The Last Deployment

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In the middle of October, after hearing that we’ll be in Iraq another six months, we settle in deep. We’ve been living in the moment of the war, moving from place to place, mission to mission, never stopping long enough to push the stakes of our tents deep into the sand. We are wandering gypsies, and we like it. But when Captain Roar stands before Bravo Company and tells us that we are in for the long haul, we stare back at him and ask him what we are supposed to do. Nobody is ready to settle into a long hibernation in Iraq.

I think we finally realize that this war isn’t going to be brief. Therefore, our tents become more than just tents. We build wooden half-walls to block the crisp evening wind and construct real wooden door frames to replace the curtains we use in the summer. We build rafters and crossbeams, remove the tentpoles, and lay the canvas tent-skin over the new wooden frame. We add on porches and decks, wire in lights, and build small, boxy patio chairs. In the evenings we sit on the porches, playing cards, reading, smoking, or sometimes just talking as the cool desert night settles in around us.

“She was perfectly normal when we were engaged,” Jones says.

His wife wants to adopt ethnically diverse children instead of having her own. Roach and I laugh as Jones recounts the story.

“After we got married, she went crazy,” he says as he fans out his cards in his hand. “I just want to know what happened to the fun, sane girl I knew when we were engaged. I want that girl back!”

Jones folds his cards and sits back in his chair. Roach and I laugh and look over at him. He looks tired just from talking about his marriage, and I can’t blame him. I can’t blame any of the men who vent about strained marriages.
I look through the camo netting covering the porch and out into the dark night. Camp is quiet tonight. To boost morale, the battalion has set up video conferencing for troops to talk to and see their families back home. It’s our generation’s equivalent of writing letters to our wives and girlfriends—instant gratification that life goes on back home. We have declined teleconferencing with our families in order to give married soldiers more time with their wives. While most of the married men are waiting their turns to sit before a television screen and look at an image of their loved ones halfway around the world, Roach, Jones, and I are playing cards and half-joking about how wars tear people apart.

“You’ll call home and she’ll be like, ‘Do you want to talk to Ndugu?’” Roach says as he discards, “and you’ll say, ‘Who’s Ndugu?’ and she’ll say, ‘He’s our fifteen-year-old Asian son. Nobody wants the older ones.’” Roach and I laugh. Jones shrugs and smiles back at us.

“Yeah, it’ll be straight to marriage counseling for us when I get home,” he says. “I’m just afraid I’ll get home and realize that she’s this totally different person.”

Silence. Roach clears his throat; I suppress a laugh. I look into Jones’s face and see his troubles—a future he’s not sure of and a situation he has no way of changing. There’s nothing like the silence of a worried man. War has taken its course, and there is nothing Jones, Roach, or any of us can do about that.

I look down at my cards and feel the same cold realization surge through my body. I understand the concept of time and change. I know that when I return from this deployment, I will not be the same person I was when I left. I also understand that the people in my life will have changed. While I’m stuck in Iraq, the world around me is moving at a much quicker pace, and when I get home nothing will again line up. Everything will bump and grind, and nothing, not relationships with my parents or even close friendships I’ve had for years, will be the same. It feels like I’m standing on the train platform, watching each boxcar whiz right on by.

It’s the feeling of being left behind.

I peer out into the dark and notice men walking back from the teleconferences. Even in the settling dark I see Rainman’s swagger from a mile away. His walk is distinctive to him—short legs slowly stepping forward, knees slightly bowed, a bounce to his step as his broad shoulders lumber toward us. But even from this distance I can tell he is smiling.

I know more about Rainman’s wife than any of the other Bravo Company wives. “She’s forty and she’s beautiful, has a gorgeous body, and she’s my
wife,” Rainman said one night while clearing sand from his weapon. He adores her, even in times like these, when they’re worlds apart. When the company announced the teleconferences, Rainman’s wife told him that she was showing up in a trench coat—and only a trench coat.

Rainman steps onto the porch and leans against the railing. Roach, Jones, and I stop our game and ask about the teleconference. He isn’t shy about any of the details, telling us about his wife showing him her breasts.

“Then of course she wanted tit for tat,” he says, laughing.

