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## FACT

## ANNALS OF WAR

## TWO SOLDIERS

by DAN BAUM

How the dead come home.

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As a unit of the élite 82nd Airborne Division, Bravo Company found itself in some of the fiercest fighting last year during the advance on Baghdad. Its hundred-and-thirty-odd paratroopers are among the Army's best-trained and best-equipped soldiers, and none died during formal hostilities. The dying came later, after President Bush declared the mission accomplished. Bravo Company was assigned to garrison a teardrop-shaped sector of southern Baghdad defined by a hairpin bend in the Tigris River. The paratroopers, having trained to fight uniformed regiments in open combat, found themselves in an amorphous grind of guard duty, police work, and civil governance. Their main task was protecting the Al Dora oil refinery, but they were also responsible for keeping peace in a large area around it. The district embraced by the river is a pleasantly verdant but particularly hostile corner of Iraq. Many top officials of the Baathist regime owned mansions in the neighborhood, and though they fled the war, their sympathizers remained, doling out hundred-dollar payments to poor date farmers willing to plant a bomb or fire a mortar at the Americans. The area is also home to several radical mosques, behind one of which the paratroopers uncovered a huge weapons cache—among the largest ever found in Iraq. Rockets fired from the brushy banks of the Tigris would drop onto the Green Zone of the Coalition Provisional Authority, and Bravo Company prowled the darkness with night-vision scopes, searching for the shooters. The postwar work was hot, nerve-racking, complicated, and dispiriting. The paratroopers spent hours trying to organize local councils, never knowing if the same people smiling at them by day were firing mortars at them by night. On June 18th of last year, a Bravo Company soldier named Michael Deuel, away from the unit on temporary assignment to battalion headquarters, was guarding a propane station when an Iraqi walked up behind him, stuck the muzzle of a gun under the lip of his Kevlar helmet, and pulled the trigger. It was Bravo Company's first death in Iraq, and though the paratroopers did not witness it firsthand, they were shaken.

An endlessly flat, treeless desert, seemingly of kitty litter, begins within half a kilometre of the Tigris, but the copious bush of the riverside and the inscrutable hostility of the locals led the men of Bravo Company to call their assigned district Mini-Vietnam. Marshes, date-palm orchards, and water-filled ditches held Bravo Company to a few roads, not much wider than their squat Humvees, which were vulnerable to attack by rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and "improvised explosive devices." The soldiers gave the roads names: Ambush Alley, R.P.G. Alley, I.E.D. Alley. One road in Bravo Company's district, though, seemed peaceful, and it was called, simply, River Road.

Though the district was treacherous, the soldiers of Bravo Company lived in the relative comfort of the Al Dora refinery offices, playing Madden N.F.L. on a PlayStation 2 in their off-hours. From M.C.I., which was setting up cell-phone service for the Coalition Provisional Authority, they cadged a cell phone with a Westchester County area code. They couldn't call out, but family and friends could call in, by dialling 914 and the number—a far cry from, say, the sporadic V-mail of the Second World War. For months, Bravo Company ate nothing but M.R.E.s, packaged rations that, though monotonous, are lean and sanitary. When the Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root showed up, in July, to open a field kitchen, the rich, fried food, perhaps in combination with new microorganisms, made everyone in the company sick for a few days.

Of the thirty-nine paratroopers who belonged to Bravo Company's 3rd Platoon, no two could have been more different than Specialist Solomon Bangayan, a Philippine citizen serving in American uniform, and Specialist Marc Seiden, a Jew from New Jersey. Bangayan was tiny and shy. He stood five feet five inches tall, and his smooth complexion and glossy black hair made him look about fifteen years old. He'd joined the Army in the spring of 2001, about eight months after arriving in the United States from the Philippines, and spoke halting, schoolbook English. For him, soldiering was a means to attain citizenship in the United States and to accrue money for an education in nursing. But he applied a grim resolve to proving his worth as a soldier. Once, searching for weapons in

an Iraqi house, he kicked an unyielding door so hard that he landed on his back. He got up and kicked it again and again until another soldier nudged him aside and blasted the lock with a riot gun. The men of Bravo Company gave him the nickname Bang and called his mangled diction Banglish. In a crowd of big, loud white guys, he gravitated to a quiet friendship with Specialist Ricardo Costas, a delicate, latte-colored Puerto Rican with enormous, long-lashed eyes whose squad leader called him Sweetness.

