Veterans’ Voices: Personal Stories of Combat and Peace

Western Illinois University

2015

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Acknowledgments
On behalf of the veteran and service member community, and the Veterans Resource Center at Western Illinois University, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Barbara Harroun and Dr. Jacqueline Wilson-Jordan. It is through their dedication, leadership, guidance, and passion for serving veterans and service members that Veterans’ Voices became a reality. We are very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with such committed, compassionate and humble professionals.

To our talented student veteran editors, Ryan Bronaugh, Daniel Holst and Jared Worley, this literary magazine would not have come to fruition without your continued enthusiasm and support. We know that you have academic, family, work, and other commitments, but each of you volunteered more time than you had available to make this project happen. Once again, thank you for your service to Western, and to our country.

Finally, thank you to all of the student and alumni veterans who took this opportunity to share your stories. We know it is not easy to bear your emotions and personal stories for all. We truly appreciate the impact you make on our campus, our community, and our lives.

Crystal Kepple

Kathy Meyers
The work on *Veterans’ Voices: Stories of Combat and Peace* has traveled into many corners of my life, often across space and time. I found my thoughts turning back to loved ones who served, like Uncle Jack (World War II, Patton’s Third Army) and Aunt Lorna (*M*A*S*H* nurse, Korea). I realize now that as a kid and young adult I took their service for granted, and I wish now that I could go back and ask them to tell me their stories. I thank the writers here who have courageously shared stories that may have been difficult or impossible for others to tell. I want to especially thank my friend of many years, Katherine Meloan, for sharing her stories of Vietnam with me.

I am grateful to Kathy Meyers for her excellent stewardship of the Veterans’ Resource Center and for believing in our project from the beginning and supporting it all the way through. Thanks go to Crystal Kepple for her unwavering support, her great idea for a title, and her beautiful design work. We are indebted to Ann Marie Hayes-Hawkinson for generously inviting us to use the University Art Gallery as a place to gather and share ideas and stories.

This project would not exist without the work of our editors, Ryan Bronaugh, Daniel Holst, and Jared Worley. They offered not only the gifts of their own writing but a commitment to honoring the stories of others by truly listening. I have watched the transforming effects of their words on fellow veterans, members of the community, and all of us who have been so fortunate to read their work or hear them speak. They
dedicated so much wisdom, time, and true support for the project in every phase.

I would like to thank my family—my husband Marshal Jordan, daughter Emily Jordan, mother Linda Hutchcroft, step-mother Beverly Braniff and, in memoriam, my father, Warren Wilson, for being great models as teachers and writers and for supporting my work.

I am profoundly grateful to Barbara Harroun, my colleague and friend, for that spark of inspiration that happened a few years ago in her kitchen. Our proposal for a major writing conference had just been rejected, and we looked at each other and asked, “Okay, now what do you really want to do?” Barb is a true advocate for human beings and a dedicated, compassionate listener to their stories. I cannot express how fortunate I am to share work and friendship with her.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate my efforts here to the memory of our dear friend, Thomas Bond “John the Baptist” Gerding, who in his young days served two tours in Vietnam and could play a 12-string Guild and sing “The Ballad of Flathead John” in a way that left me forever changed.

**Jacque Wilson-Jordan**

I would like to thank my wife, Megan Worley, for being so supportive during this process. Your patience, understanding, wisdom, and love are all appreciated more than you know. I also want to thank my daughter, Harper Worley, even though she’s too young to
understand just yet. All the times I was gone and busy working on this project, are all for you baby girl. I love you both so very much.

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Thank you, Ryan Bronaugh, for being a friend, mentor, and someone to look up to during this entire process. Words cannot begin to express what it means to me.

Thank you to my grandfather, George Worley, for being my best friend growing up and teaching me some very important life lessons at such a young age. You are the example I live by and may you rest in peace.

To Jenn and Jess Stoller, my best friends, who have encouraged me, and made me a better husband, father, and overall, better person. I love you both as family more than you’ll ever know.

And finally last, but certainly not least, everyone else (professors, peers, and family) that helped and encouraged along the way.

**Jared R. Worley**

I do not possess the talent to express my gratitude to all that helped make this project a reality in words. It has truly been amazing.

To Jared Worley, Damn, man . . . it’s been such an honor. To all the student veterans I’ve met, our hours
together were some needed R&R. I feel fortunate to keep getting thrown in with the best. Thank you.

To Kathy Meyers, Crystal Kepple, and everyone at the VRC, you guys are amazing. The work you do can never be fully appreciated---even if we have a parade in your honor. You are remarkable in every way. Thank you.

To my kids, your love is the singularity from which my universe is born every day anew and all I can do is star gaze. I love you.

To my parents, you never tied me up in the backyard where I belonged. It’s incredible I’m still alive, and yet you’ve carried that burden with poise and understanding. Sorry, thank you, I love you.

Last but, definitely, not least! To Barb Harroun and Jacque Wilson-Jordan, you had the vision and compassion to dream up this project, and the courage and passion to see it through. I will follow you into hades with half a canteen—any day. Thank you.

**Ryan F. Bronaugh**

My life has been enriched and illuminated by the brilliance and compassion of Jacque Wilson-Jordan. Thank you Crystal Kepple for such artistic vision and incredibly hard work. Kathy Meyers is tireless in her service to our students and institution, all with such enthusiasm and warmth—a huge thank you. Words fail me in expressing the expansiveness of my gratitude for our editors Ryan, Jared and Dan. You amaze and inspire.

**Barbara Harroun**
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Maid Rite

Just down the street from Mike’s Sunoco Station, the ancient diner, its white, weathered clapboard sides a peeled and faded reminder of better days, was open for lunch with regulars already in place. Seated elbow to elbow around the scarred and stained Formica top counter, on wobbly stools that had long since stopped swiveling, it was the usual lunch chatter about the weather, politics, and the economy.

Sam Rizzo, the owner, stirred a pan of the crumbled beef for the specialty sandwich that bore the diner’s namesake, which was the only thing keeping the diner open. A white chef’s cap was pushed back on his bald oversized head which was equally proportioned to his rotund body from years of neglect and too much beer. His thick arms were covered with nautical tattoos of mermaids, anchors, rudders, and Hawaiian hula girls he got from his time in the Navy during Vietnam. The one of a hula girl on the inside of his right forearm, a reminder of some drunken, exotic port call, was never the subject of scrutiny or debate, unless one asked him to tell the story again about why he had to go back to the tattooist the next day and have her breasts painfully covered.

Outside a line stretched from the main entrance, around the corner, underneath the simple blue sign that advertised “Eat” to the parking lot in back. It was a simple menu that they came for: a Maid Rite sandwich—finely ground beef cooked
and piled on a plain bun, sometimes referred to as a loose meat or tavern sandwich, served with mustard, pickles or chopped onions. At lunch time, the sandwich came with a bag of chips and a Coke on the side. No one would have ever thought about putting ketchup on a Maid Rite. Not only would that be sacrilegious and a faux pas in Maid Rite-dom, but also because most Maid Rite purists considered that to be low class.

And just to prove that he was a good sport in all culinary fairness for the unsuspecting customer who wandered in after getting a whiff of the meat cooking, Sam kept a bottle of ketchup on the counter for emergency purposes, but with a stern warning for anyone who dared to defy tradition. In the twenty years he had the restaurant, no one dared.

“I’ve been coming here for fifteen years,” one patron said to another, as he chewed the last of his sandwich and licked his fingers. “Best darn sandwiches in McDonough County.”

Bonnie, the waitress behind the counter, nodded and took another order. She blew a wisp of her red hair which had swept down across her forehead. What’s tradition and history got to do with it, she thought, when she was making three-fifty an hour plus tips and barely making ends meet? It was only a sandwich for crying out loud. She tried one once, after having been cajoled by Sam—“if you’re going to work here, you better know what one tastes like”—and found the sandwich rather bland, sort of like a Sloppy Joe
without the sauce. If she had it her way, she would have doused it with some of that ketchup.

“Sam, you never disappoint,” George Jansen, the chief of police said, patting his stomach, which hung over his loose-fitting trousers. “Without a question your sandwiches are the best eats in town.”

“You know my motto, ‘if it’s made right, it’s gotta be good’,” Sam said, turning away from the stove.

Bonnie smiled and rolled her blue mascaraed eyes as she removed a dirty plate and a quarter left by the previous customer. As long as those quarters added up every day, she could live with Sam’s witticisms.

As she continued to work her way along the inside of the counter, clearing away the plates, heavy ceramic coffee mugs and red plastic glasses, the old brass bell above the door sounded as the door swung open and then slammed shut. Bonnie looked up and watched Henry Taylor slowly walk in and sit alone again at the end of the counter. This was the fifth time in as many weeks, since she started working here, that she noticed him come in after the lunch crowd thinned out and sit on the same stool at the far end of the diner. She couldn’t recall him talking more than two or three sentences to whoever sat close to him, though Sam appeared to know him quite well. Whenever Henry came into the diner, Sam stopped whatever he was doing to welcome him with a nod and a smile.

Henry had snow white hair and a matching white mustache with twisted ends which accentuated his hollow cheekbones. He had pale
blue eyes, the color of robin eggs. He looked distinguished looking; always dressed nicely. The first time Bonnie saw him she thought he must have been a professor at Western Illinois University at one time, or maybe he was a doctor, or a lawyer. She was close: he taught high school history for thirty years.

Henry always ordered two sandwiches but only ate one of them. Although she already knew the answer, having asked him each time he had been in before, she still asked him if he would like to have the one he hadn’t eaten wrapped up to take home.

“No, that’s okay, miss,” he said, dabbing the corners of his mouth with a napkin. “Thanks so much for asking.”

Bonnie nervously glanced at her watch. She had just enough time to pick up her daughter at the day care center and spend some time with her before she started her second job at Wal-Mart. When she set her handbag on the edge of the counter to hurry things along, she accidentally knocked it off, spilling the contents across the floor. Henry retrieved some of them for her, including her keys attached to an octagonal plastic keychain which contained a photograph of Bonnie, her husband Steve, and daughter Sarah taken a few days before he deployed to Afghanistan.

“That’s a nice photo. I’ve got a granddaughter about your age,” he said, “though it’s been a while since we’ve last seen each other.”

“My grandparents died when I was very young,” Bonnie said, quickly scooping up the contents of her handbag.
“That’s too bad,” Henry said, taking one more look at the photo before handing the keychain to Bonnie. “You have a fine looking family there.”

“Thank you,” Bonnie said, shoving all the items back into her handbag. “I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but I’ve got to pick up my daughter at day care and—”

“No need to apologize,” Henry said, slowly getting up from the stool.

Bonnie lived in a small three-room apartment on West Adams Street just off the town square. Although small and rundown, it was all she could afford. Besides, it was close enough to work, and her babysitter, Sally, lived in the apartment below. After she picked up her daughter Sarah, they had an hour to have some quality time together before she had to go into Wal-Mart.

“Mommy, did Daddy like chocolate chip cookies as much as I do?” Sarah asked, looking up at her mother with big green eyes. She might have had her mother’s red hair and nose, but she definitely had her father’s eyes.

They sat together on the floor playing with some colored wooden building blocks waiting for the babysitter to arrive. Bereavement counselors told her that there might be a delayed reaction to Steve’s death for Sarah and that instead of asking about how he died, Sarah, who barely knew her father, when he left for Afghanistan, might want to know who he was.

Bonnie looked at her daughter and smiled sadly. She brushed a lock of red hair off her
daughter’s freckled forehead. “Yes, he did. He liked them a lot.”

Sarah smiled. “Can we make some chocolate cookies?”

“Sure, we can make some.”

Her daughter smiled again as she stacked three blocks on top of one another. Whereas Bonnie was making sure she was doing all she could to help Sarah deal with the loss of her father, she wasn’t doing all that good herself. Almost two years after his Humvee hit an IED in Afghanistan, Bonnie still couldn’t accept the fact that Steve was gone. She sometimes still woke up in the middle of the night, thinking that she heard the phone ringing and that Steve would be on the other end, alive and well, telling her that it had been a terrible mistake for the Army to tell her that he had been killed in action.

And then she would sit at the kitchen table or in the living room and go through their photo album for the millionth time touching each photo, remembering every moment they spent together.

If he were here he would tell her not to worry and that things would get better with time. He would tell her to be strong and to have faith. That’s what she always loved about him. He always knew what to say to make her feel better.

It wasn’t only the pain in her heart that she carried with the loss of her husband; it was also the guilt.

For days after 9-11, when the whole nation walked around shocked and numb, Steve talked
about how useless he felt sitting around and doing nothing until he decided to join the Army.

“It’s only for three years. This is something that I have to do,” Steve told her the day he decided to enlist. “Larry and Mark have already enlisted.”

“What about our baby?” Bonnie said, rubbing her swollen belly. She was in her third trimester. “What if something happens to you—”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” Steve said, putting an arm around his wife. “Oh!” Bonnie said.


“She kicked again!” Bonnie said smiling. She took Steve’s right hand and placed it on her belly. “See?”

Steve leaned over and rested his head on her belly. He felt a tiny nudge and movement inside. He turned his head and smiled as he gazed at his wife. “I feel her, too.”

Bonnie smiled and ran a hand softly through his blonde hair. She believed him. Everything was going to be fine.

The Vietnam Memorial came to town over the weekend. All 252 feet of it with its 58,225 silk-screened names on black, Plexiglas panels half the size of the one in Washington.

A crew of ten set it up in Chandler Park across the street from the train station; the grass in front of it was already trampled from the procession of people who had been filing by solemnly since last evening and again this morning; in some places,
muddy patches—because of the rain that had been falling in the morning—had already appeared.

Moving from east to west, from 1959 to 1975, some stopped to read or touch a name on the cold, wet panels. Others bowed their heads and said a prayer. Many simply filed by, not sure what they were supposed to do or say. Those who did speak whispered just a hush below the soft undulating spatter of rain upon umbrellas.

At the base of one of the panels, someone left a small teddy bear, its brown body soggy and limp with plastic eyes glistening in the rain. Two panels down, someone else left a framed photograph of two young boys. Brightly colored flowers left in bunches here and there along the wall accentuated the dark plastic panels and gray sky overhead.

“Happens all the time,” a grizzled, whiskered man in a faded red VFW cap said, warming his hands with a cup of coffee underneath a canopy set up by the Woman’s Auxiliary. “I hear there’s even a special museum for all the stuff people have left behind.”

Men who had been to places like Guadalcanal, Normandy, Bastogne, Peleliu, Chosin, Khe Sanh, and Baghdad—far-away places where their brothers bled and died; men who carried their own personal museums in the scars that ran deep through their souls, nodded their heads in solemn affirmation. Then these men watched one of their own—a father and his son stop along the wall. Together father and son wiped away beads of rain and searched for one name among them all as they gazed at their own silent reflections.
Bonnie, who had cut across the park on her way to the diner, saw Henry out of the corner of her eye talking to some of the men gathered under the canopy. She had heard about the wall from a customer at the diner and wanted to see for herself. Bonnie was both mesmerized and shocked by its solemn presence and the procession of people which slowly moved from one end of the wall to the other. She shuddered when a man walked past her, tears rolling down his puffy, pale cheeks.

She watched Henry slowly walk out from underneath the canopy and move through the sea of bobbing umbrellas toward the wall. He was too old to have been in the war, Bonnie thought, as Henry walked to one of the middle panels and touched the cold plastic and bowed his head.

Two elderly women sharing an umbrella, who had stopped behind Bonnie, watched Henry locate one of the cold names. One of the women turned to the other and asked, “Where did they put all the bodies?”

The following Tuesday was a holiday, Veteran’s Day, and Bonnie couldn’t find a babysitter, so she was forced to bring Sarah to the diner. Bonnie brought along some crayons and paper for Sarah to keep her occupied until she finished her shift. She promised Sam that Sarah wouldn’t be a bother. Sam fixed up a special sandwich for Sarah and didn’t mind when she asked for some ketchup.

