



The killing in question: Genei Nasir Khudair al-Janabi, photographed shortly after he was killed by the snipers of the 1-501.



The Six-Letter Word That Changes Everything

BY TOM JUNOD

MICHAEL HENSLEY ORDERED A SNIPER UNDER HIS COMMAND NAMED EVAN VELA TO KILL A MAN ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE. VELA IS IN PRISON. HENSLEY IS NOT. AND A QUESTION PERSISTS: FOR A SOLDIER AT WAR, WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KILLING AND MURDER?

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IN THE MORNING of May 11, 2007, Staff Sergeant Michael Hensley made a radio call to Lieutenant Matthew Didier. Didier was at the American Patrol Base in Jurfas Sakhr, a Sunni town on the Euphrates forty-five miles south of Baghdad. Hensley was out in the field with four of his snipers. He'd left the base around midnight, and Didier had been waiting to hear from him. Hensley and his men had gone out in support of an early-morning raid being conducted by Apache Company; now, at nearly 1100, Hensley was calling to say that he had eyes on an Iraqi male scouting the banks of the Euphrates and heading in the direction of the place where Hensley and his men were hiding. Fifteen minutes later, Hensley called again. He thought the Iraqi had spotted them and was still coming toward them. Fifteen minutes later, Hensley again: The Iraqi was draw-



ing closer and had his weapon at the ready. Hensley asked Didier's permission to kill him.

It was an odd courtesy. For one thing, Hensley didn't need Didier's permission to kill in self-defense. Second, he and Didier were often at odds.

Hensley had taken over the snipers a month and a half earlier, while Didier was on leave, and since Didier's return, he'd struggled to establish "command and control" of his NCO. The kill Hensley was proposing was not even the kind of kill that snipers specialize in. It did not involve distance, or even a rifle. Hensley was asking permission for a close kill with a handgun.

Didier granted his permission. Fifteen minutes later he heard from Hensley. The Iraqi was dead an hour after Hensley reported spotting him. In five minutes, a quick-response team dispatched from Jurf PB found him still warm. He had an AK-47 in his arms and a large hole in the back of his head. He was small and skinny. He had some gray in his black beard. He was wearing a blue mandress and was wearing a checkered scarf around his neck. He was a Sunni and a member of the al-Janabi tribe. He was identified on-site as Genei Nasir Khudair al-Janabi. He was once a sergeant in Saddam Hussein's army. Now he was a farmer and taxi driver. He had a wife and six children. He was forty-six years old and died about fifteen hundred feet from his home.

He was the snipers' eighth confirmed kill since Hensley had taken over the unit six weeks earlier. An Army battalion is a small town, and after each of the kills, the snipers heard rumors at the chow hall. But the close kill was different. "I've been in the Army for a while," says Lieutenant Colonel Craig Whiteside, who at the time, in the rank of major, was the battalion's second in command. "I'd never heard of anyone getting killed with a 9 mil. Believe me, we've killed a lot of people, and we've killed them in just about every way possible. That was the only 9-mil kill in the entire deployment. It just doesn't happen."

Sergeant Michael Hensley was acquitted of murder, though he admits ordering the kill. He's still in the Army, instructing young soldiers stateside.

As a result, Hensley was asked to write a sworn statement about the killing. "I wrote it pretty fast," he says. "They had a small laptop and a small printer back at the base, and I had a statement configured by about three in the afternoon. Then I read it to the guys. I never told them, like, this is your story or anything. I basically pulled in the four guys who were with me and said, 'This is my account of the events.' And I asked if anyone had any questions. There were no questions."

In the statement, Hensley elaborated on what he had told Didier. He wrote that he never told his men there was an insurgent coming. He wrote that they were oblivious to the threat. He wrote that he had hidden behind an earthen berm, and when the insurgent was within arm's reach, he put him in "a rear naked choke, his hands still on [his] weapon, struggling to fire it." He also wrote that the kill was not his own. The sniper Hensley instructed to "pull out his M9 9mm pistol and quietly take the safety on fire and be prepared to use it"—the sniper who then "placed 2 9mm rounds in the insurgent's head"—was named Evan Vela. It was his first kill, but it was Hensley's story. "I was like, I've given them no reason to doubt me in the past, they're gonna believe whatever I tell them. If I tell 'em a guy walks into my hide site with an AK and I choke him down and shoot him in the head, they're gonna buy it, they're gonna believe it, because it's me."

But because it was Hensley, the story also never died. It morphed. First, members of the Iraqi police told an American intelligence officer the story of a Sunni who had been pulled out of his home, tied up, tortured, and executed by American soldiers. Then there were the members of the battalion who were passing through Baghdad International on their way back from leave. They were hearing about the close kill from other battalions, other units: *Hey, I hear Hensley climbed up on the dude's back and shot him in the head....* Eventually, battalion command figured they'd have to do something about it. They figured they'd have to start taking sworn statements. "I had a talk with Major Whiteside about it," says Major David Butler, now public-affairs officer for the brigade. "I said, 'Maybe Hensley deserves an award for this. Maybe we should give him a medal.'"

THE FIRST TIME I heard Michael Hensley referred to as a natural killer was in a conversation with two of his snipers, Sergeant Anthony Murphy and Sergeant Richard Hand. I had flown to Alaska shortly after the February 10 conviction of Evan Vela—three months after the acquittal of Michael Hensley—on charges of murdering Genei Nasir Khudair al-Janabi. The snipers agreed to talk to me because they



Hensley was something of a prodigy. In 2002, with the help of a legendary spotter, Staff Sergeant Justin Shaffer, he won the Army's international sniper competition.



wanted to talk about Vela; they wound up talking about Hensley. It is a corollary: They are snipers; snipers talk about Hensley. As different as snipers are supposed to be from most people, that's how different Hensley is from them.

"I mean, it's very self-evident when you meet him that he doesn't conform to what and who you expect people to be," Hand said. "I mean, he's a genius, but it's like he's so intelligent that he's autistic or something."

I said that I was going to meet him the next morning, and Murphy offered a suggestion. "Why don't you just walk right up to him and slap him in the face?" he said. "That would get his respect right away. He'd love that." They thought that the idea of me slapping Mike Hensley in the face was absolutely *hilarious*, and when I asked them why, Murphy said, "Well, he's a natural killer, for one thing." Later, when I asked him what he meant by that, he said, "He'd kill you and two minutes later he'd sit down and finish that piece of pie."

