

A Long Day Looking Back Micah Owen

2200 Hours, Camp TQ Iraq—Summer 2005

I've been standing out here on this short, blacked out tarmac, in full battle rattle, for quite some time, waiting for a bird to fly me to the military hospital in Bagdad. I have a large staph infection on my right arm. It is slowly growing out of control and now covers my brand new rose tattoo that I acquired a little over a month earlier, halfway through my two weeks of rest and relaxation leave.

Somehow, Iraq made its way into the fresh tattoo. I am being flown out to be poked and prodded at by some air-conditioned pistol bearer (officer). The night sky is as dark as can be. No moon looks down upon me, and if there are stars, I do not notice. Although it's late, the heat, plus all my gear, is making me sweat while standing still.

I feel like this is a huge waste of time. These cysts on my arm hurt like hell, but I'm just filling a seat that could be used by someone sicker than I am. The men around me are punctured by bullets and shrapnel from roadside bombs. My infected arm is a grotesque sight, but it's nothing compared to the mangled bodies of my brothers waiting with me here on the flight line.

I am being sent out for a minor operation that I have already endured multiple times here at our local med ward. I think the Doc here is just trying to pass me on to the next guy. I can't blame him, though. My arm looks like chicken pox, malaria, and buckshot all rolled into one.

The operations always go the same way. The doc numbs the surrounding area with a large syringe, pushing the entire length of the needle into my arm. Then he slowly pulls it out while injecting a numbing concoction. He repeats this on each side of the infected area. This portion of the surgery always hurts the worst, and I

soon ask the doc to skip the needle and go straight to the cutting. By now, I have learned to look past the initial pain of the cutting because it brings much needed relief from golf-ball-sized cysts growing up and down my arm. The captain takes the scalpel in his right hand and holds my arm with his left. He slices an X over the top of the cyst. Without being numb, I can feel every centimeter of the cut. I squint my eyes and grind my teeth in agony. The pain quickly turns to relief once the doctor's incision is large enough to allow the pressure built up to drain. The captain sponges the wound with gauze, cleans it with a rinsing solution, and then stuffs the large crater full of more gauze. We repeat this operation twice a week for a month. Finally, he tells me that he can't figure me out and that I need to see an expert, which puts me on the flight line, in the late-night heat, amid the walking wounded.

Halfway through my twelve-month deployment, I was allowed to go home for a few weeks for some much needed rest and relaxation, a break from running convoys and dodging roadside bombs and late-night mortars. I spent the better part of that time in the bottom of a bottle, trying desperately not to think about returning to the sandbox. I posted myself up at the local bar, chest out and head held high, proud to be a war veteran badass. More drinks were bought for me than the three prettiest girls at the bar put together. Between the binge drinking and late nights, I spent as much time with the family as possible. I took frequent trips to Wal-Mart with Mom, and had a few wonderful days at the cabin with Dad. All of my sisters made it out and my grandparents came into town to see me. I enjoyed being the center of attention and I soaked it up as much as I could.

I also got the tattoo that now shares space on my right forearm with the growing infection. Below the rose, on a scroll on the lower section of its stem, are the initials H.K.O. for my great granddad, Homer Keith Owen. Although I did not know him well—he died when I was just a little guy—I know that he was a man whom other men admired. As a child, I would listen to my father tell stories of what a great man Granddad was and what a great friend he was to him. The

few memories I do have of Granddad Owen are those of his big smile and deep voice. My grandmother told me that some of his grandchildren were afraid of him because of his loud, booming voice. But she said I was not afraid. I wish I had more memories of Granddad, but his cabin is a constant reminder of him, a small thirty-nine acre plot of land with a two-room cabin nestled atop a hill overlooking a hundred-year-old apple orchard. Granddad wanted the cabin to be a sanctuary for his family, something to be in the Owen name forever for all to enjoy. I intend to honor his wishes when I am an old man myself and my time here in Iraq is a far-off memory.



I hear a helicopter hammering in the darkness and a giant twin-rotor Marine Corps Chinook chopper settles on the tarmac. This will be my first time on a helicopter. I haven't talked to many who have flown on them, but those I have talked to said it wasn't great. Someone told me that the Chinooks leak fluids at all times, but that's nothing to worry about—worry when the leaking stops.

