

New Fiction from Ken Galbreath: "Checkpoint"

In high school, I was invisible—acne and braces, last year's wardrobe. I didn't have close friends. My grades weren't going to win me any scholarships. The football coach offered me the equipment manager's position after tryouts.

In the ninth grade, 9/11 happened. In tenth grade, I watched the Air Force drop daisy cutters on Tora Bora. In my junior year, I watched the Marines level Fallujah. There were yellow ribbon magnets on every car and American flags on every porch. The military was a way to be somebody.

So after I graduated, I ran to the recruiter's office; shaved my head before I even shipped out. Some guys hated basic training. Not me. I couldn't wait to get home in my dress uniform and strut through town, to show all those people who had looked over me or looked through me instead of looking at me. I'd be impossible to miss with a chest full of ribbons and medals.

I finished basic and shipped to Fort Bragg. My unit deployed to Iraq three weeks later, just in time for me to get some. But our area of operations was only peace and the endless desert. Nobody had died in almost a year. No Americans.

My platoon drove around Iraq in humvees, pointing our guns at the horizon, hoping to draw fire. We escorted supply convoys. We transported detainees. We set up checkpoints.

The recruiter never said shit about supply convoys. And he definitely didn't mention sitting at a checkpoint, in a hundred and fifty degrees, in body armor, in a truck in the desert, just sitting. That lying prick told me about kicking in doors, calling in airstrikes, airborne infiltrations. Never checkpoints.

But, no shit, there we were.

When we arrived, the lieutenant radioed in our coordinates. Sergeant Schwartz and the other team leaders arranged orange cones and stretched out large, spiral coils of barbed wire creating a temporary barrier. Two soldiers positioned signs at either end of the checkpoint. In Arabic and English, they read, "Caution. Stop Here. U.S. Forces Checkpoint Ahead. Wait for Instructions. Deadly Force Authorized. Caution." My job was to stand in the turret and man the .50 caliber machine gun, to provide security while the other guys set up.

Sergeant Schwartz pulled the heavy door shut as he got back into the truck.

"And now we wait," he said.

Scwhartz took a pinch of snuff and tucked it in his bottom lip. He passed the can to Carpenter, the driver. I heard them spitting into empty bottles. Out past the barrel of the .50, the dirt road shimmered like water. Two hours went by, then three. Farmers' trucks kicked up dust as they drove from one rural village to the next.



Ramadi, Iraq (Feb. 20, 2005). U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Shane T. McCoy.

So far, we had searched two vehicles and had found nothing.

"Hey Sergeant Schwartz," I called down from the turret. "Is it always like this?"

"Like what?"

"This..." I said, "boring."

"The last deployment wasn't," he said. "We were up near Baghdad. Urban environment."

"What's the craziest thing you ever found?"

"No shit," he said. "This one time, we stopped a car full of midget hajjis."

Schwartz told us that Bobby Barrow, one of the other team's sergeants, had halted four lanes of traffic so he could take

pictures. This was back when he and Schwartz were still privates. While Bobby was getting his picture taken, the search team found a wooden box full of Iraqi money hidden under a spare tire. So Bobby and Schwartz had to zip tie all these tiny little hands together while the lieutenant radioed headquarters. Turns out, all the money had Saddam's face on it, so they let the driver keep it. Before they left, one of the Iraqis tried to get Barrow to marry his daughter and take her home to America.

"Bobby told him, I can't take no hajji girl home to my mama!" Schwartz finished, laughing.

A truck approached.

"Punisher 7," I called it in. "This is Punisher 4. Vehicle approaching from the south. Over."

"Roger. Over." The bored reply.

A door clunked open and the truck rocked as Sergeant Schwartz stepped out. I heard the team leaders from the other trucks doing the same. Out at the furthest clump of orange cones, the white pickup truck slowed, as if the driver was reading the sign. I stood in the gun turret and held my hands and arms straight out in front of me like a traffic cop, but he kept driving, rolling past the sign.

The team leaders, standing in the road beside my truck, raised their long guns and pulled the butt stocks tight into their shoulders.

