

*Alex Vernon*

## Desert Farewell

**K**atie has sandwiched her sleeping bag between her back and the wall of the crowded, unfurnished apartment. The pieces of her disassembled .45 pistol gather on a rag in her lap, lolling in the draw between her thighs.

The females in her Quartermaster battalion headquarters company share these third-floor quarters in a drab cluster of indistinguishable buildings that is Khobar Towers, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Operation Desert Storm is over; Operation Desert Farewell has begun.

Tomorrow morning the battalion's sortie will lift away from the King Abdul Aziz Air Base airfield. They are headed home. What the army calls redeployment, her fellow lieutenants call repatriation.

Tamam, *the Arabs say*. It is ended.

A lieutenant colonel friend of mine, shortly after my own repatriation from the Gulf War in late March 1991, told me that the Saudi government had built Khobar to provide Bedouins a permanent home. Its availability for American troops on their way home demonstrates the success of that program.

I didn't think anything in particular about Khobar during my short stay as I waited for the chartered commercial flight back to the states. Five and a half years later, on 25 June 1996, a truck bomb took out part of Khobar, killing nineteen American service personnel, injuring 260 more.

*Lieutenant Katie Richardson, sitting on her desert camouflage uniform blouse, cleans the weapon for the last time. She puts down the rod brush and picks up the rag. She has cleaned it every day for the last six months, throughout Desert*

*Shield, the forty-day air war, the four-day ground war, and the few weeks after the war sitting in Iraq during the cease-fire. Always reassembling, always knowing that her weapon would fire but also that the sand had beaten her. Because she never could get all of it. Then she cleaned to protect herself. Now she cleans for the customs inspectors. The Saudis do not allow the smuggling of a single sacred grain.*

*Dust. Powder. Finer than talcum. Coats and lines everything. Vehicles, weapons, food, bodies.*

*She empties her three magazines to wipe off each round.*

*Earlier in the day she had commandeered the only bathroom on the floor for nearly an hour. In the past months her twenty-three year old body had changed. She knows she has lost weight, but she feels bigger, more substantial.*

*She never could get all of it. In her nostrils, in her ears, her saliva, and down there. For six months she smelled herself every time she bent to remove her boots at night. From when she first noticed it after being in country only a week, the smell gradually sharpened. Occasional bathing had afforded temporary relief, but the smell somehow deepened. It wasn't hers, but it was her.*

Sand and sun and not much else. "Christ, sir," one of my sergeants said to me our first night living on our tanks in the open desert, "there's nothing to do here but die." Over the next few months we would see alongside the dirt and hardball roads in Saudi Arabia the carcasses of sheep and camels, of automobiles and machines, that had finally quit. We saw them later too, in Iraq, only these were tanks and personnel carriers either abandoned by Iraqi soldiers as a real enemy pressed, or evicted of occupants by sabot, HEAT, and 25 mike-mike rounds, and TOW and copperhead missiles. I even came across a Chevy Beretta, less one hubcap, in a dug-in position at a deserted Republican Guard field hospital.

And people too, or carcasses thereof. Soldiers like ourselves.

*Tonight Katie Richardson dips her foot into the cool pool that is her war's end. She has finished her .45. It no longer shines. The bluing had faded long before she had first signed for the weapon—now the surface is worn, pocked, and flecked black. She returns it to the black shoulder holster. Steps away. Steps over sprawled bodies, duffel bags, Kevlar helmets, and flak vests on her way to the balcony.*

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She had a kid sister, didn't she? Because she certainly acted like an older sister. Determined and decisive, outgoing, and protective. She and I had shared one Engineering and two English classes at West Point. Our U.S. Military Academy class, only the ninth in history to have them, was ten percent women. Though she and I had been engineering lab partners, I did not know her well. She liked to sit in class with legs and arms crossed.

Lynn is the name of the younger sister I've imagined. The one with the looks, the natural talents, the attention. With the generous lips, the slight, boyish hips the boys admired. With hair falling straight down past the shoulders smooth and black and long against the spine. Who won the university scholarships. Who openly shared her dreams, teasing others, men and women alike, with their envy. Who always commanded a crowd's center like a Maypole, straight and sure. In a world that did not confuse sexuality with uniform and position.

*Katie stares out from the balcony across the Khobar complex. The plunging sun makes a stark ripple of the horizon; the other apartment towers stand against yet another magnificently orange Arabic twilight.*

Most certainly she had a boyfriend, or a fiancé. I've heard he was in the army also. Maybe he was a tank platoon leader, like me. Maybe he didn't deploy, and had missed the big one. Maybe he cheated on her. Maybe he was enlisted. As if that would explain anything.