Seiden, tall and broad-chested, from Brigantine, New Jersey, was the company clown. His rugged face, ceaseless ribbing, and New Jersey accent reminded fellow-paratroopers of the actor Bruce Willis. Seiden never let up; in the middle of a firefight, he would turn to a comrade and ask, “Do I look fat?” Pumping out light-machine-gun rounds—with rocket-propelled grenades whizzing past—he would pause to ask, “Do you think my butt’s getting big?” At twenty-six, Seiden was older than most of his brothers-in-arms, and he thrived on the excitement and rigor of Army life. He was a post-9/11 enlistee, inspired to join, in part, by the death of a family friend in the World Trade Center attack. He planned to reenlist; last Christmas, he started filling out the forms to become a helicopter pilot.

On January 2, 2004, the 3rd Platoon roused early. It was a Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, a day when clerics in Mini-Vietnam were known to preach mischief. The 3rd Platoon was to take two Humvees and drive down River Road to patrol the Salah al-Din mosque, or Celine Dion mosque, as the soldiers called it. Farther down River Road, at the southeast corner of Bravo Company’s district, lay the Tobah mosque, which was thought to be Wahhabi-influenced and deserving of special attention. Of the company’s seven Humvees, two were “up armored”—plated heavily enough to deflect rifle fire—and the 3rd Platoon was given both for this mission. The platoon’s leader, First Lieutenant Andrew Blickhahn, a balding twenty-six-year-old two years out of West Point, took the shotgun seat of the lead Humvee, the post responsible for spotting any mines in the road. Seiden started to get in beside him, but at the last moment, for reasons nobody remembers, he switched places with Sweetness. Seiden walked back to the second Humvee and took the shotgun seat. Bang slipped into the seat behind him, in the gunner’s hatch.

The two Humvees left the refinery compound at about 11 A.M. and headed down a road lined with palms. Calls to prayer issued from mosques, and passersby glared at the soldiers. About ten kilometres down the road, Blickhahn’s lead Humvee went around an S-shaped double bend, losing sight of the Humvee behind. Sweetness, his head and torso protruding from the roof beside a huge .50-calibre machine gun, was knocked over by a tremendous blast; he thought his Humvee had been hit. Behind him, though, he could see a cloud rising fast from the date palms. Explosives alone make white smoke; this was oily black, and swirling with debris.

Blickhahn jumped out and ran back down the road. Guerrillas often follow mine blasts with small-arms fire and R.P.G.s, so he fired his rifle randomly in every direction as he ran. Blickhahn’s driver, meanwhile, jerked the Humvee through a feverish five-point turn and caught up with Blickhahn at the bend. All they found of the second, up-armored Humvee was a smoky hole in the pavement, and, lying nearby, one door, as thick and heavy as the door of an office safe. The rest of the vehicle had flown across the highway and landed in a deep ditch. The air reeked of explosives and diesel fuel. From where Blickhahn and his driver stood on the road, the thick armor of the Humvee’s passenger side looked like shredded cardboard. Blickhahn had never lost a soldier in combat, but before he even climbed down into the ditch he could see that Seiden had absorbed the bulk of the blast and was dead. The two soldiers from the driver’s side were alive but badly wounded. One of them, wounded in the throat, was gurgling, “Help me.” Bang, who had been behind Seiden, was nowhere to be seen.

Blickhahn expected to be attacked at any moment. “We were waiting for the Chinese to come over the wall” is how he remembers it. From the roof of the undamaged Humvee, Sweetness was firing the .50-calibre machine gun wildly, pouring streams of one-ounce bullets into ditches, garden walls, bushes—anywhere attackers might have been hiding. This was his third ambush; he didn’t worry about killing innocents, because he assumed that every civilian in this part of Baghdad had known about the attack ahead of time and stayed away. Blickhahn, focussed on the casualties, was so distraught that when he radioed for a medevac helicopter he couldn’t figure out which six-digit map coordinate to give. Two helicopters took off anyway and headed in his general direction. Blickhahn was eventually able to radio the helicopters the right coordinates; within ten minutes, they had landed beside the road. The company’s first sergeant, Brett Robinson, monitoring radio traffic at the refinery, heard Blickhahn’s call for medevac. He came roaring in with the 2nd Platoon and set up a perimeter to repel attacks. One of the injured soldiers was stuck under the Humvee and unconscious, and the helicopter medics, nervous about a further attack, wanted to amputate his leg to free him. Amid the roar of the helicopters, the Bravo Company soldiers ended up in a shouting match with the Air Force medics; they almost came to blows before another Humvee managed to winch the wrecked vehicle. The soldier’s leg, as it turned out, was buried in soft mud and barely hurt.

Blickhahn and another soldier found a wire in the six-foot crater left by the bomb, and followed it about a hundred

yards through the bush to a well-dug fighting position. The position, which had a good view of the road, looked to Blickhahn like the work of trained soldiers, but whoever had set off the bomb had simply touched two wire ends to a battery and fled. The expected attack never came.

