

ON HIS FIRST DAY IN IRAQ WITH THE SPECIAL FORCES, STAFF SERGEANT GEORG-ANDREAS POGANY SAW SOMETHING SO HORRIFIC, HE SUFFERED A PANIC ATTACK. THE U.S. MILITARY RESPONDED BY HUMILIATING AND BERATING HIM, TAKING AWAY HIS WEAPON, SENDING HIM HOME, AND CHARGING HIM WITH COWARDICE, A CRIME PUNISHABLE BY DEATH. FOR THE PAST YEAR, HE'S BEEN FIGHTING TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED—AND TO CLEAR HIS NAME

THE COWARD

BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN WINTERS

DATE JULY 2004 .90. 106



ABERCROMBIE & FITCH

HE SAW

the shredded remains of an Iraqi soldier. That part is true. Really, it could have been a goat or a pig. Just unrecognizable guts in a body bag that was half unzipped back at the base where the bloody soldiers returning from the ambush were explaining and shouting and laughing. The young soldier who'd done the killing, or believed himself responsible, was sitting there shaking like a dog in a thunderstorm. It was hard to believe a person could shake like that. Hilarious. That was the consensus. Hilarious! "Look at him! He can't take it!" >> Staff Sergeant Georg-Andreas Pogany, 32, wasn't laughing. He was watching. It was his first day of war—still, for him, the introduction. It could have been a slow-motion movie. It could have been two inches from hell. As he looks back, mostly he remembers the blood, the kid shaking, and someone wearing purple gloves. Purple gloves? He may have that part wrong. He is certain of the dead Iraqi. You could say that was the end of all certainty. At that point, at about midnight on September 29, 2003, that was when the nightmare started.



A MONTH BEFORE THE DEAD IRAQI. HE WAS AT

his house outside Colorado Springs, talking to Michelle about trying to get some stupid grass to grow in their reluctant yard. Their house is the last one on the right on Stubble Field Drive, a name that said it all the first time they drove up here—the street was carved into a field that was just stubble. Now, of course, there are houses all over the place, and so you never see wild turkeys anymore, and every night the coyote cries seem farther away. Michelle thinks that's a shame. She's the type of person who is more comfortable around animals than people sometimes.

Andrew. She calls him Andrew, short for Georg-Andreas, the name his German parents gave him.

Here on Stubble Field Drive, Michelle and Andrew put a fence up for the dogs, Amelia, CC, and Tippy.

Everything good has happened here—their first real house, their first mortgage, their first chance to just say no to ugly carpet and rip it out and shop for ceramic tile at Home Depot. And Pergo downstairs because of the dogs. And paint. Okay, don't even get them started about paint. This is so funny. Say the word *paint* and the two of them will crack up. Because when they got here all the walls were white. And now, as you can see, there's more of a Mexican-fiesta deal going on—one wall brick red and another yellow and another green. Don't think they planned it that way. It was trial and error. Try this wall

blue for a few weeks. If the blue drove you crazy, you went to Home Depot and got a can of yellow ocher.

Michelle is a big woman with sandy-blond hair and a trusting, jovial nature. He's dark, witty, intense, and his smiles are fleeting, rare gifts. They are opposites who fit exactly. They got married in 1993, ten months after they met, when they were both in their twenties, working at a bar in Florida. Later, he got his degree in criminology from the University of South Florida, with an eye toward a career in intelligence. He was good with languages, could pick them up easily, was fluent in German and Hungarian. After a stint in the Marines and the Naval Reserve, he found a home in the army in 1998, serving two years at Fort Hood in central Texas and then moving on to Fort Carson in Colorado Springs to work as an interrogator with the Special Forces.

This was the start of a new life. Texas had been hell for Michelle, a living hell—but now all that was history. Andrew thrived at Fort Carson. He received a superior rating on his military review and was recommended for immediate promotion. Michelle got a part-time clerical job and set her sights on starting a program that teamed troubled youth with abandoned dogs, two sectors of society she understood better than just about anything.

When the United States started bombing Iraq in March 2003, neither Michelle nor Andrew felt particularly alarmed. Andrew was a translator, an interrogator, a support soldier; if he got deployed, Michelle figured he'd probably be far from the front lines. By summer, when most of the troops from Fort Carson had shipped out, Andrew and Michelle remained calm. Then he got the call in September to deploy with a team of Green Berets from the 10th Special Forces Group. He called Michelle and said, "It looks like I'm going." He was not allowed to divulge the details of his



mission or even tell her his length of deployment. Michelle filled in the details with easy thoughts. She imagined him gone a few months, stationed in the rear, analyzing photographs, maybe translating radio transmissions or something. She imagined him at a desk doing his duty for his country; his service in Iraq would only boost his intelligence career.

