

COURAGE UNDER FIRE

A screenplay

by

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FIRST DRAFT

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INT. A DARK PLACE, NIGHT

A man on fire, his face and hair aflame. He stares at you, accusation in his eyes. You raise a hand to keep him away. The hand bursts into flame. It is a torch, skin blistering. The burning man screams. You are inside a tank, M1A1 Abrams. The instruments glow green. Another man on fire scrambles from the hatch. The fire traces a lazy line across the bulkhead. It is headed to the ammunition stacks. The man screams at you again. The fire leaps upon the magazine of 20mm shells. It dances there a few seconds. The man is upon you - burning before your eyes. The scream is intelligible for the first time. "I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

INT. BAR, DAY

The flames become amber fluid in glass.

COLONEL NATHANIAL "NAT" SERLING, looks at the glass, at his watch, finishes the drink, leaves.

EXT. BAR, DAY

Serling crosses the street pouring half a box of Tic-Tacs into his mouth, eating them like candy.

He heads toward one of those anonymous buildings in Suitland outside Washington, D.C. Serling is in his 40's, born to the uniform, but there is something sad in his eyes, defeated in his walk.

He enters the building.

INT. HALLWAY, DAY

The sign on a door says "U.S. Army - Awards and Decorations Branch." Serling enters.

INT. COLONEL LEVINE'S OFFICE, DAY

COLONEL PHILLIP LEVINE, a little martinet, a bureaucratic Hitler.

Serling sits across from the desk from Levine. The desk is immaculate, everything arranged with a ruler and a T-square. Nameplate with pens up front.

LEVINE

I remember you. I was there in
Desert Storm, 24th Mech.

Serling nods grimly. He's been through this before. Levine
won't let it alone.

LEVINE

Frankly, I'm surprised you're still
in the service.

SERLING

So am I.

The answer doesn't give Levine any satisfaction.

LEVINE

I don't agree with this assignment.
I'm sure the General has his own
reasons.

SERLING

I'm sure. Could I look at the
file?

The file sits alone on that splendid desk - centered.

LEVINE

I'm not required to release the
documentation until I receive all
of the proper forms and orders.

He smiles. What a paper-pushing asshole. Serling smiles
ruefully.

LEVINE

Something funny, Colonel?

SERLING

Just petty little men like you who
don't have power but pounce on any
semblance of it like a crow on a
road kill.

Levine clenches his jaw. He's about to reply or spit. The
door opens. GENERAL HERSHBERG enters.

The two Colonels stand at attention until the General nods
then down. He slides his butt onto Levine's desk, sweeping
the nameplate to the corner. Levine has a shitfit, but
swallows it.

GEN. HERSHBERG

How are you doing, Nat?

SERLING

I have an "In" box and an "Out." I empty one and fill the other. I even have a rubber stamp with my name on it so I don't get writer's cramp. It's heaven.

Hershberg picks up the file, glances at the label and tosses it to Serling. Levine is about to protest, but a look from the General cuts it off at the knees.

GEN. HERSHBERG

This is a little hot potato and in that weird form of Washington alchemy it could turn into a political football. Captain Karen Emma Walden, first woman to be eligible for the Medal of Honor.

LEVINE

In combat.

GEN. HERSHBERG

In combat. First we got all the stink about women in combat. There are some who will be sniping at this just because of that. Then there are those that are going to line up and say we're only doing this to overcompensate or distract the public from the charges of sexism and sexual harassment in the services.

LEVINE

Bullshit.

Hershberg looks at Levine like he was a cockroach on a cake.

GEN. HERSHBERG

There are only two things you have to worry about, Nat. The President wants this. I want this. His reasons ... ? As usual I haven't a clue. I want it because I think she deserves it. Put it under a microscope. With your usual thoroughness, Nat. Any problems call my Adjutant, Captain Banachek, or even me. No slacking. This is important, Nat. To the nation. To the Army. To me. Let's go.

He rises. Levine pops up.

LEVINE

Sir, I can't let that file leave this office. I haven't received my 2930 or the 264.

GEN. HERSHBERG

Colonel, there's nothing I detest more than little D.C. hamsters who can't see beyond the paper at the bottom of their little cages.

He leads Serling out, closes the door behind him. Levine is left to straighten his desk.

EXT. BUILDING, DAY

The General's car waits outside. Hershberg and Serling exit, go to the car. Hershberg looks up at the building.

GEN. HERSHBERG

That's what's killing this country. Not crime or pollution. My daddy used to tell me -- look close at the word bureaucrat. There's always a rat in it.

(beat)

Do this right, Nat, and you can broom your rubber stamps.

SERLING

Yes, sir.

GEN. HERSHBERG

Captain Banachek has a list of the eyewitnesses and their current postings. Need a ride?

SERLING

No, sir. I drove my own car.

GEN. HERSHBERG

Well, don't blow through a stop sign. That breath will lose you your license.

Serling is embarrassed. He salutes. Hershberg salutes back and gets into the car, unwinds the window.

GEN. HERSHBERG

Do this right, Nat, Captain Karen Walden deserves it. And you need it.

And he signals to the driver and is gone.

Serling looks at the file, walks to his car, stops. He makes a right turn, crosses the street, enters a bar.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET, DAY

A big house and a big yard. There are five kids in the yard with a refrigerator box. They are arguing over the benefits of creating a house or a fort. A lot of yelling, laughing, and running back and forth to the house for scissors, fat felt pens and a hacksaw blade to cut the windows or gun ports (still under heated discussion).

Serling watches from his car, parked across the street.

A woman comes out of the house. She is handsome, some of the kids look like her. Her name is MEREDITH. She carries a steaming cup of coffee and walks in a straight path across the street to Serling.

MEREDITH

Just made a fresh pot. I put some cocoa in it for you.

SERLING

Thanks. You got a new fridge.

MEREDITH

Yes. The noise it used to make at three in the morning? That horrible rattle and moan? Didn't make it night before last.

She leans comfortably against the car.

MEREDITH

Got up to find a big puddle on the kitchen floor and had to throw away a whole chicken. This one's more efficient and has an ice maker in the door.

(beat)

You can't do this anymore. It scares the kids.

Serling notices the children glancing his way.

MEREDITH

They don't understand why their daddy chose to move out and leave them. Neither do I.

SERLING

You don't? I explained it to you.
I have to work out this ... thing.

MEREDITH

I hear what you say. That doesn't
mean I understand it. But the
kids. They think it's their fault.
Don't do this to them anymore.

SERLING

I ... I'm leaving town for a days.
Hershberg's got me taking a Medal
of Honor and wrapping it up in a
shiny wrapper.

MEREDITH

Medal of Honor?

SERLING

A woman.

MEREDITH

Good for her.

SERLING

Posthumous.

MEREDITH

Too bad.

But still good for her. And about time. How long you going
to be gone?

SERLING

A week. Ten days.

MEREDITH

When you get back we have to deal
with this. One way or another.

She makes it sound very ominous. Serling makes light, Smiles.

SERLING

Sounds like an ultimatum.

She doesn't smile at all.

MEREDITH

It is. I don't want you haunting
us like this. Either you come
through that front door -- to stay --
or you don't come back here at
all. That was hard to say.

And she walks back to the house, trying to hold onto her composure, tears he can't see in her eyes. But Serling can feel them. He knows her that well.

He holds the cup up to her. It is empty.

The front door slams shut.

Serling drives away. All five kids stop and watch him go.

INT. PLANE, NIGHT

It is dark in the plane. Most overhead lights out, most passengers sleeping.

One light is on -- Serling's. He is in civilian clothes. There is a collection of little bottles on Serling's tray, all empty.

He is reading Walden's file. There are tears in his eyes. The stewardess comes by and sees the tears. Serling, embarrassed, turns off the overhead light and turns his face to the window. He can see his own reflection. A man in pain. Deep, soul-cutting pain. He pulls down the shade.

EXT. FORT BRAGG, DAY

Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Home of the 82nd Airborne.

Serling, in uniform, walks into one of those one-story wooden barracks left over from WWII.

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

A classroom. Horrible photos of the results of bad dental hygiene, an illustration of proper brushing. Serling turns the disgusting photos to face the wall. The room is filling up with eleven men, all talking excitedly. It is a reunion of sorts. Hugs, unashamed tears and endless talk. "What have you been doing?" "Going to meet with us after?" "You're getting fat, man."

A man in civilian clothes enters and is instantly surrounded by the others. "Where you been?" "How's civilian life?" "How are the legs?"

He pulls up his pant legs to reveal two artificial limbs. That brings a round of scar comparison as clothing is peeled away or dropped to reveal the shiny tissue. War wounds.

Serling watches -- an outsider.

FIRST LIEUTENANT CHELLI counts heads and goes up to Serling.

LT. CHELLI

All present and accounted for,
sir.

Serling faces the men as they settle into their seats.

SERLING

I'm trying to confirm the sequence
of events that occurred at or around
Al Kufan on 26 February 1991. How
did you men come to be on the
Blackhawk designated Dust Off Two
piloted by Warrant officer Fowler?
Was it a combat Medevac?

LT. CHELLI

No. Sir.

Traffic accident.

EGAN

Damn Saudi drivers, sir. Thought
they were driving cabs in New York.

THOMPSON

Most of them are.

LT. CHELLI

We'd have a convoy of thirty trucks
or more and they'd decide to pass.

EGAN

And another Kamikazi Saudi would
be coming the other way.

THOMPSON

They couldn't go to the shoulder --
minefields. They'd...

LT. CHELLI

We were heading along the north
end of Iraq to set up a fueling
depot for the 24th, part of
Schwartzkopf's "Hail Mary". Some
mad Saudi in a deuce-and-a-half
goes to pass the convoy and suddenly
there's another convoy coming the
other way.

EXT. ROAD, DAY

A long column of trucks roll down a narrow road. Smoke from Kuwait wafts over the endless sand. In the back of one five-ton truck 2nd Lt. Chelli and his men, plus ten more, sit, bored, smoking and joking.

A Saudi driver in a big pale blue piece of shit truck thunders down the road passing the Army convoy, oblivious to the danger, bouncing his head to some Paul Revere and the Raiders music. Then he sees the other convoy. He looks for a gap in the traffic alongside of him. None. He slams on the brakes! The truck goes into a skid. It fishtails, ramming Chelli's truck. The trucks hurtle off the road. Both hit mines on the shoulder. The Saudi truck blows up. The big five-ton flips onto its side and skids for yards, plowing up sand. Another mine goes off. The truck stops. The passengers litter the sand, wounded -- moaning, screaming, bleeding or very still.

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

LT. CHELLI

We had fifteen injured. Mostly broken bones, contusions.

EGAN

A few burns. The Saudi truck blew up.

JENKINS

Mines were going off like popcorn, but no shrapnel wounds.

THOMPSON

The Saudi truck burned. The driver was a crispy critter.

EGAN

His cargo was all over the road. Pampers and shower shoes -- flip flops, you know.

JENKINS

Here we are running around scared shitless of poison gas, and Scuds and the damn Republican Guard and we get taken out by some Saudi speed merchant with a truck load of flip flops.

LT. CHELLI

The Medevac, Warrant officer
Fowler's bird, picked us up and
headed south to some MASH unit.
Nothing happened on the trip. It
was pretty routine.

EGAN

Until we were shot down.

That statement takes the wind out of everybody.

INT. BLACKHAWK, DAY

The Blackhawk flies low along the east side of the Euphrates
River. Mountains on both sides. Inside are Lt. Chelli and
his men, bandaged and bloodied but conscious.

SERLING (V.O.)

Altitude?

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

Low, fifty to a hundred feet off
the floor.

The chopper shudders. A huge impact. Then it begins to
fall. Shouting, screaming. The chopper hits the ground
hard. The impact splays the skids. Men fall out the doors.

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

SERLING

Do you know what brought you down?

LT. CHELLI

No. Triple A, a missile, TOW?
Couldn't tell. One moment we were
up -- the next we were eating sand.

SERLING

When did you see the enemy?

LT. CHELLI

Egan thought he saw some enemy
movement before we got hit.

EGAN

Just some figures below. Could
have been Bedouins, hard to tell.

JENKINS

I thought I saw a flash.

SERLING

Firearms.

JENKINS

Small arms. Maybe.

LT. CHELLI

I didn't see anything.

SERLING

The pilot and co-pilot were killed on impact?

LT. CHELLI

Yes. The medic, Balkum? Balkum, confirmed this. The Blackhawk nosed into the mountain. The Medic and Crew Chief started giving aid to the new injuries. We lost two immediately, Feretic, and Brady. Another, Rizza, died a few minutes later. My Platoon Sergeant.

EGAN

The Crew Chief tried to get out an SOS. The pilot didn't have time... He wasn't able to raise anyone, the radio was wasted in the crash.

SERLING

How long before you saw the enemy?

LT. CHELLI

About an hour - a little more. Ground troops. They came over the ridge to the northwest of us. They fired on us.

EGAN

All we had was the Crew Chief's M-16 and four nine mills, the chopper crew's side arms.

LT. CHELLI

They stripped us of our weapons on the Medevac. Procedure. The Crew Chief returned fire with his 16. We were downslope.

EGAN

Sitting ducks.

JENKINS

But the Crew Chief kept the enemy
to the ridge. Until 1600 hours
... around there.

SERLING

When he was hit.

LT. CHELLI

Yes. He was on his last magazine.
The nine mills didn't have the
range. Rounds fell short.

SERLING

Any of the enemy fire prove to be
effective?

LT. CHELLI

Monaco took two in the chest. He
died during the night. Lem, Fistch
were wounded. Cherensky, no he
was later.

EGAN

And you, sir.

LT. CHELLI

Yes. I took a round in the leg.
And the medic had a bullet part
his hair. A lot of blood but he
was still working.

JENKINS

The chopper provided us no cover.
Bullets went through it like
cardboard.

LT. CHELLI

We were in a world of hurt, sir.

SERLING

Did you discuss surrendering?

Lt. Chelli looks at the others.

LT. CHELLI

Yes, sir. We were all wounded in
one way or another. It was
discussed. But we figured we'd
hold 'em off as long as possible
in case a rescue came. It was a
... difficult and protracted debate,
sir.

SERLING

I suspect so.

EGAN

We weren't trained for that kinda
shit.

THOMPSON

Then the tank appeared.

INT. BLACKHAWK, DAY

The men in the crashed chopper are in rough shape. Battered, bloody, the dead covered with a poncho that flaps in the wind.

SWOCK! Gunfire and another hole in the fuselage. The body of the chopper looks like Swiss cheese.

EGAN (V.O.)

We'd been there a few hours. Our
shit was pretty flaky by then.

The Medic, head bandaged, returns fire sparingly. Then a noise. Everyone listens, even the most gravely wounded.

They all try to see. Over the river, up the slope and across the ridge. The sound comes from there. And over the crest of the ridge appears a tank. A Russian T-55. It pauses at the ridge. Then with a clatter and roar, comes up over the ridge and to the down slope. It stops. Then the turret swivels. Until the gun-points at the helicopter.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

It's a very strange feeling to be
sitting there and watch a big gun
like that make adjustments to blow
you away.

And the gun does that, with whirrs and cranks. A little elevation. A little windage. Then ... BOOM! The gun fires. The tank jerks back. The tail section of the helicopter disintegrates! There is a huge cloud of dust in front of the tank, thrown up by the concussion. With little wind it just hangs there, dissipating slowly.

JR. CHELLI (V.O.)

All we could do was wait until the
dust settled so they could see to
adjust. That's when, as ranking
officer, I made my decision.

The Lieutenant steps out of the helicopter, waving his white handkerchief. He takes a couple of steps toward the tank.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

I figured we'd held out as long as we could and that the lives of the men on board...

SERLING (V.O.)

You don't have to make excuses for your actions to me, Lieutenant.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

I know, sir, I know. It's just... Well, it didn't make any difference.

The cloud of dust finally settles in front of the tank. They can see Chelli and the white flag of surrender. And the tank machine gun cuts loose. The Lieutenant is hit in his good leg. He goes down.

Two men, wounded themselves, run and haul him back to the chopper. The tank's big gun begins to move again in small increments.

EGAN (V.O.)

We were just target practice for their big gun.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

A turkey shoot.

It fires! BOOM! This one misses - too far off the nose of the chopper.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

Now they had us bracketed. All they had to do was adjust for somewhere in the middle and we were dead meat.

The Medic fires at the tank with the M-16. The rounds just bounce off. Lt. Chelli stops him and looks up at the sky.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

And then we heard it.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

There's something about an inbound Huey...

And suddenly up the river comes an American Huey helicopter. The unmistakable red cross of Medevac on its side.

It buzzes by the downed Blackhawk and tank then does a steep U-turn and comes back.

SERLING (V.O.)
Did it take any ground fire?

EGAN (V.O.)
Right off the bat.

JENKINS (V.O.)
Instantly, every rag head ground pounder wanted a piece of that bird.

The enemy troops fire at the chopper, but the only real indication are the tracers arcing through the sky.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)
When the Huey cans back this time it returned fire. Someone with a 240.

EGAN (V.O.)
That Monfriez guy.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)
We didn't know at the time but.. yes, SP/5 Monfriez. The ground troops went for cover.

The men in the Blackhawk cheer. Elation takes them past the pain of their wounds.

BOOM! The tank fires again. The men in the Blackhawk are blown to bits.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)
That round killed the Medic, Raleno, Cerspach... Egan lost his legs....

Chaos. Men dying, bleeding, screaming - praying.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)
We tended the wounded as best we could.

THOMPSON (V.O.)
And waited for the next round to hit.

SERLING (V.O.)
What was the Huey doing at this time?

EGAN (V.O.)

It circled back to go over the tank again.

JENKINS (V.O.)

Then they threw something overboard at the tank.

The Huey banks and over the tank, a dark square object plummets out the open door and lands a few yards away. The Huey bucks and turns. One of the wounded men directs the Lieutenant's attention to the chopper.

SERLING (V.O.)

Threw or it fell off?

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

Couldn't tell the first time. But the chopper banked and we could see the Crew Chief unstrapping something from the other side.

EGAN

The fuel pod. He was unhooking it. I knew. I used to work choppers at Fort Campbell.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

They were still taking ground fire. We could see where the tank's big machine gun was making hits. But the Huey banked again and this time the fuel pod hit.

EGAN

Dead hit. It burst like a water balloon.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

JP8 - air fuel all over the tank.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

Then someone in the Huey fired a flare at the tank. And it blew.

The tank is drenched in gas. The tank commander, sitting half in, half out of the turret is yelling commands when he realizes what is going on.