In the morning, I drove north of Fort Richardson and went to Hensley's apartment. He met me at the door in a short little zip-up black leather windbreaker with skulls on the front and the word AFFLICTION printed on the back. There were also skulls on the back pockets of his tight jeans. There was also a bracelet of flaming skulls tattooed on his left wrist and a pentagram tattooed on his neck. He was twenty-seven years old, about six two, and he wore black square-toed motorcycle boots. When I suggested we go get something to eat, he said, "Right on," in the deep voice of a radio cowboy. At the same time there was something soft about him, something vulnerable, something even slightly effeminate, with his hair combed forward in little bangs and his boy-band sideburns. Hens-

In the months after the I-501 moved into Jurf as Sakhr, they were being attacked with impunity, they were being killed without killing back. Hensley and his snipers helped change that.

my because he made *them* lethal. His difference was communicable—transformative—and it eventually served to highlight the most ineffable difference of all in war: the difference between killing and murder.

"That's the six-letter word that changes everything," Hensley said. It was ten o'clock in the morning and we were on our way to a bar in Anchorage to drink Bloody Marys. He was, and is, still in the Army. He still has a job, and was in the middle of being transferred to Fort Benning. But because of the mortal taint upon him—because, as he says, "I'm looked at as a guy who got away with murder"—nobody called him if he didn't show up. It was better that he didn't show up.

Did he get away with murder?

"You know, nobody thinks they're a bad person. You can talk to the worst murderer, the worst rapist in prison, and they'll always try to find a way to justify what they did. And that hits home for me. I mean, when you look at things that way, maybe what I did was wrong. I refuse to believe it, but who knows? In the end, it comes down to, When that guy walked in my hide site, I made a decision. It was my decision. Nobody else made it, nobody else could make it, because nobody else had

ley was one of the most lethal snipers in the United States Army, and the most notorious. But he seemed less a lethal person than a person trapped in some kind of lethal drag. The rough-trade impression was accentuated by his hip-slung way of standing and by the shape of his body. He was hippy. He had gone from going to the gym three times a day to drinking pretty much all day. His hips were wider than his shoulders. He was also perfumed by the smell of alcohol working itself out of his body. His hands sometimes shook. So did everything else. He was twitchy and ticky. He couldn't keep still. He got up to go to the bathroom a lot. He had a lot of "nervous behaviors," he said. He was apologetic about them. His hands were a particular problem; he didn't know what to do with them. He jammed them in his pockets. He drummed his fingers against any available surface. He wiggled them in the air as though he were playing the flute. When he forgot about them, they'd curl up at the wrists until they looked palsied. The rest of his body would follow suit, his shoulders hunching over his hands in a kind of protective gesture until his body language was that of a man in shackles. It was the hands—"the hand thing"—that his men seized upon when they imitated him in Iraq. They "did" Hensley, and though he tried to be a good sport, it hurt his feelings. "It was embarrassing," he said. "I didn't think I acted like that. I was trying to be perfect. I was trying not to show them any flaws."

In fact, he was acutely aware of his flaws, because he was acutely aware of his difference. So were people who knew him. His difference was what they remarked on. That was where the idea that he was a natural killer came from. It wasn't just what people saw him do with a gun; it was how he carried himself without one. He struck people as a natural killer because he struck them as unnatural in other ways. And yet they followed him. The men who made fun of him in Iraq followed him in Iraq. He was the most lethal sniper in the Ar-

the whole picture. Evan Vela killed that guy because I ordered him to and because he had no reason not to. Was it a good kill? It's a good kill because I say it's a good kill. That's why I was there. That's why the battalion put me there."

THE STORY of Michael Hensley is a story of the surge. He deployed with 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry (Airborne), 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division in October 2006 and came home to Fort Richardson in early December 2007. That Hensley spent nearly five of those thirteen months in captivity did not make him less relevant to his battalion's cause or its eventual success. It made him more so.

When did the surge begin? The official start date was February 2007. The start date for 1-501 came a few months later. That's because the surge started in Baghdad, and the Geronimos, as the parachutists of 1-501 are called, were operating in Babil Province, with its three-city cordon of sectarian strife called the Triangle of Death. If the surge in Baghdad was about manpower, the surge in Babil was about money. It was about convincing local tribes that it was in their best interests to stop feeding the insurgency and start dining off the American dollar. By that standard, the surge began in the Triangle of Death when a local Sunni engineer began acting as a broker between the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Balcavage, and Sheik Sabah, the head of the engineer's al-Janabi tribe. This occurred about halfway through 1-501's deployment. It also occurred a few weeks after the close kill of Genei Nasir Khudair al-Janabi. And in the coincidence of the two events there is a demonstration of the blood ambivalence at the heart of the new American way of war.

"My soldiers are paratroopers," Balcavage says. "And when paratroopers come to a country, all they want to do is kill and break stuff. Well, you can do that all day long without any progress. You've got to do it *with* the Iraqis. You can't win a war just by killing people."

But then, you can't win a war just by paying people, either, or else it wouldn't be war. And Balcavage was at war before the surge took hold. His men were being shot at by snipers and blown up by IEDs. They were taking mortar fire. In the IED attack that gave the battalion its first combat fatality, on December 20, 2006, one of the survivors lost not only his legs below the knee but also his penis, and the soldier who died was electrocuted by a power line transformed by the blast into a lethal whip. A month later, in Karballa, death arrived in the form of insurgents who came to a city-council meeting dressed as American soldiers, then killed one of ours and kidnapped and killed four more. In the first few months



The 1-501's scout-sniper platoon, October 2006. Evan Vela is in the center, giving the thumbs-up. Hensley had not yet been assigned to the unit.

Hensley's first kill in Iraq quickly became legendary. Four hundred meters across the Euphrates with an M4. It was as if he had pegged a housefly with a pea-shooter.

of 2007, Balcavage says, there were attacks on his men almost daily, and what was most disturbing and dispiriting about them, most dangerous to morale, was not their frequency but rather their air of impunity. The Geronimos were getting killed without killing back, and as Balcavage says, "We were questioning how much success we were having at the time." More to the point, he'd realized that "money wasn't going to work without pressure." He'd become "absolutely convinced that you cannot succeed if you don't have a hammer."

He did not have a hammer. Usually, snipers occupy that role—they're a "battalion-level asset," like mortars, to be employed at the discretion of the battalion commander. But Balcavage's snipers had a leadership problem, and as a result they had what Balcavage calls an "acidic morale problem." They either weren't "putting themselves in position to get shots" or were putting themselves in position and discovering they didn't bring the proper weapons, like, say, sniper rifles. They were letting guys get away. They were either not pulling the trigger or pulling the trigger and, Balcavage says, "winging guys." Through the first five months of the deployment, October through March, they had one kill, and it was characteristic. The platoon leader had to wait hours before he gave his snipers permission to take the shot, and then the shooter hit the target in the leg. The man dragged himself thirty-five meters before bleeding out. On another occasion, a sniper blasted away at two guys surrounded by livestock. He slaughtered the livestock and spared the guys, hitting one in the leg and letting the other get away. "How does that happen?" Balcavage's sergeant major, Bernie Knight, asks. "You're a sniper—how do you miss? I'm a one-shot, one-kill kind of guy—and these guys just weren't doing it." As one of the snipers themselves, Richard Hand, says: "We were looked at as kind of failures—kind of a joke, in a way."

