



June 2, 2009

## REDEPLOYMENT OF THE JEDI

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### PROLOGUE

This journey started almost 5 years ago when I deployed as a battalion commander in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM II. To let my friends and family know that I was still alive and well and had a bit of a sense of humor left, I wrote weekly email letters home. I thought my deployment site in Kuwait looked a lot like Tattooine, the desert planet in *Star Wars*, so I used plenty of sci-fi imagery in my "missives."

When I came home, many people told me I should publish the missives in book form. I thought there was good material, but there had been a lot of information I would have to leave out. I added that information to the missives in italicized font to differentiate the new information from the original letters. *Living on Tattooine (a.k.a. Kuwait)* was the resulting book, which was published in December 2005.

I sold many of the books in the last 3 years, but I always found it most fulfilling when I know the book is going to a fellow soldier. I have gotten emails, letters, and phone calls from those who have received the book. Some have been from soldiers who are deployed, saying they have found the book informative and helpful. Family members sometimes appreciate the book even more because they feel as though they can understand better what their loved one(s) are going through during deployment.

Thus, *Living on Tattooine* has had a successful run, in more ways than one. But I started to realize it was not a stand-alone book. First, I kept talking to recently returned soldiers who seemed to need a shoulder to lean on. Many of them, especially the officers, seemed out of sorts. They had not been the same since they returned, they all said. Had I noticed that problem, too? Boy, had I.

At dinner one night in February, I found myself deep in conversation with a woman I have known for years. She was beside herself over her son, who was currently deployed in Iraq as a mechanic. She told me he had been home on emergency leave because his wife, whom he had married days before he went over, had lost her father. "He was here for 2 weeks, but he was no help at all to his poor wife," she said. "He may as well have stayed in Iraq, for all the support he gave to her. I feel horrible; didn't I raise him better than that?"

I explained to her that, just to make it through a deployment, most soldiers have to turn off their emotions completely. He could not reach out to his wife during her pain because to do so would have been to break the fragile shell that kept him safe in combat. She asked me if I had that shell when I was deployed, and I said yes, that I felt completely numb to any emotion

whatsoever for 3 months after I came home. Once the emotions came back, they came back in an onslaught of conflicting feelings I could just barely handle.

"Why didn't I know that? Why isn't there a book out there that tells family members what to expect?" she asked. Then, during coffee hour after church one day, a fellow parishioner came up and said he had just reread my book for the third or fourth time, and that I needed to do a sequel, or maybe even turn the book into a movie. I thanked him for rereading the book, since to me that seemed like the ultimate compliment, but I told him I did not really want to do a sequel, since to my mind that would mean I would have to go back to "Tattooine." Thanks, but I would avoid that if I could. "You don't have to go back to write a sequel to that book," he said. "I bet you have more than enough stories still in you."

I started to meld the two conversations together and realized suddenly that he was right. The sequel to *Living on Tattooine* didn't have to be set in Tattooine. What if I reconstructed the year after I redeployed,<sup>1</sup> during which time I had to process everything that had happened to me, and reintegrate into the "U.S. Galaxy," as I called it?

This sequel could cover a lot of territory. First, it could serve as a continued processing of what I went through, since looking back on that time period with 20-20 hindsight, I can see I had been suffering from difficulties that were similar to Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS), though I didn't feel comfortable calling it that. What had been so traumatic and stressful about *my* deployment?

Second, this could serve as a reintegration manual for other soldiers who have recently redeployed. There is precious little written about how soldiers of my rank, or officers in general, can deal with their issues and still function as valuable members of the military community. We are expected to "suck it up and drive on," and heaven forbid that any of us show any mental or physical weakness following a deployment. Here is where I could tell people that if they were feeling "out of sorts," they were not alone. I had been there. I had done that. I had a few t-shirts commemorating that fact. Sharing can take the edge off some of the pain we feel but can't show.

Third, this could be a document that family members could read to understand a little more of where their soldier is coming from. I remember listening with horror as a wife said, "I don't understand why my husband is acting so crazy. He wasn't in a combat zone, he doesn't have the right to be so distant with me."

First of all, I had inside information that he had never shared with his wife about where he had been and what he had done, for fear the truth would worry her too much. He'd been in a combat zone all right. Second of all, I knew that deployment itself is so stressful for a commander that the shell must be built just to survive. By the end of deployment, the commander's shell is a thick, hard wall that may take years to tear down.

**Redeployment of the Jedi** may be just one officer's story, but I think it can resonate with others. I have used the same format I used for the first book. There is a missive for each week of the year I came back, in which I describe some of the events I went through, and the emotions I was dealing with at the time. I have added italicized portions, like I did in **Living on Tattooine**.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on the word "redeployment," since I have noticed some confusion about what it means, both in civilian and military circles: "deployment" means to go overseas for a military operation.

"Redeployment" is when a soldier comes home from a deployment. This should not be confused with what happens a lot nowadays, when a soldier deploys again to an overseas location. While it might seem logical that this would be a "redeployment," it is not. The phrase would be that the soldier has deployed again, and it cannot be shortened with the "re-" prefix.

Some of the italicized portions are my observations of my own behavior, looking back with the benefit of hindsight. Other portions are based on my research in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and grieving. This commentary shows that what I went through contained symptoms of PTSD, despite the fact I had not been in a combat situation, as such. I do this to point out that any soldier, regardless of where they are on the battlefield and what their mission entailed, can have trouble integrating what they went through with what is supposed to be their “normal” life.

What I’ve discovered in doing this project makes me realize that deployment and redeployment are life-changing experiences, and failing to understand the sacrifices every soldier has made for his country and his family dishonors the soldier and his or her pain. While it may seem self-important to use the term “Jedi” in describing my story, I do this because it seems appropriate that we treat our returning soldiers with as much respect as we would if they really were Jedi warriors.

*In their book, **On Grief and Grieving**, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler say, “Our society places an enormous pressure on us to get over loss, to get through the grief” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 203). This pressure holds true for returning warriors, but in their case, the loss and grief manifests itself as PTSD. I would contend it does not pay to rush the grieving process for returning soldiers, and instead, that pressure can lead to even more pain.*

I dedicate this book to all those who have served. I am honored to have served with you.

V/R

COL Christine Cook  
Strategic Studies Institute

However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into consideration.

Winston Churchill

## MISSIVE #1

### “Ch-ch-ch-changes”

February 4, 2005

The changes started before we even got onto the plane to come home. My operations officer (I'll call him “Bob”) told me he couldn't handle another minute with my executive officer.

Bob, a loner by nature, who refers to his apartment back home as his Fortress of Solitude (FOS), must have been beside himself the whole year of deployment, not to mention the training time leading up to it. He was not one who relished sharing his sleeping tent with a man who was his exact opposite. His other tent mate was, well, me.

My operations officer is a neat-freak; my executive officer, not so much. I tried to keep my sleeping area and my office straight, really I did, but a thick coating of sandy dust had covered everything I possessed. Bob would sigh every night as he came in, then hide in his little cubbyhole, pulling the shower curtain behind him, since we weren't allowed walls or doors.

The good news for Bob was that, since I was the ranking officer on the plane, I was the Flight Commander, and therefore I could order who sat where. The officers and senior enlisted got the business class seats, and I purposely sat between my two majors.

*Due to my efforts, peace reigned between them for the entirety of the flight. Thank God for small miracles.*

This Flight Commander business was bad news for me. As everyone else got to let their nonexistent hair down, I had to be responsible for the behavior of everyone on the flight.

*The unit I commanded was a battalion headquarters. The rank structure of such units tends to be higher; thus the average age of my soldiers was older. Add to that the fact that National Guard units are known to have older than average soldiers in general. Both the average and the median age of my unit hovered at 40 years. During the course of the deployment, I noticed more of my soldiers dispensing with receding hair altogether, and opting for the highly popular shaved bald look: not my favorite look on a guy.*

*Joy. Rapture. Especially when our refueling site was the Shannon Airport in Limerick, Ireland.*

You don't know how much alcohol a group of soldiers can suck down in 15 minutes till you watch 300 redeploying soldiers who haven't been allowed to drink for a year let loose in the Land of Guinness. I mopped them up, put them back on the plane, and off we went, back to the U.S. Galaxy.

Other changes were occurring around me. It wasn't just my operations officer who was beginning to split apart at the seams. I overheard my faithful and long-suffering driver, whom I would trust with my life, tell everyone in the coach class cabin, “And I will never drive her anywhere again, as long as I live!” Ouch, that hurt.

When we touched down in Bangor, Maine, the Veterans' organization there saluted me as I came off the plane, and one of them handed me a cell phone. “Here, call your family, let them know you're back on friendly ground.” I did so, and my husband picked up on the second ring. “Hi,” I said.

“Are you calling from Ireland?”

Hmm. Was this an Operational Security Violation? No one was supposed to know when we were leaving Kuwait, or our air route. "How'd you find out I was in Ireland?"

It turned out it was all because of a bottle of Jameson's I'd bought for him. The bank called him to ask if a purchase in Ireland could be a legitimate charge to the credit card.

Well, so much for my ability to keep a secret.

He asked me if I wanted the family to be in Fort McCoy when we touched down there and I shouted, "NO!" before I could even think about it. The closer I came to home, the more I realized I wasn't ready to be here.

*Looking back, I realize that I felt like I was in this world but not of this world. I have often heard of people describing out of body experiences, as though they are watching themselves in a movie. It was like I was in a dream, and I really didn't believe I'd returned yet.*

*Worse, in a way I almost wanted not to be back. This feeling struck me as odd, since until I'd gotten on the plane, all I wanted was to be back home. But home was Terra Incognita to me now. I was afraid of what had changed while I was gone.*

*According to Jonathan Shay, in his book, *Odysseus in America*, this feeling is not uncommon to returning soldiers. "When Odysseus arrives home at last, he is disoriented and does not recognize Ithaca. The fact that he doesn't recognize his own homeland is itself a metaphor that many veterans can understand" (p. 3).*

*Granted, Odysseus took 10 years to return home. A lot can change in 10 years, even in ancient Greece. But I was amazed when I discovered how much had changed just in the year I was gone. Just as an example, MP3 players were brand new on the scene when I left. Only one or two people in my unit had one. By the time I got back, both my kids wanted their own iPods.*

I wasn't the only one feeling fear and anxiety about being back home. The chaplains at Fort McCoy seemed to expect this reaction, and spent hours trying to help us with the transition from deployed life in a combat zone to a happy, well-adjusted home life with the family. We watched the documentary, *The Horse Whisperer*, to try to stimulate discussion about becoming parents again. We'd left all this behind over a year ago, and many of us were afraid what we'd do now that we were back.

*I think we also instinctively realized that, at Fort McCoy, we were still with the group of people who could help us re-integrate best. Shay says, "recovery happens only in community" (p. 4), and my unit was that community. Our families, no matter how much they loved us and wanted us back, could never fully understand what we'd gone through, whereas my driver, my executive officer, and my operations officer had experienced almost every waking minute of my last year with me. Once we got home, this community would be scattered across Michigan and would be much harder for me to commiserate with.*

*My driver apologized to me later in the week. "I'm sorry, Ma'am," he said. "I didn't mean it. I'd had one too many drinks on our layover, I was feeling the pressure of all the guys who think I'm your confidante. And, Ma'am . . . I don't want to go home. Please help me. I think my wife and I have drifted too far apart."*

The problem was, I didn't really know how to help him. I didn't know how to face my own family. I tried to extend our unit's stay in Fort McCoy. We want the full physical, I said, not just the precursory one. We want to take our time with the demobilizing process, make sure our records were all straight, talk to the chaplains, maybe sneak in a visit to the psychologist. Meanwhile, the senior leaders, both at Fort McCoy and in the Guard leadership, kept saying, "Hurry up, don't you guys want to get home?"

*In point of fact, no. What I was looking for was some form of cleansing process, to get my soldiers and me prepared to go home and face the unknown.*

*I'm afraid those who have not deployed do not understand the need for returning soldiers to have some time to themselves to regroup. The senior leaders of the National Guard seemed to think that we'd been away for over a year, and we would want to come home as soon as possible.*

*While that is an understandable inclination which is often shared by the returning soldiers, at least until they really are home, I think this tendency toward rushing the return process is unwise and possibly harmful.*

*The ancient Greeks, when they returned home from war, would go through a "Katharsis," which was a religious purification and a medicinal cleansing, the "psychological equivalent of producing clear water from muddy" (p. 153). Perhaps the military should reestablish this kind of cleansing ritual for a week or so before sending the soldiers home.*

I love my husband. I adore my kids. But I wasn't ready to face them.

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
163rd PSB  
Commanding

Happy are they, in my opinion, to whom it is given either to do something worth writing about, or to write something worth reading; most happy, of course, those who do both."

Pliny the Younger

## MISSIVE #2

### “Homecoming”

February 11, 2005

Some may think I did a bad, bad thing, or at the very least, an unwise thing. The day before we officially came back home, I hosted a party for my unit, at the local All-Ranks Club in Fort McCoy. I told my first sergeant I wanted to thank our soldiers for doing the right thing for an entire year, for making me extremely proud, for becoming, to a certain extent, one big (well, maybe we hadn't been happy, but we'd bonded) family. I had in mind a number for the cost, and my first sergeant got to plan it.

We rented the entire bowling alley. We had more food than my folks could eat. And I paid for the drinks. We weren't exactly sure what to do for budgeting that one, and I didn't want a completely open bar, so we settled on a bar tab that would average a maximum of about three drinks per person.

Why was this unwise? Well, I discovered later that “experts” recommend, highly encourage, nay, ORDER returning units not to have access to alcohol. After a year abroad under General Order One, where we were not allowed to drink for the whole year, they say it's not a good idea to reintroduce alcohol to the troops so soon.

*The senior leaders of our military have good reason for establishing this policy. According to Shay, “Chemical attempts to forget with alcohol or drugs – reaching the American Psychiatric Association criteria for dependence or abuse – were sought by 45.6 percent in alcohol and 8.4 percent in drugs” (p. 36) for Vietnam veterans. Those soldiers who suffer from PTSS have an even higher percentage of 73.8 percent and 11.3 percent, respectively (Ibid).*

*By organizing the party, I would seem complicit in this kind of addictive behavior. But what's a commander to do? I wanted to thank them somehow, and honestly, after a year away from it, they were going to drink anyway. At least I was offering a safe space and plenty of food to go with the temptation.*

Well, they didn't tell this lieutenant colonel that. My troops had been good, I'd never caught them with alcohol, though I'm not so naive as to believe they didn't ever touch the stuff, and by God, we're Americans, and this is the first war we've EVER fought where we weren't allowed to drink. I mean, really, wasn't the Revolutionary War, at least in part, caused by us not liking the alcohol tax?

*Maybe it was the way I was raised, but I can't help thinking the pendulum on alcohol use in the military has swung too far in the abstinence direction. As a military brat, I can remember some humdingers of parties put on by generals. I had reason to believe dining ins and dining outs (special unit parties that were either closed to nonmilitary, or allowed spouses to attend) were sometimes complete alcoholic orgies.*

*By the time I entered the military, however, drunk driving and other negative effects of alcohol had forced discouragement of such rabble-rousing. The problem is, however, when alcohol is completely banned from use, it becomes forbidden fruit, and the ban creates more addiction problems than it solves.*

So, we had a party. I think everyone enjoyed it. I'm a horrible bowler, by the way. Some of my troops had way more than three drinks. And I steeled myself for the next day.

Steeled myself? For coming back home? Oh, yes.

I knew I was supposed to be happy to see my family again. I knew I was supposed to be happy to bring all my soldiers home safely, to cheering crowds and banners waving. Too bad I couldn't feel anything. I mean, nothing.

Well, except for the upset stomach from being hung over.

*Steeling myself included taking part in my three drinks as well; vodka tonics. Since I don't drink much in general, and hadn't had alcohol at all for a year, it was a lot more than I should have had. Shay might have told me I was forgetting my pain so as to forget my homecoming (p. 36) Sometimes, truth hurts.*

Our plane touched down near home, and about five officers were there to welcome us and usher us to the buses. We had a police escort through town, with crowds of people lining the street, waving. These people were here for us? They hadn't even seen us leave over 1 year ago at two o'clock in the morning.

Then we turned in to the armory parking lot, and we could see all the people. I thought I would be choked up. But there was nothing.

*I felt completely dead inside. I knew I should be happy that there were people there to greet us, and that all those people loved us, especially a husband and two kids who were looking especially for me. But emotion had completely escaped me.*

*"Selective suppression of emotion is an essential adaptation to survive lethal settings such as battle, where numbing grief and suppressing fear and physical pain are lifesaving. . . . Veterans say in this state they feel 'dead' and that they watch life through a very dirty window." (Shay, p. 39.)*

*Shay pegs the description of how I felt, down to the literally dirty windows on the bus. I didn't think I had earned the dead feeling. As a personnel services battalion commander, I had never actually seen combat. I'd seen a few dead bodies, mostly from traffic accidents (Kuwaitis are notoriously horrible drivers), and I'd drawn my gun a few times, but never had to use my ammunition.*

*I had been, however, in a state of 24/7 high alert. I hadn't been through any combat for the last year, but who was to say what would happen when I turned the next corner? Intelligence sources kept telling us of possible terrorists infiltrating the Kuwaiti border, there were reports of attacks on convoys. So we all had to live with the constant belief that it could happen at any time.*

*In addition, as the battalion commander, I was responsible for the health, safety, and mission of 253 soldiers. I could not show signs of weakness, and I had to hide any emotions I had for the whole year. I could not show anger, or fear, or remorse, although laughter was encouraged. Sadly, the laughter had dried up as well, by this time. Joy was beyond my capacity by the time I reentered the U.S.*

The bus stopped. "The colonel goes first," my first sergeant said. I knew why. It wasn't because he was deferring to my rank; everyone else was too afraid to move.

So I led the way off, and hundreds of people I didn't know swarmed around us. Where was my own family? They must be here somewhere. But I couldn't look for them. This person hugged me, that person hugged me, and finally it dawned on me that, indeed, I did know some of these people. It had just been a lifetime ago. "Where's my family?"

"Up on the top of the hill," someone said, so I started up, still not seeing them. Finally, someone led them to me, and I hugged Ken and the kids, all in one big lump. None of us could find words to speak.

*I honestly didn't know how I'd be greeted by my family. I would not have blamed any of them if they had felt I'd abandoned them. In a way, I had, even though I didn't have much choice in that abandonment. Ken had been a single father for over a year. My kids had been one parent orphans of a sort. As Penelope said to Odysseus, "my pain is as great as yours." (Shay, p. 132.) I was the Prodigal Parent. Would they prepare a feast for me, or leave me in the cold?*

"Ma'am, we have to start the ceremony," someone said, and he pulled me away just when I'd finally found them. He led me into the cacophony on the drill floor.

My first sergeant lined up my troops, and the event began.

Now, National Guardsmen don't stand much on ceremony. But I have never seen the unit look so smart in formation.

And then, they called me up to speak. I had prepared nothing. I kept it short and sweet. "You have come to welcome back your family. Your family has been my family for the last year. Now, I think they will always be a part of me. I deliver them safely back to you. Take good care of them."

Another whirlwind of activity followed, and finally, I found Ken and the kids again. My daughter had been as tall as mid-chest when I left. She reached my nose now. My son also had grown several inches, though the change was not quite as pronounced. They all spoke as though they didn't know what to talk to me about.

"So, would you like to go out to dinner?" my husband asked as he started up the car.

Three hundred sixty five days of breakfast, lunch, and dinner made by someone else was all I could think of.

*Let's see, that was a choice of brown chunks in sauce, bird of the day, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, or hamburgers served with your choice of two overly salted vegetables. Yum.*

"I haven't cooked in over a year. I want to cook. In my own kitchen."

"Great, I have the fixin's for Halibut Tacos."

The thought made me happy. Food from my own recipe, me preparing it, I was finally home. Only, it didn't quite work out that way.

My cat nearly attacked me when I walked in the door. I don't know if it was the smell of the sand and the oil smoke and the lizards and camel spiders and rats, but he bared his fangs, shot his hackles straight in the air, hissed, and got ready to claw my face. I beat a hasty retreat upstairs, got out of the uniform, and into too big jeans and a t-shirt. Boy, did I need some new clothes.

Then I came back downstairs, went to the freezer, and pulled out the halibut. I returned to the kitchen, and my husband pulled the frozen block out of my hand. "I thaw it this way," he said. I stood there, helpless, and watched him prepare the entire meal.

"You don't need me anymore," I finally said. "You've learned to live without me."

He turned back to me, shocked at my reaction. "Honey, we may have learned to live without you, but that doesn't mean we've been happy about it."

*Cooking is a comfort for me, and it was something I had been unable to do for so long. I needed the rituals and routines of mixing my own guacamole sauce, chopping the salsa ingredients, squeezing the lime onto the fish. Why couldn't Ken see why these acts were so important to me?*

*But when I think back now, I can see that he was actually trying to prepare the prodigal parent's feast for me. He was killing the ritual lamb, showing me how he had changed this meal to include some of his own signature dishes. It was his way of welcoming me back.*

*The only problem was, it was so diametrically opposed to my own agenda. I do understand where it was coming from, though. My family had lost me, perhaps for good, a year ago. They had gone through their grieving process already. And now, here I was, back from the dead. What were they going to do with me?*

And so, I settle in, trying to find my place back in this foreign world I used to call home. Something tells me I will find plenty more places where I no longer feel welcome.

That is, if I can feel anything at all.

Till next time—

LTC Christine Cook  
163rd PSB  
Commanding

Happy are they, in my opinion, to whom it is given either to do something worth writing about, or to write something worth reading; most happy, of course, those who do both.

Pliny the Younger

## MISSIVE #4

### Ridiculous to Sublime

February 26, 2005

What else would one do after a year of sucking sand in the desert and subjecting oneself to temperatures as high as 158 degrees? Go on a snow vacation, of course.

There is probably no better place in this world to enjoy a week of snow play than Dillon, Colorado. My mother owns a timeshare there, within a half-hour drive of some of the best skiing around. Breckenridge, Keystone, Loveland Basin, Copper; even Vail is pretty close by; what more could you ask?

And better yet, I'm still on terminal leave with the Army (until March 1), so I'm getting paid for this. I figured it was time to burn some of the cash I'd made in the last year.

As long as I could keep my kids healthy for the trip, that is.

Two days before we were supposed to get on the plane, I got a phone call from the school. Looking at the caller ID display and seeing the school number strikes fear in the hearts of parents. It is never good news. No, this wasn't a "Mom I forgot my homework" call, I knew that on the first ring. This was a "Your child is sick and/or injured, please come pick her up" call. I think the ring tones must be different.

So I picked up, and the school secretary said, "Your daughter isn't feeling well, and she feels warm. I think she might have a sinus infection."

I'll be right there.

Thank God I really was right there, and could pick her up in 5 minutes, I couldn't help thinking. Just a month ago, that wouldn't have been the case. What did Ken do when the school made these calls to him? That was a question that would have to go unanswered, because my husband refused to talk to me about the last year.

D'Arcy was in the nurse's office, looking miserable, when I got there. "Well," I said, we can take you home and spray saline into the sinuses to get rid of the infection, or we can go to the emergency room."

"Emergency room," she said promptly.

Two hours and one antibiotic prescription later, we were out of there, but I couldn't help feeling weird for using the emergency room for this purpose. There was a part of me thinking she wasn't really that sick.

*Even as I was going through this episode, I wondered if her symptoms were psychosomatic. I discovered later that my thoughts were probably right.*

But then, I was a mother who'd been away from my kids for almost a year and a half. Would I know anymore when they were really sick?

Either way, she was well enough to fly a few days later, and so off we went to Denver. My husband's sister and boyfriend live downtown, so we stayed with them for a few days, then headed up the mountain. It's actually lots of mountains, and we went higher and higher, and my daughter complained about the pressure in her head from her cold and the altitude.

But the views were magnificent, as different as I could imagine from Kuwait. Here were pine trees and snow and, well, sand where there wasn't snow. But that was the only similarity.

We could choose from all the ski slopes, we could choose from downhill skiing, snowboarding, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, snowmobiling, ice skating, sleigh rides. . . . And I found myself unable to make a decision. I was overwhelmed by all the possibilities. I couldn't believe it. I spent a year and a half making snap decisions—some might say life or death decisions—and now, with no life or death choices in the vicinity, I was stopped in my tracks.

*When I took the Meyers-Briggs Personality Test a year later, I learned a couple of interesting things. First, I learned I was an INTP, which means I am an introvert, I am intuitive, I am a thinker, and I am a perceiver. This means I get my energy from within myself rather than from other people, I think of the big picture and in the abstract, I tend to think through my actions rather than let my feelings guide me, and I like to gather facts more than I like making decisions.*

*Most leaders in the military are more decision, judging folk, so needless to say, my perceiving nature is not a natural fit with the Army.*

*The other thing I learned during this test is that I am extremely close to middle of the road in my leaning. In other words, there was a good chance on any given day, that I would answer the questions differently on the Meyers-Briggs test, and suddenly swerve into a different set of initials.*

*I'd never seen this part of the test before, but when I did, I had an "aha" moment. I can't tell you how often I go through a personality quiz thinking, well, I could answer this way or this way, and I'm not sure this really fits me, etc. People who know me would often peg me as an Extrovert, for example.*

*And people who saw me on deployment figured I was the ultimate judger. I made quick decisions most of the time.*

*I had to.*

*But after a year of playing a Judger for the military public to see, my Perceiver had had more than enough. My Judger packed its bags and went on extended vacation, because it knew when it was not wanted.*

Finally, I determined the kids should make the decisions. It was their vacation, what did they want to do? They both wrote down separate lists. The most memorable choice was on Paul's list, in his first grade printing—"Snowfuns." Who could resist it? Of COURSE we would have "snowfuns." So one day we downhill skied, the next we cross-country skied. When they didn't want boards on their feet, we went bowling, snowmobile riding, and sledding in inner tubes down icy toboggan-like chutes. We took a sleigh ride to a cowboy encampment and had steak dinners.

*This dinner was nigh on ruined due to deciduous teeth.*

*My daughter had been losing teeth right left and sideways for the year leading up to this point. At the age of 10, kids can lose a lot of teeth. Canines and 2-year-old molars equal a potential for eight visits from the tooth fairy. She had two of those visits in Colorado.*

*She, however, was not my problem child at the cowboy encampment.*

*It was Paul. At the age of 6, he was just starting the tooth-loss phenomenon. I don't know whether it was a form of latent separation anxiety or something else, but three of his front teeth were desperately wiggly. One of them had displaced enough so that it stuck out more like a horn through his lips. But he refused to remove them. They were so wiggly, he refused to eat the steak that night.*

*I wanted to yank it out myself, but it was slippery, he was screaming, and my husband advised that I should not push the issue.*

*Kids.*

We blew a lot of cash.

You know, sometimes it's okay to leave the decisionmaking to a 6- and 10-year-old.

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #7

### "Who, Me? OCD?"

March 19, 2005

Life back in this United States (the U.S. Galaxy) is slowly but surely settling into a routine. My husband has begun to realize he has an ally in getting the kids to and from school and to and from their regularly scheduled activities, and has begun to relinquish some of his control.

He still panics when he realizes he can't make it home in time to pick them up, and then I remind him I'll be home and can do that. I hear an audible sigh of relief every time.

He still makes the kids' lunches. I'm okay with that. He still marches them through getting their stuff ready for school the night before and making sure everything is in backpacks before they walk out the door. I'm okay with that. And we both help put on snow pants, boots, coats, gloves, hats, and mittens in those last seconds before the big yellow monstrosity shows up at the corner of our street.

God, you gotta' love winter in Michigan.

In fact, I DO love winter in Michigan, and I didn't realize how much I'd missed it in the constant days of sunshine, sand, and temperatures over 100. Every day for over 9 months. My winter "snow funs" vacation in Colorado has reinvigorated me. Granted, the over 100 degree days seems to have numbed my nerve endings to the point where I can't feel the cold anymore, so the temperatures don't bother me.

*Looking back, I wonder if this was actually a literal numbing of physical sensation, which matched my inability to feel any of my emotions. Later I would feel cold all the time.*

*Or maybe it's just that the extreme Kuwaiti temperatures wreaked havoc with my internal thermostat that I'm still trying to correct.*

But, let's face it. It's winter, it's cold, it's snowing, and it's time to do some serious . . . knitting.

*Kubler-Ross recommends doing things you love as a form of therapy. "Figure out what rests your emotions and do it without judgment: things like getting lost in movies, TV, music, a change of scenery, a trip away, being outdoors, or just having nothing to do." (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 36.) For me, that thing was, and is, knitting.*

My daughter has a friend who, whenever I am mentioned in conversation, says she can just see me. A mom, dressed in an army uniform, looking all official, with knitting in her lap.

Of course, the fact that she saw this very thing in a picture on a powerpoint presentation I did might have had something to do with her vision.

I used knitting as a calming meditation in Kuwait. I was a little hamstrung getting "my ingredients" but my husband, God bless him, sent me yarn and needles and the pattern for one sweater, I would knit it, block it, complete it, and mail it home, then email him to let him know what I wanted the next project to be.

*I'd normally email my order a few days before I finished a project so that I could always have knitting on hand. I had too little storage room to keep a stash of yarn on hand, so projects had to be mailed home as soon as they were finished, except for the two knitted t-shirts I made, which I wore on my off-days.*

*My long-suffering husband often referred to these yarn orders as wild goose chases. I had to be very specific with what I wanted, or he'd be unable to find it. Often, he had to get the yarn on-line, since local yarn stores were notorious for not having the color or fiber I needed.*

*One time I got an unexpected project from him. I received a panic-stricken email. "Paul has outgrown the socks you knitted for him. He is inconsolable. What do I do?"*

*I emailed back, telling him I had a sock pattern. "Measure the bottom of his feet from heel to toe, take him to the yarn store and have him pick out his favorite shade of Opal yarn. I need size 2 double pointed needles."*

*A week later I received the shipment, complete with the outgrown pair of socks to use as reference. I made the replacement pair in a week, then cut up the old pair and made them into a sock monkey. Unfortunately, because of the tiny size of the socks and the limited sewing supplies I had, the creature looked nothing like a monkey. I wrote Paul to tell him it was a desert kangaroo rat.*

Now that I'm back home, I have no such limitations. I can go to a yarn store anytime I want and find yummy yarns. I can't seem to stop buying them. I can't seem to stop starting new projects. Every week at church choir practice, I have a new project in my hands. My speed in knitting has gone up remarkably.

*There was something almost vicious in the way I attacked my knitting. After about 6 months, however, the anger gave way to tears, and the speed of my knitting went back to normal.*

And I'm wearing all my new togs. I've made 10 sweaters, dresses, or tank tops since I've been back.

Did I just hear someone behind me whisper "Obsessive Compulsive"?

Sure they did. . . .

*A reader for this project emailed me after receiving this missive and said, "So, you gonna knit me a tie?"*

*Ha ha, he thought this was funny. Don't tempt me. I emailed back: "Thick or thin? And what color?"  
Thin. Red.*

*I met up with him about 2 weeks later, and while we exchanged pleasantries, I placed a neatly rolled up 58" red tie in his hand. Be careful what you wish for.*

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #8

### “A Burn in the Hand is Worth . . . What?”

March 26, 2005

Denial can get you far in life. It can also hurt you.

*Denial, through workaholism or alcoholism or drug dependency, might help someone through the day, but in addition to the obvious drawbacks in these choices, Shay points out yet another problem with them. “If you are too successful in forgetting the pain, forgetting the grief, fear, and disgust, you may dry up the springs of sweetness, enjoyment, and pleasure in another person’s company” (p. 39).*

It’s been easy for me to throw myself back into my life and pretend it’s just like how it was before I deployed. I’m back, sleeping in my own bed. The cat doesn’t hiss at me anymore, although he still refuses to sit on my lap, tending instead to warm my husband’s legs. Ken and I help the kids get up and out in the morning. He and I have a good relationship, as long as I don’t bring up the topic of my year away.

I’ve gotten back into my writing and creative pursuits. I write my morning journal pages, take a weekly creativity break, and my friend and I have established a time once a week when we get together, have a leisurely breakfast, chat a bit, then “Shut up and Write” for 2 hours. I’m thinking about turning the missives I wrote last year while I was deployed into a book, since many people have suggested it, but I think it needs a little more background information, and I’m filling in some of the details I couldn’t write about over email.

I continue to lose weight, even now that I’m back, which worries me a little, but everyone says I look good. . . . Well, all except my mom, who likes people with a little meat on their bones, and thinks I look emaciated. Bad news for all of this is, I no longer have anything that fits. Good news is, due to my KOCD (see last week’s missive), I have been rebuilding my new wardrobe with lots of hand-made goodies. But I still need pants. . . .

As for the kids, well, I can deceive myself only so much in this area. My son, Paul, is in first grade. He still sits on my lap every night, which thrills me no end. I was afraid when I came back after a year away that I would have missed his cuddly stage, but he’s still cuddly, just bigger than before.

Ken has complained that according to Paul’s teacher, he’s lagging a bit in his reading ability. “You really need to go in during the lunch hour and read with him,” Ken kept saying, and finally, recently, I got back into the habit. Mr. Schwartz, Paul’s teacher who had also been D’Arcy’s first grade teacher, smiled a big smile when he saw me. “You’re back,” he said. “That’s good. Paul needs you.”

Indeed, Paul is lagging in his reading. Now I’m working with him every day. He sits on my lap as he reads to me, haltingly, with no fluency whatsoever. At least he seems to understand what he’s reading, but here it is, the end of March, and he has just started the first grade reader. I try hard not to think about the fact that, by this time in her first grade, D’Arcy was starting her fourth grade reader. I track with him on the words and help him through the text, as patiently as I can. After a year of trying to do this with him, my husband can’t listen to him anymore. He has to leave the room to keep from screaming out at Paul’s painstaking efforts to form words.

Life was almost back to normal. Almost. I should have seen the warning signs.

D’Arcy, my daughter, is 10. She was the one most hurt by my deployment. Midway through, she stopped speaking to me on the phone when her father called me, and she stopped responding to my emails. She was okay when I came home for R&R, but the night before I had to return, she bawled into my shoulder for more than an hour. “Don’t go, just don’t return!” she kept saying. As though I could do that. Did she think they wouldn’t notice I wasn’t there? What would happen if a lieutenant colonel missed a movement? Wouldn’t my next step be Leavenworth?

Of course, to my daughter, she didn’t see much difference between me being in Kuwait or in prison. At least, with the prison, I’d be stateside.

By December, or maybe it was January, Ken was having some discipline problems with her.

*The biggest issue was when she had cheated on a big pre-test and was caught by the teacher. This event started one of the more serious email volleys between Ken and me while I was gone which ended in a phone call. We needed to figure out a way to ensure cheating did not become a habit. Cheating, and lying in general, is one of my red flag issues.*

*Up till this point in my parenting career, I had dealt with dishonesty by explaining that lying (or cheating) established a breach of trust. In our family, we start with the assumption that you’re telling the truth. If you are caught in a lie, we can no longer trust you to tell the truth. Thus we set up a probation period wherein everything that the child does is monitored to ensure compliance. We say it takes a long time to reestablish trust once it’s broken, so this probation usually lasts 2 weeks – forever in a kid’s eyes.*

*Then, they need to report to us when they’ve been compliant for a week or so, and we spot-check until we decide the trust has been reestablished.*

*In this case, we tried a modified form of this approach, enlisting the help of her teacher. The discussion with the teacher also turned up why D’Arcy had felt the need to cheat – her own distrust of her ability to memorize information. Ken created a study program to help with this memorization process, and when D’Arcy took the post-test, she was the only child in the classroom to get 100 percent.*

Thank God I returned in February, just in time.

At first, she acted like she was happy I was back. But there were signs. There were the mood swings, the times she’d stomp up to her room and slam the door, not coming down for hours.

The denial in me said, “It’s just normal adolescence. The mood swings are telling me she’s going to start her period soon.” That kind of thing.

Maybe I’d been a little harsh that one day. She started being sassy to me, as probably any 10-year-old girl would be to her mother. “I deserve more respect than that,” I said, which is what I would have said, even before I deployed. But I didn’t stop. “The way you’re talking to me, maybe I should just go back to Kuwait.”

Her eyes got big in her face, and I thought she was going to cry. I felt like a horrible mother. But she never sassed me again.

Then there was the trip to the emergency room for the sinus infection that turned out not to be a sinus infection. The cold wouldn’t go away, so I took her to the doctor again.

*Antibiotics did not seem to help.*

She complained of stomach aches.

My denial came crashing down on me this week.

It was mid-week. D’Arcy had a “Winter Survival” field trip. Some winter, I’d thought. It had been warm the last few days, and all that was left of the snow were a few vestigial piles of

icy gunk here and there, mixed in with sand and cinders. She and her group were in charge of the soup, so Ken outfitted her with a Le Creuset dutch oven and a pair of hot pads. "Be careful, the handles get hot on this thing," he warned. "Never touch them without the hot mitts."

She did her typical, "Yeah, yeah," as she headed out the door under her heavy load.

At around 3 p.m. I got one of those calls again. My heart plummeted into my stomach on the first ring, and I checked the caller ID. It was the school. The nurse said, "D'Arcy had an accident during winter survival. She's burned every finger on both hands. The instructor had her hold snow in her hands until she got back here. She's in a lot of pain."

Good God, that dirty snow. "I'll be right there."

I headed out the door, called the doctor on my way to pick her up, and they worked us in between patients, in their back storage room which they normally do not see patients in. While we waited for the doctor, D'Arcy held her hands in a bowl of cold water, tears streaming down her face. I knew it wasn't the best time, but I knew it was the only time.

"D'Arcy, all these accidents, all these trips to the emergency room, do you think maybe you're still mad at me for deploying, but you don't want to tell me that, so instead the anger turns in on you, and you hurt yourself?" Slowly, she nodded. And with that, the spell was broken. "This anger, it's not worth second degree burns on every finger, is it?"

She agreed that it was not, and somehow, I knew the true healing would now begin.

*D'Arcy and I have worked very hard to develop our relationship since this event. I cherish the closeness we currently share. I know many other mothers who do not have such a relationship, and they tell me when she turns 12, 13, 14, this relationship will cease to exist.*

*Age 12 has now passed, she is well into year 13, and we still continue to have very deep, meaningful conversations. She still respects me, and I respect her deeply.*

*My own mother and I never had an adversarial relationship, and she was my most important confidante. I hope I will be able to continue this trend. I never treat it as a given, though. Every day, I strive to have another good day with my children.*

*For my daughter, however, I know that another deployment would shatter the delicate balance. How can she confide in me if I'm not there? It would be a long time, if ever, before I could ever rebuild her trust in me again.*

Till next time —

## MISSIVE #9

### “On Death and Rebirth”

April 2, 2005

The last time I wrote, I neglected to mention that it was Easter Saturday. Since then, Easter Sunday dawned, and attempted to remind everyone here that Life springs Eternal.

The night of the 26th, I put my finishing touches on the Easter dresses I was making for my daughter and me. My mother has always complained that I leave things like this to the last minute, and this time was no exception. Trying to sew complicated dresses within hours of their debut is a recipe for disaster, I realize this. But, the Fickle Finger of Fashion Fate smiled on me that evening, and the dresses came together without too many difficulties, and no tears.

I should mention that it has been a tradition since my daughter was 2 that I have made Easter and Christmas dresses, not to mention Halloween costumes for her each year. The only exception to this practice was last year, and honestly, I might have tried, were it not for the fact that I did not trust my sewing machine to be able to withstand the cruelties of Kuwaiti sand on its delicate mechanisms. I did get a Halloween costume done for her (Lady Liberty) because I was home on R&R just before the big candy fest, but alas, she had to settle for a store-bought Easter dress last year.

I was determined to make up for it this year. So her Easter dress was a concoction of fuchsia satin with lace butterfly overlay. I made myself a dress as well since nothing else fits. Mine was a simpler sheath dress in emerald Chinese brocade, splashed with cream and pink spider mums.

My mother lives in Pennsylvania, but she had not seen me since I got back, and used every excuse imaginable to get out to Michigan to see me on this holiday weekend.

I couldn't help remembering last year's Easter. This Easter came early, one of those rare March days. Last year, Easter was in April, and a drizzly, dismal day it was. "Unseasonable weather," the radio had said, and one of my compatriots said, "Let's thank God for unseasonable weather in Kuwait." He was all for cold drizzle rather than the hot and dry we had had just the week before.

The Easter message of death and rebirth has never resonated more with me than it does this year. Kuwait felt like a year of living on the cross to me. I'm not sure when my symbolic death occurred, but in some ways, I think I still wait for my rebirth.

I am back in the U.S. Galaxy, certainly, but I am not "back" yet. I wonder, as I enter my third month after return, if I will ever get back to normal.

*When asked, in passing, "What does normal look like?" I answer, "It doesn't have a face, and you will never see it, because 'Normal' doesn't exist. We put the fun in 'dysfunctional'."*

*I say it tongue-in-cheek, but it is somewhat like asking that question, "What does 'right' look like?" The answer to that question is, "It depends on who's asking the question." To a military person, right might be dependent upon what the regulations say is right. To a spiritual person, it might be dependent on what the Bible or the Qu'ran or the Torah tells us is right. Shay would also say the military needs to combine "regulation" right with, for lack of a better term, the spiritual, moral concept of what's right, to establish trust in the organization (p. 206).*

*“Normal” is based on a community’s sense of the average. I also think the idea of “normal” blurs with the concept of what is “ideal.” Since the ideal is based on what makes something the best, normal is sometimes an unreachable goal.*

*What a veteran may think is normal is “What I was like before I deployed.” If that’s the definition, then there’s no hope for me; I wasn’t “normal” to start with.*

*For me, I figured normal would be blending back into my routine, being able to function during the course of the day without my thoughts drifting constantly to deployment, and being able to feel my emotions while being able, for the most part, to control them.*

*Okay, I’ll drop the pretense. Feeling normal would have required being able to rewind the clock, so that I’d never have deployed at all. But am I supposed to want normal, or is it better to embrace the new me, the one seasoned by the experience of what has gone before?*

Till next time —

## MISSIVE #11

### “Losing My Religion”

April 16, 2005

I think I'm finally beginning to figure out why I've been so dead inside. I've been losing my religion.

