



MATT GALLAGHER

**EMBRACING THE
SUCK IN A
SAVAGE LITTLE
WAR**

**'AS FUNNY AS
IT IS HARROWING'**
ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

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About the Book

Iraq, late 2007. Lieutenant Matt Gallagher arrives just as US policy shifts from lethal operations to counter-insurgency. He encounters a world where nothing is as it seems. Friends are enemies, reconciliation is war, roads are bombs and silence is deadly. Nothing left to do except 'embrace the suck'...

...and blog about it. Matt Gallagher's response was to write an on-line journal (called Kaboom) which quickly went viral. Read by thousands of soldiers who recognised its unflinchingly honest portrayal of the real war, as well as high-ranking Pentagon officials and interested parties around the world, Kaboom was shut down by the US Army in June 2008. Now you can read the whole story, based on that brilliant, acerbic, banned blog. Kaboom paints a shockingly original and uncompromising portrait of a savage war the world is still struggling to understand.

KABOOM

EMBRACING THE SUCK IN A SAVAGE LITTLE WAR

MATT GALLAGHER



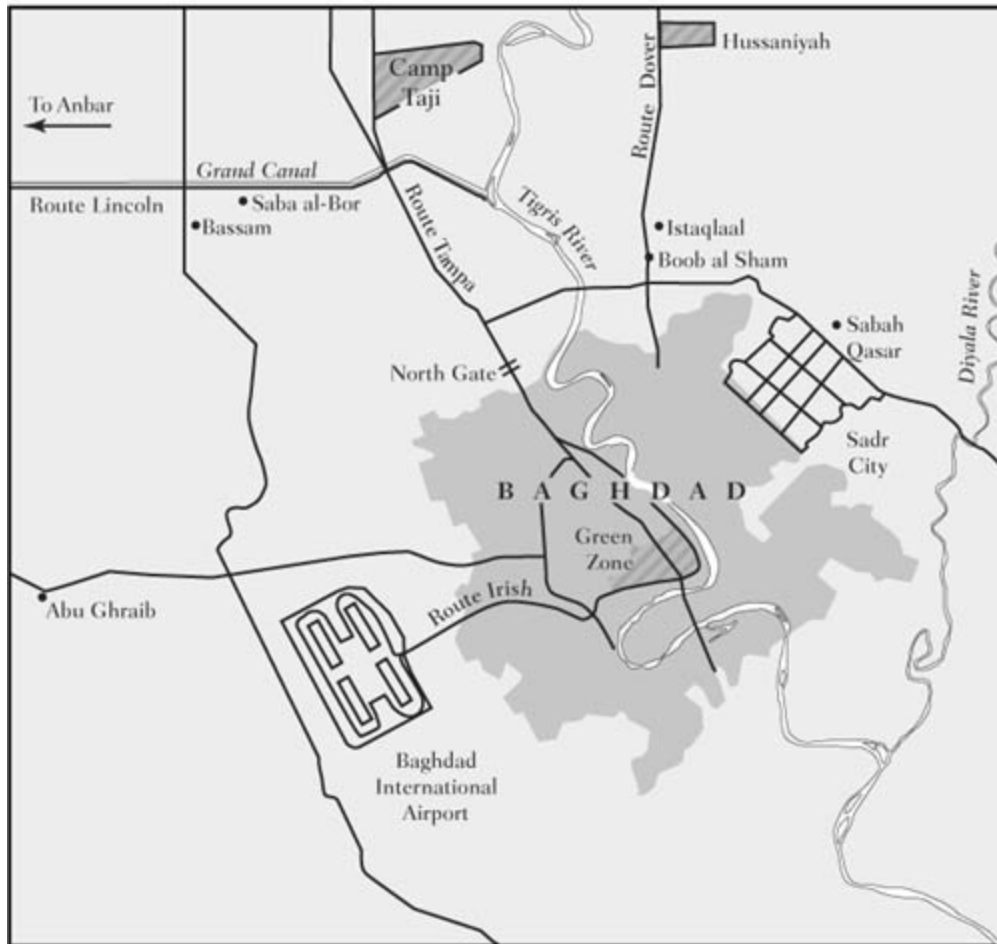
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*For my mother,
Deborah Scott Gallagher*



MAP OF IRAQ



MAP OF BAGHDAD AND SURROUNDING AREA

INTROLOGUE

"White 1, dis, uhh, White 2." Staff Sergeant Bulldog's deep Southern drawl crackled over the platoon radio net, stirring me out of my early-morning haze. Our senior scout's distinctively dry twang was laced with undertones.

