

I R A Q

Young Men and Fire

Marine Lt. Nathaniel Fick leads a band of brothers in his memoir of the Iraq War

By JASON WATKINS
DOWNTOWN NEWS

The most striking evidence of Nathaniel Fick's abilities as a world-class military mind comes not from his Dartmouth education nor his reverence for Marine Corps history nor even the bulk of the decisions he made in battle, but rather from the single fact that he returned home from war with the same number of men he left with.

Fick makes only passing mention of this in his newly published book, "One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer," in which he recounts his journey from Ivy League upperclassman through Officer Candidate School to the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. Fick downplays the survival rate of his platoon so much, in fact, that one is left with the false impression that this is something less than a monumental achievement.

But Fick is no ordinary officer and his are no ordinary Marines. Midway through his military career, Fick was invited to join the elite First Reconnaissance Battalion, the Corps' elite fighting group that played a vital role in the invasion of Iraq and seizure of Baghdad. No other group in the Marine Corps trains more and fights harder than First Recon, and their failures and successes often make national headlines. Getting shot at, encountering roadside attacks, even being fired upon by fellow Marines — it's a miracle *any* of them made it home alive, let alone all of

“
I mourned for myself. Not in self-pity, but for the kid who'd come to Iraq. He was gone.

NATHANIEL FICK
FORMER MARINE CORPS CAPTAIN

them. Exactly how he managed to return with all 65 of his men still puzzles Fick, but he credits some combination of skill, luck and what one of his best Marines, Rudy Reyes, calls the "sacred geometry of chance."

Enrolled at Dartmouth and headed for medical school, Nathaniel Fick was so moved by a motivational speech given by a former Marine that, within a few months, he found himself aboard a bus headed for Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Quantico, Virginia.

"I wanted to go on a great adventure, to prove myself, to serve my country," he writes early on in the book. "I wanted to do something so hard that no one could ever talk shit to me."

He chose his path wisely.

Three years later, Fick was leading a platoon of 22 men and one platoon leader — a hardened warrior named Gunny Wynn who is regarded by fellow Recon Marines as something of a legend — through battles in Afghanistan and Iraq. His platoon was part of the initial inva-

sion of Iraq, breaching the southern border with Kuwait sometime in the morning hours of March 21, 2003, then crossing the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and eventually arriving in Baghdad just as the statue of Saddam was being toppled by U.S. troops.

Their journey was chronicled in Evan Wright's acclaimed book, "Generation Kill," and in his three-part series that appeared in *Rolling Stone*, but Wright's account is strictly that of an embedded reporter while Fick's was written by the man who was making the decisions. (In a sense, Fick's telling of the same story proves how differently an event is viewed by each observer.)

One of the book's many virtues is Fick's ability to throw a shaft of pure light on the true makeup of his men. The notion of a United States Marine as a hardened killer with a piercing gaze is well warranted (and not altogether inaccurate) but Fick offers us another side of the story:

Christmas morning dawned clear and cold. The patrol had been uneventful, and I walked the lines to see the Marines. I thought some of the younger guys might have a hard time that day, but they were festive. A captured tumbleweed stood next to each fighting hole, pruned by hand into a triangular shape of a little pine tree. Candy and mini Tabasco bottles from MREs hung from the branches. There were even gifts. During the past week, Marines had squirreled away packets of cheese or pound cake — MRE delicacies — for their buddies.

On one occasion, after receiving orders from his commanding officer to move 10 kilometers on foot across rocky terrain, the Marines in Fick's platoon carried 200 pounds of gear across the desert of Afghanistan under the light of the moon while another platoon moved in the comfort of Humvees. Evoking the spirit of Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," Fick writes:

I thought, then, of my favorite time at Quantico, those moments in the bunk after we sang "The Marine's Hymn." Now, as I had at OCS, I sensed an outpouring of grit, pride, and raw desire to live up to the traditions we'd inherited. These Marines came from places like Erie and Tuscaloosa and Bedford Falls. The most junior of them earned nine hundred dollars a month. Some had joined the Corps for adventure, others for a steady paycheck or to stay out of jail. Now they all kept walking for one another.

"One Bullet Away" makes no assertions of the validity or legitimacy of the war — it's not entirely clear where Fick falls on the political spectrum except for a few brief glimpses into his upbringing. ("Some of my classmates had been hunters since they'd learned to walk, but I had fired a gun only two or three times in my life," he writes.) But he is concerned with the legitimacy of his own men; after a particularly bloody battle with Iraqi insurgents, Fick writes, "I



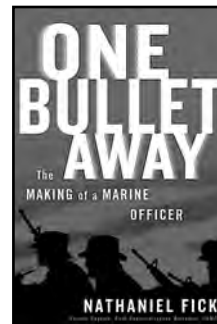
PHOTO BY JOYELLE WEST

guessed the television news that night was full of reports of collateral damage and civilian casualties. I wished people could see how much we agonized over our decisions and prayed they were the right ones. These choices didn't always translate into hesitation on the trigger or racking self-doubt, but sometimes it was enough to sit awake in the cold rain just thinking about them."

Much has been made about that breed of otherwise virtuous soldier or Marine turning into a callous, unfeeling murderer in a war zone, only to return home to face his demons with eventual unraveling. Contempt for this type runs deep throughout Fick's platoon; each man deals with war in his own way, at the time of his own choosing, but no one falls so harshly upon himself as Fick:

As darkness fell over Valat Sukkar, I sat alone in the dim green light of the radios. I felt sick for the shepherd boys, for the girl in the blue dress, and for all the innocent people who surely lived in Nasiriyah, Ar Rifa, and the other towns this war would consume. I hurt for my Marines, goodhearted American guys who'd bear these burdens for the rest of their lives. And I mourned for myself. Not in self-pity, but for the kid who'd come to Iraq. He was gone. I did all this in the dark, away from the platoon, because combat command is the loneliest job in the world.

In a recent reader review on Amazon.com, an anonymous person who claims to be a part of Fick's platoon takes him to task for writing such a book so soon after the events occurred, calling it political positioning that's "20 years early." Not that the reviewer, identifying himself only as "SaltyTex," has much of an axe to grind: his only real gripe seems to be that Fick was paid to tell his story, a notion in which only an idiot could find fault and only a jealous colleague would point out. The reviewer's other apparent goal is



ONE BULLET AWAY THE MAKING OF A MARINE OFFICER

By Nathaniel Fick
Houghton Mifflin Company
October, 2005
Hardcover, \$25.

to call Fick out as a well-to-do, Ivy League "thinker" with a good military record who aspires to one day become a senator. (Why the American people would find fault in this behavior somehow eludes "SaltyTex.") Fick himself admits that he has no desire to run for office, though that almost appears a waste, given that he's currently earning his master's degree at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at a little place called Harvard.

"I'm really interested in policy, I'm just not that interested in politics," Fick said during a phone interview. "I really like walking down the street and being anonymous."

But perhaps the most unsubstantiated claim by "SaltyTex," and a difficult one to make, is that Fick's book and Evan Wright's "Generation Kill" paints Recon Marines in a bad light. Both books are honest depictions of a misunderstood (if not completely overlooked) generation within the military, and both portray these men as honest and caring, crude and violent, feared and respected killers. To suggest, like "SaltyTex" does, that these accounts "hurt our reputation" and expose the platoon's bad side is to miss the point entirely. Fick's book isn't a piece of propaganda for the cause of the Recon Marine — or for the Corps as a whole — any more than "Full Metal Jacket" is an advertisement for war. Rather, the book is meant as a solitary voice among many. His view is simply that some stories need to be told, and that this happens to be one of them.

And this is exactly where Fick and "One Bullet Away" so masterfully succeed. In what he calls the "aftermath" of war, Fick is forced to face the evidence that his experiences as a Marine officer and as a veteran made him into a principled, honorable and heroic man.

"I took sixty-five men to war and brought sixty-five home," he writes. "I gave them everything I had. Together, we passed the test. Fear didn't beat us. I hope life improves for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, but that's not why we did what we did. We fought for each other."

Ultimately Fick was spared from doing what he feared most. "I knew if anybody got killed, I was the one who was going to have to fly to their hometown and explain to their parents what happened," he said. He never had to.

Both unsentimental and quietly introspective, "One Bullet Away" emerges as one of the clearest voices to come out of the current war. Nathaniel Fick is just one man telling one story about one particular moment in time, and yet he and his men prove that uncommon valor may well be an uncommon virtue. ■

Former Marine Corps Captain Nathaniel Fick will sign copies and read from "One Bullet Away" on Friday, Oct. 14, at Bay Books on Coronado Island beginning at 6:30 p.m. and on Saturday, Oct. 15, at the Marine Corps Association Book Store on Camp Pendleton from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Visit www.nathanielfick.com.

**REQUIRED READING
WE ASKED YOU
TO RECOMMEND YOUR
FAVORITE BOOK
TO READ ON DEPLOYMENT**

40

features@armytimes.com
Lifelines
FUN, FITNESS AND FILM



SHEILA VEMMER/STAFF



FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about the artists, visit
Monica Allen Perin: www.monica-watercolors.com
CWO2 Michael D. Fay: <http://mdfay1.blogspot.com/>
Sgt. Kristopher J. Battles: <http://kjbattles.blogspot.com/>

To see a video and a slideshow of some of the work on display at the Navy Art Museum, visit militarytimes.com/offduty

By Jason Watkins

jwatkins@militarytimes.com

If the role of a journalist is to paint a complete picture of war, then the role of a war artist is to paint just a small sliver of it.

That's the goal of the handful of artists serving in the U.S. military whose job is to "go to war and do art" of what they witness in battle.

Four of those artists are featured in a new exhibit, "Afghanistan and Iraq: Combat Art," on view at the Navy Art Museum in Washington, D.C., through the end of February.

The collective works showcase a range of experiences and emotions in the war zones and provide a record for future generations.

