HIDDEN WOUNDS, 701 WHALEY AND PIENSA: ART COMPANY PROUDLY PRESENT

BULLETS & BANDAIDS

These stories are pulled from the bloody roots of memories of men that walk around us. They're fathers, brothers, sons, and friends. They laugh with us; share our grief in times of heartache. They've sheltered us in peace, and fought for us at war. Here are some of their stories.

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Anonymous

Heroes

I'd begged for war. Its romantic violence beat through my heart; coursed through every portion of me. The thrill of blood and victory sung me lullabies while I slept, while my waking hours were filled with fantasies of justified brutality. I wasn't special. I was a Marine. A warrior. And people call us heroes.

I'd prepared myself for this. Hell, it was already a part of me, as it is in so many who don't know better. And this, coupled with my training, had molded me into something steel, ready to wield hate and discontent like dragon flame. This training is what brought me to Kabul, and what brought me to a gun range several miles outside of the city itself. There we were conducting a live fire exercise with Army Special Forces using M16s and AT4 rocket launchers.

In Kabul, there are gangs of children who have run away from their homes, or whose parents have cast them out or had died, often very young themselves. These gangs aren't malicious; they're hungry, though the two can often be confused. Industrious and ambitious, these children scratch and pick and claw out a living through dust and giants in order to survive one day at a time. They were denied the luxury of childhood. And they were out on the range with us.

The brass casings that were ejected from the spent rounds of our M16s could be used in a number of different ways, melted down for a thousand different reasons. For this reason, the children were waiting with baited breath for the opportunity to fill their thin, empty pockets with brass turned to gold. So we obliged them. Thousands of rounds had peppered our targets and the side of the orange mountain beyond. Our guns were spilling out what these children considered currency.

After we had expended all our ammunition, we returned to our vans, leaving the Army Special Forces to finish at their own pace.

As soon as we got into our transport, the children flooded forward, ready to collect the candy of a metal piñata. They didn't know that there were still soldiers on the firing line. The soldiers reacted calmly enough,

pelting the children with rocks, rather than opening fire on them and potentially hitting us. And so they ran away. All but one.

He walked over to our van clutching his stomach and making a face I at first thought was laughter. An then the rock fell out of his temple. It was about three inches in diameter and left a broken white hole with a red eye in the center of this 8-year-old's forehead, which almost immediately filled with blood that ran down his face. He fell to his knees while another kid ran up and knelt behind him.

That country is anything but clean. There was no helping him. This child was going to die. And he knew it. And we watched. Too many things ran through my head as I saw him fall backwards. He wasn't laughing. But every Marine in the van was.

It was a cacophony of mad gut-laughter, as though war were the joke and this child was the punch line. The chuckles floundered before they died, hiccups of jaded comments transitioning into a cold, dead silence. I'd like to think I was the exception, but I may have cracked an awkward smile, not wanting to reveal my concern for a situation I couldn't have prevented, nor could help. This is war, after all, and concern is weakness.

And I was not weak. I wanted to rend the enemy in two with my teeth. I wanted to drink their blood to gain their strength and taste that sweet victory; to take all the shit the enemy could throw and respond stronger. Of course it was going to be hard. I was just going to be harder. The enemy had their methods and, by God, we had ours. So you can't blame the soldiers, nor the marines. Not entirely. Any one of us could very well have done the same. And they laughed, and I smiled because it's war and we were warriors. Just save the term "hero" for someone else.

Burl H. Vick

No one speaks the truth with such cruelty as Time. It holds our heads so that we cannot turn away from the inevitable nature of nature, struggle being its foundation, and war, man's expression of it. Carl Jung once said "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being." In trying to kindle this light, wars are fought and people are killed. The motivations of these wars are as varied as the colors of light, with man judging man based on his own struggle. This is the story of the struggle of a man named Burl H. Vick.

The war had started in June of 1950, bringing first blood to the stage of the Cold War. Korea had been stripped from Japan and split like spurned lovers down the 38th parallel, separating the north (Russia) from the south (America) and ushering in a new form of warfare. Burl had been in middle school when the Second Great War had ended. Because of the lack of media coverage of war at the time and the cultural feeling of unity through victory, the noble burden of duty to war had found purchase in Burl's young soul.

At age 19, and being of strong mind and body, he began as a mechanic on jet airplanes with the Navy/Air Force fire squadron on the USS Philippine Sea, an aircraft carrier that has now been decommissioned and broken down. (Age? 19 When did he join? Feb 14th 1951) His test scores, coupled with his demonstrative talent, brought him into naval air intelligence school, where he began studying aerial photographs and plotting bomb lines and troop movements. The gravity of this can be difficult to portray, but Burl's story does it justice.

In July of 1953, orders came down that several specific hills, paramount in maintaining and spreading a foothold for US troops, needed to be taken and that Burl should set up the bomb lines for the close air support. This wasn't Burl's first mission, but it's one of his most memorable. It's been said that war is hell, but the facets of that statement are many. There were already American troops on those hills, clawing and scratching inches at a time towards the hilltops.

Burl did what any respectable warrior would do. He plotted the points for the close air support. He willfully played a part in a horrible battle

necessity: the sacrifice of the few for the greater good. 1000 men from each side died that day for the equivalent of a few dozen football fields. The forfeit of these men's lives was an unspoken one, passed from the tired eyes of an officer down to tired eyes of his subordinate. The Peace, being War's bastard brother, had no place here; no peace of mind, no peace in finality, save for the final peace of those sacrificed. Or so you would think.

But Burl has found it. The justification of his actions is not in doubt, this war being one with cold purpose, backed by the distant warmth of those cheering him on back home. He had done his job and protected that which his country demanded, his scars of battle more trophies than anything else. He fought his war with harsh nobility, biting through the mean necessity and driving on.

Normally this is where the author says "when the war ended," but this isn't the case with Korea. To this day it continues, with guards tense and wary just outside the demilitarized zone and skirmishes sporadically rumbling like aftershocks throughout the 38th parallel. This war, still being fought, gives rise to a feeling of cathartic principle: That backing down means losing. This is why Burl, as well as an uncountable number of men, struggled and will struggle, though the motivations change.

These motivations differ as often as man does, the victors deciding how it's written in history. We pick and scratch and claw for bits and pieces of land, or for honor, or for any other goals found noble, trying to glean some semblance of meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe. We wage war so that when time holds us accountable, we can look upon our works and say that they're good. And we'll find out, because no one speaks the truth with such cruelty as Time.