Right on schedule, a little after 1:00, Henry entered the diner and sat on his usual stool. Two
patrons, who knew Henry, looked in his direction and silently nodded their heads. He looked more tired today, she thought as she brought him his two sandwiches.

“I saw you at the memorial in Chandler Park the other day,” Bonnie said, setting the two plates in front of him.

“I’ve been to the one in Washington and I saw this one when it came here the first time in 1987,” Henry said slowly. “Until you see those names up close, one has no idea of its emotional power.”

Bonnie nodded. She felt the same way, but for her it was not just the names, but all those loved ones attached to the names.

“I lost my boy in Vietnam,” Henry said, his eyes cloudy with tears. “He was ten days shy of his nineteenth birthday.”

“I’m sorry,” Bonnie said, sitting down on a stool next to Henry.

“When Danny was a boy, we used to come here once a week for a sandwich. I would sit here and Danny would sit where you are now. The last time was right before he shipped out. At first, I couldn’t even come to this part of town. Then slowly over time, I came back here. It was my way of remembering him and the last time we shared a moment together.”

Bonnie gasped when she realized why he always ordered two sandwiches and left one untouched.

“Today would have been his sixtieth birthday,” Henry said.
Bonnie could feel the pain swelling in her chest; her heart beat faster as she softly sobbed. “That’s such a sad story. I’m so sorry for your loss, Mr. Taylor.”

“Henry.”

Bonnie wiped away the tears from her face.

“Who’s this cute looking girl?” Henry asked, looking down at Sarah as she colored in a sun in the sky.

“Sarah,” she said, choosing a green crayon to start coloring the trees.

“Sarah, that’s a pretty name,” Henry said.

“My Daddy picked my name,” Sarah said as she colored in more of a tree.

“What are you drawing, Sarah?” Henry asked.

“A picture of Mommy, Daddy and me,” Sarah said, sticking her tongue out the corner of her mouth as she concentrated on making sure she colored the trees correctly. “Daddy’s waiting for us here, right Mommy?”

Henry looked up at Bonnie with a confused look on his face.

“I lost my husband in Afghanistan two years ago this Friday,” Bonnie said in a hushed tone.

Henry looked at Bonnie the same way the veterans had looked at each other in Chandler Park. He took hold of Bonnie’s hand and the two of them sat quietly along the counter and watched Sarah finish her drawing. Sam brought them two cups of coffee and as Bonnie sat there with Henry and her
daughter, for the first time, in a very long time, she didn’t feel alone.

Jeffrey Miller
Broken But Breathing

The first bottle felt good, relaxed the muscles a bit. The second bottle came slightly closer to hitting its mark. His mind filled with clouds of obscurity, dissolving the film reel of memories that played in his head every minute of every day. He filled his glass three quarters of the way, and watched the translucent, caramel liquid swirl within itself.

It always smells much better than it tastes, which isn’t bad either. The sharp clink of a dense glass bottle meeting a glass coffee table broke the silence in his small, one-bedroom half of the duplex, and he leaned back into a dingy, brown couch, the leather of which was worn and wrinkled. His world seemed to be righting itself finally, his demons cowering into their respective dark corners of his mind. He ran his hand through his thick, brown hair, then smiled and thought about nothing as he lifted his glass for another drink.

But then he saw the tattoo on his left forearm. Everyone in his platoon had gotten one like it before their first deployment. The black, twisting outline of his dog tags began to reignite his thoughts, cackling at him for trying to escape his past. The demons crawled out one by one, whispering his name, reminding him of those memories he so desperately wished to forget. So he decided to get rid of that mark on his arm that the alcohol couldn’t erase. A brand new, unused, Farberware chopping knife sent a shower of thick,
red blood all over the gray carpet. The thin layer of ink-infused skin came off with ease, but so did the quarter inch of flesh underneath. He shouted in disgust, more pissed about his heavy hand than the pain it brought forth. He threw the knife at the coffee table and pulled off his navy blue shirt as he stood, then wrapped it around his blood drenched arm that ran like a leaky faucet. The dark trails on his white skin stood out like fresh paint on a blank canvas, a sight that would shock most. He had seen it so many times that it felt ironically calming. His keys were right where he had left them after returning from the liquor store the night before, and he stumbled over to grab them, blood dripping all over the beige tile in his closet-of-a-kitchen as he went.

Taking the stairs down wasn’t much of a problem, the hand rail offered its support the whole way. It was the closest thing to a friend he had, or at least that he could think of at the moment, since everyone else was so busy lately. Friends from high school still thought they were in high school and closer friends were enjoying careers or had moved away. His mother had died nine years ago from cancer, and his father hadn’t taken a day out of the office since; they were the only real family he had. He climbed into his charcoal gray Silverado and shut the door with a loud, long creak that made him cringe. I need to put some WD-40 on that stupid door.

He fumbled with the key for what seemed like half an hour. That little keyhole was hard enough to find with a clear head and a whole
forearm that wasn’t soaking his khaki shorts, and he cursed his body for having blood in it. Finally the engine fired up, and he pulled the gear shift handle down to neutral, then back up to reverse. The ER was just a few short miles away; he told himself he could drive there without a problem. Just as his foot let off the brake and the truck eased backward ever so slowly, his peripheral vision began to blur, and he suddenly felt his body sag as if it were three hundred pounds heavier. It felt like he hadn’t slept in days. He shook his head violently to get rid of the exhaustion, knowingly trying to fool himself that he was just drunk and tired, instead of passing out from massive blood loss. The bed of the truck dipped as the first two tires went over the curb at the end of his driveway, and he spun the wheel without opening his eyes to turn correctly into the quiet, dead-end street.

His head felt like it was full of lead, and he tried with all his strength to hold it up and look over the steering wheel. The mid-morning sun shone blindingly through his windshield, and he could barely see as it was without the black splotches crowding out his vision. Pressing the brake down as firmly as his leg would allow, he grabbed the shifting handle and attempted to put the truck into drive, the gears switching with loud knocks that echoed through his head. Too far. He pushed the handle back up to what he thought was drive and looked at the road through his eyebrows as he put a little weight on the gas pedal. The truck lurched backward and he immediately realized he had put it back into reverse. The wheel spun indecisively on
its own. He kicked around for the brake and tried to
stop, but the truck only sped up. That’s not the
brake pedal!

He heard a deafening bang accompanied by
the sound of crushing and bending metal, and his
head flew back against the headrest. Then
everything was still. The only sound was his idling
engine, and it hummed loudly, almost drowning out
the permanent ring that lived in his left ear, another
nagging reminder. The rear view mirror caught his
attention for a moment, and gray-blue eyes stared
back at him, un-whole, devoid of emotion, of will.
They were like so many pairs of lifeless eyes he had
looked into before while futilely searching for the
faintest sign of a soul hiding inside. He felt for the
door handle with the hand on his good arm, but his
energy was down to zero when he finally found it.
He gave the plastic handle a weak tug, then fell
against the steering wheel as his body began to shut
down. The images he drank all morning to forget
scrolled through his mind, a slide show of torment
and sadness.

His first kill, a small boy who had shot at
them with an AK-47 bigger than he was. His best
friend Chris, face and arms removed by the blast of
a suicide vest, lying cold and empty in the muddy
street. The eyes of his friend Jason, dark and full of
tears as he bled out on the first floor of that house,
finally free of pain with the last exhale. His ex-wife
cowering in the corner of their North Carolina
apartment, covering her bloody face with her hands
and crying, screaming for him to stop, and the fear
and trembling on his three year old son’s face after
watching his father hit his mother with a closed fist. His shotgun and a cold, metallic taste in his mouth while he wept because he was too weak and pathetic to pull the trigger.

Then, darkness.

***

Something tickled his cheek, a feather perhaps. It walked up from his chin all the way to his right temple. He felt comfortable, safe, and warm. This better be heaven. The clacking of plastic against a window frame was the first sound he heard, and he realized that the feather he felt was a light breeze coming through a window. Then the musical notes of a familiar tune grew louder as they found their way into his ear. ‘I should have quit you, long time ago.’ The words trickled into his soul with a completely new meaning than they had before. He slowly cracked his eyes open and saw brown fan blades playing with the light shining through the window onto the textured, white ceiling. ‘I wouldn’t be here with all my troubles, down on this killing floor.’ He looked around at the ocean blue walls, and a strange depression came upon him as he realized he wasn’t in heaven. This was his bedroom.

He turned his head slowly to his right and squinted at the light that peeked through each of the blinds covering his double window as they swayed forward and back, tapping in a rhythmic pattern that tried to keep time with the music. Birds chirped outside his window, a lawn mower purred in the
distance, and a train whistle howled from farther away. Everything was so serene, so normal, yet so unsettling for him. Suddenly, he noticed Led Zeppelin’s ‘The Lemon Song’ fading out as a sharpening pain began to crawl up his arm. He began to remember his spontaneous surgery and the unfortunate incident in the street, and reached over to check the state of his self-inflicted wound. His fingers ran lightly over a soft, white cloth that wrapped around his forearm, and then up to a small plastic cord that he knew right away was an IV line. He craned his head to his left side and saw a half-full IV bag dangling from a bent hangar that was duct taped, upright, to his short, wooden bed post.

Who did this? A leery, untrusting feeling came over him abruptly. He told himself that if someone had helped him, it was nothing to worry about, but uncontrollable panic rushed in like an intravenous drug to his bloodstream. He sat up and scanned the room for signs of another’s presence. His iPhone was attached to the speaker dock on his bedside table, and the soothing riffs of ‘Thank You’ now emanated from the black device. With a piercing sting that ran up his arm, he ripped out the IV and reached under his pillow to find his loyal companion faithfully waiting to be needed. He took out the black handgun and pulled back the slide, enough to be comforted by the sight of a shiny, brass round in the chamber, then released it to its normal position. After shifting across his white sheet to the side of his bed, he took his phone from its dock and scrolled through the call log and text
messages. Nothing looked new or out of place. Led Zeppelin II was halfway through, and this one album had been chosen to play without the others, which told him whoever was here had only been gone twenty minutes or so. He stood and lifted one of the white blinds to look out at his driveway. There was no movement, not a soul or vehicle in sight, not even his truck. My truck! He shoved his phone into his pocket, raised the gun into a two-handed grip, and aimed at the bedroom door as he stalked silently toward it. He took a deep breath, pulled the door open, and popped around the corner into the hallway, his handgun leading the way. Sweat began to seep from the pores on his forehead, and the rate of his heart increased as he instinctively, methodically cleared the rooms in his duplex. The bathroom was just as he had left it, only the shower curtain was folded and lying on the counter, having lost its supporting partner. The living room was absolutely spotless: no empty Scotch bottles, no chopping knife, no filet of flesh and tattooed skin, and no blood stains. The kitchen was just as clean, and his keys sat on the counter as if nothing had ever happened. When he had checked every corner of every room, including closets, he went to the door that led to his garage. He burst into the one-car space with a violence that would leave most trembling, and was both relieved and confused to see his truck sitting there. He quickly checked the garage to make sure he was alone, then lowered the gun and held it at his side with his right hand.

He leaned against the truck, his forehead resting on the bandaged forearm that lain atop the
hood. The sweat that was beaded on his face sporadically dripped to the concrete below, leaving dark, splattered spots that resembled the blood in his memories. His breaths were now deep and controlled as he made an effort to slow his heart down. He hadn’t felt that kind of adrenaline since Fallujah, and it had a peculiar way of making him feel right at home. The gun found its way into the waistband at the back of his blue, athletic shorts, and a tap of the small white button on the wall opened the garage door with an incessant hum and obnoxious squeals. He slowly walked toward the light flooding into the garage, and winced when he saw the rear end of his truck. The bumper and tailgate formed a wide U-shape right in the middle, clearly telling the tale of having met a stubborn tree trunk. His license plate hung by one screw, as if desperate for help, so close to giving up. Groaning aloud, he stroked his short, auburn beard as he chastised himself inaudibly. He stepped out into the driveway and squinted in the late afternoon light, contemplating a neighborhood walk as an attempt to clear his mind.

After stuffing his gun under the mattress, grabbing his keys, and ensuring his duplex was locked, he walked down the driveway and into the street. Directly across from him was a sight that was sure to catch every eye that passed. He stared at the tire tracks ripped into the turf that led to the large oak tree in the yard across from his, and noticed the painfully obvious chunks missing from the tree’s brown, corrugated armor, pale colored scars that clashed with the natural beauty of the oak. Beyond
the tree was an immaculate lawn of deep greens and a quaint, white-sided home guarded by beds of wood chips and pink flowered bushes. Flanking the driveway was a flag pole that stood watch over the property, proudly flying two flags, an American flag above a black POW/MIA flag. He walked past the home, another crack at suppressing his thoughts. He stared at each house as he passed them on his way down the street, all of their perfect yards and undamaged trees screaming at him, calling him ‘liar’ and ‘scum.’ The cul-de-sac at the end of the road tried to force him to return on the opposite side of the street, the same side as the house with the flags. He defied its guidance and crossed back over to retrace his initial path, staring straight ahead the entire time. When he finally came back to the end of his driveway, he couldn’t take another step. His father’s words clawed at his conscience: ‘A man without integrity is no man at all.’

As he walked up the driveway to the home with the flags, he noticed that the small, blue pickup truck in the driveway had a Purple Heart on its license plate, a mark he indignantly refused to get on his own plates. He didn’t know how he’d pay for the damage to their property, he hadn’t had a job since being discharged. Jobs required interaction with people; people were like flies buzzing around his corpse that his dead hands couldn’t swat.

I could be sued for this. Whatever happened wouldn’t be fun, but he had enough on his mind without this annoying blade between his ribs. A new kind of adrenaline flowed through his veins as he rounded the corner of the garage and headed up
the sidewalk. A light blue plaque hung on the front door, inscribed with the words ‘God Bless This Home and All Who Enter.’ With a scoffing, nasal exhale, he pressed the doorbell, then chuckled to himself as the first verse of the Marine Corps hymn chimed from the other side of the door. After a long thirty seconds, the door handle finally turned and a short, black man with a bald head and a gray beard emerged. A prosthetic leg was the first thing he noticed about the old man, followed by a vise grip handshake minus the index finger.

“How can I help you, son?” the old man asked with raised eyebrows, his voice rough and intimidating. A confession followed, but the old man refused to let him pay for the damage to the grass or the tree.

“I’ve been where you are,” the old man said.
“And where’s that?”
“You might feel alone, but you’re not, son,” the old man smiled as he spoke, and warmth emanated from his dark, kind eyes. They talked for a while, moving from topics like Vietnam and Iraq, to the Marine Corps and the VFW. It was the first real conversation he’d had with another human being in a few weeks. The closeness he felt with the old man was eerie, as if his best friends weren’t dead, like they weren’t decomposing in decorative boxes under the ground somewhere, like they were right there with him.

When their talk ended, he thanked the old man and walked down the driveway to return home. The old man called out after him, and spoke with a glint in his eyes.
“Zeppelin saw me through a lot of tough times, I hope it helped you too.”

Luke Cummings
The Water Pistol

Tom, a Technical Sergeant in the Air Force, walked out the north Q pulling his toolbox and various equipment behind him. Built to be hand carried, the tool box sat on a small cart with a lanyard to pull it along the ground with other system related equipment resting on it. It often reminded him of a larger metal version of a tackle box that he and his son used while fishing.

After arriving at midnight and relieving his previous shift’s counterpart, Tom admired the starry night above Qatar that evening. He even saw a meteor streaking across the night sky. Assigned to the 4th Fighter Wing from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, Tom was deployed to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar in advance of a possible invasion of Iraq sometime in 2003. His unit conducted 24 hour operations split between two shifts each working the opposite: 12 to 12.

Unfortunately political dissention kept their F-15E Strike Eagle fleet grounded while the diplomats worked out the flight clearances. However, even grounded aircraft require scheduled maintenance. And working out of the northern hangar and office complex built by the Qataris that his unit renamed the Q, Tom pulled his equipment out to the flight line.

