

O-Dark-Thirty
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Editor's Note

Memorial Day. The commemoration of America's war dead dates to the end of the Civil War when this day was called Decoration Day and was set aside as a day to decorate graves to honor the dead on both sides of that tragic war.

Over time, the commemorative and contemplative meanings of Memorial Day have faded for many Americans. The day is simply the finale of the weekend traditionally marking the beginning of summer in America. But we know that for our readers it's something more.

This little journal is one of the ways that we in the Veterans Writing Project and at O-Dark-Thirty honor the service and sacrifice of all American service members and their families.

On Memorial Day we'll take a moment to honor those Americans who gave what President Lincoln called at Gettysburg, "the last full measure of devotion." We hope you'll join us and ask others to do the same.

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

The Suicide Bomber

By John Severns

May 1, 2007

The first suicide bomber my team encountered was fairly bad at his job. In hindsight, this makes sense—you probably don't send your best people out on missions you know will get them killed. You send the people who are expendable and have no other useful skills.

We were a few minutes late to the bombing. Instead of targeting us, the bomber attacked a group of Afghan police who spotted him from some distance away and started shooting. He blew himself up in the middle of the road at least 50 yards from their position. The police were just fine; startled, I would imagine, but otherwise fine.

By the time we arrived, the police had already set up a rough cordon and were keeping everyone else away. Our arrival was completely by accident. We'd spent the day at a government radio station up north and were driving back to Gardez when—surprise!—suicide bomber. The police were thrilled to see us and immediately turned things over to the convoy commander.

I was the only person on the team with a camera, and I got to work documenting the site. It was the first time I'd ever seen a dead body

outside of a funeral home.

Calling what we saw a body is, perhaps, being overly generous. Body implies some sort of cohesion. An entire, whole thing. There was little left to fit that description.

The weathered gray road where the bomber stood was scorched black. Tiny pits scarred the road where shrapnel struck hard enough to leave a mark. Those same marks were still there when we left a year later. They're probably still there today.

A foot or so out from these scars, streaks began to appear. Like rays emerging from the sun, thin lines of scorched blood and liquified flesh painted straight reddish-black bands on the road, all of them pointing to where he had detonated the explosives. Some faded after a few feet—others ran all the way across the road.

Interesting fact about suicide bombers—the legs and head almost always survive. This one's legs were lying about ten feet away in reasonably good condition. The clothes and shoes had been blown off, but they were still recognizably legs. A policeman was picking one of them up by a toe when I started taking pictures—I gestured at him to put it down. For some reason, I thought the legs' position might be some kind of evidence, like on CSI or Law and Order. *“Hmm, the leg landed 3.5 meters away with the toes pointing 254 degrees. The bomb maker was clearly of foreign origin and will strike again in 24 hours.”* Something like that. Be kind, I was new.

The head was a little further away. Perhaps it rolled? I don't know. Again, it was in pretty good shape, except for the fact that it was a severed head. The bomber's mouth was open, and some of his teeth were chipped. I got as many pictures of his face as I could.

I should mention that we received some extremely good training before heading to Afghanistan. Our training could not, however, cover every conceivable situation. How to clean up after a suicide bomber was one of the situations we missed. We started discussing it, and at

some point I mentioned that we should try to find the bomber's fingers. Because, you know, fingerprints.

In retrospect, there was absolutely no chance we were going to find this guy's fingers. Parts of him were spread over hundreds of yards. There were literally dozens of acres of grassy fields and farmland to search. But when you're in a stressful situation, like picking up after a suicide bomber, you tend to cling to any plan that makes sense. For some reason, fingerprints made sense to us.

So we started looking for the bomber's fingers. I teamed up with one of our medics, and we began walking around. We never found any fingers. We did find some other things—about a hundred feet away we found part of his shirt wrapped around a bush. There were no fingers in it, so we moved on.

Hundreds of feet in another direction, we found a shapeless hunk of pale flesh stuck in a tree over our heads. We stared at it for a while, completely baffled, until the medic finally said, “Oh, it's a spine.”

I stared at it a bit longer. It looked nothing like a spine to me. Just a tattered mass of pink and gore.

Around that point the futility of our search sank in, and we walked back to the convoy. They'd packed up the body parts, and we returned to Gardez. Our mood was good—a dumb suicide bomber had killed himself, and no good guys got hurt. Score one for our team.

It wasn't until almost an hour later that I got called to the clinic. While we were picking up after the bomber, an eight-year-old child had been brought to our FOB. He was playing with his friends on the road near the police when the bomber blew up, and a single ball bearing struck his skull just behind and below his ear.

The docs had to point out the injury for me. The rest of his body was completely unharmed. He looked like he was asleep, except for the tiny hole hidden beneath his short hair.

It was probably the worst place to get hit by a ball bearing. The

ball cut right across his brain stem, then bounced around inside his skull for good measure. Death was most likely instantaneous. His uncle brought him to our FOB because, like many Afghans, he had an outsized belief in the power of our medicine. We can fix anything.

We can't. We couldn't fix him. Dead is dead is dead.

Looking back, what's most extraordinary to me was how little I felt. Before that day I had never seen a dead body outside of a casket; by the day's end I had helped pick up the pieces of one body and found a naked child lying dead on our clinic table. Yet all through it was a sense, never vocalized but ever present, of being cool and professional and emotionless. No one wanted to show any sort of weakness, especially so early in our deployment.

I'd like to say it was hard, that it was difficult to suppress the horror and sadness that humans are supposed to feel in such situations. I'd like to say that, but I'd be lying—it wasn't just easy, it was effortless. I remember laughing with our squad leader at some joke he made about needing gloves. Years passed before it even occurred to me that there was something deeply wrong about how we felt that day.

It was already dark when we returned the boy to his family, so he was buried the next day. I don't know when or if or how the suicide bomber's remains were ever buried.

Like I said, there wasn't much of a body.

Air Force Captain John Severns is the Chief of Public Affairs at Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri. He has deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan four times, including for a year on the Gardez Provincial Reconstruction Team in Paktya, Afghanistan, with the 82nd Airborne's 4th BCT. This essay is drawn from that deployment.

The Indian Chief

By John Tinseth

The smell of pine trees and their fallen needles baked in the hot sun always makes me a little sick.

When I was running with a ruck sack, a rifle and sucking in red dust four platoons back, that burnt pine needle smell took me past the point of being, 'a little sick' to an anger bordering on satanic. I would kill Jesus to stop the stabbing pain in my lungs wrapped tight in that Pine Sol smell. I knew the chest pain was really from smoking cigarettes and drinking too much on Hay Street the night before. But I blamed the pine trees—a useless fucking tree if ever there was one.

Eleven years prior, when I was eight, I played in the same woods the army was trying to kill me in. Just behind the duplex quarters of Hammond Hills which my mother thought were made of wax paper and toad shit. And that's from a woman who grew up dirt poor.

As kids, we took pine tree branches and placed them in a semi-circle, shoveled dead pine needles with our hands covering the branch skeleton in a rust colored wall. One semi-circle of dead pine needles stood against another and we fought our battles with pine cone projectiles. Meanwhile, my father baked in a record breaking heat wave

in the Central Highlands with his SF camp about to be pounced on by an NVA regiment.

When I was home on leave he told me he survived with the absolute firm knowledge no harm would come to him because, "I'm the kind of guy who never won anything." He suggested I think the same way. To do otherwise—to think you could win the contest meant certain death. And as confusing as that was to me, at 19, something clicked and I understood.

A book was out about WW III and it explained how someone like me, a paratrooper in the infantry, would die before I ever saw the door of a C 130 somewhere over Western Germany. And while I thought of what my last moments alive would be like in a burning C-130 nose diving into the German countryside—I never thought I would die in those peaceful woods behind the village of wax paper and toad shit. But I came close.

The voice was a low rumble that crept out of green overgrowth and bushes.

I was playing in the woods behind Hammond Hills, quarters for senior enlisted men. Dad was a captain but Vietnam was keeping Ft Bragg hopping and there was a wait list for officer's quarters. I wonder today if I would have heard that voice in the woods behind the officer's billets. Maybe.

