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My War and What Came After

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MY WAR AND WHAT CAME AFTER

A Thesis

by

JESUS LOPEZ

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2018

Major Subject: Creative Writing

MY WAR AND WHAT CAME AFTER

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by
JESUS LOPEZ

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May 2018

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ABSTRACT

Lopez, Jesus, My War and What Came After, Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2018, 122 pp., 3 figures, 8 references, 21 titles.

My War and What Came After is a memoir that explores my personal experience with modern military life. It is my primary purpose to connect the military world with the world of writing. I am the guy that was willing to put everything on the line, including my life to become an English professor. The memoir is a detailed account of my adult life but also a coming of age experience and a successful ambitious plan to achieve my educational ambitions. It was an extreme and maybe even a crazy decision but calculated enough that it worked. It could have undoubtedly gone a lot smoother but I regret nothing. My memoir includes the reasons that motivated my decision to enlist, my Mexican American family reception towards the decision, quickly maturing into a professional soldier, my online dating, my masculinity (machismo and military masculinity), and my trauma.

DEDICATION

First and foremost: to my wife, who supports me everyday in my ambitions. You are the light in my world full of darkness. To my professors at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and fellow work-shopping students that helped me make this memoir possible. Thank you all for believing in me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of my masters in fine arts studies would have been possible with out Dr. Jean Braithwaite, chair of my thesis committee. The mentoring and advice provided to mold my thesis into a quality piece of non-fiction was superb. My thanks go to my thesis committee members: Dr. Jose Rodriguez, Dr. Elvia Ardalani, and Dr. Shawn Thomson. My experience in UTRGV was enjoyable because you guys were there and further motivated me to be a professor.

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CHAPTER I

PRESENT DAY

I am a veteran with PTSD. I am not fond of saying or admitting it. What does it mean for me? It means I can't give my back to an entrance of a room or restaurant. I am always analyzing the threat level of everyone around me. I feel that someone is always out to get me and intends on physically harming me or others. I live in a constant state of paranoia. I can't go to the supermarket without experiencing a hallucination or a sense of danger. Two little girls with disfigured faces appear, replacing the faces of the real children at the supermarket. When I go to a restaurant, I always sit in a position to be able to get a good view of the whole area. I always have a plan in my head for the chance something goes wrong. I still can't sleep more than a few hours before I have to go do something productive (typically homework). I am insensitive and do not show many emotions of kindness, love, and compassion to the point that my wife calls me a robot. I am paranoid but hardly afraid of anything. I know these facts are contradicting each other. I go to horror films to see people get scared or comedy films to see people laugh. Sometimes I even go see sad films to see people cry. I do this to remind me of what it was like to have those emotions. I feel that there is little that surpasses the emotion of fear, especially when bullets were whizzing by my head or impacting the ground in front of me. I don't know what it is like to be relaxed anymore. The one good thing about that is that I am always aware of my surroundings. The bad thing is that I live in a constant state of hyper-vigilance and alertness.

I can't even relax in the confines of my own apartment because of the idea that someone might break in despite the lack of probability.

Would I do it all over again, knowing the difficulties that I have today both physically and mentally? Absolutely. This might come as a surprise because things didn't always work out as planned. I am not bitter about my service even though the military could improve in many ways to avoid hurting its soldiers. I embrace what I did and what I endured. No one forced me to enlist and I begged to "be in the action." If I hadn't served by volunteering, I don't think I would have much worth telling and I would be in significant amounts of debt. I don't know where I would be in life without joining the military.

I am proud to be a veteran and a scholar. I am ambitious and I do not plan to retire early because I am passionate of what I do. Being with students and teaching non-fiction writing has been my dream since I started my undergraduate studies but teaching in general has been my dream since I was a kid. While everyone dreaded going to the English class, I was the kid that got ahead on the assignment booklet and had to be assigned more worksheets to keep me occupied. Retirement is not in my dictionary. If I had to die somewhere, I would prefer it be in a classroom. I enjoy being in it as a student and will love it even more as an instructor. The classroom environment has been dear to my heart and a part of me will never want to leave it. I came out of the military a confident, assertive, and appreciative individual. I am not sure that I would have the personality, skills, and strengths that I do now had I not enlisted when I did. I am still learning about myself and how to enjoy the little moments in life. I am having a difficult time readjusting despite the many years that have passed since I got discharged. I feel that a part of me still remains in Afghanistan that never came back. I cannot undo my trauma. All I can do is minimize its power over me and refuse to let it impact the course of my daily life. I have to

stay positive. Every day I aspire to be a better student, civilian, husband, brother, and son. Eventually I hope to be an outstanding member of society, a spokesman for veterans everywhere, and a professor that students enjoy. I'm sure everything will work out and fall into place. I believe that everything that I went through served a higher purpose to eventually lead me to the classroom environment.

You may be wondering how I got to this point in my life. It is not hard to connect the dots. It is not a typical coming of age memoir but I matured and grew from my experiences with great amounts of success. I wrote everything down in a log/journal to remember as much as possible.

CHAPTER II

APRIL 15, 2012-JANUARY 6, 2013 DEPLOYING TO KANDAHAR WITH: THE YOUNG AND THE BOLD

I deployed to Afghanistan not long after my training to serve as an intelligence analyst in the Kandahar province, Maiwand District. Soldiers have to fly in a covert Delta Airlines flight of 18 hours to reach Kyrgyzstan before taking a 4-hour plane ride in a C-130 to reach Kandahar Air Field. I still had the same level of maturity and social skills I had in high school and personally had a rough time making a quality conversation. I was a person that existed but no one really cared about. Being a virgin didn't help either. I did not know anyone with whom I could share my thoughts, and it was rough to be in an 18-hour flight when all I could produce is a bunch of small talk. "Hey are you excited about this tour?" I would ask the person adjacent to me. I personally wouldn't even want to talk to the old me.

I am from south Texas and I thought that the heat of Rio Grande City could not be beaten. Kandahar instantly proved wrong the second that the C-130 plane opened the drop-down hatch to dismount and collect my gear. The average high temperature in 2012 was 117 degrees Fahrenheit and I was coming into the country on my birthday (April 21). In my graduate studies years after the Army, I came upon a book by Mary Roach, a best-selling author that studies the science of humans at war declares that "a human in extreme heat can sweat as much as two kilograms an hour, over the span of a few hours (Roach 127)."

The summer was about to get started and I didn't know how I was going to endure it. I felt sorry for anyone that grew up in a cold state like Minnesota, Alaska, or Maine.

At Kandahar Airfield, I was notified that the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, a few actors from the "Jackass" movies, and Dennis Haysbert (the guy from the Allstate commercials) were all going to show up in a parade to boost the morale of the soldiers. I thought "Awesome, the first day in country and I am about to take pictures with people that would even prove to be an uncommon opportunity to meet in the U.S." However, 30 minutes before the parade was supposed to start, insurgents decided to shoot 155 mm mortar rounds onto the base, making everyone scramble to safe points (sites covered with concrete and sandbags) of the base. There was a feminine robotic voice that yelled "ROCKET ATTACK" when there was a danger to the base and "ALL CLEAR" when the danger ceased.

When it seemed safe, all the soldiers decided to head back to their temporary living quarters, knowing that there was going to be no parade. We all concluded that the Taliban were not going to let us have any fun. As soon as we arrived back to the tents, I decided to take a shower after a lonely and scary night. While I was in the shower, insurgents decided to shoot the final 155mm mortar round of the night near our temporary tent area. The vibration of the round's impact was an earthquake that left my ears ringing for a minute. I told myself that if a mortar round was going to kill me that night, I was going to die clean. I continued to bathe as if nothing happened.

March produced a sex scandal that rattled every soldier in Headquarters company. During a briefing early in the deployment, it was made clear that all soldiers were to abstain from sexual activity or be punished at the full extent of UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice). The rare

military couples that deployed together were exempt when it came to this rule. The scandal happened with Specialist Moon (a female lower enlisted soldier in her early twenties) and Staff Sergeant Smith (almost a senior enlisted male soldier in his mid-thirties). SSG Smith was married with six kids in Washington state waiting for him. SPC Moon had a boyfriend (supposedly). The deployment had just started and the constant rumors were that Smith was having sexual relations with SPC Moon at least a few times a week before finally getting caught by someone with enough rank to get them in trouble. I don't know exactly how or when they were caught but they were both demoted, put on extra duty, and forced to take a buddy soldier everywhere they went to make sure that they never had sex again. I didn't have much sympathy for them because cheating made me uneasy and uncomfortable. I do not know exactly how their loved ones took the news or whether they even found out at all. I wished them the best when they got back to their family. One thing was clear for me: avoid having a relationship in Afghanistan at all costs. This affected me greatly because I avoided every female soldier and contractor like the plague. I even avoided their path and sometimes waited for them to pass without noticing me. I didn't want any conversation to seem like flirting nor did I want to be flirted with. Maybe I was making an excuse not to lose my virginity but I also wanted to stay out of trouble.

It was late April when I was transferred to Base Sarkari Karez to begin my job as an intelligence analyst. The operating base was a bunch of desks looking at a projector screen at the front of the room that could only be accessed by a complicated combination of codes. No one without a secret clearance or above could enter. Each adjacent desk had a different section working on a distinct way to help the three infantrymen companies. The S1 section was in charge of making sure that soldiers had their correct pay and corresponding mail. The S4 section was in charge of supply, making sure that the troops had enough building materials, water, and MREs'

to make it through the month. I was personally the S2 section that was in charge of producing a daily PowerPoint containing all the significant activity in Kandahar's Maiwand District. I provided weather reports, requested air support like UAVs' (unmanned aerial vehicles) for surveillance, and gave coordinates to predator drones (attack planes carrying missiles). I was upset because I was in an infantry unit and was stuck behind a computer. This is the last thing that I wanted to do in the Army. I was the robot that the Army produces after boot camp and training. I did what I was told and kept to myself.

"I want to be where the bullets are flying," I told Sergeant Lyon, the man who was supervising the progress of the PowerPoints I was making.

"You should have chosen to be Infantry then," he replied. Then I revealed the story of how when I was enlisting, I only had the option of an intelligence job or nothing at all.

I got what I asked for. Not even a couple of weeks after SGT Lyon and I had our conversation of my desire for combat, I got reassigned. All of a sudden, a smaller platoon needed more personnel and I got granted a spot where I hoped to make new acquaintances that would mold me into a stronger individual and a place that would give me the adrenaline rush that I wanted.

I was taken to a more remote and isolated area called Strongpoint Demaiwand. Strongpoint Demaiwand had the worst conditions any soldier could live in. Females were not allowed in this place. There were no showers so we had to wash ourselves with water bottles and baby wipes. There was no legitimate restroom either, just tubes on the ground in which to piss and sawed-off barrels in which we shit. The feces had to be burned every night for disease prevention. We were lucky to have free phone lines and internet; however, the generator

powering the whole base constantly malfunctioned so we were left without air conditioning in the summer and without heat in the winter.

With Strongpoint Demaiwand, the ANA (Afghan National Army) came as a packaged deal. To say that the ANA were reckless would be an understatement. The soldiers hired to serve under the Afghan army had a lack of education and competence. The vast majority of the soldiers I came in contact with also had no escalation of force (non-lethal guidelines to reduce significant injury/collateral damage).

We had an Afghan linguist to remove the language barrier between U.S. soldiers and the ANA. The only phrases that I personally learned before heading to Kandahar was “Good Morning,” “Food and Water,” and “Stop, put your hands up!” Our Afghan linguist had difficulty translating correctly and seemed to filter the things the ANA said to avoid conflict. Our platoon sergeant had a feeling that some of the Afghan linguists were telling the Taliban where and when they predicted U.S. soldiers were going the next day. Too many times, IEDs were emplaced near the route that was discussed publically. The actual route taken the next morning was random.

Just because the relationship with the ANA was tense doesn't mean that we didn't find them interesting at times. They loved to approach the medical tent. Sergeant Samson (the company medic) was always busy with their inquiries. He was the one that kept us informed on the reasons that they asked for his help.

The buff ANA soldier Rambo provided strong competition to the strongest U.S. soldiers. He did twenty repetitions of 315 pounds on the bench press in a span of an hour. Soon after, he took himself to the medical tent and said, “I'm sick. My arms hurt and I need pain medicine.”

An ANA with the last name “Fakira” came running to the medical tent after his afternoon nap and wanted to be evaluated because he was concerned about his dreams. We thought that he

was going to start describing his combat nightmares. Instead he started venting of his concerns of the women he was dreaming about. Sergeant Samson replied with “Well what do you want, to dream of men?” He was given a placebo to make it all better. Fakira together with another ANA soldier named Abbud Ali went to the medical tent the next day because of the panicked fear of drooling while they slept. Samson did his best to explain salivary glands. They both got their daily dose of placebos and went on their merry way.

Samson told us that one of the most common reasons that the ANA were going to the medical tent was stomach pains because of overeating and lack of good sanitation practices. They would stuff themselves with roasted sheep and then take their bloated stomachs over to the medical tent for more pills. A placebo was the magic pill to make to make them go away. Extra bottles had to be ordered from the battalion headquarters because it was more cost effective than handing out ibuprofen. The next day, they commented on how great they felt because of the “medicine” that was given to them. I admired their politeness but I cracked up a little when Samson told me that they were amazed of the healing effect of hand sanitizer. It reminded me a lot of the popular “Vicks Vaporub” that my Mexican American family believes has the power to cure many things.

The patrol dogs that sniffed bombs kept us alive and were the only animals in Afghanistan that I truly appreciated. Sometimes, we escaped IEDs by pure luck because of a German Shepard sniffing out the explosives underground. The most common IED in Kandahar was pressure plate activated. A wooden plank would have to be stepped on (with a certain amount of weight) and would break to trigger the bomb. The IEDs were attached to a charged battery that would explode HME (material with 1.7 times the potency of dynamite). The biggest scare and avoided catastrophe was sixteen daisy chained IEDs in one spot. The whole patrol

would be either be dead or have missing limbs if anyone would have stepped in the wrong spot. Every day, any shape (triangle/square/circle) in the ground was bad and immediately reported for the Explosive Ordinance Disposal unit to show up and give the “all clear” or diffuse the hidden bombs. The most complex IED I encountered was a photo-cell IED that was solar charged. When the patrol was fifteen minutes away from the bomb, an insurgent would attach the battery that would allow the photocell to charge. That is how long it needed to be timed so that when a shadow was cast over it, the HME would detonate. Because of this, I have the upmost respect for dog handlers. They are always at the front of the line during combat patrols and at the highest risk. Even dogs are heavy enough to activate some pressure plate IEDs.

With combat patrols came the animals that threatened my life while walking to a village or bazaar. They were a burden and sometimes an equal danger as the Taliban, if not worse. A mice infestation in the area guaranteed that snacks in any bags or containers would not be spared. Rats the size of squirrels took my whole hotdog with ketchup before hopping out of the guard tower on the fourth of July. Not even gunfire scared me as much as this monster rat did. Many soldiers had sadistic ways of killing these pests. The cruelest was putting a mouse inside a Gatorade bottle while blowing cigarette smoke inside of it until it suffocated. Camel spiders ate one of our soldiers’ toes. There were snakes the width of a pencil that could kill with one bite. Although the commanders told us to wear boots while walking to the shower (water-bottle shower) area, that was not going to happen. No rule or snake was ever going to make any soldier wear boots to shower. It was just too inconvenient to remove and then put on after. Ants the size of a pinky seemed to have super speed. They made the fire ants in Texas seem like a joke. Stepping on an ant hill was a death wish. Mosquitoes could suck a pint of blood before they were full. Sometimes the retardant uniforms were not enough to keep them away. Sheep would not let

us sleep because of their hunger. It brought a whole new meaning to “counting sheep.” Poor puppies and kittens with rabies had to be shot even though they were just babies. I didn’t have the guts nor the heart to kill a dog or a cat. I grew up with too many of them in my childhood to be comfortable with that.

I was in charge of preparing patrol briefs for the infantrymen and occasionally participating in the patrols to get a good perspective of what the villages and its inhabitants looked like. It was also important to notice how they reacted to coalition forces (whether friendly or hostile). Their physical and emotional reaction revealed how much presence insurgents had in the area. The infantrymen and I were not very involved in the village interactions. Sometimes I felt like we were just security for the lieutenant and the senior NCO (the patrol leader and patrol sergeant). When we got to the village, they were the ones talking to the elders and obtaining information about Taliban activity and ways that their quality of life could be improved with our help. The infantrymen and I were just sitting and waiting for their conversation to finish. It was frustrating because I could have sat down with the elder and the lieutenant and written down their dialogue but I wasn’t allowed to. I had to debrief the lieutenant on the conversation, write everything down, and finally put it into a PowerPoint for the battalion commander (in a different base) to read.

Every morning, I saw activity in the Maiwand district and how many soldiers were either wounded or dead because of IEDs or Small Arms Fire. It was difficult to put faces to the names in the reports because there were just too many people hurt or killed every day. I got desensitized. Eventually I saw the screen with the amount of soldiers dead or injured but it didn’t faze me anymore. I just saw the numbers without the slightest emotion because it was routine. These reports also included any bombs/weapon caches that were discovered, attempted/thwarted

attacks, the weather forecast, and the confirmed terrorists that everyone should be on the lookout for.

My main military intelligence job involved putting every piece of information together and giving my best assumption of when the enemy fighters were going to attack and with what equipment. All types of intelligence came in to assist me in this process. I had geographical, geospatial, interrogatory, imagery, local interviews, and meteorologist intelligence. We even had a GPS device that the platoon took to calculate which route was least likely to be IED infested. I had to piece all the reports and figure out what was worth reporting and what was garbage. I had a sergeant and a lieutenant helping me in sorting the reports out, but it was my job to make a presentation to the platoon every morning, whether or not I went on the patrol. The patrol briefs described what the infantrymen and myself were to expect when going to a village and new intelligence. It typically consisted of suicide bombers and new bomb ideas that insurgents were implementing to attack us. I would fail to give these briefs effectively because I was what they call “fresh meat.” In their eyes, I hadn’t done anything or gone anywhere to earn respect. To the infantrymen, I was relaxing safely in the confines of the base instead of participating in the dozens of patrols they had already encountered. I got too nervous, lost my train of thought, and was a rookie. The fact that I didn’t go on the dozens of patrols that they did also didn’t help. I was scared of everyone and therefore lost the platoon’s attention very quickly. Why would anyone listen to what I had to say if I looked like a deer in headlights?

Whenever I did get the chance to go on a patrols with the infantrymen (typically because I volunteered), I would stuff as many handfuls of candy and treats that I could fit into my cargo pant pockets. The base cafeteria had a huge variety of mainstream chocolates that I decided to give to the village kids. Soldiers rarely ate candy and it was typically frowned upon to consume

them, so it worked out. One of the first words that Afghani kids learn is “chocolate” because they love it and due to their limited food varieties. Occasionally they would take advantage of the situation and steal (pens and sometimes knives) from the soldier providing the treats, but that is a risk I was willing to take as they approached me. “Don’t give the kids chocolate; you are making yourself a target,” Specialist Bash told me once.

I went to the village Ghundi Ghar with some “Cliff Bars” (a healthy chocolate granola bar) because the cafeteria had run out of Hershey’s and Reese’s Pieces that day. I gave one to a toddler that looked no older than four, and at first, she said, “Thank You.” The momentarily grateful girl took the first bite of the Cliff bar and spit it out in disgust. She approached me, threw the remaining cliff bar at my face, and said, “Chocolate, Fuck You!” The whole platoon laughed in disbelief. The funny thing is that she knew exactly what she was saying. Curse words are one of the first things that Afghan kids catch up on.

I want to say that the most idiotic thing that I did during my deployment was kill a turtle in my attempt to save it. Someone in the platoon wrote “Kick Me” with a sharpie onto the shell of a land turtle during a routine bazaar patrol. The problem was that I didn’t know that it was a land turtle. I felt bad for it because people were actually kicking it. I decided to carry it in my cargo pant side pocket until I found a proper place to set it free. In order to get back to Strongpoint Demaiwand, we always took an alternative path to avoid a common route. This way, no Taliban could identify what time or path we would take. This alternative route that day took us through a lake and I figured this was the ideal spot to let the turtle go. The second I released him into the lake, he swam until he sunk to the bottom. I couldn’t reach him with all the gear I was carrying. I should have realized that his shell was too heavy to float but it just didn’t occur to me at the moment.