Balcavage and Knight were after more than comic relief. "We had to have something that said, 'Hey, if you're coming at us, this is what we got,'" Knight says. In March, what they had was a job opening in the sniper section of the scout platoon. And then they had Michael Hensley. He was not officially a sniper, at least not in Iraq. He was a squad leader in Apache Company. But he was a prodigy. The son of Christian missionaries—he remembers his upbringing as "Amishlike"—he'd already been in the Army nine years. With the help of an experienced and gifted spotter, he had won the Army's international sniper competition in 2002,

when he was twenty-two. He was a sniper in Afghanistan in 2003. He'd helped train snipers at Fort Richardson. And in the Triangle of Death, he was one of the first of the Geronimos to draw blood. It was in February. It was in Jurf as Sakhr. It was during a town meeting. There was mortar fire from across the Euphrates. One of Hensley's men, Cody Anderson, saw the flash of binoculars and said, "I think I see a guy." Hensley said, "If he pokes his head up again, I'm going to take him out." He did not have a high-powered sniper's rifle. He had the basic rifle of the American infantry, the M4. It is basically a .22. The guy across the river was anywhere from three hundred to four hundred meters away. It is not the kind of shot typically made with an M4. "So Hensley says, 'I see him, I see him,'" says Anderson. "And I'm like, 'Where?' And he's telling me, 'He's right fucking there, he's right fucking there.' So I start laying down suppressive fire, I start shooting in the general vicinity, and Sergeant Hensley, he's like *plink plunk*." The natural killer had his first kill, with an M4. Imagine what he could do with a .50-caliber sniper rifle. Imagine what he could do with a dozen men.

HENSLEY HAD A GIRLFRIEND. She was very beautiful. She was also trouble. He met her at the bar in Anchorage where he liked to ease his hangovers with Bloody Marys. Her name was Tennille. She had a thing about men with bald heads and tattoos. He had a thing about women who emanated dark mysteries. Tennille's mystery was that she had been on and off heroin since she was eighteen. Hensley's was that he was Hensley. He had gone through life knowing that he was "not like anyone else. One day maybe someone can come down from another planet and explain me." But Tennille explained him to himself by being a female version of him. She took him home to meet her parents. He scared them to death, but then they saw his manners and heard the courtliness in his voice when he talked to their daughter and they loved him like a son. When he came home on leave in January 2007 and Tennille told them of his intentions, they thought he had saved her. He hadn't killed anyone yet when he said goodbye to her and went back to Iraq. Then in February he killed the man across the Euphrates with an M4. In March the Red Cross gave him an emergency message from Tennille's parents. They were asking him to come home. Tennille was dead. She'd overdosed. She died in the apartment she shared with Hensley. She was found sitting against a wall, with no pants on. She had been there awhile. Her official date of death was March 1. He took emergency leave. The apartment was full of the terrible residue of her decay. He cleaned it himself. He was not one to shirk missions. Besides, he was angry at her stupid ass, and angry at the Army. "Every relationship I've ever had I've sacrificed to the Army," he says. The cleanup helped him focus his anger. He got the pentagram on his neck in Anchorage and then went back to Iraq in the third week of March. On the way back he heard that he'd been selected to lead the sniper section. He was at the airport in Iraq, waiting to get started, when he ran into a sniper who was also returning from leave. It was Evan Vela.

EVAN VELA HAS A WIFE. Her name is Alyssa. Her last name is not Vela. Her last name is Carnahan. So is Evan's. His father, Curtis Carnahan, adopted him when he was a little boy, but Evan never changed his name on his social security card, and the Army wouldn't accept anything else. His father has very long hair and a **HIPPIE PARKING ONLY** sign planted in his driveway in Idaho. Evan looks like a handsome Mexican boxer. He's always been pretty quiet. He's known Alyssa since eighth grade. Back then he never said a word. They dated in high school, but she got tired of dragging everything out of him, and they drifted apart. When she was living in Portland, Oregon, she heard that he'd joined the Army, and he heard that she was free from her boyfriend. He drove from Idaho to see her, and they talked for hours. They got married on May 5, 2006. Alyssa already had a son named Jarom, and Evan never called him anything but his son and planned to adopt him. Alyssa was a Mormon, and in September 2006, before his deployment, Evan was baptized in the Church of Latter-day Saints. He was a scout in Iraq, but in December he became a sniper. Alyssa was pregnant with Blair, and in March Evan came home for the birth. He was very quiet, almost like the old Evan. He was very happy when he held Blair for the first time, but also very sad because he felt unworthy of her. He loved the Army, but he told Alyssa he was very uneasy with the prospect of killing. He hadn't killed any-

one yet, but he knew he would have to. He was a sniper. Before he went back to Iraq, he met with his bishop, and his bishop read him some Mormon scripture and gave him a video called *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled: A Message of Peace for Latter-day Saints in Military Service*. The teaching was that if he went to war in the spirit of love, even for those whose blood had to be shed, then the shedding of blood would not be counted as sin. He drove very slowly to the airport, trying to stop time because of what he was going back to. He did not know that he was going back to Hensley.

Vela was not like Hensley. Hensley was not like Vela. But they'd gone on leave at the same time, and now at the airport Vela heard that Hensley was going to be his boss. With his bald head and his tattoo and his twitches, Hensley was the most recognizable NCO in the Army, and Vela approached him. Vela had gone home to celebrate a life and Hensley to grieve a death, but what they talked about now was business. Hensley asked Vela very detailed questions about the kinds of weapons the squad had and what each man in the section was capable of. Vela understood that it was Hensley's way of asking what *he* was capable of. They never talked about home, and besides, once Hensley took over, Vela went on so many missions with him that he called home less and less and found that even when he did, there was less and less he could talk about.

THE SNIPERS got a kill right after Hensley took charge. It was April 7. Hensley wasn't there. He was on another mission. It was Murphy's kill. He had seen a man walking toward him with a weapon. It was a hot day and the heat was causing the light to dance. It was hard to see even through a scope. Murphy pulled the trigger and shot the man through the head. The weapon Murphy thought he was carrying turned out to be a length of plastic pipe. Was the man an innocent? Nobody in Iraq was innocent. But as Sergeant Major Knight liked to say, "He was innocent that *day*." Murphy went back to base knowing that he'd be investigated. He was not surprised that the company commander, Major Butler, was there to meet him. He was surprised by what Butler said: "I just want to tell you not to second-guess yourself. You did your job. You felt threatened, and you pulled the trigger. That's what you're supposed to do. That's what we want. Way to go."

