PART ONE

Brandon Neely

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Shoot First, Think Later

Brandon Neely was the first soldier to beat up a detainee at Guantanamo prison camp when it opened in 2002. In Iraq, he was on the battlefield the day the war began. He was an integral part in two of perhaps the most historic and infamous moments of his generation. In Iraq, it didn't take long for Brandon to become disillusioned with the military and conclude that what he was doing was neither noble nor heroic. But when it came to Guantanamo, that process took him four and a half years.

For Brandon, who was raised as an Army brat and moved from base to base throughout the South, the military had always been a major part of his life. When he was ten years old, his dad took him down to the shooting range and showed him how to assemble, disassemble, and fire an M16 rifle. Even then, he admired the power and authority his father, a high-ranking military officer, had. Soldiers had to complete any menial or difficult task his father ordered with a "Sir, yes, sir!" But on the whole, his dad left the military at work and didn't bring his job home.

He always told Brandon and his sister, "You can sign up, but college first." Brandon, more concerned with football and partying than discipline and drill, wasn't interested anyway.

If he had gone to college, Brandon says, he would have spent all of his time at frat keggers, not in class. So, instead of wasting his parents' money, he bagged groceries after graduating from high school. But one summer day a few days after his twentieth birthday, he woke up and realized he was wasting his life. He was still living the life of a teenager—even working the same job he'd had in high school. It dawned on him that instead of college, he could escape his hometown, get some training, and make something of himself by enlisting in the Army.

When Brandon gets an idea in his head, he becomes doggedly determined to follow through. His dad said that he had never seen Brandon run so fast as when he got out of the car to go to the recruiting station. The recruiter offered to show him a video, but Brandon said no. He already knew what he wanted. When he was a kid, he had met some military police officers on base, and they had made an impression on him. He had already done the research and was ready to sign the five-year contract as an MP.

Graduating from basic training was the proudest moment of Brandon's life. For the first time, he knew what people meant by a true sense of accomplishment and honor. He was no longer an ordinary guy. He was a warrior.

When people describe the gung ho soldier, they are thinking of someone like Brandon. Being a soldier was something that Brandon was good at. It fit his personality. He thrived under the discipline; he didn't have to make decisions about what to do but simply give his all when carrying out orders. He always kept his uniform freshly pressed and his boots shined. He liked the power he felt with a gun in his hand and knew how intimidating he could look. The more hours he dedicated to weight lifting, the more imposing his physique became.

On September 11, 2001, Brandon was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. Immediately after he saw the towers fall on television, his officers ordered him to grab his M4 carbine and M9 pistol; they set up tight security on the base and searched every vehicle entering the gate. Brandon had never heard of al Qaeda, and he couldn't point out Afghanistan on a map. All he needed to know was that America had been attacked, and he was in a position to do something about it. His unit was already set to deploy to Egypt, and although it wasn't Afghanistan, it was a chance for Brandon to play a part in a large global emergency. His country needed him, and he was ready to make something of his life. He was ready for revenge and for war.

The few months' deployment in Egypt turned out to be a letdown—boring, in fact. So on January 5, 2002, when a squad leader came pounding on his door looking for volunteers for some missions with other units, Brandon jumped at the chance. He didn't even know where they would send him, but he wanted to get in on the action. Within forty-eight hours, he was told he was going to Cuba, to set up a prison to hold terrorist suspects. Brandon had no idea what to expect. He was disappointed not to be going to Afghanistan, but all the same, that night as he lay in bed, on the brink of embarking on the unknown, he had butterflies in his stomach.

The naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, has apartments, a school, swimming pools, movie theaters, and even bars. But when Brandon and his unit arrived, they drove past all that, to a group of makeshift military tents where they would be staying. Down the hill from their tents was a collection of three hundred cages spread over a large area covered with rocks, known as Camp X-Ray.

The cells were nothing more than dog kennels, completely exposed to the elements and the giant banana rats, lizards, and scorpions that roamed the camp. Civilian contractors were still

constructing it out of old fencing and posts scavenged from around the island.

Looking around, Brandon simply thought, "Thank God I'm not staying down there." Beyond that, he didn't dwell much more on the detainees' situation.

Soldiers were given the rundown. First, never use the word *prisoner*. They were detainees in a detention center, not prisoners of war. Prisoners have rights; detainees have no rights. A whole new set of military laws would be replacing the Geneva Conventions. This was the first time anyone had ever run—or even conceived of—such an operation. This was a new kind of war, unlike any other that had been fought before. They were making history.

