barrier. Tracers, ours orange, theirs green, filled the air. One of them shot a grease gun, a little Tommy gun that shot 45 slugs. Luckily, only effective at close range. “Man, I wish we had a mortar,” I thought. They were headed across and down river toward the bridge and our defensive position. So they were between us and the highway.

“That’s not good,” screamed the Dago. Impatient, I grabbed the M-79 and lobbed a grenade at them. It made a ‘thunk’ sound. It missed the boat but was close enough to send one of the VC overboard. Their fire was becoming less effective, but they were getting closer to the bridge. I heard Reed grab the radio and shout at the lieutenant, “You see this?” Soon, the rest of the platoon left their bunker and returned fire. Charlie was getting close to our camp HQ. The VC were almost across the river!

Unbelievably, through fusillades of fire, they kept going. Four of them made it to the other side. We kept firing, but they were getting out of effective killing range. The VC were now directing their fire up the bank toward the bridge bunkers. All of a sudden there was an explosion! Wood, water, mud and all kinds of debris filled the muggy curtain of air. The bright light before the boom and shrapnel could mean only one thing…Charlie had a
LAW, or Light Anti-Tank Weapon, the weapon that replaced the bazooka. This was getting serious. We had to stop them from ascending the bank and getting to the barracks/bunker area by the HQ. Without having to stay down, I fired about a six-shot burst. One of the VC went down. Not sure if I got him because everyone was firing. Now there were three gooks left. They continued to advance. “Oh, shit,” we all thought. “We have to get down there,” Asshole screamed. “We’re on the wrong side,” Toker replied. “Leave the 60, take everything else,” George barked. We moved out. The VC were still going up the bank. Then, miraculously, machine gun fire erupted from the defensive positions. Smoke, tracer rounds, and an ear shattering rat-a-tat belched from the last stand area. In a few minutes the remaining three VC were all down. Weapons at the ready, we stood and watched. Soon our platoon leader, Lt. McGahey, stepped out. He was dirty, bloody and all askew, but smiled. “Thanks for the heads up, Sgt. George,” he said. “No problem,” said Asshole. We all just looked around at each other, our mouths open. It looked like a couple guys had been hit. McGahey told everybody else to stay inside the bunkers until he assessed the situation. We went back to our position, policed up, and trudged back up and around to our base position. Before we did, we all looked at the big
rambling hooch and fired a few rounds into it. Fuckin’ gooks!

There was good and bad news once we got to road level by the lieutenant’s quarters. The LAW had killed PFC Mayer and wounded two other guys from the HQ. McGahey appeared to have been hit in the shoulder. Two of our guys from the forward guard position were shot, Hospital and Toker, but it didn’t seem too bad. Glancing bullet wounds, not the shrapnel induced gouges absorbed by the guys in the bunker. It was a strange moment. No one knew what to do or say. A celebration wasn’t called for. We settled on having a beer and a smoke. After awhile, Lt. McGahey said, “Men, I guess we better continue to keep an eye on that big old hooch.” Everyone just kind of sighed. At least we weren’t the first troops in the 9th Division to lose security on the Tan An Bridge.

I laid down on my rubber dollie, air mattress, to rest. As I lay there, the insects droning, the monsoon humidity blanket approaching, the smell of C-rations being heated by C-4, a plastic explosive, I wondered: would I have to go back and watch the hooch, would I get wounded sometime, would my buddies be all right, what was to come? It had been another surreal experience in this place called Nam. I drifted off into an uncomfortable sleep.

Larry Harris
Through the Eyes of Man

Is it the way a man lives that makes him a man? Or what he does in the process? I can’t count how many times that statement has come to mind. However, the process of life gives man a whole new meaning. Whether he loves a woman, excels in athletics or studies, or simply just is who he is. Most people only see who a man is today, rather than see him for who he ought to be. Life gives us a task, but it’s up to you how you make it through the battle. For me, I see life as a challenge rather than a battle; I simply see the brighter side of the day. I do whatever it takes to make it as a well-rounded individual. Then again, who doesn’t? I don’t know what life has in store for anyone, much less me. All I can say is that’s the beauty of it.

People look at me, and wonder, here is another student with hopes and dreams. Fact that matters is, they’re right. However, who am I to judge? Being who you are is what makes everyone else different from one another. It’s never a bad thing, but who knows that person better than themselves? You have your gifted students, gifted athletes, and gifted musicians. Being who you are is what makes the world go round. It’s never about one thing; it’s about everything that makes the world what it is. Some people choose to not even go to college, and just choose to work for a living. Some people decide to practice hard and play even harder, which lands them into the world of professional athletes. Some choose to love school, and practice to become a doctor, lawyer, or even a
teacher. No matter what path one chooses it’s not about the value of a job; it’s what you do that matters.

