

Chasing War

by

Jason Davis

7 March 2003

The evening of March 7, 2003, the most difficult night of my life, I got up from the couch, turned off the t.v., and led my wife out the front door of our small three-bedroom home. We walked up the slightly sloped driveway, past the flower gardens and into the middle of two empty streets that intersected at the foot of the driveway. The distant streetlamps were blown out and the twinkling stars that shone through the streaking clouds provided the only light. The air was crisp and the night was quiet, like the stillness of an early morning pond. It seemed that life in our usually bustling neighborhood had stopped—for the week that led to this night, cars were not driven, children did not go outside to play, and wives neglected the gardens of their half-empty homes. We lived in an off-base neighborhood dominated by military families, and my unit's delayed plane was the last to leave.

With my wife's hand in mine, I pointed into the sky at a recognizable but unknowable grouping of stars. Robyn turned slowly and looked softly into my eyes. I told her I would look into the sky every night and that I would think of her. She cried and promised to do the same. After a few solemn and wordless moments with her hand in mine, I led her back down the slightly sloped driveway and into our small three-bedroom home. I finished my half-empty rum-and-Coke and went to bed.

Saturday, March 8, 2003, was not a morning like every other, but it felt the same. The sun had risen early and the sky was perfect and blue in a way that smoggy Southern California would never know. I bloodied my youthful face with a dull razor and brushed my teeth with an old toothbrush. The air inside the bathroom was chilly and I stood beneath the shower to soak under the warmth of the falling water. I felt that everything would be fine if I could fall down the drain and escape to somewhere other than where I was; but on this morning, I would have to say goodbye. There is no such thing as *goodbye* when the deployment orders state "one-hundred and eighty days to not more than three-hundred and sixty-five." Beneath the falling water, I thought of how naïvely and imprudently I acted the day I raised my right hand. I swore to defend the Constitution of the United States, and now I would have to do it in Iraq, for the defense and freedom of America at home. None of it made sense to me and I wondered how war could be defined and numbered in days. I thought of the valorous conflicts of generations past—Team America didn't leave the game in the bottom of the fifth inning—they played that shit to extra innings if it meant victory! But this wasn't a game I wanted to play.

My bags were packed into our only car—a hand-me-down Honda from the in-laws that had been towed from California to Kentucky by an even older motor home. Robyn drove us onto post through Gate Six and past the old, run-down housing preserved for Privates and soldiers new to the Army. Every door was shut; every window and curtain was closed. Deer wandered the deserted streets and picked at the grass in the front yards and doorsteps of empty homes whose wives and children had left for the company of family in other places. The radio was off and the road was smooth and quiet. An air of undisturbed absence glided over the fingertips of

my outstretched hand through the passenger window. We drove past the 2nd and 3rd Brigade gyms and their empty parking lots. Even the parking lot for the Post Exchange, the Army's version of Wal-Mart, was empty. Fort Campbell, home of the Army's prestigious 101st Airborne, was deserted and the only remaining activity was the last of the 502nd Infantry Brigade readying to leave.

“DAVIS! Hurry the fuck up!”

Sergeant Colby was my Forward Observer (FO) and I was his Radio Telephone Operator (RTO). As artillery FO's, we were as much an asset to the infantry platoon as a medic. I had only known Sergeant Colby for a month, but I liked him compared to the other sergeants. He was slow to anger and was sensible about Army bullshit. Sergeant Colby was short, but burly and thick like a tree trunk. He'd been in the Army for ten years but you could tell he'd seen better days. Soldiers like that just bide their time; having put in half a retirement, they were stuck, and had little leverage or say in their career paths. Department of the Army would send them to Drill Sergeant Academy, Recruiting School, or in Sergeant Colby's case, to a deploying unit with an open position. That's why he came from Korea: he was available, and I was a Private First Class (PFC) in a sergeant's position for a unit heading to war.

