

# Home and Where the Heart Is

Robert B. Miner

**W**e touched down on Oahu at three in the morning, back home after a year in Iraq. The route we took to get there was ridiculous, from Kuwait, to Germany, to Ireland, to Alaska, then finally to Hawaii. For that last, unbearably long leg, I gave out some of the leftover Flexeril I'd gotten when the rear wheel of my truck hit that janky little pressure plate IED outside Balad. The explosion jacked up my back for about a month, but I still had a few pills left. I made sure Andy got one. He and his platoon had had a rough go, and I thought he'd benefit from the sort of deep sleep you get on muscle relaxants.

It's not like he was going to blow himself away on the plane. We all still had our rifles, sure, but we'd turned in all our ammo in Kuwait. I turned on my phone during the layover in Alaska and was giddy to see new notifications. I hadn't gotten a text since mid-tour leave six months prior. Smitty had started a group thread with Cooper, Andy, and me. He and Cooper were going to pick us up on base after the homecoming ceremony. Their battalion had been back for a few days, and they'd already retrieved their cars from storage. I showed Andy my phone.

"You see this?"

"Can't wait," he said, but he never took his eyes off the mountain range to the east.

I frowned. "Make me believe it."

He turned his head and showed me all his teeth.

The feeling when the plane's landing gear skidded on the concrete runway of Honolulu

Airport was so pure that I worried the time away had turned me into a caricature, rubbed smooth and raw. Breathing the damp, tropical air outside the airplane made me want to fall to my knees and kiss the ground, and if it hadn't been for my soldiers nearby, I might have.

Before we could see the friends and family gathered in B-Quad, we had to turn in our rifles, account for our sensitive items, receive a safety briefing—don't kill yourself, don't drink and drive, don't beat your wife, don't fry bacon with your shirt off—and finally get into formation and march in step in front of the temporary grandstands before we could be dismissed.

Andy and I, being single and childless, didn't have any sign-wielding family in the stands, but I shook hands with my guys, congratulating them on reuniting with their wives and sons and daughters. I loved my men, and I was truly happy that we'd made it back. Happier still to see them happy. But then there was a tug, something reptilian at the base of my brain. Andy and I shared a look and made for the parking lot.

Smitty and Cooper were waiting in Smitty's Jeep Wrangler. It was a little after eight in the morning, but we didn't blink when Cooper handed us each a forty of Old English malt liquor, a nip of Captain Morgan rum, and a Red Bull from the front passenger seat.

"Drink the neck, pour in the rum, then chug the whole thing as fast as you can. Drink the Red Bull when you're done," Cooper said. He turned in his seat, a wicked grin on his face. "I call it a 'Redeployer.'"

I poured the rum into the forty. After a year away, it didn't take long for the Redeployer to do its work. I checked into my hotel in Waikiki, already buzzing.

Whatever concerns I'd harbored about Andy's state of mind went away—he seemed

ready as anyone to enjoy our homecoming. He brought home a girl that first night, though that wasn't surprising. Andy was tall and muscular, and he had a face that would not have been out of place on a movie set. I'm sure he barely had to try.

Maybe there were some fights in those first few weeks. Cooper had a temper, and Andy's good looks and size made him a target for jealous types with a chip on their shoulder. Naturally we were comfortable with violence, and most of us were capable fighters.

And sure, Andy took it too far one night, and if we hadn't gotten him out of that bar, that unfortunate guy would have gotten a lot worse than a busted eye and however many teeth he was missing by the time we pulled Andy off him.

I couldn't have imagined there was another level to what we were doing. You figure nobody would drink harder than a few twenty-four-year-old lieutenants, back after a year of deprivation and hardship, with a little money in their pockets and an island full of beautiful tourists to fuck.

Then we heard that Drewski died. He hadn't just died, of course, he'd been killed. He had been stationed in Hawaii, too, in 3rd Brigade. They were in Afghanistan, scheduled to get back in a few months. Drewski was our friend.

The news broke on a Wednesday, and we went to Lulu's after work. The place was packed, and we formed a cluster near the bar so we wouldn't have to wait for drinks. We drank with startling determination. At first we didn't talk about it, but once someone mentioned Drewski, we started toasting him. Every few minutes, someone raised a bottle and said something, then everyone drank.