I see her at the Academy. A professor has asked her to escort a visiting psychologist of some eminence around the barracks. She has brought the psychologist to a plebe room, having told the plebes that morning to ensure the room was spotless, in Saturday morning inspection condition even though it was only Tuesday. The plebes stand at attention in their dreary gray uniforms; she does not put them at ease. They answer the three polite questions posed by the psychologist with a "Yes, sir," one of their four permitted responses. On perusing the medicine cabinet shelves—with each cadet's half an exact copy of the other, identical items in identical places on the same of three shelves, even same-colored toothbrushes (blue) with their bristle ends pointing toward the room door—the psychologist asks, "Do all the medicine cabinets look like this? It's the largest obsessive-compulsive complex I've ever seen."

She reflexes a social laugh, holds her watch high to check the time, and hurries the psychologist out of the room: "We don't want to miss lunch formation."

"Be straight or be gone, ma'am," the plebes pop the cadet company motto after her.

"Be straight," she echoes over her shoulder. Be straight indeed. On their mirrored medicine cabinet door she had spied a smudge. A *smudge*, after she had *told* them *that morning* she wanted their room *perfect* for the visitor. Damn *boneheads*. If only she had inspected the room before meeting up with the psychologist. Walking to formation, she struggles to stay in the conversation him, her head too engrossed in the one-way conversation she's going to have after lunch with the two *smacks*. They won't dick her again.

Just now they pass her and the psychologist in that stiff-bodied, hurried pace required of plebes called pinging. "Be straight or be gone, ma'am." "Be straight or be gone, ma'am." They look like race-walkers frozen from the waist up in the position of attention.

"Be straight."

But this too is invention, because while she may have played escort for part of the day, I showed the psychologist, who was actually a woman, the plebe room. I heard the obsessive-compulsive remark, and noticed no smudge.

*Sponge-like Katie had absorbed the roaring forces. Saturated and desiccated. For eight months she was tossed about by events, a bit of sand blown desultorily at a sultan's sneeze or a general's sigh; or a dust devil, formed, then suspended in its nervous whirlings, until finally dissipated on some tacit command. Tossed, jostled, and bruised. Anger and dismay and struggle at first (held inside so the soldiers didn't see), then submission. History, the desert, rolls and catches, pulling bodies under and tossing shells back up.*

History.

My own division avoided Kuwait altogether and instead attacked into Iraq west of the Iraqi army's westernmost unit, bypassing our enemy's defenses by going around them to strike deep into his rear. Our envelopment severed all his supply avenues into, and escape avenues out of, Kuwait. The defensive positions we came upon were oriented southeast, toward Kuwait; we rolled him up from the west, sometimes from the northwest. He was facing the wrong way. Had no idea we were coming.

Mistook our artillery preps for yet another round of air force bombs. When we hit them, Iraqis abandoned their posts and fled into the desert, Iraqis surrendered to us, in droves. The units that did put up a fight had very little fight in them.

The ground war lasted 100 hours with a miraculously low number of U.S. casualties. The mother of all battles had become the mother of all routs.

I imagine her as a signal officer in my division, two days after the cease-fire went into effect on 28 February (though she might not have known the date, the days having blurred together in the unprecedented rapidity of our attack). Two days into the cease-fire—fire only if fired upon—and still in southern Iraq, she and her driver have been sent forward to deliver a replacement cable for an infantry brigade's TACSAT, a portable tactical satellite dish for maintaining communication across the vast desert battlefield. The brigade was expecting a fight; there was some urgency. A captain at the brigade tactical operations center where she delivered the cable told her she ought to stick around to "see the show." The scout platoons from the brigade's three battalions, he explained, had passed the night watching and reporting Iraqi convoys streaming north toward Baghdad, toward safety. Shortly after 0800 an Iraqi BMP realized it was being overwatched, panicked, fired a sagger anti-tank missile at a Bradley, missed, and was destroyed by return fire. Another BMP and two T-72 tanks fired. Missed. Were destroyed, by two M1A1 tanks. Five minutes later, four more BMPs, and two more T-72s. The engagement lasted eleven minutes—so the captain had told her while she swapped out the cables for the TACSAT. "Stick around and see the show." She declined. Had to get back.