I've never had a conventional view about God. I was glad I'd grown up as an Episcopalian, because my priests were always open-minded men and women who seemed to believe Christians didn't have the whole answer when it came to what God was, and it was okay to borrow the best practices from other religions as I saw fit.

I dated a Muslim in college, and while I realized after a few months that we had irreconcilable differences, I was glad to have had the opportunity to explore his religion. I knew I had to step away, however, when I realized my belief in God was stronger than his, and yet he kept insisting I had to convert to his religion.

Sorry, guy, no dice.

Over the years, I married a lapsed Catholic who eventually got confirmed in the Episcopalian church we attended. St. Clare's is a unique church in that it shares its worship space and grounds with a reformed Jewish temple, a cohabitation which suits me just fine.

And then I discovered the Course in Miracles and the Unity Church.

While I never joined the Unity Church, its concepts appeal to me. The main idea, spiritually, is that we can learn best practices from all the major world religions. This jived with what I'd believed all along. The underpinnings of this religious sect used a thick tome called the *Course in Miracles*, which had a *Bible*-like text and a year-long workbook designed to coach the mind into believing that God was good, God was omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. There was no opposite to God, and the only manifestation away from God was the Ego, which built itself on fear and anger. But Ego was only an illusion, because there is nowhere and no thing where God is not. I loved these theories, but I knew I worked best in the ritualistic, routine structure of the Episcopalian church service. The rote practice took me to a meditative spot wherein I could ponder what God was, and what his will was for me.

Then I was mobilized and deployed to Kuwait in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

This could not actually be God's will for me, could it? First of all, here I was being sent to a war. What was war except the supreme manifestation of anger and fear and the Ego in all its glory? If I were to take the *Course in Miracles'* teaching to its logical conclusion, this war was just an illusion. And yet, here I was, right in the middle of it all, and no matter what I did, I could not get away.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*“Hated by God – this is how many veterans feel” (Shay, p. 55). I didn't feel so much forgotten by Him as ignored when I was deployed. Now that I've come back, I feel more as though the community of God has created its own playground, and the people there purposely play games they know I don't like to play. So that I'll leave.*

*I have tried to speak to the priest about my unhappiness, mostly to no effect. Sometimes the result has felt like, “I don't care what you like or don't like, it's my church and I'll do what I want.”*

*It would be pretty to think it's just my church, but I'm not sure I'd be happy too many other places, either. The Christian trend is more like Born Again stuff, which I have had a knee-jerk reaction against since I was a child. My own Christian beliefs seem antiquated.*

It didn't help me that here I was in the desert, and the desert has many connotations in Biblical mythology. Wasn't it in the desert that the chosen people of Israel had wandered because they could not understand their one true God? Wasn't it in the desert that Jesus was tempted by the devil himself?

I kept wondering what I had done wrong, why I was wandering in this wasteland for a year. Maybe I really didn't understand God myself. It was all a big lie. War is real, it is not an illusion, and God is not here in the desert with you. It's called a desert because of the desertion.

Worse yet, the only church services available to me on Tattooine until near the end of my deployment were born again, praise the lord and pass the ammunition-type services, with follow the bouncing ball hymns and a video/light show atmosphere. These services attracted soldiers in droves, but drove me the other way, as far as possible from the chapel tent.

I'm not a hell-fire and brimstone kind of girl. I'm not a Hallelujah Praise the Lord kind of girl. I'm contemplative, I'm meditative, I'm unconventional, but I liked the structure and routine of my services back home. Luckily, near the end of my time in the desert, I found an Episcopalian priest an hour away from me, and whenever I could, I went to services there. They were few and far between, but they were a welcome respite from the daily monastic life of a wartime soldier.

I welcomed the idea of coming back to my home church, settling into my routine, trying to find my own version of God again. Sadly, that reunion still eludes me.

My church changed priests just before I left. The new one has been leaving his mark. Since I have been back, I have not sat through the same service twice. All the ritual and routine has been stripped away, and I feel abandoned again. To add insult to it all, now we're going through a "discerning" process to determine if we need to add a new, friendlier, more open and liberal-minded service, and I cringe at the thought.

*A common refrain of returning veterans, according to Shay, is, "This wasn't the place they left" (p. 120). I certainly still feel this way. During the time I was gone, a lot of things changed. U.S. citizens became noticeably heavier and less fit. Being away for a year gave me an outsider's perspective of what has changed over the years, and a lot of these changes seem negative. I defended my country, and this is what it stands for?*

*My church had changed, too, so much so that one place where I should have been able to expect solace and routine was giving me the opposite.*

I cannot find God in all this chatter going on around me. The desert closes in yet again, and I see my own cross in the distance. The *Course in Miracles* said everyone will go through crucifixions, and 3 days will pass before the resurrection. It's up to me how long that 3 days will last.

It's been a really long 3 days.

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #12

### “Taking on the Establishment”

April 23, 2005

Since I’ve come back, I find myself at odds with the military establishment in the Michigan Army National Guard.

It came to my attention first when I attended the Michigan Leadership Conference in mid-March. First, the senior leadership unveiled the Command Plan ‘07, which had already thrown everyone for a loop. I had been in the process of creating my Yearly Training Brief (YTB) due in April, when suddenly I’d received an email from my brigade commander saying the YTBs were postponed and all work on the YTBs was suspended until after we knew about this command plan.

I could see why. The entire structure of the Michigan Army National Guard had been tossed up in the air like a salad, and leaves of romaine, arugula, and radicchio had flown everywhere. Virtually every unit in the state would undergo a massive reorganization, and there wouldn’t be a unit left that looked the same.

My personnel services battalion was going away, as I already had known. One of my detachments (the one currently deployed in Kuwait) would also go away upon its return. The other detachment would no longer need a captain at its helm since it would become a platoon. Any command and control with the Adjutants General branch in the state would cease to exist.

The brigade I would join in April went from being an administrative Troop Command unit to being a deployable regional support group.

The changes were the kind of thing that would make people have to amend their 5-year plans, let alone their yearly training plans.

As a recently redeployed battalion commander who had gotten used to the daily changes going on in this Army in Transformation, I had already devised three training plans for my battalion. They were like off-the-shelf contingency plans. I had the “we’re going to de-activate within the year” plan, the “oops, we didn’t mean it, you’re reactivated” plan, and the “not only are you reactivated, we’re mobilizing you again” plan. The incoming 163rd battalion commander had an already tailor-made plan for any situation.

My new job, as S-3 of the brigade (soon-to-be regional support group), would be to supervise the creation of 5-year training plans for all of my subordinate units. I figured every deployable unit would get deployed within 3 to 5 years, so I had in mind to create a basic yearly training plan, a pre-deployment year training plan, and a deployment year plan. If the unit was lucky enough to have more than 1 year before their deployment, they should focus on individual training the first year, then team training the second year, and finally collective training on Year 3. It was the ultimate in plug-and-play. Depending on what year we found ourselves in, we’d use that plan. Year 1 also doubled as the post-deployment year, where the cycle could start all over again.

I was pondering this concept when the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (DCSOPS) got up to talk about the revised plan for annual training. He looked nervous, and soon I figured out why. All our AT plans had to be scrapped, because we were about to go where no Michigan National Guard unit had gone before: we were going to change the training focus with only 6 months to go in the planning process.

Horror of horrors. How dare you change a perfectly faked plan?

*The Army is a bureaucratic organization, and we continue this bureaucracy at our peril. The way the Yearly Training Plan has evolved into a "Check the Block" is a great example. The senior leadership insists on having one, but many M-Day commanders don't have the time, nor do they have the inclination, to really do the process justice. Commanders have the continued desire to look good on paper, though, so their full-timers use last year's plan, updating the dates (sometimes) so it looks good.*

*Sadly, "Leadership truthfulness at all levels means eliminating perverse incentives to look good at the expense of being good." (Shay, p. 228.) I say, either do the YTPs right or drop them altogether.*

I say perfectly faked, because most of these units just used the same plan over and over again. The field artillery units went out into the pucker brush, got into mud up to their eyebrows, and fired off lots of howitzer rounds. And they had a blast, I guess quite literally. The maintenance units found a nice garage where they could fix trucks. Sure, they said they'd be out "in the field" but the field had to be a nice flat place where the trucks could come in and out.

Speaking of trucks, the transportation units liked to go out into the field and baja all over the back roads of Grayling for 2 weeks, if they had the kinds of trucks that could withstand that sort of thing. Some trucks got stuck if you drove them off a flat road surface. Digging out those trucks the rest of AT tended to be a training distracter, so they would usually set up on Camp Grayling itself.

But now, the senior leadership dared to change everything. Since we were a nation at war and the soldiers needed to be warriors first, the plan was to create an annual training where the soldiers stayed in garrison for 2 weeks and performed warrior training and specific Lanes training put on by the joint force headquarters, with help from recently redeployed subject matter experts. When they weren't doing those two things, they could work on unit-specific, mission-oriented training. They were throwing the idea of perimeter security out the window.

The outcry was unbelievable. The poor DCSOPS looked stunned as commander after commander read him the riot act. How dare they change training this close to a training event? How were they going to keep their soldiers gainfully employed with this sort of plan? What kind of training was this?

I sat there, seething. I thought the plan was perfectly acceptable. Having recently been in Iraq and Kuwait, I could tell this was more like what a soldier really would face when deployed. It was important for the unit to be able to do its mission, which this kind of plan would allow the soldiers to train. After all, those field artillery units hadn't gotten to fire their howitzers when they deployed. They went as military policemen. We didn't do perimeter security anymore. Soldiers needed to know how to survive, but if they couldn't perform the unit's mission, that unit was useless to the fight.

*In fact, what I had seen was if a unit couldn't really perform the mission for which it was intended, it really would be considered to be the Security Force (SECFOR) unit.*

Finally, I stood up and said my piece. "If there's one thing every one of us in this room needs to understand, it's the idea that change is a constant. You have 6 months to come up with a new annual training plan. Consider yourselves lucky. When I deployed, I got off the plane, only to be told my mission had changed. This is the wave of the future. Get used to it."

Then I sat down. The room of 250 officers was silent. My heart was beating so hard I could hear it in my head.

At the next break, the DCSOPS came up to me. “Thanks for your vote of support. I felt like an Army of One till you stood up.”

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #13

### “Committing Hara-Kiri”

April 30, 2005

Does music soothe the savage beast? Or does it just open the flood gates?

I am the first to admit that people are usually surprised by my musical tastes. Here I am, a lieutenant colonel in the army, a mother of two children who wears a suit to work, and am usually asked why I’m so dressed up. No wonder my own driver, when I was deployed, was surprised that our daily musical playlist included Nine Inch Nails, Stiff Little Fingers, Siouxsie and the Banshees, U2, and Evanescence.

Not to mention LinkinPark. Especially, near the end, LinkinPark.

In the desert, I discovered their first two albums. Lyrics like, “I tried to give you warning, but everyone ignores me,” or “Sometimes I just need you to stay away from me,” in Chester’s ranting voice, often were just what the doctor ordered after a tough day in Arifjan with the bosses.

This week, I bought their live album. Since their albums didn’t have any curse words and since my kids were curious what I listened to when they weren’t around, I finally let them listen to my new musical addition. Six-year-old Paul seemed noncommittal. D’Arcy, my ten-year-old, immediately struck to the heart of the matter.

“I really like them, Mom. I can scream at the top of my lungs when I sing along and never have to curse. It makes me feel better when I’m mad at the world.”

Indeed. That’s exactly what I like about them. Screaming angst in all its glory. What’s not to like?

*Listening to this music while I was in the sandbox helped me to keep the appearance of rationality. According to Shay, in Greek and Roman times, in “the model of ‘rationality’ . . . any emotion weakens reason and virtue, so root out emotion from your soul” (p. 108). By venting any frustrations out during car rides to and from meetings with my superiors or subordinates. Thus I stripped my emotion away so I would appear rational when it counted. My driver might say that he knew otherwise. . . .*

I’ll tell you what’s not to like.

This week, while the kids were in school, I was listening to the album in the family room, at loud volume, singing along, singing louder and louder until suddenly it all broke.

Everything. All the pain, all the courage, all the fear, all the anger, all the love, all the hate, all the feelings of inadequacy, all the . . . all the . . . I didn’t even have words for all the emotions that suddenly tumbled onto my head and tore through my stomach until I thought I might vomit. I cradled my head in my hands, and tried to cry. I wanted to cry, but that part didn’t come out.

*I know now that what I labeled emotions were actually a bubbling up of suppressed memories as well. The reason my breakdown at this moment was so visceral was because “Human memory is physical in the brain, psychological, social, and cultural – it is all three things at every moment.” (Shay, p. 92.)*

*It is also, when it hits after a year of suppression, completely overwhelming. My head hurt, my stomach hurt, my heart hurt, and I was breathless. Human memory is physical, all right.*

As a battalion commander, I couldn't afford to react to anything around me. So I pushed these feelings deep down inside, and acted like the totally in-control commander I was afraid in my heart I was not. I'd pushed them so deep that they didn't even come up when I came home. Leave it to LinkinPark to finally stir them up.

My emotions were now making up for lost time by coming all at once. They were committing hara-kiri with my gut, with my heart, with my lungs. I wrapped my arms around myself, expecting to have to stanch the bleeding. But there was no blood, just internal wounds.

*Kubler-Ross and Kessler say, "Denial and shock help us to cope and make survival possible. Denial helps us pace our feelings of grief. There is a grace in denial. It is nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle" (p. 10). My body and my mind must have determined that, after 3 months, I was ready to deal with my grief over the deployment.*

*It should not have been surprising that many emotions tumbled down on me that day. That is a symptom of grief itself. "In grief we often have a deep well of different emotions occurring at the same time, which is what makes grief confusing. We don't have to choose which emotion is right or wrong. We can feel each emotion as it occurred and understand that relief is not disloyalty. . . ." (Ibid., p. 33). I could tell that these emotions needed to be processed; I just wasn't sure how to go about that.*

When my husband came home, I went through the motions, acting as close to normal as I could. I'd done that for a year with no one noticing, why not now? But I knew it was the opposite now, and I had to warn him. "Ken," I said, once the kids had gone to bed, "I'm going through something right now, and it's hard. I don't know what to expect. But if I act weird, or whatever, please know it's not you. It's me. And I need to process this."

I'm not sure he understood my message, but I knew what it meant. It meant the hard part of coming home was just beginning.

*I have mentioned before that Shay has written of spontaneous, natural healing. When I look back at my own recovery process, this moment is a significant one. There are some veterans, I think, who never have this moment and keep their emotions under tight wrap the rest of their lives, or they vent the emotional buildup in explosions of rage. "Even without alcohol, stimulants, opiates, or sedatives, some entirely clean and sober combat veterans endure civilian life with all their emotions shut down, except for anger, the one emotion that promoted survival in battle." (Shay, p. 39.) There are others who may experience this Hara Kiri moment and don't recognize it for the opportunity it presents.*

*When I talk with other veterans, at least a few of them have admitted to having this sudden onslaught of emotions. It stuns them when I ask, "Did it happen around the end of the third month after you returned?" Invariably, they have said, yes, it did.*

*In the Aristotelian plot structure, which is a basic plotting device for fiction writers, at the point one quarter of the way through the book, the main character goes through an event which changes the direction of the plot. It is an event the character must respond to, and it launches Act II. I find it ironic, as a novelist, that this Hara Kiri event seems to hit at the quarter point of a veteran's first year back. It is the living embodiment of our reintegration process. If the veteran uses this time as Plot Point I, he or she can proceed to Act II of their healing process. If, however, the message is ignored, the healing process shuts down.*

*I have found the best way to deal with these tumbling emotions as they erupt is to not push them back down, but to separate them and deal with them one at a time. I have tried to assign specific events to each submerged emotion, so that I can honor the emotions and vet their validity for being there. Then, as much*

*as I can, I release them. They are free to come and go as they please, once I have found their place in my personal history. This process has worked for me so far.*

Till next time –

## MISSIVE #15

### “Aviators Without B-Orders”

May 14, 2005

A few weeks ago, I began a rant about the fact that I was infuriated that my commander had decided to hold my unit's Freedom Salute on a weekend when I had planned to attend a writing conference in Florida. Thankfully, she thought better of it, probably the moment she saw my crestfallen appearance over lunch that week. So she changed the date to June 3rd. It's still not a great time, because this means I'm expected to be two places at once, but at least now, it's two army places at once.

And Freedom Salute trumps all other commitments.

So now, I am looking forward to 3 days of fun and sun and writing conference on the beaches of Jacksonville, Florida, next week. But that, of course, means I need to do a substitute training assembly, since my conference falls on my drill weekend.

I don't think, in my entire career, that I've ever had this many STAs in a year. My commander says this may also be the only year that they'll be so understanding of the need for substitute training assemblies, so I should enjoy them while I can. I substituted for March and May, and I know I'll be substituting for July, September, and October, for a variety of reasons, but mostly to make up for things I missed while I was gone last year.

And so, this week I've spent portions of 3 days working in the office in Jackson, as well as a field trip to Lansing, working to put together the yearly training programs and annual training plans for the 63rd Brigade and all its subordinate units.

I think this is the biggest ash and trash brigade, definitely in the state of Michigan, but possibly in the whole National Guard?

*“Ash and Trash” is Army speak for something that has a little bit of everything in it. Instead of a brigade filled with units that are all similar, ash and trash brigades have units with different specialties.*

We are a non-go-to-war command and control headquarters for personnel units, medical units, aviation units, trucking units, quartermaster units, and maintenance units. I know I'm forgetting something. . . .

And right now, three of the units have just redeployed, five of them are currently deployed, and three more are getting ready to deploy.

When I walked in on Monday morning, my long-suffering and overworked full-time assistant, MAJ Mary Rodgers, said, “I have something to show you, Ma'am.” She crooked her little finger to let me know she did not plan to tell me anything. I walked over and looked down at the piece of paper in her hands. I understood her silence as soon as I saw what it was. It was the alert roster for the units that were set to deploy for TY 2007. Of the five that were on the list, four of them were ours – maintenance, trucking, medical, and personnel.

“TY07?” I said, incredulously. “That must be a typo.”

She looked at the paper. “I hadn't noticed that.” She picked up the phone. After a bit of conversation with the Operations director for the state, she hung up. “Not a typo. TY07.”

Wow. I had been given less than 30 days from the point of alert to the point when we moved out. These units were being given an alert over a year before they were set to go.

All was not roses, however. There was a good reason for alerting them this early. Two years into this GWOT process, we'd used up the best units, and were now cutting into the bone. I didn't want to say anything negative about any of the units, but I knew from the personnel unit's perspective, they had deployed the two better units first, and had robbed the 363rd of many of their members to get the other units fully staffed and ready to go.

The trucking unit was in even worse shape. Our state had given a trucking unit to every rotation thus far, robbing Peter to pay Paul from our other trucking units to do it. According to our commander, last time out, Michigan couldn't fully staff a whole transportation company, so they gave two platoons instead, under the flag of our state's unit, but with another platoon and the headquarters coming out of another state. Our state had done this under the express stipulation that we needed a pause on transportation units for the next year or so. So much for that promise.

*If the fallout from the Vietnam War taught us anything, it taught us that filling a unit with individual replacement soldiers is one of the least effective ways to fill the army. According to Shay, to prevent PTSD, "The leading preventive psychiatry recommendation is to keep people together, through training, into a fight, and home again." (Shay, p. 5). If this is a cause of PTSD, ostensibly, National Guard unit members should not suffer from PTSD. After all, these units are supposed to deploy together, after having trained together for years. National Guard units should be the most cohesive units in the U.S. Army.*

*Should be does not always equal are. From the very beginning of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, states have broken units, involuntarily cross-leveling unit members to make complete units. If this had been a 1- or 2-year war, the National Guard might have gotten away with this process.*

*But as the long war continues, the units get less cohesive and more fragmented. This trend may usher in many disadvantages, not least of which could be a soaring rise in soldiers with PTSD symptoms.*

We would need to break two maintenance units to make a maintenance unit that could go this time around. And the medical unit was the worst situation of all.

Currently, that medical unit was actually an aviation unit that was undergoing a transition. We weren't even sure at first if they'd really be going as medical, and MAJ Rodgers made another phone call to make sure.

*"Woe to the leader who starts from the assumption that his men must be kept in the dark on everything except their orders. In the absence of trustworthy information from the leader, they fill in the blanks from their imagination, often imagining the worst." (Shay, p. 53.) The State Headquarters had just emailed this information to us with no explanation. While I'd like to assume the resulting chaos was unintentional, I wonder what they were thinking, not to give us more guidance and instead wait for our calls for clarification.*

*To be fair, though, this was not 100 percent their fault. They'd been given the request for forces from higher headquarters without any clarification, as well. You know what tends to roll down hill.*

There was no MTOE for this unit yet, no mission paragraph, no nothing. So here was a unit that would deploy in a year, and all we knew was that if we didn't get any better information, we'd be having aviators in doctors' slots.

Have I said recently that I love my job as the S3?

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #16

### “Creating a Buzz”

May 21, 2005

Well, the feeling of stomach disembowelment seems to have passed for the moment, although this bout with emotional overwhelm has left me five pounds thinner. Ah well, at least the bathing suit looks good, for a change. And that’s important, because I’m in sunny, though very windy, Jacksonville, Florida, enjoying a writers’ conference in a hotel that’s right on the beach.

I’ve come with a friend of mine, one who, while an introvert like me, is much more outgoing, much more likely to market herself, and she has taken me on as her pet project. She’s been marketing me.

I do have something to sell, actually two things, but I don’t feel very comfortable doing so. One is a murder mystery I finished writing while in Kuwait, the second in my mystery novel series.

*Sales pitch: this novel, Bad Wisdom, finally made it into print in April 2008, 4 years after I finished it.*

The other project, my friend Margaret has convinced me, should be the collection of my emails I sent home on a weekly basis while I was in the desert.

I agree with her that there is some merit to the “missives,” as I have come to call them. I think they need more information to round them out, and I haven’t decided yet whether that would be in footnotes, or at the end of each missive, or between-the-lines, as it were, to explain something readers might not understand while they were reading.

*This was the genesis of Living on Tattooine (a.k.a. Kuwait). When I first wrote those letters, which, looking back now one might have called ‘blogs,’ the original intent was to just let everyone at home know I was still alive, and not to worry about me. Over time, they came to be so much more. Now when I re-read them, I realize they were also an attempt to get down part of my “ground truth” about what I was going through, as I was going through it.*

*Shay says those suffering from PTSD have an obsession to establish that ground truth, an obsession that can lead to death or insanity if we are not careful (p. 87). He likens that search for truth as the Sirens’ call. “The ‘voice’ of the Sirens, scholars tell us, is the ‘voice’ of the Iliad, the voice of a wartime past experienced as more real and meaningful than the present.” (Ibid., p. 89).*

*I guess I was one of the lucky ones. Unwittingly, I documented my ground truth while I was experiencing it, and so I can look at it and know it was not more real or meaningful. It just was. I also know that even as I wrote my truth, it began to change. I injected some humor into it, even when I felt none, because I figured I would laugh at it in 10 years, so why not laugh at it now?*

*In the book, I changed truth even more by commenting on it, thus adding details to it. And now, I do so again as I examine the year after coming back. In doing so, I refine my own story, my own ground truth. This is a life-affirming exercise, and I would recommend it to anyone, most especially returning war veterans. Get to it before it becomes an obsession that could eat you alive.*

Regardless of how I do it, I can tell you, there's a market for it. It doesn't seem to matter to whom we speak, as soon as I mention I've been in Kuwait for the last year, a buzz occurs around me.

Let me give you an example. At dinner last night, we were sitting at a ten-top. Margaret, the outgoing one, decided to raid the dessert table early before the best desserts were gone. She then proceeded to get desserts for everyone else at the table. This maneuver broke the ice. And then, just because she's been doing this all weekend, when we all began to talk about what we're writing, Margaret said, "Chris, here, has a collection of letters she sent home from Kuwait."

You know, it's not every day someone's just come back from Kuwait. But what is amusing about this tactic is, no one figured out immediately why I'd been there. A polite woman from Texas asks, "Well, now, what were you doing in a place like Kuwait?"

"I was deployed there." Silence around the table, although the men all sat up a little straighter in their chairs. Deployed? "With the military." A gasp could be heard from the woman on my right. "In support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM."

At least four incredulous, "WHAT?"s erupted around the table.

And then the questions began. What did you do there? I was a battalion commander. That got some stares. What's your rank? someone was brave enough to ask, and I got a head shake of disbelief when I said I'm a lieutenant colonel. "Are you married?" a Floridian woman asked.

"Not only is she married, she has two small children," Margaret piped up with a smile on her face. She was obviously enjoying the celebrity she had foisted upon me.

The whole group exploded with that one. "A woman ought not to be deployed if she has children," one woman said primly.

"Now, wait a minute," I said. "My driver, a man, left a 2-month old baby at home. I think that's even worse."

"It's different. You're the mother," said one woman. The man next to her said, "But, is it really different?"

This is the kind of conversation I get any time the conversation comes up.

*Shay mentions that a soldier provides a form of entertainment for civilians. "The king asks Odysseus why he grieves, but then doesn't give him even a moment to answer before he negates Odysseus' grief by explaining that the 'big picture' justifies the suffering – as entertainment (p. 16)."*

*I felt like the entertainment, all right.*

*I often wonder what people are thinking when they say women with children shouldn't go to war. They almost act as though they think it hasn't been happening for the past 20 years.*

*I'm here to tell you, it's happening. If these people really cared about women leaving children behind to go to war, though, why don't they educate themselves? Why don't they say something, or protest? Something.*

*I'll tell you why. Because we soldiers are the entertainment. And since people can convince themselves it's just entertainment, they can also convince themselves it's not really real. I have become someone's reality show.*

That's not to say I don't kind of enjoy the celebrity myself. I have one editor who says she'd like to see the first 25 pages of my book. And once I get going on these subjects, I can go on for days.

Meanwhile, my writing is pouring out of me. I can't seem to stop myself. I'm working on two or three projects at once, but the one that seems to resonate the most is one I've dubbed

CATCH 20XX. This is a book I believe will be a fictionalized account of my time in Kuwait. I've been dabbling with it for a few months now, but one of my dissatisfactions, till recently, was that it was from my perspective, and I knew my own perspective was totally skewed. I wanted the people I'd come to adore or abhor to have their own voices, and so I needed a narrator that was omniscient, and loved all the characters equally.

And then it came to me.

I needed God.

But not just any God. I needed a Depeche Mode kind of God, a God with a sick sense of humor.

And as soon as I realized it, the narrator came to me. S/He was all I could call this God, till Margaret got wind of it and told me the word "Ta" in Chinese means him, her, and it. Perfect. S/He-Ta it was. Even sounded a little God-like in a Zen Buddhist Hindi sort of way. And as soon as S/He-Ta had a name, S/He-Ta spoke through my hand and on to the page.

*Personally, I think S/He-Ta was an answer to one of my prayers. I know I have been dealing with a sense of abandonment—I have been abandoned by the Christian God of my youth. During my deployment and since, I have railed against this abandonment. I have wanted to stop believing in God. But in my heart, in my soul, I know I need that superior being to believe in, or I will never heal fully. It's like Alcoholics Anonymous – you must believe in a higher power, or the cure may never fully take hold. I needed a God I could believe in. I find it ironic that the narrator I created for Catch20XX is that God.*

Today, I was enjoying a Saturday afternoon coffee break at an outdoor table at Starbucks, doing a free-writing session with Margaret, getting to know S/He-Ta's voice and thinking all was right in the world, until I watched a man walk past. He was dressed in desert camouflage pants and a brown army t-shirt, his hair and beard matted down into dreadlocks, a vacant stare on his face. He scratched his cheek as he stood in front of the coffee house door, then rooted through his cargo pockets and the Alice pack on his back, trying to find a buck or two for a cup of coffee.

*Here was one of the war wounded. According to Shay, "Veterans with combat PTSD are war wounded, carrying the burdens of sacrifice for the rest of us as surely as the amputees, the burned, the blind, and the paralyzed carry them (p. 4)." While I could not physically see any wounds on this man, I could feel them. They were palpable to me.*

Margaret whispered, "Vietnam vet?"

I shook my head. "Desert camo, too young in the face. That's an out of work OIFer," I said, knowing with certainty I was right. I dug through my own purse, looking for a couple bucks to offer him, but when I looked up again, he was gone, taking a little part of me with him.

*I am still haunted by this man. I feel as though maybe I could have done more for him. Maybe instead of looking in my purse for the money, I should have caught his eye and engaged him in conversation. Maybe he didn't need or want the money. Maybe he would have appreciated my acknowledgment of his existence.*

*I threw my dice, I took my chance, and when I looked up, he was gone. I thought," There but for the grace of God, go I."*

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #17

### “Catching Up On What I’ve Missed”

May 27, 2005

I am thinking of the last birthday I had in the United States. The day before my birthday, 2 years ago today, seemed like it’d lead to a good day. I had given my husband a list of things the kids could buy for me, little things I hoped would organize my life in some way. My husband isn’t good with birthdays; in fact, he isn’t good with dates in general, so I was trying to help. Then I told him he could drop me off at the gym, so I could work out for a few hours while he did the requisite shopping, and then he could pick me up when he was done.

I should have known there was a problem when he picked me up and the kids chattered on about the archery practice range that was just down the street. But I, fat, dumb, and happy, thought they were just talking about that as a decoy.

The next morning, as the kids were getting ready for school, I asked Ken, “Should we do my presents at breakfast, or should we do it when you come home from work?”

“Presents?” he said.

I thought he was joking.

“Yeah, you know, happy birthday to me?”

He turned white, I swear to God.

“Don’t tell me, you didn’t get anything for my birthday.”

“Uh,” he stammered. “I will, I swear.”

So, for my 39th, he forgot my birthday. And he knew he’d never live it down. Especially when, the next year, I wasn’t even there to celebrate my 40th. Ken bent over backward to try to make the birthday I spent away from my family a special day. He probably felt he had to, knowing he’d forgotten the year before and now I was half a world away. Even before the big day, he sent a huge package, filled to the brim with presents. He wanted to make sure I got my gifts. This time.

And so, now, I sit, on the eve of my 41st birthday, and instead of thinking of birthdays, I think of ways I can catch up on what I’ve missed over the last year.

This was a good week for it. I went on not one, but two field trips with my daughter, making up for all the ones last year. I think D’Arcy appreciated the effort. At least, she had the good grace to smile up at me as we walked at the farmer’s market in downtown Ann Arbor, and to stick close by me the whole time.

*A teacher told me around this time, “Oh, you’re D’Arcy’s mom. I knew you must be home, because I saw her smiling again. She never smiled while you were gone.”*

*I think deployments of mothers are hardest on puberty-aged girls. The other day, someone asked a 14-year-old if she missed her mother while she was gone, and the girl burst into tears. This, from the daughter of a woman who was convinced her child had weathered the deployment unscathed.*

We were looking at a jewelry stand, at the hand-beaded earrings. She wanted to buy a necklace for herself with the \$20 I’d given her. Lacking all subtlety, she suddenly turned to me and said, “When’s your birthday?”

"The 28th, this week," I replied. Then she shooed me away, and went over to a couple of friends. They huddled close for a few minutes, and then she went over to the jewelry maker and returned a few minutes later, looking very pleased with herself.

The other escapade was a full-day trip to Greenfield Village. We ate together on the grass, sharing a picnic lunch of sorts, then walked to the farm, watched glass being blown and silk being spun from the silkworm pod. Again, D'Arcy stuck close to me, except for the time when she was on the bus going to and fro.

Since there was no room for parents on the bus, I carpooled with some of the other mothers.

They chatted while I sat in the back, knitting. As a mother who had not been a mother for a year, I wasn't really sure what to talk to them about.

*At this point, I had gotten really bad at small talk. "Acts of war generate a profound gulf between the combatant and the community they left behind." (Shay, p. 152.) I tried, really I did, but I couldn't think of much to say. And honestly, I think this tongue-tied problem cut both ways. What does a civilian say to a returning vet? "So, how was the war?"*

One mother complained about her own daughter. "She has that 10-year-old girl attitude, you know what I mean? Like I can do no right. I just want to throttle her throat."

The other mothers agreed, while I tried to make myself invisible in my seat. She must have noticed, because the mother turned to me and said, "What about D'Arcy? Is she ever like that?"

I shook my head no. "She started that when I first came back, but I told her I deserved more respect than that. And I think she prefers me being here, rather than in Kuwait."

I realized it was true. Finally, an actual advantage to having been deployed. My daughter had literally skipped a normal adolescent development, solely because I hadn't been there for her.

I wondered how long that development would last. But I could not think of a better birthday present than that.

*"Some veterans never allow themselves satisfaction of a job well done because there's always something else that could hurt them." (Shay, p. 97.) Somehow, through some force of will or just sheer dumb luck, my daughter and I were able to patch our relationship up pretty well within a fairly short time of my coming home. I cherish every minute that we have the good relationship. But I am always afraid that this joy will be fleeting.*

*I am also not a fool. As I've said before, I know my relationship with D'Arcy is just one more deployment away from complete destruction. I'm not exaggerating when I say she would never speak to me again. This is a fact that weighs heavy on me, especially when I know the Reserves and National Guard have evolved into an Operational Force with an average dwell time of 3 years.*

*When will I have to go again?*

Till next time —

What you focus on you will feel; what you focus on determines your direction in life; what you continually focus on, you will get.

Tony Robbins

*A note about my signature block and tagline. You might notice that, although I'd officially given up command of my battalion on April 1, it took till the end of May for me to reflect that change on my*

*emails. I might not have done it even then, except I got a one-line response to an email I sent to my brigade commander: "You need to change your signature block."*

*She was right, of course, but I really didn't want to give up my role of mom to my unit. I knew the official change of command ceremony would happen next week, but I would never really be able to give the unit to my successor. Thus, the resulting irony of the quote below my signature block. Just what did I think I was focusing on?*

## MISSIVE #18

### "A Salute to Freedom"

June 3, 2005

Yesterday I was sitting in the generals' mess hall at the top of Wilson Hill in Grayling, Michigan, with 150 or so other NCOs and officers. There was no food; we were sitting in rows awaiting the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (DSCOPS) section of the Joint Force Headquarters Command, Michigan, to brief us on AT Site Recon.

MAJ Rodgers, who sat next to me, and our logistics and training Sergeant Major, who sat next to her, were sweating. She fanned herself with the stack of papers that had been passed out. One of the enlisted soldiers went around opening windows to let the breeze in.

Me? I wasn't hot. It couldn't have been more than 80 in this room, and frankly, that's half the temperature I started to get used to in the desert last year.

That is so sick and wrong on so many levels, I can't begin to tell you.

I really didn't want to be here.

Here it was, the first weekend in June, and lovely weather, and the last thing I want to do is the Army thang. So, instead, I thought back to Saturday morning. Early a.m., I got up and drove the 3 1/2 hours to Grayling in time for this 0800 briefing. Felt like old times. I woke up at 3:45 every morning I was in Kuwait, so why not now?

I stopped at the Cook Road exit to refill the gas tank. I was in my uniform and I happened to notice I'd parked behind another group of soldiers. They filled up, got themselves some coffee, and were getting back in their car when two trucks pulled up on the other side of the pumps. Out stepped some older guys dressed in fishing gear.

Although they parked across from the other soldiers, they completely ignored those guys, and instead made a beeline for me. One guy, in a navy Vietnam vet cap, long gray hair, and a grayer beard, reached out his hand and said, "Thank you so much for your service to our nation, soldier."

I turned to shake his hand and he stepped back, looking a little shocked. "I mean, Ma'am!" he said, and he gave me a short salute.

"We can still shake hands, right?" I asked.

He grinned, and reached out his hand again. "You're a vet, right?" He asked. I nodded. "You musta just got back. I'm from the 'Nam myself. Me and my buddies, we're going up north for a weekend of fishing. We're all Vets. But we saw you, and we just wanted you to know how much we appreciate what you've done."

We parted company, and I cannot deny the feeling of warmth the exchange gave me, but I also could not help wondering how they had known, just by sight, that I was a Veteran. More to the point, how did they know I was one, but the other soldiers in the car in front of me were not?

*I love Vietnam veterans. Now that I'm a vet myself, I find a natural affinity with them, like they are people who truly understand what it's like to try to become part of society again after coming home from a deployment. I really think they can see through the veneer and recognize fellow vets. Maybe they can feel the aura. Either way, they accept me as I am, and I think they know I accept them, and I thank them for their service, too.*

I don't wear a combat patch. I have been criticized for that, but because senior army leaders have decided that combat patches go above our flag on the BDUs, I refuse. Sorry, guys, nothing goes above my flag.

Did I have a thousand yard stare? Did something about me, about the way I stood, shout it to the rooftops? I mused over this the rest of the way to Grayling, and it wasn't until I was parked and had gotten out of the car that I saw it, plain as day. My desert camo uniform was hanging in the back seat behind the driver's seat.

*Nah. It's my veteran's aura. I'm sure of it. . . .*

*I still deal with a sort of denial about my combat veteran status. I keep forgetting I am one. I know that I am, but I look in the mirror, and I think I don't look like one. I guess I am the new face of the combat veteran. I am still coming to terms with that fact.*

Duh.

I wasn't paying much attention to this meeting I was sitting through. There wasn't much to pay attention to. This year was mostly about individual training. We weren't "going out to the field." I had recommended that they use the base as a logistics supply area, like this was where we'd deployed to. After all, the days of deploying into pucker brush without electricity and computers was long gone, so why train for it? Train for reality was my mantra this year.

The headquarters did the north-south with their heads to my suggestion, so we'll see. I'm not sure how realistic people who haven't deployed can really get it.

I really didn't get a warm and fuzzy feeling when we broke up and my section headed down to the house where MAJ Rodgers has set up our office for the weekend. On the wall, she had stapled a huge matrix she referred to as the "chicklet chart." It told us, in vivid Technicolor, which brigades have control of which training areas at which times during AT.

Vivid Technicolor on a six foot by six foot chart.

"How many people got this monstrosity?" I ask. I asked it rhetorically, but she heard and she answered.

"Each MACOM, Ma'am."

MACOM. The self-importance of calling the brigades MACOMs was getting to me. "Who has the kind of f\*\*\*ing resources and time to do this d\*\*\* much work? Not to mention waste of f\*\*\*ing ink and money —"

"Ma'am!" MAJ Rodgers looked shocked. She is a devout Christian who wouldn't swear unless it was to save her soul, and even then she'd have to consider long and hard.

I was reacting to the use of the chicklet chart as a bunch of pretty pictures covering up the fact that people didn't know what they were doing. I was reminded of my dad's comment in the 1970s about the fact that he was expected to do all kinds of administrative bullshit. "What we need is a good war, so we can drop this crap and get the priorities straight. What do we *have* to do instead of what looks good. The fact that technically we were in the middle of the Vietnam War just added fuel to my father's flames. He grumbled that the senior leaders said it wasn't a "real" war, but as my dad said, for a "conflict" there sure seemed to be a lot of casualties.

*My father was a wise man.*

*Trouble is, here we are in the middle of a war — one we even call a war — and no one was noticing that maybe we needed to get our priorities shifted because of the added wartime stress to the system. The cost to print just one page of this chart must have been \$100 in printer cartridges. To what purpose? Shay*

says, "Any incompetence [encounters] in civilian life arouses feelings of fear, rage, and grief (p. 25)." Only problem was, I was reacting to the incompetence I saw in my military life.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I reverted to battle-mouth for a second there."

"Joint Forces Headquarters, Ma'am," she said, quick to forgive, and answering my second set of rhetorical questions. "They're the only ones with a plotter this big."

Great. Just great.

We worked through the afternoon, inputting our own units into training time slots based on priority and when we had the training zones. We had 27 units, all with conflicting needs and schedules. We were all ready to break for the day by 6 p.m. Then my section asked if I wanted to have dinner with them. "Would love to, but I have to head down to Lansing. Freedom Salute's tomorrow."

Which is, technically, today. Granted, I would have preferred to have company for dinner. I ended up eating alone in a bar much later that evening.

*I found myself wishing I could call my former driver from Kuwait to ask if he wanted to share dinner with me. But his wife might have looked askance at this, and I knew they were having some marital problems. Besides, it was already 8:00 or so, so chances were he'd already eaten. Isn't it ironic that I wanted the company of a soldier from deployment? But then, he'd probably understand where I was coming from, and even, possibly, what my issues were.*

A sense of extreme loneliness was catching up with me. Or was it isolation? I'd felt a connection with the Vietnam Vets, but I felt alone even in large groups of people I would once have considered friends.

Today, I walked into the armory at 0715, and I suddenly got that sense of camaraderie I'd been missing. All these soldiers knew me, had lived with me and I with them, for over a year. I saw my driver, and we began to talk as though we were still side by side in the car together. This felt so good. And it was all going to disappear by the end of the day.

*"The most significant community for a combat veteran is that of his surviving comrades." (Shay, p. 33.)*

I hadn't been able to sleep last night. I'd tossed and turned, thinking about Kuwait, thinking about my unit, thinking about the future of the military, wanting to cry at it all. What was I going to say in my 7-minute speech for the Freedom Salute? And then, at 3 a.m. it hit me. I'd write about the battalion flag.

It was actually a funny story, at least I thought it was, about how the battalion had been around for almost 10 years and still didn't have a flag, and that we needed one for deployment, and so we ordered one, and when it came, it was the wrong color. The speech came to me fully formed, and I jumped up, turned on my laptop, and typed it in whole, then settled back down to fitful sleep.

As I delivered the speech this afternoon, I realized that, though it wasn't really a theme for the Freedom Salute, the battalion soldiers deserved to hear this. I knew somehow, deep down, that the 163rd would never get an actual deactivation ceremony. So I would celebrate the battalion while I could.

