New Fiction: The Lost Troop by Will Mackin

We had a dry spell in Logar. It was December and the weather was dog shit, so a degree of slowness was expected. But this went beyond slowness. It was like peace had broken out and nobody'd told us. Nights we'd meet in the ops hut for the mission brief. We'd tune the flat screens to the drones—over Ghazni, Orgun, and Khost—only to find all three orbiting within the same cloud. We'd listen to static on the UHF. We'd stare at phones that never rang. We could have left it all behind, walked off the outpost into the desert, never to be seen again. We could have created the Legend of the Lost Troop. Instead, we chose some place where we imagined the enemy might be hiding—a compound on the banks of the Helmand River, a brake shop in downtown Marjah, a cave high in the Hindu Kush mountains—and we ventured out there, hoping for a fight.

I thought of the Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima, who, when their island fell to the Americans, didn't know that it had fallen. Who, not long after, didn't hear that A-bombs had destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that their emperor had admitted defeat. Those soldiers hid in tunnels, on Iwo, for weeks after the war was over. For months, even. For them, the fight continued in those dark and narrow spaces, until they ran out of food. Until they drank the last of their water. Until, absent the means and/or the will to take their own lives, they climbed out of ratholes into the sun, to wander warm fields of lava rock in surrender.

I wondered if, one night, we'd drop out of the starry sky in our blacked-out helicopters and land near a walled compound in the desert. We'd run toward that compound with the rotor wash at our backs, through the dust cloud that had been kicked up by our arrival and out the other side. Through a crooked

archway in the compound's outer wall, we'd enter the courtyard. And there, among the fig trees and goats, we'd find an American tourist with a camera slung around his neck. Having served his time in Afghanistan, our fellow American had gone home, fallen in love, got married, and had the two bow-haired daughters now hiding behind his legs. Maybe he'd wanted his girls to see how brightly the stars shone in the desert. Maybe he'd wanted to share with them all the strange places the Army had sent him, way back when. I imagined that he'd look over at us and then say, with understanding and remorse, "Dudes, war's over."

But, as far as we knew, it wasn't. Therefore, we met in the ops hut every night at eight. In the absence of new intelligence, we'd review old intelligence. We'd double-check dead ends and reexamine cold cases. Finding nothing mission-worthy, Hal, our troop chief, would open the floor to suggestions. It'd be quiet for a while, as everyone thought.

"Come on," Hal would say.

He'd be standing in the middle of the room. We'd be sitting on plywood tables, balancing on busted swivel chairs, leaning against the thin walls. The drones, orbiting inside moonlit cumulonimbi, would beam their emerald visions back to us. Lightning would strike twenty miles away and the UHF would crackle. I, for one, didn't have any good ideas to offer.

One night, Digger spoke up: "Who remembers that graveyard decorated like a used-car lot, out in Khost?"

I raised my hand, along with a few others.

"I think we might need to go back there," Digger said.

The graveyard in question was on the northern rim of a dusty crater. We'd patrolled just to the south of it, a few weeks prior, on an easterly course. The "used-car lot" decorations were plastic strands of multicolored pennants. One end of each

strand was tied high in an ash tree that stood at the center of the graveyard. The other ends were staked into the hard ground outside the circle of graves. The graves themselves were piles of stone, shaped like overturned rowboats. I couldn't recall the name of our mission that night, its task and purpose, its outcome. But that graveyard stuck with me. I remembered the pennants snapping in the wind, dust parting around the graves like a current.

Digger, who'd been closer to the graveyard than I was, thought that the graves had looked suspicious. He thought they resembled old cellar doors—the type, I imagined, you'd find outside a farmhouse in Nebraska and run to from darkened fields as a tornado was bearing down. Digger postulated that at least one of those graves was made of fake stones.

"Styrofoam balls," he suggested to us in the ops hut, "painted to look like stones, then glued to a plywood sheet." Digger though that, if we sneaked into that graveyard and pulled open that hypothetical door, we might discover a Taliban nerve center, a bomb factory, or an armory. Digger had no idea what could be down there, but he'd got a weird feeling walking past that graveyard that night.

"Good enough for me," Hal said. "Let's make it happen."

We rode our helicopters—two dual-rotor, minigun-equipped MH-47s—northeast from Logar. We sat in mesh jump seats, across from one another, roughly ten per side. The MH-47, at altitude, stabilized like a swaying hammock. Lube, dripping from the crankcase, smelled like bong water. Beyond the open ramp at the back end of the tubular cargo bay, we watched the night pass by like the scenery in an old movie.

The 47s dropped us off in a dry riverbed, three miles east of the graveyard. We patrolled westward under heavy clouds. The clouds carried a powerful static charge, while the earth remained neutral. Sparkling dust hovered, and through night

vision I saw my brothers, walking with me, as concentrations of this dust. All I heard, as we walked, was my own breathing.

We connected with the crater's easternmost point, then walked in a counterclockwise direction along its rim until we reached the graveyard. We found the pennants torn and tattered, the ash tree diseased, the graves crooked. None of the stones were made of Styrofoam. Not one of the graves was an elaborately disguised entrance to a nefarious subterranean lair. Though, upon closer inspection, I noticed that the dust that I'd remembered parting around the graves, like a current, actually funnelled into the spaces between the stones. In fact, it seemed to be getting sucked into those spaces, as though there were some sort of void below the graves, which lent a measure of credence to Digger's theory.

From the top of one grave, I selected a smooth, round stone, about the size of a shot-put ball, and I heaved it into the crater.

Joe, our interpreter, was right there to scold me. "I would expect such disrespectful behavior from the Taliban," he said, "but not from you."

Joe was Afghani. His real name was Jamaluddein. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in 1980, he'd escaped to the U.K. with his parents; he was twelve years old at the time. Now, as a middle-aged man, he'd returned to help save his country from ruin. He wore armor on missions, but he carried no weapons. His interpretations of our enemy's muttered words were always clear and precise. He had a bad habit of walking two steps behind me on patrol and closing that distance whenever we made contact with the enemy. Thus, I'd seen conflagrations reflected in the smudged lenses of Joe's glasses. I'd heard him whisper prayers between sporadic detonations. His voice, with its derived British accent and perpetual tone of disappointment, exactly matched that of my beleaguered conscience.

So I jumped into the crater after the stone. I found it at the end of a long, concave groove in the dust. Turning toward the crater's rim, I saw my boot prints in the dust, descending the slope, each as perfect as Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon. On my way back up to the graveyard, I was careful not to disturb those tracks, or the flawless groove that had been carved by the stone. I wanted these things to remain, I suppose, in the event that an asteroid should slam into the planet, sloughing away the atmosphere, boiling the seas, and instantly ending life on earth. Our troop—asphyxiated, desiccated, frozen—would lie scattered about the graveyard, preserved in the seamless void of space forever, or at least until other intelligent beings came along and discovered us. Perhaps because those beings existed as thin bars of blue light, incapable of offensive or defensive action, they'd puzzle over our armor, our rifles, our grenades. They'd wonder, especially, why we'd worn such things to a graveyard. There would be no mystery, however, regarding the boot prints in the crater, since they'd know, from the boots still on my feet, that I was the one who'd left them. Furthermore, they'd deduce, from the groove, that I'd descended into the crater after a stone. Only one particular stone could've cut that groove. And they might find it, among a thousand others, right where I'd returned it, atop the grave, just moments before the asteroid struck the earth. But none of that would explain why the stone had been in the crater in the first place. "Did one of them throw it?" the curious bars of blue light might ask themselves.