He tries to bail. Too late. The tank erupts in flames. The ground troops run away from the burning tank.

KA-BOOM! Something goes off inside the tank. Then another explosion, and another. The ammo inside cooks and blows.

The tank disintegrates. Inside the crashed Blackhawk, the men cheer.

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

The men relive that moment with smiles and laughs.

SERLING

Did you see what knocked the Huey
down?

The mood darkens.

LT. CHELLI

No.

EXT. RIVER, DAY

Inside the Blackhawk the mood darkens as they see the Huey.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

We were yelling and screaming so
much we didn't notice the Huey was
even hit.

JENKINS (V.O.)

We just saw it spiral down and
crash. .

EGAN (V.O.)

It landed between the tank and us,
on a little piece of high ground.

SERLING (V.O.)

How far away?

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

Five hundred meters.

The Huey loses altitude fast, the tail rotor dead. It crashes.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

She hit hard.

JENKINS (V.O.)

Real hard. Surprised anyone
survived.

It takes a lot of time for the dust to settle.

SERLING (V.O.)

Did the Huey at any time climb to an altitude to radio in a position?

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

LT. CHELLI

They didn't have a chance. They were taking fire all the time.

SERLING

They could have climbed to escape the fire.

THOMPSON

Roger that, sir, and left us to take the flak. As long as they were firing at the Huey they weren't shooting at us.

SERLING

The sun set shortly after the Huey crashed. Was there any more ground fire?

LT. CHELLI

The tank was incapacitated -- but we caught sporadic ground fire through the night. The Huey took most of it. It was between us and the enemy so...

SERLING

You had no communications with the Huey?

LT. CHELLI

No. As I said our radio was wasted. We tried shouting at it, but that just drew enemy fire, so we ... stopped.

SERLING

So you spent the night waiting?

JENKINS

Longest night I ever spent...

LT. CHELLI

Monaco died during the night. It was cold.

(MORE)

LT. CHELLI (CONT'D)

But... We heard voices from the Huey a couple of times, small arms fire between it and the ridge.

SERLING

Could you see into the Huey? Were you able to discern what was happening there?

LT. CHELLI

No. Some rocks hid the interior. We couldn't see anything in daylight and most of our time there it was dark.

SERLING

And with dawn came a new attack?

LT. CHELLI

Not quite. The sun came up. We were pretty ragged by then.

EXT. BLACKHAWK, MORNING

The sun comes up. Lt. Chelli, weary to the bone, and a few men look up at the sky, at the ridge. On the ridge -- enemy activity, heads popping up, guns laid on the ridge.

LT.,CHELLI (V.O.)

On the ridge we saw forty, maybe fifty enemy. They began firing at the Huey mainly and moving toward it under the cover fire. The Huey returned fire.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

240 and M-16, maybe Beretta.

EGAN (V. O.)

Then we heard the rescue team coming.

JENKINS (V.O.)

A Huey, A Blackhawk and a pair of Cobras.

THOMPSON (V.O.)

And a big ass F-14 Tomcat. You never heard such a beautiful noise.

The aircraft zoom overhead. Awesome, beautiful sights. The men on the downed Blackhawk cheer with what little strength they have.

The Cobras strafe the ridge line. The Blackhawk and Huey land between the two downed aircraft.

The wounded are loaded into the Blackhawk. Three men run out of the crashed Huey and into the new one.

There is gunfire everywhere.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

All the wounded were loaded aboard. The dead were left behind. We were taking fire at the time. One of the Blackhawk medics was hit, I think.

SERLING (V.O.)

Again, I'm not criticizing, Lieutenant, but why were the dead left behind?

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

When we got aboard the Blackhawk that was when we saw the enemy on the other ridge. They'd flanked us in the night. It was a hot LZ, all right. The decision was made to leave the dead. By the commander of the rescue, I think.

The wounded are loaded onto the Blackhawk and then both it and the Huey rise.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

The last thing we saw was the Tomcat drop white phosphorus on the two crashed choppers.

An awesome display of burning white fire explodes the two choppers.

LT. CHELLI (V.O.)

Then we were out of there.

The rescue choppers back away.

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

THOMPSON

Thank the Lord.

LT. CHELLI

Colonel, this isn't just some
Lessons Learned or post-action
analysis, is it?

SERLING

No. Captain Walden has been
recommended for the Medal of Honor.

LT. CHELLI

Well, I don't know if it was Captain
Walden or whoever -- but that Huey
and her crew saved our lives.

THOMPSON

I wouldn't be here today. I know
that.

EGAN

We all thought we were dead.

JENKINS

That Huey could have climbed and
just radioed in a location.

LT. CHELLI

And by the time someone would have
gotten to us we would have been
dead.

THOMPSON

The Medal of Honor is not enough
for what they did.

EGAN

They ought to give it to every
soldier on that Huey.

There are sounds of affirmation from the rest of the men.

SERLING

Thanks for your help, gentlemen.
You're excused.

They all rise and go back to conversing among themselves,
making plans for the reunion dinner that night. Serling
heads for the door. Lieutenant Chelli stops him.

LT. CHELLI

Sir? You have a minute, Colonel?

SERLING

Sure, Lieutenant.

LT. CHELLI

Sir, you had a remarkable career -- before the incident at Al Bathra. I was wondering if perhaps you could give me a few hints in reference to getting on the fast track, like you.

Lt. Chelli carries a large manila envelope and worries it between his fingers.

SERLING

I wouldn't really know how to advise you on...

LT. CHELLI

I mean, they say, sir, that if it hadn't been for the incident at Al Bathra you'd be a General now. I'm a full-tilt career ring-knocker, sir, and I plan on being the youngest General in Army history.

SERLING

Well, I don't know about any Army fast track, Lieutenant. I know it's hard work and a little luck...

LT. CHELLI

Sure, sure. Well if I can find me a Rabbi like you got in General Hershberg...

SERLING

General Hershberg and I never met before Desert Storm. I'd hardly call him my Rabbi.

LT. CHELLI

But you're on his staff. He saved you from a Court Martial.

SERLING

Where'd you hear that?

LT. CHELLI

Scuttlebutt, sir...

Chelli knows he's fucked up.

SERLING

Hershberg, didn't do me any favors.
(MORE)

SERLING (CONT'D)

Good luck on your career,
Lieutenant. Fast track or not.
When you make General I'll send
you a bottle.

He starts away. Chelli is disappointed, then remembers. He catches up to Serling.

LT. CHELLI

Sir, I forgot. I wanted to give
you this.

He hands Serling the envelope.

LT. CHELLI

It's an article I wrote for Military
Review. It's an operational
assessment of the battle of Al
Bathra. In it I propose three
operational alternatives to your
... the decision you made.

SERLING

Only three?

LT. CHELLI

I thought you might like to read
it.

SERLING

No. Thank you.

Serling tries to give it back to the Lieutenant

LT. CHELLI

I'm not being critical, sir.

SERLING

No?

LT. CHELLI

You don't want to read it, sir?
I'm sure you've gone over the
incident many times. There might
be a solution here that you didn't
think of.

SERLING

I doubt it. I doubt it very much.

He gives the envelope back and walks away.

INT. ENLISTED MENS' CLUB, DAY

A nightclub -- but spotless, immaculate. The bar is pristine -- all the bottles lined up, the glasses stacked precisely.

One employee is painting dots on the floor for the table legs. To make sure all the tables line up properly, a string has been tacked to the floor.

Sitting in a chair in front of the bandstand is a man in his late 40's, wearing black pants and a khaki shirt -- civilian clothes, but he probably would make anything he wears look like a uniform. TOP SIDARIS. He sits, arms folded, listening to a young band, long hair, Salvation Army clothes, flail away at a Seattle grunge imitation. Well, Top doesn't so much listen as tolerate.

Serling walks through the front door, blinks in the darkness and focuses on Top.

TOP

That's enough! That's enough!
Cease! CEASE MUSIC!!!

The band stops.

LEAD SINGER

You want to hear another song?

TOP

No. That's enough. I tell you,
my ears are bleeding.

BASS PLAYER

But you didn't give us a chance.
We didn't got to finish the first
song.

TOP

Don't get you shorts in a bind,
son. You're hired. I don't know
if you're any good, but you make
enough noise and that's all that
counts with this crowd.

DRUMMER

Hired? Cool.

TOP

On one condition. You play at
least one song that's on my jukebox.
Deal?

The band members look at each other, confer, and head for the jukebox.

Top turns away from them and heads for a table in a back corner in the dark.

SERLING

Hey, Top, need someone to wash glasses?

Top turns and sees Serling.

TOP

Major! Oh, it's Colonel now. Sorry, sir. What are you doing here, sir? Transferred out of that paper-pushing quagmire to a real Army posting?

SERLING

No, T.D.Y. Just doing a little leg work for General Hershberg.

TOP

Come over here to my office, sort of.

He leads Serling to the corner table. One of the band members turns from the jukebox.

GUITARIST

Hey, Mister.

TOP

First Sergeant or Top will do.

GUITARIST

There's not a song on here after 1980.

TOP

'75. You backing out of the deal?

GUITARIST

No, sir.

TOP

Top. I'm not a sir, I work for a living. No offense, Colonel.

SERLING

None taken. Can a fella get a drink in this joint? I'll buy you one.

TOP

A little early for me, sir.

He heads to the bar, glances at the band members arguing at the jukebox.

TOP

I don't understand this Seattle grunge sound. Goes right by me.

SERLING

That's probably the point. Bourbon. Neat.

TOP

So how's D.C.? Forget D.C., we all know how D.C. is every time we tune in to CNN. Fuck D.C. How's the family?

SERLING

(shrugging)

The same. I see you caught yourself a nice featherbed here.

TOP

Well, hell, I retired and this thing came up. It's not too bad. The beer's cheap and it gives me time to spend with my grandkids. My son is a W03 now.

SERLING

Good for him. Sorry to see you, leave the Army, Top. Always thought you'd go for Sergeant Major. It wasn't because of Al Bathra was it?

TOP

Naw. Sergeant Major was never for me. Too much politics. I always said I'd get out if I ever had a chance at one last good fight. Desert Storm was that for me. After all those ... mean years and ... well, I went out happy and proud. Muller!

An employee runs over, snapping to attention

TOP

Is that a bottle of Johnny Walker next to the Bushmills? What are the standing orders for bottles behind the bar?

MULLER

Alphabetical order, Top, but I thought, maybe since I get more orders for the JW I'd move it where it was handier.

TOP

And how am I going to do my inventory with any expedience. And all the Johnny Walkers go in the "Ws'" not the "Js'". Black then Red.

MULLER

You know, Top, I could do the inventory for you.

TOP

It's my responsibility. I'll do the inventory.

SERLING

But I'll take a hit off that Johnny Walker before you move it.

Top pours the drink. Muller fixes the bottles.

TOP

He's right, though. Alphabetical looks ... unorderly. Maybe the bottles should be arranged by height, tall to short.

SERLING

You heard anything from Patella?

TOP

He left the Army. Settled in Florida.

SERLING

A good man.

TOP

He was one of the best gunners I ever saw. It's too bad what he's done to himself.

SERLING

What's that?

TOP

Last time I saw him he was climbing
into the bottle so far he could
pull the cork after him.

He looks pointedly at Serling's drink. Serling can't face
Top. The band members come over.

LEAD SINGER

We found a Sly and the Family Stone
song we can cover.

TOP

Good. Now one other thing. See
this here VU meter.

He points to the one on the wall behind the bar.

TOP

It goes in the red and I pull the
plug. Like this.

He flicks a switch on the bar. The stage lights go dark,
the power for the amps and mikes goes out with a pop.

TOP

And I got to recognize the jukebox
song. Don't try to get away with
any kind of musical camouflage.
See you tonight. Nineteen hundred
hours. Be on time or I dock your
skinny little asses.

The band moves away, not quite sure what they've gotten
themselves into.

TOP

That's showbiz.

He watches as Serling pulls himself a refill.

SERLING

Maybe I should visit Patella.

TOP

Maybe there's room in that bottle
for both of you.

Serling looks at Top -- shocked, embarrassed.

TOP

Let me be blunt, sir, if I may.

SERLING

You may, not that you ever needed permission.

TOP

I mean blunt, sir. Now I'm retired I seem to have this fuck you attitude that goes with old men and young studs.

He looks directly at Serling.

TOP

You fucked up, sir. You made a command decision in a combat environment under hostile fire -- and you were wrong. That's the chance you take when you make decisions. Nobody's perfect -- not even the sainted General Hershberg. You make decisions and you hope you're right more than you're wrong. Just like any other job. Except when a combat officer fucks up -- people get killed. It's a war, sir. People get killed. I repeat for the particularly dense. You are going to make mistakes. Some people will die. Don't make the same mistake twice. And drive on. You're a good officer, sir, the best combat officer I've seen in almost thirty years. You belong with the troops. (Continuing) Get out of babble-land and back in the field. Get past this. Now I need a drink.

He grabs Serling's glass and empties it. The doors open and the enlisted men start to pour in. Among them are Lieutenant Chelli and the survivors of the Blackhawk.

TOP

I'm getting too salty in my old age. Stick around, sir. We'll talk about the good times. Shoot the shit. Smoke and joke.

SERLING

I have to get down to Benning in the morning. Early.

He watches Lt. Chelli and the gang. Full of camaraderie and good spirits.

SERLING

Thanks for the advice, Top, but you said it all before.

TOP

If you do see Patella have him call me.

SERLING

I will. Here, buy that table a round on me.

TOP

Who are they?

SERLING

Heroes. Real heroes.

And he leaves. Top takes the preferred money and looks at Chelli's table, then back at Serling, who is out the door.

EXT. FORT BRAGG, DUSK

Serling walks. A formation runs by calling cadence.

FORMATION

If I die in a combat zone, box me up and send me home. Put my medals on my chest, tell my mom I did my best.

The flag is lowered. Serling watches. He walks by an old tank mounted on a concrete block. An old tank, WWII, welded shut, a frozen monument. To what? Serling doesn't know.

INT. BOQ, NIGHT

Serling enters the Bachelor officers Quarters. He is tired, not physically, just drained. He gets to his room, opens the door. It sticks. There is a manila envelope wedged between the door and the floor. Serling pulls it out. Chelli's article. Serling tosses it on the bed with a wry smile.

He goes to his briefcase and pulls out an airline bottle of booze. He opens it, realizes what he is doing, and determinedly screws the cap back on. Then sits on the bed, more tired than ever. He is sitting on Chelli's envelope.

Yanking it out from under his butt, he looks at it a moment, then opens the clasp. He starts reading.

Outside, an Armored Personnel Carrier rolls by, that clanking roar all too familiar to Serling.

EXT. DESERT, NIGHT

The vague, black outline of a rolling monster in a dark desert landscape.

BOOM! That vehicle blows up. In the fire and flame it becomes an Arab M110 tank.

BOOM! Secondary explosions tear off the turret. An American tank, M1A1 Abrams, rolls by the burning vehicle. Serling, a Major, is half-in-half-out of the Abrams, on the radio. The desert is full of tanks, on line, Americans rolling across the battlefield, leaving burning enemy tanks behind them like rows of giant smoke pots on a barren field. Fifty meters behind the tanks -- a line of M2/M3 Bradley fighting vehicles, smaller cannons, ungainly-things.

SERLING

Enemy tank at twelve o'clock!
'Gunner!

PATELLA

Target!

SERLING

Sabot!

PATELLA

Up!

SERLING

Fire!

PATELLA

On the way!

BOOM!

The tank's big gun fires. Up ahead a tank blows! Serling looks down at Patella, a fresh-faced kid with the sorry beginnings of a mustache. Patella beams.

SERLING

Good shooting, Patella.

Serling's tank rolls past this new victim. It burns, a dead man sprawled across the track. The sand next to the burning tank stirs, shifts. And then, from the sand like giant beasts rising from the bowels of the earth, four tanks emerge. T-55's, Russian made. Big, ugly, mean looking chunks of steel. The one Serling passed swivels its turret until its big gun is aimed at the backs of the Americans.

They fire! The huge guns belch a column of flame at the Americans. Serling is riding along, calling out orders, keeping his company in line when...

The Abrams to his left blows up!

SERLING

Holy shit! Where did that come from?!! Black Four! Black Four! This is Black Six! Red Three was just taken out! Anybody see the shooter?!!

PATELLA

I didn't see anything fire!

Patella scans the desert. Serling, peering through his night vision goggles, looks right, left then behind him --just in time to see a burst of flame from the muzzle of an Arab tank. The Abrams to his right is hit. It smokes and one tread flies off. The crippled tank spins in a circle.

SERLING

Turn about! Turn about! Who's that firing?!! Our Bradleys?! Black Four, this is Black six, Over.

TOP

(V.O. filtered)

Black Six, this is Black Four.

SERLING

Black Four, get on the horn to Red Three, find out if our Bradleys are firing at us. Over. Patella? What do you see?

PAITELLA

Hard to make out, sir.

Patella's staring at his night vision scope. Boom! A vehicle spews out a ball of flame behind them.

BOOMI

The sand explodes a few meters
from Serling's tank! Serling ducks
down.

TOP

(V.O. filtered)

Black Six, this is Black Four!
Red Three says he has enemy tanks
in his lines. I say again - enemy
tanks in our Red lines. Over!

Boom! A round glances off Serling's tank! Serling is shaken,
sweating, scared.

SERLING

Patella! Find me target!

PATELLA

Got one, sir! I think.

SERLING

"I think"! Do you or do you not
have a target, Patella?

On the Bradley line a Bradley aims it's 25mm at one of the T-
55's and fires! No effect.

PATELLA

Got one, sir! He just fired!

Through his green night vision it is hard to tell the Bradley
from the T-55.

SERLING

Sabot!

There is gunfire all round him - a tank battle!

PATELLA

Up!

Serling peers through the goggles. Machine gun fire glances
off his tank. He ducks.

PATELLA

Sir? Round up!

Serling sees the Abrams to his side take another round.

PATELLA

Sir?!

SERLING

Fire!

PATELLA

On the way! The Abrams' big gun bellows. The blast kicks up a cloud of dust and sand in front of it. They wait.

TOP

(V.O., filtered)

Black six, this is Black Four. We just lost Red Three.

Across the desert one of the Bradleys is a flaming wreck. The dust begins to settle.

SERLING

Target!

PATELLA

Got one, sir!

Serling looks through his night vision at the burning vehicle. Does he recognize it?

SERLING

Oh, God... Boylar...

PATELLA

Target, sir!

SERLING

Patella, are you sure we aren't firing at our own Bradleys?

PATELLX

They fired, sir!

