

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Clock Strikes Twelve

My year-long run as guest-columnist for The Wrath-Bearing Tree comes to an end this month. I'm not sure if WBT founders Adrian Bonenberger and Mike Carson planned for my stint to last only twelve months, but in my mind it was always the goal. Twelve months, twelve Strike Through the Mask! columns, each with a different subject, obviously, but more personally, each with a different tone or style. My goal was variation within similarity, like a record album of yore: some songs fast, some slow, some mournful, some more upbeat, but all recognizable as the unified work of the creator.

I also welcomed the pressure of a monthly deadline. On my blog Time Now, I publish when I please. But I grew up loving the daily, weekly, and monthly columns of writers I admired in the newspapers and magazines I read—thinkers who wrote lively, interesting columns on a regular schedule. Finally, I realized I could use Strike Through the Mask! to range wider and dive deeper than I typically did in Time Now. Subjects I might not touch in Time Now, such as soldier memoirs and current events, I have explored at length in Strike Through the Mask! Most of all, I wanted to show Time Now readers a little more of the “real me”—my opinions, thoughts, and interests apart from the focus on other peoples' books and artworks in Time Now.

I couldn't have asked for better editors than Adrian and Mike. They have allowed me to write almost without suggestion or guidance, for better and for worse, and their infrequent edits and comments have always been on-point and encouraging. The war-writing community is lucky to have such thoughtful and generous leaders.

So what lies ahead? Time Now seems to have run its course, as well. I won't definitively declare it's over, but it does seem time for other writers more in-tune with the spirit of the 2020s to carry on its work. But who knows? I've read John Milas's *The Militia House* and watched *The Covenant* and I have thoughts.... Navy veteran Jillian Danback-McGhan's short-story collection *Midwatch* is on the way. A movie titled *Fremont*, about Afghan interpreters in America, and *Northern Shade*, about PTSD, are highly recommended and I look forward to watching them. Entire genres related to war-writing, such as YA and romance, lie mostly untouched, awaiting analysis....

I started Time Now in 2012 when it seemed clear that a vibrant writing-and-publishing scene centered on the work by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was emerging. One precipitating event was the 2010 War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy. I was fortunate to attend and it was there I first met or heard read authors such as Siobhan Fallon, Matt Gallagher, and Benjamin Busch. Another catalyst was the publication in 2012 of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*—novels published by major houses and widely reviewed and largely celebrated. At the time, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I had already sponsored a reading by Brian Turner. That had been an early-on, isolated event, however, and now I sensed a cohort of vet-writers and affiliated family members and interested authors with no formal military affiliation coalescing. I also intuited that I, an infantry veteran of Afghanistan with a PhD in English Literature, was in a position to document and promote the emerging work.

Scenes need events, outlets, and platforms to thrive. From that first 2011 WLA conference to the next one, in 2018, a number of events and publishing venues, infused by a sense of community, shared endeavor, and a do-it-yourself ethos, made being a vet-writer exciting and fulfilling. Online publishing

sites a-plenty were available, and publishers and general readers were reasonably open to vet memoir, fiction, and poetry. Seemingly every large city and college campus was hosting vet-writing workshops and the vet-writer presence at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference (AWP) was robust. I regularly attended AWP between 2014 and 2018, where I hosted several panels and met and mingled with many writers in the scene. And until 2015 I had a position at the United States Military Academy at West Point that allowed me to stage events for vet writers and artists to read and perform for cadets.

That physical sense of community has largely faded, and vet-writers now rely on social media to promote, connect, and opine. That's OK, but if writers and artists now coming into print feel isolated rather than connected by the digisphere, I remind them that the cohesion of 2010-2018 was largely generated by the initiative of the participants themselves. If recreating that energy seems desirable, then the answer is to stage readings, host events, create platforms, reach out, form alliances, and keep knocking on doors. I'm not a position to help make that happen much anymore, but I love the spirit and energy when I see it.

To end here, I'll offer some photos of prominent authors in the scene I've taken over the years. Some I've already published on Time Now, but they're too good not to be given another airing. Salute to all the writers and their works!

Brian Turner, author of *Here*, *Bullet*, *Phantom Noise*, and many others, Red Bank, NJ, 2018



Siobhan Fallon, author of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* and *The Confusion of Languages*, West Point, NY, 2018



Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Highland Falls, NY, 2014



Matt Gallagher, author of *Kaboom*, *Youngblood*, and *Empire City*, Camden NJ, 2016. (This picture was supposed to be taken in front of Walt Whitman's house, but what can I say? We screwed up and took the photo a few doors down from the Good Gray Poet's residence.)



Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* and others, West Point, NY, 2014



Elyse Fenton, author of *Clamor*, Dodge Poetry Festival, Newark,

NJ, 2014



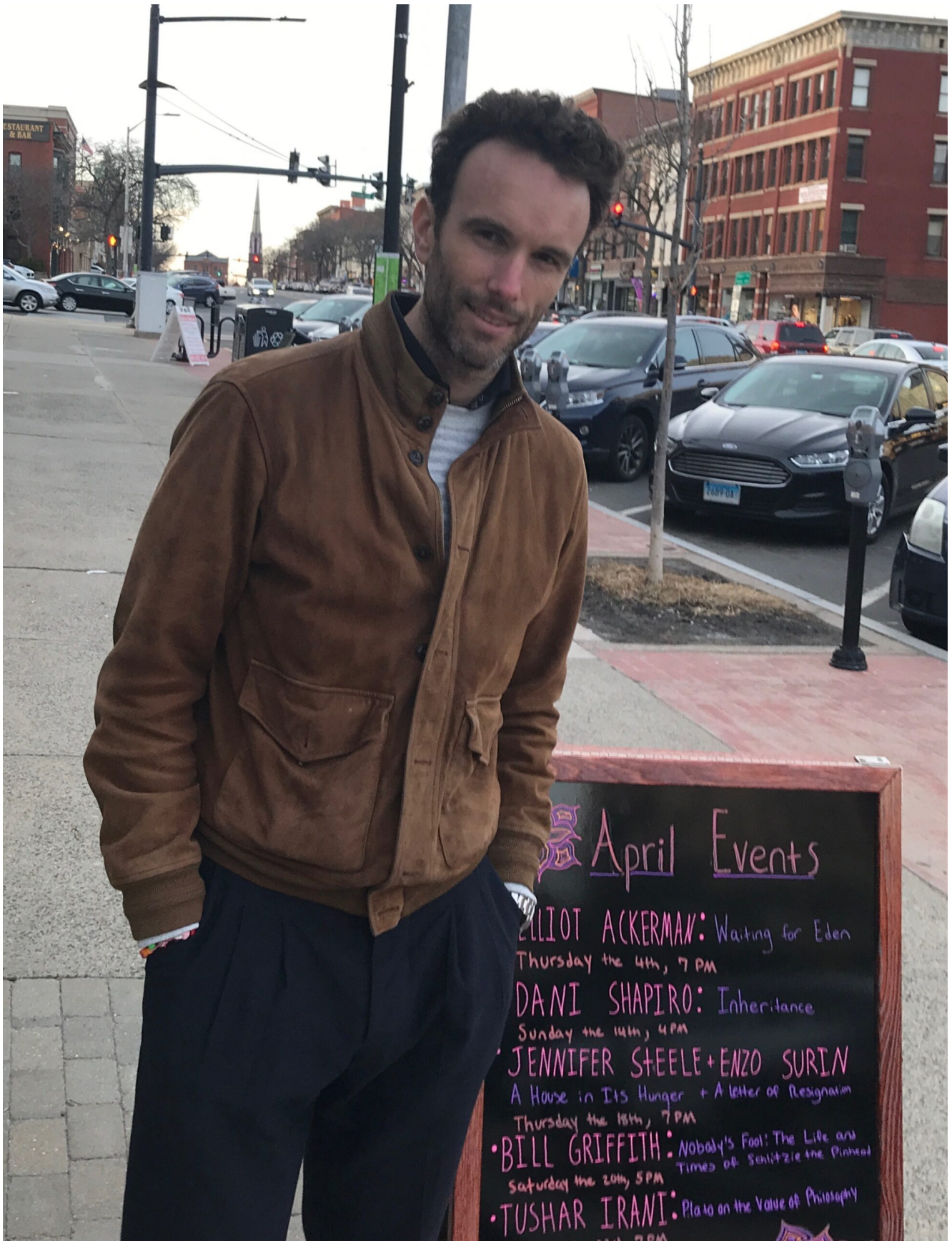
Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016