While the administration was publicly declaring that "we don't do torture," lawyers at the White House were concocting legal loopholes that exempted the United States from the Geneva Conventions and other laws outlawing torture. Al Qaeda was not a conventional army that represented a state; the terrorist organization did not abide by the same military rules, and therefore, the lawyers erroneously argued, the Geneva Conventions did not apply. Alberto Gonzales, then White House chief counsel, called the conventions "quaint" and "obsolete." In what are now known as the torture memos, White House lawyers explained that the United States could legally abandon its commitment to uphold military laws. Reversing a long tradition of American norms and laws, these memos laid down a path for the widespread, systematic use of torture.

January 11, 2002, was detainee arrival day. Brandon felt high with anticipation, waiting for his chance to finally meet the terrorists face-to-face. "I was ready to seek my own personal revenge on these people in whatever manner I could," he says. The World Trade Center attack was still fresh in his and the other soldiers' minds. They were ready to kick some hajji ass.

All the same, as the soldiers gathered around waiting, an intense silence enveloped the camp. The men who would be arriving were the "worst of the worst," capable of masterminding 9/11. Who knows what else they could be capable of? Brandon's escort partner told him that in case anything happened, he had Brandon's back.

Marines with .50 caliber guns escorted the first busload of detainees. When the doors opened, they threw the detainees down off the bus, yelling, "Shut the fuck up, sand nigger! You're property of the United States of America now."

The first detainee off the bus had only one leg. The MPs, who caught him, screamed at him to walk faster as they half-dragged him along. Eventually, a marine threw the man's prosthesis after him. The second detainee off the bus was handed off to Brandon and his partner.

The detainees were an odd sight in their orange jumpsuits. They wore hoods, black gloves, surgical masks, earmuffs, and gunner goggles blacked out with tape—in other words, they were in a state of complete and total sensory deprivation, which has been scientifically proven to cause mental breakdowns. They had been unable to see, hear, or move for the entire seventeen-hour journey from the Middle East. Most of them had urinated or defecated on themselves. Some had their handcuffs and leg shackles fastened so tightly that their wrists were bloody and their ankles swollen and turning colors. Soldiers had tied the waist chains that connected to the prisoners' legs too short, preventing them from being able to fully stand upright. MPs later bragged about punching and kicking the detainees throughout the trip. When the detainees' goggles were eventually removed, the collected sweat and tears poured out and ran off their faces, as they squinted to adjust to the light. They were a dirty, weak, bedraggled lot—not quite the hardened terrorists the soldiers had prepared themselves to face. Most of them were barely five foot five and maybe 120 pounds. It seemed unbelievable that this was what terrorists looked like close up.

The soldiers' orders were to force the detainees to walk head down so that they couldn't see where they were going, and to transport them as quickly as possible. Eventually, the soldiers made a game of it, competing to see who could move the detainees the fastest. In their leg irons, the detainees couldn't keep up and were dragged along the rocks. If they were lucky, they could pick up their feet and let the soldiers carry them.

First, the soldiers delivered the detainees to the holding pen, where they were made to kneel with their faces down in the gravel under the blazing sun. Some stayed that way for hours, until, one by one, they were escorted to the in-processing center and then to their cages. The detainees were made to sit in the middle of their cages and were forbidden to move, talk, or even look up. The detainees weren't allowed to know which country they were being held in. Brandon and the others would mess with them, telling them a different location every time they asked: Russia, Iran. "Your whole country has been nuked," the MPs told them. "It looks like a parking lot now. Your friends, family, house—everything is gone."

Each prisoner was given two buckets: one for water, one for a toilet, which the guards had to empty. (Eventually, the guards let certain detainees empty the buckets, an opportunity the detainees jumped at, if only to get some exercise.) Each was also given a sheet but wasn't allowed to use it to cover himself as he defecated into the bucket or tried to sleep. Bright stadium floodlights shone down on the detainees, day and night. In case that wasn't enough to deprive them of sleep, every hour Brandon and the other guards woke them up, forcing them to show their hands to ensure that they didn't have any weapons. For a while, blaring music was played over the PA system. Brandon could make out some of the songs, like Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA," but mostly it was so loud that he couldn't even figure out the song. Other times, though, the camp was dead silent.