Blickhahn returned to find a group of soldiers huddled over Bang. They'd found him about fifteen feet behind the wrecked Humvee; he'd been blown out the gunner's hatch and was less visibly torn up than Seiden. As the men tried to insert a tube into his airway, they realized that he was dead, too. First Sergeant Robinson covered Bang and Seiden with ponchos, helped load them onto the back deck of a Humvee, and ordered four men to climb up beside them to keep the bodies covered.

**B**ang and Seiden now entered the world of Mortuary Affairs, the Army's hidden but exquisitely reverent system for returning fallen soldiers to their families. Every job in the Army has a numerical designation—infantrymen are 11B, medics are 91W, truck drivers are 88M—and those who handle the dead go by the designation 92M, or “ninety-two mike.” Mortuary Affairs is a small specialty. The active-duty Army, of nearly half a million soldiers, has only one company of ninety-two mikes—the 54th Mortuary Affairs Company—consisting of two hundred and twenty-five men and women. (The Army is slated to create a second Mortuary Affairs company in 2006.)

Ninety-two mikes are trained in six and a half weeks at Fort Lee, Virginia, by Douglas Howard, a sixty-three-year-old civilian mortician who served as a Mortuary Affairs specialist during the Vietnam War. (The designation was then fifty-seven foxtrot.) Howard's face is deeply lined, but his hair and mustache are inky black. He chose his profession after being told, as a high-school senior, that his personality suited the business; he moves with stiff formality and speaks in soft, clipped tones. The Army has no trouble filling its ninety-two-mike slots with volunteers, Howard said. Many grow up in mortuary families. Others recognize in themselves a capacity for serenity in the face of death. They visit a morgue in nearby Richmond during their training, and Howard watches them closely; he weeds out those who blanch, freeze, or—worse—make jokes in the presence of the dead. At the vaulted warehouse where the ninety-two mikes are trained using hundred-and-seventy-five-pound mannequins, Howard introduced me to Captain Kelly Dobert, a twenty-nine-year-old West Point graduate, who in January will take command of the 54th in Iraq. Dobert is thin and pale, with blond hair and dark circles under her eyes, but she lit up in a bright smile when she shook my hand. “This is the command I requested,” she said. “It really touched my heart.” Mortuary Affairs is a lonely and subdued specialty. Other soldiers wear insignia to identify their function—crossed cannons for artillery, a screaming eagle for the 101st Airborne—but Mortuary Affairs has no unit patch of its own. Members of the company keep to themselves, in order to protect other soldiers' morale. Other units take two-fisted mottoes—“Death from Above,” “Sledgehammer,” “No Slack.” The motto of Mortuary Affairs is “Dignity, Reverence, Respect.”

When an Army division goes into combat, ninety-two mikes quietly establish collection points in discreet locations. Company commanders typically know where they are; soldiers typically don't. A collection point is nothing more than a couple of litters on sawhorses, a hand-washing station composed of a steel basin and a jerrican hung in a wooden frame, and a small desk for paperwork. Camouflage netting covers the station, and a one-square-foot sign announces its function: “Mortuary Affairs Collection Point.” A green, generator-powered refrigeration container big enough for twelve bodies stands outside. Six ninety-two mikes generally man a collection point.

Sometimes a unit that has lost soldiers in battle is in no condition to recover its dead, and the nearest ninety-two mikes venture out to gather up the fallen. Usually, though, a unit delivers its own dead to the collection point, in what is officially called a “human-remains pouch,” made of thick, rubberized canvas with a steel zipper and loop handles along the sides. Everybody but the ninety-two mikes calls these body bags. (Bravo Company covered Bang and Seiden with ponchos because the unit wasn't travelling with pouches that day.) Soldiers are often distraught when they show up at a collection point carrying dead friends, and the first job of the ninety-two mikes is to assure them that their friends' remains will be cared for. Only when all of a dead soldier's buddies have left the collection point do the ninety-two mikes lift the pouch onto a raised litter and open it.

**T**hroughout the Second World War, the dead were sometimes buried in temporary cemeteries near the battlefield. Often, though, combat soldiers buried their buddies where they fell, marked the graves with a rifle and helmet, and noted the coördinates on a map. Families learned of the death by telegram, often days later. Only after the Allies defeated Germany and Japan did the Army send soldiers of what was then called Graves Registration to recover bodies and either bury them in military cemeteries abroad or ship them home, depending on the wishes of the

families. Of the four hundred thousand Americans who died in that war, the remains of about a fifth have never been recovered or identified. America now fights smaller wars, and takes more care with its dead. During the Korean War, helicopters became available, allowing remains to be recovered and shipped home quickly. When I mentioned to Howard how ceremonious and expensive the handling of fallen soldiers seems, given the chaos of war, he fixed me with a cold stare and said, "It is, quite literally, the least we can do for them."

