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My Long War

By DEXTER FILKINS

I.

I pulled on my running shoes and stepped into the sweltering streets. It was a Thursday in July 2003, twilight, and well over 100 degrees. I was feeling a little reckless. If this ended badly, the only thing anyone would remember was how stupid I was.

We had set up the New York Times office on Abu Nawas Street. We lived and worked there: an Ottoman-style house with a gated yard and a veranda on the second floor that looked out on a boulevard that tracked the eastern bank of the Tigris River. In those first days, we didn't fortify the place; no razor wire or blast walls, no watchtowers or machine guns mounted on the roof. Cars motored past our front yard on their way to the Jumhuriya Bridge a couple of miles up the road.

In the beginning, Baghdad wasn't that threatening. The other houses around us were either abandoned or rented by foreigners: the French Embassy and the BBC were around the corner. And the Iraqis in the neighborhood were friendly, waving whenever we passed. Running at night seemed reckless, but given the otherworldy heat, running during the day was impossible.

So I set off. The reaction of my neighbors was immediate. I felt like a revelation, like a prophet. Men looked up and waved; they held up bottles of water as I ran by. "Good, good!" one man said in English. "America good!" Abu Nawas was lined with fish restaurants that overlooked the Tigris; as I passed, men held up chunks of *masgouf*, their beloved bony fish, and asked me to join. Children stopped their soccer games and ran after me; even the stray dogs gave pursuit. I felt I was living the scene in the movie "Rocky II," when the character played by Sylvester Stallone goes for a training run in his Philadelphia neighborhood and all the children clamor after him.

I started running that same route every evening after that, usually well into twilight but early enough that the streets were still filled with people. My reception was always the same: cheering crowds, squealing children and happy stray dogs. In an odd but real way, my five-mile runs up Abu Nawas Street made me wonder what the war in Iraq was all about. All day long reporting in the country, I encountered hostility and chaos, which was intense and growing and very real. And yet at night when I hit the streets, in the fall of 2003, I could not find a trace. It was as if the city, in the heat of the afternoon, had exhausted itself, only to lighten with the setting sun.

Once, early on, a young Iraqi boy ran up alongside me. He had been kicking a ball along Abu Nawas, and as I came running, he left his friends and started running next to me in his bare feet. The locals sometimes did that, but usually they dropped off after 50 yards. The Iraqi boy, who was perhaps 9 years old, kept running

the two and a half miles to the Jumhuriya Bridge, and as I turned to run back on a trail along the Tigris, he dropped off to wave goodbye.

A few days later, at twilight, the same boy appeared again, picking up the trail along the Tigris. His name, he said, was Hassan. We ran together for a while, me in my running shoes, he in his bare feet. Hassan motioned across the Tigris, toward the sprawling compound that once housed Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace and that was now the headquarters of the American occupation. The Green Zone.

"Saddam house," he said in English.

We ran together some more, and Hassan motioned again across the river.

"Now, Bush house."

One night, without warning, a wall of razor wire went up across Abu Nawas Street. Somebody somewhere had decided that the Sheraton Hotel, which sat just 100 yards away, was too easy a target for the car bombers, who had begun striking the city. A barricade now stood between me and the rest of the neighborhood. All traffic ceased.

A few days later, sensing the disruption they had caused, the Americans made an opening in the razor wire so pedestrians could walk through. I resumed my running, but I never saw Hassan again.

One afternoon later in the summer, another Iraqi youngster pulled alongside me as I made my way down the street. She, like Hassan, was about 9 years old. Her name was Fatima, she said, huffing next to me and looking up with enormous brown eyes. She wore sandals, and she was very dirty. She kept up the pace.

Fatima and I ran for a couple of miles, her sandals making a scraping sound on the pavement. After a time, she indicated that she needed a rest. We stopped at one of the open-air fish restaurants. Everyone seemed to know Fatima; she seemed to know them.

