Jarhead: A Marine’s Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles (Anthony Swofford)

I go to the basement and open my ruck. The basement is in Iowa, after a long, harsh winter, and deep in the ruck where I reach for my cammies, I still feel the cold of February. We were supposed to turn in our desert cammies, but I kept mine. They’re ratty and bleached by sand and sun and blemished with the petroleum rain that fell from the oil-well fires in Kuwait. The cammies don’t fit. While in the Marines, I exercised thirty hours a week. Since I’ve been out, I’ve exercised about thirty hours a year. The waist stops at my thighs. The blouse buttons, but barely. I pull out maps of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Patrol books. Pictures. Letters. My journal with its sparse entries. Coalition propaganda pamphlets. Brass bore punch for the M40A1 sniper rifle. A handful of .50-caliber projectiles. I think of what I must look like to the late-night walker peering through the basement windows: the movie cliché, the mad old warrior going through his memorabilia, juicing up before he runs off and kills a few with precision fire. But, no, I am not mad. I am not well, but I am not mad. I’m after something. Memory, yes. A reel. More than just time. Years pass. But more than just time. I’ve been working toward this—I’ve opened the ruck and now I must open myself.

It would’ve been easy to sell my gear to a surplus store. After the war, when I spent most of my monthly pay in the bars in Palm Springs and Newport Beach, Las Vegas and Santa Monica, I’d steal a case or two of MREs (meals ready to eat) from Supply each week, and on my way out of town for the weekend I’d sell the meals for $80 per case in an army/navy store in San Bernardino. And occasionally I’d steal more than meals. Or I wouldn’t necessarily steal. Sometimes I’d happen along a Sergeant Smith’s ruck, and he’d be nowhere near, and I’d remember the saying Gear left adrift, must be a gift, and I knew that the ex-marine who ran the army/navy store would give me $300 for the sergeant’s misfortune.

So my ruck didn’t have to be here, in my basement, six or seven moves and eight and a half years after my discharge. I could’ve sold it for one outrageous bar tab or given it to Goodwill or thrown it away—or set it afire, as some jarheads did.

I open a map of southern Kuwait. Sand falls from between the folds.

As a lance corporal in a U.S. Marine Corps scout/sniper platoon, I saw more of the Gulf War than the average grunt. Still, my vision was blurred—by wind and sand and distance, by false signals, poor communication, and bad coordinates, by stupidity and fear and ignorance, by valor and false pride. By the mirage.

Thus what follows is neither true nor false but what I know. I have forgotten most of the statistics and must look them up. I remember the weapons, though not their capabilities, so I must look those up as well. For the place names I refer to maps. For unit deployments and order of battle, I must consult published charts. I search through congressional reports and presidential statements at the Federal Depository Library. I remember most of the names and faces of my platoon mates. I remember the names and faces of some of their girlfriends and wives. I think I know who cheated and who stayed faithful. I remember who wrote letters and who drove their men mad with silence. I remember some of the lies and most of the questions. I remember the dreams and the naive wishes, the pathetic pleas and the trouser-pissing horror.
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I remember some of the sand, but there was so much of it, I should be forgiven.

I remember about myself a loneliness and a poverty of spirit; mental collapse; brief jovial moments after weeks of exhaustion; discomfitting bodily pain; constant ringing in my ears; sleeplessness and drunkenness and desperation; fits of rage and despondency; maturity of the self; lovers to whom I lied; lovers who lied to me. I remember going in one end and coming out the other. I remember being told I must remember and then for many years forgetting.

This is war, I think. I'm walking through what my father and his father walked through—the epic results of American bombing, American might. The filth is on my boots. I am one of a few thousand people who will walk this valley today. I am history making. Whether I live or die, the United States will win this war. I know that the United States will win any war it fights, against any country. If colonialism weren't out of style, I'm sure we'd take over the entire Middle East, not only safeguard the oil reserves, but take the oil reserves: We are here to announce that you no longer own your country. thank you for your cooperation, more details will follow.

Our rucks are heavy with equipment and ammunition but even heavier with the burdens of history, and each step we take, the burden increase.

The sky is a dead gray from the oil fires billowing to the north. We hump and hump and look at one another with blank, amazed faces. Is this what we've done? What will I tell my mother?

Troy says to me, "I feel sorry for these poor bastards. They didn't have a chance."

We stop for a water break. A few feet behind me a bombed jeep sits on the road. A corpse is at the wheel, sitting erect, looking serious, seeming almost to squint at the devastation, the corpse's face not unlike our faces—what has happened? Bombs, bombs, big bombs and small bombs, all of them filled with explosives meant to kill you! On either side of the jeep, more corpses, two near me, one not, all belly to the desert, as if they were running from the bomb—as if running would've helped. The back sides of the corpses are charred and decaying, the bottom halves buried in the sand, the sand wind-smeared like cake icing against the bodies, and I wonder if the bottom halves of the men are still living, buried by the mirage, unaware that death lurks above. Maybe the men are screaming into the earth, living their half lives, hoping to be heard. What would they tell me? Run.

I assume the men were screaming before the A-10 or A-6 dropped its bombs. But maybe they were on their way to Kuwait City for supplies, and it was evening and the men neither saw nor heard the plane that dropped on them. Perhaps one of the men was telling a dirty joke or repeating a rumor he'd heard about the major's wife. But they must have been screaming. I hear them now.

We continue walking. Cortes is having trouble. He's complaining, asking how much farther until we get there, is it over yet, where are the trucks? He still doesn't understand that this is war, not boot camp. As a recruit you can cry about your blisters and occasionally convince a sergeant that even though you are a worthless malingering and you need a truck to carry you the rest of the way this time, you'll make the next hump. I want to say to Cortes, "This might be the last hump you're ever on, you might die soon. Don't you want to hump hard and long and make all of us proud of you for finally carrying yourself?" But I know that inverse logic could just as easily be applied, and probably is being applied, by Cortes: "This might be my last hump ever, I might die soon, so why not ask for a truck? I'd rather take a ride to my death than be forced to walk my way there." I will not be surprised if Cortes sits down during the next water break and refuses to continue.

My body is sore. My feet are burning, though I will not blister because, as though my feet were made for the Marine Corps grunts, I never do; in the past I have walked forty miles straight without a blister. But my shoulders feel as though fires have been lit on them. My chest is sweaty and raw and bleeding. I can feel sand working into the wound. My knees are sore and my back and even my toes hurt, but I will not stop until I'm told to. The sniper rifle, fourteen pounds, is heavy in my fists. I think of the M16 broken down in my ruck, 7.78 pounds, and I again run through a gear manifest in my head, making sure that everything in my ruck is absolutely necessary. Along the road jarheads have discarded pairs of boots and socks and caramels, porn magazines they didn't throw away before, when ordered to, a white-gas stove, a shaving-gear bag, jeetison it if it will not save you.