

THE OTHER WHITE HOUSE

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Brian Bouse was simply called BB by everyone who knew him. He'd had the nickname since he could remember. He didn't mind, it was just something he had gradually learned to accept. Brian had always known what he wanted to be since he was ten or so. He wanted to work in a museum. He loved history. The places, the people, the times, the events. The whole planet was one giant mystery novel that somebody had to tell. He figured he was as good a somebody as there was for the job. He spent his youth pouring over books about wars, assassinations, intrigue, and how it all played out. For Brian, his future was a no-brainer. He knew what he wanted, he just wasn't sure how to go about getting it.

He finished his undergraduate work in American History. He knew he needed a minimum of a Master's degree to even be considered for most government-appointed positions. The real meat and potatoes would be the doctorate. That would have to come at some point. He had discovered the job quite by accident. He took a guided tour of the White House one day while vacationing with his family in Washington. He quickly learned he knew more about the White House than the pretty young lady who was giving the tour. She was an obvious political appointee, who had little experience or interest in the position, it was only a stepping stone for her.

He made some inquiries and learned that the White House tour appointments were generally payback for campaign donors. The people giving the tours seemed to have little interest in the subject. He knew that most were, but not all. Some people were hired simply because they were the most qualified individuals for the position. They loved what they did and wanted the tour group to share their enthusiasm. He noticed that half of the tour group were foreigners, who were simply in awe of what they were seeing. For them, this was the promised land. The Emerald City. The place where all the magic happens. He then went to work on getting a position in the White House. He didn't just want to be there, he knew he belonged there. He simply had to get in.

He contacted his congressman who said he would do all he could, but that consisted of mainly writing a letter to the selection committee. He said he had never met the President and had little if any sway with him. The problem for Brian was you never knew what the selection committee was really looking for. Most were professional government stooges who were just lucky enough to have been born into the right families. They had never really held a real job in their lives. They had no ideas or opinions of their own, just keeping their jobs. Fortunately for Brian, President White had won the election, not the other idiot. White was a veteran who said that everyone on his staff would have military experience. The selection committee had been replaced by a far more conservative group. Brian seized upon the moment.

He told his girlfriend about his plan. It should have been simple. He knew he had several student loans that were sizable. He also knew being in the military would impress the selection

committee. He talked it over with several people, including his father who had been an officer in the Army. He would just join the Reserves. One weekend a month, two weeks a year, that was it. He had no real love for the military or combat. He liked reading about war, not fighting a war. He took the only job available to him at the time, which was a fire support officer for an Artillery Unit in his city. He knew the XO and several other people. They welcomed him with open arms. Within a month of enlisting, he was on his way to basic training. He would spend eight weeks in Georgia, followed by ten weeks at Officer Candidate School. Upon graduation, he would be commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Army Reserve. Brian, like most other enlistees, had absolutely no idea what he was getting himself into.

Boot camp was difficult, but certainly nothing he couldn't handle. He was older than the other soldiers by a few years. The fact that he had been to college made him a constant target for the drill sergeants' abuse and ridicule. Once they discovered he was on his way to OCS, the abuse only intensified.

Brian knew it would not be easy. He also knew the Army was only a means to an end. He was no professional soldier, neither were the rest of these kids. They were just cannon fodder and Brian would be the one lighting the cannon. Eight weeks later, he was done with boot camp. He was in the best shape of his life. He was going to need it. One of his drill sergeants had been an instructor at OCS for a few months.

"Shit, if you think this is tough, wait till you see OCS. This ain't nothing," he said as Brian left the barracks.

He got a week off to go back home before the start of the program. He rested up and pretty much sat around, waiting for it to start. He reported to the post the next week. The reception station atmosphere was pretty relaxed. Several of the people had been in the Army for years and had seen combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. They had a chest full of medals to prove it. Brian's only combat experience had been playing paintball as a teenager. He quickly discovered he was not much good in combat. He would always get shot.

The next ten weeks were the toughest of his life. The instructors were brutal. They took every available opportunity to humiliate and degrade him and the other would-be officers. They slept very little, marched a lot. They ran until they vomited, then sent packing to do it all over again the next day. He lost nearly fifteen pounds in the first two weeks. Several cadets quit, including some that had been in the Army for years as non-commissioned officers. They had an inspection one morning. Nothing could be out of place. They had three days to prepare for it. Brian had wisely spent his time preparing. Just like in the movies his instructor put on a white glove and ran it along the edge of Brian's locker. It was spotless. He had passed. The rest of his platoon was not so lucky.

His battle buddy was Sgt. Jeffery Lovely. He had been to Iraq twice. Once in 2003 and then in 2007. His unit was hit by an IED which killed two of his soldiers. He was awarded a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. He figured with his resume, he'd just show and mail in his performance. He was in for a very rude awakening.

"Who you were and what you did before you came into this institution doesn't matter. Not one goddamn bit. I don't care if you have ten years of service or haven't spent two weeks in the Army. You all need to prove yourselves." said one of the officers who ran the program.

Sgt. Lovely spent the three days getting drunk and chasing skanks. His locker and uniform were good, but not great. One of the instructors took his locker and threw it down the stairs of the barracks, then told him to go get it and redo it. Lovely told them to fuck off and quit. Out of a class of 82 cadets on the first day of the program, only 52 made it to graduation. Brian was one of them. It was the proudest day of his life. His parents were in attendance when his name was called.

"Lieutenant Brian Bouse, United States Army," he said

He received his diploma and was pinned by his father. Both of them had to hold back their tears. They knew what a major accomplishment this was. He had done what 99 percent of the population could never do, which is make it through Officer Candidate School and graduate. He had done it. Now, it was time to go back home and take it easy, at least that's what he thought. He was not expecting to be told that his unit was deploying to Afghanistan in three weeks. They were going Taliban hunting with artillery, instead of shotguns. No one in the battalion was happy about it, except for the kids, who thought it was going to be one great big adventure. Most of the soldiers in Brian's company had little if any active duty experience, let alone actual combat experience. It was a textbook case of the blind leading the blind.

He was fortunate enough to have SSGT. David Perez in his company. Perez had nine years of active duty experience and had been deployed several times in his career. He was probably the least happy out of all of them. He pleaded with the battalion XO to stay behind, but he knew David's experience would be invaluable.

"I got a wife at home with my kid and another kid on the way. I wasn't there when my first son was born, please don't make me miss this one also."

