Glyn Vincent

In the Sandbox

Since the Civil War, someone from pretty much every generation on the Sivits family tree has served in the military. When Daniel Sivits was a kid, his uncle, Carl Sivits, fought in the Korean War. Carl came back, but he could no longer handle life, and one night he ended it with a shotgun.

This was in southern Pennsylvania, where the Allegheny ridge runs up against Maryland and West Virginia. Dan grew up in a little town called Hyndman, with his mother, his younger brother Charles, and his stepfather, Bill, a coal miner. The family lived in a small house in a hollow by Wills Creek. They were poor—"snow came in through the windows," Dan recalls—but not unhappy. The boys were inseparable. They were just a year apart in age, and they looked like twins, both skinny and blond. Bill taught them how to shoot arrows and hunt squirrels, and they spent much of their time wandering along the creek and through the surrounding woods on their own. Dan doesn't talk much about his boyhood these days, but when he does, Charles is always in the story and the mood is carefree: "We'd jump

a train and go up above Fairhope, swim and walk all the way back. By the time we got back, we was black as coal because of walking in all the dirty railroad tracks, and then we had to go down here and jump in the creek and clean off before we ever came home."

Dan was cocky, and whatever he did Charles did the same. In 1960, the year their uncle Carl committed suicide, a friend of Dan's enlisted in the Marine Corps, and Dan thought, "Heck, if he can do it, so can I." Besides, he says, "I wanted to make something of myself, and I wanted my parents to be proud of me." So he dropped out of high school and became a marine. Later that year, Charles dropped out, too, and he joined the army. Dan wound up in Cuba, guarding the naval base at Guantanamo Bay during the missile crisis, and Charles was shipped to Korea to patrol the thirty-eighth parallel.

When Dan was discharged, he went home and got a job in a dry-cleaning plant in Cumberland, making a dollar and a half an hour. One day, Charles came home on leave, and the brothers spent a night catching up. Charles showed Dan pictures of the pretty Korean women he was dating. He was stuck on one in particular, a girl called Sally with big wide eyes and a Doris Day haircut. The next evening, when Dan got back from the cleaning plant, he found a piece of cardboard on the kitchen table with a note from his brother saying, "I sure hate to leave and you know yourself that I wouldn't leave if I was sober so I've drunk this brew. Thanks for letting me stay overnight . . . You all be good and take care of yourselves."

Charles returned to Korea, and Dan soon reenlisted—this time in the army. Dan asked to be posted in Korea, too, but he was sent to Germany. Meanwhile, Charles was transferred to the 1st Infantry Army Division—the Big Red One—in Vietnam. After six years in the army, Charles was a staff sergeant, but he had never experienced combat. On his first mission—a nighttime operation to surround a Viet Cong village northeast of Saigon—he was walking, as a sergeant must, at the head of his platoon when a Claymore mine packed with ball bearings blew up in front of him. Charles was one of seventeen men wounded in the explosion and, in the firefight that ensued, he was left by the side of the road, where he was found dead the next day.

Dan had been in Germany just a few weeks when his mother wrote asking him why he hadn't come home for Charles's funeral. "The Red Cross was supposed to have notified me that my brother had been killed," Dan says. "They never did notify me. I was all by myself. Hadn't made any friends

Above: Dan Sivits in Vietnam, 1967. Left: Charles Sivits with Sally in Korea, 1964.

hardly by that time. And I broke down and had some problems with not being able to cope." In his grief, Dan had the notion that he would finish his brother's tour for him, so he applied for a transfer to Vietnam, and this time he got his wish.

When his first tour in Vietnam was done, Dan volunteered for another. After his second tour, he couldn't find a job, and in 1970 he signed on for a third. "The money was good," he says. "You didn't have to pay taxes. I was living high on the hog." In fact, Dan was an eager soldier. He spent most of his time in Vietnam deep in the bush working as a mine warfare and demolitions specialist. Once, when he was helping to clear a road to a Special Forces camp on the Cambodian border, his unit came under attack and three South Vietnamese fighters were hit by Viet Cong fire. "They were out in the open, about seventy-five yards in front of our perimeter. The enemy

was using mortars, RPGs, machine guns, AK-47s—they were putting it on us. Before I could even think, I said 'Lay down some fire and I'll go out and get them guys.' " Three times, Dan dashed into the open to recover the fallen Vietnamese. He didn't even realize the last one was dead until he'd completed the rescue. It didn't matter. As far as Dan was concerned, any one of those wounded soldiers could have been his brother, slowly bleeding to death. For his wild courage, Dan was awarded a bronze star, and by the time he finally left Vietnam he'd collected another one, as well as a purple heart.

Dan had never had much luck finding work he liked as a civilian, and after the war he joined the navy. He started out on an underwater demolition team, then he got into ship maintenance, and he ended up as a submarine welder in Coronado, California. There he met Freda Morris, a slim, auburn-haired teenager from Arkansas with Indian blood—part Blackfoot, part Cherokee—and hazel eyes. Her father had fought in Vietnam, and she was living with her divorced mom. Everyone knew her as Sissy. Dan, who was now in his mid-thirties, had a lean, hard military bearing. He drove a sports car, wore a boonie hat, and had a tattoo of three stars—red, white, and blue. They fell in love. In the spring of 1979, Sissy found out she was pregnant, but she was too young to marry without her parents' consent, and her father refused to support a marriage that he said wouldn't last. Sissy was just sixteen years old when the baby, a boy she named Jeremy, was born in December, a day after the thirteenth anniversary of his uncle Charles's death.

Dan and sissy settled in San Diego, in a house with a small yard near Balboa Park. Dan was making a decent living, and in the family snapshots from Jeremy's first five years—the baby in his father's lap, the mother helping the toddler learn to walk, the little boy posing in a cowboy outfit—Dan and Sissy appear fit, tan, and smiling. Then, in 1984, after spending twenty-two of the past twenty-four years in the military, Dan had to decide between an overseas post and retirement. He chose retirement, and moved the family back home to Hyndman. When he couldn't find work there, he took a job more than a hundred miles away, with a commercial drywall finishing company in New Castle, Delaware. Money was short, and Dan was gone five days a week traveling to jobs up and down the eastern seaboard.

Sissy was left to care for Jeremy, and she kept him close. The B&O Railroad line ran by their house, and if the boy wanted to visit friends on the other side, Sissy took him by the hand and walked him to the crossing. Jeremy was a

lonely child, and overweight. In elementary school, the other kids called him Pugsley after the fat little boy on *The Addams Family*, and he fantasized about becoming an athlete. In his cramped room in Hyndman, he filled a wooden chest with baseball cards, and idolized Jackie Robinson, the black second baseman who broke the game's color barrier. Jeremy wanted to excel, but mostly he craved attention from his dad, who was terse and distant even when he was around. Sometimes in the summer Dan took the family with him on the road, putting them up in the homes he was building. Jeremy always brought a small television with him and, given the choice of any bedroom in a house, he would install himself in a closet, turn on his TV, and watch baseball, a sport in which his father had no interest.

