

He would rather be drunk. He rarely knows the real names of the women with whom he consorts. He frequently complains. He would rather be high. Ask him what he'd be doing if he hadn't taken his current job and he'll say, time and again, "I'd be in trouble like my friends back home — dead or in jail." He is profane, uneducated, impious, lecherous, and unwashed. He doesn't care much about the war. In most cases, he misses his mother badly.

But the American combat infantryman in Iraq is doing just fine. His emotions tamped into a predatory groove by a long night of remotely observing the Milan runways, his reflexes tuned to Pentium speed by his Xbox, he pulses with caffeine, androstene, maltodextrin, sodium citrate, high-fructose corn syrup, nicotine, and a psychedelium of food dyes. He scores a 10 –1 kill ratio when the enemy fights him head-on.

After hours, surfing the online skinmarts, he logs in as Chinaman, MentallySick, SweetThang, watching college girls in Kansas and fleshy female marines in Kuwait disrobe for him before their webcams. In many cases, maybe most, his life in Iraq is safer, freer, and more comfortable than it would have been at home.

Unlike the GI Joes who stormed Normandy, he lacks that lantern-jawed certainty that his enemy seeks global domination. But he's no Hey Joe, either. He left his bong back in the ranch house and his crack pipe in the trailer. He believes he's doing more good than harm. He's not shamming his way home or greasing civilians or fragging his officers. Supply clerks and mechanics around Baghdad might be bugging out on steroids and ecstasy, bugging Iraqis behind the porta-potties and begging for Prozac, but the grunts who do the fighting — a mere 10 percent of America's troops in Iraq — make do with wholesome home cooking: stacks of *Barely Legal* magazines and tubes of Pringles.

His is the 506th Infantry — the same regiment that immortalized itself as the Band of Brothers in Normandy and Bastogne during World War II. Today's Joe in the 506th works in the bloodiest sector in Iraq: the heart of Sunni Triangle bandit country, between Fallujah and Ramadi. The regiment's battle space sees 10 times the national average of attacks on Americans, and some of the units here have taken casualties that rival the ones they suffered in Normandy.

On a cold Thursday night the 3rd Platoon of Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion of the 506th is running a mission called Mad Max: patrolling part of the Baghdad-Jordan highway from an overpass that the Americans have turned into a small fortification. The platoon's 12-hour shift begins at midnight: six hours on the bridge and another six on the road beneath.

Sergeant Hector Rodriguez, a thick-armed squad leader from the Bronx, has stuck on the windshield of his Humvee black letters that read MICHELLE. But this Michelle is no belle. The vehicle, says its gunner, -Gordon Wade, "has been hit three times by roadside bombs and once by a suicide car bomb." It looks very at home on a mission named after a film set in a post-apocalyptic desert.

From the highway overpass, looking out between little sandbag huts too stinking to enter, Wade views a landscape that is almost totally dark. The 8 p.m. curfew in the Sunni Triangle has dried up the traffic on the road below. On one side of the highway there is a village of 50 sleeping houses. On the other side is the still Euphrates. In the dark it is just a flat black mass.

Anthony Cruz is a 29-year-old Texan with a Filipino mother. Half of the platoon's 37 members are Texans or Southerners. Cruz has been posted abroad for four years. He lights a Marlboro. "I don't know if it's because we fucked them up," he says, "or maybe they're taking a break. But the insurgents have been quiet." The night around us is also quiet, except for an occasional cock crowing at this strange hour and sometimes an answering squawk from a radio in one of the vehicles.

Geostrategy and regional politics are other people's business. At the tactical level, on the ground in their sector in the most violent battle space in Iraq, this Band of Brothers is winning. The 500-man 506th takes mortar fire, sniper fire, rocket-propelled grenades, and bursts of small-arms fire every day, but, as Cruz says, things have quieted considerably since last year. Last year the soldiers of the 506th got shot at or blown up every time they ventured out. Now they freely patrol on foot. Their local polling station had a turnout of 55 percent in Iraq's January election — three times Iraq's Sunni average. The 506th's officers attribute the 75 percent decline in violence on their turf to the retaking of Fallujah, the insurgent stronghold 15 miles away. But after more than a month with them I get the feeling that the fighting has also diminished because of the unit itself: its aggressive tempo, its cultivation of local intelligence. Now the 506th mostly contends with roadside and suicide bombs. Suicide bombers have become the main enemy now that the local insurgency, sapped by severe losses, has stopped fighting head-on.