That night quickly changed. Into one that nobody would ever expect from the desert of the Qatari Peninsula. Vincent van Gogh’s metaphorical Starry Night disappeared. A thick incredibly dense
fog rolled in from the Persian Gulf and covered Al Udeid in its thick gray mist. Its murk restricted visibility to nothing more than an arm’s length. Mixed with refinery fires, jet exhaust, and salt water, this fog produce a pungent aroma one would hope didn’t cause any long lasting harm.

Tom, however, admired this murkiness for the reminiscence. Standing within its tethered wisps watching it wrap about him, he stood within his own world. Both the Q and the flight line fled the boundaries of his new world; only the thoughts of his past remained. He reminisced about all the science fiction and fantasy worlds he read and watched both as a child and even today. How often has dense fog been used as a plot device? From multiple Twilight Zone episodes to Alfred Hitchcock and Three Investigators. Fogs hid secrets, caused unrest, incited terror, and were even used as portals beyond place and time. In one his favorite book series ‘The Mageworlds’ the void, a fog like transcendence, was a place where all time and space met to coalesce at one’s request.

Working twelve hours a day and living in a tent with seventy-two other Airmen, privacy and isolation never truly existed during deployments. Yet at this time, in the midst of this all-encompassing fog, Tom lived a world alone. He sat on his tool box and reached out to grab the fog, its tendrils flowed from his hands as ghosts encircling about him. If only he could form it into shapes. In this world of his, he had but one desire. Yet before he could focus his thoughts, a strange glow entered
at his peripheral. Four feet down the ramp laid a yellowish lime green water pistol.

Of course. He remembered hearing that the previous shift, bored and dangerous, started a battle with water balloons fired atop aircraft from makeshift catapults and drive by shootings using the latest super soaker technology known to man. They must have dropped this. He smiled at the fun they surely had, but it was the thoughts of similar engagements he had with his wife and son that now fully occupied his thoughts.

His wife appeared in front of him, her smile of a mischievous come-hither intent misdirected his attention when a squirt of water tickled the back of neck. Jumping from his tool box, he spun around and saw his son laughing hysterically, “I got you dada, I got you good.”

He lifted his son and hugged him dearly and his wife walked over and placed one hand on Tom’s lower back and the other on her son. She and Tom shared an affectionate kiss.

This moment would last forever in Tom’s mind, but those tendrils pulled his wife and son slowly back into fog and they too dissolved from sight. Tears filled his eyes. It would be several months before he could hug and kiss them again, but he knew the mission. He would make his family proud.

Pulling his toolbox again, he passed by the water pistol still lying on the ramp. He thought this could be a cheesy cliché of an old Outer Limits show that when he walked by it for a few feet and then turned around it would be gone. Tom,
however, detested clichés and picked it up and saw that it was still full of water.

As he walked to the flight line, he kept shooting himself with water and each time his son’s voice echoed clear as day, “I got you dada, I got you good.” He eventually reached his aircraft. His friend Dan was busy attaching the power and cooling air units to the aircraft.

Dan looked at Tom’s wet hair and drenched t-shirt, “Dude, you’re all wet.”

“Yeah, I was having a water pistol fight with my wife and son on the walk over.”

Not wanting to play the downer, Dan simply replied, “Well I hope you won.” But there was a sadness to Dan’s voice that was barely detectable.

Tom, knowing Dan’s regrets in life and that he had no loved ones back home, gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder, “I know Dan, let’s get this job done and afterwards we can grab a drink the rec center.

Dan smiled, and somewhere Tom’s wife and son missed him dearly and loved him even more.

Dan W. Holst
I.E.D. Encounter

I had been driving a MRAP in and out of Baghdad for a few months now. I was truck one of seven armored trucks that we used to transport unarmored semis hauling goods to different bases. We had previously hit two I.E.D.s, and so we decided to take another route out the west side of Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). We didn't really like the route because it wasn’t as open as the road before. There were a lot of places for the enemy to hide. If I remember right, the road was “protected” by the Muslim Brotherhood. The most important aspect though was that there had been no activity in that area. I don’t think many people even knew it was there. So we made our way through for a few weeks.

After a drive through a tight neighborhood we would take a right turn on to the interstate. There were spots in the road where it had started to give way and make a lot of small craters, which wasn’t uncommon due to the size and volume of trucks that went through there. Since I was the first truck in line, I normally drove a ways in front of the convoy, and it was my job to spot and clear any obstacles that might be in the way of the convoy. As I made my way down the interstate, I turned my head to say something to my vehicle commander. I remember everything being in slow motion after that. He had raised his hands into the air and was bringing them down as he yelled, “Oh Shit!” in super-slow motion. As I turned my head back to look in front of me, I noticed a bright light and then
realized that I was watching flames crawl up the hood of my truck until they engulfed everything in my sight. The thought finally sank in, “I am being blown up! Punch through the kill zone! Punch through the kill zone!” I pushed the gas pedal to the ground and nothing happened and I started to worry. The only thing I could think was, “Come on! Come on!” I grabbed the button so I could key my microphone to talk to the rest of the convoy.

All I could think was that my truck was “down hard” or unable to operate. This must have run through my mind about ten times. But, before I could even grab the button, I heard the turbo spooling and then the truck moved (with the size of the truck, it took the engine a minute to respond to a fully depressed gas pedal). The truck was mobile!

So I pushed through the kill zone as my vehicle commander relayed to the rest of the convoy that Truck One had been hit. We stuck to our training and posted on the other side, and when we had come to a halt, everyone went nuts for a minute. There were four of us in that truck and all of us were screaming at each other to make sure everyone was okay. Everyone’s first priority was our gunner. We were worried that shrapnel had hit him since he was halfway out of the truck. Luckily, the concussion from the blast had knocked him down into the truck before the huge fireball got to him.

Once we all realized that everyone was okay, there was a pause, a short moment of silence while everyone let what just happened sink in. Then, without hesitation, the entire truck erupted in cheers! “Hell, yeah! You need to try harder than
that! Fuck you Taliban! Gunner! Find that Son-of-a-bitch and light him up!” Everyone in the truck started looking around as the vehicle commander started sending up reports. I started checking out the truck. All eight lights on the roller that was in front of my truck had been busted, my rhino system was destroyed, my passenger side mirrors were busted, and the doors of the storage boxes outside of the truck had been blown open. Other than that, from what I could tell, the truck was fine. Eventually, our corpsman came up and checked us out. Everyone was fine.

Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) came to check out the blast site and determined that it was 155mm artillery round covered in diesel fuel soaked rags, and then buried. It was set off by a command detonation, which means the person watched us drive by and then pressed a button to detonate the explosives. That only added fuel to the fire because the other two I.E.D.s our convoy hit were all command detonated, so we figured it was the same guy. Eventually, we were cleared and continued on with the mission. The entire team was riding an adrenaline high all the way back.

As the sun rose, I noticed a smudge on my windshield. I tried to use the windshield wipers a few times. thinking it was just dirt. As the daylight became brighter I realized it was asphalt embedded into my bulletproof windshield. It blew my mind. Before we made it back to base, a call came over the radio that a few of the “kids,” or trucks, that we were transporting had stopped. The drivers had stopped to pray. As they did that, I stepped into the
gas tank to look at the truck. The entire front of the truck was peppered with asphalt. Even the turret was peppered. Eventually we made it back to Al Taqaddum, or TQ, as we called it. I grabbed my camera to take pictures of the truck. I would need these pictures when I submitted the paperwork to get the truck fixed. This was the first time anyone got a good look at the damage. It just so happened that our commanding officer was riding in truck two that night. As he came to check out the truck, I greeted him and began to explain everything to him.

“Sir! Check out this hole! Sir! Check out my rhino system! It’s gone! Sir! Look at this!”

I wish I had a picture of the look on his face. He looked scared, confused, and most likely thought I was insane considering how excited I was at the moment. Once everyone made it onto the base we headed back to our camp to spin down for the day. Everyone except for Truck One!

The only thing on our mind was doing what we had to get done in time for breakfast. We had to go and talk to our doctor for an evaluation. I was the last to go in. Everyone spent a few minutes in there, doc asked some questions, gave them a Snickers bar (which is my favorite) and then the next guy went in. They asked me all kinds of stupid questions, which just added to my hostility.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, just a little excited and very hungry!”

“Are you angry?”

“Yeah, I’m kind of angry. Some SOB just tried to kill me tonight!”
“Are you suicidal?”
“What!? Seriously? No, I’m not suicidal!”
Eventually all the tests and questions were done and they released me. We walked out together and then I realized I didn’t get a Snickers bar! “Are you serious!?” If I remembered right we missed breakfast, too, so I grabbed an MRE and a guy from my truck and we started to work on the truck. We took the roller to the shop where civilian contractors took care of it. They saw me walk in and they jokingly asked, “What did you do to it this time?” I told them what had happened and they were shocked that I was even there. They immediately jumped to their feet and ran outside to disconnect the roller from the truck. They told me to go away and get some sleep and they would take care of the rest. These guys were the best! We called it a day after that. We returned to the truck early so that we could get the rest of the truck taken care of. We found the roller was already fixed and attached to the truck. So, we inventoried the tools in our storage boxes, cleaned the .50 cal, and made sure everything was in its place.
Two days after the explosion we were back on the road doing what had to be done.

Jerry Keppler
Charlie Don’t Surf

Once a year Rat, as he did for the past ten years, returned to Southeast Asia and lay to rest the ghosts of his past. In Vietnam, he walked in the memory of the shadow of death and met some of the men he had been trained to kill. They shook hands, exchanged gifts of tobacco and whiskey and talked how they had once tried to kill each other. Rat admired his former enemy who invited him into their homes where wives cooked dinner and grandchildren sat on his knee.

And then before he flew home with his conscience a little cleaner, he stopped off in Bangkok where he hung out at the Federal Hotel with other vets who were in country to lay to rest their own ghosts. They swapped stories around the pool and drank to the memory of their comrades.

As always, when Rat was in town, he visited legendary Thai tattooist Jimmy Wong who learned his craft on Rat and others at a base along the Thai-Laos border during the waning days of the war.

Rat eyed the young man in the chair at Jimmy Wong’s tattoo studio with contempt. It wasn’t that Rat was envious of the young man’s collection of Oriental and old school Sailor Jerry and Ed Hardy ink—more ink for his own good; nor was it his voluptuous Thai girlfriend that the man had bar-fined earlier in the evening, who made periodic beer runs to a 7-11 around the corner, that made Rat recoil with disdain. It was listening to the young
man rave about his recent trip to Vietnam to another
customer that pissed Rat off.

“And there’s this bar, I shit you not, called
‘Charlie Don’t Surf’,” the young man said, wincing
as Jimmy shaded in his latest creation. “Just like
Apocalypse Now.”

Rat looked over at Jimmy and rolled his eyes.
This kid was probably still shitting in his drawers
when he was humping his .50 caliber across one
paddy field to another.

“Of course that wasn’t my scene,” the young
man continued as he admired Jimmy’s work. “I
went there to get an appreciation for the people and
the culture.”

“I’m thinking about doing Nam next,” the
attentive customer said, who decided on an orange
and red koi tattoo for his calf. “Nam is happening
these days.”

Rat grunted.

The young man had also been admiring Rat’s
ink, especially one faded tattoo on his beefy upper
arm. One drunken, San Franciscan night, thirty-five
years earlier, Rat had stumbled into Sailor Jerry’s
tattoo studio and gotten an old school heart with his
girlfriend’s name Rosa written in the center. Five
years later, a round from an AK 47 put an end to it;
six months later, a “Dear John” letter, while he
convalesced in Tokyo hospital, put an end to Rosa.

“Hey man, where did you get that one?” the
young man asked grinning. His girlfriend giggled
and covered her mouth. “If I were you, I’d ask for
my money back.”
Rat stared at the man with his cold, blue eyes, a stare that he had perfected during three tours in the bush. He twisted his mouth into a wry smile. “Vietnam.”

That always shut them up. Some ghosts couldn’t be laid to rest.

Jeffrey Miller
Clear as Time

Ω

Robert Fujimoto figured Poker to be a ploy to lift his spirits, which is why he took Q up on the game despite thinking it was a foolish endeavor. Doc watched from a seat near the tail-gate, amused by the two Marines’ ability to nearly pull the card game off despite the jarring nature of a ride in the back of a Five Ton and the stirring winds that churned round the truck bed.

They slid the draw stack face down under the plastic band wrapping on a MRE box, and held the cards dealt in their hands low in their laps. The trip was the first supply-run the unit made since crossing into Iraq from Kuwait along the eastern shoreline. A few cards at the top of the stack came loose and took to the air. They soared around the bed of the truck and above the Marines not assigned a point, their heads nodding in the rhythm of the truck’s motion, before the gale brought by the vehicle’s speed sent them over the side rails or tail gate and out, or in, to the desert.

As far as Doc could tell, there was not going to be any break in the weather. The climate had been forgiving, even cold at times, when they left out of Zubayr heading south for Rumelia before sunrise. Now, as they made their way back north again, the sun was a third of the way through the sky and the spring desert was again hot and humid.
“When do you think we’ll be able to get rid of this goddamn NBC shit, Doc?” Q asked, shoving cards into a leg pocket; both had given up after losing the cards to the desert winds. The Nuclear Biological and Chemical protection suits, better known as MOPP gear, were supposed to be the Marine’s best friend in an environment with the potential to turn poisonous. But for the duration of the assault on Iraq it served as a cumbersome sauna suit and disruption in camouflage; every individual rifleman and medic wished to strip out of theirs and leave it on the desert floor.

“Look around,” he hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “We’ve nearly blown everything in this country to shit, yet the suits and spooks are convinced Saddam will rain droplets of nerve gas, or small pox from remote control airplanes.” He rubbed the tiny ridges on the safety of his service pistol with a forefinger, paused—not for effect, then added, “I’d say we’re in them ‘til we go home.”

“Fuck,” Q said, “this is just going to keep getting better isn’t it?” He volleyed a glance and smile at Fujimoto but got little in return. Then his smile bowed to a grimace as he struggled to stretch his back through the body armor. His back had given him trouble since jumping out of an armored troop carrier during a night assault. They were STA, but not being used in the manner and function for which they had trained and were used to. They were bastards.
The entire squad was aware that Fuji hadn’t spoken much since an engagement with a small band of Republican Guard. The skirmish was quick, lasting less than ten minutes before the five surviving Iraqis surrendered. Three Guards were found dead, and another died shortly after the fray ended—his spleen shredded, along with a cavern of flesh around it. In that galvanic fraction of time Corporal Donald Tennison also received a round in the neck, and it proved fatal. They all felt the loss, and the anger fueled a fire in the furnace of their hearts lit months earlier. Fuji’s enthusiasm for the mission, however, flat-lined in the moment his best friend’s heart stopped and he joined the ranks of Billies heading home.

Tenny was the reason no one called him Robert or Fujimoto, his birth name. Tenny started calling him Fellatio immediately following their introductions at basic in San Diego, and by the time they completed training everyone, including most of the D.I.s, were using the moniker as well.

“Hey Fellatio . . . you’re gonna wear what’s left of the blacking off that rifle you keep rubb’n it that way, man,” Doc said.

The Marine, sweating in the mixture of stifling heat and his temperament, only acknowledged Doc’s statement with a quick glance and nod. Doc got up from his seat at the front of the bench and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, each navigating the gear and food sprawled around the bed, to keep from falling as he moved to
sit beside his friend. The bulky Five Ton loped along the pavement chewing up the desert miles.

“How you hold’n up, man?”

“The fuck does it matter?”

“It matters. It matters ‘cause we can’t afford to have ya not think’n clear,” Doc said, using his best, detached yet forgiving, command voice. “Come on man, it matters ‘cause you’re my friend,” he pleaded. Fuji stared down at the steel deck plate under his feet.

Doc sighed, “You know what, man? Fuck it. Fuck everything, and don’t worry about shit other than getting yourself right, whatever that takes. Just know that if you wunna talk or . . .”

“Shit Doc, why don’tcha just giv’em a reach over?” Q added, trying to lighten things up, but characteristically only added indignity.

“Seriously? Shut up, Q. You’re outta your fuck’n element,” Doc said.

