

What I like most [about the workshop] is being able to put it down on paper, and then let it go. Which maybe I've never done for 50 years since Vietnam. – Jim Smith

What I saw was a circle of strangers who were willing to let down whatever guards they have and be vulnerable in this space and write down things that have a deep kind of emotional truth and resonance. – Ryan Lanham

That's the most amazing part, the community that's built around it. You can't really get through a couple of workshops without the other folks getting to know you really well. – Ross M. Atkinson

My experience is completely different from theirs. And it's interesting to hear from other people that, at some level, these things don't change. I think the good thing that has changed is the attitude towards veterans, and that's what makes this a great class. It allows veterans to realize that they're okay, they're human beings too. – Milt Mays

Thank you for being here and for listening to our veteran voices! Thank you, Ross & Ryan, for empowering my voice, veteran voices, and all the students you influence each day! I love you both! – Mark Cunningham

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Charlie Mike

An Anthology of Military Life



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Vietnam Veteran

Anonymous

VA Shrink: "Were you in Vietnam?"

Vietnam Vet: "Yes."

VA Shrink: "When were you there?"

Vietnam Vet: "Last night."

Don't Mean Nothing

Roger Ramjet

I was eighteen when I enlisted in the Army. I believed the things we had been taught in our civics classes. I believed Domino Theory was valid and that communism was headed for California if we did not stem its tide in Vietnam. I believed in the American way of life and that our leaders were “The Best and the Brightest.” Our fathers saved the world from Hitler and Tojo. They were like gods to us. I believed that I had a sacred obligation to serve my country. I loved America and all it stood for. I was a patriot and proud of that fact. I believed that anything was possible and that the American dream was available for anyone willing to work hard and obey the rules.

I was fairly successful as a high school student. I was usually on the honour roll. I was captain of our wrestling team, played football, and ran track. I had a girlfriend, a car, and a part-time job. As is the case with most eighteen-year-olds, I was naïve concerning how the world really worked. I harbored the fantasy of coming home with a chest full of medals and impressing the girls. My generation was raised on John Wayne movies. Fighting in a war was a rite of passage. It was how you proved your manhood.

I enlisted in the Army on 4 August 1969. I went through basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. I completed Airborne Infantry training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. I graduated from Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Then I received orders for Vietnam. My MOS was 11B1P (light weapons airborne infantry). Every “Conduct and Efficiency” rating I received was “excellent.”

Big-Headed Boy

In the 173rd Airborne Brigade we operated in squad- or platoon-sized elements. I, like everyone else, took my turn busting point, walking slack, going into tunnels, and carrying out other duties of a grunt in Nam. The following are some of the things that happened to me there.

Pleasant and I went through jump school together. We were not especially close stateside but became so in Nam. He had been there for a month or so when I was assigned to his squad. The platoon had just come back to LZ English for a three-day standdown.

Our company weapons sergeant issued me the weapons I would need in the field. I was without a clue as to how to deal with all the ordinances. I was comfortable with M-14 and M-16 rifles. I had no idea as to what to do with the

rest—the frags, claymores, and booby traps. I felt as if I was going to blow up myself and everyone around me before I got out of the arms shed. Pleasant realized how fucked up I was and came to the rescue. He showed me how to pack my ruck, introduced me to the other guys in our squad, and helped calm me down.

We went to the boonies three days later. It was my first helicopter combat assault. There were thirteen of us “cherries” (new guys) in all. My ruck was so heavy I could barely stand upright. The heat and humidity were terrible. The rest of the platoon took off up a hill as if they were weightless. Teaching us “FNGs” (fucking new guys) a lesson about humping with the Herd. They left us scattered down the hill behind them. Another cherry and I made it to the top without help. I was too scared to let them leave me behind. The other new guy was a tall drink of water from Virginia we called “Titter-Tatt.” One night several months later, in a drunk and stoned stupor back at English, he and I made a pact. I promised I wouldn’t let them get him. He promised he wouldn’t let them get me. Stupid kid stuff but that is what we were, kids. It turned out that he kept his promise, I didn’t. I would trade places with him if I could.

New Guys in the Herd were not treated badly. Everyone had been an FNG once. But cherries were certainly

at the bottom of the food chain. The Vietnamese were careful to try to bury their dead in the village cemetery of their ancestors. When we found unmarked graves in the boonies, we knew they were either NVA or VC. We had to dig them up for military intelligence. We tried to discover what weapons they had, what unit they had been in, and how long they had been dead. It was almost always a waste of time. The dead didn't have much to say. However, the brass in the rear—always in the rear—insisted. Like when they wanted us to try and search tunnels before blowing them up, when we just wanted to blow them, period. FNGs dug up the graves. I had no experience as a grave robber. I was unprepared for what a corpse that had been in the ground looked and smelled like. Many Vietnamese buried their dead standing upright. They had usually decomposed to the point they looked as if they had never been human beings.

I was frightened whenever I walked point but especially so the first time. It was on-the-job training with fatal consequences. There was no way to prepare for it. Eventually it got to the point that being scared all the time didn't matter. I just did what I had to do. I soon realized that living or dying didn't have much to do with how skilled I was or wasn't. It was just dumb luck.

When the brush was heavy with undergrowth, elephant grass, or “fuck you vines,” we hacked out our own trail. We only humped the trails when there were no other options. It was so hot the first time. I knew they could hear me with that machete a klick away. As we took a break I sank to my knees and saw a dead VC about a metre from my head. I couldn’t believe it. A dead VC snuck up on me. What the hell was I doing busting point? I was sure I was going to get everyone greased. SSG Manuel said I could have first dibs on the ears.

One night we logged atop a hill near Monkey Mountain. Each night we would try to get as high as possible to maximise our fields of fire. We usually split the squad into two manned teams, forming a circle if the terrain permitted. The next morning Pleasant got into a fight with some “shake and bake” sergeant. I don’t remember his name. He hadn’t been with us long. I ran over to see what was happening. I heard three shots. When I got to his hole, I saw that Pleasant had taken three rounds. In the back. He was dead. I called a medevac and the CO flew shake and bake and Pleasant’s corpse on the same bird out. They wrote Pleasant as a KIA. Maybe that’s what he was. They transferred the shake and bake to another battalion in the Herd. We used to go looking for him whenever we had the opportunity. It’s probably the

best we never found him. What would one more murder have accomplished?

Sometimes in my dreams I hear the chopper with his corpse on it coming to accuse me and shame me all over again.

My closest friend was a Vietnamese man named Phong. He was our "Kit Carson" scout. He had been with the NVA for seven years when he "Cho-Hoied" and fought with us.

Phong and I took an instant liking for one another. He taught me many of the things I needed to know in order to survive. There is no doubt that myself and others in my platoon would not have lived if it had it not been for Phong.

He acted as if he was fearless. He would take point or go down the holes when things got really heavy. To us Phong was not an ARVN. He was one of our own. We were brothers. I loved him.

Phong and I would often go to his hutch near LZ English when we were in the rear. A lot of the locals didn't like me being there. Some of the guys in our platoon didn't care for it either.

I had been in-country for about six months when Phong died. Our squad was on an ambush one night. Nothing happened. The next morning, we humped back to Highway One and waited for a truck to take us back to English. When it arrived, Phong sat on the tailgate. I sat next to him. We hit a pothole and he flew out of the truck and hit his head on the pavement. We knew he was dying. I think he knew it too. I held his hand and told him all the lies you tell someone who is leaving this world. The last thing he did was to squeeze my hand. Even at the moment of his death he reached out to comfort me.

An ARVN unit appeared and set up an l-shaped ambush around us. It was getting ugly. We were ordered back into the truck where a couple of frags would have greased all of us. As we were climbing back into the truck our 60-gunner had a round cook off. It hit a kid who couldn't have been more than 10. It was an accident. The kind of thing that seemed to happen all the time over there.

The locals thought we threw Phong out of the truck and shot the kid on purpose. A squad of ARVN MPs arrived and ordered everyone to disperse. I've no doubt that had they not arrived when they did there would have been a firefight.

I cried a single tear for Phong. It was the only time I cried in Nam. We went on another ambush that night.

For over half a century I've wondered what happened to that kid. Did he lose his leg? Did he die? What happened to Phong's family? Did the NVA kill them?

It has been awful to live with the knowledge that I failed to grab Phong. Sometimes I can feel my fingertips brush against his tunic. Sometimes I can still feel him squeeze my hand.

Beaver was busting point when we were surprised by two VC coming out of a spider hole.

We chased them all day and part of the night. We caught up to them running across a rice paddy dike. We fired them up. They had little more than their weapons and canteens. At one point or another we had called in artillery and gunships on them. All that firepower against two guys with AKs and canteens. The REMFs (rear-echelon motherfuckers) were excited as it was all about body count for them. I looked at what was left of them and realised that we were going to have to kill them all to win that war. Our battalion C.O. flew out in his air-conditioned chopper. He was looking good, all spit-shined and polished. He even had two pearl-handled revolvers. Just like Patton. By then it was

a toss-up as to who we despised more, guys like him or the VC/NVA.

I began to understand just how much most of the Vietnamese people hated us, how far they were willing to go to kill us. I also gained a great deal of respect for them as warriors. Their courage and resolve were remarkable. But I also learned a lesson that I wish I hadn't learned. I began to have some serious doubts as to who our enemy really was. If those two were willing to go through that kind of hell to die for what they believed in, maybe our being there was wrong. We were not willing to die for the Domino Theory or any of the rest of bullshit we had been told. We just wanted to go home and bring our buddies with us. After that I no longer believed that we were justified in being there. We were wearing the black hats in that western. That messed up my already fucked-up head.

Merrit and I got to Nam at about the same time. His dad was a lifer. I believed Merrit went airborne because he—like all of us—wanted his dad to be proud of him. We were a lot alike and gravitated toward one another. He was as goofy as I was. We were both terrified, pretending to be soldiers. Several months later he was transferred to mortars. One night he put up a poncho liner. I'll never understand why he did that. He knew better. If he had been with us, we would

never have let him get away with something so stupid. The moon reflected light off his liner and gave away his position. They rolled some frags in on him. I wish he had never been transferred. I've often wondered if his dad was proud of him. I think of Merrit when it rains.

Tam Quan is a small village on the Bong Song River. For us, it was a nightmare. It was worse than everything else we went through that year put together. It was VC all the way. We were only there twice, each time for a week. I couldn't understand why we were there at all. We never saw any sign of enemy troop movement, just old men, women and children who would glare at us as we passed by. They watched as we tripped booby traps they would never trip. Adams and Marshall died within three days of each other. Tam Quan was nothing but ambushes, mortars, booby traps, frags, claymores, Bouncing Bettys, and hate. Gonzales was wounded three times there.

For whatever reason, one of the ways we avoided saying "death" was to say someone "got his shit blown away." This literally happened to Marshall. He was so new to the Herd that he didn't have his Nam name yet. He dropped his pants to defecate. They detonated a 155 shell. We couldn't find any part of him.

About a month or so after Marshall died, a new medic came to our platoon. We called him "Boxie," which means doctor. He and Marshall were from the same town. One of the last things he had done on his leave was to go to Marshall's funeral. Small world. Two years later he would be my best man when I married.

It was in Tam Quan that Goldie, the self-confessed "only Jew in Vietnam," was badly wounded. Blown away on our way to the river for some water. He was so messed up—head, stomach, groin, and legs—that we were sure he wouldn't make it. He was so badly hurt that they had to keep him in Quin Nhon for two weeks rather than ship him to Japan. Several of us went to see him when we were in the rear. He was so full of tubes and wires we didn't recognize him. One of the nurses said he would never have sex again. That was grim news for a young guy to receive.

I was beyond angry when we left the hospital. I was furious with the ARVN, our government, REMFs, everyone.

We were mortared many times at Tam Quan. One night, Rosie—another medic—and I buried ourselves in the mud as the mortars rained down. It seemed to go on forever. It's still going on. Some 20 years after I left Nam, I went to

a soccer game in which several of my students were playing. About halfway through the match the field was being mortared.

It is largely because of what happened to me in Tam Quan that I stay inside on July 4th. I can't walk across a grassy or wooded area without automatically looking for booby traps. I can't stand having anyone behind me or not knowing where everybody in the room is at all times. I sit in the corner or I don't sit. Sometimes I find myself daydreaming about returning to Tamn Quan and killing them all.

We were out humping for some two months my first time in the field. That was way over the norm. By the time we left the boonies and came back to English Roger was dead. I don't know how else to express that fact. Roger didn't exist any longer. My first squad leader took a look at me and said, "That's a big-headed boy." Thus, I was newly baptised. But I had been reborn in every way.

I was given a radio a few months after I got to the field. Several guys refused to do so even though they were threatened with court-martial. They said it was too heavy but that wasn't the reason.

I was good on the horn. I was made for it. I was cool under pressure. I knew how to handle that awful responsibility. It was important. It was also dangerous. The antenna made an inviting target. I noticed guys would not hang around me. If the enemy knocked out the radio, we were all alone out there. That levelled the playing field. I knew how important the horn was.

We once had a new C.O. He was a lifer who came to the field for a couple of months in order to get his career ticket punched. Some jerk with a West Point ring he flashed around. He told me, "The next time we get hit I want you to throw yourself on the horn." I was flabbergasted. Normally you took the horn off your ruck and threw it as far away as the cord attached to the handset allowed. We caught a few rounds later that day, I threw the horn at him and yelled: "There it is. You throw yourself on the mother fucker." He didn't mention it again. I kept it for the remainder of my tour. There was nothing noble in my decision. I simply did not trust anyone else. I soon became the Company RTO (radio telephone operator). One of the few things I was and am proud of is the fact I did a good job humping the horn.

Rock

When we finally came back to the rear, our CO asked if I wanted to give up the horn and become a squad leader. I refused. I then received the name "Rock," as in "rock head." When I first came to the Herd I received my gear from the Supply Sergeant. He told me that I had to leave my cassette recorder and tapes behind. He told me to leave them and that he would take care of them for me until I got back. When I returned to the rear, I took a long-awaited shower, ate a steak, drank some beers, smoked some dope and went to get my music. However, the old supply sergeant was gone. The new sergeant told me he didn't know anything about my cassette player and tapes. The REMFs had stolen them. This was not unusual. One of the tapes was "Bridge Over Troubled Waters." I was furious.

When I returned to the rear by the company clerk's hootch, they were playing my music. I didn't stop to think about what I was doing. I put my 16 on rock and roll, went into the hutch and levelled it at three guys who were smoking dope. I told them "That's my tape." They took one look at me and knew I was for real. If they had said one wrong word, I was going to kill them. They pushed stuff to me that wasn't even mine.

Looking back, it is hard for me to realise I almost killed three American soldiers over something so insignificant. Sometimes I'll put a cassette in my tape deck and my hands start to tremble. I'll be back at that hutch, my finger on the trigger, a second away from killing three stoned REMF thieves over nothing.

The monsoons were otherworldly, eerie, another dimension, wonderful and terrible. Our CP unit was once trapped in a ravine with rapidly rising water and no way out. The water rose quickly up to our waists. We spent the night in two trees. It was no big deal. We lucked out and only received a few stray rounds from a nearby village, but their heart didn't seem to be in it. Unlike us, the VC/NVA had enough sense to stay out of the rain. Come morning an Air Force chopper came to our rescue. It was embarrassing. "Elite" paratroopers having to be rescued by the Air Force. We were off-loaded at an artillery base. We got off and saw a basketball game in progress. Several of us walked toward the court looking to get a little rec in. The players threw down the ball and ran away. I guess we looked pretty rough. The medics treated our various ailments. Their medic said that ours was the worst jungle rot he had ever seen.

During that same monsoon the CP squad became separated from the rest of our company. We were trapped

between what on the map were small streams but in fact were two raging rivers. Our CO, two others and I tried to cross over. We got a few feet from the bank when the current grabbed us and swept us down the river. I was sure I was going to drown. I was pissed because I thought I came all the way to Vietnam to drown. We ended up on the same riverbank we started out on. We were lucky to be alive.

To this day I am terrified of lightning. It scares me as do few other things. One night a bolt of lightning hit our radio. Two guys nearest the radio were burned pretty badly and were medevac'd. It threw me down the side of the hill. Knocked me out for a while. Everything was as white as this sheet of paper. I was on my hands and knees, searching for my weapons. Waiting for Victor Charles to come along and blow us away. If I'm outside when I hear thunder, I lose it for a little bit. It is embarrassing, though my football teams get a kick out of it.

We mostly operated in the central highlands. Once when we were running, I lost a claymore I had tied to the outside of my ruck. I didn't realise I'd lost it until that evening. By then we were on a nearby hill, hacking out an LZ so we could be extracted. A few weeks later I read in our division paper that some guy in another batt was killed by a claymore Charlie had strung up in a tree. It was in the same

area where I had lost my claymore. I've never forgiven myself. I just have to live with what I've done. Sometimes in my dreams I see him coming for me.

Later that fall I went to Danang for an R&R in Australia. Myself and another guy were standing at a bus stop when a jeep pulled up. Five ARVNs — at least they were dressed as ARVNs — each pulled out a revolver and began to pistol-whip us. There was nothing we could do. We hadn't done anything to provoke the attack. It was humiliating. These were the very people we were defending. We were out in the boonies every day humping our asses off while they were in the rear robbing GIs.

Our S-3 shop sent out an NVA POW to us. He agreed to lead us to one of the VC base camps in the area. To us he was ancient. He must have been all of forty. He seemed a pleasant enough man. He was always smiling. God knows what he had to be happy about given what awaited him when the ARVNs got their hands on him. The NVA and VC did not follow the rules concerning POWs listed in the Geneva Convention. Neither did the ARVN. Neither did we. However, we knew what he was and had been. We kept his hands tied behind his back. However, we couldn't help but like the guy. Plus we gave him respect. He had been a grunt and had been for far longer than any of us. We called him

"Pops." It soon became evident that Pops wasn't going to lead us anywhere. He was just jerking us around, trying to stay alive one more day. We weren't upset. Most of us thought it righteous of him not to betray his own. He also did not lead us to an ambush or booby trap. After several days our CO called for Pop's extraction the next morning. Those of us in the CP took a vote. Release him or give him over to the ARVNs? Our CO pretended to be ignorant about what we were doing. We let him go. We told the REMFs he'd escaped. God only knows what he did after we set him free.

Another cherry came out to the field shortly thereafter. I remember him clearly, as he was a heavy man. Most guys who went through jump school were lean and mean. He wasn't in the field for more than a week when he caught a round to his head. His death upset me. He just didn't belong there. It was stupid. He didn't stand a chance. Bad mojo for the squad.

Toward the end of my tour, we were sent to guard the big and mostly abandoned base at An Ke. It was easy duty for the most part. One night the base was rocketed. Running to the berm, we discovered their 60-guns were rusted and they had no ammo. We ran ammo out to them but to no avail. Chuck could have taken An Ke any time he desired. For some unknown reason he chose not to do so. He was

impossible to figure out. We called him "Casper," as in "Casper the Ghost." He could really fuck up your head.

We were always much under the authorised number of men. At one point our platoon was down to 30 men. It should have been twice that total. Six-men squads were not unusual. Yet we had the same duties as other units at full strength. We were always exhausted. Exhausted men are not sharp. Many grunts were hurt and some died because of mistakes we made. We lost others because there weren't enough of us to cover each other's backs.

I was sent back to the world soon after our mission at An Ke was over. On the freedom bird I sat between two REMFs who wanted me to tell them what it was like to be a grunt. I told them so many b.s. war stories that I scared myself.

At one point during the flight, I went into the restroom and sobbed.

Lost

Ryan Lanham

I drain the Jack Daniels. Slam the shot glass on counter.

“That’s ten, baby!”

My friend cheers me on. Red-faced. Loud. We’ve been barhopping all night. Another Saturday back home in Fort Worth, Texas. Been a year since I left the Army. Two years since the war. My buddy never asks me about it. We pick up where we left off all those years ago. Before I raised my right hand and swore to defend the Constitution. Before that same right hand gripped a rifle, a pistol, a machine gun. Before that same right hand extended a finger and that finger pulled a trigger and that trigger caused a mini-explosion. Hot rounds of tiny metal ripping into human flesh. Brown flesh. Dry. Leathery. Little fat to penetrate. Pools of red spreading into the earth.

After another couple shots, I’m ready to share my world with my friend. I use that same right hand to tug at my left sleeve, exposing skin from wrist to elbow. Deep red lines like railroad tracks running north and south. Tally marks of a mad man.

He doesn’t notice the bared skin. The begging for witness. To be seen for once. Understood.