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That first day, as Brandon was putting an elderly man in his cage, he, as ordered, threw the man down on his knees inside the cage and began to remove his shackles. As an MP, he was well versed on handcuffing, but here the Army was using a complicated combination of leg and arm shackles attached together by a waist belt. An interpreter told the detainee to place his hands on top of his head and not to move. Brandon held the man by his shoulders, while his partner removed the leg shackles. The detainee tensed up and tried to get away. Brandon yelled at him to stop, but then as Brandon and his partner unlocked the first handcuff, the man jerked away. Acting on instinct, Brandon threw the detainee to the ground with all of his body weight. Each time the detainee tried to raise his head, Brandon bashed it back down on the cement floor, over and over.

Brandon's partner freaked out and ran out of the cage, leaving Brandon alone with the man. Later, the soldier was reprimanded for abandoning Brandon and making him do all of the work. Eventually, other soldiers arrived, hog-tied the detainee, and left him like that for hours, until the officer in charge delivered the release orders.

Brandon had the honor of being the first soldier to get to beat up a terrorist. That night, soldiers kept coming up to him to congratulate him. "Nice job, man, you really got some," they said, patting him on the back. It felt good to be getting so much praise, but Brandon says he was left oddly unsettled. For the first time, following the rules led him to do something he wasn't quite sure was right.

From day one, it was drilled into soldiers' heads that they would never be given an order that the higher-ups wouldn't do or that would compromise the integrity of the United States in any way. In order for operations to run smoothly, soldiers have to be able to automatically follow orders. There is no time to stop and question the strategy. As a gung ho soldier, Brandon had complete faith in the military. He trusted his commanders with his life. Why would they lead him astray by asking him to do anything that was less than honorable?

Brandon still has a hard time articulating exactly how he felt after this incident. People don't get it when he says that it was justified but that he still thought it was wrong. He had performed his duty well and hadn't broken any rules. War is war. But all the same, he had a nagging feeling that bashing the old man's head was wrong. The man might have been a terrorist, but he was old enough to be someone's grandfather. The next day when Brandon saw the bruises and the cuts covering the detainee's face, he felt worse.

A couple of days later, Brandon found out that the detainee had assumed that he was being placed on his knees for execution, as had happened to his friends and family back home. The news made the whole thing even harder to digest.

Even while Brandon had his doubts, every morning before the soldiers marched down to Camp X-Ray, they were reminded of the importance of their work in guarding these terrorists. "You are the front line of this war," their commanders said. "In terms of winning the war, everything will start and end with what happens at Guantanamo. You are saving your own families, your kids, your wives, your mothers. Keep the terrorists locked up and uncomfortable, do your job well, and the world will be safe." The soldiers headed down to the cells feeling pumped up and proud.

One morning when Brandon and the others entered the block, they heard some detainees talking. "What the hell?" the soldiers asked one another. The detainees weren't allowed to do that.

They found out that the International Red Cross had inspected the camp and called for changes. Detainees were allowed to talk and move about within their cages, and they were told they were in Cuba. What was next, the guards asked one another, issuing cigarettes?

Brandon said that having the Red Cross there made him think that what the soldiers were doing was okay. Otherwise, he figured, the Red Cross would intercede. However, the Red Cross only

offers confidential suggestions to the country in question, which the country can implement or not in any way it chooses. Unbeknownst to Brandon and the other soldiers, there was much that the Red Cross did not approve of that was not changed. The detainees were given small concessions, but conditions were still harsh and interrogation methods brutal. Moreover, every time a new shipment of detainees was brought in, the soldiers reverted to the old rules: no talking, no moving, no praying.

Mostly the work was boring, and Brandon felt that his training was going to waste. Filled with 9/11 fervor and anger at Arabs, he was trained to kill, not babysit detainees. He was angry with the amorphous enemy for attacking his country and for his being stuck in a useless prison doing nothing about it. Soldiers were sent off to war with hopes and promises of being heroes—real men—seeing combat and helping America win. Brandon had imagined marching with his fellow soldiers onto the battlefield, risking his life to protect his comrades and his country and coming home with heroic tales of glory. At the prison he had even fewer opportunities to wage war than he had had in Egypt. Despite his superiors' rhetoric, he was just a cage kicker.