Sergeant Colby and Staff Sergeant Behrends had walked toward my car near the back of the parking lot. SSG Behrends was my Squad Leader and the Bravo Company Fire Support Sergeant. He was a fellow Californian, and he smirked a thin but friendly yellow-toothed grin. He had a dip in his lip, a spray-painted desert-colored and insulated coffee mug in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. He rambled on about saying his goodbyes at home and that his wife would pick up his truck later. Sergeant Colby, too, had already said goodbye to his wife and little girls, and they were both rushing me to get my rucksack and duffel bags in line with the rest of the squad. I looked down at my dog. She was smiling, but I knew she would mope when I left. She usually positioned herself near the front door of our house, next to the couch, waiting for me to return. But I wasn't going to return that year...

“Hurry the fuck up, Davis!” stammered Sergeant Colby.

I was going to spend the next year of my life with this guy, and the last thing I wanted was to piss him off. I hugged Robyn, kissed her, and grabbed my bags without a more proper goodbye. Halfway down the parking lot, I looked over my shoulder and saw the car start up. In typical Army “hurry up and wait” fashion, there was no real hurry. There was no formation, and no immediate timeline. There was only a preservation of order. Someone somewhere had dictated an 0800 arrival and three minutes early was twelve minutes late.

Fourteen hours later, Headquarters Company and Bravo Company 2/502 Infantry flew out of Campbell Army Airfield on a commercial 737 airliner. After a one-stop, seventeen-hour flight to Kuwait International Airport and a two-hour bus ride to Camp New York in the Kuwait desert, I found a few moments to look into the night sky. The stars twinkled but their glow was awkward, like a foreign gesture from someone speaking a different language. I thought of Robyn and wondered how she would get through the next year. I wondered whether she had looked into the sky the way I had at that moment. My head was clouded by the uncertainty and peril of war and of longing for home. Two days had passed and it would be another fifteen before we crossed the border into Iraq.

26 September 2001

I had no idea what I got myself into; I just wanted to marry my girlfriend and have a place to live. Four years of the Army seemed like a bargain if Uncle Sam was going to pay for my college later on. If it wasn't for my roommate Dan, the Army thing would not have happened.

Everything started on 9/11. I received an early morning call from work, several hours before I was scheduled to go in. The scheduler said Disneyland would be closed for the day, something about it being a potential terrorist target. I had no idea what the lady was talking about and mumbled something about being half-asleep. She told me to turn on the TV and I sat glued in front of it for the next ten hours.

Dan had a morning shift and had already left for work. He didn't answer his phone and he didn't come home for two days. On his voicemail, I told him I would kick his ass if he did something stupid. Specifically, enlisting would be stupid. I had no reason to think he would, and he had never mentioned a desire or previous interest, but I felt it was something crazy and random that only he would do. A lot of people didn't understand Dan. He wasn't terribly formal and often rubbed people the wrong way. He was abrasive and foul-mouthed, but was also gentle, sincere, and sappy--a hopeless romantic. When Dan finally came home, he said hadn't enlisted yet, but that he'd been talking to a recruiter and wanted to go to Korea.

"Jay—I can't just let those fucking *towel heads* get away with that *bullshit*. I want to do something about it... the recruiter is coming over tonight to talk to us."

"*Us?*" I asked him.

"Yeah, I uh... well—you don't have to sign up, Jay. You just have to listen to his pitch, that's all."

I pondered the thought. My parents had put me through private schools my whole life so that I could do something with my life. As it turned out, I dropped out of high school my senior year and was slaving in food service to pay the rent. I didn't even own a car and often rode my bicycle to work. Still, Dan was going to bail on us and work was already cutting hours. I wasn't exactly doing anything with my life and wasn't in a position to go to school. Of course it seemed we were doomed from the start—the fucking recruiter lived across the street! He brought over beer and Mexican food, and we stayed up all night playing video games. In a sense, I felt that I was better than the Army. Only barbaric football players and wrestlers and the uneducated joined the Army. My parents had raised me to stay away from that kind of life and I had never expected to be presented with an offer into it.