I fired a signal flare, a warning. The flaming red ball arced past his windshield.

Still, the pickup didn't stop; it accelerated toward the barbed wire, our position.

"Light him up!" Sergeant Schwartz nodded at me.

I aimed. I fired three rounds.

The pickup lurched and jerked and skidded to a halt. The passenger's side sagged off the dirt road into an irrigation ditch. A door screeched open, and three female figures scrambled out, screaming and crying. The search team corralled them. Someone shouted, "Clear!"

There was nothing in the truck.

And then Doc sprinted up and pulled the driver out. She laid him on his back in the road, cut his pants apart, and stuffed handfuls of gauze into the gaping wound in his groin. And then she gave up. I heard the call for a body bag on the radio.

I clambered up out of the turret, pulled my headset off, and ignored Carpenter's questions about what I was doing, his warnings that I would be in trouble for leaving. I marched down the road, around the serpentine of barbed wire to where the truck had stopped.

One round had passed through the windshield of the truck high on the passenger's side, a cloudy spider web centered around a clean hole. Another hole in the grill, driver's side. Fluids leaked from under the truck, oil and antifreeze. Blood soaked the driver's seat, dripped out the door and puddled in the sand to form tiny lakes.

I caught glimpses of the driver, with all of the people crowded around: the platoon sergeant, the medic, the team leaders, too busy talking about the details of "the report" to notice his wispy moustache. They didn't see the zits that dotted his face, because they were talking about proper escalation of force. They didn't notice me either, standing outside of their huddle.

Two young girls wailed on the side of the road. Their mother, or grandmother, was ancient and dry. The lieutenant asked the interpreter why they didn't stop at the sign, and the

interpreter turned to the woman and said something in Arabic.

Her voice was papyrus. She held her hands out in front of her and patted her breast with her hand.

"She says they didn't know what to do," the interpreter said.

"Did they not read the sign?" the lieutenant asked.

"She says there is no school here," said Nasir.

The old woman patted her chest again and again.

"There's no school here," the lieutenant said, almost to himself. And then, not so quietly, "JESUS! FUCK!"

Heads turned to look at him, including the platoon sergeant's. I stood in the middle of the road. His eyes flicked to the empty turret 40 meters away.

"What are you worried about that for?" He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "You're supposed to be worried about your fucking sector of fire, dumbass." He shoved and pulled me to the truck and ordered me back up into the turret.

I watched my sector while the platoon packed up road cones and signs. They loaded everything into the trucks.

The platoon sergeant and interpreter spoke to the old woman, telling her how to file a claim. They gave her a piece of paper with the information printed on it. Before they left, Schwartz kneeled and offered the girls a package of M&Ms. The smaller girl burst into tears and clung to the woman's *burqa*.

As they walked away, the old woman stopped and rasped at me, "*Asif.*"

"I don't speak your language," I told her. "I don't understand."

"She says she is sorry," Nasir said.

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On the ride back to base, Schwartz kept telling me not to worry. We did everything by the book.

“You’ll have to write a statement when we get back. Probably answer some questions, but just tell the truth,” he said. “We did it all by the book.”

It was annoying, the way he kept repeating himself.

I finished my tour of duty. The army gave me a medal. Later, they gave me my discharge papers. I grew out my hair and enrolled at a state university.

I didn’t strut around town in my dress uniform.

*

Two years later, Carpenter’s email arrived. It was short.

“Hey G,” he wrote. “I don’t know if you heard, but Schwartz died. Wanted you to know. Hope you’re doing good.”

The first email came a week after I left the army. Donahue died. Suicide attack in Baghdad. Last year it was Bethea. IED on some road in Afghanistan. He had gotten married the month before. Now Schwartz.

At the bottom of Carpenter’s email, there was a link to an obituary. “Staff Sergeant Michael A. Schwartzberger, age 32, died on...”

I hadn’t talked to Schwartz, or practically anyone from the unit, since I left the army, but I felt like there ought to be more than just some dates and a list of people he left behind.

I read his name over and over. Schwartzberger. The name tape on his uniform had the tiniest little letters so that they would all fit. We had just called him Schwartz.