I push my arm toward him. Point with trigger finger.
Aim his eyes at my target.

“The fuck is that,” he says, disappointment ringing
in the air.

I wanted him to look, to see. But I never calculated
the next move. Don’t know what to say, where to begin.

“A razor,” I tell him. “Found it the other day.”

It’s true. I had found the razor in a liquor store
parking lot. Thought it was a sign from god. Maybe the devil.
A sharp little gift urging me onward. The means to the end
I’d been planning.

“Why’d you do it?” he says, backing up a step,
careful not to catch the contagion. The desperation that
drives a man to madness.

“I don’t want to live anymore.”

There it is. I say it. Six sobering words. Cuts through
the boozy haze.

His red eyes don’t well up. The words don’t conjure
any tears. No emotions beyond disgust. He mumbles
something to himself, motions for the bartender. Pulls out
his wallet.

Exits stage left forever.

War and Love

Ben Schrader

At least in war, I could pretend, someone awaits me till the end

Some lover waiting, just for me, but in the end it was just a dream

No more bullets, no more bombs, no more war to keep me gone

Now I'm back and all alone, no one waits, my time is done

The romance of war was all bullshit! A heroic soldier?

Wings clipped

No one sees me, misunderstood, battle heart, my mortal wound

I long for war, I long for struggle, put my head down and dream of another

I tell you now it was simpler days, loving you so far away

I had an excuse, a place to hide, no vulnerable heart, to make me cry

Now the smallest things make me sob, a happy movie, a sad love song

I'm sure that I'm in the wrong time, in the Wild West, or on a front line

Writing a sweetie so far away, is so much easier than what we have today

Cause when they're oh so far away, the dream of love helps to sustain

But the dream is gone and now we're here, but no one knows and no one cares

Maybe there's some new war somewhere out there, where I can hide and dream of a love to share.

The View from Above Ground

Christina Lynn

Dear B,

Would you believe me if I said that I stood on the yellow footprints? Ya know, those sacred ones that Marines have in San Diego. The ones that Marines have stood on decade after decade, not truly knowing what awaits them once their feet leave that yellow paint. It's odd, when you stand on them, you feel a weight rise up—toes to head. You're there because you've made a promise, and I only hoped I could keep mine once my feet were called off of those yellow promises and onto lighter ground. In running to my next location, I briefly wondered if any of those footprints were cursed. Were mine?

Fast forward. It's The Crucible. I'm with a team of humans I can only describe as lackluster as we approach a series of obstacles within large stalls. Two of them are out of shape, unwilling to move their bodies any more than what is absolutely necessary, which pisses me off good and fast. To top it off, one of these deadweights is afraid of heights. Two others seem afraid to get dirty—why are they even here? And the last one I don't even want to talk about. We walk up to the first stall and grab a dusty card from an

empty ammo can. The goal of this particular stall? To get to the other side of a large wall that is mostly blocked off in red. If you touch the red, you “die.” I look around—we have a ladder and a rope at our disposal. Time is ticking. We have three minutes until consequences for an incomplete mission get yelled at us from our Drill Instructor who is watching above, literally like a hawk. As I hear minor arguments among my team heat up and dead-end ideas get thrown around, I don’t feel hopeful.

So, I start moving the ladder myself, trying to drag it and make enough noise to draw everyone’s attention, hoping they’ll shut up in the process. My goal becomes a success, and we eventually get the ladder off the ground at an angle up against this looming wall, which is taunting me more with each passing second. Once we do, I find multiple sets of eyes on me, and I say, “Who’s going up first?” In response, one of my teammates hands me the rope and nods their head toward the wall. So, me—I guess it’s me going up first. I quickly make my climb, anxious to see what’s on the other side of the wall and how we can all make it over in one piece. At this point, I’m about ready to jump over just to get away from these people and their lack of initiative.

I get to the top, see the other side of the wall searing with red paint. So, scaling down the wall isn't possible without incurring too much risk. I'm calling down to my team, trying to make plans and ask them what we think the rope is for and what we should do next. I ask someone to come to the top of the wall with me, but everyone seems too scared to climb that ladder. I feel panic rise up in me at the thought of failure as I look away from my team to the other side of the wall once more. As I turn my head, that's when I see it: the most twinkling, unobscured view of the Pacific Ocean. Time stops as waves roll in like a lullaby to my senses. I stop for the briefest of moments. And I think of you.

You never got to see the Pacific Ocean, but you always wanted to. You talked about it all the time growing up. It slaps me straight across my face then: the thought that I'll never tell you about this. The yellow footprints and everything that follows for me is something you simply can't know. Although, if heroin didn't kill you, then your surprise at me being at the Marine Recruit Depot just might have. As I stand alone on top of this fucking wall with no help in sight, it feels like you dying on me all over, no matter what I say or do or try or promise or hope as your life spirals downward. I think of how people sat back while

I pushed for your survival—for you to scale the wall that is life, and here I am again: trying to fix something and about to fail. I didn't save you and I'm sure as hell not going to save my team when it comes to succeeding in our mission. The Pacific Ocean is so goddamn beautiful from atop this lonely wall, and all I can think about is how much that makes me want to scream and cry and climb a million walls until I do this mission right. You and this obstacle become the same in my mind, just in this most brief and scarring moment of fury.

The truth is, sometimes it doesn't matter how hard you try—failure can find even the most motivated of us all. The truth is, I don't actually resent my teammates as it would seem, because it's not their job to be athletic, “ready to climb through the dirt and then up to the sky” type of people, because they're not Marines and neither am I. I stood on the yellow footprints, but I took no oath. I'm here for a Marines Educators' Workshop, which is essentially a weeklong simulation of being a recruit. So, I haven't been wronged by these people who left me to handle this wall all alone, but that's what it still feels like as I descend the ladder at the end of three minutes, failing the mission but being the only one that even really tried in the first place. They didn't see the view from the top of that wall, so they

have no idea how hard to is to leave it in the name of time fading too fast to try anything else that might have saved us all.

So, I'm no Marine, but I still wish you were here to see the Pacific Ocean. It's just what you pictured.

Also, as a side note about the stall obstacle, the rope was a fucking decoy and you didn't need it one bit to get to the other side of that wall. It was nothing more than a distraction, a way to make things harder during your climb—can you believe that??

Until the next life,

C

Crucible Call

Ryan McGoldrick

regard me
as you regard the dead –
for i joined them long ago

i welcomed the Inevitable
into my being
to live among the brutality.

but when your soul is long buried
there is no living –
a hole forms in the heart
that can only be filled

with hallowed soil

Ink on Paper; Ash and Dust

Ross M. Atkinson

There is an image floating around somewhere of me standing in a barracks room in Ft. Huachuca, AZ. I have the bottom of a tan Army shirt raised to my head, with the chest of a 20-year-old soldier showing. The trigger finger on each of my hands is covering the nipple on the corresponding side, as if protecting them from some unseen force off camera. I am smiling, and in front of me is a young man named Robert Near, holding a thumbs-up sign. We were playing beer pong. I don't remember who won that night, nor do I remember everyone who was in the room. I do, however, remember my friend Robert Near and I drinking and laughing, probably making fun of our other buddy McCormick for sucking at Halo 3.

I remember that evening Near threw up. It was an amazing sight. He was meters from the shared bathroom and managed to vomit into the air on his way to the bathroom, grab it in his hand and, in a strange backhand motion, throw it into the sink while diving toward the toilet. Only a spattering got on the floors and walls, not enough for McCormick to actually put any effort into cleaning. Another random set of spots on the floor, next to the sweet and sour

sauce, orange amoxicillin pills, and empty Taco Bell wrappers.

I'd say it was a more innocent time, but we were preparing for war, so while it might seem that way retrospectively, I know 20-year-old me did not see it that way. And he was probably right. Perhaps it only seems more innocent because it was a time when Robert Near was still alive. Still alive to give a thumbs-up to me covering my nipples with my fingers in the drunken celebration of a 20-year-old.

We didn't know that in less than one year from when the photo was taken—11 months—Robert Near would take that hand, once holding a thumb toward the sky in appreciation of my debauchurous pose, and load a single round of 5.56 into his M4A1 with a collapsible butt stock, smoke his last three cigarettes, and take his own life. A hole through his head and my heart. The same hole, but only one still feels pain.

I've been in many photos since January 7th, 2011. Photos like the one with my friend, but unlike the photo from our evening of beer pong, Robert Near is not in these new memories. He will never be in new memories. *He is a memory.* Static and stagnant, forever stuck as a 20-year-old ghost, ink on paper; ash and dust.

The Bullet and the Gun

Ben Schrader

The bullet and the gun, copper and steel, the squeeze of the trigger, the rush of adrenaline.

We're taught the bullet and the gun is an extension of us, reach out and touch someone they say.

In Iraq, the bullet and the gun was a way of life, here it most surely means my death.

Over there the bullet and the gun plays politics with innocent lives, while at home the innocence lost is realized.

In war it is a shame when the bullet and the gun go unused, in peace it is a tragedy when it is.

The bullet and the gun, once so easy to use, now seems like an only option.

I once felt safe with the bullet and the gun, now their coldness dangerously caress my lips.

I thought the bullet and the gun was to protect them, but now I think it is to end the misery I have caused them.

Twenty-two brothers and sisters find refuge in the bullet and the gun every day, I fight every day to not be one of them.

And yet the bullet and the gun calls like a siren in the night, tempting to be used while screaming "why" to the flashing of red and blue lights.

The bullet and th—

When I Got Shot

Gary Schneider

We were on a battalion-sized sweep. Delta was on one side of a canal and Charlie Company was on the other. Delta approached across a rice paddy toward a grove of trees; they came under heavy fire from the trees. On our side there was a hedge of what I think were caragana bushes about four foot high with a few small trees two to 4 inches in diameter and then a hard packed path. We immediately swung our line out along the path and began laying down heavy covering fire, giving Delta Company time to scramble to cover behind the paddy dike(s). I was on one knee and would raise up just over the bushes and empty a magazine from my M-16. Then I'd drop down, eject that magazine, insert another and do it again.

I had just emptied my third magazine and was twisting around to pull another magazine from its pouch when it happened! I spun around and hit the ground hard! It felt like I'd been hit by a baseball bat with Babe Ruth doing the swinging! I heard one of my guys, Millinder, shout: "Cpl. Schneider's been hit! He never gets hit, what's going on?" As I was laying there, I thought I heard a bit of panic in his voice. He then evidently saw I was still moving and asked, "How bad is it"? I was afraid to look, so just told him

to keep returning fire and I'd let him know. A lot of the enemy fire was high as there was a steady shower of twigs and leaves. I was numb from my belt all the way down my left leg. Since I didn't want to look, I thought there ought to be blood, as I groped around feeling for a wound. Finding nothing, I finally got brave enough to look. Finding no gaping wound, I propped myself up against a small tree and got back in the fight. Eventually we won. Which is to say the other side got tired of shooting at us and those who still could, left!

My left side and leg were still numb as I started exploring. What I found amazes me still today. The bullet, almost certainly a 7.63 cal. from an AK-47, hit the corner of one of my magazine pouches, which held two twenty-round boxes of 556 ammo for my M-16. (This is what I put in any of my magazine pouches if I didn't have a metal magazine to put in it.). The M-16 uses what is known as a "rimless" cartridge, meaning instead of having a lip or rim around the base, there is a groove around the base for the bolt to grab a hold of for loading and extracting the shell. An enemy slug hit exactly in that groove of one of the shells. It bent the hard brass cartridge case into a happy-face curve, forcing the lead slug out of its case and scattering powder throughout that box of shells. The metal "jacket" peeled off and wrapped

around the primer end of that shell while the lead core was deflected enough to go through the side of my magazine pouch and continue on its way.

When our corpsman had me “drop ’em” (none of us wore skivvies due to the heat), he told me I was going to have a very impressive bruise, but no purple heart, because of no blood. He was right about the bruise; it was shaped a lot like the state of Texas and turned a whole spectrum of colors for about three weeks! Anyway, I kept trying to light a cigarette and was shaking so bad I kept putting the match out as soon as it flared up. I asked a fellow Marine to light it for me before I had a nicotine fit, which he did. Then he said, “I wish I was you!” I asked, “Why’s that?” He said, “Think about it. Most guys only get shot once, and you’ve already had your turn!” Turns out he was right, too!!

Historia Poetica

Ryan McGoldrick

my mind has always
held a thousand worlds –
words, stories, songs,
cascading through imagination
but I built a dam
to keep the deluge
from pouring forth
through my hands

these hands
once pure
now soaked through
with the intoxicating cordite
scent of hell on earth

flames scorched the dam,
stories began to flow –
to flood the page,
to renew the lands
left unwatered

these beautiful dreams
realized at last
if only because of
that terrifying Armalite Aria

A Body Stands Before

Laura Mahal

Once, a boy in a hulking body,
beaded long hair, broad shoulders, stood before
a judge, who said, “Boy, you’ve two choices:
jail or the Army.” Boy chose option 2. This was in his
blood. His father, brothers, cousins, the men of this
matrilineal culture, patriotic warriors were a tradition, so
this seventeen-year-old was sent to boot camp, then to
jungles to fight, all because he had been fighting. What
white boys could do for sport, as a lark, for brown boys,
prohibited, no sport, except blood sport.

Next, a soldier in a hulking body,
no beads, short hair, broad shoulders, stood before
a lieutenant, who said, “Chief, here’s how it’s gonna go:
point man, or the brig.” Soldier chose option 1. This was
not in his blood. It was a lie built by Hollywood,
Native Americans could sniff danger, were more
expendable. The title of chief was reserved for a select few,
not an eighteen-year-old lowly LURP, long-range
reconnaissance patrol point man. White soldiers could
smoke a joint, “Chief,” who was not a chief, was the coal
mine canary. Suited only for scout work.

Today, a man in a noble body,
beaded long hair, broad shoulders, stands before
a poet, who asks: “Friend, what would you like the world to
know?”

Pray, every day, at four a.m. Prayer must come from the heart. The ventricle is the chamber of fear-elimination, eradication of nightmare memories. You go down the river in your canoe and I mine. A man with one foot in a boat and one in a canoe is likely to fall in the river. Don't wrestle a pig. The pig will like it, and you will only get dirty. There are four seasons, four directions, four stages of life: infancy, childhood, adulthood, and the elderly. Respect elders for their wisdom and experience. The dead are never to be disturbed. To do so is to attach them to the persons who commit this act. War is finally over for a soldier only when he dies. Stories need to be heard, remembered. Stories need to be heard, remembered. Stories need to be heard, remembered.

Professor Pain

Ryan Lanham

Without pain there is no learning.

That's the so-called motivational quote that's painted on the wall next to my bunk in basic training.

Without pain there is no learning.

Over the sixteen weeks of infantry basic training the idea begins to seep into my mind. Embed itself in my psyche. A nifty little quote from Aristotle. One of the more renowned dead white guys from yester-millennia that still influences cerebral thinkers of today.

Feels a little lofty for this group of grunts, reduced to dick jokes and fart smelling between hours-long calisthenics and raving drill sergeants.

But Aristotle and his one-liner of stoic philosophy seems to worm itself deep into my subconscious.

Without pain there is no learning.

It's a sentiment I'd return to time and again.

A couple years later in Afghanistan, our high-speed lieutenant would make an announcement one day asking for four volunteers to run the annual Bagram Marathon.

“How many miles is a marathon?” one of the guys asked.

“Twenty-six,” the lieutenant replied.

“Hew-wee! Fuck that sir.”

I thought about it for a minute. Thought about the longest run I’d done up to that point. Six miles. Just twenty miles shy of a true marathon.

I thought about the pain those extra twenty miles would entail. And I thought about the learning that must certainly come from that experience.

Sure enough, it changed my life.

When I finally kicked drugs and alcohol a year after the Army, after the suicide attempt, distance running became my new addiction. I ran two more marathons that year, even tried to qualify for Boston, shaving a minute-plus off my mile average, started placing in my age group.

The pain from that marathon in Afghanistan had indeed informed my future experience in running. I’d learned a lot about myself during that initial excruciating run in Bagram. I learned I was capable of more. That I could adapt. That the mind gives out long before the body. And that I had a mind that could carry me the distance.

Thanks Aristotle. I owe you one.

Prank War

Ross M. Atkinson

A prank war. We've all been in one. They start off harmless: shaving cream in the shoes, cold water over the shower, a cup of water resting on the apex of a door slightly ajar. . . Then they escalate. Air horns, spicy peppers, spiders and snakes, fake then real. There is generally a limit, however, to how far a prank war goes. Unless you happen to be a group of twenty-one-year-old soldiers recently back from deployment.

Our prank war started off with me as the fool. I had accidentally taken my buddy Nick's barracks room key back to my room. Unable to get into his, he crawled through my window in a drunken haze. He saw me, passed out from a bottle of Jack Daniels Honey, lying naked face down on top of the sheets, white ass in the air. Knowing he couldn't let this moment pass, Nick started what would be a merciless year-long prank war.

The prank that started it all was done with the help of our other battle buddies. After climbing into my room, Nick managed to pile about fifty pounds of river rocks from the landscaping outside my window onto my bed, all around my body. He then proceeded to put some rather obscene porn as

the background and screen saver for my computer and drank my roommate's beers in our shared fridge. Then Nick and my buddies found my shaving cream and some markers. By the end of this lovely evening, I was lying in a bed of river rocks, marker all over my face and lines of shaving cream from my toes to my head, traversing all areas in between. There was a pyramid of rocks strategically placed between my legs leading right up to my stark white ass crack, some shaving cream ornaments on the cheeks, and an Army of Sharpie penises and other lovely images scattered all over my face and body. It looked like some kind of fucked up sacrificial ritual had taken place.

This all would have been fine if I woke up on time to get it sorted out. If I woke up in time to make it to formation—to get ahead of it all. However, we all know a bottle of Jack Daniels Honey does not predict a timely morning.

I woke up late, sleeping through all my alarms, covered in shaving cream with fifty pounds of river rocks in my bed and lovely, hand drawn artwork all over my body. To say I was confused would be an understatement. I woke up and threw on my PTs, briefly wondering if I had been robbed, but deciding I had no time to think about it.

I ran to the bathroom to shave quickly—no shaving cream. *Of course there is no shaving cream, it is all over my chest and legs and all over the rocks on my bed . . . Why are there rocks on my bed?* I thought.

Deciding to not dry shave in a rush, I ran out of the barracks risking the stubble and met my unit already on their run. Now, this is not something typical in the service. You don't simply join a formation in motion, especially covered in half-erased Sharpie penises. The formation I joined met at the company area about 30 minutes prior to me joining them, took accountability, and then started running. I missed that meeting. I was already fucked.

“Look at that” I heard from the formation as I entered, “It's Atkinson! Hey Atkinson, you made it!” I was prepared for the ribbing I was going to get for being late and having penises on my face, but I was not ready for the first question my NCO asked as I ran next to him: “Hey Atkinson,” he said, “Explain to me how it is that your ass is whiter than the shaving cream that was covering it this morning?”

What the fuck? I thought, how does he know that?

Then from the back of the formation somewhere, I hear, “Atkinson, get some sun,” followed up by, “Yeah. Ya pasty motherfucka!”

That is when I found out there was a photo. The whole unit had a photo. A monument to debauchery and idiocy. An image and morning aptly summed up by my Platoon SGT, head shaking back and forth, asking the question, “What the fuck am I supposed to do with this, Atkinson?”

And this was only the beginning.

Whose Kid Needs to Die?

Laura Mahal

Today.

10:55 Eastern Standard Time.

“I am completely okay, but campus is on lockdown. There are reports of an active shooter at the high school down the street. I’m in Cathy and they have the building shut down to anyone coming in.”

This from my daughter. Twenty-two-years-old, with a tattoo of Cathy on her left ankle—the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Cathy, a beloved beacon of light. Today, Command Central to SWAT teams and an entire company of Pittsburgh police and emergency rescue. A shooter, reputedly at one of two Catholic high schools four blocks away. Hundreds of teenagers herded onto Cathy’s lawns, while their high-school classrooms were inspected and cleared, one by one.

Back up.

Kids were in those rooms first, told to silence their phones; *stop talking, no crying, crying’s too loud.*

Push the piano against the door.

Stack chairs against the door.

What weapons do we have?

Physics classroom shares a closet with chemistry: acids. *We can throw acid, there are metal poles, think of chemical combinations. But silently.*

No crying!

