

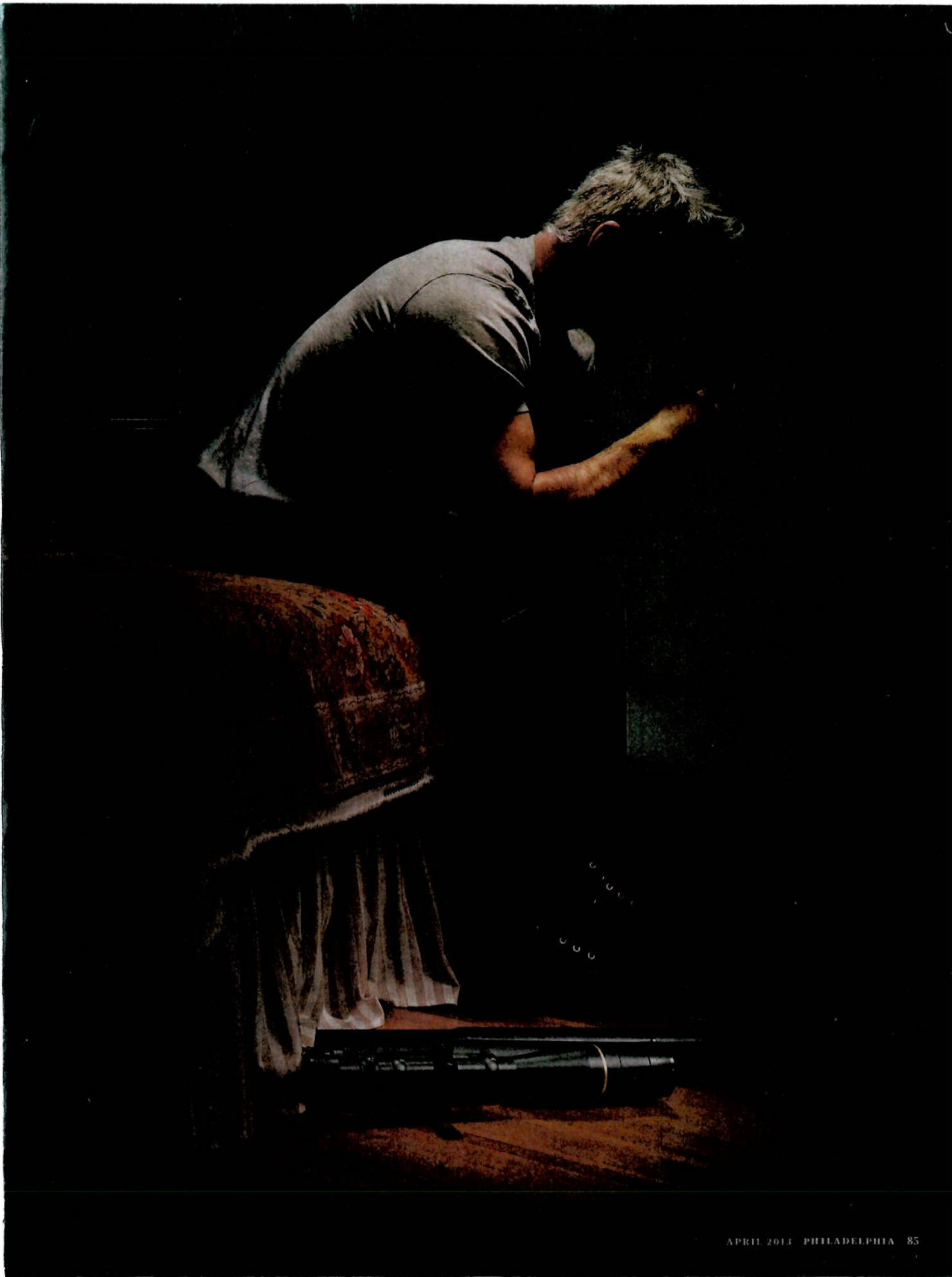


THE WAR
WITHIN

He's a dad and landscaper in suburban Philadelphia, the kind of friendly guy you'd go have a beer with. But before that, he was a Marine assassin, one who estimates he killed more than 2,200 enemy soldiers while fighting our wars in the Middle East. The government calls him a hero. He thinks he's going to Hell.