It wasn't long until I realized that no human being should be carrying the amount of weight that the infantrymen and I had on our backs. Mary Roach states that "the army likes to dress its men and women in uniforms that protect them from flames, explosives, bullets, etc. (Roach 20)." but that protection comes in heavy loads. The actual flame retardant uniform and the dreaded "combat diaper" was lightweight. The Sapi plates (bulletproof plates) with the vest that holds them was about fifteen pounds. A bulletproof helmet is about three pounds. An M4 rifle is seven pounds, five ounces. The nine fully loaded 30 round rifle magazines I carried were ten pounds. That was the easy part. The hard part was carrying a fully loaded ruck sack (huge backpack) that varied from extra ammunition, MREs, water packs, extra clothing for overnight missions, batteries for radios, and the handed down porno magazines. This adds up to a whopping average of a hundred and twenty pounds. We were not a light infantry unit. Vietnam Army soldiers carried an average of seventy to eighty pounds. Times and equipment requirements had changed dramatically and it was taking a toll on my body. My feet, back, and neck were constantly killing me. I could feel myself getting hunched little by little by the magnitude of what I carried. Throbbing pain was emerging from my whole body and nothing felt better than to throw all of the gear onto the ground when the patrol was over. Everyone seemed able to handle their own weight and the last thing that I wanted to do was disappoint. Maybe other soldiers were having the same pain as me but everyone kept a straight face. I can only assume that those that were feeling the pain were "sucking it up" so I felt the pressure to do the same. I wanted the respect of my fellow infantrymen and pulling my own weight was a huge part of getting it. Even now, I struggle to get myself to confess about this pain because I see it as a sign of weakness. I don't know whether to blame the military culture or my hyper-masculinity

but I feel a sense of embarrassment sharing this. My whole life, I've been told to be strong and "be a man" so writing this is one of the hardest things to do.

When I participated in a patrol to the village Mohammad Karez, I spotted movement on a nearby tree (yes Afghanistan has shitloads of trees) and realized that a black robed figure was aiming at our troops with a sniper rifle. The glare from the scope was giving a recurring reflection every few seconds. It was a very subtle shadow at first, so I made sure to confirm that what I was seeing was real. The desert has a way of creating mirages. At the top of my lungs I yelled, "Hey guys, do you see a man standing in that tree at nine o'clock, two hundred meters?" It was chaos after that. "Holy fuck, it's a sniper, I can see his scope!" and "Everyone get the fuck down!" was shouted throughout the 30-man patrol. The 30-man team opened with small arms fire, and our base was instructed to shoot 82mm mortar fire onto the insurgent. He was obliterated within seconds. There wasn't even a tree left standing. When we got back to the base, we realized that that sniper was a very well-known attacker in the area for the last few years. Once his remains were identified biometrically and his sniper rifle was collected, I was notified that many soldiers in deployments before ours got shot by the same man. I got commended for my actions that day with a battalion coin from my commander. It was impossible to remain shy at this point. I was on top of the world!

It was at this point in my deployment that I finally had enough pride to feel self-fulfilled and proud, and my brothers in arms opened up to me with their life stories. I was brought into all the conversations of family, women, movies and video games that were interesting at the time. For once, I didn't feel lonely and secluded from the men I spent countless hours with every day.

SGT Brown had a blonde wife and daughter and invited me to work out with him every day. He told me how he wooed his wife by taking her out to dance every night that he could.

“Nothing makes a woman love you more than spinning her around on the dance floor,” he said with a sparkle in his eye. Thanks to him, I know how to work out the muscles in my body that I didn’t know I had. Thanks to Sergeant Brown, I was able to get muscular and skinnier than I had ever been before. It was a routine to exercise with him and learn what supplements to take and why they were useful. Our cafeteria food wasn’t the greatest, but there were supplement companies that were generous, grateful, and kind-hearted enough to send their products to the base for free. Because he was the soldier I spent the most time with, he told me about his previous deployments, the trauma he had undergone, and the one IED that blew up his vehicle while playing a AC/DC song.

SPC Bash was the white man who also had a wife and young son and planned on making baby number two as soon as he got back. That is all that he talked about. He loved his son and every time I asked him what he was thinking about, he would answer “my future children.”

SPC Francis was a hot head and always had problems with his wife, Sandra. There was no shortage of Francis yelling at Sandra over the phone. I don’t know all the details because he kept to himself most of the time. Although Francis only gave us his side of the story, he showed us that his wife was spending most of the money he was making while deployed. The charges he showed me were \$24 for McDonalds, \$78 for Victoria Secret, and \$116 dollars for Burlington coat factory. These charges were all in the span of a few hours. He later discovered she was cheating on him. One of the soldiers on base that did not deploy with us supposedly obtained credible photo evidence of the affair. This news crushed him despite the issues they were having and kept him from being fully attentive on the combat patrols.

Private Banks was a black man who used to be a stripper and an excellent boxer. He had a mean right hook and took every opportunity he could to hit a hanging sandbag. He told me that

both of the things he did on the civilian side (stripping and boxing) were because he needed the money. He did not enjoy the stripping at all because of how women treated him. He didn't enjoy being treated like a piece of meat. Boxing got him hurt pretty badly but he still enjoyed it to relax and pass the time.

Private Stone, who was the skinniest white man I had ever met, was also a former stripper. This was easily believable when you got a look at his penis. The other soldiers called Stone's penis his third leg because it was at least ten inches long flaccid. We were surprised that stripping was all he had done because he would have done well in the porn industry. He told me that when he was in the public showering area in basic training, he caught everyone off guard and received comments like "What the fuck is that thing?" and "Holy fuck! You're huge."

I described myself to the infantrymen as the nerd who hadn't found his way, with an associate's degree but no life. I told them that I did not have anyone other than my parents who cared about me. I told them why and how I joined the Army. What caught them off guard was when I told them, "I am a virgin who hasn't even kissed a girl." "No Fucking Way!" was the common expression and it was the platoon's mission to make me a "player." What they taught me was a blessing and a curse at the same time. I was more afraid of dying a virgin than actually dying in the battlefield at this point in time because of the significant social pressure. I must admit that my virginity was taking priority of my personal thoughts. I did not have much luck with relationships and the reason I was still a virgin at 20 was because I didn't just want to lose my virginity without actually being in love despite a few opportunities to do so. The scrutiny of my virginity was ongoing throughout the whole deployment. "You better hope you make it back because you are really missing out" was the statement that really hit me. It was because of their comments and their astonishment that I was a virgin that made me worry about not surviving

long enough to lose it. It was like I was less of a man because I was still “pure” or “innocent” (as they put it).

On June 22, 2012, I obtained my combat action badge because it was the first patrol that involved a lengthy firefight with Taliban. Some of the soldiers on the ground and I escaped gunfire by mere seconds. Rounds were impacting the ground only a few feet in front of us. In this particular patrol, I was positioned as a rear-gunner in a Stryker (a modern army tank that laughs at an IED). Our typical patrols were dismounted because there was limited roads that vehicles could traverse upon safely. All of a sudden, we started receiving effective small arms fire. The whizzing and the cracking of the rifle rounds is unforgettable. “Get Sum!” I howled as the brass from my 240B machine gun was landing at my feet. “There you go Lopez!” cheered SGT Brown as he laughed at my excitement. I shot back until enemy fire eventually ceased. There was an adrenaline rush that cannot be obtained anywhere else. In my opinion, there is very few things that can reach that level of adrenaline (at least legally or without committing a crime). For as long as the firefight was in effect, my heart was racing, my blood was pumping madly, my breathing intensified, my senses were heightened, and my whole body put all worries aside to make sure that I made it out alive. It was addicting and despite the thrilling terror of receiving and returning fire to the enemy, I wanted more. It was like I needed this firefight to happen to get some bonding with the infantrymen. It seemed like being engaged with small arms fire together got me instantaneous respect.

“Five hours did not feel like five hours.” said Private Stone referring to the firefight. “Felt more like five minutes to me, bro, and God it was amazing.” I expressed.

The infantrymen and I preferred the mounted patrols because we felt safer in a vehicle. A mounted patrol was not common though. In dismounted combat patrols, the ANA were sent in front of the line because of trust issues. They kept “flagging” (pointing a barrel of a rifle, typically with a finger in the trigger) us with their M16s and M249s. They didn’t know how to handle nor take care of their weapons. Their weapons kept getting jammed during firefights when they needed them most. The ANA kept getting negligent discharges (firing their weapons without intending to) that luckily only impacted the ground or a wall. The ANA soldier named Rambo (because of his muscular figure) asked me if he could kill a kid from a nearby village. I couldn’t believe that he was completely serious. He already had the barrel of his machine gun pointed at his forehead. I said “Don’t you fucking dare! No Rambo, put the fucking gun down!” He laughed and shrugged as he kept walking. I had to take a deep breath to calm myself down from the complete disregard of life that Rambo (and possibly the whole ANA) had.

We got the impression that the ANA were in it for the money they got from the U.S. government. Once we got reports of “Green on Blue Attacks,” the relationship amongst soldiers became tense. This meant that Taliban were infiltrating ranks of the ANA and shooting American soldiers. The intelligence reports revealed that the Taliban were having ANA or linguists steal U.S. uniforms to infiltrate ranks inconspicuously. This caused every commander in the Maiwand district to make sure that soldiers counted their uniforms and burned the ones that were ripped instead of throwing them away in the trash. The last thing anyone wanted was for a ripped uniform to be sewed and used against us. The base separation plan was accelerated when I caught the ANA stealing our food and drinks. To top it off, it was during the fasting portion of Ramadan. Never had I seen skinny men move so fast carrying heavy boxes of energy drinks, sodas, and MRE’s. That was the last straw. Our whole company got together to erect HESCO

barriers (a huge wall of impenetrable dirt) in less than twelve hours with shovels and one gator tractor. This separated the triangular base right in the middle. One side had American soldiers while the other had the Afghani National Army.

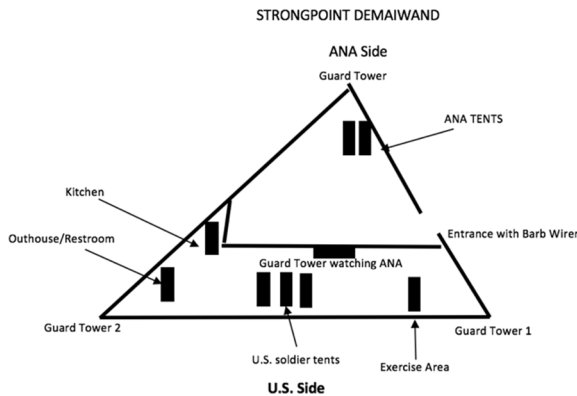


Figure 1: Diagram of Strongpoint Demaiwand

There was an M249 machine gun pointed at them at all times. The consistent thing I kept hearing throughout the deployment was that there was going to be troop withdrawals/drawdowns because the main mission was to leave the ANA in charge of defending themselves. I did not see how that was going to happen. With the separation, the lack of trust, and the ongoing fear of getting shot by one of the Afghan soldiers, I kept asking, “Who the fuck are we fighting against? The Taliban or the ANA?”

In mid-July, things were getting a little boring and that is when soldiers are at their worst. Boredom was bad because we got restless from the lack of insurgent activity and insufferable heat of 117 degrees Fahrenheit. The anxiety of waiting for something to happen is more difficult to bear than when something is happening. In Washington, soldiers are kept busy with landscaping the battalion area. It is called “area beautification.” In Afghanistan, the infantrymen

and I were filling up sandbags to reinforce the guard towers and burning trash every other day. A patrol is an infantryman's way of venting off and reducing anxiety/depression. When a patrol doesn't happen, agitation comes with it. We had sergeant White, who everybody in our base hated. He got tossed around to different units and bases because no one could stand him. He was incompetent, lazy, and an intolerant piece of shit that only got promoted to sergeant by a technical error and time in service of ten years. He complained about any work assigned to him, did not shower, and could not be trusted to handle any piece of equipment. I hate to say that the quality of life of all the infantrymen would have been better if this guy wasn't around. White was typically late to relieve the soldier on guard duty. He wanted to do as little as possible and get paid for it. We were bothered by the fact that he would serve himself three servings from the cafeteria by being one of the first ones in line, leaving some soldiers without a proper lunch/dinner. The incident that made all the infantrymen lose all respect for sergeant White was the day he messed around with the radio in the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) to the point that the soldiers on the patrol were not able to transmit that they were receiving effective small arms fire. I was not in the patrol that was getting shot at that day, but when they returned, everyone was furious and wanted to beat the shit out of him. Our Captain was in this patrol and made sure to smoke (to physically exhaust someone with exercises) sergeant White until he nearly passed out. No number of pushups, squats, and pull-ups were enough to alleviate the anger and resentment that everyone had for sergeant White that day.

The Afghani soldiers got sheep at least once a week to improve their morale and improve public relations. Sometimes, the helicopters would not land before air-dropping the box filled with sheep onto the HLZ (Helicopter Landing Zone). The sheep that broke their legs were the ones to be skinned and roasted the same night. It was an Afghan delicacy and better food than we

had. I would have taken the sheep meal over the cafeteria food any day of the week but the infantrymen meal satisfaction wasn't priority. I find it interesting that the herders were "Afghanistan rich" because the vast majority of the country found sheep lovely in taste. The soldiers called them "pimps." A sheep was way better than the vegetarian meals our cooks were feeding us. It was not hard to lose weight because of it.

The next morning as sergeant White was starting his morning shift, a few soldiers and I decided to play a practical joke. We stole a sheep from the ANA side of the base and guided it to sergeant White's cot. We got some rope, laid the sheep on his cot, and tied the poor animal up to the point that all it could do was move its head. We left it there and proceeded with our daily duties. When sergeant White entered the tent, his eyes widened as we overheard the "Baaaaah! Baaaaah! Baaaaah!" He unfastened the sheep out of its confinement and noticed that his clothes, bags, and blankets were covered in feces and urine.

The Afghani commander was not happy that there was a sheep missing from his side of the base. He angrily marched to our side to figure out where his animal was. He yelled at our Captain asking "Where the fuck is my sheep!" Sergeant White went to the lunch tent where the vast majority of our company ate and yelled, "Who was the motherfucker that tied a goddamn sheep to my cot?" He was embarrassed and infuriated at the same time when no one spoke a word to him. Everyone continued eating and ignored him when all of a sudden, the sheep entered the tent behind him as if he were a Shepherd. It was at this perfect moment that the sheep "Baaaaahs." The whole tent of soldiers could not contain their laughter for a whole ten minutes. From this moment on, Sergeant White was named "The sheep whisperer."

The Afghani commander located the sheep and took it to his side of the base. It slaughtered and devoured that same night. The four soldiers including myself that tied up the

sheep that day were never punished for our childish actions. The word spread fast of who pulled off this prank but nothing came of it. When sergeant White went to complain about the incident, our Captain stated that it was well deserved and that maybe this way he would learn to shower, wash his clothes, and get some work done for once.



Figure 2: A Couple of Photos of the Sheep That Was Tied and Eaten Later That Day

In late June, things started getting a little more hectic and chaotic. We received a local Afghani at the front gate with severe damage to his face and chest. The local villagers saw him injured and carried him over to the only place they imagined he would be saved: A U.S. Army base. I escorted him in a four-wheeler to the medic aid station. I had to initiate a medical evacuation report to get the local in a helicopter for legitimate medical treatment in a bigger base. In the meantime, Staff Sergeant Hilton brought an EX-SPRAY kit (a solution applied to the hands of a predicted insurgent). When the solution was tested, it turned a green color that indicated concrete signs that he was a bomb “emplacer” that blew himself up in the process of

preparing an IED for our patrolmen to step on. We still had to save that man's life nonetheless for the sake of the "hearts and minds" of the local villagers. I called the medical evacuation helicopter and hoped that the insurgent would change for the better once he recuperated his strength.

In early October, I experienced the most devastating event of my life. There were a couple of little girls, no older than four years old, playing in a field near our base. A few minutes later, there was a familiar boom from an exploding bomb in their playground location. The weather seemed to reflect the tragedy that just took place. Out of nowhere, a sandstorm emerged and its blistering winds impacted our protective eye gear. Apparently while the two little girls were running around, one of them stepped on an IED meant for our troops. The local villagers brought them to our base in a hurry. My heart sank as I witnessed the two girls that were in critical condition with disfigured faces and their intestines hanging from their stomachs. I wanted to break down and cry at the sight of what used to be young beautiful faces. I had to cover the lower part of my face to restrict the stench of nearly dead, tiny bodies and to make sure that my tears were not apparent. There was blood spilling rapidly from their stomachs and I was one of the soldiers that had to provide manual pressure in the futile attempt to keep them alive. I felt their last heartbeats vanish in my very hands. I had to back away before I broke down. The felling was unreal because I imagined that the girls still had the ability to wake up. I looked at them, awaiting some type of movement, anything to tell me that they were alive and going to make it. All I got was silence and stillness. The medical evacuation helicopter was unable to reach the base quick enough to save their lives. The pilots were told to head back because it was too late.

“They were dead before they even got to our hands man,” Sergeant Brown said in his most soothing voice, in his hope to comfort me. There was an undeniable fury that was apparent in my face and a rage in my eyes as I hastily stated, “Let’s go find the bastards that did this to them.” Needless to say, I did not have a lack of motivation for the months ahead, and there was no pity as my platoon and I took the lives of the insurgents we thought were responsible. The whole platoon wanted revenge and blood to be spilled. It was the most messed up month I underwent because we knew that we would not find those specifically responsible for the bomb that killed the two toddlers. It was blind vengeance. Using the girls as an excuse was a shitty thing to do. The company wanted to be engaged by gunfire so insurgents would be killed. We were picking a fight and playing with fire, getting into firefights for the sake of killing. I didn’t have much say in the matter and I kept following orders.

In Mid-November, I was in charge of controlling the camera providing surveillance on the patrol going to a village never visited before by the platoon. The camera was huge and could see everything clearly at a range of 200 meters. The patrol took effective small arms fire from five different directions and SGT Brown got shot with an AK-47 in the right thigh. The whole platoon was panicking at the situation and feared for SGT Brown’s life. Somehow, SGT Brown found the strength to walk his way back to the base. He did not want to put the rest of the infantrymen in danger by calling a helicopter to their immediate location. It is quite difficult to keep a helicopter safe from gunfire while it lands and departs. I had to overcome the chaos by maintaining visual on the patrol and enemy troops while setting up the medical evacuation that picked up SGT Brown. He was successfully taken to the medical facilities that had the equipment for the treatment he needed. Had I not maintained my cool and correctly relayed the

appropriate information in a relaxed yet urgent manner, it could have taken hours before the helicopters would have reached the base.

It took real balls for SGT Brown to walk miles with a wounded thigh back into base to make sure that neither the helicopter nor the troops would be in danger because of his injury. Because of SGT Brown's act of bravery and strength, he was awarded the Army Commendation Medal with a V (for Valor) and a Purple Heart. All forms of communication were cut off until SGT Brown was able to make a phone call home. His wife was frantic and had to call his mother in law to visit and comfort her. His wife wanted him to come back immediately but the request wasn't granted. The number of U.S. soldiers on base was already low and the higher-ups did not find it a priority to get him out of country. He figured that January was close enough and didn't want to leave his fellow infantrymen behind. He would rather pull extra guard duty than head back early. For the rest of the deployment, all he did was tower guard duty and he didn't mind it. His wound was severe enough that he wasn't allowed to go patrolling anymore.

From mid-November to early January, it started to get considerably cold and the winter season came at us full blast. Most local insurgents were dressed in robes and sandals and were unwilling to attack our base or soldiers any further. The Army brought us some steaks and shrimp to celebrate our impending return to the U.S. The cake that came along with the meal was an Air Force cake. We never figured out exactly why. We were finally able to relax and enjoy a decent Thanksgiving and Christmas meal and spend it with our brothers in arms, talking about what was waiting for us in American soil.

Despite the obvious fact that I dropped about thirty pounds and gained a lot of muscle mass, I was still worried that I was unattractive or that I would not succeed in dating when I got back to Washington. I was sharing my self doubts amongst my fellow soldiers and there was a

consensus that I shouldn't worry. There is one quote in particular that stands out among the rest that helped ease my mind: "Because you have been to Afghanistan, you have countless stories from the months you have been out here. You are part of the one percent of the world that chose to be part of the military and you are the half of that one percent that actually got deployed. Use these stories and experiences to make yourself unique and appealing to women" instructed SPC Banks. Banks had a point. There tends to be a romanticism of soldiers because little is known about the actual horrors of war. "Sometimes it is as simple as introducing yourself by saying, "I went to Afghanistan and did all kinds of crazy shit,"" he continued.

Sergeant Brown had his mind on his wife and daughter that were going to be waiting for him. He knew he had already put them through a lot and hoped his wife would understand why he couldn't go home sooner. Specialist Bash was thinking about making baby number two as soon as he got back. His wife was on board with the plan. Specialist Francis was thinking about his divorce and being a "free man," as he put it. He used that analogy as if his soon to be ex wife was a prison sentence. At least he had opened a new bank account that his future ex couldn't access. Private Banks and Private Stone were thinking about all the beer and women that they could get their hands on. I was ecstatic that these were the brothers that I had made for life and nothing could ever change that.

