

# **WARFLOWER**

A True Story of Family, Service,  
and Life in Alaska

**ROBERT STARK**

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Disclaimer: Memory is a tricky thing. So while this memoir is based on my memories, perhaps my memories are different from your memories. As the events which took place in this book become more and more distant they become more and more muddled, so I apologize beforehand if anything doesn't line up with the way you remember it. I would love to compare notes. Many names have been changed. All dialogue was recreated. Thank you for reading.

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The poem, "Look God" was written by my grandfather Joseph Moore, during his time in the Vietnam War.

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For Mother:  
Thank You for believing,  
Rest in Peace.







The color of the mountain this afternoon  
is tinged with nostalgia.  
The terrible war flower  
has left her footprints—  
countless petals of separation and death  
in white and violet.

— **T H I C H N H A T H A N H**

The difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real  
difficulty is to escape from doing wrong.

— **S O C R A T E S**

In a war, you don't necessarily hate the poor bastard  
on the other side. You don't even know him, though  
you may have a lot in common. You just go on  
fighting because fighting has come to be the way you  
live. The way your father and his father before him  
lived, maybe. You don't think about the morality of it,  
right and wrong, good and evil. You don't think at all;  
you don't dare. It might unman you.

— **T O M C L A R K E**





# PART I









**T**he sun was cool and my spirits high as wind blew my imagination from Italy to Iraq, from where I was to where I would be. The roar of aircraft on the runway was like Bering Sea waves crashing against boulders during a blizzard. It was so loud I could hardly think. I was one of a thousand soldiers packing my rucksack in a grassy field as fifteen C-17s taxied into position with enough fuel to fly to Iraq and back by breakfast. I was assigned to the tenth and final chalk, the one to be shot down if anti-aircraft weapons zeroed in. I was an eighteen-year-old airborne infantryman with grenades and mortar rounds overflowing from my ruck.

If only my family could see me now, I thought.

“Hey Stark, let me get a chew,” said John Sullivan. Sully was from a blue-collar family in Fontana, California. He boasted of his state’s revolutionary politics, and infamous bodybuilder, actor, and governor. He was five foot eight, a hundred and forty-five pounds with a crooked nose and a

cauliflower ear from bare-knuckle boxing. At times he acted thirty, but he was much older than me at twenty-two.

"I'm about to jump to my fucking death here and all you want is chew," I said.

He sneered. His name was cut from the jump roster and he was rightly pissed.

"I gave you enough dip the past two weeks to last a normal person six months," he said. "And this is the first time I've asked."

"You're a damn liar," I said, although he was telling the truth. I was constantly quitting.

"Maybe I am a liar," he said, "but right now I'm just a guy without a chew."

We laughed as I ran my fingers over the plastic lid in my cargo pocket.

"You didn't pack any?" I said. "You fucking cherry?"

"I packed five logs in my ruck," he said, shoving me. "But since command decided to send cooks, clerks, and pogues instead of SAW gunners—I accidentally left them in the barracks with my ruck." I shook my head and tossed him the can, he packed it without a pop. "I guess they don't think a SAW gunner is important during an invasion," he said. He carefully opened the can, fully aware of the strip of label I kept attached to the lid for good luck. He stuffed a plug into his lower lip, wiped his mouth of grains, and spit into a small pool forming between us before handing me back the can. I added more to my lip. I had known Sully for four months at that point; four months of spending everyday

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training followed by long nights partying. We were privates, we were brothers.

“You pack it like a girl, Sully,” said Brammer, stuffing a 155 mm mortar in his ruck.

“Go sprinkle some chew on your food, Shammer,” said Sully. We all laughed.

“Maybe I will,” said Brammer. “Tomorrow morning on the drop zone.”

“Fuck off,” said Sully, shoving Brammer. “You bastard.”

Brammer dipped so much it was a surprise he had teeth, which were relatively white and relatively straight. We called him Smeagol from Lord of the Rings, chew was his precious.

“Hey Stark,” said Brammer. “If we die tonight, at least we will die with a dip in our lips.”

I nodded.