It isn’t long before we’re joined by other men from the platoon, all eager to share their stories about seeing and talking to their loved ones. They are giddy and hyperactive. They talk wildly about how their wives looked, how they moved, what they said. They look like footballers talking about a well-executed play. They are happy, and watching them laugh and smile and talk about their wives, I am torn between feeling happy for them and alone, more alone than I’ve ever felt because I have nobody to talk this energetically about. I am single, and while my parents and friends write letters and send e-mails, I still feel alone. Even if I did have someone to teleconference with, I can’t really talk about it with these men. All I can do is sit on the sidelines and watch.

“I was nervous,” Newman says as a big smile spreads across his face, his aw-shucks dimples forming on his cheeks. Cole and Rainman have formed a semicircle around him. “I was just anxious. It was like warming up for a football game or something.”

Cole and Rainman nod. They are men after a football game, each sharing an understanding of how it felt talking with their wives.

“I made the mistake of saying, ‘I love you,’” Cole says as he steps back and spits tobacco juice into the sand. “She started crying right away. Then I was like, ‘Let me see the belly.’ She stood up, lifted her shirt, and showed me her belly. She looked like a totally different person.”

I can only imagine what it’s like to see your wife as a different person, or to see, for the first time, your unborn child, millions of miles away, through a thirteen-inch television screen. Cole’s wife is due any day now, and as he tells the story of seeing his wife pregnant for the first time, I get an image in my head of what it must look like—how his hand must have reached for the screen, how badly he must have wanted to be able to touch his wife, feel that swelling belly, press his ear against it, and feel, for the first time, his kicking child.

“I got her to flash me,” Newman says. “At first she was like, ‘I’m not going to do that.’ She was looking around, trying to see if anyone was
watching. And I said, ‘But Rainman’s wife is showing up in a trench coat. Come on!’ And then she did.”

We all laugh. Someone tries to get Newman to tell us more, but he shakes his head, smiles, and looks down at his boots—the rest is just for him.

“You know those calls are monitored,” Roach says. “So I’m sure the monitors are saying, ‘All right! Morale calls for the soldiers in Iraq.”

Roach jacks his elbow back as he imitates the monitor guys. I picture three or four middle-aged, beer-bellied, balding men—the stereotypical guys I’d imagine having such a job—sitting around high-fiving each other as Rainman’s wife opens her trench coat and Newman’s wife lifts up her shirt.

When we hear that we’ll be in Iraq for an entire year, the mood around camp hits an all-time low. Cole and King walk around camp with long faces, imitating Seinfeld’s Soup Nazi by saying, “No morale for you!” Someone even suggests that Cole and King go to Demke, our supply sergeant, and request some morale, joking that maybe a new shipment of morale had arrived and Demke had forgotten to distribute it. But Demke is fresh out of morale.

Now, as men start to drift toward the tents, where they’ll climb into their cots and fall asleep dreaming about their wives, the porch empties and I am left alone with the night. Even though I don’t share the men’s energy and excitement, I understand their need to express their feelings—the feeling of seeing one’s wife as a different person, the feeling of appreciating her for who she is, all over again, and the feeling of being a father. It makes these men seem more real; it makes me appreciate and respect them more when I understand that somewhere, across land and sea, they have lives that don’t involve mortar attacks, roadside bombs, and M16 rifles. They are able to take themselves out of Iraq for a moment and place themselves where life is a little more normal.

It also makes me realize that I have nobody like that in my life. I don’t have a boyfriend or husband waiting back home, someone to talk to when I’m feeling down or depressed. I have parents and siblings who love me, friends who trust and support me, but I don’t have that person in my life who lifts up my morale like Cole and Newman and Rainman have with their wives, and, sitting on this porch alone, that really starts to sink in.

I’ve never told my parents about my sexuality. For a while I thought they’d just figure it out. They’d maybe hear it from somebody in my hometown or my sister would let it slip during Christmas or Thanksgiving. But then I
remembered the reasons why I joined the military and the image they have of me.

When I joined the military I was looking for my parents’ respect and praise. I wanted to make them feel proud of me, like they did of my brother Brandon because he was such an athletic sportsman. My brother excelled at every sport he ever played. My parents would attend almost all his sporting events. Their jackets would be emblazoned with giant buttons depicting Brandon in football pads or Brandon holding a baseball bat or Brandon crouching like he was ready to pin another wrestler to the mat. They’d come home from his events bragging about his accomplishments. I’d listen to them and wish they’d say the same things about me, but they never did.

