

# JARHEAD

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A MARINE'S CHRONICLE OF THE GULF WAR  
AND OTHER BATTLES



Anthony Swofford

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore





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1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

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DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBGING

Text set in Granjon

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Swofford, Anthony.

Jarhead: a Marine's chronicle of the Gulf War and other battles/Anthony Swofford.

p. cm.

1. Persian Gulf War, 1991—Personal narratives, American. 2. United States. Marine Corps. Marines  
7th. Battalion, 2nd. Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon. 3. Swofford, Anthony. I. Title.

DS79.74 .S96 2003

956.7044'245—dc21

2002030866

ISBN-10: 0-7432-5428-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-5428-1

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This book is for  
the U.S. Marines of Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon,  
Second Battalion, Seventh Marines,  
August 1990–April 1991

and

in memory of my brother.



# JARHEAD

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But if you want to go on fighting  
go take some young chap, flaccid & a half-wit  
to give him a bit of courage and some brains  
—EZRA POUND, *Canto LXXII*



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I go to the basement and open my ruck. The basement is in Iowa, after a long, harsh winter, and deep in the ruck where I reach for my cammies, I still feel the cold of February. We were supposed to turn in our desert cammies, but I kept mine. They're ratty and bleached by sand and sun and blemished with the petroleum rain that fell from the oil-well fires in Kuwait. The cammies don't fit. While in the Marines, I exercised thirty hours a week. Since I've been out, I've exercised about thirty hours a year. The waist stops at my thighs. The blouse buttons, but barely. I pull out maps of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Patrol books. Pictures. Letters. My journal with its sparse entries. Coalition propaganda pamphlets. Brass bore punch for the M40A1 sniper rifle. A handful of .50-caliber projectiles. I think of what I must look like to the late-night walker peering through the basement windows: the movie cliché, the mad old warrior going through his memorabilia, juicing up before he runs off and kills a few with precision fire. But, no, I am not mad. I am not well, but I am not mad. I'm after something. Memory, yes. A reel. More than just time. Years pass. But more than just time. I've been working toward this—I've opened the ruck and now I must open myself.

It would've been easy to sell my gear to a surplus store. After the war, when I spent most of my monthly pay in the bars in Palm Springs and Newport Beach, Las Vegas and Santa Monica, I'd steal a case or two of MREs (meals ready to eat) from Supply each week, and on my way out of town for the weekend I'd sell the meals for \$80 per case in an army/navy store in San Bernardino. And occasionally I'd steal more than meals. Or I wouldn't necessarily steal. Sometimes I'd happen along Sergeant Smith's ruck, and he'd be nowhere near, and I'd remember the saying *Gear left adrift, must be a gift*, and I knew that the ex-marine who ran the army/navy store would give me \$300 for the sergeant's misfortune.

So my ruck didn't have to be here, in my basement, six or seven moves and eight and a half years after my discharge. I could've sold it for one outrageous bar tab or given it to Goodwill or thrown it away—or set it afire, as some jarheads did.

I open a map of southern Kuwait. Sand falls from between the folds.

As a lance corporal in a U.S. Marine Corps scout/sniper platoon, I saw more of the Gulf War than the

average grunt. Still, my vision was blurred—by wind and sand and distance, by false signals, poor communication, and bad coordinates, by stupidity and fear and ignorance, by valor and false pride. It was the mirage.

Thus what follows is neither true nor false but *what I know*. I have forgotten most of the statistics and must look them up. I remember the weapons, though not their capabilities, so I must look those up as well. For the place names I refer to maps. For unit deployments and order of battle, I must consult published charts. I search through congressional reports and presidential statements at the Federal Depository Library. I remember most of the names and faces of my platoon mates. I remember the names and faces of some of their girlfriends and wives. I think I know who cheated and who stayed faithful. I remember who wrote letters and who drove their men mad with silence. I remember some of the lies and most of the questions. I remember the dreams and the naive wishes, the pathetic pleas and the trouser-pissing horror.

I remember some of the sand, but there was so much of it, I should be forgiven.

I remember about myself a loneliness and poverty of spirit; mental collapse; brief joyful moments after weeks of exhaustion; discomfiting bodily pain; constant ringing in my ears; sleeplessness and drunkenness and desperation; fits of rage and despondency; mutiny of the self; lovers to whom I lied; lovers who lied to me. I remember going in one end and coming out the other. I remember being told I must remember and then for many years forgetting.

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On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops drive east to Kuwait City and start killing soldiers and civilians and capturing gold-heavy palaces and expensive German sedans—though it is likely that the Iraqi atrocities are being exaggerated by Kuwaitis and Saudis and certain elements of the U.S. government so as to gather more coalition support from the UN, the American people, and the international community generally.

Also on August 2, my platoon—STA (pronounced *stay*), the Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon, scout/snipers, of the Second Battalion, Seventh Marines—is put on standby. We're currently stationed at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base, in California's Mojave Desert.

After hearing the news of imminent war in the Middle East, we march in a platoon formation to the base barber and get fresh high-and-tight haircuts. And no wonder we call ourselves jarheads—our heads look just like jars.

