

BRIAN DUCHANEY

The Man I Killed

I woke up at 4:45 to take a shower and dress into my uniform, an old one from a couple of days ago that was hanging off the chair by my bookcase. All the starch was out of it and there were small grease stains visible on the pants. Sitting on my bed, I flipped through the TV to absent-mindedly watch the news while lacing up my boots, not bothering to polish them. I reached into my fridge and pulled out a half full Gatorade from Monday night's basketball game, grimacing against the awkward tang of citrus and toothpaste. Groaning my way to my feet, I picked up and attached my pistol belt, shoving my sunglasses into one of the ammo pouches. The sun wasn't up yet, but it would be by the time I got back.

The side door clicked open as I made my way out to the parking lot towards the soft top Humvee that we kept in the lot for such missions. Opening the door, I threw my helmet on the passenger seat and sat down on the cool canvas seat, which was a bit soggy from the morning dew. Turning the ignition switch to "start", the truck shuddered as the diesel engine whined, then finally turned over to a soft rumble. Once I shifted into drive, the truck rolled out of the barracks parking lot and lurched toward the mess hall.

I was early. I had enough time to walk through the kitchen, where soldiers in starched white cook's uniforms were preparing meals fifty servings at a time and transferring them into insulated olive-green plastic containers. Since the cooks weren't done getting everything ready, I walked across the waxed, burnt orange colored floor, past a row of ovens and stainless steel prep tables.

The double doors swung open wide as I entered the service line. Making my way over to the 50-gallon coffee urn, I grabbed a white Styrofoam cup, filled it up (no sugar), and snapped on a lid. It was still only 5:30, so no one was in having breakfast yet. Looking

around at the empty tables, I walked over to one of the mounted TV's to see some of the baseball highlights that were playing on ESPN. After seeing that the Red Sox had won a close game against the Blue Jays, I walked back through the serving line to the kitchen to wait for my soldiers' breakfast.

After all seven food containers had been loaded into the back of my Humvee, I drove out of the mess hall onto Riva Ridge Loop and turned right onto Second Street. The sun was beginning to come up over the long hill in front of me and I fumbled in my ammo pouch for my sunglasses. In my lane further up to the right, a platoon of soldiers was running down the street. All were in uniform: gray Army T-shirts, black Army shorts, fluorescent yellow safety belts. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the familiar sounds of cadences were clearly recognizable. Passing the formation and the few stragglers, who were being motivated by higher ranking sergeants screaming for them to "get their ass up to the front," I took a sip from my coffee, being careful to avoid any bumps in the road, and continued down the street on my way toward the firing ranges.

After passing through the post gates, I crossed over Route 26 and made my way through the back entrance of the airfield. Beyond the chain-link fence that ran next to the road, the old water tower with its white and red checkerboard paint job could be seen rising above the trees. The red was rusty and looked more like a dark maroon, and I wondered how often they kept up with the painting. Continuing forward, past the large vehicle wash racks, the pavement ended. Crossing the bump in the road, I tilted my coffee cup to avoid spilling coffee in my lap and passed a familiar sign. It was a white sign with red letters. It read simply: "DANGER—Live Fire Area".

Even though the trees cast long shadows on the road, I drove 40 mph instead of the posted 10 mph, zigzagging around the corners and kicking up dirt, singing to myself, trying to stay entertained in lieu of any music. Back where the pavement began again on Range Road, I turned right, following the fence around the back of the airfield and behind the control tower, about a half mile from the main terminal. I crested a small hill and turned left to the mock-up that our unit built as a training simulator in place of a real Iraqi/US base.

After the bright red gates (which I previously bought at a tractor supply company in town) the road made right angled paths preventing anyone from driving with too much speed. Entering the compound, I could see the dozen tents arranged two by six on plywood platforms that were in my inventory of supplies. They were supplies to me, but soon they would be home to another batch of soldiers who were preparing for war.

