Our Personal Community by Curtis J. Graham

It was in the news. On a bright summer day in Helmand Province, Lance Corporal Wickie did his duty and killed an insurgent. A suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into the berm of Outpost Shir Ghazay. Wickie returned fire, then applied a tourniquet to someone's wounded leg. He earned a Combat Action Ribbon, a Commendation Medal, and a Valor Device. He was promoted to Corporal, then Sergeant, and he reenlisted.

Before we deployed, Wickie told me he was getting out as soon as possible, that his contract couldn't expire fast enough. He would eat the apple, and fuck the Corps.

I first met Wickie at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I was a

Private First Class with a single chevron on my shoulder. I had orders to report to an office inside a warehouse, and the Corporals told Wickie to show me around. Wickie was small, with a round head and big brown eyes, like someone's kid brother. He brought me to a wall locker covered in dents and bootprints. He opened the door and pulled out a plastic cowboy hat. "Check out this bad boy," he said. He dusted it off affectionately and rapped it with his knuckles. "OSHA approved."

Outside, Wickie led me to the far corner of the lot, where rusty forklifts were parked in a row. He began to tell me about his dad. "Yeah, he was Secret Service for a while, before he got contracted for Blackwater. You know, spec ops. Assassin shit." He pulled out a camouflage wallet and opened it with a rip. He handed me a black business card with a longhorn skull in the center. It said, *Robert P. Wickie, Blackwater Operative*, with a phone and fax number.

"There's no address," I said. "And why is there a fax number?" The card felt like printer paper.

"Obviously, ain't no address," he said, and took the card from me. He stuffed it into his wallet. "Works where he wants, when he wants, my old man."

"How much does he make, doing that?" I said.

He took a while to answer, like he was making something up. Then he told me twenty thousand a week. "Bull crap," I said.

Wickie sucked his finger and felt the wind. The sun was setting. "'Bout that time," he said. We walked to the formation for dismissal, and Wickie realized he'd left his blouse out back. He was wearing a green t-shirt with a toothpaste stain shaped like a lollipop. The Corporals made him stand in his own formation for a while, facing a brick wall.

I’d been in Afghanistan three months, on an outpost called Shukvani. The base was situated in a depression surrounded by hilltops. The day Wickie arrived, he threw rocks at the windshield of the forklift I was driving and shattered it in three places. The Sergeant Major sent him away, to Outpost Shir Ghazay.

In the early months, I photographed things. I had a mattress in a metal bunk frame, a luxury, and I took a picture of it. The previous occupants had left us a mini fridge, a black loveseat filled with knife punctures, and a small TV. I took a picture of the sun setting behind an abutment, helicopters landing at night. A frozen steak grilling on wire mesh over burnt wood scraps. I uploaded the images to my Facebook profile.

One night, a short burst of gunfire woke me up. The noise echoed around the base, then stopped. Everything was quiet. I climbed out of bed and pulled on my flak jacket and helmet. The radio crackled with chatter. “Everyone to the berm, now,” said the voice of the Sergeant Major.

Outside, dust blew in the breeze. The ground was pale blue with moonlight. We sprinted across the packed gravel of the helicopter pads. I imagined I might shoot and kill someone tonight, then I stopped imagining. I racked my bolt while I ran, chambering a round. I reached the berm and lay against the baked earth. I caught my breath. Nearby, I heard a radio. Someone spoke.

They told us that a small convoy operated by the Afghan National Army, our allies, had parked just outside the base. They were on their way to another part of the desert and needed to pass through. They had no radios, so they fired their AK-47s into the air to get our attention. We were not in danger.

I walked alone across the crushed stone, back to the tent. I lay awake on my mattress, and felt nauseated from unspent adrenaline. I listened to mice as they ran around the tent, invisible, chewing holes in things and attacking one another over food scraps. Their tiny screams. I awoke when the sun shone through a rip in the canvas by my eye. The next day, I went to the computer tent and logged into Facebook. I checked my album titled *Afghan 2013* for likes. People had commented on my pictures of our small television, the mattress, the single steak. Someone wrote, "Wow, really roughing it over there." I deleted each of the pictures, then the album entirely.

A month passed before the big explosion happened. It felt nearby and sudden. It was like a punch of breeze, a gentle concussion. Across the desert, at this moment, Wickie was becoming a hero.

When the deployment came to an end, we kicked the sand from our boots and flew home in cargo planes. They searched every other bag for rocks and vials of moon dust. "Leave the country how you found it," they told us.

Back at Camp Lejeune, I found Wickie sitting in a pickup truck outside the warehouse. He'd used his deployment cash to buy a black Chevy with four rear tires. We got talking about Shir Ghazay. "No one believes me, man." He reached up and slammed the truck door.

