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THEATER OF PEACE:

POLITICAL PERFORMANCE FOR A WORLD IN CONFLICT

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Abstract

Theater of Peace: Political Performance for a World in Conflict

Michael Van Zandt

This thesis examines and codifies qualities of anti-war theater, and endeavors to answer the question of what methods are used in successful anti-war theater. This will be done first by introducing established theory and applying it to anti-war plays. These concepts will then be examined through a case study of an original anti-war play to test their efficacy in practice. This will establish a new theoretical framework for the analysis of anti-war theater which will be called the *Theater of Peace*.

Introduction

A few years ago, I was engaged in a casual discussion of theater and political art theory with a friend and classmate. I was caught off guard when, at one point, he asked me if it had been my time in the military that had “radicalized” me. This question made me laugh because I had never considered the politics of pacifism to be particularly radical. However, my friend’s question, had illuminated something about my work which had escaped my notice up to that point; that anti-war politics had been a throughline of my theater work since I began studying theater academically.

I was honorably discharged from the US Army in 2018 after serving almost 4 years. For the majority of my service, I knew that upon the completion of my contract, I would seek an education in theater arts to become a studied, and purposeful theater practitioner. While it may seem an obvious path now, I had not initially intended to make theater that was related to my military experience. Nevertheless, when I choose plays to study, I am continually drawn to plays which reflect the anti-war sentiments I developed during my service.

This thesis is the culmination of my research into anti-war themes in theater imbricated with my experience directing my original play. I began writing *The Great Garrison* when I left the Army and continued to work on it while studying directing and playwriting as an undergraduate at UCLA. When it came time to focus on a graduate field of study, the genre of anti-war theater seemed like an obvious choice to further develop my play and my ability to direct it effectively.

The Theater of Peace is a collection of theatrical concepts I have compiled for the purpose of creating more effective anti-war theater. It consists of theory established by practiced theater makers and theoreticians, as well as some novel concepts derived from my own artistic practice. Theater of Peace codifies a praxis for the development and production of anti-war theater in the 21st century. In this essay, the concepts which make up Theater of Peace are described with examples given from established works of theater. Then, using the recent production of *The Great Garrison* as a case study, I describe my attempts to implement these concepts in an original theatrical performance.

Synopsis

The Great Garrison tells the story of a company of soldiers stationed in Texas around 2018. One morning, they are called to assemble in a most irregular fashion with little warning. As they wait to hear the purpose for their assembly, they speculate that perhaps they are being sent off to war. This rumor inspires excitement for some, and utter dread for others. Eventually the Captain of the company arrives to inform them that they are not going to war and, in fact, the long-lasting war has come to an abrupt end. Instead, the company will be conducting an intense training operation to begin immediately.

BIRD and LOCKE are soldiers who get stuck with the job of handing out ammunition for the training exercise. LOCKE is a new soldier to the company who was excited at the prospect of getting to fight in the war, but now feels that her time is

being wasted. BIRD has already fought in the war and tells her she isn't missing much. It is revealed that he is being kicked out of the Army for something that happened the last time the company deployed.

When Sergeant THORNE arrives to withdraw ammo, he berates BIRD for what happened on the last deployment, leading BIRD to have a furious outburst. LOCKE is able to calm him down and convinces him to tell her what happened. It is revealed that BIRD was blamed for a tragic misunderstanding that cost the lives of two of his comrades in a highly traumatic turn of events.

BELL, another soldier who is a friend of both THORNE and BURN, watches from a distance as a fire starts on the training field. BIRD, it turns out, had given THORNE a box of incendiary tracer rounds as a prank to get back at him for his abuses. After inadvertently starting the fire, THORNE returns to BIRD in a rage and delivers a tirade that pushes BIRD's fragile mentality over the edge. In a fit of rage and indignation, BIRD turns his weapon on THORNE and opens fire.

Chaos ensues as different characters try to make sense of what is going on. THORNE, it turns out, has survived the initial onslaught and plots with another soldier to outflank and kill BIRD. Meanwhile, BELL and LOCKE try to make their way to BIRD in order to talk him down. They eventually do, just in time for THORNE to show up with the Captain. There is an intense standoff before BELL, thinking quickly, is able to convince the Captain that this was simply a weapons malfunction and a misunderstanding. BIRD makes the difficult decision to put his

gun down, and the Captain is relieved to not have to kill him. The characters make it home alive.

In the last scene, BIRD has finally been kicked out of the Army and must face the civilian world with all of his emotional trauma and no support. BELL meets him at the bus stop before he can leave and they have an emotional farewell.

Dialectics and Epic Theater

Anti-war theater is, at its core, a branch of political performance. In the modern era, a conversation of political performance will usually sooner or later arrive at Bertolt Brecht's "Epic Theater" and the "Alienation Effect." To facilitate the discussion of Brechtian ideas in anti-war theater, this essay relies heavily on the book *Anti-War Theatre After Brecht* by Dr. Lara Stevens from the University of Melbourne. In her book, Stevens describes how Brecht brought the Marxist idea of dialectics into the realm of political performance theory. Stevens also shows how a dialectical approach is particularly well suited to the anti-war movement within the broader field of political performance. A section from *Capital: Volume 3* reads:

The finished configuration of economic relations, as these are visible on the surface, in their actual existence, and therefore also in the notions with which the bearers and agents of these relations seek to gain an understanding of them, is very different from the configuration of their inner core, which is essential but concealed, and the concept corresponding to it. It is in fact the very reverse and antithesis of this (Marx 1991, 311).

Here Marx describes the façade of capitalism and how the inner workings of an established institution can contrast greatly with its outward perception. Brecht was able to use Marxist philosophy which addresses the disconnect between capitalism's appearance and its reality and use it in theater to address similar hypocrisies in other institutions, including war.

Dialectical theater is an aesthetic advocated by Brecht which borrows ideas developed by Marx in his critique of global capitalism. For Brecht, the struggles of political theater and the struggle against capitalism were inextricably linked. In an

essay addressed to a professor in 1927 he wrote “The works [of Shakespeare] were followed by three centuries in which the individual developed into a capitalist, and what killed them was not capitalism’s consequences but capitalism itself” (qtd in Willett, 20). In Marxism, a dialectical approach is meant to inspire new ways of thinking, and challenge preconceived notions of reality. This is done by taking the arguments in favor of capitalism (which often seem natural or even inevitable) and breaking them into smaller pieces which makes them easier to criticize. This disrupts the illusion of capitalism as a whole.

Like capitalism, the appearance of war can seem natural and inevitable. Once, during a class discussion where I was sharing my research into what would eventually become this paper, I expressed to my classmates and professor my belief that anti-war political efforts could one day lead humanity to a reality without war. At the time, I didn’t think this was a very radical position to take. After all, what would be the point of engaging anti-war themes if you believed war was eternal and inevitable? However, I was met with shock and skepticism from the class. I was asked how I could imagine a future without war, when war has existed “for all of human history.” At this point I did not have the understanding of dialectics necessary to deconstruct the argument. And so I had nothing to say in response to my classmates except to point out that “all of human history” is not actually that long in relative terms; a flaccid argument at best. This moment was pivotal for me as an artist and researcher. It showed me that before I could describe the methods for dismantling the institution of war, I first had to convince my audience that it is possible in the first place.

In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes that “it [the dialectic] includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction because it regards historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well” (Marx 1990, 103). For Marx, dialectics is an especially potent tool because it can show the true transient nature of institutions which seem eternal. Stevens points out that it is this quality which made dialectics such an appealing and effective artistic aesthetic for Brecht. According to Stevens, Marx used dialectics to “show how present conditions that have developed over time to appear as natural and unchangeable circumstances, are in fact evolving phenomena in flux” (Stevens, 26). In *Capital*, these “present conditions” and “unchangeable circumstances” were the realities of global capitalism. In 2024, our present condition of global conflict can seem like an unchangeable circumstance. It’s easy to assume that the conflicts of today are the latest in an endless history of human warfare. Dialectical theater described by Brecht is a powerful tool for encouraging an audience to see war as a problem with a solution, and not as an inevitable consequence of humanity.

To Stevens, this aspect of Marxist theory is particularly well suited for translation into theatrical application. In her words: “Marx reveals a discrepancy between the surface appearance of nineteenth-century capitalism and its ‘concealed’ ‘inner core’ using a dialectical method which shows us the tensions between inner essence and outer reality” (Stevens, 23). Stevens describes several aspects of dialectics in theater which she calls “Brechtian dialectical aesthetics.” These are the

methods by which theater artists make use of dialectics in political plays. She uses examples from plays of the 2000's and 2010's that are about wars in the Middle East in the wake of 9/11. Taking note of Steven's examples, I have endeavored to implement these Brechtian dialectical aesthetics in my play, *The Great Garrison*.

Contradiction.

Another way to understand dialectics is in terms of contradictions, what Marx referred to as "simultaneous recognition of negation." He believed capitalism could be distilled down into a series of contradictions meant to be hidden behind a deceptive and broken institution. Brecht affirms this in an appendix to the venerated *Short Organum for the Theatre*, where he writes that "The bourgeois theatre's performances always aim at smoothing over contradictions, at creating false harmony, at idealization... none of this is like reality, so a realistic theater must give it up" (qtd in Willet, 277). For Stevens, this means using contradictions as a dialectical tool can "expose the ways in which such antinomies are concealed in everyday life" (Stevens, 23). One of the ways Brecht makes use of the contradiction dialectical aesthetic is through the juxtaposition of realism (for the purposes of this essay, the term "realism" will be used as Brecht used it, meaning an attempt to portray reality on stage, and not as a reference to the theoretical aesthetic known as realism) and abstraction in his work. In an essay called "Gestic Masks in Brecht's Theatre" Meg Mumford describes Brecht's relationship to realism, writing: "the realist agenda which encourages the experimental impulse is also the source of its circumscription. In Brecht's realist art

the process of abstraction must not only stem from but refer back to the concrete” (Mumford, 156). Here Mumford articulates that for Brecht, abstraction was more useful when put into conversation with realistic depictions of reality.

Brecht did have his hang ups about realistic portrayals in theater, believing that depictions of reality did little more than to affirm the social order his work was meant to criticize (Stevens, 29). For Brecht, portraying reality in theater was an affirmation of a bourgeois paradigm. However, the usefulness of abstraction comes from its relationship to realism. Theatrical abstraction for its own sake does not have the same rhetorical power as when it can be referred back to what Mumford calls “the concrete.” This contradictory relationship inspires critical thought in the audience which is the goal of a dialectical approach. The juxtaposition of realism and abstraction forces the audience to constantly re-evaluate what is meant to be taken seriously. For anti-war theater, this means the potential to challenge an audience’s beliefs in the nature of war and its intractability.

I implemented this practice of contradictions in *the Great Garrison*. Often this manifested as realistic dialogue juxtaposed with abstracted action, or vice versa. I found that using words and actions together to form the contradiction was an effective means of abstracting while maintaining the concrete reality. One example of this was near the end of the first scene of the play shown in Fig.1 below. In this beat, Captain Steele is introducing herself to the rest of the company and delivering the news that the long war has come to an abrupt end. This is the revelation that sets in motion all the action which leads to the climax of the play.

Her dialogue could be interpreted as a portrayal of reality as it was modeled after countless speeches I heard as an enlisted soldier. In contrast to the realistic nature of her monologue, the rest of the ensemble (who were occupying space in the house) had been instructed to perform yoga poses so as to not get stiff from standing in formation too long. In this way she occupies the stock role of the comedic “straight character.” The actor did an excellent job of appearing flustered in having to give a very important speech before a spectacle of mass absurdity. This moment required her realism to contrast with the comic abstraction. The ensemble had assumed their yoga positions before Captain Steele’s entrance, but the audience guffaws came once she had entered and reacted to what she was seeing.



Fig.1

This juxtaposition of contradiction illuminates one of the main themes of the play. It points out the absurd nature of government initiatives for soldier and veteran well-being. There is little good that yoga could do for one's joints in a profession that requires jumping from vehicles, marching many miles carrying immense loads, and rappelling down cliff faces. This moment in the play echoes an earlier conversation between Corporal Bell, and Private First Class Stone as they wait for the early morning formation to start:

STONE. I just can't believe I'm in this fucking field in the middle of the night on a Sunday.

BELL. It does seem especially diabolical to call everyone in on a Sunday. The last time this happened would have been...Oh yeah, when Brick from 3rd platoon killed himself in the laundry room on a Sunday and they made everyone come in for a mental wellness check.

STONE. What kind of inconsiderate asshole kills himself on a Sunday?

BELL. That's 3rd Platoon for you.

STONE. Fucking 3rd Platoon. I should've known. Get this, when I kill myself I'm doing it on a Monday. I'm going to enjoy my last weekend.

BELL. **When** you kill yourself?

STONE. If.

BELL. You worry me sometimes.

STONE. So, why is it that we are the only two assholes out here?

BELL. I'm sure the rest of the company will be arriving soon.

STONE. Doesn't this violate that new WASTE protocol?

BELL. The Warrior Advocate's Severe Treatment Enjoinment? I don't think this qualifies.

STONE. Well then what good is the protocol?

BELL. I think it's to prevent us from killing ourselves.

STONE. Well, it's doing a great job.

This short beat has dialogue that is more ambiguous in its relationship to realism. Two soldiers make cavalier comments during a conversation about the suicide of a fellow soldier. Stone even comments on how the circumstances of his fellow's suicide might affect his own plans for shedding the mortal coil. The relationship between realistic and abstract language that is used throughout the play forces the audience to question whether Stone's hints at self-harm are to be taken seriously, or are the products of a macabre and martial sense of humor. Even his own friend is unsure whether Stone needs help or not. The tension of the moment is undercut by reference to other initiatives to soldier wellness such as "mental wellness checks" which are laughably (if not tragically) ineffectual in the face of staggering rates of soldier and veteran suicide.

Historicization.

Historicization is another of Brecht's dialectical aesthetics mentioned by Stevens. Where contradiction was concerned with the abstraction of reality, historicization is an approach which relies on invoking a shared perspective of time and historical context. Brecht criticized "bourgeois theatre" saying it "emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged

‘eternal humanity’...This notion may allow that such a thing as history exists, but it is none the less unhistorical” (qtd in Willett, 96-7). The ‘eternal humanity’ referenced by Brecht is another facet of the “unchangeable circumstances” mentioned by Stevens which dialectical theater seeks to correct. By drawing connections between present circumstances and historical realities, historicization emphasizes that the current moment is a part of a moving history, one that is alterable by the will of those who are living in it. As Brecht says in *Short Organum* “The historical conditions must of course not be imagined as mysterious powers; on the contrary, they are created and maintained by men [SIC](and will in due course be altered by them)” (190) Stevens articulates how this idea can be used in anti-war theater as a strong rhetorical device in debunking the institution of war. She says that this is “predominantly done by historicizing ideas, characters’ behavior and events” (Stevens, 35).

Historicization in *The Great Garrison* revolves around the circumstances of the play’s setting. It opens ironically with the ending of a forever-war. Although the specific conflict is never mentioned by name, it is strongly hinted to be the American occupation of Afghanistan from 2001-2021. This was the war that was contemporary to my military service and was still active when I began writing the play in 2020. My primary attempts at historicization were meant to serve as indictments of the specifics surrounding the Afghan war by referencing parallels from history, specifically the ancient world. Over the course of the play, even as the war has ended, the characters embody references to the ‘historical conditions,’ mentioned by Brecht, as they relate

to the Afghan war. An example of this can be seen in scene 5, when Privates BIRD and LOCKE discuss ancient history:

BIRD. What are you reading?

LOCKE. Alexander the Great. The legend is that he once chased a rival king across the Middle East for years just because he wanted to kill the king with his own hands. He was so obsessed that he brought his entire army, and used all his nation's resources to hunt for one man in the desert.

BIRD. Why does that sound so familiar?

LOCKE. And when another man finally killed the rival king, Alexander had him tortured to death for the insult.

BIRD. That's what you get for trying to help. You'd think he just would be happy that someone killed the fucker for him.

LOCKE. Some things you just need to experience yourself, I guess.

BIRD. Why do they call him 'The Great'?

LOCKE. Because he did great things.

BIRD. He sounds like an asshole. They should call him Alexander the Asshole.

This reference to Alexander's hunt for the Persian king Darius III is meant to historicize the manhunt for Osama bin Laden after the 9/11 attacks. This national obsession with finding bin Laden was a primary justification for the initial invasion of Afghanistan. The comparison of our 21st century liberal democracy with the despotic and maniacal rule of Alexander the Great is meant to show that justifying war often comes down to nothing more than simple vengeance and bloodlust. It may be tempting for a 21st century citizen of the free world to assume that their nation, sophisticated as it is, would only wage war for noble and evolved reasons, but that is

a romantic fantasy. In fact the reasons to go to war haven't changed much in the last few millennia, regardless of whether those reasons were ratified by a democratic process or simply the whims of an autocrat. The only real difference, which I hoped to impress upon the audience, is that while BIRD was right to call Alexander an asshole; in a democracy, war makes assholes of us all.