“Really, Doc, I’m out of my element?” Q laughed and drew a cigarette from the box secured in a breast pouch of his LBV. He cupped his hand over the flame of a Zippo and lit it. Exhaling, he drew the attention of the few that weren’t sleeping.

“Everyone take a look. We have the embodiment of the medical profession right here in our midst. Like. . . uh. . . chunk’a corn in a sea-uh shit. You know I hear smok’n’l give me cancer,
Doc?” Q took another long drag, the smoke escaped through his teeth and nose as he resumed his argument. “And how the fuck is that supposed to make me feel in this fucking mess, with goddamn tanks and shit firing rounds soaked in depleted Uranium, and people blow’n themselves up at check points day and night?” Q pulled at his collar and his voice seemed to lose some of its verve, “wearing these goddamn rubber suits—a gas mask never further than our hip.”

“Do you have a point to make, Q?” Doc replied.

“Yea I do. If they linked swollen prostates directly to excessive masturbation, there’d still be a lot of fuck’n prostates bigger than a Monkey’s Fist—right? It’s cuz the remedy sucks and makes no goddamn sense to people who’r liv’n in the jiff cuz their future’s knotty no matter . . . no matter how much time they spend in the hot-box punch’n their clowns.” Q looked around as he sniggered at his own joke. “What du-yuh think, Fellatio?”

Fuji looked at Q, “Don’t call me that anymore.”

He glanced around at the others and then realized that Q had distracted him from his hate, so he went back to it. “I just wanna kill all these fucking fuckers till we’re all totally fucked, and then go home to a different kind of fuck’n parade. If we have to kill ‘em all to go home, then I wanna get started right now and not stop till we can GO HOME,” he said, as he rubbed the barrel of his rifle
in stacked fists; his grip tight the way the batter rubs 
his bat as he anticipates the pitch. “Or—fuck it—
we can stay here forever for all I care.”

“So . . . we could call you Full-on-fuji-
motard?” Q’s retort was swift and got some laughs, 
and almost earned a smile from Fuji as well.

“Come on man, ya can’t be like that, 
Fellatio,” Sergeant Clint Wakefield said, standing 
front point as he always did, joining the 
conversation. “We’ll do what has to be done, and
then whatever other bullshit they can come up with, 
and eventually they’ll see everyone’s too fucking 
tired to care and they’ll have to end this shit and it 
will be over and . . . who knows, maybe this 
shithole will be a nice place to come for vacation in 
a few years.” He earned a few laughs from the few 
Marines standing point, their rifles pointed outward 
to the desert but their ears and most of their 
attention aimed inward at the conversation.

“Jesus—fucking—Christ, Sergeant. You 
really think we’re here till this shit’s ‘over’?” Q 
interrupted, using his hands for air quotes and 
looking defeated.

More laughs.

“I don’t know, man,” Wakefield said and 
then he felt the truck start to decelerate.

“Ahh, shit. Why are we slowing down?” Wakefield 
motioned for Q to wake the few that slept. The
truck slowed and bounded on the rear axles as the engine howled and sputtered through down shifting.

The Humvee that led the Five Ton in the small two-vehicle convoy—another sign they were a bastard unit—stopped in the middle of the road at an angle. The Platoon Commander, Lt Haley, and the radio operator got out and took position behind the vehicle. The Five Ton finally rolled to a stop approximately forty yards behind, but no order to get out and make a defensive circle came, the normal procedure any time a troop personnel vehicle stopped outside a secured zone. The seconds began to stack up like hours to the Marines who sat without facts or orders.

“Dude, we need to get the fuck out of this thing and . . .” Smitty, a gangly tall kid from Eastern Kentucky started his usual griping but was swiftly hushed by a wave of the arm when Wakefield heard shouts from Lance Corporal Fouste, the squad’s radio operator.

Wakefield jumped down from the truck and stood in the road, silhouetted himself on the vast open desert, and cupped his ears in an effort to hear Fouste’s shouts. Able to make out some words, he turned to look at Doc.

“Doc get up there, they’re shouting for you. Everyone else outta the truck, make a perimeter, fire teams one and two on that side, three and four on that one. Let’s go motherfuckers, move it! Fire team leaders report when you’re in position. Fuck’n Iraq.”
Doc jumped down and moved with caution to the Humvee where Fouste and the Lieutenant waited. He saw a white car parked in the middle of the road fifty yards ahead of their vehicle. He broke into a trot as an assortment of scenarios rolled through his mind. His experience had taught him to spurn surprises, and this had all the earmarks of the unexpected. Fouste stood facing down the road as his rifle rested on the back of the Humvee, its barrel fixed on the tattered little car. Doc saw it had several bullet holes along the side showing, and the light from its headlights were dimmed by the sun’s intensity.

The two Marines that had been in the Humvee with Haley and Fouste, one the driver and the other a corporal assigned from Weapons Company, stood near the white car, their weapons aimed at a man lying face down on hot asphalt. Doc watched as he closed the distance between himself and the LT—their images quivering like torch flames in the plumes of heat radiating up from the desert artery.

Lt Haley hurried Doc in with a waving hand as he spoke into the hand piece tethered to the radio fixed on Fouste’s back, its antennae bent in half and held to itself by a small section of green duct tape.

“Roger Stingray Alpha, be advised we are held india-papa on sierra lima victor too-niner still thirty klicks south of Zubayr . . . break . . . we have an injured civilian and one unidentified civilian.” Lowering the hand piece, Haley stared down the
road toward the white car. “Better get up there, Doc, I guess there’s a damaged national requiring your compassion.” He paused to smile, but the gravity of the situation pressed in and his mood became heavy—something he dismissed through tone. “It doesn’t sound good . . . some Iraqi bit-,” he stopped, made eye contact with Doc for the first time, “a girl or something, just go check it out.”

Only a month had passed and in the last few days it became clear to Doc he had grown to hate his purpose. He no longer wanted to be held responsible for the care of Billies. He wanted to drop his title and pick up a rifle like everyone else. And, like everyone else, do what he thought to be senseless work: killing. If he could have it his way, he thought, he’d walk just close enough to the scrap of white trash parked in the road, and for reasons only known to him in an innate form, blow the damn thing to hell—both strangers with it.

Now upon the two Marines, Corporal Rodriguez and Private First Class Acuna, he dropped the med pack off his shoulder and carried it in front of him by a handle strap sowed into its crest.

“Whut’s up?” Doc said in a flat irritated tone.

“Fuck, Doc, I don’t know. You have to have a look for yourself, man. This guy doesn’t speak a fucking word of English!” Rodriguez said shouting the last bit at the man lying face down, arms stretched out at his sides. Looking back at Doc,
Rodriguez said in a mocking tone, “other than ‘tank-you, tank-you,’” he returned attention to the man on the ground, “well tank-you too, mother fucker!” The man on the ground was wearing slacks and a tight sweater, and Acuna held to himself they would’ve been ugly when they were purchased new in the States two decades earlier.

Doc stepped to an open rear door on the driver side of the vehicle. What his eyes captured twisted from disbelief before his mind could disentangle what he saw. Lying on the hot blue vinyl bench in the back of the car was a small girl blackened and swollen with burns to her face and body. He made a quick visual assessment and figured the majority of the burns to be first degree, and the girl to be around thirteen. They covered nearly every inch of surface area exposed. Her head rested on a stack of bundled sheets, their white cloth stained red and brown with blood, black where her charcoaled flesh rubbed against them. Brown and yellowed eyes resting in puffy hollows stared into Doc’s through a mask of damaged tissue; their glossy surface moistened and reddened with pain, yet he thought he saw her soul in them clear as time.

He dropped his pack and reached out to start a better assessment, stopped, reached back for his pack, pulled it in between his knees resting on the road, released the plastic snaps holding cross straps in place, and unzipped the cover. He sprawled the tripartite compartments open, spread-eagle, and stared down at the mess of medical supplies displayed out before him in a blossom of
discomfiture. The equipment, suddenly looking unfamiliar to Doc, could just as well have been the assorted colored packaging of candies at the airport in Germany. How was it he recognized nothing? Slowly their names and functions came to him. An oral airway, and the blue tubing was a nasal. Field bandages in drab wrappers, dressings he stole from the Army clinic in Kuwait blazoned white. A splint and tourniquet strapped in with Velcro for quick access.

What did he have to help this Billie? Where should he start with treatment? Innumerable thoughts slammed against the inner walls of his mind simultaneously, the electric pulses of a massive cerebral emanation, but their action sparked not one clear notion that hinted on what to do.

Looking back to the scorched Billie in the back seat, he placed a hand, gloved in green latex, gently to her forehead. Hot!

Her head, resting slightly to one side, straightened. She moaned and he could hear the crackling of fluid in her voice. Shit!

“Uhh . . . Rodriguez.” He strained to squeeze audible words through the tightened muscles of his throat. His eyes fixed on the Billie’s.

“I need you to help me lift her out of the car,” Doc said as he packed his medical bag hastily. Before zipping it shut, he grabbed gauze soaked in Vaseline but, not knowing quite what to do with it yet, left it sealed in its wrapper and held it in his teeth. He swung the pack onto his back, and took the package of gauze and stuffed it in a front pocket. He looked back at the truck and then to Rodriguez, “I don’t know what the fuck Lieutenant wants to do with that asshole, but we gotta get this Billie to a hospital now. Help me get her outta this car and I can carry her to the truck.”

Doc, giving instructions for Rodriguez to lift her legs, careful not to let them touch anything on the car, for fear of doing more damage to the skin, had him place them in his right arm as he held her trunk and neck cradled in his left. Doc was astonished by the weightlessness of her body resting in his arms. He strained to fight back overwhelming sentiment as he imagined what had happened to the young girl; what events had left her blistered and scalded—repugnant. Not wanting to be embarrassed or caught up by emotion, he turned and headed toward the Five Ton in a hasty lumber.

The Lieutenant and Fouste met Doc in the road.

“What the fuck, Doc? Whu-de-yuh plan on do’n with her?” the Lieutenant asked, alternating his attention between the girl in Doc’s arms, and Rodriguez and Acuna who still held the man to the road with the threat of death.
“Sir, we have to get her to a medical facility. There’s the British clinic in Umm Qasr, that’s probably the closest,” Doc said.

“Are we positive we can save her . . . I mean . . . is it worth it, Doc?” Haley said. He hated to ask the question, but HQ pressed hard on all Platoon Commanders not to deviate from a mission plan. Units had already gotten lost and there were U. S. soldiers missing. He also thought he had to question Doc’s ability to make the tough choices given what happened with Tennison just days earlier. Haley wasn’t sure why, but he stayed fixed on Doc through the whole thing. He was proud of Doc. He seemed to do everything right. But when Tenny turned Billie and then said fuck it and tapped out, he saw that Doc was cut to the quick.

“Look at her—she’s first-class fucked up, but I’m still taking her to the truck. If we don’t get her somewhere soon there’s no way she’s gonna last. Not long anyway,” Doc said.

“We haven’t gotten clearance from HQ to do anything yet. But I’m work’n on it now,” Haley said.

“Sir . . . when you’re act’n and think’n on your own, I’d follow you into France with one rubber—Head Quarters dicks around and this girl’s dead,” Doc said, then turned and walked toward to the truck again. The girl an alien doll wrapped in white still balanced in his arms.
“Shit,” Haley said. “Corporal Fouste, grab me some quick ties and a sandbag, I’m gonna go help Rodriguez and Acuna with this asshole.” He took the clear plastic ties and bag from Fouste and added, “Get on the Fox Trot with HQ and let them know that we’ll be on the move in five mikes. Give ‘em our sit-rep . . . we have one wounded civilian and another in custody and we’re taking them both to Umm Qasr.” He wore beads of sweat like small pox on his face as he shook his head, “shit.”

Haley reached into a vest pouch and pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights. He pulled a cigarette from the box and lit it without a look. It unnerved him to have to report this surprise to HQ.

As Haley walked away he could hear Fouste keying the hand piece and start his radio chatter, “Stingray Alpha, this is Stingray One, be advised we are oscar-mike in five minutes . . . break . . . we are heading East-South-East to Umm Qasr for transport of one wounded civilian and one suspected enemy captured . . .”

Trailing behind the two marines and now leading the captured Iraqi toward the truck, Haley was stopped by Fouste who took the hand piece from his ear and aimed it at him with a flick of his wrist.

“HQ wants to speak directly with you sir. It’s Boz-zz . . . Cap’tin Thompson, sir,” Fouste said, and Haley noticed the grin the Corporal attempted to conceal. The non-NCOs called Thompson, Bozo, on account of the curly, fiery, red hair he wore long on top for a Marine officer. Haley
lit another cigarette and took a long drag before taking the hand piece from Fouste. He released a large cloud of smoke once his lungs had absorbed enough venom.

Acuna read the discomfort on the L-T’s face, and it left him uneasy about the change in mission. It relieved his mind some that the Iraqi in their custody had been so cooperative. The Republican Guard that shot Tenny were a rambunctious lot and that’s why Sergeant Wakefield had told him he had to shoot the one through the back. Acuna had seen and peered into the hole his round had made and watched the foul looking Billie take his last breath, ever. The idea of having to shoot at this man with a bag on his head didn’t mend well with him.

When Acuna and Rodriguez got to the truck Doc and Lance Corporal Quilesrosa, Q, rested on their knees and were leaning over the charred girl. They were settled in a small space they made by moving supplies around and half the squad was back in the truck with them. It took four of them to get the guy loaded and they sat him in the middle on one side between two Marines, Private First Class Elicier and Lance Corporal Castle. Sergeant Wakefield returned from speaking with Lieutenant Haley and gave instruction for everyone to load up, and within moments both vehicles were on the move again.

With some brief backtracking they found the road that lead to Umm Qasr, and once on it Doc
noticed the engine’s wail as the driver pressed it as hard as he could in high gear. With more than a thirty minute ride to the medical clinic he had plenty of time to think about the patient lying at his knees. The Iraqi sat with his hands bound behind him, an empty sandbag draped over his head, the stiff nylon cord imbedded at the brim loosely tightened to fit his neck. The man tilted to one side in an attempt to relieve pressure placed on his fettered hands, but when he made the mistake of leaning too far Castle threw a hard elbow into his side in disgust.

Doc began lifting articles of clothing as gently as he could to further assess the damage and amount of injury. As he lifted the gown to peek down her trunk he noticed her soft breasts. The skin was light brown with a deep mixture of milky blue, and her nipples appeared to be enlarged. Perhaps she wasn’t as young as he thought. As he took the left arm, the arm closest to him, he felt her wrist to try and determine a pulse rate. The ride was too rough, and although he managed to establish that her pulse was weak and thready beneath his touch, he couldn’t get an accurate count. He thought back on what it meant to establish a distal pulse, a radial pulse in a trauma patient in regards to their blood pressure but no specific detail came to mind, only that he was once taught there was a connection and what the connection was.

He made another observation. Her breast and chest appeared to be nearly untouched by whatever incendiary heat scorched the rest of her
upper body. Her arms were burnt badly, but only on the tops; the medial portions were smooth and the dermis and even epidermis seemed completely intact. Something else Doc didn’t notice before caught his eye, a dirty IV catheter poked out from the under part of her arm just below the elbow. The blood around it must have clotted, or the vein collapsed; there would be blood to show from its uncapped end if that were not the case. She moaned as he lowered her arm and redressed her chest.

“Can’t you give her any morphine?” Q asked.

“I don’t have enough,” Doc replied. “And I can’t count on the Brits to give me more. Hell, they probably only have it in vials for IV.”

“Enough to help her with the pain?” Q asked.

“No asshole, enough to last in case one of you idiots gets hurt. How am I supposed to explain that one of ya’ll has-tuh suffer because I used up my morphine on some Iraqi bitch?” The words split Doc’s teeth and stirred the air like a foul stench between the three of them. Both Doc and Q looked down and felt she understood what he said. Doc tried to rationalize that it probably wasn’t possible, but one look at Q and he knew they both felt regret from Doc’s slip of phrase.