The mission of a ninety-two mike is to deliver viewable remains to the family of a dead soldier within seven to ten days, and the job starts at the collection point. Wearing surgical masks, gowns, and gloves, ninety-two mikes make a preliminary examination of the body, sketching visible wounds on a diagram. They leave a soldier's fatigues intact but search every pocket, cataloguing the photographs, letters, notes, and other effects they find. They either return these to the pockets or place them in a small green bag that they tie to the soldier's wrist. They list the name of the deceased, on all forms, as B.T.B.—"believed to be." Once they've recorded the wounds and belongings, they rezip the pouch and place it, by tradition, in a closed vehicle for transportation either by road or by air to the Theatre Mortuary Evacuation Point, an air-conditioned warehouse in Kuwait.

There, ninety-two mikes place the pouch on a wooden slab similar to an oak tabletop and set the slab atop an old-fashioned roller-conveyor, of the type found in supermarket basements. As they slide the body along the conveyor, they examine the remains again, making sure all personal effects listed on the forms are in place. Finally, they lift the pouched remains into a rectangular aluminum "transfer case" and drape the case with a flag, placing the starred blue field at the upper left, over the soldier's heart. They carry the case, feet first, to a truck that will take it to one of several military airfields. When they need to set the case down, they always lay it flat on the floor. They never stack cases unless a mass-casualty emergency yields limited floor space. Once on the trucks, the transfer cases leave the custody of the ninety-two mikes.

Ritual and tradition attend every step of a dead soldier's journey. At the airfield, soldiers and airmen stand at attention, flanking the ramp. Others unload the cases and carry them into the bulbous cargo bay of an Air Force transport jet. They lay them on the floor in a neat grid. It was photographs of flag-draped transfer cases—not "coffins"—on the floor of a transfer jet that made the rounds of the Internet and major newspapers in April. From Kuwait, the transfer cases are flown to one of two military mortuaries: at Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, or at the Army's Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany.

The bodies of Specialists Bangayan and Seiden took a slightly different route. Their friends drove them not to a collection point but, following their two wounded buddies, to the 28th Combat Support Hospital, in Baghdad. The 28th C.S.H.—known as "the China Dragon"—occupies what used to be Saddam Hussein's private hospital, inside the vast compound of palaces that is now the heavily secured Green Zone. Until recently, the person who ran the hospital, under the command of Colonel Beverly Pritchett, was First Sergeant Kellyanne O'Neil, a forty-one-year-old medic with a gun-moll accent acquired in the Dorchester section of Boston. I met O'Neil, who rotated out of Iraq in March, at her home in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where the 82nd Airborne is based. O'Neil, who keeps a piranha as a pet, has long wavy hair that she pulls back in a severe bun, and tiny hands that are as strong as pliers. She is compact, radiating ferocity, but can in a heartbeat adopt the mournful air of a grieving mother. Known to many soldiers only by her radio call sign, China Master, O'Neil directed the hospital's renovation and then the care of thousands of casualties—Iraqi and American, military and civilian—a hundred and twenty-five of whom died during the months she was there. She is intensely proud of the 28th C.S.H., describing, in gruesome detail, the endless variety of wounds repaired by the hospital's surgeons. China Master was essentially on duty continually for nearly a year, overseeing emergency procedures in the hospital's hallways, sometimes pulling a sheet over the face of a patient she had lost and walking directly to the next stretcher. "When I'm in the nuthouse, I want you to remember I like Hershey's Kisses with almonds in them," she told me without smiling. The day of the attack on Bravo Company, China Master worked first on the two wounded soldiers—both serious enough cases that they had to be evacuated to Landstuhl. She then turned her attention to Seiden and Bang.

It was her habit to undress the dead and cut the name, rank, and unit patches from their fatigues, if they weren't too bloody or torn, to send to the family as keepsakes. From Seiden's, she was able to salvage only the American-flag shoulder patch. She then had Bang and Seiden moved to a small tiled room and used a hose gently to wash the mud and gore from their bodies. "If the unit is coming to see the soldier, I try to make a nice viewing," she told me. She put the bodies in fresh pouches, with blankets around all but the undamaged portions of the faces. (Bang and Seiden were among the last that she would attend this way. In mid-January, the Army ordered her to stop removing fatigues and washing bodies, because medical examiners at the morgues wanted to see all bodies unaltered—as the ninety-two mikes leave them—to learn what they can about how soldiers are dying.)