"Send it, 2," I responded.

"Dere's ... well ... I don't really know how to say this, so I'm just gonna say it. Dere's a dog at the car dat blew up last night. And he's licking at something, all crazylike. Prolly whatever's left."

"Huh?" I was still fighting through sleep-deprived grogginess.

"Yep. My gunner's confirmed it. Da dog be eatin' Boss Johnson. Or at least what's left of him."

Staff Sergeant Boondock's voice now boomeranged across the net, ringing with hysterics. "Holy fuck, Bulldog, this is straight mafia shit!" There was a brief pause, and then he continued. "Think I'll be able to bust Cultural

Awareness out on one of the hajjis now?" he said, referring to the stun gun he carried on his ammo rack. He hadn't yet found an opportunity to unleash it on anyone but bored soldiers back at the combat outpost, and we were all waiting for the day that some Iraqi did something to warrant its electric kiss. As was often the case, Staff Sergeant Boondock's words were as accurate as they were profane: This killing belonged in a Chicago mob war, circa 1929, not here, in whatever this was, circa February 2008.

We had moved out of the combat outpost to conduct an area reconnaissance in a neighborhood where a local sheik—the aforementioned Boss Johnson, nicknamed like everyone else around here to keep the litany of individuals straight and to avoid butchering Arabic names with American tongues—had been blown up the night before. Armored military vehicles were damaged, and occasionally destroyed, by improvised explosive devices (IEDs), rockets, and mortar rounds. Human beings in shabby, fake Mercedes targeted for a hit job with such weapons got catastrophically mutilated into flesh soup.

Our principal mission for the day was to engage the local populace, attempt to prevent acts of reprisal between the Sunnis and the Shias, and learn if anyone would let us taciturn Americans in on who or what was responsible for this murder. Had it been a cell of foreign al-Qaeda terrorists? A renegade band of insurgents aligned with the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) paramilitary? Another prayer bead on the death string of tribal warfare? Or had it been just another act of personal retribution, free of any grandiose political or social statements? Questions, always more questions, I thought. Never enough answers. The real problem was that in the eight hours since the explosion—so loud that our security elements at the outpost miles away had heard it—not one local individual had dared venture onto the street. This, coupled with a morning wind racing in from the south and a pale desert glow shaping the

village, sparked in my mind cinematic imagery of the strutting cowboy posse, unaware of how much red needed to run before the movie could end.

After all, I thought, every good story has a climax. Even the true ones.

With the local population either unable or unwilling to help us complete our primary task and purpose, I decided to turn to our secondary mission for this patrol: information operations. We dismounted from our vehicles and poured into the trash-ridden streets and alleys of our provisional home, a village fractured by the sectarian divide in the northern limits of Baghdad Province. The locals called it Saba al-Bor. My men facetiously referred to it as Paradise. We put up posters and leaflets that stressed peace and cooperation and urged the local population to avoid the temptations of religious violence. That was Higher's great fear: Boss Johnson's death could possibly augment the rift between Sunnis and Shias that already sometimes degenerated into late-night shoot-outs between rival Sons of Iraq checkpoint groups, also known by their Arabic name of Sahwa and more accurately described as security gangs paid by Coalition forces. The propensity of the Iraqi police (IP) and the Iraqi army (IA) to do the same only exacerbated the incessant effort for one quiet night without violence, an objective that would likely become more unobtainable come spring when the fair-weather fighters returned.

The threat of civil war still loomed over Iraq like the ghost of an heiress bride killed on her honeymoon, haunting the lover who murdered her. And although all of the words on the handouts were written in Arabic, it was fairly simple to decipher the messages being put out. The one with a very alive and very happy Boss Johnson standing next to the Iraqi flag, with his arm around other Sahwa leaders, proved to be my soldiers' favorite.

"This one says, 'Figure out which one of these bastards killed me, and you can have the billions of dinar buried underneath my house!'" Specialist Flashback cracked, as he plastered a poster onto the side of a falafel shop.

"That's pretty funny," Sergeant Axel said. "Mine says, 'At least the guy from *Scarface* got to die with a mountain of cocaine on his desk. All I got was this lousy tee shirt.'"

