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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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From the Editors...

Fort Hood, outside Killeen, Texas, is the largest military base in the world, 214,000 acres. Today it's home to around 40,000 soldiers. It's where thirteen were killed, thirty wounded in 2009, with Major Hasan charged as the shooter.

JoAnn Wypijewski spent five weeks there in 2005, covering the courts martial of Charles Graner, Sabrina Harman and Lynndie England, all convicted in con-

nection with torture at Abu Ghraib.

In mid-December of this year JoAnn returned to Fort Hood, a gloomier place than in 2005 when, as she writes, "the wars were relatively young. That was a muscular time of yellow ribbons and signs proclaiming support not just for the troops but for their job. Bumper stickers and car decals blared, 'Search and Destroy' and 'Make My Day' ... Now I was more struck by modest signs with folded hands: 'Pray for Our Troops.' Even Fort

Hood seems to have absorbed the sense of failure... The psych services at Fort Hood are overwhelmed. Counselors meet with 4,000 patients a month and rely on outside counselors to handle overflow."

JoAnn talked to a number of soldiers, and most of all to Ryan, a 25-year-old, debating with himself whether to run out his contract at Fort Hood or try to redeploy to Afghanistan. We are giving over the whole of this newsletter to her report. AC/JSC

Portrait of an American "Hero" A Soldier's Story

By JoAnn Wypijewski

Fort Hood, Texas

Traveling down Highway 281 from Fort Worth past sundown, there comes a point where the horizon to the southeast glows in the dark. This is a rural road in central Texas. Only minor towns dot the map between Fort Worth and Austin, and Austin is too many miles on to be the source. Hwy 281 leads to Lampasas; a left turn onto 190 East leads to Copperas Cove, and the rinky-dink of Copperas Cove gives way to darkness and then, suddenly, to the flat, floodlit spread of Fort Hood.

Fort Hood is the largest military base in the world: 214,000 acres. Its barracks for single soldiers evoke Soviet communal housing: monumental, sharp-angled, beige. At night, the evenly spaced bulbs brightening every storey of those U-shaped structures make them shine like Christmas boxes. In the day, the soldier trudging back to his quarters is dwarfed by their size and austere geometry, swallowed up in the drab. "Home" doesn't feel like the right word, but it will have to do.

Forty thousand soldiers live here, singly or in various styles of suburban-style family houses. From the beginning of the post-9/11 wars, these troops, mus-

tered in various units of the 4th Infantry or 1st Cavalry, were always considered the "most deployable." In mid-December, groups of them returned from Iraq almost every day – in the afternoon to various auditoria or meeting halls; at night to a parade ground, where family members filled the bleachers under a sign saying, "Welcome Home, Heroes." After troops from a 1st Cavalry brigade marched in one Friday night, lovers kissed while children clutching handmade glitter signs wrapped themselves around a father's leg, and Army loudspeakers played "Let's Get It On." Single soldiers with no one to come home to walked blankly amid the effusions of reunion. Most likely, they would go to their barracks, "sprint to the convenience store and get shit-faced in their rooms."

That, at least, was the view of a 25-year-old 1st Cav infantryman who had returned in November. For his homecoming, he had arranged to be greeted by an AA counselor.

He and I walked away from the parade ground that night toward a nearby monument to Operation Iraqi Freedom. We could still hear a voice over the loudspeaker calling out the names of people

who had not yet claimed each other, as we approached the polished marble tablets inscribed with the names of the 1st Cavalry's dead. The tablets form an arcing semicircle around a statue of two soldiers, one training his rifle at an unseen target and the other bent at the knee to help a child. A soldier shot himself in this enclosure shortly before my soldier, Ryan, deployed to Iraq, in the fall of 2010. It wasn't the most encouraging pre-boarding event, but not the most off-putting either.

Ryan had made acquaintance with war's product from the first day he entered the dining hall. The walls there were covered with photographic portraits. "Who are those guys?" he had asked someone brightly. "Those are the guys who've been killed." That came as a jolt, that "wallpaper of death." A little over a year later, as Ryan and his unit waited to depart Kuwait for the States, most everyone was more annoyed than upset, he said, that one of their number chose that occasion to kill himself.

Suicides don't have their names memorialized, though this monument's designer, underestimating the number of Americans killed in action, left several empty slabs that could accommodate them. Between 2001 and 2009, suicide rates among members of the military increased 150 per cent. Fort Hood has the most suicides: twenty-two officially admitted cases in 2010, almost twice as many as on any other post.

