



Aaron R. Heusinkveld

Objects for Deployment

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This book is dedicated to all the fallen Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom and to those still missing in action. I would also like to thank my wife, Jessica, for all of her love and support throughout my deployment and coming home.



In 2005, I finished serving an eight-year career with the United States Army with a 319 day tour in Abu Ghraib, Iraq. Most of the world may or may not know about the detainee torture scandal that happened there just two years prior to my arrival, and most also know about the estimated 30,000 prisoners murdered there under Saddam Hussein's regime. The 280 acres of hell-on-earth called Abu Ghraib can be said in many ways; however, those of us who had the honor to live there know it simply as the Bu.

The news of my deployment came just a few days before my wedding day. For over a year, my wife and I had planned a Memorial Day weekend wedding. The Michigan Army National Guard also decided that would be a good weekend to conclude our annual two-week training. After we returned from the field, all I wanted was a nice hot shower. I noticed that the Battalion Commander was present, and called for a Battalion formation. In most cases, a formation of that size is typically for a "dog and pony show."

The last time we were all together was for a parade for the governor. This was not the case here; we were given our order to Iraq. Shortly after hearing the news about the deployment, I was off to my wedding.

It's a quick three-and-a-half hour drive from the Camp Grayling training to where the wedding was in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I was supposed to be excited and full of joy for my upcoming wedding day just 72 hours away, but my mind was elsewhere. At the time, the war in Iraq was only a few years old. It was still top headline material; the media overwhelmed the public about the latest casualties. The initial shock of the news of going to war started to wear off slowly, but my stomach was still in knots and it was hard to focus on my driving. I did what I could to get the image of myself receiving the Purple Heart, or my soon-to-be wife being handed a tightly folded flag on behalf of the U.S. Army out of my head. Upon arriving to Ann Arbor, I had to share my news with someone I could trust. I didn't want to taint the mood of the wedding with my sobering news. I only told my father, the man officiating the wedding.

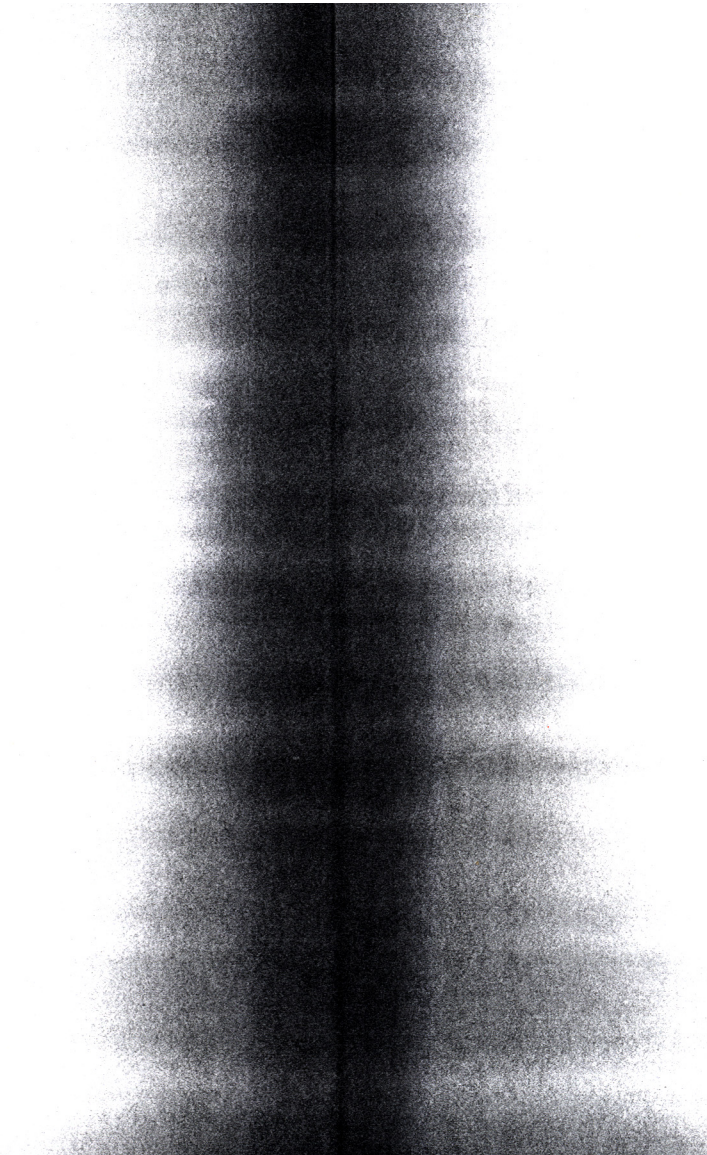


The wedding exceeded any dream, the reception was even better. The wedding had a patriotic theme of red, white, and blue. My wife was beautiful, and I wore my Army dress green uniform. At the reception, some of my friends from high school played some WWII era big-band classics. Despite the black cloud of bad news lofting over my head, it was still the best day of my life.

The honeymoon was in Las Vegas; my wife and I had a blast. During our layover in Salt Lake City, a cattle rancher sat next to us on the plane. After takeoff, we started talking about why we were going to Vegas. He told us that he was going to renegotiate his contracts at some of the high-end casinos like the famous Golden Nugget. Towards the end of the flight, he gave us his business card. The bonus was that on the back of the card he wrote a list of shows we could see for free. All we had to do was mention his name and show the concierge his card. We took him up on his offer and saw a show at the Golden Nugget. Our seats were in the V.I.P. section.

We also saw the Blue Man group. Naturally, it was awesome, however, the Mac King Comic and Magic show was the most memorable. At one point, he was looking for two newlyweds for a trick. The next thing I knew, my wife and I were on the way to the stage to assist with his well-known trick, "The Cloak of Invisibility." The trick started with me putting a paper napkin in my pocket, and he used a bright yellow poncho for his cloak and put the napkin in my wife's pocket. It was a corny bit, but the audience laughed it up. For our efforts on stage, we were given a shirt and an autographed copy of his magic trick book. Despite all the fun we were having, I couldn't stop being reminded of the war. It felt like every television I saw had live coverage and the latest causality count.

It wasn't until after we returned home from the honeymoon when I finally broke the dreadful news to my wife. I just could not bring myself to tell her any earlier, and spoil the great times we had in Sin-City. I was more nervous telling her I was leaving to fight in the war than when I proposed. Her reaction hurt me more than it hurt her. She looked absolutely heartbroken. It was almost as if I was saying goodbye to her right then and there. I had only three months to enjoy life as a newlywed and prep myself for life in a combat zone.













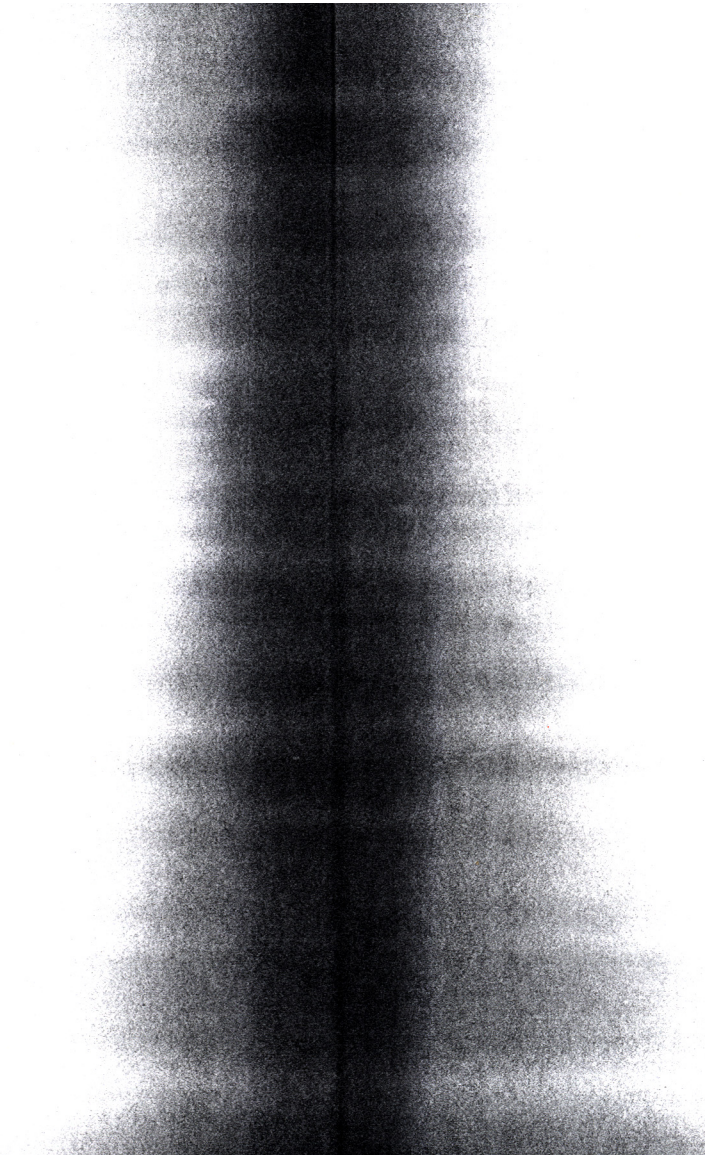








I left on October 2nd, my wife's birthday. Unfortunately, her birthday party was also my official going-away party. The entire day was extremely surreal; I had only been married for just over 90 days, and I was mentally exhausted while desperately holding onto my wife. She trembled and tried to hold back her tears most of the day, but there came a point when she could not hold back her emotions. I felt as if I was abandoning her. My sympathy went out to my fellow comrades that had children; most of the children did not understand where their daddies were going for such a long time. It was nearing dusk, and the moment had arrived for us all to say our goodbyes and load onto the bus. Everyone wanted to take group photos for their own memories. There were many last-minute hugs and kisses followed with good-byes. That evening, my wife and I never said "goodbye" to each other, we simply said "see-ya later" after a long, loving embrace.







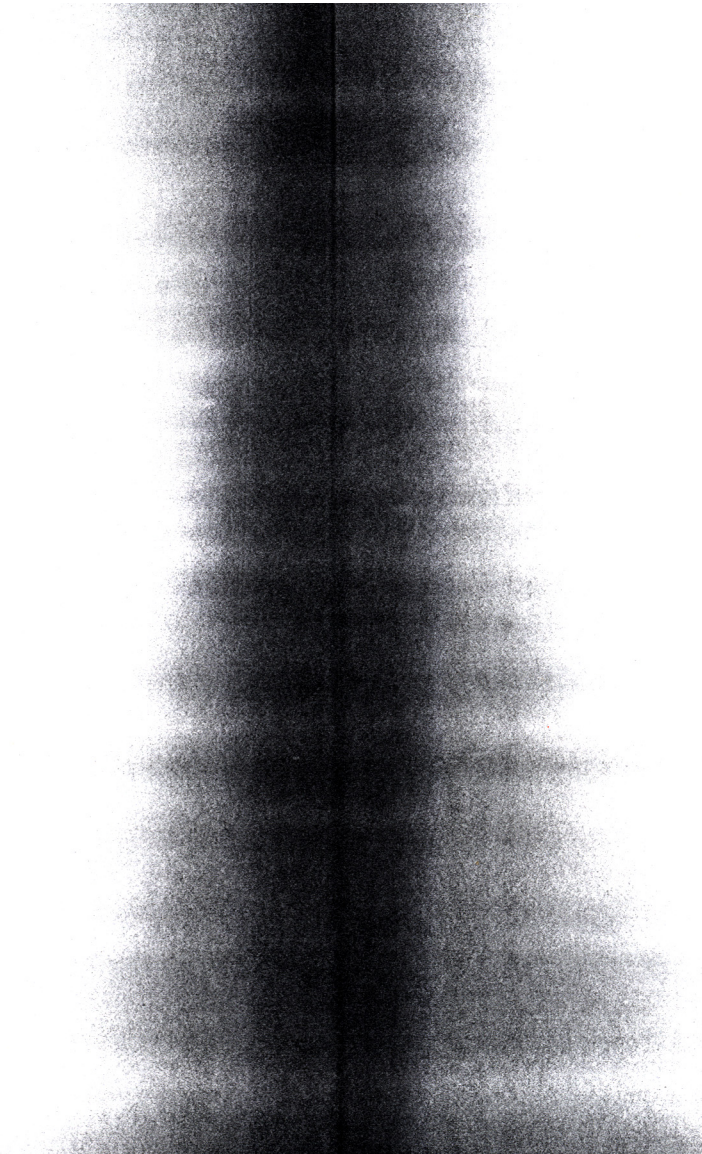








The 12-hour bus ride from the armory in Lansing, Michigan to Fort Dix, New Jersey, was long, stressful and sickening. Once there, I spent almost three months training outdoors in the cold and wet autumn. We spent most of the time out in the field learning the details of convoy security. Coming from a mechanized field artillery unit, most of the defensive driving tactics were new. What was supposed to be a three day field exercise ended up being almost a month of getting lost on the back roads of Fort Dix. Things were much easier when I drove a 27-ton tracked vehicle through the backwoods of Camp Grayling. Anything that was in my way quickly became a part of the road. We also all went through and extensive weapons training and qualifications. My weapons of choice were the M-2 Browning fifty caliber machine gun, and the Squad Automatic Weapon (S.A.W.). Like most people, I named my firearms; they all shared the name Eleanor. There was no significance of the name; I just liked the way it sounded.