The platoon roared in approval. "Stay on task!" Sergeant First Class (SFC) Big Country yelled, but by the inflection in his voice, I knew that the soldiers' imitations had amused our platoon sergeant. He was just too professional to let them know that.

As we finished up the operation and prepped for a loudspeaker broadcast to be transmitted from the back of one of our armored Stryker vehicles, Private First Class (PFC) Cold-Cuts strolled up next to me.

"LT [lieutenant] G ... I feel kind of weird."

"What's up?" This was nothing out of the ordinary; PFC Cold-Cuts wore his emotions on both sleeves and had looked sheepish ever since we rolled out into sector.

"I don't know, sir, he's ... dead, you know?"

I nodded my head, conscious of where he was heading with this. I, myself, had been surprised that I felt no horror when I saw the remnants of the car and of Boss Johnson, even if his larger pieces had already been scooped up into locals' pots and pans for burial in the immediate aftermath of the car bombing. I doubted anyone ever got used to the sight of intestine bits hanging like Christmas ornaments from tree branches, but I hadn't felt compelled to express an emotion of any kind, really. There was just a nothingness, an acknowledgment of fact, an observation that my immediate environment had been altered slightly and had the potential to spiral into something more complex.



The remnants of Sahwa leader Boss Johnson and his vehicle, the morning after a car bomb planted underneath the driver's seat detonated. The Sahwa, also known as the Sons of Iraq, proved a valuable—if tenuous—ally for American forces fighting against insurgents.

PFC Cold-Cuts continued. "Heck, we just had lunch at his place last week."

I nodded again.

He slumped his shoulders in resignation. "I guess I just thought it'd be different, that's all," he said.

So did I, I thought to myself. So did I. As we mounted back up on our Strykers, I tried to remember the person who had come to Iraq, eager to shed himself in the name of something as amorphous as an "authentic experience." Is this what he wanted to find—a local guerilla lord blown into a potpourri of blood and guts because he did business with us, the much-vaunted and ever-present U.S. Army? I wasn't sure how he ... how I ... would have reacted to this situation.

I knew one thing for sure, though. He would have cared more than I did.

I spoke my platoon leader words and issued my platoon leader orders on the radio, just as I had for three months past and just as I would for many more months to come. The Strykers began to roll out. We had a mission to continue. Might as well start at the beginning of all of this, I thought, continuing my daydream to mental salvation. Fuck it, all I have is time.

Might as well.

**I: THE RED, THE WHITE,
AND THE EMO**
(OR AMERICAN BOY ESCAPES)

WINTER 2007-2008

Alright then, I'll go to hell.

—HUCKLEBERRY FINN

AMERICAN UNTITLED

I slept through 9/11. Both towers burned to the ground while I drooled on my pillow in my college dorm. I had decided to skip class that day, after a late-night video game marathon. Nine days later, I yawned along with most of my peers as the president asked for our continued participation and confidence in the American economy. He wanted us to keep shopping. So much for a generational calling for the Millennials.

At that very moment, most of my noncommissioned officers (NCOs)—young privates and specialists at the time—were busy mobilizing for war with an enemy yet to be determined.

I was drunk when we invaded Iraq, safe and secure and carefree in my frat castle. I was even drunker two months later, when President Bush declared, “Mission Accomplished.” True, I was in the Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) by then and probably should have been more interested, but the war—and by war, I mean the invasion, liberation, and occupation parts—was only supposed to last a few months. The United States didn’t do protracted conflict anymore, not after Vietnam. Shock and awe and the Powell Doctrine and all that.

So while I did keg stands and waged war on sobriety, American tanks were screaming north across the sands of Iraq, destroying everything that moved, with a harrowing expertise the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse would envy.

The first free elections in Afghanistan? Yeah, I don't even remember those occurring. I was gallivanting across Europe, hooking up with wild French girls and waking up in strange, ancient cities. My Puritan forebears probably wouldn't have approved.