Another historical reference to the ancient world comes in Scene 7, when BIRD breaks down enough to share the story of his trauma with LOCKE. He talks about a battle in the city of Kadesh, which is the only reference to an actual setting for the war mentioned in the play. Kadesh was a city of the ancient world which no longer exists; its site is in modern day Syria, it was the location of a famous battle from the Bronze Age fought when Ramses II of Egypt led a massive excursion against the Hittite empire. The battle is incredibly fascinating to a fan of military history. It is historically noteworthy for many reasons, largely due to the fact that the details are relatively well documented. Of particular relevance to the historicization in *The Great Garrison* is that after the long and bloody battle, with thousands of casualties on each side, both the Egyptians and the Hittites returned to their capitals and recorded the battle as a victory over the other with the border between the realms remaining mostly unchanged (for more on this battle, see Witham, 2-7)

Reference to this historical oddity seemed incredibly appropriate in the context of current conflicts in the Middle East. This historical context was meant to ask the audience if US involvement in the Middle East is nothing more than the latest in a legacy of imperial violence in this region which ultimately accomplishes little in

the indifferent perspective of history. Historicizing the US with the ancient Egyptians in this way shows that our empire is next in a list of failed empires that withered away trying to assert dominance over this part of the world including: the Soviet Union, the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire, imperial Caliphates, the Mongols, the Crusader Kingdoms, the Persians, going all the way back to the ancient world and prehistory.

Originally this reference was meant as more of an easter egg; a small indulgence of my own obsession with the ancient world and military history that I assumed would go over the audiences' heads. However, I seemed to have underestimated my audience of bright, like-minded college students. After opening night, a young man approached me and asked if I was the playwright, and when I said yes he asked me about the choice to set the battle in the city of Kadesh. I started to explain the historical context, but there was no need. He had all of the contextual information necessary to fully appreciate the historicization. What he was really asking for was affirmation that his understanding of the point was correct, which indeed it was.

Historicizing the Future.

The relationship of *The Great Garrison* with historicization was established from its inception. Even before I had studied Brecht, I knew that I was going to make reference to history as a rhetorical strategy. However, from the beginning of the writing process to opening night, that relationship had to change to reflect a volatile global political landscape that was, as Brecht predicted, having its historical course dramatically altered. As I worked through the redrafting process, and world events

unfolded before me, I noticed some of the intended historicization related to the Afghan war was taking on new meaning in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and later the IDF's assault on Gaza after the terrorist attacks on October 7th 2023.

In addressing the dialectics of Tony Kushner's play *Only we who guard the mystery shall be unhappy*, Lara Stevens expands on Brecht's understanding of historicization by describing how Kushner historicized the future with his play (Stevens, 79-80). The play makes an emotional appeal by confronting the audience with the reality of civilian casualties in the form of characters who are the ghosts of Iraqi children. What's revolutionary about this play from a dialectical perspective is that Kushner rushed to publish the first part of the play before the 2003 invasion of Iraq by coalition forces. Kushner's historicization asks the audience to look forward in time instead of backwards, and in this way to consider that the brutality of the imminent war was, in Stevens' words, "calculated and contingent, but also preventable" (80).

Perhaps by chance, or perhaps due to the ominously cyclical nature of history and warfare, I found that efforts I had made to historicize the *The Great Garrison* in the conventional Brechtian sense, were starting to take on a new meaning more in line with what Stevens had described when discussing Kushner. This historicization of the future, while admittedly inadvertent, had new and undeniable meaning in *The Great Garrison* for the next generation of global conflict. In Scene 7 of the play, Private LOCKE describes why she joined the army. She

describes a need for vengeance for her father who suffered physical and psychological damage in the same long war she meant to fight in.

LOCKE. What did happen? (*pause*) It's ok. My dad didn't talk about it either. I thought he just needed some time, and he would remember what it was like to be home. But whoever he was when he went away is gone now. He's something else. A statue wearing my dad's clothes. I would think about the people who did this to him. They kept my dad and sent home this thing. I would try to imagine their faces. When I turned 18, I couldn't believe the war was still going on. I thought I'd get my chance to hurt the people who hurt my dad. I prayed for the chance.

In this way, her character was meant to serve as a metaphorical stand-in for a generation of Americans, myself included, who were raised to feel a need to avenge America's national honor after 9/11. Like LOCKE, we were children when a tragedy that we had no way to comprehend infiltrated our development on all levels. Though we were powerless to act in the moment, this war, which was allegedly in response to that same tragedy, was still active when we came of age. I, like many my age, felt duty-bound to fight for revenge against the terroristic violence that had irrevocably altered my nation and home.

In the weeks and months after the terrorist attack of October 7th, 2023, when production of *The Great Garrison* was starting to manifest in a real way, I began to realize that this metaphor would be taking on new meaning to the audience of the day, even if that was not my original intention. The question became whether to abandon this theme of the play completely, or to lean into the new context. I chose the latter. In response to LOCKE's revelation, Private BIRD, who has experienced the war first hand says the following:

BIRD. You didn't join the army because you wanted to hurt people. Some do. Some just want to kill and get away with it. Better yet get paid to kill, celebrated even. Kill enough of the right people and they call you great but that's not you. I don't believe it.

LOCKE. Everyone thinks they know me. What do you know? I came here to be the best, so they would send me to war.

BIRD. And then what? You think you could find the people who hurt your dad? Do you know their names, or where they live? Who do you blame? A nation? An entire religion? Which people are responsible? Or do you just start killing until you feel better? You won't, ever. You just kill and kill and kill and you either convince yourself that you enjoy it like that psychopath, or your heart fucking implodes in your chest! You're not a soldier because you want to kill someone. You're a soldier because you love your dad and want to be like him. Going to war won't fix anything for you or him. You can't help him by getting hurt the way he did.

BIRD's monologue explains what we Americans who fell for the enticing narrative of righteous nationalistic vengeance had to learn over two decades of senseless violence in Afghanistan. BIRD asks LOCKE if she knows the names of the individuals who hurt her Dad. For Americans, the answer to this question was essentially, yes. I knew Osama bin Laden's name when I was six years old, and could recognize his visage every time I saw it on TV. And yet when bin Laden was killed in 2011, there was no sense of a mission accomplished in regards to the war. The war raged for another 10 years. The American military inflicted destruction orders of magnitude greater than what happened on 9/11, and as BIRD says, it fixed nothing.

The similarities between 9/11 and the terror attack of October 7th as well as the responses to these atrocities are obvious. Even the way October 7th is referenced in the media, by the date alone, is reminiscent of the way 9/11 is remembered in our shared consciousness. The violence that is going on right now in Palestine and Israel

is, and likely will continue to be a dominant topic in American politics. Therefore, it necessarily must be represented in American political art. The exchange above from scene 7, when viewed in a contemporary global political context, can serve as an example of historicizing the future as described by Stevens. Just as Kushner tried to warn the American public of the imminent evil of the invasion of Iraq, this moment became a warning of the difficult lessons learned from the last two decades of chaos and carnage inflicted by the US on the people of Afghanistan. A warning that if heeded, could impress the idea that the current violence in Israel and Palestine is likewise “calculated and contingent, but also preventable.” as Stevens says, and that the people of Israel can avoid becoming enmeshed in a similar decades long counter-insurgency which in the end, accomplishes little.

Like the capitalist system which inspired the dialectical approach, warfare can sometimes seem like an impossible institution to dismantle, or even critique. But luckily for theater artists, the theories of Brecht and those who came after (including Stevens) can provide potent effective tools to chip away at the misconception that warfare is inherent to humanity. Continuing to build and adjust these theories is crucial for their continued viability. As Brecht once wrote in an essay responding to Georg Lukacs,

For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but this is why it is new.

The oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch (qtd in Taylor, 82).

The new methods that Brecht calls for are developed by theatrical practice through trial and error. It is my hope that the Theater of Peace, in so far as it is an assemblage of themes and ideas which I have found successful in theater practice, will contribute to the success of future anti-war theater.

Avoiding Ambivalence: The Hero-Myth Cliche

While many theorists like Stevens focus their research on the successful methods of anti-war playwrights, what is of equal value to a theater practitioner is the common pitfalls which must be avoided in order to construct a cogent anti-war message and avoid being misunderstood. For this I turn to an article called “Ambivalence Toward War in Anti-War Plays” published in 1969 in a magazine called *Today’s Speech* (later renamed *Communication Quarterly*.) In the article, Dr. Martha Weisman looks at many dramatic works from the interwar period and articulates qualities of anti-war plays which cause an ambivalence towards war for their audiences, rather than the intended condemnation.

Though the article itself is relatively brief, and Wiesman is focusing on older plays than Stevens, I found Wiesman’s insights to be invaluable in the form of a what-not-to-do guide for anti-war theater making as a director and playwright. In the article Wiesman enumerates several common themes that can complicate an anti-war message in theater. Among these is the tendency for plays about war to include heroic and valiant characters which serve to glorify war as an institution, what Weisman refers to as the hero-myth cliche.

The hero-myth cliche is an ambivalence-generating device described by Weisman in plays that depict war and the soldiers fighting in them. In these plays, the need for a hero figure, which Weisman argues is intrinsic to the western theater tradition (9), contradicts a playwright’s intent to depict the terrible realities of war. The “idealization of a hero” she argues, will undercut the depiction of war as a

barbarous institution. This yields an ambivalent message, and even potentially glorifies war in a way that is completely antithetical to an anti-war play. In these plays, an audience must reconcile their admiration for heroism with their distaste for the circumstances which made it necessary in the first place, and as Weisman points out, they will more naturally tend to remember the heroism.

One of the plays Weisman uses to demonstrate this concept is *What Price Glory?* by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings, first produced in 1924 at the Plymouth Theater (now the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater) in New York. This play features a huge cast (over 20 speaking roles) of mostly American soldiers in France during WWI and is the epitome of ambivalence. The scenes of the play vary wildly and abruptly in style. One scene might be a comic romp of lighthearted buffoonery and slapstick humor, to be followed immediately by a scene so dark in tone that it borders on horror, with excessively gruesome depictions of the carnage of trench warfare.

The characters are likewise difficult to pin down. The two main characters, First Sergeant QUIRT, and Captain FLAGG oscillate wildly between established stock character archetypes. In one beat they are stoic philosophers who debate the finer intellectual points of war, and in others they are rowdy drunks with no enviable qualities to speak of. One scene might depict them as romantic heroes who are single-handedly winning the war for democracy, while in others they read as chauvinist pigs as they try to carry on independent affairs with a local French woman, while evading her father's demands that one of them marry her.

What Price Glory undeniably has some very strong anti-war themes. It makes a logical appeal against US involvement in WWI. We can see this when Captain FLAGG expresses his disillusionment with the idea that their presence in Europe is for the purpose of “making the world safe for democracy.” The disregard for the lives of individual soldiers is demonstrated when the company receives orders that they will not be relieved from the front until they have captured a German officer for questioning. Missions of prisoner acquisition are generally considered tantamount to suicide missions, but to add the ridiculousness of the demand, the command unit has given the added requirement that the prisoner be specifically from the Alsace-Lorraine region.

There is plenty in the way of emotional appeal for the suffering of the soldiers as well. Soldiers return from the front lines, wounded or dead. Others go insane onstage due to stress and grief. Perhaps the most gut-wrenching beat of the play is at the end of Act 2, when the boy, LEWISOHN who was acting as Captain FLAGG’s runner, dies in his arms. In his final moments he repeatedly pleads for FLAGG to “stop the blood.” But FLAGG, who is powerless to stop the hemorrhage, can only sob and try to reassure the boy that he will be alright. This goes on for half a page until the stage direction, “LEWISOHN sighs and relaxes his body” mercifully draws the curtain on Act 2.

These moments, which are strong anti-war themes, are undercut by FLAGG’s act of heroism at the climax of the play. At one point FLAGG decides to steal off to capture the Alsatian officer himself. He returns promptly with the prisoner having

completed the mission of the company single handedly. This is the last moment of the war before the company returns from the front lines. Neither LEWISOHN nor any of the other characters who were killed or wounded are mentioned again. This heroic act by a principal character undercuts the plays' otherwise impactful anti-war qualities as Wiesman predicted. "The audience will identify with the virtues and forget the horror and brutality of the hero's war experiences" (9).

This leaves the difficult question of how to navigate the hero-myth cliché while not undermining the anti-war themes of the play. The first instinct might be to omit such a character from the play in the first place. If there is no heroic character for the audience to idealize, then there is nothing to draw focus away from the unsavory realities of war. Weisman warns against this notion. She makes the case that audiences of the western theater tradition expect a heroic and noble protagonist that they can identify with. Additionally, she identifies what she calls, "didactic anti-war dramas" which feature characters that are "self-righteous dogmatists" who preach anti-war themes to an often disengaged audience. By looking at the anti-war plays of the interwar period, Weisman concludes that, "protagonists with some ambivalence, however slight...were more vital and believable" (10).

In *The Great Garrison*, I set out not to simply avoid the hero-myth cliché, but to subvert it and use it as an anti-war device. Unlike most anti-war plays that depict soldiers, *The Great Garrison* does not actually depict the institution of war. Rather, it shows the enduring consequences after a war's conclusion. This already interrupts the

hero-myth cliché, as anything heroic that happens over the course of play cannot lend glory to a war that does not exist in the play's given circumstances.

Though *The Great Garrison* does not take place during a war, it does depict a shootout during the climax of the play. This shootout acts as the catalyst for the subversion of the hero-myth cliché. In scene 8, Stone is trapped behind cover, being shot at. While pinned down, he laments the choices which brought him to this situation while also praying for God's help:

STONE:...Dear Lord, I could use some help. Maybe an angel. I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but maybe one of those old testament angels, with flaming swords and the righteous fury and shit. Probably shouldn't curse while praying. Sorry Lord. Sorry Mom.

Burst of machine gun fire. THORNE enters in a flash with a box of ammunition and dives behind cover.



Fig. 2

Sergeant Thorne's entrance in this scene is meant to be a stand-in for the heroic acts described by Weisman. He charges the stage like an action hero, diving to safety in the nick of time under heavy enemy fire (see Fig. 2). His presence is the answer to a literal prayer for salvation. However, the heroism of the moment is subverted by the audience's perception of Thorne developed throughout the play. He is callous, vulgar and at times even a little sadistic. His character is the product of conflict, and he thrives in the chaos of warfare. Thorne is, in a sense, the opposite of what Weisman was describing when she wrote that, "When a playwright projected the impact of war on his protagonist, the ennobling experience evidently became far more dramatically viable than the destructive aspects of war." (10) War in this play has had a decidedly negative effect on the characters who have experienced it. For Thorne, his time in war has given him a bloodlust and robbed him of any empathy he might have had for his fellows. Additionally, after Thorne enters the scene, he isn't able to do much more than Stone was, being pinned behind cover, although he does have some words of encouragement in an uncharacteristically tender moment for this character. This is all to say that Thorne makes a pretty dismal guardian angel for Stone, and he is not the type of hero an audience is inclined to identify with.

Thorne's action movie entrance in this scene is contrasted with the true acts of heroism in this play. Such a moment occurs near the end of the play when Corporal Bell puts himself in between the shooter, his friend Private Bird, and the justice of Captain Steele and Sergeant Thorne. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3

This heroic act, which ultimately brings the play to its peaceful conclusion serves as a counterexample to Weisman's conclusions about heroic characters in anti-war plays. Corporal Bell acts selflessly in this scene, putting himself in harm's way to save a friend. Yet no part of his actions serves to glorify violence and conflict. His words argue for a peaceful resolution, and he acts as a deescalating force for both sides of this shootout. In this way, the audience can identify with the heroic virtues of the character, while also engaging the anti-war themes of the scene.

It is unclear whether Weisman believes these ambivalence-causing agents were oversights on the part of their respective playwrights, or whether these playwrights were purposefully subverting their own anti-war themes. She points out that many American theater artists in the interwar period were under political and social pressure to not seem unpatriotic in the looming shadow of rising fascism and

later the rise of communism. Whatever the case, I occupy a more privileged position as a playwright in the 21st century, as I can attempt to use Weisman's insights to focus my anti-war themes without overmuch concern for my social, political or physical wellbeing.

The Anti-This-War Conundrum

As a TA at UC Santa Cruz, I often tell my theater history students that art is not created in a vacuum. It is a response to the way the artist perceives the ever-changing world around them. Theater is no different, and political performance is especially influenced by a vacillating social order. Anti-war plays are often written in response to a specific conflict to which the playwright has a personal connection. They don't often criticize the institution of war itself (at least not overtly) unless it is through the lens of a specific war. In her essay discussed earlier, Martha Weisman writes, "It must be stressed that anti-war plays did not spring out of vacuum. They generally reflected the climate of the period. Many of the shifts in the anti-war emphasis of the plays paralleled shifts in the American political scene" (Weisman, 5). What Weisman is noting when discussing the American theater from the 1920's and 30's is true for anti-war plays from all eras of the western theater tradition.

Aristophanes made direct reference to his contemporary conflict, the Peloponnesian War fought between the city-states of Athens and Sparta from 431-404 BCE, in the classic play *Lysistrata*. This trend continues through to the conflicts of recent memory with plays like *Ajax in Iraq* by Ellen Mclaughlin and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* by Martin McDonagh. These playwrights were inspired by the suffering they perceived in their own time and place. So it makes sense that they would address specific conflicts with their plays rather than the totality of the institution of war. This is also likely a strong rhetorical choice for these playwrights, as the audiences of

these plays would be more attuned and sympathetic to the circumstances of the specific war with which they were familiar.