I emailed my professors and left that morning.

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The honor guard stood off to the side with their rifles. Some hairless kid in a baggy dress jacket held a bugle.

Standing behind the crowd, I searched the backs of heads for familiar faces. Bobby Barrow was conspicuous, his shoulders as broad as ever. He was the only person in a dress uniform who wasn't part of the honor guard. Carpenter would be here somewhere.

The chaplain stood next to the coffin rambling through generic scripture— *The righteous perish and no one takes it to heart. The devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil*— I wanted to shout him down. I wanted to tell Schwartz's *real* story.

Schwartz was 20 when he joined the Army.

His grandfather and his father worked in Youngstown, but Schwartz was born the year after the steel industry moved to China. There was no future at the plant.

The Volunteer Fire Department didn't offer a pension. No benefits package either. Fourteen dollars an hour might have been enough for him and Melissa, just the two of them, but then the baby came.

Schwartz was an all-American kid: athlete, honors student, Eagle Scout. The recruiters had hounded him right after high school. Then, he had tucked their cards into his wallet and nodded and smiled. When things got tight, he dug through the drawer in the kitchen where old wallet clutter was archived with dead batteries and receipts of questionable importance.

Melissa's belly was seven-months-fat when the recruiter came to pick up Schwartz for basic training. She sobbed on the porch while Schwartz rode away.

“Don’t worry,” the recruiter told him in the car. “You’ll be gone for a couple of months, and then you’ll move her and the kid down to Fort Bragg, and you’ll see her every night. Except for a training exercise every now and then.”

After basic training, he moved Melissa and Emily to Fort Bragg. He spent every night with them, except for the occasional training exercise.

After 9/11, the exercises came more often. The nights he spent at home, he lay awake, straining to sleep. He never explained it explicitly, but I understood. Some part of him needed to record the sound of his wife’s soft snores or the smell of her hair. He needed to absorb the blank hiss of the baby monitor.

On a tiny base in Khost Province, he earned an Army Commendation Medal and corporal’s stripes. He kept a picture of his daughter in his helmet. He wrote letters home every week. The letters never mentioned rockets or mortars or any kind of trouble. He told Melissa about his promotion. He wrote how much he missed her.

They had been in Afghanistan for six months and already there were murmurs about Iraq.

He received another medal and another promotion in Baghdad. He wrote letters. He kept a copy of his wife’s sonogram along with the pictures tucked in his helmet. The unit arranged it so that he could make a phone call home on the day that Ashley was born.

These are the stories he told us while we were overseas together—his third deployment, my first and only.

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Schwartz’s unit was still in Afghanistan. The honor guard had been scraped together from the fuckups left at Fort Bragg. The rifle detail and the bugler were privates, fresh out of basic

training or discipline cases. The detail's leader was a fat, dumpy sergeant first class. All of the able bodies, and minds, were in Afghanistan.

The chaplain finished the service. The fat sergeant stepped up to the casket and raised his right arm in a slow salute. I watched to see who would jump at the first volley of shots. As the last volley's echo rolled through the cemetery, the bugler started to play "Taps."

It wasn't even a real bugle. There were so many funerals, and so few trained buglers, that the army had to use fakes. The digital bugles played a perfect rendition every time, but anyone who ever played a brass instrument would be able to look at the kid in the baggy jacket and tell he wasn't playing. He didn't even know how to hold the fucking thing.

The fat sergeant handed the folded flag to Schwartz's mom.

Some of the attendees walked back to their cars. Others waited to pay their respects to Schwartz's parents, still seated, looking as if they'd be guarding his grave forever.

*

Bobby, Carpenter, and I met at a bar near my hotel.

Neither of them knew how Schwartz had died. Bobby said Schwartz's unit had deployed eight or nine months ago, but like the rest of us, he'd lost track of Schwartz after leaving Fort Bragg. Carpenter hadn't really talked to anyone since he'd been kicked out—cocaine.

Schwartz's honor guard walked into the bar a little after sundown. They were in civilian clothes, but I recognized the fat sergeant who had handed the flag to Schwartz's parents. Bobby asked about my hair: "So, when your girlfriend is pegging you, does she pull your hair? You know? And, do you have to put it back in a bun when you're licking her balls..."

