

## A COMBAT MEDIC IN IRAQ

BY JONATHAN CARP

I met Nick Crombie at Fort Benning, GA, in basic training, three days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. I was 23 years old, a repeat college dropout from a little town in South Louisiana and I arrived with a copy of Samantha Power's *A Problem from Hell* in my backpack. I had been sent to Fort Benning from New Orleans, and to New Orleans from Houma, Louisiana, where I grew up, on the day Katrina formed in the Gulf. When I met Nick I was in a panic. I was waiting to be fitted for boots when on a muted TV I saw what looked like the apocalypse happening sixty miles from my mother's house. The drill sergeants were unhelpful. At best I got jokes about how "Houma" sounds like "homo." That night they made an announcement to the effect that Katrina had obliterated the Gulf Coast and we were to call our families, so I did. No answer.

That went on for two more days then we "shipped down the hill," from Reception, where we had our heads shaved, vaccinations administered and uniforms issued, to our basic training company, C Co, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 47<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Charlie Rock, it was called.

I was the first recruit off the first bus when we got there and did not know anything about anything. They told me to run, so I ran the wrong way. They yelled turn around, and I turned around so abruptly that the weight of my duffel bags- one on my chest, one on my back- knocked me over. One of the drill sergeants snatched me up and shoved me in the right direction. So, I ran that way.

I got to the CTA, or Company Training Area- basically a big concrete courtyard- in the middle of the pack and assumed a spot in formation. "Dump your fucking duffels!" So, I did. "Pick up your laundry bag!" It was stuffed with I do not remember what- we had been given precise packing directions that made very little objective sense. I picked it up. "Hold it over your head!" So, I did.

But they never told us to take it down. It wasn't particularly heavy, maybe as heavy as a jug of milk, but holding it over your head is exhausting after a while. I am 6'6", so my arms are particularly long, and I am not in the least athletic, especially not then. I wore out pretty fast. I was pouring sweat, wondering if my mother was alive or dead, wondering if my hometown still existed, wondering if everyone I knew was alive or dead, and tears and sweat were pouring down my face. That was when I met Nick.

Nick was tall- not as tall as me, not circus tall, but a good, strong male height, just north of six feet. He was pale-skinned and spotted with acne, and he was whispering to me. "Just hang on, man. It's almost done, buddy. It seems like

forever but it's not. They're going to stop any second.” Speaking in formation at this point in my military career was a sacrilege tantamount with peeing on the altar, but there he was, telling me to hang on.

I did not hang on. They started asking who wanted to quit, saying they wouldn't stop until someone quit. At this point I had been holding my laundry bag in the air for what felt like hours, so probably around five or ten minutes. Try it sometime if you don't believe me. I quit. I was a blubbing sweaty mess and I threw my bag down, heard Nick whisper, “Oh no, man, don't quit,” and walked out of the formation. Fuck it. My Army career was all of a week old and I was done.

Of course they didn't let me quit- the military is like the devil, they decide when the contract is canceled, not you- so I got back into formation and went on with training. But I was marked as the Pussy Who Quit, making me a pariah. Nick was two bunks down from me, and he was the only person there who never held that morning against me.

He became our squad leader and we were fanatically loyal to him. We learned he had been in the Army a whole three months longer than we had- practically an eternity. Nick was something out of Captain America. He was asthmatic, and lied about it to get into the service. Lots of people did things like that, but when Nick got caught, he did not just quietly go home. He fought. I didn't have the courage to demand that the Army let me find my mother, but Nick, when he was as new as me, argued with everyone he could find, trying to be allowed to stay in. He stayed in Reception, with no privileges, no status, no freedoms, exercising the only right he had- the right to speak with the next person up his chain of command to appeal the decision of the person immediately below. And he fought, and fought, and fought, and eventually was granted an exception to policy, and shipped to Charlie Rock with us.

Nick was 19 years old, from Winnemucca, Nevada. He had joined the Army to fulfill a childhood dream, but had no desire to remain in the service long-term. He wanted to have the experience of serving as a combat medic, and he had a curiously realistic ambition for a 19 year old kid from a small town. At that age me and everyone else I knew wanted to be rich or famous doing something or other, but all Nick wanted was to be a high school band director.