Deserters

Abeche, Chad, 2008
by DAVID AXE

It started with singing.

I was in my sweltering hovel – I mean, typical Chadian room – at a guest house in Abeche in eastern Chad on Friday evening when I heard the women's voices harmonizing. My photographer Anne bustled over. "Do you hear it? I think it's a wedding."

We hopped the fence, audio recorders in hand, hoping to capture the sound for our radio reports. But the singing had ended. Anne pointed out that, at traditional weddings in some part of Africa, the women greet the bride and groom with a brief song. We'd apparently arrived a moment too late.

When I hear the first pop-pop-pop sound, I figured it was from fireworks at the wedding. But Anne said it was gunfire. Sure enough, the next sound, closer this time, was the deep booda-booda of a machine gun. Something was happening, and coming our way.

What was it? EUFOR, the Chadian army, the U.N. – they all said the same thing, that the three-week-old rebel uprising against corrupt Chadian president Idriss Deby was over, the rebels were back in Sudan, eastern Chad was returning to normal.
But this sounded like a rebel attack.

The gunfire was just outside our compound. Red traces arced overhead. I grabbed my still camera and video camera and joined Anne in her room. Then I realized I had forgotten the battery for my video camera. As I raced across the courtyard back to my room, two dark shapes appeared at my side: young men, dressed in camouflage, toting AK-47s. "Ca va?" I asked. What's up?

Now I could see the whites of their eyes. They were scared. One of them was pleading for something, but I couldn't understand his rushed French. He plucked at my clothes. He wanted them.

I don't argue with freaked-out dudes with guns, but I wasn't about to

strip naked. I led the young men into my room and dug out a shirt and a pair of jeans. I flipped on my camera as the one soldier, breathing hard, tugged off his uniform and pulled on my clothes. They didn't fit – he was as thin as a rail – but he was almost pathetically grateful. It occurred to me that the guy and his friend were army deserters, fleeing the fighting.
I grabbed my battery and hurried back to Anne. I figured the deserters would disappear, find someplace to hide, but one of them pushed inside Anne's room behind me. He was carrying two AK-47s and begged us to let him hide them in Anne's bathroom. We said, "Non." He cradled the weapons and shuffled out.

The sounds of shooting moved down the street. "Come on," I told Anne. I climbed atop a shed and glimpsed soldiers moving in the light of a few streetlamps. But the view was terrible. I needed to be out there. But Anne couldn't take photos in the dark. She didn't want to come. Earlier I had promised her I would never let her out of my sight: I was about to break that promise. I climbed the fence. "Good luck," she said. Later I learned she spent three hours in her room, terrified and worried, as fighting raged around her. It wasn't her worst night ever, but it made the short list.

I moved along a wall towards a broad intersection where I could hear machine guns chattering away. Army trucks – "technicals" with machine guns on their hoods – roared past. Each time one did, I dove behind a bush or a heap of garbage. In Chad, the army is as dangerous as the rebel groups, if not more so, and the last thing I wanted was a run-in with a truckload of power-mad soldiers.

The gunfire picked up. I ducked into a small courtyard and took cover behind a wall. Someone hissed at me. "Tu ne peux pas rester ici." Get out.

"Desole," I said and crawled back onto the street. I cowered there for a moment. Then I saw it: a figure, climbing over the wall of a nearby army compound (I could hear a tank engine rumbling inside). The soldier dropped onto the street and ran towards me. "Ca va?" I said.

His name was Ahmed. He asked me what the Hell I was doing out there. I said I was a journalist and showed him my cameras. He asked

where I wanted to go, and I pointed in the direction of the gunfire. He said, “Venez.”

We were intercepted by two technicals. A soldier in the first technical demanded to see my press credentials. As I reached for my badge, I mulled running away. There was almost no way an encounter with two technicals was going to end well: at the very least, they would seize my cameras. But another soldier in the back of the truck waved his hand impatiently. “Laissez,” he said. Let him go. We have more important things to do.
Sure, but what? We’d seen plenty of shooting and lots of soldiers, but no rebels. The constant gunfire told me that someone was trying to kill someone else, but it wasn’t clear who, whom or why. A rebel incursion was the obvious explanation, but if that were the case, why had everyone told me that the rebels were long gone? And how had they gotten all the way into Abeche past EUFOR and the Chadian army?

Ahmed and I ran. We ran so far that I got lost. He said if I bought him a pack of cigarettes, he’d show me the way back to my guesthouse. “Cigarettes? Mais, il est nuit.” Dude, it’s the middle of the night.

So I gave him two bucks instead so he could buy his own smokes tomorrow. He said he would show me a back way to the guesthouse. As we picked our way through narrow, garbage-strewn alleys, we came across two more soldiers – one of them no more than 12 years old. The kid had a hacking smoker’s cough. It was clear to me now that these three were deserters, just like the two men in my guesthouse. Every time an army patrol sauntered past, my “friends” hid in the shadows. During one close call, we hurled ourselves into a festering garbage dump. Perhaps figuring that a few turds wouldn’t make the place stink any worse, Ahmed and the older of the other two soldiers dropped their pants and defecated prodigiously.

We’d been moving, hiding, moving for more than an hour. I’d managed to record much of my conversation with Ahmed and take video of a young man, dressed in a mix of army fatigues and civilian clothes, bleeding and dying on the road. The stories were good, and worth the risk, but I guess I pushed too hard. When a pair of motorcycles zipped past, catching us in their headlights, Ahmed became suspicious. He asked why the motorcyclists would be looking for us. They weren’t,

of course, but to the mind of a deserter, everyone is a potential narc. Ahmed said that somehow I had attracted the motorcycles.

Ahmed explained that they were traitors – no kidding – and that if I told anyone about them, "it would be bad."

That's when the three deserters surrounded me and began searching my pockets. Ahmed drew the biggest blade on my pocket knife. Another deserter tinkered with my beloved Nokia N95. I was about to get robbed, or maybe worse. But the foreplay lasted the better part of an hour. Every time I tried to edge away, the soldiers corralled me, accusing, threatening. It was very very dark out.

Things were only getting worse. I took back my Nokia on the pretense of showing them some of its many wonderful features. When a car drove past, the deserters hustled into the shadows. I sprinted in the opposite direction, my cameras shoved in my pants.
I ran. I navigated alleyways randomly until I hit a dead end. When I turned, Ahmed was running behind me with my knife in his hand. He ordered me to stop. I explained that I was just trying to avoid the car. He didn't buy it. He approached.