"The quote I like is, 'Photography is like prose, and art is like poetry,'" says Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael D. Fay, one of only two combat artists in the Marine Corps. His works are

The artists of war

Painters leave legacy in ink, oil

part of the show.

While journalism attempts to tell it all one story at a time, Fay says, a painting portrays a more visceral narrative so that, when viewed as a collection, a clearer

story emerges.

"They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but there's also something ineffable [about art]. You really can't put it into words," Fay says. "That's why imagery

exists. If you just had journalists writing about it, then why have photographs? Or if you have journalists writing about it and you have photographers, why have artists? Why have musicians?"

"I want to tell the story of what our people are doing," says Morgan Ian Wilbur, a self-trained artist and former sailor who has traveled to war zones three times to create dramatic, photorealistic oil paintings. "I kind of look at it as a way to tell their story."

Wilbur is one of two Navy combat artists.

One of the show's more striking examples of the combat art genre is Wilbur's "Three on the Knee," an oil on canvas of medical personnel operating on a wounded soldier. From afar, the painting is hard to distinguish from a photograph.

Equally captivating are small line drawings, usually done on the battlefield from direct observation, that show slices of military life: a 1st Recon Marine with

an IV in his arm; the inside of a Humvee on patrol; a corporal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center who lost his legs.

People unfamiliar with military culture often are surprised to learn that combat artists are being employed at all, Fay says, and that, of all the branches, the Marine Corps would place such emphasis on fine art.

“But in point of fact, the Marine Corps is about excellence,” Fay says. “We want to be the best shots, drill the best, have the best in military music.”

Sgt. Kristopher J. Battles, a Marine and another artist exhibiting in the show, is a classical realist who paints landscapes and portraits.

“It’s not shocking to us that the Marine Corps and the military in general draws some of the better of the culture, the cream of the crop,” Battles says. “But it is surprising to some people.”

History

Combat art is as old as combat itself. Images of battle date back to the Ice Age, when cave paintings showed human figures with spears stuck in their sides. Much of what we know about the battles of ancient times comes from this art.

Every society that has gone to war has employed the skill of an artist to record or memorialize the experience. As a soldier in the Revolutionary War, John Trumbull painted the surrender of Lord Cornwallis in 1787. During the Civil War, Winslow Homer sketched battle scenes for Harper’s Weekly.

In most cases, war art is created by those who witnessed history firsthand. The Army enlisted eight artists at the outset of World War I to create a record of what they saw, starting what became the Army’s combat art program.

“War and tales of war basically shape storytelling, which is the passage of culture,” Fay says. “We’re part of that ongoing cycle of culture. We’re going out and we’re observing war, and we’re creating an artifact from that.”

There are two ways to join the ranks of combat artists. The first is to be commissioned or contracted to travel to a war zone to create art.

The other is to submit an original work based on personal experience. If it’s acquired by a museum, the creator “is now and forever a combat artist,” Fay says.

Today, the military’s art collections comprise thousands of works and include important paintings in America’s history, such as Paul Cadmus’ “The Fleet’s In,” depicting a rollicking scene of sailors,



COURTESY OF MARINE CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER 2 MICHAEL D. FAY

civilians and one infamous cross-dresser that led to public outcry and its ultimate removal from exhibition lest the Navy be cast in a poor light. (It’s now in the collection of the Navy Art Museum.)

Insiders

Unlike an outsider who shows up at camp with a sketchpad, most combat artists are in uniform — or were very recently — so they speak their subjects’ language.

“They want to feel we’re an asset and not a liability,” Battles says.

“Part of our challenge in integrating with a unit is that, although they are accounting for us, they’re also counting on us,” Fay said. “When the proverbial you-know-what hits the fan, they don’t want to be looking for us as the artist sitting there off in an artistic reverie, and [they want to know], can he shoot?”

Combat artists usually gain their subjects’ respect quickly.

“At first they may look at us like, ‘Uh-oh, we’ve got to take care of this person,’” Battles says.

“When we’re out with the young lieutenants or the corporals on patrol or living in a [forward operating base], we’re not chaplains, but we’ve been told that we bring

IF YOU GO

■ “Afghanistan and Iraq: Combat Art from the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps Combat Art Programs” runs through the end of February at the Navy Art Museum in the Navy Shipyard in Washington, D.C.

■ Visit www.history.navy.mil/branches/nhcorg6.htm.

■ Call (202) 433-3815 for more info.

something like that,” Fay says. And sketching their subjects can be “a morale builder.”

Legacy

“The unique thing about combat artists is that we start with the most brutal and rawest material there is: people and places in a time of war,” Fay says. “We translate being out there danger-close, being out there in 120-plus degrees, having on 80 pounds of gear, feeling as nasty and skanky as the next guy — having the full experience.”

That translation becomes a record of a place and time that will serve as an artifact.

It also can provide closure. Fay’s magnum opus is a drawing

Lifelines



COURTESY OF MARINE SGT. KRISTOPHER J. BATTLES



COURTESY OF THE NAVY ART MUSEUM

Marine Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael D. Fay, far left, works on a portrait of Lance Cpl. Joshua Mooi on Nov. 20 in Fay’s studio at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. Clockwise from left, “Three On The Knee” by Morgan Ian Wilbur, a drawing of Lance Cpl. Nicholas G. Ciccone by Fay and a drawing by Marine Sgt. Kristopher J. Battles.

of tousle-haired Lance Cpl. Nicholas G. Ciccone, whose 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, had stumbled into the bombed-out Kandahar International Airport after a nine-day battle with the Taliban in January 2002. His face is worn, and his steely gaze is drawn downward. “His gear is off, but the weight’s still there,” Fay wrote on his blog, *Fire and Ice*.

Several years later, through e-mails from family members who discovered the portrait of Ciccone online, Fay learned that the 23-year-old had taken his own life.

“The common thread through all their heartfelt messages is a healing sense that they’ve regained a piece of Nick they thought they’d never reclaim,” Fay wrote.

“We are fine artists,” Battles says. “One of the legacies that we want is that people see it as art and that it will be enjoyable to look at even though the subject isn’t always necessarily enjoyable, or it’s not necessarily pretty.”

“So it’s enjoyable as art, but it’s also informative as history,” he says. “So that they will say, ‘Oh, that’s what the Marine Corps was like in the early 2000s.’”

In another blog entry, Fay wrote that some of the young men he has painted have died and can no longer speak for themselves, but “I knew them. I was there, but the bullets and grenade fragments that killed them passed me by.

“I will speak for them,” he wrote. “They would want me to.” □



the Dogs War of

Nine months after returning home from Iraq, Jason Lilley, a First Recon Marine from Camp Pendleton's Bravo Company, finds adjusting to civilian life is one of the hardest battles he's fought.

By JASON WATKINS

JASON LILLEY is torn between two people: the old him and the new him.

The old Jason Lilley served two tours in Iraq as a Marine with the First Recon Battalion and was part of the first group of Americans to breach the country's southern border at the beginning of the war. At some points, he was among the northernmost Marines in enemy land.

During his second tour, the old Jason Lilley saved six of his fellow Marines in a roadside ambush, an action that earned him a Silver Star, the third-highest honor in the military. His story has been told in *Rolling Stone* magazine, in a recently released book called "Generation Kill" and on evening news broadcasts, all of which call him a hero. The old Jason Lilley was a hardened warrior, a Devil Dog, a member of the Corps' most elite group of fighters of which there are less than a thousand. They are the Marine Corps' version of Navy SEALs.

That was the old Jason Lilley. The new Jason Lilley is a damn mess.

I MET THE NEW JASON LILLEY at Pizza Port in Carlsbad. He was a colleague of my roommate, Carlos, who was also in First Recon. The two served together in Iraq.

Wearing sandals, a sleeveless black shirt and long, spiky hair, the new Jason Lilley looked like a frat boy. He stood six foot two (not counting the hair) and had sideburns and a lip ring. He had just been released from the Marine Corps, and his change in appearance was common among newly separated troops.

The new Jason Lilley needed a place to crash after getting out, so my roommate and I invited him to stay with us. What was supposed to be a couple of weeks ended up being five months, during which time the old and the new made a desperate attempt to reconcile their differences.

The new Jason Lilley was filled with native enthusiasm and spoke with a faint Southern drawl, his voice peppered with gravel and abrupt starts and stops. He would study his arms and chest in the mirror, surprised they belonged to him. He looked like twisted steel.

"I applied at the post office today," he said after a month of surfing and playing video games. "A buddy of mine works there and told me to apply. Pay's pretty good."

I helped him write his resumé, culling anything useful that might translate into employability, but his method of service didn't offer much. The real world has little use for combat skills.

The new Jason Lilley would spend hours playing video games, each one a variation of the same war game, each one more cathartic. The new Jason Lilley could just press restart when he got hit by a bullet. The games provided an escape from the white noise of battle which he said haunted him some nights.

He had the power to change things, to be a leader of men, to take lives and save lives, but he didn't have the power to secure a job at the post office or the power plant or anywhere else he applied. He eventually took a job as a bouncer at a nightclub. On one particularly busy night, he spotted a guy dancing on a table where he wasn't supposed to be. He told him to get down but the guy ignored him, so Jason pulled him to the floor. Then Jason noticed the TV cameras in his face. The guy was the lead actor in an MTV reality show that was being filmed at the club.

Jason found another job at a company that bought and sold motorcycles. He would return from work on most days, cursing the place and the people he worked with.

"Man, I work with some idiots," he'd say. "I can't believe how stupid some people are."

It's hard to relate to your new co-workers when you've spent the last two years getting shot at by people who want to kill you, he'd say.

It's like everyone's volume gets turned down.

THE OLD JASON LILLEY sat at the wheel of his Humvee as it drifted across the flat desert. It was March 20, 2003, and the men of First Recon were leading a series of raids through southern Iraq in a push toward Baghdad. They were at this moment the northernmost Americans in that country.