I was not going to have any family when the plane landed in Washington state so I only called my parents to tell them I was alive and well. The biggest things on my mind were finally losing my virginity as quickly as possible, buying my first car, traveling, and drinking my first legal beer. I survived the gray area that many Americans don't see and became more confident/stronger than ever. I was told that I had a different look in my eye that they call the "thousand-mile stare."

I still ponder on these significant events that occurred while I was overseas. The reason that I keep these memories in my heart is because Afghanistan is truly the place that molded me into the person that I am today. It was in Afghanistan that I was finally able to come out of my shell. I was finally able to show my real personality and produce the self-confidence that I needed to succeed in life. When there was gunfire every other day and I was scared of stepping on a bomb with every step, I couldn't help but be myself and let my personality shine. Maybe I needed to be under these traumatic circumstances to get that push of becoming the "real me" that doesn't care what anybody thinks. I personally wanted a longer tour. Twelve to eighteen months used to be the old standard but now nine was the most cost effective deployment for the Army. Life is truly easy in my mind when one is getting paid well to simply worry about not dying.

CHAPTER III

AUGUST 2007-JUNE 2010: ROMA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The Roma school districts are some of the most poverty stricken schools in the country with eighty-five percent of enrolled students being economically disadvantaged, more than half of the students at risk of dropping out, and a third of those students having limited English language proficiency. I was the kid that read 100 books (easy books) by the time I was four years old and was given a shirt to show off that accomplishment. I thank my parents for allowing me to read any books that I could get my hands on. I believe it was a good call on their part and a reason that I became a little smarter with every story that I finished. No books were forbidden and I was even encouraged to visit the library as much as possible as I was growing up. I went to school, typically finished my homework before my last period of class, got in the bus, and went straight to my room to either play video games or read. I played the mainstream video games like Call of Duty (shooting games) and Forza (racing games). I read more than I gamed because I enjoyed the Goosebumps books by R.L. Stine (horror teen series), Animorphs by Katherine Applegate (young adult science fiction series), and even even British literature from my college level English classes (my favorite being Beowulf).

In Roma High School, the building was vintage but had security cameras. The lockers always got stuck and the hallways looked like they last had a renovation in the 1980s. The classrooms still had overhead projectors, chalkboards, slow computers to keep attendance, and books that the instructor had to personally buy for the students. I didn't have many friends because I was a geek that did well in school but did not know how to interact well with people. What I wanted more than anything was to have the social skills that made me stand out enough to make friends, or at least get a girl's interest. I got good grades and stayed out of trouble. I consider that I was the wet dream of many parents because no one had to look after me. I was a "goody goody two shoes" that no one had to worry about. I did try my best to get laid while in high school, but I just didn't have the self-confidence nor the slightest clue of how to woo a woman. I had my fair share of crushes but I neither had the confidence, the money, nor the freedom that my fellow high school students did. I was jealous of my classmates going out to a movie by themselves, going to parties, or simply going on a drive to get fresh air. I got to admit that I wasn't the best-looking kid on the block either. I was overweight, quiet, and unattractive. When I felt that I was getting close to a relationship, I was always "friend-zoned" before anything serious happened. I was stuck with jacking off to porn when I had the chance. I never given the time of day. Melissa was the most serious crush I had for the four years of high school but I didn't have the courage to ask her out. We had many classes that gave me the chance to make a move but my fear of getting rejected and ruining the friendship we had stopped me. I ended up going to prom with a random girl that I had in another class but was staring at Melissa the whole time I danced. She even invited me to her high school graduation party and I even missed my last chance of telling her about my feelings. I felt pathetic.

CHAPTER IV

JUNE 2, 2010-JANUARY 11, 2011 LIVING WITH MY CONTROLLING PARENTS

I graduated from Roma High School on June 2, 2010 with honors, G.P.A. of 3.71, and ranking 41 out of 365. Top 11 percent unfortunately did not get me a full ride at any college. I had gotten lazy and skipped the advanced placement classes in high school. I did however take advantage of the dual enrollment classes that got me enough college credits to land me close to an associates' degree. I got accepted to UT Austin, Texas A&M Kingsville, UT San Antonio, and UT Pan American. All of these colleges were more than happy to have me as a student but wouldn't pay a dime to help me with tuition. Apparently my parents made "too much" because their combined salaries pushed a little over \$50,000. It is as if the federal government expected every last penny that my parents made to be dedicated to my education and rent payments. Financial aid was not something I was going to be able to count on.

My father was originally from Camargo, Tamaulipas and met my mother while he was working at a tollbooth from the Rio Grande City to the Camargo border. My mother gave my father an ultimatum stating that if he did not come to the United States, then he would lose her, my sister and me. It was a hard decision because my father did not want to lose us but was so close to getting his pension for working at the bridge for so long. There was no guarantee that they were going to find a part-time job or affordable living accommodations once they made a final transition to the U.S. Luckily, everything worked out financially after a while.

They decided to settle down in a small town called “La Rosita.” La Rosita is a very rural community where my parents still reside in. They bought a piece of land there and started out in a trailer. They eventually built their dream home from scratch, brick by brick. One can’t find this place on a map. I can put one foot in the U.S. and the other in Mexico because it is so close to the border. It is in the middle of Rio Grande City and Roma, Texas. The landmark is a cake shop and the other is a fire station. It is as close as one can get to Mexico. When my parents moved into this place, it was around the time when people felt safe traveling to Mexico without feeling uneasy. There is only one way in and out of this tiny town. There is no possible way for anyone to avoid a pothole along the road so cars don’t last very long. It takes about twenty minutes for anyone to get to the nearest grocery store. There is only one internet service provider so they spike up the prices knowing they have no competition. Cops are afraid to go into this small town because everyone has AK-47s/AR-15s. Fireworks are shot into the air without consequence when celebrations happen. Cats and dogs with rabies prevent anyone from having a “morning run.” It is not difficult to find a mechanic or repairman around every corner. Our neighbor Ramon was a mechanic that loved to barbeque every single weekend. He still uses every dime that he makes fixing old cars to buy beef/chicken from Mexico because he doesn’t like any reheated food.

Unemployment is the norm of La Rosita. Unless you’re a teacher, then there is no way to make a salary. Roma High School starting salaries surprisingly start at \$42,000. Rio Grande City and Roma Texas are the cities in Starr county where the cost of living is next to nothing. University professors near the area don’t even make that much. Luckily, my mother was a substitute teacher before she became a Home Bound teacher. My father was a pipe-liner that was typically never home. He always went up north to work with a variety of construction companies

when the opportunity was available. The money he was raking in from pipe-lining was substantial, much more than my mother ever made teaching. This was the only way that he was able to keep my mother studying for her education bachelors' degree and paying the house bills. Once my mother became a home bound teacher for special needs children, she was raking in the "big bucks" in comparison to the rest of the Rio Grande Valley inhabitants.

Once my parents had enough money saved up to move out of the trailer, they constructed an orange colored house house that was spacious with a good size lot and a chain-linked fence. The outside of the house looked like a forest because my mother would not stop planting trees. The biggest one was a grapefruit tree that stood about twenty feet tall. A lot of the plants eventually got cut down to make space for a garage area for my them to put three out of the five vehicles they had (really old run down cars). They had over ten dogs (typically Chihuahuas) running and protecting the house with their ankle biting, three different species of birds (including a parrot), a couple of turtles, rabbits'/guinea pigs, and even chickens. I sometimes called it a farm. The inside of the house was three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and 1200 square feet. My parents took the biggest room and my sister and I had a room to ourselves. The house was quite dark and even darker because of the plants, the fence, and gloomy blue paint in my room. There were maybe five windows in the whole house but no sunlight adequately passed through them. My parents were kind enough to provide me with my personal small and fat CRT TV for me to play the video games I wanted and view VHS tapes. I had a wooden bookshelf where I stored the books and movies I bought from the library, local book store, and scholastic book fair at grade school. I had everything I needed to entertain and educate myself inside of the house. Outside of the house, my parents purchased a big trampoline for my sister and me to jump on. They did their best to keep us safe and occupied without exploring the neighborhood.

There weren't many houses around the area and the environment was a peaceful one, adequate to raise my sister and me. This safety of La Rosita did not last long. What my parents didn't expect was that it would become a significantly populated community where drugs would reign supreme. It was when I was ten years old that my parents realized the amount of drug funded houses and vehicles that were emerging around "La Rosita." There are crumbling brick/wooden houses that are barely standing next to 4000 square foot mansions. Some families of ten to twelve people live in the tiny houses. Suddenly the peaceful community ended up becoming a place where it wasn't safe to relax or play outside without getting offered to purchase some of the drug merchandise. My parents refused to get involved with the drugs around the community and they made sure that my sister and I got the talk of what these harmful substances can do to the body and our lives.



Figure 3: My Parents' House Present Day

Chuy/Chuyito is a nickname for most Jesus' in Hispanic cultures. I'm glad no one ever called me "Chucho." I still get called Chuy on occasion when I converse with any of my family members. I still find it peculiar that even my parents find my real name a little too formal to say out loud. "Chuyito, if someone asks if you want a taste of something while you are walking around the neighborhood, just say no," my mother told me as soothing as possible. "Drugs are pills that poison you and mess with your brain. You won't be able to read any more books if you

take them,” she added deceptively. My father took a more hostile approach by saying “Chuy, if I ever find out that you are hanging around with those drug addicts in the streets, you are no longer my son.” He then added, “I have seen good, strong men at my construction site get fired and sometimes jailed because they started popping pills and injecting needles into their bodies. I won’t let that be you.” After these conversations, I sometimes ran from the bus to the house to avoid any interaction from the occasional loitering groups around the neighborhood. I felt like everyone in the community had drugs in their back pockets. I was way too paranoid for my own good. I wasn’t around whenever they gave my sister the “drug talk.” I just hoped that they took it a little bit easier on her.

While my parents did exaggerate some points, my sister and I eventually knew exactly what drugs were and why they should be avoided. Drugs were the last thing I needed to keep my intellect and a future career. I’m glad my parents were smart enough to stay out of trouble too. It only made it easier to follow their lead. My parents knew that if they started getting involved with drug trafficking (like the rich neighbors did) for more income, there would be no way to escape it later. My parents will never leave “La Rosita” and they have learned to accept the fact that the drugs around the community are not going away. They are satisfied with the fact that my sister and I did not get involved with drugs and that no one tries to offer them a “business opportunity” anymore. My family and I had to insist that we simply were not interested in any money or power that drugs had to offer and we are all the better for avoiding the horrible lifestyle that would have emerged from it. It is this mentality that kept me from smoking in the future despite the stress that the military brought onto my life. I was the only one from my company that did not return from Kandahar smoking cigarettes.

The physical environment that I grew up in did not allow me to have many friends. I wasn't allowed to play or simply walk around the streets of the neighborhood. My parents let me leave the house only to get on the school bus or grab the mail. It is because of these restrictions that I ended up being a shy individual in my teenage years. Instead of playing outside or having social interactions with the neighborhood kids, I instead ended up reading a few books a day and playing video games. My parents would rather have had me with no friends (other than my sister who doesn't really count) than have me get involved with the drugs and alcohol that plagued the community. The only thing that mattered to my parents was that I was physically safe. Everything else came second. I never participated in any sports or had a girlfriend (or a girl that was a friend) for the sake of safety. My mother wanted to keep my sister and me as close and sheltered as possible. My father was submissive and would always let her have her way. The one thing they both firmly agreed on is keeping my sister and me in the house or at least the community as much as possible. They would have not minded if I never left the house my whole life. I was never bought a toy gun because my mother wanted to keep me away from the real ones. I didn't even know about 9/11 until I reached high school. I still don't know how my mother was able to keep me so oblivious to the world around me. Once I had good access to the internet in high school, I not only updated myself and caught up to current events via magazines but also read the news daily. It didn't take long for the Iraq and Afghanistan war news to deeply affect my will to fight along side the infantrymen. My parents thought they were keeping me close, but the only thing they were accomplishing was to push me away. I was constantly imagining a different world and how everything will eventually get better.

I couldn't blame my parents at times for being overprotective. As a four-year-old child, I had a crippling asthma plaguing my body. My sickness put a significant strain on my parents

both mentally and financially. They tried everything and anything to get me cured, including a witch doctor. I had a restrictive diet, rituals, and remedies to cure me but none of them worked. It wasn't until my parents bought me a Chihuahua that everything seemed to get better. I still firmly believe that contact with that Taco Bell looking dog is the reason that I no longer have asthma. In many Hispanic cultures, dogs (typically Chihuahuas) are a popular remedy that cures asthma. The dog is supposed to die after curing the condition, but mine lived a long time. For many, there is skepticism in the effectiveness of dogs and their ability to cure. I've gotten a fair share of it myself. It sounds like a bunch of boloney but it didn't take more than a week for my lungs to heal after they gave me that Chihuahua named Max. Because of my sickness, my parents never let me escape their sight. They thought I was at risk or in danger despite every indication that I was healthy. My asthma made me the center of attention for years to come to the point that I feel my sister was ignored. Sometimes their worry about my well-being was taken too far and extreme. I just needed to breathe (in both senses).

One of the biggest motivations to leave Rio Grande City was because of my parents. I had a mother that was 43 and a father that was 55 in 2010, and I don't believe we ever had anything in common. There is a huge emotional disconnect between me and them that I don't believe will ever disappear. I love them but whenever we talk, it is just small talk and we rarely get into any personal details of our lives. We have different perspectives of what to do with our time. Even now, they fail to see how getting a graduate degree will benefit me in any way. They would rather see me working already instead of spending more time studying. My life and educational ambitions have always confused them. They find their bliss by going to flea markets and nothing else. Flea markets are about the only consistent place that they go to every weekend if not every other weekend. They have still maintained this tradition in their fifties and sixties. I

wish we had more things in common or that we could find something to bond over, but I don't know what that is. The reason that I wanted to get away from them is because they wanted to keep me in their house forever. They succeeded in keeping my sister (with her husband and two kids) there, but that was not going to happen with me.

One of the main reasons my parents didn't want me studying anywhere except STC (the local college) was because they were worried about the cost of living. There is a shame and social stigma in the Latino community about being in debt. They bought everything in cash their whole lives and credit cards were frowned upon. The life they wanted for me was an education from South Texas College that led to me to being a teacher in the same high school I had just graduated from. I had bigger plans than that. I couldn't entirely blame them for wanting to keep me in the Rio Grande Valley because they understood that cost of living is too much outside of the area. All my mother had to do was make a call to get me a job with her connections in Roma ISD. She had already made her reputation for the Lopez name. My parents kept throwing the starting salary of my high school as an incentive but money was not the issue. The issue was the fact that it was a rural place with little things to do and I was done with living in their house.

The incident that drove me away from my parents the most happened during my first semester of South Texas College. Campus was fifteen minutes away and I was the student that always found a reason to get extra credit (to assure myself of an A). I make sure to go above and beyond with my coursework to cover myself for an unexpected bad grade. Dr. Cowin was my American History professor and had a movie club where students could analyze films. I decided that it wouldn't be a big deal if I stayed after class to participate in this extra credit film activity. Out of respect, I turned off my phone, watched the movie, and discussed it with my peers. I had a good time and once it was over, I turned on my flip phone to find 43 missed calls from my

mother. In my mind, someone was either dead or dying. Nope. I found out later she just got so worried that she ended up going to campus, called the campus police, and sent them to go look for me after she found the SUV I took to school. The campus police told her to go home and see if I turned up later.

I got reprimanded and scolded for not answering the phone as soon as I got home. My father told me, “Your mother went to go look for you.” “Don’t you ever turn off your phone ever again,” my mother added. “This is bullshit and I won’t put up with it for much longer!” I yelled as I slammed my room door. Little did they know what I meant at the time. I was on a mission to find out the ideal way to get out of the Valley without doing something stupid. I turned on the T.V. as I finished my history homework. It wasn’t even ten minutes into my homework that the Army recruiting commercial appeared. At the time, the consistent commercial was that of infantrymen having a good time, greeting the locals of Iraq, and jumping over obstacle courses in basic training (which weren’t all that big once I saw them in person). The last verse spoken by a captain, sergeant, and private in the commercial was “I am Army Strong!” I figured that if I was going to do anything in the military, it might as well be Infantry. My mind was set.

I expected to be finally treated as an adult the second I got out of high school but that never happened. I was eighteen and although I did not know everything in the world, I knew that my parents were being too strict in comparison to my peers. They tried to flex their power because I lived in their house and therefore it was their rules. I still had a curfew of 10 p.m. and no matter where I went, I had to call them when I was driving anywhere and also when I was coming back. I was frustrated at getting treated like a ten-year-old.

As soon as I could, I went to the nearest recruiting station in McAllen, Texas without my parents knowing anything about it. I was lucky enough to have a high school classmate that

wanted to enlist at the same time I did. We went to the recruitment office together one day before class started. I saw the perfect chance to serve my country and get my independence at the same time while losing some weight along the way. Money was running out of my savings account and if I wanted to reach my dream goal of becoming an English professor, this was one of the best ways to get my education paid for. It was my only way out of the Valley without doing anything illegal.

Every other weekend, I would sneak to the McAllen recruiting center to get some basic military skills like rank recognition and map reading while getting a little bit of exercise. We had several potential soldiers and we were learning together. Unfortunately, despite the background checks, some future soldiers were not able to enlist because of their body fat percentile, bad grades, or because they had a change of heart at the last moment. Nothing was more bothersome to me at the time than the guys who didn't enlist because their girlfriends asked them not to. At this point in time, I didn't mind the lack of a significant other because I would be leaving before long.

I went to San Antonio to take the ASVAB (the military test similar to the ACT/SAT). I did this by lying about a university project that required for me to travel. Because of my high score, I got told that Military Intelligence Analyst was my only option of a job to join the Army. I figured out later that it was a complete lie but I took the job anyway. After all, it promised a top-secret clearance (which I never really used and didn't keep after the Army). I imagined that I would have access to all the revealing databases of the U.S. government, maybe a little insight of Area 51 or answers to other conspiracy theories. I signed the dotted line.

I informed my parents about a week before I left for basic training that I had enlisted. This produced a lot of tears and resentment at the time but they eventually forgave me for what

they considered a cruel act. I knew that my family would try and talk me out of signing the 4-6-year contract. They tried to bargain with me asking “Can’t you do the Army Reserve or the National Guard so you can stay home?” I told them, “You are the reason that I want to leave the most.” They were shocked. I believe that they didn’t know of the effect they were having on me. There was no going back now without serious consequences.

Before I got on the minivan taking me to the airport, my mother shared that there might be one thing that she and I have in common: the fact that we left our parents with little notice to make a better life for ourselves. Apparently, she was working in a grocery store in Roma, Texas with my grandparents, who were quite strict. “It was different times,” she said. “I married your father and got out of my parents’ house. I took a leap of faith and hoped that your father was a good man. It was my only form of escape at the time.” I closed the conversation by saying “I guess history really does repeat itself after all.” In her attempt of keeping me safe and close, I feel that she denied me a healthy childhood and teenage life. She ended up being stricter than her parents without even realizing it. She was lost a son (me) and didn’t realize that she was doing wrong. I hoped that she believed that my decision to enlist was with good intentions to make a better life for myself.

I considered myself a complete failure and pathetic human being before the military. This was all subjective of course. My lack of self-confidence was dragging me down. I did not know how to talk to a girl, much less get a date with one. I was a horrible interviewee with no job experience. No employer ever gave me a chance to prove myself. I had a limited education from my local community college. I was obese with no idea how to use the weightlifting machines. I hadn’t done anything interesting in my life. I was and still am patriotic to the U.S. military and hadn’t gotten the opportunity to do anything for my country. Worst of all, I was a virgin with

little to no hope of finding the right woman. I felt like I needed a drastic change in my life and nothing was more life-changing than enlisting.

I can not begin to describe how complex my decision making process was. My experience would determine how long I would serve the U.S. Army. I never imagined myself retiring. The contract was 4 years but I was open to the idea of reenlisting if all went well. I never grew up with the idea of becoming a soldier. I was deeply impacted and influenced by the desire to do something honorable for my country and make a difference in the world, but also take care of myself. It was about what I could do for my country but also what my country could do for me. It was symbiotic. The one thing that was clear was I was going to give my best effort.

CHAPTER V

BASIC TRAINING JANUARY-JUNE 2011:

I found basic training to be a joke in difficulty. The first day was a little scary with the intimidation tactics and the drill sergeants screaming at the top of their lungs. What pissed them off the most about me is that I was taller than them. Sometimes they made me squat to be “at their level.” I felt bad for short soldiers because drill sergeants casted a shadow over them like a bunch of bulldogs ganging up on a pocket Chihuahua.