So this was it. I was about to get stabbed by a 20-something Chadian deserter in a dirty courtyard in some place called Abeche. At least that's what I'm thinking now, as I recall last night, but at the moment I never thought past the moment, and never considered the consequences of not escaping, even though flight was my solitary goal. It's not too melodramatic to say that I was about to die. I knew it. I just didn't feel it. I felt only the animal drive to flee.

I saw a light playing on a wall some ways down the road. Figuring that any other random group of Chadians was better than the one I was already with, I dashed past Ahmed. Approaching this other group, I began making loud dumb noises, calling out, "Ca va?" and laughing like I was some confused tourist, which deep down I guess I am.
They were soldiers, and not deserters. They were older than Ahmed and his buddies. I told them I'd gotten turned around and asked how to get to the guesthouse. They said they weren't sure but pointed in the general direction. I said thanks and ran.

Another group of soldiers. It seemed they were out looking for bodies, but I can't be sure. Again I asked about the guesthouse. They knew the street and offered to take me there – for $12. Why 12 and not 13 or 15 or 100, I'll never know. I gladly paid up.
We found the street. We heard voices. We poked our heads over a short wall to ask them for directions … and the two young men inside recognized me. They had seen me at the guesthouse, which was next door, it turned out. They escorted me the short way home, and I offered some cash. One declined. The other accepted.

I hugged Anne. She was relieved, and angry. She had decided I was either dead or arrested. She told me to take a cold shower. I did. I thought I would vomit. I didn't.
Two Chadian soldiers wandered onto the guesthouse compound, apparently looking to hide out until the fighting was over. Anne gave them water and made friends. I made sure she locked the door. All night, I lay awake on my bedroll on the floor, sweating from the intense heat and clammy from the after-effects of two hours on the edge. I listened to the soldiers trying to break into the vacant room next to ours, looking for loot or shelter, I don't know.

In the morning everyone rolled their eyes and shrugged like last night was no big thing. "Welcome to Chad," more than one person said.
As we headed out for a scheduled lunchtime interview with EUFOR, the young soldier I had given my jeans to walked up with his father and asked for his uniform back. The guesthouse proprietor made him promise to return my jeans first, which he did. In the daylight I could see that the kid couldn't have been older than 13, and that made me want to cry.

At EUFOR, over a delicious lunch of tuna salad and casserole, some kind of dreadful feeling surged from deep inside my stomach. It was all of last night catching up to me, I guess. I thought I might pass out. I took a bite of tuna. I sipped coffee. I listened to the polite conversation at the other end of the table. I thought hard about nothing, and I absolutely did not resolve to change.

The colonel at the EUFOR base told us that all the fighting was a huge misunderstanding. Chadian soldiers had captured some rebel trucks and were bringing them into Abeche when the city's garrison opened

fire. For two hours Chadian soldiers chased each other around town while the youngest troops stripped off their uniforms, hid their weapons and ran. At least one person died – and for what?

Dennis John Norgaard

I started my career in the army in February 1969 when I was 18 years old. I enlisted about two months before I was going to get drafted. I took my Basic Training in Fort Ord, California, and then was trained as cannoneer for the 105 and 155 pallisers at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I got out of there in June 1969 and spent one month of leave at home in Harlan, Iowa, before I left for Vietnam from Oakland, California. There was a lot of dissent toward the Vietnam War in the country at that time. I remember people being lined up behind the fence and throwing cans and chanting anti-war rhetoric at us while we were waiting to leave. As we were getting on the plane, the returning soldiers coming off said to us, "You poor suckers. You're going to be over there burning shit. You don't know what you're getting into."

I got into Vietnam after a 24-hour flight and went to Ben Wah, which is in the southern part of the country. I spent a day or two there before I was shipped to small firebase, LZ Professional, in the Central Highlands. I got on the firebase, and it was probably about the size of a football field. I spent about three or four days there. I thought I was going to be assigned to a cannoneer job when I got there but instead got picked to go with the forward observer unit. I carried a radio and was attached to Company B, 46th Infantry (1-46), 196th Light Infantry Brigade. There were four companies there, and we all took turns going off the firebase for 20 to 30 days at a time on search and patrol missions. As a radio-telephone operator, my job was basically to call in and direct artillery fire for the infantry company, and at night I would set defensive targets around the perimeter where we slept.

The jungle was a really harsh environment. The terrain was triple canopy jungle and always really hard to see. If you got more than four feet away from the guy ahead of you, you were usually lost. We didn't have GPS--we used compasses--so usually two or three times during the day I would have to shoot white phosphorous rounds a couple hundred meters in the air to figure out where we were. We only had old French maps, and the jungle was so thick it completely threw off any sense of direction. The temperature would get to around 110 or 115 degrees in the summertime with high humidity, and then there would be monsoons when the temperature would drop to 55 or 60 degrees with as much as two feet of rain in 24 hours.

We walked for 8 to 10 hours a day, but never more than 8 or 10 kilometers a day because of the terrain. We usually went about 100 yards an hour, cutting a path with a machete because trails meant booby traps. Our bodies really got a beating from the moisture, and our feet and clothes rarely got dry. During monsoon season, I could see the small bones in the top of my feet from where the skin had just rotted off of them. It was pretty common to eat penicillin all the time to prevent infection from jungle rot or cuts from elephant grass or whatever else you came across.

Pretty much the only people that lived out there were the "mountain yard" or Hmong people, who were usually pretty friendly to American soldiers. I remember the first time being out, just stopping and hearing the buzz of mosquitoes and watching the land leeches crawl toward us. They were all out to eat you. Everything out there was. There were tigers, bears, cobras, pythons, banana snakes, bamboo vipers, and lots of monkeys and deer.

The sounds at night were just unreal when everything was quiet. When a tiger would roar or a monkey would scream, it would send shivers up your spine. Sometimes at night you could see really well, but other times you couldn't see your hand in front of your face it was so dark. You couldn't ever get a lot of sleep. We would usually hump about 10 hours a day, then get about two hours of sleep, then two or three hours of guard or radio watch, then two hours of sleep, and then it was radio watch or guard duty again and then you were up again for another 10-hour hump. You only got between two to four hours of sleep at night at most, and it usually wasn't good sleep. If you had a firefight at night it was pure chaos because it was so dark.

My first day out in the jungle, I remember we got into some fire. I watched M-16 machine guns cut a couple of Viet Cong down with stomach and head shots, and I saw what bullets really do to the human body. And there were a lot of booby traps. I always seemed to be lucky wherever I went, either ahead or behind the traps. One kind, a punji pit, was a covered pit with sharpened bamboo sticks that they usually urinated or defecated on so that when they punctured skin you were instantly infected. I watched two guys about five feet behind me hit one. They were screaming when we pulled them off. It definitely wasn't pleasant.

