

# AFGHANISTAN CONFESSIONS

Victor Enns



Copyright © 2014 Victor Enns

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher or by licensed agreement with Access: The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency. Exceptions will be made in the case of a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review to print in a magazine or newspaper, broadcast on radio or television, or post on the Internet.

### **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Name, Author, 19\_\_-

Edited by .

Designed and typeset by Donald Ward.

Cover art:.

Cover design by.

Set in Minion Pro.

Printed and bound in Canada.

The publishers gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Saskatchewan Arts Board, The Canada Council for the Arts, and the Cultural Industries Development Fund (Saskatchewan Department of Culture, Youth & Recreation) in the production of this book.

*for my mother Susann Enns*

## *Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Neil Maclean for his advice, afterword, and staying with this project since 2008; members of the ~~2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of Princess Patricia's Light Infantry~~ based in Shilo for their interview time; and Lynn Chalmers.

Thanks to the Winnipeg Arts Council, Manitoba Arts Council, ~~Canada Council for the Arts, and the Saskatchewan Arts Board~~ for their support. All major revisions were completed in Eastend, ~~Saskatchewan~~.

*Contents*



Albert

Jimmy

Sargeant Willis

Jolene

Afterword



# ALBERT



*disembarking Hercules*

I've read Homer, I loved the *Iliad*.  
To give glory, to get glory; that's why I'm here.

What little forgiveness God brings to me —  
I sing.



*the first day*



I lift this stone, that piece of concrete, place it on another.  
The sun sets at the end of the runway in Kandahar. We build  
an inuksuk without knowing quite what it is, like us  
out of place, but hopeful it may signal safety to more  
than the planes landing, heavy with war.

*lookout*

I can tell the Taliban  
want to kill me, suicide

bombers taking a number  
from the red wheel, death



their passport  
out of here.

*the eyes have it*



Blue burkas drift toward me. I can see  
dark eyes behind their screens magnified in my sight.

*shadows of the evening*



There are only so many seats at a briefing, before  
after. About the in-between no-one tells

what's been through my eye, my brain  
adjusting for the dark.



*commendation*

The commanders tell us we've done a good job.  
they are unofficially counting the dead Taliban

on the hillside. I rest my paradigm  
still smoking from the last shift.

*soldiering the weight*



My turn for the slow march up the ramp  
of the homeward bound Herc.

Thank God it's not me in the box,  
*Going Home*\* in the air.

---

\* A lament played by a piper at a ramp ceremony.

*adjusting for the dark*

I forget, pull the trigger anyway.  
Hear the shots across the sand

between them. Me at a loss.  
The warm barrel ruptures the swing

right to left. We've misunderstood.  
This isn't only for the moment,

forever so much longer. We find the heat  
in the body — they are the enemy.

We've come at this all wrong; hero worship  
behind the sight night scope retina.



*96 tears*

The last funeral I went to was in Leduc.  
I rented a Nissan; drove out from Wainright.

You could say I was in training, lifting my uncle's casket  
into back of the black hearse; something like

this Canadian Forces issue coffin I carry  
into the Hercules. I walk through

the service; the padre offering  
the resurrection and the life to the innocent;

the dead —  
shit out of luck.





*random alarum*



The bump in the night peripheral  
to my understanding of sleep —

deserted for a look into the darkness.  
The insurgents beyond the perimeter

can't see shit except what we let them  
see. They fight for what little they know

of Allah, the one  
big idea — we are the enemy.

Fuck holy books.  
Fuck holy wars.

Enough said enough sad all around.  
They are gone before we find them with our light.

*the red kite*



I give a boy in the green tunic  
a kite with the red maple leaf

to fly and turn away from Christ  
away from Mohammed

to the clear air. Red kites  
in Canada the dominion

of poets, peace a whisper  
left behind.

*losing time*



I look for a pattern in the dead.  
There may be an answer

in the spent ammunition.  
Time, yes, it's gone

ejected like a casing  
emptied of lead.

*first blood*

My empty four-chamber  
heart takes no cartridges.

Oh yes. There is a reason.  
Oh yes. There is a reason.

I lock and load.  
There is no reason

to forgive Taliban  
wounded,

blood  
on my sleeve.



*graduation*

This corpse is awarded  
an honorary degree;



the parchment  
to his family —

wondering  
about the last exam.

*rote learning*



I pick up the bloody pieces of school children.  
The dust of the explosion covers their faces. Eager

girls in Calgary send their money,  
encourage more risk.

Afghan teachers learn how  
to be alive. On my knees,

my stomach empty,  
I know the drill is all I have.

I bend to take a hand, chalk in its grasp,  
the letter incomplete.

*out of place*



Endless centuries  
of invasion;

nobody really sure  
who belongs here

but they all know  
it's not us.

*examples*



Why don't we kill the mullahs?  
Not all of them. We need to execute just

those recruiting boys, those Taliban mullahs  
preaching jihad Fridays, in Kapisa, in Kandahar, in Kabul.

They hide in their mosques.  
Why don't we just take them to the stadium?



*lining up*

Well fuck this shit and homilies too,  
this ain't Sunday and there is no preacher

can tell me the fucked up bodies  
of children receive God's mercy

lowered into the ground  
and covered with rocks.



I've got my boots off  
my soul on pause —

waiting for the shower  
to wash my dirt away.

*absolution*

My religion has left me, nothing  
to hold. This just one in a long line



of righteous wars. There is no end, of me  
there might be, still I take the next step —

empty my chamber into the heart  
of a grossly wounded insurgent begging.

What I say later, will not be believed.  
I am relieved. His glory in my hand.

*field work*



I will not suffer. Fuck  
the heat. Fuck the Taliban.

This is the only war I will ever fight.  
I will get it right. Here I am in all

my democratic glory and honour  
carrying civilization in my bandoliers.

Outside the wire at night I read geography  
with GPS and night vision.

In the morning my eyes read the faces  
of village men afraid of the alphabet.

Suffer. The little children come —  
pick the empty shell casings from the field.

*oral traditions*



The politicians talk about heroes again on the tv. I shake the  
dust from my boots.

Every step on today's patrol measured me for a loss of a leg  
or my balls —

the same IED\* crippling the woman next to me in formation  
making sure she will never see a baby from her own womb.  
Bombs, made from the easiest misery, simple rhetoric

you don't need to be literate to understand. Language  
approximate

violence precise†, medals pressed in the mint, the Romans  
would understand.

---

\* Improvised Explosive Device

† From Ann Michaels, *The Winter Vault*.

*damnation*

Barefoot Persephone comes running to the checkpoint, her  
burqa billowing.  
We standby — nobody ready to shoot, whatever rules she is  
breaking.




Her father, behind her, feels differently. He sights his single  
shot at her back;  
his enmity catches her churning leg. Her momentum carries  
her into my arms.