“You guys are not going to die,” said Sully. “We’ll meet up in a couple of days. You’ll see.”

“What if we do?” I said. “What then?”

“You better have lived,” said Brammer. “Because we are nothing but *hajji* worm food after that.”

“There has to be more than this,” I said. “It can’t be the end, maybe just the beginning.”

Brammer laughed, “You are a stinking hippie, Stark. What you see is what you get.”

I shook my head, “Just because I believe in an afterlife doesn’t make me a hippie.”

Sully patted my shoulder. “I am from California, I know hippies, and you are definitely a hippie.”

They laughed.

“Fuck off,” I cinched down the straps of my ruck and tucked them in.

“It’s okay,” said Sully. “Brothers are always different. You, Stark, are the hippie, Brammer is pure white trash and I’m an intellectual who should be on the cover of Men’s Health Magazine.”

We nodded, laughed, and spit in the pool while the rhythm of a thousand men cleaning rifles, packing rucksacks, and preparing for battle happened all around. It was the scariest, most beautiful moment of my life up to that point. I stared at the row of planes and watched grass blow in the breeze.

“Are you guys ready for this?” said Brammer.

“For what?” I asked.

“War,” he said. We sat in silence for a second and thought. “They can call it whatever the fuck they want, but in the end—it’s all the same. We’re going to war.”

“I’m as ready as ever,” I said, keeping my shaky hands moving by field stripping my rifle.

Sullivan nodded and clenched his jaw.

“Let’s kill them before they kill us,” said Brammer, oiling his squad automatic weapon.

“I’ll fight to the death for you guys,” said Sully. “If they let me.”

“You’ll have your chance,” said Brammer. “Don’t stress about things you can’t control.”

“You guys are closer to me than my own brother,” I said. “I’ll do whatever it takes to for us to get home in one piece.”



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“Don’t get all sappy on us,” said Brammer, patting my shoulder, “you stinking hippie.”

We laughed as I shook my head and spit. I used a folded paper towel from my back pocket to wipe sweat from my brow. For some reason, I always carried one. I stared at the final aircraft, the one I would be loading up on, and wondered—In a few hours I will be in that plane flying toward Iraq. At least we will only be gone for a couple of weeks. What the fuck is going to happen? If I die, will I go to heaven, or will I be reincarnated?

“I can’t believe this shit!” said Sully. “They cut a fucking SAW gunner from an infantry squad instead of a cook. What, are they going to fry some fucking bacon on the drop zone?”

“They probably don’t even know how,” said Brammer. “Army cooks can’t cook for shit.”

I laughed, trying to make sense of things was pointless and potentially harmful.

“Maybe you’ll be glad you didn’t jump,” I said. “In case we die. You could tell the world what a shitbag Jerry Brammer was.”

We laughed as Brammer shoved me and grabbed me behind the neck trying to start a grappling match. I broke free and stood back, I’ve always been more of a pacifist than a fighter.

“I’d rather die with you guys tonight than live the rest of my life knowing I should have,” said Sully.

We nodded. My skin was covered in goosebumps, I was cold and afraid. If only my family could see me now, I thought.

“The recruiter didn’t lie when he said I’d travel,” I said. “I just didn’t think it’d be like this.” Brammer patted my

shoulder and clenched his jaw. He was twenty-three; two years older than my big brother, Brammer was the elder of our trio. After acing the entrance exam, he was offered any job the army had, but since he had fired his first machine gun at ten and knew more about weaponry than the master gunners, he traded an athletic scholarship to Duke for a blue cord and maroon beret. Infantry all the way.

Large speakers started blasting Outkast's "Bombs Over Baghdad" and soldiers began cheering and hollering. Bombs dropped on Baghdad while we prepared in Italy. Americans watched the news at home and prayed to Jesus. Iraqis watched the news at home and prayed to Mohammed. Private Brian, a white kid from Cleveland, started doing the crip walk while the black guys and Hispanics cheered him on.

Brammer shook his head, "Fucking wigger."

Sully and I shook our heads at his comment.

The song ended and somebody announced "Formation" over the speakers and the word was echoed by a thousand paratroopers shuffling towards the podium.

