

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered off the straight path.

How hard it is to tell what it was like,
This wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),

A bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.
But if I would show the good that came of it
I must talk about things other than good.

All hope abandon ye who enter here.

—*Dante Alighieri*

FOYER TO HELL

They say war is hell. But I say it ain't. War is the foyer to hell. The journey home from war is the threshold between a killing order and a peaceful chaos, between the rational and the distorted. Those few hours on the plane are the last of a crystalline euphoria a soldier will know before he steps across the river for good. It was in the passage through Anchorage that I believed I was coming home. But just like war ain't hell, home ain't a point on the map—it's a point of view; it's an attitude, and the origin of all my points had broken from the mainland. I had no anchorage anymore. My attitude was like a cooked egg—permanently altered. My basis was adrift. I had completed the unmaking of myself. I just didn't know it yet. From the very instant my foot touched the American tarmac, I began my descent.

When all this talk of war was just academic back in 2003, I mulled it over with a friend of mine down on the Depot (The Marine Corps Recruit Depot—where I was stationed during 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq). I said to my friend, “What do you think about all this pre-emption business?”

And he said, “Man, don't sweat that shit. That's a question for the politicians. That's their show. You and me? We get paid to lead Marines and win battles. So when our time comes, that's what we'll do.” Then he said, “Besides, Saddam Hussein was a bad egg. He needed to go.”

Now I'm a natural cynic, not one to take anyone's word on anything. So I harbored some doubts, but then three things came to mind. The first was an old Gunny who used to work with me. I asked him one day how he felt about going to war.

He said to me, “My mama asked me that same question. She said, ‘You been collecting a check from the man for sixteen years, and all that time you been telling him that if ever there's a war, you gonna go. Now what are you gonna do when a war finally does come along? You gonna make good on that word? Or are you gonna turn your back on him with that pocket full of jack you got?’” Gunny said, “I been paid. Now I gotta go.” And I knew just what he meant because I'd been paid too.

The second thing that came to mind is something I always told myself. I always said that war was a reality. The politicians might be corrupt. The causes might be bullshit. But the wars aren't going away. And so long as there are wars, there are going to be young Marines sent off to die in them, and as long as that's the case, they're going to need someone to lead them home. So that's what I aimed to do. That was my cause.

The last thing wasn't really a thought. It wasn't a saying or a point of view. It was more like a condition or a state of mind. I called it lust—a lust for war.

It wasn't an interest in the political particulars of this war or that war, just a craving for the battle itself. I was a career Marine infantryman. I was out there training for combat, training for years, training to kill.

How long can you pretend to gouge eyeballs before you can't wait to do it for real—to see the thing dangling from its socket? How many times can you run the rounded edge of a bayonet across a man's throat before you crave the sound of a desperate gasp that comes only from the other side of that blade? How many shots down range can you send into dummies before you find yourself wishing the dummies would bleed? How many stories about fucking Nam can you hear before you go looking for your own war, before you start needing to live the stories that someone else can revere?

William James said, "Modern man inherits all the innate pugnacity and all the love of glory of his ancestors. Showing war's irrationality and horror is of no effect on him. The horrors make the fascination." And I know, if I am representative of the modern man, this is true. I have certainly owned my share of the fascination.

On the other hand, Douglas MacArthur asserted that, "The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war." Well, I'm not so sure about that, because I find more resonance in the words of William James. For as long as I have been a soldier—that is, a man who might suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars should my country enter war—I have always loved, really cherished, the novels, and the films, and the epics of war. The more brutal and tragic they have been, the more stark, the more realistic, the more heartbreaking, the more anti-war, the more I have loved them, and the more I prayed for my own war.

After a decade in the Corps, my prayers were finally answered. First it was 9/11, then al Qaeda, and then it was Saddam Hussein and Weapons of Mass Destruction. As far as I was concerned, that was enough. Nobody had to ask me twice. I saw the writing on the wall—the big letters H-E-L-L—just as clearly as I saw the letters spray-painted across that jersey barrier at the border, I-R-A-Q. The sign said, "Beware." I knew the deal, and I knew the way home. But when the beasts that lurk inside a warrior start to howl, there are no real choices. And there is only one path to take. We all knew that. Going to war wasn't an option, anymore than coming home was. I called them "orders" when the plan started to stray, but they never ordered me to do any damn thing my heart wasn't yearning for. So I strapped it on, locked and loaded, and I went.

The foyer was hot as hell, so I started thinking of it as hell. Then a couple of contractors—mercenaries really—were burned and dangled upside down from a bridge in Fallujah above a cheering crowd of Iraqis. That's when I knew

this thing must be hell. And shit, that's what everybody'd always called it back home. But where was the misery? For a place called hell, we seemed to be in short supply. I'm not talking about discomfort here. There was plenty of that. We shed all the blood and sweat we could ever hope to and still survive. We had the hunger going on, and the filth, and the fatigue. We had the red spackled bodies, the severed limbs, the guts and the gore. We had all that.

And there was no dearth of longing for home either. The Internet cafés and phone centers brandished lines of troops three and four hours long. Guys bought contraband porn and crystal meth from Iraqi children and slipped into their private galaxies whenever a couple of extra minutes turned up. So yeah, it had kind of a hellish hue about it. But the misery—the kind of misery where a guy wants to peel back the skin on his own face just so he doesn't have to look at it in the mirror anymore, the kind of misery where a bullet hole in the head seems like a logical means of egress from all those hairy dreams—that kind of misery was nowhere to be found. War wasn't that bad.

In fact, the ironies of war so humorously recalled, like Marines surrendering their cuticle scissors while boarding the plane for Iraq with rifles and machine-guns slung over their shoulders, seem mostly to originate from *outside* the boundaries of the battle itself. Irony tends to plague those wars especially rife with political ambiguity. That set the stage in Iraq for some pretty ironic situations.

One month in theater (April of '04), and we were asked to leave our area of operations where we'd been getting shelled and IED'd like beetles in a jar to participate in the attack on Fallujah. The operation would be ten times more dangerous than the tedious missions we'd been doing. The casualties would be sky-high. Actually, when you're that close to a fight—a big fight, one where a lot of guys are going to get killed—the word "casualties" just doesn't work anymore. It doesn't sound right. Dead. Burned. Fraggged. Ripped to fucking shreds. Those are words that better capture the moment. And yet, we were never happier. And when the siege was lifted and the attack called off, we were never more devastated.

