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All War Is Local

JOSH JETER CRAWLS through the war at five miles per hour. From a hulking armored truck, he peers down through three-inch-thick windows at the roads outside Kandahar City in southern Afghanistan, home of the Taliban and the new epicenter of America's nine-year-old war. Jeter and the other men of the 1037th Route Clearance Company, a National Guard unit from Paragould, Arkansas, retrace these roads so often that they can spot out-of-place rocks and disturbed soil, a giveaway for freshly buried explosives.

The war here is a counterinsurgency, yes. The country needs more development, less corruption, and better-trained security forces. For many soldiers, though, the war is simpler, reduced to a singular concern: IEDs, improvised explosive devices, the biggest troop killer. And many of the soldiers charged with finding them are what used to be derisively referred to as America's weekend warriors: members of National Guard units from Arkansas, Missouri, North and South Carolina, Washington, Oregon, and South Dakota who used to fill sandbags during floods and now inch along Afghanistan's roads, picking through trash piles and patches of loose dirt.

They are, in their civilian lives, cops and farmers, electricians, mechanics, welders and builders. And they know each other deeply—an echo of the Civil War, when whole towns went to war together, with shared histories, and often with shared family trees. The 1037th, the War Pigs, has three sets of brothers, a father and son, many in-laws, and a stupefying web of personal connections. "We're just so familiar with each other," Jeter says. In high school, he worked at Hays Food Town under Jason Hood, then the night manager and now a sergeant in 2nd Platoon. At home, he works with several other 1037th members, building Monroe shock absorbers in Paragould. "Specialist Gillean, I'm marrying his cousin when we get home," Jeter says. And he grew up with Private First Class Chad Murray, also in 2nd Platoon. "We sat next to each other on the school bus," he says. "I've known him since kindergarten."

I find Murray and Tyler Fraysher playing Ping-Pong in the company's recreation room that night. "Jeter's grandma drove our bus," Murray says. He and Jeter left for basic training the same day. Fraysher, currently beating Murray by several points, grew up in Piggott, an hour and a half north of Jonesboro, with 3,800 people, a handful of restaurants, 33 churches, and a new community center, all amid fields of rice, corn, cotton, and soybeans. (Piggott also boasts the family home of Hemingway's second wife, where he wrote part of *A Farewell to Arms*.) "My grandma used to babysit for Hicks," another soldier in 2nd Platoon, Fraysher says. "She goes to church with his grandma and grandpa. Hicks's dad drove my school bus, and his grandma babysat for me."

A day later, I ride in the Buffalo, a 23-ton triple-axle truck with a hydraulic arm tipped with giant pitchfork tines for digging up bombs. Josh Hicks, in the front passenger seat, operates the arm. "Yeah, my grandma babysat for Fraysher," he says. He was a year ahead of Fraysher at Piggott High School, and a year behind Wes Harmon from 2nd Platoon and Jeromy Householder and Aaron Chase, both from 1st Platoon. Tyler Keller, of 3rd Platoon, was in his graduating class of 76 students.

An explosion a few hundred yards ahead, marked by a plume of smoke and dirt, interrupts Hicks's story. We pass a sport-utility vehicle used by Compass Security—an international company that uses local contractors—parked roadside, the windows blown out. More SUVs pull over, and three dozen contractors lie on the north side of the road and fire at a tree line 400 yards south, across an open field. Incoming bullets kick up around them, and us. An Afghan contractor walks down the middle of the road firing a belt-fed machine gun from the hip, spraying without aiming. In the late-day sun, empty shell casings bounce and sparkle on the roadway. A 1037th medic bandages three contractors' gunshot and shrapnel wounds, as 1037th truck gunners dump machine-gun rounds into the tree line. They kill three Talibs, and our patrol is soon moving again.

"I've known some of these guys my whole life," Hicks says. "I have home videos of us going to each other's birthday parties." In 2006, he deployed to Iraq with nine guys from Piggott, some of them his best friends. His battalion found 1,500 IEDs, and many other bombs found the patrols. Their Afghanistan work has been dangerous too. In an ambush in July, a 1037th patrol took 12 rocket-propelled grenades, which can bore through a truck's heavy armor and spray soldiers inside with molten shrapnel. Eight 1037th troops have been wounded in attacks since their deployment early this year.

On a winding dirt road off Highway 1, Hicks swings the Buffalo's arm to clear away a clump of the dried grass in which the Taliban sometimes hide bombs. James Taylor's "Carolina in My Mind" plays from an iPod rigged to speakers, part of the day's eclectic playlist: Journey, Kelly Clarkson, Metallica, Lenny Kravitz. The grass pile is bomb-free.

After Iraq and Afghanistan and many close calls, Hicks is ready to quit looking for bombs. He'll return to Arkansas State University and study to be a paramedic. "If I stayed in the Guard, it would just be another deployment, and another," he says. He stares out the window, eyes on the berm, and the patrol heads home, back down Highway 1.