

Forward

For every person born to be a soldier, there are a dozen more who stumble into the uniform. In 2005, at the age of twenty-three, I had dropped out of the vocal performance program at the University of Arizona and retreated to the safety of my childhood home in Pacific Grove, California. Though I'd easily been more serious about music than any other of the many interests I'd had growing up, it had taken only one semester and a pile of my parent's money for me to prove I couldn't even handle the responsibility of learning how to sing.

In those days I was busy dreaming. Riding the wake of my most recent academic failure, I had convinced myself that formal education was for chumps who gave up on their passions. College was just a neatly manicured prison where middle-class drones learned how to live the boring lives of their parents. Not me though. I was going to be a professional musician. I wrote the songs and everything. All I needed was a little more time for the world to catch on to my genius.

Coming back home reminded me why my friends and I had called the Monterey Bay area "a great place to grow up and a great place to retire." After high school, most of us ran as far away as we were able. Up to San Francisco or down Los Angeles to chase dreams of their own. The leftovers and the failures to launch like me went into the trades or hospitality or toiled in menial service jobs in the scenic ghost town of our remembered childhood.

After a few months, when it had become apparent that I had little interest in striking a trail beyond our living room couch, my dad offered me a position as a laborer for his construction company. Having never shown much aptitude with the shovel and hammer I instead followed a buddy's advice and took a job as a

valet at the Monterey Marriott. This would be only temporary, of course. A low pressure, low expectation distraction while I focused on songwriting.

Then temporary turned into routine. Weeks turned to months as I stood watch before the Marriott's polished brass doors. Smiling passively, I played host to a cross-section of the world's weary travelers: businessmen in their stiff dark suits, musicians on their way to do sets at the blues and jazz festivals, families eager to drift down the coastal bike trail to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and the obscenely wealthy who imported their rare cars in for the Concourse de Elegance in Pebble Beach.

At the end of my night shifts, I crossed Alvarado Street to spend my tips on pints at the Crown and Anchor or wandered alone down the dimly lit planks of Fisherman's Wharf past the kitsch shops and shuttered calamari shacks. With all other diversions exhausted, I spent the rest of my evenings in my parent's living room strumming my guitar, convincing myself I had what it took.

Oh, also during this time my country was at war, split between two major theaters under the catch-all banner of the War on Terror. Despite daily news coverage of events in Afghanistan and Iraq, I felt almost no connection to the images on the television. Like most Americans who'd lived through 9/11, I could remember the exact time and place I was when I'd heard the news that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. I agreed that Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were assholes. Beyond this, however, I had little interest in parsing out the costs and benefits of the wars. Detached as I was, there was little escape from the endless, well-edited snippets of combat footage spewed out by the twenty-four-hour news networks.

In the Marriott's climate-controlled employee cafeteria, in one of the least affordable cities in the country, where standing before the city council to deliver an impassioned speech about protecting the civil rights of our local raccoons could be the measure of one's courage, I watched recordings of capable young men ducking into doorways as bullets cracked past their heads. I poured thick globs of ranch dressing on fried chicken nuggets as soldiers maneuvered through smoke-filled streets. I sipped cold, free Coca-Cola from a plastic cup and watched. I watched and became aware of a deep and primal dissatisfaction.

As the months wore on, I considered the choices I'd made that had brought me to this point in my life. I thought about the time I wasted meandering through three community colleges, knowing that I always had the safety net of a supportive family to fall back on when I fucked up again. Though I was still confident that I was somehow better than the sum of my history, that I was special, there was an increasingly large spike of doubt that was beginning to chip away at that armor. Was it more likely that I'd become a rock star or a forty-year-old account manager for Mile-Hi Valet? That I'd be famous or just short, fat, and balding paying too much in rent for a sensible apartment and making monthly payments on a German sedan that I couldn't afford? In this future, I imagined I'd probably have a girlfriend, maybe a wife. Someone I'd known since high school, I bet. We'd not be madly in love, but we'd share enough history to impersonate intimacy. In this recurring vision, I couldn't find what would motivate me to crawl out of bed each morning, hungover and salty, with little else to look forward to than morosely lording over a revolving pack of young valets working temporary summer gigs on their way to better things.

I couldn't put my finger on exactly what was bothering me, but I knew there was something wrong with the way I was pursuing my music. I wanted to be a professional, but I had little respect for the time, effort, and sacrifice it took to become one. I wanted to live an exceptional life, but I wasn't willing to risk anything to build it. I knew, even if I couldn't yet articulate it, that I would continue going through the motions of being alive if I didn't make a change. Every day I woke up and donned that gold Marriott name tag was another day wasted. I thought maybe what I needed was a struggle. To do something that no one—least of all me—expected. I began to consider trading in that gold name tag for olive drab.

What could a kid like me do in the Army? I suspected they didn't have much need of tactical songwriters or battlefield doodlers. I'd never even been in a real fight, yet for some inexplicable reason, something in me wanted to see combat or at least the idealistic cartoon of it I'd concocted. This idea, scaffolded by the entertainment I'd absorbed, the movies, comics, and the video games that all glorified the crucible of war as a test of a man's worth began to consume me. I was self-aware enough to know that I was immature, selfish and self-centered, but had no idea how to go about fixing these parts of myself that I'd spent an entire lifetime carefully cultivating. For a young man struggling to find his place in an increasingly confusing adult world, there was an undeniable appeal to the respect and recognition received by those who choose to be soldiers. Maybe all I needed to solve my problems was to point a gun at them.