Where in hell was the misery? When the aircraft that carried us from Iraq to the U.S. finally pulled to a stop at Cherry Point, NC, and the flight attendant mumbled over the PA, "Welcome home," I leaned back and smiled to myself. "No more of that fucking heat." But I was almost immediately stunned as I stepped out onto the flight line and felt that Carolina humidity slap me in my smug face.

Nobody was looking for misery. We were scanning the crowds of relieved parents, and cheering girlfriends, and crying wives with four and five screaming kids in tow. We were searching the mob for our own loved ones. I didn't an-

anticipate that drop of sweat trickling into my eye. I didn't see the burn coming. But it came nevertheless. It was the first burn we'd feel as we traipsed blithely into the valley of the aftermath. Our bodies had been delivered from war, but our minds lingered on the battlefield. The intensity, the quick-release on our adrenaline, was hidden behind dull eyes and broad smiles. Nobody knew what was coming. Nobody wanted to know. The Marines and the civilians collided into a barrage of hugs and kisses. The civilians were the same as they always were, but the Marines they hugged and kissed were not the men they had once known. The consciousness of every man in that unit had been reconfigured. Our identities were altered.

I saw my wife and my boys waiting for me, and a few tears welled up and washed away the pain—for a while. The sight of her was asphyxiating. I can't put words to it without some damned cliché. I was choking on relief, but all the while lacking any true understanding of where or who I was. For the moment, all that meant nothing to me. For the moment, I felt good. I thought I'd finally reached normal. But normal, I would soon discover, was out of reach indefinitely. Normal is war, and war ain't hell. War is the foyer to hell.

PAIN JUNKIE

"What do you think about this war?" people always ask me, almost as often as I ask myself. And I've stewed it in a crock pot of sleepless nights a thousand times over, and it always comes out the same—a crock pot of shitty stew. What is the war to me, and who am I to the war? How do I talk about this thing? And who is going to listen?

When I was a kid, I watched an ad for a set of Vietnam history books. A guy—a vet—came on and relayed his story about coming home. He said, "I got into a cab and told the driver, 'I just got back from Vietnam' and the driver said, 'So?'" After Iraq, I came home and got that same line, but instead of straight-up not giving a rat's ass, people would give me this glassy-eyed smile and say shit like, "Wow man."

So I got the picture real fast. If my story wasn't tragic, if it didn't make 'em cry, or if it didn't yank 'em to the edge of their seats, or get a big laugh, nobody wanted to hear it. They didn't want to hear the dry particulars. They wanted high-speed adventure and witty heroes who escaped death by the skins of their teeth and saved the day in the end.

Well, I'm not a hero and I don't have that kind of story to tell. But I thought: *I'm a writer goddamn it!* (I call myself a writer like a guy who drinks too much calls himself an alcoholic. It's more of a habit than a profession.) So I said to myself, I can come up with something. I mean shit, I just went through a war. There's got to be a tale to tell somewhere in all that carnage.

Men slaying men in war is nothing new. So what's my angle going to be? It's got to be sexy. It's got to have a hook. Otherwise it's not going to be worth jackshit. If only I was a poet and I had that gift. But I don't. I'm just a grunt who made a few observations that might be of some use to the folks back home.

My trouble was, when I got back home I couldn't get past the headlines. I was soaking up all the bad news like a pressure dressing. I wasn't sleeping, so I'd drive into the office at one or two in the morning and read articles until dawn. I had an addiction to the bad news. I craved all the death. I took hits of the bullshit that gushed from every pore in the media. But I didn't do it because it made me feel good, or even better. I did it because it deepened my pain, and I found that, ultimately, I like the pain. I was a junkie. I studied the doctrine, the history, the tactics—all of it to keep my mind in Iraq. The night watch would duck in with a curious look on his face and ask me, "What are you doing here at this hour?" And I'd answer casually, "Just reading up on the war." I was a rifle company commander, preparing a hundred and fifty Marines to go back to Iraq and fight, so getting ahead on my reading wasn't all that strange. It was normal, to him...and to me. Normal.

I was writing at the time, too. I was writing constantly, and I'd look over what I'd done and I'd congratulate myself, "This is some powerful shit." The trouble was, it was only powerful to me. To everyone else, it was just a downer. I was pissed because I didn't have any of those death-defying war stories. I got into a few scrapes, but not the cliffhanger stuff. Not the shit that sells. On the other hand, I got a pretty good look at the war in my job. In Iraq, I was the assistant operations officer for an infantry battalion, which meant I was there for the planning, and then I watched the plan unfold on the ground from above. It wasn't glamorous by military standards, but it was a good place to be to understand how we were fighting the war.

DIAGNOSIS: NORMAL

I'm hemmed into the night. My brain has come to prefer the darkness. I can't say with any certainty if this is a product of never sleeping—that is, if it's just a bad habit I've got to break—or if there's something else going on, like the systematic avoidance of those bloody dreams. I told the doc I wasn't sleeping when I got home, and he glanced casually from his desk and said, "That's normal. It'll pass."

Normal, he said. When I told him I was just about jumping out of my skin every time I heard a loud noise, he said that was normal, too. Normal, as in commonplace, as opposed to, say, pathological, like it would have been abnormal not to jump out of my skin. It's what they expected from me. They figured I was in good working order, I guess.

Then they blew off my rage with the same line. “Everybody’s got that,” they said. I wonder if they’d call me normal now, with all that I’ve got to say. Three years later, my heart was still pounding, I was still raging, and I still wasn’t sleeping. I was up, thinking about the war. I finally told myself it’s like a bad back or a trick knee; you just learn to live with it and you walk on. So as I’m walking on, night after night, when the darkness has fallen, and the rest of the world is silent, I go looking for my narrative.

The Marine Corps made a schizophrenic out of me, figuratively speaking. I used to have only one voice, one point of view. All right, so I’ve got a new perspective now. It happens. But it’s not like I just changed my mind. My mind changed. It split, two, and three, and four ways over. Now there are voices coming at me from all sides. There’s no coherence to them, and no clear distinction either. There’s the angry voice, and there’s the broken-hearted one. There is the tender me and the savage. And of course, there is the Marine. There will always be the Marine, standing tall inside me, speaking smartly about values and patriotism. Then there’s all the rest of me, the part of me that was left over when I left the Corps. He has no name, no identity, or credentials, or skills. He has no title or rank. He has no cause. He is just me in the wake of battle.