After a while, Andy's face became slack with booze, his skin covered in a thin film of sweat. His eyes went dead. It was scary to consider how much a guy his size must have had to drink to get there. Andy hadn't made a toast about Drewski yet, which was strange because they'd known each other since college.

Someone—I think it was Smitty—mentioned that he'd heard Drewski got shot in the neck. I'd heard the same thing. It was one of those pieces of information that never should have circulated, but it just appeared from the ether. Then Smitty said, "I just hope he took some of those fucks with him."

Andy put a big arm across Smitty's chest and pushed him. Not in an aggressive way, really, just sort of swept him out of the center of attention. Smitty wasn't a small guy, and he looked scared at being moved that easily. He stayed where Andy had put him.

Andy lifted his beer bottle up high. All he could manage to say was, "To Drewski. Fuck it. Fuck it all."

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A month or two later, I called Andy to see if he'd go out with me. The other guys were back CONUS, visiting with their families. Home held no appeal to me then. The girl I'd been talking to had ended things a few days prior, saying it didn't seem like I knew what I wanted. Maybe. Getting dumped clarified things, though. Now I wanted to go to a hotel bar we'd heard about where the women were supposed to be gorgeous, but the music was too loud to have a real conversation with anybody. I decided I needed Andy's powers—his height and his looks, his ability to walk into a bar and point at women and have them swoon.

"I need the big guy," I said.

"Can't," he said. "I've got PT at 0600 tomorrow morning."

"We've all got PT at 0600 tomorrow morning. Don't be a pussy."

"Sorry, buddy."

The total lack of amusement in his voice told me to leave it there, that he wasn't actually sorry. I hung up, and for the rest of the day I couldn't stop thinking about the look on Andy's face, the thousand-yard stare he'd worn on the flight back.

We hadn't talked much about anything that had happened during the deployment. That might seem strange, but it was still the early days. We just weren't dealing with anything head-on yet. I knew Andy's first RTO lost an eye when an IED went off during a dismounted patrol. A few months later, one of his guys was pulling security outside a key leader engagement with some fuck-o Iraqi police chief, when a guy wearing a stolen police uniform opened fire. They put him down, but not before Andy's soldier caught one in the cheek and one in the gut. Andy was holding the poor guy's belly, trying to stanch the bleeding, while he called in a MEDEVAC chopper. He wouldn't let anyone else touch him after the medic did what he could. The bird didn't get there in time.

Another thing kept us quiet: the unspoken hierarchy of the deployment experience. Anyone who raises their hand to serve signs a blank check for any amount up to and including their lives, but some people are asked to pay more than others. More than just unspoken, the hierarchy is ill-defined. It's as much about counting the number of enemies killed, friends lost, and explosions witnessed as it is about noticing tremors in a hand, signs of sleep deprivation,

and unexplained swells of anger.

Among my friends, I'd had the easiest deployment. They'd never have said as much, but that was my judgment. None of my guys had died. I hadn't been shot or stabbed. I came out of a year in Iraq well-read and with a bodybuilder's physique. The guilt I felt about not having had it harder told me everything I needed to know about where I stood in the hierarchy.

Even before I'd heard about Drewski or Andy's soldiers, I hadn't wanted to accept the Purple Heart. My CO insisted, but I just sat on the paperwork, and eventually he forgot about it. The IED that hit my truck had barely taken off the tire. Yes, my back hurt, so I'd gone to the aid station, but there were guys getting shot, really getting blown up, and in such close combat that they were getting knifed by insurgents. My little injury didn't rate.

On the occasions we talked about our experiences, I could contribute about innocuous things. I knew what 130 degrees felt like when you were wearing body armor. I knew the way a .50 cal smelled after it had been fired. When the conversation eventually turned to stories of real battle, though, I stayed quiet. It never felt like my place to add on. I never knew anyone who thought they'd done enough, but somehow that didn't change the way I felt. Pretty soon, my time in Iraq seemed like it had happened to someone else. I could talk about it, especially to girls, with the sort of calm detachment that's hypnotizing to civilians.