First Recon, an ultra-elite fighting force responsible for leading the most daring missions during wartime, is a band of tightly knit young men who take pride in being the Marine Corps' "cowboys." They've endured much of the same hell as Navy SEALs but their numbers are far fewer; only the top one or two percent of Marines get to try out for First Recon, and more than half of those drop out. Once in, Recon Marines lead dangerous missions by foot to conduct surveillance, to take out enemy targets and to attack. Their motto is "swift, silent and deadly."

This was First Recon's first wartime mission since leaving Camp Pendleton, a journey that would take them a thousand miles north, across the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, through the fabled city of Babylon, to the capital city of Baghdad. It lasted more than a month.

Jason Lilley was in charge of getting the men in his Humvee from point A to point B, usually amid heavy gunfire, the possibility of roadside bombings, through foreign terrain and across mine fields. If their caravan was attacked, he was expected to

have the wherewithal to stay alive and get the rest of the guys to safety. By the time he reached Baghdad, he had seen hundreds, maybe thousands, of lives ended. Many of those were women and children and innocent civilians. He was 6,967 miles away from his home in Rose Hill, Kansas.

The old Jason Lilley hadn't taken a shower in a month. His feet were swollen inside his boots. The smell was like death itself. His Humvee passed through dozens of towns on the way to Baghdad, each one more wrecked and ravaged than the last, each covered in the haze of war. Electricity had long been cut, and most of the villages were steeped in raw sewage from busted pipes. The people who inhabited the villages, though torn by war and circumstance, were usually happy to see Americans, whom they were certain would bring an end to the chaos.

Jason Lilley was almost seven thousand miles away from home, but he might as well have been on the moon. He was now just skin and sinew and bones, existing on fewer than two MREs a day, living beside other young men who equally missed their

homes and their girlfriends and who, besides doing what they were doing, could think of nothing more important than singing, shouting, Avril Lavigne's "I'm With You."

It's at this moment that the old Jason Lilley has found his home, a man among men, careening down a dusty road through the open gates of fate.

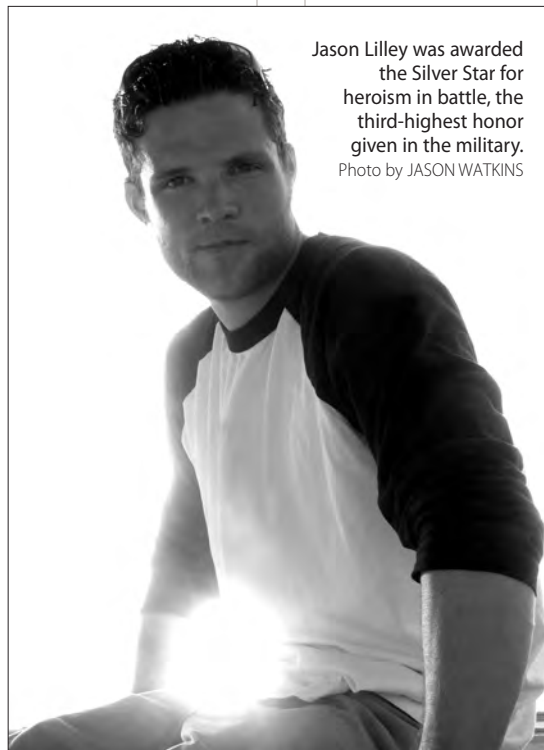
THE NEW JASON LILLEY is sleeping on the couch, his arm covering his eyes, as I quietly walk out the door on my way to work. When I return, he's in the same position, but in the space between he has made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, slipped on his wetsuit, caught a few decent waves, made another sandwich, checked the mail, checked his e-mail, picked up a job application, called his brother, made another sandwich, played a video game and taken a nap. This is the sum of most days.

The job at the motorcycle place didn't work out. Seems the main boss decided to fire Jason's boss, his friend,

the one who gave Jason the job in the first place. Both the new and the old Jason Lilley are loyal like wallpaper, so he walked out of the place too.

The new Jason Lilley is, of course, broke and broken and bored and wants nothing more than to be a part of something that carries a fraction of the weight of being a Marine. He's told to come back tomorrow to speak to the boss, then told there's nothing open, but maybe next month, we just hired someone and we've got a full house, but good luck to you. He's told he'll need to take a class first, but that costs \$800 and doesn't start until next month. He's told he's overqualified, underqualified, appropriately qualified, but still nothing.

During all this, my roommate Carlos and I supported his growing sandwich habit. We helped him buy a car so he could widen his search area — his old car caught fire on the side of the road and he left it there — but there was something with his license or his registration so he didn't drive the new one much. He borrowed my vehicle whenever he wanted to go on a date.



Jason Lilley was awarded the Silver Star for heroism in battle, the third-highest honor given in the military.
Photo by JASON WATKINS

I found something noble in his ability to sit for days on end, producing little more than a five o'clock shadow. I couldn't fathom the things that haunted him some nights, the image of Iraqi children being maimed by rocket-propelled grenades, his fellow Marines taking shrapnel in the head. And I certainly couldn't help him. Close though we were, I could never relate to him on that level.

I was equally fascinated by the old Jason Lilley. His sense of humor was always on, a joke slipping from his tongue the instant he fell asleep and a continuation of the same joke the minute he woke in the morning. He was ten times the man I was, ever hoped to be. He accepted duty with grace, death with respect and fate with open eyes and a wide smile. His body endured weekly what would have killed me in a day. Maybe the only thing we shared in common was our first name, but we were still friends.

Underneath, the new Jason Lilley was unraveling.

"I don't know what to do," he would say. "I don't know why I can't find a job."

Keep at it, I'd tell him, offering him advice or job leads or just blind encouragement. The truth was, I couldn't figure out either why no one would hire him, a decorated war hero with discipline, respect and a solid-gold work ethic.

"Marines have a pretty bad reputation," he said. "They're not very well liked around here." I could see that. Businesses didn't want a bunch of rough and rowdy "jarheads" at their place, but the Marines I knew — mostly members of the First Recon who were friends of my roommate — were the most stand-up guys

Jason Lilley crossed the shallow waters of a canal and onto a berm where, against heavy enemy fire, he began shooting. This allowed the remaining Marines, who were far outnumbered, to retreat with their lives. Because of Jason Lilley, six Marines got to go home to their moms.

I'd ever met. Jason had the misfortune of being a great guy in the midst of punks.

Sometimes, and without warning, the new Jason would share his old war stories, like the time they killed an Iraqi soldier and had put him into the back of their transport vehicle to be identified later. Halfway down the road, Jason noticed his seat was unusually soft; when he looked down, he realized he was sitting on the dead soldier.

"I was so pissed off," he said. Not because no one told him. Because even dead enemies deserve respect.

Jason rarely spoke about the truly terrifying moments — days when he was certain he was going to die and thought that maybe he already had. Occasionally I would ask about some detail and he'd answer my questions but say little more. It's a heavy feeling to be a part of someone's life after they've gone through war. Sometimes, though, when it was just us and after enough time had passed, Jason would share some story he'd hidden away, the telling of which sounded forced and unrehearsed like he had never put it into words.

One night, I joined Jason, Carlos and our newest roommate, Bryan "Trip" Thurmond, who was a distant relative of Senator Strom Thurmond, at our computer to look at pictures they'd taken in Iraq. Most were shots of nameless, smiling Marines gripping their weapons or playing cards. Some were graphic shots of dead Jihadists, their heads blown away by Mark 19 bullets. Marines posed by the bodies, proud of their kills — and maybe proud that they were the ones smiling and not the ones who

were dead. I realized I was looking at first-hand relics from a war we still don't understand taken by people who were there.

Historians tell us we have to wait twenty years before looking back at a war with any kind of reasonable understanding. I think that's probably true. But on that night, surrounded by these three men, I was a part of the story, looking at the pictures that will one day become testament to who we were and how we lived. Whatever my view of the war — which is still evolving — I'm thankful these men aren't cowards.

THE OLD JASON LILLEY returned to Iraq last year for a second time during the war. It was April 7 and Lilley's platoon was crossing the desert when a group of sixty Iraqi insurgents started firing on their convoy. Five Marines were injured in the gun battle, which lasted just a few minutes.

"Anybody who tells you they were in combat and weren't scared is lying," he later told his hometown newspaper. "Every day, every one of us was scared."

Seven thousand miles away, Jason's mom, Janis South, is teaching a classroom full of students about music and wondering where her son is. "It was very, very hard to get up in front of the kids and be happy and act like everything was great," she said later. Sometimes she'd recognize the name of a Marine who served in her son's battalion and she'd slip away to a quiet place and "fall apart for a while."

According to the official paperwork, Jason Lilley crossed the shallow waters of a canal and onto a berm where, against heavy

enemy fire, he began shooting. This allowed the remaining Marines, far outnumbered, to retreat with their lives. By the end, Jason had killed five Iraqis and had saved six of his friends.

Because of Jason Lilley, six Marines got to go home to their moms.

THE NEW JASON LILLEY is standing in his dress blues in front of 125 people in Wichita, Kan., flanked by other Marines and community leaders.

"It is our nation's third highest combat medal and I'm proud to honor Corporal Lilley and to say thank you for your service over and above the call of duty," the city's mayor, Carlos Mayans, says. "You are an American hero and I salute you."

A Marine captain is in the crowd to pay his respects. It's the first time in the captain's twenty-two years in the service he's seen the Silver Star awarded.

"It's an honor to receive it," Jason says later during an interview with the local news. "I just did my job, did what was asked of me, what anyone else would have done in the same situation." He's right and he's wrong, for courage isn't learned. It's moments like those that create heroes and heroes become future leaders of America.

He lives in Kansas now, surrounded by those who know both versions of Jason Lilley, the old and the new. He's starting a life as a civilian after living the tumultuous existence that is southern California, but he still misses it [CONTINUED ON PAGE 37]

the dogs of war

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30] here. Now, the only physical remnants of the old him is a hardened gaze, a bright silver medal and a tattoo across his chest that says "Today is a gift."