Dan was the first to go. He went to Basic Training at Relaxin' Jackson in November. He wanted to learn how to cook and had follow-on orders to Korea. Robyn and I got married and enlisted on the same day—like it was a box to check on a grocery list. She was eighteen and I was nineteen and we left a week after Dan. Robyn went to Fort Jackson also, but I was sent to Fort Benning—Home of the Infantry. It would be five years before I saw Dan again, and six months until I saw my new bride.

6 February 2003

I graduated from Advanced Individual Training (AIT), at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in June 2002, to become a 13F (Fire Support Specialist), "the most efficient killer on the battlefield." Only a Forward Observer can use an FM radio to fire someone else's guns and kill dozens of enemies and destroy their equipment. When I got to Fort Campbell, I learned that no one was

more badass than a fister. They were arrogant and proud, and I learned that most people would not even test high enough on the ASVAB to be offered the job. Many of the men I worked with were educated and socially conscious of the rhetoric we were being fed about an impending war, and that was comforting. In my small platoon of fisters, I felt like I belonged.

In the summer of 2002, the 82nd Airborne was fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and the 101st Airborne was training for an invasion of Iraq. With the 82nd Airborne's training ammunition redistributed throughout the 18th Airborne Corps, my battalion fired more artillery that summer in training than they had in the previous decade. We lived in the field that summer—one week or two with the infantry, the next week or two with the artillery. When the infantry played “bang-bang” in the forests with lasers attached to their peashooters, we trained with them. When the artillery needed observers to “call for boom-boom,” we trained with them as well. Through the changing seasons, we endured rain and snow and didn't stop training until the holidays.

CNN announced the story in early February: the famous 101st Airborne had been ordered to deploy to Southwest Asia for what would soon become Operation Iraqi Freedom. It had been expected, but it was still shocking. I saw the army as a four-year job, not as a fighting force. I learned how to kill people, but I didn't want to actually kill anyone. I didn't even know what we would be fighting for and was dismayed by the fact that one man would order hundreds of thousands of soldiers from his country to fight hundreds of thousands of soldiers from another country because he didn't agree with another country's leader.

That evening, close of business formation was more of a mood killer than CNN. The artillery battery was made up of several smaller platoons of medics, radar, communications, and various support and artillery command staff. Half of the battery was comprised of three platoons of forward observers who didn't fit anywhere else. Several senior-ranking sergeants took turns parading in front of the formation. They stuck their chests out and held their chins high; their excitement for war was like a mutiny on common sense and I didn't share their enthusiasm. They promised death and action and said “Hooah” after every remark, anticipating a returned “Hooah” in agreement. I always thought war was a game with a deck of cards, not something advanced civilizations conducted in the third world. I looked around the formation and saw the faces of men and boys who looked like they were ready for a drink. When I was dismissed, I walked away with darkened eyes that stared into the ground, and was distracted by thoughts a young man full of ambition and life should never face. I was not going to selflessly give my life for a cause I didn't believe in, and I was not going to celebrate that achievement in others.

After formation, I walked into the barracks with a friend. PV2 Michael McAlister lived on the third floor with the rest of the single fisters and was known as a boisterous and obnoxious career Private. He was an animated storyteller who had a flair for embellishing the heroic and the profane into his nightly exploits at various downtown bars. He was also a veteran of a six-month deployment to Kosovo the previous year and knew the rigors and demands that would soon be asked of us. On most days, the third floor was filled with drunken noise. Rank disappeared when each evening's agenda consisted of finding new ways to get smashed. But there would be no eight-player Halo LAN-party linking xboxes that evening. There would be no bar hopping either. Instead, each man quietly retreated to his room.