Nick was a godsend. He understood the Army far better than we did. I remember Sundays in the squad bay, when we were supposed to be cleaning, he was asleep under his bunk. People were grumbling about him, but I remembered his encouragement that first day and his subsequent unfailing kindness, so I thought I would talk to him. I asked him why he wasn't helping. He grinned at me- continuing the Captain America theme, he had this huge, utterly sincere grin that spread over his entire face- and said, “Carp, fuck these people. Who are they? They don't matter. So they're all pissy with me here at basic- so what? It's Sunday, the drill sergeants aren't here, and I'm tired. We won't get any more or less shit from the drill sergeants if the shower drains shine like the sun or if they're covered in shit. They won't promote us or give us medals for having super clean showers. So who cares? Get some rest. Let them talk. Fuck them.”

His wisdom spread through the squad he was assigned to lead. He taught us to concentrate on what mattered- for

me, on physical training- and to do the bare minimum to avoid trouble on everything else. But he wasn't lazy. Not at all. Later in basic and in combat medic school, Nick spent most of what free time he had running with me, doing push-ups with me, helping me get stronger. He never made me feel ashamed. I would reject help from others, because they approached me as if they were superior, as if they were stooping down to help this lowly piece of shit troop who could barely do twenty push-ups. Nick was never like that. He'd lope over to me, grinning, and say, "Carp, let's go run," as if it sounded fun to him, as if all he wanted to do at that moment was go on a run with me. So I did.

We graduated basic training- me by the skin of my teeth- in early November of 2005. Nick was selected to be a part of the graduation "show," in which a few of our number dressed up like characters from *Call of Duty* and, led by a drill sergeant, crept from the woods onto the parade field through a cloud of smoke and to the strains of some godawful hard rock song I can't remember. We teased him a little for this playacting, but he just grinned and said it beat having to march in the formation with the rest of us. It probably did.

When we got to medic school at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, TX, we had more free time and became friends. He was younger than me, but we had a few things in common- we had both been band nerds, we both thought the Army was at times faintly ridiculous- and that was enough in the pressurized environment of combat medic training in the winter of 2005/6. Every week one of our drill sergeants would read out a list of the medics who had died in combat that week, and we would do push-ups in their honor before being released for the weekend. I don't know what the push-ups were for. Drill sergeants give out push-ups like priests give out blessings.

It was a difficult time to be in a difficult school. Combat medic school has one of the higher failure rates of the enlisted technical schools, mainly for academic reasons. Students are expected to go from complete medical neophytes to competent medical generalists in sixteen weeks, capable of managing a broad array of injuries and diseases. We were there while the war in Iraq was reaching its violent zenith, with soldiers dying in fives or tens or more every day. We worked with mock-ups of the horrific injuries we all knew we would soon be facing- severed limbs, spilled intestines, destroyed faces, crushed skulls. The Army at the time trained both men and women- really, boys and girls- to be combat medics but only assigned male medics to combat units. We knew we were going to Iraq, most likely within six months of graduation. Occasionally we would try to reason out why we might not go- hospitals stateside need medics too, right?- but the existence of our female colleagues kept we males from convincing ourselves too effectively. The Army had plenty of medics for noncombat units and stateside facilities. We were going to war.

The burden of this knowledge had predictable results. As the course wore on the antics you'd expect from a bunch of college-age men living together in a barracks changed from anarchic to nihilistic. Vicious fights broke out over minor incidents. I once threw another soldier to the ground and started kicking him in the head because he wouldn't wake up for

his guard shift and the next day mocked his neck brace. Another soldier later punched me in the eye over some spilled foot powder. Towards the end no incident was necessary; fist fighting became an entertainment, a way to blow off steam. We would viciously pound on each other, fights invariably going to the ground where I learned about nasty tricks like fishhooking- exactly what it sounds like, with my fingers inside someone's cheek- and small joint manipulation- essentially trying to break fingers and toes- to compensate for my comparative lack of physical strength. Nick never got involved in all this. He would lose his temper occasionally at something- he had a long string of bath sponges stolen from him until he finally bought the only hot pink one in our barracks, which was, as he predicted, never stolen- but I don't remember him ever taking a swing at anyone over anything. The drill sergeants never got involved either, content to believe whatever outlandish stories we invented to avoid being "snitches." The kid I put in the neck brace said he fell out of his bunk. I explained my black eye as a fall against the showerhead.