I spoke with him by phone recently, the day before he started a new job in construction making ten bucks an hour.

"I'm nervous," he says. "I know I'm going to hate it, I know I'll be bored, I know it won't be challenging. But I need to give this a shot, living as a civilian."

I encourage him, even though he's probably right.

"I've only given being a civilian nine months," he says. "That's not very long."

"How long is it supposed to take?" I say.

"Exactly," he says. "That's what I've been thinking."

Tonight he was supposed to take his little sister to the movies but he'll have to cancel so he can get ready for work in the morning. He says all he wants right now is to own a brand-new car. Not even an expensive one, just one he can drive without worrying about it catching on fire.

"I just want something that's nice," he says. Then he tells me he's been thinking about joining the Navy and becoming a SEAL. If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say they were going to become a Navy SEAL, I could buy him that car, but when Jason Lilley says it, it doesn't seem all that unreasonable.

"I like serving my country, man," he says. "I really do."


THE NEW JASON LILLEY is making a final dive into the cold water off the Carlsbad coast. It's been six months since leaving the Marine Corps and leaving the best group of guys he'll ever know. He'll soon return home to Kansas to start over and to accept the praise of a grateful nation, but right now he's using the last light of the day to ride the waves, paddling into them, then diving under, then paddling farther.

I watch from the shore and realize that in these fleeting moments, when the orange sliver of the sun sinks below the horizon and all light fades into a soupy gray, Jason Lilley is disappearing into a void created by war and peace and this business of growing up.

It's then that he begins to make peace with the old and the new and starts to become whole again. **G**

Donovan's of La Jolla

Environment that whispers of luxury.
A dining experience that truly impresses.
A place to be, relax and enjoy.



DIRGNA Distinguished Restaurant Award
 Gold Medallion Award - Best Steakhouse, San Diego™
 Wine Spectator Best of Award of Excellence
 700 Wines of the World
 Six Well-Appointed Private Rooms
 Exclusively USDA Prime Beef
 Wine and Cocktail Bar Opens at 4:00 PM.
 Dinner Seating Begins at 5:00 PM.
 Closed Sundays. Reservations Recommended.
 Business Casual. Complimentary Valet Parking.

*California Restaurant Association

4340 La Jolla Village Drive
858.450.6666
 La Jolla, California 92122
 In the Golden Triangle
reservations@donovanslajolla.com

America's Best
DONOVAN'S
STEAK & CHOP HOUSE

La Jolla / San Diego ~ Phoenix
www.donovanssteakhouse.com



Why are all these people smiling?

Because they are all wearing Invisalign, the clear way to straighten teeth.

Invisalign straightens your teeth using a series of custom-made, nearly undetectable Aligners. It's been proven to be effective in both clinical research and in practices nationwide. So whether your teeth are crowded, too far apart, or have shifted since wearing braces, Invisalign will help you to start smiling more.



Call today to schedule a FREE appointment.

William A. Barton
 D.D.S., M.S., P.C.
 Certified Invisalign Doctor
 10715 Tierrasanta Blvd., Suite F
 San Diego, CA 92124
 3202 Governor Dr., Suite 207.
 San Diego, CA 92122

invisalign
 start smiling more™

© 2003 Align Technology, Inc. Invisalign® is a registered trademark of Align Technology, Inc.

Lifelines

Iraq vet gets 'Real'

Former Army infantryman Ryan Conklin does duty on popular MTV reality show

By Jason Watkins
jwatkins@militarytimes.com

Ryan Conklin's road to "The Real World" began in Baghdad back in 2005. He was serving as a guard in the Army's Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion of the 187th Infantry Regiment — the famed "Rakkasans" — during the first trial of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. He and his buddies were talking about future plans when someone asked him what he wanted to do after his deployment.

"I don't know," Conklin told them. "I'll probably go to college for a little bit and then I'll probably get on 'The Real World'."

What started out as a joke became a reality when Conklin, 23, happened to be in Pittsburgh when MTV was holding an open casting call for the show, now in its 21st season.

"I talked to my friends again on the phone and I'm like, 'you remember when I always said I was going to make it on 'The Real World'?' They have an open casting call. I'm going to live up to my joke and do it."

"And one thing led to another and I actually made it on. It kind of makes the joke even funnier."

Conklin was one of eight strangers picked to live in a pimped-out house in Brooklyn, have his life taped and "find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting

real." Not surprisingly, as the season's only war vet, he found it difficult to relate to his roommates.

"They didn't really know anyone who's served in Afghanistan or Iraq," he says, "and this many years into the war, I found that kind of crazy."

Conklin revealed his military background slowly and only after being prodded; eventually, though, he began sharing more and even sang a couple of songs he wrote while in Iraq.

"I didn't want any special treatment from

them," he says.

In one episode, Conklin confronts a roommate and begins shouting. The others in the house speculate it may be a result of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Given his background, Conklin isn't surprised.

"With my experiences, I think they kind of expect it out of me. I never saw it as a problem," he says. "It's just something I did, and it's something I can deal with on my own. Obviously, everyone has their own way of coping with things and everybody can vent in their own way. I had my own methods: my sarcasm, my music, my pranks."

Those pranks — like re-stringing his roommate's shoelaces upside down — were how he and his best friend from the show, Chet Cannon, bonded.

"Ryan got upset as much as any



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RYAN CONKLIN

Conklin, a cast member on MTV's "The Real World," served with the Army's 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, in Iraq.



mom to sign a waiver — "She said it was the heaviest pen and the hardest signature she ever had to write." He rose to the rank of specialist (E-4) and served one year-long tour, first in Baghdad and then in Tikrit. His unit was responsible for securing the perimeter around the courthouse where Saddam was tried; he remembers watching the deposed leader being escorted from a helicopter to a shuttle during the trial.

"It was just very busy every time he came in and went," he says.

Despite improvised explosive devices and sniper rounds, his closest call came during a patrol with a quick-reaction force.

"One day my platoon was parked in an Iraqi army compound, so you kind of feel safe but you don't really feel safe," he says. "You wait for something to go boom in the city and then you react to it."

"All of a sudden, not far away ... an explosion just ripped through right next to all of our vehicles. We didn't know what it was; some people were thinking it was a rocket, but I knew immediately. I was like, 'That was no rocket, there was no preparatory sound or anything. It was a suicide bomber.'"

That night, Conklin got to thinking. "That dude could have come right over to our vehicles and he could have taken out a Humvee or he could have taken out quite a few American soldiers."

Experiences like that — and losing two fellow soldiers in Iraq

— make relating to non-military peers difficult, Conklin admits.

"When Ryan told me he was in the military, I had a lot of newfound respect for him," Cannon says. "A lot of the kids in the house were very liberal, saying that we shouldn't be at war, we need to fight our own wars, but it was like a childhood dream of mine to be a soldier. I wanted to go into the military but I didn't nut up."

It often seems to viewers that Conklin strives harder than any cast member to understand the others.

"I went in thinking, I'm just going to do anything and everything," Conklin says. "So whenever roommates did something that they were involved in, they would always ask if anyone was interested. If I was free, I'd be like, 'Yeah, I'll go to your art show, Sarah.' Or, 'I'll go to your interview, Chet.' I get the chance to meet other people in the process."

Conklin is determined to be a positive voice in a sea of anti-war sentiment. He got involved with the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America while in Brooklyn and plans to become more involved, advocating for veterans rights. The group's founder, Paul Rieckhoff, a former Army lieutenant and author of "Chasing Ghosts," was impressed when Conklin approached him.

"That's really courageous," Rieckhoff says. "Just going to the VA is a good thing, but talking about it on television, I think that's a really important thing that he's doing."

Conklin goes through ups and downs on the show, Rieckhoff says, but he puts a face on a war that's faceless to a lot of Americans.

"He's really got a chance to inspire a lot of other vets and educate the American public about what it means to be an Iraq veteran," Rieckhoff says.

"Even when you get out," Conklin says, "you have that mentality that you look out for your buddies, so I guess my role with the exposure of the show, it would be a wasted opportunity if I didn't do something to put the word out there that there are things that need some help."

Conklin has a lot going for him.

"I've actually written a pretty lengthy memoir of everything I did over there," he says. "I get it out of my head, I get it off my chest and I get it on paper."

He won't say what the title is but he admits it will be, for better or worse, an honest account of his experiences in the military.

"It made me who I am, whether I like it or not. It was a chapter of my life I'll never erase." □

WATCH NOW
THE REAL WORLD

Watch "The Real World: Brooklyn" every Wednesday at 10 p.m. EST on MTV.

of us," Cannon said. "Any one of us could have been made out to be the comedian or the angry person or the nice guy. All of us are humans."

Cannon, a Mormon from Utah who has cousins in the service, says he instantly identified with Conklin.

"The thing I respect most about Ryan is his loyalty," Cannon says. "There were kids that, because of the way I dress, were trying to call me out on the street and Ryan is the first one to get in their faces. I don't know if that's what the military did to him. He's just kind of like a protector."

Before enlisting in "The Real World," Conklin enlisted in the Army at 17 after persuading his

features@airforcetimes.com

Life Lines

FUN, FITNESS AND FILM



Epic Gettysburg Cyclorama immerses viewer in Civil War battle

By Jason Watkins
jwatkins@militarytimes.com

Call it an antique version of a virtual reality game: A painted canvas measuring 377 feet around and 42 feet high that depicts, in painstaking detail, the bloody Battle of Gettysburg, complete with sound and light effects.

The Gettysburg Cyclorama, a 360-degree masterpiece completed in 1884 by French artist Paul Philippoteaux and newly reopened to visitors, recreates Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863, the decisive engagement during the Battle of Gettysburg when the Union gained the upper hand over Confederate forces.

The original oil canvas — groundbreaking in its time — took nearly two years to complete and included actual battle objects for a three-dimensional effect that was so powerful, some veterans of the battle reportedly cried at the sight.

It was first displayed in Boston, giving the nation a novel way of experiencing the battle. Residents

War in the round

of Baltimore could read about the cyclorama in a special brochure advertising its opening.