John Renehan, author of *The Valley*, Arlington, VA, 2018



Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue*, *Dark at the Crossing*, and many others, Middletown, CT, 2019



Adrian Bonenberger, author of *Afghan Memoir* and *The Disappointed Soldier*, Branford, CT, 2021



Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk* and *Disappointment River*, among others, New York, NY, 2020



Playwright Jay Moad and fiction author Jesse Goolsby, New York, NY, 2017. Moad and Goolsby were two of the driving forces behind the United States Air Force Academy's War,

Literature, and the Arts journal and conferences.



Roy Scranton and Jacob Seigel, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Scranton is the author of *War Porn* and Seigel is the author of the short-story "Smile There Are IEDs Everywhere," from the seminal vet-writing anthology *Fire and Forget* edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher.



Jennifer Orth-Veillon and Benjamin Busch, New Haven, CT, 2018. Orth-Veillon edited the anthology of writing about World War I *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* that features a who's-who of vet and vet-adjacent writers. Busch is the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust*, as well as a poet, actor, filmmaker, photographer and illustrator.



**New Fiction by Cam McMillan:
“The Colors of the Euphrates”**



She came from the south, wearing a bright red dress and carrying a light blue backpack, weaving through the well-worn paths on the banks of the Euphrates that had been carved out by foot traffic and various other forces of erosion for millennia. The same ground carried her ancestors and bequeathed them their fertile crescent, upon which they birthed a cradle of civilization and set forth the foundations of human history and society, with all its triumph and suffering. For all that had changed in the sweeping conquest of ecological momentum and Westphalian geopolitics, the beauty of the Euphrates remained. Its flora flourished, hosting palm trees and wildflowers, poplar trees and different species of reed, camel thorn and prosopis, that all combined to a bright, magnificent green to the armed predator drone circling 25,000 feet above. She may have heard the slight hum of its engine as it watched over her with its hellfire missiles and multi-spectral targeting system that held several high-quality cameras to broadcast the feed of her image to SPC Yates' screen, but it's unlikely. Drones circled over her head

everyday while she went to school and went on with her life, oblivious to SPC Yates' existence as a set of eyes that was capable of seeing her every move and even ending her entire existence.

His real name was Brian. If it were not for the college loan forgiveness program that brought him into the Louisiana Army National Guard, that's what he would have preferred to have been called. But it did, and the Army named him SPC Yates. He sat at his desk in the base defense operations center (BDOC) of Al Asad Air Base and watched his screen. Around him, other SPCs carried out similar tasks, monitoring drone feeds and security cameras littered throughout their area of operations in Al Anbar province. Together, they looked for things that could kill them, rockets or drones riding in the bed of a Toyota highlander or being loaded into the back of a trailer. SPC Yates was good at his job. He tasked drone pilots, far away in their air-conditioned trailers on an air force base somewhere in Nevada, to survey certain areas and strike certain targets depending on the needs of the day and the orders he received from the battle captain that sat at the back of the room. He stared at suspicious trucks and dangerous looking people. More often than not, they were nothing. A group of insurgents loading rockets into a pickup would end up being a family moving a mattress. An individual fitting the description of a known terrorist would be an old man herding goats. Through these laborious tasks and the daily monotony of his screen, SPC Yates came to know the village of Al Baghdadi, ten kilometers to their north, its winding roads and paths, and all its nooks and crannies. He immersed himself in the foliage of the river that cut between it, colorful and bright, and yearned to be around the green of his childhood, the marshes and swamps around New Orleans where his father taught him how to fish, instead of the bleak and barren landscape of sand and dust that waited for him outside the door of the BDOC. He came to recognize the people, the shopkeepers and merchants, schoolchildren and insurgents. But he had never

seen anyone quite like this, the little girl in a red dress.

She walked with an ease and absolute lack of concern or awareness about the dangerous world around her. In the strikingly vivid and detailed quality of the drone's cameras, SPC Yates could see the pattern of her dress, floral and white, as it blew with the breeze that swayed the green all around her. She skipped up and down, and bobbed her head from left to right, holding the straps of her backpack with both hands as it bounced gingerly with each leap. She had dark brown hair that she let flow past her shoulders, free of a bun or head scarf, which was uncommon. Brian thought he could see the sun reflecting off of it when she tilted her head in just the right direction. Every few steps, she would stop, and pick a rock up off the ground and skip it across the water to her right. He found her fascinating. She was unlike anything SPC Yates had seen in his eight long months sitting at his screen in Iraq. The simplicity with which she existed astounded him. He wondered what was in her backpack, books about the history of Mesopotamia, or perhaps mathematics, maybe even literature filled with pros of faraway lands. The joy he felt in her orbit was almost unrecognizable after being away from his true joy along the Mississippi for so long.

Along that magnificent and mighty body of water that cut through his small town in Louisiana all the way to Canada, SPC Yates was home. He was Brian. He remembered skipping rocks with his sister as a boy. When he was older, they would play hooky and sneak down to the banks where they watched the barges go by, as they drank cheap beer and cheaper cigarettes, speaking of days when they would leave their Louisiana outpost along the river. He thought of his sister, Laura. She wanted to be a makeup artist and work on movie sets in Los Angeles. After an unplanned pregnancy and an unreliable boyfriend, she ended up staying on those same banks and raising Brian's nephew, Ben. Before he left for the deployment, Brian promised he would send him a picture of a camel, but he never did. He

didn't even call for his birthday last month. It's not that he didn't want to. He just didn't have the energy to fake the smile and laugh he knew he would have to muster to reassure them he was okay. But, watching the little girl in the red dress prance along the Euphrates, Brian decided he would finally call Laura back and tell little Ben about the camels he saw in Kuwait to wish him a late happy birthday.