There were also a lot of hand grenade injuries. They would detonate a hand grenade that we left behind or some kind of a mortar round. One time two guys ahead of me stepped on a 105 round, which was about a 150-pound round. When we got up to them, all that was left of them was enough to put them in a sandwich-sized Ziploc bag. It just kind of vaporized them. There was a lot of sniper fire and small fire fights that would usually last from 10 to 30 minutes. Chopper pilots were always nearby. They dealt in tight spots, places you just couldn't believe. Those guys were something, and they saved a lot of lives.

During one mission, we were operating out of the lower A Shau Valley, south of where Khe Sahn had been fought about a year or so earlier. There were a lot of old trucks and old ordinance, but the jungle had already started to reclaim the land. As part of the forward observer unit, two of us would be sent off into the jungle with binoculars and a radio to see if we could set up targets or find any movement. A lieutenant and I had been sitting for an hour or two, glassing an open spot by a trail through the jungle. It was daytime, but in triple-layer canopy jungle, where the light seldom hits the ground, it was hard to tell.

I remember seeing hundreds and hundreds of North Vietnamese regulars that were going up this trail-- women, men, everybody-- just a lot of traffic. They were hauling a lot of ordinance, and after a hundred or so of them went by, I spotted a guy with blond hair. He was about my size, 6'3" or 6'4" and in fairly good shape; a lot bigger than the Vietnamese regulars. He had on an old set of fatigues that looked like they were kind of battered from extensive jungle use. They had his hands tethered behind his back with a leather piece of rope and a leather strap tied around his neck, and they were leading him up the trail.

He was apparently a prisoner of war, and I imagine they were taking him up North into the hills somewhere or to a P.O.W. camp. Getting caught by those guys definitely wasn't good. They were masters of torture. I only got a glimpse of him for about 20 or 30 yards through the jungle canopy in the clearing where they were going up the trail, but I sure felt sorry for him. I remember asking the lieutenant if I could call in some artillery fire to try to disrupt the flow of the North Vietnamese and give this guy a chance, but they wouldn't let us do any fire and said were just there to observe. I can still remember the sight of him going

up the trail. He just looked hopeless with the tether around his neck and his hands behind his back. I always wonder if he lived or died or whatever happened to him.

After seven months of humping in the jungle, I was transferred to LZ Mary Ann, a firebase on top of a hill in the middle of the jungle. I was there for roughly seven months working in a firebase command. We had our little skirmishes on the fire base--there was always something trying to come through the wire at night or somebody trying to breach the security--but it was definitely better than being out in the jungle. It wasn't great, but it was better.

I left that firebase in September 1970. The tour of duty was 12 months, but I extended for two months and got a five-month early out, which meant when we got back to the States I got to go right home. When I got home I couldn't wait to get the uniform off. There was a still a lot of anti-war dissent, and it wasn't a popular time to be a soldier. I told my mother burn that thing when I got done taking it off. I didn't want to see it again.

A few months after I got back, I remember reading in the newspaper about LZ Mary Ann being overrun by Viet Cong sappers that killed 30 American soldiers and wounded many more. I guess my timing was good or I might have still been there and been one of them. I was just really lucky. After I got home I stayed in a state of drunken or drug-induced stupor for probably too long. I was trying to forget all the bad things about the jungle. There are sounds and smells that you never forget--some of it stays with you a lifetime. I know my dad, who fought in World War II, still has memories about things too and talks about it in his sleep. Certain sounds and smells sometimes still trigger that stuff. The mind doesn't forget things like that. It's always stored up there and sometimes it comes back when it shouldn't.

Jason Greene

I will never get to tell my grandkids about large battles that I participated in. There are no awe inspiring names like Normandy, Iwo Jima, Hue City, or Tarawa that stir or instill great patriotic or other kinds of emotion, sentiments that invoke an incredulous sense of "you were there" in anyone who may hear them. Truthfully, few if any, historians will spend their careers accumulating and collecting evidence to prove or disprove this or that sequence of events for the one year I spent in Iraq.

I served in two Infantry units in two branches of the United States military: Weapons Company 2nd Battalion 2nd Marine Regiment CAAT platoon from 1997-2001 and Headquarters, Headquarters Company 1st Battalion 41st Infantry Regiment Sniper section of the Scout Platoon from 2004-2007. Seven years total service. Now, four years removed from the military, the events are very clear in my mind though the lessons they offer, if any at all, are somewhat cloudy.

On April 2, 2005 I was in a HMMV that was hit by a rocket propelled grenade. It wasn't a solid hit. The rocket went through the metal sides of the machine gun turret. I was in the back seat, behind the driver, so it passed about eight or ten inches over my head and about four or five inches away from the gunner's chest. That day stands out in my head, it left an impression. On that Saturday afternoon there were three Americans wounded, my hearing was drastically affected, fortunately only temporarily, one Iraqi civilian was seriously wounded and two Iraqi civilians, a man and a woman, were killed. And I can remember all too clearly the events that led up to that.

For the previous six months we went on sniper missions almost every day. This usually meant observing a mosque, a market, or a section of a road that saw an increase in IED activity. Most all of the time we watched the same areas over and over again so this meant we utilized the same sniper positions almost day in and day out. On the first day of sniper school a potential sniper is taught to never occupy the same position twice. So tactically this was stupid. And on that April afternoon we were looking for other positions. I was happy about this.

I was happy to be doing something that I thought made sense. Before the rocket we were scouting around for alternative firing locations,

searching cars, and someone found an IED about a hundred meters from where the HMMV was parked. We cleared the area and called EOD. So we were waiting for them to blow this IED when, in the span of a few seconds, the world that I could see exploded with dust and smoke. For the first five or so seconds it was completely quiet in the truck. My ears were ringing and I felt as though I had been punched in the face but I could hear the screaming from civilians. The gunner was shaking and repeating, "fuck fuck."

The M240 in the turret was no longer a functioning weapon but a twisted assembly of metal and springs. I looked at him, his face was bleeding. I grabbed his pant leg while he was standing in the turret, looked into his bloody face and told him he would be ok. My team leader and the HMMV he was in and another HMMV were a few blocks from us. So it was my HMMV and another. I grabbed the radio handset and screamed to anyone who may have been listening, "we just got hit by a fucking rocket."