One of the biggest factors of leaving the Rio Grande Valley was to avoid the strictness of my parents of my parents. It was noteworthy that leaving my parents put me in a harsher environment. Logically, putting myself in this predicament made no sense. I could only assume that being raised in a rigid manner made my experience all the easier. To avoid the controlling nature of my parents, I landed myself in the hands of drill sergeants. “Do your worst,” I thought to myself as they yelled inches apart from my face.

The drill sergeants have continuous drills to tire out the soldiers on the first day. On the bus, they pretend to be friendly and welcoming. As soon as the bus doors open however, one hears “Get the fuck out of my bus!” Soldiers rush to the door to the point that they fall down with all of their gear and some even get trampled on because of the hysteria. I along with everyone had duffel bags full of uniforms, hygiene items, and Vietnam-era flashlights. Soldiers are made to run around the living quarters (trailers) and hold the fifty-pound duffel bags over their heads until their muscles give up.

It is only the start of the physical pains the body would endure for the next ten weeks. There is always that one guy that does not ask permission to go to the restroom and ends up peeing himself. Going to the restroom is not something that can be denied for any soldier but no one has the bravery to ask. Asking to go pee sounds like something that will get you in trouble. I heard that in previous years, many soldiers had shit themselves for not asking either. It is not hard to see who is in a nicotine or drug withdrawal because of their craving for cigarettes and dip. Some drill sergeants smoked right in front of the soldiers in withdrawal. These soldiers looked pale from not consuming tobacco products but the typical symptoms were sweating, anxiety, and some shaking. I can't count how many times I heard "Man, I would kill for a cigarette right now" or "I can't wait to finish this basic training bullshit so I can start smoking again."

The ongoing mindset imposed on soldiers is: you are better than "those lazy civilians" because you had the guts to enlist. The mentality that is also imposed on soldiers is to embrace authority and not question orders. The Army wants a soldier to obey rather than think or question what is commanded. Drill sergeants impose the mindset that one of the most honorable things to do is die for your country. All of them talked about the times that they came in contact with IEDs or small arms fire and instilled the mentality that one should accept when "it's your turn to die" and should embrace the fact that one can't do anything about it. I thought and still believe that whole outlook was illogical and wrong. I do not believe that one should just accept death so easily.

I honestly felt that the Army does it's best to convince the potential soldiers that come into their ranks that their decision to enlist was wise. It is only this way that they are more likely to follow orders and believe that their superiors have their best interest at heart. Orders are not

meant to be questioned. It is with this approach that soldiers are molded into the ideal combatant that follows commands. Drill sergeants have two months for this molding to happen before individual job training begins. I vividly remember the quote that was not on the Army commercials: “Join the Army, travel the world, meet new people, and then kill them.” It was not the last time I heard this quote but I still remember the shock I felt when everyone laughed and cheered after hearing this.

After the Army, I researched military masculinity and found Brandon T. Locke’s University of Nebraska thesis. In his detailed study, he describes how the military “builds a man.” The notions of gender are socially constructed for the sake of “idealized masculinity (Locke 1)”. In World War II, the men found a call of duty to, as Locke argues, to “fill the masculine roles of breadwinner and soldier,” but is also a romantic appeal to young women. They should also have independence. These men were portrayed as those who put “freedom before family and loved ones (Locke 3)”. The militarization of the nation had a significant amount influence in shaping the masculine ideal through “training, GI Bill benefits, shared experiences, and the reputation men would receive from service (Locke 4).” It is men that represent the culturally ideal, masculine figure that are given the most “respect and power in society (Locke 11).” The government links the welfare of the nation to that of its men, and put these men on pedestals. This causes their masculinity/ego to rise. The safety of the country was/is portrayed as the strength and abilities of the U.S. Armed forces, essential for “containing aggressors (Locke 45).”

I was not the masculine ideal. I was the fattest soldier in the whole company at 6 feet 2 inches tall and 200 pounds. There were little amounts of muscle in that amount of weight. I met the weight requirements but struggled to pass the physical fitness test. I could only do fourteen

pushups, thirty sit-ups, and run two miles in about twenty minutes. The requirements were thirty-five pushups, 53 sit-ups, and the two-mile run in 16 minutes and thirty-six seconds. I barely met the standards at the end with a lot of persistence and some tears.

It is only ten weeks of basic training. Three weeks are learning the army values, marching effectively and experiencing the gas chamber. The second three weeks are basic rifle marksmanship and self-defense courses. The last four weeks are advanced combat training combined with field training exercises. This includes throwing a live grenade. Every single day is packed with twelve to eighteen hours of sleep deprived training.

The two things that I learned that were significant besides shooting a rifle was combatives and combat medical training. Neither one of these trainings were extensive but the basics were better than nothing. In combative training, I learned how to fight on the ground. Drill instructors told us that ninety percent (probably exaggerated) of fights end up on the floor. At least ten maneuvers of how to pin an opponent were done hundreds of times until it became natural. The goal was typically to put the opponent in a headlock or an uncomfortable position prohibiting movement. In combat medical training, I was tested on the typical combat wounds, how to apply treatment/dressing to the wounded, how to carry/drag the wounded, finding entry/exit wounds, and how to recognize the most serious injuries (that might not seem as urgent). I was put in simulations with a squad of soldiers in a stressful environment full of wounded mannequins or civilians (showered with fake blood). We were assessed on how well we treated the patients and whether we treated the most critically wounded soldiers before the marginally wounded ones. I believed that I knew everything I needed to keep a person alive.

The gas chamber is one of the most dreaded part of basic training. The whole point is that one trusts his/her gas mask. Ten soldiers at a time are lined up and enter a room filled with tear

gas together with an active ingredient that police use when riots/protests occur. With the gas mask, the gas is tolerable but within a minute, I was told to take the mask off and recite “The Soldier’s Creed.” By the time I finished the sentence “I am an American soldier,” I was gasping, coughing uncontrollably, and felt a significant amount of mucus spill out of my nose. My eyes, nose, and throat were burning from the surrounding fumes of the air. One guy in my group was a former cop and was toughing it out. He grunted, huffed, and made angry movements but the fumes did not affect him. The one sound that is clear is the roaring laughter of the drill sergeants in the background. Two minutes later, the exit door is opened and we are told to flap our arms around, keep walking, and drink water.

It should have only been ten weeks but at week eight, I caught pneumonia because of the constant temperature changes in Fort Jackson, South Carolina that varied from 30 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The one thing that the Army does not think about is the fact that the environment that soldiers are exposed to might affect them in grave ways. Soldiers come from different parts of the country don’t have the slightest clue how to endure the cold. I was granted convalescent leave (a period of recuperation for a soldier to continue his/her career) for a month and returned to do it all over again. I should have gotten out of basic training by May 2011, but that never happened. By getting pneumonia, I missed out on too much training during my recovery that I did not fulfill the requirements to graduate. I was so determined to keep going and make a life for myself so I endured basic training twice, graduating in June 2011 instead. It was now time to advance to my individual training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

CHAPTER VI

INTELLIGENCE SCHOOL JULY 2011-OCTOBER 2011:

When I arrived for Intelligence training, soldiers were passing out because of the altitude change and the heat of the Sierra Vista, Arizona desert. It was here that I finally felt like I had the upper hand with the ambient temperature. Ninety degrees was a walk in the park for me while many were treating the physical environment like a blistering inferno. It was interesting to have mountains in all 360 degrees because I was no where near sea level. We were put into a barracks room and then introduced to our classroom. In this classroom, secret-level systems were put in place so no cell-phones were allowed. The computers were connected to a secret server that I found out was a stripped version of Google. It felt like I was in college all over again because it ended up being one PowerPoint presentation after another to show my competence.

Our course curriculum was designed to teach us how to:

- Gather, analyze, correlate, or evaluate incoming intelligence reports and messages from multiple resources.
- Collect and validate intelligence, assessing the credibility of incoming information and reliability of sources by regularly using information from unclassified, secret, and top secret information sources

- Link or chart persons of interest to criminal organizations or events to determine activities and interrelationships.
- Assist in the analysis and evaluation of intelligence holdings to determine changes in enemy capabilities, and vulnerabilities.
- Brief information and products to staff and customers in the form of presentations or formal reports.
- Assemble/proofread intelligence reports and assist in consolidating them into military intelligence.
- Develop relationships with multiple customers/organizations to understand their intelligence requirements.
- Developing expertise in a specific region.
- Interact and develop relationships with customers/organizations to get further information in piecing together the “bigger” picture as well as understanding their intelligence requirements.
- Coordinate with Joint Service, military service components, and national level intelligence agencies on issues affecting the USARPAC Force Protection and Homeland defense.
- Collect, write, and prepare all-source presentations, and documents for daily support of the United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) Army's Chief Intelligence Officer (G2).
- Operate systems such as NIPR, SIPR, and JWICS as well as programs to include, M3, TAC, DIB, Query Tree, and all Office programs.

If you asked any other soldier what our job was, their answer would be “Power-Point ranger” and the weatherman.

It was in this period of time that I witnessed how shitty and unethical some soldiers can be. I realized that while less than one percent of the American population enlists to one of the

five military services, immoral and evil people sometimes slip through the cracks of the recruitment process. The “go to war or go to jail” is still in effect and gets granted by judges across the country. The soldier in my company that avoided jail sold guns illegally and they were found in a crime scene. Not much else was said of the matter. Many soldiers cheated on their significant others simply because they were not around. I found it disgusting and repulsive. Spouses had to go through a long procedure to enter the military base so it was not difficult for soldiers to fool around with each other and get away with it. Sex was not prohibited by any means but the women that wanted to have sex with me were not appealing because I knew their track records. Nothing turned me off more than knowing of their multiple partners from the company. I felt the discipline and Army values (especially honor and integrity) that were learned in basic training go out the window the second my fellow soldiers got a little freedom. We were confined to a fifty-mile radius of Fort Huachuca and in my opinion, that was way more privilege than soldiers in training needed. Maybe I thought this way because I had an oppressive home life. There was just no self-control. Some female soldiers got pregnant during this training and were discharged immediately with no benefits. One soldier smoked bath-salts, grabbed a porno magazine, and harassed female soldiers into performing the sexual acts in that magazine. When a women refused, he punched them in the face. He punched 3 more female soldiers before military police came and detained him. The ability to go off base to Sierra Vista allowed easy access to the new synthetic drugs. The weekends enabled a soldier to leave Saturday so long as they made it to the 6:00 a.m. formation time on Monday morning.

I don't know why I didn't take advantage of getting laid and pursued losing my virginity while I was in intelligence training. I was fine with using my right hand whenever I had my barracks room to myself. There was one girl during this whole madness that made everything a

little better. She was a decent opportunity to have sex that I didn't take. Her first name was Dakota. All I ever considered her was a friend. She was in the graduating class two months ahead of me (the class I would have been in had I not gotten pneumonia). She was the best company I had during the whole training because we studied together and even went to church every Sunday. I knew she was going to be an excellent soldier. We got along perfectly but romance was off the table for me because of the very likely possibility that we would get stationed in different places (which did happen). She was very forward and made it quite clear that she wanted a more serious relationship with me but I acted like I was oblivious to what she meant. She would have taken my virginity had I given her the chance but I did not want her to feel used when we went our separate ways. Had I known that this would have been my last opportunity to get laid before getting sent to war, I might have taken it. I just didn't feel pressured to get my virginity out of the way with something that wouldn't last. In a way, I wanted it to be special, meaningful, and long-lasting. Little by little, she got closer to me and grabbed my hand while I wasn't looking one time. When she asked for a kiss, I pecked her on the cheek. She pleaded for me to sleep with her on last weekend before her graduation but I just ignored her and locked myself in my room. Women weren't allowed upstairs so that kept her from coming to my door. She texted "Let's hang" and "Please don't let me leave like this." Sometimes I regret the fact that I completely left her alone and question why I didn't have sex with her before I left. At the time, I felt like doing her would be like taking advantage of her and the situation. She got stationed in Hawaii and I got stationed in Washington. There was no way we would have made it work but I sure did miss her when she left. She probably just wanted a perfectly normal sexual outlet, but I was not ready for that. A one-night stand didn't sit well with me at the time. One could call me a prude.

All I could do was pray that when I got to my duty station, everything would get better and I would see more good rather than bad soldiers around me. It was time to put my training to the test.

CHAPTER VII

FORT LEWIS NOVEMBER 2011-APRIL 19, 2012: ARRIVING AT MY OFFICIAL DUTY STATION

The army has a sick sense of humor when it comes to holidays. My orders told me that I would arrive on Fort Lewis right on Thanksgiving Day. There wasn't much to be thankful for besides the fact that I made it safe to Washington state. It was too late to get any turkey but at least I had my barracks room in a combat infantry unit. The barracks room met the bare necessities. I had ninety square feet to myself that came with wooden furniture that consisted of a desk, a chair, a TV stand, and a spring mattress. The common area had another ninety square feet that provided a stackable washer/dryer, a shared bathroom, a vanity, a fridge, and a stove with shelves on top.

I shared the area with Sergeant Skibby, the battalion chaplain assistant. He was a white man with an average build/height and dark brown hair. All I managed to say was "Happy Thanksgiving" before he waved and shut his door. Maybe he was looking forward to spending the whole three-day weekend by himself and I messed it up. Skibby was an awkward fellow that kept to himself and avoided any type of social interaction with me. The one thing that I admired was how organized he was. Nothing was out of place, especially in the food cabinet area. I planned to keep it that way. I believe he had too much of an ego after being in the Army for six years. He hadn't deployed yet, so I couldn't understand why he had so much pride. We talked only to identify who cleaned what on the common area and whose turn it was to buy toilet paper.

Washington state was like nothing I had ever seen before. The evergreen state sure had a significant amount of trees that dropped a variety of pine cones all around the area. They were all Christmas tree worthy, standing an average of seventy feet tall. Rain was the biggest factor of why the trees were gigantic. It wouldn't stop raining at a temperature of 32 degrees Fahrenheit. I wasn't ready for that type of cold, neither mentally nor physically. I hadn't experienced such freezing temperatures. If it stopped raining, it would only be for a few minutes before clouds formed to provide another downpour. It was incredible feeling to undergo a new climate I had only seen in movies/TV like "Sleepless in Seattle" (1993) and "Grey's Anatomy."

In my mind, I couldn't have placed myself in better place to fit my career needs, ambitions, and goals. I wanted to prove myself as one of the infantrymen. I wanted to get into patrols and firefights, and I definitely wanted to come out of my shell. I wanted to do things right and exemplify that I was a worthy soldier. But more than anything, I wanted to learn ways to improve myself while being productive.

It was very unexpected yet satisfying that I got ordered to an infantry battalion after I finished my intelligence training because that is what I wanted to be (an infantryman) to begin with. I might as well have been infantry except that I wasn't. I didn't get the infantry training. Intelligence training and preparing Power-Points are nothing compared to the intensive infantry training that included "clearing" a room, how to shoot a mortar round, advanced movement maneuvers, driving Strykers/MRAPs, and how to react in combat. Upon infantry school graduation, a blue cord is given for the Army soldier to wear on their left side of the dress uniform. In infantry school, the constant question asked by the drill instructors is "Why is the sky blue?" The answer the formation gave was "Because god loves the infantry!" Not having the blue cord in my uniform meant that I was not taken seriously. I was what they called a POG

(person other than grunt). Either way, I was happy to be attached to an infantry battalion in Fort Lewis because that meant that I was guaranteed to see some combat. It was now or never.

I didn't have much time from the point that I got to 4-23 Infantry battalion in Washington to mentally prepare myself for the fact that I was going to war. My squad leader visited me at my barracks room the same evening I got it assigned. He told me that I better prepare myself mentally for Afghanistan sometime in the spring. I told him "Holy Fuck! That was quick. At least buy me some dinner first." At the end of the day, I asked for it and joined for this exact scenario. It wasn't just about getting away from south Texas. It was about getting some worthwhile action while serving my country. My patriotism and naivety at the time was off the charts and I sincerely believed I could make a difference in the lives of the Afghans while taking down the "bad guys."

I was allocated in the s2 section of the infantry battalion, which meant that I would learn how to get infantrymen their corresponding security clearances and later take charge of misconduct paperwork to process soldiers out of the military. They did not bother to teach me much because they assumed I would forget by the time we returned from Afghanistan. Although I was introduced to my section, I did not get to know the team members all that well before we got split up into different companies.

A month later, it was time to take some leave and say goodbye to my family members. My mother, father, sister, and neighbors appreciated having my company in Christmas 2011. They thought that it could be the last time they would see me alive but I promised them that everything would be all right. I struggled to believe that myself. I was completely oblivious to what I was getting into and very nervous, but I pretended to be strong about the whole situation. I had made peace with myself and the idea that I might not be coming back from my upcoming

deployment and that dangerous country. I always remembered the war stories the drill sergeants told me in basic training. They knew many of us would go to war despite the downsizing of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I didn't do much while I was waiting around for the deployment to come around when I returned to Fort Lewis in mid-January 2012. The battalion commander wanted for everyone to enjoy the time that was left with friends and family before deploying. Unfortunately, I did not have any of them nearby. I finally realized why many consider moving to a new city to be one of the most difficult things to adjust to. My lifestyle turned into a boring routine of going to eat in the cafeteria, playing video games, and sleeping excessive amounts of time. Much of this time period is a blur because of this routine.

Once the deployment was over, a new challenge awaited me: readjustment. I can't express how surreal it feels to be in a warzone one week and being in a "safe" environment the next. There is no such thing as a cool-down period or a smooth transition. The military is designed this way because there is always a new "task, condition, and standard" to be upheld. There is always another mission that is assigned to the battalion or company that has to be accomplished by a certain deadline. The mission is always changing and varies by section. Afghanistan was the "completed" mission. I don't know if there is a perfect way to transition back to the states but too fast too soon was not effective.

CHAPTER VIII

JANUARY 7, 2013 THE FIRST DAY BACK

After the continuous small arms fire, the anxiety of stepping on an IEDs, the trauma, the underage drinking in Kyrgyzstan, and the 18 plus airplane ride “home,” the irony is that I didn’t want to come back to the states. In the eyes of our battalion commander, once a soldier deploys to a hostile area of war, they are officially allowed to drink without any consequences. He believed that it was the least he could do for the shit we had been through. A 9-month deployment was not enough for me. I would have appreciated an extension. While losing my virginity was a huge priority, I knew that a desk job was going to be waiting for me when I rejoined the other analysts. Deployments in my opinion is where one is allowed to be a real soldier and not just a clerk. When I enlisted, I imagined that there would be more wartime job experience than stateside job duties. All the training, both intelligence and combat related were going to be tossed out. I was never going to use those skills again. My purpose as an analyst and infantryman was gone.

There was applause from the soldiers once the pilot of our covert plane announced that we were finally in American airspace. I was not clapping. I was grieving at the thought of going back to Fort Lewis, Washington. I could already feel that my comrades were disappearing as we were heading back. Getting paid to not die and getting paid to kill was good enough for me and I would have not minded finishing out the rest of my contract in Afghanistan rather than stateside.

I don't blame those Army soldiers that transfer to a unit that is about to deploy so they can hop on a plane to go back. It is as if a piece of me was left behind. I now understood those soldiers that do three or four deployments until they felt get self-fulfillment. There are soldiers (specifically special forces or rangers in the Army) that deploy every six months and relax for the other six and they love that lifestyle. Those that are not elite soldiers but still want to get re-deployed typically put in for a transfer for a unit that is about to head out. Some will even move their whole family to the new unit just to leave all over again. It blew my mind because as a single soldier, I would have been happy to deploy again. Being married however, not so much.

The plane landed on the Evergreen state. The infantrymen and I got a handshake from the battalion and division commanders for what they called a job well done. Our M4 magazines were already empty but our rifles were still in our possession. I gave my weapon one last cleaning before saying farewell to it forever. Although the serial number of my rifle was memorized, I failed to ever find it again in my company arms room.

The infantrymen and I got on a bus after turning in our rifles to our welcome back ceremony on base. At the JBLM (Joint Base Lewis McCord) gym, there is a huge curtain that blocked the sight of many families as we lined up by company. I was in Headquarters company right in the middle while Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie companies were to the left, right, and behind us. Once aligned and organized, the curtain drops and mothers, sons, daughters, and grandparents cheer at the sight of their loved ones. No one was there to cheer for me. It sucked. Our Command Sergeant Major gave a speech describing the impact we had in Afghanistan. The speech was the same unoriginal speech given at the end of every deployment. There was nothing new said. It was not heartfelt and at least the soldiers knew it. I believe the families like to hear the speech so that they won't consider the deployment as lost time. He then released the soldiers to hug and

greet their family members. It's as if everything was in slow motion. I felt time frozen for a while as I witnessed almost every soldier around me embrace a friend or family member. Mom was working as a home-bound special needs teacher while my father was in the middle of nowhere, Oklahoma working as a pipe-liner. Despite me knowing these details, my heart still wanted and expected them to be there. Reality was harsh and my life wasn't a Hallmark or Disney movie where the important people of my life were going to magically appear.