In high school, Jeremy was a slow student—he had problems writing and reading—but he was determined to be popular. The school had about a hundred students, too few to field a football squad, but he made the baseball, wrestling, and soccer teams, and he got himself elected to the student council. There wasn't much else to do in Hyndman. The town had no movie theater, no bar or pool hall. After school, some kids would hang out in the empty lot across from the diner, appearing and disappearing in old sedans filled with smoke. Not Jeremy. Once, when a classmate insulted him, he bashed up some school lockers. But his touchiness also drove him to compete: if another kid said he could throw a ball forty-five yards, Jeremy would try for forty-six. He had a reputation as a good boy, polite and respectful.

Over the years, the Sivitses' house had grown cluttered with stacks of magazines and storage boxes, hurricane lamps and ceramic pigs, and all manner of bric-a-brac. The walls were grimy and needed paint. Sissy had grown heavy and suffered from diabetes, and Dan had let his hair and beard grow long. He had taken a job at a fiberglass plant in nearby Bedford, and with each year he became more remote. He hardly ever spoke about Vietnam—he had never even visited his brother Charles's grave—but in his presence it was impossible to forget the war. He wore POW-MIA T-shirts and bandannas. Jeremy's friends called him GI Dan because he was strict with his son and sometimes lashed out at him. From day to day, Jeremy didn't see much of his parents, since he came home from school and practice late in the evening. But he still worshiped his dad, eagerly anticipating the few chances he got each year to hunt and fish with him. When he was assigned to write a paper about discrimination, he wrote about Vietnam veterans.

He dug through his parents' closet and found Dan's medals, citations, and regimental insignia, as well as a rifle made by his grandfather. Jeremy had all these things framed as a sort of household shrine to the memory of his uncle and to his father's military career.

In 1998, Jeremy became the first member of his family to finish high school. He hoped to get a scholarship to play ball at one of the regional colleges or vocational schools where most of his classmates had gone. But that didn't work out, and it was hard to find a permanent job**.** Several big manufacturers in the area were scaling back. At one point, Jeremy got hired alongside his dad at the fiberglass plant, but then he got laid off and wound up doing temporary work at a window shade company. He was unemployed again in October when his best friend, David Hendrickson, announced that he was enlisting in the military. "If you join with me," he told Jeremy, "I get moved up a rank and make more money."

"I ain't going to be able to join," Jeremy said. "No recruiter wants to help me lose weight." He had fallen out of shape and was up to two hundred and sixty-two pounds.

David insisted that he at least come down to the recruiting office. The man there told Jeremy that if he lost sixty pounds he could enlist. For the next month he ran two miles a day with a weighted backpack, took saunas, and ate mostly rice and fish. When his father hounded him to get out and look for work, Jeremy presented him with the literature the recruiter had given him. "That's why I haven't found a job yet," he told Dan.

"OK," Dan said, and pushed the brochures aside.

The next day, Jeremy failed his first weigh-in, but he returned two weeks later and was accepted into the reserves. Dan gave his son his blessing, but in his own way; just before Jeremy left for basic training, Dan warned him that he'd disown him if he got dishonorably discharged. In early 1999, Jeremy was trained as a mechanic at Fort Jackson and assigned to the 372nd Military Police Reserve Company based in Cresaptown, Maryland, about a half hour's drive from home. His first assignment was to work in the recruitment office, urging high school students to consider a career in the military. That spring he wore his new uniform to his girlfriend's senior prom, and on Memorial Day he marched at the head of the parade in Hyndman, carrying the American flag. A year later on Memorial Day, Jeremy finally convinced his father to visit Charles's grave. It was the only time he saw Dan weep.

In August of 2001, Jeremy was deployed to Bosnia. During his first two months there, Dan was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and had to give up his job at the fiberglass plant, Jeremy's high-school girlfriend left him for another man, David's grandfather—to whom Jeremy felt as close as kin—got cancer, and the baby of another close friend was killed in a fire. Jeremy felt that his world was being erased. One night, sitting outside his bunker, he loaded his rifle with the idea of shooting himself in the head. But the moment passed.

Near the end of November, the wife of a buddy back home put Jeremy in touch with her friend Holly, a Head Start teacher, who had recently gotten divorced. The two began courting by e-mail, and Jeremy liked her sense of humor. He told her about Bosnia, which he was starting to enjoy. The fighting had ended before he got there, the countryside was beautiful, and the cafés were lively and cheap. He had visited medieval castles in Germany with his buddies. It was a life he could get used to.

Holly was skittish about getting involved with someone from Hyndman. She had attended Chestnut Ridge High School, which was four times the size of Jeremy's alma mater, and she thought of Hyndman as backward and woodsy. She had been married for three years to a country boy who seemed to have no greater ambition than lying around on the couch, and from the next man in her life she hoped for greater direction and worldliness. So she was pleasantly surprised when Jeremy returned home, in February of 2002, and they finally met. It turned out that he wasn't a redneck but a self-described "wigger"—a white man who affects black style. He had bonded with some black soldiers during basic training and adopted their taste for baggy clothes and flashy jewelry. He listened to hip-hop, which worked for Holly, who liked to go clubbing in Washington, D.C., on weekends. Jeremy took her to a Ruby Tuesday in Maryland for dinner and told her that it was his dream to go back to Europe and live there for a while. "I was swept off of my feet a little bit," Holly says.

Like his father, Jeremy found civilian life difficult. While he was dating Holly that spring, he worked at Wal-Mart, stocking shelves, and then in a succession of similarly unpromising, low-paying jobs. The recruitment brochures had claimed that being in the reserves would help his prospects, but it didn't. The war in Afghanistan was winding down, and a war in Iraq seemed increasingly likely. As soon as employers heard that Jeremy might

Jeremy Sivits on a camel in Iraq.

be mobilized, they had second thoughts. He and Holly had decided to marry, but they kept postponing the date while he looked for steady work. He tried to transfer from the reserves to the regular army, but his commanding officer wouldn't release him from his contract, and in November he was told that his company would soon be mobilized again for active duty.

