

O-Dark-Thirty

The background of the page is a dark, textured composition. It features a central vertical strip of lighter, mottled colors, including shades of grey, white, and pale blue, which appears to be a textured surface or perhaps a view through a narrow opening. The surrounding areas are dominated by deep, dark blues and blacks, with some lighter, fibrous or brush-like textures that suggest a cave interior or a night sky with distant stars.

Winter 2013

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

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On the cover: *Cody*, oil on paper mounted on wood

by Joe Olney

U.S. Army, 1998-2001

Virginia Army National Guard, 2001-2007

joeolney.wordpress.com

Courtesy of The Joe Bonham Project

joebonhamproject.blogspot.com

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O-Dark-Thirty Staff

Ron Capps *Editor*

Dario DiBattista *Non-Fiction Editor*

Fred Foote *Poetry Editor*

Kate Hoit *Contributing Photo Editor (web)*

Jim Mathews *Fiction Editor*

Janis Albuquerque *Designer*

Editor's Note

Over the past few weeks, as we were putting together this issue, one theme kept appearing in the fiction that slipped over the transom: ghosts. So many ghosts. So you're holding in your hands "The Ghost Issue" of *O-Dark-Thirty*.

On our website, we publish works under the header The Report. We took that title from a Veterans Day speech by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1884. In the speech, made to a group of fellow Civil War veterans Holmes said, "The generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience. Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. ... We have seen with our own eyes, beyond and above the gold fields, the snowy heights of honor, and it is for us to bear the report to those who come after us."

A few paragraphs earlier in the speech, Holmes said this, "But as surely as this day comes round we are in the presence of the dead. For one hour, twice a year at least, at the regimental dinner, where the ghosts at the table are more numerous than the living, and on this day when we decorate their graves, the dead come back and live with us. I see them now, more than I can number, as once I saw them on this earth. They are the same bright figures, or their counterparts, that come also before your eyes; and when I speak of those who were my brothers, the same words describe yours."

Welcome back.

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

Me and Miss Emily Episode 1: A Rough Start

By Mike Calore

It's been 9 months since I met Emily, my girlfriend's big-cheeked, blue-eyed daughter. I'd never seriously dated anyone with a child; I was never really crazy about kids anyway. Most I'd ever come across were more full of awkwardness than personality. But Emily's uniqueness has and continues to change my world.

Before Emily, the only time I'd ever watched a child was the day when my brother's army-roommate: Skrapka's child was handed to me like a chore by his estranged wife. I was staying in Mark's room over Christmas 2002; I'd just gotten to Fort Riley, and had no real amenities to speak of, so my brother kindly offered his barracks room while he was on leave. Skrapka hadn't gone on leave over Christmas, but seldom stayed in the room.

This particularly quiet night was interrupted by a strong knock at the door. Because I wasn't technically supposed to be in the room anyway, I was already nervous, but this became confusion when I saw a woman holding a child at the doorway. She became irritated at my puzzled look when she asked for Tony.

“Who?” I asked.

“Skrapka. Where is he?”

Well, he’s obviously not here. The room was less than 100 square feet. He would have undoubtedly heard the knock regardless of the drunken hibernation that often accompanied his arrival.

“Well, I was supposed to go do some things while he watched the baby. So, could you take him for a little bit? I’ll only be a half-hour.” The woman bargained. And to this day, I don’t even believe I replied. What I remember, even if a bit foggy, is that I had had no prior experience with children. No younger siblings. No younger cousins. No legitimate interaction with anyone weighing less than fifty pounds. Yet, here she was, shoving a baby and a bag in my direction. In short, I didn’t know what to do. So I took it.

After the door shut, panic set in. As if it were waiting for the click of the latch to come around, I realized, perhaps a little too late, that I was holding a tiny, fragile, confused, needy, poop factory, and I was its custodian. I was overcome with a sudden fear. What if I break it?! What if it does something? I’ll be screwed. After a few moments, I decided to do the only thing I was absolutely authorized to do in a situation like this: I put the little, drooling baby boy onto my brother’s dirty, used, army-heirloom couch...and stared, just praying it wouldn’t make a sound. That was my only first-hand experience with a child. So, nearly a year ago, I had another decision to make. I knew, even in the beginning, that I really liked Kim. Her strong personality and maturity reminded me of... well...me. Sure, there were plenty of things that were different, but she was far different than anyone I’d met before. But, she had a child.

In retrospect, she broke me in gently. Perhaps, more leery of me than I was of her, she would casually make mention of Emily, or show a picture or two. After a while, I caught a video and we’d talk about her more often. Eventually, I’d heard so much about her that I needed to at least meet Miss Emily.

Now, you'll have to know this. When it comes to children, they have two reactions to me. They either laugh and giggle, or they scream and cry. Frankly, I think it's the teeth. Let's face it, I have huge teeth and kids don't understand much about the importance of oral care in society. My first experience with Emily was a lot like you'd expect. She cried. A lot.

Kim tried to comfort my distress at Emily's reaction, but I understood. She was moving into a new house a stone's throw from my apartment at the time, and it was a totally new environment for her. Additionally, I was a totally new person. So after some discussion, we decided I would have to come around more often.

In the following weeks, Emily became more accustomed to seeing me. Her personality and energy was astounding, even at 18 months. It was at this point when I finally cut my parenting teeth, even if she wasn't my own. Initially, I decided it was only right for me to step in when there was some inherent danger. As it turns out, babies get into everything dangerous. And all the while, Emily does it with her blonde curls bouncing and her big cheeks smiling. This makes it extremely difficult to stay serious, let alone set boundaries.

Before long, she allowed me into her daily routine. She incessantly asked me to pick her up. Emily often came into the kitchen and announced "Mike cookeen" or go over to the cookbooks on the shelf and point to the picture of a male chef and say "Mike!" Emily would ask for my food or offer me hers. She would climb on me like I was a jungle-gym or I would spin her. (Emily is a bit of an adrenaline junkie.) Even if it's a bit selfish, I loved to teach her words or work on the ones she almost had. (I take full credit for turning "deps" into "steps.")

Things were going smoothly, until I left for a six-week PTSD program in New Jersey. While I was gone, Kim would show her pictures of me, so she'd remember me. I was gone for nearly 30 days before I was able to visit home again. The whole ride home, I worried

about Emily's reaction. A month is a long time for a toddler.

When I walked through the door, Emily was sitting near her toys in the dining room. "Hey!" I said in my most amiable voice. I didn't realize it until I got closer, but she was turning away from me. So I knelt down and tried to pick her up. This only started her whining, so I let her go and she ran into the kitchen to Kim crying the whole way. I was utterly devastated. I knew it wasn't her fault, but I guess I'd been hoping for a seamless experience when I walked in. Things also seemed different with Kim.

Looking back, it's easy to see why the mood had altered between us all. My relationship with Kim and Emily had consisted of nothing more than phone calls and texts for four weeks. More than this, I was working exhaustedly on traumatic experiences. My feelings had atrophied, if even in part. And we all knew it. But it was Emily who catalyzed the movement back to normal.

For most of that first day, Emily stayed close to Kim. But at dinner, she remembered something we'd done, what to her must have been so long ago. I put my face down by her while she sloppily ate. She then raised her fork to me and offered some of her food and laughed. It was her sign to me... a symbol of understanding and love. "Here, eat my food."

The rest came back effortlessly. And the following weekends couldn't have been better. I left the program and returned in late October. A few days later, we took Emily trick-or-treating. The neighbors ogled over her. All seemed as well as it could be. My sense of accountability with Emmy grew larger. I started changing diapers, giving in, and babysitting more.

Not long ago, Kim conned Emily into painting my toenails. Of course, with children, especially toddlers, you can't tell them no. So once it was in the air, I was committed. She grabbed my big toe, unable to fit her hand completely around it, and brushed kid's scented nail polish all

over. I knew then, that I would do just about anything she ever asked of me. Truthfully, I owed her.

Michael Calore is a combat veteran who served two deployments in Operation Iraqi Freedom during his three-year enlistment. His memoir-style essays reflect chiefly on his experiences during and after war. Michael resides in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and is seeking a degree in English from Penn State University.

A Letter From A Friend

By John Perdue

(ed: What follows is a lightly edited series of notes I received from a friend I haven't seen for about 30 years. John Perdue served in the U.S. Army in the early 1970s as a medic. He never served in combat, but rather provided both physical and mental health care for grievously wounded soldiers at Walter Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, and the Forest Glen annex in Bethesda, MD. Instructors for the Veterans Writing Project are also instructors for the National Endowment for the Arts' Operation Homecoming, a program that puts writing and music instructors into Walter Reed and the National Intrepid Center of Excellence.)

Most of my experience was as a garrison trooper helping fragments of humanity pass through my watch. That is nearly 40 years ago but faces, names, hope and rage pop up in my psyche randomly. It's not always comfortable but it helps give definition and continuity to what I define as my backbone.

In 1970 my lottery draft number was 63. I was a student at Old Dominion University and had fallen in love with my first blowjob. When a class was canceled, I came home early to find a pot dealer falling in love with the same blowjob in my room. I was grateful for the lid, but didn't like the price.

This led to the deep whining typical of 20 year olds. I dropped out of classes to pursue boring my friends with tales of my loss and to refine the art of masturbation. All of this, of course, led to induction.

In Basic Training at Ft. Dix, New Jersey, I came to my senses and reconciled my distaste for the war and Nixon by submitting a form requesting to serve as a medic. This was no problem at that time and soon I was off to San Antonio as a 91L20 to be trained as a field medic. Actually, in 1971 the war was routine and nearing its end by most considerations. I had spent a great deal of effort protesting the war, burying a few friends and had lived with a veteran who had survived the A-Shau valley as a member of the 1st Cavalry Division while in college. I opted to serve as a Medic to justify my core beliefs rather than just roll along. No one cared, by '71, it was routine and off I went

Just before the end of AIT (ed—Advanced Individual Training—specialty training for each specific Military occupation Specialty or MOS), I spent a weekend in Texas spending what money I had all in one shot with a friend. He was a reservist from a wealthy NJ family, a graduate of Yale with a green '69 GTO convertible doing his stint to stay in the USA. He was a great athlete, good enough looking to draw women like bees to pollen but unable to converse well with people.