Soon after the ceremony and reunion, soldiers and their families headed to their cars and drove home. The bag full of uniforms and toiletries I packed from Afghanistan were brought over in an LMTV (Light Medium Tactical Vehicle). My civilian clothes, television, and video games (pretty much all I had) were in a warehouse for another month. All I had was what I went to Kandahar with. I went to my new barracks room that had the usual kitchen, washer/dryer that I shared with another soldier and a private room with a cheap mattress. My cellphone was disconnected for obvious reasons. My only form of entertainment was a nearby Rec Center called "The Warrior Zone," where a computer lab with webcams was available (but only for active duty soldiers and their families). Getting onto base is a privilege that even veterans don't have after they are out of the military. Working out was the only thing that kept me going in Afghanistan and the only thing that I had to do when getting back from a combat patrol so I found comfort in going there constantly. I had a decent amount of savings (because there is nothing to spend money on when one is in the middle of a desert) but was not ready to buy a car yet because the base only had shady dealerships. I must address however that there are some soldiers in Afghanistan that actually do have the ability to spend money in a war setting because they are put in a huge base that is heavily secured. It always bothered me that soldiers of my same rank as me were getting the same "hazard pay" while in a safe environment. They dined in

actual restaurants while I was in SP Demaiwand. It was frustrating because every soldier gets that extra pay without an evaluation of how much their lives are being put at risk. I have more respect for those deployed soldiers that were also in danger. Now I was stuck on Fort Lewis with no friends and no way to travel. I hadn't even seen or explored Washington in the slightest.

CHAPTER IX

JANUARY 8-MARCH 13, 2013 PASSING TIME BEFORE POST-DEPLOYMENT LEAVE

What surprised me the most was the sense of abandonment I felt from the men I deployed with. Apparently it is all too common but I didn't know it at the time. Many veterans have told me of the same experience. The company of those they considered dear and lifetime friends tended to just stick to their own. I couldn't even reach them with a phone call to see how they were doing. The first few months when a soldier returns from a deployment are free for soldiers to do whatever they want. I was back at the office as expected. I was generally briefed that I would be in charge of misconduct documentation. I would get more specific instructions when I got back from leave. I reported only to my squad leader Staff Sergeant Harold. The intelligence job was over. Paperwork was my kingdom now. In the meantime, everyone in the intelligence section of battalion would waste time on their smart phones until it was time to go. The battalion commander ordered that soldiers show up in the morning and then get released for the rest of the day to be with their families. I thought that I was going to have the company of the soldiers that I spent nine months with. Instead I was alone. I couldn't entirely blame the married soldiers for wanting to be with their wives but not even the single soldiers seemed to care about me. Everyone in Afghanistan said they were going to take me out to town and show me a good time and help me lose my virginity. Now they were nowhere to be seen.

The only small-talk interaction that I had with a few the infantrymen that I deployed with was in the battalion building or the barracks. I saw SGT Brown not too long after we got back in the barracks building pulling 24-hour duty. He told me his wife was more than happy that he was back. She helped pack the gunshot wound until it closed. The 7.62x39mm round that entered his thigh never came out. They told him that removing it would also require removing a huge amount of his muscle mass. It could take decades before the bullet comes out naturally so he got a tattoo of crosshairs on the entry wound scar. It would only mean something to the soldiers that were in Demaiwand. Last I heard from him, it still was not even close to coming out.

Specialist Francis told me of his divorce when he came over to apply for his secret clearance at the battalion building. He told me that he was in a shitty situation after he returned because he couldn't find any of his possessions in the house he rented out with his ex-wife. "It wouldn't surprise me if she sold everything I had after I cut her off," he said with a frown. When I asked him where he was living now, he said that the first sergeant approved for him to get a barracks room while he transitioned out of the Army.

In February, I caught a glimpse of Specialist Bash while he was getting some printer paper from the supply s4 section. I gave him a wave before I asked him what he had been up to. He excitedly shared "I haven't stopped going from one doctor's appointment to another because I got another baby on the way." "Holy shit! You didn't waste any time. Congratulations," I reacted. It wasn't long before he informed me that it was a girl. He reenlisted to get stationed in Fort Bragg, organizing with the retention officer so he wouldn't have to leave until his daughter was born. His career ambitions involved him getting airborne certified so that he could jump out of planes for a living. He was fond of the east coast as well so it worked out for him.

Being in the infantry really taught me how incredible some men can be in war and how military masculinity gets enforced. Those that survive war come back with an immense ego and a sense of invincibility/immortality. It wasn't even two weeks after the deployment was over that a soldier literally crashed and burned from going over 100 mph. I had that idea too that nothing could hurt me just because I had survived Afghanistan. Some return with a hateful attitude towards the world. I was filled with rage and survivors' guilt. The death I had seen during my tour left me emotionally numb and introverted. I was enraged at the fact that civilians around me would complain about how "difficult" their petty lives were. All I could think about was the lousy conditions I lived in SPDemaiwand and how they had no idea. It was my personal choice to enlist but I felt that everyone could use a humbling third world country experience. I wished everyone would experience Afghanistan, even if it is just a week to get an in depth feeling of what soldiers go through and realize that life could always be worse. Out of the nine months I was deployed, I didn't shower for about five of those months. The first hot shower after that stung my body but also relieved it.

I took a taxi to a nearby shopping center to buy new sheets and pillows when I overheard one girl whine about cracking her smart phone screen. I heard another man complain that there wasn't any wireless internet inside the store. I heard a teenager crying because his mom wouldn't buy him an Xbox. The one that bothered me the most was the cranky lady complaining about a ten-minute wait to get her Starbucks coffee. I just wanted to punch them all in the face for not realizing how good they had it. I calmed down when one of my supervisors told me that everyone is going through their own war. Ours was a literal war but everyone has their daily obstacles and struggles. Life's struggles can be a daily war that one goes through, whether it is

literal, physical/mental, or financial. It took a while for me to get empathetic for civilians. I had to stop my assumptions and judgments that I had the most difficult life imaginable.

When I finally got my T.V. and video games, that is all I ever spent my free time on. There was a surreal feeling of not having to worry about getting shot at every so often. It became difficult to relax. Going to sleep was never going to be the same. It was weird to sleep where no sound was emanating from the room. In Kandahar, the one constant thing that made sound was the generator designed to keep the electricity of the base going. When the machine failed, the base was non-operational. It was the constant sound of the gasoline powered generator running that was a lullaby to the Strongpoint Demaiwand soldiers. Every now and then I would find a video on YouTube of a similar generator and play it on repeat before I could get a nap. Silence was scary. The nightmares that I had were so vivid that it felt like I never left. I hardly dreamt in Afghanistan but now the dreams never stopped. I found it interesting that despite the horrific things I saw during my sleep, I was never actually scared of what was happening. I knew it was fucked up but I didn't fear getting shot at or piles of bloody children all around me. They didn't wake me up. I kept sleeping and then I was a little shocked when I woke up.

Three months passed by pretty quickly and it was time to pack my bags and visit my family back in Rio Grande City, Texas. It astounded me that my battalion took three months to allow us to take an official vacation. Those that had their families on base did not mind this at all because it was relaxing. The time before leave is meant as a relaxation period where work is only until 12 p.m. We did PT, got breakfast, bull-shitted for a few hours and then left around lunchtime without having to come back. I just slept and played videogames to pass time the only way I knew how.

CHAPTER X

MARCH 14-APRIL 11, 2013 COMING BACK TO THE VALLEY

The one constant thing that is always said about the Rio Grande Valley is that everything stays the same. It's like a twilight zone. Those who leave it always find a reason to come back. Sure enough, not enough time had passed for any significant changes to happen to my old friends, family, or the surrounding infrastructure. As I landed at the airport, my mother broke down in tears as she embraced me for the first time in more than a year. "Thank god you're home," she said as her tears fell onto my shoulder. I replied with "I told you I would come back and that there was nothing to worry about." I was later told by my father she didn't know if I would survive and couldn't sleep for more than a few hours a day until she finally heard I was back in Washington. Every day she was watching the news reports and reading online articles desperately and frantically looking for my name in the "soldiers killed in action" sections.

For my parents, it was like I never left and they expected everything to return right back to normal. They thought I had just taken a small break and that I was the exact same person that I was when I left. They thought they could still impose their strict rules and curfew and continue to treat me like a child. My old room was just like I left it. As I was heading out to meet up with some old friends or the gym, my mother said "I still expect you to be back by ten." I was shocked that she actually thought she had power over me. I was borrowing their one of four cars but always made sure that I returned them with a full tank of gas and fully washed. I replied with "If you want me by ten then it is best that I find somewhere else to sleep or get a hotel."

She was shocked by what she called “rebelliousness.” She quickly figured out that I wasn’t bluffing and stated “No, this is your house. Just drive safe and be careful.”

I did not want to spend any time in my parents’ house other than to grab a snack and sleep. I questioned why I even decided to come back to the Valley when I could have spent the time anywhere in the world so long as I paid the airfare. I visited my old high school teachers and professors and told them about my war experiences because they wanted to hear all about it.

I decided to visit the South Texas College gym because it did not make sense for me to invest in a gym membership. I was only going to be in the Valley for a few weeks. As I was walking along the halls, I noticed that I was getting an increased amount of attention from the women all across campus. This new-found attention was caught me off guard but I enjoyed it none the less. I was 195 pounds and very muscular because of the ridiculous amounts of supplements that I was taking in Kandahar. They were free after all.

It was at the STC gym that I first came in contact with Linet. I was instantly attracted to her because she was a tan, short, and slim woman that was running on a treadmill. I was increasing the weight in the chest and bicep machines to impress her. I introduced myself and somehow wooed her without much effort. I assumed it was because of my physical attractiveness at the time. We talked as she waited to be picked up. Before hopping onto her aunt’s car, she gave me a sensual stare. I was then upset with myself because I forgot to catch her name/number before she left.

For the next few days, I could not get Linet out of my mind. I went to the campus gym as much as possible. She never showed up. I finally got the bright idea that she might be on the gym sign in sheet from the day I met her. Sure enough, her full name and ID number were written down. I identified her because she was the only girl that signed in that day. Frantically, I typed

her name on Facebook and sent her a friend request. I figured that if there was any chance in hell that I was going to get laid, it was going to be with her.

Linnet accepted the friend request within the hour. I told her that she was on the gym list and she was impressed by my determination to see her. We introduced each other and I found out that she was from San Isidro. It was no surprise that she did not go to campus constantly. It was a forty-minute drive with no traffic. She was surprised that I was a soldier and even more surprised that I was in Afghanistan a few months before. I was twenty and she was nineteen.

I invited her to the movies but she wanted a more personal date. I told her that we could watch a movie in a private room on campus. All we had to do was reserve the room. She agreed and I downloaded her favorite movie onto my laptop (which was Date Movie). The next day we sat in the private room, watching the movie while talking about ourselves. Linnet was a volleyball player that just graduated high school the year before. She was taking one class every semester because she couldn't get financial aid. Her parents could not produce a proof of income because they were farmers in Mexico. She was not a U.S. citizen, so that made things even harder.

As we were watching the movie, we talked about our relationship history. I told her that I didn't have much of a track record. She told me that although she did sneak out of her house to meet with a high school classmate of hers, first base was as far as she had gotten. I believed her. This news set off a switch inside of her that made her grab my short hair and bring my lips to hers. We kissed for about twenty minutes, ignoring the movie and getting the hots for each other. If we hadn't been in a campus room with cameras all around, nothing would have stopped us.

That night, Linnet and I explained our stories about how we were both virgins. I was waiting for someone special and I had convinced myself that I wasn't going to lose my virginity with a one-night stand. She explained that the guys she went to high school with were

uninteresting and not worth her time. We both agreed that it was about time we got it over with. This way, we wouldn't be able to judge one another because of lack of experience. The plan was to reserve a hotel and get condoms before she got out of class the next day. My last text was "I'm happy that I'm not going to die a virgin after all." She replied, "We definitely won't 😊."

On April 11, 2013, I put the plan into action. I showered and scrubbed my whole body with more soap than usual and shaved everywhere except my legs and arms. I paid extra attention to my pubic area. I already shaved my pubic hair on a regular basis for comfort but this time I was more thorough. I didn't even know what was going to happen so I even shaved my ass. I proceeded to grab the key for the shitty Rio Hotel room (literally the only hotel with a way to hide the red SUV that I borrowed from my parents) and awkwardly bought my first pair of condoms from the gasoline station nearby. Even the young cashier blushed as I pointed at the Trojan ultra-thin condoms with "more pleasure for her." I patiently waited outside of the building she was getting out of class from. When I kept texting her with no reply. I started to think that I had just been played. It seemed too good to be true. She finally stepped out of the campus building and was equally as nervous as I was. We held hands, I opened the passenger door, and I started driving. She stated, "We got five hours before I get picked up." I was thinking there was no way it was going to take that long.

I made the short drive to the Rio Hotel with my knees shaking. I could tell by Linet's face that she was uneasy and anxious as much as I was. I parked the red 2002 GMC Envoy at the back side of the hotel and carried Linet to the room. She was only about 120 pounds. When we arrived at the front door, she said "15 is your lucky number" (room 15) and I countered with "It is our lucky number."

We started undressing slowly. She decided to keep her bra on but did take her panties off. We started kissing sensually for fifteen minutes before I decided to go down on her. I was pleased to see that we had both shaven the night before. I had seen enough porn in my teenage years to know that going slowly was important when engaging in oral sex. I was already rock hard as we fumbled to learn how to put on the condom correctly. As I slowly went inside her, her pained face was apparent. She told me later that it wasn't until fifteen minutes later that it actually became pleasurable. Once I started going in and out of her, she got wetter and I was able to go faster. I was mind-blown at how good it felt. We did every position that we could think of. I had to force myself to cum because the condom wasn't too comfortable. Either way, we tore our bodies apart. I had to put on her makeup to hide the "hickies" on my neck and deep scratches on my back.

I was surprised that I didn't finish within five minutes. It took us three hours! Three hours is how long we lasted. I never lasted that long ever again. She could hardly believe that I was a virgin. We could have watched the entire movie of Titanic (1999). We cuddled for fifteen more minutes and showered together before we looked at the clock. "Fuck! We got to drop you back off!" I yelled. Talk about a buzzkill. I sped back to campus and made it just in time to see her aunt waiting for her. She waved goodbye and I was still in shock. I firmly believe that the day that anybody loses their virginity is not going to be very productive. I'm glad I didn't have to do anything important like sign documents or take an exam. I tried working out afterwards but it was a lost cause. My body was limp with exhaustion already. I decided to go back to my parents and lay down, thinking about how great sex truly was and how perfect everything had gone.

I could have just walked away and ignored Linet. It's not like she was going to follow me back to Washington. I couldn't live with myself if I had. It wasn't that simple. I was in love

almost instantly and I couldn't forget this woman even if I tried. She even thought that I was going to ignore her because I had "gotten what I wanted." Looking back, maybe this is exactly what I should have done. I texted her and asked if she would wait for me. She replied "As long as it takes." My long-distance relationship had officially started.

I spent the rest of my leave with my parents and invited them to take a trip to Corpus Christi to look at the State Aquarium and the Lexington Museum. We had a decent time and it was more enjoyable than I expected. We talked a lot and I told them about my war experience (as much as they could stomach). It was somewhat enjoyable to go out to Corpus because I enjoy museums in general but I pushed the idea of the trip with the guilty feeling that I owed them some quality time. It wasn't long before I hopped back on a plane to Fort Lewis.

CHAPTER XI

MARCH 24, 2013-DECEMBER 13, 2013 GETTING TO WORK IN FORT LEWIS

The second I got back to Fort Lewis, I realized that if I was going to retain my sanity, I needed to get a car and get out of the base. I was lucky enough to get someone to take me to a used car dealership near Seattle. I ended up getting a 2007 Chevy Trailblazer because I was used to SUVs already and I needed the versatility. With this vehicle, I traveled and did as much as I could to get an adrenaline rush in my spare time. I ended up snowboarding/skiing with other soldiers and barely avoided an avalanche. I bungee jumped off a bridge. I dove out of the sky on a parachute. I go-karted for miles on an abandoned track. I drove a sports car at 220 miles an hour on a closed track. I went mountain biking on muddy terrain. The craving for adrenaline was addicting to say the least. Although I have never used a single drug or narcotic, I could only describe myself at the time as an adrenaline junkie. I did everything that could possibly put me in danger because I could not get close to the feeling of being shot at. I figured that if I wanted to live a long enough life, it was best that I stopped this foolishness.

Once I heard about soldiers I deployed with getting seriously hurt from some of the things that I was doing, I realized that I should tune down the adrenaline filled activities. I figured that I am not Superman and should not take my mortality for granted. I then decided to do the simple things like go to the zoo/aquariums of Washington and museums. I visited the Seattle Zoo and the Tacoma Point Defiance Zoo.

I visited the Museum of glass, the Lemay Museum of vintage cars, The EMP museum of Seattle, the famous gum wall, and even the first Starbucks. This whole time, I was just wishing that Linet was by my side.

Once leave was over, soldiers are expected to get back to the discipline that the active duty Army entails. There is no need to think. Leadership is there to do it for you. If the Army wants a soldier to have anything, they will issue it and make him/her sign paperwork stating financial obligation if the item is lost. Haircuts were a mandatory high and tight. No facial hair was allowed either. All uniforms must be well kept and the same color. If either the uniform blouse or pants were faded more than the other, they had to be replaced. The work schedule had me wake up at 5:30 a.m. to make it to the P.T. formation area by 6 o' clock so my section could be exercising by 6:30. PT was done by 8 o' clock, so we could be in the office by 9:30. I had to ask permission to lunch at 11:30 and return by 1 p.m. I continued to work up until 5:00 p.m. I was then released so long as I made it back early to P.T. the next morning. Every Friday, we would have a formation at the end of the day for the first sergeant and commander to tell the company soldiers not to be stupid over the weekend. I was not allowed to get out of a fifty-mile radius of Fort Lewis. If I was late to any of these specific time periods or formation times, I would get written up. If I wasn't fifteen minutes early, I was late. We supposedly had "our time" at the end of the day and weekends, but it never felt like I was actually free to do as I wanted. I sometimes woke up on my time off and weekends thinking that I was going to be late to work or formation. It felt like a never ending cycle but made months pass by quickly.

My primary job as a soldier was to be in shape and pass the APFT (Army Physical Fitness Test). I can still pass that test today but not the body fat standards. It was next to impossible not to stay fit in 4-23 Infantry. Running seven miles every morning was a

requirement by the new battalion commander. I always had a huge appetite and I was grateful that I was not gaining any weight but the runs were also taking their toll. I kept asking why in the world we were doing mini marathons if there was hardly any running involved in a war environment. When the Expert Infantry Badge competition went underway, the battalion commander did his best to replicate the weight carried in Afghanistan by making all soldiers, infantry or not, participate on a twelve-mile ruck march with at least eighty pounds inside a ruck sack. My body constantly reminded me of the damage made by overloading weight. My feet, back, and neck pains were chronic at this point in time but I still refused to see any healthcare provider to complain about this. I kept telling myself that if no one else was going to sick-call, then I shouldn't either. There is no denying that the Mexican American and military masculinity standards were deeply affecting this decision. All I ever did was buy myself some ibuprofen to ease the pain enough to sleep the little amounts that I could.

The infantrymen culture was not lenient nor kind to those that went to sick-call. Anyone that went to the medical bay on base was harassed as soon as they returned to their proper section. The constant criticism that I heard was "You just went to sick-call to avoid PT, you piece of shit" or "There is nothing wrong with you. You are just being a malingering soldier." This made going to get checked (physically or mentally) seem like a taboo. This mindset affects me even today. I continue to feel like describing this pain and suffering is wrong. In my graduate studies, I came across a book by Erin P. Finley, a medical anthropologist and investigator of Veteran evidence based research. He states that multitudes of service members experience stigma in receiving health care. "59 percent" of the service members he interviewed stated that they would feel "weak" if they reported health concerns. "49 percent" were concerned that their fellow soldiers would lose "confidence in them." "46 percent" dreaded that their leaders would

put the blame on them for “having a problem. (Finley 103)” It is not surprising that I was not alone in this dilemma.