The set-up of the field never ceased to amaze me. For the two weeks that soldiers spent out here, our unit maintained a realistic setting. Soldiers alternated pulling security at the perimeter of the compound 24 hours a day, even though we were still in New York. The soldiers didn't salute officers. The members of my unit and our sister unit, who were in charge of training, even played Muslim prayers over loud speakers five times a day. Every aspect of the field was meant to simulate the real thing. Soldiers were walking around, rifles slung over shoulders, muzzle down, readying themselves for the day by washing under portable showers and utilizing field latrines. Passing the water buffalos, 500-gallon capacity water coolers mounted on trailers, I turned right, passing the tents on my left, and up a hill towards the designated mess tent. I drove over the bumpy terrain of sand and roots and pulled up next to a skinny pine tree. I opened up my door and yelled over the noise of the Humvee to a young private: "Hey, can you guide me in close?" Because of the lack of a rear-view mirror, and the dim light of the morning, I wanted to make sure I could get close to the tent without any damage. Plus, it would make moving the meal a lot easier. I shifted into park, put on my soft cap, and stepped out into the sand.

"Good morning, Sergeant Adams. Breakfast is here."

Smiling, he said, "Aren't you supposed to have a helmet?"

"I do," I said, returning his smile. "It's on the front seat. Where do you want this stuff?"

"You can just leave it there. We'll have a couple of these guys move it."

I left the troops in the field eating their breakfast of eggs, bacon, oatmeal and bread and made the twenty minute ride back to post. I arrived near our company headquarters just in time to see the rest of my unit finishing up their stretching from the morning's scheduled run. I beeped the feeble horn of the Humvee, waving at everyone who was stuck doing PT. I turned left and drove the half-mile past the scattered rows of other barracks. They were two story buildings with open floor plans that were shabbily converted and used as individual housing. Though the stairs and patios had been fixed, with either new pressure treated wood or dark stained pine, the buildings retained their aluminum siding. The buildings alternated powder blue, green, tan, and cream and included little carved signs out front that had names such as "Pine Ridge" or "Glen View". After securing the steering wheel with the long cable and steel padlock that was tucked under the seat, I walked across the parking lot and looked left at the horseshoe pits and putting green that lay between the loop that the road curved around and made. I thought to myself how bad the putting green was. It was rocky, and instead of the plush turf

found at the golf course, it was just regular grass. The only difference was that there was a cup with a tilted flag sticking out of it. Seeing this, I made a mental note to try and get out of work early so I could go into town and play nine holes before dinner. I walked toward the side door, skipping up the steps. Once I got inside, I went back to my room and changed into one of my clean uniforms. I brushed off my boots, but I didn't bother to put any polish on them. I knew they'd only get dirty again. Before putting on my coat, I went down the hall to shave and rinse the fine dust out of my hair that had blown in it while in the field.

I left my barracks again, this time feeling a little more professional and put-together. I got in my truck and drove over to the breakfast lodge. It was usually quieter than the larger mess halls on post, and though the food was a little worse, it was easier to take something and leave. I toasted myself a bagel, wrapped it up in a paper towel, and walked back outside to my truck. My unit was just coming back from PT. I said hello to those who were close by. I got into my truck, rolled the windows down, and turned up the CD player. It was still before actual working hours. I decided I'd drive out to Dunkin' Donuts and pick up coffee for my office.

I got into the office at about 9:30 with coffee for Sergeant Major Harper and Lieutenant Colonel Donnelly. They insisted on giving me money, but I wouldn't take it. LTC Donnelly asked, "What are your plans for the day? We need to sit down and go over the unit list for the 20th. Will you be around?"

"I should be Ma'am" I replied. "I have to run into Watertown and pick up some lumber at Home Depot, then I have to pick up some paperwork. I should be back by twelve."

SGM Harper added, "Well, if you're coming back at twelve, would you pick me up a salad at Wendy's? I'll give you money when you get back."

It was moments like this that made me think of my service as a joke, probably because I knew I was safe. My role was support. Even though I had my bosses, I really didn't answer to anybody. If I were back later than expected, I wouldn't get in trouble if I told them I went to the mall to pick up a DVD. As long as I could be found when they needed me, I was ok. "No problem" I said. "Just call my cell phone and remind me, would you?"

It was about one in the afternoon when I got back to my office. SGM Harper was gone, so I put her salad in the refrigerator. I turned around and walked outside and across the gravel parking lot from my office to Matt's to beg some DVDs off of him. I was tired from getting up early and I knew I'd feel guilty about leaving work early, so I decided to just waste some time at the office. I could clean out my desk. I could finally take care of the inventory of body armor that had been piled up on the

conference table in my office. I turned the corner of the building and saw Corey's truck parked on the lawn outside. The grass still smelled sweet from when I cut it the afternoon before. Cutting the grass was a nice escape from the office. It got me outside and I could listen to my iPod and still call it work.