So we became the Dustin Hoffman and John Voight of our unit. I will tell you that cold beer, Mexican pot and a GTO on a seemingly endless, star-filled Texas road is not a bad place to be. One night we wound up at a huge club surrounded by Mercedes coupes, Jags, etc., with what sounded like Chuck Berry coming through the walls and doors. Since we absolutely could not afford it we went in to play up our off to war, need some trim routine. Well, it worked for him and it actually was Chuck Berry. Inside, I met a couple and the husband was in charge of assignments at Fort Sam [Houston]. We had a nice long chat.

During our training that week we rotated through the burn unit. One of my classmates was a Black guy, a very devout Christian. He and I

were the only two who treated the Napalmed Vietnamese kids in the burn unit simply as kids; the rest of the soldiers just couldn't deal with the disfigurement and pain on display. I think this is why my orders were changed. This and the fact that my Dangerfield/Youngman/Hoffman routine from the weekend got the husband from that jaunt to send me to Valley Forge and Forest Glen in DC.

So, I never saw combat. I worked as an Occupational Therapist for pieces of soldiers left walking. Later I got on as a counselor for an experimental unit trying to help men stay in and return to combat or go home and hopefully not blow the back of their heads off. We had about an 80% success rate. It was an exceptional unit. If you have ever seen movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" you will have experienced what was typical of a psychiatric ward available to returning vets. Ours was different. There were three levels: one typical with medications and evaluations; the other two operated on a Skinner-based point system which allowed for more earned freedom. Want a cigarette? Cost ya 5 points. What's a point? Well you get 3 for getting up and getting dressed, more for attending meetings etc., and wearing your uniform and acting like a living, breathing soldier. With the medication, the doctors, and our program, men did better faster than the Cuckoo's Nest model. I felt useful.

Still, there were attempts at suicide, none successful on the unit, but two were lost on leave. Some of my regular army friends would dismiss their loss as trivial, for the weak. On this unit I did try to understand. I quit being a piss-ant and bitching about the war, etc., and just try to stem the flow of decent, depressed, and absolutely crazy patients that passed through my care. In the end, we were successful enough to make my position a warrant officer's job and trade our doctors and nurses with higher educated ones.

I became the liaison to parade our crazies through the White House once a month to meet with [President Richard] Nixon and [Vice President Spiro] Agnew. Agnew in my opinion hated my attitude. He didn't like to address my disturbed troops; maybe he considered them malingerers or they

just made him uncomfortable. My hair was always “medic long” and it is fair to say that I may have perfected my passive aggressive act at this time.

This experience is nothing compared to that of my friends who never made it back, or even the ones who did—coming home to a one stop light town on the Eastern Shore where some junior exec from the local bank asked, “Did you kill anyone?” Of my small High School class of 1968 there are a great number of empty seats at the reunion beside the clip-on ties and bad suits.

Being a POG [ed—Personnel Other than Grunt—anything other than infantry], garrison trooper, etc., has made me feel unable to talk about any part I played during my time in service. I dealt with burn victims and pieces of walking & hobbled human beings, all of whom gave me a love of life I would not have expected. My duty at Forest Glen was with the insane and PTSD victims. The Army I knew just would not deal with it except through a scripted military channels, yet there was my unit and I felt that here, stateside we were still trying to leave no man behind. Several members of my boot camp company passed through with manic depressive disorder, schizophrenia and depression. As I mentioned earlier, suicides happened.

I know how angry I was with my country for years afterward, but I knew inside I may not have survived some other things life threw at me without having done that.

As to my own experience with hopelessness years later; I held a gun to the roof of my mouth in Ocean City, Md. I was struggling to survive my bankruptcy. I bought a '53 Chevy pickup from a friend and traveled to Ocean City on illegal tags and \$20 to do a four-month contract with an exterior finishing company out of Baltimore. I lived in the truck by the grace of another vet, a security guard, refusing to stay with my uncle because by this time my poverty and debt seemed to cause anyone standing next to me trouble. To me it seemed most believed I deserved the shit because well, I was vulnerable. After two weeks I had earned \$2200, enough to rent

a room, pay child support and get a phone to hopefully find other work. By that Friday afternoon, I realized the company was a scam and had bailed on all of us.

That night the guard let me stay in the trailer and after buying me a bit of Jack Daniels that I gulped down. I was done, fuck it. I got his .38 from his desk and started to do the only right thing left. I saw myself reflected in the window overlooking the ocean and started moon walking, and then laughing at myself. I just passed out thinking, why would I want to bring more pain to my daughter that if just hung on, I might see again. (It took a few years but with success I got her back with full custody just in time for her dreadlocked teenage “Whatever?” phase. We are very close.) I felt absolutely free and a bit nauseous from the bourbon and headed back to Princess Anne, my hometown about a one and one-half hour away, on fumes. I met a desperate Black hitchhiker with ten bucks on him. In those days you didn’t hitchhike while black on the Eastern Shore. We made it.

I claim no right as anything but a garrison trooper, but reading some of the stories in your journal have brought back the names, feelings—from in and out of service—along with the memories of the impossibly small metal coffins I witnessed arriving at McGuire [Air Force Base, New Jersey] while I was finishing Basic. The Army was one of my best and productive times personally, but it was a different one than today’s: a draftee Army, not a professional one; a forced mix of ethnicities, wealth, ages and attitudes. Even at my level it was always about the people you were serving with and nothing more.

Fiction.

Walk Until You Sleep

By Rod Merkley

In his dreams Martin Johnson was dead. He dreamed of a cemetery, full of white headstones. He walked down the rows as the sun slowly passed below the horizon. He remembered the names of his fallen friends and comrades, the names of America's heroes. As he walked by the headstones he read their names. He would wander, knowing that he was supposed to be somewhere but not knowing where it was. He would finally arrive at a headstone, just as the sun finally set and snowflakes began to fall. His dreams were so lifelike that they always seemed real. He could feel the cold, smell the decomposing leaves from the trees around the cemetery, his fingers touched the headstones as he walked by, and he finally saw the headstone. It was three feet tall and one foot wide, made of pure white marble, and on its face it read:

Martin Johnson

Staff Sergeant

U.S. Army

1978-2009

Operation

Iraqi Freedom

He knew that this was where he was supposed to be because it was his headstone. In his dreams, Martin Johnson was dead.

Goodbyes were always hard for Martin. Throughout his life he had said goodbyes to a great number of people. He said goodbye to his mother and father when he left for the military, he said goodbye to his buddies who died on the battlefields of Iraq, and he said goodbye to his wife who could not deal with his PTSD enhanced mood swings after he returned from combat. Martin Johnson was used to goodbyes. But even for someone who was used to goodbyes this one was difficult. Tonight he was saying goodbye to his little five-year-old son.

Martin limped up the darkened stairs, he limped down the hall, he quietly limped through the door, and he limped over to the bed where this little son slept. In fact, Martin limped everywhere that he went. His limp was just a part of him. Along with a handful of medals and the thanks of a grateful nation, Martin had returned from Iraq with a permanent disability.

It all happened on a cold Iraqi morning a few miles outside of Forward Operating Base Warhorse in Diyala Province, Iraq. It was a cold winter morning and Martin's platoon was on patrol. People laugh and think that soldiers are joking when they talk about the cold Iraqi winters, but those who have served in Iraq know the truth. After the scorching summer and windblown fall, the cool wet winter months came with a surprising chill. This was especially noticeable in the early morning hours just before sunrise. Martin was the gunner in an armored Humvee as his convoy traveled through the city of Baquoba. He heard the beginning of the call to prayer and would remember thinking how relaxing that sound was. The morning calm of the call to prayer was violently interrupted by an explosion.

In the latter years of the war in Iraq the technology utilized by the various militant groups evolved with the technology brought by the Americans. The massive bombs that had been used in the past were less

effective against America's heavily armored, mine resistant vehicles, so the Iraqi militants were using something new, or at least new to them.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Western scientists developed a weapon known as a shaped charge. A shaped charge basically harnesses the power of an explosion to form a projectile of molten metal that would cut through even the thick new American armor. It was this kind of IED that was used against Martin's vehicle. The explosion sent shrapnel throughout the cabin of the vehicle, instantly killing the truck commander who was sitting in the passenger seat, significantly injuring the driver, and destroying the front third of Martin's right foot. What happened next led to Martin's receiving the Bronze Star. Heroic actions such as returning fire after sustaining significant injuries, taking control of the vehicle and driving out of the kill zone, and assisting medical personnel in the evacuation of injured soldiers were all cited in his award decoration.

The next few days were a blur of action. He vaguely remembered his evacuation to the Combat Support Hospital at Joint Base Balad where he received emergency surgery to stabilize him for the flight home. He spent a foggy few days at Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany where he began to comprehend the extent of his injuries. Finally he made it to Walter Reed Army Medical Center where he received another surgery before he returned "home". Home meant two years and four more surgeries at the Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Carson, Colorado where he underwent physical therapy that gave him strength to walk, hike and run as much as he liked. But he still walked with a distinct limp.

So on what he assumed would be the last night he limped over to his little son's bed and gave him a goodnight kiss. He cried when he thought of his son growing up without his daddy but he secretly knew that this was for the best. He was broken, damaged goods, he wasn't good enough for his wife anymore and he didn't want to burden his son with the problems that he had dealt with since his return from Iraq. So he dad

decided that he was going to die and that weekend was the time that he had chosen to kill himself.

Suicide...killing himself...somehow that had never seemed right. So Martin came up with a plan that would ensure his death but not be recognized by his family or friends as suicide.

He thought about it for weeks after his wife left him. First he had planned a motorcycle accident but decided against it because it could either be too obvious or worse, he could fail in his attempt and be even more seriously injured and not die. Martin had heard stories of suicide by police but decided against that because of how it would affect others. Drug overdose, climbing accident, and drowning were all ruled out because of various reasons. One day he was walking in the hills around his house to clear his mind and he came up with a plan. He would walk himself to death.

Martin Johnson was a planner. He planned everything in his life and his death was no different. It would have to happen in the early fall when the nights were cold enough to induce hypothermia but the days were warm enough to justify going on a long hike. He would have to start walking and get into shape so that people would not wonder why he was hiking on weekends. Finally he would need to get his affairs in order so that his son would be taken care of.