How could I have gotten it so wrong? How did I manage to evade those tough questions for so long? I signed an enlistment contract when I was seventeen years old. I went to war when I was thirty-three. That gave me sixteen years to think this shit over. I’d read a few books. It’s not like I didn’t know the deal. It’s not like I hadn’t heard about the grotesque deterioration of humanity on the battlefield. It’s not like I didn’t know that soldiers would be spent in war like loose change by powerful men. I knew. From the beginning, I knew.

My high school mandated that every student watch the movie *Gallipoli*, which might be among the more tragic of the tragic war movies. No doubt, they were trying to steer us away from the glamorous call to arms that lurked in our hallways donning dress blues and blazing medals. I loved that movie. I went back and watched it a dozen more times. I even bought it. I remember in the movie the makeshift sign at the deadly opening to the trench which read: “Abandon hope, beyond this point.” But I didn’t abandon hope, and I wasn’t repelled by war. I became infatuated with it. I had a love affair with tragedy.

And then I fell in love with the Corps. *Semper Fidelis*—that’s their motto—*Always Faithful*. For a kid coming from a broken home, that meant a hell of a lot. They could have said, “Always the first to go,” or “Always in the shit,” or “Always kicking ass” —though I’m not sure what that would have looked like in Latin. They could have come up with something like that, something bad-ass, something potent and for the ages.

But no. They chose, as the most crucial element of being a United States Marine: *Loyalty*. They said, above all, we’re never, never going to leave your ass behind. I was hooked...by that, and by their reputation for being the meanest, roughest, toughest, hardest motherfuckers in the world. That’s what I wanted. I wanted to be among those who said, “My loyalty dies only when I die.” And I wanted to be a hard motherfucker. The Marine Corps promised me both.

BRAIN DAMAGE

I grew up working at a truck tire joint in Boston. It was a tough spot, in the tough part of town. The guys used to say you didn’t work there—you served. And when you quit, or were fired, or hauled off to jail, deported, overdosed, or shot, your name would be commemorated on “The Wall.” There was no real wall. The Wall was made up in our minds, kind of a joke, but it was real in the sense that we’d experienced something that struck all of us as surreal.

It wasn’t war, but there were some commonalities beneath the surface. There was hierarchy, and exploitation, and manipulation. No question, there was all that. And there was desperation. There was suffering—especially when the cold months came around. There was racism. There was the clash of morality and immorality that left the shop ever-imbued with strife. There was the constant awareness of survival, and how close a man was to the edge of it when he worked there.

There was a lot of dark humor going around, the dark humor one picks up in dark places. And there was a bond too, like we were all in this shit together. There was a visceral feeling that life didn’t get any better than this, which is why we used to say, “Nobody ever works here just once.” We all tried our hand at quitting. But sooner or later, we all came crawling back. So above all, there was the dream of getting out. Everyone shared in that.

Sometimes I rode with a guy who called himself “Brain Damage” or “B.D.” for short. He got hit in the head with a piece of flying steel. The doctor told him the blow should have left him with brain damage, hence his new name. He drove an old, beat-up Ranchero, which he called his “Lincoln with a flatbed.” He stenciled onto his jacket BMFIC: Bad Mother Fucker in Charge. He shaved off the left side of his beard, and said to anyone in life who tried to tell him what to do, “You don’t sign my God damn paycheck!” Brain Damage would do hits of heroin before we’d go out on road jobs, and then he’d pull over on the way and ask passersby what time the ten o’clock train was leaving—just for laughs.

I don’t know. I think maybe the doctor got it wrong. Maybe he really did have brain damage. But I rode with him, and we had to talk about something. So I asked him one day, “How do you become a Marine?” I was fifteen or sixteen at the time. He said, “They only take football players—corn fed fuckers

with twenty inch necks. They'd never take you." That did it. If Brain Damage, of all people, said I couldn't make it, then I was damn sure going to make it. I was determined.

BUSTED INTO THE GRUNTS

It took some looking, but I finally found a recruiter's office and wandered in.

"How old are you, kid?" the recruiter asked me.

"Sixteen," I admitted.

He laughed me out the door and roared after me, "Come back in a year."

I did go back in a year—to the day. I reserved a deep suspicion for recruiters when I was in high school. I'm not sure who taught me to feel that way, but it stuck. So when I went back to the recruiter's office to sign up, I watched his every move with narrowed eyes, like he was playing a shell game.

I marched in and announced, "I wanna be a grunt, that's it."

And he said, "No problem."

But still my suspicion lingered. When I went down to the processing building in Boston to sign my enlistment contract, I packed my suspicion right along with me. The enlistment contract is similar in many ways to a mortgage agreement: a lot of pages, a lot of fine print, most of it describing the consequences should the undersigned default on his or her end of the bargain. These are the sections most people tended to gloss over. I didn't gloss. I scrutinized every line with my eyes two inches from the page, unconcerned by the long line of recruits behind me, all waiting impatiently for their turns to sign their lives away, or by the irritable Gunnery Sergeant sitting in front of me, growing more irritable every minute.

The Gunny finally blurted at me, "Just sign the fucking thing!"

But I was stubborn and determined, so I shook my head and kept right on reading. Then something caught my eye. It's been a few years now, but the words went something like this: A Marine may lose his guaranteed Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) if he becomes the subject of disciplinary action.

"What's this?" I tapped the page dubiously.

The Gunny pulled the contract toward him, looked at it for a second, and then looked back up at me. "What's your MOS?"

"Oh-three" I said with pride. 0300 is the numerical designation in the Marine Corps for infantry. I hadn't even gone to bootcamp yet, and already I was basking in the glamour of being a grunt.

The Gunny laughed, "You idiot!" He shoved the contract back at me. "Nobody gets busted out of the grunts. They get busted *into* the grunts. Now sign the goddamn contract!" Contented by his answer, I signed.

When I was in the School of Infantry, I met just such an individual who

got busted *into* the grunts. His name was Lorne and he was a former college football player. Lorne had a real proclivity for the beach—or maybe it was an addiction—which seemed to flare up every time he was supposed to be on duty. He was a guard at the Naval Academy in Annapolis (a desirable duty), but he went to the beach one too many times. So they busted him out, and sent him to be an Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAV) driver. He did okay there for a while...but then he started going to the beach again.

So they busted him to us, the grunts, the bottom of the barrel, the end of the line. I liked Lorne a lot. He enjoyed working out and so did I, so we used to skip out of our clean-up duties to go to the gym. Lorne probably wasn't the best of influences, but I felt secure in the notion that no matter what happened, no matter how much trouble I might get in, nobody ever gets busted *out* of the grunts.