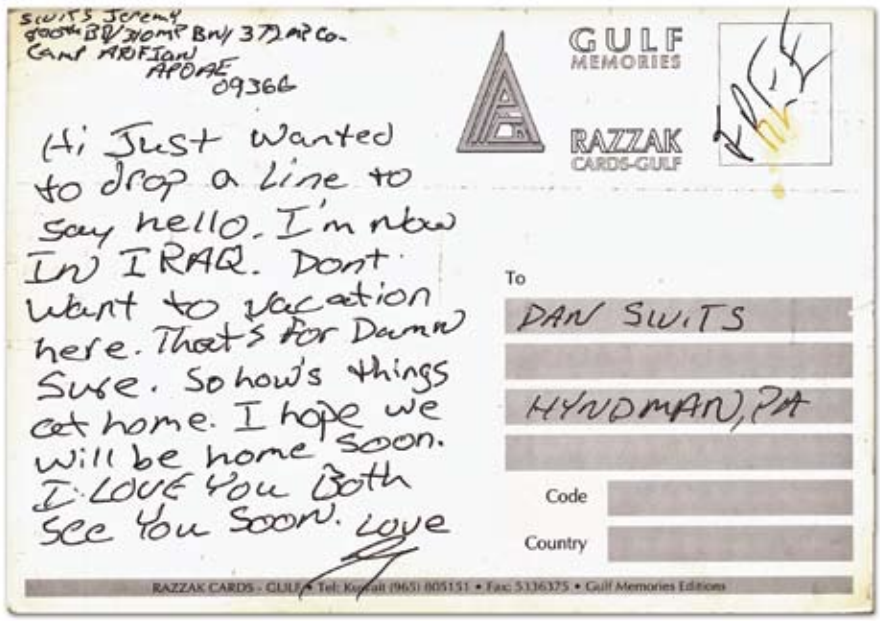
Jeremy and Holly got married a few days after Thanksgiving. Three months later, on February 25, 2003—the same day, as it happened, that Holly's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer—they tied a yellow ribbon around the tree in front of Holly's parents' house. It was the eve of Jeremy's deployment, first to Fort Lee and then on to Iraq. The next morning they were up before dawn. The air was bitter cold, the ground packed hard with snow and ice. Jeremy's company wasn't leaving Cresaptown until the afternoon, but the families had been told that threat of terrorist attacks required them to arrive early and in separate groups. When Dan and Sissy showed up, they could see that Jeremy and Holly had been crying. Dan gave Jeremy a cross that he had worn in Vietnam. He figured it would help bring Jeremy

back home alive. "It was just a whole bunch of random bizarreness," Holly says of that morning's emotions. Finally, the family watched as Jeremy, the company mechanic, clambered into a military wrecker—a heavy duty tow truck—and drove off at the rear of the convoy of trucks and Humvees.

While american forces advanced on Baghdad in March and April of 2003, the 372nd Military Police Company was held up at Fort Lee, Virginia. The MPs were given weapons and urban warfare training; they attended quick dos and don'ts classes in Muslim culture; and they were taught how to use their gas masks. On Easter weekend, Jeremy's father came to visit him. Dan had been through Fort Lee in the seventies, and the two men compared their training experiences. The previous weekend Jeremy had gotten a three-star tattoo like Dan's. "The white star was my dad being completely true, the red one was my uncle shedding blood for the country," he says, "and the blue one was me trying to be both of them."

On weekends when he didn't visit Holly and his parents, Jeremy went to Virginia Beach with his MP buddies. One of his new friends was Ivan Frederick, a guy whom he'd met in basic training back in 1999. Frederick, who was thirteen years older than Jeremy, had been in the military since 1984, and he'd also worked as a corrections officer in Virginia. Back in Cresaptown, he was brash, a joker who could often be found at the Bear Claw, a small bar just down the road from the reserve building. Jeremy had seen him as arrogant and superior, and he'd kept his distance. But at Fort Lee, Frederick noticed Jeremy and started to razz him. "Not picking to be mean, picking to have a good time, have a laugh," Jeremy says. They were both into NASCAR, and started hanging out. Jeremy detected a mellow attitude under Frederick's bravado. "I got to know him a little bit and thought, Man, this guy's pretty decent," he says. "He's not as bad as I thought he was."

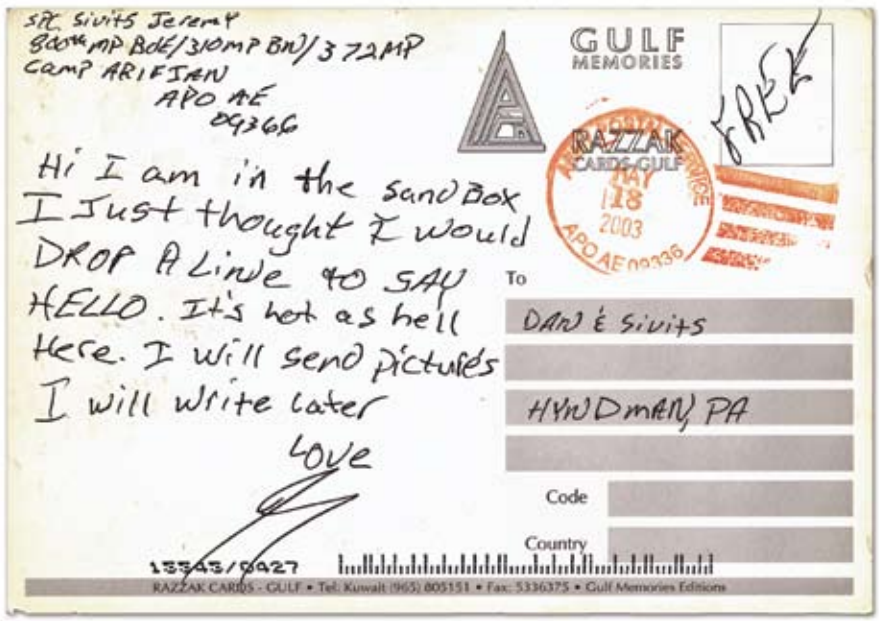
The 372nd Military Police finally took off for Kuwait aboard a chartered 747 on the thirteenth of May, more than a month after marines had pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square. Their arrival was not promising. The pilot aborted his first landing attempt, and on the second try, the lights went out and the cabin filled with smoke. Then, for four hours, the derelict jet sat on the broiling tarmac without power. Eventually ground transport arrived, but it quickly became clear that army command in Kuwait had no idea where to quarter Jeremy's



Two postcards sent home from Iraq by Jeremy Sivits, May, 2003.

company. In the hundred and twenty degree heat, their unairconditioned bus was sent from Camp Wolf to Camp Arifjan to Camp Camden Yards. A rumor went around that the 372nd wasn't supposed to be in Kuwait at all; that they were supposed to have been sent to Fort Bragg for homeland defense. By the middle of their second night in country, when they were finally given a few tents and a place to pitch them, the soldiers were sick with heat exhaustion, and demoralized.