There was an investigation, and Murphy was found blameless. It was a matter of intent. Clearly his intent was not criminal. Clearly his intent was to kill and not to murder. The distinction was so important that there was a meeting about it. The meeting was so impor-

tant that Knight and Balcavage addressed the snipers themselves. What they said was pretty clear: If you have the shot, take the shot. If you feel threatened, take the shot. We'll back you.

How what they said was taken was another matter. Balcavage and Knight thought they were offering assurance. They thought they were clarifying the rules of engagement. They thought they were clarifying the ineluctable line between killing for cause and murder. To kill, you need PID—positive identification. You need evidence of hostile action or hostile intent. You need “reasonable certainty” that the human being you are about to dispose of presents a threat.

The snipers thought something different. They had all been part of the scout platoon. There used to be six of them, and they went out attached to scout teams. Now there were a dozen of them. Now there were half as many scouts and twice as many snipers, and the snipers were going out on their own, in small kill teams. The restructuring was Hensley's idea, and it was lethal. Everything now was oriented toward the kill, and Hensley's snipers looked at the meeting as a final restructuring of what was expected and what was allowed.

They thought instead of assurance they were being offered license. They thought that Balcavage and Knight were revising the ROE instead of clarifying them, with *perception* of threat trumping *evidence* of threat as the rationale for pulling the trigger. Most significantly, they thought—and later, they testified in court—that they were being pressured by Balcavage and Knight for more production, in the way of “increased kills.”

Balcavage denies this: “I never said, I want you to increase our kills. Was that my intent? Absolutely. The role of the sniper is to engage and destroy the enemy. Do we want to do that more? Yes, as long as it gives us the overall effect that we were looking for. And the effect that we were looking for was paranoia in the enemy. We wanted to say, You either stop what you're doing, or this is what we're doing. We don't use snipers to make friends with people. We use them to destroy the enemy.”

The snipers had no problem with Balcavage's message, whether explicit or implicit. “You hear that we were pressured to get more kills,” Anthony Murphy says. “Well, what's not politically correct is that we *wanted* more kills. I mean, why would we not want to kill the enemy that's killing us? Yeah, of course we want to kill them. Legitimate targets, man.” They were all in agreement on the subject of killing. What they were not in agreement on was the subject of murder. The difference wasn't moral but legal, and Hensley was right. It was the six-letter word that changed everything.

It was a reminder that the natural divide between officer and enlisted man could turn into a divide between accuser and accused, and so when Sergeant Major Knight said, at the end of the meeting, “Now, we don't want to turn you guys into *murderers* or anything,” he believed he was saying what had to be said, and that neither he nor Balcavage nor anyone else ever encouraged the snipers to commit murder. What Murphy remembers, however, was saying to himself: “*Okaaaaaay*, what

The first mission was against snipers from the other side. Hensley inserted his men at night, waited for the Iraqis to engage U.S. troops, and then, when they ran away, his men rose up and shot each of them at the dead run.

“I'm like, Okay, they're setting a pattern. Why can't we put some snipers out there that they don't know are there? We insert at nighttime. We lay down in a hide. We put on some vegetation. We sit there. Nobody knows we're there. I'll even go in two days prior, so no one *really* knows I'm there. And I stay hidden. I stay unseen. And I use Apache Company as bait. They come down, get shot at. We shoot whoever's doing the shooting. And that's exactly how the first mission went.”

It was on April 13. Sergeant Richard Hand and Sergeant Robert Redfern were the shooters. They were hiding up to their necks in a canal full of black water. They were there for hours. Then four insurgent snipers engaged Apache Company and began running away. They ran directly toward the canal. Hand and Redfern rose up out of the water and shot each man at the dead run. Shot them through the lungs, through the throat, through the head. They had grenades on them and high-powered ammunition. It was an outstanding kill—“pivotal to our success in Jurf,” as Balcavage says.

The next day, Hensley went after a man he thought was laying IEDs. There was a checkpoint outside Jurf as Sakhr called Checkpoint 312. It was a bad checkpoint for IEDs. Hensley had seen a house near the checkpoint and had thought that if he were in the IED business, he'd be making use of it. He decided to check it out.

did he say *that for*? They're up telling us to go out and kill people. What's he talking about murder for? Who the hell ever said anything about *murder*?”

HENSLEY WENT OUT on every mission after that. Between missions he was training his men. When he wasn't training his men, he was working out. When he wasn't working out, he was committing operational details to memory. He wasn't eating—his men say he didn't need to eat. He wasn't sleeping—his men say he didn't need to sleep and that he moved just as much when he was sleeping as he did when he was awake. He *talked* just as much when he was sleeping as he did when he was awake, and about the same thing: missions. Hensley had some ideas. He had some objectives. He had an agenda. He wanted to show what his snipers could do and what he could do with his snipers. “I didn't have a lot of guys who went to sniper school. I had a lot of young guys I was training in the field. I couldn't kill the enemy from afar. So I used more unorthodox, guerrilla-type tactics.” Longer missions. Longer distances. Heavier rucks. Smaller teams. Smaller footprints. More speed. More stealth. More invisibility. More isolation. More risk. If he couldn't turn his men into the classical ideal of snipers, he'd turn them into something else. He'd turn them into stalkers, and so a lot of their kills would occur well within three hundred meters. “A lot of our kills were close.”

The first real Hensley mission was against snipers from the other side. They were in Jurf as Sakhr. “They were really tormenting our guys,” says Sergeant Major Knight. “They created a little bit of a morale problem. We had some guys afraid to go out. They went out, but they thought about it.” But Hensley was a sniper. Even when he was a squad leader in Jurf as Sakhr, he thought like a sniper. So now he had an idea.

He crawled around and thought he saw a man laying command wire. He wound up stalking the man for hours, crawling around with a hundred-plus pounds of rucksack on his back. He liked crawling. He liked the mud, liked smearing it on his face. He was ordered to go back and check the man one more time before he left. He was advancing on him with his SR-25 raised when the man bent down. Was he reaching for a weapon? Hensley perceived a threat, in accordance with what Balcavage and Knight had told him. He shot the man through the heart. The man's wife and children began screaming, "because I essentially shot him in his front yard. I mean, right in front of his family. So of course they're going to be a little hysterical." The man was not carrying a weapon, but a search of the site turned up a spool of command wire. It seemed like another good kill. It was the natural killer's second kill, and later David Petta, one of Hensley's youngest snipers, would remember Hensley squatting near the body, saying, "I hate this part of my job. No, I love this part of my job."