PURPLE HEART

Crossing over to war, or crossing back—I'm not sure which was more thrilling. To make that plane ride home is to have overcome war. It is to have made it through alive. And for that you get the solemn distinction, that enviable title of "combat veteran." There are men who seek the Combat Action Ribbon (CAR) more fervently than any other personal decoration.

It's true, because it means you've been in the shit—at least that's what it's supposed to mean. The intent was clear enough. A Marine was supposed to have been in a fight, a direct fire fight, with bullets whizzing by, some guys getting shot at, and others shooting back. But then people started scratching their heads as Marines were getting shelled and IED'd, day in and out, without ever having fired their rifles. Could you really tell them they weren't in combat? A guy could have his legs blown off from an IED, but no Combat Action Ribbon. It didn't seem right.

Suddenly the meticulous criteria for a CAR became hazy. Suddenly it was a matter of dispute. So they loosened the regs. And then they loosened them a little more. The next thing we knew, CARs were getting doled out to anybody with the loosest affiliation to combat. To us grunts, that didn't seem right either. Purple Hearts, as a result, took on an interesting new importance. It let people know that you were in a *real* fight, a fight close enough to feel the heat, close enough to catch some lead. But then the credibility of the Purple Hearts started taking hits too.

There was a corpsman—a medic—in my company who was hit in the face with a piece of shrapnel from an IED. But not to worry, it was no bigger than a staple. He didn't even realize he'd been hit. I had to point it out to him. He pulled the tiny piece of steel out of his cheek, tossed it in the trash, and went back to work. For that, they gave him the Purple Heart.

I remember saying to the Colonel, “What’s up with that?”

And the Colonel said, “You know something? A combat wound is a combat wound, no matter how small. So he gets the medal.”

Ironically, at the very same time the ’04 Presidential elections were in progress. I remember watching Bob Dole on television commenting that John Kerry was a fraud because Kerry’s Purple Hearts weren’t for any real wounds—not the life-threatening wounds that Dole had suffered. Then, at the Republican convention, to further ridicule Kerry, they handed out little purple band-aids and called them “Purple Owies.”

As I watched all this unfolding from Iraq, I couldn’t help but wonder if these people would have had the audacity to put a picture up on the screen of our corpsman—serving in Iraq—and, in front of America, call him a fraud. I suspected not. But of course you can’t have it both ways. Either both men were frauds, or neither of them were.

It was all politics and cheap shots. I knew that. But at the same time, I think it was more. Those cheap shots came at a price. Suddenly people were cornered into having to decide which wounded were worth caring for, and which were not. Suddenly every veteran with a Purple Heart was judged by his or her wounds, instead of being unhesitatingly treated for them. What I learned in Iraq from my own reaction and from the reaction I witnessed on television is that the act of privileging one wound over another, the mere distinction, creates a fissure in the consciousness, through which our humanity begins to slip away. That was the price we paid for those cheap shots. They were not so cheap, I think.

THE INVISIBLE WOUNDED

When I got home I heard people talking about post-traumatic stress. “There’s going to be a lot of it,” a Vietnam vet said to me one day.

And I said, “I don’t know. The guys seem to be holding up okay.”

And he said, “Wait a while.”

To be honest, I didn’t believe him at first. I figured I knew better than him. I was a rifle company commander. I didn’t want to believe. No, it was more than that. I didn’t have the capacity to believe—not in that role. To believe that there could be psychological injuries sustained from the violence we inflicted would be to acknowledge its inherent immorality. A commander must never go walking into that moral field of fire, for he will surely fall. So I traversed around my own conscience and denied the existence of remorse.

I guess I took a wrong turn. Because I found myself smack-dab in the middle of that damned field, where I’d explicitly tried not to go, and just as I suspected, I fell flat on my face. I saw all the Marines around me who were dis-

traught by the things they’d done and taken part in. I read in the newspapers about incident after incident of veterans around the country who had come home and committed suicide, for what I can only assume was an inability to further reconcile their deeds in war with their sense of morality. There were thousands of them.

They were wounded, deeply, but their wounds were invisible, and therefore easily missed. I saw all the officers around me nod sympathetically. They shed tears, just as I did. They cared, just as I did. But in the end, they all went back to work, and I couldn’t. I had to give up my company and resign my commission.

What gives? I thought. How do they go back to work, back to war, knowing of the wounds to a man’s soul that war inflicts? But they did, nonetheless, and the denial of remorse went on and on. It goes on still. And consequently these veterans with invisible wounds became, by default, antagonists to their own country. They were swiftly cut loose and left to fester in isolation. Small wonder so many suicides occurred.

They said a combat wound is a combat wound, no matter how small, and that every last one rates the Purple Heart. Yet never once has a veteran been awarded the Purple Heart for combat stress. Never once. Perhaps that small token of recognition might have prevented a few of them from taking their own lives. Only through genuine acknowledgment that combat stress is an injury, not a disorder, can we ever give uninhibited affection to our wounded.

THE JOURNEY FROM CHERRY POINT (MARCH 1, 2004)

We almost didn’t fly out that day. We had a great big jumbo jet waiting for us, the airborne equivalent of a luxury liner, and the damned thing was broken down. They toiled with it for half a day, while we waited and waited for “the word.” The Marines, as they are so prone to do, curled and stretched their bodies across every surface of the hangar floor and slept. When even that did not kill enough time for the struggling mechanics to get our plane running, the Marines woke up and started thinking about chow.

Nobody expected to be around long enough to worry about dinner, so nobody brought anything to eat. And now we had a few hundred hungry, well-rested Marines on our hands (never a good thing), so a creative remedy had to be thought up fast. The remedy, it turned out, was right in front of our faces, and it was as obvious as a jumbo jet. We filed onto the disabled 747 and sat down to dinner. We got hot towels and meals brought to us by a conspicuously irritable flight crew, who clearly would rather have been on their way to a motel for the night than serving us our in-flight beverages, while we sat idly on the tarmac.

When we were finished eating, we got back off the plane. Now, I've noticed in my life that, as one climbs into an elevator, there comes a particular expectation to emerge into a new place when the doors open again. I realized that night, that a very similar phenomenon occurs when exiting a plane. You expect to be somewhere new. So it was a little strange filing off the aircraft and finding the same old place waiting for us at the bottom of the steps. A back-up plane eventually arrived, and we gutted the old plane's belly of all our luggage and weaponry and fed it to the new one. Finally, some thirteen hours from our arrival to the air station that morning, we took off.