After leaving she got herself and her driver L-I-D: lost in the desert. It should have been simple, just head south across the featureless three kilometers on the map, hit the secondary east-west road and turn west to her battalion's new location. Only those featureless three kilometers on the map hid a mess of wadis and berms, which turned them around and around until they didn't know south from northwest from south-southeast. Fucking 1:50,000 maps. Twenty meter contour lines don't show shit for terrain. Useless fucking maps. She flipped through the pages of her CEOI to find the infantry brigade's frequency and call signs, hoping that the tactical operations center could talk her back to its location or point her toward her own battalion; meanwhile her driver took them up a rise to gain a better vantage. On the way up, the thuds and ground vibrations of firing artillery usurped the air behind them.

She couldn't see everything of what was happening in the oil field below, but what she couldn't see she heard over the brigade's radio net.

A shot hadn't been fired for over forty minutes. The Iraqis had been streaming northward to gain a causeway to cross the canal when the first rounds fell. Scatterable mines from overhead bursts scattered along the causeway to block it, while arty fell on the vehicles bottlenecking toward the causeway and also on the southern end of the Iraqi formation. Vehicles in the south broke formation and crowded north. Vehicles in the north tried to make the single-lane mine-cluttered causeway anyway—none did—or tried to turn back south. Or east or west into the lowland marsh, where they got stuck. Or into one another, or those coming from the south. Or exploded. After the artillery, an Apache attack helicopter battalion swept the area one company at a time, until its last company expended its last Hellfire air-to-ground missile. Through her binos she watched Iraqis abandon their vehicles and scramble into the marsh, saw a T-72 turret blown off its hull and spin through the air to land atop and crush a truck 100 meters away. Vehicles flipped over. Caught on fire. Some turned southwest toward solid ground only to be stopped by direct fire from Bradleys and Abrams positioned to deny that egress. When the Apaches had finished their run, the brigade commander released the tank battalion waiting in the south, like race horses in the gate, who then burst up the east road toward the causeway destroying whatever wasn't already destroyed, and at the causeway turned around to come down the west road destroying whatever wasn't already destroyed, receiving no enemy fire whatsoever and losing only one American tank in the process, when it drove too close to a burning Iraqi armored vehicle, and its tread and the gear hanging off the turret caught on fire. The soldiers, the American crew that is, escaped unharmed.

"Astounding . . . astounding," the brigade commander broadcast.

Six hours from when the first artillery round left the tube to when the tank battalion resumed its original defensive positions and called for a resupply of fuel and ammunition. Six hours and nearly one thousand destroyed vehicles later. She remembered the division commander's words when he landed in his Blackhawk helicopter for an unannounced congratulatory visit to her unit the day of the cease-fire:

"I only wish we had had three more hours. In three more hours we would have met and annihilated his last operational division. Would have knocked the fourth largest army in the world back to the stone age."

She remembered how we had tried anyway, with an artillery barrage that began at 0400, minutes after she learned of the upcoming 0500 cease-fire, and concluded nicely at 0458. She would never, could never forget the streaking MLRS missiles' exhaust trails overhead stabbing like white-gold tines the dark morning sky.

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She remembered the Iraqi POW she had interrogated two days into the ground offensive, a captain who spoke in unhalting English. He had surprised her by asking where she was from in the states, then told her about his degree in sociology from the University of Oklahoma, about his dream of returning to Columbia for his next degree, and about how his superiors had cut his Achilles' tendon to prevent him from running away. This was the "fucking raghead" for whom she had sweated in her gas mask two hours every other day for the past six months? For whom she had spent Christmas day waiting in line for a phone three hours in a small sandstorm instead of lounging in her parents' living room? This was the enemy?

Forty minutes and six hours later. She had forgotten to eat her lunch. Her driver slid her an MRE across the Humvee hood. Dehydrated pork patty. She couldn't eat it. They knew where they were now, having oriented themselves and their maps on the wreckage below. They drove back to the battalion and maintained their direction by keeping the sounds of secondary explosions, the columns of rising smoke, and the glow of it all over their left shoulders.

What she had witnessed resembled less a battle than her driver's story of fishing, by dropping a hand grenade in the swimming hole. Throughout Desert Shield she had resented comparisons of fighting the modern high-tech war with playing video and arcade games, merely a matter of joysticks and buttons. But watching this battle she pictured a brigade commander a teenager who couldn't wait to enter his name in the machine's honor roll beside the game's high score.