Then we send a few guys downtown to rent all of the war movies they can get their hands on. They also buy a hell of a lot of beer. For three days we sit in our rec room and drink all of the beer and watch all of those damn movies, and we yell *Semper fi* and we head-butt and beat the crap out of each other and we get off on the various visions of carnage and violence and deceit, the raping and killing and pillaging. We concentrate on the Vietnam films because it's the most recent war, and the successes and failures of that war helped write our training manuals. We rewind and review famous scenes, such as Robert Duvall and his helicopter gunships during *Apocalypse Now*, and in the same film Martin Sheen floating up the fake Vietnamese Congo; we watch Willem Dafoe get shot by a friendly and left on the battlefield in *Platoon*; and we listen closely as Matthew Modine talks trash to a streetwalker in *Full Metal Jacket*. We watch again the ragged, tired, burnt-out fighters walking through the villes and the pretty native women smiling because if they don't smile, the fighters might kill their pigs or burn their cache of rice. We rewind the rape scenes when American soldiers return from the bush after killing many VC to sip cool beers in a thatch bar while whores sit on their laps for a song or two (a song from the fifties when America was still sweet) before they retire to rooms and fuck the whores sweetly. The American boys, brutal, young farm boys or tough city boys, sweetly fuck the whores. Yes, somehow the films convince us that these boys are sweet, even though we know we are much like these boys and that we are no longer sweet.

There is talk that many Vietnam films are antiwar, that the message is war is inhumane and loo

what happens when you train young American men to fight and kill, they turn their fighting and killing everywhere, they ignore their targets and desecrate the entire country, shooting full automatic, forgetting they were trained to aim. But actually, Vietnam war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in Omaha or San Francisco or Manhattan will watch the films and weep and decide once and for all that that war is inhumane and terrible, and they will tell their friends at church and their family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base and Seaman Johnson at Coronado Naval Station and Spec 4 Johnson at Fort Bragg and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fighting, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man. With film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. It doesn't matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar—the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not.

We watch our films and drink our beer and occasionally someone begins weeping and exits the room to stand on the catwalk and stare at the Bullion Mountains, the treacherous, craggy range that borders our barracks. Once, this person is me. It's nearly midnight, the temperature still in the upper nineties, and the sky is wracked with stars. Moonlight spreads across the desert like a white fire. The door behind me remains open, and on the TV screen an ambush erupts on one of the famous murderous hills of Vietnam.

I reenter the room and look at the faces of my fellows. We are all afraid, but show this in various ways—violent indifference, fake ease, standard-issue bravura. We are afraid, but that doesn't mean we don't want to fight. It occurs to me that we will never be young again. I take my seat and return to the raging battle. The supposedly antiwar films have failed. Now is my time to step into the new combat zone. And as a young man raised on the films of the Vietnam War, I want ammunition and alcohol and dope, I want to screw some whores and kill some Iraqi motherfuckers.

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When the Iraqi army of Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait City, Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah flees to Saudi Arabia and establishes his government either in a Saudi palace or the Al-Dammam Hilton, depending on what paper you read. At a press conference on August 3, President George Bush calls Saudi Arabia, Kuwait's southern neighbor, a "vital U.S. interest." Defense Secretary Dick Cheney visits Saudi Arabia on August 5 and brokers a historic deal allowing U.S. troops on Saudi soil for the first time ever. On August 6 the UN Security Council passes Resolution 661, imposing an economic embargo on Iraq and occupied Kuwait. On August 7 the deployment of American fighting troops begins.

I'm in the base gym at noon on August 7, lifting a few hundred pounds over my chest, working off the days-long damage from our Vietnam War Film Fest, when I hear an announcement over the public address system: *All personnel from STA 2/7 are ordered to report immediately to battalion headquarters. Get some, jarheads!* Now we're locked down on base. Our deployment is inevitable.

On August 8, Iraq formally annexes Kuwait, and two days later twelve of the twenty-four Arab League countries vote to send troops to help defend Saudi Arabia. Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets are frozen by the United States, Great Britain, France, and West Germany. On August 14, two days after my twentieth birthday, the Seventh Marines arrive in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

As I debark the plane, the oven heat of the Arabian Desert grips my throat. In the distance the wind blows sand from the tops of dunes, cresting beige waves that billow like silk through the mirage. The tarmac is full of American civilian jumbo jets—American, Delta, United; we flew United. The scene on the airfield is like that at any busy international airport, only we passengers are wearing fatigues and carrying loaded rifles, our gas masks strapped to our hips. Just beyond the tarmac, artillery batteries point their guns east and north. Fighter jets patrol the sky. During the twenty-hour flight our mode of debarkation was debated—tactical or general—and I'd hoped for the tactical approach—live rounds and a defensive perimeter could be the only authentic introduction to a theater of war. That won't be like jumping off a Huey at Green Beach in the Philippines, trading an MRE for a plate of hot noodles and blood pork. We received our rounds, but we exit the plane in an orderly single-file line.

and I realize that we'd surely look ridiculous surrounding a civilian jetliner with our weapons drawn and the cabin crew performing inventory in the galley while we scream for war.

We're marched toward a series of large, bright green Bedouin tents. Inside the tents marines drink bottled water and attempt to stay cool by draping wet skivvy shirts over their heads. Jarheads from other units who've been in-country a few hours affect the air of grungy desert veterans, pointing to the pallets of European spring water and saying, "You better drink a lot of that. It's hot here," as if offering us religious insight.

After we sit for an hour in the hydration tents, the colonel calls a battalion formation and proudly announces that we are taking part in Operation Desert Shield. He explains that the Kuwaiti-Iraqi conflict is not yet our concern, but that currently our mission is to protect, to shield, Saudi Arabia and her flowing oil fields. We'll be shielding enough oil to drive hundreds of millions of cars for hundreds of millions of miles, at a relatively minor cost to the American consumer. We joke about having been transferred from the Marine Corps to the Oil Corps, or the Petrol Battalion, and while we laugh at our own jokes and we all think we're damn funny jarheads, we know we might soon die, and this is not funny. We laugh at the possibility of death, but like many combatants before us, we laugh to obscure the tragedy of our cheap, squandered lives with the comedy of combat and being deployed to protect oil reserves and the rights and profits of certain American companies, many of which have direct ties to the White House and oblique financial entanglements with the secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, and the commander in chief, George Bush, and the commander's progeny. We know this because Kuehn, one of our representatives from Texas, says, "All those old white fuckers from Texas have their fat hands in Arab oil. The motherfuckers drink it like it's beer."