"David, I need you here. I've got a bunch of rookie soldiers and officers here and we're going into a nasty situation. I'll make sure you get promoted to E-7. You'll be filling the slot. I do have quite a bit of pull with the selection committee. My letter of recommendation will get you the rank. Everyone I've ever written has been promoted. I'll even help you with your presentation package. "

That seemed to smooth things over. Once you make E-7, you can't ever lose the rank. It's awarded by congress. Only they can take it away, which almost never happens. For an enlisted soldier, this was the gravy train. Perez wasn't happy about it, but he didn't put up a fight. He knew he was going one way or the other, he may as well get as much as he could out of the deal.

Brian found him smoking outside the motor pool one afternoon.

"Man, these people aren't soldiers. No offense LT., but you got no idea what you're getting yourself into. It's one giant shit sandwich with no bread."

Perez did have a point. The battalion commander was a dentist in the civilian world. The XO was in the middle of a divorce and the company commander had just been arrested for DUI. They were hardly a force to be reckoned with. True, they did have some devastating firepower at their disposal, but most of them had no idea how to use it. Their training came from YOUTUBE videos.

"Afghanistan sucks. It's cold as hell there and the people would just as soon kill you as they would help you. I just don't understand why we are going there? What in the hell can be so important in that place?" He asked

Brian would later discover why were had been there for so long, fighting an enemy that should have been wiped out a decade ago. It just wasn't the answer he wanted to find. He said his goodbyes. His girlfriend told him she would wait for him. He told her that if she was still waiting for him when he got back, there would be a ring for her. Any woman who would put herself through that had to be the one.

They spent a week at Bagram AFB, then were driven out to their position on top of a mountain they would call home for the next eight months. Their job was simple, blast the shit out of the bad guys, who in this case looked just like regular civilians. The area had been a hotspot for Taliban activity. The US Government didn't have enough troops to keep in the country and had to rely on mercenary contractors to do most of the work. Brian thought it odd to see American pickup trucks with American bumper stickers on these mountainous dirt roads in the province. The Taliban were a careful, cunning, elusive enemy. They knew full well they could never take on the US military directly, so they resorted to hit and run tactics. Some of which had been very effective. Two Canadian soldiers had been ambushed and killed the other day with a dozen more wounded. The take-home lesson here was to never let your guard down. The Taliban were constantly watching you and waiting for you to make just one little mistake.

Their estimated strength in the area was in the thousands. Army Intelligence figured they were preparing for a big offensive. One that would be a black eye for the occupation forces, they just weren't sure when it would come.

Most of Brian's day was spent making useless reports and taking watch on the radio. He had to keep track of all of the company's personnel and equipment. They had enough firepower to bring down some of these mountains, they just had to keep track of it. He would read the daily intelligence briefings and hand them out accordingly. It was pointless busywork, but it kept him occupied.

He knew it would only be a matter of time before he was ready to apply. His hunch had been correct. President White had issued new criteria for his White House Interns. Military service was now a top priority. White had been a tank commander in the first Gulf War. He was a straight, to the point, no-bullshit type of guy that Americans loved and needed. Getting accepted would make all of this worth it. He just had to get through the next eight months and make it back home.

The letters and emails from his family and girlfriends sometimes did more harm than good. They were living their lives and pursuing their dreams, while he was living someone else's dream. He

was a pawn in this deadly game of chess being played by those in Washington and beyond. At two months into his deployment, he still had absolutely no idea why he or any other American was in this country. At some point, every soldier has to take a step back and wonder just how in the hell they got themselves into this situation in the first place? What memo did they not get that the rest of the population got? For Brian, this moment was right now.

The only thing that kept him in check was his books. His parents and girlfriend knew he was a history buff and sent him everything they could. His new favorite area of study was the history of the White House, from its humble beginnings to where it is today. Brian knew if he was offered a chance to be a tour guide, or White House Intern, he would most likely have to pass some kind of entrance exam, or at least be able to impress the selection committee with his knowledge of the subject. He read everything he could on the subject. To Brian, the White House was a symbol of America. A symbol of its strengths and perhaps its weaknesses. He studied the presidents and their lives inside as well. After all, they were just regular people, like Brian who were allowed to lead the free world. While the rest of his platoon played video games and watched pornos, Brian was trying to expand his knowledge. He was expected to act like an officer at all times, even if he really wasn't one. He'll never forget how it felt the first time someone saluted him. He just wished people in the civilian world would do that as well. Life would be so much easier.

He decided to do it one evening after leading a patrol in the mountains. He was tired, hungry and most of all, cold. The winter in Afghanistan could be brutal. It stayed cold for five months. Between the cold, snow, and snipers hiding in the mountains, he was ready to go back home.

He decided to make a model of the White House. He found a kit online and had his parents purchase it for him. It was nearly three feet long and almost a foot and a half wide. He really didn't know why he wanted to do it, he just knew he had to. It would keep his mind occupied.

A group of soldiers from Poland who were part of the NATO force were ambushed and killed a few days ago. The attack was swift and brutal. None survived. The base camp was put on high alert. His CO told everyone to be on alert twenty-four hours a day. They had an informant and translator working with their company who told them that they were next on the hit list.

Brian knew full well what the game plan was. Use him and his troops for bait, lure out the Taliban, then have the Air Force blast them to pieces. He watched them deliver an airstrike last month on a Taliban position. The ground shook when the bombs detonated. He almost felt sorry for the poor bastards on the receiving end. To some general running the show in Washington, it made perfect sense. To Brian, it was the very definition of insanity.

He first noticed the beautiful flowers in the spring. The rows and rows of white plumes. It looked like cotton at first. Brian wondered how cotton could grow in a climate like this. He asked Perez what it was.

"You mean, you don't know? They never told you?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

"Told me what?"

"Sir. Those flowers are poppies from opium plants. They bloom and the opium gets harvested. That's how they survive."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes sir. Bet you never thought you'd be a drug dealer when you enlisted now did you?" said Perez as he laughed it off.

"There's enough heroin there to feed a whole city for a year," remarked PFC Gabrelli.

"And we just let them get away with this?" asked Brian in shock.

"Yup. The farmers make their money off the opium and it keeps them from joining the Taliban. The only thing this whole fucking country can make is heroin. Everyone's skimming off the top. From the President of the country on down to the military. It's one giant drug factory. The Taliban almost had it eliminated when we took over in 2001. Now they're the largest drug dealer in the world."