The crew chief meets my group on the runway. He is a tall, slender white man with a large, crooked nose. He wears a coyote-tan jumpsuit and a green flight helmet with a set of headphones that is dangling a short spiraled electrical cord. He divides us into two short lines and marches us toward the chopper. I am the third to last man on the right line. As we file in, I notice two other Chinooks being loaded with more soldiers and Marines, some men standing and others on stretchers. I feel even worse about taking up this much needed seat to the hospital. There has to be someone who needs my spot more than I do.

It's too late. I'm now on the bird, my ready bag (a desert-camo backpack filled with three days' worth of clothes and other must-haves) placed between my legs and the ratchet-strap seatbelt secured tightly across my lap. I take a quick look around for the leaks I've heard about but I cannot find any. The tail gunner takes his position behind his 240 Bravo machine gun at the rear of the chopper, lying down in the prone and attached to the bird by a lanyard line. There are two other gunners forward to my position, one on each side of the Chinook. The Gunner on the left is operating another 240 Bravo machine gun that is mounted on a sling. The gunner to the right is in command of a Mini Gun. The rotors spin faster, the chopper begins to vibrate, and I can already tell that this is not going to be a fun ride. I take another look at my arm and the rose, cursing it as the reason why I am on this bird, surrounded by all these Purple Hearts. The cabin light turns off, but in my mind I can still see the rose.

I'm standing in front of the picture album at the tattoo parlor with my sister Casey and cousin Kenni. I have less than a week left on leave before I ship back to Iraq and one of the many items on my "to-do" list is a new tattoo. I pick the

rose because of my grandfather, Jack Owen, Granddad Owen's son. During the summers of my childhood I would help Grandpa cut his loads of firewood and I can remember his rose tattoo flexing with his large biceps each time he picked up and threw down the heavy splitting maul. Most of the time, it took just one swing of the maul to cleave the freshly bucked rounds of madrone, fir, or oak. In my younger days, I stood in the bed of Grandpa's truck while he and Dad fed me chunks of wood to stack neatly in tiers.

Grandpa had a significant part in making me a man. Grandpa gave me my first snort of whisky, was the first to let me run a chainsaw and, through many close calls, taught me how to drive. Grandpa drove big-rig trucks from when he was sixteen years old until he retired. On many of our weekend trips together, I listened to his experiences and the knowledge he acquired over his many years of hauling. I enjoyed listening to him. I joined the Army Transportation Corps partly because of him. I wanted to drive big trucks so that we could, perhaps, someday swap truck driving stories. I hold that friendship close to my heart, and when I look at the rose, I think of him.

The Chinook takes off in a vertical climb. The sheer strength of the bird forces my heart and lungs to drop to my gut, pressing heavily on my bladder, which is freshly filled with orange Gatorade. I've never had to pee so badly in my life. As we gain altitude, the pressure slowly releases its grip on my bladder, alleviating my fear of peeing my desert-camo uniform. The rear cargo door remains open, and we all stare out the large opening as if we are watching a live TV program. At first we see only darkness. After a few minutes, we start to see the lights of small villages. More minutes pass and we see brighter clusters of light. We're soon flying over a major city. Streetlights illuminate empty roads and alleyways. Building rooftops are now as clear as day. Across the landscape of the city, we see tracer rounds flying sporadically through the air toward a far off unknown target.

Paranoia and confusion start to set in.

“Why are we flying so damn low?” I think to myself. I don’t have my weapon. I was forced to leave it back at the company, like the rest of the medevac-Joes on the chopper. It never feels right not having your girlfriend (weapon) by your side. She is a part of you, much like an arm, leg, or a heart. I miss my girl. My eyes are glued to the action outside the cargo door. Though the tracers are far from us, scenarios and possible plans of action bounce inside my head. I need to calm down. I take a few deep breaths and try to think of some happy thought of back home. I think again of the cabin and of the clear rivers and of the trips I took with dad.