SERLING

At us or at the T-55's?

PATELLA

At ... oh, God.

Boom! A round lands near Serling! The tank shudders.

LOADER

Sir! We're taking fire!

Serling looks through his night vision.

LOADER

Sir!

Everyone waits for the next round to come.

DRIVER
(V.O., filtered)
Sir?

SERLING
Black Four, this is Black Six.
Order all Bradleys to turn .ninety
degrees and stop. Ninety and stop.
Over.

TOP
(V.O., filtered)
Ninety and stop. Roger. Out.

SERLING
Patella! Target?

The Bradleys all turn sideways to Serling's tank.

PATELLA
Tank, sir!

SERLING
Front on? Or side on?

PATELLA
Front on.

SERLING
Sabot!

PATELLA
Up!

SERLING
Fire!

PATELLA
On the way!

BOOM! A T-55 explodes. Another! Then another as the other tanks follow Serling's example.

PATELLA
We got 'em, sir!

There is a lot of cheering on the radio traffic. But Serling is oblivious. He stares through the dust, waiting for it to settle again. To focus on the burning Bradley.

SERLING

Newton, let's go check out our
first hit.

The driver turns the tank around and they head back. Serling takes off his night goggles. The burning vehicle comes into view. Serling stares at it. A star becomes visible on the charred side. A limp arm hangs out of the hatch. Serling's tank stops.

PATELLA

Oh shit ... oh shit, oh shit, oh
shit, oh shit...

A constant, tragic litany as he stares at the ruined Bradley, now plainly visible. Serling just shakes his head, tears in his eyes.

SERLING

Boylar...

INT. BOQ, NIGHT

Serling stares at the page of Chelli's article, but he doesn't see it anymore. Finally he tosses it aside. Grabs the little bottle of booze and drains it. He tosses away the bottle in disgust.

EXT. FORT BENNING, DAY

Fort Benning, Georgia. Serling drives through the gates.

EXT. AIRFIELD, DAY

Big C-130 Hercules lumber down the runway and then, impossibly take to the air. Serling rides in a Humvee across the airfield, past a group of soldiers in parachutes waiting on the tarmac.

The Humvee stops in front of the 264th Medical Company - Air Ambulance. There are a Huey and a Blackhawk helicopter on pads out front, more in the nearby hangar.

Serling enters the Company HQ, a quonset hut.

INT. HQ, MORNING

There is a SP/5 behind a desk.

SERLING

Looking for major Teegarden.

SP/ 5

In the back, sir.

He gestures. Serling goes into the back. MAJOR TEEGARDEN is playing a Gameboy with CAPTAIN COUSINS.

SERLING

Major Teegarden, Nat Serling. I'm doing the follow through on your Medal of Honor recommendation for Captain Walden.

TEEGARDEN

Really? About time. Gladto meetcha. This is Captain Cousins. What took you so long?

SERLING

I work at the Pentagon.

TEEGARDEN

'Nuff said. Coke? Coffee?

SERLING

Coffee'd be nice. Black. Can you break down the events of 26, 27 February, '91 for me?

TEEGARDEN

Sure thing. I'm on call if that's okay. Let's see. I sent out Dust Off Two, Warrant Officer Fowler, at about 10:20 hours to evac the troop from that vehicular accident. We were getting ready to move forward, provide support for elements of the 82nd Airborne and the 24th Mech.

SERLING

A routine run.

TEEGARDEN

Well, kinda routine. We were in Iraq by then. Captain Fowler couldn't fly above 100 feet, that was our ceiling. So the fly boys could go low for their bombing runs. Our radios lost contact below 250, 300. So we were deaf.

(MORE)

TEEGARDEN (CONT'D)

And there was the dust and then the smoke from Kuwait, oil fields burning. Visibility was nil. So we were blind, too. And sand everywhere.

COUSINS

Sand storms, sand devils, sand outs! Sand in the rotor, sand in the fuel, sand in the intakes. Sand in your eyes, sand in your nose, your ears, your food, your water, your mouth, up your ass, in places you didn't know you had places. I'm still finding sand and I've been home for years. Sorry.

He is embarrassed and goes back to his Gameboy.

SERLING

When did you realize Fowler's ship might be in trouble?

TEEGARDEN

Well, you sort of know how long a mission takes, how long enroute, the pick up, how long to the MASH, how long to return. I give 'em some leeway. I gave Fowler almost an hour. Then I called HQ. They confirmed the pick up. Then I got the MASH unit on the horn and found out Fowler hadn't delivered. I wasn't that worried. A sandstorm could have put 'em down.

He looks at Cousins.

COUSINS

Sometimes the visibility was so bad you set down to wait it out. They usually blew over.

TEEGARDEN

But I called Air Rescue anyway.

The SP/5 comes in.

SP/5

Major, we have a possible heat exhaustion on the small arms range.

TEEGARDEN

Dwayne, grab that for me.

Captain Cousins puts away his Cameboy and runs out. Through the window Serling sees the crew join him at the Blackhawk.

TEEGARDEN

Heat stroke can roll out of heat exhaustion. Heat stroke can kill.

SERLING

How did Captain Walden get involved in the search?

TEEGARDEN

She came to me.

The Blackhawk takes off outside. Teegarden watches it go.

TEEGARDEN

When she first came to the unit, Walden rode co-pilot with Fowler during her orientation. They were friends. They'd traded envelopes.

SERLING

Traded envelopes?

TEEGARDEN

When we first got there, on the way over actually, we each wrote a letter to whoever ... in case we didn't come back. We didn't know what we were getting into. Saddam's crack army, best in the world, in continuous control for years. We were ... green. So we wrote these letters and traded them. You know, in case anything happens to me send this to my folks, my wife... I actually found Captain Walden's letter in Fowler's footlocker when we packed his ... effects. I sent it to her folks.

SERLING

Captain Walden and Fowler were close.

TEEGARDEN

No closer than anyone else. No romance or anything, if that's what you're implying.

SERLING

I'm not implying anything..

TEEGARDEN

We were all close. Just the few of us, four choppers and their crews. Most of the time we were off by ourselves. We were ... yeah, close.

SERLING

I was in a tank unit in Desert Storm. I know how close you get -- especially in combat. I'm sorry. So Captain Walden approached you.

TEEGARDEN

We were all monitoring the rescue channels. Captain Walden came to me. Karen knew Fowler, knew his flying habits, thought she could retrace his route.

SERLING

You agreed?

TEEGARDEN

(angry)

Yes, we're Medevac. Rescue is our business, too.

SERLING

I'm not questioning your decision, Major. So she went.

TEEGARDEN

Not right away. I made her wait an hour in case Rescue came up with something. Then I said okay. I made her strap on the extra fuel pods. She was not to attempt evacuation. There were too many on Fowler's Blackhawk for the Huey anyway. Walden's mission was to spot Dust Off Two, go for altitude to call in the location, then render what aid they could until the rescue team arrived. Those were my orders.

SP/5 comes in.

SP/5

Sir, Medevac at Saint Mare Elyse. Bee sting.

TEEGARDEN

Roger. On it.

(to Serling)

I've got to take this.

SERLING

Bee sting?

Teegarden starts out the door.

TEEGARDEN

For some people it could lead to
anaphylactic shock. Could be fatal.
Come along if you want.

EXT. PAD, DAY

Serling follows Teegarden out to the pad. The rest of the crew and co-pilot meet him. This is a team. They've done this thousands of times. Serling is seated in the back, given a helmet, strapped in.

They take off. The dialogue throughout the flight is heard over the intercom.

SERLING

Did Captain Walden file a flight
plan?

TEEGARDEN

Not as such, but we discussed her
route. She was going to follow
the Euphrates, along the Eastern
bank. Fowler used to say he flew
English style, on the wrong side
of the road. Some kind of silly
business to confuse the enemy. I
used to tell Fowler that personally
I thought he was confused but...
Finally I told Karen, Captain
Walden, she could fly.

SERLING

Finally...?

TEEGARDEN

Well, to tell the truth, I was
delaying her as much as I could
hoping that Rescue would come up
with something.

(MORE)

TEEGARDEN (CONT'D)

I suppose that's why when Walden went down it got dark before we... But Walden was insistent, so I said okay. Besides, I figured there couldn't be any harm in having another pair of eyes out there looking for Fowler.

SERLING

You feeling some reservations about your decision?

Teegarden turns to look back at Serling. They are flying over the base, Serling trying not to look down.

TEEGARDEN

What the hell does that have to do with the action of Captain Walden on 26 - 27 February '91?

SERLING

None. I just... Did you have any contact with Captain Walden after she left your base camp?

TEEGARDEN

We lost contact after she was twenty minutes out or so. She was keeping low, like I said, our ceiling was down to give the jets a lower profile. She put down once because a dust storm degraded visibility...

SERLING

You learned this on the radio?

TEEGARDEN

No. That I learned after the action.

SERLING

Please stay with what you personally witnessed. I'll be interviewing the crew later. Why did you send along Specialist Altameyer and the machine gun? Isn't that unusual for a Medevac?

TEEGARDEN

Well... There'd been reports of aircraft taking ground fire along the Euphrates.

(MORE)

TEEGARDEN (CONT'D)

Nothing of consequence. Could have been some trigger happy Bedouins, those people fire guns in the air like kids wave at trains. Plus, Walden's mission was not to evacuate, but to locate and report. There was an MP unit next door to our base camp. Altameyer was always hanging around the company area. He had a hard-on for choppers.

CREW CHIEF

Don't we all?

Teegarden smiles at his Crew Chief. They are over the area. A ground soldier guides them in for the landing. The Medic bails and runs to where a group of soldiers circle a prone man.

SERLING

So the next time you heard anything of Walden's situation...

TEEGARDEN

It was a rough night. As soon as the sun went down and neither aircraft had returned... I don't think anyone in the company got any sleep. At first light, Division Intelligence and Search and Rescue reported they had satellite infrared photos they thought might be our two birds. We cranked up and went in with the rescue party. I flew one Huey, Captain Liebman our other Blackhawk.

The Medic comes running to the Huey accompanying a litter. The litter is put aboard.

Serling looks at the man on the litter. He is all puffed up, red faced, gasping for air.

MEDIC

Let's get this one to the hospital, stat. He's swelling like a blow fish. I've poked him with some epinephrine, but we gotta get him some help before his throat swells shut.

The chopper takes off.

TEEGARDEN

Roger.

He calls in to the hospital, briefing them on their patient. The man on the litter starts pulling on Serling's arm in a panic.

MEDIC

Hold him, sir. Hold him still.

Serling holds the man as the Medic cuts a slit in his throat.

MEDIC

Sir, he's not getting any air.
I'm traching him.

The man struggles as the Medic tries to insert a tube through his throat. Serling calms him.

SERLING

You're going to be okay, troop.
Just relax. You're in the best of
hands. Just relax.

Finally the tube is in and the man is getting air. The patient relaxes. Serling lets go of him and sits back down.

SERLING

Uh ... where were we? What did
you see when you got to the crash
site?

TEEGARDEN

Two wasted choppers. They were so
shot up they looked like termites
had been at fez. I was surprised
anyone was alive. They were
encircled by a hundred maybe more
of enemy troops moving in under
cover of fire. Oh, and a wasted
tank on the ridgeline.

SERLING

You called in the Willy Peter
strike?

TEEGARDEN

Yes. It was a hot LZ. We couldn't
stay to retrieve the bodies. When
Ilario, Walden's Crew Chief told
me that Captain Walden and her co-
pilot WO Rady were both dead ...
well, we all saw the footage on

(MORE)

TEEGARDEN (CONT'D)

CNN when they dragged our boys through the streets of Baghdad. I wasn't going to let that happen to any of my people... especially a woman. And don't think that's a sexist remark. I knew these people. I ... cared about these... They died... bravely. I wasn't going to let anyone desecrate... So, yes, I called in the air strike. A cremation if you will.

SERLING

You never saw the bodies of Walden or Rady or the Blackhawk crew?

TEEGARDEN

No. I didn't. I've seen enough dead people.

SERLING

You said there was enemy fire during the rescue.

TEEGARDEN

Yes. We took some hits. Liebman's Blackhawk took some hits. We had one man wounded in the evacuation, Berg.

SERLING

When did you learn about the events that occurred on the previous night?

TEEGARDEN

At the MASH. Altameyer, Ilario and Monfriez started talking. That's when I wrote up the citation. I didn't expect the Medal of Honor would actually come through. Most of them get knocked down to the Silver Star or an Air Medal, but... I wanted everybody to know how extraordinarily this soldier had performed.

They land at the hospital. Doctors and nurses are waiting on the pad. They hustle the patient into the Emergency Room. The Medic goes with them.

SERLING

Why did she do it?

TEEGARDEN

I... I don't know. Does anyone?

SERLING

You said she was aggressive. Was she a hot dog?

TEEGARDEN

No. Very conscientious. A highly motivated individual, but not a Nintendo jockey.

SERLING

Why did she do it? Why didn't she just go for altitude and call in the location?

TEEGARDEN

And watch that tank chew up Fowler and his crew -- the patients. People were in trouble. We help people in trouble. It's our job.

SERLING

Would any of your other pilots have done the same?

TEEGARDEN

I don't know. Would I? I don't know. I hope so. I'd hope we all have in us whatever Captain Walden found that day. But... "Was she a hot dog?" "Was she Audie Murphy?" "Why did she do it?" What does this have to do with the citation?

SERLING

Nothing. Just curious.

TEEGARDEN

Same here. Same here.

The Medic comes back with five Dr. Peppers. He tosses one to each of the men. They all drink - except for Serling.

SERLING

You put Altameyer, Ilario and Monfriez for the Silver Star and Air Medal.

TEEGARDEN

Yes, and they deserved it. They received them.

SERLING

Good men?

TEEGARDEN

The best.

Drinks finished, Teegarden lifts the chopper off the pad.

SERLING

Then why did you transfer them out of your unit after Desert Storm?

TEEGARDEN

Well, Altameyer wasn't mine in the first place, he was an MP. You'll have to ask his CO. Ilario and Monfriez requested transfer for a variety of reasons their own. I had no reason to deny it. After what they'd done it was the least I could do. The least.

They land at the airstrip. Teegarden shuts the Huey down.

SERLING

Thanks, Major. I might call you back with some follow ups.

TEEGARDEN

She gonna get it? The Medal of Honor?

SERLING

Just a matter of rubber stamping the paperwork as far as I can see.

TEEGARDEN

Good.

The helicopter is still. They walk back to the quonset hut.

SERLING

It always reflects well on a unit, and thusly the Commanding Officer when someone under their command is recognized. A career enhancement they call it in D.C.

Teegarden looks at Serling, his anger growing.

TEEGARDEN

You think that's why I did it?
(MORE)

TEEGARDEN (CONT'D)

You... I know something about you,
Colonel. I can put it in one word.
Fratricide.

Serling is brought up cold.

SERLING

I wonder if that word is any better
than what it replaced. Friendly
Fire.

TEEGARDEN

So you've got no room to cast any
doubt on the actions of Captain
Walden and her crew or me, for
that matter. Not one bit.

SERLING

No one knows that better than I,
Major.

And he walks away.

INT. OFFICE, DAY

Serling is on the phone.

SERLING

Colonel Serling. Is the General
busy? Thanks.

He waits. He is in the Hall of Heroes, important men and
actions in Airborne history depicted on the walls.

SERLING

General. I have a message here to
call you...

(beat)

Fine, fine. I just finished
speaking with the C.O. who wrote
up the citation.

(beat)

A little touchy. I yanked his
chain a couple of times but I think
he's just the touchy type, not
covering up anything. Just touchy.

(beat)

I'm still here at Benning. One of
the eyewitnesses is an instructor
at the Ranger School now.

(MORE)

SERLING (CONT'D)

(beat)

I'll stay in contact. By the way sir, I'm forwarding to you an article written by a Lieutenant who survived the incident. It's an after report of Al Bathra.

(beat)

Nothing new, but well written.

(beat)

He's ambitious, intelligent, well spoken and not shy about speaking his mind. Your kind of officer.

(beat)

Me. I'm doing fine. I'll report again in a day or two after I've interviewed all three eyewitnesses. Could I talk to Banachek again?

(beat)

Thank you, sir.

Serling looks at the poster behind him. The hierarchy of awards for the Army. At the peak - The Army Medal of Honor.

SERLING

Banachek, could you find something for me? A guy I served with in Desert Storm just received a medical discharge. Could you track him down for me? Get an address? Patella, first name Loren, middle; name Michael.

(beat)

Thanks, I'll call tomorrow. 'Bye.

EXT. RANGER SCHOOL, DAY

Young men with shaved heads going through the disciplined hell of Ranger School, instructors barking at their heels like Chihuahuas on steroids. The students look haggard. The cadre, in their berets and starched fatigues, look like Army poster boys.

Serling walks up to the Ranger Officer watching the training, talks to him. The officer points up. Serling looks. A fifty foot tower, fast rope training - sort of a speeded up rappelling - men zip down the rope, some with more finesse than others.

While STAFF SERGEANT ALTAMEYER, a black tough, harangues them. Altameyer is buff. There is a long furrow of a scar on his left forearm.

ALTAMEYER

Get down the rope, soldier!
Somebody's shooting at you!. You're
a sniper's wet dream hanging in
the air like that! Go! Go! Go!
You're slowing down the man behind
you! You're gonna get his ass
wasted! This chopper's been in
the air too long! Get down there!
Move it! Move it! Move it! C'mon!
What's wrong?! You want to live
forever?! You scared?!

He has a recalcitrant soldier, tired or scared, hard to tell,
but he's paused at the top of the rope.

ALTAMEYER

C'mon Fedderman. Chopper's leavin!
The war's waiting on your ass!
What are you afraid of?! All you
can do is break your spine. It
don't hurt and you get a spiffy
set of wheels.

Altameyer quickly hooks up to one of the ropes and jumps
over the side of the platform. Head down!

Altameyer plummets the fifty feet - not sliding - falling
the whole way head first. He puts the brakes on for the
last two yards and comes to a stop - his head inches from
the ground.

Fedderman, the recalcitrant student, ashamed, comes down in
fits and starts. Altameyer watches.

ALTAMEYER

C'mon soldier. Let loose. Scare
me!

Fedderman is down. The Ranger goes over to Altameyer and
pulls him aside. Serling can't hear them, but it is apparent
that Altameyer is getting his ass chewed. At the end of the
dressing down the officer points to Serling and Altameyer
comes over, salutes.

ALTAMEYER

Sir! The CO said you wanted to
speak to me.

SERLING

Yes, I'm doing the follow through
on Captain Karen Emma Walden's
Medal of Honor recommendation.