The leadership hands out laminated “ACE Suicide Intervention” cards to the living, about the size of a credit card. It probably wasn’t intentional, but the card evokes the famous deck produced by the Pentagon at the start of the Global War on Terror, featuring “high-value” targets. The face of this card features the Ace of Hearts, with the number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and the message:

Ask your buddy (does s/he want to end it all)

Care for your buddy (actively listen and remove any weapons)

Escort your buddy (to the nearest commander, chaplain, shrink or medical professional)

The soldier who gave me the card, a “broken soldier” named Curtis, awaiting a medical discharge, scoffed at the leadership’s effort. When soldiers talk together about the issue, he said, it’s mostly to make jokes. He spoke quickly, coldly, but cynicism is an untrustworthy emotion here: easier than vulnerability, more befitting the Army ethos than disappointment or fear. Curtis has been waiting for a year for his discharge to come through. He ruined his ankles after returning

from Iraq to garrison life at Fort Hood. He cannot get through the day without Vicodin. He cannot get through the maze of appointments, paperwork and further proofs of his condition without being called a malingerer, a weakling, a piece of shit. He stopped driving after having two crashes. He calls himself a “barracks rat,” and leaves post only to meet and talk with others about a soldier’s “right to heal.”

Six years ago, when I was at Fort Hood to cover the courts martial of Charles Graner, Sabrina Harman and Lynndie England, all charged and convicted in connection with torture at Abu Ghraib, I met with the heads of psychiatry, psychology and social work at Darnall Army Medical Center here. The post was dealing with the first couple of waves of soldiers to return from tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I was curious about what the psych team was preparing for. I remember those three men now as being deadly serious. They did not want a rerun of addiction, spousal abuse, violence, murder, homelessness, suicide; they did not want silence about the reality of PTSD. They explained the protocols they were putting in place to get people treatment and to change the “Suck it up, soldier” culture that made so many soldiers – from private to commanding officer – loathe to admit they had problems. I thought those men were sincere; I still do. I also thought they were defeated before they began. The military is not in the health business, and they could hardly eliminate the business that it is in, the source of their patients’ problems.

* * *

Ryan: I don’t think they cared about that stuff, because when you break it down to an individual level, the doctors are just trying to cover their own asses. The medical coverage just for a battalion, like 800-900 soldiers, falls onto one captain who’s a PA, physicians assistant, not even a doctor. This is a heavy combat battalion: one guy. You really expect him to handle this? They’ll send us to 5,000 briefings, so they can check the box, “Oh well, yes, you know, he was aware that these resources were there. And if you feel like killing yourself, go talk to the Chaplain.” And then, five minutes later, they’ll take you back behind the company to smoke the shit out of you for an hour and a half and tell you what a piece of shit

you are, and how you’re incompetent, which, you know, is hard for an average soldier let alone for a 19-year-old who has just gotten back from a war zone.

It’s the hypocrisy that bugs me. I think the failure right now is in middle leadership. Somebody who was a private in the first deployment now is an E6, a staff sergeant; he will have maybe ten soldiers underneath him in a line unit.

What happened is they had the surge, so they created these units out of thin air and they had to fill positions. So people started getting promoted left and right. It was pretty easy during a deployment to move up. So we have a lot of E6s and E7s, who are sometimes over 27 soldiers, who are just not capable of caring for those soldiers. They were just put there because the Army needed somebody to hold that position, and that’s across the board, almost the entire Army. So you have an incompetent platoon sergeant, incompetent squad leader, incompetent team leader. That 19-year-old, who may have had some trauma while deployed, comes back and there’s no compassion, no understanding, no attempt at understanding. I think that’s the failure.

* * *

By 2008, three years after I spoke to the psych/social team at Fort Hood, nearly a third of all service members had done two tours of duty, in Iraq, Afghanistan or both. About 10 per cent had done three tours. Today, about 1 per cent has done at least six tours; that’s more than 11,000 soldiers. An Army psychiatrist Col. Charles Hoge told Congress in 2008 that, by the third deployment, about 30 per cent of soldiers will have serious mental health problems.

The psych services at Fort Hood are overwhelmed. Counselors meet with 4,000 patients a month and rely on outside counselors to handle overflow. Just to get an appointment on post takes an average of six to eight weeks. Under such conditions, prescription drugs become the treatment of convenience.

More than 7,000 Fort Hood soldiers were on antidepressants or anti-psychotic medications in 2009. Many of those returning soldiers who aren’t already on medication may well be down the road. Immediately upon return, soldiers spend days waiting in line, filling out forms. They are asked whether they are experiencing any problems. Most say no. They

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just want to get home, go on leave. In any case, it is often not until they have been back a while, weeks, months, years, that the full psychic effect of combat is felt.