We call for a translator and a medic, tie a tourniquet above  
her bleeding calf.  
We give her a bottle of water, a shot of morphine; listen to  
her story —

hazy, but not unusual. She is just a girl who's been told she  
can't say no.  
The merchant is buying and she is all her family has to sell,  
her hymen

worth a premium to the fucker three times her age, and we,  
we standby —  
as responsible as her father and brothers who will stone her  
as an unholy whore,

neither feminists or Christ on the barricade, just me and my  
unit,  
to take  back to Hades in the morning.



*dissociation*

I've got silver thread around my wedding ring, just a little  
too big -  
turning around. Sand worms turn blue in my pockets. Not  
enough

air, I pin them to the display board in the courtyard, like  
medals.  
Breath looks for inspiration Death, expiration.

The Army barber draws his razor across my throat, soap on  
the blade —  
try to remember Nabokov, Ada in the shade.



*translating scripture*

My index, my pointing finger, pulls the sensitive trigger —  
sends my message, coded lead and fire into what might be

a target. He may be a man or a boy of fifteen, either way  
carrying an AK-47 he learned to assemble and fire in the  
hills.

Whence cometh my help? The manual is vague when it  
comes  
to divine intervention. God and Allah, Mohammed and  
Christ

send their messages in code, the life of an interpreter  
particularly short in Kandahar, Afghanistan.





*mortar round*

I wonder where their rockets come from.  
They learned to sight infidels while I was

shooting for the moon in my green backyard.  
Tonight the full moon evens the odds —

now whose aim is deadlier.  
Taliban teenagers, or my little I.

*physics*



They call me Einstein, confused about the books  
I read. I know nothing about science and Albert,

once upon a time, not so much about literature  
musing on the universe as if it were non-fiction.

I look for comfort in the stories recalculating the place I am,  
now in motion. This LAV\*, tumbles end over end, my world

turning on an IED the lacuna yawning to swallow  
the shattered armour, blood

a weightless arc , inside the behemoth  
learning Taliban formula.

---

\* Light Armoured Vehicle

207. *recalibrating*



My Trijicon\* sight channels Jesus, brings the hot  
world to my retina through the scope

burnished with scripture. Every shot  
hard earned, contracts revising Christ.

---

\* American company that printed John 3:16 on  
the scopes for rifles in use in Afghanistan



*dirty magazine*

I look at the split beaver in the porno and know this image  
bears no relation  
to my tank commander who bears no relation to my sister  
sending me care packages

from back to a time I used to call home. I can tell *différence*  
from *jouissance*,  
just another word looking for a Leonard Cohen song.

*catch and release*



It's hard to imagine Eros in the palm  
of my hand — my own oasis

love a mirage at the back  
of my mind, the stink

of the toilet  
as I unwind.

*all my gifts*



Haji's we're not allowed to call them  
on camera, but what they are in front of our weapons.

A confusion of Gods, they refuse to stop, driving  
towards the phalanx of armoured ferranghi, throttle open.

I fire my C6\* into the engine block  
still the Land Rover does not stop.

I raise my fire shatter the wind  
screen. I give Haji requirement for eternity.

Smoke, roadside, wheel spins.  
Quiet drops like a scavenger.

---

\* Standard Canadian Forces infantry rifle

*equation*



I was bad at math until given a rifle.  
Now I can compensate for the wind velocity

for the fade for the loss of velocity  
insignificant really, as the soft squeeze

of the trigger drives y into x.  
My stance braced for calculation.



*ways of knowing*

This death an intimacy  
I give you, Taliban;

I've never known a woman  
like I know you.



*composition*

I take a picture of the tanks  
on the hillside outlined by sunset.

I remember movies — not of war  
so much, as of hillsides,



Bergman peasants outlined against  
the sky. They step on the horizon

with a tenderness these machines  
mimic only when they are still,

silent coordinates developed  
to raise a little hell in the morning.



*evaporation*

There is no time to do anything  
but wet myself. Piss will dry,

pungent like the rest  
of Afghanistan.

I reach into my pack for another bottle of water,  
try to drive my body past dehydration,

and then check my weapon. There will be a lot of waiting —  
the sun as unmerciful as the interrogators in Bagram

where we send what we find alive.  
Still looking I swallow rain from an Alberta hillside.



*going clear*

A.

I want to crawl into the radio  
when I know I forgot the crypto.

The current code only code  
until oh eight hundred

hours. Here we are —  
the turn in the dark.

The leviathan rumbles, still I hear  
the whispered fucks going round.

B.

Nothing like this in WW II movies, radios with cranks  
not with software from Cisco.

I mean to be clear  
I mean to be thorough.

I mean to be as fast  
as Pheidippides.\*

---

\* The Greek runner carrying messages during the invasion of  
the Persians, attacking Marathon.

It's still the damn Persians,  
but no place to run.

C.  
Recce\* meets us on their way  
to different co-ordinates

slip the crypto into my hand.  
My message to be  
as clear as Jonah's

my signal  
as strong.



---

\* Reconnaissance.

*writing on the wall*



I'm high. I've inhaled, the hash pipe glows in the dark,  
the ember leads me to the place where the light shines

reflections on the back of the cave. I'm not  
too philosophical, just rational knowing the Taliban

sleep at night because they can't see in the dark.  
I don't wait to see more of their heat, toss

the grenade, breaking their bodies. Blood  
spatter hardening, civilization's petroglyphs.

*ways of seeing*

A.

I want fewer acknowledgements; news stories and  
photographs  
ignorant catalogues claiming glory, just hymns to superior  
forces.

We build in sand, and shift, balance elusive as the winds  
come up.

I cover my face. I have nothing to lose.

B.

I have friends, writing from home  
to stop the war.

I use my C6 to sign  
treaties.

C.

I want moral clarity like the morning after  
a good drunk, the highest resolution



cast on my eye, the beam  
so hard to remove.

*a man's reach*

So I'm reaching for my weapon when I hear the alarm.  
So I'm reaching for my weapon when I hear.  
So I'm reaching for my weapon.  
So I'm reaching past the small hours —

this load and lock like so many  
others in the dark. I know I can  
see and they can not. I look for targets  
outlined like in school.

There is no substitute for training,  
for my monocular that sights  
the body trying to slip away  
I plant a quick bullet —

this Haji too late  
to turn away;  
another for his brother  
who hesitates.

The blood pools, but  
no reason for the family  
to seek reparation,  
to knock on my door.





*well-dressed man*

Love poems in school made me  
squirm, Penthouse letters more

on the mark and out of the reach  
of teachers wearing ties.

No suits in Afghanistan,  
not even for the diplomats.

I've got heavy armour  
over my heart, bondage

on my mind, taking  
prisoners alive.



*where's my horse?*



My commander tells me stories.

Cavalry once meant horses, beating hearts;

romance, the smell of shit and sweat. Now all just  
regimental history, but why I joined the Forces.