ALTAMEYER
(surprised)
Something wrong?

SERLING
No. Just crossing the T's dotting
the I's. Can we talk?

ALTAMEYER
Yes, sir. I've been let off duty
for the rest of the day.

They walk across the field to the parking lot. Altameyer
keeps giving Serling sidelong glances.

ALTAMEYER
I don't know what to tell you that
I didn't already say. They got it
all in writing.

SERLING
I read the transcript.

ALTAMEYER
Isn't that enough?

SERLING
Not for the Pentagon.

ALTAMEYER
You talking to the other guys?

SERLING
Not yet. But I will.

ALTAMEYER
This here's my car, sir. I was
thinking of going to the gym to
work out for the boxing team.
Could we do this there?

Altameyer looks at Serling to see if he's impressed. He
should be. A Saleen Mustang Convertible - turbo-charged,
black with a red interior - the muscle car of the 90's.
Serling gets in.

SERLING
Sure, anywhere you're comfortable.

INT. MUSTANG, DAY

Altameyer smiles and keys the Saleen to life, peeling rubber
out of the parking lot.

SERLING

You were an MP in Desert Storm.

ALTAMEYER

Roger that, sir.

SERLING

You hung around the Medevac unit.

ALTAMEYER

I did, some.

SERLING

You like helicopters?

ALTAMEYER

Negative on that, sir. Don't even like to fly in planes. Didn't before my crash, don't especially now.

SERLING

But you did hang around the Medevac unit. You want to be a medic?

ALTAMEYER

I wanted to hump a nurse once, that count, sir? I see where you're going. I play poker. Those Medevac folks, between missions, had a lot of spare time on their hands. Want to know a poker secret, sir? Make you a mint. The people you play against, find out what they're interested in, pretend you're interested. They start running off at the mouth don't pay no attention to their cards. Them Medevac folks, they do love to talk about choppers.

He grins.

ALTAMEYER

Medevac folks bought this here auto. Yeah, I hung at the Medevac. I hung, I played, they talked, I won.

SERLING

Until February 26.

ALTAMEYER

Well...

Altameyer pulls into the parking lot of a gym. He goes inside, Serling follows.

INT. GYM, DAY

Altameyer is known here. A lot of high fives, grab-ass, shouted hellos. He and Serling go to the locker room.

INT. LOCKER ROOM

Altameyer begins to change. Off comes his shirt and T-shirt. There is another scar, a big one, across his back. Serling notices it. Altameyer notices Serling noticing.

ALTAMEYER

I had some phys rehab time, got into boxing.

SERLING

So, how did you come to be on Captain Walden's helicopter?

ALTAMEYER

Uh, let's see. Major what's his butt ... Carden Party.

Serling eyes Altameyer. Is the Sergeant fucking with him?

SERLING

Teegarden.

ALTAMEYER

Right. He asked me, said they were on a Search and Rescue and they might need some gun. The war had just got cranking and we didn't know what old Saddam Insane had in his pocket. I said okay. I wasn't seeing any action and I ... you know. So, I got me a 240 and bungied it in one of the Huey doorways and away we went.

SERLING

Did you know Captain Walden before this?

ALTAMEYER

Seen her around. Not much. She didn't play poker, for money, she said. She ... was just another officer.

He turns his back on Serling. In his sweats now, he begins to tape his hands.

SERLING

The flight was uneventful. Up until...

ALTAMEYER

Up until...

He smiles sardonically.

ALTAMEYER

We set down once, dust storm. That and the oil fires. We couldn't see shit so we hit ground to wait it out, let it blow over. We were down for a half hour or so. Then we went back up. God, I hate the dust. Hate the dust. Hate it.

He hates something. He bites off the tape.

SERLING

How long before you spotted the crashed Blackhawk?

ALTAMEYER

Half hour, forty minutes.

Altameyer pauses, busies himself with his hands. It is evident Serling has to prompt him.

SERLING

So tell me what happened.

ALTAMEYER

Well, it all happened so fast, at first. Then it seemed to take forever. We came around a bend in the river - and there it was.

Nervously Altameyer scrapes a fingernail across the wooden bench. Rhythmic scraping.

EXT. HUEY, DAY

The same rhythm, but the chop chop of the blades as the Huey zooms along the river thirty feet off the ground. The river runs through a wide canyon, the cliffs and ridges rise above the helicopter.

Altameyer rides in the rear door, pilot's side, machine gun at the ready. In back with him are CREW CHIEF ILARIO, a MEDIC, and SP/4 MONFRIEZ. Up front -- CAPTAIN WALDEN piloting and her co-pilot WARRANT OFFICER RADY.

They follow the meandering water as it curves around a bend. And abruptly come across a battle. The crashed Blackhawk, survivors firing their weapons.

Across the river bank -- the tank. A round explodes from the tank gun. Flame belches from the cannon. Ground troops move toward the crashed Blackhawk, firing as they go.

ILARIO

There they are!

MONFRIEZ

Fuck, a tank! They're in deep shit.

WALDEN

There's your target, Altameyer. Get it.

Walden banks hard! Standing on the skid, hanging from his safety strap, Altameyer watches the tank appear in the open void directly beneath him. He opens fire!

The bullets glance off the steel hide of the tank. The machine gunner on the tank unleashes a stream of fire at the chopper. The clank of bullets slapping into the aluminum shell of the Huey. A couple of holes appear magically under Monfriez' feet.

MONFRIEZ

Holy shit! We're taking fire!

The tank cannon goes off again. A huge explosion near the Blackhawk! Enemy fire peppers the Huey.

WALDEN

I'll try another pass!

ALTAMEYER

Won't do no good. I might as well be pissing on that tank.

RADY

What we need is an airstrike!
Bomb that fucker back to Baghdad.

WALDEN

By the time a jet jockey got here...

ILARIO

And we ain't got no bombs.

WALDEN

Monfriez, unhook the aux fuel pod,
prepare to toss it overboard!
Altameyer, put a hold on that 240!
Get the flare gun from the survival
kit.

MONFRIEZ

Toss it overboard? What the fuck?

WALDEN

Do it! It's a bomb!

Monfriez gets it, he goes to unhook the big square fuel pod.
Altameyer scrambles to find the survival kit.

ALTAMEYER

Survival kit ... survival kit...

Ilario finds it for him, passes him the flare gun and a flare.
Altameyer fumbles the flare into the barrel. Walden banks
the chopper to go back to the tank.

They fly over the crashed Blackhawk. Desperate faces look
up at them. Rady is twenty feet away from some kid. Their
eyes meet.

RADY

Climb for altitude and call in our
co-ords?

WALDEN

After we slow down the tank.
Otherwise there won't be anything
for them to rescue. Target coming
up!

She nears the tank.

MONFRIEZ

Ready here.

The auxiliary fuel pod teeters on its perch.

ALTAMEYER

Ready here.

She banks over the tank. The tank machine gunner lets loose.
Tracers arc to the chopper, whistle through the doorway, a
few plunk into the side and front window.

WALDEN

Choose your moment!

Monfriez drops the pod! The Huey jumps up in the air with the weight loss! Altameyer is scared. The pod misses the tank by twenty feet.

MONFRIEZ

Shit! Shit!

WALDEN

We'll try again. Prepare the starboard pod. Right away. Rady, we flying?

RADY

No damage yet! None that's stopping us!

He looks at the gash in the window near Walden's head.

MONFRIEZ

Ready!

WALDEN

Altameyer!

ALTAMEYER

Ready!

WALDEN

Have another flare ready in case you miss.

ALTAMEYER

I won't.

ILARIO

I got one.

WALDEN

Here we go! Pick your moment!

RADY

Allow for the speed of the craft. The pod will drop at the same...

MONFRIEZ

I got it! I got it!

They bank over the tank again! The gunner fires at them! Tracers chew at the Huey! Soldiers on the ground fire up at them! Monfriez drops the pod. The chopper lurches!

The pod bursts upon hitting the tank. A direct hit! Gasoline spews everywhere.

MONFRIEZ

Got it!

Altameyer fires the flare gun. It strikes the tank. The tank bursts into flame. The soldiers onboard the Huey cheer, shout, yell in triumph! But only for an instant. They are in trouble. Walden frantically fights the controls. The chopper tail is out of control.

WALDEN Grab something! Hold on! Rady, call in a Mayday!

She looks over. Rady sags in his chair, blood pouring down his chest. The window in front of him is shattered by bullet holes! Walden switches channels on the radio. Ilario straps into the seat. Monfriez hooks up.

WALDEN

Mayday! Mayday! Dust Off Three
is going down! Mayday!

They crash! They hit hard! It is awful quiet for a moment. Dust settles. A hot engine ticks as it cools. A moan. A little movement. Altameyer hangs by his safety strap outside the chopper door, the 240 dangling over his head. The barrel is inches from his nose. He skitters out of the way. It hurts to move. He gets up painfully. The chopper has splayed its skids, sits in an angle. The rear rotor is imbedded in the roof, protruding inside. Walden, unbuckled, is bending over Rady.

WALDEN

Ilario, Rady's hurt!

Ilario is fumbling with his straps. Monfriez is hanging out the other door.

BOOM! The tank blows. Secondary explosions as the ammo goes off. The ground troops, small figures on the ridgeline begin to fire. Rounds pock the Huey, kick up grit on the rocks between the Huey and the ridge.

WALDEN

Altameyer, get the 240 working!

With Ilario's help she gets Rady into the back of the helicopter. Ilario goes to work on him. Altameyer unbungies the machine gun.

WALDEN

Monfriez, check for fire!

He does that while Walden goes back up front to check the radio. Altameyer returns fire.

WALDEN

This is Dust Off Three. This Dust Off Three. Acknowledge, all channels. This is Dust Off Three.

She clicks through all channels. Nothing.

WALDEN

Ilario? Altameyer, easy on the ammo. We might be here a while.

The three conscious men look at her.

MONFRIEZ

No fire, fuel tanks intact.

WALDEN

Ilario? Rady...

ILARIO

He's in a bad way. Lung shot. Not much I can do here.

She bends over Rady, wipes the blood from Rady's face.

WALDEN

The head wound?

ILARIO

Superficial. Radio?

WALDEN

Dead.

She turns to survey the scene. Coming down the ridge carefully, under cover fire, is the enemy. She looks the other way. Across the river, three hundred meters or more, is the crashed Blackhawk. A few men there can be seen looking at the Huey.

WALDEN

Ilario, could Rady manage if we carried him to the Blackhawk?

ILARIO

I don't know, Captain, it might kill him. He might die in the next fifteen seconds just laying there.

MONFRIEZ

I'm not sure we can make it.

Walden looks at Monfriez, who has his M-16 out and is checking to see if it's loaded. He points.

Four or five enemy soldiers have positioned themselves up the river behind a pile of rocks. Someone from the Blackhawk fires on them.

MONFRIEZ

We try to get there we walk right
into their guns. Carrying Rady we
might as well Just shoot ourselves,
save them the bullets.

She looks out over Altameyer's shoulder. The enemy troops have stopped moving, finding cover in the rocks below the ridgeline. Occasionally one of them shoots. The bullets punch holes in the chopper, but the main body is protected by a outcropping of stone. Altameyer returns fire. Short two or three-round bursts from the 240.

WALDEN

Ammo?

ALTAMEYER

I got this belt and another five
hundred.

WALDEN

I guess we wait.

MONFRIEZ

For what?

WALDEN

Search and Rescue.

She looks at the men. They don't feel a bit of her confidence. Actually, neither does she.

Machine gun fire. Everyone ducks, then looks up at the ridge. One enemy soldier with no live target is firing at the Huey's tail.

Full magazines emptied in one long blast, perforating the aluminum tail. Laughter, then another long burst. BURRUPP!

INT. LOCKER ROOM, DAY

Altameyer's fingernail has cut a groove in the wooden bench top.

Each scrape of his fingernail creates a loud sound similar to the machine gun. Altameyer sees that Serling is watching the nervous scraping. He stops self-consciously.

SERLING

Tell me about the night.

ALTAMEYER

I never seen it get so dark. No city lights. Just black. Black. It's hard to describe to someone who wasn't there.

SERLING

I was there.

ALTAMEYER

Yeah? Infantry?

SERLING

Tanks.

ALTAMEYER

You wouldn't get me in no tank. Death traps. There you are sitting on five hundred gallons of diesel fuel, a couple hundred rounds of high explosive artillery in your ass pocket. We saw a lot of dead tanks with crispy critters hanging out of them over there.

SERLING

Well you know who turned them into crispy critters. Not Infantry. Tanks. Other tanks.

He lets that sink in.

SERLING

Tell me what happened during the night.

ALTAMEYER

Not much. The Captain put us on two-hour watches, but there wasn't no need. None of us were going to sleep.

INT. HUEY, NIGHT

The four of them sit with the wounded man, peering out at the night.

Altameyer with the 240 and Ilario with his Beretta pistol in his lap, at one door.

At the other door, Monfriez cradles the M-16 while Captain Walden has her own pistol in hand.

WALDEN

I wish the moon would come out.

She looks up. There is a hint of the moon behind the clouds when they thin.

ILARIO

You think Air Rescue will come tonight?

MONFRIEZ

Most likely they'll wait for first light.

WALDEN

We just have to hold our water until morning.

ALTAMEYER

I can hear them out there, moving and talking - when you people aren't gabbing.

WALDEN

Then I suggest everybody...

BAM! She shoots, right past Monfriez' head. An Iraqi soldier falls, firing his weapon. Suddenly the Huey is under attack from all sides! They hardly see the enemy except when he is lit up by his own gunfire.

A small firefight. Typical. Instant chaos. Gunfire that merges into one big blast of noise.

Then silence. The enemy can be heard scurrying away. The metallic clatter as Walden fumbles to reload her Beretta. She fumbles because her left arm is shot up, in her forearm a bone splinter pokes through the bloody hole. She has another bullet in her stomach. She gets the Beretta loaded one-handed, then discovers the stomach wound.

WALDEN

Shit.

Then rouses herself.

WALDEN

Ilario, you hit? You okay?
Monfriez? Altameyer?

ILARIO

I'm okay. I'm okay.

MONFRIEZ

My ear...

It's bloody, the tip shot off. He touches it. It hurts.

ALTAMEYER

I took one. No, two.

They look. There is a bloody furrow up his left forearm and another across his rib cage.

WALDEN

Take care of him, Ilario.

ILARIO

Rady's dead.

Cold, eyes glazed over. Dead. Ilario goes to Altameyer.

ALTAMEYER

I'm cool. Check the Captain out.
She looks serious.

Ilario goes over to Walden. The others watch.

WALDEN

Altameyer, Monfriez, keep a look
out. They might try again. How
many rounds left?

She grits her teeth as Ilario examines her wounds.

WALDEN

How many rounds? Report.

ALTAMEYER

I'm opening my second box of ammo.

My last.

MONFRIEZ

I've got one magazine left for the
'16. Beretta's full.

ILARIO

Mine's empty. No more nags.

ALTAMEYER

I've got another mag. Here.

Walden almost screams, swallows it.

WALDEN

Both of you fire a couple of rounds off, let them know we're still alive and kicking.

They do so.

WALDEN

Now save your ammo for something you can see.

They stare out into the dark.

ALTAMEYER (V.O.)

The trouble was you couldn't see a damned thing. You knew they were out there, sneaking up on us, ready to try again, but you couldn't see... You couldn't see.

Altameyer's eyes stare out at the night.

INT. LOCKER ROOM, DAY

Altameyer is back there, in the desert, staring out into the night. The thousand-yard stare.

ALTAMEYER

You couldn't see.

SERLING

The rest of the night went without incident.

Altameyer takes a breath, back in the real world.

ALTAMEYER

Yeah. Wasn't that enough for one night?

He is suddenly belligerent, realizes it, and covers with a smile. He nervously rubs the scar on his forearm.

SERLING

We could continue this tomorrow if it's getting to you.

ALTAMEYER

What?

SERLING

If these things are getting too close...you know. We could finish up tomorrow.

ALTAMEYER

I don't get emotional about this shit. It's a gig, you know. My job. It's in the job description. You're gonna get shot at and shit on for chump change. But you get to travel to the worst asswipe countries in the world, sample their worst diseases, eat the worst food, in the midst of the worst weather, the meanest bugs and snakes and crawling critters in the worst conditions known to man. Now ask me why I do it. C'mon, ask me. Ask me.

SERLING

Why?

ALTAMEYER

'Cause I get to kill people.

He tries a macho killer smile. It starts to fail, so he struts into the gymnasium.

SERLING

Tell me what happened at dawn.

INT. GYM

ALTAMEYER

Dawn. Why is it people think only good things will happen when the sun comes up? As if a little sunlight on the situation would make things better. We knew at first light they were going to attack. If they did -- we were dead men.

SERLING

And woman.

Altameyer looks deep into Serling's eyes, looking for something. He doesn't find it.

ALTAMEYER

And woman.

Altameyer looks at himself in the mirror checks out his arms, his chest, his back. Then looks into his own eyes.

INT. HUEY, MORNING

The sun creeps up over the mountains. The crew of Dust Off Three are on watch, weapons ready, exhausted, sleepy-eyed, spent.

ALTAMEYER

Oh, fuck me.

ILARIO

Fuck us.

Silhouetted against the sun, enemy soldiers are descending the ridgeline where the tank still burns.

WALDEN

How many?

ALTAMEYER

A hundred, maybe more.

With more light, the ridge seems to have a soldier behind every rock. Walden tries to crawl over to get a look, but her wounds stop any effort. Altameyer gets ready to fire.

WALDEN

Wait 'til they get closer. Make every round count.

MONFRIEZ

We're gonna need every bullet.
Look.

Between the Huey and the river thirty enemy soldiers have found cover.

ILARIO

We're fucked.

They all look at the enemy troops moving in, skittering from cover to cover, advancing on the Huey.

SERLING (V.O.)

Was there any talk of surrender?

ALTAMEYER (V.O.)

None. Never.

Everyone checks their weapons.

WALDEN

Where's Rady's Berretta?

Ilario pulls aside the poncho covering Rady's body. He takes Rady's Beretta, the extra magazine.

WALDEN

Glad to have you with us, Altameyer.
Sorry about the circumstances.

ALTAMEYER

What the hell, who wants to live
forever.

ILARIO

I do.

WALDEN

Quiet!

MONFRIEZ

What the hell for? They know we're
here.

WALDEN

Quiet! I hear something. Choppers.

That shuts them up. They don't move -- all listening.

ILARIO

I don't hear shit. All this gunfire
has made me deaf. My ears just
ring.