On our way to Kuwait, we touched down in Ireland for a beer. It was eight in the morning and I ordered a pint of Beamish, the last beer before war. That was the best damned stout I ever tasted. Then we flew through the night over the Alps. The sky was clear and I could see all the way down to the little clusters of yellow lights nestled low in the deep blue valleys between vast ranges of snow-covered mountains.

They really were breathtakingly immense. It was a marvelous sight. The lights were so small. The people were not even specks. They were only an idea from my vantage point. There was no way in, so far as I could tell, and there was no way out. It struck me as a magical and mysterious and wonderful place. That was their life, hidden out there in the mountains, and isolated, where they could only be seen from afar, as little glowing lights in the night, where their existence was but a cursory notion. And then we flew on.

I thought about that dark valley and suddenly the twinkle in my eye flickered out. That's us, I thought, the warriors. Down there. Isolated. Mysterious. That's war. We are indeed viewed only from above, from afar, as cursory notions. Our families, our dreams, our futures, our humanity, our lives are all but cursory notions to the people who click by us on their television sets back home and peer down upon us like little glowing lights, marveling at our beauty.

There would come a time when I would no longer relish the battle. But the isolation I grew to really love and to desperately need. I sometimes wish to be seen as those tiny people in the Alps, as only a glowing light in the distance. I sometimes wish to follow in the footsteps of the movie protagonist *Jeremiah Johnson*, the soldier who'd seen enough of "civilized" life and headed for the mountains. The cold is a good place to be when you want those kinds of things. It's a good excuse not to come out and look at the world. But the mountains and the cold were a long way off from where we were heading that night. It was the flat hot lands we were after.

The Kuwaiti floor was littered with dozens of inexplicable fires as we approached the airstrip, giving me the immediate impression that we were touching down on the outskirts of hell. By contrast, I never saw the world coming

when I flew home. The windows were all closed. So were my eyes. Once we were in Kuwait, we filed into a dusty hangar and checked into theater. They sat us down for an after-school special styled instructional video on the hazards of combat life. It was a joke to us mostly, that anyone could show up to war so utterly ignorant that he might actually find this video informative. But then again, it really wasn't a joke.

The legend of the Marine Corps as a "force in readiness" has merit, but the myth comes at a price, and it's paid for in the lives of its own. Four months before my unit was in Iraq, we didn't even know we were going. Two-thirds of the Marines in the battalion were brand new to the Corps. They'd trained with us for less than two months, been in the military less than six. Every rifle company commander and most of the platoon commanders were new to the unit, and so was the Battalion Commander and his Executive Officer. I was new, too. But being new or inexperienced has never in history been a good enough excuse not to cross the line of departure. We always go, ready or not. And we go on time.

At the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, I used to remind every recruit I trained of the acronym GRUNT. Now it's a term of endearment for an infantryman. It's a title of distinction. But it wasn't always. It once stood for "Ground Replacements, UNTrained." That was in WWII, when the troops were dying so fast that whole units were wiped out at once. The GRUNTS were bundles of bodies that had received just enough training to obey orders. Many Marines who landed at Guadalcanal, for example, had never fired their weapons before they went into the attack. Their sergeants let them take one practice shot into the air before they went in. Those were the first "Grunts."

I warned my recruits that nobody would care if they trained hard or they didn't. Nobody cared if they knew their jobs well, if they studied, if they worked out, or if they just sat on their asses and didn't do shit. Nobody cared. "When the time comes to go," I told them, "your ass is going. Don't you ever forget that. And don't you ever believe that any politician, no matter what he or she says on TV, gives two hoots about your life. When they need the Marines, they're going to call us, and they sure ain't going to ask if we're ready." Watching that little video reminded me that little had changed.

After my tour in Iraq, on the bus ride from the air station to our base in North Carolina, I spent most of that time thinking about what it was going to be like to finally be home from war. There was a strange mix of melancholy and joy brewing inside me. I'd spent weeks in Iraq thinking about nothing but this day. It was going to be all about the sex, and the booze, and the big steak dinner. My wife sent me an electronic picture of our fridge stocked with beer. We made that picture our wallpaper on the computer monitors in Iraq, and we stared at it for weeks with watering mouths. But when I got home, I couldn't

stomach half a bottle. I had no appetite for steak, or any damn thing else. I collapsed in bed after scarcely a kiss. And when I woke up, I thought about being back in Iraq.

On the bus ride out of Kuwaiti International Airport, when we first got in theater, war was all I wanted to think about. I tried to make sense of the massive craters scattered all over the sides of the roads among the carcasses of dead camels. I tried to figure out why our convoy guides had zipped ahead in their pickup trucks and disappeared into the horizon without a trace, leaving a half-dozen buses full of tenderfoot Marines to find their own way through the desert. It all seemed so inexplicable, but all I could think about was how badly I had to go to the bathroom.

It was a three-hour ride. So before we launched, everyone went off to the head to drain his bladder. Meanwhile, I was filling mine up with a two-liter bottle of Saudi Arabian spring water. My mind was elsewhere. Bottled water in war? I'd never heard of anything like it. That must be some kind of oasis, I thought dreamily, as I stared down the long rows of palletized bottles. A salty First Sergeant grumbled at me, "In my day, we used fucking canteens." These were the vital contemplations that edged out my memory to urinate before we left.

That was a costly mistake. After an hour riding over the bumpy highways, the pain began to really swell. My teeth were chattering. My fists were clenched. My eyes batted nervously. I thought my bladder was going to rupture right there in my seat. It was a brutal ride. Under normal circumstances, I would have just jumped off the bus and taken a leak on the side of the road. The opportunity did actually present itself. Our convoy pulled over at a lonely intersection and the Kuwaiti drivers gathered to confer. As they pointed their arms in various directions across the open desert, it became apparent we were lost. There were only two options: turn left or go straight. By the infinite look of both roads, it was clear that to choose either one represented a major commitment.

A few of us officers stepped off the bus to help them out. "Udari," we said with commanding tones (Udari was the name of our camp). The drivers shot a few perplexed glances at us and continued their discussion. "Udari," we persisted. "Udari, Udari, Udari!" We kept repeating ourselves, and raising our voices, and slowing our words the way Americans tend to do with foreigners who don't understand us.

"Udaaaari," we mouthed dramatically as if caught in slow motion. One of the drivers repeated, "Udari?" and we burst into chant again. "Udari, Udari, Udari." It sounded like a sort of primitive invocation. Of course, we had no better idea how to get to Udari than they did, but repeating the destination seemed like a good idea at the time. Personally, I felt no tactical urgency to get

to Udari quickly. My interest in getting them on track was entirely selfish. I just wanted to find a toilet.