They never did because I was horrible at sports. I ran track for several years, but once I got into high school, I lost my youthful enthusiasm for it. And I lost my speed. I couldn’t keep up with the other racers, and the few times my parents did come to watch me run, I let them down by coming in almost last in every race.

So I joined the military during my senior year of high school, and I finally felt like my parents were proud of me for something. During that first year, while I was living at home and driving to Rugby, North Dakota, one weekend a month for drill, every time my mother woke me up and watched me drive away from the house, I felt she was proud of me for doing something respectable and useful like participating in the army. I knew my parents were proud of me, and I never wanted them to lose that feeling. So I never told them I am gay.

Two days before Halloween, I receive a package from home. My friend Ashley has sent a box filled with Halloween candy, Mad Libs, a John Mayer CD, and, at the bottom of the box, a mullet wig.

“What's that?” Roach says as I lift the wig out of the box. The hair is wavy on top and straight in the back. I lower my head and place the brown synthetic hair tightly around my scalp. I toss my head back and look over at Roach, my top front teeth bucked out over my lower lip.

Roach bursts into laughter. The rest of my roommates look over at me. They get up and stand around my cot, asking to try it on.

“Here,” Roach says, “you need these.”

He hands me a pair of BCGs, the thick, brown-framed glasses the army issues to the troops. We call them Birth Control Glasses (BCGs) because nobody would have sex with someone wearing them. I place the glasses on
my face, and when I look up at the rest of the men surrounding me, I have a complete Halloween costume—a nearly blind, mullet-wearing redneck.

We take the act door to door. In Elijah and Newman’s tent, Rogers dons the wig and glasses, and when Elijah starts playing some eighties funk music, he dances on the wooden floor, flexing his muscles and bowing out his legs like a redneck weightlifter. Newman names it “The Mullet Muscle Dance.” We take turns wearing the wig—each of us, I imagine, feeling what it’s like to be somebody else for a night. We snap pictures, laugh, and even comb the wig, happy to have such a distraction.

Later in the night, we’re forced to participate in a practice drill. The idea is that if an enemy is able to get inside the gate or attack Anaconda, we’ll know what to do. We’re lying in our tent in full battle rattle—Kevlar helmets, flak vest, canteens, ammo pouches—pointing our weapons at the door. Roach is kneeling behind his cot, propping his elbow on top of it. Rainman has this serious look on his face as he lies perfectly still near the front of the tent, waiting for a hajji to come bursting through the door.

Rogers and I are lying on the dusty floor in the middle of the tent, waiting for the squad leaders to come in and give us the “all clear.”

After half an hour, we tire of wearing our entire battle rattle. We let our helmets fall to the floor and open the Velcro on our flak jackets. Rogers goes over to his cot, retrieves a CD, and places it in the boom box. Instantly, an Irish drinking song comes bursting through the speakers. Before long, we’ve shed all our gear and are singing and clapping along to the music. Rogers gets up and tries to do an Irish jig, his feet kicking out while his hands rest on his hips. He kicks left, then right, then grabs his M16 with both hands and thrusts it into the air as his feet kick wildly around the room.

In the middle of Iraq, in the middle of a war, in a moment we are told to take as seriously as if our lives depended on it, we are dancing to Irish music and laughing as Rogers parades around the room. Roach gets up to do the jig with Rogers. Everyone else is hooting and hollering, and I’m sure that if the Iraqis did break through the wire, none of them would ever even consider coming near our tent for fear of the maniacs inside.

I reach into one of my bags, grab the mullet wig, and hand it to Rogers. He places it on his head, and the party continues. Here is our normal moment. This is what it feels like to escape this place. I laugh, clap my hands, and offer the BCGs to Rogers.

A week later, Iraqis attack Anaconda’s front gate, killing one soldier and wounding five, and I never again bring out the wig.
We are supposed to have Veteran’s Day off, but some big-wig general finds out and makes us work.

After two days of rain and clouds, the sun finally shines some light on Iraq. We’ve settled into a routine of doing base projects at Anaconda. It is warm, the perfect day for working, and a gentle autumn breeze drifts in over the work site where we’re pouring concrete. It is almost as if the gods are giving us a treat for Veteran’s Day—one perfect day in Iraq.