"Where does it all go?" asked Brian.

"Who knows. Probably back to the states. To Europe, to Russia. See those contractors down there sir? What do you think they're doing? They're making sure the heroin gets loaded onto the trucks and gets taken to the airport. It's flown right out of the country."

He looked through the binoculars. He could see several mercenaries dressed in black and brown talking to the locals. Everyone seemed relaxed. It just didn't look right to Brian. Some of them were just wearing side arms only. They knew they weren't in any danger.

"Ever wonder how we could defeat millions of Germans in just a few years, but somehow can't defeat a few thousand towel heads in two decades? Kind of makes you wonder," said Perez, looking through the binoculars.

Indeed, Brian did start to wonder. It was beginning to make sense. They were here to stop the Taliban from stopping the heroin production. He and everyone here were simply used as hired guns for the mercenary armies that controlled the country. He almost felt like throwing up.

When he got back to base camp, he took his concerns to his CO. He and Brian had gotten along pretty well. The CO was a weekend warrior who was looking for bragging rights with his drinking buddies. He had seen him make several questionable decisions that could have ended in disaster, just so he could look good. Whether he knew the real reason for their mission or not, he felt the CO should at least be reminded of it.

"I didn't sign up to be a drug dealer. I can't believe I'm in this shit hole so somebody back home can get their fix," said Brian.

The look on his Captain's face said it all. He knew why they were here. The fact he never told Brian about this didn't make it any easier.

"Lieutenant, it's a complicated situation. We can't go imposing our values and morals on these people, they're nothing like us. It's like trying to teach French to your dog." he said

"Drug dealing? We're selling death here sir. White death. This isn't right. Not on any level. In the areas the Taliban control, there are no opium farms, none. I kind of wonder why we aren't doing the same thing."

"Brian, we're here for eight months, then we go home. We're not here to change the world. This country has been a basket case since the British left. It's going to be a basket case after we leave. You have to accept sometimes that you can't change what you cannot control."

"Those contractors down in the valley, who do they work for?"

"Who knows? They might be CIA, or DIA or some other alphabet agency."

"I think we should at least question them. See why they're spending so much time on an opium farm."

"Absolutely not. I don't know who they work for and I don't want to. You need to know that they work for some very influential people in our government. The type of people that can end careers with just one phone call. Am I being clear." he said sternly.

He knew this was going nowhere. His CO was a professional turd polisher. Talking to him would be a waste of time. Just as he was about to leave, his CO handed him a piece of paper.

"Next week, the XO and I have to go into Kabul for several days. You and Lieutenant Walker will be in charge. Walker's a good man. You can learn a lot from him.

"Yes sir," said Brian and walked out of the building. It was beginning to rain. He had only seen the sun once in the past week. His bad mood got even worse.

The next few days were rather uneventful around base camp. He was pretty much left to run the entire company. They had morning formation, then scattered for most of the day. He took his platoon out on their scheduled patrol one morning down in the valley a mile or so below. It was much warmer down there. The entire area was covered with opium farms and bright white poppies that were starting to bloom. It might still be winter up in the mountains, but down here, it was almost summer. He watched a convoy of several hummers and pick-up trucks go down the road in front of them. Several of the contractors waved to them. He half-heartedly waved back. He decided to have a look at one of those farms. He told Perez what he wanted.

"Sir, I gotta say, that's a bad idea. We don't want to go messing with their operation."

"Where the hell do you think all this heroin is going to end up? It's going to be stuck in some kid's arm or in some junkie. This shit is evil."

"It's your ass Lt," he said

He took the dozen or so soldiers from the platoon and headed to a farm about a mile down the road. Two of the contractors drove by in a pickup truck and gave them a weird look. They walked right onto the farm from the main gate. He broke the platoon up into two groups. One headed for the farmhouse and another headed for a group of buildings near the fields. They

passed by a group of Afghan workers who said nothing to them and kept walking by. He and his group went over to the fields, while Perez took his group to the farmhouse. He was about a hundred feet from the warehouse-type buildings when a contractor and two Afghan men came out to meet him. They stopped and looked at each other. Brian was intruding in their little club. They seemed more annoyed than worried.

"Afternoon Lieutenant. Can I help you with something?" said the contractor with a heavy southern accent.

"Just thought we'd have a look around. We got to at least look like we're trying to stop these guys," said Brian.

The contractor turned and said something on his handheld radio. Brian figured he was calling for reinforcements. He and his soldiers walked over to the first garage-type building. The contractor followed him. His attitude had changed. It was now much more friendly. Brian figured he was just stalling until help arrived. He was about ten feet from it when he saw it. Dozens of Afghan men loaded the white powder into small crates and sacks that looked like laundry bags. He walked over to them and put his hand in one of the sacks. He picked up the powder and looked at it. It looked like sugar at first. The men just looked at him and kept on working.

Clearly, they had no fear of the United States Army. Why would they? We were just here to ensure they can get the crop harvested. We were on their side, he was on the side of the heroin farmers and drug pushers.

"Holy shit," said PFC Gabrielli.

"This is real? This shit must be worth a fortune!" he said in awe, after picking up and holding the powder in his hand.

Brian looked at the contractor. He kept looking at the road. Brian stepped away from his and whispered into his radio.

"Perez, you there?" he asked

"Yeah LT, go ahead."

"We're going to have company soon. Not sure if they are friendly or not. Be ready."

"Roger that. If they're who I think it is, we could be in trouble," said Perez.

"I think they just want to scare us. They don't want any trouble, not yet." Brian said.

He walked back over to the contractor.

"Do you ever feel remorse or guilt knowing where all this shit is going to end up? How many lives will this stuff take?" he asked

"I just follow orders Lieutenant. A good soldier follows orders, even if they don't agree with them."

"If you guys did this in the States, you'd be arrested and thrown in prison."

"Probably, but we aren't in the States. Lieutenant, a smart man would just ignore all this and walk away. You're a smart man, aren't you?" said the contractor.

"You know, I was so naïve when I enlisted, I actually thought the Army were the good guys. I thought we were going in to stop places like this," said Brian

"There are no good guys in wars. Just winners and losers, that's all," he said

"LT, we got company," said PFC Saunders, pointing to the road.