Nick was at times overpoweringly sincere. I was at the time engaged to be married to the woman who is now my wife, and like any separated couple, we had some disagreements over the phone. Nick would try to help. He would, with complete innocence and sincerity, try to mediate our arguments based on what he heard me saying into the phone. Mandy, my wife, thought he was being manipulative and intrusive, but when she visited me that winter and met him, she understood. He was just being Nick. He was just trying to help.

He wasn't a saintly ascetic. The drinking and carousing was as nihilistic as the barracks fighting, and with it Nick fully joined in. I was older than Nick, legally permitted to drink, not required to sneak liquor back to hotel rooms. We were on the San Antonio Riverwalk when he bet me I could not finish a 64 ounce margarita in five minutes. If I could, he would pick up our dinner tab. If I couldn't, I would. I couldn't. I finished it in about seven minutes. I don't know why I kept rushing after the time was up; it just seemed the decent thing to do. Anyway, Nick immediately bet me again that I couldn't finish another in five minutes. I am from Louisiana. My honor was being challenged. I accepted. I don't remember much else that night, but Nick got me safely into the barracks and into my bunk. And I never, not for a second, even thought about whether he would or not. It never occurred to me to doubt him.

Nick had this infectious, child-like enthusiasm for goofy fun. We ate breakfast one Saturday morning in the chow hall and thought to smuggle a bunch of individually packaged boxes of cereal back to our wall lockers, to avoid having to go out any more into the cold winter drizzle. But when we got back, around 8am, Nick yelled, "Hey Carp!" and hit me right on the nose with a thrown box of Kellogg's SmartStart. So I did the only thing I could, and took off after him. We chased each other around the squad bay, pelting each other with cereal boxes, laughing like little boys, until some other members of our platoon angrily insisted that we stop all the noise. Nick said, "Fine, whatever," and slouched back to his bunk just the way my eleven-year-old slouches to his room after being scolded.

We graduated from combat medic school in March of 2006 in a quasi-academic ceremony, complete with diplomas distributed as we walked across a stage. We got our separate orders; I was going to Fort Hood, Texas, to join the First Cavalry Division, Nick to the First Armored Division, which was based in Germany and at the time deployed to Iraq. Nick went to Germany, was issued his equipment and shortly thereafter joined his unit in combat. We lost touch, he busy with the war, me getting ready for my turn coming in October. The last time I talked to him was to tell him that Mandy was pregnant; he was so happy for us.

I was at the National Training Center, a thousand square miles of the Mojave Desert where the Army goes to play war, preparing for my upcoming deployment to Iraq when I got a text message from a mutual friend. Nick had been killed by an IED in Ar-Ramadi, Iraq, on June 7, 2006. I got up, walked outside and cried for Nick. I still think about him almost every day. I miss him.

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July 18, 2007, was a normal day in Baghdad. It was well over 110 degrees Fahrenheit, with the air full of humidity from the Tigris. I think I had duty in the aid station that day, but I'm not certain. I know I was sitting in our little smoking area around dinnertime, doing what I spent most of my time overseas doing, what soldiers call "smokin' and jokin'." I was there with a few of my fellow junior enlisted medics and a sergeant from the other battalion that shared our base.

The smoking area was one of the perks of being a medic. It was a little shaded area, between the rubble of what had been an Iraqi communications building and an office building turned barracks the Air Force had narrowly missed. We would sit there in old, white, cracked plastic chairs around a filthy white plastic table and smoke cigarette after cigarette for hours, bullshitting about whatever came up. The cigarettes were usually marvelously cheap Arab brands. I was partial to a Yemeni brand called Ghamdan, which sold for five US dollars a carton. Some of the guys would go to the PX and spend \$30 on cartons of American cigarettes, but I thought they were fools. Sure, the Goddamns, as we called them, tasted like they'd been made with the freshest camel dung, but you got used to the taste and \$5 a carton was unbeatable. Besides, we were trying to rebuild Iraq, right? So why not patronize Iraqi merchants? At \$5 a carton I got to three packs a day before we left.

