

Freedom Sings USA – James Eyler

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I don't know why am I here...

Who am I to write these words?

Who am I that people would listen?

To be honest...I don't know.

I don't why write this.

Maybe I just hope that someone will listen.

Maybe it's just for me.

#

I was just another kid in a Mark Twain novel, raised on fishing, catching snakes, lizards, and turtles, and ventures to the creek and pond. I didn't get my license until I was 18, which was 5 months after I graduated high school. I never snuck out of the house to go to parties because there were no parties within walking distance. When I joined the Army, I wore the same country naiveté as Jerry's cousin come to town. **I was proud to raise my hand and swear my oath.** I looked at my country with the same innocence as a child that looks to their parents like they belong in a Marvel comic. I was told we were the good guys, our purpose was to promote global justice. Wherever

bad guys roamed, we would hunt them, we would find them, and we would take them out. Swearing my oath was the greatest honor I'd ever been given. I believed in our cause. I believed in our mission. I believed them when they said we were the good guys. We all did.

How dare they lie.

#

"What makes the green grass grow?" the drill sergeants would shout to a hundred young scouts-in-training.

"BLOOD-BLOOD-BLOOD MAKES THE GREEN GRASS GROW," we'd shout, stabbing and slashing with our bayoneted rifles.

"Who are we?"

"THE QUICK!"

"Who are they?"

"THE DEAD!"

"And what do we want?"

"TO KILL-KILL-KILL WITH COLD BLUE STEEL!"

#

It might seem harsh, sick, and demented, but to all the scouts and infantry...those words caress our souls like a lover's serenade. The power, the

energy, the longing to satiate that primal urge. It prepares us for war, and it is in war that the urge is satiated. Turns out the demon doesn't have horns or wings; it has a mirror. When the war is over and we return from combat, it's ourselves we have to learn to live with. That's why so many of us fail.

I was trained as a hunter of men, like on Star Trek, only we sought out new enemies and new bases of operation. My drill sergeant used to say, "I could scout my way up a pig's ass and eat a ham sandwich before he new I was there!", and that's exactly how he trained us to be.

Some people might think that the call to war would be daunting and frightful. It's not. Not to us. Sure, we were worried that we'd never see our families again, or come back maimed. But there's a certain morbidity to honor among scouts; a reason the poem we adopted to represent all scouts begins with, "Halfway down the trail to Hell in a shady meadow green", honors us with, "Marching past, straight through to Hell, the Infantry are seen, accompanied by the Engineers, Artillery and Marine, for none but the shades of Cavalrymen dismount at Fiddlers' Green", and ends with, "...and put your pistol to your head and go to Fiddler's Green". What was our motto? "If you ain't CAV; you ain't shit!" Every part of our existence was to make us into a well-oiled fighting machine—RECON! We weren't sad when the

Towers fell. Well, maybe a little, once the anger faded...and the anticipation. But behind the furrowed brows and turned frowns was a buzzing level of excitement. High-fives and cheers could be heard through the halls. Wolves howling to the scent of prey. After years of training, the moment to satiate that welled up urge had arrived. We were going to war. And why were we going to war? Well...to retaliate against Bin Laden of course, for the attack on the Twin Towers! Which is why we're going to...Iraq?

Wait what?

The mastermind of the Towers came from caves in Afghanistan, why were we going to Iraq?

WMD's they said.

Some bombs and some gas? We'd known for years that Saddam had them, he'd gassed his own people years ago. Why wait? Why now? Doesn't it seem convenient?

*Don't worry about it, the why's of war are echelons above your pay grade. Just do your job.*

Do my job, but what does that mean? It doesn't matter. The wolves are howling and I hear their call.

We land in Kuwait, stock up on ammo and supplies, and head into Iraq,

tip of the spearhead...on the backs of diesel trucks? I could see the hotspots in the thermals, holes in the ground still warm from a recent explosion, so why were we being carried to our objective?

*You ask too many questions, we're at war in the middle of combat. It doesn't matter why we're here or how we get to where we're going. We're here now, and the only thing that matters—right now—is that we all get back. We do our job and we do it well and we all come back. Got it?*

Got it!

It was true. The guys were all I cared about. Sure, I cared about my family, I wanted to see them more than anything in the world—my son, my mom, my dad, and my sister. But while I was in combat, my brothers were all that mattered.