Martin started with short walks two or three times a week. He walked around the hills near to his house or to the grocery store. He hiked with other veterans as part of a service group and he went on longer hikes with a local volksmarching club. As he walked and hiked a funny thing happened. Martin started to become happier. When he began even short walks were arduous and the pain in his foot was severe. But as he started to walk more he got stronger and started to really enjoy himself, and he became happy. It is a well-known fact that getting out and becoming more active has a positive effect on your mood but it was not something that Martin had expected. He actually started to doubt his

plans to die. In the end, however, he decided that his plan was sound and believed that as the winter approached his mood would again return to the depression that he had experienced after his return from Iraq.

Early on the morning of October 3rd, Jessica, Martin's younger sister knocked on his door.

"You realize that I never wake up before six on the weekend, bro. You can't sleep in for once?"

"Fifty kilometers is a long way Jess. You gotta start early and walk all day."

"And remind me, why do you have to walk fifty in one day?" Jess asked.

"It's for a badge from my volksmarching club. I guess that in Germany some of the most famous volksarches are fifty kilometers. When you complete the fifty you get a special badge for your walking stick and a patch for your jacket. But really it's more of a pride thing. If I can walk fifty with half a foot then I'm pretty much the shit."

"Okay, 'the shit'," Jessica joked while doing air quotes with her fingers. "You have a good time. What time should I wake Jakey up?"

"If Jake isn't up by nine then wake him up. His mom will be here at noon to pick him up."

Martin then surprised her by giving her a hug and saying, "Thanks for everything Jess. You're the one that's been there for me through it all."

"Okay bro, I'll see you later."

Martin thought to himself that that was probably the last real conversations that he would have in this life.

He stopped by a diner for a high calorie breakfast and cup of coffee then he was off to the trailhead for the start of his walk. He had chosen this route for a reason. While most of the volksmarches are loops to discourage cheating this one was out and back. The problem was that there were several important forks in the trail where if you took the wrong trail you could become almost hopelessly lost. At eight thirty-five

AM Martin started walking at a nice, steady pace. He walked all morning and into the afternoon. At about two PM he hit the turnaround point and started heading back. He came to the fork where he had decided to get lost, stopped, and said a little prayer. Martin prayed for his family, for his son, and for all of the other soldiers out there who were suffering like him. Then he did something that he had not planned on. He prayed for God to give him a sign that he was supposed to live. Then he just sat there at the fork of the road for about an hour, enjoying the cool, fresh mountain air. Then he slowly stood up and started walking down the wrong trail, walking to his death.

Martin walked for five more hours until the sun had set and he began to shiver. He walked over to the side of the trail, lay comfortably on the hillside, and went to sleep. As he slept he dreamed. He dreamed of his friends, both alive and dead, he dreamed of his son and the life that he would live, and he dreamed of hell. He felt the fingers of demons grabbing his at him. He felt them burning his flesh and pulling him up. He heard the demon voices.

“Calm down! Calm down man! We’re trying to help you.”

Martin opened his eyes, he was awake and he was alive.

“Are you alright? We have a space blanket, we’re going to wrap you up so that you can warm up and then we’ll take you down the mountain.”

“Okay, thank you,” was all that Martin could say.

Even the best-laid plans can be undone by random circumstances. In this case the random circumstance was the poor decision of a boy scout. Thirteen-year-old Jarom Marker decided to go exploring during a weekend scout camp. He wandered a bit to far however and stumbled down an embankment, breaking his ankle. When he could not be found in the immediate area by his troop, Jarom’s scout leader called the state police and a search was organized. The search proved successful and Jarom was found, but the search party also found a hypothermic Army veteran who became lost on a hike named Martin Johnson.

Spending the night in a hospital bed while recovering from hypothermia may not seem like a likely situation to have a life changing epiphany, but that was where Martin had his. He realized that he was happy to be alive. Not only that, Martin realized that he actually had a really good life. He realized that he had found the happiness that everyone seeks, a true happiness based on pride and contentment in our circumstances. Exhausted from his ordeal, Martin fell asleep. He fell asleep and dreamed about being alive.

Rod Merkley is a doctoral student studying clinical psychology at Marywood University. He was a medic in the Army Reserves for ten years and is an Iraq war veteran. Rod writes short stories, both fiction and nonfiction, about life as a Soldier and the psychological effects of war.

Merry Christmas from Mosul

By Kevin E. Lake

Dedicated to the three U.S. soldiers lost on Christmas Day, 2008, FOB Merez East, Mosul, Iraq. It was an honor to serve with you. You, and those you left behind, will not be forgotten.

"Merry Christmas, Sweetie!" Specialist Jordan said to his daughter, Hailey, over a shaky connection from nearly seven thousand miles away. Expecting his call, she'd been glued to her mother's laptop for hours, and she had answered the Skype call on the first ring.

"But it's not Christmas yet, Daddy. It's still three hours away," she said, a confused look on her face.

"But it's already Christmas here in Iraq. It's eleven o'clock Christmas morning. We're thirteen hours ahead of you, remember?"

As he talked to his daughter he fiddled with a crushed AK-47 round with the finger tips of his right hand. His lucky AK-47 round, taken from his gunner's turret on his very first mission outside the wire in Iraq, only four months before. It had been hurled his way from the barrel of a sniper's rifle, and after clanging around his head a dozen times in less than

a second it had rested peacefully in front of him, just below his trigger finger. He'd figured it had been a combination of good luck and the good Lord that had allowed him to dodge the bullet (pun intended) so he'd kept it and made sure to say his prayers.

"Oh, yeah," she said, rolling her eyes at her own forgetfulness. "I keep forgetting."

"You're only six," he said, smiling into the webcam. "That's understandable. Most of these idiots over here still can't figure it out." He threw a dirty sock at Private Banks, one of his three roommates and the only one that was awake. The four men shared a twelve feet by twelve feet plywood box they called home.

The first couple of months had been difficult, getting used to the cramped space, but they found it as cozy as could be now. It offered much more space than they had in their tightly packed gun truck they took on the road every night on missions.

"Is it snowing there, Daddy?"

"Oh, no," he said, laughing at her innocence, ducking the sock that Banks had thrown back at him. "Honey, it never snows here."

"Isn't it winter there, too?" she asked, looking confused again.

"Yes sweetie. It's winter, but it's still in the mid-eighties during the day. It does get cold at night though. Down to the mid-thirties."

"That seems like such a strange place," she said, her face now wearing a look of fascination. "I'd like to go there someday."

"Well," he said, looking thoughtful. "Maybe someday that will be possible. Don't count on it until you're a grown up though. This place isn't going to be safe for a long time. Is it snowing there?" he asked, changing the subject. He lived Iraq day in and day out. His Skype call to his daughter and wife, and his three month old son he'd not met yet was his daily excursion away from his grim reality.

"Yes," she said. "It just started this afternoon. I love it when it snows on Christmas!"

“Yeah, me too,” he said, eyes glazing, his mind filled with memories of so many white Christmases.

“I hope you’re home next Christmas, Daddy. It doesn’t feel like Christmas without you here.”

“I know, Sweetie. I’ll be there. Our unit won’t have to deploy again for at least two years once we get back. And I’ll be out by then so I won’t have to go with ‘em!”

“You’d better be out,” his wife, Tristan said, appearing on his screen behind Hailey. She was holding their son.

“I promised you,” he said. “Trust me, after the time we’ve had here, I wouldn’t re-enlist if they held me at gun point. How’s that fat little baby doing today?”

“He’s great. Say hello to your daddy,” she said, holding the infant in front of the web cam. He reached out for the screen of the laptop, attempting to eat the corner.

“He puts everything in his mouth,” Hailey said. “That’s gross.”

“You were like that too, Sweetie,” he said. “That’s just what babies do.”

“How’s everything going over there?” Tristan asked.

“Everything’s fine,” he said, the sound of a mortar going off half a mile away in the background.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Someone slammed the door,” he said. He had gotten used to the mortar attacks, because they came every day and every night. They sounded like fire crackers compared to the I.E.D. blasts that went off when they were on convoy security missions, providing security for trucks transporting military necessities to bases all over northern Iraq.

“Oh,” she said.

“You seem more scared than I am,” he said, laughing at her, thankful she had believed his lie.

“We just worry,” she said. “This is as hard on us as it is you.” She

wrestled with the baby in her arms. Her biceps had grown an inch since giving birth.

“I know,” he said. “But you have nothing to worry about. I’m with the best men I could imagine being with.” He leaned back, allowing his family to see the two sleeping soldiers in the webcam. “I take care of them, and they take care of me.”

“Yeah,” Tristan said sarcastically. “It looks like they’re working hard watching your back.”

“Hey,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “This is only the second day we’ve had off since we’ve been here. Cut ‘em some slack. I’m going to go eat Christmas dinner soon and come back and sleep myself. We’ll be back out and at it again tomorrow.”

“Daddy,” Hailey said. “I hope Santa Claus gives me my wish.”

“What’s that honey?” he said, wondering if he’d even know what toy she was talking about when she named it.

“I saw him at the mall last week. I told him I wanted to see you for Christmas.”

“Well, you’ll see me on Skype tomorrow,” he said. “That’ll have to work for now. But I promise honey, you’ll see me again next Christmas. I promise.”

“I hope so Daddy.”

“Ok,” Tristan said. “This little guy is getting heavy and somebody has to get to bed so Santa Claus can come.” She looked down at Hailey, one eyebrow raised.

“Ok, guys,” he said. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow if I can. Remember. Never worry if I don’t call when I’m supposed to. You know that we get stuck out on the road sometimes, or the net goes out and it takes ‘em a couple days to get it back up.” This was another lie. The net did go out regularly, and for extended periods of time, but it was intentional. When someone from the base was killed, they blacked out the net so that the DoD could notify the family and prevent them from learning about it on

Facebook or through emails.

“I know Daddy,” Hailey said, rising from her chair. She leaned forward and kissed the web cam. “I love you and miss you. Merry Christmas!”

“I love you and miss you too,” he said, kissing his web cam as well. “Merry Christmas from Mosul!”

Click!

The video screens on both laptops went black. Once again, Specialist Jordan felt seven thousand miles away from the family he loved. His façade of happiness was gone now, and it had taken a great amount of energy to display, even if only for a short, ten minute Skype call. He felt the weight of the world return to his shoulders.

“Listen up!” Staff Sergeant Prendergast said, entering the men’s room unannounced. “Wake up dirt bags!” He kicked the bunk of the sleeping soldiers.

“Yes, Sergeant,” the men, rubbing tired eyes, said.