Then it happened. The alarm blared. He was no longer Brian.

"Incoming, incoming, incoming."

SPC Yates' heart stopped and jumped into his throat. Before he could think, he was on the ground where his heart raced again, beating like a drum into his chest that threatened to break through his sternum and spill onto the floor. He scrambled to reach for his kit, the Kevlar vest and helmet that lay next to his seat, reaching his left arm out to cling for the facade of protection. The explosions were distant at first. But as Brian pulled his vest across the plywood floor, they grew closer. The ground shook. The walls shuddered and the ceiling sagged with each thud that grew louder and louder. He couldn't make his hands work. He flopped and flailed on the floor, trying to get on his vest and helmet, grappling with clasps and fighting with clips in his desperate attempt to live even though he knew it wouldn't save him. Those around him did the same, completely disregarding their assigned duties and tasks as all semblance of order collapsed and everyone embarked on a journey of personal survival, no matter how in vain. The room filled with dust when a rocket impacted a T-wall outside, tearing a hole into their plywood fortress and filling it with smoke, soot, sawdust, and sand. Brian couldn't hear. He inhaled the toxic mixture into his lungs and nostrils. He gave up on the vest and hugged the ground as tightly as he could. He made himself as flat as possible. He wished that he could dig through the earth and come out the other side. The ground around him continued to shake. The grains of sand in front of his face bounced with each additional thud and he felt that he

was one of them, a victim of circumstance and location that left him completely at the whim of the explosions that rocked across Al Asad Air Base. He could hear again. People were screaming. *Help! Get the fuck down.*

They were anonymous screams that Brian could not identify. He was too paralyzed to try. His surroundings and all of his bodily senses collapsed onto him into a single mass of noise. The explosions. The screaming of orders. *Get that gun up!* The pleas for help. *Holy Shit. Jesus Christ.* The inaudible cries from friends. The beeps of the monitors and systems. The alarm. All of it, even the unheard, the smells and vibrations, combined into a terrible cacophony of noise that paralyzed Brian completely. Frozen and resigned to his own death, Brian thought of nothing. He did not think of God, or his sister Laura, or his nephew Ben, or even his friends who could be dying around him. Fear, fear, fear, was all his body could muster. The fear gave him no purpose or drive, nothing to combat or defend against. The fear simply was. It ate alive at his insides and propelled his heart harder and harder against his chest. Nothing in the biological array of his body, no organ, no frontal cortex, nothing, could sustain a thought or sensation other than absolutely paralyzing fear. And then it was over.

The explosions stopped first. And as the mass of noise evaporated, it created a vacuum that was filled with utter silence. The mosh pit of yells, and screams, and barking of orders was replaced by a tense quietude. It was as if anyone spoke or made a sound of any kind, it would all begin again. The dust in the air slowly settled back onto the ground as the earth no longer shook with fury, but instead lay there like the inanimate rock that it was before. The smoke began to clear from the room. And in that silence, they were brought back. The fear and panic dissipated, replaced by a slow, burning anxiety that sat like a tripwire. It could be activated at any time when chance would again return the

chaos. The people around Brian became aware of their surroundings. He himself was no longer paralyzed. Instead, he felt hungover. He was stuck in a deep sludge, like a dream where your feet never move fast enough, and you can't outrun the monster chasing you no matter how much you try to make your legs move. People checked themselves for wounds, feeling and looking for blood. They did so for their friends around them. Brian patted slowly around his torso and down his legs, praying that the adrenaline wasn't so strong that he hadn't noticed a chunk of flesh missing. He wasn't hit. Aside from a couple superficial wounds, lacerations to faces and extremities from shards of plywood and other shrapnel, no one was seriously wounded. They were alive. Finally, someone spoke. It was the battle captain.

"We up?" he sputtered out through his cracking voice. "Everybody good?"

The NCOs responded in the affirmative. After the brief shock of realizing they were alive, their duties and responsibilities sprang back into their collective mind. The base needed to be defended. There could be more attacks. Accountability of personnel needed to be collected and the wounded tended to. The chaos returned. This time, it was in the form of orders being barked and confusion running rampant as people sought answers for important questions. Is that gun up?! Where did it come from, I need a grid?! Where's the mass cal?! Do we have a medevac en route to that location?! How long until the QRF is up?! Do we have air support on station yet?!

Brian sprang back up to his station and started directing all of his drones to various locations to find where the rockets had been shot from. He looked along the MSR that weapons were regularly transported on. He scanned abandoned lots in Al Baghdadi. He searched known firing areas and recognizable landmarks where previous attacks had been carried out. He tasked his drones to every location he could think of,

changing their course intermittently as orders and the person giving them changed by the second. He searched frantically for the mysterious ghost that could begin shooting again at any second. Every truck was carrying rockets. Every house was hiding insurgents preparing the next wave. Every individual was a spotter who guided the rockets to their target.

“Point of Origin located, prepare to copy grid!”

Finally, someone found it. As Brian directed his drones to the location, he heard people shouting. So focused on his own task, the words blurted out around him were blurred out. *Truck. Mosque. Burning. Civilians.*

When Brian finally got a predator over the location, he put the pieces together. He made out the scene through a cloud of smoke. The vibrant and gorgeous green that he had fallen into earlier was replaced by utter devastation and sheer turmoil. A truck blazed with a powerful surge of bright red and orange. Twenty meters away, a trailer smoldered, disconnected from the burning cab, and emitting a large and continuous plume of black smoke through its twisted steel. Secondary, smaller explosions set off throughout the frame. To the right of his screen, Brian saw a building split in half. A wall was caved in by the blast. Cinder, concrete, and wooden shards were strewn across the ground. Through the smoke, he saw a crescent moon on the remaining part of the roof and realized it was a mosque. It was a Friday, the holiest day of the week, and people were certainly inside. Zooming in with one of the cameras, he saw a mass of red. Body parts, legs, arms, and the unrecognizable alike, combined to make a ghastly mural of blood, flesh, and bone. Brian quickly averted his eyes and began dry heaving off to his right.

“SPC Yates, get your eyes back on your fucking sector!” shouted his sergeant.

