

## No Discharge in the War

“There’s no discharge in the war...” An ode to the late Rudyard Kipling, this statement captures the enduring impact war has on a person. War is a subjective, with no two people having identical realities. I offer my reflections on the beauty of war—a perspective nearly lost in cinema and literature.

I deployed to the Middle East on two occasions: once to Iraq in 2009 and once to Afghanistan in 2013. Each deployment was uniquely challenging. Aside from the occasional rain, the horizon of the Middle East offers the clearest skies I have ever seen. The daytime skies are the most vibrant of blues and the nights are reminiscent of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. In Afghanistan, the clarity provided an extraordinary advantage in terms of air superiority. I was part of a small team of Marines supporting the Georgian Army. Our job was to control the air support.

What’s interesting, and something the movies always get wrong, is the most common experience of war: boredom. This is quite the factor to contend with. Boredom begets complacency, which begets failure of the mission. Our days were filled with patrols and dodging incoming indirect fire, but extended periods passed without excitement. It was almost as if an unspoken parlay existed with mutual agreement to let the other sleep at night. Entertainment was a rare commodity, which usually meant some version of maintenance or rehearsals. But you can only do that so much before you reach diminishing returns.

One day, my dear friend Mike and I found a baseball and two gloves in a storage container. This was such a welcome surprise, but I found myself wondering what the journey was like for these relics. At this time in the war, we were holding the farthest northern patrol base in the province which brought many distinctive encounters.

We were honored to have one of the “hottest” landing zones in the country which hosted a near-daily barrage of mortars. The slap of indirect fire is a haunting metric to judge just how skilled your enemy is, and how dedicated they are to their craft. Our team was tasked with operating this LZ, so we were quite familiar with it. Despite the incredible risk, we took the gloves and baseball to the LZ to play catch, something I had not done since I was about 10 years old.

It was late afternoon, 5:00 or so, long after our “parlay” was in effect. Each evening, I would watch the sunset, unobstructed by a lack of a roof over our common area. The view was breathtaking and I witnessed it daily. We played catch for about 30 minutes for several nights until our elder age of mid-twenties caught up to us. We talked and enjoyed the sunset, reminiscing about home. Mike and I had the unique privilege of being close friends

long before this deployment, so conversation came easy to us. The familiar sound of the ball smacking inside the glove was a reminder of home and America's pastime—a welcome respite from our current reality.

We went to play catch as we had been doing. All was going well until Mike threw a wild pitch over my head, a fact he still debates today. The sunset was well underway and unfortunately, the weathered baseball blended seamlessly into the heavy rocks surrounding the fractured concrete landing zone. We searched until the light was gone, but to no avail. The ball was lost, as was our escape from reality. In many ways, it paralleled the wartime experience; things go well until they don't. Unfortunately, we only had one baseball, leaving behind two gloves with little purpose.

Months later, we were still searching for the ball. Our time in this war was ending, with orders to retrograde from the patrol base. This meant a long convoy back to the larger base, Camp Leatherneck. I recall leaving the patrol base thinking about the baseball. I looked back at the patrol base, watching it shrink in the distance. I finally understood what Tom Hanks' character felt when he lost Wilson in *Cast Away*. It is hard not to wonder what came of *our* Wilson. The patrol base was taken over by our opposition shortly after our departure, and for a moment I felt a bit lost and without purpose - much like the remaining gloves - lamenting the abandonment of the baseball.

Kipling was right. There is no discharge in the war. There simply is no end, not for everyone. In this case, the baseball was left behind as we moved on, not unlike the structures we erected, or the souls that were lost along the way. Somewhere north of Camp Leatherneck, under skies that never cease to amaze, lies the scuffed baseball, lying amongst the rubble of my memories. Not everyone makes it back. There is no discharge in the war.