"Great," whispered Brammer. "I can't wait to hear this."

"Maybe he'll tell us why SAW gunners were cut," said Sully.

"Hurry the fuck up," yelled our team leader, Sergeant Debaser. "When a colonel gives a speech, you fucking double time." Everybody moved at the same speed as before.

Lieutenant Colonel Tunnell was an American of Nephilim proportions. Educated at Purdue and West Point—he had a baritone voice, muscular frame, and willingness to lead from the front. If there was ever a worthy man to follow, he was it.

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“Red Devils!” He hollered and raised a large black fist. We roared like thunder. We raised our fists, a thousand colors united under one flag. He continued, “We are doing for our country what millions of Americans have done before. We are taking the fight to the enemy. Saddam and his Regime have persecuted the Kurdish and Iraqi people for too long. It is genocide and we will stop it. The time has come to end his lawless disregard of humanity, and to take him down before attacks like 9/11 become nightly news.”

I replayed the news flashes of the towers being struck by airplanes and Americans jumping out of windows to their death. Firefighters carrying burn victims, searching through the rubble while everybody crying. The song, “Where Were You When The World Stopped Turning” played in my head, and I knew that my favorite country singer would be proud of me.

“Tonight,” he continued, “while your friends are drinking on a bar stool at home watching the nightly news, you will be making history. We will win this war! Not only are we tougher, faster, and better trained, but we are fighting for what is right.” We nodded our heads. “I will be the first man on the ground,” he said, “and I will fight beside each of you until I die a warrior’s death.”

He stood strong like a Viking, locking eyes with every soldier before raising his fist.

“Red Devils!” he yelled. “Follow me!”

We roared like Spartans as “Bombs over Baghdad” came on the speakers, and ordinary life became a movie.



**W**e loaded in buses that brought us to a dining facility for prime rib, lobster, and the works. We ate like it was the last supper. I was too young to die. After the meal, we laid on cots in an empty hangar that smelled like sweaty feet and ball sweat before returning to our rucks. Sully stayed behind.

It was colder, darker, and scarier than before.

“You ready?” Brammer patted my shoulder. I shrugged, grateful it was too dark for him to see my face. “Let’s put our chutes on and get this party started.”

Parachutes are issued by size, I am a size three, and so is Brammer. We took turns strapping each other in.

“I wonder how long we’ll be there?” I asked, trying to think quietly.

“Until the mission is complete,” he said.

“What mission?”

“To kill Saddam and take down the Republican Guard.” He tightened the shoulder straps as I winced. “Nobody

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knows how long it will take, so don't think about it. Let's complete the first mission and take it from there."

I nodded and raised my arms for the reserve. I put on Brammer's chute after he was done with mine. Burning in my lip was chew, burning in my heart was fear. It was the first time I felt like puking because I was so scared. My body shook uncontrollably. I tried to convince myself that I was keeping America safe but couldn't forget the millions of Americans who died in similar missions. Some guys put their faith in Jesus, others put their faith in Buddha, my faith was in my comrades. When it was not enough, I tried prayer.

"Okay, God," I whispered, "it's you and me." I spit. "Make sure I don't get shot out of the fucking sky, please. And watch over me while I'm gone. I swear to make something of my life when I return." I awkwardly made the cross and felt a hint of relief.

We hung our hundred-plus pound rucksacks and were inspected by a jumpmaster. Soldiers waddled to each other with rucksacks pounding knees. I could barely see their faces, but nobody looked scared. "Keep your feet and knees together," they said, or "see you downrange." I didn't understand why everybody called the place "downrange," but I didn't ask. I was the youngest person there and I sure as shit didn't want anybody to know I was afraid. Nobody mentioned enemy or death. I shivered like I was back home in Alaska only it wasn't because of the cold weather. Sully returned just as we were about to load up.

"I wish I could be with you guys, tonight," he said. "This is such bullshit."

“We’ll see you in a few days,” said Brammer. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Remember—jump as far as you can,” he said. “And keep your feet and knees together.” He surprised us with a two-armed hug. “You are my only brothers, so don’t fucking die on me.”

