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The Weight of Gratitude and the Burden of Truth

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Abstract

The roots of this thesis lie in a daily journal written in a tattered notebook while deployed to the war-torn city of Baghdad, Iraq. The artist's statement tells the story of how the tragic events of 9/11 led to a decade of service in the military and how a simple daily journal kept during combat became the foundation for a memoir. Times passing, memory issues from injuries sustained overseas, and conflicting stories led the author to question the accuracy of military memoirs. The critical theory paper evaluates authenticity in memoirs, the challenges to truth and memories, and the consequences of deliberately falsifying accounts. Ten years of military service in the Army Infantry and four harrowing combat tours to Iraq and Afghanistan culminate in the creative manuscript, *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One*.

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Artist Statement

INTRODUCTION TO THE MANUSCRIPT

You're Welcome for My Service: Part One is the first of an ambitious four-part creative nonfiction military memoir based on my ten years of service in the United States Army Infantry, following me from age sixteen to twenty-seven. In it, I chronicle my transition from civilian to service member as I wrestle with frustration and impatience leading up to my first combat deployment. Throughout the narrative, I contemplate my experiences as a soldier and explore the complex emotions, thoughts, and memories that are kindled within me when individuals express gratitude for my service.

My decision to write this memoir is deeply influenced by countless instances where people thanked me for my service. It is a humbling experience to accept thanks, especially when reflecting on both the challenging moments in war and the humorously bizarre incidents that punctuated my service.

You're Welcome for My Service: Part One is a memoir that seeks to bridge the gap between the public's appreciation for service and the unfiltered reality of a soldier's experience. It's a narrative that aims to reveal the intricacies of military life and the rollercoaster of emotions that come with it, offering readers a more intimate, no-holds-barred understanding of what it means to serve in the United States Army Infantry.

PROCESS FOR THE WORK

The process for my work can be traced to two beginnings. One beginning and the catalyst that set me on the military journey that is the basis for my memoir is watching the September 11

terrorist attacks unfold on television from my high school classroom. Like millions of others, the profound impact of witnessing the tragic events of 9/11 changed the course of my life. This shockingly heartbreaking moment ignited the sparks of duty and selfless service in my heart, compelling me to join the military at seventeen. Those sparks combusted into white-hot flame, leading me to serve ten years and embark on multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

My memoir's second beginning and germination was rekindling my literary passion in 2007 at Camp Rustamiyah in Baghdad, Iraq. When I graduated high school five years earlier, I put my writing aspirations on hold. During my third deployment to Iraq, I decided to journal daily and keep track of missions and events in a beat-up green canvas notebook. Pens and a notebook were required in our uniform, so I was never without them. This simple, battered notebook became my constant companion, capturing my innermost thoughts on daily life, missions, and the camaraderie forged under the most harrowing circumstances. These writings became more than a daily recollection; I began chronicling stories, memories, and insights spanning my military career, forming the foundation for my creative manuscript. My dedication to maintaining this journal laid the foundation for my writing habits that still endure today.

As a 100 percent rated disabled veteran with a Traumatic Brain Injury counted among the rating, writing a memoir proved more difficult than I imagined. Although I lived the events, I quickly learned that writing a memoir was challenging if you could not remember the details. Before starting this project, I had committed myself to maintaining authenticity. I refused to compromise. I felt I owed it to myself and those I served with to be as honest as possible.

To help combat my memory issues, I relied heavily on research. I poured over my journals and notes, interviewed fellow veterans and soldiers I served with, and spent hundreds of hours fact-checking. The pieces fell into place one by one, and memories were unlocked. Those

that were not, I feel, are accurately replaced with factual information by those who were with me or reliable sources. I was finally able to write.

By week four of my thesis defense, I stared at an incomplete manuscript with over 100 pages of material bouncing around my entire military career and four deployments. It was nowhere near complete and would be a disservice to myself and those I served with to try and cram so much into the length requirements of my thesis. Too much would be missed, and I wouldn't meet the deadline.

I made the hard call to pivot and reframe my memoir into four parts and submit part one for my thesis. Focusing on a set period would be more work for me, but it felt like the right thing to do. In a two-week span, *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* was ready to go.

Part one of my memoir is designed to be a slow burn for readers to imitate the growing frustration and impatience I felt as I struggled to find my place within the military after 9/11. The narrative begins with my anger-fueled decision to join the military. This portion of the manuscript underscores the gravity of military service and explores the mind of someone who had never before thought to serve.

It offers a glimpse of soldiers' lives who repeatedly thrust themselves into the dangerous embrace of combat and how they adapt to sustain themselves and their sanity through their most trying hours. It follows me from transitioning from a sheltered, small-town seventeen-year-old to a prideful, inexperienced National Guardsman, stuck at home working menial jobs, living with his parents, watching his peers head to war. Then, I trace my internal battles to break away from the monotony of a life that no longer fits me. Part one closes with my arrival in Iraq as I step onto the battlefield for the first time. It is a symbolic end representing that in war, I have finally made peace with myself and taken control of my life.

A common theme as the manuscript progresses is the shift in focus back and forth between the lighter and serious sides of my military service. It delves into the humor, bonds, and memorable moments that offer respite from the more solemn aspects of military life. These stories rarely make it into war films, and recruiters wouldn't dare tell potential recruits or their parents. These experiences illuminate the human side of the soldiers I served alongside, adding depth to the narrative and celebrating the triumph of humanity while living through inhumane times. These wild, sometimes insane, experiences are another basis for my memoir's title. I often wonder if people would be so quick to thank me for my service if these particular stories were known.

Drawing from my own experiences and the stories of the soldiers I served, I aim to deliver a gripping story that is an original and unfiltered account of my military life. I strive to provide readers with an engaging narrative that honors the courage and sacrifices of friends and comrades while offering a balanced, candid look between the stark realities of war and the humor that characterizes military life. These stories, first recorded within the scuffed pages of my notebook in the heart of a combat zone, mark one of the most illustrious periods of my life. It is equal parts cathartic release and tribute to the indomitable spirit of soldiers and the enduring connections that sustain them.

VISION FOR THE WORK

The vision for *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* springs from a deeply personal goal: to give a resonant voice to the unsung heroes who walk among us—everyday service members and veterans. These hundreds of thousands of brave souls have courageously ventured into perilous combat zones to safeguard our nation. Each of them has a unique journey story, but

few ever have the chance to tell them. While the military is widely recognized for its unwavering valor, dedication, and sacrifice, many individual service members' deeds go unknown outside their units.

Not every service member's story has to be on par with that of Audie Murphy, Marcus Luttrell, or Chris Kyle, but they deserve to be told and preserved. Within the pages of this memoir, I am on a mission to traverse the full spectrum of struggles and sacrifices that have come to define the experiences of all service members. Moreover, I intend to pay a heartfelt tribute to those remarkable individuals I have had the privilege to know who made the ultimate sacrifice. Their enduring dedication to the greater good is now etched forever in the annals of history, just as it is in my soul.

However, this narrative transcends the boundaries of an individual soldier's journey. While many people regard a soldier's stern face as a symbol of unwavering duty, that widely known rigid expression often masks the true individual beneath who wears it as armor to defend themselves down a path few dare choose. Utilizing a lens of truth within these pages, I rip off my carefully cultivated mask to reveal multifaceted dimensions of the soldier's persona—a complex, ever-evolving character shaped and reshaped by wartime military service that will humanize service members and veterans.

You're Welcome for My Service: Part One serves as my cathartic outlet. It acts as a guiding light, leading me through PTSD's labyrinth of emotions, weighty baggage, and lingering turmoil tightly woven into the fabric of my soul after four deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Through this narrative, I have the privilege of revisiting moments of respite, the bonds of brotherhood, and the humor that was too often overlooked by me and overshadowed by a decade filled with combat, the solemnity of loss, and the weight of dealing out death.

Throughout the expansive history of the United States military, generations of service members have honorably served overseas, only to find themselves adrift in the turbulent seas of civilian life. This narrative reflects the struggles of those who have silently borne the burdens of combat's hidden effects, including the traumatic aftermath of deployments. Like many of these veterans, I, too, have grappled with the overwhelming conviction that I'm not a hero and should silently bear the weight of the challenges that haunt me. Through this memoir, I extend an empathetic hand to those who might otherwise feel isolated in their struggles. This is a message of hope, a poignant reminder that no one should traverse the darkness alone. This narrative underscores that regardless of one's identity or the trials one has faced, peace is attainable, and the burden of suffering need not be carried in solitude.

A substantial part of finding personal peace has been intrinsically linked to the words that give life to this story. My faith has empowered me with strength and resilience, and I have been uplifted by reconnecting with old comrades and sharing their stories. Through this narrative, I invite my fellow service members and veterans to understand that, even though we joke about it, it is acceptable and imperative to accept gratitude when they are thanked for their service. I encourage them to embrace the acknowledgment and the appreciation offered, understanding that it is well-deserved and should be “welcome.”

Furthermore, *You’re Welcome for My Service: Part One* endeavors to reveal the profound humanity within soldiers and veterans to the world. It seeks to dispel any preconceived notions that military service is inherently political. Instead, this narrative delves into the conversations and friendships that transcend political ideologies. During deployments, our discussions were rooted not in political dogma but in the shared experiences of survival and the desire to uplift the globally downtrodden and their communities; we concentrated on the missions given to us and

bringing each other home safely. I hope to shatter stereotypes that often obscure understanding and perpetuate misconceptions by committing to the truth.

Lastly, the core of this memoir grapples with the profound impact of being thanked for my service. It explores the power and meaning concealed within this seemingly simple gesture. My vision is to provide insight into the complex emotions that often accompany gratitude expressions and bridge the gap between those who extend thanks and those who receive them. *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* is an invitation into the world of the soldier, a world that weaves emotions, camaraderie, and the enduring legacy of service into a tapestry of understanding for a largely misunderstood and misrepresented group.

LITERARY CONTEXT FOR THE WORK

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United States has spent more than twenty years at war. Nonfiction military memoirs chronicling service members' and veterans' involvement in the conflicts in the Middle East and across the globe comprise an absorbing array that explores a spectrum of standpoints that convey moving personal experiences and firsthand accounts.

You're Welcome for My Service: Part One finds its place in the literary landscape of nonfiction military memoirs as an authentic voice amidst the captivating narratives and personal reflections that have come to define this genre. I feel readers are often drawn to the allure of nonfiction military accounts, where the experiences of service members are presented in a shining light. These memoirs are the heroic portrayals often seen in mainstream media that rarely delve deeper into the darker complexities of military life. I want my work to be a beacon of subjective and objective truth.

To understand the literary context of my memoir, it's essential to explore its thematic and stylistic resonance with notable works in the genre. One of the works in this genre that I most cherish and hold as an inspiration for my story is *American Sniper* by Chris Kyle. In *American Sniper*, Kyle paints a raw and unfiltered portrait of life as a Navy SEAL sniper during the Iraq War. His account also highlights a valorous moment that, in a small measure, intertwines with my story and delves into the vulnerabilities and introspections that arise during military service.

Similarly, *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* takes inspiration from this candid portrayal. It delves into the nuanced realities of military life, showcasing moments of heroism, vulnerability, introspection, and camaraderie that define the soldier's journey. It is a testament to the need to accurately represent military life, not just the heroic images of soldiers bravely charging into enemy fire often portrayed in television and film. Rarely has mainstream media shown comedic combat mishaps or service members' well-honed janitorial skills.

Additionally, I draw parallels with other of my favorite classics in this genre. *Jarhead* by Anthony Swofford offers an unabashedly genuine and often gritty portrayal of his experiences as a U.S. Marine during the Gulf War. My memoir echoes this genuineness by sharing raw and realistic personal anecdotes and reflecting on the transformative impact of serving in the Army Infantry. It, too, underscores the bonds forged in the trials of warfare and the fellowship that sustains soldiers through their darkest hours.

The resonance continues with E.B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed*, which hauntingly captures the brutality of combat during the Battle of Peleliu and Okinawa. The visceral accounts in Sledge's work serve as a reminder of the harrowing nature of military service and the indomitable spirit of those who endure it. *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* similarly

confronts the stark realities of combat, exploring the mental and emotional toll it exacts while also celebrating the resilience and heroism that define the soldiers I served alongside.

With a plethora of nonfiction military memoirs available, I hope my work adds a distinctive and engaging thread that speaks to the challenges, sacrifices, and camaraderie inherent to military life. Like the literary classics in this genre, it pays homage to the enduring themes of bravery and resilience. Still, it also emphasizes the need to present an authentic and unfiltered account of military service.

As the popularity of titles like *American Sniper* demonstrates, readers yearn for narratives that showcase service members' courage and sacrifices and offer a rare look at the trials, tribulations, and humor that are part and parcel of military life. In *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One*, I strive to meet this reader demand, providing a compelling, relatable, and unforgettable journey through the world of military service.

By drawing from the rich selection of military memoirs and weaving my narrative into it, I aim to offer readers a genuine perspective that resonates with legitimacy, giving them a window into the lived experiences of service members. In doing so, I continue the tradition of nonfiction military memoirs, contributing a distinct and authentic voice to the genre.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC AS A CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR

The significance of my nonfiction military memoir, *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One*, as a Christian scholar, ultimately lies in the profound exploration of themes rooted in selfless service and love. The foundation of my military career, and by proxy my memoir, draws inspiration from this poignant biblical passage in the book of John: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (English Standard Version, John 15:13).

Throughout my memoir, I endeavor to articulate the essence of this passage through my experiences with the military in my stories. The encompassing theme of selfless service emerges constantly through the background as I demonstrate how far soldiers push themselves to support and protect one another, mirroring the sacrificial love exemplified in the above passage. The narratives of duty, sacrifice, honor, camaraderie, humor, and ingenuity encompassing my life as an infantryman underscore the importance of this love that has compelled generations of warriors to lay down their comfort for the well-being of their comrades.

While *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* is not categorized as Christian literature, the core principles of selfless service and sacrificial love that played a pivotal role in molding me and my actions, especially during combat, are present throughout my work.

In addition to the theme of love and selfless service, identity holds personal significance within the framework of *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One*. The narratives encapsulate the soldiers' shared identity as military members, transcending individual roles or labels. This reflection on identity resonates with my journey of anchoring my emulation of Christ-like love.

Furthermore, soldiers' trials and tribulations often test their physical and emotional limits. It is during these trying times that the foundations of faith and the teachings of Christianity provide solace and strength. As a soldier, I found refuge in my faith, seeking comfort in the knowledge that I was not alone in my struggles. I carried a tiny pocket Bible through bloody battles and heartbreaking times. Carrying Jesus' message of selfless service and love for others into combat kept me moving forward in faith when, otherwise, the dreadful realities of warfare would have consumed me. I may have doubted myself numerous times, but my faith remained unwavering.

Through my military journey, I hope to convey that even amid grappling with fear, loss, danger, and the moral complexities of warfare, the principles of selfless service and sacrificial love grounded in Christian teachings can guide soldiers in making choices that reflect their faith.

Although *You're Welcome for My Service: Part One* may not directly reflect the deepest convictions of my faith in Christ, it highlights the desire to embody His qualities of selfless service and sacrificial love by illustrating the powerful impact those qualities had on me during my service, especially during my four years of combat.

To Thine Own Self Be True: Authenticity and Inaccuracy in Memoir

Reading memoirs provides insightful and realistic glimpses into experiences one may never encounter. In the realm of literature, memoirs stand as a unique fusion of personal narrative and historical account, offering readers an intimate glimpse into the lives of their authors. This genre, particularly in the context of military memoirs, raises pivotal questions about the nature of authenticity and accuracy. Military memoirs, often recounting experiences of profound personal and historical significance, face the dual challenge of remaining true to the author's memory while adhering to factual accuracy. Because of their commitment to duty and service, military memoirists feel compelled to recount their military experiences accurately. This balance, essential for all memoirs, is critical in duty-driven narratives, where truthfulness is vital.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE GENRE

The memoir is a subset of autobiographical writing that offers readers an intimate view of the author's life, weaving personal narratives with historical contexts. However, unlike autobiographies, which often aim to provide a comprehensive account of the author's life, memoirs typically focus on specific themes or periods, offering more profound insights into particular experiences or events. Award-winning author Beth Kephart believes that the fundamental expectation in this genre is truth-telling—the assumption that the author provides an honest, genuine account of their experiences. However, this expectation is not straightforward, as memoirs inherently involve the recollection of past events through the lens of memory, which is both personal and can be faulty (Kephart 116). Although memoirs strive to capture the essence of the author's life and experiences, they are subject to the limitations of human memory, adding a layer of complexity to the genre.

THE MILITARY MEMOIR

Military memoirs occupy a unique position in the genre. Drs. Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkings, senior researchers at Newcastle University, define them as “first-person narratives about the experiences of participation with armed forces, written as nonfiction and published as books for public consumption” (Woodward and Jenkings 1). The focus of these bodies of works is often specifically centered around combat or war. According to famous Israeli author Yuval Harai, these memoirs differentiate themselves from the genre as “attempts by combatants to construct a meaningful narrative of their wars, from diaries, letters, and other eyewitness accounts, which are written amid the war with very different intentions” (Harai 2). They provide readers with unique insights into the experiences of those who have served in the armed forces, offering a personal and reflective perspective on the realities of combat and the military.

EMOTIONAL TRUTH VERSUS OBJECTIVE TRUTH

The significance of the balance between emotional truth—the genuine portrayal of the author's experiences, thoughts, and feelings—and objective truth becomes particularly pronounced in the context of military memoirs. The author's honest portrayal of their ideas, feelings, and experiences is "emotional truth;" it highlights the author's feelings and subjective reactions to events. "Objective truth," on the other hand, can be physically proven and emphasizes factuality; it necessitates precise reporting of dates, events, and locations. Memoirs can recount personal experiences and serve as testimonies to verifiable historical events, often of considerable public interest and importance. The authors, typically service members or veterans, bear the weight of dual responsibilities: to their memories and the broader historical record. This

double burden bestows military memoirs a heightened expectation of accuracy, a standard not as stringently applied to other memoir sub-genres.

However, research, including that of neuroscientists Nadine Liv and Dov Greenbaum, indicates that the very nature of memory, with its inherent subjectivity and malleability, complicates the pursuit of absolute truth (Liv and Greenbaum 3). “Pursuing absolute truth" implies a concept beyond relative or subjective truths. Some military memoirs, like Audie Murphy’s *To Hell and Back,* are celebrated for their meticulous adherence to fact. Others, like Tom Abraham's *The Cage* or Slavomir Rawicz's *The Long Walk*, are controversial examples of authors embellishing or fabricating experiences. Past discrepancies of truthfulness in the genre have sparked a broader discourse on whether memoirs, inherently reliant on the fallibility of human memory, can ever truly achieve the level of objectivity expected of factual recounting. Canadian memoirist Alison Wearing has noted that she believes many countries classify memoirs as fiction because they are “artistic renderings of their subject matter” (Wearing). Despite any intent from memoirists for factual accuracy, this could indicate that the inherent subjectivity of memory adds a layer of complexity to the debate over the objectivity of memoirs, leading to various perspectives on their classification and truthfulness.

