

Iraq



by Joe Moon

9/22/06: Expiration of Active Service

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Four years is a lifetime.

It's strange: For four long years I asked myself what the hell I was doing, what the hell I'd gotten myself into, who the hell did I think I was, and what the hell was I thinking. For four long years I kept imagining that I'd wake up back in Kansas and tell Auntie Em all about the crazy dream I'd had.

And now it's over. Now I feel like I'm going to wake up in the barracks or on a ship or in a tent or in a sleeping bag, a wonderful dream about getting out fading quickly.

I suppose very soon now, it will all be over, the whole thing, and all of life will seem like an impossible dream, and I will shake my head wistfully and die.

Or maybe by then I will understand some things. Maybe by then I will have some certainty about something, maybe I'll be able to contextualize these last four years and parse meaning. Maybe between now and then I will accrete wisdom, and I will see clearly the direction of life, or its trajectory, and be able to extract some cosmic profundity.

One can only hope.

It's hard to think about now. Too fresh, I guess. Gotta let it settle. It's too big. I have to step back and get some distance so I can see the whole thing.

Though I suppose with distance, some resolution gets lost. The visceral details will fade. Once I can hold it all in my head, I won't be able to feel it anymore.

I can still feel it now. I can still feel it all, and so I can feel the incredible relief that it's over. I can feel an even more incredible relief because my brothers are in Kuwait as I write this, waiting for a flight home.

I can still remember what it felt like, too, when we heard that Kyle had been hit.

The not knowing steals joy out of everything. I can't converse with anyone about anything else. Everything seems small, food tastes like helplessness and nothing seems worth doing. Every idle

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moment is filled with agonizing thoughts of the impossibly violent motion of hulking masses of steel, of a sudden, high-pitched deafness, of smoke and confusion.

I feel guilty for laughing at things that are funny and for trying to escape into distraction.

So I sit and discover that the hardest words to enter into a search box are casualty, wounded and KIA.

I stared at the ceiling for several hours last night, trying to parse what little information I had, trying to determine its reliability and the reliability of what I could infer from it. I don't remember falling asleep, only waking from dreams that faded fast from memory except for flashes of light and the smell of cordite.

I can't help but feel like I should be there. I remember deciding that, given the choice, I couldn't watch my brothers walk into fire without me. I can't remember when it was that I changed my mind.

I remember that pretty clearly. But I remember something else that I didn't mention then: hope. I remember nursing the hope that he was ok anyway, or that maybe it really hadn't been him, that it had been someone else. It was painful, that hope, agonizing. Hope was what kept me awake and haunted my dreams.

But all my hopes came true. He was ok. It wasn't him. It was someone else. Kyle's coming home next week, with everything intact.

I understand now that to hope is a luxury, because you don't always get to.

Kathy's brief e-mail filled me with anxiety, because I knew it meant bad news. The next night when I finally got ahold of her, the grief in her voice was a crushing weight under which there was no room for hope.

Phillip Baucus was always full of hope. That's just the kind of guy he was. It was rare for him to show frustration and he was always an encouragement in his quietly deliberate way.

The single darkest moment in my life, darker even than losing my religion, was when some Iraqi children thought I was going to execute them.

By this time we're behind on our patrol schedule, and Sgt. Wagner tells me to just tell them to go somewhere. Varner a little while later, also impatient, tells me to just kick them the fuck out, but of course neither of them have to look them in the eye and tell these people they have to leave their house in the middle of the night because some violent foreign soldiers want to use it.

Exasperated, I close the door and when I turn back, two of the little girls start crying and they all hold their palms out toward me, begging me not to do something. When I realize they're asking me not to kill them, I almost cry. I realize exactly what we've done, and that they've all been terrified out of their minds this entire time, from the moment that fucking det cord went off.

"Peace, peace," I tell them as I sling my rifle behind me and take off my helmet.

All the exhaustion, all the pain and loneliness, all the moral uncertainty, and all of the doubts, all the madness, the anger, the frustration, the isolation, all of the misery I have accrued during this deployment hits me then like a blow to the chest and suddenly I feel like the worst kind of person who has done the worst kind of thing. Suddenly I'm sure that I've done more harm than good in this country, that this place would be better off had I stayed thousands of miles away.

I never imagined I could be the source of such abject terror and I still want to cry when I think about it.

When they get outside, they're afraid to pass in front of our vehicles which are parked in front, so Lance Corporal Baucus offers to escort them past.

Before they go, I touch the woman's arm and tell her again:

"Aunt, I'm sorry."

She shows me a sad smile, places her right hand over her heart and tells me:

"I understand. It is not a problem. God be with you."

Those are the first words she has spoken that I understand entirely and I am stunned.

After they're gone, I take post on the roof with Baucus and, wracked with guilt and anger, I begin to chain-smoke cigarettes we bought from a local store a few days earlier.

Baucus tries to tell me it's not my fault, that I was only following orders, but I know better. What we've done here tonight is fucked up.

That was Phil Baucus. Who else?

I'll admit that Phil was the butt of a lot of our jokes. It was just so easy. He was ridiculously tall, had this giant nose, this almost pedantic drone and a way of mulling things over too long. But he had such an easy manner; he would always laugh along and he enjoyed it as much as we did.

He never did fit quite right, though. I mean, none of us fit perfectly

and he got along with everyone. It's just you could tell he didn't really belong. I realized later that it was because he belonged somewhere else.

I missed his funeral, but when I stopped in his hometown to see his ashes scattered, I could see him everywhere. I could see him in his parents' faces, hear him in his brother's voice and his sister's laugh. I could see him on the ranch, herding sheep onto a flatbed or riding an old horse, his gaze out on the horizon. I could see him leaning against a tree with a pipe in his mouth and a book in his lap, or leaning on a fence with a cup of coffee, listening intently to his neighbor chatter at him.

I was amazed and haunted by how much he belonged there, envious that anyone could belong anywhere so thoroughly, heartbroken to see the gaping hole he left behind.

I saw my old buddy Kevin there. We stayed up late and reminisced, about how Phil would always invite us to go hang out with Kathy on weekends. Kevin would go sometimes, but I never did. We talked about how Phil would always bring me a case of Henry Weinhard's Root Beer on his way back to base, because it was hard to find and I could never find it. We talked about how guilty we felt that we hadn't gone back with him, about how we couldn't help but think maybe we could've made it turn out differently. And we agreed that either of us would trade places with Phil in a heartbeat. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this..." but honestly it's not even a big deal, when you know someone like Phil.

He had an enormous heart, and he was killed by someone so full of blind hatred that he would lay down his life to take another. Greater hatred has no man than this, I think.

Phil taught me to look at stars one night, under a celestial canopy that only shows itself way out in the desert stillness. He showed me Orion and Cassiopeia, and gave me a little chart and showed me how to use it. That's how I choose to remember him: far from home but full of wonder, pointing at the sky.

I think Phil enlisted for some of the same reasons I did, for an uncommon experience, for the opportunity to travel and to find some direction. I guess neither of us ever did. For four years I felt like I was in some sort of stasis, like my life was on pause and it was going to stay that way forever. But today's my Expiration of Active Service. So I'd better start moving. There's nowhere to go but forward, I guess. And forward is whichever way my toes are pointing.