I walked up the steps and pushed the door open, hearing the door scrape across the floor. I called out into the empty room, "Sergeant Ricci? Parker?"

"Yeah, we're out here."

I removed my beret and threw it on a table in Matt's office. It was cluttered with computer parts, wire snips, and cables. Grabbing a Styrofoam cup, I poured myself a cup of black coffee and walked out the side door to find them taking a cigarette break.

Matt was standing with one hand in his pocket, flicking his cigarette. Corey stood on the other side of the back steps with his beret in his hand, slowly rocking back and forth on his heels. Without interrupting their conversation, I grabbed a cigarette from Matt's pack on the railing and lit it, listening to them talk. I was standing on the wooden platform outside the door, looking down on Matt and Corey. Corey looked up at me and shook his head, noticing my puzzled look. Squinting from the sun that was coming over the roof of the building, he asked me, "Did Ricci tell you yet?"

"Tell me what? I just walked over here?"

"One of our guys got hit."

"What do you mean hit?"

Corey exhaled and said, "We lost one of the guys we sent over."

Matt continued, "One of the dudes we just sent over got fuckin' killed." His southern accent didn't have a trace of emotion. He was just stating a fact. Mark peppered his speech with swears the way a girl in high school says the word "like". Though he was 38, he still had chipmunk cheeks. These were emphasized by sunburn. Matt lit another cigarette using the remnant of the one he was finishing. He kept the new one in his mouth while he ground the ash off of the old one, putting the butt into his pocket. Exhaling a fog of smoke, Matt said, "The guy didn't even get a chance to get his boots dirty." We talked for another twenty minutes or so. Corey's ringing cell phone interrupted our talk of what we guessed the possible consequences might be. I left Matt and walked back over to my building, completely forgetting why I went over there in the first place.

I spent most of the afternoon at my desk, surfing the internet for items to buy and following the e-mail traffic that the unit was spreading about, confirming what we knew and speculating about what we didn't. There were e-mails about praying

for CPT Alvarez's family. There was one from our commander about the loss of one of our soldiers, of reaffirming the mission of the unit, that we needed to carry on with business as usual. Every time the desktop flashed a new e-mail reminder on the screen, it always continued to show the subject line as "CPT Alvarez". I sat at my desk, with my boots up on the mahogany and my hand moving the mouse about the screen, from websites back to the e-mails. For each new e-mail that I read, the content shifted from everyone's personal opinion or insights, yet the subject line remained the same.

As I sat at my computer, I thought back to last week, at all of the times I made a run for Corey when he couldn't get to something. We had roughly the same jobs. We dealt with the same people. The only difference was that he handled individual soldiers that would be lumped together, while I handled larger units, either coming from or going overseas. Lately, it had been a lot of units coming home. I would get an e-mail a few days in advance and usually meet a unit representative a few days before the unit arrived in order to coordinate transportation, appointment times, specific supplies, and sometimes awards. All I had to do was authorize what they needed, and that was it. For the most part, I only dealt with people who were happy to be coming home. I heard about what soldiers planned to do. Where they were going. Stories they shared in the desert (we had one soldier who "lost" a uniform because of an "accident". He smiled when he simply said, "I had to go.") Most of all, I heard stories of the first thing they'd do when they got home. Drinking. Screwing. Sleeping. Just hanging out. I heard about futures after the war. Corey, on the other hand, dealt with soldiers who were heading out. He heard what people were leaving behind. He heard the sacrifices. I didn't realize the difference until I saw how hard he took the loss personally.

I began to feel guilty. I thought about one time when I helped out during issue procedures at the Central Issue Facility. I recalled a time when they were shorthanded, and, against regulations, I offered to go behind the counter to help speed up the process. It was Saturday and I knew the staff was working overtime to help us. Lisa, the manager of CIF, said it was no problem, as long as her boss didn't see anything. I made my way around the long counter towards the stainless steel bins of uniforms. Facing the long rows of chairs filled with soldiers, I checked their equipment inventory, looked for the size uniforms they needed, and would hand over the appropriate sized desert uniform: four tops and four bottoms. I usually didn't make eye contact. I remember, over the noise of soldiers talking and gear being thrown around, that I'd take the sheet, glance at the rank, address the soldier, and hand over his gear. "Hi, Sir. Four Medium Regular tops. Four Medium

Regular bottoms. One helmet cover, desert. Okay,” I’d say, as I signed off on the issue sheet. “Try those on. If they fit, pack it up and slide down.” It was like all the other processing I did. It was repetitive. I’d see the name, but never bother to connect it with a face.