At the last minute, we all went through a crash course of "detainee operations." We were told that it was in case we ever needed to transport detainees.

We covered everything from non-lethal hand-to-hand combat and riot control, to forced cell extractions. While we were in the process of mobilizing for Iraq, half of my unit was de-mobilizing from a year in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. From them there was almost a sense of jealousy that we were going where all the action was, instead of being confined to one area on the small tropical island. Even so, it was great to see familiar faces before leaving.







































Viper 6



KILLBURN

WHEEL

111-27

111-27

WARNING: THE POWER FOR THE  
HYDRAULIC SYSTEMS IS ON  
AT ALL TIMES WHEN THE  
ENGINE IS RUNNING

<b>R.H. HEATER OUTLET</b>	<b>FRESH AIR INTAKE</b>
DO NOT BLOCK THIS OUTLET	DO NOT BLOCK THIS INTAKE













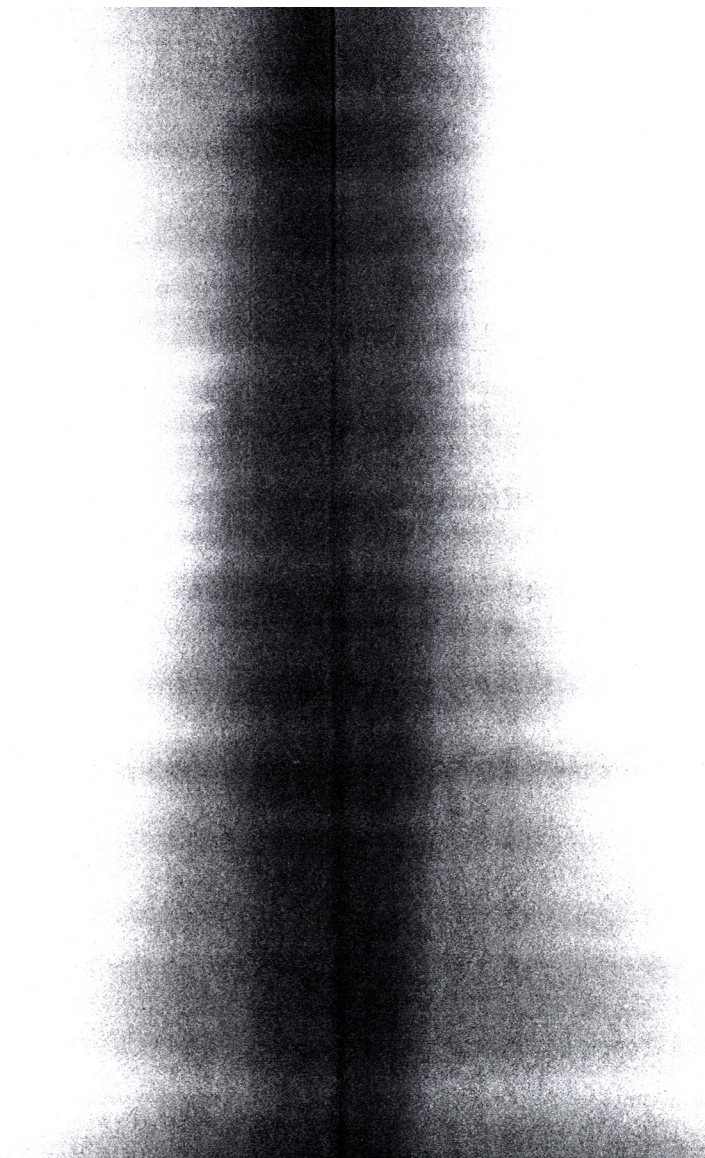






Just before our departure to Kuwait, I traded in my "Army Greens" for used desert camouflage. I was shocked that I was being issued used uniforms for my trip to Iraq. I took it as a positive omen; I figured that if they survived their first tour of duty, they would bring me the same luck. Among all my used tan fatigues, I was issued a brand new dark green protective ballistics vest. For the next year, I felt like an out-of-place shrub walking through the desert. Once I had all of my "new" gear, I knew that there was only one thing left to do, and that was to set foot on an airplane headed to war.

Once we were in Kuwait, we had a two-week layover in a place called Camp Virginia. The bus ride from Kuwait City to the camp was a culture shock. Seeing a busy Middle Eastern city for the first time on the television is one thing; it's another to experience it firsthand. On each bus, someone had to ride in the jump seat in between the driver and the door. This person was our gunner; however, he only had ten rounds loaded in his rifle magazine. The ten rounds were more than anybody else on the bus, because it turned out that it was a very low-risk area.



Life was good in Camp Virginia. While we were "Kuwaiting" to go to Iraq, there was a coffee shop, gift store, barber shop, computer and phone center, and plenty of air-conditioning. The tents we slept in felt cramped with all of our gear, and the cots were backbreaking. Next to the shower trailer, there was a section of graffiti that had the lyrics from Outkast. The "Bombs over Baghdad" tag was a popular spot for a photo opportunity. Then I had my first taste of driving in the Middle East. The roads were barren with the exception of mile-long military supply convoys coming or going from Iraq. I spent hours white-knuckling the steering wheel during last-minute live fire exercises, intensity was high, and everyone knew how serious things were going to be. I drove through a simulated city in the middle of the desert so my gunner and lieutenant could have a better sense of the mission to come. I spent most of my time playing Horseshoes outside the workout center.



On Christmas morning, the U.S.O. sponsored a five-kilometer fun run. Though I hated to run, I decided to enter and get the free sweatshirt. The following day, my unit commander decided to have one last physical fitness test before crossing the border into Iraq. I passed the push-ups and sit-ups with little effort, but when the whistle blew at the start of the run, I walked the entire two miles. When I walked across the finish line I felt that I proved my point even though I failed the P.T. I argued that if you looked at the time from the previous day's fun run, I would have passed with plenty of time to spare. Because I was getting out of the Army after the deployment, I figured the worst they could do was send me to Iraq. This marked the point in time where I started to lose morale and motivation.

A few days later, during one of our many daily formations, we were all introduced to a man called Colonel Hussy from the 306th Military Police Battalion out of New York. The interesting thing about this Colonel was that he was wearing the rank of a Major; he informed us that he was going to be promoted in a matter of weeks and that we would fall under his command at Abu Ghraib. Once again, I was in shock. The news that I would be working as a detainee guard, instead of convoy security, was very unsettling to hear. I suddenly had the images from the torture scandal flashing in my head. Then I realized why we went through the last minute detainee operations training. I felt as if a bait and switch had just occurred. Despite learning the news, most of us were relieved that we would not be on the dangerous roads of Iraq.









2004 12 21









تنکریجاری

الموت... با جالون





BOMBS  
OVER  
BAGHDAD







**HAPPY HOLIDAYS  
CAMP VIRGINIA KUWAIT  
5K FUN RUN**



*Sponsored by M.W.K.*



























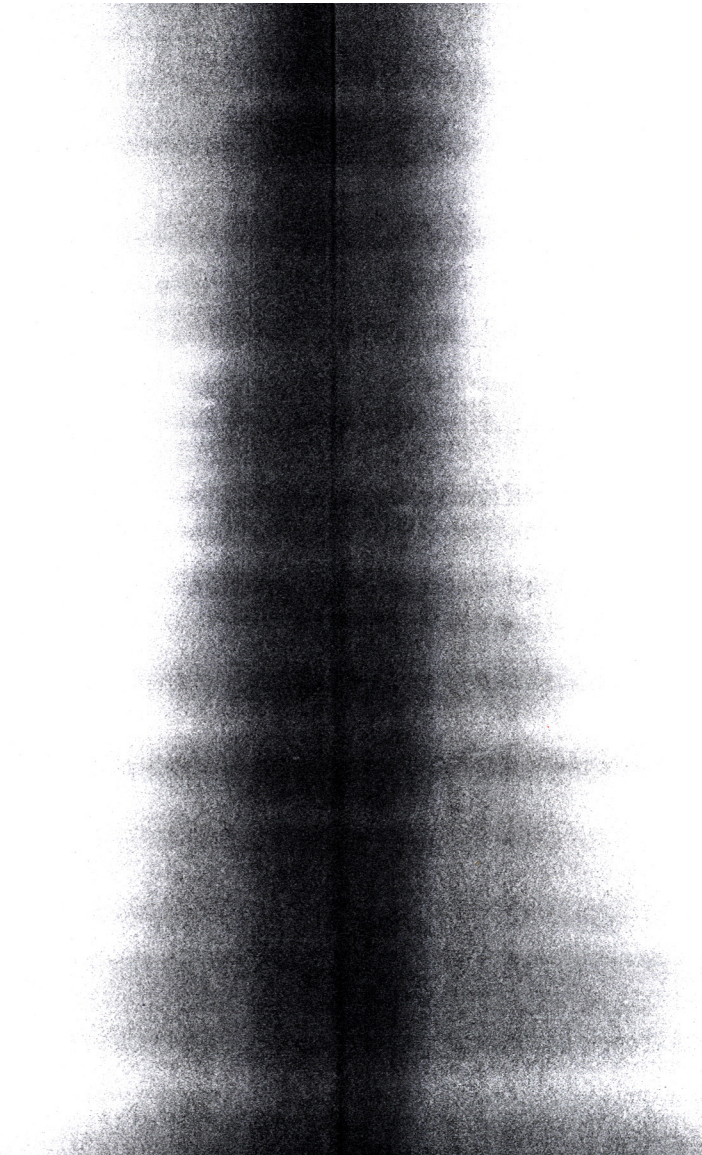


On the flight from Kuwait to Baghdad international airport (B.I.A.P.), we sat sideways on seats fashioned from cargo netting. Over the years I have learned to bring something to do while flying to keep my mind off of things. I spent most of the flight trying to set a new high score on my electronic Yatzee game. Unfortunately, there were a few people who lost their lunches from the turbulent flight. As the C-130 landed, it went into a sharp counter-clockwise, downward turn. During our decent, the plane discharged all of its countermeasure flares. Overall it felt like we were being sucked down into a tornado.





Shortly after landing in Baghdad, I heard my first Improvised Explosive Device (I.E.D.) explode in the distance. At that point, reality suddenly seemed much more tangible; I was standing on a runway in Baghdad, Iraq. I knew my journey to Abu Ghraib was not over yet. I still had to survive an hour-long convoy to the prison. My entire unit would not fit in one large convoy, so I was assigned to leave on the second wave. News spread like wild fire that the first wave had to stop due to an I.E.D. spotting. I ended up having to sit on the side of a runway for an extra hour before the "all-clear" was given and my convoy could leave. Thoughts of not surviving the final leg of my journey were stuck in my head. Dusk quickly turned to dark. I could feel my blood pressure rise, and I felt extremely nauseous and vulnerable as I left the protection of the miles of concrete barriers and razor wire. I had to lie on my back atop a layer of duffel bags with no ammunition in an open, back-up, armored, five-ton truck. I was told that all of the ammo was waiting for me in Abu Ghraib. The ride to my new home-away-from-home was gut wrenching.



A few minutes after we passed the last check point and entered the base, I felt the truck come to a stop. My sergeant yelled for me to get up and start unloading the gear. The first views of the inside walls of the infamous Abu Ghraib were breathtaking. The sky was pitch-black with no moon in sight. The entire compound was lit by gasoline or diesel fuel generators. I followed the rest of my group inside to the old prison cafeteria with three duffel bags, my weapons, and my ruck-sack. The cafeteria was where I reported each time for my daily or nightly shift as a guard for an hour-long briefing called guard mount. During these briefings, we were given reports from the last shift. There was always bad news about the latest I.E.D. attacks that we all heard in our sleep.