Too much specificity with a specific war however impedes a play's ability to be adaptable and take on the institution of war in other contexts. There is something to be said for a play which can be used to criticize the institution of war generally, and adapted from its original context to be applied to wars other than the one for which it was originally created. This is a balancing act for anti-war theater makers which I am calling the "anti-*this*-war conundrum." This concept describes the seemingly contradictory objectives for an anti-war theater production that seeks to critique all instances of organized violence, while maintaining the ethos of using a contemporary conflict which the artists are personally connected to.

Lysistrata is an example of a play that does this naturally. While written and produced contemporaneously with the Peloponnesian War, scholars like H.D. Westlake call into question Aristophanes' alleged revolutionary intent. Westlake points out that the archonship of ancient Athens was not a safe environment to voice dissenting political opinions. In his essay *Lysistrata and the War* he sets out to "refute the widely held belief that Aristophanes is seriously appealing for the immediate conclusion of peace" (Westlake, 38).

While Aristophanes' political intentions are hotly debated by scholars like Westlake (but are ultimately unknowable), they are irrelevant to the fact that for over 2,000 years since Aristophanes, other theater artists have produced and adapted *Lysistrata* with explicit anti-war agendas relevant to their own circumstances. This

legacy makes *Lysistrata* one of the most impactful and enduring anti-war plays of all time.

An example of this play's use in political performance would be *the Lysistrata Project of 2003*, an enormous and momentous event conceived by theater artists Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bowers, who organized thousands of theater artists in 59 countries to stage over 1,000 readings of *Lysistrata* in protest of the US invasion of Iraq (Kotzamani, 102). Another would be the 2015 film *Chi-raq* which sets the story of *Lysistrata* amidst the gang violence of contemporary Chicago.

In the forward to the Gutenberg version of *Lysistrata*, Jack Lindsay attributes the “immortality” of the play to its humanistic emotions which do not exist except to “save as pacifistic quietings of the desire to slay, to hurt, to torment” (Lindsay, 4). Stevens speaks to the universality of depicting the effects of war on a civilian population (Stevens, 80). Weisman describes the important role of gender for characters who argue against war in many anti-war plays (Weisman, 10). *Lysistrata* exemplifies all of these anti-war themes, which likely play a role in its enduring legacy as an anti-war play.

Whatever Aristophanes might have intended in terms of political ramifications for this play in his contemporary political climate, it is safe to assume that he had ability to predict the lasting popularity his play has had in the long history of anti-war theater. So, if enduring legacy of *Lysistrata* was inadvertent, this leaves the question of how to approach the anti-this-war conundrum with intent. Many anti-war theater artists have experimented with different approaches to achieve this.

One method is to create a play which makes a connection between two unrelated conflicts. In the play *Ajax in Iraq*, playwright Ellen McLaughlin superimposes a story about US soldiers in Iraq onto the classic of Ajax and the Trojan war. She essentially stages two plays at the same time. With this approach, McLaughlin uses some Brechtian historicization to compare the fallacies and consequences of Bush era politics with the Homeric violence of the ancient Greek classics. This has the powerful dual purpose of showing the horrors that are consistent in war of all eras, while still making specific criticism for the Iraq war, which McLaughlin was actively protesting.

McLaughlin takes this a step further with the spectacularly innovative second scene of the play (Fig. 4). In this scene, a US Army CAPTAIN describes to the audience the hopeless impossibilities of the counter-insurgency mission his soldiers have been tasked with. Alongside him is GERTRUDE BELL, a historical figure from the early twentieth century who was influential in defining the modern borders of the Middle East during the withdrawal of British imperial influence in the area.



Fig. 4

Like the CAPTAIN, GERTRUDE has also been given an impossible task in that she must re-make the political landscape in the style of European nation-states in a region that has no history for this type of political reality.

The two speak while standing on a giant map of the region. Their position is like that of the Greek gods who feature elsewhere in the play and look down on the war-torn world from their perch on Mount Olympus. Unlike the gods in this play, these characters seem to appreciate the devastating consequences that their decisions will have on many people for whom they are responsible. In contrast, the character of ATHENA in this play, who features more in the Greek scenes, revels in her ability to meddle in human affairs, and influence triumph or devastation at her whim.

By contextualizing the role of past imperial influence on modern conflict, McLaughlin criticizes not just the Iraq war, but all the past and future conflicts which are the result of imperial dominion. She shows how government agents like bureaucrats and military officers have taken the place of irrational and vindictive deities of the past who were the justification for imperial aggression in the ancient world. This makes for a strong general criticism of the institution of warfare, while still staying faithful to the specific protest against the Iraq war.

McLaughlin's play gives a strong answer to the anti-this-war conundrum. However, it does seem to fall short when considering how this play might be useful to future anti-war movements. This play could certainly be staged in its original state and be used to protest a conflict other than the Iraq war. This exact thing was done with the *Lysistrata project*, and likely no one in the audience was wondering what beef those artists had with the Peloponnesian war. The audience was able to make the intellectual leap from Greek city states to the US and Iraq in the context of productions in 2003.

However, what anti-war artists also do with plays like *Lysistrata* is adapt their setting to a completely different era. This was done in the film *Chi-raq*, which features a character named *Lysistrata*, and follows the general plot including a sex strike, but is set in contemporary Chicago. Similarly in 2019, the Archimedean Upper Conservatory staged *Lysistrata 1969* set during the Vietnam war and following the general plot of Aristophanes' original, with dialogue and design changes to suit the new context. Something like this would be a difficult undertaking for *Ajax in Iraq*, as

this play is already the loose adaptation of a classic into a different era. It would be hard to imagine a future production of this play with characters and design set in a time and place other than 2010's Iraq. I do not anticipate a production of *Ajax in Iraq in Ukraine: a New Adaptation of Ellen McLaughlin's Classic Play* anytime soon.

Lisa Peterson and Dennis O'Hare give us their own take on how to create an anti-war play which is meant to be adapted for future use. *An Iliad* contains devices within the script meant to help the play maintain relevance within changing political and social realities. Like *Ajax in Iraq*, it is an adaptation of an established classic, and is meant to compare ancient warfare with a contemporary conflict. But as the title suggests, it is not merely a retelling of *the Iliad*, rather it is *an Iliad; your Iliad*.

The play opens with the single speaking character, the POET, who addresses the audience directly and promises to sing the song that he has sung many times over thousands of years. We find out that it is simply the song of war, and it is not a song he relishes singing, and hopes one day to never sing again. This strikes me as a revolutionary anti-war theme. As I have learned through academic discourse, the suggestion that humanity might one day see the end of war is considered a radical concept, and it is not one that is common in the copious anti-war theatrical literature I have studied so far.

The play continues with the POET telling the story of the Iliad, while making references to the Iraq war, which was ongoing when the play was written. The poet tells of how the Greek soldiers were mustered for war from different city-states, but

the examples he gives are towns and cities from the US. This is the first example of the play making deliberate efforts to support future adaptations.

POET: The point is, on all these ships, are boys from every small town in Ohio,
from farmlands, from fishing villages . . . the boys of Nebraska and South Dakota ... the twangy boys of Memphis ... the boys of San Diego, Palo Alto, Berkeley, Antelope Valley...
(*An Iliad*, 27)

This compares the Trojan war with Iraq in a similar fashion to how Ellen McLaughlin juxtaposed the conflicts, except that this line of the POET's is followed by this stage direction:

* We like to include one or two towns from the locale where the play is being performed.
Feel free to pick a couple of nearby places that produce enlisted men and women, and insert them after Lawrence, Kansas.

This demonstrates a deliberate attempt by the playwright to engage future audiences under different circumstances.

Perhaps an even more stark example of this comes near the end of the play when, for about a two-minute beat, the POET recites an almost exhaustive list of the major conflicts of recorded history. I had the pleasure of seeing a production of this play, and this moment is particularly impactful to see, as opposed to simply reading the list in the script. The list is over five pages long, but in the version which was published in 2013 it ends with:

Somalia
Georgia
Iraq
Pakistan
Afghanistan
Libya
Syria ... *

* As time goes on, it may be necessary to add a war or wars at the end of the list to reflect current events. This should be done with great restraint and include only major conflicts. The same is true of the list of destroyed cities toward the end of the play. (*An Iliad*, 84)

Again, the stage directions deliberately call for alterations to the script to account for future wars. A similar moment follows this one where the POET lists cities which have been destroyed as a result of war.

. Alexandria, all that history lost . . . (Pause, searching . . .)
. . . like . . .
... Constantinople, burning for weeks . . .
. . . like . . .
.. . the Aztec temples, razed ...
. . . like ...
Dresden ... Hiroshima ...
like ...
Sarajevo ...
like . . .
Kabul .. .
like .. .
(*An Iliad*, 94-5)

The production of this piece that I was lucky enough to see was performed by Patty Gallagher produced by the UCSC department of Performance, Play and Design in May of 2024. This production made full use of the play's intentional devices meant to bring new meaning to future performances. In these list sequences, Gallagher made the additions of mentioning the current wars in both Ukraine, and Israel-Palestine. These conflicts post-date the original publication of this play but are doubtless examples of what the playwrights had in mind for future productions of their play.

Making room for new meaning in the script shows that O'Hare and Peterson had an understanding of the anti-this-war conundrum, and their play represents a strong effort to create an enduring piece of anti-war theater.

While *The Great Garrison* does not employ any overt devices to facilitate adaptation in the style of Peterson and O'Hare, it does have intentional qualities that are meant to allow the play to suit circumstances other than those in which it was written and first produced. As mentioned before, the war that ends as the inciting incident of the play is never mentioned by name. Likewise omitted are references to circumstantial details of the war; time, location, social and political realities. This choice was meant to demonstrate the universal qualities and consequences of the forever-wars which are becoming more a part of the American legacy with each passing decade.

The hope is that this could help *The Great Garrison* to remain relevant in future anti-war theatrical movements. The efficacy of this notion was somewhat validated by a conversation I had with an audience member after one of the shows. After most of the audience had cleared the house, a gentleman approached me and commended the play for its representation of the military lifestyle. He said that even though the play was clearly set in the current day, it reminded him vividly of his time in the Army during the Vietnam war. He expressed that many of the characters rang true and reminded him, for better or worse, of people he had served alongside.

When I told my wife, who is my artistic collaborator, about this conversation, she had the very exciting notion to stage the play set in the Vietnam era. This could

be done with relatively minor changes to the script. The play contains few references to plant the setting in a particular era, and what references there are could be altered with little effect on the plot. A cell phone could become a radio, the Humvee could be replaced with a Jeep, an M4 becomes an M16 etc. Staging this play in Vietnam would have the added benefit of solidifying some of the themes the play is meant to convey. Such as the fact that the United States is enmeshed in a cycle of imperial violence and every generation of Americans suffers the physical, psychological and spiritual consequences of this paradigm. As HAND says at the end of the play:

HAND: It is a shame. We take these young people and expose them to the worst aspects of humanity. We ask terrible things of them, and then we expect them to come home and act like normal citizens, as if none of it ever happened. It's an impossible thing to ask... But no one is paying me to have an opinion about it.

These consequences are by no means relegated to just soldiers and veterans. The consequences of forever wars infiltrate every aspect of our society. They contribute to a culture and cycle of violence with immediate and generational trauma that manifests in violence and suicide. It contributes to an epidemic of homelessness which affects everyone when uncared for veterans are unable to integrate into society. And this does not even account for the chaos and discord this cycle inflicts upon the rest of the world. Making these connections between the past, our current moment and potential future realities is the key to unraveling the cycles of violence and these otherwise unsolvable problems.

Topics of Future Research

Studying the theory of theater practitioners of the past has been invaluable to the evolution of my own work as a playwright and a director. The Theater of Peace is meant to be a collection of my theatrical research and its application in practice. Due to the scope and potential of this field of study, this thesis represents only the beginning of what could become a life's work. The following are concepts to be explored in future research and added to the knowledge contained within this thesis.

Epic Theater

The scope of Brecht's Epic Theatre is immense, as is its influence on modern western drama. In this essay, I only touched on a few of the aspects of Epic Theater which are useful as anti-war theater devices. Several others are described by Stevens such as characters who are a union of opposites. This is another manifestation of the concept of dialectical contradiction described earlier. The union of opposites describes characters with traits that are seemingly incompatible, and yet helps the characters to epitomize the themes of the play.

I explored this concept with two characters from *The Great Garrison*, the first being Captain STEELE, who is at the same time, very confident and self-assured, and yet also has moments of extreme self-doubt when it comes to the new leadership position she is in. Another character who I consider to be a union of opposites is LOCKE who, as mentioned before, is motivated by hatred and a need for vengeance. However, she also is capable of showing great compassion and empathy which manifests in how she comes to view BIRD over the course of the play.

The Role of Gender in Ambivalence

The paper by Martha Weisman, while short, is bursting with useful insights for playwrights and directors who are striving to effectively utilize anti-war themes. This essay focused on one of her concepts, the hero-myth cliché. However, she also makes very interesting points regarding how gender can cause ambivalence in anti-war drama. The role of gender in anti-war plays has a very interesting and complicated relationship with anti-war themes that goes all the way back to the original anti-war play, *Lysistrata*. In this play, a gender divide is obviously the point, however many playwrights since Aristophanes seemingly neglect the importance of women in anti-war movements. In *What Price Glory* for example, out of over 20 distinct speaking roles, the play features exactly one woman, and her role in the play is little more than the object of sexual desire for the male protagonists.

Ranciere

In my research of the topics discussed in this thesis, I came across *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* by Jacques Ranciere. I believe this text, and other works of Ranciere's would be a fascinating lens with which to frame a study of anti-war themes. Of particular interest to me in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was the concept of the "intolerable image." In short, subjecting the audience to a difficult image as a rhetorical strategy. This sounded like what I was meaning to accomplish with the climax of *The Great Garrison*, which features an active shooting. I understood that

staging an active shooting within the walls of a university theater would be a risky and potentially upsetting undertaking. However, this was to make the point that schools, and military installations, which are both often the sites of such atrocities, are suffering the symptoms of the same problem: a culture of violence. Additionally, soldiers and college students occupy very similar demographics of the population, making the connection even more intolerable, yet effective.

The Measure of Success

One question which I kept being referred to in my reading was how to measure the success of anti-war theater. This problem is brought up by many theorists including Brecht and Stevens. They agree that to expect a play to inspire an audience to direct and immediate social action is ideal, however unlikely. What most artists will settle for is to simply help the audience toward new perspectives which might alter their behavior in small but meaningful ways. For example, by affecting their voting patterns. However, even this goal, while achievable in theory, would be difficult to measure.

My research led me to a different avenue that might help to understand the success of anti-war plays in a new way. That is through the reaction from pro-war institutions to the plays' success. In a thesis about the play, *Behind the Battlelines*, Payman Shams describes the censorship of an Iranian anti-war play by the government-imposed theater movement known as Holy Defense Theater. Essays by A.J. Knox and Catherine Rees discuss Martin McDonagh's play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, which criticizes the violent period known as "The Troubles" in Ireland,

and despite it being written in 1994, did not receive a production until 2003, for fear of its potential to incite further violence.

These instances of censorship can act as a new metric for the success of anti-war theater and political theater more generally. Being seen as a threat by pro-war institutions is, in itself, a form of validation for political theater. This concept could be explored and expanded by researching reactions from other institutions.

Agency

A narrative element I hope to explore further is the role of agency in anti-war plays, especially those that depict soldiers. In many of these plays, war is a condition that the characters endure with no real ability to alter their own circumstances. I want to explore the power of giving characters agency and the impact of demonstrating characters who have the ability to choose peace, rather than simply enduring violence.

Agency plays a major role in *The Great Garrison*, when several of the characters choose a path of peaceful resolution rather than perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Conclusion

It was not my purpose with this thesis to define what makes successful anti-war theater. Rather, it was to learn and organize artistic methods and theories that could make me a more effective artist. That is the metric by which I consider the success of the production of *The Great Garrison*, and by extension, this thesis.

I first conceived of writing *The Great Garrison*, when I was an Army infantryman stationed in Ft. Hood (later renamed Ft. Cavazos) in 2015. Like many of my fellows, I had an intense desire to experience what I imagined as the adventure of war. I would see my mind change on this over the course of my service. I observed the devastating effects of war on my comrades who had already experienced combat. I witnessed friends go into panicked fits during training exercises that triggered memories of combat, and I attended several funerals for friends who died of PTSD related suicide.

In 2016, my unit was deployed to the South Korean demilitarized zone to help train the South Korean soldiers and to “deter North Korean aggression.” There, I experienced the local population who are ceaselessly reminded that they live on the verge of total war. This was not something I had ever been confronted with as an American growing up in Northern California. But the stark reality made me realize that many people across the world live under the threat of organized mass violence.

These experiences sobered my opinions about war, and America's role in global conflict. I knew that once my service was concluded, I would seek out a theater education so that I could become a more practiced and effective theater maker and use the rhetorical properties of theater to influence positive change in my country and the world. That is what I have strived for since I left the army. I will continue to make theater with the express intent of demonstrating that our country could one day serve as an example of peace in the world, and not function as a facilitator of global conflict as it does today.

Appendix

The Great Garrison

Mike P. Van Zandt

Characters

Corporal BELL: he/him, 22, fought in The War. Charismatic and wise beyond his years. A good leader, cares about his fellow soldiers.

Private First Class STONE: He/Him 19. Been in the unit about 1 year. Has never been to war, but is eager for the experience. A bit of a complainer.

