

Story for performance #990  
webcast from Sydney at 07:25PM, 06 Mar 08



Source: Michael McKenna, 'Diggers dispute shooting payment', *The Australian online*, 06/03/08.

Tags: Iraq, film, war  
Writer/s: Ross Murray

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Private Broden bent in close to the corpse and gave the thumbs up. She smiled one big-assed smile like the silent body on the wire bed was a prize trout. Her glowing, full, nineteen year-old cheeks contrasted with the mottled brown-black-grey of the dead flat face.

'Get in closer, closer.' Private Gaines, a short, stocky reservist who only just passed all the exams needed to be allowed into the Reserves, held the digital camera up away from his body. 'Yeah. That's great.' He took the picture, the imitation shutter sound bouncing off the prison walls. Private Broden stood upright, Gaines stepped over and showed her the results. 'I got your tats in too. See?'

'Yeah, cool.'

Gaines glanced back and forth from photo to corpse. 'Can't understand why you'd want to get that close to it, but.'

Broden put the camera in her pocket. 'I'm gonna send these back home. They'd never believe this sort of shit. My brother's into this stuff. He's emo.'

'Yeah?' Gaines shook his head. 'I could hardly get close to a dead cow back home on the farm. It's different here but. This don't worry me at all. How does that work?'

She shrugged. 'You do what you gotta do I guess. And you don't know what you CAN do sometimes.'

Private Collins had been standing back watching. He pulled out his mobile phone. 'Hey, do one of me.' Collins struck a pose next to the bed with one raised fist pretendin' he was about to pound the corpse's skull.

Gaines held the phone up, nodding his head. 'Oh yeah, man. That's the best. Who you gonna send it to?'

'No-one. I'm makin' like a digital scrap book.'

Corporal Marks yawned loudly. He was so tired, he was almost falling off his chair. Twelve hour days for twenty days without a break, and no let-up likely for a couple of weeks, at least. We're not real soldiers, he thought. We're just guys runnin' around, pretending to play war. He was only supposed to serve here for six months. Now it looked more like a year and half in the fuckin' desert of death.

The three privates had stopped talking, now seemingly transfixed by the dead man. One hand, with red and black fingers rested gently on his chest, his mouth dominated by a full complement of teeth, a bizarre locked grimace, perhaps frozen there at the instant of death. Gaines frowned. 'Why doesn't it smell?'

Collins was checking through his phone now. 'It's been all burnt up. And it's cool in here. It ain't decomposin' yet. The heat dries the body out, stops all the bacteria in him from goin' ape-shit.'

Gaines screwed up his nose. 'Fuckin' weird.'

The corpse's vacant, black eye-sockets pointed to the roof. The reservists continued to stare, until Collins' phone beeped, stirring them from their torpor. His girlfriend had sent a picture of his daughter. He smiled at her beaming two year-old face. Then flicked the phone shut. 'We gonna see any action you reckon, Corporal?'

Gaines cracked his knuckles. 'Yeah. I'm tired of babysittin' corpses and dumb-ass Iraqi prisoners.'

Scratching the back of his head, Marks answered. 'Would you let us go out there?'

Gaines grabbed his balls. 'Fuck yeah!'

Marks yawned again, and checked his watch. Their rest break was nearly over. 'We're the lowest form of life in the military, Gaines.'

Gaines smiled. 'And proud of it!'

Broden high-fived Gaines, their hands coming together in a perfectly time slap, then added, 'Believe it, man.'

Warrior skills. Soldier-heroes. Adventure. Be stronger than you'll ever be. That's what the Army Reserve pamphlets and website talked about. Marks had been approached by a recruitment officer in McDonalds. He signed up a week later. The pay and benefits were pretty good for a part-time job. It didn't mention being tired than you've ever been. His eyes drooped closed. Just another ten minutes, that's all. Ten minutes.

'Hey, we'd better get back. Sarge'll have our arse. What do we do now, Corporal?'

Broden's question brought him awake again. He shook his head to clear the fog of tiredness. Awake, asleep. The two states were becoming interchangeable, almost combining into a sort of waking dream-state. He needed a coffee. 'I think we've got another load of prisoners arriving, so...'

'That was yesterday.'

'You sure? The fifteenth?'

Collins confirmed. 'Yesterday.'

Marks checked the date on his watch. 'Oh, right.' He thought for a moment. It was getting harder to think every day now. 'You checked the prisoners in the west wing?'

'Yeah. Before break.'

'Have they talked yet?'

Gaines swaggered around. He'd only been here a few weeks and seemed to be in his element. 'Not without gettin' shit in their mouth.'

Collins and Broden smirked, trying not to fall into laughter. Marks grimaced. Maybe he was hallucinating. Did Gaines just actually say that? 'Their mouths...? How are they...?'

'Sarge told me to get creative.'

'Creative?'

Collins was once again straight-faced. 'Do whatever we have to, Sarge said.'

Break was over. Marks stood up.

Broden flicked a thumb at the corpse. 'We gotta do something about grey-face Ali?'

Marks looked at each private's face in turn, then at the cadaver on the cot. Maybe he'd gone to sleep and this was just a dream. Who took photos of themselves with corpses? What sort of a person did that? People only did that in dreams. Unless they were insane.

'You okay, Corporal?' Gaines asked.

Marks rubbed his eyes. 'Hmm...?'

Broden pointed again. 'Grey-face?'

He wasn't going to look at it again.

Marks turned to leave the cell. 'Cover it up...cover it up...or something...'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.*