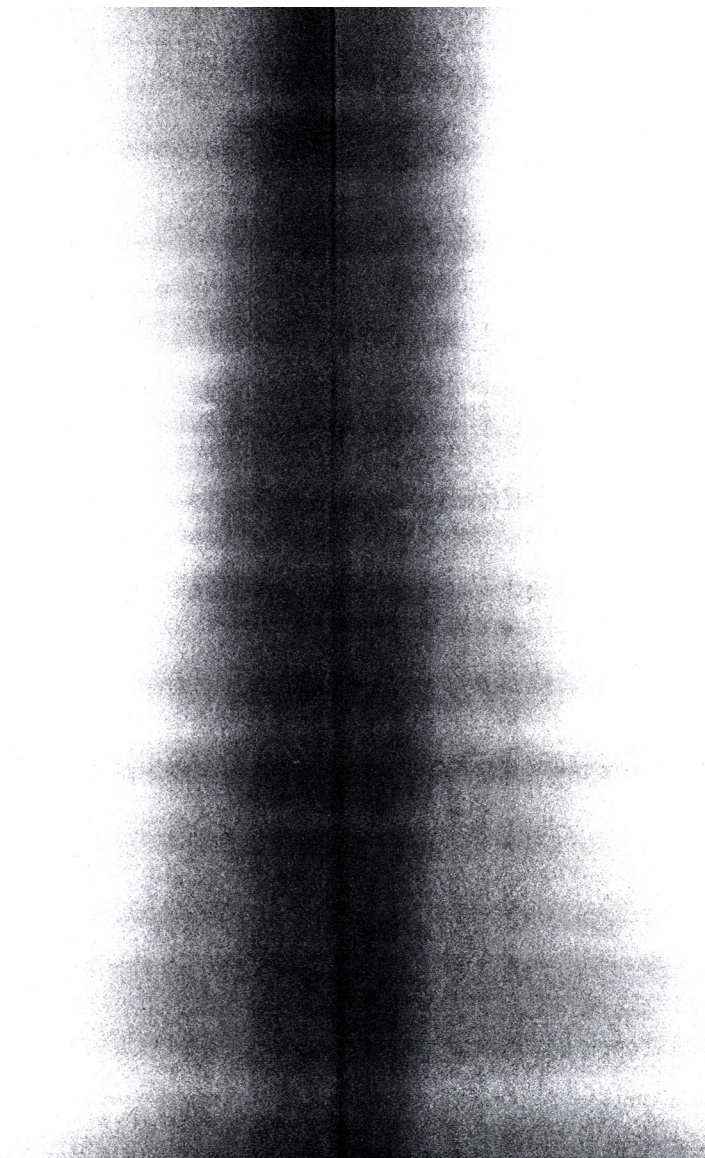








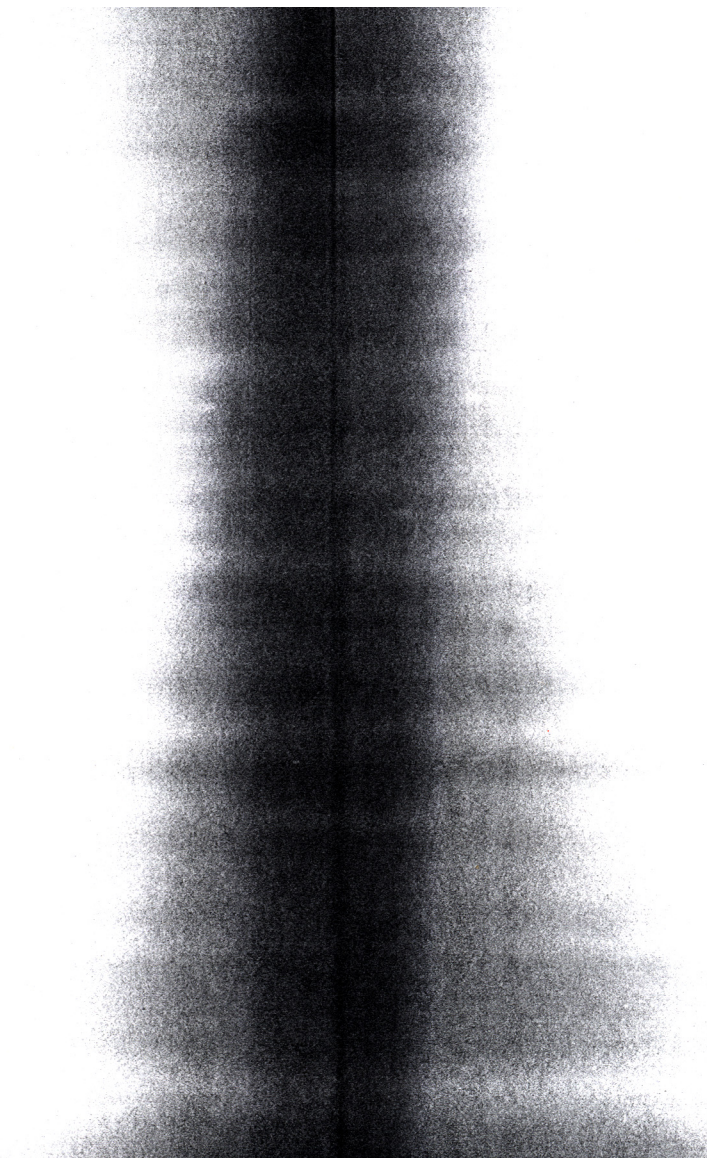
We all lived in rooms that were previously prison cells; they slept two to three people. At first we had to sleep twice as many people per room because the unit we replaced still needed somewhere to sleep. After we settled into our temporary rooms and got our bearings around the base, we went straight to work, learning what our life would be for the next year as detainee guards. On one of my first shifts as a guard, signup sheets were posted next to every cell door for people to claim as their own for the next year. Everyone not working signed other people's names they wanted to have as roommates. After my shift, I wandered around the cell blocks desperately looking to see my name. All the rooms were full, which meant nobody wanted to room with me. The last available cell was the solitary cell at the end of the hallway. It was depressing living alone the entire year, but what hurt most is the fact that I was forgotten. At first I was against the idea, however, it's not so bad when you have the keys to get out.



I kept my cell clean and simple. It was comprised of a small bed with a plywood frame and a couple of foam mattress pads, it also had a small shelving unit which I made of recycled cardboard boxes left behind by the other unit. For only twenty dollars, I was able to purchase a DVD player and an eighteen-inch television (the unit we replaced couldn't bring their electronics home because they ran at a frequency of 220 volts and used European-style plugs). I stowed all my extra gear under my bed to make room for the desk that I built in my spare time. Tucked away in the corner of the room, I always had a few empty water bottles for "number one." Going "number two" required a helmet, body armor, a weapon, and if it was dark out, a flashlight. I avoided having to use the plastic outhouses that baked under the desert sun because of the wretched smell. I covered the outside of my cell door with comic strip newspaper clippings my mother mailed me. I thought these boosted morale; almost everyone would stop by and read them as I posted them up. The walls of my cell were covered with Arabic writing.



I asked one of the translators to read the writing for me and found it was mostly the names of former Iraqi prisoners written with ash and water. I left my own mark by adding a prison-style tally calendar. For me, each new tick mark on the wall meant another day of survival. My wife helped decorate by sending me handmade paintings and drawings she made. The love she put into her artwork was inspiring and boosted my morale.





















THE DRUGS NEEDS ONE OF THE MANY MEN  
BAKERS RICE THAT ARE IN MANY OF THE  
SOLDIERS ROOMS  
IF YOU HAVE NEEDS TO GET  
CLOTHES IN THE CLEANERS YOU  
NEED THEM BECAUSE  
THEY WILL BE  
ON MOHAMMED LOCATED CLOSED FOR  
IN THE MILVAN NEXT ABOUT 10:00  
TO ALPHA BAY AGAINST THE WALL  
HOURS OF OPERATION 0600-0800  
1500-1700 !!!  
\* IF YOU HAVE UNIFORMS IN THE HALLS  
LAUNDRY, YOU CAN PICK THEM UP DAILY BETWEEN  
1700-1830 HRS & 1930-2100 HRS \*

Bridge Play This Wednesday  
1930hrs - Hospital Conference  
Room









All of us Field Artillery guys were against the idea of wearing the MP armband, but we still wore them. We weren't granted the classification of being an MP, so the armband felt like a costume. We weren't MPs but we walked around pretending we were for a whole year. Every day, I wore the stupid armband, ID badge, carried handcuffs, and a notebook. The notebook was what kept my entire life in order. I used it daily to track detainees and write my observations.





306<sup>th</sup> MP BN



SPC HEUSINKVELD,  
AARON

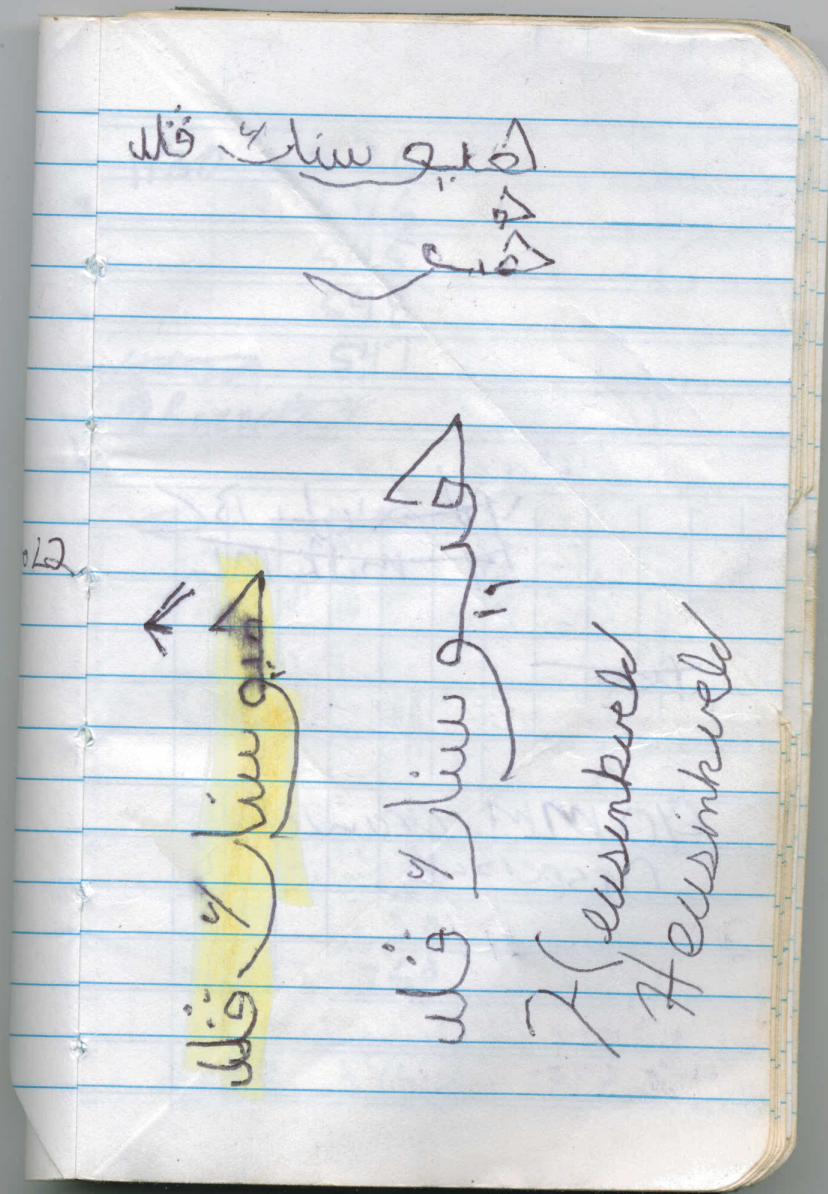
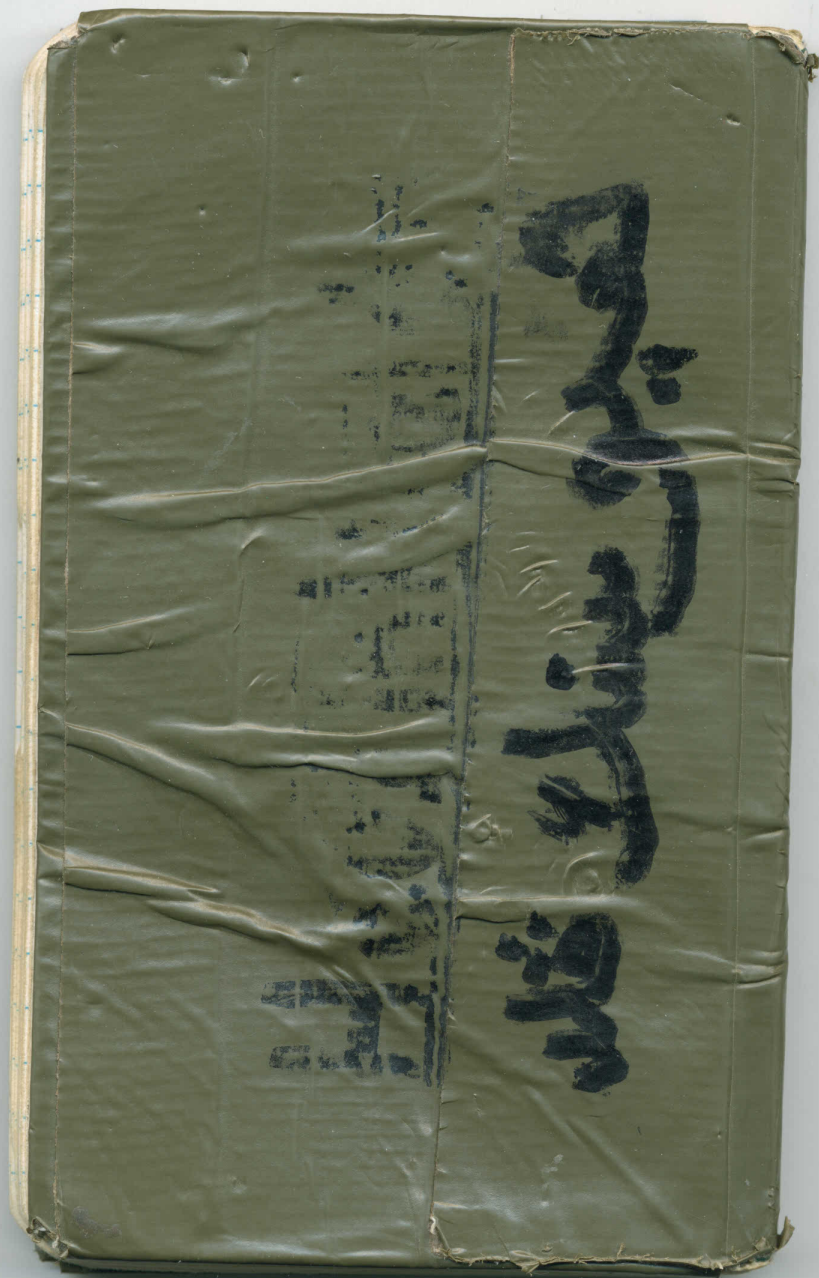