Two weeks later, they went after the mortars. It was up north, at a place called Fish Farms. It was a little like Hensley imagined Vietnam to be, so green it was almost jungly, with black water all over the place, and grass up to your waist. It was a big mission, involving more than just the snipers. The Iraqi army was supposed to engage the mortars, and the snipers were supposed to shoot anyone they saw running away—the "squirters." It went as planned. There was an engagement, and Lieutenant Didier saw a squirter. Then he lost him. Hensley saw some guy swinging a sickle in the middle of the field. He was cutting grass. He was working. But nobody worked in Iraq. Hensley described the guy to Didier. Was it the guy Didier'd seen? Didier said it sounded like him. He granted permission to engage. Hensley was the spotter and Specialist Jorge Sandoval was the shooter. The spotter is the leader on any sniper team; the shooter is just, in Hensley's words, "the monkey on the trigger." All he has to do is breathe, relax, and squeeze. Hensley could have taken the shot himself, he says, "but I wanted Sandoval to get his kill. He's in the prone, down in the grass, and he's saying, 'I can't see nothing, Sarge. All I can see is the top of his head.' I'm like, 'Well, that's all you got to hit.'" Hensley called the shot, Sandoval squeezed the trigger, and the top of the man's head parted like the Red Sea.

That was April 27. The next week there would be a firefight with insurgents inside a house, which lasted until Hensley called in fire from an Apache helicopter and the Apache obliterated the house and everyone in it, including, Hensley claims, women and children. The week after that, there would be the close kill of May 11, and that would be the sniper section's last. It was either a successful run or a deadly spree, and Hensley still believes it proves his point. "I proved that we could have won this war a long time ago if we did what's necessary to win. I proved it! I proved that just one squad—one squad—if allowed to use the right strategy, allowed to use the right techniques, could yield a result. Did that in a few short months. And if it could be done with my squad, it could be

done with any squad. It ain't that we don't have the tools. It ain't that we're not smart enough. It's that there's a certain risk factor that commanders refuse to accept. They refuse to do what's necessary to conquer. They don't think the juice is worth the squeeze."

ON MAY 17, a 1st Battalion convoy got hit by an EFP. It's a nightmare weapon, a metaphor for the insurgency, a molten and molting thing made not to penetrate armor with force but rather to pass through it with heat. It killed two soldiers, and one of them didn't know that he'd been passed through, that he'd been transgressed; he was helping another soldier when he died. One of them died in the arms of the company commander, who was coming in to take the place of Major David Butler, who was rotating out. The new company commander was still soaked with blood when he stood before Lieutenant Colonel Balcavage and said,

"Captain Charles Levine, reporting for duty, sir!"

It was six days after the May 11 close kill, and it was the last day of Michael Hensley's war. Balcavage was set to go on leave, and right before he did, he received his first feelers from Sheik Sabah. "He's a bad guy," the Sunni who acted as intermediary told Balcavage, "but we're going to have to deal with him now." The sheik was, indeed, rumored to have connections to Al Qaeda in Iraq. But Balcavage made the decision to deal with him. The payments began in the wake of Hensley's escalation, and the Geronimos never suffered another combat fatality.

Evan Vela, as he and his wife awaited the verdict. Alyssa still can't accept that her husband was sent to Iraq to kill and is now in prison for murder.



Of course, there was fighting, hard fighting, still to be done. But the kind of fighting that Hensley stood for—the kind of *killing* that Hensley stood for—became unnecessary, indeed a liability, especially in the eyes of Captain Levine. Captain Butler? Captain Butler tried to be one of the guys. Some of the snipers thought he wanted to be a sniper. But Levine was a different kind of officer. He didn't understand—he objected to—the "aura that these guys are supposed to have, as snipers. Okay? It's not Delta Force, it's not the movies. It's just a job. It's not a calling, if you will. These guys have a skill, and it's long-range marksmanship. But let's not make them something they're not. Sniper is an E-3 [low-ranked] position. They're like truck drivers."

On June 12, Michael Hensley was still a sniper, and he was all aura. He was, in the words of one of his men, "a fucking badass." He was, in the words of another, "one lethal motherfucker." He was living in face paint by this time, as if he'd found, in camouflage, another tattoo. He didn't take it off when he went to bed. He put more on. He was eating less, sleeping less, drinking a caffeinated nitric-oxide supplement called NO-Xplode like it was water, and sometimes instead of water. He was working out more. He was ripped. He would go down to chow and play his metal on his headphones so loud you could hear it ten feet away, and his troublesome hands would be whirling with the drummer, beat for beat, as

if he'd finally set them free. An IP—a member of the Iraqi police—called him the Painted Demon, and it stuck.

"I had everything under control," he says. He looked out of control, sure. But he had everything under control because he had his men under control. Later on, Sergeant Major Knight would say, "He had an agenda and was bringing them all in, one man at a time." It's not too far from the truth. He had given them their purpose—in the coin of kills—and they had given him their loyalty. He was using them to fight his war against the Iraqis, and he was using them to fight his war against the Army, and he was winning both. Steven Kipling, the platoon sergeant who had opposed him since he took over the snipers, had been relieved. Hensley was acting platoon sergeant, and though Knight had decided he wasn't ready and Didier had recommended against him, he was not only campaigning for the full-time job but proposing the expansion of the snipers into an entire platoon. And as for Didier—nobody listened to Didier. On June 12, the scout platoon was pulling security at a shrine that had been leveled by a car bomb. It was a tense mission, and some of them wanted to engage. Didier was there. But the men—one of Hensley's snipers, and then two of Didier's scouts—asked Hensley.

Didier called a meeting. He stood next to Hensley and said, "I'm the motherfucking commanding officer here. I'm the one with the authority. If any of you want to engage, you ask me." Then he turned to Hensley and told him that his men weren't wearing body armor. He was right. They were Hensley's men, and Hensley's men didn't wear body armor when it was like 130 degrees out. They wore what Hensley wore. They wore T-shirts and bandanas and paint. They were *cool*. But the standard for security situations was body armor, and Didier told Hensley to enforce the standard. Hensley said, "You just said you're the motherfucking CO. You enforce the standard."

Hensley walked away. Didier followed him. They went into a Humvee. "Are you telling me that you're not going to follow my order?" Didier asked.

"I'm telling you that I've been in the Army ten years and I've worked too hard to listen to a punk like you," Hensley said.