"It's hard for us to get through to Iraqis," says Rodriguez. At 41, he is the oldest soldier in a platoon in which the average age of a private is between 20 and 21. "We're occupiers and liberators at the same time. But what really fuckin' gets me is people who criticize us when they haven't bled for our country. I want to shove them in the faces of the dead kids the Muj have killed."

Phillip "Doc" Krebbs, the platoon medic, another Texan, is already a leader

at 20, although his rank is only specialist — two rungs from the bottom. Krebs is tall, with a fair Irish complexion. He tried college for a few months but smoked too much pot and dropped out. He has just reenlisted in the army for a further six years. "Saddam's time is gone, man," says Krebs. "I'm more interested in studying up on these insurgents. We got to learn more about Syria." He takes a pinch of Skoal from a small hockey puck of dip. Almost half the platoon dips.

Rodriguez is doing his own research. "I'm reading the Koran," he says. "It doesn't say none of that shit about killing infidels and foreigners and all that. It's just like back home: You get these ultra-fuckin'-religious fanatics. When we get posted to Colorado later this year there's going to be guys coming through the barracks on Sunday morning saying, ' You got to get up and go to church: It's Sunday.' "

In a platoon full of slackers, David Nash is the biggest slacker of them all. At 19 he's the youngest, fattest, and laziest, with messy hair, pimples, and a wrinkled T-shirt. When I first met him he was rereading Einstein's theory of relativity; his colleagues were ribbing him about his weight, about missing time at the front line due to illness, about his snide attitude, about the unsoldierly way the laces flopped around his boots.

"I was smoking a fatty-ass joint one time when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints came to my house," says Nash, who is not one of the three soldiers in the platoon who consider themselves religious. "They said, ' Imagine there is a bridge between heaven and hell, and hell is down here...' I said, 'Dude, I am smoking that bridge.' "

On the Mad Max bridge, smoking is allowed only inside cupped palms; smoking in the open might attract snipers. Between silences and the sound of tobacco juice being spat, the huge black sky over the date palms and the minaret of the village mosque pushes the conversation far out beyond the gun trucks and the sand-filled barriers. On a long night watch, the darkness seems to level everything; it feels as if a soldier could be anyone, anywhere, in any time.

Rodriguez: *The Iraqi newspapers are saying there's a giant spider in Fallujah that's eating American marines. That and a pair of winged horses taking our guys away*

Krebs: *We need to decipher that shit if we want to understand these people and win this war. You have to understand that it's all meta-phor. Nobody's that fuckin' stupid.*

Mad Max's midnight-to-noon stretch feels like a day in the 3rd Platoon's life: the snatched sleep, the caffeinated alertness, the enemy you never see, the fear buried beneath a tarmac of tedium and talk. As the night gets colder and colder, the nine soldiers on the bridge sit down inside their vehicles, one by one. Soon only the turret gunners are awake, keeping watch via the green glow of night-vision devices. Through the pixelated optics they see a world that looks like a primitive videogame, dichromatic and on pause, without bad guys.

Sitting on top of Rodriguez's vehicle, Wade chews a mouthful of sunflower seeds and loudly spits out their husks. By his side a radio pops and whines. Back at base I saw Rodriguez taking Wade to see the chaplain. Wade had been mute then, staring at the ground as we passed each other. He'd just learned that his best friend was dying of cancer back home in Boston. Now Wade quietly watches the stars wheeling overhead. In the village, a few hundred yards away, fluorescent lights flicker. But except for the green glow of Wade's night-vision device and the occasional faint orange cherry of somebody's cigarette, the night is still and dark.