When Dr. Finley interviewed fifty veterans of the OEF/OIF conflicts, he figured out that officers (commissioned or non-commissioned) train their soldiers to be “impervious to pain. (Finley 108)” The following comments were made by their superiors: “It’s just a couple of ribs, you’ll get over it,” or “Just ignore it. It’ll go away,” and even “You better be bleeding or your bone better be sticking out before you quit on me.” I personally had an experience like this when I was running slower than the rest of the group in one of the mini-marathons we consistently endured. I was asked by a superior officer if I was “hurt or wounded” in mile number five. I responded with “Just hurting.” He then replied “Then you better push it if you don’t want to run an extra five miles.” One time when it was 32 degrees Fahrenheit and pouring raining, a senior NCO made everyone downgrade the PT uniform to a t-shirt and shorts while he screamed “Is that all you got rain gods?!” What I learned from this minimization of physical issues is that they are part of U.S. Army culture. The military is slowly getting more reasonable and kinder to it’s soldiers. I can only hope that as time passes, more sympathy comes with it. Showing weakness might as well be a death sentence because only the strong and enduring are put on a pedestal. At least one doesn’t get punched on the stomach anymore.

My secondary duty was a desk job that involved processing paperwork that punishes soldiers in the Army or chapters them out of it. Sometimes I took them to court and witnessed the whole hearing that booted them out of the military or put them in jail. Why this job or position was assigned to me, I do not know. Some aspects of the military (especially the discipline) are parts that I enjoyed. On the other hand, secondary jobs that were given to me were demoralizing that I sometimes resent it. I also do not know why I was so good at my secondary

job. This obviously did not put me in a position of making friends. Literally when a soldier did something stupid, I was the first one to know. While I was doing my job, I was making enemies of the soldiers that I was in charge of processing out and their friends. Whenever my name was heard or I entered someone's office, I was the bearer of bad news. I was rarely thanked whenever a misbehaving or disrespectful soldier was removed from our ranks with my assistance. Some people simply do not belong in the military and I was in charge of making sure that they quickly and efficiently saw their way out of it. I unfortunately saw no gratitude from it. Because I was making enemies left and right, I sometimes felt that I had to watch my back for these soldiers. I was worried they might have grudges and take it out on me because I was assigned a job I did not want to do. I did not want them to "shoot the messenger" because at the end of the day, I was just the middleman on their way out of the Army. I always had my fingers crossed that I would never see them again in my life. Even now, veterans come up to me saying they recognize me from either basic training, intelligence training, or Fort Lewis and I am always hoping that they have good memories of me. I typically do not recognize them but I still ask them how they are dealing with civilian life and if all is going well.

Before Army soldiers are officially kicked out, their time and money is taken away by the dreaded Article 15. Only the commanders of a soldier have the ability to implement punishment. It is a soldier's worst nightmare because it hinders career progression and promotions. The most basic punishment was extra duty while the most extensive punishment could be jail time.

The typical soldier that wanted out of the Army ingested something to come out in the urine test on purpose. It was clear that a deployment was not coming anytime soon. This motivated many soldiers to get out of the Army by smoking weed, bath salts, meth, or ingesting oxycodone pills. I found them to be weak and pathetic to not be able to finish four years

honorably, whether or not their choice to get out was deliberate. I can honestly say that the “drug talk” from my childhood could have played into my harshness towards these soldiers. I still have the preconceived idea that nothing good comes out of drugs and the harsher the punishment for illegal consumption, the better. I felt that they too should have gotten the drug talk at a younger age. What they didn’t realize is that every employer in their future was going to asking why they got a general instead of an honorable discharge. It was frustrating to deal with the idea of being nowhere other than Fort Lewis for next three years. So many infantrymen came from individual training ready to see some combat only to realize they would finish their contract with no deployment experience. Some of them literally joined the army to “kill Taliban and blow shit up” (as they put it). They found it difficult to accept that they would only be sweeping floors and shooting at paper targets. One soldier ended up ramming over the motor pool fence and took a tank for a joyride. Many got arrested for multiple DUI charges. I had a forty-year-old First Sergeant trying to sneak in a seventeen-year-old girl in his trunk because he wanted to have sex with her on-base. Another soldier committed first degree murder, killing his ex-wife by smashing her head with a vacuum cleaner after she refused to give him break-up sex. His response when he was detained was “I’m happy that I can finally go to prison so I can get this junk (blood) out of my fingernails.”

The soldiers that I felt did not deserve severe punishment were those that got the occasional traffic ticket for parking on the wrong side of the street, not stopping completely before taking a right, or speeding. Some soldiers got arrested for domestic violence when their wives ended up smashing everything in the house. I still do not understand why the soldier that did not break anything is the one that gets charged with the domestic violence. The only reason that I knew the full details of the police reports were because I could easily access them in any

government computer. It was difficult to stay neutral. Others got kicked out after multiple traffic tickets because they were not on our commander's favorite list. One of the things that I resented from the military is the favoritism involved. I feel strongly inclined that every soldier should make the same effort to get promotions and awards rather than just being handed them. It defies the Army value of honor and integrity. It was worse when the soldier knew that he was the favorite because he would "kiss ass" to make sure he got his way and got promoted or get out of trouble.

Because of the sensitive nature of my job, I had my top-secret clearance access to a detailed database that allowed me to get a soldier's personal information. I could see where they were from, any run-ins with the law, who their family was, and even if their family had any trouble with the law. Sometimes I wished I didn't know the information I was entrusted with. I even knew which soldiers attempted suicide.

I had a job that did not produce any friends nor a good satisfaction of life. The whole time, I was thinking of better things I could be doing with my time like reading literature, advancing my studies, or making civilian friends. The only positive part about the job was that no one bothered me. I was a lone wolf that was able to keep to myself and still do my job well. When I first returned from Kandahar, I disliked being alone. Once I was used to it, it didn't bother me as much. Since the deployment, I grew introverted and my job allowed me to have solitude. I learned that if no one bothered me, then I was doing my job correctly and up to standard. I internally debated doing something stupid to get out of the Army myself because I was not improving (mentally or educationally) in any way. The monotony annoyed me the most. Week after week, I was stuck doing the same thing over and over again. Kicking soldiers out of the Army is not what I signed up for. I understand that someone had to do it, but why did it have

to be me? Why couldn't I be put in a position that made friends instead of driving everyone away from me?

Turning twenty-one on the twenty-first of April was not a good thing. I kept drinking heavily during my work schedule and somehow did not get caught. I was bitter at my leadership and kept talking back to my superiors. I surprisingly never got into trouble. I struggled to respect my superiors but my squad leader the most. Staff Sergeant Harold kept running his mouth about how much more money he made than lower enlisted, how nice his apartment was, and his BMW coupe. The story he shared that made me lose all respect for him was about a girl he impregnated while stationed in Germany. "I told her that I would pay for half of the abortion but I didn't pay a damn thing," he said while chuckling. I daringly told him "I would go back in time and pay for your mother to abort you, motherfucker." I regretted the words as they were coming out of my mouth but SSG Harold just laughed at my comment. I let out a huge sigh and was thankful that he didn't take my remark personal.

I had a sense of superiority because I did my job well and no one could do it as good as I could. The paperwork that I processed should have allowed a soldier to get removed from the army within six months. I would get them out within four. I felt like I was not making a difference and instead wasting my time in the military. It is at this time that I questioned whether I wanted to be in the Army at all. At the same time, I decided to start reading and preparing for my transition out of the military. I bought and started reading *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* in my spare time. I figured it couldn't hurt and sure enough, there were poems that stood the test of time. In the poem: "I Sit and I Sew," the narrator depicts how useless she feels to just sit down and sew, even if it is particularly for soldiers in the war. She was reflecting her frustration with the government's reception of women contributing to the

efforts of World War I. Feeling the lack of importance and futile efforts of sewing decreased her motivation to meet the task at hand. I compared myself to her. I found it very difficult to get motivated for my job considering that the soldiers misbehaving would never stop coming. I went from an idealized sense of how disciplined and honorable the military lifestyle was to disappointment and lack of faith of the institution because of the criminality I witnessed. I had no idea I was going to be stuck doing this depressing work. It was very difficult to maintain excitement and have the initiative to do my best with when there is no sign of progression in the future.

The narrator of “I sit and I sew” understands that even though the tedious condition of the sewing feels hopeless and uninteresting, there is still a purpose for what she does and has a huge impact in the bigger picture. Even though the narrator was not being recognized for all her contribution that she provided for the war, I am sure that the soldiers in the battlefield were grateful for the garments and blankets that she was making. I later calmed myself by realizing that although the jobs that we hold might be unappreciated at times, we all in some way make things better with the little contributions that we do. We all might not get recognized or get a medal for what we accomplish, but the small impact that we have in the world is important.

CHAPTER XII

MY ONE ARMY FRIEND

The one soldier that made things a little bit better in Fort Lewis was Specialist Thomas. Thomas was a skinny thirty-year-old that could eat a whole pizza and not gain a pound. He had a bald spot on the top of his head and had wrinkles of experience all over his face. He outran most of the company soldiers, completing his two-mile run time in less than twelve minutes. His home state was Georgia but he completed his bachelors' degree in psychology while in Germany. Once he accumulated a crippling amount of student debt and personal loans, he decided to join the Army to get his loans paid for. Because of the student loan payments from the Army, he would not get G.I. Bill benefits when he completed his military service. I don't remember how our relationship got started but we ended up eating out and watching movies together all the time.

Thomas had the assigned job of keeping our section armored vehicle in good condition for training purposes. When the monotony and misery of our job drove us crazy, our typical spot was a Red Robin in Lakewood, Washington. Thomas was the only person I could talk to and vent. I would express "Fuck man, it's always the same old shit. I just want to finish off this contract so I can get my ass to school. I feel like I'm wasting time here. Kicking soldiers out of the Army is eating away at my soul." Thomas would reply with "I feel you man. I am saving up as much as I can because I am in love with Germany. I was there for about six years studying psychology and was biding my time. I wanted to stay there forever. I don't know if it is realistic to just get out of the Army and reside there.

I'm probably going to end up reenlisting to get stationed there." He took me to my first baseball game and we explored a lot of restaurants in Washington together. A few times, we were confused for a gay couple. We could have cared less of what others thought of us.

The whole time, I relayed my thoughts and my concerns to Linet. She was there to comfort me when I wanted to give up and leave just to be by her side. I was convinced that if we could get through this difficult time, everything would be okay. She was my moral support. I couldn't wait for Christmas leave. I did my job as best as I could to make time fly.

CHAPTER XIII

DECEMBER 14, 2013-JANUARY 3, 2014: CHRISTMAS/NEW YEAR'S LEAVE

It was Christmas time and I was excited to get back to Linet. I flew back from Seattle to McAllen, Texas and spent a little bit of time with my family. As much as I was happy to see them, I couldn't get Linet out of my head. I hadn't seen her in seven months. I quickly got tired of my parents because yet again, they tried to treat me like a child and thought I was going to tolerate it. "You shouldn't leave. You came here to spend time with your family so I forbid you to see your little girlfriend," my mother commanded. I told her "If you want me to spend any time with you at all, then I suggest you let me decide where I want to spend my time. Treat me like an adult for once and let me make my own fucking decisions." She then said "Fine. Do whatever you want but realize that we are the ones that really care about you." They weren't very happy that I decided to leave anyway to be with Linet.

I quickly jumped in one of my parents' SUV to head over to Linet's house. She texted me that they were going to have a weekend barbeque/dance party. I had my long sleeve button up shirt, black cowboy pants, and shiny leather boots. When I got there, everyone was dancing. I was overjoyed to see Linet. I grabbed her and we danced to music that consisted of cumbias, merengue, reggeton, and huapangos. When the dance was over, we decided to play "Loteria" until we could barely keep our eyes open. It was already three a.m.

Linnet's family invited me to stay the night in the living room sofa because it was a long drive back to Rio Grande City. I kissed her goodnight and start dozing off as soon as she headed to her room. She came back after twenty minutes and kissed me intimately. We had quiet passionate sex in the couch without bothering to put a condom on. We had to keep our moans to a whisper because the whole family would crucify me if they woke up and found us. Her little cousin was sleeping in the sofa adjacent to ours and didn't stop snoring the entire time. We were exhausted and she was laying on me after we both had a pleasant orgasm.

Linnet proceeds to tell me "I haven't been completely honest with you." When I asked what she meant, she replied with "I have been seeing a guy and fooled around with him a few times, but it meant nothing. You are the one I really care about. Please forgive me." I told her "Get the fuck off of me! I'm not interested in anything you have to say or your lousy excuses. Let me get some fucking sleep and we will talk about this in the morning." I felt enraged and wanted to scream at her but didn't want to wake up the rest of her family. It wasn't fair to them. I assume that she expected me to be in a better mood just because we had sex. It didn't help her case. I had no sympathy for her. She headed over to her room and despite my complete exhaustion, I laid awake for another hour before dozing off. I wanted to leave but didn't want to crash for falling asleep at the wheel.

I woke up the next morning and realized that I was still at Linnet's house. I had the complete intention of leaving as soon as possible. Her mother refused to let me leave until I at least had one of her ham and egg tacos she prepared. I stuck around because there is nothing more insulting to a Hispanic mother than to reject her food. I pretended that nothing was wrong and shook hands with everyone before I departed. In private, I gave Linnet the most meaningless hug I had given anyone in my whole life. She however gave me a genuine one. I hastily told her,

“We are done. Don’t bother to contact me ever again.” For some reason, she had a confused look on her face. I gave a fake smile and waved to everyone as I left.

I blocked Linet’s number but she kept using different phones to text/call me in order to “work things out.” In my mind, there was no going back. Her family kept asking for me six months afterwards wondering what ever happened to me. The worst part of it all is that I had a ring in my pocket that I was going to present to her as soon as I got her father’s blessing. This may seem unreasonable because we were in a long distance relationship, but we talked almost every night. I thought she was the woman for me as she consoled me throughout my lonely and miserable months. That whole plan went to shit and I was glad that she revealed her infidelity before I got myself involved in something I would regret for the rest of my life. I couldn’t and still can’t stand a cheater. I don’t think I will ever be able to understand what motivates someone to be unfaithful. I still fail to understand the logic behind it. I could only think of how parents had to be away from each other for years at a time when a job opportunity presented itself, especially for my pipe-lining father. I fully believe that my parents were faithful to one another in their time apart so I had the same faith in my relationship, whether I was married or not.

The last time I found Linet on Facebook, she was married to a truck driver who is a chain-smoker/heavy drinker and gave birth to a baby boy. It still blows my mind how different my life could had been had I stayed with her. I imagined that we would have been together in San Isidro (her home town) where I would be a high school teacher and with a child in my arms already. I don’t have intentions of having children so my education goals and ambitions would have likely ended in my undergraduate studies. I saw myself in this situation and in the spot of Linet’s current husband. I did not like it one bit. She was family oriented and might have pressured me to stay in San Isidro. Maybe I’m just being cynical.

I didn't feel that it was my place to explain everything to her family. I drove to the nearest Kays jewelry store to return the ring and move on with my life. I got on a plane to Washington to finish out the eight remaining months on my Army contract. I would not be looking back and still don't regret that decision.

CHAPTER XIV

JANUARY 4, 2014-AUGUST 26, 2014 FINISHING OFF MY ARMY CONTRACT BY BINGE-DATING

When I got back to Fort Lewis, I was greeted by my new roommate: Sergeant Malone. He was a white, attractive twenty-six-year-old that was balding prematurely. He joined the infantry battalion in the middle of the Kandahar deployment but did not get the pleasure of seeing any combat. He was at Sakari Karez during the deployment, behind a computer waiting to drive the colonels and generals from one base to the other.

Sergeant Malone and I got along pretty well. We kept the barracks room clean and didn't bother each other. He just had one vice: strip clubs. The second this guy got one beer in his system, he wanted to throw his whole paycheck at exotic dancers. I was there to make sure that he didn't get into trouble and drive his drunk ass home when he needed me to. In exchange, he would fill up my gas tank (which was pretty fair in my opinion because gas was \$4 a gallon). How this man did not get an STD from having intercourse with strippers on a daily basis is beyond me. Malone would spend at least sixty percent of his whole monthly paycheck on strippers. I am not one to tell anyone how to spend their money but seeing him blow hundreds on women that didn't really care for him made me uneasy.

I was not going to be following Malone's lead. Paying for temporary love from a stripper was not in my plans. I had to do anything and everything to get Linet out of my head. In order to improve my odds of finding the right girl for me, I got every online dating app I could download onto my phone that was free. I figured it was like Craigslist and I was the product that had to be presented with photos and a description. I did what one would call "binge-dating." I figured the only way to get the anger and hatred out of my system was to find someone better suited for me. Considering the multiple success stories among my co-workers about finding "the one" and some actually marrying the person that they met online, I was motivated to give it my best shot. I went on over sixty online dates in the span of seven months. I couldn't possibly remember the details of every last one of them. Many of the dates were unsuccessful because there wasn't a connection or similarity among us. Some women had limited time on their schedules or too much distance between us to continuously see each other. In a few, both the woman and I agreed that the date we had enjoyable date but we didn't see it working long term. We parted as friends. There are many dates that just blend in together in my memory. Then there are dates that I will never forget:

My first online date is one for the record books. I met up with Tania, a ginger looking girl with cute freckles on her cheeks. We headed out to the nearest theatre to watch the newest Nicolas Sparks romantic movie and the date was off to a good start. We both actually enjoyed the movie and talked about the realistic/unrealistic aspects of the plot on our way out of the theatre. We headed out to Red Lobster to talk about our daily lives. She was an accountant for Bank of America, which actually had its perks for getting approved for credit cards and loans. After a lovely dinner of calamari and shrimp Alfredo, we decided to call it a good night. I drove her home and gave her a good night hug/kiss. All of a sudden two boys and a small girl run out

of her house to greet her. I did not expect all three of them to call her mommy. She then told me that her three kids were from different men and hoped that it wouldn't change anything about the lovely night we just had. I told her that it didn't bother me, but it sure did. It was a deal breaker but I just didn't have the guts to tell her in person. I was not ready to transform myself from a single man to a father of three from one day to the next.

Looking for my second potential date, I saw Ashley's profile. She was a short black slender woman with braided hair and a nice bright smile. I sent her my number via the dating website and we started texting. I found Ashley to be pretty funny via the texting conversation and decided to invite her to the nearest Buffalo Wild Wings. As I waited at the front door of the restaurant for her, a woman on the heavy side approached me. I slowly and faintly started to see the similarities between the profile pictures Ashley had put in e-harmony and the woman that stood in front of me. Apparently, the photos that Ashley decided to put in the dating website were from ten years ago. I proceeded with the date because I was starving after not eating all day. I ordered fifteen boned honey barbeque wings and Ashley decided to order the same. As we had a small conversation about our occupations, the waiter brought my wings out first. He said "Here you go sir. Yours will be right out ma'am." I believe that he was an inexperienced waiter because it was the first time that I've seen orders brought separately to a dining table. Ashley, without asking, started devouring my wings and ended up eating eight of them before her fifteen wings were brought. I was and still am astonished by Ashley's lack of manners and discipline, but maintained a straight face. She ate a whole 23 wings and didn't even take the time to enjoy them. I finished off my remaining seven wings and immediately thought of how I was going to make my escape from the restaurant. I figured that I might as well do it in the most typical/common way possible. I left the tab and told Ashley that I had to go to the bathroom to

wash off my hands. I quickly rinsed my hands and crouched my way out the front door and into my car. I screeched my way out of the parking lot and headed to my barracks room, still in disbelief over what I had just gotten myself into. She sent some hateful texts to me on my way home. “You motherfucker! How dare you leave me like this. I waited over a half hour for you to come back. Go to hell!” is as far as I remember. I am not proud of what I did. It was quite cowardly of me. Looking back, I would have paid my fair share and parted in more amicable terms.

I went out with a girl named Alli, an average 5’5” blonde girl from Missouri that was a professional cook that looked way too much like Velma from Scooby Doo. This time, it was me that got my just desserts. We talked all night about our favorite dishes and shared our favorite recipes with each other. I told her that lasagna was my favorite and anyone could poison me if they gave me a free dish. She said that she wouldn’t mind making me a dish next time we met. We were at a Mexican restaurant so we both ordered rib eye tacos. The sunset was approaching and we were still having a pleasant conversation. Alli said that she had to go the ladies room. I didn’t think nothing of it but I start to get worried after she was gone for fifteen minutes. The waiter approaches me and points for me to look outside. I see Alli running off to her car. I chase after her but she had already driven off and was long gone. I curse as I go back to the restaurant, angrily knowing that I will have to cover both of our tabs. I was very confused as to why Alli just left like that. The question that was running through my head was “Is that really the best way to get a free meal?” I only assumed that I deserved that after what I did to Ashley, but couldn’t figure out where I went wrong. I can only assume it was something I said but I can’t figure it out. Maybe she wanted to go to a fancier place. I felt I was part of the cliché of “what goes around

comes around” even though the dates were about a month apart. I was now the victim of being left behind in a restaurant. Desertion was bound to happen to me eventually.