I was playing alone so it must have been a Sunday. We didn't go to church but everybody else did. I had a Man from U.N.C.L.E. attaché case. The one with the secret camera and shoulder stock P-38. I had asked for a trench coat that Christmas but would make do with a navy turtleneck and long blonde hair while working on a Illya Kuryakin accent.

"I am a great chief," the low rumble said. Not thirty feet away, maybe less. I looked up from my brief case. "What?" I said, looking for the voice. "I am a great Indian chief and I'm looking for brave warriors to fight for my people." I turned to the voice and faced the bushes to my

right and up a slight hill. I was calm. I was curious. I answered back. "What people?" "My tribe is out west—many moons away."

Out west? I was born in South Dakota and had lived most of my eight years out west: Ft. Bliss and Ft. Sam Houston, TX, Ft. Sill, OK...I knew the west.

"Where out west?" I said putting my brief case down and folding my arms. "My people moved many times—many years." I nodded my head, "Me too. Where did you go?" "Many places," he replies. I remember as a kid hearing my father saying 'horse shit' a lot. I always wondered what the big deal was about horse shit but something was telling me this guy might have some.

I yelled to him, "I've lived in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and I was born in South Dakota. Do you know those places?" There was silence. Then, "Yes. We were in those places many times."

My father had left Ft Bragg and was in Vietnam. I had dreams of him in his camp spurred on by John Wayne in *The Green Berets*. My grandmother had taken me to see it. I also had the record that inspired the movie, "Ballad of the Green Berets" written by Sgt Barry Sadler, a neighbor and someone my grandmother thought was a, "pretty big honcho." My father thought he was a staff sergeant and not a very good one.

My dream was always the same. My father's camp is being attacked by Viet Cong. My father is giving orders to his men and I walk up carrying an M-16. He looks at me and yells, "What are you doing here!?" I shrug my soldiers. He points me to a position and I join a circle of men surrounding him. We aim our weapons at the charging enemy.

I ask the Indian chief, "Where were you in all those places?" "Come to me, brave warrior and I will tell you."

I looked down at my PX French Shriners and kicked at some dirt that looked just like the dirt at Ft Benning and Ft Jackson. I don't

remember being scared. If anything, I thought this 'chief' was probably a high school kid who was teasing me in front of his buddies. He wasn't very convincing and I was getting bored.

"Come to me, brave warrior. I will take you back in time where many buffalo..." "Nice try." I thought. I waved goodbye to the bushes and walked the ten feet or so out of the woods and up a hill to our cul-de-sac. I jumped in a dumpster next to the car port and played astronaut and then I walked some fifty feet home.

I have no idea who the Indian chief was although I do wonder how lucky I was. I never mentioned it to anybody. Bigger things were going on. The army was kicking us off post since my father was in Vietnam. Another move—but this would be the first time on the other side of the gate.

A second generation Army brat, John Tinseth enlisted as an 11B infantryman with a \$2500 bonus for four years in 1976. John has written five screen plays and a spec script for "The Unit." His blog, The Trad, has been featured in the NY Times, Esquire, GQ-UK, the New Yorker, Vanity Fair and most recently got him fired from his job. While his time in the Army was important, he believes his life as a Brat is what defines him.

Fiction.

First Person Shooter

By Kevin Jones

The M16A4 service rifle. 39.5 inches long. 8.79 pounds. Maximum effective range, area target: 800 meters. Maximum effective range, point target: 550 meters. You can hit ten out of ten head shots from 500 meters on the Known Distance range in high wind. You are an Expert marksman, a hunter of men, a killer. A United States Marine. Born-to-fight-trained-to-kill-ready-to-die-but-never-will! Sir yes Sir! This is your War Face. This is your weapon. There are many like it, but this one is yours. This is your blood. This is your sweat. Give your soul to Jesus because your ass belongs to The Corps.

* * *

Run. Up the hill. Back down. Back up. Again and again and a-fucking-gain until your lungs burn and your quads feel like rubber. Sergeant Czerzinski runs along side of your sorry ass without any discernable effort, screaming, “Get up my fucking hill!” and “You worthless piece of shit, why don’t you die? Why don’t you just fall out of this run and cry like the a little fucking girl because this hill is just too goddamn hard for you?” The Marine in front of you pukes all over the front of his t-shirt. His step doesn’t falter. He doesn’t quit. Marines

don't quit. Ever. You can't quit in combat. What if it's hot? What if you're tired when the enemy attacks your position? There is no "time out" in war. No second place. You know this because the sergeants have told you. The sergeants who have gone and fought and returned from their wars. The ones that you look upon with fear and admiration. The ones who have killed for their country and brought back stories and medals and scars.

* * *

CH-46 Sea Stallion. Twin rotors. Looks like a giant banana thump-thump-thumping along in the sky with you and your team in its belly. Metal and skin. Oil and sweat. The pilot drops low over the waves of Kaneohe Bay, 30 feet off the deck, navigating with night vision goggles in the early morning dark. Check your equipment for the hundredth time since getting on board. Rifle, harness, ammo, IR strobe, emergency life vest, fins, knife, check, check, check. Now slow and hover, the cop-ter's back door opening like a giant mouth waiting to spit its cargo into the sea. Stand up and look at the other seven men in your team before lining up in the doorway. The Marines look like demons in the red light of the 46's interior. Everyone has their war paint on: light and dark green streaked over faces and necks. Your team leader, Sergeant Czerzinski, a massive, powerlifting bastard, has written "Fuck" on one cheek and "Kill" on the other. Veins the size of fingers rise and fall in his neck as he chews his gum. He steps to the back of the bird, looks over the edge, smiles at the crew chief strapped safely into the doorway and steps out into the night. You follow.

Drop. Drop. Drop.

Splash.

Feet first into the cold water. Kick hard for the surface. Breathe. Swim away from the area before everyone else drops on top of your head. The instructors at the Scout Swimmer's School drove the point home: ro-

tor blade vibrations over the ocean drive sharks into a feeding frenzy. Maybe it's true, maybe not. You don't want to find out. Reach down to the snap link on your harness. Get fins. Put them on over your scuba boots. Where's the sergeant? Where's the team? There. Link up. Tread water. Grab hands and count like children: One-two-three-four-five-six-seven and you make eight. All set? Let's go.

* * *

Practice, practice, practice. The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war. All you do is sweat. All you've seen is peace. Everyone's going but you. You want to go. You want to stay. Go. Stay. Go.

* * *

Dollar beer night at The Shack in Kailua. Too many Marines, not enough girls. Try to wedge your way in close to a brunette tourist from the Mainland almost sitting by herself at the bar. The conversation goes along predictable lines:

Her: Smile, laugh, toss hair, drink, drink, look around the room, laugh, ask why you're a Marine.

You: Smile, joke, drink, drink, show tattoos, look around the room, joke, lie.

* * *

Survival training. No food for days. You're taught how to skin and cook a rabbit in the field. Sergeant Czerzinski is in charge of this period of instruction. You and the other Marines each get a bunny and are told to hold it close to your chest. You are ordered to take a knife and slit the throat of your rabbit.

The sergeant says, "Hold it upside down so that it will bleed out faster." When the Marines hesitate he laughs at them. He looks at them in disgust.

"You love this bunny?" he asks. "You can't kill it now that you've

been holding it all this time?”

The Marines are quiet, staring.

“That’s just emotion you’re feeling,” he says. “Just bullshit. Now, take that knife in your hand and cut that fucking bunny’s throat. Kill that goddamn thing. Fuck your feelings. Fuck feeling sorry for something. You want to survive in combat, you squash that shit right fucking now, you read me?”

In unison, “Yes, sergeant.”

“You can’t kill a goddamn bunny, how the hell are you going to kill a man?”

You grab the rabbit by its ears, pull back, slash the entire neck open. Blood gushes out warm over the blade, your knuckles, the dirt at your feet. You hold it upside down and listen to its breath get slower and slower until the rabbit stops moving and everything is very still.

“Right now,” Czerzinski is saying, “right now, somewhere in the world, your enemy is training to kill you. He might be a trained soldier, or a teenager with a bomb strapped to his chest, or an old man with nothing to lose doing what some fucked up country tells him to do. You need to be able to kill any of them without hesitation, without mercy. Without doubt.”