A man walked out onto the sidewalk, put a hand on Fatima's shoulder and ran a finger across his neck. "Mother, father finished," the man said. He pointed to the sky, as if to suggest they had been killed by bombs.

"Fatima live here," the man said, gesturing with his hand to encompass the restaurant and its environs.

Then a second man walked up, twisted Fatima around and gave her a long and ugly kiss on her lips. He laughed and walked away. Fatima looked at me with very sad eyes, and I suggested that it was time to go.

We ran some more, and then, after a time, Fatima stopped. She suggested, without saying so, that it was time for her to go back.

"Bye-bye — tomorrow, O.K.?" Fatima said, and she turned and walked up the street. I never saw her again.

II.

I was jogging along the trail on the banks of the Tigris, heading south. I was nearing the halfway point, a

defunct pump station that blocked me from running any farther. It was the summer of 2004. The heat was unbearable, as it usually was. I was carrying two half-liter bottles of water, one in each hand. I was about 30 yards from the pump station when I heard an explosion, and the ground shook beneath my feet. I turned around and watched a white mushroom cloud rise up about a mile away. Close. They had hit Tahrir Square again, a traffic roundabout near the Jumhuriya Bridge. The bombers were always hitting the roundabout at Tahrir Square. They would park their car next to one of the market stalls on the edge of the roundabout and wait for an American convoy or a bunch of contractors to come in; then they would hit the gas and fly into the roundabout and crash the middle of the convoy and explode. It happened all the time.

I stood and watched the mushroom cloud for a while. I needed the rest anyway. The cloud was dissipating in the blue sky. After the blast, which itself was quite loud, there wasn't any sound to speak of, at least not that I could hear from so far away. The buildings along Abu Nawas Street obscured my view of the square itself. If I had tried to run back to the bureau, our guys would already have left to cover it. I stared at the remnants of the cloud for a few more minutes. I tried to imagine what was happening. I took a sip of water from my bottle. I retied my running shoes. I turned and got on with my run.

III.

It started with a face. Black, possibly an Arab from North Africa, covered by a thin layer of dust. Rubble around the head. Lips parted slightly. No blood. The Marines had found him at the top of the minaret in the southern part of town, at the top of a winding set of stairs, and snapped a photo. It had been in the evening, and the face had a bluish cast. From the start, the guerrillas had used the minarets: to shoot, to spot, to signal one another. When American soldiers first came into Falluja, 6,000 of them on foot in the middle of a November night in 2004, they weren't allowed to shoot at mosques without permission. After 12 hours, they threw the rule away.

There were a lot of dead guerrillas, but we weren't seeing them. By then, a week into the thing, a quarter of Bravo Company was wounded or dead. There was Romulo, the car-crazy kid from West Virginia, and Nick, the surfer from Baltimore. Jake, the mouthless mangled face. There were others. But we had gone forward anyway, rolling, absorbing the blows, moving forward through the streets. They were shooting at us, the Marines and me and Ashley Gilbertson, the photographer who was traveling with me, but we kept moving anyway. And now we were at the city limits, where the streets opened onto a big flat plain of brush and trash, abruptly, just like a movie set. End of town.

So where did the insurgents go? They were dead, under the rubble, that's where they were. Buried. Vaporized. Ground to dust.

A few years before, in Afghanistan, an American officer asked me, "Have you ever seen what a 2,000-pound bomb does to a person?" He was not really bragging because in this case the victims had been American soldiers. Friendly fire, five guys. "We put the remains in a sandwich bag," he said.

Still, it was a curiosity that we had seen so few bodies. The generals were reporting hundreds of dead, thousands even — we knew that from the radio — but we weren't seeing many. You would think by then we would have seen an arm. A head. Like in the suicide bombings in Baghdad. So I had been rolling it over, the lack of bodies, considering the explanations: the Muslims bury their dead very quickly; it's a religious thing.

That was one. The insurgents never leave their dead behind. That was another.

