

ABLE TO SEE EVERYTHING IN FRONT OF US

by Elizabeth Hall

A photograph is a still picture of a moment we don't want to forget. It's literally seconds captured of what might have been going on, and it tells a story to the person viewing it. I have several hundred "captured moments."

Why? Why was this moment most important to me? Why take a picture? Why remember a place where I didn't want to be in the first place? A place that took me from everything I loved and knew, everything I was comfortable with and around, a place that destroyed the innocence I once had, a place that has often left me a depressed, with the only thought: "Why me?"

A picture is a second in time that someone captures, usually in order to remember something. My picture has caused more pain than I ever wished to deal with, more wine glasses tipped over and hangovers than I would have thought possible. It's made me question, "Why me?" in anger and gratitude, and left images in my mind I will never forget. My picture would be displayed as a memorial in my home, but also on my soul forever. It has caused nightmares and tears too many to count, and even made me contemplate the easiest way to join my fallen comrade. Too bad I was scared to inflict pain upon myself.

I tried hard to find the most important picture to me, and even after looking them all over, the picture I chose is one that—no matter how far I try to push it out of my mind—is as clear as day when I open my eyes every morning.

My picture was the most life-changing event I think I will ever deal with, or at least for now: I truly believe that. I will not share my picture with you, because it is only a second of what justification it owes the person it represents. A bayonet affixed stands vertically atop empty boots, with a helmet over the stock of a rifle. Dog tags hang from the rifle's handle. Back home, several hundred mourners filled a church for the funeral of an Army reservist who died in Iraq after his vehicle hit a homemade bomb.

I was the only female SAW gunner I encountered in Iraq. I loved the thrill of being behind such a powerful weapon, and gave it no thought that I could die. I loved being on top of a vehicle, able to see EVERYTHING in front of us and tell the hajji's: *yella! yella! imshe!* meaning: *Go! Go! Get out of here!* My REAL job in the army was Communication Specialist. I made sure we could talk to the guys when they went out, and I often had night radio watch; I would switch off with my fellow female battle buddy.

That day, it was supposed to be my mission. I heard the call as clear as day and knew something wasn't right. No contact with my guys and an accident.

I remember the date every year as if were my own birthday, even though I can't remember the birthday of my nephew or other important anniversaries. December 19, 2003! Killed. December 19. In Balad, Iraq. His name, most will forget but a few close friends and family. A cook, he was in a convoy when his vehicle struck the bomb. He was working as a door gunner, providing rear security for the convoy. Two other western New York soldiers from his unit were also wounded.

Often I am left feeling angry with the Army for the poor representation we give our fallen soldiers. The army will continue on as his family mourns his life indefinitely. "He put his life on the line when he could have been safe working as a cook," his father told *The Buffalo News*. "He's my firstborn, my oldest, and I'm proud of him." An 11 year old girl named Jamelah is left fatherless, and all the army does is present his father and daughter with flags following the service, along with a bronze star and a purple heart. Oh, and a small amount of money that hardly justifies anything to the family left behind.

Now that I am home, it falls right smack in the middle of the Christmas holiday, and on that day I feel that I can no longer be involved in the craziness of the holiday. I hang a star on my Christmas tree with his picture and name as a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice he gave, and this ensures my drink of the day is in honor of him. *You will not be forgotten.*