* * *

Your mother sends a birthday card. She says how proud she is. She writes about your little brother, who never takes off the USMC t-shirt you sent him. She says that he runs around the house playing war. He wants to shave his hair just like yours but she won’t let him. She worries about you. Be careful, she writes. Be careful.

* * *

Your unit goes on float. Six months at sea on an amphibious assault ship, sailing in circles, waiting for something to happen. Push-ups on the flight deck, swabbing decks, laughing at sailors for not

being as tough, for not being Marines. You go to the Philippines and the battalion commander orders your unit to spend an entire Saturday afternoon rebuilding a Catholic orphanage while PR flacks take pictures for Stars and Stripes. That night, you go into town and pay five bucks to take a teenage girl into the back room of a bar. This girl, she says that she only works there part time to pay her way through college. She says she loves American movies and rock and roll and then she goes down on you and doesn't say anything more. Three days later your ship leaves and you watch the sunset over the Sea of Japan in an explosion of pink and orange. It is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen.

* * *

Midnight in the Indian Ocean. The platoon sergeant wakes everyone up. "Get out of the rack," he says. "The CO is coming through with an announcement." Your platoon sleeps stacked from deck to ceiling in bunks like coffins. The Marines stand, pissed off and bleary eyed, waiting for the skipper to make his appearance. The rumor mill is in full effect. Surprise inspection, some think. More fuck-fuck games, others say, more bullshit. What is it now? Finally, he arrives. Fresh shave, starched uniform, Academy ring like a door knocker on his hand and the First Sergeant dogging his heels like a porter.

"At ease," says the First Sergeant. "Listen up."

The CO tells the Marines that shit has gone down and they're going in to secure an American embassy. He uses words like "Non-combatant Evacuation Operation." He says, "The balloon has gone up" and "This is not a drill." He tells the junior officers to meet him in ten minutes for a briefing, and that this is what you're all here for.

Czerzinski looks over at you. "Stick with me, you skinny fuck," he says. "You'll be just fine." He sits down on a rack and starts sharpening his knife.

You make it to the head before throwing up your dinner. It

looks the same coming up as it did going down.

* * *

On the flight deck, surrounded by helicopters, the heat is a living thing. You are a hundred miles off of the African coast. Sergeant Czerzinski orders your team to take their dog tags off and tie one to each boot, down low, between the tongue and laces. He explains: “You’ve only got one head but two legs. If an RPG hits you in the chest there won’t be enough left for anybody to identify.”

He says, “You need teeth for dental records.”

He says, “We may find one of your boots a few hundred feet away with that dog tag in it.”

* * *

You’re in a helicopter again, coming in low over the ocean and across the sand. The embassy is a small, cement building squatting in the distance surrounded by razor wire and burning tires. It is hot hot hot and the world smells like gun oil, sweat, and fear.

Riding in the belly of the copter, you discover that fear has an actual taste. Acrid, metallic, copper, sour, it is all of these and none at the same time. You are learning your first lesson of war: that this fear is real. This fear is yours. It has become part of you and you will carry it in one form or another for the rest of your life.

Your mind spins in circles as you hear small arms fire pinging against the skin of the aircraft. You hold your rifle against your chest, muzzle down, fingers squeezing the stock, knuckles white. Czerzinski looks over at you and laughs. He’s holding something out to you in his massive hand, gum, but you shake your head. All you can think of is how thin the aircraft is and then there’s another blast against the bottom of the bird and everything shakes.

“Well, ladies,” Czerzinski says. His voice is loud enough for everyone to hear but you swear he’s speaking only to you. “This is where

you earn your stories.”

The bird lands and you hit the ground running. Everything is in slow motion as you head for the edge of the LZ with the rest of your team and throw yourself onto the dirt. You're too close to the others. Everyone is bunched up. Clusterfuck. One grenade and you all go. Czerzinski is everywhere, shoving people away and pointing, yelling, “Spread the fuck out!” or something like it. You roll away and make for the bushes. No rocks, no trees. No hard cover anywhere. Hide and seek, just like elementary school. More small arms fire and you hit the deck. The ground becomes your lover. Crawl on your belly. Feel the dirt and weeds and grass as you dig your way through the brush. Artillery falling now like the End of Days. Ours? Theirs? Getting closer? You can't tell. Clutch your rifle and pray to get out alive. Hope that no one can see you crying. Look for the other Marines.

See the captain's hand signal: Advance. Get up and run with your team towards the embassy. Your job: secure the perimeter. Run and pray. Run and pray. Say “fuck” as loud as you can. Hit the wall. Face outboard. The shelling stops, the small arms fire remote now, distant. The loudest sound is your breathing. You lay on your belly again waiting to shoot anything that moves towards you. Silence. You wait some more. You want to shoot. Why isn't there anyone to shoot? More helicopters land. More Marines. They are everywhere now. Somewhere behind you, on the other side of the embassy wall, the ambassador is being escorted out of the building. Somewhere, your CO is getting his picture taken by an embedded reporter for today's news cycle. Outside, with your team, you wait and wait and wait. No one will ever know your name.

* * *

You ride the bird back to the ship. Your team made it back without any injuries. There's a rumor that someone in second platoon got hit, head

shot, never saw it coming. Others say it's bullshit; everyone on the raid is fine. Sergeant Czerzinski wants an ammo and equipment check. You pull out your magazines and stare: they're all full. You didn't fire a single shot. You watch Czerzinski as he counts his few remaining rounds out into his upturned helmet. The muscles in his forearms pop and dance and you wonder how you and he can be part of the same species. You are the fish crawling up onto the shore, learning to breathe air for the first time. He is the evolved creature you will someday become, and this fills you with a mix of horror and excitement. You are covered in dirt and sweat and somewhere in the back of your mind you realize that this place, these people, are starting to feel like home to you.

* * *

A year later Czerzinski gets into a bar fight while on liberty in Waikiki. He kills a tourist with his bare hands, deserts the Marine Corps, and vanishes. Some say that he killed himself shortly after the fight. Others, that he went back home and snuck into Canada where he works at a car wash in Toronto. Your favorite rumor is the one where Czerzinski joined the Foreign Legion. You can picture him, shaved head, white kepi blanc, and the desert all around him. He would no longer be the man you knew. He would have changed his name.

Kevin Jones' work has been featured in The New York Times, Ink Pot, Prime Number, r.kv.r.y., Monkeybicycle, The Cobalt Review, and the anthologies Home of the Brave: Stories in Uniform and Boomtown: Explosive Writing from Ten Years of the Queens University of Charlotte MFA Program. He lives on Florida's Gulf Coast where he teaches writing and literature.

The Road

By Sean Niquette

Where do we go from here? He thought about the possibilities as he looked at the road stretched out before him. Everything was easier before. Everything was so much simpler. He thought about being ten again, eager to put on his gear and get on the rink. It had been years since he had played, decades actually. He missed it, the simplicity of the sport. You put on your gear and tried to score more goals than your opponent. If you did, you won. If not, you lost and you practiced until you did win. No one got hurt, other than a couple concussions or cuts; except the time that goalie broke his neck, but that was rare.

It wasn't so simple over there. There was no goal scoring, only cheering when some poor bastard blew himself up with a rocket and burned to death, or cheering when the helicopters dismembered and destroyed some insurgents on a farm. There was the rush of playing sports, but there were no sports, only close calls and adrenaline highs. There was crying and breaking, laughing and joking, arguing and stress, sprinting and dodging, more laughing. But there was no winning or losing, only living and leaving, for most. Those who didn't

live didn't leave. Their things left, and their memory and spirit lived. Those who lived, left.

Where do we go from here? How do we travel this road? He thought about how far he could drive with his truck packed so full. Almost everything he owned was in it: everything that mattered, at least. He carried the weight of his service in old uniforms and gear, pictures and memories from the Soldier's life he tried to leave behind. Army duffle bags, stuffed with memorabilia, books, field manuals, a flag he brought home from the war, still carrying the stench and memory of death, medals and coins. Would the wheels fall off before he got there? He stared ahead at the road, wondering where to go.