A few days later, Jeremy entered Iraq as the mechanic on a convoy that was delivering fifty Humvees to various locations. He was glad to be on the move. Days passed without incident. Then, while traveling through eastern Baghdad on the way back to Kuwait, Jeremy was standing in the open turret of his vehicle, manning the gun, when an Iraqi stepped into the road carrying a yard-long tube on a shoulder strap. Jeremy had the man in his sights—his sergeant was shouting, "RPG! RPG!"—and he was getting ready to squeeze the trigger when he realized that what his target was carrying was not a rocket-propelled grenade launcher but the driveshaft for a truck. He sat down hard and found that his hands were



trembling. He had never drawn on a person before, and it scared him to realize that he might really kill somebody.

Jeremy's company was soon installed in a date factory in the predominantly Shiite Iraqi city of al-Hillah, not far from the ancient site of Babylon. Their mission was to train a local civilian police force, and they were well received. The company didn't have a kitchen, so they depended on local markets to provide them with fresh meat and vegetables. The Americans befriended Iraqi vendors and restaurant owners. They handed out candy and played soccer with Iraqi kids. Two women in the 372nd MPs, Specialists Megan Ambuhl and Sabrina Harman, grew particularly close to some of the children in al-Hillah, and developed relationships with their families too. Ambuhl, a college graduate, had traveled to Africa and the Galapagos Islands, and she seemed more mature than Harman, a pizza-shop manager from Alexandria, Virginia, who sometimes responded to the war as if it was a simulation. "The other day I heard my first grenade go off. Fun!" she wrote to her father, and in the same letter she said, "On June 23rd I saw my first dead body. I took pictures!" She enclosed a snapshot of herself leaning over a blackened corpse, giving a thumb-up. Jeremy's postcards home were less

enthusiastic. "I'm in the sandbox," he wrote upon his arrival in al-Hillah. "It's hot as hell."

The people of al-Hillah were generally grateful to America for getting rid of Saddam Hussein, but as the first summer of the occupation wore on, the positive dynamic between Iraqis and Americans gave way increasingly to feelings of mutual disappointment and resentment. "It almost got to the point where I didn't want to be bothered by them, because all we heard was 'Mister, Mister, give me this, give me that,' " Jeremy says. "It was frustrating—like 'I'm done giving, you start giving to me.' " Charles Graner, a friend of Jeremy's buddy Ivan Frederick, felt the same way. Once, on an expedition of MPs to the markets of Baghdad, Jeremy watched a child approach Graner, asking for money. Graner wheeled on the beggar in a rage, yelling: "Get away from me! Go away!" The speed with which he snapped startled Jeremy. But nerves were strained that summer. The insurgency was spreading. Any Iraqi, even one in uniform, was a potential threat. Without security and trust, many American soldiers began to question the purpose and conduct of the war and occupation.

In late July, Jeremy wrote to his father: "Pop, how do you deal with something that you have seen a senior NCO that you look up to do?" The week before, he had been a gunner on a night convoy returning from southern Iraq when the lead truck came to an abrupt halt at an intersection where there was a cluster of Iraqi police. One of them had apparently yelled or made a hostile gesture at the NCO. "He got out of the truck and choke slammed this Iraqi cop that weighs about 120 lbs," Jeremy wrote to Dan. "Dad, he could of easely of popped this guy's head like a pimple. I didn't know what to do." Jeremy wondered whether to aim his gun at the Iraqi or the NCO. "I'll be honest I kind of FROZE. I tell you this WAR play hell on you're mind. I don't know how you do it, because you have seen and done more in war time than I could even think or imagine."

JEREMY STOPPED VOLUNTEERING for night patrols. He was tired of being shot at, tired of working fourteen-hour days, seven days a week in stifling heat, and tired of being somewhere he wasn't wanted. Morale was terrible. "We were done," Jeremy says. "Couldn't take it anymore." Come fall, the 372nd MPs were supposed to go home. Instead, at the end of September, the company was ordered north, to the outskirts of Baghdad, where their new assignment was to police Abu Ghraib prison.

The MPs had been warned about Abu Ghraib. It was right in the middle of the Sunni Triangle, and had been attacked regularly by insurgents. It was also, they had heard, the place where thousands of Saddam Hussein's prisoners had been tortured and executed. The last words of his victims, some Iraqis said, were written in blood on the walls. The first American troops to reach the vast prison compound—nearly half a square mile, contained by twenty-foot walls topped with concertina wire—had found dogs roaming the grounds, digging human bones out of mounds of garbage.

Now, Abu Ghraib was being used to house Iraqi criminals and suspected insurgents and in September of 2003, new rules for interrogating these prisoners had been ordained by the military high command in Iraq. Practices that had previously been considered illegal were now allowed and even encouraged by the Pentagon. Military Intelligence (MI) officers began showing up at Abu Ghraib, manhandling prisoners and ignoring MPs who protested. Shortly before Jeremy's company arrived at the prison, an MP noted in the log that a detainee "was stripped down per MI and he is neked and standing tall in his cell," and a few weeks later when Megan Ambuhl and Sabrina Harman first entered the high-security cell blocks—the hard site, as they were known—they saw naked male detainees with women's panties on their heads. There was excrement on the walls, and there were pools of urine on the floor. Some of the stripped detainees were shackled to the bars of their cells, moaning in pain. Ambuhl and Harman had no prior experience or training as prison guards, so when Ambuhl was told by MI agents to come into the showers and point at the detainees' genitals and laugh, she obeyed.

But to Jeremy, Abu Ghraib was an improvement over al-Hillah. "I'm doing fine here," he wrote his parents. "The new place I'm at is not that bad!" As a mechanic, he lived apart from the guards in a different part of the prison, in a converted cell that he shared with another mechanic, a nineteen-year-old kid fresh from basic training. Every morning at seven, they went off to change oil and fix broken axles for ten hours or more. They were bored and spent a lot of time thinking about going home. Jeremy wrote to his father about them going fishing together in the spring. He wrote to his mother, asking about her job at the Dollar General Store in Hyndman. And, he told his parents, "I can't wait to see my BEAUTIFUL wife. You don't know how much I miss her. I think when I get home we will just run away for about a week."

One night in early November, Jeremy was looking after the prison's generators when his friend Sergeant Frederick stopped by the office where he was working. They started talking—"just goofing around having a good time being me and Freddie like we always did," Jeremy says. Frederick got a call on the radio, summoning him to a holding area where he was needed to escort some detainees into the high-security cell block. On his way out, he invited Jeremy to come with him, and Jeremy agreed.

At the holding area, they found seven prisoners with green plastic sandbags over their heads and their wrists in flex cuffs. There were only three MPs on hand to escort them, so Jeremy took one of the prisoners by the cuffs and, following the others, led him downstairs to the cell block. Charles Graner was there, wearing a black wool ski cap and bright green and black gloves. He was yelling at the new prisoners. They had been thrown in a pile on the floor, and when Jeremy pushed the detainee he was leading toward the pile, another soldier pushed the Iraqi down to the ground. Graner's girlfriend, Lynndie England, and another MP, Javal Davis, were jumping on the prisoners' bare hands and feet. Then Davis, who weighed more than two hundred pounds, hurled himself onto the pile of prisoners.