And at this point we also know that the outcome of the conflict is less important for us—the marines who will fight and die—than for the old white fuckers and others who have billions of dollars to gain or lose in the oil fields, the deep, rich, flowing oil fields of the Kingdom of Saud.

By late September the American troop count in Saudi reaches 150,000 and the price of crude oil has nearly doubled since the invasion. Millions of Kuwaiti guest workers from the Philippines, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and India have humped across the dry desert to the relatively safe haven of Jordan.

Our days consist of sand and water and sweat and piss. We walk and drive over the sand and we drink water, gallons of water. And as we drink, we sweat, and as we sweat, we drink. Six times a day we gather for formation and swallow two canteens per man, and between formations we ingest more water, and we piss and sweat and walk the desert and drink and piss and sweat. We look north toward what we're told is a menacing military, four hundred thousand or more war-torn and war-savvy men. Some of the Iraqi soldiers who fought during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (September 1980 to August 1988) began tasting combat when we were ten years old. The Iraqi dead totalled more than 120,000 with 300,000 or more wounded and 60,000 prisoners of war. An army capable of sustaining such damage and invading another neighbor two years later sounds like a truly menacing force. And the civilian population that supports this army and its missions, that accepts such a staggering mutilation and loss of fathers and sons, must be extremely devoted to the country and the protection of its leader. While fighting Iran, the Iraqis became experts at fortifying their border using mines and obstacles such as the thirty-kilometer-long and eighteen-hundred-meter-wide artificial lake used to defend the city of Basra. We're forced to wonder what the Iraqis are preparing for us at the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. And in 1981 and 1984 the Iraqis used mustard and nerve gas against the Iranians, including civilians, and since then they've dropped nerve gas on the Iraqi Kurds. We believe they'll do the same to us. Gas! Gas! Gas! We wait for the Iraqi army. This is our labor. We wait.

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We've been in Saudi Arabia for six weeks, and we're currently operating in the training/security area called the Triangle: on my map, its coordinates form a rough triangle, the tip of which points toward Kuwait; twenty miles rear of our position the pogues (regiment and division-level headquarters and support personnel) eat three hot meals a day in a chow hall and sleep in an air-conditioned officer's company barracks while we're boonies-stuck and out of luck, no showers, no hot chow, no rack, no wadi in sight, no oasis. We can't see the superhighway and the Saudis and Kuwaitis driving toward Egypt and safety, though we know the road runs just to our south and we hear their Mercedes dies engines racing through the night, their sound like some kind of muffled cosmic laughter.

We're excited this morning because the reporters are finally coming. It's late September and we've each received newspaper clippings from parents or grandparents or siblings, neat cutouts of stories from our hometown papers about other hometown boys deployed to the Arabian Gulf, the margins penciled in by a parent or grandparent or sibling: *Didn't you know Private Douglas from school? Is William Wesley the kid you beat up in fourth grade? I thought Hall was in jail?* Now the clippings will end. The reporters will write about us, and when you're written about, you don't need the clipping. You stand tall and have your picture taken and you say wise, brave things that your family and friends read and they become even more proud of you, and girls not your girlfriend read about you, the ones you almost had, and they become sorry for having said no, because now you are brave and wise and your words and photo are in the newspaper. And people will take time out of their busy days to read the article and send it to someone else serving in the U.S. Marines, in Operation Desert Shield, and they'll write in the margin—*Wasn't Swofford an altar boy with you? Is Swofford the kid who stole your third grade science project? Is he of the Swoffords recently divorced in Carmichael, the father arrested for chasing the mother's boyfriend out of the house and down the street with a pistol?* You never know what other people know about you, what they remember, what they write in the margins.

Knowing the reporters will arrive soon, we shave for the first time in a week, pull new cammie from the bottoms of our rucks, and helmet-wash our pits and crotches and cocks. Vann's wife recently sent him a bottle of cologne, and we each dab a bit on our neck and our chest.

Sergeant Dunn gathers the platoon in a school circle under the plastic infrared (IR) cover. It's before zero nine and already one hundred degrees. Our platoon commands three Humvees, and the vehicles are under IR cover. Ideally, weapons, vehicles, and personnel shielded under the netting will avoid detection by enemy infrared devices. We're not convinced. Why believe in the effectiveness of IR netting when the drink tube on your gas mask breaks every time you don-and-clear during training nerve-gas raid? When the best method of maintenance for the PRC-77 radio, the Prick, is the Five-Foot Drop?

We've known about the press visit for a few days, and Sergeant Dunn has already recited a list of unacceptable topics. We're prohibited from divulging data concerning the capabilities of our sniper rifles or optics and the length and intensity of our training. He's ordered us to act like top marine patriots, shit-hot hard dicks, the best of the battalion. As the scout/snipers, we've been handpicked by the executive officer and the S-2 officer to serve as the eyes and ears of the battalion commander.

"Listen up," Dunn says. "I've gone over this already. But the captain wants you to hear it again. Basically, don't get specific. Say you can shoot from far away. Say you are highly trained, that there are no better shooters in the world than marine snipers. Say you're excited to be here and you believe in the mission and that we'll annihilate the Iraqis. Take off your shirts and show your muscles. We'll

gonna run through some calisthenics for them. Doc John, give us a SEAL workout. Keep it simple snipers.”