How do we make it? How far can I make it? He carried with him the live memories of those who didn't live. They were the memories of the dead; full of the life and vibrancy they had before dripping into the ground, spraying into the air, or getting stuck into the ceiling. The dark sights, crushing sounds, and horrific screams of pain and death overloaded the good memories, the live memories. The dark weight of memory pushed down upon his psyche like the physical weight of his belongings pushed down upon his truck's shocks. How far can I make it? He wondered how long he would last until the burden of his past stopped him, dead in his tracks. He remembered talking to the wife of the dead, holding in everything he wanted to tell her. It was his burden. How long could he bear it? The dead were living within him, pulling at his shoulders like the body armor he once wore, like the body he once carried, like the responsibility of being a Soldier forever.

How long could he last? Where would he go? Where would this truck, this psyche take him? How would he travel that road? None of it, he decided, matters at all. He too will be a dead burden, carried on the shoulders of someone he loved.

Soldier Sean Niquette is a Purple Heart recipient who served in Iraq in 2011. He lives in Texas with his supportive and loving wife. He enjoys writing fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.

Something to Bury

By Jamie Rand

There are eight of them in the back of the humvee, sitting four to a side and knee to knee, as it thunders through the dark. The headlights bounce over tire tracks torn through thick tendrils of sand blown down from the berm. The spume behind the vehicle is a bright taillight red, and Hewitt, sitting portside aft, thinks of a comet's tail.

He looks up at the sky. To the south, the flarestacks far out in the desert flicker orange against the night. He can't see the flames—the berm is in the way—but he knows they're out there, those three fires, dancing on the horizon. He's smiling a little, thinking about that, about the strange way they make him feel, when Isaac shouts, "Man, why's everybody's so *quiet*?"

"It's zero three thirty in the fucking morning," Corporal Eckard answers. He's sitting next to Hewitt. "Why do you think?"

The humvee takes a sudden lurch and they grab for the seat slats. The butts of their weapons clang against the bed. Isaac squeezes his rifle between his thighs and puts one hand on his kevlar to stop it from flying

away. “Like riding in the back of my dad’s pickup.”

Hewitt smiles and asks, “You’re a hick, you know that?”

“How does that make me a hick?”

“Shut up, both of you,” Eckard says. “*Christ.*” He elbows Corporal Donaldson, sitting next to him. “Hey, you need a pair of retards over in your squad? I’ll trade.”

“We’re fine, thanks. Full up.”

“Man. I can’t even *give* you assholes away.”

They ride on. The air beats at their faces and drums in their ears. It isn’t wet with dew, like it would be back home, but there’s a softness to it. And a smell, something Hewitt’s gotten used to but never stopped noticing, something he doesn’t have a word for. It makes him think of rust, of mangy animals, of sunburned skin.

The humvee stops at the east gate, although *gate* is kind of a misnomer. It’s a thick cable with a hook on both ends, strung across the road between two of those waist-high concrete slabs Searle calls Jersey barriers. Off to one side there’s a little area where they’ll search the Hajis later in the day, and back behind the berm there’s a guard tower with the barrel of a 249 sticking out of it. Under the orange glow of the mast lights the whole place looks like a setting out of some cheap movie.

As they take off their kevlar and jump out of the back of the humvee, Isaac asks, “Hey, anyone remember spring? Back when we actually, you know, did shit?”

“Yeah, I remember it,” Searle says. He pulls his boonie cover out of his cargo pocket and puts it on. “We were in our MOPP suits for three weeks straight. And we woke up to a gas siren eight times a night.”

“I meant the convoy ops,” Isaac says. He works his sling over his shoulders and adjusts his rifle.

“Yeah, that was fun. Glad it’s over with, though.”

“It’s better than this.”

Searle picks up his rifle and starts walking toward that little

search area, where half a dozen Marines are sitting around a table built out of plywood and two by fours, talking to each other and listening to a Sony boombox. Hewitt knows it's a Sony because that's the only brand the PX sells.

"The gate isn't bad," Searle tells Isaac. "You'll see. Better than being up in those towers." He looks over at Eckard and grins. "Not that the *corporals* would understand, since they don't get tower duty. Corporal."

Eckard rubs at the back of his neck and throws him a sidelong glance. "Hey, if you really want my job, it's all yours. You can see what it's like getting yelled at for someone else's fuckups."

"I get that already. *Without* the extra pay."

The Marines at the table gather up their gear and throw their trash away. A few shake hands and talk with their replacements before they head to the humvee. With the platoon on three different shifts, some of them rarely see get to see each other.

Then Sergeant Galen cups his hands around his mouth. "My Marines, school circle on me."

Hewitt and the others cluster in front of him. He pulls out a little field notebook, the kind with the waterproof paper. "Alright. Quick brief for you new guys. We rotate shifts every two hours. Two of you in the tower, two at the cable, two on vehicle search, two on Haji search. I'll be pairing new Marines with old ones. Those of you that've done this before, I expect you to bring the boots up to speed. Any questions about that?"

No one answers.

"Good. Oh, and Corporal Latham'll be here with the dog squad at zero five. They're on their own program, so don't worry about them."

"They're sergeants, by the way," Eckard adds. "That's right. We're outranked by fucking *dogs*."

"*You* shitbirds are," Sergeant Galen says, and they laugh. "Alright,

listen. First shift. Tower is Hewitt and Searle. Donaldson—corporal type—and Roberts, the gate. Corporal Eckard and Private Isaac, vehicle search. Fisher and McNasty, you're here with me. Make sure your rifles are in condition three. Chow will be here in about an hour. Any other questions? No? Alright. Get to it."

Up in the tower, Merrick and Cavanaugh are sitting side by side on a tall wooden bench, talking about a story they heard on the news—the old man who went *Grand Theft Auto* at a farmer's market in California and ran over a dozen people. They're joking about it, wondering how many stars he had, if the police called in SWAT teams and the FBI to take him down, if the Santa Monica Pay 'n' Spray had a handicap entrance. Cavanaugh's laughing as he stands and shakes hands with Searle. Merrick hands Hewitt a paperback.

"Hey, thanks for letting me borrow this."

It's his copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, part of the care package his parents sent, and it's in five different sections, the cover gone, loose pages sticking out, the whole mess held together with a boot band.

"What the fuck, Merrick?"

He shrugs. "Sorry. I was reading it yesterday and the thing just fell apart. I'll buy you a new one when we get back." He turns to Searle, who's struggling to hold in his laughter. "Nothing new to report. The 119's up, the SAW's in condition three, the NVGs are broke, and the ICOM is still a total piece of shit."

"Got it. Hewitt, do a radio check. I'll inspect the 249."

He worms between Merrick and Searle, picks up the handset, and keys the button. The soft static on the radio goes silent. "Charlie One, Charlie One, this is—break." He looks up. "Shit. What tower is this?"

"Romeo Six."

"Uh, Romeo Six, radio check, over."

There's a long pause. Merrick and Cavanaugh climb down from

the tower, still talking about the old man. Searle opens the cover on the SAW, removes the ammo belt, and blows sand out of the feed tray assembly. He's nearly finished with the inspection by the time the radio squawks and says, *That's a solid copy, Romeo Six. Charlie One out.*

"What, did you wake them up?" Searle asks. "Turds."

"Guess so."

Hewitt hooks the handset clip over the thin wall of the tower and cranks the 119's volume knob to the far right. Searle closes the feed tray cover, slaps a live-ammo magazine into his rifle, and joins him on the bench.

They're quiet for a little while. They listen to the distant lawnmower drone of the generator. They look out at the desert night, at the city lights on the horizon that glimmer like candles. It's peaceful, in its own strange way. In a few hours they'll be down at the gate, sweltering in a hundred-degree heat, slapping at monstrous flies with red eyes and polka-dot abdomens. But right now, things aren't so bad, and knowing that worse is coming somehow makes this better.

Hewitt opens his flak jacket and reaches for the pen and the small notebook he keeps stashed under his SAPI plate. Although he can't quite see what he's writing, he scrawls: *Happiness before something shitty (shit-tier). Contentment in the moment—all about contrast.*

"You writing a book about this?"

To anyone else Hewitt would lie, but Searle, of all the guys in the platoon, understands. "Not a book. An article, maybe." He caps the pen and puts the notebook on the table.