My daughter is calm by nature. Age seventeen, a high school junior, she was tagged to lead the Student Walkout for Gun Safety at her school after, which was it? Marjorie Stoneman somebody or other? School in Florida, Parkland. That was six years ago, six hundred shootings ago.

Today's shooting was a hoax. Some prankster, more like a group of hackers, robo-called over a dozen schools in Western PA, with the following message: "**Active shooter. Not a drill. Kids down.**" A day? Two? Three? . . . after the Nashville shooting, *preschool through the age of dead*, and nobody fucked around with this. Cops shoved bodies toward Cathy, high-school physics classes ended for the day. My daughter watched it all from her eight-decade-old university sanctuary—she was locked in, not locked out. If there had

been a shooter, there were four-hundred-plus high-school kids gathered on one lawn.

But no senators' kids.

No offspring of presidential candidates.

Nobody who mattered to the suits who will skirt blame, spit out talking points, wait for the next sound bite to distract the public.

Oh, you didn't see this on the news today?

Of course not.

Just a little speed bump in Western Pennsylvania. A few thousand of us parents, sitting by our phones, waiting to see if our children made it out alive.

Just a Boy

Milt Mays

He was just a boy, but he changed my life forever. And his mother's and his father's and many others he never knew.

I knew his mother long before him, or at least a while—five months of her pregnancy. I'll call her Mrs. Jones. She came to me in a usual way—went to the screening meeting and saw the Naval Hospital OB nurse. The nurse thought Mrs. Jones might be a good patient for us lowly family physicians—uncomplicated pregnancy, though her first, and she was a bit older, but only thirty-two. A Black woman recently married to a Black marine sergeant who trained budding Navy pilots. Kinda like the movie, *An Officer and a Gentleman*. He was not Lou Gossett Jr., though after I came to know him, I was sure he could be just as brutal. But I was a Commander in the US Navy, whose commands were always right and who knew what was best. Yeah.

It was only a few years after the beginning of HIV. As department chair of a Navy family practice residency in Pensacola, I had suggested that we get patients into our residency that had HIV, because we needed to know how to treat them. No takers. No one wanted the exposure, and if

they were thinking about it, their spouses usually convinced them otherwise.

When taking care of pregnant patients, we asked the patient if they wanted an HIV test. It wasn't like the tests for syphilis or gonorrhea, which were given automatically. HIV was a political and social land mine. We had to ask. So I asked Mrs. Jones. She declined the test. I should have wondered why.

She went into premature labor and had to be transferred to the tertiary OB and Pediatric hospital in Biloxi, Mississippi. But after she delivered, and her baby overcame prematurity, they came back to me.

She called her son JR. He was a sickly baby. Had several bouts of pneumonia, which had to be treated back in Biloxi. He grew and got a little better. She came in with him for checkups. After a few checkups, I noticed Mrs. Jones had some bruises on her arms. Tripped and fell, she said. Once, I thought maybe I smelled alcohol on her breath.

Also, JR was not growing well. He fit into the general diagnosis of Failure to Thrive, or FTT. Many things could cause that, including parental neglect.

Dad would also come in sometimes. He smiled and laughed, yet with occasional hard looks and sharp words towards his wife.

I began to worry he was abusing her, and she was abusing alcohol. JR had FTT. Maybe they were neglecting him because he had been such a problem as a preemie.

Then I noticed JR had a lot of lymph nodes enlarged in his neck, his groin, under his arms. I decided to run some blood tests for FTT and at the last minute added an HIV test. Which came back positive. Everything changed.

We had to check with his parents. Dad's test was negative. Mom's was positive. Where had she got it? I asked. She said it was probably from a transfusion she had when she lost her first child a few years ago in New Jersey. What was the name of the hospital? She couldn't remember. More and more unreliable. I couldn't trust what she said. But at least we knew where JR got it.

JR was placed on anti-HIV drugs, a bit of a cocktail, about which I knew next to nothing. So, he was mostly followed up in Biloxi. But that was a long ride.

The day I saw him for his six-month check, he was smiling less than usual. His mother had a bruise on her cheek. She smelled of alcohol. Dad was not there.

JR had another fever and was a bit short of breath. I told Mom he might have pneumonia again and we needed X-rays, blood tests, and an IV. She agreed.

The X-rays of his chest showed pneumonia. His pulse ox was low-normal, so we put him on oxygen. Kids hate nasal oxygen. They hate an oxygen mask, too, but JR kept it on. I think he'd had it before, so he went along. Probably made him feel better, too, getting more oxygen.

I needed blood for his viral titer and his white cell counts, and a blood culture to make sure we got the right antibiotics. There were unusual bacteria that caused pneumonia in HIV patients. Kids are difficult sometimes to get blood. You can try arms or legs, which we did, but every attempt failed. He had a fever. We needed blood ASAP. He was my patient. I was the Residency Director, a leader. I should draw the blood. Yeah.

So, I went for the external jugular vein. It's easy once you get the kid immobilized in a papoose, a special board with lots of Velcro straps, and good nurses and corpsmen to help.

We had Mom leave the room. He didn't like the papoose at all and was wailing and fighting. Which was

actually a good sign. If he'd just laid there, I would have been more worried.

They got him immobilized, head slightly lower than body, and I got the needle and syringe. It was a small room, crowded with five people surrounding JR—me, a nurse, and three corpsmen holding his arms and legs and head. The door was closed, but he was screaming so loud, even around his oxygen mask, the rest of the clinic knew something was going on.

I found the engorged external jugular vein, stuck the needle in, got the blood, took the needle out. Simple. The nurse handed me the vacuum tubes for the blood culture and other tests. Stick the needle in the top, the tube sucks the blood out. Simple.

JR jerked. His head hit my hand that held the syringe and needle full of HIV-infected blood. The needle speared my hand, not the blood culture tube.

It was instantaneous and I quickly moved on like nothing had happened. I backed up a bit and inserted the needle into each tube for the various tests. Focused, calm, like nothing had happened.

Then I walked to the bathroom and took off my gloves. My hands started shaking.

The nurse who'd been helping me knocked and came in.

“Dr. Mays, you got stuck with that needle, didn't you?”

I looked down at the blood oozing from the puncture and nodded. My hands were uncontrollably shaking now. The calm was gone. I washed and squeezed the wound and washed some more. I felt nauseous. I wanted to call my wife. I wanted to leave. But I had to go talk to Mrs. Jones. I had to get JR started on preliminary antibiotics. Luckily this was a residency program, so residents were available and did most of the work. Why hadn't I let them draw the blood?

In an hour I found out the HIV viral titer of JR's blood was extremely high. Then, my life changed forever.

It took about a week, but I started hating JR. After three months of taking the nauseating, energy-draining prophylactic HIV cocktail, the hate deepened. I knew it was wrong. But it was there. I let someone else take care of the Johns' family. I should have seen a shrink. I should have done a lot of things.

It took years of negative HIV tests to be sure the meds worked. No making love. Keeping it secret from all

except my wife, a few close friends, my doctors, that one nurse.

I never told anyone from the Jones' family.

It took many more years before I finally came to grips that JR was just a boy. He was just a boy. And I had been his doctor. It took thirty years to finally write this down. I wonder if he is alive today. I hope so. If he is, and reads this, I hope he forgives me.

“I’m Proud of You”

Ryan McGoldrick

those words you said
often enough –
but i never felt you meant
until that hot April afternoon
under that South Carolina sun

of course you were proud

i was finally the man
you always wanted me to be
anger directed at a goal
you approved of –
not at you

those words then,
from the you i tolerated
meant so much –
more than they should

i shouldn’t have felt
so much joy
at you being honest
for once

but i did.

I no longer care
if you would be proud –
if anyone would be proud

if I save my joy
for the words of others
I’ll be waiting a long time

you taught me that.

I no longer care
that you were proud –

on this chilly February morning
in the shadow of the Rockies
I've come to understand –
I am proud.

Dog Tags

James Speed Hensinger

Every man was required to have two dog tags on their person. You wore them every hour of the day, in the shower, when sleeping, when exercising, when indoors, when outdoors. The Army was very serious about replacing them if one or both went missing. In fact, the IG's (Inspector General's) people were fond of pulling surprise inspections on units, and one of the things they did was have the men stand in formation and then order each man to show them two dog tags.

The rumor was that a sergeant or officer dealing with a dead soldier's body was to insert one tag between the two front teeth in the upper and lower jaws then slap upwards on the chin to force the tag between the teeth, thus permanently labeling the cadaver. The other tag was then attached to the dead man's personal effects. I never saw this done, and I have been told by sergeants and officers they were never instructed to do this. Dog tags are still a macabre perversity—their primary purpose being to label the unconscious or dead. Some of us thought of our dog tags with pride. We were special. Others (including me) thought of them as a sign of ownership. We were cannon fodder, each

mutually interchangeable. They literally reduced us to a number.

Recently, in the process of going through my parents' estate, I found their dog tags. Both served as officers in World War Two. I was surprised to find in my mother's jewelry her parents' dog tags. Grandfather Speed is a bit of a hero of mine. He played football at the University of Chicago under Alonzo Stagg, graduated early, was a 1904 graduate of Rush Medical College, studied surgery in Germany, held professorships at UCLA and the University of Chicago, was a founding member of the American College of Surgeons, spoke five languages, practiced orthopedic surgery for over fifty years, was an invited lecturer on surgery in China and Japan in the 1930s, and in 1950, had a model airplane on his desk with a plaque from Trans World Airlines honoring his 100,000 miles of flight.

Grandfather Speed had divorced in 1914. He left a wife and two daughters, although they remained a part of his life, and after he remarried, they reintegrated with his second family. Divorce was very rare then, and socially ostracizing. He took refuge in volunteering to be a surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps as an American assigned to the British Expeditionary Force in the trenches of World War One in France. This was before the United States had joined in the

war, which is why he had several medals and awards from the British. After several years at the front, he was released and became Chief of Surgery at a large Chicago hospital.

When America later joined the War in April of 1917, his hospital formed a medical unit and because of his war experience, he was commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel and became the commanding officer. Back in the trenches in France a second time, he met an American nurse and fraternized a little too much. My future grandmother became pregnant with my mother's older sister, Patricia. They married in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France. Their dog tags appear to have been privately purchased, and Grandmother's is in the form of a silver bracelet with a plaque and a flexible chain. It has her married name, Speed, added in a different style of engraving. It looks to me to be freehand lettered. I wonder if my grandfather made this alteration.

Grandfather took his new wife across the Channel and ensconced her with relatives in England to wait out her pregnancy while he went back to the front, sawing off arms and legs. These were the days before the invention of penicillin, and ether was used as an anesthetic. After peace was declared, he accompanied his unit back to the States, then immediately turned around and returned to England by ship to escort his new wife and daughter back to Chicago.

He estimated he had performed 6,000 surgical procedures during the war. His experiences led him to write a definitive textbook, *Fractures and Dislocations*, which stayed in print through multiple editions until the 1950s.



Note: Margaret Rudd's World War One ID bracelet. Her married name, Speed, was added. ©James Speed Hensinger

During Vietnam, a dog tag was made of embossed aluminum about two inches long by one inch wide. The soldier's last name was stamped on the first line; this was followed on the second line with the soldier's first name and middle initial. It did not matter if there might have been enough space for a full middle name; it was always shortened to a single letter unless the man really had no middle name. In this case, where there was nothing, it

became three letters, "NMI" for "No Middle Initial." Go figure.

The third line had the soldier's service number preceded by a two-letter code for his status. If it was "RA," it meant Regular Army, which was Army-speak for a volunteer enlisted man. Mine was "US," which meant I had been drafted. Members of the National Guard used the code "NG." Army enlisted reservists had the code "ER," and most officers started with an "OF."

The Army service number was an eight-digit number. In basic training, we were drilled mercilessly to memorize our service number. Upon hearing the command to "State your service number!," your instant response was to shout, "Sir! USXXXXX557! Sir!" We were expected to do this in less than two seconds. It became an exercise in tongue twisting. I may have forgotten my parents' 1960's phone number, but I will never forget my service number. Actually, I am one of a small number of Army personnel who had two service numbers.

In mid-1969, the Army ceased assigning unique service numbers and converted everyone to using their Social Security Numbers, dropping the use of a two-letter prefix. I actually have two different ID numbers, from before

and after the change. Because of this, whenever I see a Veterans Administration form with a service number block, I am never sure which to provide.

The fourth line started with the soldier's blood type. In my case it is "O Pos" for "O Positive." This was followed on the same line with one's service number. That is, up until the time when the Army switched to using just the man's Social Security Number.

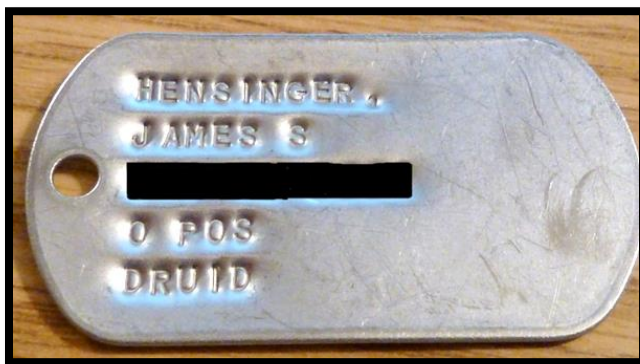
The last line was one's religious preference, and although the whole line was available, it was usually abbreviated. For me, "PRES," which was the abbreviation for Presbyterian.

Most of us wore our dog tags on a light "ball" chain, which was similar to a twenty-four-inch-long key chain hung around the neck. Some of the more fatalistic men laced one dog tag into their bootlace to hold it against the tongue of their combat boot on the theory that if one's head or foot should get blown off, one tag would remain.

I lost my dog tags when I snagged my chain while running with my M-16. We were taking a meal break while patrolling outside the wire on a mountain near Phu Tai west of Qui Nhon, South Vietnam. I had been using my P-38 can opener, which I had strung on my dog tag chain, so the chain

was hanging outside my shirt. Somebody thought they heard something. I grabbed my rifle and sprinted for cover behind a log, dumping my freshly opened can of peaches in the excitement. Several hours later, I realized I had snagged the chain on something, possibly the charging handle on the rifle, and the chain had broken. There was no shame in this. Shit happened.

When I got back to base camp, I went to the supply hooch and requested new dog tags. At the time, I was feeling rebellious, which is a feeling not well tolerated in the Army. I decided to change my religious preference. The supply clerk, also feeling rebellious, went along with the joke. I had become a lapsed Christian, and it amused me to think of what the Army would have to do should they have to find a Druid priest to officiate at my funeral.



Note: My dog tag showing my religion as Druid. ID Number blacked out. ©James Speed Hensinger

A Long Terrible Journey

Marshall Spring

Excerpts from Rifleman's Creed, By Maj Gen. William H. Rupertus

“This is my rifle there are many like it but this one is mine.”

I wonder how this is affecting my mom.

How is my girlfriend. Is she still my girlfriend?

“My rifle is my best friend. I must master it as I must master my life.”

Fuck this is hard.

When is chow?

“Without me, my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will . . .”

Shit. They are taking this seriously.

“My rifle is human, even as I am human, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses its strengths, its parts, its accessories, its sights, and its barrel. I will keep my rifle clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will . . .”

Breathe, lead, squeeze, breathe, open your eye, asses, breathe. . . Good shot.

Pie the door, check your corner, watch his six, find the bombs, dead check that motherfucker.

“Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and I are the defender of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.”

Was that my idea?

What did I do?

Was I there?

Did I do that?

Why was I there?

Why did he die?

Did I have to kill them?

What did I do?

Is it fair to judge anyone?

What did we do?

Why did we do it?

What did I do?

“So be it, until victory is America’s and there is no enemy, but peace!”

I didn’t realize until now that peace was enemy.

Yellow Ribbon Worship

Ryan Lanham

Veterans day. Great. A day of jingoistic back-patting and free appetizers at Applebee's. Here I am sitting in class with a bunch of undergrads. Twenty-year-olds. Kids putting just enough effort into school to keep partying on weekends.

Maybe that's the grumpy old man in me coming out.

I'm a little surprised when the instructor starts class with a nod to the formerly uniformed.

"Listen up, class," she says. "Today is Veterans Day. As you know, Ryan is a veteran, so let's all say thanks."

You fucking kidding me. Shit makes me want to vomit.

Don't thank me. Don't put me on the spot.

Ask me what it was like over there. How did it feel to hand briefcases of cold, hard American cash—worthless Monopoly money—to Afghan civilians whose family we killed?

Sorry about your little boy. Here's 2,500 dead presidents. Good luck finding somewhere to spend it.

I'm not asked about that.

What about our flimsy pretexts for military invasion?
No one buys that shit anymore.

And yet few question our all-volunteer force.

This ain't Nam. There're no draftees.

We're mercenaries in an unjust war. A war of acquisition.

What's in it for me?

So yes, I'm a little bitter being a hypocrite who gets free housing, free schooling, free books, free healthcare. A new lease on life while a trail of dead rots in the wake of the American War Machine. Leaving behind blood-soaked earth when we fly home to awaiting crowds in giant airport reception halls. Welcome home heroes! Have a beer! A shot! You earned it.

No wonder we're offing ourselves in record numbers. We know the truth. We've seen the ravages of unbridled hegemony. We've seen your hell.

Don't thank me for my service.

Just think for yourself.

Just a Good Push

Ross M. Atkinson

My first sergeant said two words to my good buddy Jon Doane one fine morning in Bagram, Afghanistan. These were special words as they would come to be immortalized in our friend group. We had just returned to Bagram as a company for the first time in twelve months. Each of our communications teams was sent out to a FOB or COP in Regional Command East, Afghanistan. As one could imagine, our return to Bagram was one of celebration. The kind of celebration that can only come after twelve months of fear and uncertainty. Poker games with soldiers handing each other their hard-earned deployment cash, holding onto near-beers and the hope of going home soon.

One phenomenon after a deployment is that rank seems a little less important. Before we deployed, the first sergeant walking into our tent would have caused a call of “At Ease!” This would have been followed by soldiers falling out of bunks and knocking over stacks of poker chips in an attempt to stand at parade rest. But post-deployment, no one said a word, and no one was expected to.

One consequence of this relaxed atmosphere, however, is that rank can sneak up on you. This is what

happened to my good friend Jon Doane. Sitting on the outside of a poker game, leaning over to see the pot, Doane had a feeling well up in his stomach and let out a massive belch. And when I say massive, I mean a game stopping, jaw dropping, burp. It was so loud it frightened our new green lieutenant, who had arrived just a couple months before we left country. I saw the LT let out a little yelp upon hearing Doane's momentous release, which wasn't a surprise, as everything seemed to frighten the new LT.

Following the yelp from our LT, we heard: "CPL Doane, Just Push!" come from the back of our tent. Our first sergeant had made it into the tent unseen, apparently heard the burp, perhaps saw the frightened LT, and decided this turn of events was not acceptable. So Doane did what he was told and got down in the front leaning rest position and started doing pushups. And there he stayed for fifteen minutes, and then thirty, and then forty-five, when one of the NCOs asked, "CPL Doane, what are you doing down there?" Doane, exhausted, barely able to look up, arms shaking, said, "First sergeant told me to push."

"Oh shit," the NCO replied, "If first sergeant put you there, only first sergeant can let you up." Forty-five minutes become an hour and the increasingly worried NCO went to our team lead who, upon seeing the beet red, sweaty CPL

Doane struggling to simply exist said, “I’m going to check with 1SG to see when this can end.”

That is when we hear it. First sergeant’s voice from outside the tent. “Oh Shit!”

We see him come running in the tent, “CPL Doane, get the fuck up! I said, GOOD PUSH!”

War Stories for Ashley Amsden

Gary Schneider

When I left off, I was hiding behind a paddy dike with my M-60, which had become a one shooter. I was pretty sure what the problem was; however, I'd have to dismantle the gun to confirm it. In the meantime, I wanted to deal with the sniper hidden somewhere up in the trees. I picked a clump of branches that looked suspicious and cranked off another single shot. Imagine my delight when a sniper and his rifle tumbled out of that tree! (More on that later.) Then I took off my flack jacket and shirt to make a relatively dirt-free spot to dismantle the M-60. My suspicions were confirmed when I found I had a bent firing pin. I don't know what genius decided a part designed to slide back and forth as many as five hundred and fifty times a minute should be made of a relatively soft metal, but it wasn't a good idea! Without any way to fix it, I was screwed and knew it.

About then I heard Miller hollering, "this way, this way." I looked over the dike and saw the "bear" wading roughly even to us. Clearly, he had a head wound, which was wrapped with a battle dressing and a utility shirt, and was blind but trying to get to our lines by sound alone. In such a battle the noise is horrendous but the M-16 rifle sounds completely different from the AK-47 used by the NVA. I

hollered for Charlie Company to give me covering fire; I was going out.