BY ANTHONY L. GARGANO

MODEL PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN BARKAT
STYLING BY AMANDA LIPTOCK





Before he sets to work, the man in the tree will steal a moment to concoct a deal that his Maker will find reasonable, and he takes to bargaining out loud. Because certainly there can be no better confessional than atop a stately old oak that rises upright some 90 feet, straight toward his Maker's lap. Proximity, the man believes, can't hurt. So he doesn't so much speak the words as hurtle them out and up. He wonders if they ever reach their destination, before duty beckons and he must return to paring the limbs of one of his Maker's trees ruffled by his Maker's most recent storm.

Sometime between dusk and blackness, after he has ordered home everyone else on the job, the Tree Pruner begins his climb down, moving like a squirrel, leaving only the faint rustling of leaves. The Tree Pruner learned long ago how to melt into his environs and become invisible—*Yes, sir, I am a cloud in a cottonball, sir.*

That he can scale a tree of great heights as though it's a staircase holds little self-sway. Anything in life, he says, can become a neat parlor trick with the proper training.

The Tree Pruner and six friends recently spent a weekend in the woods, bow-hunting for deer. He killed five, and his buddies together killed zero. As he sliced into an animal, cutting off the head and opening up the belly with a big knife, he remembered his first time. Back in 1986, he was part of a four-man team dropped deep in the Oregon timberland without food or supplies, expected to live off the land for several weeks as a part of forest

training. For days, the group subsisted on leaves and berries and worms; then he killed a deer. Officially responsible for cutting up the body, he hurled all over the carcass, destroying a deer feast. The look of disappointment on the other men's faces sent him scurrying back into the brush alone, determined. Nearly five hours later he returned, dragging another dead deer.

In the Marines, you lose your cookies first, then your cowardice. Later, of course, you'll lose the ability to sleep, and that's what plagues the Tree Pruner now. That's why he pushes well past everyone else's work whistle, desperately seeking a benefit that far surpasses his 50 percent stake in the landscaping company. What he seeks is fatigue. The kind that will deepen following a hot shower and a hot meal and some nuzzle time with his wife and small daughter, when he will sleep to overtake him. Sometimes he overdoes it, and his limbs lie heavy with ache and his back whines, and that only stirs his mind. Because if he thinks about sleep, he'll grow anxious over what looms in sleep, and then he can't sleep.

His wife feels warm next to him. Will the faces return once he drifts off? The Tree Pruner begs his Maker to keep them away, but too many nights they reappear, hundreds of them, blinking before him one by one with their saddle-brown complexions, like a slide show. He sees their faces through the scope of his rifle, in exaggerated detail that exposes every crease, pockmark and open pore. Their expressions vary. Some look to be pleading, others frozen in terror. Some sneer, and he swears he can smell their sour breath, even though in real life he was far away, tucked in a hole in the sand, under cover. He never heard their shrieks of terror. There was no such climax in the sort of death that he delivered. Just a thud, then silence.

He dreams many awful things—usually, fractured scenes of war that he once witnessed, theatrical and bloody. And those faces. He wonders sometimes if they're the faces he really saw in the scope, and whether they are bent on driving him mad, some sort of requital from the afterlife.

Let's haunt the motherfucker who killed us.

When they jar him awake, he fumbles in the dark for his sweats and sneakers, slips from the house, then drives to an all-night gym to lift weights. Intellectually, he knows he's pawing scars in his sleep. The Pruner has never been diagnosed, but some call what curses him dream anxiety disorder, or nightmare disorder. The root cause isn't difficult to diagnose. The Tree Pruner thinks he's going to Hell.