"That's cool," Searle says. He takes a can of Skoal from his pocket and starts packing it. "Hey, throw on some tunes."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Just put it away if the rover comes."

Hewitt pulls out his mp3 player. It's a MuVo he bought after graduating from SOI. With the volume maxed out, it's just loud

enough to hear what's playing, which right now is the Beatles' *A Day in the Life*.

"Nice change of pace," Searle says. "I actually know who this is."

"Hey, just because something isn't popular doesn't mean it isn't good. Look at Modest Mouse. They're fucking awesome."

"You've told me that like a hundred times. Point stands. You're still a hipster."

"Yeah, I guess I am," he says, smiling. "You know, I used to have this Livejournal where I'd review indie stuff. Garage bands who put their songs on Napster. Shit like that."

"Find anything good?"

"A little." He takes a sip of water from his Camelbak. "Funny thing. For my last update, I wrote, *Off to fight the Iraqis. Back when the war's over*. And that got more comments than any of my reviews."

Searle spits off the side of the tower. "What'd they say?"

"What, the comments? You know. Same old shit. Be safe. Come home. Though, I did have a girl give me her address. So that's pretty cool."

"Write to her?"

"A couple of letters. But that's not my point. And actually, my point kinda has to do with that article I want to write. If you want to hear it."

"Sure. Go for it."

"Okay. Well. How do you feel when you watch the news in the chowhall?"

Searle shrugs. "Pissed off, sometimes."

"Why?"

He pauses before he answers and speaks slowly, as if trying to make sure each word's the right one. "Because they make this out like it's . . . I don't know. Entertainment? Like it's something for people to watch. Like a new season of *Survivor*, or some shit."

“Good way to put that, yeah. That’s kinda how I feel. And that’s how most people feel unless they know someone over here, right? The war doesn’t like, personally affect them.”

“Yeah, I’d agree with that.”

“They don’t have a frame of reference,” Hewitt says. “And I think that’s because no one ever reports on the small stuff. No one ever talks about it. Like, you know, like the way some of the porta-johns have shit piled up to the seat, so you have to squat to take a dump.” He motions toward the tattered paperback. “Or this. I can tell people it’s hot over here, yeah, but that’s just a word. I mean, everyone’s been hot. But if I can tell them it’s so hot that it melted the glue from a book, that gives them a sense of perspective.”

Searle nods a little. “Alright, yeah, that makes sense.”

“Anyway, since no one read my reviews, I figured when I’d get back, I’d write about what life’s like here. Just, like, daily life. The shit people can relate to. Like you said, maybe someone’ll read it and realize this isn’t a TV show.”

“I like that. It’s a good idea, anyway.”

“Besides,” Hewitt says, “this shit’s all I have. I mean I’ll probably be going for my doctorate when I’m out. Who’d they rather want, a kid who reviewed shitty bands, or a combat vet who writes articles?”

Searle smiles. “If they’re smart, fucking neither.”

“That’s probably true,” Hewitt admits.

They’re quiet for a little while, listening to the Beatles, Beck, and Blink-182. They almost make it to Cat Stevens before they hear the approaching sound of the rover. Hewitt stashes the book and mp3 player in his flak jacket.

When the humvee stops at the gate, a pair of Marines jump from the back and start giving out paper plates wrapped in tinfoil. Their morning chow is beef hotdogs, scrambled eggs more green than yellow, and a cinnamon bun. As they’re eating one of the guys below

powers down the generator and the glow of the mast light fades away. It isn't sunrise, not yet, but the sky's a dogtag silver with just enough light to see.

With the engine turned off they can hear the Sony over on the table. On the Armed Forces Radio Network, Steve Holy starts singing *Good Morning Beautiful*. McNally's crooning along with it, doing a terrible falsetto, replacing beautiful with corporal.

"Hey," Searle says. "First truck of the day."

Hewitt looks up from his food. There's a semi making its way down the MSR. "Anything we have to do?"

"Keep an eye on him when he pulls up. That's all we do up here."

But the semi stops well before the cable, a good fifty yards out. Searle frowns, stands, and slowly, almost idly, reaches for his weapon. From below, Sergeant Galen shouts, "Tower, do you see that?"

"Aye, Sergeant," Searle says. Then, to Hewitt: "They've never done this before."

He puts his chow aside, stands up, and grabs his rifle. A slow-burn worry creeps into his chest, sinks in, settles in. It isn't fear, not yet, but it's close. "Do you want me on the SAW?"

"Not yet. Let's see what he does."

The driver-side door opens. Someone climbs down. He's too far out, and it's still too dark, to see much more than a vague shape. He moves away from the truck, maybe ten feet, and sits down on the sand. Even from this distance they can see the small flame of a lighter and the cherry of a cigarette.

"Tower, put him in your sights," Galen barks. "Fisher, get on the horn with Charlie One."

"Rifle," Searle says. They both chamber a round and take a knee, resting the handgrips of their weapons on the metal wall of the tower. Hewitt flips up his day aperture and aims center mass. His face and ears are suddenly hot, like he's blushing. He glances at Searle, expecting—

hoping—to see something like his own sudden worry reflected there. But what he sees on Searle’s face isn’t fear, not exactly. It’s more like pity.

Fisher’s voice comes over the 119. *Charlie One, Charlie One, this is Echo One, stand by for salute report, over.*

The reply is almost instantaneous. *Go ahead, Echo One.*

Size, one footmobile. Activity, uh, sitting down on the sand. Location, about fifty yards from the gate. Break. The radio hisses and clicks. *Uniform, unknown. Time, zero five hundred hours. Equipment, none. Over.*

There’s a pause. In it, Hewitt can hear Steve Holy, still happily singing about good morning beautiful days. His thumb’s on the safety. He can feel the hard plastic of the stock against his cheek. A tingle in his toes. He slides his foot to the right and the sound of the suede boot against the sandy metal is a harsh rasp.

Echo One, this is Charlie One, come in, over.

This is Echo One, send it.

Wait and see what he does, over.

Roger that, Charlie One. Standby.

They wait. The wind sighs. The sun, just breaking the horizon, is the throat of a wide, pink funnel. After a short time the driver stands up and climbs back into his truck and Hewitt aims for the shape behind the windshield, squinting against the sunrise. The vehicle drives forward slowly. Eckard and Isaac walk in front of it and sign for the Haji to flash his lights. He does. Then he climbs down again and smiles at them and nods and stands with his arms out. He’s a short man, bald, maybe forty, with a thin moustache and a potbelly. Roberts points toward the search area.

The dog squad sniffs around the truck while Fisher and McNally pat the driver down and wave a hand-held metal detector over him. Eckard and Isaac jump into the cab. A minute later they come back out.

“Vehicle’s clear,” Eckard shouts.

“Haji’s clear,” McNally says.

On the 119, Fisher says, *Charlie One, this is Echo One. Vehicle and occupant are clear, how copy?*

That’s a solid copy, Echo One. Let him through. Charlie One out.

Roger that. Echo One out.

“Roberts, let him through,” Sergeant Galen says.

The driver, still nodding and smiling, gets back into his vehicle. Roberts lowers the cable. They watch as the truck rumbles and hisses its way down the MSR.

Searle takes the magazine out of his rifle and eases the charging handle back. He catches the round that falls from the ejection port and sits down on the bench. After a drink of water, he looks at Hewitt and asks, “You gonna write about that?”

Hewitt grins, but it feels fake on his face. Stretched. “Maybe,” he says. “But I’d probably make it fiction.”

Searle laughs. “What? Why?”

He looks down, thinking, as Searle thumbs the loose round back into his magazine. He wants to say *Because I can give it meaning*, but that isn’t right. Not exactly.

“Because you can’t be honest about this shit,” Hewitt says, finally. “Can you imagine me telling my parents I almost fucking shot someone while some shitstain country song’s playing on the radio?”

He sits down on the bench and takes the magazine out of his rifle. He’s quick enough to yank the charging handle back and catch the round as it flies out of the weapon.

“I guess there’s that, too,” Searle says.

