Twenty-Three and Angry

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I was once asked to describe how I felt during war—how I feel now. The truth is I'm just twenty-three and angry. My anger is not fueled by reminiscing about war; it's not brought on by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or physical ailments. My anger comes from the war itself: meanings never found, solutions never reached. I'm not political. I never have been. And I'm sure as hell not going to start today. I'm not going to argue the semantics of Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation New Dawn. But I will discuss the year I spent in Wardak Province, Afghanistan, and the malevolent realities of that useless fucking war.

In November 2009, twenty years old, I sat in the back of the CH-47 Chinook helicopter, awaiting liftoff to the Tangi Valley, my reality for the next three hundred and sixty-five days. The platoon piled in deep, shoulder-to-shoulder, "nut-to-butt" as we say in the military.

I was one of the more fortunate soldiers. I sat next to the tailgate of the helicopter; the crew chief positioned me there because I carried the long gun and, if needed, could return accurate fire upon the enemy. I sat there nervous; my cold and clammy hands grasped my MK-14 rifle. My body shook profusely from the vibrations of the helo and the cold, dry air entering through the tailgate as we lifted off.

The ground shrank away. My sense of reality faded along with it. Many of us were nervous. Many were anxious. Some were excited and others—well, for them this was just another job, another deployment. I personally thought to myself, "This will be the realest damn thing I ever do."

When you learn that there are people in this world who want to put a stop to the beating in your chest, you look at life from a new perspective. Twenty minutes into our flight, the crew chief screamed, "Touchdown in three mikes. Reported heavy fire on and around the LZ. Be advised: return fire and prepare for the immediate evac of the bird." The time it took to land was the longest three minutes of my life. My body went into a sense of overdrive: adrenaline rushed and my heart raced; my fingers grew firm around the trigger housing of my rifle. Still, I trusted the men around me. I trusted myself. I was prepared to rely on my instincts and training.

Lesson learned? "Shut the hell up and do your job."

I sat on the bird with one headphone in and one out, waiting for instructions once our boots hit the ground. I was listening to "Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress" by the Hollies as the tailgate dropped. We touched down in the Tangi Valley. I synched my rucksack to my back, stepped off the ramp and fanned out to the rear of the bird to pull security with another soldier. We dropped our packs hard against the sharp red dirt of Afghanistan. No shots were fired. But the adrenaline and fear we experienced that afternoon—the anticipation of a possible attack—stayed with us throughout the deployment.

A few weeks later, I found myself living in a fucking nightmare I couldn't wake up from: I was in the heart of Afghanistan, fighting the

fight, fighting to stay alive and fighting the memory of her, a girl who I had left behind, who begged me to stay. She was the only girl who ever truly believed in me, and at the time, the only girl I had ever loved. Her name won't be disclosed in this story, but I can promise, if she's ever reading this, she'll know exactly who she is. Before I left I had made a promise to come home to her, to write her every day, and to watch every sunset. There wasn't a single evening that I didn't watch the sun mask its face for the day. Watching it set over the mountains, I knew, back home, she was watching the same sun rise over the world I had left behind.

Prior to me joining the military the economy was tangled and in shreds, and from the look of it, it wasn't going to untangle itself any faster than I was. I took night classes at my local university and worked a dead-end job farming, which was leading nowhere. At the end of every month, I found myself broke. I sure as hell wasn't getting any smarter. So, I hid in the back corners of bars and at the bottoms of bottles, looking for answers and solutions that became further out of reach the more I drank. Eventually, I waved "goodbye" to mom and dad and said "hello" to Uncle Sam.

Afghanistan offered the same simplicities every day: walking around outside, looking at the same old rocks, staring out over the same old mountains and eating the same damn food. At one point, I thought Kentucky was bad. If Kentucky was bad, Afghanistan was hell. I'd clocked in for a 365-day shift and was waiting for my year to end. The closest I came to escaping this reality was losing myself in a murder novel or a fast-paced movie or catching up with old friends on

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Facebook. When I saw their pictures of the things they were doing back home, it was sobering.

My friends weren't changing. I was.

Once you go to war, you never come back. While you're there, you feel as if you're stuck and everyone else is moving on. Staring over timeless mountaintops in guard towers I became more and more ignorant, spouting off useless absurdities with zero validity in life: fast cars, fancy women, and booze. At the same time, I was subtracting hours from my life, killing my lungs with cigarette after cigarette to combat the boredom.

When winter set in, we shot at anything that moved just to warm our hands on the hot brass. On those cold, quiet nights there were times I could feel her hand in the palm of mine, warming it in spite of the cold. She was a fast-fading memory, though, just like all the other things I'd left at home.

The seasons changed and colorful collages of plants, trees, and vegetation spread throughout the valley. Fighting season was near. Butterflies grew in my stomach. I remember a close friend of mine, a senior combat veteran, telling me, "It's the butterflies that keep you alive. When you become numb to war, that's what kills you." The feeling of something not right at the bottom of your gut makes you do the right thing. When it comes down to it, you'll do whatever you have to in order to stay alive. If you become numb, you become complacent, missing the smallest and simplest things that make you dead.

We had a leader that became numb, only for a minute. But it only takes a second. His vehicle was moving too fast. He neglected to order his team to check an un-cleared culvert and hit an IED. The shock

wave rolled through me as I stood in the turret of an MRAP, hands clinching the machinegun in front of me with pure fear, not for myself, but for every soldier inside of that vehicle, for every family member and friend patiently waiting for them back at home. I helped pull a soldier out of the burning truck, screaming to him through the ringing, “You’re going to be all right.” Within minutes, he was dead.