*Reserve components of the Army came up with the idea of a Freedom Salute as part of the Deployment Cycle Support Contingency Plan (DCS ConPlan). It is an idea in which the heart is probably in the right place, but the implementation has missed the mark.*

*Ninety days after a unit returns, just as soldiers come back to regular drilling status, the Headquarters pays homage to the unit for its service in the war effort. Soldiers get flags and pins as thank you's, family members get remembrances for the sacrifices they have given, and certain employers or support organizations receive awards for their support to the unit members.*

*As Shay says, "Today we see our heroes as unmixed blessings, almost as though pure beneficence is part of the definition. . . . However, the ancient Greek idea of the hero was deeply mixed. . . . Ancient Greek heroes were men of pain who were both needed by their people and dangerous to them (p. 2)." We are treated as heroes in the Freedom Salute, but something goes wrong almost every time. I can't quite put my finger on the problem so we can fix it, either. Is it that the Emcee of the event has to perform additional duties but has no experience with the unit's deployment, so there is no heart in the ceremony? Is it that we heroes don't see ourselves as heroes and think this is a bunch of stupid hoopla signifying nothing?*

*While I might lean toward the latter, I am reminded of a man, a chaplain, who was an individual deployer. He was not invited to the Freedom Salute of the unit with which he deployed. Instead, the State Headquarters called him up during Boss's Day at Annual Training to do the salute for him. They didn't think to invite the soldier's family to this ceremony, so he received the equivalent of the gold watch in front of a bunch of complete strangers. This chaplain was past fury over the whole thing. He thought the state was using his Freedom Salute as a public relations stunt, and that he, as a soldier – and the sacrifices he had made during deployment – didn't really matter to anyone else.*

*Obviously, he was someone who had wanted, maybe even needed, a meaningful Freedom Salute, and it didn't rise to his own expectations.*

*My battalion was my family, and always would be. My own family, on the other hand, was late to the Freedom Salute, so they were not there to receive their pins and flag and other paraphernalia.*

*We have a saying in my family – if it's just me (as in Mom) coming to an event, I'm on time or a little early. If I have to take one child along, we end up about 5 minutes late. Two children, and we run 15 minutes late. If my husband's involved, all bets are off. In this case, my husband and two children were over 2 hours late. They completely missed the ceremony. It's a wonder that they came at all. I was hurt, but I hate to say I was not surprised.*

*Some things never change. But I love them anyway.*

*Till next time –*

*NOTE: When I sent the last missive, I received a note back from a reader. "Are we going to get to see the speech?" So, here it is in its entirety.*

## MISSIVE #18A

### “The Flag Addendum”

June 3, 2005

I was asked on Friday if I wished to say a few words at the Freedom Salute, and I was foolish enough to say, “Yeah, sure.” So they told me, “You have 7 minutes.”

Yipe, I thought. This means I really have to write a speech. For those of you who don't know, I have never read a written speech in my life.

And so, last night was a very sleepless night. It may have been that extra cup of coffee after 9 p.m. that did it, you never know. But what was I thinking about as I tossed and turned? I was thinking about this speech. The one not written. How was I supposed to distill the very essence of our deployment into just 7 minutes? How could I let you all know this story had comedy, it had tragedy, it had. . . . Well, the truth was, it was so much more than just the story about the 163rd PSB's deployment for OIF II.

It was the story about a flag.

What we in the army call our “Colors.”

You see, the 163rd has not always been a personnel services battalion. The 163rd Personnel Services Company (PSC) started its life in 1987. Am I right, MSG Hawn? He was a founding member. A young woman by the name of Lieutenant Mulcahy was also a founding member.

I am a relative newcomer, although I have longevity—in the 15 years I've been in the MIARNG, I have spent 13 1/2 of those years in this unit, most notably as the XO, the XO, and still the XO.

Don't worry, I haven't forgotten this is the story about a flag.

In 1995, then MAJ Mulcahy came back to the unit just in time to become its first battalion commander. Now that we were a battalion, complete with CSM Boardway, our two fearless leaders set about in earnest to get the battalion Colors. Because, you see, every battalion has battalion colors. Ours was to be navy blue with red fringe. Because we're an Adjutants General unit.

But the colors never appeared.

November 2003, the battalion was alerted. Time for mobilization. Time for deployment. And since I knew a transfer of authority would take place between us and other PSBs, not once, not twice, but in fact three separate times, I figured it was time we got our flag.

COL Mulcahy, now our brigade commander, agreed. And so the flag was ordered.

By February, we knew the transfer of authority would take place March 15th. CSM Boardway and I both emailed, requesting a rush job; we wanted our colors for the ceremonies. On March 7th, CSM Boardway told me the good news. “We have a flag. They're shipping it today!” Since mail averaged 7-10 days, there was a slim chance we'd have our flag for the big day.

Well, March 15th came and went. No flag arrived, so we used the Michigan flag. At least it was navy.

April came and went. May came and went. Finally, in June, I sent an email to COL Mulcahy. It started, “I suppose the reason we still do not have a flag is because they had to order special navy blue silk worms from China, who then had to spin the silk . . .” and I went into excruciating detail about how this flag was being made.

I received one line in response: “I thought this was taken care of.”

What then followed was a series of emails which would have been funny were it not so sad. I can't share all of it, since I have only 7 minutes, but these were my favorite excerpts:

"Do they need a guidon or battalion colors?"

Now, really, if I'd needed a guidon I'd have made it myself. . . .

"Don't you remember the first PSB flag we got was big enough to cover a house?"

I'll take it. . . .

Finally they admitted they didn't know what it should look like, and asked us to send a picture. Oh, saints preserve us!!!

And then—TADA!!!—"We found the PSB Flag!!! . . .Does it matter if it's tan?"

Now, really, military folks in the audience, I appeal to you. Would you ask an artillery battalion commander, "Does it matter if it's tan?" It's red or you're dead. Would you ask an infantryman, "Does it matter if it's tan?" Light blue or he'll fry you. Would you ask a signal guy, "Does it matter if it's tan?" Orange, if you want to continue the ability to speak.

NAVY BLUE. WITH RED FRINGE. What part don't you understand?

COL Mulcahy took all this with a grain of, well, sand. "It's your desert camouflage colors."

With all due respect, ma'am, it has red fringe.

So, the 163rd, contrary to popular opinion, did not deploy as a PSB. It deployed as a Corps Support Command.

Regardless, I am proud and humbled to have been the battalion commander who led the 163rd PSCOSCOM into battle, the only unit of its kind. In theater or anywhere else, for that matter.

BRAVO to all of you. I love you all.

## MISSIVE #19

### "Flashback Attack"

June 10, 2005

It seems I will never really get away from this battalion commander business.

Ostensibly, I am no longer in the position. A week ago, after the Freedom Salute, we did the flag dance they call a Change of Command, and I passed the flag to another guy. But, right after this ceremony, the commander of the 363rd Personnel Services Detachment came up to me. He looked agitated. He still wore his crossed rifles instead of the Adjutants General shield.

"Ma'am, we've been alerted," he said.

"Yes, I know. For 2006."

"Six?" This stopped him. He looked a little confused. "BC told me it's this year."

I shook my head. "I know it's hard to believe, but they gave you a full year to prepare."

I would have thought that might have calmed him down, but if possible, he looked even more panicked. "Ma'am, what do I do?"

"What do you mean, what do you do? Everyone needs to know, it's not a matter of if you're going to be deployed. It's a matter of when."

"Well, I'm not scared of the deployment, Ma'am."

"Well, then consider yourself lucky. This is a unique opportunity. You can spend a whole year preparing for your mission." I quickly outlined my 5-year training plan idea for him, then finished up by saying, "Just get these rotating training years together, and then do the pre-deployment year option."

"I don't know what my mission is. I don't know when I'm going to go. And my BC doesn't have a f\*\*\*ing clue!"

I looked at him in surprise. Now, granted, I was a bit biased. This was my battalion, and no one who followed me would ever be as good in my eyes. To hear a captain saying this about a fellow lieutenant colonel was still a little hard to take. "Now, hold on a minute—"

"No, Ma'am," he said, looking earnest. "I mean it. BC and I, we go way back. We were in the same infantry battalion together. He hates me. And he don't know a thing about personnel business. He's been no help. I can't even get a training plan together, let alone those rotational ones you're talking about."

Something told me I wasn't going to be able to fix their history or their relationship. But as the Brigade S-3, I had the responsibility to make sure the captain had a working training plan in hand in about a week. So I made plans to meet with him in the armory of his choice on Thursday afternoon.

The BC came up to me soon after, asking me what the captain had wanted to speak to me about. He also seemed agitated, like he didn't like people talking about him behind his back. "Training plans," I said. I gave him the run-down, leaving out the part about the BC being no help.

"He and I, we have a history," he said.

"So I've been told. You're the lieutenant colonel here, though. You need to overcome that history."

He shook his head grimly. "He's gonna pull the race card, I just know it. Look, I need to be at that meeting with you."

Which is how I came to be in the middle of Saginaw, looking for an armory. My car didn't have GPS, bummer that that was, and so here I was, on the street with the correct name, but no matching address. I could tell it wasn't a good neighborhood. And I could feel panic rising in my chest and blocking my ability to breathe.

Calm down, you've got a cell phone, I told myself. I pulled it out and dialed the captain's number. No answer. I didn't have a number for the armory, or I would have called there. I looked up the BC's number. He finally answered. "Sorry, I'm running late," he said.

"I can't find the place," I said, gulping it out a little.

Maybe he sensed my panic. "I know exactly what happened. That road is weird, and it splits. What you need to do is head back toward the entrance to the highway . . ." and he talked me through it.

I parked in the armory parking lot and took a deep breath. I wanted my pistol to be nestled under my arm in its holster, I wanted that sense of security that, regardless of where I was, good neighborhood or bad, I had some semblance of protection.

*I also think I hated my own incompetence in this situation. If I'd gotten lost in Kuwait, I could've been in a world of hurt. Hell, I could have wandered into Iraq. And didn't I know it.*

The meeting did not go well. Once the BC got there and we all sat down, the captain just wasn't getting it; he did not have any ability for making a yearly training plan at all. Both he and the BC didn't understand that the warrior tasks would take care of themselves, but not being able to perform the personnel mission would be the worst fate.

"But, Ma'am, if we go to Iraq and don't know how to do convoy operations—"

"You're not going to Iraq," I said, then realized I was about to share insider information.

The BC caught it. "How can you be so sure?"

"The timing. He's going in July, which is off what the other PSDs are doing by 3 months."

"So?"

"There was only one unit that arrived 3 months late when I deployed. They fell under me. And FORSCOM is still replacing like unit for like unit. I'd be willing to bet, except officers aren't supposed to bet, that you're going to Kuwait."

They didn't believe me.

Their loss. Either way, I told them the fact that they were a personnel unit that didn't know how to do personnel business was a much more critical failing. If they couldn't perform the mission they were designed for, they'd be stuck doing guard duty.

After 3 fruitless hours of this, I had to call an end-date, because I had a meeting to go to with the brigade commander, an hour away. I gave the BC the email address of a guy at the Personnel school who helped my own troops with remedial personnel training when I deployed and who might be able to arrange personnel operations training for this unit, but I had little hope that either commander would ever go to the trouble of emailing.

I got on the highway and headed west down a road that wasn't particularly familiar to me. I noticed the dryness of the roads. We must not be having the requisite amount of rain. I noticed that the shoulders of the roads were suddenly eerily similar to Kuwait's . . . the sand, the cinders. And then I saw the overpass. It had graffiti. Granted, it wasn't the Arabic graffiti I'd grown accustomed to, but the font was reminiscent. And then I saw the people walking along the top of the overpass.

I'd pulled the car over to the side of the road before I even thought about it, ducking down, reaching for a nonexistent pistol. And then I stopped. Get yourself together, for God's sake.

Since when did you even see combat? Since when had you ever had to provide over watch, except when changing tires? What made you have the right to suffer from a flashback, for God's sake? You have not earned that right.

*I still have trouble with this. I can see I occasionally exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress, even after being back for 3 years, but I also know I am, by definition, one of the Rear Guard soldiers that combat soldiers so disdain. "Typically, survivors of horrible trauma consider their own pain unworthy compared to that of others who had it worse." (Shay, p. 79.) By no means do I consider myself to be a survivor of horrible trauma. I was lucky and had a relatively uneventful deployment, even though I ended up working myself to death. But, as Mary Garvey, an Army veteran, says, "PTSD is not legitimate [for me] – I only took care of patients . . . met the coffins . . . stewardess . . . sent them to die." (Ibid.)*

*Rear echelon soldiers are part of the system that creates the trauma. My units were in charge of Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration. We processed them in and then sent them off to war and possible death. We reached out and touched virtually every soldier, sailor, corpsman, and airman who went through Kuwait to get to Iraq. By my own estimation, that was about 300,000 persons.*

*We were also connected to the patient liaison system, so we often saw the soldiers returning, wounded. As part of the Casualty Accounting team, we saw the names of those same soldiers and prepared the next of kin information when they died.*

*It eats at you.*

*And as the officer in charge of making sure these tasks were done – and done right – I felt an overwhelming responsibility to be competent. I wonder if the constant overwhelming responsibility can lead to traumatic stress in senior leaders.*

I straightened in my seat, breathed in and out. There was green grass and green trees. I wasn't in Kuwait. The people on the overpass, maybe they shouldn't have been there, but they weren't about to launch an RPG or drop a bomb on my head. I was just on the outskirts of Saginaw, Michigan. I'm all right. I'm all right. Hyper-vigilant, maybe, but all right.

*I think the events that brought on this flashback, beside the similarity of the scenery and the overpass to Kuwait, was the adrenalin rush I'd experienced just before the meeting when I was trying to reach the armory. In a way, this was a buildup 2 years in the making. When we mobilized, my unit spent 60 days performing convoy operations, perimeter defense, checkpoint operations, and other like-minded combat functions, only to arrive in Kuwait and be told we would virtually never have to use these newly acquired skills.*

*Shay says, "Most of the skills that soldiers acquire in their training for war are irrelevant to civilian life . . . [they] struggle very hard to learn certain things and acquire certain distinctions . . . with the end of the war these things completely lose their utility . . . they are entirely value-less" (p. 21). In our case, what we learned wasn't even relevant to the area to which we deployed. The result was that we spent a year expecting and trained for an attack that never came. I think the constant adrenalin surges wreaked havoc with my health and my mind.*

But I was amazingly embarrassed. How many other drivers had witnessed that erratic behavior?

I checked the traffic, pulled back onto the highway, and got up to speed, hoping I wouldn't go through an episode like that again.

Till next time –

## MISSIVE #20

### "Affairs of the Heart, Part I"

June 17, 2005

I'm not totally sure why this kind of thing always follows me around, at least in the military. I can go for months without worrying about this type of thing if I remain nonmilitary, but. . . .

Some of the names have been changed to protect the innocent. And the guilty.

The day of the Freedom Salute, when COL Mulcahy arrived, she was obviously perturbed. She came up to me and said, "I need to talk to you, because I've got a problem, and I need your help. Not now, we'll talk later."

Great. Nothing like getting the day started with an agitated boss pulling the Carnegie line out of her hat. My father once told me that no one can resist the "I've got a problem and I need your help" line. It appeals to a person's empathy, sympathy, and desire to be of service.

This time was no exception. How could I say no to COL Mulcahy, someone I call Melissa when we're not in uniform? I was about to be suckered into something. I could tell.

But I had to wait till the end of the day before I heard what it was really about. She came out with it once we were in private. "You know the issue that's going on in the brigade with Chief Knox, right?"

Actually, I was in the dark about Knox, though I recognized the name. "No."

She rolled her eyes impatiently. "Knox didn't deploy because he was having an affair with a soldier in his unit. Caught in the act, dead to rights, by his wife. So he didn't deploy because he's in the middle of a Court Martial."

"Ah." I didn't like where this was headed, already. I had spent what felt like 75 percent of my deployment time dealing with legal issues because the paperwork and proof and dotting the I's and crossing the T's took so much of my time. I had had 27 Article 15's, one of which had finally resulted in a Court Martial. Almost half of them had involved inappropriate sexual behavior in some form or another. The others were mostly due to alcohol.

I had made the mistake of thinking leaving command would relieve me of dealing with this kind of shenanigans. Au contraire.

She went on. "Well, it turns out, the problem is rampant. Now I have an Officer in Charge (OIC) of one of my battalions who allegedly is having an affair. MAJ Nixon."

*A couple of words about MAJ Nixon: He was, without doubt, one of the most highly competent Active Guard/Reserve officers I have ever met or worked with. Competence in the workplace, however, did not always translate into competence in the home life. He had talked smack about his wife since at least the year 2000, which was when I first met him. He insulted her so much behind her back that when he got started, I, as the lone female officer in the room, had an overwhelming urge to leave.*

*Their divorce was almost final when his alleged affair came to light, and believe me, he was doing his wife and family a favor by divorcing her.*

*I also feel the need to mention Nixon was a DESERT STORM veteran, and that my understanding is, his marital problems began shortly after his return.*

I had been forming my counterargument, why I should not be the one to do this investigation, because I knew that was what she was about to ask me to do. Use someone who could use the active duty for special work money, like my former executive officer who still

hadn't been able to get a full-time job. But finding out who was allegedly having the affair stopped me. A major. That meant whoever investigated him had to be higher rank. That left me, and . . . me.

"You want me to do the investigation."

"Look, I know you don't want to take time away from your family, and I know you're a bit burnt out right now, and I wouldn't ask you to do it unless I absolutely had to. But you are one of our best investigators, and I need you to catch this guy. I can't have my active duty guys doing this kind of thing. The message it's sending –"

"Missy, don't hurt yourself. I'll do it." I said it with a great deal of misgiving. I could tell by her manner that she was on the warpath with this. I wasn't totally sure why, but these affairs happening in her brigade, she seemed to be taking them as a personal affront.

My thoughts on the subject of affairs within the military has been a very gray area. I'm not sure how my attitude developed. I was raised to believe that having an affair was not a good thing. And sexual harassment is just plain not right. I have never been soft on them when I have found out about them within my command. For example, there were two soldiers still in Kuwait because they refused to stop their inappropriate behavior, in spite of both of them being married with children back home. They were awaiting a court martial at the major general level.

I guess the real problem was I seemed to be the only one who wasn't soft on them. Well, me and COL Mulcahy. Everyone else seemed to turn a blind eye, and if cases resulted in courts martial, the perpetrators always seemed to get off.

And here was another thing. When was a relationship between two soldiers an adulterous affair and when was it okay? I know that I had read it was never a good idea to have relationships. But relationships were rampant in the National Guard, at least in the state of Michigan. There were several examples of married couples, especially in the active guard reserve. It stood to reason; work with someone every day, for long hours, and your office becomes your dating pool. Even COL Mulcahy was married to a military man, a now-retired lieutenant colonel.

My worst experience with this, peacetime, had been when the first sergeant of my unit was married to the readiness officer. Talk about conflict of interest. Granted, when the relationship was that flagrant, it was obvious it was not a good idea. But when a soldier in one unit was dating a soldier in another unit, how did it hurt anyone?

In this case, however, it was an officer who was dating an enlisted woman, so it was considered an alleged fraternization issue. COL Mulcahy was hot that this was not an acceptable situation.

I thought of the first sergeant/readiness NCO situation, which had happened within COL Mulcahy's unit long ago, and I thought back to my childhood. I had highly respected a nurse, rank of colonel, who had gone to my church. I also respected her husband, a command sergeant major.

*My ambivalent feelings about this situation reminds me of what Shay said about the "Dodger Song." It "not only doubts the good will and good intentions of society's power holders, but with the words, "and I'm a Dodger, too," acknowledges the thousand little and large betrayals of 'what's right'. . . ." (p. 108.)*

*I know adultery's not right. I know fraternization in the military is bad and leads to pain and suffering and a betrayal of what's right. But Mulcahy's adamant "not in my brigade" stance disturbed me, for a couple of reasons: (1) I was afraid she'd already made her mind up what she was going to do regardless of what my investigation turned up; (2) there was a little bit of – I hate to call it this because I love Mulcahy so much – a holier-than-thou attitude I was catching; and (3) I feared, based on rumors I'd*

*heard about senior leaders in our state that she was an Army of One on this issue, and the whole prosecution of this case would come to nothing.*

*Turned out I was right.*

But I didn't say anything.

She told me I could use a mixture of substitute training assemblies and active duty to complete the investigation. It turned out, to investigate this particular case, I'd be traveling all over the state.

With heavy heart, I agreed to take on the task. School would be out in a week and a half. I'd been looking forward to spending whole days with my children, for the first time in a long time. Instead, I'd have to put them in day care, and my husband would be single parent again.

All for an investigation that would probably come to nothing in the end.

Till next time —

## MISSIVE #21

### “Affairs of the Heart, Part II – Road Trip”

June 24, 2005

After spending the first few days of my investigation in Jackson and Lansing, I had gotten all the background information. I talked with the battalion commander of the unit where the alleged fraternizer was the officer in charge, and he gave me the low-down.

It seems the OIC, whom I'll call MAJ Nixon, but which isn't his name, has submitted his resignation in an attempt to avoid the investigation. It won't help; the investigation will go forward, but the commander expects Nixon to plead guilty to the charge of having an affair.

Nixon has been in the process of getting a divorce, which is very close to being final. This fact didn't surprise me, since I'd known he had a troubled marriage for years. On the surface of it, it seems as though this relationship with the sergeant in one of the battalion's subordinate companies is, in some ways, innocent. His divorce is almost final; the soldier is not in his direct line of control; they have a dating relationship.

*I use the word “innocent” very loosely here. I mean to say it's not full-blown adultery, since the divorce was almost final, and it's not a full-blown case of fraternization within his own unit in a case where he could use his position for his or her personal gain.*

*I'm well aware of the legal definition of adultery and fraternization. Adultery is such for as long as he is legally married. Fraternization is technically any inappropriate relationship between officers and enlisted.*

When I ask this of the commander, he gets a little cagey. LTC Maynard, as I'll call him, says, “Look, it's become public knowledge that they're having an affair. It's hurting the morale of that unit, and the morale of mine. Look, you had situations like this when you were deployed, didn't you?” I nodded. “It didn't take long for morale to be effected, did it? And I'm afraid he'll take advantage of the soldier because of their difference in rank.”

True.

I asked whom else I could speak with before I talked with the sergeant and the officer. He told me I should talk to the first sergeant of the unit the sergeant was in, and possibly the command sergeant major, who had recently retired.

The good news: not too many people to interview. The bad news: most of them were over 6 hours away.

So, it was time for a road trip. Too bad I didn't still have my driver from Kuwait.

*Of course, if I had asked him along, would this been considered fraternization in my own case?*

*I told a friend of mine, Nancy, that I had to do this trip, and she jumped at it. “I'll be your assistant driver, please?”*

She is recently divorced herself. Her husband left her for another woman the week I deployed to Kuwait. She has been having serious issues trying to process this divorce, and has been flirting with severe depression.

*Can PTSD occur without combat? If so, she was, and still probably is, a sufferer of PTSD.*

But I figured she'd be good company.

So, on a lovely summer day, we set off, going first to Jackson, then to Lansing, and finally on up the highway to our destination. To fill the time, we talked, we listened to music, we talked some more.

I don't know how we got on the subject, but somehow we turned to religion. She is a Mormon, but she has been having trouble reconciling her Mormon beliefs with the fact that her husband dumped her. "Why do you think God has abandoned me?" she finally asked.

"I'm not the one you should be asking that question. I also believe God abandoned me, and made me go to Kuwait, for no good purpose."

She gasped. "But of course, you must have had a purpose going there. I mean, you were a big, important person there."

I snorted. "I had very little power. I couldn't get my boss to accept any of my ideas. No, I really feel like there was no good reason for me to go, and I left my family and left my life for a whole year."

"And you're angry about it."

"Yeah."

"You've been angry ever since you got back."

That brought me up short. "Really? Is that what it seems like?"

She nodded vigorously.

"I'm sorry. You know, I really had not felt much of anything for the first 3 months, and then I felt a rush of emotions I haven't been able to name."

"When we get together, you're just so sullen and silent."

I was silent for a time after that, trying not to look sullen. Finally, I said, "You know, I don't talk much because I don't think anyone will be interested in how I feel. Who wants to hear about me processing all this deployment garbage? I mean, I don't think I would want to, if someone else had gone instead of me."

"Of course we want to hear about it. We're your friends." But then she was silent, and in the silence, I could feel rather than hear that, indeed, she didn't really want to hear about my problems. Because she had plenty of her own.

*"How can your friends not understand that your loss has shut you down and that isolation comes with a profound silence all its own? You have entered an abnormal, lonely, and unwelcome new world where you are nothing but an island of sadness?" (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, pp. 81-82.)*

She said, "You know, you and I, we're not so different. We have both lost our own lives as we know it, you to the war, me to divorce. And we both believe no one else wants to hear about our problems."

I nodded, digesting what she had just said. "Yes, you're right."

The Upper Peninsula is about as dark as summer night can get, and we were in a place where the deer run at night, so we didn't talk much after that, trying to ensure we made it to our destination.

The next morning, I did my interviews, first with the first sergeant, then we drove about 50 miles, and I spoke with the sergeant who was alleged to be having the affair with Nixon. She was sullen and a little defiant as she told me there was nothing wrong with her relationship with MAJ Nixon; that they both loved one another, they planned to marry once his divorce was final, and she had never received any kind of favorable or unfavorable action due to her relationship with him, because he was not in her direct chain of command.

After the interview, I rejoined Nancy, we bought some sodas for the road, and settled back into the car for the long ride back. Nancy seemed angry.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Well, so what did that woman say?"

I was struck by the venom in the words 'that woman.' "Well, it is confidential."

"You're right. I'm sorry. Never mind." But she still seemed miffed.

"Well, I will tell you this, that the soldier does not believe she's done anything wrong."

"Not done anything wrong!" She erupted. "She's a home wrecker, she's ruined a family here, and she thinks she's done nothing wrong?"

I felt like telling her that the timing was wrong, that he'd filed for divorce before the witnesses placed the two as dating, but I knew my interview with this soldier was not the cause of her eruption. I waited, and it wasn't long till the plaintive refrain came. "Do you think my husband was having an affair? Do you think that's why he left me?"

How do you tell a friend you love that there was no doubt of that? He had moved in with someone he was working with just 2 months after he asked for the separation. But for Nancy, to admit there had been an affair would be to admit defeat.

*According to Shay, "Social trust is the expectation that power will be used in accordance with 'what's right.' When social trust is destroyed, it is not replaced by a vacuum but rather by a perpetual mobilization to fend off attack, humiliation, or exploitation, and to figure out other peoples trickery" (p. 151).*

*Nancy's spiral downward from watching the trickery going on in an army investigation to her sadness and embarrassment over what happened in her own marriage maybe a "civilian" example, but it is still a result of PTSD. The problem is, this breach of social trust is rampant, both inside the military and without.*

*I have already mentioned that Mulcahy is an Army of One when she fights adultery in my state's National Guard. Why? Because in order to have an adultery case stick, don't you have to be clean of adultery yourself? Mulcahy may be fairly clean, but if her superiors are not, an appeal will be overturned.*

*I am struck by recent news headlines as I write these portions of this book. John Edwards goes down for adultery after years of preaching strong family values – betraying a wife who has cancer, no less. Closer to home, Kwame Kilpatrick, Detroit's mayor, flagrantly thumbs his nose in the face of bail breach and inappropriate conduct with his chief of staff, as though he feels he is above the law.*

*With examples of this kind of behavior at the highest levels, do U.S. citizens even know what right looks like anymore? As a soldier, can I feel proud of defending my country, the supposed beacon of hope and City on the Hill? That hill's been dealing with mudslides and erosions for several years now. . . .*

I patted her knee as I drove. Things inside were bubbling to the surface, things I myself didn't want to admit. The betrayals I had suffered were not the sexual kind, but I knew there was betrayal there. I just refused to admit it, because if I did, it would be to admit defeat as well.

Till next time –

## MISSIVE #22

### “Affairs of the Heart Part III – Alternate Point of View”

July 1, 2005

I have a confession to make. Even though I am no longer the battalion commander of the 163rd Personnel Services Battalion, I have been in at least weekly contact with the company commander of one of its subordinate units.

Captain James Kirk deployed with the 263rd Personnel Services Detachment in late November 2004. I visited them at the airport the day they came in. The unit was scheduled to round out the incoming personnel group that was set to replace my chain of command in Arifjan.

And then shock waves reverberated throughout the Michigan Army National Guard when my wartime command and control headquarters relieved the 263rd's commander and sent him north to Baghdad to act as a liaison officer for the Multi-National Force-Iraq.

I was devastated. The company was devastated. The commander was devastated. I fell on my sword to fix things, explaining they were a AA unit, and the unit needed their commander, but was unsuccessful. CPT Kirk had to leave his unit in the hands of a command that did not care one whit for the soldiers.

*If I could pinpoint the most damaging event that occurred during my deployment, this was it for me.*

*I care deeply about my units. I want them to do well. I want to be able to mentor and guide them. I want to see them have a mission worth working for.*

*I knew fairly early into my deployment, maybe 3 months into it, that one of my organic units which answered to me stateside would deploy into the command and control headquarters. It took me awhile to find out what their mission would be. Meanwhile, I asked my commander if we could switch around units slightly, so that my organic unit would replace one of the units under my command. That way, I could tailor-make their training plan, and send it to them while they were still mobilizing, and they'd be ready to hit the ground running. It seemed like a win-win situation for my unit in the desert and one of my units from back home. My commander said she didn't see a problem with it, but the final decision rested with the person coming in to replace her.*

*Then, I think she sat on it, and a decision was never made to change units around. Looking back, I should not have been surprised. Frankly, my boss was not one to rock the boat, and if a decision had already been made, she wasn't going to try to change it, especially when she was having leadership troubles of her own.*

*As the arrival of my unit neared, I started trying to find out what this unit was supposed to do. No one had an answer for me. The only one who had any idea was another lieutenant colonel, a battalion commander who had been pulled from his command involuntarily when his units were deployed piecemeal, and his headquarters had been split up to do not much of anything. He said, "God, I hope they don't do what they did to one of my units. They basically tore them apart and threw them all over the place. It's not a good thing for a unit."*

*This filled me with foreboding. CPT Kirk got wind that he would be the "patient liaison officer," which made him nervous. Via email, he said, "I'm a commander. What are they doing to me?"*

*I still tried to get the units changed, asking my commander's replacement if he would consider such a switch. He didn't see any benefit to the change, and when he realized what unit we were talking about, he got a weird gleam in his eye. "Oh, no, that commander? We have special plans for him."*

*Sure they did. They sent him north, leaving the unit in a complete shambles. To make things worse, they also relieved the first sergeant, and then in front of the whole headquarters, the new first sergeant yelled at them, "What on earth did you send the whole unit for? We told you we only needed 15 pax!"*

*It is pure conjecture on my part, but there was a soldier who had been removed from this unit just prior to the deployment, a full-timer, and maybe she was the one who'd struck some kind of deal with the command.*

*Either way, the unit was destroyed, a destruction that lasted well past the terms of the deployment itself. I still feel betrayed by the system, to this day.*

Soon after, I began emailing Kirk, in a way because I wanted periodic assurance that he was still alive. Thus began a friendly, and eventually deeply spiritual conversation, wherein we discussed the military, God, and His purpose in our life.

Kirk was coming home on leave this week, and so we made plans to meet for lunch. He lived in Lansing, so on the day I interviewed the OIC I was investigating, I made plans to meet Kirk at that office, and head out from there.

As expected, MAJ Nixon acknowledged he was having an affair with the sergeant, and said that the only remorse he felt about the whole situation was that he would lose his career over it. He also stated, "I am not the only one in the Active Guard Reserve system in this state that has been in this situation. I'm just the only one who has lost his job over it."

I said, "You were the only one who decided to put in his resignation, rather than face the results of the investigation."

He just shrugged.

*"Veterans' behavior has been variously called irresponsible, impulsive, judgment-impaired, thrill-seeking, and danger-seeking, but these adjectives don't quite get at the sense that the dice must be rolled." (Shay, p. 45.) I couldn't help feeling that MAJ Nixon was trying to sign his own death knell in the military just to see what would happen when he rolled these dice.*

Shortly thereafter, CPT Kirk entered the office. He was almost not recognizable. He had lost easily 30 pounds. MAJ Nixon looked from one to the other of us and said, "Damn, I want to go on deployment, so I can lose some weight."

Kirk and I went to a restaurant off Waverly, a bar with food. We chatted about his deployment, and my deployment, and the similarities and differences we had gone through. "I feel betrayed by the system, Ma'am," he said. "I'm not sure I'll ever get over it."

*Kirk was already showing extreme PTSD symptoms 9 months into his deployment. "'don't trust nobody' is the voice of complex PTSD." (Shay, p. 64.) He had good reason to feel this way. If anyone was an Achilles who's been betrayed by his superior officers, this was the guy. I suffered this betrayal with him, tried hard to reverse it, and felt the betrayal, too. But he was still living it.*

I nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. "I don't think I'll ever get over what they did to your and your unit. Don't they see, this kind of thing is what destroys morale?"

He turned instantly serious. "We don't have to have others destroy our morale. We do it to ourselves. MAJ Nixon? He's a friend of mine. A good friend. A good officer. He doesn't deserve to be fired. And I know you're the investigating officer, and I know I shouldn't be talking to you about it, but there it is."

“You know his being fired wasn’t a done deal, don’t you? And while I won’t tell you about my investigation, I will say that I won’t be recommending that either of them be fired. A brigade commander’s letter of reprimand for him, is what I’d think. But he sealed his fate when he put in his letter of resignation.”

“What was he going to do? His back is against the wall. And look who put him there.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. Echoing Nixon, he said, “He’s not the only one who’s been in this position. Look at me. I’m married to an NCO. I couldn’t court her, but I could marry her. So I did. I had to. There are affairs happening all the time, extra-marital, singles, you name it. You know why LTC Maynard turned him in, don’t you?” I shook my head. “Because Maynard tried to come on to the female sergeant himself, and she refused him, that’s why.”

*The minute Kirk said this, I had the frigid feeling that he was telling me the truth. LTC Maynard had always been a personable enough guy, but I had never felt comfortable around him. There was a certain shiftiness that I, as a female, had felt nervous about. He was the kind of guy I would make sure I was never alone with.*

*Meanwhile, I had also felt uncomfortable about this investigation because of the reputation this particular battalion headquarters had had for years. Let’s just say rumor on the street was that it was an all-male headquarters for a reason; that the old-boy network in it was highly toxic to any woman who came into the office, and they tended to leave as quickly as possible. “If a trainer uses power to coerce a private gain, be it sexual, financial, or careerist, the whole body of trainers – sometimes the whole service – is injured.” (Shay, p. 224.)*

I put my head in my hands. “Kirk, why are you telling me this now? How the hell am I going to try to get this information through my investigation? I’ve been working on this thing for 2 weeks, and nothing has ever uncovered it. No one has mentioned it except you. And from you, it’s considered hearsay.”

“Everything is hearsay, Ma’am. Look at us. You know that anyone who saw us here, meeting for lunch today, could decide we were in an inappropriate relationship.”

“But we’re not.”

“You know that. I know that. But they don’t give a damn. You’re fraternizing with a junior officer. We’re both married. Could look bad for both of us, if the right person got hold of it.”

*I always considered this relationship between Kirk and me to be strictly a mentoring relationship. I have always been extremely careful with male army relationships. During my entire time as his commander, and later as his mentor, I think I called him by his first name only once, even though it was common in the National Guard to call people by first names. I don’t recall that he ever dared to call me by anything other than ‘Colonel Cook,’ or ‘Ma’am.’*

*But now the seed was sown. Funny how just mentioning the possibility of impropriety in the relationship poisoned the whole mentoring process. After this conversation, we were never as comfortable talking together again.*

*Sometimes it sucks to be a woman in the military.*

He looked at me with eyes that looked bigger because he was so thin. They basically told me to do the right thing. Easy to say, not to do. Because right now, I wasn’t really sure what the right thing was.

Here’s how I finally handled it. I recommended a brigade level letter of reprimand for MAJ Nixon, and a counseling statement for the sergeant. I recommended that the OIC be moved

from the battalion to another job. When I handed the packet to COL Mulcahy, she didn't look happy with the result. "He's getting fired," she stated unequivocally.

I touched her hand. "Melissa, I think you should know something. I realize it's hearsay information, but there are rampant rumors that MAJ Nixon was not the only officer who tried to have an affair with the sergeant."

She shrugged her shoulders as if to say she didn't care. "I'm a lawyer, Chris, and you know what lawyers think about hearsay information."

In the end, I had a bad taste in my mouth. In my heart of hearts, I didn't feel like I'd done the right thing at all.

Till next time –

## MISSIVE #23

### "Any Color Except Red"

July 8, 2008

The sleepless nights have begun. Well, they've been happening for a while now, but I've tried to ignore them. The best thing to do with insomnia is to deny that it's a problem, right?

I can usually go to sleep at the beginning of the night, but midway through, I wake up, on my back, staring at the ceiling, and unable to breathe. Maybe it's sleep apnea, or a form of it, but it's like my tongue has rolled back into my throat, blocking the air passage.

It started when I was in Kuwait. I would wake, and start to roil and gurgle as I tried to start breathing again, and I'd sit bolt upright in bed.

*"You let down, you go to sleep, people die." (Shay, p. 55.)*

I do that now, too, and then the panic sets in, and I feel for a pulse. It's there, still, but racing from my fright. So I go to the bathroom, and I as do so, I realize with some relief that I am not in Kuwait anymore. I don't have to hike 250 meters to a portapotty, realizing after I got there that I should have grabbed some toilet paper on my way out.

There is toilet paper here, and a nice padded seat, although my husband has gotten tired of reminding me that I should really put the roll on the toilet paper rod. I'm so used to carrying my own squashed set.

Then I get back into bed, make sure I'm laying on my left side, and I close my eyes. And what do I see? Black oil smoke blowing across the sandy horizon. I can almost smell the acrid smell, and I sit bolt upright in bed. Is the house on fire? I sniff the air, but no, it was just my overactive imagination. And the memory of the time when the heater blower motor blew, spewing that same acrid smoke smell into our tent at two in the morning.

*Tent fires were, and are, a constant threat in the desert, although I've heard, slowly but surely, the camps are transitioning to hard-sided modular dwellings. One time, a soldier of mine saw that a cigarette had hit a fest tent, grabbed his video camera, and started filming. In less than 90 seconds, that tent had burnt to the ground. If we smelled smoke, we had very little time to get out alive.*

Oil smoke. I cough and hack at the thought of it, even now, and when I think of it, I immediately tell myself I have to do my part to get this country off oil.

"I want a Prius," I told my husband one day in May, and he was amenable. He figured they've been out a year or two, the bugs should be worked out by now, and so he began the research process.

It turns out Prii, as I like to call the plural thereof, are so popular that there is a 4 to 8 month waiting list after we put in our \$1,000 down payment. So, at the beginning of June, as a sort of a birthday present, Ken did just that. He called me from work to ask, "What color do you want?"

"Any color, as long as it's not red," I said.

There is a history behind that answer. I come from a Polish family on my father's side. My father-in-law is also Polish. My dad always had a soft spot for red cars. I did not realize this was a Polish trait until I realized my father-in-law took it to the extreme.

He has always had red cars, as far as I can tell.

Truth in advertising time: at this moment, neither of my in-laws' cars is red, for the first time since I married into the family 19 years ago.

He says this is because red cars are the safest, like fire engines. I've tried the "fire engines are chartreuse" argument, but he will not be dissuaded. And since we often have gotten their cars when Ken's parents were done with them, we have owned our own string of red cars since I was married.

Now, I don't really have anything against red, per se. But familiarity has definitely bred some contempt into me. Thus my comment.

"Are you sure?" my husband tried, himself 50 percent Polish. "The Prius Salsa Red is really a pretty nice color."

Doggedly persistent, I replied, "Any color as long as it's not red."

Let me tell you a little something about the universal subconscious. The subconscious cannot hear negatives. So, the universal subconscious heard my plea this way: "Any color as long as it's red."

A couple weeks later (remember what I just said . . . a 4 to 8 month waiting list . . .) my husband called me on the phone. "Honey," he said, a little hesitantly, "We have the chance of getting a Prius right now. The original owners backed out on the deal. But—"

"It's red, isn't it?"

"Uh . . . yeah."

So, now I sit in a spiffy brand new Salsa red Prius. She's marvelous, even if she is red. She gets roughly 50 miles to a gallon right now. I think she's smarter than I am. And I think, by driving her, I'm doing my part to get this country off oil.

For the first time in years, we have named our car. Well, she named herself. She is wise, she is smart, and her primary driver is a veteran. She is Minerva. Goddess of Wisdom. Goddess of War.

We usually call her Min.

Till next time—

## MISSIVE #24

### "Patriotism and All That"

July 15, 2005

So, last week, the missive's date was on my father's birthday, but since that fact didn't fit in with the theme of the day, I didn't mention it. I will mention it this time since recently, my father has been in my thoughts. A lot.

My father died June 28, 1990, 6 months after I married Ken.

*My mother has cited anecdotal evidence that many war veterans she has known have died relatively early, often of heart attacks. My father was a Vietnam vet. He always told me he never really agreed with the war, but as an officer, there was no choice but to go and serve to the best of your ability.*

*He never spoke to me about his experiences. My mom swears he never exhibited signs of PTSD. He was more like the Post World War II ilk; the stoic, "let's get back to life and put that part behind me" school. I think those soldiers who deal with their combat experiences in this way face the danger of the anger and pain turning inward, eating away at your health and contributing to premature death.*

His birthday was July 8, 1929. He liked birthdays, and he liked the Fourth of July. He would begin celebrating his birthday Fourth of July weekend, and as far as I could tell, we could celebrate it all month, and he wouldn't have been happier.

He was a true Patriot, a man of great integrity, a role model.