There was one assignment that seemed like it could be an opportunity for some real action: the Initial Reaction Force (IRF) teams, five-man riot squads that were brought in to deal with prisoners who had broken the rules. Brandon was selected to join the first of the squads. They received two days of training—more than on any other aspect of detainee handling. Dressed in full riot gear, with shields, batons, and kneepads, the IRF (pronounced "erf") team would enter the cage. The first man would use a shield almost as if it were a weapon, to throw the detainee to the ground, as the other four would grab a limb and hog-tie the detainee. During training, members of the IRF team revved one another up by drumming their batons across their shields. They were told to use as much force as possible and that this was their chance "to get some."

Calling in the IRFs, while not a daily affair, was common enough. Any time a detainee lost the privilege of using one of his comfort items—a blanket, a toothbrush, or a mat—the IRF team was called in to attack the detainee first. If a detainee exercised, cussed, or tried to talk to another detainee, he was attacked. A member of the medical team, unable to get a detainee to swallow a can of Ensure, called in an IRF. Detainees were IRFed if they refused medication and the officer in charge figured that technically this situation was similar enough. After the team hogtied the detainee, the medic entered the cage. Noticing Brandon looking on, the medic told him to stand a little to the left. Then the medic grabbed the detainee by the neck and tried to force the liquid down his throat, spilling it all over his face. The medic punched the detainee twice in the face and walked out as if nothing had happened. When Brandon turned around to leave, he realized that the medic had placed him in that position to block the line of sight from the watchtower.

This was the kind of thing that Brandon had hoped he would get to do at the prison. Finally, Brandon thought, something akin to being a tough soldier and not just a guard.

There was one IRF attack, though, that upset Brandon. Detainee Jumah al Dossari had been taunting a female guard, calling her a bitch. Even though male soldiers themselves are known to harass the women, they are extremely protective when detainees do the same. One soldier, Sergeant E-5 Starsky Smith, a giant 240-pound man who was infamous around the camps for abusing prisoners, felt pissed at Jumah's insolence. When the officer in charge called Smith and his IRF team in, Smith tossed his shield aside, took a running jump, and landed with his knee on Jumah's back. The female guard stood by, yelling, "Whip his ass!" Smith proceeded to grab the prisoner's head and slam it into the floor, over and over. Even after Jumah stopped moving, the team continued to rail on him, hitting, punching, and kicking him as he lay on the floor. Next, they gave the female guard a chance, holding the man down as she punched his head a couple of times.

The guards left the cell with their arms and uniforms covered in blood. Jumah was carried out on a stretcher and was hospitalized for two weeks for broken ribs and a broken wrist, not to mention bruising and lacerations. When soldiers tried to mop the floor of the cell, the soapy water turned bright with blood. They tried scrubbing and using hoses, but the cement remained tinged.

Brandon had watched the whole thing. It was quiet on his section of the block, and so, curious, he had walked over to get a closer look. Because you could see right through the metal cages, everyone could watch. Most of the soldiers were laughing and cheering, but Brandon says his reaction was one of disbelief. It was hard to process what was happening. These soldiers weren't bad people, and this guy—this terrorist—shouldn't have called that woman a bitch. But it seemed as if the soldiers were taking it too far. All the same, war is war.

That night the soldiers laughed about what had happened. According to Brandon, the officer in charge joked that he had never heard his name and "war crimes" mentioned so many times in one sentence. The whole incident had been filmed, as was the customary procedure, but afterward, the MPs said that the tape had been lost.

Even if Brandon had disagreed, there was no way that he would say anything. He was new to the unit, and besides, it wasn't his place. Who knew what kind of ostracism and repercussions he could face? In that kind of environment, you simply don't want to take that risk.

A week later, Brandon was assigned to work the block where Jumah was being held. When Smith showed up, Feroz Abbasi, another detainee, yelled, "Sergeant, have you come back to finish him off?"

Soldiers had a way of turning even seemingly routine tasks into opportunities for abuse. The soldiers mocked the detainees' language and played music during prayer calls. Detainees were allowed to take short showers, and some guards turned off the

water while the detainees were still soaped up. Other guards took away the detainees' meals before they had a chance to finish.

Brandon saw a Navy physician perform violent rectal exams on new arrivals. Without lubrication, the doctor "just reached back and shoved his finger as hard as he could in their rectums." His fellow MPs told him that other doctors were doing the same, often while laughing. Brandon didn't see those, but they all heard the prisoners screaming. There was a physical therapist who, showing off for Brandon, stretched a detainee's arm straight, although the man could barely move it on his own because of a sustained injury. "You want to really watch him scream?" the medic asked, laughing, doing it again and again.