While China Master worked, the paratroopers of Bravo Company returned to their billets in the offices of the Al Dora oil refinery. Nobody spoke as the men peeled off their web gear, helmets, and body armor. After ten months of war and insurrection, Bang and Seiden were the first comrades they'd seen killed, and they were distraught. One of the unit's N.C.O.s kept bursting into tears. "My platoon sergeant took me aside and said, 'You can't do that. You can't cry in front of the others,'" he told me. Staff Sergeant James Haack, a square-jawed twenty-two-year-old Kansan who'd been both dead soldiers' original squad leader, said, "I know it sounds funny, but it hadn't occurred to me this could happen." Captain Leo Coddington, Bravo Company's twenty-eight-year-old commander, wondered if the platoon had established a pattern of travel on River Road which the Iraqis were somehow able to divine. Lieutenant Blickhahn, who had been riding shotgun in the lead Humvee, replayed in his mind the moments preceding the blast and tortured himself for failing to spot the bomb in the road. He learned later that the massive explosive, made from old artillery shells, had been buried under the pavement by someone tunnelling in from the roadside ditch, a technique never seen before in the area. (In July, Blickhahn was awarded an Army Commendation Medal for his actions that day. The medal can be awarded for "meritorious service," but Blickhahn's was awarded with a bronze "V," for valor. Soldiers, though, are the harshest judges of their own performance. Months after the deaths, Blickhahn told me, "They defeated me.")

Several soldiers helped pack up Seiden's and Bang's belongings for shipment to the Army's Personnel Effects Depot, at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, in Maryland: books, CD players, toiletries, Seiden's GameBoy. Soldiers at Aberdeen would clean and pack them for delivery to the families. Following Army procedure, Coddington made sure that Bravo Company's cell phone and the soldiers' e-mail-capable computers were rounded up so that no news would slip out before the families of Bang and Seiden were notified officially. But Seiden's girlfriend, Tricia Ferri, happened to call before the phone was removed. Everyone in Bravo Company knew Tricia; she'd sent boxes of Oreos and had spoken to most of them when calling for Seiden. Usually, they answered with a cheerful "Hello," but this time the soldier who picked it up said gravely, "Second of the 325th." When he heard Tricia's voice, he hung up.

At three o'clock in the morning, Coddington finally had time to go see his fallen men at the hospital. First Sergeant Robinson, eight years his senior, who has eighteen years of Army experience to Coddington's seven, was still there, and China Master was still working. Coddington had held himself together all day, but when China Master opened the pouches and he laid his hands on his soldiers' bodies he leaned against Robinson and wept.

The Army relied for generations on Western Union to deliver to families the news that their sons and husbands had been killed in combat. At the start of the Vietnam War, the Army discovered that in some cities Western Union no longer employed its own messengers but relied on local taxidriviers to deliver telegrams. In the vicinity of Fort Benning, Georgia, where many of the fallen had been based, the cabdrivers didn't welcome the responsibility. So the Army began assigning its own soldiers to break the bad news to families personally.

Gail Seiden, Marc's mother, woke on January 2nd to the news of a helicopter crash near Falluja, and told herself, in a semiconscious moment of superstition, "O.K., I'm home free. I don't have to worry about today." Gail, who is fifty-eight, plump, and bookish, with short curly hair and a sense of irony that can swing bitter or funny, helps manage a Jewish nursing home near her house. Her husband, Jack, fifty-six, is an accountant—gentle, sedentary, and instinctively risk-averse. Gail and Jack had lived in a state of mild shock since the day Marc was born. He was, progressively, the kind of kid who would shove coins into electrical sockets, skateboard off the roof, or, at sixteen, take the family car on a joyride. His sheer physical energy and passion for excitement were utterly alien to them, and they spent his childhood years alternatively cringing, laughing, or hollering at him to be careful.

Jack and Gail invited me to dinner in a cozy two-story row house in East Windsor whose walls are covered with pictures of Marc and his older brother, Adam. "I'd actually suggested when Marc was nineteen that he join the Army," Jack said, as Gail cut up cantaloupe at the kitchen counter. "I thought the discipline was what he needed. In those days, nobody thought about war." Instead, Marc tried a year of college, then drifted down to Brigantine, a small town north of Atlantic City and one of the few places on the American coastline where the working class still holds the beach. He got a construction job, fell in love with Tricia, and lived an easygoing seaside life with Tricia and her childhood friends. Jack and Gail thought he seemed on the verge of settling down. But as his adolescence slipped away Marc grew restless. The son of some family friends died in the World Trade Center attack, and during the national outpouring of fear and patriotism that followed Marc announced that he was joining the Army. He selected a particularly dangerous specialty, airborne, and flew to Iraq with Bravo Company in March, 2003. Marc's

phone calls home were upbeat, but, as Gail recalls, “I lived every day with my heart in my mouth.” Last Thanksgiving, Marc called them excitedly; he’d been chosen to share President Bush’s surprise Thanksgiving dinner in Baghdad. The Seidens happened to be watching the Presidential dinner on television at that moment, and they had the extraordinary experience of catching a glimpse of their son in the background as he talked to them on the phone. It was the last time they saw him.