Kuehn says, “It ain’t simple. This is censorship. You’re telling me what I can and can’t say to the press. This is un-American.”

As we begin arguing about the gag order, Staff Sergeant Siek arrives. He says, “You do as you’re told. You signed the contract. You have no rights, you can’t speak out against your country. We call that treason. You can be shot for it. Goddamnit, we’re not playing around. Training is over. I’m sick of hearing your complaints. Tell your complaints to Saddam Hussein. See if he cares.”

I want to come to the defense of free speech, but I know it will be useless. We possess no such thing. The language we own is not ours, it is not a private language, but derived from Marine Corps history and lore and tactics. *Marine Corps birthday? 10 November 1775, the Marine Corps is older than the United States of America. Birthplace? Tun Tavern, Philadelphia, a gang of drunks with long rifles and big balls. Tarawa? Bloodiest battle of World War II. Dan Daly? He killed thirty-seven Chinese by hand during the Boxer Rebellion. Deadliest weapon on earth? The marine and his rifle. You want to win your war? Tell it to the marines!* When you are part of that thing, you speak like that. Reporters are arriving to ask me what I think about sitting in a desert, waiting for war. I’ll answer them. I like it; I’m prepared for anything that might come my way; I have supreme confidence in all of my leaders, from my team leader to the president.

The reporters are due at our position at 0900.

Staff Sergeant Siek says, “You are marines. There is no such thing as speech that is free. You must pay for everything you say. Especially the unauthorized crap.”

I leave the free speech argument and walk to our straddle trench. I enjoy shitting in the desert. There’s no seat in a straddle trench, but I’ve been punished many times, for hours on end, in the squat position, so I could sleep while straddling the trench. Also, it reminds me of Korea, where we spent a month of our last deployment. Most public rest rooms in Korea had straddle holes, and I enjoyed shitting there as well, often drunk, often having just walked away from a bar booth where I’d been buying a prostitute five-dollar Lady Drinks.

I look at the sky, blue like no blue I’ve known before, and at the desert that will not stop. This is the pain of the landscape, worse than the heat, worse than the flies—there is no getting out of the land. No stopping. After only six weeks of deployment, the desert is in us, one particle at a time—our boots and belts and trousers and gas masks and weapons are covered and filled with sand. Sand has invaded my body: ears and eyes and nose and mouth, ass crack and piss hole. The desert is everywhere. The mirage is everywhere. Awake, asleep, high heat of the afternoon or the few soft, sunless hours of early morning, I am still in the desert.

*The Desert* will become the popular moniker of Operation Desert Shield and the forthcoming Desert Storm, the Gulf War, the Operation to Free Kuwait—whatever else the war, the mass staging and movement of personnel and weapons of destruction might be called, it is the Desert. Were you in the Desert? Who were you with in the Desert? They kicked ass in the Desert. Those jarheads didn’t come to shit in the Desert but sit on their asses and chow down on pogy bait.

I wipe myself and turn to kick sand over the waste. A Land Rover crests the rise, an enlisted man in the driver’s seat, a marine colonel next to him, and two reporters in the back.

The press-pool colonel and his driver wait in the Land Rover, the air-conditioning blowing the colonel’s hair into fine white wisps of artillery smoke.

We gather under the IR netting and the reporters introduce themselves. The man is from the *New York Times* and the woman from the *Boston Globe*. They shake our hands and urge us to speak freely, but they know we’ve been scripted; they know our answers to their questions have already been written on our faces, though maybe not in our hearts. The *Boston Globe* woman looks bored, or at least



not very interested in what we might tell her. She just heard the same stories a few miles away.

~~“Yes, ma’am, I believe in our mission. I believe we will quickly win this war and send the enemy crawling home.”~~

“Yes, ma’am, I’m proud to be here serving my country. I’m proud of our president standing up to the evil. Them ragheads is gonna go down.”

“I’m from Texas, ma’am. I joined when I was eighteen rather than go to jail for a few years of petty stuff. I find out later my dad talked to the judge the night before and set the whole thing up. How ’bout that shit? But I’m proud of what the Corps has made me.”

“This is about freedom, not about oil. This is about standing up to aggression, like the president says. Nobody wants to go to war. We just got to be ready. We can shoot out someone’s eyeball from a click away. Ain’t no better shot in the world.”

“I’m proud to serve my country. This is what I signed for. I’m gonna make my pop and mom and my girl proud. I come from a little town in Missouri. They’re gonna make a parade for me, they got the ribbons up already. My mama says the whole town is behind us.”

“My uncle, he was in the Vietnam and he don’t feel good about me being over here, but still he writes me letters about watching my ass and don’t try being a hero and watch out for your buddies.”

“I think the mission is valid and we have all the right in the world to be here and the president has all the right to deploy us and we are well trained and prepared to fight any menace in the world. They can bomb us and gas us and shoot and we’ll keep at them. Many of us have been preparing for this since birth.”