“Don’t get all emo on us,” said Brammer. “It’s not the time. Remember—bring a bunch of Copenhagen, we’ll be out by the time you get there.”

“Roger,” said Sully, sniffing. “I’ll see you guys in a few days.”

He patted our reserves, spit at our boots, and joined the formation of sulking soldiers scratched from the jump. I felt for them. We would earn a gold star known as a “mustard stain” on our airborne wings to show we jumped into combat, they would not. I struggled to stand straight with the weight of my ruck yanking me down. Grateful to have been transformed from an alcoholic, pill snorting seventeen-year-old to a strong, able-bodied eighteen-year-old in a matter of months. I felt like a man. A light rain began to fall as sweat ran down my hairless chest, to my privates, and down my legs. Airplane engines revved and it smelled like jet fuel and fresh rain.

“This is it!” I shouted to Brammer. “Here we go!”

“Our entire lives led to this moment,” he hollered. “Remember—chamber a round when you hit the ground then get your night vision ready.” I nodded. “See you at the assembly area.” We patted shoulders, clenched jaws, and shuffled to our separate chinks. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

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I waited in line for a final inspection at the tail end of the aircraft with my hands on my helmet and back flexed. The jumpmasters inspected every chute and reserve. The weight of the ruck, tightness of the parachute straps, and pain of the rifle digging into my hip were almost unbearable. Not to mention the stream of sweat running from my helmet to my boots. Hot wind from the props blasted my face, yet still, I shivered. I was ready to be in the fucking desert. I stared at an American flag hanging inside the plane wondering what was happening back home. The cheering had long ceased, the only sounds were my thumping heart and roaring engines.

After inspections, we waddled up the gangway to squeeze into narrow webbed seats with our rucks on our laps. A sigh of relief was echoed. An old woman with brown paper bags full of snacks and thank you cards from elementary schoolchildren said she would pray for us and then walked out. I hid my eyes. The ramp raised and doors closed, land disappeared.

Silence.

If fear has a taste, it is a combination of shellfish, ball sweat, and Copenhagen. Please—don't tell anybody—I was so scared I thought I was going to shit my pants.

As the plane began movement and lifted from the runway, we hollered like Vikings, Spartans, Americans—until leveling off at cruising altitude. All eyes went inward. Soldiers snacked, dipped, prayed. Lights turned off, everything became dark and cold. I still shivered yet stopped sweating.

I visualized my mother on the phone with her husband in

prison. I saw my brother pacing alone in a solitary confinement cell. Where was our father? What was he like? Would I ever hear his voice or meet him? I imagined my friends in Seward huddled around a bonfire on the beach drinking cheap vodka and laughing. Northern lights danced between peaks on a canvas of stars. They whistled to the spirits in hopes of being carried away to the land of lights. A meteor shot across the sky and they watched it until its tail burned out. They made a wish. Elliot, my sweetheart, wished for my return. I know she did. Elliot loved me when nobody else did. When my mother chose to love a murderer over me, and father chose to love nobody over me, and my brother chose to be the leader of a prison gang over me, Elliot loved me. Will she love me if I return, or remember me if I die? Will she remember the time we made a bed on her mother's living room floor and stayed naked for two days as snow fell outside the sliding glass door and VHS movies replayed on the television? I thought about Benny Benson, the Alaskan orphan who designed our state flag and was reminded that we can all do great things despite our backgrounds. I saw my history teacher's face when he kicked me out of the class senior year after I called him out for picking on students; I was making history while he was teaching it, the fuck stick. I recalled the first naked woman I ever saw when I was in fifth grade and my friend's mother changed out of lacy white underwear and stood naked staring at the blanket I hid under on the couch.

A jumpmaster shouted something I could not understand, breaking my concentration. It was pitch black and freezing,



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my heart pounded. Red lights came on above the doors and white lights in the walkway.

“Stand up, hook up!” The jumpmasters yelled from both doors.

Had we just taken off? I wondered. Had I been asleep? Was I dreaming? Holy shit!

I grunted and stood like everybody else with my left hand covering the reserve and right hand holding the static line attached to a cable overhead. I shook and listened to boots shuffle and people whisper the Lord’s Prayer.