“Shit,” Doc said as he wiped his brow with the back of his hand. The green latex glove was dirty, marked with soot and a fresh streak of old
blood. A hole had torn out at the palm. Doc pulled the med bag out and dug out an IV kit he prepared before they left Zubayr. He tore the plastic packaging around the tubing open with his teeth and fixed it into a 500mL bag of Lactated Ringers. Doc went to work trying to flush the catheter in her arm by pressing the bag to force fluid through. It was no use, the LR went nowhere and he gave up after only a few goes. In defeat he simply laid the bag and tubing across her chest. He knew it was not likely that he could start a new IV with the truck bouncing the way it was. To keep from embarrassing himself he chose to make no attempt.

A

The Brits had the girl on a gurney and commotion filled the room. The chaos was intimidating to Doc, who stood in the corner watching. The Doctor, a bearded sheik with blue turban, had a smooth English accent and every person in the room at his command. His power bewildered Doc and he could do little else but imagine himself with a power that matched what he saw. Then the doctor took a scalpel and, starting just above the knee on the right thigh, made cross incisions that flayed the burnt flesh open wide. Doc couldn’t help but make a connection to hotdogs he had seen split from neglect on a hot grill.

He wanted desperately to make himself some use to the care of the young Billie. He stepped up and listened for a command that he could fulfill; to recognize a task that he could perform that would
initiate his participation. The scene was chaotic, and the action and pace of the action wild. He felt completely out of place, and a sense of failure swept over him. He retreated back into the corner; as he did a heavy-set girl with short blonde hair started cutting the cloth that wrapped the woman’s chest and trunk. She pulled the cloth back carefully away from the skin, which clung to the cloth for a moment and then wept with oily fluid where the burns were most severe.

Doc noticed the girl’s breast again, virtually undamaged. The skin was as smooth and milky as any tits he’d seen. Her swollen nipples, puffy and dark, were leaking fluid. The cloudy white liquid ran the slope of her breast and down around her ribs before soaking into the sheets beneath her. He looked up and saw the woman watching him as he stared back in awe. His face blushed and he turned and left the room.

Outside Doc noticed the squad standing in a cluster more than fifty yards away, across an island of sand surrounded by a paved drive that looped around in a large semicircle. There were British soldiers mixed in the group, and most were smoking cigarettes and sharing laughs. The silhouette of two men, who stood at the end of the long concrete porch bordering the building, caught Doc’s eye. One was the Iraqi they found with the woman.

He approached as the sun retreated behind the building and walked into the shadow shared by the two men. Once in the shade he could make out
the clothes the other was wearing. They were the old “chocolate chip” desert cammies worn by allied troops during the Gulf War. The uniform and the patch on the arm with the Arabic and English letters “F. I. F.” told Doc what the man was, and why he was talking to the captured Iraqi. Though the man now stood with hands free, and the hood no longer draped his head.

Doc approached closer and they broke their conversation and both turned to face him. Doc pulled a cigarette he was saving in a plastic bag tucked under his vest, he put it to his lips but never lit it. The two men broke from their banter and turned to face him. Doc’s curiosity as to who the man was prevailed over his usual hesitation to speak to any Iraqi national, and he questioned the interpreter.

“Has he said anything?” Stumbling over how ridiculous the question felt the moment it escaped his mouth Doc shook his head and rephrased, “What’s the story? Does he know who the woman is?”

The Free Iraqi Force interpreter looked young to Doc, not much older than thirty maybe, but his confidence and air pronounced a wisdom he found intimidating. The man looked deep into Doc’s eyes and paused for a moment before his expression turned to one of manners, “It is his wife.”

For a moment no one spoke, and the man who had been a captive less than an hour earlier
nodded, face down, buried in a hand that shielded his eyes. Doc pulled the unlit cigarette down, and after he failed to find a safe place to put it immediately, settled for stuffing it in a front pocket.

“She was . . . bad . . . hurt . . . like that, when a tank round hit family home. She was holding duh . . . duh, two little children in her arms.” He paused, “Twins . . . yes? They deed not make it.” The man’s dialect was stressed and even had a hint of English accent. Doc stood, frozen.

“The man could not take the bodies of his children, so he left them there to save his wife. To try. He took her Basra in East to a hospital where she treated some. Was treated, you know? When war reached Basra the hospital filled up too much, quickly, and they must be releasing her to die. The man, this man,” the interpreter placed a hand on the other Iraqi’s shoulder and introduced his name, “Malik Yusuf Zaid,”—the name came too quick for Doc to catch—he put his wife in the car and drove south. He knew he would run into allied forces and prayed that, even if he were killed, someone would try and save his wife.”

Doc stood unable to speak. He felt ashamed standing there with only a blank look on his face and nothing to say. He scrambled for words like a child trying to eat alphabet soup with chop sticks. His face flushed as a dizzy spell set in and he thought of just walking away. Finally there was a break in the silence as a female voice from behind him called out.
“Excuse me, sir?” The blonde girl from the treatment room, the British soldier, walked toward them.

“Excuse me, but are you the bloke that brought the young lady in?” Her walk was deliberate and light for such a heavy girl, Doc thought.

“Yea, I guess. Well yea, we brought her in. Is something wrong?” Doc again felt humiliated for asking another dull-witted question.

“Well I just wanted to let you know that the Major has decided to med-evac the patient. She has produced urine which is evidence her kidneys have managed to hold up despite all the strain, and he believes the infections are treatable. She will be flying out as soon as the bird gets here. We’re preparing her for the trip now.” Her eyes were soft and of the bluest blue. Doc noticed the skin on her forehead and nose was peeling, no doubt from too much sun exposure. She looked tired, over worked and fatigued from stress, and yet he sensed she enjoyed what she was doing. If it were not joy it was at least pride. She was not a fraud.

Behind him the interpreter was already translating the news to the woman’s husband, and there was an audible sigh, then loud moans of dark clouds falling out of a hopeless sky. When Doc turned around Malik embraced him in a tight hug. His smell was strong with sweat and the stubble of his beard irritated Doc’s neck as he buried his face
on his shoulder. His body quivered and the weeping progressed to a howl.

Through the sobs the man spoke to Doc in English. The words were broken and with heavy accent, but Doc understood.

“Tank you, tank you, tank you.” He stopped and kissed Doc on the cheek before speaking again, “Goadbliss you. Tank you, tank you, tank—,” Doc pulled away. The scene and the man flustered him, and he was feeling worse about the whole incident.

With effort Doc was able to separate himself from the man, whose weeping finally came under control and he was taken to see his wife. Because she was to be flown to the U.S.S. Comfort, a medical hospital ship, the news had already spread to the small band of media on the base about Doc’s, and the squad’s, efforts to rescue the wounded civilian. It was Good Press. The med-evac came in the form of a British Royal Air Force dust-off with a large red cross painted on both sides of the body near the tail. When Doc made his way to the tarmac to watch, he was greeted with praise and handshakes.

“Good job, Doc,” and “fuck’n aye, man, you did it,” came at him from faceless figures. A man from a foreign news station approached him and asked for an interview. Before Doc could reply to the first question the man started in with others. Doc didn’t remember whether he offered any responses or not. The young man’s wife, no longer a mother, was loaded onto the bird and after a few
minutes it lifted into the air, turned at an angle away from the crowd, and flew out to sea.

Doc backed out of the crowd and walked to a cargo container setting alone at the edge of the tarmac. He reached into a front pocket searching for the cigarette he had hastily stuffed away earlier. A sharp edge stabbed his hand, and he latched onto it and pulled it out to have a look. It was the gauze soaked in Vaseline; its foil package unbroken, its contents unused. His thoughts drifted back to all the events that had filled the day, to the bodies of the babies no longer upon their mother’s breast, and unburied in a room turned to rubble.

He looked toward the road where he saw Fujimoto smoking a cigarette and cleaning his weapon, a clunky M16-A2 with worn blacking—he and Q were standing in the shade of the Five Ton. Q’s arms flailed in pantomime as he laughed at his own jokes. Doc found the cigarette in a front pocket on his vest and saw that it had broken just above the filter. He flicked it to the ground between a forefinger and thumb, and leaned his back against the container.

An old, familiar weight pressed down on his shoulders. He gave into the heaviness and sat on the backs of his heels, his shoulders still firm against the metal canister. What had he done to earn praise and respect? All he’d done was picked her up and carried her. Anyone could have done that. He rubbed a finger over the metal corpsman’s caducee pinned to his collar, and looked at the gauze still in
its wrapper. The reality of his situation was as obvious as the suffering in the girl’s eyes. He had earned friendship, comradery, and acceptance. But his part in it seemed like an elaborate con now. He was in over his head and hated himself for it.

Ryan Bronaugh
Honor

What is Honor? You are not born with it, yet it can mean whether you live or die. It cannot be given unto you, nor is it earned; people often mistake experience and the seasoning of one's life with honor.

Honor is many things, both together and apart. It is how you stand, how you speak toward others: mindful, with dignity, respect, and civility. It is how you act and react - fair when possible, swift in defense of principles and values you hold true, unwavering in defiance of ideas and actions that compromise your beliefs.

Honor also need not be found through war, but in service toward the welfare and benefit of others. Peace is not dishonorable, for violence of man upon man does not always quantify honor; reason may counter validity of such actions.

Honor is forged in the depths of the heart and soul, inflamed in its fiery embrace, tempered and honed through knowledge, wisdom, courage, compassion, and love. In its purest and rawest form it is the indomitable, the hard place, the shield at night holding fear at bay. It wanes only at your inaction, splinters at your leisure, and is sacrificed at your whim.
Honor cannot be taken from you by force, and it must never be surrendered. It is the final measure of you, the piece you hold to your chest. Once honor is kindled, it must be nurtured and at times reshaped and re-forged. Ideas and opinions can be added, but if anything is to be taken from your honor all must be relinquished or surrendered.

Brandon Kyle Mooney
Forgotten Warriors

One moment an individual was walking through a meadow of flowers. In the next moment sons, daughters, husbands, and wives became soldiers. They defended our nation and paid with their life or health.

The citizen soldier – the Minute Man. Our Nation is built on their willingness to respond to Our Nation’s call. Some fought in the jungles of Vietnam; others responded to fight in a desert’s distant war. They fought with skill and determination and freed a land.

Then our Nation’s warriors returned home to parades and parties and joy spread from shore to shore. But when the glow subsided, the warriors remained alone and forgotten. We asked them to fight and then failed to provide them medical care. We research and study and search for a cause delaying response through ignorance and fear. Yet the forgotten warriors suffer in silence with honor and hope. For all the forgotten warriors want is medical care.

Doug Rokke
Hello, Pale Babylon

Hello, Pale Babylon
Will you still be there when I am gone?
With your towers high in the air,
Desperate voices shouting,
While you no longer care?

With trumpets sounding loud the call,
Do pretty soldiers shake and fall?
You wagered lives that took us all.
We are your foundation,
A weary and troubled nation,
Stretching across our own creation,
With a dozen bloody wars long won,
Hello, Pale Babylon.

Hello, Pale Babylon,
Shimmering in the setting Sun,
The lights on the towers,
Might seem pretty,
But don't be dissuaded by offers,
That always turn up empty.
A child's innocence cracks at the seam,
Broken backs weighted,
By another's dream.

With trumpets sounding loud the call,
Do pretty soldiers shake and fall.
You wagered lives that took us all.
We are your foundation,
A weary and troubled nation,
Stretching across our own creation
With a dozen bloody wars long won,
Hello, Pale Babylon.

With my last breath,
I hear the echoes of your death.
And feel the tower fall.
I feel my hand stretch to reach,
The cracks where the walls breach.
Like lies, they start small,
And so, Hello, Pale Babylon
You were here, but now you're done.
Born to die all along,
Fading at the end of a song.

Brandon Kyle Mooney
Ignored, Misunderstood, and Denied

Inspired by Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”

I have read of the best minds of generations destroyed by paranoia; exhausted, unrestrained, ravaged, creeping themselves through the streets at dawn looking out for each other’s six, metal-headed warriors looking for the man responsible for their buddy losing his leg amongst the turmoil of the night, who came home and into their mother’s arms, sat up drinking in the darkness of the suburbs and rural farms trying to forget the days contemplating suicide, who bared their souls to each other under the fire and saw God staggering through unscathed, who passed through airport terminals with medals pinned to their chests and blind eyes to the truth, who couldn’t get a job and bounced around from town to town looking for meaning in their lives until someone declared “have you seen the world,” who hid behind anything they could when the rain of pinks showered all around them as they cried out for their mothers, who got busted for drinking underage trying to forget the undeniable chaos when there was no forgetting,
who ate with their families for the first time returning home only to be someone
that no one knew or understood,
with screams, with cries, with rousing nightmares,
uppers and downers and endless pain,
undeniable hauntings of the men they once knew and called brother shouting
through the night stuck between heaven and hell,
in grocery stores, shopping malls, gas stations, schools, churches, rooftops;
ever being able to let go and sobbing into the shoulders
of strangers all around them,
whose blood boiled in their brains making them long to be back fighting
with their ghosts,
who sat in bathtubs for hours gazing at the light above their naked bodies
without blinking, longing to be taken,
who three, four times a day put the barrel of a gun into their mouth,
tasting the cold metal in the backs of their throats,
who cry for living and not being right there with their friends and
dying a hero’s death,
who found purpose in living for their brothers, fathers, uncles,
grandfathers, and all of the people they will never know.

Jared R. Worley
ZERO — ZERO — ZERO

They used me to draw them in the Nebula
They often joked, just like Mutara
This heated battle within the eagle's eye
We finally fought the enemy down
But they’re not gone.
We are intruded, through and upon
Fighting hand-to-hand
Blood splatters and stains my walls
Through it all, I’m told we won.
DESTRUCT SEQUENCE ONE

My crew fought bravely
Many died, the living – barely
So I limp them home
Or what remains of them.
They will heal but my soul is stained
Systems askew, I will never again
Fly true.
DESTRUCT SEQUENCE TWO

Within me remains an intruding creation
I will fight this sickening infiltration.
An engineering dysfunction
Puts my weapons in disarray
It de-energizes my core.
Don’t press me, don’t you see the sparks
Pain to me and to those I love
It’s always confusion and criticality.
DESTRUCT SEQUENCE THREE

I arrive safely — my crew is home
Yet not for me, my home was out there
Dodging fire, winning every fight.
Yet under this battle, I will never be the same
Broken and no longer needed, but desire remains
An uncontrollable flame, so I return to space
For one final flare against this fiercest enemy
I do what I must. I will be free!

Forgive me and please remember,
It's just a matter of my internal security.

Dan W. Holst
The End of Shock: Grief

Shock is the initial outrage; feeling down – and up, confused – and steady. We play our parts during those times, on autopilot.

Keeping the conscience down low, hoping the wounds don't cut too deep and expose; that sorrow.

Given time, the heart chiseled cold. Memories suppressed, trying to hold it down. In fear of being disclosed.

The profound thoughts come too late; they tell a different story. What could have been, what should have been.

What if we had done this, what if we had done that? What does it matter anyway?

Can't think, must move.
It’s what they all say,
that’s how to push on.

Grief sets in; cuts deep. There is an end, that’s what they all say. We hide ourselves; resolved to make it count. To make it matter, one day at a time.

Maybe I can atone for whatever sin. Maybe I can make it better. But that anger arises;
that hurt.
Searching through lost memories,
hoping to glean understanding.
Lost meaning;
Their faces are more important anyways.

You remember that laughter,
that voice. It seems to be
the first that tries to go;
won’t let it go.

The memories try to
fade. But; the photos
will never ever
let them go.

Must think, can’t move.
It’s not what they say.
I must hold on.

John Morton
The Picture

It would be much too dangerous to talk about my fears.
I’m not scared of dying for my fear is for the living
With tires turning and joints burning, we speed to the medic

While I relive that final moment:
A massive flash throws me hard to an abrupt stop
Against that rock face.

Now, Agony again twists my face,
tears shadow my sight.
Blurring my vision while holding my picture.