EVEN IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE TREE PRUNER PERSONALLY, YOU know his type. He's 49, with bright hazel eyes, brown hair cropped

short, a small, slightly turned-up nose, and a thin face that angles downward, toward a strong chin that resembles the period below an exclamation point. He keeps incredibly fit. He looks the way he did in a photo taken of him in Kuwait during the Gulf War some 22 years ago, which he texted to me with the caption *Sick, mean-looking motherfucker, huh? I was back then. Mean as a junkyard dog.*

The Tree Pruner lives with his wife and seven-year-old daughter in a leafy development in the western suburbs. He's the man two doors down who always waves when he's by the curb retrieving his mail, who plows your driveway after the snowstorm without you asking, who buys Girl Scout cookies, and cupcakes for the school, and his fair share of whatever else the kids are hawking. If two men with badges knocked at your door and asked you to tell them everything you knew about this man, you'd say he was a sport and that he keeps a fine yard. And that he's pleasant—always, always pleasant.

What you don't know about the Tree Pruner is that he estimates he killed 2,200 people while fighting for the United States, directly and with Tomahawk missiles. During his days as a Marine sniper—which only recently ended after several part-time covert missions—he spilled enough blood to pitch a pond.

He wanders among us now armed with a brave face, while inside he is bleeding for his past sins. Ignorance is bliss, because the burden of knowing is bestial. We pat him on the head for the doings designed to keep chaos from our front doors, but his worry is that our tab is his immortal soul. Sleep tight, because the Tree Pruner doesn't.

He has no regrets. He rationalizes that somebody has to become a sharp-shooting wielder of death in the name of country, to answer to the code name RAVEN.

I can't tell you his name, because the Tree Pruner doesn't want you to know who he is, what he did, what haunts him. But you

have always known him. He grew up in Lafayette Hill, the youngest of four boys, born six years after the third son. He was the kid next door who looked for anything to climb or jump out of, the one you could goad into almost anything. Quite the daredevil, forever breaking bones or getting stitched up, but he never found any of the serious trouble that you fear for boys. He was a playground scrapper, usually for a cause.

He'll tell you that his childhood was idyllic, and perhaps that's why he chose to protect such a way of life. His mother worked part-time as a legal secretary, but was always there to drive the boys to practice and make her famous creamed chicken over Pepperidge Farm pastry shells. His father worked for IBM during the day, as a bartender some nights and at a beer distributor on Saturdays and Sundays. He was the Pruner's best friend. He'd also been a Marine, one who earned a Purple Heart after another soldier, buzzed on beer, knocked him off the side of an aircraft carrier into the Pacific Ocean and a propeller chopped off a quarter of his heel.

When the Tree Pruner was eight, his father took him for an afternoon of shooting, and the old Marine knew immediately, after the kid tilted his head, squinted, and fired mouse-hole shots, that his boy had the eye; he pressed the trigger slowly, applying pressure in incremental degrees, painstakingly, patient, proving he had the gift of definitude. The Tree Pruner still wonders aloud to his Maker: Why such a gift? Why couldn't he have gotten something more conducive to, say, football? He attended West

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Chester University on a football scholarship and returned punts his freshman year. Beer and pot and bad grades doomed him after one year.

The Tree Pruner's father banished him from the house. A day later, the lost boy hitchhiked along Ridge Pike to Norristown and enlisted in the Marines as a 2531 Field Radio Operator; by February 1985, he was in Parris Island, South Carolina, for basic training. The brass quickly learned of his gift; intense specialized training soon followed. He was taught how to ration a dehydrated pork patty into pieces the size of pixels. How to dig a six-foot hole with an undersized shovel. How to skim a foreign land for survival and disappear into its terrain.

By January 1991, the Tree Pruner was deployed to Kuwait for Operation Desert Storm. The Tree Pruner roamed the desert floor with his recon team, picking off Iraqi officers one lethal shot at a time. These are the types of shots that now haunt him.