MP



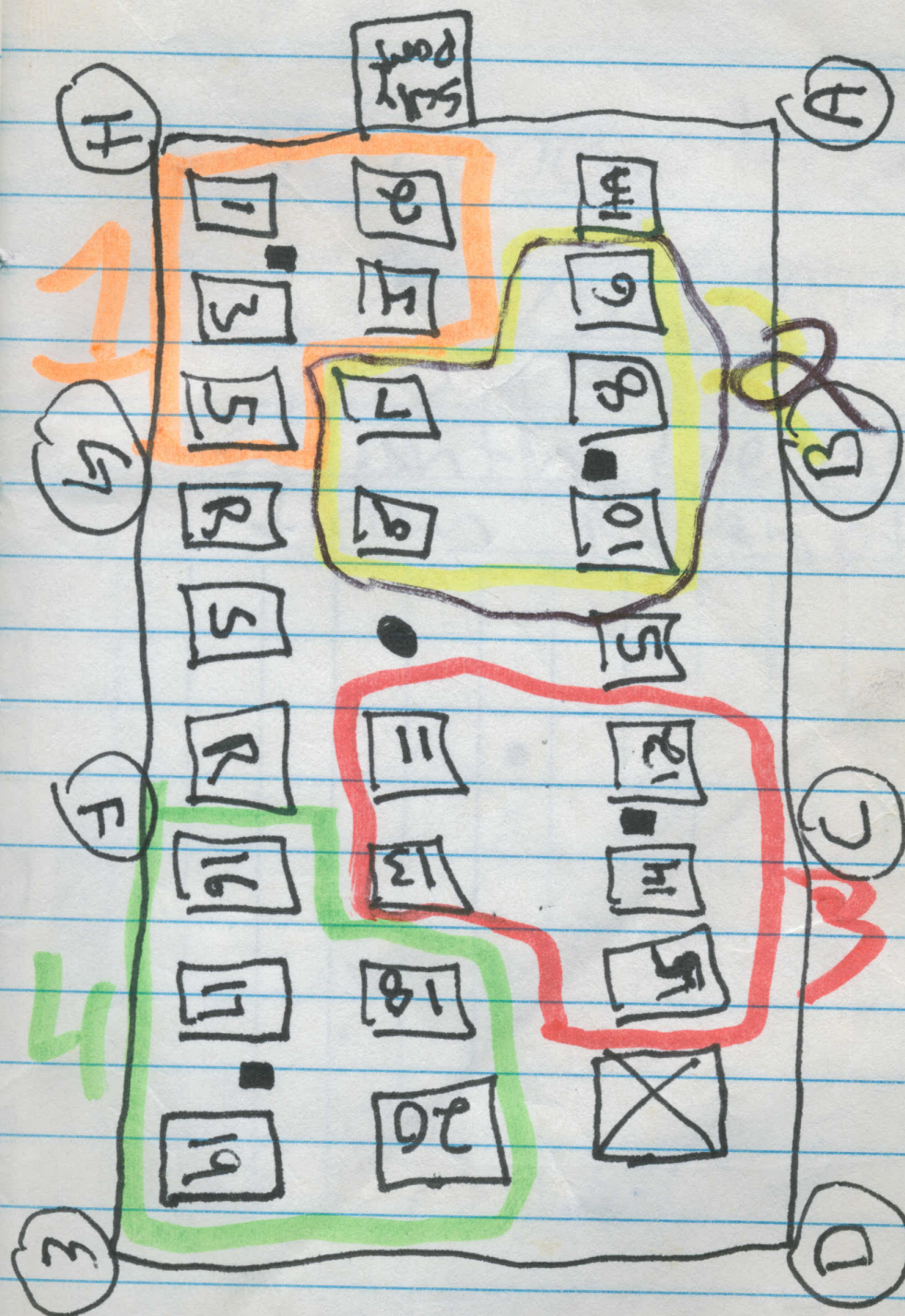






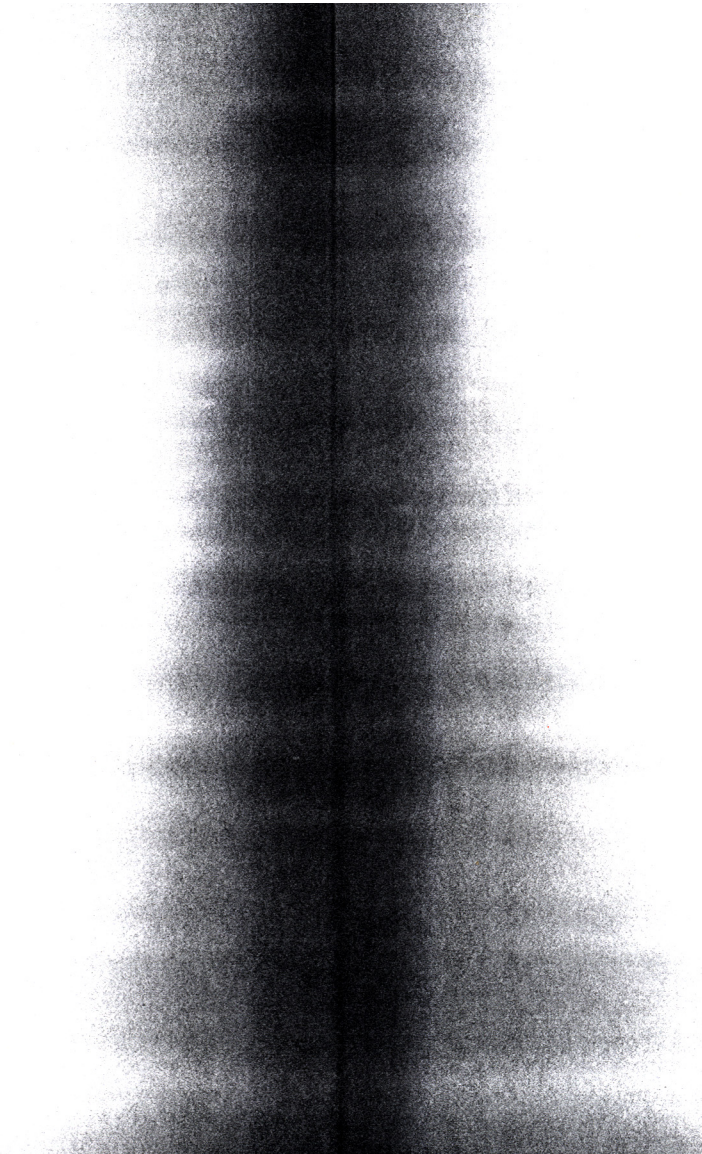


365 Days in Abu Ghraib  
 More Like Abu Grave,  
 Spending my year  
 12 hours a day ~~sleeps~~  
 Babysitting insurgents  
 that can't behave,  
 Dodging the mortars  
 Ducking the strays,  
 Keeping my head down  
 cause that's what I've  
 Been told, Damn Mister  
 Mister is 'getting old,  
 The days are a 101  
 and 80 Feels cold,  
 I've got 3 calanders  
 counting down the days,  
 Teaching the Terrorist  
 that Killing americans  
 Just don't pay.





The transition from a "normal" lifestyle to what I endured for almost a year was not easy. At first, I was hyper vigilant, and always had my guard up. My closest friends were my interpreters; their friendship and loyalty proved to be a one of my greatest assets. My days off were few and far between, I worked thirteen-hour shifts daily for over a month before I had my first day off. After that, I had a day off about every ten days. Most of the other soldiers kept to themselves or played video games all day, however, I would spend my breaks with my interrupters. I never knew their real names for security reasons, but "Bill," "George," "Dave," "Turbo," and "Ahmed" have left intimate memories with me. They were my best friends for almost a year. We spent hours playing card games or watching Iraqi soap operas. During the soap operas, I would tell them what I thought the actors were saying. Most of the time, I was pretty close. Yatzee was by far the game of choice among us all. Some of my most memorable moments were sitting down together and eating and socializing. Like most Iraqis, we sat on the floor.

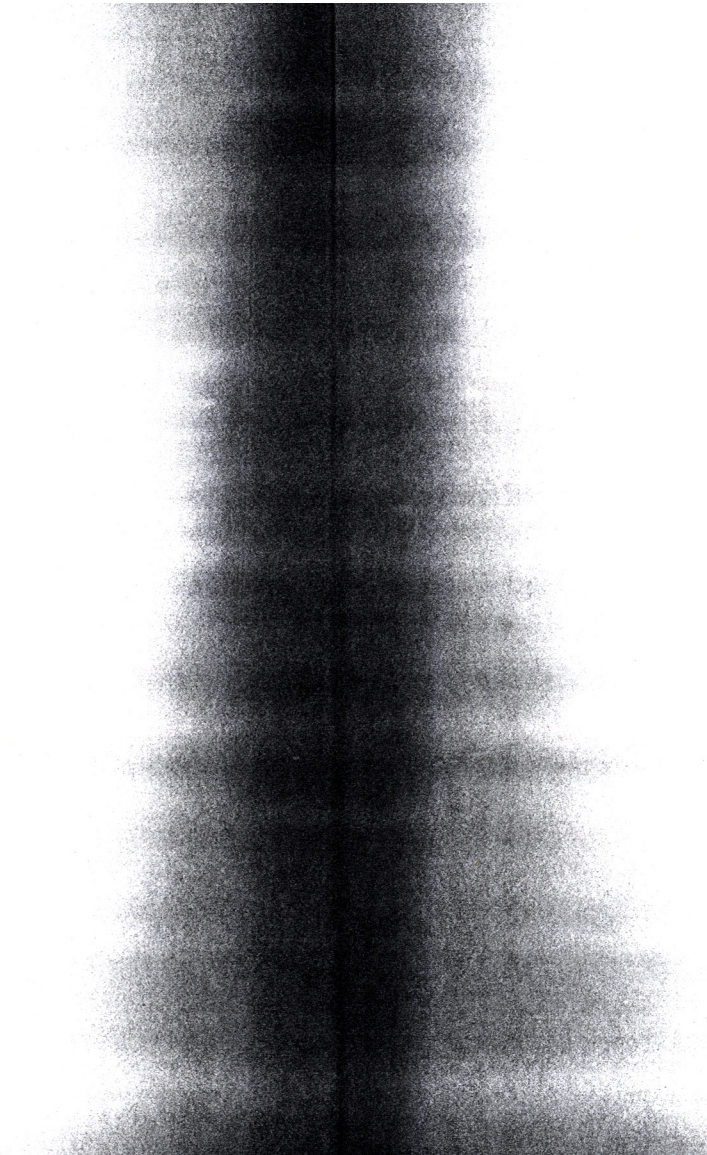


We shared the plentiful bounty of food out of Styrofoam containers from the dining facility. One of Bill's hobbies was calligraphy, and he loved my last name because of the way it looked in Arabic. After the deployment, I used one of his calligraphic designs for a tattoo as a way to always remember the good times we shared. Dave worked in the field hospital, and was good at translating medical terms. He was in the process of applying to go to medical school in the United States. One year later, we crossed paths again in Atlanta, Georgia while he studied at Emory University.

Because of the immense heat, I had to increase my water intake to over 6 liters a day to fight the daily threat of heat stroke or dehydration. We were provided all the bottled water we could drink. In addition to four Red Bulls, I drank two pots of coffee during my arduous thirteen-hour shift as a guard to stay awake.



Dave, one of my interrupters, brought me my own coffee maker from Baghdad so I could brew coffee in my room. The coffee from his local market was excellent. It was an extra strong dark roast, but it was smooth going down. Having my own coffee maker in my room was awesome. It cut down on time walking to the dining facility just to get a cup of the burnt, thick-as-mud Army coffee. Toward the end of my deployment, Dave also gave me a special watch as a gift. I still wear it every day.