I nodded toward the door, distracting him.

"Hey bartender," he yelled. "Get these boys some drinks!"

We sat at a table and told stories about Schwartz. Bobby had known him far longer than me; Carpenter too, so I let them do the talking. I was drunk. I smiled and nodded in the right places, chimed in with exclamations when I was expected to.

We kept waiting for the fat sergeant and the honor guard to open up. They were happy to drink on Bobby's tab, but they stayed quiet, like we were still at the funeral. They seemed surprised by the way we described him. It was like they had never even met Schwartz.

We wanted to hear their stories about him, but what we really wanted was to know how he died. The obituary had said nothing, not even *where* he died. And it wasn't like he was a spy, out doing something classified. He was in the fucking field artillery.

The jukebox died. Bobby was content to give it a rest. There was a lull in storytime.

"Tell 'em about that kid you smoked at that checkpoint," Carpenter said.

My stomach dropped. I focused on the beads of condensation running down a bottle of beer, but all I could see was that dusty, old woman. I could hear her voice, her rusty tongue dragging across the roof of her mouth. *Asif*.

She says she is sorry.

I struggled away from the memory and looked up, hoping for an interruption, an earthquake, a meteor strike, anything not to have to relive it.

The men from Schwartz's honor guard stared at me hungrily, waiting for blood. Bobby wouldn't meet my gaze. He understood

that this was necessary. If I shared my story of bloodshed, then they would tell us what happened to Schwartz.

Blood calls for blood.

"So," I said, "this kid, who it turned out couldn't read, blew through a sign at our checkpoint, and I thought I was doing the right thing, but it turned out-."

"Dude!" Carpenter interrupted me. "Tell it *right*, man!" He turned to the fat sergeant and the rifle detail. "So no shit, there we were, in the middle of this fucking dirt road ..."

He told it all.

When Carpenter finished, the fat sergeant raised his bottle towards me, and then everyone at the table did the same. I waggled my bottle side to side. The label lay in shreds on the table.

"Sorry boys," I said. "I'm empty."

"Get me one too!" Carpenter called as I walked away from the table.

The parking lot was dark and cool. I pondered getting in my car and driving back to Asheville. The keys were in my hand.

Raised voices and breaking glass forced me to do an about face.

Inside, Bobby stood in front of his overturned chair, red-faced, cursing down at the fat sergeant. "You don't fucking know. You weren't there, you tubby shit!"

And now the fat man jerked to his feet knocking his chair to the ground too. "Listen, sergeant." He pointed his sausage fingers in Bobby's face. "You need to tone it down. I don't know who it is that you guys knew, but it wasn't the guy that I knew. Schwartz was a fucking shit bag and a drunk. That's

why they left him in the rear.”

“What?” Bobby’s arms sagged.

When a unit deployed, they left people back in the States to take care of admin stuff– bitch work. They called it rear detachment. It was for broke-dicks, whiners, fuckups. Schwartz wasn’t any of those things. This was a mistake.

“They. Left. Him. In The. Rear,” the fat sergeant repeated, accentuating every word. “Schwartz got a DUI, and then he got busted for being drunk on duty. His ex took his daughters and got a *restraining order*. He was about to get busted down to sergeant.”

“Liar!” Bobby said. Angry tears brimmed from his blue eyes.

“That morning, when he didn’t show up to P.T. formation, no one blinked, because, like I said, Schwartz was a fuckup. When he missed 0900 formation too, we sent a couple guys to his quarters.”

Bobby made harsh cawing sounds and the tears spilled over.

The fat sergeant continued. “When they knocked, no one answered, but they knew something was wrong. So, they broke in. They found him in the garage, in his truck with the engine running.”

Bobby crumpled into a chair. Until now, I’d never seen him look deflated.

“Did he leave a note?” I asked.

“Sort of,” the fat sergeant said. “That’s how the guys knew something was wrong when they went to Schwartz’ place. He wrote *Sorry* in giant, spray paint letters across the garage door.”

Asif.