Despite my own temporary, youthful irreverence, the conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq continued. America's brushfire wars of the early twenty-first century did not require an engaged populace, and as a result a weary but rugged warrior caste evolved. This caste represented less than 1 percent of the total population it fought, bled, and died for—deploying to combat for months, or a year, or a year plus at a time—multiple times. Soldiers died, or they didn't; their families crumbled under the strains of deployments, or they didn't. Such proved to be the burden of the all-volunteer force. Meanwhile, the greater society followed our president's battle cry and continued to shop, squander, and flaunt. A nation at peace, a military at war—a military I joined, through a series of haphazard and bizarre events viciously under-quantified and oversimplified by the word "life," as a young armored cavalry officer in the spring of 2005. Two and a half years later, I departed for an Iraq War preparing to enter its fifth year of blood bursts.

I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. History was happening.

I was born into a class, in a time, to a people, in a place where someone else's sons and daughters served in the armed forces. While I wasn't a politician's boy or a spurner of old money like in the fables, a child of two lawyers still qualified as a Fortunate Son in most parts of the world. I was raised in that curious subculture of Americana enslaved to emo music, new friend requests on Facebook, and lots and lots of Internet porn—part of the generation that the "An Army of One" slogan supposedly appealed to, due to our obsession with all things self. I didn't come from

the breadbasket of rural America or the urban ghettos like most of my men, and I didn't seek out the military for glory or for country. I came from the West Coast suburbs, modern white-collar contentment at its most gnarled and escapist, and happened to read too many damn books about soldiers.

But we all have our own stories of how and why we ended up in Iraq. And those stories don't matter nearly as much as the simple truth that we did end up there.

What we didn't know, even though all the old soldier stories say it clear as day, is that we would always be there, even long after we left.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

In the hours before we departed for Iraq, I sat on a couch on my back porch overlooking the sprawling Pacific blue, feet up, Guinness in hand. A bleeding orange sun cut a casual retreat across the sky, while the shadows and lights of dusk danced together in a fading embrace. If war was both hell and my immediate future, Hawaii had served as a tropical purgatory—a twenty-month stopgap wedged neatly between my youth and whatever it was that came after.

My immediate surroundings symbolized this stark juxtaposition between past and future rather pointedly. Sure, there were five or six empty kegs, pretty much guaranteeing that my housemates and I wouldn't get the deposit back—but there was also a too-full army-green duffel bag, stuffed with equipment and supplies, rigidly posting guard in the near corner. My baby blue 1974 Volkswagen hippie van—known as Rufus the Love Bus—was still parked in the driveway, but in the passenger seat lay seventy pounds of state-of-the-art body armor, augmented

with a weapons rack holding seven rifle magazines, a Kevlar helmet, and a pack of rock-hard Skittles.

I should have been contemplating various mounted and dismounted warfare maneuvers or dissecting the tactical mission details of the coming counterinsurgency fight. Those were the things good army officers were supposed to brood over on the eve of battle. My mind, however, was clogged up with all kinds of civilian pollution—typical, prosaic, and beautifully, beautifully mundane. Like the kegs. And my family. And how I still sucked at surfing.

Like how I knew I couldn't deal with all the bullshit and still be there for my girlfriend, if she disappeared halfway across the globe for fifteen months and for reasons unknown, waiting for the plane to land and our lives to resume. Like how that was exactly the situation I was leaving her in.

Like God.

Like how cocaine always seemed to systematically destroy young Hollywood starlets' assets, which was totally selfish, because some of us were going to be relying on mental images of said assets for a while.

Like how the weekend before, getting drunk in Honolulu with the other lieutenants, I thought I was excited about all of this. "For God!" we laughed. "For country!" we cried, stumbling over one another. "For the Red, the White, and the Blue!" we howled, between the bars. We were nothing special; nor were our antics. This was the normal Friday night ritual for junior officers trapped in the tropical purgatory. Wild and free for the sake of being wild and free. I already missed it.

Like how I didn't want to die, but if I did, I hoped I could do it as a martyr, to appease the raging Celtic ghosts of my bloodline. Or as a swashbuckler, to satiate my cavalier tendencies and fantasies. Best yet, as a swash-martyr, to meet all of the above criteria.

My inner ravings continued, as I thought about pretty much anything that allowed me to escape the possibility that, give or take a metaphorical carcass or two, I'd bitten off more than I could chew with the whole Iraq thing. This temporary distraction eventually proved to be just that.

"Hey, dude, you almost ready?" I looked up at the screen door where Lieutenant Demolition, one of my housemates and a fellow platoon leader deploying for the first time, stood. "I just finished loading all my stuff into Rufus."