Jeremy had never seen anything like this before, and he didn't know what to make of it. Physically assaulting a prisoner was against regulations, though it didn't really require regulations to see that what was going on was wrong. But Jeremy found it kind of funny too. The other Americans were all laughing and joking. Davis jumped again. Then Graner started jumping on the pile of prisoners and so did Frederick. When another soldier passed by, Graner urged him to come and get some.

From above, Jeremy heard the angry voice of the ranking officer on duty, Shannon Snyder, who was on a balcony overlooking this scene. Snyder told Davis to cut it out and go back to his post, and Davis did as he was told. But after Snyder left, Graner and Frederick continued hitting, insulting, and undressing the detainees, forcing the naked prisoners to climb into a pyramid foundation, and to simulate scenes of fellatio and masturbation. And they took photographs of everything.

For Graner, the night of November 8 was a party. It was England's birthday, and he wanted to show her a good time. He also wanted souvenirs to give her as birthday presents. While the prisoners in the pile were being stripped and lined up against a wall, Graner handed Jeremy his camera and

squatted over the ones who were still on the floor. Graner lifted the hooded head of a man, cradled it in one arm, and made a fist with his free hand, posing as if he were about to punch his victim. Jeremy took the picture.

Moments later, Frederick grabbed the Iraqi whom Jeremy had escorted onto the tier, drew an imaginary x on his chest with his finger, and then punched the target with his full force. The man collapsed, gasping for air. "I might have put him in cardiac arrest," Frederick said. Jeremy went over to the fallen prisoner, and pointed to his own chest, rising and falling as he inhaled and exhaled, to remind the convulsing man how to get his breath back. Finally, Meghan Ambuhl handed the prisoner an inhaler, and after a few minutes he began to breathe normally again.

Then Graner knocked a prisoner unconscious. This time, the assembled soldiers feared the detainee was dead. "His eyes were closed and he was not moving," Jeremy said later. "But I could see his chest rise and fall, so I knew he was still alive." Graner was rubbing his fist. "Damn," he said, "that hurt."

After thirty minutes, Jeremy decided that he'd seen enough. He'd laughed at the pyramid, but now his buddy Frederick was masturbating some of the inmates, saying, "Look at what these animals do as soon as you turn your back on them." Jeremy thought that was too much. When Ambuhl and Harman said they were going down the hall to make a phone call, he left with them.

"You didn't see anything!" Frederick called after him.

Jeremy walked back to his office, where he had a cigarette, and went to sleep on a cot. The next morning, he had to be woken at six to refill the generators.

Two months later, Jeremy was in his usual position—lying under a truck in his overalls—when a sergeant informed him he was wanted at headquarters. The sergeant ordered him to leave his flak jacket and rifle behind, and at headquarters Jeremy was told to wait in a chair in the hallway. Sabrina Harman and Megan Ambuhl were there, too, and they all sat together in silence for an hour until Jeremy was called into the office of Special Agent Tyler Pieron from the army's Criminal Investigations Department. "We're led to believe that you know about some stuff that happened late October or early November at the hard site," Pieron said.

Jeremy slumped in his chair and said, "What do you want to know?" Pieron advised him of his rights. Jeremy said he had nothing to hide and

no need for an attorney, he was ready to talk. His interview lasted from nine in the morning until half past four that afternoon. "I put everything on the table . . . I just let it fly," Jeremy says.

The next morning Jeremy wrote to his father:

> Dad I have to tell you something. I hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me. Some shit happened in the prison. I was there and was a witness. I was quinestoned by CID yesterday. Because I was in some pictures. I swear to you I didn't touch any of them as far as striking them. The only thing I did was take of a set of flex cuffs. I don't know what's going to happen. I could get off with nothing at all, I may get dearaliction of duty. But the one that scare me the most is a less than Honorable Discharge. Or even Dishonorable. That scares me so much because I know what you told me. I'm sorry Pop. I fucked up! I should of told someone. Dad I'm so damn scared right now. I let you down SO BAD. All I ever want was to make you PROUD. And I fucked that up. Just like everything else. Dad, you my father I don't want to lose you. I'm scared that I will now. I was truefull with CID. I told them everything I knew. I'm so scared.

Jeremy's tears stained the letter. "Sorry about the spots," he wrote, then signed off, "Love, Jeremy."

Dan told him to sit tight, that the army would take care of its own. Jeremy wasn't so sure. He'd had several more interviews with CID officers, telling them everything he could about what he had witnessed, and each time he signed a copy of the statements he had given. But by the end of January, he'd stopped mentioning the matter in his letters home. Iraq was simply "hell"—a place he hated and was chafing to leave. "We should only have about 80 days until we fly," he wrote. "I can't wait to get on that bird." He knew he was in trouble on February 4th, when he and five others—Ambuhl, Davis, Frederick, Graner, and Harman—were moved to Camp Victory in Baghdad, and England, who was pregnant, was sent home to the States. Still another month passed before he learned from a bulletin on CNN that he was to be charged and court-martialed.

Jeremy called home with the news. But he was not allowed to go into any details. He was still bound by official secrecy, and the pictures had not yet come out. When they did at the end of April, Holly was stunned. In the first report she heard, Jeremy was identified, incorrectly, as the main

photographer. "It was the most horrifying moment ever," she says. "I was thinking, 'Who did I marry?' "