That fact gave me enough confidence to go out without Andy. When I got to the bar, though, it wasn't what I'd expected. The ceilings were tall and it was open to the sand and the ocean air—I could smell the salt. The room seemed infinite, too much a part of the world. There was music, but it wasn't loud—I could hear conversations. Then my voice, too, would be on

display.

My confidence gave way, and the ensuing tumble brought me to the square bar in the center of the room. I drank until I recovered some courage. On the other side of the bar, two women stood talking. One was short and pretty, one was tall and not as pretty, but she kept looking my way. I smiled at her, then she smiled back. I grabbed my drink and started making my way around the bar towards her. My elbow clipped the first corner and I stumbled a little.

In that moment, I wanted a good story to tell more than anything else, something to make the guys laugh, maybe even make them jealous. Maybe, I thought, I could get both women.

I made the second turn. The women were talking to each other, giggling, and not looking my way. I thought about what I'd say. I settled on, "Hi."

The tall woman, Eileen, did all the talking. Eventually her friend left, and Eileen put her hand on my arm. We kissed, and she tasted like tequila, and even though I don't like the stuff I had the strange thought that if someone could bottle a tequila that had been swallowed by a girl you were about to fuck it would sell through the roof. When I told her this, she laughed and kissed me again. I had another drink.

Then I was home, examining my cheek in the bathroom mirror. It was red and tender. I was having trouble standing, my brain swimming in a tar pit of absent memories. I was alone.

Too drunk to consider what I might have done differently, I jerked off into my toilet because I'd gotten used to doing it that way on the FOB. I fell asleep thinking about how I could turn my failure into a funny story for the guys.

The next morning, stopped at a light before the highway on ramp, I opened my car door and vomited onto the street. It wasn't the first time that had happened in the past few weeks, but it was the first time I felt no relief afterward.

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Our battalion commander showed us the new OPTEMPO for the brigade during a training meeting a couple of weeks before Christmas. For a mainlander, Christmas in Hawaii was a weird time. People strung multi-colored lights through palm trees, and everyone said *mele kalikimaka*. Not once did it feel like any Christmas I remembered, except when Lieutenant Colonel Brand talked through the three-year deployment calendar, and our battalion was nowhere to be found.

I turned to Andy, ready to nudge him in the ribs and celebrate our good luck. We'd done our platoon leader time—the best job we'd ever have—at war, and we wouldn't have to suffer through another deployment in some bullshit staff job.

Andy's face didn't betray any of the emotions that I was feeling. He looked almost bored, as though none of the information was new to him, or at least he knew it didn't affect him. The meeting trudged along, a consistent drone of training schedules and performance metrics, while I wondered at the changes in Andy's behavior since we'd been back. He seemed no longer to have any enthusiasm for girls and booze and the other parts of island life that Cooper, Smitty, and I still prioritized. He showed up to PT formation already drenched in sweat. Gone was the thick, healthy physique that had caused us to liken him to a Grecian statue. In its place was a body, though still intensely capable, that looked as though the skin and muscles had been



wound tightly around the bones, with no room to accommodate an ounce of fat or joy.

After the meeting, Andy and I headed back towards our company area. We didn't talk. When we passed Chaplain Greene walking in the opposite direction, I neglected to salute him. He stopped us, though instead of scolding me for my lack of respect like another Major might have, he smiled.

"Is everything alright, Lieutenant Barrett?"

If Andy hadn't been standing next to me, I might have said, "No, sir. I'm worried about my friend." But Andy was there, so I lied.

"Sorry, sir. I guess I'm a little distracted. We just got the new battle rhythm. No more deployments for us until after we leave here and take company command, probably."

The Chaplain nodded and made a sound of understanding, though he gave no indication whether he thought that was good news or bad news. He looked at Andy, then back at me.

"It's a surprisingly complex bit of news to process, isn't it?"

"Sure is, sir."

"If you'd like to talk about what you're feeling, I'm always available."

"Thanks, sir. I'll keep that in mind."

I snapped to attention and saluted. He returned the salute, then patted Andy and me on the shoulder as he passed between us. Seeing Chappie seemed like a sign, a reminder from God that I didn't have to tackle whatever was haunting Andy by myself. By the time we reached our company area, I hadn't figured out how to tell him I was worried, but I knew I had to.