We were up on top of this building on the edge of town, staring out at the big plain and wondering where they had all gone, when one of the marines came over and showed Ashley the picture of the black face. He had brought us the photo to show us; he knew we needed one, a photo of a dead insurgent. The marine, Lance Cpl. Alex Saxby, tilted up his point-and-press camera to show us. “I got two dead friends,” he said. Alex’s glasses had broken at the nose bridge, and he was holding them together with a wad of first-aid tape. The photo of the dead jihadi seemed all he had left in the world. “It’s my birthday today,” he said.

I remembered when the Marines had killed the man in the photo; it was a couple of days before. We had come to this open spot in the city, a kind of Falluja Central Park, with trash and junk strewn about it, and there was a long row of buildings on the other side. Filled with bad guys, or so they said, and they seemed to know well enough. They had sent up the ScanEagle, a kind of model airplane with cameras; you could hear it at night buzzing around like a big fly. They had sent the tanks in front of us, and they had blasted those buildings, blowing giant holes in them, so we could advance across the junk field. They blasted a minaret too. Two shots, two large holes in the tower and then silence. They went up later, up the winding stairs, and found the guy. In the rubble. They snapped a photo. A face in bluish hue.

And so with the fighting over, it seemed as if finding that body was the thing to do. I was a reporter, and I needed a corpse for the newspaper. Ashley asked Capt. Read Omohundro, Bravo’s commander, and he gave us a dozen guys. They liked us now; we had been through hell with them, seen their buddies die. They wanted to help us. So we took a dozen guys and walked back up the street we had come down the day before. By then, you hardly noticed the wreckage, there was so much of it. Long piles of white rocks and dead wires and sliced-up cars, some of them still smoking. A ruined world. Nothing like the way we had found it coming in, when it looked more or less like a normal town. The Marines had blasted everything: every building, every car, even if there was no one in it; every single person, even if we hadn’t seen him. Now the town was quiet. Nobody said much. It had been many days since I had heard my own footsteps. It was only then that I thought something might be wrong.

We came to the door of the minaret and Ashley stepped to go inside. When Ash needed a photo, he had no fear. He would go anywhere for a picture. A few days before, he had run right into machine-gun fire, right into it. I had stayed crouched behind the wall. I didn’t much feel like following him into the minaret. It was a picture, after all. There wasn’t much I could do with a corpse. I wanted to leave, but I went anyway. Ash and I moved to go through the door, and a pair of marines stepped in front of us. We’ll go first, they said. The first marine put his hand out. I didn’t get a look at them, maybe a sidelong glance of the first guy, and they bounded up the stairs. Ashley with his camera fell in behind them, and I behind Ashley.

The stairs squeaked as we went up. It was a narrow staircase, winding, just wide enough for your body. A nautilus, maybe 100 feet high. Not very stable. Dark, too, but for the holes shot by the tank. I slowed my step. The shot was loud inside the staircase, and I couldn’t see much, because the second marine was falling backward, falling onto Ashley, who fell onto me. Warm liquid spattered on my face. The three of us tumbled backward out the doorway. The second marine, although bloodied, was not hit.

The first marine was stuck, maybe three-quarters of the way up the stairway. The shot had come from farther

up the stairs. A very loud shot. Then tumbling and screaming and quiet. The guy who had fired was in the minaret, at the top of the stairs, sitting up there.

"Miller!" the marines shouted.

"Miller!"

No answer.

I tried to imagine him up there, Miller, foot stuck in the stairwell in some odd way that prevented him from falling like the rest of us. Unable, for some reason, to speak.

Ashley was sitting on the stoop beside the entrance to the minaret mumbling to himself. His back was turned to the tower, and his helmet was on crooked so he looked especially vulnerable. His shoulders were heaving. My fault, he was saying, my fault. There was blood and bits of white flesh on his face and on his flak jacket and on his camera lens. My fault.