After work and on their days off, Brandon and his group of friends mostly hung out at the beach, snorkeling, fishing, and swimming, or at the outdoor bar, getting drunk on dollar beers. They played sports, went to the movies, and grabbed burgers at McDonald's. With so much to do, Brandon never felt homesick and rarely called home.

During downtime, no one talked about what happened on the block. It was the last thing anyone wanted to think about. Brandon says that maybe it was just because the work was so boring, but there was a certain understanding that whatever happens on the block stays on the block. "When your shift was up, you'd just leave the camp and go wake boarding," says Brandon. "We just blocked it out and did our own thing."

At times, it seemed like they weren't even deployed and certainly were not at war. It seemed unreal and jarring on those days off when they remembered that only two miles away from them, all hell was letting loose.

Every now and then, Brandon and a friend would ask each other, "Is this shit really going on?" This particular friend was a military history buff, who had spent some time at college and

read up on all kinds of military regulations. Having been in the Army for two years, he had the most Army experience of all of Brandon's friends. He told Brandon that what they were doing was illegal, according to the Geneva Conventions, and despite what they were being told, the conventions always apply. Brandon didn't believe him. Technically, they had received training on the Geneva Conventions during basic, but Brandon said that it barely lasted twenty minutes, and the commander told them that they would never need to know any of it in the field. Like most soldiers, Brandon barely paid any attention. When Brandon looked it up on the Internet, he saw what the guy was talking about. Oh, shit, he thought.

All the same, Brandon figured that the high-ranking officials must have a greater grasp on the confusing legality of the issue than a low-ranking soldier like himself, who had never even gone to college. He was repeatedly told that he would never be given an illegal order. Even the unit's motto, inscribed on each man's patch under a skull with lightning bolts, read "Demonstrate Lawfulness Throughout the World." As a trained soldier, he knew right from wrong on the battlefield. But here, those rules didn't apply, and the lines were confusing. Camp Delta's Standard Operating Procedures Manual wasn't published until March 2003, nine months after Brandon left. Before that, they were making it up as they went along. The officers repeatedly told the MPs that it wasn't their jurisdiction to figure out what was legal or illegal. It was their job to follow orders and react, not question. "In the military, if you start thinking for yourself," says Brandon, "you become dangerous and they don't want you around."

When Brandon saw news reports about the camp, they were troublingly inaccurate. Why was the military trying to hide this from the public if it was legal? But on the other hand, he figured, maybe their operations were classified. That happens all the time during war—some soldiers weren't even allowed to tell their families where they were deploying next. Besides, he figured, so what

if they had to bend the rules a little in order to get information to save American lives?

It's understandable that Brandon was confused about where to draw the line. The nation as a whole, after all, has been unable to reach such a conclusion, even with acts as extreme as partial drowning.

According to U.S. law, torture is an "act committed by a person acting under the color of law specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering (other than pain or suffering incidental to lawful sanctions) upon another person within his custody or physical control." But the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel parsed this definition, just as they did the label "prisoner of war." The lawyers seized on the meaning of *severe*, arguing that to count as torture, the pain had to be "equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death." Moreover, that pain had to be "specifically intended." If there was any way to prove that it wasn't done on purpose—say, if a doctor were present or the perpetrator didn't realize how much it could hurt the detainee—then, legally, it wasn't torture.

Rumors escalated among the soldiers about who the prisoners really were. An E-7 told Brandon that some terrorists were of such high value that they were directly taken to a naval brig to be held in isolation. Other MPs who worked at the brig said that children were also being held, a fact that has since been confirmed.

Sometimes, when Brandon was bored on the blocks, he started up casual conversations with the English-speaking detainees. He often talked with a British detainee, Rhuhel Ahmed, who was only one year younger than he was. Ahmed had been captured

while traveling in Afghanistan with two other UK detainees; this group is now known as the Tipton Three. Brandon was told that the detainees were the most dangerous in the world and not to interact with them or show any compassion. But Rhuhel seemed like an ordinary kid. Sometimes Rhuhel helped translate what other detainees were trying to say, which made Brandon's job that much easier. They talked about girls and going out on the town. "The kind of thing anyone their age would talk about," says Brandon. They discovered that they had the same taste in music, and occasionally Rhuhel rapped for Brandon. To Brandon, it sometimes seemed as if he and Rhuhel were just two regular guys, eating the same MRE bagels for breakfast and drinking tea together—except for the wire fencing that separated them. All the same, Brandon stood by as Rhuhel got IRFed, taken to interrogations, and later put in solitary.