By this point, Andrew knew he wouldn't be at a desk. There was a heightened level of urgency to this mission; he would have just two weeks before leaving; the rest of the guys, all Green Berets, had trained for it together, but one soldier dropped out and Andrew was picked to replace him. He was not a Green Beret. *Odd man out*. Two weeks to prepare. No time to do anything really but pack and teach Michelle how to pay the bills and get all that paperwork at home in shape in case he never came back.

He started smoking, a habit he had kicked years earlier. Michelle smelled it.

"You started smoking again?" she said.

He denied it.

She believed him.

He asked her to go to Borders to buy a book he'd heard about called *The Arab Mind*. What a crazy way to prepare for war, from a book your wife runs out and buys you, but what choice did he have? He read the book, packed, taught Michelle how to pay the bills, wrote his will, made burial arrangements, vacuumed up dog hair in the house, while in



his mind he tried to rehearse reaction drills. He was about to face an enemy he didn't understand, with guys he didn't know and with whom he had never gone through the most basic reaction drills, like if you're in a convoy and you get attacked, everybody has a place they need to go and things they need to do. Day after day, if you're a combat soldier, you practice these things with your unit—drawing your weapon, aiming and firing, transitioning from your rifle to your handgun, your pistol, it has to become muscle memory. These reactions have to just...happen. You can't think about them. He was thinking about them, or rather the lack of them; he was thinking about all that his muscles didn't know.

He was not a combat soldier. He was going into combat.

Apprehension about the unknown is a normal human reaction. Normal. He would rarely speak of it, most especially not in front of Michelle. His first job as a husband

know where to aim her front bumper exactly.

Then he said good-bye. Four separate times he would say good-bye. Just when he thought it was the real good-bye, then it was, "Well, sorry about that, soldiers. The plane is broken, so go on home and come back tomorrow." Then, "Come back tomorrow." Then, "Come back tomorrow." It got so ridiculous, all Michelle and Andrew could do was laugh. The laughter held everything. The laughter was the lid.

War came quickly, abruptly, a shift in landscape so immediate it's like you don't even have a chance to adjust your eyes. Suddenly it's: Iraq. "Okay, Iraq." Now here he is in Iraq, sitting for a convoy brief. You always get a convoy brief, a preview of what might happen as you ride along, truck after truck after truck. *So yeah, okay, soldiers, it's gonna be a long, tough ride through the Sunni Triangle to Samarra, north of Baghdad. It's gonna be miles and miles of hell—just ask the last guys who got ambushed, and the guys before them. Watch your ass. Watch the rear. That's how they come. Or else they're waiting ahead. Or they're hiding out of sight launching RPGs.*

He drives the Land Rover. A support soldier is in the seat next to him. Both have their rifles across their laps, barrels pointed out the windows, and they scan in silence, scan the rearview mirror and the side mirrors, scan ahead, behind, above, between. There is little small talk. There is no "Well, this is fucking intense." Mostly there's just the sound of the Land Rover and the sound of the dry air whizzing in the windows and the scorching sun in all its stark acquaintance.

Suddenly the vehicle ahead stops. Pogany hits the brakes. Guys jump out, get into position, form a perimeter, rifles up, fingers an inch away from the triggers.

Fuck.

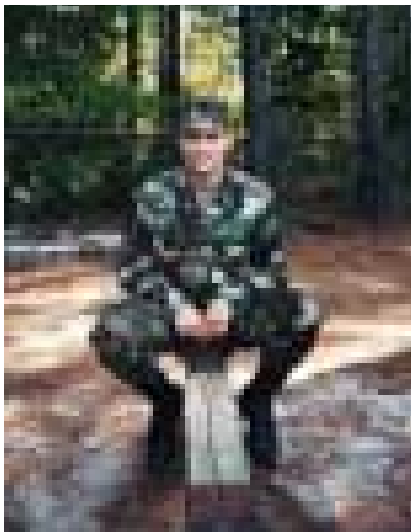
Word comes: "A wheel!" A wheel fell off one of the trucks in the convoy. They'll have to wait there while they fix the truck.

Word comes: "We can't fix the truck." *You can't fix the truck?* "We have to call for a tow truck." *A tow truck?* How about we just put a fucking flare in the sky to announce our position so we can get ourselves blown up and get it over with? Two hours, then three hours, then four hours, waiting for a tow truck like you're waiting for your mom to come pick you



was: Protect Michelle. He'd had a heightened sense of that ever since she collapsed in Texas.