Rotors beat a warning to our advance. Getting there  
is half the fun the other half is the explosion at the end

of a rocket launch, we've humped Carl Gustav\* up a hill  
and loaded. Co-ordinates always co-ordinates,

but some times its point and shoot  
like a digital camera, take aim

at the flash of fire  
from the other side of the valley

the shadow of death from one hill  
to another. Morning for the scavengers.

---

\* 84 mm rocket launcher

*inventory*

We've been counting bullets. There must be enough for the  
Taliban.

They are the enemy, there must be enough for every one of  
them.

There are. There are intentions in counting these  
many five oh cartridges loading into the heavy gun.

we waste fundamentalists, but not ammunition  
enough for everyone until we're done.

*the reader*



The journalists try not be surprised, not about the killing  
they've come to see, but the very idea we may have read

a book or two, not just about war, but those too. Some of us  
know Hemingway  
others Winter, but we read whatever is going on and shows  
up.

The slow boat loads Canadian words to the Arabian  
Peninsula  
as secret as the scared base. The shipped alphabet

drifts like the silt on the Arghandab  
fills the hole in me.

*making angels*



Who here holding a gun imagines he is free?  
Providence, the wheel of fortune


loads the C6 the C7\* and the heavy gun.  
We'll cut the martyrs into mincemeat

dancing on the head of the pin  
dancing on the head of a pin.

---

\* The next size up from the standard issue C6, the C7 is a bigger, heavier, faster machine-gun, belt fed and usually crewed by two soldiers.

*remote control*

In my lap, key strokes remake what actually happened  
into something more real than yesterday. Explosives 

live, in the village being chastened by the Taliban,  
the Afghans cower in the compounds

while we wind up the drones our video sends loaded, the  
eye  
softened with saline, the rockets fired

without remorse. The bad guys  
have to be here, somewhere.



*nothing left to lose*

There is no end'  
in sight, cliché's all

there is left as the order  
comes to leave. Behind

disorder, taking charge  
an empty promise, exhaustion

reason's forgiveness. I want  
to saddle up a victor, instead

slink into the transport, fly away  
radio packed under my ass.

---

\* *The Signaler's Remorse.*

JIMMY

*conquistador*

I was bored, signing up  
there is no better way  
of saying it. I am not  
an adrenalin junkie, but  
how much Wal-Mart  
can you stand?

I'd rather stand  
for something,  
stand-up for my buddies  
who matter more  
than a cheap carton  
of cigarettes.

Hard to get here  
but I'm not leaving  
soon, the wind  
creasing my cheeks  
with fine grit.  
We've been called,

crawling into the LAV  
sun rising  
over my shoulder.  
Hillier's right.  
We're here  
to fight.





*paradise city*

The stink  
of Kandahar City  
catches you  
at the back  
of your throat

tongue pushing  
your teeth  
to keep  
from retching

you swallow  
your puke. There's shit  
in the gutter, the dead  
carcass of a donkey

on the corner.  
You raise water  
to your lips,

the kids here



climbing the waste  
for dinner.

*rolling and tumbling*

Roads predict  
where we'll be

there will be  
bombs; improvisation



a riff played  
off the LAV,

we're really  
cooking. Now

listen  
to the music.

*I love rock n roll*

I need my heart  
in my mouth  
my shit  
in my Joe Boxers,  
my finger  
on the trigger.

Finally  
I get to shoot  
outside the LAV III  
I see one of them  
(they are the enemy)  
loading an RPG.

My fire comes easy  
+ so natural  
to me Mick Jagger  
can't get no satisfaction  
satisfaction like this I find  
a cigarette in my gear



mix the smell  
of tobacco  
cordite + teen spirit  
in the air opening  
a bottle of water  
from our sponsor



*midnight special*

They didn't have to ask  
me in my gear, walking up

to the point. "*Here,*  
*this is yours,*"

a position  
all sand.

Substance in the  
breath of God

blowing away  
fear. I see

traces of gunfire  
in the night.

This desert is cold,  
what I've seen before

is not, through  
and through

until tonight.  
My weight



against these bags;  
altar light

flashing, *pock*  
*pock*, a miss.



I load, targets  
illuminated

flares iridescent —  
blue the night.

*mess around*

This is the place  
to cradle my gun

not so much  
kick back



not so much  
fuck you sam

just a little  
hello, let's

show the other  
calibre

to mess up  
the Taliban.

*for what it's worth*

I clean my rifle,  
I clean my gun;

got my sights  
on democracy.

Pull the trigger  
nobody looks

me in the eye  
kill the enemy



casings hot  
next to my boots.

Olive trees in another  
dimension. Oil

that's what  
makes the earth

turn;. oh, ah  
amen.



life is a highway

We were all drunk  
leaving

graduation, faking  
our way

into a world that  
held our childhood.

I got away that night  
careening into the dark.

Last night  
my buddy Eric

wasn't so lucky,  
dead now, the doornails

through his heart —  
the IED



ripping up  
his diploma.

*another one bites the dust*

The firefight lasts  
all of 60 minutes,  
but no tv show this  
    me laughing  
alive, shooting  
    the enemy.



Haji ragheads all  
look the same to me  
but an easy test —  
    if they shoot  
I shoot.

    The little fuckers

better off dead,  
    they don't want  
    to be prisoners. If  
I make a mistake  
the purser carries  
    cash in my wake.

*just a shot away*

This song  
sings my heart

I live  
I live



to kill  
to kill

the enemy  
after

my own  
heart.

*wardance*

This little war  
music lives in  
45 celsius air



this dance  
this dance  
moves me.

Afghans  
back away  
nothing to hear

but my bang  
bang bullets  
in the air.

*highway to hell*



There are civilians  
on the other side  
of this wall splitting KAF\*.

Them going  
Hajj †to Mecca  
while we mount

heavy metal bound  
for Helmond province  
with every intention

of sending the Taliban  
insurgents to hell.  
(they are the enemy)

---

\* Kandahar Air Field

† Muslims pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime.

taking care of business 

My empty  
four-chamber  
heart takes  
no cartridges.

I will march  
down Main Street;  
my feet follow  
the dust.

Oh yes.  
Oh yes.  
There is a reason  
There is a reason

I lock & load.  
There is no reason  
to forgive Taliban  
wounded,

blood  
on my sleeve.

*fortunate son*

I'd heard some of this  
war music

before getting out here;  
seen the movies

*Apocalypse Now,*  
*Full Metal Jacket,*

with my dad.  
He tried to show



me soldiering  
wasn't all

I thought.  
Still it was

what  
I wanted.

There will be  
new songs

to download  
after patrol.



*I will look  
at death, and spit,*

again, Dad,  
tomorrow.



*pretty vacant*

Fuck 'em  
fuck 'em,

fuck  
the Taliban.

They ARE  
the enemy.



Fuck 'em  
fuck 'em,

fuckin'  
eh?

*people get ready*

There is no war movie like my day.  
I get up to dust and sand.