As I rolled over the top of that dike and into the water, I discovered the water was just a little over my knees, but the bottom was about eight inches of the blackest, gummiest, stinkiest mud only a thousand years of human excrement could produce! With all the water that was being kicked up around me, I knew I was being shot at a lot! Anyway, my pride wouldn't let me crawl back over that dike so I started wading out to the bear. He was about forty yards away, which seemed like forever.

When I got to him, identified myself, and told him to "take my arm, you are going home," I'll never forget the grip of his hand on my left forearm. I kept expecting to catch a bullet any second in what seemed like a mile-long journey. When we finally got back over that dike, I called Miller to escort the bear to safety for a med-evac, while I put my M-60 back together. I admonished the bear to STAY AWAKE, no matter what, that beautiful young lady back home was counting on him. "If you go to sleep, you'll die!"

When we had had that drinking/b.s. session, we had compared knives. While mine was a standard off the shelf mass-produced blade, his was a Randall, a very expensive,

custom-built thing of beauty. I had gotten my knife from our M-79 man when he tripped a booby trap and got thoroughly sprinkled with shrapnel; I told him they would steal it from him at Charlie-med but if he would give it to me, when he got to where he was going, drop me a note with his address and I'd mail it to him. Never heard from him again.

I looked at the bear's knife on his right hip and thought about the thieves at Charlie-med but then thought I didn't know how I'd hook up with someone in Delta Company, and I sure didn't want to be accused of trying to steal it! I thought at least he's alive; the knife is Delta Company's lookout! Just to be clear, many of us carried knives. Not for any Rambo shit, but to cut down giant bamboo to make a shelter for the night.

For several weeks I thought I'd done a pretty great thing. Then a few weeks later we were all loaded in "six-by's" to go to another fight when a corpsman from Delta Company hopped up on the back bumper and asked if there was a Corp. Schneider here. I said, "Yeah, that's me. What did I do now?" He said, "You are the one who brought back the bear, right?" I said, "Yeah, how's he doing?" He replied, "Not so good. He was D.O.A. at Charlie-med. His parents got his personal effects including his knife sheath but no knife. Did he have it on him when you brought him back or

was it lost on the battlefield?” He then asked, what hip was it on? I said his right hip, I remembered cause I wore mine on my left. He then said, “Are you sure?” I kind of lost it and told him YES! I realize it would be easier to claim it was lost in battle but that was NOT the case! He left and I never heard about the bear’s knife again.

Personally, I felt like I’d just been kicked in the crotch; I laid it all on the line for nothing! That Delta Company corpsman said the only reason he’d left the bear alone on the field was cause he couldn’t get a pulse and thought him dead. I absolutely believe him! No matter how heavy the fighting or how much hot lead was being exchanged, when one of us hollered “Corpsman up!” they ALWAYS came! They are the truly brave men!

More recently, I was lying in bed waiting for sleep to claim me when I had a giant “What If” moment. What if I hadn’t hit that sniper at all? What if I’d only come close? It is like ducking when a bullet whizzes past your ear. Inside, you know it’s way too late to duck, but you do anyway. What if I’d only come close enough to make him jerk, lose his balance, and fall? What if his rifle (a scope-sighted sporter) had got caught up in the brush and not plunged muzzle-first into the mud? That would mean both the sniper and his rifle were in perfectly good working order and he could have had

me at any time while I was going out or coming back! While the average AK-47s we were facing were notoriously inaccurate at one hundred yards or more, I'm pretty sure that gun was a whole lot better.

Then I thought about a reenactment show about the American Revolution. Supposedly, early on in the war, a British sniper had a clear shot at an American officer directing his troops. That sniper claimed he "did not have the heart to kill an officer who was conducting himself so gallantly on the field of battle." When I told my V.A. counselor about all these "what if's," she asked how that made me feel? I told her "Not so good." It was a lot easier when I thought of them as "just gooks."

Destination: Earth

Ryan Lanham

“Next in line.”

I shuffle a few steps forward toward the clerk, although shuffle might not describe the action, exactly. More like float.

Here at HEPS—Human Entrance Processing Station—disembodied souls wait for their next planetary incarnation.

“Name?”

“Spirit 3074-niner Alpha.”

“Star System?”

“Cignus B.”

“Destination?”

I hesitate, tempted to lie. Then I remember what happened to my buddy when he tried to dodge his last assignment.

“Earth,” I say, “Bring it on.”

The faintest hint of smirk crosses the clerk’s face.

“Sign here on the dotted line. This document outlines the terms and conditions of your next lifetime. It’s a

blueprint, of sorts, mapped onto your genetic coding. Once you give us the okay, there's no turning back. Just strap in and enjoy the ride.”

I glance over the document, review the bloodline of my prospective family, scan the fine print of dos and don'ts of earthly existence.

Yeah, whatever, I think. Let's get this show on the road.

With a flash of telepathic consent, I sign the document and step into the Incarnation Portal.

Here goes nothing.

Chaos. Pure fucking chaos. It's a blitzkrieg of shrieks and wails and screaming doctors.

“We've got a breech birth,” I hear one yell. “Grab the forceps.”

I feel it. The metal clamps squeezing into my skull. I'm a suffocating lab rat in some twisted science experiment. Nothing on my body works. No hands. No feet. No lungs. Just a tiny brain trying to process the massive wall of stimuli bombarding my mind, body.

“Oops,” I hear the clerk say, a distant ghostly voice in some darkened corner of my newly formed brain. “Meant to drop the veil before you got squeezed out. My bad.”

A press of the button back on the Incarnation Portal, and suddenly darkness.

Nothingness.

Just another fresh babe choking on womb goop and feces, aswirl in the chaotic red-carpet foray into human life. Blissfully unaware of the path ahead, and free of cumbersome memory-making brain circuitry.

For a while at least.

Kids Killing Kids

Marshall Spring

I remember the kid who got shot in the eye. He was too young to be there.

I remember the kid who was hit by a car. He was too young to be there.

I remember the farmer whose roof we fucked up because my dog sat there.

I remember not asking enough, why are we here? Because I wanted to be there.

I remember squeezing my trigger and then that kid was no longer there.

I remember being there and I don't know why. But I know I was too young to be there.

Failure to Report

Ross M. Atkinson

I was late. “FTR” was the acronym floating around my mind. Failure to report. I cannot miss movement, I thought.

Our unit was heading to the field to train on our equipment. I was a new fuzzy—a fresh-faced E-1 with something to prove. In this moment, I was proving that E-1s are incompetent, a truth that needs no reinforcement. I threw on my ACUs, hopped on my motorcycle and flew down to the field. The one thing a 1000cc crotch rocket can do well is move quickly. I made it with 10 minutes to spare, assault pack on my back filled with every single piece of the equipment I needed.

Wait, where was my ACH? My helmet? In the rush out the door, I popped my motorcycle helmet on and forgot my Army Combat Helmet. Missing equipment during inspection was just as bad as being late, so I hopped back on my bike and flew to the barracks. I parked the bike out in front, on the sidewalk leading to the door—key in the ignition. I sprinted to my room, grabbed my ACH and sprinted back to my bike.

Upon exiting the barracks, I saw a large man in PTs standing over my still-running motorcycle. He watched as I approached and shouted, “Is this your bike, Private?”

“Yes,” I replied, hoping for a compliment.

But instead he asked, “Who is your first sergeant?”

I knew I was fucked.

“First SGT Thomas . . .” I hesitated because I did not know this man’s rank. He saw me hesitate.

“Ohhh. First SGT Thomas is my battle buddy, let’s go pay him a visit.”

My heart racing, I was so frightened I forgot to turn my motorcycle off as we walked side by side toward my company area.

On our walk, I witnessed as the man who caught me with my motorcycle on the sidewalk was greeted over and over with “Good morning, First SGT” and “Good morning, Top!”

Yep, definitely fucked.

Upon entering the building, my 1SG was asked to “hem up” his soldier, and decided that a fitting punishment would be for me to put on my motorcycle helmet and sit in a squat with my arms out, “. . . like you’re riding your

motorcycle, Private Atkinson—and don't be afraid to rev the engine.”

I moved my right hand in the motion of the throttle.

“No, no, no, Private, that's not how a motorcycle sounds.”

I begin to ask for clarification, “Should I . . .”

“That is also not how a motorcycle sounds, either,” he said.

“Brrrrrt . . .” I made the noise.

“Good, good, now stay there and keep on riding that motorcycle,” he said as he started to walk away with the other First SGT.

He stopped as an E-5 from our company entered the company area, looked at him and said, “Hey SGT Michael, stay here and make sure everyone who walks through here knows that Private Atkinson LOVES his motorcycle so much, and that he thinks it makes him special. Special enough to ride on the motherfuckin' sidewalk, if you can believe it.”

“Roger that, Top.” SGT Michael replied.

“Brrrrt . . .” I continue in the background.

Looking directly at me, he continued, “And go ahead and tell anyone who outranks him walking through here to make him do some exercises.”

“Roger that, Top. How long?”

“Brrrrrt . . .”

“I have some details I need people for in about an hour. Send him my way then.”

“Roger that, Top.”

“Brrrrrt . . .”

In-2-Me-See

Mark Cunningham

“We who have touched war have a duty to bring the truth about war to those who have not had a direct experience of it. We are the light at the tip of the candle. It is really hot, but it has the power of shining and illuminating. If we practice mindfulness, we will know how to look deeply into the nature of war and, with our insight, wake people up so that together we can avoid repeating the same horrors again and again.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh

Write Mark! Just let yourself write! You found your sacred pen, you got your chai latte, you went to yoga and now all you need is to move into your center, hear your voice, let your body sensations guide you along like informative friends signifying important information. Quiet the old voices that may seek to bog you down with self-doubt or criticism and connect with who you are at this moment, this ever flowing and evolving process that you are, rather than some idea of who you once were. Feel the deep chasm that opened within you as you wrote that last sentence. Feel the release of loving sadness hidden there far below the surface that may linger at times, holding you back from shining your

bright light even brighter to those you meet, work with, and relate to daily. I'm so proud of you! Proud of all the ways in which you continue to nourish your heart, mind, body, and spirit! I'm so proud of you for sharing the most wounded and challenging parts of your journey, not only to heal yourself, but to heal with and for your family, clients, ancestors & the global community! Thank you! Feel that release . . . Feel it move through you and welcome the state of surrender . . . Let go of the illusion of control that only breeds more fear, stuckness, and misalignment on your path!

Now, tell them. Tell them a little about how you came to be here today. But, where the hell do I begin? Do you talk about the moral injury that set in once you realized the farce of counterinsurgency that you just lived out upon returning home from OEF? Do you talk about being an only child to a single mother navigating life in Sin City? Naah! Remember you wanted to speak about healing because your friend Nick at Health4Heroes said that would be valuable for others to hear . . . Ya know that transformation from soldier to a therapist and all the experiences in between these two vocational points along your journey. Don't forget you also said a few minutes ago that you wanted to write from who you are now, not some old identity. Hmmm . . . I hear a bird call, or what I presume to be a bird call, as it could be a

recording of a bird call for all I know. I hear a man cough across the parking lot, a gas-powered machine, cylinders firing, most likely a lawn mower in the distance. I feel the sun licking my neck and exposed left arm. I smell . . . nothing because my nose is still a bit clogged with snot after Aspen brought home another bug from daycare. I taste a hint of granola mixed with the spicy corn from my microwaved vegetarian lunch. I see my hand, this hand that has held and fired an M9, M4, Mark 19, M2 50cal, M240B, M249 SAW, M203, and who knows what else, all for a country, an ideology, resources, a reaction to fear, a “purpose,” a war A twenty-year war that somehow ended last August 2021, twenty years after 9/11 when you were only eleven.

An owl . . . a wise Great Horned Owl perched on the tip of a dying tree branch hanging over the creek. What was it within you at that exact moment that twitched your head twenty degrees to ten o'clock to lock your focus at about twenty-five meters, to connect with this owl that just turned itself twenty degrees as you wrote that sentence? Was it intuition, was it the owl, a random coincidence, synchronicity, God, the universe, or some moment set in motion by billions upon billions of years of moments, decisions, actions, inactions, biochemistry, physics, and all that is? Oh isn't it beautiful!? The great mystery of it all.

Once it drove you crazy not knowing, not having theories to explain the violence, injustice, and beauty all around you. Now the owl stares at you because it is you . . . You are it, and, at the same time, you are in a relationship with it . . . experiencing it inside of your nervous system and you in its system all at once. True intimacy. Like the reflection of the moon in a still pond. How proud I am of you to notice such beauty and presence and all that you have done over the past eleven years to create stillness in your pond since you left that war back in 2011.

That war that bombarded your inner pond with mortars, RPGs, IEDs, and the threat of an “enemy” all around you, yet nowhere all at once. That war that left so many waves the size of tsunamis in your inner pond holding you back from this intimacy, this presence, this clarity. And yet, it’s okay, I know you have always done the best you knew in each moment. Look now and see all the people who touched your heart and you touched theirs along this journey of healing. I know it has been fucking miserable and isolating at times, but you are here now, with your daughter, stepsons, partner, family, community, and all the clients who you support and heal with alongside their journeys. You and they are so lucky to be influenced by this wisdom of trauma and all the wisdom and mystery yet to be experienced. Enjoy

it! Don't stop learning to play your guitar even when it feels like you are too busy with life to pick up a new skill, keep getting on your yoga mat to breathe, stretch, sweat, and play in your body and in the community.

Keep noticing your inner drill sergeant voice and respond to it with curiosity, compassion, and love so that you respond to others from a higher place rather than just survival, fear, control, and judgment. Keep opening up to others when you feel stuck in the mud while trusting in yourself to not push yourself beyond your boundaries with those who have yet to earn such intimacy with you. Keep living, playing, writing, exploring, wondering, and know that your light is seen by those who need it most even when you fear most for the world.

Romeo and Juliet in Bosnia

Kathleen Willard

In between the silence and the grass,
in between the moment before thunder,
when all animosity of enemies seems distant,
two lovers from opposite sides of the conflict
meet on the bridge of desire
share an overcoat
and bind their hearts together with damp wool.
I watched from the anteroom,
their promises drifted up through the broken lace of
windows.

And the savior of surplus rice,
and the dissection of our country,
will not liberate like their lover's embrace.

And when she was killed by sniper fire,
senselessly, randomly,
and her body lay on the concrete bridge unclaimed
under the fusillade of bullets,
I did nothing.
I turned my back to my small stick fire
and brewed juniper tea
longing to warm my soul with its miniature flame.

Two Non-Combat Tales

Gary Schneider

We had set up a temporary base camp in the “bush” to run daytime patrols and nighttime ambushes out of. Since I had already honed my knife sharp enough to split frog hair and cleaned my rifle to the best of my ability, I was sitting around doing absolutely nothing with plans to do more of the same, and then rest afterwards. One of my gun team members approached me with a problem. His name was Mike, a German born lad, fighting for his citizenship. At that time, two years or four? And your American citizenship became automatic. And rightfully so!

I had asked him one time, “What are you doing here? You could have stayed home and waited to take the test till Vietnam was over!” I’ll never forget his answer: “My mom and I emigrated to America to enjoy all the great things America has to offer. If I’m going to be an American Citizen and enjoy all the benefits she offers, then I should be willing to fight for her!”

His present problem was, he had a huge boil on top of his right shoulder. It looked very painful! I told him he should have “Doc” look at it. Mike said Doc (a great little Puerto Rican guy from Philly) had told him it was coming to

a head and in a few days it would burst, drain, and the problem would go away! Mike wanted to know if there was anything I could do to help in the meantime? I told him to get a canteen cup half full of water, heated to as hot as he could stand, then dip a rag in that water and start squeezing that boil, which should bring it to a head. Mike left and I went back to my previous pursuits thinking I'd dealt with that problem. Then about twenty minutes later, he handed me a rag and said he was ready. I couldn't very well say, "I didn't mean I was going to do it," so I said O.K.

The water was indeed quite hot; I could barely stand to dip the rag into it. Anyway, I started placing the hot rag on the boil and squeezing it. I told Mike to let me know if the pain got too bad and we could stop. He just sat there stoically and let me continue to abuse his boil. After about five minutes of this treatment, the boil burst and squirted about a foot. Unfortunately, a good deal of which landed in my face! I quickly wiped my face with my sleeve before Mike could notice. I wouldn't want Mike to think I didn't know what I was doing! I continued to work more pus out till I could get no more. Then I told Mike to go ask Doc to put a "patch" on the wound so it wouldn't get infected while it healed. Mike's relief from the pain was immediate, for which he was grateful. I returned to doing nothing with my

usual vigor. I think Doc was a little embarrassed, as he came by later and hassled me a bit, saying “What the fuck, killing gooks is not enough for you? Now you got to be a corpsman as well?” I replied as tactfully as possible, that I thought he must have been too busy, and the problem was one I could handle, so I did. Nothing more was said of the matter.

We were in the “bush” and late one night, I was sleeping when I heard footsteps approaching. I awoke immediately and was surprised when asked if I wanted to go on “R&R”? I asked, “To where?” They said Hawaii. I had absolutely NO interest in going on R&R to Hawaii, as I had just left there about six months ago. In addition, Hawaii was the only destination where married men could meet their wives. I had always hoped for an R&R to Australia (it would be the only way I would ever get to see the place), though I knew that possibility was remote to say the least! Whenever an Australian billet ever came up, the clerks in the Company office in the Battalion Rear always seemed to get it.

Since they wanted an answer right away, I asked who was the next in line? They told me it was Holder (no, not the former attorney general), the rocket squad leader, a tall, handsome black man who happened to be married and a friend of mine. Every two weeks or so, along with her constant letters every, Holder’s wife would send him one or

two of these gigantic cigars. They were about ten inches long, an inch or so in diameter, kind of greenish looking and in their own plastic tube. I figured they were very expensive and had to be taking a pretty good bite out of her paycheck. I went looking for Holder and when I found him, I woke him up. He was a bit pissed (sleep wasn't that easy to come by) until I told him what was up! I told him if I turn the R&R down, he's next in line and could meet his wife in Hi.! But they wanted an answer right now! We went up to the CO and his radio operator together and the deal was done. Holder was going to Hawaii!!

I never thought any more about it till a few weeks later. Our Company had the dubious distinction of being a "C.A.R.T." (Combat Action Response Team), which meant we moved around a lot, wherever the fat was in the fire! I think we were in camp Phu Bi when Holder came up to and asked how I wanted my steak cooked. I didn't consider myself someone who just fell off the pickle wagon, so I was skeptical to say the least. Holder assured me he had just found a good friend of his who was assigned as a cook in the officer's mess and he could deliver! I said medium rare but anything between raw and charred would work for me! We had to sneak away from everybody but when Holder brought those T-bones they were hanging off all sides of their paper

plates! That was the only time in Vietnam I had enough to eat! I went to Vietnam wearing 220 lbs. on my 6' 4" frame and returned weighing 165! That was Holder's way of thanking me for giving up my R&R for him. I told him, "Hell, I didn't give up anything I wanted anyway, but THANK YOU very much just the same!" That only goes to show how officers ate while in relatively secure rear areas, while we enlisted peons were fed whatever slop they could come up with and not too much of that!

An Extension of Presence

Laura Mahal

1. 1330 hours. I sat alone in the church communion hall, eating my nitrite-free turkey sandwich, diagonally sliced, with a side of Baked Lay's potato chips. My boss, blue nametag, came in at the end of my break and patted my shoulder: "You're doing a good job. People like you. Keep up that cheerful spirit."

2. 1350 hours. Returned to the childcare room, where Noah's Ark and "Jesus Loves Me" posters were covered with brown butcher paper. Made my way toward an available computer. My boss, red nametag, drew me aside before I typed in my password. "You're too chatty. People might perceive that as an effort to influence them. Follow your protocol sheet. No deviations." I got back to work.

3. 1400 hours. Man walked into voting center through a side door, kitty-corner to my non-dominant hand. I turned away, filing paperwork on large, wheeled metal bookshelves behind me. When I faced the door again, I saw him scanning the line of election judges. Black nametag, red, blue. He executed a right face and appeared before me, five o'clock shadow on a face lined before its time.

4. A German shepherd heeled behind him, “service dog, do not pet” draped across the dog’s back in black cloth, the color of mourning. Haunches flared in a flank of muscle when the dog sat, thick tail still as an icon on a shelf. The young man, mid-to-late twenties, I guessed. Realizing I had access to this man’s date of birth, current address, and much more.