"Yeah," I said. "Give me ten minutes."

He nodded and shrugged his shoulders, yelling, "Bring on the Suck!" to no one in particular while he walked back inside. At least someone had freed himself from the quicksands of doubt.

I reached into my front pocket, pulled out a journal, and wrote a short passage. "Today is December 7, 2007. The anniversary of Pearl Harbor. I keep looking to the skies over Kolekole Pass, but the Japanese planes haven't come. I guess when you're bringing the fight to the enemy, the twisted romance in it all changes somewhat. Preemptive conflict may make sense, but it sure feels hollow."

I closed my journal and drank the last of my Guinness. Dusk had already blinked away into the dark, and if the sea was still out there, it now bled black. I stood up and grabbed my duffel bag from the corner.

Then we left for war.

THE GRAVEDIGGERS

"Sir, over here. We saved you a seat."

SFC Big Country stood up, waving me over to the table that he and the rest of the Gravediggers platoon had already secured. It was Christmas Eve, and I had raced down to the chow hall after yet another meeting of the

squadron officers. At the meeting, I learned that after days and days of weapons ranges and packing and unpacking and repacking shipping containers, we were finally going to leave Kuwait the next day—on Christmas—but telling my men could wait. It was time for family dinner with the soldiers.

It had been unnecessary for SFC Big Country to stand up to get my attention; I'd recognize the pride of Iowa anywhere. A corn-fed giant brimming with competence, military bearing, and a no-nonsense brand of Midwestern keenness, he had taken great care in training and shaping this cavalry scout platoon in anticipation of our deployment. He was a veteran of Afghanistan, and we were polar opposites both physically and temperamentally—something that allowed us to play off each other's personalities and leadership styles with ease.

"How was the meeting with the brass?" he asked, using a blanket term for anyone above the rank of major. "Any motivating speeches, or was it just another PowerPoint presentation?" We shared a deep-seated resentment for grandiose mandates and regulations that failed to pass the logic test at the ground level, a requirement in most of history's armies. Too often, as a platoon leader and a platoon sergeant, we found ourselves playing *dance, monkey, dance* for the grand camo circus, and we attempted to shield our men from this bureaucratic part of the army. We weren't always successful. Militaries need parades even more than they need wars.

I set my tray down and looked back at him, shaking my head. "The standards for the fleece cap have changed again. What constitutes 'cold' is no longer up to the individual; it can now only get cold when the sun is all the way down and the moon is all the way up, weather be damned. And yes, that somehow took forty minutes to explain."

My platoon sergeant didn't bat an eye. "Good to know they're worried about the important things the day before we go into Iraq."

Closest to the entrance and exit doors, we were at the near end of the table, and as I glanced down, howls of laughter erupted from the far side of our gathering. Staff Sergeant Bulldog, the platoon's senior scout, shook his head in mock disgust at the antics of Staff Sergeant Boondock, our other section sergeant. Sergeant Boondock was doing a not-so-flattering impression of a fobbit bitching about the perceived hardships of life in the rear. A fobbit was another comprehensive label that lumped together all noncombat-arms soldiers who tended rarely, if ever, to leave the safety of the FOB, or forward operating base. Other, older wars knew them as rear-echelon mother fuckers (REMFs), and POGs, people other than grunts (pronounced like "pogue"), terms that still found their way into soldier speak. As line guys, my platoon roared in approval as Staff Sergeant Boondock clowning his way through the parody. Even Staff Sergeant Bulldog broke down when his counterpart began to wail on about the horrors of a three-day laundry turnaround.

These two NCOs led through sheer power of persona, something they may have learned while serving together in Afghanistan as team leaders. A battering ram of raw power, Staff Sergeant Bulldog was revered by his soldiers for his straightforwardness. He legitimately scared soldiers—and officers—who didn't know him, but we all knew there was a teddy bear underneath the gruff exterior. A very wild and very burly teddy bear, but still a teddy bear.

"These goddamn, mother-fucking fobbits." Staff Sergeant Boondock had finished his impersonation and moved on to the commentary portion of his routine. "Leaf-eating REMFs, the lot of 'em. I hate them more than I hate hajjis. And that's saying something." George Orwell's walking embodiment of the rough man ready to do violence

on behalf of the softer and weaker, my junior section sergeant issued instructions with the deadpan earnestness of the American everyman. In addition to his time in Afghanistan, he had served as a gunner on a Bradley armored vehicle during the initial push into Iraq in 2003. Given some of the stories we had dragged out of him about the invasion, his jagged edges were more than understandable—and completely necessary given our vocation. Soldiers are trained to kill and kill well, and they tend to remember those that have tried to kill them.