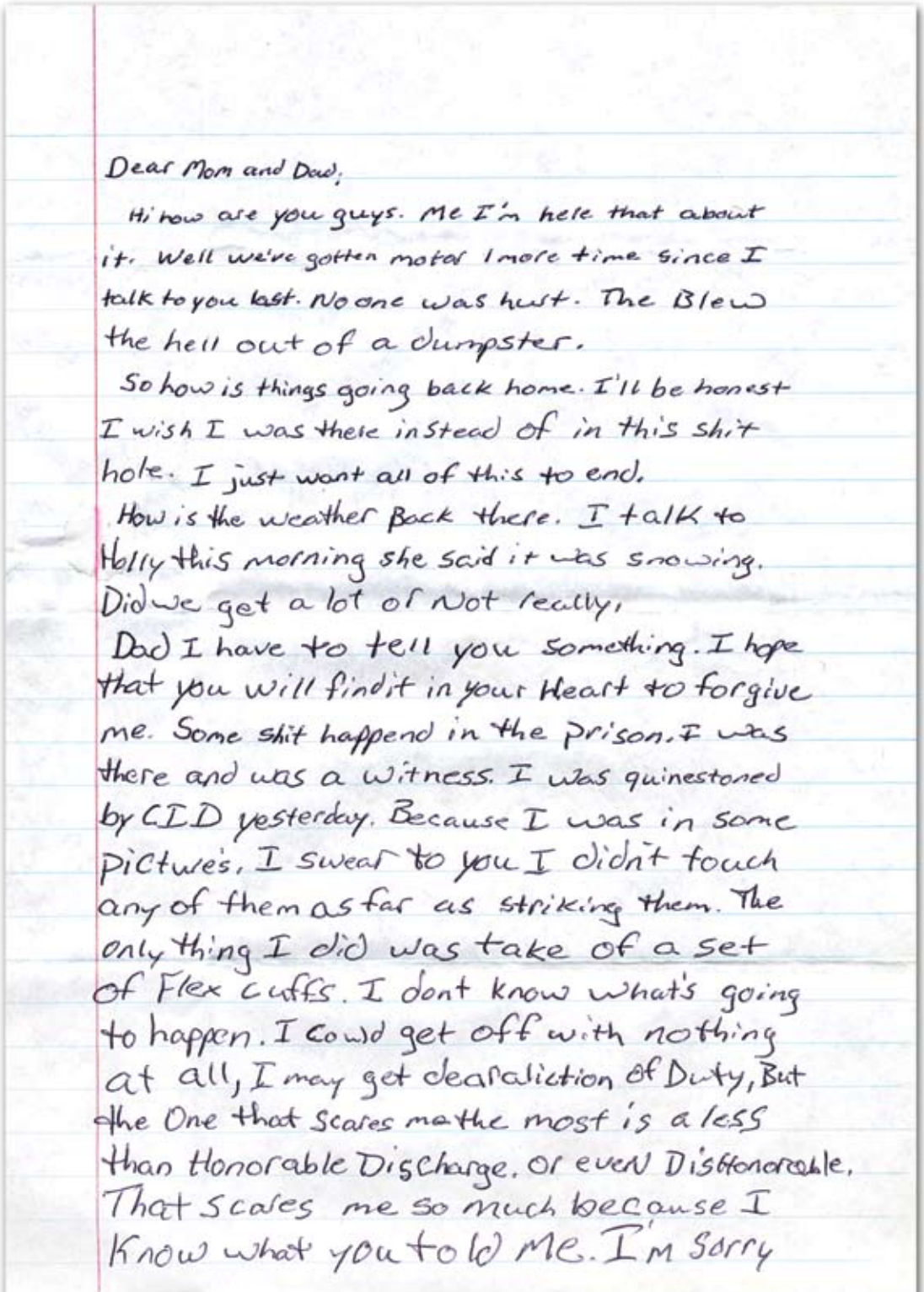
Over the phone, Jeremy told her he had only taken one picture and was present at the hard site for just a short time. Holly didn't press him. "He's still getting mortars thrown at him," she says. "He doesn't have his gun. All kinds of stuff is going through my head. Do I want to question him? Do I want to freak him out and make him feel like I'm going to abandon him? Because he could still get blown up at any moment." Holly's father, who had been a staff sergeant in the army for two years and a reservist for twenty-six, tried to reassure her. Someone in command had to have ordered these activities, he said.

A few weeks before Jeremy's trial in early May, his mother, Sissy, stepped out onto her porch in Hyndman and found her front yard filled with reporters. The phone began to ring at all hours. Television crews were camped out in the street and kept their floodlights on the house well into the night. A neighbor finally arranged to have a tractor trailer parked in the street to block the view of the house so the Sivitses could have some privacy.

A reporter and photographer from the *New York Post* found Holly at her parents' house, and took her picture when she stepped out to her car. The next day, a reporter followed her to her job at Head Start. The office was getting constant calls from the press, and after a while, her boss suggested that she should keep a lower profile. So Holly quit work and went on unemployment.

Sissy was particularly worried about Dan. His son's ordeal stirred his memories of Vietnam. Dan had always blamed himself for his brother's death, since Charles had enlisted because he had. Now Jeremy had done the same, and Dan wanted to help his son. But he felt helpless. He couldn't get to Baghdad, and he couldn't hire an expensive lawyer. The one time he spoke to a reporter, Dan, a lifelong Republican, regretted showing his rage. He had said that the Bush administration was using his son to cover their butts.

For his part, Jeremy realized that he had no defense. "I'd confessed," he says. "I self-incriminated." It irked him that dozens of other soldiers suspected of abuse at Abu Ghraib in late 2003 had refused to speak with CID and their cases were closed without charges. At one point, it was suggested that Jeremy might receive clemency if he cooperated in the prosecution of



Dear Mom and Dad,

Hi how are you guys. Me I'm hele that about it. Well we've gotten motar 1 more time since I talk to you last. No one was hurt. The Blew the hell out of a dumpster.

So how is things going back home. I'll be honest I wish I was there instead of in this shit hole. I just want all of this to end.

How is the weather back there. I talk to Holly this morning she said it was snowing. Did we get a lot of Not really,

Dad I have to tell you something. I hope that you will findit in your Heart to forgive me. Some shit happend in the prison. I was there and was a witness. I was quinestoned by CID yesterday. Because I was in some pictwes, I swear to you I didn't touch any of them as far as striking them. The only thing I did was take of a set of Flex cuffs. I dont know what's going to happen. I could get off with nothing at all, I may get dearaliction of Duty, But the One that scares me the most is a less than Honorable Discharge. or even Dishonorable. That scares me so much because I know what you told me. I'm sorry

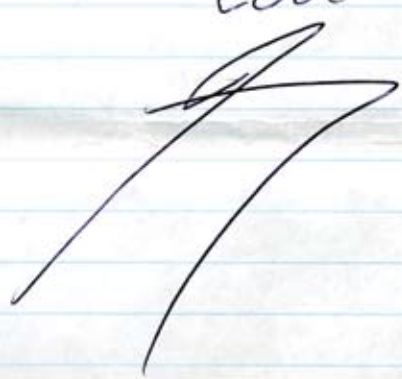
A letter sent to his parents by Jeremy Sivits from Iraq, January, 2004.

Pop. I Fucked up! I should of told someone. Dad I'm so Damn Scared right Now. I let you down so BAD. All I ever want was to make you PROUD. And I Fucked that up. Just like everything else. Dad you my Father I dont want to Lose you. I'm scared that I will Now. I was trueFull will CID I told them everything I Knew. I'm so Scared.

I will let you Know what is going to happen when I hear. Sorry about the Spots.

Well I'm going to close for Now.