Mac walked over to his stereo with the giant Bose loudspeakers and dug through a book of CD's. He pulled out an old favorite and turned the volume all the way right. Iommi's opening guitar riff wafted slowly into the air and bounced off the painted white-brick walls like an expanding cloud of thick, black smoke. Geezer's bass thumped in time with the slowing beat of

our writhing hearts. As the wailing sirens climaxed into a crescendo of anticipated silence, the indelible shriek of Ozzy's vocals exploded down the fist hallway. A procession of defeated and half-dressed warriors had stumbled lethargically into the room in anticipation of the sonic annihilation. Mac looked at me and mouthed words I'll never forget: "*Dude, we're gonna fucking die.*"

19 March 2003

The invasion began in the middle of the day. I told Sergeant Colby I expected plastic pop-up Iraqi silhouettes to spring from the ground and I would be strategically placed in a foxhole with an M4 resting on a sandbag. My dominant eye would look over the sight as I aimed center mass; then I would see spurts of Al Qaeda blood spilling from the chest of my enemy. That was the war I felt the Army had prepared me for. Sergeant Colby laughed and called me a Princess, a nickname that stuck for the rest of the deployment. While other soldiers carried cans of Skoal and packs of Marlboro's, I carried a set of Revlon tweezers for ticks and ingrown hairs on my neck and a pocketknife to pick the dirt from my fingernails.

The early spring Kuwait sun yellowed the sand around us. Temperature was expressed in degrees of hot: *hot as balls* and *fucking hot as shit*. It was hot as balls when the Army's 3rd Infantry Division rolled through Camp New York in the Kuwait Desert. They were racing north towards Baghdad with giant American flags waving from the turrets of their Abrams and Bradley tanks. The echo of Guns N' Roses lingered above the dust settling in their tracks. On the big screen in the MWR (Morale, Welfare, Recreation) tent, Fox News embeds were reporting live from the rolling behemoths that had just passed. They talked about 9/11, weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein, Al Qaeda and the Twin Towers.

Sergeant Colby put on his headphones and shuffled through his 64MB MP3 player. He only had twenty-four songs and settled contentedly on Creed's cover of *Riders on the Storm*. He handed me the other ear bud and we sat silently and fixedly on the mechanized FLOT (forward line of troops) advancing towards Baghdad.

24 March 2003

Like a game of capture the flag, my company crept delicately across the border and into Iraq. There was no fence and I didn't need a passport. Instead, I had an M4 with seven thirty-round magazines, and an M203 40mm grenade launcher with nineteen rounds of High Explosive, Red and Yellow Smoke, and White Phosphorous. Our seventeen-vehicle convoy of Humvees and LMTVs stepped over the line, looked to see if anyone was watching and tip-toed across the deserted landscape. Instead of baddies, we found Bedouin tent towns and camels. Instead of combat, we found shredded lettuce-like remains of defeated armor from Desert Storm. They were preserved as iron monuments and relics of the shock and awe strategy of the United States military. The President said God was on our side, but I was thankful for the many 2,000-pound bombs carried by the United States Air Force.

29 March 2003

We heard them before we saw them, and it wasn't until they were over us that we heard them: a staggered formation of six Blackhawk helicopters had appeared from behind a rolling stretch of sandy dunes in southern Iraq, just fifty meters from our position in prone. The engine

rotors pulsed a vibrant staccato of Dolby perfection as a tsunami of dust assaulted the Pickup Zone (PZ). Rocks and miscellaneous debris were lifted into the air and then collapsed onto our necks and faces. The air-chauffeured assault into the holy city of Najaf would mark our entry into combat.

The Army's UH-60 Blackhawk is a versatile utility helicopter that is often used for moving cargo, equipment, and troops. It has two internal passenger carrying configurations: seats in and seats out. When we got into PZ posture, we already knew which to prepare for. Our movements were swift and robotic from months of training. It took two privates to lift and swing the rucksacks through the doublewide doors. The crew chief arranged them inside until another came hurtling at his feet. The rucksacks lined every available square inch of the floor. My head rested on the cushioned part of an assault pack and a plastic rucksack frame was lodged against my right shoulder. With my legs scissored near the roof, I didn't see any of the eight other faces during the three-hour flight, just camouflaged body parts and boots and M4 Carbines.