Not long later, Isaac and Corporal Eckard climb into the tower. They’re playing ‘Who Would You Rather Sleep With’, and Eckard’s having a hard time deciding between Nancy Reagan or Janet Reno. Hewitt and Searle go down to the gate, where they lean against the Jersey barriers, squint away from the sun, and listen to the morn-

ing news broadcast from the Sony over in the search area. Locally, the Iraqis have failed to elect a new president. In Britain, Dr. David Kelly has committed suicide because of something called the September Dossier; Tony Blair refuses to comment. And back in the States, Pat Robertson's prayer offensive against the Supreme Court is already floundering.

Hewitt lowers the cable for a small white pickup. It's a Toyota with an orange license plate and Arabic writing along the top edge of the tailgate. The Haji inside smiles and gives a little salute as they let him through.

"I think half of this goddamned country owns one of those trucks," Searle says. He slaps at a fly on his flak jacket. "Do they even sell them back home?"

"I'd buy one," Hewitt says. "Bet they're durable as hell."

"Probably, yeah. Guess they'd have to be."

Roberts, over at the table, shouts in pain. There's a burst of laughter. They turn to see him holding a hand to the side of his head as he looks at Corporal Donaldson and shouts, "What the *fuck* was that?"

Donaldson, laughing, holds up a bug zapper shaped like a small tennis racket. It came in a care package a few days ago, and it took him all of five minutes to start using it on everything except insects. His favorite thing is to come up behind his prey and press the metal netting against their ear.

Searle's smiling. "I can't believe he brought that thing."

From up in the tower Eckard yells, "Use it on your balls, Donaldson."

"Ha, never again," he shouts back.

"What did Corporal Eckard pay him to do it?" Hewitt asks.

"A can of dip, I think."

"Brilliant."

Searle shakes his head and glances down the MSR. He turns and holds a hand up against the sun. "Fuck."

“What?”

“It’s the Haji bus. There’s like thirty of them in there. They take forever to search.”

“So? We’re on the gate.”

“Yeah, but traffic’ll start backing up. It’s about to get busy. How’s your water?”

Hewitt reaches over his shoulder and shakes his Camelbak. Water sloshes in the bladder. “Close to full.”

“Good. We could be here a while.”

The bus hisses to a stop. The Hajis step out and line up like they’re at an airport back home, taking their shoes off, turning their pockets inside out. Coins and keys and oddities like ketchup packets and assorted fruits fill a wide plastic bin. They chatter with each other and laugh and smile while Roberts waves the metal detector over their bodies. Sergeant Galen stands away from them in an alert stance, his rifle pointed at the ground. The guys from the dog squad are sniffing around the bus as Fisher and McNally stalk the inside.

Donaldson, standing at the table, suddenly smiles. He reaches for one of the cinnamon buns left over from morning chow and puts it on the netting of the bug zapper. He holds the racket out to the Hajis in line like it’s a tray of hors d’oeuvres. They’re smiling at him uncertainly. He’s nodding at the roll and rubbing his belly. One of them reaches for it and Donaldson presses the button on the handle. The Haji jumps and makes a little sound of pain and sticks his fingers in his mouth.

Hewitt watches this from the gate. They’re laughing, Donaldson and Roberts and Sergeant Galen. Some of the Hajis are, too. Even the guy that got electrocuted, he’s smiling around his fingers. But it’s a pitiful smile. It reminds Hewitt of the way kids would smile back in high school, that bullied smile, hopeful and pathetic and somehow doglike, wanting to be a part of the joke but ashamed to be the butt of it.

He glances at Searle. He’s laughing, too, laughing hard, and

Hewitt feels a sudden urge to wrap his fingers into a fist and punch him. He, of all people, shouldn't be laughing. He's smart enough, maybe even kind enough, to understand that. But he's standing with his hands on his hips, his head thrown back, laughing at the sky, like this is a scene from *Jackass* and someone just took a baseball to the nuts.

Roberts and the rest finally finish the search. The Hajis pile back onto the bus and they lower the cable and let it into the camp. Traffic has backed up behind them and they're looking at a string of cars and pickups and semis stretching back down the MSR.

* * *

Their relief comes at twelve hundred. No handshakes, no talk, not this time. The traffic is continuous, vehicles entering and exiting, and they're constantly having to raise and lower the cable. Hewitt's lower back aches from bending and standing and pulling at the clevis hook. His hands are sore and chapped and the left one is bleeding a little, in that web between the thumb and index finger, where he caught it wrong on the latch a few hours ago.

Hewitt looks over at their relief as they check in with Sergeant Galen. "Thank Christ."

"Yeah," Searle says. He takes his boonie off and mops his face with it. His hands and forearms are an angry red that'll probably hurt tonight and peel tomorrow.

"How the fuck did we get stuck out here for six fucking hours?"

Searle shrugs and squares his cover. "Traffic, dude. Told you we might be here a while."

Syczpanski and Martin meet them at the cable a few minutes later. Hewitt and Searle grab their kevlar and head over to the clearing barrel, where they wait while Sergeant Galen finishes talking to his replacement.

Eckard and Isaac are the first to join them, and Eckard's smiling.

“That looked like it *sucked*,” he says.

“What, being on the gate for a six hour shift?” Searle asks. He presses his fingers against the sunburned skin on his arm and winces a little. “This shit makes me hard.”

“I bet. Hewitt? How’re you doing? ‘Cause you look done sir done.”

“I’m fine,” he says. He palms sweat out of his eyes. Being under the midday sun is like opening the door to an oven set to broil.

“You still good on water? I got some.”

“Yeah, I’m good. But thanks, Corporal. I appreciate it. Really.”

“No problem,” Eckard says. He gives Hewitt a friendly shove. “Don’t be a fag about it.”

Fisher and McNally join them. They look as sun-drenched as Hewitt feels. When Fisher shrugs out of his flak jacket, they can see the back of his blouse dark with an eagle of sweat. It looks like something from a Rorschach test.

“Well, that sucked six dicks,” Fisher says cheerfully. He puts his hands on his hips and stretches. “Who’s up for a double? I hear they’re paying overtime.”

“Get the steward on the phone,” Eckard says. He’s grinning. “This shit’s gotta be an OSHA violation, right?”

“This whole goddamned deployment’s an OSHA violation.” He cranes his from side to side. “Hey, I’m going to the PX after this. Anyone wanna come?”

“Can’t. We’re on react, remember?”

“Fuck,” he says. He draws the word out. “I forgot all about that.”

Donaldson and Roberts and Sergeant Galen come to the clearing barrel. Donaldson’s idly twirling the bug zapper. Hewitt glances at him and looks away.

“Alright,” Sergeant Galen says. They all turn to him. “There was a negligent discharge yesterday. Not here, some other camp, but they want us to make absolutely goddamned sure that doesn’t happen again.

So corporals, fuckin *check* your squad members, okay? I'll check again at the barrel."

While they inspect the weapons, Galen adds, "And gents, I'd like to apologize. Traffic got too heavy to shift you around. That was my fuck-up, and I take responsibility."

It sounds good, Hewitt thinks. Sounds fair. But he says nothing about letting Donaldson fuck with the Hajis. Nothing about the way they laughed at someone who had no choice but to laugh back.

"It wasn't so bad," Searle says.

Hewitt glances at him. "Yeah, for you."

"What?"

He shakes his head. "Nevermind," he says.

They clear their weapons and climb into the back of the humvee. Not long later they're racing parallel to the berm, following the beaten tracks back to the CoC. It's just past noon and far north of a hundred degrees, and the wind, heavy as it is at the speed they're going, feels like someone's blasting an industrial-size blow dryer in their faces.

"I'm gonna jerk off tonight," Eckard says loudly. They look over at him. "Just so you know. Like, twenty three hundred, don't be anywhere near my rack."

"Using that letter?" Donaldson asks.

Searle shouts, "What letter?"

"I'll show you when we get back," Eckard shouts back.

"Is it from Kristine?"

"Yeah. You'll like it."

Searle gives a sardonic thumbs up. Eckard, maybe seeing that he isn't talking to the best audience, starts telling Isaac all about it. A five paragraph blowjob, Eckard says.

"Well, that settles it then," Searle says. "You should marry her."