The world was muffled and indecipherable. I couldn't hear shit. The HMMV parked behind us and the soldiers outside of it opened fire killing a man and a woman who I assume was his wife. Later on that night, around dusk, after we returned to the FOB, we were called together, the participants in that day's activities were congratulated on our aggressiveness and our conduct under fire.

Before that I had been involved in several IED attacks to include those that twisted and warped my truck on our way back from an extraction where we watched a market for sixteen hours. There was one firefight that lasted for the better part of an afternoon on October 2, 2004. By May I was terrified every time I chambered a round to leave the FOB and I was frustrated that we seemed to be reacting to threats instead of being more proactive in our tactical posture.

From this one event, this period that lasted about ten to fifteen seconds from beginning to end, I learned fear, and afterwards it was there like a conditioned response. Even after the passage of six years I can recall what that series of events in that hot, shit- filled street instilled in me.

In Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian one of the members of Glanton's paramilitary force says, "The good book says that he that lives by the

sword shall perish by the sword." Judge Holden replies, "What right man would have it any other way?" He further states, "It makes no difference what men think of war. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other."

JT Fowler

"Whoever appeals to the law against his fellow man is either a fool or a coward. Whoever cannot take care of himself without that law is both. For a wounded man shall say to his assailant, 'If I live, I will kill you. If I die, you are forgiven.' Such is the rule of honor."

-Lamb of God

I was with 2nd Bn 7th Marines' Mobile Assault Platoon (or MAP). We were supporting Echo company, who was doing a cordon and search operation in the farming community south of Fallujah called Al Ziadon. MAP 1A's job was to block a bridge to allow Echo to sweep the area and disrupt or interdict any insurgency operating inside. We had moved into our position the night of the 24th and I had stayed awake, walking the lines from truck to truck to make sure all my boys were keeping vigilant. As the sun came up and I was just getting to sleep, a call came from Echo 2 that they were under fire from some high ground to their south and that one "urgent" CASEVAC request was sent. CASEVAC meant someone had been shot. So, as the acting Quick Reaction Force, we were dispatched with barely tamed urgency.

We left all the spike strips and C-wire for MAP 1B, who would be taking over our position. They were taken care of. So we ran. Toward our fallen comrades. Toward not friends, but brothers. Since I was the section leader I always put myself in the first truck.

The Suicide Truck.

One kilometer to the south, our turn on the road and our turn of fate became one and the same. I couldn't see exactly what was around the bend as there was a line of shops with garage style doors blocking my view. As we rounded the corner, we almost hit a black sedan which swerved erratically to our left. I jumped out of the front passenger seat to assess the situation. I made it to the front quarter panel and was confronted with my moment. I was confronted by The Enemy, 4 Al Qaeda, dressed in casual Iraqi clothes; their holy war garb.

As one of them in the back seat nearest me frantically tried to reload, he looked up. I saw the fear in his eyes. The wild panic we all feel when our mortality is tested. And he saw the blood in mine. The sweet nectar of justification, just seconds away. The driver hit the gas and sped past us. I button hooked right and brought my rifle up, firing while walking towards the fleeing car. I put the clear tip of the front sight post of my rifle inside the circle of the rear sight aperture both vertically and

horizontally. In other words, I took a breath and aimed at my Enemy. And I hit him. The car swerved to the side and stopped. It was then that they returned fire. I thought of my injured brothers-of-war and I continued to walk forward.

My second truck was pulling to the intersection at this time , so I told the gunner to engage. The bullets from his M240 B flew through the dirty white car, making it look like the negative of a picture of the night sky. I kept walking forward and shooting. Aim, fire, aim, fire, aim, fire. I approached the vehicle, recognizing that the two-way gun range had become one sided. There was one passenger still alive, covered in blood that was quickly soaked up by dirt. More eye contact, then one quick pop from my weapon. Was it a mercy killing? That I won't say. I'll tell you this, though. I sent his rag stateside.

This isn't a typical story. There's no arc where I change from one man into another. I was and will be forever on watch to protect my family, both at home and abroad. And there are times when I go to my footlocker. I take out the blood and brain matted cloth. And somewhere inside me I smile.

Luke Brannon

It was the 16th of December. The Germans had unleashed the greatest counter-offensive of World War II, now known as The Battle of the Bulge. My unit, D Co., 1st Battalion, 395th Inf. Regt., was part of the 395th Regimental Combat Team who began an offensive; a drive through the Siegfried Line to secure the Ruhr Dams.

It was bitterly cold and everything was covered with a heavy blanket of snow. We had advanced several miles encountering moderate resistance from the fortified positions, never imagining that all hell was about to break loose. We were a heavy-weapons company and our squad was heavy machine gun, attaché to A Co.. Our mission was to provide cover fire for the riflemen advancing against Kraut pillboxes. Then the artillery hit.

The barrage began early that morning. All we could do was dig in and cover up the best we could. When the order came to pull out, it was a kind of shoot-and-run situation. We were ordered to throw our 30 cal. Machine gun onto a weapons carrier, which promptly left, leaving all of us with only our side arms. In my case, it was a carbine rifle.

To let the truth be known, we were literally running for our lives. We, the "underlings," later found out that we had been cut off from the rest of the division and were partially surrounded. We were definitely in a forced march situation, in a run-and-shoot defense. However, we were successful in getting out and back to the relative safety of Elsenborn Ridge.

Eight days later. Christmas Eve. We were still undergoing the most fearsome artillery fire of the war, suffering numerous casualties from it. Our machine gun position was entirely laid out. All we needed was the machine gun. They said "one more day." We didn't know if we had one more day on the line, though.

Because of our reinforcements, we were able to go into the town of Elsenborn to attend a Christmas Eve service and to spend the night in whatever shelter we could find. We gathered up our "fart sacks" and off we trudged through the heavy snow. We marched toward sanctuary for an all-too-short reprieve, prayers garnished with artillery fire and occasional strafing by ME-109s.

We got into Elsenborn a little before dark and located an abandoned house that still seemed structurally sound. Because the entire town had been evacuated long before, the shell of the buildings carried a hollow echo. It was a combination of store front, kitchen, and living room with two bedrooms upstairs. All of the food items in the store area had been stripped before we arrived; everything except for a barrel of rotten apples that could not be eaten. Instead, they gave off a mouth-watering aroma that made all of us, who hadn't eaten in 4 days, even hungrier. A quick search of the area turned up no food, but there was a cow in the back shelter and a rooster that was half-starved himself.