I'd read the official report on the Division website, and I'd heard from others who were there. Private Cody talked about how Wickie just shucked a bunch of rounds from his magazine so that later, it would look like he'd returned fire. Rucker said he saw Wickie crouching beneath a truck, covering his ears during the firefight. Wickie stood in front of me and twisted his toe in the dirt. He told me that, last week, he'd been eating a sandwich at Chick-Fil-A when someone dropped a tray of dishes. He ducked beneath the table and barricaded himself with chairs. People laughed at him, he said.

I’d been out of the Marines for six months. I grew my hair long and wore flannel shirts. I was in college studying literature, and I’d recently signed up for a course in war poetry. On my way to classes, I walked past the campus veteran’s lounge. It was an oversized closet with a computer desk and a silver mini-fridge with Capri Suns for the veterans to drink. The students inside laughed often. I never went inside. I didn’t feel like one of them. Most of them wore combat boots with blue jeans, t-shirts from the infantry units they’d been in. Their hoodies were smattered with graphics of skulls smoking cigarettes. Aces of spades, fanged dogs. They probably had good stories, and I couldn’t think of any of my own.

In the poetry classroom, students took turns reading stanzas from Brian Turner’s “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center.” The poem was about a veteran walking through aisles and seeing weaponry in household items. The students sat in a circle, reading aloud. They were careful to pause when appropriate, to read with continuity from one line to the next. In the poem, a

box tips over, and nails trickle out like shell casings from a machine gun. Paint spills and expands like a puddle of blood.

A student with a combover read a stanza about dead soldiers lying on the conveyor belt at the cash register. I listened to the description of the body. A year ago, I had been standing in a medical tent watching an Afghan civilian dying. He had fainted from blood loss. He was naked, with a catheter inserted. His toes were all crossed over themselves, and he had gashes that peeled and showed the muscle beneath. I watched the Navy Corpsmen bustle around, wearing tied-on paper scrubs over their cammies. At the far end of the tent, a little girl lay on a plywood table. She would soon have her legs removed. She would live. On the wall were x-rays of her femurs and pelvis. I saw the faint gray silhouette of her flesh on the outside, cracked white bone on the inside. She had stepped on a doormat bomb the day before. The man in the bed would die after amputation. The next day, I would drive a forklift and carry a cardboard box containing his legs, and those of the little girl, to the pit where they would be burned. I'd drop them off, and I'd smell them burning as I drove away.

In the poem, none of the shoppers see what the narrator sees. I set my photocopied page on the table because my hand was shaking. I looked around the room and was conscious of my heart beating in my ears. The students kept reading and reading. I grabbed my bag and left the classroom before it was my turn.

I walked down the hallway, touching the wall at intervals. It was cool beneath my fingertips. Billboard flyers fluttered as I walked past them, promoting frisbee tournaments and drag concerts. In the bathroom, I dry heaved. I flushed the toilet with my foot and waited in the hallway for the hour to end.

My next class was American Education. I arrived early. There were two veterans in this class, and they always came in

together. The guy was bald and in his late thirties. He wore cargo pants and brown shoes. The girl wore a pink sweater that looked like shag. They didn't fit in with anyone but each other. They seemed to like it that way.

Today, we were giving presentations about our Personal Community. The guy went first, and he talked about the Army. He had a deep, loud voice. He shook a little, being at the front of the classroom. He spoke in short bursts, like a Sergeant addressing a group of young soldiers. He had to project confidence, because of his rank. He clicked through a slideshow of himself in various states of undress, posing with weaponry outside plywood buildings. The class clapped for him when he finished talking about the camaraderie he knew in Iraq.

The class was mostly queer and transgender students studying music education. The next person to speak was Skye with the green and black hair, the pierced lower lip. She spoke about her friend who leapt to his death from a parking garage. Another friend had opened the passenger door of Skye's car and rolled onto the freeway while she was driving. The people who understand Skye's post-traumatic stress, she said, are her Personal Community. Someone turned on the lights, and the classroom erupted with applause.

I stood next. I kept mine generic—my family, my friends. There was no camouflage in my slideshow pictures. I clicked through the photos as I talked. A camping trip. My uncle's '78 Nova. I imagined it wouldn't take much to make them think I was someone, a person of valor. I'd just have to show the right pictures, ones with sand and smoke in them. I could tell them the story of how Wickie became a hero. I could talk about the sound and the blood, and the way it felt afterwards. I could be anybody. I could be Wickie. It wouldn't have mattered what I told them, really. They would still applaud for me. They might even call me a hero.

I walked down the hall after class and passed the lounge. Someone had just told a joke, and there was an explosion of laughter. I thought about leaning in and knocking on the door. I thought about stepping over the threshold, pulling up a chair. Maybe they'd tell the joke again. Maybe I could hear it, too.