"Miller!" The marines were screaming now.

They started to run into the tower. It was crazy, but they ran into the tower, heedless and headlong, the way you would charge a machine-gun nest. Young and determined, up the winding stairs. They ran up the stairs, and there were more shots, I couldn't tell whose; there was fighting and yelling. Then the marines came out empty-handed. Alive but empty-handed and shouting.

"I can't get to him," one of the marines said, emerging from the tower. It was Michael Goggin, an Irish kid from Weymouth, Mass., 19, with a heavy accent. His face was covered in dust. Like the dust in the photo, looking like a ghost.

Again and again they went up, Goggin and the others, and there were more shots and more dust and more yelling. I wondered how many people were going to die to save Miller, who was shot for a picture. I worked out the numbers: the Marines don't leave their own behind, and neither do the insurgents. Miller is trapped, and the insurgent is up here, in a perfect spot, with perfect lines of fire. You could see the marines, too; it was in their eyes. Obsessed and burning. Maybe the whole platoon would die, I thought.

"Miller!"

Silence.

"Miller!"

Our leader that day was Sgt. Sam Williams, a 24-year-old from northern Michigan. Sam pointed to the top of the tower and told his men to fire. And so they did, guns singing, grenade launchers, machine guns, boom-boom-boom-boom. Horrendous and loud.

What if Miller is still alive? I thought. There was so much firing and so much stuff flying, bricks, shrapnel, bullets. Two marines were wounded. One of them was Lance Cpl. Demarkus Brown, a kid from Martinsville,

Va., 22. The marines were raking the minaret, Demarkus was, too, and then he dropped his rifle and grabbed his right cheek. “I’m hit — I’m hit!” he said, panic in his eyes, real panic as if he was going to die. But the wound was small, and Demarkus was so young, he seemed like one of those kids on the playground who gets hurt every time. He seemed so frightened. He was killed a week later.

The firing stopped. Smoking rifles. Two more marines went up, and the minaret began to come apart. Bricks falling, dust and rocks, the tower swaying. Gunfire started to come into the mosque from the houses nearby. The insurgents had found us.

Ashley was still seated on the stoop, helmet crooked, mumbling to himself like a child. My fault.

Miller was out. Two marines had pulled him from the tower, Goggin one of them, choking and coughing. Black lung, they called it later. Miller was on his back; he had come out head first. His face was opened in a large V, split like meat, fish maybe, with the two sides jiggling.

“Please tell me he’s not dead,” Ash said. “Please tell me.”

“He’s dead, Ash,” I said.

I felt it then. Darting, out of reach. You go into these places, and you think they’re overrated, they are not nearly as dangerous as people say. Keep your head; keep the gunfire in front of you. You get close and come out unscathed every time, your face as youthful and as untroubled as before. The life of the reporter: always someone else’s pain. A woman in an Iraqi hospital cradles her son newly blinded, and a single tear rolls down her cheek. The cheek is so dry, and the tear moves so slowly that you focus on it for a while, the tear traveling across the wide desert plain. You need a corpse for the newspaper, so you take a bunch of marines to get one. Then suddenly it’s there, the warm liquid on your face, the death you have always avoided, smiling back at you as if it knew all along. Your fault.

A troop carrier, one of the old Marine jobs, had come for Miller. Bullets were bouncing off it as it rolled up. It was going to head straight for the hospital, as if there were a chance for him. The marines lifted Miller onto a gurney, arms flapping, face flapping.

The escape was left to Sam. Ashley finally got up and we moved inside the main body of the mosque next to the minaret. Gunfire everywhere, so loud. The insurgents were closing in. One of the marines was holding a rifle covered in blood, and he looked at Ashley and figured, I guess, that he had best not give him a gun right now. He shoved the M-16 into my hands: sticky and warm. When I was in high school, I shot a duck with my friend’s gun, barrel out the window of his parents’ station wagon. The duck swam in circles for a while and then he died.

