

# Servant of Freedom

## Guy Choate

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We have a place, all of us, in a long story—a story we continue, but whose end we will not see. It is the story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, a story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend, but not to conquer.

It is the American story—a story of flawed and fallible people, united across the generations by grand and enduring ideals.

The grandest of these ideals is an unfolding American promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born.

—President George W. Bush  
January 20, 2001, Inauguration Day

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**A** *ugust 2011.*  
I am 29 and walking out of Checkpoint Charlie, the bar at the corner of Esplanade and Decatur just outside the French Quarter, and a block south of the New Orleans apartment I've been living in for the past year. I go to Checkpoint regularly, but not for a drink. About once a month, I enter through the catty-cornered door, walk through a host of drunken patrons, and when necessary, I walk slowly, very slowly past the mohawked gentleman with the four-foot python constantly readjusting itself along the man's shoulders. I try not to make eye contact with the serpent as its tongue flickers at its mouth and I assume it tastes the must of stale beer lingering in the air. Snakes are my worst fear, but I face it because Checkpoint Charlie houses my closest washer and dryer. Other than the snake's presence, I enjoy everything about this place where I sit on top of one of the five washers, reading my book and declining the joint I'm offered by the aspiring gutterpunks who use the laundry room as a place to loiter.

I pull my hot clothes from the dryer and cram them back into my big green Army duffel

bag I brought them in. They barely fit and when I hoist the duffel onto my back I can feel the heat of the clothes through the bag. I walk back through the bar, out the door, and turn north, behind a man and woman in their 40s holding hands. They're walking slowly and casually admiring the architecture on Esplanade, as tourists do, and I can't help but eavesdrop a little on their conversation. But just as I pass them, their tone shifts from vacation speak to something more serious. I hear the man ask when boot camp will start.

"He said the first day will probably be Monday," the woman answers. There is anxiety in her voice.

I think of my own mother and how concerned she was when I joined the Army at 17, more than half my life ago. My mom called it boot camp, too, even though I'd already specified that the Marines had boot camp, the Army conducted basic combat training. I wanted to comfort the woman as I would've wanted someone to comfort my mother, to tell her that it's hard, but that her son will survive it. And not only that, but he will grow almost as much physically as he will grow mentally. That she will be proud of him, but not as proud as he will be of himself on the day she comes to watch him march across the parade field at his graduation. And he will try to be humble, but he may not be able to contain his excitement as he is recognized in front of everyone as being an expert marksman. He'll want you to ask him to tell you about that day when he hit 36 of 40 targets and the drill sergeant slapped his helmet with a metal rod while saying "Good job, shithead." And it will be the proudest moment of the first 18 years of his life.

"Did I hear y'all say you've got one going to boot camp?" I ask.

The couple looks confused until the woman puts it together.

"Oh, no," she laughs, "I'm doing boot camp at my gym."

I've heard of the gym fad—"boot camp"—but I'm not familiar with it beyond that it's rumored to be as physically strenuous as the training I had at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I try to imagine Drill Sergeant Ziebarth kicking a metal trashcan across this woman's bedroom in the middle of the night and demanding she do push-ups in her underwear until she experiences muscle failure. How will she cope with low-crawling in the rain for two hours before being put to bed sopping wet, wrists and ankles bleeding from being dragged across the rocky dirt? In looking at her face, I know she will cry the first time Drill Sergeant Winstead makes her tell him that her family doesn't love her anymore and that's how she's ended up at basic training, learning to master a four-count exercise called "The Dying Cockroach."

"I guess that's what I get for eavesdropping," I say.

And then I step it out, somewhat embarrassed and eager to get home to fold my clothes before they are permanently wrinkled from being pressed so tightly in the bag. But just before I make the turn onto Chartres Street, the couple calls out to me.

"Thank you!"

"For what?" I call back, feeling the pull of the straps on my shoulders as I twist at the hip. But I know why they are thanking me. Everyone thanks me for it these days.

"It's because of guys like you that we can walk down this street tonight," the woman says as they catch back up with me. Me in my camouflage cut-offs. Me with my Army-issue duffel bag. Me with my clean-shaven face. Me asking about a son joining the military; a son they may not even have. I don't mean to exhibit so many clues that can be traced back to my time in the military, but it's hard not to sometimes.

"Glad to do it," I tell them. But that response makes me feel guilty in those final steps to my apartment. I feel guilty when I open the door and my dog is so happy I've returned, again. I

feel guilty as I dump my clean clothes onto my bed and begin to fold my boxer shorts in the way the Army taught me—into thirds and tightly rolled.

I've done nothing to ensure those people have been able to walk down the street tonight, so what right do I have to accept their thanks? But I can't say that to them. I can't shatter the naïve illusion they have regarding the hometown hero they think I am. They think we all are. I can't tell them I did it for the \$3,000 signing bonus. Or because college sounded terrible at the time. Or because it was the fastest way I could think to feel like an adult. I can't tell them I didn't join out of a sense of duty or patriotism. It would ruin the narrative they so desperately want to believe in. That we all want to believe in. The idea that war is still simply good versus evil. Or that it ever was. That the American position in any conflict throughout history has ultimately been in defense of our citizens' ability to walk down the street at night.

