

Why am I still here?

By Imhotep Alexander Wallace

Boredom is an odd, yet simple thing. It is simply the experience between two engaging events. Most people abhor it and desperately seek the next interesting event. However once it happens, what will they do? How do they deal with the new sensations? If you choose to avoid uncertainty, you're asking for even more heartache; the creeping monotony of the mundane and the crushing inevitability of an earth-shattering event. In either case, what a person wants never matters, we can only do so much to control our lives. The only real control most of us have is how we react to the events that wash over us, like a tide of causality. This is probably the first and most important lesson of a soldier. The hard slog of battle, the unnerving emptiness of a reprieve; losing control of yourself during these moments could harm your entire squad. So you fight boredom with readiness. You fight excitement with focus. You fight apprehension with resolve. "Heavy stuff. That your next piece, Carr?" "Naa-Well, I'll probably use some of it. Just uh my diary...kinda." "Coo'." Being embedded with these men & women has exposed me to the same jarring experiences, but the in-between time is what surprised me the most. Boredom when you could die at any moment; it'd be laughable if it weren't so morbid. "Listen Up! Got some news." The CO is rattling off some points, I wonder where this'll lead us... "...and pushed them out of the town. Not bad. Oh and finally, our entire platoon is being shipped out back to the US for a little R&R, something about being due." The news washed over the group gradually. The slow build of clapping, cheers and heavy sighs drowned out the end of the CO's announcement. We'd been given time off before, but actually going home? It was almost beyond me. Like a weight I never knew I was carrying lifted. It's funny though, there's something I'm missing. Some element of this

that's not processing the way it should. Why am I not happy?

I woke up to a sea of grey. Through the window was a seemingly uniform blanket of clouds. Leaning forward slightly, I confirmed that they surrounded our plane. It was only five in the morning. Four hours of hazy sleep didn't quite refresh me. On this long flight, it was about all I could manage; I can never sleep well on these things. The virtual silence on the plane made the clouds more stifling. It was so different from last night, the excited and confused emotions of a bunch of kids about to see home for the first time in what was unanimously believed to be "Too \$%@#ing long." Filling their conversations were thoughts of relaxation, release, and who would be paraded in front of a camera first (the favorite was 6'5" Logan Mansfield of Canton, Kansas). Now, hours after the musing and complaints, questions start milling in their heads. Not if all their stuff was ok or if their significant other remained faithful. Well, not just that. Time and exhaustion finally wore away the walls surrounding the past. Months, years in a country half a world away from home coalesce into a glaring inconsistency: "I've watched my enemies fight and die. I've watched my friends fight and die. I have fought, but I'm not dead. How am I going to reconcile this?" It comes to some of them earlier than others. Some come up with answers, some will never stop wondering. In any case, it can't be left alone. I've followed these men and women for 3 years, documenting creation, destruction, and tedium. Being embedded exposed me to the same danger; it's natural that it would hit me too. There's a niggling doubt about the flesh that still clings to my bones. I can't ignore it. So what's going to be my answer? The clouds are still gray; hopefully it won't be raining in New York. The silent, colorless clouds are almost surreal. We'll land soon.

"Welcome back, Allen!" Forging their way through the crowd of friends and family were two of my coworkers from the paper. The exchanged pleasantries were almost nostalgic; pretences of civil conversation I'd done away with long ago gave a feeling of normalcy. As I was shunted towards my

coworker's car, I suddenly felt a twinge in my gut and become aware of the growing distance between myself and my platoon. "My platoon..." I guess that explains it. Honestly, I barely like most of them. Though events have certainly matured them, they're mostly a bunch of kids. The gap in our ages isn't very wide, but I still find it a bit difficult to relate to them. Also, I've been told I'm a bit stuck up. Still, when Bob said "It's about time you got away from those jarheads and relaxed!" I grunted more stiffly than usual. The rest of the day was a whirlwind of parties, meeting with family, getting called by my platoon inviting me to one of their gatherings, some checking in with various administrations, and jet lag. At the end of it all, I creep back to my apartment, unplug my phone, and plummet into my bed with the singular intent of sleeping until I die. Two minutes later, my eyes open. The nearly soundless room, my uncomfortably comfortable bed; it's unnerving. I feel as though someone broke into my home, put everything out of place and then put it back the way it was and left. I distrust the sameness of it all, it doesn't seem real. After all the change I've witnessed, how could anything stay the same? As I stare at my ceiling, I'm reminded of something Sgt. Meadows told me.

I had been embedded for a month. There hadn't been any major action for me to cover yet. I must have been showing it on my face when one of the privates started on me, saying something like "We're not just here to entertain you." I said under my breath how unsure I was about that. How much he heard, I'll never know, because right before he puffed up for a tirade, a bullet sailed through the base of his jaw. Deafening machine gun blasts and muffled shouts created a wall of sound. As I dove for suitable cover, I got a good look at my surroundings; Cover fire, establishing a line, attempting to recover the fallen private. If there could be such a thing as order in this chaos, they were doing their best to create it. I felt my mind detach from my body. I started to see the damage that was being done. I had an inkling that flesh wasn't a much for a bullet, but seeing the ground, the plants, the stone & concrete being torn up almost as easily was like seeing the inherent frailty of nature. I chanced a look at the fallen private. I can barely describe the wound, there was so much

blood covering any details. It seemed to have hit him from the side, but that's all I could make out before three men advanced past him while 2 others grabbed him and pulled him to cover. About an hour later, the gunfire was slowly subsiding. The private was somehow still alive and was being treated. I was hunched over, my hand to my forehead, in absolute cold shock. I heard footsteps close to me and turned quickly to see Sgt. Meadows. He slowly bent down, picked up some spent shells and said quietly, "Welcome to the real world." He had hit my last nerve. "What!? How can this be the real world? Bloodbaths don't just happen in real life!!" He dropped the casings, turned to me and looked me dead in the eye. What he said next he said very clearly, as if he knew I'd never forget it. "Just because the bubble grows doesn't mean it won't pop." He turned and walked away, adding "Guess what you just lost today."

This civilized society we've created, is it real or is it simply an idea of what we think the world should look like? Is it a gloss we shine over humanity to more strongly demonize examples of our base, savage behaviors? Are we collectively shielding ourselves with the pretension that the human intellect is meant to bring peace, rather than more efficient and bloody war? What happens when your bubble pops? I'm lying here in my bed waxing philosophical about the nature of man in a crisis. Another thing I learned while embedded was "Fatigue + Boredom = Nothing Good." This room is becoming familiar again. I think I can close my eyes now. Even if I did lose something watching that private court death in the middle of nowhere, maybe it wasn't something I needed to be happy.