Take this, he said. The Marines don’t leave their guns behind either. I didn’t actually hear him say that. It was too loud to hear.

Sam held up three fingers and counted them down. Three-two-one, and we were off, out the door and into the street, me carrying Miller’s blood-soaked gun, a pair of machine guns to our east opening up as we ran. Legs like jelly, legs like wings, we were all flying together. Bullets zinging past, hitting the bricks. “I want to

die," I heard Ashley say. "I hope they shoot me." We jumped a final fallen tree and turned a corner down an alley and we were safe.

"I know you guys are thinking you got Miller killed," Sam said back at the house. He was pulling on a cigarette, seated against a wall on the second floor. He seemed a wise old man sitting there, not a line on his face, and we the children. "It's a war," he said slowly, like a man as old as time. "That's what happens in war."

Lt. Andy Eckert walked in. He hadn't gone with us.

"We take full responsibility for what happened out there," Ashley said to Eckert. I said it, too.

"Yeah, it was your fault," he said.

Lance Cpl. William L. Miller, 22, Pearland, Tex. The town made me think of pearls. A necklace. Miller's official portrait shows a boyish cadet with a long thin face untroubled by thoughts of the future. Rummaging through Ash's photos, I found a photograph, taken at another mosque a few blocks back — the Grand Mosque, the center of town. The marines had fought hard for that building; the photo shows Miller and four of his buddies taking a break during a quiet moment, sprawled in a perfect row, illuminated by a ray of light that entered through a nearby window. Miller's head is tilted to the right. He's asleep.

A few months later, at a memorial service in the gymnasium in North Carolina, I spotted Miller's parents, Susie and Lewis. Their son's helmet and rifle and boots and dog tag were out there on the gym floor, arranged in a tombstonelike structure along with those of the 20 other marines from Miller's battalion who had died in Iraq. The tombstones were splayed out in a large V on the gym floor. Miller's helmet and rifle were fourth from the bottom on the right-hand side.

I wasn't sure if I could face the Millers, but I felt as if I needed to say something.

I walked up to the Millers with some hesitation, and they saw me. I was carrying a notebook. I figured the Millers would say something cutting, something full of despair, maybe even lunge at me. The father of a woman who had been murdered in Palm Bay, Fla., did that to me once, in the waiting room of the local hospital. Grabbed me and threw me into the door, shouting in my face. I hadn't even asked him a question. I hadn't even gotten his daughter killed.

"We're so grateful to you," Lewis said to me when the service was over, down on the gym floor. "If it weren't for you, we would never have known how our son died."

I guessed he was referring to the article I had written about the battle. My eyes met theirs, but I don't remember too well what they looked like. They looked tired. Exhausted eyes. When I was a kid, I had a friend who shot himself, Pat Galloway, and I went to the viewing, and his mother and father, Bob and Natalie, had the same eyes. All cried out. After he died, the Galloways put Pat's high-school graduation photo on the mantel above their fireplace. I imagined a photo like that of William on the mantel in the Millers' home.

I asked them about Pearland, Tex.

"Pear-land," Lewis said to me, "Pear-land. We're known for our pears."

IV.

I pulled on my running shoes and stepped outside. Running wasn't so easy anymore. By the summer of 2006, my route had shrunk to a fraction of its old self: about half a mile between two posts of armed Iraqis. My old path along the banks of the Tigris, the one I had used since 2003, was finally rendered impassable by several new coils of razor wire. Still, a second stretch of pavement ran closer to Abu Nawas — I could use that. If I ran between the two checkpoints five or six times, I could make five miles.

The guys in the first checkpoint were friendly but not overly so. On the wall of their little white shed, they kept a small photo of a shouting Moktada al-Sadr, the angry Shiite cleric. In the summer, we told the Iraqis who maintained the bureau to carry water out to them. They didn't say much, but I knew they drank it. In the winter, the guards hacked branches from the few trees that remained in the park and burned them for warmth. Once, when I wasn't around, the fire burned out of control, scorching what was left of the grass the Americans had planted the previous year. Everything was like that in Iraq: anything anyone ever tried burned to black.