We flew north commanded by men far from the front lines. I unfastened the Velcro from my protective vest and took off my helmet while trying to relax in the unbearable heat. The infantry battalion commander would not let us remove the charcoal-lined chemical protective suits despite being a week past their twenty-four hour effective use. With the engine above us, the inside cabin felt like an oven. Dirty, stinging sweat dripped into my half-closed eyes. I fell in and out of sleep, distracted and fascinated with the world below. Iraq looked different from the sky and the bright yellow colors of the landscape disappeared into a low-contrast world of blackened overhead shadows. Instead of rolling hills and sandy dunes, I saw jagged windswept ridges and cavernous slashes cut mysteriously into the earth. Flocks of camels roamed listlessly across aimless herding paths. They seemed free and casual and beautiful and aware, but disinterested in the phantom shadow sprinting across the ground at 117 miles per hour. I dreamt I was a camel and could wander as they had—free to choose my own course.

I was awakened as the Blackhawk dipped low and hard right. The pilot had changed the flight pattern to NAP of the Earth (near as possible), which was employed in potentially hostile situations to prevent detection. I looked out the window and the desert was gone. Bleached-white mud brick houses were scattered across patchy green fields. Wraith-like figures robed in black looked curiously into the mid-afternoon sky and the gunner moved his finger to the trigger of his belt-fed, gas operated M240B machine gun. His barrel followed the scattering movements of laborers below. When the small green patches turned into large green farms and the small mud houses turned into villages of small mud houses, the Crew Chief motioned five minutes to landing. I thought of the words SSG Behrends had told me before leaving Fort Campbell: “No amount of training can prepare your mind for war,” he said. “But you *are* trained, and regardless of how prepared you think you are, you *will* react and I have faith your training will allow you to react successfully.”

The Crew Chief kicked the doors open fifteen feet before landing and shoved the rucksacks and MRE boxes out the door. The infantry platoon sergeant, SSG Hamblin, was mouthing, “GO! GO! GO!” but his voice was drowned out by the *woomp woomp woomp* of the rotor blades. Hollywood got that part right—in slow motion, I saw the crew chief close the doors twenty feet up, and the Blackhawk ascended into the safety of the sky as the gunner's muzzle twitched nervously in every direction.

We were alone in a field of reeds towering above our heads. I landed on my feet and fell onto my elbows and knees. The vegetation was densely packed and stalks of tiny green forest were all I could see in every direction. My pulse was beating frantically and my knees trembled

at the sound of automatic gunfire in the close distance. As the soundtrack to war temporarily ceased, my platoon regrouped from various points in the landing zone. My mind played back audio tracks of yelling and screaming from the rooftops of houses a kilometer away, but the ringing, imagined silence gave way to a cacophony of mortars exploding behind the reverberation of several kinds of automatic gunfire. I set up my radio and reported my location to company fire support. SSG Behrends said that Alpha Company was engaged in a firefight not far from our location. The GPS said we were in a field adjacent to the battalion staging area, and if there was a moment for joking, it was seized by a tactless young private named Taylor who said, "Holy fucking shit, we're in 'Nam!"

The sounds of war dissipated slowly into a fuzzed-out white noise: it was time to move. Adrenaline made up for muscle failure and lack of sleep; I stumbled onto my feet and traipsed through the fields with a 120-pound rucksack on my back. I needed a machete, but settled for parting the dense growth with my hands. I baby-stepped through the reeds, walked up and down irrigated ditches, and crossed a thin, wooden plank laid across a small canal before falling out of breath against the stone wall of my destination. Our Russian exchange soldier, PFC Lobanov, was the only man to beat me to our destination. He was short but stout and had broad shoulders shaped like the funnel of a tornado. He was already on his way back to help the rest of the platoon when he noticed me finishing the last of my canteen of water. His accent was thick and he motioned for me to quit whining about the sand in my pussy and to move on and help the others. I was fatigued and my muscles were exhausted, and I would soon find out that in war, there were no days off.