“You’re always so full of hate, Sergeant,” said Sergeant Axel, a stocky Oklahoman and another Iraq veteran. “Let the hate out! You know you’re just jealous because we don’t work with females.” The combat branches of the army—like cavalry, infantry, and artillery—did not allow women soldiers. There were various reasons for this, such as the physical demands of being on the line, but most of my single soldiers seemed to believe it was because if the female soldiers were sent down to the cav, there’d be too much sex for any war to continue.

While Staff Sergeant Boondock and Sergeant Axel continued to crow back and forth—they routinely bantered like a married couple, on only the most trivial of matters—the platoon’s other two buck sergeants observed the exchange in amused silence. Sergeant Spade’s eyes darted back and forth like a wolf’s, always scanning, always prowling. Sergeant Cheech bit down on his lip, seemingly always on the cusp of interjecting, and pushed up his outdated army-issue glasses—affectionately referred to BCGs, short for birth control goggles due to their unsuccessful track record with the womenfolk, be they in the military or otherwise. Sergeant Spade was headed back to Iraq for his second tour, Sergeant Cheech, for his third. Like all of my NCOs—with the notable exception of the recently engaged Staff Sergeant Boondock—they all had left wives and children in Hawaii, most of whom had wept

hysterically when we left the base for the airfield some two weeks before.

Straddling the line between the sergeants and the soldiers was Corporal Spot, a baby-faced stoic from the Ohio countryside. He was so quiet it was sometimes easy to forget he was there—until you were reminded by a penetrating set of steely blue eyes, eyes trained expertly to execute the enemy from long-range distances with a sniper rifle.

Stuck between their leadership were the junior soldiers, better known as the Joes, ecstatic to escape the rigors and demands of daily military life if only for the extent of this meal. Making an enterprise as freakishly ginormous as the military go is no simple task, and no one understands that more than the junior enlisted soldiers who bear the brunt of it all.

“LT, I gotta question for ya.”

Between bites of glazed ham, I looked over at a grinning Specialist Haitian Sensation, a young foot soldier originally from Haiti who also served as the platoon’s resident weight-lifting expert.

“Send it, Sensation!” I responded, with so much fake zeal that it sent him into a fit of giggles.

Eventually, Specialist Haitian Sensation recovered and asked his question. “Smitty here says he’s more gangsta’ than me. What do you think?” Private Smitty’s claiming to be gangsta’ was almost as absurd as me being an authority on the subject; this native Arkansan loved huntin’, dippin’, and boozin’—in that order. Then again, Specialist Haitian Sensation read poetry by Maya Angelou in his spare time, so despite his love of hip-hop music and tough upbringing on the streets of Trenton, New Jersey, I wasn’t sure his claim to the label was exactly legitimate either. All the same, this unlikely duo were inseparable and fought like blood brothers. Private Smitty just smirked, shrugged his shoulders, and spat a wad of dip into a coffee cup.

“Don’t be askin’ da LT stupid questions over dere,” Staff Sergeant Bulldog said from across the table. “He ain’t got time for you alls’ bullshit.” Both Specialist Haitian Sensation and Private Smitty deferred, hiding their grins between bites of food. Like all of our men, these two soldiers worshiped the NCOs—sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of respect, sometimes because they didn’t know or couldn’t remember how to worship anything else. The army was, and has always been, built on this unique brand of instantaneous compliance—after all, it is the NCOs who teach soldiers how to listen to the instincts that lead to survival and to ignore the other instincts, the ones that lead to a small hole in the dirt of Arlington.

I looked across the table. “Does that mean I got time for your bullshit?” I asked, directing my question at Staff Sergeant Bulldog. Smiles spread across the table like a goodwill plague.

He laughed. “Shit, sir ... you bettah.”