I lie down in dust and sand blows over  
me in my stained hometown underwear,

the laundry working over-time to erase  
one moment when the IED blew apart our LAV —

my friend's legs lost, and me saved  
with a prayer.

Thank you Lord, thank you.  
I'll be ready next time.



*machine gun*

I go into the fight lifting my gun  
off my hips like Kandahar tango,





oh yeah release them bullets, the Taliban want my heart.  
All I've got is this C6 love, and ammunition.

I never hope to die. I save those faithful  
who pray, take a knee to steady my fire

there will be dead, turbans disturbed for  
a head count me here remembering old testament verses.

*different world*

I'd follow my commander anywhere he has us  
protect. Him just as far out front as will give  
him the edge as he bends his arm to signal us forward.

Fear is a reservoir we all draw from. He draws courage  
from a place we've only heard about in movies,  
documentaries   
not ever this close  the truth.



*whole lotta love*

My finger

trigger

her

love

oh

*blues before sunrise*



I slip the magazine from my locker into my rifle  
blessed bullets will deliver paradise to Talib boys  
who know nothing better than sacrifice.

*ain't it fun*



I've got my fun.

pointed at the ground.

I've got my fun gun

This is serious

we've got to take stock.

so serious says the Lord —

I press the stock

finger the trigger

against my cheek

with nothing

and shoot.

to believe



*bad to the bone*

I fuck anything that bleeds. The Canadian women  
soldiers know I want them when they're on the rag —

but it doesn't really matter what time of the month  
I'm there with my bone or my tongue.

They don't say stop. I don't say no,  
I say baby come to me.

We're going to make love  
all night long. My tongue

speaks Dari. Afghanistan  
murmurs ; bleed on me.





*so lonesome I could cry*

What am I to remember  
this day so lonely and blue?

I remember soap  
I remember boot —

my weight carried through  
to the root of the enemy.

Close quarters, my knife  
pulls through the throat —

this boy sinks, his knees  
looking for the prayer

rug as I send him to God —  
give Abraham his due.

*96 tears*

The last funeral I went to was in Leduc.  
I rented a Nissan; drove out from Wainright.

You could say I was in training, lifting my uncle's casket  
into back of the black hearse; something like

this Canadian Forces issue coffin I carry  
into the Hercules. I walk through

the service; the padre offering  
the resurrection and the life to the innocent;

the dead —  
shit out of luck.

*live and let die*

Chili on toast, chili on toast  
satisfies my appetite;

tomorrow morning there  
will be Haji to roast.

*the letter*



*The only thing we find  
is a night letter no-one was able*

*to read. Fear has cleared  
the village, the mullah*

*on the donkey picking his way to a cave  
we have no clearance to bomb.*

*All we do is watch the heat signature  
pack itself into the hole.*

*Taliban lullaby  
Taliban prayer*

*Allah keeps him  
safe tonight.*

*born to be wild*



I've got this  
rock n roll  
in my head  
four beats  
to the bar  
rapid fire  
the pulls  
of the trigger  
what I can  
see  
is all  
that's left  
of another  
century  
the loudspeaker  
twisting  
at the end  
of the wire  
falling from  
the minaret.

*smells like teen spirit*



Sometimes you just hasta laugh  
casings eject hot around your boots

Haji dance death at the end of your gun —  
a grin all you want to wear, firing in the sun.

*no time left/that ain't the way to have fun*

Hey fuckhead!  
Do you think  
I need a reason

to light you up?  
It must have been you  
fuckhead, that placed

the IED in the road.  
Now, I will come  
to the mountain.

Mohammed,  
five prayers  
this day

won't save  
your ass from  
the grenades,

launched  
like a chip  
from my shoulder.



*ring of fire*

I can't look her  
in the eye, all I want  
is her, but I'm not  
supposed to want  
pussy here in the gan;  
I want pussy here in the gan.



The order never comes,  
all I can do is load.  
There's the forbidden  
Afghan cunt in a burka,  
the forbidden Canadian  
cunt carrying ordinance;

either could end me  
at the bottom  
of the street.  
I say c'mon virgin  
sister c'mon on soldier  
I want to plant





my pecker  
one more time  
before I die.  
The order, the order  
never comes.  
All I can do



is imagine  
Boom! Boom!  
out go the lights.  
Smell gunpowder  
and sweaty pussy  
dead to rights.

*shame, shame, shame*

All there is,  
is screaming.  
We've kicked



the door loose  
from its moorings  
in the mud wall.

hold our weapons  
to our shoulders.  
No-one wants

to fire, no-one  
wants to be  
in this house.

There are rifles  
among the children  
crying for their mothers

screaming,  
we are here to live  
you are here to kill.

Lies it's all  
lies all we have  
to go on.

*who loves the sun*

Two weeks in the FOB\*  
and we all stink,  
at each others' throats.



Oakley's protect my eyes;  
watch, but nothing  
to see. The sun,

our enemy,  
the Taliban, shadows,  
in their caves.

---

\* Forward Operating Base, primitive forward installations  
outside the wire.

*knocking on heaven's door*

So I'm reaching for my weapon.  
I hear the sound. So I'm reaching  
for my weapon when I hear.



So I'm reaching for my weapon.  
I'm reaching past  
the small hours —

this load and lock  
like so many  
others in the dark.

I know I can  
see and they can not.  
I look for targets

outlined like in school.  
There is no substitute  
for training,

for my monocular  
that sights  
the body



trying to slip away.  
I plant a quick bullet —  
this Haji too late

to turn away;  
another for his brother  
who hesitates.

The blood pools, no reason  
for the family to seek  
reparation, to knock on my door.

*dirty water*



I've traded my Metallica t-shirt  
for a tin pail full of nearly cold water.

I sink my feet, hot, callused, bleeding;  
one from a deep crack in my right

foot, the other from a scab on the heel  
into nothing but water, which turns

pink, then warms as if heating elements  
r' stuck into the brackish water instead of my

287 bones times two feet,  
all the time I think. Got' em both,

don't complain, you'll walk again tomorrow,  
with clean socks, it won't be so bad

these boots walking foot patrol,  
June Forward Operating Base, Afghanistan.

*ironman/many rivers to cross*

I drop my belt,  
my body armour  
stands for itself.



I stand for a piss.  
The sand on my foreskin  
reminds me

I'm not in my high school  
locker room I look  
for water from a river

I don't know. Across —  
the enemy.  
I roll up my foreskin,

look for sanitizer,  
my hands, palms out  
against the wind.

*we're not going take it anymore*



My father left when I was ten —  
I stuck him in the thigh with a kitchen knife.

He hit my mother and she was going  
to love him anyway and I said “nothing doing

you bastard son of a bitch” turning the blade enough  
to raise a red pattern on the floral wall paper.

Dad came to, just like the Haji at my feet, and that  
one day I let him haul his ass to street. Tonight

it's too late for resuscitation, I've got  
nothing to regret. Mother's not in sight.



*blinded by the light*

The last thing I see  
is white light white heat  
like Lou Reed said.