He did a good job staying positive on Tuesday, September 23, the day he was scheduled to leave. No big deal. Off to war. No big deal. It's been going on for centuries. He went out to the garage and made sure his Jetta was parked in the right spot, because Michelle doesn't drive a stick and she wouldn't be able to move it. He pulled it out and reparked it, pulled it out and reparked it. No big deal. Off to war. He hung a tennis ball from a string so Michelle would



POGANY WENT OUTSIDE AND HEADED TOWARD THE NEXT BUILDING. PEOPLE RUNNING EVERYWHERE. HE STOOD TO THE SIDE, WONDERING WHAT TO DO. AND THERE WAS THE BODY BAG. THE BODY, REALLY, IT COULD HAVE BEEN A GOAT OR A PIG. IT WAS SHREDDED BEYOND RECOGNITION.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF GEORGE ANDREAS POGANY

up from school but she forgot—only, no, really, okay, a lot worse than that.

In the fifth hour, the tow truck finally comes, and so they roll out. Pogany driving again. The guy next to him doesn't look right. Five hours, trapped there, sitting ducks—it is definitely taking a toll. He's folded up, mumbling. And now the sun has started to set, all red beauty, all light and hope sinking from the sky. You can't scan for enemies in the dark. You can't scan for shit. It's like a video game, another new level, everything getting impossibly worse. Only it isn't a video game.

The other guy is mumbling. It isn't like talking low. More like singing. "That Sam-I-am! That Sam-I-am! I do not like that Sam-I-am!"

"Did you say something?" Pogany asks.

"Do you like green eggs and ham?" the guy says. "I do! I like them, Sam-I-am!"

What the fuck? It would be different if the guy had said, "Sorry, but this just calms me down." You know, maybe a man needs to say a Hail Mary or a load of Our Fathers to soak up his fear; you couldn't condemn a man for excusing himself into a private holy place, especially when he's driving into darkening desert sky thinking quite realistically that he's two seconds from an RPG in his lap.

But this guy makes no excuses. He's scared out of his mind, and this is how it's coming out.

"You want a cigarette?" Pogany yells over the hum of the engine and the eggs and the ham. "How about a cigarette?"

"I do not like them, Sam-I-am. I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them in a house. I do not like them with a mouse."

Fuck!

"Could you, would you, on a train? Not on a train! Not in a tree! Not in a car! Sam! Let me be!"

"Okay, just stop," Pogany says finally. Because he's trying to drive and concentrate on not getting ambushed, he needs the guy to wake up or come out of this trance he's gotten himself into. "You know, just stop! Don't you know any other book?"

"Not in a box. Not with a fox. Not in a house. Not with a mouse. I would not eat them here or there. I would not eat them anywhere!"

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

For miles, that's it, driving and straining to see, waiting to be attacked, and I could not, would not, on a boat, I will not, will not, with a goat—and then darkness falls complete.

"Say! In the dark? Here in the dark! Would you, could you, in the dark? I would not, could not, in the dark."



YOU CAN'T

make shit like this up. There was some comfort in that. No amount of reading or training or reaction drills could have prepared him for this surreal drama. *So this is what it looks like. Welcome to war.* >> When the convoy finally arrived at the U.S. military compound near Samarra, Pogany found his room, unpacked his gear, went through it and made sure all his magazines were loaded up, his vest, his body armor, his helmet, all that stuff, he was organizing it when all of a sudden there was gunfire, very close, very loud. He went out to find one of the team guys, who said it was nothing, probably just a wedding, because when Iraqis have weddings they like to shoot off guns. >> A wedding. Okay. Right. *A wedding?* Why not? Why the fuck not? He smoked a cigarette, went to bed. He was in bed for maybe an hour when he heard another clap of gunfire. Then popping sounds, explosions, all in the distance, so you knew something was going on somewhere, someone was getting ambushed or attacked or mortared. He lay there in his bed and tried to sleep. Then came the roar of an engine, loud, a track vehicle probably, a Bradley.

He got up to find out what the hell was going on. A medic was running into the building. "Someone's gotta help the patrol out! They got ambushed! They got attacked! And they shot up a bunch of Iraqis and they took prisoners and there's this one guy that's all shot to hell."

Pogany went outside and headed toward the next building, where the Bradley was. People running everywhere. He stood to the side, wondering what to do, and there was the body bag.

The body. Really, it could have been a goat or a pig. It was shredded beyond recognition.

A dead body is not a big deal. Anyone will tell you. You gotta compartment that shit. You're supposed to be ready for it, that's why you had to sit through all those movies, all those videos of people getting

their throats slit, torture, all kinds of shit to get you conditioned, almost like health class and you see sex happening, only, well, no. Not like that at all. But the idea is to get you conditioned with virtual horror so that when the real thing comes along, you're better with it, you're a little more used to it, you learn to deal with it like the others: with laughter. Plenty of guys learn to laugh. You see some dead guy all fucked up, and you just laugh. Pogany was never one of the ones who learned to laugh.