Didier told Hensley to get out of the Humvee and find a seat away from his men. "Sergeant Hensley, you're relieved," he said. Hensley sat alone. Didier called his remaining NCOs together, his remaining team leaders, and said, "Are you going to follow my orders, or do I have a mutiny on my hands?" They answered that his orders would be followed. There were MPs on hand, being used for transport, and they escorted Hensley back to the base. He was no longer an acting platoon sergeant. He was no longer sniper-section leader. He was no longer even a sniper. Suddenly, the Painted Demon was as anachronistic as some terra-cotta god of war.

ON JUNE 19, Captain Levine approached Staff Sergeant Hensley outside the base. It was a week after Hensley had been relieved of duty. "I remember crouching down on the rocks with him," Levine says. "The first thing I asked him was 'How are you doing?' That's the first thing I ask all the soldiers. 'How are you doing?'" Levine was a tall, physically impos-

"If I'm so legendary, why couldn't I stop my girlfriend from killing herself?" Hensley says. "If I'm such a superhero, why is a soldier of mine going to jail?"

He kept saying, "That was fucked up, that was fucked up." Finally, he told his friend Alexander Flores about it. He said that they hadn't seen a man with an AK-47 approaching the hide. They hadn't seen anyone. They were asleep—Redfern, Hand, Sandoval, even Hensley, even Vela, who was supposed to be pulling security with the 9 mil. It was so freaking hot, and they were all so freaking tired. On May 8, they'd gone on a mission at 0400. They were out for a day and a half with no sleep. They'd gotten back to the base just before midnight May 9. They tried to rest on May 10, but at midnight they had to be back out again. It was mid-morning when the Iraqi tried going out to his pump house to turn his water on. He climbed over an earthen berm and stumbled on the five sleeping soldiers. When Sandoval woke up, Vela and the Iraqi were just kind of staring at each other. Sandoval told Vela to get the gun in his face. Then Vela woke up Hensley. Hensley, in his own recollection, says that he woke up to see an Iraqi "in a squat, the traditional Muslim squat thing. He had his hands up in the air." Hensley went behind him, yanked his head back in a choke, then knocked the wind out of him with a knee to the back. The Iraqi was on the ground when Redfern said, "We've got a boy."

"Well, wave him in," Hensley said.

The boy came in. He was a teenager, but he was so slight, the Americans thought he was twelve. He looked at the man on the ground. "Father," he said in English.

THE DEGREE TO WHICH HENSLEY had been keeping the snipers together by force of his own charisma and his own will and his own singular example

ing man with a tic. He blinked a lot. When he spoke, he both habitually asked for feedback—"Are you with me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"—and remained oblivious to it. He was in his early forties. He had come late to the Army and late to religious feeling, and so believed above all in the natural goodness of the American soldier. Hensley disappointed him. "I said, 'What's up? What happened with Lieutenant Didier?'" Levine remembers. "Hensley said, 'Sir, I don't want to listen to anything he fucking has to say.' I said, 'Well, some of your guys were walking around without body armor. You yourself did not have on body armor.' And he replied, 'Sir, I don't really give a shit about body armor. Anyone gets within three hundred meters of me, I'm going to kill him.' And when he told me that, that's when I realized he is not fit to continue leading soldiers in combat. That's when I realized I had a soldier who was not right mentally."

Hensley had thought that there was only one person in the world who was remotely like him, and that was Tennille. He had just met another. He called Levine "Blinky." He did not know that he had just found his perfect antagonist, and his inevitable accuser.

THEY ALL KNEW ABOUT THE LIE. And because they knew about the lie, they knew about the kill. A lie does something to a kill, even—or especially—in war. It's transformative. It changes its very nature. You can kill a man in war and never talk about it again. But if you lie about killing a man in war, you can never not talk about it again. A lie puts a kill in the realm of conscience. And that's what happened with the snipers.

Sandoval talked about the May 11 close kill.

was apparent as soon as he was relieved of duty. The sniper section fell apart. Or, to be more specific: On June 20, Alexander Flores and David Petta fell asleep, and then it fell apart. They were the only two soldiers in the section not deemed mission-ready. They were supposed to be pulling security. They fell asleep twice. They had to be disciplined. They objected. They said that if they were disciplined, they'd go to the chaplain with what they knew about May 11.

Of course, as Hensley says, "that never would have happened if I'd been there. I'd have handled it." And even Petta agrees. "I don't think it would have all come out if Hensley was there. Things would have kept going forward...."

But Hensley wasn't there. Vela and Hand were. Vela was acting leader of the sniper section and Hand was the acting scout platoon sergeant. Vela went to Hensley and asked him what to do about Flores and Petta. Hensley said, "If you don't follow through, they own you." Then he said, "They don't have anything. They weren't there. If CID [the Army's Criminal Investigation Division] comes around, don't talk to them. If you don't give them a statement, they can't touch us."

Flores and Petta went to Chaplain Dan Hardin at two o'clock on June 21, 2007. Two hours later, Levine says, "I was coming out of the operations center at the base, and I saw the chaplain standing on the railing. He said, 'Charles, I just spoke to two of your soldiers. I think you should listen to what they have to say.'" Levine did, and so did Sergeant Major Knight and Major Whiteside. With Balcavage on leave, Whiteside was the commanding officer of the battalion. "I called CID on the spot," Whiteside says. "They said, 'When do you need us there?' I said, 'Yesterday.' They said, 'It'll take a week.' I said, 'No, you don't understand. It's our own soldiers...."

Levine keeps a list of what he did next. For their own protection, he put Flores and Petta in a trailer. He ordered his First Sergeant to go to where the snipers and scouts lived and secure—confiscate—their belongings. He secured Hensley's weapon, because "if what I was told was true, then we have someone whose criteria for killing another human being is different from yours and mine." He separated Hensley from the rest of the platoon, because he believed that he had already "gotten under these guys' skins," and that he would try to influence the investigation. He was right. "I had guys doing things for me," Hensley says, "going to everybody's computer and cameras, deleting pictures in bad taste, deleting possibly incriminating stuff. I have my loyal band of men while I'm being escorted around under armed guard...."

The platoon was separated from the rest of the battalion. They were put in a big tent with wooden partitions separating the pallet beds. And they were investigated for murder. All the kills were investigated and all the men were investigated and all the men were made to feel like murderers. "Once CID comes in, all they're doing is fucking hitting on you," Richard Hand says. "They're trying to prove that something went bad. There's no innocent until proven guilty. It's: You're fucking guilty." If they were murderers, they might not have talked. Even if they were natural killers, they might not have talked. But they weren't either of those things. They were American soldiers, whose job happened to be killing people. Sure, they talked. "It was every man for himself after a while," David Petta says. And to this day, it's what gets at Hensley. "I thought my men would stay loyal till the end," he says. "I was proven wrong."