"This cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg ... is, in every particular, a true and accurate reproduction of the whole mighty struggle, as it actually took place on July 3, 1863," the brochure reads.

In 2003, conservation specialists began restoring the aging painting as part of a \$15 million restoration project, and it was opened to the public in a new state-of-the-art viewing room at the Gettysburg National Military Park visitors center in September.

"The new cyclorama painting

experience presents a unique opportunity: The opportunity to view the 1863 battle in the same context that battle veterans did when they first saw the painting toward the end of the 19th century," spokesman Robert Wilburn said in a news release.

Today, visitors can stand on the elevated viewing platform and take in a 360-degree view of the battlefield, complete with a narrated — and intense — sound and light show. Replica artifacts such as boots and rifles once again litter the foreground to blur the line between where the painting begins and ends.



CHRIS BROZ/STAFF

MILITARY MOONLIGHTERS

Are you working a second job to support your family? Do you supplement your income with side work? Is your night job more interesting than your day job? We'd like to hear from you.

Tell us about it at lifelines@militarytimes.com and we may publish your story in a special series about service members and the weakening economy. Be sure to include your name, rank, current duty station and phone number.



PHOTO COLLAGE BY JASON WATKINS/STAFF

National Infantry Museum to open in Georgia

By Jason Watkins
jwatkins@militarytimes.com

The infantry is an often-overlooked but integral component of a wartime victory. Now, those who fight on the front lines are being honored with their own museum, slated to open March 20 in Columbus, Ga.

The National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center at Patriot Park will be a 190,000-square-foot tribute to the infantryman, tracing his roots through every war fought by Americans. Among the 30,000 artifacts to be displayed in the facility are Hermann Goering's field marshal baton and a Civil War battle drum.

The museum will honor the valor and sacrifice made by infantrymen, who represent 80 percent of those who die in battle in the U.S. armed forces, museum officials contend, adding that more than half of all Medals of Honor are awarded to infantrymen.

Among the features of the new museum are an IMAX theater, a parade ground, a walk of honor and authentic World War II buildings, including one used by Army Gen. George S. Patton.

The museum is near Fort Benning and the Army Infantry School, the "Home of the Infantry."

For details and a 10-minute video describing the planned museum, visit www.nationalinfantrymuseum.com. □



NATIONAL INFANTRY MUSEUM

A scale model of the National Infantry Museum, set to open this spring.

century, the viewer will once again enter a realm in which their senses will, if for just a moment, place them in the midst of battle."

The battle

Seven score and six years ago, Confederate forces descended on the tiny Pennsylvania town, where they were met by 94,000 troops of the Union Army. Three days of bloody skirmishes between 165,000 soldiers followed; by July 3, 1863, nearly 51,000 were injured or killed, and the Confederacy was dealt a crushing defeat.

The Battle of Gettysburg, long regarded as the turning point of the Civil War, remains as popular a subject for historians as the battlefield is to tourists.

Today, a visit to Gettysburg National Military Park can serve as a family getaway; located just north of the Maryland/Pennsylvania state line, the remote town is scenic, educational and — best of all — affordable, especially during winter months.

Visitors can walk, ride horses (or drive, depending on weather) along historic trails that join 1,400 monuments across the 6,000-acre park and take in the scenery just as the soldiers saw it 146 years ago.

Plan your visit

Stay: The Holiday Inn Battlefield, which has affordable rooms (about \$70 during an off-season



PHOTOS BY JASON WATKINS/STAFF

The Gettysburg battlefield is home to more than 1,400 Civil War monuments, and the downtown is a shopper's paradise.

weekend). It's in the center of town. *516 Baltimore St.*; www.holidayinn.com

Eat: The Dobbin House Tavern, opened in 1776 and still serving traditional fare like "primal rib of beef" delivered by wait staff dressed in period attire. It's a popular place, so make reservations. *89 Steinwehr Ave.*; www.dobbinhouse.com; \$19.95 to \$34.95

Shop: Gettysburg has a number of quaint shops selling Civil War memorabilia; most are worthless tourist trinkets, but some stores, such as the Horse Soldier (www.horsesoldier.com), specialize in historic artifacts

and antiques. Most shops lie along Baltimore Street and Steinwehr Avenue, and in the city square.

Get the 411: The 139,000-square-foot Gettysburg National Military Park Visitors Center and Museum should be your first stop to get acquainted with the battlefield. The new, state-of-the-art building cost \$135 million to construct and houses a stadium-seating theater with an introductory film (narrated by Morgan Freeman) and the restored Gettysburg Cyclorama. It's open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (until 7 p.m. in summer) every day but

The Gettysburg Cyclorama, a 360-degree painting, recently has reopened to visitors to the battlefield.



Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. Charges apply for admission. www.nps.gov/gett

Don't miss: The Soldiers' National Cemetery, just off Baltimore Street, is the final resting place of hundreds of Union soldiers. It's also the site of the most memorable speech in American history: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered

four months after the battle. www.nps.gov/archive/gett/gncem.htm

Other stuff to see: Hard-core history buffs can also visit the home of President Dwight D. Eisenhower — learn more at www.nps.gov/eise

Before you go: Read Michael Shaara's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "The Killer Angels," a historical retelling of the three-day battle. The novel was the basis for the 1993 movie "Gettysburg."

Find out more: Log on to the Gettysburg Foundation Web site for tips and resources for your visit. www.gettysburgfoundation.org. □

Safer water bottles

Toxic scare has drinkers diving for protection. How to tell if yours is healthy, plus 8 great BPA-free bottles

By Jason Watkins
jwatkins@militarytimes.com

Chances are, every time you take a chug out of that reusable plastic water bottle in your rucksack, you're ingesting trace amounts of bisphenol-A, or BPA, a chemical some scientists say can cause health defects.

Various studies in recent years have shown that BPA — which is used to harden plastics in everything from reusable water bottles to eyeglasses — can mimic the effects of the hormone estrogen and might lead to developmental problems in infants.

Small amounts of BPA can “leech” out of the plastic and into your water, especially when

heated, microwaved or left sitting for long periods.

However, scientists are split on whether the threat is real, and the effects on adults, they seem to agree,

are less of a concern.

According to the National Institutes of Health, there is “some concern” that low levels of exposure to BPA among fetuses, infants and children can lead to developmental problems in behavior, in the brain and in glands that

TOM BROWN PHOTO/JOHN HARMAN ILLUSTRATION/STAFF

affect puberty and reproduction.

The National Toxicology Program issued a statement in September that cited “some concern for neural and behavioral effects in fetuses, infants and children at current human exposures. ... The possibility that bisphenol-A may alter human development cannot be dismissed.”

But the Food and Drug Administration downplayed the risk earlier this year, saying that

products containing BPA “are safe and that exposure levels to BPA from food contact materials ... are below those that may cause health effects.”

The FDA has the power to limit use of BPA in food containers and medical devices, but the report concludes that BPA exposure is not enough to warrant action.

Still, retail giant Wal-Mart has announced it will begin to phase out most BPA plastics used for food containers, and big makers of reusable water bottles such as Nalgene and CamelBak have debuted BPA-free versions while maintaining the safety of their other products.

In an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, doctors Frederick S. vom Saal and John Peterson Myers accuse the chemical industry of an “aggressive disinformation campaign” that they likened to the “manufactured doubt” developed by the lead and tobacco industries.

“We shouldn't wait until further studies are done in order to act in protecting humans,” said Dr. Ana Soto of Tufts University, who has called for more restrictions on the chemical.

To make sure the plastic water bottle in your pack isn't slowly altering your brain, we found eight new BPA-free bottles available now. Drink up. □

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

DO'S AND DON'TS

- **Do** look for plastics that use the numbers 1, 2, 4 and 5 on their recycling label.
- **Don't** microwave plastic bottles.
- **Do** use glass or ceramic products when possible.
- **Don't** leave plastic bottles inside a warm vehicle.
- **Do** look for “BPA-Free” labels on plastics.
- **Don't** store liquids in bottles for long periods of time.
- **Do** call companies if you have concerns about their products.
- **Don't** fill water bottles with caustic or harmful chemicals.

NALGENE 24 OZ. OTG BOTTLE

This slim, impact-resistant bottle is dishwasher safe, won't retain tastes and odors, and is made from Eastman Tritan copolyester with no BPA. It features a unique hinged cap that's easy to carry and lets you open the bottle with one hand. It also fits in most cupholders.

Retail price: Around \$10

Online: <http://www.nalgene-outdoor.com>

**SIGG STEELWORKS 0.6 LITER BOTTLE**

This Swiss-made bottle is made of stainless steel and holds about 20 ounces of liquid. Assorted bottle tops are available to replace the standard screw top. In true Swiss tradition, this bottle is a finely engineered piece of gear.

Retail price: Around \$20

Online: <http://www.sigg.com>

**INTAK BY THERMOS 24 OZ. HYDRATION BOTTLE**

Available at Target stores and featuring a useful rotating intake meter to let you monitor your water consumption, this BPA-free bottle has a leak-proof push-button lid and is made from Eastman Tritan copolyester.

Retail price: Around \$10

Online:

<http://www.thermos.com>

NALGENE EVERYDAY TRITAN

With a 32-ounce capacity, this is the classic Nalgene water bottle. It comes in various colors, is dishwasher safe and, like all Nalgene bottles, can withstand extreme temperatures — from 40 to 212 degrees Fahrenheit. The screw-top cap is familiar to anyone who's ever carried a Nalgene on a long haul.