27 March 2003

When the last of the platoon had settled into the courtyard of the battalion staging area, we prepared our gear for the first mission later that evening. The sun had set and there was no electricity. Red ash sparkled from the jittery lips of men around me, and the stars had yawned awake from slumber. The moon was omnipresent but dull, and the evening temperature was still hot as balls. The gentle hum of Army generators pulsed into the night amid chirps and beeps of ASIP radios in the battalion TOC (Tactical Operations Center). Sergeant Colby was listening to music and had pulled out a small, crumpled plastic sandwich bag from the top of his Kevlar helmet. Inside were small photos of his wife and children. I took off my sweat-lined vest and snacked on an MRE. The dirt was unyielding but flat and I passed out against the cushion of my MOLLE rucksack. Three hours of sleep felt like thirty minutes when Sergeant Colby nudged my shoulder. It was time to move out.

We inched carefully through the farm fields and over the irrigated ditches beyond the battalion staging area. The midnight sky was cloudless and black, the stars refused to twinkle, and I was cold inside my sweat-lined DCU jacket and protective vest. Our weapons were held at the low ready, and the entire platoon, except for myself, had mounted their night vision goggles. We were the rear security element for a company-sized patrol in search of weapons caches in the fields. Second Platoon had led the advance with First Platoon at their far flank. My platoon was getting into position when a fury of yellow arced into the sky. It exploded and drooped slowly, teeter-tottering and zig-zagging across the illuminated sky like a giant lightbulb hanging from a string.

"ILLUMINATION!" I yelled out.

No one else had seen it, nor understood the implications, except Sergeant Colby. Illumination is an artillery round that burns slowly in the sky to light up an area of interest. In most cases, it also precedes a barrage of high explosive rounds, and one round had a kill radius of forty-five meters. Sergeant Colby yanked off his goggles and looked into the sky as I dropped face first into the dirt. He grabbed the Lieutenant and yelled, "Get them the fuck down!" The biggest problem with NVG's are that they focus too narrowly on what is in front of the viewer, trapping the wearer into tunnel vision. The three-dimensional world is rendered onto a two-dimensional plain in static and grainy shades of green and black. There is no depth perception. I wasn't wearing my goggles because I am green-and-red colorblind and my eyes cannot distinguish between the subtle shades of green.

I jumped onto the radio to find out whether SSG Behrends knew if the illumination was friendly. It was his job to battle track and coordinate mortar and artillery assets for Bravo Company and it would be his job to contact the Battalion Fire Support Sergeant, SFC Sunderland, to find out whether another company within the battalion had called in a fire mission. My inquiry came back empty and we were told to treat the illumination as hostile. I imagined an Iraqi forward observer crouched in the wood line calling fire on the dozens of silhouetted grunts standing over me. I distinguished the sound of large artillery firing into the sky like a pack of coyotes howling for a kill. The thumps of several 155mm howitzers rattle the earth for miles when fired, and my suspicion was confirmed when HE exploded in the distance. Someone was getting fucked up. So far, it wasn't us.

Another round of illumination burst into the sky when a panicked and agitated cry echoed despairingly into the air. We had already been dangerously silhouetted against the backdrop of a forest and the last thing we wanted after potentially being seen was to be heard. An infant black lab, separated from its mother, was yelping into the night. It was scared, newborn-blind, and had clumps of mud dried to its fur. The company commander, nearly one mile up the road, had jumped onto the radio demanding the noise be silenced and quickly extinguished. Sergeant Colby had reached it first, outstretching a gloved hand of comfort and trust. As another round of illumination burst into the sky, we laid low to check the map. SFC Sunderland had radioed the Brigade Fire Support Sergeant and discovered that First Battalion, in a nearby sector, was calling fire. The illumination was friendly, but the dog needed constant attention to keep it quiet.