While all this was going on, I certainly could have stepped behind the bus and relieved myself, and I wouldn't have been embarrassed to do so, except that I found myself inordinately worried about what the locals might think. It's true, there wasn't a house or a soul as far as they eye could see. But then again, we would, along our days in Iraq, find people emerging from some pretty remote spots. I didn't know that yet, but the possibility seemed to occur to me. My great concern about urinating was the direct result of a brief we'd been given before we deployed, where they thoroughly beat into us all the idiosyncrasies of Middle Eastern culture.

Don't show the soles of your feet, they warned us. Don't touch them with your left hand. Don't refuse a cup of tea, but then don't accept a second one. Don't mention their women in conversation, don't look at the women, and for God's sake, don't put your hands on them. Don't wear sunglasses when you talk to them. Don't wear shoes in their houses. Don't beat them with sticks (they'd rather be shot). These were the kinds of admonishments that flashed to mind and got me thinking that urinating on the side of the road might just fall into that long list of things that one can do to inadvertently insult a Muslim. So, in the interest of preserving America's good standing in the Middle East, I decided I'd better wait until we got to Camp Udari.

ABANDON ALL HOPE—YOU WHO ENTER HERE

Camp Udari, Kuwait. It was one of many American bases in the country that functioned as a waypoint for arriving troops. They would wait there over a number of days while their units trickled into the country on staggered flights from the United States. Once a unit was assembled, they would calibrate their weapons, draft their orders, and prepare for the journey north into Iraq. I squirmed in my seat as we pulled to a stop, and then staggered from the bus to the porta-johns. I moved like a man with cerebral palsy. They were scarcely fifty feet away. I almost didn't make it that far.

The porta-johns were lashed down with heavy cables so the high desert winds wouldn't sweep them away, but the doors slammed open and shut incessantly, like the beating of a requiem march played for the arrival of war's newest fodder. Finally, I made it to the porta-john. *Finally.* That short walk felt like an eternity. I threw open the door and leapt inside. The intense chemical stench and blistering heat that gathers inside those blue boxes hardly made an impression on me.

Taking a piss never felt so good. But then that's what war is—the domain of extremes. The best beer. The greatest piss. The highest high and the lowest

low, the deepest joy, and the hottest rage, and the coldest hate, and the meanest fear, and the blackest blood, and the sickest shit, and the longest hours, and the most fucked up things a man could ever fathom. That was war.

When I finished, I burst from the porta-john like a new man. I had my chest out; I was ready for battle. It was at that moment, at Camp Udari, that I got my first taste of the violence of war. A muffled shot rang out, right there in Kuwait, right there at the porta-johns. Where? Why? How? I was already spinning in confusion. Suddenly, Marines from every direction swung around and started running toward me.

Actually, they were running toward the porta-john three doors down. A Marine in our battalion had locked himself inside and shot himself in the abdomen with his pistol. As they jimmed open the door and the wounded Marine spilled out onto the sand, I remember feeling distinctly unsympathetic. I looked around me, and it didn't appear that anybody else was too broken up about it either. They looked stoic, or annoyed, or they just smiled. I shook my head and said, "Why the fuck would a guy do that?"

The Marine next to me muttered back, "Fuckin' scared."

"Scared?" I said. "What the hell could he be scared about? What'd be scarier than getting shot in the stomach?"

And the Marine shrugged. "The unknown."

When I think about that young Marine now, turning a pistol on himself on the doorstep of war, I feel pity. But I surely didn't feel it then. I felt disgust. For the life of me, I can't figure out why. I've heard vets talk about this—this apathy toward death and violence. I've heard all kinds of explanations. But I'm not buying most of them. Because nobody put a gun to my head, or twisted my arm. I wasn't coerced. And I wasn't worried about what anybody thought about me. I wasn't trying to conform, or fit in. And I wasn't there for a lack of options. When I looked down at that bloody Marine, I genuinely didn't give a rat's ass. He was a traitor, or he was weak. Either way, he could rot in hell, as far as I was concerned. But that was then. Now I think he was just hopeless.

The Marine survived. Apparently, that had been his plan all along—he'd shot into his flank deliberately to avoid hitting his stomach. He didn't want to die, but evidently he couldn't live with himself in war. He was released from the battlefield, but he'd never be completely free from its wrath. His colon was obliterated, a wound the doctor promised would haunt him for the rest of his life.

A NEW DAMNED FLAG

Hopelessness. There's a lot of that going around among combat veterans after war, particularly the disabled ones. "What am I going to do without my arm?" a guy might say to himself. Or, "How am I going to live with these stumps

I've got for legs?" Or even, "How am I going to get out of this fucking head of mine? How am I going to crawl out of this skin?" At first, there's a lot of talk of overcoming—and some do—but after the story's been done in the local paper, after the popular interest in him starts to fade, the veteran finds the interest in himself starts to fade too. Hopelessness sets in.

When I first arrived to our base in Iraq, I met a Soldier whose head was covered with burn scars. His face was melted and warped. He'd been inside a humvee when it was hit by an RPG and engulfed in flames. It was a miracle he'd survived. But he was tough to look at. I was surprised to see him still in country.

Some of the other Soldiers said, with a real sense of pride, "He could have gone home, but he wanted to stay with us." I remember looking at the Soldier with furtive admiration after they told me that. I thought to myself, "Man, I wouldn't stick around after that." But a long time afterward, I looked back on that Soldier, after I'd come home and I gave some real thought to the place where veterans return, and I realized that there was more to that Soldier's decision to stay in Iraq than unit pride.

Sooner or later he'd have to come home, and when he did, that face of his would make him an outsider, no matter how heroic his actions, no matter how selfless. He could never just blend in and be left alone, like I've been so inclined to do. He would always stick out. He would be judged by his ugly face. His face would become a symbol of the ugliness of war, and people, however sympathetic, would be inclined to look away. In Iraq, that wouldn't be the case. There he was accepted—more than that—he was admired. He was a hero. He was loved.

From the Vietnam era, we were given the POW-MIA flag that flies on the flagpole of government facilities—in many cases by law—and a lot of other places, too. There's a white silhouette of a soldier depicted on the black flag. His head hangs low. Maybe he's hopeless, too. And the words below him are most powerful. They read: "You are not forgotten."