The body bag was half unzipped because someone was stuffing something into it, maybe more of the body or who knows what. It was hard to tell because of all the blood. The guys were soaked in blood. And one person had purple gloves on. Purple gloves?

Okay, things are already getting fuzzy at this point.

But it seems like three people have blue gloves on and one person has purple gloves

He may have said it then, or he may have said it later. All he knows is that he said it, the worst thing a soldier can say.

Send me home.

The sergeant told him he would give him until after lunch to think about what he was saying. He told him that if he decided to drop the issue, he would forget that Pogany ever brought it up.

Pogany went back to his room and ate a Nutri-Grain bar. It was in slow motion like everything else. Eating a Nutri-Grain bar in slow motion is like chewing on sandpaper with the sound magnified in your head like a screeching, dying cat.

After lunch the team sergeant came back to talk to him. "I'm not right," Pogany said. "Something is extremely wrong."

The team sergeant took away his weapon, put him on a suicide watch, and gave him two Ambien pills.

Pogany took the pills and passed out.



WHEN THE PHONE RANG, MICHELLE POPPED awake. It was about 1 A.M., just four days after she'd said good-bye to Andrew for the hundredth time.

"Hello?"

He was calling from the satellite phone they had issued him. They had taken away his weapon but not his phone. The phone became his lifeline. The connection was crystal clear.

"Shell," he said.

"Andrew? Are you okay?"

"No, I am not." He was gasping for air. He was hyperventilating. "Shell, I'm sorry."

"What is the matter with you?"

"It's bad," he said. He told her he was having some kind of nervous breakdown. He told her he didn't know what was happening to him. "It's bad." He told her no sleep for three days, throwing up, asking for help, no help, get his head out of his ass, bad soldier, no help. "I need help." He was gulping for air. She tried to make sense of it. Andrew asking for help? Andrew? She felt it in her stomach like the worst kind of punch.

So she did what a wife does. She went into rescue mode. She imagined herself saving him from whatever this was. She knew what

this was. In Texas she had found herself all at once a walking advertisement for PTSD. Or rather a curled-up one unable to do so much as go outside and get the mail. Sinking that low. It wasn't like the memories came out of nowhere. They had always been there. She had relived it every day since she was 6 years old, Fourth of July, watching fireworks, falling half asleep, someone carrying her off the boat, then more fireworks. Only they weren't really fireworks; the mast of the boat had hit a power line, the boat caught on fire with her mother in it. She saw this, over and over again, every day until she was 30 years old, never telling anyone about seeing it again and again, believing if she relived it enough times it would surely go away. And so, flunking out of school, all the bad-girl behaviors, just reliving this over and over until she was a married woman in Texas, finally breaking down, turning to her first real friend, her husband, and collapsing into truth.

She learned: The longer you suppress it, the worse it gets. She thought: *Whatever is wrong with Andrew, please don't let it be that, please don't send him to that mental hell, isn't one per family enough?*

In the morning, she called the Red Cross and told them about Andrew's condition. She was referred to the Red Cross branch at Fort Carson, where she sounded the alarm about her husband. Eventually, she got a call from Captain Venema, who said he would be her contact person, he would keep her informed. He told her steps were being taken to ensure Andrew's safety. Over the next few days, she went back and forth with Venema. He reassured her; he tried to be consoling. She tried to be calm. She wasn't calm. Finally, she said, "I am furious! You got all these guys with all this combat experience, and not *one* of them will take my husband under his wing and just show him how they got through it? Everyone had to have a first time. Everyone! Don't even try to tell me they didn't panic. Like, don't even go there, okay? *Don't go there....*"

It was the last time Venema spoke to her.



ON THE MORNING OF HIS THIRD DAY OF WAR, HE was told he was being sent to higher headquarters and might get kicked out of the

army. He was confined to his quarters with a bottle of water and a Chili/Mac MRE. He tried to eat it but threw up.

That evening he put his bags on the truck and sat for the convoy brief. You always get a convoy brief. One of the intersections they would go through was of special concern. The convoy that went through it earlier that day had been hit with RPGs, with one confirmed fatality.

"Okay," he said. "So can I have my weapon back?"

"No."

And so he rode through the dark into a known combat zone, a soldier with no weapon, his only link to sanity a prayer.

They arrived at higher headquarters in Tikrit, a large military compound fashioned from one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. "You stay away from my guys," he was told by a sergeant major the next morning. "I don't want you fucking interacting with anybody."

Pogany asked to see a chaplain. They confined him to his quarters.

Several hours later, he was finally allowed to see a chaplain. The chaplain took him for a walk around the palace, asked him about his family, and so Pogany told him about Michelle and the dogs and Home Depot, and then he told him what was happening to him, the strange symptoms he had never before encountered until the night of the shredded Iraqi. The chaplain listened and then said the most remarkable word.