Specialist Haitian Sensation and Private Smitty were certainly not the only odd couple in the platoon. Sitting right next to me was Doc, the Gravediggers’ medic, and across from him, Private Das Boot. Doc, a quick-witted and slightly round college graduate from Seattle and of Asian descent, and Private Das Boot, a gangly, ever-serious German American hell-bent on proving his mettle in battle, would soon be nicknamed “10” by members of the IP—Private Das Boot being the 1, Doc being the 0, so often were they found standing next to each other, planning their postwar trip around the world.

Then there were everyone’s favorite hetero-lifemates, Specialist Big Ern and Private Van Wilder. Snippets of their reciprocating madness drifted to our end of the table, causing even SFC Big Country to grin openly. As always, Private Van Wilder’s Texan twang paced the conversation, while Specialist Big Ern’s understated Carolinian accent was far more precise in its delivery.

“Why don’t you love me anymore, Big Ern?”

“You are such a homo. That’s why I don’t love you.”

“You’re my gunner, Big Ern! I got to know that you love me for me, no matter what! I don’t care how old and crusty and heartless you are, I love you. Tell me again what going to basic training with Moses was like.”

“Shut the fuck up, or I ain’t gonna let you sleep in the tent tonight. You’ll have to sleep in your (driver’s) hole, down in the Stryker, with all the other dumbfuck drivers who don’t listen to their gunners.”

“Can I take those fobbits with me?” Private Van Wilder asked, pointing to some overweight female soldiers sitting at another table, luckily out of earshot. “I love me some fat chicks ... I’m going hoggin’ tonight, boys!”

This exchange caused the table of Gravediggers to explode into laughter and applause. Eight years of college may not have yielded Private Van Wilder a degree, but it had helped perfect his ability to spin yarns of excessive debauchery.

Sitting on the far side of this verbal smackdown, near the aforementioned section sergeants, were the final four members of the Gravediggers: Specialist Flashback, Specialist Prime, PFC Cold-Cuts, and Private Romeo. Specialist Prime, a well-traveled former trucker who knew more about the American continent than Lewis and Clark combined, was going into painfully specific detail about the machinery of a Stryker’s engine with Specialist Flashback, my vehicle’s driver and another product of Main Street USA.

“Hooah,” he automatically responded to Specialist Prime’s prompts, using that ultimate army crutch word and unofficial motto: “Hooah” meant “yes,” “no”, “maybe so,” “fuck yeah,” “fuck no,” and “FUCK,” depending on the situation, the tone, and the user. In this case, I was pretty certain my driver was employing some subtle Iowan

sarcasm, but Specialist Prime either disagreed or didn't care. Their technical conversation continued.

Private Romeo, a smooth-talking Puerto Rican who had adventured as a professional dirt biker in a past life, was teaching a very interested Staff Sergeant Boondock and Private Van Wilder how to cuss in Spanish. Or how to admire a passing female's backside. I was too far away to tell for sure. Private Romeo had come to us just before we left Hawaii, and just like PFC Cold-Cuts, he had become a devoted family man very early in life. The Gravediggers' resident joker, PFC Cold-Cuts had taken years off of my NCOs' life spans, and the reason was simple: He was smart and capable and wanted to know the *why* of things. Not that that was a bad thing, but sometimes in the military there is no why, or there's no time for why. There's only time for mission execution. As a result, Staff Sergeant Bulldog had taken PFC Cold-Cuts underneath his very firm wing and tended to explain why as only he could: "Shut the fuck up and do what I tell ya to do. Dat's why." Even PFC Cold-Cuts couldn't find any holes in that explanation.

As I watched the platoon joke, clown, and ramble their way through the holiday dinner, I couldn't help but think about the country that had produced them. These were the men in the flesh that society only celebrates in the abstract. The NCOs had served in the army long enough to stop caring about the whims of the American culture they protected so effectively; the Joes were just removed enough to not fully recognize how the same society that reared us had detached itself from us the day we signed our enlistment papers. In a volunteer military, we fought for the nation, not with it.

SFC Big Country issued guidance for the evening's preparations to the junior NCOs, and then we stood up and exited the chow hall. Spirits were high, I thought. So was morale. It was a good day to be alive.

Such would not always be the case.