Hensley stuck to the statement he made on May 11: They killed a guy who was carrying an AK-47. Then the CID tried to break him. They brought up Tennille. "They misjudged my character, because they thought that would be something that would break me down," Hensley says. "They thought it would force some heavy emotion from me. Well, it may have. But it wasn't anything that's gonna make me admit to being the guy on the grassy knoll. I'm not that stupid. So all it did was make me angry. That's basically where they lost me, and I invoked my rights. I was like, All right, I'm out of here."

And Vela? He tried to be like Mike, he really did. His first interrogation at the hands of the CID lasted seven hours. He stuck to Hensley's version of the close kill. He was holding out on the second day when the CID's lead investigator entered the room. He asked everyone to leave and then closed the door. As Vela later testified, "He told me I would never see my family again." After fifteen minutes, the door opened. The investigator said that Evan Vela was ready to make a statement. The CID misjudged Hensley, but it was Hensley who had misjudged Vela: "He turned out to be much more of a sensitive guy than he ever was when he worked for me," he says. "And

that tells me he may have acted the way he acted around me to impress me. And, looking back, I think a lot of guys were like that. I think a lot of guys looked up to me and wanted to impress me." It is one of the few regrets he has, one of the few mistakes he'll admit: "I thought I had everything under control because I trusted my men. I was stupid. They were weak. It'll never happen again."

HE LET THE BOY GO. He does not know why. He can be merciful. That is even the word Anthony Murphy uses to describe him. "He's vicious but merciful. You can see his mercifulness, surrounded by his spirit, and his weirdness." It wasn't like he killed every person who crossed his path. It wasn't even like he killed everyone who compromised a hide site. Vela and a few other snipers had been compromised in April; Hensley told them to let the guy go. Now he told the boy to go. But, he says, "as soon as I released the boy, I knew the father was going to die."

He didn't know it before then. He didn't know it until he watched the boy leave. Then he was like, Oh, that's why I sent him away. He got on the radio. He started making calls to Didier. The father was still on the ground. He was still alive. He did not speak English, so he couldn't know what was being said. But Hensley "had already made the decision. I was committed at that point, you know? I was already in decisive mode. So I set up a little scenario in my mind. I was like, All right, I got a guy 200 meters out... then I got a guy 150 meters out... all right, I see a weapon... I got a guy 100 meters out, I'd like permission to do a close kill. It's like a tragic Shakespeare play. I have the ending—and I don't have to do anything but sit and watch—because I know."

Nobody else did. "Redfern and Sandoval are up in the pump house. They keep turning around. 'Hey, what are we gonna do, Sarge—what are we gonna do?' 'Shut the fuck up and look that way. You ain't concerned with what we're gonna do. Hand, you're on the berm, shut the fuck up and look that way. You ain't concerned with what we're gonna do.' And I was like, 'Evan, you got your pistol? He's like, 'Yeah.' I was like, 'You ready?' Ready meaning: Is there a bullet in the chamber? Is the weapon ready? Not, Are you ready mentally? And then I said, 'All right. Shoot him.' He pulled the pistol out and he shot the guy [continued on page 115]

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[continued from page 89] once in the head, and then he started making some gurgling noises—the guy was making gurgling noises like, *aaaahhckkkkk*—a really loud noise, almost as if his blood were draining back into his body cavity. I said something to the effect of, ‘That’s freaky, shoot him again.’ And Vela shot him again. Whether the bullet impacted him or not, I don’t know. But I think it did. Whatever.”

They had taken an AK-47 with them on the mission. It had figured significantly in Hensley’s stagecraft. Now he put it on the body. Or he directed one of his men to. The killing, he said, “is legitimate to me; it’s not legitimate to the law. So I got two choices. I can do something illegal, like put a gun on him, or I can go to jail for murder. I don’t know where you stand ethically on all of that, but that is what it is. And if doing something that is a little dishonest keeps me and my men from going to jail one day, I am going to be a little dishonest. If the law causes my men to get killed, the law will be broken. If lying prevents me from going to jail, I’m going to lie.”

He broke the law. He lied. He did these things, he says, not “for pleasure” or “without motive.” He did these things, he says, to save the lives of his men. He did these things because he decided that if Genei Nasir Khudair al-Janabi lived, his men would die. He did these things because Khudair al-Janabi “was making too much fucking noise.” He did these things because Khudair al-Janabi “had no right to be there, he was a bad guy, he deserved to die.” He did these things because he’d been deputized as the battalion’s “hired gun.” He did these things because he acted as the “buffer between what needed to be done and what the battalion needed to know about.” He did these things so that all his men would come home, and the terrible irony he lives with is his knowledge that because he did these things, one of his men did not.

Balcavage says it. Knight says it. Whiteside says it. So does Levine and so does Butler. They all talk about the American soldier. The American soldier kills. The American soldier sometimes kills innocents—“It’s war,” as Balcavage says, “and things happen.” The American soldier sometimes kills a lot of innocents. But the American soldier never *murders* them. What’s the difference? The difference is what makes us different. The difference is what allows Whiteside to avow, “We’re Americans. We’re still the good guys.” The difference, says Balcavage, “is what allows us to walk away from chaotic conflict and still live with ourselves.” The difference, says Butler, is that the Army, despite its lethal capacities, “tries to live by Judeo-Christian values.” And that difference, all these officers say, is what Michael Hensley—with his difference—tried to erase. It is one thing to kill an Iraqi. It’s another to resort to what Balcavage calls “deliberate, well-thought-out murder.” It is another still to lie about it and then, in Levine’s words, “twist the minds of a bunch of young American soldiers” in an

effort to justify it.

Levine, then, had several interests to protect when he preferred murder charges against Sergeant Michael Hensley (three counts premeditated, related to the killings of April 14, April 27, and May 11, 2007), Sergeant Evan Vela (one count premeditated, related to the close kill of May 11), and Specialist Jorge Sandoval (two counts premeditated, related to the close kill of May 11—when he gave Evan Vela the 9 mil—and also to his April 27 killing of the man in the field with the sickle).

For one, he had to protect the surge. He had to demonstrate to the Iraqis that the Army was willing to do the right thing. Indeed, when the May 11 close kill was just starting to be investigated, the engineer who was the go-between for Balcavage and Sheik Sabah went to Balcavage and told him that he had to go talk with the sheik and other local leaders about how the Army was handling the matter. “So I met with them,” Balcavage says. “And I told them the truth. I told them we were investigating the accusations. What I was surprised at was how well just telling them that we were investigating stymied the negative impact. I thought the impact was going to be retributive attacks on our guys because of perceived injustice—perceived injustice in a war of injustice over there. Little did we know that the Sunni awakening in our area was just around the corner.” Little did he know that in a month he would be paying Sheik Sabah and his tribe for every IED they removed from the roads his soldiers traveled.