It grew dark and the Chaplain had summoned us to his quarters for the Christmas Eve service. It was a partially destroyed house that had been rigged with an Army blanket over the door for privacy. Inside, he'd arranged a table at one end of the room for an altar, with a table cloth and one lone candle that provided the only light for the room. There was no other furniture in the room, so the ten of us stood with our rifles slung over our shoulders and our helmets in our hands. Dirty, unshaven soldiers with heads bowed, solemnly waiting for any words of assurance that might be forthcoming.

Our regular chaplain had been killed 8 days earlier by German artillery, so this time our chaplain was a stranger to me and a Catholic. I am and have always been a Methodist, but at this time and place it mattered not what denomination you were. We were all Christians looking for the hand of God to guide us through this terrible ordeal. The service itself was very brief, due to the constant interruption by shells landing in the village. And so, with God's blessing, we went back to our store-house for the night.

Hunger was our first priority. We went out back to the cow shed to try to milk the cow, but she had not been milked in days and her udder was swollen and hard. An attempt at milking her produced nothing but a puss-like substance that made us all sick to look at. The only option then was either to kill the cow or rooster and butcher it for meat. Time and lack of knowledge on how to butcher a cow made that option impractical, so we took the rooster.

We found an old enamel chamber pot and cleaned it out as best we could. We packed it full of snow and built a big camp fire in the old

caste iron stove in the kitchen area for hot water. It was an easy job to catch the rooster, enticing him with a rotten apple peel. The poor thing probably hadn't eaten longer than we had. Anyway, one of the guys wrung the rooster's neck, plucked the feathers off, and cleaned him out as best as he knew how. At that point in time, it was good enough.

The fire was good and hot and the water was boiling, so into the pot he went. All of us were beginning to salivate, anticipating eating boiled chicken. All of a sudden we heard an airplane coming and just as swiftly heavy machine gun fire began to hit out building. It was bedlam-everybody diving for cover under or behind anything they could find.

And then total silence.

We waited for another few minutes and began to stir around again when here he comes again from the other direction, slamming those shells into our house, making us scramble for cover again. This time we waited a little longer, calling out to each other to see if anyone was hit. This time our airborne assailant was gone, but so was our supper. While we were ducking and diving, all our water had boiled out of the pot and our rooster was burned black. It was totally ruined. No food tonight.

Meanwhile, someone had gone outside to relieve himself and had come running back in, shouting "Hey, come look at this!" We all ran outside and, to our surprise, discovered why we were the target for the strafing attack. Sparks were flying out of the chimney at least ten feet high, creating a beacon that could probably be seen for miles. Needless to say, we immediately doused the fire and killed any chance of a warm night, much less a warm meal. The only thing to do was to find a place to put out our bedrolls and get what rest we could.

I decided to go upstairs to sleep, as did one more guy whose name I either didn't know or have long forgotten. I laid my sack out in one bedroom next to the chimney, which still had some warmth in it from our fire downstairs. I was so hungry I couldn't sleep. I decided to poke around some more, so with my Zippo lighter for a lamp, I discovered a narrow door that opened into a long narrow closet that was only wide enough for shelves down one side.

There were all kinds of old empty jars and bottles and rags. Then I

spotted one jar that looked familiar. It was a quart sized mason jar- one of those with the glass top and wire clip that folds over to hold the top on, with a rubber gasket between. I couldn't believe my eyes as I held my lighter closer and closer. I could see inside that there were four big, plump chicken drumsticks that had been baked and seasoned with pepper and preserves for the future.

I must have hollered or whooped or something because the other guy upstairs came charging into the room, saying "What's the matter?" When I showed him the jar, his eyes grew as big as mine.

"This has got to be a booby trap. The Krauts have occupied this village and they probably poisoned this jar of chicken."

By this time, the other guys from downstairs had heard the commotion and were standing around in disbelief. Some thought it might be poisoned and some did not.

I said "I don't know how much you guys know about preserving food, but if this jar fizzes when I pull this rubber ring out, I'm gonna eat this chicken."

So, as all eyes were focused on this jar of chicken, I slowly pulled the rubber ring and heard the sweetest sound you could imagine. Psshh. It was well past midnight and it was now Christmas Day. Six guys divided up four delicious drumsticks and savored the greatest Christmas gift of all.

At daybreak, after about four hours of uninterrupted sleep, we rolled our sack and headed back to the front line to resume our duties and hardships that were yet to come. I don't remember anyone saying "Merry Christmas," for it was anything but merry. We were given a box of K-rations for our only other food that day. The kitchen crews could not or would not come to where we were. I'm sure some GIs got fed that day, but we were not among them.

Our machine gun and ammo arrived and we immediately set up in a defensive position to ward off any further German assault. There was no direct frontal attack but the German artillery continued relentlessly and along with some strafing by ME109s, all of which kept us pretty much confined to our foxhole positions.

The weather had cleared enough that planed could fly, and while it allowed the Krauts a chance to attack us from the air, it also allowed our own Air Force to fly. When finally we saw our own bombers soaring across the sky, we were cheered that big help was on the way. We watched in wonder as a large formation went over and was drawing heavy anti-aircraft fire. One bomber was hit and began to fall, turning slowly and pitching into a dive. We waited anxiously to see any parachutes, but none were ever seen. It was a lousy Christmas for that crew.

The rest of the bomber formation did not waver, but continued on its course just as before, while another plane moved up into the vacant spot left by the stricken bomber. We had to admire their grit to hold fast under such heavy fire. All I could think about was the possibility that that bomber could have carried one of my brothers, who was a crew chief and waist gunner on a B-25 with the 8th Air Force based in England.

It was Christmas Day, 1944, and the only presents we received were artillery shells from unseen German guns. The shelling seemed to increase as the days went on, until the fiercest barrage of all came to our positions on Dec. 28th. This was the day my present arrived in the form of an artillery shell blast that rendered me unconscious and fractured my spine; an injury I bare the consequences of to this day. The damage done to me put me out of the war and into Army hospitals for the next 8 months, after which I was medically discharged with disability. And still I consider myself lucky compared to so many who gave it all and did so willingly for our country. God bless America.

Mills Palmer Bigham

Let me tell you about my first kill, so you can understand the way death may or may not affect the living party.

It took place in Hit, Iraq, on February 13th, 2006. I was on point, patrolling south, and searching for IEDs on the Main Service Road. I was doing everything a 19 year old does when he thinks that he is bulletproof. I would jump down into IED craters and kick the dirt around.

The largest crater was also the last, and closest, to base. I had just finished climbing out of the crater and was resuming the trek south. I was looking over my left shoulder, making sure I wasn't walking too fast. I hear a Marine scream, "GRENADE".