By the time the darkness lifts from the bridge it's almost 6 a.m. The Euphrates is a pearly opalescence of yellow and blue. Lines of cloud -mimic the sand bar running down the middle of the river. The sky between the streaks of cloud is blue and yellow, like the water. From the bridge the road is also like the river, with muddy strips like the dark undersides of the clouds. Soon there are tiny flashes of pink on the fish-scale palette: in the vapor trail of a jet, and where the clouds meet the horizon.

The 3rd Platoon is quartered in Soviet-style Iraqi barracks from the 1960s located on a disheveled base called Camp Manhattan. It was once a leafy, well-tended Royal Air Force outpost during Britain's four-decade raj in Iraq. Amenities include a small room with four wired computers, a television area with a loveseat and a table where people clean their weapons, and a little balcony for smoking. There are four porta-potties outside. Camp Manhattan is an infantry base, so there are no women among the 700 men. Food, institutional stuff — broiled chicken and rice, stews, pastas, bologna, pork chops, and ice cream — is trucked into this small forward outpost three times a day from a larger camp outside the wire. The Joes sleep about 10 to a room, with camouflage ponchos strung up between their beds. Most of the few windows are blacked out, because a day here ignores the rhythms of light and dark, and the soldiers grab sleep whenever they can. Everyone has a laptop and games, music, and movies. T&A covers the walls like a dusty mosaic from some lost spring break civilization. The byways are choked with cartons of Pop-Tarts, Kool-Aid, and Oreos; the mothers and kindergarten classes of America see to it that the 21st-century Joe fights on a wicked sugar high. A package of videogames or digital camera equipment ordered

on Amazon will arrive here in just 10 days.

With new missions constantly coming down from the battalion command, and one day in three spent sleeping with their boots on as the base's Quick Reaction Force, the platoon members find that the six or 12 hours of downtime each day are usually as precarious as the uptime is boring. In barracks or in sector, the weird, uneasy boredom passes by on a stream of talk. Appropriately for young men involved in a -nation--building project, philosophical and cultural issues are frequently addressed in a political context, as in "Shut up, you Democrat fag" or "Fuck off, you redneck Nazi." In a month of listening to soldiers make extraordinary confessions and talk about how much they wanted home (for sex, for their parents, for a drink), I never hear a word about wanting out.

One afternoon I'm with Rodriguez, Wade, Nash, and Jonathan -Bailey, a 20-year-old from upstate New York, on the smoking balcony off the -second floor of the barracks. A gunner like Wade, Bailey was wounded in November. He was concussed, an eardrum was destroyed, his cheek was scarred permanently, and he was almost blinded by a wound to his right eye socket. The platoon used to have three Baileys: this one, known as Sniper Bailey, and College Bailey, and a third who was switched out of combat duty.

*Sniper Bailey: I stopped smoking last year, but then I got blown up and started smoking again. They flew me out, and the doctor set me up with a satellite phone. I got through to my mom. "Mom, I got wounded in combat, but I'm okay." Then the line died: click. When I got through again 10 minutes later it took me three hours to calm her down.*

Rodriguez shows me a piece of shrapnel from an IED, a crude roadside bomb. The metal is jagged, and its edges are sharp enough to cut your finger. One side is striated from the explosive it held. It's the size of a Hershey bar. The scars on Bailey's cheek and eyebrow are from one of these bombs. The 3rd Platoon has suffered 27 percent casualties since September, mostly from bombs like this. The IED is a lethal, disfiguring enemy, but a wholly unsatisfying one: Its targets can't kill back and don't get to prove their mettle to themselves or their friends, and if they survive they don't remember a thing. "IEDs, man, these things are our kryptonite," says Rodriguez. "They are so simple, but they are the new technology of our war." As we speak, there is an explosion in the distance.