Meanwhile, the Army now has another mission: preparing to cut the number of soldiers. With the war in Iraq officially over, the plan is to reduce the active-duty force by 50,000 over five years. It is the military version of permanent layoff, whether by offering soldiers buy-outs, chaptering them out for infractions, passing commissioned and noncommissioned officers up for promotion, or refusing to renew contracts. A few years ago almost any live body would do; now, as Raymond Chandler III, sergeant major of the Army, announced recently, “We are looking for the best and brightest.”

I met Ryan at Under the Hood. This coffee house/hang-out spot for GIs, their friends and Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) is a house of calm in the ugliness of Killeen. It wasn't here in 2005, when the wars were relatively young. That was a muscular time of yellow ribbons and signs proclaiming support not just for the troops but for their job. Bumper stickers and car decals blared, “Search and Destroy” and “Make My Day.” The messages, the ribbons, the flags everywhere had a hammer effect. Now I was more struck by modest signs with folded hands: “Pray for Our Troops.” Even Fort Hood seems to have absorbed the sense of failure. At one checkpoint exit, the lighted sign that previously had mixed traffic safety with toughness now implied exhaustion: “We Survived the War, Now Survive the Highway.”

* * *

Ryan: The garrison life today is very different from what it was. Before, the garrison life was just about waiting around between deployments. Now there are still deployment schedules for 1st Cav. for Afghanistan, but the gap between deployments is two years instead of one, and where in the past they lowered the standards, now they have raised them. If the soldier can't meet the standards, for various reasons, he is going to be disciplined.

They'll be cutting a lot of soldiers, and it's really, really obvious right now. Where in the past they would have just turned a blind eye to behavior, now they're making sure paper work is following people; people are getting Article

15s [nonjudicial punishment]. Just today one of my soldiers got 14 and 14, which is 14 days extra duty and restriction, for missing an appointment. He's got to work until 22:00 every night and on weekends; that's pretty severe. So, small things they would have ignored in the past because they needed the soldiers are now a big deal. And because Fort Hood is the biggest installation in the nation, I think the effects of the drawdown are going to be more dramatic here than they would be at any average post or the small ones.

My unit has been drug tested three times in the last month. That just shows you how they're trying to catch people, because they test you once, and a lot of guys will go out and get high, and then they test them two days later to trick them. They'll test us before we go on leave, and test us when we get back. Believe it or not, guys who have been through two and three deployments are leaving the Army in such a way that they

They were silhouettes working in the dark, a medieval kind of punishment for missing an appointment, acting out, losing their temper.

don't get their GI Bill anymore. I mean, the VA is always going to be there, but you can lose other benefits.

On substance issues they are trying harder. As I said, I'm in recovery. They went from one AA meeting on this post before I deployed, to three meetings, and they're opening up a rehab facility, a detox facility. They are very concerned about being held responsible for the suicide rate, which is going up, as well as the DUIs and the substance abuse problems – very obvious consequences, I think, of the wars – and it looks like they're trying to do something. With drugs and alcohol, the first option is ASAP, which is the Army's Substance Abuse Program, which is the treatment people go through. But if someone is hot for heroin or something, I think the command is a little more severe. With alcohol and marijuana, there's been a handful of command referrals to ASAP in the past few weeks, which means it follows the soldiers' career; that piece of paper follows them, so when they apply for a federal job, it follows

them there. And I know for a fact that in the past many soldiers, many NCOs [noncommissioned officers] got away with multiple DUIs, domestic disputes – just two or three years ago.

* * *

Taking a walk around the post that night, Ryan and I passed small groups of men, in twos and threes, sweeping, raking leaves. These were the soldiers on extra duty. Despite that glow on the horizon from Fort Hood's floodlights and the commercial strip of its supporting town, Killeen, it was like pitch at ground level where they toiled. How could they see what they were doing, I wondered. Seeing wasn't the point. They were silhouettes working in the dark, a medieval kind of punishment for missing an appointment, acting out, losing their temper. They'd just got back from Iraq, but somehow they've “failed to adapt.” So there they sweep through the night, the Army's version of sitting in the corner with a dunce cap.

Under the Hood is located in a little white cottage strung with fairy lights, just off a tattered business strip of pawn shops, title loan outfits, used car lots, and other enterprises in the business of exploiting soldiers, often run by ex-soldiers. Every Thursday the café hosts a night called Ribs and Rights, a free barbecue that also serves up a delectable ratatouille, toothsome empanadas and pastries. The evening's political program – know your rights, know how to secure them – is sometimes in the form of a presentation and, as on the night I visited, sometimes a matter of informal conversation. A few men sat at tables, eating, chatting, reading. A few women sat on the cushy couches, talking, a child rustling among them. A soldier named Chris was working out some chord changes on a guitar. Curtis, the “broken soldier,” appeared to feel at home here. Brochures about IVAW's Operation Recovery, a campaign for soldiers' and veterans' right to heal, sat in stacks here and there.