Emotional truth is the foundation for a deeply personal account that captures the essence of the author's lived reality. It is about capturing the heart of what the author experienced and how those experiences impacted them. On the other hand, objective truth demands factual accuracy in recounting events. It emphasizes factuality that can be backed up and verifiably represented with accuracy. This dichotomy often places memoirists in a challenging position. Personal biases and perceptions color inherent fallibility and subjective memory. As a result, memoirs become a nuanced blend of factual recounting and emotional truth. Premiere

Netherlands military scholars, Drs. Esmeralda Kleinreesink and Joseph Soeters find that this balance varies among memoirs, with military memoirs facing heightened stakes in factual accuracy due to the public nature and historical significance of the events described (Kleinreesink and Soeters 391). Additionally, their research indicates that the "soldier-author" places recounting the truth as paramount:

> The majority (57%) of soldier-authors provide some kind of truth claim as to the contents of their book. Of those making truth claims, the majority (61%) acknowledge the subjectivity of their truth claim, fitting our post-modern era. The fact that this more often occurs in books published by traditional publishers supports existing theories that this practice is a marketing tool. These truth claims are important to soldiers for positioning their books as non-fiction stories, which is quite common for autobiographers. What is unusual, however, is that they also provide evidence for their truth claims, sometimes only in the form of their own memory, but often also in the form of some sort of research. Contrary to other autobiographical writers, soldier-authors substantiate their truth claims, fitting the specific demands of war writing in which authenticity is seen as the gold standard. (Kleinreesink and Soeters 385)

This information helps set precedence for case studies of military memoirs. If military memoirists objectively hold themselves to a higher standard of truth, then their works should also be objectively viewed separately from other examples of the genre.

Two prominent examples illustrating the balance between authenticity and factual recounting in military memoirs are *American Sniper* by Chris Kyle and *Thank You for My Service by* Mat Best. *American Sniper*, a memoir by former Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, is a compelling account of his experiences in Iraq between 1999 and 2009. Kyle's narrative is deeply

personal, offering insights into his emotional state and the moral complexities of war. It has been praised worldwide for its accurate, harrowing portrayal of war. However, the memoir has also faced scrutiny for certain factual inaccuracies, particularly regarding the number of medals he earned (Kyle 155) and a widely publicized, disputed altercation with “Scruff Face” mentioned in the book (310), where the author claims to have gotten into a bar fight.

Kyle claims he was awarded two Silver Stars and five Bronze Stars with a V device (155). An article published by the *Washington Post* revealed that his military records “show that Kyle received one Silver Star and three Bronze Stars with V” (Lamothe). Although Kyle’s discharge form DD 214 matched Kyle’s claims, critics were quick to cite the inaccuracy (Lamothe). Although such discrepancies in paperwork are not unheard of, people used this to cast doubt on the author.

The most famous dispute ended with Kyle being sued for defamation by former SEAL and Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura. In a now-deleted subchapter, Kyle recounted the following encounter with the later-identified Ventura:

> "You deserve to lose a few," he told me. I was uncharacteristically level-headed at that moment. "Look," I told him, "Why don't we just step away from each other and go on our way?" Scruff bowed up again. This time he swung. Being level-headed and calm can last only so long. I laid him out. Tables flew. Stuff happened. Scruff face ended up on the floor. I left. Quickly. I have no way of knowing for sure, but rumor has it he showed up at the BUD/S graduation with a black eye. (Kyle 310)

Kyle was murdered before the suit could go to court. Randy Furst, a reporter for the *Star Tribune,* published an article about the trial's details. Kyle reportedly admitted in a video deposition, taken under oath a year before, to multiple fallacies in his recounting of the fight but

claims the "fight had indeed occurred and that he had punched Ventura in the face" (Furst). Kyle went to the grave with his claim.

There is additional proof that Kyle's publisher, Harper Collins, used the publicity from the controversy to profit from the book. An article from *Slate* by senior writer Mark Stern describes the publisher's actions:

> HarperCollins editor Peter Hubbard wrote in an email that the publicity from the story was "priceless." HarperCollins publicist Sharon Rosenblum described the Ventura kerfuffle as "hot hot hot," immediately arranging for Kyle to retell the tale on *The O'Reilly Factor*. Sales of *American Sniper*—which, up to that point, were fairly modest—spiked dramatically, apparently in conjunction with interest in the Ventura story. After the *O'Reilly* appearance, Ventura publicly denied Kyle's accusations. Yet Rosenblum arranged for Kyle to tell the story *again* on *The Opie & Anthony Show*, and HarperCollins printed several new editions of the book that still featured the "Scruff Face" section. (Stern)

Whether Kyle's "Scruff Face" story was a subjective truth, embellishment, or white lie, his publisher's actions indicate that a truthful and authentic story was unimportant to them.

It can be argued that by failing to do their job to verify the accuracy of Kyle's accounts, they cast a shadow on his stellar reputation. Ventura eventually settled out of court for an undisclosed amount. These discrepancies and the actions of his publishers raise questions about the ethical balance between emotional authenticity and factual accuracy in Kyle's recounting and the relationship between author and publisher.

Despite these notable controversies, *American Sniper* resonates with many readers for its raw and honest portrayal of a soldier's life in combat, highlighting the complex interplay between emotional truth and factual precision. In a moment of introspection, Kyle acknowledges his

regrets, expressing sorrow for ‘'the people I could not save—Marines, soldiers, my buddies'’ (376). This emotional complexity further emphasizes the blend of emotional truth and factual recounting within military memoirs, illustrating the intricate interplay of memory and remorse. Kyle's reflections extend to the challenges of real life, stating, "Real life does not travel in a perfectly straight line; it does not necessarily have that 'all lived happily ever after' bit. You have to work on where you are going" (377). This insight adds a layer of vulnerability to his narrative, portraying the struggles of post-war life. Moreover, Kyle defends the actions of service members in Iraq, asserting that those who criticize their lack of empathy can not imagine what they face at war. Furthermore, he vividly describes the harsh realities of combat, challenging the audience to consider the difficult circumstances soldiers face. This perspective not only contributes to the emotional truth of the memoir but also underlines the complexities of military service.

Thank You for My Service by Mat Best provides a candid and often humorous look at his time in the military and the transition to civilian life. Best's memoir is notable for its authenticity in conveying the emotional landscape of a veteran. This book steps outside the bounds of the usual minutiae of military operations like many of its kind. Instead, it excels in portraying the psychological and emotional aspects of military service and the challenges veterans face. This focus on the emotional truth, rather than strict adherence to factual detail, this anecdotal, sincere tone offers readers a different yet equally valid perspective on the military experience and mindset:

> These were the forces that convinced civilians to thank us for our service on airport concourses across America in solemn, guilt-ridden tones, as if we had been forced, reluctantly, to sacrifice our freedom, when we had actively exercised it to enlist and do something we loved. (Best 186)

Best poignantly expresses his thoughts on service, sharing himself with his readers. This open and unabashedly no-holds-barred take on his military service was a successful mix that propelled his book to number five on the *New York Times* Bestseller List when the book was released in 2019

Additionally, Best deftly weaves humor and personal narrative throughout his memoir instead of focusing on fine detail. For example, he describes the thrill of combat as, "Using a suppressed AR-15 to high-five a jihadi to martyrdom? That is a warm slice of freedom pie with a cold serve of America" (4). Best humorously and descriptively invites readers into the mindset of combat soldiers. There is an eloquence revealed in his boisterously enthusiastic writing tone when he recounts why he wants to share his story:

> Blah blah blah blah blah. Every veteran story was just this endless parade of horribles. What they failed to show, time and again, was my experience, which was the same as the experience of the hundreds of veterans I've known and served with who loved their time in the military and to this day view it as one of the most important, meaningful, enjoyable periods of their lives. No matter where you looked, there was no appetite for our stories anywhere. (186)

Best reveals that he is trying to share with the world a look into the mindset of soldiers who are freely willing to serve and who love their jobs.

These two works exemplify the spectrum of authenticity in military memoirs. Although *American Sniper* has faced criticism for its factual inaccuracies, it remains a powerful testament to the emotional realities of war. On the other hand, *Thank You for My Service* prioritizes capitalizing on the emotional journey over detailed factual recounting, offering an introspective look at the personal effects of military service. Together, these memoirs demonstrate that while

factual accuracy is necessary, the emotional truth of the author's experience is equally significant in conveying the essence of their story.

ESTABLISHING AUTHENTICITY

Logically, two critical factors contributing to the potential for accuracy in military memoirs are documentation and corroboration. Military operations are typically well-documented. Official records, mission reports, and operational logs provide a detailed account of events, including dates, locations, and outcomes. This extensive documentation is a factual backbone for military memoirs, enabling authors to ground their narratives in verifiable facts. Such records ensure that the "big picture" elements of the memoir—the broader framework of events and timelines—align with historical reality.

Military operations are seldom solitary endeavors. They involve teamwork, with multiple individuals witnessing and participating in the same events. This aspect of military service allows for uncommon corroboration in other memoirs. Fellow service members can confirm or refute details, ensuring the "small picture" elements—like dialogues, specific actions, and enemy engagements—are as accurate as possible. The presence of multiple witnesses to the same events provides a check against the subjective nature of memory and personal bias.

Lone Survivor by Marcus Luttrell and *To Hell and Back* by Audie Murphy are intriguing case studies for examining the role of documentation and corroboration in achieving factual accuracy. Due to a lack of witnesses, Luttrell's portrayal of Operation Red Wings, a 2005 Navy SEAL mission in Afghanistan, is based on personal memory in *Lone Survivor*. *To Hell and Back*, Audie Murphy's book, is substantiated by military data and the experiences of fellow service members.

Marcus Luttrell's account of Operation Red Wings exemplifies the reliance on personal memory in the absence of corroborative witnesses. Luttrell's narrative is the sole survivor's account of the operation, which limits the possibility of corroboration. While the broad strokes of the mission align with military records, the lack of surviving team members means much of the detail relies on Luttrell's memory and those who rescued him. This reliance raises questions about the interplay of factual accuracy and personal recollection in military memoirs, particularly in extraordinary circumstances where corroborative accounts are unavailable. For example, in his book, Luttrell recounts enemy numbers:

> All we knew was Sharmak had between 80 and 200 armed men. I remember taking the middle number, 140, and asking myself how I liked the odds of 140 to 4. That's 35 to 1. Not much. (Luttrell 201)

Famed author and photographer Ed Darack's research for his book *Victory Point* indicated this number is exceptionally higher than the estimated number backed by credible intelligence:

> Both videos later authenticated by U.S. military intelligence, showed eight, including Shah himself; furthermore, extremist "commanders" typically lie and exaggerate about how many fighters they command, often multiplying by tens, even hundreds. (Darack 215)

However, this discrepancy, and others related to the battlefield, can attributed to a scientific reason instead of deception. University of Canberra professors Andrew Flood and Dr. Richard Keegan argue that understanding military personnel's cognitive resilience and stress responses can illuminate the complexities of memory in recounting intense experiences, emphasizing the need for a nuanced evaluation of the factors affecting these narratives' accuracy (Flood and Keegan 2). Drs. Kleinreesink and Soeters' research indicates that most military memoirs include

disclaimers (Kleinreesink and Soeters 383). Flood and Keegan's argument justifies the need for such disclaimers and explains how one's memory can differentiate from verified sources.

Audie Murphy's memoir, recounting his experiences in World War II, contrasts with *Lone Survivor's* ability to corroborate events. Murphy's narrative is situated within a well-documented period of military history, with numerous available records and fellow service members' accounts to validate his experiences. Murphy describes the aftermath of combat in chilling reality:

> Perhaps it is the knowledge that we carry in our hearts that nobody ultimately wins. Somewhere we all go down. Force used tyrannically is our common enemy. Why align ourselves with it in whatever shape or fashion. Now comes the picture of mass defeat, the most awesome spectacle of the war. It is in the bent bodies of old women who poke among ruins seeking some miserable object that will link their lives with the old days. It is in the shamed darting eyes of the defeated. It is in the faces of the little boys who regard our triumphant columns with fear and fascination. And above all it is in the thousands of beaten, dusty soldiers who stream along the roads towards the stockades. Their feet clump wearily, mechanically, hopelessly on the still endless road of war. They move as haggard, gray masses, in which the individual had neither life nor meaning. It is impossible to see in these men the quality that made them stand up and fight like demons out of hell a few shorts months ago. (Murphy 269)

Additionally, Murphy has the benefit of being known worldwide as America's most decorated soldier. This external validation lends a level of factual credibility to Murphy's account that is harder to achieve in memoirs like *Lone Survivor*. *To Hell and Back* is a shining example of an

authentic memoir, with verifiable details and a blending of objective and subjective truths. Such an example proves that accuracy in storytelling can withstand the test of time and criticism.

In *Lone Survivor* and *To Hell and Back*, the authors navigate the delicate balance between personal recollection and factual accuracy. Luttrell's narrative, while compelling, illustrates the challenges faced when external corroboration is limited. In contrast, Murphy's memoir benefits from the corroborative potential inherent in World War II's well-documented and witnessed events. These case studies highlight the varying degrees to which documentation and corroboration can be leveraged in military memoirs to meet the heightened expectations for accuracy. The analysis of these primary sources reveals that while military memoirs have unique access to verifiable facts, they also grapple with the inherent limitations of personal memory, especially in circumstances where corroborative evidence is scarce.

CHALLENGES TO AUTHENTICITY

The authenticity of military memoirs is crucial, not just for the integrity of the genre but also for the respect and trust of the reader. In addition to memory, there is the challenge of outright falsified memoirs. Authors deliberately lying under the guise of authenticity can have far-reaching impacts by distorting public understanding of military operations, eroding confidence in veterans' narratives, and disrespecting the experiences of those who have genuinely served. When a military memoir is exposed as fabricated, it casts a shadow over the genre, raising doubts about other accounts and undermining the value of truthful storytelling.

Two stark examples of falsification in military memoirs are *The Cage* by Tom Abraham and *The Long Walk* by Slavomir Rawicz. In *The Cage*, decorated war hero Tom Abraham

recounts his dramatic experience as a soldier and POW in Vietnam. He painstakingly recalls being locked in a tiny bamboo cage while captured:

> Panicking, I grab the bars above my head with both hands. As it slowly sinks deeper into the water, I'm forced to crane my neck to keep my face above the surface. A few seconds more and I'll be dragged under. I'm sucking in air as deeply as I can. How long can I hold my breath? (Abraham 488)

However, that harrowing tale of his capture was proven entirely false. An article by *The Guardian* revealed the factual inaccuracies in Abraham's story. Journalists Sale et al. state that the chief of public affairs for the US Defense Department's POW-missing personnel office, Larry Greer, conducted an "exhaustive search of US military personnel center archives in Missouri, had shown he (Abraham) was never a prisoner of war" (Sale et al.). This is damning evidence for Abraham, who centered his memoir around his capture and imprisonment in a bamboo cage.

Although there are numerous other verifiable documents and corroboration of his service, including records, medals, and photos, there is other evidence to dispute Abraham's POW claims. *New York Post* journalist Phillip Recchia published an article with statements from several former members of Abraham's unit saying he was a "liar" and "never wounded or captured or tortured" (Recchia). Ultimately, Tom Abraham's *The Cage* is now widely regarded as a discredited and fabricated account of being a POW in Vietnam and serves as a significant example of falsification in military memoirs. Later revelations put doubt on Tom Abraham's harrowing account of his time as a POW in Vietnam. Extensive investigations and analytical evaluations of Abraham's accounts revealed the falsification. Experts and witnesses questioned key elements, contrasted Abraham's story to known facts, and questioned his discrepancies.

Initially accepted as a valid account, Abraham's narrative was later debunked, revealing a complex fabrication.

Tom Abraham's narrative in *The Cage* underwent a significant transformation as experts and researchers scrutinized it, examining the memoir's claims against independently verifiable facts, cross-referencing timelines and events, and consulting with individuals who knew the situations described. These investigations revealed discrepancies in verifiable mission timelines and troop accountability records, turning the dramatic tale of being held captive in a bamboo cage from believable to complex fraud. This revelation damaged Abraham's credibility and raised broader questions about the veracity of other memoirs. Military and veteran community members were outraged by the outright lies of a fellow veteran.

Despite contrary evidence, Abraham continues to assert that his book is accurate, and he was captured. Additionally, *New York Times* reporter Phillip Recchia reveals that Abraham's agent intends to keep the book listed as an autobiography and has “no plans to alter the content of the book or amend it in any way” (Recchia). This underscores the need for rigorous fact-checking and verification in publishing military memoirs and highlights the ethical implications of publishers deliberately presenting fictional accounts as truth.

Slavomir Rawicz's *The Long Walk*, detailing his escape from a Siberian Gulag during World War II, was widely praised but has since been condemned for numerous falsehoods. Famous critics, such as journalist and Ian Fleming's brother Peter Fleming, renowned mountaineer and explorer Eric Shipton, and Tibetologist Hugh E. Richardson, questioned Rawicz's story. Large sections of the book were determined fabricated, if not highly embellished, including dedicating more than three pages to accounts of an encounter with two Abominable Snowmen where he concludes:

> What were they? For years they remained a mystery to me, but since recently I have read of scientific expeditions to discover the Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas and studied descriptions of the creature given by native hillmen, I believe that on that day we may have encountered two of the animals. I do insist, however, that recent estimates of their height as about five feet must be wrong. The minimum height of a well-grown specimen must be around seven feet. (Rawicz 223)

Such sensational claims against a mounting backdrop of people stepping forward to challenge Rawicz's book were a severe hit to his credibility.

The book, which gained significant attention and acclaim, was eventually challenged by historical records and eyewitness accounts contradicting Rawicz's story. The specifics of these contradictions include discrepancies in timelines, geographical details, and the plausibility of certain events as described by Rawicz. Despite Rawicz claiming his story was true until his death, he could not provide any proof of his story.

However, there are numerous sources pointing to many parts of his story being falsified. Many of them are mentioned in a *BBC News* article by Hugh Levinson, the producer of *BBC 4*'s production of *The Long Walk.* For example, Levinson indicates that records were found "signed in Rawicz's own hand describing how he was released from the Gulag in 1942, apparently as part of a general amnesty for Polish soldiers. These are backed up by his amnesty document and a permit to travel to rejoin the Polish Army" (Levinson). Those papers alone make it nearly impossible for Rawicz to have escaped unless he was mistaken for someone else.

Among Rawicz's claims is a long list of charges that his captors brought up to him in his trial:

> There were whispered consultations up and down the table. The President stood, the court stood. He read the charges at length. He announced that the court had found me guilty of espionage and plotting against the people of the U.S.S.R. It took quite a long time to get through all this and all I was waiting for was the sentence. It came at last. (Rawicz 26)

Additionally, documents recovered reveal "that rather than being imprisoned on trumped-up charges as he claimed, Rawicz was actually sent to the gulag for killing an officer with the NKVD, the forerunner of the Soviet secret police, the KGB" (Levinson). Explorers inspired by the story have even attempted to recreate the route Rawicz claims to have taken and failed because of the geographical inconsistencies in his story to actual terrain (Levinson). These issues and counterclaims seem to discredit the writer and his story greatly.

Cleo Egnal, an experienced writer with *Ranker,* has amassed information on the book. She observes that the general agreement is that the book is an "incredible story—the only issue is that no one is sure if it's true. And even if it is true—or partially true—we're not sure if Rawicz is telling his own story, or if he just stole it from somebody else (Egnal). Whether *The Long Walk* is a memoir or fiction raises questions regarding authors' and publishers' duty to verify war memoirs. The unraveling of *The Long Walk* as a potentially fabricated narrative not only questions Rawicz's integrity but also ignites a debate about the responsibility of authors and publishers to ensure the authenticity of military memoirs.

In *Handling the Truth* and *Writing the Memoir: From Truth*, Beth Kephart and Judith Barrington provide valuable perspectives on this issue. These two works serve as stellar sources for writers to research memoir writing. Together, these two authors clearly define the importance of truth in memoirs and how authors can achieve authenticity in their writing.

Beth Kephart emphasizes the importance of honesty and integrity in storytelling by exploring the art of writing memoirs. Kephart argues that while memoirs are inherently subjective, there is a fundamental obligation to the truth (Kephart 6). This perspective backs up the claim that truth is especially relevant in military memoirs, where the stakes of factual accuracy and ethical storytelling are exceptionally high. Kephart's insights underline the need for memoirists to navigate the delicate balance between personal recollection and genuine integrity.