I am not dead,  
but flying  
blind

to Landstul.  
Vision reduced  
to an archive —

stock photos  
memory scatters  
for me to recollect



## SERGEANT WILLIS

*under our breath*

This is a shooting war. Peace  
an improbable outcome. Sunbathing,



only the lizards feel safe in territory  
we call occupied under our breath.



*adjusting for the dark*

There are only so many seats at a briefing, before  
after. About the in-between no one tells

what's been through my eye, my brain  
adjusting for the dark.

*in Ghazi stadium*



They took a fucking poll — 17,000 Afghans figure  
we're the losing team, and whatever we do is wrong

because they die in larger numbers. Long after the air strikes  
are history, Taliban will be back, executing women

exchanged



for law and order, ~~standing up~~ democracy ~~for~~ another  
beating,

Thanatos satisfied with a seat in Ghazi stadium



.

---

\* ~~The main stadium in Kabul, originally built in 1923, and host to a Duke Ellington concert in the 1940s. In the 1990s it was used for public executions by the Taliban.~~

*walk on by*



This village has no business  
can only sell cartridges.

The guns in another village  
wait to be loaded for a quick look

down the street; left, right,  
sulfur trace a quick up and down.

This is the hole we're marketing  
for democracy, hey hey, look at the salvage

on the side of the road.  
*walk on by, walk on by.*

*no need for the ICRC\*.*

I'm silent. The Afghan informant uncomfortable to be doing what he is doing.

His is an exercise in risk management, but it won't be anything he learned

in a text book. Will I turn him over to the ANA?† Torture always a hard question, not in the manual. The translator is dubious, but I send them both home

imagining my own, where it is still yesterday, neighbours maintaining their innocence and their lawns with no need for the ICRC‡.

---

\* International Committee of the Red Cross charged with following up prisoner abuse cases, usually with very limited access.

† Afghan National Army.

‡ ~~International Committee of the Red Cross charged with following up prisoner abuse cases, usually with very limited access.~~



*hard to defend*

I've been here long enough to go home  
another word for safe.



This base isn't what I'm thinking.  
The enemy propelling rockets

in this general direction, no generals though  
to receive them, just me and my men

smoking duMaurier, wistful as the smoke curls  
around our Roman noses.

The western tradition a drill, the literature abandoned  
like a hill village too hard to defend.

*a jarhead's ass*



A rucksack blows by me in the dark  
mortar fire trails us down the mountain.

We march, guns ready, through this village  
like we own it. We can see in the dark

but not the eyes watch us pass.  
There is no knowing how much they want us

here or gone as we walk on by into the security  
of the LAV ~~sent to extract~~ us like shrapnel from a jarhead's  
ass.

*after last night's attack*

The decision has been made to let the Taliban collect 

their dead, a bitter harvest. We are not to count

the enemy in the illumination of American flares.

This morning, we look for other measures of victory —

children on their way to the school  
still standing after last night's attack.

*blind eye of Afghanistan*



Whiskey is hard to come by, their rules our rules.  
When I was young so much younger than —

today I would have 26 ounces of something hard  
enough to bruise my brain. Can't get there with

just another Molson's product placement,  
the only alcohol I can find in the blind eye of Afghanistan.

*he takes a shot*



Mark takes his digital camera everywhere.

I swear he sights for composition before he takes a shot.

*in my hand*

My religion has left me, nothing  
to hold, this just one in a long line.

Of righteous wars there is no end, of me  
there might be, still I take the next step —

empty my chamber into the heart  
of a grossly wounded insurgent begging.

What I say later; will not be believed.  
I am relieved. His glory in my hand.



*when I was seven*


They believe all their killing is for God.  
I am alone with my killing, unconvinced

in this confidence game my God will forgive me,  
even if the dead are the enemy —

looking like the old Testament Philistines  
in the picture Bible Grandpa gave me when I was seven.

*the heavy bag*

Detachment. What we are called. We make safe  
the Forward Operating Base. Detached is what I am.

Not enough to sweat outside the wire. Dissociation,  
ad game, keeps blood off my hands.

I bring it all back in the gym. Pull downs, curls, crunches —  
but nothing as satisfying as the heavy bag.



*the bleeding cavity*



I don't pray, haven't since my father died  
taking God with him. These butchers

pray five times to the God that is the only God.  
Father forgive me because I will shoot the first fucker

walks down this roadway, dynamite freeing  
his heart — leaving, the bleeding cavity.

*the myth of glory*



Most of the dead, insurgents.  
Even though I walk among them,

I feel no remorse. We are not  
to count the dead the calculus of war

surreptitious. Our photographs are not  
to show the faces of the dead;


erase the face of the enemy —  
the myth of glory.

*cojones on the line*

I sit here and wait; debate the virtues of video war games  
with another good soldier who just got here today.

This is his first tour, the training fresh in his face  
like a close shave which he doesn't need very often.

His eagerness is infectious; on the way back from orders  
my words of caution belayed by the spring in my step.

Tomorrow there is no virtual reality, a village to clear  
using a lot more than our thumbs, putting our *cojones* on  
the line. 

*nothing left*




God, I'm grateful to find my bunk.  
Sleep gentle my night, nothing left to fight.

*any life we can*

I'm at the party in the mess. There are balloons  
for the zic's' birthday — floating. I've a pin in my hand,

popping latex but only two soldiers hit the ground.  
There is some laughter, suggestions I've had enough

to drink, but there is never enough of either. Here is   
another world, us in our compound, ~~celebrating~~ any life we  
can.

---

\* Second in Command

*under her burka*



I'm not supposed to know how to describe  
the breasts of a Pashtun woman.

She's hidden, she's hidden in her compound.  
Just my imagination under her burka.

*I'm too old*



I'm too old for this fucking war. I know  
how the young men want to prove

they can take it they can give it  
they see victory like the women

in a glossy porno, dicks in hand. What  
I've seen remains in the mass graves

I can't even talk about. This time  
this time righteousness

mistakes vengeance  
for an answer God needs.

*aching for something to say*



I unwrap hard sweets from my rations,  
the Afghan women heat water for tea.

We sit in the fine dust, pop candy  
into our mouths, aching for something to say.



*prisoner of war*



The camera wants to see me kill.  
A picture is worth a thousand.

The poet wants me to kill, +  
bleed a little metaphor,

to capture his imagination —  
prisoner of war.



*little fuckers*

Little fuckers with machine guns —  
Darwin's little upstarts

do their best adaptations  
to survive the science

of elimination we bring  
in the name of the alphabet.

*when I am dry*



Oh yeah I can feel the water on my back  
wash my dirt away wash his splatter away.

The losses riding the air beat me back  
to base but not fast enough for the surgeon;

me washing blood, thinking in Bible stories  
looking for succor in a slug of whiskey when I am dry.

*wail for the loss*



A.

Compassion is not a word you waste on the enemy —  
Capricious Gods load my magazine.