My promise to carry every day.
My own Badge of Courage.
The blue eyes of both my waif and my wife, filled

And giving of love.
Yet now the fade, shape of a sickle and a shadow cloaks my soul.
Savior or Satan

Both very much alive in this agony of hell.
But from that picture my sight did fail
Painless now…and a light.

Dan W. Holst
Making Cents

Everyone sees it every day yet do not recognize it,
They just pay.
The cost seems minimal because it’s just a few,
No one asks how it exists and made brand new.
Mintage begins as a blank in a fire that is very intense.
This is the beginning of how we make cents.
It then is washed and tumbled around,
Because to make cents the blemishes must be found.
Next it goes through something called upsetting.
In life this is something on which we’re always betting.
Then the strike comes that defines its features.
Striking moments are what defines us as creatures.
Finally they face the final inspection.
In life we call this a simple reflection.
Now the only thing left is simply to count,
Because the cost is great no matter the amount.
So when we look to our lives to recompense,
Just know we’re trying to make sense.

Jason Riley
On Your Left

A curious curiosity about my ride
Snaking along the creek, a silver arrow meandering below the blue
Flowers open to the sun, seeking the gilded life

Lover’s hand-in-hand, chatting, smiling, sharing the wild blooms.
Dogs testing the strength of the leash or is it the love of their friends
Seeking treasures somewhere, anywhere, there, or there, on the ground.
New families teaching and learning the transition of four legs to two.
Legs of three trudge along the side. All, at times oblivious to my ride.
I gracefully glide around.

On Your Left

It was Memorial Day and thoughts of friends long lost to time
Of days fighting wars, riding power through the heavens.
A terrible roar, shouted by the dragon as it took its form.
Birds of Prey, neither metaphorical nor living matter;
An Eagle, a Falcon, a Nighthawk, a Raptor--
I flew them all, my gorgeous rides.
Never, “On Your Left,” but always straight on!

Grounded now between the streams, I still ride the arrow
But alone and ever grounded, not too fast, neither too slow.
Strong two legs, power my Trek, guide my path.
My heart as passionate to my enemies and to my friends
Yet to them I say…

On Your Left

This new path I’m on, it’s straight as an arrow
Yet twists and turns abound.
No Commanding Officer nor mission objective
Like sun to heat to water to seed.
Life needs a directive, perhaps a different perspective
The blossom is ever deprived while the seed survives
So, to grow, I ride; to live, I must love, to leave it all behind
I look for guidance, the light unto my path
It is all in my heart, which guides me true.

On My Left.

Dan W. Holst
My Turn to Serve

My First Day

“Half right face, front leaning rest position, move!” The first time I heard these words come from the drill sergeant, I had no idea what he meant. But others knew, so I followed suit and started doing what everyone else was doing, which was dropping to the ground like I was on fire and doing push-ups.

“In cadence!”
“One, two, three!”
“One!”
“One, two, three!”
“Two!”
“One, two, three!”
“Three!”

This went on for what seemed like an hour, but really was no more than five minutes. What seemed like a thousand push-ups was more like fifty or sixty. As we were getting the command to stand up, I was sure my arms were not going to follow me; they were just going to stay there on the ground. My arms did move with me, but might as well have stayed on the ground because I could barely move them. My platoon got in trouble so often, and had to do so many push-ups, that our battle cry became “Half right face, front leaning rest position, move!” My entire time and existence at basic training seemed to be push-ups with blurs of training in between. The good thing was that we all maxed our push-up scores on our P.T. test. One day
as we were doing push-ups to the point of being mind numbing, I started to think, “Is this what I signed up for; is this how I am going to serve my country?”

My First Advanced Individual Training

(A.I.T)“Half right face, front leaning rest position, move!”

My Reclass (2nd A.I.T.)
After just a few years in the Army, I decided it was time to change my Military Occupational Specialty (M.O.S.). I took an interest in helping work on the trucks we had in our unit. When there was a slot open for a Wheeled Mechanic, I expressed my interest in the 91B slot, so my unit sent me to school. Now being what is known as prior service or M.O.S.- Q (qualified) at school since I had already completed an A.I.T., and seeing how the prior service were treated at my first school, I was excited. The teachers would bullshit with them, let them drive their own vehicles to class, and really never messed with them. Boy, I couldn’t have been more wrong! Granted, I did have a few more privileges than the soldiers who were there for their first A.I.T. or M.O.S.-T (trainee); I was able to leave after final formation on Friday and not show up until first formation Monday morning, among other things.

So, the first time I heard a platoon sergeant yell out, “Half right face, front leaning rest position, move!” I kind of leapt with joy because one of the M.O.S.-T soldiers had done something wrong, and we were supposed to be separate from them, so I was thinking, “Sweet! I don’t have to push.” Then I realized it was also directed to us prior service. The joy quickly turned to anger and everything just went to hell. The small group of us prior service, in my opinion, were called out on the most insignificant things and smoked or corrected in earshot or sight of the M.O.S.-T soldiers. This time not only did I tell myself, “This is not what I am serving for;” I also expressed my opinions through the chain of
command. Nothing was done about it, so I just kept my head down and dealt with it, continuously reminding myself that I would be leaving in a few short weeks.

My Deployment

Now with many years under my belt in the Army, I started looking for deployments but wasn’t able to get one because I didn’t have the right M.O.S. or rank, or because all the slots were being filled. Just when I was ready to give up, my unit was given mobilization orders to go to Iraq and I was pumped! I came from a large military family where my father and mother both served over twenty years in the Navy, and my two oldest brothers Michael Jr. and David, like myself, were Army National Guard; both served in Iraq together. Michael also served a tour in Afghanistan, and my brother just older than me, James, wanting to be different, joined the Marines and also served in Iraq. So here it was, my time to serve, and now I was going to Iraq just like all of my older brothers had done. Well, the deployment was off-ramped which meant it was canceled due to the draw-down in Iraq and pulling the troops out.

Needless to say, I was upset and was about to say “to hell with all of it” and wait for my ETS (Expiration Term of Service) date and not sign back up. But then I found out there was another unit that was looking for soldiers regardless of rank or M.O.S. I got excited and jumped on the chance, no matter where it was going. Come to find out the unit
was to be deployed to Afghanistan and we would most likely be seeing some combat. Turns out that was also off-ramped, but the command of this new unit would not take no for an answer. They made phone calls and trips all over and finally got a deployment to Kuwait to be security for the units coming out of Iraq, but the units were out of Iraq sooner than expected. Nonetheless our command found us another deployment to Kuwait to be the Command Cell (in charge of operating and running the camp) for Camp Virginia. As we were all standing there being told all about what was going on and where we were going, I was thinking, “Where in the hell is Kuwait?” “Why the hell are we going there?” and “I’ll probably be doing some stupid, meaningless job.”

Kuwait was a “Green Zone,” in other words no combat or fighting, a bordering country to Iraq and a hub for many soldiers, airmen, Marines, and sailors that were being deployed to countries in the Middle East, like Afghanistan and Iraq, before the draw-down. The troops went to one of the camps in Kuwait for a week or so before going to or coming back from one of the other countries in the Middle East. After being in-country for a few months kicking sand and turning wrenches on trucks, it occurred to me that if these trucks were not being fixed for the security force to use then they could not do their job, and if they could not do their job, others would not be able to do their job, so on and so forth. I am not saying that everything would come to a grinding halt if I stopped turning wrenches; what I am saying is that me doing my job
made it easier for others to do their job. At that moment I realized this is why I raised my right hand many years ago. It was to serve so I could help others.

Stephen Wallace
Lessons My Mother, My Father Taught Me About Service

I was born into a Navy Family.

My father served twenty-two years on active duty, and then seventeen years in civil service doing the same job he did in the service. And then, until they put him in his grave, although he stopped serving full time because of health concerns and disabilities, he was a lifelong member of more Veteran Service Organizations than you could shake a stick at.

My mom also served for over twenty years. Not by actually being in the military, but through her support of my dad and our family. Raising four kids, while my dad served, she put herself through college, and worked part time. As result of my father’s service and commitments, not only was she the primary parent that raised us, but she normally also worked in civil service on one of the bases near where we lived. She was a budget analyst and was good at everything she did.

She knew the cost of anything and everything with respect to the Navy and as you will see what was most important about life and obtaining one’s goals. In that regard, she taught me a new meaning of the Fear of God, and was often His instrument of knocking sense into me, that taught me to always respect both her and my Father.
This is my background. This is my story. In this legacy of their service, I will always remember the day I decided I might serve in the military. During my senior year, I came home from high school with the paperwork to apply for an Air Force ROTC Scholarship for college and my mom’s first question was, “Why do you want to go into the service?” and the second was, “Why the Air Force?” all with a “What you talking about Willis?” look on her face.

Up to that point in my life, you see, I was one of the kids who would have laughed at my Dad and his service. Before this in tenth grade, I was one of those kids who had so much hair; it would not fit in the confines of my high school ID card picture. To some degree I was accustomed with doing what I wanted to do. Regularly, I thought to myself, I would never serve in the military. Why make those sacrifices? Why place yourself under someone else’s control? This defied rational logic.

Although my parents who grew up after the depression, who saved everything, and brought a new meaning to the word, “work” knew better, I did not. And even though when I was young, I think I had an understanding of sacrifice beyond what most young adults today or then did, as the baby of my family, I was spoiled and took a lot for granted.

In that regard, I want to share one profound experience that helped me significantly there. I remember when I was young I grew up in the
South, in Virginia. And based on the sacrifices and military service of my parents, we lived in a good neighborhood. We lived in a brand new house in the suburbs within a mostly white neighborhood with good schools. Let me clean that up; it was an all-white neighborhood. I was the only black kid in most of my classes, and if there was someone else of color, there was only one or two.

In that Southern environment, forty-something years ago, some boy called me a Nigger, and I beat him up, up one side and down the other.

I grew up knowing how to fight. My dad was a boxing coach and champion. He was the “All Navy Heavyweight Champion” for eight years from 1961 to 1968. He also held the title as the world heavyweight military champion for at least two of those years. As an amateur fighter he had beat Ken Norton and Joe Frazier, and out of 365 fights he had only lost 12, and was destined to go to the Olympics until a drunk driver rammed him with a Buick station wagon while he was only in a Volkswagen bug.

And although the steering wheel of that Volkswagen being thrust into my dad’s chest did irreparable damage to my dad (he had over a hundred and fifty-two stitches from the top of his chest to the bottom of his gut) that he could never box again, he could coach.
In that, while still in the Navy, he started coaching the Navy Team until he retired from Active Duty. He then received a job in civil service as the All Navy Coach that he worked for close to another twenty years as a coach. During this period, I fondly recall him coaching Duane Bobick, and other Olympians. In particular I remember getting to go to Montreal, and the Olympic trials in 1976. I also remember him being selected as the Olympic boxing coach in 1980, the year they did not go. But I am digressing.

Let me get back to this boy I beat up, and the aftermath. I got kicked out of school. Are you hearing me? I got kicked out of school, and sent home, for getting into a fight with this boy who called me a nigger. And then what is worse, I had to face my mother.

My mother proceeded to tan my hide from one side of Sunday to the other, and once she got done whipping me she said something that stands profoundly with me today. She said to me, never, never again let somebody let you make an idiot out of yourself that you get kicked out of school, that you lose your benefits in society.

I may need to break that one down for you a little bit more. My parents worked very hard to get us where we were. My parents sustained many injustices, many bad looks and names. I can still recall driving cross country to visit my relatives in Texas and not having places we knew we could
stay. Yet, they had dealt with injustice and not let it slow them down.

I remember hearing stories of my father growing up and not being able to go to school. Although my Dad’s family owned their own land, to survive they had to take care of not only their own animals and cotton from their land; they also picked cotton for their white neighbors. My dad told stories of his experiences growing up as a result and not going to school, and being laughed at for being a few days behind the other kids while he was out, that he and my Mom were determined to ensure that not only did we have an opportunity to go to school, they determined and made sure we would go to good schools and do well in them. We may have gone wearing K-mart jeans, but my Mom and Dad were going to make sure we had the best options available to us.

As I look at my family, out of the four of us, three graduated from prestigious colleges, and as I have been able complete two Master’s Degrees and help numerous others go to and get through school, I am tremendously encouraged. This was a lesson my father and mother taught me.

But to fully understand this lesson I need to share some more about this experience.

As I came home, feeling pride that I had taught this boy something, my Mom whipping me for getting in a fight and getting kicked out of school taught me
a different lesson. Because once she got done
whipping me, not only did she tell me she loved me,
she told me, “Son, do not be afraid to prove
yourself.”

She did not care how I proved myself whether it
was by academics or athletics, but she wanted me to
prove myself and warned me. She said, “Son, do not
let other people take you down to their level.” She
said to me, “Son, do not be afraid to prove
yourself.” She went on to say, “The people who are
worth anything will respond, when you set out to
prove yourself, and the ones that don’t respond are
not worth you losing your opportunities to succeed
in society.”

She told me this boy I got in a fight with was stupid,
and probably his parents were stupid. She then
asked, why in the world would I get into a fight
with him, why would I allow him to get me kicked
out of school and complicate my opportunities to
succeed? And then she shook her head, and I want
to tell you it left a profound impression on me. I
have never forgot that lesson, and regularly
challenge my own children and others with it.
Namely, you must not be afraid to prove yourself;
you must make the most of every opportunity to
serve well and not give into stupid people or quit
that you cost yourself or others you care about their
opportunities.

Ronald Pettigrew
Christmas 1970--A Time Without Peace

As our nation celebrates Christmas once more with Americans in harm’s way, my thoughts return to an experience so long ago in a distant land during a previous war. Although a Christmas truce had been announced formally, and Americans at home, then referred to as the world, thought there would be a cessation in bombing and fighting throughout South East Asia, reality was quite different for those of us with combat missions to complete.

December 24, 1970 arrived with the warm tropical sun dispelling any dreams of a white Christmas. While I knew that the celebration of the birth of God’s son “Jesus” was just hours away, as I prepared for the evening’s combat mission my thoughts turned to the blessings of God and how I could resolve the moral dilemma of engaging in combat on this most holy day.

Christmas Eve arrived with the sound of aircraft flying overhead and the candlelight church services in the base chapel. As I had during my childhood, I went to the service to sing songs of praise and joy in anticipation of Jesus’ birth. I left the candlelight service refreshed and praying for peace amongst all nations and especially in our small war torn corner of the world. A Huey helicopter hovered above, dispensing “snowflakes” as I left the chapel in what seemed an unusual prelude to a night when B-52s would rain bombs and death upon an enemy far below. Our mission was not unusual except we
were going into combat on Christmas Eve with the conclusion – death– on Christmas Day. We put a reel of Christmas music on the Wollensak tape recorder and sang Christmas songs as we flew towards our “IP” and fate with destiny on our Lord’s birthday. We interrupted “Silent Night” to switch reels as required to record the radio transmissions during our bombing mission. We dropped our bombs with knowledge that it was Christmas morning, then replaced the mission reel with the Christmas music reel and resumed our rendition of “Silent Night.” The irony of this event did not escape any of us, and we soon were discussing the meaning of killing, even in war, on Christ’s birthday. We were not dealing well with the significance of these contrasting events, when suddenly the sky was bright as day and the voice of our Lord echoed in our minds, “be at peace for today is Christmas and you just did your job.”

Today, as we engage in combat once more on Christmas Day we must remember that the message is one of peace amongst all nations and peoples of the earth. We must set aside economic, political, and social agendas and strive for the peace and harmony that was the promise issued so long ago. I pray that understanding will prevail and revenge will be set aside with a dedication to restoring the brotherhood of all peoples on earth. We cannot use only force to settle disputes but must strive in our actions and thoughts for “PEACE ON EARTH.” To quote one hymn, ‘LET THERE PEACE ON
EARTH AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME.” Merry Christmas.

Doug Rokke
The First Meal of the Rest of my Life

I grew up the son and grandson of Iowa farmers. While we lived in small town America, our backyard produced an abundance of home grown vegetables and fruits. This cornucopian bounty graced our every meal.