Award-winning author and poet Judith Barrington discusses the challenges of transforming personal experiences into a compelling narrative while maintaining factual accuracy. She acknowledges the complexities of memory and the subjective nature of personal narratives but also underscores the responsibility of memoirists to remain as truthful as possible to the actual events:

> Tampering with the truth will lead you to writing a bit too carefully—which in turn will rob your style of the ease that goes with honesty. Dishonest writing is very often mediocre writing. Especially when written in the first person, purporting to be true, it has a faint odor of prevarication about it. It's the kind of writing that leaves some of its readers with a nagging doubt: *What exactly was it I didn't believe*? (Barrington 28)

Both authors share many similar suggestions on how writers should approach authenticity. This guidance is crucial in military memoirs, where the temptation to embellish or alter facts for a more compelling narrative can betray the reader's trust and dishonor the real experiences of service members.

Falsified and unverifiable accounts like *The Cage* and *The Long Walk* damage individual credibility and undermine the genre's trustworthiness. They highlight the critical need for authenticity and factual accuracy in military memoirs. This imperative is heightened by the

genre's capacity to shape public perception and historical comprehension of military events. As such, maintaining authenticity in military memoirs is not merely a literary concern but a matter of ethical responsibility and historical integrity.

A critical ethical consideration is the accuracy of the information presented. Whether intentional or accidental, factual inaccuracies can mislead readers and distort the public's understanding of military operations and experiences. Moreover, military memoirs hold a unique place in literature as they often serve as sources for understanding conflicts and the experiences of those who serve. Inaccuracies or embellishments can betray the reader's trust and potentially impact historical records and perspectives on military history.

You're Welcome for My Service

Part One

By: Joshua Macer

Prologue

Ten years. It's a span that, when spoken, seems so brief, yet it's heavy with the weight of a decade's worth of life lived in overdrive. During that time, I served four tours—three to the scorching sands of Iraq and one to the rugged, unforgiving terrain of Afghanistan. I knew I immediately wanted to join the Army after witnessing the horrors of 9/11. That day's events were a clarion call and, at seventeen-years-old, I answered the call, feeling compelled by an unshakable sense of duty to defend the nation that had been so violently attacked.

In the following years, my boots pressed into the soils of many lands. Germany's lush landscapes starkly contrasted with Fort Polk's Louisiana marshes and Fort Campbell's Kentucky fields. The Middle East is a blur of sand, mountains, verdant beauty, and blood. These places became chapters of the story of my life. Combat had become as familiar to me as a lover’s touch, yet one thing that I never got the hang of and still catches me off guard is when someone says, "Thank you for your service." It's such a simple, genuine phrase of gratitude acknowledging one’s military sacrifice but, for me, it always opens a floodgate of memories that threatens to drown me in a deluge of faces and places.

I don't feel like a hero. Never have. I’m just not one. In my eyes, I was a man just doing his job—no different from the farmer who tends fields or the teacher who shapes minds. I did what I felt needed to be done, and I would do it all over again without hesitation. But, every single time someone shakes my hand or pats my shoulder, my mind spirals, rifling through hundreds of scenarios ranging from camaraderie and absurdity to terror and loss. There are some moments I could share that might draw a laugh, such as the absurdity of laying on my back in the middle of a firefight with my foot stuck in a door I’ve kicked in.

And then there are times so intense that they're etched into my being—like the post-adrenaline rush of a firefight after being caught in a complex ambush and almost dying. I take a knee and throw up as my body shakes uncontrollably. Neither of these stories is glorious; if anything, they prove my point that I'm no hero.

Swirling in the shadows are the echoes of the faces of those I served with, my brothers and sisters in arms. Some were quiet professionals who wore their bravery like a cloak, and others like Viking warriors who wielded it like an axe. Some are no longer here, having paid the ultimate price in service to their country. They are the heroes.

Then come memories of local children, often filthy and wearing ill-fitting clothing, whose laughter or callous glares could momentarily lift the weight of war or damn us, depending on their intent. It reminds me of the innocence of those that we tried to protect—in doing so, many of us lost ours in the process. In that handshake, when someone looks me in the eye with genuine respect and says those four words, a torrent of emotions wash over me. Gratitude, guilt, pride, and sorrow mix in an internal cocktail that's hard to swallow.

Would they still offer their thanks if they knew every story and saw every image that flashed through my mind? Would they understand the complexity of the feelings that accompany my service? The overwhelming sense of humility subsides as I compose myself, and I always manage to respond—sometimes with a nod, sometimes with a word of thanks, or by saying, "It was my pleasure." Each reply is tinged with an awkwardness born from the conviction that, for some reason, I don't deserve their thanks. It's really true that it was my pleasure—the pleasure of serving something greater than myself, of being part of a lineage that traces back to the earliest days of our nation's history. But it was also my pain, my sacrifice, and my burden, shared by the few for the many.

I was happy to have stepped up. I hoped that by doing so, someone else may not have had to. Now, as I navigate civilian life, things are different. I carry with me the indelible marks of my service. Life has moved on, but I am not sure I really have. They say you can take the soldier out of the war, but you can't take the war out of the soldier. This rings true with every beat of my heart, each throb a reminder of where I've been and who I've become.

Yet, despite the complexity of my feelings, I'm aware that the handshake and the gratitude it conveys are not just for me. It's for all those who stood in line, who held the line, and especially for those who never made it home to hear "thank you" themselves. As I continue to move forward, embrace my family, and strive to cherish the life I've built, those four words will always resonate with a frequency that shakes my core. But I will continue to accept them, not just for myself, but on behalf of a collective spirit that has served throughout the annals of time—past, present, and future. For in every veteran's heart, there is a story, a sacrifice, and a commitment to duty that remains long after the uniform is put away. It's time to do more than accept it. It's time to embrace it: *You're Welcome for My Service*.

Every great story has a genesis, that moment when the ordinary flow of life is disrupted, giving way to something new, something defining. Though the beginning of my story is mine alone, sadly, countless others were taking the first steps of their story simultaneously and joining me on the same path. My beginning also marked so many tragic ends.

The World Get's A Lot Bigger

I was sixteen and navigating life as best as possible in Chandler, Indiana. The only home I'd ever known was a stereotypically small Midwest town that, if driving through, you'd blink and miss it unless you got stuck at its one-stop light.

I had just begun my school day in the unremarkable, drably carpeted room above my small Faith Christian school's gym. I was fighting sleep as my bulldog-faced trigonometry video teacher droned into white noise. As my head drooped, the principal and faculty faces, etched with a seriousness I had seldom seen, ushered in my peers and flicked on the news.

I'll never forget the goosebumps prickling my flesh as I turned my head from the T.V. and stared at the way the light filtered lazily through the tiny slit windows, indifferent to the tragic history that was unfolding. The images that burned into my retinas were surreal—towers collapsing, smoke billowing, and faces marked by fear and despair. It was September 11, 2001, a date that would become etched in the collective memory of a nation.

None of us older students learned anything of value that day besides the great evil that humanity is capable of. Faith Christian School was K-12, so children of all grades and ages were there that day. The laughing and cheerful faces of the younger students that we briefly watched stood a bright, painfully stark contrast to us older kids, the faculty, and parents coming to pick everyone up.

I lived a stone's throw from the school, so I walked home from school that afternoon. When I got home, the house was silent, and I was left alone with my thoughts; my folks were out of town on a cross-country delivery trip to Texas. I'm glad they were because I didn't really want to be around anyone. As I tried to process the enormity of what had happened in solitude, anger simmered within me and boiled over. It was an emotion I couldn't fully comprehend. I couldn't

concentrate and was so enraged that a few individual's decisions could affect so many. I was normally pretty reserved, but I was so wound up I paced back and forth in the living room, imagining scenarios of what I would do to help if I were in New York or what I would have done if I were on the planes. I didn't know anyone at the time personally affected by the attacks of that day, yet something had shifted in me as I watched the horror unfold. Before that day, the news was just background noise that my parents and other adults watched. I had never been concerned about anything outside of my family or town before, but now, the news demanded my full attention. I watched for hours, pacing and trying to make sense of the absolutely senseless. I tossed and turned that night, unable to sleep. I didn't realize I was taking the first steps of a new path.

Though a year ahead academically, I was only officially a sophomore, poised to graduate the following year. Until then, I hadn't realized just how simple and predictable even life was in Chandler. I worked as a library aide, a job that suited my quiet demeanor. But the tranquility of my routine life felt disrupted, like a still pond struck by an unforeseen stone. *My little bubble popped*. Before that day, I had never truly considered what being an American meant to me or about the principles of freedom, patriotism, and my place in the world. I suddenly realized I had taken things like that for granted and realized just how small I was.

The desire to serve surged within me, a call to action that felt as natural as breathing. Denying that desire made me feel like I was wearing a tie that was too tight. I knew I couldn't just sit idly by, but I was hindered by my age. In my newly ignited patriotism that manifested as rage, I wanted to make sure something like this wouldn't happen again. The thought of other people stepping up in my place to ensure another event like 9/11 didn't happen filled me with a deep, overwhelming shame. To me, doing nothing would make me culpable and a coward.

I wanted to join the Army like my uncle had, but seventeen was the earliest age I could. September 23 felt like an eternity away, not twenty-two days, but the resolve to join the military only grew stronger with time. I knew the biggest hurdle, however, wasn't my age; it was convincing my parents, especially my mom. Next to *Worrier* in the dictionary is a picture of my mom's beautiful face, creased in concern. There was no doubt in my mind that securing her signature on the parental consent form was going to be nearly impossible.

I came up with a plan. *Lie.* We were poor. Until that day, college had always been a dream of mine, one I had always thought was out of reach because of finances. The military presented a path, a means to an end. Specifically, I would use the National Guard as my stepping stone into the Army.

So, I lied. "Mom, I want to join the National Guard for the education benefits and to seize opportunities." Sure, I still wanted to go to college someday, so maybe I even lied a little to myself about my motives. I wasn't looking for a college degree, not anymore. I was after something else.

I was right; convincing my mom wasn't easy. My sweet, loving mother *lost her mind*. "I'm not going to send my son to die!" By February 2002, I convinced her to have a recruiter come out to the house and talk to us.

The recruiter that the National Guard sent was like a character out of a war movie: a muscle-bound, red-haired giant who could have easily graced any recruitment poster. "You're right, ma'am, you aren't." He avoided any talk of 9/11 or war. His tactic deftly focused on the key to winning my mom's signature—college. "All we need is your signature so your son can go to college for free and earn a paycheck working part-time." This guy was good; by the time he was through, *I* was almost convinced that college and part-time service were my plan.

Finally, she relented, moaning pitifully as she put pen to paper, “I’m signing your life away.”

I took the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) four days later at the National Guard Armory in Evansville. It is a similar test to the SAT or ACT but designed by the Department of Defense to find the whole skillset of a person. I scored 76 out of 99. None of that meant much to me, but the recruiter's eyebrows shot up when he read me the score.

"You're pretty dang smart. The current average score is 45." His statement would later seem ironic in the face of my decisions at MEPS (Military Entrance Processing Stations).

A few weeks later, I found myself at the Louisville MEPS to inprocess and enlist in the National Guard. I got to take two days off from school and work. The night before was a blast; the government put us potential recruits up in a Ramada near the MEPS for free and gave us meal vouchers. It was the first time I’d ever stayed in a hotel, out of town, by myself.

My recruiter dropped me off with my paperwork and said, “Be outside for pickup at 0330; don’t be late. Good luck.” With that, he drove off.

It was a blast meeting other teens my age who were interested in the military. A group of us walked to Joe’s Crab Shack for dinner and played cards until the early morning hours.

The next morning at MEPS was objectively boring; it involved medical tests and interviews, but for me, it was great. Sitting in a room for the first time with other young men like me, ready to fight, was humbling.

Thankfully, everything checked out. That’s when I met *him*. I can’t believe I don’t remember his name. “Macer,” a gravelly voice belonging to an overweight, balding Master Sergeant called. Outside of my uncle and the recruiter, he was the only other soldier I had ever spoken to.

I jumped up, “Yes, sir!”

His eyes turned to slits, “Cut that crap out—I work for a living!” (You have no idea how many times over the years I’ve heard or said that since then, but the novelty was new.) I can say it now: this guy was a walking cliché and likely near retirement. The Infantry is very… *picky* about physical fitness; I doubt he would have met the standard anymore. Seventeen-year-old me only saw something else as I took in his uniform and medals: a certified war hero. He definitely saw something in me—a sucker.

“Seventy-nine on your ASVAB? You can do anything you want with a score like that. What do you want?”

I stuck my chin out, “I want to be a 13 Foxtrot (Joint Fire Support Specialist); I want to be frontline but learn skills for outside the military.”

“No, you don’t.”

I frowned. *Yes, I did.*

“You want to be 11 Bravo—Infantry.”

“I really don’t.” I looked everywhere else in the room but at him.

His next words, echoing the cool lines of *Starship Troopers*, one of my favorite movies, steered me toward the Infantry. "The Infantry made me the man I am today," he said, gesturing toward the kaleidoscope of colored ribbons on his left breast I’d noticed before. I took another look and was hooked. Just then, he shifted slightly, and I saw a distinctive cobalt-blue cord on his right shoulder. Its vibrant blue, braided tightly and ending in a neat tassel, called for my attention just as a bright blue and silver rifle medal on his chest caught my eye as it shone, somehow gleaming in the dull fluorescence.

No one else at this MEPS had them. They looked awesome; I remember seeing them in almost every war movie I've watched. "These?" he asked, rubbing the medal and blue cord lovingly, "This is a Combat Infantry Badge—the CIB. Only the Infantry earns the privilege to wear it. You have to see combat. The other is the Blue Cord; it separates the Infantry from the rest of them."

Sold. "Infantry, it is, sir." I noticed a scowl creep across his broad face. "Sorry, I mean, Infantry, it is, Master Sergeant."

Now beaming, he patted my shoulder. "See, I knew it; you're a smart kid and a quick learner."

As I said, test scores and grades may have proven I was smart. Even that grizzled old Master Sergeant had said it (obviously a ploy). But I had just proven my intelligence. I based one of my most important life decisions on shiny "chest candy" and a line from one of my favorite films. In hindsight, I wonder how differently my path would have been had I not been so easily swayed. I know one thing for sure: if I had the choice, I wouldn't change a thing about my decision.

The Master Sergeant shuffled a four-page sheaf of papers toward me. It had a simple title for something that carried so much weight: *ENLISTMENT/REENLISTMENT DOCUMENT. ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES*. The pen *swooshed* as I swept it across the papers. The only sound I remember hearing was the scrape of my pen on paper.

I found myself standing tall, full of nervous energy and pride, in a small, blue-carpeted room with wood-paneled walls adorned with the symbols of our nation's military branches, bearing silent witness to the gravity of the moment. Around me was a diverse group of young men and women, all of us strangers to each other yet united by a common purpose.

The same Master Sergeant who convinced me to join the infantry stood at the front of the room behind a wooden podium emblazoned with the emblem of the Department of Defense. His presence was commanding now; his eyes shone, perhaps with pride, as he looked out at each of us. Clearing his throat, he began, his voice resonating with authority and respect for the ritual we were about to partake in. “Raise your right hand and repeat after me,” he instructed. I lifted my right hand, feeling the weight of the moment. As I raised my hand, I felt a surge of pride wash over me, flooding me with warmth. “I, state your name,” he began.

“I, Joshua Macer,” I echoed steadily, joining a chorus of voices.

We repeated the Oath of Enlistment line by line after the portly Master Sergeant.

“According to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice,” he concluded.

“According to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice,” I finished, my words resonating with a sense of finality and determination.

As I lowered my hand, I felt my pride surge and a newfound sense of identity. I was no longer just an individual; I was now a part of a larger entity: a defender of my nation, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead, or so I thought.

Sure, I had signed the contract, dotted the *i*'s, and crossed the *t*'s. I had raised my right hand, sworn that solemn oath, and was bound by obligation. But I was still untrained, seventeen, and still in high school. While the rest of the Military Services prepared for war, I impatiently waited for my high school graduation in May and for basic training in September.

Graduation

In the months leading up to graduation, I threw myself into preparation. I worked out relentlessly, transforming my six-foot-one-inch, one-hundred-thirty-pound frame into something more fitting for a soldier. I maybe gained four pounds and was still the least intimidating presence around—but I learned I could do *one-armed* pushups. It made my friends jealous and, in my mind, the girls fawn. Attending monthly drills at the National Guard armory became a part of my routine. I felt like each drill was one step closer to a new reality I was dying to begin. I'm not going to lie; I was more than a little surprised and definitely disappointed about how much sitting around I did when I wanted to be *training*.

Many in Chandler met my decision to join the military with disbelief. No one believed the skinny kid who worked at the library and loved writing and reading would be a good fit to join the armed forces when they were ramping up for war. But I didn't care what they thought, and God knows I surely didn't listen to them. At least my mom, for the moment, was content and mollified, thinking that her son was just using the military for a free college ride.

Anytime they started in, I zoned out and gave them my patented, "Oh, the Guard will be some of the last to deploy. That's why I chose that branch. College… blah, blah blah…" It had become second nature to spout it off and, normally, it would shut people up and convince them that I wasn't making a rash decision or going to wind up overseas. Looking back, it's nice to know people cared and didn't want me in harm's way; however, if not me, then who? I was convinced someone would have taken my place. I couldn't bear the guilt of someone doing what I was unwilling to do.

I started keeping a journal in January of 2002, a place to pour out my thoughts and chronicle the journey ahead. Three things dominated the pages of that pristine black velvet book:

the aspiration to become a writer, my impending graduation, and my enlistment in the military. I found that journal years later on a Thanksgiving trip home to my parents' house; I wiped off layers of dust and mildew and read it late one cold night on their back porch. I hunched forward, lustily taking in my long-forgotten history in the pale glow cast by the sole outdoor light. As I read, I was struck by how unbearably naïve I had been.

Back then, everything was so "important." I flipped through page after page of teen angst. *I'm in love, and she says she loves me too* (I was; she wasn't—don't even get me started on how I was seventeen and she was twenty-one). I came across one of my favorites, the very inaccurate: *I have everything planned for my future.* There was page after page of mundane entries like I *went to school today.* It was painful to read—not because of any bad memories—but because of how truly cringe-inducing my youthfully optimistic belief that everything in life would be perfect; I had no clue what the next ten years would bring.

The end of May came and, with it, my graduation. I was class valedictorian. That's something people normally brag about, I guess. But it really wasn't a big deal; I only had a 3.7 GPA and went to a private Christian school in a small, one-stoplight town. My graduating class was huge; there were three of us. *Slightly above-average GPA* aside, I still had the *honor* of giving the graduation speech. I stayed up late the night before graduation, furiously making notes.

On graduation night, I stood behind the pulpit of my school's Free Will Baptist worship hall, looking at an audience of familiar faces and their families I had known since the seventh grade. I started to speak, but instead, I threw the earmarked notecards up in the air. Not a soul stirred in the room as the cards fluttered to the short, olive-drab carpet of the sanctuary.

I can't tell you what I said; it mattered so little to me. I vaguely recall talking about the importance of the future and moving forward; I must have done decently; people stood, clapped, and cheered for the three of us. At that moment, I was just overwhelmed with how pointless all this felt to me. It was no longer a priority. Delivering that speech felt more like a farewell to one life and the beginning of another. I should have been excited, but I was already itching to move on.