The *Times* reporter has brought a football. Kuehn and I toss the ball back and forth and speak with the reporter. He stands between us and his eyes follow the ball. He looks like an anthropologist, an expert in primate behavior. He’s a kind man, soft-spoken, eager to hear from us what we really think about the operation, to see how we live through a single day. He wants a look at the psyche of the frontline infantryman, and I can only offer him processed responses. I’ve been ordered to give him SPAM. I wish to speak with him honestly and say: I am a grunt, dressed up in fancy scout/sniper clothes; I am a grunt with limited vision. I don’t care about a New World Order. I don’t care about human rights violations in Kuwait City. Amnesty International, my ass. Rape them all, kill them all, sell their oil, pillage their gold, sell their children into prostitution. I don’t care about the Flag and God and Country and Corps. I don’t give a fuck about oil and revenue and million barrels per day and U.S. jobs. I have a job. I’ll walk the rest of my life. I’m a grunt. I’m supposed to walk and love it. I’m twenty years old and I was dumb enough to sign a contract and here I sit, miserable, oh misery of a stinking hell of all miseries, here I sit in the hairy armpit, swinging in the ball sack, slopping through the straddle trench of the world, and I can hear their bombs already, Mr. *Times*, I can hear their bombs and I am afraid.

I go out for a long pass, over the straddle trench, and I catch the ball with one hand, a difficult catch with one hand, and I slam my left shoulder and my face against the desert. I am proud of my difficult catch. Kuehn yells, “Touchdown!” Sand is in my mouth, it feels gritty against my teeth and gums, and I run my tongue over my teeth, clearing the sand, and as if the particles of sand were particles of luck, I swallow them. As I jog the ball in, I hear bitching and moaning.

Vann yells, “Swoff, quick, throw the ball in the shitter!”

The colonel, on seeing the football, has exited his vehicle and instructed Staff Sergeant Siek that better than a workout of calisthenics, we should play football for the reporters, wearing full MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear and gas masks.

We were issued the MOPP suits at 29 Palms and have been humping them in our rucks ever since. They weigh ten pounds and were once hermetically sealed, but after six weeks of being beaten around in our rucks, most of the suits aren’t even in their original packaging but bound together with

duct tape and nylon rip cord. The MOPP is supposed to protect us from skin contamination during chemical attack. We're happy to use the suits for this foolish game, because now they'll really be useless; we'll burn them in the straddle trench and it will take Supply months to issue replacements.

Grunt mathematics: ruck minus ten pounds equals happy grunt. What else can I burn?

Doc John Duncan, our navy corpsman, reports that the temperature has reached 112 degrees.

In combat, we'd wear our cammies under the suit, but we'll cut down the heat by wearing our skivvies, and those of us, like me, who wear none will go naked beneath. Siek assures us that the colonel has guaranteed him that the next day the shower trucks will visit our position. The next day.

With just the bottoms on, I begin to roast; I feel as though I've stepped into an oven. Dunn orders us into formation, and before we don our masks, we each drink a canteen of water. We put our masks on and tie the hoods.

We're all in great shape. Stateside, we'd run two or three 10Ks a week, swim three thousand yards four days a week, and spend at least a few hours a day in the weight room. In the desert, we've been performing Doc John's SEAL workouts every morning and running three or four miles a night, not to mention the battalion humps of seven or fifteen or twenty miles.

The MOPP suits are in jungle camouflage, so we look like a movable forest, something from a Monty Python skit. We break up, scout teams one and three versus teams two and four. We use five-gallon water jugs to mark the goals. This football game will kick our asses, but it might be better than standard-issue boredom.

I drop a touchdown pass. Dickerson and Fowler argue back and forth across the line of scrimmage and throw sand at one another and insult each other's mother. *Hut, hut, hike.* My team makes ten yards, good enough for a first down. Combs and Johnny Rotten get into a pushing match and a few of us pull them apart. The drama of the scene is catching, our audience is entranced. The reporters are taking notes and Siek looks happy with our performance. We've been forced into this inhumane game and we're going to play. We have no lines. MOPP improv. The heat is intense: 125, 130, 140 degrees inside our suits.

Combs intercepts a pass and runs it in for a touchdown. We're all bent over at the knees, trying to catch our breath, and Siek shouts at us to continue the game. The Pentagon insists that warriors can't fight at 100 percent in full MOPP and gas mask for eight hours. Siek wants us to play ball for an hour.

After a few more changes of possession and no change in score, Siek calls halftime. To demonstrate to the reporters the usefulness and practicality of the drinking tube, he orders that with our gas masks on we drink from our canteens, as if to say, *Aren't we smart, we've thought of everything.*

The gas mask and hood cause your hearing to lengthen and stretch, so that words enter your brain in slow motion, and it takes a moment to formulate just what it is you're hearing. I hear Siek telling the reporters that our gas masks are high-tech pieces of equipment, that combined with the MOPP suits we are virtually an unstoppable fighting force, that the only chance the Iraqis have is to drop an A-bomb on us. We retrieve our canteens from inside the IR net, and a few of us break the seals on our masks to catch fresh air. The air tastes sweet. It swirls around my face and cools my lungs and I think of fighting with this gear on and I hope, more than anything, that if we are going to war, and they are going to kick our asses, that they'll do it with an A-bomb, scatter us dead with the flames and fiercer winds of a Little Boy or a Fat Man. And soon.

We stand in line and Siek issues instruction on using the drink tubes. Of course, we know the directions, but this is part of his show. The problem is, even if your drink tube is intact, the device on your canteen cap designed to interact with the drink tube will probably be broken. The atmosphere is one of glee.

When talking with a gas mask on, it sounds like you have a styrofoam cup over your mouth.

Kuehn yells, "I'm fucking dead already. The cap is broken on my canteen. If I drink this, I'm gonna drink some fuckin' mustard gas. I been saying for three months I needed a new canteen cap."

Vegh says, "My drinking tube is broken. I'm not going to break the seal on my mask, because that would kill me. I'll die of dehydration. Sir, thank you, sir."

"Staff Sergeant," I say. "I requested a new gas mask four months ago. My drinking tube fell off in the gas chamber at the Palms and Kuehn stepped on it. And we have unserviceable filters in our masks. We're all dead. We are the ghosts of STA 2/7."