Private LOCKE: She/Her 18. New to the unit. Was top of her class in basic training. Her father fought in The War. Eager to prove herself.

Private LAMP: He/Him 18. New to the unit. Quiet and timid.

Sergeant THORNE. He/Him 23. Fought in The War. Thinks a lot of himself. Bit of a misogynist. Thinks being an asshole will help him teach younger soldiers important lessons.

Private BIRD: He/Him 22. Fought in The War, Is being kicked out of the Army for something he did in the war and was demoted. He's experiencing social ostracization. Bitter about what he perceives as injustice.

First Sergeant HAND: He/Him 43. Fought in a few wars. Senior ranked enlisted soldier. Answers only to the captain. Good leader, cares about his soldiers. Has a mentorship relationship with the captain.

Captain STEELE: She/Her. 35. Been to war. New commander of the company. Harsh at times but fair. Tough from earning success in a male dominated environment. Previously served as military police.

ENSEMBLE: Private WOOD, Sergeant HILL

SCENE 1

A parade field at the Great Place. Dark hours of the early morning. Two soldiers

enter, BELL and STONE.

STONE. Well what a fucking waste of time this is!...WELL?

BELL. Well what?

STONE. Well what are we doing out here!?

BELL. Your guess is as good as mine.

STONE. Are you fucking with me? Is this some kind of prank?

BELL. Not by **me**, that's all I can say.

STONE. Are you sure we have to be here right now?

BELL. You can read the text from First Sergeant Hand in the group chat, look:

BELL takes out his cellphone.

To entire company, comma, full company recall, colon, (*Looks up*) It says the word 'colon', I'm not reading the punctuation. (*back to phone*) All personnel to congregate at the parade field, period. A S A M F G D P, period.

STONE. God damn!

BELL. Respond to acknowledge period. Good-bye fluffers. Daddy is heading to work now. There's treats in your bowl. Be a good boy, who's my good boy?...I think he might have been voice texting.

STONE. Is that it?

BELL. There's some responses: On my way, roger that, Fuck my life, laughing emoji, crying emoji, throw up emoji, eggplant, poop, et cetera.

STONE. I hate this place.

BELL. What do you mean? This is the Great Place!

STONE. A stupid name, what's so great about it anyway?

BELL. Hm.... You're kinda putting me on the spot... Maybe nicknames don't hold up so well under scrutiny.

STONE. Exactly. This place is a shit-hole.

BELL. There are worse places in the world.

STONE. How would I know? I haven't been anywhere. I left my shitty hometown in the middle of nowhere, to come to the shitty Great Place in the middle of fucking Texas!

BELL. See? There you go. You have been somewhere. You've been to Texas!

STONE. I hate Texas! I hate barbeque, I hate country music, I hate the Cowboys, armadillos and rodeos, and I hate the Alamo!

BELL. Aw, what's the matter? Is someone a little grumpy? Is it too early for Private First class Stone?

STONE. I'm pissed! I thought the Army was going to take me places. I thought I would have done my job by now. I wanna go fight the war! I wanna give 'em that pew pew pew! Knock knock, who's there? America Motherfuckers! I want to do what you did.

BELL. Is that what I did?

STONE. C'mon man, you know what I'm saying. You fought the war. You were a part of history. I want that. I want to serve my country!

BELL. You are serving. Right now. This is what serving your country looks like. Be grateful. War is a hassle.

STONE. But I want the hassle.

BELL. Do you know what a slit trench is?

STONE. A what?

BELL. A. slit. trench.

STONE. No. What is that?

BELL. It's a hole in the ground. That you dig. That you shit in. In war you shit in holes in the ground. Everyone likes to think about the glory. No one thinks about where they are going to shit.

STONE. I don't care about that.

BELL. Easy for you to say. You've never shit in a hole.

STONE. I just can't believe I'm in this fucking field in the middle of the night on a Sunday.

BELL. It does seem especially diabolical to call everyone in on a Sunday. The last time this happened would have been...Oh yeah, when Brick from 3rd platoon killed himself in the laundry room on a Sunday and they made everyone come in for a mental wellness check.

STONE. What kind of inconsiderate asshole kills himself on a Sunday?

BELL. That's 3rd Platoon for you.

STONE. Fucking 3rd Platoon. I should've known. Get this, when I kill myself I'm doing it on a Monday. I'm going to enjoy my last weekend.

BELL. **When** you kill yourself?

STONE. If.

BELL. You worry me sometimes.

STONE. So, why is it that we are the only two assholes out here?

BELL. I'm sure the rest of the company will be arriving soon.

STONE. Doesn't this violate that new WASTE protocol?

BELL. The Warrior Advocate's Severe Treatment Enjoyment? I don't think this qualifies.

STONE. Well then what good is the protocol?

BELL. I think it's to prevent us from killing ourselves.

STONE. Well, it's doing a great job.

LOCKE enters with LAMP following close behind.

LOCKE. This has got to be the place.

LAMP. *How do you know?*

LOCKE. We are looking for a parade field. This is a...field.

LAMP. *Where is everyone?*

LOCKE. I'm going to go ask.

LAMP. *Don't ask!*

LOCKE. Let go of me. What's your plan then? You want to go back to the barracks and wait some more?...Well?

LAMP. *I'm thinking. (pause) Yes.*

LOCKE. Good. Then go and stop bothering me. I never wanted you following me anyway...What? You don't know the way back huh? Helpless, that's what you are. I'm going to ask one of those guys.

LAMP. *What if they are officers?*

LOCKE. If they are officers they will definitely know if this is the right spot, won't they?

She goes to BELL and STONE.

Excuse me.

LAMP: *Shhhhh.*

LOCKE. Don't Shush me! Excuse me, Hi.

STONE. What?

LOCKE. I said, hi. It's a greeting, short for hello.

LAMP. *Locke!*

LOCKE. Relax. They aren't officers.

STONE. Are you lost Private...Locke?

LOCKE. I don't know, Private Stone. We are looking for the Bravo company formation.

BELL. Well then you're in the right spot.

LOCKE. Now that's helpful. Thank you. I told you this was the place.

LAMP. *Ok!*

STONE. So **you** are in Bravo company?

LOCKE. That's right.

STONE. I don't think so. I've never seen you before. I think I would remember you.

LOCKE. Well we are.

BELL. How long have you been here?

LOCKE. We're new. Just got here from basic.

STONE. No shit.

BELL. Welcome to the Great Place. I'm Corporal Bell, and this is Private First Class Stone.

LOCKE. My name is Locke. This is Lamp. Why do they call this the Great Place?

STONE. Because it's in Texas, and Texas is great. Get on board. Support units form up over there. This area is for infantry.

LOCKE. We are infantry!

STONE. Yeah right.

LOCKE. It's true! and if you call me support again, I'll kick you in the dick!

BELL. She certainly sounds like infantry.

STONE. I've never met a woman infantryman...or infantry...woman? How about you, highspeed. Are you infantry? Hey, you talk or what?

LAMP. *Yes.*

STONE. Yes what?

LAMP. I'm infantry.

LOCKE. We just need to know where to form up. If you're not going to help us we'll figure it out ourselves.

BELL. I'll help you. We are all on the same team here. Do you know what platoon you are in?

LOCKE. We haven't been assigned a platoon yet.

BELL. Who's your POC? (*pause*) Person of contact. C'mon try to keep up. This is the army. Everything is acronyms.

LOCKE. Lamp, you remember his name?

LAMP. *Sergeant something.*

BELL. What's that? C'mon now, speak up. I've got bad ears. I've been **blown up** too many times.

LOCKE. He said Sergeant something.

STONE. That narrows it down.

BELL. Just take out your phone and call him.

LOCKE. Lamp, you took the number down.

LAMP takes out his phone. Horrible realization.

LAMP. *It's dead!*

BELL. Oh, boy. This will just have to be a learning experience for you.

LOCKE. You're useless.

Sergeant THORNE enters.

THORNE. Bell, you seen First Sergeant Hand yet?

BELL. Good morning Sergeant Thorne. Not yet, it's just us so far.

THORNE. Good. Two privates have escaped and I gotta track them down before it gets out that I lost them.

BELL. We found some privates.

THORNE. I'll be fucked. Where have you dickheads been?

LOCKE. Here, Sergeant. We were told to-

THORNE. -I don't give a fuck what you were told. You do what I tell you! It's ok, We'll fix you. So, you're my new killers?

LOCKE. Yes Sergeant!

THORNE. You think the enemy will be scared of you two? You don't look like a killer to me. And what is that God awful smell?

He gets in close and inhales deeply.

LOCKE. My Perfume?

THORNE. It's making my eyes water. God, I'm sick of the smell of females.

LOCKE. You don't have to smell me, Sergeant.

LAMP. *Shhhh!...Sorry.*

THORNE. I don't have to smell you? Is that what you said?

LOCKE. There's no regulation against wearing perfume.

THORNE. No regulation? Is that right? Is there any regulation against making you do push ups until you sweat that shit off your skin?

BELL. Technically Sergeant, there's this new WASTE regulation, the Warrior Advocate's Severe Treatment Enjoinment. It no longer permits physical training as a form of punishment.

THORNE. What is this army coming to? Listen here about this nose. This nose is a deadly weapon. If I'm breathing, then this weapon is hot. Let me tell you a little war story. Last time we were deployed I killed two baddies with this nose. Two guys stopped for a cigarette. That was their only mistake. Just a cigarette, what could be more harmless? Well, I smelled that cigarette from over 100 meters. Bang bang! They were dead before they had smoked down to the filter. You think about that before you slather that shit on yourself. You want to smell like a female, go get a female's job. Here it will get you killed. Worse, it will get me killed. I better not be able to smell that on you tomorrow.

LOCKE. Yes, Sergeant.

THORNE. And what about you, huh?

LAMP. *Uh Me?*

THORNE. 'Uh me' Yeah you. Who the fuck else? Speak up when you talk. Are you a killer?

...

LAMP. I've never killed anyone.

THORNE. No shit. Just look at you. That's fine. I'll fix both of you after formation.

LOCKE. But-

THORNE. -Save it. Stand over there and wait for formation. I'm sick of looking at both of you.

BELL. You gotta relax Sergeant. Yelling at privates is bad for your circulation.

THORNE. It is the only thing that brings me any joy.

STONE. Sergeant, do you know what this formation is about?

THORNE. Jesus private, you look like shit.

STONE. Thanks.

THORNE. Thanks what? I'm not your fucking friend!

STONE. Thanks Sergeant.

THORNE. Stone, how old are you?

STONE. 19.

THORNE. You been drinking?

STONE. No...Sergeant. No Sergeant.

THORNE. Bullshit! I can smell it on you.

BELL. Why are you smelling everyone today?

THORNE. Your eyes are all glassy. What's the matter? You didn't get enough sleep last night? Well perk up. It's a beautiful day in the Great Place.

BELL. You're gonna catch a violation of the SHARP initiative if you keep sniffing privates.

THORNE. Sniffing privates is not sexual harassment.

BELL. Say that again, a little slower.

THORNE. Very funny. You know what the fuck I mean. I didn't violate SHARP.

BELL. Its Sexual Harassment and Assault Response and **Prevention**. The guy at the seminar said, its always better to prevent a violation than to respond to one.

THORNE. Stop citing acronyms at me.

BELL. I'm just looking out for you Sergeant.

THORNE. It's too early in the morning for all these regulations.

BELL. So, do you know what this is all about?

THORNE. I might.

BELL. Well, don't leave me hanging!

THORNE. I don't know if I should say, to a lower ranked soldier such as yourself.

BELL. Aww c'mon! What do you got for me?

THORNE. Not much. I didn't hear a lot. But I did see First Sergeant Hand talking with the new Captain about something big.

BELL. But you don't know what about?

THORNE. I've got a theory.

BELL. So?

THORNE. I think it's the day we've been waiting for.

BELL. Christmas?

THORNE. Better than Christmas. It's the war bro. It must have picked up and we're going back.

BELL. No.... No no no. We're not going back. No no. That's impossible.

THORNE. Believe it.

BELL. Can't be.

THORNE. What? You didn't enjoy yourself last time?

BELL. We can't be going to war, I mean... We just got home. We're home!

THORNE. We got home a year ago. That's how it goes. Year on, year off.

BELL. It's not our turn. It's someone else's turn.

THORNE. You remember when they told us we were going last time? It was in a surprise formation, early morning, just like this.

BELL. Fuck!

THORNE. There it is. The realization. Let it sink in.

STONE. I'm ready Sergeant!

THORNE. Well look who perked up. You excited private? Going to war make your little dick hard?

STONE. No! I've just been waiting for this. I've been too long in Texas not doing shit. I'm ready to do my job.

THORNE. You think you're ready to do some fighting, huh?

STONE. Hell yeah.

THORNE. You think if I grabbed your throat right now, you could stop me from killing you?

...

THORNE lunges at STONE and puts him in a choke hold. STONE struggles with all his might.

C'mon show me what you got. You wanted to fight so fight.

BELL. I don't believe this.

THORNE. Believe it.

BELL. Please God it can't be.

THORNE. You'll have to pray harder than that Bell. God can't hear you.

BELL. It can't be true, it just can't.

THORNE. *(To Stone)* How are you supposed to fight if you can't even defend yourself?

BELL. It's gotta be something else.

THORNE. What else could it be?

BELL. Something. Anything.

STONE goes limp. THORNE lets him slide onto the ground.

THORNE. Well, I didn't notice that distinct smell coming from the laundry room, so you might be out of luck.

BELL. *(Looking at Stone)* What did you do that for?

THORNE. I was making a point. I didn't know he would just pass out.

BELL. What did you think would happen?

THORNE. I don't know, I guess I thought he'd put up a fight.

BELL. Not exactly a fair fight.

THORNE. There's no such thing as a fair fight.

Pause.

Where is everyone?

BELL. They've been trickling in.

The ranks swell with the ENSEMBLE.

THORNE. Alright, this is it. Hey form up!

BELL goes to STONE on the ground and rouses him.

BELL. Alright killer, time to get up.

STONE stands.

STONE. I was having a good dream.

BELL. Welcome back to the nightmare.

STONE. Where am I?

BELL. Texas.

STONE. Oh fuck!

First Sergeant Hand enters. The company assembles in formation.

HAND. Good morning, Bravo Company. At ease. Now I'm going to be turning over to the ma'am in a second but, the new WASTE protocol says that we can't keep you all standing in formation too long. It's bad for joints and your circulation. So, lets everybody spread out and find some room, and we'll be doing some yoga this

morning so yall stay nice and limber, and you won't be walking all stiff like Frankenstein when you're First Sergeant's age.

The company disperses throughout the house.

Ok looking good, lets start with a the

Checks notes.

Nat-ara-jas-ana pose ok might look something like this.

He does his best. The company attempts the pose. Captain Steele enters.

Outstanding. Just keep posing. Ma'am over to you.

STEELE. Um, thank you. Good morning Bravo company. My name is Captain Steele, I'm your new Company commander.

THORNE. *Hey Bell!*

STEELE. You can address me as Captain, Captain Steele or ma'am.

BELL. *Yeah?*

STEELE. I'll try to keep this brief, I know it's early.

THORNE. *Where is that fucker, BIRD?*

STEELE. But there's some news that I wanted you to hear from me. We will be embarking on an adventure together as a company.

Excited murmuring through the company.

BELL. *I don't think he's here.*

THORNE. *Motherfucker.*

HAND. Switch sides!

STEELE. Right, uh ok. Before that, there's some things you should know about me. I came here from a military police command, but don't get it twisted. I am every bit as infantry as anyone else. That being said, I will hold this company to the same standards of discipline and professionalism as my last command.

HAND. Okay lets transition to uh the gar-u-dasana? Looks something like this.

STEELE. Ahem, I follow the rules, and those who follow me follow the rules. You might look around this army and notice some things are changing. You might have mixed feelings about these changes. Allow me to extend you an invitation to keep those feelings to yourself. This company is going to be ahead of the times not behind them. Those who can't keep up in my army will be left behind. With that out of the way, I can get to why we are all here on a Sunday.

Excitement continues to build. Poses break down.

STONE. This is it!

BELL. Please no!

The Commander in Chief has announced an abrupt end to all overseas combat operations. A withdrawal order has been issued to all troops in combat zones. This is in effect an end to the war.

THORNE. What the fuck!

BELL. Oh thank god!

Shock throughout the company.

I know this may come as a surprise; emotions may be mixed. It may even be a disappointment for some. It certainly is on some level for me. But I want you to know that this will not affect our combat readiness. We still have work to do. This mission is over, now we prepare for the next one. We will get this company into the proper shape to fight...So starting today, we will kick off a field training exercise. This will give us the benchmark which we can build off of in the months...and years of training ahead.

Murmurs of mixed dissent and approval.

First Sergeant, your remarks.

HAND. Yes, thank you ma'am. Keep going with your poses. Just to go off a few things the ma'am said. The Big Army is heading into a training phase. A peacetime climate. Probably none of you here are old enough to remember the time before the war, so allow me to enlighten you. There's gonna be a lot less funding. It ain't right, but no one pays me to have an opinion about it. There's gonna be some downsizing as well. We all are gonna need to work harder-otherwise you'll get let go and won't be a thing I can do for ya. Like the ma'am said, we are gonna have some good training, but training is no substitute for experience. An army at peace quickly forgets how to

fight a war. So it will be very important for you combat vets to teach our new recruits and pass on what you learned fighting down range. That's really all I got for you.