We were there, chain-smoking and sweating, talking about whatever inanities might come up, when we heard somebody shouting from around the corner. Medics all, we looked at each other to confirm that we'd all heard it, then ran to see what was happening. I saw a person covered in flames, rolling on the concrete, while someone else shouted for help. The sergeant, whose name I cannot remember, immediately ran toward the burning individual and shouted for us to get the

aid station ready.

We ran inside and shouted that there was a fire. We had special fire blankets, fireproof and treated with a special gel intended for use in just this situation. They had been set out in the aid station, but our battalion Physician's Assistant, who was also our acting platoon leader, insisted that they be moved to the supply room. So, we went for them there, and immediately remembered it had just been fitted for a lock to discourage the natural acquisitiveness of the soldier. I ran for the key, came back and saw my platoon sergeant, a more practical man than I, getting ready to kick the door in. He didn't. As we came out with the blankets, the sergeant who had run to the victim was walking in the door with her.

She was Marisol Heredia, and I did not know her well. Most of what I know I learned after the accident. She was a water purification specialist, a soldier whose job was finding clean water and ensuring it remained clean. She was 19 years old, originally from California but had family in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, about a hundred miles north of my hometown. In Baghdad we drank bottled water and used municipal water for all other uses, so she had been reassigned as a fueler. Now her job was to ride around on a fuel truck and refuel the generators that powered our base when the city's electricity went out, which was every day. It was a pretty easy job, right up until it killed her.

The generators were owned by the Atta brothers (no relation to Mohammed Atta of 9/11 fame), Iraqi contractors who owned and operated most of the buildings on our base. They ran a laundromat, a few stores, and eventually opened a restaurant. They also had some sort of hazy connection to organized crime, or so was the rumor. They were allegedly in the prostitution business, acting as pimps for the elaborately dressed and made-up young female interpreters on our base, and also supposedly once told one of our number that we ought not venture into northern Baghdad, as they could not 'protect' us there. I have no idea if any of that is true. I didn't patronize any prostitutes nor knew anyone who would own up to doing so - the rumors were always of officers and senior NCOs keeping them as a sort of harem, I think because only officers and senior NCOs had private rooms. Any ordinary troop bringing a hooker back to his room would have to share with his three or four roommates. Our first sergeant went so far as to call a formation to specifically deny the rumors surrounding him and two of the interpreters. In reality, they were probably nothing more than ordinary collaborators, making a buck off the Americans while we were there.

The generators the Atta brothers owned were designed to be fueled while running, which involves some mechanism to avoid the generator's operating pressure forcing fuel out the fuel intake when it is opened. I am pretty vague on the technical details of the accident. Whatever the precise failure was, the generator Marisol was fueling that day was not functioning properly and regurgitated diesel all over her.

Ordinarily diesel is not particularly flammable. A favorite trick to play on new troops is to drop a lit cigarette into a puddle of diesel. Contrary to expectation, the cigarette will simply go out. Diesel is only flammable if compressed, or in a

vapor. Unfortunately that day Marisol was surrounded by fuel vapors, probably due to the intense Baghdad heat. And she wasn't a fueler, hadn't gone to that course, and did not know better than to pull the nozzle out of the generator when it started overflowing. Somehow a spark, probably from static electricity, ignited the vapor around her, which in turn ignited the fuel covering her.

She was instantly engulfed in flames. David Sedaris wrote a book called *When You Are Engulfed In Flames* that I've never read, because I've seen someone engulfed in flames and it didn't strike me as particularly humorous. She rolled on the ground just as we'd been told in school, and that sergeant ran over to her and, I later learned, put out the flames with his bare hands, burning himself in the process. He carried her into the aid station, which is where I realized who it was.

At first I thought she'd been lucky. I could see that most of her uniform had been burned away and her hair had badly singed, but she herself looked mostly okay from a distance. I breathed an inward sigh of relief as the sergeant brought her to the gurney in our treatment room.

I was completely wrong. She was burned all over. Our battalion's physician's assistant was at the chow hall, so our sister battalion's surgeon treated her, with me assisting. He was calling for morphine, which for some reason he could not access. Someone was sent as a runner to get the PA, so he could give her morphine. While this happened I was with her, doing what I knew to do, putting the burn dressings on her.