With this nebulous plan still forming, I drove to the closest Armed Forces Career Center. Summoning all the rehearsed confidence I could muster, I told the recruiter that I wanted to be a medic and I wanted to be a Ranger. The nameplate on his desk

read: Staff Sergeant Powell. He'd enlisted one of my best friends a year earlier. Nick, who by then was serving as an infantryman in the 2nd Ranger Battalion, said that Powell had done right by him despite the reputation recruiters have rightfully earned as liars, con-artists, and criminals.

Powell's once muscular build had grown softer by the comforts of office life, but he still seemed an imposing figure as he tapped his finger quickly on his desk and smiled. He looked me over, and his blue eyes flashed above his puffy, red cheeks. The kid sitting before him was money in the bank. He didn't have to dangle college or bonuses or promises to see the world in front of me. All I wanted was to be a badass and that, as it turned out, was an easy sell. As we talked about my plans, he regaled me with stories of his unit's exploits, including all the bloody details an eager wannabe could have hoped to hear.

Shortly after the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Powell along with the rest of the 3rd Ranger Battalion had been sent to take control of Haditha Dam, a hydroelectric facility on the Euphrates River. Their mission had been to ensure that the dam remained operational, unlike so much other critical infrastructure that had been destroyed by Saddam's retreating forces in the preceding weeks. During the days-long battle for control of the facility, Powell had seen an Iraqi soldier pop up over a concrete barrier with two RPGs, one on each shoulder, and manage to shoot both off before being riddled with small arms fire. There had been some talk amongst Powell's squad of sending a team with a medic to try to save him. Anyone, it was argued, who would do something that insane was a kindred spirit and deserved the Ranger's aid.

I sat doe-eyed in that office, surrounded by framed medals and tri-fold American flags, elbows on my knees, soaking it all in. Jesus, it was just like Call of Duty. Whatever reservations I'd had before walking through the door had been washed away in a soothing stream of idiotically glorious daydreams.

It took some months for me to sign the paperwork. During that time, the few people I'd given advanced warning to remained skeptical. The loudmouth class clown¹, who'd made a lifestyle of going and doing whatever he wanted, who'd—on more than one occasion—said he'd flee to Canada if the draft were reinstated, was joining the Army. I had to ease everyone, especially my parents, into the idea.

My father's birthday was the number one pick for the draft during Vietnam. A University of the Pacific undergrad at the time, he had no interest in going off to war, and upon receiving his draft notice, he'd immediately signed up for the Army Reserve. He'd spent his enlistment as a Drill Sergeant at Fort Ord and, through some pre-computer-age voodoo, his last year at a Coast Guard station in Monterey. He'd never told me much about his service, and even after I'd decided to join, he said little else aside from that I was going to hate military life. He was right of course, but I think part of him knew that I needed something to hate, or at the very least something that would be a match for the stubborn foolishness that had long been the guiding light of my wanderings.

The problem, I'd thought, was that everything had always been easy. Friends were easy, sports were easy, money was easy. I earnestly believed and was consistently distracted by the illu-

¹ My senior year I was also voted "best legs." Unrelated but flattering.

sion that life was good and would never change for the worse. I didn't fail out of college because it was too difficult, I just didn't care. I thought life was nothing more than a long series of happy accidents where people lined up to hand you gifts because they recognized how special and talented you were.

During the months I procrastinated, Powell would occasionally drive to my house to check up on me. We'd make small talk, usually staying outside the fence that ran along the border of the front yard. I felt uncomfortable letting him meet my parents, sure that their lack of enthusiasm for my decision would make things awkward. Eventually, he invited me to hang out at a pool hall on Cannery Row where he moonlighted as a bouncer. I'd show up, and we'd stand there, chatting about nothing and watching everyone else drink and shoot pool. I'd always felt out of place in loud bars and other environments that emphasized how insignificant a person could be amongst strangers, but on those nights, armed with the knowledge that I'd soon be leaving that world behind for something bigger and bolder, I no longer cared that I felt apart. I reveled in it.

One spring afternoon, between being shuttled around in his government-issued Ford to gather necessary paperwork, I found myself sitting on a thin, lumpy futon in Powell's studio apartment in Salinas. Staring at a pile of bodybuilding magazines on the floor surrounded by walls empty of personal photos or even unframed posters. I sensed little connection in the room to anything personal or historical beyond Budweiser bottles and empty cans of Copenhagen. I'd seen Powell as a modern day Spartan, a warrior who had transcended the assumed comfort of the material. I didn't yet know what it was like to be alone, to have been to war and come home to find that you no longer related to the hopes

that fueled the pursuits of your friends. I hadn't yet broken through the blinding artifice of the American Dream and come out on the other side ragged and tired from the exertion and the knowing of what keeps the machine running.

Much of what follows I lifted from journal entries scribbled in an attempt to make sense of the bizarre, horrifying, and sometimes amusing circumstances I found myself in during my training and deployments to Iraq. What draws me back, again and again, to scrutinize these pages is the way they remind me of how perspective changes everything. All I didn't know then. All I continue not to know now. I promise that I did my best to recreate those years accurately, but there will be lies, exaggerations, omissions, and times I took the opportunity to make myself appear smarter, braver, and taller than I was.

Despite the sports teams I'd played on, the academic summer programs, the Boy Scouts, despite my parent's and teacher's best efforts to mold me, only the Army shook me out of myself and forced me to reconsider my mind and body as a part of something bigger. My life could have taken a hundred different paths on the legs of uncountable choices, but I am thankful for the one I made when I finally signed that paper. I put on the uniform almost by accident, and it was one of the best mistakes I ever made.