My father is, through and through, an outdoorsman. Though he now works within the confines of prison walls as a correctional officer, I know that his heart wishes that he could relive his logging days among the evergreens. I share a similar passion for the outdoors as he does. Because of Dad, I have a different appreciation for the outdoors than most. I wish I could remember everything he had shown me and tried to teach me along the way. We have many traditions together—trips to the cabin, endless drives down long gravel logging roads, and backpacking trips to destinations that few have ever seen—customs that could never be replaced by material goods or personal possessions. It’s because of Dad that I enjoy hearing nothing but the sounds of crickets, the slow trickle of a creek, or the soothing song of raindrops on a metal roof.

I know that Dad is proud of me. I read it in his letters from home. I don’t know why I constantly feel that I need to hear him say it. It’s as if each time I hear him tell me that he’s proud, I can mentally cross out a prior disappointment, such as the times when my buddies and I decided that it was a great idea to get drunk on a school night, or the fact that I never did well in school. I not only look up to my father, he is my honest-to-God hero. I can’t wait to go home, put this war behind me, and pick up where we left off, far from tracer rounds, sandstorms, and constant uncertainty and paranoia.

“Change of plans,” the crew chief yells over the helicopter's thumping. “We have to stop and pick up a K.I.A. You three will go out with me to retrieve the body. The rest will stay seated.” The chief points at me and then he moves to instruct the other two physically able bodies.

“Great. What the fuck?” I’m not pleased to hear this and continue to curse the Marine inside my thoughts.

We feel the G-forces of the Chinook as it banks hard and turns around. The city lights slowly grow brighter. I can still see sporadic gunfire through the cargo door. The tracers are still far off in the distance and not close enough to hear. The roaring sound of the bird probably muffles any outside noises so I don’t expect to hear anything. The pilot lands somewhat gracefully, but we are quickly surrounded by sand that is kicked up by the rotors. I unlatch my seatbelt and stand up, and the three of us follow the crew chief off the bird and onto solid ground. I am relieved to see that we have landed in a large compound surrounded by concrete walls and occupied by an Army Stryker unit. I feel somewhat safe seeing all the troops around, but I still worry, thinking about picking up a fallen soldier.

As we walk, I notice a civilian contractor standing under a covered walkway between two brown clay buildings. He is taking pictures of a man lying in an unzipped black body bag. The contractor is a middle-aged, blond-haired white man, wearing a sweat-stained, blue Hawaiian shirt, tan khakis, and a hip-holstered pistol. A few steps more and I make out that the man in the bag is an Iraqi with a short, gray and black beard. The top of his head has been blown away by what appears to me to be a very large caliber bullet or shotgun slug. I am relieved to see that is not one of our boys. We wait at the body while the contractor takes another picture, then zips up the remaining portion of the body bag.

The chief and the hired gun exchange words, but all I can hear is that the man in the bag is some kind of local official. They both make a few head nods and

shake hands. The chief turns and motions for us to pick up the body bag, which is an awful mess. It's covered in sand, blood, small bits of tissue, and hair. I am thankful that the body bag is on a stretcher, which makes the carrying easier. We each pick a corner, lift, and head to the bird. We place the body on the deck between the two rows of passengers. I sit down and re-fasten my seatbelt. I can't control the awful thoughts I'm thinking right now. *What if that was me in that bag?* That question has never hit me as hard before. I shouldn't be thinking about this. I should be thinking better thoughts, but I can't. The Chinook lifts once more, followed by another overwhelming sensation to pee. I stare at the black body bag lying in front of me.

Our bird finally touches down at the hospital. We remain in our seats until the ground crew can remove the K.I.A. and priority patients. I wait my turn, secure my gear, and walk into the building. The inside walls of the hospital are decorated with beautiful blue, green, and white tiles arranged to look like a happier place than what it is outside the sliding doors. After a much needed stop at the latrine, I check in at the desk and receive my room, bunk number, and appointment time. The clerk hands me a map of the area that shows how to get to the bunk room, the chow hall, and, more importantly, the phones. I fold the map and shove it into my right cargo pocket then proceed to the sleeping bay.