Every second and fourth Friday, Under the Hood features a poetry slam/open mic night. A few weeks ago it hosted a special Warrior Writers workshop. That's what had drawn Ryan. He has been coming to the place ever since.

He is a slim blue-eyed youth – not a youth, really, a man, a soldier, specialist

by rank, soon to enter training to become a sergeant, with a dark modified Mohawk in the modish style, old beyond his 25 years but younger, I think, than he imagines himself. Younger in his ideals and his confusions, of which he is not unaware. He took me to an Army-Navy store to buy desert boots for his mom for Christmas, and to the PX to buy a Stetson and the crossed-rifles and other insignia for his dad's edification. He looked good in the hat. Eventually, I asked the obvious question.

* * *

Why did you enlist?

Ryan: It's exciting, I guess. Unexpected. I mean, I came out of the closet when I was 14. Three or four years later, I was protesting the war in Iraq in San Francisco. I was protesting a recruiting office in my home town in Sonoma County, doing a sit-in, and four or five years after that I'm enlisting. I mean, I sobered up when I was 21, and then I enlisted. I had got tired. I didn't think my life was going anywhere.

I don't regret enlisting. I regret joining the infantry, and going enlisted. In retro-

spect, my test scores were high enough as to where I could have done something else. I could have gone commissioned, or even something maybe more glamorous, because being a grunt kind of sucks at times. I mean, I'm definitely working my way up the ranks very quickly, which is nice. I can effect change where I see deficiencies. Like, I was talking about the leadership being broken. Now I have three soldiers underneath me, and I may have more soon and, like, I can get involved in their lives. If one of them thinks he's got PTSD and he struggles with some emotional things, I can try to help him go in the right direction, instead of just, like, "Good luck, bud."

See, I was a high school dropout. I got my GED and enrolled in college, Portland Community College, and I did very well. When I started, I was intimidated; so, I did an EMT program, and I did surprisingly well. I mean, I had dropped out of high school! So, then I thought, well, maybe I should keep up with this. Maybe I should become a paramedic, and then maybe I should go to med school, and my goals kept getting higher: tuition and supporting myself, student loans and whatnot. I wasn't getting any help from my folks, which is understandable, because they had given me enough chances at that point; I couldn't really expect them to do more. But it just got to be too much. It got to the point where the classes were getting more advanced, and I could work less and less. I couldn't afford to work less and less, but if I was going to be accepted at any kind of credible university, I would need to have a 3.5 GPA at least. My average was quickly falling as I had to work more, so, it just wasn't realistic. It was, like, what are my options? I even looked into prostitution. Finally, joining the service was, like, why not?

But you never at least thought, oh, I'll see what ROTC involves; maybe I could get a scholarship?

Ryan: I was too embarrassed to research it. Mind you, look at the environment I'm in, ok. I'm in Portland. I'm gay, and I'm very comfortable with my sexuality, but my friends, my whole circle, know almost nothing about the uniformed services. So, if I were to research and find out, there would be no one to talk it over

with, or it would be a very awkward conversation to have. I think my pride was too great to even try. I did a fair amount of online research, but, as you see, the military has a completely different language. And my recruiter, being like a used car salesman, gave me the impression that I was getting informed, but really I wasn't at all. So when I passed all the aptitude and general knowledge tests, I did very well.

And joined infantry, which is basically cannon fodder.

Ryan: Exactly, although, when you look at the numbers, what is it: 4,500 died in Iraq, out of more than a million who were deployed, over nine years? Not too fucking bad.

Except for them.

Ryan: I know, I know, it's terrible. But you have to realize I've been in the Army long enough not to look at human life the same way. If you look at the history of our wars, it's phenomenal. And I'm also comparing it to the loss of life on the other side; now, that's tragic. Look at the headline just today, page 1: "Junkyard Gives Up Secret Accounts of Massacre in Iraq." The Marines just massacred hundreds and hundreds of civilians.

In Haditha.

Ryan: Yeah, you're familiar with that? There was like a 76-year-old man in a wheelchair. They were slitting throats and killing toddlers. I mean -. Oh, I'm off on a tangent.

Well, it is and it's not a tangent.

Ryan: But where was I? What was I even talking about?

We were talking about why you went into infantry when you could have done better after doing so well on the tests.

Ryan: Right, well, I sat down after getting these results and the recruiters were saying, "Well, what do you want to do?" And I didn't really know anything, and I was, like, "I don't know; I just want to be a soldier." So they were, like, "Well, you want to be a mechanic?" And I was, like, "No, I don't want to get all dirty."