Ma'am.

STEELE. Ok, let's get this training underway.

Steele salutes the company. They return the salute. Ensemble begins to dissipate. All exit except for THORNE, BELL, LOCKE, LAMP.

THORNE. Hey, you two new Privates, don't go anywhere. Bell?

BELL. Yes, Sergeant?

THORNE. Bring me that shitbag, Bird. I don't care where he is, find him and get his ass here.

BELL. Ok Sergeant, I'll find him.

THORNE. The company needs privates for some details, so it looks like you two lucked out. Let's see... You.

LAMP. *Yes Sergeant?*

THORNE. Speak up now! Can you drive or what?

LAMP. Drive, Sergeant?

THORNE. Yeah, like a car dip-shit. Can you drive a car?

LAMP. Yes, Sergeant.

THORNE. Good. Congratulations, you're the Captain's new Humvee driver. Report to Headquarters platoon...Private, did you hear me?

LAMP. I'm...going?

THORNE. Yes, out of second platoon into headquarters...As in not my problem anymore...as in good-fucking-bye!

LAMP looks at LOCKE.

LOCKE. Don't look at me, get moving!

LAMP exits.

THORNE. And you.

LOCKE. Yes Sergeant!

THORNE. You got the best job of the exercise.

LOCKE. What am I doing Sergeant?

THORNE. Ammo.

LOCKE. Ammo?

THORNE. Yeah you sit at the ammo depot and sign out bullets for those who will be running the course. You'll be sitting in some field in the middle of nowhere for the duration of the exercise so have fun with that.

LOCKE. But that's-

THORNE. -I didn't ask for an opinion., Get moving.

LOCKE Exits. BELL and BIRD enter.

THORNE. Well, look who it is! Wakey wakey shit-head!

BIRD. That's my bad Sergeant...I thought we had the day off.

THORNE. You don't get days off Bird. Not while I'm in charge of your sorry ass. You're on duty 24/7 until they finally kick you out.

BIRD. When will that day get here?

THORNE. You think you're too good for formation? As long as you disgrace that uniform by wearing it your ass is gonna be at formation.

BIRD. Sargie-poo believe me...

BIRD produces an energy drink and opens it.

BIRD. There's no place I would have rather been than at formation. Certainly not warm in my bed, wearing my cozie wozies.

THORNE makes a swipe for the can, but BIRD pulls it back in time.

Woah! Watch it. These are expensive on a private's salary you know?

THORNE. No, that's fine. Drink your fucking drink, Bird. Ya know something? I'm gonna miss you when you are gone. So I'm gonna have to really cherish the rest of our time together.

BIRD. I don't know what I'm gonna do without ya.

THORNE. Approaches BIRD menacingly.

BELL. Sergeant, can I just remind you about the new WASTE regulation?

THORNE. Take a hike, Bell.

BELL. I just would hate to see you get in trouble for-

THORNE. I said get outta here!

BIRD. Don't worry Bell, I can handle this guy.

SCENE 1.1

Supply room, and HQ office. Same space, different place. HILL is checking figures in the supply room. WOOD is behind a desk in the Battalion S1 Office. LOCKE enters the Supply room.

LOCKE. Hello?

HILL. Hello. Oh Hey! Are you the one assigned to the ammo detail?

LOCKE. I think so. Are you on it as well?

HILL. Oh, no. I'm the supply officer. You know what they say though, 'bullets don't fly without supply!'

LOCKE. Oh! Right, of course sorry.

HILL. No worries, girl!

LAMP enters the HQ office.

LAMP. Um. Hello?

WOOD. Hello! Yes, come on in. Can I help you?

LAMP. I think so.

WOOD. Is there a problem with your pay?

LAMP. My pay?

WOOD. Yes, did you get paid too much?

LAMP. I don't think so.

WOOD. Oh thank goodness. That can be a disaster.

LAMP. I need to get a Humvee license.

WOOD. Oh good! I can help you with that!

HILL. You just moved into the C-Barracks right?

LOCKE. Yeah, how'd you know-

HILL. -I've seen you around. We are the only women ya know, on our floor. Plus, I saw your shower caddy. Twelve showers for just the two of us. It's regulation that our facilities have to be the same as theirs.

LOCKE. I love that for us.

HILL. I know right? The army is the only place you see a line out the door for a men's latrine. I'd keep your shower caddy in your room though, if I were you. As soon as that line gets **too** long, they will invade ours. Someone will snag that fancy shampoo you have.

LOCKE. Thanks for the tip.

HILL. So, you're fresh out of basic. Are you in the support company?

LOCKE. No, I'm infantry.

HILL. Really?! Good for you! I wanted to go infantry when I joined. But it wasn't an option back then. But that's great for you!

LOCKE. Thanks.

WOOD. Ok, here is the form for new Humvee drivers. What is your name?

LAMP. Lamp.

WOOD. Ok, Private Lamp. Here you go!

LAMP. Um.

WOOD. Is there something else?

LAMP. Don't I have to take a class or something?

WOOD. Hm. Let me see. How many fingers am I holding up?

Wood holds up 2 fingers.

LAMP. Two?

WOOD. Very good! Which hand do you write with?

Lamp holds up his right? hand.

WOOD. Is that your right or your left?

LAMP. My right?

WOOD. Correct! So you can see, you know your directions. You seem qualified to me.

HILL. So are you running the exercise then?

LOCKE. I don't know. Sergeant Gunn stuck me on this stupid detail. Oh sorry, no offense.

HILL. None taken. Fuck Sergeant Gunn. That guy is such a... A friend of mine from another company told me that he as a teeny tiny, crooked dick, and that's why he's an asshole all the time. And she would know, too. So, you don't know who is doing this job with you?

LOCKE. Um, No, I-

HILL. -That's fine, I can look it up right here. Looks like it's private Bird. That figures. He's always late. He'll probably show up eventually, he's really lazy. The sooner he's gone, the better in my opinion. Don't let him make you do all the work!

LAMP. I've never driven a Humvee before. I don't know if I can.

WOOD. That's ok! You have driven a car right?

LAMP. Yeah. I used to drive my brother to school.

WOOD. Ok. So it's easier than that. You don't even need to worry about roads sometimes. No stop signs or lights. The Humvee is armored. It weighs maybe, 12 thousand pounds. Very safe. The windshield is this thick! So you can't even fly through it if you crash. Worst case, you smash your head on it...But you will be fine!

LAMP. Oh god!

HILL. Now, the ammo is already offloaded out in the field. Here is the inventory sheet.

HILL hands LOCKE some documents.

HILL. Check the stock against this list and make sure everything is in order. Dispense the ammo to everyone doing the exercise and log how much you give out. Keep track of everything. Any questions?

LOCKE. I think I got it.

HILL. Of course you do. Now really important, don't smoke near the ammo.

LOCKE. I don-

HILL. -Hey, is that Marc Jacobs Daisy?

LOCKE. Oh, Yeah! It is. Good nose.

HILL. I love it.

LOCKE. Sergeant Gunn says I have to stop wearing it.

HILL. Oh, don't let Crooked Dick bully you! If you have to, you can file a harassment complaint.

LOCKE. Thanks.

HILL. No problem, let's get a drink sometime after the exercise is over.

LOCKE. Sure!

HILL. Good luck!

LOCKE exits.

WOOD. Just break early, and you will be fine.

LAMP. Ok.

WOOD. Who are you driving for?

LAMP. The new commander.

WOOD. Hey! That's a very good job. She must trust you a lot.

LAMP. I wish she had picked someone else.

WOOD. Why is that?

LAMP. Locke is in second platoon. She is my only friend.

WOOD. Oh, I see. Well, you may still see her around. It's a small army. Well, it's actually a big Army. Maybe the biggest ever. But, it's still small. Good luck, Private Lamp.

LAMP. Thanks.

Lamp exits.

SCENE 2

Captain STEELE's office. Sparsely furnished, a desk but no chair. STEELE Enters. A

knock is heard, and HAND enters.

HAND. Hello ma'am. I hope I'm not interrupting, just wanted to make sure you were settling in ok. See if you needed a hand with anything.

STEELE. Oh, um. Thank you.

HAND. How do you like the new office?

STEELE. It's bigger than my last office.

HAND. That's because it's so empty. The last commander didn't like a lot of clutter. He said he needed extra room for thinking. Isn't that strange? Thinking room? Now breathing room, I understand. Elbow room, although I don't know why you need to be flapping your elbows all over the place.

STEELE. That is strange.

HAND. It's my understanding that thinking happens up here ma'am, and not out here.

STEELE. That's a good point.

HAND. Anyway, let me know if there is anything I can do to help get you settled in here.

STEELE. Do you know where the chair is?

HAND. Oh... The chair.

STEELE. There doesn't seem to be one anywhere.

HAND. Well, ma'am we are going to have to get you a new chair ma'am. We'll put an order in.

STEELE. Aren't there any in this building?

HAND. Not a single one I'm afraid.

STEELE. How could that be?

HAND. That would also be the last commander's work. He had funny ideas about comfort. One day he stormed into my office, proclaimed that sitting was for the weak and had the company round up all the chairs, and dump them at the artillery range.

STEELE. That's extreme.

HAND. He was. I'll put in the order in. but supply moves slow. It could be a couple weeks.

STEELE. Well, it won't matter if we are in the field.

HAND. Do you mean to participate in the exercise?

STEELE. Of course. Does that surprise you?

HAND. No, not surprise exactly. I do wonder why you put yourself through the hassle.

STEELE. I wouldn't ask my soldiers to do anything I couldn't do.

HAND. Well could is one thing, and should another, and would is a separate issue entirely. Now, wouldn't doesn't preclude couldn't as one who couldn't, mightn't even if they could. But couldn't and shouldn't are mutually exclusive.

STEELE. Are you saying I shouldn't train with the rest of the company?

HAND. I wouldn't presume to say shouldn't as undoubtedly you could. As for me I would embarrass myself. These knees aren't worth a damn these days, which makes

the matter of should or shouldn't of no consequence, as in truth I couldn't. As to your question, if you did, you should for the right reason.

STEELE. I see. Well, I have to do something to win these soldiers over.

HAND. Why is that?

HAND begins inspecting the desk closely. He is looking for something.

STEELE. I don't think they trust me. I could see it on their faces this morning. I'm the commander, but I'm not in command, not really.

HAND. Trust comes in funny ways ma'am.

STEELE. Do you trust me?

HAND pops up from behind the desk.

HAND. ...You have an excellent record. And I **trust** that it reflects your ability to lead this company.

STEELE. That's a diplomatic way of saying 'no'.

HAND. What is a soldier if not a diplomat? Trust comes with time, and familiarity.

HAND finds the mechanism opening the secret compartment and produces the hidden bottle of whiskey and single glass.

HAND. Aha!

STEELE. What is that?

HAND. I thought that old dog might have had one of these stashed away. There's just the one glass. As this is your office now, you ought to have the bottle.

STEELE. You aren't suggesting we drink in uniform?

HAND. Only because I can't command it.

He fills the glass and hands her the bottle.

It's the perk of having an office.

They drink.

STEELE. Well, I don't hate that.

HAND. Of course not. And now I trust you a little more than I did. Are you married, ma'am?

STEELE. That's a little personal. What does that matter?

HAND. It doesn't. But most of the soldiers in this company are. They married young. I can't say why, but I did too when I was a private. They miss their spouses when they are away, and they complain about them when they are home. Family gives them something they can talk about besides work. It's a way to building trust.

STEELE. I'm divorced actually.

HAND. Even better! You're gonna fit right in with them.

They have another drink.

STEELE. Really?

HAND. Oh yeah, these guys are always getting divorced. They should give out medals for it.

STEELE. Why is that?

HAND. Medals are good for morale.

STEELE. No, why do you think divorce is so common?

HAND. Hard to say. Occupational hazard I would think. Or could be a soldier is just hard to love.

STEELE. So, you think the whole marriage thing is fucked then? Just something to talk about at work?

HAND. If I thought that, I wouldn't have married my third wife. I'll be retiring soon. Hopefully MRS. First Sergeant can hold on till then. Love is something nice to believe in. The soldiers always have their heads full of big ideas to believe in. Country, glory, honor, God. Why not love too?

They drink.

HAND. When did you get divorced?

STEELE. After my last deployment.

HAND. That will do it. You can't love someone properly from half-way across the world. Not for months and months.

STEELE. You might be right. I missed [pronoun] while I was gone...but when I came home, it just didn't go away. The missing didn't go away. We stopped saying 'I love you too' I remember that. We would say 'I love you' to each other, just not 'I love you **too**'. It was like we were both just saying it, unanswered. To no one.

HAND. Falling out of love is hard.

STEELE. Yes, but it was also easy. We didn't have one of those messy divorces with the shouting and breaking things. Neither of us wanted it to be anymore. There was no resentment, it was just. Sad.

HAND. I think I know what you mean.

They drink.

STEELE. It's funny.

HAND. What is?

STEELE. I thought getting this position meant it was only a matter of time until I led a combat operation. I've been waiting for my chance. So of course, the war ended right when I got my dream job. Now what do I do?

HAND. You fight. Fight the enemy.

STEELE. Which enemy?

HAND. Not the one you're thinking of. Not the kind, you shoot and he shoots back. That war is over, it's true. But your real fight, yours and mine is just beginning. The

other enemy is the one that comes home with you once the fighting is over. He lives inside your head; with all the horrible things you've ever seen and done. He whispers in a soldier's ear. He strikes when they are alone, and feeling every bad thing a person can feel. Do you know what I'm talking about?

STEELE. I think so.

HAND. It spreads like a virus, our enemy. Killing your soldiers faster than you would believe. And there isn't enough whiskey in the world to let you forget how you failed them. I will fight the other enemy until the day I take this uniform off for good. Don't worry about missing the war, ma'am. There is plenty of fight right here. It's alive in our company even now.

STEELE. But what do I do?

HAND. You can't always know. Sometimes you don't see until it is already too late. Look, and listen, your senses are your greatest weapon, and your words. Words can kill him. Look for the signs he makes. And, of course, you always stay strapped.

HAND produces an intimidating ornate pistol.

STEELE. What are you doing with that?!

HAND. It's my everyday carry, isn't it pretty?

STEELE. Where did that come from?!

HAND. Designer Gun Emporium, just outside the base on Republic road. You should check it out. Tell Gus you know me and-

STEELE. -First Sergeant, you have to know that carrying a privately owned firearm on duty is a serious violation.

HAND. Oh, I'd say I know that by now ma'am. You aren't the first MP to tell me so. But, The Great Place has different rules. The great place is known for its... goings on. events, you might call them, happenings. The proper term might be... active shootings if you want to be technical. The worst thing about the other enemy is it doesn't always kill. Sometimes, He turns into a soldier and makes them his. That's how the war comes home with you. And you have to fight it the old fashioned way.

Knock at the door. STEELE stows the bottle, HAND puts away the pistol.

STEELE. Come in.

LAMP enters.

HAND. Who are you?

STEELE. This is my designated driver. Er- the soldier who I have designated to be my driver. Were you able to get your Humvee license?

LAMP. *Yes ma'am.*

HAND. C'mon man, say it with your chest!

LAMP. Yes ma'am.

HAND. You're gonna have to work on that. What's your name?

LAMP. Lamp.

HAND. Shine bright private Lamp.

STEELE. Private get the Humvee started, we're gonna go see what we can make of this exercise.

LAMP exits.

STEELE. Since I can't fight alongside the company, I can at least train beside them.

HAND. I'll be on the sidelines cheering you on, ma'am.

They exit.

SCENE 3

The Ammo Depot. Crates of ammunition sit on pallets. Razor-wire surrounds the perimeter. LOCKE with a rifle, and BIRD with a machine gun enter.

LOCKE. Here it is! This is it. We're here.

BIRD sets down his things and finds a restful position in the shade.

LOCKE. What are you doing? Hello?

BIRD. Hello.

LOCKE. We should get started.

BIRD. I am started.

LOCKE. What about all the work we have to do.

BIRD. What work?

LOCKE. Making sure everything is in order. Counting the ammo.

BIRD. Oh that, I'm not doing that.

LOCKE. We were told that everything needs to be accounted for.

BIRD. Do you always do what you are told?

LOCKE. I always do what I am ordered.

BIRD. You should abandon that policy. It will get you in trouble.

LOCKE. The supply officer said-

BIRD. -The supply officer wants you to do her job for her, and if you do then you're an idiot.

LOCKE. I'm not an idiot.

BIRD. Well I'm not convinced.

LOCKE. We have to make sure everything is here at least.

BIRD. It is.

LOCKE. How do you know?

BIRD. Look, there it is.

LOCKE. We are responsible for this stuff. If something goes missing, we could get into trouble.

BIRD. I'm already in trouble. That's why I'm here with you. It's not that complicated. When someone shows up, you give them ammo so they can run the exercise.

LOCKE. And what if we run out because we aren't keeping track?

BIRD. There's a mountain of bullets here. We may run short of morale, compassion, human decency, or the general will to live. But there's always more bullets.

LOCKE. Fine, I'll do it myself.

BIRD. Knock yourself out.

LOCKE goes to the ammo and attempts to move the razor wire but cuts her hand.

LOCKE. FUCK! Oh Fucking bitch!

BIRD. Ouch.

LOCKE. Am I really doing this all by myself?!

BIRD. You are more than welcome not to do it at all.