The summer that followed was an agonizing whirlwind of impatient waiting, each day a step closer to basic training to the fulfillment of the path I had chosen. I wrote. I worked out. I dated every girl who showed any interest in me (there weren't too many). Each book I shelved at the library felt like a small tick on an imaginary checklist. I felt like I was pretending at a life I didn't want.

Processed Meat

September 2, the day I had so impatiently longed for, had arrived. It was time for me to ship off to basic training at what was then Fort Benning, Georgia. In 2023, a congressionally mandated Naming Commission renamed ten installations previously named after Confederate generals. Fort Benning was renamed Fort Moore in honor of General Hal Moore and his wife. Most of that day was a blur. Don't ask me how, but I found myself standing inside Columbus airport, being rounded up in a large holding area near the airport's exit with other recruits by uniformed personnel.

Spoiler alert: my lack of detail may seem like it isn't a big deal to me, but it is; heck, it was only the third flight I had ever taken. I don't even remember telling my folks *bye*. My memory is just *blank* in some spots. I guarantee I will be the first to admit it if I come up with nothing. You'll notice this is an annoying recurring theme for me. At that point in my life, I had a mind that was like a steel trap. But I now suffer from the effects of surviving multiple IEDs and EFPs (Improvised Explosive Devices and Explosively Formed Penetrators) attacks. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is an unseen scar that I carry from those attacks. Those IEDs and EFPs sprang that steel trap mind of mine years ago. On any given day, I find large swathes of my memories inaccessible. I'll sometimes walk into a room and forget what I am there for or be mid-sentence and just trail off because I can't recall what I was saying. Imagine being surrounded by dense fog, all alone in a rowboat in the middle of a vast lake, and trying to navigate to shore: that's my mind. Just know that it is a thousand times more annoying for me not to remember than for you not to know the details—back to the story.

A stern-faced, skinny staff sergeant grabbed my arm and pointed toward a series of buses, "Grab your bags and load up." His curved-billed hat partially shielded his eyes.

The curved-billed hat-wearing soldier *calmly, quietly,* and efficiently demanded respect and exuded authority.

There is no way that was a drill sergeant… was it? They were supposed to scream and be in your face, beat you down. The hat didn't look right, either. Drill sergeants had those round brown hats. These people didn't have those. They were quiet professionals. I suddenly felt great. This was going to be easy. Everything I saw on TV and in the movies was apparently a lie.

It. Was. Not.

The late summer Georgia humidity washed over me as I stepped out into the night and onto the Greyhound-style charter buses waiting outside for us. I enjoyed a peacefully quiet bus ride as we were transported to Fort Benning; anytime there was light from a lamppost or building, I squinted out the window, hoping for a glimpse of the base during the short fifteen-minute drive away.

Once on base, the buses stopped beside a sign that read "30TH Adjutant General Battalion." As we were herded off the buses into the semblance of a group, Quiet Hat announced, "Welcome to 30TH Adjutant General Reception Battalion; here, you will begin the transformation from civilian volunteers by preparing for development into disciplined, competent, professional, well-trained soldiers who are prepared to become valued members of the Profession of Arms." I had goosebumps; it sounded so heroic to my virginal ears. It really meant tons of processing paperwork, vaccinations, and equipment issuing.

After months of thirsting for this day, I was gulping down the Kool-Aid; my God, it tasted sweet. I wouldn't have known it then, but what followed may have been the most boring week of my ten-year military career.

The 30TH AG was the stop-and-go where all of us "in processors" had to go before *actually* heading out to basic training. The 30TH AG was the first integral part of becoming a soldier, the administrative portion. Getting paid is pretty important. I filled out dozens of papers and forms. I plopped down in a barber chair and was issued my first uniform and buzz haircut by a trimmer with a vacuum hose attached; within seconds, all my hair was gone. I hadn't begun training yet, but at least I was starting to *look* the part of a soldier. I was so proud when I was handed my first set of dog tags. I don't think I ever wore anything as much as I did those. And it wasn't a complete waste of time. I learned a lot of helpful stuff, like my hat size was seven and a quarter, and I had high arches on my feet. By the week's end, I had memorized my Social Security number. That's been extremely valuable to know when filling out paperwork.

No one got in our faces or yelled at us the whole time—definitely not what I expected.

There were highlights, of course, like the vaccinations. The military makes sure its members are inoculated for any number of preventive *unseen enemies* that could take them out medically. We proceeded, single file, into a large windowed room. It was covered wall-to-wall with blue padded mats. *Weird.* I'd never seen gym equipment in an office-type setting before. There were ten or so medics around the room at "stations." They were giving injections, vaccinations, or other goodies via needle. A young medic stood at one of the stations, about fifteen people in front of me in line, poking a series of needles into a hulking, muscle-bound Latino. He smashed unceremoniously into the person before him on the third jab, crumbling like a cookie onto the pads. *Okay, so the mats make sense.* Near the end of the vaccination trail, people dropped their shorts and exposed their cheeks to a tiny female medic.

"Look, boys," her voice boomed for someone so small, "stop clenching those cheeks; it doesn't impress me—it will just make you bleed." Her words rang prophetic as seconds later, a

thin, bright red fountain of blood erupted out of someone's butt cheeks and splattered across the blue mats in front of me. "We got a bleeder!" her booming voice was nearly drowned out by the other medics laughing. None of the shots bothered me—the only thing I clenched during the ordeal was my jaw.

The final requirement before we could head to Sand Hill to actually *begin* basic training was to pass a mock PT test. PT stands for Physical Training. Almost every duty day in the Army includes at least one session of working out. You have to be fit to fight. The tests are given to gauge a soldier's physical fitness level of standard.

Hopefully, growing up, you were told uplifting things like, "It doesn't matter if you what you look like," or "It's ok if you fail as long as you try your hardest." For most people who get told that, it's absolutely true—unless you join the military.

Looks *do* matter—there are rigid weight and grooming standards. If you're an overweight soldier, you won't be for long—you'll either drop it or the military will drop you. The same applies to PT tests.

Thankfully, I had prepared for basic training; I was ready to go. I got to my station and got ready. I knocked out twenty pushups like nothing.

"Get up," my grader said nonchalantly.

At the next station, I dropped to my back and started doing sit-ups. I counted to thirty in my head. My grader wrote something in his notebook, "That's enough, next." I then completed a one-mile run within the time limit. I jogged part of it! I killed it! *Too easy!* I had no clue they only checked for the bare minimum to ensure recruits could move forward.

Still, no one yelled or got in my face.

The next day, they packed us like cattle into a large metal trailer with our duffle bags strapped to our chests and our backs and sent us to Sand Hill for basic training. It *really* was a repurposed cattle car with a few rows of wooden bench seats and metal bars to hold on to; the military used them as mass transportation for years. When the vehicles stopped at our destination, shadowed figures outside shimmied with clasps on the doors and flung them wide open. The slew of swear words and shouting that greeted us blew my mind.

Let’s Get Basic

It's widely agreed that the military has elevated the use of curse words to an art form. While the Navy may have set the bar high, giving birth to the phrase "swear like a sailor," I argue that each branch brings its own unique spin to swearing.

I grew up being told, “Swearing is a sign of stupidity.” I disagree. The military’s use of cussing is as academic as it is creative and reflects a breadth of imagination and a depth of emotional expression that could easily rival the works of the great poets and playwrights. To hear a seasoned soldier unleash a torrent of cussing effortlessly weaved into everyday conversation is to witness a master class in verbal dexterity.

While sharing the full spectrum of military communication is tempting, I'm mindful of the impact on our forests. After all, should this memoir ever go to print, it would take an undue number of pages to do justice to the creative expletives that peppered our daily dialogue. I'm all for saving the trees and the environment. Feel free to use your imagination moving forward.

“Get out of that truck, you piece of garbage, worthless privates! *That’s putting it mildly.*

I had found the drill sergeants and their intimidating round hats. Guess what? They got in our faces. They treated us like crap. These professionals, not quiet but loud, boisterous, and *highly* trained, tore us apart and built us back from the ground up. It was a miserable fourteen weeks; I had the time of my life.

Some things stick out more than others after all these years of my time spent at basic. A lot of them are those stories that make me wonder whether or not folks would thank us for our service if they heard them. For example, we had free time to do our laundry one Sunday afternoon. I was minding my business, lost in thought in the barracks laundry room, a sea of white washing machines and dryers parted by a long concrete basin lined with faucets in the

middle of the room. I ignored the fifteen or so other recruits doing laundry as I daydreamed about being about showing up at home in uniform. I had just switched my freshly cleaned clothes over to the dryer when I heard Perry's guffawing.

Perry was a private from my platoon. He was a really loud guy with an infectious laugh. He was… nice. Some folks choose to be infantry; some are required to because their ASVAB is too low. I'm not sure which one of those he was, but I have a pretty good idea.

My reverie disturbed, I looked up to see that Perry had jumped up on the sink basins and was holding a large blue capful of Tide detergent. Fifteen people had turned into about fifty. They crowded the laundry room around him, laughing and cheering.

"You won't do it, Perry," someone yelled.

Hands began to shoot up in the crowd with money.

"I'll give you twenty bucks if you drink it," shouted someone else.

Without even waiting to see if they were serious, Perry dramatically thrust up the large cap of Tide again.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!" He roared like a maniac, tilted his head back, and drank the detergent like it was a shot of whiskey. He shook the empty cap upside down above his head, all while laughing and smiling like the Cheshire cat.

His sweet moment of triumph was cut short as his face contorted into the most disgusted, pitiful look I had ever seen on a grown man's face at the time. Desperately, Perry clambered from the wash basin, thrust his face under the sink, and ran water into his gaping maw.

Thick soap bubbles began to pour out his mouth and shower down his face. I was in the middle of dying from laughter when a chorus of voices yelled out in unison, *At ease!* The room was silent except for the running water from the faucet.

A solitary drill sergeant entered the laundry room. His eyes barely contained a burning fire. *Someone had already ratted Perry out.* He slowly surveyed the concrete jungle like a predator on the hunt, searching for its prey.

His cold, calculating eyes scanned the recruits, landing on Private Perry, who stood there with a look of utter bewilderment as the bubbles kept spewing from his wide-open mouth. But it wasn't Perry's bewildered expression that caught the drill sergeant's attention; it was the soap bubbles cascading magically from Perry's mouth. The drill sergeant's eyes, which usually concealed a veneer of stern professionalism, barely hid the shock within them.

In that surreal moment, a tomb's hush descended as time stood still. All of us trainees were frozen in fear.

All of us except Private Perry; he hadn't even noticed, nor would he have likely cared.

The silence was broken only by the gentle pop of soap bubbles bursting against the cold barracks floor as they poured from the gambler's mouth. Then, the drill sergeant, once again the hunter, in complete control, let out an exasperated sigh. With a shake of his head, he pointed squarely at Perry, saying, "I hope you die," before briskly turning on his heel and exiting the room, leaving us to our own devices and the mystery of Perry's sudden transformation into a soap bubble maestro.

As our drill sergeant walked away without his prey, we couldn't help but exchange stunned glances, thanking whatever deity we worshipped that we were still alive. Perry, meanwhile, continued to blow bubbles, his expression a mix of confusion and amusement. By then, Perry had started to laugh between hiccups.

I wonder where Perry is, and if he thinks back fondly on his own, *You're Welcome for My Service* moments. I sometimes can't help but be amazed that the nation put its faith in us.

As I said, drill sergeants excelled at breaking us down to build us back up. Before week three of training, I had full-blown Stockholm Syndrome. I respected my round-hatted instructors now more than I feared them. Near the beginning of week two, I began feeling a bit under the weather; it started with a tickle in the throat and a slight cough. But after a week and some change, my body ached, my head pounded, and my cough became a constant, hacking companion while my lungs steadily felt like vices were squeezing them. I did what any "hardcore" private would and acted invincible when one of my drill sergeants heard me trying to remove my lungs out my mouth forcefully and asked how I was feeling.

"Good to go, Drill Sergeant," I spat out between fits of coughing. There was no way I wanted to have a target on my back by going to sick call the next morning to get checked out by the medics.

He eyed me up and down with a squint and gave me his expert opinion. "Yeah, Macer, you'll be fine; you've probably got a cold. I've seen this every training cycle. We have the gas chamber tomorrow; any crap you have floating around in your lungs won't be in there long after that. Hang in there; it will clear you up." Without a doubt, Infantry drill sergeants make for excellent warfighters and trainers—however, they are not doctors (except for maybe on the battlefield or in alcohol-heavy situations).

The next day was the gas chamber, the place where theory meets practice, in a soldier's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) preparedness and training. Before us, it silently loomed the dark, stone-built structure with windows sealed shut, designed specifically to contain the 2-chlorobenzylidene Malononitrile, more commonly known as *tear gas*. We had been briefed on what to expect before forming up in front of the building.

"Gas, gas, gas!" The drill sergeants barked in unison. The words echoed through the woods. The urgency in their voices snapped me from the fog of sickness hanging like clouds around my head and to action as training kicked in. I scrambled to don our protective gas masks within the eight-second requirement.

Adorned with our masks, we entered the chamber single file. The door closed behind us with a resolute thud, separating us from the sweet, fresh woodland air outside. The room was empty except for us trainees, the drill sergeants, and what looked like a coffee can with a tiny flame under it. I was standing in the front and focused on the coffee can. The room was still and quiet. I saw nothing from the can, yet the air quickly grew heavy with an ominous, ethereal fog as the presence of CS gas made visible. Despite the mask snugly stuck against my face, I could detect the faintest hint of its acrid scent.

We were then put through our paces—jumping jacks, running on the spot, anything to elevate our breathing and test the integrity of our masks.

“Lift up your masks, state your names, ranks, and Social Security numbers. Once everyone is done, replace your mask and clear the filters,” a squat drill sergeant instructed. I couldn’t recognize them with their mask on in the dimly lit room. We did as we were told, and amazingly, I detected only a lingering trace, the merest *hint* of the gas, no more perceptible than before removing the mask. “This is to show you your equipment works and will save your life with proper training and when it is taken care of,” Masked Drill Sergeant said.

I found myself thinking *these things really work*, almost in disbelief at my mask's effectiveness. I was protected and insulated from the gas that sought to burn and choke. For a moment, I thought we might be the one group that got to get away without having to take our masks off.

"Now, this is to show you what happens if you *do not* care for your equipment or maintain your training. Remove your masks and place them back in your mask carriers." We did as instructed as quickly as possible. To our credit, all of us had our masks properly stowed away and were standing back at attention within seconds. I waited in tense silence. Slowly, one by one, people could no longer hold their breath, and the sounds of choking and fits of coughing replaced the room as they tried to breathe.

Finally, I could hold my breath no longer; exhaling, I desperately gasped for air, filling my lungs full of gas. The sensation was immediate and overwhelming. The gas clawed its way down my throat, ripped apart my lungs, seared my eyes, and infiltrated every pore. Breathing became a Herculean task, each inhalation a fiery torment.

My drill sergeant was right; it *definitely* cleared me up.

I was reborn as I emerged from the chamber. I emerged an eternity of minutes later, gasping and flailing, a grotesque figure with thick strands of green snot streaming from my nose and coughing so violently I feared my lungs might burst. It was a baptism of tear gas, phlegm, and snot that I fiercely hoped scoured away the illness that had built up inside my lungs. I felt great but exhausted.

Apparently, the healing powers of the gas chamber don't apply to serious medical issues. The next day, I was a wreck. Despite the drill sergeant's assurances and how great I felt after the gas chamber, my condition deteriorated overnight as I slept. I couldn't muster the strength to rise from my bunk, let alone stumble out for the PT formation. It took the assistance of a fellow recruit, happy to break the monotony of his training, to escort me to the aid station, a journey that felt more like a death march than a quest for healing. I was ticked off I was being forced to go to the aid station. I had done everything I could to avoid it, *including the gas chamber.*

I do not recall much of the rest of that day besides the shock on the medic's face as he took my temperature—104 degrees—a number that seemed to upset the medics, and that I took a ride in an ambulance to the base hospital.

I woke up in the hospital the next day. It was like surfacing from a deep, dark pool, the world slowly coming into focus. I'd been sick before, but not like that, at least not since I was a little kid. I was so out of it that I didn't even know what was wrong with me. One of the nurses who came to check my vitals simply glanced at my chart and said, "You've got double lung pneumonia." It carried the weight of a death sentence in the context of my completing basic training. For four days, I impatiently lay in that hospital bed, dreading being recycled (having to start over my training).

On the fourth day, I was discharged. Not a single drill sergeant mentioned me being gone. I didn't dare question it. I completed the rest of my training on time and with my original group.

I won't go into any more details about my basic training experience here because, well, it's *basic*. If someone wants to know more, ask a veteran or soldier what it's like, or better yet, enlist. However, I did graduate. *You're Welcome for My Service.*

Graduation Part Two

The day of my graduation from Fort Benning was marked with the standard military pageantry that could swell most unprepared American hearts with pride. My mom and dad surprised me and made the long drive from Chandler, even though we only briefly got to see each other.

The ceremony was nothing short of spectacular (especially for the family members; I just marched around and stood there while). A Bradley Fighting Vehicle, a tracked beast of modern warfare, tore across the parade field, roaring loudly as it announced its commanding and formidable presence. It halted in a display of power and precision, ejecting soldiers who hit the ground running for a mock battle that unfolded before the audience's eyes. Camouflaged snipers, hidden in plain sight, later revealed their positions, showcasing the element of surprise they wielded like a weapon.

From the stands, I could hear the collective gasp of awe and smattering of applause from the families gathered that mingled with the martial music and the announcer's voice narrating the unfolding scene. I was able to catch the sight of my parents, and it anchored me in that moment; their faces were welcome beacons of home and normalcy in the sea of uniformity.
Normally, there are two ceremonies over two days, with trainees getting a pass to spend time with visiting family and friends on the first evening. But for whatever reason, they combined the award ceremony with graduation day, so none of us got that precious time off.

As the ceremony drew to a close, families were allowed out onto the parade field to find their new infantryman and place the coveted blue cord on their shoulders. I found myself enveloped in the warm embrace of my mother. Her eyes, brimming with tears of joy and smile, were a sight I had sorely missed during the long, grueling weeks of basic training.

"I love you, son," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. Her words comforted her more than me, helping to assure her that her son was indeed fine.

Dad, ever the stoic figure, offered his praise in a manner that was quintessentially him—a man of few words but deep feelings. "Good job, son," he said, clapping me on the back with a pride that needed no embellishment. He quietly buttoned the blue cord on my uniform and stepped back. I was an infantryman.

Misery

My folks offered to drive me home. I have no doubt it was born from a desire to make up for the time lost during training and their trip to make financial sense. But, in that moment, swollen with an equally arrogant and immature pride, I made a choice that proved the Army doesn't teach everything.

"No, that's okay," I brushed off their offer with a casualness I still regret, even though they never took offense. "Just take my bags home for me. I want to fly back and spend some time alone." In my hubris, I really wanted to show off, mistaking my new rank and the uniform it adorned as symbols of invincibility and importance.

As I sat in the Atlanta airport's USO, the reality of my decision settled in. Surrounded by the transient population of soldiers and their families, my initial flush of pride gave way to a reflective understanding. I was the lowest-ranking person in uniform. It was also glaringly obvious I was fresh out of basic training. Private Second Class Macer wasn't the big deal I thought I was in the grand scheme of things. Though worn with pride, my uniform was a reminder of just how low on the totem pole I was and not a ticket to the admiration I had envisioned. I had built it up so much in my mind that I'm glad it happened like that, the first day out. It set me straight.

Within my first week of being back home, I broke my mom's heart. Well, *almost*. As I got older and before I left out on my own, I often would lay or sit in her bed with her and talk for a few minutes at the end of the night (she said I *never* talked to her enough—she was right). Well, that particular night, she called me into her room for a quick chat.