*December 1995.*

I am 13 and sitting on the brown carpet in the den of my parents' house. My mother hauls a basket of clean clothes from the laundry room to the couch I'm leaning against and she turns on the world news. I feel guilty because I know she's going to ask me to help her fold, but I don't want to. I am selfish. She asks, and I reach into the brown plastic basket and pull out a washcloth because they are easy to fold—halved, twice. On television, the news displays images of large, clumsy-looking tanks rolling through the drab mud and snow in Bosnia. I ask my mother what an ethnic cleansing is and she tells me people are killing other people solely for who they were born to be, not because of something those people had done. She tells me it's so sad.

"It's just awful," she says.

The news says we are going over there to stop them. I tell my mother I think it's stupid that we are going over there to stop them. I don't think it's our place to die for someone else's problems. I am young and proud of myself for having an independent thought. I ask my mother what she thinks.

While continuing to fold clothes, she tells me "You could have been born in Bosnia, instead of here, and that would mean you would be one of those people that were being killed for no reason. And I would want someone to come stop that from happening to you."

I find her answer to be unsatisfying and I make a note to try my opinion out on my dad to see what he thinks. I have no idea where Bosnia is. I ignore the globe in the next room. I ignore the National Geographic maps folded up on the bookshelf. I pull out a towel and feel its warmth on my hands before I fold it in half until it looks like the other towels in the back bathroom.

### *December 2000.*

I am 18 and standing at parade rest—arms folded and hands overlapped at the small of my back—with my battle buddy in front of Drill Sergeant Waltman at The Defense Information School, also known as DINFOS, at Fort Meade, Maryland. I'm taking the oral portion of my Phase 5 exam. If I pass, I gain the privilege of wearing civilian clothes around the barracks—I miss wearing jeans. I know the answer to the current question, which was on my study guide, but I sometimes transpose the letters of the guy's name, so I think hard before answering. The question: "What current Middle Eastern terrorist has both the initiative and the financial power to be a serious threat to America?"

"Osama bin Laden," I finally say, half thinking the answer is Omasa din Baden, because it

might as well be—it's not like anyone has ever heard of the guy.

"That is correct, soldier. You're free to wear your civies, but that does not mean you aren't still a soldier first, hooah?"

"Hooah, Drill Sergeant," I respond with the versatile Army word that means whatever it needs to in any given situation. And then I sign my civilian clothes out of storage before taking them back to my room and pulling them, tightly folded, from my green duffel bag. Just in time to repack them for my trip home for the Christmas exodus.

### *January 2001.*

On my 19th birthday, I get on a plane and return to Maryland to finish the Department of Defense's version of journalism school. A couple of weekends later, my friends and I acquire daypasses to make the short train ride into the nation's capital where we will join the crowds already gathering on the National Mall. Mashed shoulder to shoulder with strangers, I take photographs of a small boy in a thick coat on his dad's shoulders, waving a tiny American flag as newly elected President George W. Bush, whom I know nothing about, reaches the podium and makes his inauguration speech.

### *September 2001.*

I am 19 and in my first semester of college at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, sitting in an 8am, required Speech class when the guy sitting to my immediate right reaches down to his waist. He works as a camera man for a local television station, which explains his Motorola pager, the first piece of technology I've ever seen capable of sending or receiving a text message. He raises his hand to interrupt the young professor's lecture.

"I just got a message saying that a plane crashed into the World Trade Center in New York," he says.

No one knows what to do with the information. And a few people say things like, "That's terrible," but none of us seems to be too concerned. New York is far away from Little Rock. I wonder if I would have even mentioned the message to the class, had I been in his shoes. I can feel other students judging the guy for it. The professor goes back to her lecture but before too long, without raising his hand, the guy begins reading his pager aloud.

"Another plane crashed into the World Trade Center. America is under attack."

This time there is more concern from everyone in the room, but it still doesn't make sense to me, and I get the feeling it doesn't make sense to anyone. We all look at each other, trying to see how to act. Eventually, the professor goes back to her lecture and we finish class.

At home, I turn on CNN and watch the burning buildings, listening to speculations as to what happened. I'm lying on my dad's leather sofa, my six-foot body folded so that I can fit—knees bent, arms under my head. New York City is a place I've never been to and so it doesn't quite seem real to me. An attack on a building I've never heard of in a city I've never been to seems even less real. I embrace my freedom to fall asleep, as is customary after my Tuesday/Thursday morning class.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I roll over to pull it out. It's my mother asking if I've heard from the Army. She's nervous, and I feel important for a second because I'm a soldier. Because I am selfish. She tells me to go fill my car up with gasoline because people are saying we won't be able to for a while, and prices are being gouged. She can tell I am sleeping, and makes me assure her I will go fill my car up. Years later, I realize she wants my tank to be full so I can be sure to have enough gas to get to her. But when I get to the nearest gas station, the lines

are long, so I go back home.