Yet no meal was complete without the richness of pure non-homogenized, non-pasteurized milk. Each week Dad took us kids to a local dairy farm where the farmer filled our tall tin with pure, fresh milk. Back home Mom would skim the cream off the top in preparation for the best pure vanilla home-made ice cream.

When that young summer day came, my dad taught me to crush the ice. Buying bagged iced from the local service station, we dumped it into a burlap bag. Handing me a short stick of 2 x 4, my dad taught me to crush the ice in the bag resting on the concrete basement floor. It took both of my hands to grasp the stick, yet my Dad used just one hand to smack the bag and crush the ice. I often thought, why crush the ice? Nevertheless, we poured in the crushed ice, mixing in salt as the machine churned. It was pure milk cream to frozen delight. From Italian Gelato, German Eis Cafes, and creamy Kuwaiti deserts, I’ve never tasted better.

I enjoyed that ice cream for nineteen years until my parents, younger sister, and grandparents shuttled me to the Davenport, Iowa Greyhound bus station. After the hugs and tearful good byes, I stepped on to that bus for my new life journey in the
United States Air Force. Hardly a few miles had passed, when God rested an epiphany upon my soul. Overwhelmed by a vast burden, I knew that from that point onward, my life was my sole responsibility. Even with prayers begging for help, my eyes welled up and I cried, bawling like a little baby.

Arriving in Des Moines, I joined my fellow recruits, and we enjoyed a fun night of swimming and dinner at the hotel. I woke up the next morning on Valentine’s Day, 1986, and met those same recruits in the lobby. We talked about the oath that we would soon take a few hours later, the same oath I willingly repeated until my retirement in 2007.

Was I apprehensive? Sure. Was I scared and unsure? Of course. Was I excited? Yes. But what I remember most profoundly is that I felt ugly. My face had broken out and felt incredibly oily and dirty. I knew I was ugly, and, combined with all the uncertainty and impending change, it soiled my soul in ways I can’t possible articulate.

Bused to the Military Entrance Processing Station, I became separated from the group and didn’t know where to go. I wandered the halls, searching for my place and too scared to ask for help lest I seem helpless, stupid, and immature. As usual, I felt too stupid to follow the obvious instructions. Would I get yelled at, laughed at, refused entry? I just wanted to cry.

Eventually a nice man brought me to my appointed place; no yelling or laughter ensued, but it wouldn’t be the first time such fears stopped me
in my tracks. I passed the tests, took the oath, and became a new United States Air Force Airman.

Having never flown before, my fear only grew while we rested on the floor of the airports waiting for our flights. Would I miss my connection and prove my inability to follow simple directions? Yet again. After two flights from Des Moines to San Antonio, we arrived at Lackland Air Force Base where basic training began immediately.

Herded like cattle, yelled at, packed in tight, we lost any vagabond of freedom. Each moment was orchestrated to mold us into responsible Airmen. Of course we all felt, or maybe it was just me, fear and shame at the possibility of failure, washing out of basic training. We arrived late at night, unkempt, unnerved. Forced to march as if we knew how but didn’t, we learned through shame, degradation, and ridicule. Through the yelling and shame to break us, we arrived as simple cows steered to the feed trough of Lackland’s chow hall.

The cooks slopped leftovers from M.A.S.H. on our plates and we sat at our assigned tables only to be yelled at to clean our plates. I don’t remember the side dishes, but the main entrée was some sort of ground meat patty cooked dry and tasteless. Actually, no, that would be a compliment to the chef; it had a taste, and it tasted unlike anything I had ever tasted before, devoid of moisture, spice, or any kind of pleasant essence. One might even prefer regurgitated dog food folded into a McRib without the sauce, pickles, and onions. A vile hellish darkness that sapped every last bit of dignity was our meal, each bite a condemnation of the
culinary arts. It wasn’t just me. Looking into the eyes of the others at the table, we all fought the same gag reflex. Could we talk or laugh about it? Not without more yelling, so fighting the gag at every bite, I finished my first meal.

Psychological warfare breaks down the psyche to modify behavior. This was that warfare, to crush and salt from us any sense of pride, dignity, or self-esteem. I’d eaten dirt, pet food, and worked in manure, yet this topped them all. It was an ugly, disgusting end to a foul day forever seared in memory.

The twenty-one years I spent in the Air Force were filled with many unbelievable ups and downs. Adventures took me across the world, and it became the greatest event of my life, yet that beautiful journey, unknown at that time, began in an utterly repulsive manner. During that meal, I could hardly guess where life would lead me next. After we found our way to our barracks for our first night’s sleep, I laid my head on my pillow and cried.

Dan W. Holst
The Summer of Living Dangerously

The Marines were away on some project, some military-type exercise they seemed to love. They had loaded themselves and their gear and their frightful weapons into the bellies of the Hueys and the big Sikorskys, almost as if they were willingly, gladly, reentering their mothers’ birth canals. Dozens of dusty vortexes, blinding mini-tornadoes, rose around the landing zone as the whopping blades picked up speed, and one after another the loaded craft rose, taking flight like monstrous locusts or cicadas. The absence of the Marines meant that the adjacent Navy area where their hooch was would be quiet and nearly deserted that night. They could be together without fear, without having to be so quiet and watchful. He had waited for this night for several weeks, planning how it should be, and even boldly trading a lacy slip from one of the nurses for his month’s ration of Salems.

His expectations had become a constant daydream of reveries. He lived and moved about in a fantasy world, a schoolgirl in love for the first time. He couldn’t concentrate, could hardly eat or sleep, yet he was content in that strange magical way that very new young love affects people. It was springtime all over the world. When the rains came, they were warm and soft. His heart was full to bursting with love and compassion, and seeing a poor homeless, skinny dog on a street in Da Nang might bring him to tears. He always carried chocolate and change for the children. Only one
thing was lacking from this paradise, and he would correct that!

He would go to the section of the base where the Black army guys lived--“Dark Town” was one of the nicer names the red-necks called it--and see if he couldn’t buy some heroin. He knew that Vick really liked this special drug.

“What you doin’ ‘round here white boy?” a tall Black soldier asked roughly.

“I’m looking for Snake,” he answered, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Oh yeah, well, what you want with Snake? He know you, Jack?” Ricky dug the bills out of his dungarees and showed them to the guard.

“Oh, well now, why don’t you say you is here on bizness?” They walked down a long row of tents, all looking as indistinguishable as houses in a cheap subdivision, and stopped. The guard pulled back the tent flap of Snake’s hootch and motioned him inside. When his eyes adjusted, he could see that there were five guys sitting on the two bunks along the sides of the tent. One was lighting a bamboo bong, and the others stared at him as he found a place to sit. One guy was sharpening a big K-Bar fighting knife, and another had a .45 in his lap. They wore bandanas tightly tied over their heads, or colorful African knit caps. There was Motown music coming from a tape player: “Like a snowball rolling down the side of a snow-covered hill, growing…” As frightening as this scenario had at first seemed, they were all very friendly and soon made him feel welcome and at ease. The leader, Snake, spoke up, and asked Ricky what he had
come for. He seemed to betray some surprise, even some concern, when Ricky told him.

“You ever do this shit before, Boot?” he asked.

“Um, well no, not exactly.” Ricky admitted. They all chuckled and hooted, and one said “Whooee! You know what we got here? We got us a mo’fuckin’ virgin!” At this Ricky felt himself blushing deeply, not so much because he was so green about drugs, but because he was still a virgin. Snake let this banter go on a little longer, and then raised his hand, a bishop giving his flock a blessing, and the tent became quiet. Very seriously Snake showed him how to heat the drug in a spoon, how to filter it through some cotton into the syringe, how to wrap the big rubber band around his arm and find the vein. Snake demonstrated all this twice, letting one of his friends have the first dose, and then treating himself to the second. His friend was leaning back with a look of absent dazed contentment on his face. Snake’s eyes glazed slightly, and he smiled a brotherly, knowing smile at Ricky. One of his front teeth was shining gold. Race seemed not to matter at all in this place. He could feel a bond with these guys as if he had been initiated into a secret society and was now a brother himself.

“This good fuckin’ shit, Bootcamp,” Snake said kindly. “You going to have a good time tonight.” He handed Ricky the package and Ricky paid and thanked him and said goodbye to them all. He could hear them laughing and joking as he left the tent. What a great bunch of guys, he thought,
and wondered why he had always been afraid to come into their area, to meet and mingle, and get to know them. He sang their song as he walked back to Vick’s tent: “Like a snowball rolling down the side of a snow-covered hill, growing.”

He didn’t go for chow that night. He was too nervous to eat. He’d asked his friend Hawk to be sure that Vick did, though, to give him a little more time to get the tent ready. He didn’t have much to work with, but he’d purchased a colorful Buddhist tapestry from the monks at a nearby monastery to cover some of the dirty tent wall, and cleaned the hooch out very well.

It looks nice, Ricky thought happily. Incense and candles were burning when Vick returned, and Ricky was sitting on the bunk in his lacy slip. Though he felt very sexy, he also felt very vulnerable, exposed this way. He hadn’t yet let Vick see him in his feminine mode, hadn’t even told Vick about this yet, for Christ’s sake! And Vick could be very unpredictable---how would he react? But Vick just looked at him, and looked around the tent, and smiled his special smile. He was home, and his lover was waiting for him, even if he did happen to be wearing some woman’s lacy slip.

Ricky handed Vick a glass of Old Grand dad, and Vick sat down on the bunk beside him. He put his arm around him, pulled him close and took his hand, and all Ricky’s nervousness vanished. After a few tokes of good Thai boo, Ricky got out the stash of heroin. Vick’s eyes lit up at the sight of this treat. Vick had used before, and he knew how to prepare the drug better than Ricky did and took
right over. Soon the world was a different place: the most ordinary things were shining and beautiful, and the drab army tent was a colorful sultan’s harem. It seemed to glow all out of proportion to the light from the flickering candles, and even to breathe in unison with their own breathing. All the monkeys in the bamboo thicket were chattering and seemed to be singing songs of love, songs that only he and Vick could understand.

Vick was glowing, more beautiful than Ricky had ever seen him, literally glowing, and every time they kissed, icicles fell from the roof of the tent and slid slowly down his back. He felt his vagina becoming as wet as a warm muddy frog pond, and there were water lilies floating inside him, water lilies blooming inside him, and the tent seemed to be a botanical garden full of trumpet vines and oleander and orchids, and he thought he saw the delta dawn breaking so glorious over muggy hazy bottom lands, and magnolia trees were blooming, and Vick was covered with honey, the sweetest Tupelo honey, and Vick was laying back and Ricky was licking every inch of this sweetness. His sweetness! No one else in all Vietnam had such sweetness that could compare with his Vick’s.

Then Vick began to pull his new slip off, but Ricky stopped his hand. He heard himself try to say: “Vick, don’t please. I need this, Vick, my Vick, my sweet darling Vick. I am your boy, you know that, but--- please---Vick, dear Vick, let me be your girl, too. I’m your Ricky, and I’m your little girl, too. Oh please Vick, my Vicky, my love.” He wasn’t sure if his words made any sense, because they seemed to
flow out of his mouth like soft bits of cantaloupe or papaya. But then Vick lifted his slip just enough, and stopped, so he must have understood, and they lay back together and the night closed around them, lovers entwined in a glowing, floating, vibrating tent, just one of hundreds in that huge tent city on the western edge of the Chu Lai U.S. Marine Air Base, in what was then the Republic of South Vietnam, on the coast of the South China Sea.


Katherine Meloan
The Combat Room

The air outside was a transfigured atmosphere that carried violence, death, hunger, pain, and, eventually, hate that could change a person forever. Inside this room, however, you could only hear the muffled sound of combat’s rage beating on the exterior walls. The men who found themselves in the room had spent three years constantly fighting combat itself and had realized the disillusionment of what it is to be a “hero.” Their faces were pale from hunger, lack of sleep, and the constant fear of the unknown. They had found themselves standing together in the room only after they had cleared the entire three story structure that surrounded it. They had methodically gone from one room to the next, moving in absolute harmony, only breaking the silence with one lone voice shouting “Clear!” The light from the outside shined through the holes that had been put in the walls by the random gunfire and shrapnel outside. It left each man with a feeling that was only defined by him, and trapped forever in his mind. To each man, this room would hold a special meaning that no one would ever understand, not even the man standing next to him.

Outside the air smelled of fire, both wood and flesh. In the room, the air smelled fresh, crisp, and clean. It was very cool and dimly lit. It was as if the room was a completely stripped brick box. The walls were brick, the floors were brick, the ceiling was brick, and the hearts that stood inside of her
were brick. The men standing in the room hadn’t known comfort or compassion for what seemed like forever, especially when they were living in it. The only apparent contents of the room were a stack of disheveled boxes that symbolized the absolute destruction of a family’s livelihood. All that remained were these three boxes that had been created from sheer panic. The other interesting object was one lone prayer rug, so stubbornly laid out in the middle of the floor, as if to offer some sort of spiritual solace to anyone who would look to faith. No matter how powerful the rug and what it symbolized, it was paled even further by what was laying on this truly magnificent symbol of hope and comfort.

For the fibers of her hope supported the beautiful figure of a sleeping baby. I don’t know the sex of the child. All I knew then was that I was looking directly into the face of God. A hope and faith in a godless world that said, “You will continue no matter what happens, because I am here.” Was it the child or was it God or was it both that spoke that day? For in this one short moment in time, in the middle of combat, hope and love made everything outside go away. The loud was made silent, the hot was made cool, and the hardest of hearts were made soft, all by stepping into this one room.

Jason Riley
On Post

If there ever was a word that makes a Marine run, it is the word “Post.” That god-awful time of standing guard in a little box, or other torture device the military has dictated for hours on……..just on….it doesn’t end. Desperately attempting to not lose your mind, which which did happen on occasion.

Even in formal military ceremonies whenever the word “Post” is shouted out, the highest ranking enlisted member marches quick and fast, in a hurry to get to the back of the formation.

The word just means a bad time. Even after almost a year and a half of being out of military service, that word still sends shivers down my back. A word shouldn’t have that much power! Honestly, though, aspects of those long starlight nights and scalding hot summer days made for the best times in my life. I guess that’s a sad thing to say, but at no other time have I been able to get to know an individual at their core. You know, the real meat of the person. What makes them truly tick, but more importantly the passions of their lives.

We woke up at 2315 (11:15 P.M.) like every day that ended in “Y.” Luckily, the hot Kuwaiti sun had gone down hours ago, leaving the desert cool and calm. (I didn’t stand post in Afghanistan, I was permanent QRF (Quick Reaction Force), thanks be to Odin. The God, or gods, made sure I more than made up for that in Kuwait.) We put on our cammies, grabbed our gear, and headed out to do
our time. We made our way to the armory, some laughing at silly jokes, most staggering like zombies.

At the armory we gathered our weapons and equipment. We had to wait to be inspected and briefed on anything new. Generally, this included a few random tidbits about random personnel caught having sexual relations, and to be on the lookout for... well...more desert. Then we would stumble to our post, and stand there talking for hours.

Usually it was just me and one other Marine, hanging out, with nothing else to do but sit and talk. Stuck in a dark box staring out into the night desert allows one plenty of time to think, even thoughts you don’t want to have, perhaps especially those thoughts. Every thought you share, mainly because you have nothing else to do. You talk about the little things that turn into big things. Making arguments out of apples and oranges. Anything to keep yourself awake. This goes on for most of the night, and is by no means quiet. Then there are the stories.

The stories that were told and the lies that were sold made these times even more priceless. You would be a fool to hang on to every word in belief of full truth. The stories woven made for interesting times with each new twist, every iteration getting bigger and bolder. Most would forget that they would tell the same story repeatedly. I never called them out, for that would be way too boring. I honestly do wish I could remember every detail spoken; lost words on the desert sands they have become.
Six hours later, we anxiously await the sun. The sun moves too slow as one nods in and out of sleep, while the other stares with glazed eyes towards the horizon. The sun will bring energy, along with the hustle and bustle of a military base in the morning. We look out and see the chow line grow. We won’t have to wait in a line, but the food will be cold when it gets to the posts. That is fine by us; we have only two more hours.