Covering his mouth with his fist, Brian continued to gag as he

resumed his scan of the area. The drone pilot was in control of the flight path and the cameras, so Brian simply watched the carnage like a helpless onlooker of an interstate car wreck. The pilot continued circling above the site as it completed its battle damage assessment, until veering off to the Southeast. The camera slowly followed a blood trail that led out of the larger, unidentifiable mass of red. The size of the trail grew. It began with small dots that grew bigger as the drone flew Southeast. Then it turned to a steady stream of dark red that grew thicker and thicker the farther it went. The drone slowly followed the trail down the banks of the river until it reached a thick area of brush where the trail stopped. As the camera zoomed out and the pilot reoriented himself, Brian noticed a red figure at the top right of his screen right along the water. The camera zoomed in and Brian saw her.

The little girl's red dress was still red, but there was a dark stain covering her right abdomen and the lower portion of her back. Her blue backpack was gone. She lay face down with her right foot caught in the root of a tall poplar tree. Her left knee was bent as if she was climbing up a steep cliff. Her left arm was curled under her torso and out of view, while the right was sprawled out to her side as if she was reaching for something. Her hand was open and palm facing up towards the camera of the drone. In it, she carried something, but he couldn't make out what it was. Her face rested in the mud, inches before the river, and her hair was sprawled out into the water in front of her, revealing the back of her neck. The current slowly drifted her dark brown locks back and forth. As she slowly crept out of the frame of the camera, Brian watched the water ripple off the top of her head and the bottom of her dress blow delicately in the wind. Then she was gone.

Brian finished the rest of his shift. He sat there in silence, staring at his screen until his replacement arrived a few hours later. He grabbed his rifle and his kit and walked out

of the room, noticing the full scope of damage for the first time. He saw splinters all over the dust and sand covered floor. He saw the hole in the wall at the other end of the BDOC where the rocket's blast had blown through. When he walked out, he saw T-walls blasted and Hesco barriers torn apart by the more immediate blasts. Further off, he saw smoke from small fires that continued to blaze throughout the base. He walked back to his chu and saw he had a text from Lauren. He ignored it. He laid down in his bed and rubbed a picture of him and Ben playing fetch with his parents' dog in a creek bed that ran off the Mississippi. He took a bottle of NyQuil he had stored under his bed and drank the half bottle that was left. He opened the bottle of sleeping meds that the base doctor had prescribed and swallowed a handful. He fell asleep.

That is how Brian finished the last month of his deployment. When he wasn't on shift, watching his sector, he'd go back to his room and take enough sleeping meds to fall asleep. He would direct drones over to where the little girl in the red dress had died every once in a while. There was nothing there. Just an empty patch of mud and a tall poplar tree. Sometimes Brian would stare at the empty space and dream of sneaking off the base and leaving a flower at the site, or maybe a book that she would have liked to have in her backpack. The rest of the deployment was uneventful. There were no more attacks. Their replacements eventually arrived, and Brian did his best to teach the new SPC that sat in his chair everything that he could. But the kid didn't really listen. His name was Hanson and he talked about wanting to get into a fight. He wanted to get attacked. He wanted to transmit an order to a drone to conduct a strike. He wanted to see the blast and carnage. He wanted to feel the power of holding death in his hand. He talked about the Iraqis he saw on his drone feed like they were actually just little specs in a video game. Brian ignored him.

Just before he finally went home, Brian went down to the bomb

yard where they kept blown up vehicles and trash. They had brought the truck that shot the rockets at them there the day after the attack. The insurgents hid all thirty of the rockets behind bags of flour to get through a checkpoint, causing them to ignite and cook off the rockets inside halfway through their launching. That's why the truck blew up, the mosque was destroyed, and the little girl in the red dress slowly bled out alone on the banks of the Euphrates. It's also probably why Brian survived. He stood there at the gate of the bomb yard and stared at the smoked out twisted steel that remained of the truck that tried to kill him and his friends. He wondered if it was a piece of shrapnel from the twisted mess that had pierced the little girl's red dress and dug into her liver or another vital organ. He thought of flour and how a simple cooking ingredient had decided who would live and who would die. He considered how and why no combatants from either side were killed, only innocents. He thought of the fourteen innocent men, women, and children who had been torn to shreds in that mosque. He wondered how many more had been wounded. He thought about how he could find no mention of it in any US news sources. He thought of his friends and fellow soldiers he didn't even know who were wounded. He remembered the little girl in the red dress.

Two weeks later, Brian was home. He moved in with Lauren because, after he gave up his lease for the deployment, he had nowhere else to go. He was remote and cut off. She would try to get him to come out for social occasions or family get-togethers, but she couldn't even get him to come outside of his room for dinner. She left a plate outside his door every night. Eventually, the extra sleeping meds he stashed from Iraq were gone, and he had to come out. No longer able to sleep, he set himself out to fix Lauren's crumbling porch. He used up about half of the money saved from the deployment on lumber, tools, and finishing, and got to work. It was August in Louisiana, and it was hot. Unlike Iraq, it was humid. He demoed and worked to put in a cinder block foundation so that

it could ride out the hurricanes and flooding that had brought it to such a state of disrepair in the first place. Lauren would bring him out water and plead with him to get out of the heat and come inside to the air conditioning. Anything to get him to talk. But he just kept working.

Finally, in October, the work was done, and the deck was finished. Brian had done an outstanding job. The foundation was solid. From it, six solid posts of cedar rose up. A finished staircase led up to a deck of pressure treated tropical hardwood. Ben helped him build some Adirondacks out of fresh pine. Together, they sanded and treated the wood, so the chairs looked rustic and modern at the same time. Once the foundation was finished, Lauren planted a garden around it of beautiful hibiscus and phlox. With all the work done, Lauren was worried what Brian would do next. He hadn't returned to school like he planned. He was going to study to be a marine biologist and move to Miami. After getting back, when he would answer her questions, he'd just say "eh, I'll figure something out." But she wasn't so sure. She often thought she questioned him too much and should leave him alone, but she was genuinely worried and felt a responsibility as his big sister. She decided to take a family trip to Brian's favorite spot on the river to celebrate the completion of the porch and Ben's good grades from the fall term. She was surprised when Brian agreed.

When they got there, it was exactly as Brian remembered it, a small hideout in the River State Wildlife Refuge where the noisy barges couldn't be heard, and the drunk New Orleans' tourists wouldn't be found. Sitting in the blue, still water, oak and cypress trees let their leaves sway back and forth in the wind while the wildflowers bloomed on the shore. Lauren set down a picnic blanket and took a couple of beers out of the cooler for her and Brian. There was a juice box for Ben. She prepared both of their favorites: fried shrimp po'boys. She looked over at Brian, who stood on the shore of the river

delta, and thought she saw a slight smile. Ben ran alongside them chasing a dragon fly.

Brian looked out at the still water and smelt the air through his nostrils as he inhaled deeply. He looked down at his feet and saw the water slush up between his toes as it mixed with the mud and turned into a milky brown. He looked up at the sky and wondered what he and his family would look like to him from a camera on a predator at 25,000 feet. He knew the answer was specs among bright green. All around him was the beauty of the wildlife that he had yearned for in that desert where nothing lived. He looked back at Ben, who was now running around Lauren and playing with her hair and thought about how carefree his nephew was. He considered whether that was for the better or worse. Brian crouched down, placed his fingers in the water, and started making little circles in it. He bent down onto his knees and sunk his fingers in the mud. He dipped his hair, now long and curly, into the water and felt the ripples wash up against it. He felt himself in the river, in the mud, in all of it.