About half a dozen pickup trucks came racing down the road. Perez and his men had taken cover in the buildings and farmhouse. Brian knew he had to defuse this situation and quickly. He knew the contractors wouldn't be stupid enough to shoot at his soldiers, but he didn't want to take the chance.

'Safety's off boys." he said. The click of half a dozen of them readying their weapons was enough to unnerve even the most hardened of people like this contractor. Two of the trucks came over to the buildings where he and his troops were. They stopped and half a dozen heavily armed contractors stepped out. The man Brian had been talking to walked over to another man in the truck. He got out and walked over to Brian.

"Is there a problem here Lieutenant?" he asked

"Only if you consider drug dealing a problem."

"This is a classified operation, Lieutenant. Your assistance is not required. Now, if you and your boys would be so kind as to vacate the premises, we'd very much appreciate it."

He got on the radio and spoke to Perez.

"I think we just stepped in the middle of one giant pile of shit," said Perez

"Yup. I think this is one battle we aren't going to win. Let me just have a little fun with them for a few minutes, then we'll split."

"What do I do if they start shooting at us?"

"Shoot back," said Brian.

He walked back over to the contractors. He knew he had to just walk away, but not before he gave these guys a piece of his mind. He walked right up to them and looked at them. He knew these men were not the type to be fucked with. They had all the visual and mental scars of combat. Some of them had probably been Rangers or SEALs. You could see it in their faces.

"You people are garbage," he said

"No need to get personal Lieutenant. I don't judge you."

"How many kids are going to die because of what you people are doing here? How the hell can you do this?" asked Brian

"I have General Searcy's number on my speed dial. Don't make me call him."

Brian knew he was beaten. Whoever these people were, their connections ran far and deep. From all he knew the general could be the one running this whole operation.

"2nd Platoon, we're out of here. We'll meet in front of the gate," he said into his walkie-talkie.

"Been nice to meet you, Lieutenant. I wore that uniform when I worked at the Pentagon. You ever been there, it's quite a place." said one of the contractors.

Brain said nothing more and he and his troops headed back to the main gate. They made sure they were not being followed, then had a platoon meeting.

"Damn, LT.....you got some serious balls. One of those guys was a Green Beret," said Saunders

"Well, somebody had to try and stop them."

All of the men in the platoon knew the significance of what they had done and all of them, without hesitation supported Brian. Perez, most of all, which kind of surprised him. He figured Perez would have just blasted him for taking an unnecessary risk, but he didn't. He backed Brian 100 percent.

"I lost a brother to this shit." he said "I wish I could have met the person who sold him the shit that finally killed him. I would have killed him myself.

"I lost my best friend to a heroin overdose. It was the first time he shot up. Shit killed him. He took too much. You were right LT, those assholes are garbage. I'd love to back there and burn that fucking place to the ground." said Gabrielli.

"We better get back to camp. We have to pull fireguard tonight, even though it's 1st Platoon's turn. They are battling a nasty flu bug."

Several of his troops stopped and laughed. Brian turned to them.

"What's so funny?"

"Come on Lt, you really don't know? None of the other Officers have told you?"

"Told me what?"

"They ain't got no flu or bullshit like that. They all got caught shooting up. Even Lt. Walker got caught. The whole platoon is toast. The CO piss tested all of them yesterday. Only one passed, everyone else tested positive for heroin." said Gabrielli

Brian was stunned. He was also angry. He was supposed to be in charge. Someone should have told him about this. How the hell this could be happening and he had no idea, was disturbing. He knew they were not professional soldiers, but to use heroin on a deployment?

"Is this true?" he asked Perez

"Yes sir. That's how they move the drugs. The laundry service. Remember those bags we saw at the farm? The locals were given the job, sort of like a way to keep them out of trouble and keep them from killing us. That's how all the drugs get moved around here. In the laundry bags. Once a week they drop it off, once a week it gets picked up, along with their money. The whole fucking thing was happening right underneath our noses."

"Jesus. Anyone else have any more gossip I should know about?" asked Brian

"Well, Lt. I guess we have decided that you're basically an idiot. But, you're an honest idiot and we trust you. We don't trust anyone else around here. No one." said Gabrielli

"Well, Mr. Gabrielli, you're probably right. I am an idiot. I should have known better. I should have done a lot of things differently. I'm sorry I let you guys down." he said solemnly.

"You didn't let us down LT, the Army let us down, not you," said PFC Saunders.

Brian did feel a little better, knowing he had the support of his troops. They were right, you couldn't trust anyone here. This was one giant criminal enterprise. He wasn't sure at this point who the good guys really were if there were any. He had read the briefing this morning. Battalion size columns of Taliban fighters were seen in the area. Brian now had this to worry about on top of everything else. He was right in the middle of a category 5 shit storm with no end in sight.

The first thing he did when he got back to base camp was to go over to 1st platoon's tent and have a look for himself. It was worse than he could have imagined. He caught two soldiers smoking weed right in the tent. Two other soldiers were so strung out, they couldn't even get out of their cots. He took the joint out of the soldier's mouth and threw it on the ground.

"Party's over. I want all of you outside in formation in ten minutes," he said

"Wake those two up. They better be there as well."

"Come on Lt. why don't you go back to your own platoon? I'm sure they miss you." said one of the soldiers.

"Where is Lt Walker?" asked Brian

"I think he's on a date." said one of the men in the tent.

"What are you talking about?"

"Afghan girls will sell you their asses for like fifty bucks. That's for an expensive one with all her teeth that doesn't stink." said one of the soldiers

"Where is he?"

"I ain't no snitch LT, but you might want to look behind the chow hall." said another soldier.

"I will be back to this tent in exactly one hour. Every drug, every pill, every joint, every everything you are not supposed to have had better be in a pile in the middle, including the heroin. If it isn't, I'll get the MP's from Bagram out here in the morning with their drug dogs. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir." said several of them in unison.

He stormed out of the tent and went behind the chow hall. There was about a ten foot clearing between the wall and the razor wire-topped fence. Brain saw a young Afghan girl run past him. Walker seemed to be running after her. Brain grabbed him and slammed him against the wall. He was bigger than Walker and far less doped up.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You're an Officer in the United States Army for Christ's sake!"

Walker tried to push him off, but he was so doped up, he just fell to the ground. Brain didn't even help him up.

"I'm a fucking pawn Brian.....and so are you. We're just pawns. I realized this a long time ago. Now fuck off, go back to your own platoon."