Love



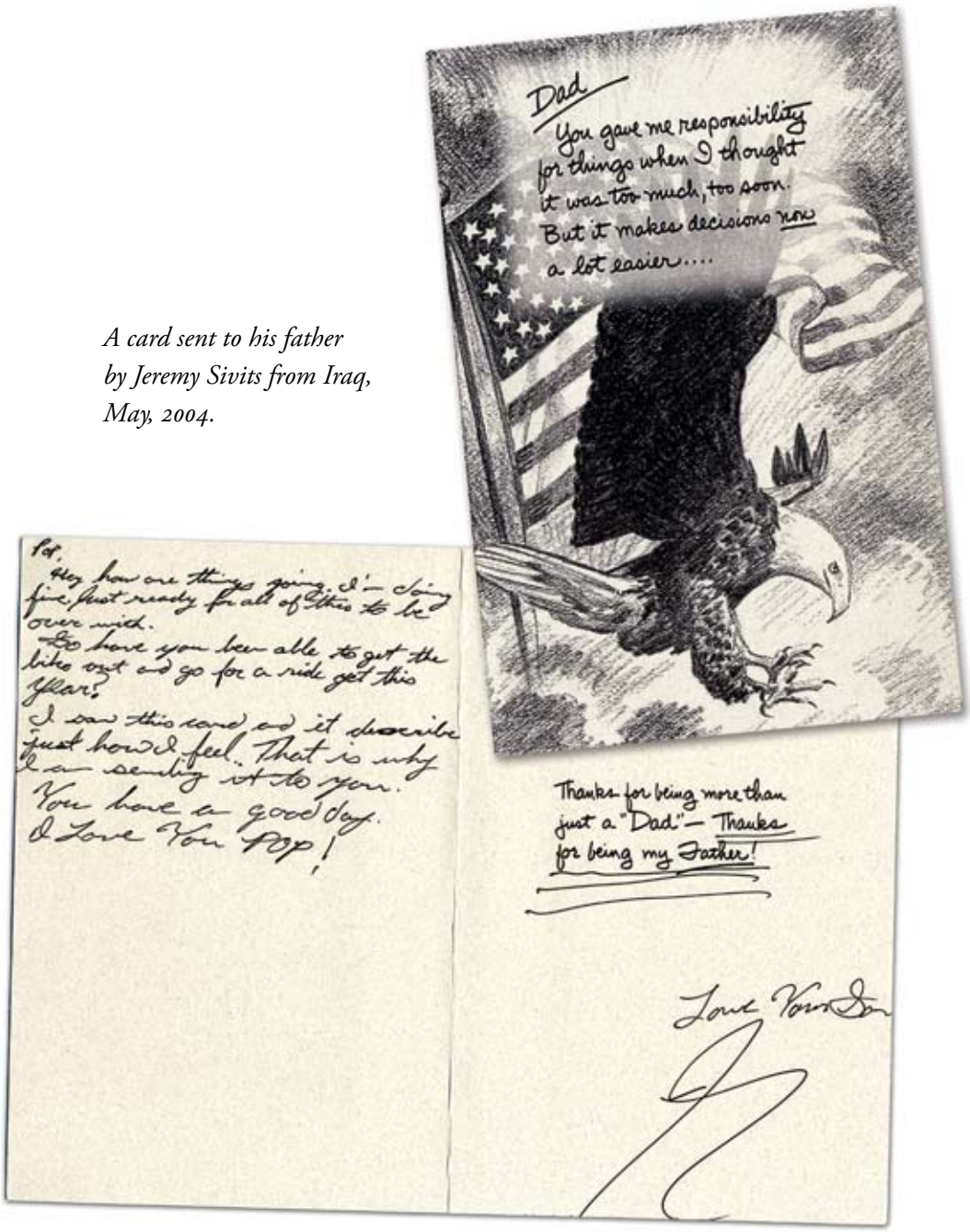
others, but as his lawyer negotiated a plea agreement, the terms became less favorable: in exchange for pleading guilty and for testifying that the other Abu Ghraib defendants had abused prisoners for their own enjoyment and on their own initiative, he was offered a bad-conduct discharge and a maximum jail term of one year, rather than five years. It took Jeremy several weeks to consider the deal. He was still living in the same tent with five of the other charged MPs, and they told him to do what he had to do. Jeremy recalls Frederick saying, "If it hadn't been for me, you would never have been involved in this mess." A few weeks before his court date, Jeremy capitulated, and within days his prepared testimony was leaked to the press. In the accounts that followed, Jeremy was portrayed as a whistleblower.

On may 19, 2004, Jeremy called Holly to tell her he was about to be taken to the convention center in Baghdad to be court-martialed.

"Don't leave me," he said. "I love you."

"It'll be okay," Holly said. "Whatever happens we'll get through it." In Pennsylvania, it was still evening of the day before, and she had just come home from an outdoor prayer vigil held in Jeremy's honor. More than a hundred and fifty people had gathered at a campground outside Hyndman, near the banks of Wills Creek, not far from where Dan Sivits's boyhood home had once stood. Dan and Sissy were there of course, along with their neighbor Tom Cunningham, who had been mayor of Hyndman for thirty years, and Rhonda Sites, the owner of the diner, and her husband, Greg, Jeremy's soccer coach in high school. There were yellow ribbons everywhere and posters that read, we support jeremy sivits, our hometown hero. Everyone had seen the pictures of abuse at Abu Ghraib—but like Cunningham, and the other veterans in the crowd who held small American flags in their hands, they believed Jeremy was a scapegoat—the soldiers who got in trouble at Abu Ghraib had been acting on orders from higher-ups.

Dan stood in the second row, holding Sissy's hand. A faded orange T-shirt that Jeremy had given him hung on his wiry frame, and he wore a black MIA bandanna across his forehead. The crowd went silent when he rose to speak. "We still love him," Dan said. "I am a veteran of the Vietnam War and I want to say one thing—Jeremy is always a vet in my heart and in my mind." As the day faded, the residents of Hyndman stood together and sang "God Bless America."



A card sent to his father by Jeremy Sivits from Iraq, May, 2004.

Holly, a Democrat, thought the anthem was the most moving moment in a ceremony marred by political grandstanding. One speaker had gone on about godlessness in America, and she'd thought, What's that got to do with my husband? Holly had known for weeks that Jeremy's trial date was coming, and while she waited, the insurgency in Iraq had grown steadily bloodier—bombs were exploding every day, civilians were being decapitated, military casualties were increasing. Holly had no faith left to lose in President Bush and his war, but her devotion to Jeremy was unshaken. She didn't let herself worry about what her husband had done at Abu Ghraib. She worried about his safety, about getting him back alive. She worried about her mother, who was dying of breast cancer. She worried about her job and her finances. She had gone on antidepressants, and as her community sang and prayed around her, she imagined a miracle: the judge would tell Jeremy there had been a mistake and set him free.

But Jeremy knew he was going to jail. Of all the soldiers implicated in the Abu Ghraib outrages, he was the most minor figure to face prosecution, and perhaps for that reason military command had put him first in line for a court-martial. The secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, had flown into Baghdad a few days before and promised that the wrongdoers would be punished, and Jeremy understood that he was being made an example.

