

By the Rivers of Babylon

Frank Richards

They had just passed through the city of Nasiriyah and were racing northwest along the highway beside the Euphrates River when their Bradley Fighting Vehicle broke down. After grinding to a stop along the left side of the road, Lieutenant Allen and his crew stepped out of the armored scout vehicle. The next Bradley in line pulled over, and Allen, with some reluctance, passed the troop's yellow guidon over to its crew. The second Bradley revved up and sped forward to lead the rest of the troop past them and on down the road toward distant Baghdad.

"Sergeant Johnson, you and the crew do what you can to get us back up and running while the scouts keep lookout." He motioned to their two scout observers and pointed to the Bradley's M240 machine gun. He didn't expect any action, but it would do to keep everyone occupied until their vehicle was fixed.

"We're gonna be here a while, sir." Johnson slammed an engine cowling closed. "I'll radio Regiment for a maintenance vehicle."

Allen groaned. He walked over to look down at the river. They'd been leading the troop, and now, here they were, stuck. Worse, left behind. He picked up a stone and tossed it into the river.

The first words of Psalm 137, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, and then that old Rastafarian song of the same name began to earworm through his mind. He sighed and tossed another rock. Might as well go down and dip my hand in the water, he thought. He imagined his mother telling all her friends down at the Zion Baptist Church, "He sat by the rivers of Babylon, just like in the Psalm, and

touched his hand to the waters."

No Mississippi this. The river itself wasn't that wide. He sidestepped his way down the bank, and then bent over, cupped his hands and dipped them into the clear flowing water. *By the Rivers of Babylon*. Something caught his eye there, on the stones of the riverbed. He picked up a mottled green arrowhead, bronze, about three inches long and held it up for inspection. This is probably from some ancient battle. Left here since biblical times. Maybe even earlier.

Allen looked past the arrowhead south along the river. In the distance a long trail of dust billowed into the afternoon sky. Could this be their maintenance vehicle? Sunlight, reflected from metal, flashed and glimmered at the bottom of the cloud as it approached. Then he heard noises, faint at first, but growing in volume. He made out the individual sounds of wagons rattling, chains clanking and horses screaming, neighing, and snorting. Chariots of soldiers raced toward him and then rolled on past. Each chariot carried a three-man crew, just like his Bradley. One man held the reins, steering, the second gripped a spear, and the third shouldered a bow and a quiver of arrows.

Hundreds of chariots drove by, heading northwest along the river. These were followed by rank after rank of an army on the march, stomping, tramping, raising the cloud of dust he'd first seen. Families followed alongside the soldiers. Fathers, mothers, wives, and children ran along the line, some saying good-byes, others shrieking in protest. A gray-haired woman dropped to her knees, sobbing, tearing at her clothes in despair as her son marched away.

Allen remembered how upset his own mother had been at his own deployment. He walked up to the column. "What's happening here?"

A soldier shrugged and stepped out of the line. He stood a bit taller than the rest. His black hair was tied up under a brown leather helmet, and his armor was made of tanned leather and some sort of wood, polished to a dull sheen. The man grimaced. "Every time we pass a village, it's

the same sight. If the males are older than fifteen, they are drafted into the army. Years go by and when they finally return to their village, their hair has turned gray." The soldier leaned on his spear and shook his head. "That is, *if* they return. Because up ahead," the soldier pointed with the tip of his spear, "there are battles where the blood of men flows like the sea. Yet still the emperor's heart beats only for war."

"Maybe I shouldn't complain. I'm a soldier, after all. Just like you. We must do our duty, right? But—" he paused. "Have you seen the plains up ahead, where we once fought and now will fight again?" His spear clattered to the ground. He grabbed Allen's shoulders and shook him. "Have you seen them? Well, have you? Littered with men's bones. Everywhere bones, nothing but bones. And soon, new ghosts will wail where old ghosts moan."

The soldier picked up his spear and hurried to rejoin the column, which gradually faded into the distance.

"Who was that you were talking to, sir?" Sergeant Johnson made his way down to the river's edge to join Allen. "I heard voices, but I don't see anybody."

"I wonder how many armies have passed this way before us, Johnson? How many battles were fought? How many soldiers died?"

"Who can say, sir?" Johnson shrugged. "We just got a call from Regiment. Maintenance will be here within the hour." He pointed at the arrowhead Allen still held in his hand. "What's that?"

"Old arrowhead."

"I used to collect arrowheads. Is that bronze?"

"Keep it." Allen handed the arrowhead to Johnson. "Let's get things ready for maintenance. We've got a lot of driving to do if we want to catch up with the troop."

Frank Richards served in the United States Army. He is currently working toward an MFA degree in fiction. Frank's short stories have appeared in literary reviews such as *The Menda City Review* and *The Penman Review*. Portions of *Soldier of a lesser War*, his novel in progress, have appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *Village Square* and *O-Dark-Thirty, the Review*.