"Son, I am glad to have you back home where you belong." She patted my back a little harder than normal while she said it.

Sigh. I gently took her hand, which wasn't patting my back, and held it tightly. "Mom, I am joining the Army. I really like the military. I had a blast during basic training; it only proved what I already knew, that this is what I'm supposed to do. I know it."

She shrank in front of me as my words sunk in, and the skin around her eyes tightened as she desperately struggled to hold back the tears that threatened to overflow. Yet, despite her best efforts, a single tear managed to escape. I was eighteen, an adult, and I could do what I wanted now, but I still felt horrible letting my mom down. "This was your plan all along?"

She was on to me! I did what any loving son would do when they saw they were on the verge of breaking their mom's heart. I doubled down on my lie that convinced her to sign the dotted line for me to join the military. "Absolutely not, Mom. I never expected this. But I will at least try to give the original plan we agreed to a try."

I was honest about that. I did try, and I was miserable.

In the following months, I subjected myself to what I felt was the mediocrity of living a "civilian" life during wartime. While I don't necessarily feel that way now, I sure did as a fresh young soldier right out of basic training with something to prove to himself.

I laughed. I smiled. I joked. I pretended like I wasn't bothered at all by the fact that I was sitting around doing nothing. The first time when I lied to my mom to get her to sign off on me joining the military, I felt like I was being rightfully untrue to her. When I lied to her this second time, it felt more like I was only being untrue to myself. I might have convinced her again, but it wasn't working for me. So, I pretended.

Now that I was done with basic training, I was back to a "normal" grind except for one weekend a month and two weeks of annual training in the summer with the National Guard. I entertained two civilian jobs in quick succession that made me hate being a part-time soldier. The

first of those jobs saw me on an assembly line of sorts at “UnitedTaste” in Evansville, Indiana, near home. It is well-known as one of the world's leading developers, packagers, and retailers of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) and rations destined for militaries globally. Each MRE contains a full-course meal, including everything from an entrée, snack, tiny Tabasco bottle, and gum. They are designed to satisfy even the *least* discerning taste buds and give a fighting soldier enough calories in one meal to fight all day. At the time, MREs were still a tasty novelty to me. My subsequent years in the military taught me that MRE are a mix of necessity and convenience, offering a gastronomic experience that was, for lack of a better term, bowel-clogging.

Despite their reputation, these meals had a certain charm, providing sustenance in environments where the luxury of choice was non-existent. My relationship with these pre-packaged lifelines grew from mere acquaintance to a form of survival over the years. But for a span of five short days, I hated their existence.

Those five hate-filled days, not so ironically, align with my amazingly long-lived five-day tenure at UnitedTaste. Upon being hired (on the spot, they had a grossly high turnover rate), the manager laid out the terms plainly: "You'll be working seven days a week, twelve-hour shifts until further notice." To some, this might have sounded like a golden opportunity, a chance to earn and contribute. However, to me, it felt like a prison sentence. I've since spent four grueling years in combat, in locales that others might deem the most forsaken corners of the Earth. Reflecting on those times, I can say with certainty that I would choose any single one of those locations and the harrowing uncertainty of war over the monotonous certainty of that assembly line in that godforsaken warehouse.

The employees on the line at UnitedTaste, those hardworking souls, either driven by a sense of patriotism or the sheer necessity of livelihood, deserved every bit the same amount of

respect as the military does. They endured day in and day out a grueling work schedule in an unforgiving factory, performing a critical function that supports the military machine from behind the scenes. My hat goes off to them, for I quickly realized I was not cut from the same cloth.

I spent the majority of my first day there cutting my arms open on the thick brown cardboard boxes designed to hold the MREs and bleeding all over. The line of boxes moved quickly, and I only had to thrust two packages of MREs into the boxes as they rolled by. But, every single time, without fail, when I shoved the brown plastic packaged rations into the slightly darker brown cardboard packing, I would scrape my arms against the rough edges of their openings.

Every few minutes that afternoon, a loud whistle would ring, and the line would halt as someone had to pull bloody packaging boxes from the line. I was by myself and had no idea what I was supposed to do or even that they were stopping because of me. I was enjoying the breaks, though.

After a few hours of this, one of the employees, an older woman with a creased brow and straight hair that had begun to grey at the temples, came up to me and eyed my arms with a sigh. She handed me a pair of what looked like hand-sewn blue jean-looking leg pieces.

I had no idea what they were. “Um… thanks?”

She saw I didn’t get the picture and held them up, showing me. “Jean protective sleeve covers—I made these myself. Take them. Please. For the love of God, He knows you need them more than I do. Maybe we can avoid stopping the line every ten minutes to pull your bloody boxes off of them. Don’t tell anyone it was you; I don’t want you getting in trouble.”

I was appreciative of her kindness, but with how I felt that day, I'm still not sure if her actions were a kindness or a curse. The arm protectors worked wonders, though. If only such simple armor could have protected us in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As the war on terrorism was escalating, the itch to switch to the Army and full-time military service grew unbearable. Yet, there I was, stationed not on the battlefield or overseas but on the assembly line, my arms shielded by makeshift protectors fashioned from old blue jeans, *supporting* the war effort I craved to be a part of. Day in and day out for an eternity of a standard work week, I packed box after box of MREs, each destined to support troops—possibly a noble cause, yet one that felt painfully removed from the action.

A profound sense of clarity washed over me on the fifth day of my brief career in packaging MREs. As the alarm blared in the early hours of the morning, a decisive moment had arrived. With a flick of my wrist, I silenced the alarm and sank back into the depths of my bed, a smile spreading across my face. *Negative.* I had made my decision. I quit. I did not even bother giving my two weeks' notice, but I did at least call and tell them about my decision after I woke up.

"Thank you for actually letting us know you are quitting. Most people don't even bother. We will mail out your check this week." I couldn't believe the person I spoke to actually thanked me for telling them I quit; apparently, most people who quit just vanished.

I wish I could say, "Yeah, I'm just good like that." Nope, I wanted to make sure I got paid. A week later, I got a hefty paycheck for my sixty hours of labor—a handsome sum for five days' work—that was not at all worth the time spent earning it. The realization had crystalized: that was not the life I was meant to lead.

That moment of sleepy rebellion against the expected path was a small turning point. In my mind, it reaffirmed my unwavering desire to serve in a capacity that extended beyond the manufacturing line, to be in the thick of the action, defending the values and freedoms of our nation.

I promised myself to try one more job and see how things played out before packing my bags permanently. That's how I found myself working at the front desk of a "Budgetel" in Evansville. It actually wasn't a horrible job. I enjoyed meeting diverse and interesting people.

A long-term visitor who took a special interest in me was a former televangelist-turned-playboy construction manager for roadway projects. He would bring me Jack Daniels mixed with Coke that I would politely sip on as he told me stories of "the good ole days."

One day, he came downstairs a bit more buzzed than normal when he handed me his routine Jack and Coke. I settled in for another night of storytelling, but he said, "Back when I was preaching, life was great. Oh, well." Something in his eyes made me think that maybe the good old days weren't so good for him to wind up here. I could see a pain in his eyes that neither of us wanted to talk about; he didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask.

I must have seen him bring seven women back to the hotel in a month. One night, he stuck out his tongue and smiled. It put Gene Simmons to shame. "This is why I'm such a ladies' man."

I tried not to gag into my nightly mixed drink.

A few short weeks after that unique statement, I was watching nights at the front desk; the quiet of my late shift was broken by a young woman pushing open one of the glass doors. Her slim figure carried her confidently to the desk, where she greeted me with a smile that seemed to light up the dimly lit lobby. She was stunning.

"What's your cheapest room rate for the night?" she asked, her voice soft and alluring.

I quickly tapped some keys to pull up the room rates, aware of her expectant gaze. "So, the absolute best price I can do for the night is $49.99 plus tax," I replied, meeting her eyes.

There was a brief pause, a moment of consideration, before she responded, "That's a bit out of my price range."

I hated upsetting someone so gorgeous, but I maintained a professional demeanor and offered what assistance I could. "I'm sorry, ma'am, that's the best I can do. There may be a few hotels running specials down the road," I suggested, hoping to provide her with alternatives.

However, my words seemed to bring little comfort. For a split second, she frowned slightly, her disappointment evident. Her expression quickly turned pouty as she leaned closer, and her finger traced a path down my shoulder in a gesture that was both bold and unsettling. "I'm not interested in staying on Farris Avenue [a well-known spot for prostitutes that I was *not* talking about]," she stated, her voice taking on a persuasive tone. "I was thinking of something a little cheaper, like free. I'll make it worth your while, baby."

Her proposition hung in the air, a test of professional boundaries and personal ethics. I took a deep breath, steadying myself. "I am sorry, but that is the best I can do," I reiterated firmly, trying not to choke on my tongue. The room was almost as hot as she was.

“Fine, whatever, I’ll find someplace else,” she said, clutching her purse and stomping out

It took me far too long to realize what the woman wanted the room for and why she was willing to go so far to get the room free. An icy chill shot down my neck as the door opened, and she walked out.

“You’re an idiot,” my manager said the next day when I showed up for work.

A fallen televangelist who would ply me with drinks and stories, and a prostitute's far-from-tempting proposition wasn't enough to keep me happy as happy as my manager. I quit a few days later after I received a phone call from the National Guard armory.

The call was from one of the section sergeants at the National Guard unit I was in. "Congratulations, Private Macer, you are being activated and are ordered to report to the Armory Monday morning at 0600 to head to Camp Atterbury [at the time, one of two full-time National Guard training bases] to help facilitate deployment operations for troops."

I was ecstatic and honed in on two key things from that conversation: *activation* and *deployment*. One meant full-time, and the other meant going overseas. I relished the chance for both.

This was my big moment. This is finally happening. I sat my parents down and told them what I knew. That went over really well.

"Mom, Dad, I have no idea how long it will be before I come back home or even what I'm gonna be doing. There is a war going on, after all. All I know is that I am finally needed.

Any talk of war bothered my mom. Her first and most pressing question was, "Are you going to war, son?"

They hadn't told me the details of what we would be doing when we got to Camp Atterbury, so I answered truthfully. "I'm not sure, Mom. I doubt it, but you never know." The poor woman had nothing to say. For that short weekend before my activation, I thought that if things went well, I wouldn't even need to switch branches! I was brand new to the military and full of excitement for what lay in store for my future with the National Guard.

What I got was a full-time dose of disappointment. That Monday afternoon, the proud infantryman Private Joshua Macer reported for duty to the Camp Atterbury dining facility to

assist with preparing meals and KP duty (KP is a fun little acronym that stands for Kitchen Pickup. It means washing tons of dishes, and cleaning up the kitchen and dining room).

In my excitement, I hadn't even remotely considered the possibility this was a crap assignment being "voluntold" (volunteered without having the option of refusing). Day after day blurred together as I slung food amidst the clatter and clamor of excitement and nervous activated guardsmen finalizing their training before shipping out overseas. I wanted to be the one preparing to go overseas. Instead, I found myself enveloped in the scent of industrial cleaner and overcooked vegetables, far from the heroics I had imagined in my anger on 9/11. This wasn't just a deviation from my plan; it felt like a derailment.

I had at least been prepared to be disappointed with my jobs at UnitedTaste and Budgetel—this one took me by surprise. I felt betrayed, like I was caught in friendly fire. The notion of serving food and cleaning up after my fellow guardsmen while they prepared for the real action was a pill too jagged and bitter to swallow. Each day, as I watched soldiers gearing up for deployment, my deep sense of embarrassment took a deeper root within my soul. I was supposed to be among them, sharing in the weight of that anticipation, not watching from the sidelines or, worse, behind the serving line.

This wasn't the military experience I had signed up for. I was miserable, caught in a loop of menial tasks that seemed to mock my aspirations and even my short infantry training. Look, I wasn't stupid; I knew that there were duties and tasks that weren't fun, and would be no matter what branch of service I was in. But this, literally, wasn't my job. I wasn't a cook. I could deal with occasional KP duty. But there is a fine line between duty and when it becomes your job. That line became very blurred at Camp Atterbury.

My self-imposed sense of isolation from my peers grew with each passing day. The individuals passing through daily were gearing up for something great, something meaningful, while I was stuck in what felt like an endless loop of menial tasks. The difference I longed to make seemed just out of reach. It was during this low point that one of the guys from our armory, a corporal who was never without a dip of tobacco in his mouth, offered me a case of Bud Light to cheer me up if I would cover buying him some chewing tobacco. I was eighteen, still underage (and no longer had former televangelists supplying me), so I jumped at the chance.

That evening in my tiny concrete barracks room, after yet another long day of KP duty, I decided to crack open a bottle of beer. My appetite had vanished in the wake of my disappointment and dealing with food all day, but I thought maybe the beer would offer a small reprieve and help me sleep some. The reality was far from it. I drank three bottles while reading in bed before getting tired and drifting off to sleep, dreading another day.

The middle of the night brought a rude awakening. I stumbled into the shared barracks bathroom, a sickening sense of urgency propelling me forward as I vomited into each sink on my way to the closest latrine stall. Stale beer was the only thing I could taste as I purged my system of the day's only intake. I had thought it was just a bad beer, or maybe I had drunk too much (I had only been “drunk” a few times before), but the relentless vomiting and subsequent bouts of diarrhea that wrecked me pointed to something a bit more flu-like.

I spent hours at the aid station the next morning dry heaving and taking bags of IV fluid before finally being released and put on quarters for forty-eight hours (quarters is essentially bedrest). It gave me the break I wanted from the kitchen, but it’s definitely not what I had in mind for a few days off.

“The Pukening” was a turning point for me. Not only did I gain a five-year aversion to beer, the very smell of it triggering an uncontrollable gag reflex, but I also came to a stark realization about my current trajectory in the military. I already knew I didn’t want to be a part-time soldier. This full-time “opportunity” definitely wasn’t for me and certainly wasn't what I had signed up for. It was time. I did my due diligence and tried to be a dutiful son. The embarrassment of my position and the physical misery of the flu crystallized my determination to change my path.

While on quarters, I scheduled a meeting with an Army recruiter, desperate for a way out of the endless cycle of KP duty and into a role that felt more in line with my aspirations. Surprisingly, the transition was far simpler than I had anticipated. The recruiter was efficient and assured me that he would handle the paperwork and reenlistment information.

“This will be way easier than joining the National Guard was, and trust me, you won’t be stuck here playing cook and doing dishes.” He was infantry, too, and although he didn’t say it, I could tell he ached to get back on the line to deploy. He was a staff sergeant without a CIB. He wanted to fight, too. “You’ll be in Iraq before you know it.”

He definitely knew what to say. Not that it mattered: my mind was made up before he even walked in the door. He gave me the lifeline I had been craving, a chance to reset and start anew on a path that felt more authentic to the dreams I had harbored when I first enlisted.

As I sat across from the recruiter in my tiny barracks room, discussing the logistics of my transition, a sense of relief washed over me. It was as if I was finally taking back control of my life and steering it in a direction that promised not just personal fulfillment but a genuine contribution to the efforts I had longed to be part of.

“Can I choose my duty station?”

He didn’t even look up from his paperwork. “You can choose from what's available; there aren’t many right now. What did ya have in mind first?”

I knew immediately the one I wanted. “Germany, Sergeant.”

This time, he looked up and smiled. “Good call. I spent four years in Germany. It’s available. Done.”

I smiled as I signed the paperwork and shook his hand.

He walked away and said over his shoulder, “I will be in contact. Congratulations, you won’t regret this.”

The embarrassment of my initial assignment still lingered since I had to wait a while to transition. It slowly faded into the background, replaced by a renewed sense of purpose and determination. The only thing I cared about was joining the Army.

My inner turmoil might seem cliché or trite. I fully believe if other veterans and service members read this, they might mock my feelings on the whole matter. It’s what we do to each other, but I guarantee deep down they know exactly how I feel. It's just that most of us don’t make a habit of talking about our feelings, much less writing about them.

I had graduated from basic training in December 2002. It was March of 2003, only a few short months later, but still a dreadful lifetime. I was on my way to becoming the soldier I had always envisioned, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead with the conviction that I was finally on the right track.

Departures

The United States military can win battles overnight. Still, it took until August 2003 to finalize my transfer out of the Indiana National Guard and arrange my flight to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for my final processing and my subsequent flight to Germany. Knowing my ship-out date was coming made the wait much more bearable.

I was scheduled to fly out from Louisville, Kentucky. This time, I didn't repeat my past mistakes. I walked up to my parents as they ate breakfast the day before I was flying out.

"Would you two drive me to the airport and wait with me until it's time for me to go? I'd love for y'all to see me off."

Dad chuckled like I asked something stupidly obvious, "Well, sure, Son."

Mom cried and hugged me.

My departure from Louisville International Airport was a straight military send-off cliché, complete with my parents and, at the time, my fiancée waiting with me. I cherished every second of it.

Yes, I was engaged. I only mention it to hammer home the type of person I was back then. Getting engaged probably wasn't the wisest decision for either of us. But it was one that, in retrospect, was more a product of youthful naiveté than of enduring love. I am sure she was important back then to me. But in the grand scheme of my life, she was a ripple in the pond. I'm sure I even loved her then, but if you asked me where or how I proposed, I couldn't tell you. When I say my number one priority at the time was the military—it was the military. It sounds weird, but that's just how it was. It wasn't until much later that I learned what real—enough to lay down arms for—love was.

Watching her wave goodbye as I headed towards security was a poignant moment that would be the last time I saw her. She broke up with me a few months into my first deployment to Iraq. A guy she was trying to set up with her best friend convinced her I was cheating on her. They wound up married and are still together. Good for them.

I didn't cheat. But I didn't try to fight with her about it. It might sound cold, but I was too busy at the time, you know, fighting a war. Had I worried about her leaving me when I was there, it could have put me and others in danger. So, I chose not to care. Over the next ten years, I had to become pretty good at not caring about things. Some things are worth fighting for, but she wasn't.

The USO terminal was a small bubble of calm amidst the hustle of the airport that I grew to love over the years. While waiting, the unexpected sight of Air Force One touching down provided us with a brief distraction—a reminder of the world beyond my immediate sphere. I had never seen the plane in person before. Soon, my flight was called and, after heartfelt goodbyes and a flurry of photos, I made my way down the carpeted hall to the gate and boarded my plane.

Unlike my initial inprocessing experience for basic training at Fort Benning, which was fraught with the inner excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty characteristic of stepping into the unknown, this experience felt markedly different—definitely mundane by comparison. Fort Jackson's 120TH Adjutant Battalion handled me and the other prior service individuals (those who already completed their basic training or had been in before) separately. Thankfully, our process wasn't geared toward new recruits and was even more calm, streamlined, and efficient. It felt almost perfunctory.

There were a few days of the standard administrative paperwork and ensuring everyone ticked the right boxes. I put my Social Security number on a few dozen more papers. Following the administrative deluge, we were relegated to a holding pattern, our days punctuated by morning PT sessions and basic formations. Though far from physically demanding, these activities offered a nice routine while waiting for final orders and flights to post. It was a limbo state, filled with the anticipation of my military future.

There was only one stand-out event during that time. It took the form of an unexpected message from the Red Cross that abruptly brought me face-to-face with personal loss. The use of the Red Cross for such communications was more common in those days, a time when cell phones hadn't yet become the ubiquitous appendages they are today. Their role in bridging the vast distances between military personnel and their families, especially in times of emergency or grief, was something I hadn't fully appreciated until that moment.

I was called into the office of the NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge). A broad-shouldered man with sharp cheekbones sat behind the desk. I had seen him around formations but hadn't met or spoken to him. With utmost professionalism, he relayed the message that had been passed through the Red Cross channels by my parents. "Your Grandpa Lucas passed away last night. I'm sorry to have to tell you. There is a phone in the day room you can use to call your parents."