As he closed his eyes, he saw himself amidst the beauty of the Euphrates, surrounded by the same luscious green. He walked the well-worn paths he had watched on his monitor for countless hours during those 9 months. He followed a pair of footprints along the water that did not have a discernible pattern, zigzagging back and forth, stopping and starting, and leaving rocks unsettled from their natural place. He kept walking. He heard laughter. As he turned the corner around a tall poplar tree, he saw a little girl in a red dress dancing in a clearing of mud between the foliage. She laughed as she rocked her head from side to side and twirled in circles, amused by how her dress flowed up with her movement. Her innocent smile and sparkling eyes were oblivious to Brian's presence until he took another step and snapped a branch. Surprised but not startled, she turned towards him and smiled, saying something in Arabic that Brian could not understand.

She giggled again and reached her hand out towards Brian, gesturing him towards her. Unthinkingly, he followed, taking her hand and following her down to the water. They walked out into the river, as the water passed her ankles, then her knees, and eventually rose to her hips. She let go of Brian's hand and leaned back, floating atop the water, and let the current take her downstream. Brian began to follow.

"Hey, you okay?" Lauren whispered into his ear. She was crouched beside him with her hand on his shoulder.

Brian pulled his head out of the water and sat up on his knees, turning towards her, tears bubbling in his eyes.

There was a long silence before he said, "there was this little girl."

Lauren got down on her knees with him and nodded her head earnestly.

"Over there?" She asked.

Brian nodded, "she was just so little, not much bigger than Ben. And she was beautiful, Lauren." A slight grin broke through his tears.

"You know, just this beautiful little girl skipping along the river. And she had on this red dress."

He paused before exhaling sharply and looking out at all the green across the water. He gazed at the oaks and the cedars and the cyprus. He looked at the marsh land's vegetation sticking out from the river's surface. He looked up at the sky and thought he heard a slight humming sound.

"Would you look at all that green," he said to Lauren.

"Yeah, it's really something isn't it?" She responded.

Brian took off his shirt and slowly waded out into the still

water until it reached waist height. Lauren looked on from the shore. With his jeans still on, he leaned back and let himself float freely, completely at the whim of the light tide. He stared up at the sky around him and saw nothing but clear, blue air. He imagined himself riding the river all the way down to the Gulf, getting caught in the loop current and finding his way to the jet stream that would carry him across the Atlantic. From there, he'd latch onto the warm water flow around the horn of Africa and go up into the Indian Ocean, where he would have to find his own way to the waters of Oman and all the way up through the Persian Gulf. At the mouth of the Euphrates, he would travel north along its banks until he found that inconspicuous patch of mud on the shore just south of Al Baghdadi.

New Review: BRAVO! Ben Fountain Scores a Touchdown on Reality

'A fierce, exhilarating novel' GUARDIAN

BILLY
LYNN'S
LONG
HALFTIME
WALK

'A hero for our times' INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

BEN FOUNTAIN

Americans do not genuinely support the troops. This is the impression Ben Fountain's 2012 war novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* left me with. Though American society supports their military in theory, they don't care beyond their own comfort zones. And by comfort zones I mean luxurious "La-Z-Boy's" close to the remote for changing the channel as soon as it gets uncomfortable. I am aware that this is a broad and exaggerated statement to make, but Fountain's novel made me question America's supposedly infinite support for its veterans and challenged my assumptions about American patriotism.

When the novel opens, it is Thanksgiving Day at Dallas Cowboy Stadium. The 19-year old Billy Lynn and his fellow Bravo squad members have just finished two weeks of special leave from Iraq for an act of heroism caught on film by a FOX News camera crew. They have been paraded throughout the country to reinforce America's faith in the war, and they will now spend their final day, and the entire novel, at a uniquely American holiday celebrating a uniquely American sport. When the day is over, the eight "Bravo Squad" Soldiers will return to Iraq. Unless—again in uniquely American fashion—they can land a movie deal first. Right away, Fountain's plot reveals how, for America's entertainment elite, the true battle has nothing to do with Iraq. FOX News producers, Cowboy Stadium CEOs, and Hollywood directors do not really want to celebrate these soldiers for who they are or what they did. They would rather celebrate capitalism by fighting each other over who can make most money off these soldiers' traumatic experiences.

Through a close third-person narrative, Fountain gives unfiltered access to an impressive amount of tangled emotions and interactions happening over the course of one single day. Streams of consciousness collide with word-clouds emphasizing words in uncommon ways (e.g., "nina leven", "currj," and "terrRist"). This creates confusion and distracts from things happening outside of Billy's head, but, at the same time,

Billy's intimate and honest inner monologues tied me to the novel. It felt voyeuristic, allowing insight into thoughts far from my reality. Imagining the "overcaffeinated tag teams of grateful citizens trampoline right down the middle of his hangover," I got the feeling I knew his moods and opinions better than the overcaffeinated "grateful" citizens. Yes, I even almost felt his headache worsen as the manager kept forgetting to get a real twenty-first century "hero"—Advil.

Fountain's decision to name the squad "Bravo" points to the endless thanks given to veterans, handed out as effortlessly as clapping your hands and yelling "Bravo" at overworked stage stars. Like actors, these soldiers wear costumes to fit expectations and re-appear for encores despite being tired after the big show. This thread of superficial gratitude stretches throughout the entire novel, pointing out not only the civilian crowd's thirst for sensation but also their longing for justification. "It was worth it?" they ask Billy. "Don't you think? We had to do it, don't you think?" Billy, having seen the reality, wishes that "just once somebody would call him baby-killer." While doubting the legitimacy of his duties to patrol, shoot and kill, he experiences how society glorifies a soldiers' violent agency. Being celebrated for "the worst day of his life," Billy questions whether the U.S. Army's actions abroad are fully understood and if his fellow citizens even desire to do so. This impression gets reaffirmed when the squad is expected to march onstage unprepared during the Halftime Show. "The explosions start," Billy says, "and they all flinch, boom boom boom, lum rounds are shooting off from somewhere backstage, smokers that explode with the arid crackle of cluster bombs scattering over a wheat field." These cheering fans fail to notice that fireworks might not be as entertaining to veterans as they are to civilians. Nobody bothers to wake Bravo Squad up from this PTSD nightmare.

In addition to the stream of consciousness and word clouds, Fountain provides flashbacks to round out Billy's character.