I spend the entire morning cutting rebar. I lift the forty-foot unfinished steel rod onto the table and ask Roach to hold the bar in place while the rebar cutter slices the steel into foot-long, manageable pieces. The pieces fall onto one another, clinking and rolling around before falling into the dusty sand. I spend all morning doing this and thinking about being a veteran.

I don’t know any veterans of foreign wars. My grandfather wasn’t a vet. My father has asthma, so I’m guessing the military wouldn’t have let him in. My uncle Tony served in the air force, but I know very little about what he did during his time. I don’t even know where the vets hang out in my hometown—we don’t have a VFW. All I know about veterans is the picture I’m given by the entertainment industry—old, nostalgic men sitting on bar stools, drinking beer at one in the afternoon, grumbling about how loud the jukebox is. That is the only picture I see. What perplexes me most is that these old vets seem comfortable with the image. Young people don’t see the men who fought in World War II, the troops who defended hilltops during bitter winters in Korea, or the soldiers who lost their buddies in Vietnam. Instead, we see these old men wearing baseball caps and jackets with the word “veteran” printed in bold letters or the bumper stickers on Buicks that tell any kid tailing them that the man driving 10 mph used to be an artillery gunner in World War II.

In the afternoon, the entire battalion lines up in a formation for a Veteran’s Day ceremony. The battalion commander has requested one large, mass formation: officers up front, sergeants in the middle, specialists and privates in the rear. Each soldier is an arm’s length away from the next, each boot placed side by side down the line, each chest bowed out, and each head held high.

The commander speaks. The chaplain prays. Some general reminisces about old army vets. The color guard raises their flags and fires some blanks. We salute. It is all just a haze for me. Each speaker blends into the next, and by the end I have a headache. The ceremony is formulaic and too military. It is a showcase of military brass, what the men in the lower ranks
call a “dog and pony show.” I find myself drift ing off, watching the swaying leaves or the seagulls that fly over our camp on their way to the base dump. After the ceremony, I walk back to my tent and know that I am not alone in these feelings.

Outside our tent, Lake bullshits about being a vet. Back home he used to work as a used-car salesman, a profession I imagine he excelled at. He’s the perfect bullshitter. During monthly drills, he’d ramble on about the number of used cars he’d managed to talk up to naïve customers or how tame his colleagues were compared to him. I don’t doubt his ability to spin a yarn. Right now, he’s got a small audience assembled in between the tents, and he reenacts the scene running through his head.

“When I get home, I’m going to go to the grocery store and demand that I be first in the checkout line,” Lake says. He grins at the crowd with his signature used-car salesman smile. “I’m a veteran! I’m a veteran!” I’ll yell. ‘Back to the end of the line, old man!’”

The crowd laughs as Lake’s finger points off to the motor pool, sending the invisible old man to the end of what we’re assuming is a long line. I laugh along and wait for Lake to continue. When he gets going like this it’s best to just sit back and let the scene unfold.

“Then some guy will come up and say, ‘I was in World War II,’” Lake says as he shifts his weight to his right foot and steps back, “and I’ll say, ‘OK. I’ll go behind you.’”

The scene continues in much the same fashion as Lake takes a step back with each remark:

“I served in the Korean War.”

“OK. I’ll go behind you.”

“I served in Vietnam.”

“Alright. Fair enough. I’ll go behind you.”

“I served in Desert Storm.”

“Well, that’s about equal so I’ll stand beside you.”

By the end the crowd has begun to disperse. People walk back to their tents, laughing as they prepare for the night. King and Cole stick around and continue to talk about how ridiculous the ceremony was and how drawn out the entire event seemed.

I sit out on the porch and watch the men. If a World War II or Vietnam War veteran had seen Lake’s act, I’m sure the man would have punched him right there. Lake jokes about the war, about hearing mortar attacks, about death, about wives leaving men while we’re over here, and I can’t
blame him. He deals with these things through humor, and while older vets may see scenes like Lake’s as disrespectful, I respect Lake even more because of his candor, because comedy is his answer to war.