5. Aware of body language—this young man was seeking clear information and simple guidance—I spoke quietly: “Sir, may I help you?” Red-nametag boss was watching. Do everything by the books: ask for a form of ID. Verify voting information. Offer a paper ballot or the chance to use a TSX machine. Usually those who chose to vote by machine were trusting sorts, but anyone might prefer a paper ballot. Hew to training. Stick with the election manual.

6. “Paper, please,” he replied.

7. We exchanged common courtesies. I thanked him for voting, invited him to choose his cubicle—trifold science project boards on 3’x3’ card tables in the converted church nursery / voting center. That was it. I would keep plowing through my early-voting shift for the 2016 elections.

8. The shepherd paced itself to the man’s measured steps, and in a moment, all I could see were long legs in pressed

blue jeans, and the dog, shoulders tight with attentiveness, as the ex-soldier retreated to complete his ballot in anonymity.

9. 1410 hours. A high-pitched bark erupted. A miniature Pomeranian or teacup chihuahua, some expensive designer dog curated to maximum ugliness, leapt from a beaded purse, lunging toward the service dog. “Ruffy!” shrieked a Kardashian-lookalike. She held her red-and-white manicured nails away while she scooped the little dog into the crook of her arm. “Be a good boy and help Mommy vote.”

10. The Pomeranian’s mommy wasn’t at my station. I watched her proceed to a table, twenty feet from my soldier, and lay a purple poof on the floor. Ruffy settled down for the breath of two or three ballot measures, skimmed quickly by a blonde in a high ponytail.

11. 1416 hours. Yipping erupted again, this time accompanied by the scurrying of furred feet and clipped toenails. Deserting the voter before me, I somehow teleported myself between the blonde and the soldier. Ruffy bared tiny white teeth.

12. Behind me, I could feel the tension of battle readiness: the sensation surging through my body was in him, too.

13. As Blondie wailed and Ruffy lunged, I flipped a voter privacy screen into an impromptu barricade. The soldier backed away, ballot in hand, shepherd at his side, little rat dog not worth a glance.

14. I abandoned my post and exited the voting center. To hell with red-nametag boss and the manual.

15. “May I walk you to your car,” I asked, awaiting a nod or the shake of the man’s downturned head. To be honest, also awaiting permission from a canine weighing well over 120 pounds. “I didn’t, I can’t, drive,” he said. “My girlfriend is coming to get me,” he added, pointing toward a rusted brown van that ambled our way, backfiring twice before halting outside the orange cones and signs reading: “No campaign literature or electioneering within one hundred feet of the voting center.”

16. A skinny, tattooed arm slid out the driver’s side window, motioning him around the far side, away from me, yet he held up a fist clenched in military sign language to cease all movement. “I want you to meet someone,” he said, for both our benefit, me and the girlfriend. “Jess, this is Laura. Laura, Jess. She helped me. There was a dog situation. Laura is one of us.”

17. Jess translated that into veteran, then asked, “How long?”
“Long enough for it to imprint.”

18. She rolled her window down, cranking at a lever ill-disposed to turn. “Can I ask you something, Laura? Have you ever had a miscarriage?” A bizarre question for a random civilian to ask, but not for Jess, who needed to know.

19. I took a ragged breath, remembering to be cognizant—Blondie and Ruffy might exit the voting center at any moment. Dogfight bloodshed would be trauma for all involved. “Yeah,” I said. “Two. Maybe three.” Our eyes connected. I knew what existed between this couple: Love, Hope, Pain. Despair. “But I do have two healthy kids. They’ve got asthma, and the pregnancies were rough. I spent most of the second one on bedrest. Still, they turned out okay.”

20. I wrote down my name, address, phone, email. “You can call me,” I said. “Or come over.”

21. I wanted to say it would be okay, but that was a promise I could not deliver on. I wanted to tell her my kids were changemakers, curse breakers, even.

22. I hoped Jess would call me. She never did.

Suckers

Ryan Lanham

It's early July and we've been in theater for seven months. We're traveling north on Route Utah. The asphalt roads we've laid are named after states. This one seems fitting. It's a tough land. Tough people. This route runs north and south from Kabul to our outpost, FOB Shank, in Logar Province. It's not the red earthiness of Utah. More tan and chalky like the Badlands of South Dakota. To our east, the Hindu Kush, a perennially white-capped mountain range thrusting upward from the horizon. Its sawtooth ridgeline is formidable. Imposing. Further east it joins the Himalayas. Mountains in the Hindu Kush average nearly 15,000 feet, the highest almost 20,000. A few of the high-elevation mountain passes function as historically important access points to India and the southeast Asian subcontinent. It's strange to think about man and beast weathering snow and blistering winds to inch across this unforgiving terrain in search of glory and riches and conquest.

Nowadays much of the violence is self-contained. Taliban killing their own. Our mission, as we move north along Utah, is to visit the site of a truck bomb that exploded yesterday, killing twenty-four people. Sixteen little kids.

When we arrive at the elementary school everything appears oddly normal except the massive crater in the road just outside the entrance. Children are running and jumping and laughing. A few approach with open hands and demand “pen.” Others join them. Pen. Pen. Pen. I dig in my pockets for a pen and toss it to the crowd. Boys fight over the prize.

Normally on a day like this we pass out Dum-Dums. A little sugar to soothe their wounds. Our colonel is adamant about keeping the trucks stocked with Dum-Dums for hearts-and-minds missions. Soccer balls too. But those can be unwieldy. He wants pockets full of suckers when we’re marching through war-torn streets. I think American kids would see through the Dum-Dums charade. They’re the cheapest suckers you can buy. Banks and doctors’ offices give them out for free. They’re small and hard and gone in two bites. Give me real candy, our kids would say. Snickers or Starbursts. Something that shows you care.

But these kids don’t know good candy. They’re dum dums. We smile and give them our worst. Our cheapest. A veiled attempt at benevolence. It’s all a sham. And I think they know it too. On days when we don’t bring pens or soccer balls or Dum-Dums, and we spend a little too much time patrolling the streets of their villages, kids will climb to the rooftops and begin throwing rocks. Just a few at first.

Something we can laugh off. Then the streets clear and rows of children line the walls overhead.

A scene from *Lord of the Flies*.

Their little faces scrunched up in hate. Little arms heaving stones from above. It's scary. Maybe those arms will hold other weapons one day. Weapons that allow the full expression of their hate. On days when the rocks rain, we run back to the safety of our trucks, pull the gunner down, and creep away.

Today, at the elementary school, we bring an interpreter, and after an hour interrogation with local officials, we learn that the truck and its explosives were destined for Kabul. Likely to an embassy or government building. But the truck stalled and the plan was aborted. A failed Oklahoma City bombing. Except the kids part. When Afghan police arrived on scene to inspect the stalled truck, a group of children gathered round to watch. Somewhere in the distance a man pressed a trigger. Better to blow them all to hell than risk being caught.

We make a few notes. Shake our heads. Maybe some hands. Then return to the trucks for lunch, where someone grabs a bag of Dum-Dums and makes the rounds.

Little Things

Milt Mays

Sometimes, in fact most times, it was the little things a doctor did that helped patients. It may not involve anything you learned in all those four years of medical school, or three years of residency. All those complicated books, biological reactions, anatomic variants, physiologic nuances were sometimes outweighed by little things you learned in grade school. And sometimes those little things were like that one soldier in a platoon in Vietnam—they could be well hidden. Even from me, a retired Navy captain in the medical corps. But maybe it was worse for me. Maybe I'd been on a medical high horse for so long, my vision of the little things was lost.

He was another overweight diabetic veteran, an epidemic in the US. I saw probably fifty a month. Problem was that Agent Orange had been used as a defoliant in Vietnam. It took forty years after Vietnam for the US government to finally admit that Agent Orange had caused several medical problems, including diabetes. And here I was working for that government in the VA primary care clinic. Irony just kept on coming in the service.

He was a Mexican American named Jimmy who had been a grunt in Vietnam. A low-ranking soldier who carried

a rifle and walked in the jungle a lot. He always seemed a little nervous, but jovial and so agreeable I felt like hugging him after each visit. All I needed to do was get his blood sugar under control, fairly simple with injecting insulin—for most people. Well, really for a fair number. You suck out enough insulin from the bottle to read a certain number on the syringe, then inject it. But this guy was special. I just didn't know it yet.

The first minutes of every-three-month visits, I would ask, “Are you giving yourself fifty units in the morning?”

“Yes, just like you told me to, doctor.” A smile, a nod. He wanted to please. It took me a few visits to start reading his sideways glances and pursed lips showing he had more to tell, but didn't want to, and probably would not have if pressed those early visits.

That same question and answer continued for a year. In the meantime, he told me he could not watch any war movies and always stayed inside on July Fourth, made sure his wife and kids stayed away from the house on Veterans Day. He just wanted to be left alone and not have everyone keep asking, “Are you okay, Jimmy?” Because he wasn't.

Once he looked sternly at me. “You know that John Wayne movie, *The Green Beret*?”

“Sure.”

“That is the hardest, because I was there.”

I frowned at him. “You were in the movie?”

“No, that was the place I was at, that place where I lost a lot of friends. It wasn’t like the movie.”

He had no tears, but he closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry. Would you like to talk to a counselor about that?”

He shook his head. “No. Thank you, doctor. I know how to handle it—not watch those movies.”

Once I asked him what books he read. He just shrugged.

That made me start thinking. Maybe his vision was bad, and that was the reason his sugars were all over the place, even though I tried to make insulin dose changes very simple, up or down five units only. I wondered if he needed glasses.

So, one visit I got a vision chart. I had him stand back at the twenty-foot line and asked him to read the letters.

“I like the ones with just the Es,” he said. “I can point which way they are going.”

It reminded me of my dad, who had very bad vision. He’d wanted to serve in WWII so bad he’d memorized the vision chart. But they used the E chart, and he failed.

I didn’t have an E chart. So, instead, I held up a bottle of water about three feet from him. It said in large letters, SPRING WATER, in all caps.

“What does that say,” I asked.

He looked at it. “There’s an S.”

“Okay, good. What else.”

He looked at the floor. “I don’t know.”

“Can you see it?”

He nodded but gave me one of those sideways glances with pursed lip. By this time, I had figured out this indicated he had more information.

Should I ask or wait? I thought if I asked, he would clam up, so I waited.

After a good thirty seconds, probably easy for a psychiatrist to wait out, but for me seemed like eternity, he looked up with tears in his eyes. “I can’t read.”

A man who had been to Vietnam, spent three years in the service, lived in this well-to-do city, and I just assumed. Not only was he suffering from bad PTSD but couldn't read. He'd probably gone through hell trying to cover it up in the service. Yet, I'm sure his sergeant had probably picked up on it. Had he teased him about it? Had he even tried to teach him to read? Had anyone? Even now, he probably went through every day afraid someone would find out his secrets and make fun of him. How could I ever understand his life? I felt the fall from my high horse.

We got a nurse to help him with the insulin pens, showed him how to read the numbers.

In one month, his glucose levels were controlled.

In another month, he agreed to a counselor. And we even got him an English reading teacher.

Little things.

Phu Cat

James Speed Hensinger

Some of us adopted stray dogs. There must have been a dozen mongrels in the compound. Some had homemade collars made of scraps of rope. One wore a bandana tied around his neck. They were mostly tan or black mongrels with short hair. All remarkably similar in appearance. They were about fifteen inches at the shoulder with floppy ears and long snouts. Who knows, maybe they were all part of the same litter, or maybe it was how the purebred mongrel had devolved. Since they weren't housebroken, they couldn't come into our hooch. In the evening, you often saw guys and dogs playing with balls or Frisbees on the chopper pad.

I was an FNG, a Fucking New Guy. I hadn't learned the "system" yet. A guy was an FNG mostly because no one had bothered to learn his name yet. FNGs had to be tested by the 'Nam before people learned their names or gave them a nickname. FNGs may have had "book learning," but now they had to go through OJT (On the Job Training) to learn the stuff they didn't teach in basic and advanced training back in the World. If they did something stupid, people could die.

My nickname became Speed. It was literally my middle name, and my mother's maiden name. I decided to name myself rather than risk what someone else might dub me. In high school I had run the 440-yard race, or the quarter mile on the track team, and some of my buddies had taken to calling me "Speed." It was a tease for always coming in second. The only thing I was good for was a leg in the mile relay race where we needed four 440 runners. Unfortunately, many of the NCOs didn't know the backstory and assumed I was an amphetamine user.

I was tired, hot, and sweaty after riding in the back of an open deuce-and-a-half truck down from An Khe in the Central Highlands, then unloading office furniture for most of the day. When I carried my duffle bag and rifle into our hooch, I found a cat lying on the empty bunk that was left for me. The other guys had all snuck away from unloading the trucks earlier in the day to have first pick of the bunks. I hadn't thought of this, which I guess just reinforced my FNG status. I ended up with a bunk in the middle of the length of the building. It was as far away from the front door as the back door. This would give me a disadvantage when all of us had to get out of the hooch in a hurry, such as when we were under attack. I did get a bottom bunk, but that was

because there were two empty bunks, mine and the one above me.

Dropping my bag, I asked some of the guys what they knew about the cat curled up on my bunk.

A guy I didn't know said, "Her name's Phu Cat, like the air base in Qui Nhon twenty clicks east."

He had been with the advance party, arriving a week ago. How he knew this I hadn't a clue. He might have just been making it up, but Phu Cat she was.

Phu Cat was a free spirit, but she came with the bunk. She had a shorthair white coat with an even, faint gray overlay of color, a gray blaze on her forehead, a Mona Lisa smile, and startling blue eyes. She slept on my bunk most days and nights except when she was out hunting.

Cats were rare in 'Nam because the Vietnamese liked to eat them. But because she was living with Americans, she was safe from the stewpot. I would sneak food from the mess hall for her. Although she slept on my bunk, she wasn't really my cat; nobody really owns a cat. Actually, it usually works out the other way, the cat owns you. There were twenty of us living in the open bay of the second floor of our hooch sharing her attention, and soon, some of our families back in the World began mailing canned cat food to us.

Dogs and cats were our surrogate families. They didn't yell at us like sergeants. They didn't ask us to do chickenshit things like roll our socks into balls or polish brass belt buckles. They never bitched at us about haircuts. All they needed was love and affection, shelter and food. It was a touch of home, a touch of normalcy.

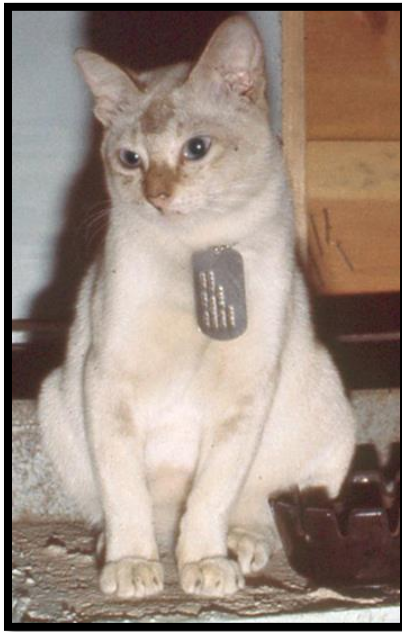
Dog tags were a fact of life. Everyone had two. Phu Cat had a collar I made with a bit of knotted parachute cord and her own "cat tags." I had gotten a friendly supply guy to include her tags with his order for replacement dog tags for myself. I have no idea what the guy thought in the supply depot down in Cam Ranh Bay when he got the order form.

Every night, Phu Cat curled up on my bunk down by my feet. Although she often left in the middle of the night to hunt, she was always back by morning.

One night an awful moaning sound awakened us. I soon realized it was coming from Phu Cat. Although I grew up with all kinds of pets—including dogs, guinea pigs, white mice, chickens, parakeets, and a litter of opossums—I had never had an indoor cat, only barn cats. We talked about what was causing her to moan in this awful way, and decided she was in heat. Every night she would torture us with her

mating calls. The whole hooch got pissed off because her constant singing was disturbing our sleep. We debated about what to do. I had never seen another cat in Vietnam. Where was she going to find a lover? Someone suggested we could use a Preparation H suppository to calm her down. It was more of a joke than a serious solution. Finally, without our help, she stopped moaning. It had only been about a week, but it seemed like longer.

Time passed, and she was getting rounder and heavier.



Note: A pregnant Phu Cat wearing her "dog tags" watching me work. © James Speed Hensinger

I suspected she had found a mate and might be pregnant. But her new body shape could have another cause. Asking around, I found out the Army had a K-9 unit in Qui Nhon, some twenty clicks east on the coast, and the K-9 guys had a veterinarian. I asked the First Sergeant if I could get a ride with the mail jeep into town. He knew about Phu Cat and decided it would be OK. The next morning, I tied a leash length of parachute cord to her collar, picked her up, grabbed my rifle, and off we went in the jeep. Benny, our mail guy, dropped me off at the veterinarian's shack on the edge of her name source, Phu Cat Air Base.

The plan was for Benny to pick us up in a couple of hours. Phu Cat got a little squirmy. I doubt she had ever seen so many very large dogs. These scout dogs were all German shepherds that had had too many vitamins. I felt sorry for them wearing heavy fur coats in one-hundred degrees and ninety-five percent humidity. Fortunately, they were all under control, muzzled and leashed or in kennels. Some of them had white bandages wrapped around a limb, or body. One guy even had a bandage on his tail, which I figured was a battle injury probably from a mine or grenade. Every dog with a bandage should have gotten a purple heart.



Note: US Army War Dog. ©James Speed Hensinger

The vet was surprised to see a cat. As he examined her by running his fingers over her, looking in her ears and mouth and taking her temperature, we talked about what he wanted to do when he DEROSed. A man DEROSed when he flew home. DEROS stood for Date of Estimated Return from Overseas. The doc was looking forward to a small animal practice in Storm Lake, Iowa.

After the exam, he pronounced her pregnant, and explained her temperature seemed to be spiking, which meant she was probably a day or two away from birthing.

While Phu Cat and I waited for Benny outside the vet clinic, we sat on a bench, and I started taking photos of various aircraft on the runways of the Air Base. Well,

actually, Phu Cat wasn't very impressed by the aircraft, but there they were. I've always liked machinery; this was impressive stuff. Benny showed up about an hour later. I was out of film and Phu Cat was sleeping in the sun on the table. Picking up Phu Cat and my rifle, I climbed into the jeep.



Note: C130 Hercules transport/cargo plane at Phu Cat Air Base.
©James Speed Hensinger

Two days later, she started poking around and pawing at things. I decided she was looking for a place to have her kittens, so I made a nest for her with a blanket in a cardboard box I stole from behind the mess hall and slid under my bunk.

The next day one of the guys who had been sleeping after pulling night perimeter guard came to me at work with

the news Phu Cat was delivering, but there was something wrong. He'd walked past her box on his way to the latrine to shave. Heard her moaning. One kitten was out and OK, but the second seemed to be stuck. Why had he waited to come to me? He was sleeping, and apparently, she hadn't started moaning until the second kitten got stuck. Running back to the hooch to her birthing box, I saw right away she was breeching. Two tiny hind legs were sticking out. The kitten was turned around and wasn't coming out the normal headfirst way. I'd watched calves being born and been told about this. With a cow, you put on rubber gloves that extended up to your armpits and pushed the calf back in to turn it around. I had a problem. First, I didn't have rubber gloves, and second, there was no way my hand was going to fit in there. Several of my buddies had started to gather. Word had spread about Phu Cat's birthing, and guys were ghosting out of the office, with excuses like, "Gotta hit the latrine, Sarge."

I asked two guys who were watching, "Hey, would you guys mind holding her head and front paws? Don't choke her or anything, just pin her to the floor."

What I planned to do might cause her to bite me, but if they could grip her right behind her head, she might not be able to twist out of it. This was an all-or-nothing situation. If

the kitten stayed in her womb, they both would die. The kitten was covered in slime and very slippery, so I pulled off my OD T-shirt and used it to cover my hand with a single layer of fabric. I hoped the fabric would give me a better grip. I didn't know if this kitten was going to live or die, but I knew there were probably several more kittens behind it who were not getting born with this little one in the way. Trying not to crush the kitten, I squeezed as much of it as I could in my hand and pulled. Nothing happened.

“Oh shit.”