LOCKE. Why does this always happen?

BIRD. Probably because you don't wear gloves.

LOCKE. Every time I try my best, no matter how hard I work, I'm always stuck with someone too stupid or lazy to be helpful to anyone.

BIRD. Alright I'm gonna let that go because you just cut your hand on razor wire, and I know that shit is fucking barbaric. I can also appreciate that you are fresh out of basic, and you got your head full of these romantic ideas about being a soldier. It's nothing new. I've been there. But right now, I'm going through something, and you are making it worse. So I'm gonna clue you in: The army doesn't give a fuck about you. There is nothing noble or heroic about what we do. It's just a job. You might as well be collecting trash, or sorting mail. Internalize that however you need to, but stop bugging me.

LOCKE. You don't know anything about me.

BIRD gets up.

BIRD. I know plenty. I know you're the type who gets off on shit like honor, duty and defending your country. Basically, you believe all the bullshit. The army is full of soldiers like you. I used to be that way. But it never lasts, you either wise up or get KIA.

LOCKE. You're so full of shit. You have no idea what war is like.

BIRD. I know more than you! I've seen people like you, always trying to do something heroic. Drawing enemy fire, giving first-aid, jumping on a grenade. They are all stupid!

LOCKE. Watch your mouth! You just don't care, and that's nothing new either. It's boring. You have no respect for anything or anyone. Apathy disgusts me. You're just a piece of shit.

BIRD. Don't call me that! I get it all day, but I won't take it from you.

LOCKE. Piece of-

BIRD rips off her nametape and throws it.

BIRD. There.

LOCKE. You...DO NOT....DO...THAT.

BIRD. Ok, calm d-

LOCKE. That is my name! My father's name! You threw my father's name in the dirt!

BIRD. Ok, I'm sorr-

LOCKE. -You **are** sorry! You can disrespect your own uniform, but you keep your hands off me! Now help me find my nametape.

The two search for the nametape.

BIRD. I'm sorry I said that stuff.

LOCKE. You don't know what you are talking about.

BIRD. I do, but I'm still shouldn't have said it. I didn't mean to upset you.

LOCKE. My Dad, isn't stupid.

BIRD. I didn't say he was.

LOCKE. Yes you did. He fought in the war. And he did something heroic. And you said that was stupid.

BIRD. I'm sorry...

LOCKE. So you were here the last time our unit deployed?

BIRD. Oh yeah with Bell, Gunn, 1st Sergeant Hand, the whole gang.

LOCKE. Then...why are you still a private?

BIRD. Got demoted.

LOCKE. For what?

BIRD. Being a piece of shit.

LOCKE. Will you tell me about the war?

BIRD. Didn't your dad tell you?

LOCKE. He doesn't talk about it. He doesn't talk much at all actually.

BIRD. It's something you have to experience yourself. I'm sure you'll get your chance.

LOCKE. No I won't, the war is over.

BIRD. Over? What are you talking about?

LOCKE. Captain Steele said so this morning.

BIRD. Oh fuck me.

LOCKE. What's the matter?

BIRD. I'm done. This is it for me.

LOCKE. Why?

BIRD. I'll get kicked out for sure now. It's only a matter of time.

LOCKE. You're getting kicked out?

BIRD. I thought maybe I could stay if the war picked up again. But now... What am I going to do? I can't go home...

LOCKE. They won't keep you now.

BIRD. If the war is over, then so am I. I'm just wasting my time now. (*nametape*) I'm sorry I threw your nametape.

LOCKE. I don't think we are going to find it.

BIRD. If you still care, I'll help you move that wire and the ammo crates.

LOCKE. You will?

BIRD. Maybe if I start working harder, someone will decide I'm worth a damn.

How's your hand?

LOCKE. It fucking hurts!

SCENE 3.1

Two ENSEMBLE meet DSC for coffee talk.

ENSEMBLE 1: I guess they went with white camo this year.

ENSEMBLE 2: Yeah. That's fine with me, desert tan was not my color.

ENSEMBLE 1: Still, are we invading the north pole next?

ENSEMBLE 2: I think it's less about blending in, and more about uniformity at this point. After all, it doesn't matter what color you wear if a drone is picking up your heat signature.

ENSEMBLE 1: I guess so. The Navy was running camouflage blue for a while there.

ENSEMBLE 2: Were they falling off their boats and hoping to blend in with the water?

ENSEMBLE 1: I don't know. If I fell off a boat I'd want to be wearing bright orange or something.

ENSEMBLE 2: That's not exactly a sexy color scheme for a uniform.

ENSEMBLE 1: That's true.

They exit.

SCENE 4

Staging area for the exercise. BELL and STONE are cleaning their weapons.

STONE. Does that look clean to you?

BELL. No. You've got dirt in that little crease there.

STONE. What!? Gimme that. How am I supposed to get the dirt off, when I'm finished with a piece I have to set it on the ground?

BELL. You'll figure it out.

STONE. This is starting to feel like busy work.

BELL. Good job, you figured it out.

STONE. So are you really leading a team through the exercise?

BELL. Looks that way. The big army thinks I'm ready for more responsibility. Lucky me.

STONE. So, are we still gonna...be friends and hangout?

BELL. Of course, why wouldn't we?

STONE. Well, you're in an NCO position. I figured you'll be hanging out with Sergeant Thorne now.

BELL. We can still hang out. We're still buds.

STONE. Really?

BELL. Yeah, although...

STONE. What?

BELL. We can't really drink together anymore.

STONE. What! Why not!?

BELL. I know you're underage. I have to be responsible now.

STONE. I knew it! Our friendship is over!

BELL. We can still hang out and play video games like always.

STONE. I always drink when I play video games. A friend would know that!

BELL. You don't have to.

STONE. Oh boy. Here we go. I drink a lot. So does everyone. I'm surrounded by drunks telling me not to drink. I've got Sergeant Thorne breathing down my neck...literally smelling my breath, and now **you're** telling me to stop drinking. And I have yet to hear a compelling reason why I should stop by the way!

BELL. Well, you are underage.

STONE. Please don't lecture me about this. I didn't go to college, did I? Does this look like college to you? Are we in a lecture hall right now? So then stop lecturing please.

BELL. Ok, relax. I won't tell you not to drink.

STONE. I just can't drink in front of you?

BELL. Correct.

STONE. First I'm not going to get to fight the war, and now I've lost my only friend.

BELL. C'mon, don't be so dramatic.

STONE. Do you think you could get me on your team so I can finally get away from Thorne?

BELL. That's way above my paygrade. Besides, Thorne isn't that bad.

STONE. He wants to kill me.

BELL. No he doesn't. That's just the way he talks.

STONE. He wants to end my life. He said so, and shouldn't I believe him?

BELL. Well-

STONE. The only way he could be clearer is if he actually killed me.

BELL. He's not going to kill you.

STONE. He wants to and that's enough for me.

BELL. You make yourself an easy target.

STONE. How, by being alive?

BELL. Your uniform is pretty ratty.

STONE. It's used.

BELL. Well, appearance matters to Sergeant Thorne. This makes you look like you don't give a shit.

STONE. Fuck that.

BELL. Well, you wanted to know what his problem is. Maybe splurge on a new uniform?

STONE. I can't afford it.*(pause)* I send all my money home.

BELL. Home?

STONE. Yeah to my mom. She needs it, for my brother and sisters.

BELL. Oh.

STONE. She wanted me to get a job in town, but I had to get outta there. I hate being broke all the damn time. I wish I had a fresh new uniform. Nothing looks better.

When I was a kid I saw soldiers at the ballgame and I'll never forget how good their uniforms looked. I hate wearing this worn-out shit. I hate it more than Thorne does.

BELL. You should tell him that.

STONE. Like he gives a shit.

BELL. He cares more than you think. He wouldn't fuck with you so much if he didn't care.

STONE. Why did the war have to end? I could use a little combat pay.

THORNE enters.

THORNE. What are you two doing?

BELL. Cleaning weapons Sergeant.

THORNE. Let me see that.

Takes STONE's weapon.

THORNE. You've got some dirt in that crease there.

STONE. Yes, sergeant.

THORNE. Fix it later, I'm teaching a class. All of you! Claim some land, and listen up!

ENSEMBLE enters and LAMP looking a bit lost. All but THORNE find space in the house.

First-Sergeant Hand wants me to teach you new guys some field craft. Things I learned in the war. So shut up and pay attention. We'll start with a pop quiz. What is the most effective piece of equipment to an infantry soldier in combat? Shout it out!

ENSEMBLE(Kevin): A rifle!

THORNE. The obvious answer. No.

ENSEMBLE(Rylind). A radio!

THORNE. Now you're thinking. Still wrong. Next.

STONE. A first aid kit?

THORNE. First aid-How the fuck are you supposed to kill someone with a first aid kit? Do push-ups! What else? No more guesses? You all fail. The deadliest weapon in your arsenal by far is...TIC TOC!

THORNE produces a GoPro style camera.

This, is the Troop Infantry Combat, Tactical Overwatch Camera. TIC TOC! I'm gonna give you all a quick lesson in the operation of this weapon because these days, no soldier goes into combat without a TIC TOC. War is fought just as much on the internet as it is on the ground. Every bit of footage you capture with a TIC TOC will get us support, funding, supplies, and new recruits. This technology is one of the strongest forms of propaganda ever. Every like, comment, and subscribe is another blow to the enemy. I myself have twenty thousand subscribers on my own combat footage channel. @theModernAchilles check me out. Your TIC TOC can even record you getting killed. Believe me, there is nothing more important you could do for the war effort than to die on camera. Your mom might see it on Facebook, but the support it brings, you could practically win a war all by yourself. Now, how to use the thing? Where do you put it to win over the algorithm? I need a volunteer from the audience...you, squeaky. Get up here.

LAMP gets on stage, THORNE faces him towards the audience. He demonstrates on
LAMP.

Now, the first instinct is to put the TIC TOC on the helmet here. This isn't bad. It gives the audience a nice POV, basically they see what you see. But in re-watch it feels a little detached. What I like to do is put it right in the middle of the chest, here. This is a much more intimate and dynamic camera angle. It kind of makes the footage

look like a video game and gives the audience the feeling that they are in the action.

Alright, fuck off.

LAMP sits back down.

Now you could also just fix the TIC TOC directly to your rifle. Some soldiers opt for this, it kind of brings the weapon into the story as its own character. But I don't recommend it. You're not going to capture everything you want to. Imagine an enemy tank is moving on your position, so you set your rifle down and pick up your rocket launcher. Now you're doing this cool thing, and TIC TOC will never see it! What a waste! Why even fight a war if it doesn't end up on TIC TOC? Anyways, that's about all I got for you, let's get ready to do this exercise.

ENSEMBLE and LAMP exit.

THORNE. Stone, you and me are running the exercise tonight.

STONE. Tonight?!

THORNE. The fuck I just say? Then you will be doing it again with Corporal Bell in the morning so he can get qualified leading a team.

BELL. Hey, so we are gonna be on a team after all.

STONE. So, tonight...**and** in the morning?

THORNE. Yeah. It looks like there aren't enough privates to go round. Suck it up. Get your shit ready, we have to go draw ammo.

THORNE and STONE exit. BELL goes back to cleaning his weapon.

SCENE 5

The ammo depot. LOCKE is reading a book. BIRD makes a phone call.

BIRD. Heyyyyyy, how you doing?

LOCKE. Um...excuse me.

BIRD. I'm just hangin' out. Ya know, pretty chill.

LOCKE. Hey!

BIRD. Hold on a second. What!?

LOCKE. Do you have to do that here?

BIRD. Where do you want me to do it?*(back to the call)* Sorry about that. It's good to finally hear your voice. I like it, you sound real good. Your profile picture is pretty cute too*(pause)*Hang out? This Friday? Imma bit busy this Friday. No no no its not like that. I'm not even talking to any other-*(pause)*So Saturday is kinda tricky too. I'm not really gonna have a night off for about the next month or so but-*(pause)*why did I call? To talk I guess, you gave me your number, so I thought-...Hello? Damn.

LOCKE. What's the point of swiping right now?

BIRD. To talk to pretty girls.

LOCKE. Short conversation.

BIRD. What else should I do? Talk to you?

LOCKE. Why don't you read a book or something?

BIRD. Books don't do it for me. The letters just sit there. Staring at me. It's unnerving and I get bored looking at them.

LOCKE. That's when you're supposed to turn the page.

BIRD. Turn the page. And then what? That page leads to the next page and another and another. When does it end?

LOCKE. Usually once you get to the back cover.

BIRD. Yeah right, is that supposed to be some kind of metaphor? Like how I'm supposed to just live each day looking forward to the next one? Wake up, go to sleep, wake up go to sleep, and then it just ends?

LOCKE. I think you are reading the wrong books.

BIRD. What are you reading?

LOCKE. Alexander the Great. The legend is that he once chased a rival king across the Middle East for years just because he wanted to kill the king with his own hands. He was so obsessed that he brought his entire army, and used all his nation's resources to hunt for one man in the desert.

BIRD. Why does that sound so familiar?

LOCKE. And when another man finally killed the rival king, Alexander had him tortured to death for the insult.

BIRD. That's what you get for trying to help. You'd think he just would be happy that someone killed the fucker for him.

LOCKE. Some things you just need to experience yourself, I guess.

BIRD. Why do they call him 'The Great'?

LOCKE. Because he did great things.

BIRD. He sounds like an asshole. They should call him Alexander the Asshole. Why are you reading that book anyway?

LOCKE. It's important for soldiers to study celebrated generals of history.

BIRD. You're not going to learn anything in that book that will make you a better soldier.

LOCKE. You teach me something then.

BIRD. What?

LOCKE. You say my book won't make me a better soldier. You've been to war. Teach me something I didn't learn in basic and can't read in a book. Something useful.

BIRD. ...something useful? Yeah alright, let's see. Ok yeah, bring me one of those boxes of machine gun ammo.

She brings over the ammunition.

BIRD. You know about machine guns?

He removes the belt of linked bullets.

LOCKE. I read the manual. I know the rate of fire, carry weight, maximum range-

BIRD. -Yeah yeah, whatever. Those are just stats. Look at this. This is the ammo belt. The bullets are linked together, and they feed through the machine gun like this. You can break a belt in two, or link two belts together so you don't need to reload as much. Now here's the important part, every 5th bullet is a tracer. It glows red when it fires so you can see where the bullets are going.

He begins to break bullets off the belt.

LOCKE. What are you doing?

BIRD. You can separate the tracers by setting aside every 5th round like this, see?

He sets every 5th bullet aside.

LOCKE. Why would you want to do that?

BIRD. This is the genius part. You can snap these back together and make a belt of just tracers.

He starts to snap the tracers together.

LOCKE. But what's the point?

BIRD. Don't you have any artistic vision? It turns a machine gun into a freaking Laser! It's like some Star Wars shit!

LOCKE. ...Wow.

BIRD. What?

LOCKE. ...Nothing, Um, yeah cool.

BIRD. You're not gonna find that in a manual, I can tell you that. This is field artistry.

LOCKE. Right...good, I'm glad I know that.

BIRD. You don't get it. You have to see it in action to really understand. It's best at night. Lights up the whole sky.

He puts the belt back in the box.

LOCKE. Hey, someone is coming.

BIRD. Our first customers.

THORNE and STONE enter.

THORNE. Well well.

BIRD. Sergeant Thorne, I was wondering when you would be stopping by.

THORNE. It's good to see you finally being of some use.

BIRD. Just trying to do my duty.

THORNE. What does a shit-head like you know about duty?

BIRD. What can I do for you Sergeant?

THORNE. It was a long walk out here to shit-head island. Is there a place to take a piss on shit-head island?

LOCKE. We've been going off in the woods, about 50 meters that way.

THORNE. I think I'll go right here.

THORNE pisses nearby.

LOCKE. So, you are running the lane?

STONE. They are making me do it twice. Once tonight, and again in the morning.

I'm not gonna get any sleep again.

LOCKE. You get to go twice?! How did you manage that?

STONE. I guess I'm just the luckiest asshole in the company. Apparently, there aren't enough able-bodied privates. I'm drowning in leadership but there is no one to do the exercise except me.

LOCKE. I should get to go.

STONE. Be my guest.

THORNE comes back over.

THORNE. I need rifle and machine gun ammo for the exercise. Gimme extra, I'm feeling trigger happy.

BIRD. Sure thing, take these.

BIRD offers three boxes of ammunition, one of which contains the tracer belt.

THORNE. Private! Grab these, we are getting the fuck outta here.

STONE struggles to carry three heavy boxes. STONE and THORNE move to exit.

LOCKE. Sergeant!

THORNE. What?!

LOCKE. I was wondering when I might be replaced on this ammo detail so I could run the lane?

THORNE. Replaced? You don't get replaced. You are here until the mission is accomplished.

LOCKE. But, I need to train with the rest of the company.

THORNE. You don't need to do shit except what you are told, you got that!?

LOCKE. But that's-

THORNE. What Private? What is it?

LOCKE. Bullshit! If I don't get to fight in the war, I should at least get to train like everyone else!

THORNE. Tough shit Private! You feeling like you missed out? Well, you did and lucky you. I know killers little girl, and that's not you. I'm a killer. I've killed killers. I know what they look like. I know what they say with their eyes. Your eyes say panic. Fear and panic. So thank whatever god you believe in that the war is over, because you woulda fuckin' died in that war, and probably got others killed with you. Ask this fucking traitor right here about it if you don't believe me. Let's go Private, it smells like piss out here.