“We’ve just had a squad leader’s meeting. We’ve received intel that Hajji’s gonna hit us hard today.”

“I just love how we don’t bomb them during Ramadan, but they always hit us hard on our holidays,” Specialist Jordan said, barely audible.

“If you leave here to go to the chow hall, the latrine, anywhere, wear your body armor,” Prendergast said, ignoring the comment. As quickly as he had entered the room he was gone, off to spread the word to the rest of his troops.

“Great,” Banks said. “We think we’re gonna have an easy day, and we gotta wear our cages to the chow hall. To hell with that. No turkey for me.”

“I’m not going,” Estep said. “I’ll eat beef jerky for Christmas. That shit has destroyed my back. I’m just happy to have the day off.” He rolled back over, putting his pillow over his head. His bunkmate above him

was already snoring again.

“I’m going,” Jordan said, putting his massive body armor on over his head. “I’m gonna eat turkey ‘til I’m ready to puke, then come back and sleep ‘til tomorrow.” He pulled the Velcro straps around his waist and secured them to the front of the armor. He patted his Kevlar chest, dust flying everywhere. “See ya later Banks,” he said, just before walking out the door. As soon as he had closed the door, he opened it again, catching the AK-47 round he’d forgotten and that Banks tossed to him. They’d all been together long enough to know everything about each other and Banks knew that Jordan never left the room without his lucky bullet.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Mortars and rockets rained onto the base from all directions. Placed in the center of Mosul, the base was an easy target.

“Shit!” Jordan yelled, running for cover, the mortars landing closer to their living quarters than they ever had.

WHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ! Came the sound of rockets from all directions.

“Run!” Another soldier called out to him from inside a cement bunker twenty yards away. Jordan ran as fast as he could, slowed by the armor.

BOOM!

A mortar landed between him and the bunker. The men under its cover hit the ground as they were pelted with gravel, dust and smoke. When the smoke cleared, they peered out. Specialist Daniel J. Jordan, age twenty nine, from Lacey, Washington lay on the ground face down, motionless.

Hailey tossed and turned, unable to sleep. She could never sleep

on Christmas Eve and she was willing to bet that most other kids couldn't either. She kept her eyes on her Barbie clock, the numbers reading 11:49. The minutes seemed to pass slower and slower the closer it got to midnight, the official start time of Christmas.

But finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the clock read midnight. It was Christmas!

Hailey sat up in her bed, daring herself to sneak into the living room and look under the tree. See if Santa had come yet. If not, maybe she could hide behind the sofa and see him when he did.

Just as she got the nerve to leave her room, she heard something in the living room. Curiously, she snuck down the hall and peered around the corner of the wall once reaching the end. Something, or someone, was coming down the chimney, and what she saw when the intruder's foot reached the pit was not a shiny black boot, but a dust covered brown one.

"Daddy!" she said, only a loud whisper so as not to wake her mother, as a dust covered soldier crawled out of the large fireplace. She hadn't seen his face yet, but she didn't need to.

"Hi, Hailey," he said, turning with open arms to catch her as she ran toward him.

"How did you get here?" she asked, hugging him like she had never hugged him before.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "All that matters is that I'm here. I promised you that you'd see me on Christmas again."

"Can you stay? You don't have to go back do you?"

"I can stay until you go to sleep, honey. But I do have to go back."

"Then I'll never sleep again," she said, enjoying the warmth of his arms, looking up at him with admiring eyes. "I'll stay awake for the rest of my life if it will keep you here."

"Ok," he said, smiling. "You stay awake as long as you can. I'll help. I bet your mom has some Coca Cola in the fridge. Let's get some."

“But mommy doesn’t let me drink soda,” she said, this time a quiet whisper. She looked toward the hall, still hoping her mother didn’t know she was up.

“Let’s ignore the rules for a while,” he said, and his voice was equally secretive. “It’s Christmas. This is our special night.”

The two of them crept into the kitchen. He took a two-liter bottle of Coca Cola out of the refrigerator and poured a glass for both of them. They sat at the table with their drinks and began eating the cookies that had been left out for Santa Claus.

“I helped mommy bake these,” she said, her mouth half full.

“I can tell,” he said. “They’re delicious. Chocolate chip is my favorite!”

“How did you get here so fast?” she asked. “I just talked to you a few hours ago. You were in Iraq. I thought you said the plane ride to get there took you a whole day?”

“It’s really far away,” he said, chasing a bite of cookie with Coke. “I used the magic of Christmas. You know, like Santa does to be able to deliver toys to boys and girls all over the world in one night.”

“I knew it was all real,” she said, a stern look on her face. “Stacy at school said that Santa wasn’t real.”

“Don’t listen to her,” he said, taking another cookie from the plate. “Besides,” he said, glancing over his shoulder toward the living room. “It looks like Santa already came.”

She looked under the tree as well, her cookies forgotten as she rose from her chair and walked into the living room. “I didn’t even notice. I was so surprised to see you.”

“Open one,” he said, nudging her toward the gifts.

“Should we wake mommy?”

“No,” he said. “This is a very special Christmas, just between us. I’ll see mommy later.”

“Ok,” she said, dropping to the floor, grabbing the closest package

to her. It had her name on it, and she ripped the gift wrapping off, revealing a Nintendo DS, and it came with the game she had wanted to go with it; Cooking Momma III.

“Let’s play, Daddy!” she said. He had sat down beside her. She climbed onto his lap, handing him the box. He opened it, inserted the batteries included with the hand held gamer and then inserted the game.

“Here,” he said, handing it back to her, ready to go. “You need to show me how to play.”

“It’s easy,” she said. “All my friends already have it. I’m really good. Just watch what I do.”

“Ok, honey,” he said, squeezing her, smelling her hair.

“This is the best Christmas ever, Daddy,” Hailey said, running the stylus across the small screen, slicing and dicing animated vegetables to prepare a computerized soup.

“I know it is,” he said. “I know it is.”

They played the video game for half an hour and then opened the other presents. They took occasional breaks from playing to polish off the remaining Coke and cookies.

“Honey,” he said after a while, his voice grave. “There’s something I need to let you know.”

“What is it, Daddy?” she said, yawning.

“I won’t be able to see you again after tonight.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her eyes heavy.

“Something bad happened today. I won’t be coming home. All you need to know though is that it didn’t hurt. And you were the last person I talked to. You were the last person I was thinking of. I’ll always be thinking of you and we will see each other again someday. Just never give up believing in the magic of Christmas. It’s a special time and anything can happen. Your wishes can come true.”

“I don’t understand, Daddy,” she said, her eyes now closing.

“I’ll leave this for you,” he said, pulling a spent and battered AK-47 round

out of his pocket. “Rub this every Christmas Eve at midnight. We’ll get together for Coke and cookies every year. From tonight until you’re ninety years old if you want. Just don’t lose it.”

“What is it?” she said, fighting hard to open her eyes enough to see.

“It’s my lucky charm. Now it’s yours.” Hailey smiled, closed her eyes and then went to sleep.

He laid her on the floor, turned off her game and spread a blanket taken from the back of the couch over her. He kissed her on the cheek and made his way back to the fireplace. Once there, he placed the spent round in her stocking. He made his way up the chimney, like old Saint Nick himself, and he was gone.

“What are you doing, Hailey?” her mother asked, nudging the sleeping girl with her foot.

Hailey awoke on the living room floor, her Nintendo DS in her hand. She looked around the room. “Where’s Daddy?”

“He’s in Iraq, honey. You know that. What time did you get up? It’s only seven o’clock. You know you aren’t supposed to start opening your presents until I wake up.”

A knock came at the door.

“Who could that be on Christmas morning?” Tristan said, making her way to the door. Hailey rushed to the window.

“Daddy!” She said, excited to see two men on the porch in Army uniforms.

Tristan’s jaw dropped at the site of the Captain and First Sergeant on her porch, Christmas snow blowing behind them. There was a letter in the Captain’s hand, and she had seen too many war movies to know what this visit meant.

“No,” she said, the words leaving her lips as a whisper.

“We’re sorry, Mrs. Jordan,” the Captain said after she’d opened

the door. “Especially today of all days. Can we come in?”

“Yes,” she said, her worst fears confirmed before the news was officially delivered. “Honey,” she said to Hailey. The little girl had made her way to the door, looking outside as if her father were going to join them next. “Why don’t you take your stocking and go into your room for a few minutes.” She took the stocking from the fireplace and handed it to Hailey. The little girl ran down the hall, shoving her hand into the stocking as she went.

“There was a rocket and mortar attack yesterday in Mosul,” the First Sergeant said. “It was the largest in the history of the war in Iraq. We’re sorry to inform you, but we lost three soldiers, and your husband was one of them.”

“Oh my God,” she said, dropping into a chair. “Oh my God.”

Hailey peered out the window, the sound of the government car pulling away. She turned as her mother entered the room.

“Honey, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“I already know,” Hailey said.

“You already know what, honey?”

“Daddy isn’t coming home,” she said. She was back on her bed now, sifting through the candy and hand sized toys she had dumped from her stocking.

“How do you know that, honey?”

“Daddy told me. Last night. He came to see me for Christmas. Just like I’d asked Santa.”

“I think maybe you were dreaming, honey,” her mother said, making her way over to sit on the bed, convinced her daughter was in denial.

“No I didn’t,” Hailey said. “He gave me this.” She picked up the battered and twisted AK-47 round that had been lying on her bed. “He

left it in my stocking. I fell asleep before he left. He said to rub it on Christmas and he'll always be here.”

Tristan stared at the round, and she knew the story behind it. Her husband had told her all about it when it had happened, after she had put Hailey to sleep that night. He never shared any of his war stories with his daughter. She took the round in her fingertips, fondling it like she had seen her husband do in the webcam during so many Skype conversations.

“Don’t lose it, Mommy!” Hailey said, taking it from her and placing it in the top drawer of her nightstand. “We’re gonna need that next Christmas.”

The baby cried from down the hall, but Tristan didn’t seem to hear it. Her eyes were fixed on her daughter, and her whole body felt numb.

“They baby’s crying, Mommy. You’d better go get him.” Hailey picked up a Snickers bar that had a picture of Santa on the wrapper and tore into it. “It’s okay if I have candy for breakfast. It’s Christmas. Daddy said we can break the rules on Christmas. It’s a magic time.”

The baby cried again.

Louder.