"Normal."

He said, "You're having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation." He said there's a name for it. People go through it all the time. He told him about the combat-stress team. He told him there was help.

Pogany curled into a ball and cried.

The chaplain called Captain Marc Houck, the army psychologist with the combat-stress control team attached to the base. This was what should have happened two days earlier. This was the way it was supposed to work, the way it worked for other soldiers. A guy freaks out, you send him to Houck; you don't confine him to a room with a bottle of water and a Chili/Mac MRE. Pogany met with Houck and was asked to tell the events of the days since his arrival in Iraq. As he told (*continued on page 159*)

A RISING MILITARY-INTELLIGENCE AGENT. ALL THAT COLLEGE HE DID, SIX YEARS IN THE ARMY, AND LOOK WHAT IT'S COME TO. I AM NOT A COWARD. ALL I DID WAS ASK FOR HELP. THIS MAKES NO SENSE. DO YOU SEE HOW THIS MAKES NO SENSE? IT IS THE CRY OF A MAN DROWNING IN LOSS AND DISILLUSIONMENT.



HARD
HAT
AREA

NO
SPASING

WHERE DO YOU GO WHEN YOUR JOB LEAVES YOU? CONTINUED FROM PAGE 151

Orthodox Jew, say. I don't know if Orthodox Jews believe in divorce or not—I'm just making that up—but what if it's the case. Okay? There's no reason to volunteer that."

Not Bob feels tricked. "I don't see how I'm volunteering," he says, slightly petulant.

Brushing Not Bob's objection aside, John says, "You began your career in New York. You had military, right?"

"I didn't want to put that in. I didn't want it to date me."

"At the same time, I got my B.A. degree," John says. "It's tough working, and it's tough going to school, and you graduated cum laude, am I right?"

Not Bob nods.

"Cum laude," John says, "They don't

throw that around. You have to earn it. Then take them through a quick chronology."

Not Bob says he understands.

"I know you're out of work," John says sympathetically. "You didn't lose your talent. You haven't lost your dignity. Nobody's taken away your accomplishments."

Not Bob purses his lips.


"Every night when you go to bed," John says, "take out this letter, this list you wrote. It says all those positive things about you. That is the tape that will play."

Not Bob tips his head slightly, quickly, in assent.

"You're not going to stop the tape from playing, so you've got to make it work for you. You've got to use your astute wisdom."

Not Bob says, "I will."

John leans back, pleased. A yellowing afternoon light has replaced the deep blue vault behind him. He and Not Bob exchange a few more words, rise, and shake hands, then part. John follows Not Bob to the door, as if he were releasing him from custody.

Not Bob, headed for his cubicle, walks quietly down the hall, his head down, his shoulders tipping slightly from side to side, a man on his way from one mystery to another, from what happened to what's next. 

ALEC WILKINSON's latest book, *Mr. Apology*, was nominated for a PEN literary award.

THE COWARD CONTINUED FROM PAGE 112

the story, he broke down repeatedly into uncontrollable sobs.

Houck used the same word. He said, "Normal."

Houck told Pogany he could get help immediately and could possibly return to duty within a week. Houck told him that he was going to write up his evaluation and give it to the command the next day.

Elated, relieved, Pogany called Michelle on the satellite phone and said it looked like everything was going to be okay.

It wasn't.

On his sixth day of war, he was told to report to his superiors at 11 A.M. He was told to pack his shit up and have it in the hallway and be ready to go home, because he was leaving. He wasn't going to be returning to duty.

He stood in front of a commander and a sergeant major, and the berating was heated and continued for about an hour, *fucking coward, fucking coward, fucking coward, I'm going to make sure everyone in the rear knows you're a fucking coward*, on and on, as the sergeant major inched toward his face and Pogany could feel his spit, *fucking coward, fucking coward*, Pogany came to believe that they were trying to provoke a reaction, to make him throw a punch, the one certain illegal act, so that became Pogany's only focus, don't let it in, don't lose it, don't let it in, don't lose it, *fucking coward, fucking coward, fucking coward, if this were fifty years ago we'd take you out back and shoot you*.

When it was over, Pogany asked to see the medical report written by Houck. What happened to "normal"? What happened to "combat stress"? What happened to the idea of help, of no big deal, of returning to duty?

Pogany was not permitted to read the report.

"I can't see my own medical report?"

"No."