WALDEN

Shhhh!

Then they all hear it. So does the enemy. They stop moving. Choppers! They all start searching the skies, desperately looking for their saviors. The enemy decides to attack. Gunfire begins to pour at the Huey. Bullets slap into the hull. The crew returns fire. Then around the bend of the river comes the Rescue team.

Cobras rake the enemy with electric mini guns. Five thousand rounds a minute tear up the ridgeline. Rockets are fired! Explosions on the ridge.' The tank is hit again! One Cobra attacks the enemy along the river, between the two crashed choppers.

The Cobras are effective, but enemy fire is only reduced not stopped.

The Medevac choppers land, one Blackhawk near the downed Blackhawk, one Huey near the downed Huey.

MONFRIEZ

Let's get out of here! Ilario!

Monfriez grabs Walden. Ilario goes to help. She gasps in pain. Monfriez goes down! A bullet in the leg!

WALDEN

Ilario! Help Monfriez!

Altameyer's gun empty, he grabs Walden with his good arm.

WALDEN

No! Help Monfriez! I'm staying with Rady!

MONFRIEZ

He's dead!

WALDEN

I'm not leaving him behind! Come back with stretchers! Two stretchers! Go! Go!

She takes the M-16. Starts laying down covering fire! The men start to move, Altameyer and Ilario carrying Monfriez.,

MONFRIEZ

No! No! Not without the Captain.

He stops them. They all turn around to face the Huey. In time to see Walden cut down by enemy gunfire. Five, six bullets tear through her body. Ilario rushes back. Altameyer and Monfriez follow. They gather around Walden. She is dead. The enemy fire increases. Mortar rounds begin to explode near the Huey.

ALTAMEYER

Let's get out of here!

They move as fast as they can to the Rescue Huey piloted by Major Teegarden. The Crew Chief and Medic meet them halfway. Monfriez is carried to the Rescue Huey. He tears away from the Medic and taps Teegarden on the shoulder.

MONFRIEZ

Captain Walden is dead. So is Rady.

Teegarden nods, lifts off. All choppers leave the area. Two jets come roaring in. Teegarden talks on the radio, circles above the jets. The jets come in low, on a run.

Bomb canisters float out from below them. The bombs land on the two crashed choppers. White phosphorus. Big, white explosions. Bright, white fire. The choppers are incinerated. Instantly.

Teegarden's Huey leaves. Altameyer looks out the door at the white smoke climbing into the air.

INT. GYM, NIGHT

A weightlifter slaps white powder on his hands before approaching a weight. Altameyer watches the white cloud of dust. He has his boxing gloves on now.

MCQUILLEN

Altameyer, you ready?

SERLING

You were wounded again in the evacuation.

ALTAMEYER

Yeah. Took a bullet. Didn't feel it until we got to the MASH. In the back, scraped a rib, through and through. Little shit.

Altameyer steps into the ring where MEDINA, another boxer, waits. Serling looks at the old man who yelled, MCQUILLEN, natty even in fatigues - starched, tailored fatigues.

MCQUILLEN

Where's your brain bucket?

ALTAMEYER

Don't need it.

MCQUILLEN

You don't step in my ring without one. I have to tell you again and you won't have a head to put it on.

A departing fighter tosses his head gear to Altameyer, who puts it on. McQuillen rings the bell. Altameyer and Medina fight. Well, Altameyer takes a lot of blows. He seems to take and give very little back.

MCQUILLEN

C'mon, Altameyer, plant one before the season's over!

McQuillen looks at Serling.

MCQUILLEN

No fire. No killer instinct, know what I mean. He's got something. Ain't scared. Wades in there, takes a lot of punishment, eats a lot of leather, but he don't dish none out. Well, some.

Altameyer takes a brutal blow. It staggers him. He comes back at his opponent, laughing.

ALTAMEYER

That's the best you can throw at me? What are you, some kind of pussy, Medina? You hit like a woman. My little sister hits harder than that. My mama hits harder. You some kind of fag?

Medina starts punching harder, trying to shut Altameyer up. Altameyer just talks more trash, spitting out his mouthpiece and taunting Medina through bloody teeth.

MCQUILLEN

Maybe he thinks he can win by wearing out the other fella, if Altameyer don't bleed to death first.

McQuillen goes in and stops the fight. Altameyer protests. McQuillen lets them go at it some more. Altameyer is a human punching bag. Blow after painful blow is taken -- and he keeps egging Medina on. Serling watches in horror and fascination. What's wrong with Altameyer?

EXT. GYM, NIGHT

Altameyer, face bruised and swollen, eyes bloodshot, tosses his bag in the back. Serling gets into the passenger side..

INT. MUSTANG, NIGHT

Altameyer starts it up, drives away, a much more sedate ride than the one to the gym.

SERLING

What kind of officer was Captain Walden?

ALTAMEYER

Female.

Kinda short.

He tries to toss it off as a joke.

SERLING

Did she display any ...
characteristics that ... gave you
any idea of how she would perform
in combat?

ALTAMEYER

I didn't know her. I was just on
for the one gig.

He is suspicious again.

SERLING

During the incident ... did she
display any fear... any doubts
when she had to make those ...
perilous decisions?

ALTAMEYER

Perilous decisions... No, she just
made them.

A curt answer.

SERLING

Just like that.

ALTAMEYER

Just like that.

Serling is left with his own thoughts. They arrive at the
BOQ in silence. Serling gets out of the car.

ALTAMEYER

She was okay. She was... What
you're gonna do will make her a
hero, right? She ... deserves it.

He is reaching for the words.

ALTAMEYER

I just wish... I just wish...

SERLING

What?

ALTAMEYER

I just wish I could be left out of
it. I don't want to tell that
story again. Not one more time.

SERLING

Why?

ALTAMEYER

Living it was enough. Know what I mean?

SERLING

I do.

He goes to Altameyer's side of the car, gives him a card.

SERLING

Thanks. Here. Call if you have anything to add to the eyewitness statement. They'll pass it on to me. By the way, the Medal of Honor doesn't make anyone a hero. It just recognizes that fact.

He heads for the BOQ. Altameyer drives away.

EXT. BOQ NIGHT

Serling watches the taillights fade. Something about the Sergeant bothers him. Finally he goes inside.

EXT. LAKE, DAY

A beautiful lake on a likewise beautiful morning.

Serling, in civilian clothes, approaches a bait shop at the edge of the water and enters.

INT. BAIT SHOP

Worms, crickets, minnows, all on display with hand-tied flies and other fishing paraphernalia. An old woman, a hard-working walnut of a face, is pulling a few dead minnows out of the tank to toss to an eager cat.

SERLING

Mrs. Patella?

MRS. PATELLA

Yes?

SERLING

I'm looking for your son Loren. I was at the clinic, they said he was here.

An old man comes out of the back room.

MR. PATELLA

Who are you?

SERLING

Colonel Nat Serling.

They recognize the name. It doesn't overjoy them. Mrs. Patella edges closer, sniffs, wrinkles her nose.

MR. PATELLA

He's out at the McCaffrey place, painting their house. Hope to hell he finishes it before summer.

SERLING

Could you give me directions?

MR. PATELLA

Sure, draw you a map. Know how your military types get all het up over maps.

He goes to get some paper and a pen. Mrs. Patella smiles nervously at Serling.

MRS. PATELLA

Loren admires the hell out of you, Colonel. Maybe you could talk him into going back to the clinic.

SERLING

He drinking again?

MR. PATELLA

It's not the drinking. Everybody drinks.

MRS. PATELLA

Not like that.

Mr. Patella shoots her a dirty look.

MR. PATELLA

It's... Let me put it this way, Colonel. I hid my guns. I don't want him to be alone in the house with a gun. You catch my drift?

SERLING

I see.

MRS. PATELLA

Talk to him, please.

SERLING

I Will.

MR. PATELLA

Can you read a map?

SERLING

The Army taught me.

MR. PATELLA

Then I'll try to explain to you so
you won't get lost.

MRS. PATELLA

My husband was in the Marines.

EXT. LAKE, DAY

Very bucolic. Cottages huddle around the lake. Serling, looking at his map, parks behind one. Half painted little summer cottage. He checks the number with his map.

SERLING

Patella?

No response. He goes around the side, toward the lake. Paint buckets, brushes, a splattered plastic drop cloth. A gunshot! Serling runs to the lake. A man sits on the end of the dock, .22 rifle perched on his shoulder. He fires again! At a bottle bobbing in the water. Another shot and he sinks it. Serling walks out onto the dock. PATELLA, a haunted man, hears the steps on the dock and turns.

PATELLA

Major!

He stands up, extends a hand, they shake, then hug. Old Army buddies. A little awkward, but friendly.

SERLING

What are you doing?

Patella sits down again. Serling joins him. There is a case of beer between them.

PATELLA

Sending old soldiers to sea and
then to a watery grave.

He holds up an opened bottle of beer -- half full. He drains it, looks at the empty bottle.

PATELLA

Ever wonder why they call an empty bottle of booze a dead soldier?

Serling looks at the bottle, too.

SERLING

Yes.

PATELLA

Have one.

Patella tosses the empty into the water, pulls out a full one from the case.

SERLING

No, thanks.

PATELLA

Don't tell me you ain't drinking, Major? I can smell it on you. And you got to be drinking some for it to come out your pores in the morning.

SERLING

I'm trying to quit.

PATELLA

You're not going to lecture me.

He fires at the bobbing bottle, misses.

SERLING

No, but I will pass on a word from your mother. She wants you to go back.

PATELLA

No way. Worse than they Army. Had to make your bed in the morning. Had to pull KP.

He shoots and hits the bottle. It sinks.

PATELLA

They don't understand. No one does.

SERLING

I know.

Patella empties the bottle. It, too, goes into the water and another comes out of the case, is opened, is drunk from.

PATELLA

I don't like to drink, never did.
Before... Before I never was so
much of a drinker. But booze is
the best way of coping. Until
they give me something better,
I'll stay with the booze.

He fires. Hits. Sinks.

SERLING

Have you tried to do without it?

PATELLA

Yeah. You?

SERLING

Yes.

It is a sad yes. Patella tosses the latest empty into the water.

PATELLA

Anything better yet?

Serling is silent.

PATELLA

Obviously no.

He fires, misses. Goes to the case, opens a new one. Gives it to Serling. Serling takes it. Patella gets a fresh one for himself.

PATELLA

You still in uniform, major?

SERLING

(nodding)

Not a Major anymore. Colonel.

PATELLA

You'll always be Major to me, sir.
And Blackburn will always be
Sergeant. I'm stuck in time, like
some fucking "Twilight Zone" I
can't get past 2200 hours, Feb 26,
1992. It's like I didn't live
before that night. And I sure
haven't lived past it.

(MORE)

PATELLA (CONT'D)

Blackburn, Sacks, Boylan, I hardly knew Pittman, but now I remember every moment I spent with the poor bastard. His ugly laugh, the picture of his ugly girlfriend. His fucking bad jokes. I can even see his face when I killed him. I wasn't there but I see him. I'd have to be in the tank to see that, right, and if I was in the tank I'd be dead. But I'm not dead and I wasn't in the tank, but I see his face.

Serling turns away. The light on the lake shimmers. It blinds him, but he stares into it. It's like fire.

SERLING

You didn't kill them, I did. I gave the order.

PATELLA

I pulled the fucking trigger.

SERLING

The investigators cleared us of all blame. We didn't know that the target signature of a tank being hit was the same as one firing. We never trained under live fire. How could we?

PATELLA

How could we? Yeah, how could we, Major?

He fires at the bottle -- misses.

PATELLA

Major?

Serling looks at him.

PATELLA

They weren't on the same radio freq as us, were they?

SERLING

No. Why?

PATELLA

I keep hearing them scream.

(MORE)

PATELLA (CONT'D)

I swear, I heard them scream. I still do.

SERLING

So do I.

PATELLA

You poor bastard.

He offers Serling another beer. Serling declines.

PATELLA

Mama says the booze will kill me. She don't get it does she?

SERLING

No.

PATELLA

No one understands but you, Major.

He laughs, a little hysterical, a little out of control.

PATELLA

My mama thinks I'm drowning and the man she sends to save me can't swim. Sorry, Major.

Serling laughs, too. He takes the second beer, empties his first and tosses it in the water. Patella shoots. Misses. He offers the rifle to Serling.

SERLING

No, thanks.

Patella shoots. Hits. Sinks.

SERLING

Don't kids swim here?

Patella looks out at the water.

PATELLA

Shit. Oh, fuck.

He lays down the rifle, takes off his shoes, shirt. Patella jumps into the water. Serling waits. He stares at the surface of the water, worried. Nothing happens, not a ripple on the water. Serling pries off his shoes, staring at the water. Patella breaks the surface! Laughing.

PATELLA

Scare you, major?

SERLING

Yes.

Patella saddens.

PATELLA

Sorry.

He sets some broken glass he's scooped up on the dock, dives again.

EXT. DOCK, LATER

The dock is littered with broken glass, bottle shards, a couple that aren't broken. Patella sits on the side of the dock, holding a bleeding right hand by the wrist. Serling bandages him.

SERLING

This, I can fix. I've been trained.

PATELLA

All them OCS medic courses?

SERLING

Three kids...

Serling is saddened now. Patella looks at him.

PATELLA

Damn, Major. You came to me looking for some kind of answer didn't you?

Serling tries a smile, fails.

SERLING

I can't deny it.

PATELLA

Oh... I'm so sorry, Major. So damn sorry.

SERLING

So am I.

They look at each other for a moment.

EXT. LAKE, DAY

Serling pauses by his car. Patella, paint roller in his left hand, salutes with the bandaged hand.

PATELLA

Major, you get any clue you let me know.

SERLING

You do the same.

He finally returns the salute, gets in the car and drives away. Patella watches him go, looks at the paint roller in disgust and tosses it away.

INT. HOTEL ROOM, DAY

Serling stands on the balcony looking down at the canal that winds through the city around him. He goes into the room. There is a bottle of Jim Beam on the table next to the phone. Serling stares at the bottle. Then dials.

SERLING

Hi, hon.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Nat! Where are you?

SERLING

San Antonio. At a hotel. Tired of BOQ's. I was going to stop off at the Alamo later, get the kids T-shirts. I thought I'd ask you about the sizes.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Nat, you know their sizes better than I do. What's going on?

Serling looks at the bottle.

SERLING

You always call me on it, don't you?

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

And you do the same for me. That's how it's always worked.

(softly)

What is it, Nat?

Serling's thumb works nervously at the plastic covering the bottle cap.

SERLING

Nothing. I just wanted to talk to somebody who doesn't salute, I guess. A halfway friendly voice.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Well, you want me to prattle on for a minute?

SERLING

Please.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Let's see. Something's wrong with the new fridge. The light doesn't come on when you open the door. Josie lost a tooth. We did the whole tooth fairy bit, she found a quarter under her pillow. So. I catch Dennis with a pair of pliers trying to get little Barry Kraval to yank a few of his bicuspids. They were going to split the . proceeds. By the way, Josie wants a wig to wear to school.

Tears are welling in Serling's eyes.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Oh, I have to drive twelve blocks all the way over to Wagner so Brian can practice riding his bike cause he's afraid to fall in front of his friends and he won't let anyone see him riding a bike with training wheels.

Serling is almost overcome.

SERLING

I got to go.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Talk to me, Nat.

SERLING

Gotta go. I'll call you later.

MEREDITH
(V.O., filtered)
Nat...

He hangs up, looks at the bottle, dashes out the door.

EXT. THE ALAMO, DAY

A little mud building trying to hold it's own in the city of San Antonio. The tour guide shows the tourists the mark where Colonel Travis drew a line in the dirt.

TOUR GUIDE
The Alamo reminds us that we
Americans have always had heroes.
In moments of crisis, there are
those among us who step forward
and do the right thing, the brave
thing, without regard for their
own lives...

Serling listens to as much as he can. Then he leaves -- in a hurry.

INT. HOTEL ROOM, DUSK

The sun sets on the bottle -- half-empty now.

EXT. CANALS, NIGHT

Serling is drunk. He doesn't stagger, but he walks like in a dream. Through the tourists, the lovers, past the restaurants, the boats. It all swirls around him. He leans against a tree slides down the trunk -- to vomit into the water. Two kids stare at him, ice cream cones in hand.

GIRL
You sick, Mister?

BOY
He's not sick. He's drunk. Drunk
as a skunk.

GIRL
Do skunks get drunk? How?

Serling looks at them.

SERLING
I got kids.

The Mother comes to get them. Serling looks at her.

SERLING

I got kids.

It's a plea for something. Understanding. Forgiveness.

MOTHER

A lot of good you're doing them
right now.

And stomps off with the little ones in tow.

SERLING

You're right. She's right.

And he starts to sob. Passersby try to ignore him.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

Serling, in uniform, drives onto the Post.

INT. PHARMACY, DAY

SP/5 Ilario deals pills at the Pharmacy window.

ILARIO

Here's your fungicide, but I'm
telling you, in the morning when
you shower, piss on your feet.
Urine will kill that athlete's
foot in no time. Next. Here's
your Hismanal, Sergeant, but you
want to get rid of the allergies --
bee pollen pills -- and no coffee
or chocolate. Caffeine makes
allergies worse.

SERGEANT

I give up coffee they might as
well discharge me now.

Ilario has a boyish face hidden behind Ray Charles style
horn rimmed shades. A nervous man. Serling gets at the end
of the line. A couple of men in line look at him -- and
leave. Serling frowns at them. Ilario doesn't look at faces,
just nametags, so when he sees Serling's he looks up from
his clipboard to Serling in shock. He knows the name.
Ilario, covers.

ILARIO

Can I help you, Colonel?

SERLING
Some aspirin, please.

ILARIO
Sure, here you go.

The aspirin are handy.

SERLING
What? No homeopathic alternative?

ILARIO
So you know about alternative
medicines, sir?

SERLING
My sister is a believer. Me, I
believe in aspirin.

ILARIO
So do I. Take one every day.

SERLING
Altameyer called you?

Ilario is taken aback only a bit.

ILARIO
No. Monfriez. Altameyer called
Monfriez. He called me.

SERLING
That's nice, you three still stay
in contact. Friends?

ILARIO
Not exactly. What do you call
people who shared something like
we did?

SERLING
Heroes.

ILARIO
Survivors, more like it. So where
do you want to do this?

SERLING
Anywhere you feel comfortable.

ILARIO
You smoke?

SERLING

Not anymore.

Ilario grabs his cigarettes, turns to a SP/4.

ILARIO

Rowtero, take over. Sick Call's done. I'm going to feed my cancer genes.