We find out that Billy might not have even joined the military voluntarily. The reader re-experiences his many moral challenges and choices, and Fountain manages to convey the unfamiliar situation of a teenager who survived frontline battles while still being unsure if he had adequate alternatives besides enlisting. Furthermore, Fountain digs up emotions merely hidden underneath layers of stereotypical masculinity. Lacking role models in his father and community, Billy looks up to his fallen supervisor, the NCO "Shroom," who shared not only advice, but also his final moments with Billy.

Fountain satirizes themes of masculinity and femininity in other moments too. He provocatively reduces manhood to muscles and materialism while minimizing womanhood to sexual temptations. Billy and the other soldiers objectify every female in the novel, infusing the war-hero-trope with the thirsty testosterone of a sexually deprived teenager. Additionally, Fountain critiques America's second biggest source of pride (next to its military): football. When Billy sees the football players' excessive protective equipment, he reasons: "They are among the best-cared for creatures in the history of the planet." So why not "send them just as they are at this moment, well rested, suited up, psyched for brutal combat?" "Send the entire NFL!" he shouts—"Mere bombs and bullets bounce off their bones of steel. Submit, lest our awesome NFL show you straight to the flaming gates of hell." Obviously, Billy, a soldier who has fought for life and death rather than for a championship, does not want autographs.

The author creates a tornado of national pride, suppressed emotions, consumerism, and trauma, and leaves the reader both speechless and yet also asking, "how should we treat veterans?" This, in addition to the jumps from reality to flashback and Billy's constant hangover, makes *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* a stressful read. Fountain provides long build-ups to multiple dramatic turning points, including the movie deal, the return to war, the need for intimacy and the

official “Halftime Show” climax. As a reader, I constantly hoped for success while suspecting failure. Eventually, I began to question society as a whole. I asked myself, if this is true, if society does use solidarity to hide self-absorption, what’s the point of this book? Why put ourselves through this? But Ben Fountain assists the reader at the right moment. He leads us through Billy’s twisted experiences, making sure we stay with the novel, understand its message, and take heart from the experience. Toward the end, Fountain has Billy observe that “his reality is their reality’s bitch.” Those words kicked in like the Advil Billy never got. They made me rethink the fake, oversaturated, and questionable life America and maybe even I call reality, what Fountain describes in another work as the “Fantasy Industrial Complex.”

This book is a stressful one. But this is exactly what makes Billy Lynn a page turner. We bond with Billy faster. His thoughts and feelings stick with us after turning the last page. A worthwhile read, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* changes our perspective of the world, which is what, in my opinion, a war novel should do.

**New Essay by Joshua P.F.:
Bombs in the Trash**



It was a relatively clear and cool night in the spring of 2008 on our fortified U.S. compound, Camp David, which was co-located on the property of the Najaf Technical University at the southern end of Najaf, Iraq. I was smoking hookah and watching Arabic TV with our local Iraqi guards, something I did nightly, when my Captain, a West Point grad, sheepishly poked his head in the door and asked if we could talk. Of course, I said, then passed the hookah's hose to the Iraqi next to me, ensuring the tip was pointed back toward me so not to give offense (passing the phallic hose's tip facing outward is considered vulgar). I rose, then walked to the door.

My Captain, a tall, thin, dirty blond in his late 20s, was in uniform: combat boots, ACU bottoms, and a military-issue fleece top; I, on the other hand, was wearing my usual ensemble: Vibram-soled Merrell hiking boots, Dickies work pants (a California staple of '90s skate culture), plaid snap-button shirt, and a navy-blue nylon windbreaker.

"What's up, Sir?" I asked.

He scanned the room pensively. There were no other Americans around, just the two of us, and our non-English-speaking guards inquisitively throwing casual glances away from the TV toward our conversation.

“Soooo...” he began to say. “I’ve heard you take little trips outside the wire in civilian clothes...”

I looked at him, trying to keep my expression neutral. The accusation, though true, was quite salacious. U.S. Military personnel in Iraq, even Special Forces like he and I, were strictly confined to the guarded installations, Military Camps and FOBs, and only left under direct orders to conduct a mission or move to another installation. When leaving “the wire,” soldiers travelled in convoys of heavily armored military vehicles with guns big and small, medical supplies, commo gear, and anything else needed for a prolonged fight. No soldier would want to venture out alone as a vulnerable civilian—logically it didn’t make sense.

“...if you happen to be out tonight, do you mind checking to make sure the MSR is clear?”

Clear, I thought to myself. What does he mean by clear? I asked. The Captain explained his concern that there might be something hidden in the roadside trash (sporadic piles of trash line every major road in Iraq) on the MSR (Main Supply Route) in front of our compound. Apparently, he’d read some intelligence cable claiming terrorists were threatening to disrupt U.S. Army convoys in the region with IEDs, and he was apprehensive about his resupply run the following day. This didn’t surprise me. I’d seen Special Forces officers refuse to get out of armor-plated trucks during a mission, fearing stray bullets. I’d known Special Forces commanders who reject orders of battle that position them at the head of a convoy, fearing roadside bombs that often target the first truck.

I reiterated his request in more direct language: “So you want

me to go outside the wire in civilian clothes and dig through trash piles looking for bombs?"

His response: "Basically, yes, if you're out already."

I asked again. Maybe he was tired and didn't understand the ramifications of his request. He wasn't suggesting an official military mission with bomb detection technology and protection gear; he was proposing that I go out, unsanctioned and unprotected, into what was technically a war zone, risking my personal safety to ensure his. What if something happened, like if I was kidnapped or blown up? Surely this would get him in trouble, maybe even court martialed. He was such a straight arrow, a by-the-book kind of guy. Why would he risk this?

Was he really that scared?

Was he a coward endangering someone else for his own protection?

But in my Captain's defense this wasn't an order, like how they say in movies "that's an order!" It was more like a suggestion, and I felt free to decline his request (although consent becomes fuzzy when there's an asymmetry of power: he a captain and I a sergeant). Actually, I think he was asking me for a favor, that's probably the best way to describe it. And that surprised me more than anything.

He and I'd had a rocky relationship up to that point. To be honest, I've had a rocky relationship with authority my entire life. This came up in my psychological evaluation during Special Forces selection, and I was almost kicked out over it. Fortunately, they let me pass with the excuse that I was young and would therefore age out of my rebellion, which I don't think ever happened. So I don't think my Captain knew what to do with me. I, and a few others on the team, often did things without asking his official permission and ended up begging for his forgiveness after. I never hesitated to do what I thought was right. He hated that, but he needed me. I was one

of the more senior members of the team, and I ran all of the HUMINT (human intelligence) operations.

So maybe this favor was a proverbial olive branch, a way for me to get back into his good graces. Or maybe it was the other way around, maybe he felt like a disrespected outsider and wanted to be included in our *extracurricular* activities. Maybe he wanted my respect? It was no secret that I thought of him as weak and ineffectual. That's how we were taught to think of officers; and most I'd encountered (but not all) lived up to those expectations.