Fowler has been wrestling with his drink tube and canteen, and finally he rips his mask off his face and punts it down the field. We're breaking up with laughter, but Siek is not happy. He tells us to take our masks off and drink from our canteens, and that he'll talk to Supply about replacement parts. He whistles like a referee and we resume the game.

Vann returns the kickoff. Kuehn decides to switch from touch to tackle, and he takes Vann down hard. Vann punches Kuehn in the side of the head, Combs kicks Kuehn in the ass, and we all jump on the pile, punching each other, and it doesn't matter whom you punch, because you're not punching hard, you're not punching to hurt, but only to punch. The half-speed fight degenerates into a laughter-filled dog-pile, with guys fighting their way from the bottom to climb back to the top, king of the pile, king of the Desert. We're sweating and shouting and shrieking through our masks. This is fun, playful, mindless fun, the kind grunts are best at. Siek doesn't like our grab-ass, and he yells at us to resume the game, but we do not listen. He must know what terrible treat will soon be played out for the colonel and the reporters.

Field-fuck: an act wherein marines violate one member of the unit, typically someone who has recently been a jerk or abused rank or acted antisocial, ignoring the unspoken contracts of brotherhood and camaraderie and esprit de corps and the combat family. The victim is held fast in the dog-pile position and his fellow marines take turns from behind.

Combs pulls Kuehn from the bottom of the pile and yells, "Field-fuck!" Fowler starts the fun by thrusting his hips against Kuehn's ass, slapping the back of his head; when you aren't field-fucking you're shouting support and encouragement or helping secure Kuehn.

Dickerson yells, "Get that virgin Texas ass! It's free!"

"I want some of that. I ain't seen boy ass this pretty since Korea."

"*Semper fi!* Scout-sniper!"

"Somebody get a picture for his wife. Poor woman."

Kuehn yells, "I'm the prettiest girl any of you has ever had! I've seen the whores you've bought you sick bastards!"

"Scout-sniper! STA 2/7!"

We continue to scream, in joy, in revelry, still wearing full MOPP and gas mask, and we look like wild, hungry, bug-eyed animals swarming around disabled prey, and we sound thousands of miles away from ourselves.

The reporters have stopped taking notes. Siek runs toward us, yelling, "Stop! Stop, you assholes!"

I stand back from a turn with Kuehn. I feel frightened and exhilarated by the scene. The exhilaration isn't sexual, it's communal—a pure surge of passion and violence and shared anger, a pure distillation of our confusion and hope and shared fear. We aren't field-fucking Kuehn: we're fucking the press-pool colonel, and the sorry, worthless MOPP suits, and the goddamn gas masks and canteens with defective parts, and President Bush and Dick Cheney and the generals, and Saddam Hussein, and the PRC-77 radio and the goddamn heavy E-tools that can't help us dig deep enough holes; we're fucking the world's televisions, and CNN; we're fucking the sand and the loneliness and the boredom and the potentially unfaithful wives and girlfriends and the parents and siblings who don't write and the bad food and the fuckhead peaceniks back home, the skate punks and lab

unionists and teachers and grandmothers and socialists and Stalinists and Communists and the hungover hippies grasping their fraudulent sixties idealism; we're fucking our confusion and fear and boredom; we're fucking ourselves for signing the contract, for listening to the soothing lies of the recruiters, for letting them call us buddy and pal and dude, luring us into this life of loneliness and boredom and fear; we're fucking all of the hometown girls we've wanted but never had; we're angry and afraid and acting the way we've been trained to kill, violently and with no remorse. We take turns and we go through the line a few times and Kuehn takes it all, like the thick, rough Texan he is, our emissary to the gallows, to the chambers, to death do us part.

We stop the field-fuck and rip our gas masks from our faces and throw them in the air, as football players might do with their helmets after an especially grueling victory. We're bent over at the waist, hands on knees, breathing hard, breathing free. We pile our charcoal-lined MOPP suits in the straddled trench. We're standing around the trench either naked or in skivvy bottoms. We look like burnt victims. The fires, the smoke and mirrors of history have been transposed to our skin.

The colonel and his driver jog at double time toward the Land Rover, the woman from the *Boston Globe* in tow. The *Times* reporter will stay on a few days.

Kuehn douses the suits with fuel and strikes a match. He says, "May God please save us, because these MOPP suits won't," and he drops the match, sending the pile into raging flames that burn black and sooty, choking the blue sky gray.

A few guys stand in line in front of a Humvee while Vegh pours water over them in a useless attempt at replicating a shower. Nothing other than an honest, power-driven shower will clean the muck from our bodies. I rub water over my face, and as the water runs down my forearms and mixes with the charcoal MOPP protectant, I recognize an odd formation on my skin, like a tattoo of fish scales. My thoughts return to my childhood in Japan. The world expands and contracts. My temples begin to throb and my ears ring a piercing rhythm through my brain. It's the heat, or breathing through the gas mask for an hour, or desert exhaustion, but I must sit down, and as I do, I stare at my forearms as though they are a map.

One day, as a child in Tachikawa, Japan, I sneaked off the air force base where my family lived and entered the city, hoping to find a nearby candy store. I was nervous. When shopping with my mother, Japanese women constantly stopped us on the street to look into my blue eyes, and the attention confused and aroused me and I often pissed my pants while a Japanese lady giggled and tickled my stomach or stroked my hair. But my younger sister's birthday was soon, and I wanted to surprise her with a long necklace of whistle gum, her favorite novelty from our preferred candy store. I'd never been off base alone, and I quickly lost my way. I knew the store was in an alley, and so I wandered from alley to alley, as they all looked alike with noodle houses and teahouses and sake bars and fish shops and electronics stores and candy stores that weren't the one I wanted. I ended up in a tattoo shop.