*Bailey: When I was in the hospital and wanted to come back to the platoon, my parents told me I was being foolish. I just didn't feel right going home with the injuries I had. In the hospital there was only one other infantry guy. Me and him — the only combat guys in the hospital — we were the only fuckers there who wanted to go back to the war.*

The 3rd Platoon has been in Iraq since August. Before that it was based in Korea. The average soldier in the unit has spent only two or three weeks in the States over the past two years. Out of nine wounded soldiers in the platoon, one is still an invalid, four chose never to leave the base, three returned home, and four are trying to get back to the unit.

Nash chimes in: "I could have gone home too. I was in Germany recovering from pneumonia, and they said I could go home. I told 'em, 'Fuck you, I'm not going home. I ain't leaving my friends.' "

His comment seemed tacked on, an afterthought to a conversation among tougher, more willing warriors. A minute or two earlier Nash had been talking about how war was a waste of time. We should, he said, be devoting more resources to space travel, not the war.

Apart from leaving behind the patrols and IEDs and late-night conversations, going back home to Louisiana would have meant Nash's missing a fair amount of one task at which today's ghetto-redneck-dork-jock infantryman truly excels: watching TV with his friends. The central lobby of the 3rd Platoon barracks has a few metal chairs and a sofa made from two wooden freight pallets facing a big satellite TV so cheap that the subtitle function is often turned on for English-language broadcasts. The unit is highly skilled at that essential mission of the stoned and the hungover: watching nature television with sunglasses on. Sometimes it is more like the television is watching them: *This Mexican free-tailed bat is one of over a million in the cave. The noise is deafening. It is no wonder the young bats in the cave want to get out.... When it comes to togetherness, there's no doubt about it: The wild scrubland of Africa has the cutest little carnivores.... These flamingo chicks have no trouble attracting attention on the great, predator-rich plain....*

But most of the flamingo chicks Nash and his colleagues see are on Fashion TV. In fact, most of the people they see are on Fashion TV. The channel plays on the platoon's television like an endless runway show. These soldiers have probably seen more of Milan than they have of Iraq. As the models saunter up and down the far-off runways, the soldiers scan the screen as vigilantly as they do on Mad Max duty. Wade, a valued lookout in his post as an M-240 gunner, has spotted 11 breast popouts in a single hour of Galliano.

One evening I speak to a soldier called Kenneth Eastridge out on the smoking balcony. It's cold out and it's been raining for three days. Eastridge, a 20-yearold specialist, is -going on leave tomorrow. It's almost 5 p.m., and his friends James Farmer and Zach Siebeneck want to go to dinner and get back so they can play a farewell game of *Halo 2* on their Xbox.

Eastridge is slight, soft-

spoken, and goofy, with floppy hair. He's gentle and smart. When I arrived he showed me his *High Times* collection. He seems at first to be a middle-class slacker, a skinny stoner from a nice subdivision in accentless Anywhereville. I wanted to talk to him more, because I liked him and I didn't know if an offbeat character like him could be happy in the military.

*Eastridge: I'm not going to reenlist. I've had a great time, but I can't wait to be out of the army. I grew up on my own, and I never had no rules or people telling me what to do. My mom left me when I was 10. She was a crack addict. My dad would go to work at 5 a.m. and then hang out with his friends. I was all alone the whole time, the only white kid in the projects in our part of Louisville.*

*My dad grew up on a farm, but the government took it away to build a highway. When my mom abandoned me the first time she brought me a videogame one day and said she was going out. She didn't come back for two and a half years.*

*When I was 12 or 13 I shot one of my buddies. I killed him. The news said I shot him over a Sega game. My lawyer told me I didn't have to plead guilty, but I was devastated and I didn't want a trial. I knew what had happened. I pleaded guilty.*

*It brought my mom and dad back together. My mom was a runaway crack addict, and now she has a garden and works for an online shoe store. All because I killed my best friend. Her and my dad moved out from the projects to the country, and they go shopping together and get me *High Times* and *Barely Legal*.*

*My dad taught me how to shoot a .22 when I was four. He took me out to the creek where his family's farm used to be. They had been there for generations. My grandfather was in World War II. He was captured by the Nazis and escaped. The army was different then. I don't know if we could do what those guys did, all that *Band of Brothers* stuff, Normandy and all. But we look after each other like brothers, so I guess it's all the same. You fight for your buddies.*