*

To add to the confusion that night, I think I'd been drinking with our Iraqi guards. Technically, U.S. soldiers in Iraq weren't allowed to drink alcohol, but I and a few others on my team were released from General Order No. 1 so we could drink during meetings with intelligence sources. Of course we abused the privilege. I'll confess that once or twice my team (minus the Captain) got drunk and then went out looking for a fight.

Anyway, I gave my Captain one last chance to retract his request.

But like a good officer, he stayed the course: "Let me know if you find anything!"

Dumbfounded, I went to get Jim, our Senior Weapons Sergeant and my partner in crime. Jim is an interesting guy, physically imposing, sort of a redneck, and up for anything; he definitely fit the stereotype of an SF dude. And he's one of the most kind and loyal people I've ever known, though we did have some heated arguments.

"What the fuck?" Jim asked. "Is he serious?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"This is fucking ridiculous."

“What isn’t?”

“He’s such a fucking pussy...”

Jim and I continued to discuss the bizarre tasking. We couldn’t deny his accusation: in the past few months, Jim and I, along with an interpreter, had on several occasions dressed up like locals and quietly snuck off our compound. Sometimes it was to meet an intelligence source, or attempt to recruit a new source, and sometimes it was just for fun, like to go to a restaurant or sightsee. There weren’t many places in Iraq where U.S. soldiers could get away with this sort of thing in 2008, especially in southern Iraq, but Najaf was a relatively peaceful city because of all the Shia holy sites that brought over a million tourists every year, mostly from Iran. As long as we kept our mouths shut and dressed like locals, people would hopefully assume we were light-skinned Iranians on holiday.

So it was far from unreasonable for Jim and I to accept our Captain’s secret mission. We were frankly bored in Iraq, and we’d do almost anything, no matter how dangerous, to get the wartime experiences our egos craved—that’s why we joined Special Forces. Despite the military’s emphases on rules, structure, and hierarchy, many soldiers (especially in Special Forces) flagrantly break those rules with the excuse of “making mission,” as we called it, with little to no thought of the repercussions. This, at least in our minds, seemed heroic. So how could we refuse our commanding officer’s tacit permission to break the rules, knowing there was a chance we’d uncover IEDs and potentially save American lives?

“At the very least,” I told Jim, “this will make for a funny story later.”

“Yeah, if nothing fucking happens.”

“Right...” I said looking at Jim. I could tell he didn’t particularly want to go, but we’d spent so much time talking

shit about others on our team, like the Captain, how they were weak, how they were pussies, that I think we both felt saying “no” would have made us hypocrites, and potentially cowards. My pride couldn’t handle that.

Jim looked at me. He wasn’t going to back down if I was in.

“Let’s just do it,” I said.

“Fine.”



Jim and I decided not to bring an interpreter on our trash-digging escapade since we weren’t expecting to meet anyone that night. But we did bring one of our local Iraqi dogs, Willy. Willy had an athletic, medium build, droopy sad eyes, and a burnt orange and white coat. We thought he’d happily dig through trash piles looking for uneaten food and expose any explosive devices. We loved that dog and we’d hate to see anything happen to him, but if someone was going to get blown up that night, better him than us.

Jim and I chose to drive our newly acquired covert POV (Privately Owned Vehicle), a white Toyota 4-Runner with ballistic glass, steel-reinforced doors, and armored seats. Wearing civilian clothes, we grabbed our body armor, Glocks, M4s, bugout bags, and the dog, then jumped into the SUV. We exited our compound through the main gate onto a side road. It was after midnight and the Iraqi gate guards gave us funny looks; I can't imagine what they thought (there were all sorts of rumors swirling around about our activities in Iraq, like that we were putting sharks in the aqueducts to eat children). We drove a few hundred meters down the main road, and then we stopped at our first large pile of trash. The houses on that MSR were set back pretty far back from the road, so there was plenty of room for us to park in the dirt. And lots of trash.

At the first pile, we opened the car door and shoed Willy out. Of course, the scaredy-cat looked at us, then looked at the open door, then whimpered. We tried to pull him out, then we tried to push him out, but Willy absolutely refused to exit the vehicle. I think he was afraid we'd leave him out there, outside of our cozy compound. Iraqi dogs have a harsh life in the unforgiving desert, but live in near luxury on U.S. military camps (I bet the Iraqi dogs think we invaded the country just for them. And who knows, maybe we did).

So, Jim and I had to search the trash ourselves. Our first instinct was to take turns; one would stay inside the protective vehicle while the other checked a trash pile, and then we'd switch. But neither of us could stomach the thought of watching the other get blown up while cowering in the truck, survivor's guilt and all. So we got out together. Willy still stayed in the truck though. I think he was the only one that night thinking clearly.

We carefully approached our first pile of trash. Jim extended the muzzle-end of his rifle into the pile and carefully turned over several pieces of trash. I followed suit. Willy watched suspiciously. Nothing, thank *Allah*.

We searched through a few more piles, fortunately still nothing. Then we moved farther down the road, still nothing. Just as we were about to give up for the night, Jim and I looked up to see lights flashing in the distance. We were on a main road next to a suburban area a couple miles south of downtown Najaf, and not surprisingly, we attracted the attention of local residents who probably assumed we were actually planting IEDs, not looking for them, and called the police. So just when we thought this night couldn't get any weirder, Jim and I looked at each other.

"We're about to get arrested, in Iraq."

As we watched the lights approach, I tried to imagine what the police would think, rolling up on two bearded, heavily armed white guys in western garb rummaging through piles of trash after midnight.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" Jim asked.

"Uh, I don't know... but we may know these guys."

The cops arrived, a pickup truck loaded with Iraqi police officers brandishing AK-47s. We lifted our hands to present a non-threatening posture, and I offered the traditional greeting, "*salaam a'layk.*" Then I quickly told them we were American soldiers stationed in Najaf: "*Ihna Amreekan, saakin gareeb minna.*" Then I asked, in more broken Arabic, what police station they were from. Their response: the station about a mile southeast of the city limit. This confirmed my suspicions. We did know these guys, unfortunately.

*

A few weeks prior, our SF team in armor-plated, turret-mounted-.50-Cal Humvees descended upon the Iraqi police station at the southern end of Najaf, about a mile east of Camp David, in a "show of force" unsanctioned by our Captain.

We were pissed.

It was common practice for police in Iraq to arrest someone on fictitious charges and extort money from his family for release; the Iraqi police were considered quite corrupt by the general population. But unfortunately for this particular cohort of extorting police officers, their hostage was one of our coalition partners, a soldier from the Iraq Army unit located on the northern end of Najaf. This unit came to Camp David several days a week for training, and we conducted joint combat operations together. So we were pretty close with these guys.

The kidnapped soldier lived in the neighborhood next to Camp David, and after he was arrested, his wife and a few fellow Iraqi soldiers quickly rushed to our compound to inform us. At this point in the deployment, we were sick and tired of watching our collaborators get exploited and sometimes slaughtered while we stood idly by, usually waiting for bureaucrats to sanction intervention. So this time, before any military officers could debate the appropriate course of action, or more likely just schedule a meeting to discuss who'd be in charge (who'd get to take credit), we decided to grab our guns, pile into our military vehicles, and rush to the Iraqi police station to conduct an impromptu rescue operation.