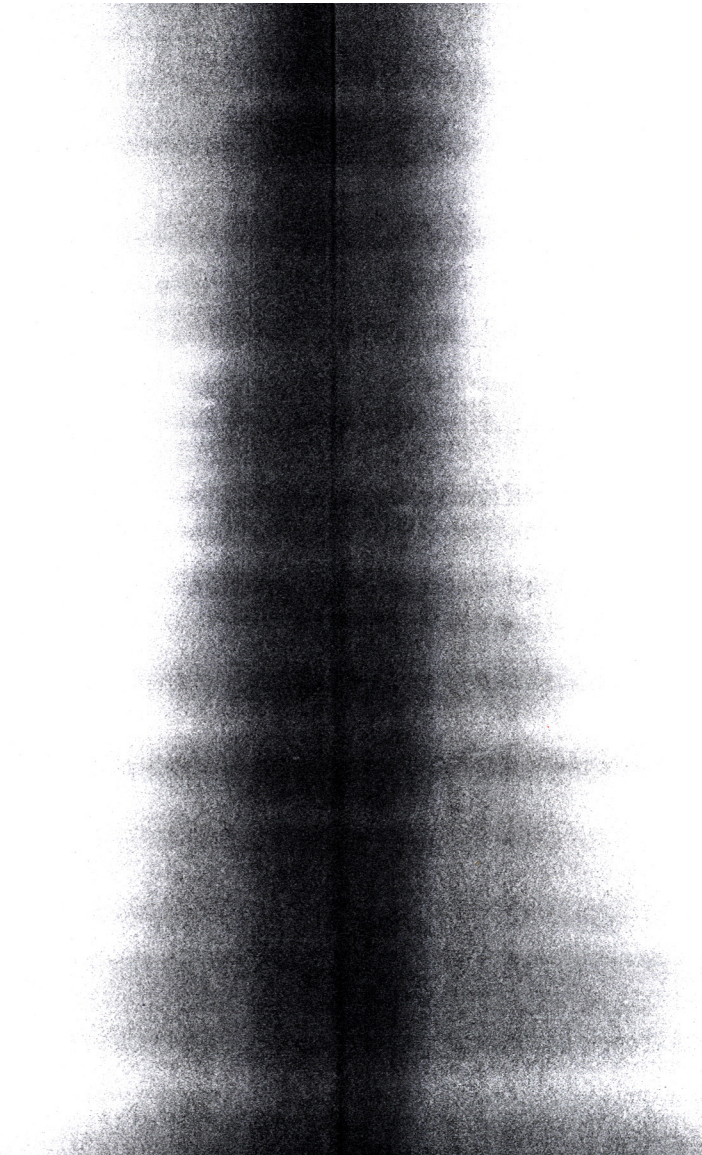


Three times a day, whether I wanted to or not, I ate. The government contracted Kellogg Brown and Root (K.B.R.) and the Halliburton Corporation, who sub-contracted labor from India to prepare all of our food. The hired Indian labor wore blue jumpsuits; everyone nicknamed them the "blue berries." They became a good source of entertainment throughout the base because they had a good sense of humor and always got the job done. Overall, the food was safe to eat, but it always tasted funny and the menu rarely changed. For the last three months, just because I could, I ate breakfast for every meal. The dining facility was more than just a spot to eat; it was where we watched the news. Typically, the televisions were tuned to FOX News. The last week of August I was sitting next to a soldier from the Louisiana National Guard as he witnessed his home destroyed by hurricane Katrina. After witnessing the horrifying news, we both sat and expressed our frustrations with the G. W. Bush administration.

The daunting rhythm of eat, work, eat, work, eat, sleep quickly became an uphill psychological battle to fight. What little "free-time" I had, I spent wisely doing laundry, getting my haircut, hand-writing letters, hanging out with my interrupters, calling the ones I loved back home and sleeping. The movie "Groundhog Day" always comes to mind when I think back to my deployment, because every single day felt the same.



I felt that the supposedly "un-biased" media painted an exciting image of a soldier's lifestyle, living in large and safe bases in the "green-zone" throughout Iraq. They showed troops playing volleyball, flag-football, swimming, fishing, and going for daytime runs around a maze of fortified air-conditioned trailers where they slept. There were a few occasions when I, on my day off, had to go with a convoy to the "green-zone" to pick up our mail. (Every other day we received enough mail to fill the back of a humvee.) Most of the guys, including myself, felt the love and support from back home. I was even adopted by a Big Ten University sorority. They sent me all sorts of interesting packages and mail. It is amazing how many calendars and decks of cards are sent overseas. I felt that some people thought that we must have had nothing better to do than sit around playing cards, looking at our calendars, and waiting to come home. The few times I was in the "green-zone" I would always go to the "Big-P.X." and pick up odds and ends for myself and my buddies. The Post Exchange was an air-conditioned superstore that had almost everything essential to survive.



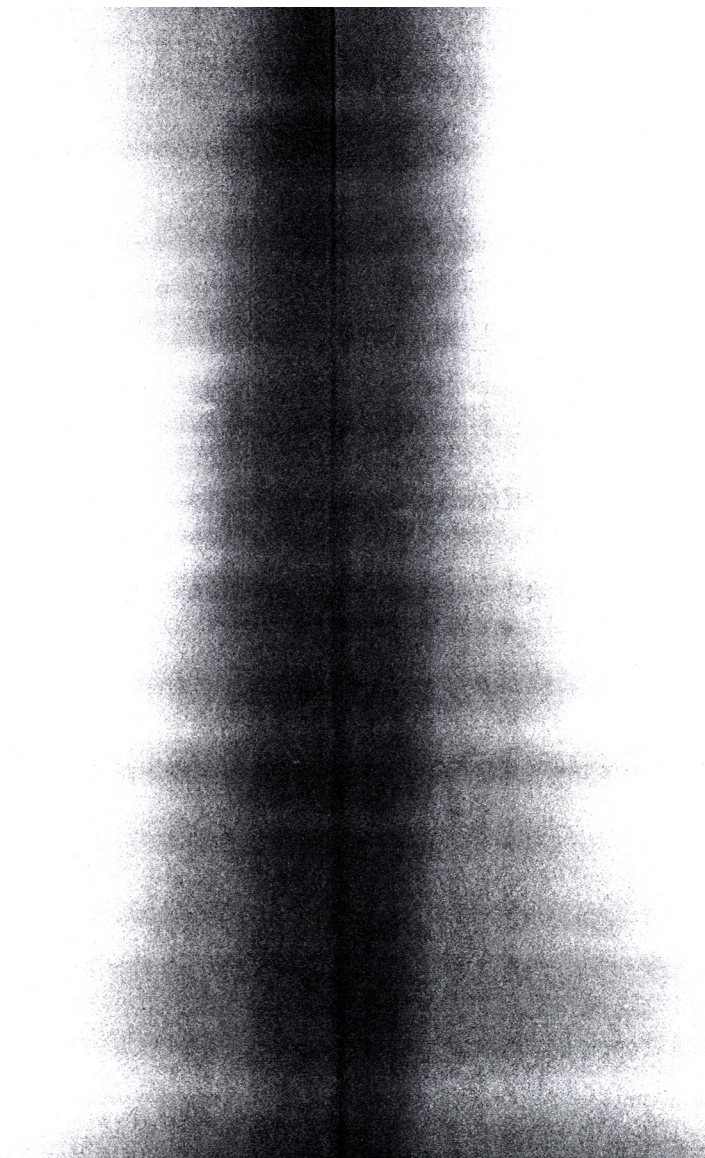
The top selling items were comfort items like chocolate that would not normally survive in a care package. I would also walk around one of Saddams' manmade lakes and watch people fish for carp, and hit golf balls into the water. I respect the troops that were fortunate enough to have lived with these luxuries, and no doubt they had their own challenges, but life was much different living within the walls of the Abu Ghraib.

For my own safety, I was required to wear my full combat gear anytime I was outside my room. The imminent threat of incoming enemy mortar rounds or rockets was something I was not prepared for. Almost like clock-work, every day the air-raid siren would sound off like a tornado. The siren had different tones to let us know where the last mortar landed. The running joke was; "As long as you can hear that siren, you're not dead yet." For my first month at the Bu, I would flinch, my heart skipped beats, and I would start looking for the nearest cover after each explosion. Eventually, the daily dose of deadly bombs falling from above and the sounds of the deafening explosions became second-nature.



I heard, and sometimes felt, the concussion of the explosions. Depending on which way the wind was blowing, I could smell the explosion. The concussions felt like a car driving by, loudly blasting its base. The raw power and the smell of the explosions are next to impossible to describe, and even harder to forget. It was a somber reminder knowing that no matter how much precaution I took, the impacts were as deadly as they were random.

My main mission during the deployment was to guard detainees. I started out working in Level Three of Camp Redemption. After the detainees finished their in-processing, they were brought to my level. If they followed the rules, they were transported to Level Two and if they didn't, they were bumped up to Level Four. Think of each level as minimum to maximum security. Each level has their zone, which was where the detainees were housed in tents. Level Three housed four tents in three zones. Zone One only had two tents, which were juvenile tents. Level One was the largest of the zones.



This is where the general population stayed before they went to their trial. The majority of them eventually had their names cleared. It's tough because they are called detainees, but in actuality, they are prisoners of war. The juveniles ranged in age from ten to eighteen; it was hard knowing that the kids were just innocent pawns in the deadly game of war. Even though I was breaking the rules, I sometimes brought in my DVD player and some of my Loony Toons discs for them to watch. The cartoons kept them quiet, and out of trouble for the most part. The kids learned to trust and like me because I was the "good guard" that would laugh and joke with them. Most of the other guards viewed them simply as "little terrorists." The other half of Zone One included the recreational area and the shower area. The detainees would play soccer with balls covered in duct tape. The duct tape helped the balls last longer against the effects of the razor wire that lined the inside of the fence.