Our first objectives, Dodge and Chevy, explosions and gunshots filled the air.

This was war and there were enemies to kill, urges to satiate!

*Go to this grid location, guard the ammo depot.*

But it's too big. Besides, we're scouts not infantry, too small to guard such a large objective.

*You'll do as you're told.*

Roger.

*Do it now!*

Roger.

The depot was the largest I'd seen, meant to outfit the world's third largest military. Countless mounds of massive bunkers filled with bullets, grenades, mines, artillery rounds, rockets, even Stinger missiles from...Jordan? Raytheon makes those...in America. How many did I see? I don't know, how many can fit in a bunker large enough to hide a submarine?

It was a pretty popular stopping ground for the type of thief that would want a Stinger. We stopped as many as we could, but we knew we couldn't stop them all. The depot was too big for six squads of scouts.

*Leave the depot.*

Roger, when's our relief?

*Leave the depot. Go here, go now.*

But we can't leave all this ammo.

*You will, and you'll kill whoever you see.*

Roger.

Our prey had been found and the howling renewed. What ammo, what depot? There were urges to fulfill.

Until we discovered

The objective was full of Marines.

They waved; we waved, we carried on.

*Forget about that, go here.*

Iran?

*The border. Monitor all traffic on the road.*

The most technologically advanced cavalry unit in the Army, sent to the border of Iran to wait. For what? Keep us out of the way, on standby, anxious and ready to pounce. Five cars in two months.

Three months in combat.

*Four months*, they'd told us before we'd left for the hot sand. In and out with hardly any time to be missed.

*Six months*, they told us when we got to Iran.

Then six became eight.

We knew before we left the Iranian border that we'd spent a year in combat.

Not four, but twelve...

We weren't going home anytime soon.

Those hugs and kisses goodbye suddenly didn't seem like they'd been

enough.

Balad Ruz was where most of us heeded the call of the pack and satiated the primal urge. Raiding houses, pounding faces, breaking ribs, enforcing peace and democracy.

Who's the target?

*Anyone with a shovel on the side of the road.*

A shovel???

*Or on a motorcycle.*

What about scooters?

*Or if you feel threatened at all.*

What about harsh language?

*Shoot to kill.*

For a shovel?

*Shoot and don't stop 'til your target changes form.*

We'd made a name for ourselves in Balad Ruz. Probably after our own 1st Platoon fired upon our roving patrol, killing the XO and wounding three others. One of them was Sgt. Anderson, one of the best NCO's in my platoon. We didn't take the news well. The gunner that shot the 240c was whisked to Alaska as soon as we got back to the US; we never hid our intentions of

vengeance. The lieutenant in charge of 1st Platoon, who'd been commanding the Bradley that killed the XO, was later promoted and given a cush assignment, but that's what happened when your daddy was a high-ranking general, or a senator or some shit. The XO was given a promotion post mortem and his name was later added to the 4ID memorial. The fratricide was swept under the rug worse than a four-year-old cleaning his room and no one ever really heard much about it.

*You ask too many questions.*

I want to know what's going on.

*What you ask is dangerous.*

But...

*What knowledge is worth the lives of your brothers?*

Nothing worth that price.

*Then shut your mouth and man your gun. We all want to get home.*

Balad Ruz had been our proving grounds, where our facade of invincibility was shattered by our own bullets. The commanding general of the Iraq theatre caught wind of my platoon and ordered us to save him in Tikrit.

*We get mortared every night. Your mission is to stop it.*

Roger.

*I don't care how you do it, just get it done.*

What do you mean?

*Whatever you need.*

Can we stay with you in the palace.

*Negative. We can't have your type around here—dirty, dark, and savage. Find whoever's doing this. Just complete the mission.*

Roger.

*Loose the pack.*

Two days was all we needed—one to get there and set up shop, one to let the artillery saturate the area before we rolled in under the cover of night with 1-22 Infantry. We caught most of the targets on the infamous "Deck of Cards". Pretty much everyone but Saddam. He came later, after a long night on OP.

Balad Ruz may have been our proving grounds, but Tikrit was where we earned our reputation.

The day we found the man that eventually would lead us to Saddam, I faced my darkness. I saw this man, this beast, this terror—the women he'd raped, the men he'd killed, and the children...