Our Captain wasn't consulted.

We pulled up to the police station aggressively, jumping the curb and nearly ramming one of the buildings. We trained our .50 Cals on blind corners and quickly exited the vehicles. We swiftly disarmed each cop we encountered as we made our way to the headquarters building. We kicked in the door, pushed everyone up against walls, and demanded to speak with the person in charge. He timidly revealed himself, a short pudgy dark-skinned man.

We yelled. We bullied. We demanded. And out-gunned, the police chief relented (thank *Allah* this went as well as it did).

We got our guy back and tucked him into one of our gun trucks. Then we thought it'd be funny to disarm the Iraqi cops, so we grabbed all their heavy weapons, about 4 "BKCs" (Russian PKM machine guns) and a few AKs, and brought everything back to our compound. We laughed all the way home.

But our Captain didn't find it funny when several Iraqi police officials showed up at Camp David an hour later complaining about what we'd done and demanding their weapons back. Our Captain came undone, red-faced and nearly hyperventilating, yelling at us:

"What the fuck were you thinking!" He kept repeating, almost to himself.

Jim and I looked at him but didn't respond. The Captain was in no mood to hear our excuses, or argue. He was angry, yes, maybe uncontrollably angry, but I think he was also deeply embarrassed. And afraid. Our Captain was afraid of injury and death, much more so than Jim and I were, we already knew that, but I think he was also afraid of something else, maybe his biggest fear: ruining his military career. This was the first time he'd personally had to face our action's consequence, and I suspect he feared word might get back to his (and our) superiors. We'd get a slap on the wrist and probably a chuckle, but since he was technically in charge, he'd surely be scapegoated for our actions.

"You better give the fucking guns back!" he continued.

Jim and I still didn't respond. Then we quickly walked away before our discomfited Captain realized we weren't taking him, or this threat to his career, seriously—in our minds, the only thing to fear was cowardice. We knew we'd pushed him over the edge, but that just made the situation even funnier for us. We laughed awkwardly as we weighed our options. But we didn't

have much of a choice. So begrudgingly, we gave the guns back.

I wondered if the Captain would ever speak directly to me again. He did of course: a few weeks later he tasked me with a secret mission to dig through trash looking for bombs.

*

So needless to say, Jim and I were a little apprehensive when a truck full of these same Iraqi police, with their weapons, emerged out of the darkness. This time we were the ones outgunned.

Gesturing to us and the surrounding area, one of the cops asked what we were doing: "*Shitsawi hun?*"

Willy could be seen through the windshield peeking over the passenger seat.

"*Walla inshoof a'la mutafegiraat* [we're looking for bombs]," I said. I expected a laugh, I thought the situation was pretty funny; but they just stared. I continued to explain, or at least attempted to explain, that our commander heard there might be an IED on this road and we were searching for it. I asked if they'd seen anything: "*itshoof walla ishi?*"

"*Lah,*" was the curt response; they showed no interest in continuing our conversation. I could tell they were confused, maybe by my shoddy Arabic, and they must have thought we were complete idiots (which we were of course). Then without offering to help, they abruptly left us there on the road. "*Bishoofak ba'adayn,*" see you later fellas.

Jim and I left too.

On the ride back, Willy was finally at ease.



Back at Camp David, Willy happily bounced out of the truck. I think he was ready to call it a night and snuggle into his warm bed (he slept with one of the interpreters).

“Now he finally gets out of the truck,” I said to Jim.

“Fucking pussy,” Jim said with his usual levity, and a dip in his lip. Then he spat on the ground.

Willy scampered into the interpreters’ building. He’d survived another day of our crazy war. And he’d have to survive many more days to come. We’d all soon go home, back to the U.S. to get on with our lives and military careers, but Willy would stay. Deployment after deployment, SF team after SF team, Willy would have to find a way to survive. We didn’t understand that. We never thought about the long-term consequences of our actions.

“Let’s go tell the Captain,” I said.

We found him waiting outside our team room in a small courtyard, looking up at the stars. "What did you find?" he asked.

"Nothing, Sir."

"Good," he responded casually, and went back inside.

And that was that.

*

About a decade after I left the military, I saw my Captain in the dining facility of a compound belonging to one of the most elite units in the Special Operations arsenal. I had since gone back to school to study physics, graduated with an engineering degree, and was now hawking high-tech solutions and methodologies to problems the U.S. government wasn't yet facing. Jim had retired after a long and successful career in the Army, and was now building his redneck dream home in the hills of rural Tennessee. And there was my former Captain, who was probably a Lieutenant Colonel or even Colonel by now, standing near the salad bar.

I hadn't seen him since leaving Iraq in 2008, but he looked about the same, maybe a little older and a little stockier. I was the opposite, about 30 pounds lighter from sporadic bouts of fad dieting. We were both in civilian clothes, but I could tell he was still "in the fight": probably hunting the next Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Well, not hunting himself. I'm sure he still sent enlisted soldiers to do the fighting. But even then, I envied these soldiers, the simplicity of their mission. I still imagined their experiences capturing and/or killing HVTs (High Value Targets) most closely aligned with my idealization of the heroic military life. In contrast, my experiences digging in trash looking for bombs felt meaninglessly reckless.

When I first saw the Captain, I reflexively smirked. Look who

it is, I said to myself conceitedly as chills ran up and down my spine. But how could he be here, amongst the bravest of the brave? The best of the best? How could they not see him like I did, as a coward who sent others into harm's way for his own protection and professional advancement? I knew in that moment, even after ten years, I still wanted to feel superior to my Captain. I still wanted to see him as the career-obsessed coward, and me, in opposition to him, the self-sacrificing soldier willing to risk everything, break any rule, to do what was right, what I thought was right.

But I also knew I was wrong. There's nothing right in war. My smirk had always been a defense mechanism hiding something deeper. I felt it almost immediately. It welled up in my stomach, my mouth relaxed, my countenance dropped. In Iraq, I just wanted the experiences of war—to feel what it felt like to be a hero—with wanton disregard for any of the long-term consequences suffered by the Iraqi people. But now, seeing my Captain, who after ten years had reached the pinnacle of the "heroic" military system I'd envied, I could no longer pretend. My actions overseas, disrupting a country in which I didn't belong, weren't brave. They were an attempt to live out a juvenile fantasy. Thinking my Captain a coward was just an excuse to justify this selfish pursuit.

I took a step in my Captain's direction. There was one thing left to do, the right thing. I needed to say, "I'm sorry." I was sorry for how I treated him. I was sorry for who I pretended to be. I was sorry for almost everything I did in Iraq. But for some reason, I hesitated, and he walked out of the room.

I guess that makes me a coward too.