*Dad fit the mold of Shay's Achilles character in that he was "habitually blunt" and "truthful to the point of being tactless. He was perfectionistic and a bit self-righteous, too." (Shay, pp. 237-238.) Like father like daughter, I'm afraid.*

He was also sexist. "No wife of mine will work," he said to my mother on the eve of their marriage, so she had a career as an officer's wife, which was work enough as far as I could tell. But around my junior year in high school, something funny happened. He looked at his only daughter and realized he never wanted to hear my fiance saying that to me. So he said, "Every woman should have a career they can fall back on. Because nowadays, with divorces being what they are, you can never count on a husband to take care of you."

Then, when I started looking at Princeton, he said to my mother, "You need to get a job." Then he turned to me and said, "You are definitely smart enough to get into Princeton. And somehow, some way, we'll get the money to send you. Would you consider an ROTC scholarship?"

My mouth must have opened about a foot. Was this the man who had laughed at the first women to go to West Point just a few years ago and said, "I can't wait till the first seniors get them in line and yell, "Pop that chest up."

Yet he was serious. So that's exactly what I did.

I don't think in a million years he would have predicted that his daughter would make it past the first 4 years of officerhood, let alone the fact that I've now, one year shy of retirement age, made it a career. As of this writing, I have even reached the rank at which he retired.

I did not miss the eerie coincidence that he went to Vietnam as a lieutenant colonel with a 9-year-old boy and a 5-year-old girl, and he turned 40 while deployed, whereas I turned 40 in the desert as a lieutenant colonel, leaving a 9-year-old girl and a 5-year-old boy behind.

*Eerier yet, I was talking to one of my soldiers while I was deployed, a guy from the New York unit who actually came from near Philly. I considered his age, then asked, "Where'd you go for Basic?" He told me Fort Dix. "When?" 1972-73 was his reply.*

*I asked him what training brigade he was in. He didn't know the answer to this question, but when he rattled his company info off, there was a '3' in it. I told him, "You may have the dubious distinction of having had a brigade commander and a battalion commander who were father and daughter."*

*When he went home on R&R, I got an email from him. "What's your maiden name?" I told him, and then got a response: "I see the resemblance."*

*As a present to me, he had a friend create a photo montage of my father and me – me in the desert and my father from a basic training yearbook.*

*I see the resemblance, too.*

While he was gone, I sent him a tape (okay, my mother helped me) of me, talking and telling him about what we'd been doing while he was gone. It was the Fourth of July, and I insisted on catching the sounds of the fireworks to send to him. He wrote back, "Thanks for the fireworks. Sounds like Da Lat on a bad day."

I didn't understand the comment then, but I did this year. I thought about that just 2 weeks ago, as I watched the fireworks falling from the sky, bracing myself for each boom and willing myself not to think about RPGs and unexploded ordnance.

Now, I am on the eve of yet another thing my father would probably have never predicted. I received news recently that I am being considered for a nomination to the U.S. Army War College. My father was Distance Education Class of 1971.

I am being considered for the residence course, and I am thrilled, but I also note that no one is helping me with my packet. It's like I have to prove to them that I really want this, and that, if given the opportunity, I'll actually complete the course.

*Mission Complete, July 25, 2008.*

Michigan has been having trouble recently with people dropping out.

Do I really want this? Ever since I was a lieutenant in the PA Guard, watching the occasional news show about what they were doing down the road in Carlisle, I have thought, I don't know if I'll ever make it to lieutenant colonel, but if I do, I want to go there. Yes, I really want it.

So I made an appointment this week, got my picture taken, and filled out the paperwork. I'll prove I have stick-to-it-iveness, that I really do want this, by doing absolutely everything I need to do. But then I have to let God do the rest.

Oh, Dad, if you could just see me now. Keep your fingers crossed for me.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

What you focus on you will feel; what you focus on determines your direction in life; what you continually focus on, you will get.

Tony Robbins

## MISSIVE #25

### “A Boost of Incompetence”

July 22, 2005

Annual Training starts in a week, and I am not looking forward to it. Annual Training was optional for most recently redeployed folks, but since I switched from the battalion commander to the S-3 of a brigade that did not go to war, the brigade commander insisted I attend AT.

The commander says that in no other year will there be as much leeway for me. She plans to allow me a lenient leave policy, and my “reconstitution” days (also known as my time off) can be on the middle weekend, even though middle weekends are a thing of the past in the National Guard.

Not only is my heart not in it, I’m not sure my heart’s in the right place. It feels lower and heavier than normal.

I have done what I can to offset the portending gloom. This weekend is drill, and we’ve been packing up and getting our schedules developed for the field exercise, such as it is. As the S2-3 shop, our section goes 24 hours, and we have the luxury of having enough officers on our staff that we’ll be able to cover down on everything.

Since I am not a morning person, never have been a morning person, and spent over a year being a morning person, I have volunteered for swing shift. I will work the entire 10-day exercise from 1 p.m. to 1 a.m. Since from experience I know that anything that happens at night usually happens around 12:30 a.m., I figure I’ll be able to react to it before I go off shift. And if I have to, I can even extend my shift for an emergency.

I will also be able to hit all my needed meetings, with my assistant S3, MAJ Rodgers, now going by Jones (long story) covering the 0900 operations meeting at headquarters.

I have also met my other assistant, MAJ Scheidler, who is a hoot. He is also recently redeployed, from Bosnia instead of OIF, but his war stories are fabulous, and he has the kind of sense of humor that makes just about any story funny. We’ve been missing each other for most drills, but this weekend, he was there, and we hit it off immediately.

Maybe it’s just that we share deployment experience. I sometimes find it hard to talk with soldiers, especially officers, who haven’t deployed. Sometimes, they just don’t understand where I’m coming from.

But Scheidler, he’s different. First of all, we can talk for hours about dining facilities and sleeping in tents and the flora and fauna he dealt with, in comparison to my camel spiders, scarab beetles, and rats.

The other thing he can do is read my mind. At one point, we were looking at various schedules for all our units, and I said, “I wish I had a horse blanket.”

He said, “Roger, Ma’am.”

And in about an hour, he walked into MAJ Jones’ office with the horse blanket. He knew without my saying it that a horse blanket was a synchronization matrix that showed where each unit was at any given time. He’d done it for the whole annual training. While the Joint Force Headquarters of Michigan had developed the “chicklet chart” that had shown roughly the same thing, theirs had been multicolored, hard to read, taller than I was, and wider than it was tall. Unwieldy and wasteful at best.

MAJ Scheidler’s was neat, fit on two 8 x 10 pieces of paper, and relied on words rather than colors. I could have hugged him when I saw it.

MAJ Jones was insistent that we know our own battle rhythms, and she spent hours with the section hammering it out. "How are we going to handle the commander's call?" she asked. "It's typically so disorganized."

"What we need is to convince the colonel that what we need is a commander's update briefing," I said. "We did these nearly every day, and they followed a specific format."

"A CUB!" Scheidler said, and snapped his fingers. He fired up his laptop, tapped a few keys, and voila, the CUB slides appeared that he had used daily in Bosnia. "I'll just come up with one for the 63rd Troop Command," he said.

Everyone should have a MAJ Scheidler.

So, it's not my own section that makes me dread the coming couple of weeks. They are awesome. No, it's the annual training itself and the levels of incompetence that goes with it at the senior levels.

*According to Shay, returning veterans often "considered themselves very good at what they did and were openly contemptuous of the attitude, dedication, and competence of their fellow employees" (p. 58). Was I openly contemptuous? Well, I wasn't trying to be. But I can say that it was pretty obvious to returning veterans that the senior leadership had no idea what the ground truth really was on the battlefield, since they'd never experienced it, nor were they likely to. It's hard to plan realistic training if you don't know what real is. Some of them at least asked me, or other vets, what it was really like. Most did not, because they assumed they could tell what real was by observing from afar.*

God bless them, I think they mean well. The Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and his assistant have the right idea. They want to change annual training so that each unit can focus on what they would do if they actually went to war. They want to run the field exercise in Camp Grayling itself, and have LANES training for convoy operations and Entry Control Point as the main centralized activities being run at the state level. I am all for this switch in the training plan.

But when it comes to the implementation thereof, it is clear that most of the senior leaders don't know what they're doing. It seems they can't even figure out what uniform the soldiers should be wearing. Do they go full interactive ballistic armor and Kevlar helmet?

If they don't do it in Iraq, they shouldn't do it in Grayling, is what I say.

Ah, but the 1st Army readiness folks want us to acclimate to the body armor . . . why? Trust me, when you're in a dangerous area in Iraq, you acclimate to that body armor just fine. Otherwise, why make people miserable?

The LANES are another thing. Intelligently enough, they've hired the 1462d Transportation Company, newly back from Iraq, to run the convoy lanes, and the unit will do it superbly. The Entry Control Point issue is another thing, though. I'd like to see them do it like they do in Kuwait or Grayling, where all entry into and out of the camp would be done through the control point, and every vehicle will have a trip ticket with authorization to travel signed off by a lieutenant colonel or above. Everyone should get out for a real vehicle inspection as well because it's good training for both the vehicle drivers and the people learning about control point operations. I mention these ideas, and the guy running the operation says, "Uh, what's a trip ticket?"

So I develop one for them, but the whole operations section at the Joint Force Headquarters is leery of it. They're afraid the colonels and generals and the folks at the Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ) won't want to play this game. No, the entry control point will be a mock

one, set up on an entry point that is normally locked, and the front gate will do business as usual.

Oh, well, I tried.

What about drinking? There are clubs right on post. . . .

If they don't do it in Iraq, they shouldn't do it in Grayling, is what I say.

Now, don't get me wrong. I think the no drinking during OIF/OEF is one of the dumbest rules they've ever come up with. We fought our revolution over rum and tea and, till 2003, we never disallowed alcohol during wartime. They say they do it in deference to the Kuwaitis and Iraqis who don't drink due to their religion, to which I reply bulls\*oney . . . the Kuwaitis drink. The Iraqis drink. And by disallowing it, we create forbidden fruit.

But . . . why can't the clubs on post become "MWR facilities" selling near-beer and soda and food for the duration of our 10-day field exercise, and leave the alcohol till after the field exercise?

*The rule for soldiers on the 10-day field exercise is no alcohol. This rule has been enforced by First Army for years. JFHQ soldiers, who never deployed to the field, disregarded this rule, since they felt they weren't on the field exercise. There are those soldiers who believe that all soldiers should live by the rule, regardless of being in the field, to build cohesion in the National Guard.*

*Field troops have noted that soldiers living on post get to drink and they don't. They don't like the double standard.*

More complicated answer—because the clubs will lose money and they're barely making ends meet as it is and they need the money from alcohol to stay in business. Sure they do.

*Let me tell you about the Dusty Room. Once upon a time, the dining facility on Camp Virginia had been a tent. Once the trailer DFAC went up, the "ownership" of this fest tent reverted to the PSB headquarters. Then along came the rainy season, and the fest tent was condemned due to black mold.*

*That meant no one could live in it, but it didn't mean we couldn't use it for other purposes. My unit took over that PSB's mission, and so ownership of this tent, and the accompanying unsanctioned MWR facility the PSB had run, transferred to the 163rd PSB, my headquarters.*

*Some of my soldiers, I suppose because they had nothing better to do, embraced this facility, made it an official MWR facility on Camp Virginia, and turned it into an all-ranks club. They served near-beer and had Karaoke nights and sponsored other events throughout the year.*

*That MWR facility had a profitable operation in Kuwait, and if we could do it in the desert, it ought to be doable in Grayling, Michigan, during the time when we had a captive audience.*

Easy answer—because the folks at Joint Force Headquarters don't want to have to play the game quite so realistically. Frankly, the generals and colonels do their networking and schmoozing over drinks at the club, and they don't want to have to give that up.

*"In the Iliad, the gods are arbitrary, heartless, capricious, and unconcerned with justice." (Shay, p. 105.) Some of the senior leadership's choices seemed like that to me.*

So, complaints from 1st Army readiness notwithstanding in this case, alcohol will be sold to soldiers when they are off-duty. Ain't that nice?

*This decision also necessitated E8s and above to provide security duty at the All-Ranks Club for the duration of AT. So much for me having access to my sergeant major battle captain or my E8 Intelligence sergeant during bar hours.*

Hey, it's not going to be me. I'm on shift from 1300 to 0100, so you won't be finding me in the bar till after the 10-day field exercise.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

What you focus on you will feel; what you focus on determines your direction in life; what you continually focus on, you will get.

Tony Robbins

## MISSIVE #26

### “Keeping the Explosion Inside”

July 29, 2005

I'm at my 6-month point post-deployment. I should be over this, I keep thinking. Instead, I seem to be worse than ever.

*It actually took 1 month for every month deployed to get back to some semblance of 'normal.' While I was deployed, the hardest time was between the 6-month and 9-month point for most of my soldiers. Little did I know I was about to enter the nadir of my own redeployment process.*

I had a sleepless night last night, after a sleepless week, 2 weeks, how long have I gone without sleep? I'd like to blame this on the fact that I just don't want to go to Annual Training, but if I'm honest with myself, when I CAN be honest with myself, I know that AT has very little to do with it.

I fear that I am finally, totally, losing it.

*I know that I was not alone in this kind of breakdown. According to Shay, "I believe that nearly every veteran who returns to civilian life after a long time in combat has moments in which he is afraid of losing his mind" (p. 108). But I certainly felt all alone with my pain. Why? Because I could not talk to anyone about it. Certainly, the Veterans' Administration said we could have up to five visits with a psychologist and they would be free of charge and that they would never appear on our record, but as a senior leader, I did not, could not believe that I could use those services, even as I suggested their use to others.*

*There is, for example the question on the Secret/Top Secret Clearance application which asks, "Have you ever seen a psychologist?" or "Have you ever been diagnosed with a psychological disorder?" You have to be honest in answering this question, and then when they have the in-person interview with the investigator, they ask you all these questions again just to see if you get nervous when answering them. In other words, just going to a psychologist could jeopardize my career.*

*Nor could I talk to anyone about my moments of self-doubt for fear they'd label me a nutcase, and that would also signal the end of my career.*

*Recently, I took part in a survey through the VA Hospital nearby which was trying to determine why senior leaders have not taken advantage of the post-deployment psychological services, so I'd have to say the military is finally realizing this problem is a systemic one. I guess it's gratifying to know I'm not the only senior leader who has had moments post-deployment when I have questioned my sanity. But I think the trend needs to be addressed more than it has been.*

I can look back on the last 6 months in my saner moments and realize I've been going through a progression of sorts. At first, I felt totally numb. I had turned off all emotion in an attempt to survive the deployment, and it took months before any kind of feeling could come back into my life. I think I might have even denied it for awhile, because maybe I was afraid I'd discover I didn't really want to be back home.

There. I said it.

I had hated every sandy inch of Kuwait, every portion of Iraq I'd touched, and, well, okay, I never hated Qatar. But now that I was back, now that I could see what I was fighting for, I found myself wondering why I had fought for THAT.

Yes, folks, I went to war so we as a nation could watch American Idol, Girls Gone Wild, vapid reality shows. I had fought for people who were 50 to 100 pounds overweight to go through their fast food drive-throughs in the safety of their own cars. Cars that spewed exhaust from millions of gallons of gasoline.

A military officer for the United States of America swears to defend this country's Constitution against all enemies, foreign or domestic. By extension, that means I have to obey our civilian leadership, because that's what my Constitution says I'll do.

But, what if what my civilian leadership orders me to do seems very wrong? What if the standards of the military are higher than the standards of the citizens we protect? Did the founding fathers of this nation ever expect to see this country looking the way it does today?

I'm not proud of this aspect of my country and the service I provide to it. I am ashamed of this. I hate this. And so, every time I thought of it, I would shut down. I didn't want that emotion, that thought process to enter into my heart or into my psyche, for fear this hatred would start to extend to my family.

But by the end of April, I couldn't hold it in any longer. Too many emotions to name came flooding out. I was powerless to stop the flow, but also powerless to deal with it. Thank God I am a writer, so I could write about it, but even then, I could only deal with one emotion at a time.

I think I've processed some of the emotions. I think I've processed the fear. I think I've processed the grief. Now I find myself staring in the face of the triple threat: Shame. Hatred. Anger.

And I don't know which one is worse. They seem to all be connected in one mass. What am I ashamed of? Who, or what, do I hate? What, who, has made me so angry? And . . . don't listen to that voice . . . stop it . . . what if what you hate is you? STOP. What if what makes you angriest is what you yourself did?

*Shay lists the following as symptoms of a degraded thumos (the great fighting spirit):*

- apathy, ennui*
- self-loathing, sense of unworthiness*
- loss of self-respect/ initiative*
- raw vulnerability*
- social withdrawal*
- hypochondria or ignoring real issues*
- suggestibility*
- danger-seeking; picking fights*
- claims to have been players in the most important event in history*
- entitlement*
- demanding respect*
- rage over small slights*
- global destructiveness*
- apocalyptic ecstasy (pp. 160-161).*

*At this point, I was dealing with at least five of these symptoms actively, and was occasionally dealing with several others.*

*I'd like to point one thing out in particular, that of ignoring real issues. Two days before this car ride north during a routine breast self-exam, I found a lump. I figured at the time that I could not actually get it checked in the near future, so I literally buried it, and did not do much in the way of further checking till 4 months later. Meanwhile, it was a sore that festered, and added to my sense of overwhelm.*

I said STOP!!!

A 3-hour road trip; 3 1/2 hours if it's bad traffic. And it is bad traffic. Construction. I hate construction. Stopped cold for 2 hours in construction. Yes, this is what I fought a F\*\*\*ing war for, folks.

And so I seethe. For 5 hours I seethe. Seethe so much I sweat. And with each passing hour, the music gets louder and I scream inside the car. I beat against the steering wheel, even after the traffic has cleared, and it's smooth sailing up the highway to Grayling. Part of me worries that other drivers will see me and think I'm freaking out. Who am I kidding? I AM freaking out. And part of me just doesn't care what others may think.

*Kubler-Ross and Kessler say that when a person is grieving, "it is important to remember that the anger surfaces once you are feeling safe enough to know you will probably survive whatever comes" (p. 11). Maybe that's true, but I can tell you, at the time the last thing I felt was safe. I especially did not feel safe with my own anger.*

*"Loved ones and friends are often taken aback by these feelings, because they surface just as you were beginning to function at a basic level again." (Ibid., p. 12.) While this is true, I think the other person taken aback at this onslaught of anger was me. Maybe I was ready to face it, but that didn't mean I expected to get so enraged by events.*

Pure unadulterated fury is what this is. I just wish I could figure out what it's about. But my mind is blocking it, or the fury is blocking it. I'm so angry that it blinds me to why I'm so angry. Snippets get past . . . LTC Rainwater . . . COL Boyd . . . the general . . . sand . . . my boss, what's her name? Good God, I've forgotten her name . . . please don't try to remember her name . . . I can't even remember the name of the nutcase I had to send home . . . she was a DESERT STORM vet, and now I think I understand her just a little bit more . . . she was trying to deal with this fury.

Maybe I was the nutcase all along.

*"Sometimes a veteran's desire to 'stop the screaming' or 'stop the nightmares' gets framed as forgetting, 'If only I could forget . . .'. But the inability to remember things that the veteran longs to recover and the inability to feel safe from ambush by flashbacks and nightmares are two sides of the same coin. The veteran has lost authority over his own process of memory." (Shay, p. 38.)*

By the time I arrive at Grayling, about 6:30 p.m., I am exhausted. My brain has beaten me to a pulp. I surrender. I emerge, my legs shaking, from the car. I straighten my shoulders and pretend nothing is wrong. I walk into the place that will be my office for the next 2 weeks.

*I had become really good at this. Shay has a list of skills soldiers acquire during combat which includes "suppression of compassion, honor, guilt, tenderness, disgust, and grief." And the "ability to lie fluently and convincingly" (p. 21). I was doing both of these things at this moment, well enough so that I think no one even noticed I was under duress.*

A cool breeze from an oscillating fan greets me. MAJ Jones turns around, a big smile on her face. "Ma'am, it's good to see you," she says, her voice rich with warmth and kindness. I think she actually means it. Maybe I'm not a horrible person. "We were just about to go to dinner, but we were waiting for you. Would you care to join us?"

Food. Who can think of food, with a stomach that roils at the merest thought? And these have been no mere thoughts. . . .

“Yes, thank you. I’d like that very much. Would someone else drive?”

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

*DNW is Donald Neale Walsch, who wrote a series of books called Conversations With God. I was reading them as research for creating my narrator for CATCH 20XX. As I think I’ve said before, I used the actual taglines I had on my signature line at the same times in 2005 that I write about in these missives. I had changed to this one in the past week. I find it ironic that I chose this quote around the time I felt I had lost all hope.*

## MISSIVE #27

### “Battle Rhythm and the Mask”

August 5, 2005

Now that I'm up in Grayling, now that I'm settling into the routine, it feels almost normal. After all, this is the army life; the life I lived for over a year in the desert. When I close my eyes to the grass and trees, I can almost imagine the sand and the heat instead.

Speaking of heat, most of the time here, I don't feel it. Everyone in my section complains about how hot it is, but it's only 80 or so, which is only a little over half of the degrees I went through last year.

I take solace in my schedule. We in the army call this our battle rhythm, and I have tailored mine this year to suit me.

*My retreat into routine was an example of “the veteran clinging to sanity above the sucking whirlpool of rage and grief, guilt, and despair – and of all the destructive ways that humans act on these vehement emotions.” (Shay, pp. 107-108.) I was very fragile at this point, and I knew it.*

I get out of bed at about 10 in the morning. Note how I didn't say I awake then. I have already been awake for hours. I still do not sleep.

Then I begin my preparations for the day. I get dressed in PT uniform, head out for a jog to the weight room past the parade field, and work out for an hour or so. I am usually the only person in the gym and that suits me just fine. I don't have to talk to anyone, don't have to be civil; it is just me, smacking the weights into submission.

*Kubler-Ross and Kessler say, “Try walking, swimming, gardening – any type of exercise helps you externalize your anger” (p. 16). I must have known this intuitively, because I was almost religious about the amount of exercise I was getting around this time.*

I run back just in time for lunch. I eat at the dining facility, although the concept of dining hall food threatens to give me flashbacks. There is another problem here as well; we share our dining facility with the soldiers who are playing the Opposing Force (OPFOR). These soldiers are all volunteers from a unit that redeployed around the same time we did. They have recently redeployed themselves. They were a long range surveillance patrol company that was mostly used for guard duty at the camps, including the Abu Ghraib prison.

*This unit had issues. They went in thinking they'd have one kind of mission, and instead discovered no one wanted to use them for their intended purpose. Many of the soldiers were bitter for serving a year of deployment on glorified guard duty.*

I daresay they are getting better training playing the enemy here in Grayling than they did the entire year they were away. I say enemy with a bit of hesitation, because the training scenario has them playing third country nationals who may or may not be friendly. Honestly, this is how I think it should be, because that's real life.

*Even 1 year into our OIF time, it had become obvious to a number of us that we were dealing with a counterinsurgency, even if the senior leadership of the army and the civilian leadership refused to believe it. As such, we were training soldiers to fight and kill when instead we should have been teaching that most of the people in Iraq are not our enemy, and we should be learning their culture and helping them to take ownership of their country. The disconnect between our training and our mission only exacerbated a growing dichotomy. So, while many commanders complained of lack of training realism at this AT, I was applauding them for actually getting close to reality than we'd been training in the past.*

But, speaking of real life, I can't help but think that these role-players will take advantage of the dining hall situation and stage a dining facility bombing, similar to what happened in Mosul a year ago. And so I find myself hyper-vigilant every time I enter the dining facility and watch these soldiers in civilian dress with more than a touch of suspicion, even though logically I know it would all be play-acting if it did occur.

Needless to say, I'm not eating much.

After lunch, I head back to get dressed in my uniform for the day. I shower, get dressed, my hair is now long enough that I need to pull it back in a tiny bun at the nape of my neck, and then I begin to apply my mask.

I have never worn a lot of makeup, mind you. I've always been a bit low maintenance. But I have found myself, during this annual training, using this time as a meditation to get myself into the right state. I transform myself into the officer I must be.

A month or so ago, some friends of mine from way back came to see me. My husband had just recently put together a selection of pictures from my deployment, and he asked them if they'd like to see the slide show. Eagerly, they said yes.

The first picture shown was a picture of me in my desert camouflage. My hair was short, my face was serious, I looked nothing if not fierce. "Who's that?" my one friend asked.

"That's me," I said.

Both the women gasped. "Oh my God, that can't be you. That person scares me."

Yes, the officer I need to be. So around 12:30 every day, I smooth on the foundation, the concealer, the blush, the mascara and eyeliner, and lipstick. All the same ingredients I put into my face every morning. But there is a difference. As I do it here, for annual training, as I did it in the desert for a year, this is the application of my war mask.

I have become adept at covering my soul when I do this. The result is hard as steel. And when I am in uniform, when I wear the war mask, there is absolutely no trace of that fragile woman who drove up here a week ago. When I am done, I am all business, I am the competent lieutenant colonel. Down to the eyes that reveal nothing behind them.

It is my role, and I have learned to play it well.

*Shay says "disguise, deception and misrecognition" are the dominant themes of The Odyssey (p. 122). I realize just how much I was trying to disguise myself here. Looking back, it feels similar to Athena disguising herself from Odysseus when he washes up, disoriented, on the beach by his home. But I think I was doing much more than trying to disguise myself. I was working out, I was trying (failing) to sleep, I was showering and trying to make myself look the part. But I was also retreating into myself, licking my wounds. I spoke of degraded thumos, or great fighting spirit, in the last missive, which is closely related to narcissism. Positive narcissism, it seems, is needed to be a good soldier.*

*I had lost parts of that. Looking in the mirror and applying my war mask was an attempt to retrieve it.*

Costume in place, I grab my ballistic armor and helmet and head to the office. I go through the meetings, I write up the reports, I monitor the training, I chastise those who do not follow the rules. Another day passes, and then another night, and at 1 a.m. or so, I head off to my hooch for another night.

I'm too keyed up to sleep. I remove the mask, but the vestiges of the role remain, like makeup the remover hasn't been able to swipe clean. I read for awhile, knit for awhile, lay down on my bed, and stare at the ceiling. Listen to music. And close my eyes, knowing sleep will not come.

All too soon it will be 10 a.m., and it will be time to start it all over again.

Till next time –

*Shay quotes Dr. Mary Harvey, who has a three-stage description of recover: (1) establish safety, sobriety, and self-care; (2) perform trauma-centered work constructing your personal narrative, allowing time for grief; and (3) reconnect with people, community, ideals, ambitions (p. 168). It is interesting to me, looking back, that at this point, I tried to reestablish self-care but began to withdraw from society to do so. By this time, I only had a few people in the army I was willing to trust.*

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #27A

### **"Playing the Game"**

August 8, 2005

*NOTE: This is an extra missive. I added it because the memory came back to me in such detail that I knew it was important to my reintegration process, or lack thereof.*

I took a couple days off over the middle weekend. Honestly, I'm not sure it was such a good idea.

A funny thing happened just before I left. MAJ Scheidler sidled over to me that afternoon. "Ma'am, I think you should see this."

MAJ Scheidler, because he is a transportation officer and has been in transportation companies for years and because as part of his deployment, he helped run a movement control center, has been the trip ticket God for this annual training. As such, he has created a tracking system for all movements occurring within our brigade. We have been insistent that:

- (1) Every movement have a trip ticket, signed by a lieutenant colonel or higher;
- (2) That every movement have a minimum of three vehicles, just as would be expected if actually deployed; and,
- (3) In concert with the S2 section, that each convoy commander debrief after every trip, to include a SALUTE report on any suspicious activity that may have occurred during the journey.

*There was controversy and much joking at a few Lieutenant Colonels' expense, myself included, about this whole SALUTE report idea.*

*Ever since I trained in the ROTC some 20-odd years ago, I've know what a SALUTE report was. When we came back from patrols, we were supposed to report any suspicious activity in this format, so we could be sure we gave all pertinent details: Size of the unit we saw; Activity they were engaged in; Location of the unit; Uniform they were wearing, Time we saw them; and any Equipment they were using or carrying.*

*We announced the rules of these trip tickets at a CUB, and the battalion commanders were, at best, nonplussed. One man, whom I'll describe later, was openly hostile to the idea. And one guy from the Aviation Battalion smirked as he said, "SALUTE report? What's that? Never heard of it." I rattled off what they were and said it was basic Army knowledge; he could find more information in his manual of common skills.*

*I guess my comment irked him.*

*He came in later that day, pulled out his manual of command tasks, and pointed out to my staff that it wasn't a SALUTE report. It was a "Spot Report given in SALUTE format."*

*My staff, in turn, pointed this out to me. So, at the next CUB, I said I stood corrected; I now knew the SALUTE report was actually a Spot Report given in SALUTE format. Then, every time I mentioned it the rest of the meeting, I used the long name.*

*I thought one lieutenant colonel was going to throw something at me.*

Scheidler looked deadly serious as he handed me a pile of recent trip tickets. "Notice anything about all of these, Ma'am?"

I checked the papers over carefully. Three vehicles or more. Check. Signed by a colonel. Check. Wait. I looked again. "That's not an original signature." I looked at the others. None of them were original signatures. These trip tickets were photocopied with that battalion commander's name.

I bit down hard, in danger of cracking my back teeth. “Is this being done on purpose?” I asked, although why on earth I’d ask such a stupid question knowing what the answer is was somewhat beyond me.

MAJ Scheidler let the question pass as rhetorical. “Why don’t you read the SALUTE reports on the back?”

I turned the first one over. Dutifully, there was a SALUTE report:

Size = One.

Activity = Dead.

Location = Side of road (here was a legitimate 8-digit grid coordinate).

Unit = Skunk.

Time = 050330AUG05.

Equipment = Quite the stench.

“Everybody’s a comedian, aren’t they? Wouldn’t be funny if the TCNs turned that skunk into an IED, would it?”

“It gets worse, Ma’am. I just found out the 14—st (number not given to protect innocent and guilty alike) Trans Company’s been skipping out of going out the back gate. Someone gave them a key to open up the ASP road, and they’ve been going that way all week.

*This meant the unit didn’t need to use their trip tickets because they weren’t using the checkpoint gate. They were flagrantly avoiding some of the required training for AT.*

*Yes, this unit had deployed. And yes, they had a “reason to distrust credentials, institutional position, and abstract, univ ersally applied procedures . . . lives lost when people went by the book.” (Shay, p. 166.) But here was the kicker – this was already training not in accordance with any book – it was from lessons learned on the battlefield.*

“And another thing. The units won’t check back in. I have five convoys out, and I don’t know if they’ve come back yet.”

“Does their battalion commander know they aren’t playing the game?”

*This is the man who was openly hostile to the trip ticket procedure. Now he was trying to pull the wool over my eyes, and I wasn’t going to have any of it. He fit the mold of what Shay mentions in his book – those officers who are “quibbling, unscrupulous, corrupt, ambitious, self-serving, sophistic, rejoicing to make the worse argument appear the better” (p. 78). What pained me most was that it seemed COL Mulcahy seemed to trust him more than she did me.*

Again, he treated the question as rhetorical. “Ma’am. I’m ashamed. I’ve been part of the trans units here since I was a private.”

“That unit deployed, for God’s sake. Their battalion commander is about to deploy. Don’t they realize disregarding the rules can get someone killed? Well, put them on RED status. Till they check in, we consider them missing, possibly dead. Report them as such in the commander’s update briefing today.”

Scheidler had alerted me to the issue, but there wasn’t much I could do right then. COL Mulcahy was out of the vicinity, and I was about to go on the equivalent of R&R. “Let me think over what I’ll do about this. Meanwhile, when Mulcahy gets back, let her know we have people who are blatantly disobeying direct orders, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, but he didn’t look too happy about his assignment.

*I have mentioned before that Shay says social trust is based on the belief that the people in power will do what is right. When that expectation is broken, those who have been betrayed will always try to fend off attack, humiliation, or exploitation, and to figure out any tricks that have been played (Ibid., p. 151). I felt humiliated and exploited by this commander. What other tricks was he trying to pull?*

Well, I thought about it all right. The whole weekend. Sure, I came back home, spent the weekend with my kids and husband, all the while getting angrier about lieutenant colonels who didn't use the training for what it was meant to do. I think my brooding colored my whole weekend.

*"Homer shows us the first way the soldiers lose their homecoming having left the warzone physically – they may simply remain in combat mode, although not necessarily against the original enemy." (Shay, p. 20.)*

*In this case these words ring true to me on two levels. First of all, I couldn't enjoy myself at home because of what was happening at AT. But second, by the end of my deployment, my enemy had become my senior leaders, who had betrayed my sense of what was right. I had come back to the Guard thinking it would be different, but now I was beginning to see that I would experience the same betrayal, possibly every time I got into uniform.*

*My enemy was all around me, and my confusion came from the idea that these people used to be my friends. They used to be people I could trust.*

Monday morning, I really didn't want to go back. This military crap was really beginning to wear on me. And as soon as I got back in the car, the seething began again. What was it about that 3 1/2-hour drive that could really get me going?

I listened to LinkinPark "Live in Texas," the volume getting louder with every song. One song in particular haunted me, and I played it over again. "I don't know why I stay, when you just push away, no matter what I say, you're still so blind to me. . . ." Wasn't that what was happening here?

The veterans knew the real deal. We knew that trying to sneak out with no one to cover you was dangerous. We knew that a skunk could be wired with plastique. We knew that a vehicle that had missed check-in could have gotten dead along the way.

*Kubler-Ross and Kessler say, "Anger does not have to be logical to be valid" (p. 11). That's nice. I'm glad my anger is valid, even when I'm not being logical. But I have a stake in trying to remain logical. I wanted my anger here to be logical, because otherwise I was afraid I was losing my grip on reality.*

That battalion commander should have known better. He was about to know better. He was going in the box next year. If he was man enough to actually deploy with his unit, that is. The jury was still out on that one.

I'd alerted COL Mulcahy that this particular commander had been playing this game all week, but there's one thing I've learned recently. I love her as a mentor, I have great respect for her, but I was beginning to realize that she trusted people I wouldn't for the life of me trust myself. This battalion commander was one of these people, and she had waved off my complaints so far, saying, "I'm sure he has a good reason for his behavior."

Right.

*I'll say again, I loved COL Mulcahy like a sister. But starting with this AT, I began to have the feeling that I couldn't really trust her to make good decisions, either. When my trust in her slipped away completely, I began to doubt my ability to trust any senior leader in the military ever again.*

*I realize trust is a two-way street, and the only way to get trust is to be trustworthy. This was what I kept trying to teach my children. By the same token, in order to be surrounded by people who are trustworthy, I first have to be willing to trust people.*

*This ability is what was stripped away from me during deployment. Will it ever come back?*

Why did I stay when they didn't seem to want to listen to the wisdom of those who had been there? I was using "they" in a general sense. There were senior leaders at the Joint Force Headquarters who didn't want to play the game either. They said I was a hero, that I was war-hardened, but when I gave a suggestion for how to train the units for deployment, the answer was always, "Maybe next year."

I got back to Grayling and went straight to COL Mulcahy's office. She was in. I don't know if that was a good thing, or a bad thing. She took one look at my face, pulled me into the office, and closed the door. "What's up? What's wrong?"

And I let it rip. I told her that I was afraid for these units that weren't following the rules. I told her this kind of sh\*\* could get people killed. I told her people were just playing the game, or not playing the game, and that either way, it just wasn't right. "When are they going to realize, this isn't a game? It's war, Melissa. This is the real thing."

"I know." She took my hand in hers. "Are you sleeping?"

"What?" I said, but I knew what she meant. "No. Not really."

*Odysseus stayed awake 9 days and nights . . . "He doesn't trust anyone else to do it right, even though Aeolus has given him a perfect following wind . . . made a 'mission' out of it." (Shay, p. 53.)*

*By this time I was going on far longer than just 9 days without sleeping. I'm not sure I was trying to make a 'mission' out of things. I trusted my own small circle of soldiers, but definitely felt a lack of trust for those of my own rank or higher.*

She sighed. "I should never have forced you to come to AT. I wanted you here, but it's too soon. You needed some time to heal. I'm sorry." I didn't say anything. "Chris. You've been there. You've seen the train wreck. You know what leads to the train wreck, and you want to point to it and help the leaders who are about to go in, and say this is how to avoid the train wreck. But Chris, they need to learn it for themselves."

*"Homer has a discredited voice speak the truth . . . near the end of the epic." (Shay, p. 101.) This may have been the first time I felt like the discredited voice, although I did not know it at the time. It was not to be the last.*

Her words washed over me. I could feel the truth behind them, even if I didn't like that truth. In the desert, a chaplain had told me that if I'd had a dysfunctional family, I'd have been the "fixer," the one who tried to make everything all right. But, he had said, "When you can't fix the dysfunction, but you still try, you will become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. You need to step back and disengage if you want to keep your sanity intact."

I wondered, there in COL Mulcahy's office, just how often and in how many different ways I'd have to hear the same lesson before I learned to disengage earlier rather than later.

Because the army ain't nothing, if it ain't a dysfunctional family.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #28

### "Forgetting the Pain"

August 12, 2005

While my weekend R&R may or may not have led to an explosion in the colonel's office, there is one positive aspect which has occurred. My sense of humor has reengaged.

My last night on duty before I left for the weekend, my sergeants complained about the office. "I think the Feng Shui just isn't right," one of them said. This sent the whole section into hoots of laughter. As if we could transform a cinderblock structure with broken filing cabinets, no natural light because we had to create blackout conditions, and uncomfortable desks and chairs into a Zen sanctuary.

Of course, I took my sergeant's comment very seriously. "Yes, you're right. We need to do some cures. While I'm gone, make a zen rock garden."

This, of course, resulted in another round of raucous laughter. But what do you expect for conversation at 0130 in the morning?

As I packed up my bags to go back to Grayling, I threw in a Feng Shui manual as an afterthought. Yes, I do have such silliness laying around my house. What can I say?

*Kubler-Ross says, "Anger is usually at the front of the line as feelings of sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness appear" (pp. 11-12). It's like opening Pandora's box, and all the bad emotions come out. In Pandora's box, only hope was left by the time she got the lid back on.*

*I think there is some truth to Pandora's box. Once the anger starts to blow the top of the box off, then there are myriad suppressed emotions that burst to the surface. One of them suppressed ones in my case was humor.*

*I had used humor to survive in the desert. The original missives, people have told me often, are very funny. I figured if I would laugh at my memories in 10 years, then why not laugh now. But as the year wore on and I kept having to suppress more and more of my emotions, my humor also became suppressed. My laughter became more cynical, harsher, more bitter.*

*There was nothing bitter about the lightheartedness of my Feng Shui makeover of the Brigade S2-S3 office. Maybe it wasn't per se, but the whole office laughed about it, and became more relaxed.*

*Humor was obviously one of the suppressed emotions I was more than happy to have back. But I also knew I had my work cut out for me dealing with the rest of my boxed in emotions.*

After my blowout with COL Mulcahy, I headed to my office, feeling somewhat the worse for wear. I cleared my weapon by rote, then walked in the door. "ATTENTION!" someone yelled, and my whole section stood.

"I'm not the commander," I said. Then I noticed the grins almost everyone was struggling to hide. "As you were, you goofs. What's up?"

MAJ Scheidler beckoned me to come into the briefing room. There, in the center of the table, was the lid of a combat field desk, filled with carefully raked sand. Next to it was a tiny rake, made in Rube Goldberg fashion from two plastic dining hall forks. Deadpan, I said, "While I appreciate the work that has gone into this cure so far, it is not a rock garden until it has rocks."

They all nodded in unison.

From sheer boredom, and to my section's, not to mention the commanders' complete surprise, I started putting up Feng Shui cures all over the place. During the commanders'

update briefings, my section updated all the battalion commanders on the improvements made that day, or night as the case may be.

I had put construction paper shapes in each corner to create a Bagua, put triangles in the Fame area, fake trees in the Family area, purple in the back corner to stimulate Wealth. I even fashioned an aluminum purse of sorts for the Helpful People section of our office, complete with the names, "COL Mulcahy (brigade commander), BG Taylor (the assistant to the Adjutant General), and MG Cutler (TAG)" inside.

*"Are their helmets and flak jackets for the soul and for the character?" (Shay, p. 33.) Again, I sense the irony that when I was feeling so low, I retreated into a pseudo-spiritual, ritualistic practice such as Feng Shui, even if it was mostly in jest.*

*Feng Shui does create a symbolic shield of sorts, the Bagua, which separates living spaces into nine sections. Establishing colors and cures in effect creates a shield which deflects negative energy away and attracts positive energy to the areas.*

*Doing all this mumbo-jumbo also had the benefit of defusing peoples' developing anger over training. They'd be about to explode about something, stop, and then say, "Why is there a green rectangle on the wall?"*

*Could Feng Shui be a helmet and flak jacket for my soul? Doubtful, but "It might, Rabbit, it might." (Bugs Bunny)*

Even our rock garden improved every day. My S2 NCO found five rocks, and added quotes to their underside, all from Sun Tzu's "Art of War." He carefully raked around them every day.

Our efforts were met with bemusement by all but my staff. I can't say the Feng Shui of the place was any better, but our moods sure were.

Except for that "Wake the Commander" moment.

Part of the result of my blowup in front of COL Mulcahy was that she announced everyone had to play the game, and the most critical aspect of this announcement was that she wanted the units to check in with the trip tickets. Anyone less than an hour from ETA was green, 1-3 hours was amber, and over 3 hours was red. Hit 4 hours, and it became a critical commander's information, wake the commander. I asked her if she really meant it. Do I really wake the commander? She insisted that, yes, she meant it.

It happened that night. At midnight, a unit was still not there. I hesitated. Do I really wake the commander? She had said yes, but . . . they had been on the firing range. What if something really had happened? Midnight. Maybe she's not asleep. I went to the officers' club, which was where her hooch was, and found her just leaving the bar, having finished a drink with the generals. I explained the situation. She called the battalion commander of the unit to explain that one of his units was missing, and he'd better find it.

"Let me know when they finally call in," she said, and she went to bed.

An hour later, a sheepish sergeant came in with the paperwork. I let COL Mulcahy know as well.