We laugh because we have a different idea of what it means to be veterans. Even now, as vets, the title doesn’t mean the same thing it used to. We get angry after six months away from our families and start demanding privileges like teleconferences and e-mail. We fuss over the heat, complain about burning our own shit, and when we’re forced to pull guard duty in the towers surrounding the base, we take books along and read during our four-hour shifts, paying little to no attention to the possibility of enemy forces crawling into our camp. I don’t think we understand what it means to be veterans yet. We aren’t on the front lines of this war. We aren’t raiding houses in Baghdad like the Marines. We’re building up bases now, repairing schools, building picnic tables, and pouring concrete, jobs people wouldn’t normally associate with a war. But this war seems like such a different war from the ones we’ve seen in movies. We are a generation that demands instant gratification. We have the ability to instantly send e-mails during war and the opportunity to see our wives and loved ones through teleconferences, but we want to be instant veterans. We want the respect and prestige that comes with the title, without fully understanding what being a vet means. Maybe in thirty years, when we’ve had time to reflect and consider how serious this war is and we’re sitting around telling war stories, we’ll understand our role in this war. But who’s to say we’ll ever sit around telling war stories.

As we dance around in wigs in the desert and act out grocery store veteran scenes, we demonstrate that we’re too young and idealistic now to care about being called vets.

My mother has a military photo of me hanging in her living room. The photo was taken at the beginning of basic training, in the fall of 1998. The military marches you into a room, right before they put you through the rigors of running obstacle courses, shooting semi-automatic weapons, and throwing hand grenades, and snaps a picture. They paste the top half of a Class-A army uniform over your chest and a hat atop your head. They don’t ask you to smile. In fact, I think they prefer that you frown. Look tough like the army pawn you’re about to become. Besides, who smiles before going into the army?

It is the same military photo almost every army parent receives—same uniform, same American flag backdrop, same growling look. The only
thing different is the face and the name. I imagine that there are millions of other mothers with nearly the same photo hanging in their living room. When I left for Iraq, my mother told me that she had moved the photo to the dining room; that way, while my family eats dinner, they can be reminded that I am in Iraq.

Walking back from the work site, I am reminded of this photo and the image my family has of me. It’s the same image every American gets on Veteran’s Day—the snapshot of a son or daughter serving in the U.S. military, an uncle who paid the ultimate price for his country, high school classmates who enlisted after graduation because they had nothing else to do, or the cousin whom family members talk about whenever the war is mentioned. I don’t know how many times I heard the phrase “I have a (insert cousin, son, daughter or any relative here) serving in the military” as I was preparing to leave for Iraq.

In my hometown, when any member of the community asks which of the five Lemer boys I am, the common reply is: “The one in the military.” Through the community newspaper and my mother’s proud boasting, they know I spent two months in Fort Leonardwood, Missouri, for basic training. They know I spent another two months in Gulfport, Mississippi, learning how to be a carpenter. They read about my deployment to Kosovo in 2000. They know how I spent the hot days in Kuwait, and they’ve heard from my mother what kind of missions I am doing in Iraq. That is how they remember me; that is how they separate me from my four brothers.

It is this image they have of me that makes me uneasy. I am remembered solely for being in the military. While I’m still young and hope to eventually put this deployment and my military service behind me, I am reminded that thus far in my life the most significant thing I’ve done is serve my county. It is this thought that makes me both proud of my past and scared of the future. But then I think about the alternative. If I’m not remembered as being the son who served in the military, what will I be remembered for? Isn’t it nice to be remembered for accomplishing something, for doing something like serving your country?

As I near my tent, I walk by a metal Conex box Demke uses for storage. Above the Conex are about twenty-five dirty, white, oscillating fans, posed atop stands like elegant geese poking their heads above the swamp grass. Some of the fans are gently twirling in the breeze, the blades spinning around like they’re alive. When we were at BIAP, when the temperature rose to 130 degrees, these fans were our most prized possession. Now, watching them spin in the wind atop the Conex, like last year’s Christmas
fad, they look sad and beaten down. They were great when we needed them, but now that we have air-conditioning in our tents, we’ve discarded them like trash.

Seeing the fans, I can’t help but think about how most people view veterans. Once a year, we march the veterans out, parading them around towns, saluting their achievements, honoring what they’ve done for this country. But once that day is over, once we no longer need them to remind us of why we’re Americans, we forget about them; they simply become old men sitting on bar stools and complaining about loud music.

I kick my way across the sand toward my tent. For now, I’ll accept my status as a new veteran. But when the time comes, I won’t be an old vet sitting on a bar stool in some VFW. I also won’t be the old vet stomping around town yelling about his achievements. I want to be remembered for more than just having served in the military.

At the very least, I don’t want to be a discarded fan.