The Seidens had just returned from errands at around four o’clock in the afternoon on January 2nd—midnight in Baghdad—when the doorbell rang. Gail was upstairs; Jack opened the door to find two officers in dress uniform—a woman and a man with a silver cross pinned to his collar. “Are you Jack Seiden, father of Specialist Marc Seiden?” the woman asked. “I have an important message to deliver from the Secretary of the Army. May I come in, Mr. Seiden?” In shock, Jack refused. “We’d been told if one person comes to the door, he’s wounded; if two people come, he’s dead,” Jack told me. “I thought, If I don’t let them in then it can’t be happening. But she kept saying, ‘Mr. Seiden, we have to come in, we have to come in.’ She was crying.” Jack backed away, yelling for Gail. From the top of the stairs, Gail saw a pair of uniformed legs and thought, Marc’s home early! As she ran down the stairs, she saw the second pair of legs.

The woman introduced herself as an officer from Fort Dix, New Jersey. “The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your son Marc was killed in action in Iraq on January 2nd,” she said. “The Secretary extends his deepest sympathy to you and your family in your tragic loss.”

Notification officers follow a careful protocol detailed in a slim booklet called the “Casualty Notification Guide.” They are not to speak to N.O.K., as the booklet calls next of kin, about insurance, personal effects, or possible mistakes made by soldiers involved in the death. They are to use “good judgment” and avoid “gory or embarrassing details.” They are not to extend “overly sympathetic gestures.” Underlined, with the heading “IMPORTANT,” is the warning “Do not physically touch the N.O.K. in any manner unless there is shock or fainting.” The woman from Fort Dix told the Seidens that a casualty assistance officer would be assigned to handle all of their funeral arrangements and would call within twenty-four hours. “Mr. Seiden,” she concluded, “I must be returning to Fort Dix. Again, on behalf of the Secretary of the Army, please accept the United States Army’s deepest condolences.”

**H**elen Bangayan, Bang’s mother, left the Philippines in 1981, at the age of thirty-three, to work as a companion to a wealthy, stroke-afflicted American woman in Beirut. She left two-year-old Solomon and his three older sisters to grow up with their father, Max, in Sudipen, a torpid, underemployed village of brightly painted cement houses a day’s drive north of Manila. Solomon acquired the nickname Kelly to honor his paternal great-grandfather, Quilino.

Helen did not return to Max. Instead, she moved to the United States with her employer, got a green card, and, after the woman died, met Victor Therrien at a church social in New Hampshire. Vic, a voluble, pious, retired construction worker, took her to live in a farmhouse on Vermont’s border with Canada. Vic had five grown children of his own and made it his mission to reunite Helen with hers. It was too late for the older children to immigrate, Vic learned; children of permanent residents have to make it to the U.S. before they turn twenty-one if they want to get green cards. By the time Vic was able to arrange the visa for Kelly, he was seven days short of his twenty-first birthday, and had to abandon his schooling as a diesel mechanic to emigrate. He arrived in Vermont in August of 2000, barely able to speak English.

To make him feel welcome, Vic bought Kelly a used Ford Taurus. “I asked him what he wanted most, and he said in the Philippines if you have a Ford it means you’re rich,” Vic said. Kelly spent that winter skiing at nearby Jay Peak, riding horses, and delighting in his first snow. But it didn’t take him long to realize that immigrating and prospering were two different things; he’d landed in a region with high unemployment, and he had limited English and no diploma. So in the spring of 2001 Kelly did what thousands of immigrants have done to get ahead; he joined the United States Army. A recruiter met the Therriens on the roadside halfway between Burlington and their home, and they completed the paperwork on the car’s hood. Non-citizen immigrants have served in the U.S. military since the Civil War, and join for many of the same reasons that Americans do—pay, skills, adventure, love of country—but service in an American uniform has also long been a fast track to citizenship. Beginning in 1952, a legal resident who joined the Army could shorten the wait for citizenship from five years to three. After 9/11, an executive order by President Bush and legislation by Congress made the process easier and faster—waiving immigration fees, letting non-citizens on active duty petition for citizenship immediately instead of after three years, allowing immigrant service people to raise their right hand and take the oath of citizenship at military posts abroad instead of having to travel to the U.S. at their own expense. The services don’t specifically go trolling for immigrants to join, though they

publish recruiting materials in Spanish and seek out Arabic speakers, who are needed in Iraq as translators. Some thirty-eight thousand service people—about three per cent of the total—are non-citizens.