Kevin E. Lake served as a machine gunner in Mosul, Iraq during 2008-2009. After returning from deployment (and spending six months in an Army hospital) he relocated to the Philippine Islands to pursue writing full time. He is the author of “From the Graves of Babes,” a ghost novel which recently spent six months as Amazon’s #1 rated ghost novel in customer satisfaction. His most recent novel, “Off Switch,” addresses the issues of P.T.S.D. and suicide among veterans, which is currently taking out veterans of the wars in the Middle East at an alarming rate of eighteen per day. These and all other Kevin E. Lake books can be purchased on Amazon.

A Drink With Death

By Kelly McCoy

The large pane window displayed an ugly scene through the backward yellow letters spelling out Sunday's Finest Tavern. Snow and sleet had been mixing in the dirty street for over an hour. It was a quarter till ten on a Sunday and the world seemed abandoned, other than the presence of a disinterested single bartender at the far end of the bar.

Sitting in the same seat that I had occupied far too often on a weekday night over the last few months, I found myself at odds to the bartender; he on one side, and I on the far opposite. I was on the far end of the mirror behind the bar. Though it seemed to be my seat of reflection, I could only see half of myself. It was a seat where anyone could have a conversation with themselves and no one would care.

The bar was different that night; weather had kept the rest of the regulars at home. The Islay scotch before me was the same. The smoky robust peatiness reminded me of the putrid taste in my soul. Through my self-loathing it had been my choice drink, but it had lost its taste over a month ago. It was no longer enjoyment or taste I sought; it was a prescription of pain relief turned punishment that hit the soul hard with every sip.

I didn't hear him come in. I don't even really know where he came from. I remember feeling a cool breeze, almost a gust move behind me. The door must have opened. I looked over my left shoulder to see who had walked in, but saw no one there. Bringing my head back forward, I was startled when a man appeared on my right, dressed in a dark over coat placed a black fedora on the bar.

"Mind if I join you?" The man said in a cold and hollow voice of a smoker. He looked to be in his latter thirties, but his eyes looked much older. His skin was pale. His hair was a wiry mess of grey, white, and occasional black. The man turned his head, his eyes drew upon me. Initially mumbling, I responded "No, I don't see why not."

"What are you drinking? It looks like the right kind of pill." He said with a little more roughness than I thought he had in him as he settled into his seat.

I responded in a memorized statement; you're not an alcoholic if you know your drinks "Bunnahabhain, 12 year. It's smoky and peaty. Not many enjoy it, but Sunday's is the only bar serves it around here." The bar tender, having renewed interest in his patronage, moved down towards us. "What will it be?"

"Same as him. Bunnahabhain please. Keep it neat, and poor another for my friend here who recommended it." The man replied with a confidence that made him appear comfortable in this surrounding. Still, his voice seemed vaguely familiar.

We sat in silence as the bar tender poured two glasses. I kicked back the remainder of my original glass with a hard swallow that watered my eyes and burned my chest. Though this was to be my third, my head remained clear. The third drink would do the trick.

Our liquid vices placed before us, the bar tender went back to his corner. Though I always considered him a horrible bar tender, I guess he knew what his patrons wanted—solitude.

I picked up my glass. It was a taller pour than the previous two. It

would have to be the last for the night. The dram seemed to magnify the clear gold liquid, deceptively enhancing a thought of smoothness to the drink. To honor this stranger, who had bought the round, I held up my glass to offer a toast.

“To new acquaintances.” I said.

With a clink of the glasses the man responded “To those who passed on but drink with us now.”

I pulled my glass back, looking at this odd man next to me. He took a strong drop from his glass and set it down. “My name is Michael.” He said without looking at me.

I sipped at my drink, my nose immediately catching the smokey peat, reminding me that peace of mind was just an illusion. I took one last look at the conceived smoothness, a lie, and set the glass down. I muddled my disinterested response “My name is John.”

I extended my hand with my head remaining bowed. He returned the shake with a cold but firm and reassuring grip. My disinterest turned to curiosity, “What business are you in?”

“I am in the death business.” He said, taking the glass to his lips. We all have need for medication in the name of our ills.

“Well then we make a good match, I am in the killing business.” I wasn’t sure then, nor am I now completely sure why I said that. Michael made no effort to show shock or concern he merely looked forward just as I was doing. I decided to clarify. “I am in the Army, and I don’t actually kill. I merely help those who do the killing get to where they need to go and find who they need to find.”

Michael remained stoic. “We all have a job to do, some of us have pleasant jobs.” Michael paused, seemingly contemplating what it was he was saying. “But those with pleasant jobs have no satisfaction. Do you have satisfaction?”

“I am here. I think that sums it up pretty well.” I said with involuntary irritation and a disgruntled laugh.

Michael stiffly let out a chuckle. “That is true, we are both here. I think that does sum things up pretty well.”

“So what brings you here tonight? I have never seen you here before.” I asked.

“I’ve been around here before, but usually don’t stay too long. Not a fan of crowds. Tonight I was passing by. I have work late tonight, but saw the place empty except for you. Figured a drink couldn’t hurt to pass the time.” Michael said, finishing with another sip from his glass.

“I appreciate the round. I can buy you a second, but this will have to be my last.” I said out of respect of his gesture.

“It’s no problem. Never good to drink by yourself.” Michael paused, contemplating while coddling his glass before him. We retained our forward looking posture. Silence crept into the conversation as I began to get lost in my thoughts as Michael was in his.

Michael finally blurted out “I’d like to ask you a personal question, advice if you well. But to even it out, ask me something first.”

I turned and looked at Michael. He did not return my look. He was thinking hard while focusing on his glass. I was hoping that he had not just fallen off the wagon, making for an awkward night as he begins the tailspin back into alcoholism and the uncouth self-pity that brings. I looked back at my own and thought about the litany of thoughts I had since I returned home.

“You see a lot of death? You seem to understand it?” I asked, scared to know the answer.

“For far too long.” Michael responded, still focused on his glass.

“If I could ask death himself, I would ask—why are the good ones taken? Why are the good people of this earth taken before they have a chance to live?” It was the question I had wrestled with every day since returning from Iraq.

“Well, I have seen death in the saddest of instances. The death of a teenage daughter beloved by all, but cancer was untreatable. The death

of a Good Samaritan at the hands of thieves, as he tried to help a victim in distress...something he had committed his life to. Death is without prejudice for the good things we do on this earth. Death doesn't know whether you are a saint or a sinner. Death is merely just a fact." Michael said, finally looking up at me as he finished his words; his cold blue eyes piercing into me.

I shot back, the darkness in my soul had been stirred and my blood pressure was rising, "Then what is the point? What is the point of living a good life? What is the point of Soldiers dying when death holds no truth to how someone lived?"

"My friend, it is not death you are looking for. The reasons for why someone dies can be as complicated as why there is life on this planet and not on others, or as simple as a single reason or purpose. The reasons behind the individual instances do not matter in the scheme of things. Death is a fact, death is absolute. Good people, just as bad people, die." Michael said in a calm cold voice of a man who seemed to have seen death one too many times. "But it is not why people die that you should be concerned with; it is how people die that is the difference."

I only looked at Michael through the mirror in front of us, holding true to bar room conversational etiquette. His discourse and erudite cadence had irritated me. Death was a poor conversation topic in a bar where you come to forget about the past. Yet it was my question and if he had an answer beyond his irritating words, I was willing to listen.

"What do you mean?" I pointedly asked.

Michael twisted his glass in little semi-circles, causing the honey gold liquid to softly swirl. He continued to look at the scotch as he talked "How people die makes the difference. Not all of the time," he cautioned "but whenever the favor can be afforded, I have seen amazing stretches of time and the most beautiful words spoken. Though people will die a sudden death, they have mostly said their peace. Some people may die a horrendous and ugly death, sometimes reflective of internal strife and

others a sad matter of the circumstances afforded by free will. In the end, those who have a pure heart and soul, they may not have a choice on when they die—but they are almost always offered a choice on how they leave this life.”

“That’s a fucking lie” I shot back, my blood beginning to boil, concentrating on my glass in an effort to keep my eyes from watering. The scotch seemed to have dimmed in color; I could smell the foul peatiness. I softly snarled “I know plenty of people who would have rather of gone out a different way.”

“Listen to me.” Michael’s head lifted and turned towards me with a soft but stern voice. “It is their final seconds, minutes, hours, or however longer they are given that matters. This precious time, as life is leaving their body. How do they handle those fleeting moments? Are they in an agonizing self-indulgent painful shriek of horror or do they turn to those they love and speak?”

My blood cooled. I turned my watering eyes and looked at Michael’s eyes that had new warmth in them. Michael focused on me with an intensity that could only match the hatred I had for death. He continued.

“How we leave this earth is the only opportunity that can be afforded as a comfort in death. You can push the timeline. You can push your final breaths. You can push life itself. Live to the moment you need to say what it is you need to say. It is here, that the good ones have the opportunity in an instance that is otherwise outside of their control.”

“So what of God then?” I retorted with inner angst forcing words on my tongue.

“God has power, but in the end God gave you free will, which ultimately gave every human the choice of determining whether God actually exists. God may intercede when it is imperative for some reason that is known only to him, but the death brought on this life is at the hands of man, disease, and nature. Natural things happen, those who

can be saved get saved, those who die, die. But in the end, a man dying of violence is a victim of this free will. There is little that can be done for that.”

“So when a good Soldier dies, God has no say? It is of this free will?” I was building towards a quiet irate state, “That’s fucking bull shit. God has a choice, he has...” But Michael held up his hand, asking me to stop.

“Life is your gift, death is your cost. What you do with it is up to you, and how you go out of this life, in those final seconds is up to you. God must deal with these absolutes to keep things in order; besides the way you are talking you are going down a path to deny God his existence.”

“So what if I am.” I shot back, turning to look at my glass of waning scotch.

“I don’t think you want to do that. You seem like the kind of man who respects God until he gets too much scotch in him.” Michael said as a matter of fact.

“Probably.” I mumbled back.

Michael, sensing that the initial part of their agreement had run its course, offered “So I have answered your question. May I ask mine?” “Only fair.” I said slightly annoyed but finding logic in his words as I lifted the glass up to eye level and drank the remaining layer of scotch, taking in the peatiness as a penance.