He leads Serling out.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

The Post swimming pool. Kids and their mothers. A lot of noise, a lot of splashing.

ILARIO

You think this is how the Nazis got started? Banning smoking?

SERLING

I doubt it.

ILARIO

A bit totalitarian though. So what do you need to know?

SERLING

How long were you with Captain Walden?

ILARIO

Over four years, four years and a couple of months. Stateside at Fort Hood, can't seem to get out of Texas, then over in Saudi.

SERLING

That's a long time. Did you know her well?

ILARIO

As well as you get to know any officer, I guess.

SERLING

What was she like?

ILARIO

She was okay. Wasn't on my ass too much. What's this got to do with the Medal?

SERLING

Nothing, just curious.

Ilario chain smokes, lighting one with another, sucking them down. He stares at Serling a moment.

ILARIO

Look, you don't want to do this.

SERLING

Why not?

ILARIO

It isn't all like the report. If you go ahead with what you got she'll get the Medal and everybody will be happy.

SERLING

I won't be. I want the truth.

ILARIO

Leave it be, it's better that way. Why do you want to push it?

SERLING

It's important to me. I could order you to tell the truth.

Ilario smiles.

ILARIO

You could.

SERLING

Or I could ask you as one soldier to another. One vet to another.

ILARIO

You were in Saudi? See any combat?

SERLING

Yes. Tanks.

ILARIO

You lose any men?

Serling nods. Ilario lets that go by.

ILARIO

Have you noticed ... I have since I came back, that there's this ... closeness with other combat vets. This ... thing.

SERLING

My Sergeant Major said it's because we've all faced the tiger. We've all been tested. We know our limits.

ILARIO

Yeah? I don't buy into this "bond of war" shit, but we all know something no one else knows. Can't explain it to a civilian, not even another soldier if he hasn't been under fire. It's a secret. We never share it.

SERLING

So you can tell me the truth.

ILARIO

I guess so. You won't like it. Captain Walden wasn't all that glorious a hero.

SERLING

For instance...

ILARIO

The dust storm for instance. We were forced down by a dust storm...

SERLING

I know.

INT. HUEY

The Huey is surrounded by a whirling, dark wall of dust and sand.

WALDEN

I think we should go back. This sand isn't doing the aircraft any good. If it continues up north we'll never see a damned thing.

Another Walden, a tentative, even scared Walden.

RADY

I say we wait until this blows over, they always do, and try a few more clicks up river before we go back.

ILARIO

Yeah, Cap, let's try a little more.

MONFRIEZ

I'm for going ahead. The ship can take it.

Walden looks at Altameyer.

ALTAMEYER

I'm just a passenger.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

SERLING

So she was reluctant.

ILARIO

Well, she wasn't all fired up about going ahead. Then when we spotted Captain Fowler's Blackhawk... I knew those people, every one of them. Fowler, Tierney, Terry Gunther.

He is down. Ilario has big highs and deep lows. This is the bottom of the canyon for him.

INT. HUEY, DAY

The Huey rounds the bend of the river. Ilario sees the crashed Blackhawk.

ILARIO

There they are!

And the tank fires. The Huey crew takes in the scenario.

MONFRIEZ

Fuck!

ALTAMEYER

Get me around so I can fire!

Walden turns the chopper. Altameyer stands on the skids, hangs from his lifeline and fires. The bullets have no effect on the steel tank. The tank machine gunner lets loose! Bullets pock the Huey. Walden banks.

ALTAMEYER

Turn around! Turn around! Let me have another shot at it!

WALDEN

I'm going for altitude! Call Search and Rescue.

ILARIO

Fowler will be meat by the time Search and Rescue get here!

WALDEN

We can't do anything against a tank!

RADY

Call in an air strike!

MONFRIEZ

Still take too long!

WALDEN

I'm going for altitude!

RADY

Wait one! Wait one! We got two bombs on board! The spare fuel pods! Monfriez, unstrap one! Altameyer, get out the flare gun!

WALDEN

It won't work!

MONFRIEZ

Let's try it!

He starts unstrapping the fuel pod.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

SERLING

So it was Rady's idea to use the fuel pods.

ILARIO

Yeah. I helped. Captain Walden turned the chopper around when the first one missed...

INT. HUEY, DAY

The Huey banks above the tank. The first fuel tank has missed. Walden circles the Huey away from the tank.

WALDEN

That's it, I'm going for altitude!
I'm getting us out of here!

MONFRIEZ

No! One more! I can get it this
time! One more!

The tank fires again. The Blackhawk takes a hit.

ILARIO

Please, Captain! Please!

Walden turns the chopper.

WALDEN

Alright! One more! Then we're
calling Search and Rescue!

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

MARIO

Not so Rambo, huh? Rambette,
whichever. Doesn't make as good a
story. I gotta take a piss.

He jumps up suddenly and enters the building. Serling watches him go, with some suspicion. But then he is distracted by a little boy holding up his soggy trunks with both hands.

BOY

Mister Colonel, tie me?

Serling gathers the limp, loose ties.

SERLING

Here's a nice double knot.

BOY

Okay, like on my shoes. I have
trouble with knots.

SERLING

So do I. There you go.

The kid runs off a few paces, stops, comes back.

BOY

Thank-you-very-much.

And off he goes, dodging the returning Ilario, who sits down, filled with nervous energy. He lights up another cigarette, looks out at the pool.

ILARIO

Know why I like to come here? No. Not to rubberneck the women in bikinis. The kids. I love watching kids. There's something about them. They do the damndest things, never think about the consequences. Talk about brave.

SERLING

I don't think oblivious risk-taking is necessarily brave.

ILARIO

But can you imagine, going through life without thinking about the consequences? It's not the doing that gets you -- it's the consequences. Deep, huh?

Ilario has suddenly realized he is being a motormouth.

SERLING

What happened during the night?

ILARIO

The night. Oh, the night. That night. We argued mainly. Captain Walden wanted to surrender at first light. Because of Rady, she said, being wounded so bad. Her responsibility was to get him medical care, she said.

SERLING

And after Rady died?

ILARIO

She still thought surrender was a good idea.

INT. HUEY, DAWN

The sun is coming up.

ALTAMEYER

I'm not giving up until I'm out of ammo.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

ILARIO
Macho shit like that. He's a Ranger
now.

SERLING
How about Monfriez?

ILARIO
He wanted to fight.

SERLING
And you?

ILARIO
I ... didn't know. I was ...
scared. Really scared. You know.

SERLING
I know.

ILARIO
Do you?

SERLING
Yes, I do.

ILARIO
Sure.

He doesn't believe it though.

SERLING
What happened during the evacuation?

ILARIO
Well, there we were, right? On
the left a big ass rock and on the
right an extremely hard place and
the two John Waynes stroking away
until their wad was shot and me
and the Captain trying to ...
maintain...

INT. HUEY, DAWN

The Search and Rescue team whip past the Huey. Captain Walden
is in the door of the Huey, being held back by Ilario and
Monfriez while Altameyer fires away.

MONFRIEZ
Wait for the Cobras!

But Walden breaks free and dashes toward Teegarden's landing Huey. And is shot down. She falls. Ilario and Monfriez both dash out to bring her back. Monfriez takes a bullet.

ILARIO

Jesus H. Christ, Captain! Wait
for the Cobras!

The Cobras rake the enemy. Altameyer runs out of ammo, goes to help Ilario with Walden.

MONFRIEZ

Let's go!

All of sudden Walden begins to fight Ilario and Altameyer.

WALDEN

I'm not leaving my chopper! It's
not safe! Not safe!

She fights them, completely hysterical. Monfriez puts a tourniquet on his own leg. Walden grabs the M-16.

WALDEN

I'm not leaving ray chopper! Go!
Go!

She aims the M-16 at them. They back away.

WALDEN

Go on!

She fires at the ground in front of them. They back away more. The enemy gunfire peppers the Huey. Walden is cut down. The three men come back to Walden. She is dead.

MONFRIEZ

Let's get out of here.

They turn and hustle to the rescue choppers.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

SERLING

So, why did you lie to Major
Teegarden?

ILARIO

We felt bad for her. We were trying
to be ... nice. I... I... I didn't
want her folks to know she ...
cracked.

(MORE)

ILARIO (CONT'D)

Her folks are nice people, live in
Abilene. They used to come over
to Hood, watch her kid when we
went out on exercises...

Ilario is getting into an area he didn't want to go. He
pulls himself out.

ILARIO

That's the way it went down,
Colonel. So just forget the Medal,
or leave it as it is. I don't
care. I gotta get back.

He gets up and walks away. Serling is left on the bench,
staring at Ilario's retreating back. Ilario glances over
his shoulder a few times, then goes inside the Medical
building. Serling, puzzled, concerned, turns to watch a
tiny girl, only three or four, cannonball off the high board.

EXT. ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, DAY

The Arch sweeps across the sky above St. Louis and the
Mississippi. Serling drives his rental car across the bridge
to Granite City, Illinois.

EXT. GRANITE CITY, DAY

Serling parks across the street from a gun store -- Kane and
Greene Guns. Serling in civvies, walks inside.

INT. GUN SHOP, DAY

Del Monfriez, fortyish, wearing a pistol on his belt, like
all the other salesmen, is at the counter with a customer.

CUSTOMER

How late you open?

MONFRIEZ

'Til nine. Like they say at the
girls school -- lights out at nine,
candles out at ten.

The customer has picked the pistol off the counter and aims
it at the wall, holding it sideways.

MONFRIEZ

Where'd you learn to hold a pistol, "Boys in the Hood"? Seen too many of them black gangsta flicks. Always holding it like that, sideways, no wonder they never hit nothing, always full auto, of course, you hold a pistol like that, you ain't gonna hit nothing. That's why they need them splatter guns, MAC-10's and shit. That's where the sights are, on top. No wonder they have so many innocent drivebys, can't hit nothing, yanking the weapon like they were pulling their pud.

He takes the pistol back and demonstrates an exaggerated gangsta grip. He gives it back to the customer, turns to Serling.

MONFRIEZ

Help you, mister?

SERLING

Colonel Nat Serling, you've already heard about me.

Monfriez gives Serling a good looking over.

MONFRIEZ

Yeah. Let's go out back. Browder, take over here.

Monfriez leads Serling through the store, into the back, past the inventory to a small indoor range.

INT. INDOOR RANGE

MONFRIEZ

Hey, Colonel, you heard about the Polish proctologist, uses two fingers so he can get a second opinion.

He waits for the laugh, sees he's not going to get it, sits down at the bench where a pistol and a box of ammo lay.

MONFRIEZ

I know why you're here. I'm telling you straight out -- I made my statement. It's in writing.

(MORE)

MONFRIEZ (CONT'D)

I don't gotta say diddly more. I
don't work for Uncle Sam anymore.
I got this store, half of it anyway.
You know how they make Mexican
shishkabob? They shoot an arrow
into a garbage can.

He shoots at the target, looks at the results, fiddles with
the gunsights.

SERLING

Why'd you leave the service after
fourteen years? Why not pull the
full twenty?

MONFRIEZ

If you can ask the question you
ain't been in it long enough to
understand. Know the definition
of a Jewish nympho? She does it
once a month whether she wants to
or not.

He shoots again, adjusts sights again.

SERLING

I'd like you to tell me what
happened, what you actually saw.

MONFRIEZ

Like I said, you got it on paper.
I got nothing to add.

SERLING

Can I ask a few questions?

NONFRIEZ

Go ahead, but remember what the
bride said on her wedding night,
"Don't ask me no questions I won't
tell you no lies." Hear about the
Polack who bought a rowing machine?
He woulda drowned if the lake hadn't
been frozen over.

SERLING

How long were you Captain Walden's
Crew Chief?

MONFRIEZ

Just a few weeks.

(MORE)

MONFRIEZ (CONT'D)

When she got to Saudi her regular
Crew Chief got the chicken pox
second day over. Kept a clean
ship though. I came from the 232nd.
Me and Walden didn't hit it off.
I'll be honest.

SERLING

Why not?

MONFRIEZ

There's this kind of woman, you
don't just meet them in the Army.
They want a man's job, they figure
the way to be is tougher than a
man. I don't fault 'em none.
It's a tough row to hoe, but they
end up being one thing...

He looks to Serling to finish.

MONFRIEZ

...a bitch. You know, like that
Margaret Thatcher, full tilt flaming
bitch.

He shoots. Then as an afterthought, a punctuation, again.

SERLING

Was she a good officer?

MONFRIEZ

She was alright. Hey, she could
fly. That was her job. But, hell
you can train a ten year old to
fly a UH1, that don't make them
Norman Fucking Schwartzkopf. She
got on my ass, but I put her right.
Here try it.

He hands the gun to Serling, who aims. BAM! BAM! BAM!
BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! Serling empties the
magazine at the target.

MONFRIEZ

Nice shot group. Yeah, after I
sighted it in. You done with your
questions?

SERLING

No.

MONFRIEZ

Yes, you are. You're done now.

He walks out, carrying the pistol. Serling follows.

INT. GUN SHOP

SERLING

Why did you make up that statement?

MONFRIEZ

The other two weepy ass wipes talked me into it. Look, she gets the Medal. Fine. Fine by me. Lotta good it's gonna do her. Shit, maybe I can sell my story to People magazine. Maybe a TV movie. Otherwise this whole thing ain't worth the hole in a chicken's ass to me. Goodbye. Browder, call Dr. Witkin, tell him his pistol's sighted in.

Serling doesn't leave.

MONFRIEZ

Colonel, you know what to do if you get a hang fire? When you pull the trigger and the round doesn't go off?

SERLING

Wait, with your weapon pointed in a safe direction.

MONFRIEZ

You know why? Sometimes the primer just cooks. Could be a slow burner. It could still go off. And if you open your weapon to take the round out ... ? It might blow up in your face. Leave this round in the chamber, Colonel. Leave it be.

Serling looks at him.

SERLING

You just threatened me, didn't you, Monfriez?

(MORE)

SERLING (CONT'D)

I work at the Pentagon so I'm kind of slow on the uptake, but I do recognize a threat when I hear it.. Let me respond this way.

He leans over the counter into Monfriez' face.

SERLING

I may be an officer and, therefore, a gentleman by proclamation, but before I joined up I was a Chicago street kid. I fought my way to school everyday and fought my way back home every night. I lived in a battle zone and firefights were just background noise.

Monfriez turns away. Serling yanks him back -- hard!

SERLING

So, now that I'm in civilian clothes and declaring myself off duty I have no compunction whatsoever to taking you outside and tearing you a new asshole.

Serling is suddenly very scary. Monfriez hand slides toward his gun. Serling's hand shoots out and grabs Monfriez' wrist.

SERLING And if you think that gun is going to help you -- don't. Because I'll break your fucking arm before you clear the holster. You'll be hearing from me, Mister.

And he turns and leaves. Monfriez trembles with rage.

EXT. PAY PHONE, DAY

Serling is at the pay phone.

SERLING

Banachek, Serling here. The General in?

(beat)

When's he expected back?

(beat)

I'll call him tomorrow, then. In the meantime, I'm going to visit Walden's family.

(beat)

I don't know. I'm at loose ends here.

(MORE)

SERLING (CONT'D)

Maybe they can help me tie some
up.

(beat)

Thanks. Talk to you tomorrow.

INT. LIVING ROOM, DAY

Outside a little girl, ten or so, plays in the yard with some friends. They are making chalk outlines of their shadows. Serling, in uniform, watches through the picture window. GERALDINE and JOEL WALDEN sit with him in the living room, all watching the girl.

GERALDINE

Sometimes she wakes up in the middle of the night and asks if her mama's come home yet. Otherwise.... I read somewhere that if a child doesn't see a person die or dead, like in a casket, that the person isn't really dead for them. That would be nice, wouldn't it?

SERLING

I don't know how to ask this properly, but did your daughter have a ... background of... heroics?

GERALDINE

No. No. Just an ordinary girl.
Just our Karen.

JOEL

A little more stubborn than most.

SERLING

I'm just trying to ... understand her.

GERALDINE

She wasn't a remarkable girl... woman. To us she was, of course, but by most standards, I guess -- nothing much remarkable about her.

SERLING

Well, she was a female helicopter pilot. That's still rare enough to be remarkable.

JOEL

That's my fault. We took her to the fair, when she was ... eleven.

GERALDINE

Twelve. Seventh grade.

JOEL

There was a helicopter there, a small one, with the bubble up front, we called it a whirlybird. The fella, the pilot, was selling rides. I bought Karen a ticket. It was a short ride, but when she came down... I don't think she ever came down, actually. After that she was ... up there.

GERALDINE

She went back every day for the rest of the Fair. Used up all her 4-H savings.

JOEL

She didn't say much after the fair, not a peep. Didn't go collecting models of helicopters or go to air shows or nothing.

GERALDINE

Just shows up at the dinner table one day, just before graduation. She's joined the Army, she's going to fly helicopters. I was pushing her to be a nurse. She was always so independent.

JOEL

Got that from her mother. Stubborn, too.

GERALDINE

She was so proud when she got her wings. We went to the graduation.

The little girl, ANNE MARIE, comes in. She looks like her mother.

ANNE MARIE

Gramma, can I make some Kool-Aid?

She looks at Serling, his uniform. It is a hard look for a little girl. Serling is uncomfortable.

GERALDINE

Sure, Anne Marie. You know where
it is.

The girl runs off, with another hard glance at Serling before
she is gone.

GERALDINE

Sorry, but the young man who came
to tell us about Karen was dressed
just like you. She misses her
mama.

SERLING

I understand. I have kids of my
own.

JOEL

Her father is in Michigan. He and
Karen divorced after only a couple
of years. He wanted Karen to quit
the Army. My thinking was he never
got over Karen not taking his last
name. We have custody.

GERALDINE

He didn't even fight it. Not that
I wanted him to but... guess he
has a new family... Anne Marie is
our saving grace. You have
children, you know. They are what
we live for. What we do it all
for. Treasure them while they're
here, Colonel. While you can.

There's not much to say after that. They are all quiet.
Children's laughter filters in from outside.

JOEL

God, how I love that sound.

He smiles. So does Nat.

EXT. WALDEN HOUSE, DAY

The Waldens escort Nat to his car. He carries a foilwrapped
package. Serling opens the car door, takes out his keys.

JOEL

If she gets this medal will we
meet the President?

SERLING

Probably.

JOEL

I've got something to say to him.

GERALDINE

Joel ...