It seemed useless. She was swelling visibly, her skin looking hard and shiny, with the top several layers peeling off. Her teeth were black, her tongue was black, her eyebrows and eyelashes were gone. She was screaming, first just agonized howls of pain, but then, as I think she started to understand her situation, words. She was begging to die. "Kill me. Please kill me. Let me die. Please kill me."

I kept opening more of the bandages and putting them on her. I felt stupid and useless. I was supposed to be Doc, the hero, the savior, but I had no earthly idea what to do. I had been trained, sure, but what does that mean? My training said burn dressings, so I applied them, but what do you do when your patient is a nineteen-year-old girl in so much pain she is begging for death? Just apply more burn dressings? That is what I did, at any rate, while the doctor, who had finally gotten some morphine, administered 10 mg of it, the same dosage our PA had given to a senior NCO whom he thought might be having a heart attack, but wasn't. It seemed as stupid and useless as the dressings. Maybe it helped her, I don't know, but at the time everything we were doing just seemed stupid.

Some of my fellow medics came with a stretcher, dressed to take her to the combat hospital. We had to wear all our combat gear to go from our base to the hospital, even though both were well within the heavily fortified green zone, and no rules would be bent this day. They put one of the burn blankets down and we took her to it. Once she laid down we put another burn blanket over her. She immediately shrieked and threw it off. We put it back and she threw it off again. We told

her she needed it- who were we to tell her anything then?- and she told us she'd lay on the one but she wouldn't let the other one be placed on her. What her actual words were I don't remember. She screamed every word.

Her talking was a positive sign. I was thinking through all this on some level as we treated her. The burn dressings were important because the body will continue to cook, like a roast, after the heat source is removed. The burn dressings were supposed to stop that. I don't know if they did. I could not keep them on her because she was thrashing back and forth as she screamed. She could talk, so she could breathe. In medic school they told us that anyone who *says* he can't breathe is by definition lying. I was hoping her burns were just agonizing, not lethal. She was carried out to our ambulance, loaded in with my squad leader, an intrepid Ecuadorian immigrant, in the back to take care of her. They drove away.

I walked back into the aid station and realized everyone who was anyone in the battalion had come to the aid station to gawk. I am sure the assembled captains and majors had some plausible excuse for being there, but truthfully they were just there for the same reason people stare at car accidents. I figured I was going to hear bad things about my performance that day. I knew I had done something wrong, because I felt wrong, I felt stupid and useless. Nobody said much to me, though.

We caught our breath and started cleaning up. Nobody told us to, but we just needed something to do I guess. My roommate and I cleaned up where she had been treated. At first we thought it was a matter of wiping down the gurney with an antiseptic cloth and throwing away the burn dressings and associated wrappers, but then we noticed that bits of Marisol were all over the walls and floor. Everywhere she had touched her skin came off. We tried to sweep them, but they were wet and sticking. We put on gloves and picked them up one at a time. Normally I hate that sort of fiddling work, but I just did it that day, unthinking. It sounds like horrific work, but I just needed something to do. We got the aid station together and ready for the next disaster, and I walked back to my room.

As I walked back, people seemed to avoid me. They looked, but said nothing. I felt like they were accusing me, silently demanding to know why I hadn't done more, afraid I'd be as useless if they got hurt as I was for Heredia. One sergeant stopped me, pulled me into his room and kept asking me how I was feeling and telling me it was "okay to feel." I think he wanted me to break down and sob or something, but I just felt a combination of guilt and emptiness, a feeling that life was senselessly cruel and that this senseless cruelty was somehow my fault. When I got to my room it was empty, my roommates all off on various missions. I sat on my bed and stared for a while, then tried to sleep, but I wasn't tired. I got up and played *Halo*. It sounds callous now and it felt callous then, but I learned in Iraq that life just continues dumbly onward after horrors and tragedies. The world doesn't stop or care, and you have to fill up the time somehow.