The northern checkpoint was more official — these guys had uniforms — but it was scarier, especially after dark. The wall, about five feet high, ran from the Tigris all the way to Abu Nawas; there was no getting past it. As I approached on foot, I would often see their heads peeking over the top of the wall. They had a searchlight, which sometimes they turned on when they saw me coming. But usually they left it off, and that was worse. I didn't want to surprise them in the dark. I didn't want them to mistake me for an insurgent trying to overrun their post. I would run right up to the wall and touch it, even in the dark — I needed the distance for my run — and often I could run all the way up to the wall and not one of them would say a word. Often I wouldn't say anything, either. I would run all the way to the wall, and at the last second I would catch sight of one of them, his face level with mine, staring at me in the dark. It would scare the hell out of me. Probably them, too.

Often it was the dogs that saved me. The wild dogs who lived in the reeds down by the river had multiplied and encroached on the park itself. There were dozens of them now, living in the folds of dirt, using the last of the eucalyptus trees to shade them from the sun. At night, as I ran past them, I would set them into a frenzy of howling and barking. The dogs would come up into the road, dozens of them, maybe a hundred. I hated the things — they were so aggressive — but their yipping and yapping often alerted the guards to my approach, and they would switch on their searchlight and see me coming.

Running at night — it was madness. I was courting death or at least a kidnapping. The capital was a free-for-all; it was in a state of nature. There was no law anymore, no courts, nothing — there was nothing at all. They kidnapped children now; they killed them and dumped them in the street. The kidnapping gangs bought and sold people; it was like its own terrible ecosystem. One of the kidnapping gangs could have driven up in a car and beat me and gagged me, and I could have screamed like a crazy person, but I doubt anyone would have done anything. Not even the guards. They weren't bad people, the guards, but who in Baghdad was going to step in the middle of a kidnapping? The kidnappers had more power than anyone.

I had been in Iraq too long. Going on four years. I had lived through everything, shootings and bomb blasts, and I had never gotten so much as a scratch. I guess I was numb. I guess I felt invincible. The danger seemed

notional to me now, not entirely real, something I wrote about, something that killed other people.

The one thing left that I wasn't numb to was the running itself. Running out there on the Tigris, with the dogs, in the dark, in the dying city, was something I could still feel. In Baghdad, the most hopeless of cities, for a few blissful minutes my heart would race.

I approached the second checkpoint. The birds rustled in the eucalyptus trees. The dogs began to yip and howl, but tonight they kept their places. The sky was clear; the streets, blissfully still. An orange moon was rising above the city. Just above the wall was the silhouette of a soldier's head. He was looking, too.

"Good, good!" he said from behind the wall.

V.

In Cambridge, Mass., I go running at night, when the city is quiet. It's quiet during the day; at night more so. After 10 p.m., I run down the residential streets, passing the homes, and listen to the padding of my own shoes. There are hardly any cars. The people of Cambridge have built quiet lives for themselves here, in homes that keep out the sound.

One night, running down a street near the Harvard campus, I encountered a skunk. It was standing in front of someone's house. I had never seen a skunk outside of a picture book. Its hair was soft and black, like a cat's, with the bold white stripe. I stopped to look at it for a while, and the skunk allowed me to do this for several minutes before slinking into some bushes.

Sometime after that, in the afternoon, a hawk began appearing on the Harvard campus, landing on the larger buildings and monuments like Memorial Hall. It was a large, muscular hawk, of the red-tailed variety, with wide wings, and it announced its presence with a shriek. I usually heard it while walking out of Widener Library at lunchtime. I felt as if I were the only person who noticed. The hawk's cry was plaintive but edgy; perhaps he had lost his way. One day, when Widener was closed, the hawk followed me to the law school for a half-mile. The hawk soared past me a few times and landed on a steeple and gave out a cry. By the end of summer, he was gone.