I wasn't close to my Grandpa Lucas. I had only met him a handful of times; he was my Dad's biological, estranged father. But something about hearing the news hit with an unexpected force. Maybe the fact that my parents had chosen to use the Red Cross because they were worried about how long it would be until we talked underscored how my life was already

changing. Or maybe it was that for the first time, I realized that life continued to move forward, for better or for worse, or end in my absence.

Da Steppt Der Bär

Upon my arrival at Rhein-Main Air Base in September 2003, I was stepping onto what was commonly referred to as "the gateway to Europe" for U.S. military personnel. The airbase, nestled in the heart of Germany, was a bustling hub of activity before its closure in 2005, serving as a critical transit point for troops headed to various assignments across the continent. The atmosphere was charged with decades of anticipation and anxiety from service members like myself navigating the next steps of our military careers.

The terminal itself was a hive of movement, with service members gathering their bags and belongings before shuffling into a modestly sized building that served as the processing center. A long row of names with corresponding assignments and bases was displayed prominently on rows of monitors inside. My blood pounded in my ears from holding my breath when I took my turn inside to discover my new home and duty station within the Army. I found my name among those on the screens before me and felt an electric jolt of reality as I read "Baumholder" next to it. The name was unfamiliar, but its placement on the board made it unmistakably my next destination.

"Baumholder," I muttered under my breath, trying the new German word out for size; a voice next to me chimed in.

"Hey, looks like we're both going to Baumholder." I heard a stereotypical Wisconsin accent beside me; I turned to see a tall, dirty, blonde-haired guy, "I'm Jason Wroblewski." He held out his hand.

"Joshua Macer," I responded, shaking his hand.

Our introduction was abruptly cut short by a squat airman with glasses who overheard our exchange. "Oh, sucks to be you two; you got the Rock, good luck with that," he said with a

wry grin. As I would learn, the Rock was an affectionate nickname for Baumholder. It hinted at the tough reputation of the base or maybe the hilly, mountainous terrain—no one really knows where it comes from. The airman was just trying to intimidate us, but I thought it sounded awesome.

Ski checked the schedules. (It's Ski or Skiho, not Jason, not Wroblewski—bottom line. We've been best friends for twenty-one years and never called each other by our first names.) He noted the departure time for the bus to Baumholder and looked over at me, "It looks like we have plenty of time to wait; wanna go smoke?"

I raised my eyebrow, "Sure." We headed outside to the designated smoking area and waited impatiently for our ride.

When the black bus arrived, we claimed seats in the very back of the mostly empty vehicle. The bus sported seats that looked like they were part of a school photo laser background from the nineties but were surprisingly equipped with ashtrays, a feature that seemed oddly out of place yet curiously welcomed. Deciding to take advantage of this anachronism, we shared a cigarette, much to the chagrin of the few other passengers. I had started smoking a few months earlier while working at the good ole Budgetel. When in Rome? Nah, when in Germany.

The bus hummed to life, pulling away from Rhine-Main Air Base, and with it began our hour-and-a-half journey to Baumholder.

The Autobahn was our introduction to Germany's high efficiency and style. "So, this was the famous German highway," I mused, my eyes tracking the sleek cars that zipped past with an almost choreographed precision. The vehicles were noticeably sleeker and more compact than those back home, a testament to European design sensibilities. They looked boring to me; I've always loved American muscle.

Our route took us through the picturesque gem capital of Germany, Idar-Oberstein, a name and place that would forever be etched in my memory with a sense of wonder. There, emerging as if from the pages of a fairytale, was the Felsenkirche (Crag Church). My jaw dropped as we saw it come into view. It stood, perched high above the town, clinging to the face of a sheer rock cliff. From below, it looked like the church had grown organically from the stone.

Wanderlust is real, and it grabbed hold of me tightly that day. "Looks like something straight out of *Lord of The Rings*," I remarked. As we continued, cliffs draped with netting to catch falling rocks dotted the sides of the roadways. They've literally woven safety nets into the landscape, I thought, admiring the blend of practicality and foresight.

As Baumholder drew near, the landscape transformed once again, this time into scenes plucked from medieval lore. The lush forests painted strokes of verdant green across the horizon. "Man, feels like we're about to step into a medieval legend," Ski said. I half-expected to see a knight or elf emerge from the woods.

The short trip was so breathtakingly beautiful that I already knew I had made the right choice in choosing Germany. I couldn’t wait to start traveling and exploring. Wanderlust would have to wait; I didn’t know it, but within a little over a month, I would be in Baghdad, Iraq.

Baumholder was (still is) a gloriously beautiful post. Besides the location of being nestled amidst rolling hills and a quaint, friendly town with a rich history dating back to the Roman empire, the base was a sight to behold, its structures and facilities tiered gracefully with the landscape.

It was the best duty station I ever had, even if the barracks were dated, and in the midst of the base’s beauty, faint traces of its historical complexities could be discerned, like a faded

swastika peaking out from old plaster on one of the buildings. This picturesque setting offered a serene backdrop to the disciplined military life within.

You can literally walk off base and, in moments, be strolling down gorgeous cobblestone streets lined with a cascade of historic stucco and brick buildings. The whole time I was stationed in Germany, I never drove, except for military vehicles (even though I got a license to drive in-country). I explored everything on foot, by taxi, or by train.

When we rolled into Baumholder, the place was as quiet as a graveyard. No one had bothered telling us that the bulk of the 1ST Armored Division units stationed there had already shipped out to Iraq, leaving behind a shell of a base that felt more like a ghost town than the bustling military hub it normally would be. It never occurred to me that my unit would already be in Iraq when I showed up. War didn't make me nervous; death didn't scare me, but my not being with them did.

A wave of nausea crashed into me when I found out. Where is my unit? What training did I miss? Are they okay? What are they doing? If they are already in Iraq, do they even need me? Would they even want a random new guy showing up? How do I get to my unit? What *even* is my unit? When do I leave? All at once, I was slammed with these thoughts of doubt and anxiety in rapid succession, like a kid showing up to their first day at school and not knowing anyone.

Our welcome committee was a stint with the IRT unit (Individual Replacement Training, a long-standing method used to replace troops on the battlefield), tasked with fast-tracking our gear-up and cramming in some last-minute training before we got thrown into the mix and shipped down range. The uncertainty of our future assignments hung over us like a thick fog—none of us knew which company or battalion we'd end up with once boots hit the ground in the

theatre. At least I knew I wouldn't have to wait long to deploy. I was getting my wish sooner than I thought.

Leading our ragtag group of maybe thirty IRT soldiers who had trickled in were the two highest-ranking individuals among us—Sergeant "Stovetop" and Corporal "Chowder." Putting an E-5 and E-4 in charge of such a large group of soldiers preparing for deployment is a *really* big stretch. Back then, these guys seemed like the epitome of seasoned soldiers to us, fresh out of basic. They had that air about them like they'd seen it all and then some. But they were more interested in smoking us ("corrective" physical training) for the slightest infractions than imparting any real wisdom or leadership. Or, God forbid, actually training us.

It got beyond stupid one day. Instead of hiding out and trying to avoid work, Ski and I actually took some initiative. We were using an FM 7-8 (Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad Field Manual) to go over battle drills in an overgrown field we wrongfully thought was out of sight of the barracks when Chowder interrupted us.

"Hey, you two!" Chowder's head was sticking out the window of the nearby barrack's third-floor day room.

Sigh, "Yes, Corporal," we said in unison, our arms moving slowly to parade rest behind the small of our backs.

"Sgt. Stovetop has a task for you. If you finish it, he's going to let you have the rest of the afternoon off. Get up to the day room, now." His ugly, smug little face vanished.

"Yes, Corporal." We stopped training, gathered our gear, and headed upstairs. We didn't dare keep either of them waiting. We didn't want to smoke and definitely wanted the rest of the day off.

When we arrived, Stovetop and Chowder had two packs of MRE crackers sitting on a table. Stovetop smiled deviously and threw us the crackers, "Okay, here you go. All you have to do is eat a pack of crackers in one minute with no water, and you can have the rest of the day off. If you fail, you get smoked. Time starts on your first bite."

MRE crackers come in a package of two squares. They are essentially two, five-by-five-inch salted soda crackers. They taste fine but are *very* dry and almost impossible to eat in a timed race without drinking.

"Um, Sergeant," I chimed, "The MRE Cracker Challenge? You're supposed to give us two minutes. It's already hard enough to choke those things down. I've seen enough people lose given two minutes to do it. I'd rather go back to training."

He slammed his hands on the table, "Um, Private," he mocked, "Shut your face; this is training. Start eating—or get smoked."

We ate the crackers. Of course, we didn't eat them in time, so we didn't get the rest of the day off. Instead of training the rest of the day, we got smoked—for hours. The whole time that sweat was dripping down my face, I was throat-punching those two idiots while they choked on MRE crackers in my mind. What an amazing use of our time.

In hindsight, those two were some of the worst NCOs (Non-Commisioned Officers) I have ever encountered. Well, not worst, but laziest. Leadership, to them, was a power trip, not a responsibility to mold us into effective soldiers. I loved smoking soldiers as an NCO, too; it builds character and reinforces discipline, but when I did it, it wasn't at the sacrifice of training.

Most of this IRT group was fresh out of basic, as green as their BDUs (Battle Dress Uniforms—Camouflage). Except for the two NCOs who had PCS'ed (transferred from another duty station) to Baumholder, I was the only other one with any "experience" (Ha!) under his belt.

My extra few months of “one weekend a month” training and a two-week-long Annual Training event didn’t really count for crap when facing the reality of our impending deployment; if anything, I probably had *forgotten* more of my training during my extra “experience” than the newer soldiers had learned.

It didn’t really occur to me (or probably anyone on IRT at the time) how much pre-deployment training and getting to know the ins and outs of what to expect when we joined our units in Baghdad that we were actually missing out on. We were too busy living for being off-duty and partying like crazy before deploying. Stovetop and Chowder continued to think the best use of our time was keeping the punishment exercises coming and acting like they knew the secrets of the universe. It was definitely a missed opportunity, a failure in leadership that could have cost us more than we realized once we were in the thick of it. Thankfully, it didn’t; if it did, I didn’t have a gauge to know any better.

Despite the lack of proper training, there was a certain charm to our days in IRT. We had our fill of Baumholder’s nightlife, making up for the rigor we weren't getting during the day with escapades that would have definitely blurred the lines of military conduct if the rest of the units hadn’t been deployed. It was a reckless sort of freedom that you only appreciate when you’re young, dumb, far from home, and knowing you’re about to go to war. It gives clarity that alcohol seemed to help out a lot.

Baumholder, by night, was an entirely different beast. For a few hours each night, most of us would let loose and forget we were soldiers awaiting deployment, lost in the thrill of being somewhere entirely new.

Before I continue, I must provide a disclaimer. Please understand that any omission or change of names in my stories is either by accident or request. It is *totally* not an act of plausible

deniability, nor is it an attempt to protect anyone's identity, especially mine. The following stories are of a sordid, inebriated, and warmongering nature. I would like to make it unequivocally clear that the views and antics of the individuals (not me) involved most certainly do not represent the views or policies of the Department of Defense (DOD), the U.S. Army, or any remotely sane human being *and are most definitely, probably not me*. Most likely, any omission from me is likely a direct result of TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) incurred through multiple concussions while overseas. Yes, let's use the TBI as an excuse.

Host nation law has a unique meaning for soldiers living abroad in foreign nations. These host nation laws are the legal rules and regulations established by a foreign country where military personnel are stationed. They are to be adhered to by members of the U.S. military and their families as if they were citizens.

However, host nation laws take on a somewhat less grave and serious meaning for a single, underage soldier stationed abroad. They become a unique, almost magical dispensation, granting the ability to legally partake in activities that would be off-limits back in the United States. In other words, these laws offer a tantalizing opportunity to enjoy the privileges of adulthood, particularly in the realm of alcohol consumption, at an age when they would otherwise be barred.

To this young soldier, host nation laws essentially mean they can stroll into a local establishment, often without even needing to flash their U.S. military ID (like many try back stateside) and, suddenly, they're holding a beverage that, even though they are old enough to fight and die for their country, it would have been the stuff of forbidden dreams and illegal back home. For them, host nation law is like the universe giving them a rare wink and nod, saying, "You've crossed international waters; have a drink, kid."

Essentially, it's their backstage pass to the world of adult libations, complete with the joy and bewildered smiles of both local patrons and soldiers who can't quite figure out what each other is saying except “cheers.”

Ah, the curious phenomenon of host nations allowing underage, single soldiers to drink on their soil. It's like giving toddlers bazookas and hoping they'll use them responsibly. In my experience, it often led to some hilariously unimpressive displays of American diplomacy.

As for me? Being an eighteen-year-old patriot, I considered it one of my solemn duties to observe host nation laws to the strictest standards of my interpretation. In fact, that observation led me to see some of the most captivating dawns I've ever had the privilege to experience.

To contrast the debauchery-fueled nights, those Baumholder, Germany mornings truly possessed an ethereal beauty that could rival any postcard. The rolling hills, the serene countryside, and the charming stucco buildings made for a breathtaking backdrop to start my day as I stumbled back to the barracks. Nearly every weekend unfailing, as dawn broke over the enchanting German landscape, it often found me—sometimes alone, often in the company of fellow soldiers—making my way back to the barracks after a night of conscientious adherence to those laws.

Physical fitness was key, too—we would road march or do PT back to the barracks miles away from town. My peers and I were always up for training. We would practice land navigation through the charming streets with bleary eyes or cover and concealment by diving into nearby shrubbery. In those moments, I couldn't help but marvel at the contrast between our less-than-sober selves and the scenic beauty of Baumholder. Nature seemed to wink knowingly at our early morning antics, while sober Germans would ignore us or shake their heads at us on their way to work. *You’re Welcome for My Service*.

But even as we laughed and drank, a part of me knew we were woefully unprepared for what lay ahead. No amount of partying or alcohol I drank before deployment washed away those feelings, not that it stopped me from trying. I wasn't scared of war or fighting; I was aching for that.

My fears about my lack of cohesion and lost months of training and bonding with the guys in whatever unit I got assigned to still gnawed away at the pit of my stomach. I was never the most popular dude growing up, and because of that, fitting in scared me more than the possibility of dying in combat. I knew with certainty that working well with your brothers could mean the difference between life and death in a war zone.

Looking back, it's easy to see the flaws in our preparation, the gaps in our readiness that were glaringly obvious to anyone with a lick of sense. Maybe Stovetop and Chowder did what they thought was best, or maybe they were just as lost as the rest of us, caught up in a system that was churning us out as fast as it could without much thought for the end result.

I have a few stand-out memories of IRT (too many late nights out; it will be a common theme for my downtime) of my time spent stationed in Baumholder before deploying to meet up with our units in Iraq. Most leadership was overseas already; we were left mostly unsupervised to "train" during the day. Much of that "training" boiled down to menial maintenance tasks or being smoked by Chowder and Stovetop.

We faced an unexpected adversary—the relentless, unforgiving hills of the base's German countryside. These weren't your average slopes; they were the kind that could make even the toughest soldier (unless they were liquored up) question their life choices. But in the spirit of American ingenuity (absolutely *not* born of laziness), some of us devised a plan that would forever cement our place in the annals of military innovation.

It was a typical gloomy autumn morning that only Germany could do just right, making things bitterly cold yet ridiculously hot anytime an activity was to be done. A small group of around eight of us gathered around our three-floor, aging barracks. Our mission that day was simple, or so we thought. All we had to do was mow.

But in our sights was a massive hillside to mow; the unit's time-worn push mowers were barely a match for this natural obstacle course—our burning calves weren't. The incline was so steep that even the most motivated were joking about "accidentally" falling and hurting themselves to avoid the task. But, then, like a beacon of apathy, some POG (Person Other than Grunt) had an idea of equal parts genius and slothfulness.

"What if we attach ropes to the mowers and lower them down the hill?" he proposed with a mischievous grin. "Then, all we have to do is take turns pulling them back up." The ridiculous idea was met with little resistance. After all, we only had to lose our dignity and were soldiers—God knows we had plenty to lose.

With more motivation than when we started our task, Ski and I scrounged up some old ropes from one of the unlocked maintenance sheds and tied them securely to the handles of our mowers. As I cinched the final knot around my mower, I joked, "We're armed for mountain warfare." As the first mower teetered on the edge of the hill, I couldn't help but wonder if this was how the Wright brothers felt before their first flight. Two soldiers now stood at the top of our tor. The rest of us fanned out at the bottom of the slope at the ready and counted in unison,

"One… two… three! Go!" We watched in awe as the soldiers above us spartan kicked the sputtering lawn tools down the hill.

What happened next was glorious. The mowers hurtled down the hill, bouncing and jolting like twin red rockets. This was our rodeo, and the lawnmowers were our bulls.

As they reached the bottom, cheers of “Heck yes!” and “Hooah!” erupted from many of us.

For a brief time, the sight of soldiers unleashing ragged lawnmowers down the “uncut,” “overgrown” hills of Baumholder became a regular occurrence. The grass didn’t even need to be cut anymore, but we used the above buzzwords (pun intended) to convince leadership to have us conduct “lawn maintenance.”

Lawn maintenance meant mower races, with the glorified winners earning bragging rights and the losers sometimes buying the first round at the pub. It wasn’t training, but it made us look busy, was good for a laugh, and kept us away from Stovetop and Chowder (who were too good to do menial tasks). I do not doubt that whatever rear detachment command was overseeing the base would have been pleased with the appearance of newfound initiative some soldiers took in barracks area maintenance and beautification. It was a peculiar form of entertainment, but as we prepared to ship out to Iraq, it bonded us in a unique way that only lawnmower races can.

However, pride comes before a fall. Or, in our case, a fiery catastrophe. It was a cool, windy Thursday before the weekend. The air was getting frigid, and already I could feel winter’s chill touch. It hadn’t rained in almost a month since I had arrived, a rare occurrence for the gorgeous German base. We hadn't considered the potential fire hazard that our makeshift racetrack posed.

Once again, we volunteered to mow in exchange for an early “close of business” release. A daring new racer, a freshly arrived private eager to prove himself, stepped up to the hill. “You can’t do it, New Guy!” we egged him on as he attached his fraying rope and ripped the mower's cord. The ragged beast belched out smoke mightily like a dragon preparing to rain down fire as it sprang to life. Disaster struck when he kicked his mower down the hill with an extra dose of enthusiasm, “This is Sparta!” he roared.

Oh, the dragon rained down fire alright as flames engulfed the mower's small, overused engine. The flames spread spectacularly fast, thanks to the dry weather. Our eyes grew as wide as saucers as we watched the mower careen wildly, flames dancing in its wake. We started to scatter like roaches, looking for ways to put out the growing patches of fire. One soldier quickly yanked his BDU blouse top off-beat at the burning grass.

New Guy's hands strained as he yanked the rope with all his might to stop the dragon's charge. It was too late; flames licked at the frayed *old oil-soaked* rope. He dropped the rope as it became a lit fuse. The dragon was now a fireball hurtling toward the road below. Luckily, the beast rolled to a fiery, anticlimactic stop on the sidewalk right before the road.

We sprang into action, hurling water, Gatorade, and soda at the fiery beast until the flames subsided. The mower/ racecar/ dragon was toast. The flames that had at first so quickly spread on the hill vanished just as quickly—we hadn't left enough grass for the blaze to spread!

We gathered around the smoldering wreckage, a mixture of relief and laughter in the air. *No one saw us.* I may not have saved the world during IRT, but I sure learned how to mow it. Thank God New Guy didn't burn the base down. Tragically, the lawn mower was never seen again. *You're Welcome for My Service.*

A few days later, we were back outside Frankfurt to conduct some actual training before our scheduled flight to Kuwait the following week. I don't remember the training now, but I do remember my secret embarrassment my first time walking around Frankfurt, and not just passing through it.