“Check equipment!”

I checked every strap and buckle from chin to groin before the guy behind me slapped my ass and yelled, “Okay!” I smacked the guy’s ass in front of me and it was passed forward until the jumper in the door held his hand straight in front of the jumpmaster and yelled, “All okay jumpmaster,” and the jumpmaster smacked his hand and waited.

The doors opened and cold air rushed in. I was too far back to see outside but I could certainly feel it, and it was certainly not hot desert air. I shuffled forward, unaware of anything else on the planet. I had never been so present. If fear has a smell, it smells like Doritos, ball sweat, and Copenhagen. The plane nose-dived from cruising altitude to five hundred feet and our rucks became weightless. I stretched my back like everybody else, seconds turned into hours. The moment we leveled out, the red lights above the doors turned green and the jumpmasters yelled, “Go, go, go!” Guys in front were swept out the door as I shuffled forward

listening for gunfire. I slammed the riser in the jumpmaster's hand, turned ninety degrees, and tried to jump. But since my ruck was so damn heavy, I fell forward into pitch-black darkness, thankful not to hit the side of the plane.



I dropped so fast that I barely had time to struggle to keep my feet and knees together. I could not see the ground, so I had no idea when or where I would land. A single light in the distance terrified me; *hajji* was waiting to kill me. I landed in knee-deep mud without injury. Everything was soaked, but I was alive! I laid on my back, cut the tangled risers, removed the parachute harness, took my rifle out of the case, and loaded a round.

Here we go, I thought. Let's do this right, let's kill these bastards in the middle of the night.

I attached the night vision goggles to my helmet and made sure the carabiner was attached to the band. Two pick-up trucks without lights and a handful of soldiers were on the runway. My trigger finger shook outside the housing as I watched them. I assumed they were friendlies because nobody fired, so I continued to scan the muddy valley, surprised to be surrounded by rolling mountains and a nearby village. Hundreds of soldiers struggled to stand with their waterlogged rucks, others trudged slowly towards the runway. One soldier tried to lift his ruck over his head but

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couldn't because of the weight, so he grabbed a shoulder strap with both hands to swing it onto his back but lost balance and fell. He kicked the ruck, squatted with his lower back pressed against the hip belt, tightened the shoulder straps, and planted his feet to rock forward. As he stood and took a step, his boots became stuck and he fell forward trying to yank them out, punching the mud. Dozens fell with their feet stuck. The rain had been in the forecast, but nobody expected knee-deep mud.

It was my turn.

I pulled out the compass and shot a bearing to the northeast corner of the runway, towards my platoon's assembly area. Unwilling to pack my parachute into the aviator kit bag, I left it for whoever took Sully's place to collect in the morning, and using the back against hip belt/rocking technique, I surprisingly stood and began walking towards solid ground. Perhaps thirteen years of skateboarding and snowboarding were finally paying off. I had balance.

My boots sank over the top laces with every step. When I pulled one up to move forward, the transfer of weight drove the other one deeper. I struggled in slow motion, reminded of post-holing up snowy mountains with a snowboard in my arms and a backpack on my shoulders. I took my time. I passed soldiers lying behind their rucks where they stayed all night, many were frostbitten by morning. Grunts and grimaces echoed across the valley due to broken legs, broken backs, and other lesser injuries.

I walked beside two soldiers before they both lost their

balance and fell. They asked for help but I refused. I did not recognize their voices and could not carry their weight. I firmly believe in the power of momentum. A soldier approached on the south edge of the runway and startled me by shouting.

“Who you with, soldier?” he said.

“173rd Airborne Brigade,” I said, quietly. “1/508th, Alpha Company Second Platoon.”

“Speak up,” he shouted. “And it’s sergeant.”

I walked past him as he yelled at my back. At the northeast corner of the runway, I pulled out my compass to recheck the azimuth. I noticed two soldiers holding a fluorescent panel with infrared chem-lights arranged as my operation order explained. When I was within a few feet, my platoon sergeant whispered in his squeaky voice.

“Who you with, soldier?”