OUT OF THE WIRE

The first time I rolled out of the wire, I wasn't as nervous as I probably should have been. I'd woken up with a strange sense of calm that morning, something I attributed to the fact that I was going on a leader's recon and thus would be attached at the hip to the platoon leader whose unit we were replacing. It was still his show, and with the Gravediggers staying back at Camp Taji for the day under the supervision of SFC Big Country, the burden of leadership melted away like a renegade iceberg finding itself alone in the Caribbean. I was there to listen and absorb—a welcome break from my normal occupational hazards and duties. It was New Years' Day 2008, and my unit—the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division's Second Squadron, Fourteenth Cavalry Regiment—had arrived on the coattails of the surge.

"Most depressing New Years' ever," Staff Sergeant Boondock announced in the shower stalls that morning. "I should be recovering from a vicious hangover right now, swearing to God that I'll never fucking drink again. This fucking blows donkey dick." I was inclined to agree.

Rolling out of the wire was what we called going outside the relative safety of the FOB for missions—where those mysterious, ambiguous terms like *the enemy* were found and where daily updates became bar tales. I had my nose in a map, studying our area of operations (AO), while my counterpart lieutenant—of the First Cavalry Division—briskly answered my elementary questions with master's-level responses.

Captain Whiteback, the Bravo Troop commander, sat across from me in the back of the Humvee, smiling wickedly. He had gotten his nickname for being the only non-Hispanic on his Stryker, which included Specialist Fuego, a former and future Gravedigger originally from

Cuba. Like most officers, myself included, Captain Whiteback was just another gangly Caucasian. He didn't have to say anything; I knew I looked the part of the cherry lieutenant with my bright eyes, skinny frame, and general life awkwardness. I locked and loaded my M4 Carbine by sticking a rifle magazine filled with thirty golden rounds of kill into it and pulling back on the weapon's charging handle. The Humvee moved out of Little America and into the other Iraq—the one that was there before American soldiers arrived and that will still be there when we leave.

"You ever been to Mexico?" Captain Whiteback asked me over the mild roar of the vehicle's engine.

I nodded.

"Iraq is kinda like that, but with bombs." He paused momentarily and then smirked to himself. "And Arabs too. I guess there aren't too many Arabs in Mexico."

The scenery I glimpsed for the first time from the up-armored window was nothing new; it was the same Iraq I had seen on television for the past four years. With the stark atmosphere of a northeastern industrial city and the transient wandering of a mostly jobless population, our AO was everything I'd expected—desolate and deprived, too tired to hope, but too human not to. Knowing what to expect didn't keep my internal alarm system from blaring, however, whenever I made the mistake of remembering where I was.

The other lieutenant continued talking as we drove, pointing out schools, mosques, and various huts, tossing out many, many Arabic names, which I wrote down in my notebook with question marks next to them. I asked him about the sheiks, and he delved into the never-ending layers of grey involved in working with these men and the tribes and families they led, as well as the insanely complicated dynamic between the Sunni and Shia Muslims. There were capable leaders he told me, but there were corrupt ones, too. Some cared about securing peace; others

didn't. Some were motivated by money; others were obsessed with it. Much of the local violence occurred between the various groups with different interests vying for power.

"It sounds like the Montagues and the Capulets," I said.

He laughed. "It'd be easy if things were simple enough to boil down to just two families."

Rather than go all the way into our sector to the combat outpost, we stopped off at one of the outlying eastern villages for a meeting with one of the local sheiks. We dismounted, handed out some Beanie Babies to a swarm of overly friendly and undernourished children, and began to move into the sheik's house. The terp (soldier slang for interpreter) explained to us the source of the children's excitement—the accompanying Strykers, which locals referred to as ghost tanks due to how quietly the engines ran. Strykers aren't tanks, technically speaking, but no one felt compelled to correct the Arab children.

Inside the house, I met a group of Iraqi leaders, did a lot of listening and nodding, and drank my first glass of chai—nothing more than a hot shot of sugar. The other lieutenant received a call on his radio shortly thereafter, though, which cut the meeting short. We were needed for something a bit more kinetic in nature—a raid on a purported sleeping spot for a known insurgent.

He slapped his radio antenna. "I fucking hate fragos," he said, bitterness dripping off his words like hot icing. Over the ensuing weeks and months, the Gravediggers would become very familiar with this reactionary and fluid operational tempo. Change was the norm, and this norm was called a frago, short for fragmentary order. Trying to understand the whims and reasons behind the frago was like drinking from a fire hose: Fighting it only made things worse.

The raid turned up nothing but an empty room, a pack of wild dogs, and an old man holding his piss bag, but later