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Order out of Chaos: Specialist Ryan Leach

When you first meet Specialist Ryan Leach, you don't immediately associate him with the Army. Apart from the prominent "soldier's cross" on his tattooed forearms and his military-issue glasses, he exudes an aura of ease, of civilian nonchalance: He wears a loose-fitting T-shirt, high-rolled slacks, and low-cut canvas shoes without socks. Although his hair remains close-cropped, it is as unscrupulously maintained as the scruff of his beard. Even with the pageantry of The Citadel's weekly military parade flashing through the windows at the far end of our room above Daniel Library, it is easy to forget that we're meeting to discuss his six years of service as he settles into an armchair, crossing one leg over the other. He evokes the distinct impression of an ambitious college double-major taking a casual break from the end-of-semester crunch of a 23-credit-hour workload—which he is—in addition to being a husband, a father, a university employee, and a volunteer at a nearby high school.

Despite casual appearances, Specialist Leach assertively identifies himself as a soldier. A self-categorized "military brat," he says that he although he desired a civilian sense of permanence while moving from military base to military base throughout his childhood, by his junior year of high school he had become aware of an irresistible need to contribute to the organization that had played a crucial role not only in his own life, but also and even more crucially in all American lives after the attacks of 9/11. He subsequently became heavily involved in the ROTC and nurtured an "obsessive" determination to join the Marine Corps. After three unsuccessful attempts to enlist, however, rejected each time for irregularities in his

medical records, a routine call from an Army recruiter offered him the opportunity that he was, by that point, eager to accept unconditionally. His response, made partially in jest, was “if you can get me into the Army, I would do anything you said.”

Although his original ambition was to serve as a helicopter crew chief, preliminary medical examinations revealed Leach to be colorblind, thus not only precluding him from specializing in technologically sensitive fields, but also oddly precluding him from pursuing a secondary interest in training as a linguist as well. After being provided with a list of positions for which the US Army did consider him qualified, he chose to become an MP, an acronym officially signifying “Military Police,” but one that he jokingly refers to as meaning “multi-purpose.” Contrary to popular belief, he explains, the MP divisions are often the most heavily armed units in the Army because their training in discretionary shooting uniquely suits them towards asymmetrical and urban modes of warfare. “In fact, while I was going through school,” he says, “we actually had a platoon of National Guard field artillery guys attached to our company to be re-classed into MPs because they didn’t need field artillery in Afghanistan. They needed people who could shoot and move.”

In broad terms, Specialist Leach describes his military experience as learning to always expect the unexpected. From the moment he arrived at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for basic training, reality was consistently at odds with his anticipation. Caught in the middle of a February snowstorm, his first two weeks in the Army consisted of sitting around and waiting. Basic training itself—the beginnings of which he describes with vivid imagery of cadets tripping over one another amidst the mad roar of screaming drill-sergeants—he characterizes as “an impossible game you have to learn to play,” a trial of disorientation and stress designed to train him to seek order within chaos and to persevere through desperate circumstances. Leach says

time and time again when describing his first deployment that “everybody comes to the realization, probably that first day of basic training, that you really have no idea what you were getting into.” Nevertheless, he praises his training for making him stronger: “You come out with a greater appreciation of what you are capable of mentally and physically.”

Apart from the obligatory duties of resolving domestic disputes and conducting road-patrol, Specialist Leach describes his initial experiences as an MP as largely consisting of “critical site security” at Fort Hood, Texas, routine border-guard missions he recalls fondly as times for fishing, relaxing around campfires, or “hanging out and playing cards.” At the same time, he compares his first year of active duty to his first two weeks of basic training—a long period of anxious waiting, of repeatedly being prepared for deployment and subsequently being recalled. It wasn’t until the final hour of waiting to board a plane to Iraq that the true weight of his enlistment set in. His feelings, he suggests, were necessarily conflicted: On one hand, he came to the sudden, dreadful realization that he might never see his friends and family again; on the other hand, he felt a sense of elation in knowing that he was finally going to do what he signed up to do, that he was going to get to put his training to use.

Specialist Leach landed in Dubai on 4 March 2004, one year after President Bush delivered his frequently-invoked “Mission Accomplished” speech. As both Leach and history can attest to, however, “the war wasn’t really over yet.” Nevertheless, from the initial distance of the US Army’s central base of operations in the UAE, the true extent of the military’s involvement in Iraq at the time remained conceptual for Leach until he found himself situated directly within the conflict he ironically refers to as “Operation Iraqi Freedom 2.” His description of crossing into Iraq only reiterates the uncertainty and surrealism that glints off the surfaces of his recollections: an endless convoy of vehicles moving under the cover of darkness at three

o'clock in the morning, lights blacked out, radios exploding with alarm, everyone on maximum alert while slowly approaching and quietly passing by "two Kuwaiti soldiers standing next to some barbed wire."

The reality of Baghdad, as he would soon come to find, was something else entirely. With no place to sleep that first night in Iraq, he found himself standing on the roof of his truck in the rain, looking out over the berm of the encampment and watching the fireworks of tracer bullets as mortar shells exploded all around. It was, he suggests, the most perfect introduction to the Iraqi war, the best "way we could have spent it to give us a sense of what the year was going to be like... that's kind of how the whole year was, and that's how my experience of being deployed was: You could go through these moments where you would think that everything is just going to be hell on Earth, and they're the most intensely boring moments of your life... and then you would hit these times where it was all hell breaking loose, and then it would stop and you would be in the calm again." It was, for him, "this very odd thing where your...body and your mind gets used to getting in these very jarring circumstances," so that you find yourself growing anxious in moments of calm and, in a funny way, "almost more calm in the high intensity" of chaos. This is, in his view, one of the most lasting effects combat has had on his identity, especially in transitioning back to civilian life—he feels the need to be constantly engaged, explaining both why and how he maintains such a busy schedule.

Over the course of his six years on active duty, Specialist Leach served two tours in Iraq, first in 2004 as a member of Brigadier General Jeffery Hammond's personal protective guard under the 545th MP Company, 1st Cavalry Division, and later between 2006 and 2008 as ground operative in the rural outskirts of Baghdad as a member of the 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Division. His views on his deployments are mixed. His first tour he characterizes as an incredible

experience, one that offered him access to arenas and opportunities that few soldiers and fewer civilians could have enjoyed. Among his most memorable recollections was sitting on the rooftop of a hotel in the middle of Baghdad during the first Iraqi elections—high above a city wracked daily by the noise of commerce and violence—and hearing for the only time in his life an absolute and profound silence. Of his second tour, Leach is more critical—and more reluctant to discuss. All he will suggest is that there are aspects of combat that he would never wish for anyone else to have to endure.

Regardless of whatever misgivings Specialist Leach may have about combat, he nevertheless characterizes his time in the Army as crucially formative. As he asserts at the beginning of our interview, military service taught him how to be self-disciplined and self-motivated, skills that have proven him invaluable both on and—as the rigors of his academic and personal schedule can attest to—off the battlefield. Ultimately, however, he understands his service as a duty, an obligation he personally chose to fulfill through enlistment. “The country today needs people who are more willing to serve their country in one way or another,” he says, “whether it’s in the military some other aspect, any other aspect.” A soldier at heart, five years out of the Army, Leach now looks for a new way to serve: whether he fulfill his duty as an educator, as a scholar, or in some other fashion, only time will tell. Talking with him in person and knowing of his accomplishments, you get the sense that from amidst the chaos of his studies and his responsibilities, an order will emerge in some fundamentally unexpected way.