Michael grasped the top of his glass with his fingertips now gently swirling what was left of his drink in a counter clockwise motion. He was looking straight ahead, in full excogitation. I looked down at my empty glass, and in his contemplative silence I asked myself if I should have another. Michael’s words broke my train of thought, “Do you fear death?”

My head jolted back in an involuntary acknowledgement to the questions that again sparked my rising frustration and anger for the topic

of death. So much for a change in subject. My jaw tightened along with my right hand around the empty glass, forcing the moisture from the ice to cool my hand and temper. The words flowed out of my mouth with chilled anger, "I do not fear death. I hate death."

Michael seemed to frown at my response, "I am sorry my new friend, I did not mean to make you angry. I only ask, because in my business, I see people always afraid of death. In contrast, people like you aren't always afraid. I only wish to understand."

Looking at Michael, he appeared sincere in his words and mannerisms. His face gave away that there was something more to his question, there was something personal. Michael came tonight looking for answers, just as I had.

I turned back, looking forward at my own reflection. I thought about Michael's words on how and why people die. His words made sense, I may not have wanted to listen, but I knew what he said had a logical flow to it. I owed him a response.

"Death is not my worry. What comes of it comes. I do not fear death, I hate death." My traction began to settle in, as a strange dark firm hold took control, and I spoke with greater confidence as my hatred spoke for me. "I hate the loss that death brings. I hate the living effects of death. I do not fear those whom I hate, and death is not different than any other enemy in my book. In the killing business, death is both an intimate partner and your mortal enemy."

Michael, for a stoic fellow, appeared to have been dealt a blow by my comments, and responded with concern, "What of the possibility that death leads to a new beginning? Is there no good associated with death?"

"Death of our enemies provides the ultimate living recourse for justice; to this I see some good. Death, in effect, allows us to bypass our systems of courts and laws. Those who die at our hands, die because they engage us. Their cause, just as our cause, will be judged upon our

death.” I paused as the true meaning of his question cleared in my mind. It was still a conversation, but now I felt my comments were borderline disturbing. “Those who lived a life with a pure heart, I can only hope that when they die, they will be cared for on the other side. But the ultimate actions of the dying, in death, I do not know. I have not seen this.”

Michael listened patiently, and replied with an odd spark in his dull grey eyes. “John, what if I told you that I have seen death. What if I told you that in my work, I have seen death so much that I now know there is an invisible beauty that comes with it. A beauty that is betrayed by the mortal eye. Only those who pass on can see this beauty, while the living only see the darkness and emptiness that succumbs the atmosphere.”

I smiled, again it was uncontrollable. It was probably the scotch. It was the emotions. It was the memories of deathbeds of loved ones and memorial’s for dead Soldiers. It was the scotch, I had to deflect. I am getting too deep into my memories, “I’d probably ask you how much scotch you have had to drink tonight.”

Michael would not relent, he continued in his slow raspy voice, growing older and wiser with every word. “Picture this, a room dark and sullen, much like this bar. Despite the number of people that enter into this room, death lingers. The darkness lingers. The emptiness lingers. Is that your definition of death’s presence?”

“Sure, that sounds about right.” I responded.

“So take someone you have loved and lost. Someone who you respected and had a kind heart. Think of them in their final moments, while you are surrounded by the darkness, they are surrounded by light. They are surrounded not by the darkness and emptiness that lingers, but love and peace that awaits them.”

The concept provided a nice visual, but I could not see his point. Death is an enemy. Death brings pain, loneliness, depression, and separation. It was the loss that I hated; it was not the act. “It is a nice concept to say the least.” I responded as a courtesy.

Michael pulled his black fedora closer to him, feeling the felt and looking as if he was contemplating on leaving. He looked at his watch and sighed. "My friend, I am glad to have stopped by for a drink. You are good company. I hope I did not bring you too much frustration."

"No, not at all." I lied. I told the truth. "I am thankful we had a chance to meet. I will think to look for the light, instead of the darkness next time death is around. I thank you for your words. You must have seen a lot in your time to have the wisdom you shared."

Words spoken, Michael stood as I swiveled my chair around to meet him standing up. I produced my hand. The hand-shake was firm and comforting, despite his hands still being cold.

"Death doesn't seek your sympathy, as death empathizes with you for every loss. That is the darkness you see. Death only asks that you understand the other side, the love and peace that comes to those who you are about to lose. Death is not your enemy; your enemy is your enemy. Death is your companion, as death is everyone's companion." He paused and produced a small smile that I had not yet seen from him, "I believe you said at one point that death is both your enemy and intimate partner?"

I involuntarily took a step back, retracting my words "I didn't mean it like that..."

Michael held up his hand again and spoke, "No, I finally understand what you meant. Death is like a brother, bounded by familial love and trust, but separate in thought and action. A brother is trusted, but in the end even a brother can turn on you. To this end as well, brothers may ultimately hate each other, but they are bounded together by something greater than the causes that separate them."

"As you have for most of the night, you have put it much better than I." I responded, confused with Michael's depth and eloquence.

Michael continued, as he put his coat and hat back on, in order to brave the cold outside. "John, I came looking to understand something

tonight, you have helped me a great deal. I thank you for that. I do wish to add one last thing though.” He paused, I patiently remained attentive. “Death is an absolute truth for us all, a common association we all share. But above all, Death knows the good ones, and in the end if the favor can be afforded, Death will allow for those people to go out on their terms. That is the only gift Death can give to the living in those final moments of their passing.”

“Michael,” I had to ask, “Who are you? A pastor? A mortician? You have a great way of putting things with an obvious understanding of what you are talking about.”

“John, simply put, I am both. My profession, just as yours, takes a lot of care and dedication in order to perform my duties to a positive standard. I began with a naivety that I would just act when called, to this day I still do. In the end, though, sanity comes with understanding the picture. Happiness comes when you see the light and leave behind the darkness.”

Riddles or eloquence, however you would like to put it, I was unsure what to make of his comments. Either way, despite being odd company, frustrating company, he was ultimately good company. “Next time your around, I will buy the next round or two.”

“Be careful, that stuff can get you killed if you’re not careful.” Michael responded, pointing to the bar, “but if we happen upon each other on a night like this again, it would be an honor.”

With a final hand shake, Michael grabbed his glass and took a final draw. Setting it down on the solid wood bar; a solitary smile of remembrance crept across his face. “You know the peatiness of an Islay is said to be medicinal. Back a thousand years or so, the Scots would use an Islay scotch as a cure for whatever the ill may be. I have found this drink too often to be the right prescription in moderation, as the peatiness is not a punishment but a healing property.”

With no more words, Michael walked towards the door as I

turned to look at my empty glass and pay the night's debt. Reaching into my pocket for a fold of cash, the wind blew through the door as Michael stepped out. I turned my head to see him, but he was already gone.

The bar was now empty, but the atmosphere had lifted. The dank darkness of the bar had seemed to have lifted by a fader, but it wasn't last call. I produced the appropriate payment and placed it on the bar. The bartender produced a finger in recognition for my actions.

I turned and looked towards the door. I thought about the brightness Michael talked about and what the brightness might look like to those I had lost. For the first time, in such a long time, a smile came across my lips.

I could see the brightness.

Michael "Kelly" McCoy is a Captain in the United States Army. He has deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq for a total of 41 months since his commission in 2003. "A Drink With Death" was written after his last deployment, as he attempted to accept the tragedy of war, specifically the death of one of his soldiers; SGT Faith Renee Hinkley. Kelly enjoys writing fiction and national security focused non-fiction in his blog Thinking Warrior Journal.

Iraq: Till Death Do Us Part

A Short Play by Steve Christopher Scuba

Characters: JACK – A Husband (Male, 20's to early 30's, Ethnicity – Any)
GINA – His Wife (Female, 20's to early 30's, Ethnicity – Any)

Setting: A weekend cabin in Arizona.

Time: 2007. Sunrise.

(With the stage dark, the sound of light Middle-Eastern music is heard giving way to the sound of a soft breeze blowing. The sound fades as the stage lights come up to the inside of a weekend cabin. A few feet Left of Center Stage is a double bed with a headboard. The bed is open at the foot allowing the actors to sit on the edge of the bed while facing the audience. No bedposts or tall footboard should obstruct the actors' movement. It has two pillows and is covered with a sheet and a blanket suggesting a Southwestern motif. Downstage Right is a wooden chair and an end table with a cell phone and a box of tissues on it. Other than that, the stage is bare. The furniture should have the look of comfortable, well-maintained pieces that have been handed down from one generation to the next. They are the kind one would expect to find in an older weekend cabin or house.

JACK is seen sleeping in the bed. GINA slowly enters from Stage Left. She wears a worn set of U.S. Army-issue ACU fatigues and tan desert boots. She is also outfitted in battle gear consisting of tactical gloves, a Kevlar helmet and an IBA

(Individual Body Armor) with front, back and side plates. The gloves should be foliage green “Wiley X Hybrids” or a pair similar in style and color. The Kevlar helmet should have an ACU cover with a night vision mount but without the night vision apparatus. The IBA should be the type which opens from the front as opposed to those issued after 2007 which slip on over the head. It should have three single M4 magazine pouches with full-flap covers on the front. Each pouch contains two M4 magazines. A First Aide pouch is attached to the back right side of the IBA. All four pouches are in the ACU color/pattern. The uniform and battle gear have the appearance of coming straight from the battlefield. The fatigue shirt and IBA bare the rank of Sergeant. The shirt also has a Civil Affairs unit patch on the left sleeve and a 10th Mountain Division combat patch on the right sleeve under a subdued, reversed American flag patch. The ACU nametape above the right breast pocket has the surname “Rabeeah.” Above the left breast pocket is the “U.S. Army” nametape.

GINA looks around as if cherishing every glance. She takes off her helmet and holds it under her arm as she stops by the Stage Right side of the bed and lovingly stares at her husband. She looks away from him and retrains her glances around the room again. This time, however, she looks with hesitation and growing trepidation as if suddenly realizing the monumental task at hand. Continuing to look about, she wanders over to the chair and puts her helmet on it. She takes off her gloves and lays them beside the helmet. She next removes the IBA and places it next to the chair. She removes her ACU top last and places it on the chair. She has on a tan, army-issue T-shirt underneath the fatigue shirt as well as a tan, ACU web belt. She lets her hair down and then heads back to the Stage Left side of the bed.)

GINA

Jack...Jack, wake up... it's me. (Louder) Honey, wake up... I'm home!...
(Even louder/excited) Baby, I'm home!