The POW camps were a staple of the Vietnam War. Everybody knew about them, and that black and white flag made sure nobody forgot. But Vietnam is over and those camps are long gone. We have a new war now with a new problem. The problem is our body armor—it's too damned good. It actually saves lives. Unfortunately, it doesn't save limbs and it doesn't save souls. So we get a hell of a lot more wounded than any other war has ever seen. That means there are a hell of a lot more disabled vets trudging through the blackness, hopeless and forgotten.

I say we need a new damned flag. We need a flag with that same downcast soldier and the same bold white letters reminding him and everyone else, "YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN!" I say, it's time to run the down the old

POW-MIA flag, and run up a new one. We will call it the WIA-KIA flag. We will let it fly and we will think of them. And we will say quietly and loudly, and until our hearts burst, “You are not forgotten. You are not forgotten.”

VESTIBULE

Udari was loaded with reservists who never left. To us, the active-duty members, reservists were the uncommitted. They were the weekend warriors, the guys who didn’t want to *man-up* and do the warrior thing full-time. And for their indecisiveness, they were activated and sent to places like Udari to rot and to be bitten by pestering Kuwaiti flies, and to linger outside the boundaries of war, never dumped into the hot core of it, but not allowed to go home either. They were doomed to be exiled from both. (I realize, of course, that since my time there, reservists took a much heartier role in the war, but these were my impressions at the time.)

I wandered outside my tent one night toward the sound of gathered laughter and acoustic guitars. There was a cookout, a bevy of reservists celebrating one year in country.

“What, this country?” I asked one of them, surprised. “Kuwait?”

“Yep,” he smiled like it was something to be proud of. “Three hundred and sixty-five days today.”

“You never went up north?”

“Nope,” he confirmed nonchalantly. “Been stuck in this shithole the entire time.”

I didn’t know whether to pity him or be jealous. “I guess that’s pretty cool. Pretty relaxed eh?”

“Ha!” he scoffed. “Try doing it for a year.”

I shrugged, “At least you don’t have to worry too much about getting shot at here.”

“I don’t know,” he muttered dubiously looking up into the sky, “There’s always them SCUD missiles to worry about. Anything can happen, ya know? This *is* war.”

I looked past him at the blazing fire, and singing reservists in their shorts, and flip-flops, playing guitars and drinking non-alcoholic beer. “Yeah right,” I said to myself. “This is war.”

I noticed little pockets of Marines huddled together, smoking cigarettes, and peering suspiciously at the hoedown from patches of darkness. The reservists had offered us chicken and sausages from the grill. But there were no takers. We just looked on sullenly and cursed their existence. As I gazed into the revelry, I couldn’t, for the life of me, figure out how the hell they’d fit all those guitars into their sea bags.

PREP FOR COMBAT

Preparation for combat in Kuwait amounted primarily to a lot of meetings. As a member of the Battalion staff, I attended the daily operations and intelligence briefs given at the Regimental headquarters tent. The particulars of the briefs were mundane, but there was one issue that had the Colonel’s bitterest attention. It was the Kuwaiti Army. They’d been training in the impact area of our firing range. That meant we couldn’t shoot our rifles, which meant we couldn’t calibrate them before we stepped off. That was a bad thing, and it had been dragging on for days.

The old Gunner (an infantry Chief Warrant Officer, and well-known for his vociferations), got up to brief the situation. “Sir,” he said in his southern drawl, “the Kuwaitis are still in the impact area.” The Colonel’s face was long and exasperated. The mood in the room was grave. The Gunner went on, “But I got some great news sir.” The Colonel’s head rose hopefully to hear it. The room was silent. Everybody sucked in his breath with anticipation. The Gunner grinned, “I just saved a bunch of money switching to Geico.” There were a few hearty laughs from the back, including mine, but otherwise resounding disapproval swept the room. Beyond those minor episodes of comic relief, the focus of the meetings remained ever the same: logistics and the enemy.

It was subtle, but it was a clue nonetheless to how we were going to fight this war. We weren’t busting our asses trying to figure out how to establish rapport with the people of the Sunni Triangle. We weren’t staying up long nights talking about out how the hell we were going to actually win their hearts and minds, the very thing we were sent in to do. Sure, the issue came up, but it was always a sidebar, an afterthought. This was the Marine Corps after all, the grunts, and grunts see the world in threats and responses, attacks and counter-attacks, offense and defense, allies and enemies, winning and losing. We weren’t losing sleep thinking about Iraqi hearts and minds.

But I wasn’t looking for clues either, not then. I was focused on exactly what everyone else was focused on—victory and survival. When a man straps a fifty-cal machinegun on his truck and tears up into a foreign country, I don’t suppose he can afford to think about much else. So we talked to our boys constantly about fighting, and dying, and getting wounded. We talked to them like they were our own sons.

There’s an age-old rift between officers and enlisted, but I never knew a commander who didn’t love his Marines like they were blood. So when it came to getting more weapons, more armor, and more protective gear, they fought the chain of command tooth and nail. They fought for the things that were going to keep their Marines alive in a fight.

BID FOR VICTORY

Even in training, the focus was always on the fight, on winning and surviving. The military is called when a violent extension of policy is desired. They're called when there's killing to be done. And when they're called, they train for exactly that. We had two—three months tops—to get ready for war. Not much time. We had to prioritize. They came around and told us that Iraq had become a counterinsurgency situation, and they handed us a manual and said, "Learn it."

The manual said, you've got offensive operations, defensive operations, and you've got what's known as *stability operations*, or what was more commonly referred to as, "SASO" (the acronym for Stability and Support Operations). We knew we'd be doing all three in different proportions at different times, but stability operations was advertised loud and clear as the key to success. SASO was our *bid for victory*.

I'd been in the Marine Corps for over ten years by then, and I'd never heard the word "SASO" before. "What the hell is SASO?" I asked. SASO was essentially every decent thing we could do to keep the country from plummeting into a massive civil war. It was the meeting and the greeting, the gladhanding, the relating with the Iraqi people, even the embittered Iraqi people, and working with them to improve life in their neighborhoods. It was the winning of their hearts and minds, the gaining of their trust, the getting them to believe in the possibilities of democracy, getting them to believe in us over the insurgents. That's what SASO was supposed to mean.

We stood up in front of our Marines, our grunts, our young killing machines, and we held up our manuals and said, "Gents, we got an insurgency on our hands. That means there's a bunch of no-good terrorists running around Iraq, ruining things for the rest of the folks over there. We've got to stop them. And to stop insurgents, you've got to go after their center of gravity. You've got to take away that which gives them power. In an insurgency, the power is in the people. So that's what we've got to go after. We've got to get the people on our side. We've got to get their hearts and minds. We've got to get their support. When we get their support, the insurgency will crumble. That's what SASO is all about."