Vic and Helen Therrien viewed Kelly's enlistment with pride; Vic is a Navy veteran, and expresses a patriotism as pure as his faith in Jesus. Their confidence was only slightly shaken by Kelly's phone calls—he dragged them out for hours, unwilling to let go of the sound of his mother's voice. When he came home on leave last Thanksgiving, he told them he did not want to return to Iraq. He'd seen too many terrible things, he said, and he was afraid he would die there. Vic and Helen drove him to the tiny River of Life church, in northern New Hampshire, where Vic's sister is pastor, and Kelly accepted Jesus as his personal savior. "We didn't know he was going back to be killed, but God knew," Vic said. "God saw to it his heart was prepared." After his leave, Bang flew back to rejoin Bravo Company in Mini-Vietnam. At about eight o'clock on the night of January 2nd, Vic and Helen heard their dogs barking in the freezing darkness outside. Helen opened the door on two officers. "Please tell me he's only wounded," she cried. The officers asked to step inside.

At the Dover mortuary, military medical examiners inspected Bang and Seiden to determine the cause of death and to gather intelligence about methods that the Iraqis are using to kill American soldiers. Under a practice new to Operation Iraqi Freedom, they sorted through personal items that had been shipped with the remains to find what they call "sentimental personal effects"—watches, rings, medallions, and other items that families might want to have at the time of the funeral. They gathered these in velveteen pouches to send with the caskets.

The mortuary has enormous warehouses, filled with every uniform, award, and insignia of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. Drawing on the personnel files of Bang and Seiden, civilian morticians decorated forest-green "Class A" Army dress uniforms with silver jump wings, marksmanship medals, insignias, and myriad patches specific to each. Both men were posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. The mortuary is extremely careful about the allocation of medals; a missing or incorrect award can infuriate family members. Morticians then dressed and "cosmetized" Bang and Seiden and placed each in the type of casket his family had chosen—wood for Seiden, silver-colored eighteen-gauge metal for Bang.

The morticians make one of three recommendations for the soldier's remains: viewable, viewable for identification purposes only, or non-viewable. In non-viewable cases, the Dover or Landstuhl morticians inject each body part individually with embalming fluid and gather the pieces in a sheet that has been impregnated with embalming chemicals. They wrap this in a second sheet, and finally in a standard-issue olive-green Army blanket. They fold the blanket in a distinctive cruciform fashion, secure it with large safety pins, and place the bundle in a casket. They arrange the decorated uniform on the bundle of remains, so that when the family looks inside the casket they see the correct uniform, more or less in the shape of a soldier. The Army does not require families to view remains; the medical examiners, along with the F.B.I., make the positive identification. But some families insist on opening the bundle and seeing what the Army has deemed non-viewable. "They've sent away their nineteen-year-old son, and they can't believe he's gone. They want to see it," Douglas Howard, the ninety-two-mike trainer at Fort Lee, explained. In such cases, Howard recommends that only one family member, or a family friend, look.

It is remarkable that the morticians at Dover were able to render both Bang and Seiden viewable from the waist up, given the size of the bomb that killed them and the extent of the damage. Seiden's only visible wound was what looked like a port-wine birthmark on his face and neck. The right side of Bang's face was reconstructed with wax, but it was recognizable. When the Dover morticians finished, Bang and Seiden parted ways.

A soldier in dress uniform and carrying the velveteen bag of sentimental effects escorted each casket to the funeral homes the families had selected. The Army also assigned each family a casualty assistance officer, to manage arrangements for the funeral. "I'm not the biggest fan of the Army, but I have to say, ours was terrific," Gail Seiden said of the officer assigned to the family. "He took care of everything. Everything." Jewish law requires the dead to be buried as quickly as possible, and the Seidens wanted Marc home fast. "And no autopsy, I told them," Gail said. "He's been mutilated enough." The Army assigned the Seidens a rabbi chaplain, who hurried Marc's body home and met it at Dover to prevent an autopsy. He recovered the velveteen bag; it contained Marc's dog tags and a key ring. Gail had wanted Marc buried in a Jewish cemetery, but, knowing that the Army meant more to him than Judaism did, she and Jack decided to have him buried in the vast Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery, about forty minutes from their house. "They asked us if we wanted a general funeral, and I said, 'Sure,' thinking, you know, a general funeral, like a regular funeral," Jack said. "They sent a general." Since September 11th, any service member killed in action is entitled to have a general preside over his or her funeral. Marc was