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“You want to be a paratrooper?” And I was, like, “No, you know, planes scare me.” And so they were like, “Infantry; you’re taking infantry.” And I said, “Sure.” And, you know, there’s a lot of pride in infantry. A couple of people in the recruitment office were infantry, and they’ve got their infantry rings, and they’re, like, Hoo-ya! I was, like, oh, kind of a boy’s club; that’s cool. So I jumped in, and I signed the paper. I don’t know, I think it also had something to do with trying to prove my masculinity, you know. People here ask me all the time, “What are you doing here?” They keep trying to push me into an administrative position for the company, doing paperwork and accountability. I have this problem sometimes where I think, oh, I’m so cultured, you know. All these guys come to a Christmas party in hunting jackets, and I’m wearing a long-sleeved shirt or my nice Christmas sweater.

Well, it’s a contradiction. It’s one, I guess, you have to deal with all the time. Being gay in a homophobic institution. Being anti-war and choosing the warrior way as the best economic option. Doing a job and being proud of your abilities, but also conscious of the effect.

Ryan: Like I said, there’s so much pride in the infantry, in the crossed rifles and the colors, the light blue of our insignia and the braid on our dress uniforms. There are all kinds of traditions. Part of it is that everyone looks down on infantry; we’re just stupid grunts. I wonder if maybe we submerge our suspicions about what it is we do with all that pride. Does that make sense? I mean, pride is what we use to submerge those suspicions.

* * *

Ryan lives in one of those somber barracks, in a small room with a shared bathroom and kitchen and his own walk-in closet. In a few days, he and the other soldiers there would go off on leave. From next door and all around rang cries reminiscent of the fraternity beer cellar, “Huh-Woohaah!” I helped Ryan pack the last of his things. “Look at this scarf, nice, right?” he said, wrapping a soft brown muffler around his neck. It was nice. “We get issued everything for use in climates from Hawai’i to Alaska. Look at this parka. It’s a little big; I wish it were more fitted. How about this windbreak-

er; I mean, it’s awesome. These goggles, they were great in sandstorms, but, on their own, they’re just cool.” On the walls of his room he’d hung reproductions of Japanese prints, and in a window he’d taped an Occupy Wall Street flyer. He had printed it off the Internet. Another printout, of *Time’s* Person of the Year – “The Protester” – cover, was on his desk.

* * *

Ryan: The Protester: that’s beautiful. I was in Iraq when Egypt started, and the reason the whole Arab Spring was so powerful was because of social networking. I used to be against it as a form of spreading ideals and activism, but in the Arab Spring, when so many people were out on the street, that was the primary means of communication.

If nothing else, it was a way to coordinate, and to communicate unity, solidarity. People could say, “I’m not alone in this.” And that’s what I think the Occupy movement is doing also. Maybe someone kept these thoughts just to themselves. Like, “Why can’t I find a job?” Or, “Why

I saw this Occupy movement jump off when I was deployed, and I was ecstatic.

does nothing seem to work for the people I know?”

I saw this Occupy movement jump off when I was deployed, and I was ecstatic, seeing people doing something. You know what I mean? People standing up and saying something about such obvious injustices. Like, why are we giving money and tax breaks to people who created the economic conditions that we’re in now? I think the protest is a form of holding our politicians accountable, and putting pressure. But even more than anything else, it’s opening the discussion. It’s making Americans think twice about their circumstances. They’ve got to ask, “How do I feel about what’s happened? What can I do?”

There was a very strong sense of patriotism when I enlisted, because I love the freedoms I have in this country. We’re not put to death for being gay, ok. I can walk down the street and see a transsexual who would be defended in a court of law. In a lot of the rest of the world, that’s not the case. So I love the liberties

of this country. And it’s almost shameful to travel and say you’re American, because we’re so well known for being lazy and not doing anything.

In my judgment – my very shallow judgment, or maybe not so shallow, because I know them pretty well – most soldiers are not well informed. They make judgments, but they’re very ignorant judgments. They don’t vote. Nobody, almost nobody here votes. They don’t care. They’re here because they didn’t know what else to do. I mean, I didn’t know what else to do, but I am by far the exception insofar as I care, or at least have intellectual curiosity.

Most of the people here don’t even know it’s Congress’s responsibility to declare war. They think it’s the president’s responsibility. That’s the failure of our country. And that’s also why I love the Occupy movement, because people are starting to think again. “Oh, wait, the budget is passed by Congress? What does Congress consist of? Oh, that’s what that other election is for? Oh, we do it every two years – yeah?”