Two artists were busy on skin, one needling a man, his partner needling a woman. The artists were smoking and talking and hard at work, so they didn't notice me enter their shop. The clients looked at me and the woman smiled. They were naked above the waist, and their bodies were covered with ink, dragons and fish and ancient, wicked shogunal faces. Their tattoos were identical. I didn't even notice the woman's breasts. At the navel they each had a tattoo of a mushroom cloud. As the artists worked, in the middle of the man's chest an image of the woman's face began to appear, and in the middle of the woman's chest an image of the man's face began to appear. The man was ugly, with the face of a kicked dog, but the woman was beautiful and I thought him lucky to have her face.

painted on his chest, though I didn't understand the permanence of the shared act.

~~The artists still hadn't noticed me, and I continued to stare. I stood watching for an hour at least as the faces were finished and the artists moved to their clients' forearms. They painted fish scales and the electric needles continued to hum in the air like mad flies. The couple stared at one another and the woman occasionally smiled at me. The artists worked and smoked and talked back and forth in quiet, harsh whispers, aware only of the skin canvases in front of them. The woman's work was completed first, and when her tattooist noticed me, he hissed and threw his cigarette at me. The burning cigarette missed and I picked it up and threw it back at him, then I ran from the shop. The woman screamed. I didn't stop running until I made it home.~~

I awake hours later on a cot under the infrared net, with an IV in my arm. I passed out, as did a few of my platoon mates. We'll be sick for five days with dysentery. Yesterday, Fowler had gone to the rear on a fuel run and stole a vat of food from the chow hall, hoping it was hot food—lasagna or beans and rice or beef stew or any of the slop they make in those hideous chrome kitchens, but it was a plain green-leaf salad with no dressing. Only those of us desperate enough to eat the salad are down with the sickness. The lettuce came from Jordanian fields where they use human feces as fertilizer. So here we are, defending a country none of us gives a shit about, eating its neighbors' shit, and burying ours in the sand.

Prior to leaving the platoon, the *Times* reporter asks us what we want from the States, and we give him a list: European or Asian porn mags of any size, shape, content, and function; Oreo cookies; canned tuna; saltine crackers; Gatorade; Truth; a rotate-to-the-states date; ham; turkey; salami; a month of the *New York Times*; condoms just in case; canned soups; letter-writing gear; batteries; powdered chocolate; actual coffee, not crystals; candy bars; pop; beef jerky; whiskey; mouthwash; rubber band; duct tape; corned beef hash; Sterno; Jolly Ranchers; the names and addresses of women incarcerated at federal correctional facilities; mail-order Filipino-bride catalog; cigars; baby-name book; marijuana; methamphetamines; cocaine; LSD; penis enlarger; pocket-pussy; blowup doll; butt beads; Vaseline; baby powder; shaving cream; boot laces; toothpaste; shower soap; needles and thread.

We don't believe he'll come through, but a month after his visit, a cardboard box the size of two footlockers arrives, full of some of the items on our list and others we didn't request. We're surprised and a few of us walk around the box and choose not to remove anything, having forgotten what we requested and feeling that if we reach into the box, we'll spoil the magic.

Kuehn thumbs through a smut mag and says, "He's an all right motherfucker. I didn't believe in him for a second. He's all right for a reporter."

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On the second day of boot camp I was selected for the platoon scribe position. My job would be to assist the drill instructors in administrative duties such as completing sick-call chits, training schedules, and travel manifests. My first task required me to draw on the barracks chalkboard the proper layout of our footlockers. Drill Instructor Burke handed me a photocopy of the footlocker display and ordered me to create a masterpiece.

Burke, like most DIs, didn't speak as much as growl. His chest was as thick as a butcher block. His eyes looked dead, as though he'd lost them for a few years and found them washed up on the beach. When he yelled, every vein in his body jumped. He wore, I would learn, the Charlie Uniform: olive-drab wool trousers and short-sleeve beige shirt with ribbons and badges. Expert badges for rifle and pistol were pinned to his left pocket flap. Above the badges he wore ribbons from Beirut. Later that night he'd tell us "Beirut bedtime stories" about digging dead buddies from the rubble.

I suppose there was confusion over what capabilities a scribe should possess, and drawing had never been my strong suit. I struggled through a poor representation of the schematic I held in my hand. I attempted to concentrate on the task while Burke ran up and down the squad bay, agitating and insulting my fellow recruits, making accusations about bestiality and other dark secrets the recruits were hiding. I took some pleasure in that scribe duty might keep me out of the line of verbal fire.

He yelled to a recruit, "I can't believe my fucking eyes! Did you piss your trousers, boy? Did you piss your trousers like a little girl?"

"Sir, no, sir!"

"You had an orgasm, is that it? You think I'm so sexy you jizzed in your trousers? Where are you from, boy?"

"Sir, Olympia, Washington, sir."

"Fuck me standing! My mother lives in Olympia. She don't piss her pants. Where'd you learn to piss your pants, boy? From your mama?"

"Sir, the recruit's mother is dead, sir."

"One less bitch I got to worry about her calling her senator because her cunt son can't handle me Marine Corps!"

"Sir, my mother was not a bitch, sir. Sir, I am not a cunt and I can handle your Marine Corps, sir."

Burke punched the recruit square on the forehead. He swayed but his knees did not give. The recruit had made the mistake of using personal pronouns, which the recruit is not allowed to use when referring to the drill instructor or himself. The recruit is *the recruit*. The drill instructor is *the drill instructor* or *sir*.