I had already squeezed so hard I was very worried I might have killed it. Then I remembered a veterinarian telling me some foals had to be pulled out with a block and tackle. Phu Cat looked at me, but she seemed to sense I was trying to help. I decided to pull harder. The kitten seemed to be stretching, but then I realized it was sliding out. But it wasn't moving, and slime covered its head. Its chest wasn't moving.

By then word had spread, and most of my bunkmates had left their jobs and come to the hooch to watch. Ringo was drinking from a canteen cup of water. I figured the kitten might be dead, but why not try something? Back in the World, I had been an Eagle Scout and a Red Cross Water

Safety Instructor, so I was cross-trained on several resuscitation techniques, and step one was to clear the airway.

“Ringo, hold out your cup.”

I had to get the slime away from the kitten's nose and mouth.

Using one hand, I plunged the poor thing into the water and pulled it out. Then using the same T-shirt, I wiped its face. I held its little face in front of my lips and gave it several quick puffs of breath like I was trying to blow a candle out. I was worried I might overdo it and damage its little lungs, so I made sure not to do the ordinary lip-to-lip contact. My lips were huge compared to its tiny face. I just blew short puffs of air into its face. Suddenly it moved and opened its mouth. I gave the kitten a couple more puffs and it began breathing on its own. I believe the adage about cats having nine lives, and this little guy had just used up a couple.

“You did it!” Ringo shouted. “Look, it’s trying to cry!”

I too felt some warm fuzzies of self-satisfaction. The kitten had responded to my attempts.



Note: Phu Cat with her new family. ©James Speed Hensinger

I set it down with the first kitten and saw Phu Cat was working on a third kitten. I saw this one was black as its little head appeared. We were the proud fathers of three kittens that day. While the whole hooch celebrated the same way we spent many evenings, by getting drunk on warm beer, Phu Cat celebrated by nursing her new kittens.

Lost in Baghdad

Ben Schrader

I was the techie in my platoon. Thus, whenever we got cool new gear, or some new system, they sent me to learn how to use it. Then I would come back and train everyone else how to use it. From the Blue Force Tracker to new tactical gear, I was the techie.

Halfway through our deployment to Iraq we had already been hit by god knows how many IEDs, so when they told us we would be getting the new Warlock IED jammers, we all rejoiced. So they sent me from our small base near Baqubah to Camp Victory in Baghdad.

Me and Sgt. Carter would join a brigade-wide convoy to Camp Victory to get trained on how to use them. We were with medics, mechanics, tankers, cooks, and all other kinds of MOS's, but Sgt. Carter and I were Cavalry Scouts, and had easily seen more combat and been on more missions than anyone in the convoy. There were about 15 Humvees on this convoy, making it a prime target for an ambush.

The ranking officer was a doctor who had never left base, and when he told us the route we would be taking, me and Sgt. Carter looked at each other in dismay. The route took us through the heart of Baghdad. My platoon had run

many missions to Camp Victory, but we always skirted around the city on the surrounding highways, not only because it was quicker, but also safer. Unfortunately, Sgt. Carter was spineless and kept his mouth closed. The headstrong specialist that I was, I raised my hand.

“Sir, shouldn’t we take Route New York?” And pointed to the route we always took to get to Victory.

“No, some MPs gave me this route, they said it was the fastest way there.”

“Even for a convoy this size?” I retorted.

“It shouldn’t make a difference.”

“Ok, sir.”

We get to Baghdad.

“Fuck we’re stuck, this is a dead end.”

We had to turn around 15 Humvees on a small crowded market road, with everyone staring at us like, “What the fuck are these idiots doing?”

In my mind, I could see a grenade being tossed into the turret of one of our Humvees, and one of us dying. Thankfully, that didn’t happen. After 30 minutes, we turned around and finally made it to the civilian entrance to Camp Victory. The gate guard looked more confused than us, because we obviously had no idea where the fuck we were going.

I spent the next couple days in class. But when I wasn't in class I went to Saddam's personal swimming pool, where a dozen Australian Special Forces soldiers were hanging out drinking beers, which we weren't allowed to have. When it was time to go the captain leading our convoy said, "here's the route we're taking," once again through the middle of Baghdad, and immediately my hand shot up, but I didn't wait to be called on, "Sir, I really think we should take Route New York, my platoon has used it many times, it's fast and easy."

"No, the MPs said this was the fastest . . ."

Fuck

And once again, the captain got us lost in Baghdad. As we had to turn our trucks around, I barked at Sgt. Carter.

"Give me the mic"

"What? Why? Do you see something?"

"Just give it to me" "OK"

I pushed the mic button.

"Shadow 3 to Lion 2"

"This is Lion 2"

"I'm sure glad we listened to the MPs."

Guns, Drugs, and Las Vegas

Ross M. Atkinson

20 x 6 = 120. So I have 120\$ in blue Pokeballs. Sold about 50 last night at 12 a piece at the rave, that is 500 + 100 = \$600 + \$120 in the bag. \$720 is that right? Did I eat too many? Did someone steal some?

There is a strange phenomenon that happens when you sell drugs. You can never get away from the numbers: the addition, the multiplication, and the questions of who is and is not your friend. It is like the ticker that rolls at the bottom of the evening news, a constant stream of calculations that bring about persistent irritation and fear. Fear of getting ripped off, of losing friends, of making too many friends—a dissolution of trust.

Selling ecstasy was a little better than something like cocaine. Or at least that is what I told myself. At least it isn't crack or meth or heroin. Back to the rave tonight to risk everything for \$100. Las Vegas can be as nasty as it is bright and beautiful. Don't you know, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. That is a great motto unless Vegas is your home.

Let me eat a few of these tonight on my way to the rave, get ready. A few more in the rave. I think these yellow dolphins are pretty speedy, just what I like. I get a call. A dozen more to sell at a park down the road. I don't trust this

buyer, but \$240 is \$240. I call up a few friends and head over, one of these friends is a young man named Jesse Ordonez. Arriving, we see the purchaser alone in the park. I approach, ask for the cash with Jesse by my side. The buyer—now a pastor in Vegas—asks to see the pills. I pull them out at the same time he pulls out a small silver handgun.

I remember him saying, “Give me that shit, bitch.”

And at that moment, almost as if I had planned it, a police officer in an unmarked vehicle turned on a spotlight. The gun toting, drug purchasing, soon-to-be pastor split. I tossed my stash to the ground near a bush. A knee in my back. Red, blue, red, blue in the background. Jesse lying next to me. Sex lights, we’d call ’em, because every time you see ’em someone’s getting fucked.

No pills or guns were found, and we were released after one of my passengers was picked up by his mother, still being under eighteen and out past midnight. I came back for the pills later with Jesse. I was afraid the cops or the gun toting future pastor would still be there, but it was just me, Jessie, and a baggie of my disco-biscuits.

I hear later that someone had been shooting a gun in the upper-middle-class neighborhood where the park was, and the cop that stopped us was patrolling to identify who was firing a weapon. The cop’s presence at that moment was

both the thing that saved me and the thing I was most afraid of.

I find the pills and eat four in a fervor and give a few to Jesse for having my back. How many have I eaten now?

In and out of consciousness for days—felt like weeks. I have flashes of memory, my first out-of-body experience, my first bout of sleep paralysis—a condition that would follow me all the way to the service. A little overdose memento from a night ornamented with drug calculations and a diminishing trust in humanity. Dehydrated, I can't drink or eat. I puke when water hits my stomach, when I swallow, when I even think about swallowing. My girlfriend takes me to the hospital, a bucket between my legs.

When I arrive at the fluorescent, white-tiled ER, I am met with looks of concern from staff behind the desk. Not the “he just cut off a finger” kind of concern. Less exciting and more pitiful.

“This boy needs some fluids!” One of them said.

Three bags of saline drained into my veins, and I felt alive again. Alive, for the first time in days. Hydrated with no bullet holes in me. A fate luckier than Jesse's, who would later lose his life in a gas station shoot-out. Alive . . . But never so lost.

Maybe I should join the Army . . .

Zero-G Oak Tree

Ryan McGoldrick

Trees hate me
I think –
Who could blame them?
I was a little shit
always climbing all over them.

But they got their revenge
every now and again.

I always knew
when they were about to strike.
Time would slow to a crawl
right before gravity would switch on.

And I knew I had fucked up.

That single moment of weightlessness
floating in space
before Connor's tree released its grip
and I hit the pavers below,

or when I ran down
the curved trunk of the
old oak outside school
and the ancient bastard tripped me.

Trees hate me –
Or maybe I was just
a clumsy little shit.

Cornered

Ryan Lanham

The staccato report of machine gun fire gets louder, closer. I crouch in the doorway to a qalat with two team members. Giant turquoise doors open into the fort-like compound. But they're locked. Bolted tight. We could blast our way in, but noise would draw attention.

We huddle together, pull security. Our rifles stare away from the doorway into the night. Machine guns march closer. Reverberations rattle my teeth. Time feels sticky. I experience the moment outside of my body. Floating high above I can see tracer rounds etching pink arcs in the black sky, closing in on our location. The enemy are thin, wild eyed. Bared teeth flash with each trigger pull. They're brave to attack, to push the line.

Or high.

Maybe both. Maybe ready to die, to meet Allah. Collect their virginal harem.

I return to my body.

"We've got to fucking move," I say. "They're right around the corner."

My team members hold still. Weapons pointed at shadows.

“I’m not going to die like this,” I say, feeling the weight of panic.

Minutes stretch to infinity. The warm Afghan air is filled with scents of the countryside. Manure and hay, burning firewood and roasted lamb.

I remember a campfire as a kid. Unfolded hanger stretched above, a marshmallow licked by flames. I remember the fear I felt when it caught fire, white turning black under the orange glow. Helpless as it melted, slipped from the hanger. Sizzling on the coals below.

“Fuck this. I’m moving.”

A call comes over the shoulder radio.

“We’ve got air support overhead. They’re tracking enemy combatants moving east now along the riverbed.”

The echo of gunfire sounds different, like a train rolling away in the distance.

“They’re moving away,” a team member says.

I feel the weight of my last words. The decision to run. I wonder if they think me a coward. Almost breaking protocol. I search their faces for answers, but they just look tired. Maybe they were thinking it too. We train to stand our ground, to turn and face the enemy.

But I’m not ready to go down like this, to find myself skewered over the fire.

Learning a New Language

Or. . .

How to Speak Drill Instructor

Marshall Spring

Sensitivity warning: If offended by colorful language do not read

“Get the fuck over here you cock-sucking maggot motherfucker.”

My Drill Instructor wants to talk to me. First day of boot camp and I already have a nickname.

“Bring your faggot fairy girlfriend with you.”

He wants me to bring my bunkmate.

“You two queer bitches need to fill these cups. I hope you hydrated because I’m either getting piss or blood out of your filthy cocks today.”

He wants us to take a urinalysis.

“You pathetic motherfuckers better open your cock holster and sound off like you got a pair before I kick you in your syphilitic cunts so hard your ovaries will come shooting out of your ears.”

He would like us to respond louder.

“You two shit stains go gather up fifteen of your mongoloid moron cum dumpster comrades and get your worthless carcasses into my head and produce me seventeen cups of piss in thirty seconds or I am going to come in there and shove my boot so far up your ass that you can polish my toe with the back of your tongue.”

I may have made a mistake.

Ambush

Gary Schneider

We were walking someplace in the pouring rain when our Lt's radio man got a call on his "two-way." This was unusual, mainly because our radios very often did not work. Most particularly in the rain. Anyway, the problem was that Delta Company had walked into an ambush and had a hell of a firefight going on. They could use some help. Could we respond? Since we were only about three miles away our "Louie" said of course! The call came to "double time," and we headed towards the coordinates on the run. Since there was no wood on our M-16s, nobody gave it much thought that our rifles were muzzle up in the pouring rain. When we arrived at the given location, no one was there.

The rain had stopped and it was deathly still. There was a field of elephant grass to our front so we started working our way thru it. For those of you unfamiliar with elephant grass, imagine your lawn a bit overgrown, say anywhere from four to ten feet tall. This grass was usually home to all kinds of creepy crawly things including bamboo vipers and cobras. We were lucky as the field we were in was only about four feet tall. Then after about a hundred feet it appeared to be mowed. Probably cut with a hand sickle to thatch someone's house. I was looking forward to getting out

of the grass when I noticed the grass about six feet in front of me move slightly. With the safety off and my finger on the trigger, I started parting the grass with my gun barrel. To the great relief of both of us, it turned out to be a wounded Marine!

I stepped up to him to see how bad he was hurt when I noticed the sharp, jagged end of his shinbone sticking thru his trousers. He was a rather short Black man, though his color was more the color of chocolate milk with a lot more milk than cocoa. As I called out, “corpsman up,” he grabbed me around the knees and said, “Thank God you’re white!” What he meant of course was, “Thank God I was on his side, not the other.” The V.C. and N.V.A. in that area routinely murdered any prisoners, wounded or not. I can only imagine the terror that young man went thru as he crawled thru the grass and heard the V.C. stripping weapons and web gear off the dead and beating the grass looking for any other wounded Marines. Then he said, “Look out man, they’re waiting for you. I just heard them talking a minute ago!”

I immediately screamed “AMBUSH,” and everyone dropped into the grass as the shooting started. Then I heard a lot of single shots, followed by a lot of cursing. My opinion is that all that rain had got down our rifle barrels and plugged our gas return (a little soda straw-like thing that bled some

of the propellant gasses off thru a small hole inside the barrel, which causes the bolt to fly back, ejecting the spent casing then the spring-loaded bolt flies forward, pulling a fresh round from the magazine, all quicker than you can blink) turning our semi-auto rifles into single-shot guns! After each shot you would have to reach up and manually pull the bolt to the rear to eject the spent round, then release it to chamber a fresh round.

After the fight, I looked for that young man to thank him for his timely warning, only to learn he'd already been shot full of morphine and medevac'd out. Evidently when the ambush had been sprung and Delta was forced to withdraw, in the fog of battle he had inadvertently been left behind. At any rate, while it's true we saved him, he just as surely saved our bacon!

The Incident

Jeffery M. Curry

“Look, Sergeant, we are behind your recovery one hundred percent. We want to make sure you get everything you need. I know you understand how delicate this situation is for everyone involved, but putting you in front of a class of students is too much of a liability right now.”

He said it. He actually said I couldn't do my job because I am a goddamned liability. A liability for his reputation and how he looks on his next evaluation report, more like it. Besides, who is he referring to when he says, “everyone involved,” anyway? No one else was involved but me and my wife. I didn't hear from either of these two until I knocked on the door and reported to this office twelve minutes ago.

“Now, the Sergeant Major and I have ensured all your appointments are scheduled and we'll be having your company commander report your progress to us on the weekly.”

“You know what that means, don' you Sarn't? You miss one goddamned appointment meeting and it's your ass.”

“Roger that, Sarn’t Major.” As if you give a shit about what happens to me other than my readiness metrics being green across the board. This really screwed that up for you, didn’t it, you hypocritical son of a bitch?

“I think what the Sergeant Major and I are trying to say is that we want to make sure you get the care you need so you can get back in the game and our unit cohesion can return to normal. You’re an important part of this outfit and the students seem to like you.”

Really? The gray, bushy, wrinkled eyebrows pushing his thin-framed glasses down his alcoholic-pocked red bulb of a nose showing me the hatred in his bloodshot eyes definitely makes me think he really did mean it would be my ass if I missed an appointment. Appointments, by the way, I had to make myself while the staff duty NCO carted me around the installation like I was a lost private. So, no, I don’t think that’s what he was saying at all. I also know you didn’t ensure I got any of the care I needed after what happened. It was up to me to fight with all the shitty medical admin civilians to line up my appointments.

“— and we care about your welfare as a soldier, as a part of this unit’s family, and as a person. What happened on Friday, y’...you know...the incident that required a

commander's critical information report to me, is something we take very seriously. Now, it says here that you never experienced any symptoms after each of your three deployments . . .”

Are you serious? You're really going over my Periodic Health Assessments right now? Of course, I didn't put any of that shit down on an official Army medical questionnaire. I have to maintain a damned Top Secret security clearance just to keep my job. No one fills that shit out truthfully until they start retiring or separating. You know that because I am sure this is your last fucking assignment before you get out.

Besides, what would you know about symptoms after a deployment? You spent your only deployment in a mansion at the Green Zone in Baghdad doing intel updates for high-ranking officers. You got to see Air Force chicks lay out by the old Saddam Hussein pool. I had to go to Iraq and make target packets on villages where kind-hearted women and kids lived just to appease the agenda of the current regime while we cleaned up the ISIS mess. Then, I had to go to Afghanistan and draw everyone down, twice! You never saw the Taliban take over a town we just left. You didn't see the insurgent men rip a little girl from her mother's arms, knowing she'd be shared by more than half the men

who took the town over, then branded a whore and killed—
if she was lucky.

“Now, we’re a far cry from taking shoelaces and belts from soldiers and sticking them in a road guard vest. I’d like to think we’ve moved past that type of treatment for these...incidents. But, what you did, err...tried to do, caused quite a stir. We can’t just sweep it under the rug and let on like it never happened, though I am sure that’s probably how you feel right now. No, we’ve got to deal with this directly. Have you seen the chaplain?”

Caused a stir? Sweep it under the rug? The chaplain? I don’t give a shit about the chaplain or the stir I might have caused! I damned sure don’t want anything swept under the rug anymore! Can’t you see? That’s part of the reason I did this! It’s part of the reason I’m here. You people calling yourselves leaders need to know what this life does to people. What it’s done to me.

“We had thought you was one of the good ’uns, Sarn’t. Had real potential and came with good evals from all yur ol’ units. Shame, really, we gotta even take ’ese steps.”

“Roger, Sarn’t Major.” What the hell am I supposed to say to that? You just keep staring at my baseball card profile from your Soldier-Leader Risk Reduction Tool

instead of looking at me, looking into my eyes. I'm just another risk to be mitigated so you can get a good command evaluation. Am I no longer one of the good ones? Does my sacrifice and suffering no longer count?

I skipped college to join the Army. Most of the men in my family served. My uncle is still serving in the Reserves, and I wanted to do my part for my country and our family legacy. I thought it was the right thing to do. I knew there'd be risks. My uncle even told me how proud he was of me for choosing to serve in a time when it was inevitable to get deployed. To go to war. I was making everyone proud and happy.

“Well, how's your wife holding up? She's the one that found you, right?”

Seriously?

“In any case, Irene and I would like to extend our help to her anyway, however we can.”

Can this be more awkward?

“Thanks, sir. I'll talk it over with her and see what she wants.”

She wants me to be okay. She wants me to get help. She wants me to have other people want things for me. She

wants to stop living with a husband that wakes up in the middle of the night with terrors, is always drinking, and tries to kill himself because the shit in his head won't stop. She wants her husband back. I want me back. Does anyone care what I want?

“But we'll get you back right so you can rejoin the fight, be fit as ever, and put this whole mess behind us. Sound good?”

“Yes, sir.”

I'm sure my nod was too slight for him to notice, but I felt every muscle in my neck when I moved. I am still so sore from trying to hang myself in my closet with my cargo belt three days ago that I can feel every slight twinge. I'm straining just trying to stand up and render a proper salute so the Sergeant Major doesn't jump in my ass, and I can get the hell out of this office. The amount of paperwork I am carrying feels like the dictionary, English and Arabic, and, of course, I get an escort back to my company area. Based on the scowl he's giving me, I'm sure he wants to get back to his real job.

Sorry, brother. I didn't want it to be this way. I didn't know what else to do. All I heard that night was screams. All

I saw was blood and tears. I couldn't make the bleeding stop. I couldn't make the crying stop. I couldn't make the screaming stop. It reverberated in my head, bounced off the walls inside my skull trying to escape through my ears until all that was left was a crescendo of noise. Then, a solid tone and a fade into darkness. My lungs burned from the fire and smoke caused by the bombs being dropped because of my target packets. I heard a faint voice calling out from a distance in the darkness, barely audible over the tone. I felt the pressure slowly loosen from around my neck until the cold air rushed into my lungs. I felt my wife's hands on my head. I puked all over the hardwood floor. It smelled like sour whiskey and coke. I cried so hard in her lap and just kept telling her how sorry I was and how worthless I felt. I did everything for everyone but myself and they just kept asking for more. I just laid there in her lap and sobbed until I slipped away to sleep. I woke up in the hospital.

I don't want you to escort me around anymore than you want to be escorting me. I'd like to take that job away from you. I have so many things I have to do for other people now that this incident happened. Substance Abuse, Chaplain, behavioral health, commander's risk reduction updates, getting back to "normal" so the unit doesn't suffer from my actions...so many responsibilities come out of a

suicide attempt. Not one of them has to do with me. So, brother, as much as I'd like to get you out of this duty, I am pretty busy taking care of everyone else.