(JACK slowly wakes up and then quickly sits up—startled and astonished that his wife stands before him.)

JACK

Gina?! (Louder) Baby! (Even Louder) Is it really you?!

(She nods yes. He jumps out of bed and hugs her.

He is wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt.)

JACK

(Overwhelmed with joy)

Baby, you're back! I can't believe it! You're back!

(He hugs her and kisses her lips and face.)

When did you get in?!

GINA

Just now.

JACK

How did you know I was here?

GINA

(Smiling)

Oh, just a hunch.

JACK

(Ecstatic)

I can't believe it! I must be dreaming! Baby, what a surprise! And on our anniversary! They granted you leave for our anniversary and you came here to surprise me! I thought I'd be spending the whole day by myself just dreaming of you. But now you're here in my arms!

(He kisses her passionately on the lips, hugs her tightly, and then looking at her face realizes that she is crying)

JACK

(Tender)

Don't cry hon... It's alright... We're together now.

(He heads downstage, grabs a tissue, and heads back to her. She meets him half-way and takes the tissue, dries her eyes, and places the tissue in her front pocket.)

GINA

(Nostalgic and excited. She walks around the space as she speaks)

Look at this place...an “oasis of serenity”... that’s what my grandfather used to say. You know, there have been so many times over the last six months when chaos was the order of the day... and in my mind, I retreated to this wonderful cabin... refreshing my soul!

(She extends her arm to him and he takes it and spins her into him like a ballroom dancer. She ends up facing the audience with her back to his chest. He wraps his arms around her, glowingly happy to have her in his arms and to hear her voice.)

GINA

(Calm. Happy. With her eyes closed)

I used to love coming out here in the summer... In the fifth grade, I stayed until labor day!... My grandparents would come by our house and pick me up and I knew the next few weeks would be magical!...On weekends, my parents would come out or if dad had to work, he’d stay in Flagstaff and mom would join us...I loved to hear the sound of the wind all around me and the way it touched my skin...And how grandpa always had a story about this old cabin...either one I’d heard a million times before or a completely new one...He’d tell me how his own father labored to built it...or the funny story about how an antelope wandered in one day for breakfast as if he owned the place... or how he was overcome with happiness the day he and grandma were married here...during a sunset ceremony outside...

(Casually breaking away, opening her eyes and looking at the audience. Sort of in a trance)

Or how Navajo warriors once used this land... coming here after battles for their own post-war retreats... “to cleanse their spirits”...(Pause)...
(Now Happy, looking at him) But we have our own memories here don’t we?

(She moves back into his embrace with her back to his chest)

JACK
(Happy)

I'll never forget the first time you brought me here. Remember how dark it was when we arrived that night?

GINA
(Happy)

Yeah, the clouds blocked the stars...

(They complete each other's sentences/ideas as only kindred spirits can)

JACK
... and then you woke me up in the middle of the night and brought me outside...

GINA
... and the clouds were gone...

GINA and JACK
(They speak together not realizing that the other is saying the same thing until the words are uttered)
...and the sky was full of stars!

(Now realizing that they said the same thing, they share a tender laugh)

JACK
I'd never seen anything like it! *(With Amazement)* Stars as far as the eye could see.

(Pause)

JACK
(Curious)

Is that what it's like in Iraq?

(She looks down and doesn't answer. It's obvious that he has touched a nerve)

JACK

(Tender. Apologetic)

I'm sorry, hon.

GINA

It's okay.

(He gently kisses her head)

JACK

(Changing the subject)

So, do your parents know you're here?

GINA

No...*(With hesitation)* They haven't heard yet.

JACK

(Playful. Lustfully romantic)

Oh, so I've got you all to myself, is that it?

(She smiles)

JACK

How many days are you home for?

(She doesn't answer)

JACK

(Hugging her tightly)

How long can I have you by my side?

(Anguish begins to fill her spirit and tears again flow from her eyes)

JACK

(Tender)

Hey...what's wrong?!

*(She takes a few steps away from him and looks down.
He follows her and puts his hands on her shoulders.)*

JACK

(Concerned)

What is it? Are you in some kinda trouble?

(She doesn't answer him.)

JACK

Baby, you're freaking me out here. What is it? What's going on?

GINA

(She looks into his eyes. Tender but with anxiety)

Jack...Oh, my darling Jack...On this of all days...

JACK

(Serious now)

What? What is it?!

GINA

(Realizing that she wasn't as emotionally strong as she thought she was)

I need to sit.

(She takes his hand and they sit on the downstage edge of the bed facing the audience. They look at each other with a serious gaze for a moment.)

GINA

Sweetie...*(Intent and purposeful)* Any minute now your mother is going to call you on your phone... and when she does, I need you to answer it. Do you understand?

JACK

(Unsure)

Sure.

GINA

(Forceful)

I need you to promise me. Promise me that you'll answer the phone when it rings.

JACK

(Now sure of himself)

Yes, of course!... *(He clasps his hands with hers)* When the phone rings, I'll answer it.

GINA

(Forceful)

Promise me!... Promise me sweetheart!

JACK

I promise! I'll answer the phone when it rings... You have my word!

(She smiles and kisses him tenderly on the lips. They release their hands)

(Pause)

JACK

(Gingerly)

Gina...Honey...what's this all about?

(She looks away)

JACK

Hon?

(She continues to look away without responding)

JACK

(More insistent)

Whatever it is, you can tell me.

(She continues to look away without responding)

JACK

(The unknown is taking its toll)

Baby, please!

(Pause)

GINA

(Looks forward now. Taking deep breaths and fighting back tears. Dreamlike)

A few hours ago... the vehicle I was riding in... was hit by a roadside bomb... Jack, although part of me is here with you now... the rest of me... the rest of my body... the rest of my being... is in Baghdad... I've been taken to an army field hospital but there's nothing they can do... I won't regain consciousness... I won't make it.

JACK

(Unnerved. Confused)

I don't understand. What are you saying?

GINA

(Looks in his eyes. Solemnly)

I died today Jack... Our vehicle was destroyed and so was I *(Jack whimpers in shock. He doesn't understand what's going on but just hearing these words spoken is horrifying. He grasps her hands again tightly)*...At this very moment, two soldiers in full dress uniforms are at our house in Baltimore... They're breaking the news to your mother...And at any moment she's going to call you and tell you the news.

JACK

(Scared) Baby, you're really scaring me!...*(Unsure)* I'm dreaming right?

*(He looks into her eyes and realizes she is telling the truth.
Horrified, he freezes in terror and looks at her for a beat)*

JACK

(Releases her hands and hugs her. Crying)

Gina! Please, tell me this is some kinda nightmare!...(More intense)
Dear God, wake me up... tell me this isn't happening...

(The cell phone begins to ring. JACK is startled and freezes)

GINA

(Solemn and Encouraging)

Jack...Honey...you have to answer it.

(The cell phone continues to ring)

JACK

(Holding her tight)

No...No, I can't!...I won't!

(The cell phone stops ringing)

JACK

(Almost hysterical)

As long as I don't answer it, you'll be here, right?...I mean, as long as I don't officially know, than it never happened!... You're here with me now and that's all that matters!... Honey, we're together...on our anniversary...in your family's cabin...where we spent our honeymoon... Remember?...Two years ago?...

(Starting to tear up)

...Before all this mess in Iraq... Before you mobilized...(With anger)
Before this fucking "surge"...(Happy) Remember how we held each other under the stars... and how we watched the sunrise... and made

love in this bed... and dreamed of a wonderful life together... till death do us part...

(The cell phone rings again. JACK freezes and stares at it)

JACK

(Becoming hysterical)

No!... No Gina! I won't let you go!... Let it be someone else's wife or daughter or sister...But not mine!...*(Louder)* Not mine!

GINA

(Pleading)

Jack, please...

(The cell phone stops ringing. He stands up and takes her hands bringing her up to him so that they are facing each other)

JACK

(Emphatic)

I'll hold you!...I'll hold you and I won't let you go!

GINA

(Happy)

Oh, sweetie.

(He brings her to the top of the bed and sits in the center of the bed with his back against a pillow. She sits next to him on the Stage Right side of the bed with her back against the headboard. She sits up higher than him and he rests his head against her side, cradled by her left arm. Her boots remain on)

JACK

(Less agitated now)

As long as you're by my side, we'll be together forever...like we were meant to be.

(She strokes his hair with her right hand and calms him down)

(Pause)

JACK

Sweetheart, are you in any pain?

GINA

(Calm)

No...Right now I'm at peace.

(She continues to stroke his hair)

(Pause)

JACK

(Calm)

Don't go hon... Please promise, you won't leave me.

GINA

(Solemnly)

I'll always be with you, Jack.

(Pause)

(After a few beats, he falls into a deep sleep in her arms. Realizing this, she stops stroking his hair and gently gets out of the bed on the Stage Right side. Knowing her task has been accomplished, she purposefully walks to the chair, puts on her fatigue top and IBA. She puts her hair up and then puts her gloves on. She next picks up the helmet and cradles it under her right arm. She walks to the Stage Right side of the bed and after a quick, nostalgic look around the room, she lovingly gazes at her sleeping husband before softly kissing him on the lips; after which, she gently holds his right hand. With this done, she faces downstage and puts on her helmet and gracefully exists with purpose Stage Right. A beat or two after exiting, the sound of a light breeze is heard blowing.)

*After a longer than normal pause, the cell phone rings. After the second ring,
JACK quickly wakes up and sits up in the bed)*

JACK

(While sitting up in the bed, looking around)

Gina? (Louder) Gina!

(He jumps out of the bed on the Stage Right side)

JACK

(Standing next to the Stage Right side of the bed, screams loudly/hysterical)

Gina!

*(He focuses squarely on the ringing phone now, frozen in fear.
The phone stops ringing. Walking to the end of the bed,
he sits down with uncertainty and trepidation)*

JACK

*(While uncontrollably squeezing/rubbing his left hand with his right.
Sorrowful/Tearful)*

Oh, my baby...Gina...my love!

*(The phone rings again. Purposefully but wide-eyed, he stands and walks
to the end table. He now realizes his fate -- like an innocent man walking
to the gallows whose outcome cannot be reversed. Once there, he pauses
for a beat before picking up the cell phone and answering it)*

JACK

(With a neutral but unsure voice) Hello... (Pause)... (Voice cracks) Mom?...