Finally, Tuesday rolled around and the units rolled back in from 10 days in the field. COL Mulcahy told us we were all expected at the bar to celebrate the end of a successful field exercise.

I'm not much of a drinker. The night before we came home from Fort McCoy, I had hosted a party for my unit, and had three gin and tonics. I was more than looped, since that amount of consumption equaled almost a year for me normally. And since that evening, I hadn't touched anything.

Close of Business that day was 1700, in comparison to the 0200 that had become my norm. My workaholism was in hyper-drive, so I couldn't come down. I stayed in the office till about 2000, and accidentally skipped dinner.

*Going "for the sake of having a mission that shuts everything else from their minds." (Shay, p. 57.)*

One of my troops reminded me I was supposed to be at a command event at the club, so I went back to my hooch, showered, blow-dried my hair, put on the mask. This time, of course, it was the civilian mask, the one no one at camp had seen since AT began.

As I walked into the bar, no one recognized me. I sat down with MAJ Scheidler and a few others I recognized, after greeting the generals who sat at the bar. "What'll you have?" Scheidler asked me.

White wine seemed safe.

I nursed that one glass of wine all night, but whether it was that I'd lost so much weight or because I hadn't had dinner or because I had no tolerance for alcohol anymore or because I hadn't slept in days, weeks, months, that one glass of wine was making me loopy. I got more relaxed, I had to think about how to form the words I spoke, when I spoke, which wasn't often. Mostly, I let the alcohol surround me with a pleasant golden haze.

I remember having a conversation with another vet who'd just returned. We realized a guy I'd gone to college with had stood up in his wedding. After an hour or so, I remember deciding it was probably time to go, but I got called over by the generals. They wanted to talk. Standing up made me dizzy, and I remember grabbing on to the back of the general's chair just to steady myself. He laughed at this.

*Even at the time, I remember feeling like my unsteadiness, my inability to handle a glass of wine, was a form of "entertainment for the royals." (Shay, p. 106.) I observed this at the time, as though I were disembodied. I look at it now and wonder, instead of amusement should this general have been noticing the change in my behavior and seen it as a possible warning sign, that I could've used a little help? This man had never deployed, however, so maybe the thought didn't even occur to him.*

I got myself home safely, since it was only a 2-minute drive, but I sat there, marveling at this. Just one drink had done this to me.

I actually slept that night.

But, isn't it a dangerous thing, when alcohol actually gives you something you need?

*I had gone without good sleep for so long, I really wasn't sure how to get to sleep anymore. "Such a state directly interferes with sleep, often causing a vicious cycle, because of the physiological and psychological 'jacking up' that comes from going without sleep. 'I've got to get some sleep!' . . . The easy, cheap availability of the sedating drug alcohol has been irresistible to many veteran insomniacs." (Shay, p. 39.)*

*Going through this experience, I could understand why. The alcohol had finally let me sleep. It was a subtle seduction I found very hard to resist. In fact, I didn't resist it for the next few days, although the relief-filled sleep was a short-lived by-product.*

Maybe it happens once, maybe twice. But don't count on this drug for your solace.

The next night, I drank a glass and a half of wine. I was loopier than the night before, and waited awhile before driving home. Sleep did not come.

The night of the main party, I got the news that I had been nominated and my name sent forward for the resident course at the U.S. Army War College. Everyone congratulated me and bought me drinks. I think I drank a total of three glasses of wine. Either way, I couldn't track what people were saying to me. I was in my own golden cloud.

I ended up next to RJ, the guy who knew my friend from college, and a young first lieutenant. They matched every one of my drinks with two of their own. RJ finally opened up and started telling war stories about being with the reconnaissance unit up in Baghdad. The lieutenant was eager to hear. He'd been medically disqualified for headaches when his last unit went, and he was bound and determined to be the company commander of a transportation unit that was heading out soon.

*I always worry when someone is so set to get deployed. I'm afraid they have the expectation that deployment will be the high point of their careers, and if so, they are bound for disappointment and bitterness. This man recently redeployed, and I have seen in his face some of the reintegration issues I faced when I got back.*

I remained silent, drinking. Finally, I stood up.

"You all right, Ma'am?" the lieutenant said.

"Yeah. I think so." I considered. "Not to drive. I think I'll walk back."

"You can't go alone," one said. "We'll walk with you," the other said.

So we walked. And as we walked, RJ said, "You haven't talked at all about your deployment, Ma'am."

"Yeah, tell us, we want to know."

And so I began to tell my story. And they listened. All that wine had loosened my tongue, and I had stories to tell. We reached the barracks, and the lieutenant let down the tailgate of his truck. We sat, and I looked at the stars. The Leonids were shooting their asteroids through the night in astounding clarity. I talked and talked, and they listened and listened. And I think they understood.

*"The trauma survivor must be permitted and empowered to voice his or her experience. The listener's must be allowed to listen, believe, and remember." (Shay, p. 244.)*

*Thanks for listening, guys.*

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #29

### "Time Off for Bad Behavior"

August 19, 2005

I have found the last 2 weeks or so positively draining, so at the last minute I decided to go on vacation to get over my annual training.

Ken couldn't come with us, which was a disappointment to me.

*Of Odysseus, Shay said, "He is united with his wife, son, and father, but much of the time he is icy or cruel. And then he runs off again!" (p. 4.)*

*I'm not sure I was icy or cruel when I came back from AT. But I was detached from the world and needed to reattach. Ken was unable to get off work. Otherwise I think he might have gone with us.*

*This points to a problem women in the military have that is probably rarely discussed. When a woman goes to AT, all the child-rearing goes to the husbands when they're lucky enough to have one. This means the husband's work bears the brunt of sudden single parenthood. Deployment was even harder. Kudos to Flat Rock Metal, Ken's employer, for putting up with his erratic work schedule. But every company has its limits, and Ken was worried he had overstepped, especially with AT. He was the one who determined he could not take any more time off. I was unhappy, but I respected his judgment.*

*I was also angry at the National Guard about this detail, too. I had told the ESGR representative that Ken's work deserved an award for their support to me during my deployment. He talked a good game about how he'd fix up the presentation time. Then, months later, when I asked when the presentation would happen, he tried to put the monkey on my back, saying I should set it up. For God's sake. He was the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve representative. It was his full-time job to do this kind of thing.*

*I tried to get some information from Ken about how we could set up a time, and Ken about blew up in my face. He, too, believed this should be handled by the ESGR guy.*

*Suffice it to say, Flat Rock Metal never got the award they deserved.*

I hoped I'd be able to control my two kids, now ages 6 and 10, and that they wouldn't get on my nerves too much.

I also didn't really want to make any sorts of plans whatsoever.

*I have mentioned before that I am naturally a perceiver rather than a judger, but that Army rituals and routines force me to act like a judger. Since I'd just completed 2 weeks of being a classic INTJ, my perceiver self rebelled again, just as it had in February-March when I first came home.*

I called my mother at the end of AT and asked, "Would you and Arland be up for me bringing the kids to your house for a few days?"

Mom was thrilled to death that I'd be coming to see her, but her husband is much more into routines. As a former infantry officer, he believes in making a plan, which takes into account the smallest detail, and never letting go of that plan. That's what got him through the worst Korea had to offer, and all the Cold War years.

I sometimes marvel at the ability to stick to a plan through thick and thin. Nowadays, in the Army, we are warned that the first thing to go out the window at the beginning of an operation is the plan. We are told to determine the mission, and think through various courses of action,

develop branches and sequels because we know the plan will change, the worst thing will happen and we have to adapt to that, I could go on and on.

Sometimes my way of planning and my stepfather's way of planning can cause a bit of friction.

But they both seemed amenable to a visit, so when they asked when I might be arriving, I said, 'When's good for you?' My "plan," such as it was, was to have no "plan" for my vacation. Okay, I did have a mission: visit as much family as possible, have fun, show the kids Philadelphia and maybe Washington Crossing, but when, how, and in what way we were going to do this was completely up for grabs.

I'd had enough of planning. Thanks anyway.

*Shay might have said this was also a symptom of another PTSD issue. This lack of planning might have been similar to "an emblem for combat veterans' attraction to danger . . ." (p. 44). Everyone knows if you fail to plan, you plan to fail, and isn't that a direct invitation for danger to enter one's life?*

So the kids and I packed for any eventuality, and we were off within a day of me coming back from AT. Yes, I missed Ken, and he missed me, but D'Arcy, Paul, and I had a good time anyway.

I marveled at what good travelers my kids had become in my year's absence. Granted, they were a few years older now, but I had no troubles with the sudden, "I gotta go potty!" moments somewhere 30 miles between rest areas. We got into a groove of driving for 2 hours, stopping for a restroom break and a snack, and heading back on the road. We made a science of getting back to the car within 15 minutes.

For the record, we would never have been able to do that with my husband. He takes frequent breaks which normally expand to at least 30 minutes. Drives me just a little crazy, but there you have it. When we travel with Ken, we have to budget our time to suit.

So, when we got to my mom's place that day, they were a little surprised to see us. "You made good time," Arland said, while my mother eyed me suspiciously. "You've lost even more weight, haven't you?" she said.

I love my mom absolutely and unequivocally, but we go way back when it comes to my hair and my weight. She likes my hair short, and she thinks I look better with some meat on my bones. During this trip, she said nothing about my hair, although I could tell she didn't completely approve that I was growing it out. But she was concerned that maybe I was anorexic.

I tried to explain to her that while I was in the desert I had decided I refused to bow to food rules anymore. "No food rules," was my mantra. I ate what I wanted when I was hungry, and I stopped when I was full. Right now, I wasn't often hungry, and when I started to eat, I felt full pretty fast, and yes, I was losing weight, but I refused to worry about it, because I had No Food Rules. No plan.

She was nonplussed by my explanation.

Other than this minor argument, we had a good time at their place. We went to Hershey Park, always the big hit with my kids, hung out with some of my friends from the area and their kids, and swam in the Carlisle Barracks pool.

After 3 days, we went to Philly. At a rest area, I called to find a hotel. As I said before, I literally had made no plans, didn't know which day I'd go to Philly, nor where we'd stay or eat.

I found a Hampton Inn on 19th Street, within walking distance of a variety of things. The first night, we discovered Nobu was there. Nobu is a Japanese restaurant owned by Morimoto,

of Food Network's IRON CHEF fame. My kids, especially Paul, are enamored by IRON CHEF. In their eyes, it's like Pokemon with chefs as the pocket monsters. Ken always jokes that they're using the "crab brains" attack, or the "sheep's stomach" attack, referring to the cooking competition in Pokemon terms.

My kids were not going to let us leave the city without going to this restaurant. I was sad I could not have my husband with me, but I, too, wanted to eat there. We called Ken from the table, and described the glowing, ocean-like interior of the place, and the fact that Paul's sorbet sampler dessert came on a slab of ice. We kept the receipt so Dad could see what we'd eaten.

The next morning, we did the obligatory tour of Independence Mall with the Liberty Bell and Constitution Hall and the relatively inexpensive horse carriage tour of the important sites. We bought some souvenirs, then headed to South Street for the equally obligatory Jim's Cheese Steak and soft pretzels.

That night I called my cousin in New Jersey who has two sons close in age to my kids. She was game to let us stay with them the next night, and she gave me directions.

The next day, on our way, we went first to Washington Crossing. Not necessarily the normal place to stop, but my kids were big fans of Stanley Freberg, and they loved the skit about Washington trying to choose between the boats, "Donald Duck? Or Popeye?" So I figured they needed to see the real place.

*I see an irony here, so let me point it out. First of all, I want to say George Washington is one of my all-time heroes. He was wise and prudent and led our country during a time when it must have been insanely difficult to do so.*

*However, consistently throughout Freberg's album, the comedian portrays Washington as a general who is completely incapable of making even the smallest decisions, and he is oblivious to the stress this puts those under who are around him.*

*The parallels to my situation of not making a decision for this trip are not lost on me. But I prefer to look at this a different way. Maybe Washington wasn't indecisive so much as he wanted to know as many details as possible before he made his decision. This is the sign of a strategic thinker, rather than a tactical thinker. As a general and as a president, he needed to be strategic. Maybe he wasn't the best tactician, but then, he shouldn't have been.*

*I also want to say that the kids and I agreed this was one of the best vacations we ever had. Because there were no plans, there were also no expectations, but we can still look back and remember just how much we saw and accomplished in about 1 week.*

We got there, toured the tiny town, saw the reproduction black boats that were similar to what he and his troops had used, and selected fun stuff at the gift store. We ate ice cream outside, gazing at the water which was a bit low in the August sunshine. Cars slowly crossed the rickety old bridge, taking turns, since it was only one lane. The town across the river was shrouded in full green foliage.

"Now, remember," I said, licking at my ice cream, "They crossed in December, and it was cold. They wouldn't have stopped at the General Store for ice cream before they went across. There were no leaves on the trees, there was ice flowing by. . . ."

"Why don't you kick the end of that boat around and take a look . . . I can't! My feet are frozen!" D'Arcy said, quoting Stanley Freberg (*History of the United States, The Early Years*, CD format).

Paul looked at the scene, very serious. Finally, he asked, "Why didn't he just take the bridge?"

Out of the mouths of babes.

I thought of reminding him the bridge wasn't there in 1776, but then again, that bridge sure did look old; it might have survived the Revolution.

There was one other possibility, of course. Maybe crossing the bridge wasn't part of Washington's original plan, so he couldn't consider that option.

Till next time—

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #30

### “Contemplating a Novel in a Month”

August 26, 2005

My first job out of college, other than my National Guard career, was as a salesperson and baker for York Springs Winery, in Camp Hill, PA. In my heart of hearts, I wanted to be a writer, but writing didn't pay the bills.

My father had always said, “Do what you love, and the money will follow,” and I had every intention of doing what I loved. But the money was hard to come by, and love didn't pay the bills.

Neither, it turned out, did working for York Springs Winery. But it was a fun job, with three really terrific co-workers. We were Chris, Chris, Fritz, and Chris (the last one being me, the only female), so we asked Fritz if we might call him Chris, just to avoid the confusion.

Chris, the first one with the mutton chop sideburns and John Lennon glasses, rode his bicycle to work every day. When he found out I wanted to be a writer, he told me of his brother, who had the dubious distinction of having won a competition, writing a first draft of a novel over Labor Day weekend.

*I'm a fairly prolific writer. For the life of me, though, I can't imagine churning out over 50 pages a day like this guy must have.*

Chris the First didn't seem to think it was such a hard thing to do, if his brother could do it.

I was reminded of this factoid when I spied a book in the writing section of my neighborhood Borders. It was all about writing a novel in a month. I grabbed it in excitement, because I knew I had a novel banging around inside my head and in my heart, and yet I was having trouble getting it on to the page. Maybe if I just forced myself to write 5,000 words a day for a month, I would be that much closer to my goal.

I read the book's first chapters, about preparing to do this feat, selected a few cheerleaders I could email my status to on a daily basis, signed a contract of sorts, and decided my first day will be September 1st.

I am now chomping at the bit.

My novel has a name. *CATCH 20XX*. It's a play on *CATCH 22* and on the concept that whenever I did a military course that had an exercise in it, they used to write the year as 19XX. After the year 2000, the military trainers seemed to get confused, so they now were using the regular dates, throwing any semblance of non-real-world play out the window. Since the Iraq War promises to go on more or less forever, the idea that it is tied to 20XX seems quite appropriate to me.

I have one little problem. This novel will probably be based on my own experiences, and granted, many of my experiences had the surreal quality of situations in *CATCH 22*, and its share of no-win situations. But I am, somewhat by necessity, limited to my own point of view.

Therein lies the rub. In the past 2 months, I have found myself getting angrier and angrier about what happened to me in the desert. Why did I have to go there? Why did God abandon me in the desert? Why did my boss hate me? Why did my point of view differ so radically from my chain of command's?

*I was hearing the Siren's Call, though I didn't know that the time. I wanted to know the truth. According to Shay, "Complete and final truth is an unachievable, toxic quest, which is different from the quest to create meaning for one's own experience in a coherent narrative" (p. 87).*

I want *CATCH 20XX* to be funny, to be heart-wrenching, to be meaningful. I can't afford for it to become mired in the mud of my own bitterness. I also think that writing a novel about this, and trying to understand all sides of the situation will allow me to, once and for all, get this damned deployment out of my system. I don't want it to color my world and my life forever.

*Of course, the truth is that it will. Writers face a world of dichotomy. They want to have the original experiences so they may be more creative and write what they know. The rumor is, the myth is, that you can't be a truly good writer unless you've had a rough life.*

*But that's a "be careful what you ask for" myth. If you ask for those experiences that will mold you into a great writer, you need to be prepared to live that experience.*

*I was handed that experience on a silver platter. I was deployed for a year to an exotic place and I lived to tell about it. I suffered hardships, I was forged in the fire of wartime. And now I didn't want it to color the rest of my life? GROW UP, Christine. Of course it will color the rest of my life, as it will color my writing and add a patina that cannot be emulated. I should learn to embrace it and work with it and make it my own.*

So what I needed was a narrator who could float above it all and love all the characters the same. As I mentioned in May, that narrator is a Depeche Mode God with a sick sense of humor, named S/He-Ta.

I'm a little worried about channeling this S/He-Ta narrator, especially since I've been grappling with all this anger and since I've been having some trouble dealing with my own religion, specifically my own church, recently (more on that in a future missive). What if I try to write in an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent voice, and nothing comes to mind? What if I try to channel S/He-Ta, and all that comes out is my seething anger. What then?

Abandoned by God once again.

Or worse, what if what I write is complete dreck? What if no one in the world would want to read it?

For solace, as well as for research, I decided to read David Neale Walsch's *TOMORROW'S GOD*, which is about an all-Good, all knowing God who uses human-kind to experience what God knows so that God can understand it. I found the book humbling, enlightening, and uplifting. And I figure this is an underpinning theme for my book. We have *CATCH 20XX's* so S/He-Ta can experience what S/He knows so S/He can understand it.

Not to mention reading this stuff is just enough cerebral activity to keep me from tearing my hair out before I start writing hell-bent-for-leather next week.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #31

### “The Search for Truth Begins”

September 2, 2005

Seven months ago today, I was on a plane flying home from Kuwait.

I wonder if there are certain facts I will always remember about my deployment to Kuwait. And there will be certain facts I will try my hardest to forget.

For now, I want to know the truth. I think this novel I began to write in earnest yesterday is my attempt to get to the heart of what really happened in 1 1/2 years of my life.

Some of it seems so simple, really. If I just look at dates, for example. On November 4, I was alerted, along with my battalion, for possible mobilization. On November 8 I received the mobilization orders. On December 7, 2003, the 163rd PSB was mobilized for support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM II. On December 13 we arrived at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, to begin our mobilization training. On January 30 we were validated, and by January 31, we were on the plane to Kuwait. Three hundred sixty-six Groundhog Days later, we stepped on the plane to come back home.

So why do I look at this period of my life as a giant hole where God sucked me out of my normal life and threw me in the desert? For no good reason.

Here's the problem. When I look at this year in retrospect, I cannot for the life of me figure out what I did, what mission I had to accomplish, why I had to leave my family behind, go away, and come back forever changed.

Was it really to no good purpose? Or am I forgetting the juice of it?

I have now gone through 2 days of my novel in a month, and I must say, the 5,000 word daily quota seems to fly onto the page with no effort. Scratch that, there is effort, but not the “I have to think of the next thing to write” effort. It is the effort to draw forth the memories, the effort to fight back the tears, the effort to remember the truth, that is the hard part.

I do my writing almost first thing in the morning. I get the kids off to school, sit down to write my morning pages, then head straight to the process of putting words to paper.

I finish about an hour later, and I feel drained. My mouth is dry, my hands and legs are shaking. I can hardly stand. Why? Because as I write, a feeling of hatred bubbles up inside me and flows onto the page, and I am left breathless. I realize as I write that I hate God. I hate God for sending me. I hate God for the boss He gave me. I hate God for the lack of mission my units had. I hate God for sending me into a place where so many people ended up hating me.

*I was trying to explain my losses to people, trying to explain why I felt so lost and rudderless. I was afraid that maybe if people heard what my losses were, they'd snort with disdain and say, "That? That ain't nothing." Compared to others, maybe my hardships weren't worth complaining about. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler, though, "Losses are very personal and comparisons never apply" (p. 30). I take that to mean it is enough for me to acknowledge they were my hardships, and I may grieve them in my own way. I take some solace in this possibility.*

I hate the monsters that seem to now dwell inside of me.

*"Everyone knows that war can wreck the body, but repeatedly forget that it can wreck the soul as well." (Shay, p. 33).*

I hate hating things. It goes against my nature, and what I believe God is. S/He-Ta, this God creature who embodies my book as the narrator, I think is my true belief about God. God = Love. God = Truth. God is everywhere. God has no opposite. Therefore, there is no hate. There is no anger. There is no such thing as Evil.

So, if there is no such thing, then why are my days and nights filled with hate, anger, the overwhelming feeling of evil?

Because the definition of Evil, since God has no opposite, is that it is Ego, the only thing that can even be close to God's opposite, that makes me feel this way, I try to tell myself. Several years ago, I discovered *The Course in Miracles*, a strange, metaphysical textbook that talks about this dichotomy of God versus the Ego and the idea that the Ego is not really separate from God, but wants to believe it is. Any time someone comes close to becoming one with the force of Good, the Ego tries to throw everything opposite to it in the path, as obstacles to true enlightenment.

*The Course* has a workbook, 365 exercises long, at the end of which the student may reach enlightenment. According to the book, the course is mandatory. Everyone must take it sometime in their lifetime. The only elective is that we get to choose the time when we take the course.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that I was within 25 exercises of the completion of the first time through the course when I received my alert. That alert sucked me into the vortex of the Ego, and threw me into the desert where I could not see God at all.

I know, spiritually, that there is no such real thing as fear, anger, evil, or even that all-important Ego. It is all an illusion. But, try as I might, even if I know this to be true, I can't stop seeing that illusion. Nowhere was that illusion more real, more palpable, than in the deserts of Kuwait and Iraq, with a war that just wouldn't quit raising its ugly head.

How can that war not be real?

So now, I feel that there is more than 1 year I have to make up before I come back to the place I was spiritually before this unfortunate series of events. How long, oh Lord, before I come close to that enlightenment I so crave?

*Shay recommends doing religious penance for coming to terms with PTSD. He also says taking part in arts-related activities can help. "We also recommend service to others and the doing, (not simply passive consumption) of the arts as ways of living with guilt" (p. 154).*

*Writing this book from the perspective of a God-like narrator was, I think, my attempt to do both.*

The Ego has me firmly in its grip now. And now, all I want is the truth. I am not sure if I will get the truth by writing this book. I will get my version of the truth, which by default becomes my Ego's truth.

But, since I believe God is the Way, the Truth, and the Light, the only force in the universe which is a force for good, I figure getting my truth down on paper might be able to help me process this Ego-driven detour, so that I may set my sights on the real Truth.

One can only hope.

*Shay says, "veterans face a characteristic peril, a risk of dying from the obsession to know the complete and final truth of what they and the enemy did and suffered in their war and why" (p. 87). I admit to being obsessive and compulsive about trying to get my story down on paper. It flowed out of me, but at the same time, it was ripping my heart out of me, too.*

*Painful war memories are "sacred stuff." (Ibid, p. 90.)*

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #32

### “Six Feet Under – Water”

September 9, 2005

The date of my parents' anniversary. Funny how I can just look at a date and things like that come back to me. I can remember people's phone numbers, too, not that this talent has anything to do with this missive.

*I could remember things such as these little details, but by this point in time, I was having a lot of trouble with my memory. I'd be in the middle of a sentence and literally my mind would shut off. There would be nothing in my head, and I would stutter to a halt, then apologize to the person I was talking to, and say, "Give me a moment. Perhaps the thought will come back."*

*It was embarrassing, and it was scary. Scary, because I was afraid something was really wrong with me. I joked about it, blaming it on my Anthrax immunizations I'd been forced to endure for almost a full year. But deep inside, I was afraid it might be Alzheimer's or something I could not fix.*

*What was odd was that when these episodes occurred, the people I'd been speaking to would cluck with understanding. "That happens to me, too," they'd say. "Wish I could blame my memory lapses on Anthrax."*

*I began to realize the real problem had more to do with the frantic pace of our lives than it had to do with Anthrax or Alzheimer's. Shay says, "The rapid pace of social and cultural change in America . . . is often blamed by Vietnam veterans themselves for their sense of estrangement" (pp. 120-121). And if they think they had a rapid pace 30 years ago, it's just gotten exponentially faster with every passing year.*

*We have so much trouble with memory now because we are bombarded constantly with random facts, too fast for our brains to categorize.*

Between my 5,000 words entries into my novel in a month, my morning pages, my work for the army, and taking care of the kids, I've been watching the news a lot. Hurricane Katrina hit a little over a week ago, and it looks to me like every inch of Louisiana and Mississippi, except one small patch in the middle that is the evacuation site, is under water.

There is much that horrifies me about this event. It horrifies me that the President seems not to care about these states and cares even less about New Orleans and the people who live in the area. It horrifies me that the Mayor of New Orleans is playing a blame game about why the city was ill-prepared for the catastrophe. It horrifies me even more that the Governor of Louisiana seems paralyzed into inaction and also seems to be laying blame.

And it horrifies me most that there are 39 people I care deeply about down there, and I can't reach a single one of them to find out if they're all right.

I speak of the 209th Personnel Services Detachment, one of the units under my command when I deployed. These folks were terrific people. They were called late in the game, mobilized and deployed in record time to replace a unit that didn't go, and in spite of the haphazardness of their mission, served valiantly anywhere I placed them. 75 percent of them were black, 15 percent of them were of Hispanic origin, and just a sprinkling of them were other. The entire time they were under my command, we did not have a single administrative problem with them. They had the least amount of Article 15s out of all my subordinate units.

I pray to God every day that they are okay.

Perhaps it is callous of me not to have the same feelings for my higher headquarters, which also hailed from New Orleans, Louisiana. There is no love lost between us, I'm afraid, and I feel

worse about the relationship now that I am writing about it. But I also console myself that, being a reserve unit, not many of the soldiers actually lived in Louisiana, nor Mississippi, for that matter. Maybe they have weathered the hurricane unscathed. The 209th, however, is a Louisiana Guard unit, so they were in the thick of it when Katrina unleashed her fury.

Speaking of Guard, I find myself incensed that they blame the lack of first responders on the Guard. Not a day goes by that the newscasters say the Guard hasn't shown up, where are they?

I can tell you where they are. I know because I helped deploy them myself. A significant portion of Mississippi and Louisiana's guard soldiers, a 5,000-man Brigade Combat Team worth, are over in Iraq. All the units still at home in the New Orleans area are underwater, and their equipment is floating downriver, if it's back from Iraq at all. How dare you blame this chaos on the Guard?

Meanwhile, I have to give credit to COL Cosgrove, our Operations Officer for our state. Now, here's a man who thinks and plans ahead. In the midst of the chaos once the storm hit, he realized that the guard units in the vicinity of the natural disaster would not be able to respond adequately. He called the National Guard Bureau, who themselves were in a state of disarray. "Are you going to be calling a nation-wide alert for all states to respond?"

"Don't know. Maybe. We'll get back to you."

I can just kind of see him, standing there with a dead phone to his ear, thinking, "Great. Now what am I going to do?"

What he did was recommend to the Adjutant General, Michigan, that all state soldiers be put on alert for possible activation to help respond to Katrina.

Then he tried to get information about what kind of units might be needed. Again, the National Guard Bureau was unresponsive. So he contacted his S3s at brigade level by email and said, "I anticipate needing to activate units to help with Katrina. Please let me know what units you have available on short notice to help. My thinking is there may be emphasis on engineers, MPs, and service support."

About 24 hours after he emailed this, the National Guard Bureau put out the call that this would take a nationwide effort on the behalf of National Guardsmen, but they provided little else in the way of guidance.

*"Character exists in dynamic relation to the ecology of social power, modeled and remodeled throughout life by how well or badly those who hold power fulfill the culture's moral order." (Shay, p. 157.) Hurricane Katrina was a study of this comment. People succeeded or failed in earning my respect based on how well they responded to the crisis. Our civilian leadership failed. People like this colonel stepped up and did the right thing and thus earned almost undying respect from me.*

Since I'm making up a drill this month due to my plans to attend a "Building Strong and Ready Families" workshop with my husband in 2 weeks, I decided this week was probably the most necessary time for me to work. Tuesday through Friday of this week, I went in for 4 hours apiece, and MAJ Jones and I came up with a plan of action.

As a support brigade, we have a lot of what we call "ash and trash" units. Okay, the commander prefers to call us the most diverse brigade in the country, and maybe we are. We have aviation units, medical units, trucking units, personnel units, quartermaster units, and even one lowly water purification unit.

Frankly, I could make a case for any and all of those units being useful down in the Gulf area.

We sent a message up the chain to Cosgrove, letting him know which units we think might be helpful, and which are the most “ready” to deploy immediately, since it will take 2 days of constant driving to get the equipment down from Michigan. We thought it might not be a bad idea to just send them, and see if they can be used. Then we alerted the units involved, and told them to start packing up and calling their people. And then we conferred with the S1 side of the house. No one knows how these folks will be paid. Would it be State Active Duty? If so, which state would foot the bill? Or will these troops be federalized? Moving from Title 32 to Title 10 would wreak havoc with the Posse Comitatus rules, but it would make it easier to figure out the pay.

Either way, in a brief respite from all the work, MAJ Jones and I talked quietly about the whole situation. She and I both agreed that this is what the National Guard is for, and that it's too bad there doesn't seem to be some overarching plan about how we'd respond to a national catastrophe like this.

“Makes a lot more sense for us to be doing this than the Iraq War,” she said to me.

I responded, “Heck, we might not even have had to do it at all if the majority of troops from Mississippi and Louisiana weren't over there as we speak.” I told her about the BCT I'd deployed. She hadn't known that was where the first responders were.

She lightly switched to another topic. “Did you hear, Ma'am? It's official. By September 07, the 63rd Brigade will no longer be a TDA unit. We will be the 272nd Regional Support Group. We'll be a go-to-war unit.”

I nodded thoughtfully. Go-to-war unit. In 2 years. Something gripped my heart. Right now, in the throes of trying to process what had happened to me last year, I didn't think I could face such a thing. Maybe in 2 years, I could think about it. But my husband. The kids. Would they be able to take it? D'Arcy was finally talking to me again. . . .

I realized Jones was looking at something on her desk. She looked up. “This is the new walking MTOE, so we can begin to look at where we can place the soldiers we have and where we have holes we need to fill. Ah, here's one for you. Group commander, how's that sound?”

I flushed with a combination of emotions. Pleasure, because she thought I could be good commander material. Pain, because she thought I could be good commander material. And something else. . . . I could feel a lump in my throat I couldn't process into thought.

“Ma'am,” she said, suddenly very serious. “There's been talk, you know, around. That they might need a support group like ours to take command down in Mississippi. You know, to run the service support effort. If that happens, I guess the question is, do you think we should volunteer our own headquarters for that mission?”

I looked at her, thinking that loaded question through. Deploying again, for a national mission rather than an overseas mission, just 7 months after my return. We were an administrative command and control headquarters, about to transition to a service support command, it was true, but we hadn't had the experience yet.

“The Officer-in-Charge doesn't think we have the experience to do it properly. He doesn't think we have the right people.” She stopped, her eyes filled with tears, and I remembered she had family down south. Maybe this was where her tears were coming from. “But how hard can it be? We'd do the mission we're given to do, because it's the right thing to do, isn't it, Ma'am? I want to go down and help them. So much.”

“Yes, it would be the right thing to do, Mary,” I said. “I think that's what the National Guard is for. And God bless you for having the heart to want to help. Would your ex-husband be able to take care of your daughter? I know he's been sick.” She squared her shoulders and nodded.

When I went home that night, I broached the subject of possible activation for Hurricane Katrina relief with my husband, although I didn't say anything to my children. They were having enough problems just understanding the hurricane, and I didn't want to spend another hour trying to explain to Paul that Katrina wasn't likely to cause a flood in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

*My son, to this day, is inordinately afraid of thunderstorms and tornadoes. Thank God we don't have hurricanes in Ann Arbor, or I might never get him out of the basement. Of course, he's a bit scared of the basement, too. . . .*

I knew what my husband would say before he even said it. "Chris, this is an important mission, and means a great deal to our country. Do what you have to do."

For now, we are on hold. The OIC has the brigade commander's ear, and seems to have convinced her that we're not ready for this mission.

I hope to be as pro-active as COL Cosgrove has been in all this, and so MAJ Jones and I have started to develop a contingency plan, just in case we get the call.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #33

### “Back Story”

September 16, 2005

Now that I'm 2 weeks into the novel in a month process, the memories are coming fast and furious. Fury, yes, that about sums it up. The fury is going down on the page, at a very fast pace. I am ahead of schedule on my daily and weekly total, but I can now see that even if I hit the 50,000 goal, early or on time, I will be nowhere near finishing the first draft of the novel.

I am in the middle-doldrums, but the biggest issue is the mixture of my feelings of anger and remorse. I thought if I wrote down what made me angry, I would be able to understand it. Instead, I just feel more confused.

So, I will try to put together a cliff's notes version of some of the things that upset my applectart while I was deployed. Maybe seeing it all on one “page,” so to speak, will help me sort things out.

*By the time I got to writing Missive #33 of this book, I had a battle going on inside myself. To this point, I have not discussed what happened during my deployment that disturbed my applectart so much. The truth is, I have tried to bury the details as deeply as possible as a process of forgetting things that have brought me pain. But the writing of Catch 20XX was a process of “alethe – literally that which is unforgotten.” (Shay, p. 92.) As such, even to me, these memories feel incomplete.*

My upset about deployment began long before I was actually deployed. When I was selected for the battalion command, I knew in the way you just knew these things, my time for deployment was coming soon. I had two very small children and the concept of leaving them rent my heart to pieces, but I knew I did not have a choice.

Correction. That had been a choice I had made before I even had children. Staying in the military after my contractual obligation meant I would not be able to resign. So if the army needed me, then they could send me anywhere I wished.

I'd made an uneasy peace with that.

*Kubler-Ross and Kessler say, “In some cases, anticipatory grief may happen months or years before the loss” (p. 5). In this case, I think I already knew I would deploy, and had bouts with anticipatory grief over leaving my family.*

I went to the Pre-Command Course in March 2003, and there I learned two important things: (1) It was no longer “if” we would deploy, it was a matter of “when”; and (2) Once we deployed, there wasn't much of a job for personnelists to do on the battlefield. As one finance guy so aptly put it, “Our job has been replaced by an ATM.” More to the point, my battalion's job had been replaced, for the most part, by the advent of eMILPO, the international personnel database system.

That is, if we could get computers. My job, and the jobs of the 250-plus people who eventually deployed with me, were dependent on access to computers. National Guard and reserve units, however, didn't have these computers. I spent 2 months of my mobilization time trying to convince people that these laptops I was asking for were pacing items; we simply could not do our mission without them.

By the time I actually deployed, because of all the work I'd been doing prior to the plane trip, my reputation preceded me. Although I was originally scheduled to be a corps asset under the 13th COSCOM, I was transferred, literally while in mid-air, to the 3rd PERSCOM. This meant my mission would be almost entirely in Kuwait.

What little mission it was.

For OIF I, they had mobilized nine Personnel Service Battalions and 27 detachments. They had backfilled for OIF II with like for like, for the most part.

I ended up consolidating corps missions with the PERSCOM missions, because I realized my troops had too little to do otherwise. That consolidation gave me 25 soldiers to do the job of about five people.

My boss did not want to hear about my lack of mission.

*My boss never wanted to rock the boat. She towed the party line, and seemed intent on doing what her bosses told her to do, even when their orders seemed vague, confusing, contradictory, or downright unwise. It didn't help that she seemed to have three bosses: (1) the personnel chief of Third Army/CFLCC, the boss for technical issues of how personnel business would work in Theater; (2) The Theater Support Group commander, her command and control headquarters; and (3) The PERSCOM commander, who was stateside, but had put this personnel group in its place to perform the PERSCOM mission for Rotation 2, to give them a break. In trying to please three masters, sometimes it was impossible to please even one. As a result, her behavior, to me at least, seemed inconsistent at best, schizophrenic at worst, and self-serving. "Sophocles, and the other Athenian tragic poets, detested Odysseus as a sleazy ass-kisser to the powerful Agamemnon and Menelaus." (Shay, p. 78.)*

What I would have liked to do was to send two or three of my detachments home. The personnel community literally didn't have enough PSBs and PSDs to fill out the next rotation, and I figured if I gave up some now, not only would I open up some of the detachments for the next rotation, but I would be getting rid of two to three PSDs for all future rotations. But again, this was not what my boss wanted to hear.

The truth was, PSBs and PSDs were on the chopping block. We all knew this. By 2008 there would be no more PSBs. I don't know if my boss and her bosses were on a campaign to convince the army that PSBs were needed in the inventory, or what, but the idea of sending some PSDs home because they weren't needed was anathema.

*I hit a brick wall every time I suggested it. And since I fight for the right and don't know what's good for me, I suggested it every chance I got. Butting one's head against a wall is not a good idea, especially when one does it over and over again.*

So, instead, I went to 24-hour operations for all my units in an effort to give the soldiers something to do. I took on more missions and set up more tents so I could spread my soldiers as thin as possible. Granted, now I didn't have to see 25 soldiers at a time sitting in the office playing solitaire on those computers I'd worked so hard to get; there were only 10 at a time, on 8-hour shifts.

Meanwhile, the really sad thing was when someone did come in wanting personnel business, my poor soldiers had difficulty making mission.

*Not that they didn't want to. My soldiers desperately wanted to help every soldier who walked in their door. But they didn't have the resources to do so.*

That eMILPO I was talking about? It only worked for soldiers we had the passwords for. Since we were area support rather than direct support, what my soldiers needed was access to any army soldier's file, regardless of unit. That required a "GO ARMY" access, and the military refused to give my units that access, due to security reasons. I tried for a year to change their minds, to no avail. I even had higher headquarters' support on this one, not that it mattered.

So, if a soldier came in to check his records, my soldier would call back to the states, or to Korea, or wherever the soldier's unit was from, and that PSB would do the work. The soldier probably could have made the call himself.

The one thing that did require my soldiers to be there were for ID tag and ID Card issuing facilities. Even that was problematic in the desert conditions. The automatic ID tag machines were down more than they were up, which at least gave my maintenance guys something to do (and they thought they'd be working on trucks . . . ha!). So most of the time the soldiers were back to the manual method, one letter at a time. Kachunk.

The ID cards were another thing. The chipped CAC card was the only card soldiers wanted to have, but that required a special machine, and that machine had to have consistent access to the Internet.

*What's a chipped CAC? I hear you ask. It's like a credit card with the soldier's picture on the front and bar codes and such on the back. What makes it different from other cards is a computer chip embedded in the card itself, which can hold up to 70K worth of information on that soldier. The real kicker of this was, at the time, this chip only held the same information which was embedded in the bar codes on the back. The potential of the card had yet to be realized. But everyone had to have one. . . . By the way, CAC stands for "common access card."*

At the time, Internet access was hard to come by at most desert locations. We had the old camera method, and we had a couple CAC makers that could issue the chipless forms of CAC, which were no good to the soldier and needed to be replaced as soon as the soldier was able to find a chipped location. There were only two of those machines in theater at the time.

Yes, one of them was mine in Arifjan. But they were dealing with other issues, like Third Country Nationals and Contractors trying to get chipped CAC cards. That was illegal, and I stood my ground that I would not allow anyone except military and DOD/DA civilians to have access to these cards.

The president of Bechtel personally used LTC Cook's name in vain on that one. That, by the way, was one of the few times I had the support of my boss during the entire deployment. It helped my case that the Mosul Dining Facility bombing had just taken place, since we figured it was someone who'd been able to get on base with what looked like legitimate ID.

Rumor had it that the deputy commander for Kuwait wanted to figure out how to reduce the footprint of soldiers in this country. I had soldiers twiddling their thumbs while on deployment; I could see where this guy was coming from.

I happened to meet up with the S-1 for the Area Support Group Kuwait, and we discovered my mission and his overlapped and we were duplicating work. He and I tried to work out a solution where my soldiers would get more work, and we would possibly get the access of a GO ARMY eMILPO password. It seemed like the perfect solution. I shared my ideas of how I could consolidate my battalion's mission to three camps, using a total of two battalions for all of Kuwait and still provide the same level of service. He shared this information with his boss, who bought the idea completely.

The S-1's boss then tried to usurp the command of my unit, which branded me as the someone who had attempted to go outside my chain of command to my current boss. My boss had the Pentagon DCSPER on her side, so lieutenant general trumped the colonel who wanted me.

*Even though I did not actively try to get this change in command to take place, which was something I was later accused of trying to orchestrate, I feel an intense amount of guilt over the whole affair. The rest of my deployment went to hell after this point, and I believe I may have contributed to the downfall of a few other units as well. "The point of this for veterans' is not that they 'spoil everything they touch,' but rather that many of the men I have worked with believe this about themselves." (Shay, p. 83.) Do I believe this about myself?*

Needless to say, the hostile takeover did not take place, leaving me in the care of a hostile boss, seething at my perceived disloyalty. And so, like unit was replaced with like unit, thereby using up and deploying every last PSB and PSD the army had in inventory in less than 3 years.

Now, those same PSBs and PSDs will be out of the inventory in less than 2 years, leaving me with the eternal question . . . just why did I deploy again? To what purpose, Lord?

I look at this information in Cliff's Notes form, and it looks so harmless, really. Maybe I am the one who is being unreasonable here. Maybe I am the immature one. Maybe my anger is not justified.

*As I mentioned before, this is a process of unforgetting, and it feels incomplete. There's a chance I've been so successful at forgetting that I won't be able to retrieve some of the most painful events. Some of it is the loss of my own honor that hurts so much. But I also fall into the trap that perhaps, in reading these events, my readers will find my experiences unworthy of the importance I've placed on them. That's "when the 'masters of truth' find you unworthy. . . ." (Shay, p. 97.)*

But I look at it, and just see all the waste, fraud, and abuse that is going on here, and I'm powerless to stop it.