So we kept going. People would ask me if she was going to be okay and I would tell them the truth- if she avoided infection, she'd probably live but be terribly disfigured. For the first few days everyone wanted to know if she'd live, how

she was doing, how we were doing. Eventually most people lost interest. I developed a terrible fear of being trapped in a burning vehicle. We had two different models of Humvee, new ones designed from the ground up to be an armored vehicle, the older ones a standard model with armor and locking doors added. Yes, the United States Army went into combat in unarmored Humvees with doors that did not lock. I know guys who were in the initial invasion who say they didn't even have doors, much less armored ones that locked. Anyway, some of the older models had rear doors that stuck and could only be opened from the outside. After what happened to Heredia, I started having nightmares about being in one of these that was burning and pounding on the door, screaming to be let out, while people outside just stared in at me the way they had stared on my way back to my room that day. Eventually I summoned the nerve to refuse to ride in a vehicle I could not exit on my own. At first I got flak about it, but whenever I'd say, "I don't want to burn to death in here," people got quiet and went along with my request. Burning to death had suddenly become a live issue.

We were kept studiously uninformed about Heredia's progress. The privacy of medical information is serious business, so Heredia just disappeared. We heard conflicting rumors- she was fine, she was almost dead, she was horribly disfigured, she looked almost normal- which meant no one knew anything. One day our PA dragged me to a conference on the Green Zone's plan to handle mass casualty events, featuring any number of medical bigwigs representing every medical asset in the area, from the State Department, KBR, and the U.S. Army, and co-starring me, standing off to one side horrified that my division had been in Iraq for nearly a year and they were just now deciding to plan for mass casualty events in very vague corporatese about "assets" and "workflows" and "maximizing return." What if the building I lived in got rocketed to smithereens? They didn't have a plan? But I was just a dumb junior enlisted troop, so I kept quiet.

Leaving this charade, our brigade surgeon- the PA's boss for all things medical- pulled him away from me and whispered urgently to him. I heard "black mold," and "probably not long." He wouldn't clarify anything for me, but I didn't need him to. Heredia was dying.

Another of our medics, a guy named Pagniano who looked and acted almost as stereotypically Italian as his name, started disappearing for stretches every day. He had "that thing," our platoon sergeant called it, and he had to go every day and could not miss it. Some of the other medics started getting resentful, having to cover some of his duties for him so he could go to this mysterious "thing." Pag, as we called him, was extraordinarily ambitious and was constantly out to further his career, and we started to assume this was just another soldier competition or some such silliness. I didn't resent Pag's ambitions, mostly because I did not share them in any form, so his ability to achieve them did not cause any resentment, and I got along with him well.

On Labor Day, Pag and I went to the chow hall to pick up a bunch of meat we'd acquired for a little medic BBQ. As we took the ambulance over to the chow hall- one of the privileges of being a medic- I took advantage of the privacy to

corner him on the matter of his mysterious “thing.” He was evasive until I told him some of the other medics were starting to get irritated with him over it. “What the fuck do they know?!” he exclaimed. He then swore me to secrecy and explained that Heredia was dying and that he was going to be on the detail firing the salute at her memorial service. So that was his thing.

She died September 7<sup>th</sup>. The memorial service was the next day, I think. Our platoon sergeant insisted that we all attend and that we be there early. I know it sounds horrible, but I did not want to be there. Formal mass grieving feels very unnatural to me, more like an exercise in torture than a sincere expression of sadness. But I was ordered, so I was there early, sitting with the other medics in a row.

The wait for the service to begin was surreal. “Hey There Delilah,” by The Plain White Ts, which must have been Heredia's favorite song, played on endless repeat for 45 minutes. At first it was sad, then it was annoying, then it was hilarious. We started quietly singing along. It was hard, though, because people were arriving all the time, and we didn't want to be seen cracking up.

The service itself was a mix of bland and heartbreaking. Her commanders gave very ordinary remarks of the type they will give about anyone who dies, what a great soldier she was and how hard she worked and so on. Her friends broke down mid-eulogy, each one of them. They must have loved her very much. Then came the roll call, which is the most agonized part of any military memorial service. Her platoon was called to attention, and roll was called. Each soldier's name was called, and they each answered “Present.” Then the first sergeant called, “Heredia!” Silence. “Specialist Heredia!” Silence.” “Specialist Marisol Heredia!” And then taps played, and the rifles outside volleyed. And then we filed out, nearly 200 of us, saluting the memorial made from her rifle, her helmet, her dog tags and a pair of her boots. The theater the memorial was held in was the same one in which Saddam Hussein conducted a famous purge early in his reign, calling out names of the damned, who were then executed in the cellars of the same building.