### *October 2001.*

Just over a month after the World Trade Center folded down on top of itself—a pile of dusty metal and ash—my best friend from DINFOS, Stanis, e-mails me to say he is being deployed to Kuwait. It wasn't long before he ended up in Afghanistan to support the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain Divisions.

I get a B in Speech.

### *December 2002.*

I am 20 and folding a stack of black, Merino wool, v-neck sweaters—arms across each other, a fold on each side, then down—earning an hourly wage at Banana Republic at the mall. Setting one perfectly folded sweater down on top of the other, in descending order according to size, I am filled with a strange satisfaction at seeing them set just as I intend each time. A perfect stack. I watch as crowds of people, shopping for Christmas gifts, come into the store and pull a medium from the middle of another stack of sweaters, disregarding the precision with which the sweaters have been placed on the shelf. They are selfish, but I've come to accept it, and I take a certain pride knowing that I'll be able to fix them later, and also that they couldn't fix them if they wanted to.

At 9pm, I lock the doors and sing, *a capella*, the entire album of Better Than Ezra's Closer. My boss laughs as my cracking voice reaches from the front to the back of the store, and I walk to get the dust mop. When I'm finished mopping and we have folded all the clothes and put them in each of their places, the few of us still there walk to the parking garage together.

At the house, my new stepmother is going to bed, but my dad hits a button on the microwave to heat the plate of food they made for me. They make me dinner every night, and when I don't get home from work before they go to bed, I always find it on a plate in the microwave. Dad stands in the kitchen, across the bar from where I sit at the bistro table and he asks me how my classes are going. I tell him about getting an 'A' on my oral history project I did with his mother, whom we call Mum. He hands me my dinner across the bar as I slide him the transcript of my interview. While I eat, he reads, laughing in the correct places, and I am proud of myself, of my work. When he gets to the part where Mum tells the story of my grandfather, Pop, wanting to be propped up in a rocking chair on the porch when he dies, his laugh slowly drifts into quiet tears. Pop was in a lawsuit with his sister over some family land, and as long as he was alive, she had no chance of getting the land. He wanted my grandmother to prop him up in the rocking chair and tie his hand to a pulley, so that every time his sister drove by, she could pull the rope and his hand would wave to show her that he was alive and her fight was useless.

"This is good, son," Dad tells me. I act like it's nothing. As if I don't think about winning his approval with every move I make.

"Thanks," I say.

And then my dad tells me about his draft number coming up in the early 1970s. He watched it on television as his birthday—November 7—was pulled out of the big barrel like in a casual televised game of bingo. Pretty much anybody with a number below 100 was assured of being drafted and sent to Vietnam, while anyone above 200 was spared. Dad's number was 76. Pop told him that when the time came, Dad could go to Canada with his blessing to avoid going to Vietnam, which Dad found strange, given that Pop, with only the one eye, had volunteered for World War II, and had a strong interest in all wars. He'd read anything he could get his hands

on that had to do with the Civil War or the Revolutionary, or any other great battle in the history of mankind. But Vietnam was not the same kind of war, which must have convinced Pop that my dad had no obligation to fight in it.

"Vietnam," Dad tells me, "was a lot of people dying to perpetuate the ideals of a bunch of old generals and politicians who were stuck in the 1940s, politically and militarily, and who were invested in keeping the military-industrial complex humming." Still, he says he wouldn't have gone to Canada, had the time come, but it never did. The war came to a close before he had to go.

My grandmother didn't mention Vietnam in the interview my teary-eyed father had just read, but I know this is his way of telling me he cares about me just as his father cared about him. In 1944, Pop reported to Camp Robinson, in North Little Rock where he served as a military policeman rather than shipping out for combat overseas because he only had one eye. He kept watch over a host of German POWs, who were clearly happy to be right there and gave him no trouble. After all, they were getting plenty of food, had a warm place to sleep, and some of them had summer jobs working on local farms. Pop had it made, in the rear with the gear. He said the prisoners knew that if they escaped and by some miracle found their way back to Germany, they'd end up on the Russian front, freezing and hungry, right up until the time they got their *ärsche* blown off.

Dad knows in less than two months, on the morning of January 8, my 21st birthday, when he should be out buying me my first legal drink at a bar, I'll report to Camp Robinson for the first leg of my nine-month deployment to Bosnia. He's also telling me that since I'm going as an Army journalist, I'll have it made, too. In the rear, with the gear. He's implying he would send me to Canada, if Bosnia in 2003 was anything like Vietnam in 1972. But it's not. Nor is it like fighting

in what will become my generation's wars—in Afghanistan and Iraq—wars that all my battle buddies will take part in without me. They will make physical, emotional, and psychological sacrifices without me, and I will be reminded of that every time someone thanks me for my service.

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