250 people, 1,000 people, 150,000 people. How many of them are in the same position I was? Not having enough mission, but not being able to change the plan once it's been set in motion?

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #34

### “Building Strong and Ready Families”

September 23, 2005

There is a rumor floating about, and it’s not a pretty one. According to this rumor, up to 75 percent of marriages in the National Guard are now ending in divorce.

I have reason to believe this rumor is true. The people who have told it to me are chaplains, psychologists, and army senior leaders, and they say they are quoting statistical studies. I also know how many divorces I have personally witnessed happening recently.

This statistic is significantly higher than the national average, and I think the statistic has been skewed because of the increase in deployments due to OIF and OEF.

Let’s face facts, here. Okay, let’s face my own facts here. When I started dating Ken, it took him a few months to even realize I was in the National Guard. This was not a fact I flaunted. He only found out when he did because we had a long distance relationship, and he wanted to get together on a drill weekend.

“Oh, that’s not a good weekend,” I said. “I work that weekend.”

He, of course, thought I meant at the bakery. “So just ask off for that weekend.”

“I can’t just ask off for that weekend. It doesn’t work that way in this particular job. . . .” “Huh?” he said, in a manner of speaking. I said, “Well, you see, if I don’t show up, I would be considered AWOL.” Still didn’t compute. “I’m wearing green that weekend. . . .” Now he was really confused, so I finally spit it out. “Look, I’m in the National Guard, and that’s my Army weekend.”

Dead silence followed that announcement.

I thought that was that. The end of a perfectly pleasant dating relationship. Luckily, I was wrong, and in spite of his shock, in spite of his inability to understand why someone like me would be in the military, he hung in there and continued to date, then to marry me. He eventually became my biggest supporter, and though he didn’t have an Army bone in his body when I met him, he’s become a terrific Army wife.

Yes, you read that right.

*He refers to himself as my Army wife. I call him my spousal unit. But nothing will erase the time when a general invited all the spouses at our leadership conference to go to a breakout session by saying, “Now all you wives, go to Room – -” It’s just something of which my husband will never let me hear the end.*

But not everyone is so lucky. If a soldier is not a part of a two-soldier relationship, chances are that the non-Guard partner doesn’t get it, and doesn’t want to know what the soldier is up to. I think they’d all like to believe that this Army weekend business isn’t really a job, exactly. It’s more like hunting buddies that get together once a month, and otherwise it won’t affect their lives. Better yet, he or she gets paid for this hunting weekend (sometimes spouses don’t even know that).

Maybe in the 60s, 70s, 80s, this concept worked. There were no mobilizations to speak of, so in ostrich fashion, the spouse could ignore what was happening. That began to change in the 90s, first with DESERT STORM, then with Bosnia and the other deployments we were doing.

OIF blew the thought process completely out of the water. This wasn't a hunting weekend. This was war, and the spouse was gone for over a year, doing God knows what. These "hunters" weren't hunting animals. . . .

A lot can happen in a year, on both sides of the fence. The spouse is likely to say, This is not what I signed on for. When I said through thick and thin, better or worse, I didn't realize I'd be alone for a whole year. Or more.

Meanwhile, the soldier changes irrevocably during wartime. They face horrors the spouse cannot even imagine. Even if they don't, as was my case, they come home a very different person than when they left. Some of this is positive change. A lot of it is negative. Regardless, it is different, and sometimes, the person is so different that the husband and wife have grown completely apart.

The National Guard, and possibly other services, have created a rebonding weekend of sorts that they call "Building Strong and Ready Families (BSRF)." It's run by the chaplain community, and they set it up because they're smart enough to realize that families being torn apart may well equal the Guard being torn apart. A soldier may give up the army in an effort to save his family.

Sadly, I think the program is too little, too late.

*God bless the Chaplains. They mean well. They don't have easy jobs.*

My husband and I went this past weekend at the urging of my commander. I give her credit for wanting to make sure my husband and I were on solid ground. We sent the kids to the in-laws, who live close by, but I found myself wondering why they didn't set up some kind of childcare for people who didn't have that luxury.

Then, the whole weekend was, how to put it? A little light on substance. They said it was to allow the husbands and wives the ability to have some quiet, fun time together to reconnect. The class periods were devoted to learning how to communicate with each other in respectful, effective ways. While it was a pleasant weekend, and Ken and I had a nice enough time, I'm not sure it delivered what it should have.

Certainly, Ken and I were no better informed after the weekend than we were going in.

Maybe it's because my husband and I have tried, always, to communicate respectfully with each other. Early in our marriage, we both agreed that we would not throw insults at each other, nor would we tell each other to go f\*\*\* off. When we have a disagreement, we discuss it as civilly as possible, trying to understand each other's side, and we always present a united front to the kids. It helps that we often see things the same way, or close.

We also communicated on a daily basis via email while I was deployed, so he kept me abreast of everything that was happening. I would receive an email entitled, "Thursday" and then I got a laundry list of events. Paul was late for school, and had a screaming fit about underwear. D'Arcy got caught cheating on a test. What are we going to do to address this, and nip it in the bud so that it doesn't become a habit?"

I responded every day, offering my side of the advice, and my support to his solutions. I had the benefit of being on the other side of the world, so my responses were usually considered and deliberate. It's hard to fly off the handle when you're so detached from the situation.

I have trouble, however, thinking that the communication tools offered in the BSRF workshop would help any spouse dealing with a soldier who has any PTSD tendencies.

*In fact, the BSRF workshop didn't even offer a laundry list of PTSD symptoms a spouse might want to watch out for. It think this is a big omission. I think it's critical for family members to know the distinction "between simple PSD – the persistence into civilian life of adaptations necessary to survive battle – and complex PTSD, which is simple PTSD plus the destruction of the capacity for social trust." (Shay, p. 4.) Lack of social trust is a marriage will often be the death knell.*

Will the soldier be willing to step aside from his impulses long enough to realize he needs to speak differently to his spouse? I don't know the answer to this question, but I find myself not trusting that this is the ultimate solution.

It sure is being touted as such, however. I hope, and pray, that "they" are right.

*This belief stems from the idea that "Religiosity and family support as sources of courage are forms of what could be called 'the right stuff' theory of good military performance." (Shay, p. 212.) Here's what I see is the problem with this thought process. The Army uses "realpolitik" in this regard – doing things for its own best interests. The military thinks good family relation-ships will improve military performance. While that may be so, I have to say a 75 percent divorce rate tells me that's not the issue.*

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

**MISSIVE #35**  
**"LDRSHIP"**  
September 30, 2005

Those of us who have been in the Army in the last 10 years or so know I did not misspell the title of this missive. I do not refer just to Leadership. Instead, I refer to the seven core Army values.

These seven Army values are Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage, and the Army uses the LDRSHIP acronym to remember all the pieces. In the past month, as I have been writing my novel in a month, I have found myself thinking long and hard about these Army values.

Namely, I find myself wondering how many people actually follow them. Sure, I think just about anyone can roll them off their tongues. We wear a little dogtag-shaped piece of plastic on the chain around our necks so we can keep them close to our hearts. But, again, I ask, how many people understand what the words mean? How many truly live every day in accordance with these values?

What I am realizing as I write *CATCH 20XX* is that the people I encountered during my deployment seemed overwhelmed by trying to live all seven values at the same time. Each person seemed to pick their favorite one, the one they thought should have priority over all the others, and they focused on that one, sometimes to the exclusion of all others. This was not necessarily a healthy habit. But I would contend it's a natural thing to fall into.

With some trepidation, I admit I myself fell into the trap. I understand, theoretically, at least, that all seven values are core values, and therefore none should have priority. But I gravitate toward thinking integrity is the most important one. Without integrity, the other six values can become distorted and warped. How do you decide who to be loyal to, without integrity? Respect and selfless service and personal courage can be hollow without integrity. Integrity helps us to figure out the right duty to perform. And, for me at least, honor and integrity are intertwined and cannot be separated.

My stance that integrity drives the other Army values "is what it is." It informs how I am as a commander and leader, but after the past 2 years of ups and downs, I cannot say unequivocally that my stance is the right one. I can tell you that my commander in the desert chose another leading Army value to live with, and the clash between her stance and mine led to heartbreak and misery on my part.

*Recently, I read an article that threw my own understanding of what integrity means into doubt. I was brought up by my father to believe that integrity meant "standing up for, and doing, what's right."*

*The article pointed to the root of the word. The root is the Latin word, "Integritas." According to the article, Roman gladiators, during inspection of the troops, would beat their armor and yell, "Integritas!" to signify that they had the strength and willingness to fight to the death.*

*To me, that is altogether a different meaning.*

COL Smith, I think, if I understood her correctly, believed that Loyalty was the be-all and end-all of the seven Army values. She believed in loyalty to the mission, loyalty to the chain of command, loyalty to the personnel community. She was not interested in analyzing whether any of these things were right or wrong, only that we were loyal.

*The fact that I was dredging up the negative parts of my deployment at this time was actually part of the grieving process. "You can grieve fully for people who were terrible to you. And if you need to grieve*

*for them, you should do so.” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 72.) I felt betrayed by my commander, but I also felt the need to see her side to events. Possibly, betrayal in this case is a two-way street, and I instinctively understood this fact. Perhaps my sense of betrayal was a reflection of the betrayal she felt she was receiving from me.*

Because I questioned whether the mission was the correct use of Army funds and manpower, because I questioned whether the personnel community had a mission there in general, and because a plan I had developed and she had disapproved landed in the hands of someone outside the chain of our command, I was branded disloyal.

*“In combat, trust goes to the leaders who give critical obedience rather than blind obedience, to their own bosses.” (Shay, p. 227.) I gave critical obedience, but I think there is a fine line between what can be considered critical obedience and what can be considered subversive. I think this fine line was something the deployed senior leaders have to walk every day.*

I truly believe I came very close to getting an ‘X’ in the ‘No’ block of my OER under Loyalty. I was horrified by the very possibility. In my heart, I did not believe I had ever been disloyal to the mission—I ensured every day that my soldiers were there to perform it, regardless of whether we had customers or not. I was not the one who had floated the manpower reduction plan through another chain of command. I was guilty of creating this plan with the cooperation of an S1 who floated the plan up his chain of command.

*“Journalists seem to believe if you feel guilty, you are guilty. A person of good character feels moral pain – call it guilt, shame, anguish, remorse – after doing something that caused another person’s suffering, injury, or death.” (Shay, p. 112.) Regardless of fault or not, I feel guilt over this episode, not because of harm done, but because of the injury to honor, integrity, and loyalty it inflicted.*

I didn’t believe, I still don’t believe, I was being disloyal to COL Smith or to the personnel community in general. I just believed that the personnel community had outlived its usefulness. I loved it as much as anyone else did; the Adjutants General Corps had given me a good 18-year career, but all good things must come to an end.

And it was my integrity that was telling me this.

When all is said and done, I wonder just who was being disloyal. The happy ending to this was that COL Smith and I, to a certain extent, made an uneasy truce. I supported her on things she did not expect support from me on because my integrity told me she was right in these areas. She supported me on some critical things, notably in my effort to send a soldier home who was mentally incapable of being in the field any longer, but the doctors didn’t want to send anyone home. I did not get an ‘X’ in the ‘No’ block for loyalty.

But I felt betrayed.

Am I wrong to think that loyalty should go both up and down the chain? I was trying to do the best I could as a battalion commander in a combat location. I was trying to get all my soldiers home safely, and I was trying to give them a mission that meant something, so they could be proud of what they did while they were there. I did not feel that I had the loyalty and support of my chain of command. I ended up believing they did not have the best interests of the soldiers at heart.

Maybe my true purpose for being in Kuwait for a year was to act as the buffer between a command who didn’t care about their own soldiers and a battalion of soldiers who cared

deeply about doing the right thing. I know that when they had a customer, they treated that soldier with the decency and respect that soldier deserved. They took their time with each person, gave them water to drink, and a presence that said, "I care what your problem is, and I will bend over backward to help you solve it." I know my soldiers grieved when they saw a name on the casualty list, and they could say, "I pulled up his personnel record for him while he was passing through my camp on his way north." And they cheered when, due to their efforts, they saw someone else on the promotion list. "That guy? I helped him update his promotion paperwork."

That, to me, is the core army values at work. Loyalty to the soldiers, performing duties that support and defend, respecting others just because they are soldiers, honoring them, selflessly doing whatever needs to be done to help them, having the integrity to know what the right thing is to do, and the personal courage to do that right thing even in the face of every obstacle.

I was there to try to remove what obstacles I could. Sometimes I felt that, to be loyal to my chain of command, I would have to do what my integrity said was wrong. I chose to be loyal to my integrity. As for whether that was the correct decision or not? The jury is still out. . . .

The post script to my novel in a month is this: I have completed about 60,000 words at month's end. The book is nowhere near complete in either plotting or in processing. I still have a lot of processing to do. And so, I enter October having made the decision to keep writing until the novel is done. At least the first draft of it; I am not sure the book will ever be done, until I can put my demons to rest.

*"What the APA calls PTSD . . . is probably rooted in an array of changes in the physiology and anatomy of the central nervous system – and may be irreversible. . . ." (Shay, p.?)*

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #36

### “A Prophet Without Honor”

October 7, 2005

Last week we had the brigade’s Army Training Management Conference. MAJ Jones had asked me to provide an introduction briefing, complete with slides, as a kick-off for the weekend.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt I had to lend some urgency to training management. It has become clear to me, now more than ever, that it’s not a matter of if you’ll deploy, it’s a matter of when. Not only that, it’s a matter of how often you will deploy.

It was easy to put together the slides she wanted. It was easier to put together the briefing. I knew I had to get everyone on board with the idea of a 5-year rotational schedule. I’ve mentioned it before in my missives—Year A’s training plan should focus on individual training, Year B would be mid-level collective training, Year C would be full blown company or battalion level collective training. The fourth year would be a Pre-Deployment training plan that would focus on everything a unit needed to work on the year prior to a deployment year, and the final training plan would be a skeletal training plan that covered everything the unit needed to do while deployed.

I made sure I got the approval of my boss before presenting this briefing (if there was one thing I learned from my deployment, it was to make sure you had buy-in from your commander before you do anything) and after I explained it to her, there was silence on her end of the phone. Finally, I said, “Does this mean you don’t approve?”

“No, no,” she was quick to reassure me. “It’s just, have you heard of ARFORGEN?” I had to admit that I hadn’t. “Well, you could have fooled me. Your concept dovetails with the new deployment plan the army is coming up with right now.”

I got the approval, but what she said kind of scared me. If ARFORGEN basically mirrored what I had come up with as a matter of necessity, it meant that the concept of an every 5 year deployment was about to become a reality. What would happen to me, to the National Guard, to this nation, if our troops, even our reserve troops, began to be used every 5 years?

Ostrich that I am, I decided not to delve too much into that line of thought for the time-being. I had to do this briefing. So on Saturday morning after MAJ Jones spoke and after COL Mulcahy and the command sergeant major said their piece about the importance of the Army Training Management System, it was time for me to get up. I did my spiel, laying out the 5-year modular training plan.

I spoke only about 15 minutes, but the glazed look on everyone’s faces made me feel bad, like it had been a boring speech. I realized when I turned it over for questions that it wasn’t boredom I saw in their eyes. It was fear.

*“I think in the National Guard over the past few years, with the increased deployment schedule and the upheaval with units that don’t know what their mission is going to be, there has developed something Shay warns about, . . . a climate of fear among officers, making them averse to decision, responsibility, and truthfulness – these are combat strength hemorrhages.” (Shay, p. 229.)*

“What if we’re slated for deployment in 2 years?” one captain asked.

“Create the predeployment training plan immediately. Our office will approve it for use in lieu of the plan you came up with last year. Then develop the deployment year plan, based on what you know of your proposed mission. As you have time, develop year A, because you’ll need it when you get back home.”

“What if we’re slated to be deactivated? Do we have to do any of these plans?” my battalion commander replacement asked.

“Well, considering that I know a personnel services battalion that was slated for deactivation who instead was mobilized, I say plan a Year A plan that has deactivation activities in it, but realize the plans are subject to change. You might want to have a pre-deployment plan, too, just in case.”

The what-if’s came fast and furious, and I could tell all the commanders were overwhelmed. You want me to come up with 5 years of training plans, instead of just 1?

But then, ATMS is a 5-year plan anyway, I thought to myself. What was the difference? The good thing was, once they had the modular plans in place, they could use the plans over and over again.

The maintenance units were the most adept at figuring out what I was saying. They pointed out that it wasn’t much different from the four-year rotational schedule they already had.

*The maintenance units had 1-year training in-state, 1 year out-of-state (CONUS), 1 year at NTC or JRTC or such, and 1 year at an OCONUS exercise, such as REFORGER. They repeated this cycle every 4 years.*

I spent the rest of the weekend trying to help the subordinate units understand the new system. I was losing the battle, though. Most of the commanders just tried to submit the plans they already had completed, which we all knew was just eyewash. The trucking companies tried to submit carbon copies of each other’s plans, even though they all trained on different kinds of trucks.

*The most glaring error the trucking units made this weekend was something they called “training in the BSA Area.” COL Mulcahy called them on it. “What do you mean, BSA? Your brigade does not have a BSA.”*

*If they’d been smart, they would have said they meant a Battalion Support Area which they planned to set up. But one commander was dumb enough to tell the truth. “Well, there’s this Boy Scout camp where we use their trails for truck drills in return for us clearing brush and stuff.” She asked him if the paperwork had been sent forward to make this an approved service project, through the state headquarters. His reply? “Uhhh. . . .” She then reminded him such a thing was illegal. So the commander struck that section out of his plan. Only problem? Every other trucking unit had copied his training plan. And they weren’t quite so knowledgeable about that “BSA” as he had been.*

I was drained by the end of the weekend. What kind of games did they think they were playing? Games that could get them killed someday, a small voice inside me said. And if they thought they’d be getting out of their deployments just because they hadn’t trained for it, well, wake up and smell the coffee.

*“Lying and deceit are valuable military skills.” (Shay, p. 151.) And they’re completely at odds with the military values, I might add.*

What if, I thought at the end of the night, what if I'm right, and we have to use these training plans over and over again, deploying every 5 years? Would I be ready to go again in 5 years? Truth be told, I knew that we'd be lucky if it was 5 years between deployments. The unit that replaced me had been in OIF I. That was an every other year commitment. And, while they had basically just sent the flag, with a complete cross-leveling of people into the unit, the point was not lost on me.

Is our Guard and Reserve ready for this change? Judging by the reactions I got this weekend for just suggesting it, the answer is a resounding no.

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #37

### "All Things Come to an End"

October 14, 2005

I guess I should have figured it out last weekend. The signs were all there. I just wanted to pretend they weren't.

It was my drill weekend, and since it was the beginning of the year, it was time to perform the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) and weigh-in. I was scheduled to have lunch with COL Mulcahy since she and I never get to see each other anymore, and we figured post-exercise was as good a time as any.

I blew away my APFT. I have remained in pretty good shape since I got back, weight-lifting and smacking up imaginary opponents in kickboxing several times a week (a way to get my aggressions out) so I had more pushups than I have had in about 15 years, and my run time was the best its been in quite some time.

Too bad it preceded an asthma attack.

I had had severe issues in Kuwait, to the point where I was using my inhaler several times a week and a navy doctor almost sent me to Landstuhl. He told me Reactive Airways Disease would only get progressively worse, and he figured I wasn't long for my military career. Once I was back in the states, however, and I got the oil smoke and extra sand out of my lungs, four attacks a week became two, then one, then one a month, and then it became pretty quiet.

Thus the reason I was a dummy and forgot to bring my inhaler to the APFT. So I coughed and hacked my way through the rest of the day, and took my medicine when I got home that evening.

Looking back on that day, Melissa as much as told me she would be leaving the position of brigade commander soon. It was there in the "once I'm gone" comments, and the, "You know, I've already been in this position for 2 1/2 years. I can't stay here forever." And then there was the infamous, "Well, there's been talk . . . oh, never mind."

Then, after lunch, I discovered my beloved MAJ Jones, the assistant S3 and backbone of the section, wanted to apply for a job with the Family Support Section at the Joint Force Headquarters. She asked me if I would write a letter of recommendation for her, which I did, but it filled me with a heaviness in my heart.

I didn't want to lose her, but again, I can't say it was a big surprise. I had wondered, as soon as we found out the brigade was becoming a go-to-war unit, if Mary would actually be able to deploy. She is a single parent. Her ex-husband is also in the National Guard, but not for long. When his unit was set to deploy, he discovered he had a virulent form of cancer. He would be her most likely family care plan, but his health is, at best, up in the air right now.

Besides, when I first met Mary, she was a lieutenant in the Family Support Group, and in spite of her lower rank, she was the one who virtually ran the program. Now she had a chance to be the head of the Family Support Group, and I couldn't think of a better person who would care more deeply about our families.

I had an idea for her replacement, however, which would be almost too good to be true. The company commander of the 263rd Personnel Services Detachment, the soldier who was suspended of command as soon as his unit was deployed and the commander sent north to Baghdad, would soon be home. His trust level was completely shot at and hit, and I thought he needed some serious nurturing when he came home. He also deserved his major once he got

back. I have been in nearly constant email contact with him in the past 10 months, and the relationship we have is the closest I have come to being a mentor in my career. What a perfect opportunity.

Mid-week, I got a weird phone call from MAJ Theut. He was my Executive Officer in Kuwait, and he recently transferred into my section again at the Brigade. He was performing a substitute training assembly when he called. "Ma'am! We want to know if you've been selected as the new brigade commander!"

He caught me completely unaware. "Which brigade, what are you talking about?"

"Haven't you heard? COL Mulcahy's been selected as the next general. She's leaving. And frankly, we can't think of anyone more suited to being the commander of this unit as it transitions than you."

I was flattered, to say the least, but I figured it was unlikely, not to mention I didn't think I would be ready for it so soon after coming off battalion command.

*Looking back, I had some approach-avoidance issues on this command thing. I discuss later my concerns over the overwhelming sense of responsibility I feel when I am in command. But I have also been told, too many times to believe they lie to me, that I am a very good commander. Maybe that's because I care so much.*

*So, did I want to be the commander of the Regional Support Group? The answer to this question is probably yes. But I'd already made it clear, in my saner moments, to COL Mulcahy, that I wasn't ready to go back into command again yet. I needed a break.*

*Now, I know I probably won't be presented with the opportunity again.*

"I've been nominated to attend the resident class at the U.S. Army War College," I said. "I don't think they'd put me in just before they sent me off to Carlisle, do you? I mean, that's what they did with COL Anderson, and that was pretty disastrous."

"I didn't know you'd been selected for war college. Wow. Congratulations. You're going to be the next general after Melissa."

His words were kind, if a bit off the mark. I was thrilled that Melissa would be making general, but I wasn't totally sure the Michigan Army National Guard was ready to have two female generals at once.

*I think it's a quota thing. No more than 10 percent of our senior ranking officers are female. Since we have only seven general slots in the state, having two females at a time would skew the numbers.*

Meanwhile, I hadn't even made time in grade to be considered for colonel yet.

Once I got off the phone, though, I couldn't help wondering what the plan would be. Who was going to replace COL Mulcahy, if not me? Much as I didn't want to say this to MAJ Theut, or to MAJ Jones, who I know had put him up to making the call, I couldn't think of anyone else besides me, either.

*As it turned out, there were probably four or five people who were best suited to the position.*

If I were given that job, would I be ready for it? Would I be prepared to groom a brigade, as it went from being an administrative unit in charge of the training of numerous units to a unit that could deploy as a group headquarters? I wasn't totally sure. But stranger things had

happened in the Michigan Guard. I had reluctantly taken command of the battalion 3 years ago. I say reluctantly because I knew that I take the position of command so seriously, I know I lost a few years of my life doing so. The responsibility level is so high.

And yet, a small part of me would feel so honored if I were selected.

I finally gave it up to God. If it were his will, I would step forward and hold the position, doing the very best job I could to take care of the soldiers.

I realized then just how far I've come since February. Yes, I still feel shell-shocked from deployment. Yes, I still feel like I'm having trouble dealing with processing the whole thing. But now, I finally feel that in spite of my fears, I could step forward to do what was asked of me. Because it is the right thing to do, if for no other reason.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

Be the hope for humanity.

DNW

Yes, you.

## MISSIVE #38

### "Between Heaven and H--"

October 21, 2005

I am definitely getting the feeling that God does not want me to be a Christian anymore.

*"Anger has no limits. It can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself, . . . but also to God . . . ' God is a disappointment, and my faith feels shattered with his plan for me . . . '." (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 13.) Since I was still dealing with my anger, 9 months post-deployment and since I had dealt with anger over the mission and over my friends and over the loss of my life as I knew it, it was inevitable I would eventually have to face the anger I had toward God.*

*Grieving individuals, after the death of a loved one, are "left with a god who did not come to aid when we needed him most." (Ibid.) I was dealing with a God who had sent me to war when I didn't want to kill anyone. He had, I thought, abandoned me in the desert. From a Christian perspective, President George Bush kept pushing the point that this was a Christian war. And while I wanted to believe the words Christian and war should probably not belong in the same sentence together, I could not deny that the majority of Christians didn't seem to agree with me that Jesus Christ was a pacifist who insisted we turn the other cheek.*

It was bad enough when He abandoned me, sending me into the desert for a year. I really felt like I knew how the Jews felt when they wandered for 40 years in the desert wilderness, not going more than 50 miles away from the land of Milk and Honey at any given time, but not finding it until long after a generation or two.

Frankly, it stinks. I think God is lucky he had any believers after that one, but there you have it.

But I can't seem to help myself. Not only did I spend a year in the dusty, hot as Hades wilderness, but there wasn't an Episcopalian chapel within 50 miles of me at that point. And as I have mentioned in a past missive, I don't do born-again. I don't follow the bouncing ball when I sing. So for the most part, I didn't attend church the whole year I was gone.

Now that I'm back, I've discovered that I don't seem to have an Episcopalian church within 50 miles of my old church, either.

In 1999, our beloved priest of 10 years (25 years for the church, but 10 for my husband and me) was discovered to be having an affair with a parishioner of the church. He was guilty of breaking a canonical vow, and suspended from the priest-hood. The whole church went into shock.

To add insult to injury, within a month our assistant rector also left. We got an interim minister, and he hired another assistant rector. They both proved to be a poor fit for the congregation, and we never accepted them. Before the year was out, both of them resigned.

Our only remaining church leader, a deacon, then was removed by the bishop and sent elsewhere.

People left the congregation in droves. We could hardly pay our bills. Our family came close to leaving, as well. And then, saints preserve us, along came a friendly, cooperative, amenable interim rector, who got the church back on track. We put together a search committee, and within 8 months, they had chosen a new minister.

I thought at the time that they had rushed the actual search and hiring process. Our congregation was not through grieving for all we had lost over the last 2 1/2 years. I was worried that they had tried to find someone as close to our original priest as possible, or that they hadn't really had a good feel for what everyone was looking for.

The new minister started in September 2003. He had a crunchy granola wife, he wore Birkenstocks at the altar, he wanted to change our prayers and our services and our music as soon as he came.

*Okay, I feel I need to soften this line. I mean nothing cruel by calling someone crunchy granola; there are parts of me that are crunchy granola, too. She's a nice person, she's a vegetarian, she home-schools her kids, and she uses only natural fibers when she knits. By the way, I also own a couple pairs of Birkenstocks. So, take that for what it's worth.*

And 2 months later, I was gone.

By the time I came back, I hardly recognized the church. They sang music I detested, and changed the services weekly. My husband even seemed nonplussed as he juggled the three hymnals, prayer book, and thick bulletin-booklets we got each week.

And then there were the troubles with our kids. They didn't want to go to church. It's bad enough trying to listen and juggle, but add a kid that keeps going in and out of the cry-room, and honestly, I didn't feel God in this space anymore.

Great. Here we go again.

Over the summer, the church leaders did some namby-pamby-mumbo-jumbo, and determined that our congregation wanted three services instead of two.

*They called it a discerning process. I disdain this process so much that I really don't even want to describe it. Suffice it to say it involves pebbles and jars and going around in circles talking about our feelings ad nauseum. . . . I get sick just thinking about it.*

*The real problem is, the whole process smacks of conspiracy theory, because no matter how many votes each side gets, the decision always goes opposite the way everyone I talk to would like it to go. One friend once said, "I just want the decision to go my way. Just once. I don't care if that decision has to do with the color of a tablecloth. If it goes my way, I won't feel so much like I'm being set up."*

Not any of the congregation members I had talked to, mind you, but it didn't seem to really matter. They were determined there would now be a 9:00 service. This one was going to be a more low-key, contemporary service, and the 10:30 would be a more traditional Rite II service.

That settled it. I was going to the 10:30 service.

Simple to say, not so easy to do. Since they wanted to get people to go to the 9:00 service, they started making the children's choir perform at it. I made it clear that my children would perform at the 10:30 services, and I would not be driving them to the 9:00 service.

Meanwhile, the 10:30 service turned out not to be as advertised. It was rare when they actually followed the Rite II service. They've been changing it every week, to the point where I am driven to distraction.

*I recently was talking about this book project to a woman who went to our church, and she said there were times during my first year back when I just seemed so angry. I think this was the time to which she was referring. And I'll admit it, every time I went into the church, I'd seethe, so I guess it was obvious I*

*wasn't happy. But I'm not sure what it's a testament to that I continue to go to this church, whereas this woman to whom I was speaking has since dropped out.*

When I am in need of a community for my healing from deployment, I feel as though I cannot turn to my church for my solace. I know in my heart that no man, or woman, is an island, but I sure feel pretty alone each Sunday morning.

Here's hoping things will change, or I may be looking for a new church.

*"Many a veteran has had the experience that people who formerly helped them 'turn cold and still' . . . They have been driven out of factory offices, union halls, government offices, and felt 'cursed by heaven.'" (Shay, p. 56.)*

*The past few years, I have had to face facts. My beloved Episcopalian religion is going the way of the Dodo bird. While I am still nurtured by the church services I grew up with, the church believes it must emulate other more Evangelical churches, or face extinction. If I had wanted that style of worship, I'd have probably gone to that kind of church. Obviously, I do not.*

*But my daughter, as she grows, gets more involved in the contemporary style of service. And, regardless of discussing my unhappiness with the priest, and despite many church members leaving, our priest and vestry continue to make changes in the services. I am reminded of something my mom once said, that she was a Republican whose party had left her. I am an Episcopalian whose church did the same. I'm still in a quandary what to do about it.*

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

*Note that I changed the tagline yet again. This time I went from a sense of hopefulness to the fatalistic concept from **Raging Bull**, where a character needs to decide whether to take part in a rigged boxing match. Hmm. . . .*

## MISSIVE #39

### “Facing the Uncertainties”

October 28, 2005

So this week, there is good news, and there is bad news.

The good news is, I finally heard from the company commander and the detachment sergeant of the 209th Personnel Services Detachment, Louisiana Army National Guard. I had sent an email to each of them within a week of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation, but they did not get back to me until this week. Maybe they were in cahoots; the commander called the detachment sergeant and said, we’d better get back to her before she calls in for backup.

Or something to that effect.

Captain Barragan, the commander, emailed to say his house had suffered some damage, and that he and his family had evacuated to Texas before the storm hit. He didn’t get into too much other detail. MSG Perez, however, was kind enough to give me a better run-down of the unit. He said the unit had suffered no lost lives, though at least 70 percent of the soldiers had lost their homes or were otherwise displaced by the storm. He personally was living in a camper trailer, but at least he could count himself as not exactly homeless. As for unit equipment, their armory had been completely destroyed, with most of their stuff washed downstream forever.

Unh. How’s that for a kick in the gut? I prayed a thank you to God that none of my beloved soldiers had died in the storm, but my heart caught at the obvious suffering I could read behind his stoic words. On impulse, I forwarded his message on to COL Mulcahy, with the words, “This was one of the units that fell in under me in Kuwait.”

She responded swiftly by email. “I want to help them. What can we do?”

The uncertainty of what we could do weighed me down. Already, the Michigan National Guard had sent trucking units, water purification units, engineer units, and military police down to the Gulf area. From what we could tell from the daily reports, Mississippi was using the offered assets better than Louisiana was. Our water purification team, after weeks of ineffective employment, was calling it quits and heading north again. Our officer-in-charge of the brigade had put the kabosh on sending our unit down as a regional support group headquarters, saying we lacked the personnel and experience to do the job that was needed. He was stuck in admin mode, and no amount of convincing from MAJ Jones or me had had any effect.

I emailed Perez and told him we wanted to help, and if he had any suggestions, please send them. I sent the same message to Barragan. I haven’t received any reply, whether because of pride on their part, or spotty access to the Internet, I’m not able to guess.

COL Mulcahy also called to inform me that her replacement as the brigade commander would be COL Fratelli. “Remember, I introduced you to him during Annual Training.”

I did remember that, and now that I came to think of it, that was her way of telling me, “This will be your new boss. You need to get to know him.” She’d known since at least August that she would be moving. I love how the Guard tries to keep all their movements so hush-hush. So, the new brigade commander for the upcoming RSG would not be me, a fact that, in my heart, I already knew. I was only a little disappointed. And a touch relieved as well.

Meanwhile, I was now faced with trying to understand someone I knew very little about. COL Fratelli had grown up in the infantry and engineer background of the Michigan Guard.

For the most part, until we got to senior levels, the Guard was like the Offspring song. Combat arms and combat support? You got to “keep ‘em separated.” With this move, they were putting a combat guy in with combat support, and I could already hear the rumblings of discontent in the ranks.

Other than the 15-minute introduction and drinks at the Officers’ Club in Grayling, I’d never seen him before. He had thick, graying hair, but other than that, he looked much younger than I knew he probably was. His face and demeanor reminded me of a shy and embarrassed fourth grade boy. When he stood, he was tall, but his shoulders hunched forward in a gawky way, and his eyes remained fixed on the floor when he spoke. The enlisted men call him “Opie.”

The only other time I’d heard his name was not to a good purpose. Before I deployed, I got involved in a potentially explosive situation, where the active duty guys from the engineers (Fratelli) had arranged the help of one of my detachments for a personnel admin weekend in lieu of their proscribed wartime training without going through the chain of command. This meant the company commander didn’t know about it, I as battalion commander didn’t know about it, and my brigade command didn’t know about it. As battalion commander, I wrote a formal email informing then LTC Fratelli that under no circumstances could such a request be done outside the chain of command. He needed to send an official request for assistance through the 63rd Brigade, and he should be advised that, since this unit was likely to be deployed within the year, wartime training took precedence.

Though I know what I wrote was completely accurate, I find myself hoping he doesn’t remember that I was the one who sent that email to him.

*I also heard through the grapevine that this man had risen in rank quite fast. He was AGR, and it was thought he might be on the fast track for general.*

*There is a problem between AGR officers and Mobilization Day (part-time) officers in the National Guard, at least within our state. Anecdotal evidence up until a year ago was that AGR officers don’t deploy; they leave it to M-Days to do it in their stead.*

*I’m not saying all AGR soldiers want this to happen, but senior leaders have helped to make it happen, saying they can’t do without the expertise of their full-time force.*

*Meanwhile, these AGR officers continue to move up the ranks. “The sense of some Vietnam veterans that civilians have been eating their lunch is a powerful source of resentment, even hatred. This takes the form of viewing civilians as having advanced educationally and occupationally, while the [veteran] stood still or lost ground’.”(Shay, p. 135.)*

*In the case of AGRs, this quote is applicable to the National Guard if you think of the non-deployers as the civilians in this instance. It’s changed a bit in the last year or so, because so many National Guardsmen have deployed that the nondeploying senior leaders are now heavily out-numbered. Suddenly some of them are “volunteering” for deployments. I think this is because they can see their authority over the deployed masses is slipping.*

Meanwhile, that unit did get deployed to Kuwait, although their commander was sent forward to Baghdad. The good news there is, CPT Kirk is finally back in Kuwait, reunited with his unit, in preparation of them coming home in a few weeks’ time. One of the first things I need to do with the new commander, besides briefing him on the S3 aspects of the brigade, is to request that I be allowed to greet that unit when it gets off the plane. I’ve promised Kirk and his crew a welcome home party.

The Chief of Staff of the Army has just published new “Army Top Three Priorities.” They are: (1) Win the long war while sustaining our all-volunteer Army; (2) Accelerate the attainment of the Future Combat Systems; and (3) Accelerate business transformation and process improvement. I sent this announcement to my former XO. His reply was, “Isn’t that five priorities?”

Whether it is or not, I’d have to say they seem to me to be mutually exclusive. And Number 3 just blows me away. Since when has the Army been a business? Process improvement, sure, we need that, because if we WERE a business, we’d be out of business by now. . . . I just have to wonder what the heck they’re thinking up at the top of our heap here. Or, are they thinking at all? Mutually exclusive stakes . . . that’s what makes for good characters in fiction.

*Then you can pit the mutually exclusive stakes against each other to generate inherent conflict. Isn’t that just what we need in the Army right now?*

On that front, I am nearing completion of *Catch 20XX*. I feel as though I’ve run the Leadville 100-miler . . . drained, totally exhausted, oddly exhilarated. The book is well over 100,000 words long at this point, around 550 pages. Meanwhile, the good news on the writing front is *Living on Tatooine (a.k.a. Kuwait)*, my book of missives back home from the war, is set for a publication date of December 15th of this year. Now, here’s to figuring out how to market it.

Till next time—

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #40

### “Catharsis”

November 5, 2005

Three days ago, I finished the first draft of *CATCH 20XX*. It weighs in at well over 100,000 words. I know that it is a disjointed beast that would probably make no sense whatsoever to anyone who reads it but me. And all of it weighs heavy on my mind.

I'd like to say that doing this project has helped me to process the events that took place the year that I was gone. Maybe it has, but I'm not sure the processing has had a positive effect.

*Shay likens the process of trying to find the truth behind the deployment as the seduction of listening to the Sirens' song. In the original Odyssey, "the Sirens sing of the final truth of what happened in the Trojan War" (Shay, p. 87.) In other tets, academics believe the Sirens will tell the listener their fatal flaw. If both ideas are true, then writing Catch 20XX was an attempt to get the truth behind my deployment, but it also exposed my fatal flaw to me. So this experience has both positive and negative ramifications.*

*What's my fatal flaw, you may ask? My insistence on living by my integrity is my fatal flaw.*

There are friends of mine who said, while I was doing this, that I just seemed to seethe with anger sometimes. I haven't really noticed, because I've felt so detached. I have often felt drained after a day's writing. Two months is a long time to do so many words every day.

There is one positive thing from the experience, although I hesitate to say it is positive. As I wrote the last three pages of the manuscript, tears started spilling down my cheeks. By the time I wrote THE END, I was bawling.

*Shay says once a combat veteran has established his own narrative, they can begin the re-integration process. The obsession has been "moderated to a life-sustaining sense of belonging to a community with a meaningful history" (p. 92).*

Now that the novel is done, at least the first draft of it, I think I've entered another phase of my reintegration. The tears were the first sign, but there are others. While I have been so angry now for so long, now I feel as though I have been wrong about everything. I find myself doubting how I reacted to what took place around me last year.

I suppose, maybe, that my literary device worked too well. I had chosen a God-narrator for the express reason that I wanted to see more than my side to all the events. If God is Good, and God is omnipotent and omnipresent, then my enemies must have had their own reasons for what they did. I wanted to understand where they were coming from, and give them more than just a two-dimensional characterization. I figured a God who loved all people equally would be able to deliver that objectivity I was looking for.

I am searching for ground truth.

The result has been that I look at what I did and worry that I was the one who did the wrong things. Did I really need to fall on my sword because they wanted me to falsify the weigh-in paperwork? Maybe COL Smith was right, and I should have been more loyal to her. Maybe I tell the truth to the point that I am almost subversive. And what about the times I remained silent rather than telling the truth? Were they sins of omission rather than commission?

And so I wallow in my own self-loathing. I want to do the right thing. I want to be a strong officer, someone who can be trusted to take care of soldiers and live by her integrity. Someone people can rely on.

What if I am not that officer? What if I am the one who has been wrong all along? What if I'm a poor leader? What if I deserve to be fragged?

Thus my anger gives way to regret, the kind of regret that eats away at my very soul. It's time to pray to the God I thought had abandoned me, saying I'm so sorry if what I did abandoned him. I knew not what I did. I know not if I did right or if I committed unpardonable sin. Either way, I am sorry. So very sorry.

*Regret is actually a stage in the grieving process. Since I consider the reintegration process to be a form of grieving, I should not have been surprised when this phase hit me. Kubler-Ross and Kessler said both that "regrets will always belong to the past," and "dreams are often the regrets of tomorrow" (pp. 39-40). But I believe regret is, ultimately, the process of making oneself human again. Nobody is perfect. I was not a perfect commander. I was not a perfect subordinate. Once we realize our imperfections, we can and must forgive ourselves. If we do not, we get into a vicious cycle of never getting out of regret. But if we deny our mistakes, we are in danger of deluding ourselves into thinking we were better than we were. I think it's hard enough to be called a hero when I know I am not one. But to be called a hero when one believes falsely that one is, is probably the way to insanity or megalomania.*

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #41

### “Preparing for a Welcome Home”

November 12, 2005

Shortly after I finish this missive this week, I will be on my way down to Indianapolis to welcome back the 263rd Personnel Services Detachment from a long, hard, and ultimately fruitless deployment.

Just trying to get the okay to go down and welcome them back has been, for me, a long and hard journey, but hopefully it will be not so fruitless in the end.

I have recently been taking flak from LTC Benson, the Officer in Charge of the 63rd Brigade. I don't know if it's because he and I are competing for top dog position with the incoming commander, or if he just doesn't understand where I'm coming from, having never deployed himself. We've been having issues with the brigade's transition from an administrative unit to a go-to-war unit. He keeps saying we don't have the people or the experience to begin the transition. I keep saying that hasn't stopped units from going to war unprepared recently. Just look at the 146th Medical Support Battalion. Just a few months ago, they were an aviation unit. Now, they're on the “Units of Interest” list to deploy in less than a year, as a medical battalion.