B.

Taliban body parts draw no sympathy their fingers  
still on the triggers of their Kalashnikovs.

I flush with relief, exultation, that I am still  
breathing, lungs hungry for air, no matter how bitter.

C.

The explosion of the IED is ahead of us. We draw  
to a halt. This improvisation set too lightly

has opened a goat from the village, gasping for air.  
I vomit on the deck from the turret, wail for the loss.

*out of here*



I slip into a makeshift hideout my hand around the neck  
of a \$100 bottle of whiskey, warm, no ice.

What I saw today, a woman's parts around the square  
gathered by her keening mother made me puke.

I will need the whole bottle to rinse my mouth  
so I can breathe when I come out of here.



*fire from the light*

The acrid smell of Khandahar City left behind —  
~~here is~~ desert heat, sharp wind drying urine before it hits  
the sand.

No traces here, memory a French Foreign Legion film -  
catching fire from the light.



*I love my job*

I am a professional. I profess war. I have trained hard to do my job. My job is to kill the enemy. Not people.

My job is to protect my unit. I am responsible. I fulfill the requirements of my government +

the Canadian Forces. I am a professional. I am a war fighter. I love my job.

*her heavy breath*



She didn't scream when I looked at her —  
the door kicked in the mother and father

yelling Pashtun phrases not in any phrasebook  
we'd be given to understand but with no need

for translation. They were pissed at our guns —  
we were pissed we couldn't find theirs,

Allah their only ally at four in the morning,  
the ANA soldiers jealous of our night vision,

still useful in a room that will not see  
electric light for decades after we've gone.

I looked over my right shoulder, saw her  
cover her black hair, sit up against the wall.

All I wanted was to say that love is not far from this  
invasion.

My mouth longing for the warmth of her heavy breath.





*fuck the Samaritan*

Six feet long enough to sleep deep enough to keep the  
scavengers at bay.  
But I'm not digging, who builds his house on sand?

No-one here can know me; no-one who knows me can hear  
me  
there is so little to say, prayer for the end of war, not a  
soldier's prayer.

This is what I came for. The threat, the answering  
bullet, the bomb in the road. Fuck the Samaritan.

*the relationship of technology to God*



I don't want to know about the dead civilians in the next  
village full of Taliban and a few old men, babies on the  
breast

mothers with just enough milk to keep them alive, the room  
cut  
in half by a precision bomb half the family precisely dead —

The Koran not much of a ground to air defense. The mother  
keening, learning the relationship of technology to God.

*coordinates of righteousness*



This is my third tour, and I still want more  
heat, dust, challenge and blood.

Adrenalin pumps want, pumps need,  
my commander brings me in. A quick little talk

on the nobility of the enterprise. We make sure  
the West has phoned in the coordinates of righteousness.



*one last time*

I unlace my boots, real desert in them in everywhere sand  
and heat rash  
and a smell I swear comes only to feet pounding the roads  
in Afghanistan,

so different from unlacing skates in the clear air of a prairie  
winter. It snows in Afghanistan but not so much in  
andahar City, which is full of heat, hate and blood

evaporating into an atmosphere so thick and disgusting I  
hrow up in my mouth, swallow the bitterness of so little to  
hope for and know I get to go home at the end

of my roto; even in the Forces I'm more free than any  
Afghan is likely to be  
before we all leave, tired, and sore with little good to  
remember

but the night sky and that moment  
of unlacing Afghanistan, one last time.

*peace harder to find*



One more thing, just one more thing before I leave;  
one more thing, just one more thing before I come home.

History still some years off as I file my report,  
I know what I have given, and what I have given up,

A war fighter, I lay down my rifle my life  
still mine to own; peace harder to find.

*looking for an application*

I ~~try not to~~ listen to the bullshit they spread as I wait for  
transport. Reality  
to shift again from this mirage of heat and hostility to the  
coolness

of a Manitoba winter and a warm Brandon welcome. I don't  
get

close to the others, they move away from me, cause , my zic



died in my charge. Not so many dead here to compare  
to any other war. Still, there are enough to make this trip

unbearable. All I will remember is his eyes  
looking for an explanation.



*victory as we rise*

I'm in the Herc, bound for home, glory not so much.  
Props on the wings raise the desert. I want to forget

this plain where the God that is one God has gravity.  
Recall the misguided strike passing for victory as we rise.





# JOLENE

*beauty*



There's Jolene —  
my two daughters  
waving, from the other side

of the tarmac.  
I walk into the belly of the Herc  
me not sure I've heard right.

The entire flight, voices  
in my head  
argue here is

nothing left to doubt.  
Stepping into the heat  
words drop like flies.

God in the beauty  
of the weapons\*  
I carry.

---

\* Leonard Cohen/Robert Bringhurst.

*dance*

The last dance  
a slow waltz  
in the Legion.

I had my Jolene  
we had it all.  
The Kosovo vets

with their eyes  
on the rising hem  
of her skirt. Me hard

against her  
deployment  
in the a.m.



*equality*

The soldier on my right  
has breasts and a vagina.  
I could put it another way  
another time I might like to.

But this afternoon we stand  
on guard over construction  
nothing “re” about it, no schools  
no schools for years.

Brown-eyed girls see  
equality in camouflage  
carrying a gun  
instead of the alphabet.



*a whisper*

I miss fucking  
my wife, Jolene

she's got her hands  
full of the girls, running



through the day  
with only a whisper

of my love. Me here  
remembering

the smell of cranberry  
in the crook of her elbow.

*prayer*

Desert wind today's Sunday  
grit in my shorts  
my thighs raw with a motion  
no love chaffing all the same

whether I dream or phone home  
all I've got is a hard on  
for utility, hear the calls  
for five o'clock prayer. God

will smile as long as my head  
is in the sand. Kiss my ass,  
Jesus. Forgive the fight, there  
is light here, somewhere.



*networks*

Checking my gear,  
grit under my visor  
I keep seeing yesterday's news.

The terminals are connected  
to all the major networks;  
hey ho, another dead today.

Shoulder the soldier  
into the transport  
only so far



the numbers  
too small for home  
to notice. I'm alive alive oh!

*vocabulary*

I don't plan to die  
any where  
I can't smell  
tall grass  
cottonwood  
and the musk  
of a prairie river  
labouring through  
the mud. Here the  
sun brings down  
my shades, what  
I see, my tongue  
denies  
vocabulary.







*history*

She grabs her hijab as I enter her  
compound. Sand, stone, mud really  
between us; nothing  
but loathing  
as I try to save her  
from history.

*message*



I'm on the satellite phone, God knows  
where, at some FOB in sand hills even the devil  
would disregard, trying to raise Jolene.

Woman, lover, wife, mother I want her  
to tell me the kids are all right and everything's  
going to work out fine. All I get is the message machine.

She's got the girls in gymnastics, that's probably  
all it is, me on the ground in the Gan  
not able to leave a number.