I rotated my body fully to the right, bringing my rifle to the alert simultaneously. I see the person in the follow through of his throw. The grenade is spinning slowly, the spoon coming off slowly. The sound of body armor, and the bodies they protect, hitting the concrete created a strange thump, thump, thump sound. I pulled the trigger, quickly, twice. Pop… Pop.

The grenade was a dud.

We approach the person, carefully, we don't know if he has any more explosives on him. As I get near him, it is abruptly clear he is leaving this world, and soon. He is suffocating on his own blood. He is blowing blood bubbles through his red teeth. He is crying. There are bubbles coming from the two holes in his chest. One to the left of his heart, and the other to the right.

Death took him, and there were no new bubbles.

He cried no more. I checked his ID. He is 12.

I wept that night.

The rest of the kills I made did not affect me in this way at all. It is true what they say, the first is the worst, and then it only gets easier. I also learned I was not bulletproof.

Robert LeHeup

The Sound of Snow

"We should go forth on the shortest of walks, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return, prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and
brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again -- if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man -- then you are ready for a walk."

-Henry Thoreau

The wind was light, betraying the gravity of the surrounding mortar and cement that was peppered with gunshot wounds. These marks, punctures that never bled, never healed, had been my home for several months. Scourged to the arid desert of Afghanistan, where there existed a vacuum of empathy for the dead, I, along, with the rest of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines, 2nd Marine Division, was sent to rid the world of a terror that had no foreseeable end.

This terror, bathed in the blood of innocents, bathed in the blood of a civilization whose institutions were founded on life, on liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, had represented an evil more clear and wrong and real than any I'd seen before. To my young mind, these were, unquestionably, The Bad Guys. So, with shifty eyes and a round in the chamber, we took the embassy at the heart of their capital, dismissing the heat of the late summer and driving on. We took it and held it between our foaming teeth, filed down to daggers by training and the eagerness of youth. We held it. And days passed.

And months passed. And the climate of both Earth and man changed. And in this one place, on this one night, I changed as well.

I was walking between the retaining wall of the embassy and another wall set up to confuse aggressors. We were told that beyond the retaining wall and immediately across the street was another compound that still held potential Al Qaeda. They may even likely be guarding it.

For lust or love, we accepted this without question. The Bad Guys were

right next door. Any day now… Any fucking day now…

The cold had approached through a thunderhead, and in its wake the sky had scattered the land with falling snowflakes, like the ashes of a dying autumn. This ivory blanket, still in the making, gave an eerie silence to the moment, the minnows of sound being caught in small icy nets and gobbled up into the ether.

The snow from earlier in the week had melted and encased the leafless branches of an overhanging tree, giving it an almost personified form; making it seem like a monster out to rend me with talons sharper than my Ka-bar. Even so, what sweet music was made when their fingers collided? When frozen gem touched frozen gem?

I went through the mantra of what I should do if I saw them. One of the Bad Guys. "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." And why not? They'd kill me if they could…

But how? How would you kill them in this scenario? How would you kill them in another one? What about another one? And the one after that?

It didn't matter. So long as I killed them.

But this wasn't the case.

In this one place, at this one time, completely alone and in deafening silence save for the wind in the trees… In this one place at this one time the man across the street, the haji I would have casually shot in the face just moments before, began playing a homemade flute.

And the moment's recognition met with my conscious transformation. It was a beauty I couldn't have imagined to pray for. The flute danced along the melody of the wind through the branches, accompanied by the sweet chimes of the trees playing their crystalline cymbals like a belly dancer in slow motion. All the while, the snowflakes melted on the muzzle of my loaded gun, precious and fleeting as a passing thought.

I felt in a way I never would have otherwise, caught like sound in the snow. Freezing and frozen.

And then I left.

Two years later I was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps. and, having saved enough money to begin again as a regular citizen, I tried to start over. Soaked in horror but needing to smile, I tried to start over.

I had no debts. My will was made before I ever left America. No affairs needed tending (at least those I had the ability to attend to). I was a free man.

And so, without knowing it, I took one of Thoreau's walks. And I wept.

Robert Taylor Chambers

Though things may fade, nothing ever fully ends. The life of a newborn fades from the world of Nothing, blossoming from sweet, sticky conception, to grow, thrive and make a lineage of their own. In time, they fade from the world of Something, but they continue on in what they've left behind. This continuance is why we live. It's what we strive for. And just as some of the details of this story have faded and been lost, the aftereffects are still felt today.

Robert Taylor Chambers
17th January 1942 enlisted
Army Air Corps

He looked at his grandchildren through wet, knowing eyes. He saw their lives unfolding like blossoms before him, bearing the petals and thorns of every burgeoning child. For what they meant, he cared passionately, the weight of experience and age tamping down a smoldering love. They were his blood, the trophy of a life both beautiful and brutal. Beautiful for the love he shared. Brutal for the war he fought:

It was 1942, and Robert Taylor Chambers found himself in a B-26 Marauder, coined The Widowmaker, flying from the French coast inward towards blood and violence. The American Army Air Corps had sent a squadron to rain lead and death upon the outskirts of a French town that had been surrounded by Nazis. The roar of the wind and engines gave the somber mood a dull tension, the cold inching its way closer and closer to his bones, his foundation.

Halfway to the intended target, a firefly called out. A second later, a quick thrum of thunder sounded. Then another firefly. Then more thunder.

And the sky was alight.

The shrapnel rang a cacophony of death knells, loud and strong, forcing the squadron to return to reassess their strategy. Most of them, at least. Robert refused. Instead, he gritted his teeth and flew forward, mocking

Fate and fighting on, stealing each moment with an insane certainty. Knuckles white, eyes ablaze, he flew through the explosions, through white hot metal and fear, through everything the enemy could throw at him… and then the booming was behind him and he continued on. He reached his target several minutes later, and staring through a tacked scope, his crew lined up the enemies to prepare for the offensive. Fat, metal tears dropped from the deck of the plane, crying and washing away the pitiful German encampments with fire and brisance. Afterwards, having splayed the Nazi force and accomplished his mission, he turned his Widowmaker around and dove back into the metal rain of the anti-aircraft guns, shrugging off danger and laughing at the Gods. And they noticed.

Pain lanced its way into his right shoulder and the right side of his face. He didn't know it at the time, but he had a sheet of metal that was buried underneath his face and a flap of skin where his underarm used to be. Seeing how damaged he was, the crew switched him to the radioman's seat behind the cockpit, but a little bit more shrapnel, the plane began plummeting. Robert had to step up.