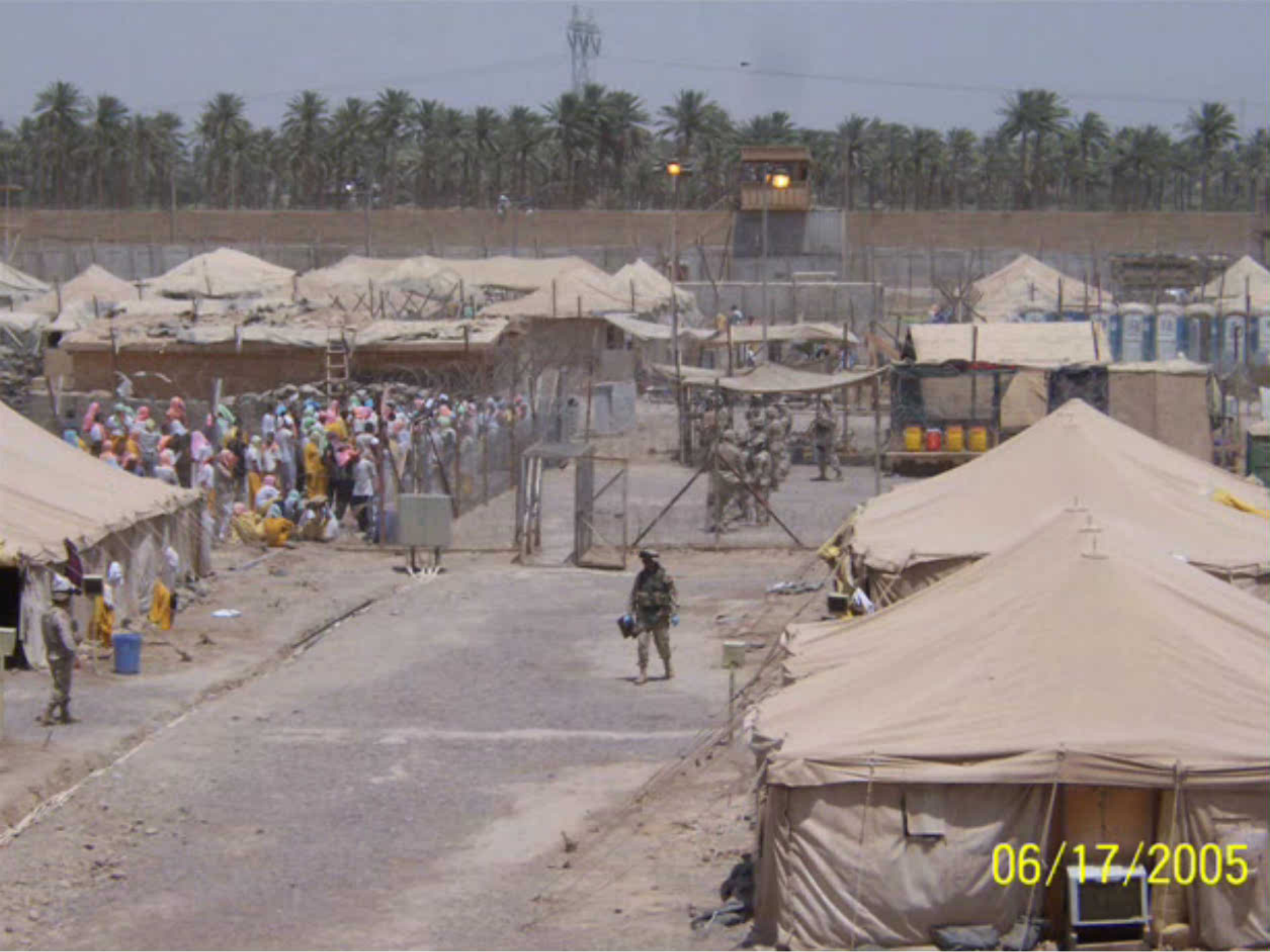












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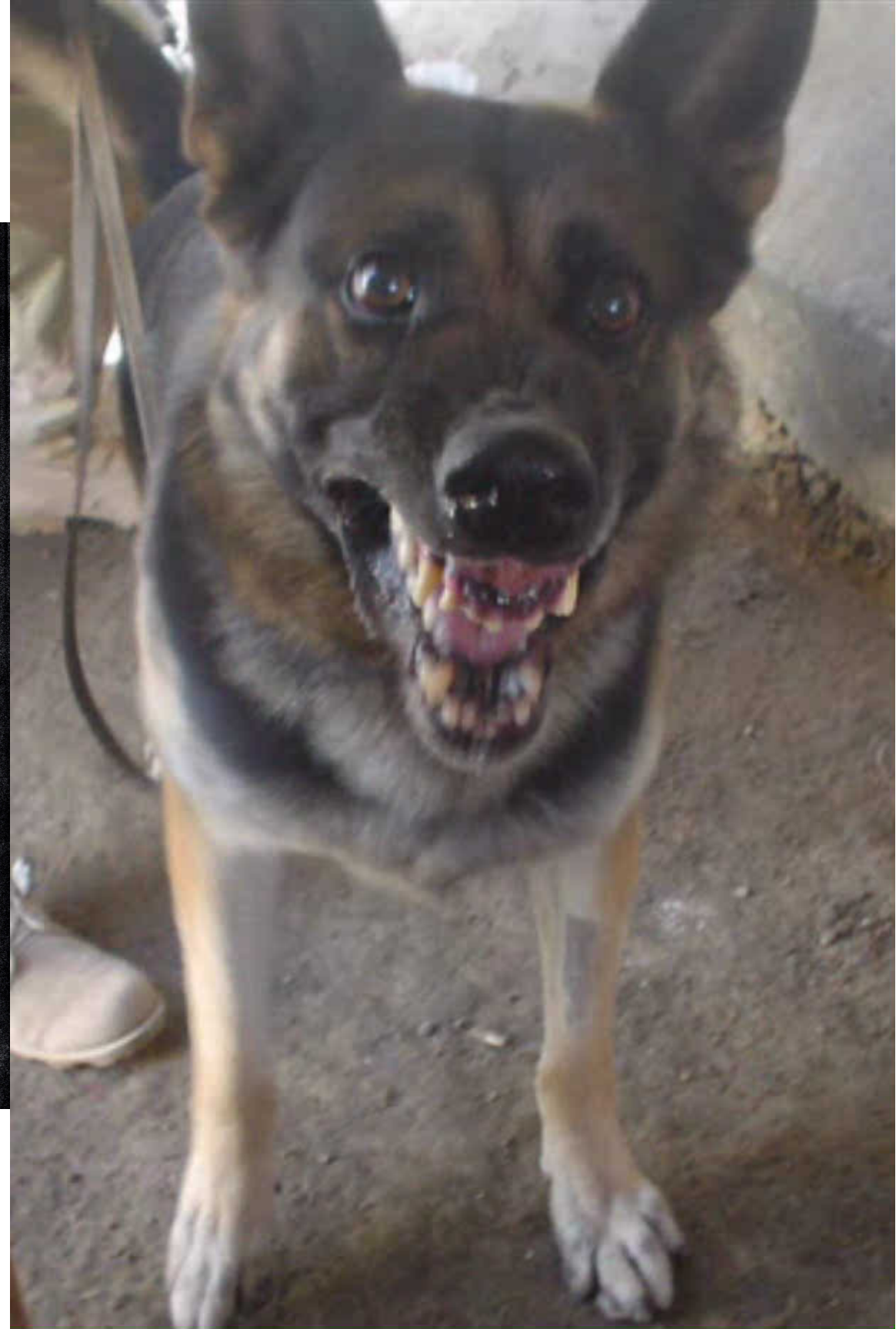




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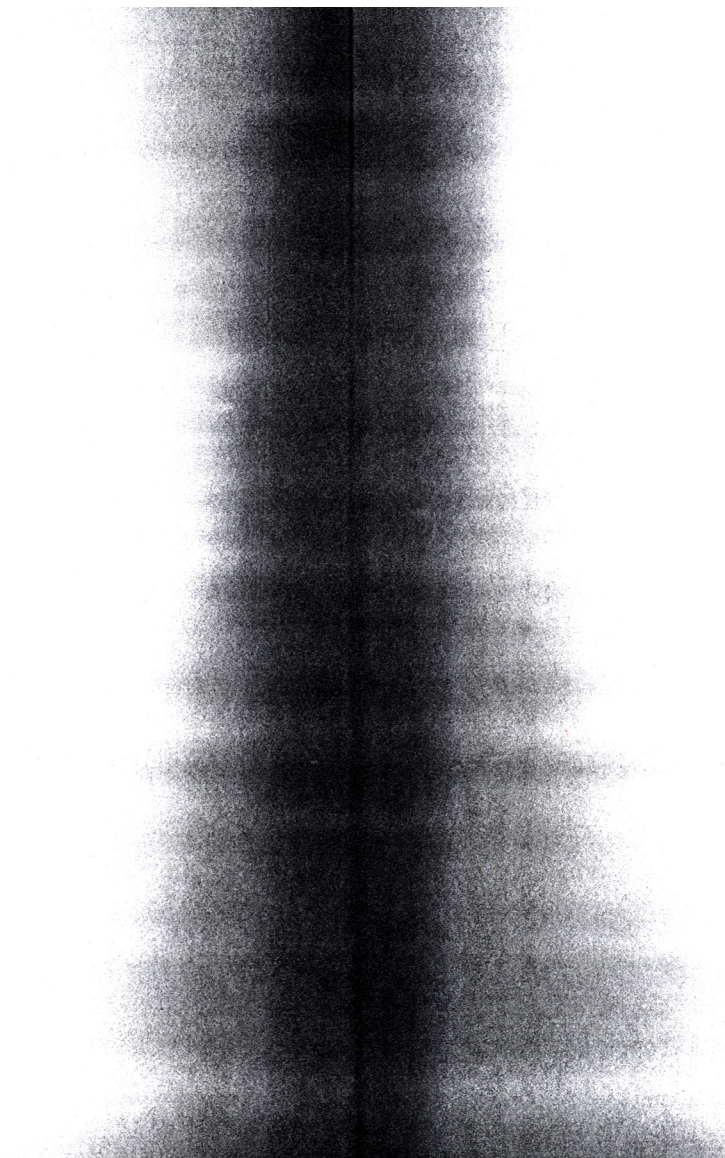


Every so often, the military dogs were walked through the compound and, like clockwork, the kids from juvenile tent would always run to the front gate and harass the fierce beasts as they strolled by. The kids knew that they were safe from the dog because they were behind a fence. One day when I saw the dogs heading my way, I discreetly unlocked the gate to the juvenile tent. When the dogs walked by and the kids ran to the gate, the gate flew wide open and they were suddenly face-to-face with their worst enemies. The look on their faces was priceless, and they ran back inside their tent. Looking back, I know this was a mean thing to do. It exemplifies my frustration with the relentless, trouble-maker teens who were probably just being teens in a very tense situation.





I was the master of performing shakedowns. There were many occasions when I would find trash bags full of contraband. It's a shame my hard drive crashed on the way home from Iraq and I lost the majority of my photos. I had photos of people's important belongings as well as weapons.



Many of the detainees would create artwork while inside their tents. One piece I could not bring myself to throw away was a picture of a sailboat flying an Iraqi flag. It was stitched onto a piece of canvas, and colored with highlighter and pens. The detainee was unable to finish a couple of areas before I found it and had to remove it; the only thing missing is the sun in the background and part of his name. I also recovered an abundance of shanks of all shapes and sizes.



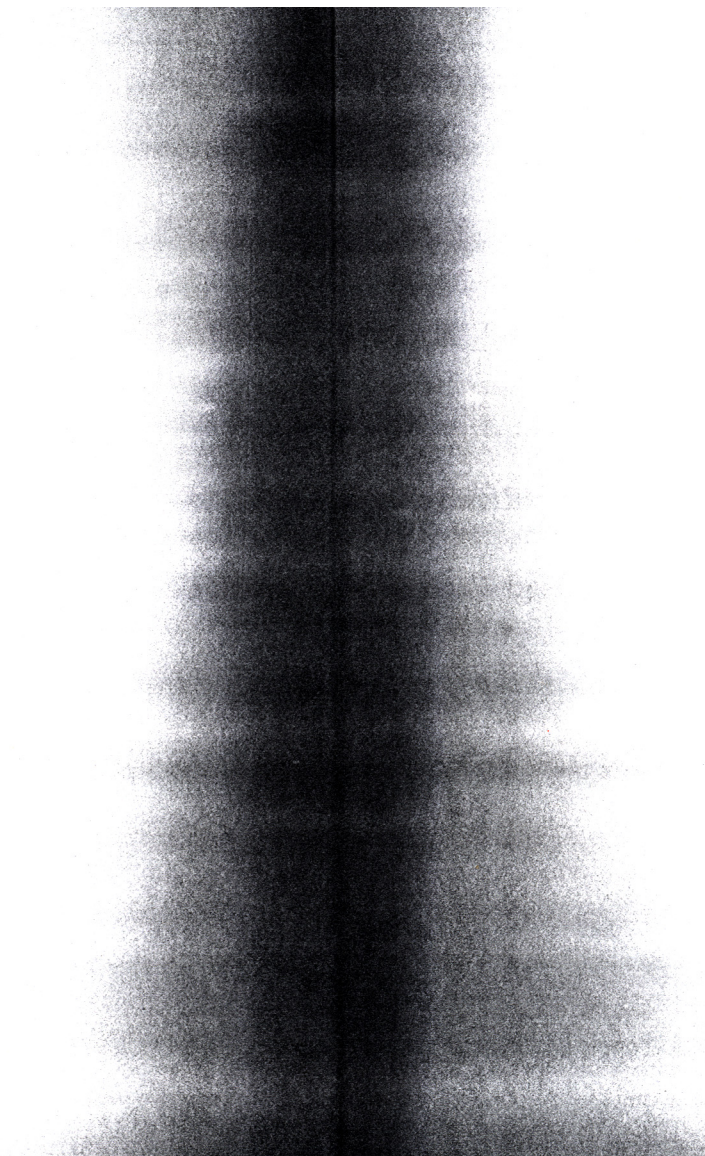




One day, I had to defend one detainee from being slashed by another. Fortunately, I was able to take him down without being cut by the crudely made weapon. The attack was over religious views. The detainee being attacked was cornered at the gate of his tent. I called for someone to cover me while I went in. Once I entered, the detainee with the homemade knife started swinging it around, violently trying to keep his distance from me. I knocked the knife out of his hand and pinned him down while one of the other guards cuffed him.

The guard tower is another area where I spent hours upon hours in the blistering heat. All of the towers had air-conditioning, but the filters were always clogged and mostly worthless. To help pass the time, I would always bring an extra shotgun up with me to clean. In the compound, I used non-lethal rounds with the shotgun. The rounds have a clear casing so you know that they are safe to use. I used a special set of rounds that I colored red so they would look like lethal slugs. The casings were clearly labeled; however all the detainees saw was a red round being loaded into the shotgun.

I figured a little bluff might save my life one day. Each level of the camp had its own tower and radio channel; when the moon rose, and the detainees were on lockdown, those of us in the guard towers played trivia games over the radio. The trivia topics ranged from what color Fred's truck was from "Sanford & Son," to what was Kodak's first name. During lockdowns all of the detainees had to stay in their tents, and only one person at a time was allowed out to use the toilet. Lockdowns were always a sigh of relief for us; I could feel everyone's stress level go down, including mine.







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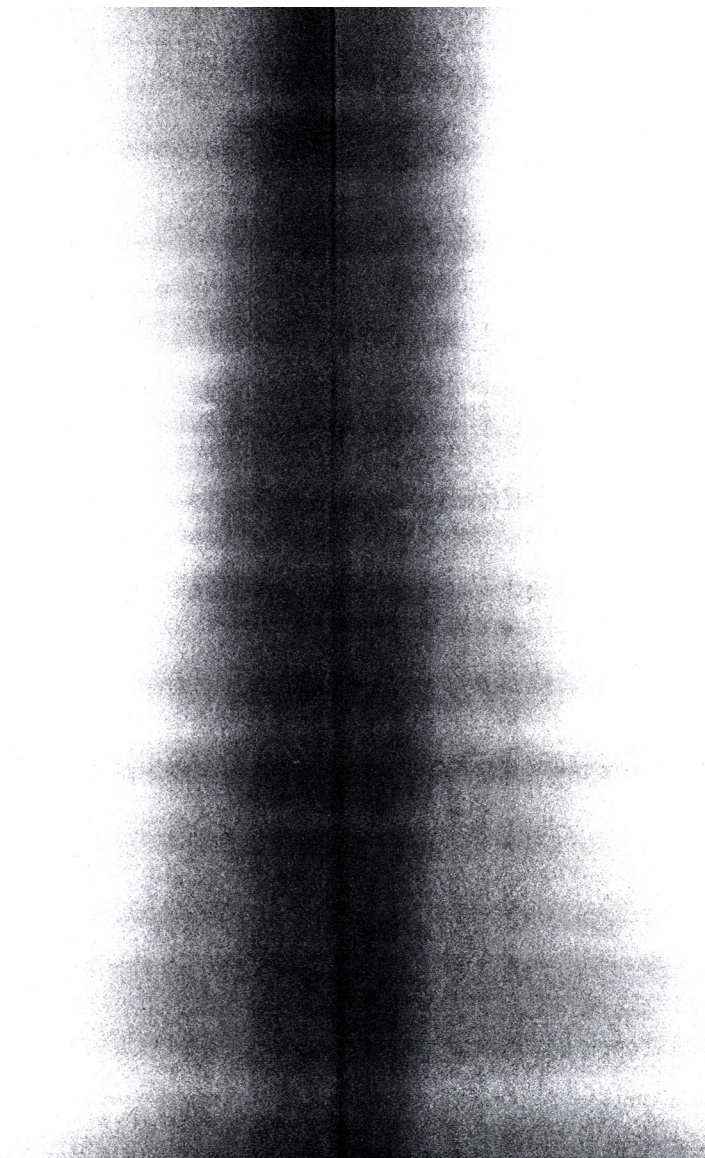


At Abu Ghraib, we learned to pay attention to any constant environmental factor that changed; it almost always meant there would be trouble. From the guard tower I could see the mosque. Some days, all the lights were on, some days they were all off. Sometimes they changed right as I was watching them. Eventually, I learned that these were acute signals to the insurgents about something we were doing inside Abu Ghraib, or that something was going to happen. Basically, I watched them watching us.