I was born into a middle class family, with a first class value of life. It’s always better to have tried and failed than to have never tried at all. What makes me who I am is my environment. Where I come from, the value of family, love and equality, have never been second-guessed. You don’t have to pretend to be someone else; all you have to be is yourself. I have been a helping hand to a vast majority of my community since I’ve been born. Years later, here I stand, still the same compassionate, caring and hard-working individual I have always been. School has always been great to me; I’ve gotten to know teachers better than any student they’ve known. I know my grades speak for themselves, but I know if I keep at it, in the end, I will make it.

Helping people has always been my greatest quality. However my biggest and most desirable quality would be my heart. Giving up is never an option for me, which is why I joined the Army National Guard. To serve my country, help others who can’t help themselves, as well as finish my education on the road to a career in medicine or government.

Even when my service is up, I will continue to help people one way or another. I don’t know what life has in store for me; I don’t know where I will end up in the next ten years, but one thing I do know: life goes on. I have no intentions of wasting it, and wherever it takes me, I will never give up,
and keep moving forward, whether times are good or bad. I can’t wait to find out.

Robert Campbell
My Life as a Veteran (Excerpt)

It’s strange to go home on leave and see people I knew go about life as usual, when I was about to travel to a war zone halfway around the world, possibly on a one-way ticket. Our flight from Travis AFB near San Francisco stopped to refuel in Hawaii, and we got to get off the plane and walk around the airport for about an hour. What a cruel irony that was. An hour of paradise before a year of hell. We stopped one other place; it might have been Guam or Wake or some other island. By then, we were all groggy from lack of sleep and the realization that life as we knew it was coming to an end, either figuratively or literally. On the plane, I sat next to another infantry 2LT named Brian and an infantry Captain who happened to be my unit commander in jump school. After I was out of the Army and working in Chicago, I saw an article about Brian in Parade magazine. I called him. He had had a tough tour of duty in Vietnam, but survived. He said the Captain had been killed.

Soldiers in uniforms in airports were pretty common back then. I got to Chicago too late to catch my connecting flight down to Galesburg, so I called Tom O’Mahoney, another buddy from WIU, and Tim’s twin brother (both were charter members of the Baloney Gang). I spent the night at his place and a few other guys came over and we partied the night away. Tom spent a couple of years at Western and then returned to Chicago to become a pipefitter and marry his high school sweetie, Mare the Fair.
Kids soon followed. Tim survived that first year at Western, but later got drafted.

When I was stationed at Fort Bragg as a new second lieutenant, Tim had a chance to visit while in transit between bases. For some ridiculous reason, we decided to go to the 82nd Airborne Officers Club for Friday night happy hour in our civvies. PFC O’Mahoney was not shy about elbowing captains and majors out of his way to get to the bar or about shouting to the barkeep for some service. Although he raised some eyebrows, nobody said a word to us. It’s certainly worth a good chuckle now, but it could have gotten both of us into a lot of hot water back then. When I was going through the advisor school in Xian, Tim was stationed with a unit there, too. He was a quasi club manager’s assistant or something, so we managed to get together there for a night and whoop it up a bit. Strange how paths cross in different places.

Stan McGahey
Contributors

Anonymous is a WIU alumni and veteran.

Jelly Bean was born and raised in Illinois, growing up in Macomb. He served four years, eight months and fifteen days in the Marine Corps, with the military occupational specialty of 0331 Machine Gunner. He partook in three overseas deployments, one being the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He attended WIU and transferred to ISU where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 2007. He resides and works in Normal IL, and is happily married.

In his senior year of high school, Chris Bell was voted most likely to be a clown in the circus. He served four years in the Army and is currently a junior at Western Illinois University majoring in English Literature with a creative writing minor. In 2005 his non-fiction essay, “Seeing the Elephant: My War Story” was published in *Western Voices*. His short fiction has appeared in *Festival Harvest*. Chris is a member of Sigma Tau Delta. His twin muses are his three daughters, especially his youngest daughter Lauren, and a 23-year-old book jacket photograph of Ann Patchett.

Ryan Bronaugh is a graduate student of the English department at WIU. This is also the second year he has served as the fiction editor of this literary magazine. Ryan served just short of eight years on active duty, completing multiple deployments including combat tours in Iraq. His fondest memories are getting to spend time with
brothers, his worst is having to say goodbye to them. His writing ensures he is always with them, and never has to say goodbye again.

**Robert Campbell** was born and raised on the Southside of Chicago, Illinois. He spent six years as an Automated Logistical Specialist in the Illinois Army National Guard, and has spent all of 2014 in Kuwait. He attended WIU from 2013-2016, and is now a nursing student in Chicago. He was a member of Tau Kappa Epsilon while he was at WIU, and he has been to five different countries, hoping to visit even more in the future. Robert says his writing is a way to tell his story, and hopes to inspire future writers everywhere.

