Chapter 1

Joe B. Brown, recently of the United States Army, collected his clothes and toiletries from his wardroom at Walter Reed Hospital. The medic watching him as he prepared for his discharge from the hospital asked, “So, what ‘cha gonna do now, Colonel?”

“Don’t know, Jerry. Probably get used to these hearing aids. They still chafe my ears a bit.”

“Don’t worry about that, sir. That’s a common complaint as the tender skin in your ears becomes accustomed to having them in the canals.”

Looking around his room one last time for anything that might be left behind, he turned to Specialist Fourth Class Jerry Smith, extended his hand, and said, “Well, this is about all she wrote. I want to thank you for getting me through these past several months.”

“Sir, it’s been a pleasure for me. I might say for all of us here, you went through a lot, and the road back has been long and tough, and especially after losing your buddy, Sergeant Tuttle. But, I think you’re on your way.”

Jerry could see how his condolence remark caused a flash of pain in Colonel Brown, and he regretted instantly his words. But, beyond this flash, Colonel Brown showed no other emotion, but rather continued on with his own remarks in a warm, gentle manner.

“Yes, I will miss him. But, again, many thanks and please say so to anyone I miss today.”

“Yessir. I’ll do that. By the way, I still want to be seeing you at physical therapy. You’re not through the woods there.”

”You can count on it. Again, many thanks.”

Joe went to the main desk where he signed a few last papers, said good bye to several people there, and then proceeded to the front doors of this old, venerable institution. Passing through them, he walked a few steps further, stopped, thought a second, and then did an about face towards the building he just left.

“To all of you, fallen comrades both past and present, for all that you’ve done, I salute you.”

Joe’s hand lifted slowly to his head . A rigid, flat line extended from his elbow to the tips of his fingers resting gently on his right eyebrow. Looking straight ahead, he could just see his palm. It stayed there for a few, silent moments until it was snapped cleanly back to the seam of his trousers.

The bricks of the Walter Reed remained silent, but not without Joe hearing a thank you coming from the wind. With that, he did an about face and walked toward Georgia Avenue, passed through the entry into the post itself, turned right and continued onward to the Metro Subway station. There, he bought a ticket, shuffled painfully through the turnstiles, went to the waiting platform, and stood for the next Red Line train going to Metro Center.

Four minutes later, as promised by the information board, the train arrived which Joe entered. It then swooshed away to its next stop. Nine such stops took Joe to Metro Center where he transferred to the Yellow Line which took him to the King Street exit. A stroll of a few blocks took him to Cedar Street where a small colonial bungalow awaited him. A short walk up the sidewalk took him to his front door which he unlocked to enter a house he had left essentially unattended eighteen months before.

As he made this Metro journey, Joe reflected on where he was going. Going where? To what? He hadn’t the foggiest idea. He had been offered a chance to go through a transition program to civilian life that was offered to retiring personnel, but he declined it.

*Transition to what? A civilian? What’s that? The last time I was a civilian. I was a nineteen year old kid and now, I’m forty-two. What do civilians do?*

He also had a lot of work in front of him before he was even ready to think about becoming a civilian. The scar tissue from his wounds still was tight, and he needed a lot therapy before it would loosen up sufficiently for him to move comfortably. Bill’s death was something he still hadn’t come to terms with even though he couldn’t remember it. Finally, and this was very hard: he had to “take off his uniform.” From his limited experience with military contractors, he knew they thought differently about things, and he had to learn what that meant.

*No, I’m not ready for ‘project transition.’*

Bringing his attention to where he was standing, he looked at his home. He had bought it while stationed at the Pentagon. Then, after his three year tour of running position papers around and getting coordination agreements from aligned offices and officers, his tour as an action officer ended. He was then sent back to Fort Stewart, Georgia for refresher training with the Third Infantry Divison en route to his tour in Afghanistan.