After his phone call home, Jeremy was issued a sidearm with a single round of ammunition—to defend himself in case the armored bus taking him to the convention center was attacked on the way. A truck bomb had exploded near the trial site the day before, and on the morning of Jeremy's court-martial, throngs of protesters had gathered to denounce American abuses.

The trial lasted less than four hours. Jeremy's laboriously detailed account of what he had done and seen on the night of November 8th at the hard site at Abu Ghraib was the first public admittance of culpability by an American. "It was wrong, it shouldn't have happened," he told the judge. Then, in tears, he apologized to the Iraqi people: "I should have protected those detainees that night. I should have done the right thing." He pleaded with the judge not to discharge him from the army. "I want to stay in. I love the army. I love the flag. That's all I've ever wanted to be, was an American soldier." Then, after just twenty-eight minutes of deliberation, the judge handed down the maximum sentence allowed by the plea agreement: a year in prison and a bad-conduct discharge.

"I wasn't mad at him," Jeremy says of the judge. "He had a job to do. Same with the prosecution. They had a job to do. They weren't out to destroy me."

In Hyndman, Jeremy's dad was less forgiving. "Jeremy's job was working on vehicles, not in a prisoner environment," he said. "Once he got in there he couldn't tell a staff sergeant 'I won't go along with what you are doing.' " Two days after the trial Dan was hospitalized following a nervous collapse.

Early one spring morning last year, Holly drove up to a side gate at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina to pick Jeremy up and take him to the beach for a few days before returning to Hyndman. Jeremy was being released two months early, a reward for good behavior. He was wildly excited. At one point, Holly considered pulling off the road so that he could get out and calm down. "It was almost like we were on our first date again," Holly says. But Jeremy's agitation was not entirely romantic. While Holly was driving, Jeremy pulled out his trial transcript and opened it to the torture photographs taken at Abu Ghraib. "I want you to know the real story," he said. "I'm not going to hide it from you."

Jeremy had never been able to talk to Holly about Abu Ghraib in detail. Now he went through his memories picture by picture. Holly had a lot of questions, but only one that Jeremy had a hard time answering: had the soldiers really been instructed to abuse the Iraqis? Jeremy understood that Military Intelligence had told them to be rough with the prisoners, but he felt that he and his friends had gone too far. "Why would you do something of that nature when you know darn well it's wrong?" he said.

Jeremy's return to Hyndman was quiet, with no celebrations. Holly soon became pregnant. He took the first job he found, working the grill at the town diner, earning minimum wage. His high school buddies came in, and there were hugs and awkward attempts at normal conversation, but the old connection wasn't there. When he got back from Bosnia, it had bothered Jeremy when his Hyndman friends asked, overeagerly, "Did you kill anybody?" Now, nobody knew what to ask him, and he didn't know what to say about Iraq. After a while, when he walked through the crowded front room of the diner, many of the people he knew—even those who'd supported him—nodded without a word.

Perhaps it was Jeremy's sense of growing isolation that spurred him to tell his story. A few months after his release from prison, he declared that he wanted to get everything off his chest. Yes, he had deserved to be punished,

Dan and Jeremy Sivits after a hunt.

he said, but he also felt it was unfair that others were being let off the hook. Every night on television, there was more news about prisoner abuse, and no one was paying the price. He felt like a dupe. He had been making periodic trips to Fort Hood, Texas, to testify for the prosecution in the courts-martial of his former comrades at Abu Ghraib, and on his most recent visit he had acquired a new tattoo alongside his red, white, and blue stars: a red apple with a worm crawling through it. "It's official," he said, "I'm a bad apple." Some of the defendants had the same tattoo, and Jeremy chuckled as he displayed his—an emblem, simultaneously, of alienation and solidarity, of defiance and shame. Jeremy had repeatedly demonstrated his belief that duty means taking responsibility, but his straightforwardness could be disarming.

The summer after Jeremy's release, Holly's mother died, and Holly and Jeremy decided to move in with her father. Jeremy had found a better job, with benefits, as a mechanic at a concrete plant in Cumberland. On autumn weekend afternoons, he could be found watching a Penn State football game in his living room, where the walls and shelves were crowded with Holly's

mother's collection of angel figurines. At such times, with the household dogs nudging around his feet, Iraq seemed far away, and Jeremy projected an air of boyish amiability. But one night after a shift at the concrete plant—he was tired, his nails were black, and he hadn't shaved—he rocked nervously in his recliner, watching the game out of one eye, and his voice suddenly grew animated. "If I was such a bad person, why did I go and help those two Iraqis that Freddie and Graner hit?" he asked. "Why did I take the flex cuffs off that detainee whose hands were turning blue?" He kept coming back to these questions, and he pondered why, on that night, he'd stayed as long as he did at the hard site.

"I could have probably left before, but I didn't," he said. Then he added, "I almost feel like I was supposed to be there. Because I actually helped a couple of people, and if I hadn't been there—what would have happened to them?"

Jeremy believed he was settling into a new phase of life, and was trying to put the past behind him. He rarely goes out anymore. He's stopped wearing flashy clothes, and he listens to country music instead of hip-hop. He's put on weight again, and Holly says he's become wary and cautious since he got home. He doesn't trust people and he doesn't joke around like he used to. She worries that he is becoming quiet and withdrawn, like his father.

"Jeremy can't say the war doesn't bother him because it does," Sissy said one afternoon. "He tries to say, Oh, Mom, I just want to forget about it. But he'll see something on the news about Iraq and he'll get up and walk away. He won't talk about it. He's going to do the same thing this man did." She pointed at Dan.

Jeremy is big, with the strong dark features of his mother's Indian heritage, and when he shows anger, he does so in a sulking, brooding way, without projecting any sense of menace—or sometimes he just stops talking, and scowls. But one night, he suddenly blurted out that he was having problems controlling his temper, that he was lashing out at Holly for no reason, and that he was in therapy. He blamed his experience in Iraq. He'd seen so much hatred there, he said, and he'd felt it get inside him.

Toward the end of December, Holly was rushed to the hospital, where she gave birth—a month early—to a baby boy, James Sivits. The infant had trouble breathing, and after a few minutes in his parents' arms, he was hooked up to a respirator. The doctors warned that he might have

to be transferred to another hospital, but after a few days James started breathing normally.

"I got everything I wanted for Christmas," Jeremy said early in the new year. "I got my wife, I got to be home, I got a new baby, I got a good solid job. It's a new start." Jeremy felt that he would be a different kind of father than Dan had been. "When I was growing up war was a no-touch subject with Dad. I don't think I'll be as cold and as locked up. I think that I'll actually be able to talk, to tell my son what I experienced," he said, and fell silent.