He returned to the cockpit, being the only one who could land a plane whose landing gear was malfunctioning. This falling coffin was pulled up just in time to land on its belly, causing it to flip twice, head over nose. The wings flew apart, along with the tail, scattering across the landing strip as though scared of the crew inside. The violence of the previous few hours gave a deafening pause to the still wreckage, giving an ethereal presence to the emergency workers rescuing him and his squad. My grandfather blinked…

…and woke up in a hospital in England. There, he was told that his radioman had died in the crash, but that the rest of his crew had made it, a small price to pay for mocking the Gods, though the radioman might disagree. But Robert had done it. He, along with the rest of his crew, had saved the entire French village from being overrun by human monsters. For this, they were awarded the French Croix de Guerre, given to them personally by Charles De Gaulle himself.

While he was still in the hospital, he was told that his shoulder had become gangrenous, and that he's not have use of it again. They pumped him with antibiotics and tried to console him. And he laughed at the Gods again, fearless and determined. He started frequenting a

bowling alley every day until, several months later, he was able to fly more missions. And for this, he was rewarded, not simply with ribbons or metals, but with his perpetuation.

And so he sat, this powerhouse of a man, now grown fragile with time, looking at the youth that he'd made; looking at his opportunity for immortality. He saw through them to what they may become and smiled, knowing that it was life that he'd fought for, and life that he'd won. A transcendent feeling of comfort dawned on him, because with the right eyes, you see that everything may fade, but nothing ever truly ends.

Steven Diaz

Alive Day

It all started while we were driving down a poorly maintained road in western Iraq. I was the A driver, the front passenger, in an unarmored humvee. Not all our humvees were like that, just this one, because the armor weighed us down too much. We were the lead truck in the convoy and drove at a pretty fast pace. Marines call the lead truck the suicide truck because usually during an ambush the first vehicle always gets hit and since it's unarmored the chances of you making it out aren't very good.

I was listening to the radio while watching the road for any signs of Improvised Explosive Devices. Almost like a scene from a sci-fi movie, time froze. There was nothing. I couldn't talk or see anything: Then slowly the only thing that came back was sound and some feeling. I touched my face that was covered with blood while hearing people yell and scream. The only thing I remember them saying was "Diaz! Diaz! Diaz is down. He needs help!"

To this day, I don't know exactly what happened to me and my friends don't like it when I ask them to tell me the story. I did, however, get some things from them to help me remember. After the explosion happened, my Corporal, who was driving, tried to move the humvee off the road. His name was Corporal Jahala, he was short, dark skinned, and always felt like he had something to prove; but nobody ever knew how to say his name so we just called him Corporal J. We met up later on after the attack and he told me that when the bomb went off, pieces of shrapnel shot into the humvee and ricocheted inside. He said it looked like fireworks because of the sparks when it hit something metal. But it was no show; when the shrapnel that didn't hit metal, it hit us.

There was blood everywhere. Cpl. J was struck in his arms and right leg. He's still not able to walk like he used to. In between J and myself was Lance Corporal Jordan, a tall, white, goofy guy from somewhere in middle America; Jordan was manning the machine gun that was on the humvee's turret. Since only half his body was exposed, he only took damage to his legs and the lower part of his arms. I took the majority of

the blast, which was relieving because I knew that if I had it the worst, then nobody died. My body acted as a shield not only to the guys up front, but also to the other two Marines sitting behind us.

Those Marines only got hurt from flying rocks and other debris. They got to stay and finish their time in Iraq. The shrapnel that bounced around hit my head, arms, and legs. One piece entered my left eye and bounced from the bones in the eye socket into the right side of my brain. A large part of the right side of my head is made of plastic. Since the shrapnel was making my brain swell, the doctors had to remove a part of my skull and couldn't put it back, so they made a replica of the skull with plastic. They let me keep the bone they took out and I basically carry it around with me wherever I go. My arms weren't injured too severely. They were just peppered by the shrapnel. To this day, there are still metal fragments coming out of my arms. My left leg had to have a fasciotomy done on it. I don't know what that is, but I have a huge scar from it. My right foot took major damage. It required over ten surgeries, one bone graph, two skin grafts, and many other reconstructive procedures.

I don't remember what happened after the blast other than hearing it and touching my face, but I've put pieces of the story together with what little information I've gathered. When the rest of the convoy saw what happened, word got passed down to our Lieutenant, who was in charge of us. He gave the order to leave us where we were. Maybe he was scared of an ambush, or he thought we were all dead. One Sergeant from our platoon disobeyed the order and went to help us. He then saw that we were still alive so he called from the corpsmen, or medics, to come help us.

When the corpsmen got the call, they raced up the convoy to our rescue but somehow ran out of gas. I've been told that when they finally got to me, I was still conscious, but suffering from shock, which later I fell into a coma for about a week or more. When they got to me my eye ball was hanging out from the socket, not dangling but it was out. My right foot had a huge whole on the top part of it, lost all the bones from the big toe over to the next two. My face and arms were peppered with shrapnel. I was medevaced from the scene to a trauma center in Iraq and from there, flown to a military hospital in Germany, and lastly, to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

NNMC is the place where I woke up. One second I'm in a scorching hot desert, the next I'm tied down to a hospital bed with tubes coming out of my mouth and arms. I was eventually released from the intensive care unit and spent a lot of time in the surgical wards. I spent a total of one year and eight months at the hospital. During that time I had to see many different doctors to assist me with all of my injuries. Since I had a traumatic brain injury, the doctors were all scared that I might have suffered from brain damage. They ran many tests on my head and had to be seen by several different neurologists. Once I was able to get out of bed I had to learn how to walk again. With the help of trainers (who came to my room almost on a daily basis) and I was able to walk again.

Even though I could walk, I still had to use crutches and a wheelchair at times to get around because of the foot surgeries I was having. Though my brain and feet were beginning to heal, my eye was a different story. Since the damage I received was so intense, there wasn't much the doctors could do for it, to this day I'm still waiting for the chance to regain vision.

I was truly scared. I never before felt so much fear like I did during my recovery. I finally realized I was given another chance at life, a clean slate. God didn't want to take me yet because he had a plan for me. Ever since the accident, I've tried to live my life differently than the way I had before. I will never be the same again mentally or physically. For those of us who pulled through the brink of death from our injuries, we lived to die another day. We call it Alive Day. It's our second birthday, another day we will never forget. My Alive Day is March 25, 2005, the day I lived again.

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