This tour was actually Joe’s fourth one in the Middle East. He had been in Desert Storm as a very young lieutenant and then repeated it as a major during the second invasion. That action was followd up by a year’s occupational duty in the vicinity of Baghdad. Those actions were relatively conventional as they involved maneuver warfare that applied standard Army tactics. In both cases, he was lucky enough to have only received minor wounds. As far as he was concerned, they were hardly worthy of the Purple Hearts he had gotten, but the Army being what it was, he accepted them. Now, these latest wounds were more serious, and they made Joe rethink what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. The Army tended to agree as it retired him with a medical disability. This, of course, was important as it decremented the taxes on his retirement pay.

But, now, as he stood in the foyer of his dusty house, it began to dawn on him again. What was he to do with the rest of his life? And again, he didn’t have a clue. He had gone to college for a couple of years, disliked it, and decided to enlist. Arriving at Ft Jackson, South Carolina, he quickly learned how all the funny and hoary stories he had heard about the rigors of basic training were in fact, rather true. He got up early in the morning, helped clean his barracks, ran through his “daily dozen” physical training drills, returned to the barracks to change into the uniform of the day which in those days were still called “fatigues” as opposed to the “Army Combat Uniform” or “ACU’s” as they are known today. From there, he and five hundred other trainees would fall into their platoon formations, and march to breakfast. Before entering the Mess Hall, he would be required to do a dozen pull-ups.

Breakfast was a hurried affair consisting of a choice of pancakes or waffles being thrown on a steel tray and covered with fried eggs or scrambled eggs as preferred by the soldier. Toast was then forked onto the tray along with a cup of coffee. After breakfast, the day’s training of marksmanship, marching, hand-to-hand combat, personal hygiene, etc. commenced only to end after dark with another scrubdown of the barracks. As one wit, who undoubtedly had heard it from his father, quipped, “The Marines builds men; the Army builds housewives.”

Basic training was endured in this manner for nine weeks. From there, Pvt Joe B. Brown was moved on for five more weeks of Advanced Infantry Training which consisted of learning more of the concepts that were first taught to him. Graduation from Infantry School led to Jump School at Fort Benning, North Carolina. Completion of this three-week course resulted in his getting his “jump wings” and eligibility for $150 in extra pay. From there, Joe was off to Ranger School.

Rangers are identified by a shoulder tab, and as such, consider themselves as members of an elite infantry force. Certainly the training Joe had gotten so far barely prepared him for the rigors he was about to encounter. Initial physical training over four days that included long hard runs, chin-ups, sit-ups quickly eliminated candidates who either didn’t have the stamina or desire to continue the program. From this start, things then got tough!

The following phases consisted of small unit maneuvers involving squad tactics under realistic battle conditions in all sorts of terrain including mountain and swampy terrain. Leadership skills that held the candidates together as a team were constantly being demanded under conditions that stressed their abilities to endure and succeed. Altogether, nine weeks of hardship passed seemingly without end, but Joe earned his tab.

By this time, 26 weeks of training had passed, and a strange thing occurred to Joe. He had found a home in the Army. He was lean, hard, and ready to tackle any challenge the Army put in his way. In short, he loved being a soldier and he knew what his future would be.

Joe then pulled a tour in Germany where he discovered how good beer could taste and began to understand how important education was in the life of a soldier. In three years, through hard studying, he finished his undergraduate degree through the extension programs offered by the post’s Education Center. This effort attracted the attention of his company commander who encouraged him to attend Officer Candidate School or OCS as it is commonly known.

OCS was an intense twelve week course that consisted of two phases. The first was focused on learning basic leadership skills while the second emphasized practical applications in the field. Throughout this training, Joe was evaluated on his leadership traits and ability to work as a team member. Joe was graduated first in his class. His career as an officer was now underway. But, now, his future was past; he was a “silly-vilian.”

*So, what am I gonna do now,*  wondered Joe for the tenth time this morning as he had been doing since his later days in Walter Reed when his mind and body began to come together. *Frankly, I still don’t have the slightest idea. The only thing I’ve ever known or wanted to know was the Army, and it’s spit me out.*

As he pondered these thoughts, Joe looked around the entry way of his house. Things were pretty much as he had left them. A bit dustier perhaps and the windows certainly needed a scrub job, but otherwise, no different from his last glance at things just before he went out the door a year and a half ago. He was also gratified to note there was no vandalism to be seen. That had been a concern when he decided to leave it unattended, but he took his chances rather than rent it out and suffer damages by poor tenants.