It was the last day of training, and we were released early, so Ski and I wanted to explore the city a bit before hitting the bars near the base. It was a revelation; this bustling metropolis defied my naive small-town preconceptions of a Germany populated solely by Germans. As I

walked the crowded banks of the Main River, I encountered a diversity that mirrored our own melting pot of America. Yet it shocked me to see people from all walks of life living in the city of this country. The realization that the world was far broader, far more complex, and infinitely more interesting than my limited experiences had led me even to fathom or consider was both humbling and exhilarating. It made me feel like a small-town idiot.

That contrasts perfectly with one of my most prideful moments as a young soldier—when I got issued my DCUs (Desert Combat Uniforms—worn during deployment in the desert) during IRT and switched to wearing them. It was a physical show of how close I was to deployment and marked a difference between those of us who would be going to Iraq and those who were staying behind. *They looked cool, too.*

Another badge of honor I was weirdly, fiercely proud to receive (any soldier deployed during this era can attest) was the smallpox vaccine. Within days, the site of the injection morphed into the common itchy, pus-filled blister that (I felt) marked me as part of an elite group prepared to face whatever threats lay in foreign lands. Despite the discomfort and swelling, we wore our reactions with pride. Every itch was worth it. I can still see the small circular scar from the blister. Apparently, it didn't take much to please me. Thinking about that, it's a wonderful quality to have when you are an infantryman.

We finally got a flight time for a few days after Halloween 2003. Halloween that year was one for the history books. Ski and I dressed up as "vintage" WW1 German soldiers (we didn't dare touch WW2) and went downtown to our favorite bars. We thought we were hilarious and lucky we didn't cause an "incident." Ski *had* drawn on a very suspicious-looking mustache that drew a few side eyes. Luckily the costumes sucked, and I don't think anyone realized what we were dressed up as. *You're Welcome for My Service*.

The next night was a Saturday. We decided to be responsible and stay in the barracks to “recover” from the night before. I found myself lying on the floor as Ski poured Goldschlager down my throat. We celebrated with the “fancy stuff” since we were so close to deploying. With the taste of cinnamon still lingering, I lifted myself off the floor, waxing philosophical and pondering the bigger picture. "Ski," I began, clearing gold flakes from my lips, "ever think about what's unfolding over there right now?"

Ski, sprawled on the tiled floor, grunted for another pour. After obliging, I watched him contemplate the popcorn ceiling. "I try not to, man."

"Why's that? I know you're not scared, bruv," I prodded, trying to peel back his layers and figure out what he meant.

"Heck no, man. Not about me, at least. I joined after 9/11. I signed up to fight and kill bad guys. The way I see it is anyone that doesn’t think they are going to try to kill us back is stupid.” His gaze shifted from the ceiling to me.

"Don’t look at me. I wholeheartedly agree. " I felt the weight of our imminent deployment. "It's just... do you ever wonder if we're actually going to make a difference? You and me. What if we show up too late and everything worth doing is already done? People back home constantly told me one person can't make a difference. But it made me think, if we strip away everyone, one by one, there will be no one left to make a difference."

Ski yanked the bottle from me, took a long drink, and then said, "I’m too dang drunk for this, but yeah, man. Exactly."

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I hated the taste of Goldschlager, but it had hit me like a ton of gold bricks. "I'm not scared of dying. I'm scared of not making an impact, of arriving too late and being seen as some cherry POG."

Ski laughed, a bit too heartily, as he drenched me in another wave of cinnamon liquor. "You're a cherry, alright."

I choked on the heavily spiced libations. "At least I'm not a tanker; I'd rather be a POG," I retorted, stumbled towards the bathroom, and threw up, the night's philosophical musings drowned in a haze of alcohol and apprehension.

That was the closest thing to a serious conversation that we had about war before we deployed to Iraq. We would talk at length about combat, killing, life, and death during that first deployment and many times afterward over the years. I can't remember now what it feels like not to be kissed by war anymore.

This Is… War?

Three days later was the eve of our flight to Kuwait. Ski wasted no time when we were released for the evening, “Macer, bro, let’s go downtown for a few drinks. We won’t stay out long.”

I poked my head through my favorite Slipknot hoodie and asked, “Do you think we should?” He already knew my answer.

Ski was already wearing blue jeans and a red tee and slipping on his shoes. “Yeah, bro, it's not like we’re supposed to be on lockdown. Like I said, just a few drinks for a few hours.” We headed out as the sun was setting.

That night, the term *few* was subjective. We must have imbibed a *few* dozen watered-down happy hour screwdrivers with more orange juice and vodka. We stumbled back to our barracks a *few* hours later as the sun was rising.

Our 0900 formation the next morning for accountability and load out to the airport at Ramstein smelled like a distillery. No one bothered locking us down the night before. Most of us saw no problem observing a little host nation law one last time—except one person.

The rear detachment NCOIC of our flight group, a loud, short-haired Hispanic, lost her mind when she saw our sorry state and smoked all of us—including Stovetop and Chowder. It was glorious watching them get theirs.

I spent the short bus ride to the airport trying not to throw up the booze from the night before. That all too familiar nineties' seat patterns made me dizzy. We soon found ourselves hungover and bound for Kuwait on a contracted Delta Airlines flight filled with service members and civilian contractors. Flight attendants served us like paying customers; I suppose we were—

except Uncle Sam covered the bill. During the flight, I had my fill of sodas, peanuts, and Tom Hanks stranded on an island. I hadn't expected to travel in style like this.

We arrived at Ali Al Salem airbase about ten hours later.

I expected living conditions to be austere. Sure, we got assigned to large, tan-canvased tents for our short stay, but that was about the worst thing I can say about it. The sparse interiors had enough bunk beds to sleep twenty or so people and were air-conditioned. I didn't know that the airbase, only about twenty-three miles from the Iraq border, had been a permanent fixture in the Middle East for decades.

We were especially shocked that there were fast food restaurants and a coffee shop there. Ski and I made it a point to hit them up as much as possible before we left. At least twice, we grabbed a copy of *Stars and Stripes* newspaper and sat inside the Green Beans coffee trailer sipping on iced coffees—dang, I miss that coffee. We spent our afternoons playing cards, in the internet cafe, or standing in long lines, kicking rocks, outside the box-trailer fast food restaurants. It reminded me of a Wild West town made of converted shipping containers. We were definitely "eating fresh" and "loving it" while we were there. The people deployed here had it *rough.*

Over the years, we would make fun of how good people on "deployments" to Kuwait and then later big, fancy bases in Iraq and Afghanistan had it. It used to really work me up that some people had it so good while others, like me and my brethren, would be sent to the worst places. Thankfully, many of these folks would never see constant indirect fire attacks and ambushes. They wouldn't have to go days without simple thinks like electricity, showers, or hot food It wasn't anger I felt. It was more like an intense pride, like in an "I had it harder than you" sort of way. "Embracing the suck" is one of my favorite sayings—it's something we learned to love (for

sanity reasons). Living in locations like that is one of the proudest things I had the privilege to do in the Infantry.

God knows that besides passing through, I never got to enough of any of these luxuries that bases like this had, so I learned to savor them when given the chance. I'm not knocking the people who deployed to those places, though. Everyone's role is vital—we all are part of one big, interconnected, happy, dysfunctional military family. For example, without those service members in Kuwait, I would have never made it to Iraq to fight bad guys—I couldn't have done my *very* awesome grunt work without them.

This Is War

We were slated to head to Iraq within a week and a half. The night we left Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait for Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) was a night of "hurry up and wait." Hours before our estimated flight time, we moved from our tents and formed up outside one of the terminals—a large permanent metal and canvas holding area that almost, but not quite, looked like an actual airport terminal.

During a late-night formation, we stood, bathed in the glow of tall floodlights that pushed the surrounding darkness away, and were assigned chalks or flight groups.

A gaunt-faced Airforce NCO with a thin nose spoke: "When your chalk gets called, form up back here. You have five minutes. We will do a head count, march you to your flight, and get you onboard to Iraq. Any questions?" His nasally, high-pitched voice made a few people around laugh.

There were no questions.

Ski and I were in the rectangular wooden smoke pit chain smoking when our chalk was called over the loudspeakers.

"Chalk Three to the staging area."

A short time later, we marched toward a C-130 Hercules; its immense metallic frame cast a silent, imposing shadow in the night light. The Gunship Gray giant, scarred from countless missions, loomed ever closer and instilled me with confidence about the ride we were about to take. The air shimmered as it thickened with a haze of jet fuel as our pilots ignited the engines. The jet engines roared to life with a deep, throaty vibration.

I'd never been inside a military aircraft before. As I boarded the plane, I admired the interior; it was stark and functional to its core. The fuselage was lined with red canvas webbed

seating, cramped and bare, offering little in the way of comfort. The dim, utilitarian lighting cast long shadows, giving the space an almost cavernous feel. The air inside was stale, a mix of sweat, metal, and the faint, lingering odor of oil and machinery. It was a space designed not for comfort but for purpose—to take me to war.

As I shuffled in and settled into this sparse environment, packed in with my fellow soldiers, I felt like a sardine in a tin can. We were each donned in our battle dress and had our bags strapped to the fronts of our chests, and the close quarters forced physical proximity that, under any other circumstances, might have fostered a sense of discomfort, but it looked like it provided solace to those around me.

I caught glimpses of the expressions etched on the faces of those around me. Some wore masks of stoic resolve, their eyes fixed forward, betraying nothing of the tumult that might be churning beneath. Others had a faraway look, perhaps pondering the loved ones left behind or contemplating the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Amidst the islands of contemplation and resolve, there were also those who attempted to inject a semblance of levity, their whispered jokes and forced smiles a valiant effort to buoy spirits in the face of the unknown.

I wonder what mine looked like.

After everyone was seated, our gear was loaded. I took my last glimpse of Ali Al Salem's lights as the cargo ramp slowly closed with a metallic thud. We were airborne minutes later. Every now and then, the plane would shudder as it cut through the air, reminding me I was stuck in a metal cocoon.

Combat "corkscrew" landings are tactical maneuvers designed to minimize an aircraft's exposure to ground threats during the critical phases of approach and landing in a hostile environment. Throughout my multiple trips into various combat zones, I learned this technique is

particularly emblematic of military operations flights, where the risk of anti-aircraft fire or missile attacks is significantly elevated. The essence of a combat landing lies in its ability to reduce the aircraft's time in the most vulnerable flight profiles—straight and level approaches to the runway.

It’s neat how they work. A corkscrew landing is executed by the pilot approaching the destination at a higher altitude than normal. Once the aircraft reaches a point, more or less, directly above the intended landing spot, it begins a rapid, spiraling descent, effectively tightening the loop as it gets closer to the ground. This maneuver is akin to a hawk's stoop, where the bird of prey folds its wings and dives in a steep, swift plunge to capture its target. In this case, the hawk is 75,000 pounds and carries over sixty troops and equipment for combat. The goal is to maintain a high rate of descent and a tight turning radius, making it exceedingly difficult for enemy forces to track and target the aircraft effectively.

It makes sense that the reasons behind adopting combat landings are deeply rooted in the practicalities of modern warfare. In conflict zones, airfields and bases are often within range of enemy artillery, mortars, and missile systems. A standard, linear approach gives enemy forces a predictable target, increasing the risk of the aircraft being hit. By employing a corkscrew landing, the aircraft's flight path becomes unpredictable, and its time in the danger zone is significantly reduced, thereby decreasing the likelihood of a successful enemy attack.

It also makes sense that this type of landing isn’t without risk. I’m sure it requires pilots to possess exceptional skill and nerve, as the maneuver is physically demanding and disorienting (at least from the back), subjecting both the crew and passengers to high g-forces and rapid changes in direction.

Now, you know more about combat landings than I did as we descended into Baghdad. I'd never heard of them before.

The final moments before the C-130 Hercules went down on the runway were intense. My fingers clenched the red cargo net seats in a death grip until my fingers whitened, bracing as the beast began its combat descent. The aircraft spiraled down, my stomach flipping with each turn. I stared intently out the window and saw spats of red gunfire tracers lancing through the inky black below as a firefight unfolded. As we plunged into darkness, the pilots took no chances. They launched multiple flares into the night to protect us from any possible anti-aircraft fire, their orange-yellow light casting eerie shadows across our tense faces through the small, round windows. Aircraft are most vulnerable to enemy fire when they are coming in for landing since they are moving much slower and lower than normal. In the early days of the war, even if there wasn't enemy contact nearby, launching flares at landing was common practice—something else I didn't know then.

I did my best to swallow my heart back into my chest as the cabin filled with the roar of engines at full throttle, battling the rapid drop while the fuselage shook violently against the battering winds. The howl and whistle of the wind outside was symphonic as it voiced its fury.

Blind to the cause of our tumultuous descent, every bump and sudden drop magnified my discomfort, turning the experience into a roller coaster ride—I hate roller coasters. The plane seemed to teeter on the edge of free fall before regaining composure, a testament to the pilot's skill. The C-130's metal frame hummed with tension, a constant reminder of the precariousness of our situation. Equipment and heads rattled inside as the aircraft's structure groaned under strain. Suddenly, relief came with the tactile bumps of touchdown and the abrupt deceleration on the runway.

As the cargo doors whirred open, a dangerous new world greeted me. The rush of warm, dusty air smacked me in the face. It starkly contrasted with the recycled atmosphere we had grown accustomed to during the flight. The mingled scents of jet fuel and distant burning trash fires hit sharply and burned my nostrils as I inhaled. I stepped off the aircraft and onto the tarmac and planted one tan combat-booted foot in front of the other on the gritty, cracked concrete.

The sights and sounds of the airfield were a blend of activity and desolation. The sparsely lit expanse revealed shadowed figures moving with purpose, the silhouettes of other aircraft, and the distant hum of machinery and voices. The sky was a canvas of deep blues and blacks, the stars obscured by the haze of dust and smoke that hung in the air.

I turned to look at Ski as we filed off the plane and raised my eyebrow.

"Well, we made it, now what?"

Epilogue

February 21, 2024

Every great story has an ending—this isn't *the* end, but it is a fitting stopping point. It took me a little over two agonizingly slow years to take from 9/11 until I stepped into a combat zone for the first time. I would wait even slightly longer until I actually encountered the brutality and thrill of combat. I should have been careful about what I wished for; I wound up spending at least a part of *every* calendar year from 2003 to 2011 deployed. When my proverbial dam broke, it *really* broke. I'm still trying to rebuild it.

I haven't been deployed since 2011 but, every night, I'm engaged in combat with insurgents, fighting for my life and those of the soldiers with me. I wake up drenched in a cold sweat, my heart pounding in my chest and my hands shaking. It often takes me a moment to realize where I am, that I am home and safe.

I have confronted Death head-on many times in my life and have survived to tell the tale. I'm now a 100 percent disabled combat veteran for a slew of fun issues, including Traumatic Brain Injury, chronic migraine, and PTSD. I am fiercely proud to have served my country. Out of those ten years that I wound up serving in the military, four of them were spent in combat—yeah, I got my wish and then some.

I have actually come across very few soldiers or veterans who have spent as much time deployed as I have. I really am blessed to have survived them. I came home and had my life, limbs, and eyesight. I knew after 9/11 that I wasn't meant to stay a small-town kid from Indiana. Just like that Master Sergeant I met at MEPS, the Infantry made me the man I am today. What I never realized was that I was losing a part of myself, leaving it behind each time I went overseas and came home.

Being deployed is undoubtedly the most intense, stressful, and often painfully dull and repetitive experience of my life. I like to say it was the best-worst time of my life. Of course, there were many good times, but there were many more bad times. I made lifelong friends, saw many beautiful places, learned about different cultures, and gained valuable life experience—most of them while deployed. Unfortunately, those happy times faded and were replaced with increasingly pervasive unpleasantries. That said, I would do it all over again.

It took me sixty-seven pages to put me at my first deployment. Although sharing my story and the story of those that I served with is cathartic a journey, a part of me dreads writing what is left. I have lost too many of my brothers to the enemy. These great men are heroes who had their lives cut short in service to their country. Not a day goes by that I do not think of them and pray for their families. On multiple occasions, I have had to engage and destroy the enemy directly. Mistakes and collateral damage happened. Plus, I never got used to being blown up, but I came home.

It wasn't until nearly the end of my time in the Army that I began to wonder how my experiences affected me. Until then, I didn't have time and had others relying on me. I never gave myself the chance to take care of myself. Looking back on it, I wish I would have. I guess that in my mind, I thought others would see me as weak for seeking help, especially when there were so many other soldiers in much worse shape than I was. To make matters worse, I didn't want to believe anything was wrong with me. I was the typical prideful Infantryman. Little did I know I was becoming my own worst enemy.

Before getting out of the Army, I actually started to see a therapist and get treated for other physical issues I was having. Among the most serious of those, I was diagnosed with

severe PTSD with anxiety, Sleep apnea, and Traumatic Brain Injury. I wound up spending my last months as a soldier participating in Fort Campbell's TBI rehabilitation program.

For whatever reason, though, after I got out, I stopped seeking help for my issues. Things got very bad. I was beginning to spiral out of control. Within a year, my wife and I were on the verge of divorce. We argued almost daily. I was often rude and aggressive to others. I was becoming violent, and it started to frighten my wife. I was always so angry at everyone and myself. I was cynical and depressed. I wouldn't talk to anyone about it. I found myself struggling more and more with daily life. I was constantly on guard, stressed, and nervous. I couldn't sleep. My memory had gotten worse than it had been before. Often, I would walk into a room and have no idea what I was doing. I tried to keep these emerging and previous issues from others around me.

I felt like I peaked at twenty-seven. I didn't want to be viewed as weak or broken. I was always on guard. I could never "turn it off," as my therapist calls it. I was two years out of the military and still in full combat mode. My pride and fear of being viewed as weak almost completely destroyed me. I was a ticking time bomb. One day, I looked in the mirror and didn't recognize the face staring back at me. Who was I? What had happened to me? Where was the hero my friends and family had called me? It was almost two years after being discharged before things got so bad that I really had to start getting help and talking about what was bothering me.

I knew I needed to do something and quick. I was stuck, though. I would have never gotten the help I needed on my own. I was too stubborn. Thank God my wife stuck by my side. She encouraged me to take that step to get my desperately needed help. I got back into therapy and on the medication I needed. I started being seen for all of my other issues. Just being able to

talk about my feelings has been the biggest help. I can now use all the bad things I have experienced to make me a stronger, better person.

Today, my life is leaps and bounds better than it was. My wife is still amazing, but our relationship is stronger than ever. We have a beautiful daughter who is the best thing ever. I can now look in that mirror and recognize the man I thought was lost forever. Instead of being broken by my experiences, I take what I learned from both war and my personal life to help others in the same situation. Any bad situation can be made into something good when you put effort into it. Do I still have issues? Of course I do. I have them daily, but now I can face and overcome them. I am not just surviving anymore but living again.

If you ever find yourself in a similar situation, take heart. I know that if I can overcome my demons, anyone can. Be strong; you are not alone. Someone is always there for you; nothing is too hard to overcome. There is always going to be someone there for you. Look me up if you ever think there isn't, and I will be there.

You're Welcome for My Service.

Annotated Bibliography

Abraham, Tom. *The Cage*. Corgi, 2013.

In his compelling novel, Tom Abraham explores his service as a British citizen in the United States Army fighting in Vietnam and his capture at the hands of Viet Cong fighters. Although initially praised for its truthful, dramatic, and gritty portrayal of his experiences, this book has since lost its good reputation. Veterans and military members who served with Abraham have widely criticized this book and claim he falsified his accounts of his capture. Defense Department records have no record of his capture. This is a cautionary tale of what can happen when someone makes dramatically false claims about their military service.

Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir*. Eighth Mountain Press, 2002.

Judith Barrington's seminal work about memoir writing offers practical advice and philosophical insights into the art of autobiographical writing. Barrington combines her personal experiences as a memoirist with her expertise as a teacher, providing a comprehensive guide that is both accessible and deeply informative. The book covers various topics, from ethical considerations in memoir writing to the craft of constructing a compelling narrative. Her emphasis on the transformative power of writing personal stories is particularly enlightening, making this book a valuable resource for novice and experienced writers. Barrington's approachable style and the inclusion of exercises and examples were handy for me in developing my memoir writing skills. Additionally, this book helps me research and address the importance of being truthful when writing a memoir.

Best, Mat. *Thank You for My Service.* Random House Publishing Group, 2019.

Mat Best's memoir is a distinctive and often laugh-out-loud humorous account of his experiences as a former U.S. Army Ranger and contractor. Best's narrative style is uniquely candid and infused with irreverent humor, offering a fresh perspective on military life and the transition to civilian life. The memoir is notable for its unapologetic tone and Best's willingness to confront controversial topics head-on, ranging from the realities of combat to the challenges veterans face in post-military life. While his approach is unconventional, it provides an honest and sometimes raw portrayal of war's personal and psychological impacts. Best's book is not only a reflection on his military service but also a commentary on broader societal attitudes toward veterans. This work is valuable to me because it contrasts with other, more formal military memoirs, highlighting the more human side of soldiers.

Darack, Ed. *Victory Point: Operations Red Wings and Whalers: The Marine Corps' Battle for Freedom in Afghanistan*. Berkley Caliber, 2010.

Darack's book offers a comprehensive account of two critical operations conducted by the U.S. Marine Corps in Afghanistan: Operations Red Wings and Whalers. This meticulously researched book analyzes the strategic, tactical, and human aspects of these military operations. Specifically, Darack's compilation includes firsthand accounts, military reports, and personal interviews, presenting a multifaceted perspective on the events. The book is notable for its detailed description of the planning and execution of these operations and its focus on the bravery and challenges the Marines involved face. This is significant for my research because it provides factual accounts of enemy troop numbers present in Marcus Luttrell's area during the events of *Lone Survivor.* These

numbers are much lower than that claimed by Luttrell in his book. This is important because it illustrates how combat and other factors can affect memory and perception.

Egnal, Cleo. “The Man Who Walked Through a Blizzard and a Desert to Escape the Gulags.” *Ranker*, Ranker, 10 Mar. 2019, www.ranker.com/list/story-of-sawomir-rawicz/cleo-egnal.

Cleo Egnal’s article recounts the harrowing tale of Sławomir Rawicz, a Polish soldier who claimed to have escaped from a Soviet Gulag and endured an arduous journey to freedom. Egnal presents a detailed summary of Rawicz's purported journey involving traversing a blizzard and a desert. The article delves into both the physical and psychological challenges faced by Rawicz. Most importantly, Egnal also explores the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Rawicz's story, discussing the skepticism of historians and the lack of corroborating evidence. The author asserts that one thing is sure: the story is not true, at least not all of it, and the difficulty lies in the inability to verify whose story is authentic. This is useful to illustrate the problems that arise when one falsifies an account, compounded with the challenge of being unable to corroborate and verify the claims that have stepped forward to dispute them.

Flood, Andrew, and Richard Keegan. “Cognitive Resilience to Psychological Stress in Military Personnel.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 13, Mar. 2022, *https*://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.809003.

Andrew Flood and Richard Keegan's research explores the concept of cognitive resilience in military personnel relating to psychological stress. The study analyzes how military members cope with stress and maintain mental health in challenging environments. The authors discuss various strategies and psychological constructs that contribute to

resilience, offering insights into the mental conditioning of soldiers. The findings of this study can have significant implications for military memoir writers and writing authentically. Understanding the psychological framework and resilience strategies can give memoirists a deeper perspective on their experiences and the experiences of others in similar situations. I also find this research helpful in understanding my own stress-related experiences.

Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. John Murray, 2019.

James Frey's story was initially published as a memoir and recounts the author's experiences of addiction and recovery. The book gained significant attention for its raw portrayal of substance abuse and the journey towards rehabilitation. However, it became infamous for the controversy regarding its factual accuracy. Investigations revealed that Frey had fabricated or exaggerated key parts of his story, leading to a public debate about the nature of memoirs and the expectation of truthfulness in autobiographical writing. This book serves as a pivotal case study in discussions about the ethics of memoir writing, particularly regarding the fine line between literary creativity and factual integrity. Frey's work is a cautionary tale about the consequences of breaking reader trust and the importance of maintaining authenticity in personal narratives. It is a personal reminder of the unspoken bond of my responsibilities as a memoirist in representing myself truthfully to my readers.

Furst, Randy. “In Video Deposition, Author Trips up on Fight Details in Ventura Libel Suit.” *Star Tribune*, Star Tribune, 29 July 2014, www.startribune.com/july-10-in-video-kyle-trips-up-on-fight-details/266448121/?c=y&page=1.

Randy Furst's article in the *Star Tribune* provides an insightful look into the deposition of Chris Kyle, author of *American Sniper*, regarding his legal battle with Jesse Ventura. The article focuses on the inconsistencies in Kyle's account of a bar fight with Ventura, a central issue in the defamation lawsuit. Furst highlights how, when scrutinized under legal examination, Kyle's narrative revealed discrepancies that questioned the memoir's accuracy. This reporting underscores the complexities and potential consequences of memoir discrepancies, especially when legal action is involved. Furst's article is essential in illustrating the real-world implications of inaccuracies in military memoirs. The deposition details and the issues it raised about the veracity of Kyle's claims are vital in discussing the ethical responsibilities of memoirists. Furst's reporting provided a concrete example of how a "simple" embellishment or inaccuracy in a memoir can lead to significant legal challenges and credibility issues, reinforcing the argument for stringent adherence to truthfulness in autobiographical writing, particularly in memoirs dealing with sensitive or contentious subjects.

Harai, Yuval. "Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Middle Ages to the Late Modern Era." *War in History*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2007, pp. 289–309. ProQuest, https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/military-memoirs-historical-overview-genre-middle/docview/224149293/se-2, doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344507078375.

Yuval Harai provides an extensive survey of the evolution of military memoirs. Harai's work is significant for its in-depth analysis of how the genre has developed over centuries, reflecting changes in warfare, society, and literary trends. Harai's thorough examination aids in understanding the genre's current form and the expectations placed

upon contemporary military memoirists. Harai's extensive knowledge was crucial in helping me understand and define contemporary military memoirs. It provides me with a foundational context for the evolution of military memoirs, highlighting how historical shifts have influenced the genre's approach to authenticity and factual recounting.

Kephart, Beth. *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*. New York, Penguin Group, 2013.

Beth Kephart's book is an insightful exploration of the art and craft of memoir writing. Kephart offers a “just right” blend of personal reflection, practical advice, and literary analysis in this work. She delves into the ethical complexities and emotional intricacies of writing about one's life, emphasizing the importance of honesty and sensitivity in memoir writing. Its engaging style focuses on memoirists' nuanced challenges, including navigating memory, shaping personal experiences into a compelling narrative, and addressing the potential impact on others featured in their stories. Kephart also includes a variety of examples from renowned memoirs, providing readers with a rich context for understanding the genre. This book is an essential resource for me as a memoir writer and as a research tool to give perspective on the importance of truth-telling in memoirs.

Kleinreesink, Esmeralda, and Joseph Soeters. “Truth and (Self) Censorship in Military Memoirs.” *Current Sociology.*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2016, pp. 373–391, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115590613.

Kleinreesink and Soeters explore the complex dynamics of authenticity and self-censorship in the context of military memoirs. The authors analyze the challenges military memoirists face in balancing personal experiences with the expectations of factual accuracy. Their study emphasizes how military memoirs are shaped not only by

the authors' memories but also by a conscious or subconscious self-censorship influenced by various factors, including societal norms, military culture, and personal ethics. This article is instrumental in understanding memoirists' internal and external pressures, especially in contexts where personal experiences intersect with broader historical events and societal expectations. They assert that many military memoirists hold themselves to a higher standard of truth. Their research is invaluable in discussing the heightened stakes of factual accuracy in military memoirs. Their research helps frame the discussion around the balance military memoirists must strike between personal truth and the collective historical record.

Lamothe, Dan. "How 'American Sniper' Chris Kyle's Truthfulness Is in Question Once Again." *The Washington Post*, 25 May 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/25/how-american-sniper-chris-kyles-truthfulness-is-in-question-once-again/.

Lamothe provides an unbiased examination of the discrepancies between Kyle's account of his military service in *American Sniper*, specifically Kyle's recollection of the medals he earned versus that of official military records. The article delves into the broader implications of such discrepancies, raising questions about the reliability of memoirs and the responsibility of memoirists in maintaining factual accuracy. Lamothe's article was pivotal in illustrating the challenges faced by military memoirists in balancing emotional truth with factual accuracy. While Some of Kyle's records align with claims made in his memoir, other official documents do not. It is a critical example of how trust can be lost when the truth is skewed, especially in a high-profile memoir like *American Sniper*.

Levinson, Hugh. “UK | Magazine | Walking the Talk?” *BBC News*, BBC, 30 Oct. 2006, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6098218.stm.

Hugh Levinson's article investigates claims and counterclaims surrounding Rawicz’s story of escaping from a Siberian prison camp and enduring a grueling trek to freedom. It offers a balanced perspective, considering the arguments supporting and contesting the memoir's authenticity. Levinson's investigative approach provides insights into the complexities of verifying autobiographical narratives, especially those involving extraordinary claims. Levinson's article is a “catch-all” for evidence against Rawic’s claim and is essential for pointing out the issues in his curiously captivating story.

Liv, Nadine, and Dov Greenbaum. “Deep Fakes and Memory Malleability: False Memories in the Service of Fake News.” *Ajob Neuroscience,* vol. 11, no. 2, Mar. 2020, pp. 96–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/21507740.2020.1740351.

Nadine Liv and Dov Greenbaum's study critically explores the intersection between memory science and the phenomenon of “deep fakes.” The authors explore the concept of memory malleability, highlighting how easily human memory can be influenced and altered, particularly in the age of digital manipulation. This article contributes significantly to understanding the fluidity of memory and the implications this has in a world increasingly dominated by technology-driven misinformation. Their insights were integral to my research on memory's reliability in memoir writing. Their exploration of memory malleability provides a scientific basis for understanding how memoirists might inadvertently distort or misremember events, complicating the pursuit of absolute truth in autobiographical narratives.

Luttrell, Marcus., and Patrick Robinson. *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10*. First edition., Little, Brown, 2007.

This is the gripping memoir recounting the intense experience of Luttrell, the sole survivor of Operation Redwings, the deadly SEAL Team 10 mission in Afghanistan. The book offers an intensely personal narrative detailing the challenges and brutal realities faced by Luttrell and his team. It has been praised for its raw, emotional honesty and criticized for certain factual discrepancies. Luttrell's account provides a unique perspective on the complexities of war and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of extreme adversity. Luttrell's memoir serves as a pivotal case study for my critical paper. I cite the author's challenges to authenticity, particularly in contexts where corroborative evidence is limited. Additionally, this illustrates the difficulty in ensuring factual accuracy when a single perspective must carry the weight of historical documentation.

Kyle, Chris, et al. *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*. First edition., W. Morrow, 2012.

Chris Kyle's book is a gripping memoir that chronicles Kyle's career as a Navy SEAL and his experiences as the most lethal sniper in U.S. military history. The memoir offers a compelling insight into the realities of modern warfare and the psychological toll it takes on those who serve. While widely acclaimed for its candid and raw portrayal of combat, the memoir has also been subject to controversy and scrutiny over the accuracy of some of its claims, raising questions about the author's truthfulness. *American Sniper* played a significant role in exploring the need for absolute truth in military memoirs. This book’s verifiable factual details, mixed with the controversies that arose, serve as a critical

example of the inherent challenges of portraying authentic yet accurate accounts of military experiences. Additionally, Chris Kyle and a briefly mentioned event from his book intertwine with my memoir.

Murphy, Audie. *To Hell and Back*. Easton Press, 2003.

This novel is Audie Murphy's autobiographical account of his experiences during World War II. Widely recognized as one of the most candid and poignant war memoirs in American literature, this work offers a firsthand account of the harsh realities of combat, reflecting Murphy's incredible bravery and the harrowing experiences of soldiers in battle. His narrative is straightforward yet deeply evocative, capturing the essence of a soldier's life during one of the most tumultuous times in history. Murphy's humility and honesty shine throughout the book, offering a human perspective on the glorified theme of war heroism. This memoir is significant not only for its historical value but also for its contribution to understanding the personal impacts of war. It is a shining example of how military memoirs can withstand the test of time and scrutiny when written with conviction and truth.

Rawicz, Slavomir. *The Long Walk: The True Story of a Trek to Freedom*. Lyons Press, 2016

This is a remarkable account of Rawicz’s purported escape from the Gulag and his grueling journey to freedom. The narrative details the incredible hardships faced during the trek across various harsh landscapes. Although initially acclaimed as a true story, subsequent investigations and reports have cast extreme doubt on the memoir's authenticity. I utilize Rawicz’s story as a significant example of the controversy when one deliberately misrepresents themselves in a memoir. *The Long Walk* is a crucial case study

examining the consequences of fabricating or embellishing personal military memoirs. Additionally, I use this story to highlight the importance of factual accuracy and the ethical implications when memoirs deviate from the truth and cannot be verified.

Recchia, Philip. "Veterans Rip 'Pow' Bio as a Viet 'Con.'" *New York Post*, New York Post, 24 Nov. 2002, nypost.com/2002/11/24/veterans-rip-pow-bio-as-a-viet-con/.

Philip Recchia's article explores the controversy surrounding Tom Abraham's memoir, *The Cage*. The article reports on the backlash from multiple veterans who challenged the authenticity of Abraham's claims of being a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Recchia provides insights into the veterans' perspectives, highlighting concerns about the accuracy of Abraham's account and the impact of such fabrications on the integrity of military narratives. This piece underscores the critical importance of truthfulness in military memoirs and the repercussions of deceit within the veteran community. This article is crucial in continuing the discussion on the ethical implications of fabricating experiences in military memoirs. Additionally, the veterans' responses in the article offer a real-world example of how falsified accounts can undermine the trust and respect of readers and service members that military memoirists served alongside.

Sale, Johnathon, et al. "US Claims Briton's Vietnam Tale a Fraud." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 Nov. 2002, www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/nov/20/books.booksnews.

This article presents a detailed examination of a controversy surrounding Tom Abraham's contentious memoir about his capture and time spent as a POW. This investigative piece reports on the U.S. government's allegations that the memoir contains fabricated

experiences and events, challenging its authenticity and the author's credibility. The article is significant for exploring the broader implications of truth in memoir writing, especially in historical contexts like the Vietnam War. It delves into the process of fact-checking in memoirs and the ethical responsibilities of authors, publishers, and the media in verifying the accuracy of autobiographical accounts. This piece is a valuable resource because it highlights Abraham's specific case and reinforces the premise of broader discussions about authenticity and truth in non-fiction writing.

Sledge, Eugene. *With the Old Breed*. Presidio Press, 2007.

Sledge's memoir is a profound and unflinching look at his experiences as a Marine during the Pacific campaign of World War II. This critically acclaimed work is widely regarded for its accurate portrayal of war horrors and the human spirit's resilience. Sledge's narrative is notable for its detailed descriptions of the brutal conditions and the psychological impact of combat, offering a deeply personal perspective on the realities of warfare. His writing style combines clarity and emotional depth, making the experiences accessible and impactful for readers. This book is an excellent personal resource and serves as an inspiration and driving force for me to write my military memoir contribution. Additionally, it is one of the first works where I read about the realities of combat and its enduring effects on soldiers before joining the military.

Stern, Mark Joesph. "Chris Kyle, Author of American Sniper, Was a War Hero. He Was Also a Liar." *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 20 Jan. 2015, slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/01/american-sniper-lawsuit-chris-kyle-told-lies-about-jesse-ventura.html.

Stern's article critically assesses the credibility of Chris Kyle, mainly focusing on allegations made against Jesse Ventura. Stern discusses the implications of Kyle's contested claims and how they cast doubt on his overall truthfulness. This analysis is crucial in understanding how publishers might capitalize on the controversy surrounding a memoir, potentially prioritizing profit over the author's long-term reputation and the integrity of the narrative. This article analyzes the complex relationship between publishers, authors, and the truth. Stern's exploration of Kyle's case provides a poignant example of how publishers might exploit controversial aspects of a memoir for commercial gain, sometimes at the expense of the author's credibility.

Swofford, Anthony. *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*. Scribner, 2003.

Anthony Swofford's story is a candid and self-examining memoir that provides a raw and unfiltered look into the life of a Marine during the Gulf War. In his work, Swofford combines personal experiences with a critique of military culture and the complexities of war. His narrative is characterized by its frankness and emotional depth, offering an objective perspective on the psychological impact of warfare on soldiers. Swofford's style is both gritty and lyrical, effectively capturing the monotony, adrenaline, fear, and camaraderie experienced by Marines. This memoir stands out for its honest exploration of the effects of war on individual identity and morality. Swofford's memoir was one of my initial sources of inspiration when I decided to write a memoir. He shows me the value of everyone's unique story and the importance of sharing personal experiences and insights.

Wearing, Alison. “Should Memoir Be Considered Non-Fiction?” *Open Book*, 28 Aug. 2020, open-book.ca/Writer-in-Residence/Archives/Alison-Wearing/Should-Memoir-be-Considered-Non-Fiction.

In this thought-provoking article, Alison Wearing delves into the complex debate surrounding the classification of memoirs as nonfiction. Wearing raises some critical questions about the reliability of memory and how it impacts the truthfulness of memoirs. She argues that the fallibility of human memory and the too often subjective nature of personal narratives challenge the conventional placement of memoirs within the nonfiction genre. Wearing's exploration is not just theoretical; she also discusses practical implications for writers, readers, and publishers. This article helps me describe the ethical and philosophical considerations of autobiographical writing.

Woodward, Rachel, and K. Neil Jenkings. *Bringing War to Book: Writing and Producing the Military Memoir*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57010-9.

Woodward and Jenkings comprehensively analyze the process and implications of writing military memoirs. Their study delves into the complexities involved in narrating personal experiences of conflict, addressing both the practical aspects of memoir writing and the ethical considerations unique to military narratives. The authors skillfully combine exhaustive academic research with insights from actual memoirists, providing an in-depth view of how military experiences are translated into written form. This book is helping in defining military memoirs. More importantly, it will be precious as I continue my memoir for its thorough exploration of the interplay between personal memory, cultural narratives of war, and the publishing industry's role in shaping memoirs.

Zinsser, William. *Writing about Your Life: A Journey into the Past*. DaCapo Press, 2004.

William Zinsser presents a reflective and instructive guide on the art of memoir writing. This work stands out for combining personal anecdotes and practical writing advice. With his characteristic warmth and clarity, Zinsser guides readers through turning personal experiences into engaging narratives. He emphasizes the importance of simplicity, transparency, and honesty in writing, offering valuable insights for memoirists and writers of all genres. The book is commendable for its accessible approach, making the art of writing about one's life approachable and relatable. Zinsser's experiences, interwoven throughout the guide, serve as compelling examples of effectively capturing and communicating the essence of personal history. I refer back to this book numerous times while writing my memoir. Zinsser’s words continue to be a guide, and his book is readily available on my nightstand and Kindle for reference.