Retail price: Around \$10

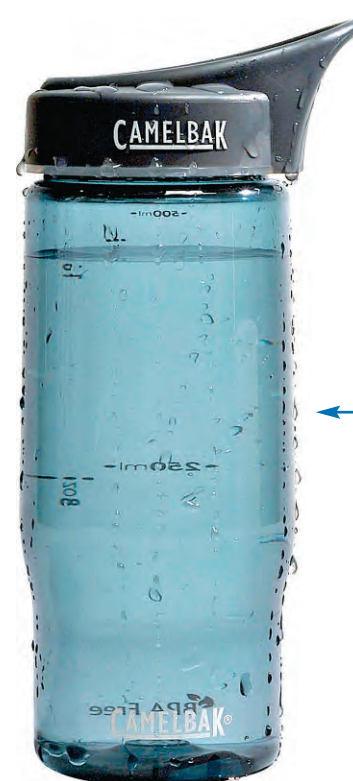
Online: <http://www.nalgene-outdoor.com>

NALGENE 12 OZ. TODDLER GRIP-N-GULP

Protect your future troops with Nalgene's BPA-free toddler series, featuring a one-piece sipper and a minigrip design for small hands. Even better, it's spill-proof. Not microwave safe. Dishwasher safe.

Retail price: Around \$9

Online: <http://www.nalgene-outdoor.com>

**CAMELBAK .75L BETTER BOTTLE W/BIG BITE**

This 750ml bottle comes in a variety of colors and features CamelBak's no-spill, Big Bite valve, which lets you sip without tipping the bottle. It's also compatible with CamelBak's hands-free adapter and is dishwasher safe. Available in 12 colors.

Retail price: Around \$13

Online: <http://www.camelbak.com>

CAMELBAK .5L BETTER BOTTLE W/ CLASSIC CAP

Like its Better Bottle brethren, this half-liter version comes with a classic lid that's interchangeable with Big Bites but might be preferred by those who don't take small sips. Dishwasher safe.

Retail price: Around \$9

Online: <http://www.camelbak.com>

KLEAN KANTEEN 800ML STAINLESS STEEL BOTTLE

A plastic-free alternative, this sturdy bottle looks like a scuba tank and is made from non-leeching, nontoxic materials with food-grade electropolished steel. Its wide mouth allows for ice cubes.

Retail price: Around \$19

Online: <http://www.kleankanteen.com>

Inside Guantanamo

Documentary looks at life in the controversial military prison

By Jason Watkins
jwatkins@militarytimes.com

"They've forgotten that we're down here," laments the soft-spoken, 23-year soldier as she reflects on her mission. "And they want to sit there and they want to say, 'Well, they're beating them.' ... I haven't ever beaten anybody. I've never tortured anybody. And it really hurts. It's like, 'Look, I'm in the Army, I'm serving our country, I'm trying to make it safe for you.

DON'T MISS IT

National Geographic Explorer's "Inside Guantanamo" debuted April 12 and will re-air on the National Geographic Channel. Check local listings for air times. To find out more and watch a panel discussion with military and civilian experts, visit www.natgeotv.com/guantanamo.

And this is ... the thanks I get? That's really what makes it really hard." The sergeant's noble frustrations aptly capture the contradictions and politics that shroud the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. For three weeks, a camera crew from National Geographic Explorer was granted broad access to this hotly debated patch of real estate. Shadowing military guards, government leaders, attorneys and even former detainees, "Inside Guantanamo" chronicles the specialized mission of the controversial military prison: to detain suspected enemy combatants of the U.S.

The 90-minute documentary is as much about life in the prison as it is about the geopolitical controversies that surround it.

For their part, troops assigned to run the facility appear proud of their mission.

"We've got nothing to hide here.

It's a fact. There is nothing that I'm not proud to talk to my kids about or to explain to my mom," Guantanamo's commander, Rear Adm. David Thomas, says to the camera.

However, because of security concerns, camera crews are severely restricted in what they can show within Guantanamo's heavily fortified walls — no detainees' faces or names or nationalities, no names of the guards, no critical infrastructure. The military operates as though Gitmo is a target for terrorist attack, the narrator says, with armed guards on constant patrol.

What the cameras do capture, though, are the prison's routine inner workings — cell checks; detainee transfers; the human, sometimes combative, interaction among guards and prisoners. The difference is, Guantanamo doesn't house your common cat burglar. Among those who now call Guantanamo home are members of al-Qaida, the Taliban and the alleged co-conspirators of the Sept. 11 attacks, and they're housed across nine concrete and steel maximum-security and medium-security camps — including at least one camp that no journalist has ever seen.

Still, Gitmo remains a highly visible facility.

"For the military," the narrator continues, "Guantanamo is the front for the war on terror. ... The eyes of the world are on these guards. Any misstep can become headline news."

The film explains the ongoing battles questioning the necessity — and legality — of the prison.

The Supreme Court on three occasions challenged the Bush administration's assertion that the detainees at Guantanamo don't fit the Geneva Conventions' definition of "enemies" and are therefore not subject to the conventions'



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

A guard tower overlooks Camp Delta. There have been no escape attempts at the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

protections. Allegations of torture, including the notorious practice of "waterboarding," are discussed at length in the documentary.

"Questioning the detainees in this program has given us information that has saved innocent lives by helping us stop new attacks," says then-President George W. Bush in a 2006 clip.

Not everyone agrees, including Bush's former secretary of state.

"Guantanamo has become a major problem for the way the world perceives America," says retired Army Gen. Colin Powell. "And if it was up to me, I would close Guantanamo, not tomorrow, but this afternoon."

Caught in political crossfire

Inextricably linked but far removed from the controversy are the hundreds of military people who serve duty at Guantanamo, checking cells, transporting detainees and securing the site. Some of the detainees first arrived when the guards now watching over them were still in grade school.

The film captures the lingering monotony of life in confinement: a guard helping a detainee choose between a book by Louisa May Alcott or Stephen King; the shouts and curses routinely delivered to military guards by detainees; the 12-hour days spent checking each cell every three minutes for suicide attempts.

Because of the limited access, viewers never learn what charges, if any, have been brought against the detainees or what reasons the military might have for their detention. Viewers only learn that many of them weren't sought out by coalition forces but were turned in by others, often for a cash bounty. When released,

Gitmo at a glance

Guantanamo Bay now houses nearly 200 detainees.

■ The facility was first put into use in 1903 as a coaling and naval station. In 1942, it was used as a Japanese internment camp.

■ Today, more than 6,000 military personnel, contractors and detainees call Gitmo home. Troops from all branches of the military belong to Joint Task Force Guantanamo (JTF-GTMO).

■ Troops work four days on, two days off, in 12-hour shifts

that begin at 5:30 a.m. They carry a whistle, a radio and pepper spray; only the guards in the towers have live rounds.

■ The 45 square miles of land belong to Cuba but the U.S. leases it — at \$4,085 a year — from Fidel Castro. (He has reportedly stopped cashing the checks.)

■ Camp 7 holds the "highest-value" detainees; no journalists have seen it. Its location on the base is a secret.

Source: National Geographic

many have returned to civilian life in the Middle East, but some have returned to the fight against America.

Gitmo, says a former prisoner, did nothing but hurt the American cause.

"They created more jihadists against them," says Omar Madani, a detainee who spent six years at Gitmo but was released in May 2008. He is now in Kabul.

As detainees were released, says the narrator, stories of their detention spread throughout the Muslim world, and some say that those stories have inspired the next generation of jihadists.

"There are military officers who believe that the No. 1 and 2 leading, identifiable causes of U.S. combat deaths in Iraq are, No. 1, Abu Ghraib and No. 2, Guantanamo, because of their effectiveness in helping recruit combat soldiers against American forces," says Alberto J. Mora, former Navy general counsel.

Many disagree. Terrorism came first, they say, not Guantanamo.

"I don't want them in our prisons. I want them" at Gitmo, Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney said during his 2008 Republican presidential campaign. "Some people have said we ought to close Guantanamo. My view is we ought to double Guantanamo."

As a documentary, "Inside Guantanamo" maintains neutrality but presents a detailed picture of Guantanamo today. How we treat enemy combatants will ultimately be up to future generations to judge.

"Guantanamo, at moments, has contained the best of America and the worst at the same time. It's an amazing place," says Lt. Cmdr. Charles Swift, a military lawyer who has defended several prisoners. "And you see in individuals, the heroic and beauty that is America, and at times you see what we can be when we succumb to our fears." □



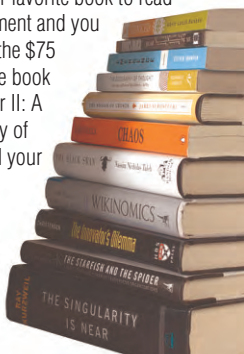
ARMY MMA
SOLDIERS SLUG IT OUT
IN FULL-CONTACT
FIGHT TOURNEY

46

features@armytimes.com
Life Lines

WHAT'S ON YOUR SHELF

Tell us your favorite book to read on deployment and you could win the \$75 coffee-table book "World War II: A Chronology of War." Send your entries to features@armytimes.com.



The Call of the WILD

58 military teams. 54.5 miles of pain.
Could you hack this ultimate fitness test?

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Visit www.militarytimes.com/wildernesschallenge08 for a video of this year's event.

By Jason Watkins
jwatkins@militarytimes.com

There is perhaps no better way to build comradery and teamwork than to receive a collective physical beating. Just ask the members of "The Devil's Rejects," a four-person team of Marines from Camp Lejeune, N.C., that we followed in the 8th annual All-Military Wilderness Challenge near Fayetteville, W.Va. The two-day event offers service members the opportunity to take in some of the world's most scenic vistas in exchange for suffering some of the cruelest body poundings

imaginable. "You guys are tough as nails," said Michael Bond, the event's coordinator, during a team briefing. "I know you can do this ... A marathon has got nothing on you guys." A total of 58 four-person teams from all five branches competed for bragging rights in this year's event, hosted by the Mid-Atlantic Region Morale, Welfare and Recreation Department. The winning group — a Coast Guard team from Boston — walked away with an engraved wooden trophy and countless bumps and bruises to show for their hard work.

THE TEAM STATS

Team 112 'The Devil's Rejects' — Marine Corps
Total Overall: 8th Place
Total Time: 9 hrs. 15 mins. 59 secs.