Satisfied with the order of things in the foyer, Joe moved through the rest of the house. It was rather small consisting of a living room, dining room, kitchen on the first floor. Going down into the basement, an entertainment center presented itself with the standard high definition TV screen, a sound system, stacks of cd’s and a wall shelf of books. Most of them were either on military topics or were spy thrillers. John Le Carre` was a name often seen in this collection.

Moving on, he inspected his washroom and was relieved to see a hose hadn’t broken to flood the floor away. He had forgotten to turn off his water from the outside and a flooded basement was always a nagging fear in his head. Finally, he went into his workroom where his work bench stood with an array of tools hanging neatly from hooks on a large peg board. Across his table stood an iron, a heating torch, and electric finishing sander. Special vises were clamped to the top. They were for mounting skis for repairs. Skiing was one of Joe’s few passions other than the Army, and he had become very proficient in tuning his own equipment.

*OK, everything’s standing tall here. Let’s see how the upstairs fared during my absence.*

Going back upstairs to the foyer, grabbing his suitcase, Joe trudged up the flight of steps and then looked into each of the three bedrooms. The first one was his study where he had shelved more books, and a computer center. Adorning one wall was Joe’s “I Love Me File.” Consisting of plaques, certificates and diplomas, the wall attested to years of military service around the world. In the corner niche was a Bose radio that piped music as he worked around the house. Generally, Joe didn’t play rock, but rather country music and preferably old country music. Blue grass was an acceptable second choice. Occasionally, he would tune in some classical music if it was light. Perhaps Mozart, but never Wagner.

The other bedroom was obviously a guest room. It had twin beds, a set of chests, a small table, and a mirror. A couple of landscapes hung on the walls. Off to one side and adjoining the study was a bathroom complete with sink, toilet and shower.

Last came Joe’s master bedroom. Bigger than the other ones, it featured a queen-sized bed, a contemporary easy chair, a silent butler for hanging clothes that would be worn the next day. A set of high and low boys stood next to two walls. Pictures of soldiers were scattered about. The people featured in them paraded a changing set of uniforms and locations that told of different assignments in different times and parts of the world. Absent among them were the latest pictures of Joe’s last tour in Afghanistan. Looking at them, Joe wondered if he would ever hang any of his latest photos there. He had enough, and they were of pretty good quality; but, to hang them? He didn’t know. Opposite the bed was another small TV for watching the late news, and on either side was a night stand where an electric alarm clock was still ticking the minutes away for Joe’s return. Beside them was a short stack of magazines and a half-read novel.

As he had already noted upon entering his house, everything was in good order, but a thorough spring cleaning was needed. Certainly the lawn and garden would need attention. The next door kid he had hired to keep things at bay did an OK job, but just that. The plants and shrubs and grass met neighborhood standards, but not his. So, work was needed there. Probably the garage could use a cleaning. Undoubtedly, now that he was no longer in the Army, a lot of military impedimenta would need discarding.

*Yeah, I got a lotta work to do here for a few days at least. I wonder how my car is? It’ll need to be taken down off its blocks and have oil added to it. Probably, a general inspection at the dealer wouldn’t hurt. Seals and gaskets might have dried and could blow when I start using it again.*

But, right now, Joe was tired. Although it was only noon, his endurance was still a bit shaky, and a nap was beckoning. But, before having a nap, Joe started automatically down to the kitchen for some lunch until he caught himself.

*OK, dummy. What will you be eating here? No food is there. Just like Old Mother Hubbard who went to the cupboard. She had no food for her dog nor have I for me.*

Fortunately, a number of small restaurants were within walking distance, and going one of them, Joe was able to get a hamburger. Coming back, he passed a small 7-Eleven where he got enough food to get himself started at home. Stowing his groceries in his kitchen, double checking his refrigerator and stove to see if they worked properly, he then turned himself in for a nap. Tomorrow promised to be a busy day.