*After I killed my friend I didn't shoot a gun again until I was 18 or 19. When I smelled the gunpowder I got all shaky-like. I saw him again, looking the way he was after I shot him, this crazy look on his face and a big-ass hole in his chest.*

*That gunpowder smell. That and burning metal. The smell of welding — like, once we had to fix the lights on top of the Humvee — just that smell makes me nauseous. Or the antitank mine that blew up our vehicle when my ears got fucked up. That was the same smell of burning metal.*

*A lot of my friends have been killed back home. I lost three in a month once. One was shot by a guy he'd beaten up in a gang thing. My other buddy was running from the police and wrecked his car. The other one was drunk driving and fucking around and hit a tree. If I hadn't joined up I'd be with those guys. All my living friends are in jail — for murder, for drugs.*

*When I think of home I just think about my family, starting my family. I'm in love, man.*

*I'm getting married in a week or so, in Korea. I can't wait to have kids. My dad has always wanted to have his own body shop. Maybe we'll call it Pony's. That's his name, Pony. I'll have to get used to the smell of melted metal, I guess.*

*My fiancée never left Korea. She might have to move to the States and stay with my parents before I get back. She's scared. She thinks it's like the movies — everyone shooting each other.*

Bangme.net is the Fashion TV of the 3rd Platoon's cyberlife — Bang Me and its online meat-market cousins, hotornot.com and myplace.com. They are places you can go online to see pictures of women, read what they say about themselves, and meet them or the weirdos behind the perky personas. If someone "bangs" you on bangme.net, it means they like your photo and profile and want to be part of your Bang Me string. Then you e-mail each other back and forth and meet in a Wendy's back home. Joseph Baggett, a 20-year-old Tennessee Wiccan, has a 98 percent positive response from 418 women on the site. His Bang Me portrait shows himself without his spectacles, holding erect an enormous M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon in the barracks bathroom. His Bang Me tag is "MentallySick."

The four-screen computer room is packed 20 hours a day with soldiers instant-messaging their women or parents, shopping for pickup trucks, and watching one another coax chatroom hotties into sexual -favors with lines like "Excuse me while I lock the door to my room." The wallpaper on the computers is always changing: a psychedelic pot plant, an Arby's roast beef sandwich that morphs into a vulva, an altered *Family Circus* cartoon with the little blond kid pointing to his dead friend and telling his mother, "I'm Rick James, bitch." A nun smoking a bong, an advertisement for tiffanyteen.com.

As the soldiers surf for knives, baby strollers, old Ford Mustangs, and inflatable German nurses, their talk hangs in the room like smoke, dissipated only when someone is killed and communications are shut down for three or four days while the family is notified. Outside it could be a freezing, muddy night or a warm spring afternoon. In the windowless room

the fluorescent light and the disembodied chill of cyberculture never change. "Check out this site, live-shot.com. You can shoot the fuckin' deer from Iraq and the company will send the meat to your family.... That's a man, dude. That's definitely a man.... Hey man, that slut banged me, too.... This is what I got waiting for me back home. [*On the screen is a photo of a pretty four-year-old girl in a pink tutu.*] Just five more months of good luck and I see my daughter. [*A loud knock on wood*] It's a shame her mother is such a cunt, though.... Jesus, my driver and gunner from when I came here with the 3rd Infantry in the invasion, they just came back to Iraq, got re-deployed — they just got fucking blown up. Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ. [*I hear the soldier breathing in and out through his nose for ages, behind me at his computer while I work at mine.*] Jesus Christ..."

At two or three one morning, alone in the computer room filing an article for the *Washington Post*, I hear Nash talking to Patrick Duhon, an Airborne grad who has been in the service for five years. Duhon, who is clean-cut and squared-away in his demeanor, is Nash's squad leader. His contract is over in a year, and Duhon will not be reenlisting. His vehicle was blown up in February, and he could have gone home, but he stayed with the unit for his recovery and is rushing his return to work outside the wire. The barracks are still as he and Nash speak. They don't know I'm here, listening.