“It’s Stark, sergeant,” I said. “Private Stark.”

“I’ll be damned,” he said. “Golden Child—you quick, kid. Not as quick as me, though.”

“Roger sergeant.”

“Follow Corporal Corn,” he said. “He’ll put you in position.”

“Roger sergeant.”

Corn tapped my shoulder and pointed toward our invisible platoon before walking away at a near sprint, seemingly unaware of my heavy ass rucksack and minimal night vision training. I tried to keep pace but fell behind, almost tripping multiple times in deep depressions. Depth perception is nearly non-existent with NVGs. The moon and

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stars were hiding, all was dark besides a single terrifying light from the village. I finally noticed a dozen soldiers on their bellies in a large circle and realized that it was my platoon. I had completed the first mission, and I wondered about Brammer. Lieutenant Spencer knelt in the center of the circle whispering on the radio as his radio telephone operator lay a few feet away pulling security. Corn waited until the LT was finished then directed me into position at six o'clock with Specialist Reed.

I removed my ruck, put it in front of me then laid in a puddle that covered my torso, back, and entire lower body. Everything but my head and neck were submerged. Corn assigned me a sector of fire before racing back to the platoon sergeant. I was colder and shakier than before. Scared and relieved at the same time.

"You awake?" I whispered.

"My dick is going to freeze off," he said, with a thick Jersey accent. It was hard to understand him because he spoke so fast. "In fucking Iraq of all places."

"No, it won't," I snickered. "You heard about Brammer?" I asked. As a team leader, Reed had a handheld radio and knew what was going on.

"Nah," he said. "But since you're a private, put your poncho over this puddle so we can get out of the mud."

I didn't think it would work, but I was trained to follow orders. So with shaky hands, I removed the poncho from the outside middle pouch, and as Reed rolled on his side I laid it over the puddle. When he rolled back, he sank into the water,

and we were back in the same fucking puddle, only now my poncho was muddy.

"I swear to God my fucking dick is going to freeze off." He said, trying to get closer. "I can't feel it, man, I really can't."

"Your dick is not going to freeze off," I said, shoving him. "Quit worrying about it. I can't feel mine either."

"Really?" He said. "Don't fucking lie to me, Stark. I ain't got no kids, man. I would rather go home missing legs than missing my dick."

"The sun will rise in the morning and your dick will thaw out," I said. "Just calm down."

"I hope you're fucking right," he said, breathing heavy.

I scanned my sector while trying to resist thoughts. I wished I was in a warm bed with Elliot instead of a cold puddle with a guy I hardly knew. I searched my pockets for a can of chew but found only wet flakes, plastic shards, and mud. The can exploded on impact. I dug through my ruck and found two rolls in the same condition.

"Fuck," I whispered, I wanted to yell.

"Sup?"

"My cans broke."

"You should've packed them better."

"No shit."

"Give me a chew anyway."

I took a pinch of muddy chew mixed with plastic pieces and my burning lip revived me. Reed did the same. We kicked each other for hours to stay awake. I realized that being a real-life soldier is nothing like playing a video game. After

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hours of trembling, sunlight arrived with a hint of warmth, exposing barren mountains and the nearby village. Hundreds of soldiers squirmed on their bellies and backs in the mud trying to pack away their night vision. I didn't understand why we hadn't destroyed the village; I didn't understand the difference between Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias; I knew one word, *hajji*. The muddy field glimmered as I removed my night vision from my helmet, packed them into my ruck, and locked eyes with Brammer. We held up our dirty fists, clenched our jaws, and nodded. Our platoon sergeant and LT spoke for a few minutes as we waited in silence.

"Smoke 'em if you got 'em," said the platoon sergeant. "We're moving out, so pack your shit."

Reed lit a cigarette and I bummed one. Everybody smoked. We struggled to lift our rucks, even with help, especially one of my teammates, Private Loveall.