Chow can wait. I find my neatly made bunk quickly brings back memories of basic training. The bed is sharply made with a green U.S. wool blanket and white cotton under-sheet folded to regulation standards. I place my ready bag on the bed, watchful not to wrinkle the creases. I retrieve the map from my cargo pocket and begin to study it. I find my location and then I find the location of the phones. I replace the map in my pocket and head toward the exit.

There are five others in the bay with me. Two lie in their beds fast asleep and one Marine sits upright on his bunk reading a *Maxim* magazine. He has a bandaged arm in a sling, small cuts across his face, and a Band-Aid over the bridge of his nose. The last two men look to be Army battle buddies. One soldier

sits in a wheelchair with his foot propped up facing the other, who leans against the concrete wall next to the bay entrance. I didn't notice them on my way in.

"Hey man, what's up?" the soldier leaning against the wall says to me.

"Howdy." I nod my head and make eye contact with both of them.

"If you don't mind me asking," the soldier says, and stops talking as he watches me reach with my left arm to pull up my right shirt sleeve to reveal my infected arm.

"Damn!" he says. They both show disgusted faces as they try to make heads or tails of my arm.

"You guys know how to get to the phones?" I ask, even though I already know the answer. I am just looking for a way out of the conversation. The soldier in the wheelchair gives me a few quick instructions. I thank them and am on my way.

I find the phone booth without any problems. There are eight phones in a row, each separated from the next by a short plywood wall. I pick a booth that is not occupied and sit down with my AT&T calling card which is already pulled from my wallet. I dial the number, the line rings twice, and my mother answers with her patented, proper, lady-like, "Hello." *My God, it's good to hear her voice.*

I open my eyes to my mother rubbing my back and telling me that it is time for breakfast. I can already smell the bacon from the kitchen, and I automatically know that there are pancakes and eggs to follow. My bright yellow Thunder Cat pajama top is resting on the floor alongside of my bed. Mom, who is sitting on my bed next to me, reaches down, picks up the shirt, and helps me to put it on. She gives me my first hug of the day and then tries unsuccessfully to comb my wild bed head with her fingertips. As a child, Mom's face is the first to greet me in the morning and her hug is the last embrace before I am sent to bed. I hop out of bed and follow the delicious aroma to my plate waiting for me at the kitchen table: two pancakes, an egg, and two slices of "butt" bacon. I dig in enthusiastically, hardly stopping for air.

I am her only son and her youngest child. Now, all these years later, I can't imagine the hell that she is going through knowing that her baby boy is off to war and in harm's way. But her spirits seem to remain strong. During our phone conversations, she doesn't tell me about how worried she is and I don't tell her about how scared I get. There is an understanding of the unspoken, something we both know can do more harm than good. Mom's voice gives me hope, strength, and determination to make it back home. I would gladly trade my rifle and this dirty uniform to be back alongside my best friend and Wal-Mart battle-buddy. If I close my eyes, I can imagine myself lying on our couch with my head in her lap, carrying on our conversation while she again combs my hair with her fingertips.

I hang up the phone and pause for a while before I stand up. I place the calling card back into my wallet while making a mental note that I have thirty-five minutes remaining on the card. It is now almost 0300 in the morning. I know that the chow hall is open twenty-four hours, but I am not hungry. My first doctor's appointment is at 0930 so, instead of food, I decide to go back to my bunk and try to capture a few hours of sleep.

The sleeping quarters are dark and quiet. I use the dim light from the shower bay entrance to navigate to my bunk as stealthily as I can, careful not to wake anyone. My ready bag is still resting on top of my bed untouched. I slowly unzip the front zipper and retrieve my black beanie, placing it on top of my head. I take off my boots, a great feeling after wearing them for twenty-one hours. I find a fresh pair of socks and slip them over my tired dogs, my reward for making it through this stressful day. I hang my uniform top on the front right bed post along with my watch and dog tags. Then I stretch out on top of the covers, so I won't have to make the bed in the morning. This has been a long and nerve-racking day. I close my eyes, thinking that I am not looking forward to the morning when I will be poked and prodded at by some air-conditioned pistol-bearer.