The Battle of Abu Ghraib took place just fifteen days before my 24th birthday. The night of April 2nd, 2005 was what I thought was going to be my last on earth. Shortly after sun down, over 100 insurgents launched the largest attack against any military installation since the Vietnam War. I was working in my compound at my usual post when mortars and rockets rained down from above, exploding randomly throughout the entire base. Nobody knew where the next one would hit, but we all knew what our duty was and did not run. Without warning, the earth shook below my feet. I was knocked on the ground lying on my back and my ears rang loudly. A 120-millimeter mortar impacted about thirty feet away from me. Thankfully, there was a concrete bunker that shielded me from its razor-sharp shrapnel. The smell of the explosion rapidly burned into my nose and can only be described as the smell of death. Experts say "that you never hear the one [mortar] that kills you." I am living proof that they are wrong.



Somehow, only two of the 100 detainees I was responsible for were peppered with shrapnel, but they were bleeding badly. I quickly gave first aid to the wounded. Meanwhile, the other detainees saw that I was distracted and tried to escape. Even though I was weaponless, I was able to put a stop to the attempted escape verbally. Three hours after the attack started, the sounds of explosions and gunfire slowly started to fade away, and I was sent to the field hospital due to my concussion. I sat on the floor with the oxygen mask over my face and watched the wounded come in, one after another. Most of the soldiers were injured by shrapnel from mortars and were bleeding all over the place. There was nothing more I could do except to pray.



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The day after the attack, I had a terrible time wrapping my head around what had just taken place. I could not sleep at night and was rapidly learning firsthand the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.). When I started to walk towards the compound for my shift, I instantly felt nauseous and short of breath; I felt embarrassed because I wasn't able to make it through my first shift. My sergeant convinced me to talk with the psychiatrist to try to figure things out. I was medicated and told that I should work in a less stressful area after a short rest.

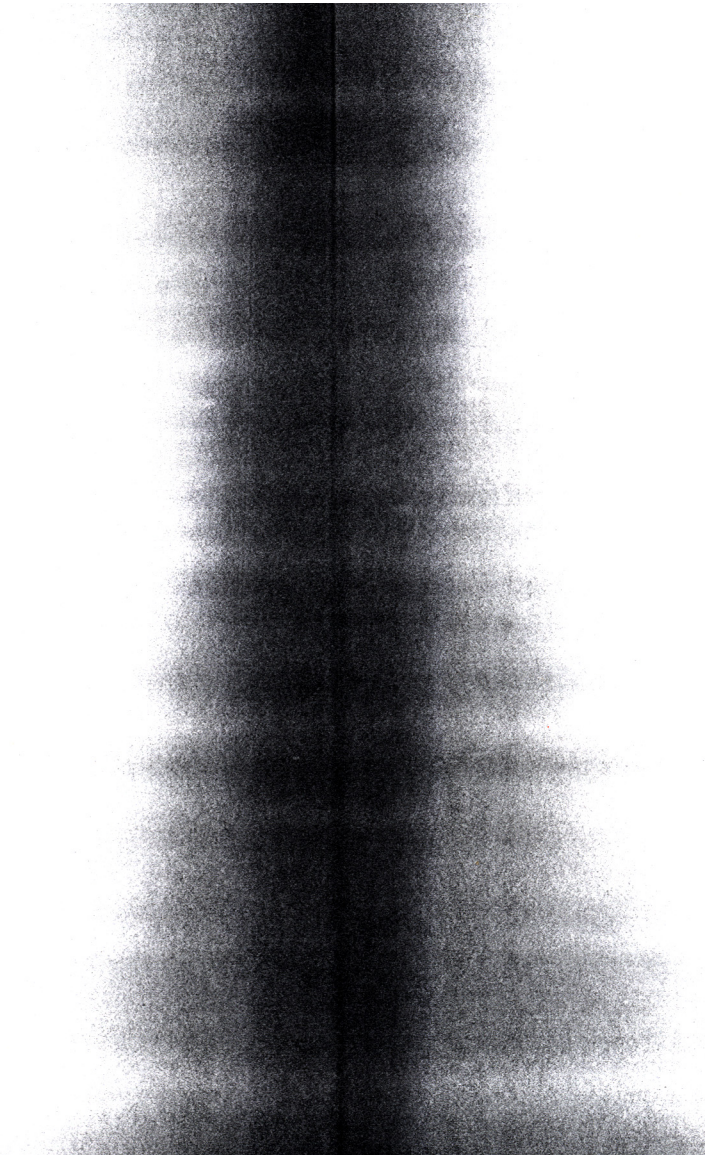
During my short bed rest, boredom quickly set in. I was barely sleeping, and feeling sick to my stomach most of the time. I mentally replayed the attack over and over. I thought that the leadership of the base was completely blindsided by the massive coordinated assault on the base. By then, it was too late to come up with a contingency plan. However, a plan was created.

This plan was called "linebacker," and we held drills almost daily. During these drills, someone from my unit would run down the cell blocks sounding the alarm with a bullhorn yelling, "linebacker, linebacker, linebacker; Get up, get up, get up; linebacker, linebacker, linebacker; Go, go go!" Typically when we had these drills, I would go into an immediate panic attack and become sick while running to my humvee to get into position. Before April 2nd, there were no such drills, after April 2nd, they were almost daily.

Something that helped keep my mind off of things was the time I spent designing my coin to give out. Coming from a field artillery unit, it seemed like the higher ranking Military Police officers only passed out their coins to their own people – other MPs. We artillery guys were there doing the same thing, though we didn't receive recognition. I felt that we deserved better, so I came up with my own design, and had two thousand wooden nickels made.



One side had a picture of the unit crest with my name and unit, and the other side had a small map of Iraq with the caption, "Why mister, why?" This was the most common question the detainees would ask. They were asking, "Why have I been detained?" I passed out my "adda-boy" coins to everyone without regard to unit or rank. The higher the rank, the more shocked they were that I (only a specialist) would come up with such an idea, but they turned around and coined me in return. I take great pride knowing that my wooden nickels boosted the morale of many, and that somewhere out there my coin is on display, or in someone's foot locker waiting to be discovered by someone's grandchildren in the future. Before the deployment, I never received a single coin from anyone. After my coins, I got a coin from every officer. That was never my intention, but it happened. My coins were a good ice-breaker when talking to high ranking officers.



















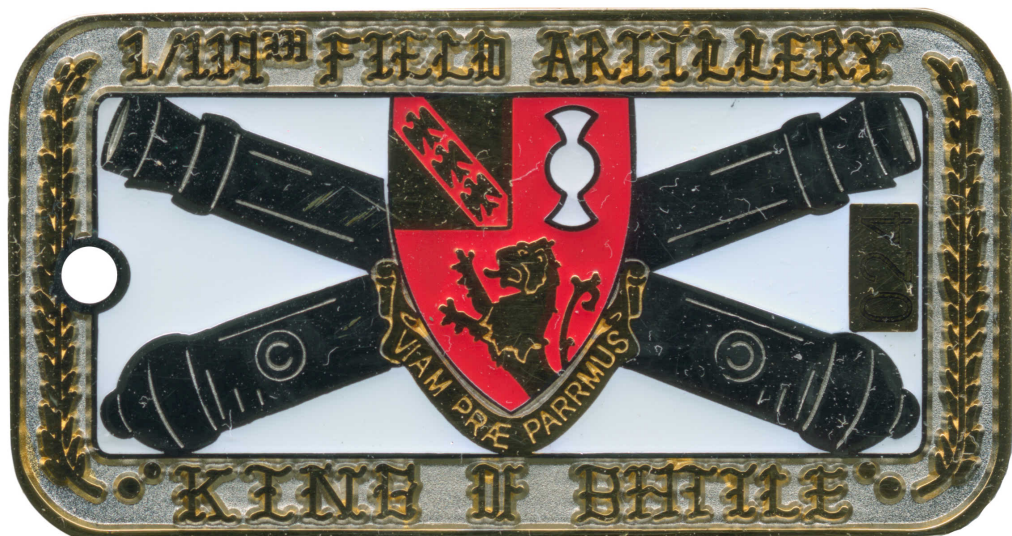










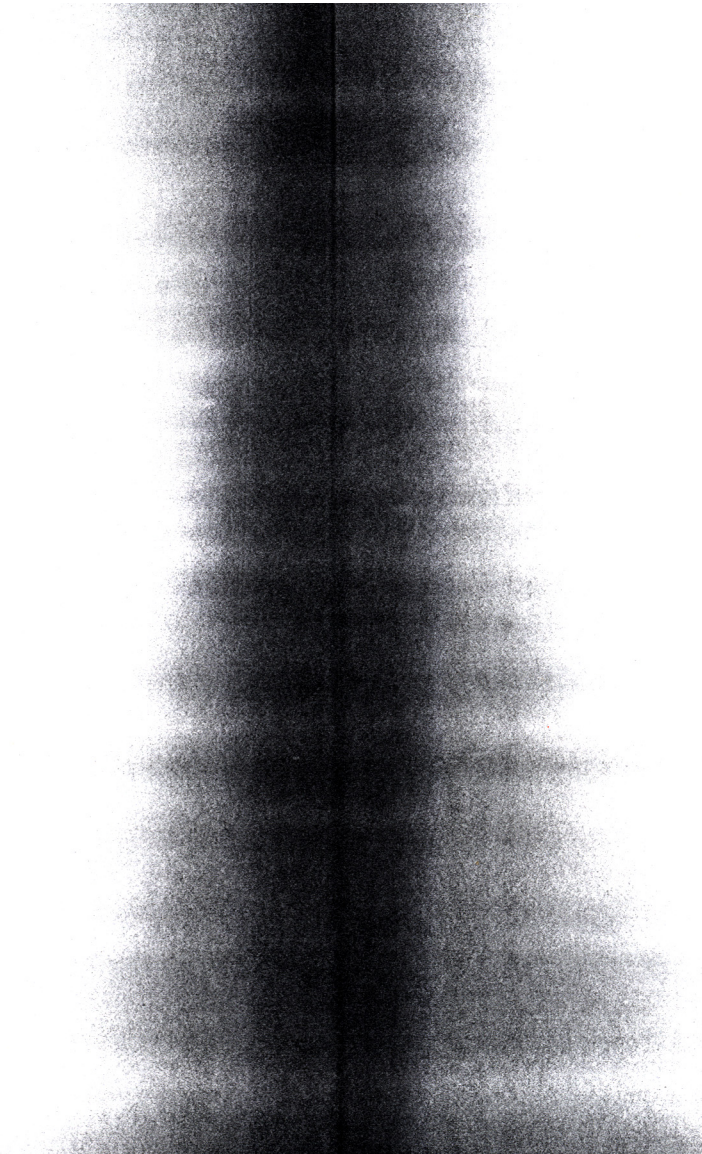








After my week of bed rest, I was assigned to work in the field hospital on-base. It was a hard experience for me. In the hospital, my mission was to ensure safety for and accountability of all the injured detainees in a particular ward. There were four areas that needed watching – the emergency room, intensive care unit, and two recovery wards. The job was simple because the detainees were mostly non-ambulatory, and tethered to the bed with a “soft-restraint.” I would also escort detainees to the in-house optometrist, dentist, and physical therapist. It always seemed wrong that they were receiving better healthcare than most back home. After seeing what took place in New Orleans just a few months prior, I knew our resources were needed elsewhere. Whenever a soldier would come in via medivac, things were always intense. I wasn't physically injured by these encounters, but the emotional scars of seeing the wounded and dead come and go hurt the most. (It is a little comforting knowing that American heroes such as Audie Murphy felt what is known as survivor's guilt).