*(He listens and begins to cry as he sits down in the chair.
With the phone still to his ear, he slowly buries his chin into
his chest and looks down as the lights fade to black)*

Steve Scuba is an Army Nurse and Iraq war veteran.

Poetry.

Walking Wounded
Maritza Rivera

I used to dance
and carry your weight
effortlessly across
the floor.

I used to walk
the distance of your gaze
keep cadence when you marched
kick a soccer ball past the goalie
score winning runs
dash to the finish line.

A bullet whispered your name
before you heard the shot
before you felt the sting of it.

When you regain consciousness
I will be a ghost of searing pain
reminding you of how I felt
before the lights dimmed.

In time I will be replaced
by a robotic facsimile
that will never tire
as I once did.
You will walk and run and dance
again without my support
and wonder what became of me.

Now I lay me down on a heap
of other amputated limbs
a mangled mess of bone and blood and skin
missing the flex of your muscles.

Maritza Rivera is a former Army Military Intelligence officer who served from June 1974 to August 1978. She is the author of About You and A Mother's War, written during her son's two tours in Iraq. She is also a regular contributor to Poets Responding to SB 1070, participates in the Memorial Day Writer's Project and hosts the annual Mariposa Poetry Retreat in Waynesboro, PA.

Gunnery Sergeant Stark

Paul L. Greenberg

You stop your wheelchair at the corner,
violent hacking from your throat
and dust belches out
Dust from the deserts of Al Anbar
Dust from the plains of Djibouti
Dust from the mountains of Helmand

You shake in your chair as the spasm
rattles your torso
and the stubs of your thighs
bounce on the edge of your chair

The fleshy fissures in your forehead
trace the sleepless nights
the sleepless years
of humps, ranges, patrols
of courage anger fear
cigarettes and canned beer
rifles grenades pistols knives
angry ex-wives

and children
who call
to ask you for money
and reproach you
for things you can't remember

Paul Greenberg is an avid fiction writer, English teacher and performance artist. He has taught ESL in South Korea, Morocco, and most recently in Rangoon, Burma. He has served in U.S. military on both the active and reserve side for fifteen years, and currently resides in North Carolina.

Profile

The Gospel According to Zinsser

William Zinsser is the author of 18 books and countless articles and essays. His formal education includes Deerfield Academy and Princeton University. But he was also a sergeant in the U.S. Army during WWII who served in North Africa and Europe. His book, On Writing Well, has sold over 1.5 million copies and is widely considered to be one of the best how-to guides on writing non-fiction. O-Dark-Thirty editor Ron Capps sat down for a chat with him at Zinsser's office in New York. Here is Capps' impression of the man.

Bill Zinsser was in his sophomore year at Princeton when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. University administrators and service representatives told students to stay in school instead of rushing out to enlist. The thinking at the time was that it would be a while before the armed forces were really ready for the millions of men needed to fight the war and the young Ivy Leaguers would better serve the nation if they waited until the officer candidate programs were better established.

A WASP-y young man from an established east coast family, Zinsser longed to distance himself from his background. So he ignored

the administrator's advice and went to the recruiting station to enlist in the Army as a private.

Zinsser wanted to change his life and the Army was prepared to cooperate. The New York City native trained at Camp Lee and Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia, and then continued his sojourn through a succession of Southern posts. "A collection of Quonset huts connected by duck boards over water," he called them. He wanted to do more, so he volunteered for overseas duty.

Again, the Army cooperated. He shipped out of Norfolk on a troop ship, the USS General W.A. Mann, on a solo passage across the Atlantic at a time when packs of U-Boats patrolled the coastlines of the United States, Europe and West Africa. Not long into the voyage, Zinsser says, "I woke up and we were near land. I saw a white city on a hill. It was Casablanca." The sight of French-Arab Africa that day sealed in Zinsser an insatiable hunger for travel and an abiding interest in Arab culture.

Zinsser was assigned as a clerk in an Army Air Corps unit that provided direct support to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor to the CIA. British Lancaster bombers and American B-17s and B-24s flew off of the North African coast to drop supplies to partisan units fighting the Nazis in Europe. Zinsser's ambition and education had guaranteed him a role. But while some of his Princeton classmates would end up flying the bombers, Zinsser had another skill that was in high demand: he could type. He became the squadron's administrator. In time, his commander had Zinsser typing out the officer's memoir—a somewhat less than strictly factual account of the commander's wartime exploits.

Across North Africa and on to Sicily Zinsser stayed on the ground, filling administrative roles and gradually shifting over to intelligence debriefing duties. He stayed with the unit when it moved to Southern Italy, which Zinsser remembers as desolate and beset by grinding poverty. As 1944 wore on, the squadron moved to northern Italy, but with the war

winding down there wasn't much work for his bomber squadron.

Once again, the army cooperated with Zinsser's desires. He needed something to keep his mind occupied. The light clerical and debriefing duties weren't taxing. So when he saw a tiny note in the Stars and Stripes announcing that one soldier from every unit would be allowed to attend college courses in Florence, he beat it to the First Sergeant's office and was first in line.

The war ended and Bill Zinsser came home to New York ready to begin his new life. The credits from his classes in Florence, he said, helped him complete his degree at Princeton without ever attending another class there.

He had always wanted to be a newspaperman. So when he got back to NYC he talked his way into a job at the New York Herald Tribune reporting on the waves of veterans who were returning from the war and clogging up the college systems thanks to the GI Bill of Rights.

Thus began a new life for the man many people credit with changing their lives by teaching them how to be better writers. Yep, that's right. Be a better writer = be a better person. Who knew?

William Knowlton Zinsser, Bill to his friends, is a former journalist and freelance writer, writing teacher and college master at Yale, and the author of 18 books. Today, at 84, he was still teaching at The New School in New York. His class on memoir is unique among writing classes in that he doesn't want his students to write for the class. "I'm more interested in teaching the process than in the finished product," he told me. "I teach them how to come to terms with who they are, what they once were, their heritage."

This iconoclastic approach to writing is central to his teaching and gets to the theme of *On Writing Well*, Zinsser's hallmark work that has sold over 1.5 million copies since it appeared in 1976. Yes, he's the guy who wrote *On Writing Well*, and if you're interested in learning how

to write non-fiction, change that to learning how to write, you either have a copy or you need one.

If there is a core message to *On Writing Well*, it is to de-clutter your writing. Take away all the superfluous words and get to the point. By doing so, you get to the core of who you are as a writer and thus, who you are as a person.

Zinsser's message of clarity and precision is one that resonates with hundreds of thousands of people. They write to him regularly telling him he has changed their lives. These letters have changed how he teaches and, more broadly, his outlook.

"Writing is a craft," he says. Particularly non-fiction writing. Occasionally, some writer will rise to the level of art; he mentioned Tom Wolfe and his book *The Right Stuff*. But mostly, writing is just a craft like any other. No better or worse than a plumber's or a potter's craft.

This workman-like approach infuses Zinsser's work and his life. "I never hung out with writers," he said. "The point of the craft isn't to hang out with other writers—most of whom want only to talk about themselves or their most recent work. I want to hang out with real people and write about them."

His office in Manhattan is a model of his message: a small desk and chair, two wooden seats at a round table by the window, four pictures on the walls and a bookshelf. There is no computer, no fax machine, no cluster of hand-held devices. There is a phone, a 1970s vintage push-button unit that looks as out of place in 21st century New York City as a Model-T. It is simple and pared down to the essentials. Zinsser doesn't use the Internet or email. To reach him, I wrote an email to his editor at *The American Scholar* who printed it out and mailed it to Zinsser. He called me on the phone.

He continues riffing on the craft theme: "Craftsmen learn from other craftsmen. Artists learn by watching other artists. For all the ways that Picasso changed art, there would be no Picasso without Cezanne.

“Writers,” he says, “learn by writing and by imitating others.” This doesn't mean plagiarizing, but rather reading what interests us and learning how writers we like work their craft.

For his part, Zinsser learned by imitating the baseball writers he read in the New York dailies. He spent his youth pouring over the baseball pages of the New York Herald Tribune, the New York Times and the Evening Star. He revered the baseball writers of the day; he calls them his Faulkner and his Hemingway.

He also imitated noted essayist E.B. White. Alongside *On Writing Well*, the book on writing taking up the most space on shelves in the country is Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. E.B. White learned from William Strunk and later updated his teacher's little style handbook. There is a framed photograph of White at his typewriter in the boat-house where he wrote hanging on the wall of Zinsser's office. It's right next to the photo of Babe Ruth at the plate in 1926 at Fenway Park.

Zinsser emulated White for decades. He wanted not only to write like White, but, he realized too late, he wanted to be E.B. White. He was in his early 50s when he broke out and finally understood that Bill Zinsser wasn't E.B. White. This epiphany changed his life.

During a summer vacation from his teaching job at Yale, Zinsser and his wife had rented a cabin on the shore. He sat in the shed looking out at the water—much as White had done in his boathouse—and began writing a book about writing. He wrote a book in Bill Zinsser's voice telling Bill Zinsser's stories and teaching Bill Zinsser's methods. When it was done, he was liberated from E.B. White.

That liberation manifests itself in his teaching, particularly in his ideas about memoir. Zinsser teaches his students to embrace the process not to fear it, and in doing so he frees them to write. “People are afraid to sit down and ‘commit an act of writing’. They are scared to death they'll do something wrong. I teach them to write for themselves, to strip away the clutter and find their humanity.”

“Don't write for the English teacher you had in High School,” he says. “Write for yourself. Write clearly and accurately, strip away all the pretense and anxiety. Just tell your story. Keep it simple.” He wants his students to find themselves in their writing. In his memoir class students have to explain what they want to write and how they will write it rather than imagining the finished product. “Thinking is the hard part,” Zinsser says. “After that, the writing is easy.”

Writing is Bill Zinsser's craft. He's good at it. He takes it seriously, like a religion. He speaks of the ministry of his work and of approaching it with a Calvinist ethic. His approach to work is diligent, even somewhat evangelical. He tries to disabuse terrified students of the idea that writing is some sort of holy edifice while he spreads the Gospel According to Zinsser—improve your writing, improve your life. Read the book, see the light

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militarymarketingsolutions@gmail.com
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The Veterans Writing Project
6508 Barnaby St., NW
Washington, DC 20015
O-Dark-Thirty.org
VeteransWriting.org