**Luke Cummings** is a twenty-eight year old junior at Western Illinois University-Quad Cities, where he is majoring in English. He was in the Marine Corps infantry from 2006 to 2010. As he enjoys writing both for personal reasons and to benefit others, he hopes to build a career on the side as an author or writer in some form. When he’s not pouring over his textbooks and homework, he loves spending time with his wife and two children, as well as cooking anything and everything, and desperately trying to improve his golf game.

**Christopher Gibbs** is a WIU Alumni with bachelors degree in Law Enforcement and Justice Administration and a minor in Forensic Psychology. He was a member of WIU Veterans club, WIU Archery Club, and Alpha Gamma Rho. His favorite subject is English. He currently works for the
Department of Justice at the Federal Bureau of Prisons as a correctional officer where writing is extremely important in helping establish Union policy and reports at work! He is an Iraq vet, active from 2004-2008, USMC 0311 infantry.

A native Chicagoan, **Larry Harris** attended Western Illinois University from 1965-1967. A 1968 draftee, Larry spent 1969 in Vietnam. After the Army he graduated from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Larry retired as an alternative education teacher in Salt Lake City. He moved west to Colorado in 1974 and on to Utah in 1988. He has been a bartender, salesman, liquor store owner, and writing instructor. Larry has two children, Andrea and Tim. He and his wife, Tina, are retired and living in St. George, Utah where he is active in local veterans’ affairs.

**Dan W. Holst** served the United States in the Air Force for twenty-one years and followed that with five years as an Army civilian. Having acquired an eclectic collection of world knowledge, he is driven to read and write and hopes one day to simply have a voice.

After expulsion from Western as a freshman, **Dr. Stan McGahey** served in the Army from 1966-69. He graduated from Infantry OCS and served in Vietnam with the 82nd Airborne Division and MAC-V. Upon readmission to WIU he earned a B.S. and M.S. in RPTA, followed by a Ph.D, in International Tourism from Hanyang University in Seoul. He taught for 25 years at universities in Asia, the
Pacific, Eastern and Western Europe, and the USA, including as a Fulbright Scholar in Macedonia. He has traveled, written, and consulted in over 100 countries and is a member of the UNWTO Panel of Experts. He is a lifetime member of VVA and an honorary Peshmerga.

Brandon Kyle Mooney is an Illinois native and veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom campaign. A combat medic assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division out of Ft. Stewart, GA, Brandon enjoys writing, music, movies, and gaming when his injuries and PTSD from military service do not otherwise occupy his time with coping techniques and bed rest.

Pamela Peigler is a senior Journalism major and photographic media minor at Western Illinois University projected to graduate in December. She is an Army Veteran who is still serving in the Illinois Army National Guard. She is a member of the Veteran's Club at WIU, writer for The Odyssey Online, and the Western Courier. Her job in the Army is a Human Resources Sergeant. Her hobbies include photography, writing, makeup, spending time with her Yorkie, Roxy, traveling, and cooking.

Doug Rokke enrolled at WIU in September 1971 right after two years in “Nam” as a USAF bomb-nav hard hat flying on B52s. Doug earned a BS in Physics in 1975, and then earned his M.S. and Ph.D. in Physics-Technology Education from the University of Illinois. Doug combined a life in academia with military duty and retired as a Major
from the Army Reserve and the UIUC. Doug, a veterans’ advocate, is host of “Warrior Connection” on the Progressive Radio Network (prn.fm), and an expert regarding the health and environmental effects of depleted uranium munitions, NBC-E, and emergency combat medicine.

Chadwick S. Swenson is a WIU graduate, class of 2000. He is a former Army Captain (Promotable) and a Disabled Veteran.

Susan Gorman Winstead received a Bachelor of Science degree (1983) and an Army ROTC Commission (1984) at Western Illinois University. She served on active duty in the U.S. Army from 1984 - 1993 in positions of platoon leader, company executive officer, supply officer, company commander, division staff officer, and with a readiness group. She has numerous published achievements and is the recipient of several writing awards. She lives and works in suburban Chicago.

Jared R. Worley is a veteran of the Air Force and a senior undergraduate of the WIU Department of English. He serves as the nonfiction editor for SITREP, Vice President of the Phi Delta chapter of the English Honor Society Sigma Tau Delta, an editor and writer for *The Mirror and the Lamp*, and the creative writing student representative for the Department of English Student Advisory Council. When he isn’t doing any of the aforementioned duties, he is spending time with his wife and two year old daughter, working at Walgreens, and working on his studies.
Contributors

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Robert Campbell
Luke Cummings
Christopher Gibbs
Larry Harris

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