But for all our talk of gaining popular support, for all our long speeches, we didn't train like we meant it. We didn't focus on establishing rapport or helping a languished people left with no government or infrastructure. We didn't focus on demonstrating our good will or earning the trust of the Iraqi people. Those things certainly came up; they were understood and addressed often enough by the commanders, but when it came down to training hours, SASO took a back seat. Combat came first.

We focused on killing, on bringing violence to bear, and on surviving. That's what we were designed to do. So that's what we thought about doing all the time—*all the time*—even when SASO was the order of the day. I think it was exactly this obsession with the fight that squeezed us into a state of mind that guaranteed our inability to accomplish the mission.

MATILDA VILLAGE

The Marine Corps had a formalized SASO training center at the March Reserve Air Force Base in California, which, at the time, all units were required to visit for approximately nine days prior to deployment. It was a simulation of managing an Area of Operations in Iraq. It allowed the unit to function cohesively, as a whole, while other Marines outside the unit facilitated the training environment and provided evaluation.

The scenario was a small Iraqi town called Matilda Village, where any number of events could be experienced, ranging from a family seeking compensation for a child killed at a Coalition checkpoint, to a man claiming information about insurgent activity in his neighborhood, to a disgruntled sheikh seeking concessions from the American commander, to an Iraqi demonstration, to IED attacks, to a full blown chain of assaults on the Marines. These were scenarios drawn directly from the experiences of those who had already been to Iraq, so they were realistic, and they were played out by Marines dressed in their best attempts at Iraqi garb.

Initially, the village appeared to be relatively peaceful, but it had a distinct undercurrent of hostility. From there, the situation deteriorated. No matter how skilled the commanders or their Marines were at relating to "the locals" they would always ultimately face attacks. And that sent a subtle message in itself. The culmination of events, the most difficult stage of the training, was always the time when the fighting became most intense. That was the climax. And that too sent a message. It said to Marines, the fighting will be the most difficult challenge you will face. Relating to the people will be easy.

We had to push hard on the SASO and avoid offending the locals of Matilda Village. If we failed at SASO, the trainers would intensify the attacks against us. And that's just how the situation devolved. The syllabus required that we fail. As the training progressed, and the attacks grew in frequency, and the casualties grew more severe, we grew more frustrated.

Despite our best efforts to do it right, the trainers still escalated the violence. We knew this would be the case, of course, but as instinctively strong competitors we tried, almost irrationally, to overcome that inevitable outcome. As the intensity of the fighting continued to grow, we started feeling a conspicuous distaste for the people of Matilda Village, even though it was all just make-

believe. We sneered humorously at each other, “Fuck Matilda Village.” And that in itself demonstrated just how realistic the training was. They had created an environment that predicted exactly the kind of frustration and growing animosity we’d soon feel in Iraq.

THE BOX

Back at Udari, our turn finally came to cross the highway and get into a staging area we called “The Box.” Once we left the camp, there would be no coming back—not for anything. It was prohibited. We had three days to rehearse our convoy before we journeyed up into Iraq. Three days—a “hell and calling” week. We put our vehicles into long lines and drove around and around in giant figure eights practicing convoy procedures. This went on through the days and nights. The training was not always smooth or productive, but the intensity was high, even volatile at times.

We stopped the convoy one afternoon for what appeared to be a roadside bomb, though oddly placed nowhere near any road. This was not a drill. It was the real deal. The war had come early. Hearts were pounding. Eyes grew keen. Voices stern. Three or four of the officers, including me, stood together for fifteen minutes or so pointing at it and discussing gravely our options until somebody else strolled out and picked the thing up. It turned out to be just a plastic bag from the Post Exchange making its own pilgrimage across the desert. Relieved though we were, a certain disappointment could be felt among us. Everyone seemed anxious for the war to get going. We’d all had enough practice by then.

At night we ran into other troubles. Keeping sixty vehicles together while trailing around off-road through the darkness with the lights out proved more challenging than we’d expected. There was always somebody meandering off the course and taking everybody else behind with him. Pulling ourselves together was no easy task, either. Not every vehicle had a radio, and not every Marine had a clue. We’d flag down passing trucks and yell, “Hey! Which convoy are you with?” And somebody would lean out the window, shrug, and yell back with a grin, “Shit, I don’t know. I’m just following the guy in front of me.” There were a lot of us out there. It’s not as if we all recognized each other, especially in the dark. So the nights became something of a three-ring circus.

Finally the ammunition came, and boy did it come. Rockets, and bullets, and grenades—I’d never seen so much of it at once, and I’d been in a while by then. The crates and the cans were busted open and the bandoliers of ammo came spilling out at our feet. We stared down at it all as if we’d stumbled upon the cornucopia of war. The brass glistened in our beaming faces like a pirate’s booty, and it was guarded fiercely at first. The logisticians tried to dole strict

portions of the ammo to each man until it became perfectly obvious that there was far more than we needed or could carry. Then they began tossing boxes of it into our outreached arms like loaves of bread. “Take as much as you want!” they roared cheerfully. And we did. I was as enthusiastic as the next man, no doubt, though it was admittedly hard not to suspect, with all this superfluous ammunition in our hands, that someone, somewhere, knew something we didn’t.

When our hell and calling week was up, so was our time, and we had to go. We may have looked good at a distance to our inspectors, and maybe we actually were good at some things, but up close it would be fair to say that we were not so good at many other things. We were good at putting on the dog. We might have been running around like chickens with our heads cut off, but evidently we looked sharp doing it. The Division inspectors put their stamp of approval on our movement plan, and we prepared to cross the line of departure on schedule. It was time to go. “Ready” didn’t make a difference anymore.

That night, I couldn’t sleep. Nobody could, as far as I could tell. We sat on our trucks waiting to go as attack helicopters roared by every few minutes, flying low, with spotlights shining down on us looking for bad guys. It felt surreal, like a futuristic movie. Yet, strangely, I never tired of watching them pass, so hypnotic they were, so mesmerizing.

I noticed a Staff Sergeant standing near me and greeted him casually, “Hot as hell today wasn’t it?” It was still Spring and the Staff Sergeant shook his head and said knowingly, “This ain’t shit. Just wait till Summer.” He’d been in Iraq for the invasion and had a real *been there, done that* way about him. With him, the worst was always yet to come. We stared together out to the north, to the black sky that hung silently over Baghdad, over all the violence that raged beneath it, and we knew we’d soon be there. The worst was indeed yet to come.