* * * * *

THE REPORT WRITTEN by Houck was unflinching in its assessment: "Soldier reported signs of symptoms consistent with those of a normal combat-stress reaction. Short-term rest, stress-coping skills, and/or brief removal from more dangerous situations are often adequate to resolve such reactions. Team cohesion and the soldier's place in it are important in preventing/reducing stress reactions. If desired, the combat-stress team can work with this soldier at FOB Ironhorse. The next level of care in treating such stress reactions is a 72-hour program at FOB Speicher. Rest and a concentrated stress reduction program are provided, with return to duty assumed."

Months later, *Army Times* printed a letter to the editor written by Specialist Cheyenne Forsythe, a mental-health practitioner who was with Houck when Pogany came in for help.

"His case was no different from the dozens of other cases I had seen. The process is simple: They come in, we figure out what's going on, then we make our recommendations.... Captain Marc Houck and I had a long talk with his commander and his command sergeant major, going over the best measures to take with a combat-stress reaction. I was floored when I found out, a couple of days later, that they ignored the recommendation of my team's licensed psychologist, Captain Houck. And now, to see how far things have gotten off track..."

* * * * *

ON TUESDAY, October 7, 2003, he came home from war. Wives and husbands and mothers and fathers greeted the returning soldiers

with tears and flowers and balloons, but Michelle had already been told not to bother coming. Two soldiers approached Pogany and ordered him to stand spread-eagled. They patted him down, searched him, relieved him of his knife, his laptop, his satellite phone, it felt like every shred of dignity. They walked him to a Chevy Tahoe and ordered him in, took him to speak to the commander, then a shrink, and then they drove him home and confiscated his personal handgun, a nine-millimeter pistol.

A week later came the criminal charge: Cowardice.

"Cowardly conduct because of fear," he told Michelle, reading the charges. "Cowardice," he said. A military crime punishable by death.

She said, "Death?"

He was stripped of his security clearances. He was not permitted to wear his uniform off the base. He had to drive to work in his civilian clothes and then get changed. His army friends turned against him, wouldn't even look at him. A disgrace. A fucking disgrace. Once a rising military-intelligence agent, a college graduate and five-year serviceman, soon he was stuck at Fort Carson sweeping parking lots.

He tried to make sense of it: Of course, you can't have soldiers freaking out every time they see something horrific. If a soldier isn't able to do his job, you have to remove him. Of course. And maybe you've got dead bodies and prisoners everywhere to deal with, so you take your own shit out on the soldier bugging you like a fly in your face. Of course. But this criminal charge was not made instantaneously during the heat of attack. It was made after receiving evaluation after evaluation advising otherwise.

Malicious. That's how it seemed.

Almost immediately he started reading, researching, trying to make sense. The last time the army punished a soldier for being scared was 1968, when Private Michael Gross got a two-year prison sentence for running away from his company in Vietnam. The *Manual for Courts-Martial, United States* defines cowardice as “misbehavior motivated by fear,” and goes on to say that fear is “a natural feeling of apprehension when going into battle.” *This makes no sense, this makes no sense, do you see how this makes no fucking sense?*

The media caught on. “Coward!” That was a new, exciting word. CNN ran footage of Pogany with HEROES & COWARDS under it, so as to spectacularly contrast it with footage of Jessica Lynch, a dream of a poster girl if ever there was one.

That was hard to take.

Paula Zahn: “Heroism and cowardice, both are in the headlines tonight. In the case of heroism, it is the story of Private Jessica Lynch and her ordeal as a POW; on the other side, an army investigator who was accused of cowardice.... Pogany saw an Iraqi soldier cut in half by machine-gun fire...”

No, he didn't. That is *not* what he saw. Where did the machine gun come from? That Iraqi was already dead. He wasn't cut in half. He was shredded. In a bag. But really, the dead body was only one piece of the story.

If only for the sake of his own sanity, he needed to tell someone the whole, exact story. At one point, he went to the phone book and looked up lawyers. He found Richard Travis, an ex-army guy. A savior. Someone who would listen.

Travis said, “I'll protect you.” Michelle said, “Whatever it takes.” Andrew was twisted up. Not sleeping. And the strangest thing was, he was still having anxiety symptoms. He got stomach pains so bad he was hospitalized and put on morphine. “Pancreatitis,” they said. Could be related to an acute stress reaction. *What the fuck? Who the hell gets pancreatitis?*

And then it's all a jumble. Medical talk, mental-health talk, legal talk, media talk, so much talk happening all at once. Like, Soledad O'Brien's voice on his answering machine. “Hi, this is CNN's Soledad O'Brien.” That is not something an average man ever expects to hear. Soon he was sitting in Travis's office, hooked up to a little microphone on his shirt, and he had that ear thing wrapped around his ear, and he was explaining that, no, he didn't see a soldier being torn apart by machine-gun fire, he saw the *aftermath*.

O'Brien: “You were physically ill. You were throwing up. You went to see your superiors. What did they tell you? You said, ‘I'm having a hard time with this: What did they say?’”