THORNE and STONE exit.

LOCKE. I hate that guy!

BIRD. FUCK!

BIRD throws something in rage.

LOCKE. Hey! are you ok?

BIRD. He doesn't get to say that to me!

LOCKE. He called you a traitor. What did he mean by that?

BIRD. IT'S NOT FAIR! I should fucking go after him, I should-

LOCKE. Hey!

BIRD. I'M NOT LETTING HIM GET AWAY WITH THAT.

LOCKE. Just try to calm down. Ok? Stop shouting. Do some push-ups or punch a tree or something.

BIRD. It's just...not fair. That's not what happened.

LOCKE. During the war?

BIRD. Yeah.

LOCKE. What did happen? (*silence*) It's ok. My dad doesn't talk about it either.

Whoever he was when he went away is gone now. He's something else. A statue wearing my dad's clothes. I would think about the people who did this to him. They kept my dad and sent home this thing. I would try to imagine their faces. When I

turned 18, I couldn't believe the war was still going on. I thought I'd get my chance to hurt the people who hurt my dad. I prayed for the chance.

BIRD. No.

LOCKE. Excuse me?

BIRD. You don't want to hurt people. Some do. Some want to kill and get away with it. Better yet get paid to kill, celebrated even. Kill enough of the right people and they call you great but that's not you. I don't believe it.

LOCKE. Everyone thinks they know me. What do you know? I came here to be the best, so they would send me to war.

BIRD. And then what? You think you could find the people who hurt your dad? Do you know their names, or where they live? Who do you blame? A nation? An entire religion? Which people are responsible? Or do you just start killing until you feel better? You won't. Ever. You just kill and kill and kill and you either convince yourself that you enjoy it like that psychopath, or your heart fucking implodes in your chest! You're not a soldier because you want to kill someone. You're a soldier because you love your dad and want to be like him. Going to war won't fix anything for you or him. You can't help him by getting hurt the way he did.

LOCKE. At least I could finally understand what he went through! I wouldn't have to wonder or imagine anymore. I begged him to talk about it. I screamed and cried and

cussed him out a hundred times. But he never said a word. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't talk to me. But I don't think he could talk about it even if he wanted to.

BIRD. Saying it out loud makes it more real. You make this terrible thing alive in someone else's head, and horror can spread like a virus.

LOCKE. Tell me what happened to you. No matter how bad it is, say it out loud. To me.

BIRD. What good would it do?

LOCKE. Maybe none. But maybe you should say it just so you know you can.

BIRD. Ok... We were in the city of Kadesh. Doing one last patrol when we took enemy fire. It was just a couple shots from a distance. Didn't really even come close to hitting us. We could have just left like we were planning. No one would have been hurt, but we were told to secure the area, so we returned fire. When we got to them, three were dead, but one was still breathing. A kid, I don't know how old.

LOCKE. What did you do?

BIRD. I tried to help him. He was looking right at me. He didn't look angry or afraid, he just looked sad. Then the shooting started again. More this time. It felt like the whole city was trying to kill us. I guess we got the order to withdraw, but I never heard it. I was with the kid and trying to remember what I learned about first aid. They say they were yelling for me to evacuate, but I don't remember that. I couldn't

see or hear anything except the kid. Eventually Bell came back for me. He dragged me by the collar to the evac Humvee.

An ENSEMBLE comes back for the one who stayed. The ENSEMBLE exits.

LOCKE. Why did you get in trouble?

BIRD. Two of our squad were killed while they waited for me. Back home I got blamed for the KIA's. They said I had disobeyed direct orders. I've been waiting to be kicked out ever since.

LOCKE. What happened to the kid?

BIRD. I don't know. I tell myself one of his friends came back for him like mine did for me.

LOCKE. Thank you for telling me that.

BIRD. I'm sorry I can't tell you what happened to your dad.

LOCKE. That's ok. I don't think I'll ever know.

SCENE 6

Staging area. Early morning. BELL sleeps against a tree. A group of ENSEMBLE enter and assemble in an exercise formation. They start with a few regular exercises, push-ups, jumping jacks, sit ups, etc. This transitions into more absurd exercises until

the formation is doing fortnite dances. Physical training concludes and the ENSEMBLE exits. An orange glow starts in the distance which wakes BELL.

BELL. Woah...

He watches the glow intently as it grows and wanes and grows. THORNE enters in a rage covered in dust and soot.

THORNE. THAT MOTHER FUCKER! When I get my hands on him! Piece of shit!

BELL. How did the exercise go, Sergeant?

THORNE. Get the fuck away from me! Where is the platoon Sergeant?!

BELL gestures off stage, Gunn storms off. STONE enters. He is also dirty. He collapses on the ground exhausted.

BELL. What happened to you?

STONE. I don't know. Fire. Big Fire. I've never seen anything like it.

BELL. I could see it from here. Did you run the exercise?

STONE. Run? I ran. I ran as fast as I could.

BELL. Start from the beginning. Here, take this.

BELL hands STONE a canteen which he takes eagerly.

STONE. We got the ammo, and I carried it back. All of it. Sergeant Gunn did not help at all.

BELL. Did you expect him to?

STONE. He said carrying the ammo would make me stronger. By the time the exercise started my arms were dead, I could barely keep my gun up. But everything was ok until we got to the machine gun section.

BELL. Yeah?

STONE. I let the first burst go and...I don't even know...The whole sky lit up. It blinded me through my night vision. It was so bright.

BELL. What was it?

STONE. I don't know. The gun became like a flamethrower or something. Or a laser canon. I've never seen anything like it.

BELL. Woah.

STONE. Gunn started swearing, at me, or god or someone. But he wanted to keep going so I kept shooting the targets. Then the tree line caught fire, and the range operator called a ceasefire.

BELL. Did they say when the exercise would continue?

STONE. When the fire is out. I hope they take their sweet time putting it out.

BELL. I'm glad you made it out.

STONE. I guess. I think I might rather have burned than have to start the exercise over, matter of fact.

BELL. Well, you can take a load off for now.

STONE. Maybe I can get some sleep while this gets sorted.

STONE stretches out and tries to sleep. THORNE re-enters and kicks STONE.

THORNE. Hey! Wake up!

STONE rolls over and gets up.

THORNE. We are going to draw more ammo and go again. Get your shit.

THORNE exits.

STONE. Yes Sergeant.

BELL. Sorry man. Good luck.

STONE. Thanks. I guess I'll need it.

SCENE 7

The ammo depot. Dark hours of the early morning. The sun rises over the course of this scene. LOCKE and BIRD are looking at the sky with night vision.

LOCKE. Wow!

BIRD. This is one of the things that makes this job worth it.

LOCKE. The stars! I never knew there were so many! Where did they come from?

BIRD. There's less light pollution out here, but the night vision picks up all the little stars your eyes can't normally see.

LOCKE. It's beautiful.

BIRD. Definitely worth waking up early.

LOCKE. You can't see many stars where I'm from. The sky always looks empty. But this is incredible.

BIRD. That really thick part, that's the rest of the milky way. The universe isn't so empty.

STEELE and LAMP enter.

STEELE. Knock knock.

BIRD. Oops someone's here.

LOCKE. It's the Captain!

BIRD. Apologies ma'am.

They get up quickly.

STEELE. This is the ammo depot isn't it?

BIRD. Yes, ma'am. This is the spot. We weren't expecting you, ma'am.

STEELE. I'm going to be doing the exercise, as surprising as that seems to everyone.
As soon as the fire is out that is.

BIRD. You will probably be wanting some pistol ammunition, right this way, ma'am.

STEELE. Thank you private...

BIRD. Bird, ma'am.

LAMP. Hey Locke.

LOCKE. Lamp! What are you doing here?

LAMP. I'm the Captain's driver.

LOCKE. How is that going?

LAMP. It's ok. I'm getting the hang of the Humvee. The key is braking early ya
know? You have to account for the extra weight of the armor. How is second
platoon?

LOCKE. I wouldn't know. I've been stuck out here.

STEELE. And who are you?

LOCKE. Private Locke ma'am.

STEELE. Very good. I make a point of meeting the women of the company. If you need anything you can come to me directly Private Locke.

LOCKE. Yes ma'am. Actually...

STEELE. Yes?

LOCKE. Well, I'm on this ammo detail, and I know the job has to be done, and I don't mind doing it at all...It's just I would appreciate the opportunity to try the exercise ma'am.

STEELE. I see. Would you give it your absolute best?

LOCKE. I would!

STEELE. And do you think you have it in you to get the best score in the company?

LOCKE. I know I do.

LAMP. She will, ma'am. She was the best at everything in basic.

LOCKE. Except weapon assembly. You were always better at that, Lamp.

LAMP. I guess so.

STEELE. I will look into getting you on the exercise. Let's go, Lamp.

LAMP. It was good to see you Locke.

LOCKE. You too.

STEELE and LAMP exit.

LOCKE. I like her.

BIRD. She seems alright.

LOCKE. More than alright.

BIRD. She seems like she might actually give a shit.

LOCKE. Someone else is coming.

BIRD. Already?

THORNE enters.

THORNE. YOU! MOTHERFUCKER!

BIRD. What can I do for you now Sergeant?

THORNE. CUT THE SHIT. Did you think you were just going to get away with that fucking stunt?

BIRD. You are going to have to be more specific, I pull a lot of stunts. I'm kind of a stuntman.

THORNE. I don't give a fuck about your petty games! YOU DON'T PHASE ME!

BIRD. You seem completely unphased. Calm and collected.

THORNE. You think I give a fuck what a piece of shit like you thinks?

BIRD. Maybe if you explain the problem, I can-

THORNE. You know what I'm talking about! The tracer belt! You asshole! You gave me a fucking Star Wars belt for the exercise and started a fire during my run.

BIRD. That seems like a lot of responsibility to heap on me, sergeant. I am only a private after all.

THORNE. One day you are going to get what's coming to you, Key. We should have left you that day in Qadesh. Instead, you are going to wind up another homeless vet parasite. Rotting on the sidewalk like human garbage, while everyone passes you by and pretends not to notice that you're alive. I can't wait to find you sleeping under some highway one day. I'm gonna kill you and no one will stop me or even care that I did. They will just scrape your brains off the street and throw you away with the rest of the trash!

THORNE exits.

LOCKE. What the fuck is that guy's problem!?!...Key?

BIRD. He wants to kill me?

LOCKE. It's ok, just breathe.

BIRD starts gathering ammo, and his weapon.

LOCKE. What are you doing?

BIRD. He thinks I'll just roll over and die huh?

LOCKE. You're freaking me out a little bit.

BIRD. I'll fucking kill him! He doesn't kill me! I KILL HIM!

BIRD exits.

LOCKE. Where are you going? What are you going to do? Come back!

BIRD. (*Offstage*) HEY MOTHERFUCKER!

Sounds of machine gun fire.

LOCKE. Oh shit! OH SHIT!

SCENE 8

Nearby. STONE takes cover. Intermittent machine gun fire in the background. He looks at his phone.

STONE. No service...Typical. That will end up being my fault somehow. They'll find my body here and say "why didn't he call for help?" No bars. Now, that's an act of God. Or maybe not but it's out of my control. "He should have paid for better service." "What was he spending his money on?" "Not his uniform obviously" And then I'll probably be buried in this second-fucking-hand uniform.

Burst of machine gun fire.

FUCK! Oh God please don't let me die here! Not in Texas of all fucking places Lord!

He looks at his phone again.

Maybe I could leave some kind of message. Like a suicide note...but a murder note. I haven't contemplated murder as much. What should I say? Probably mostly the same stuff, I guess.

He begins recording.

Hi Mom. Remember when you told me that if I joined the Army I would definitely get shot? Well, it looks like you were right. Too bad you don't get to say 'I told you so'. I took that from you too, cuz I'm just that bad a son. I'm sorry I won't be sending money home anymore. I didn't spend a penny on strippers, Mom. You probably won't believe me, but strippers don't take pennies.

Burst of machine gun fire.

That's the guy who's trying to kill me. I'm praying for the first time in a while. I haven't been going to church like I told you. It's not because I'm lazy, it just wasn't the same as it was back home. Plus, you weren't making me go. I just thought I'd come clean about that. Probably another 'I told you so.' I could really use God right about now. Dear Lord, I could use some help. Maybe an angel. I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but maybe one of those old testament angels, with flaming

swords and the righteous fury and shit. Probably shouldn't curse while praying. Sorry Lord. Sorry Mom.

Burst of machine gun fire. THORNE enters in a flash with a box of ammunition and dives behind cover.

THORNE. What the hell are you doing?

STONE. Taking cover, making my peace with God.

THORNE. Well, tell God to wait.

STONE. What is happening?

THORNE. Key has gone full school shooter. I always knew he'd snap. I just didn't think he would have all the ammunition in the battalion when he did.

STONE. What do we do?

THORNE. We do some hero shit you know what I'm saying? We kill, or get killed.

STONE. Oh god!

THORNE. What's the matter? I thought you wanted a firefight. Is this more exciting than you were looking for? Not so fun getting shot at is it?

STONE. In my mind I was able to shoot back.

THORNE. Here, get to shooting.

THORNE hands over the ammo.

STONE. But he has a machine gun, this isn't fair.

THORNE. War is never fair. The last time we deployed we had night vision. You think the enemy had night vision? No. But they still gave us hell. And we can give him hell.

STONE. If he doesn't put about a hundred rounds in us first.

THORNE. Killing ain't easy private. You wanna do something easy? Try dying. Dying is easy. You wanna die?

STONE. No Sergeant!

THORNE. Ok then, guess we got some killing to do. Are you afraid?

Machine gun burst.

STONE. Yes.

THORNE. I can tell. Your little heart looks like it's about to burst out of your little chest. Cut that out. You want to die afraid? Get angry instead. Much better to die angry. More dignified.

STONE. Ok.

THORNE. Ok, now let's see what we got here.

He pokes his head up. Machine gun burst. He quickly pulls back.

THORNE. Fuck! That was close. He's got us zeroed pretty good.

STONE. Sergeant...

THORNE. Yeah?

STONE. I don't wanna die sergeant... not at all.

THORNE. Private look. You're alive now right? You'reYour breathing right? So just keep doing that and you will be fine. Just keep breathing, what could be easier right? Now I need you right now ok? Are you with me?

STONE. I'm with you sergeant.

THORNE. Alright then. Now, he's got us pinned down, it doesn't look like we are going anywhere soon. We'll wait until we get our chance.

STONE. Our chance?

THORNE. He has to know this situation is hopeless for him. It's only a matter of time until military police get notified. He probably already gave himself up for dead. He just wants to kill us. If we wait he might try to push our position, and when he does that, we can take him from two sides. He can only go for one of us at a time and it will probably be me. That's when you take the shot.

STONE. Ok, I can do it.

LOCKE enters and walks behind cover.

THORNE. You?! I thought you'd have been shot by now.

LOCKE. Key wants you not me.

THORNE. He's fucking crazy! He'll kill anyone.

LOCKE. That's not true! It was all that shit you said to him. You were way outta line! He's a good soldier.

Machine gun burst.

THORNE. So, I guess I'm imagining this pickle we are in. He's killed his own before. He's a traitor.

LOCKE. He told me what happened on the last deployment. He didn't kill those soldiers.

THORNE. The fuck he didn't. It's his fault they're dead. He told you what happened huh? Did he tell you about the funerals? When the families came? Did he even tell you their fucking names?*(pause)* I didn't think so. He doesn't want to think about that. Well, I'll never forget!

LOCKE. He was trying to save someone.

Machine gun burst.

THORNE. He's a killer. And he'll kill you if he gets the chance.

LOCKE. That's not true!

STONE. He snapped, it happens. Another active shooter at the Great Place. We're famous for it. It will be all over the news tomorrow.

LOCKE. That's not his story. I know its not.

THORNE. We are gonna get him before he gets us.

STONE. We're going to flank him! When he pushes our position. It's sergeant's plan.

THORNE. Not much else to do. Help us and we can get that fucker!

LOCKE. I'm not doing that. I'm going to talk to him.

She moves to exit.

THORNE. You can't do that! He's going to turn you into Swiss cheese.

She gets out of cover. A burst goes right over her head. She flinches but is unharmed.

She looks back at both of them, then exits.

THORNE. Well, she's got some stones. We could have used her on the last deployment. Get ready Stone, our chance might be coming.

SCENE 9

The Staging area. BELL leans up against a tree. He feels a bite.

BELL. Ow Fuck!

He looks down and swats at his sleeve. He swats at his pants and boots. His eyes follow the ground until he comes to the red ant hill.

BELL. Little devils.

He squats down and watches the ants.

BELL. Straighten out those ranks. These soldiers are out of step! Listen fellas, I understand that you have a duty to your colony, and your queen. I respect your way of life, even though as an American, monarchy appalls me. But that doesn't mean you can come bothering me. I have as much right to be here as you. We can co-exist, but that's not just my call. Peace is a choice that everyone has to make, or no one can. We don't have to like each other, but we can respect our differences and agree not to molest each other.

Sounds of distant machine gun fire. At first BELL ignores it. Then he starts to wonder if the shooting is coming from the wrong direction.

BELL. I hope we have reached an understanding. I will consider us at a ceasefire.

Machine gun fire.

BELL. What the hell.

BELL takes out his phone and makes a call.