* * *

While we talked, a ’90s dance mix was playing from his sound system: “Finally, it happened to me right in front of my face, and I just cannot hide it...” He showed me a website for Outserve, an invitation-only social networking site for gay service members. He found it overseas. He was “struggling a little bit about being deployed... And a lot of it was for cruising, I’m not going to lie, but it was also a place you could go just to talk.” The Central Texas chapter, CTO, has almost 200 members, and a party almost every weekend. He showed me a home-made video on the site: officers and enlisted men wearing silly costumes, dancing and having an old-timey kind of camp fun.

Sexuality, he said, is what brought him to politics as a teenager, what made him begin to question all of the other received truths of society, as he knew it. If the dominant world of grown-ups could be so wrong about what was right in love, what else might it be wrong about? Now Ryan calls CTO “a reprieve, a sanctuary.” He thinks by example he might be able to change some minds in the military, shatter the idea that everyone belongs in a pigeonhole, but he doesn’t spend any more time on post than he has to.

* * *

Ryan: I was in Iraq when Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) was lifted, and I don't know what I was expecting, but nothing changed. It wasn't like all the gays in the Army started wearing rainbow flags and dancing around in drag.

The policy change had been inevitable for the past year, so people had digested it to a certain point, but there's always been a fair amount of homophobia in the line units, especially in the infantry. Guys would be like, "I'm not doing anything with them." That's been a general sentiment ever since I've been in. And so the change of regulation doesn't change the mentality.

I came out very tactfully. I waited until we were almost through with the deployment. I don't think it's really fair to expect people to open their mind when they're already stressing over so much other shit. So I would indulge their ignorance until we got back, and now that we're back, I'm like, "Ok, I'm done making sacrifices for your ignorance; it's time for you to start getting educated for my freedom." And by and large that's been the case. Guys say, "He was there with us through everything. And he's a capable soldier who would do anything for us." You know, we get really close in the infantry, really close. Some of the guys tease me, but they do it the way an older brother would a younger brother if he went to ballet or something. It's not a malicious, hateful teasing.

There is one thing, though, about the way it was done, and the fact that bias complaints now aren't handled in the same way as racial bias complaints: they're handled as sexual harassment; and you know the Army doesn't take sexual harassment real seriously. And it's not about sex. I mean, if we're just talking about that, sex between men doesn't bother a lot of these guys, especially when they're deployed.

In a way, DADT was a protection. Now that it's gone, I do feel a little vulnerable. The other day a sergeant asked me, and not in a nice way, "Soldier, are you gay?" He never could have done that before. It was illegal to ask, so I wasn't forced to lie outright. Now he can ask the question, anyone can, and it's all a matter of judgment how I answer. Who's asking? Who's around to hear? What might they do to me if I tell the truth? How might it come back on me later – because I am in

a business where people carry guns. It's very easy for an "accident" to happen.

What did you tell the sergeant?

Ryan: "No, sir."

And you're thinking maybe you want to find a way to redeploy to Afghanistan?

Ryan: I have a year and a half left on my contract. I can stay here, right, and have a certain amount of school paid for. While enlisted, I get tuition assistance, which is \$4,500 a year. That's not including books. So, well, that can get me closer to my bachelor's by the time I'm finished. Or, I can deploy again, make upward of \$30,000 in one year, have that to lean on in the bank account, get out and pursue my GI Bill, which includes BAH – basic allowance for housing; and here's another tangent: none of these motherfuckers is going to use it. Nobody. Like maybe 2 percent of soldiers ever utilize it, at least in my field, infantry – because they're afraid of school, because they don't like it, because they don't even bother. I'm, like, "You, guys, don't understand."

Now, you get the GI Bill benefit only for three years. But over those three years you get BAH, off the chart for wherever it is you locate. So, like, the BAH for this town – if someone gets out and he stays here because he's got family and wants to go to Central Texas College, which is, you know, less than average – is like \$600 a month. I'm looking at New York, right, NYU. That's where I'd like to go. I'd get \$2,800 a month while I go to school, and they'd pay all my tuition, and then I could pursue other money for scholarships, grants, what have you. And I'm really considering it, because how many times am I going to have the opportunity?

I'm just looking at what financial condition am I going to be in when I get out, which is not a question many people ask themselves.

But it's got to be difficult, especially given your history.

Ryan: I have been struggling, when I go to Under the Hood, with going to Afghanistan and all my thoughts around that. It's like two lives. I come here and I put on these boots and this uniform, and I'm one person – a very good, loyal soldier – and then the second I take it all

off, I follow my Occupy blogs and I ask a lot of questions. There are a lot of contradictions there, which is why I get a lot of nourishment when I go to Under the Hood, because there you can just be. You can think about these things, but no one's forcing anything on you, no one's judging you. At the same time, ignorance is bliss. Sometimes I think I'd be better off if I didn't challenge these ideas and just conformed to them.