JOEL

I know that Kuwait thing wasn't his cross to bear. I know that. But I want him to know something. If he gets ready to send our kids off to fight he better have tried everything he could to avoid it first. I'm talking negotiating like it was his own life -- or his kid's. It seemed after Vietnam, for a while there, we thought twice before sending our kids in harms way. Lately, though, it's more like every time some half-assed politician starts dipping in the opinion polls he invades some pisspot country. And American kids die. If he's going to do that -- it damned sure better be worth it. Damned sure.

He is surprised at his own passion. He calms down.

JOEL

(Softly)

That's what I want to tell him.

Serling shakes the man's hand.

SERLING

I hope you do.

He gets in the car and drives away.

INT. HOTEL ROOM, NIGHT

The usual Holiday Inn motif. Serling sits in front of the coffee table. On it a half-eaten Rice Krispie treat and crumpled foil. And a bottle of whiskey. He stares at it. Then he dials the phone.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Hello, Serling residence, chaos is our middle name.

SERLING

Cute.

MEREDITH

(V.O. filtered)

Nat. It's raining. Been raining all day. The Gomez' kids have been here all day. All day. Ten kids. At full volume. How are you, Nat?

SERLING

Fine. Fine. I guess.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

You guess...

There is moment of silence.

SERLING

...I have a bottle of George Dickel in front of me. I don't want to drink any of it. But...

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Well...

(beat)

That's a step in the right direction. That you called.

SERLING

I guess so. That doesn't help me not drink it.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

You could toss it out the window.

SERLING

I'm not sure these windows open.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

You know what I mean.

SERLING

Yeah. But I'd go buy another one.
Or I'd go to the bar.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Then the secret's not in the bottle,
but why you need it. Tell me that
one.

Now the pause is on Serling's side.

SERLING

I can't.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Why not?

SERLING

I don't know. Cause I'm not sure
what it is yet?

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Bullshit. Tell me.

SERLING

Guess what I'm eating.

You can hear her sign, two thousand miles away.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

What?

SERLING

Rice Krispie treats.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Really? We made some today, the
kids and I. Lasted ten seconds.
Synchronicity.

SERLING

A nice old couple gave them to me.
I'd like us to be a nice old couple.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

So would I.

(MORE)

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

It's a pledge of love on both sides
and all the emotion inherent in
that. But you know drinking from
that bottle won't help us in that
direction.

SERLING

I suppose not.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Does that help?

SERLING

A lot. Thanks Mer'.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Any time.

SERLING

I gotta go now.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

Will I see you soon?

SERLING

Hope so. Gotta go.

He has to hang up or he'll cry.

SERLING

'Bye.

MEREDITH

(V.O., filtered)

'Bye.

There's fifteen years of love and affection behind those
goodbyes. Serling hangs up. He takes the bottle over to
the bathroom, opens it and pours it down the toilet. The
empty bottle goes into the waste basket. He goes back to
the room, looks around. Lonely. Cold. It's going to be
long night.

EXT. DESERT, NIGHT

Flame! Fire! Tanks blaze on the sand. Tank guns fire!
Serling sits in the turret seat of his tank, half-in, halfout.
He looks down into the tank. Patella is in gunner's position
at Serling's feet. He looks up at Serling.

PATELLA

I need a target, sir.

The tank rocks. Something has hit it.

PATELLA

We're taking fire, sir!

Serling looks out. A flaming round passes by his head in slow motion. Another glances off the front of his tank.

PATELLA

Sir! We're taking fire!

Serling looks down inside again. The Assistant Gunner is BOYLAN, the flaming man of Serling's nightmares. Boylan, on fire, calmly loads a new round into the tank gun.

BOYLAN

Round up!

Serling watches in horror as Boylan taps Patella on the shoulder. And the flame leaps from Boylan to Patella. Both men are on fire, but ignore it.

PATELLA

Sir!?

Patella reaches up to touch Serling's leg with a flaming hand. The fire attaches itself to Serling and works its way up his body. In the flickering flames Serling's face is revealed. A frightened man. Stark, naked fear.

SERLING

Fire! For God's sake! Fire!

PATELLA

On the way!

And he pushes a button. The tank rocks as the gun fires!

INT. HOTEL ROOM, NIGHT

Serling wakes from his nightmare, soaked with sweat, gasping for breath.

INT. AIRPORT, MORNING

Serling had a rough night. He is at a phone in the airport.

SERLING

Well, General, I've got one eyewitness who recites the recommendation like he was reading it to the rest of the class. She's a hero. I've got another that says it's all a lie, she was a coward or incompetent or both. And the last says no comment, she was a bitch on wheels. But they all have this in common. They want me to stop.

GEN. HERSHBERG

(V.O., filtered)

And what are you going to do, Nat?

SERLING

Carry on, sir, with your permission.

GEN. HERSHBERG

(V.O., filtered)

By all means, carry on, Nat. I've got to go. Banachek has some message for you.

SERLING

Thank you, sir.

BANACHEK

(V.O., filtered)

Nat. I've got a call here from a Sergeant Altameyer, Fort Benning. Says he need to talk. Says he left something out.

SERLING

Then I guess I'm on my way to Benning. Talk to you later, Colonel.

BANACHEK

(V.O., filtered)

You, too, Nat.

Serling hangs up, frowning.

EXT. OBSTACLE COURSE, NIGHT

The Rangers are going through the obstacle course, a big muddy field with barbed wire constructions, culverts, tunnels and anything else that can make going difficult.

Then there are the explosions tossing up mud and the gunfire from an M-16 wielding cadre. The most unpleasant one hundred yards you'll ever traverse in your life. The students scramble through it in teams. One team leader makes it. Or thinks so. Altameyer gets in the team leader's face.

ALTAMEYER

What the fuck are you doing,
soldier!? Where are your men?

The team leader turns to show his men. But Altameyer points to the course. One man hopelessly tangled up in the barbed wire, left behind.

ALTAMEYER

You don't leave a man behind!
Look at me when I'm talking to
you, soldier! You never leave a
man behind! Never! You're
brothers! He depends on you! You
depend on him!

He goes over the top, starts pushing the soldier around. The C.O. intervenes. Altameyer is dressed down, sent away. And Serling steps into his path.

SERLING

You're looking for me, Sergeant?

Altameyer is surprised.

ALTAMEYER

Yeah, yes, sir. Uh, how about we
go for a ride?

SERLING

I'd rather we talk someplace quiet.

ALTAMEYER

I'm doing the talking. You want
to hear it, sir, you'll have to be
in my car.

Serling hesitates, then follows Altameyer to his car. They get into the Saleen Mustang. Altameyer drives off the Post.

INT. MUSTANG

ALTAMEYER

Might lose my gig with the Rangers.
C.O.'s pissed at me. Probably
send me to the regular Infantry.

(MORE)

ALTAMEYER (CONT'D)

That's okay. Let him. Infantry man. It's not a career, it's a shitty job. When you join up do they tell you in the job description that you're supposed to kill people? I mean, you'd think that's a given, but...

He takes a bottle of liquor from under the passenger seat uncaps it, takes a big swig.

ALTAMEYER

Don't give me any shit about drinking and driving, sir. I'm not in the mood. Have some.

He offers the bottle to Serling.

SERLING

No, thanks, I'm trying to quit.

ALTAMEYER

Me. Too, after this bottle.

He laughs.

SERLING

You have something to tell me?

ALTAMEYER

Roger that, sir, 'deed I do, sir. Soon as I figure out what it is I will relay that information. You ever kill anyone, sir?

SERLING

Yes.

ALTAMEYER

You know, you can talk about killing somebody. Wolf talk, you know. "I'll kill you motherfucker, I'll waste your ugly ass." We all say it. But killing somebody... it's a hard thing to do. Easy to pull the trigger. Hard to live with. Know what I mean?

SERLING

I know exactly.

He empties the bottle, tosses it out the window.

ALTAMEYER

I killed people that day. That night. Out in the desert. I don't remember much about them. Little figures falling over. I saw a couple of faces, but none stayed. A dude with a mustache, I can remember him if I try. But Captain Walden's face. Her face... she's looking at me whenever I close my eyes. Nothing gets rid of her. Dope, booze ... praying. Even tried that. Nothing works.

SERLING

Are you telling me you...

ALTAMEYER

I'm telling you shit. Just shut the fuck up and listen... sir.

He laughs, but it doesn't work. This is a tortured man.

ALTAMEYER

It's the grey areas that get you. You know, right or wrong, black and white... Who'd ever think killing would be a grey area. It's wrong to kill someone. That's one of the black and whites, one of the Ten Commandments. Then you get in the Army. You kill people. It's part of the job, they say. You kill someone, the Army says it's okay -- then it's okay. Maybe that makes it okay for them, but it don't make it okay for you. Know what I mean?

SERLING

I think so.

Altameyer looks at him, desperate for help.

ALTAMEYER

Tell me, sir, tell me.

SERLING

It's a struggle every day, finding out what's right or wrong. Most people don't even want to wade into those waters. That's why we have religion, Codes of Conduct, to sort it out for us.

ALTAMEYER

But they don't help a bit when it cuts to the bone, do they?

SERLING

Well... they... No. What does this have to do with Captain Walden?

ALTAMEYER

Everything. Everything.

He reaches under his seat, pulls out a .45, aims it at Serling! Serling stiffens. There is nowhere to go. He looks. They are speeding down a rural road. A train runs parallel to them. Altameyer punches it, passing the train.

ALTAMEYER

I always liked trains. Since I was a kid. They're big, black, strong, tough. Iron. If I ever boxed pro, I was going to call myself Howard "Night Train" Altameyer. What do you think, Colonel, don't that have a nice ring to it? "Night Train".

He is ahead of the train, makes a turn, comes up to the tracks, stops on the tracks. Serling can see the train coming, light on. Serling's hand goes to the door handle. Altameyer pokes the gun into Serling's chest.

SERLING

Altameyer.

ALTAMEYER

Shut up! Sir...

The train sounds the whistle, rushing at them.

ALTAMEYER

I do love trains. Ain't that whistle pretty? Listen to it.

It sounds again. The train is closer.

ALTAMEYER

But the train off track ain't worth shit. It's just ... scrap iron.

He pulls the gun away. The train is roaring at them.

ALTAMEYER

I lost my tracks, sir. There in that desert. Get out.

SERLING

Altameyer...

ALTAMEYER

GET OUT!

Serling gets out. Altameyer turns the car, faces the oncoming train. Serling grabs Altameyer's door. Altameyer floors it. The Saleen Mustang kicks in the turbo. Serling is torn loose. The Saleen rushes at the train. The whistle sounds. Then they meet. A horrendous crash! The Saleen disintegrates! Explodes! Serling has to run to get out of the way of the flying wreckage.

The train slows as best it can with a loud screeching and hiss. Serling can only stare sadly at the mess left of Altameyer and his car.

INT. MP STATION, NIGHT

Serling, very tired, is on the phone in the MP headquarters, a police station with fatigues.

SERLING

Well, sir, I'd like you to call the Fort San Houston Provost Marshall and have them detain Specialist Ilario.

(beat)

Substance abuse, trafficking.

(beat)

I don't know if they'll stick. I don't care. I just want them to hold him.

(beat)

I think there's grounds, yes, sir.

(beat)

Just hold him. I'm on my way.

(beat)

Thank you, sir. I'll call you from Texas. Sorry for the late hour.

He hangs up, turns to an MP.

SERLING

I need a ride to my car.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

Serling drives onto the Post.

INT. BARRACKS, DAY

Serling stands in front of a room where two MP's are stationed. A First Lieutenant briefs him.

LIEUTENANT

We found a whole drugstore in his foot locker, plus drug paraphernalia, needles and such in every little cubby hole. Like a packrat with a Jones.

SERLING

But no Ilario.

LIEUTENANT

Not hide nor hair. But we're on the lookout. So are the San Antonio Police.

Serling nods.

He goes out.

SERLING

How long are those souvenir shops open at the Alamo? I have to get some T-shirts for my kids. I ... uh forgot last time I was here. I'll be back at say, 1800 hours. Your office?

LIEUTENANT

Fine. See you then, Colonel. Maybe we'll have something by then.

SERLING

Let's hope so.

EXT. FORT SAM HOUSTON, DAY

Serling leaves the Post, in the heart of urban San Antonio. A car just outside the gate pulls in behind Serling. It follows him into downtown. It is Ilario.

EXT. PARKING GARAGE

Serling parks in a public parking structure. Ilario parks on the street. He goes to a pay phone, dials, talks. Serling comes out of the garage. Ilario hangs up, follows.

EXT. THE ALAMO, DAY

Serling stands in front of the Alamo again, bag of T-shirts in hand. He looks down. At his feet is a brass plaque. The line that Colonel Travis drew in the sand.

ILARIO (O.S.)

The line between the heroes and
the cowards.

Serling turns to look at Ilario.

ILARIO

A pretty thin line. I wonder how
many "heroes" didn't cross it
because they were more afraid of
being called a coward than they
were scared of dying.

SERLING

I was just thinking the same thing.

ILARIO

Wanna talk?

Serling nods.

ILARIO

This way.

Ilario leads him away.

ILARIO

You turned me in. How'd you know?

SERLING

The sad fact is, if you command in
today's Army you have to keep an
eye out for all kinds of substance
abuse. What are you using?
Morphine?

ILARIO

Anything. Anything to kill the
pain.

He is taking Serling to the river. They find a seat on a riverfront bench. This is the San Antonio River walk, where the river cuts through the center of downtown, a walkway on each side, trees over hanging the water -- stores, restaurants, hotels lining the walk. Dark, secluded, peaceful.

ILARIO

I want to tell you what happened
to Captain Walden.

SERLING

Let me make a phone call. Some
people are expecting me at eighteen
hundred hours.

ILARIO

No phone call. I do this now or
not at all. You just might call
the MP's on my ass.

SERLING

Okay, talk.

ILARIO

What time is it?

Serling looks at his watch.

EXT. BASE CAMP, SAUDI ARABIA, DAY

Walden looks at her watch, then the sky. There is desert as
far as you can see, a few Army tanks, MP's, a few trucks. A
little olive drab oasis.

WALDEN

I'm going to check with Teegarden
again.

Rady, Monfriez, Ilario and Altameyer play cards on the deck
of the Huey. Rady waits for Walden to be out of earshot.

RADY

Leave it alone, will you? It's
not our mission. She's going to
put us in a world of hurt with
this gung-ho shit.

MONFRIEZ

You're in a world of hurt unless
you start paying attention to your
cards. Captain W's okay. Takes
care of her ship.

ILARIO

And her crew.

MONFRIEZ

And her crew. Our job is to help
people, remember.

RADY

They call and say Fowler needs a Medevac, I'm there. It's not our mission to wander around No Man's Land looking for trouble. Raise.

ALTAMEYER

You got trouble right here. Raise you, five.

ILARIO

If it was you out there, you'd want every aircraft in the hemisphere out looking. Pass.

Walden comes back.

WALDEN

We're on. Let's get in the air. Altameyer, Major Teegarden wants to see you.

Altameyer looks worried. Rady tosses down his cards, with a lot more force than needed.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

Walden's Huey takes off. Teegarden watches until the dust obliterates his view.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

The sand swirls around the parked Huey. Inside the helicopter the crew wait it out.

RADY

I say we go back. This beer can with a rotor can't take much more of this sandblasting.

MONFRIEZ

Maybe this isn't one of your precious Blackhawks, but she'll do the job. When the last Blackhawk is towed to the junkyard, the crew will fly home in a Huey.

WALDEN

We'll wait for it to blow over, then try a few more clicks up the river.

RADY

But all this sand in the intakes...

WALDEN

Monfriez?

MONFRIEZ

She's fine, Captain. It ain't healthy, but it ain't going to kill her.

RADY

What about the rotor blades?

WALDEN

Rady, shut up.

RADY

You don't have to prove you've got more balls than a man to make Major.

WALDEN

Rady, goddamnit.

RADY

I'm asking for a transfer out soon as we get back.

WALDEN

What, Christmas comes early this year? Looks like it's clearing. Let's get. I've got sand in places I didn't know I had places.

They crank up.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

They fly.

RADY

What's that? The main rotor sounds funny.

WALDEN

Now you're the Crew chief, Rady? The Crew Chief says we're air worthy. The Crew Chief is the final word on that. Now I told you to shut up.

(MORE)

WALDEN (CONT'D)

If you don't keep your conversation limited to the requirements of keeping this craft in the air I will haul your ass up for a Court Martial and you won't need a transfer.

Ilario and Monfriez share a conspirational smile. Chalk one up for the Captain.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

The Huey flies along the river. Altameyer is watching out one door, Monfriez the other, both searching the river banks. Ilario searches over Altameyer's shoulder, talking to him.

ILARIO

Both Captain Walden and I flew with Fowler at Hood. Captain "W" was the co-pilot, I was the Medic. When Captain "W" got her bird she took me with her.

WALDEN

Ilario's the only one who can treat my sinus allergies.

ILARIO

Local bee honey.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

The Huey comes around the bend and upon the crashed Blackhawk. Men can be seen in the rubble firing weapons.

ILARIO

You see Fowler?! What are they shooting at?!

BOOM! The enemy tank fires! Ilario's question is answered. The tail of the Blackhawk is blown off!

WALDEN

Altameyer, there's your target!

She banks the chopper.

Altameyer fires. The bullets do little damage. Altameyer, adrenaline pumping, keeps firing after they pass the tank.

WALDEN

Cease fire! Cease fire! I'll try another run.

RADY

We should go for altitude! Call Air Rescue! Get the fuck outta here!

Walden banks the Huey, gets ready for another run.

WALDEN

We'll make another try. Rady get on the horn to the AWACs, give 'em our coordinates! Here you go, Altameyer.

They pass again. Altameyer fires. Ilario is scared. Holes are appearing in the Huey. He stares at one near his head, transfixed in fear. Rady is staring out his window.

RADY

That didn't do shit. You might as will piss on a rock.

WALDEN

Rady, get on the phone! Monfriez, status? L

MONFRIEZ

Stable. Nothing prime. Rady's right, Cap, we'd need a jet with a two-ton bomb to take out that tank.

WALDEN

We're not a jet, but we've got a couple of bombs. Monfriez, unstrap the spare fuel pods! Altameyer, get the flare gun.

RADY

What? What do you think are, Walden, a jet jockey? Go get a fucking Cobra! This is not our mission!

BOOM! The tank fires again!

WALDEN

Rady, just get on the phone to the AWACS. We don't stop that tank, there won't be anything left to rescue! Let me know, Monfriez.

MONFRIEZ

Ready, Cap!

Not quite, he's still fumbling with the straps. Altameyer is scrambling to load the flare gun. Ilario is braced in his seat, frozen in fear.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

WALDEN

One more time, gentlemen. I know you can do it.