But, see, she was already about a million steps ahead of the story. It wasn't just the dead body. There was a lot more to it. *Odd man out*. Not a Green Beret. Five hours stuck in a combat zone, a wheel, *Green Eggs and Ham*. A medical report. Combat stress. “Normal.” Everyone slow down, let's try to unravel this.

“And what I'd like to interject here, if you don't mind...” said Travis, his attorney, who was sitting next to him.

O'Brien: “You can, as long as it's really short, Richard.”

Travis: “Okay...another issue that we'd like to raise is whether or not mefloquine had any impact on this case—”

O'Brien: “That's the antimalarial drug the soldiers take before they headed over to Iraq?”

Travis: “Correct. Right.”

O'Brien: “Well, we'll see how this case turns out. Richard Travis, the attorney for Staff Sergeant Georg Pogany.”

Travis: “Thank you.”

O'Brien: “Gentlemen, thanks for joining us this morning. We certainly appreciate your time. Best of luck to both of you.”

Mefloquine hydrochloride: It goes by the trade name Lariam. Travis thinks it's the Agent Orange of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He told Pogany about it when Pogany was describing his panic attack in Iraq. “Well, did you take Lariam?” Travis asked him.

“Did I take which?”

“Little white pills.”

“You just take what they tell you to take,” Pogany said.

Roche, the manufacturer, issues warnings about Lariam. For one thing, it may cause suicide. But that's rare. And there's no proof, of course, that the three special-ops soldiers who served in Afghanistan and then came home to Fort Bragg in the summer of 2002 and killed their wives and then themselves—there's no proof that the Lariam they took contributed to their madness. But suspicions surrounding this case and others of soldiers on Lariam going insane have been mounting, and Roche has been gradually making its warning label more specific, pointing out that the drug may cause anxiety, paranoia, depression, hallucinations, and psychotic behavior.

Hallucinations and psychotic behavior. That's the part that got to Pogany. He looked through all his paperwork and found that, yes, he had taken Lariam, four 250 milligram pills over a four week period.

It changed everything. All at once, he could forgive himself for losing his mind the night of the shredded Iraqi. Maybe it wasn't just the mounting stress of being at war. Maybe he had a chemical in his brain making him nuts. “*Hallucinations and psychotic*

behavior. On occasions, these symptoms have been reported to continue long after mefloquine has been stopped.” Okay, that last part didn't help. Was this why he was still feeling all the strange symptoms? Was he going to stay like this?

This is so fucked up.

* * * * *

CRUSADE. That's the word he has started using. It has become for him a crusade about redemption, but not really redemption, because he doesn't think he did a damn thing wrong. The thing about crusading is, it takes up a lot of time. It takes a certain amount of focus.

The army dropped the cowardice charge in November. They substituted it with an accusation of dereliction of duty “for willfully failing to perform his job,” which carries a penalty of up to six months in prison and a bad-conduct discharge.

Michelle thought that was progress. But really the charges were inconsequential. Travis made that plain. He said he'd have a field day cross-examining these guys. So much damning evidence. All of it right there, signed and sealed. So Michelle quit worrying about Andrew being executed or sent to jail. Now she was worrying about what her husband was turning into. Her husband. Her husband! He was always a bulldog when it came to fighting for what was his, never wanting to let go once he got his teeth in—but never so consumed as this. Not even close.

Then the army dropped the dereliction-of-duty charge and offered an Article 15 hearing—a meager attempt at a plea bargain. Pogany refused. He demanded a trial. He wanted to explain. He wanted *them* to explain.

He waited for a response.

“Okay, everything is dropped,” they said.

“Everything is dropped?”

“Everything is dropped,” they said. *Come on, be a team player.*

Pogany requested “everything is dropped” in writing. He waited for months. Instead, they came back and said they were going to kick him out of the army for willful dereliction of duty after all.

This goes on and on, back and forth, on and on. His going theory is: Lariam. They don't want to admit he's fucked up because of the Lariam. Maybe he is. Maybe he isn't. Maybe they'll kick him out of the army. Maybe they won't.

The media has tried to get answers out of the army. What are the plans for Staff Sergeant Pogany? “It would not be appropriate to comment,” said Major Robert E. Gowan, public-affairs officer of the Special Forces Command. Could the army explain

why this happened? Why would they ignore the advice of their own medical team and send a stressed-out soldier home for a court-martial? Gowan issued an answer:

"Throughout his time in Iraq, when advised that he had a mission to complete, Staff Sergeant Pogany repeatedly requested to 'go home.' After considering all the evidence available at the time, to include information from witnesses and the psychologist's report, Staff Sergeant Pogany's command determined the best interests of Staff Sergeant Pogany and the unit were served by sending him back to Fort Carson."