On an early December morning, I awoke to a series of text messages from the Tree Pruner. It was shortly before sunrise. He explained that he had been up all night again. As sort of ersatz therapy, I had suggested he jot down some of his remembrances from the war. He read them to me over the phone.

My recon team consisted of Will, a simple man who loved to hunt and fish and acted as our main gunner; Sam, a quiet but good Marine; and Greg, my spotter, a man of great muscle who carried a 50-caliber machine gun that weighed 60 pounds fully loaded. He is the strongest man physically that I have ever known. He is a single father now. My wife and I watch his daughter a couple of times a week.

Tomahawk missiles can blow up a Volkswagen 56 miles from a warship; one missile took out 400 Iraqis at once. Imagine yourself buried up to your eyeballs in sand, watching body parts flying over your head. Legs, arms, heads, everything in between. We walked through piles and piles of dead men. I'll never forget the smell. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced. We pushed on and saw a whole battalion retreating. We felt good at that point, but still on edge and very much focused. I called in another Tomahawk, told the ship our coordinates and said,

"Please, don't be short." Another missile came in. Another 300 to 400 Iraqis dead.

We trudged through that mess and still the smell was unbelievably bad. That's when we dug in. We were tired. It was our first real battle and it lasted for two hours, nonstop. We were trained well, but no training can prepare you for this. We dug a hole in the sand and took turns sleeping in two-hour shifts. I couldn't sleep, though. I just wanted to keep moving and shooting. I could tell the soldiers we were fighting were weak and lacked our training.

Then Will got sliced in two by a 50-caliber weapon. I charged them with my M-16 A2. They fled. The rest of the team called me down and we dug in a hole to rest.

Now there were just the three of us. And you know what I remember? The three of us were lying in a foxhole, and Sam farted and we laughed our asses off. It was the first time we had laughed in six weeks.

I spent three more weeks in high ground, watching over convoys of troops trying to go back to the air base to deploy home. There were a few brave Iraqi soldiers that tried to disrupt the convoy, and I picked them off, one by one, with some help from heat sensor recognition from satellites. When you aim for an eye, not much is left when a 40-caliber bullet strikes from a high mile away. I think I was directly responsible for 39 kills during that three-week period. I saw all of their faces as they exploded off their bodies.

THE TREE PRUNER returned home in 1992 to a son born to his first wife. Before they could begin to build a life, however, he was re-deployed, this time to protect the contractors brought in to rebuild Kuwait. The Tree Pruner dug into a mountain ridge and took watch. At least once a day, he spied an Iraqi soldier trying to break through the perimeter and shot for the eyes.

While he was in that hole in Kuwait, his wife was having an affair with a man who worked in a hospital. "It happened to a lot of my buddies," he tells me one day. "All of those happy reunions that you see, with the woman leaping into the man's arms—well, let's just say for a lot of the guys I knew, that wasn't the story."

The Tree Pruner, however, feels blessed. His second wife was his first love, a hairdresser he met in 1996. She finally suggested they go on a date because he kept coming

back for a trim when he didn't need one, too shy to ask her out. He kept getting called back to the desert, but she stayed true. In 2006, after three miscarriages and a tubal pregnancy that almost killed her, they had a daughter, conceived on one of the Tree Pruner's trips home that lasted exactly 13 days.

Now his wife listens to him scream at night. Sometimes she'll pretend to stay asleep so he doesn't feel bad when he leaves for the gym. Other times she'll rub his back while he sits on the edge of the bed, sweating and shaking with fear. He has told her all of the stories, many, many times, so that she knows them by heart. She has heard about the dreams so often that she, too, can now see the faces. The only thing she can do is hold him, try to pull him back from the abyss.

He has one dream the most. It's an instant replay of one of his missions. He calls in a Tomahawk missile strike that lasers battalions of men, and he watches bodies explode like fruit. Blood is everywhere, dousing the sand and splattering his hole and him all over. He can taste it, and then he has to push forward after each strike from the naval vessel. He has 30 minutes to move forward, dig in and dial the boat. He reaches for his long-range weapon and shoots as many enemy officers as he can spot. He fires every 30 seconds, killing 38 officers and 28 special-forces-unit men.