They still have more pilots than they do doctors.

So what's stopping our brigade from being put on the list for deployment as soon as we become official, and being sent overseas to be a glorified mayor of a forward operating base, regardless of our lack of personnel and/or experience?

And now, LTC Benson also believes that since I'm the S3 rather than the battalion commander, I don't really have the right to go see CPT Kirk and his troops when they return home.

Since Benson is full-time and I am part-time, he automatically has the ear of the commander more than I do. To add to that situation, our new commander is also a full-timer, in charge of the Human Resources Office for the state. This means COL Fratelli is LTC Benson's boss in more ways than one. I'm beginning to feel my goose is cooked.

To help my cause, I requested and received an audience with COL Fratelli this week. I put together a detailed S3 Information Brief, which described my section, our missions, our deploying, redeploying, and transitioning units, and where we are in our own transition process.

COL Fratelli was friendly, but aloof. I guess I should not expect much more from a colonel. He did seem interested in the briefing itself, though. He had requested a 15-minute briefing, and I had designed it to be so, but he kept asking questions at each slide, and thus my 15-minute brief became an hour. He seemed to be quizzing me on my knowledge of the situation as much as on my ability to think on my feet. I think I passed the test, though it's a bit hard to tell.

I guess I should mention here what I may have mentioned in passing before. The Brigade S3 for this administrative unit has been, in the past, a plum ornamental position, given to people as they came off a battalion command. I think it's been meant as a respite for lieutenant colonels who need to take a bit of a break from the hard work. The work is usually done by the Assistant S3 (a full-timer), and the part-time S3 just stands up and gives the briefings, aiming to look pretty.

I think that was the intention when COL Mulcahy gave the slot to me. I have, however, never used this position as such.

While COL Fratelli may have assumed that MAJ Jones had put together this power point presentation for me, the truth was that I was the one who developed it. Therefore, I knew all the information in it, as well as all the background information behind it.

Again, maybe this is part of LTC Benson's heartburn. As the full-time OIC, he is not used to a part-time S3 of the same rank working in almost a full-time capacity.

Part of my briefing was a slide that presented the names of all the people who manned my section. I felt it prudent to mention that MAJ Jones would soon be leaving and that I needed to replace her with a good soldier. As the Human Resources Officer, COL Fratelli knew this change of manning; he had, in fact, approved it. I told him I had a recommendation for the replacement: CPT Kirk, who would be returning from deployment this week.

He was surprised, and seemed interested, in my suggestion. While he mentioned that Kirk was a relatively junior captain to be going into a major slot, I told him he'd be eligible for promotion in December. I also told him his deployment experience would dovetail well with what our S3 shop was doing, and that Kirk had had a hard deployment, was shell-shocked, and needed a position where he could trust his chain of command.

*I never told COL Fratelli the half of it. Over the past month or so, Kirk had shared with me reasons why he was afraid to come home. I had learned details of his troubled childhood and the lack of trust he'd had before he went to war, which had been exacerbated by his deployment. "The most violent and intractable cases of combat trauma we have worked with in the VA Clinic have frequently experienced rapes or other severe abuse and neglect in childhood and/or adolescence prior to military service." (Shay, p. 142.) While I won't go into specific detail, what Kirk had told me threw him squarely into this camp, so I really wanted to surround him with a group of supportive people who could understand and respond to his needs post-deployment.*

Fratelli said he'd consider my recommendation, but that there would be a career board for it. If Kirk was interested in applying, he would need to get his application in quickly.

I then broached the subject of my going down to Indianapolis to welcome back the unit just as LTC Benson walked into COL Fratelli's office. Benson said, "We've got you on the UH-60 manifest to go down."

I said, "I really wanted to go down with the Mobilization Force Readiness people, and continue down to their mobe station. As the former battalion commander, I owe the unit a round of drinks."

Fratelli seemed concerned by my plan. "Is this okay with Kirk?"

I told him yes, CPT Kirk was expecting me, and so was the unit. I had really hoped to drive down, rather than fly. Fratelli gave me permission, and LTC Benson looked unhappy that I'd gotten my way. I left the office, worried that he would start rumors behind my back, but as a part-time National Guard officer, I knew it was probably not the first time that had happened between full-timers.

*It was too soon for me to know what COL Fratelli's leadership style or philosophy was, but I was already disturbed by the feeling that Benson and I were getting pitted against each other. Shay might liken the leadership style I saw from him in this instance as being like Agamemnon's (pp. 240-241).*

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #42

### “Shattered and Rear-Ended”

November 19, 2005

On Sunday after church, I finished packing up my brand new Prius, and got on the road to Indianapolis. I don't know how I'd gotten it into my head it was a 4-hour trip. You'd think after coming up every other weekend during my Advanced Course at Fort Benjamin Harrison that I would remember it was a solid 6-hour trip.

I felt drained before I hit the hotel where I was to meet COL Mulcahy and her new boss, MG Cannon. They had arrived earlier in the day by helicopter, and had gotten rooms since we didn't know exactly when the plane would touch down.

We had a pleasant dinner, then found out the plane had indeed been delayed till the wee hours of the morning. Since I was going on to Camp Atterbury and the senior leaders would fly back as soon as the plane had landed and they'd welcomed back the troops, we decided to try to get some shuteye.

Around 2 or 3 a.m., we headed over to the private terminal. We were alone there, waiting for the military charter flight. Finally, in the troops streamed. We shook their hands—the division commander, the deputy division commander, both of a chain of command this unit hadn't had before they left, the current battalion commander, the former battalion commander (me), the Mobe Force Training officer who had been a former detachment sergeant for this unit when I was the detachment commander, and a few sergeant majors.

CPT Kirk was the last one off the plane, and he looked like he was ready to bounce off the walls. He shook our hands, looking really agitated, then finally let out a banshee-style scream and stamped his feet. “God damn it, God damn it,” he yelled.

COL Mulcahy and MG Cannon exchanged glances, like they were saying, “What's with this guy, for god's sake?” But I knew. I understood that Banshee wail as though it had been my very own.

*“When we are in fear of the enemy, nothing is too good for the ‘great-hearted spirit’ (thumos) of our fighting men; when they return as veterans we see their needs as greedy, deMelissang, uncultured belly (gaster).” (Shay, p. 13.) I felt sorry for Kirk. It was obvious to me that his anger and upset and lack of trust was not understood at all by anyone who had not yet deployed. What is ironic is that the story of his crappy deployment was known even in the highest circles of our state's National Guard Headquarters, and no one had done anything to help him, even though they said he'd suffered terribly.*

The soldiers filed onto the bus, and I said to Kirk, “I'm driving down to Atterbury, but it's so late, I think I'm going to need an A-Driver to keep me awake. Would you be willing to go along with me?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

After months of daily emails from me to him and back again, suddenly we were awkward trying to actually talk to each other. I considered myself to be his mentor, and I was fully prepared to try to help him through this reintegration process, but it almost seemed as though we couldn't talk.

I played some music, tried to make conversation, drank some Diet Coke to try to keep me awake, but it wasn't until the near miss that things actually got going. In the middle of Mid-

Nowhere, Indiana, Kirk became suddenly alert. "Something on the road," he shouted, and stamped his foot as though he had the brake. I had already seen the red lights in front of me, reacting and swerving to avoid whatever it was. "It's a deer," Kirk said, but frankly I was more concerned with the Explorer's bumper that I was way too close to.

"Where are the hazard lights?" I asked, feeling like an idiot, but the car was relatively new, and my husband drove it most of the time, so I had no idea. Kirk found the button first, on the center panel, and pushed it in so the cars behind us wouldn't hit us.

Everyone managed to avoid both the deer and a collision, except, it turned out, my former detachment sergeant, who had been in the lead car, and had bumped the haunches of the animal, but the deer seemed unhurt. We all carefully drove around her, and moved on, now in Hyper-Alert mode.

"You all right?" I said to Kirk.

"Yeah," he said.

"That remind you of something?" I asked, thinking of the IEDs he'd probably driven past during his months in Baghdad.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said.

"You were pretty hyped up back there."

"Nah, a deer? That ain't nothing."

"I meant in the airport."

He was silent, but I could see the agitation in his hands again.

"I hate them," he finally said. "I hate them all."

"Mulcahy? Me?"

"No, not that," he said. "I hate them. I hate what they did to me."

I think I knew the "them" to which he was referring. I hated them, too. "Totally understandable," I said.

"I think I need to get a divorce."

It was my turn to be silent. He had brought this subject up in recent emails, about the fact he was afraid to come home, that his wife, who was also a Guard soldier, had not been understanding of what he had gone through, and he was afraid he didn't love her anymore.

"James, don't do anything rash," I said. "You're just back from an extremely stressful deployment. Honestly, you're not yourself. I wasn't myself when I first came back. Hell, I'm still not myself. I think it'll take at least a year. You married her because you loved her. Take some time to try to remember why. Take some time to allow her to get used to you again, and what you've become. Don't make such an important decision before you've even seen her."

He didn't say anything more, just turned up the volume on the music to help me get the rest of the way to Atterbury without wrecking the car.

After some sleep the next morning, and time just hanging out with the unit, sharing war stories, I took them to the little club on base, and bought them all a round of drinks. We played Euchre, a quintessential Michigan card game, and Kirk mopped up some personnel issues I was pretty sure I didn't want to know too much about. Something about one male soldier having fallen in love with another . . . don't ask, don't tell.

*One would have to wonder why these soldiers would choose the first night of their demobilization to bring this kind of situation up unless one considers the risks combat veterans are willing to take as part of their danger-seeking. "Why did you do it?" Because I wanted to see what would happen" is the likely reply. (Shay, p. ?)*

The next morning, I talked a bit longer with Kirk, again urging him to do nothing rash, and I gave him my phone number, both home and cell, and told him he could call me anytime he needed to talk. I also told him, "There is something through the VA, five times with a psychologist, no questions asked, not a part of your permanent record. I recommend you take them up on that one." I got a thousand-yard stare in response.

I'd never seen anyone so shattered by deployment. Well, not quite true. I'd seen one in the mirror. I've become firmly convinced deployments are toughest on the commanders.

On the way home, I pushed myself too much. The drive was too long, and it had been a long couple days. I decided to take a bit of a break at the Jackson armory, and turn in my travel voucher. Getting out of the car, walking around a bit, and getting myself a diet soda cleared my head. I felt better about doing that last half hour's drive.

I pulled out of the armory parking lot, and stopped at the light, trying to decide if I needed to turn left here or at the next intersection.

*It is a confusing intersection, even at the best of times. To go north, you have to go south, then over two streets, then around the corner to get back on the road.*

*There was an easier way to get back on the freeway, but it was technically illegal, and I was fighting tiredness. I'd decided to do the legal way so as to keep myself out of trouble. Ha.*

*Sometimes it does not pay to be a law-abiding citizen.*

BANG! My car jumped two feet forward. I looked up at the light, thinking, did I not notice it was green? No, it was still red. A huge white truck was filling the entire view of my rear windshield.

Shaken, I pushed my park button and got out of the car. The older man in the pickup was very apologetic. "I'm so sorry, the roads were slick, my boots, too, I went for the brake and accidentally hit the accelerator."

"She was a brand new car," was all I could think to say, and I worked hard not to burst into tears.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #43

### “Too Much Too Soon”

November 26, 2006

Happy birthday to Ken, my beloved, who turns 42 this Friday, Thanksgiving turkey that he is. . . .

This missive is kind of a continuation from last week, since this story just keeps going, and going, and going. . . .

Shortly after I returned, limping my broken car's tail behind me, I received an email from some friends of CPT Kirk. It was sent to God and everybody, inviting us to a surprise party to welcome home CPT Kirk, “Bronze Star Award Recipient.”

I groaned. I could not think of a worse thing to do to one shattered warrior than to give him a surprise welcome home party. He might just completely flip out.

But what to do? Did I go directly to his wife, MSG Kirk, and explain my concerns? Something told me that wouldn't sit right with her. Then I had a flash of inspiration. The mobe force readiness soldier and former detachment sergeant. He was a good friend of both Kirks. Maybe I could reason with him.

I forwarded the email on to him, even though he'd been on the original email list, and said, “MSG Hetchler: You and I both saw CPT Kirk last week. While I am very proud of him, and would love to welcome him back with a party, I think he is not ready for that many people, whom he will actually regard as strangers even when they are long-time friends. And, with his startle reflex in full gear, as it was a few days ago, how do you think he will handle surprise of any kind?”

I got a one line response: “Good point.”

A day or so later, there was an all-points email :

“The surprise party for CPT Kirk has been postponed until further notice. James would like to settle back in before celebrating his return.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Two days later, the 263rd PSD had its official return home to the Michigan armory they now called home. This armory was brand newly built and the soldiers had never actually seen it, so it was like returning to a foreign country. I got dressed in my BDUs and headed over to be there for the official welcome home ceremony, and got lost trying to find the place.

When I finally arrived and walked toward the main entrance, three or four of my former battalion soldiers stood by the front doors. My readiness NCO, MSG Hawn, squinted at me while I was still in the parking lot, and said loud enough for me to hear, “Is that the Colonel?”

I can't tell you how it warmed the cockles of my heart to be referred to as “The Colonel.” As though there would never be another colonel for him. His new battalion commander was just beyond him, behind closed glass doors. Hawn and the other soldiers hugged me when I got close enough.

A word on hugging. I swear to God, before I deployed, I would never have hugged anyone in the military. I knew I had to keep a professional distance, especially as I gained in rank, from my soldiers and also from my own supervisors. But post-deployment, there are people I hug. These are the people who had become my family over the year we were deployed, and they deserve a display of affection I would never have contemplated before.

I was part of the official ceremony, having been the former commander, so I had to sit at a position of authority. I felt like an idiot doing so, but those are the breaks. It was a hurry up-and-wait affair, so I went around and spoke with some of the people I knew. MSG Kirk was standing with MSG Hetchler. When I came up, she looked at me with doe eyes and said, "Thank you for intervening with the party. I didn't understand before. I think I understand more now. This will change everything."

The way she said it made me hesitate. There was a note of barely concealed anger in her words, but I shrugged it off as me being paranoid. "Your husband's been through a lot. It will take him time to heal. Please give him the time he needs."

She nodded curtly. "I'm telling you, this changes everything."

The unit finally arrived, saving me from finding out what that "everything" might be.

We took our places, the unit filed in, and Kirk took command. I thought about the fact that for the majority of his deployment, he had been disallowed from doing that, and how that must have hurt him. CPT Kirk's knees shook uncontrollably. When he was called up to speak, his words were short, terse, filled with love for his unit, but an underlying hatred for almost everything else. It was palpable.

*We see not only the 'what' of real experiences, but the why of a veteran's need to disguise his experiences at all. What is 'home' anyway?" (Shay, p. 4.) Certainly, I don't think Kirk felt like he was home yet. I think he wanted to turn around and run away. He didn't trust what his wife was going to do; he'd as much as confided this to me already, and her comments to me earlier made me certain Kirk was right to be afraid.*

After the ceremony, COL Fratelli went up to MSG Kirk and gave her the rest of the day off, "to spend getting to know your husband again." I watched her silently leave, her eyes filled with what I could only call fear. Then Fratelli turned to me and said, "Jesus, what is WITH that guy?"

"Redeployment is with that guy," I answered. "He's had a sucky deployment. He has some serious healing to do." Fratelli looked at me, not entirely convinced I knew what I was talking about. But then, he's never deployed.

*And is likely never so to do. Honestly, if we are going to have senior leaders who never deploy, at the very least they need to have a class in learning to deal with the trauma all the other returning veterans are coming home to. Yes, you read that right. It is just as traumatic for a soldier to come home as to face deployment. I won't go so far as to say it's as traumatic as facing combat, because I can't speak to that. But deployment and redeployment are both equally traumatic. I'm absolutely sure of that.*

That evening, when I came back home, I dropped CPT Kirk a line on the email. "If you need me over the holiday weekend, to talk, or whatever," and I put down every phone number I could think of, from my cell phone to my mother's home phone number.

The sense of foreboding was fulfilled by his response the next day: "Monika is moving out. She says I've turned into a monster, and she doesn't recognize me any-more. Happy Thanksgiving."

Here I was, now in Carlisle, PA, far away from this cry for help. I had no phone numbers for him. I wrote back: "CALL ME!!!"

Happy Thanksgiving, indeed.

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #44

### “Anniversaries”

December 2, 2005

This is my 16th anniversary of marriage to Ken. Last year, with me in the desert, we celebrated our 15th anniversary apart, so now, it seems I'm always getting the number of this one confused. Sometimes I say it's our 15th, then say, no, that's not right. Or it's the 17th, no, that's not it, either . . . why is it that missing a year screws it all up for me?

We, of course, plan to have a special anniversary dinner. The sitter is set. We are going to the Earle Uptown, our favorite French/Italian place, even though it's the most expensive restaurant in town.

On December 2, 2003, I was just days away from the official mobilization date of December 7th. We went to the Earle that day, too, and it was a somber affair. In an effort to pretend the deployment wasn't happening to us, Ken blew out all the stops. We had the most expensive thing on the menu—beef tenderloin with truffles and foie gras, and champagne to drink. I guess he was trying to make up for us missing our big 15 in advance.

I think, tonight, we plan to have the same dinner. For old time's sake?

Sometimes—no, most of the time—I think deployments are harder on the families than they are for the deployed soldier. For me, deployment was just one long, tedious Groundhog Day. I got up roughly the same time every morning, worked till late in the evening, had a crappy year, but I was able to focus on just one thing. As long as I made mission and everyone in my battalion had beans, bullets, bucks, and got home safely, I was good to go.

Ken, on the other hand, had to have his mind on three or four things at once. He was the primary caregiver, playing both father and mother. He had to work full-time. He had to be the family readiness group leader. He was the liaison for the whole unit. He had to be the chief tutor, had to get the kids to school, help them with homework, tuck them in to bed at night. He went from early in the morning till late at night, knowing that this might be forever if I didn't come back home. He was desperate for a break that wouldn't come.

*When I read the Kubler-Ross book, I was struck by the fact that Ken and my kids were in a state of grief over losing me the entire year I was gone. Ken has said to me that occasionally it would occur to him that I might never come back, and that he might have to do this for the rest of his life. But mostly, he tried to bury these thoughts. Kubler-Ross and Kessler say this is a common form of denial. “This does not mean that you literally don't know your loved one has died. It means you come home and you can't believe that your wife isn't going to walk in the door at any minute or that your husband isn't just away on a business trip” (p. 8).*

*Granted, I really was away on a business trip. A really long business trip. But Ken had to treat it as though I were dead. That kind of emotional confusion had to have been hard on him.*

And, as a father, he sometimes didn't know how to ask for help, nor did he always know whom to ask it from.

He made it through, but even now, more than 9 months since I returned, he still cannot talk about it. When I was preparing *Living On Tattooine*, (A.k.a. *Kuwait*) for publication, I asked him if he wanted to read it. He hesitated, about to say yes because he thought that might be the right answer, then licked his lips and cleared his throat. “I'm sorry. I can't. I just . . . can't.”

I didn't push.

We can't seem to talk about last year . . . can't mention that we lost an entire year of being together. In a way, this doesn't feel like it's the 16th anniversary, or maybe it's the 16th minus one.

One year without a husband. One year without my kids. One year without a wife, one year without a mother.

My husband keeps reminding me it was actually 1 1/2 years. And he mourns every minute of that loss.

But, I think of what I'm learning about CPT Kirk and his wife, and I thank God every day that Ken waited for me, and has tried to reach out and understand what I went through in an effort to keep us on an equal footing. I would have curled up and died if he'd taken the kids and left the day I came back.

My heart breaks when I think of the Kirks, because in a way, I can understand both sides. My own bias naturally goes toward CPT Kirk, because we have a shared experience. I tried to email MSG Kirk to tell her it might not be a bad idea for her to talk with my husband. She never answered me.

CPT Kirk has called several times, because he needs to talk. He admits that he felt nothing when she told him she was leaving, and I said that didn't surprise me, because I felt nothing for 3 months after I returned, and I thought that was the norm rather than the exception. I told him I tried to get MSG Kirk to call my husband, and he said that wouldn't happen. "She's insanely jealous of you, you know," he said.

"Why? I haven't done anything to be guilty of," I said, but as I said it, I couldn't help feeling guilty.

"Because she knows I can talk to you. She knows you understand me. She's jealous because we share something she won't be able to share. Ever."

*Over several calls, Kirk admitted to me that, due to the "can't court her but can marry her" unofficial rule in our state's Guard, he was, he felt, forced to marry her prematurely, because they had started a dating relationship. He couldn't afford the taint of a fraternization charge.*

*Now, just a few years later, he was afraid they didn't have enough in common, and he should never have rushed into the marriage. Meanwhile, she was saying he had changed during the deployment, and he wasn't fully engaged in the relationship. He didn't care about her worries and fears.*

*Of course, the real reason he wasn't engaged was, like me, he'd had to turn off all emotions just to survive the deployment. It took me 3 months to begin to thaw. She'd moved out after 1 day.*

*"She'll understand it when she deploys," I said.*

He snorted. "Who are you kidding, Ma'am? She'll never deploy."

I had no reply to that, although I always wondered how someone could be so sure they could get out of a deployment in this day and age. Not if, but when. . . .

So, the Kirks look like they're headed for divorce, although I still tell him every chance I can get that he needs to make haste slowly, and allow himself at the least till he can find some emotion again before he even considers such a thing. At least he's agreed to go to counseling, and for that I am very glad.

I've been careful to keep my husband abreast of every time I talk to Kirk. While I still believe there is nothing between us except a mentoring relationship, I realize how easily it can be misconstrued by just about anybody. It pains me to think that a female officer must always

be careful to keep up the appearance of propriety so meticulously; that's how it goes in a co-ed military.

But I know in my heart that I would never do anything to ruin my relationship with Ken. I owe him a great debt for keeping the family together while I was gone, and for doing everything in his power to keep up his own set of appearances. The best way for me to repay that debt is to remain absolutely truthful and absolutely faithful to him.

I mean it when I say, "If you ever leave, I'm going with you."

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #45

### “Impossible Expectations”

December 9, 2005

There is nothing like spending the holidays in the desert to make you want to pull out all the stops the next year. Last year’s Christmas season was particularly horrible, now that I think of it, which I try not to as much as possible. One of my organic units had come in and been immediately ripped apart, my original wartime higher head-quarters had redeployed, leaving me with a chain of command who did not really seem to care what my units did or didn’t do. My replacement unit had come, and we were in the midst of trying to train them. Our ability to get mail would soon be turned off, so I told everyone not to bother with Christmas presents.

The one high point I can remember for the holiday season was the Boxing Day celebration, where we invited all our units to Camp Virginia for a huge “White Camel” Christmas gift exchange. I, quite frankly, planned this event while snubbing my nose at the higher headquarters commander, who had said the roads of Kuwait were too dangerous to travel. I’d travelled 75,000 miles with not a scratch. Give me a break. He was going to have one very long year if he didn’t go off his base at all because of the supposed security risks.

When I came back in February, there was still a Christmas tree on display at my house as though my family had held off celebrating until my return. So this year, I find myself wanting to make this the absolutely perfect holiday season. The resulting stress is almost overwhelming.

I started by writing the family Christmas letter around Thanksgiving. I have 2 years to make up for, since the 2003 letter never got out, what with me in the middle of the mobilization process. Last year I relied on wishing everyone a happy holiday via email. So I figure 2005 had better be good. I have over 100 letters to mail out and it’s a big process to do so, but so far I’m on schedule.

Ever since my 11-year-old daughter was 2, we have hired a babysitter for a whole day in early December, and Ken and I have taken a whole day to select presents for everyone. If we get all, or most, of our shopping done by the end of the evening, we have a nice dinner together before relieving the sitter of her command. That shopping spree is scheduled for tomorrow.

Next week, we’ve invited all the second grade cub scouts (Bear Cubs, to be specific) to our house for a cookie baking and caroling party. I have to get the house cleaned up for that, and, if possible, I’d like to have all the decorations up by then.

The decorating in itself is a big chore and one I feel a great deal of pressure about. We were not allowed to hang Christmas lights in our tents last year, due to the fire hazard. Needless to say, we kept our decorating to a minimum. We had one Christmas tree in our office “lobby” and a stocking for each soldier, courtesy the American Legion of Lansing, Michigan, and we had my nondenominational HannaChristKwanzSolstice “whippin’ tree” (see *Living On Tatooine A.K.A. Kuwait* for more information and a picture of said tree), and that was about it.

Every day I bring up another box from the basement, and put out the decorations that are in there. The tree itself is a huge endeavor, since it rests on a platform that has a 1950s train set going around a Christmas village. Thus, there is a method to the madness of putting it up, which requires the help of everyone in the family.

First, I get the fake tree box, and my kids and I put the tree together.

*Why a fake tree? Trust me, getting pine sap out of a Lionel train engine is not worth having a live one.*

Then it sits for a few days, until Ken has a chance to put on the Christmas lights. This is one of those bones of contention. I wouldn't mind putting on the lights myself, but he insists, probably rightly, that his ability with the lights is much more professional. That assumes he can get around to it with his work schedule. This year I finally gave up and did the lights myself. They're not bad.

*Boy, if this isn't a "story about a [wo]man who's always on 'mission' –" (Shay, p. 57) working harder than anyone around me. I was nearly obsessive-compulsive about remembering every detail.*

But then I really do need his help, putting together the platform. We have to haul all the pieces up from the basement and screw it all together. Once that's done, I can staple on the white sheet that doubles as "snow," and then we put the tree onto the platform.

The kids get to put on all the ornaments, since they have to stand on the platform, and a kid's weight is probably less likely to break the whole thing. Our ornaments tend to be lopsided, but it's what makes it our tree. None of the ornaments are breakable, so we don't have to worry about the kids dropping them, nor do we have to worry about the cat whapping one off the lowest branches.

Our cotton and glittered batting is looking a bit woebegone this year. Some of it, I swear, dates back to the 1960s and 70s, when my own parents last put up this tree. I went to the store this year and found some replacement stuff—a glittery tree skirt and some batting for the mountains.

It's Ken's job to put together the track and trains, and every day, I've been adding a few more buildings as I find them. It's beginning to look like a little town.

I want to bake cookies, and make all my presents, and sing Christmas carols, and see all the Christmas classics on TV. In the last day or so, I feel as though I'm failing at my mission, though. The kids are bouncing off the walls, they don't seem to see that Christmas is a spiritual time, and we're so inundated by the commercial aspects that I just want to cry. My husband finally told me, "What's done is done, and that's what's supposed to be done. And we're supposed to enjoy the process, not think it's a requirement."

He's right, of course. My Christmas decorations and my holiday system is not at the caliber of a battalion commander trying to make sure all her soldiers come home safely. I want it all to be magic for my kids, but if we get stuck in the traditions without understanding why they are the way they are, the magic will magically disappear.

I resolve, in my heart and in my mind to lay off a bit, and savor the good parts of the holiday.

Holiday baking is next week, by the way. . . . Are 10 different kinds of cookies too much?

*Veterans use many strategies to numb their pain—chemicals, danger-seeking, workaholism, sexaholism. These have in common cutting emotion out. "Many men go through the motions, but emotionally speaking, they're like ice." (Shay, p. 39.)*

*In spite of a brief fling of trying to use alcohol to deaden my pain, I had managed to avoid the call of drug abuse, danger-seeking, and sexaholism. But workaholism was another matter. Workaholism was my drug of choice. I could tell, by trying to get all the details right in the frenzy of the holidays, I was almost*

*successfully deadening the emotional pain I continued to feel, not least of which was my certainty that God had abandoned me. So, why should I celebrate His birthday?*

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #46

### “Keeper of the Family Rituals”

December 16, 2005

Last week I was bemoaning the fact I wanted everything to be perfect to the point it is driving me crazy, but I now know why it's so important for me to do so.

I am the Keeper of the Family Rituals.

*According to Shay, Dr. Mary Harvey's Dimensions of Recovery include: authority over remembering; integration of memory; affect tolerance; symptoms mastery; self-esteem; self-cohesion; safe attachment; and meaning making (p. 175).*

*During this time period, I think I focused on self-cohesion and meaning-making. Being a mother, and being the Keeper of the Family Rituals, made me an important member of this family.*

This Wednesday, when my kids asked me what was for dinner, I told them popcorn and pizza in front of the television. It was one of two customary Christmas movie nights we have during the holiday season, a ritual I put into place when D'Arcy was about 2.

“I had forgotten that ritual,” D'Arcy said, and Paul said, “What's a ritual?” Either way, they were both excited about the prospect of junk food and junk – albeit questionably spiritual – holiday television for hours on end.

I ordered the pizza. We didn't know when Ken would be home, but I ordered pizza for him, too. The kids busied themselves picking out the movies from our amusingly vast collection of Christmas flicks, mostly on video, since the DVD really came into its own while I was deployed.

“We never did any of this while you were gone,” D'Arcy mused. “I don't think Dad knew we were supposed to have a movie night.”

*During the grieving process when a parent of young children has died, “the surviving parent is often so overwhelmed with emotions that he or she is doing everything possible just to get through a day.” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 160.) I am sure this was what Ken was going through, especially during Christmas. While he is still mum on the year I was gone, what little I have gotten out of him was similar to the above quote. I had noticed at one point that it seemed he never took friends up on their offers to help while I was gone. I asked him why, and he said, “Look, I was just trying to make it to the point where the kids got into bed each night. I made sure they were fed, I got them to school, I got them to do their homework. I didn't have the time to consider how someone else could help me.”*

“Dad was just trying to keep it together,” I told her. “I think he was successful at doing that.” I said this because D'Arcy and her dad are currently going through a phase where she seems to think Dad can do no right.

“Grief is also the shattering of many conscious and unconscious beliefs about what our lives are supposed to look like.” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 78.) I still deal with people who tell me I should get out of the Army because a woman is supposed to be at home with the kids. And, granted, when I go through times like this, when the kids tell me what was missing when I wasn't there, there is grief in that lack. Being the feminist I am, my comment back to them is that the father is supposed to be at home as well; that a family unit is incomplete without one or

the other, and what about all the men who are gone from our families as we speak because they are at war?

*But there is the she-bear mother part of me that down inside agrees with the assessment. A mother should be at home. I, at the very least, had not wanted to miss out on Paul's fifth year, and D'Arcy's ninth year. But I did. And I still grieve that loss.*

"We missed the rituals," D'Arcy said. As she did so, she put *Frosty The Snowman* on the growing pile of potential viewing candidates.

"What other Christmas rituals do we have?" Paul asked.

"Well, I do the Christmas letter. We've already done the tree stuff. Saturday, I'll be baking cookies with Devon and Chris. That's a ritual that goes back to before either of you were born. Speaking of which, we need to choose what cookies you want."

"Snickerdoodles!" Paul said.

"Chocolate chip cookies, cakey or chewy, I'm not picky," D'Arcy said.

"We've gotta make the ginger cookies for Dad, or it won't be Christmas," I said.

"Oh, the ginger cookies," D'Arcy said dreamily. "They're really good."

See, I felt like telling her. Her dad can't be all bad if his favorite cookie was really good. Instead, I said, "I make D'Arcy's Christmas dress, and she and Dad have a Daddy-daughter date. Paul, you and I can have a Mommy-Son date."

The more I talked about it, the more excited we all became. The wait for the pizza was short as D'Arcy discussed what she wanted for her Christmas dress.

"You guys need to pick out what Christmas presents you'll make for everyone. That's a ritual, too."

D'Arcy sat down in front of the television with her pizza, her blanket and pillow, and the remote control. "I like the rituals," she announced. "That's why we missed you so much while you were gone. You know, Santa and the Easter Bunny don't come when you're not around."

"Santa came last year," Paul said indignantly.

"Yeah," she replied, winking at me when he wasn't looking. "And the Tooth Fairy came, too. But Santa's heart wasn't in it last year. He missed Mom, too."

Her comment made me want to cry. I had left in 2003, and she'd still believed in Santa. By 2005, the jig was up for her. Paul still believed, which I decided was a good sign. I had never actually pushed the idea of Santa, because I've never believed Christmas was about him. Most of our presents were from family and friends, with the exception of the stockings and one big present that came from the big guy. I had always vowed that if the kids asked me outright about Santa, I'd level with them, but I would always explain that the real message is the Magic of what happened when Jesus came into the world. Keeping that magic alive was, for me, the most important thing.

*While in general this missive is one of my more cheerful ones, I sense an underlying tension when I reread it. I think I get this feeling because it's sort of the calm before the storm. Or the eye of the storm, more like. Shay says, "I want to focus on the poet's picture of the peaceful fjord as a death trap. Many times . . . veterans have said that as much as they long for calm, peace, and safety, these conditions arouse a feeling of unbearable threat" (p. 63).*

*I'd had 9 months of reintegration by now; 9 months of numbness followed by anger, fear, sorrow, and regret. I found soon enough that I had a few more months left before I truly began to feel whole again, though forever changed. But this night, I'd chosen to take a break from the cacophony, and bathe myself in*

*established rituals and routines. Though it still didn't feel completely safe, it did shore up my strength for future trials.*

God bless Ken for being able to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in spite of not knowing all the rituals involved.

I told them the story of us tracking Santa while we were in the desert. "We had Santa's flight number, and we knew when to expect him at the Deployment tent. He and his sleigh and reindeer were expected to swipe their Identification cards and listen to the briefings at 0330 Christmas morning. I never heard about him missing formation from the overnight soldiers, so I have to assume he arrived on schedule."

"Did you get presents?" Paul asked. "How did he know you were there?"

"Santa keeps track of these things," D'Arcy said. "Like, he knows right where to find her this year, too."

I figured he'd know I was back because this house had all its rituals intact this year.

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #47

### “What If? . . . If Only. . . .”

December 23, 2005

Although sleep has been coming easier for me these days, I still occasionally lie awake at night, replaying events from the deployment in my mind.

What if I'd been able to convince the people at the pre-command course that personnel units would be mostly idle on the battlefield? What if we'd never deployed? If only we'd stayed with the 13th COSCOM as our chain of command, what would have happened then? What if someone else had gotten the battalion command instead of me? Even COL Mulcahy had said more than once, “There but for the grace of God would go I.”

It sounds kind of silly now, but I'm not in the church choir because I tried to make a bargain with God before I left in December 2003. God, if you let this cup pass from me, if you let me not deploy, I'll join the church choir. Let's just say, I kept my end of that if-then statement.

*Bargaining is a phase in the grieving process, but “Guilt is bargaining's companion.” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 17.) Again, I was suffering from anticipatory grief about losing my way of life; in fact, at this point, I was grieving over the possibility of losing my life entirely. There was no way I could guarantee to my family or friends or my soldiers or even myself that we would have a deployment safe from harm. The opposite was more likely. I didn't want to leave my life as I knew it. But with that admission comes the guilt attached. This guilt cuts both ways. First, I feel guilty that a part of me wanted to get out of my deployment. Good soldiers are not supposed to feel this way. Good leaders are not supposed to feel this way. But I also feel 20-20 hindsight guilt. Did God want me to join the choir, regardless of it being a bargain or not?*

*If so, I'm afraid I still disappoint Him.*

When I was about 11 or 12, I became the only alto in the 8th Street Episcopal Church choir in Fort Meade, Maryland. I had remained in a church choir until I married, but after I moved to Michigan, for some reason that responsibility dropped off my plate. St. Clare's Episcopal had a huge choir, they didn't need lowly me. And I didn't feel quite right doing choir if my husband weren't also involved.

Then the kids came along, and life got busier, but there was a little part of me that thought, God gave me 10 talents. Am I using all of them to my fullest ability?

The bargain, as I saw it, would reinstate one of those talents. But, God didn't buy it. I deployed, and the rest is history. Now that I'm back, when I sing the advent carols and I know every alto part, occasionally someone next to me will ask, “Why aren't you in the choir?”

I shrug, and a little voice inside me says, “Because God didn't want me there enough. . . .”

It strikes me now that I never really felt good about my deployment. But, what if I had? What if I went into my time in Kuwait with the expectation that it would be a good deployment, and that we would have a good reason to be there?

Would it have been any different?

*Probably not. Shay says that just doing “the mobilization of the mind and the body for danger, the vigilant sharpening of the senses . . . is also an obvious survival adaptation to combat . . . may embark on*

*a frenzied search for calm" (p. 39). In other words, just preparing for mobilization will create the need to spend time deliberately reintegrating the past to the present in an effort to stabilize.*

I've kept in occasional contact with the woman who replaced me. She deployed while she was in the midst of the distance education version of the U.S. Army War College, and I did not envy her trying to perform the job I had while also trying to keep up with all that work. But she came into the job with the belief she was there for a reason.

If only I had done the same.

I got some interesting news from her recently, though. She wrote to tell me that Doha was now closed, and they were consolidating the personnel units, so that one battalion, rather than three, would cover all of Kuwait. Postal operations would no longer have its own battalion; and personnel services and airport deployment/ redeployment operations would all go under one umbrella.

It was my plan; the plan I had developed with another colonel and the S1 of the Area Support Group for Kuwait, the one I had briefed to my commander and she had said it wasn't her vision of the personnel battlefield. This was the plan that had nearly ruined my career because I had even suggested it, and now it would be how they ran things in Kuwait.

Was I proud that my plan would go into effect finally, albeit more than 18 months after I'd first suggested it? Well, yes, a little bit. But I found myself thinking, if only it had been accepted the first time I suggested it, then I would have saved two personnel services battalions and four personnel services detachments from deploying, a total of about 250 personnel.

*"The absolute truth about the Trojan War that the Sirens sang was utterly detached from any community that remembers or retells it. Instead of nourishing and sustaining, it killed . . . by starvation."(Shay, p. 91.)*

But who am I kidding? I called it OIF "Until Further Notice" (UFN) when I was deployed, and the phrase is even more apropos now. Maybe I would have saved those units from going in OIF III, but they would just have been lined up for OIF IV, V, or VI. They aren't even calling it that anymore. It's OIF 05-07, OIF 06-08 now. Boy, is that a mouthful.

It's never been a question of if you deploy, it's a matter of when. And now, it's a matter of how often. Will it be every 5 or 6 years? Or every 2 or 3?

If only this war had never begun. If only the World Trade Centers had never come down. What if we could just rewind history . . . but then, where would we rewind to? Back to a time before the Middle East didn't hate us? When would that be?

*Living in the land of regret, I think. According to Shay, "Both hyperarousal and numbing may persist into civilian life, paradoxically existing as constantly inflamed anger, but numbing of everything else. Or they may alternate with one another, giving the veteran a history of 'cycling' between over-excitement and numb withdrawal" (p. 40).*

*By this time, I wouldn't have described myself as being either angry or numb, but I did feel like I was cycling between emotions. I had good days and bad days, but I think I was mostly cycling between thinking I was better than most officers and times when I thought myself worthless. I think Shay would agree that I might have been suffering from degraded thumos, my great fighting spirit.*

I could play this What If-If Only game all night, and into the next day, and it still isn't any more effective than bargaining with God. I read once that you should never ask for a sign from

God, because you are sure to be disappointed. Either you will not get the sign, or the sign won't be the one you expected, or you won't like the sign when you finally see it. Don't ask for God's will to be done and then try to say, Oh, I didn't expect *that* to be God's plan.

*According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler, "We become lost in a maze of 'if only' . . . or 'what if' . . . statements" (p. 17). I was lost, all right.*

Nothing happens unless it's meant to be. If it happens, it was God's will. It's easier to believe that. God knows what you can bear, and he won't go past that limit.

I'm not sure I believe that last one, but I do believe what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. . . .

Sleep would make me stronger, too.

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #48

### “Not What I was Hoping For”

December 30, 2005

For Christmas this year, on Christmas Eve, I received . . . good news and bad news. The good news: I have been accepted into the US Army War College. The bad news: instead of getting the resident class, I have been selected to attend the distance education version.

This was not what I was hoping for.

Over the past few months, I have had my heart set on going to the resident version of the War College. Who am I kidding? For the last 17 or so years, I have hoped to go to the resident War College. I was supremely happy when I was actually nominated for the possibility. I have spent the last couple of months figuring out how to handle it from the family perspective.

Ken was beginning to figure out what we would do. Sure, it meant another year away from each other, but this time I would be in the United States, a moderate car ride or a short plane trip away from each other. We could meet on weekends. It would be like the old times, when I went to Fort Benjamin Harrison for my advanced officers' course, and he came down one weekend, I'd come home the next.

The kids were a little bit of a wrench, but I was sure we could work it out. Maybe the kids could come out with me, and spend the year in the Carlisle schools, where my stepfather is on the school board. Or, they'd stay home with Ken, and I could see them on the weekends as well. Mom lives in town where the War College is, and I looked forward to spending a year close by her, and close to my brother as well. Granted, I would probably have to rent a place, rather than living with either of them, but it seemed like a great plan.

I had some more selfish reasons for wanting the resident school, too. First of all, Michigan has been known for giving colonel rank to resident war college students before they attend. I have just reached time in grade this month for consideration for colonel, and frankly, not having to undergo the DA selection process would be nice. Going to war college stipulates that a graduate must remain in the service for 2 years, and so I would basically go to war college, finish out the last 2 years, and be able to retire.

Retirement is looking better and better to me.

But, with this objective announcement that I was selected for the distance version, my dreams for the next 3 years have been dashed pretty quickly and succinctly. With the distance version, it means I won't get colonel till after being selected by the DA board, which means it's at least another year. The distance version of the course takes 2 years, and from what I've heard it's a hard and arduous 2 years, and I get exhausted just thinking of it. Then, I still have to give another 2 years to the army cause. . . .

I've been getting the feeling recently the Michigan National Guard senior leadership may be getting just a little tired of me. I am the squeaky wheel. I find myself being more blunt now that I've redeployed, like I don't have time for stupidity, and so I tell people when I think a plan is, well, stupid.