Cpl. Simon Miller, 25
(team captain)
Legal Admin.



Cpl. Justin Jindra, 22
Heavy Equipment Mechanic



Cpl. Kristen Steil, 22
Motor Transportation Mechanic

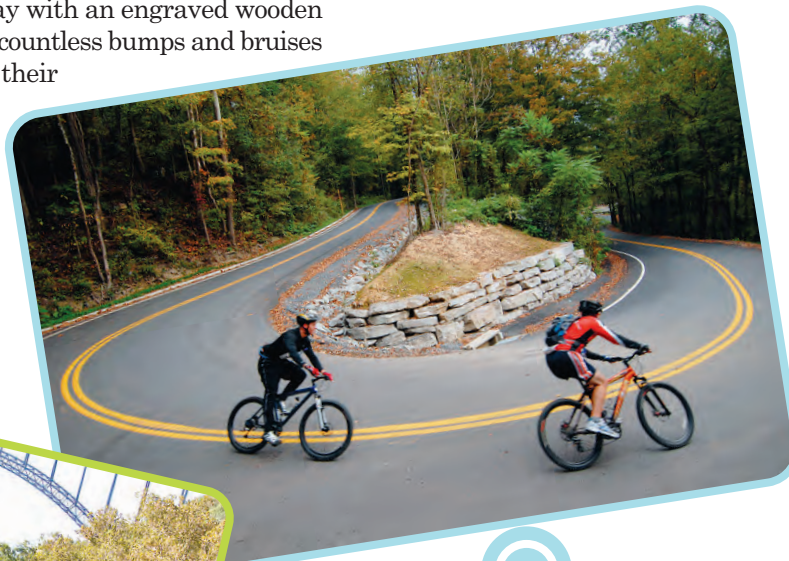


Sgt. Juan Galvan, 21
Motor Transportation Mechanic



"There's no shame in getting off [your bike]. Don't take too many chances. You guys gotta get back to work on Monday."

— Michael Bond, event coordinator



● Village of Thurmond

4

7-mile "duckie" boat

Participants were paired up in "duckie" boats (inflatable kayaks) and paddled down the swift — and chillingly cold — New River. The middle of the river had the fastest currents — and the highest potential for getting dumped out of the boat. Plenty of boats and team members flipped while traversing the Surprise Rapids, a fast-moving stretch on the bend of the river that features class I to class III rapids.

END OF DAY ONE

PHOTOS BY
CHRIS MADDALONI AND
JASON WATKINS/STAFF

GRAPHIC BY
LISA ZILKA CHAVEZ/STAFF

DAY ONE

- 1 Mountain run: 5 miles
- 2 Swim: Half mile
- 2 Whitewater raft: 14 miles

DAY TWO

- 3 Mountain bike: 14 miles
- 4 "Duckie" boat: 7 miles
- 5 Mountain hike: 14 miles

Total miles: 54.5

"In the end, really, I don't think the rafting counts for much because I've seen teams do horribly in the rafting and kayaking, but as long as they run and they do good in the bikes, [they do well overall]. To me it's just luck."

— Marine Cpl. Simon Miller



Heaven Help You Rapids

Laurel Creek



FINISH

N

New River Gorge Bridge

14-mile mountain hike

Hands down the toughest part of the course, the hike featured 14 miles of some of the most rugged trails in the Appalachians and crossed below the New River Gorge Bridge, the longest steel-arch bridge in the Western Hemisphere. Some teams, like "The Devil's Rejects," ran for most of the grueling hike. They finished second among the Marine Corps teams and eighth overall.

START

Half-mile swim 14-mile whitewater raft

One member from each team swam downstream for half a mile to rendezvous with his or her raft. Two teams were placed in a nine-person raft, with one experienced river guide, and continued down the Gauley River for five miles, through 35 separate rapids. A whitewater guide can make or break a team. Marine Cpl. Simon Miller said his boat had a less-than-stellar guide. "He was horrible," he said. "He fell out, he dropped his paddle and we had to go backwards to get it."

DAY ONE: 5-mile mountain run

For the Challenge's first event, 58 teams of four, each with one woman, traversed five miles of scenic trail and unpaved road skirting the Gauley River. "The number one goal here is to finish and to be nice to each other. Those are pretty much the only rules we have," event coordinator Michael Bond said.



JOHN HARMAN/STAFF

RACE RESULTS

1ST PLACE
'Duckie Fuzz & The Masters of Rubber' — Coast Guard
 ■ Lt. Cmdr. Dan Deptula (team captain)
 ■ Lt. Brian Maggi
 ■ MK3 Chris Tull
 ■ Lt. Cheryl Hickey
Total Time: 8 hrs. 11 mins. 53 secs.

2ND PLACE
'Dale Milton Racing' — Marine Corps
 ■ Maj. Keith Parrella (team captain)
 ■ Maj. Rhesa Ashbacher
 ■ Capt. Craig Clarkson
 ■ Maj. Jeff Groharing
Total Time: 8 hrs. 43 mins. 29 secs.

3RD PLACE
'The Copper Collars' — Navy
 ■ NDC Don Thrush (team captain)
 ■ NDC Cass Schussler
 ■ PO1 Bryan Edwards
 ■ Lt. Sarah Wilson
Total Time: 8 hrs. 43 mins. 29 secs.



DAY TWO: 14-mile mountain bike

Rising before the sun, teams assembled near the bank of the New River. The teams left 30 seconds apart and traveled 14 miles along the picturesque trail to the village of Thurmond. Participants rode their own mountain bikes across mud puddles and dangerous switchbacks. "If you miss one of these switchbacks going too fast," Bond said, "you're going to get so much airtime that you're going to be able to figure out what you did before you even hit the ground."

Surprise Rapids

"So far, I've never had much luck in the water sports. There's always next year, though."

— Marine Cpl. Simon Miller

Lifelines

Country on tour

Singer Mark Wills deploys to war zone to entertain troops

By Jason Watkins

jwatkins@militarytimes.com

Country music star Mark Wills enters the U.S. Army Band recital hall at Fort Myer, Va., and greets a crowd of two dozen musicians, sound technicians, USO reps and Army personnel.

"These are my war buddies," Wills says, "the guys I'm traveling with now."

Wills and his new crew have gathered for a quick rehearsal Dec. 15 and will catch an early flight the next day to spend nearly two weeks traveling to forward operating bases in Iraq and Afghanistan to meet and perform for service members as part of the Sergeant Major of the Army's Hope and Freedom USO Tour.

"I kind of feel like it's my tour," Wills, 35, says of his eighth trip to the war zone. "I take a lot of ownership over it."

Wills has recruited fellow country musicians Craig Morgan and Keni Thomas for this trip, which has become an annual holiday event. Comedian Louis CK, sports commentator and model Leeann Tweeden and several Miami Dolphins cheerleaders also are in the lineup.

"I grew up playing army," Wills says, "so when the opportunity arose for me to be able to give back and do something like this, I jumped at it. Because I think this is one of the coolest things that any American can do —

show support for our troops."

Although Wills has no military experience — his father was drafted into the Army during the Vietnam War and served with the 101st Airborne — his fellow musicians have decorated service records: Morgan served on active duty for 10 years with the Army's 101st and 82nd Airborne divisions, and Thomas is a former staff sergeant in the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment. He participated in the ill-fated Battle of Mogadishu, memorialized in the book and film "Black Hawk Down," and was awarded a Bronze Star for valor.

"Those guys are the real deal," Wills says. "I think the theory for myself, for Craig, for Keni and for everybody on this tour is to touch as many soldiers as we can — to shake hands and talk and sign pictures."

Wills goes through a three-song set of hits, including the perennial favorite "Nineteen Something," which spent seven weeks atop the country charts in 2002, before turning the stage over to Morgan and Thomas. He spends a few minutes packing necessary gear — a Kevlar helmet, a bulletproof vest (he purchased his own), clothes — and places his ruck into a neatly stacked line of bags before spending the rest of the afternoon catching up with old friends.



STAFF SGT. MATTHEW CLIFTON/ARMY



COURTESY OF MARK WILLS

Country star Mark Wills travels by helicopter in Iraq in September. Top, Wills performs during the Sergeant Major of the Army's holiday USO tour in December.

Wills and longtime friend Master Sgt. Caleb Green, a vocalist with the U.S. Army Band, share photos of their families on their iPhones while the other performers rehearse.

"He's a headliner and he could be anywhere in the world doing what he wanted to do, getting paid," Green says, "and he chose to hang out with the little guys like us, which is cool."

"I do get paid," Wills jokes. "I get \$25 a day."

Their friendship has blossomed over years of USO tours where they have performed together, and they share "war stories" from trips past.

"You've heard the whole thing of brothers in arms," Wills says. "Really, for what we do, these

are our brothers in arms. Just like the real Army."

"You couldn't write the right words, you couldn't write the right song to convey what happens on this trip," Green said.

Wills willingly accepts the dangers of a combat-zone venue. Last September, he suffered severe dehydration while filming "My Military Diary" in Iraq for GAC — he refers to the trip as the "IV Tour" — and has been closer to mortar and machine-gun attacks than he'd like.

Still, he keeps re-enlisting.

"You can't deter me from going," he says. Iraq is "no more dangerous than Detroit."

When he performs for soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, his show takes on a more "adult

friendly" vibe, he says, and troops often become part of the show.

"We cuss a lot more," he jokes. He also asks who in the crowd is a fan of country music — and who is not.

To those who are not, he says, "tough s--- — it's a free show."

"It's honestly the best crowd you will ever play for as a performer," says Kevin Key, 30, Wills' lead guitarist. "I always look forward to a military crowd because they just appreciate everything you do."

Wills has traveled to the Middle East eight times since the outbreak of the war in 2003, and each time, he says he's reminded of why he goes.

"It gets into your blood and you can't get rid of it. Once you feel the satisfaction of being able to go over and entertain," he says, "you almost crave it."