Not Broken

Ross M. Atkinson

Getting out of the service with two painful knees, stress fractures in my feet, and weak ankles from multiple injuries was not something I wanted to admit was a lifelong issue when I was twenty-one.

I was not “disabled”; I knew people who were disabled. They were in wheelchairs, had therapists, went to meetings. Not me. I was just fine. I could walk and talk and jump and run. With only a little bit of pain. But what does a little pain matter anyway? Isn't pain just weakness leaving the body? That's what I was told in the service. Only complainers whine about a little pain. I am not a complainer.

I also definitely wasn't having issues with my brain. Sleep issues are typical for college students, and that is what I was now, a college student. These issues were not because of a disability or a disorder. Not because I lived in a place with people who wanted to kill me around every corner; not because I was forced to listen to perimeter sirens blaring for hours, alone, weapon pointed at my office door, thermite grenade in my other hand, waiting for the enemy to enter my office. Not because I can still hear the cries of cats dying by my hand, one by one, shot with a 9mm handgun—the FOB

mayor over my shoulder praising me for “dispatching the rodents.” You know, many people have panic attacks now and again, and all 22-year-olds drink and do drugs. The DUI I got was not because I had any issues to resolve, it was just par for the course, average—normal. It is all normal. I am just fine.

We and War Make It So

Milt Mays

A young man who comes to shine
a spotlight on the flag, a beam
for friends and family and national pride.
A Marine, you know, a modern knight.
A Marine, goddammit,
there is no equal,
and we and war make it so.

In college he opts to serve his country.
In Quantico he learns how
to win, how
to lead, how
to hate, how
to kill.

He never realizes he needs more, yes
a Marine needs much more.
If only we taught that.
Or would it matter in war?

He needs to know how
to forgive, how
to turn the other cheek, how

to help
the old and crippled and starving men,
the bloated children,
the wrinkled, sad women,
how to love the other side,
the ones he is supposed to hate.

But they make him hate more when
he sees friends die, shredded
by mortars, cut in half
by machinery of war.
The enemy makes him hate, the enemy
who destroys,
stealing souls by night
trying to rid him from their country. The enemy
are young men like him.
Right. They are all boys.

He captures them and lines them up blindfolded
into interrogation.

“You must have your papers!
If not, you go to ARVN’s shed.
And you know what happens there.”
Not Auschwitz and poison gas, God no.

Just a little torture and
bullet in the head.

War and young men: Nothing so cruel
as a nineteen-year-old boy puffing his chest. They kill,
they torture, they butcher like the best
in Dachau.

*So, what you need, Marine knight
armored in Quantico,
is to learn they are human,
even those boys who come at night and kill
your brothers.*

Oh, sure. Don't you see? It's so easy.

*Or...please
or...please
Try to remember:*

*Love,
Forgive,
Help.
You know these already.*

*Please try to remember them
over your friend's dead body.*

Says we who have never been,
or seen, or heard the screams
or felt the pain and melody
of war.

What is crystal clear:
we should never,
never
put you there again
where hell is here,
Marine.

Yet we do
and will again,
over and over, for we are human—
we make Marines.

A Marine, goddammit,
there is no equal,

and we and war make it so.

Veteran Left Behind

Shaun Case

I saved your lives
You never knew,
Covered in my blood
It was all for you.

—chorus—

Wounded to the core
Lost in the fight
Dreaming of salvation
Drifting into the night

Tossed to the wind
My soul turned to ash,
You left me behind
Your honor is trash

Wounded to the core
Lost in the fight
Dreaming of salvation
Drifting into the night

Full of laughter
Everyone feels fine,
I saved you again
I am the true front line

Wounded to the core
Lost in the fight
Dreaming of salvation
Drifting into the night

Your life is a dream
It isn't very real,
Drowned in my blood
It's all I can feel

Wounded to the core
Lost in the fight
Dreaming of salvation
Drifting into the night

My Version of War

Kathleen Willard

As for starting them,
I never set off cannons,
but listened to my father learn Vietnamese
by tape in our California living room,
part of his preparedness
to take up his command in Da Nang.

The closest I ever came to a battlefield
was the San Francisco International Airport when we
waved
our father off to war as if, he were leaving
on an ordinary business trip.

My first skirmish came
when I asked Chico Martin
to be my Sadie Hawkins date
and his anti-war activist parents,
using clandestine methods, uncovered
the truth of my father's profession
eclipsing polite chit-chat
as they carpooled us to the gym.
Chico refused to dance with an untouchable.

At my high school Stop the War
demonstration, I was outflanked
by some six foot basketball player in my French class,
who, chest out, chin pressed tightly
against his neck—shouted
like a platoon leader
questioning my commitment
for wearing a black armband.

But he had nothing at stake,
and when his anger stopped echoing
in my ear, he drove to Carmel Beach
to catch the last waves before sunset.
In our house,
we counted the days between my father's letters
and tried not to read too much
into the long silences between them.
Or of the origin of the half-carved Buddha.

Fuckin' A McCray

Ben Schrader

You never get to choose who you live with in the Army, sometimes you get an awesome squared away roommate, sometimes you get a shitbag. For five months I lived with a shitbag, “Fuckin’ A McCray,” called that because at least once a day you had to say “fuckin’ A McCray!” After living with a slob, who always smells and always gets in trouble, your patience wears thin. On our trip to Vienna for the weekend I broke. It started after Oktoberfest, him and Bentley didn’t want to pay for a room, so they slept in the van. When we returned in the morning the sliding door was sitting next to the van because they thought it would be fun to do donuts in the parking garage while the other hung outside of the van. Gordie, who rented the van, obviously said, “FUCKIN’ A MCCRAY!” Thankfully, Gordie was smitten with a girl he met, and after we traded the van in for a new one, he went off with her.

After getting the new van, we were off to Vienna. All day long McCray bitched about this or complained about that. “Whaaaaaat?” he would stupidly ask when we would tell him to shut the fuck up. The dam broke as he said he had to take a piss. I informed him the next stop was a few miles down the road . . . but no, “I’m gonna piss in this wine

bottle.” “Don’t do it asshole!” “You’re gonna get piss everywhere!” “The car is going to smell like piss!” Everyone shouted, but he pissed anyway, he then proudly beamed, “See, I only got like two drops on the floor...” but then he stated “I’m gonna throw it out the window!” “I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!” I yelled, but before I could finish my sentence a bottle was flying down the autobahn.

I pulled over at the rest stop, got out of the van, slammed the door and walked away from the van, and yelled “Fuck You” for a full minute. It kept me from killing Fuckin’ A McCray.

A Time to Heal and a Time to Sleep

Milt Mays

I'd been without sleep before, but not like this. At the Naval Academy in summer rotations on ships, you had eight on and sixteen off, but then sometimes those sixteen got shortened to twelve, due to other duties. And then I graduated to medical school where the work quadrupled and sleep got less, but still not like this. After medical school I became an intern with every third night down to every-other-night call. It was 1980, long before the push to give resident doctors reasonable work hours. It was the era when residents saw patients whether they were tired or not. So, many times I got no sleep the day after call, making it thirty-six on and twelve off. But that's what I had wanted, right? Get as much experience as possible in three years of residency.

I have to admit, it was interesting being up all night caring for patients who were either at the worst part of their lives or had just plain bad lives. Naval Hospital Charleston backed up to the projects, or as we called it, the Knife and Gun Club. You could be taking care of a sick kid in one room when a gunshot to the chest would come in the other.

And then you would be near sleep sitting up, writing a note on a patient at the high counter, next to another intern

and a second-year who ran the ER at night. You split up the night: first watch was 2300-0300 hours, second was 0300-0700, and that's when the usual staff ER doc came in along with the day crew nurses. The beginning of first watch was variable, though. If the ER was really busy, the second-year would wait and sometimes not "set the watch" until midnight or 0100 hours. So that left you with 0100-0400 or 0400-0700. Three hours sleep. Not bad, except as an intern you also had to finish with any patients you'd admitted to the inpatient wards. Sometimes that meant working on an ICU patient who crashed. You might get to sleep around 0230. I didn't go to sleep if I expected only a half hour. Just take a shower—that's worth at least an hour of sleep.

This winter Saturday night, the ER was hopping. It was cold enough in Charleston in January to wear a coat outside, so many of the patients had coats on. We had two interns, the second-year, and the third-year who were usually up on the labor deck. Every available resident on call was busy seeing patients. It was crazy busy. Until things started to ease, though only a little, at about 0030 hours.

The second-year, John, a skinny guy with red hair and freckles, was sitting on a stool writing up his notes on a patient. He still had his Service Dress Blues on, minus the coat, but with a white shirt, black tie, and a doctor's lab coat

on, stethoscope draped around his neck. A Black woman in long black overcoat zipped up in the front came in the ambulance door, the door that faced north, towards the projects. Keep in mind we were supposed to just see active duty, retired and dependents, but we were the only major hospital for miles, so we saw any emergencies that came in. We were used to patients coming in through the ambulance door. She came in, saw John, walked to him and tugged his lab coat sleeve.

“Doctor, I need to see you right now.”

John glanced around at her, “Okay, did you check in?”

“Yes, but the nurse didn’t seem to understand.”

John looked for a nurse. They were all busy.

“Okay, just a minute.”

He went back to writing his note.

She pulled on his lab coat again. “Doctor, I need to see you. Right now!”

John sighed and pushed back from the high counter, got off the stool and turned to her, “Okay, let’s go in here.” He proceeded to walk into the room in front of her.

Mistake.

She walked in behind him, shut the door, pulled out a long butcher knife and said, “I’m going to kill you, and then kill myself.”

She came at him, knife held high. He had the presence of mind to put his arms up, crossed to catch her arm coming down at him. He averted her to the ground, ran out of the room and called a Code Zebra—which meant security should show up with mattresses. Which they did: pushed into her, disarmed her, and got her into something like a strait jacket.

John couldn’t go to sleep the rest of the night, or that day. At least that’s what he told me when I saw him that afternoon.

I, on the other hand, had fallen asleep on an elderly woman I was seeing in an exam room.

I awoke with a start, still sitting with pen in hand, note on the chart half written.

I looked at the woman, “I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay, doctor,” she said. “You probably needed it.”

Take Away the Tooth

Laura Mahal

A stone's throw away, a jawbone ache so deep, one must
take away the tooth.

Cat is a comfort, warm and weighty purr, if she wishes to
grant solace.

Out of birth canal comes power, out of squat comes
reclaiming, out of shrieks, truth.

The walls are muted green, forested by her hands, and she
loves truly.

Cat is a comfort, warm and weighty purr, if she wishes to
grant solace.

Don't mind me if I reach for bottle, malty with forget, or a
powder called disconnect.

The walls are muted green, forested by her hands, and she
loves truly.

Water is rhythm, circadian in cycles, water flows through
us, releasing, releasing.

Don't mind me if I reach for bottle, malty with forget, or a
powder called disconnect.

The days of respirators are not over. The days of grief,
acknowledged, may be a signpost.

Water is rhythm, circadian in cycles, water flows through us, releasing, releasing.

I am going to find from whence pain sources, I shall pierce the culprit with a dagger.

The days of respirators are not over. The days of grief, acknowledged, may be a signpost.

Out of birth canal comes power, out of squat comes reclaiming, out of shrieks, truth.

I am going to find from whence pain sources, I shall pierce the culprit with a dagger.

A stone's throw away, a jawbone ache so deep, one must take away the tooth.

Muscle Memory

Ben Schrader

Right thumb, click to safe

Right index finger, push magazine release

Left hand, pull magazine and put to the side

Move right hand to charging handle

Pull and twist your M4 to look into cartridge release to ensure the weapon is unloaded

Release charging handle

Right thumb, push pin near handle to release upper & lower assembly

Once rear is separated, move hand to front pin to pull out and separate

Put lower assembly to the side

(If in a hurry you can leave the front pin in and just move on to the next step)

Right hand, pull charging handle, firing bolt will come out, as will the charging handle

Put upper receiver and charging handle to the side

With your fingernails, pull the tiny asshole cotter pin out the side of firing bolt and put to side

Put firing bolt vertical, twist bolt cam, which will fall out

Tap bolt cam on hand and firing pin will come out

Now put it all back together in the opposite way you took
apart

It took 15 minutes to write all that

But my hands have a map

Put an M4 in front of me and I'll have it disassembled and
reassembled in a minute

Hell, I can do it blindfolded

Muscle memory

Putting it together, taking it apart

Loading, unloading

All as memorable as aim, breath out, squeeze

So simple, yet so intricate

So small, yet so destructive

Hands don't forget

The hands remember how to kill, how to survive

Heart Talk

Ryan Lanham

Emotional violence is acoustic, using intonation to achieve its results.

Say what?

Emotional violence uses intonation to achieve its results.

Come again?

Emotional violence uses intonation.

Wait, wait, wait. Are you telling me what I think you're telling me?

It's not what you say. It's how you say it.

Boom. There it is. Golden nugget of truth. It's something my last partner used to say to me all the time. *All* the time. All. The. Time.

It only took eight years or so for me to finally get the message: my default way of communicating was essentially violent—*emotionally* violent.

“Ryan, do you want to go to the park today?”

“NO.”

Short, curt, snippy.

I thought I was being efficient, using an economy of words, leaving no room for ambiguity. When asked the question,

my mind instantly calculated a number of different factors: the repair man was coming and needed to be let in; I had a conference call that afternoon; it was supposed to rain.

Rather than share this train of thought with my partner, I simply said no. Or rather, I barked my response.

NO.

It's only now, years later, that I realize my standard communication style in many situations is to issue orders instead of converse. To make in-the-moment decisions without consulting others.

Of course, that makes sense in a military context. If your squad is taking fire, you wouldn't want democratic deliberation determining a course of action.

“Hey, Tommy. Uniform looks good today. By the way, as you can see, we're taking fire from our three o'clock. Would you and Billy mind shooting a few rounds at those guys? No? That's okay. I'll ask somebody else. Thanks.”

Unfortunately, there's no reset button after the military, nothing that returns us to our factory settings. Instead, it takes effort to return to a place of common civility in everyday conversation—for me, at least. And especially with those who are closest to me.

Sure, I can remain courteous and civil when talking to strangers or general acquaintances, but what about at home when

the gloves are off, the guard is down, and I'm surrounded by people who seem to have a superhero ability to push my buttons.

But this isn't about them, is it?

It's about *me*. My reactions. Not theirs.

The way I react—or *respond*—comes down to choice. I can choose my tone of voice, the way in which I say things.

While contemplating this new insight, it's been a trip to think about how intonation can be used as violence. Drill sergeants in basic training might be prohibited from beating the shit out of new recruits, but nothing prevents them from emotionally destroying their wannabe soldiers. It's part of the game. Break down, build up. Each shouted word, each screamed command is an emotional slap in the face or punch in the gut. And it's constant. Months of emotional abuse, stripping the enlistee of their honor, dignity.

But I'm not here to complain. I raised my right hand and volunteered. I chose to play the game.

Now, however, I'm in the business of reconfiguring my life—my *responses*—in a way that honors others. I'm choosing a new way to speak, to intone my words, to convey my thoughts.

It's taken time to reprogram my manner of communicating. Most of it begins with the way I talk to myself. I've learned to be lighter, softer, less critical. I've thanked my inner drill sergeant for all the ways in which he's helped me get

shit done over the years. I appreciate the discipline I developed during my time in uniform.

Only I'm not in uniform anymore. It's time for release.

Yes, Inner Drill Sergeant, you've served a purpose—now I'm letting you go.

I'm ready for a new way of doing things, a new operating system. One that includes consideration for others in its calculations, allowing time and space before responding. One that monitors intonation, searching for the highest frequency. For harmony.

One that operates not from the mind—but from the heart.

Trust and an Existential Haircut

Ross M. Atkinson

“Dude, why are you paying ten dollars for the French guy to cut your hair?”

“It’s closer to fifteen,” I answered.

“Fifteen dollars every couple weeks? Man, just go to the local national—the Afghani guy in the bazaar—it’s like two dollars. Throw him a five and he’ll give you a shave and a cigarette too. Shit, for fifteen he might give you his firstborn.”

I decided to take my friend’s advice one hot Afghani day. A five-dollar bill in my hand, I walk through the doors to a little wooden shack with cardboard on the ground. It is covered in dark hair, much darker than the blonde spears coming from my scalp. The man is grizzled. Old, but not elderly. The kind of age that only comes from decades of working under the harsh Afghan sun. Large cracks in his face and hands. Hands that carry two lifetimes of work, showcased by thick calluses.

“Sit,” he says, grabbing my five-dollar bill. American money. Green and gold.

“Have you been doing this long?” I ask, nervous as he grabs his clippers. No drape to protect my clothes from the tiny daggers of clipped hair.

“No” he replied.

At least he is honest, I thought.

The haircut was done pretty standard, a clipper cut close to the head. A high-and-tight. Then he whipped out the straight razor.

As he lathered up some cream, I said, “Never had one of these before.” Growing more nervous.

“Shave” he said, smacking his razor on some strap. He said it as if I didn’t know what he was about to do.

As he brought the straight razor to my cheek, and then the back of my neck, and then my throat, I thought: if he wanted to kill an American soldier; if he had a bad day today, I wouldn’t have a say. It would be over in a messy whimper right here on these cardboard floors. My deathbed a nest of dark Afghani, French, and American hair.

He dragged the razor across my neck, expertly. Why did I decide to trust this man? We generally don’t even let children come within a few meters of us outside the wire,

unless directed. Here I was with a straight razor to my throat, perhaps a willing participant in my own death.

I gave him an extra five after he finished. Gotta be sure he doesn't kill me when I come back in a couple weeks for another existential haircut and shave. It was a good shave, mortality be damned. And if he was going to kill an American one of these days, an extra five dollars to ensure it wasn't me seemed like a small price to pay.

“Get a Haircut, Shithead!”

James Speed Hensinger

I walked out the gate of our compound headed for the mother truckers' PX (Post Exchange) a half mile away. I was headed for Papa San's Barber Shop; at least, that's what we called it. It was mercilessly hot, and the air so saturated with humidity, it felt like I was trying to breathe underwater. I checked over my shoulder every minute or two to see if I could grab a ride in a jeep that might be going by. By then I had sweat stains down my chest, under my arms, and in my crotch.

By the PX was a small tailor shop and a barbershop operated by civilian Vietnamese who were permitted in the compound during the day.

Stepping through the open doorway of the dirt floored shop, the temperature must have dropped twenty degrees. Papa San had a C-130 he must have gotten on the black market. “C-130” was our name for a giant four-bladed fan two feet across on a chrome floor stand. They were worth their weight in beer! My sweat-soaked shirt was drying rapidly. What a relief!

I saw three GIs, ahead of me, studying the porn magazines from a little table between the wooden chairs by

the wall. Two barbers were working, and The Doors' "Light My Fire" was blaring from a radio.

There were a lot of similarities with my hometown barbershop across from the courthouse on J Street back in Indiana. I remembered having to take my little brother, Johnny, with me on Saturday mornings. Our father always gave me a dollar fifty for a butch haircut for each of us every two weeks, whether we needed them or not.

Mr. Preston, the barber, had a leather upholstered board that he laid across the arms of the barber chair for Johnny. There were about ten years of back issues of *Field & Stream* for men to read while they waited their turn. Mr. Preston had bottles of witch hazel and eucalyptus, which he always asked Johnny for his preference and Johnny always had the same answer, "No thanks, Mr. Preston. I'm not old enough to shave." It was their own little joke.

Pretty soon the chair, not a barber chair, a regular wooden chair, opened up and I took a seat while surrendering my glasses to the Vietnamese barber. That was the first thing I didn't like. Without my glasses, I felt out of control, lost. I was so myopic, I couldn't find the floor without my glasses when I got up in the morning. My guy was maybe 110 pounds and five foot two, hardly a threat, but

you never knew. He could be a barber by day and a VC (Viet Cong) at night.

He stood on an overturned wood soda crate while working. Papa San didn't even try to get me to tell him what I wanted. There's the thing, I didn't want a haircut. I had been told I needed one. He flipped a sheet over me like a reverse cloak and tucked a tissue paper collar around my neck.

Picking up a double-edged razor blade, "Not to worry GI, I sharpen first." As he laid it against the inside of an empty beer glass and moved it back and forth with his index finger scrubbing the edges against the glass.

Then, holding the razor blade in his right hand, he held it between his first two fingers and his thumb and commenced cutting my hair.