Hannah was physically beautiful so I was wondering what was wrong with her from the second I met her. I figured if a woman was good looking as her was single, then something was seriously wrong. She was the manager of a Five Guys restaurant. She was kind enough to bring me a free burger the whole month we dated. I could have done without the burgers in my diet but couldn't help myself. I would always pick her up from work. I figured out quickly why she wasn't taken. Hannah was living in an apartment with four other people that kept stealing her stuff. She didn't have a mattress and had a cat that pissed all over her blankets constantly. She lost her virginity by being raped by a guy she was going out with. She told me that it ruined sex for her for almost a decade. To top it off, she had to get an abortion from her previous relationship when she realized that she could only conceive a child with a father of a certain blood type. I stayed with her for a month, about every other day because I pitied her more than I liked her. I gave her rides to the grocery store, to and from work, and even helped her sell personal stuff on a flea market for a little extra money. I tried to make her tough times a little less miserable. I was completely astonished when her mother died (while we were dating) because while everyone was giving their condolences, she said “It's ok, she was a bitch anyway.” I didn't push for her to reveal how her parents treated her but can only assume there was trauma involved. The day I stopped visiting her was when she kicked me out of her apartment at three a.m. because she was having an anxiety attack. At this point, I realized it wasn't my job to “save” or help anyone, much less when I was trying to find a serious relationship and save myself.

Monica was a short Mexican American girl that reminded me of a high school classmate. She was brown skinned with black hair, a cute white smile, and had a generous breast size in her

profile picture. She quickly grabbed my attention because I figured it was time I brushed up on my Spanish. I hadn't spoken a word of Spanish since I left the Rio Grande Valley because the Army is not keen of it. Almost every time I spoke Spanish in the military, I was reprimanded because it is not "America's language" and it was forbidden in Afghanistan because of the secret reports I handled. We decided that our date should be at a haunted house because it wasn't going to stick around for much longer. The place was going bankrupt because they were open year-round but only made the majority of their revenue in October. Washington weather really created the perfect spooky environment with the constant rain and clouds everywhere, even in July. We decided to go to a haunted house/maze called "The Thirteen Floors." I sat patiently at the entrance waiting for her. I found that the consistent problem with online dates is that one never knows who is going to show up. I sure did not expect the Monica. To put it rudely, I don't know how she could stand up with so much weight. Either way, I proceeded to go on with the date and have a little bit of fun. Haunted houses always fail to scare me and I was getting bored by the fourth floor. On the fifth floor, I told Monica that she should go up first because I was terrified even though that was far from the truth. She called me a dick and a coward for not being the brave enough to go first. It really got interesting when the tenth floor made us go through a corn maze labyrinth. As she turned on one of the corners, a seven-foot-tall man appeared. He reached behind his back to get his chainsaw as he chased after us. Monica started to scream like a madwoman, especially where the surrounding areas were filled with fog. I dropped to the floor, hysterically laughing at how frightened she had gotten. "Pinche Mamon!" she screamed at me as I kept laughing. As we came out on the thirteenth floor, she hurried to her car and flicked me off as she drove by. It was at this moment that I realized that even if a date is destined to go bad, I should not deny myself a little bit of fun by making the best out of the situation.

I went out with Kayla, a 23-year-old blonde who was a certified LVN. She brought her friend Daisy for protection. The bar we met at had wooden chairs, a pinball arcade, and a few pool tables. Not long after Kayla was describing her recent medical patients, Daisy got in an angry discussion with another girl at the bar (a complete stranger). Kayla noticed that the altercation was about to turn violent. Kayla rushed to Daisy's aid when she noticed the other girl about to punch her on the face. Kayla quickly reached the assaulting woman and proceeded to strike her in the kidney. This ended up turning into a full-blown bar fight. I should have left, but instead, I distanced myself from the danger but not too far that I wouldn't be able to see the situation unfold before me. More and more women got involved that I believe were related or friends of the involved parties. The quarrel ended up with broken beer bottles and stools as they attacked each other. The bar manager tried to calm everyone down but ended up getting a black eye from a woman twice his size. The bartenders didn't have much luck in calming down anyone either. As Kayla intervened in the fight, she somehow ended up stabbed in her right butt cheek with a switchblade. It all happened so fast that I couldn't distinguish where the blade came from nor who stabbed her. I knew that any effort for me to break up the fight was going to be futile. There was no stopping them so I just continued sipping on my beer and watched the frantic situation. The police came and Kayla was arrested, still with the knife in her ass. Ironically, she was sent to the same hospital she worked at. I wondered how the conversation with her boss turned out and if she was imprisoned after. She later sent me a text of the scar that resulted from the blade that was inserted into her. I am assuming that she wanted praise or for me to tell her that it was a cool scar. I really wasn't fond of it and didn't have much interest in meeting her a second time.

Because of what I had experienced on my online dates, I decided to do research in my spare time to figure out what good came out of the binge-dating I had done. Not only did I read online, but I also grabbed a few books from my local library on base. I just had to do research to soothe myself and make sense of what I underwent. I learned quite a bit from these online dates and wondered what others thought of them as well. I conducted surveys on my fellow soldiers and then my fellow classmates on campus after the Army. The vast majority of people would ask questions to confirm that the person in the profile is real. The most effective way I discovered to find out if the person behind the photo was real was to make the person take a picture of themselves with their tongue out and putting a finger on their nose (some awkward picture that isn't commonly taken). The second way was to make the person take a picture with a time/date stamp on it. It is significant that there is already a sense of mistrust before one even goes out to meet a person that might one day could become a best friend/spouse. These verification methods are necessary to ensure that the person in the photos is legitimate.

When I asked what the biggest fear of going on an online date was, the answer was consistent depending on the gender of the person being asked said question. Almost every female was afraid of the man not being real or being a stalker, kidnapper, rapist, or murderer. Almost every male, to a surprising discovery, was just afraid that the woman would be ugly or fat. Men hoped that the worst picture in the online profile actually looks like the woman they are hoping to meet. What this discovery reveals about gender is that men have very little to fear and sacrifice when they date. This also reveals that men tend to be shallower than women when looking for a significant other online and choose to face more risk at physical deceptions. What this reveals about women is that they feel very vulnerable when they show up to online dates, yet are more accepting to different personalities as long as there is no present danger.

There are many people that not only describe themselves as a person they are not, but also put pictures of individuals that they know will serve to provide physical appeal. People might even put pictures from many years ago to physically attract others. Dr. Fincham was one of the first psychologists that I read in his book *Romantic Relationships Emerging in Adulthood*. He has a doctorate in social psychology from Oxford University. He takes a huge interest in psychological perspectives and the study of personal relationships. Physical attractiveness is important in the formation of, maintenance of, and satisfaction of romantic relationships (Fincham and Cui). It is highly valued and it is an easily and rapidly recognizable attribute. That is what is initially searched for in the opposite sex. Just because someone is a little on the heavy side does not mean that he or she will pursue someone their size. People choose to pursue/date the body type that they are attracted to.

Finding a date even minutes away from one's location is not an unrealistic expectation in modern society. Many potential dates can be a few minutes away and are still looking for their prince charming or woman of their dreams. Another researcher I discovered was Samantha Holland. She has a PHD from Sheffield Hallam University in the UK and is a research fellow in the Carnegie Research Institute. Holland expresses that if people intend to meet, it will be more difficult to conceal any physical deceptions and whether they have another significant other (Holland). She also states that due to the lack of visual cues and validation of their proclaimed identity, people tend to be more honest and reveal themselves more in texting or online environments.

When someone registers for an online dating website, he/she should apply themselves and provide an accurate description of themselves and put a decent statement of how they would love nothing more than to find a significant other to call their own. People are also expected to

put recent pictures of themselves that express how they look and possibly what they do for a profession. When people search for a significant other, they are expected to choose someone that is not “out of their league” and that has a profession that coincides with both of their schedules.

Because of my experiences, it is not a surprise that many people are scared to engage in online dating. There are horror stories everywhere. I learned that compatibility and religious matching is overrated because the people online will make the initial effort to meet only if they see a pretty face. One must be very cautious with every step that is taken when meeting people online. One never knows what details presented on the profiles are legitimate nor whom exactly is going to show up to the date.

Although many say that I spent too much time and went on dates with too many women (which pushed over sixty), I feel that they were necessary to figure out exactly the person that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I met many women that taught me of the different personalities and attributes that exist. I now knew what I was looking for in a significant other. Dr. Frank D. Fincham states that emerging adulthood is the period between the late teens and mid-twenties that a unique and important developmental period. During this period, people gain relationship experience before settling on someone to partner with (Fincham and Cui).

The final researcher I found was Jeffrey Arnett. He is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark University in Massachusetts. He states that emerging adulthood is the time for young people to explore their options in romance and love. It is also crucial to discovering what kind of person they want to marry and gain relationship experience before settling on someone to partner with permanently (Arnett). Dr. Fincham also states that emerging adults are able to clarify for themselves what kind of person they would like to marry by having

interactions/experiences with a variety of people. It is the only way to figure out what is and isn't wanted in a person and the main priority in the relationship.

I went to a Red Robin restaurant to eat a burger with Specialist Thomas and told him everything that happened to me during the online dates. He too was involved with online dating websites but he felt like he was being matched with single mothers or much older women on purpose. He quickly shifted the conversation to why he is so fond of Germany. "The beer is delicious and the women are beautiful," he expressed with excitement in his voice. He then told me that he bided his time when he was completing his psychology degree. Rarely does anyone take eight years to finish a bachelors' degree. It wasn't because Thomas wasn't intelligent but rather because he wanted to stay there forever. He learned the language and loved the culture. Unfortunately for him, student visas don't last forever. He wouldn't have minded working as a mailman so long as he could stay. It wasn't possible. He racked up over sixty thousand dollars in debt from being there almost a decade that the Army was paying for with the student loan forgiveness program.

Apparently Thomas had much better game than he had now because he dated dozens of beautiful women in Germany. He had the old pictures to prove it. He told me of his fondest and most bizarre memory of the country. He said "I had just come out of a bar around midnight with a drop dead gorgeous blonde and we headed over to the local park. She got on her knees and gave me the best blowjob of my life. I had my eyes closed until a skinny white dude in a white t-shirt comes over to me and casually asks me how my night is going. The blonde was still going at it with everything she's had. The guy wouldn't leave until I told him to fuck off." I reacted to the story with a laugh saying "Damn, maybe he just wanted to join in." Thomas cringed as he shook his head in disapproval.

CHAPTER XV

MAY-JUNE 2014: OBSERVED REACTION TO WOMEN IN COMBAT ARMS

Women are coming to the infantry. That was a scary thing to hear for most infantrymen. Men in the military are regarded as national heroes by society and the media. Women are rarely in the advertisement. Traditionally, the women who exemplify the ideal masculine characteristics are typically marginalized but can result in positive social status. The media and the government depict the soldiers that demonstrate “the values of the middle class.” They are typically shown as “unemotional, socially desirable, strong wage-earners, physically attractive, and strong civic leaders (Locke 15).” In WWII and the cold wars, although there were instances where women could serve their country in “masculine ways,” the propaganda came infused with the message that these roles were only temporary and that women were best “off at home once the men returned.” Even today, women in the military are typically not treated well in comparison to men because of military masculinity. It doesn’t help that females compose only about 14.6 percent of the whole military services combined. The Air Force is the service with the highest percentage of women at 19 percent. When I was in my infantry unit, there was no sympathy for women who were interested in a combat arms career.

As I was finishing off my four years of service, there was a drastic change that allowed for women to choose any job they wanted. They could choose to be infantry, combat engineers, cavalry, or the usual combat medics (that was already allowed). This news did not sit well with my unit. They made all of the infantrymen (including myself) undergo new sexual harassment classes every week that totaled 36 hours. Everyone was saying, “How about they do us a favor and just not send any women to this unit.” They were scared of not being able to curse nor be comfortable because of the strong probability of offending a female soldier. They were likely also scared of losing their male dominated space that allowed them to have a sense of superiority over women. They insisted that there would be too much drama the second they would arrive. They also insulted women by stating that men are physically superior and women would just “slow us down.” In Strongpoint Demaiwand, the infantrymen and I did not shower for five months straight and couldn’t possibly imagine a woman tolerating those conditions. This reality produced insults from the infantrymen because it would mean that if they deployed again, they would not be able to go where the “action” was. The most offensive comment I heard was “What are they going to do? Put a tampon attachment on their M4?” Infantry battalions clearly make an uncomfortable work environment for female soldiers. I was glad that I would not be around to see it develop. Women in the military (and many other professions) constantly have to “prove themselves in a predominantly male environment (Finley 161)” and prove themselves capable of being able to do any profession.

CHAPTER XVI

JUNE 1, 2014-AUGUST 1, 2014: MY TRANSITION OUT OF THE MILITARY/REENLISTMENT OFFERS

As my re-enlistment window was opening, I took a long hard look at what I had accomplished and what I would accomplish if I stayed in the Army. I got a fifty-thousand-dollar offer (plus my twenty-two-thousand-dollar salary) to re-enlist. I could take the money and stay in Fort Lewis, Washington or choose the location of choice (which could extend to Europe) with no bonus. My leadership personnel wanted to keep me because of how good I handled the misconduct paperwork for the soldiers that got kicked out or punished. My officers begged for me to reenlist. The Army would at least have a good soldier in their ranks (as they put it). Then I thought about how officers were the ones making the big bucks. To put it into perspective: An entry-level enlisted soldier makes about 18-22 thousand dollars a year. An entry level officer makes 32 thousand dollars plus housing allowance just because they have a degree. I was going to pass on the 50K bonus or location of my choice to make sure I got a bachelors' degree of my own. I wasn't going to have the time to get a degree while in the Army because of the constant training (for a war that was nowhere near). The fact that I was putting on some extra weight towards the end was stretching the limits of my allowed body fat percentile. Towards the end, there was a significant decline in my physical fitness once PT was no longer mandatory.

Getting out of the Army is like getting out of jail. I heard it a million times before I finally realized why that is a reality. The number of classes that soldiers need to get out of the Army is ridiculous. The last three months of a soldier's contract is packed with courses to "effectively transition to civilian life." I was wondering how difficult could it be, but then I thought about all the homeless veterans I've seen on the streets across the U.S. In order to fully escape the confines of the Army, a soldier has to complete courses explaining the benefits available and complete at least two job applications. I made an application to the nearest McDonalds and Walmart in Edinburg, TX. I got called for the interviews but never appeared. I was checking off the requirement boxes to make sure everything remained hassle free. To prepare for the English major, I started reading the Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick in my spare time. All that I knew was that American Literature was one of my classes but had no idea where to start. I figured I couldn't go wrong with classics that I hadn't read yet. I didn't actually come across these books until years later, but I enjoyed them more than I expected.

I kept a good log of everything that happened in my Army (war and dating life). One could call it a diary. I wanted to let everyone know about my experiences and realized that the English major was the only way I was going to successfully tell what happened. I could only assume that every other major was not going to allow me the time to focus and engage on writing, much less workshop it. I applied to the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Texas Pan American. I love Texas so I didn't mind going back there so long as my parents were not close-by. I got accepted by both universities but UTPA gave me more credits for my high-school dual enrollment courses, South Texas College credits, and military intelligence training. I wanted to be done with my bachelors' degree as soon as possible because nothing was bothering me more than seeing the people I graduated high school with completing

their degrees while I was not even halfway there. I felt inadequate because although I got a lot of real world experience, I found my education lacking. I valued the knowledge gained from the military, but now I was a sophomore in college while my high school classmates were starting to pursue graduate degrees. I was a little jealous to say the least but highly motivated to catch up. I felt the need to stay ahead to not feel like a failure.

Just when I thought I was done with the Army, one final requirement was to speak with an Army Reserve recruiter. In the original contract soldiers sign to enlist in the Army, there is fine print saying that eight years is the full-service commitment. I was not aware of this. In other words, although my Army contract was three years and eight months, I was still held liable for another four years and four months. I would be in the “inactive reserve,” which meant that no matter what I was doing, I could be called up to enter a future war conflict during that time. The loophole was to do less time in the Army Reserve (2 years) to fulfill the eight-year commitment. I signed the dotted line once again and was assigned to 319 CSSB (a company support unit). I was set to report on October 2014. I would do one weekend a month until August 2016 to make sure that my studies would not be interrupted by a potential World War III.

On August 2, 2014, I was free to go. My father flew up to Seattle to help me drive home with all my stuff. We are both the best drivers when it comes to endurance. I drove eighteen hours before taking a break and my father drove the final eighteen hours. 36 hours to get to the Rio Grande Valley.

I stayed for a few days at my parents’ house before I decided it was time to head to Edinburg, Texas. I wanted some time to myself and to get myself situated in my new apartment. Again, the urge to keep me in the house was irritating. My father was sad when he realized that I wasn’t going to be staying in my childhood home once again. My mother repeated the “this is

your house” speech all over again. I stood my ground and stated “This is your house and dad’s house. My name is not on the property nor on the title of the house. Driving to campus is an hour and twenty minutes without traffic and that is going to wear me out. I thank you for the time that you let me live here but I am not staying.” Even though classes did not start for a few more weeks, I was anxious about living somewhere new and getting the first week out of the way.

I had a good talk with Thomas, who was surprisingly in a chipper mood because he started seriously dating and the love he had for this woman was so strong that he proposed within a couple of months from knowing her. Where did he find this woman you might ask? E-harmony. When he told me, I said “No fucking way! I went on all these dates and you are the one that finds the love of your life. I’m happy for you, but fuck you.” We chuckled and then told each other to keep in touch. Once he married, he decided to reenlist with the condition that he got transferred to Germany. I don’t think his wife knew anything about the blowjob. Sure enough, he got his way and is now enjoying his stay at Ansbach, Germany, getting his bills paid by Uncle Sam.

CHAPTER XVII

AUGUST 26, 2014-MAY 14, 2016 UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

I entered UTPA for the Fall 2014 semester and it felt surreal. I could not get over how free I felt. It was freeing to not be in a schedule where I woke up at 6 a.m. for physical training and ended my day at 5 p.m. Not being in a rigid military environment was mind-blowing at first. I could not believe how easy I found the classes despite taking eighteen hours at a time. I felt that I needed to take this pace in order to take advantage of the G.I. Bill benefits and to catch up to my high school classmates that were ahead of me. I felt like Adam Sandler in the 1995 movie “Billy Madison.” It seems like four years of age wouldn’t make much of a difference, but it does. Coming right out of the military to the basic college courses, it seemed that the 18 year olds were undisciplined. I was bothered hearing how difficult they found a class because they would rather be playing video games or getting drunk with their friends instead of allotting their time for doing homework. If there was a presentation, I would be the first one on the list to get it out of the way. Time management was a good skill that I was glad I had. I struggled to feel sympathetic to those that didn’t have it. Although I did my fair share of video gaming while taking classes, I made sure everything was done before I even dared to touch my game controller. I brought the mentality that if I get all the work done early, I can take it easy later and relax.

On October 18 (during my first undergraduate semester), I started the Army Reserve in Harlingen, Texas. The second that I got there, I knew something was wrong. The formation time was 6:00 a.m. on Saturday. I was there early because I was a little nervous about meeting my new team members and my unit in general. Everyone showed up on the parking lot around 6:30 a.m. I thought, “What the fuck is going on with this place?” Obviously, no one was going to be in trouble. I later figured out that everyone is fashionably late with no consequences.

When morning PT was over and we got our uniforms on, I realized that most of my unit did not have a unit patch on their right arm. This meant that almost none of them had deployed or been anywhere other than the 319th in Harlingen. Then I realized that some were coming right out of basic training, having started their six-year Army Reserve contract. The discipline in the unit was non-existent according to my previous active duty experience in the military. Everyone in the formation had no respect for the leadership. The soldiers could not stay in line when making a formation, they would not quiet down when superiors entered the room, and even made jokes while announcements were being made.

It is interesting because in the Active Army, no one questions where you work or what you do because there isn't time for anything else other than military work. In the reserves, one has the time to do anything while still being considered a soldier. After all, it is only one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer that has to be attended. A good chunk of the lower enlisted were students. Some of the officers were unemployed and those that were employed did not care to share where they worked. It was incredible to witness how some of the lower enlisted had jobs with higher paying salaries than the jobs the officers had. One in particular was making seventy-seven thousand dollars after being an assistant manager of a Target store for ten years. It was refreshing to see the variety of careers/jobs that the soldiers had.

The things that were lacking most of all in the Army Reserve were motivation, discipline, and training. It is difficult to keep soldiers caring for the mission of the unit because of the little amount of time spent with each other. There is no sense of unity because after the weekend is over, everyone is worried about their civilian agendas rather than their military career. Maybe it can't even be called a career after all. Soldiers were lacking the basic soldier skills that make a unit effective. They did not have to qualify with their rifles so their marksmanship skills were declining. I had to remind them how to take a rifle or machine gun apart because they had completely forgotten. What blew my mind most of all is that there was a significant lack of accountability. No one knew where soldiers ran off to. I always had trouble finding people because they hid somewhere in the building, went to lunch without notifying anyone, or just went home (because some lived nearby). It was infuriating.