The worst part was the malevolent, fucked up thought, “At least it was someone else instead of me.” You don’t want to think that, but it’s human nature. You think and do what you can to stay alive. Three men were wounded that day and two were killed. I wasn’t.

That night I used the war’s two most imperative drugs: pain killers and prayers. I lay on my cot, looking at my sergeant’s computer, trying to escape those memories. He was watching a movie about our job as infantry soldiers. It seems so interesting to everyone outside of the military. Not to me.

When you watch someone blow up in front of your face, your stomach goes straight to your throat. You take life more seriously. The only certainty in life becomes death. But I wanted to be there.
A lot of guys choose the infantry as a last resort, the end of the line, the only choice other than jail, or because of their bottom-line scores on the military aptitude test, and for some, the few and rare, it’s their calling, their nature. Personally, I took the first ticket away from home and ended up as a paratrooper. It beat a dead-end job, failing out of school, and a life without goals or ambition. Becoming a soldier changed me. At least I stopped disappointing everyone who got close to me. Being an Airborne Infantryman gave me a new foundation.

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From the bottom of a foxhole in Afghanistan, I was able to work my way out and up into someone I could be proud of.

Infantrymen, perhaps more than other soldiers, get to know the lay of the land because their boots are always on the ground.
I felt the tedium of things never changing until the afternoon I lost my closest friend, Christopher Barton, killed in a firefight in Khost, Afghanistan, at the end of May 2010. He was a good man, one of the best I've known, a great comrade, brother, and husband. I never heard a man talk as highly of his wife. He was a week away from going home to see her when he was KIA.

We had served together since day one of basic training. When I was notified of his death, I shut down. I couldn't think straight. I could barely think at all. I wanted to go outside of the wire every chance I got. I wanted to shoot at anything or anyone that moved. Outside the wire I chased ghosts. I became enraged and unstable. When you lose someone close, you become fucking dangerous. Eventually, I had to let go. I needed to stay focused, not only for me, but for the men around me. I had to stay strong for his family, for his wife, and for my own family back at home.

In war, you lose many soldiers. Some, like Chris, are close as brothers. Others are little more than strangers fighting next to you on the battlefield. One afternoon I rushed out with the quick reaction force and my platoon medic to help Afghan National Army soldiers wounded in a firefight. The ANA were dead when we got there. I looked at their blood-covered, limp bodies as we moved them out of the mangled Humvee and a thought came to me: they gave their lives

to their country, to their people, protecting the American soldiers fighting next to them.

Many soldiers—myself included—treated the ANA like animals. Everyone looked at them as if they were oxygen thieves. But most never got to know them and judged them only by their nationality. What changed my mind? Watching a group of full-grown men cry as I cut shrapnel-torn clothes off of their brothers, then zipped them into body bags. They were human beings, just like the rest of us. I wondered what if they, too, watched the sunset and longed to be at home with wives or girlfriends.

As quickly as spring came, it was gone. Our summer in Wardak consisted of foot patrols, ambushes, and firefights. Adrenaline fueled my body, my heart raced, and summer raced along with it. One morning I had woken up in a tent cloudy from frozen breath. The next morning, it seemed, I woke on a cot with a perfect silhouette of body sweat from the summer heat. And just as quickly, the chill returned.

I remember pulling security during the elections week, also known as “hell week” throughout valley. Cool September winds and clear blue skies reminded me of home, of tailgating parties in the school parking lot before Friday night football games. Sitting at the observation post with the warm sun on my face and the cool, fall wind on my back for hours left me with time to think. Mostly I thought about what I would say when I once again stood face-to-face with friends and family back at home.

When I finally made my way out of that foxhole, I saw a lot from my 2000-foot perch with a 360-degree panorama. I saw muzzle flashes and heard explosions miles away. Little battles raged all

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around me. My vantage showed MEDEVAC helos at eye level, rushing to pick up the wounded and KIA, the most unfortunate realities of war. At night, I was reminded of the Fourth of July as colorful tracers whizzed by, RPGs exploded, and IEDs registered with every bone in my body. It was what modern celebrations of freedom and independence look like.

I got cold chills and a rush when the sonic thrust of an F-15 combined with the sky's blue amber glow.

I remember thinking, "When all of this over, I'll look at life from a new perspective. I'll laugh about it. I'll never tell anyone how I really feel when they ask me to tell of my experiences."

On our final mission, our flight home, the crew chief of the UH-60 Blackhawk yelled in my ear: "Wheels up, time now, enemy hostiles spotted in the area!" My attention grew firm and alert, but my adrenaline ran faint. After a year spent in Afghanistan, getting shot at was part of the job. I turned to the door of the helicopter, suspended my feet from the side, and pulled security, waiting to engage the enemy. Once the helicopter reached a safe altitude, I slowly lowered my weapon and took my finger off the trigger for what felt like the first time in a year.

As I sat there in that Blackhawk, exhaling as if I had been holding my breath for a year, I noticed a quote written in chalk above the door: "He enters a battle gravely, with sorrow and great compassion, as if he were attending a funeral." I thought of every battle we'd fought, each time a soldier was killed, ours or theirs. I remembered taking a knee to support my exhausted body against my rifle, looking around at what was left of the battlefield, taking a head count of my soldiers. Those

times were more like funerals than victories, watching the medics load wounded soldiers into helicopters or zipped body bags into Humvees, foreshadowing the days to come—more fighting, more bleeding, more death.

I laid my back against the helicopter seat, removed my helmet, and ran my fingers through my dirty, scraggly hair. I wiped the sweat from my head and put in my head phones. I was going home.

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