It was after three when we moved again. The platoon's objective was nothing more than a supporting role and the lack of action was wearing us down. We moved and stopped repeatedly like an accordion, and after setting up another security position, Sergeant Colby and I had leaned silently against a berm next to a small building resembling an outhouse. Sergeant Colby woke me up an hour later; the rest of the platoon had also fallen asleep. The mission was over and nothing had been found. There were no arms caches and the field was empty.

Fifty meters separated each platoon and we dragged along slowly, exhausted and silent. As the dark black sky turned a pale blue-gray, and then a watery orange, the silence gave way to the sounds of chirping birds and diesel engines. With light, we were amazed at the sight of overturned trucks along the side of the road. We hadn't noticed them in the dark. Shattered glass and brass shell casings littered the gravel shoulders. Pools of red, green, and black fluids were scattered across fortified trenches. There had been a battle here, and I was thankful we missed it.

Black robed figures holding plastic bags haunted the edges of the fields we had just departed. These were dressed like the same beings we saw earlier from the Air Assault. They walked to their mosques, stumbling fearlessly through our formation with pale, emotionless faces and dark averted eyes covered thick with eye makeup. Microphones blasted from the tops of

neighboring minarets. The voices were cracked and worn from age, and the women draped in black were assembling in front of the mosques.

Our death march continued across an overpass damaged by mortars. Lightless light poles leaned on the railings of the bridge. Chunks of asphalt had been displaced so that the ground was pockmarked like cheesecloth. The all-night mission had drained our attention and we lost ourselves to the rhythm of baby steps. Thirty minutes had passed before a familiar soldier appeared from the field beside us. He had fallen asleep during the first illumination scare. When he woke up, he realized he was alone and decided to stay hidden until he saw us on the way back to the compound.

28 March 2003

I felt refreshed after sleep but it didn't last long. On the next mission, we walked further into town, beyond the farm fields we had played in the previous night, to "make a presence." It was a busywork patrol—commanders couldn't stand to have soldiers lazing around when there's a war to be fought! We were kept busy so that we wouldn't have time to think about how tired we were.

The midday sun was hot as shit. The leather headband inside my Kevlar ballistic helmet had turned black from dirt and sweat. We still wore the expired chemical protective suits and the leggings had frayed from dragging on the ground. My pant legs beneath the suit absorbed layers of leg sweat and powdery charcoal from the chemical suit. It had been more than fourteen days since my last shower, and I was still wearing the same pair of socks. They were green cotton, but the sweat never dried, and some of the color had faded like it had been bleached. Worse was the collective smell of baby wipes and baby powder and sweaty nut sacks when the wind blew at night. During the day, sweat dripped down my leg and I walked and walked and walked beneath the yellow ball of fire that had cracked my lips and reddened my face.

We climbed through fields and strode across bridges and waded through shit streams colored like a drain clogged with espresso and antifreeze. It smelled like animal carcass, human waste, and motor oil; my boots and pant legs were caked with the sludge and it powdered like mud when it dried. The air was dry and my throat was cracked. I was hacking green lung from nose and mouth, and Princess bitched and whined to pass the time. Sergeant Colby giggled. The formation was silent and we continued to walk. The two-hour minimum time for a patrol was not yet close to ending, and our presence had yet to be "made."

The war planners pegged 3rd Infantry Division to follow the Air Force all the way to Baghdad, but they met little resistance along the way. Most of the Iraqi Army had either disbanded or smartly chose not to fight the armored tanks. In the light infantry, we were supposed to follow in their wake and take care of the second wave of resistance. We expected an opposition, but there was no interest. There were no regime leftovers or reinforcements. There was no Al Qaeda and there was no war. Our only fight was over food, and there was only one *Chicken with Noodles* MRE (Meal, Ready to Eat) per box. Everyone wanted the *Chicken with Noodles* because it had the best snacks and beverage-based drink powder. The infantry treated MRE's differently than what I had been used to. There was to be "no ratfucking of MRE's," said SSG Hamblin. "You don't fuck your buddy like that," said SGT Tofaneli. In the infantry, one reaches his hand into the box like drawing from a hat to play charades. "Fuckin' oh well" if you were the one to draw *Pasta with Vegetables*. In the artillery, if you weren't present for the box-opening ceremony and somehow were left with the last MRE that wasn't even worth scavenging

through—either Country Captain Chicken or Boneless Pork Chop—you wouldn't let it happen again.