Duhon: *Tell me how you feel about the army, Nash.*

Nash: *I don't care.*

Duhon: *Nash, I hate people who can do so much with their lives and just don't fucking care.*

Nash: *I still don't care.*

Duhon: *Nash, you are the lowest person on our fucking squad. No one wants to take you out with them because you're a pain in the ass. I've been trying to tell you this all year. How would you like it if I said, "Specialist Nash, here's a cherry-ass private and I want you to take charge of him and teach him how things are done," and an hour later I come back and the guy's equipment is still a mess and his pack's packed the way he wanted and everything's all fucked up? The military makes everything real fuckin' easy for you. How come you always got to make it so fuckin' hard? I'm trying to train you up so you can take some fucking responsibility, and you're always fucking fighting back. When I came up, there was none of this "be nice to privates" shit. I'm not going to take it easy on you just because you're coasting through this or I want you to like me. You don't fuckin' look like it, but you have too much potential for that.*

At 3:50 one morning the platoon is getting ready to go out on a mission. The soldiers are going to go to suspected safe houses in the village of Mudiq, five miles from their base, looking for weapons, ammunition caches, and insurgents. "Cordon-and-knock," it's called — a gentler version of a full-on

kick-down-the-door raid. One or the other happens at least once every five or six days.

Soldiers are checking the sights on their carbines, strapping on their kneepads and ballistic eye gear, stuffing their pockets with beef jerky and brownies. The young guys listen to death metal by Slipknot and Coal Chamber; the old guys to Guns N' Roses.

Mounting up outside the barracks, soldiers wearing black wool caps and camouflage bandannas smoke and pack their vehicles. On the building opposite us the shadows of a returning patrol are amplified on the wall by our headlights: vehicles with giant gun turrets, enormous men with rifles swinging in silhouette across the stucco. The soldiers in the 3rd Platoon check that they have battering rams and flexicuffs.

Beneath a fat crescent moon circled by cloud, the soldiers are drinking coffee and Mountain Dew, bumming cigarettes and dipping Copenhagen, fixing masked chemlights to the long antennas of the Humvees and electrical strobes to the backs of the helmets of squad leaders.

In the vehicle, waiting to go outside the wire, Sniper Bailey mentions again that his mother is always beating on him. So is his grandmother. They are Sicilian.

Bailey: *Anyone want a Kiss?*

Lee Brooks ( Bailey's team leader): *Shut up, you fag.*

Bailey: *I can't believe my mom sent me this whole bag of -Kisses. I keep telling her, "Mom, I'm trying to eat right. Send me some healthy shit."*

Wade (who is 25): *Hell, you guys are young. Your metabolisms can handle it.*

Bailey, seriously: *Yeah, that's true. It's not like we're 25 or something. We can eat whatever.*

It's a long, silent wait in the dark in the cold Humvee. Wade's feet are at my elbow as he stands in the turret. The other three are in their seats. Everyone has a cold. We talk about vitamins and whether large quantities of yellow dye number five can make men sterile.

At 5:20 a.m., 10 minutes before we roll, Brooks orders Wade and Bailey to "lock and load."

In the first suspected safe house the interpreter finds a false bottom in a large armoire. The space is empty save a little bit of white -powder, which smells of soap. It's still dark out and the Iraqis inside the house are

disheveled and sleepy. Nobody touches them or raises his voice.

The old man of the house says his 32-year-old son is a taxi driver in Jordan and has been away for five days. The women of the house stand around, watching mutely. Krebbs says, "These motherfuckers are guilty. You know their son was here five minutes before we got here."

I mention to Krebbs that when we got to the house for our "surprise" dawn raid, there was a huge Abrams tank waiting outside. When we went in the front door, no one was blocking the back. "That's the army, man," says Krebbs. "Everything's always all fucked up."

We leave the house with half the contents of its drawers and shelves on the floor. The search was done slowly and quietly, but the place is a mess. The soldiers take a GPS reading of the house's location and radio the names of all the military-age men in the house to base, to check against a database. Nobody checks their IDs to make sure they are who they say. The Iraqis all seem to have the same name, and sometimes it seems impossible to know who is whose brother or cousin or son or father.