It may be that her lover was one of the infantrymen directing the attack; maybe he was the one who called her for the TACSAT cable because he knew she could deliver it quickly, the captain who told her to stick around for the show. Maybe she learned something else from him, or about him, something she hadn't wanted to hear, something she couldn't bring herself to bear.

It may be that, at Khobar Towers on her way home, some news from home finally caught up with her. News that would keep her away.

Who can tell her story? History can't. I can't. Hearsay can't. She can't.

*Katie inserts the magazine, chambers a round, and switches the safety. She places the weapon in her mouth, the nub sight hooked behind her teeth, the faded bluing meeting forgotten ruby red as her lips clamp tight. Her eyes close, all secure. She is remembering the penny drill from basic marksmanship instruction during cadet basic training: Prone position, with M16. When you achieve a good sight picture, your buddy places the penny on the flash suppressor at the end of the rifle. If you do it right, the penny won't fall when the weapon fired. "Don't pull the trigger," the upperclass cadet would coach, in his tight bright gold tee-shirt. "Breathe in, now hold it. And squeeze. Slowly. The shot should surprise you."*

*The horizon trembles away. The sun is submerged now beneath the sand.*

I've been told that women don't traditionally use guns. Drugs, car exhaust, jumping, drowning, the occasional wrist slitting. But she wasn't a woman, she was a soldier . . . you know what I mean.

I am aware of three other suicide attempts by American soldiers in our war. Two happened before the ground war: a soldier, sex and rank unspecified, from a Military Intelligence unit, and a female lieutenant from a medical unit. Neither succeeded.

The third attempt occurred, like hers, after the war, on the way home. And like her, this soldier succeeded. He was an enlisted man though, and like myself a combat soldier. On his way home. An infantryman. *Hoo-ah.*

*A female captain wakes to the shot. She goes to her own duffel bag for a blanket, on the way waking the nearest NCO to fetch the battalion commander where he sleeps on one of the men's floors below. She returns to the balcony and covers the body.*

During the air war against Iraq prior to our launching the largest tank battle in history, I learned of a civilian, a friend of another officer, who had committed suicide back home in Georgia. The news interrupted my marking operational graphics on my maps for the upcoming ground offensive. The very word, *suicide*, had passed out of my vocabulary months before. In our simple world of meals and mail call and desert and the enemy, survival suffused everything. That Desert Storm night I concluded that only when a society forgets the fight for life, when it has



gotten what it wants, when it has forgotten that it isn't in control and so panics when forced to remember, can its people turn to suicide. The pause passed, the word flitted away again, and I returned to my maps.

*On the plane the commander will try to write Second Lieutenant Katie Richardson's family. He won't know what to say. Several rows behind him meanwhile the captain, a staff officer, will open her green army notebook with its personnel and equipment data and operations orders, with its tick marks in the front inside flap for each day she had survived the desert, and, on a blank page, begin to sketch, a picture of the moment no one saw, of the woman, not the body, on the balcony.*

That Desert Storm night I did not remember to think about my mother's father, who a year after his wife's death from cancer took his own life with a shotgun. My mother was well along in her pregnancy with me at the time; she has not forgiven him his selfishness, that he could not think beyond himself, to her, or to me. She has also credited me with her emotional survival and well-being—were I not on the way, and then had she not had my every need and absolute dependency occupying her days, she might not have held herself together. A born hero I was, lying helpless in my mother's lap. The minister at my parents' church issued her fair warning: because of her father's last act she too would always tote suicide in her bag of life tricks. He had made it an option. A possibility.

Several years after the Gulf War—a hero again, so people told me, told all of us when we came home—I learned how my father found the body. When no one answered the door, dad sent mom back to the car. Were my two older brothers there? He tried the back door. Eventually crawled through a window. And came out the front door. I was as surprised by dad's story as by his calling the grandfather I never met by his first name, Cay. Surprised because in my late twenties I had only known the man's family nickname, Papa, and had not known that from him I have my middle name. Cay. Indirectly speaking, my mother bore me to bear him.

That Desert Storm night I dismissed the notion with easy conclusion, the pause passed, the word flitted away again, and I returned to my maps.

Alex Vernon's first book, *The Eyes of Orion: Five Tank Lieutenants in the Persian Gulf War* (Kent State University Press, 1999), is a collaborative memoir. His most recent work, "Staging Violence in West's *The Day of the Locust* and Shepard's *True West*," will appear in the *South Atlantic Review* (Winter 2000). He is currently a teaching fellow and PhD candidate in English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.