Like I said, before I enlisted I had been involved in the Not in Our Name protests, and with the Radical Faeries and just the activist community in San Francisco. I guess you'd call it the outskirts of the nonparticipation movement. And that's not enough for me. I don't think that's really going to change anything. So, we can make decisions. We can, like, eat vegan – and I do that mostly because I oppose factory farming, and I don't think what we do to animals, how we make them live, is good for them or healthy for us. We can recycle. But what does that really change?

I'm convinced, at this point in my life, that the only way we can effect change is through policy, is through fighting the system from the inside. So here I am a soldier doing what I can on an individual basis, and I'm not delusional by any means. This system, as far as the military industrial complex, there's nothing I can do to change it at this point in my life. But as a veteran, as an educated veteran in the future, there may be something I can do. But I can only do it having said I've been there.

Now, here is where I differ with some of the Under the Hood people. I enlisted, basically, to the other side, right. But there's also part of me that believes that the armed forces are necessary. I really do not have enough faith in the good of mankind to where someone will not try to step on somebody else. You know, me, my family, as subjects. So, I see the need for having defensive armed forces. And if all the liberals, say, decided that there was a conflict that necessitated military intervention – like, if there was a genocide like in World War II, and we were in the majority and all the square states of the country said, "No, we don't want to waste our money on that" – I would still hope that, because of democracy, those red states would still agree to serve our cause, under, let's say, majority rule, or the faith of the people, assuming po-

litical representatives are representing the people appropriately. So, I guess it's like, despite the fact that I may not agree with why we were in Iraq, or why we're in Afghanistan, I see majority rules as a principle. Ok. Service to my country. And I'm not going to pretend that this is a completely noble cause. You know, I don't want to go to Afghanistan to kill a bunch of people, although I'm infantry, so we do: if someone shoots at me, I'm going to try to get him. I want to go to prepare myself financially. So, I guess – it is kind of hard to say this – I value my future financial status more than I value the life of a complete stranger in a country thousands of miles away. I guess, it's my greed. I'm selfish. I'm American. But, at the same time –.

I was in Iraq. We did not do good there. We did not do good at all. In those first few years, we just went in there and shoot 'em up. Then, all of a sudden, in 2008 it was, like, "Let's have rules of engagement," you know, Positive Identification of your Subjects. That should have been the rule from Day 1: know who you're killing. Now the people absolutely despise us. It increased the recruitment of our adversaries. It gave them fuel to turn themselves into martyrs. Anyone even vaguely familiar with tactics knows this is not what you do. I mean, you can read the first two chapters of Machiavelli and know that. So, on a grand scale we failed, for nine years.

And going in there and claiming we were giving democracy defeats the whole idea of democracy. Again, look at the Arab Spring: it happened organically. They overthrew their dictators on a national scale in due time, instead of us saying, "You're going to have democracy."

In the community surrounding my installation in Iraq, near the Iranian border, and all outside it in the farmland, people were trying to build their mud huts back again, and all around there was rubble still. The roads had potholes. No plumbing. Clean water was hard to find. Agriculture was destroyed. It was starting to get put back together. But those people don't get the *New York Times*. They don't follow parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom. They don't care. All they see, in nine years, nine fucking years, is that a 4-year-old is now 14-ish: old enough to throw a grenade. All they know is these tan vehicles driving up and down their roads, shooting their uncles,

their fathers, their grandfathers and brothers. All they know is that.

That's where I have a little bit more of an advantage, because I wasn't there during the initial invasion, the different phases. I was there for the end, for the closeout. We were getting rocketed, we were getting blown up, but it was almost a passive mentality that we had. It wasn't, let's go out and destroy 'em! – which is what a lot of my leadership wanted to do, because they wanted to go back to the good old days. I'd tell my soldiers – we're on 24-hour guard and there's not a lot to talk about – I'd say, how would you feel? You're in your hometown, you're in Ohio, Utah, wherever, and somebody comes in as an invader. Are you really going to care about the ideology of why they're there, or are you just going to want to take your land back? You're going to call to arms,

When a soldier is over there fighting, he's not fighting for his nation, he's not fighting for liberties and all the other romantic bullshit.

and unify with the people who you're familiar with, even if on a racial or religious background you differ, you're going to unify and fight back. So know that. Know that in your head, when you need to positively identify the person who you may or may not be killing. Understand that they're trying their best.