I had assumed that Loveall's first experience with physical labor was in basic training, where they waived his failed physical fitness tests because we needed numbers. He was six feet three inches tall and weighed a hundred and forty-five pounds soaking wet. Pale and frail with gangly teeth and pink eyes, he reminded me of a terrified snowshoe hare. He tried to stand with his ruck but his shaky knees buckled and he collapsed into the mud. He rolled around on his back and belly until his entire body was covered in mud while sergeants laughed and mocked him. I thought he would drown, but I didn't say anything—because I was the youngest and lowest ranking and I didn't want people to think that I was some

kind of a softy. His slow blinking eyes stared at the pale blue sky and he mumbled incoherently.

“Loveall, you fucking wimp,” yelled Debaser. “Stand up.”

“Get up, weakling,” shouted Corn.

“You’re a pathetic excuse of a soldier,” said our squad leader, sergeant Hollywood.

“I’m sorry, sergeant,” whispered Loveall, “but I can’t.”

“Stand up,” yelled Debaser. “You fucking pussy!”

“I can’t,” he said. “I just can’t.” Tears ran down his cheeks.

Our platoon sergeant shook his head in disbelief. “Sergeant Debaser,” he said. “You and Golden Child stay behind and help him.”

“Roger, sergeant.”

“Second platoon,” he held his arms straight behind him. “Form a wedge.” Forty or so mud-covered soldiers moved into a staggered wedge with lit cigarettes dangling from dirty lips. “Follow me,” he said, waving his left arm over his head. Everybody moved out.

Suddenly it was only Debaser, Loveall, and I, and I became terrified of being overrun by people from the village. Debaser continued yelling at Loveall; he made him look bad as a leader, he said. All Loveall could do was whisper apologies from a spread eagle position in the mud. No matter what was said, the poor bastard could not stand. I wished Debaser would just stop yelling.

“He can’t carry his gear,” said Debaser. “Let’s grab his ruck with one hand on the frame and move until we need a break.”

“Roger,” I said.



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“He can carry the rifle and AT-4,” he said. “Can you handle that, Loveall?”

“Roger sergeant,” he said. Mumbling with mud in his teeth, mud on his face, and mud on his eyelids.

Debaser and I took small, fast steps resting often. Loveall could hardly place a boot in front of the other without losing balance and falling over. I became furious. I told him that he should have stayed home or been a pogue because I was carrying his rucksack while Sully was stuck in Italy. It got to a point where he claimed he couldn't even walk, so we left him behind about fifty meters and waited. I had never seen a more pathetic and desperate person. We walked back to him, leaving his ruck in the mud. He was lying on his back staring at the sky with empty eyes.

“I can't do it,” he said. “I can't go on.”

Debaser was too angry to speak, he shook his head.

“Quit being a fucking pussy,” I said, spitting on his boots. “Get the fuck up!”

He could barely stand, and when he did he swayed like a tall tree in heavy wind. His glazed eyes moved from Debaser's to mine, Debaser's to mine, Debaser's to mine, before flicking the selector switch on his rifle from safe to semi and spinning it until the barrel pointed at his open mouth. I froze. It still haunts me that I froze. His eyes closed and his face winced as he slowly put pressure on the trigger. Debaser smacked the barrel out of his face and shoved him back into the mud.

“You fucking idiot,” he yelled. “You're too fucking young

to die! Give me the fucking AT-4." Debaser handed me the rifle and grabbed the rocket launcher.

"You're a real bitch," I said. "We just got here!"

Loveall could barely lift his helmet out of the mud to look at us. We walked away and he followed. We continued to stop and wait for him. After we reached our platoon at the road, I washed my hands and face and rifles in a mud puddle. Iraqi men with kind eyes and weathered faces gave us warm chapatis from a straw basket and hot chai. I was afraid of them until Brammer explained they were Kurdish and the entire reason we arrived. I was grateful for their company then and came to respect and appreciate the men in white turbans. I was happy that it was not raining, I was not shaking, and they were not trying to kill us. I learned to count my blessings. Debaser told the LT and platoon sergeant about the incident, I told Brammer, and the next day the Chaplain came to talk with Loveall and take him away to someplace warm, peaceful, and full of pretty women and tasty food, or so I imagined. It was the last time I saw Loveall outside of a dream, though I often wonder if his rifle would have even fired?