"I'm sure your wife would just love to hear about this? Isn't she pregnant?"

Walker stood up and looked right at Brian. He realized for the first time that it was possible to dislike someone on your own side more than the enemy that was trying to kill you.

"You're finished here. Do you hear me? I just hope you make it back home alive and in one piece." he said and shoved Brian out of the way.

He knew his company was in deep trouble. If they were called upon to provide fire support, they would not be able to do so. The Taliban could overrun them without much resistance. He heard rumors that the government was paying them not to attack US or NATO soldiers. He wondered where they got the money, now he knew. The enemy was not Al Qaeda or the Taliban. It was the same enemy that Napoleon and the Russian's lost to. The enemy that could not be stopped. It was destroying his own company as well. A little white powder that looks harmless at first, but takes everything from you in the end. It had consumed whole armies and now it was taking his troops as well. Brian knew he could not let it win, he had to try and stop it, even if it was futile at this point. He first had to make certain that his platoon was clean and sober. He ordered urinalysis for all of his troops. He knew his CO was going to blow a gasket, but he didn't care. This was his

platoon, these were his troops and his responsibility. The very fact that he had little or no control over his situation was even more infuriating. He had to do everything someone else's way, regardless of whether it worked or not. Nothing was more aggravating than being partially in charge. You get blamed for the failures and someone else gets credit for your success. That was something he never learned in OCS. Brian had taken the classes for drug screening. The Army did not screw around when it came to drug testing. You had somebody standing right in front of you watching you pee in a cup. Brian was known as "the dickwatcher" by his troops. He told Perez what he was doing.

"As far as I know, no one in this unit is using. Of course, I don't pretend to know everything," he said

"Well, I guess that will have to do. It's purely a scare tactic. I'm just going to have to sit on the samples until next week when SID does the actual testing."

"I can spot a junkie a mile away LT, I think we're ok."

"Let's hope so."

Brian went back to his makeshift living quarters, which consisted of a tent and two heaters. His parents had sent him a full-scale model kit of the White House. He was delighted when he opened the package. It would take him weeks, if not months to put it together. He carefully laid out the pieces on the table. It was a flawless representation of an amazing building. If you loved American History, the White House was the crown jewel of jewels.

He just hoped he'd have enough time to complete it before his deployment was up. He figured he'd present it to the selection committee during his interview. Couldn't possibly hurt. SSGT Perez came into his tent with some paperwork.

"Knock, knock," he said

"Oh, thanks, just leave it on my bunk. I'll sign them as soon as I'm finished here."

"What you got there?" asked Perez

"It's a model of the White House."

"It's going to look like this when it's finished?" he said holding up the box.

"Hopefully."

"You really like this stuff huh? All the history of this country?" Perez asked

"I do. The White House has a lot of history. The first block was laid down in 1792. It was completely destroyed by the British in the War of 1812. It's undergone several renovations and expansions since. See here: this is the West Wing. This is where the President and his staff work. The main building is called the Executive Residence. This is where he and his family live. The

East Wing is where the First Ladies set up shop, as far as I can tell. The whole Property sits on just 18 acres."

"When it's finished, let me know. I'd love to see it. I used to build models when I was a kid." said Perez.

"All right. Did you confiscate everything 1st Platoon gave us?"

"Yes sir. Couldn't believe it. You'd have thought this was an opium den, not the United States Army. The shit is going to hit the fan over this one." he said. He put the drugs on the table. There was enough heroin and cocaine for dozens, not just a few.

"Perez.....be honest with me: how high up does this go? Can I trust these people?" he asked

"Bro, I'll tell you what my squad leader told me when I was a buck Private my first day in the Army."

"What's that?"

"Don't trust anybody, especially an Officer."

1st platoon and 2nd Platoon kept busy for a few days until the CO and XO returned. Brain figured they would blow a gasket after learning what he had done, but they never said a word. They hastily assembled the entire company in formation and told them what was happening. After spending months in the country, doing nothing, they were finally going to get their first real piece of the action.

"The Bundeswehr nearly got overrun last night. They lost almost half a dozen men and two vehicles just ten miles from here. We are going on the assumption that we'll be next. We're an easy target. 3rd Platoon will man the 155's. 1st Platoon will provide perimeter security. 2nd Platoon, you guys are going to block any escape path for the Taliban. This is the real deal boys, this is what we came here for." said Lt. Col McDonald.

Brian knew exactly what was going on. They were simply the bait for the Taliban. As soon as they engaged the enemy, the Air Force would blast them to pieces. He hoped the Taliban wouldn't be stupid enough to fall for it.

He had typed a letter and gave it to his CO. It was sealed, but Brain knew full well it would probably be read several times before it left the base. It contained everything that he had seen in country, regarding the drug running and drug dealing. He had been observing it for months, including the personnel in the US Army, he felt were aware, if not participating in the operation. He included General Searcy. A man who many thought might try and run for President. He had no idea how far, or how high up the drug dealing went.

"If I don't make it back, make sure this gets to my congressman," he said.

Brian knew he had probably just ended his career and had a giant bull's eye on his back from this point on, but he didn't care. He saw the CO running over to the Battalion Commander's tent about half an hour later. He knew at that point, he couldn't trust the CO either.

Brian and his troops were not infantry. They were 13Bs and 13Cs. Artillery. They were trained how to use, shoot and maintain the giant 155mm Howitzer cannons. They could be devastating when used properly. They really had nothing with them but small arms and fragmentation grenades. They had one M60 Machine gun, the rest were just regular M16s. If things got ugly, they were going to need a hell of a lot more firepower than this.

Brian figured they had the 155s to back them up. Artillery could be dropped within fifty feet of their position and the effects were devastating. He figured that's what the XO had in mind. The Taliban were elusive. They just needed to be brought out in the open for a few minutes. That's why Brain and 1st platoon were going out there.

It was snowing in May up in the mountains. It was hard enough to breathe when they weren't hauling around equipment. Hauling around 210 rounds, plus water was next to impossible. The Platoon's movement had slowed to a crawl. Several of the soldiers were openly bitching about the mission.

"LT, I realize I'm not in charge here, but doesn't this seem like a job better suited for the 10th Mountain Division?" asked Saunders

"Probably."

"So, how did we get stuck with it?"

"Cause we're bait stupid, that's why," said Gabrielli.