It's sarcasm, but Eckard takes the advice seriously. He stops talking and frowns a little, like he's honestly thinking it over. The

frown deepens and he scratches at his cheek.

Hewitt smiles. He doesn't want to—he's still thinking about Donaldson and the Hajis, still turning that over in his mind—but he can't help it. Corporal Eckard looks like a man trying to unravel the mysteries of the universe.

“Holy shit you broke his brain,” Isaac says.

McNally, at the back of the humvee, busts out into song. It's *The Power of Love* by Huey Lewis and the News. When he gets to the chorus, everyone else, Hewitt included, joins in, and Eckard spends the remainder of the ride back looking like a kid having an unwanted birthday party. They're laughing at him as they sing, and—at least for Hewitt—it feels good to laugh. In some strange way it makes the scene at the gate somehow more tolerable. More acceptable. Something, he thinks, to bury beneath better memories. Something to forget about.

Later, back in the hooch, he'll turn on his laptop and try to write a little about his day. He won't say anything about Donaldson. He won't say anything at all, really. He'll stare at a blinking cursor for a while, close the program in frustration, and open up one of his games.

Jamie Rand served in the Marine Corps infantry from 2001 to 2007 and currently attends graduate school for creative writing at Virginia Tech. He has had fiction and non-fiction published in the magazines Blood Lotus, Annalemma, Absinthe Revival and Carte Blanche, in addition to stories in the anthologies Specter Spectacular and Best New Writing 2011.

Poetry.

Nikon F (Black Body)

Neil Leinwohl

It sits in a drawer below the week's underwear.
A relic of a time when light was measured with a glance
toward the sky.
It stood between me and the reality.
A witness to all I observed.
A testimony faded in albums seldom touched.
It judged the world one thousandth of a second at a time.
Not caring if it was the truth.
Leaving that to the captions.
Sometimes I hold it in my hands and put it to my eye.
I don't like what I see.

Neil Leinwohl served as a photographer with the 34th Engineers in Vietnam (67-68) and with the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg (68-69). He is the Creative Director of an Advertising Agency in NYC. Neil also paints and will have 2 paintings in the upcoming Veterans Art Project show at the Pentagon.

Redcon 1: A Battle Rap

David Barry

Eternity blaze and hot to trot
We came we saw we all forgot
Just what to bring and what we brought
But it's all good no one was shot
Try to believe the things we got
Will keep us safe better off than not
You and me us three we bought
The pad and paper time to meet your maker
Write out the will hem up the fakers
Give it all to God, the wife, the mayor
Cuz we wont need nothing where we going
And what we're doing no one's knowing
Better believe I'll bring a potion
Better believe it'll cause a commotion
Get up start up locomotion
I'll set this whole damn world in motion
Keep track of my attacks and don't relax
Don't slack or you'll be held back
Cuz if you go loco, then I go psycho
Like Nintendo with no game over
Life's a breach for an engineer soldier
Spit out the grids let rain the mortar

Wrong place right time for me to slaughter
Those that would kill my sons and daughters
The enemy's me, I am the infidel
I won't stop shooting
Till I send you all to hell
Try to blow me up
Try to shoot me up
Try as you might I still will fuck you up
Driving slow and looking for you
Your bombs your wires your broke-ass shoes
If you ever so much leave me a clue
My 25 will be pointing at you
So give me a reason, give me a sign
To pull this fine little trigger of mine
It won't hurt me quite as much as you
We came to bring the pain this is what we do
We're here we're pissed it's time to act
It's time to close the curtain on the final act
And all you can do is hope to react
To a bon-a-fide Easy Echo attack

David Barry is currently an active duty Captain in the US Army. He deployed to Iraq in 2008 with the 4th Infantry Division, where he served as a combat engineer platoon leader. His platoon found and removed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) from the roads in eastern Baghdad.

REDCON 1, is a rap David composed designed to get his guys focused before rolling out the gate to find and destroy improvised explosive devices.

Football in Chu Lai, 1970

Milton Bates

You could count on it, the game would be
brutal when they showed up red-eyed from
lack of sleep, wearing the welts of a night

among mosquitoes in a piss-fouled bunker.
The longer the mortars fell, the more intense
the play. The wind peppered their faces

with dust as they piled fatigue jackets for
boundaries on a godforsaken slab
of clay. After the coin toss it was skins

against t-shirts, both sides in olive drab
from belt to jungle boots. No anthem or
referees, no spectators besides the guys

in the guard tower, weary of watching
concertina wire. They played two-hand touch,
not tackle, but ferocious, dirty,

elbows to ribs and knees to groins. How good
it felt to see the enemy and know
the score. They played to hurt. They played to win.

Milton Bates served as an Army sergeant in Vietnam in 1970-1971. He has published poetry and nonfiction, including the book The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling.

Interview

A Conversation with Richard Currey

Richard Currey was born in 1949 in Parkersburg, West Virginia and later moved with his family to Washington, DC. He was drafted in 1967 and ultimately enlisted in the Navy. He became a combat medic, was trained in jungle warfare and special operations, and saw action in Vietnam and elsewhere attached to the Marine Corps' Fleet Marine Force.

After leaving the military in 1972, Currey published a book of prose poems called *Crossing Over: The Vietnam Stories*. The book became a cult hit and was named a "Best Title of the Year" by Library Journal. But it was the novel *Fatal Light* that would establish Currey's international reputation, with widespread critical acclaim and 20 different editions published in 11 languages. The book was nominated for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and brought Currey the Vietnam Veterans of America's Excellence in the Arts Award and a Special Citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation.

Currey went on to write *The Wars of Heaven*, a story collection including O. Henry and Pushcart Prize winners that was re-issued in February 2013 in a new digital edition. Currey's prize-winning second novel, *Lost Highway*, re-released in 2005, chronicles the life and times of a fictional country music star.

O-Dark-Thirty fiction editor Jim Mathews recently sat down with Currey for a conversation about his time in the military and the effect it had on his life as a writer.

O-Dark Thirty: When did you discover your desire to write and was it driven by your military experiences?

Richard Currey: No, I've always been a writer. I saw a recent quote by Larry Heinemann—a great writer out of the Vietnam era who wrote *Paco's Story*. Larry said that he became a writer because of the war, not in spite of the war. In my case I was always a writer and always wanted to be a writer—so I became a writer in spite of the war. Writing has always been a natural calling for me and I would have found my subjects, but for anyone who has military experience—certainly combat experience—that really remakes your DNA. You will not avoid that subject in your life or your writing. But it wasn't war or the military that first brought me to writing. I was introduced to real writing—authentic literature—by my grandfather when I was about 10 years old. Interestingly, he gave me books that were quite challenging for a kid that age, notably *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. I was a big reader and had read my share of Robert Louis Stevenson and Conan Doyle, that kind of stuff—but Hemingway's language, the poignancy of his story, and the power of the book took me to a new place and communicated in a way I had never seen before.

ODT: So you began writing before you entered the military?

RC: Yes, I was writing extensively in junior high school and published short stories in my school literary magazine. Less so in high school because we all know there are so many other distractions in high school, but my interest never waned. And then my life took a peculiar turn: I was drafted. This was 1967 and Vietnam was, of course, raging at that point.

I got the notice—and, yes, it really did say, “Greetings from the President of the United States.” So, rather abruptly at that point, in ways I didn’t even realize at the time, my life was utterly reinvented. For starters, I had to confront what I was actually going to do instead of going to college somewhere. For a while, I thought college was still an option, but the local draft board didn’t agree with me. And we all know what the Army was doing at that time—fighting in Vietnam. Bear in mind that, at this point, my sense of geopolitics and the complexities of our military involvement in Vietnam were less than limited. So my options were a two-year hitch in the Army and probably go to Vietnam—and that wouldn’t be good. My father had been in the Navy so I had some sense of family tradition in that direction, which led me to trade two years in the Army for a four-year enlistment in the Navy. The Navy recruiter promised a safe and clean four years and even said something about maybe becoming a Navy journalist. I went to boot camp in November 1968 and after some testing I learned I would, in fact, be assigned to the medical corps. I had no medical training whatsoever at the time and no ambitions in that direction. I mentioned the recruiter’s idea about being a Navy journalist. But it was not to be. I completed the basic medical training that every corpsman does and then I got orders for further training at Camp Lejeune—a Marine Corps base. And very quickly I realized that this was combat medic training, and by that time I realized the decision I thought I was making back when I enlisted was not the way I was going. I was detached to the Marine Corps and never again served with a Navy unit or wore a Navy uniform for the rest of my enlistment.