With a comb in his other hand, he started alternating: a stroke with the comb, a stroke with the razor blade. Always dragging the blade like the comb in the direction my hair lay. Having an unknown Vietnamese man standing behind me with a sharp blade messed with my sense of security.

He hummed the song on the radio as he stroked with the blade. After maybe ten minutes, he put down the comb and blade to step in front of me.

“GI numbah one. You wan shave too?”

“No, I’m fine.” I said, leaning forward to get up.

He put his palm on my chest and gently pushed me back in the chair.

“How ’bou ear clean? You wan?”

This was a new idea. I had been watching, and nobody had died since I came in, so I asked, “Ear clean?”

“Numbah one GI, numbah one.” He showed me what looked like metal chopsticks with teeny tiny spoon bowls. More like micro ice-tea spoons.

“Hol still, GI,” he said as he deftly inserted one in my left ear, twirled it for a second, and removed it. Then he did the other ear. It felt really weird, it tickled while also making a nerve twitch in the back of my throat.

“OK,” he said, and I started to lean forward to rise.

Once again, he put his palm on my chest and gently pushed me back in the chair.

“GI get massage now.”

“No, I . . .”

“Price same same GI.” Still pushing me back.

I realized it would be easier to go with the flow than to try to tell him no.

Stepping up onto his box, he cracked his knuckles and proceeded to place his palms together as though praying, then hit me on the tops of my shoulders with rapid light rabbit punches using his little fingers. His hands made a small rattle-thump sound with each strike. A half dozen on each shoulder. Putting his palms on my ears, he wrenched my neck sharply to the left, then the right, and proclaimed me done. I've never understood the purpose of this. It certainly wasn't relaxing. In fact, I always tensed when I knew what was coming.

I'd never had a razor cut before. It was exceptional. My hair looked smooth and even, and nicer than I could remember in a long time. I forget what I paid him, but I'm sure it wasn't even a dollar.

Prescribing Fentanyl

Milt Mays

She makes me hate what medicine has become. A woman who has been sexually abused in the service, and who has developed a depressive disorder that affects her entire life, making her a terrible mother, a cruel wife, but most of all an addict to fentanyl. Fentanyl that I continue to prescribe her. She has had reactions to methadone, and the VA had no specialists in pain management. They won't pay for an outside pain specialist. They want the primary care doctors to handle it. And, to top it all off, the VA was cracking down on narcotic prescriptions.

I sit in the office staring at this woman who has lost thirty pounds. She is tipping the scale at a mere ninety pounds with hollow eyes and a scarred face from picking. After several tries for several weeks, I haven't been able to get her an appointment with a specialist at the Denver VA, until last week. The computer screen stares back at me, but only holds questions. Why did she not go to the appointment I had arranged for her last week? Why is she continuing to smoke marijuana when it is making her vomit? She thinks it is her diseased esophagus, always blaming that, since that is where everything started for her in the service: the pain in

her chest that led to her eventual need for pain meds. The sexual symbology is so sharp it cuts.

I want to scream at the world for making this woman suffer so much, and for making me be the one who must continue to feed her addiction, so she won't suffer from pain. I hate the bureaucrats who seek to end the narcotics she needs to prevent pain and withdrawal. Administrators who have not seen a patient in years but pass down laws from above without a fight, because it is easier for them. I yearn for the days not too long ago when leaders of the hospital saw patients and fought for them and their doctors, not for the rules of the bosses above them.

I write the script, give it to her, and try to get her another appointment with the GI specialist. I tell her I will not write another script for fentanyl if she pops positive for marijuana. I see the anger in her face, a flinch, barely noticeable, a response suppressed by a woman who had been whipped too many times for saying no to a superior—likely a man. I can't look in this woman's eyes or I will cry.

Dear Divided Stated of America

Mark Cunningham

Dear Divided States of America, I see you. I feel you. I am you and I love you like I love the rest of the world and all the beings that call it home. I too have felt the fracturing, the polarizing, and the conflict in my psyche and soul. I don't have the answer, but I trust we all have an answer, our own inner healing intelligence. Have you heard of this concept? Others call it the inner guru, wisdom, or healer, or for those more scientific you might take the lens of homeostasis or the self-organizing principles from dynamic systems theory. Whatever you call it I want you to remember and trust in it. For the religious, perhaps you call it faith or the divine plan of God. Let me give you an example that brings it home from the MAPS MDMA-assisted psychotherapy training where this concept is key in how they train therapists to work with veterans and others in helping those impacted by PTSD, moral injury and complex trauma and other difficulties of life that find their way into our life journey.

We all know that if someone gets injured in a motorcycle accident, the first responders or the nurses/doctors can remove the obstacles to healing like the debris or foreign objects left inside the wound, they can reduce the bacteria by washing or sterilizing the wound to

reduce infection, they can even sew it together with stitches to help the flesh have the ideal environment for healing and even add a protective barrier after. But the doctor is not the healer. They are simply setting the conditions for healing to assist and support the inner intelligence of healing organized by your DNA, white blood cells and an organizing intelligence that we can try to name that is innate to the organism. Just like the intelligence that transforms a banana into more of you and your body or the energy that allows your next breath. So, although we can reach out to therapists, coaches, mentors, teachers, and more for guidance or reflection, or techniques to bring about healing, transformation, adaptation, or evolution, forget not your inner healing intelligence in your psyche and in all of us.

When you feel conflict in your own life it may be that you are striving to find logical answers that are only making it harder like black and white, right or wrong, fact or misinformation. Perhaps there is an abstract truth waiting for you if you can bring this conflict into your heart and breathe into it, sit with it, be with it and appreciate the wisdom in the paradox and leave room for mystery or the unknown. When you experience this conflict with another person in your world, notice the opportunity for the same process. If there is anything we have learned from reacting with violence to

violence is that it only begets more violence, division, and harm. May we find curiosity, trust, and room for mystery within ourselves and each other as we continue to move forward breath by breath, moment by moment, and day by day.

Fidget

Gary Schneider

Everyone has one. That little sixth sense which tells you to avoid taking the dark “shortcut” home after dark, etc. I picture mine as a fleabit little rat that hobbles around in the back of my mind on his hind legs (one of which is a wooden peg): a patch over his left eye, a notch in his right ear, and a bandaged broken tail. I’ve named him Fidget. I remember one day we had recently finished a pretty big fight and I’d been down to our LZ to make sure none of the dead were any of my guys. When I came into our main camp area, Spankie’s face lit up like it was Christmas. He started hollering “You are alive!” To which I made some lame remark to the effect: “The fevered dreams of my enemy’s hopes have been greatly exaggerated,” which was hard to say as he rushed forward and gave me a tremendous bear hug. For a little guy, he had a lot of strength!

He was maybe five feet tall and a bit chunky. “Someone told me you were dead and piled with the others,” he said. The following afternoon I was walking thru camp when “Spankie” (Francis Millender, Jacksonville, Florida) stepped out in front of me about thirty yards away and started advancing toward me slightly bowlegged, with his hands extended out from his hips in what I imagine was

his idea of an old west gunslinger. Though my primary weapon was an M-16, I also carried a 1911 model .45 tucked inside my waistband I'd picked up on the battlefield. I started to do the same when Fidget started yelling in my ear, "NO! Don't do it!" I immediately raised both hands above my head and started chewing Spankie out, that this wasn't playtime and he was to NEVER do that again! That's an order! He was embarrassed and kept showing me the empty magazine well in the butt of his pistol and saying "Look, it's unloaded, it's safe!" To which I replied, "Unloaded guns are the ones that kill people!" After a few more blistering comments, I stalked off to where I was going to set up my poncho for a tent for the night.

I had barely got there when I heard a single shot followed by the dreaded cry of "Corpsman!" I knew immediately who fired the shot and who the probable victim was. My fears proved correct. It was another seventeen-year-old. A Black soldier named Bernie, from Rocket squad who was also armed with a .45. Spankies' best friend. I stayed away from the area thinking Spankie was in enough trouble without me being there to tell them I'd just ordered him not to play cowboy anymore. Fidget and I both suspected there might be one "up the pipe" and I've asked myself a thousand

times WHY didn't I tell Spankie to PULL The DAMNED SLIDE!?! I never saw Spankie again.

A few years ago, I finally got up the courage to visit the traveling wall on its second trip through Ft. Collins and thru my tears apologize to Bernie. His death is listed as, "Death by Misadventure." which pretty much describes my opinion of Vietnam in general!

Cadences

Ben Schrader

Oh Mama Mama can't you see

What the Army's done for me...

They made me, not me

They changed me

You can't see me

You don't know me

There is no me, only we

What kind of soldiers are there?

The quick and the dead

What are you? The quick!

What are they? The dead!

The cadence stays the same

As they drill death into your head

Death of the enemy

Death of your friend

Death of your mother

Death of your lover

Death of your self

But in the end the only real death is your innocence

Left right left right left right kill

Left right left you know I will

Trained to kill

Kill a father

Kill a sister

Kill a haji

Kill anyone that gets in your way

But bit by bit, soldier by soldier, we keep killing ourselves
as well

And for what or for who

How does the green grass grow

Blood blood blood drill sergeant

Whose blood

Our blood

The poor's blood

A farmer's blood

Innocent blood

But not the blood of the rich

Nor the blood of a politician

C130 Rollin' down the strip

Recon scouts on a one-way trip

They said fight for your country

Fight for the flag

Fight for your brothers

Fight for patriotism

They don't care what you fight for

Just that you do
And they'll use your death so others can fight too
If I die in a combat zone
Box me up and ship me home
Pin my medals upon my chest
Tell my mama I did my best
Or maybe tell her the truth
That I died for a bullshit war
That I died so some asshole could get rich
That I died in vain
That I died when I enlisted
That I died before I went to war
And I'll never come back, even if I live

The Secret

Milt Mays

I couldn't share this with anyone but my doctor and my wife. Here I was, an outgoing department head, a Captain in the US Navy who played basketball every noon with the Navy residents in training, discussed their training problems with my staff and the residents—in essence, I was a social kind of guy. We'd just had a great Halloween party where my eight-year-old son had been a bellhop, my wife Cousin It and me a werewolf.

I was sitting in the exam room with my doctor and the infectious disease specialist. They happened to both be black and I was white. We all wore uniforms. We were Navy doctors. Unfortunately, due to their race, they had more experience with this sort of thing. The intensivist, Dr. Davis, said, "In a previous residency program I was in, the program director had something similar. It ruined his career when a resident found out and blabbed it. This . . ." he paused. "This is much worse. They'll start making jokes about you having gay sex or going downtown to the ladies of the night. Once those rumors get started, you'll be finished. The Navy might discharge you just on suspicion you are gay. Or at the very least send you to some job in Adak, Alaska, where you'll be so isolated no one will care. So, you can't tell anyone. Only

me, you, your doctor here, Joe, and your wife. That's it. It's going to be stressful. The preventive medications have side effects that you won't like. The only other doctor we might consider is a psychiatrist."

"Nope," I said. I could get through this. It was only three months. I'd gone through Plebe summer at Annapolis. This would be a piece of cake.

"Oh, yeah. The other thing—no sex with your wife for at least a year. The virus can sometimes take that long to take over, even after these emergency prophylactic meds. After a year, let's talk."

I'd been stuck with a needle full of HIV-infected blood trying to help out my patient, a six-month-old black boy with HIV. I couldn't tell his dad, a drill sergeant indoctrinating Pensacola pilots, or his wife, an alcoholic liar who had given the disease to her baby, and now possibly to me. The mom and dad already knew the boy had HIV. But I couldn't tell them I might have gotten it from their boy. I couldn't tell the residents. I had to carry on as if nothing happened.

But it had happened. Every day I wished I could go back and not draw that blood from the boy. Wished he hadn't

jerked at the wrong moment and driven that HIV-filled needle into my finger.

After a month of the medications, I would look in the mirror every morning giving myself a pep talk to take the medications one more day, just one more day. Despite the nausea, despite the energy loss, despite the fact I could not do what I had done my whole life to relieve stress, exercise. Or simply talk to a friend.

But I found a friend I could talk to. I'd known him for almost twenty years. He'd been a senior resident in my Navy Family Practice residency in Charleston. He was a fellow Captain family physician who was now in charge of all the Navy Family Practice residency program directors—my boss. The Family Practice advisor to the Navy Surgeon General.

So, between the love of my wife, my doctors, and that great friend, I got through it. And the medications worked.

But I probably should have seen a shrink.

Ordinary

Ryan Lanham

“Fractured T-12,” I say, rubbing the small of my back. “I was in a truck that hit a bomb, years ago.”

The group of old men nod, jaws slightly open, surprised by what I’ve just revealed to them.

“An old Army injury?” one asks, tone reverential.

“Yep. An IED blew off the back end of my truck while I was in Afghanistan.”

It’s become a standard refrain that I parrot around new people whenever the topic of old injuries comes up. Today, I’m drinking coffee with a group of new neighbors—old men, retirees, who meet every Friday morning for a stiff cuppa joe at the local coffee shop. I’m the new addition to the group. Not quite old, not quite retired. They’ve still accepted me into their group, and something about my experience in the Army adds a layer of credibility to my manhood, to my honor.

Here’s the rub: what I’ve just told them about my back injury isn’t true. Isn’t honorable.

Not really.

The truth is, I'm not quite sure how I hurt my back. It wasn't until years after I'd gotten out of the Army that I finally had an MRI. Sure, the imaging had revealed an old hairline fracture to my T-12, and sure, the VA had added back pain to my record—but what I'm not sure about is the event that caused the injury.

Yes, it's also true that I was in a truck that hit a bomb, but the blast didn't rock me hard enough to break my vertebrae. At least, I don't think so.

Maybe it was from carrying a ruck. Maybe it was from wearing 40 lbs of protective gear every day in Afghanistan and humping up and down mountains with weapon and ammo and water.

Or maybe it was from joining a CrossFit gym after I'd moved to Colorado, shortly after the suicide attempt a year after I'd gotten out of the Army. Maybe rapid-fire dead lifts and power-cleans with shitty form had tweaked my back, fractured my T-12.

Truth is, I'm not really sure.

But that doesn't fit into the injured war vet narrative that I'd begun to cultivate once I became an MFA student at CSU. Once I started writing about the war and sharing my story publicly, a new identity began to take shape. Instead of

keeping my military past to myself, people began seeing that as my primary identity. I began seeing that as my primary identity. Troubled war guy. Injured combatant. Disabled veteran. Blah, blah, blah.

As I began honing my craft as a storyteller for the writing program, I started to understand the importance of streamlining stories, creating composite characters, even composite events. And that's what the IED and back pain became: a composite event. Yes, I'd been in a truck that hit a bomb, and yes I had back pain. Hell, why not join the two together to create a narrative people can enjoy. If not enjoy, at least find provocative. Glamorous. Injured war vet. Oooh. Aahh.

Here. Now. Sitting with a bunch of regular retirees in a sleepy coffee shop in Niwot, Colorado, there's no more need for pretense. No more need to be someone I'm not.

Maybe I'm just an early-forties dude with some back pain from living a reckless lifestyle during my first few decades. Maybe I never was injured in war. Maybe my days of little white lies have come to an end.

Maybe I'm back to being a regular old joe.

And that's okay with me.

Author Biographies

Ross Atkinson is a US Army combat veteran who served in Afghanistan from 2010-2011 where he discovered a distain for war and a love of writing, reading, and teaching. After earning his Master of Arts in English in 2017, Ross decided to continue his education and is now a doctoral candidate in CSU's the School of Education where he performs mixed-methods research into veteran program use, writing workshops and well-being. In what little free time he has, Ross likes to bowl, brew beer, and zone out on a good PC game. Email: Ross.atkinson@colostate.edu

Shaun Case was a military "brat," born overseas and travelling from post to post until graduating from high school, after which she joined the Army and later the Air Force. Shaun performed countless intelligence missions with the Air Force. During one of those, she was killed but revived after being dead for 5 minutes. After leaving the military, she eventually earned her bachelor's and then a master's in public health and returned to working with various federal agencies on their projects and missions in foreign countries, as well as here in the US. She has been designated a subject matter expert by the UN for that work. When not at work or in VA groups, she volunteers with the National Park Service.

Josh Chacon, coming from Colorado, is a seasoned graphic designer with a passion for visual storytelling. A graduate of Colorado State University with a bachelor's degree in graphic design, he skillfully merges creativity with precision. Notably, Josh's artistic flair shines through as he plays a pivotal role in crafting the captivating cover of *Charlie Mike*. To see more of Josh's work, visit his website: www.behance.net/joshuachacon

Mark Cunningham served as a military police officer for seven years and deployed to Afghanistan. He later attended CSU to become a marriage & family therapist. Mark has a passion for studying human evolution and now specializes as a sex therapist and psychedelic therapist in his private practice in Fort Collins, CO. Mark enjoys time on his slackline and paddle boarding with his family and friends.

Jeff Curry is a 2003 graduate from Colorado State University with a Bachelor of Arts in English literature and also earned his commission into the U.S. Army from the CSU Army ROTC program. Jeff served as an Infantry officer and a Models and Simulations officer from 2003 to 2023 and holds a Master of Science and an MBA. Choosing to follow his original love for literature and writing, Jeff decided to pursue his creative writing MFA at Regis University where he is currently in his second semester.

James Speed Hensinger has supported himself as a silversmith, Volkswagen mechanic, landscape worker, graduate student, teaching assistant, farm laborer, librarian, hardware store clerk, petroleum geologist, handyman, jukebox serviceperson, road laborer, roofer, emergency medical technician, backpacking guide, soldier, night watchman in a funeral home, software engineer, fur hunter, writer, carpet cleaner, photographer, and dishwasher. He now lives in Westminster, Colorado with a large old tom cat, Gibson. They are perfect companions. In 1969-1970 he served in the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Website: www.Jhensinger.org

Ryan Lanham received his MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Colorado State University. Prior to that, he was a seeker of suck, connoisseur of crisis, and witting pawn in the age-old game of give-away-your-sovereignty, donning an infantryman's blue cord during the masquerade. Nowadays, he dresses for comfort and occasionally writes down his fleeting thoughts on a fleeting life in a wild and wonderful world.

Christina Lynn isn't a veteran, but she's married to one. By day, she works in education. By night, she's reading books, growing deeper into codependency with her two sausage dogs, and pondering when her next ghost encounter will be. As a proud introvert, you won't find her full name anywhere in this journal - she submitted a piece to Charlie Mike simply because her soul needed to let the story out.

Laura Mahal is supposed to be writing novels, as she has one due in Oct 2023 and another in Feb 2024. She recently completed the three-year “Book Project” fellowship through Lighthouse Writers. Laura edits as her day job—working with veterans is a passion project. She would like to apologize on behalf of MPs everywhere for Ben Schrader and his fellow soldiers getting lost in Baghdad. Whispers: Laura was a 95B, U.S. Army, circa 1987-1992. You may find many of her writings at www.lauramahalwriter.com.

Milt Mays grew up in Colorado, graduated from the Naval Academy and Creighton Medical School, and spent a career as a Navy Family Physician. He had tours with the Marines, a Navy Security Group in Scotland, and was Director of the Family Medicine Residency in Pensacola, Florida. After Navy retirement, he guided fly fishing, then worked primary care for the Veterans Hospital in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He lives in Fort Collins,

Colorado with his wife. He sings and plays guitar, fly fishes, and has published novels, short stories, poetry, and songs. Website: <https://miltmays.com>; YouTube: @miltmays6984

Roger Ramjet is a 72-year-old Vietnam combat veteran and a retired high school teacher and coach.

Ben Schrader is an Army veteran ('01-'05), who received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He is also the author of *Fight to Live, Live to Fight: Veteran Activism After War*. Ben is currently the Director of Adult Learner and Veteran Services at Colorado State University.

Marshall Spring is a combat-disabled Marine and a Purple Heart recipient. After his service as an Explosive Detection Dog Handler, he's turned his focus to preventing veteran suicide. With firsthand understanding and deep empathy for the challenges veterans face, Marshall is committed to providing the necessary support to those who've served. His journey is one of resilience, bravery, and compassion, inspiring his fellow veterans to find strength in seeking help and healing.

Kathleen Willard, daughter of Lt. Colonel James Gordon Donahue, spent 17 years dealing with the displacement caused by being a member of a military family. She crisscrossed the country and the globe. Her father served two tours of duty in Vietnam. She has published two books of poems: *Cirque & Sky* and *This Incendiary Season*. Two books of poetry, *The Next Noise Is Our Hearts* and *Electric Grace*, will be published in Fall 2023.