"This tour, going overseas, is not about selling records to me," Wills says. "I don't care if one person in the military ever buys my album. That's not what we go for. That's not what I go for."

He's seen celebrities accept USO invitations so they can feel close to the action or, worse, receive credit for supporting the troops.

"I go because I enjoy it. I go because it's Christmas, and what better way to give some man or some woman a Christmas present that you've never met in your life than by taking a little entertainment to them," he says.

"And I'd like to think that if I were in the military, maybe one of my favorite singers would come over and do a show for me." □

E S S A Y

My Doggy Cody

BY J A S O N W A T K I N S

HE WAS MY BEST FRIEND, my trusted sidekick, my unfailing partner in crime and my most loyal confidant. He was, of course, just a dog, but puppy love is perhaps the purest of the form because it is unburdened by the dramas and disappointments of humans and their baggage.

I got him when I was thirteen. For months I had begged my mom for a golden retriever puppy, had cut out pictures from pet catalogs to soften her. I even picked out a name—Cody, strong and simple yet sensitive—in support of the universal truth that all boys should have a dog. But she would have none of it, claiming that I would lose interest in a dog, that I lacked the requisite commitment to care for a living thing. She said any dog of mine would suffer a miserable existence, a fair point considering my spotty record. In the dozen years I had been alive, I'd either lost or misplaced a kitten, two goldfish, a snake named Spanky, another snake with no name, a turtle, a box full of horned toads, more than a dozen stuffed animals and a horse. (The horse, I later learned, was shipped off to a "happier place" after my brother and I lost interest in him, but I always carried around a secret suspicion that my neglect caused his demise.) In fact, the only creature that hadn't hastily fled my company was an alley cat named Tigger who, loyal to his core, could not be driven away.

Because I had an older brother who showed no interest in my suitability as a playmate (or in my existence), I grew up believing I was an only child. On top of that, I grew up in the rural southwest, ten miles from the nearest town and surrounded by cows and coyotes, so my need for a real friend was not imaginary. This time would be different, I told my mother. I will not somehow snuff this puppy.

My mother picked me up from school on the day I turned thirteen. Because junior high was particularly hard on me, having introduced me to a world of bullies and minor injustices, my ride home was always a quiet affair. But this day was different; sitting on the seat next to mine was a small box, wrapped neatly in paper, the four sides folded one over the top of the other to hide the contents but just barely. I put the box on my lap and said that I would open it later. Then the box began to move. When I opened one of the flaps, then another, a knowing grin stretched across my face. There, staring back at me with two pin-point, black eyes was Cody, a month-old butter-scotch ball of fur. My mother had driven four hours roundtrip to pick him up from a breeder. He was registered with the American Kennel Club as Cody Watkins, the first thing in my life over which I possessed official ownership.

HE SLEPT IN A MAKESHIFT KENNEL beside my bed for those first sleepless months. After learning the rhythms and rules of our home, he earned a place atop my bed. Even then, he required constant care—frequent trips outside, food, water, petting, love—all at the risk of ceaseless whimpering. It's said that the bonds of love are cemented at first sight, but I believe they begin in moments like these when the happiness and survival of another creature rests squarely on your shoulders and comes at some small or imagined sacrifice.

As Cody grew, we laughed at his awkward progression from fur ball to awkward puppy, his limbs and paws too big for his body and his movements a mixture of marginal dexterity and aloofness. But he, like most golden retrievers, was blessed by a quiet affection for his newly adopted family and he showed us patience and grace in our endeavor to mold him into a well-trained, disciplined member of the clan. His body soon filled out, his movements gaining agility and his coat becoming a thick, brilliant blanket of orange velvet.

One of the few amenities we enjoyed growing up was a swimming pool in our backyard. Cody took to it like, well, a bird dog to water, eventually jumping off the diving board and paddling to the other side where the steps were. We called it the Cody Crawl. Friends loved it. My mother hated it because she was left with the task of cleaning out the pool filter. His favorite activity,

throw, was playing fetch. Every year for Christmas, Cody got a new package of bright yellow tennis balls which we would throw endlessly as he bounded across the yard (or pasture or through the house), returning a few seconds later with the ball. He insisted that we throw it again, and again (and again) until one of us exhausted, and he never exhausted. He held onto each ball until its integrity was compromised by doggy slobber and dirt, and then he'd go find a stick or cow patty until we could produce another ball. It was in those moments, from the point of separation of the ball from our hand until he clutched it again in his mouth, as the ball began and maintained its arch and then fell back to earth, that Cody was the happiest. I sometimes wondered if we facilitated this meaningless act for his benefit or if he was just keeping us busy so we'd stay around longer.



DURING MY SOPHOMORE year of high school, my friend Tammy and I were to present a fictitious product in our speech

class. Our visual aide was Cody, outfitted in a device we claimed would serve as a contraceptive for dogs to spare them the indignity of, you know, being neutered. Cody, not our concept, was a hit. And because his attention could really only be held by the round, yellow ball in front of him, one of our classmates thought it might be funny to see him fetch, so he threw the ball fifty yards down the hallway as Cody, with all the grace of a car wreck, slipped and slid from one end to the other. Students in other classrooms stared in confusion as an orange bullet blew past their door, then again on the return trip.

Partly because of this and partly because of his beauty and charm, Cody became something of a celebrity in my hometown. He was featured occasionally in my high school and community newspapers (I was on staff at both) and made appearances at social events. People asked about him not in the way one might ask about a pet but in a truly interested way. He was like my considerably more handsome and more popular brother, and I

found myself, deep in throes of my own teen angst and longing for attention, acutely jealous.

MY FAMILY LOVED CODY AND IN TURN he loved each one of us, particularly our other pets, who approached all newcomers with a mix of trepidation and disgust. But soon he and Tigger were fast friends and he and Misty, my brother's dog, were soulmates. On many days, the four of us would set out armed with a pellet gun into the fields of a neighboring ranch to hunt small game, Tigger trotting along to keep pace while Cody and Misty ferretted out rabbits and sparrows or the occasional skunk. I was base camp, dispatching the troops to every near and distant landmark within our slowly expanding world. There, in the august light of summer, a boy and his dog (and his cat and his brother's dog) held court over a postage stamp of land, the only world the three animals would ever know. Sometimes the existence of a loyal pet in the life of a child is his first sign that the world may not be such a bad place, that perfection, though fleeting, exists.

The day Misty died, Cody searched for her for hours, finally resting his head on the front porch as the gravity of the situation closed in on him. During his formative years, she was the closest thing to a maternal figure in his life. Cody was just a dog, of course, but he was a smart dog and he knew that an unfillable void had been created by her passing. He mourned the death of Miss Watson, our basset hound that lived through more presidential administrations than I had. He mourned the death of Gator, who didn't die but whose ownership was reappropriated after eating ten two many of our shoes. And eventually, along with the rest of the family, he mourned the death of Tigger, who had finally succumbed to the predators of the desert. On the day Cody and I discovered his lifeless body in the middle of a cow pasture, the victim of a coyote or an owl, Cody stopped in front of his remains as if to pay his final respects. Then, as I placed the river rock at the head of Tigger's grave in the southwest corner of our field, Cody genuflected again. So this is how it's going to be, his eyes said. Get attached to something and then lose it.

And so it went, for the remainder of his life was marked by the slow unmooring of friendships and alliances in the name of time or progress. He sat on the front porch as my brother drove away to college, and he sat on the front porch the day I drove away to college, though by now he was no longer a puppy with an unfillable appetite for chasing tennis balls but had grown into a stalwart protector, a patriarchal sentry who watched over our family and home, quickly rising to greet every new visitor with a cold, wet nose and an appeal to play a little fetch.

When I came home on weekends and holidays, Cody would be waiting there on the front porch, now with a new playmate

and hunting partner. Tip, my uncle's puppy, had taken up residence at our house and trailed Cody wherever he went, sometimes invading too closely into Cody's personal space. No longer a spring chicken, Cody did his best to tolerate the tightly wound pup but sometimes he would indulge Tip and set off on some journey to a distant ranch, both dogs returning at the end of the day thirsty and tired.

My relationship with Cody soon faded, though, as the existential crises of college and adulthood claimed most of my waking hours and I returned home less and less. As he got older, I suspected that each time I saw him would be my last and my farewells were usually short but poignant, like visits to a dying relative. But each time I returned, he was right there on the porch where I last saw him, sometimes with a tennis ball in his mouth, sometimes not.

Someday,
we'll all be
called to our
maker and
we'll be
judged by
the dogs we
loved and
the dogs who
loved us.

Just before Christmas last year, I got a call from my mother telling me that Cody had taken a turn for the worse and she was forced to make the difficult decision to have him put to sleep. For a moment I said nothing, then sighed and told her it was for the best. "He shouldn't have to suffer," I told her. "You did the right thing." I knew I couldn't have made the decision myself, that I would have selfishly chosen to prolong his suffering in order to delay my own. And I thought about Tip, now friendless on the front step.

I regretted not being there, not holding Cody as he breathed his final, doomed breaths, not being able to say goodbye. I knew—we all knew—the day would come when we would be forced to accept Cody's passing from our family but I always imagined the circumstances would be a little different, though how I'm not quite sure. The truth was, it had been years since Cody and I were close, and I doubt his last moments of clarity were filled with remembrances of me and of Tigger and all of our other

friends during those untroubled days of my youth when nothing mattered, not even schoolyard bullies. The truth is, he wasn't just a dog. He was my friend. And when he finally did slip into that deep sleep, I like to imagine him entering his next life the same way he first entered mine: with furry ears a-flopping and a furiously wagging tail. Because someday, we'll all be called to our maker and we'll be judged by the dogs we loved and the dogs who loved us.

People ask me all the time what it was like growing up in the middle of nowhere, with no playmates and with nothing to do. It must have been boring, they say. You must have led a lonely existence.

You wouldn't understand, I tell them. ❀

Jason Watkins is the editor of San Diego Downtown magazine and design director of San Diego Pets. He is originally from New Mexico.