By the third house the soldiers start slowing down. The 506th is a light infantry unit trained for air assault; this is not the kind of work that really excites its members. But their sector, which was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's first recruiting stop in Iraq after the invasion in 2003, is an insurgent stronghold. Since September they have taken in five times as many suspected insurgents as their predecessor unit did. More than half of these — a high hit rate — have been sent to Abu Ghraib for further investigation after a screening process in Ramadi.

Toward the end of mornings like this, military discipline tends to loosen. Soldiers sneak smokes down alleys. Nash, especially, gets more and more grubby. The seat of his trousers sags, and the cuffs puddle around his heels.

In an alley off the main road the soldiers check out the twisted axle of the car that blew up their platoon leader, Sergeant Huey, last Veteran's Day. As they talk they take pictures of the gaggle of Iraqi children who have gathered before them. "Man," says Doc Krebbs — whose best friend blew his brains out in a porta-pottie on base and whose platoon leader died in his arms — "that one's real cute."

Rodriguez kneels to talk to the kids, who shyly come to him with sweet smiles. Literacy in this part of Iraq is 35 percent, even lower than in the rest of the country. The tribes of Anbar province have fought against every regime anyone around here can remember: Saddam, the monarchy, the British, the Ottomans. U.S. intelligence officers in this battle space call the area the

southern Alabama of Iraq. The odds are good that these cute children will grow up to be smugglers, petty crooks, or terrorists. The average education level of their parents is fifth grade.

All the members of the 3rd Platoon have high school degrees or GEDs. One has a college degree. "Stay in school, man," Rod-riguez urges the kids. "That's right, -little -buddy, stay in school. Go to college or something. Be a lawyer or a -doctor. No army! No army! That's what I tell my own son. Van Damme? You like Van Damme? I'm Van Damme. Hey, watch it — that's my magazine for my fuckin' weapon! You be good, son. Be doctor, be lawyer."

Wade's best friend dies back home in Massachusetts at the age of 25, of lymphoma. When Wade hears the news he seems almost to be in shock. He can't believe that someone so young could just be taken away, even though it happens around him all the time. Rodriguez has decided to take Wade with him on a drive he has to make to Camp Anaconda, a vast American suburb a hundred miles away, home to a Burger King, a Pizza Hut, and 20,000 cosseted, enervated cooks, clerks, and other Yellow Ribbon heroes. Rodriguez thinks Wade could use a break. The night before they leave, Wade and I talk in the dark on the smoking balcony at the barracks.

*Wade: My friend who just died thought I was crazy when I joined the army. I tried college for a year, but it wasn't for me. Then I worked down at the freight docks in Boston. Now I have a career, direction, college if I want it. A -future when it all seemed so gloomy. I love this job. I'm going to go for Special Forces selection with Doc when we get home, but my family's worried for me. I don't really like calling home. I don't like telling them bad news; they feel so helpless. And I don't like telling lies and just saying the boring stuff. So I don't really call. This tragedy with my friend...*

He chokes up and starts to cry.

*When I left for Iraq he thought I was crazy, and now he's the dead one. It's so fucked up. His dying message to me was, "Keep a smile on your face and an extra one in your back pocket. You never know when you'll need the extra one." I guess I need it now.*

*We've had a lot of losses around here. Half my original squad has been wiped out. I miss them. It's kind of hard not to be angry with these Iraqis. When we got here, all the little kids and the families, we were throwing candy to them. We're giving them candy or medicine and they're putting bombs in the road and taking potshots at us. My other buddy got shot in the throat by a sniper.*

*I remember I was at the hospital and the chaplain came out and told me*

*about Sergeant Huey. I was so devastated. This place seems so miserable. And now my best friend dies of cancer. You go through all these emotions here and you don't expect more of it from back home. "Tomorrow is promised to no one." That's what the chaplain told me.*