The post-deployment battle rhythm was maddeningly slow, so my platoon finished all its

allotted work by ten o'clock. I spent the next hour deep in thought, while Sergeant First Class Lewis kept the guys busy by cleaning the barracks and conducting hip-pocket training.

In thinking about how to help Andy, I thought about a lecture I attended back in college. Our ROTC program was able to book Paul Bucha, and our Officer in Charge was loud about what a coup it was to get him. Bucha won the Medal of Honor as a captain in Vietnam, for actions during a battle in 1968. He received the award in 1970. After the Army, he had enjoyed success in business, government, and philanthropy. His was the sort of life to which every officer aspired.

He was not, as I expected him to be, shy about sharing the details of his time in Vietnam. Even if he had been, all of us in the audience had read his citation. Outmanned and outgunned against an enemy unit nearly four times their numbers, Bucha led his soldiers through a full day of intensive combat. He sustained a shrapnel wound but never slowed down, never stopped leading from the front. He called in artillery support, treated casualties, sustained the defensive positions by distributing encouragement and ammunition, put himself in harm's way to call in rescue helicopters, and even single-handedly destroyed an enemy bunker with grenades. Then, of course, he led the element which rescued the dead and wounded.

He could have stood in front of us still and silent for an hour, and I believe we would have paid him the same sort of reverence that we did by virtue of his talent as a public speaker. It was an unbelievable talk. For thirty minutes he held us rapt without a single note card or glance at his phone. He stalked back and forth while he spoke, as lithe and handsome as a jungle cat. He must have been well into his sixties at the time, but I'd have followed him into battle then and there.

Near the end of his speech, he paused and looked over the small group of us. He looked

to be reading the passion in our eyes, the rabidness of our youth. When he continued, he spoke in a tone more measured than before.

"We're conditioned," he said, "to seek out the guy with the most medals on his chest. We see a stack of fruit salad on a uniform, and we assume that's the officer who has it all together. He's brave, he's capable, he's seen some shit.

"All that might be true. But what about the officer who doesn't have any of those fancy medals? What about the leader who was in the same position as the first guy, but he was so thoughtful, so disciplined, so buttoned-up that he never had cause to be courageous in the extreme? Isn't that the leader we should want to emulate?"

He took a step closer to our seats. I leaned over my knees. With the distance between us diminished, I saw him in greater detail. And even though my initial impression of his charisma and his sharpness remained unchanged, I noticed something new. His eyes, constantly searching, were too pleading to simply be watching for signals that we were engaged by his speech. They were desperate for a spark of understanding.

Back then, I wondered at what had driven him out. He seemed poised to shoot through the ranks on the sort of trajectory that should have put him in the Senate one day. Back then, I didn't get how a Medal of Honor could end a career.

I left for Andy's office early, about 11:30, hoping I could catch him before he left for lunch. I wanted to suggest we eat together, maybe grab some Popeyes and shoot the shit. I hoped that at some point during the meal I would find a way to give voice to my concerns in a way he'd be willing to hear.

Andy wasn't in his office. I poked my head around the corner to the area where his platoon sergeant worked.

"Hey, Sarge, you seen Lieutenant Grady?"

Sergeant First Class Baxter looked up from the work on his desk and used his pen to indicate the quad behind me.

"Went for a run, sir."

I forced a laugh.

"You not working him hard enough at PT?"

Baxter shrugged. "Colonel Burke said that for a shot at Regiment, he'd need to get his two-mile time below twelve minutes. Tough for a guy that big without working overtime."

"Regiment." I blinked. "Ranger Regiment?"

Baxter gave me a look meant to make me feel stupid for asking. There was only one real Regiment. He said, "I think he's planning to put in his packet at the end of the month."

Despite the distress I felt at having news about my friend broken to me by someone else, I forced another smile and thanked SFC Baxter. Back in my office, I tried to remember the last time Andy and I had had a real conversation. Was it before we got back? Maybe over a pair of shitty cigars, sitting in the shadow of the concrete barriers that protected our sleeping quarters from mortar fire, desert grime still caked over our faces from that day's mission. In those moments, I had never felt closer to anyone, yet now it was like I didn't know him at all.

Among other things, a transfer to the 75th Ranger Regiment meant he would leave Hawaii for Georgia, well ahead of schedule. It meant rapid-fire deployments to Afghanistan. It

meant I'd read everything wrong.