"They're probably watching us right now, so make sure you're constantly looking around you. Johnson, you're on point," said Perez

"Great," said Johnson

The platoon walked for two hours until they reached their spot. Twice, Brain had seen locals watching them. He didn't know if they were friendly or not. He also saw someone looking at them through a pair of binoculars. He definitely was not a local. He stopped the platoon.

"That's no local," he told Perez

"No, it sure isn't. Looks like a contractor."

"What the hell are they doing up here?"

"I don't know. Those guys worry me more than the Taliban," he said

They reached their position shortly before nightfall. Even in May, the temperature in the mountains was near freezing. It was going to be a long night. They still had to dig their foxholes,

which was going to take a while. Perez pointed out that they could use the rocks and boulders as better cover. They also found a small cave they could hide in if things got really bad. At least they had plenty of cover.

"I don't like this one bit Lt."

"Me neither. Those rocks up above. Someone gets up there and starts firing, we're done."

"Somebody could already be up there."

"Have Saunders and Johnson set up in those boulders up there with the M60. Gabrielli and Montoya can set behind those rocks. The rest of the Platoon can go in the cave. I want two people on watch at all times. I'll take my turn as well."

"Roger that LT." said Perez.

It was now pitch black in the area where 2nd Platoon was set up. About an hour after they had set up camp, they could hear gunfire and explosions in the distance. It went on for the next two hours. That was the area controlled by the Bundeswehr. He figured they were getting hit again. They were good soldiers, but inexperienced. They had pretty much the same weapons and equipment as they did, but it looked brand new as if it had never been used. It was certainly getting used tonight.

He, as well as several of the other soldiers, had 2nd generation Night Vision Goggles with them. They checked their batteries before they left. The 2nd generation was a huge improvement over the first. You had depth perception and clear views. Everyone was settled in. It now became a waiting game. The gunfire had stopped abruptly. Brian wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one. Maybe they retreated. Maybe they heard about another easy target in the mountains.

It was shortly after 9 PM. Gabrielli was on fire watch. He knew better than to light up a cigarette out here, the LT. would kill him. He had a can of chew with him and put a good size chunk in his mouth. He hated chewing, but when you need a fix, you need a fix. He was fighting to stay awake. He would wake up the next guy in about twenty minutes. Then he could get some sleep. He put his blanket over him and tried to stay warm. He couldn't believe he left his job back in the States for this shit. What was he thinking? Here he was, freezing his ass off in the middle of this shit hole, while his buddies were back home, drinking beer and chasing girls.

He closed his eyes, just for a second and that's when he heard it. It was the sound of rocks falling. He quickly came to and looked through his NVGs. He nearly shit himself, when he saw a dozen figures moving about in front of him.

"WE GOT COMPANY!" he shouted over the radio and fired his M60 at the figures in front of him. He hit two of them, sending them flying backward. The other figure started shooting at him, hitting the rocks in front of him. PFC Gabrielli was now in the middle of a vicious firefight. He quickly realized the rocks would shield him from the bullets. Saunders and Johnson were now firing blindly as well. Suddenly, a wave of gunfire erupted over the side of the cliff above them. The bullets were ricocheting everywhere. Brian and the rest of the platoon had their NVGs on and were returning fire. They were in the middle of a small clearing, surrounded on either side

by cliffs and rocks. They were trapped. There was no way to escape. They were firing hundreds of rounds a minute. At this rate, they would be out of ammo within two minutes.

"2nd Platoon, save your ammo, repeat, don't waste ammo. I'm going to call in artillery," he said over the radio. The radioman working the SINGARS radio handed him the receiver for the radio.

"Papa Doc, Papa Doc, this is 2nd Platoon, we need fire support at the following coordinates," he said and rattled off the coordinates as best he could read them.

"Copy 2nd Platoon, hang on, 1st volley in less than a minute." said the CO over the radio.

Perez checked his coordinates. Brian had a GPS receiver with him. His own, he had bought that was better than anything the Army had. He was going to bring the artillery in close.

The first volley hit the hills and rocks above them, causing a small avalanche. The second volley was right on target, hitting the Taliban hard. The explosions were so loud, it blew out one of his eardrums. After it was over, Brian had a loud ringing in his ears. His hearing would never be the same since.

The strikes were right on target, buying them some precious breathing room. Perez ran out to Gabrielli and Brian checked on the rest. Two of his soldiers were dead. A grenade had been tossed into their makeshift bunker. He closed his eyes and said a quick prayer for them. There would be time to grieve later. Right now, he still had to worry about the rest of his troops.

Mercifully, the rest of the platoon was ok, shaken and disorientated, but alive. The full scale of the carnage would not become apparent until the next morning when the sun came up. Right now, the only thing they could smell was gunpowder and cordite. He got on the radio and relayed the message to the battalion commander.

"XO, we got two dead. We need immediate evac out here," said Brian.

"Lieutenant, We are pinned down here as well. We had a disaster last night. One of the shells exploded as it was being loaded into the mortar. Wiped out the whole squad. Fucking train wreck. We're going to get help to you boys as soon as we can. Right now, the weather is working against us. What's your situation like, ammo-wise?"

"Not good. We've only got a few hundred rounds left. They hit us that hard again, we'll be wiped out."

"Ok, let me and the CO figure something out here. I doubt they'll try and move on you again tonight, after what the artillery did to them, but be ready. God bless you son." he said

Brian knew they were in deep shit. They were surrounded. If they tried and evacuate, they'd be cut to pieces. If they stayed, they'd probably run out of ammo. The last thing he wanted to consider was being captured. If it came down to that, he had his grenades with him. He's taking as many with them as he could.

He was able to make contact with everyone in the platoon. They were all scared shitless but were ready for round two.

"They know the Air Force won't be able to move on them with the snow and cloud cover. The first wave was just to test us. The main attack is coming." said Perez

"Any ideas?

"We have to keep everyone where they are. We move everyone in the cave, we'd be trapped. We just have to let them come at us again, then drop artillery on them. I just don't see any other way." he said

Brain knew he was right. They couldn't risk moving. Even in the cover of darkness, they had no idea what kind of equipment the Taliban had available to them. For all he knew, they could have the same NVGs Brian had. Rule numero uno in combat is to never, ever underestimate your enemy. The Army had learned that the hard way in Vietnam. He and the rest of the platoon just had to sit and wait. The two dead soldiers would have to wait until the morning. Brian was able to get their dog tags. One of them was so hot, it burned his glove.