Then the faces come back. He wonders if this is the time they'll finally get him.

IN THE WINTER, after the sun sinks below the horizon, the desert cold fills the vast empty space the way water does, and feels just as heavy. Undeterred by impediment, it moves about freely, coiling around you like a serpent. The desert cold is a precise cold, and it slapped the Tree Pruner relentlessly during an overnight journey across the desert.

January 21, 1991, 1 a.m. Years and weariness have rendered some of the details somewhat fuzzy. The Tree Pruner remembers that he was on a ridge, providing cover for a small squadron below that was penetrating the enemy's pocket a mile at a time. As the men trekked forward, he would follow them from above. He would traverse the upper terrain, dig a hole and fire from it. After a day of this, he was ordered to sleep for a few hours. So he dug a new hole, unwrapped a dehydrated meat patty, and was about to eat it when he noticed, far

Sniper

below him, two members of the Navy SEAL team lying still.

As he ate, he watched the men from the ridge, hoping to see some movement. Later he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but he couldn't stop thinking about the men below. He'd look down, squinting through his binoculars, trying to make out their figures in the moonlight. They were still frozen. He climbed down 60 feet to discover the sand beneath them caked in blood. One of the men had a massive chest wound and was missing part of his leg; the other was missing half of his face. He checked their dog tags.

As a Marine, he took an oath, one that said he couldn't leave these men to turn to dust in this desert. So he tied a rope around one man and then around his own waist, then picked up the other man, the smaller of the two, and curled his lifeless body around his neck. He began his trudge back to the base, disobeying his orders to sleep.

He remembers tilting his head to the side and having a conversation with the dead men. He brought up a variety of subjects. Women provided a steady stream, as did sports. He liked to talk about football, and the Super Bowl wasn't too far off. He wondered who might be challenging for a spot this year. He hadn't heard how the playoffs were faring. Maybe the Eagles would finally do something.

And he talked about his Maker, and asked his fallen countrymen directly whether they had seen Him. He wondered if he might encounter Him, too, very soon. He could hear the crackle of gunfire in the distance.

For nearly two miles the Tree Pruner hiked across the Kuwaiti desert, dragging the two dead men. He reached the base shortly before sunrise. The captain looked at the blood soaked into his fatigues and nodded in deference. "You did the right thing, Marine," he said. "Get a shower and some rest. We'll take you out to your post later."

I ask the Tree Pruner to ask his Maker if He could send such a man to Hell.

EVERY SO OFTEN, the Tree Pruner's phone rings and it's for RAVEN. In the past, he would accept the orders on the other end of the line, believing his duty unfinished. After 9/11, after watching Americans leap from the Towers, he jumped at the chance to serve. He would be given a series of numbers that he wrote down in a small notepad, and the code would tell him to either report to an area Air

Force base or retrieve a US Airways e-ticket and fly first-class down to North Carolina in his fatigues.

He declined the last time, a little over a year ago. He can't do it anymore.

"I cannot take another life," he says. "I know I've done this for my country—for what I believe is in the name of righteousness—and my priest says that God understands. But after all of the horrible things I've done and all of the lives I've taken, will I really get to step into heaven?"

The afterlife consumes him like a forest fire. What is it? And will he have a price to pay in it? He's a devout Catholic, but his beliefs are more hopes and fears than adherences to ancient text. *Maybe it's true*, he'll think of the entire existence of an afterlife. Then, *Maybe not*. At night, he spends hours with his eyes open, rolling around the question.

Hence, the Tree Pruner's text messages come at all hours. It all depends on when the faces seek him. They tell his life story now, the war he fights inside his head every day.

As I sit here alone in this house, and the girls are out at the mall, I can't help but feel I've been left alone so many times to kill. Why do I hate to be left alone now? Go figure.