ODT: So you ended up doing what you thought you were avoiding.

RC: And along the way I became a very different man. I saw what the cost of war looked like up close. I saw what grievous personal injury

looked like. I was confronted with the burden wounded marines would carry for the rest of their lives. And I became preoccupied with some hard questions: What the hell were we doing? What was the purpose of this carnage? There's no question the experience radicalized me. I served until '72, but I was deeply disturbed by the costs and burdens of war that we continue to deal with as a country today. We're hearing the same questions we heard 40 years ago: What did we really achieve? How much did it cost? Not just in dollars but in the profound impact on people's lives? This is all part of the big stew that becomes PTSD or what many psychologists today call "moral injury." On the other hand, we're also having to face the fact that the collective, social and political contract with veterans is in deep trouble. There are so many vets now in need, who earned their benefits in the hardest possible ways but are not seeing their needs met. So in many ways the long sad cycle continues.

ODT: Did you recognize the changes that were happening in your outlook as they were happening or was it something that you fully realized upon returning from the war?

RC: I certainly knew I was rocketing from innocence to a very weighted view of the world, but the speed of that transformation was disorienting. I was operating on emotion—there was no time to think anything through. I was in a state of shock. I was horrified by what I was seeing and did not have the psychological equipment at the time to understand where to put that stuff. I tried, though, mostly through reading, to get some sort of grip on why we were in Vietnam and what the outcome was supposed to be—why the effort should be worth the cost. Needless to say, I didn't find satisfactory answers to that question.

ODT: So after the war, how did the desire to be a writer get reignited and did you feel compelled to write about what you saw and experienced?

RC: I think it's an interesting thing that at that time in America—1972—Vietnam was an uncomfortable national secret. So when I started writing again, I began writing poetry and the subjects of the poems had nothing whatsoever to do with the military. And I might add that nobody was really talking about Vietnam. It's nothing at all like today where Iraq and Afghanistan are part of the national conversation. And so I enrolled in college on the GI Bill, but there were no veterans groups on campus. There were no veterans resources anybody ever mentioned to me. No questions were asked. And you know what? That was okay with me. But we know, of course, for myself and clearly for a whole generation of veterans, that if you're not consciously confronting difficult military experiences, then you're burying them like some shameful secret. It was as if a million men and women had to bury their wartime experiences as if they were somehow part of something horrendous, as opposed to what their country sent them to do. It was several years before Vietnam again became a topic of national discussion. But then it was everywhere. I saw this transformation in national attitude with my own work—the first time *Fatal Light* was submitted for publication, in the early 1980s, it was turned down. The head of the publishing house told me, “We can't sell this. Nobody cares about Vietnam. Nobody writes about it. Nobody reads about it.” He said I'd be lucky to sell 500 copies. But just a few years later, the very same publisher was very excited to accept the book and publish it and *Fatal Light* did very, very well. This illustrated the country's changing capacity to engage the topic of Vietnam. And I think we've been careful ever since to never again relegate a generation of vets into silence.

ODT: How long did it take you to write Fatal Light?

RC: Six or seven years. Eventually I did start writing about the war and it took a while, as it does with any writing, to feel my way into that and

to understand what I was trying to say and where I wanted to go. Did I want to write a book of poems? Did I want to write a novel? I was growing toward narrative fiction but that process took several years. And many different kinds of starts.

ODT: *That sounds like a common experience for writers the world over. As someone who has taught fiction, what advice would you offer a young writer who might be struggling to learn the craft and find his or her voice?*

RC: My approach to the craft of writing is, I think, less formal than some. Some writing teachers are much more doctrinaire, more technical or process-driven than I am. They approach a particular structure and follow a particular body of rules in the belief that that will get writers where they need to be. And that may be true. I'm sure it is for some. But I tend to be a kind of self-invented writer and so came upon my ideas of craft in an informal way. As I mentioned before, I started writing when I was young and there wasn't anyone telling me, here's how you should do this or do that. Certainly, in *Fatal Light*, I invented (over time) the form of that novel in order to tell the story the way I wanted to tell it, as a series of intense vignettes that formed the larger arc of the novel. That was a hit and miss process for a long time. So I tend to approach writing with the feeling that—you've just got to write. You've got to sit down with the materials, whether it's your computer or a notebook and pen, and write into your story. For loosening up the writing muscles there's a particular textbook that I like called *The Practice of Poetry*. This was obviously developed for teaching poets, but there are many exercises in it that any writer would benefit from. For example, reading a single newspaper article and fictionalizing it. Or picking a minor character from a book and doing a primary character sketch. Use different voices or perspectives or points of departure to tell familiar stories. As one uses these techniques your mind, your imagination, your voice moves in and goes from

there. I'm a big believer in improvisation and letting your story take off without worrying whether you're writing the beginning or somewhere in the middle—or the end. The lesson of my experience is that all of that comes clear in time. And that no words on the page are lost or useless or mistakes. If they don't work in the story you're writing, they may well work somewhere else.

ODT: Have you ever encouraged writers—specifically veterans—to write about what they know? In other words, military characters and settings?

RC: I've never been sure about the "Write What You Know" dictum. If I'm not mistaken, that came from Hemingway and after that took on an almost biblical authority. I think for many writers it's difficult to write what you know, because what we all know as individuals is actually pretty limited. Or what we know isn't very interesting. And under any given circumstance, what we know is going to need a lot of embroidering and re-engineering in order to be an effective story, something that's emotionally moving or powerful. Conversely, too, it's sometimes important to leave out what you know in order to avoid bogging down the writing with extraneous detail. I think that many veterans, of course, feel strongly that they want to write about their military experience. They believe they have something to say. And they probably do. But it's certainly not at all the only opening they have. Or it may simply be where you just have to obsessively deal with the military experience for a while before you can move on and start writing other kinds of fiction.

ODT: If you could give some advice to vets who are either seeking to become writers or expand their writing skills, what would that advice be?

RC: Read. It's the central instruction for every writer. I'm a completely

voracious, undisciplined, eclectic reader and always have been. For me, that was the training ground where I got to see how any number of writers approached their subject matter, how they went about telling their story and building their story. I certainly have favorites. I'm a big fan of crime fiction for the strong storytelling. But crime fiction is also where we're seeing some of the best sociocultural commentaries on life in America today. Although this brand of fiction has often been undervalued as "genre" or merely entertainment, some of the best fiction writing we see today is by people like Elmore Leonard. Anyone who wants to get a working manual on economy in prose can read any Elmore Leonard book. His stories are told chiefly through dialogue—moved forward by conversation. When you look at one of his books analytically, there is very little reference to anything physical in the stories—which tells us how much we, as readers, bring to reading, and how much we can trust our readers to meet us in the middle of a story. Leonard is very instructive in that regard. Another writer I admire is George Pelecanos, who has written some great books. My personal favorite of his is *The Sweet Forever*. It's a terrific book about March Madness in the 80's—that's the backdrop for a story set in Washington, DC which is a beautiful (and heartbreaking) sociological portrait of a time and a place, all beautifully rendered as a crime novel. And a real poet of crime fiction is James Lee Burke, who himself wrote short stories and five literary novels before he ever moved into the crime fiction format. But he brought with him his poetry and beautiful effectiveness of scene and sense of place to the crime stories he writes—and, thereby, has lifted them into a higher sphere of achievement, work that transcends "genre" or other categorization.

ODT: Do you see a possible burst of writing talent coming out of this generation of veterans—as we saw after World War II and Vietnam?

RC: I believe so. I think it's just the nature of the creative contract.

I think we're beginning to see substantive books coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan, and I think that will only continue. And it would be wonderful to start seeing some new fiction from women who have served, which is a perspective that we have not seen enough of coming out of the combat situation. I think waiting for us somewhere out there is a brilliant new book by a woman veteran, which will be a game changer.

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