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Cooper, Smitty, and I met for dinner at a crummy Italian place with a two-for-one deal on bottles of wine. Dinner had been Andy's idea, but he was going to be late. The three of us ordered four bottles knowing that, whether or not it was Andy, someone would drink the fourth one.

"Who the hell would want to leave this place before they had to?" Smitty asked. He filled everyone's wine glasses to the very top. "After the Career Course, I'd suck a dick just for the chance to come back."

We laughed. Cooper nodded.

"Fort Benning is going to be a rude awakening after this."

"In the 75<sup>th</sup>, he'll spend as much time in Afghanistan as he does in Georgia," I said.

The truth of that settled on the table. No one responded right away. Instead of lifting my wine glass, I bent over and put my lips to the rim to avoid a spill.

"You think he'll stay in?" Smitty asked. We knew Smitty was a lifer, fourth generation West Point, who had probably never entertained a life outside the Army. But, maybe because he had lived it as a kid, seen the ins and outs, he never romanticized the life of a soldier. He was happy to live a silly little life with Cooper and me for as long as it was defensible to the brass.

Andy then came through the door wearing the first earnest smile I'd seen on him in a long time. The grin persisted after he sat down.

"I guess we're drinking," Cooper said, pouring wine into Andy's glass.

"Cheers to you, buddy," I said.

"Thanks boys." Andy drank half his glass and showed an email from Human Resources Command on his phone. "I PCS in two months."

"You're really ready to leave all this?" Smitty asked. He must have meant Hawaii outside the walls of the half-empty restaurant, but for a moment it seemed like this was the self-imposed expanse of our experience. I wondered if I'd ever learn to surf, or whether hiking the lush Hawaiian mountains in search of hidden waterfalls would ever appeal to me.

Andy refilled all our glasses and said, "Ready or not, here I go."

It was one of the last times we'd all be together. Andy and I aren't close anymore. There wasn't a falling out or anything, it's just what sometimes happens with Army life. It's like being on one of those metal carousels on the playground, the ones that go way too fast to be a kid's toy. At some point you let go and the thing sends you flying towards God knows what. You almost never land in the same place as the people you were riding with. Down the line there would be weddings or a big football game that brought us to the same place. But we were married then, or had kids, so were never really alone enough to be with one another in the same way.

Andy seemed happy, and he drank with us like before, when being reckless had felt uncomplicated and fun.

"You can't believe the training capacity they've got down there," he said through a mouthful of pasta. "I talked to Colonel Burke about it, and he said they never have to do any dry-fire bullshit or beg for resources."

“Woop-di-do,” said Smitty, rolling his eyes. Everyone laughed, including Andy.

“And the gym—it’s like a D1 football facility. Did I show you pictures of the gym?”

“The tan beret’s going to look good on that big ass head,” I said.

Andy clapped a huge paw on my shoulder and smiled. My skin tingled from the ambient energy of his excitement. I leaned back in my chair, and I knew right then I wasn’t going to stay in the Army past my initial commitment.

According to Facebook, Andy’s out now, too, living somewhere in Texas, working in oil and gas. He left the Army after his time in Regiment, which included two more deployments over three years. I always wondered what he saw the third time around.

On the sidewalk outside the restaurant, we hugged and said our goodnights. It was a balmy evening, and my stomach was bloated with mediocre Italian food. Cooper and Smitty took off in the Jeep for their place, leaving Andy and me to ourselves. The shimmering orange sun sunk behind the top of a high rise like a scoop of sherbet. Andy swatted at a mosquito.

Honolulu wasn’t quiet, exactly, but the space between Andy and me was still.

“You want to get a drink?” I asked. I meant it mostly as a joke.

But Andy grinned.

“Yeah, man. Let’s get after it.”

Pleased, I threw a hook at his ribs. We walked until we heard music and happy voices, and we pretended we were young in the way we had been for a little while longer.

**Robert B. Miner** is a New York City native, West Point graduate, and occupational dilettante. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in, among others, *Consequence*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *J Journal*. His work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He lives in Kansas City with his wife, two kids, and a dog, but you can find him at [www.robertbminer.com](http://www.robertbminer.com).