In the library, the chairs are soft and full, a cafe serves French pastries, and at the front door a machine dispenses plastic bags to cover your umbrella when you come in from the rain. Across the yard is Memorial Hall, a gothic structure whose walls are adorned by plaques with the names of 136 Harvard students killed during the American Civil War. One of them was Robert Gould Shaw, who led one of the first black regiments. I saw the names, engraved in marble, when I first arrived at Harvard and took the guided tour. I went back several times after that, but each time I found the building closed.

One day, Ashley, the photographer, phoned. He asked me what I did in Cambridge, and when I told him, he was silent. Ash took the train up from New York, and we went into Widener Library together, and he took a photo of me at one of the long wooden tables, among my notebooks. We got drunk that night, and Ash slept on my couch. He left the next day.

VI.

When I was in Iraq, I might as well have been circling the earth from a space capsule, circling in farthest orbit. Like Laika in Sputnik. A dog in space. Sending signals back to base, unmoored and weightless and no longer marking time. Home was far away, a distant place that gobbled up whatever I sent back, ignorant and happy but touchingly hungry to know. And then I was back, back in the world with everyone else, but not returning all the way. Still floating like Laika among the regular people in the regular world.

For me, the war sort of flattened things out, flattened things out here and flattened them out there too. Toward the end, when I was still there, so many bombs had gone off so many times that they no longer shocked or even roused; the people screamed in silence and in slow motion. And then I got back to the world, and the weddings and the picnics were the same as everything had been in Iraq, silent and slow and heavy and dead.

I flew west to see Billy Miller's mom and dad. I might have gone to Pearland, Tex., where his bedroom was, where his sister, Sabrina, was, and where his name was emblazoned on a plaque in town, but I wanted to see his grave. I flew to Little Rock, Ark., and then rented a car and drove north to Greenbrier, in the foothills of the Ozarks, and Susie and Lewis, his parents, met me there. The Millers were officially still living in Pearland, but since Billy was here, in the family cemetery, they had taken to renting an apartment nearby. When I steered my Chevrolet Cobalt into the June Beene apartments, Susie walked out into the parking lot to make sure I got the right unit. She was wearing a bright red T-shirt with a Marine Corps insignia and Billy's name sewn into it.

The Millers joked and smiled; they talked of Billy and his life, almost as if he were still there. Their good cheer was relentless. They did not flinch. I told them I thought about Billy everyday, about how he had taken a bullet for me and Ash. Stepped in front of us so we could get a photograph. "He was just doing his job," Susie said. "He died doing what he wanted to do." She was ready for that one. I gathered it was a construction, the cheerfulness was, a Potemkin thing, and building it had come at no small effort. Still, it made me sad, even a little frustrated.

We drove out to the cemetery and walked out to Billy's grave. There was a tombstone made of rose granite, adorned by an American flag and a bouquet of plastic flowers. Onto the face of the granite the Millers had emblazoned a pair of photos of Billy — one solemn, the other smiling — which were protected by sliding metal covers the shape of teardrops. The cemetery dated back to the middle of the 19th century, and there were many former soldiers there, and in the back, some slaves. We ate catfish at a local restaurant. The Millers gave me a couple of magnetic stickers they had made up after Billy's death, an American flag and a ribbon and a photo of Billy. "For your refrigerator or car or whatever," Lewis said. I hugged Susie and promised her I would come back, Ashley and I both. Lewis led me through Conway in his truck and out to the Interstate. I pulled over right before I got onto the freeway to shake hands, and I looked back and waved one more time as I merged with the passing cars.

Dexter Filkins, who covered Iraq for The Times from 2003 to 2006, is a staff writer for the magazine. This article is adapted from "The Forever War," to be published by Knopf next month.

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