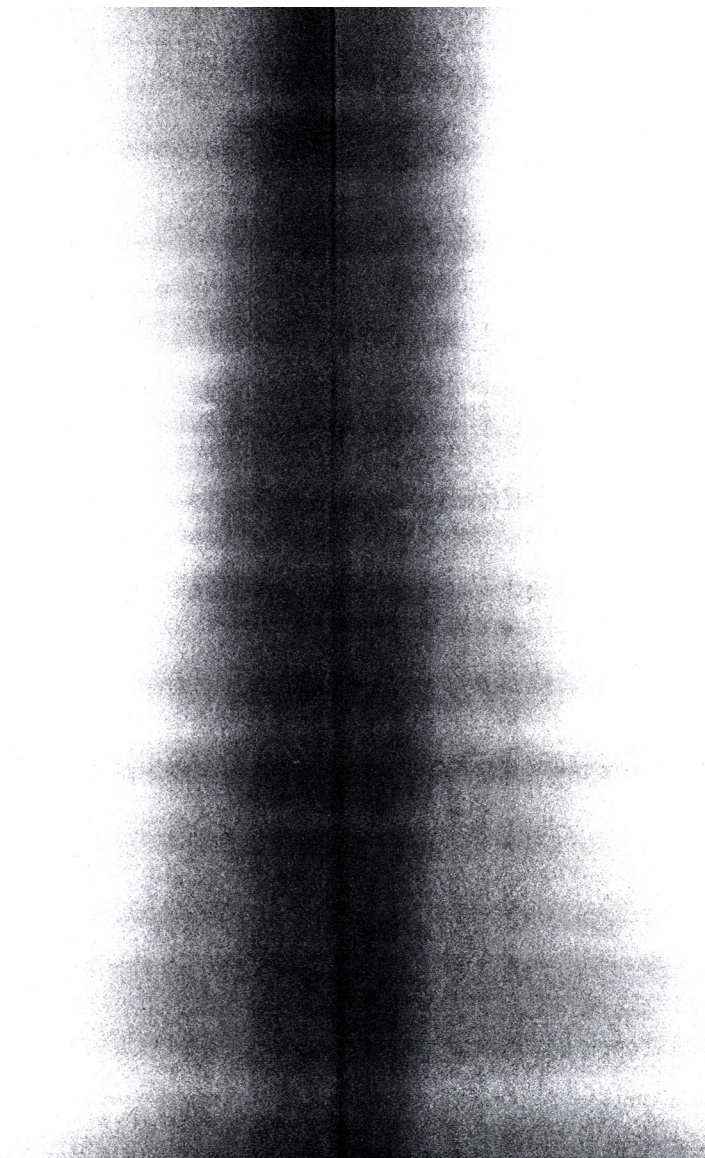
Even though nobody in my unit was seriously injured, most of them were able to return to their respective compounds where all hell broke loose. Most of all, I was just glad I didn't have to go back to a place where I had almost died just a week prior.







Despite all the inherent hazards of war, one of the worst health hazards was created simply by our own occupation. Naturally, our base had to be one-hundred percent self sufficient; the entire base was powered by over two dozen electric/diesel generators that were over forty-feet long. The generators came in pairs, and would cycle switching back and forth; one generator would always stay running providing the much needed electricity as well as constantly spewing its toxic exhaust. I knew if the dangerous fumes didn't make me sick, the never-ending noise pollution would leave me with an everlasting ringing reminder of my time at the Bu. Housing over 8,000 people, the Bu also generated enough trash to top off a landfill. All of the trash was conveniently hauled outside the perimeter walls to burn pits. The trash was burned for security reasons. All day, every day, the trash pits would slowly smolder as a thick, black smoke blanketed the area.



When it rained, it poured. Because of the extreme climate, everything was dry. The rain formed huge mud puddles all over the base. The rainwater simply had nowhere to go. While roaming around the compound, I would use the heel of my boot to dig out mini canals to help divert the standing water to a better location. When it wasn't raining we had dust storms. Those were an opportunity for the detainees to riot. They knew our visibility was limited. Sometimes the storms were so bad I could not see the end of my rifle. During a dust storm, I was sent to the compound to help keep an eye on the situation, whether or not I was on-shift or off.

































In addition to a trip home for my two-week leave, I was also selected to go on a four-day pass to Doha, Qatar. Qatar is a small country located east of Saudi Arabia, along the gulf coast. I was able to enjoy some fun in the sun on a sand dune safari. On the safari, I swam in the sea and ate authentic Middle Eastern food inside a beach side tent. I was also able to explore the downtown area. I made my way to the jewelry district and was able to haggle rock-bottom prices on some gifts for my wife. The trip was short, but much needed.



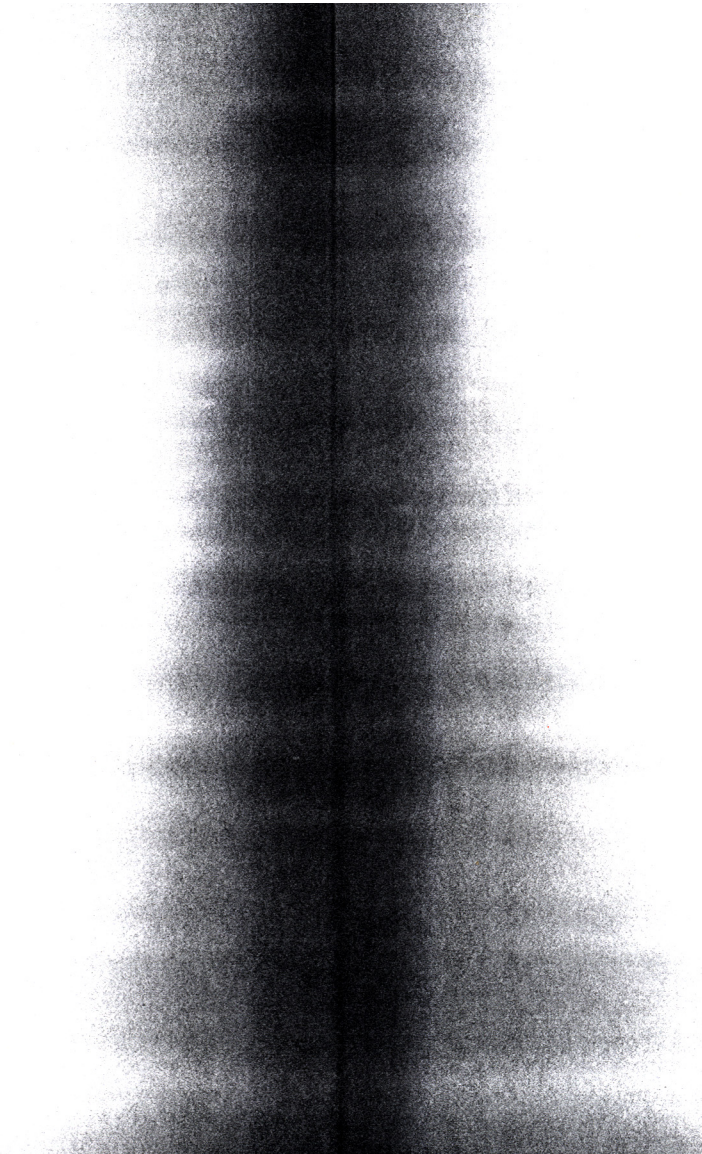








Eventually, in December our replacements arrived. I was finally able to share the same feeling with the unit we replaced when we arrived. After a few weeks of training the new guys, we started our long journey home. The convoy back to B.I.A.P. was quick and safe, and once I was there, I felt an enormous sense of relief. I spent about a week there before the flight back to Kuwait. I almost felt bad for the soldiers who lived and worked there; the monotony was challenging in its own way. Even though they did not see combat (non-combat is sometimes falsely perceived as not as "exciting" or "important"), their support role was vital and often under-appreciated. During the flight from Kuwait to the United States, the plane stopped in Shannon, Ireland to refuel. The pilot radioed ahead, and the bartender was ready and waiting for our arrival. From one end to the other, the bar was lined with pints of Guinness and shots of Jameson Irish whiskey. All we had to do was pay for what we wanted and enjoy. Personally, I could only hold two pints and two shots. After Ireland, we flew to Bangor, Maine, where we received a true hero's welcome from the local V.F.W.



The sky was clear and there was a fresh blanket of snow on the ground. We all ran outside and had a snowball fight until our hands were numb. The last stop before returning home was Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. There, I underwent physical and mental health evaluations. We all were given advice and suggestions that would make our post-deployment lives easier. After a week filling out mountains of paperwork and taking hours of classes, we departed by bus for the last leg of the fifteen months away from home.

As the bus entered the city limits of Lansing, Michigan, local police accompanied us to our final destination. When the bus pulled into the armory parking lot, my emotions were all over the place. Words cannot describe the feelings I felt as I held my wife for the first time in over a year. I was overwhelmed by everyone welcoming me back. It seemed like everyone wanted to hear my stories from overseas, but all I wanted to do was go home and be with my wife.



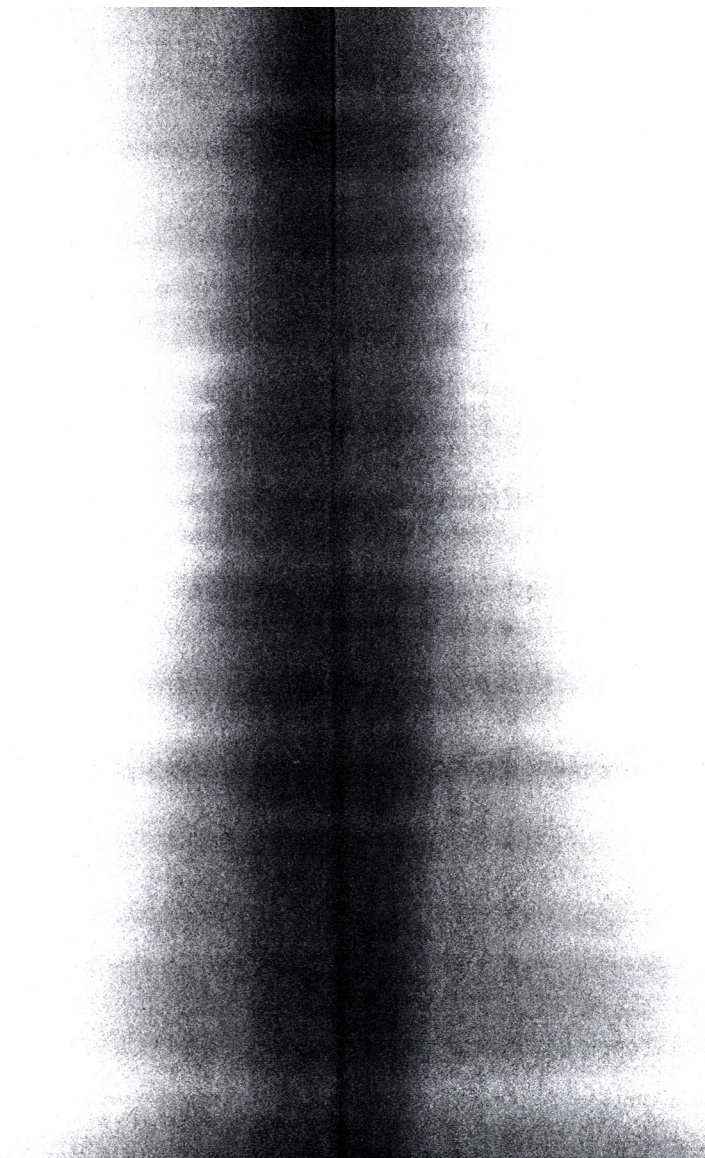








Readjusting to civilian life was hard. At first, I kept my emotions and feelings to myself and was having trouble falling asleep most nights. Coming home from the busy lifestyle to sitting around the house was worse than being away. It may sound insane, but there were times where I almost wished I was back in Iraq. It wasn't until after I moved to Atlanta, Georgia a few months later that I realized I was having unusual problems mentally. My wife encouraged me to see someone at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Since then, I have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as a Traumatic Brain Injury, stemming from the April 2nd attack. I also live with a condition called Tinnitus, which means that I have permanent ringing in both of my ears. I always knew that the noise pollution from living with generators would end up hurting me. Every time it is quiet, I am reminded of my experiences. Having to wear the thirty-three pound body armor for long periods of time also did its damage. The bulging discs throughout my neck and lower back can sometime make it hard to tie my shoes.



After many trips to my local V.A. Medical Center, the help from their staff, and all of the love and support from my friends and family, I finally feel that I have a better sense of life and a deeper, greater understanding of the world as a whole.

Abu Ghraib was just a small Iraqi prison, but it's one that will forever have a scar on its name in the history books. For me though, it was more than just a prison, it was a home. There we were, forced to grow up quickly, to learn to survive under the most unfavorable conditions. Abu Ghraib taught me that, for the moment, true happiness is to simply survive and maintain self-respect while doing so. Life in the Bu was not suitable for most. I am relieved it's over. Even so, I will hold the memories closely for the rest of my life.



## COLOPHON

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Aaron Heusinkveld, Members of the 1-119th Field Artillery, Friends  
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Thank you,  
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Aaron enlisted into the Michigan Army National Guard after high school in 1999. He started his military career as a Forward Observer, later changing to a Field Artillery Surveyor. He deployed to Iraq in 2005, where he served as a guard at the Baghdad Central Collection Facility better known as Abu Ghraib. He currently lives in Minneapolis, MN with his wife Jessica. He enjoys the outdoors, motorcycle riding and is an active member at his local V.F.W. Post. He is currently attending Saint Paul College, where is working towards a degree in land survey technology.