RADY

We need that fuel to get back!

WALDEN

We've got more than enough to return, Rady. Get on the radio. Call in our position. That's an order. Here we go.

She banks over the tank. Monfriez drops the fuel pod. It hits. Altameyer fires the flare gun! The tank bursts into flame. Ground fire rakes the Huey. The chopper goes out of control. It whirls! Rady screams! There's blood on his window. Ilario hugs the wall. Walden tries to get control.

WALDEN

Mayday! Mayday! Dust Off Three is...

FADE OUT - FADE IN

Ilario bends over Rady, who has been hauled into the back of the chopper. He presses a flap of scalp back over the shiny skull, wipes the blood from Rady's face. Ilario is calm -- this is what he knows how to do and he takes comfort in it.

Walden is on the radio, clicking through the channels.

Altameyer blazes away with the 240 out one door. Next to him, Monfriez does the same with the M-16.

MONFRIEZ

We gotta get out of here. There's hundreds of them! We can't fight this!

ILARIO

One lung, through and through. Filling with blood, fast.

ALTAMEYER

Call for help! Call for help!

WALDEN

Radio's dead.

ALTAMEYER

The Blackhawk! They have more men! More firepower! We'll be safe there.

ILARIO

Bad scalp wound. Into the brain. Concussion at least.

MONFRIEZ

Yeah, the Blackhawk! We'll be safe there! Let's go.

WALDEN

Ilario, can we move him?

ILARIO

I wouldn't. He's barely maintaining as it is.

WALDEN

Monfriez, go to the other door! We're taking fire there.

He obeys.

ALTAMEYER

I'll lay covering fire! Get to those rocks! Then you do the same for me!

WALDEN

We're not leaving Rady.

MONFRIEZ

What?!

WALDEN

He wouldn't make it. Altameyer, conserve ammo. We might be here a while.

MONFRIEZ

We gotta get out of here!

WALDEN

We're not going anywhere.

ALTAMEYER

We can't fight. We don't have...

WALDEN

TAKE YOUR POSITIONS!

They do.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

Ilario stares out at the night, scared, every noise makes him jump. Altameyer is at one door, Monfriez the other. Walden, Beretta out, sits next to a bandaged Rady.

MONFRIEZ

You know at dawn we're dead. They'll have reinforcements. We have to get to the Blackhawk before first light.

ALTAMEYER

It's so dark you can't see your hand in front of your face. Now's the time to do it. Slip right by them.

WALDEN

I told you, Rady can't be moved.

MONFRIEZ

Rady's dead. He'll never make it. You know that, I know that.

ALTAMEYER

You don't even like him. All he did was give you grief. Now you're going to die for the prick? I say we go.

MONFRIEZ

So do I. Ilario?

ILARIO

I just want to get out of here.

MONFRIEZ

It's a majority.

WALDEN

That would be great if this was a democracy -- but it isn't. We stay with Rady.

(MORE)

WALDEN (CONT'D)

I don't like him, but he's one of mine. I wouldn't leave one of you behind. I won't leave him.

ALTAMEYER

Maybe if we surrendered the rag heads would doctor him up.

Walden looks at him, hard.

WALDEN

No surrender.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

Ilario checks Rady's IV. Ilario's hands are trembling. He glances out into the night. Walden takes one of his hands in hers, smiles. He calms down a bit.

ALTAMEYER

I hear something out there, I tell you. I can't see it, but I hear it. They're closing in.

MONFRIEZ

Of course they are. What would you do? I say we make for the Blackhawk now.

WALDEN

And I say we've heard enough of that shit. Now. Can it.

Monfriez looks at her, fingers the M-16.

ILARIO

Maybe we should surrender.

It's a mumble. The others ignore him.

MONFRIEZ

You don't have to go with us, Captain. We don't even need your permission.

That gets Altameyer and Ilario's attention.

WALDEN

Give me the M-16, Monfriez.

He looks at her. She raises the Beretta from her lap.

WALDEN

You may run, but I'm not letting
you take our firepower with you.

She takes the M-16 from Monfriez.

ALTAMEYER

Are you going to take my gun away,
too?

She looks at him.

WALDEN

If I have to.

ALTAMEYER

You just might.

ILARIO

(softly)

They might treat us okay. I can
make a white flag.

MONFRIEZ

Give it back.

She turns to face Monfriez. He has his Beretta aimed at
her. That jerks Ilario back to reality.

ILARIO

Guys...

MONFRIEZ

She's trying to get us killed.
It's us or her. Who you with,
Ilario?

ILARIO

Cap... Rady's finished.

WALDEN

That your expert opinion, Ilario?
He'll never recover. If he was
out in a field somewhere and we
came to Medevac Rady, you'd body
bag him? You'd leave him behind?

ILARIO

Yes.

It is word filled with shame, a blatant lie.

WALDEN

At least he's ashamed to say it.

She looks at Altameyer, who glares back. Then Ilario, who can't meet her eyes. Then back at Monfriez and the gun aimed at her.

Quickly she raises her pistol and fires! Monfriez fires back. Walden takes the bullet in her stomach. But her shot at Monfriez went past his shoulder. A ragged Iraqi falls on top of Monfriez, a bullet in his face.

Suddenly they are in a firefight. Altameyer and Monfriez fire into the dark. Muzzle flashes reveal the dozen enemy who have crept up on both sides of the Huey.

Ilario crouches in a fetal position next to Rady, whimpering in fear. Walden uses the M-16 and Beretta.

Then it is over. Quiet. They all stare into the night. Nothing. Then they look back at each other. Walden bleeds from the stomach. She is in pain as she jerkily grabs a magazine from the floor and reloads the M-16, then her Beretta. Monfriez is reloading his Beretta.

MONFRIEZ

We gotta out of here. They'll try again. Give me the 16, Cap.

She looks at him.

ALTAMEYER

You're wounded, ma'am. Give him the 16. We gotta go. We'll carry you.

She aims the M-16 at Altameyer.

WALDEN

Give me the 240.

ALTAMEYER

You won't shoot.

WALDEN

The mood I'm in right now, Altameyer, I'd empty a magazine into your hide, reload and do it all over again.

He looks at her, the M-16 pointed at him, then her again He hands over the 240.

WALDEN

Pistols, too.

They hand over their pistols. Ilario, roused from his paralysis, moves to her with a bandage. She points the Beretta at him. He freezes.

ILARIO
You're wounded, Cap.

WALDEN
You're with them.

MONFRIEZ
What are you going to do, keep watch on us all night? You're hurt. You're tired. You won't last 'til first light.

She doesn't answer, shifts her position, gasps from the pain that shoots through her. Monfriez moves forward. She points the Beretta at him.

ALTAMEYER
What if they attack again?

WALDEN
You'll get your weapons back.

ALTAMEYER
By the time you give 'em back it might be too late.

WALDEN
It's already too late.

MONFRIEZ
You can't stay awake. You won't last to first light.

She just stares at him, grimly determined. Ilario starts crying. For himself? For her? Hard to tell.

FADE OUT - FADE IN

Walden is heavy-eyed. Altameyer, Monfriez and Ilario watch her. Ilario is tired, scared, sick of the situation, of himself. The M-16 barrel slowly drifts down. Walden's head drops, eyes ease closed. Monfriez moves toward one of the pistols. Walden's head pops up, eyes jerk open. She points the Beretta at him. The M-16 muzzle goes up to check Altameyer's movement. The sun is rising. Light glows behind the ridgeline. Two silhouetted figures scramble over the rocky line. Altameyer sees it.

ALTAMEYER

Aw, fuck me. Here they come.

MONFRIEZ

I've got movement over here, too.

What now! Captain?

ALTAMEYER

Give me my gun for God's sake.
Christ...

WALDEN

Ilario, how's Rady?

ILARIO

Still breathing.

MONFRIEZ

What are you going to do, Captain?
Fight them all by yourself? She
frowns, weak, thinking slow.

ALTAMEYER

Give me my gun, Captain. C'mon...

MONFRIEZ

What are you going to do, Captain?

Ilario is overwhelmed, looking at Walden.

ILARIO

Cap, let me look at that wound. I
won't do anything. I promise. I
swear. Please.

She looks at him, thinking about it. She's in a bad way.

ALTAMEYER

They're getting close.

MONFRIEZ

What are you going to do, Captain?

ILARIO

Please...

He's hurting as much as she is.

WALDEN

What's that?

Everybody freezes. Choppers. That distinctive sound. They
search the skies. Gunfire!

The enemy begin their attack on the grounded Huey and Blackhawk. Everyone hits the deck. Bullets perforate the Huey's body. The rescue team arrives. The Cobras strafe! Teegarden lands his chopper.

WALDEN

Go! I'll cover for you!

Altameyer and Monfriez hit the ground, crouching, ready to run to Teegarden's chopper. Walden begins firing the 240.

Altameyer and Monfriez run. They are hit, go down, get up and continue. Walden empties the 240, grabs the M-16. Ilario is still there.

WALDEN

Go! Go!

ILARIO

I'll send back a stretcher.

Walden smiles at him.

WALDEN

Two stretchers. Now go!

He runs to Teegarden's Huey. Breakneck running, blind panic, bullets kicking up rocks and dirt all around him. He gets to it. The Crew Chief hauls him aboard.

INT. TEEGARDEN'S HUEY

Monfriez is leaning across to shout to Teegarden.

MONFRIEZ

Walden and Rady are dead!

TEEGARDEN

Both dead?!

MONFRIEZ

Dead! Let's get out of here!

Teegarden lifts the Huey away. Ilario looks at Monfriez and Altameyer. Both stare him down. He looks out the chopper door. The jets drop their bombs on the Huey. White phosphorus explodes, brilliant blossoms of fire bloom on the desert. White smoke, white fire. And death.

EXT. SAN ANTONIO RIVER, NIGHT

The street light flickers and comes on. Ilario stares at it, sitting on the bench. Serling, standing over him, looks at the ground.

ILARIO

We talked. Monfriez said she would have Court Martialed us. Altameyer agreed. Who knows? She was probably killed by enemy fire before the jets came. Who knows?

SERLING

You really believe that?

ILARIO

No.

And he weeps. Serling waits.

ILARIO

I figured out what all those veterans have in common. Fear. They've all been scared as they will ever get. They've plumbed the bottom of fear. Petrified scared. Until your heart stops, your lungs can't get air, scared sick. And nothing can ever scare you like that again. You've seen yourself at your worst and so...

SERLING

I think you're right, Ilario.

ILARIO

You do?

SERLING

I did something in Desert Storm. Everybody said I made the best decision I could at the moment. They thought that it was a tactical decision. But only I know that I made the, call out of fear. Sheer, stark naked fear for my own life. And I was wrong. Some men died. They can justify it all they want, but deep down inside I know I did what I did because I was just ... plain, simple scared. It's okay to be scared in combat.

(MORE)

SERLING (CONT'D)

It makes sense. But when it overrides your duty -- you've crossed a line. We both crossed the same line, Specialist. Let's get you some help.

He offers a hand to Ilario. Ilario takes it, selfconsciously rises. Looks at Serling's watch.

ILARIO

You have to get out of here.

SERLING

Why?

ILARIO

Altameyer was supposed to kill you.

SERLING

So? He didn't.

MONFRIEZ (O.S.)

So I'm here to finish the job.

Serling turns. Monfriez stands there. CAR-15 with a homemade silencer at his side.

MONFRIEZ

Good work, Ilario. I told you you'd find a way to keep him here.

ILARIO

You're not going to kill him. The killing is done.

MONFRIEZ

No, it isn't. I'm not going to Leavenworth just because you couldn't hold your water.

He raises the gun and points it at Serling. Ilario, steps between them.

ILARIO

I won't let you. You'll have to kill me first.

MONFRIEZ

Okay.

And he shoots. Ilario takes a slug in the chest, goes down! Serling tosses his T-shirts into Monfriez face.

Then kicks Monfriez into the river! Monfriez goes under with a big splash! Serling goes to Ilario. Ilario looks at the hole in his chest.

ILARIO

Now I know what to do here...

He is dazed.

SERLING

I'm going for help.

He starts down the walkway, looking for an open door. Monfriez climbs out of the water. He still has the gun. He fires! Bullets tear up the door Serling is knocking on. He runs to another, locked also. He pounds on it. The glass shatters in a window next to Serling. More gunfire!

Serling runs down the walkway alongside the river. Monfriez pursues -- fires. Serling is hit. A bullet tears through his side. He falters. Monfriez comes running. Serling gathers his strength and runs to a building under construction. He staggers past the "No Trespassing" tape, knocks down the crude barrier.

INT. BUILDING, NIGHT

A maze of half-completed walls, rebar poking out everywhere, half-connected plumbing, scattered stacks of pipe and cement bags. Serling runs in and ducks behind the cement bags. They erupt into grey dust as Monfriez shoots at him.

Serling tosses a piece of pipe at Monfriez and runs. They play hide and seek in the maze. Serling plays every nook and cranny, every shadow and blind spot. But Monfriez is unflagging. He pursues, gun ready, occasionally tossing off a shot to force Serling to run. Which Serling does and trips over a pile of lumber. He falls! Monfriez comes after him. Serling tries to rise, the lumber scatters beneath him and he falls again. Monfriez is above him. The gun is leveled at Serling.

MONFRIEZ

Sorry it's only a one-gun salute,
Colonel.

WHAM!

Monfriez is hit from behind! He falls. It's Ilario, wielding a length of pipe. Ilario jumps Monfriez. They fall into a tangle of flailing arms and legs. The CAR-15 erupts. Bullets fly. Serling has to duck! Ilario is thrown back. Monfriez rises. Serling tosses a bag of cement at him! It explodes!

Monfriez goes down again, dust all over him. He has dust in his eyes. But he fires the CAR-15, blindly, wildly. Serling grabs Ilario and runs. Slower now, their wounds and the fight draining them. They make a turn, go down a hall, another turn. Dead end. Nothing but cement block, bare conduit.

ILARIO

Shit.

Serling looks around, desperate. On the floor, welding apparatus. Against the wall, a wheeled table for the electrician. They can hear Monfriez coming.

MONFRIEZ (O.S.)

C'mon guys. Take it like a man.

Ilario slumps against the wall. Serling looks for a way out. There is none.

SERLING

Like you did in the desert,
Monfriez?

MONFRIEZ (O.S.)

I did what I had to do.

SERLING

Because you were afraid.

MONFRIEZ (O.S.)

I wanted to survive.

Serling finds a wrench on the floor. A bigass monkey wrench. He hefts it in his hand. A weapon. He looks at Ilario, who shakes his head sadly.

SERLING

What about taking care of your
fellow soldier?

He looks at the acetylene tank, goes to it and tries to lift it. He can't. He looks at Ilario.

MONFRIEZ (O.S.)

That's all bullshit.

SERLING

No, it isn't. Ilario just proved
it. He saved my life.

He looks at Ilario, imploring. Ilario gets up, helps lift the tank. It is heavy. Both men are in great pain. They put it on the cart.

Serling puts the cart in the middle of the corridor.

MONFRIEZ

Not for long.

And he is at the end of the narrow hall. He smiles.

MONFRIEZ

Let's see how brave you are,
Colonel.

He comes at them. Serling raises the monkey wrench. Monfriez looks at it.

MONFRIEZ

You'll never get close enough to
use it.

And he keeps coming. Serling brings the wrench down -- on the acetylene tank nozzle. The nozzle breaks off! Gas shoots out of the tank at a fierce rate.

The tank is propelled down the hall like a rocket, the wheels of the cart sing. The tank and cart ricochet off both walls. Monfriez doesn't know which way to jump. Sparks fly as metal grinds against concrete. The gas ignites. The tank goes faster. It hits Monfriez in the chest. Blows him into the back wall. Through the wall!!! Both Monfriez and the tank arc out over the river. They splash into it. Serling and Ilario stagger, limp to the hole in the wall. They look down. In time to see Monfriez bob to the surface. Dead. Chest crushed.

EXT. RIVER WALK, NIGHT

The paramedics work on Ilario while Serling, also bandaged, watches. Ilario, critiques the paramedics.

ILARIO

You guys are good.

PARAMEDIC

This is the city. We get a lot of
practice on bullet wounds.

The medics finish for the moment. Serling looks at Ilario.

SERLING

Thanks.

ILARIO

I kind of owed it to Captain Walden.
(MORE)

ILARIO (CONT'D)

It's what she would have done.
She's the real thing.

SERLING

So are you.

Ilario, laughs derisively. It hurts.

ILARIO

At the wrong time.

SERLING

That's how it works. We all have
the potential to be a hero or a
coward. We're just human.
Sometimes we're scared --
sometimes... Like you said -- it's
a fine line. We all live astride
it.

The paramedics escort them both to the ambulance.

SERLING

The secret is to admit to the
weakest part of ourselves, accept
it and...

ILARIO

And what, sir?

Serling doesn't know the answer until he says it.

SERLING

...and ask for help when we're too
weak to do it ourselves. That's
true bravery.

A door has been opened to him. He is still contemplating
what he said when the ambulance door closes on them.

INT. WHITE HOUSE, DAY

A ceremony. A couple of suits, a couple of Generals, an
Honor Guard, General Hershberg, Major Teegarden, the President
of the United States, and at the center of attention, Joel,
Geraldine and little Anne Marie Walden. Colonel Banachek
reads from the citation.

BANACHEK

...Captain Walden's courage under
fire, conspicuous gallantry,
(MORE)

BANACHEK (CONT'D)

intrepidity and supreme dedication to her comrades, her extraordinary valor and inspirational supreme sacrifice were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflected utmost credit on herself, her unit and the U.S. Army.

The medal, glorious in repose in a velvet box, is given to the little girl by the President himself. And Joel Walden turns to our Supreme Commander.

JOEL

Mr. President. Could I have a word?

EXT. SERLING HOUSE, DAY

Serling and Patella get out of Serling's car and walk up to the house.

SERLING

She's still a hero. The rest of it would only muddy the waters. Let it rest. Two of the eyewitnesses died tragically. The third is in rehab. Let her have her medal. She more than deserves it.

He opens the door to his house. Meredith sees him.

MEREDITH

You're home.

SERLING

I'm home.

She rushes to hug him. Tears, kisses.

SERLING

This is Patella. He's going to stay with us for a little while if it's okay. We've joined this program together. Okay?

She just smiles at him.

MEREDITH

But...

You're home.

SERLING

I'm home.

She takes his arm, leads him inside.

MEREDITH

C'mon, in Mr. Patella. Know
anything about refrigerators?

The door closes.

THE END