Pogany would get wind of these answers and get hot. Red-hot. *You want evidence? I'll show you evidence.* He'd fire off files to reporters. His dining room, the one with the red wall and the yellow ocher wall, was becoming a fortress of files. "Did you talk to that guy Steve Robinson? You should talk to him too."

Robinson, a leading veterans' advocate, testified in January before Congress, saying that soldiers who suffer mental breakdowns need help, not punishment. "Nowhere is this apparent disregard for psychological injuries more apparent than in the case of Staff Sergeant Georg-Andreas Pogany, who was charged with cowardice," he told the House Armed Services Committee panel. Afterward, he told reporters that Pogany's case had soldiers running scared. If they were afraid to report problems before, now there was no way in hell. "I have talked to soldiers who have said it," he said.

Travis started compiling statements like Robinson's on a Web site with Pogany's picture and a link to his legal-defense fund. "Okay, look at this," Pogany would say. "Post this one too." Like, army suicide rates. This is interesting. The spike in 2003 was huge: 17.3 per 100,000 soldiers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, compared with 12.8 for the army overall that year. One of the suspected culprits for the suicides: Lariam. "Post this one too." Army Surgeon General James B. Peake ordered a Mental Health Advisory Team survey of 756 soldiers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the first ever conducted during combat. Army mental-health workers said they felt untrained to treat combat stress, and many soldiers seeking help said they faced obstacle after obstacle—having to take two armed convoys, one to go be evaluated and another to get medicine. "Post this one too." And the spike in the suicide rate? The numbers the army quotes never include the soldiers who kill themselves once they get home—eight confirmed cases so far.

For Pogany, these weren't just numbers. One of the guys in his unit, Chief Warrant

Officer William Howell, 36, came home from Iraq and took his gun and chased his wife around the front yard with it before turning it on himself. The army confirmed that, yes, Howell had taken Lariam.

"Post this one too," Pogany said.

Michelle cries when she talks about Andrew sometimes. His military career is probably over, and so are his dreams of an intelligence career. Who's going to hire a guy with a record like this? A rising military-intelligence agent, all that college he did, six years in the army, and look what it's come to. *I am not a coward. I didn't do anything wrong. All I did was ask for help. This makes no sense. Do you see how this makes no sense?* It is the cry of a man drowning in loss and disillusionment.

He works in his dining room. He's got big blue binders, boxes of complaints he's filed and Pentagon reports and DOD directives and practically a Ph.D.'s worth of research on military law and pharmaceuticals. So far he's filed three inspector-general complaints, one of which fills a three-ring binder three inches thick. He's filed a congressional complaint and six Article 138s, his specialty. Each time he files these things, he sets the alarm in his Microsoft Outlook fifteen days ahead, because if they don't respond within fifteen days he gets to file to someone higher in the chain of command. He loves those alarms. *Bing!* He loves Outlook.

He does this instead of sleep. He can't sleep. Michelle will say, "Come on now, turn that computer off and come to bed." He eventually goes to bed. In the middle of the night, he wishes that he had been able to see them zip up the body bag and take the shredded Iraqi away. If he had seen that, maybe he would stop seeing the goat or the pig, that unrecognizable pile of human remains, over and over, a form of torture perhaps only lunatics know. To hear him complain about this and to hear how he had to beg the army to send him to Walter Reed Army Medical Center for counseling and to see him continuously and meticulously track the details of his case is to see one of those dogs pacing at the pound you look at and say, How did that poor thing get so damaged?

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Get your head out of your ass, you fucking coward.

Three months after Andrew got home from Iraq, the team sergeant who first called him a coward, the guy who told him to get his head out of his ass, was killed in Iraq by a roadside bomb.

The memorial service was at Fort Carson, and Andrew went, but Michelle didn't, and afterward he got in his Jetta and dropped his head on the steering wheel, overwhelmed by the whole shit deal.

JEANNE MARIE LASKAS is a GQ writer-at-large.

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VOLUME 74, NO. 7. GQ—GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY (ISSN 0016-6979) is published monthly by The Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.: S.I. Newhouse, Jr., Chairman; Steven T. Florio, Vice-Chairman; Charles H. Townsend, C.O.O.; John W. Bellando, Executive Vice-President and C.F.O.; Jill Bright, Executive Vice-President-Human Resources; John Buese, Executive Vice-President-Chief Information Officer; David Orlin, Senior Vice-President-Strategic Sourcing; Robert Bennis, Senior Vice-President-Real Estate. Shared Services provided by Advance Magazine Group: David B. Chemidlin, Senior Vice-President-General Manager, Shared Services Center. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Canada post return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 1632, Station A, Windsor, ON N9A7C9.

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