In the evenings Nash sometimes looks through a journal that he intermittently writes. These days he doesn't have the energy to write new stuff, even if he's angry. He just reads old entries like this one, which was sparked by an earlier encounter with Sergeant Duhon:

*Situations are strenuous, stressing me out 'til I'm exploding with nothing but hatred. This same hatred that flows through my veins ends up pouring into street drains. Tryin to catch up to a life that keeps runnin' away, but nothing I can do or say to stop it. So I just drop it and start a new one. But I can't, man, fuck I'm tired of these snarling-ass faces putting me in difficult situations in the same fuckin' places, saying I can't stand up and be a man, using their fucking stripes to make themselves seem bigger, fuck that, prove yourselves, throw up when you gotta. You're hardcore, prove it. Swing on me nigga and lose your face so I can show you your true place...beneath me. Like the ground I walk on I'll trample you. We'll see who stands in the end, E-5, E-6 [sergeants' ranks — Duhon is an E-5] fuck that E-Z the same nigga y'all hate, that's right. Bringing the fight to y'all's doorstep. Still goin' strong, lookin' to knock you Niggas COLD OUT. And still I'm goin' strong.*

The night Eastridge left for Korea to get married, I went outside for a cigarette. Nash came up to join me. It was dark out, about 9 or 10 p.m., and almost every-one else was in bed. A couple of days earlier I'd heard Nash tell someone that things weren't too good — there were problems back home.

Nash: *Hey, Bull, what's up?*

Me: *Not much. How about you?*

Nash: *I been better, but I've also been worse.*

For a few minutes we both smoked silently. I sensed that Nash wanted to talk. After the upbraiding I'd heard Duhon giving him, I wondered how he handled a crisis at home while trying to survive a tough army existence to which he seemed so ill-suited. I had asked around a little about Nash. I'd heard that he had been one of the braver soldiers in the platoon's biggest gun battle, in November, and that he was maybe the top marksman in Charlie Company. Fat as he was now, he'd been a nationals-level wrestler in high school. And he was the youngest in the platoon. But with all his talking about space travel and about his own apathy, I was wondering how far he might go with his mental AWOL status.

Nash: *My best friend back home just shot himself. Three days ago. Now I*

*only got one friend left at home who isn't dead or in prison. Just one. Fuck that.*

*Life is fragile. Now I can see it: Life is precious. You can waste it or you can make the best of it. Why spend it on a corner dealing? Why die on a corner selling coke when I can die for my country? I'm so young. I'm only 19; I got so much stuff in front of me. Sergeant Duhon cussed me out the other night. I thought, "Whatever. Screw you, asshole." You know what? Now I'm grateful for what he said to me that night. Shit, if he wants me to be the best soldier in the platoon, I'm grateful that he thinks I can be. I'm grateful that he even fucking cares.*

*There's nothing hard about the army. It ain't even that dangerous for a lot of us, compared to home. It's not even uncomfortable. You should see where half the people in this platoon grew up. Or fuckin' prison. I've seen bad things in Iraq, but I seen bad shit at home, too. One of my friends, we were in a car at a red light and four dudes stopped and lit us up. That was okay: Back home I could get revenge. Here I can't do nothing about it when my friends get blown up. After they shot my friend at the traffic light we went to their neighborhood, some ghetto-ass neighborhood, and took them all out. I killed two of them myself, shot 'em dead.*

*I made a decision a couple of days ago. Like I said, life is precious. I'm signing up for Special Forces selection. It feels so good committing to this thing. I've never seen a future before. It's a sense of clarity like I never had.*

We had gone around the corner to talk and were sitting on the hood of a Humvee. There was no moon, and the stars above us seemed un-usually huge.

*Nash: When I went to the hospital in Germany I was offered 30 days' convalescent leave back home, and then I could probably have stayed in the States. Even then I said, "Fuck that, I'm going back to my friends." Now they're the only friends I have. The people at the hospital tried to talk me out of it. Then they said, "What part of the service are you in?" I said Eleven Bravo — the infantry.*

*They never bothered me again about going home.*