I looked up toward the row of skinny gray lockers beside my desk, the type that resemble gym lockers at a YMCA. They were full of dents, scratched up, and mostly off balance. I had pictures of my nieces on the side facing me. While I looked up, I realized that I could pick up my phone and call them any time I wanted. I wasn’t worried about a seven-hour time difference or, worse, the remaining months that I would have to wait to see them. I could take the time and drive home the five hours whenever I felt like going home. Looking back at my desk blotter, I saw a list I had made that afternoon of things I wanted to get done that day. None of it got done. All I’d really accomplished was picking up some packing boxes, getting myself coffee, and picking up some uniforms for Corey. I looked over my list, but I wasn’t focused on it. Instead, I was trying to remember who CPT Alvarez was.

I couldn’t remember him. The more I tried to picture him, the more the faces of others blurred together. He was just another person that blended into the other faceless soldiers that I ended up sending into harm’s way. I thought about some of the people I got a chance to talk to. They were real, but they were all faceless. There was the one guy in his early 30’s, slightly graying and bulging a little in the middle. He told me he got reprimanded for carrying around a “medic pack”. It was nothing more than bandages and general first aid supplies, yet he got in trouble because he was handing out aspirin. He told me the only reason he had it was to help out the people around him. There was the young private, who was too skinny and wore ugly brown military issue glasses. He was concerned about where he’d find cigarettes. There was another who told us of his eight kids, even though he wasn’t much older than 35. I spoke with taxi-drivers, businessmen, teachers, lawyers, college students, stay-at-home moms, and all other walks of life. All of them had sacrifices to make. And all of them are a faceless blur.

I was snapped out of my daze around four when Colonel Donnelly called me into her office. She was sitting at her desk, leaning back in her desk chair with her hands buried in her red hair. I sat on the corner of the Sergeant Major’s desk on the other side of hers. “What’s up?”

“By now, I’m sure you’ve heard.” She let out a soft sigh and raised her eyebrows, a sign I recognized as her trying to shake off fatigue. “I just came from a meeting with Colonel Wood, and first thing is we’re not supposed to mention this to anybody. I don’t know too much of what happened, but I’ll fill you in when I do find out. I’ve

got to go pick up my daughter from day care, so you can take off for the day. If you want, come in late tomorrow since you had chow duty this morning.”

“Okay, Ma’am. Thanks. Have a great night.” I walked back to my desk and picked up my belongings before walking out to my truck for the evening. I looked at my computer and noticed I was still receiving e-mails about what happened. By now, everyone knew what happened. Word gets around quickly when you have front line communication.

We knew three days before the press got the word and the television stations started reporting about a “fragging” incident. “Fragging” is another piece of military slang. It’s when a soldier kills a superior in the unit because of hate, jealousy, ill-will, or whatever reason someone could have for taking the life of someone on his own side. In this case, the sergeant that killed CPT Alvarez wasn’t even after him. CPT Alvarez, new to the country, had been getting briefed by his new CO in their billets. While the Captain and the commander were talking, this sergeant decided to drop a grenade in the window. CPT Alvarez was killed his third day in Iraq. And I’m partly responsible for him getting there.

After leaving the office, I drove back to the barracks. I walked inside, tired and worn out. The TV was on but it was silent, the volume turned down. Matt sat sideways in an armchair, still in uniform with a beer in his hand. Another person had his boots and coat off, but was lying on the couch, flipping aimlessly through the stations. I walked past them and went straight into my room. I changed out of my uniform and put on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. Sandals. Keys. Wallet. After I changed, I decided that I needed to go out. I didn’t want to see a uniform, a pair of boots, or our dilapidated WWII barracks. I put on my beat up Red Sox hat just so I wouldn’t have to look at my close-cropped hair. I walked out of my room, pulled my door shut without locking it, turned right and headed for the backdoor. Matt looked back over his shoulder towards me. He asked, “Hey, where ya headed?”

I paused to look over at the TV and then at Matt. “I just need to go out for a bit. I’ll be back in a little while.”

Matt was looking back toward the TV. “Alright, man. I’ll be here. Smitty and I are probably gonna grill if you’re gonna be around.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll be back by six.” I walked across the floor towards the back door. I pushed the metal door open harder than I had anticipated, so that the handle swung into the metal railing outside, making a loud, echoing “ping”.

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