He could feel the snow on his face as he crawled over to Gabrielli's position.

"Tell me some good news LT, please," he said almost hysterically.

"Well, we're not dead. Not yet."

"When are we getting out of here?"

"They're going to get us out of here soon. The base camp was hit as well. We gotta hold on for just a little while longer."

"Jesus, LT. I know I talk a lot of shit, but I'm really a pussy. I'm not cut out for this crap."

"Really? You seem to be doing just fine."

Aren't you scared? Do you want to die out here?"

"Of course not. I want to get out of here and out of this shit hole country, but to do that, we have to survive. You did real good out here. You probably saved the whole platoon. You are a soldier Gabrielli, whether you want to admit it or not."

He could see the expression on his face change. He had indeed saved the platoon. He had saved lives. Most of all, he had proven to everyone that he was good in a pinch. He was scared shitless but still did his duty. He had won the LT's respect and that was no easy accomplishment.

The rest of the night was just as miserable. It was freezing. The troops tried to stay warm. Brian wrote a letter to his parents and put it in a sealed sandwich bag. He stuck it in his pocket.

"LT, if I don't make it out of here. Please tell my wife I love her. I know I haven't been the best husband or the best father, but I love them. They're all I have." said one of his soldiers.

"Knock it off. You can tell her yourself when you step off the plane. You aren't going to die out here?"

"How do you know?"

"The Taliban may be crazy, but they aren't stupid. They know what kind of firepower we have at our disposal. We just gotta hold on until help arrives."

"When's that going to be?"

"Soon.....real soon private," Brian said.

He opened his eyes just long enough to see the sun trying to poke through the clouds. He relieved himself in a corner of the cave and woke up SSGT. Perez.

"Morning sunshine," he said

"I'm going to take a look around," Brian said. He was so cold, he wasn't sure if he had actually slept or not.

He stood at the end of the cave. He dropped his GPS and bent down to pick it up. The bullet ricocheted off the cave wall. He dove for cover and grabbed his 9mm. He had foolishly left his rifle in the cave. He looked up and could see dozens of Taliban climbing down over the cliff. He fired and hit two of them. The rest of his troops opened fire as well, knocking several of them down. Perez, grabbed both rifles. He was still in his socks. He tossed a rifle to Brian. Both of them were now trading fire with the Taliban. Gabrielli opened up with the M60, shredding several of them as they tried to storm his position. One of them threw a grenade that landed very close, but the rocks took most of the damage. He watched PFC Saunders take a bullet and collapse. He kept on firing, killing two more fighters.

The fire fight went on for two more hours. Brian used one of his grenades on some of them hidden behind a large rock. They stopped firing shortly thereafter. There were so many spent shells on the ground, you almost had to be careful not to step on one of them and slip. Perez used his grenade launcher, sending a small boulder on top of a fighter. When it was all over, three more soldiers from Brian's platoon had been killed or wounded. There were only four of them left. He got on the radio and frantically called in for help.

"Papa doc, Papa Doc, we need immediate evac from the site. We're getting murdered out here."

"Brian, you've got help coming, just hold on son. As soon as the weather breaks, you'll be out of there."

"We'll all be dead by then. Give us another volley. Then wait ten minutes and give us another. Bring it down right on top of us." said Brian as he threw down the receiver and rejoined the fight.

"2nd PLATOON, INCOMING!" he shouted over the radio.

Brian looked down and realized he had been shot. The rifle plate had taken a direct hit. It had saved his life. The damn thing really worked. That was a rare event in the Army.

The platoon did as ordered and a minute later, the first volley from the Howitzers landed just a hundred feet in front of them. One of the shells hit the side of the wall, causing a massive landslide. Gabrielli was buried alive. The rocks managed to save his life once more. The Taliban were not so lucky. Several of them were caught unprepared for the rockslide and it killed them almost instantly. 2nd Platoon had been lucky, very lucky. He knew they were on borrowed time. Their luck was running out. They had to get out of here and fast.

"Gabrelli, you ok?" Brian asked over the radio

"No. Get me the fuck out of here!"

"Hang on bud. Help is on the way."

No sooner had Brain said that, than a RPG came flying into the mouth of the cave. It exploded and sent him and one soldier flying backward. Brian's ear was blown off. The soldier next to him was nearly decapitated.

He managed to crawl out of the cave. He looked up and saw several Taliban standing in front of him. Two contractors stepped forward. One of them helped up Brian and sat him down on a rock.

"Jesus, what a mess," he said. Brian realized it was the same contractor he had seen that day at the opium farm.

"LT. Bouse, what the hell are you doing? Why did you write that letter? Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"Fuck off," said Brian with blood all over his face.

"Brian, I wore that uniform just like you do. I don't want to have to do this, but you're not really leaving me much of a choice."

"There's always a choice."

"Not when you go writing letters to your congressman about what we're doing here. Lieutenant, the entire operation was set up to be a drug lab. That's why we're here. We're not here to fight the Taliban or kill Bin Laden. We are here cause the government needs billions of dollars in untraceable funds. You should have listened to your superior officers. They were only trying to help you."

"If you're going to kill me, then do it. Otherwise, get the fuck out of here!" said Brian, weak from the blood loss.

"You just don't do things the easy way, do you. You shouldn't really call people garbage either, that wasn't very nice," he said and aimed his gun at Brian's head.

He only saw the man fly forwards and explode on the canyon wall. A few seconds later, another group of fighters was vaporized right in front of him. Brian crawled down between two rocks and took cover. The SABO rounds from the tanks were coming down on the fighters in all directions. Brian picked his head up long enough to see a large column of LEOPOLD Tanks coming down the road towards their position. The German Army was coming to their rescue. He and his soldiers were fortunate enough to be in the sector controlled by the Bundeswehr, or German Army. For the first time since the bullets started flying, Brian thought he might actually get out of here alive. It was about freaking time.

Within minutes, dozens of soldiers from Battalion 263 of the Bundeswehr had flooded the area and sent the Taliban scattering in several directions. They had captured several wounded fighters. As tempted as Brian was just to walk over and shoot them dead, he knew he couldn't. Even in war, there were rules. Everyone these days had a camera. One slip up and you could spend the rest of your life paying for it. He was able to walk over to the tracked vehicle and sit down. The German medics were quick and professional. They stopped his bleeding, but he was too weak to do very much. He had done his job, now he could relax if that were possible.