*hymns*



MSN says hello  
to my lover

My lover says  
MSN to me

Two continents  
call the refrain

Hymns  
to jeopardy.

drill 

I watch them  
pick up the bloody pieces  
of school children.

The dust of the explosion  
covers their faces. Eager  
girls in Calgary send their money

encourage more risk.  
Afghan teachers learn how  
to be alive. On my knees,

my stomach empty,  
I know the drill is all  
I have.

I bend to take a hand,  
a pencil in its grasp,  
the letter incomplete.

*breasts*

I think the only thing I can think as I walk  
the topless beach in Cyprus.

I've heard we once kept peace here.  
With a beer in my hand as I decompress

I think Jolene's breasts have never been this tanned,  
Alberta's sun so circumspect.

*embedded*



My pecker  
has a mind  
of its own.

The only place  
it embeds  
is memory.

*hesitations*



All I've got is a sheet between my legs,  
cock'n balls in the locker with my weapon.

So fuckin' hot and the snoring so loud  
nothing to turn over, Jolene,

but your hesitations from home,  
tired, saving yourself for me.

*package*

I sit on my cot, with my boots on the ground; open  
the package that came in the mail as if this was Edmonton  
and not Kandahar with the heat draining every pore.

Jolene's handwriting as if in a note she passed to me in class  
reaches me uncensored this time, and I know she loves me;  
waiting. The kids, though, reach me

with their pictures of explosions and admonitions to look  
both ways ~~before~~ crossing the road that may be mined with  
IED's.

They know more than I ever had to, and there is nothing I  
can do.



*celebration*




The eviscerated pig must have been frozen, at least as far as  
the secret base  
on the Arabian Peninsula. There hard to find Christians  
buried the unclean  
in sand, to thaw, unmarked, in the jingle trucks bringing her  
inside the wire.

Christ! Can you smell salvation, roasting in the barrel?  
Charcoal  
fires memories of Easter, pulled pork and potatoes, jellied  
salads,  
a small celebration, Jolene on the phone.

*cigarette*

Shit. I could kill  
for a cigarette.

War is not the best  
place to stop. 

Jolene, listen to me.  
I'm trying. Ontario tobacco  
here can kill me  
but so can the Taliban.

Them I can shoot, the only thing I know  
to do with a cigarette is to light it  
take it into my mouth —  
but it's you I want.

All I have, a memory,  
a taste of you, still  
in my head, I'm coming  
home, lickety split.

*heat*

Fuck, I want to dance.  
I've managed a little contraband  
More than the two beer.  
It feels like the weekend.

Tonight I'm clean after coming  
in from outside the wire.  
God, I want to dance,  
wish my big heavy feet

in combat boots were in shoes.  
I can feel the bass in my balls,  
with nothing more to prove.  
Still, I won't move

or the slow dance,  
turn my wedding ring around my finger;  
remember Jolene in the Legion hall —  
her sweat in my palm on her back.

Cooler when we stepped outside  
than here on my own, closing the door,  
feel the heat. The only thing to light,  
my cigarette.



*pistol*

There is no talk  
of guns when I phone  
Jolene, not ever  
a pistol in my pocket  
though I can  
see her kneeling  
naked before  
me. Love  
so much  
to say.

*ravish me*



Ravish me Jolene, when I come home.  
I want you to need what's left of me.  
I want your mouth on mine, on my dick;  
we have to see if there is anything

left inside the part of me  
I thought made me a man.  
I dream of your clit  
and your vacancy.

My tongue wills its prayers  
to the heart of you,  
but there is always the chance  
that's all I have left. I haven't

propositioned soldiers of either  
sex. I haven't propositioned  
whores or widows looking  
for a way to keep living.

Whatever I've got, love,  
you can have. No really  
I want you to have  
the best part of what's left of me.

I write you a letter,  
I write you a poem.  
Ravish me, Jolene  
when I come home.



*just wanting*

I listen to the bitching  
I listen to the bitching  
before I step into the heat



outside. The heat outside.  
There's no rockets this evening,  
there's no rockets tonight

I'm just wanting, what I might  
have had way back home  
with Jolene, tonight.

*piling on*



Twisted,  
Jolene  
calls me,  
wants me

home. Her voice  
all I can hear  
for days;  
satellite relays

what  
I want is —  
to hold  
her, my

daughters  
piling on.



*minutes*



There is no where  
to go. I hang  
a blanket  
round my bunk  
curl like a  
puppy pant  
in the heat  
fondling  
my self  
imagine  
the last time  
I was alone  
with Jolene  
on her knees  
my hands  
on her hips  
coming inside  
the circle  
of heat  
breath short  
minutes all  
I have.

No-one  
wants  
to hear  
me  
remember  
love.



hold



Restart you  
on my screen  
heart on my sleeve.

I want to  
Skype you, Jolene,  
in whatever

time zone whatever  
you might be  
wearing —

but there are  
the kids haloed  
by the webcam.

I hold on  
to their  
first words

to me here  
in Kanadhar  
as you look

for a way  
to whisper  
in my ear



something  
something  
they can't hear.

*decision*

Split second decision, he dies  
I live; back home Jolene  
doesn't need ever  
to know.



*fading*



So what gives?  
Jolene, I haven't  
heard from you this last  
week, not an easy time,  
I've been outside  
the wire with cause  
to fire my weapon, and retrieve  
wounded, keeping them alive  
for rescue. I hope I never  
need to be. Strong  
my back against a mountain  
my buddy's head on my shoulder  
the sound of the battle fading  
the American choppers  
on their way.  
The thing is no-one died,  
and all is good,  
but I haven't heard  
from you. Exactly how hard  
is it to shop in the West  
Edmonton Mall?

*convinced*



I can still wiggle  
my toes, I say  
“I can still wiggle  
my toes,”

as they tie tourniquets  
around both my legs  
and my right arm  
which wants to hold on to

you, a memory  
of life warm in my heart  
beating like the whop  
of the chopper

getting me out  
a long way  
back, morphine  
wisdom in my

veins, convinced  
I'll find  
my way back  
to you, Jolene.

*clear*

It wasn't me,  
Jolene, that died.  
It wasn't me,



killed anyone. I didn't lose  
much, all my body parts  
intact; working

under your hands.  
Jolene, I nearly lost you,  
thank God you draw closer

to what is left of me.  
The seven months of adventure  
I pass off as hell, no-one else

needs to hear what you say  
in my ear, what I did  
we clear.





## AFTERWORD

By Neil Maclean

I was approached by a friend and writer in Winnipeg about providing technical advice, nomenclature, and jargon to Victor Enns for a book of poetry he was working on based on the point of view of the average Canadian infantryman in Afghanistan. At first I was very hesitant, unsure I was the right guy for the job. Victor sent me a few examples of his work, and asked me directly. After I did a little sleuthing, I offered my assistance.

...