Now, at the same time I don't think anyone is going to be noble enough or humble enough to say, "Oh, well, I'm going to sacrifice my life because they're aggrieved." No. But it may give them – and here's the dangerous part, too – it may give them some hesitation. Hesitation to pull the trigger, which may or may not be a good thing. It may cost their and their buddies' lives, or it may save another life.

I'm sure you've heard before, when a soldier is over there fighting, he's not fighting for his nation, he's not fighting for liberties and all the other romantic bullshit I talk about a lot, even though that is on my mind in a period of peace. But when I've got rockets coming down on my head, all I care about is our

Paladin firing back. And what I'm fighting for is my life and the life of the men around me.

So, that's what I say about ignorance is bliss: if I could just, like, la-la-la-la, put myself in the position not to think about what I've done or might do, it would be a lot easier. Because these are my brothers and sisters, too. It's not their fault that we're over there. But if it wasn't me in that position, it would be someone else, so, just by me participating in it, does it make it any better? Does it make it any worse?

* * *

I have always disliked the slogan "Support the troops!" Better, it seems to me, to say, "Spare the troops." Spare them our patriotism or pity. Spare them our cowardice, our condescension and short memories. Spare them the fake categories that our support or our silence accommodate. Most of us have never had to weigh the question of life or death as a matter of daily existence. "Support" in that context is a puny word, or an evasive one.

Like other soldiers whom I've met, Ryan cringes when a civilian says, "Thank you for your service." He is not sure which bothers him most: the Killeen flag-waver who refuses to allow him to pay for something because he is a hero, or the San Francisco liberal who waves away a bill because she feels sorry that he is a victim. In airports, flying out of Texas and then Chicago for Christmas, I heard loudspeaker announcements that Private or Specialist or Sergeant So-and-So was arriving at Gate A9 or B19, and wouldn't it be fine if people gathered to greet him with applause for all he'd done for the good of our country? I wondered how that soldier really felt about America's cheap gratitude.

There is a common sense support, and that is needed by soldiers engaged in efforts to repair and speak for themselves. Support Under the Hood. It does not festoon its walls with slogans. It allows soldiers their brutal honesty, and understands what that costs. Above all, it seems to have grasped the essence of kindness.

Support the right to heal. Support Iraq Veterans Against the War and its Operation Recovery, in conjunction with Under the Hood. The cover of a triptych brochure they have created for that cam-

return service requested

paign bears a print by an IVAW member named Matt Howard. Within the silhouette of an armed soldier, Howard writes:

“PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. How is this a disorder? What part of being emotionally and spiritually affected by gross violence is disorder? How about Going to War and Coming Home with a Clear Conscience Disorder? I think that would be far more appropriate.”

Inside, the brochure highlights the facts I have already cited here, and more:

-That one in three military women has been sexually assaulted and that many men, too, have screened positive for Military Sexual Trauma.

-That in one weekend at Fort Hood this past summer there were sixteen cases of sexual assault.

-That, as of the fall of 2010, Fort Hood had only one social worker to handle cases of Military Sexual Trauma.

-That one in three soldiers in Iraq couldn't see a mental health professional when they needed to, and ditto for Afghanistan.

-That, while in combat, 12 per cent of service members in Iraq and 17 per cent in Afghanistan were on antidepressants or sleeping pills, the kinds, as we know, that come with warnings like Do Not Operate Heavy Machinery.

-That the military has no way of tracking prescription drug use by service members.

-That the Fort Hood command regards mental health problems as discipline issues, and that a severe stigma continues to attach to people who need psych care.

-That one of the leading causes of death at Fort Hood is suicide.

Operation Recovery confronts the civilian with just a small piece, maybe the smallest, of the immense violence unleashed by the wars so many once cheered. Beside the brochure's disturbing catalogue, the IVAW's platform – immediate withdrawal, reparations to Iraq and Afghanistan, a commitment to care for returning soldiers – appears not only rational but conservative.

The third part of the triptych is a de-

tachable postcard to the commander of III Corps, Lt. Gen. Donald Campbell Jr., who has overall responsibility for Fort Hood. It repeats the catalogue of shame with respect to the treatment of soldiers, and reminds the general that he has “the power to change the policies and correct the lack of oversight and accountability which allow for ... the abuse and neglect of soldiers at Fort Hood.”

It also asks that he convene a town hall meeting at the post, for a full airing of the issues of trauma, suicide, overmedication, and various regimens of abuse. As a previous generation of righteous survivors taught, silence equals death. **CP**

Iraq Veterans Against the War can be reached at ivaw.org.

Under the Hood is on College Street in Killeen, and can receive tax-exempt donations made out to Fort Hood Support Network, PO Box 16174, Austin, TX 78761, or underthehoodcafe.org.

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