That last hour is generally the worst. You have to wait for your replacements, who, by themselves, are begrudgingly not looking forward to post. Their walk is slow; every hundred yards seems to take a mile’s worth of time. You wait until they get close, then shout some obscenities at them in hopes they hurry. They are the best thing you have seen in hours; their presence signals the end. Well, that is until you have to wake up in four hours to do it all over again...stand Post.

John Benjamin Morton
A Precarious Situation

I remember being an active duty soldier newly promoted to the rank of Army captain on a MAC flight to Germany. Everyone on the flight wore dress greens. The majority of the soldiers were Army reservists deploying for a few weeks to participate in REGORGER – Return of Forces to Germany training exercise. I was deploying too, but being a part of the Regular Army, my status was PCS (permanent change of station) to my new duty station.

When I arrived in Germany the Berlin Wall was still intact and the Soviet Union still a super power. I remember Central Europe as clean and Eastern Europe as gray with grime covering centuries old structures from the exhaust of factories and Trabants – the pastel colored cars of East Germany.

My first assignment in Germany was adjutant in the 17th Signal Battalion, 22nd Signal Brigade, V Corps. I worked long, hard hours before being selected a company commander.

As my time in Germany progressed, political change took place in between the time when I was an adjutant and when I assumed command of a company. The Berlin Wall had been overtaken and dismantled and the U.S. military in Europe seemed in limbo with peace supposedly having broken out, changing the status of U.S. forces to defend the West from the East.

But then, a new threat emerged in Southwest Asia. A television program called Gasthaus that
aired on the Army Air Force Television Station discussed the forward deployment of U.S. military units from Europe to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

A surreal disbelief descended on the soldiers in Germany facing the reality of deploying to Southwest Asia. A region we had never trained for and knew very little about politically, geographically and environmentally.

We spent long hours packing pallets with equipment to be shipped and preparing soldiers for Desert Shield. My battalion had a headquarters company and four line companies. One of the line companies in my battalion deployed to the desert along with maintenance and logistics support soldiers from my company.

As more and more deployments to Desert Shield occurred, the need for security in Germany increased. Kasernes in and around Frankfurt were heavily fortified with concrete barricades and concertina wire.

The soldiers in my company who went to the desert had been there about three-and-a-half weeks when the air raids began in January 1991 and Desert Shield became Desert Storm. The soldiers sent from my company weighed heavily on my mind.

Military life had to go on for those left in Europe and on that day, I had to travel from my unit in the outskirts of Frankfurt, Germany to the V Corps Headquarters in Frankfurt. The weather was chilly with a pale blue sky and large loose clouds. I’d been sent to pick up routine materials needed for day-to-day operations that were controlled items requiring an officer’s signature.
Because I was a commissioned officer and a company commander, I was assigned a military vehicle and a driver. During my time in command, there were two young, enlisted soldiers – one male and the other female who interchangeably drove for me. On this particular day, the male soldier drove.

I didn’t think it would be any different from the previous occasions I’d made this trip, but it was very different. The traffic on the autobahn had grid-locked bumper to bumper and hundreds of thousands of protesters swarmed everywhere as the vehicle approached the compound housing the corps headquarters.

The world had seemed to stop its daily routine to protest the Persian Gulf War. Signs were everywhere with words written in ink on large sheets or drop cloths saying “Kein krieg fur ol” hanging from windows of businesses and the sills of apartment buildings. Similar signs, but smaller and on poster board, were adhered in so many car windows, I had lost count.

The usual heavy presence of U.S. Army vehicles and personnel in and around the compound was absent. Not even the soldier who guarded the gate was there, and to make matters worse, the compound was locked and inaccessible.

Back then we did not have cell phones. The Army still used stationary black telephones with a rotary dial. Word about this post being closed had not gotten out to the smaller outlying units. We had no choice but to return to our unit.

This would be no easy task. Due to one-way streets and the numerous throngs of protesters, we
had to go with the flow before finding ourselves at the front gates of the U.S. Consulate, a separate compound, and a short distance away from the corps headquarters.

I remember being surrounded by color, noise, and opposition in what seemed to be a sea of protesters, so many protesters, there could be no distinction made between the road, sidewalk, or lawn.

I remember German police in full riot gear standing atop large green water trucks with long, powerful hoses used for crowd control.

I remember my fear of what could happen. If the protesters gained leverage over our vehicle, it could be flipped over. On the other hand, the pressure from the water pouring from the hose could shatter the windows. We were in a precarious situation.

I remember telling the driver not to stop, to keep driving, we needed to keep our momentum.

I remember praying hard. Our vehicle seemed to become like a boat in a body of water and floated out of there.

Susan M. Winstead
I stare down into my Kevlar.

A baby lies on her back staring up at me with the largest blue eyes I have known, or have ever known me. Her hair is short and so blonde she fades into the white sheets beneath her, and there is hardly an outline to her head at all. Her eyes appear to be suspended in mid-air, just above her smile. There is nothing abstract in that smile; it is intended for me. The picture—stuck in a plastic protective sheath designed for a baseball card—is glued to the cap cushion, which is also glued in place.

I am not where I am.

I am thousands of miles away, standing over my little girl’s crib. She is about to wake from a full night’s slumber. Her hands softly clasp at empty space. Her lips pucker and kiss the air. Her closed lids dance as her blues eyes stir behind them. There is a fraction of a moment when she squints and then the corners of her delicate mouth wilt to form a grimace. Finally, her eyes open.

I am the first thing she sees at the start of a new day; our eyes meet, and she responds. Grimace lifts to form a smile.

I reach for the orange pill container in my pocket. Inside is the lotion I rub on her skin after her baths.
I squeezed a sample from the pink plastic bottle just minutes before I left the house for the airport. I remove the lid and take in the scent. Johnson & Johnson: Aubrey Ann.

Pat asks me to go over the pills and procedures with the guys again and his voice rips me back from where I am back to where I am. I look into his eyes; they are black and beady and dance in their sockets. I survey the room. Ceja is sitting near me cleaning his rifle and listening to music through large headphones. I tap him on the shoulder and he looks up and pulls them down, letting them hang on the back of his neck. I hear System of a Down’s “Chop Suey!” blasting faintly through the speakers. I ask him for his self-aid pack and he reaches down, pulls it off his LBV, and plops it into my falsely eager hand. As I’m walking away he says aloud, “Fuck, I can’t wait to kill my first fucking rag-head! I don’t care who he is, or what he’s done, it’s about getting that first kill. You know?”

I know.

I stop, turn, and face him. Resting on his pack is a picture of him and his mother. At least six inches shorter than him, she stands with her arms wrapped around his large frame. Both are in sweaters and standing in front of a Christmas tree. Loud enough for all to hear, I say, “Cujo, your mother is the only woman in this world with the strength required to love you, man. Don’t you think that relationship
will be compromised if you can’t even look her in the eye?”

He’ll talk to me again, but not until the next morning at morning chow.

I give my spiel, again, on when to take the small bag of pills I’ve placed in each of their self-aid packs—and how to fight off shock until they can be treated by a corpsman, or a buddy.

I wrap up my hip-pocket lesson with a disclaimer: “I don’t know what I’m doing, so be careful. Some of this stuff I’ve never used before, and all of it I haven’t messed with in months.”

There are a few nervous giggles and then an anxious stillness fills the air.

Realizing there are times when you must give someone what they want because they need it, I smile.

There’s not much that is remarkable about my study, except that it fits me. I have my desk, a green couch which, like me, barely survived my twenties, a pool table, dart board, and stereo; all of which act as necessary distractions when I need them. Sitting at my writing desk I am surrounded by shelves of books, and two tables littered with stacks of essays, stories, and other pieces—some finished, most not. There is a large white-board hanging on the cinder block wall to my right. On it is a list of titles of
stories and essays. There is a list of works unfinished, and one for those which are “finished.” Next to each title on that list is another list of publications where they’ve been rejected. There is also a list of ideas. Right now that list is short. I spend too much time in my study. Although I neglect many aspects of my life, important aspects, my daughter lightens my guilt by spending much of her time in my study as well.

She often falls asleep on my old green couch, perched right in front of my desk, while I work. She’s still short enough that I have room on the end cushion if I want a soft place to sit and read. It’s also where she likes to sit and read.

Sitting at my desk I examine pictures in a scrapbook.

A phone call from an old friend from my days with infantry has my mind reeling on the past. He tells me Ceja is a new father. Said he talked to him on the phone and he’s back in Southern California sounding very confident and proud; he suggested I give him a call as well. I find a picture of Ceja standing in front of a billboard with Saddam Hussein’s image painted as large as can fit. Ceja, holding his SAW in front of him at a patrol angle, looks confident and proud. He proved a killer, for sure; but not a murderer.

Glued to the inside of the back cover of the scrapbook is a photo encased in a plastic protector. The
image is smeared from the hours of sweat and abuse it endured while pasted to the inside of my Kevlar. It is a forlorn Picasso, the shapes vague and the colors faded from sunlight. In my mind, however, the image is still crystal clear. Until now I’ve hardly noticed its worn condition.

“Dad?”

I look up. It’s Aubrey, nestled into my spot on the couch. I gaze into her eyes; happy I can. She’s seen me drift off, and I feel as though she knows where I am.

I close my scrap book and give her a smile. Content, she dives back into her book. Satisfied, I set the scrap book back on the shelf, to be where I am.

Ryan F. Bronaugh
Contributors

Ryan F. Bronaugh is a second-year graduate student of the Department of English and Journalism at WIU. He is also a TSA and Tutor Coordinator for the University Writing Center. Ryan has had three short stories published in minor literary magazines. One of his short stories took first place in The Rosanna Webster Graham Prize in Creative Writing, and he hopes to experience more, and greater, success throughout his writing career. His active-duty military career spanned 7 ½ years, where he served as a Corpsman with 2nd Marine Division and completed a total of four deployments and visited more than 23 countries. He enjoys all work involved with veteran affairs. His current efforts in fiction include a full-length manuscript, as well as several short stories. He is alive today thanks to his three wonderful children, dog Trixie, and all the things that nearly killed him.

Luke Cummings is a twenty-seven year old freshman at Western Illinois University Quad Cities. Before this, he spent four years in the Marine Corps infantry, followed by four years working at a local factory. 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 poring 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.

Dan W. Holst is a twenty-one year veteran of the United States Air Force. Born locally to an Iowa farming background, Dan founded his values here but through extensive travel and living overseas has embraced the many differences that we all enjoy as equal citizens. An
avid dancer and writer, Dan enjoys the outlets for his omnidirectional thoughts and hopes his continuing graduate education at WIU will further that objective. What Dan truly seeks, but not as an end in itself, is a voice. American Dignity!

Jerry E. Keppler was a Builder Second Class Petty Officer in the United States Navy Seabees. He served from 2007-2012 and was stationed in Gulfport, MS. He deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Spain, and Sao Tome and saw a few other countries in the process. He is from Decatur, Illinois, and comes from a family of military service. His grandpa was in the Air Force, his uncle was in the Army, and his dad was also a Seabee. He is currently a Law Enforcement and Justice Administration student at Western Illinois University.

Katherine Meloan was born in Monmouth, Illinois, reared in Oquawka, Illinois, and educated in the Oquawka Grade Schools and Union High School, Biggsville, Illinois. Her favorite teacher was Miss Anna Burris, who instilled a life-long appreciation of reading, writing, art, and music. She served in the U.S. Navy, Vietnam, 1965, and received a BA at Western in Art and English in 1975. Special Profs include Robert Schilgden, English Dept., and Ann Paoletti and Fred Jones, Art Dept. She attended graduate school at Adams State University, Alamosa, Colorado, graduating with an MA in Clinical Counseling. She currently resides in Bailey, Colorado, with her sister Becky and partner Ms. Etta. She works as a Therapist and Intern Supervisor at The Gender Identity Center of Denver, Colorado. She identifies as a transsexual womyn.

Jeffrey Miller has spent over two decades in Asia as a university lecturer and writer. Originally from LaSalle,
Illinois, he relocated to South Korea in 1990, where he nurtured a love for spicy Korean food, Buddhist temples, and East Asian History. He served in the United States Air Force from 1976-1980 and received an MA in English from Western Illinois University in 1989. He is the author of eight books including *War Remains: A Korean War Novel*, *Ice Cream Headache*, and the upcoming *The Panama Affair*. He and his wife Aon, have four children, Bia, Jeremy Aaron, Joseph, and Angelina. If he’s not working, writing, or reading, he’s usually chasing little kids around his home.

**Brandon Kyle Mooney** was born in 1981, and raised south of Macomb, in Barry, IL. Attending JWCC after high school, he graduated and enrolled in WIU the following year. After graduating from WIU in 2005, he worked at an online photography company for two years before joining the Army in 2008. He wanted to do something worthwhile, and the Army funnily caught his family off-guard. With basic training in Ft. Sill and medic school at Ft. Sam Houston completed, he joined the 1st Battalion, 30th Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division and served as an infantry line medic in Iraq.

**John Benjamin Morton** is a veteran of the United States Marine Corps, in which he served as a 0341 Infantry mortarman. He deployed three times with 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, first on the 24th MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit), then in Afghanistan, and finally in Kuwait. He currently attends Western Illinois University, pursuing a double major in Political Science and English. He enjoys a good match of pixel slaying with his friends, and long walks on the beach.

**Ronald Pettigrew** is an Academic Advisor at Western Illinois University (WIU) for the School of Distance Learning and Outreach. Ronald also serves as a Navy
Chaplain assigned to Marines. With multiple deployments and tours in combat or direct support of those in combat during Desert Shield, Storm, and Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, as a Chaplain and Naval Officer, he traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Far East, Middle East and Pacific. In addition to his present experience as an Academic Advisor, he has also served as a Pastor, Resident Hall Advisor and Director, and Graduate Advisor in both the Multicultural Center and Provost's Office at WIU. He received his Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from the University of Southern California (1987), Master of Divinity in Urban Ministry from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois (1996), and Master of Science from Western Illinois University in College Student Personnel (2009).

**Jason Riley** is a veteran of OEF/OIF, serving with 3rd Battalion 1st Marines on the initial push into Iraq. He served on multiple deployments throughout his time of service as an infantry Marine from 3-17-93 to 9-4-03. After exiting the Marine Corps, Jason went into Business Development, where he utilizes the skills he learned in the Marine Corps to help businesses grow and achieve mission accomplishment. Jason also developed Check Point McDonough County, a peer group for veterans to network, educate, motivate, inspire, and empower one another. His philosophy is to ensure the success of those around him. Jason earned his Bachelor of Arts Degree in English at Western.

**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, 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.

Stephen Wallace served seven and a half years in the Illinois Army National Guard with one tour to Kuwait, and is currently attending WIU to pursue a bachelor’s degree in LEJA. He comes from a large military family. His mother and father retired from the Navy; of his five brothers, the two oldest were Illinois Army National Guard, his brother just older than him and the youngest are Marines, and his brother just younger than him is still in the Illinois Army National Guard.

Susan Gorman Winstead received a Bachelor of Science degree (1983) and 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, adjutant, company commander, division staff officer, and with a readiness group. She is the 2010 recipient of the Ann Darr Scholarship for Female Veterans and Active Duty Military Personnel awarded by the Writer’s Center in Bethesda, Maryland. She lives and works in suburban Chicago.

Jared R. Worley is a junior at Western Illinois University majoring in English with a double minor in Creative Writing and Communication. He is an Air Force veteran, having served as a radio operator at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland. In his spare time, he enjoys
spending time with his wife and daughter, listening to Pink Floyd, watching movies, and reading the works of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He hopes to eventually receive his Master’s in English, and teach English composition at the community college or university level.
Contributors

Ryan F. Bronaugh
Luke Cummings
Dan W. Holst
Jerry Keppler
Katherine Meloan
Jeffrey Miller
John Benjamin Morton

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Jason Riley
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Stephen Wallace
Susan Gorman Winstead
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