As we approached the city skyline, we saw the effects of another battle. The asphalt looked like it had been hit by a meteor shower. The Iraqi Army had welded weapons platforms into the beds of several late-model Chevy trucks. They were lying on their sides and were charred from the losing end of a futile encounter. Other vehicles were unrecognizably reduced to smoldering frame and tire. Blackened lakes of blood puddled beneath an anti-aircraft machine gun that rose solemnly into the sky. Several unclaimed corpses were scattered across fighting positions dug into the side of the road. Their faces had withered and cracked from burning. Their mouths were parched open and hollowed; they died gasping in toothless shock and there were no eyes, just holes blacker than burnt skin and clumps of hairless skull. No one else had said a word. The formation was silent and there was no joking or shit talk on the radio. I saw this in passing. Perhaps Hollywood was in town and we were behind the scenes for *Saving Private Ryan* or *Band of Brothers* or *Black Hawk Down*. It was easy to accept when observed and not fought. It was easy to pass and forget without the need to fire our own weapons: there was no sanctity for the value of human life. This was not self-preservation and it wasn't a scene of "kill or be killed." This was the heartless example of America's unremitting military supremacy, and it sickened me. We marched forward to the sluggish and rhythmic sound of boots slapping the ground.

Beyond the battle scene, the fragrance of a kitchen fire roused the hunger in my stomach. It was bread—cooked over an open fire in a hooded chute like a chimney on the side of the road. A man in a dirty white dress was tending to the dough, like pizza, with a long, metallic spatula. He placed a flattened roll on the device and flicked it onto the inner brick walls of his stove. It stuck there, cooking above the fire, until he flipped it like a pancake to cook the other side. This was the first man we had encountered since the war began and we approached him cautiously and with our weapons at "low ready." We were fearful and unaccustomed to the traditions of daily life in Iraq, but the man was alone and unarmed. He reached into the fire, pulled out a thick tortilla-like piece of bread, and offered it to me. There was a formation of soldiers on either side of the road, with the Lieutenant and his RTO, and Sergeant Colby and myself in between at the front of the formation. I looked around and was unsure whether I should accept the hospitable offering from the enemy. It could have been poison; it could have been dirt—it could have been a million paranoid plots to kill the Americans, and we were all assholes for hiding behind the muzzles of our weapons and thinking such thoughts.

"Go ahead, Davis. Take some," jeered Sergeant Colby. He was whispering cautiously, but I was unaffected. No one had moved and the platoon had stopped. This was the Lieutenant's platoon, but he was uncharacteristically silent and stiff. The eyes behind his black rubber-rimmed goggles had widened. I reached forward and took the bread. I ripped it into quarters and ravenously devoured it. I passed the other pieces to Sergeant Colby and the LT. The man was smiling and held his right hand to his chest in humility and thanks. I looked at him and smiled and thanked him. The bread was crispy and thick and it was the most delicious piece of bread that I had ever tasted. It might as well have been manna falling from God's blue sky because the pain in my stomach had vanished.

We circled the block without incident. We watched the people watch us, and they continued with their work as we passed. It was strange that a baker could work just up the road from the tragic remains of war. I tried to keep the images from my mind. I tried to focus on the bread and the man and the kids following us through their neighborhood's shantytown streets. These people were not affected by what had happened as if the events and the noise and the

deaths were common. If there was an enemy in Najaf, they were still hiding. We made our way home for a night of guard duty and spades and bullshitting around an empty fire pit, sipping powdered cocoa, and wondering what the next day's mission would bring.



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