*Shay says returning veterans will often cut their noses off to spite their proverbial faces. "They have screwed up the golden opportunity that their service has earned them and they go back, humble supplicants, to the bit man" (p. 55). Had my brutal honesty cost me my resident War College seat?*

This plan they've come up with recently for a forward operating base is a classic example. It's going to take millions of dollars to build this place out in the middle of Grayling base, and no permanent facilities will go in there, so we'll have to keep rebuilding it. It will have no ability for communication, no computers, and we'll have to erect all these tents somehow.

And all I can think about is that Camp Grayling itself, with its barracks and its infrastructure, is more like Iraq and Afghanistan than this hole on the map will be. Instead of spending all this training time trying to build this waste of training space, we could just use what we have, use less taxpayers' money, and save the training time for, um, how about our actual mission training? Or warrior task skills? Or a host of other possibilities.

And here's the clincher. Why do they feel they have to have a separate forward operating base, away from the actual camp? It has nothing to do with training. It has everything to do with what looks very much like senior leadership not wanting to wear their battle rattle, and they feel they need to if other soldiers are around.

*Battle rattle: helmet, interactive body armor (IBV), weapon, with gas mask at the ready. What I'm saying here is that the senior leadership of my state didn't want to be part of the game, but they felt no qualms about forcing that game onto others.*

There, I said it.

What kills me is, in Iraq, in Kuwait, possibly even in Afghanistan, no one wears the battle rattle when they're in a secure FOB, anyway. And what really gets me is, when they see my reaction to this plan, and my disbelief that they would consider such a waste of money, they feign shock. But this is your plan, they seem to be saying.

No. I agree that I have been stressing the need for training realism. I agree that we need to act like we're living on a FOB. But whenever I try to explain that living on a FOB is more like living on Camp Grayling, and we have the training site already available, it's like they wave their hands around their ears and chant "la la la. . ." They don't hear me at all.

*Not using a veteran's advice happened in The Iliad as well. During an exceedingly dangerous mission, Odysseus "discovers the Trojan order of battle . . . but his boss, Agamemnon, the 'consumer' of this intelligence, never makes any use of it . . ." (p. 231). Shay says this event was a form of betrayal to Odysseus. I kind of felt a form of betrayal by my National Guard senior leadership when my war knowledge went unheard, too.*

So, I have to wonder, what is the state's plan for LTC Cook? Why was I suddenly removed from the resident War College list? Am I going to make colonel? Am I going to have to stick around for another 4 years, in an atmosphere that seems to be getting less logical by the month? Or do I just cut my losses? I have 19 1/2 years in, 1 1/2 of those years deployed. Maybe I've given all I want to give to this military. Say no to the distance War College, and retire quietly at the end of July.

I have emailed my commander, asking for a frank discussion about my options. He said he'd be willing to talk over the phone, and/or meet with me. He also gave me the okay to go up my chain of command, and discuss my options with the state chief of staff, possibly to the assistant to the adjutant general.

So, I emailed the chief of staff today with my concerns and desire to discuss options. I await his reply.

For things to go well for a soldier, a third dimension must be added to his own army's *bie* and *metis*: trust that those who wield official power will do it in accordance with themis: 'what's right'." (Shay, p. 206.)

*In a way, I guess I hoped for an intervention by the senior leaders on my behalf. After all, they had nominated me for resident War College, and I hadn't received the seat. One telephone call from a general might have made all the difference.*

*Hope springs eternal, I guess.*

What a way to start the new year.

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #49

### “Losing Faith in the System”

January 6, 2006

Happy New Year.

It took until yesterday for me to get a response from the chief of staff. His answer didn't cheer me up any. This, sanitized, is what the email said:

LTC Chris,

. . . checked with NGB and the suggestion is for you to “decline” this year in hopes of resident next time. It does not count against Michigan numbers . . . in fact we can ask to allocate the DL nomination to someone else in MI who was not sent forward due to allocations of 3. . . . Next year we put your packet in for resident again . . . if you get it great—if not, you get DL. . . . I think it is worth the chance . . . would be more that (sic) happy to talk to you about conversation with NGB.

“As far as my crystal ball and your future . . . sorry I just don't have the ability today to predict tomorrow . . . at this pt. and time I see no reason for your future to be considered dead end. . . .

“All the rest of the stuff you have asked about is too much to type an answer to . . . please call and we can talk. . . .

CoS

The ellipses are his, and that for the most part this is a word for word rendition of the email. This answer took my breath away; it disappointed me so much.

What disappointed me so much? Well, first of all, I wasn't looking to decline so I could put my name in the hat again in a year. I figure a bird in the hand in this case is definitely better than two in a bush. I cannot be guaranteed the Distance version OR the resident college if I were to decline for the year.

Besides, that would mean, regardless, the same amount of time will have passed. It's still 3 to 4 years before I can retire.

But I think what really upset me was that second paragraph, the one with the crystal ball comment. First of all, it probably needs a little explanation. I had asked, in my email to him, if they knew what the plan for LTC Cook was. This was not a disingenuous question on my part. I know full well that in the Michigan Army National Guard, I live in an “Old Boys' Network,” quite frankly with emphasis on the “Boy.” In the past, the future of our officer force was known well in advance.

In the same way that COL Mulcahy's move to the MP Command was not a surprise because everyone knew she was pegged to be the first female general in the state, we used to know exactly who was being groomed for certain positions. I had had a sinking feeling when I came back from deployment that the system had broken down. This comment made me sure of it.

On a quarterly, or as needed, basis, the full colonels in brigade command, the JFHQ directorate staff, the Chief of Staff, and all the generals, get together and discuss career moves for majors and above within the state. It used to be that it seemed we all knew what we'd get with a rough time-line of when we'd get it, based on our experience, our interests, and our projected career path.

I had distinctly felt the pull of that career path through lieutenant colonel, or at the very least until I became the battalion commander of the Personnel Services Battalion. COL, then CPT, Mulcahy had said as much the minute she first met me, my first weekend as a first lieutenant in the state. "If you prove yourself, Chris," she said, "You'll move from this position to an S1 at battalion level, then the XO of the company, and eventually the commander of the company itself." This comment was before it became a battalion, but the point was still there. That change in unit structure had just made my path clearer, and extended the line from major to LTC.

Once I did that command, though, the path was not so clear. The position I was groomed for, that of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel for the state, was closed off to me, because I was a part-timer. I will not get into the political issues around the fact that our state did not allow temporary AGR slots for full-time positions because that would extend this missive way beyond comfortable reading length and probably bore everyone, also.

So, where was I going to go from here?

Add to the fact that it was hard for me to figure out what they wanted to do with LTC Cook the fact that the career board had been dealing with so many manpower changes in the recent past that it seemed they'd gotten to the point where they put all the names in contention onto a bulletin board, then threw darts to determine who would move where next.

The chief of staff in this system telling me he had no crystal ball and couldn't predict what was in my future made it clear that my image of the bulletin board and darts wasn't too far from the truth. The fact that he referred to me as LTC Chris and signed the note CofS just adds fuel to my indignant little fire here.

*"When I speak of prevention of moral injury in military service, this Homeric episode is an example of what I want to prevent: betrayal of what's right in a high-stakes situation by someone who holds power. The consequences . . . range from loss of motivation and enjoyment, resulting in attrition from the service at the next available moment, to passive obstructionism . . . to outright deception, sabotage, fragging, or treason." (Shay, p. 240.) What Shay describes is the extreme, and while I'm not willing to state this was a high-stakes situation, it was important to me, and I can point to this letter as a time when I reached a turning point. I just didn't want to play the game anymore.*

Maybe I'm an idealist. I believe that if the Army is going to fund the War College, whether in distance or in resident version, they save this schooling for the people who they think will really be the movers and shakers of the force. I suppose it's just too much to ask that, if I were the nomination for resident, they might have thought I was destined for possible general. But how could they do that when they didn't even seem to have any clearer a picture of where I was going if and when I hit colonel than I did?

I'll be at the Joint Force Headquarters this weekend for drill, so I can see this man face to face, and if I thought it would help, I'd talk to him about my quandary. But, as I just inferred, I don't think it will help. After all, he doesn't have a crystal ball.

*"The soldier's confidence in the commander is also critical to protecting him from overwhelming battle stress. . . ." (Reuvenal, as quoted by Shay, p. 225.) This cop-out of saying he had no crystal ball felt like yet another betrayal to me. Looking back, it may have been that I suffered more PTSD-related events post-deployment than during. Or maybe they ran neck and neck. Would I have considered this a betrayal if I hadn't been deployed the year before?*

I hate to say it, but I think there is a direct correlation between my disappointment over what happened while I was on deployment and my disappointment over the state's apparent inability and/or unwillingness to do anything more than suggest I decline this year in hopes of getting resident next year. Obviously, no one is willing to get out on a limb and ask why I was moved from resident to distance, nor is anyone willing to try to insist.

Why would they? If I were sitting in the chief of staff's slot, would I stick my neck out for a lieutenant colonel who just redeployed?

Well, yeah, I guess I would. But I guess that's beside the point.

Till next time —

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #50

### “Leap and the Net Will Appear”

January 12, 2006

A year ago this week, I gave my mission in the desert to another woman, then got the sickest I had been since I got there. Funny how you remember this kind of thing a year later.

I sent an email today to the Chief of Staff, accepting the distance version of the War College. This was after a week of soul-searching, talking to a variety of people, and going through a military decisionmaking process of sorts.

One colonel, a close personal friend who was with me in the desert, told me point-blank that I should take this opportunity without looking back, because it is without doubt the absolute best training program available in the military; he thinks it's even better than the resident War College.

The chief of staff let me know that the real problem, in his mind, is that each state National Guard has a quota system for how many soldiers are allowed to attend resident War College. Michigan seems to have a one every other year quota, and since there's a colonel in the Class of 2006, they can't have one in the Class of 2007. He also said that since Iowa seems to have three or four going per year, maybe someone could shake the tree, and get me a residence phase off the waiting list.

COL Fratelli, my brigade commander, seemed keen to help me with the whole problem I was having last week, of not being on Michigan's RADAR for where to put me next. He gave me the manning roster for the whole state's colonels and lieutenant colonels, and asked me to go through it to determine what positions I'd most like to fill.

I told him one position for which I'd be perfect would be the Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel (DCSPER), but it was an AGR position. His comment was that not all directorships needed to be AGR slots, and that if I were interested in that slot, I should say so.

So I did.

In fact, I'm thinking of leaping to see if a net will appear. If I don't get the DCSPER slot, or the Human Resources Officer slot, which would be another good fit, then I'm still considering retirement in July.

*I was feeling a bit hopeless in my quest. No one was willing to help me get the resident course, and in my heart I knew they'd never give me the Directory of Personnel job, either. In a way, I thought they wouldn't want me in that slot because the Director of Personnel in some ways becomes the keeper of the family secrets. I am the kind of person who tends to bring closet skeletons into the open air.*

*It was me against the political system of the National Guard. As Shay says, Odysseus knew he had "no hope against the Cyclops in a force-on-force match up. This is the way some veterans I work with feel when they face the government" (p. 47).*

*Sadly, I realized only later that this officer wasn't someone I could feel I could trust, either. As he set his sights on trying to get the Assistant to the Adjutant General position, he became less likely to help anyone who could not in some way influence this decision. It was at this point I began to lose hope in senior leadership in general. Shay quotes a comic strip, which showed a major having brain removal upon promotion, a lieutenant colonel receiving backbone removal, and a colonel having heart removal. (Ibid., p. 229.) I can only wonder: to become general did I have to lose my soul?*

Meanwhile, I seem to be going day by day. I feel a little listless. Here it is, I'm almost a year back from deployment. I have a new book to show for it, *LIVING ON TATTOOINE (A.k.a. KUWAIT)*, which came out a month ago, and sales of it have been satisfactory. I have written the first draft of a monster of a book, the fictionalized version of my experiences in Kuwait, which needs my attention.

So, why do I feel like I can't get anything done?

I think I might be suffering from depression.

*"After bargaining, our attention moves squarely into the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined." (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 20.) Depression, in the grieving process, is not mental illness; it is an appropriate response to loss. But I was not raised to see it that way.*

*Depression terrified me when I was a kid. My mother, wonderful person that she is . . . I think she has a knee-jerk reaction against depression. She suffered bouts with it when she was a teenager that her doctors later blamed her bleeding ulcers on. My brother and I, as teenagers, were prone to what she called "blue funks," and whenever she started to see us wallow in them, she would tell us to snap out of it.*

*There would be no mental illness in our family, thank you.*

*So now, if I ever feel blue, I don't feel as though it is ever appropriate. I didn't feel as though it were appropriate at this juncture, either. I could feel myself suppressing it, in spite of the damage I knew suppression had already done to me.*

The email letter I got recently from a soldier who was under my command while I was deployed didn't help matters.

About a year ago, I was in the throes of a chaotic personnel situation that I did not talk about at the time. Maybe I was ashamed that such a thing could have happened in my command, although I still look back and think it was not my fault. I'll discuss it here, but names and units will not be mentioned, or if they are, they'll be changed to protect the innocent as well as the guilty.

The situation had brewed almost the full year. I had a captain who was sure his master sergeant was having an affair, or at any rate, inappropriate conduct with a staff sergeant in his command. The captain, who was the commander of the unit, was a staunch Christian evangelist. The master sergeant scoffed at the captain's behavior because he said the guy didn't understand the difference between sex and friendship. My executive officer had at first resisted doing anything, but it eventually came to me, and I said a counseling statement from the commander to both parties was in order. They needed to stop going off alone anywhere, and were not to do anything that might jeopardize the appearance of anything other than appropriate conduct.

The problem was, they didn't cease or desist. By October, it had gotten ugly, and I received 27 sworn statements from various unit members, all having some sort of proof that they believed it was not an appropriate relationship. Despite protestations of innocence from both the master sergeant and the staff sergeant, I separated them. I pulled the master sergeant to another camp, and told them they were not allowed to communicate.

Of course, this separation wasn't really successful, what with the modern joys of cell phones and computers and instant messages. But at least now they weren't in physical proximity.

This master sergeant was keeping book. He had four staff sergeants he would be the senior rater for, including the woman he was having this relationship with. One soldier was on weight control, and so should have at the very least gotten a "Needs Improvement" in the Physical

Fitness category of his NCOER. To cut a long story short, when the NCOERs appeared on the commander's desk, all four of the soldiers walked on water, including the soldier on weight control. The commander suspected something wasn't right, but the rater refused to get involved; he said he just wanted to get through the deployment.

Then, the rater of all four of these NCOERs got skewered on his own NCOER, by the same master sergeant who senior rated the others. That was when I yelled foul. I had a conversation with the rater, and though I could not get him to admit the four NCOERs for the staff sergeants were illegitimate, when I asked him if the signatures for the rater were really his, he refused to look at me.

Meanwhile, I had turned the whole case over to the Inspector General at the division level, and the master sergeant and female staff sergeant had to stay in country after we all left, to be tried in a general level courts martial. I was told they received a General Order Memorandum of Reprimand, which would go into their permanent files, and that would be the end of their respective careers.

Last week, I received an email from the rater, who was now requesting that I write a memorandum stating the circumstances surrounding his last NCOER were suspicious, and the comments should be taken with a grain of salt. I did so, under the stipulation that I write that all five of the NCOERs were suspect, and that each of the soldiers add a copy of the memorandum to their file. He said he was in a position to ensure that would happen.

Speaking of which, I asked him if the Memoranda of Reprimand were in the files of the soldiers in question. He reported, no, there was no sign of any such letters.

You gotta love being in personnel. If you have access to everyone's records, you can know what to leave in and what to make sure disappears. But, I've gotta say, the whole exchange brought up unpleasant memories. The fact that the master sergeant and the staff sergeant who were having the "affair" or whatever you want to call it were still in the system adds fuel to my belief that the senior leaders in Kuwait were not interested in following through on doing the right thing. Nor were the senior leaders in the units these soldiers were returning to. I didn't know which fact I felt worse about.

*Here was an example, in my mind, of everything I thought was bad about the National Guard. The powers that be were willing to overlook General Officer Memoranda of Reprimand and never get them into the permanent files, but no one was willing to try to put in a good word for me, a soldier who had spent nearly 20 years trying to do the right thing.*

*It added more insult to me to think of the reason why the two people who could have spoken on my behalf weren't going to do so: they were both going before the Generals' Board – one for his first star, one for his second – and they awaited waivers for a validated Inspector General complaint. They didn't speak on my behalf because they didn't want to rock the boat during what was, for them, a critical time.*

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #51

### “A Word or Two on Finances”

January 19, 2006

I find myself, as I come quickly toward the end of my first year redeployment, reviewing the year, and attending to any unfinished business.

I heard from Captain Kirk recently. He called out of the blue, to tell me that while the divorce paperwork was still going forward, he and his wife were going to counseling. I told him I thought that was a good thing. I reminded him it had taken me months to feel almost normal again, and that he would probably go through the same evolutionary process. He was silent for a moment, then said, “I forgot, you’re still relatively new being back in society, too. It hasn’t even been a year for you, either.”

*An update here: about 2 weeks after the end of these missives, I was told he and his wife had gotten back together. I was very happy to hear this.*

*Sadly, however, this improvement in their relationship came at the expense of our mentoring relationship. As Kirk had mentioned before, his wife was insanely jealous of me. When she moved back in, our communication pretty much stopped.*

*The good news is, as of 7 months before this writing, they were still together, which makes them one of the rare post-deployment success stories.*

Meanwhile, I keep contemplating what I said to him, trying to determine if I was right in my prediction. Here I am, just weeks away from my first anniversary of coming home. Am I back to my normal self yet?

That’s when finances enter the picture. When it comes to family finances, my husband and I have had a kaleidoscopic evolution over the past 16 years. How we’ve handled money has changed depending on the season and which of us feels strongest about it at the time.

When we entered the marriage, Ken liked to spend money on quality purchases, and I suffered from Scottish blood.

*Meaning, don’t buy anything unless it’s dirt cheap.*

He always handled the bills, and I was mostly okay with that. Around the 10-year point, when money was tight and we wanted to control things better, I began an organizing campaign. I filed the bills by date when they came in, we had payment plans, and I tried to ensure we didn’t have late payments. Because I was the keeper of the organizing plan, I ended up being the keeper of the checkbook, too.

That, by necessity, changed when I deployed. Actually, just about everything about money changed when I deployed. Ken had the checkbook (except for one pad that I carried in my possession, of which I reported to him every time I used it. Twice, to be exact). Because of my Scottish tendencies and the fact that I was in a combat zone and because I really couldn’t think of much I needed to buy, my spending was nearly non-existent. I could go weeks, sometimes months, without getting money out from the finance center right next door to my tent.

Suddenly it was like there was only one spender of the family income. But the family income suddenly doubled. I won’t say I made no money before I deployed, but as a part-time

soldier with a writing career that I did more for love than for money, and otherwise I was a stay-at-home parent, the pay increase was dramatic.

I think Ken reveled in the money he could suddenly spend. He took care of the extra childcare expenses, paid down the credit cards to zero, then began to double-pay the mortgage. By the time I redeployed, we were sitting pretty fat and happy. We paid cash for the trip to Colorado.

Since Ken had the finances well in hand when I came back, I just never took back the reins. Granted, with my paycheck dwindling back down to nearly nothing, our spend-ing habits needed to change yet again. And since I now had the kids again, and access to actual shopping again, no longer in the combat zone, our little nest egg started diminishing as well.

We face another trip to Colorado next month. Ken's sister, who lives out there, has had a baby, and of course we want to see her. But money is a bit tighter this year than last year. It won't be quite the same.

*The other reason finances were raising an ugly head was because I'd despaired of getting the job I wanted in the National Guard, and now it was time to seriously consider retirement. Since the Army was my largest single resource provider, this decision could have had a serious impact on my family's bottom line.*

*Not that my children gave a damn. When I confided my quandary to D'Arcy, she was completely unsupportive of the military. "Why don't you just quit, Mom?"*

*Why, indeed?*

Regardless, though, Ken still has control of the finances. I find myself doing the ostrich thing. If I give it some benign neglect, all will be well. Or something like that.

*I think I'm getting sand up my nose. . . .*

*According to Shay, I'm not the only returning veteran with a complete disinterest in my finances. "I have never known a group of people so little interested in money as the combat veterans I have worked with" (p. 57).*

So, have I regained my former life? In some ways yes, in some ways no. Obviously, I've given up my part in the money situation, at least right now, until I have the strength to want to take it on again. I have gotten past the numbness, I'm mostly past the anger, though I still have my moments. I still live with my regrets and my might-have-beens. And my lack of trust in others seems to grow stronger with time, rather than weaker.

Maybe I'll never go back to the way things were. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? Which assumes what doesn't kill you will still change you forever. I can laugh again, I can cry again, I can love again, I can grieve again. I am living again. I still have a husband, my family is intact, we can continue to grow together again. And that is enough for right now.

Till next time—

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #52

### “Kids Will Be Kids”

January 26, 2006

My kids have really grown in the last year. It's easier to see the changes if you've been away for awhile, I think. When I came back, almost a year ago, D'Arcy had gone from being below my chin in height to reaching my nose. The difference was easily between five and eight inches. Paul had also grown significantly taller. He had gone from being at my belly button to almost reaching my chest.

They had gone from being a fourth grader and a kindergartner to being a fifth grader and a first grader, and the intellectual significance of such growth cannot be underestimated. They had also grown more independent of me because they had to be. Their musical abilities had developed. They were more emotionally adept and secure.

Now that I've been with them for the last year, they have developed even more, but I kind of didn't notice it as much because I had been right there as it occurred. Both of them have grown about three inches each, so the difference between them is still proportional. D'Arcy is just about 5'4", and I think she's slowed down somewhat since she started menstruation this past summer. She still has mood swings, but at least now we can pin the blame on the hormone cycles.

*She had also begun her teaching of me. The comment she made last missive, about "Why don't you just quit?" had struck a chord. Maybe she was right, I thought. The deployment had been more than a little hard on my family. It had been hard on me. Why not just quit after 20 years? So I settled into that thought, and I nearly wrote an email to COL Mulcahy telling her I would do just that, but as I wrote the email, I dissolved into tears.*

*Why not just quit? Because I'm not a quitter. Why not just quit? Because while I love Ken and my kids, they're not my only family. Why not just quit? I'd be divorcing the Army. Why not just quit? Because I really didn't think my job here was done. Why not just quit? Because the military has made me who I am. While my family might be able to point to my negative traits and blame them on my military career, they would also have to point to almost every positive trait I have and say, the Army molded and shaped her to be that way.*

*And I'd always wanted to attend the War College. As I'd discovered about the color red, the universal consciousness only gives you what you've specifically asked for. I'd never stipulated that I wouldn't accept the distance version.*

*One simple comment from D'Arcy made me realize retirement wasn't really an option.*

She is now in middle school, and while she sometimes has difficulties with her teachers, and complains about everything being "unfair," for the most part, she has settled into this new phase in life pretty well. She treats me as her biggest confidante, and I am honored to be so. It helps that I can harken back to my own time in middle school, and commiserate about bullies and difficult subjects and how weird the boys are acting.

Paul, for his part, still cuddles in the chair with me every night as we read together. I think he missed his mom last year more than he will ever let on, but the effects show in his difficulties in school. The teachers seem to like him, and say that he is a nice boy who is very kind to others, and never tries to make trouble. But then, from the other side of their mouths, they say he

doesn't always finish his math assignments, has trouble with reading fluency, and though he says he loves to write, it's hard for them to get him to finish a sentence. They say he lacks focus and is painfully shy.

I can't help but feel guilty about this development. If I hadn't gone to war, maybe my son would do better in school. Maybe he wouldn't lack so much focus. Maybe he'd have more confidence.

I realize, logically, that boys learn differently from girls. I do not expect him to learn in the same way that D'Arcy did. They have always had different learning styles. D'Arcy is a leaper. For months it might seem that she is learning nothing, and then suddenly everything comes together for her. She refused to read at all in kindergarten, for example, but was reading at fourth grade level by the end of first grade.

Paul, on the other hand, has always been the observer. He wants to watch everyone else do things, then finally, when he believes he can show mastery, he will try it himself. He gets easily frustrated with things like reading and writing, where you cannot show mastery until you have consistently practiced the skill.

And so, logically, maybe his learning challenges have nothing to do with my going away. But my emotions surrounding the issue are not quite so logical.

I think back to my father. His tour to Vietnam happened to coincide with my brother being diagnosed with Dyslexia. Dyslexia, in his case, was a physical problem, manifested because my brother had grown so fast that the lenses in his eyes had not kept up, and his brain could not get a consistent read on whether the letters were right side up or upside down; left to right or mirror-imaged. 1969 was a tough year for my mom, while she tried to communicate with a child on the brink of puberty, dealing with learning problems and bullying.

It wasn't logical for my Dad to correlate this problem with his going away. But looking back, I'm almost sure that he did, and that he carried a tremendous amount of guilt about it with him.

My brother's story had a happy ending, and I look at Paul, and his kindness and his enthusiasm, and I expect his story to be happy as well. I have more patience listening to his halting reading practice than my husband can muster, and so Ken leaves the room, and Paul and I cuddle up and read together. As long as he passes second grade, I think, everything will be okay.

Till next time—

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## MISSIVE #53

### “It Never Really Ends”

February 2, 2006

I sent emails today to MAJ Tim Starr, my Operations Officer while out in the desert, and CPT Kirk, my former Personnel Services Detachment commander, to wish them both happy birthday.

They found out my first year with them, when they were both sister detachment commanders, that they were born a year apart to the day, in the same hospital. There are other eerie similarities between these two men that I won't go into here, but suffice it to say they formed a bond that is hard to break, then took me along for the ride.

I told Tim Starr in my email to him that I will probably always remember his birthday because it now has the added coincidence that he and I celebrated it on the plane back from Kuwait last year.

So today is 1 year to the day that we touched back down in Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. A lot of water has gone under the bridge, a lot of healing and reintegration has been done. But I think the healing may never be complete.

*“Both the original traumas of war and the wreckage caused by their psychological injuries have caused irretrievable losses of this magnitude.” (Shay, p. 84.)*

Deployment changed me. It may have made me “more so,” in that the positive aspects of the change were probably always latent in my personality. The negative aspects were probably already there, as well.

As I said a few weeks ago, my numbness is gone. Before I left, I used to cry at AT&T commercials. When I first came back, I could watch the worst things in the world, and I would remain unaffected. AT&T commercials no longer affected me. I was like a stone. Now, however, I'm back to my old self, only more so. I cry so often my kids laugh at me. I think I'm making up for the lost year of tears.

I still have my angry moments. As I wrote to CPT Kirk last week, I am angry least often with my own kids, most often at the army and its system. Can I blame this on my deployment? Maybe not. After all, part of my difficulties in getting along with my dad when I was growing up was that we were too much alike, quick to anger when something violated our integrity. But then, he was also a redeployed soldier.

The cyclic nature of that last comment may be something I don't wish to contemplate right now.

*Kubler-Ross and Kessler calls this a form of healing. “Healing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing” (p. 25). During the year post-deployment, those three R's were exactly what I did.*

I still have regrets. I realized the other day that I literally could not remember the names of anyone in my chain of command from when I deployed. Absolutely every last name was gone. I found myself fighting between two sides—the part of me that didn't want to remember them and the part that thought I was dishonoring my memory by not being able to remember them. I finally let it go, saying I'd remember them when the time was right.

I find myself feeling alone a lot. I am told this is a feeling of isolation, and that it is common to redeploying soldiers, and can be helped by getting together with people who were in the unit you deployed with. Perhaps. But, again, I had bouts of feeling isolated before. Maybe this tendency has become more pronounced since I came home. At least, I notice it more.

I think the biggest difference is in my level of trust. I used to trust much more than I do now. This is the one thing I cannot point to from before and say it's just more so. I really did trust people a little over a year and a half ago more than I do now.

*Further analysis has led me to believe my lack of trust really was a situation where I had become more so, but I didn't recognize it at the time I was writing this missive. I did trust people around me more before I deployed. The person I didn't trust was myself. During the deployment, my lack of self-trust and lack of self-esteem manifested outward, so I saw it reflected back at me through other people.*

*Will others who have a lack of self-esteem please raise their hands? It is hard for military officers to admit this failing, because we feel we have to show self-confidence in the extreme, or face the consequence that our subordinates will trust neither our decisionmaking nor will they willingly carry out our orders. But if an officer gets himself into the same vicious cycle I did, where lack of trust in oneself manifests itself as a lack of trust in everyone else, it can lead to a spiral downward.*

*Recognizing the lack of trust for what it is can be the first step to healing. I have found if I accept myself and my own decision making, and recognize that, in fact, I've been a pretty good officer for twenty plus years, I can open my heart to trusting others. Again, though, this might well be a lifelong healing process.*

I really thought people in positions of authority had gotten there on their merits, and while I did see issues where people had gotten to where they were under questionable circumstances, they usually got taken down to size on a regular basis.

Dare I say it, I think I am an idealist at heart. But I lost those ideals when I deployed. I saw a lot of people who had made it to darn near the top of the heap, and they weren't the best officers I'd seen. They were in positions of power, but instead of using that power wisely, they were using it to make sure they got to the next rung on the ladder, and the people below them be damned.

It was disheartening, it was a betrayal, but I told myself it will be different once I'm back in the states. War does bad things to people, makes them do things for Machiavellian purposes.

*"War itself does this. War itself creates situations that can wreck the mind." (Ibid., p. 31.)*

Sadly, I was wrong. Now that I'm back, I feel as though a veil was pulled away from my eyes. I see now what I didn't see before, and it's hard to get my idealism back. Thank God I still trust my husband and my kids and the rest of my family. But then, they seem to work to prove their trustworthiness every day. And it's only as good as the trust you built with me yesterday.

Do I think it would be any different in the outside world? Is this only a military development? No, it's not. After all, I've lost trust in my church and religious life. I can see on the news situations where businesses lose my trust as well.

*Shay says veterans "risk losing their capacity to participate in the democratic process. They risk losing the sense that human virtues are still possible" (p. 33). With 20-20 hindsight and now 3 years later, I can say that my loss of trust, especially in my dealings in the military and its civilian leadership, is the one remaining vestige of my post-deployment stress. My anger, fear, regret, and sadness, in one*

*way or another, leads back to my lack of trust in the system, in the people, in the plans for the future. I don't know if my trust will ever return.*

But I also can see that this is a two-way street. I work consistently at earning people's trust, so that's not what I mean. I mean that I have to be willing to extend my trust in order to get trustworthiness in other people. So, I know logically that the world has not changed. And in order to get my trust back, I need to trust.

So, 1 year into this redeployment reintegration process, I have healed a bit, but the process has not ended. Maybe I can rebuild my trust by first trusting in this process; that eventually, with my consistent effort, I will heal, I will become stronger, I will be fully reintegrated into the U.S. Galaxy.

*After rebuilding this year immediately post-deployment, I can see that, indeed, as I had begun to suspect, I was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress. "An injury, not a disorder!" Shay insists. "As with any injury, the symptoms can range from mild to devastating, depending on the severity of the wound, the robustness of health at the time of the injury, and the conditions – especially nutrition – under which recovery occurred" (p. 149).*

*Am I likely to be one of those soldiers who will never recover? Well, yes . . . and no. In many ways, I have recovered. But in some ways, I can see myself going into a bad cycle, especially regarding trust. I find it interesting to note that I mentioned both Kirk and Starr in this missive, because they are both officers who seem to struggle still with the same destruction of trust that I do. It may be a deployed officer's fate to deal with this kind of injury on an ongoing basis. But I am not a psychologist, so I'm not qualified to make that as a general statement. Maybe it's a field of inquiry that deserves further study.*

I have signed off with "Till next time" for the last 53 missives. While I do not intend to send another one in the near term, since the title of this one is "It Never Really Ends" then I think I will use it again. You never know. So,

Till next time –

LTC Christine Cook  
63rd Brigade, Troop Command  
S-3

So do it. If you win, you win, and if you lose you win.

Raging Bull

## EPILOGUE

Just when things were beginning to settle down into their new normal, I was in for another change to routine. On March 1, 2006, on the anniversary of the date I officially got off active duty, I broke my elbow.

It may be, on the surface of it, that this event was NOT connected with my deployment. Certainly, the Veterans' Administration (VA) does not see these events as connected, and therefore would never entertain the possibility that it was a service-connected injury.

But there is something in the back of my head that says maybe, just maybe, my deployment had everything to do with breaking my elbow.

I have a great story to go with the injury. Whenever someone hears about the break, they ask me, "How'd you do it?" I can answer quite honestly, "I did it snowboarding." That reason makes people look at me and say, "Oh, ah."

The reason I connect this with my deployment was why I decided to get on a snowboard in the first place.

I am not, by nature, a person who is a rampant risk-taker. The only reason I have done snow sports in general was that my father insisted when I was a girl that I needed to learn how to ski because my whole family skied, and he wanted to do skiing vacations, and he'd be damned if he would have his 12-year-old daughter sitting in the lodge like a snow-bunny all day.

I have 30 years of skiing experience now. Skiing I can do. So on our annual trip to Colorado, it started out safely enough. Ken and I took skiing lessons on rented skis to get our snow legs back. Our kids took snowboarding lessons because it's cool, of course. It was an absolutely glorious skiing day, and I looked like a verifiable expert on the new parabolic skis.

It should have served as a warning that, on the first day, my daughter complained that she'd hurt her wrist. "Do you think it's broken?" I asked. She shook her head.

They seemed to be having fun at it, though, and I found myself thinking, I'm 41 years old, not getting any younger, if I don't learn to snowboard now, I never will. I'm a good skier, this should be a cakewalk.

The next day, we snow-shoed and cross-countried, and had a bit of a rough time of it, but somehow it cemented in me that I wanted to try snowboarding.

*Interestingly enough, while snow-shoeing, I got a phone call from the Chief of Staff. I told him I was in Colorado on vacation. He said he had an investigation he wanted me to do, but that he would talk to me after I got back. Then he said, "Be careful. Don't get hurt."*

*So much for him not having a crystal ball.*

So I convinced my husband that the next day, we should take snowboarding lessons.

I should have taken it as warning number two that Paul went kicking and screaming to his lesson. Under no circumstances did he want to snowboard again. We almost missed the sign-up for our own lessons. But I was bound and determined, and a screaming, crying child now safely ensconced in his own lesson, we went to the rental area to sign up and get our equipment.

I should have taken it as warning number 3 that I got the guy who broke his jaw while snowboarding as my equipment specialist. He couldn't decide which foot I should have first, so I was probably set up wrong to begin with.

Two hours into the lesson, feeling extremely tired, I leaned my weight wrong and went down on a straight elbow. Into a snow bank.

I replay the scene over and over in my head. It's a technicolor nightmare. I can still hear the music that was playing. I can still see the white snow bank in my goggles and my arm going into it. I can still feel the indescribably excruciating pain, I can still feel the certainty I had that it was broken, and I was a fool for taking the lesson in the first place.

But something, some outside force that had gotten into my head, had driven me to do it, and I wouldn't take no for an answer.

My husband refuses to accept the idea that I was going through the PTSD symptom of taking high risks. After all, I was in a lesson. I didn't just rent a snowboard, take myself to the top of the mountain, and throw myself down it.

True, but I do think there was a part of me that thought I had made it through a combat deployment unscathed, and therefore, I could not get hurt.

This break has led to other issues. It has changed my life as completely and effectively as the deployment did. It's almost like another reintegration process will have to take place.

The elbow break is definitely an event that caused post-traumatic stress. I don't use the word "break" lightly, either. A chunk of my bone literally broke off the end of my humerus. The effect is permanent and unfixable. To try to pin it back on would have shattered the tiny piece, thus sending shrapnel throughout my elbow, dangerously close to the nerves that control all movement and feeling in my right arm. And yes, I'm right-hand dominant.

So instead, after discussion with my doctor, we decided on the no-surgery, 100 percent physical therapy option. With any luck, after 6 months or so, my elbow would be 95 percent functional. What would I lose? Well, she told me that I would never be able to get a spin on a football throw, and that I could twist a screwdriver one way, but wouldn't have much power the other way. Why? Because the bone would create a satellite scar tissue, and would stay mostly near where it once was, but the ligaments that are attached to that small piece of bone have nothing to pull against as they work; thus no power behind those particular motions.

Louise Hay is a famous alternative medicine/spiritualist writer. If you look up elbow injuries in her book about healing your mind to heal your life, it says elbow injuries occur because of the person's resistance to change. Just be open to change, so the thoughts go, and the injury will heal itself.

There's a cruel irony in that statement.

For one thing, my life has been about nothing but change for the last couple of years. I have attempted not to resist that change, but to go with it and see where it takes me. If I have shown resistance to change, it has been because of the onslaught of changes I've been through. Too much too soon. If anything, I figure I'll accept change, but can we just slow down the pace a bit?

This elbow break has certainly forced a slowing down of change.

Meanwhile, it was in the act of reaching out for a little bit of change that I broke my elbow, thereby halting the changes completely.

Bet I'll never try snowboarding again.

This injury throws my army life into a tailspin, too. Granted, my physical therapist has done everything in his power to help me get back into pushup shape. But when I look at the list of things we need to do, I realize my days of digging a foxhole are over, as are a number of other tasks army soldiers are supposed to be able to do.

I went from having a picket fence PULHES to having a 3 in my upper body during an accident that was less than a minute long.

*My elbow break, positive or negative as it was, did one thing I am sure of. It forced me to accept my new reality. This, in itself, is usually the final stage of clinical grief. "This stage is . . . recognizing that*

*this new reality is the permanent reality. . . . In resisting this new norm, at first we may want to maintain life as it was before." (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 25.) I may have wanted to go back to life as it was before my deployment, but my elbow break was permanent, and it changed things forever. I could not, under any circumstances, maintain the life before this point.*

And so, having this accident happen at the end of my year-long reintegration process has the effect of extending my reintegration. And I wonder, if this kind of stress can occur in a relatively senior officer deployed to a location where the worst battle effects were caused by the senior leadership, just what can be happening to those soldiers on the literal battlefield?

I think deployment is especially hard on commanders, most notably at the company and battalion level. These are the commanders who face implementing the decisions made at higher levels, who also face the intense responsibility of making sure their soldiers come home. These commanders have names and faces and conversations to go along with anyone they send on a mission. It's likely, in the case of the National Guard especially, that they know the names and faces of those soldiers' family members.

For company and battalion commanders, war is personal. Poor decisions made above can hurt people unnecessarily. I spent a year trying to protect my soldiers from the bad decisions others had made, but in the process, I had to strip away a part of myself. Add the insult to the injury by realizing that some of the people who are least likely to receive emotional help afterward are the officers. There are many reasons for this fact, but I think one of the biggest is the stigma that is attached to seeking out that help. Strong commander-types shouldn't need psychiatric help, right?

For me, the process of writing has served as a processing tool to help me heal. I hope that, by writing this sequel to *Living On Tattooine (A.k.a. Kuwait)*, I can let fellow soldiers know it's normal to feel out of sorts for awhile after coming home. I want them to know it's important to honor their own tears and memories and fears and anger and isolation and numbness. All soldiers who deploy, regardless of where they end up on the battle-field, or what job they did, have been changed forever by their service. Honor the lessons you have fought hard to receive.

I now have a little piece of bone floating in my elbow, so close to a nerve that it occasionally jangles the whole arm. It serves as a reminder of the piece of myself I lost on deployment. That missing piece occasionally jangles my nerves, too.

It reminds me that I am not alone on this journey, and that the journey may never end.

## AFTERWORD

*Three and a half years post-deployment, many things are back to normal. I enrolled in and graduated from the U.S. Army War College, Distance Version, and I haven't retired yet.*

*The major change I've undergone is that I switched from the National Guard to the U.S. Army Reserve, and I personally blame the lack of trust I had built up post-deployment as the primary reason for my need to change venues.*

*I realized in Summer 2006 that I categorized my senior leaders and peers into three piles: those I could trust unequivocally; those I could not trust; and those where the jury was still out. I then watched as the first pile got ever smaller, the second one got bigger, and the third one ebbed and flowed as officers I'd originally put in pile #1 first went into the uncertain pile, then went into the "don't trust" category. When pile #1 dwindled to one person, I realized I was at culmination point. My inability to trust anyone in the National Guard might have been self-induced, but it had become toxic to me. I need to have a reset. So here I am.*

*"Odysseus concluded that no one is to be trusted, when he concluded that unless you beat them to it or get over on them first, other people only want to hurt, exploit, or humiliate you" (p. 43). The quote is ironic, however – no one in the case of the Cyclops, is actually Odysseus. In other words, No one is the only one he can trust, so he can only trust himself.*

*I still trust myself. I trust my integrity. I will continue to do what's right. And I know my job with the Army is still not complete. My family, both literal and figurative, are counting on me to give back. And so I do.*

*Anakin Skywalker was a man who lost trust in everything, including himself. He became Darth Vader, and he tried to do what was right in his own mind based on the dark world he had been driven into. Eventually, though, he fought back to reality, and in the end, he became a good man again.*

*The redeployed senior leaders face this same darkness and danger. Do senior leaders suffer from PTSD? Sure they do. The problem is, they feel they cannot share their fears and experiences with others, and so they are in danger of spiraling downward into Anakin's dark place. We owe it to them, and we owe it to ourselves, to let them process and reintegrate, without fear that showing their perceived weaknesses will ruin their careers.*

*"What is left ungrieved remains stored in our body, heart and soul. It can come out each time we experience loss anew." (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, p. 73.) This fact does not bode well for soldiers, especially senior leaders, who deploy over and over again. Recent research has concluded that up to 20 percent of returning OIF soldiers are suffering from some form of PTSD, and that the percentage goes up to about 30 percent if the soldiers deploy more than once.*

*These statistics, I think, are skewed. Only 20 percent of the soldiers have reported, or admit to, having some form of PTSD. How many have not reported their fears? How many senior leaders have admitted to it? And if they don't admit to it, then the grieving process cannot start, and the that ungrieved portion threatens to explode every time they deploy again.*

*Here's to all my redeployed brethren who struggle through as I have. I hope in some small way my missives have helped you.*

Till next time —

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However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into consideration.

Winston Churchill

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