I'm really struggling thinking back with all of the brutality. What the fuck did I do? Please try and answer that question for me. As I grow older, I find my answers to be absolutely meaningless.

Am I pussy for crying while I think about this shit? Am I a real Marine? That's what I've been asking myself tonight.

I feel strong physically every day, but weak however inside from week to week. Just trying to bury myself with my family and my work in order to push off looking at myself, and the men I have taken away from their families.

If it wasn't a mortal sin, I probably would have blown my brains out a long time ago.

There are days when the Tree Pruner's words reek of raw desperation and sorrow, and I pray to his Maker for him. I pray that he'll find a way to defeat the faces.

Have I freaked you out yet? I'm sure I have.

Sorry. They break you down and build you up to what they want you to be. The perfect soldier! Like a robot!

As I think back, the Muslims—and I mean the Taliban and Afghans—are so unruly. They have these beliefs that are so misguided. They would rear the tiny little heads and bodies, and it was apparent they could barely hold their weapon. It was easy pickings. It didn't even seem fair. But it was them or me, and there was no hesitation ... Done for 2nite. I'm feeling very heavy of heart!!! Fuck me????

Veterans' Day tomorrow. I think I want to lay this to rest, like my brothers in arms who are gone. It just hurts too much! Visiting a bunch of gravesites tomorrow by myself. I don't want anyone to see me break down, especially my wife and kids. But I go to pay my respects.

On my way home now. I'm all welled up and trying to keep it together.

Have you ever watched the movie 300? Life in Sparta! In my world, life is the USA. And that means take no prisoners. Mow them down like the grass I cut and the trees I take down! I will not let that happen under my watch!!!! But my watch has come and gone! Thank GOD!!!

I feel guilty because growing up I was taught, "Thou shall not kill," and then I learned that I was really good at it.

Sometimes I feel like the world's most dangerous predator with the things I've done. Like I was born with it. But I was trained to kill people. Never on the outside world, because I'm too nice a guy. I was taught to treat people the way you want to be treated. "With respect"—until the respect is not twofold. Then unleash.

One way or the other. Life and death are the ultimate struggle. Where we end up is the question I ask myself? So tired of thinking about this. You have no idea!

Five in the morning and even knowing I'm one of the baddest men on the planet, I'm still afraid to go back to sleep!

Sorry.

I don't want him to apologize. The least I can do is listen. It seems kind of thin when we thank men like the Tree Pruner for their service. I mean, it's polite, and I truly believe that it's heartfelt. But shouldn't our gratitude extend beyond two words?

Every day is a day of hope. Hope to just be a good father and a good husband. That's all I hope for these days, and a good provider. Just keeping on!

Can real enemies show respect? I think not. I got sleep with another countless night of a heavy heart.

All I want to do these days is protect my friends and family. I read this book about 20 years ago. It was entitled, I Am Third, by Gale Sayers. God is first, my family is second and I am third. Somehow I chose my country first, which tells me God must be second. I wish somehow things could be different.

I cornered a priest today. He has a good soul, like I once had, but has no idea of war and its consequences. I just told my wife about it, and we've been laughing ever since.

How can I stop bringing the girls into my horrific past life? It is so vivid to me, and then I try so hard to hide it from them. But they feel it and then call me a hero! Am I a hero or just a trained life taker?

There is no definitude in real life. As with all of us, the Tree Pruner's mood varies. Some days he'll text me about how life is so grand and he's grateful to have played a part in keeping our world intact. Others, he explains what Hell is like, saying he has been given the guided tour.

Maybe someday the Tree Pruner will dawdle atop another stately old tree, repairing his Maker's creation, and will finally receive the answer he craves.

Perhaps he won't hear the words out loud: "Yes, my child, we have a deal." But he will see a bird, and they will stare knowingly into one another's eyes, and the Tree Pruner will feel a rush of warmth.

Later that night, the faces will go away for good, and he will just know. **T**

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