Brandon was unsure whether following these orders was right or wrong. The only thing he knew for certain was that it was something that he had to do, so why even think about it? "After a while," he says, "it was just, keep your shit clean, go home, and forget about that place. Let's just get the hell out of here."

Brandon arrived home from Cuba on a Friday, got married that Monday to a girl he'd been e-mailing while deployed, and reported back to duty on Tuesday. There were no debriefings or exit forms beyond a nondisclosure statement in which Brandon and all the soldiers agreed not to share information about Guantanamo.

The welcome-home ceremony was rinky-dink in comparison to what soldiers would have had if they were coming home from the battlefield. Girlfriends and families gathered, but there was little fanfare. First the general cracked a joke that all they had done in Cuba was water ski, swim, and fish, which garnered a lot of laughs. But then, on a more serious note, he congratulated the men and thanked them for guarding the world's most dangerous

detainees and stopping the terrorists from killing anyone else. Everyone cheered and clapped. Brandon felt good to have people shake his hand and thank him when they heard about his service. Any doubts he might have had were washed away.

Brandon didn't talk about the prison—not with his family, his friends, or even other soldiers—and no one asked him any questions. Within his unit, it was a nonissue, and the MPs were back to work with lots to do. Mostly, Brandon figured he would never see the camp again, and particularly since everyone who ever serves at Guantanamo has to sign that nondisclosure statement, he would probably never even hear another word about it.

Guantanamo was hardly in the news, so no one at home seemed to think much of it. Instead, there was talk about Saddam Hussein's connection to al Qaeda and the possible existence of weapons of mass destruction. Compared to that, a small jail in Cuba was hardly newsworthy.

Brandon told Wendy, his new wife, stories about jet skiing and snorkeling and described how beautiful the beaches and the sunsets were. It sounded like fun, and she was glad he hadn't been in any danger. "Just like any other normal person, I didn't think anything of it," she says.

When it came to explaining the prison work, Brandon told her that all in all, it didn't sound too different from being a prison guard anywhere else. Instead of cells, the detainees were kept in cages, and sometimes they refused their food or tried to fight back against the guards. He told her how some of them threw buckets of feces at the guards—something so disgusting and degrading that Brandon won't admit this to me later. But mainly, he told his new wife, it was just boring, and she didn't have any questions. She was proud of him for serving and keeping the terrorists locked up.

Wendy is quiet and soft-spoken, with a girlish nature. She looks so young that people jokingly asked Brandon whether she was of age. As newlyweds, they were wrapped up in honeymoon bliss. They drove around looking at houses, daydreaming about their future together. Brandon was sweet to her, buying her a card or flowers for no particular reason. When she said she was thinking

about enlisting, he told her he'd help shine her boots. She was a welcome distraction. Between married life and work back at the base, he had little time to dwell on what had happened at the camp.

He just wanted to put the whole thing behind him and get on with his life, so he did. Time to move on to the next order of business: Iraq.

In Iraq Brandon finally got to be in the middle of the action. It was March 2003—the initial invasion—and he was on the front lines. As a military police officer, he patrolled the streets, providing convoys with protection as they drove through city neighborhoods that could turn into combat zones at any moment. He scanned buildings for snipers and streets for potential car bombs. At other times, the MPs raided houses, chosen at random, and arrested at gunpoint every man of fighting age.

Brandon craved the unique adrenaline rush of combat like a heroin addict searching for his next high. In Iraq, whenever there was a mission, he volunteered to go. If a door needed to be kicked in, everyone looked to him. He led from the front and experienced as much as he could. Brandon knew he was a good soldier and saw it as his responsibility to ensure that it was the Iraqis who were killed and not the Americans. He showed no fear, no hesitation. To this day, his commander tells new soldiers about Brandon's wartime feats.

If there is one phrase that could sum up Brandon's military experience, it's "Shoot first, think later." Soldiers never know whether they are going to have a fight-or-flight response until they are in the middle of the battle. For Brandon, when the pressure is on, he goes on adrenaline-fueled autopilot, running straight for the action and using full force. It was the same in Iraq as it had been when he had pounded the detainee's skull against the ground instead of fleeing the cage as his partner had. But when he came out of the haze of battle, he saw the path of destruction and the dead bodies left in his wake. It was only later, away from the enemy, that he realized what he had done.