When I was a kid all I wanted to do was be in the army. I spent my time playing soldier, shooting my friends with invisible bullets in the rain forests of the west coast, and setting up stealthy patrols with GI Joe on rainy days.

So naturally when I was able I signed up, I did. The recruiting centre gave me a bunch of trade options but what I was most interested in was the Infantry. My recruiter thought I was nuts. When I went off to basic training I was all of 120 lbs. I had no idea how tough it would be to get through Battle School and earn the PPCLI hat badge and the right to call myself a Patricia. But I made it. It was one of the hardest things I have done in my life, and always will be.

I went through before the actions and behaviour of a small few would change how the military operated. The crucible of Basic Training and Battle School was far different then, and I could spend an hour telling you stories about our treatment as recruits that would horrify.



One day during training in unarmed combat we learned how to kill with a knife. That was the first time I was inwardly horrified at what my job could entail. I couldn't imagine cutting a man's throat. I was secretly sickened, but I understood this was all part of the job of the infantryman. Could I be this violent?

When the opportunity came to go overseas I was not going to miss the chance. It would be Bosnia. Just recently, 18 years later, my experiences in that little slice of man-made hell woke me up with a violent jolt. I never realized what affect it had left on me. I was there after the ceasefire agreement but the scars of war were very fresh. I was a kid at the time and that kind of shit seems to bounce off, I figured I was bullet proof. Three tours of that place, each one easier until it was more of a booze cruise than a peacekeeping tour. The only reason I went on my last tour there in 2003 was to have a good time on leave, drinking and fooling around with European women. Like a good soldier. But what I didn't see happening was that kid playing with GI Joe was long in his grave.

At the 10-year mark some aspects of being an infanteer were getting old. I was thinking about leaving but I was also institutionalized, so I kept plugging along. There were days I was even tired of putting the uniform on, tired of the discipline, tired of the restrictions on my liberty, tired of playing the game. The sacrifices of the profession of arms.

It's 2005. Sabres are rattling, war clouds are forming, and Generals are holding press conferences. We are going to war. I want in, there is no way I'm going to miss this; it is my calling, my duty, my destiny and, more importantly, all I have trained for. I'm ready. Finally the Canadian Armed Forces will throw off the shackles of the Peacekeeping myth. But I wasn't slated to go on this rotation. So I throw my name in to replace anyone who drops out of training, can't go at the last minute, or gets killed in the first few months.

Then the phone rings at home and three days later I am on the tarmac at Kandahar Airfield. It's February 2006. I get hooked up with my platoon and get acquainted. Two days later we are getting ambushed on Highway 4 north of Kandahar and I cannot believe what I'm seeing. I turn to

my driver and I say, “They’re fucking shooting at us?!” Over the staccato roar of my gunner returning fire on his C6 in a long, panicked burst he says, “What the fuck do you think is happening??”

I clearly remember the first time I left the wire. We rolled through the gates, bunkers, wire and machine gun positions, out to the loading bay, the area where we would get out of our little G Wagons and lock and load our weapons. I knew at that point everything was for real, for keeps. We screw up, we die. We don’t work as a team, we die. We draw the short straw, we die. Or go home with no legs, no eyes, burned to a crisp, no balls, no dick, no arms. The list goes on. For about a month I dreamt about how I was going to die the next day. I ended up being one of the lucky ones.

But after a while I accepted death. I knew it was there and I was ok with it. There was no bullshit bravado about it, like the movies. Just a realization that at some point I was going to die and screw it anyway, I’ve had a good run. Thank fuck for all those tours to Bosnia and all the chicks and partying. I think that’s how many guys get through it. I’m not a religious man. Light switch goes on, light switch goes off. That simple, and I still feel that way.

My section, made up of some of the best, toughest, smartest men I will ever know, ran the gauntlet on average five times a week for over six months. It became addictive. Adrenaline

is a powerful drug. I craved it and I wouldn't take a break. On top of that, the responsibility I felt for the young guys I worked with prevented me from doing so. I had to be there at all times. I didn't realize, being immersed in that environment, that stress was driving me. I had to be ordered to take a day off.

I recall going home on leave. My girlfriend and I went to Vancouver to enjoy some left coast lifestyle. The first night in our high end hotel room was nice. But a storm came off the ocean with tremendous thunder. When the thunderclap "round" went off I was glued to the floor. That was the first indicator I wasn't the guy I was before I left.

I spent some time back in Manitoba talking to some friends before I went back. One of my buddies remarked, "Dude, you're six inches off the ground".



I received an email just before I went back from a buddy in my platoon. In it he said things were really getting hot and we were going to be in the thick of it by the time I got back. He sounded excited, and so was I. He was dead a month later.

The rest of the tour was endless, no rest for the wicked. Day in and day out of grinding through the strain. I began to hate these people I was supposed to be helping to liberate.

I had read *On Combat* and *On Killing*\* before I went over and was neither surprised nor disturbed by the fact that I had dehumanized these people. I had zero compassion left for any of them — men, women, or children. I held them all responsible for the death of my friends.

And then it was over. Back to Manitoba, back to being just a guy. Back to life. Two weeks after I was home one of my closest friends was killed by a suicide bomber riding a bicycle. An old man who slipped through the security cordon under the threat of his family's death blew himself up next to my friends patrol and killed four of them. I fell apart.

I really snapped inside. I wanted to go back and kill. There was no limit to the rage I felt. I could be this violent; I wanted to be this violent.

In the weeks to come I was a shut in, struggling with my friends' deaths, struggling with the ignorance of the civilians around me, struggling with how callous I had become. Where was this liberal B.C. kid I used to be?


Eight years have gone by. I went back once, for nine months, this time on my second tour. But I was already numb, conditioned. And my career in the military goes on. I work with the Air Force (still proudly wearing the Army uniform) as a Hercules Loadmaster, a fantastic job, even if the

---

\* Both books by (US Lt. Col. Dave Grossman)



guys I work with don't know what it's like to be the "boots on the ground" infantry, on patrol, outside the wire.

It's been 20 years since I signed up; I'm a bit of an old dog now, no longer the fit skinny kid I was. But I'm left with my memories of being a soldier, and I love them. It's a struggle to let them go, and I suspect I will never be able to, much like many of my buddies. Like  the old recruiting commercials said when I was a kid, "Choose the career, live the adventure". That's all I wanted, I wouldn't have it any other way and I would do it all over again...

...

Victor Enns' writing impressed me; it was artistic but didn't possess the naivety that I had been seeing up to this point from artists without a military background. I felt it was important that his work reflect the real passion soldiers have, that it broke through the stereotypes people hold about the ground pounder: rough, boorish, dim, no other job options. Nothing can be further from the truth. Soldiers are a very proud and tight-knit bunch, often deep and intellectual types, who view themselves as entirely unique in society; anyone who hasn't worn the uniform is an outsider. This work describes their emotions well. Most of us have come back, but sadly we continue to lose soldiers to the war, here at home. A soldier does not leave war behind. A collection like this one will remind readers why.