Burke surveyed the platoon, hands clasped behind his back.

He yelled, addressing us all, "I am your mommy and your daddy! I am your nightmare and your wet dream! I am your morning and your night! I will tell you when to piss and when to shit and how much food to eat and when! I will teach you how to kill and how to stay alive! I will forge you into part of the iron fist with which our great United States fights oppression and injustice! Do you understand me, recruits?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"If your daddy is a doctor or if you come from the projects in East St. Louis or a reservation in Arizona, it no longer matters. Black. White. Mexican. Vietnamese. Navajo. The Marine Corps does not care! Your drill instructors do not care! You are now green! You are light green or dark green. You are not black or white or brown or yellow or red. Do you understand me, recruits?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Burke approached me and the chalkboard. "What in the fuck is that, scribe?"

"Sir, it's the recruit's drawing of the footlocker, sir," I said.

"Jesus, Joseph, and doggy-style Mary, that looks like a pile of dogshit! My three-month-old daughter can draw better than that."

"Sir, the recruit has never been good at drawing, sir."

"Why the fuck are you my scribe? Isn't my scribe supposed to know how to draw?"

"Sir, the recruit doesn't know. The recruit thought the scribe was supposed to *write*, sir."

"Of course the recruit doesn't know! The recruit doesn't know because I haven't told him! And don't fucking tell me what my shithead scribe is supposed to do. You are my shithead scribe because someone fucked up! You should be in the retard platoon, learning how to draw with crayons and throwing your shit on the bulkheads!"

While he spoke, he spit in my face, and he bashed the brim of his Smokey Bear cover into my nose and pressed his index finger into my chest. He asked me to read what I'd written and point out exactly where the skivvies and running shoes were supposed to go. I couldn't decipher my chaotic drawing. He slapped me on the back of the head a few times, as though slowly contemplating some further violence, winding me up, and then he shoved my head into the chalkboard. The board was affixed to the cinder-block barracks wall, so that after my head broke through the chalkboard, it stopped at the cinder block. I did not really feel the assault. It's possible it was minor enough, and that's why I didn't feel it, or I was in shock. The large bump on my head would fade away by the end of the week.

Burke leaned in close to my face and I could feel his moist, cruel breath in my ear, and he said, "Boy, you just entered my killing zone."

He continued berating me, and he complained that I'd ruined his goddamn perfectly good chalkboard, which was, according to Marine Corps Logic 101, absolutely true. He ordered me to prepare my own footlocker as a model for the rest of the platoon. While I labored over this task, I allowed my platoon mates to write letters home.

Eventually I finished, and did not a bad job, for the first time in my life attempting to fold skivvies into four-by-six-inch squares, for the first time in my life actually referring to underwear as *skivvies*, pants as *trousers*, a hat as a *cover*. Now, hands were *dickskinners*, the mouth was a *cup receptacle*, running shoes were *go-fasters*, a flashlight was a *moonbeam*, a pen was an *ink stick*, a bed was a *rack*, a wall was a *bulkhead*, a bathroom was a *head*, a shirt was a *blouse*, a tie was still a *tie*, and

a belt a *belt*, but many other things would never be the same.

~~Burke didn't touch me again, but he beat on other recruits. I'm sure he had only the best intentions, and now when I consider him and his acts of violence, they seem petty, not severe enough. I wish that that night at the chalkboard, after he'd shoved my head into the wall, he'd have put me on the floor with a swift knee to the stomach, followed by a boot to the face, and another boot, and then he'd have continued beating me, while the other recruits watched, horrified, observing their future. Perhaps this is only the luxury of distance and time and the reemergence of the blind stupidity and dumb loyalty that first led me into the Corps and helped carry me out alive. But a further beating wouldn't have damaged me, a further beating wouldn't have caused me to run.~~

One morning during a heavy rain, we shoved our racks to the bulkheads and turned our barracks into a mini-drill-field and practiced close order drill. We'd been issued our weapons the day before and even for a farm boy raised with a rifle in his lap, the particulars of COD are difficult. You don't throw the weapon over your shoulder and a piece of straw into your mouth, like you used to do before, diddling down to the local hot spot for squirrels.

We dropped our rifles, confused *port arms* with *shoulder arms*, and along the way Burke became angrier and angrier, until he grabbed a recruit's rifle and rifle-butted him in the chest. The recruit fell backward a few ranks, and Burke threw the recruit's weapon at him and stormed out of the barracks. Unfortunately for Burke, the company commander stood at the back stairwell and had watched him train us and eventually lose his temper.

A few hours later, a command lieutenant spoke to our platoon and ordered anyone who'd been physically assaulted by Burke to come forward. Along with others, I chose to speak, and I wrote a report of what had occurred the first night of training when Burke had introduced me to the chalkboard. Partly I did this because I believed that no one had a right to put his hands on me. I briefly fantasized that the Marine Corps would apologize to me and buy me a ticket home, no questions asked. But mostly I hoped that reporting Burke's brutality might somehow put me in danger, increase the odds against my survival, that his fellow DIs would fuck me further and longer than anyone else, and I welcomed this imagined challenge. I'd increased the likelihood of my failure.

Burke was transferred to another platoon in our training company, and we rarely saw him. The matter didn't surface again, and I left boot camp and never spoke about the event. Sometimes I'd think that my reporting Burke would surface and reflect poorly on me. I had daydreams of running into Burke in a bar on Okinawa, where I'd apologize to him for being so weak, ask his forgiveness, and let him beat on me more, as I assumed he'd have liked to that second night at boot camp.



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