The German Army Medic quickly evacuated him to Bagram Air Force Base. He was operated on for nearly two hours. He had a blood transfusion which probably saved his life. Three days later, he was able to get out of bed and walk around. He had two broken ribs and lost one of his ears, but he was alive and would live to tell about it.

Only Brian, SSGT Perez, and PFC Gabrielli had survived the ordeal. Gabrielli had survived with only a few scratches on him. Perez had been shot twice. He needed half a dozen surgeries, but with a year, he was back to his old self, minus the mental and emotional scars.

Gabrielli and Perez were awarded the Purple Heart and the Silver Star. He was the one who pinned them at the Awards Ceremony. Brian was given a Purple Heart as well. General Searcy came to see him in the hospital. Brian wasn't sure if he wanted to thank him or strangle him. The news shocked Brian, he never saw it coming.

"Lieutenant, let me be the first to say congratulations," he said and shook his hand

"For what?"

"For being awarded the Medal of Honor. Some German Army Snipers saw the whole fight. They recorded everything you did. Just amazing."

Brian was stunned. What the hell had he done to deserve that? All he did was manage not to get himself killed and that was just dumb luck.

"Well sir, I'm honored, I really am, but I certainly don't think I deserve...."

"Brian, of course, you do. You're a hero son. A real hero. America needs heroes like you. Men who understand the way things work, even if they aren't perfect, even if they don't agree with them. I hope you understand what I'm saying."

"Yes sir. Yes I certainly do," he said

The General smiled and shook his hand.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to call me or my secretary," he said as he left the room.

Brian was in shock. The Medal of Honor? That honor was usually reserved for the deceased. It was rarely given for someone who had actually survived. This was the big leagues. He wasn't sure if he actually deserved it, or if it was just down to make sure he kept his mouth shut. Either way, things were about to get very real for Brian Bouse.

Back at base camp, Brian was given a hero's welcome, as were the rest of the soldiers. He was interviewed by the Army Times and two other news agencies. Word of his heroism had spread like wildfire in these parts. Of course, why it was up to the German's to rescue them, or why they were out there defenseless in the first place was never brought up. The entire ordeal had been a disaster for the company. Six soldiers had been killed when the mortar shell exploded in the tracked vehicle. The battalion commander and XO had both since been replaced. Perez was still in the hospital, but Gabrielli ran over to him.

"Jesus, you like shit LT."

"Nice to see you too Gabrelli," he said

The two of them sat down and had a cigarette. Brian had never smoked in his life until he came here. Gabrielli clearly had something on his mind.

"LT, I may not be the smartest guy in the world, but I don't think we were supposed to survive that fight, were we?" he asked

"Why do you say that?"

"I hear shit. You know, people talk. I listen. I'm a good listener. There were some shady people in camp the same day we left for that pass. They talked to the XO. I wonder what they told him?"

"I wrote a letter to my congressman about what is going on here. That contractor knew about it."

"I don't trust anyone out here Lt, except you and the Sarge. Everyone else I trusted is dead."

"I'm sorry that's the case Gabrielli, but you're probably right. I don't trust anyone out here either," said Brian.

Brain went back into his tent. He sat down on his bunk. He was in no shape to do anything. He looked over at his White House model. His enthusiasm and passion were now gone. He looked over at the pile of drugs. They were still on the ground next to his table. A large grin came over his face. He sat down and began to get to work.

He was still on active duty a year later for the ceremony at the White House. He requested that SSGT Perez and PFC Gabrielli, who was now SGT Gabrielli be present. He met and had lunch with President White and his family. For Brian, it was a dream come true. He was on the front page of three major newspapers. He sold his story to some publishing company.

"The Heroes of 2nd Platoon" was going to be made into a movie.

The actual ceremony was packed with military brass and journalists. Brian gave dozens of interviews to reporters. He was almost exhausted when the ceremony began. President White stepped up to the podium and began speaking:

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my esteemed honor and privilege to be here today in the company of someone who epitomizes everything that is good and decent about America. He is a hero in every sense of the word. A man who lives by decency, honor, and duty. I am pleased to present to Lieutenant Brian Bouse, for conspicuous bravery and gallantry above and beyond the call of duty, the Medal of Honor." said President White as he put the large medal around Brian's neck. It was much heavier than he realized. The press took what seemed like hundreds of pictures in the next few minutes. Brian just stood and smiled. He could get used to this.

"I understand Lieutenant Bouse is a history buff, much like myself. While on deployment to Afghanistan, he made a model of the White House. Could you bring it in, for everyone to see?" asked White

Some aides very carefully brought Brian's scale model of the White House in the middle of the Press Room for the media to look at. They took even more pictures.

"I really can't say enough about this young man. I'm just blown away by the detail and care he took when constructing it. I'm going to put it on display downstairs so everyone can look at it and enjoy it as I did." he said

The ceremony was wrapping up. Brian went over to Perez and Gabrielli. He gave them both a big hug. He hadn't seen either of them in months.

"What the hell did you get a Medal of Honor for? I was right next to you the whole time."

"Yeah, but I didn't piss my pants during the firefight." Brian joked.

"I told you guys, I spilled water on me, that's all," he said

"Urine flavored water?" added Perez.

"You still going to be a White House Aide?" asked Gabrielli

"Oh, no. I think I've done far more in the White House already than I could as an aide," said Brian.

"What do you mean?" asked Perez

"Remember all that heroin we took from 1st Platoon?"

"Yeah, there was a shit ton of it."

"Well, what do you think the White House model is made out of?" asked Brian.

"What do you mean?"

"Heroin tar is holding it all together. I didn't have any glue," said Brian

They both walked over and looked at the model, then looked back at Brian.

"You're telling me, that entire thing is made out of pure heroin?" asked Gabrielli

"The best money can buy."

"It's going to be on display, for everyone to see when they come into the White House?" asked Perez

"Yup. I guess it will be our little joke," said Brian.

Perez and Gabrielli were laughing all the way out of the White House.

"You're alright LT." said Gabrielli as he put his arm around Brian's shoulder.

"You are too bud," said Brian as they walked out of the White House together. Two strangers arrived in a country and left as best friends. War can be terrible, but sometimes, it can bring people together, like the men of 2nd Platoon, may they rest in peace.