After came the medals. The sergeant who rushed to her and put out the flames was to be given the Soldier's Medal, the Army's highest award for noncombat valor. But he was from another battalion, and it wouldn't do not to give one of our own a medal. The command hit on Pagniano. Supposedly Pagniano had rushed to her along with the aforementioned sergeant and had assisted in putting out the flames. The sergeant got evacuated shortly after Heredia for his burns so was unavailable, but none of the rest of us remembered that happening. We all had to complete sworn statements detailing what we remembered from the incident, and I suppose it was in his that Pagniano first told his story, but I may be wrong.

The simmering resentment towards Pag turned icy. Everyone was sure he hadn't done what he said he did. I personally have no idea. I mentioned nothing about him in my statement, but not because I was certain of where he was or what he was doing, but because I just did not see him at all. Maybe he did run to her and help. I don't know. I'd like to think

my friend didn't lie to advance his career, but everyone else was dead certain he had.

At any rate, he got no medal. I was repeatedly interrogated regarding his movements and actions during the accident by my platoon sergeant, my platoon leader, and the battalion executive officer (the second-in-command). Every time I answered the same way. I did not- and I still do not- know if he did what he said or not. If he did, I am sorry I could not corroborate his story for him. I honestly wanted to; I felt like Pag got a bad rap.

A few weeks after all this the battalion commander caught me in the chow hall and asked me how we were handling things. I answered him completely honestly, which was, I later learned, a terrible mistake. We were doing okay, I said, staying on mission and not talking about what happened much. He called in a combat stress team to talk to us. It was mandatory, and my platoon sergeant let me have it in his most threatening mode, which was very urgent, quiet and stern. I don't know if I ever saw him angrier. "Do not tell the commander anything at all you did not tell me, and do not ever tell him anything about anyone else. Do you understand me?" Yes, sergeant!

We all had to sit in a circle with the combat stress team and relive the incident. Everyone involved was there, including her supervisor, who broke down in tears and sobbed that everyone blamed him but it wasn't his fault. I wanted to tell him it was okay and that I didn't blame him, but the vibe in the room was definitely not sympathetic. Maybe everyone did blame him. He was after all a trained fueler supervising a junior soldier doing a job that was new to her, and that soldier had been killed for lack of proper training. It feels cruel to say, but maybe he was partially to blame. Maybe it was his fault.

The Army is a dangerous job. Of course everyone knows that, with the bullets and bombs, but even outside of combat the Army is very dangerous. We handle high explosives and flammable materials constantly, and the people doing the actual handling are usually the least experienced among us. In the civilian world a skilled member of a HAZMAT team, for instance, will remain in his role for years, acquiring more and more experience and becoming a consummate professional. In the Army, a brand new junior soldier is assigned to carry the explosive artillery rounds, and once he becomes capable and competent, he is deemed ready for promotion and another new troop is assigned to the dangerous job. So fingers are severed, feet are smashed, horrible burns are suffered, all from dumb accidents. Once you're good at your job, you are promoted out of it and someone new is assigned to learn how it's done. It's funny to think about in a corporation or bureaucracy. It can be lethal in the Army. It killed Heredia.

Anyway, story time continued around the circle. We all fumblingly told our tales. I remember Pag telling his- the contested version- and the looks he was getting from some of the other medics. I told mine and looked to the doctor who was there in the treatment room with me that day and who was sitting right next to me for reassurance that I had done the right thing. He gave me a tiny nod.

It may well have been nothing more than acknowledgment that I was talking and looking at him, but that nod was

liberating for me. He was the doctor, and when I said I had tried to do the best I could, my voice trembling and my eyes imploring him for reassurance, he had nodded. I had not failed. I had done my job. It wasn't my fault, I wasn't incompetent, I wasn't a disgrace. If he hadn't nodded I might be a train wreck right now.

I still see Heredia some nights in my dreams, her lips and teeth and tongue blackened, her skin peeling off, her hair scorched, crying out to me. "Please kill me. Please kill me. I want to die."