PHONE(STONE).////////ell? Bell, Hello?////////Fuck-////////Static.////////llo?

BELL. Stone? Can you hear me?

PHONE(THORNE). ////-LO?////////GIMME THA-////////-UCK

BELL. Sergeant? Are you still at the ammo depot? Hello?

PHONE(THORNE). ARE YOU////////THIS FUCK////////TO
FUCKING////////KILL US!////////HELLO!?

BELL. Say that again! Slow it down. I can't understand you.

PHONE. //////////Machine gun fire////////

BELL. What was that? Hello?!

PHONE(THORNE).///// ELL! BELL!//////////DEAD OVER
HERE//////////YOU GOT THAT?!

BELL. No! I do not copy! Sergeant, say again. I can't understand you.

PHONE(THORNE)://///Hear a damn thing!////////

Call cuts out.

BELL. Well that's not good.

*Bell tries to make a call. It goes to voicemail. Distant Machine gun fire is heard. Bell
exits in the direction of the shooting.*

SCENE 10

ENSEMBLE enters with an RC Humvee, and drives it across the stage. As the Humvee disappears offstage, the sound of a violent crash is heard. ENSEMBLE exits. A moment later, STEELE and LAMP enter disheveled and disoriented. STEELE has a small radio.

STEELE. *(To the radio)* Bravo actual, this is Bravo-1. I need mechanical and towing for a Humvee wreck A-S-A-P. I'm located about 12 and half kilometers down the northeastern service road.

She sets the radio down.

STEELE. HQ will be here in an hour.

LAMP. I'm sorry ma'am.

STEELE. Are you ok?

LAMP. I think so. I thought I was getting the hang of it.

STEELE. You need confidence when you drive a Humvee...Of course, too much confidence can be its own problem.

LAMP. Is the rest of the company going to find out about this?

STEELE. The new commander turned her Humvee into an accordion. Yeah, that's the kind of story that gets around. Might even end up on local news. But don't worry. You won't get in any trouble, it was an accident. So what's wrong?

LAMP. I was hoping, maybe... Locke wouldn't find out.

STEELE. Locke.

LAMP. She was the one at the ammo depot. We came to the company together.

STEELE. Oh, are you two like-

LAMP. -No! Ma'am. We are just friends, or well. She's **my** friend. My only friend. I don't want her to think I'm useless.

STEELE. I'm sure she doesn't think that.

LAMP. She does. She said so. I thought if I could do well as your driver, she might change her mind. She's the reason I joined the army in the first place.

STEELE. How is that? Do you come from the same place?

LAMP. Yeah, we even went to the same high school. But I don't think she even knows that. I was always kind of in the background, and she was at the center of everything. I wanted to be her friend, because I want to be more like her.

STEELE. What is she like?

LAMP. She always knows who she is. She doesn't have to change herself for anyone. I never talked to her at school. I just followed her around a lot. I even followed her home one time.

STEELE. Oh, you don't want to be doing that.

LAMP. Not like in a creepy ma'am. I just wanted to talk to her without all the other kids around. I wanted to tell her how I admired her. But I didn't get the chance. She was yelling at her dad in the driveway, so I went home. I heard her say she was joining the army after graduation. I didn't have any plans, so I just kept doing what I was doing. I followed her.

STEELE. I thought I had heard every 'how I joined the army' story.

LAMP. I know how it sounds, like I'm a stalker or something. But she seems to always know what's right. The right thing to say, the right answer, the right way to go.

STEELE. She sounds like a natural leader.

LAMP. She is, ma'am.

STEELE. We could use more of that.

Sounds of a vehicle pulling up. HAND enters.

STEELE. That was quick.

HAND. I heard you on the radio, thought you could use a ride to the ammo depot.
Something is going on up there.

STEELE. We just came from there, everything seemed fine. We were headed to go
draw weapons and hit the exercise.

HAND. I think you might want to check again ma'am. I can't quite explain it, but
there is something in the air. I got a feeling like I used to get on deployment. It makes
me worried for our soldiers. I think they need their commander right now.

STEELE. Well, I can't go anywhere until someone shows up to tow this wreck.

HAND. I'll stay and wait for the mechanics. You can take my Humvee.

STEELE. And you can't tell me anything else?

HAND. Just that you should take this.

He produces the ornate pistol and offers it to her.

STEELE. What would I need that for?

HAND. You wont know until you do. No one ever knows what the right thing to do is
until they've done it. But it doesn't matter what the right thing is, if you don't have
the power to do it.

Pause. She takes the pistol.

STEELE. Let's go Lamp. I'm driving.

STEELE and LAMP exit.

SCENE 11

Near the ammo depot, Bird sits behind his machine gun.

BIRD. Where are you. C'mon, poke that head up again. Next time, you're mine.

COME ON OUT, THORNE. I GOT SOMETHING FOR YA!

LOCKE enters.

LOCKE. Bird!

BIRD. Stay back! Back up! You hear me? I'm serious! I don't want to hurt you.

LOCKE. You have to stop this!

BIRD. It's too late to stop! It's over. I'm over. At least I can take this motherfucker down with me.

LOCKE. You aren't over!

BIRD. I pulled the trigger. They'll be coming for me. It's too late to stop.

LOCKE. You haven't killed anyone yet! Just put the gun down.

BIRD. Forget it! My life is over ok! It's been over for a while. I just didn't know it.

Now leave me alone Locke!

He Fires a burst.

BIRD. COME OUT COWARD! COME OUT A DIE LIKE A MAN.

LOCKE. Stop throwing your life away! Please!

BIRD. You don't understand! I fought! I fought and I killed, and I watched others die. And they were gonna put me on the street! But it doesn't matter. All that matters is Thorne. I need to kill him!

LOCKE. I do understand.

She goes in closer.

BIRD. You need to back up. I'm serious! Don't test me!

BELL enters.

BELL. Bird you there? What are you doing man?

BIRD. Oh Fuck! Not you too!

BELL. What's going on here?

LOCKE. He's got Sergeant Thorne pinned down.

BELL. Hey Bird! You good bud?

Key jerks the gun around and points their direction.

BELL. Woah! Hey buddy, take it easy will ya?

BIRD. Get outta here Bell!

BELL. Ok, so tensions are a little high.

BIRD. You shouldn't be here.

BELL. I think maybe I should be. I'm not gonna hurt you, so point that thing back at Thorne.

BIRD fixes the weapon back where it was.

BELL. That's better.

BIRD. Don't try to talk me out of anything. I'm doing this. You can't save him.

BELL. I'm here for you man, not him. But you don't want to be doing this.

BIRD. It's done!

He fires a burst.

BELL. It's not! You can let it go right now!

BIRD. No! I need him to die! Why should his life go on and mine is over? Everything that happened, it's his fault as much as mine. If he had just helped me! IF ANY OF YOU HAD JUST HELPED ME!

BELL. I know that? Ok? I'm sorry. Bird, I'm so sorry about what happened. And I'm sorry that I'm only saying so now. I'm ashamed of what happened, and you didn't deserve any of it. I'm sorry ok?

BIRD. It doesn't matter now.

LOCKE. Killing Thorne won't change what happened in Kadesh!

BIRD. What do you know?

LOCKE. I know that you can't help the dead with more killing. It won't help the guys who got KIA, it won't help that kid you tried to save, and it won't help my Dad. I know that now. You told me that!

BELL. So put the fucking gun down will you? You're starting to make me a little nervous ya know?

BIRD. I can't! I can't just put it down. He deserves to die!

BELL. He will. He's not gonna live forever. We're all worm food! You don't need it on your soul.

BIRD. They will be coming for me.

BELL. We can figure it out. We'll tell them whatever we have to. We've gotten out of worse trouble than this.

BIRD. When?

BELL. *(pause)*I don't do well being put on the spot *(pause)*Remember when you matched with a Colonel's daughter on Tinder?

BIRD. You think that was worse than this?

BELL. Definitely. That guy was a Green Beret.

BIRD. I forgot about that.

BELL. We can get out of this mess too.

BIRD. How?

“Retreat” is heard played on a bugle.

BELL. Hey, that's the work day. Why don't we just head out for a beer, like nothing happened?

“Retreat” is followed by “to the colors”

LOCKE. Hey, you can see the flag coming down from here.

BELL. Bird, the flag is going down, its time to go home.

BIRD. The MP's have their heads up their ass. I could have killed Thorne 5 times by now.

BELL. Maybe they aren't coming.

STEELE enters in the high ready position. LAMP follows.

STEELE. What is going on here?

LAMP. Locke! Are you ok?

LOCKE. Lamp!?! Yeah, I'm ok.

THORNE and STONE enter.

BELL. Thank god you are here ma'am.

STEELE. Start talking Corporal.

BELL. Well you see-

THORNE. There he is ma'am! Let's take him out before he takes us all out!

LOCKE. No!

STEELE. Don't fire a shot until-

THORNE. -He's right there!

BELL. It's a good thing you are here too, Sergeant. We could use your weapons expertise.

STEELE. What are you talking about?!

BELL. Ma'am, it seems we've had a bit of a weapons malfunction. If you can believe it ma'am.

STEELE. A weapons malfunction?

THORNE. My ass! This fucker has been trying to kill us!.

BELL. A bad case of runaway gun ma'am. But everything seems under control now though.

STONE. You're not buying this are you?

STEELE. Corporal, are you sure about this? I've heard disturbing reports.

STONE. He's trying to kill us!

BELL. I'd say I'm sure ma'am. Private Locke and I have been here the whole time.

We'd be more than willing to fill out an incident report.

THORNE. This is a fucking joke. That man is a traitor!

STONE. He's been shooting at us!

BELL. I'm sure Key tried to orient the weapon in a safe direction. Accidents happen.

You look fine to me. Suck it up, Stone. This is a dangerous job.

THORNE. I'm sick of this. Say the word ma'am and let me eliminate this piece of shit!

BIRD. Try it motherfucker!

STEELE. Stand down sergeant. When I want your input again I will ask for it. Until then, shut your mouth. *(To Bird)* Private, if this is true, you need to let go of that gun right now!

Key tightens his grip on the gun.

STEELE. Now Private!

BELL. Ma'am, safety protocol dictates that control should be maintained on a malfunctioning weapon until it is neutralized. I can show you the regulation, ma'am.

STEELE. That isn't necessary.

BELL. The weapon needs to be disassembled so it can be delivered safely to the gunsmiths. These guns haven't been serviced in forever. Something like this was only a matter of time. Thank God no one was hurt!

THORNE. Oh, fuck off Bell.

BELL. This is the protocol, Sergeant. I didn't write it.

THORNE. This wasn't a malfunction!

BELL. Any high stress situation will have conflicting reports. I'm sure you know that from deployment.

STEELE. Enough! We need to get that weapon under control. Who knows how to disassemble it?

LOCKE. Lamp! Lamp can do it. He was the best at it in basic. He could do it with his eyes closed.

STEELE. Private? Is that true?

LAMP. Well, I did it once. But there weren't any bullets in the gun when I did.

LOCKE. But you can do it!

STEELE. What's the first step?

LAMP. The first thing would be to remove the ammo belt, so they can't fire.

They all wait. Slowly, Key removes the belt from the gun.

LAMP. Then, you would slowly let the bolt go forward, without taking your hands off.

Bird follows the instructions.

LAMP. Now it should be safe to remove the bolt assembly through the butt stock.

Then engage the safety. Remove the barrel. And the weapon has been disassembled.

Collective release of tension. STEELE lowers her weapon.

LOCKE. Way to go Lamp!

STEELE. Good job.

THORNE. I don't believe this shit!

STEELE. Ok, Lamp lets get back to the Humvee. I need to get on the radio with First Sergeant. I think we will be suspending training for now. Private Locke.

LOCKE. Yes, ma'am?

STEELE. When we start up again, you will be doing the exercise with Lamp and I.

LOCKE. Yes ma'am!

STEELE and LAMP move to exit.

LOCKE. Bird? *(Pause)* See ya.

STEELE, LAMP and LOCKE exit.

THORNE. I bet you think you're slick huh?

BELL. I don't know what you mean, sergeant.

THORNE. I bet you don't. I see how it is now, Bell. And you. I guess I underestimated you.

BIRD. Don't make that mistake again.

THORNE. I won't. See you on the outside. Let's go Stone. Who knew you were the only loyal one in the company?

THORNE and Stone exit.

BIRD. Thanks.

BELL. It's ok. this is all so fucked up.

BIRD. I didn't mean to get you on Thorne's bad side.

BELL. I'm not scared of him. Are you...ok now?

BIRD. Don't worry. I'm not gonna shoot up the place again. I got it out of my system.

BELL. But, are you going to be ok?

BIRD. Ok? I don't think I even know what that means.

SCENE 12

Captain Steele's office. She sits in a chair at her desk. She sips whiskey from a glass.

A knock.

STEELE. Come in.

HAND enters.

HAND. I hope I'm not intruding.

STEELE. Never. Please sit.

She indicates a second chair.

HAND. Look at you, with chairs to spare.

She pours him a glass.

STEELE. And two glasses.

HAND. You are making this place your own.

STEELE. It's growing on me.

HAND. You seem well suited.

STEELE. I need to give this back to you.

She hands over the pistol.

HAND. It's clean. Wasn't fired.

STEELE. I didn't need to.

HAND. That's good. I must be getting a little jumpy I guess. So what happened?

STEELE. A weapon malfunction.

HAND. Is that right?

STEELE. That's what the report will say, anyway. It might have just been a mistake.

People make mistakes.

HAND. Malfunction, mistake, sounds like a matter of semantics. No need to worry the higher ups about details like that.

STEELE. My thoughts exactly.

HAND. What's this?

He picks papers off the desk.

STEELE. Private Bird's record. I've been reading up on some of our soldiers

HAND. That's quite a read.

STEELE. Is there anything we can do for him?

HAND. I'm afraid not. He was court martialed. We gotta let him go.

STEELE. What will happen to him?

HAND. He will have to make what he can of his life. It is a shame. We take these young people and expose them to the worst aspects of humanity. We ask terrible things of them, and then we expect them to come home and act like normal citizens, as if none of it ever happened. It's an impossible thing to ask... But no one is paying me to have an opinion about it.

STEELE. That's a shame. Corporal Bell I think deserves some sergeant stripes.

HAND. I think that's a fine idea.

STEELE. We can take care of that tomorrow, when we resume training. For now everyone could use an evening off.

SCENE 13

A Bus stop. Key sits wearing civilian clothes. Bell enters.

BELL. Oh good, I thought I would have missed you by now. When is your bus coming.

BIRD. It was supposed to be here 30 minutes ago.

BELL. Where are you headed.

BIRD. This bus goes to the greyhound station. After that, who knows? I was thinking maybe California.

BELL. Oh yeah?

BIRD. Sounds as good as anywhere else. Plus, I've never seen the ocean.

BELL. Never?

BIRD. I've seen the beach on TV and stuff, I saw it from a plane once. But I've never really seen it the way you should.

BELL. The beach is cool.

BIRD. Yeah. I thought I could maybe get a job at a bar on the water. And then, maybe one day, open my own place. And I'd call it Teddie's.

BELL. Who is Teddie?

BIRD. I'm Teddie.

BELL. You are?

BIRD. Yeah. My first name. I guess I should get used to it again.

BELL. You look like a Teddie. I see it.

TEDDIE. This will be an adjustment.

BELL. Well let me get you started. Nice to meet you Teddie!

They Shake hands.

TEDDIE. So, what do you say? Meet me in Cali once you get out?

BELL. Maybe, someday. I'm thinking of re-enlisting.

TEDDIE. All you've talked about since the last deployment was how you can't wait to get the hell out of the army. I'm the one who wanted to stay.

BELL. It's starting to grow on me. And maybe I can make it better.

TEDDIE. Well, the army doesn't deserve you. There could always be another war ya know?

BELL. I know. I wouldn't mind fighting for the right reasons.

TEDDIE. Well, you don't always get to choose.

BELL. You do. You can always choose. You might have to deal with consequences, but you always choose in the end.

TEDDIE. Well, I wish you luck.

BELL. Thanks.

STONE enters.

STONE. Bell, I've been looking for you. (*coldly to TEDDIE*) Hey.

TEDDIE. Hey, sorry about all that. I didn't mean to scare you.

STONE. You didn't scare me.

TEDDIE. Well, I'm sorry anyway. I wasn't trying to get you.

STONE. Well, you almost did.

BELL. Relax, man.

STONE. I'm relaxed.

Sounds of a bus arriving.

TEDDIE. I guess that's me. So long.

BELL. Goodbye my friend.

The embrace. TEDDIE exits. Sounds of a bus pulling away.

BELL. So, what do you need?

STONE. Thorne is drunk and 'inspecting' barracks rooms. He wants me to help him harass new privates, so I got the hell out of there.

BELL. You don't gotta do that shit. It's your night off. Let's go get a drink?

STONE. Really? But I'm not 21. I thought you had to follow the rules now.

BELL. Some rules are more important than others.

STONE. I dont know if drinking sounds as fun as it used to.

BELL. You aren't getting all mature on me are you?

STONE. Of course not. I just think I might have outgrown drinking.

BELL. You aren't even 19!

STONE. I know. It just seems kind of childish.

BELL. Well what do you want to do?

STONE. Play video games?

BELL. Sober?

STONE. Why not?

BELL. You're right!

STONE. I don't mind wasting a little time.

They exit

End.

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