buried on January 7th, just five days after he died, six thousand miles away. It was bitter cold; his friends from Brigantine remember their tears freezing to their faces. A detachment from Fort Bragg carried Marc's casket to a bier under a canopy. The general knelt before the Seidens and presented the flag and, in a velvet box, Marc's medals. Seven soldiers fired three rifle volleys, and a bugler played "Taps." At first glance, military funerals seem cold and mechanical; every service is alike and everybody moves in jerky tin-soldier fashion. But in its exaggerated solemnity—the slow-motion way the general salutes the casket, the crispness with which the flag is folded into a triangle—a military funeral movingly conveys the grief of the institution. It's a Jewish custom for mourners to sprinkle a shovelful of dirt atop the lowered casket, but the cemetery didn't allow families to approach the gravesite, and on this the cemetery wouldn't budge. "The rabbi said he'd go up there, say a prayer, and put some dirt," Jack said.

Helen Therrien had a special request, too; she wanted her son buried in the Philippines with full U.S. military honors. Bang made it home to Sudipen on January 16th, two weeks after he was killed. The Army flew Helen there (Vic was in the hospital at the time), and she and her daughters used the emergency-expenses money provided by the Army to buy and roast eleven pigs for the mourners. Bang lay in an open casket in his sweltering, cement-block house in Sudipen for four days, while hundreds of people came to sit in folding chairs around the casket and sing hymns. The Philippines is overwhelmingly Catholic, but Sudipen is home to four Protestant churches and each sent a choir to sing over the body. In a video, Kelly's childhood friends look stunned, impressed, and subdued. The Philippines, which the United States seized from Spain in 1898 and held for forty-eight years, was the only colony that the United States ever had, and in many Filipinos affection for America runs deep. "A lot of Filipinos joined the U.S. Army in World War Two," Helen told me. She tapped her two index fingers together. "The Philippines and the U.S.," she said. "Like this."

On the fourth day, an honor guard and a one-star general flew in from South Korea to perform Bang's funeral. They marched slowly through Sudipen's cobbled streets ahead of a white Mercedes hearse, then stood at rigid attention in the withering humidity as hundreds of people gathered in an open-air hall. After "Taps," they slid Bang's coffin into an aboveground cement vault and—in keeping with Philippine tradition—pushed in behind it a bag of clothes, to be worn in the afterlife.

Kelly had taken out a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy, which was paid to Helen, along with the standard twelve-thousand-dollar military death benefit. President Bush sent a letter of sympathy, referring to her son warmly by his nickname, which she laminated and placed in an album. "Our nation will not forget Kelly's sacrifice and selfless dedication in our efforts to make the world more peaceful and more free," the President wrote. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, of the Philippines, sent a letter as well. "We are proud of him," she wrote. On March 5th, another letter came to Helen, from the Citizenship and Immigration Services branch of the Department of Homeland Security: "Your son made the ultimate sacrifice for America; it is only fitting that we bestow upon him our Nation's ultimate honor—citizenship. It is our honor to present you with this certificate of posthumous citizenship."

The men of Bravo Company returned to Fort Bragg on January 28th, and soon afterward some two dozen of them piled into vans for the long drive to northern Vermont. They crammed into Helen and Vic's farmhouse and ate prodigiously, sharing photographs and stories. They brought along an oil painting of Bang—rendered by a Baghdad artist from his official Army photograph—as well as a huge framed drawing of paratroopers leaping from an airplane. The Therriens have mounted these on a prominent living-room wall. Helen also has flown twice to Fort Bragg for memorials and other ceremonies; staying connected to Bravo Company, she said, "is part of my healing."

Though soldiers of Bravo Company also attended memorials in both East Windsor and Brigantine for Marc, the Seidens have since let the contact wither. They declined invitations to go to the two ceremonies at Fort Bragg; they have never met Bang's family. "Am I angry?" Gail asked as she wiped down her stove. "Of course I'm angry. I just don't know who at." The same framed drawing of the paratroopers that Helen has on her wall was stacked sideways on the Seidens' living-room floor, and Gail kept in a closet the oil painting of Marc that the unit had commissioned. Jack has arranged the folded flag and Marc's medals on an electric organ in their living room, next to Marc's bar-mitzvah portrait, as a kind of temporary shrine, but the flag and medals look like they'll soon find their way into a closet. I asked if the Seidens, too, had received a condolence letter from President Bush, and Gail said no. "Sure we did," Jack said. "We have it here someplace." ♦