Ultimately, though, the charge sheets that Levine signed were not about Iraqis. They were about Americans. They were about Hensley and his effect on what’s known in the Army as “good order and discipline.” They were about what Balcavage calls Hensley’s “cult of personality.” They were about the near-mutiny that Hensley inspired—some of the charges preferred against him had to do with his disobedience and disrespect of Lieutenant Matthew Didier—and the fact that the entire scout platoon, after being investigated, was then disbanded, and all but five of its thirty men scattered all over the battalion. The Army had unleashed Hensley. It unleashed a soldier who told me, “Hey, it was a business. I had a quality product, and I was selling cheaper than the competition. I don’t think anybody was disappointed.” It unleashed Hensley as it unleashed death itself, and in its prosecution of Hensley and Vela and Sandoval it was trying to undo what it had done. It failed utterly. Not only because the Army made the mistake of underestimating him and his influence when it did put him on trial; but rather because I have spoken with many enlisted American soldiers—hell, many Americans—in the course of reporting this story, and I have yet to meet a single one who says that Michael Hensley did anything wrong.

The first trial was Sandoval’s. It was held in September 2007. Evan Vela was given testimonial immunity and forced to take the stand. He recounted the killing of Khudair al-Janabi in

graphic detail and came apart emotionally while doing so. He made it clear that Hensley had given the order. He made it clear that he had pulled the trigger—or at least that the 9 mil was in his hand while the trigger was pulled. Sandoval was acquitted of murder but convicted of planting command wire in the April 27 kill.

The second trial was Hensley’s. It was held in November. Hensley was aware of how Vela had testified in the Sandoval trial. He was looking at life without parole, and he figured he’d have to take the stand to save himself. But he says that while he and Vela were in pretrial confinement in Kuwait, they managed to do what they were forbidden to do, and communicate. He says that before the trial, Evan got him a note, saying it was going to be all right. And it was. Before Evan Vela took the stand in the trial of Michael Hensley, he ripped all the patches off his uniform except the American flag; in what his lawyer calls “a PTSD episode,” he went blank. He testified that he had no memory of Hensley ordering him to shoot Khudair al-Janabi and doesn’t know if he did. Hensley’s lawyer argued that Evan Vela shot and killed the man for reasons only Evan Vela knows. Hensley was acquitted of all three counts of premeditated murder and convicted instead on charges of planting the AK-47 and disrespecting a commanding officer. He was sentenced to time served.

The final trial was Vela’s. It was held in February 2008. Hensley testified. He had nothing to lose. He had been acquitted. So he was, as he says, “willing to play the monster” for Vela’s military jury. He admitted giving Vela the order to shoot Khudair al-Janabi. He also spoke, for the first time, of seeing armed Iraqis approaching the hide site and refined his argument that the close kill was a legitimate act of self-defense. It is not only the one argument he offers; it is also the only one he accepts. Everything else he rejects, including the gist of Vela’s defense. Extreme sleep deprivation? Dehydration? PTSD? The pressure to get more kills? *No*. They’re excuses. They’re apologies. They’re explanations. They make it seem like he and Vela and the rest of them did something wrong. They didn’t. Vela followed an order. How could he have possibly known it was an unlawful order when the person giving it was Michael Hensley? How could he have known it might be murder when the person asking him to kill had been given the power of life and death?

He has no regrets, other than his “regret that some of my men might think they did something wrong,” and another one he voiced at the trial, after Vela was convicted of unpremeditated murder and sentenced to ten years in Leavenworth. Hensley was angry. And when he saw the boy he’d let go at the hide site on May 11, he said, “Hey, kid, how’s your father?” Then he said: “I should have dumped him in the river, along with you and the rest of your family.”

Not quite a month after Evan Vela’s conviction for murder, his wife, Alyssa Carnahan, with her baby Blair in the car seat, picks up Michael Hensley at his apartment, and they drive to-

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gether to Fort Richardson. She picks him up because he doesn't have a car that works, and because he's been helping her out. He has been helping her out, particularly, with the Army. Alyssa does not like the Army. The Army asked her husband to kill and then sent him to jail for murder. She has asked the Army to keep paying Evan and to keep providing her family with benefits pending the outcome of Evan's appeal. The Army turned her down. She has no money. She is moving, however, to Leavenworth, to be closer to Evan, and the Army owes her moving expenses. Hensley is escorting her to the base because he knows how to talk to these fucking people. It seems like a bad idea—the wife of a convicted murderer enlisting as an ally a notoriously unconvicted one—but Hensley knows how the Army works. He knows how to get things done. He makes the Army uncomfortable, and he knows that if there's anything the Army doesn't like, it's being uncomfortable. Sure enough, once he shows up with Alyssa, in his black leather jacket and his sideburns and his boots, it's a situation, and the Army has to stop it. Alyssa gets paid. Hensley wins.

He always does. That's why, later that night, he's sitting in a hotel bar with Alyssa Carnahan and Josh Michaud, drinking White Russians in his black leather jacket. Alyssa has every reason in the world to hate him; it's because of Hensley that her husband is in jail. She doesn't. She trusts him. Joshua Michaud, one of the youngest of Hensley's snipers, has every reason to hate him; it's because of Hensley that he and the rest of the snipers were investigated and called murderers. He doesn't. He idolizes him. And it's like this with everybody: Evan Vela's father; Evan Vela's lawyer; Sergeant Anthony Murphy; Sergeant Richard Hand; even the informer, the whistle-blower, David Petta. Everybody likes Mike. More to the point, everybody likes Mike, so nobody thinks that killing an Iraqi in a hide site was a crime worth prosecuting American soldiers for. Everybody likes Mike, and to like Mike is to like him past a certain point of conscience. It's almost a continuation of Iraq; He has them all on his side, against the Army. There is only one of his men he's worried about, and that's Evan Vela. He's worried about him because he can't get to him; he's worried about him because someone else can. It's what haunts him, and now, as he switches from White Russians to Long Island iced teas, he tells Alyssa, tells us, his silent and rapt audience, what he told her husband before he went to jail. Hensley was in Iraq to testify, but he stayed in Iraq—he missed his plane home—to have this moment with Evan as he was being led away to serve his time. And what he told him was: "They're going to try to change your mind in prison. They're going to try to make you say you did something wrong. They might even make you say it in order to get parole. So say it. Don't ever worry about what I think. It doesn't matter what you say, because I know what you really think. You'll never have to apologize to me." ¶

Cory Booker