The chains broke and I let my darkness free.

I don't know what I did to the man. I hadn't been the first to see the demon in my mirror. Not even the second, third, or fourth. But they'd all had it coming in their own right, terrorist, insurgent, bad guy. Righteousness was on our side.

*Fire up the Bradley, we're heading out.*

But we just got back from an OP watching cows. What's the mission.

*You'll find out soon enough. Man your gun, scan your sector, make sure no one get through.*

No one?

*No one. You'll never forget tonight.*

The night was as uneventful as any other OP I'd performed in the past few weeks. Tikrit was quiet. We'd pacified the city. No one wanted to stir the pack. My eyelids were my worst enemy, pulling and tugging, singing their siren's song.

By Odin's beard, I was tired. We all were. The stress. The weight. Eight months in combat, or was it nine?

*We got him.*

Got who?

Trucks sped by, American, up-armored; special ops guys, hanging out the windows cheering.

Got who? Are we done? Can we go back? I'm hungry and I haven't slept.

*You can't tell anyone about what we did.*

About what?

*We got him.*

GOT...WHO?

I saw who at the same time as every other American tuned in to CNN. Dirty rags for clothes, scraggly beard, lost look in his eyes. Saddam Hussein, the great dictator of Iraq. The next time I'd see that piece of shit would be two years later, swinging from the end of a rope.

Tikrit erupted in cheer after we captured him. Over the next three days, jubilation, elation, and happy gun shots rang through the air.

Mission complete. Time to go home.

*You're staying the whole year.*

But we caught the bad guy. The mission is complete. The message written in every porta-shitter in Iraq was no longer a joke—KBR...Keep Bush Rich.

*The mission is far from complete. It's only just begun. You'll be back.*

*We'll all be back.*

Not me. Not ever. I've seen war. I have my mirror. I'm getting out and never coming back.

*Say what you want. You've already tasted the prize at the end of the hunt. You'll always hear the call. You'll always feel that tug. It's not so easy to let go.*

Watch me.

We landed in Ft. Hood and families cheered. Mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, children, boyfriends, girlfriends, brothers and sisters, everyone had someone to hold and kiss, someone's arms to cry into.

Everyone, it seemed, but me.

I'd never felt so alone.

I'm glad I didn't have a gun that night.

Eight months later with sergeant stripes on my collar, right arm held at a ninety-degree angle while I stood in front of the flag that I loved, I swore my oath for the second time. In the end, they'd been right. The call was too strong. I'd been home for a while, I'd done those things that used to make me happy, tasted the dreams I'd longed for in Iraq, but nothing was the same.

Civilian life wasn't all that it was cracked up to be.

How am I supposed to worry about bills and who cares about social etiquette? Don't you know where I've been? Don't you know what I've done?

I'm a hero.

That's what they tell me.

*What happened to that sweet little boy?*

What the fuck do you mean, what happened? That little boy went to war. That little boy loosed his darkness. That little boy died.

*But we liked him, we miss him, we want him back.*

So do I. But he's gone forever. It was the price I had to pay to satiate that primal urge.

*How tragic. How terrible. But at least it's gone. At least you're safe.*

My smile can't reach my eyes. It's as hollow as my soul.

Gone? I wish. How sweet life would taste.

Safe? Not ever.

There's a different war to be fought.

The one I see in the mirror.

As politicians divide the spoils

All that death and danger boils down.

To nothing more than a bunch of Blood and Oil.

SONG—the message: "We were lied to" as well as "combat is addicting"

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\*The focus should be my time in Iraq; the entire section about my training can be reduced to a single line, something like—we were trained to be killers with cold blue steel. The "cold blue steel" will resonate with pretty much every veteran.

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"Every veteran knows what makes the green grass grow."

#

It was the greatest honor I've ever taken

It was the worst thing I've ever done

We went in thinking we were the good guys.

The reason for war is a means to an end.

Nothing is more thrilling than hunting

Swearing my oath was the greatest honor I'd ever been given

I believed in our cause ... I believed in the mission

I believed it when they told us we were the good guys

How dare they lie.

We were trained to be killers with cold blue steel

Just another cog in Free-dom's wheel

We all know what makes the green grass grow

Oil and Blood and the Rich Man's dough ... yeah, yeah.