The racial diversity of the unit was not varied. It was no surprise that the Mexican American or Latino was the majority. The most apparent difference from the 4-23 infantry demographic was that one third of the soldiers in the unit were female. I was right to assume that the men had to watch what they said in front of them. Even the first sergeant and the company commander (with the rank of captain) were women. My old infantrymen buddies would have had a heart attack.

I want to say that half of the reservists were out of shape. The majority of the soldiers in shape had gotten out of active duty first before coming into the reserves just like I did. A reduction of the morning tacos would have done them good. It didn't help that the unit gave a free all you can eat voucher for Luby's at lunchtime. I had gained weight as I got out of the military but still maintained the required body fat percentile. I could see beer bellies coming out of the uniforms and some of the officers in the unit were no exception. When the Army physical

fitness test was being conducted, extra pushups and sit-ups were being counted and run times were reduced by a minute or two depending on how important the person was. I feel that Homer Simpson could have given some of these soldiers a run for their money. I wondered what the point of doing the official PT test was if accuracy wasn't going to be a part of the record. I could only assume that someone would get in trouble if the actual event didn't happen.

When there was talk about the unit deploying to Iraq/Afghanistan, the soldiers got excited because of the financial opportunity it would present rather than serving their country. I personally had some patriotism that fueled and motivated me in the active army throughout the years. The benefits alone would have not been enough to encourage me. Those that enlist only for the money and the benefits just don't sit well with me. I couldn't find the slightest bit of patriotism in the vast majority of reservists. I found it pathetic when I heard "I can't wait for a deployment or annual training. I could really use the paycheck" or "I could use some training days to pay for my child support." One thing was clear: If these soldiers deployed to a combat zone, they would all be dead within a few months if they stepped foot outside the base. The fact that we were in a support unit meant that even if there was a deployment, it would be to support the combat soldiers by providing them with supplies and water. No way in hell would anyone in their right minds would let these soldiers go on a patrol.

I couldn't identify whether it was patriotism or pride that I was feeling when dealing with the reservists. I was proud of the active duty and combat experience I had that most of them did not. At the same time, I was proud that I did my service for my country as much as I did it for myself. One of the biggest motivators and factors of enlisting in the first place was the education benefits. Money was the last thing on my mind. I value education over money any day of the

week because at least it can't be taken away. Maybe I wasn't different from the reservists looking forward to their paycheck.

What turned me off of the Army Reserve in general is the fact that there was nothing to do. It was \$100 per day to show up at a building and to do nothing. We had a class or two that varied from resilience training, Army history, or preparation for the two-week summer training event. Once the class was over, it was just sitting and waiting for 5 p.m. to come around before the leadership let us go. Sometimes, I just waited by laying down under the stairs of the building until it was time to leave. Compared to the "real" active Army, the Reserves was a kiddy camp or a daycare center. It was a pseudo military experience. There was hints of the real thing but no genuine moments.

I was happy that I only had two years in the Army Reserve and that I didn't sign up for more time. Army Reserve soldiers take thirty years to retire versus the twenty in Active Army. The difference is that Active Army soldiers get a retirement check for the twenty years after their service. Reserve soldiers receive their retirement checks when they reach sixty years old. It just didn't make any sense for me to stay in the military. Once again, the recruiters tried to get me to stay in the Army. If I didn't take the money before, I wasn't going to do it now. It was time to close a significant chapter of my life.

In Spring 2015, I met Vanessa in a British Literature class. I don't know what it was about her but we hit it off immediately. I didn't give her much time to think because I invited her to a SpongeBob square-pants movie that was premiering in the middle of class. While I was in Washington, I saw pretty much every movie that premiered for the sake of distracting myself

after a long day at work. It always felt awkward to go to cartoon movies by myself so she made the perfect companion for them.

We were both 22 at the time and within a few days of knowing each other, we got very serious. We enjoyed the same foods, were just as ambitious, and loved to travel together. Our sexual chemistry was off the charts but I wish I could have been a bit gentler as she was dealing with her virginity. I unfortunately pressured her unnecessarily at first because I was not fooling around with her. If I could go back, I would have stuck to her values and waited until marriage to have sex. After the first couple of times of love making and eventually rough sex, it became amazing. We could not keep our hands away from each other. I could have not found anyone more compatible than her to be at my side. She told me that she would have married me after our second date and I believe her. I got along with her family really well and moved into her apartment (which was bigger than mine at the time) within three months of meeting. Many of her family members told her to be careful with me because I was going too fast. Both of our mothers and siblings even thought that she was pregnant when we got engaged on July 5, 2015.

Within six months (August 20), we ended up marrying. We didn't want a big wedding because like many modern couples, we wanted to invest in seeing the world instead of feeding and entertaining people. We didn't have many friends anyway because of our introverted nature. Even if we wanted to make a huge wedding, we didn't have a huge amount of people to invite. Even though many family members would have liked to have attended the courthouse wedding, we only gave a day's notice. For obvious reasons, only our primary family members were able to make it. At times, Vanessa hoped that we would have stuck to more traditional ways. I completely forgot to get her mother or brother's blessing before we got married. We also didn't do much of a photo-shoot. The money that was saved from having the small wedding and lunch

was better spent on Paris, France. It was a conventional place to go to because everyone wants a honeymoon in Paris, but we are far from being the traditional couple.

We didn't understand the couples that wait years to marry because we realized that we would have been equally as happy even if we had married the day we met. When I remembered the amount of online dates I went on, I feel that I was looking in all the wrong places because the right person for me was in class rather than online. She was the woman I was looking for the whole time I was online dating. I feel that I could have saved myself a lot of time if I had just gone to college sooner. Either way, I was happy that Vanessa was available and that we got along so well.

It wasn't always smooth sailing. I was not as sane as I believed I was. I needed help but didn't know it. The nightmares, the insomnia, and the depression never stopped for me. They were ongoing from the second I got back from Afghanistan. The infantry mentality was to suck it up and not complain about anything. My chronic physical pain and my mental instability was something that most infantrymen are told to ignore. I couldn't ignore it now that I was married. Leadership in infantry battalions encourage that their soldiers pretend that everything is fine even when it isn't. If a soldier complains about anything, the belief is that they are just trying to avoid physical exercise and training. The number of soldiers that come back with some form of PTSD is huge. Millions of soldiers have come back from wars with this disorder but it was originally diagnosed as being "shell shocked." This was the simple explanation for those who just didn't behave the same way upon returning from war. It is obviously more complex than that and traumatic events do terrible things to the mind.

Vanessa and I got to know each other little by little and were happy that things did not change much after we married. My biggest initial concern was that she would change the second

we made it official. I'm glad that was not the case. Once we had more time living together, the PTSD signs were apparent. I was not sleeping well and had constant nightmares. I was overly paranoid and on edge. I had a short fuse and it did not take much to get me angry. The biggest symptom was my social isolation. I avoided anything that involved mingling. I refused to become a statistic of PTSD. I didn't want to jump the gun. Erin P. Finley writes that "men may be less likely than women to seek out the health care and social support they need to effectively manage" distress and disorders (Finley 8). If Vanessa hadn't been in the picture, I'm not sure I would have ever gotten any help.

I tried to avoid the fact that I had PTSD to avoid the official diagnosis. I saw it as a negative label. My wife and I took anger management therapy for a few months before we realized that there was something bigger and more serious happening with me. This was affecting both of us. In this therapy, our psychologist Dr. Moore told us that I should have a deeper evaluation because there was something serious behind the anger. She simplified PTSD by elaborating on each letter on a piece of paper. P is for post, which she described as "after." T is for traumatic, which means a traumatic event must have happened. S is for stress, which is caused because of the trauma. Then D stands for the disorder that is triggered after the traumatic stress event. Once Dr. Moore put it in simplified terms, I figured that enough things happened in Afghanistan that could have psychologically affected me.

Many veterans return from war and "drink too much, are unable to sleep, have unspeakable dreams, have emotional numbness, and lash out aggressively at friends and loved ones. They also struggle profoundly with rites of everyday life (Finley 1)." I had almost every symptom in the book but wouldn't accept it until I finally got evaluated. The reason that I avoided the diagnosis of PTSD is the negative social stigma that comes with it. When some

civilians hear the term PTSD, there is already a preconceived assumption that I might be a crazy person. I was afraid that it might lower my chances of getting employed in the future as well. The biggest reason to avoid the diagnosis however was that it made me feel vulnerable. I felt that that it was yet another form of weakness. Veterans rarely see their experiences as “traumatic themselves (Finley 48).” It wasn’t until years later that I finally considered the things I experienced as trauma instead of simplifying it by calling it messed up things that happen in war. My ego and masculinity took a hard blow.

On May 14, 2016, Vanessa and I graduated from UTRGV. We connected with each other in almost every way, including degrees. I got an English degree and she got a Spanish degree. We both decided that our Bachelors’ degrees (despite the Magna Cum Laude distinction) were the modern high school diploma. It would be in our best interest to advance our education for the sake of our future careers. For now, we just had to wait until the summer was over. We needed a little schooling break anyway. It was nice to not have to worry about a grade for a little while.

CHAPTER XVIII

AUGUST 2016 STARTING GRADUATE STUDIES

Vanessa and I had to patiently wait for the summer 2016 semesters to pass us by so we could start class. We were both nervous and didn't know what to expect for grad school. We were freaking out about how difficult we expected the classes to be just because they had a different numeration. We were happy to find out that the coursework was similar in difficulty, but there was just more of it. I was able to explore the literature and subject matter that I wanted to. I guess that is what it is all about. I was able to concentrate in my Creative Writing classes to better my writing and prepare myself for teaching in the future.

CHAPTER XIX

SEPTEMBER 2016 STARTING COGNITIVE THERAPY

There is literally no physical therapy that I have received since I started going to the VA. The VA just won't schedule it for me despite my numerous requests. The best they could do is give me numerous bottles of Naproxen (a glorified aspirin). I was glad that I got some psychological treatment.

It was around the same time that I started my Creative Writing graduate studies that I got my individual PTSD cognitive therapy. Despite the fact that I got diagnosed earlier in the year, everybody was put on a waiting list. I was finally able to rationalize what happened in my traumatic events and look at how much impact my role in the events had. The therapy was around twelve continuous weeks where I was exposed to my "stressor events" that happened in Afghanistan. I could no longer avoid the statistic. There was no doubt of PTSD at this point, once I shared how eventful my deployment had been. It was time to face the facts and get the help I needed. Being with Vanessa made me realize that the way I behaved and reacted was not typical. I could not diagnose myself when I was single, but now that marriage became a significant part of my life, I wanted to be a better person to my wife.

As cognitive therapy started, I was reminded by my therapist Megan that it was not designed to "cure" me but instead help me live more comfortably (at least mentally). The McAllen VA has one of the best mental health service clinics in the state of Texas. Some veterans travel hundreds of miles to visit this clinic.

Survivors' guilt was the biggest thing impacting my mental health. I could never forget the two little girls that died right in front of me. These little girls appeared (and still appear) in public places. When I see children at my local supermarket or flea market, the faces of those girls replace the faces of the children in front of me. It freaks me out, makes my heart race, and at times paralyzes me. I was finally able to realize that there was truly nothing that I could have done to save these girls, no matter the medical training that I had at the time. This was the most difficult thing to accept. I needed to stop the thoughts of "what if I had more medical training" or "maybe if I had called the helicopter for these girls' sooner."

The second biggest stressor event was saving the guy that planted the bomb and exploded himself. The thought of this guy being saved while the two little girls died bothered me extensively. I kept thinking of the soldiers that might have been killed because this insurgent survived. This thought kept me up at night. I finally realized that I shouldn't stress on the hypothetical situations. I also was able to comprehend that many different factors went into him surviving. I was not the sole reason that this man survived. I was a big reason (calling the helicopter for him) but many others also played a significant role.

It does not surprise me that many veterans stop in the middle of the cognitive therapy. There is nothing that the therapists can do to force a veteran to show up to their appointment. The reason that many veterans stop going to the therapy completely is because it involves revisiting the traumatic events over and over again. I had to hand write it, read it to the therapist, and was encouraged to read it everyday until the next session. Every moment of the trauma gets analyzed and evaluated beyond comfort. Most veterans including myself are not comfortable with the amount of exposure that we have to undergo. The therapy requires "extended amounts of time revisiting traumatic events in extreme detail, remembering the smells, sights, sounds, and

thoughts that occurred at the time of the event (Finley 124).” Many times, I wanted to tell the therapist to ease off because I had enough of that session. Despite the vast psychological knowledge that the therapist had, at the end of the day, she had never been to combat nor experienced combat trauma. Sometimes I wanted to yell “You haven’t served and you don’t know shit of what I have been through!” I was seriously bothered when she asked “Don’t you think you went through this because god wanted you to? Don’t you think that god knew that you could handle this trauma?” I interrupted by saying “I don’t believe in god. I haven’t for a while. Don’t give me that shit.” I had to calm myself and realize that she was doing her best to serve/help me.

After therapy, I was able to freely and calmly share what happened in Afghanistan without tearing up or having my voice break when I shared my experience. At times, I felt insensitive to the things that happened because I was able to talk about the experience as if it were nothing. I find it best to keep my military service to myself because the questions of “Did you kill anyone?” or “Did you see any action?” are the first ones I get. Sometimes I have to catch myself and stop talking because I realize that I am giving appalling information in a calm tone. Sometimes I see dread in peoples’ faces when I casually talk about the girls that got blown up in Kandahar. I can only assume that some civilians and students regret asking me once I give them the blunt and gory details. The one time that I regret revealing my trauma was when I worked at a chicken restaurant two years ago. A couple asked me about my Afghanistan experience and I told him about the firefights, IEDs, and the girls (intestines and all). Their faces were horrified and they decided to take their meal home either because I freaked them out or made them lose their appetite. Talking about my trauma is therapeutic at times and vivid but sometimes it feels like I’m talking about a dream that never happened because it was so long ago.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION

The one thing that is clear in my mind despite everything that I've gone through is the fact that I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. Things could have run a lot smoother and less painful but I have no regrets. I can look at myself now and be prideful of the things that I have accomplished and hope to accomplish. I no longer feel like a loser that has nothing going for him. I don't want to say that the military saved me but rather taught me so much that I didn't expect to learn. The life skills that it provided have helped me immensely at reaching my definition of success throughout the years. Trauma is the negative thing that came from my military experience but so much good came from investing my early adult years into this institution of power.

First and foremost, I am happily married with two dogs (a schnauzer and a terrier). I have my family and currently have no intention of having kids any time soon. Vanessa and I figure that we have to learn to enjoy the moments we have with each other before we share them with children. We are always thinking of the next field trip (domestic or abroad). We have been to Ireland, Belfast, Paris, and Peru internationally and have traveled to every national park in the left side of the U.S. The frames in our living room always have the pictures of the places traveled but also empty spaces for new photos as we decide what is next. We both have the consensus that a city is right for us to teach together. We dream of working at the same university or community college and talk about having adjacent offices called the "Lopez corner."

I am married to the right woman because of the multitude of online dates that I went on. This was a welcome change from not being able to talk to a girl without blushing. Online dating is a learning process. I am happy that I am done with that and hope that I never have to binge date ever again. The new applications coming out everyday that include a minimum amount of income or education level are interesting. I hope that one day online dating will be a safer venture for meeting “the one” or a safe place to casually meet new friends.

Although I gained weight after I got out of the Army, I am in much better shape than when I came into the service. I am realizing that I can not consume the amount of food that I did while running seven miles every day and not expect to gain weight. Meal-prepping has been helping me out significantly. I am happy that I haven’t stopped the weightlifting exercises that I learned in Afghanistan with SGT Brown. I taught these exercises to my wife and we enjoy the routine of going to the gym everyday.

I got the combat experience I wanted from working with the Infantry. I know it sounds like a wanted a death wish but it was just a self-fulfilling need that I got out of my system. I am still patriotic enough that sometimes I imagine being in the front lines fighting ISIS soldiers in the middle-east. There is always a new enemy that is worse than the Taliban and I wish I could do more to stop the terroristic treats.

I am at the last steps of completing my Masters’ in Creative writing. I now have life experience that makes me unique and that I can share with my future students one day. I know for a fact that I wouldn’t be able to afford the program that I am in right now had I not enlisted and used my GI Bill to pay the tuition. I have read and learned more literature that I ever thought possible in the several years I have been at Edinburg, Texas. Non-fiction has been my favorite since the first undergraduate course I took.

My six years in the Army were worth it despite some major mental and physical setbacks. I am now an excellent interviewee thanks to my presentational speaking skills I obtained by presenting to colonels and generals in Afghanistan. Everything came into place because of the military and nothing else could have guaranteed me this type of success. I have grown and gained so much from the military and its benefits that I can't imagine an alternate route my life would have taken without it. I can't wait until August 2018 to further my literary studies education to a whole new level at the University of Texas at Dallas. Dr. Lopez has a nice ring to it. Greatness sometimes comes from small beginnings. Who would have imagined that a small town boy of La Rosita would pursue a doctorate degree?

I have learned that helping veterans has served as my coping mechanism time and time again. My transition to civilian life could have not gone any better but many veterans are not as lucky. I will be in the lookout for veterans in my classroom because I want them to have the same if not better success than I did. Many articles suggest that from 52 to 80 percent of veterans drop out of college and leave their education benefits untouched within the first or second semester. I don't want them to feel alienated in their new culture that doesn't have the same structure as the military. I want to be an extra layer of support, both in their lives and in their writing.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT AM I DOING NOW?

Every Tuesday since February 13, 2018, I have been attending a Veterans Cognitive Therapy Group that has eight Vietnam veterans and one Iraq veteran to make sure that we make it, one week at a time. This group is being led by a former sergeant first class Steve Harris. I am the youngest veteran at 26 years of age while the oldest veteran is over eighty. I have come to realize that it takes more guts to ask for help than it does to just suck up the pain (both physical and mental). We are there for each other and want to be able to see each other week after week. We get reminded that there are those that contemplate taking their lives. Luckily there is a peer center that allows veterans to get distracted with photography, woodwork, wood carving, and art painting classes.

At the first meeting, I was told that there was a veteran that already had a pistol in his hand, breaking down and luckily he contacted Steve before he went through with it. Another delta force (a form of special forces) soldier was about to kill himself because of his limited hearing out of his left ear. Not being able to hear made him feel weak and old. To him, the lack of hearing made him feel like a worthless human being. This left me thinking of how little it takes for soldiers to want to end their lives, especially when their physical state leaves them feeling weak. Those in leadership positions have been told their whole lives to never show a sign of weakness because the rest of the chain of command crumbles at the first sign of it.

This exemplifies the idea that the military can only function if leaders are seen as fearless and invulnerable. It further supports the idea that “sucking it up” is perceived to be the best way to lead and hasn’t changed much throughout different war conflicts. It is military culture that puts the “strong” in a pedestal while frowning upon the injured.

At the end of the day, all combat veterans want is to be heard. Little did I know that all one has to do is show up to the nearest VA office, visit the mental health area, and wait for a psychologist to fill them into their next available slot. Even in my therapy group, these men want to share their combat experiences. It is always intriguing to hear about how combat used to be in Vietnam, especially with the tunnel system the Vietnamese had in place. One end of the tunnels was where they lived while the other end was where they attacked. One thing that never ceases to amaze me is the way the locals always find a way to improvise. When I was in Afghanistan, I once saw a bus being carried by another bus in order to conserve gas. This was somehow done without machinery. One veteran shared about a Vietnamese local ripping his pants to attach to the tube of a bike rim and eliminated the need for a tire.

The group, I’ve been told, has come a long way. Apparently, I showed up at a time where everyone gets along and is cracking jokes. The whole group was having small talk and laughing before I even showed up. At first however, these eight veterans were at each other’s throats. They were yelling at each other to the point that they wanted to beat each other up. It is hard to imagine that because of how well they get along. The most recent time I joined the group, we played show and tell with our old basic/combat photos on our phones.

I can’t imagine leaving the peer group at this point. I am glad to have found my clique of people that understand the trauma of war and the importance of being there for one another. It took me a while to wake up early enough to meet these men, but I am glad that I did.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jesus Lopez was born in Rio Grande City. He is a U.S. Army Veteran from the years 2011 to 2016. He got awarded his Bachelor of Arts in English on May 2016 from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He continued his studies in UTRGV to obtain his M.F.A. in creative writing and graduated on May 2018. He resides at 912 French Ave. Apt 3, Edinburg Texas 78541. His personal email is lopezman-1@hotmail.com. He is a very ambitious individual that will continue his studies in the University of Texas at Dallas because of his ultimate goal of becoming an English Professor. He enjoys writing non-fiction as much as possible, using his experiences of growing up and the military (both in English and Spanish).